

HILDA RICHARDS

BESSIE BUNTER AND THE SCHOOL INFORMER

CHAPTER I

Miss Bullivant's Secret!

'On dear!' said Barbara Redfern.

'Oh, crumbs!' sighed Mabel Lynn.

'Another twenty minutes!' Clara Trevlyn said, with a glance at the clock above the blackboard in the Fourth Form class-room. 'I know I shall expire before this lesson finishes.'

Barbara Redfern nodded in sympathy at that. Mabel pulled a wry and acquiescent face. And then the three of them sat sharply upright and tried their best to look alert and intelligent as Miss Bullivant, the mathematics mistress of Cliff House School wheeled sharply from the blackboard on which she had been drawing complicated mathematical diagrams, the mysteries of which, presumably, were to be explained to the extremely lackadaisical class under her charge.

'Clara, you were talking!' Miss Bullivant said sharply.

Clara mumbled something.

'Please do not do it again,' Miss Bullivant said, and frowned that very fierce and frightfully severe frown of hers, which pulled her thin eyebrows over those gimlet-like grey eyes in an unbroken straight line.

'Now let us get on with the lesson,' the mistress went on. 'Pay attention, girls.' She indicated the diagram on the blackboard. 'You will prove that the angle so formed is equal to the angle on the tangent.'

There was a rustle, a stir. Many weary sighs went up, many a stifled groan.

The exercise was not difficult, but on this, the first day of term after the glorious summer holiday, it was a task to the Fourth Form at Cliff House which they felt was only equal to the task of Atlas of old, who had carried the world on his back. Work, in fact, seemed impossible.

Miss Bullivant stood and watched.

'Five minutes only, girls,' she reminded them, meaning, of course, that only five minutes would be allowed for the exercise.

'Oh, rats!' muttered Nancy Bell.

Nancy was not a nice girl. She was regarded in the Fourth Form, as a matter of fact, as rather spiteful, extremely lazy, and a somewhat ill-natured gossip.

‘Nancy, you spoke?’

Nancy Bell looked up.

‘No, Miss Bullivant!’

‘I regret to say I disagree. You were not paying attention to your work, Nancy. I had occasion to remark last term that you were utterly neglectful. Next time I catch you being inattentive I shall punish you.’

‘Silly old crow!’ scowled Nancy Bell. ‘I suppose she thinks that’s clever. For two pins—’ And as the mistress’s back was turned Nancy dropped a piece of blotting-paper, which she had already rolled up into a pellet, into her ink-well, and fished it out again with the nib of her pen. ‘Wonder what she’d say if I flicked this at her?’

‘Dare you!’ grinned Lydia Crossendale mischievously.

‘All right!’ And Nancy, seizing a thin, flexible ruler, put the soaked pellet on its end and bent it back, directing it at Bessie Bunter.

Whiz!

There came a spluttering howl from fat Bessie Bunter, two desks in front.

‘Ow-wow! Wow! Who did that?’ she yelled furiously.

For fat Bessie, hearing those whispering voices behind her, had turned just in time to stop that pellet as it flew between Nancy Bell’s desk and the blackboard. The pellet squashed fairly and squarely upon her little snub nose, splashing ink all over her face. Bessie leapt to her feet. The class stared, and then, seeing her, a yell of laughter went up.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Look here, you grinning cats—’ Bessie said furiously.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Girls!’ Miss Bullivant rustled from her desk. ‘Bessie, sit down!’ she thundered.

‘What is that ridiculous mess upon your face?’

‘Oh, really, Miss Bullivant, I dud-didn’t do it! I— Oh, crumbs!’ And Bessie gingerly plucked the ink-soaked pellet from her face; with a gesture of distaste flicked it upon the floor. ‘Oh, crumbs, you know, that might have gone into my mouth, and if it had gone in my mouth I might have swallowed it, and then I should have been pip-poisoned, you know! Grooo!’

‘Bessie, go to the cloak-room and wash your face!’ Miss Bullivant said sternly.

‘Everyone else, stop laughing! No, wait a moment! Who flicked that pellet?’

Nobody answered.

‘Very well!’ The mistress’s jaw squared; her eyes glinted. She looked very much now like the old Miss Bullivant they knew, the starchy, acid-tempered mistress whom the Fourth had so dreaded last term. ‘If the culprit has not got the good grace to own up, I shall take steps to find out. Bessie!’

Bessie jumped.

‘Oh, really, Miss Bullivant, I wuw-wish you wouldn’t shout like that, you know!’

‘Did you see who threw that pellet?’

Bessie paused.

‘I am asking you a question,’ Miss Bullivant said tartly. ‘Did you see?’

Bessie became more and more confused. In her usual muddle-headed way she tried to give an evasive answer.

‘Oh, nun-no, Miss Bullivant!’ Bessie said. ‘I dud-didn’t, you know; and, if I did, I couldn’t very well tell you that it was Nancy Bell, could I? I mum-mean, that would be snu-sneaking, you know!’

Miss Bullivant frowned. A titter went up from the class. But Nancy’s face became positively fierce.

‘Sneak!’ she hissed.

‘Nancy, did you throw that pellet?’

‘No, Miss Bullivant!’

‘But Bessie says—’

‘Oh, really, you know, I never said it was Nancy!’ Bessie put in indignantly, actually unaware that she had let the cat out of the bag. ‘I wouldn’t dream of blaming it on to Nancy, Miss Bullivant!’

‘You mentioned Nancy’s name.’

‘Oh, crumbs, dud-did I?’ Bessie blinked, by now completely out of her depth. ‘But I dud-didn’t mean to, you know! That—that was simply a slip of the tongue, you know. I—I dud-didn’t mean to sus-say Nancy, you know! What I meant to say was Lydia Rossendale!’

‘What?’ yelled Lydia.

‘Oh, crumbs! Nun-no, not Lydia! Nun-not anybody!’ Bessie said desperately.

‘Thank you, Bessie. You may go to the cloak-room and wash your face!’ Miss Bullivant said. ‘Nancy, you will step out in front of the class!’

‘What for?’ Nancy asked sulkily.

‘Because I tell you to!’

‘But——’

‘Nancy, you will take fifty lines!’ Miss Bullivant said angrily. ‘Now step out of class this instant!’

Nancy looked mutinous. For a moment she hesitated, then, with a shrug, she stepped from her place.

With ill-grace she slouched between the desks to the front of the class. Miss Bullivant’s eyes glimmered.

‘Show me your hands!’ she said.

Nancy started.

‘But why?’

‘Will you do as you are told or have I to punish you further?’ Miss Bullivant rasped.

‘Hold out your hands. No, palms upwards please!’ She took a look as Nancy reluctantly complied. Her lips tightened as she saw the tell-tale ink-marks upon the fingers. ‘Thank you, that is sufficient!’ she said grimly. ‘The condition of your fingers tells its own tale. Nancy, you did flick that pellet.’

Nancy’s face blazed into open mutiny.

‘Who cares?’ she said bitterly. ‘Do you think I do? Do you think I want to learn maths—under your instruction? I don’t! I suppose you don’t realise what you did for me? You don’t know, do you, that because of that bad report you sent home that my father cancelled my summer holidays and that I had a miserable time at home? That’s what you did for me with your bad report, and I say I don’t care—I don’t care! I won’t learn maths under you—I won’t! I won’t let you have the credit for teaching me!’

Miss Bullivant stood still. She was gazing at Nancy. If the Form expected her to fly up into her well-known temper, if they expected the bitter, acid words which normally would have fallen from her lips, they were booked for a surprise.

‘Nancy, go to my study,’ she said, with quiet constraint. ‘I will talk to you there.’

Nancy scowled. The Form gasped. For a moment it seemed that she was tempted to disobey. Then reluctantly she turned.

‘Now girls—all of you, apply yourselves to the lesson, please,’ said Miss Bullivant.

‘Barbara, will you kindly pick up that pellet from the floor and deposit it in the wastepaper-basket.’

The Form settled down. Babs, with a piece of paper, picked up the pellet as she was requested and walked with it to the wastepaper-basket, which was placed near the mistress's desk on the floor.

She dropped it in, and then, straightening up, she stole a quick look at the mistress, who was sitting in front of her desk, frowning at a newspaper-cutting, obviously some days old, which was stretched out in front of her.

Babs was not curious, nor was she inquisitive, but perhaps she would not have been natural if, just for a moment, her eyes had not strayed towards that cutting. And then she stared and flushed.

She caught a glimpse of two bold headlines:

‘GRANT BULLIVANT GOES TO PRISON.
SIX MONTHS FOR FORGER BROTHER
OF RESPECTED SCHOOLMISTRESS!’

Just that Babs saw. She saw it almost without realising that she had taken it in. One quick look at Miss Bullivant she gave, then crept away.

So that was the reason for the maths mistress's preoccupation. This was her secret. Her brother was in prison.

‘Oh, goodness!’ thought Babs, and a wave of sympathy, of compassion, engulfed her. She felt suddenly sorry for Miss Bullivant.

CHAPTER II

Nancy's Spite

IN Miss Bullivant's study Nancy Bell sat, her rather mean, spiteful face screwed up into an expression of extreme vindictiveness.

Nancy had been forced to spend a more or less miserable eight weeks at her home in Berkshire. And during those eight weeks the resentment she had felt against Miss Bullivant had grown to hate; and hate had grown into utter vindictiveness.

Nancy could not forget that while everybody else in the Form had been enjoying themselves she had been forgotten, lonely, miserable. And all because of the Bull! How she detested the Bull! She felt that she would have given anything to get even with her.

‘And I will—I will!’ she vowed to herself. ‘I'll find a way of making her sit up!’

Her fists clenched; her eyes glowed with the passionate resentment she felt. For once even Nancy was stirred out of her lethargic calm. For once she was a spirit of unrest, a girl burning for vengeance. Oh, how she hated Miss Bullivant!

She stood looking through the window which gave a view of the quad, the playing fields beyond, and, beyond the playing fields, a glimpse of the red roof of the tuckshop and the fine old bronze gates.

A car was coming in through the gateway—a gigantic, yellow car which had obviously seen better days, which was splashed with mud and striped along its body with vivid bands of black. Nancy's eyes opened.

‘Father!’ she breathed.

Was it? It certainly looked like his car. And now she remembered Mr. Bell had said something about coming to see Miss Bullivant. For Nancy, of course, in defending herself against that bad report, had told lies.

It always came easily to Nancy Bell to tell lies. She had told her father that Miss Bullivant had a down on her, that the bad report was the result, not of her own neglect, but of the mistress's personal spite.

Mr. Bell had listened. He knew his daughter, and he knew her penchant for getting herself out of difficulties by the easiest way possible. And he had said rather grimly that he himself would come and see this Miss Bullivant then; a statement which had caused Nancy to palpitate at the time, but a statement which, since it had not been repeated, she had dismissed from her mind. And now—

Nancy stared, aware that her heart was fluttering within her.

She had a wholesome dread of her father. He could be both stern and harsh, and he detested fibs in any shape or form. She watched the car as it came nearer.

Yes. Undoubtedly now it was her father's car.

It stopped.

Nancy watched.

Now out stepped a man. Nancy breathed a sigh of relief. A tall, stern, upstanding figure, dressed very primly, with a pair of very yellow gloves carelessly dangling in one hand.

She recognised him at once. It was not her father, but Mr. John Jackson, a governor of the school; a very hard-headed and frightfully practical man, whose motto was efficiency, and who was entirely devoid of sentiment. But Mr. Jackson—in her father's car!

'What on earth——' Nancy muttered.

But wait. A second occupant was climbing out of the car—a rather short, stumpy man, very red in the face and rather plump, who wheezed as he squeezed his bulk from the car into the quadrangle. Then Nancy started back with a gasp of very real dismay on her lips.

For this indeed was her father. He had come to see Miss Bullivant.

Aid then, almost before she had time to collect her scattered wits, the door opened and Miss Bullivant herself appeared.



'Nancy!' Miss Bullivant gasped, horrified

She came in very quietly, very softly, in that disconcerting way which from many years of practice was now a characteristic. Nancy felt rather than saw her presence as she whipped round, to find the tall, angular Form-mistress, one hand still on the handle of the door, regarding her with rather sad reproachful eyes.

Quite unlike Miss Bullivant, that, but at sight of her Nancy forgot her momentary panic. The hate within her flamed up afresh. She stood very still.

‘Well, Nancy,’ Miss Bullivant said, and she said it, surprisingly enough, quite kindly. She shut the door, coming forward. It struck even Nancy, incensed as she was against the mistress, that there was some new quality in Miss Bullivant.

Not the glinting-eyed Bull this, bristling with rage. Not the angry Bull, this, who on any other occasion would have stormed and been acidly sarcastic.

For a moment in the hard lines of that face there was real kindness, real understanding, a desire, it seemed, for friendship. But Nancy blinded herself deliberately to those qualities; raging bitterness took possession of her.

This was the mistress who had spoiled her holiday, whom she had to thank for not going away. She stiffened.

‘Well?’ she said sulkily.

Miss Bullivant breathed a little hard through her nostrils.

‘Nancy, I want to talk to you,’ she said. ‘I am not going to punish you. I am sorry for what you told me in the class-room. I had no idea, naturally, that you would be deprived of your holiday because of the report I sent in.’

Nancy, glancing at her, secretly sneered bitterly. What hypocrisy, she thought. This—from the Bull!

But Miss Bullivant did not see the sneer. She came further forward.

Now Nancy was sure that there was something behind this hypocrisy. For a moment she stood rigid, burning. Then she felt those bony knuckles upon her shoulders. All the hate she had been nursing against this mistress seemed to burst and surge up in one passionate flame.

She jumped away.

‘Please don’t touch me!’ she cried.

‘Nancy! Nan—’

But there Miss Bullivant’s voice dropped into a startled gasp of alarm. For Nancy, in making that passionate jump to escape the mistress’s caress, slipped on the edge of the carpet which, reposing on a shiny floor, immediately and catastrophically gave way under her feet.

One moment Nancy was jumping back; the next she was reeling sideways. Unable to stop herself, she felt herself shooting forwards.

Miss Bullivant, too late, sprang forward to her rescue. Then—Crash!

‘Oh!’ gasped Nancy agonisingly.

For as she fell she caught her face against the edge of the desk. It was a sharp edge, and so great was the velocity with which the girl fell that it made a cut in Nancy’s temple. At once the blood began to flow. Nancy, gasping, thudded in a heap on the floor.

‘Nancy!’ Miss Bullivant gasped horrified.

And at the same moment the door opened again. And while Miss Bullivant stared in startled dismay at the stricken girl, into the *room* strode two figures—Mr. John Jackson, his eyes stern and grim, and Mr. Joseph Bell, utter wonderment and incredulity in his face. They pulled up short.

‘Why—what on earth—’ Mr. Jackson began.

‘Nancy!’ Mr. Bell cried. ‘Nancy, what has happened?’

Nancy had risen. Except for the cut on her temple she was not badly hurt. But her wits were fully alive now. She saw at once the opportunity of making her lies good in her father’s eyes and of hurting Miss Bullivant at the same time.

She pretended to groan as her father anxiously helped her to her feet. She swayed with dizziness which she was far from feeling. Miss Bullivant, as anxious as any of them, stood rooted to the spot.

But Mr. John Jackson, remembering he was a governor, remembering suddenly his duties, harsh and unbending as Miss Bullivant herself had been in the past, turned sharply.

‘Miss Bullivant, what is the meaning of this?’

‘I—she fell,’ Miss Bullivant said.

‘I didn’t!’ gasped Nancy.

‘Nancy!’

‘I didn’t!’ Nancy Bell repeated vindictively. She shot out a quivering hand. ‘Miss Bullivant was struggling with me, She— she got hold of me and threw me across the room. And—and then I hit the desk!’

‘Nancy!’ Miss Bullivant cried, her eyes wide.

‘It’s true!’ shrieked Nancy.

Miss Bullivant quivered.

‘Indeed it is not!’ she cried.

‘I see!’ Mr. Jackson’s eyes glinted. ‘Thank you, Miss Bullivant. Nancy Bell, you say that Miss Bullivant threw you deliberately?’

‘Yes!’ Nancy said spitefully.

‘And you, Miss Bullivant?’

‘I deny it!’ Miss Bullivant said angrily.

Mr. Bell glared.

‘Then perhaps there is something in it,’ he said. ‘I’m glad I came. Nancy told me that her mistress had a personal spite against her. It seems that it’s true.’

Miss Bullivant looked completely overwhelmed.

‘But I assure you—’

‘Enough!’ The governor waved his hand. He looked very grim, very determined all at once. ‘We will not argue this matter now, Miss Bullivant. It seems to me that there will have to be a private inquiry about this. Nancy Bell, will you kindly leave the room and get your injury dressed, and after that you may attend in Miss Primrose’s waiting-room, when I shall be pleased to hear what you have to say. Mr. Bell, you had better come with me and see Miss Primrose. This matter shall be put before her. You, too, Miss Bullivant,’

Miss Bullivant drew herself up. She became the harsh, acid- faced mistress of old. She nodded distantly.

CHAPTER III

A Scare for the ‘Bull’

‘You say that Miss Bullivant deliberately pushed you?’ Mr. Jackson asked.

‘Yes!’ replied Nancy Bell.

‘Miss Bullivant?’

‘I did not push her!’ Miss Bullivant said with asperity.

‘H’m!’ Mr. Jackson looked down his nose.

‘Very well,’ Mr. Jackson said at length, ‘that will be all, Nancy Bell. You may go.’

Nancy nodded demurely, and as her face was turned away from that somewhat dramatic group she smiled spitefully.

For Nancy realised that her evidence had put Miss Bullivant in a very unenviable position indeed. The inquiry, from Nancy’s point of view, had been eminently successful.

She had declared that Miss Bullivant had a down on her. She had declared that Miss Bullivant had lost her temper and had deliberately pushed her. That evidence, coming on top of what Mr. Jackson and Mr. Bell had witnessed, made the case unpleasantly black against Miss Bullivant.

She went out, softly closing the door behind her. She was expected, of course, to go to her study. But Nancy had another idea; she stood in the corridor, one attentive ear to the door, listening.

'I've done her!' she muttered gleefully.

From inside the study came the sound of voices. Mr. Jackson was speaking rather sternly, and as Mr. Jackson was a governor of the school his words carried weight.

'I regret to say, Miss Bullivant, that I can only conclude you lost your temper,' he said. 'I will not go so far as to say that you intended to lay hands on Nancy Bell; indeed, I do not think that is the case. You probably forgot yourself in the heat of the moment—'

'Thank you!' Miss Bullivant retorted acidly. 'I repeat, I did not, forget myself.'

'The evidence points to a different conclusion,' Mr. Jackson returned coldly. 'It is particularly unfortunate that Mr. Bell, the parent of the girl—and, incidentally, a friend of mine—should have been present to witness such a scene, intended or not intended. I believe, Miss Bullivant, that you have put in nineteen years of service at this school?'

'I have,' Miss Bullivant replied.

'That is a long time. I think—' And here again there was a heavy pause, while the listening Nancy gulped excitedly in her throat, wondering now what was coming. 'I think were it not for the length of service, that I should consider it my duty to recommend the board of governors to dismiss you.'

Nancy's face fell.

'But I will exercise clemency. Miss Primrose, I am certain, will make sure that incidents like this are not repeated. To assure Mr. Bell that this is not the usual thing that goes on here I shall make it my personal duty to visit the school from time to time unexpected and unannounced. If there is any further unpleasantness—which I sincerely trust there will not be,' Mr. Jackson went on pompously—'then I shall have to ask for your resignation, Miss Bullivant. As it is, we will let the matter pass for the moment. But I look to you, Miss Primrose—'

'I see!' Miss Primrose said in a rather strained voice.

'Meantime, we will go. Mr. Bell, you have nothing you wish to say to Miss Bullivant?'

Nancy's eyes gleamed; she scowled. So Miss Bullivant was getting off with a caution. She was getting ready to run, however, the moment she heard footsteps approaching the door.

'No, I don't think so,' Mr. Bell wheezed. 'I am not a harsh man. I only wish I had known of this before, however. I feel, in view of what I do know now, that I have misjudged Nancy. I am extremely obliged to you, Mr. Jackson, for the way you have handled the matter, and I accept the guarantee of Miss Primrose that Nancy shall not be persecuted in future. Miss Bullivant,' he said, and his tone changed. Though Nancy could not see, she could tell that her father was looking at the mistress. 'I know the name. I wonder if there is any connection? Miss Bullivant, would you mind answering me a question, please?'

'If I can,' Miss Bullivant's voice came stiffly.

'Have you a—a—cousin, or any relative, by the name of Grant Bullivant?'

Now there was a pause—a pause which even to the listening Nancy seemed tense

with drama. She could not resist a peep through the keyhole, and that spy-view showed her Miss Bullivant standing stiffly, defensively alert, her nostrils quivering, a look in her eyes which rather suggested that of an animal standing at bay. Her thin lips compressed until they formed a bloodless slit in her face; then very slowly the reply came.

‘I have many relatives, but no cousin of that name.’

‘Oh!’ Mr. Bell seemed disappointed. ‘I only wondered,’ he said. ‘The name struck me; it’s not common. But my son Edward was in partnership with a fellow named Grant Bullivant. He forged a cheque in my son’s name; they’ve just sent him to prison.’

He said that inconsequentially, as an excuse for having asked the question. But Nancy, still spying, marvelled at the expression on the Bull’s face. Her cheeks seemed to tighten suddenly, to grow thin and haggard; into her eyes blazed a sudden, fierce light. In an instant, however, it was gone.

‘Well, let’s go, Bell,’ Mr. Jackson said.

That was Nancy’s cue. She slipped away; she went down the corridor, rather mixed feelings warring within her. She had not ‘done’ the Bull, as she had so gleefully promised herself; but she had put the Bull on her best behaviour, and the next offence would mean the sack for certain.

Nancy’s eyes glittered.

‘And I’ll see she gets it!’ she muttered. ‘Rob me of my holiday, would she? That cat—’ Her face twisted in a mask of vicious malice. ‘She’s got to watch her p’s and q’s!’ she muttered vengefully. ‘The next slip-up, and out she goes! Well, I owe it to her! Out she jolly well will go!’

Then she became suddenly thoughtful and curious.

‘I wonder what startled her when father mentioned that name—Grant Bullivant?’ she added musingly. ‘The Bull seemed scared out of her wits. Grant Bullivant sent to prison. My hat! I believe the old ogre is hiding something. Supposing—supposing that Grant Bullivant did turn out to be some relative? What a show-up for the Bull!’ And Nancy, quite startled and thrilled at that prospect walked thoughtfully on down the corridor.

CHAPTER IV

At Night

‘BARBARA!’

It was Stella Stone, the head girl of Cliff House, who called that name—tall, graceful Stella, who stood at the door of the newly decorated Study No. 4, which Barbara Redfern shared with her two chums, Mabel Lynn and Bessie Bunter, in the Fourth Form corridor.

‘Oh, Stella!’ and she smiled. ‘You wanted me?’

‘Yes! Someone on the phone in the prefects’ room. The railway station, as a matter of fact. Will you go and answer them, they’re asking for you?’

‘For me?’ Babs said. ‘Oh, I say! Yes, I’ll go—like a shot. Won’t be a minute, you girls! Thanks awfully, Stella!’

And Babs quitted the room, while Stella remained behind to chat pleasantly with Mabel and Bessie.

But as she went along the corridor, Babs’s eyes grew thoughtful. A message from the

station. She wondered for a moment what it concerned, and then, thinking on, she guessed.

That morning she had received a letter from Effie Stevens, her mother's maid, telling her that Mrs. Redfern was giving her a surprise in sending her a tuck hamper. Could it be about that?

It was!

For when Babs got through on the phone to the stationmaster at Friardale she learned to her great delight that the hamper was waiting her at Friardale Station. Would she come and collect it, or would she wait until to-morrow's delivery, as the station cart had finished its journeys for the day?

A sudden idea shot into Babs's brain.

'No,' she replied. 'Will you hold it, please. I'll call for it. What time does the station close, by the way?'

'About eleven, miss.'

'I'll call earlier, then.'

'Very well, miss.'

And Babs rang off, flying back with the good news to Study No. 4. Stella had gone by then, but Clara Trevlyn and Janet Jordan were there, and they looked up with interest as Babs laughed excitedly.

'Cheers!' she cried. 'Guess! Tucker hamper at the station for little me!'

'Oh crumbs!' Bessie said at once. 'I sus-say, go and get it, Babs!'

'Chump! I can't, can I? And as it's first day of the term there are no passes out to-night. But I've got an idea,' Babs said. 'We'll have a dormitory feed!'

'Ripping!' voted Bessie.

'And four of us—four will be enough. I think we'll sneak out after lights out and collect it!'

'The Bull's on duty,' Janet warned doubtfully. 'You know what a tartar she is.'

'Never mind! We'll just have to risk the Bull,' Babs exclaimed. 'We'll give her plenty of time to settle down after she's put the lights out. Clara, you'll come?'

'You bet your giddy little gloves I'll come,' Clara grinned.

'And you, Mabs?'

'Every time!' cheered Mabs.

'And you, Janet?'

'Rather!'

'But what about me.' Bessie Bunter indignantly protested. 'Oh, really, you know, you can't leave me out.'

'Your mistake, we can and will.' Babs laughed. 'Sorry, Bessie, but you're just a duffer when it comes to breaking bounds.'

Bessie glowered.

'Oh, really, Babs!'

'Cheer up!' Babs cried. 'Bessie, you prepare for the spread. We'll nip out and back in less than an hour, and we'll have a really ripping feed. You can get some lemonade powder and ginger-beer from the tuckshop after afternoon lessons, just to help down the contents of the hamper. But, meantime, keep mum, everybody.'

They kept mum—all except Bessie. Bessie, without intending in the least to give the game away, very decidedly did give it away, and by the time afternoon lessons were finished, the whole of the Fourth Form knew of the enterprise afoot, and looked forward with no little sense of adventure and relish, to the promised feed.

There was a thrill in having the feed after lights out. All against school rules, of course, and as the lynx-eyed Miss Bullivant was duty mistress for the day, an even

greater hazard than usual.

But that was where half the fun came in.

They talked about it in whispers among themselves, Perhaps Miss Matthews, their pretty Form-mistress, noticed the under-current of excitement at call-over in Big Hall that evening, but putting it down to the new term high spirits, she forbore to comment. In groups the Fourth trooped off to bed, and when Miss Bullivant came round to put the lights out at nine o'clock, they were all suspiciously docile and all apparently fast asleep.

But Miss Bullivant, who would certainly have had her suspicions immediately aroused by that sign alone on another occasion, seemed to-night to take no notice. She just switched out the lights, and with a low-voiced 'Goodnight, girls!' went out. They heard her soft footsteps disappearing along the corridor.

'O.K.!' breathed Babs.

She sat up in bed, One head after another popped up around her.

Luckily for them, the Bull was not on the prowl that night. She had gone straight to her room, and at this moment was sitting there.

She was sitting there—quite still, her chin cupped in her hands, her bony elbows resting upon a desk over which a light shone on a boyish photograph.

There was not a girl in the school who would not have been utterly amazed to see Miss Bullivant then.

Gone were the harsh lines on her face. Gone that bitter, sour expression which seemed to be her main facial characteristic. The harsh lines had softened into thin folds, the grey green eyes were dim, and those usually cold, hard lips were trembling. There were tears in her eyes as she gazed at the photograph, and then shook her head. Her voice came with curious broken huskiness.

'Grant!' she whispered.

The smiling face stared back at her. Extraordinarily like Miss Bullivant, that face.

And yet, paradoxically enough, extraordinarily unlike her. There was a resemblance in the build, The long, firm chin was there; the same straight nose, a tiny moustache decorated the upper lip that had a little more curve in it than Miss Bullivant's.

The eyes, though practically the same colour, were bigger, wider apart. The face was not a handsome face. Nor was it a good-looking face. It was rugged, and yet in its ruggedness seeming to give an expression of confidence, or frankness.

'Grant!' Miss Bullivant whispered once again.

Now the tears came to her eyes. They grew dim and soft. She swallowed hard, looked away, and then, as though drawn by magnetic force, her eyes came to the photograph once more.

