

THE NEW HOUSE
MISTRESS

*

ELINOR M. BRENT-DYER

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“What on earth——” began the mistress ([page 49](#))

THE NEW HOUSE MISTRESS

by

ELINOR M. BRENT-DYER

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TO
DULCIE SHAW AND HILDA CROMBIE
WITH LOVE FROM ELINOR

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THE NEW HOUSE MISTRESS

CHAPTER I

MISS LESSING IS GOING

“LOOK at those babes!”

Gillian Thornaby turned at the words, and looked across the tennis courts to where a group of the middles were standing, all having a terrific argument, to judge by the way their heads and hands were moving.

“What on earth can be the matter with them?” she asked. “Are they proclaiming a strike, do you think, Janet?”

Janet Murdoch, her great friend, and head girl of the school, laughed. “It looks like it, I must say. I wonder what it’s all about.”

“Let’s stroll over and find out,” suggested Gillian, slipping her hand through her friend’s arm.

The two grandees of the Sixth made their way round the courts to where the group of some seven or eight girls were all standing together, gesticulating wildly. When they reached them, it was to find that all were badly upset about something, and Winifred Chester was in tears.

“Well,” said Janet, “what is the trouble? And why are you crying, Winifred?” She was promptly assailed by a chorus which made her cover her ears with her hands, and cry wildly, “Be quiet, all of you! I will *not* listen if you all try to talk at once! Now then,” as they obeyed her, “you, Barbara Allan! What has happened to you all?”

Barbara Allan, a slim, dark child of fourteen, who was reputedly the leader of the middles, turned a scowling face on the head girl as she replied briefly, “Miss Lessing’s leaving at the end of the half term.”

“Miss Lessing leaving? Are you *sure*, Barbara?”

Janet sounded surprised. Miss Lessing, the popular house mistress of the Middle House at St. Helen’s School, was the last person she would have chosen as being likely to leave. Every one knew, of course, that she was engaged to be married, and the general opinion was that the man was jolly lucky. But every one also knew that he was in New Zealand, working on a great sheep farm at present, and was not likely to be coming home for another year.

“She t-told us h-herself,” tearfully answered Winifred. “Mr. Anderton has got an un-un-unexpected l-l-leave——”

“Dry up, Win!” interrupted Barbara. “Here’s a hanky! It’s true, Janet,” she went on to the head girl. “She told us at breakfast. She’s leaving at *half* term, ’cos he wants to take her back with him, and she has lots to do. The Head is making it all right for her, ’cos Mr. Anderton will only be here six weeks. So she’s going in a fortnight’s time, and—and we’re having a new house mistress.”

Janet’s face had grown sober as Barbara proceeded with her unexpected news. It would have been trying enough in any case to have Miss Lessing leave at the end of term. But half-way through, and with all the middles taking it as badly as it was evident they were doing, it looked to the head girl as though things might happen.

“It’s hard luck on us, of course,” she said as she hurriedly cast about in her mind for something to say that would help to set them right again. “But all the same, it’s very jolly for Miss Lessing. If I were you, Winifred, I would try not to let her see you howling. It might spoil her pleasure, and you don’t want to do that, I suppose?”

Winifred made an effort, and choked down her sobs before she replied, “I d-don’t; but, oh! I can’t think *how* I’m going to bear the rest of the t-term w-without her!”

“Oh, stop that wailing!” said Gillian irritably “You’re a regular Mrs. Gummidge, Winifred. What you’ve all got to do is to buck up and show Miss Lessing how glad you are for her. Barbara, take that child away, and make her stop crying, and the rest of you get something to do, and don’t stand about there when you are supposed to be playing tennis!”

Gillian was games prefect, so the middles could say nothing further on the subject. They moved off obediently, while Barbara, seizing the lachrymose Winifred by the shoulder, shook her slightly as the best means of bringing her to her senses, and said, “Stop howling, Win! It won’t do any one any good, and, anyway, we’ve got to think of a present for her.”

Thus adjured, Winifred managed to mop up her tears, and the pair then joined their own tribe, who were in the games shed, finding the nets of balls dedicated to their team, and grumbling loudly all the time over the “bossiness” of the seniors.

