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HILDA RICHARDS

BESSIE BUNTER

AND THE

GOLD ROBBERS

PAUL HAMLYN LONDON

CHAPTER I
The Man from Montreal

‘GOING well, Mabs?’

‘Topping, thanks!’

‘Nearly finished?’

‘Yes! Another quarter of an hour or so.’

Barbara Redfern, lying back in the armchair before the fire in Study No. 4 in the Fourth Form corridor of Cliff House School, smiled as she glanced affectionately at the golden head of her chum and study-mate, Mabel Lynn.

But Mabs did not look up, even though she replied to her chum’s questions. For Mabs was busy —feverishly, energetically busy.

Mabs was writing as if her life depended upon it.

But that was not quite the case. Mabs was merely writing a new play which she was completing for presentation at the forthcoming Schools Dramatic Prize Competition.

But the play was urgent now.

Tomorrow it had to go into rehearsal and the necessary inspiration had not struck Mabel until this evening. She was writing desperately before that inspiration wore off. For Mabs, as the leader of the Cliff House Junior Dramatic Society, was very anxious indeed that her school should carry off the prize this year. And the inter-schools Dramatic Competition was not so far off now.

Babs, with nothing to do for once, and in a singularly lazy mood after an afternoon spent on the hockey field, watched the golden-haired Mabs’ pen as it went scratch, scratch, scratch over the paper.

Mabs’ ambitions were no secret to Cliff House. Daughter of a famous playwright and a famous actress, Mabs had acting in her blood. She had already written one play which was, at the moment, in production at the local film studios.

And this occasion was a big one. For the Schools Dramatic Prize was the most important thing of its kind that could happen. With a happy sigh Mabs looked up.

‘My goodness, I feel all out of breath.’

‘Working up all right?’ Babs asked lazily.

‘Spendidly! And there’s a lovely part for you, Babs. As a matter of fact’—and Mabs frowned seriously at the script—‘it’s the biggest part of the lot. But won’t it be just too thrilling if we can win the prize?’

‘Oh, we’ll win it all right—with you looking after things, Mabs,’ Babs cried.

The golden-haired girl blushed at the compliment.

‘Now, Babs, you old flatterer!’ she chided. ‘Still, I’m going to do my best. And I say, Babs — you know who’s judging the contest this year? Miss Pearl Katherley! They say that she’s the greatest dramatic actress of the age. It seems just too wonderful to think of her coming here to judge my little play. But, by the way, where’s that fat old duffer, Bessie? She went for the post ten minutes ago.’

Babs laughed. She bent forward, stirring up the fire.

‘Oh, I expect Bessie’s discovered that her postal order hasn’t turned up, as usual. Probably trying to borrow on the strength of it. You’re expecting a letter, Mabs?’

Mabs nodded.

‘From my people. You know daddy’s gone over to Montreal to supervise the production of his new play there. Mother’s with him, of course. And so is Cousin Austin. You’ve never met Cousin Austin have you, Babs? He’s a detective. Awfully nice, and frightfully clever. Daddy should have written yesterday. I suppose he’s busy. But he can’t fail to write today. Anyway, let’s get this finished.’

Babs smiled, lay back in the armchair, and closed her eyes. But not for many seconds. The door opened and a fat figure, blinking behind thick, round spectacles, entered the room.

‘Oh, hallo, Bessie! Letter for me?’ Mabs asked brightly.

Elizabeth Gertrude Bunter, the third occupant of Study No. 4, disgustedly shook her head. But she threw a packet on the table. ‘No, there wasn’t,’ she grumbled. ‘Only this—a mouldy paper from Canada. That’s yours, Mabs.’

‘And no letter?’ Mabs asked.

‘No! There’s wasn’t even one for me,’ Bessie said indignantly. ‘Blessed postal authorities, you know. I’ve been expecting a letter now for —’

‘Three years,’ Babs put in.

‘Eh? Oh, really, Babs, dud-don’t rot, you know!’ Bessie said peevishly.

‘Aren’t you going to open your paper, Mabs?’ Babs asked idly, picking it up.

‘Goodness, no! Not yet—more important things to think about,’ Mabs laughed. ‘But you can have a look at it if you like, Babs.’

Babs stifled a yawn. She was not particularly interested. The paper arrived with unflinching regularity every Wednesday afternoon from a firm of publishers in Montreal.

Major Lynn was responsible for that piece of thoughtfulness, of course, knowing that Mabs was interested in his activities.

But Babs was in an unusually bored mood now, and, for the want of something better to do, she slipped the paper from its wrapping and unfolded it. Idly she opened it. Then she jumped. Her eyes, round and horrified, were fixed upon a glaring headline which shrieked the width of one of the sheets:

‘ENGLISH PLAYWRIGHT SENSATION. MAJOR LYNN AND WIFE
ARRESTED. SERIOUS CHARGES.’

The first thought which sprang to her mind was—Mabs must never know!

Loving her parents as she did; almost idolising them, Babs could imagine the upsetting effect such dreadful news would have upon her chum at a time like this! Of course, there was a mistake. There must be a mistake!

It was preposterous to think that the kindly people who were Mabs’ parents could do anything criminal. But Mabs must not know—especially now, when she was so happily busy in the throes of her play—when she was fighting so hard to bring dramatic laurels to Cliff House!

Not until she could satisfy her chum, anyhow, that there was nothing to worry about! But how to keep it from Mabs?

Babs drew in her breath. She folded the paper double. She was flurried, uncertain all at once — a feeling of panic had gripped her. At all costs Mabs must not see. She wanted to read it. She must read it. But first —

‘Ahem! Mabs do — do you mind if I go into the Common-room and take the paper with me?’

Mabs looked astonished.

‘Oh, but Babs, I was going to ask you to run through this. What’s the matter?’ she asked in hurt concern. ‘You look quite pale, old thing.’

‘Dud-do I?’

‘You do! Feeling all right?’

‘Why, yes, of course,’ Babs tried to laugh carelessly. ‘It—it’s the air.’ she said. ‘It’s a bit stuffy in here. Ahem, I think I’ll go to the Common-room.’

‘But the air is stuffy there, too,’ Mabs said. ‘At least, it’s no better than it is here.’ She eyed her chum in wonder. ‘Babs, what’s the matter?’

‘Nun-nothing.’

‘Well, don’t run away now. I’ve hurried this so that you can read it, Babs. Do look through and tell me how it strikes you. I’ll look through the paper while you do it.’ But Babs shook her head hastily at that.

‘No,’ she said. ‘All right, Mabs, I — I’ll look at it. But —’ she paused desperately. ‘Don’t you think we’d better run through it together. Or — or ——— Look here, tell you what,’ she added, trying to sound natural, ‘why not go and borrow Jemima Carstairs’ typewriter so that we can type out the parts?’

Mabs stared. She regarded her chum oddly. She could not fail to notice that Babs seemed flustered and confused.

‘Don’t you think that’s a good idea?’ Babs asked earnestly.

‘Yes, of course!’

‘Well, go on.’ Babs took the script from her feverishly. ‘You go and see Jemima. Bring the typewriter back. But don’t hurry. I’ll read it through while you’re gone.’

With a smile she hoped was natural, but which, in fact, was strained and twisted, she bundled her amazed chum into the corridor.

The door closed. She heard Mabs retreating. But what about Bessie?

Bessie, however, was almost hidden in the armchair which had its back towards Babs. Babs paused. Then, with one eye upon the armchair she carefully opened the paper again and tore out the sheet which contained the startling announcement that had so shaken her.

Mabel Lynn’s father and mother arrested!

Why?

Babs did not know, nor, desperately anxious now to destroy the news before Mabs should see it, had she time to find out. The paper made a heart-stopping, tearing sound as she detached the sheet, and Babs glanced in agony at Bessie Bunter. But Bessie, with her eyes closed now, was dozing peacefully. She did not look round.

Babs breathed with relief. The incriminating paper was folded into a small square.

She glanced towards the fire.

‘Bessie —’ she said.

‘Ur-r-r-r-gh!’ came from Bessie Bunter.

Babs nodded. It was a nod of satisfaction. The news sheet in her hand, she tiptoed towards the fire. With a stealthy glance at Bessie, she placed the sheet upon it. At the same moment there came a knock at the door.

Babs jumped with a guilty start, her face crimsoning. Mabs back?

‘C-come in,’ she faltered.



The door opened. Babs almost swooned with relief as she saw that her visitor was Sally, the parlourmaid.

‘Is Miss Lynn in?’ she asked.

Babs shook her head.

‘Not here,’ she replied. ‘Is it urgent, Sally?’

‘Well, miss, there’s a man who says that he’s her Cousin Austin, from Canada. He’s come to see her.’

Mabs’ cousin from Canada! There could only be one reason for his sudden arrival. He had come to break the news to Mabs.

‘I — I — oh, goodness!’ she cried distractedly. ‘I’ll go and see him. Where is he?’

‘In the visitors’ room, miss.’

‘Has Miss Primrose seen him?’ Babs asked suddenly.

‘No, miss. Miss Primrose was engaged, so I came at once to find Miss Lynn.’

Babs almost said ‘Good.’

In the visitors’ room, Babs found a tall, thin-faced man, who smiled in a solemn, but rather pleasant way, as he rose when she entered. Babs introduced herself.

‘Mr. Lynn,’ she then exclaimed. ‘I think I can guess why you’re here. You’ve just come from Canada.’

‘Yes.’

‘You — you know what happened there — about Mr. and Mrs. Lynn?’

He looked surprised.

‘You know?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Oh! Does Mabs?’

‘No; that’s why I came when the maid said you were here. She doesn’t know — she mustn’t know! She’s my friend, Mr. Lynn. But more than that — she’s working on a new play. She thinks her father and mother are doing well in Canada; that nothing has happened to them.’

'If she heard the news, it would just crumple her right up. And especially at this moment. Mabs has just written this play. She is practising it in the hope of winning the Schools Dramatic Prize. It's an ambition she has had for years, and she's likely to be bitterly disappointed now if it didn't happen. And she will win it — if she's given the chance.'

'I see!' The admiration deepened in the detective's face. 'But the paper? What has happened to the copy that was sent from Canada?'

'I — I tore the news out,' Babs confessed.

'I see,' he said again, 'You are a good friend, Babs. A fine friend. I didn't intend to tell Mabs myself, but if it hadn't been for you she would have had to know. But now I'm going to tell you something and I'm going to ask you something.'

'Major Lynn and his wife are in prison in Montreal. They are awaiting trial on a charge of having stolen a valuable nugget of gold. Major Lynn, as you know, collects things like that. He offered first to buy it, but they wouldn't sell. He went into the office next day with a better offer. While he was there with his wife the lights were put out. There was a commotion, and when the lights went on again the nugget had gone. The major and Mrs. Lynn were arrested — on suspicion. The Canadian police are clinging to the idea that Major Lynn arranged it all with some unknown accomplice — the unknown accomplice having got away with the nugget. They've been remanded by the Canadian courts, but they've got to stand their trial in three weeks' time. Meantime —'

'Meantime?' Babs breathed.

'They're in prison.'

Babs gasped.

He glanced round quickly.

'Being on the spot, I took up the case,' he said. 'I'm on the trail now. Listen, Babs, because this is where you can help me, if you will. I believe that nugget is in England — near this school!'

Babs' eyes opened wide.

'Here?'

'Yes! You know Ivy House?'

'Yes!'

'Yesterday it was taken over by a family called Knox. There are four in the family — the father, the mother, a boy named Sammy and a girl called Katie. They've completely furnished the place, and they're living there now. I have an idea that Mr. Knox is the man who carried out the robbery in Montreal — that the nugget is there!'

Babs quivered.

'But — but why?'

'Don't you see? Gold is fetching big prices in England. Once they can melt it down into a bar they can sell it. But there's a snag. I'm almost certain that Knox is my man, but detectives can't afford to make mistakes.'

Babs saw that.

'But what do you want me to do?' she asked.

'Something very simple-if you will do it. I want you to get into that house. The Knox family say that they have come from abroad, but what part of the world they won't say. They know me. I think they're suspicious of me. But you could strike up a friendship with the boy and the girl. I want you to get invited to the house. Ask questions. Do a bit of detective work on your own. You understand? It's for Mr. and Mrs. Lynn — and Mabel, Babs.'

Babs stiffened.

‘For Mabs?’ she said softly.

‘For Mabs!’ He nodded solemnly. ‘Now, listen, Babs! I don’t want you to do anything without me. If you really are going to help you’ll have to work in with me. Mabs mustn’t know. The Knoxes mustn’t know that I’m in the neighbourhood, so that it means we’ve got to meet in secret.

‘Where we shall meet, how we shall meet, I will let you know,’ he said. ‘But first get on chummy terms with the Knox kids. You won’t find it hard. They’re a pair of awful little snobs, but you mustn’t let that influence you. The boy has got a car. You can recognise him by a scar over the right eye. He and his sister take tea every afternoon at the Friardale Tea-rooms. If you could be there tomorrow ——’

Babs nodded grimly.

‘You can count on me!’ she said.

‘Splendid, kid!’ His hand closed over hers. ‘Well, we’re partners, Babs,’ he said. ‘But, mind — not a word to anyone. Not a breath to a soul! I believe that that nugget is in the house. To prove the major’s innocence we’ve got to find it — before the trial in Montreal. That gives us a bare fortnight here. You see, Babs?’

‘I see!’

‘Good! That’s settled, then. Shake.’

And they shook, after which he left her.

Babs, her head in something of a whirl, tramped thoughtfully back into the study. She had committed herself. From now onwards she was to work in secret with this detective.

She wondered, never guessing then, what strange situations this adventure was to lead her into.

CHAPTER II

Babs Shocks Her Friends

‘Babs!’

‘Where are you, Babs?’

‘Mabs wants you in the music-room.’ Barbara Redfern started.

It was four o’clock on the afternoon of the next day, and lessons had finished five minutes ago. Babs, mindful of her promise to the detective, had taken the precaution of getting a late pass from Stella Stone the captain of the school. She already had on her hat and coat. She was thoughtfully fastening her gloves as that hail came from outside the door.

Babs tried to dodge, but she was too late. Three or four boisterous figures swarmed into the room, headed by Clara Trevlyn, the tomboy of the Fourth.

‘Babs, here you are. My hat! You’re not going out?’ Clara exclaimed.

Babs coloured.

‘Well, I was.’

‘But what about the rehearsal?’

Babs paused biting her lips. In the stress of other things she had completely forgotten the rehearsal.

‘Oh, I — I’m afraid I’ll have to cut rehearsal!’ she said.

‘Cut it?’ Clara stared. ‘But Mabs is waiting for you now. The rehearsal can’t go on without you, Babs. You’ve got the biggest part. The whole play hangs upon you!’

Babs stood silent. The colour came and went in her face.

There was a sudden step behind Clara. Mabs herself came forward.

‘Babs,’ she said, and then she stopped, her eyes rounding, as she saw her chum fully

dressed. 'Babs, you're not going out?'

Babs put a nervous hand to her face.

'Well — yes.'

'But the rehearsal — Oh, Babs!' and Mabs turned pale. 'You can't have forgotten the rehearsal! You know we can't carry on without you.'

Babs felt mean. But she remembered her promise. She remembered the task before her. She dared not look Mabs in the face.

'I — I'm sorry, Mabs, I am truly, frightfully sorry, but I've just got to go out!'

'But why? Where?' Mabs looked hurt. 'Babs, is — is it so important?'

'Yes!'

'What is it?'

'It — it's nothing,' Babs mumbled. 'I — I've just got to go, that's all. It's something important — something which concerns me. Please, Mabs, don't ask questions,' she added pleadingly. 'But I must go.'

'But your part?'

Babs winced.

'I — I'm sorry. Get — someone else to read it for me,' she advised. Mabs fell back, the crimson rushed into her face. Her play was the dearest thing on earth to Mabs. She had thought Babs almost as interested as herself. But that Babs could go off like this — leaving the rehearsal in the lurch. Her own chum to whom she had given the biggest part — around whom indeed, she had written that part. She stepped forward. 'Babs!' she cried, almost in agony.

But Babs, breathing hard, feeling herself desperately up against it, tore herself free. Without looking, without speaking, she pushed her way through her astonished chums, and bolted for the door.

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'Hallo!' Jean Cartwright said. 'Look who comes here!'

She turned. Eleanor Storke and Bessie Bunter who were with her in the Friardale Tea-rooms looked round at the same time. It was not a usual thing for this trio to meet; but Jean had received an unexpected remittance that afternoon, and Bessie had no part in the play. Like nearly everyone else in the school, Jean was fond of Bessie, and though the fat one had a habit of borrowing and sponging, she did it in such an inoffensive way that nobody would possibly take offence, and Jean had invited Bessie to go into Courtfield with her.

And, naturally, it had been the hungry one's suggestion that they should come to the Friardale Tea-rooms where most unexpectedly they had met Eleanor Storke tea-ing in solitary state.

Tea was well under way now. A great feed was in progress at Jean's expense.

Jean laughed merrily, thoroughly enjoying the experience, for it was not often that she had money to spend freely. But they all stared as that exclamation came from Jean.

One and all looked towards the door.

A girl, looking rather guilty and nervous, had just entered that door.

'Why, Bib-Babs!' exclaimed Bessie in delight.

'Babs!' Jean supplemented. 'My goodness, what a lovely surprise! But I thought you were rehearsing.'

Babs stopped. She looked, and felt, taken aback. She had overlooked the fact that she might meet Cliff House girls in the tearooms. Certainly she had not expected to meet girls from her own Form. But having met them there could be no retreat now, even if

she wished. She looked quickly round the room.

But except for the Cliff House party the room at the moment was untenanted.

‘Come on!’ Jean invited. ‘Sit down, Babs, and join us. My treat,’ she added.

Babs hesitated. She looked round the room again.

‘Looking for someone?’ Eleanor Storke asked. ‘Oh, Babs, such a funny hook-nosed man has been here! And do you know what I saw coming from Cliff House — a dog with one ear? Peculiar — yes! He did look funny. But here you are, and hungry, by the look of you. How did the rehearsal go off?’

‘I — I don’t know.’ Babs confessed.

‘Don’t know?’ Eleanor’s mouth made an ‘O’ of surprise. ‘Oh, I say how peculiar! How very peculiar! Rehearsals are funny things, aren’t they? Did I ever tell when we did one of Shaw’s plays? Laugh! My dear, how I laughed! I thought I should have died!’ she added seriously. ‘The stage carpenter, you know —’

‘Oh, Storky, please!’ pleaded Jean. ‘Let Babs get a word in edgeways. Sit down, Babs!’

Babs, rather uncomfortable, sat down.

‘Bib-but I sus-say, you know,’ Bessie expostulated. ‘Why aren’t you at rehearsal, Babs? You never tut-told me you were going to cut rehearsal to sn-sneak away like this for a secret feed. I think that’s mean, Babs. If you’d told me, you know jolly well I wouldn’t have minded coming with you —’

Babs smiled. It was a rather strained smile, however.

‘I — I didn’t come for a secret feed, you duffer?’

Bessie’s eyes opened in astonishment.

‘Then why did you come here?’

Babs shook her head. It was impossible to explain, even had she cared to. But at that moment Mrs. Hathaway, who kept the tea-room, emerged with tea, and Babs thankfully devoted her attention to pouring out. There was a strained little silence.

‘I say,’ said Bessie, presently, ‘these tarts are topping! Nearly as nice as the ones I make, you know.’

She crammed one into her mouth, and for a moment even the voice of Bessie Bunter was not heard. But suddenly there was a sound behind them. The door opened. A titter broke out, followed by a guffawing voice:

‘Gee! Look at fatty, Katie!’

Babs started. She wheeled quickly in her chair, and then quite tensely she gripped the arms of that chair as she beheld the two who had entered.

A boy of seventeen or so, with a pale face, above the right eye of which ran a scar. He was accompanied by a girl with pale hair, dressed in a vivid red coat and a black hat. Babs felt her heart give a great jump. Katie and Sammy Knox! The boy and girl into whose good graces she was to attempt to get.

The boy was rudely pointing at Bessie, guffawing as he pointed.

‘What’s she remind you of, Katie?’

‘Elephant,’ Katie said at once.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Bessie blinked truculently.

‘Look here! Are you referring to me?’

‘We are!’

‘Well, dud-don’t,’ Bessie said with all the crushing Bunter dignity that she could muster, and grabbed another tart. But the boy and girl only continued to stand and titter.

‘A prize, isn’t she?’ the boy said admiringly. ‘Say, fatty, what do they call you?’

Jean's lips set. Eleanor Storke frowned. Babs, flushing uncomfortably, said nothing, though the anger began to boil inside her. She remembered that, for Mabs' sake, she had got to make friends with this precious pair.

Bessie glared.

'Look here —'

'Well, aren't we? And what a sight for sore eyes.'

'He, he, he!' shrilled the girl.

Jean, red with wrath, rose to her feet.

'I don't know who you are or where you come from,' she said biting, 'but will you please keep your remarks to yourselves?'

Bessie glowered.

'Yes, rather,' she supported. 'That's right, Jean, you tick them off. Bib-Babs, you're not going to sit there and let them talk to me like that?' she added wrathfully. 'Look here —'

'Shush!' Babs pleaded.

'But why should I shush?'

'Well, you'll only make matters worse.'

'Quite a porker, isn't she?' came from the boy. 'Gee, Fatty, they ought to have you in a circus. And look at redhead.' This was a mocking reference to Jean Cartwright, whose fiery head of hair was a very conspicuous feature indeed. 'Gee, don't glare at me like that, ginger. You'll set me all on fire.'

The boy laughed. With a wink at his sister he ambled forward. They came towards the Cliff House chums' table as Bessie, smothering her wrath, was raising her cup to her lips.

It was intended to appear accidental, but the quick out-thrust of Sammy Knox's elbow as he passed Bessie was the most deliberate thing in the world. Bessie's nose went violently into her cup. Tea spurted up, cascading into her fat face. The fat one jumped up with a spluttering roar.

'Ow! Wow! Groo! I'm scalded!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled the boy.

Bessie desperately wiped tea from her face. Her eyes gleamed. Her hand wandered quickly to a sticky jam tart.

But even as her fat fingers closed over it, Babs grabbed. 'Bessie, don't —'

Bessie glowered.

'Oh, really, Babs. If you th-think I'm going to be insulted —'

'Yes, drop it, Bessie,' quickly advised Jean. Her lips curled with contempt. 'They're not worth wasting good tarts on!'

'But, look here, you know —'

'Please, Bessie, do sit down,' Babs begged desperately. Bessie blinked at her. But she was not proof against Babs' pleading. She saw that her chum was really alarmed and really in earnest, and so with a last angry glare she seated herself.

For a while there was peace. Tea came up for the newcomers. Then, suddenly, something sailed from the direction of their table, hitting Jean Cartwright on the ear. Jean set her teeth.

'I saw that. That little beast threw it,' she said. Simultaneously a sharp exclamation came from Eleanor Storke as her hand went swiftly to her face.

In a moment Eleanor was on her feet.

'Somebody here threw something,' she said hotly. 'Something hard and painful. I will not have things thrown at me. I strongly — yes, most strongly — object.'

'Storky, sit down,' Babs begged desperately.

'No! Why should I sit down!' Eleanor was on the warpath now.

'The boy threw it! I object to boys throwing things. Boys should be taught their places and this one is going to be put in his place right now.' Her chair went back. 'I'll deal with him,' she vowed grimly.

She actually started towards the next table. But, Babs, in sudden fluttering anxiety, sprang to her feet, clutching at her arm.

'Storky, no!' she panted. An open quarrel with the couple at the next table might ruin everything now. 'Sit down — please! There's no sense in making a scene. I — I'll go and speak to them —'

Bessie's eyes gleamed.

'That's right, Babs, you give them a bit of your mind,' she said. Watched by her chums Babs stepped towards them. Sammy Knox looked up with a cheeky grin.

'Ho, ho!' he said, 'one of the mighty ones in person. What's the matter? Come to borrow the salt to put on Fatty's pigtail?'

'He, he, he!' giggled Katie.

'Or have you come to join us at tea?' the obnoxious boy went on, trying, as usual, to be funny.

Babs forced a smile, smothering her inward anger.

'Well, that's nice of you —'

The boy's eyes opened.

'You mean — you will join us?'

'As you've invited me — yes, why not?' Babs asked.

'Then come on! Gee, this is good.' He rose, placed a chair for her and winked at his sister. 'That's dandy. What's your name?'

Babs told him. She was glad that she had her back to her friends.

'And your name?' she asked

'Knox — Samuel and Kathleen, at your service. More commonly known as Katie and Sammy,' Sammy grinned. 'You belong to the big Girls' School, don't you? Cliff House.'

'Yes! But I haven't seen you two about here before!' Babs looked from one to the other. Her face was smiling, but her eyes were keen. 'New to the district, aren't you?'

'Well, yes,' Sammy admitted, after a pause.

'Oh, what part do you come from?'

Again a pause. The boy and girl looked quickly at each other. Babs, idly stirring her tea, was intently watching them from under half-closed lids. She did not miss that swift glance — a glance of warning from one to the other. Then the boy said: 'Well, we've just come from abroad, you know.'

'Abroad? Oh, how exciting. What part?'

'Africa!'

'Africa, eh?' Babs' eyes shone. 'How romantic! Cape Town?' she asked eagerly. 'Do tell me. I've so longed to meet someone who has been to Africa.'

Again that swift, warning look. It was obvious to Babs that Africa had been thought of on the spur of the moment.

There was a sound from the table behind her. A loud voiced 'ahem' in Jean Cartwright's voice. Babs affected not to notice it.

'Hey, your pals want you,' Sammy said, nodding.

'Do they? Well, never mind.' Babs laughed. 'I like talking to you,' she said.

Sammy stared. But it was a stare of pleasure.

'Gee, that's fine! Have another tart?' he said enthusiastically. 'You know, I like you! Nothing stiff and starchy about you like there is about the other three. I guess you're

fond of a lark? So are we. We don't know many people in this place, and I guess we'd welcome a pal. I've got a car, too. You ought to see me do fifty. Tell you what,' he added. 'Doing anything after tea?'

Babs shook her head.

'Nothing particular.'

'Then why not come along with us — to Ivy House? That's where we're living. A place dad got cheap because it's a bit of a ruin. The folks will be out, and we can have high jinks.'

Babs' heart jumped at that. To go to Ivy House! She could have laughed. Sammy, all unconsciously, was playing beautifully into her hands.

'You'll come?' Sammy asked eagerly.

'Yes, of course! Thank you very much!'

At the same moment there was the scraping of a chair behind her. Jean Cartwright, Eleanor Storke, and Bessie rose. Jean came forward. Her face was very disapproving.

'Babs, we're going. Are you coming?'

Babs hesitantly shook her head.

'No I'm — I'm stopping,' she replied. 'If you don't mind, Jean.'

'She's coming with us.' Sammy put in. 'You leave her alone. We're going to my place. That's so, isn't it, Babs?'

Babs nodded.

Jean stared. Eleanor Storke shook her head, Bessie looked incredulous and dismayed.

'Bib — but I say, Babs —'

'Please, Bessie,' Babs said.

'But you're not going off with those rotters?'

Babs flushed. For a moment she felt she could not meet Bessie's gaze. But she had to play her part! She must make the most of gains she had achieved — even if it meant hurting Bessie. She smiled.

'Now, run along, Bessie, there's a good old fattikins,' she said. 'I — I shan't be long — not really. I'm just going along with Sammy and Katie —'

'Sus-Sammy! Kik—Katie! Mum-my hat! Babs, you don't mean to say you're friends with these two?'

'I guess she does! I guess we're all friends,' Sammy put in coolly. 'And I guess we don't want you, old fat tub. You buzz off and leave Babs alone.'

'But —'

'Bessie, come on!' Jean said in a strained voice.

And she plucked the dazed Bessie by the sleeve and led her towards the door. Babs stood flushing to the roots of her hair. She caught the look of scorn Jean threw in her direction, and bit her lips. She felt Eleanor's wondering eyes upon her, and looked away. But harder than all was that amazed, betrayed, stupefied expression upon the face of dear old Bessie.

The door closed. Babs sat down with a flushed face, the echo ringing in her ears. It seemed to her that the door slammed upon a friendship!

CHAPTER III

The First Link

ON the other side of that door, in the High Street of Friardale village, the three Cliff House girls paused, however, Jean glancing rather angrily at an open yellow car which was drawn up in front of the shop. Her face was flushed.

'Well, that's about the limit,' she said. 'Storky, what on earth's come over Babs?'

Eleanor Storke shook her head. For once even she was baffled. 'It's funny,' she said. 'Funny! Those two are utter outsiders, and yet Babs goes and chums with them. Yes, chums with them. My dear, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I'd never have believed it. I couldn't believe it! Are they friends of hers, or what?'