Grant! Her brother! Her younger and her only brother—the one being in the whole world whom this hard, middle-aged woman loved, on whom she had lavished every bit of the affection of which her nature was capable.

Grant!

The mists of time seemed to rise up in front of the photograph. She saw herself as a young woman. Not even then had Miss Bullivant been handsome—but better-looking, less hard, less severe.

She had worked for him hard in those days. She had saved and scraped. And then she had put him into a business—in partnership with a man named Edward Bell, Things had gone swimmingly. He had begun to make money, he had paid back what she had lent him.

And then—

The face in the photograph seemed to smile back at her.

‘No, no!’ Miss Bullivant choked. ‘It’s horrible—horrible! Grant, you didn’t do that! You didn’t!’

Grant, accused by his partner of having forged a cheque. Grant, during the holidays, arrested, tried, sent to prison.

She saw him again as he had stood in the dock, proud, defiant, upright. She saw his arms as they stretched towards her, heard his croaking, shaking cry: ‘Evelyn, I am innocent!’

Oh, the unendurable agony of those moments. The shame of them. The fierceness, the bitterness of them. Had she lived through all that? Had she really seen Grant, her brother, the one person in the world whom she had loved from infancy, go to that reward?

And now—

Now, this afternoon, for the first time she had discovered who the partner was. Edward Bell. The son of the father of the girl who had persecuted her, who had brought that monstrous charge of ill-treatment against her. Nancy Bell!

Nancy’s brother was responsible for her own brother’s shame! And the bitterest stab of all—as if everything was not sufficient mockery—she had received a curt, censored message from Grant that night. He was in Kenmarsh Prison—Kenmarsh of all places, not six miles away from Cliff House School!

She sat on, staring at the photograph with eyes that were filmed with tears.

And upstairs, in the Fourth Form dormitory, Barbara Redfern & Co. were then preparing for their adventure.

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And farther away, in a dim stone cell of Kenmarsh Prison, among the marshes, a convict was painfully and stealthily filing through a stout iron bar with a tiny saw!

CHAPTER V

The Secret Message

‘DARK’ commented Barbara anxiously at the *clouds* above her. ‘Going to rain.’

‘It is,’ Mabel Lynn agreed.

‘Going to thunder, you mean,’ Clara Trevlyn said. ‘I can sort of feel it in the air. Better buck up, kids. Don’t want to get drenched!’

‘Rather not!’ Janet Jordan agreed.

And they all gazed up anxiously at the dark, lowering sky again.

They were walking through the woods towards Friardale Station—dark, eerie at night, but intensely black now. The air was heavy and hot and oppressive, and a warm wind blew from the sea, heavy and ominous.

Rain very obviously was in the offing, and very probably as Clara, who was somewhat weather-wise, prophesied, it would be accompanied by thunder. There was that stillness, that oppressiveness in the atmosphere which seemed to suggest it.

‘Better hurry,’ Babs advised.

The others nodded. They quickened their steps. To go adventuring at night was one thrill; to get caught in a drenching downpour was an experience they had no wish to share.

But it seemed that they were in for it, for even as they stepped out a spot, big, blobby,

heavy, fell upon Mabel Lynn's cheek.

'My hat, it's started!' she cried.

'And half a mile to the station! Crumbs!' Clara groaned.

They had no Macintoshes. In their excitement to get going they had taken no notice of the weather portents. But here they were, half a mile from the station, and apparently in for a real soaking.

'Run!' Babs cried.

They broke into a run. From ahead of them came an ominous flicker, the distant lightning heralding the thunderstorm which the tomboy had foretold. They had reached the edge of the south copse now, and as they darted into the clearing which separated the main part of the woods from the north copse the rain fell in a hissing shower.

'Get on to the road!' gasped Babs.

She led the way, turning off to the left where the clearing ran on past the ancient manor of Friars Gables, and joined up with the by-road that led to Friardale Station. An ominous mutter came to their ears from the distance. For a few minutes the rain stopped as they ran on, and then came pelting down again.

'Hark!' gasped Babs.

She pulled up. Mabs, Clara, and Janet halted at the same time. For a moment there was a deathly stillness, and then faintly, from the right of them—a distance, perhaps, of four miles, yet sounding nearer than that owing to sound being carried by the wind—there came an electrifying alarm.

Clang, clang, clang!

The deep, sonorous notes of wildly ringing bells.

In the half-light they stared at each other with startled faces.

'Babs!'

'What is it?'

'The prison bell from Kenmarsh Prison!' Babs answered sombrely. 'That means that a prisoner has escaped.' She paused. 'We'd better hurry,' she said, 'He may be coming this way!'

And at the very same moment the rain came down again.

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While two miles to their left a gasping, hunted figure, with wildly gleaming eyes, ploughed its way through a curtain of drenching rain past the orchards of Faith Farm. The prison bell continued its noisy clang. There came the hoarse, strident voices of pursuers. The figure, panting for breath suddenly fell in a heap on the ground, clutching desperately at the stout stems of the meadowsweet which had been allowed to run wild in the orchard.

A flash of lightning flickered in the sky. For a moment it revealed the features of the figure; the features of a young man, haggard and grimed, a small, clipped moustache adorning the upper lip.

The features, indeed, of Miss Bullivant's hunted brother. Grant Bullivant!

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In her study Miss Bullivant was studying again the letter she had received from her convict brother that afternoon.

Only once before had she read that letter, and her senses, blunted with the misery and

the desperation upon her, had not taken in its full significance. But, reading it again, it suddenly struck Miss Bullivant that it was not the sort of message her brother usually wrote. It was, in places, incoherent, almost bewildering. This is how it ran:

‘My Dear Sister,
‘Going on fine, you will be pleased to hear. Prison life is not so bad.
‘To be shut up here means that I’m out of touch with the world I feel has wronged me. And perhaps it’s just as well.
‘Get my last letter? I wrote you on the fifteenth, if you remember. At the moment I am not worrying. What is the use of worrying? I have my time to serve.
‘Away with dull care. That is my thought at the moment.
‘Shall expect a letter from you when you read this, Evelyn dear.
‘Make it a long one, won’t you?
‘For the present think as kindly of me as you can, and do not worry. I am innocent, and I feel that in good time my innocence will be proved. In any case, when I am finished here I shall devote my whole life and my whole energies to proving that I am not the sinner I have been judged as being.
‘Chalk that up, Evelyn. Tell the world. You will help me, won’t you? I don’t think I have anything else to tell you now. Oh, yes, I have!
‘Quarry! You remember Quarry, my old school friend? I met him just before I was sentenced. He remembered you, too, and asked me to give you his kind regards. But in the stress of the moment I forgot it. Nice chap, Quarry, wasn’t he? He’s coming to see me next Wednesday, when you will be here, too, I hope. I am badly wanting to see you.
‘With all brotherly affection,

‘Yours, GRANT.’

Miss Bullivant frowned at that letter now. Emotion before had blinded her to its strangeness. But as she read it again it struck her how little it resembled the letters her brother had written before.

Grant had always been rather verbose in his letters. A thoughtful, studious type of young man, he had never seemed to be able to express himself in the simple language in which this letter was couched.

And who was Quarry? Quarry! Why, she had never heard of the fellow!

Quarry, Quarry, Quarry!

And then suddenly Miss Bullivant peered closer at the letter. A little gasp of excitement escaped her lips as, purely by accident, her eyes rested upon the first word of the paragraph above that one starting with the name Quarry. Chalk! Chalk—Quarry!

Miss Bullivant sat stiffly upright. She stared again at the letter, from the letter to the photograph propped up in front of her. Chalk—Quarry. That was the name of the old abandoned working in Friardale Woods!

Chalk—Quarry. The two words each commenced one of the strange paragraphs. It was as though Grant were trying to tell her something in this letter; something he had dared not say in plain words. And if so he was deliberately trying to convey his message by means of the first word in every paragraph.

Feverishly she looked at the letter again, scanning it closely. Now, taking only the first word of each paragraph and writing them down as they had been written by her

brother, a message slowly took shape before her eyes.
For this was the sequence of the paragraphs:

Going—
To—
Get—
Away—
Shall—
Make—
For—
Chalk—
Quarry—

Miss Bullivant's mouth gaped open with surprise. Now she saw. It was a message. Her brother was contemplating escape. When he made his escape he was going to make for Chalk Quarry in Friardale Woods.

He knew the place, of course. Once or twice, when he had visited her at Cliff House, she had taken him to the spot—wild, lonely, rugged, filled with holes and little caves and old tin shacks in which anyone might hide with safety for days on end.

He was telling her this; intending, when he had escaped, to go there and await her.

'Goodness gracious!' Miss Bullivant gasped faintly.

But there it was. No coincidence, that. The very phrasing of the letter, the use of that fictitious name of Quarry, proved otherwise. Her brother had deliberately planned this letter.

Miss Bullivant sat bolt upright, staring through the window.

Grant was going to escape. When?

Her face grew rigid; suddenly her body tensed. Across the window a glow flickered momentarily, and then was gone. A rumbling came from the east, accompanied by a swift spatter of rain.

'Grant!' she breathed. 'Grant!'

She rose. Restlessness suddenly had possession of her. She paced backward and forward, thinking, thinking, impelled even now to go out to Chalk Quarry; perhaps to lay in supplies there—a change of clothing that would be ready for her brother when he came, if he succeeded in getting away.

But reflection showed the futility of that. There were half a dozen places where her brother might be hiding in the quarry, each of which would be difficult to find in the dark, if only she knew! If only she knew!

She walked towards the window, throwing it open, staring into the shadowy quad.

It was raining hard now; hard, brisk thunder rain which fell with a hiss from the skies and splashed and roared on the asphalt below. Above her rolled the clouds, black, lowering, ominous, scudding in the storm warmth of the night. Refreshing the rain-brought wind, cooled by its passage, blowing in her hot face. She closed her eyes.

Grant—

And then suddenly she started. What was that?

For from the distance, away to the west, came a sudden clang; the ringing of bells— heavy bells—thudding like heartbeats into the night, their sound ranging over a distance of miles.

Clang, clang, clang!

The bells of Kenmarsh prison!

For a moment Miss Bullivant listened, her eyes agleam, her heart thumping with

suffocating force within her. And then she knew, just as surely as if she could see that hunted figure in the Faith Farm orchard, the truth.

Grant had made good his promise!

He had escaped!

Miss Bullivant trembled.

Then suddenly she stepped back into the room. Into her thin face had flashed a look of purposefulness, of determination. Her thin lips came together; into her eyes came a new, fierce light.

Not a moment longer did she hesitate. She picked up her Macintosh, jammed on her hat, picked up her bag, only pausing for a moment to see that it contained the money that her brother would surely need. Then quickly she stepped across the study. The door opened and closed behind her.

CHAPTER VI

The Quarry's Secret

'COME on!' Babs gasped anxiously.

'Oh, crumbs, this is awful!'

'We'll have to buck up. It's going to rain again. The storm's not half finished yet. We'd better go by way of the quarry again, I think,' Babs added thoughtfully. 'It's off the beaten track.'

Clara Trevlyn grunted. That, as a matter of fact, was all that Clara could do at the moment. She was soaked through like the rest of the party, and, as it happened, she had the heaviest part of the hamper which they had just collected from the station to contend with.

It was a big hamper, and it was, even for a hamper, extremely heavy. They had not covered half a mile of the two back to Cliff House yet, but even so they had been forced to change carriers three times.

And the going was not in their favour, either. It was not raining at the moment, but it threatened once more. Out to the east the lightning still played; the thunder rolled and bellowed in a terrifying manner, and drew nearer and nearer, telling them that the worst part of the storm was yet to come.

Under foot the grass was heavy and soggy and squelched with every step they took. Clara's shoes were already thick with mud—so thick that she had to lift her feet high in the air at every step.

'Crumbs, this is a mud-lark!' she grumbled at last.

They stopped, dumping the heavy hamper on the ground between them. Mabel Lynn and Janet Jordan came forward to take their turn, and the party staggered on again, this time with Babs and Clara in front, beating a way through the pitch-like darkness of the woods.

Overhead the trees dripped rain in disconcerting and depressing blobs, and darkness, like black velvet, hemmed them in. But suddenly there was a movement in front of them, a point of light flashed. A voice cut through the silence of the night:

'Stop there—in the name of the Law!'

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped Clara.

There was a squelching of footsteps. Two dim figures now showed behind the light which proved to be a torch. The chums stopped, blinking a little as they found the light directed at them.

Behind it they saw the peaked caps and the uniforms of two warders from Kenmarsh Prison, each with a rifle slung in readiness over his arm. They saw the men peering at them in the dark.

‘Girls!’ one of the warders said. ‘Cliff House girls. What’s in the hamper?’ he added suspiciously.

‘Tuck!’ Clara said.

‘Tuck?’

‘Food, cakes, pies, patties—everything, in fact, to give you indigestion!’ Clara put in, ‘Would you like to see?’ One of the men came forward. He lifted the hamper, then put it on the ground again. He smiled rather sheepishly.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘Having a bit of fun, eh? O.K. We’ll say nothing. I’m sorry we stopped you, but there’s a convict escaped from the prison, you see, and we have reason to believe he might head in this direction.’

Babs started.

‘And you—you’ve seen him heading in this direction?’

‘Well, no, miss. To tell the truth, nobody’s seen him. He’s just—well, vanished. But he has a sister at your school, though it’s not our business to make that public, of course. You probably know her. Miss Bullivant!’

‘Bullivant?’ breathed Babs, and then quite suddenly and startingly, she remembered that newspaper cutting she had seen on the Bull’s desk. ‘You mean—Grant Bullivant?’

‘Yes. You haven’t seen him?’

‘No.’

‘Thank you. Well, so-long. Sorry to have troubled you.’ the warder said genially, and with his companion went off into the darkness. But Clara, Janet, and Mabs stood staring at Babs in amazement.

A flash of lightning for a moment shot down from the heavens, illuminating their pale, startled faces.

‘Babs—you knew?’ Mabs asked.

Babs nodded.

‘But you never said—’

‘No, I didn’t say anything.’ Babs paused. It was unnecessary now to conceal the truth from her friends any longer. ‘You see, it wasn’t my business. I found out quite by accident.’

And she told them what she had seen; how sorry she felt for the Bull.

There was a pause while they all digested that information.

‘Well,’ said Clara finally, ‘let’s go!’

‘You won’t say anything,’ Babs begged. ‘It would be awful if it got round.’

‘Goose! Of course I won’t say anything! I’m sorry, really. It must be rotten for the old girl. My hat, it’s coming on to rain again!’

‘Oh, crumbs!’

‘My hat!’

‘What a storm!’

They battled on again, lurching, stumbling. Hiss! Down came the rain as if trying to sweep them off their feet. Near at hand the thunder rolled deafeningly, seeming to run right round the world. The lightning flashed, showing faces that were white, strained, and desperate.

‘Come on!’ Babs gasped.

They were all shaken. The storm was easily the worst they had known for some time. The storm was at its height now. Thunder rolled continuously. One flash after another,

each blinding in its brilliance, illuminated the earth, showing the trees waving gaunt and distressed arms.

A roaring wind screamed through the branches. All was noise, pandemonium. They squelched onward, dragging rather than carrying the hamper now. Sometimes they were over their ankles in water, at other times they stumbled over broken branches whirled from the trees by the fury of the storm.

A blinding flash in front of them caused them all momentarily to pull up, gasping for breath. It was followed immediately by a crash that made the earth beneath their feet heave and quake. Farther away in the woods came a rending crash.

‘I say! That was a tree, struck by lightning!’ Mabs roared.

‘Yes; let’s get on!’

They hurried on, dazed and frightened. Almost at a trot they went now, scared by the force of the elements which raged about them. A jagged flash of lightning zigzagged down from the heavens, seeming to spurt up into fiery branches as it reached earth.

Ahead the ground gave out a shower of sparks.

‘Getting dangerous!’ gasped Babs. ‘The lightning’s striking the woods. Get out; make for the old quarry. We can shelter there!’

The others nodded. The danger of being struck was very real.

Another tree crashed somewhere behind them. For an instant a lurid glow burned.

Babs set her teeth. She and Mabs had the hamper now, tugging it between them, determined even in this direst of peril not to let it go.

And then suddenly came a glad cry from Clara Trevlyn, stumbling ahead.

‘Cheers! The quarry!’

There it was. They all gazed thankfully. A slippery slope led down the chalk side to its cavernous bottom. The quarry, an enormous pit, showed alternately white and red in the lightning flashes,

But here at least was sanctuary for a time—a safe place in which they could dodge the more terrifying fury of the storm, a place of refuge until the storm was over.

At a run they went towards it, towing the hamper behind them. Now they were on the edge, a huge chalk wall to one side screened them. Babs was in the van now, was leading. A vivid flash struck the wood above, illuminating everything as though it had been as clear as day.

Babs stopped. Clara, coming full pelt behind her, almost cannoned into her.

‘Babs, you chump!’

‘Look!’ breathed Babs.

There came another flash, and in that flash they all saw. There at the bottom of the pit, in a hollow in the chalk face, stood two people. A woman and a man. The woman they recognised at once. Miss Bullivant!

But the man—

Close-cropped, hunted, a strange garb upon his body—the garb of a convict.

‘My hat—the escaped convict!’ Clara breathed. ‘Miss Bullivant’s brother!’

‘She must have known!’

Darkness for a moment, then another flash. Babs stood still, staring. She saw Miss Bullivant now, saw her face turned towards her, her finger pointing. She had seen the Cliff House girls.

Darkness again. A roll of thunder passed with a crash heavily overhead. Then Babs, staring, blinked. Miss Bullivant and her brother had gone.

Blackness, and the thunder rolled away with a promise of retreat.

Babs turned.

‘She’s gone,’ she said stupidly. ‘But she saw us. I say, what are we to do?’

‘Get back!’ Clara grunted. ‘Look—the rain’s stopping!’

It was. Thankfully they climbed back up the slope. Thankfully they resumed their way, drenched and dripping, and almost exhausted, back to Cliff House.

They reached the big wall which led round the boundary, and then stopped. For in front of them, drenched, dripping, soaking, a haggard expression on her face, was Miss Bullivant.

And Babs knew by the way she was waiting, by the way she was standing, that she had seen them.

CHAPTER VII

A Feed—and a Fiasco!

‘THE Bull!’ Clara Trevlyn muttered.

‘And she’s seen us,’ Janet Jordan said. ‘My hat, now we’re in for it!’

‘Let’s go on,’ Babs muttered. ‘We can’t dodge.’

That seemed the best thing to do. Miss Bullivant had seen them, was looking full at them. They were caught very well and truly out of bounds, and their hearts sank as they realised the punishment for such an offence.

A gating for a month at least—with the possibility of even more detentions. And to be caught, on top of all that, by the Bull. The strictest mistress at Cliff House. They groaned.

‘Come on; let’s face it!’ Mabel Lynn said.

They trooped on. Miss Bullivant waited. Now she took a step or two towards them, halting under the lamp outside the school. The lamp shone down upon her features, showing them white, strained, hard. She spoke:

‘Barbara!’

‘Oh, crumbs! Yes, Miss Bullivant?’

‘What are you doing out of bounds?’

‘Well, we—that is,’ Babs stammered. ‘You see, the station rang me up, saying that this hamper was waiting for me——’

‘And instead of leaving it until to-morrow, you must break the school rules by fetching it to-night,’ Miss Bullivant said, and paused, her eyes running over the faces of each girl. ‘You are foolish—foolish,’ she added. ‘Foolish indeed! You had better come with me!’

The faces of the four girls shone with the hope they felt. This—from the Bull. Not a row. Not even an admonishment. No stern hint, as was usually the case, that they would be severely punished.

‘Janet and you, Clara, take that hamper ahead,’ Miss Bullivant said. ‘Barbara, please fall into line with me. I would like to speak to you.’

‘Yes, Miss Bullivant,’ Babs said, dropping into step.

She looked at the mistress. They were walking along the road now to the door in the wall of the school building, which led to the mistresses’ private entrance, and of which Miss Bullivant had a key.

For a moment Miss Bullivant did not speak, her face was working in the darkness, and she took no heed of the rain which had begun to fall once more.

Then suddenly she turned.

‘Barbara!’

‘Yes, Miss Bullivant?’

‘I—I——’ She stopped; she gulped a little. ‘I saw you once before this evening,’ she said. ‘In the quarry!’

Babs started.

‘Yes, Miss Bullivant, we saw you, too!’

The mistress bit her lip.

‘I am aware of that,’ she said. ‘You saw me with my brother— Grant! I do not need to tell you that, I think. But, Barbara, he is innocent—innocent!’

‘We will say nothing, Miss Bullivant,’ she said. ‘And if ever we can do anything—’

‘Thank you, Barbara,’ Miss Bullivant replied gratefully. ‘I will remember that. You are a good girl,’ she added softly. ‘Perhaps you had better help Clara and Janet with the hamper. Go to your dorm and hurry in getting out of those wet clothes.’

The others looked surprised, too, and grateful.

They left the mistress at the mistresses’ private door in the school, and making as little noise as possible, stole up the stairs. Outside the dormitory door Babs stopped.

‘Not a word about anything we have seen, or about the Bull,’ she said. ‘I gave my word to her—’

‘Well, who was going to say anything?’ Clara asked.

‘Right-ho!’ Mabs said. ‘She’s been jolly decent!’

‘Rather! Mum’s the word!’

They entered the dormitory, its two white lines of beds dimly showing in the semi-gloom. A fat figure sat up, staring hungrily towards them.

‘I sus-say, Babs, got the hamper?’

‘Yes!’

‘Oh, good! But be careful! Primmy’s on the prowl. We—we heard Stella talking to Miss Drake outside the door, you know, not twenty minutes ago. But she’s gone now.’

But Babs frowned.

‘What was the matter?’ she asked.

‘Well, I—I dunno, you know,’ Bessie said. ‘I say, Babs, are there any cream cakes in the hamper?’

‘Yes! Be quiet now, Bessie. Light the candles.’

Girls sat up all over the dormitory.

‘My hat, we thought you’d never get back when we heard the storm, Babs! Old Primmy really was mad. Apparently those Third Form kids had been kicking up a shindy—’

‘Apparently!’ Freda Ferriers sniffed. ‘My hat, you should have heard them!’

‘But, I say, you know—’

‘Quiet, Bessie! What happened?’ Babs asked again.

‘Well, Primmy was working in her study. She came along to see what the rumpus was about,’ Gwen Cook answered. ‘The Duck must have had the same inspiration, too, mind you, for she met Primmy in the passage outside. But it does look as though Miss Bullivant is in for a row, however. The Bull couldn’t be found, mind you!’

‘And you heard Primmy telling the Duck all that?’ Babs said.

‘Yes!’

‘But where’s Primmy now?’

‘She said she was going to Miss Bullivant’s study!’

And Babs frowned again. Her heart gave a thump of anxiety. For if that was true—if Miss Primrose really had gone to Miss Bullivant’s room, then she would find out— That the maths mistress—the duty mistress for the day—had been Out!

Miss Primrose had found out.

She was, as a matter of fact, facing Miss Bullivant even then in Miss Bullivant's study on the hall floor of the school. Miss Bullivant, coming in, was taken aback to find Miss Primrose sitting there.

But at her entry the headmistress, tall, dignified, rose to her feet. She eyed her deputy in surprise.

'Miss Bullivant, you have been out?'

Hopeless for Miss Bullivant to deny that. Her hat, her drenched and dripping clothes supplied that answer. Even as she stood there the rain dripped from her Macintosh.

'Yes, I have been out,' she answered in a low voice.

Miss Primrose's eyes became stern.

'I need hardly tell you that I am surprised,' she said. 'You are aware that you are duty mistress for the day? You are aware that it was your duty to remain in the school?'

Miss Bullivant sighed a little.

'Yes, I am aware of that.'

'As a result of your conduct I have been put to considerable inconvenience,' Miss Primrose resumed. 'Considerable inconvenience! I may add, Miss Bullivant, that I am greatly disappointed. I have not always agreed with you, I know, but I have at least always relied upon you. I have regarded you, if unnecessarily strict at times, as a conscientious mistress. And I am amazed,' she added, 'that this should happen after the incident of Nancy Bell.'

Miss Bullivant winced.

The headmistress, having worked off her first anger, was more mollified.

'I have had trouble with the Third Form during your absence. I heard noises in the Fourth Form dormitory. You see what happens when a mistress neglects her duties. I think, for your own peace of mind and for the sake of discipline, that you should make a final tour of inspection before retiring—late though the hour is. Wait, I will accompany you!'

They left the room together. But outside Miss Primrose paused, staring at the floor.

'Good gracious, what is this?'

Miss Bullivant gazed, then she started, biting her lips. For outside her door was a great pool of water made by the drippings from her wet clothes and the clothes of Babs & Co., but leading away from the pool in four very distinct traces were the little rivulets of water which had dripped from the Fourth Form chums as they ascended the stairs. Miss Primrose, her eyes gleaming, was on the warpath now with a vengeance, switching on lights as she went. The trail of dripping water kept good. It led up to the Fourth Form quarters, up the stairs, into the corridor in which the Fourth Form dormitory was situated. A further pool of water outside that door showed where the trail came to an end.

And underneath the door glimmered a chink of light.

'Ah, we've found the culprits,' Miss Primrose breathed.

She flung open the door. There was a subdued chatter in the dormitory. Candles stood about at intervals, all lighted.

'Girls!' Miss Primrose thundered. 'Remain where you are, Barbara Redfern!'

'Oh, crumbs! I mean, yes, Miss Primrose?'

'You are captain of this Form. What is the meaning of this?'

Babs paused, her wet blazer in one hand.

'Well—we——'

'I see!' Miss Primrose's eyes fastened upon the dress. 'So you are one of the girls who have been out, Barbara; Clara, you, too! H'm!' And Miss Primrose frowned as she stepped into the dormitory, while everybody stood completely dismayed, watching her. 'Janet Jordan, there is a pool of water by your bed. Have you been out?' Janet sighed.

'Yes, Miss Primrose!'

'Mabel Lynn! You, too?'

'Yes, Miss Primrose!'

'And why have you been out? You are aware, I presume, that you have been breaking bounds?'

'Yes, Miss Primrose! You see, we—we went to fetch this hamper!'

'I see, yes!' The Head's eyes for a moment dwelt upon the hamper. 'That shall certainly be confiscated,' she said. And then she paused, looking rather queerly at Miss Bullivant. 'I observe that you have not been back very long,' she said. 'Miss Bullivant, did you see anything of these girls while you were out?'

Miss Bullivant looked at the floor. Babs & Co. gulped. For a moment they had imagined that Miss Bullivant had given them away. But this proved conclusively that she had not—that, in fact, she had been caught herself.

Miss Bullivant gazed at Babs. There was agony in her eyes. Never before had the mistress found herself in the position of trying to shield a girl, but she badly wanted to shield Babs & Co. now.

But Babs was quick to see that hesitation. Quick to see what Miss Bullivant was feeling, what she was trying to hold back. They were found out now, in any case. She stood forward quickly.

'Yes, Miss Bullivant did see us,' she said. 'She—she spoke to us about being out of bounds!'

'Oh!' Miss Primrose looked dazed. 'You did not mention it to me, Miss Bullivant!'

'No!' Miss Bullivant agreed. But the look she threw towards Babs was grateful in the extreme. Rather dismally had Miss Bullivant been wondering what would have happened to her if Miss Primrose had discovered she had seen those girls without reporting them, without punishing them 'I—I felt quite competent to deal with the matter myself,' she said.

'Yes, of course! Well, in that case—' Miss Primrose paused. 'Barbara, you will go to bed. You will all go to bed. And every girl in this room will take a hundred lines for being out of bed. Barbara kindly take that hamper outside. I will see that it is removed.'

A sigh of disappointment went up from the Form. But Babs did not care somehow. And Miss Bullivant smiled in relief. She felt an overwhelming admiration for the Fourth Form captain just then. For by that prompt action Barbara had saved her. Had Miss Primrose discovered that she had allowed Babs & Co. to go unpunished after that incident, it was more than likely that she would have had to leave Cliff House School.

When the grumbling and the mumbling had subsided in the disappointed Fourth Form dormitory, and the girls were asleep once more, a figure sat up in bed. The figure was that of Nancy Bell.