“It’s all very well for them!” declared Marjorie Lennox as she disentangled one lot of balls from another. “Miss Lessing isn’t *their* house mistress, so they don’t care!”

Clare Morris, a small girl of fourteen, with the face of an angel, and the disposition of a mischievous imp, suddenly looked up. "Here's Barby," she said. "Come on, Barby! I've got an idea."

"What is it?" demanded Barbara.

"Where are those wretched seniors?"

Enid Treherne peered anxiously forth, and announced that Janet and Gillian were playing with Greta Worsley and Mary Setoun-Smith on the special court reserved for the school tennis four, so they were safe for a time.

"Come on, then! Council in the hayloft!" And Barbara led the rush from the tennis court to the stable-yard, where George, the man-of-all-work, was busy with some job of his own, and paid no heed to the middles, who dashed across the yard and into the stables—now empty, since the school wagonettes had been replaced by motor buses—and swarmed up the ladder into the loft, which they regarded as their special property. There was not much hay in it, but it was a gorgeous place for meetings, and so long as they shut down the trap-door once they were up, and were careful not to bring any hay into school, the Head allowed them to use it during their free hours.

They sat down in a circle on the floor, while Marjorie shut the trap, and then all turned to Clare.

"Get on with it!" ordered Barbara briefly.

"Well, it's only this. Miss Lessing is leaving. We're going to have a new house mistress. Let's give her the time of her life!"

They were quick enough to grasp her meaning, and seven faces lit up with a wicked glee.

"We could do it easily," said Enid, with a chuckle. "She'll be absolutely new, and not know any of our traditions, of course."

"We'll make her sorry she took Lessy's place!" supplemented Marjorie.

"It'll be something to do, anyway," decided Barbara. "Righto! I'm on."

"So'm I!" Monica Cliveden sat up, shaking her long brown hair out of her eyes. "We've just a fortnight to get ready in, and we've got to think of Lessy's present too, so we haven't much time. You'd better call a meeting as soon as poss, Barby, to decide what we're going to do."

"Can't we decide now?" asked Winifred. She was a pretty child with not many brains, and a sentimental disposition. She followed Barbara implicitly in most ways, and had never yet been known to oppose anything the latter strong-minded young person might suggest.

“We’d better have a meeting here after tea,” said Barbara. “You can all be thinking up schemes in the meanwhile.”

“Not much chance to think up schemes when we’re tennising,” said Enid Treherne’s twin sister, Elaine. “Miss Morgan doesn’t leave you much time to think.”

“She’ll leave us less than ever if we don’t get to the courts at once,” declared Barbara. “Come on, you people! We’re late enough as it is, and it’s too much to hope that the others have got the balls out and the nets up! We’d better buck!”

They left the loft, and tore back to the courts, where it was discovered that Barbara had maligned the rest of the middles, for the nets were all ready, and the balls were lying on the courts waiting for them. Miss Morgan had not yet come, so they occupied themselves in stilling the curiosity of the others.

The Octave, as they were generally known in the school, were the leaders of middle school. With the exception of Winifred, who had been admitted as Barbara’s chum, they were all girls of character, and though the rest of the middles might sometimes grumble at their sovereignty, they followed them, on the whole, with great meekness. So, when they had been informed that a meeting of the Octave would take place that evening, and that they would soon know what it was about, they calmed down a little, and when Miss Morgan finally came from the Head, with whom she had been conferring, she found them playing practice setts with much vigour and enthusiasm till she should turn up.

“Good people!” she said, with a relieved look, for she had just been discussing with Miss Blake how the middles would take Miss Lessing’s sudden departure. “Make up your setts properly now. Oh, do you want to finish Barbara’s sett? Very well. And then you can split up and play with Olive and Dorothy, and Jessie Barton and Violet Mayne.”

Under the martinet eye of the games mistress they had no further chance for discussion, and they had to give their whole minds to what they were doing, for she made them have a high standard, and keep up to it as well as they could. They played hard for the next forty minutes, and when they were released they had to run to get into their form room in time for their general knowledge lesson with the Head.