'No, they're jolly well not!' Bessie glowered.

'Well, she can jolly well have them,' Jean said disdainfully. 'If Babs has found a sudden taste for that sort of company, she's welcome. Anyway, it's a bit thick after the way they insulted us to go over to them like that. Coming, Storky?'

'Yes, of course!'

'You, Bessie?'

Bessie paused.

'Nun-no, I th-think I'll just wait and sus-ee, Babs,' she said unhappily. 'You go.'

Jean nodded. But she glanced sympathetically at the fat junior. Jean was stung and hurt. She liked Babs. She and Babs had always been friends.

'Well, I'm going. So's Storky. See you later, then, Bessie.'

And the two juniors walked off up the street, leaving the duffer of the Fourth rather hesitantly standing on the pavement.

Bessie frowned. It was a troubled frown. Like Jean and Eleanor, she could not understand Babs. She had borne the brunt of Sammy and Katie's insults.

On any other occasions Babs would stick up for her. But Babs, so far from sticking up for her, had deserted her — had, in fact, gone over to the ranks of the enemy.

A laugh came from the other side of the door. Then the door opened. Babs, apparently on the best of terms with her new companions, swept through the portals into the street.

'Bib-Babs —' Bessie muttered forlornly.

Babs stopped. A wave of crimson colour rushed into her face as she beheld the fat, uncertain face of her chum. The laughter died magically from her face.

'Why, Bessie, haven't you gone back? I thought —'

'Nun-no, I — I was waiting for you, Babs,' Bessie said pathetically. 'I — I thought you mum-might like to come bib-back with me, you know.'

'What-ho, Fatty!' chortled Sammy. 'Here we are again, girls. Friend of yours, Babs?'

'Yes!'

'Ho, ho! Then that alters it, of course,' Sammy said. But with the eye farthest from Babs he winked at his sister. 'Pleased to meet you, old lard tub. Fine for the sort of weather we're having, isn't it? Ha, ha, ha!' He went off into a roar at his own absurd joke. 'Well, if you're a friend of Babs' you can come along with us.'

'But —' Babs stammered.

Bessie's eyes lit up.

'Oh, kik-can I? Nun — not that I want to come with you, you know. But I want to be with Babs.'

'O.K. No offence! Don't mind us,' Sammy grinned. 'In you get, Katie! In you get, Babs! Half a moment, Big Lump! I'd better jump in first to see if the old bus will carry you,' and, with a wicked smile on his face, he clambered up beside his sister into the driving seat.

Babs climbed in at the back of the car, Bessie stood on the pavement.

'All serene, Fatty!' Sammy called back. 'She'll stick it, I think. Climb in.'

Bessie gasped and blinked. Babs leaned forward to give her a hand over the side of the body. Bessie got one foot on the running-board and clutched at the door. Again Sammy winked. There was a thud as the gears went home. The car shook and shot forward.

Bessie toppled.

‘Oh, wow! Stop!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ yelled Sammy.

‘Bessie!’ gasped Babs.

But Bessie had slipped off the running-board. For a second or two she was carried along, hanging breathlessly to the bodywork. Her fat face was pale with fear.

There was a light of frightened terror in her eyes. Babs leaned forward to get a better grip, at the same time yelling to Sammy to stop. But Sammy only accelerated.

‘Ow! I’m fuf-falling! I’m slipping! I’m gig-going!’ wailed Bessie.

She went. Her arms slipped from Babs’ grip. Babs saw her go spinning back into the road, saw her rolling over and over like a ball. She saw her sit up, bellowing with all the might of her lungs.

Babs felt almost sick.

‘Sammy!’ she yelled.

‘Hallo!’ Sammy looked round. He stopped the car. ‘Where’s Fatty? Gee, I thought she was inside!’ he said, with pretended innocence.

Babs’ face was red with indignation. For the moment, at any rate, she had forgotten her purpose.

‘You knew very well that she wasn’t in the car!’ she said angrily. ‘You did that on purpose!’

‘Oh, come now!’ Sammy expostulated.

‘It was a beastly trick to do!’ Babs protested hotly.

Sammy scowled.

‘Look here, you’re not ticking me off, are you? I thought you were a sport, Babs.’

Babs bit her lip.

‘Well, Bessie — Bessie is a friend of mine,’ she said. ‘I don’t like to see my friends treated like that. A joke’s a joke —’

‘O.K.! Anyway, she’s all right,’ Sammy said. ‘Look!’ he pointed up the road where several passers-by had rushed to Bessie’s rescue. The fat one stood among them now, blinking tearfully at the car. ‘Sorry, Babs, didn’t mean it. But I just couldn’t resist it! Must have a bit of fun, you know. You’re not going to cut up rough about it?’

Babs felt that nothing in the world at that moment would have given her greater satisfaction than to smack this callous youth’s face. But she had to play her part.

‘Drive on,’ she said quietly.

Ivy House, shadowed and overgrown with the evergreen from which it took its name, was reached in record time. Up the drive he went at fifty miles an hour, stopped the car with a shrieking of brakes, and jumped down.

‘Here we are, Babs.’

Babs alighted. She followed the precious couple as Sammy let himself in with a key. It struck Babs as strange that in so large and rambling an old house no servant was kept.

She knew Ivy House — for years a derelict, a place of secret rooms and secret passages, in which she and her chums from Cliff House had shared many an adventure.

‘Come in! Make yourself at home. Dump your clobber.’ And Sammy indicated the seat at the hall-stand. ‘Well, here we are. Folks out, house to ourselves. Like a cigarette, Babs?’

‘No, thank you!’

‘Oh, come on, be matey, you know!’

But Babs shook her head. She followed him into the large morning room, looking

about her keenly.

The place was furnished now — not expensively nor in good taste, but with an ostentatious display of rather glittering stuff, which reflected at once the taste of its tenants.

‘Jolly place!’ Sammy said, pulling at a cigarette. ‘You know it, Babs?’

‘Oh, yes!’ And Babs, looking round her, told him of some of the adventures she had had in it.

‘Secret passages — eh?’ Sammy’s eyes gleamed. ‘We don’t know anything about those, do we, Katie? They weren’t mentioned when dad took his place over. I say, it’d be a lark to explore! You probably know the house better than we do, then, Babs. We’ve only just come here, you know.’

Babs nodded. She was looking at the bureau at one end of the room. Rather fixedly she was looking at that, trying to keep the excitement she felt out of her features. For upon that bureau, thrown there carelessly, was a paper — a paper she recognised at once. It was a copy of the newspaper which had been sent to Mabel Lynn yesterday, and it was open at the very page which she had been at such pains to destroy.

‘Well, now we’re here, what about doing something?’ Sammy suggested. ‘Know any games, Babs?’

Babs had a quick inspiration.

‘Yes, I think so!’ She looked eager. ‘I know this place. You don’t; at least not as well as I do. Supposing we play hide-and-seek — you know, I’ll hide somewhere, you try to find me.’

She waited tremblingly for his reply. Sammy scowled.

‘Not much of a game, is it? Still, it’ll give us something to do! Go on, Babs! You go and hide.’

‘Give me three minutes?’ Babs asked.

‘Yes!’

‘Right! Then I’ll make a noise.’

‘O.K.!’

Babs rose to her feet. She was shaking with suppressed excitement now.

One thing she had discovered which seemed to indicate that she was on the right trail — that copy of the Canadian paper, opened at the place which would naturally be of great interest to the inhabitants of this house, if they were the people Austin Lynn suspected them of being. But that might only be coincidence of course. She had got to make sure.

Outside the door Babs paused, thinking quickly. Then, making up her mind, she rushed up the stairs. There was a door on her right. She took a hasty peep in. The room was empty. The next door she opened — just oddments and lumber. From downstairs came a shout: ‘Ready, Babs?’

‘One minute!’ Babs called.

She was quivering now. She opened the third door, and her eyes gleamed, for this was a room that was occupied, the bed stood in the centre of the room, unmade from the night before. A dressing-gown lay thrown across it. But at the foot of the bed was a trunk.

Babs paused. Then very cautiously she went towards the trunk.

There were more clothes on top of it. She lifted them off; and then she gave a sudden start. The colour came into her face as she saw a label. ‘Eagle Hotel, Montreal,’ the label read, and below it was a date — a date less than a fortnight old!

Babs quivered with excitement.

Then Austin Lynn was right. These people had been in Montreal less than a fortnight ago —somewhere about the same time as the robbery which Major Lynn and his wife were accused of having perpetrated.

‘Babs!’ came impatiently from downstairs.

‘Coo-ee! I’m ready!’ Babs shouted.

And she jumped back into the passage, hiding herself in the empty room. She was trembling with excitement now. Her eyes were ashine with triumph.

She felt at last rewarded for all the bitterness she had had to put up with on account of those new and detestable friends of hers.

The first point was proved. The first link in the chain of evidence which would restore liberty to her chum’s parents was established.

CHAPTER IV

Locked Out

‘No, I really must be getting back,’ Babs said.

Sammy, in the drawing-room of Ivy House, looked disappointed. ‘Oh, stop — just another half-hour, Babs.’

But Babs shook her head.

‘I daren’t, I tell you!’

Babs had hung on, and hung on purely in the hope of meeting this detestable couple’s parents. But she had not.

‘Well, I’ll guess you’ll have to skid if you’re so decided on it, Babs,’ Sammy said.

‘But we’ll see you again?’

‘Oh, of course!’

‘When?’

‘Well, I — I’ll let you know, shall I?’

‘O.K.! Unless I give you a surprise.’ Sammy’s eyes twinkled. ‘Well, it’s been awfully jolly having you, Babs. I hope we’ll see more of each other. Wouldn’t you like to give me a kiss before we part?’ he asked.

But Babs, prepared to put up with much at Sammy’s hands, was not prepared to go to that length, thank you! She shuddered at the suggestion. Rather hurriedly she shook her head and departed.

She felt rather thankful when she found herself in the road again.

‘My hat!’ she muttered. And she took a deep breath of the pure evening air.

But she must hurry. Cliff House was a good quarter of an hour’s walk away. She had less than that time in which to make the journey, and if she was not in by half-past seven the gates would be locked upon her.

There was a movement in the trees. A sudden voice hissed upon her ears: ‘Babs!’

Babs stopped, her heart jumping.

‘Anyone with you?’ asked a voice. The voice of Austin Lynn!

‘No,’ Babs replied. ‘Where are you?’

The undergrowth beside her moved. A man straightened up. She found herself peering into Austin Lynn’s features. She laughed then.

‘My goodness, what a start you gave me!’ she said.

‘Sorry!’ he smiled. ‘One has to be careful, you know. I’ve been watching you, Babs, even though you haven’t guessed it. You’ve spent quite a time at Ivy House. Find out anything?’

She told him. The detective’s eyes glimmered.

‘Good work!’ he approved. ‘That’s the stuff! Now we’re sure Knox is the man who

stole the things. Good enough! I'm not sure that Sammy and Katie know about his real activities, but keep your eyes open, Babs. I'm doing my bit, and I think we're on a big thing. I've got an idea they'll try to melt that nugget down — probably with other stuff. Somehow, we've got to get hold of it before that happens.'

'You think the nugget is in the house?' Babs asked.

'Sure of it. Anyway, it hasn't left yet. I've been keeping watch on Papa Knox and Mama Knox, too, today. They've been exploring the old quarry woodsheds, and I've got an idea why, but I won't trouble you with that at the moment. The next step, Babs, is — find out where the nugget's hidden.'

'Which means,' Babs said ruefully, 'that I've got to go to that house again?'

'Well, I'm afraid so. You don't like the kids?'

'They're hateful!' Babs said, with a flash of indignation. 'Rough luck! Still, stick it, Babs! I'm grateful for what you've done: but Major and Mrs. Lynn aren't out of prison yet, you know. You're a real little brick! Keep it up! I'll be seeing you again before long. When, and how I'll let you know.'

He shook her hand, patting her on the back. Then, as silently as he had appeared, he melted away again.

While Babs, her thoughts in a tumult, broke into a run. But that interlude had taken time — precious time. She reached the gates of Cliff House School, and there she stopped, staring blankly. For the gates were shut and locked for the night.

At the same moment Piper, the porter came out from his lodge, the keys in his hand. He peered through the bars.'

'Piper, let me in!' Babs pleaded.

Piper stared.

'Which you're late,' he said 'Which you've been reported as being late.' He fitted the key into the lock. 'Which it's my unpleasant dooty, Miss Redfern, to take you to the headmistress!' he said sternly, and threw the gates open. 'This way!'

Babs groaned. Dismayed, she went in. She was 'for it!'

CHAPTER V Curious Conduct

'BABS!'

Mabel Lynn looked up eagerly as Barbara Redfern entered Study No. 4.

Mabel was seated at the table making a few last minute alterations to her new play before going to bed. Bessie was there, too, seated in a chair, a cross of sticking-plaster upon one plump cheek. She looked up as Babs entered, blushed a fiery red, and then with a grunt subsided. But she did not say anything.

Babs coloured.

'I —— Oh, hallo, Mabs!'

'Get it hot from Primmy?' Mabs asked sympathetically.

'No, not very. She — she gave me a hundred lines and a conduct mark.'

'Lucky! That's what comes of having a good record,' Mabs laughed. 'But sit down now. Let's hear all about it. Storky —' she frowned. 'Well, you know what Storky is,' she said awkwardly. 'Rather liable to exaggerate things. She says that she and Jean and Bessie —'

Babs flushed again.

'I can guess what she said!' she exclaimed, in a constrained voice.

'Well' — Mabs looked troubled — 'she says that you went off with two perfectly awful kids you met in the tea-rooms. But, naturally, I can't believe that,' Mabs added.

Babs inwardly groaned.

‘Well —’ she stammered. She glanced at Bessie. ‘They — they’re rather strangers, you know. They’ve lived abroad for a long time. What you — you might call high-spirited.’

Mabs frowned.

‘But weren’t they rude to Jean and Storky and Bessie? Storky says —’

‘I —’ Babs gulped. She passed a hand across her forehead. ‘Oh, Mabs, please don’t ask me questions now!’ she said. ‘I — I can’t tell you anything — really.’

Mabs looked amazed.

‘But, Babs, I’m your great friend, aren’t I?’

‘Yes, of course, Mabs; but — but —’ Babs paused, hating to see that look of hurt reproach in Mabs’ face. ‘I’m sorry. I — I’ve had a busy time.’ she said. ‘A — a rather trying time. How did the rehearsal go off?’ she asked desperately, trying to change the subject.

‘The rehearsal didn’t go off — it had to be postponed,’ Mabs said. ‘We tried it out with — with Leila in your part. But it wasn’t any good. There’s only one girl who can do that part, Babs, and that’s you! I’m sorry you weren’t there,’ she added.

‘Yes, I — I am, too,’ Babs admitted.

‘But we’re going to have a run through tomorrow afternoon,’ Mabs said eagerly.

‘You’ll be all right for that, Babs?’

Babs hesitated.

It occurred to her that perhaps she would have to give up her part in the play. If she was going to watch the Knoxes, that would take a lot of time — time that she should spend rehearsing, and Babs knew that if she was forced to continue to miss rehearsals as she had done that afternoon, that it would not be fair to the rest of the cast.

Babs had it on the tip of her tongue to ask Mabs to get another girl to play her part.

But Mabs was talking.

‘And — and —’ Mabs shrugged. She stared at Babs again, her face rather clouded. ‘I — I think I ought to tell you, Babs; but there’s been — well, a little trouble. Some of the girls in the show were annoyed because you suddenly went off like that.’

Babs bit her lips.

‘They — they think you rather let things down, Babs. I tried to stick up for you — I told them you wouldn’t have gone off without good reason. Then Storky and Jean came back with this story of what had happened in the tea-rooms, and, of course, when the others heard that, they just said that you’d gone off to — to dodge the play. Babs, that’s not true?’

‘No, of course not!’

‘That’s what I said!’ Mabs, looked relieved. ‘I told them so. Well, you tell me all about it when you feel like it — eh?’ she added brightly. ‘Meantime, Bessie — look at our Bessie,’ she added, with a laugh. ‘Been out collecting souvenirs. Came back with a great mark across her face, and almost as mysterious about it as you, Babs. Bessie just refused to say a word. Babs, make her tell us what she has been doing.’

Bessie blinked.

‘Oh, really, Mabs! In any case, Babs knows.’

Babs flushed.

‘Wh-when the boy set that car going, you know, I was flung into the road. And — and I hit my face against the kerb,’ Bessie went on.

‘Oh, Bessie, poor dear!’

‘And — and Mrs. Hathaway took me in and bandaged it up.’ Bessie caressed the bandage tenderly. ‘It took the skin off my face, you know, and it jolly well spoils my

prettiness. I was surprised,' she went on indignantly, 'that you went off with those two after that, Babs.'

Babs bit her lip.

'I'm sorry, Bessie. I — I —' and she stopped, the words dying on her lips as she found Mabs' gaze upon her — Mabs staring in wonder, in mystification.

'Babs, what is it?' she said tensely. 'Who are these people?'

But Babs shook her head.

'I'm sorry, Mabs, but — but I just can't tell you,' she said, and felt almost grateful when the door opened. 'Yes, Stella?' she asked, as she saw the captain of the school standing there.

Stella eyed her. She eyed her very peculiarly. It was obvious that Stella had heard the rumours floating about.

'Nothing! But call-over bell has gone, and you kids apparently haven't heard it.' she said. 'Trot along into Big Hall now.'

She went, but not without another look at Babs. But Mabs stood aside, an expression of puzzlement, of pain, on her face. She knew an inward qualm. It seemed suddenly that some subtle shadow had come between her and her chum.

.

'Well, here we are,' Mabel Lynn said. 'All the cast here?'

'Yes,'

'Topping. Now Babs —'

It was the afternoon of the next day, and the cast of the new play — eight in number — were gathered together in the music-room.

Bessie Bunter, complete with sticking-plaster, was also there, though Bessie had no part in the play.

It was a half-holiday at Cliff-House. A glorious half-holiday. Outside, the sun shone, Birds carolled blithely, and all was happiness and animation.

The Upper School, preparing for the cricket season, could be seen from the windows of the music-room, practising upon Senior Side.

In the tennis courts, girls, ambitious to shine in the new season's tournaments, were getting down to it in grim earnest.

Clara Trevlyn groaned.

'And here we are!' she grumbled. 'My hat! Why must we have rehearsals on days like this? I wanted to get in some tennis practice. Promised Janet we'd have a single together as soon as we could.'

Mabs smiled anxiously.

'But you don't mind, Clara — not really?'

'Well, not as it's for the cause,' Clara replied. 'No, Mabs. As long as everybody is willing. I'm not standing out. But, come on, buck up and let's get it over.'

There were nods at that. Practically every girl there shared Clara's sentiments. Had they obeyed their own inclination they would have been out of doors on such a beautifully sunny afternoon. But the play must come first, and, seeing that there was only a fortnight in which to rehearse it, every opportunity must be taken full advantage of. Several of them, indeed, had put off their engagements so as to get ahead with the rehearsal.

'Well, here we are,' Mabs said. 'Now take up positions. You there, Babs; you there, Lucy. Lucy is acting the part of the headmistress,' she added. 'Now, Rosa, you there—you're the Form-mistress, remember. We'll run through the first act briefly.'

The girls fell into places, Babs with the copy of her script in her hand. The first act was run through with one or two interruptions. Mabs' eyes shone.

'Topping!' she said. 'My goodness, Babs, that was splendid! You see, I wasn't exaggerating when I said the whole play revolved around you. It just couldn't be a success with someone else in your part. Now, act two!'

'Hallo!' Clara said suddenly.

'Look at this!' And Clara, who had been lounging near the window, rather wistfully regarding the fine weather and the happy girls who were disporting themselves on the cricket pitch and the tennis court, turned. 'Whose is this bilious yellow car?'

'And the two inside it!' Rosa Rodworth exclaimed. 'My hat!' Babs looked up swiftly. Clara, who had opened the window to let in the fresh air, leaned out. Babs, with a sudden thumping of her heart, crossed the room and leaned out, too. Then her face lost every tint of its colour.

For down there, in the quad, was the yellow car belonging to the obnoxious Sammy Knox. And Sammy, and Katie his sister, were seated in it.

'Who are they?' Clara asked.

'My hat! What a pair!'

'What are they —'

It was at that moment that some instinct made Sammy look up. He stared at the girls who crowded the music-room window and nudged his sister. For a moment Babs found his eyes upon her and tried to dodge. But it was too late. Up jumped Sammy in the car, one hand waving excitedly.

'Babs, Babs!' he shouted gleefully.

'Babs?' Clara echoed in amazement at her leader. 'My hat! You don't know those freaks, Babs?'

Babs, covered with confusion, shook her head, and then nodded.

'Well, you see —'

'Babs!' shouted Sammy. 'Gee! There you are. Say, Babs, come down a minute!'

'In — in a minute!' Babs gasped.

'But —' Mabs stared. 'Babs, you're not going?'

Babs distractedly shook her head.

'I — I must!'

'But the rehearsal?'

'Oh, yes, the — the rehearsal!' Babs put a nervous hand to her face and then withdrew it. 'C-can you carry on without me for — for a few moments?'

Mabs' eyes grew large.

'But, Babs, you know we can't!' she expostulated. 'I say, wait here and I'll go down and see them. Are — are they the friends you met yesterday?'

'Yes; but Mabs — no, don't!' Babs gasped in alarm, as Mabs took a step towards the door. 'No, don't — please! I — I'll go down. I — I won't be a minute — really! Just carry on for a few minutes, please!'

And, lest Mabs or someone else should forestall her, she jumped towards the door.

She smiled breathlessly round her, and — Slam!

The door closed, leaving the cast of the new play staring in baffled, bewildered surprise at one another!

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In palpitating alarm, Babs rushed out of the school into the sunlit quad. Her mind was in a whirl. She felt shaken to the very depths of her being. But at all costs Sammy and

Katie must not hang about here. At all cost she must get rid of them.

Sammy leaped from the car into the quad.

'Well, here you are, Babs! I say, go and get your things on. We've come to take you out.'

But Babs shook her head.

'I'm sorry, Sammy — I can't come!'

'Can't?' He looked sullen at once. 'I say, that's too bad!' he said. 'Why can't you?'

'Well, I'm busy —'

'Go on — we know. This is a half-holiday here this afternoon, isn't it?'

'Yes; but you see —'

'Then why can't you come?'

'Well, as a matter of fact, there's a rehearsal on. I'm in the cast, you know —'

'Rehearsal eh?' Sammy looked at his sister. 'What — you an actress?' he added, with quick interest.

'Yes!'

'Gee, that's fine! All right,' Sammy said. 'Then we'll wash out my programme, Babs.'

'Oh, I say, that's very nice of you.' Babs gasped.

'Not at all! Anywhere we can put the car?'

Babs stared.

'Yes! Sort of garage it, you know. We were going to take you for a joyride, but as you're rehearsing we'll come and watch the rehearsal instead. Katie and I are interested in theatricals, aren't we, Katie?'

'Yes, rather!' Katie agreed at once.

'But — but —' Babs was bewildered. 'No, you can't come,' she gasped out. 'I mean, this is private.'

'Oh shucks!' Sammy said. 'I guess you can let us in. We'll sit still and won't say a word. Honest! Will we, Katie?'

'No, we won't, really, Babs!'

'But — you — you don't understand,' Babs said. 'Oh goodness!'

I'm sorry, you know, but it just can't be done.'

Sammy scowled.

'But why not?' he objected. 'We're interested in Cliff House School. We'd like to look around the place. There's a sort of friend of ours here — well, not a friend, but a girl we've heard about. A girl named Mabel Lynn. Do you know her, Babs?'

Babs stood perfectly still. She was sure her face turned white.

'Mabel Lynn!' she gasped faintly. 'You — you know her?'

'Well, not so you'd notice it,' Sammy grinned, and he turned, winking at his sister.

'But we've heard of her. As a matter of fact,' he added confidentially, 'my old man — the pater, you know — knows her father. We told him about you last night and he told us about this Mabel Lynn girl. So we said we'd try and check up on her.'

'I see!' But Babs, as she stood there, didn't see. She only realised all at once that her plans were in terrible danger. If Sammy and Mabs met —

'And' — Sammy chuckled — 'we found something else out,' he added. 'There's a chap named Lynn — a Major Arnold Lynn, who was imprisoned a fortnight ago in Canada for grabbing something in a jeweller's shop, you know. We aren't exactly detectives, but we've seen the paper and we've got an idea that this Mabel Lynn is something to do with him.'

Babs was trembling now. At whatever cost, Mabs must never meet this precious pair. At the same moment a golden head appeared from an upstairs window.

‘Babs!’

Babs turned with a gasp. She almost jumped as she saw Mabs.

‘Yes?’

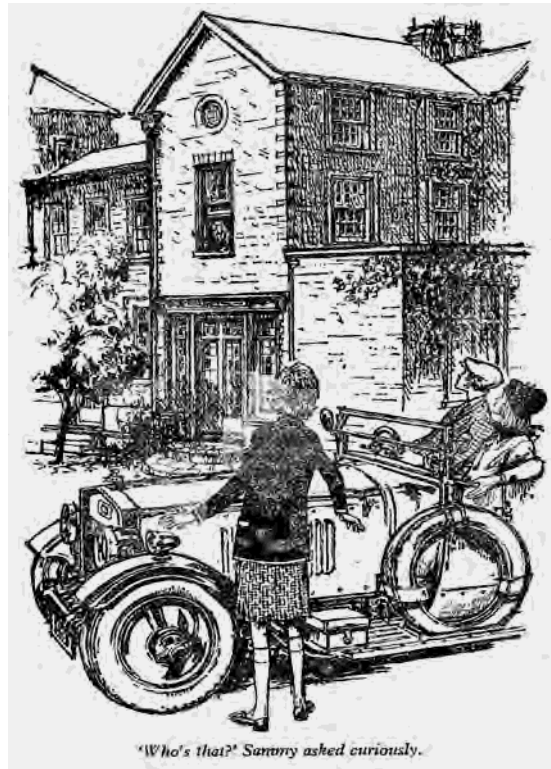
‘We’re starting again. Will you be long?’

‘Who’s that?’ Sammy asked curiously.

‘Oh, a — a friend of mine. Just a minute, Ma — old thing,’ she corrected hastily.

‘Well, if you don’t want to leave your friends, why not bring them up?’ Mabs asked, little realising the mischief she was causing.

‘Wait a minute, Babs, I’ll come down myself’ And as her head disappeared Sammy grinned.



‘Well, that’s what I call all right,’ he said. Then he stared at Babs. ‘Gee, Babs, what’s the matter? You’ve gone like a sheet.’

‘Sammy!’ she said desperately.

Sammy glanced at her

‘Yes, Babs?’

‘Let’s go! In the car now. I — I could do with a blow,’ Babs said.

‘In fact, I — I feel like a blow,’ she added with desperate eagerness. ‘I — I can’t face that rehearsal again.’

‘But that — that girl?’

‘Oh, never mind! Let’s get going,’ Babs cried feverishly.

‘Gee!’ Sammy stared. ‘I guess you’re a surprise packet,’ he grinned. ‘O.K.! All right with me. Jump in!’

‘Hurry!’ Babs cried desperately.

She jumped in with one agonised glance towards the doorway of the school. Sammy grinned, winked again at his sister, shot home the gear, and turned the car round so that it pointed its bonnet towards the gates. At the same moment a running figure, in whose golden hair the sunlight glinted, appeared from the doorway. She stopped as

though she had been shot as she saw the car moving off.

'Babs!' she cried in a stricken voice.

Babs looked round, then quickly she looked to her front again. The car, gathering speed, whizzed off.

Mabs stood still, her expression one of dazed bewilderment. Babs, her Babs, her dearest chum, had run off, leaving her.

Had deliberately left the rehearsal flat!

CHAPTER VI

The Ruined Rehearsal.

'IT'S no good, Mabs?'

Mabel Lynn shook her golden head despondently.

'I'm sorry, but no,' she said definitely. 'Without Babs the whole thing falls to pieces.'

It was an hour later. The scene was still the music-room. The cast, with the exception of Babs, were still there. But the cast, to judge by the glumness of its expression, was in anything but good humour.

They were puzzled, quite sore, and in no small measure angry. Jemima Carstairs sighed.

'Tut, tut! Too bad! Naughty old Babkins running off in that old mustard can,' she said. 'Well, what to do, Mabs?'

Mabs, her face harassed, shook her head.

'There's nothing to do,' she said. 'We'll have to rehearse again when Babs comes back.'

But Rosa Rodworth looked immediately mutinous.

'We will, will we?' she asked. 'In other words, we can waste more of our time.'