In the darkness Nancy's eyes glittered. Anything that happened to Miss Bullivant was of vital interest to Nancy now, and Nancy had made up her mind that there was some sort of secret between Babs and the Bull.

She had watched Miss Bullivant closely, she had watched Babs, and, groping for anything which might be directed against the Bull, she was on the alert.

Nancy lay down again. But not to sleep. Had she discovered something? What was the secret between the Bull and Babs & Co.?

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While down in her study, safe again once more, Miss Bullivant was feverishly packing together a parcel of food and clothing. The clock above the mantelpiece chimed eleven.

CHAPTER VIII

The Whip Hand

‘PHEE-E-E-E-E-E!’

Nancy Bell started.

‘Pheee-e-e-e-e! Evelyn!’

Jet dark was it in the Fourth Form dormitory, dark and silent. It was, as a matter of fact, nearly midnight, and Nancy had just been dozing off at last when that curiously restrained whistle from the quadrangle below fell upon her ears. She jumped a little, and then she started almost out of her skin. Evelyn!

Miss Bullivant’s name!

It did not occur to Nancy in that moment that there were several other Evelyns at Cliff House. Miss Bullivant was on her mind, and the association was immediate. Someone in the quad below was whistling Miss Bullivant, was calling her name.

Nancy slipped out of bed.

She tiptoed towards the window just as Barbara Redfern opened her eyes. She gazed down into the quadrangle below. A brilliant moon was shining after the storm, and the quad, at this time, was as light as day.

And there, standing in the centre of it, plainly revealed in the moonbeam’s light was a man.

A man with cropped hair. In a prison uniform. A convict!

Nancy gazed, and then her eyes flamed. Instantly to her mind came the words her father had used in the headmistress’s study. A fellow named Grant Bullivant, her brother’s partner, had been sent to prison.

She remembered that stiff defensive attitude of Miss Bullivant, that tell-tale trace of guilt in her eyes. Her brother—a relative of hers—a convict, here, obviously having escaped from prison. Could it be one and the same?

Nancy drew in her breath. If this escaped convict was Miss Bullivant’s relative calling to her for assistance, what a show up for the Bull. What a story to tell the newspapers.

A mistress at Cliff House aiding and abetting a man escaped from prison.

‘My hat!’ Nancy breathed.

She slipped from the window, groping for her dressing-gown. In a second she had slipped it on, had stolen through the door.

Babs sat up in bed.

‘Clara!’

‘I’m here!’

‘Mabs!’

‘Yes?’

‘Janet!’

‘What is it?’ Janet Jordan asked sleepily.

‘Somebody calling Miss Bullivant from the quadrangle,’ Babs whispered, ‘Nancy Bell’s slipped out!’ She got out of bed as another faint whistle came from outside and peered through the window. Then her eyes opened. ‘My goodness, it’s Grant! Let’s go down, Nancy means mischief.’

In a moment the four were wide awake. And realising Nancy’s spiteful vindictiveness, they leapt from their beds.

‘Be quiet now,’ Babs bade.

She led the way towards the door. On tiptoe they crept along the corridor, down the stairs. On the landing Babs stole a glimpse through the window. She saw Miss Bullivant had joined her brother in the quad, was handing him a parcel.

‘Come on!’ Babs whispered.

Down the stairs, now they were in Big Hall. And across the hall, leaning through the window, staring with excited intensity towards the pair, was Nancy Bell.

‘Sh, she’s seen!’ Mabs muttered.

‘Grab her, get her back to the dorm before she gives the alarm,’ Babs breathed.

‘Quietly, now!’

She led the dash forward. But some sound made Nancy turn. She jumped round with a start. She saw the four figures and gasped. And then madly she made towards the window.

‘No, you don’t, come down!’ Babs gasped.

She caught hold of the girl by her dressing-gown, Clara caught at her arm, Janet caught at the leg of her pyjamas, Mabs tugged at one shoe. Nancy wriggled desperately, gasping, struggling, kicking out this way and that. She was half over the sill.

‘Come. back!’ gasped Babs.

‘Let me go!’

‘Not yet, come back!’

‘I won’t come back, I’m going to give that cat away.’

‘Heave her!’ Clara said grimly.

They heaved. Nancy, half over the sill, came back with a precipitous rush. Nancy gasped and squirmed on the floor, and then, realising that her scheme was going awry, she opened her mouth and shouted.

‘Help, help, help!’

Echoing, that cry rang through the school. Nancy shrieked. Outside, Miss Bullivant turned. From upstairs came the sudden opening of a door. Too late, Clara got her hand upon Nancy’s mouth, pressing down fiercely. Nancy’s voice faded away in an inaudible gurgle.

But the mischief was done then. From above came Miss Primrose’s voice:

‘Goodness gracious! What is the matter?’

‘My hat!’ gasped Babs. She leaned through the window. ‘Miss Bullivant!’ she called. Miss Bullivant was running towards the window now. Her brother, the parcel under his arm, was cutting off towards the hedge in the opposite direction. Miss Bullivant panted up. Babs called her.

‘Miss Bullivant, quick! Go to your room, please. Miss Primrose is coming! Nancy Bell—’

Miss Bullivant gave a startled look at the girl on the floor. Then she heard footsteps descending the stairs. For a moment she paused, and in that moment Babs gave her a push.

‘Miss Primrose,’ she hissed. ‘Be quick, Miss Bullivant!’

‘Thank you, Barbara!’ Miss Bullivant gasped.

She realised now what had happened. She saw at once Babs’s intention. If she were found here—if Miss Primrose knew— Her heart failed her. For a moment even Miss Bullivant was thrown into a panic.

She did not stop to think. For the time being, at least, Babs was mistress of the situation. She turned, quickly crossed the hall.

She had barely reached her door and shut it behind her when Miss Primrose, looking stern and angry, appeared.

‘Girls, what is the meaning of this? Who is that you have got there? Goodness me! Nancy Bell!’

Reluctantly Babs & Co. stepped away. Angrily Nancy scrambled to her feet.

‘Miss Primrose—’ she raged.

‘Calm yourself, Nancy, please!’ Miss Primrose frowned. She gazed very sternly at Babs & Co., and her brows came down a little over her eyes. ‘So!’ she said, frowning at the four girls. ‘You evidently are not satisfied with having broken bounds. You must add another disgraceful escapade to your follies. Will you be kind enough to explain this, Barbara?’

Barbara flushed.

‘Well, you see, Miss Primrose—’

‘It’s like this—’ Clara put in.

‘We were having—well, a joke, Miss Primrose,’ Janet Jordan said.

‘Yes, a joke!’ Mabel Lynn gulped with relief.

‘It’s not true!’ Nancy flamed. ‘It’s a lie, Miss Primrose. They tried to stop me from following Miss Bullivant.’

‘Indeed, and why should you wish to follow Miss Bullivant?’

‘Miss Bullivant was in the quad talking to an escaped convict!’

‘What?’

‘It’s true, These girls set on me so that Miss Bullivant could get away—Ow!’ Nancy yelled in sudden agony. ‘Clara, you cat, you trod on my toe!’

‘Please, please!’ Miss Primrose frowned. She looked serious all at once, her eyes glimmered. ‘Wait a minute, Nancy, you say that you saw Miss Bullivant in the quadrangle?’

‘Yes.’

‘How long ago?’

‘About three minutes. I tell you—’

‘Thank you, that is sufficient,’ Miss Primrose said sternly. ‘You girls will all go back to your dormitory. Nancy, I will verify the truth of your assertion myself. You are not, as a rule, a truthful girl, and I have reason to believe that you are feeling vindictive towards Miss Bullivant, Go!’

They trooped back while Miss Primrose, frowning very uneasily, followed them as far as the foot of the stairs. There, however, she hesitated outside Miss Bullivant’s room.

No chink of light came from within that room. Miss Primrose knocked, went in.

She switched on the light in the maths mistress’s study and went through into the bedroom. There, between the sheets, lay Miss Bullivant, sleeping peacefully.

Miss Primrose frowned.

‘Wretched girl!’ she muttered.

She tiptoed out of the room. But immediately she had gone Miss Bullivant, fully dressed, peered up from under the bedclothes. She gave a gasp of relief.

‘My goodness, my goodness!’ she muttered to herself. ‘And Barbara—Barbara did it all for me. That girl! However can I thank her!’

The Bull really was struck by remorse.

But Miss Primrose, stalking angrily to the Fourth Form dormitory, there flung open the door. Babs & Co. were just in the act of getting into bed again.

‘Nancy!’ Miss Primrose cried grimly.

‘Yes, Miss Primrose?’

‘You told me an untruth just now. You will, therefore, take a hundred lines in addition to being detained on the next half-holiday, for being out of bed. Barbara, Clara, Janet, and Mabel, you are also detained next half-holiday.’

‘Yes, Miss Primrose,’ Babs said meekly.

‘That is all. Good-night, girls, and do not let me hear any further disturbance from this dormitory.’

‘But I say!’ yelled Nancy. ‘Miss Primrose, you can’t punish me! It was true, I tell you. I saw Miss Bullivant—’

‘Good-night!’ Miss Primrose repeated.

‘But—’

‘You will take a further hundred lines, Nancy, making two hundred in all. Good-night!’ The door closed behind the headmistress.

Clara chuckled,

‘Serves you right, you little sneak!’

‘But look here—’ seethed Nancy.

‘Be quiet!’

‘But I tell you——’

A slipper sailed out of the darkness, stopping further utterance. Nancy Bell glowered.

‘Who threw that?’

‘I did,’ Clara Trevlyn said grimly. ‘And I’ve got my outdoor shoes to follow!’

Nancy glowered. Clara and Babs chuckled. The moon came up, shining through the windows, and illuminated the dormitory. Once more the Fourth Form slept.

Except Nancy. For Nancy’s thoughts were bitter and revengeful. Not yet had Nancy finished with Miss Bullivant, and knowing what she knew now, she felt that she had the whip hand.

It wouldn’t be Nancy Bell’s fault, that girl promised herself, if Miss Bullivant was not sent away from Cliff House in disgrace during the next few days.

For that now was Nancy’s task.

CHAPTER IX

A Mean Girl’s Trick!

MID-MORNING break, thought Babs, was the very best break of the day. A quarter of an hour of freedom—time enough to have a bite to eat to hold off the hunger pangs until lunch with a glass of cold milk to wash it down—she always looked forward to it. But this morning, the morning after the hectic night before, she was not happy. She stood with Mabs in the music-room, discussing the ‘situation’.

‘And we can help,’ Babs was saying, ‘by watching Nancy Bell. Nancy’s going to be dangerous if she gets half a chance. She is dangerous now. She suspects that the Bull is hiding her brother, and, once she’s in the position to prove those suspicions, she’ll blab everything she knows. We’ve got to watch Nancy, Mabs.’

Mabs’s face set grimly.

‘And we jolly well will!’ she replied. ‘But I say, Babs!’

‘Yes?’

‘What was she doing here a few minutes ago—in the music-room? And why did she back out of the door in that silly way when we came in? It looked as if she were hiding something behind her. And I say— Look! The property box is open!’

Babs swerved round. Mabs, who had been looking round the music-room, trying in her own mind to solve that minor mystery of Nancy’s strange conduct, was pointing to a large, wooden box in one corner.

The box bore the initials, C. H. J. A. D. S., which meant Cliff House Junior Amateur Dramatic Society, of which Mabs herself was the chief organiser.

Another girl would probably never have noticed that the box was open. In fact. It was frequently left open when girls, less careful than Mabs, went to it.

But Mabs always saw that it was shut, and at very regular intervals inspected its contents to see that all was there.

For the box was her own personal responsibility, and contained all the costumes and other articles belonging to the dramatic society.

She darted towards it now, Babs more slowly following. A quick search inside, and then Mabs swung round.

‘Babs, one of the handcuffs is missing!’

‘What?’

‘It’s true! Look! I put them both together.’ And Mabs held up a pair of handcuffs which had been used in the presentation of her last play. ‘The Little Lady of Luxor.’ Two pairs of handcuffs had been bought specially for that occasion, and were cherished properties of the dramatic society, because they happened to be real. And now one pair was missing.

‘Nancy Bell!’ exclaimed Babs. ‘Phew! So that was what she was hiding. But why’s she taken them?’

Mabs’s face grew suddenly tense.

‘Can’t you guess? The Bull—her convict brother. Nancy’s got some wheeze on against her.’

‘Oh, goodness!’ Babs breathed.

Understanding shone in her eyes. That would be one of Nancy’s tricks. Nancy, heartless herself, anxious to make the Bull sit up, would lose no opportunity in this crisis of her life for tormenting her.

‘Some joke in class,’ she considered. ‘Nancy’s taken the handcuffs to humiliate the Bull during maths lesson. Well, she won’t. Come on, Mabs! We’ll get that thing off her!’

‘Rather!’ Mabs agreed.

They left the room, descending the stairs in quest of Nancy Bell once more. There was nobody in Big Hall when they reached it, except diminutive Marcelle Biquet, the French junior, most of the girls having gone out for a breath of fresh air, or to collect their books before assembly.

But Marcelle turned as they came down, pointing to Miss Bullivant’s door on the left of the Hall.

‘Babsie!’ she cried.

‘Hallo, Marcelle! Seen Nancy?’ Babs asked.

‘Oui, oui!’ Marcelle nodded. ‘I watch her,’ she said. ‘I see her go to ze study of ze Bull—n’est ce pas? Ze Bull, she go. Ze headmistress summons her. Zen Nancy go into her study, and—voila!’ Marcelle’s eyes shone with mystification and excitement.

‘In her hand she have ze handcuff!’

‘Oh!’ Babs said grimly. ‘Thanks, Marcelle!’

She nodded towards Mabs. The two of them stepped towards the Bull's door. As Miss Bullivant was not there they did not trouble to knock, but walked straight in. A girl, arranging something on the mantelpiece, turned with a start.

It was Nancy Bell.

Babs frowned; then her eyes glimmered. Propped up against the clock on the mantelpiece was a piece of Bristol board containing a hideous caricature. It was obviously intended to be the face of Miss Bullivant, grinning horribly, by the side of a long-faced young man with a little moustache.

They were both looking through the bars of a cell, and both wore caps, decorated with broad arrows. Underneath was the crude lettering:

‘OUR FAMILY AT HOME.’

And draped over the caricature was the pair of handcuffs, another card attached inscribed with the words:

‘THE FAMILY HEIRLOOMS!’

Mabs's face darkened. Nancy wheeled, taken a little by surprise, then grinned in an easy fashion when she saw that the intruders were just members of her own Form.

Babs, however, motioned Mabs back.

‘Stand by the door!’ she ordered.

Nancy stared.

‘Here, I say! What are you going to do?’ she blustered.

Babs did not reply. She walked deliberately towards the mantelpiece. She put up her hand to knock the spiteful caricature and the handcuffs aside, when Nancy sprang for her.

‘No, you don’t! Leave those things alone!’ she shouted.

Babs turned. In a moment she had the sneak of the Fourth by the shoulders. Babs was athletic, and Babs was strong and, moreover, Babs was quivering with fury now.

She caught, and gave her a push. Nancy went staggering three paces across the floor, then, with a gasp, subsided into Miss Bullivant’s armchair.

‘Oh, leave those alone!’ she yelled.



*‘Ha! Ha! Ha! Nancy’s sign says,
“OUR FAMILY AT HOME”!’*

But Babs had the handcuffs now, and the caricature. She wrenched them down, then paused. Nancy, in the armchair, had half-risen to her feet. Babs gave her another push, which sent her breathlessly collapsing into the chair again. Nancy's arms came up. Babs was laughing now. The handcuffs flashed in the air. Snick, click! With a quick movement Babs slipped them on Nancy's wrists and withdrew the key. Nancy stared. 'Why, you beast! You've put them on me!'

'Exactly!' Babs smiled.

'Take them off!'

'Not this time,' Babs laughed grimly. 'What a nice little joke we were going to play on the Bull, weren't we?' she said scornfully. 'But it isn't a joke now, is it, Nancy—not now the tables are turned? Mabs, got a pin?'

'Here we are,' Mabs said.

'Good! Hold Nancy—thanks! Don't struggle, Nancy, or this pin might go into you.' And very adroitly Babs pinned the insulting caricature to the front of Nancy Bell's own tunic. 'Your family at home!' she laughed. 'Looks well, I must say!'

Nancy was almost panting with fury now. She glared.

'Look here! What are you going to do? Take those things off!'

'Not yet. All in good time.' Babs smiled. 'Ever heard of the doctor who had to take his own medicine, Nancy? Didn't find it very pleasant, did he? Well, this is your own medicine, and you're taking it, whether you find it pleasant or not. Now get up!' she ordered.

'I won't!'

'All right! Got another pin, Mabs?'

'Here we are!' Mabs assented cheerfully, and handed the pin to Babs.

'Thanks! Nice long one, isn't it?' Babs asked. 'If I stick it into someone—Nancy, say—do you think she'd move?'

Babs, naturally, had not the slightest intention of doing anything of the sort, but so grim, so earnest was her expression as she made the suggestion, that Nancy, already at a disadvantage, seriously believed that she meant it.

'O.K.! Are you going to move, Nancy?' Babs asked calmly.

Nancy's eyes were wild.

'Look here, you can't stick that in me!'

'Well, you've said it,' Babs replied mischievously. 'I'll prove it, shall I?' She advanced towards Nancy, the pin held in a very businesslike way between finger and thumb. 'I'll give you three to get up and outside,' Babs offered. 'If you haven't moved when I say three—well——' And she looked thoughtfully and with considerable relish at the pin. 'Now! One—'

'Look here—' Nancy yelled.

'Two!'

'Don't you dare stick that thing in me! If you do, I—I'll report you to the Head!'

Nancy panted.

'And you'll tell her what you were doing, eh?' Babs laughed. 'Well, go on—report away! Last time, Nancy. Now! Three!'

She leaned over Nancy. Nancy, her courage failing her, bounded out of the armchair. She swung round.

'But look here—'

'Whoo-aa, I'm coming!' exclaimed Babs.

She rushed towards Nancy, holding the pin as though it had been a lance, and so ferocious and so determined was her expression that Nancy, never one for courage, completely took fright. Besides which, the pin was big, it was sharp, and was very

capable of making quite a considerable puncture. Nancy detested being hurt. She flew for the door.

Mabs obligingly held it open. And then, as Nancy paused on the threshold, aware of the ridiculous figure she would cut in public, Mabs gave her an obliging push which precipitated her into Big Hall. Nancy gasped.

‘You can’t do this—’

‘Get out!’ Mabs exclaimed.

She gave Nancy another push, and then followed her into the hall. Babs came out immediately afterwards, shutting Miss Bullivant’s door behind her.

A few girls, awaiting assembly, were in the hall now, and they stared wonderingly towards the scene. And then, as Nancy was spotted, a howl went up.

‘My hat!’

‘Look at Nancy Bell!’

‘Her family at home!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Nancy glared round furiously.

‘Look here—’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Quite a crowd collected at once, facing the redfaced, furiously panting Nancy. Nancy gritted her teeth. She tugged desperately at the handcuffs, but the handcuffs, of a small size, and securely locked with the key reposing in Bab’s pocket, refused to slip over her wrists.

‘Jolly good!’ Clara Trevlyn approved. ‘I always did say that Nancy’s family were a queer lot. And isn’t that a really ripping portrait of Nancy?’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Take these things off me!’ Nancy yelled.

‘What, rob you of the family heirlooms? Tut-tut!’ Jemima Carstairs said blandly.

‘Besides, you know, they suit you so jolly well!’

‘I’ll say they look swell!’ Leila Carroll put in.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Doesn’t she look lovely!’ laughed June Merrett, and she broke into an impromptu chant

*‘She was only a convict’s sister,
She was only a convict’s sister,
She was named Nancy Bell,
And as she sat in her cell—’*

‘Come on, somebody—a good last line!’ invited June Merrett hilariously.

‘“Her brother turned pale when he kissed her,”’ suggested Jean Cartwright.

‘No, rotten! Come on!’

‘“The cuffs on her wrists raised a blister!”’ Elsie Effingham chortled.

‘Or “At Cliff House her friends never missed her!”’ Rosa Rodworth put in.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Nancy grew more and more furious.

‘Look here, you grinning cats—’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘My hat! If only I could get you!’ Nancy Bell roared.

‘But the most notable of the Bells was Mr. Archer Bell, of the Middle Ages,’ June went on impressively. ‘Ladies, you have all heard of Mr. Archer Bell, who was so

fond of arrows that he introduced them into the uniform of the Bell family, where they are worn under appropriate conditions until the present day.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled the Cliff House juniors.

'And—but cave! Here comes Miss Primrose!'

'Gee!'

A sudden silence. Girls coughed. Cries faded.

'Girls!' the headmistress cried; then she saw Nancy and jumped. 'Good gracious! Nancy Bell!' she cried unbelievably. 'Nancy, what are you doing in that ridiculous condition?'

Nancy gritted her teeth.

'You don't think I've done this myself?'

'Indeed!' Miss Primrose stiffened. 'Please, Nancy, remember to whom you are speaking!' she said severely. 'I repeat, what are you doing with that ridiculous placard?'

Nancy breathed hard.

'I didn't put it on!' she cried. 'Barbara Redfern and Mabel Lynn put these on me!'

'Sneak!' came a hissing whisper from a circle of girls.

'I'm not sneaking! It was Barbara Redfern!' Nancy Bell hooted. 'She flung me into a chair. She put the handcuffs on my wrists. And that beast Mabel Lynn pinned this notice on my tunic!'

'Indeed! Please calm yourself, Nancy!' Miss Primrose frowned. 'Barbara!'

'Yes, Miss Primrose?' Babs said.

'Did you put these things on Nancy's wrists?'

'Yes, Miss Primrose.'

'And you pinned that ridiculous and very offensive caricature there?' Miss Primrose asked Mabel Lynn.

'Yes, Miss Primrose,' Mabs replied, taking her cue from her chum.

'Indeed!' Miss Primrose became erect. 'This is a joke, I presume?'

'Yes, Miss Primrose.'

'It is a very insulting joke—a very insulting joke!' The headmistress frowned. 'The caricature I find particularly obnoxious. Ahem!' She glanced towards Miss Bullivant's door as though having the occupant of the room behind it in mind. 'Mabel, did you draw that caricature?'

'No, Miss Primrose.'

'Barbara, did you?'

'No, Miss Primrose.'

'Then who did?'

Silence.

'Who did? Nancy, did you draw this caricature?'

'No!' Nancy said sulkily.

'Barbara, perhaps you will tell me the meaning of this joke. I presume you had a reason for playing it upon Nancy?'

'Oh, yes, Miss Primrose. But—I'm sorry,' Babs added. 'I cannot tell you. I hope you won't mind, but if I told you, that would be sneaking, and—well, I'd hate to be classed with Nancy Bell!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' came an involuntary laugh.

'Silence, please!' Miss Primrose frowned. But she looked at Babs, and, knowing Babs and knowing Nancy, perhaps she guessed something of the truth then. But Miss Primrose was really annoyed. She felt now that, having started an inquiry, it was up to her to sift the matter to its bottom. 'Barbara you will tell me,' she said. 'I have a

feeling that this insult was not intended for Nancy. Who drew that caricature?' Silence.

'Very well! Nancy, you refuse to say?'

'I didn't do it!' Nancy replied, in a great funk now.

'Very well!' Miss Primrose's lips compressed. 'All you girls seemed to be enjoying the joke very much,' she observed. 'Perhaps one of you will tell me? If any girl knows, it is her duty to step forward and speak up. Now!'

But nobody would speak up. But they all knew of Nancy's vendetta. They all knew, as plainly as if they had been told, that it was Nancy herself. Looks were cast at that girl.

'No?' Miss Primrose breathed through her nostrils. 'Very well. In that case, every girl participating in this joke will take fifty lines. Nancy, since she will not speak up, will also take fifty lines.'

Nancy glared.

'But what have I done?' she hooted. 'Dash it all—'

'Nancy, you will take a hundred lines, and you will write "I must learn to address my headmistress with proper respect." No more—otherwise I shall double your punishment. Barbara, free this girl!'

'Yes, Miss Primrose,' Barbara said.

And she produced the key, unlocking the handcuffs that secured Nancy's wrists.

'Thank you. Now, please—no more disturbances.' Miss Primrose said. 'The next time I shall not be so lenient. All you girls will do your lines this afternoon, and will hand them to Stella Stone before tea.'

She rustled away, while Nancy stood scowling. But there were no grins on the faces of the juniors now. There was no amusement. They all glared at Nancy, from her to Babs.

'Babs, who did it?' Clara Trevlyn asked.

'Nancy.'

'And you wouldn't own up! You worm!' Clara said bitterly.

'You awful little coward!'

'You've got the whole of us punished!'

'Go and own up!'

'Rats!' sniffed Nancy.

'Sneak!'

'Coward!'

A hiss went up. Nancy turned red and white by turns. But Miss Matthews, the mistress of the Fourth, was bearing down upon the crowd now, and further expression of their indignation was abruptly terminated.

But Nancy stood there, looking furious, biting her lips. It seemed that the way of the vendetta-ist was not going to be all honey and smoothness. She was in the Head's bad books now, and in the bad graces of her Form.

'Dash!' scowled Nancy.

She did not blame herself. She blamed Miss Bullivant, and though Nancy had been frustrated in another attempt to cause suffering and humiliation to that harassed mistress, she was by no means at the end of her tether.

The knowledge of her own unpopularity, indeed, only increased the determination with which she would in future work against Miss Bullivant.

The Bull, she promised herself, should suffer deeply and bitterly for everything she had done to Nancy Bell!

CHAPTER X

‘They’re Going!’

‘HALLO!’ muttered Barbara Redfern.

‘Detectives!’ whispered Mabel Lynn.

‘Phew!’

‘I say, you know, I wonder what they’re coming for?’ Bessie Bunter asked, with an owlish glance at the two men who came sauntering up in the direction of the sunlit quadrangle of Cliff House School. ‘Mum—my hat! The Bull! Babs, I’ll bet it’s the Bull!’ But Babs did not need to be told that. Neither did any of the chums. They stood on the steps at the entrance to the school, having a short breather before dinner-bell sounded. There were six of them: Babs, Mabs, Bessie and Clara, Janet Jordan and Marjorie Hazeldene.

It really did not astonish any of them to see the detectives; for the fact that Miss Bullivant had a brother, who had yesterday escaped from prison, was well known. Small wonder, then, that detectives were on the spot; small wonder that they should be coming here to interrogate the mistress.

Babs frowned a little. For Miss Bullivant her heart beat anxiously. She remembered the mistress as she had been in class that morning—nervous, haggard, ill at ease, as though expecting catastrophe at any moment.

Even those girls who normally did not like the Bull had been tolerant and well behaved towards her, realising the condition of her mind, realising the mental agonies she must now be undergoing.

One or two mean spirits, however, like Lydia Crossendale. Nancy Bell, and Marcia Loftus, had tried to take advantage of the Bull’s preoccupation. But Nancy, thanks to her cowardice in Big Hall that morning, was not popular, and the Form, having no intention of being punished again for Nancy’s sins, had let her know it.

An ink pellet had hit Nancy behind the ear in the middle of one bright remark.

Altogether, indeed, the schemer had not had a happy time.

The detectives came on. Babs & Co. knew they were detectives, for they had recognised Inspector Winter, the chief of the Courtfield Division, and Detective Silvey, one of his assistants. They both stopped, and Inspector Winter smiled.

‘‘Morning, Miss Barbara! Is Miss Bullivant in her room?’’

‘I think so,’ Babs replied.

‘Thanks.’

He went in; but several girls had seen him and recognised him and Silvey. An eager throng swooped towards Babs.

‘Babs, who is he after?’

‘The Bull?’

‘What did he say?’

But Babs turned a deaf ear to those pleas. Rather anxiously she was watching the detectives as they tapped at Miss Bullivant’s door. She saw Miss Bullivant open that door, saw her start and jump at sight of the officers, and her heart smote her again. A muttered invitation, and the detectives went in.

‘My aunt!’ Marcia Loftus whistled. ‘They’ve come to fetch the Bull! I say, what’s the news?’

And Marcia, without troubling to confirm that impression, flew excitedly away to spread the gossip over the school.