After tea, however, they had an hour to themselves before they need go to prep, which lasted from six to seven. Luckily, none of the Octave were down for practice during that period, as they very well might have been. So, as soon as grace had been said, they tore up to their rooms to change for the

evening, and when they were ready they raced downstairs, and congregated round a big oak-tree in the grounds: their light frocks were not the thing for the loft, and they well knew what matron's wrath would be should they mess them up by going there.

"We've awfully little time," said Barbara when they were all settled. "We want to make things as rotten as we can for whoever takes Lessy's place. Go ahead in turn, each of you, and suggest something."

Clare was the first. "I vote we pretend not to understand when she gives orders," she said. "I don't mean not do them, but do them wrong. It ought to be easy enough!"

"And if she tells us things, we can always say we've never done it like that before," added Gwen Ferrars, with great lack of lucidity.

"Supposing she tells us to do things just as we've done them, though?" asked Winifred.

"Well, she's not likely to do that always," returned Gwen. "Of course, the usual things we'll *have* to do. But she's certain to make changes sometimes."

"I think you're all idiots!" said Barbara suddenly. "What's the use of being footling about it? The best thing we can do is to tell her that we hate her, and let her see we're at war with her from the first."

"Oh, Barbara! But what if she reports us?" asked Winifred, who was a canny young person in some ways, and had a wholesome fear of Miss Blake's wrath.

"If she's sneak enough to do that, well, let her!" retorted Barbara.

"There'll be an awful row," murmured Marjorie, a look of half-delighted terror dawning on her face. She revelled in "rows," and managed to get into more scrapes than any other girl in the middle school.

"Of course, if you're going to funk a little trouble—" Barbara stopped scornfully. Her expression settled it. Winifred hated to be at odds with her beloved Barbara.

When they finally broke up it was all settled, and the successor of Miss Lessing, whoever she might be, was in for a charming time if the middles had anything to say in the matter!

CHAPTER II

THE ARRIVAL OF MISS OSWALD

THE fortnight that remained to the half term exeat passed swiftly—too swiftly for the middles, who remained utterly disconsolate—and Miss Lessing took her departure amid a chorus of good wishes from the girls and the rest of the staff.

“I am very glad for Miss Lessing’s sake that things have so arranged themselves,” said Miss Blake to Miss Morgan and Miss Browne the senior mistress, as they sat having coffee with her that evening. “It has been a long waiting for them both, and it looked as though it would be at least a year longer. Also, I am not sorry on the girls’ behalf. They were becoming thoroughly sentimental about her—even those scaramouches, Barbara Allan, Clare Morris, and Marjorie Lennox. The rest are like little sheep, of course. What Barbara, Clare, and Marjorie do, they do.”

“Oh, schoolgirls are always like that,” said Miss Browne easily. “Let’s hope this will put a stop to that sort of thing. One doesn’t want the girls to be too matter-of-fact, but they were really becoming absurd.”

“I wonder how they’ll like Angela Oswald,” mused Miss Morgan. She looked at the others, and a laugh glimmered in her blue eyes. “They aren’t to know, I suppose?”

“Oh, I think not. It will be far better for them all if they make friends without knowing anything at all. Even Janet and Gillian, who have been here the longest of any of our present girls, came after she had left, and though her name is on the Honours Board, I question if they will link up the two. In fact, I think nothing would be more unlikely. No; we will let matters take their own course.”

“I quite agree with you,” said Miss Browne. “They are far more likely to settle down with her if they know nothing about her beforehand.”

“In any case, Angela herself doesn’t want it,” added the Head. “Let me show you her letter.”

She found the letter, and read it aloud to the two mistresses. Then the session broke up for the night, Miss Morgan going off to bed, as she wanted to be up early to give the tennis four an extra coaching, and Miss Browne making her way to the staff room to correct the Sixth Form essays, while Miss Blake, left to herself, picked up a new anthology of verse that had come by the afternoon post, and speedily became lost to the world.

This was on the Friday night, and on Monday the girls came back from their exeat, and found that Miss Oswald had already arrived. The middles, fresh from a week-end of home, were ripe for any mischief, but their spirits were rather damped when they were met by the Treherne twins, who had arrived first, with the news that Miss Oswald was here.