Thanks, but I'm fed-up for one. I've other things to do besides hanging around and waiting Barbara Redfern's pleasure to turn up at rehearsals. I say get somebody else!' The faces of the cast showed, indeed, that they sympathised with Rosa's point of view.

'Well, I'm fed-up, for another,' Clara Trevlyn said disgustedly. 'If I'd known, you wouldn't have got me here. Blessed if I can understand Babs. It's not like her.'

'There was no reason for it,' Rosa went on hotly. 'If Barbara likes to put her new friends before us — well, the best thing is for her to leave the cast. We all saw. We gave her the opportunity of bringing them here to watch the rehearsal so that we could get on. Mabs, so that they should not feel strange, went out to invite them in. And then Babs dashed off with them. Well, it's not good enough.'

'No!'

'Hear, hear!'

'The afternoon ruined,' Rosa Rodworth went on. 'Just wasted. Well, I'm off!'

Clara made an impatient movement.

'I vote we all tackle Babs! It's Mabs' play. Anyway, if this rehearsal is a wash-out, I'm not hanging about any longer. It's too late to do anything now, but we can go for a stroll in the woods. And perhaps tea at the Hathaways' place in the village. Who says?'

'What-ho!'

'Oh, I sus-say, Clara, that's a ripping suggestion,' Bessie Bunter put in eagerly.

'Then who'll come?'

'I will!'

'And I!'

‘What-ho!’

And faces brightened a little. The afternoon had been wasted, but there was no reason why it should be lost altogether.

The tomboy’s suggestion at this juncture seemed to be the best. But though they all determined to make the best of it, and though they all went off together, there was no disguising the bitterness they felt inwardly towards the leader of the Fourth. Babs had let them down!

CHAPTER VII

The Wreck of Her Friendship

‘ENJOYING it, Babs?’

Barbara Redfern was in the back seat of the yellow car. She was, at the moment, in Richmere village. Richmere was ten miles or so from Cliff House School, but it had taken the elated Sammy Knox less than a quarter of an hour to get there.

Sammy was out to impress Babs with his driving skill.

‘That’s what I call driving,’ Sammy said proudly. ‘Gee, don’t we tear — and on these roads, too. Well, what about a look round the old town now we’re here? Like something to eat, Babs?’

‘No, thank you?’ answered Babs.

‘Oh, come on!’

So off they went again, and this time finding a small tea-shop open, they went in for tea and cakes. In miserable silence Babs ate and drank, for the most part feeling that every mouthful of the food was choking her, wondering rather agitatedly what impression she had created back at Cliff House.

‘Say,’ Sammy leaned forward, ‘game for a lark to-night, Babs?’

Babs glanced at him suspiciously.

‘What sort of lark?’

‘Oh, nothing much. Just a spree.’ He winked. ‘We’re having a bit of a party at Ivy House. Some swell friend of dad’s is coming — a fellow he met in Mon — abroad, I mean,’ he added hastily. ‘We’re having a slap-up dinner — with wine! Topping stuff,’ he added, with a wink at Katie. ‘Do come!’

Babs’ first inclination was to shake her head. But very vividly all at once she remembered her promise to Austin Lynn.

Her promise not to lose any opportunity of getting into Ivy House to discover the hiding-place — if that were possible — of the nugget which would prove the innocence of Mabel Lynn’s parents, and so disperse that ominous shadow which threatened to wreck her friend’s happiness.

What a chance, perhaps, to find things out!

Sammy saw her hesitation. He leaned forward, accidentally spilling the salt sifter on the floor. But a trifle like that did not worry Sammy. He allowed it to stay there.

‘Babs, say you’ll come?’ he asked eagerly.

Babs paused again. Instinctively she picked up and replaced the sifter on the table. What time?’

‘Eight o’clock!’

Babs’ eyes gleamed.

‘Well, I couldn’t come then. You see, I got into a bit of a bother to-night. If I come at all it will mean breaking bounds. I can’t do it until after we’ve gone to bed. But I could get along at — ten clock, say?’

‘O.K., then!’ Sammy chuckled. ‘And — gee, here’s a good idea. I’ll meet you with

the car. Ten o'clock in the road outside the school. How's that?

'All right,' Babs answered anxiously.

Sammy laughed scoffingly.

'Why, we'll only just be beginning then. The party won't break up until three or four o'clock in the morning — you see. It's on, then, Babs?'

'Yes, thank you!'

Sammy chuckled.

'You're a good sort,' he said. 'We'll give you a time — and games! Better bring some cash with you. Bound to have a flutter with the cards, you know. Anyway, we'll get back now, shall we? I've got a new road I want to try out — the one through Friardale woods.'

They rose. They went outside and clambered into the car. 'Here, Katie,' Sammy grinned in high good humour, 'you shove your fat self in the back for a change. Come on, Babs. Sit by me, and I'll show you how a car should be driven. O.K., off we go!'

And off they went — not at fifty miles an hour this time, for the road was a bad one.

Babs knew it. It led straight through Friardale woods over the light, rustic bridge that spanned the stream there, but neither road nor bridge was meant for heavy traffic. She pointed that out.

'Oh, don't you worry about the bridge!' Sammy said confidently. 'I've seen that. It's strong enough for this bus—not wide, I'll admit, but we can get through with a bit of a squeeze. Now, hold tight! We're going!'

Friardale woods loomed ahead.

Now! At thirty miles an hour they went, heading for the rustic bridge that continued the rut-road over the stream.

The bridge came in sight. Babs gave a sudden shriek.

'Sammy, look. Don't —'

But Sammy saw. There was a party of girls on the bridge. They had paused there, interestedly leaning over the fragile rail, looking at something in the water below.

Babs saw at once that they were Cliff House girls. Though she did not know it at that moment, they were Mabs, Clara, Bessie, and the others, out for their walk to Friardale village.

Clara had merely stopped to point out a huge, brown trout, which was swimming lazily round one of the rocks which jutted out from the bed of the shallow stream hereabouts.

Sammy grinned. He dropped into second gear. The car went screaming on, Sammy raucously blaring the horn with a sound that made ghastly echoes in the wood. On — on —

'Sammy!' cried Babs.

'Watch me give 'em a fright!' Sammy gurgled.

'Sammy, you're not —'

'I am! Sit back and laugh!'

And Sammy himself laughed in an exultation of glee as he set the car's bonnet at the bridge.

Babs sat up, her face suddenly white and frightened. Now she recognised the girls, who had turned, wondering. She saw the sunlight glinting upon Jemima's eyeglass; she saw a billow of golden curls among the other heads there. Mabs and Co !

'My goodness!' Babs muttered. She made a last imploring appeal. 'Sammy, stop!'

But Sammy was bent over the wheel now. The expression on his face showed that he meant to charge the bridge, girls or no girls! Babs saw it rushing towards her. She shut her eyes, trembling.

‘Look at this idiot!’

‘He’s coming for us!’

‘My hat! Look who’s with him!’

‘Babs — Babs —’

Honk, honk, honk! shrilled the hooter.

‘Get out of the way!’ roared Sammy.

Then the car was on the bridge. The bridge creaked and swayed. The Cliff House party, scared, pressed back against the rail to let the car pass. There was a sudden crack, a shriek from Bessie Bunter.

‘Ow, wow! I’m gig-going —.’

The rail, not built for such a sudden strain, cracked and collapsed. With a roar it went into the stream.

And the eight girls, pressing back with all their might to give the mad motorist room, went with it.

Crash!

Splash!

Babs opened her eyes. She was just in time to see the disaster. She saw girls’ legs and feet in the act of disappearing over the edge of the bridge.

She heard her own name. She saw the spray which leapt upwards, felt a dash of it in her face. Then the car was on the other side of the bridge and racing on. Sammy broke into a breathless roar of laughter.

‘Ha, ha, ha! Did you see that? What a thrill!’

‘You may have killed some of them!’

‘May have fiddlesticks!’ Sammy snapped. ‘Ha, ha, ha! I blew the horn, didn’t I? They ought to have got out of the way. Did you see Bessie? She hit the stream with a grunt like a grampus. Oh, gee! What a spree! Don’t be potty, Babs! I knew what I was doing!’

For a second Babs sat shakingly still. She felt her whole frame quivering with nervous reaction. She knew she had been afraid—horribly, terribly afraid, and in the aftermath of that fear she was as pale as parchment.

And then, suddenly rushing in to take the place of that fear, a storming wave of anger took possession of her. She forgot her mission in the knowledge that her own chums had been so shamefully treated, that she had been made to appear as an accomplice in that treatment.

Without realising what she was doing, she brought her hand round smartly and slapped Sammy’s cheek.

Smack!

The car skidded. In sheer astonishment Sammy applied the brakes. He stared.

‘Hey! What did you do that for?’

Babs did not wait to answer, but, tempestuously flinging open the door of the sports car, stepped down.

‘Thank you! You can take your beastly car back home! Those girls were friends of mine! Good-bye! I never want to see you again!’

In quivering anger she began to stride away. Sammy looked dismayed.

‘Babs — Babs! I say, comeback!’

But Babs affected not to hear.

‘Babs — Babs, you fool!’ Sammy roared. ‘Oh, all right! But you’ll get over it. Don’t forget the party. I’ll be waiting with the car at ten o’clock.’

Babs heard, but she took no notice.

She was running now. She ran with breathless haste. She had seen that accident. She

did not think now, on reflection, that it was likely that any of the girls were seriously hurt, for the bridge was less than three feet above the stream, and the stream it crossed was, owing to the winter drought, barely more than a foot deep. But she felt that she must know. She felt that someone might have been slightly hurt, at least. If help was needed —

She ran.

And then quite suddenly the bridge broke upon her vision, its smashed and distorted rail trailing down into the water. She was in time to see Jemima Carstairs, dripping wet, and extremely bedraggled, dragging out a roaring and shivering Bessie from the stream. Over the bridge she ran.

‘Girls!’ she gasped.

Eight pairs of eyes — bitter, fiercely hostile — fastened upon her. Eight angry girls, dripping water, regarded her.

‘Don’t speak to her!’ Rosa growled. ‘We’ve finished with her! Let her go out with her mad friends! We might have been killed for all she cared! Come on!’

‘But, I tell you —’ Babs gasped, almost sobbing in the tumult of her agitation.

‘Oh, get out of it!’ Rosa snapped savagely.

And as one the eight turned away. Mabs looked back. For a moment her eyes and the eyes of Babs met, and in Mabs’ face was hurt, wounded, angry expression — the expression of a friend who felt herself betrayed. But she said nothing. With Rosa’s hand on her sleeve, she allowed herself to be dragged away.

And presently on the spot which those eight dripping figures had occupied was only emptiness.

CHAPTER VIII

A Task Indeed

How long she sat there Babs did not know. She did not care. She saw nothing. She heard nothing until quite startingly, a sibilant voice fell upon her ears.

‘Babs!’

It was the voice of Austin Lynn.

She did not speak. He dropped on to the bank of the stream beside her.

‘Babs!’ he said in a tense whisper; and-then, gazing sharply at her, he became aware of the utter misery in her face. ‘Babs, what’s the matter?’ he added, in concern. ‘You look ill!’

Babs smiled twistedly.

‘Do I?’

‘Yes, What on earth — But, Babs, listen! I’ve news!’

Babs shrugged

‘And I’ve news, too,’ she said. ‘Mr. Lynn, I’m sorry, but — but things have happened! I — I can’t go through with this — not any longer!’

‘Babs!’ he exclaimed.

‘I’m sorry, but —’

And then her face averted, Babs told him of her experience.

‘Poor kid!’ he said. ‘I’d no idea that it would come to this. But —’ He shook his head.

‘You’ve made up your mind, Babs?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sorry!’ He sighed. ‘Well, so be it!’ he exclaimed. ‘It’s rotten! I don’t blame you; but — well, things might have been different!’ he added, with a little bitterness.

‘Babs, I’ll not disguise from you that you have been my one big hope in this case.’

You've got easy access to Ivy House. I never could get that. And today, Babs —'

He paused.

'Today,' he added in a tensely thrilling whisper, 'I've been at work. I've found out things. Knox —the man, I mean — not the boy —'

'Yes!' Babs said, drying her eyes.

'He's meeting someone to-night — a crook called Carlo Rendle; a man the police in Montreal want. Carlo's coming to his house — on a matter of business, I suspect. He and Knox are old partners. They were probably in the Montreal job together. Babs, I've a suspicion that Carlo is going to take the nugget away.'

Babs sat upright.

'Away?'

'Yes. And once Carlo has it, our chance has gone. Once Carlo gets it to London it will be melted down, and then well, what can save the major and his wife? You said just now that you'd been invited to this party?'

'I have,' Babs whispered.

'Babs' — he leaned forward — 'I don't like asking it — I hate asking it now. I know the fix you're in. But if the major and his wife are found guilty, it will be five years for them at least, and there's not a scrap of evidence other than the finding of the nugget in somebody else's possession that can save them.'

For a moment she did not reply.

And then gradually things became clear to her. She saw. Her friends had deserted her — even Mabs. They felt that she was a stranger to them. They felt that she was no longer the Babs they loved. They felt that she had betrayed them because of these new friends of hers — the callous Knoxes.

She stood up.

'Austin,' she said quietly. 'I want to carry on!'

He sprang to his feet. His face was radiant now. 'You're the right sort, Babs! Without you I should be stumped! You'll go to the party tonight?'

'Yes!' Babs cried.

'Splendid! Well, keep an eye on Carlo Rendle. See that he doesn't get away with anything. Keep your ears and eyes open, too. If you get into any sort of scrape, cry out. I shall be hiding in the garden. To-night, Babs' — his voice thrilled — 'to-night you may get the nugget! In that case —'

He smiled.

'The job is over, Babs.'

CHAPTER IX

A Stormy Meeting

'IT'S not good enough!'

'We won't act with Barbara Redfern!'

'Mabs, you've got to do something about it!'

'Hear, hear!'

The meeting of the Junior Amateur Dramatic Society, which was being held in the music-room, was growing quite stormy.

It was quite a large gathering. And quite obviously it felt very, very strongly indeed upon this question of Barbara Redfern.

Mabel Lynn was looking distressed and worried.

'Girls, please!' she begged now.

But the girls of the Fourth Form did not look as if they were going to please. They

looked wrathful and indignant.

Of them all, only Jemima Carstairs seemed at all composed. But then that was natural, for Jemima in no circumstances allowed herself to be shaken out of her unvarying mood of unruffled calm.

‘I say, there’s going to be no beating about the bush!’ Rosa Rodworth exclaimed.

‘We’re all agreed. Babs has to go! She’s letting the play down!’

‘Hear, hear!’

‘So the obvious thing,’ Rosa concluded, her dark eyes a-gleam, ‘is to give Babs the order of the boot, and put somebody else in her part. We’re all agreed upon that?’

‘But listen!’ Mabs cried distractedly.

‘Yes, Rosa; give Mabs a hearing,’ Clara supported. ‘Dash it all, she’s chairwoman!’

Mabs flashed a grateful glance at the tomboy.

‘Please listen, girls!’ she pleaded, with some agitation. ‘What Rosa has said is true. I admit it. But —but I think we ought to give Babs a chance to explain.

There was a grumble. A shuffling of feet. Mabs found herself in the minority on that point. What Barbara Redfern had done had disgusted them all.

‘Babs is my friend,’ Mabel said desperately.

‘Was, you mean,’ Jean Cartwright bitingly corrected.

‘She is my friend,’ Mabs went on. ‘I don’t understand her actions any more than you do. But she must have a reason. Babs would never do those things without a reason. I know it seems strange. I’m as worried about it as any of you —’

‘Well, what about her part?’ Rosa boiled up. ‘That’s the question!’

‘The part was written for Babs,’ Mabs replied. ‘You know that. There’s no one else who can do it half as well. I’m anxious that she should take it. You all know what depends upon this play. It’s absolutely necessary, if we’re going to win the Schools Dramatic Prize, that we should have the best possible cast.’

Another grumble. Girls stared resentfully at the pale-faced, golden-haired leader of the dramatic society.

‘And I say you can’t do the rest of the cast full justice by having Babs in the play,’

Rosa Rodworth jumped up to shout. ‘In any case, if you’re still keen on her, you can cross my name off the list. I’m willing to do my best, but I’m not willing to have my time wasted while Babs goes round getting up to mischief with those frightful urchins she’s picked up from Friardale.’

‘Hear, hear!’

‘That’s right, Mabs.’

‘Better ask Babs to resign.’

‘Put it to the vote!’

But Mabs shook her head. Desperately she was keeping herself under control. No one guessed how near to tears she was as she gazed around.

‘Please,’ she said. ‘No, it’s no good putting it to the vote. It’s — it’s like sentencing her without hearing her evidence. Let me talk to her first. Give her an opportunity to explain.’

‘And if she doesn’t explain, look you?’ Lucy Morgan excitedly cried.

‘Yes! Then? What then?’ Jemima Carstairs inquired.

‘Then,’ Mabs said, and gulped — ‘then, if she has no explanation, or it is not satisfactory —’

‘We call on Barbara Redfern to resign?’ Jean Cartwright asked.

‘Yes!’

There were nods at that. Girls exchanged glances. And then, as there was a sudden sound behind them, they all turned to look towards the door. In a second a stillness, in

which a quick intake of breath by Majorie Hazeldene made an unusual noise, descended.

Every eye gazed upon the figure which had pushed open the door — a girl with a glorious mass of chestnut hair, in whose strikingly pretty face was registered hesitation and uncertainty.

The girl was Barbara Redfern!

CHAPTER X The Storm Breaks

FOR a full half-minute no one spoke. But glances of resentment regarded the newcomer.

Barbara flushed to the roots of her hair, and then as quickly turned white.

Rather unsteadily she advanced into the room.

'I — I heard there was a meeting on,' she said.

From Rosa Rodworth there came a scornful: 'Ree-ally?'

Again there was a silence.

Babs suddenly met the gaze of Mabs. She seemed to wince as she gazed at her chum — at that pretty face, over-shadowed and uncertain, at the wondering question in Mabs' blue eyes.

Babs gulped.

But Clara Trevlyn, always one to come to the point, stood up.

'Come in, Babs,' she said 'We were talking about you.' Babs, amid silence, came farther into the room.

'The question we're going to decide,' Clara went on, 'is whether you wish to continue in the part picked for you in the play?'

Babs hesitated.

'Well, of course —'

'Then that means you've got to stop playing the giddy goat with those Knox kids!'

Clara bluntly proclaimed.

A murmur of approval went up.

Again Babs flushed.

Every eye was upon Babs now.

'I'm sorry — I can't promise that!' she replied in a stifled voice. 'My hat! Then you're really keen on them?' The danger light appeared in Clara's eyes, while Rosa smiled scornfully.

Babs looked desperate. Her eyes filled with mute appeal, sought Mabs again — Mabs looking puzzled, hurt.

The expression on her face was like that of someone who had been wounded.

Oh, if Babs could explain! If she could make them understand! If they knew the real reason for her friendship with those hateful Knox children, whom secretly she despised even more than they despised them! If she could speak out — But she couldn't.

She stood, crimson, confused but silent.

'Oh, let's give it up!' Rosa Rodworth said roughly. 'Babs doesn't want to explain, that's evident. She's keener on her precious new friends than on us. Well, let's cut the chin and get to business. Mabs, you know what you said. Are you going to put it to the vote!'

Mabs was pale. She looked beseechingly at Babs. 'Babs, please — won't you say anything else?' Babs desperately shook her head.

'But, Babs, it means that — that you'll be asked to resign.' Again the chestnut curls shook. But inwardly Babs' heart was bursting. She wanted to tell them that she detested the Knox brother and sister.

But she couldn't!

She bowed her head.

'Babs!' Mabs cried in agony.

'Let them vote,' Babs said quietly.

'You — you want them to?'

'No; but the committee does. I'm sorry!'

There was dead silence. But obviously there was nothing else to do.

Mabs shaking, looked around her. Even now she could not believe that she was hearing aright — that this girl who stood before her was Babs — that beloved Babs who had been her friend for so many terms, for whom she would have risked anything.

Babs, who had been as eager as herself to make the play a success. Babs, the soul of honour. One of the most popular girls in the school. What had happened to change her dear chum so?

'Come on!' Rosa cried impatiently.

'Very well!' Mabs moistened her lips. 'Babs, I — I hate to do it!' she cried brokenly.

'I — I can't!'

She dropped listlessly into her chair. But Lucy Farraday, the secretary and treasurer of the society, sprang to her feet.

'In that case the duty falls on me,' she said. 'Girls, you are all aware of the suggestion. Rosa Rodworth proposed it ——'

'I second it, look you!' Lucy Morgan shrilled.

'The motion is proposed and seconded,' Lucy went on. 'The motion is that Barbara Redfern shall be asked to resign her part in the play. All those in favour.'

Rosa Rodworth, Jean Cartwright, Lucy Morgan, and Phyllis Howell shot their hands up at once.

There was a pause, and then, almost defiantly, Clara held up her hand — the Form's honour was very dear to the Tomboy. Halfheartedly, Marjorie Hazeldene supported, while Lucy herself nodded in agreement.

Only two did not agree apparently. One was Jemima Carstairs, and the other Mabel Lynn.

'It is carried,' Lucy said. 'Jemima, you didn't vote.'

'No,' Jemima admitted.

'You wish to say anything?'

'Not at all, old Spartan. I don't think little Jimmy's old enough to have a vote, you know.'

'Very well. The motion is carried.' Lucy looked at Barbara. 'Babs, you heard?'

'Yes, I heard!' Babs murmured. 'I resign.'

'From this moment you are out of the cast! Girls, the business of the meeting now is to select somebody to take Babs' place.'

But Babs turned away, weary, and sick at heart, overwhelmed by emotion.

Expelled from the cast.

Some invisible hand, heavy and oppressive, seemed to have descended upon Babs, stifling everything within her.

CHAPTER XI

When Friends Quarrelled

‘ATISHOO! Atishoo!’

Barbara Redfern, trailing wearily along the Fourth Form corridor at Cliff House School, paused outside the door of Study No. 4 as that sound reached her ears.

‘Atishoo-oo-oo!’

She turned the handle and went in.

‘Bessie!’ Babs exclaimed.

Bessie blinked.

‘Oh, hal-halo, Babs!’ she said half-heartedly. Babs looked concerned.

‘Bessie, you’ve got a cold!’

Bessie sneezed yet again.

‘Poor old thing!’ And Babs came forward. She went to put her hand upon Bessie’s shoulder, but the fat one shrank away. Babs halted.

‘I — I —’ Bessie gulped. ‘Oh, really, Bib-Babs, I — I — atishoo! Oh, crumbs! This kik-cold is giving me a headache, you know. It was that ducking in the stream,’

Bessie went on miserably, and eyed Babs with hurt reproach. ‘You know, If I — atishoo!’

Babs looked troubled.

‘Bessie, I’m terribly sorry!’

Bessie blinked feebly.

‘Oh, crumbs! Oh, dud-dear! Babs, it — it’s rotten, you know! Nun-not the cold so much as — you drifting away from us all like this. Oh, crumbs!’ And Bessie coughed.

‘I — I’d put up with the cold, Babs, if — if I thought — atishoo!’

That came out with such violent gusto that the china ornaments on the mantelpiece shook.

‘Bib-Babs —’

‘Yes, Bessie?’

‘You’re not gig-going out with those two awful thuth-things again, are you?’ Bessie asked, with pathetic earnestness.

‘Poor old Bessie!’ Babs said again. ‘Don’t worry old thing! I’m sorry — really, about the cold and —and Mabs. It’s hateful, Bessie! But I have a reason for this, you know. I know I was in the car, but I never guessed that silly idiot was going to rush it at the bridge.’

Bessie brightened.

‘Dud-didn’t you, Babs?’ she beamed. ‘W-well, of course, I didn’t think you did, you know. But Rosa Rodworth said that you laughed. Oh, dear! Oh —’ And Bessie was shaken by another paroxysm of coughing and sneezing. ‘Oh, crumbs, I’m gig-going to dud-die, I think, Babs!’

‘Not you!’ Babs smiled. ‘Lie back, there’s a good old fattikins. Look here! Let me make you comfy.’ And Babs, glad of the activity, bustled about, found a cushion, and put it behind Bessie’s head, while the fat one, with an exhausted sigh, leaned back against it. ‘Now, that’s better, isn’t it?’ Babs asked brightly. ‘Shall I make you some nice, hot orange juice, Bessie?’

Bessie smiled pathetically, but beatifically. Bessie liked having a fuss made of her.

‘Oh, Babs, that will be lovely,’ she said now.

Babs laughed. She bustled across the room to the fireplace. And then she stopped as her eyes, aligning with the mantelpiece, found there a letter.

A letter stuck up against one of the vases was addressed to her. It was unstamped, and bore only her name and address — and the one word ‘Private.’

She turned quickly. ‘Bessie, who delivered this?’

Bessie blinked.

‘Oh, crumbs — that!’ she said. ‘Oh, I sus-say, I mum-meant to ask you about that. Sally brought it in about a quarter of an hour ago. Who’s it from, Babs?’
But Babs did not reply. She was tearing the letter open now. She withdrew a single sheet of paper.
And she read: ‘Must see you at once. Am waiting by the old oak in the woods. — A.L.’

A. L. Austin Lynn! Why, only an hour ago she had been talking to him. Something very important must have cropped up meantime to cause him to call her again. And if what Bessie said was true, he must already have been waiting a quarter of an hour!

‘What is it, Babs?’ Bessie asked curiously. ‘I say, you know, I’ve got a tickle in my nose. Is — is it a postal order, Babs?’

But Babs was not listening. Quickly she tossed the letter on to the fire. In sudden agitated haste she sprang towards the door.

‘Babs,’ Bessie yelled. ‘I sus-say, where are you going?’

‘Won’t be long,’ Babs said hurriedly.

‘Bib-but look here, what about my orange-juice?’

But Babs was already too far away to hear. With winged feet she sped, almost cannoning into a girl at the end of the corridor, who had just emerged from the music-room. She pulled up breathlessly.

‘Why — Oh, Mabs!’

‘Babs!’ Mabs’ eyes opened. ‘I say, where are you going?’ But Babs fled on, her pulses racing at the encounter. Mabs stared after her, her blue eyes clouded, then, sorrowfully and puzzled, she shook her head as she went on towards Study No. 4. Across the quad rushed Babs, down the drive, through the gates, and into the woods she plunged. The old oak to which the note referred was a hundred yards off the main road, and the woods were quiet and deserted.

Austin Lynn came forward to meet her.

‘Babs! I was beginning to wonder if my note had gone astray. But you got it —’

‘Yes, I’m sorry I’m late, but —’

‘Right-ho, Babs! You needn’t explain. And I can’t stop long, because — because — —’ He looked swiftly round. ‘Babs, you’re still going to Ivy House to-night?’

‘Of course!’

‘Good girl! Well, I’ve some news for you — something which will make your job easier. I’ve been prowling around there myself, Babs. As a matter of fact, I was spotted, and I had to get away rather quickly. But I’ve found out where the nugget is hidden.’ Austin Lynn said swiftly. ‘Listen, Babs! You know the small room with the lattice window which overlooks the garden?’

Babs breathlessly nodded.

‘I climbed a tree. I was looking in.’ Austin Lynn’s face grew keen. ‘I saw Knox hide it there. There’s a little cupboard opposite the window — a small thing, only a foot square. He put it there, behind an old deed-box. So to-night, Babs —’

‘To-night I can get it,’ Babs breathed.

‘Yes; but be careful. If there’s any trouble or any fuss, shout. I shall be hiding in the garden—in the clump of bushes just opposite the window — and, if there’s a chance I’ll take the nugget from you. You understand?’

‘Yes!’

‘Good girl!’ Austin Lynn nodded. ‘Well, now I must go,’ he said. ‘I fancy Knox saw me as I was creeping away. He might be trailing me. He’s got more than a suspicion

that I'm on the track. That's why he sent for Carlo Rendle. Obviously he is getting frightened, and wants to get this business over in a hurry. But, listen. If by any chance I shouldn't see you to-night —'

'Yes?' Babs said.

'Meet me here at this spot tomorrow afternoon — at three o'clock. You can manage that?'

Babs thought. Tomorrow was a special half-holiday at Cliff House — an extra half granted for the great hockey match between the Cliff House First Eleven and Whitechester School, their hottest rivals.

She had rather looked forward to attending the match, but in these desperate circumstances —

'Yes, I can manage it,' she agreed.

'Good!' His eyes shone. 'Thanks, Babs; you're a brick!' he said.

'I shan't forget this, and neither will the Lynns when they know. Good-bye now!'

Babs went back, thoughtfully frowning. The task sounded simple, but it was not Babs to count her chickens before they were hatched, and even though she knew the hiding-place of the nugget, that was no guarantee she could get it.