Before long everybody heard the story—a story which, like all rumours, gathered trimmings to itself as it progressed. Grant Bullivant, the escaped convict, had been discovered in hiding under Miss Bullivant's bed; the detectives had come to fetch him away, and at the same time to arrest Miss Bullivant.

Quite a crowd collected round the steps as a result, watching with eager and avid interest the door of Miss Bullivant's room.

But a murmur of disappointment went up when suddenly that door opened and Miss Bullivant, looking very pale, but extremely dignified, came Out, chatting to the detectives. She threw a look towards the crowd, and then, her head held very high in the air, walked off in the direction of the headmistress's study.

'Gee! Gone to see Miss Primrose!' Leila Carroll muttered. 'What's in the wind now?' Again Babs frowned. She felt suddenly uncomfortable being in the group. It struck her that the whole school was spying upon the unhappy mistress, and she among them.

It was bad enough for Miss Bullivant to have her own private worries these days. To feel that the school was watching her every movement must be putting a strain upon the mistress well nigh unendurable. Babs flushed at that thought. She moved away.

'Anybody coming to the tuckshop?' she asked.

'Yes, I am,' Mabel Lynn said at once.

'And I,' Clara Trevlyn assented. 'I've got two boblets. Come on! I'll stand you a lemon juice. Coming, Marjorie? Coming, Janet? Where's Bessie?'

But Bessie Bunter, mysteriously, had vanished.

They went off, talking among themselves, Babs feeling faintly worried, wishing she could do something to relieve Miss Bullivant's load, but hardly knowing what.

To the tuckshop they went and, surprisingly enough, found it empty except for the presence of Mrs. Jones, the good dame who kept the shop. They ordered lemon juice, found a cool corner in which to sit and drink and talk and were just finishing their drinks, when Bessie Bunter, in a state of quivering excitement, rolled in.

'Oh crumbs! Oh, I sus-say, you girls!'

Babs looked at her.

'Well, Bessie?'

'I say, you know! About Miss Bullivant!'

'What's the matter with Miss Bullivant?' Babs asked quickly. 'The detectives have got some idea that Miss Bullivant knows where her brother is, you know, and she's forbidden to leave the school without permission from Miss Primrose until he's caught again. You ought to have seen the Bull's face!'

And Bessie gulped at the lemon juice which Janet Jordan had bought her.

Babs bit her lip. The Bull, obviously, was enormously up against it. Police surveillance would handicap her dreadfully in helping her brother—in fact, it might very conceivably prevent her from seeing him altogether. It meant that if Miss Bullivant did leave the school, she would probably be shadowed.

Babs rose.

She walked out, her face thoughtful and worried. A girl on the steps of the tuckshop, taken aback at the silence of her approach, jumped.

'Oh!' she gasped.

Babs glanced at her, and then her eyes smouldered. For the girl was Nancy Bell, and that discomfited look upon Nancy's face told the leader of the Fourth as plainly as anything that Nancy had been listening.

She, too, knew that Miss Bullivant could not leave the school now without permission.

Haggard, harassed, staring vacantly into space, Miss Bullivant sat in her room, when Babs's tap came upon her door. She called 'Come in!' mechanically.

But she started up as she saw Babs, and Babs, seeing her, closed the door gently, and came towards her.

'Miss Bullivant,' she said softly.

'Barbara!' Miss Bullivant said huskily.

'I've heard,' Barbara said simply. 'I know, Miss Bullivant. *You* can't go to see your brother.'

The Bull nodded at that. She sank into her chair again.

'Yes,' she whispered, 'that is the arrangement, Barbara. Miss Primrose has asked me, for the sake of the school, not to go, for the present, outside the school grounds. And Grant—my poor brother!' Her lips quivered.

'Oh, Barbara, what can I do?' Miss Bullivant asked tremblingly—a Miss Bullivant now robbed of every vestige of her authority, her sternness; a Miss Bullivant who was simply a pitiful, trembling, rather middle-aged woman, with a heart aching for the brother she loved so much, whose innocence she was so keen on proving.

A Miss Bullivant, full of courageous resolve, who found all her defences now swept away from her, who found herself rendered impotent and helpless.

'What can I do?' she repeated in a thin whisper. 'Barbara! Grant—he is helpless there. He has clothing but no food. I promised this afternoon that I would take him food. He can get none for himself, of course.'

'Where is he?' Babs asked.

'In—in the Priory ruins. In the secret room of the tower,' Miss Bullivant said, and then started, realising that she had let that out unconsciously. 'Barbara, you will not tell anyone?'

'Of course not.' But Barbara frowned. She knew the Priory ruins in Friardale Woods; she knew the tower. But this was the first time she had ever heard of a secret room in that extremely forbidding place. For an instant she regarded Miss Bullivant queerly, wondering how she could know of the existence of a secret room.

Then she remembered.

Miss Bullivant was a great friend of Professor Grant Wallace, one of the school governors. She and the professor had been friends for many years, in fact—long before Miss Bullivant had ever come to Cliff House School.

It was said that the professor had introduced the mistress to Cliff House, and it was certainly a fact that he was the godfather of her hunted brother, which probably accounted for the coincidence in the Christian names of the two.

The professor was a keen antiquarian, and his researches in the neighbourhood of Cliff House School had furnished him with a great amount of material which he had embodied in a book on Cliff House's history.

Miss Bullivant shared his enthusiasm and also the secrets he had wrested from the past. That, very evidently, was how she knew of the existence of the secret room in the ruins of Friardale Priory.

'The secret room?' Babs repeated now, and gazed at Miss Bullivant with interrogation in her blue eyes.

'Yes!' The mistress's gaze was far away. 'It is a secret, Barbara. I believe I am right in stating that it is only known to two living people, one of whom is myself. But I will tell you,' she added, 'provided always that you tell no one else without my permission.'

She paused; then, in low tones, spoke, while Babs's eyes lit up with interest and astonishment.

'It is in that room that Grant is hiding now,' Miss Bullivant went on. 'Without food, without water. Barbara, what can I do? If I go I shall be followed. If they find him—' 'Let me go!' Babs suggested.

'You?' Miss Bullivant looked startled. Then she shook her head with some emotion.

'Thank you, Barbara. That is very sweet of you,' she replied. 'But no—I could not think of allowing you to take the risk. Leave me, please! I must—I will—think of some way! Perhaps I can get permission to walk past the place, and in some manner get a message to him. But I haven't thought yet—I don't know. It is very, very kind of you, my dear girl, but you have done enough already. Please go now!'

Babs gazed at her in compassion. She nodded and rose, walking towards the door. But there was a look in her blue eyes that would have told anyone who knew the leader of the Fourth that she had by no means taken that refusal to heart, a squareness to her chin which suggested that she had other plans.

All through dinner Babs was silent and thoughtful. But when the meal was over she was smiling. In the rush out of the dining-room after dinner she button-holed Mabs, Clara, and Janet.

'Study No. 4!' she whispered tensely.

'Why, what's on?' Clara asked.

'Shush! Come on!'

'I sus-say, Babs!' It was Bessie's plaintive voice which spoke, and Bessie who rolled after them. She had seen that hurried, whispered consultation, and Bessie immediately suspected a secret feed. 'Oh, really, you know, I saw you whispering,' she said. 'It's not fair to keep me out of it. If it's a feed—'

Babs turned.

'It is,' she said, to the others' surprise.

Bessie blinked,

'And we want you to buy supplies,' Babs went on. 'Bessie, here's two pounds. Go down to the tuckshop, will you? Get in supplies, but good one. No tarts, no cakes. Something solid and substantial Ham, eggs, salmon, you know. And—yes, bring some bread and butter. But buck up. We shall want it after lessons this afternoon.'

'Oh crumbs! Oh, I say!' Bessie's eyes shone. 'Now that's what I call sensible, Babs. A really good feed, eh? M'yes!' And Bessie grinned fatly and delightedly, and rolled off in ecstatic delight to execute so pleasant a commission.

Clara stared.

'Babs, what's the giddy game? What do we want a feed like that for?'

Babs laughed.

'We don't!'

'But you told Bessie—'

'I did. That was true. I said we wanted a feed after lessons this afternoon. We do! But not for ourselves. Besides which it was a good excuse for getting rid of old Fattikins for ten minutes.'

'But who the dickens do we want the feed for?'

'Shush! Tell you in the study.'

And when they arrived in that famous and newly decorated apartment, Babs, having locked the door and hung her hat upon the key in order to block the view of any spying Nancy Bell who might happen along, told them.

'We want the feed to take to Grant Bullivant,' she announced. 'We're going to see

him after lessons this afternoon. Miss Bullivant doesn't know it, but we're just going, all the same.'

'But we're gated!' Janet Jordan protested.

'Never mind, we're going,' Babs said. 'We'll just have to risk the gating, Now listen!' And she unfolded her plans.

CHAPTER XI

Alas for Bessie's Hopes!

'FINE!' Bessie Bunter muttered admiringly. 'Yum! What a feed! Crumbs! It makes me feel quite peckish! Wish Babs & Co. would come!'

And Bessie gazed hungrily and with great anticipation at the table in Study No. 4. The table certainly looked tempting. Where 'spreads' were concerned Bessie had the eye and the soul of a true artist. Bessie could cook better than any other girl in the Lower School; she could lay a table in a way that a Ritz waiter might have envied. She had certainly excelled herself on this occasion.

A cloth of unblemished white covered the table. Knives, forks, and spoons—some of them borrowed from other studies without the owners' permission—shone and glinted in the sunlight which streamed through the windows.

A dish containing ham and beef, tastefully laid out in slices and embellished with tomatoes, occupied the place of honour in the centre of the table. Half a dozen cold-boiled eggs were already arranged.

There was, in addition, a veal-and-ham pie, a great loaf of bread, as yet uncut, butter, an unopened tin of salmon, and several sorts of tarts and cakes, and cups and saucers and plates, all shining and white.

'Ripping!' Bessie murmured, with relish.

It was a 'spread' after her own heart. Good, substantial viands which would carry even her until supper-time without experiencing her usual faintness.

Bessie had bought that tuck at dinner-time, augmenting Babs two pound notes quite considerably with her own money, some of which she still had left from her film earnings in Hollywood. With loving care she had arranged it, and now all was set for the 'spread.'

But where was Babs & Co.?

'Oh crumbs! Buck up!' Bessie muttered peevishly. 'Where the dickens have those chumps got to?'

Perhaps she would have been surprised could she have seen the 'chumps.' At that moment Clara Trevlyn and Janet Jordan were cautiously scrambling through the gap in the hedge at the other side of the Head's House.

Babs and Mabs were hurriedly unpacking attaché-cases in the dormitory, ramming the things they contained into their lockers. Babs looked up.

'Ready, Mabs?'

'Rather!'

'Think these two cases will hold everything?'

'Yes. In any case we can make another journey to-morrow.'

'So we can. But come on now and be careful nobody spots you. The tea-bell will be going in a minute and we should have a good chance of getting away then. We meet Clara and Janet in the woods.'

Mabs nodded. At the same moment the tea-bell rang. Silently the two tiptoed towards

the door, breathing with satisfaction when they saw that the corridor was deserted. Empty cases in their hands, they stole down the stairs into the Fourth Form corridor. Quite a deal of noise and chatter, the clinking of knives against plates, came from the studies as they passed. They met the Terraine Twins just emerging from Study No. 11, who both simultaneously blinked at them and then, with a cautious smile, passed on. Except for that quaint pair, however, the corridor was empty.

‘Here we are!’ breathed Mabs.

They had reached the door of the Study No. 4 now. Babs pushed it open. Bessie Bunter, unable to stall the growing pangs of hunger, was seated in lonely state at the other side of the table, with a plateful of ham and beef in front of her.

She flushed a little guiltily.

‘Ahem!’ she said, ‘Oh, really, Babs, I w-wish you wouldn’t barge in like that. You’ve sent me into quite a fluster, you know. And you needn’t look at me as if I were having a feed on my own, because I’m not. I’m—’ And Bessie gazed at the plate, trying to invent an excuse that would avert the suspicion which Babs and Mabs would naturally be bound to feel in such circumstances. ‘I—I was just sampling the fuf-food, you know, in—in case it had turned bad during the hot weather. But, I say, where are the guests?’

‘Open your case, Mabs,’ Babs said.

‘O.K. Here we are!’

‘Bessie, got any grease-proof paper?’

Bessie stared in amazement.

‘But what the dickens— Here, I say, Babs! Babs, what are you doing with that plateful of ham and beef?’

That really was an unnecessary inquiry. It was quite plain what Babs was doing with it. Babs had snatched up a piece of Bessie’s disregarded grease-proof paper and was sliding the ham and beef into it.

Bessie stared as though she believed her chums had suddenly taken leave of their senses.

‘In the bag, Mabs! There’s the bread; now the salmon. Bessie, pass those eggs.’

‘Look here—’ roared Bessie.

‘Buck up, duffer!’

‘I say, you can’t do that, you know!’

‘Pepper, salt!’ Babs said, sweeping them into Mabs’s case. ‘Tomatoes—jolly good, Bessie! A few of those tarts!’

‘But, I say, Babs; you’re taking everything! Look here, is this a joke, or what is it?’

Bessie glowered wrathfully.

‘What is it!’ Babs replied, with a grin. ‘Case full, Mabs? Right-ho, heave mine up, then!’

Bessie blinked in utter astonishment and dismay as one article after another was swooped into the case. Babs and Mabs were mad—must be! After the care she had taken in making the spread look appetising!

‘Look here—’ she roared wrathfully.

‘Nothing else,’ Babs said, looking round. ‘Oh, yes, the sardines! There’s some biscuits there, too. We’ll take those. Got any cheese, Bessie?’

‘No, I jolly well haven’t! What are you going to do with those? I thought this was a feed!’

‘So it is. Jolly good one, too!’ Babs laughed. ‘Thanks, Bessie. Sorry you’ve had all your trouble for nothing!’

Bessie glowered wrathfully.

‘Look here, you’re not taking that stuff away!’

‘Your mistake—we are!’

‘But—’

‘No buts! Ready, Mabs?’

‘Rather!’ grinned Mabs.

‘Good! Then let’s go!’

‘But, I say!’ howled Bessie. ‘Babs, you cat! Mabs, you beast! Where are you taking that stuff?’

But Babs and Mabs were whizzing through the doorway. Bessie, her breath almost taken away, watched them go. She looked at the table, a moment before groaning under the weight of good things, now almost barren except for a few tarts. Too late Bessie made a rush for the door.

‘Babs—’

Slam! Click!

The door shut, the key turned outside. Bessie yelled.

‘Babs!’

The soft scurrying of feet in the passage outside came to her ears. Bessie stood dazed.

‘Well, mum-my hat!’ she gasped feebly; and she stared at the almost empty table in dismay.

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‘O.K.?’ Babs chuckled.

‘O.K., captain!’ Clara Trevlyn assented cheerfully.

‘Good, then let’s go. The coast seems clear now.’

And the four chuckled in chorus.

They were in high spirits. They had reason to be. It was no easy task for four girls under detention to escape from the school in the broad light of day without being seen, and had they been spotted, punishment sure and severe would have followed. But they had not been seen, and on that account they had good cause to congratulate themselves. Now they had reached the safety and security of Friardale Woods.

‘Make for the quarry,’ Babs suggested. ‘After that follow the old light railway track as far as the clearing, then we’ll branch off to the right; but keep clear of the paths. Bound to be police about.’

It was no great step from there to the ruins of Friardale Priory—a misnomer, if ever there was one, for the Priory, when built, had been intended to be a monastery. It had been started, as a matter of fact, way back in the Middle Ages, and only the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry the Eighth had prevented its being completed. The Priory had been designed to be a big building. One tower had been completed, and half the building itself. Another tower, partially erected, had long ago crumbled to neglected ruins; but Copse Tower was in a tolerably good state of preservation. It burst upon their gaze suddenly, grim, gaunt, in a glade among the trees, overgrown with creeper and weeds, scrubs and bushes springing from among the debris and the ruins.

‘Well, here we are!’ Babs said.

‘You’re sure you know the way?’ Clara asked.

‘Yes; Miss Bullivant told me. Careful now. Follow me.’

They picked their way among the broken masonry and the rubble that lay on the ground, turning now and again lest prying eyes should be watching.

They reached the entrance, a gothic arch in which was set a massive door, warped and

bleached, and full of great cracks and holes by exposure to the weather. Babs stepped into the tower, coughing a little at the dusty and acrid smell which assailed her nostrils, and mounting a flight of crumbling, stone steps to her left.



The haggard face of the convict peered out

Nobody spoke. In this gaunt ruin, where every whisper escaped, every footstep sounded unnaturally loud, it seemed sacrilege to speak, somehow. They reached the landing with its broken flagstones, its crumbling arches. Babs, remembering the secret she had learned from Miss Bullivant, went forward. At the third arch from the landing she paused, scanning the wall beyond it. She counted three rows of stones up from the bottom, then three from the side of the arch. She pressed.

The chums stood watching, hearts thumping with uncomfortable intensity.

‘Got it!’ Babs whispered. ‘Look!’

She pointed. Her three chums started. Quite ten feet away from the spot on which they stood, the wall was opening, revealing a narrow, oblong cavity, capable of admitting only one person at a time.

‘The secret door,’ Janet muttered.

They stepped towards it, peering into the interior beyond—an interior very dark, but lit by a sort of greyness which told of the presence of some window or outlet above.

Babs was the first to step through the doorway, pressing her toes against the bottom stair of a narrow flight of steps. She went up.

The chums followed.

A little slit in the wall shed a pale grey radiance about them. Twenty steps there were, and at the end of those steps stood a great studded door. Babs knocked.

From inside came a movement. But there was no reply.

Babs knocked again.

‘Friends!’ she cried. ‘Miss Bullivant’s friends. Mr. Bullivant, let us in, please!’

There was a pause. The chums stood, their hearts beating rapidly. Then there was a shuffle of footsteps within the room.

The door creaked back on hinges, rusty with disuse, and opened three inches. A pale, haggard, unshaven face peered at them.

Babs’s heart leapt.

‘Mr Bullivant?’ she asked. ‘It’s all right. We’ve come from your sister. She couldn’t bring you food, so we’ve brought it. We’re girls from Cliff House School.’

For another moment he eyed them, then, with a quick look down the stairs which they had ascended, he dragged the door wider.

‘Come in!’ he invited quickly.

They stepped in, finding themselves in a narrow, stone apartment, dimly illuminated by the daylight which shone in from an open slit in the wall, and which gave a view of the other unfinished tower.

There was nothing in the room, save a bundle of clothing cast into one corner, which Babs immediately recognised as being the convict garb in which Grant Bullivant had escaped, and which Grant Bullivant had obviously used as a duster to sweep the floor, which was passably free from grime.

The man himself stood in the centre of the room, his face pale and harassed.

‘Mr. Bullivant—’ Babs said softly.

‘Thank you!’ he said. He had been regarding them, evidently not sure even yet that they came as friends. ‘You say you come from my sister?’

‘Yes. She could not get here. It would have been unsafe.’

And rapidly Babs explained the situation, while he listened, his eyes upon the door. She noticed that he looked hunted, that even as he stood his hands were trembling. But he conjured up a smile.

‘That was very kind of you,’ he said. ‘My sister is lucky to have such friends, too. You’ve brought me food? How good of you! I haven’t eaten since yesterday.’

‘Oh, how terrible!’ Mabs sympathised.

‘But don’t wait,’ he said tensely. ‘It might be dangerous. But, listen! If you will, I want you to do something for me. By the way, what do you say the name of this girl who followed my sister was—Bell?’

‘Yes; Nancy Bell.’

He frowned.

‘I wonder?’ he muttered as if to himself.

‘What?’ Babs asked.

‘Perhaps you don’t know.’ He looked at them thoughtfully. ‘The man who accused me of forging the cheque for which I was sent to prison was named Bell—Edward Bell. We were partners together. He wrote out a cheque for a large amount on his own bank. He asked me to cash it for him. I went to the bank, I handed over the cheque. and they gave me the money. Then it was discovered that there was not enough money in Edward Bell’s account to meet the cheque.’

He paused.

‘I knew Bell had been gambling, but at the time I did not attach much importance to the fact. Then inquiries came to be made. Bell had used the money I drew from the bank for him to pay off gambling debts, and to save his own face he accused me of having forged the cheque. The cheque-book was found on me by the police. Everything was against me. They sent me to prison.’ He bit his lip. The Cliff House chums regarded him in sympathetic silence.

‘But I was not guilty,’ he went on. ‘I swear I was not guilty! And I vowed, if I could escape, I would bring home the guilt to Edward Bell. That was why I did escape. And’—he paused—‘I have found the proof!’

Babs uttered an exclamation.

‘But careful—careful!’ he looked anxiously towards the door again. ‘Listen! Last night I sneaked away. I went to Edward Bell’s office in Lantham, and I found what I sought. These!’ He produced a bundle of papers from his pocket. ‘See those? Bell had this scheme cut and dried. He actually forged his own signature to the cheque which I cashed for him. See that?’

He showed Babs a paper. The paper was filled with scrawling signatures—Edward Bell, Edward Bell, Edward Bell, each slightly varied, but still substantially the same handwriting.

‘Here is another,’ Grant Bullivant said, and held up for Babs’s inspection a receipt from a bookmaker for a hundred pounds. ‘That bill was paid after the deception upon the bank, for which I am being punished,’ he said. ‘That and the forgeries will prove my innocence. But I cannot take them myself. My innocence must be proved before I can reveal myself. You take them. Give them to my sister. Tell her to take them to a solicitor.’

Babs was excited now. Clara’s eyes were sparkling; Mabs’s lips were trembling. Janet Jordan stood as if rooted to the spot.

‘Take them!’ he said. ‘Give them to Evelyn. They will establish my innocence. But I must remain here—I daren’t take the risk of getting away myself until I know my innocence is proved. And last night’—his voice dropped to a whisper—‘somebody in the office saw me. They followed me. They followed me to these woods.’

‘Oh goodness!’ Babs exclaimed.

And then, quite involuntarily, her gaze strayed through the slit in the wall which gave a view of the tower opposite. She started violently. For there, peering towards them through the grating of a window in that tower was a face.

The face of a man!

CHAPTER XII

Nancy’s Bungle

BUT though Babs saw that face she said nothing. The distraught brother of Miss Bullivant was worried enough already. To add a fresh apprehension to the many from which he was suffering now would have been heartless.

And Babs was not sure that the watcher from the other tower could see them through that narrow slit. Inwardly she resolved to make an investigation herself before giving the alarm.

Nobody else had noted that furtive face. It was not a warder, for warders did not wear felt hats, which was the headgear which the spy in the other tower had on. And the warders did not wear spectacles, either, but the face of the man she had seen very decidedly did wear them.

A sudden thought occurred to her. She looked quickly at the haggard convict.

‘Mr. Bullivant!’

‘Yes?’

‘Did Mr. Bell wear spectacles?’

‘Why, yes!’

‘And a grey felt hat?’

‘Yes. But why?’

‘Nothing. I think I have seen him, though.’ Babs said thoughtfully, and she flung a half look towards the slit in the wall again.

But Grant Bullivant was paying no heed to that. His eyes were feverish now.

‘Take the papers,’ he said. He rammed them into Babs’s hands. ‘Give them to my sister. And thanks—thanks a thousand times for all you have done for me! I swear I will never forget it. But now go. There may be danger. And be careful—for goodness’ sake be careful! ‘Come again and tell me the news. I shall wait to hear from you.

Come at night, if you can. It is dangerous during the day. But now—'

He almost pushed them towards the door in his anxiety for them to be gone, and Babs & Co., sympathising, respecting his urgency, filed through the doorway. He touched Babs's arm as she passed him.

'Miss Redfern, whatever you do, see that my sister gets those papers safely!'

'I will!' Babs returned.

'Thank you!'

The door closed behind him. They tripped down the stone steps, through the secret door on to the landing. There, for a moment, they stood, eyeing one another.

'Nice chap,' Clara Trevlyn said. 'I'm sorry about this, Babs. But I'm glad he can prove his innocence.'

'Rather!'

'Still, it's not proved yet,' Janet Jordan said cautiously. 'I believe him. I believe in those proofs, but those proofs have themselves got to be proved before his innocence can be proclaimed, and meantime he's still a convict at large. But come on. And keep a lookout, Mabs. Ready, girls?'

'Rather!'

They tripped down the next flight of stairs, breathing relief to feel that the adventure, thus far, at least, had gone well. They had delivered the food, they had got the message for Miss Bullivant. Their little trip, in fact, seemed to promise the dawn of a new hope for the misjudged man in the cell-like room upstairs.

Now ahead of them gleamed the light, the fresh greenery of the grass, the waving boughs of the leaf-shedding trees. And then suddenly Babs, leading, stopped.

'Oh, good gracious!' she gasped.

'Why, what—'

But no need for more. They all remained rooted to the spot on which they stood, for in front of them, blocking the entrance and grimly and suspiciously determined, were two uniformed men.

They were warders.

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Nancy Bell scowled.

Nancy was wandering very disconsolately through Friardale Woods.

Her eyes smouldered with the hate she felt. She clenched her hands. So sure had Nancy been of getting something on Miss Bullivant—so sure of getting her completely within her power at last, of showing her up as the aider and abettor of an escaped convict that she had been filled with malicious delight.

But now she was chastened, chagrined, her mean heart filled with bitterness and with malice. If only she could prove something against the mistress she hated! If only—

'Phe-e-e-ee!'

Nancy stopped and started.

She blinked. Unconsciously her steps had taken her across the clearing again into the trees. She came to a halt now to find herself staring up at the half-ruined tower of Friardale Priory; the tower which had not been completed, facing the completed tower which, had Nancy only known it, housed the escaped brother of Miss Bullivant at this moment. Propped up against the side of the tower was a bicycle.

And then her eyes became incredulously wide as she saw a man beckoning to her from the entrance of the tower; a man in spectacles, wearing a grey felt hat. He had something in his hand.

‘Eddie!’ Nancy breathed in amazement.

‘Nancy—here!’ The sibilant whisper came across to her from the man. He beckoned her impatiently with his hand. ‘Quick, I want you!’

Wonderingly Nancy crossed towards him. Eddie, her elder brother. What was he doing here?

Was it in connection with Miss Bullivant’s brother?

Her eyes gleamed at that. A flush came into her cheeks. For now she remembered that her father had mentioned Grant Bullivant. Grant Bullivant had been sent to prison for forging her brother’s name on a cheque. And here was her brother.

‘Eddie!’ she said.

He looked at her queerly.

‘Come inside,’ he said. ‘We don’t want to be seen here. Nancy, listen. You’ve got to help me!’

‘Help you? But what—what are you doing here?’

‘Wait a minute. I’ll tell you. It’s about Grant Bullivant.’

‘Yes?’

‘He’s stolen some papers I want. He came to my office last night and took them. He didn’t know it, but I followed him here. He’s hiding in that tower!’

Nancy’s eyes fixed upon the tower, round with wonderment.

‘You know? You’re sure?’ she asked.

‘Yes. I’ve been watching him.’ He tapped the thing in his hand. ‘This is a periscope,’ he explained. ‘By sticking it up through a window in the tower here I’ve been able to see into the room he’s occupying. It’s a secret room of some kind. I’ve tried to find the entrance to it, but I’ve failed. Jiggered if I know how he’s got in there!’

‘Have you told the police?’ Nancy asked eagerly.

‘The what?’ He stared at her. ‘Of course I’ve not told the police!’

‘But you know he’s an escaped convict!’

‘Say, am I dumb?’ her brother asked peevishly. ‘I know. But the police have to be kept out of this—never mind why. I’ve my own reasons for not wanting Grant Bullivant to be captured—not yet, anyway. Once we’ve got those papers back, then I’ll have him nabbed soon enough.’

‘But what are the papers?’ Nancy asked.

‘No questions! I’ll tell you that later.’ Edward Bell frowned. ‘But they’re vital—urgent. They can—’ He paused. ‘But never mind. Look here, there are four girls at your school—one jolly pretty, with dark hair.’

‘Oh, you mean Barbara Redfern! But I don’t call her pretty,’ Nancy said resentfully.

‘That’s her. Another with a wild mop of hair—’

‘Sounds like Clara Trevlyn.’

‘Another with fair hair.’

‘Mabel Lynn!’