“Blow!” said Barbara. “I was going to give her a jolly little welcome.”

“What’s she like?” demanded Marjorie, sitting down on her case in the hall.

“Little—dark—looks rather feeble,” reported Enid.

“Has a very soft voice,” added Elaine. “We’ll soon settle *her!*”

At this inauspicious moment the new house mistress came down the stairs, and paused as she reached the foot when she saw the group of excited girls. Then she came forward. “Good-evening, girls,” she said, and they all noted that what Elaine had said about her voice was correct. “I am Miss Oswald. I hope you all had a pleasant week-end?”

The reception her little speech received was somewhat disconcerting. Barbara scowled blackly at her, Winifred doing her best to imitate it; Marjorie giggled, and Clare and Monica stared at her.

Miss Oswald went faintly pink, much to the glee of the middles, but she took no further notice of their rude behaviour. Perhaps the welcome accorded her by the twins had already warned her of what she had to expect. She passed on into her sitting-room, leaving the girls in the hall, and shut the door firmly behind her.

Barbara stared after her. “Come on,” she said gruffly. “We’d better be going upstairs and getting ready for supper.”

They picked up their cases, and marched upstairs to their cubicles, where they dumped their burdens down, and after taking off their out-door things, and dropping them anywhere, came together to discuss the new mistress.

“She’s just a kid!” said Marjorie. “I call it the limit to give us *that* for a house mistress!”

“She’s frightfully plain! What a come-down after Lessy!” sighed Monica, who was by way of being artistic. “She’s got no colour, and with that black hair, and those huge eyes, she looks half-starved.”

“Her eyes aren’t bad,” said Enid, who was also artistic, “and she has a pretty mouth. She isn’t anything like Miss Lessing, of course, but she’s not so bad as all that, Monny!”

“Oh, bother her looks!” burst out Barbara irritably. “Who cares for that? The thing is that she’s going to be bossy! I can feel it in my bones!”

A fresh inroad in the long dormitory, which was built to take fifteen cubicles, enlarged the group, and Jessie Barton and Olive Frewin were eagerly demanding to know what the new mistress was like.

“She’s going to be—interfering,” said Barbara slowly.

“Is she? What a bore!” Jessie, a plump, placid person, knitted her brows. “Lessy never bothered us too much. So long as we kept rules, she was awfully decent.”

“How do you *mean* interfering, Barby?” asked Olive.

“Oh, I don’t know—just interfering,” was the vague answer.

“Well, *I’m* not going to be interfered with!” cried Mollie Robson, a harum-scarum young person who spent most of her time tumbling into and out of scrapes. “I think she sounds horrid! I vote we don’t put up with her!”

This was the general attitude, and when Miss Oswald came to take supper, she found her fifty charges all sat stolidly through her little speech in which she hoped that they would all be good friends when they got to know each other, while one or two of the girls were openly rude, Barbara even going so far as to yawn. Schoolgirls, as Miss Blake had remarked, are very like sheep. If one or two of them are strong characters, the rest generally follow them, and in this case the Octave simply led the rest by the nose, for they were all popular, even the sentimental Winifred having her following, who declared that she was at least lovely, if she was nothing else.

Miss Oswald was a sensible person, so she took no notice as yet of their open hostility. A little conversation she had had with the Head before she had come over to Middle House had partly prepared her for it, and she knew that, as a rule, least said was soonest mended when you were dealing with people in their early teens. So she gave the signal for rising, said grace, and then dismissed them, reminding them that prayers would take place in half an hour, and left them to their own devices.

They went out into the garden, where the Octave spent the short time in planning out a part of their immediate campaign. They were so interested in this that they took no notice of the others, till a wild shriek made them look round to where it came from. At the bottom of the garden were some tall Lombardy poplars, and, well up one of these, was a pink object which they easily recognized as Mollie Robson. The tree was swaying and bending in a most unpleasant manner, and Mollie, who had climbed it as a “dare,” but who had lost her nerve when it began to swing, was utterly unable to get

either up or down. It was obvious that something must be done to rescue her from her dangerous position; but no one dared attempt the climb, for, as it was, it looked as though the top of the tree would break off at any minute.