And there was always the possibility in the meantime, that the hiding-place would have been changed.

Into the school she wandered, her mind busy. How to get that nugget? What excuse to make at the party in order to get into the room by herself? Almost without realising it she found herself at the door of Study No.4.

She opened it and went in.

Mabs was there, the table was laid for tea. On the hob the kettle was cheerfully spluttering, and Mabs was kneeling in front of the fire with a rosy face, making toast. Bessie blinked as Babs entered.

'Oh, Bib-Babs,' she said, 'there you are! Mabs made me my orange-juice!'

Mabs straightened up. Her face red from the fire, turned even redder as she found herself staring at her leader.

'L-like some tea?'

'Yes, thanks! But I'll help to get it, of course.'

And Babs set to work cutting bread-and-butter. She smiled at Mabs, and Mabs smiled back. But neither smile was spontaneous, and neither smile was carefree.

The atmosphere seemed to be charged with constraint, and a certain hostility.

Babs and Mabs hardly spoke. When they did speak they spoke like polite strangers.

And yet they were not feeling hostile to each other. Had each obeyed her own instincts they would have been the same cheerful ragging couple as of yore.

They sat down to tea at last.

Bessie, feeling really groggy, refused tea, which showed that her illness on this occasion was not assumed. Very stiffly they sat down. Almost mechanically they ate and drank, saying little, hardly daring to look at each other.

For minutes at a time there were long, painful silences, broken only by the sound of knives tapping against plates. When that silence was broken it was with some stiff little observation.

Babs felt that she could stand it no longer. The food was choking her, the tea was tasteless. She had to do something to break down this chilling barrier. She said:

'Mabs!'

'Yes, Babs?'

'About the play?'

Mabs frowned.

‘Who have you put in my place?’

‘Rosa Rodworth.’

Mabs hated herself for what she said next, but she could not resist the thrust.

‘I had no idea you were interested in the play any longer,’ she said.

Babs flushed.

‘Mabs, that’s not very kind, is it?’ she asked reproachfully.

Mabs drew a deep breath.

‘If you were interested in the play, Babs, you could have carried on.’

Babs pursed her lips.

‘You had your opportunity,’ Mabs added.

‘Yes,’ agreed Babs.

‘Oh, crumbs!’ murmured Bessie, in dismay, ‘dud-don’t row, you know.’

‘I —’ Mabs gulped, She felt the bitterness she had tried to keep down welling irresistibly to the surface now. ‘It wasn’t a very nice thing to do, was it?’ she asked. ‘I thought you were going to help me to make this play a success, Babs. You know what it means to me — you know what it means to the school.’

Babs was silent.

‘And — and if you could give any reason for acting as you have done it might not be so bad.’ Mabs rushed on. Her face grew a little flushed. She realised with dismay that she was precipitating a quarrel, but for the life of her she could not retreat. ‘But those little hooligans you’ve taken up with — against your own friends, too —’

‘Mabs!’ pleaded Babs.

‘Well?’ Mabs looked bitter. ‘I suppose it shouldn’t matter. Why should I care if you let me down and take up somebody else?’

‘Mabs, please — please —’ Babs begged desperately.

‘Well, why should I?’ Mabs said angrily. ‘I thought you were my friend, Barbara.

You were until you got this bee in your bonnet, and since then you’ve not been the same. The Barbara Redfern I once knew,’ she said, her eyes flashing, ‘would never have let me down so heartlessly as you have, Babs, whatever the reason. That Barbara Redfern would have told me what was on her mind. We’ve never had any secrets from each other before.’

Babs shook her head in helpless dismay.

‘And — and — you’ve ruined my play!’ Mabs went on bitterly. ‘You’ve turned the Form against yourself. Now —’

Something came into her face, draining it of its heightened colour, and then most astonishingly she collapsed in her chair, put her head down upon the table, and burst into tears.

‘Mabs!’ Babs cried in a breaking voice. ‘Mabs dear —’ Her hand went forward, resting upon the disarranged golden tresses that tumbled over the table.

Mabs suddenly jumped up.

One look she gave Babs, her lower lip went in between her teeth, and then, as if there was some intolerable something she could bear no longer, she fled from the study.

‘Babs —’ Bessie mumbled.

Babs did not reply. The tears coursing down her cheeks, made shiny a face that was helpless, strained and hopeless. In blind unseeingness she stared at the door.

And then, in the depths of her misery, Bessie wept also.

CHAPTER XII

The Call of Friendship

NOT until call-over did Babs see what she ought to do after the scene in the study. Her mind was in a whirl.

Never before had Babs known what it was to be shaken as she was shaken then. She felt, in fact, that she could not see Mabs again. She knew exactly what her chum was suffering. She knew her mood. Bitterly angry, feeling that she had been betrayed. It was that welter of emotions which had prompted that outburst in Study No. 4.

Better by far if she and Mabs did not meet, Babs thought.

So Babs rather sadly took herself to the library, where all was quiet and peaceful. She took with her a sheaf of papers, hardly knowing why she did so, but feeling that she must have work to distract her mind.

Those papers would have surprised Mabs if she had seen them. For they were the lines of the part in the play which had originally been assigned to Babs.

And Babs, seeking distraction, perhaps feeling that if everything came right in time she might still be able to take her part, was learning those lines now with an intensity with which she had never swotted up a subject for an examination.

While in the music-room—

‘No, no, no!’ Mabs said wearily. ‘No, Rosa! Don’t say it like that — like this —’ Rehearsal was going on.

But what a mockery of rehearsal from Mabs’ point of view.

Rosa did her best, but Rosa’s best was not so good as Babs would have been.

Mabs passed a dazed hand across her brow.

Once again she interrupted. Rosa glared.

‘Look here, Mabs, what’s the big idea?’

‘It’s that crossing from right to left,’ Mabs said anxiously. ‘I told you to pause half-way across the floor.’

Rosa scowled.

‘You’d better get somebody else to fill the bill,’ she said. ‘I’m getting fed-up!’

‘Let’s go through it again,’ Mabs said wearily.

Rosa, by the time they commenced the fourth rehearsal, was boiling. The rest of the cast were becoming restless. The play which everyone had looked forward to as fun was rapidly becoming an ordeal of tried nerves and fraying tempers.

Perhaps nobody was sorry when the bell for call-over rang. Then, at call-over, Mabs and Babs met face to face again. They met with the most hesitant of looks before they fell into place side by side.

The roll was gone through. Still Babs and Mabs stood side by side as if they had been strangers. But suddenly Babs caught her breath.

Four cold fingers closed round her own fingers. Some electric quality seemed to spring from those fingers into hers, making her whole face glow with sudden pleasure.

The grip tightened. Her own fingers folded up to meet those so trustingly entwined in hers. And there, holding hands but still not looking at each other, Babs and Mabs stood until call-over was finished.

There was that. It was a small thing. It was an amazing thing since nothing was said between them — yet Babs knew from it that the old friendship was still there.

There were only two voices which wished her good-night that night — they were Bessie and Mabs.

Mary Buller, the prefect on duty, came round to put out the lights.

‘Good-night, you kids,’ she said. ‘No larking, mind. Bull’s on duty, and she isn’t in a good temper. Good-night!’

‘Good-night, Mary!’

Out went the lights. The dormitory was plunged in darkness. Babs listened to the prefect's retiring footsteps.

Silence. From the old clock tower the hour chimed. Nine.

Nine o'clock. In another hour she was due to meet Sammy Knox and his sister, Katie, on the road outside the school.

And after that —

She lay still, running over the words of Mabs' play in her mind.

Dong!

A quarter to ten! Now Babs gently raised herself, her heart beating a little faster. She looked up and down the faintly glimmering hummocks in the darkness.

'Anyone awake?' she breathed.

Immediately came: 'Yes, Babs, is that you?'

It was Mabs. Babs held her breath.

'Yes!'

'Can't you sleep, Babs? I can't. I've been thinking —'

'Oh, go to sleep!' growled someone.

'Hush, Mabs!'

'But why?'

Babs did not reply. She bit her lip. She had hoped everyone was sleeping, especially Mabs. She had no fancy for the Form to be a witness to her escapade, but at all costs she must keep her appointment. There was a rustle as she threw the sheets back and climbed out of bed.

She was dressing rapidly, feverishly now, anxious to be gone. Mabs sat up.

'Babs, where are you going?'

There was a chuckle from someone in the room. Lydia Crossendale answered.

'Can't you guess? To meet dear little Sammy, of course. Will the sister be there this time, Babs, or have you planned a moonlight walk?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' sniggered Nancy Bell.

Babs' face burned.

But she made no answer. She was dressed now. She strode towards the door.

'Babs!' Mabs called.

Babs did not heed. She was glad, though, that Mabs could not see her.

She went out. There was a buzz in the dormitory.

'My hat, she's gone!'

'The nerve!'

'She's bound to walk into a prefect.'

'But where's she gone?'

'Well, she didn't deny that she was going to meet sweet Sammy, did she?' Lydia jeeringly asked. 'Mabs, do you know where she's gone?'

'No,' Mabs answered shortly.

Mabs' heart leapt as a thought occurred to her. Supposing Miss Bullivant came in! The colour of alarm flamed into Mabs' face. She did not understand Babs. Babs had treated her hatefully. The Babs she knew now was a different girl.

There had been that heartbreaking scene in the study — but making up for that had been that silent handclasp at call-over.

Mabs stole from her bed.

'What's the matter, Mabs?' asked Leila Carroll.

'Nothing!'

But there was. And though the light was dim, they all saw what Mabs was doing. She tore Babs' bolster from beneath the pillow and laid it in the bed. She covered it

over with the sheets so as to make it appear to casual eyes that a sleeping figure still reposed within the bed. Then she tiptoed back to her own.

But before she reached it there came an interruption. The door opened, the light switched on. Miss Bullivant, her thin features sharp and suspicious, stood on the threshold.

Mabs stood still, Miss Bullivant looked stern.

‘Ah, you are out of bed, Mabel,’ she said. ‘I thought something was happening here. I heard a voice. What are you doing out of bed?’

Mabs was utterly dismayed.

‘Well, I —— I got out ——’

‘So I see! Some mischief, eh?’ Miss Bullivant’s eyes gleamed. ‘Very well, Mabel, you will get back to bed and will take fifty lines for being out of it.’ Her quick eyes darted up and down the dormitory. For a moment they rested with suspicion upon the bulky shape beneath the clothes in Barbara’s bed. Then she nodded.

‘Good-night, all, and go to sleep.’

The light switched out. Mabs, humiliated, climbed into bed. Once more silence settled upon the Fourth Form dormitory.

CHAPTER XIII

Success, and Then ——

‘BABS!’ Sammy cried.

‘You got away, then?’ Katie asked.

‘Yes! Everything ready?’

‘What-ho!’

‘Topping! Then let’s get off as soon as we can, shall we?’ Babs asked hurriedly. She clambered into the car.

‘All serene?’ Sammy grinned, in high good humour. ‘Gee, you’re on the dot, Babs’ — this as the hour of ten came from the clock-tower. ‘We left the old man and the old girl’ — Sammy’s way of referring to his parents — ‘playing cards with Carlo. Jump in! Hold tight! We’re going!’

Ivy House was normally a quarter of an hour’s walk from the school. Sammy compressed that quarter of an hour into about four minutes.

‘Well, here we are!’ he announced, as he whizzed up the drive and applied brakes outside the house. ‘Tumble out, Babs!’

Babs, her heart fluttering a little, tumbled out.

‘O.K.!’ Sammy grinned. Very familiarly he linked his arm in that of the Cliff House girl, taking possession of her. ‘This way,’ he said. ‘Katie, bring the rugs and things. Play cards, Babs?’

‘Not often,’ Babs said.

‘Oh, gee! And we were looking forward to a flutter. Got any money?’

‘About a shilling,’ Babs informed him.

‘A bob?’ he scowled. ‘You can’t play cards with a bob,’ he said. ‘But here we are.’

He pushed the door open, leading the way into the hall where Babs divested herself of her hat and coat, while Sammy pushed open a door on the right. ‘Dad — mother!’ he cried boisterously.

There was a movement.

Babs, smoothing her hair, hesitated. She peered into the room, thick with tobacco smoke, at two men and a woman who were seated at the table.

There were cards on the table, and little piles of silver and copper. The three adults turned as one at their entry.

For the first time Babs found herself speaking to Mr. and Mrs. Knox.

She found them little to her liking.

Mr. Knox was a big man with a rough face and hair cropped short.

Mrs. Knox was a blousy, untidy woman, very much, and very badly made-up, scarlet cheeks vieing with carmine lips. She greeted Babs effusively, but Mr. Knox, after the first glance of sulky interest, merely scowled.

The third member of the party was Carlo Rendle, a dark-featured, high-cheek-boned man of thirty or so, with an intensely black, thin moustache that formed a straight disconcerting line above his upper-lip.

‘Sure you wouldn’t like to join in?’ Mrs. Knox suggested brightly, and looked quite surprised when Babs refused.

‘Oh, come on; let’s get on with the game!’ Mr. Knox growled. ‘You kids sling it and amuse yourselves somewhere else! But don’t make too much row. We’ll finish the hand, Carlo, and then—’

‘You’ll show me—eh?’ Carlo grinned.

‘Yups! Come on, Mary! Stop finicking! Sit down!’

Mary was, apparently, Mrs. Knox. She looked hesitantly at her husband, shrugged at Barbara, and then obediently took her place at the table again. Sammy scowled; Katie pulled a face, but Babs only smiled.

It was by no means an auspicious beginning to a pleasant social evening, but it was a beginning which suited her. The adults, finding that the youngsters had no interest in their own pursuits, obviously wanted nothing further to do with them.

Babs thrilled. If only she could make use of her opportunities now!

‘Well?’ Sammy scowled. ‘What are we going to do?’ A sudden idea came into Babs’ head. ‘Shall we go outside?’ ‘Well, what shall we do outside?’

‘We’ll think of something,’ Babs vaguely replied. ‘But what?’

‘Can’t you kids go and do something?’ Mr. Knox growled crossly. ‘Don’t stand chattering there! Beat it!’

It was quite patent that Sammy was afraid of his father. He looked apprehensive all at once, then edged anxiously towards the door.

‘Come on; better get!’ he advised with a nod.

They went out. Katie pulled a face.

‘It’s all your fault,’ she said resentfully, turning to Babs. ‘If you’d only been willing to have a flutter, we should all be enjoying ourselves now.’

‘I’m sorry if I’ve spoiled everything. Like me to go home?’ Babs said daringly.

‘Nun-no, of course not,’ Sammy said, in alarm. ‘But — Oh, hang it! What shall we do?’

‘Come into the garden,’ Babs suggested.

Into the garden they went. Outside the door they stood, Katie and Sammy scowling, Babs throbbing with excitement. Her plans were cut and dried now.

In one room of Ivy House all the adult occupants were gathered. Outside she had coaxed the younger generation. The way to the room in which the nugget was hidden was clear — if she could only convincingly absent herself from the company of this obnoxious pair.

Babs pointed suddenly to a patch of rhododendrons.

‘Look! What was that?’ she asked, in a suddenly thrilled voice.

‘What was what?’

‘In the bushes?’

Sammy and Katie turned to stare. It was Babs’ opportunity. Quickly she stooped, picking up a stone. Sammy, with a suspicious sniff, went towards the clump of bushes.

Babs drew a deep breath. She raised her hand, flinging the stone as hard as she could through the greenhouse which stood fifty or sixty yards away. There was a sudden crash.

‘There!’ Babs cried. ‘Did you see? Catch him! In the greenhouse — quick!’

‘Gee!’ gasped Sammy.

‘Come on!’

He hadn’t the faintest idea what the excitement was about. Neither had Katie. But Babs’ sudden exclamation, followed by the crash, sent them both off in an eager scamper to investigate at once.

Babs chuckled at the success of the ruse. Now was her chance! She knew exactly where the room that Austin Lynn had described was, and silently she flew up the stairs. Along a dimly-lit corridor, up another short flight—and here she was!

The door was locked, but the key was on the outside. Babs turned it, closed the door, and tiptoed into the room. It was gloomily dark. A glance towards the windows showed her at once that the curtains hanging to the floor, had been stretched across it. Dare she turn on the light?

Why not?

Sammy and Katie were on the other side of the house. The only person to see the light would be Austin Lynn, who, if he kept his promise, would be hidden in the bushes beneath the window.

She switched it on, revealing a room shabbily furnished. No carpet covered the floor, and the floorboards, old and dirty, revealed great cracks and fissures and holes where the knots in the wood had been pressed out by the passage of feet.

She turned to the wall opposite the window, and her pulses leapt as she saw, half-way up that wall, the tiny cupboard — the goal of her quest. It was too high for her to reach it from the floor, however. With trembling eagerness she seized a chair and mounted it.

She tugged at the cupboard door.

It opened. Now she held her breath. In front of her was the black enamelled deedbox which Austin Lynn had described.

Raising herself on tiptoe, she groped behind it, holding her breath as her fingers encountered a cold, rough, uneven surface.

The nugget!

‘Got it!’ Babs breathed.

She drew it from its hiding-place.

But what was that?

Babs started. Very hurriedly she slipped the lump of gold-ore into her pocket.

Footsteps! Footsteps approaching the room from the corridor outside. Heavy lumbering footsteps —the footsteps of men.

‘My goodness!’ gasped Babs.

Now she heard voices.

Babs looked round wildly. Escape by the door was impossible since the corridor outside was occupied.

The only possible hiding-place was behind the curtains. She jumped from the chair, hastily pushing it into place. She switched off the light.

Then, her heart drumming so that she was conscious of its beating in her ears, she

jumped for the curtains, whisking through them, and standing on the other side as she held them together.

Not a second too soon! The door opened. The light went on. Babs almost stopped breathing.

‘Well, here we are,’ the grumbling voice of Knox senior commented. ‘I hid the thing here for safety’s sake. You’ll melt it down with the other stuff?’

‘Naturally!’

‘Good enough!’ Another grunt.

Babs stood stiff, clenching her hands.

Now there was the sound of a chair scraping across the floor. A grunt and a creak as the senior Knox mounted it. A faint plop! as the cupboard door swung open. Then —

‘What the dickens —’ Mr. Knox said in a puzzled voice. Still as a statue Babs stood.

There came the sound of scraping fingers upon the deedbox. Then Knox’s voice again, betraying agitation.

‘Carlo, hold this box!’ A pause. ‘What the —’ Another pause of stupefied silence; then a roar: ‘It’s gone!’

‘Gone?’

‘Gone, yes!’ The voice of the elder Knox became vibrant with alarm and rage. ‘I kept it here to be safe. I put it here only this afternoon. Somebody’s been here.

Somebody’s pinched it. Those wretched kids —’

‘Your kids?’

‘Them! And that girl from the school. They’ve been up to some prank! Who else? Come on!’

Hullabaloo then. Wild excitement. Mr. Knox, in a truly terrible temper, let himself go. He shouted. In his rage he danced. The floor, old and rotten, quivered.

Then the light went out. The door closed, Angry, stamping footsteps were heard savagely thudding off down the passage.

Babs almost swooned with relief. She had not been discovered. It had not occurred to them to search the room. They had no suspicion that the nugget had been taken only a moment before they entered.

Mr. Knox and Carlo would be out searching the grounds for Katie and Sammy and herself. She had time to get away. She sprang from her hiding-place, jumping towards the door. She turned the handle.

And then a gasp of dismay came from her lips — the door was locked.

Babs shook her head. She was trapped — trapped! No, not yet!

There was the window — a small enough window, but one through which she could squeeze. Outside the window was a drop of something like thirty feet, but it was a drop which must be risked.

She dimly remembered seeing a drainpipe running up the wall. If she could make that —

No time to think, no time to plan! She must act.

Desperately she rushed to the window again. In a frantic surge of energy she attacked the rusty latch. Downstairs she heard sounds of strife Mr. Knox’s voice upraised, the shrill bleating of his wife, the sharp tones of Carlo.

A door was flung open. Like a snarling cyclone Mr. Knox’s voice went reverberating into the garden.

‘Sammy! Katie! You young hooligans, where are you?’

The catch came away.

Desperately Babs pushed at the window. It opened with a click. She climbed up, then

discovered that the heel of her shoe had got wedged in a fissure between the boards. She stooped to drag it free. Her shoe came off.

At the same moment there was a soft thud. But she paid no heed in her agitation. The shoe! Bother it! It would not go on! There! She clamped it on with a reckless disregard for the leather.

Then, in frantic terror she climbed on to the broad, flat windowsill outside. In the darkness she groped. A thankful gasp came to her lips when she felt the rusty, cold, cylindrical metal beneath her nervous fingers.

Down below a pair of unseen hands parted the bushes. A pale, anxious face, glimmering grey in the light of stars, peered up at her.

‘Babs!’

Babs heard. Now she was clinging desperately to the drainpipe. If it came away and dashed her to the ground — But, no! It creaked, it quivered, but, thank goodness, it held. Like a breathless monkey she shinned down it.

Pandemonium now from the other side of the house. Mr. Knox storming and roaring.

‘But, dad, we haven’t been in the room,’ Sammy quavered, in a scared voice.

‘Where’s the other girl?’

‘I don’t know!’

‘Well, find her!’

Now Babs, reeling, felt her feet touch firm ground. A hand caught her, a pale face glimmered out of the darkness. It was the hand and face of Austin Lynn.

‘Babs, you little chump! You might have broken your neck! Great Scott! Listen to that row! You got it, Babs?’ he added eagerly.

Babs plunged her hand into her pocket. And then she stood perfectly still in horror. Her eyes rounded. Her face became ashen.

The nugget was no longer there!

.

At the same moment there sounded a crashing of feet. Sammy’s voice querulously upraised:

‘Babs, Babs, where are you?’

CHAPTER XIV A New Arrangement

‘I must have — have dropped it!’ Babs gasped. ‘I — I had it!’

Then, in a blinding flash illumination dawned upon her. Back into her mind flooded the memory of the faint thud as she had groped for her shoe. She guessed then what had happened.

The pocket of her tunic, shallow, had opened, emptying the precious nugget as she had stooped. She felt almost sick with disappointment.

‘Babs!’ roared Sammy’s voice. ‘Where are you?’

‘Lost it?’ Austin Lynn groaned beneath his breath. ‘Where?’

‘In the room!’

‘Bad luck!’ he sympathised. ‘Anyway, do your best to find it — if you can! Phew!

This is getting hot! They’re after you! You’ll have to show up, or you’ll be suspected! Look here —’

‘Babs!’ Sammy shouted.

‘Shout back! I’ll tell you what to do —’

Babs shouted.

‘Here, Sammy!’

‘Where are you?’

‘Now, quick!’ Lynn fiercely hissed. ‘I’m going to run! Follow me — as if you were chasing me! They’ll think I’m the thief, then. They’ll think I’ve got away with the nugget. That might give you another chance. They won’t suspect you. Make up some yarn when you’re questioned. You understand?’

‘Yes!’

‘Come on, then!’

‘Babs!’ roared Sammy.

‘Here!’ Babs shouted back. ‘Sammy, quick He’s getting away!’

‘Gee! Who?’

But Babs did not reply to that. Quickly she saw the detective’s plan. As he lumbered away, she followed, crashing after him.

Sammy and Katie came thudding up behind her.

‘Babs —’

‘Quick!’ Babs shouted excitedly. ‘Buck up! Oh —’ and she stumbled — on purpose, of course. ‘He’s getting away!’

‘My hat!’

‘Stop him!’

‘Who is it?’

But Babs was flat on the ground then, and Austin Lynn was trashing through the undergrowth of the neglected front garden. Sammy rushed up, almost falling over Babs.

Katie rushed up, crashing into him. After them came Carlo and Mr. Knox, the latter in a terrible temper, followed by a fluttering, palpitating Mrs. Knox. A shout broke from Carlo.

‘There he is — look!’

‘Get him!’

Babs raised her head. She was just in time to see Austin Lynn, a shadowy figure in the gloom, leaping off down the drive. But Lynn had a start of thirty yards or so.

‘After him!’ yelled Carlo Rendle.

‘Get him!’

Carlo and his confederate charged off at once. Sammy went with them, roaring as though he hoped the very power of his voice would strike the fugitive as he ran. But Katie and Mrs. Knox stopped.

‘Babs —’

Babs gaspingly rose to her feet, uncomfortably conscious that she had fallen into a bed of nettles, which had blistered and stung her hands. But so far all was well.

‘Oh, dear! Could — could I have a drink of water, please?’ Babs gulped.

‘Why, of course!’

Mrs. Knox took hold of her.

Babs rose unsteadily to her feet. Though exhaustion was part of her pose it was not altogether assumed. She was shaken and quiver in as she was led back to the house. She really was white-faced as she sipped the glass of water which Mrs. Knox, looking scared, put to her lips. And she was grateful for the cold, reviving influence the drink had upon her. But by that time Mr. Knox and Carlo, followed by a glum and drooping Sammy, had returned.

‘You got him?’ Mrs. Knox asked quickly.

Mr. Knox scowled viciously.

‘No; he got away!’

Mrs. Knox looked quite faint.

‘And — and you think it was him — the detective?’ she quaveringly asked.

‘Shut up!’

Mrs. Knox nervously retreated. With lowering brows his father gazed at Sammy.

‘What happened?’ he asked.

‘Babs saw someone. We heard a crash in the greenhouse, and we went. Babs, you didn’t come —’

‘No,’ Babs admitted, ‘you see — I saw him —’

‘On the other side of the house?’

‘Yes!’ Babs answered truthfully.

‘And Babs gave chase, you see?’ Sammy said importantly. ‘That’s why we missed her. That’s right, isn’t it, Babs?’

Babs nodded.

‘Well, he’s got it!’ said Carlo. ‘That means we’ve got to get it back.’ He leaned towards his confederate and whispered something in his ear.

A light of *alarm* shone for a moment in Mr. Knox’s grim face, and then very savagely he nodded.

‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘I guess that was his plan. If we could only be sure it was him.’

‘Well, who else? You saw him yesterday.’

‘Shush! Not in front of the kids.’ Mr. Knox said. ‘O.K., Carlo! Babs, you didn’t see him — to recognise him —’

But again Babs shook her head.

‘Wish we knew,’ Knox muttered anxiously.

‘What about having a look at the room?’ Carlo suggested. ‘He may have left something behind.’

That was a good suggestion. It was a suggestion which, in his present mood, the senior Knox fastened upon at once.

‘Come on!’ he said.

He and Carlo went off, leaving the rest of the party there. Babs closed her eyes — sick with bitterness and disappointment. They were going to search! They would find the nugget she had dropped —

But when they appeared five minutes later, the scowl, the sulky ferocity of their faces showed that they had found nothing.

‘Let us have a look,’ Sammy said eagerly. ‘We might find something you’ve missed. If the burglar’s been in the room he’s bound to have left traces, you know.’

Babs’ eyes lit up with new hope.

‘Yes, let us look!’ she cried eagerly.

The men exchanged glances.

‘No harm in it,’ Carlo suggested.

‘No,’ agreed Mr. Knox uneasily.

And so they went, the three of them, Sammy and Katie in high spirits at playing the part of detectives.

But Babs took command.

‘No, wait a minute,’ she said as she entered the room. ‘Let’s organise this. Sammy, you search that side of the room. Katie, you go over the other side. I’ll search by the window.’

‘All right,’ Sammy agreed, with a chuckle.

The curtains there had been pulled aside now. The window had been closed — by Mr.

Knox or Carlo, presumably. Babs' eyes sought the floor, finding at once the gaping fissure between two of the floorboards in which she had caught the heel of her shoe. She bent forward.

And then she caught her breath.

Something that shone with a faint gleam in the darkness of the crack winked back at her. The nugget!

He looked quickly at Sammy, at Katie. But they, intent upon their own tasks, were paying no attention to her. The nugget had fallen a good nine inches, and was resting upon the upper part of the ceiling of the room beneath.

Though the crack was wide, it was not wide enough to accommodate her hand and wrist, and she knew, in order to retrieve that nugget, that she would have to use some implement to prise up the floorboard. Yet it could not remain, its yellow glow winking in that betraying fashion.

Very carefully Babs scraped together the dust of the board with her foot.

The dust she scraped into the hole. Still with a wary eye on her fellow searchers she scraped more dust until at last the nugget was covered and the tell-tale glitter was no longer visible.

She breathed with relief.

At some future date —

'Well, I guess there's nothing here.' Sammy said at last. 'I reckon it's hopeless.

Anyway, I wonder what it was the chap pinched? The old man's mighty mysterious over it.' Sammy frowned. 'Still, blow it! Come on, I'm fed-up. Let's go down and join the party.'

And they went. But when they got downstairs the party had broken up. At least, they learned from Mrs. Knox that her husband and Carlo had suddenly gone off in great excitement, without vouchsafing a word as to their intentions.