‘And another fair, sort of thoughtful-looking. Don’t know exactly how to describe her, but she was one of the bunch all right. But you know ’em, eh? Well, they were in that room with Grant Bullivant this afternoon.’

Nancy’s eyes gleamed. Babs, Mabs, Clara, Janet! The coterie could be none other. Besides, they had shown themselves very active in the Bull’s interest since this catastrophe overtook her.

‘Yes, I know them,’ she said darkly.

‘Bullivant’s given the papers to them. They’re in the tower now—or they were,’ he said. ‘Nancy, you’ve got to get hold of them. Get hold of them as quickly as you can, and bring them back here—to me! You understand?’ His face grew desperate all at

once. 'If you don't get them you might find me where Bullivant is at the moment!'

Nancy looked startled.

'You mean—'

'Never mind!'

'Edward, you—you don't—'

'Never mind! Hang it, can't you stop asking questions?' Edward Bell snorted. 'You want to help me, don't you? You want to get your own back on this Miss Bullivant? She robbed you of your Riviera trip, don't forget. And what a laugh she'll have on you if they put me where her brother is!'

Nancy gazed at him. She felt repelled all at once. She knew her brother—a rather reckless good-for-nothing. He gambled. Once or twice in the past there had been incidents which might have landed him in prison. So Edward had been making a fool of himself again.

'Edward, tell me!'

'Get those papers! Nancy, you must!' He spoke tensely. 'If you don't, I'm ruined—ruined! And perhaps you as well. You couldn't hold your head up at Cliff House again if I went to prison, could you? And it should be easy. You know the girls. They'll be leaving the tower any moment now. Go on!'

Nancy nodded. She gazed at her brother. Incapable of deep affection for anyone, Nancy had no particular love for Edward Bell; but what he said roused her.

She must get back those papers. For his sake—for the sake of her family. But more than anything, for the sake of herself!

What a laughing-stock she would be if it ever became known at Cliff House that her own brother bore the guilt for the crime which innocent Grant Bullivant, the brother of the mistress she was so set upon persecuting, was bearing now! What a laugh against her! What a storm!

Her cheeks burned with anticipation of her shame.

And, besides, she was still desperately determined to get even with Miss Bullivant.

'All right!' she gulped.

'Remember, I'll be waiting here,' her brother said. 'Get the papers, and we'll put Bullivant back in gaol!'

Nancy nodded at that. But she said no more. She gave one look towards her scapegrace brother, and hurried towards the Copse Tower.

Somehow she would get back those papers!

CHAPTER XIII

Not Like Nancy!

IN great dismay, Babs, Mabs, Clara, and Janet faced the two grim-faced warders. The taller of the two looked rather hardly at Babs.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but it's my duty to ask you some questions, young lady. I suppose you know that an escaped convict is suspected of hiding in these woods?'

Babs nodded. She had herself well in hand now.

'And if you don't mind my saying it, your behaviour is suspicious,' the warder went on. 'We saw you on the footpath a while ago. You were running then. We followed, you, and we saw you join your friends here. We saw you go into this tower. You had bags.'

'Oh, crumbs!' muttered Clara.

‘Where are the bags?’

‘We—we left them,’ Babs said.

‘Oh!’ The warder did not look convinced. ‘You know Grant Bullivant?’

‘Yes,’ Babs replied.

‘You are a friend of his, maybe?’

‘Well, not exactly.’

‘You’re not helping him, by any chance?’

Babs bit her lip.

‘Are you?’ the other repeated quickly.

‘Well, I shouldn’t tell you if I were, would I?’ Babs answered. ‘besides, I’m not bound to answer questions.’

‘Gee, the nerve of it!’ Janet Jordan muttered.

‘If you are aiding a prisoner to escape, it is my duty to warn you that you are committing an offence against the Law!’ the warder went on sternly. ‘I can’t demand that you should answer questions, but I can warn you that if you are helping Bullivant you are committing a punishable offence. What have you been in this tower for?’

The chums breathed hard. It seemed they were in a tight corner. But Babs never flinched. She eyed the man directly.

‘That’s my business,’ she said.

‘Oh!’ He nodded grimly. ‘It’s my business, too, as it happens. You took bags in there, we saw—bags which might have contained food, say. You haven’t brought the bags out again. Where are they?’

It seemed a facer for the chums. It seemed, in fact, that that was a question they could not answer. Babs groped desperately with the situation, racking her brain for some plausible excuse which would put these pursuers off the trail.

But for once her head seemed made of wood. Her brain refused to function. Short of telling a deliberate untruth, she could think of nothing.

‘Well, you see—’ she stammered.

‘Where are those bags?’ the warder insisted.

‘The bags— Oh Babs, here you are!’ another voice broke in, and they all turned to behold with amazement the figure of Nancy Bell—a Nancy who had been concealed in the bushes near by, listening to that conversation, and who, anxious to get on the right side of Babs & Co., now saw her opportunity.

‘Babs, I’ve taken the bags back!’ Nancy went on. ‘I caught them when you threw them out of the window, you know. But what’s this?’ she added in pretended astonishment, looking at the warders. ‘They’re not going to arrest you, are they?’

Babs stared. They all stared, hardly believing their eyes. Nancy here—telling lies in order to save them!

But the warders looked completely flabbergasted.

‘Ahem!’ one said. He turned upon Nancy. ‘You knew about the bags?’

‘Why, of course!’ Nancy replied at once, and then she laughed disarmingly. ‘My goodness, what’s all the fuss about?’ she added. ‘Can’t five girls picnic in the old tower if they want to? That’s what we’ve been doing—just picnicking. Isn’t it, Babs?’ But Babs did not reply—she couldn’t. She couldn’t add a lie to Nancy’s lie, although it must be admitted that even while she was feeling amazed at Nancy’s intervention, she was also grateful.

But the warders now were taking no notice of Babs. Their attention was fixed upon Nancy.

‘Picnic, eh?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why did they throw the bags out of the window?’

‘Because—because——’

Nancy just for a moment faltered, then her inventive powers came uppermost. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘It was a joke, you know. We knew you were following us, so— so— well, we thought we’d just give you something to think about. We knew if you saw us go in with the bags and come out without them that you’d be suspicious. Only a joke,’ she added.

The warders glanced at one another, looking sheepish. But Babs was still gazing at Nancy, hardly knowing what to make of her conduct, but feeling tolerably certain that Nancy had some reason for her apparent friendliness towards them. Babs knew Nancy.

‘Oh!’ one warder said flatly. Then he became grim. ‘Just fooling us, eh? Fooling the law? Well, that’s an offence!’

‘No, it isn’t,’ Nancy said. ‘We didn’t ask you to walk into the trap, did we? You just did. Besides, it was just a joke. You’re not going to report that you were tricked by a crowd of schoolgirls?’

The faces of the warders changed. No, they certainly were not going to admit that. To have done so would have held them up to the ridicule of their comrades.

It seemed that Nancy had scored. But the shorter of the two warders still looked a little unconvinced.

‘Well, we’ll see,’ he said. ‘I’m not altogether satisfied. Bill, you nip up and have a look round. See if you can spot anything. I’ll wait here until you come back, and keep an eye on these five jokers. I hope, for your sakes, it *is* a joke!’ he added grimly.

Bill nodded. He disappeared, while Nancy sidled up to Babs, winking a little. Again Babs glanced at her, still hardly knowing what to make of it all. And then, finding Nancy’s eyes upon the papers in her hand, she quickly rammed them into her tunic pocket.

Again Nancy’s eyes followed that movement, and just for a moment a crafty look overspread her rather thin features. It was there and gone in an instant. But Babs saw it.

And Babs was warned. From that movement she began to see other things.

The face at the window of the opposite tower—Nancy Bell’s brother, Edward Bell! And, if Grant Bullivant was to be believed, Nancy Bell’s brother was the guilty party. It flashed clear as daylight to Babs. Nancy had met her brother. Her brother had told her to get hold of those papers.

Her lips compressed tightly.

The warder who had searched the tower was coming back again now. In the momentary interest of his appearance, Babs slipped the papers to Mabs, giving her a look at the same time which said as plainly as anything. ‘Take care of these.’

Mabs did not understand, but she nodded, slipping the papers up the sleeve of her white blouse.

‘Nothing there,’ the warder announced.

They all breathed with relief.

‘Nothing at all?’ the other warder asked.

‘Nerts!’

He looked disappointed; but he brightened the next moment when Babs slipped half-a-crown into his hand.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

The warder grinned.

‘Thanks, missy, that’s all right,’ he said. ‘Guess you girls must have your little bit o’

fun; but don't do it again,' he added admonishingly, and winked at his partner. 'And keep away from these woods until we get that scoundrel back. Understand?'

'Yes, thank you,' Babs said meekly. 'Please, can we go now?'

'Be off with you!' the warder laughed, and waved them on. He turned to his companion. 'Good joke, Bert. Nice kids, all the same. Well, we was boys ourselves once, wasn't we, and gals will be gals!'

Which was rather a remote connection in sentiment, but which Bert seemed to understand perfectly. He grinned, winked, and then, muttering something to his companion, they sauntered off.

But in the momentary distraction which that incident had created, Babs had taken the opportunity of quickly transferring some notes on botany from one blazer pocket to the pocket which had previously held Grant Bullivant's papers.

Half a mile farther on Nancy Bell stopped.

'Goodness!' she cried. 'I've forgotten something. You go on without me. I shan't be long.'

'O.K.,' Clara said, and grinned.

But Babs, feeling in her pocket, found it empty, and as she watched the departing form of Nancy she saw something white and fluttering in her hand. Nancy had stolen what she believed to be Grant Bullivant's papers!

At the same moment Mabs uttered an exclamation.

'Babs, look! The Bull!'

For there was Miss Bullivant, strolling thoughtfully along by the trees near the road that led to Courtfield. Babs's eyes lit up.

'Mabs, the papers! You've got them?'

'Yes.'

'Then come on. Let's give them to her now!'

She headed the sprint towards the maths mistress, shouting and waving to Miss Bullivant as she did so.

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In great excitement Nancy raced back to the half-ruined tower, the papers in her hand. She had seen Miss Bullivant before the others, and, not wishing to meet that formidable mistress with those papers in her possession, she had hastily invented her excuse to get away. She was flushed with triumph now. Her face was one big grin. Edward Bell, looking up from the bicycle, whose tyre he was examining, turned swiftly.

'Nancy, you've got them?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, good! Give them to me!'

He almost snatched the papers as Nancy handed them to him. His hands trembled as he unfolded them. Then he stared.

'These aren't the papers!'

'What?'

'Look!'

Nancy took them. She looked almost dazed as she recognised them 'Notes on Stamen,' she read, and turned over to discover further notes on Stamen. In a flash the truth dawned upon Nancy. Her jaw dropped.

'Oh, goodness! Eddie, they've fooled me!'

'What?'

‘I saw the papers. I sneaked them from Babs’s pocket—at least, I thought I’d sneaked them, but—’ And Nancy stared again at the botany notes. ‘It’s that cat Babs!’ she flamed suddenly. ‘She must have seen me. She played this trick on me, and—Oh, crumbs!’

Her brother stared at her.

‘What’s up? Of course, you would mess things up!’ he said bitterly.

‘But the Bull—Miss Bullivant!’

‘Well, what about her?’

‘She’s in the woods! They’ll have seen her!’ Nancy panted.

‘Eddie, they’ll give her those papers!’

The man’s face turned white.

‘Then I’m sunk!’ he said. ‘Great James! Grant Bullivant gave those kids the papers to give to his sister. She’ll take them to the police!’ His eyes became round. ‘Nancy, you fool—you fool!’

Nancy’s face was the picture of dismay.

‘Well, how was I to know?’

‘Bah!’ He snarled savagely. ‘You idiot! Don’t you realise what this may mean? Prison—prison for me! I must get those papers back—I must! You idiotic bungler! You—you——Where did you see Miss Bullivant?’

‘On the Courtfield road.’

‘Hang you!’ he gritted, and, with a jump mounted his bicycle. Nancy stared after him.

‘Eddie! Eddie, where are you going?’

‘I’m going,’ he said between his teeth, ‘to undo the mess you’ve done! I’m going to get those papers back! Wait here, you bungler!’

And with reckless disregard for bumps and tyres he pedalled away through the trees.

CHAPTER XIV

A Real Tragedy

‘BUT, my girls—my girls!’ Miss Bullivant said tremblingly, ‘these papers will prove Grant’s innocence. They are the proofs—the proofs!’ And her eyes shone, such a look of happiness radiated her face that Babs felt all the trouble had been well worth the while. ‘Grant told you to give me those—to take them to a solicitor? Yes, yes! The solicitor in Courtfield!’

And Miss Bullivant gulped so feelingly that the apple in her throat bobbed obviously and fascinatingly up and down.

‘Please,’ she said flusteredly, ‘get back to school now. I must hurry—I must! I will go along at once! Not a moment longer than is necessary shall Grant be under this stigma! Barbara, I will see you when I come back. My girls. My dear, dear girls!’

And Miss Bullivant, like an enormous bird, fluttered about them, so utterly overcome with delight that she hardly knew what she was saying or

what she was doing.



'Look! Miss Bullivant's being attacked!'

The four chums smiled at one another.

Clara Trevlyn shook her head. In the old days Clara and the Bull had always been the fiercest of enemies. But this calamity had brought them all very much nearer to each other, and Clara now was as sorry as the rest for the tribulations of the mistress who heretofore she had detested.

She was genuinely glad to have been of such service to Miss Bullivant. She was sincerely happy that she and her friends had been the cause of helping an innocent man to prove his innocence. She laughed.

'Giddy old Bull! Like an old hen, isn't she?'

They all laughed, glad as Clara, as Miss Bullivant, almost hopping in her excitement, stalked quickly down the road that led to Courtfield. But Babs's eyes shone with misty tenderness, and Mabs, by her side, squeezed her arm affectionately. It had all been due to Babs.

'Good work!' she muttered.

Babs laughed.

'Well, if it hadn't been for you, you know,' went on Mabs. 'But what now? Back to school?'

The Bull had disappeared now, almost running as she turned the bend in the road. They paused a moment, staring after her, and then, hearing a sudden sound from the left, turned.

A cyclist, hatless, was tearing through the trees on to the road.

'What the dickens—' Babs muttered.

'Gentleman in a hurry!' Clara grinned. 'My hat! I wouldn't give much for that grid when he's finished with it!'

They watched. They had only a side view of the cyclist, and not a very good one at that since the trees interrupted their vision. He was certainly pelting, and certainly was not studying the machine he rode.

Bump, bump! Up and down, up and down looking every moment as though he would collapse with the cycle on top of him.

'Going on to the road,' Janet Jordan said.

They stared. The cyclist, crashing through the thorny bracken, had turned on to the road now. They had a back view of him as he scorched on, sending up a cloud of dust behind him.

They saw him turn the bend, around which Miss Bullivant had disappeared, at a reckless pace, and they stared at one another in surprise. Then from in front of them a

sudden crash, an agonised shout.

'Help! Help! Let me go, you ruffian! Help!'

Babs's heart leapt.

'The Bull!' she exclaimed. 'My goodness, what has happened now? Come on!'

And, suddenly concerned, she leapt forward. What had happened to Miss Bullivant?

Clara, Janet and Mabs started after her. Again, from in front of them, came the cry:

'Let go! No, you shan't take them! They're mine—mine, I tell you!'

'Come on!' Babs gritted.

Arms to her side, she spurred on. Miss Bullivant was in trouble, was in danger. She reached the bend a good half a dozen yards ahead of her chums. Like a small cyclone she whizzed round it. Then she gasped and almost stopped at the sight which met her gaze.

'Miss Bullivant!' she exclaimed.

For there was Miss Bullivant. She was half-kneeling half-lying in the middle of the road. She had one arm extended, and at the fist of that arm the cyclist was tugging desperately, trying to wrench away the papers it contained. His machine lay on its side, discarded in the middle of the road.

Miss Bullivant turned. She saw Babs.

'Barbara!' she gasped.

'Coming!' Babs shouted. 'Rescue, Cliff House! You scoundrel, let go!'

The cyclist turned. For a moment Babs saw his face—white, grim, hunted. Then Clara, Janet, and Mabs came with a rush round the corner and joined their leader. An exclamation left the cyclist's lips, an expression of baffled rage showed in his face. Quite suddenly he abandoned his persecution of the Form- mistress and leapt towards his machine. Miss Bullivant dragged herself across the road, then collapsed with a groan of pain.

'Stop, stop!' shouted Babs.

But the cyclist paid no heed. Like a flash he bolted for his machine. They saw him pick it up and run it down the road, and then, with a flying leap, he was astride it, pedalling off as hard as he could go.

It was obviously impossible to catch up with him at that distance, and Miss Bullivant, lying back now, was very much in need of attention. Babs sprang to her side.

'Miss Bullivant!' she gasped.

The mistress's eyes flickered. She looked up at Babs, her face twisted with pain.

Feebly she shook the papers in her hand.

'I—I kept them, Barbara,' she muttered weakly. 'He ran me down and tried to wrest the papers from me. But I—I saved them!'

'The awful rascal!' Clara Trevlyn gasped.

'Miss Bullivant, are you hurt?'

'My—my leg!' The mistress bit back the exclamation of pain. 'Barbara—'

'Mabs, hold her!' Babs said quickly. 'I'll have a look at the leg. Stop the first car that comes along, Janet.'

She surrendered Miss Bullivant to Mabs, who held up the mistress's head. Quickly Babs examined the leg, running her fingers along the bone. Then she bit her lip. She looked up.

'Babs, is it serious?' Clara Trevlyn whispered.

'Leg broken,' Babs announced. 'She had a nasty tumble.'

At that moment there came a cry from Janet, farther up the road: 'Car coming!'

'Stop it!' Babs ordered.

The car glided up. It was a small Austin. They saw Janet stop it, saw her talking to the

man at the wheel, who nodded. The car reversed, swinging back down the road it had travelled. Janet dashed up to them.

'Man's gone for the ambulance,' she announced. 'Be back in a few minutes. My goodness, Babs, look! Miss Bullivant has fainted!'

That was true. And perhaps, in the circumstances, it was the best thing which could have happened. Miss Bullivant's head had fallen backwards, the harsh lines in her face had softened. Her eyes were closed, but the lids fluttered still. She looked very pitiful, very helpless—somehow very lonely and forlorn.

Babs felt a little lump in her throat.

But there was nothing they could do. Very gently Babs unclenched the fist of the mistress. The papers were still there, clenched firmly, a little torn round the edges, dusty and grimed from their contact with the road. Babs took them, smoothed them out.

'I'll keep these,' she said.

They stood, a silent, compassionate group, until the ambulance arrived. It came presently, accompanied by the small car which had gone for assistance. Very gently and very carefully Miss Bullivant, still unconscious, was put upon a stretcher and hoisted into the interior of the ambulance.

At an invitation from the ambulance driver the four girls climbed in after her, and sat on the seat facing the helpless mistress, Babs nearest her head. A shout of thanks to the driver of the Austin, a wave of the hand, and the ambulance glided into motion. Very faintly and flutteringly Miss Bullivant's eyes opened. She stared at the ceiling, at Babs, and then she seemed to understand. With a frightened gasp she looked at her empty hand.

'Barbara, the papers—'

Babs leant forward.

'Miss Bullivant, I've got them!'

Miss Bullivant's face lighted up.

'Barbara, you do believe that he is innocent?'

'Yes.'

'And—and you know who is guilty?'

Babs recalled the face of the cyclist. Without glasses, but she knew. Nancy Bell's brother!

'Yes,' she said.

'And—and—' Miss Bullivant's eyes fluttered again. A stifled groan left her lips. For a moment she sank back, her face dreadfully white. Then suddenly, almost intensely, she raised herself.

'Barbara! All of you! I must leave it to you!' she said. 'Please—please help me! I am helpless now. Somebody must carry on. Somebody must help Grant. You have been so kind—such true friends. I—I hate to ask you really, but—oh, Barbara, you will help?'

'We will!' Babs exclaimed, and her chums nodded. 'Rest now, Miss Bullivant, don't worry any more. We'll see the whole thing through for you. We'll never rest, any of us, until your brother's name is cleared, Miss Bullivant.'

But Miss Bullivant, gasping feebly, had fainted again. But there was a smile upon her face this time. She seemed happy at last. And Babs, looking at her three chums, nodded. She had made a promise. She meant to keep it—for Miss Bullivant's sake. But she had little guessed, then, what difficulties she would be called upon to surmount; what a desperate fight she was from that moment embarking upon. But Babs had given her word, and Babs meant to keep that word.

CHAPTER XV

Only Babs Can Save Her

TAP!

Rather hesitantly Barbara Redfern knocked upon the door of the sanatorium. Inside there was a step. The kindly, motherly face of Mrs. Thwarters, the matron, peered out at her. She smiled.

'Oh, Barbara, I'm glad you have come! Step inside, please—'

'Thank you.' Barbara stepped inside, finding herself in the hall which divided the doctor's consulting-room from the waiting-room. A pleasant smell of disinfectant pervaded it, and she caught a glimpse of the white beds.

'Matron?' she asked anxiously. 'Miss Bullivant sent for me. Is she worse?'

The matron looked serious.

'I am afraid she is,' she replied.

'Oh! Her leg?'

'No. The leg's mending, I am glad to say. It's something else— a sort of feverish delirium. She keeps rambling, saying things. She won't eat, nor drink, and only now and again does she appear to be properly conscious. But here's the doctor,' she added with relief as Dr. Longmore, the medico in attendance, white-over-alled and worried, stepped from behind the screen that separated the hall from the ward.

His face lit up as he saw the Fourth-former. He stepped forward eagerly.

'Ah, Barbara!' He looked at her. 'I am glad you have come,' he said. 'You may be able to help me! Miss Bullivant is asking for you. She is feverish and delirious, but she keeps mentioning your name. I am utterly at a loss to diagnose her trouble. It seems,' he added, 'mental rather than physical——'

Babs looked at him as he paused.

'She is in a very serious condition, Barbara—a very serious condition.' His face became even graver. 'She has something on her mind—some fear which is worrying her. And I feel that until we can expel that fear, ordinary treatment will prove ineffective. She seems to be wanting something.' His face furrowed. 'Barbara, you seem to have shared her confidence. What is it that she wants so badly?'

Babs shook her head.

'I'm afraid I can't tell you,' she replied.

'She keeps saying "Grant, grant—" What is it she wants granting? By whom? I ask her, but she pushes me away—'

Babs started. Grant— The doctor was mistaken there, of course. He did not realise that Grant was the name of Miss Bullivant's brother—that in mentioning it, Miss Bullivant was asking for her brother.

She explained that—also as many of the circumstances as she knew were already public. The doctor's eyes lit up.

'Ah, now I understand,' he said. 'Forgive me! I have been so busy lately that I have not read the papers. But I have heard of the escaped convict. And he is the poor woman's brother, you say?'

'Yes,' Babs said.

'H'm!' he pulled down his upper lip. He glanced at her with peculiar shrewdness.

'Barbara, you know a great deal more about this than is generally known?' he asked.

Barbara flushed.

'Ye-es,' she admitted.

He looked at her again thoughtfully. Then he shrugged. 'Thank you, I will remember that,' he replied. 'But what you have told me has helped—yes, very considerably—I understand a great deal better now. But come this way. I will take you to Miss Bullivant,'

He nodded towards the matron to remain below, and with Barbara at his heels, led the way into the sanatorium—a wide, pleasantly-situated room, flanked on each side by white-covered beds.

Those beds were empty except for one in which a tired-faced woman, her grey hair tumbling upon her pillow, rested. She turned a pair of haggard eyes in Babs's direction.

'Barbara,' she muttered.

Babs stood still; her tender heart seemed to leap and then stop. Poor Miss Bullivant! How wan, how white, how dreadfully ill she looked as she lay there.

Thin Miss Bullivant had always been, but now she seemed to have become emaciated. Great staring eyes shone with unnatural brightness from her marble-like cheeks, from which the bones protruded alarmingly.

Gone that characteristic harshness, that fierceness of expression for which she had always been noted. She looked now just what she was—a very pitiful, frightfully helpless, utterly weak and worn-out old lady.

A lump came into Babs's throat at sight of her.

'Miss Bullivant,' she choked.

'Barbara!' The thin blue lips trembled. One weak, shaking hand came across the counterpane to touch the girl's fingers in welcome.

'Barbara,' she said weakly and quaveringly. 'You've come—'

'Yes, Miss Bullivant, I've come,' Babs said softly.

'Have you brought him?'

'Him?' Babs started. Then she bit her lip. She noticed the peculiar glassy look that had come into the mistress's eyes suddenly. She knew then that she referred to Grant Bullivant. 'No, not yet,' she muttered.

'They have not taken him back to prison, Barbara?' -

'No,' Babs choked.

'You will look after him?' Miss Bullivant asked thinly. 'You will see that he comes to no harm, Barbara. He is all I have now,' she added with a sigh. 'And I love him so, Barbara.'

'Yes, Miss Bullivant,' Babs choked.

'You must bring him. You must tell him that Evelyn wants him,' Miss Bullivant said childishly. 'You must give him back that big football I gave him on his fourteenth birthday. Grant, do you remember it?' she added, speaking now, not to Barbara, but to some misty shadow conjured up by her delirium. 'It was such a big ball, wasn't it? And you kicked it right through my window. Dear boy. I was annoyed then, but I forgave you, didn't I? Even though I would not buy you another ball when you burst it.' The pale lips smiled. The mistress turned her head again. Her eyes, bigger than Babs had ever seen them, looked at her fixedly for a moment, and then suddenly came back, conscious of her surroundings. 'Barbara, you will see Grant?' she asked.

'Yes, yes, Miss Bullivant!'

'And you will bring him to me,' Miss Bullivant asked fitfully. 'Barbara, you must! Tell him that I need him. Tell him that I must see him. I—I think I am dying, Barbara, but I—must see Grant first. Tell him that I want to see him!'

'Yes,' almost sobbed Barbara.

'You promise?'

‘Yes.’

‘And you will save him from prison?’

‘Yes, Miss Bullivant.’

‘Thank you! You are a good girl, Barbara. I am glad now we understand one another. It is dreadful, sometimes, when I think back, how silly I have been. I am sorry! If only I could have it all over again. But now it is too late, Barbara. You will remember me kindly when—’

‘Oh, Miss Bullivant—don’t—don’t!’ Babs choked.

And she dropped her head on the sheet by Miss Bullivant’s side.

‘Dear girl,’ the mistress said absently and tenderly stroked Babs’s glossy brown curls.

‘Dear, dear girl!’

And then she sighed, and Babs, looking at her, felt her heart pulse wildly and alarmingly, for Miss Bullivant, dreadfully white, had fallen back upon the pillows.

‘Thank you! Hush!’ Babs felt the doctor tug at her sleeve. ‘She has fainted again,’ he explained. ‘Any little excitement causes her to go off like that. Come back with me into the consulting-room. Barbara, she is dreadfully ill.’

Babs nodded. She could not trust herself to speak. She felt suddenly that she loved Miss Bullivant as she must always love anyone so pitifully weak.

Miss Bullivant—dying! She caught in her breath. No! No! No! It struck her all at once what sort of place Cliff House would be without Miss Bullivant—even the harsh, domineering, often unjust Miss Bullivant they had known in the past! What a strange place Cliff House would have been without her!

‘She mustn’t die!’ she muttered. ‘She mustn’t! Doctor, she won’t die?’ she added, as they reached the consulting-room.

He shook his head rather worriedly.

‘I don’t know,’ he replied sombrely, and stood for a moment uncertainly thoughtful.

Then he looked full at Barbara. ‘She is in a very critical condition,’ he observed.

‘Yes.’ Babs nodded.

‘Her mind is restless, feverish. Her every thought seems concentrated upon this brother of hers. She fears for him; she is afraid. Barbara, if ever he should go back to prison it would kill her.’

‘He shan’t!’ Barbara vowed grimly.

‘On the other hand, she is just—wasting away.’ He made a gesture of hopelessness with his hands. ‘I am convinced now, Barbara, that nothing I can do can save her. It is this terrible worrying that makes her so ill. Once that trouble is removed there is hope—great hope. And you’—he stabbed a finger at her. ‘You are the only one who can save her, Barbara.’