Barbara was the only one who really kept her head. While Winifred cast herself on the ground in a storm of frightened tears, and the others shrieked all manner of impossible instructions to Mollie, she dashed round to the stable-yard, where she was lucky enough to meet George, who was just going home.

“George! Miss Mollie is in one of the Lombardies!” she called. “Fetch a ladder!”

Then she turned and sped back, while George, startled out of his usual slowness, hurried back to the stable for a ladder. When she got back to the lawn she found that matron and Miss Oswald were both there, having heard the noise. The new mistress had a coil of rope in her hands, and she seemed to be making a knot in it at one end. Even as Barbara reached the group she called out, “Keep quiet, Mollie! Catch the rope when it comes!”

Then she made for an oak-tree which stood near, and went up it at top speed. When she was slightly above the terrified Mollie she stopped, and going out as far along the branch as she dared, hurled the rope, in which she had made a noose, with a sureness of aim which sent it well over the child’s head. Mollie, somewhat reassured by the coolness of the mistress’s tones, managed to get it over her shoulders, and then, on the word of command smartly given, loosed her grasp of the tree, and let herself go. Miss Oswald hauled at the same moment, so that she swung midway between the ground and the oak-tree bough, and then gently lowered her, while the poplar, relieved of the weight, swung back. Once she was safely on the ground Mollie soon recovered her natural self-possession, and when the mistress had reached her was almost herself, though she was rather paler than ordinary.

“Are there no rules against climbing those Lombardies?” asked Miss Oswald, who looked a good deal more upset than the child.

“No,” said Barbara.

“Then will you all please understand that, for the future, no one is to attempt it. Mollie might have been killed if the tree had broken. It is a most dangerous thing to try to climb poplar trees, and no one is ever to do it again.”

The girls heard her in silence. Truth to tell, they were filled with admiration for the quickness of her action. Some of them, at any rate,

realized that she had practically saved Mollie's life. There could be no doubt but that the tree must have gone in another minute. Mollie herself knew it, and she came forward with a fiery face.

"Thanks awfully," she mumbled.

Miss Oswald looked at her for a moment. "You needn't thank me," she said. "Naturally, I was only too glad to be able to pull you out of this scrape. I think it is almost time for prayers now, so perhaps we had better all go in. You aren't hurt, are you, Mollie?"

"No, thanks," replied Mollie.

"Ah, I am glad to hear that. We will say no more about it then. Only remember what I have said, girls."

She led the way in, with a white-faced matron beside her, and took prayers as calmly as though her shoulders were not aching badly with the wrench she had given them during the few moments she had supported Mollie's weight on the rope. Then she dismissed them to bed, and betook herself to her own room.

"I say," said Mollie soberly, as she walked down the corridor with Barbara and Winifred, "she really did save my life, you know. That beastly tree was groaning like anything! It would have gone in another moment."

"You're an ass, Moll!" said Barbara heartlessly. "What possessed you to do such a thing?"

"Dared," said Mollie laconically. "I say, Barby, I'm awfully sorry, but I don't feel as if I could—er—fight her just at present."

"No one wants you to after that," replied Barbara icily; "but it's rather a pity you should have given her such a jolly chance to butt in!"

Mollie said no more, but she went to her cubicle an unhappy girl that night. She admired Barbara immensely, and would have given almost anything to have been able to follow her; but even her conscience was not elastic enough to let her defy the mistress who had saved her life like that.

CHAPTER III

THE DORMITORY ROW

FOR about two days there was peace in the Middle House. Naturally Miss Blake, to whom Miss Oswald had been obliged to report the happenings of Monday, had sent for them all and read them a lecture on recklessness.

Mollie had come in for a double dose, which had rather cooled down her gratitude for the house mistress's rescue of her. Miss Blake had been very emphatic about the wickedness of doing such a thing.