And Babs, at that, felt another tremor of uneasiness.

She had heard enough now to guess that the men were on the trail of her detective friend, Austin Lynn.

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An hour, two hours passed. Still the menfolk of Ivy House had not put in an appearance.

Babs professed her intention of returning to school. Sammy pulled a face.

'Well, if you must go, you must,' he said.

Babs tramped back to school. It was nearly one o'clock then, and the old place lay shuttered and silent. She found her way in without mishap, climbed the creaking stairs, and entered the Fourth Form dormitory.

A sound of deep and heavy breathing came to her ears. She sighed with relief. So her absence had not been discovered.

She tiptoed to her bed and then stared as, in the dim light, she saw that cunningly arranged bolster. At the same moment a whispered voice penetrated through the gloom.

'Babs!'

'Yes?'

'Is — is everything all right? You've been out a long time —' It was Mabs!

'Yes,' Babs said. 'Mabs, was it you who made up the dummy?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you,' Babs said, and in the darkness she smiled — a tender, misty smile. 'That

was awfully decent of you, Mabs.'

'Go to sleep!' growled a sleepy voice.

Babs undressed.

She climbed into bed, wishing Mabs a good-night. A whispered 'Good-night!' came back, in a troubled voice, and silence reigned once more in the dormitory.

In less than five minutes Babs, worn out with the adventures of the day and the excitements of the night, was asleep.

On the following afternoon Babs slipped through the gap in the hedge that led to Lane's Field, keeping a wary eye about her.

She hurried. In less than two minutes she had plunged into Friardale Woods.

Everything was quiet here except for the twittering of the birds.

The grass underfoot was bright and green. It was wet, however, for there had been a sharp shower of rain during the morning. Now she was within sight of the old oak.

She hurried forward.

She stopped, staring round.

Austin Lynn was not there!

Babs blinked. It was unusual for the detective to miss an appointment. She glanced round cautiously.

'Mr. Lynn — Austin!' she said softly.

There was no answer.

Babs frowned. She took a step forward. Then she started, her eyes fixed suddenly upon the ground.

There was a small clearing at this spot, with the grass growing higher than in most parts of the wood; but the grass was now trampled and crushed, and where it grew thin great, heavy foot-marks showed on the soft surface of the ground.

It was evident at once that there had been some sort of a struggle.

'My goodness!' Babs breathed.

Her heart was thumping now. She went forward, examining the prints. Then suddenly, beneath a nearby bush, she saw a battered hat, squashed and mud-stained, peeping from beneath an overhanging branch.

That hat! She knew to whom it belonged even before she plucked it from its hiding-place, and, turning it over, found the initials inside. 'A. L.' Austin Lynn!

Babs' eyes became wide.

Bemusedly she turned the hat over in her hands.

And then she saw something else — a something which caused the colour to ebb from her face. The silk lining of the hat was muddy like the exterior, but among the mud were ominous blobs and patches of red.

Blood!

Babs trembled suddenly. She saw now what had happened. Austin Lynn, waiting for her, perhaps, had been set upon, had been attacked. By whom? As if in answer to that question a sudden glittering in the grass caught her eye. She went towards it and picked up a cufflink.

One of the links which, last night, she had seen in the shirt-cuffs of Sammy Knox's father!

The prints, outlined clearly in the wet grass and the soft earth, went on for a dozen yards or so. Then suddenly they stopped, giving place to the prints of only two pairs of feet.

'They overcame him here,' she deduced. 'They picked him up and carried him away.'

In quivering apprehension she went on. But not far. Twenty yards farther on she came upon an unmistakable trail of tyreprints. Mr. Knox and Carlo had had the car!

The car had not been on a road. That fact alone would have excited her suspicions. She was glad now that it was not on a road, for the prints of the tyres, clear and well-defined, led her onwards.

She followed the car's course, finally halting outside the door of a ramshackle old hut of rusty corrugated iron near the old chalk quarry in the woods.

Here the car had stopped and reversed, turning backwards.

From inside the hut came a stifled groan.

In a moment Babs was inside the hut.

Austin Lynn lay there. Great splashes of mud were upon his clothes. There was a smear of blood upon his temples. His hands were bound behind him. One foot was twisted up and doubled beneath him in a curiously helpless way. Around his mouth was a handkerchief.

'Mr. Lynn!' Babs gasped.

The agony in his eyes answered her.

She hastened to his side. With trembling fingers she worked at his bonds. Lynn sat up with a groan.

'You tracked the car, Babs?'

'Yes. But how —'

And then he told her. He had been waiting for her by the oak. Carlo and Knox must have followed. They had set upon him. He had struggled, but they had been too much for him.

'They brought me here,' he said. 'They searched me. They thought I was the one who stole the nugget last night. They thought I had it on me. They left me here, threatening to come back. But my ankle, Babs —'

Beads of agonised perspiration appeared on his forehead.

'Your ankle?'

'It doubled under me during the struggle!' Lynn gasped. 'It — it feels on fire. I — I think it must be broken.'

He groaned again.

Babs breathed heavily. But in a moment she was fumbling with feverish hands at his shoe. The shoe came off, the sock followed, disclosing an ankle that was swollen, bruised and black. Babs, who had some first-aid experience with the Cliff House Girl Guides, ran her fingers deftly over it. Her face became serious.

'It's — it's broken,' she announced.

Lynn shook his head. He groaned again. 'You know what this means?'

'It means you've got to get assistance at once.' Babs said practically. 'It means you'll have to go into hospital.'

'Exactly! And that means' — his face was bitter — 'that I shan't be able to work on this case.' He sat still for a few minutes. 'Babs, what happened last night?'

Babs told him.

'And the nugget's there?' he said. 'Only you know where it is? They won't think of looking. They think I've got it. Still' — his face became serious; he looked at the girl — 'Babs —'

'Yes, Austin?'

'Can you carry on — alone?'

'Alone? You mean —'

'I mean,' he said tensely, 'that everything depends upon you. I'm out of the fight now. Only you can carry on. It's a big thing — a mighty big thing, but we can still prove nothing that will help Mabs' parents if the nugget is not recovered. Babs —'

She nodded.

'I — I'll do it,' she said softly.
For Mabs' sake Barbara Redfern was embarking upon her strangest adventure, her most desperate fight.
But meantime, all unguessed, the storm-clouds were gathering about her head at Cliff House School.

CHAPTER XV

In the Form's Bad Books!

'No!' said Mabel Lynn distractedly, and paused. 'No,' she added again, as if to give emphasis to that denial.
In the Music-room of Cliff House School there was a disconcerting pause. Seven girls, in neat school uniform, turned as one to glare at the golden-haired Fourth Former.
For the cast of 'A Fourth Form Fantasy,' which was being rehearsed in the Music-Room, was rapidly becoming fed-up.
'Well, what's the matter now?' Rosa, asked. 'That's the third time you've interrupted in ten minutes, Mabs!'
Mabs sighed.
'You needn't tell me that,' she replied. 'But I'm producing this play, aren't I? Jean, you stepped out of position that time. Jemima, you should go over to the left when Jean says, "What made you go there?"' As it was, you were masking Rosa all the time. Now, let's do it again.'
The cast reassembled itself in position. With a rather sulky air the players went through it again.
Mabs groaned. She felt she had never conducted a more wretched rehearsal. The whole thing was ragged, slow, and utterly painful.
'Well?' Rosa glared. 'That's the end of it. Satisfied, Mabs?'
Mabs was far from satisfied, but she nodded.
'We'll leave it at that for the moment,' she said lifelessly. 'Let's get on with the next scene — when Babs — I mean you, Rosa, are in the punishment-room. Off the stage everybody except Rosa.'
There was no stage. At least, the stage was imaginary, represented merely by the flooring between the grand piano on one side of the room and a collection of half a dozen chairs on the other. But they all cleared off rather thankfully.
'This is the big scene,' Mabs said anxiously.
Rosa carried on. But it was obvious to all of them, that Rosa, hard as she tried, certainly was not cut out for that part.
Rosa could act. But she could not act with sympathy and understanding, because there was very little sympathy and understanding in her own stormy nature. But Babs in that part —
'Well?' Rosa demanded at the end.
Mabs shook her head.
'I'm sorry, Rosa —'
'You mean I'm not good enough?'
Mabs paused. Actually Rosa had announced the verdict which was in her mind, but Mabs' was far too generous a nature to agree bluntly.
'You want more rehearsal,' she said. 'You must get some feeling into your voice. Remember, you are the girl who is going to be expelled. If you are expelled it will probably mean the death of your mother. You are supposed to be suffering. The strain

is almost more than you can bear. Can't you put yourself in that position?'

Rosa scowled.

'And look a fool?' she asked. 'What's the matter with the way I'm doing it?'

'Well, you don't let yourself go. You're too restrained — too placid all the time. You saw Babs do the scene at the rehearsal. That's how I want it done now.'

Clara Trevlyn coughed warningly. The light of danger appeared in Rosa's eyes.

'You do, do you?' she said in a voice that was almost a snarl. 'You mean you don't want me in the part — you want Babs. Babs, Babs, Babs! That's all you've said to me since I took the part. You don't want me to do it. You want Babs! You never see me doing it. You see it as Babs would be doing it. Well, I'm fed up — fed right up to the chin. I'm wasting my time. I'm not Babs, and I don't want to be Babs. You can put somebody else in the part!'

There was a tap on the door.

'Who's that?' Mabs cried irritably.

The door opened. A fat, round, shiny face, whose eyes were adorned by a glinting pair of enormously thick and perfectly circular spectacles, peered into the room.

It was Bessie Bunter.

'Oh, I sus-say, I hope I'm not interrupting, you girls —'

'Vain hope, fattikins!' Jemima Carstairs informed her.

'Yes, buzz off, please, Bessie!'

'But look here, you know —'

'We're busy!' Mabs said impatiently.

Bessie blinked short-sightedly at the group of amateur actresses. 'Really, Mabs, you nu-needn't snap my head off like that, you know. Is Babs here? I've looked everywhere for her.'

Mabs paused.

'Babs?'

'Yes, I — I want to see her about tea. We — we've got no bread in the study,' Bessie vouchsafed with a blink, 'and if we've got no bread, how are we going to have tea?'

Babs said that she'd get a loaf — and I can't get bread if I haven't any money, can I?' she asked indignantly.

'You're sure you've looked for her?' Mabs asked anxiously. 'Tried Senior Side?'

'Yes!'

'And the tuckshop?'

'Of course I have!'

'The library?'

'Yes.'

'The swimming-pool?'

'Oh, really, yes!' Bessie gasped. 'I've been over the whole blessed school!'

Mabs paused. She caught a glance from Clara Trevlyn. Babs was not in the school, yet Babs had no right to be out of school at this time. Mabs' heart knew a flutter of uneasiness.

'Perhaps she's in the cycle shed,' Jean Cartwright suggested.

'Well, she's not,' Bessie retorted, 'because I've looked there, too, you know. I tell you I've searched the school from end to end.'

There were curious glances now. Not usually was Bessie so positive. Mabs bit her lip. The conduct of Babs lately had seemed to show her as a far different girl from the cheerful Form captain they had all known and loved.

Lydia broke into a scoffing laugh.

'What an example for the captain of the Form to set!' she scoffed. 'If it was one of us

others she'd be sent to Coventry —'

'Hear, hear!' Marcia Loftus applauded.

Lydia warmed to her subject.

'Babs' conduct just lately ought to be inquired into,' she declared. 'She had to be chucked out of the play because she was always leaving the rehearsals flat. She had ruined the play. She broke bounds the other night, If she wants to act the goat, then let her act the goat, but when she drags the whole Form into it and makes them suffer by making the play a failure, it's about time for the Form to do something about it.'

'Hear, hear!'

'Yes!'

'Listen!' Her eyes suddenly flamed. 'I say, what about a Form trial?'

'A what?'

'A Form court! We'll try her. She can do all the explaining she wants then. She can explain to the Form. We'll hold it in the Common-room —'

'I say, that's a good idea!'

'Yes, a Form trial!'

'Come on, let's go and find her.'

The rehearsal became forgotten then. Mabs was left there biting her lips. In an excited crowd the girls surged towards the door, bundling into the corridor.

CHAPTER XVI

The Verdict of the Court!

BARBARA RDBFERN looked tired and worn.

Her chestnut curls were awry and disarranged. Her dress was crumpled.

She stood looking round at the unusual aspect of the Common-room to which she had just come on hearing that she was wanted there.

For on the dais at one end of the room was a chair and desk. The furniture had been shifted to the other side of the room, leaving a space in the middle which was occupied solely by three chairs, arranged back to back.

Babs set her lips. She recognised that arrangement, and she knew what it portended. A Form court!

Practically the whole of the Fourth Form were there. The news had spread abroad. A Form court was a weighty matter at Cliff House. It was one of the unwritten laws that every girl should attend.

Only once in a very long while was a girl put upon trial by her Form-fellows, but when that happened it was to be taken seriously by the Form. Even a senior would not have dreamt of interrupting a Form court.

'Well here we are!'

And Rosa Rodworth came forward.

Babs stood facing her, held by Lydia Crossendale on the one side and Brenda Wallace on the other.

Freda Ferriers and Gwen Cook hovered near Mabel Lynn, ready to prevent any interference on her part. Nancy Bell and Marcia Loftus hung around Bessie.

'Barbara Redfern, you know why you have been brought here?'

'Oh, get on with the washing!' Clara Trevlyn said testily. 'Babs knows. She's to be tried.'

'Yes; cut out the preliminaries!'

'Very well!' Rosa nodded. 'In accordance with custom,' she said, 'and so that it shall never be said that the Court was prejudiced for or against the prisoner, the Form will

select its officers by a public draw. Any girl not wishing to take part in the draw, stand aside!’

There was a shuffle at once. Mabel Lynn stood aside. Bessie Bunter stood aside. Clara Trevlyn, Marjorie Hazeldene, and Janet Jordan joined them, and, after a pause, little Marcelle Biquet.

Rosa nodded.

‘Now bring the hat! In the hat,’ Rosa explained, ‘are pieces of paper. The names of the officials of the court are written on those pieces of paper. Each girl who draws the name of an official must fill that part. Now, are you all ready?’

They all were. Hands dipped into the hat. There was a breathless silence as the girls fished out their scraps of paper and unfolded them.

‘The court president?’ Rosa asked. ‘Who is the court president?’

From Jean Cartwright came a hesitant: ‘I am!’

‘Right! Then you are chief of the court,’ Rosa said. ‘I’m one of the jury’ — as she consulted the paper in her own hand. ‘You will be the judge, Jean. Take the desk there. Now; who’s the counsel for the prosecution?’

‘What-ho!’ beamed Jemima Carstairs.

‘You’ve got it?’

‘Yes!’

‘Right! Counsel for the defence?’

‘Here!’ Lydia Crossendale clamoured.

‘My hat, what a defender! Court usher?’

Amy Jones was the court usher. Twelve others were the jury. The court assembled.

The jury filled the places on the left of the room, Jean taking her place at the desk on the table and putting on the barristers’ wig — a property from the Dramatic Society’s property box — for the purpose.

Babs, between June Merrett and Brenda-Fallace, was placed in the dock. Amy Jones tapped for silence.

‘The trial will begin!’ she cried.

Jean looked up.

‘Prisoner at the bar —’

Babs stood rigid.

‘You are charged with behaving in a manner liable to bring grave disgrace on the Form. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?’

Babs stood silent.

‘Guilty or not guilty?’ Amy Jones rapped out. ‘Speak up!’

‘Not guilty!’ Babs replied.

‘The prisoner pleads not guilty,’ Jean said. ‘Counsel for the prosecution ——’

‘Adsum!’ Jemima said brightly.

‘You will now state your case, and call your witnesses.’

‘What-ho!’ Jemima said. ‘Then the case — the case is, ladies and gentlemen — or, rather, your honour and your worshipfulness — that jolly old Babs is up against it!’

The judge frowned.

‘That is not a statement.’

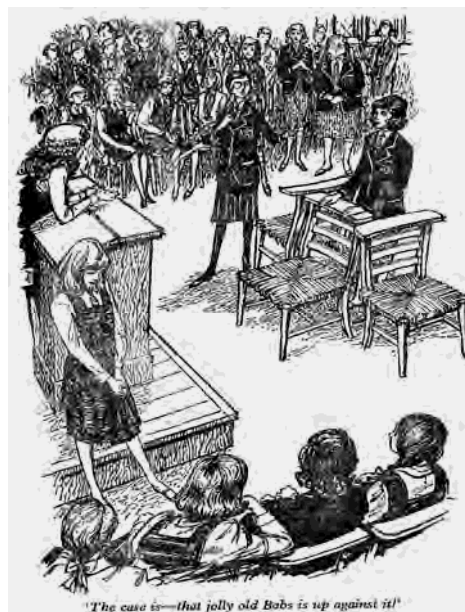
‘No?’ Jemima sighed. ‘Well, let me put it differently — what? Old Babs — ahem, the jolly old prisoner! — is a girl we all know and all admire — a real old Spartan — what? For many decades or

moons, or ages, or whatever it is, we’ve known the jolly old prisoner.

And what have we known about her?’

The president frowned.

‘Keep to the point, counsel!’ she said.
‘What-ho!’ Jemima’s eyes brightened. Now’ — she beamed round — ‘as counsel for the persecution —’
‘Prosecution!’
‘Ahem — prosecution! As counsel for the prosecution I feel bound to point out that this jolly old trespasser has always been one of the gang!’ Jemima burred on. ‘What I say, you old lumps of suspicion, is that you’ve all made a merry old bloomer! You’ve just given our Spartan the works because you don’t understand. Isn’t that so, Babs? The question is, is Babs a girl who is likely to bring disgrace on the Form? I say, no!’ Jemima added.
‘And, to prove it, I’m going to ask the prisoner a question,’ Jemima went on. ‘Any objection to that, your noble old lordship?’
‘You may ask,’ Jean replied.
‘Right!’ Jemima turned triumphantly. ‘Babs, are you maliciously conspiring, like old Guy, to get the whole honour of the Form blown to pieces? Answer me!’
‘No!’ Babs replied.
‘Well, there you are!’ And Jemima beamed round. ‘Gentlemen and ladies, and your honourable old nobleskins, that’s the case!’ she said. ‘There is no evidence against her.’
Lydia sprang to her feet.
‘Your honour —’
‘What-ho!’
‘I maintain that the counsel for the prosecution has put no case.’
‘Hear, hear!’
‘That, so far from prosecuting, she is trying to influence the court in the prisoner’s favour. I demand, on behalf of the court, that a new prosecutrix be appointed.’



‘Counsel for the prosecution is dismissed!’ Jean ordered sternly. ‘Rosa Rodworth is hereby appointed.’

Jemima sighed. But she winked at Babs.

Babs smiled back, gratitude in her heart, realising plainly Jemima's motive — to make the trial into a farce.

What Jemima failed to do, Rosa did. She sketched recent events at Cliff House School. Barbara letting down the play. Barbara being seen in the company of the terrible Knoxes of Ivy House. Babs being present in Sammy Knox's car when that incorrigible boy had upset the party of Cliff House girls into the stream in Friardale Wood.

She described how Babs had broken bounds last night, how she had refused to say where she had been.

'The evidence plainly shows that the prisoner is guilty,' Rosa went on. 'I submit that she broke bounds to go with her friends, the Knoxes. That obviously she is in some shady game with them. With your honour's permission I would like to ask the prisoner a few questions.'

'Granted!' Jean Cartwright agreed.

Rosa turned. Babs, standing still, looked at her.

'Prisoner at the bar, you know that it is an offence not to answer questions quickly and truthfully. I ask you now to tell the court for what purpose you went out this afternoon.'

Every eye was upon Babs.

'I prefer not to answer that question,' she said in a low voice.

'Very well. Will you tell the court whether you met the Knoxes?'

'I did not!'

'Very well. The court may judge for itself whether that is true. This is a court of justice and fair play. I have completed my case, your honour,' Rosa said.

She stood down. Lydia was called.

But it was obvious to everyone, before Lydia spoke, that Babs was condemned.

Lydia, though counsel for the defence only succeeded in making the case blacker against Barbara — which was Lydia's intention of course. There was a pause as she came to the end of her speech. The judge hesitated.

'Thank you!' she said. 'But before referring this matter to the jury, I would like to ask if anyone else would like to say something. Yes, Mabs?'

Mabs stepped forward.

'I would like to say something,' she said. She stood very proud, very upright. 'I agree with Jemima. We are all making a mistake where Babs is concerned. We know Babs! Oh, I agree that she has acted in a way that has puzzled us all, but Babs is not the girl to act like that without good reason. For some reason she cannot speak at the moment, but she has promised me, at least, that when she is free to speak she will. Babs, will you speak now?' she asked desperately.

But Babs shook her head.

'I — I can't,' she said in a stifled voice.

There was another buzz. Jean frowned.

'That is enough, Mabel, You may stand down,' she said.

'Ladies, you have heard the case for and against the prisoner. You have heard the plea on her behalf. We all, I think, share the sentiments of Mabs and Jemima, but let's stick to the point. Babs is not the Barbara we knew. She is not,' Jean added seriously, 'the sort of girl we are proud to have among us.'

'Hear, hear!'

'Especially when she happens to be captain of the Form!'

'That is the offence for which she is being tried,' Jean went on.

‘On that and that only we are to judge. As Barbara will not reveal her motives, we can only draw the conclusion that those motives are not honourable. Ladies of the jury, you have heard the proceedings. Is it your opinion that the prisoner is guilty, or not guilty?’

‘Guilty!’ came as one voice.

Barbara flinched.

‘The verdict I accept.’ Jean bowed her head. ‘Now the question of punishment. It is Coventry or resignation. But the prisoner cannot resign her captaincy without first consulting a mistress. Therefore, there is only one punishment. Coventry!’

A murmur went round. Jean fastened her gaze upon Babs. ‘Barbara, I am sorry to do this,’ she said. ‘I wish the job were someone else’s. But you know in these matters that we cannot allow our own feelings to enter into it. The sentence of Coventry is that you will not speak to any girl in the Form. It also means that any girl seen speaking to you will also be sent to Coventry. You hear?’

Babs murmured: ‘I hear.’

‘Very well! You have all heard. The sentence is pronounced. Release the prisoner.’

‘But, Babs —’ Mabs cried.

Jean frowned.

‘Mabel, you heard! You are not to speak to Barbara!’

‘But I must!’

‘You will not!’ Jean’s eyes glinted. ‘The sentence has been passed.’

‘But Babs is my chum. Oh, you — you —’ Mabs gazed round wildly. ‘Do you think I am going to remain in this Form not speaking to her? Do you think I’m going to share the same study

and not speak to her? I tell you, you are all making a mistake.

Babs, please tell them —t ell them!’

‘Y-yes, tut-tell them, Babs,’ Bessie pleaded almost tearfully.

‘Mabs, be careful!’

‘You’ll be sent to Coventry!’

‘You’re asking for it!’

But Mabs did not care.

‘Babs!’ she choked.

Babs turned white. Another few words and Mabs would find herself ostracised as well. And then what of Mabs’ play, her hopes, her ambitions?

‘Babs!’ Mabs said again.

But Babs deliberately averted her head. She looked away from her chum. Then with slow, dragging steps she trailed from the room. Mabs made as though to spring after her, but was caught.

Babs, without a look, went out. In the Common-room was a death-like silence, broken suddenly by a blubbering howl from Bessie Bunter. Then Mabs understood.

Babs had cold-shouldered her because she did not wish her to share her punishment.

.

At the same moment Jemima Carstairs, gazing through the window that gave a view of the drive below, started.

For two figures were coming through the gates that led on to the drive. Jemima recognised them at once. They were Sammy Knox and his sister Katie.

Here!

Jemima looked back into the Common-room. But there was a group round Mabs now

and about Bessie Bunter. Jemima let her monocle fall, and then without undue haste she strolled towards the door.

But once on the other side of the door, Jemima flew. Jemima, for some reasons of her own badly wanted to catch Sammy and Katie before they arrived at the school.



CHAPTER XVII

Jemima's Little Joke!

'WELL, well, well!' Jemima said in astonishment. 'If it isn't Master and Miss Knox! How goes it, old Spartans?'

Sammy Knox and his sister paused.

They stared at Jemima, who, like some apparition with a gleaming glass in its eye, had suddenly appeared from the bushes that fringed the drive of Cliff House School. They stared at her in bewilderment.

'Who are you?' Sammy asked.

'Me?' Jemima laughed. 'What, never heard of me?' she asked. 'One of the brightest and the most dazzling of the jolly old lights in the Cliff House firmament. Fie on you, Samuel! Such ignorance in one so young — forsooth!'

Sammy blinked in amazement.

'Well, I seem to have seen you before.'

'What-ho! Once seen never jolly well forgotten — what?' Jemima asked flippantly.

'But do, I beg, let me do the honours. Welcome, strangers, to our humble gates. On what mission art thou bent, prithee?'

'Looking for anyone?'

'Yes — Barbara Redfern. You know her?'

'Know her?' Jemima smiled. 'Babs is even to me as my own sister,' she said. 'You want to see Babs?'

'Yes.'

'Tough luck! You see,' Jemima explained seriously, 'she's just been sent to

Coventry.'

Sammy looked startled.

'Coventry?'

'That's the name.'

'But what on earth's she gone to Coventry for? Coventry is miles away!'

'Great lad! See you know your geography,' Jemima applauded. 'But there the unpleasant old fact is. You haven't seen Babs this afternoon?' she asked, polishing her monocle carefully.

Sammy scowled.

'No, we haven't! We made an appointment with her to go to the pictures in Courtfield, but she didn't turn up.'

Jemima's eyes gleamed.

'And you don't know why she didn't turn up?'

'No. That's what we've come here to find out.'

'Too bad!' Jemima sympathised. 'Naughty old Babs! And now it's too late to go to the pictures at Courtfield?' she brightly suggested.

'Of course!'

'Ahem! Anything particularly interesting in the pictures at Courtfield?' Jemima carefully resumed.

'Well, yes, there's a big picture with Pearl Katherley,' Sammy volunteered. 'But there was something else.' He looked at his sister. 'I say,' he added, 'do you know a girl named Mabel Lynn at this school?'

Jemima glanced up sharply.

'Mabel Lynn? What-ho! My own name I could know no better,' she replied.

Sammy stared.

'You mean —'

'Well, what should I mean?'

'You mean — you're Mabel Lynn?' He looked excited. 'Oh, gee! I say!'

Jemima, of course, meant nothing of the kind. But it was obvious that Sammy had drawn that conclusion, and inwardly she thrilled now, feeling that she was on the verge of some discovery.

'Gee, Mabel Lynn!' Sammy breathed, as if he could not believe his good luck.

'We've just come from abroad, and my old man knew your father — Major Arnold Lynn.'

'Indeed?' Jemima asked.

'He did. But the joke is,' Sammy went on, 'that Major Arnold Lynn was put in chokey in Montreal for pinching something a fortnight ago. And his wife. We — we read about it in a Montreal paper,' he went on vaguely, 'and this afternoon we were going to take Babs to the pictures to show her,' Sammy went on eagerly. 'We've been asking Babs about you, you know, but I don't think she knows you very well, does she? But at the pictures in Court-field there's a news film, and one of the news items is an interview with Major Arnold Lynn — your old man — in prison. You didn't know that, did you?'

'No,' Jemima solemnly assured them.

Sammy stared.

'You don't seem very cut up. Aren't you sorry your old man is in prison?'

'Well — well.' Jemima shook her Eton-cropped head. 'Serious sort of affair,' she agreed, very solemnly. 'Still' — she shrugged — 'these things will happen. Poor old Mabs! I'm sorry her people are in prison, though.'

'Th-though—' Sammy stuttered.

‘Well, of course. Mabs happens to be a friend of mine.’ Sammy blinked.

‘A — a friend,’ he stuttered faintly. ‘You mean to say — but I thought you said — you were Mabel Lynn.’

‘Oh, tut, tut! No, no!’ Jemima said anxiously. ‘Don’t let’s have any misunderstanding — what? I never said I was Mabel Lynn, you know. Not handsome or clever enough to be jolly old Mabs. My name — Jemima Carstairs — just that. Jimmy to my friends, which is a big reason why you must always call me Jemima. Well, sorry to have spoiled the jolly old joke. So sorry you can’t come into the school.’

Sammy’s eyes glinted.

‘You fooled us!’

Jemima sighed.

‘Too bad!’ she murmured. ‘Too utterly bad — what? But I didn’t! You fooled your jolly old selves. Not my fault if you jump to conclusions — what? I never said I was Mabel Lynn. Ahem! Those gates —’

Sammy stared.

‘What about the gates?’

‘Well, they’re open, you know.’