Babs jumped.

‘I?’

‘Yes.’

‘But how?’

‘By bringing her brother, Grant Bullivant, to the school to see her,’ the doctor replied.

CHAPTER XVI

Piper’s Bargain!

‘IT’S impossible!’ Clara Trevlyn declared.

‘Just potty!’ Janet Jordan affirmed.

‘Why, as soon as ever he was seen he would be arrested!’ Mabel Lynn exclaimed. ‘I know.’ Babs gazed at her chums sombrely. ‘But we’ve got to do it somehow. We’ve got to, I tell you! We’ve got to think! We’ve got to find some way out. Miss Bullivant’s life depends upon it. The doctor says that unless she sees her brother—unless she is convinced he is safe and sound—she will just go on wasting away. He gives her less than a week if she remains in her present state. Oh, there must be some way out! There must!’

But the coterie assembled after dinner in Study No. 4, that famous apartment in the Fourth Form corridor which housed Babs, Mabs, and Bessie Bunter, did not look convinced.

Their private thoughts, indeed, were that Babs was proposing an impossible venture. To bring Grant Bullivant to the school! Grant Bullivant, an escaped convict who was in hiding, whose description was circulated all over the country, for whom the police were ceaselessly searching. It was mad!

Even if they got him as far as Cliff House School there would be the difficulty of smuggling him in. And that difficulty, considering there were upwards of two hundred other people in the school, would be considerable.

‘Well, I’ve promised,’ Babs said. ‘I had to tell the doctor in confidence that we know where Grant Bullivant was. I’ve told him we’ll try to get him here by to-morrow night. So we’ve just got to do it. If we don’t—’ She drew a deep breath. ‘Well, we shall just have failed Miss Bullivant.’

They pulled faces at that. But an air of gravity sat upon them. Face to face with fact like that, it became obvious that they must attempt something, however desperate the venture. Miss Bullivant’s life was at stake. Without her brother Miss Bullivant would die!

‘Think!’ Babs cried distractedly. ‘Think—my goodness! — we’re not going to be stumped! Got it!’ she exclaimed suddenly.

‘Got what?’

‘The idea.’

Her chums stared at her. Babs’s eyes had suddenly lit up. Her cheeks, sun-burned still from her glorious summer holiday in Hollywood, had grown flushed with excitement. Mabs stared.

‘You mean—’

‘I mean you can do it!’ Babs whispered. ‘You can! Mabs, you’re an expert when it comes to make-up. You can make-up Grant Bullivant to look like an old man. Beard and moustache— glasses. Give him a stick. Tell him to limp—’

‘Oh, goodness!’

‘Mabs, you could do it?’

‘Yes, of course!’

‘Well, then, there’s the solution,’ Babs laughed relievedly. ‘We’ll do it! Look here, we’re going to Courtfield after lessons to see this solicitor about these papers. We can call upon Grant Bullivant in Friardale Priory, coming back. We’ll tell him about things. He’ll be prepared then for what comes, and to-morrow we’ll creep out and disguise him and bring him back to the school. Nobody will know; I’ll pretend he’s an old friend of mine, or something.’

‘By Jove! It’s an idea,’ Janet Jordan said.

‘Rather!’ Clara supported.

‘But—’ Mabs frowned. Then she looked at her chums. ‘Hold on! What about clothes?’ she asked. ‘Grant Bullivant can’t come to the school looking like a scarecrow, as he does at present.’

Smiles died. They looked at one another again. That was a dampening consideration, certainly. Clothes were a problem.

The clothes which the hidden convict had at the moment had been procured goodness knows where by his loyal sister, and were, as Mabs said, little better than a scarecrow's. The very raggedness and shabbiness of them would make Grant Bullivant conspicuous.

But Babs was thinking hard. Not Babs to be baulked by a problem of that sort. She laughed.

'Piper!' she exclaimed.

'What?'

'Piper, the school porter. I'll bet Piper has a suit of clothes knocking around somewhere. We'll hire them, or borrow them, or if necessary buy them. Piper's clothes would fit Grant Bullivant at a pinch. Grant is younger, but he could get into them. Come on—let's go and see Piper now. We've just time before lessons.'

'Good egg!' Clara Trevlyn voted with satisfaction.

They unlocked the door into which Babs had slipped the key as a matter of precaution whilst the conference was going on. But now, alert, alive, filled with hope once more, they flooded out into the corridor in a body.

Down the stairs they went, perhaps something of the pent-up excitement they felt, showing in their faces. One or two glances followed them.

'Hallo! What's the matter with Babs and Co.?' June Merrett murmured.

'In a hurry about something, aren't they?' Jean Cartwright asked.

But Babs & Co. were unconscious of those looks. They passed on by.

At the door, however, a glowering figure was standing on the top step. She was staring moodily and savagely across the quadrangle, and her lower lip was projected in a pout of bad temper.

Nancy Bell, indeed, was feeling at war with the world. She hated Miss Marrapet now almost as much as she hated the stricken Miss Bullivant. Things had gone again very badly that morning, and she was nervous and anxious as to what had happened between Babs and Miss Bullivant.

She looked round now as the four chums came out, her crafty eyes narrowing a little. She saw their eagerness, their excitement, and guessed immediately that something was afoot.

She threw them a glance.

'Where to-day? What's the hurry?' she called out. 'Can anybody come?'

'No,' Clara said shortly, and the four sped on.

Nancy bit her lip. But she followed the party with her eyes as they tripped across the quadrangle and down the wide drive. Something was afoot, she guessed, and seeing that Babs had seen Miss Bullivant, Nancy concluded that it must be something to do with that lady.

It was up to her to find out, anyway, she felt. Anything which Babs did these days was of interest to Nancy, for Babs had the papers which would prove her own brother's guilt. Nancy's eyes glittered as that thought crossed her mind. If she could get hold of those papers!

If!

Then—

Then she could, without hesitation, give Grant Bullivant away.

She knew where he was hiding. But it would not be safe while those proofs were in Babs's hands, for those proofs in the right hands might prove her own brother's guilt, and what a sorry fool she would look then, having connived at the capture of the man

who had borne the brunt for Edward Bell.

She might be accused of all sorts of things—of conspiring to defeat the ends of justice; she would certainly be shown up for the mean, malicious and spiteful-minded girl she was at heart. No! First get the proofs! Then she would be safe, but until then—

She climbed down the steps, strolling on across the quad. Her eyes never left Babs & Co., and observed now with a thrill of interest and curiosity that they were knocking at the door of the lodge belonging to Piper, the porter.

She saw the door open, saw Piper's curious face regarding the girls, then they all went in.

Piper! What could Babs & Co. require with the school porter? Nancy quickened her steps.

But inside the lodge Babs & Co. were facing Piper. Piper regarded them curiously.

'Which it is very nice of you to call on me, young ladies.'

'Yes, isn't it?' Clara said. 'I mean, of course, it's very nice of you to ask us in, Piper. But the fact of the matter is—'

'Well, you see, we want some clothes, Piper,' Babs said.

'Clothes?' Piper stared.

'And we thought perhaps you might have a spare suit,' Mabel Lynn put in.

'Yes, a spare one,' Janet Jordan supplemented. 'An old one, you know.'

Piper scratched his head.

'A spare suit,' he repeated. 'You mean coat, trousers, and so on?'

'Yes, Piper.'

'Of course we'll pay for them.'

'But why?' Piper stared amazed. 'Surely you ain't going to dress up?'

'Ahem, no—well, nun-not exactly,' Babs said. 'You see, we want it for a very special reason. You know Mabs is president of the Dramatic Society—'

Enlightenment came upon Piper. His face cleared.

'Why, I sees,' he said ponderously. 'Oh, hum, yes—play— acting, eh? Old clothes—that's what you mean.'

That was precisely what they didn't mean, but they smiled and beamed, and Piper, proud of his detective ability in being able to solve the problem, expanded. He chuckled.

'Which I have,' he said, and their hearts gladdened. 'It's an old suit,' he explained, 'but it is still good—not the sort of thing men wear to-day, of course, to tell you the truth,' he added confidently. 'I once nearly almost got married in it, and I bought this suit for the wedding. I ain't never worn it except to try it on in the tailor's shop. It's a good suit—cost me thirty-five shillings pre war. Sort of sentimental value, if you understand?'

The girls grinned. The discovery of a secret romance in Piper's life would have been intriguing and entrancing had their own mission been less urgent.

'But, bless you, I don't want it,' Piper said—'not now. Them days is gone. Mind you, I might get married yet,' he added warningly. 'I may be getting on, but I've still got looks, and Mrs. Moggins—her who keeps the pie-shop in Courtfield—was saying to me only the other day— But wait a minute and you can see it,' Piper added. 'Which you can have it if it's any good, Miss Redfern. There ain't many of these girls I'd trust with that suit, but you—well, bless you!' Piper said benignly.

The chums chuckled. Piper dodged through the door into his bedroom. They heard him pulling out drawers and pushing them in again. An odour of moth-balls came to them. Then Piper emerged again carefully carrying in his arms a grey tweed suit.

The moth-ball odour became terrific.

'Oh, ahem!' coughed Clara.

'Which this is it,' Piper said. 'Good suit, ain't it? Ahem! Groo! 'Scuse me, young ladies, but I had to put in moth-balls, you know. Clothes won't keep these days with all these insects buzzing about, and I've an overcoat—one that was fair eaten away by the moths. Now—' He shook out the coat.

It was very decidedly old-fashioned but new-looking—a fascinating row of buttons running down its centre, its revers rather high, and body rather long.

'That's the coat,' he informed them unnecessarily. 'Nice, ain't it?'

'Splendid,' Babs said.

'Them is the trousers,' Piper added, and shook them out, a cloud of moth-ball dust floating in the air. 'Which they're smart. Good as new—in fact, they are new—a bit old, of course. Why, I had this suit afore you gals was born—afore you was born!' Piper repeated impressively. 'And look at it now.'

Eyes looked at it. Clara coughed.

'Ahem! Just the moth-balls, you know, Piper!'

'It's awfully smart,' Babs murmured politely.

'Ain't it? But wait a minute.' And Piper dived back to return with a pair of patent-leather boots. 'Here's the boots I got to go with it,' he said. 'Fifteen bob, they cost me—fifteen bob. Ain't they just beautiful? Elastic sides, and everything. See?'

'Oh, my hat!'

'Eh, hat?' Piper stared. 'Well, I did 'ave an 'at,' he said. 'But I wore it out. It was a straw thing they call boaters these days. But I've got an old hat.'

'That will do,' Babs said.

'Well, that fixes it,' Piper said. 'Well, here you are—keep it, Miss Redfern. I'll give it to you,' he added, with reckless generosity. 'As a matter of fact, I've been wondering what to do with it. I don't get much chance to wear fine clothes these days, you know. I'm always in this here uniform. But I've got another suit—a real, brand-new one, right up to date, which I bought six years ago—'

'But can't we buy these,' Babs asked, 'or pay you for them?'

'Well—' Piper hesitated. 'Say a half-a-crown,' he said hopefully. 'Or, if that's too much, two shillings.'

'Say five,' Babs corrected, and extracted two half-crowns from her purse.

'Five!' Piper's eyes glistened. 'Which is very generous of you, Miss Redfern.'

'Not at all. It's worth it,' Babs said. 'Well, do it up in a piece of paper, if you don't mind, Piper. Here's the five shillings,' she added. 'Now, if you'll get the paper—'

Piper, in great elation, bustled off again. The chums exchanged glances and grinned delightedly at each other.

'Done it,' Babs said. 'That's just the suit an old man might wear, Mabs. Now we'll get it back to school and pack it. We'll take it with us when we go to the solicitor in Courtfield this afternoon, and to-morrow—'

'To-morrow!' Mabs breathed.

Her eyes danced; it seemed that Fate, for once, was smiling on their plans.

But they did not see Nancy Bell, who, outside, had been standing at the open window. They did not see her as she sneaked away, a look of quiet cunning and satisfaction on her face. But Nancy grinned.

'So that's the game, is it?' she said. 'Disguise. And they're taking it to Grant Bullivant this afternoon—when they go to see the Courtfield solicitor!' She looked apprehensive at that. Then her face lightened. 'Well, you'll just have to go, too, Nancy!' she said. 'Somehow you've got to prevent those proofs getting into the

solicitor's hands. If you don't, it will be ruin for brother Edward and disgrace for you.'

And Nancy, frowning, scuttled away.

CHAPTER XVII

The Listener!

AFTERNOON lessons had drawn to a tedious end, and Babs, Clara, Janet, and Mabs, keyed up now with expectation, repaired to the cycle sheds, Piper's suit, safe in an attaché-case, carried in one hand, to be strapped upon the carrier of one of their cycles.

'Here we are,' Babs said, as they reached the sheds.

She was trembling a little. She felt anxious. For this trip was one which might have so many and such far-reaching results.

The proofs she had might not completely satisfy the police, but in the hands of Mr. Gleethorpe, the solicitor of Courtfield, to whom she had been instructed to deliver them, they would form a basis for reopening the case on behalf of Grant Bullivant, and very possibly would succeed in testifying much that might help prove that injured man's innocence; for Mr. Gleethorpe had a reputation in cases of this sort, and if anybody could prove Grant Bullivant guiltless it was he.

But while the case was being prepared, Grant Bullivant, naturally, was still a hunted man. They had to be careful there. They had to go with caution.

The case would take weeks perhaps, to come on, and during those weeks Miss Bullivant, deprived of her brother's company, might pine away altogether. So it was a mission which, if fraught with peril, had enormous consequences hanging upon it.

They went into the shed, wheeling out their machines, and watched—although they did not know it—by Nancy Bell, in hiding at the back of the small greenhouse belonging to Piper's lodge.

Babs strapped the case on her cycle.

'Ready?'

'Rather! Got the papers, Babs?'

'Yes, in my pocket.'

'Good egg! Be careful with them, for goodness' sake! Let's go.'

They wheeled their machines on to the track heading towards the gates. From farther up the drive a sudden voice assailed their ears. A fat, waddling figure, arms waving frantically, ran towards them.

'Babs! I sus-say, Babs, wait for me!'

'Oh, crumbs! Bessie!'

'Take no notice!'

They quickened their steps. Bessie yelled frantically.

'Babs—Babs! Babs, dud-dear! I say, you know, wait for me! If you're going to have a secret feed—'

But Babs & Co. affected to turn a deaf ear to the fat one's plaint. Bessie they loved. Bessie they took with them practically wherever they went. But this, decidedly, was no mission which would be improved by fat, loquacious Bessie's company. They walked quickly out into the road, mounted their machines hastily, and disappeared.

Bessie, reaching the gates, panted and glared.

'Mean things!' she muttered.

Her eyes gleamed behind her thick, round spectacles. She stood in the gateway, glowering at the backs of the four disappearing cyclists. Then she shook her fat fist. 'The—the meanies!' she said.

Bessie pouted. There could be but one explanation for the sudden disappearance of Babs & Co.—and that was a secret feed. Any mysteriousness on the part of her chums Bessie always attributed to the desire for a secret feed.

'Go without me, would they?' she muttered. 'Sneak off and scoff the feed on their own! But they jolly well shan't—they jolly shell wan't! I mum—mean—well shan't!' Her eyes gleamed with determination. Not, if she knew it, was Bessie going to be left out of a feed. Her eyes sought out the cycle shed, and, making up her mind, she ambled across to it. Then she stood in the doorway and blinked.

'Oh, crumbs!' she muttered.

She had forgotten that her cycle had a puncture. She had forgotten that it was in great need of repair. But she remembered it now as it met her gaze—a forlorn-looking object, one tyre completely flat, the other considerably deflated, the handlebars rather patchy with rust in places, the saddle awry. Not a machine, certainly, with which to chase expert cyclists like Babs & Co.

Bessie's face fell.

'Oh, crumbs!' she muttered. 'Is—is that my bike?'

She knew it was. But Bessie had that unfortunate habit of being able to bluff herself when occasion required. It was no hard matter for Bessie to close her eyes to the dilapidation of that machine, to put out of her mind the fact that it belonged to Bessie Bunter, and quest for another.

Her eyes ran over the fifty or more bicycles which still remained in the shed, and her eyes caught sight of a shining green one, very brightly chromium plated, the enamel new, the tyres hard.

'Ripping bike!' Bessie murmured. 'Ahem! That's just like the one I was going to get. As—as a matter of fact, it is the one. I saw that in Courtfield, and I was going to buy it. So really it belongs to me, doesn't it?' Bessie went on, arguing with herself. 'It should be mine, of course. Ahem! Perhaps I'll just borrow it and try a spin on it—just to see how it works. No harm in borrowing the old iron. It's really my bike, after all. I should have bought it if my measly uncle had sent me the twenty pounds I asked him for!'

And Bessie smiled. That satisfied her. She hadn't the faintest idea as to whom the bike belonged, of course, but that was a small detail.

Actually, it was the bicycle she had seen displayed during the Courtfield sales, but Bessie had no idea that it belonged to Nancy Bell, who had also seen it and who had bought it. But that didn't matter.

Confident now, she stepped forward, trundling the bike out of the shed. Then she stopped, coming face to face with Nancy Bell.

Nancy grinned.

'Thanks!' she said. 'So good of you to get my bike out for me, Bessie!'

Bessie gaped.

'Your bike?' she asked feebly.

'Of course! Whose did you think it was?'

'Oh, really, you know!' Bessie said. 'Oh, really, Nancy, thuth-that's not fair. That's my bike! I saw it first—I mum-mean, I was going to buy it, you know!'

'And you didn't!'

'Well, no,' Bessie admitted. 'But I—I always looked on it as mine, you know. It's a lovely bike, isn't it? So—so green, you know,' Bessie added hopefully, gazing at the

bicycle. 'I was just going to take it for a ride, just—just so that I could tell you what I thought of it. You don't mind a crack rider like me taking it for a ride, Nancy?'

'I do.'

'But look here—'

'Stand aside. I'm in a hurry.'

'But, I say, you know—' Bessie looked anxious. 'Nancy, be a sport! Let me have it. I've got to go to the village, you know. A—a matter of life or death! I—I've got to fetch a doctor,' she panted. 'It's fearfully urgent. Sus-somebody might die if I don't fetch a doctor!'

She kept her hand upon the bicycle, but Nancy, the grin fading from her face now, tore it away.

'Let go, you fat idiot!'

'Oh, really, Nancy—'

'Get out of my way!'

'But look here—'

Nancy lost her patience at that. She stepped forward suddenly. With one hand she pushed Bessie, and Bessie, struggling for possession of the bicycle was caught unawares. She sat down with a bump, and heavily gasped, at the same time catching her leg against the out-jutting pedal. She roared.

'Ow—ow—ow! I'm hurt! Ow! Nancy, you cat, you've broken my leg! It's bleeding in three places—I mum-mean, it's broken in four places!'

'Chump!' snorted Nancy.

'But I say, you know! You dud-don't want to leave me here to dud-die, do you?'

'I don't mind!' Nancy said heartlessly.

She ran the machine forward, grinning at the howling Bessie. And then suddenly she stopped. A figure confronted her—a tall, severe figure, whose face was set in forbidding lines.

'Miss Marrapet!' Nancy gasped.

The mistress nodded. She looked at the machine.

'Going out, I presume?'

'Yes!' Nancy bit her lip.

'You doubtless remember,' Miss Marrapet asked, 'that you are detained? Which means that you are due in the class-room immediately after tea. And unless you have forgotten it, I must remind you that detention carries with it the strict rule of keeping within school bounds. You will put that bicycle away, Nancy!'

Nancy's teeth set.

'But I've got to go out!' she panted. 'I must—it's urgent!'

'Indeed? In that case, you should ask permission first. Why must you go out? What matter is so urgent that you make rules for yourself?'

'Well, you see—'

'Yes?'

'I—I've got to go to the village to—to call for some medicine!'

'Indeed?' Miss Marrapet did not look impressed. 'I was under the impression that medicines were dispensed by the school authorities. In any case, Nancy, I think I can cure any malady you may be suffering from,' she added grimly. 'You will put that bicycle away!'

Nancy looked mutinous.

'You heard?'

'Yes!'

'Then do as you are told. And take a further hundred lines for daring to hesitate when

an order is given you!’ Miss Marrapet said sharply. ‘Bessie Bunter!’
‘Ow-wow! Y-yes, Miss Marrapet?’ Bessie mumbled, staggering to her feet.
‘Take this machine from Nancy and put it in the cycle shed.’
‘Y-yes, Miss Marrapet.’
‘And, Nancy, come along with me!’
And Miss Marrapet, to make doubly certain, led the scowling and baffled Fourth Former away. Once again Miss Marrapet had spoilt her schemes. Babs & Co. had got away—would, even now, be delivering those papers to the solicitors in Courtfield! It was beginning to dawn upon Nancy Bell that the way of the transgressor is hard.

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And meantime, Babs & Co., riding breathlessly up to the doors of Mr. Gleethorpe’s office in Courtfield, had dismounted. Quickly they propped up their machines in the kerb facing the door, hurriedly crowded round Babs.
‘Got the papers?’ Clara asked.
‘Rather! Here!’
‘O.K. We’ll wait. Buck up, Babs!’
Babs laughed. She was feeling elated now. This was the first big step towards proving Grant Bullivant’s innocence, and she was full of hope. She went towards the door, rang a bell, and stepped forward into a small hall. A boy of sixteen or thereabouts came forward to meet her.
‘Yes, miss?’
‘Mr. Gleethorpe—I must see him!’ Babs said. ‘A matter of urgency. Tell him I come from Miss Bullivant.’
But the boy shook his head. He smiled apologetically.
‘I’m sorry, miss,’ he said, ‘but Mr. Gleethorpe’s not in. And he won’t be in again until to-morrow.’
‘But I must see him!’ Babs exclaimed.
‘I’m sorry—’
‘Can’t I go to his home?’
‘I’m afraid not. Mr. Gleethorpe has gone up to London. You can leave a message with me, if you like.’
Babs groaned. Her hopes dashed, she turned away, putting the papers in her pocket again.
Not at home! Unable to see the solicitor until to-morrow! That meant another day’s delay. Another day—with Miss Bullivant hovering between life and death!
But she could hardly leave a message. She daren’t leave a message. She said, rather dispiritedly: ‘All right! Thank you, I’ll call again.’ And she rejoined her chums on the pavement.

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But if the first part of their mission was a failure the second could still be carried out. It took the chums a few moments to get over their disappointment, but, as Clara philosophically remarked, it couldn’t be helped, and, after all, there was to-morrow which, being Saturday, was a whole day’s holiday. Meantime, they must see Grant Bullivant.
So to Friardale Woods they rode, leaving their machines hidden in the bushes on the outskirts of the wood. Grant Bullivant, they knew, was hiding in the secret room at

Friardale Priory, the ancient, incompleated building which possessed two towers, one of them in a state of dilapidated ruin.

It was a lonely spot, picturesque, but desolate, which, like most of the old ruins around Cliff House, had the reputation of being haunted.

They stepped Out warily, keeping sharp eyes alert for warders, who, they knew, were still scouring the woods. But the woods were silent and deserted, and never a soul they met until finally the Priory was reached.

It was growing dusk then, and the looming height of Copse Tower stood out in almost spectral grimness against the darkening sky. Babs looked up.

'Coast clear,' she muttered. 'Come on!'

They stepped into the Priory, their footsteps echoing hollowly on the old flagstones.

In the corridor of vaulted arches they went, and Babs, finding the secret spring, pressed it, releasing the door which led into the upper regions of Copse Tower.

Up a steep, narrow flight of stairs they wended their way, stopping finally at a studded oak door. Babs knocked.

'Barbara Redfern!' she said. 'Mr. Bullivant, let us in, please.'

There was a movement inside. The door opened. The haggard face of Miss Bullivant's brother peered out at them.

'Ah!' he said. 'Come in.'

They stepped into the tiny room. Babs who had the attaché-case in her hand, put it upon the floor. Grant Bullivant gazed at them, fingering his chin nervously.

'You have news?'

'Yes,' Babs said sombrely.

'My sister—'

Babs gulped.

'Miss Bullivant is ill,' she said. 'Seriously ill!'

He stared at her, fear in his eyes.

'Ill? Evelyn ill?' he whispered. Then: 'Seriously, you say? Miss Redfern, how seriously? Tell me. She—she isn't going to—'

'Please,' Babs said. She gazed compassionately at the hunted man. 'Don't worry yourself, Mr. Bullivant. Listen. Miss Bullivant is ill. She is asking for you. The doctor says that she must see you.'

He stared hopelessly.

'She must see me?' he whispered hoarsely. 'She is ill—ill?' He straightened up. A sudden fierce look shone in his eyes. 'I will see her!' he said. 'I'll go—to-night! Miss Redfern, how can I get in?'

'No, wait!' Babs put a hand against his chest. 'Sit down, please. You can't go like that. You'll never get there. The police are hunting for you. You'd be caught long before you got within sight of Cliff House. But you can go—you'll have to go—tomorrow.'

'But how? And if to-morrow, why not now?'

'Please!' Babs begged.

And then, while she waited for him to be calm, she told him of the plan.

'The clothes are here,' she said. 'You'll also find a razor and some shaving soap and a brush. I bought these, intending to send them as a birthday present to my father, but you have them. We'll be back here to-morrow evening. It won't be safe to go in the day-time. Mabs will make you up, and meantime, you must practise a limp and husky voice, just in case you're spoken to. I'll introduce you as an old friend. Is that all clear?'

He nodded.

'But Evelyn! You're sure she will be all right until then?'

'Yes; quite sure.'

He breathed with relief.

'Thank you,' he said. 'You're a ripping kid, Barbara.' He looked at her gratefully. His voice became a little husky. 'Neither Evelyn nor I will ever forget what you have done for me—never. If it hadn't been for you I think I should have gone and given myself up. I can't stand this much longer—living up here, no lights, afraid to walk about—afraid to eat almost. It's a terrible thing to be a hunted man, Barbara!'

Babs gazed at him compassionately. Mabs sighed a little, though she was studying his features in order to carry back to Cliff House a mental impression which would help her in her plans for making him up. Clara shuffled uneasily. Janet remained silent.

'But still'—he smiled wryly—'don't let me burden you with my troubles. You've been splendid, all of you. I only wish I could tell you how I appreciate it. But the proofs,' he added quickly. 'Barbara, what has happened about those?'

Babs told him. He looked dashed.

'To-morrow?' he said. 'Well, well, it can't be helped. But I want to tell you something. I believe Edward Bell knows where I am. I saw him this morning in the woods here as I looked through the window. He's hanging around. But while he knows that I have those proofs there's nothing to fear from him. But go now, girls. Come back to-morrow evening!'

'Yes,' Babs said. 'Mr. Bullivant, you're all right for food?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Nothing else we can do for you?'

'No. Please get back to Evelyn,' he said. 'Tell her that I'm coming to see her. Tell her—Barbara, for goodness' sake try and cheer her up. Keep her from thinking. Tell her for my sake she must get better. She's very fond of me, Barbara; I, of her. We've always been such good pals.'

'I understand,' Babs said.

'Now go, please. It is not safe for you to stop here. And thanks—thanks a thousand times for coming, for being such topping little sports!'

They went at that, tramping back the way they had come. And from a window opposite, a cautious face withdrew. The face was the face of a young man, and he had strapped to one ear a microphone sound amplifier.

Thanks to that amplifier, Edward Bell had heard every word of that conversation.

His eyes gleamed.

'So they've still got the proofs!' he muttered. 'Gee, what a stroke of luck!' He put the amplifier in his pocket and turned towards the aperture through which he had entered.

'Nancy can save me. Nancy can do it!' he muttered. 'I'll get those papers back and tie up Bullivant at the same time!'

Gleeful and excited, he sped away.

CHAPTER XVIII

Still a Chance!

SCRATCH, scratch, scratch!

Nancy Bell groaned.

Lines were always an anathema to Nancy Bell, who was lazy by nature. But lines in

the class-room, under the reproving eyes of Miss Marrapet, were just an ordeal. But there was nothing else for it. Miss Marrapet, obviously taking her duties very conscientiously, and determined that Nancy should escape none of her punishment, sat at the mistress's desk.

Every time Nancy happened to look up she found that reproving glance upon her, saw those lips framing themselves for some curt command. Nancy groaned. Her heart swelled with bitterness.