"It was practically throwing your life away!" she said severely. "You may not have thought of that—but it is true, nevertheless. It was a scatterbrained thing to do. You have no right to risk your life for a foolish prank. If I were not sure that you had had a thorough fright this time, I should punish you most severely. As it is, I shall say no more; but if you persist in these doings, Mollie, I shall have to consider whether we dare keep you here."

Mollie had wept bitterly over this. It had only been a joke; she had meant nothing more by it. The serious view the authorities took of the matter made it another thing entirely. The Head's final sentence had frightened her even more than those sickening moments in the poplar, and she was almost unnaturally subdued.

As for the others, the scolding they had received from the Head for daring Mollie—she had soon got *that* out of them—allied to the fact that one or two of the more thoughtful of them still felt queer when they remembered how near to death or disablement the girl had been, made them disinclined for any defiance of authority. They had all been put on their honour not to climb the poplars again, and Miss Blake had added a few serious words on the subject of trust.

However, this state of things could not last long, and it was Miss Oswald herself who precipitated the next trouble.

Miss Lessing had been very strict about the rule against girls visiting each other's cubicles after hours. Any girl caught breaking it was assured of sharp punishment. Miss Oswald was no less strict, and they were prepared for that. What they were not prepared for was her rule that no one might go up to the dormitories during school hours unless she had first obtained permission from either the house mistress or matron.

If it had been fine weather no one would have minded that, for on most days the girls spent all their free time in the gardens. But, unfortunately, after half term the weather changed, and when Thursday came it came with such a steady downpour of rain as made it impossible for them to do anything but stay in the house. Even the walks they had had on the two previous days were out of the question to-day. This meant that after breakfast they had a full half-hour to spare.

Some of them retired to the common room with stamps and post cards, and all the other collections that were absorbing them this year. Two or three

people went over to school at once, and lounged about their form rooms. The rest, amongst whom were five of the Octave, marched off to their dormitory, and prepared to hold an indignation meeting about the weather. Miss Oswald, passing the door at the time, heard them, came in, and remarked that as they knew they were breaking rules they were therefore prepared for penalties, and awarded them an order-mark each. After this she sent them downstairs, and proceeded to her own quarters quite serenely.

The delinquents themselves were furious. This happened to have been a rule that Miss Lessing had been lenient over, and they raged *privatim et seriatim* during the short time that was left them before they got into raincoats and sou'westers, and went across to school.

"It's a shame!" proclaimed Barbara. "We've always done it—Miss Lessing never minded! Just because this peacock of a woman comes in her place, all our decent times are stopped!"

"I wish you'd stop jabbering!" put in Violet Mayne at this point. "I'm trying to get these wretched rules for what governs the ablative into my head, and I simply can't learn a thing while you are yapping on like this."

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Barbara, who was irritated at having to take an order-mark, and who had planned to play a tennis match against Clare that afternoon.

"Barbara Allan!" said matron's voice in horrified tones from the doorway; "have you forgotten yourself?"

Barbara pulled up short, turned red. That particular expression had been forbidden at the beginning of the term, and if she had not been in such a temper she would not have used it.

"You can take an order-mark," said matron. "And please go upstairs and put your top drawer tidy before you go over to school. I never saw such a disgraceful mess in my life!"

Barbara glanced at the clock, realized that she had a bare ten minutes in which to do it, and fled. She found the contents of her top drawer on her bed, and it took her a good quarter of an hour to put it to rights, by which time she was late for prayers. What made that all the more maddening was the fact that Miss Blake was a little late herself, and had only just gone in when the girl came out of the cloak-room.

Four order-marks in one morning—her untidy drawer had meant one—were rather more than Barbara could face with equanimity, for five in one week meant that she would be debarred from the Saturday evening party, and would have to spend her time by herself at Middle House while the

others fox-trotted and waltzed gaily round the hall at school. She withdrew to her form room, and sulked for the rest of the morning.

As if to show just how badly a day *could* turn out, Mademoiselle took it into her head to demand some French poetry which they were supposed to have learnt the week before. Barbara, with amazing carelessness for her, had neglected to learn it, and by the time the lesson was over she was facing the fact that she had to spend her free time that afternoon in learning and writing it out, and also had to go to the Head at twelve for being rude to Mademoiselle.