‘Open?’

‘Yes, rather! Gates open,’ Jemima explained seriously, ‘are always better to get through than gates closed. What I mean to say is,’ she went on, ‘we’ve rather a ferocious porter who likes throwing people over gates if they’re not wanted in the school. And he’ll soon be closing them.’

Sammy snarled.

‘Funny, aren’t you?’

‘Not a bit.’

But Katie, with an apprehensive glance at the gates, plucked his arm.

‘Come on!’ she whispered.

Sammy didn’t — not at once. He glared.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘I’m going. We’ll both go, but not before we’ve given you something to remember us by, clever stick! Take that!’

His arm came up and round now as, with bared teeth, he aimed for Jemima’s cool and smiling face.

Sammy swung round. His hand should have caught Jemima that furious smack. No Jemima was there. But his hand swung on straight at his sister’s cheek. There was a smack, then a howl from Katie. Jemima had quickly ducked and bobbed up again in the same place. But Katie’s eyes were wild.

‘Sammy, you brute —’

‘I — I —’

But if Sammy’s temper was uncertain Katie’s was no less. In a moment all the gentle femininity which should have been hers, vanished as if from a wave of magic wand.

She sprang at Sammy. She tore off his hat and pulled his hair. Jemima applauded.

‘Go it!’

And then the figure of Piper, the porter, issuing from his lodge, put an end to the conflict. He came forward, Katie spotted him, and in wild alarm fled. Sammy took one dazed look at him and flew after her. Piper halted.

‘My heye!’ he said. ‘Which these are nice goings hon, Miss Carstairs.’

‘Aren’t they?’ Jemima said solemnly. ‘And very nice goings off, too, if you ask me, Mr. Piper,’ she added, staring at the gates through which the two Knoxes were precipitately disappearing in hot argument. ‘By the way, Piper —’

‘Yes, Miss Carstairs?’

‘Here’s half-a-crown. Nice new one. Lovely looking things, new half-crowns — what? Like to own it?’

Piper’s eyes fastened admiringly upon the coin.

‘Well, Miss Carstairs, which I says was —’

‘Tut, tut; don’t say it!’ Jemima advised. ‘But do your old friend Jimmy a favour, Piper, my Spartan. Keep that gleaming eye of yours open for the two bipeds who have just fled, snarling, and next time they turn up, turn ’em out! Or turn a hose-pipe on them, or something! Get it?’

Piper grunted.

‘Which I see your meaning, Miss Carstairs.’

‘Topping! And for that,’ Jemima solemnly assured him, ‘you shall be decorated, my Spartan. Here’s the medal!’ And she placed the half-crown in Piper’s hand, smiled, and walked off.

But as she went back towards the school there was a strange light in Jemima’s eyes, and that usually unruffled forehead of hers showed two sharp lines.

Jemima was not slow in putting two and two together and finding the right answer. Knowing Babs’ friendship for Mabs, she fancied she guessed now the reason for Babs’ mysterious association with the insufferable Knoxes. Babs, of course, was trying to keep Mabs and them apart — by sacrificing herself!

Jemima frowned. Babs, she saw, was up against it.

But if Jemima could help, Babs was not going to be up against it much longer!

CHAPTER XVIII

Babs Confides

‘BAB!’

Bessie Bunter blinked very dolorously as she spoke the name.

But Babs, writing at the table in Study No. 4, did not look up.

Babs was busy. She was busy writing lines. It had got to Miss Matthews’ ears that Babs had broken bounds that afternoon, and the mistress had given her a hundred lines and had gated her for the next two half holidays.

The time was after tea in Study No. 4. Tea had been a meal which Babs had not shared. For once she had taken tea alone in Big Hall.

Though she ached for her chums’ company, she felt that she could not endure tea in the cheerful study, and had left Mabs and Bessie alone. Mabs would speak to her — Mabs would find herself in Coventry also.

But Mabs was out now, holding a rehearsal in the Common room. Babs had snatched the opportunity to get on with her lines.

But Bessie blinked.

‘Babs!’ she cried again.

Babs sighed. She caught a sheet of exercise paper and scrawled words upon it. She showed it to Bessie. Bessie blinked again as she read:

‘YOU MUST NOT SPEAK TO ME. REMEMBER I AM IN COVENTRY.’

‘But I don’t care,’ Bessie objected. ‘Blow Coventry! Look here, Babs —’

Babs sighed.

‘Bessie, don’t be silly —’

‘But look here, you know. Oh, blow!’ Bessie looked utterly miserable. ‘I — it’s

rotten, Babs, sitting here with you and not speaking to you. You — you know I dud-don't believe what the Form say — I think they are a pack of idiots. As I said to Jean Cartwright —'

She stared as the door opened. Lydia Crossendale looked in.

She stared at Bessie.

'Caught you!' she said. 'I thought I heard voices. Bessie —' Bessie glowered.

'Well?'

'You know Barbara is in Coventry?'

'Oh, gig-go and eat coke!' Bessie growled.

'You know what happens to girls who are seen speaking to her?'

'Rabbits!' Bessie sniffed.

'You know —'

'Oh, go home!' Bessie cried. She rose to her feet. Her fat face was suddenly red and wrathful. Danger lights glinted in the eyes beneath the thick round spectacles. 'Get off! Get away! Babs is my chum, isn't she? If I jolly well want to talk to Babs I shall jolly well talk to Babs, Coventry or no Coventry. Lot of rot!' And Bessie sniffed indignantly.

'But, Bessie —'

'Oh, get out!' Bessie snapped.

Lydia's lips compressed. She closed the door. Babs shook her head sorrowfully.

'Bessie, you shouldn't have said that. You know what will happen now.'

'I don't care!' Bessie glowered. She was almost on the verge of tears in spite of her wrath. 'Oh, Babs, I kik-can't stand it,' she said. 'It's a beastly thing being like this. Mabs was cut up at teatime, you know. She could hardly eat. She kept looking at your place and sus-sniffing, you know —'

She stopped as the door opened. Jemima Carstairs came in.

'Hallo, Bessiekins!' she said. 'You've been and gone and done it, haven't you?

They've labelled you Coventry, too, I hear.' She glanced at Babs, then she put an envelope on the table. 'So long,' she added.

She went out. Babs, rather wonderingly, picked the envelope up. It contained a brief message typed on Jemima's typewriter. It simply said:

'Can you come to the library? Want to talk to you about M. L. Have found out about her father.'

Bessie eyed Babs strangely.

'Mum-my hat, Bib-Babs, what's the matter? You lul-look quite queer, you know.'

'Do I?' Babs murmured faintly.

'Yes, you do!' Bessie rose in concern. 'It's that fearful tea they give you in Hall. Look here, I'll go along and borrow some money.'

'But, Bessie — no!'

'And then we'll have a feed,' Bessie went on. 'Mum-my hat, I could do with a feed. You wait here, Babs. I won't be long.' And Bessie quitted the study in a hurry, utterly forgetful of the fact that she was in Coventry.

Babs looked at the letter in her hand again. The last thing she had desired or anticipated was that anyone else at Cliff House should discover the secret which she had so desperately attempted to guard. Jemima at least could be trusted.

She screwed the letter up in her hand. She threw it into the fire, then quickly she flew to the library.

A girl, interestedly reading the titles of a row of books, swung round at her entry. It

was Jemima. She strolled to the door, coolly closed it, and then nodded.

‘Walls have jolly ears, but locked doors never listen, what? Well, here we are. Come along, old Spartan. Let’s sit among these tomes of learning and open our hearts,’ she added cheerfully. ‘Rather refreshing people, these Knoxes, what?’

Babs stared.

‘Jimmy, you’ve —’

‘Seen ‘em? What-ho! Triumph of matter over mind, what? Just shows you what you can do when you brace the old optics. I also spoke to them. Pardon me if I blush Babs, but they actually mistook me for old Mabs. Rough on Mabs, of course ———’

Babs sat quite still.

‘Mabs? Then they told you —’

‘Exactly!’ Jemima cheerfully polished her monocle. ‘Tough luck on Mabs’ people, what?’ she murmured. ‘But tougher luck on you, Babs. I may not be clever, and I may not be beautiful,’ Jemima went on enigmatically, ‘but I smelt from the first in that hobnobbing of yours with the Knoxes, that summat was up, what? You want to keep it from Mabs?’

‘Yes!’

‘Laudable! But pardon my asking a simple question. You know I haven’t got that first-class bubble of grey matter you possess. Babs — but why, exactly? Mabs will have to know some time.’

Babs hesitated.

‘I — I suppose so. But — well ———’ She bit her lips.

‘Jimmy, can you keep a secret? Seriously?’

Jemima glanced at her curiously. Like a cloak the banter and the levity dropped from her.

‘I’m not prying, Babs.’

‘I know!’

‘And I don’t want you to tell me anything unless you feel like it, what?’ Jemima added. ‘But I — well, how does one say these things? I had an idea there was more behind all this than the foxy Knoxes let out, and — and — well, I also had some feeble notion, if I could be of any help, of putting my humble and unworthy services at your disposal. But as I say, tell me what you like — or what you don’t like. I’m not curious. It had struck me that you were tackling some sort of job a bit sticky for you, and if it’s possible, Auntie Jimmie would like to give a helping hand,’ Jimmie went on.

‘Thank you!’ Babs gulped. She smiled very gratefully. ‘That’s decent of you Jimmy — frightfully, and — and perhaps you can help. I’m in the very dickens of a mess. You see —’

And she launched out, opening her heart at last. It did her good. Jemima sat perfectly still through the whole of the recital. Only the alert gleam in her eyes showed that the story was making an impression.

‘And that’s it,’ Babs finished. ‘You see, Jimmy, if I don’t get the nugget —’

‘The Lynns are for it — and Mabs is bound to know,’ Jemima nodded. ‘So that’s why you’ve kept in with those outsiders?’

‘Yes!’

‘And you’re planning to go there tonight?’

‘I was.’

‘And what will you do?’

Babs sighed.

‘Nothing. Just watch my opportunity, of course.’

‘Not hopeful,’ Jemima decided with a frown. ‘You might go to Ivy House a dozen times without finding one.’

‘Yes, I’ve thought of that.’

‘A problem!’ decided Jemima.

‘I’m afraid it is.’

‘Well,’ Jemima frowned. ‘The puddle I call a brain has stirred,’ she announced solemnly. ‘It’s working. I have an idea. To-night it is?’ Jemima whispered mysteriously.

‘Yes.’

‘We go to Ivy House?’

‘We?’

‘You! Me! Two of us,’ Jemima informed her. ‘Must make a party of it — what? I create a racket in the garden —’

Babs frowned.

‘But —’

‘It should be a good rumpus, quite an artistic rumpus, in fact,’ Jemima promised.

‘What happens? The Knoxes all dive out to investigate.’

‘Well?’

‘You dive in! Then you dodge up and get busy with the old nugget. Don’t worry about little Jimmy. I can look after my end of the programme. Simple — what? Well,’ she frowned, ‘any flaws?’

Babs was looking at her, a gleam of respondent excitement in her eyes.

Desperately she had been searching her mind for some method of getting the Knoxes away from the spot while she searched the room in which the nugget was hidden. But so far, at least, she had had to confess defeat. Now —’

‘Jimmy, you mean it?’ she asked eagerly.

‘What-ho!’

‘Then,’ Babs decided, ‘we’ll do it. To-night, Jimmy, after lights out — somewhere about twelve o’clock?’

‘The hour,’ Jemima announced solemnly, ‘is fixed. When graveyards howl and witches creep — or whatever it is — I’ll be there!’

And they parted.

CHAPTER XIX

Bessie Has Her Say

‘I SUS-SAY, you girls —’

Bessie Bunter blinked indignantly round the Fourth Form Common-room.

Really it was incomprehensible.

For though there were twenty or so girls in the Common-room, and though they had all been talking most animatedly when Bessie came in, they were all now as silent as oysters, and all more astonishingly, had their backs turned towards Bessie.

Bessie sniffed.

‘Look here, you know, what’s the little game?’ she asked wrathfully.

Bessie had forgotten that she was in Coventry. Or perhaps Bessie had not taken the announcement seriously that she was in Coventry.

‘I sus-say,’ she said, with less assurance. ‘I sus-say, you know, dud-don’t keep this

up. It — it isn't fuf-funny.'

Still silence! But suddenly Amy Jones moved towards the blackboard which was in the room. Very rapidly she wrote something on it in white chalk.

Bessie blinked at the announcement.

'YOU ARE IN COVENTRY FOR SPEAKING TO BARBARA REDFERN.'

A sense of bitterness, of injustice, swept Bessie. Her eyes gleamed behind her spectacles.

'So I'm in Coventry?' she demanded sternly.

No reply.

'All right. Then for once I can jolly well speak without being interrupted.' Bessie said wrathfully, 'and I'm jolly well going to speak now!

'Old Babs has helped all of you tons of times. Now she wants help you ji-jolly well turn your backs on her. Send her to Coventry! You call that being sporting?'

Faces flushed. One or two of them looked guilty.

'You're mum-mean — mum-mean!' she cried sobbingly. 'You dud-don't want to speak to me! Well, I don't want to speak to you, so there! I came here to ask you to cash me a postal order in advance, but would I ask you now? I wouldn't! I wouldn't touch your money if — if it was made of silver and gold. Bah! Cats!' And Bessie blinked with tearful valour round the silent Common-room, sniffed a huge sniff, and went out.

But in the corridor she stopped. She heaved a heavy sigh as disconsolately she ambled on.

She was conscious of a feeling of forlornness, of loneliness as she went on down the corridor, and there was still the matter of the money for the chocolate.

She tapped on the door of Study No. 5.

The Terraine twins — that peculiar pair who held aloof from the rest of the Form preferring to mind their own business in their own silent way — were there. Bessie had no particular use for the twins.

Privately she dubbed them a pair of oddities. But usually they were well supplied with money, and, in the circumstances, she must fall back upon them for a loan. She beamed very brightly into the room.

'Hallo, twins!' she said genially.

The twins looked round. They both stared at Bessie. Then they both returned to their reading.

Bessie glowered.

'Look here, you freaks, I'm jolly well speaking to you, you know!' she said wrathfully.

No reply.

'Aren't you going to say something?'

The twins turned their heads. They both shook them deliberately. Bessie grunted, went out, slamming the door with a crash that set the ornaments on the mantelpiece dancing.

'Blow!' she said.

She rolled on. Then she thought of Mabs. Mabs, at least, wouldn't let her down.

Bessie brightened. Off to the music-room she went.

She pushed the door open, blinking owlishly into the room. There was quite an uproar in that room.

Surrounded by the cast, Mabs, her face white and strained, was facing a red-face and

gleaming-eyed Rosa Rodworth.

'I'm sick of it!' Rosa flared. 'I do my best — but what happens? Pearl Katherley herself couldn't please you in this mood. You've just made up your mind that nobody except Barbara Redfern can

do this part, and nobody jolly well will. Well, there you are — that's my last word! I'm finished!'

And Rosa, head up, eyes gleaming, and every atom of her stormy nature aroused, strode off towards the door. She pushed past Bessie Bunter and stamped into the corridor. A deep and rueful silence fell.

Bessie ambled forward.

'It's an ill wind that gathers no moss, you know,' Bessie announced wisely. 'Perhaps it's a jolly good thing for the play that Rosa has gone out, because now, Mabs, you can get a girl of real talent — someone who really knows how to act, you know. I mean me — Elizabeth Gertrude Bunter!' And Bessie struck a posture and beamed. Mabs did not smile. She simply shook her head.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Rehearsal is held up for the time being.

We'll have to find a new leading lady in place of Rosa. Though I'm blessed if I know where,' she added distractedly. 'There'll be a meeting after prep, so bring along suggestions.'

'But look here —' howled Bessie.

And then she blinked and jumped as Clara Trevlyn suddenly sidled up to her and hissed fiercely in her ear: 'Be quiet, you idiot! Do you want to get Mabs sent to Coventry?'

'Oh, crumbs!' Bessie gasped.

In her excitement she had forgotten that.

She looked round now — at the stern faces that confronted her.

She felt utterly limp. She turned to Mabs again. But Mabs, surprisingly, had gone.

With a worried frown and a heavy heart, Mabs was retracing her steps to Study No.4.

Her play —

A little lump came into Mabs' throat. What evil influence had fallen over that play?

Ever since the play had gone into rehearsal, it had met with nothing but disasters and set-backs — first Babs,

now Rosa.

Mabs groaned.

If only Babs could have played the part!



Without realising she had reached that apartment, she found herself outside the door of Study No. 4. She put her hand upon the knob, was about to turn it, when she stopped.

For from inside the room came a sudden heartbreaking, dramatic declaration:

“Miss Graham, do not do it, please — you mustn’t expel me — you mustn’t! I’m sorry! I wasn’t responsible, but I don’t ask you to believe that. Give me time to prove my innocence — for mother’s sake!”

Mabs tingled. The voice was the voice of Barbara Redfern. The words were from one of the most dramatic and moving passages of her play. That inflexion of the voice, the realistic break in the tone, the heartbreaking poignancy of those accents! That was what Mabs had been looking for — what Rosa had failed to give her.

Very gently she pushed the door open, peering through the slit. There was Babs, looking up at an imaginary mistress, her face wrung, her arms bent, her fists clenched. “Miss Graham, is this your last word? Please, please think. Oh” ‘ — and Babs went down on her knees, burying her face in her hands —’ “Miss Graham, if you won’t do it for my sake, do it for mother’s! You see” ‘ — this in a whisper which thrilled Mabs — “if I’m disgraced now—if I’m sent home, it—it might kill her—”

Babs knew the part. She had learnt it by heart! Every word, every shade of expression, every action was perfect — perfect!

‘Babs!’ Mabs choked.

Babs looked round. Her face went white. She shook her head. Then, as Mabs took another step, she suddenly ran towards the door. She went out blindly, feeling dumb and heartbroken, a vivid picture of Mabs’ flaming, excited face in front of her mind’s eye.

And outside she met a party of Fourth Form girls, who stared at her, and then, with heightened colour and glances at each other, passed her without a word.

She smiled bitterly. But she breathed relief at the same time. Another second and those girls would have heard Mabs — speaking to her, the penalty for which she would be sent to Coventry. And then what of her play?

But Mabs, staring like one dazed, staring like a wounded animal at the door, had crumpled. She gave a hollow sob. For a moment she had forgotten Babs’ fate — forgotten that she was in Coventry.

Now she realised it — realised, too, why Babs had gone out — to discourage her from

betraying herself!
That also meant that Babs could not play the part.
The part which would save her play!

CHAPTER XX

Mabs Makes Up Her Mind

BUT Mabs did not give way to despair for long.
Now she was fighting for her play — the play that could only succeed if Babs took the most important part.
Half an hour later the meeting of the Dramatic Society was held. Mabs went there full of purpose, full of determination. Next to her friendship with Babs, her play was the dearest thing in her life. It was worth fighting for.
The members of the cast and the committee — all with the exception of Rosa — were assembled. Mabs came to the point without preamble.
‘Members of the cast and the committee, you all know for what purpose we are here. Have you any suggestions?’ she asked bluntly.
Nobody had.
‘Very well!’ Mabs drew a deep breath. — ‘When I first showed you the play you voted it a good one. But the play was only good because it was cast well — because the main character was its strongest character and its best. The whole play depends upon the main character which was written for Barbara Redfern. Her acting, her interpretation of the character made it. It will still make it. Girls, I have only one solution to offer to our present difficulties, and that is’ — she saw disapproval appearing on their faces, but she did not falter — ‘that Babs be re-invited to play the part!’
Immediately Lucy Morgan sprang up in her seat.
‘I disagree, look you!’ she cried. ‘Babs is in Coventry!’
‘Hear, hear!’
‘And she’s let the play down already!’
‘That’s right!’
‘Don’t be a goose, Mabs!’
‘You can’t defy the Form like that.’
Mabs, fighting desperately, was howled down. She fought on. Half an hour’s storm and the meeting ended — still with no solution of the difficulty achieved.
Mabs, feeling exhausted and dispirited, went back to her study.
There she received another shock.
What had happened to Study No.4?
The small desk which was Babs’ had gone from the corner. The bookcase which belonged to Bessie Bunter had gone from the wall.
The cupboard was open, revealing a diminished quantity of china and cutlery. Mabs stared dazedly.
‘Babs — Bessie,’ she muttered. ‘They — they’ve taken their things!’
There was a step behind her. She turned, finding herself staring into the features of Jemima Carstairs. Jemima looked sympathetic.
‘Jolly old birds flown, Mabs?’
‘Jimmy!’ Mabs cried in a choked voice. ‘You knew —’
‘Shush, shush! Stiff upper lip,’ Jemima murmured hastily. ‘Brace up. Mabs!’
‘But Babs — she’s gone!’
‘Not far, old thing. Only into Study No. 10. Ahem! Babs thought it best in the

naughty old circumstances. You see, she doesn't want you to be sent to Coventry as well. Thinking of the play.'

Mabs bit her lip. Recognising that she would not obey the ruling of the Form, yet realising that the Form would punish her if she was caught speaking to them. They had cleared out!

'What study?' she almost panted.

'Ten! But why — hi, whoa!' Jemima gasped. 'Mabs, where are you going?'

But Mabs did not reply. She did not even look. She was sprinting off down the corridor, her eyes alight with a fierce intensity, a welter of emotion clamouring tumultuously within her.

She reached the study, flung open the door.

'Babs!' Mabs gasped.

'Mabs — be careful!' Babs gasped in agony. 'They'll hear.'

'Do you want to desert me?' Mabs asked almost fiercely. 'No, of course not. But, Mabs, we — we did it for the best! You know what it will mean if you're caught talking to us. The Form —'

'Bother the Form! The Form isn't going to dictate to me!'

'But the play, Mabs. Mabs, don't!'

'Bother the play too!', Mabs cried bitterly. 'Hang the play! I'm fed up with the play! They won't let me have who I want in the play — and it's my play, isn't it?' she added in angry tears. 'I've stood enough from the Form, Babs. If they've ruined my play, they're not going to ruin my friendship.'

She stopped. Babs straightened, looking over Mabs' shoulder. And at the door, headed by Lydia Crossendale, were half a dozen Fourth Formers.

'Mabs!' Lydia cried.

Mabs swung round.

'You know that Babs is in Coventry now —'

'I know that you are a pack of idiots,' Mabs said dispassionately. 'I know that I hate you. I was speaking to her — yes! I wanted to, and I'm going to. Babs is my friend, whatever you ninnies accuse her of doing. Go away!'

'You know you'll be sent to Coventry?'

'I don't care! Get out!' Mabs cried almost hysterically. Without a word Lydia turned, ignoring the cry from Babs. Her companions turned with her. The sound of their footsteps were heard disappearing down the corridor.

'Mabs dear, you shouldn't,' Babs said quietly. 'You know what it means. We tried to prevent it —'

'I know!' Mabs shook her head dully. Now that she had got over her burst of passion, inevitable reaction was setting in.

She had defied the Form! Like Babs and Bessie, she was in Coventry! In Coventry — when she had embarked upon the play which she had hoped would bring her the crowning success of her junior career.

Barbara went over to her. She put a shaking hand upon the heaving shoulders.

'Mabs!' she cried brokenly.

But Mabs sobbed.

'My play, my play!' she cried wildly. She looked up, her face pitifully white, with agony and anguish. 'Babs, my — my play,' she whispered. 'What — what am I to do now?'

Babs stood still, in the depths of an utter, wretched misery. What could Mabs do?

Nothing! Only Babs herself could do something. The key to the whole position was in her hands.

Get the nugget, and all this hateful suspicion and terrible gloom would be lifted. To get the nugget meant not only saving Mabs' mother and father, but saving Mabs herself now!

Well, she must not fail! if Babs required any strengthening of her purpose for the enterprise to-night, surely she had it now!

‘Hist!’ Jemima Carstairs said dramatically. ‘Methinks we have arrived, Babs!’
Barbara Redfern nodded.

All around them was grey darkness and spell-binding silence. Not a breath of wind stirred. Not a sound of life was heard. They might have been in a world unpeopled, save for the yellow square of light that broke the black façade of Ivy House.

‘Lights downstairs!’ Babs muttered. ‘They’re up, apparently.’

‘How many in the house, Babs?’

‘Four, perhaps five. Sammy and Katie, Mr. and Mrs. Knox, and perhaps a fellow they call Carlo Rendle — a crook from the States, I believe, who they have staying with them.’

‘Quite a family party, what?’ Jemima remarked. ‘H’m! Well, there they are, and here we are. And now for the jolly old fireworks. Got anything that’ll lever up the boards, Babs?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, let’s stagger,’ Jemima said.

Babs nodded.

They went. The gates of Ivy House opened at their touch, which was not surprising, seeing that they contained no lock — had been innocent of a lock, indeed, ever since Babs could remember. With silent stealth they crept along the drive.

The house loomed nearer, Now they had a glimpse of the downstairs windows which were illuminated. Those windows, curtained though they were, provided an excellent view of the occupants within. Babs stopped suddenly, catching at Jemima’s wrist.

‘Look!’ she breathed.

Jemima, groping for her monocle, and then letting it fall again, looked.

And she saw. Mr. and Mrs. Knox were seated at a table with a youngish man who wore a thin line of black moustache on his upper lip.

They sat at a table, absorbed in a game of cards which they were playing. In an armchair, half-asleep, sat Katie. On the arm of the same chair, looking on with sulky resentment registered on his features, was Sammy. Jemima chuckled.

‘The whole group,’ she said. ‘What a pretty picture, Babskins! Seems a pity to disturb them. Wish I’d brought the merry old camera!’

Babs smiled faintly. She plucked Jemima’s arm.

‘And they’ve got the car outside — see?’ She pointed at a dim yellow shadow against the wall. ‘Jimmy——’

‘Listening,’ Jemima said.

‘You know all about cars ——’

‘Well, I can start ’em, and I can run ’em. And sometimes, y’know, I can stop ’em,’ Jemima said. ‘But what’s a car to do with it, my fellow conspirator?’

‘Suppose you use it to create a racket?’ Babs whispered. ‘Egad! That’s a good idea. You mean, if they think somebody’s running off with the old boneshaker ——’

‘That’s it! They’ll come out. I’ll watch. As soon as they’re out I’ll make a dash. You scare ’em. But come this way first.’

She led Jemima aside. Now they were on the north side of the house. Babs pointed to a small gothic window that glimmered thirty feet above the ground.

‘That’s the room where the nugget is hidden,’ she whispered. ‘I’ve got an idea. I may not be able to get away by the door, but there’s a long ladder somewhere about here. If we can find it —’

Fortunately, the ladder did not take them long to find. To rear it against the wall without noise was a more difficult matter, however. But they managed it.

Together they stole back towards the car. Jemima climbed into it while Babs took up a position in the black shadows thrown by a clump of bushes.

Babs clenched her hands.

‘All right, Jimmy, let it go!’ she called softly.

‘What-ho!’ Jemima breathed.

She switched on the petrol, pressing the starter-button. The gears were in neutral, and the hand-brake was on. Jemima engaged the clutch, at the same time stepping upon the accelerator. Immediately the night was made hideous.

The din was sudden, terrific. It shook the ground. Babs, glancing anxiously through the windows, saw the card-party sit up as though it had received an electric shock.

Startled glances were exchanged. Mr. Knox lumbered to his feet.

‘Gee, the car!’

‘Somebody’s fooling with the car!’

‘After ‘em!’

Cr-r-r-r-r! shrieked the engine of the car.

Birds awoke. A startled trill mingled with the deafening din Jemima was creating. A dog howled somewhere near by. Now there was a rush of footsteps from the house.

The door was flung open. Mr. Knox’s voice braying on the air like an enraged donkey:

‘Hey! What are you doing with our car?’

Babs heaved a deep breath.

She saw them. In a body they came past her. The door was open; her way was clear.

Quick as a streak of lightning she shot from her hiding-place. In a second she had cleared the intervening piece of ground, stumbling heavily against the doorstep.

Desperately she flew over the threshold.

But she did not see Carlo Rendle pause. She did not see him as he, in the rear of the others, twisted just in time to see her vanishing skirt over the edge of the threshold.

Heart thumping, pulses racing, she leapt up the stairs. It was dark, but Babs knew her way about. Up the first flight along the landing; up the second and shorter flight, and the room which was her objective was gained. She fumbled for a moment for the key, turned it, and crashed the door open.

The moonlight poured in through the window, showing her the gaping hole between the floorboards beneath which the nugget was concealed.

Babs drew out her screwdriver. In a moment she was across the room. She knelt down.

And then —

She stopped, straightening quickly.

What was that?