But she plodded on. Nothing else she could do.

She glanced at the clock. Half-past six. Half-past six! Babs & Co. would be in Courtfield now; would have seen the solicitor; would be on their way back. The proofs had gone.

Nancy felt desperate. If only she could have followed. If only, by some means, she could have robbed Babs & Co. of those proofs. The dreadful shadow which overhung her brother, and which was bound to have its repercussion upon herself, would never have been. Grant Bullivant would be safely in prison again.

Her vengeance against Miss Bullivant, his sister, would have been complete.

But now—

'Nancy, get on with your work!' Miss Marrapet said sharply.

'Dash you!' Nancy muttered under her breath.

Scratch, scratch, scratch went her pen, again scrawling carelessly over the lines of the paper before her. Two hundred lines! What a colossal task it was. How many had she done now? One hundred and ten—one hundred and eleven.

Goodness, would she never finish?

Then the class-room door came open. Stella Stone, the tall, graceful head girl of Cliff House, came into the room. She threw a look towards Nancy, and went up to Miss Marrapet.

Nancy caught her own name. She looked up, to find Miss Marrapet frowning.

'Nancy!'



Bessie could hardly believe what she heard coming from the phone . . .

'Yes, Miss Marrapet?'

'Your presence, apparently, is required on the telephone in the prefects' room. Please bring your lines to me, answer the call, then return. I will give you five minutes!'

'Yes, Miss Marrapet,' Nancy said humbly.

She rose, glad to get away, but filled with a secret fear. She, wanted on the phone? By whom?

All sorts of alarming possibilities took shape in Nancy's mind as she went along the corridor to the prefects' room. Supposing the solicitor had already got to work?

Supposing it was the police? Supposing—

She trembled.

By the time she reached the room, her guilty conscience, so strongly at work, had reduced Nancy to a bundle of nervous fears and apprehension. She almost dreaded picking up the receiver.

Still it had to be done.

‘Yes?’ she said.

And then a voice came to her—a voice at whose sound Nancy gulped with relief. Her brother, Edward Bell.

‘Nancy—that you?’

‘Yes!’

‘Good! Listen. I’ve found something out. That Redfern girl and her friends—’

Nancy’s interest quickened.

‘Yes?’

‘They’ve been to the solicitor in Courtfield, but they haven’t delivered the papers!’

Edward Bell’s jubilant voice came over the wire. ‘I’ve found that out. They won’t be seeing him again until to-morrow, so that gives you to-night to get hold of them.

Nancy, whatever you do, mind you get hold of them. If you don’t, I’m sunk!’

‘Yes!’ Nancy said eagerly.

‘Get them! Never mind how you do it! Get them—and destroy them, then ring up the police. Tell them where Grant Bullivant is hiding!’

‘Yes,’ Nancy said.

‘And in the meantime—’

‘Shush! Stop!’ Nancy hissed ‘Somebody coming. Yes,’ she added in a clear voice,

‘certainly I’ll come down. But not until next week, Miss Smith. I’m rather busy at school here at the moment. All right? Good-bye!’

She dropped the receiver just as the fat face of Bessie Bunter peered in. Nancy swung round furiously.

‘You, you fat thing! I thought it was somebody else!’

‘Oh, really, Nancy—’

‘Shut up!’ Nancy exclaimed rudely, and flung herself out of the room, leaving Bessie gazing after her in surprise.

‘Well, of all the ill-mannered things!’ she muttered, and then looked into the room,

blinking at the phone. Bessie saw at once that it had not been hung up properly.

The microphone, indeed, rested across only one of the hooks and the lever in the middle had, therefore, not been depressed, which meant that the caller at the other end was still connected.

Even as Bessie watched, she heard a faint, metallic voice coming from the earpiece.

‘Crumbs!’ Bessie muttered. ‘Nancy hadn’t finished. She ought to have hung that thing up!’

And Bessie, intending to do it for Nancy, ambled into the room.

She picked up the microphone, peered at it. The voice came to her.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’

Bessie, without thinking, put the thing to her ear.

‘Oh, hallo!’ she said.

‘Gee what’s che matter?’ a voice came over the wire. ‘I’ve been bawling “Hallo” till I’ve nearly shouted myself hoarse. Now, look here—’

‘Oh, crumbs! Y-yes?’ Bessie said.

‘You didn’t say whether you understood,’ Edward Bell at the other end went on.

‘Nun-no,’ Bessie replied.

‘Well, don’t you?’

‘Of course I dud-don’t! I say, you know—’

‘Oh, help! Listen! Get it straight, for goodness’ sake! I’ve told you Barbara Redfern’s still got those papers—’

Bessie’s eyes gleamed.

‘Get them from her. Destroy them. Then telephone for the police,’ Edward Bell said testily. ‘Tell them where Grant Bullivant is hiding. Got that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sure, now? Repeat it. I want to make sure you don’t bungle this job.’

Bessie almost gasped. But she collected herself in time. Unwittingly she had stumbled upon a secret. Unwittingly somebody was going to do something to Babs.

She was feeling a little sore against Babs & Co. for having cycled away and left her, but Bessie was loyal if she was nothing else, and all her instincts of protection rose to the surface now. She forgot her own little grievance against her chum.

‘Y-yes,’ she said. ‘I get the papers and phone up the pip-police!’

‘O.K. That’s good enough,’ Edward Bell said, with satisfaction. ‘I’ll keep my eye on things here. You know where to find me if you want me. Take things calmly; you sound a little scared.’

‘Y-yes,’ Bessie agreed her head in a whirl.

The man at the other end rang off then, and Bessie took the receiver and blinked at it rather as if it would solve the mystery which now perplexed her. Then she put the receiver up, and thoughtfully rolled out of the prefects’ room into Big Hall.

Hardly had she arrived there than four girls came strolling in from the quadrangle outside.

‘Babs!’ Bessie exclaimed. ‘Oh, I sus-say, you know!’

‘Hallo, Bessie!’ Babs smiled. ‘Sorry we had to go off without you.’

‘I think that was jolly mean of you,’ Bessie said indignantly. ‘Really, Babs—’

‘But if you’ve got anything in the way of a tea ready, we’ll love you for ever,’ Babs said. ‘We’re famished.’

Bessie blinked.

‘Why, dud-didn’t you go out for a feed, then?’

‘Of course not, chump! We went to Courtfield—on business.’ Bessie stared.

‘What business?’

‘Oh, business!’ Babs replied vaguely. ‘You wouldn’t understand, Bessie.’ She looked suddenly hard at the fat girl, noticing the suppressed excitement in her face, the obvious signs that Bessie had something which she was dying to say. ‘What’s the matter, Fatima?’

Bessie looked mysterious.

‘Shush!’ she said.

The four stared.

‘Somebody might be listening, you know,’ Bessie added, and looked round furtively, putting a finger to her lips. She blinked again mysteriously. ‘Shush!’

‘Why, what on earth—’

‘Shush!’ Bessie said again.

‘Look here—’ roared Clara Trevlyn.

‘Shush! Somebody may be watching!’ Bessie whispered thrillingly. ‘And if anybody got to know—’ she shook her head darkly. ‘There’s something going on, Babs. Your life is threatened!’

‘What?’

‘Shush!’

The four gazed at their fat chum. Clara blinked.

‘Well, it can’t be the sun,’ she considered. ‘We haven’t had any to-day. And it can’t be over-study because the fat chump’s been scoffing chocolates most of the day in the class-room. Does it hurt?’ she inquired solicitously.

‘Come to the study!’ Bessie gasped hoarsely.

‘But what—’

‘All is known!’ Bessie added thrillingly. ‘Your secret is out. Villainy is afoot. Every moment is fraught with peril. Only I can sus-save you, Babs. But come this way!’

And Bessie, looking frightfully important and mysterious, wagged an admonishing fat forefinger again, and led the way towards the stairs.

The chums followed in growing amazement and wonder.

‘Rats!’ Clara opined. ‘I’ve seen it coming on for a long time— ever since Bessie came away from Hollywood. She’s just gone sky- high!’

Still, they were curious! They smiled. Bessie had some queer ways at times. She was often influenced by the latest film she had seen, or by the latest book she had read.

But they had no idea, really, that Bessie was the bearer of such startling tidings. They were more amused and curious than anything else as they followed the fat one up the stairs.

Into Study No. 4 Bessie led the way, carefully closing and locking the door behind her. Again she put one fat finger to her lips, motioning them all over to the window opposite the door. Then she spoke in husky whispers.

‘Babs, you have the papers?’

Babs started.

‘Why, what—’

‘Shush! I know all!’ Bessie whispered. ‘Nancy is going to steal them. And when she’s got them she’s going to phone up the police and tell them where Grant Bullivant is!’

‘What?’

‘Bessie!’

They regarded the fat junior with a new interest now. They saw that her mysterious play-acting really had some significance.

‘Bessie, how do you know?’

‘I found out,’ Bessie replied. ‘Nothing can be hidden from a Bunter. But enemies are at work against us, you girls, and we’ve got to tread warily. Once let—’

‘Look here, come off the stage! How did you find out?’ Clara asked bluntly.

‘Oh, really, you know! I fuf-found Out,’ Bessie stuttered. ‘I happened to go in the prefects’ room when Nancy was telephoning, you know, and—and Nancy left off the receiver. Well, I picked it up—’

‘And listened!’ Babs shook her head. ‘Bessie, how often have I told you that you mustn’t do these things?’ she asked. ‘Still, as it happens, perhaps it’s just as well you did. So they know, eh? Nancy’s going to steal the papers?’ She paused. ‘How?’

‘Up to Nancy, evidently,’ Clara Trevlyn said.

‘Yes, up to Nancy,’ Babs repeated thoughtfully. Then suddenly a mischievous light came into her eyes. ‘Bessie, you must tell nobody of this—nobody, you understand? Miss Bullivant’s life is in danger. We’ve got to save her. But it’s a pity that Nancy should have all this trouble,’ she added musingly. ‘A pity she shouldn’t get those papers!’

The chums stared.

‘Why—what the dickens? Are you off your giddy chump, too?’ Clara asked.

‘No. But if Nancy found some sort of papers?’ Babs asked, and smiled. ‘Nancy has never seen them at close quarters, has she? She’d be satisfied. She doesn’t really

know what the papers look like. Wait a minute!’

And Babs, caught in the throes of a sudden inspiration, flung off her coat and hat and drew her writing materials towards her. For several minutes she remained busily writing, the chums craning over her shoulder. Then Clara Trevlyn grinned.

‘My hat! If Nancy steals that—’

Babs laughed.

‘She will!’ she said. ‘I’ll see that she does. But mum’s the word. Bessie, forget everything you know about this. If you don’t we’ll never speak to you again!’

‘Oh, really, Babs! As if I would sus-say anything!’

‘Well, don’t!’

And, for once, Bessie remembered. She didn’t!

.

Night.

Silence reigned in the Fourth Form dormitory.

Eleven o’clock had just chimed from the old clock tower, and the Fourth was sleeping the sleep of the just. But one girl was awake—one girl whose eyes were glittering, who was gazing with feverish intensity towards Barbara Redfern’s bed.

It was Nancy Bell.

Nancy had watched Babs during the undressing stage before going to bed. She had seen Babs, with great stealth and secrecy, take some papers from her pocket. She had seen her slip them under her pillow.

Nancy did not need telling what those papers were. She had not the faintest doubt in her own mind that they were the proofs which would prove her brother’s guilt.

And Nancy, remembering that telephone message of Edward Bell’s, anxious at all costs to be revenged upon Miss Bullivant and hound Grant Bullivant back to prison, was determined to get hold of them.

She sat up now, looking towards Babs’s bed. She whispered:

‘Barbara! Barbara Redfern!’

No reply.

‘Are you asleep, Barbara?’

Still no reply.

Nancy breathed quickly. Silently she slipped out of bed. Notwithstanding the fact that she was barefooted she walked on tiptoe, approaching the bed of the sleeping Babs with stealth and caution.

Now she had reached her objective. For a moment she stood looking down upon the face of the sleeping leader of the Fourth Form, her pretty face surrounded by a mass of tumbling chestnut curls. Babs was dreaming. In her sleep she smiled.

She moved. Nancy, her heart seeming to leap into her throat, jumped into the darkness cast by the wall between two of the windows.

But Babs was not awake. She had merely moved in her sleep. Nancy stood for a moment flattened against the wall, listening with trembling terror to her own heartbeats. Babs did not move again, however, and Nancy was reassured. She stepped forward.

Now—quickly, swiftly, cautiously!

She slipped her hand beneath Babs’s pillow, her eyes upon the sleeping girl, holding her breath as she did so. Flatly her hand glided between pillow and under-sheet, groping fingers hooked and questing. Her face flamed suddenly as the edge of her fingers touched a wad of papers.

Securing a grip between two fingers, she cautiously drew them out. Careful—careful, now! In trepidation, watching Babs. moving slowly backwards as the papers came towards her. She had them. They were in her hand.

Elation filled Nancy. She found herself trembling now. Quickly she padded back to her own bed, ramming the papers beneath her own pillow.

She was saved! Her brother was saved! Her way to complete her vengeance against Miss Bullivant was open at last.

In her own bed the sleeping Babs slept on, a faint half-smile upon her face.

The clang of the rising bell, the chatter of girls, grumbling voices, and the deep, sonorous tones of Bessie Bunter, greeted the ears of Barbara Redfern as she sat up in bed in the morning light of the September morning.

She yawned, stretched herself, and was immediately awake. Then quickly she put her hand beneath her pillow, fumbled for a moment, and then smiled. Her eyes sought out the bed of Nancy Bell. But Nancy's bed was empty.

Babs blinked at that. Quickly she scrambled out of bed. Clara Trevlyn, next to her, had just awakened, and was looking at Babs. They exchanged a glance that was half-puzzled, half-startled.

'Babs!' Clara murmured. 'Nancy—where is she?'

Babs shook her head. She knew now that Nancy had stolen the papers she had put under her pillow last night. She had intended that Nancy should steal them. She had wanted to give Nancy a fright.

For the papers which Babs had written out purported to be a confession by Edward Bell, and Babs had imagined that Nancy would read that confession and would get the fright of her life.

That would have punished Nancy. Nancy, fancying that Babs had a confession signed by her brother, would have been in the bluest of funks.

But the scheme seemed to have gone wrong. Nancy was not here!

Babs had left that out of her calculations. She had expected to be up before Nancy.

Nancy was one of the lazybones of the Form. She remained in bed, like Bessie Bunter, until the last possible moment.

But apparently Nancy could exert herself when occasion required, and desperately determined to lose no time in completing her plan, she had got up several minutes before the rising bell.

Now Babs realised, with a feeling almost akin to sickness, that Nancy was probably obeying the second part of her brother's instructions. Having got what she believed were the papers which Edward Bell had instructed her to obtain, she was ringing up the police!

'Oh, my hat!' Babs gasped. 'Clara!'

'Yes?'

'Come on quick! Nancy—she'll be phoning!'

'My giddy aunt!' whispered Clara.

Her face became grave. With alacrity she sprang out of bed. That, they had not taken into consideration when they had hit upon this little scheme for scaring Nancy Bell. But they realised the peril into which they had plunged Grant Bullivant and themselves at once now.

'Come on!' Babs muttered.

She paused only to slip into her clothes. At all costs they must stop Nancy. Whatever the outcome of the incident from Nancy's point of view, it would be attended with dire results for Grant Bullivant.

The Fourth Formers in the dormitory gazed at the two as they sprang for the door,

tearing through it. Jemima Carstairs stared.

‘What-ho, Babsie! Wherefore the hurry? Surely you’re not sprinting round the track this early?’

‘Yes. What’s the matter, Babs?’

‘Where’s the fire, old thing?’

But Babs did not wait. She did not even look back. With Clara on her heels she tore open the door and rushed into the corridor. A prefect was going by, but Babs, in her great haste, never even saw her. Crash! Over went the prefect. Over went Babs; but Babs was up again in a moment.

‘Hi!’ yelled Sarah Harrigan.

‘Sorry!’ Babs gasped.

She ran on. Clara, grinningly avoiding the prefect, sprinted after her. Sarah, in great wrath, rose. She glared after the fleeing figures of Babs and Clara. Then she sprinted after them.

Babs and Clara pelted on. They reached the top of the stairs. The banister rail was the quickest way down.

They took it! Whiz! Bump! Whiz! Bump! And there they were at the bottom, fortunately for them, unseen by prefect or mistress, though Stella Stone happened to be emerging from the Sixth Form corridor. Across the Hall into the Sixth Form quarters.

At last! The prefects’ room.

And a voice coming from the room. The voice of Nancy Bell!

‘Yes, inspector. He’s there, in Friardale Priory. Yes, I can take you!’

Two separate whirlwinds, that joined together as one, Babs and Clara darted into the room. Nancy turned, a half-gasp upon her lips, the receiver held in one hand.

Babs jumped for it, tearing it away. Clara caught hold of Nancy and dragged that girl backwards. Babs put the receiver to her ears.

‘Yes, yes, yes! Inspector Winter!’ she panted.

Click! came from the other end of the wire.

‘Inspector Winter!’ Babs yelled frantically. ‘Inspector Winter!’

‘Leave that alone!’ Nancy Bell yelled.

But from the other end of the wire came no sound.

Babs feverishly depressed the lever in the centre of the instrument. At the same moment there was a step in the passage. The face of Sarah Harrigan peered in, her eyes glittering.

‘Ah! So here you are!’ she said. ‘Barbara, put that receiver down at once! Clara, let go of Nancy! Now go back to your dormitories—all of you. And Barbara—’

‘Yes?’ Babs said, crestfallen.

‘Take a hundred lines. You take fifty, Clara.’

Babs gasped. But she put the instrument down, Crestfallen, with Sarah bringing up a very grim rear, the three of them trailed back to the dormitory.

‘They had tried. They had failed. Nancy Bell had succeeded in giving the police warning.

What now could they do to help Grant Bullivant?

But Babs’s mind was racing. There was still a chance!

CHAPTER XIX

Meet ‘Uncle Ephraim’

‘WE’VE got to go!’ Babs said feverishly. ‘We’ve got to go now, Mabs, you get the make-up box ready. Clara, bring the Macintosh. We shall want the Macintosh to cover that awful suit of Piper’s in broad daylight.

‘I’ll say,’ agreed the tomboy.

It was five minutes later—or nearly five minutes later. Clara, Babs, Mabel Lynn and Janet Jordan were congregating in Study No. 4 once more, and Babs was hurriedly explaining the details of her latest plan.

There was still a chance, The police had to come from Courtfield, and that would take time. Half an hour, at least, Babs reckoned.

But they—

‘We can do it in ten minutes on our bikes,’ Babs said. ‘It means cutting breakfast, of course, so there’ll be a row. But that can’t be helped. We’ll get to the Priory, make-up Grant Bullivant, and get him away before the police arrive. I’m afraid it’s going to be a rush job for you, Mabs.’

‘I can manage it,’ Mabs said.

‘Right. Got the mac, Clara?’

‘Here!’

‘Then let’s go! And remember, hard as you can go!’

They nodded. Their faces were grave now, though they all felt the thrill of the adventure. A race against the police. A race to save the capture of an innocent man. A race, the result of which might make the difference between a recovery of Miss Bullivant and a Miss Bullivant who might never recover!

It was a thought to inspire, to bring out of them every ounce of their energy.

Most of the girls in Cliff House were not out of their dormitories yet. But the four were alert and eager. Clara Trevlyn very thoughtfully had borrowed the Macintosh she had—a plain Ulster Macintosh which belonged to one of the prefects—from the Sixth Form cloak-room, and she carried it under her arm.

Together they dashed out of the study into the drive and towards the cycle shed.

It was the work of a few moments to get out their cycles. Piper, just unlocking the gates, stared in amazement as they came whizzing through them.

‘My heye!’ he gasped. ‘My heye! Them young gals! My heye! They’ll break their necks!’

He stood watching, gaping as the quartet sped off up the road, four clouds of dust marking their passage, every atom of energy they had concentrated on the task in hand, pedalling as they had never pedalled before.

The hedge seemed to fly by. The rush of wind in their faces stung and hurt and fetched tears to their eyes. But no matter. On, on!

‘Quickly!’ Babs ground between her clenched teeth.

She led the way. Twenty miles an hour she was going, but even so the journey seemed slow. On, on! Now nearing Friardale village, now turning recklessly to the left and rushing across the moss-like grass of the clearing.

Never before had Babs & Co. ridden as they rode then, and in an incredibly short space of time they saw the Copse Tower of the Priory looming ahead of them through the ruins.

At the near side of the clump of trees and bushes which surrounded the Priory, Babs came to a halt.

‘Stop here!’ she gasped. ‘Park the bicycles in the bushes. If we have to make a quick getaway I’ll stop behind. Grant Bullivant can have my machine and you others go on. Take him straight back to the sanny.’

‘O.K.’

‘Come on, then.’

They took the footpath through the bushes, approaching rapidly but carefully. Clara had the lead now. Suddenly she stopped.

‘My giddy aunt! Look!’ she whispered.

‘What?’

Clara pointed, then they all stopped, treading on one another’s heels. Ahead of them, in the clearing, the great ruined tower, raising its gaunt height to the morning sky; but intervening was a clump of bushes.

And behind that clump, his back towards them, his watchful gaze fixed upon the tower, was a man. Babs recognised him at once.

Edward Bell!

‘He’s waiting till the police come,’ Clara whispered. ‘My hat! What now?’

‘We’ve got to get rid of him.’

‘But how?’

‘I’ll show you.’ Clara nodded grimly at her chums. ‘Wait Just a minute.’ She unfastened the Macintosh. ‘Now, when I give the word, charge, bowl him over. I’ll clap the Macintosh over his head. You, Babs, and you, Mabs, rush on into the Priory and fix up Grant Bullivant.’

‘O.K.,’ breathed Babs.

It was a desperate expedient, but the situation was desperate now. There could be no kid-glove methods while a man’s liberty was at stake, while the life of his sister hung in the balance. They all looked at the tomboy, and Clara grimly nodded.

‘Go!’ she muttered.

Out upon the unsuspecting spy the four swept. A decline, running towards the watcher, helped them. Their feet on the soft mossy grass made no more than a faint thudding sound, and Bell never heard them, so concentrated upon his own task was he, until they were within five yards of him. Then he turned.

‘Hey! What—’ he yelled.

But it was too late then. Bell was caught quite unprepared. Clara, her face grim and determined, was upon him. She was holding the Macintosh open in front of her. She made a sudden swoop, throwing herself and the Macintosh completely on top of the surprised spy, and Bell, with a strangled yelp, went flat upon his face. Janet piled on top of him; Babs, and Mabs on top of Janet. A muffled voice came from beneath the folds of the Macintosh.

‘Ow—wow! Oh, lemme out!’

‘Rabbits!’ Clara said, grinning. ‘Hold him, girls!’

They had held him. Clara struggled to a kneeling position. She had her knees in the middle of the man’s back now. She caught the folds of the Macintosh, drawing them together and tying them into a knot. Bell kicked.

‘You little beasts!’

‘O.K.’ Clara grinned. ‘You go on, Babs. He’s safe enough now. Janet and I will attend to him. We’ll drag him into the tower.’

‘O.K.,’ Babs said.

She straightened up and dashed away. Mabs, retrieving her make-up box, which had fallen to the ground during the melee, followed after her. Together they dived into the tower, hastily ran up the dusty steps that led to the corridor.

Babs found the secret spring, pressed it. Together they entered the opening that led to Grant Bullivant’s secret hiding-place. An amazed man met them at the top of the stairs when, breathlessly, they knocked on the iron-studded door.

‘Quick!’ Babs gasped. ‘We’ve got to get away—at once. The police—’

‘They’re coming here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh!’

‘But there’s time!’ Babs gazed at him. She gulped with relief when she saw that he had shaved—that he had already put on Piper’s suit. ‘Good enough, we can manage it, I think,’ she said. ‘Mabs, do your stuff. I’ll keep watch at the window. The police will have to come this way.’

Mabs nodded. She already had her make-up box open. The light was not good, for the window to which Babs referred was merely a slit in the wall. But it gave a wide view of the ground below, which was the road up which the police must come.

She took her position. Mabs immediately got to work. Grant Bullivant, realising the urgency of the circumstances, asked no questions, offered no suggestions, but did just as he was told.

Mabs sat him down upon a box, and, using the light that filtered from the aperture, commenced her work. From her makeup box she produced a real hair beard and a moustache which she had made overnight in readiness.

‘Now, just remain still,’ she said.

Rapidly she smeared his face with grease-paint, then covered his shaven chin and upper lip with spirit gum and carefully patted the whiskers into place. Babs, alternately watching her and keeping watch through the window, almost danced with the impatience.

‘Getting on, Mabs?’

‘Yes. Won’t be long.’

‘Buck up.’

Mabs ‘bucked up.’ No time for fine art. Mabs had fondly hoped to spend an hour on this task, but the need for urgency was great. The grey beard was pressed into position.

With a powder puff Mabs powdered Bullivant’s eyebrows that they took on a grey hue, the colour of the beard. A pair of spectacles were placed in position.

‘Nearly ready, Mabs?’

‘Two minutes,’ Mabs said.

There were sounds of movement outside the door, on the steps leading to the secret entrance. Babs turned.

‘Who’s that?’ she gasped.

‘O.K.,’ came a cheery voice from behind, ‘Only Clara. We’re bringing this little bird up here. We’re going to leave him in the secret room. If the police find it they may as well find somebody. Open the door, Babs.’

Babs laughed. She ran forward, flinging open the door. Edward Bell, his face still covered by the Macintosh, his hands securely strapped to his sides, by means of the arms of the Macintosh, stood before them.

‘Look here—’ he roared in muffled accents.

‘Sorry, can’t. Much too busy,’ smiled Babs. ‘Bring him in, Clara.’

‘What-ho.’

‘Nearly finished, Mabs?’

‘Yes.’

Babs sprang to the window. Then she jumped.

‘Police!’ she hissed. ‘My hat, they’re here. Come on, every one of you—get out!’

Mabs, pick up that make-up box. Clara, take the Macintosh off Bell.’

They moved quickly as they heard footsteps scurrying down the narrow steps outside. At a mad speed, they gathered their things together. Clara undid the Macintosh,

forcing her prisoner into a corner. Bell, dazed, almost out of breath, glared around him. Clara gave him a push which precipitated him on the floor.

‘O.K. All out!’ she grinned.

‘But look here—’

‘Rabbits!’

They bolted for the door. Too late Bell started in pursuit. It clanged upon him. He heard footsteps scurrying down the narrow steps outside. He tried the door, but Babs had had the forethought to shoot the bolt on the outside. He gritted his teeth.

‘Let me out, hang you!’

No reply. He kicked. But as well kick the iron side of a battleship. The door was strong and stout. And so deep within the tower was the room, that if Bell kicked until he was blue in the face he was not likely to be heard.

He was a prisoner in the cell of the man for whose capture he, with his sister, had plotted.

The very man whom he had sent to prison. The man who was suffering for his guilt. For a moment the justice of the situation occurred to him—but for a moment only.



Piper blinked. ‘Them’s my clothes!’ he said

CHAPTER XX

For His Sister’s Sake

‘COME on!’

‘This way!’

‘Careful, now!’

‘Clara, you stop behind. Keep an eye on what’s happening,’ Babs counselled. ‘We’ll get Grant Bullivant back to the school. It should be easy now because the school will be at breakfast. And he can use your bike.’

‘O.K.,’ Clara said.

The four of them stood behind the clearing near the spot at which they had hidden their bicycles. They were watching the police—a full half-dozen of them, accompanied by two warders armed with rifles—who were streaming from the road in the direction of the tower.

But for the moment, at least, they were safe. A thick hedge hid them from view, and their bicycles were in readiness.

Grant Bullivant, looking nothing like Grant Bullivant in Piper's wedding suit, covered by his Macintosh, a short grey beard hanging from his chin and a moustache adorning his upper lip, with a pair of spectacles perched on his nose, and Piper's old felt hat upon his head, stood beside them.

Mabs eyed him with some pride, and yet with some dissatisfaction. For the work of ten minutes, Grant Bullivant certainly was a credit to her. But there were little touches here and there which Mabs had not had time to do, and her artist's soul was dissatisfied because she had not done them.

Still, the disguise was effective. Nobody at the moment would have recognised the escaped convict in this extremely antiquated-looking old gentleman, who now stood with the Cliff House girls, gazing at the policemen across the clearing.

'Right. Then let's get going,' Babs said. She picked up her machine. 'You don't mind staying, Clara?'

'Go on. Of course not. I think it's fun,' Clara chuckled.

'O.K., then.' Babs nodded to the others. 'Careful. Don't make a noise or they may come this way. Look they're entering the tower now. My hat, did we close the secret door?'

'Yes, I did,' Janet Jordan put in.

'Oh, good kid! Well, let's hop.'

They wheeled away their machines, taking a rather diagonal course in order to keep the thickest of the bushes between them and the searching police. Once free of the clearing, however, there was no danger as, seeing that it was barely eight o'clock yet, there was no unnerving prospect of meeting anyone.

Babs mounted her machine, signalling to the others to do the same, and rode for some distance along the ruined light railway track that led to Chalk Quarry, the scene of so many a breathless adventure. From there to Cliff House was not a great distance. A plunge through the woods on to the road.

But before reaching the road, Babs stopped.

'Better leave Clara's machine here,' she said. 'No sense in attracting attention. If there's anybody knocking about they might recognise Clara's bike. In any case, it would look odd to see a man riding it. Mr. Bullivant, we're going to call you Uncle Ephraim,' she added. 'You don't mind?'

'Get me to Evelyn!' the man muttered feverishly. 'I don't mind anything then.'

'And we've just been to Friardale to meet you,' Babs went on. 'But we're not likely to meet anyone. The school's at breakfast.'

But there, at least, Babs was wrong. For as they wheeled their bicycles through the gateway, Piper came out of his lodge. He stared at sight of Babs & Co., and then his gaze rather surprisedly travelled to the man.

'Oh, crumbs!' Babs gasped.

It was evident that Piper recognised that suit. For Grant Bullivant's Macintosh was flapping open, and even though Babs had done her best there was still a betraying odour of moth balls emanating from him. But Bullivant, of course, knew nothing of that. He eyed the staring porter with some surprise.

'My heye!' Piper gasped.

'Oh! Ahem!' Babs said.

'My heye!' Piper blinked. 'Them's my clothes!' he said.

'Yes, Piper.'

'But—who's this?' Piper added, and stared at the man.

'Ahem! Uncle Ephraim!'

'Who?'

‘Uncle Ephraim,’ Babs repeated. ‘We—we’ve just been down to—to meet him, you know, Piper.’

Which was true.

But Piper still stared, eyeing the man, noting how his gorgeous suit sat upon him, but still obviously wondering. Then he stared from one to the other of the girls.

Piper had seen four go out. Three only had returned. The absentee was Clara Trevlyn.

‘Ho, ho!’ he said suddenly. ‘Uncle Ephraim, eh? Ho, ho, ho! How are you, Uncle Ephraim?’

‘I’m very well, thank you,’ Grant Bullivant answered, affecting to use the husky voice which Babs had advised.

‘Ho, ho, ho! That’s prime,’ Piper said delightedly. ‘Which I says, that’s real arty!

Bless you, I know you. You can’t take old Piper in, you can’t. I ain’t been at this school for twenty years without knowing the way of these girls. Which you can’t pull the wool over my heyes, I say.’

Grant Bullivant started.

‘You know me?’

‘Of course, of course,’ Piper cackled. ‘Which, I says, it’s thumping good,’ he added admiringly. ‘Ho, ho! Thumping good! You don’t look like a gal at all—’

‘Nun-no,’ stuttered Grant Bullivant.

‘But you’ll do! My heye, you’ll do! A fair caution you is, Miss Trevlyn, begging your pardon for saying so. Which you almost took me in. I don’t mind being man enough to own up to it!’

The chums gasped in relief. So Piper imagined Grant Bullivant was their tomboy chum! Babs affected a laugh.

‘Good, isn’t it?’ she asked.

‘Not half, it isn’t. I’d like to see them gals when you take Uncle Ephraim to meet ’em,’ Piper cackled. ‘But you go on; I won’t give you away; not me I won’t.’

And Piper, grinning still, made way for them to pass.

They passed, gulping with relief, while Piper, scratching his head and chuckling still, watched them go. They trundled their bicycles off towards the bicycle sheds, and with Grant Bullivant in their midst, trailed on towards the school, thankful that dear old Piper had not thought to wonder at ‘Uncle Ephraim’s’ height.

As Babs had prophesied, the grounds of the school were deserted, owing to breakfast, and they never met a soul as they hurried on up the drive, past the school, and up to the sanatorium. There Babs knocked upon the door.

Mrs. Thwaites, the buxom matron, opened it. She stared at Grant Bullivant.

‘Barbara, who is—’

‘Please, matron, can I see Dr. Longmore?’ Babs asked. ‘This is the gentleman the doctor is anxious to meet—’

‘Oh, I see! The doctor’s with Miss Bullivant at the moment. The poor creature’s in a bad way. But come in! Come in, sir!’ the matron added, with dubious looks at the disguised convict.

They went in, entering the waiting-room on the right of the hail. Grant Bullivant looked towards the screen.

From behind the screen came a faint murmur.

‘Grant, Grant—’

‘Evelyn!’ he gasped.

He started towards the screen, but Babs caught him by the arm.

‘No, just a minute, please. Here comes Dr. Longmore.’

Dr. Longmore it was, looking harassed and grave. He saw Babs, looked curiously at

Grant Bullivant, then hurried up.

'Barbara, she is sinking. You must get that brother of hers—'

'He's here,' Babs announced.

'Here?' The doctor started. Then he looked at Grant, who, careless now by whom he might be recognised, was tugging at his false beard. The beard came off in his hands, the spectacles followed. Dr. Longmore jumped.

'Why, bless my soul! I was completely deceived. Barbara, you have done splendid work—splendid work. I was becoming distracted. Mrs. Thwaites, please say nothing of this. I will take all responsibility. I have my patient to consider. This way, Mr. Bullivant.'

He led the way forward. Grant Bullivant gulping, eagerly started after him. The doctor turned, nodded to Babs, who followed as well, leaving Mabs and Janet where they stood. The three of them entered the ward. Miss Bullivant lay on the bed, moaning and tossing restlessly from side to side.

'Grant, Grant, why don't you come to me?' she muttered feebly.

'Grant, I am dying—'

'Evelyn!' Grant Bullivant cried.

He started forward, arms outstretched, his lips quivering now. Miss Bullivant turned. She saw him. Her eyes opened in glad astonishment. A look of happy surprise flickered across her worn, pain-wracked features. One hand, very white, came out.

'Grant!' she cried huskily.

Babs stood still by the window.

'Grant!' she gasped again. Her brother, unable to speak now, was on his knees at the side of the bed, was stooping. She touched his hair feebly, running thin, loving, trembling fingers through it. 'Grant, Grant, Grant! My brother!' she cried quiveringly. 'Evelyn, I am here,' Grant Bullivant said. 'Evelyn, you will get well. You must get well. For my sake, Evelyn!'

'Grant'—she smiled. It was the first real smile Miss Bullivant had given since her illness—'Grant, my dear,' she said. 'Safe at last. The police—they have not got you? Your innocence is proved?'

'Evelyn, yes, yes!' He raised his face to her—a face all wet with tears; a face which quivered with emotion and with the joy he felt. 'There's nothing to be afraid of now. Only you must promise that you will get better. You must get better!'

'I will get better,' Miss Bullivant said thinly. 'Grant, I must get better—now. You have meant so much to me. You still mean much to me. I have thought about you, Grant. I feared I should never see you again, and so I did not care what happened. But if you want me to I will get better—'

'Evelyn, I do, I do. Please!'

She smiled.

'Hold me, Grant! Put your arms round my shoulders—just like that. And then I won't be frightened any more, will I, Grant? I just knew you would come. Oh, Grant!'

She sighed. Grant Bullivant, clinging, held her tight.

'I'm so happy now,' Miss Bullivant said dreamily. 'It means that a big, big shadow has gone. All is clear again. You are safe, aren't you?' she added, with sudden feverish alarm. 'Tell me you are safe. Those policemen—they are not after you any longer?'

Babs, biting her lips, turned towards the window.

'No,' Grant Bullivant lied desperately.

'For if they took you away from me again I—I couldn't stand it,' Miss Bullivant choked. 'I couldn't, Grant. I should just die as I was dying before you came. But I'm

better now. For your sake, I'm going on getting better and better, and then we'll have a holiday together—in some quiet place. Just you and me, and we'll forget everything and be very, very happy. Grant, promise me they shan't take you away!'

'I promise, Evelyn.'

'Never again?'

'Never again,' Grant Bullivant solemnly avowed.

But Babs at the window gave a sudden violent start. She felt her face turn white. For coming towards the sanatorium up the running-track were three men. One was Inspector Winter, of the Courtfield Police. The others were police-constables. They had come for Grant Bullivant!

CHAPTER XXI

Another Appointment

THAT, at least, was Babs's first impression. She watched, almost in agony, as she saw them approach. They had evidently entered Cliff House by the rear entrance, which, of course, was natural, seeing that they had come from Courtfield, and the direct road to Courtfield was at the rear of the school buildings. She threw a look towards Miss Bullivant—Miss Bullivant, who was lying back now, her grey face tinged with just a little colour, her eyes closed, a smile playing about her lips.

For a moment Babs wondered what she would do.

Give the alarm and therefore upset Miss Bullivant again? Remain still, and allow the police to come into the ward and carry off Miss Bullivant's brother under the invalid's agonised eyes? Not even Babs felt equal to that situation, but something told her to remain still, to say nothing.

On came the police. She watched. Were they stopping at the door?

No, they were going on. Her heart beat with joy, then palpitated again as the three of them halted under the very window at which she stood. She heard Inspector Winter's voice.

'We shall find Miss Bell in the school,' he said. 'Silver, you've got to talk to her. I'll go and see Miss Primrose and get permission to take Miss Bell to Friardale Priory. She gave the information. She must know where this secret room is. We'll take her with us.'

'Yes, sir.'

Babs's eyes opened. So the police had come, not for Grant Bullivant, but for Nancy Bell. Obviously they had difficulty in finding the secret room in Friardale Priory, and since Nancy was their informer, they had come to make Nancy show them where the place was. Babs heaved a heartfelt sigh of relief.

Grant Bullivant's presence here still remained unsuspected.

She heard the police tramp off. Once again she cast a look towards Miss Bullivant and her brother. They remained in the same position, and still Miss Bullivant slept peacefully upon her brother's arm. Tenderly, Babs smiled at Dr. Longmore, who stood near the screen. He smiled back, and beckoned to her with a nod of his head. Unnoticed by the reunited brother and sister, Babs padded across the room. The doctor motioned her into the hall behind the screen with a nod of his head, and they rejoined the waiting Mabs and Janet in the waiting-room.

'Babs, how is she?' was Mabs's eager question.

It was the doctor who replied, however.

‘She will live,’ he told them. ‘She has fallen into the first real sleep she has enjoyed since she was brought into the sanatorium.’ He gazed at the girls, and then shook his head. ‘Her improvement may be rapid, or it may be slow, but she will live. And she has you girls to thank for it!’

Babs flushed. Mabs and Janet looked embarrassed.

‘I, too, thank you—from the bottom of my heart,’ the doctor went on earnestly. ‘I have done my best, but the cleverest doctors in the world could have done nothing for Miss Bullivant without her brother. You have achieved that. It is to all of you that the most heartfelt thanks are due. I will keep Bullivant here, and, as I said, I accept all responsibility. But’—a shadow of anxiety crossed his face—‘is he still a hunted man?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ replied Babs.

‘His innocence cannot be proved? Frankly, I shudder to think what might happen if he is taken away from Miss Bullivant now!’ Babs’s face clouded. She explained the position. The doctor’s face lighted up.

‘And you have the papers?’ he asked. ‘You are taking them to Gleethorpe? I am glad. Gleethorpe is a friend of mine. If anyone can handle the case, it is he. May I make a suggestion, Miss Redfern?’

‘Why, certainly.’

‘I will phone Gleethorpe. I will get him here. Grant Bullivant will be safe—at least, for the time being. While I am in charge of the sanatorium, I have the power to refuse admission to whom I will—yes, even the school governors. Mrs. Thwaites will say nothing, and if by any chance Bullivant is seen, I will pass him off as my assistant. But the papers. If Gleethorpe comes he will want to see the papers. Perhaps you would entrust them to me?’

For answer. Babs pulled the papers from her pocket. With complete confidence she handed them to the doctor.

‘There!’ she said.

‘Thank you. And now, what do you propose to do?’

Babs looked through the window. She saw Nancy Bell, in the act of being escorted across the quad by the three police officers.

‘I think,’ she murmured, ‘that we have another appointment— at the Friardale Priory. I’m rather anxious to see what happens when the police find Edward Bell!’

‘And me!’ Mabs supported. While Janet chimed in with a soft-voiced: ‘Rather!’

CHAPTER XXII

The ‘Bull’ will not Forget

‘HALLO!’ Clara Trevlyn muttered.

From her hiding-place in the bushes beyond Copse Tower, the tomboy frowned. For over half an hour now Clara had maintained an uninterrupted vigil upon the tower. She had been vastly interested in what was going on there, and there was enough going on to absorb even the tomboy of Cliff House School.

Half a dozen men had disappeared into the old ruin, and, leaving one on guard, had been absent quite a while. Then one, then another, had come out, holding low-voiced conferences together and disappearing again.

Clara had chuckled. For she guessed, naturally, the cause of their perturbation. She knew the basis upon which their conferences were held. The secret room! They could

find neither exit nor entrance.

Which was not surprising, considering that the secret of the room was known only to seven people, four of whom were herself and her chums. The others were—Miss Bullivant, and her brother, and Professor Wallace, one of the governors of the school, at present holiday-making in Egypt.

Even Nancy Bell did not know the secret.

So Clara had watched with amusement, enjoying the joke, greatly tempted, knowing what they would find there, to go and tell them. But it was not that consideration which had wrought that surprised ‘Hallo!’ from the tomboy’s lips.

It was the appearance of reinforcements upon the scene—three officers and—Nancy Bell!

Clara craned forward. Nancy and the officers had just driven up in a car. She watched them alight; saw Nancy pointing.

She was pointing excitedly, quiveringly, to the top of the tower, and there seemed to be some argument going on. Clara watched. Then the whole party disappeared into the tower again.

Clara chuckled.

‘You may bring the police to the tower, but you cannot find the secret room,’ she muttered, paraphrasing the old proverb. ‘Clara, my pet, this is where you take a hand!’ The temptation was irresistible—to Clara. The tomboy had remained still far too long. She wanted to see what was going on—what would happen when the detectives reached the secret room—which they would never do, without assistance. The coast was clear now. Nobody was about, and Clara ambled inconsequently towards the building.

She entered it, ascending the stairs. Quite a hubbub of voices reached her ears.

‘Well, where is it?’

‘We’ve sounded every wall.’

‘Miss Bell!’

‘I tell you it does exist!’ came Nancy’s frantic voice. ‘And Grant Bullivant is hiding there! I know, I tell you. I’ve seen him there!’

‘Well, how is it we can’t find the room?’

‘It’s secret. I don’t know. Miss Bullivant knew—’

Clara chuckled. She crept forward, dodging round one of the arches and pressing herself into the wall.

But at that moment Inspector Winter turned. He saw her.

‘Miss Trevlyn!’ he exclaimed recognising her. ‘What ever are you doing here?’

‘Me? Oh, just having a look round,’ Clara explained innocently. ‘This is public property, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. But at the moment the police are conducting investigations here,’ the inspector said sternly. ‘Unless you can assist in those investigations, Miss Trevlyn, I must ask you to leave.’

‘Oh!’ Clara said disappointedly.

‘Do you know anything about the Priory?’

‘Well, I know it’s old,’ Clara said brightly. ‘I know it’s ruined, too. You can see that for yourself, you know, if you look at it long enough. And I know it’s got all sorts of fascinating places in it. The secret room, for instance.’

The inspector started.

‘You know it?’

‘Oh, yes, I know it,’ Clara said inconsequentially. ‘It’s here, you know. Shall I show you how it works?’

‘Please do,’ the inspector said grimly.

Clara grinned. But with apparent innocence she went to the spot, pressing upon a certain brick.

‘Hallo, the wall’s opening!’

‘That’s the entrance!’ Clara exclaimed. ‘If you follow me I’ll show you how it leads to the secret room.’ And she almost hugged herself in glee, for Clara very badly wanted to see the meeting of Edward Bell with the police. ‘Nancy, will you come with me?’

Nancy stared at the tomboy suspiciously. But Clara’s expression was as sweet as honey.

‘What’s the game?’ she muttered.

‘Game? No game,’ Clara said blankly. ‘You want the guilty man, don’t you, inspector? Well, if he’s in the secret room as you say, this is where you find him. This way.’ And Clara, without further ado, led the way.

The police followed. But ahead of the police went Nancy Bell, filled with wonder and not a little suspicion, and altogether at a loss to account for Clara Trevlyn’s willingness to help the police to find the man upon whose side she had heretofore shown herself such an active helper.

The door was reached. Clara slipped back the bolt.

‘This is the secret room,’ she told Inspector Winter.

He nodded. Clara stood aside. She did not want to go into the room to be denounced by Edward Bell, but she wanted to see what happened. But Nancy, all eagerness now to give away the man whose capture would save her brother, was the first to jump forward. And then she gave a gasping cry.

‘Edward!’

Edward Bell, standing at the window, jumped. He turned.

‘Nancy!’

Then the police swept in, and Inspector Winter, who in the dim light could not see Edward Bell’s face very clearly, stepped forward. He gripped the young man by the arm.

‘Got you!’ he said. ‘You come with us, young man!’ ‘But—’ Nancy said.

Edward Bell’s face shone with sudden fear. He saw the police—half a dozen of them—pouring in upon him. He did not understand. Fear, inspired by the guilt upon his own conscience, made him jump to a panicky conclusion.

‘Hang you, let me go!’ he shouted. ‘I never meant it. I didn’t mean to do it. I didn’t know it would send Bullivant to prison—’

‘Edward!’ Nancy yelled.

‘I didn’t!’ Edward Bell panted. ‘It—it was a mistake. I was only practising those names!’

‘What?’

Inspector Winter took another look at him.

‘Those names—the papers—’ And then Bell, seeing Nancy—seeing her white, desperate face—stopped. Perhaps something of the truth dawned upon him then. He drew back, realising that he had given himself away.

‘What’s this?’ Inspector Winter looked grim now. He gazed at the man, at his white, guilty-looking face, at the trembling Nancy, fear on every line of her features. ‘I think I recognise you now,’ he said. ‘You’re Edward Bell, aren’t you?’

The man gasped.

‘Yes.’

‘The man who was Grant Bullivant’s partner—who prosecuted him?’

‘Y-yes. But I never—’

‘Where is Grant Bullivant?’

‘I—I don’t know. He—he was here.’

‘And he’s got away, eh? And left you in his place?’ The inspector’s eyes glimmered.

‘Rather interested in the movements of Bullivant, weren’t you? How long was he here before your sister informed us of his whereabouts?’

‘Two days.’

‘Ah!’ The inspector nodded again. His face became keen, alert. ‘You knew he was here for two days. Yet you didn’t give him away. Why?’

Edward Bell looked hunted.

‘Well, I—I——’ he mouthed, and then realised the difficult situation he was in. He dreaded the police; dreaded now what they might discover; and anxious at any cost to remove suspicion from himself, rather gave himself away. ‘Well, you see, he—he had some papers I wanted.’

‘What sort of papers?’

‘Papers which proved this man’s guilt!’ Clara Trevlyn said, She stepped into the room now, her eyes flashing. ‘I know! And I know, too, where the papers are. Barbara Redfern has them!’

But then Nancy Bell stepped forward.

She was very sure of herself.

She was remembering that she had taken some papers from under Barbara Redfern’s pillow the previous night.

She had not read those papers, but before she had gone to sleep again she had stolen down to her study, and there, with the aid of a box of matches, had burnt them in her study fireplace.

Therefore, gone, she thought, was all the proof that could send her brother to prison.

‘Inspector Winter,’ she said, ‘don’t listen to what Clara has to say. She’s either inventing tales deliberately to get my brother into trouble, or she’s imagining things.’

The police and Edward Bell stared at Nancy then.

Nancy gave her brother an almost imperceptible nod.

‘Just one moment,’ said Inspector Winter. ‘This is the first time I’ve heard about any papers. Whose guilt do these papers prove?’ He turned to Edward Bell. ‘*Yours?*’

Nancy’s brother had recovered some of his self-composure, thanks to the hint that he thought Nancy was giving him, that she had destroyed the incriminating papers, as he had told her to, before phoning the police.

‘Not my guilt, of course,’ he blustered. ‘Grant Bullivant’s guilt.’

Inspector Winter stroked his chin.

‘Grant Bullivant was retaining papers that proved his own guilt?’ he said. ‘That seems a strange thing to do.’

‘There aren’t any papers, I tell you!’ burst in Nancy Bell, desperately trying to save her brother.

‘You be quiet just a minute, please,’ said Inspector Winter. ‘I want Mr. Bell to explain a statement that he made, if he will—’

Clara had opened her mouth to speak again, but she closed it without saying anything. If the inspector was likely to make Edward Bell further confess his own guilt, Clara was not going to stop that.

‘Now then, Mr. Bell,’ said Inspector Winter, ‘you said Grant Bullivant had some papers you wanted. What papers were those?’

Edward Bell searched his mind desperately for a reply.

‘There weren’t any papers,’ he said.

‘But you said there were.’

‘I was mistaken.’

‘And yet you dare not phone us—that is, the police for two days though you knew where Grant Bullivant was?’ queried Inspector Winter.

‘No—no, that’s not it at all,’ protested Edward Bell wildly. ‘You’re getting me all confused. I don’t know what I’m saying. I refuse to answer any more questions at present—’

Inspector Winter nodded.

‘You’re quite within your rights to do that,’ he said. ‘Everybody can retain the right to refuse to answer police questions until they’re in a police-court—but then they have to justify their reasons for withholding information, You’d rather not tell me why, though you knew where Grant Bullivant was hiding, two days elapsed before your sister got into communication with us?’

‘Yes,’ snapped Edward Bell.

Inspector Winter turned to Nancy Bell.

‘And you, miss,’ he said. ‘When did you learn where Grant Bullivant was in hiding?’

‘Only a few minutes before I phoned you,’ lied Nancy.

Inspector Winter nodded.

‘And how did you come by the information?’ he asked.

‘Er—’ Nancy stuttered and hesitated, and she shot a venomous glance at Clara Trevlyn. ‘I overheard something that Clara said to her chums,’ she declared spitefully.

‘Right,’ said Inspector Winter. ‘I’ll be questioning Miss Trevlyn in a moment. Now, answer me truthfully, Miss Bell—did you know anything of any papers that Grant Bullivant had?’

‘No,’ Nancy lied feverishly. ‘I tell you, those papers are an invention of Clara’s—’

‘Then you know of no reason why your brother should delay telling the police when he knew where Grant Bullivant was hiding?’ Inspector Winter pressed.

‘No!’ almost shouted Nancy.

Inspector Winter turned to Clara Trevlyn.

‘Miss Trevlyn, how long have you known how to get into this secret room?’

‘For quite a time, inspector,’ answered Clara frankly.

‘And has Grant Bullivant been hiding in this room?’

‘Yes.’

Clara spoke the word fearlessly.

‘You’ve known it, and, I dare say, have been helping him?’

‘Yes.’

Inspector Winter nodded.

‘I recall an incident reported by two of the prison warders—how they followed some of you girls to this tower. Was Grant Bullivant here then?’

Clara nodded.

‘You’ve been playing a dangerous game, Miss Trevlyn,’ Inspector Winter warned her.

‘I never imagined you and your friends were the kind of girls to try to defeat the ends of justice. What were your reasons?’

‘Because, as I have said before, my friend Barbara Redfern has the papers that will prove Grant Bullivant’s innocence. We’ve been searching for them, we found them, and we deceived Nancy Bell into thinking she’d robbed us of them.’

‘What!’ Nancy yelled.

‘Barbara has them. The papers you stole last night from under her pillow in the dormitory were fakes!’ Clara replied, and though she was not of a malicious turn of mind, she felt a grim satisfaction at sight of the sudden pallor that ran over Nancy’s

face. 'Those papers prove that this man forged his own cheque!' she added. 'It proves that he is the guilty party and not Grant Bullivant. And that's why he didn't give Grant Bullivant away—because he was afraid to while those papers were in existence!' There was silence. Edward Bell licked his dry lips. The grip of Inspector Winter tightened.

'Bell, is this true?'

Bell, craven and coward that he was, whimpered. A groan burst from his lips.

'I'm done!' he cried. 'Nancy, you fool! You fool! Why didn't you get hold of them? Why didn't you destroy them? You see what you've done—you see? I'm done! Yes, I may as well own up now. I did forge that cheque. I was in debt. I was being threatened. So I drew a cheque and got Bullivant to cash it at the bank, and when the bank said there wasn't enough money in my account to meet it, I accused Bullivant of forging it!'

'You rascal!' Clara cried.

'Shut up!' Nancy yelled.

'I won't! I—' And Clara backed away then. For Nancy, crazed with fear, realising at last that everything she had fought for had gone to the winds, realising that her brother had confessed, and blaming Clara for it, made a rush at her. Clara backed away; with one hand she caught Nancy.

'No, you don't!'

'Let me go! Let me—'

But now there was another commotion. Bell, taking advantage of that momentary scramble, suddenly broke away. He leapt for the door. In a flash he was on the other side of it, was leaping down the stairs. There came a roar from the police.

'Stop him!'

'He's getting away!'

But Bell was desperate now. Frantically he tore down the stairs. Hunted, desperate, the fear of imprisonment was strong upon him. He knew that he had given himself away. He knew that he would be sent to prison. That terror lent him wings.

Down the stairs he pelted, the police streaming in his wake. He dashed outside. At the same moment three girls, running across the clearing, saw him.

'Look!' exclaimed Barbara Redfern.

'He's getting away!'

'Stop him!' roared Inspector Winter. 'Stop him!'

Babs and Mabs and Janet rushed forward. But Bell, his face grey and desperate, charged straight on. He swerved to avoid Babs, pushed Janet, and she went rolling over and over. Mabs flung herself down trying to catch his legs, and grabbed desperately. But Bell jumped just in time. He flew on.

'Stop him!'

The police were in full cry now. Bell sprinted on. Now he was streaking for the road where the police car was waiting. He jumped into it, fumbled at the gears. The police, joined by Babs & Co., sprinted in pursuit. But it was too late.

A roar from the car, a belch of smoke from the exhaust, and the car was off.

Edward Bell had escaped!

He made his getaway. An hour later the car was found abandoned on the other side of Sarmouth, and the mystery of Edward Bell was complete.

Babs was not sorry. Now that everything was done, she felt rather more sorry for Nancy Bell. For Nancy, balked of her prey, found herself called upon to face the scorn of the school, the scorn of the police court.

For there were police proceedings, of course, and as a result of Babs & Co.'s

evidence, and the evidence of the police, who had heard the terror crazed confession of Edward Bell, Grant Bullivant was adjudged an innocent man once more, and was given his freedom.

Nancy, coming within an ace of being expelled, owed the fact that she was not sent away to Miss Bullivant, who, at Babs's request, pleaded for her.

'I'll give her a chance,' she told Babs. 'After all, Barbara, I wanted another chance, Nancy will think about it, I am sure. She will be grateful. But you, my girls—all of you—what can I do to thank you?'

'Just go away and get completely well again,' Babs smiled.

'I will.' Miss Bullivant sighed with happiness. 'And I never, never shall forget what you have done for Grant and me,' she said. 'And when I come back, Barbara—'

'When you come back?' Barbara asked softly.

'I will do my best—my very best—to make it up to you. Though that, actually, is impossible. I think you will find that I have changed, my dear—for the better. To you, Mabel, Clara, and Janet, I owe everything—and so does Grant here. Shall we ever forget, Grant?'

'Never!' Grant said fervently.

THE END