Now, with eyes round with horror, she stared towards the door. There was a crash of footsteps. She felt rather than saw the figure that stood at the door. Snick! The lights went on. Babs — dazed, bewildered, blinked, almost sick with dismay and the realisation of failure — found herself staring into Carlo Rendle’s face.

‘You!’ he exclaimed.

Babs gasped. Her game was up, it seemed. Outside the noise of the car had stopped. But there was a crash, followed by a hooting voice and smothered curses from Mr. Knox as they blundered in the wake of Jemima, who was truly leading them the dance she had promised.

Babs threw a hunted glance towards the window. She took a step backwards.

But Carlo, his face a savage mask of rage, was upon her.

‘You — hey?’ he ground out. ‘Little Miss Barbara Redfern? I had my suspicions of you! Now I know! Working in with the detective chap, aren’t you? It was you that set him free! So this is your little game! What have you come here for!’

‘Let me go!’ Babs panted.

‘Yeah, likely!’ he sneered. ‘You’ll go from here when we’ve got what we want — see? Not a minute before! Knox wouldn’t believe me when I told him you were in league with the detective. Perhaps he will now! You shall talk, young lady! Oh, yes, you shall talk! There’s a nice dark cellar overrun with rats where you can spend the night, and maybe you will see sense in the morning! This way!’

He tugged her towards the door. Babs let out a desperate gasp. Downstairs all was strangely quiet now.

Another savage tug. Then —

Crash!

‘Whoa!’ called a voice.

Carlo wheeled. The crash had come from the window. Simultaneously there was a second crash. The electric-light bulb, shattered to pieces, tumbled on to the floor. The man’s grip upon Babs relaxed.

‘Babs!’ Jemima shrieked.

Babs flew at once for the window. ‘Quick! Clamber through! Shin down the ladder! I’ll see to him!’ she added. ‘Stand back there!’ she roared furiously.

And Babs, gasping and desperate, had scrambled through the small window. Jemima, standing statuesque, remained motionless as she desperately worked her way round. From the direction of the outhouses came a shout in Sammy Knox’s voice: ‘Dad, look! There’s a ladder up against the wall!’

‘Jimmy!’ Babs gasped.

‘Get down!’ Jemima hissed.

Babs obeyed. She had her legs round the ladder now. There was no time to descend step by step. She simply shut her eyes and let herself go. Whiz! Not twenty yards away, crashing feet in the undergrowth told her that the Knoxes were on her trail.

‘Jimmy!’ she gasped.

‘Coming!’ Jemima sang.

She came. She came, even as Babs, with a rush that scorched her hands from friction with the woodwork of the ladder. A head was thrust through the broken window.

Came the voice of Carlo.

‘Stop them! They’re getting away!’

‘Jimmy!’ Babs gasped. ‘Quickly! Run!’

But Jemima paused. Ten yards away the Knox family, hot on the trail now, were striking in a line towards them. Jemima’s eyes gleamed. She turned suddenly, giving the ladder a push. It heeled over.

‘Lookout!’

‘The ladder—’

‘Mind!’

Sammy, in front, caught his foot in a piece of turf and went sprawling. With a roar, Mr. Knox sprawled on top of him, burying his face in the soft ground. Katie, giving

up all as lost, flung up her arms and shrieked.

‘Help, help, help!’

‘Come on!’ Jemima chortled. ‘Babs, quick! The car!’ There was a roar, a shout.

‘Stop ‘em!’

‘They’re getting away!’

‘In the car—’

‘Good work! Hold tight!’ Jemima chuckled breathlessly. The car shot away. Jemima could drive. It was a quarter of a mile to the gates, but that quarter of a mile was accomplished in a straining second gear in well under half a minute. Jemima climbed out.

‘Come on!’ she said. ‘Ye fishes, what a night! All right, Babs?’

‘Yes. But the car? They’ll follow!’

Jemima chuckled.

‘Not they!’ She laughed softly. ‘I’ve got the ignition key, and, to make doubly sure, I’ve also got the starting handle!’

‘You’re sure they can’t start the car?’

‘Sure! The only way they’ll get that car to move again is to push it!’ Jemima replied.

‘But run —’

They ran. For a quarter of a mile they ran. Then Jemima stopped.

‘No pursuit. The way is clear,’ she said. ‘Gee whiz and whoa-up! Quite exciting while it lasted, Babs. But good work, what? Did I scare ‘em, or didn’t I? By the way, you got the old nugget?’

‘No!’ Babs said in a stifled voice.

‘Tough luck!’ Jemima murmured. ‘Ahem! What now, Babs?’ But Babs, for once, could find no reply. She didn’t know. The bright hopes which had sustained her were gone — gone for ever! Oh, fool, fool that she had been to bungle everything so.

If her position had been bad before, it was a million times worse now. While she had remained friendly with the Knoxes there had been a possibility of getting hold of the nugget.

But now the Knoxes suspected — now they knew — the doors of Ivy House would be barred to her for ever! What hope ever of getting that nugget now?

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Back at Ivy House a shaken Knox family surveyed one another. ‘It was Babs,’

Sammy said. ‘It was Babs — with another girl!’ ‘But what did they come here for?’

Katie asked. ‘Why play a joke like that? If it was a joke.’

Mr. Knox scowled. He looked utterly scared.

‘It wasn’t a joke,’ he said. ‘They were after something — something that — but never mind. Here, you kids, get out!’ he barked roughly. ‘Go and find Carlo. Where the dickens is Carlo?’ he added querulously.

‘Well, he’s searching that room.’

‘Go and find him. Tell him I want him. Tell him — quick!’ And Mr. Knox made a threatening move towards his offspring as though, in his sudden desperate anxiety, he would kick them out of the room. Sammy and Katie scared, went.

But when they had gone he looked at his wife. Mrs. Knox, agitated, nervous, was seated in the chair.

‘What’s that Redfern girl got to do with it?’ he demanded. ‘What’s she been here for — rummaging in that room?’

Mrs. Knox helplessly shook her head.

'I—I don't know —'

'Don't you? Well, I do!' His face was savage. 'Carlo was right when he said he wouldn't trust her. Now we know. She came back to that room to-night — to find something. Yes, the nugget!' His face was twisted and bitter. 'Oh, I see it now! Carlo was right all along. Babs has been hand in glove with the detective.'

Mrs. Knox gasped.

'We thought when the nugget was pinched from us that he'd got it. Well, we found he hadn't. But now we know. That kid Babs was helping him the night he tried to pinch it. She must have had it. Oh, it's easy to see now what happened! She couldn't get away with it, so she hid it somewhere — in that room!'

'My dear —'

'And she came back for it to-night,' he added. 'She's got it most likely. And if she's got it, what then? A nice mess we're in.'

Mrs. Knox face, paled.

'You mean —'

'I mean we'll have to bunk! If she's got it she'll take it to the police. And once the police get hold of it —'

He bit his lip. Beads of perspiration broke out upon Mrs. Knox's face. They both jumped as the door opened and Carlo appeared.

Each stared at him eagerly.

'Carlo, you found —'

'The nugget — no!' His face was savage. 'But I found this —' he said. 'Babs must have dropped it when I grabbed hold of her.' He held up a dainty little diary. He opened it, his eyes fastened very peculiarly upon the pair. 'Look at this,' he invited. The elder Knoxes craned forward, staring at the written inscription on the fly-leaf of the diary. That inscription read:

'TO BARBARA, FROM MABEL LYNN.'

'Mabel Lynn!' breathed Mr. Knox. He looked in startled fashion at his henchman.

'Carlo —'

Carlo Rendle smiled grimly.

'See the idea?' he said. 'Mabel Lynn —her pal. Mabel Lynn's parents are in prison for having pinched the nugget. Babs got hitched up with the detective who was on the trail of the nugget. Why? Because if she could find the nugget in England and hand it over to the police, it would prove that the Lynns in Canada were innocent!'

Mr. Knox's shaggy brows met.

'And you didn't find the nugget?'

'No!'

'Then that means she's got it?'

'Looks like it! But I'm not sure. She may have pitched it into the garden — anything! We've got to go canny for a while. No use getting the wind-up. We've just got to figure this thing out between us. Suppose Babs found the nugget —'

'She'd take it to the police.'

'Yes! In that case the police will be here on our track. But I've a funny hunch that Babs hasn't got the nugget. If Babs hasn't got the nugget she'll know where it is. Maybe, seeing that Mabel Lynn's such a pal of hers, she'll tell her. I didn't see the gal who helped her to-night, but that might have been this Mabel Lynn herself. The best thing,' Carlo said, 'is to clear out of here and lie low for a while.'

Less than an hour later the Knoxes and Carlo left Ivy House. And lying low in the

days that followed, they discovered all that they wanted to know. On the fifth day they returned to Ivy House, and Carlo arranged his plan of campaign.

‘Well, I guess it’s all O.K.!’ he said. ‘My hunch didn’t let me down, you see. The nugget’s still in existence, and three people know where it’s hidden. One of them is the detective chap — still in hospital. The other’s Barbara Redfern at Cliff House School. The third is this Mabel Lynn — or so I figure it. Right! Then we’ve got to get hold of Mabel Lynn — Sammy!’

‘Y-yes?’ Sammy said.

‘Tomorrow you and Katie go to Cliff House School. Find out who this Mabel Lynn is. Talk to her. Use your wits and use your brains — and bring her here. Once we get her —’ he grinned. ‘Then I don’t think the rest’ll be so hard,’ he said.

CHAPTER XXI

A Problem for the Fourth!

DOWN the stairs, from every corridor, girls were swarming.

‘An extra holiday!’

‘Hurrah!’

A surge forward. Girls were staring. Unbelievably they stared at first, suspecting that some rumour-monger was pulling their legs. But there it was — plain for all to read, a neatly typed notice signed with her usual characteristic flourish by Miss Primrose, the headmistress. It read:

‘NOTICE.

‘On Wednesday next the competition for the Schools’ Dramatic Prize will be held in Big Hall, when Miss Pearl Katherley, the celebrated actress, will visit Cliff House in order to judge the junior play ‘A Fourth Form Fantasy.’ The judging will take place at 11.30 a.m. instead of 2 p.m. as originally arranged. There will, therefore, be no lessons on Wednesday morning, though all girls are ordered to keep within school bounds until 2 p.m.

‘(Signed) PENELOPE PRIMROSE.

‘Headmistress’

‘But—gee! Say!’ Leila Carroll suddenly put in. ‘Quit the celebrations, sisters. Doesn’t Primmy know?’

‘About the play!’

Girls looked from one to the other.

‘Oh, my hat!’ Eleanor Storke said in dismay. ‘I say, you know, I don’t believe anyone’s told her. We forgot that!’

‘And Pearl Katherley’s coming —’

Blank consternation now. Faces were glum. Then suddenly there was a stir, a turning of heads towards the wide, sweeping staircase which led up to the Fourth Form quarters.

For down those stairs three girls were approaching.

Barbara Redfern, Mabel Lynn, and Bessie Bunter.

They came, arm-in-arm, Bessie in the centre, swinging their way through the crowds. Neither to right nor left did they look. Girls, murmuring uneasily, gave way before them.

Up to the notice-board they strolled, stopped there, looked at the notice, and read it. Mabel Lynn bit her lip.

Round swung Babs. Round swung Mabs. And Bessie, because she was in the centre, swung round with them.

And as they came, so they went — amid a death-like silence, watched by fifty pairs of eyes, but greeted by never so much as a word.

But behind them they left a blank and constrained crowd of girls.

‘We’ve got to do something about it!’

Thus Clara Trevlyn, the tomboy of the Fourth Form, addressing the glum-faced girls Babs and Co. had left behind them.

‘With Mabs in Coventry —’

‘And Primmy knowing nothing about it.’

‘And arranging a whole holiday for a play that won’t be staged!’

‘And inviting Miss Pearl Katherley to see it!’

‘Well?’ Jemima beamed. And she stared at Clara, unofficially the leader of the Form now that Babs was disgraced. Clara’s face was glum.

‘Well,’ she repeated, ‘we’ve got to do something. It’s letting the school down.

Wednesday is the day. Today is Monday — which means there are only forty-eight hours to get the play rehearsed and ready. Well — oh, hang it! Look here! We’ve got to speak to Mabs.’

‘You mean — let her out of Coventry?’

‘Yes; unless,’ Clara said, with a threatening glare, ‘somebody else can make a better suggestion. If you want my opinion now, I never have held with Mabs and Bessie being in Coventry. If it hadn’t been for the law of the Form, I wouldn’t have agreed to send them. Mabs has done nothing wrong — except talk to Babs. And, after all, you can’t blame her for that. Babs is her friend — she was my friend until she started being funny and doing idiotic things. I vote we release Mabs —’

‘And Babs?’

‘She’s got to stop in Coventry!’ Lydia Crossendale heatedly spoke up. ‘She jolly well deserves it. She’s let everybody down!’

‘Hear, hear!’

‘Oh, well, let’s go and see Mabs!’ Clara exclaimed. ‘Stop ragging now!’ There was a pause; then a dozen girls joined her.

Up the stairs they swept, into the Fourth Form corridor. Clara knocked upon the door of Study No.4.

Three girls — Mabs, Babs, and Bessie — who shared that famous apartment, wheeled to meet them. They looked surprised.

‘Oh!’ Clara hesitated. She coloured. ‘Mabs, we’d like to speak to you.’

Mabs smiled.

‘When I’m in Coventry?’ she asked.

Clara flushed again

‘Well, you’re not in Coventry now — at least —’ She paused. ‘It’s about the play,’ she said.

‘Yes?’

‘Can we see you — alone?’

Mabs glanced at Babs.

‘What you have to say to me can be said in front of my friends,’ she said rather quietly. ‘You haven’t been in too much of a hurry to speak to me recently, have you? Now you do want to speak to me, I don’t see why I should agree to your conditions.’

‘All right, all right!’ Clara exclaimed. ‘No need to get on the high horse, Mabs. Have it your own way. You’ve seen the notice on the board?’

‘Yes!’

‘And you realise we’ve got to do the play?’

‘Then why not go and do it?’ Mabs invited.

‘Now, look here! Oh crumbs! Mabs, don’t play the giddy goat,’ Clara implored. ‘You know we can’t do it without you. And we can’t let the school down. Will you take the play on again? Everybody will back you up —’

‘And the cast?’

‘Well, the cast, naturally, is as you choose it. There won’t be a lot of work to do. Most of the girls who were in the play have learned their lines. The only thing’ — Clara paused, glancing in troubled embarrassment at Mabs — ‘well, the only thing is — is — Oh, hang it! You tell her, Janet.’

‘It — it — well, it’s about Babs,’ Janet Jordan found herself stuttering. ‘The Form is willing to release you and Bessie from Coventry, Mabs, But Babs —’

Mabs’ lips set.

‘Meaning that Babs is still to remain in Coventry?’ she asked. ‘Meaning that she is barred from the play? No, thanks!’

Dismay settled upon the group at the door.

‘I’ve been through all that already,’ Mabs said, her voice rising. ‘I’ve told you that if this play is going to be a success, Babs has got to take the lead. The part was written for her. Nobody else can do it half as well. Without Babs, it’s just a washout. And I refuse to handle the play unless Babs plays the part!’

‘But she’s in Coventry, Mabs!’

‘So was I! If you can let me out you can let her out!’

‘But you haven’t done the things she’s done.’

‘Release Babs, and I’ll do it — gladly, with pleasure. But if I handle the play I’m responsible for its success, and I know what will make it a success. So go on now, think it over!’

And Mabs waved a determined hand towards the door.

The girls hesitated. Then Clara shrugged her shoulders. Truth to tell, Clara was feeling rather mean, for Clara liked Babs, and before this ban on Coventry had been put upon the leader of the Fourth, she had been one of Babs’ greatest chums. But Clara, like everybody else, had to obey the dictates of the Form.

‘Come on!’ she growled.

She turned, pushing her way through the crowd. Resentfully her followers gazed at the three in the study — Mabs standing very upright, the same glint in her eyes; Babs looking — and feeling — thoroughly unhappy, knowing very well what a tremendous sacrifice her chum had made by making that announcement; Bessie blinked woefully. But at last they were all gone. There was silence in the study. Bessie mechanically plucked an apple from the dish on the fruit table. Without appetite she began to eat it. Mabs sighed. Dropping suddenly into a chair Babs heaved a deep breath.

‘Mabs, you know how much your play means to you.’

Mabs shook her head. A little gulp came into her throat.

‘Dud-don’t let’s talk about it, shall we?’ she asked.

She smiled mistily up at her chum, and then quickly dropped her head. But Babs looked troubled.

‘Mabs!’ she muttered.

But Mabs did not reply. And Babs, knowing what the renunciation meant to her, stood uncomfortably silent. How badly Mabs wanted to handle that play again, perhaps only she knew. And yet she had refused the opportunity — for her sake.

There was a step in the corridor; voices. Babs started. Bessie jumped and coloured furiously as Miss Primrose, the headmistress, came in, followed by the school captain.

Bessie blinked guiltily as the three study-mates stood up. 'Oh crumbs!' Bessie gasped. 'Miss Pip-Primrose!'

Miss Primrose stood still.

'Yes, Bessie, you wished to say something?'

'Well, yes. It — it wasn't me, you know,' Bessie said hurriedly.

'I mum-mean I didn't know it was Stella's cake, you know. I wouldn't have dreamed of touching it if I'd known it had been Stella's cake, Miss Primrose. That is, of course, I dud-didn't see it, you know.'

Miss Primrose frowned.

'Bessie, what are you talking about?'

Bessie blinked.

'Well, haven't you come about the cake?'

'The cake?'

And Miss Primrose looked surprised. But in Stella Stone's eyes enlightenment suddenly dawned. She smiled quietly. She thought she understood.

She had missed a cake which her uncle had sent her yesterday. She had been puzzled as to its absence. But obviously it was on Bessie's conscience, and Bessie, alarmed by the unusual visit of both headmistress and head girl had, in her usual guilty fashion, jumped to the conclusion that her latest sin had found her out.

'Bessie, what is this about a cake?' Miss Primrose asked. 'Well, it — it was that cake of Stella's, you know. I mum-mean, of course, I didn't know Stella had a cake. And if I'd known she'd had a cake, do you think I'd have taken it — me, a Bunter? No, not though I was almost sus-starving, Miss Primrose. Besides, it was a seed cake, and I'm not fuf-fond of seed cake.'

Miss Primrose looked amazed.

'Stella, the child is apparently talking about your property.'

'Yes,' Stella nodded grimly. 'I think I know. But never mind, Miss Primrose. I'll attend to that afterwards. Mabel —'

Mabs stepped forward.

'Miss Primrose has come to see you about your play.' Stella paused. 'You know that the time is fixed, and the preparations have been made?'

Mabs flushed.

'Yes.'

'Miss Primrose wishes you to assure her that everything is going on as it should be.'

'That is so, Mabel,' Miss Primrose interjected. 'I am sorry I have not had time to be present at one of your rehearsals. However, knowing that you can be trusted with these things. I have had no qualms. But there are certain details I want to discuss with you.'

Mabs bit her lip.

'I — I'm sorry; but — there isn't a play now, Miss Primrose,' she faltered.

'There is no play?' Miss Primrose looked incredulous. 'But, Mabel — my goodness! Everything is arranged. The school is entered for this competition. Miss Pearl Katherley is making a special journey down.' She looked utterly scandalised, full of sudden consternation. 'But this is ridiculous!' she cried. 'We cannot cancel arrangements at the eleventh hour!'

Babs stepped forward.

'Miss Primrose, may I explain?'

'Please do! I want to know the truth of this!'

'Well —' Babs paused. 'You see, Mabs started the play. It went into rehearsal.

Everything was going swimmingly. Then — then I got into trouble with the Form.

The Form sent me to Coventry, and Mabs was sent to Coventry afterwards for speaking to me.'

Miss Primrose's eyes glinted.

'Thank you, Barbara! I do not wish you to go into details. I think I understand. It is not my habit to interfere in Form matters, but this is no longer a Form matter. It is a matter which affects the school. The prestige of Cliff House is at stake. I should have been told that the play had been abandoned. As it is, it is now too late. The Form, I take it, is aware that final arrangements have been made?'

'Yes, Miss Primrose. And — and the Form has offered to let Mabs out of Coventry.'

'Indeed? In order to take up the play again, I presume?'

'Yes.'

'And you have agreed to this, Mabel?'

But Mabs shook her head.

'No, Miss Primrose.'

'Why?'

'Because,' Mabs explained, 'they will not let Barbara Out as well. And the play can't go on without Barbara. It would simply be a farce. We've tried other girls in her part, but Barbara is the only girl who can do it properly.'

Miss Primrose glanced at Stella. Some message of understanding seemed to pass between them.

'Thank you!' Miss Primrose nodded. 'I am not going to inquire for what reason you were banished by the Form, Barbara, but I will talk to the Form. The matter cannot rest where it is at present. I am sure the Form does not wish Cliff House to earn the ridicule of the other schools competing in the contest. And I cannot cancel arrangements now, because I do not know where I can get hold of Miss Katherley in the meantime. Ahem! Barbara and Mabel, you had better absent yourselves from the first period of lessons this morning. Perhaps it would not be advisable for you to be present when I talk to the Form in class.'

'Oh, I sus-say! That's fine!' Bessie approved. 'You mean me, too, Miss Primrose?'

'Indeed I do not, Bessie!'

'But I'm in Coventry, too, you know!' Bessie argued warmly. 'Bessie, please be quiet. You are simply a foolish child. This matter does not concern you. Barbara — Mabel, you will attend the second period of lessons. Meantime, Stella, will you come along to my study? I wish to discuss this matter with you.'

'Immediately, Miss Primrose?' Stella asked.

'Well, within five minutes.'

'Thank you, yes, Miss Primrose.' And Stella smiled as Miss Primrose swept away.

Then she came into the room her eyes sternly fastened upon Bessie. 'And now, Elizabeth Gertrude Bunter, I will talk to you,' she announced — and palpitating Bessie did not see the twinkle in Stella's eyes — 'on the subject of —'

'Oh, crumbs!' groaned Bessie.

'Not crumbs — cake!' Stella said.

CHAPTER XXII

The Knoxes Reappear!

MISS PRIMROSE was as good as her word.

She spoke to the Form.

She spoke very seriously and with profound sincerity, and the Form listened in silence. Not for twenty-one years had Miss Primrose been the headmistress of Cliff

House without learning the ways of the girls in her charge. She knew exactly how to appeal to the Form. She knew the strength of its loyalty to the school as a whole. She knew how to be tactful with dignity. She emphasised a desire not to interfere in matters that concerned the Form, but she did ask them most seriously to remove the ban of Coventry they had placed upon Barbara Redfern, and so allow the play to go forward.

The honour of the school depended upon the Fourth. The Fourth had the opportunity now to win one of the greatest dramatic prizes in existence.

The Form listened. But almost to a girl it agreed with Miss Primrose. In any case, the Fourth was wavering now. Since that interview with Mabel Lynn this morning opinion had been divided.

The opinion of the Form as a whole was that bygones should be bygones, and now that co-ordinated effort was necessary they should pull together as one girl. At the end of her speech Miss Primrose was cheered.

‘You will do this, girls? For the school’s sake! I may go back and tell Barbara and Mabel that no bad feeling still exists?’

A murmur of approval.

‘Thank you!’ Miss Primrose smiled. ‘I sincerely hope from this moment that you will support Mabel and Barbara. The play has suffered no doubt through postponement of its rehearsals, but I am trusting you to do your best to show Miss Katherley the talent we have here at Cliff House when Wednesday arrives. You will rehearse this evening, I take it. At the conclusion of the rehearsal I will make it my duty to consult Mabel, and, if necessary, the cast will be excused tomorrow morning from first period in order to have an extra rehearsal. Thank you, girls!’

And Miss Primrose went, leaving a wave of good-fellowship behind her. Truly she knew how to deal with the Form.

And so the glad news was broken to Babs and to Mabs; and so, finally, the ban of Coventry came to an end. In the Common-room during the dinner hour they were once again received as friends, and by tacit consent nothing concerning Barbara’s previous offences was mentioned.

But Babs was worried.

She tried not to show it.

She still had got to get possession of that nugget.

But how? When, in ten days’ time, the trial was to be held!

Babs was desperately turning that over in her mind, while Mabs, free now of all her troubles, was elatedly preparing. In the dinner-hour the stage was set, the girls warned to take their parts. It was an excited and elated Mabs who took her place in class that afternoon.

And then the first disaster happened.

Phyllis Howell, who had a small part in the play, was taken ill in the class-room, and had to be sent to the sanatorium.

‘Well, that’s done it?’ Mabs said to Babs over tea. She said it rather glumly; for Phyllis’ part, though it was not large, was the light relief in the play, and Phyllis had been extremely good in it. ‘What the dickens are we to do now?’

‘Have to get someone else.’ Babs advised.

‘But who?’

Bessie, in the act of transferring a pastry to her mouth, looked up.

‘Well, if you’re looking for someone else, what about me?’ she asked.

‘You, Bessie?’

‘Why not? You know what a jolly topping actress I am really. I — I can play

Shakespeare like anything!’

‘But this isn’t Shakespeare, Bessie.’

‘Well Dickens, then.’

‘My dear Bessie, don’t you know that Dickens never wrote plays?’ Mabel Lynn asked patiently. ‘In any case this is my play. We want a girl of medium height, rather slim; a good-looking one too.’

Bessie blinked.

‘Well, I may not be tall, but you can’t say I haven’t got a figure ——’

‘No,’ Babs agreed critically, ‘we certainly can’t say that.’

‘And you know I’m the best-looking girl in the Form.’

‘Oh, good gracious!’

Bessie blinked indignantly.

‘Well, aren’t I?’

‘With the exception of thirty-one other girls—yes!’

Bessie glowered.

‘Oh, fudge! You’re jolly well jealous, that’s what it is. You know I can beat any of you for looks and for acting. Haven’t I performed on the films, and wasn’t I in a circus once?’

That was true. Bessie had performed both in films and in the circus, but she had not performed because of her acting ability — rather because of her lack of it, indeed. Bessie was naturally funny in the most serious of circumstances. When she really tried to act she was a scream.

But, Babs, thinking it over, had a sudden idea.

‘Well, why not, Mabs? Bessie —’

‘What?’ cried Mabs.

‘Bessie could do the part. After all, it’s burlesque.’

‘O.K.!’ Mabs sighed. ‘You have it, Bessie.’

‘You mean I can do the part?’

‘Yes!’

The part wouldn’t suffer. In fact, it would assure its success. Now that Mabs had the idea, she wondered they had not thought of it before.

So when the cast assembled for the rehearsal in the music-room that evening, Bessie, proudly boasting of what she was going to do, was among them.

And Bessie went through the part. She went through it in a way that brought titters, sternly suppressed, from the audience. Bessie took herself with dreadful seriousness.

When Bessie tried to look mournful and sorrowful, she was the funniest thing ever.

When she was lighthearted, she was so dramatically humorous that her audience was convulsed. Oh, no doubt that Bessie would be a success!

But the girl who aroused the admiration of everyone — even those who still harboured some latent resentment against her, was Babs.

Even the cast, familiar with the part as they were, stood hushed and silent when Babs held the stage. Never had Babs convinced the Form so decidedly as she did then, that only Babs could do the part justice.

She was magnificent! Superb!

The first act finished with Babs declaiming on the stage. There was a hushed murmur of applause.

‘Oh, Babs, that was marvellous, marvellous!’ Mabs cried. Her face was happy, her eyes shining. She was almost trembling in her happiness.

Babs laughed. It did her good to see Mabs so happy. Then she frowned as the door opened and the cheerfully perky face of her sister, Doris Redfern, of the Upper Third,

peered into the room.

‘Lo, Babs!’

‘Buzz off!’ Babs cried at once.

‘Ratses!’ Doris retorted cheekily. ‘My hat, what’s going on here?’

‘Mind your own business,’ Clara Trevlyn admonished. ‘Little girls,’ she added severely, ‘should be seen and not heard.’

‘Go hon! Is that so?’ Doris gazed at her. ‘Then what are you talking for?’ she asked interestedly.

‘Look here, you cheeky kid —’

‘Woof!’ Doris jeered.

Clara made a rush. Doris stepped aside and slammed the door. A moment later it opened again to reveal her cheeky little face.

‘Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf?’ she cried.

‘My hat! Let me get hold of you —’

Clara made another rush. Doris, with a merry peal, shut the door again. A second later it opened once more however.

‘Pax!’ Doris said. ‘Wow, Babs, hold her back! Mabs —’

‘Well?’ Mabs smiled impatiently.

‘You’re wanted on the telephone in the prefects’-room.’

‘Who wants me?’

‘I don’t know!’

‘Oh, bother!’ and Mabs looked vexed. She wanted to rehearse Bessie again. ‘All right,’ she said resignedly. ‘I’ll go!’

But Babs stepped forward.

‘No, you carry on, Mabs. I’ll go,’ she offered. ‘You won’t want me for another ten minutes. It may be nothing important. I can take a message.’

Mabs looked grateful.

‘Oh, thanks, Babs! That’s good of you,’ she said. ‘Would you mind?’ She turned her attention to the fat one. ‘Now, Bessie —’

And Babs quitted the room, leaving Doris behind. She hurried along to the prefects’-room and took up the receiver.

A voice which set her tingling came over the wire.

‘Hallo, that Miss Mabel Lynn?’

The voice was that of Mrs. Knox.

‘You want me?’ Babs asked.

‘Yes! My name is Knox — Mrs. Knox,’ the voice went on. ‘You’ve heard of me, of course?’

‘Yes!’ Babs said.

‘And I’ve heard of you, My husband and I are here at Ivy House.’ Mrs. Knox went on sweetly. ‘We’ve only just discovered that you’re at Cliff House School, Mabel. We knew your father and your mother —’

Babs was tingling now. What a stroke of luck that Mabs hadn’t answered this call!

‘We were wondering if you’d join us at a little party we’re having this evening?’ Mrs. Knox went on. ‘As a matter of fact, Sammy and Katie — that’s my boy and girl, you know — are on their way to Cliff House School now to bring you back. Can you manage it?’

Babs thought desperately. Alarm filled her. Sammy and Katie — on their way here to see Mabel Lynn!

‘Well, I — I’ve got a rehearsal on,’ she said, ‘and — and it’s difficult to get leave —’

‘I see! Very well; then I’ll leave Sammy and Katie to fix it up with you,’ Mrs. Knox

said sweetly. 'But do try, Mabel. We're all so very interested to see you. Good-bye!' Babs rang off. Absently she hung up the receiver, her thoughts a-riot. There was a step outside the door. Babs turned quickly. A gleaming monocle peered into the room.

'What cheer, Babs?'

'Jimmy!' Babs gasped.

'Before you!' Jemima beamed. 'As large as life and full of beans — what? And with news, my Babskins! Behold I have just seen a marvellous sight!'

Babs stared.

'The ob-Knoxes — Sammy and Katie of that ilk — strolling through the school gates!'

'Oh, goodness!' Babs gasped. She stared at the immaculate one. 'Jimmy, you'll have to help me. They're coming to see Mabs. Look here, go to the music-room! Get Mabs out of the way — somehow, anyhow!' she cried distractedly. 'I'll go and meet the Knoxes and get rid of them somehow! Take Mabs to one of the box-rooms! Lock her up — anything — until we've got rid of the Knoxes!'

'Mabs won't be pleased,' Jemima decided.

'Can't be helped. Jimmy, you'll do it?'

'What-ho!'

Jemima, with a cool grin, strolled off, and Babs, her heart fluttering, rushed into the quadrangle. Sure enough, two figures were strolling up the drive towards the school. Sammy and Katie Knox!

They stopped as Babs presented herself in front of them. Sammy glowered.

'Sammy, what do you want?' Babs gasped.

'Not you!' Sammy scowled. 'We've had enough of you! We didn't know you were playing the low-down on us, Babs! We've come to see Mabel Lynn!'

'What for?'

'Is that your business?'

'It is!' Babs faced them desperately. 'Mabs is busy,' she said. 'Oh, rabbits! We want to see Mabel Lynn! She's expecting us!' And Sammy made roughly as if to push Babs away.

But Babs stood her ground.

'Wait a minute!' she said quickly. 'Look here, you can't crash into the school like this! You don't know Mabel Lynn —'

'Well, that's why we've come here — to get to know her!'

'But — stop! You — you can't go into the school!' Babs cried desperately. 'You can't! Mabs doesn't want to see you!'

'Oh! You been telling her things about us?'

'Dear me! What is this?' asked a voice. And Babs jumped round, peering into the mild features of Miss Wright, the English mistress. 'Barbara, you are not quarrelling with this boy and girl?'

'I'm afraid I am, Miss Wright!' Babs gasped.

'Who are they — friends of yours?'

'We're Sammy and Katie Knox,' Sammy truculently spoke up, 'and we've come to see Mabel Lynn. But Babs doesn't want us to see her.'

'Dear me! That is peculiar! You are friends of Mabel Lynn?'

'We are,' Sammy said — 'at least, we know her people — Major Lynn and Mrs. Lynn, you know. My mother rang up Mabel on the telephone, and invited her to a party we're having at our house. We've come here to ask Mabel if she's coming.'

'Oh!' And Miss Wright smiled. 'In that case you had better see Mabel,' she

acquiesced. 'Er — let me see! Mabel is rehearsing in the music-room, isn't she, Barbara? I am going that way. Come with me!'

Babs groaned. Her only hope now was that Jemima had got Mabs safely out of the way.

Sammy threw her a triumphant glance. Katie, turning behind the mistress, insolently put out her tongue. With an inward groan, Babs strode after them as Miss Wright led the way into the school.

A hush descended upon the occupants of the music-room as the mistress, with Katie and Sammy, entered. Unfriendly stares were directed towards the two Knoxes.

'Ahem! Is Mabel here?' Miss Wright asked.

'No, Miss Wright!'

'Indeed! I thought there was a rehearsal in progress?'

'Well, there is. But Mabs went out. Jemima Carstairs called her out urgently,' June Merrett vouchsafed.

'And you have no idea where they went?'

'No, Miss Wright. We're waiting for her. The rehearsal's hung up.'

'H'm!' Miss Wright pursed her lips. 'You had better wait here,' she informed the two Knoxes. 'Barbara, will you go and find Mabel, and tell her that these friends of hers are waiting for her?'

There was a gasp at that word 'friends.' Mabel — the friend of these two outsiders! Sammy and Katie looked quickly and uneasily at each other, sensing the hostility in the atmosphere, recognising, in fact, one or two of the girls on whom they had played rather mean jokes while they had been in the neighbourhood. Sammy looked apprehensive.

By that time Babs had vanished. Miss Wright smiled at the two. 'If you will remain here, Barbara will bring Mabel to you,' she said. 'I cannot stop myself, as I have work to do. The girls will look after you.'

She moved towards the door, but Sammy caught her arm.

'Here, I say, you're not going to leave us here?' he stuttered in alarm.

'I beg your pardon!'

'You stop!' Sammy said. 'We came to see Mabel Lynn — not all Barbara Redfern's pals'

'Pals? You mean friends!' Miss Wright, as English mistress looked sternly disapproving. 'That is a slangy word!' she said admonishingly. 'I do not approve of slang! These are girls belonging to the Fourth Form,' she said. 'They are Mabel Lynn's friends as well as Barbara's.'

'All the same, we don't want to be left with them!' Sammy cried.

'I should say not!' Katie supported.

'But why not?'

'Well —' Sammy stammered. He saw grim, frozen faces regarding him. He knew, once he was left alone in that room with these girls who had been his victims, his atonement for past sins would be called for in no small measure. 'Look here, let's come with you,' he suggested.

Miss Wright, however, shook her head.

'I have told you I have work to do. You will be perfectly well looked after here. Clara, you will attend to the comfort of Mabel's guests?' she added to the Tomboy.

'Won't I?' Clara said grimly.

'There you are!' Miss Wright beamed. She did not recognise the threat in those words but Sammy did. So did Katie. Their alarm and apprehension deepened. 'You have Clara's word, my dears —'

‘She’s got it in for us! These girls will rag us!’

Miss Wright looked shocked.

‘My goodness —’

‘Can’t you see it? Look at ‘em!’ Sammy cried wildly. ‘You can see it in their faces. They’re dying for a chance of smacking back on us. You’re just playing into their hands.’

A murmur rose. Miss Wright’s lips set.

‘I deplore your slang. Really, I feel it is unwise to leave you with these girls. The influence of your speech —’

‘I’ll say it’s unwise! Katie applauded. ‘We’d be wiser to hang out in a jungle than here!’

‘I beg your pardon !’

‘We’ll wait with you.’

‘You certainly will not wait with me!’ Miss Wright said, with asperity. She was nettled now.

The dislike she had begun faintly to experience against this pair now became something stronger.

‘I regard that remark as in very bad taste!’ she said severely. ‘I consider it calls for an apology!’

‘Yeah?’ said Sammy. ‘Catch me apologising to this pack!’ The murmur in the room became almost a growl.

‘Oh, I say, you know —’ Bessie Bunter said indignantly. ‘Shut up, fatty!’ Sammy said rudely. ‘Hi, ma’am!’

This as Miss Wright moved towards the door. She stopped, however, as that exclamation fell upon her ears.

‘Were you speaking to me?’

‘I was!’

‘Then you certainly have a great deal to learn!’ Miss Wright said severely. She paused. ‘I hardly think,’ she added, ‘that you have shown yourselves fit to associate with these girls. In the circumstances, I am sure that it is undesirable for you to meet Mabel Lynn, or indeed, any girl in this school. I must request you to leave!’

‘What!’

‘You will go!’ Miss Wright became suddenly grim.

‘You will go!’ she repeated. ‘I will see that your message to Mabel is delivered, but I regard you as an unsuitable friend for Mabel I shall most certainly forbid her to associate with you! Go!’

Sammy looked astounded.

‘You mean, get out?’

‘She means just that!’ Clara said. ‘And she means stop out! And if you don’t want to get out of your own accord —’

She did not finish. She took a step forward. It was a threatening step, and it was followed by a supporting movement from all the girls in the room.

The fight and the bluster died out with magic suddenness from Sammy. He blinked, plainly not liking the look of things. Katie pulled at his sleeve as he showed an inclination to remain and bluff things out.

‘Come on!’ she said, in a scared voice.

Then he thrust his hands into his pockets, and, turning for a moment, pulled a face at the girls behind him, then put out a tongue at the mistress.

Miss Wright looked as if she were going to faint.

She reddened.

‘Really, how dare —’

But Sammy laughed. He dodged as Miss Wright made a grab towards him. The door slammed. The sound of his and his sister’s running feet came back from the corridor. Sammy and his sister had made their first — and their last — sally into Cliff House School. But by no means had they given up the idea of meeting Mabel Lynn!

CHAPTER XXIII

Lying in Wait

FARTHER along that corridor a face peered out of a doorway. A pair of troubled blue eyes followed the disappearances of the two Knoxes and Miss Wright down the corridor.

And Barbara Redfern, as she watched them go, breathed a deep, deep sigh of relief. She left her hiding-place. She thought she knew where to find Jemima. Silently she sped along the passage and up the stairs which led to the box-rooms and the attics, darting a look into the quadrangle as she passed the landing window. Sammy and Katie were in the act, then, of walking down the drive.

‘What cheer, Babs?’ a voice hailed her.

Jemima Carstairs sauntered forward, her monocle fixed in her eye.

‘You — you did it?’

‘What-ho!’ Jemima chuckled. She nodded towards the closed door of a room across the landing. ‘Bit tough on old Mabs. Looked sort of surprised when I pushed her in the room and shut the door. Dear, dear! I stopped here and talked to her, just to prevent her from making a row, you know. How one’s motives do get misunderstood! Safe now to let her out?’

‘Yes!’

Jemima nodded. She crossed to the door, put a key in the lock, and opened it. Mabs, her face furious, stepped out of the room. She stared at Babs.

‘Well, have you finished your little joke?’ she asked biting. ‘I heard that, Babs. I didn’t think you’d plotted this!’

Babs coloured.

‘Well, you see —’

Mabs glanced at her queerly. Then, with a rather scornful glance at her chum, she went off down the stairs.

Jemima grimaced.

‘Cut up,’ she opined. ‘Dear, dear, what a life! You ought not to have stopped here, Babs, then only little me would have been blamed. Still —’ She shrugged. She peered through the window rather absently, and then turned again. ‘Ho, ho!’ she whispered softly. ‘Babs!’

Babs moved towards the window. She stared out. Near the gates, talking in the lane, were Katie and Sammy.

She looked at Jemima.

‘Mean to get hold of our Mabs,’ Jemima opined. ‘Waiting the old opportunity, what?’ That seemed obvious. Babs turned away. They meant to get hold of Mabs. But why did they mean to get hold of Mabs? To tell her of her parents?

Yet what good would that do them?

‘My goodness!’ Babs breathed.

Jemima glanced at her curiously.

‘I’ve got an idea,’ Babs said. ‘About those Knoxes, I mean. It’s funny they’re suddenly trying to get hold of Mabs!’

‘Funny’s the word! Or should one say peculiar?’ Jemima agreed.

‘What’s their object?’

‘Search me!’ Jemima invited.

‘I think I know!’ Babs looked excited. ‘The Knoxes haven’t found the nugget yet, but they’ve guessed that I’ve hidden it. They’ve found out that Mabs is my friend. As a friend, they probably think I’ve told Mabs things. They want to get hold of her to pump her. They know the nugget’s still about. They probably think Mabs knows all about her parents, and that she and I are working together. If they could get hold of her they’d use some means to force the secret from her, Jimmy, you see?’

‘You mean, we’ve got to keep them from meeting Mabs?’

‘Yes! Until —’ Babs paused. ‘Until we’ve got the nugget.’

‘And how?’

‘Shush!’ Babs whispered. There were footsteps on the stairs. ‘I’ve got the glimmerings of an idea, but it wants working out,’ she said. ‘But come on, here’s Clara.’

Clara it was, come to tell them that they were wanted at rehearsal.

They went back into the music-room, Mabs favouring them with curious, half-hostile glances as they came in. But she said nothing and, as the second act was now in progress, and it was Babs’ cue to go on, conversation was postponed.

And in the interest of the rehearsal, in the magnificent way in which Babs played her part, Mabs brightened, enthusiasm came back once again, and the incident was as though it had never been. But after the rehearsal — When they were back in Study No.4.

‘Babs!’ Mabs said.

‘Yes?’ Babs questioned.

‘Why did you shut me up? Was it to prevent me meeting the Knoxes?’

‘Yes!’

‘But why?’

‘Well — well —’ Babs paused. ‘Mabs don’t — don’t question me.’ she said. ‘Please don’t I’ll tell you all — sometime. But not yet! Give me time. I’ve a reason — really! A good reason.’

‘And I’m part of it?’ Mabs asked shrewdly.

‘Well — yes!’

Mabs drew a deep breath. All the anger, the resentment she had been feeling faded now.

‘All right, Babs,’ she said. ‘I think I know. You wouldn’t do anything without a good reason, would you? I don’t understand, but still — well, never mind now. I’ve something else to think about. What do you think of the play?’

‘Topping!’ Babs agreed, glad to change the subject.

‘So do I,’ Mabs laughed. ‘And tomorrow is dress rehearsal,’ she said. Her eyes sparkled suddenly. Her face dimpled. ‘Babs, you’ll help me, won’t you?’

‘Of course!’

‘That’s the ticket! Well, look here, you can do something at once. Go through the play — get out a list of props for me. I’ve got to go out — down to the costumiers in Friardale. We’re running short of certain grease paint, and, naturally, I don’t want any hitch tomorrow. You’ll do that while I’m away?’

Babs stared.

‘You’re going out — now? Alone?’

‘Now!’ Mabs replied. ‘Got a special late pass out. Shan’t be more than an hour. Back in time for call-over, anyway. Why, what’s the matter, Babs? You look quite pale.’

And that was true, for Babs was looking pale. Mabs, going out — alone—at this hour! And in the road outside, waiting to waylay her, were Sammy and Katie Knox!

CHAPTER XXIV

Babs Will Not Fail

‘I’LL run along and see Stella,’ Babs said. ‘I’ll ask for a pass for myself so I can come with you. We can go down to Friardale on our bikes, then.’

‘Jolly good idea,’ Mabs applauded at once. ‘We’ll go into the question of props when we come back.’

So Babs ran off. She did so rather hurriedly, almost rushing into a slim, elegant Eton-cropped junior strolling along outside. Jemima reeled back with exaggerated alarm from the impact.

‘What-ho and heigh-ho! Girl in a hurry, what?’ she said. ‘Whither away, my charming cyclone?’

Babs told her.

‘Good scheme, but weak!’ Jemima decided seriously. ‘Three on a stunt like this are better than two, what? The Knoxes are bound to speak to you. Mabs will stop. They’ll speak to her, too!’ Jemima said seriously. ‘Now, if there were three of us — get my meaning?’

Babs did get her meaning — at once. And she approved the suggestion.

If the Knoxes did speak, then Mabs was bound to stop, too. Whereas if there were three of them Jemima could hurry Mabs off, leaving Babs to do the talking.

‘Come on!’ Babs gasped. ‘I’ll ask for two!’

And with Jemima, she went off to Stella’s study. When Stella learned they required the passes to accompany Mabs, she had no hesitation in handing out another two. And with those they returned to Study No.4.

‘What-ho!’ Jemima beamed. ‘Hope you don’t mind if I totter along with you, Mabs, my bonnie, but I’ve a wee bit of business myself in Friardale. Rather jolly, what?’

‘Yes!’ laughed Mabs. ‘But buck up, for goodness sake!’

Ten minutes later they were wheeling their machines through the gates. In the road outside they mounted and pedalled off up the road. Then there was a sudden shout. ‘Hi!’

‘Hallo, the Knox kids!’ Jemima muttered.

‘Pedal on!’ Babs urged.

But that seemed impossible, for the shout had come from ahead of them, and now, bursting through the bushes that lined the road, came Sammy Knox. He planted himself fairly and squarely in the path of the bicycles.

‘Hi!’ he cried again. ‘Is one of you —’

He got no further. Babs, desperate, realising that in another second he would have uttered Mabs’ name, charged at him.

Sammy gave a yell, skidded to the side of the road, missed his balance, and collapsed in a breathless howl into the arms of his sister Katie, who came out of the woods at that moment.

Jemima chuckled.

‘Neat work. Babs!’

‘Come on, pedal up!’ Babs gasped.

She put on a spurt. Sammy sat in the road and yelled, shaking his fist. Mabs looked at Babs peculiarly.

‘Babs, why did you do that?’

‘Oh, nothing!’ Babs laughed. ‘Just to teach him a lesson.’

They pedalled on, Babs leaning desperately over the handlebars.

In a very short time they had reached the costumier’s in Friardale village.

‘Well, here we are,’ Mabs announced. ‘Coming in, Babs?’

‘Of course!’ Babs said, and then, gazing across the road, started. ‘Er — that is, no.’

Out of the corner of her eye she gazed across the road again at a doorway in which an instant before she had seen the figure of a man — a man she recognised, who had beckoned to her with a swift sweep of his arm.

‘I — I’ll join you later.’

Mabs stared, her eyes full of wonderment and puzzlement. Again reflecting, perhaps, upon the oddness of Babs’ conduct. Babs had begged to come with her — and yet here was Babs deserting her.

But Mabs shrugged. Jemima, with a glance at Babs, caught the golden-haired one’s arm and tugged her into the shop. Not till the door closed upon them did Babs run across the road.

She ran to the door. It opened. A voice whispered: ‘Babs? Come in!’

The door closed behind her. Austin Lynn stared at her. He had a crutch under one arm, and his face was white.

‘Babs,’ he cried, ‘I was hoping to see you, What’s the news? Got the nugget?’

Babs shook her head.

‘And no prospects?’

‘Well —’ Babs said. As briefly as she could she told him the story. She had not seen Austin Lynn since the day when she had rescued him from Chalk Quarry and had him conveyed to the hospital with a broken ankle.

‘I see!’ His keen face was thoughtful. ‘What a mess!’, he exclaimed. ‘I’m hopeless! It’s as much as I can do to hobble about, but I’ve got out of hospital — this afternoon. I’ve taken lodgings here, hoping to get hold of you. But, Babs —’

‘Yes, Austin?’

‘We’ll have to do something — quickly. There are only nine days before the trial. It will take a week for me to get back to Montreal. That means I’ve got to have that nugget in the next two days — the day after tomorrow, at the latest. But this —’ He groaned.

‘Oh, it seems hopeless — hopeless! And you say you’re not friends with the Knoxes any longer?’

‘No!’

‘That makes it even worse!’ He frowned. ‘The situation’s desperate — desperate!’

‘But I’ve got an idea,’ Babs said. It was an idea which had been taking shape in her mind for a day or two, but now it suddenly materialised. ‘Listen to this!’ she said.

She explained. His face lit up.

‘It’s risky, Babs. Suppose they spot you?’

‘Well, I’ll have to chance that.’

‘And this other girl — Jemima? Is she to be trusted?’

‘Absolutely!’

He thought.

‘All right. I’ll have to leave it to you,’ he said; ‘but I can help. I’ll have a car in Friardale Lane tomorrow. If you have to get away make for the road. But watch, Babs. If we don’t get that nugget the Lynns are done for!’

‘I’ll get it!’ Babs promised.

And she meant it. Her scheme was desperate, but its very recklessness might make it a

success. Tonight she would tell Jemima about it. Tomorrow —
But she should not fail!

CHAPTER XXV

Five O'clock

BABS, wary of Sammy and Katie, had by devious means prolonged the hour of departure from Friardale until the very last minute. That was not hard, for Mabs, inordinately interested in everything in the costumier's shop, required no persuasion to dally.



It was with a start she discovered at last that they had only ten minutes in which to get back to Cliff House. They scorched back — hotly. But, as Babs had foreseen, Sammy and Katie were waiting for them. Again they called upon the Cliff House girls to stop, but time was precious then.

They scorched by with never so much as a look. And so Cliff House was reached at last, the danger point was passed. Immediately upon arrival, however, Babs plucked Jemima's sleeve.

'In the library — ten minutes?' she whispered.

And in the library ten minutes later they met. Babs carefully closed the door.

Jemima listened without interruption, but there was a gleam in her eyes. Now and again she nodded her sleek head as if in approval.

What Babs proposed was this: That tomorrow she should phone the Knoxes, and make an appointment in the woods, hinting that she knew something of the nugget. That meant that the senior Knoxes would be drawn from the house.

Katie and Sammy probably would be watching the school. The house would be empty, save perhaps for Mrs. Knox. Jemima was to go along to the house, get the nugget from the room with the gothic window.

‘And when you’ve got it flash a signal with your torch from the window,’ Babs said. ‘I’ll hold the Knoxes until I see you signal. When the signal appears I shall know that you’ve got the nugget, and everything is plain sailing. Is that clear?’

‘Clear as diamonds!’ Jemima agreed.

They discussed details.

‘Now, you understand, Jimmy?’

‘What-ho!’ chuckled Jemima.

‘Splendid! But it’s five o’clock now. We’d better be going.’ Five o’clock it was! Babs took a hasty glance at herself in the small hand mirror, and smiled.

For Babs was slightly disguised. Her own chestnut curls had been pushed up under a mouse-coloured wig. A skillfully applied tint had given to her rosy face a sunburned hue, which altered it out of recognition.

Added to that, she had borrowed a pair of faintly tinted spectacles, which had the effect of changing the colour of her eyes, and gave her a wondering stare, very unlike the Babs that Mr. Knox and his henchman knew.

It was a complete disguise. Add the fact that the interview was going to take place in the shadow of the trees and Babs had every reason to feel that she would not be recognised.

She put the mirror away. The case in which she had brought the props from Cliff House School she rammed underneath a clump of bushes. Jemima, by that time, was on her way.

Babs waited until she had disappeared. She wanted to give Jemima time in which to get into the house. Then, rather thoughtfully, she trailed off towards the broken fence, near Friardale Lane, which was the place of her appointment.

Until she saw that light she had to keep these two men and Mrs. Knox in conversation to prevent them, at all costs, from getting back to Ivy House, and so interrupting her fellow conspirator in the work she had to do there.

Now she was approaching. The three turned, staring at her. Again Babs felt her heart go pit-a-pat, but she did not falter. Mr. Knox, looking excited and nervous, shambled towards her. Carlo Rendle and Mrs. Knox, distrust and suspicion on their faces, hung back. Babs paused.

‘Mr. Knox?’ she asked, in a low voice.

‘That’s me! You?’

‘Hilda,’ Barbara Hilda Redfern replied.

He breathed with relief.

‘So you’ve come! We were beginning to wonder if it was a hoax. All right, Mary!’ he called softly. ‘This is the gal. Hilda. Hilda who?’

‘Never mind that.’ Babs looked round quickly. ‘We’re alone?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve found out,’ Babs went on. ‘But I mustn’t be seen. You mustn’t tell anyone that you’ve met me.’

‘No, no; but —’

‘And — and if I get the nugget?’

‘You know where it is?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where?’ both asked sharply.

‘I’m coming to that.’ Babs looked towards the gothic window. It was about time now that something happened. ‘I haven’t got it with me, but I think I know where you can lay your hands on it,’ she said desperately. ‘There’s a girl at our school, Barbara Redfern —’

‘We know her,’ Knox said, with a scowl.

‘She — she had it. She’s hidden it.’ Again Babs glanced at the window. Where was that light? ‘She’s hidden it in a secret place.’

‘Yes, but where?’ Knox demanded impatiently.

‘In — in —’ would Jemima never signal? ‘In — a house,’ Babs said desperately.

‘What house?’

‘A house not far from here!’

‘Look here, where’s the house?’ Carlo demanded. ‘You can say that, can’t you? Quit stalling. We haven’t got all night.’

Babs caught her breath. From the gothic window faintly glimmered a light. The signal for which Babs had waited. Jemima had secured the nugget.

Babs did not hesitate. To the surprise of the Knoxes and Carlo Rendle, Babs suddenly turned and fled for Cliff House.

It was after the dress rehearsal that Austin Lynn came to Study No. 4 at Cliff House, and explained all. By that time Mr. Knox and Carlo were safely in Courtfield police station. Sammy and Katie and their mother were making hurried arrangements to leave Ivy House for ever.

Next morning they were gone. That was the morning of the play. By that time Cliff House knew the whole story. Babs was the heroine of the hour.

Then came Miss Pearl Katherley, surrounded by an army of fellow judges.

There was an expectant hush as the curtain went up and the lights went down, revealing the first scene of ‘A Fourth Form Fantasy.’

The audience settled down, watching anxiously, intently. Mabs seated at the side of the stage, from which point she could see both players and audience, felt herself thrill. She sat in tense attitude. On the stage the players did their parts well. The audience sat, interested, enthralled. How they laughed when Bessie made her entrance! What sympathy showed in their faces when Babs made her impassioned appeal to the headmistress not to expel her! Except for the words coming from the stage, there was not a sound in the vast hall.

Act I came to an end. There was a murmur of approval. Mabs rushed round to the dressing-room to give one or two last-minute hints, and the curtain went up for Act II. She saw Miss Katherley talking to the gentleman upon her right. It was being judged! How Mabs sat through the second act she never knew. But Babs was splendid. Her voice, dominant and vibrant, carried to every part of the hall. Miss Katherley was leaning forward, lips parted, eyes shining.

Act III — and the last!

A roar of laughter as Bessie Bunter opened the act. Then a sudden silence as Babs, a tragic figure, came forward. A sigh went all round the audience at the words: ‘You are to be expelled!’

Mabs saw some of the kiddies in the Third and Second Forms crying now. There was an electrifying hush then as Jean Cartwright, in the character of Babs’ mother, rushed on to the stage.

The audience sat enthralled. Miss Katherley’s eyes shone.

And then, before Mabs knew it, the play was over. A deafening roar of applause went up. Twice there were special calls for Barbara Redfern. Then: ‘Author — author!’ shouted the audience, and Mabs, more desperately nervous than she had ever been in her life before, took the call. Miss Katherley came forward.

‘Mistresses and girls of Cliff House School,’ Miss Katherley said ‘I wish to congratulate you upon the dramatic talent Cliff House holds! I wish to congratulate especially Miss Mabel Lynn, the author of this play, and Miss Barbara Redfern, who

took a difficult leading part so well! I have conferred with the judges, and I am happy to say that we are unanimously of the opinion that Cliff House School be recommended for the Prize!’

What a shout then! The air vibrated. The school went mad. In the middle of it all a telegram was handed to Mabel Lynn.

Mabs opened it, and read:

‘Released this morning. Hope play is a success— Mother and Father.

Mabs’ eyes became blinded by a sudden rush of tears and happiness. After that, of course, there was another speech. She simply had to tell the school.

And then — well, Cliff House had simply cheered itself hoarse with excitement and happiness. It had to resort to deeds. A rush was made. Mabs was caught up, Babs was caught up, Jemima was

caught up, and hoisted upon the shoulders of their school-fellows. In a swarming crowd they made for the door.

‘Here, I sus-say,’ Bessie Bunter stuttered — ‘I sus-say, where are you taking Mabs and Babs?’

‘To the tuckshop!’ Lady Patricia Northanson of the Sixth said. ‘Come on, Bessie!’ But Bessie needed no telling to come on. She was in the forefront of the procession. Bessie usually was when the tuckshop was the goal!

THE END