Miss Blake was very grave about it all, and she told Barbara firmly that if this sort of thing occurred again she would have her games cut for a week, and have to go walks instead.

Accordingly, when eight-thirty and bedtime came, Miss Allan was in a mood to do anything. What she actually did was to start a pillow-fight. She flung her pillow at Violet, who had come to apologize for getting her into a row with matron, and Violet, not unnaturally resenting this reception of her well-meant apologies, returned the compliment. In five minutes every one of the fifteen girls had pushed up their curtains, and the air was full of hurtling pillows.

Clare, grabbing at one too violently, tore it, and in some miraculous way also tore the stout ticking in which it was encased. The room was covered with feathers, and one or two people began to choke and cough. A pillow, flung by Mollie, set the electric light swinging, and the bulb caught against the wall and was smashed to atoms. This did rather calm the girls down, but Barbara, with the light of battle in her eyes, snatched at a pillow from the floor, and hurled it full at Gwen, who dodged. It sped on towards the door, and caught Miss Oswald full in the chest as she entered the dormitory, drawn thither by the awful noise of the battle. Miss Oswald gave a gasp, and sat down suddenly and violently, while the girls stood by appalled at what had happened. Even Barbara herself was a little startled.

The mistress got to her feet as quickly as she could, fully aware that she was not cutting a very dignified figure on the floor, and looked at the girls.

“Who started all this?” she asked.

“I did,” said Barbara, in as insolent tones as she dared.

“But we joined in,” added Clare, Gwen, Marjorie, and half a dozen others.

Miss Oswald ignored them, and kept her attention on the girl who had spoken first. “And what damage has been done?” she queried, in such a

conversational tone of voice that one or two of them quite gasped.

“If you look, you’ll see for yourself,” replied Barbara, who seemed to be possessed to-night.

“I know that, but I prefer that you should tell me,” was the equable reply.

Barbara had gone as far as even she dared, and there was something about Miss Oswald, despite her lack of anger, that quelled the girl’s fury. So she pointed to the forlorn fragments of the electric bulb, and said, more meekly than they had expected to hear her, that a pillow had also been torn.

“I did that, though,” protested Clare loyally. “Barbara had nothing to do with that, Miss Oswald.”

Miss Oswald looked at her. “I see. Well, you people seem to have done a fair amount of damage, considering that you are not supposed to be young hooligans. I think you had better try to set it right. Marjorie, put on your dressing-gown and bedroom slippers, and go and ask Annie for a brush and dust-pan. Barbara can sweep up the broken glass, while you—Violet, isn’t it?—can see that none has gone into your bed. Then you can all pick up these feathers and put them back into the case, after which Clare can take it to matron. To-morrow, Clare, you may mend it, and the girl who flung it—you, Monica?—can mend the slip. Now, be quick, Marjorie.”

There was nothing for it but to do as they were told. Marjorie went off for the brush and dust-pan, and when Barbara, seething with anger, had swept the floor clear of glass, they all had to turn to and pick up the feathers. It was half-past ten before they were finished, and Clare had taken the pillow to matron’s room, where it was received with a grimness that struck terror into her heart. Then they went to bed, and Miss Oswald spoke her final words before switching off the light.

“It is now nearly eleven. Your ‘lights out’ is at nine, I believe. That means that you have missed two hours’ sleep. You can make it up to-morrow afternoon in your free time. Immediately after dinner all the girls in this dormitory will come across, take off their frocks, and put on their dressing-gowns and lie down on their beds for three-quarters of an hour. You will do the same after tea. While you are lying down no girl is to speak to another. No girl is to bring a book with her, and every one is to try honestly to sleep. That is all. Good-night, girls.”

A sullen silence answered her. She took her hand off the switch.

“I said ‘good-night,’ girls.”

A mumble from a far bed was the only reply. She laughed pleasantly.

“I had no idea that you had been allowed to forget your manners,” she said.

That was all, but there was a sting in it which hurt. She switched off the light without saying anything more, and left the dormitory, leaving behind her fifteen people who were boiling with rage.

She had asked for trouble. Well, the members of Dormitory Number Three would see that she got it!

CHAPTER IV

A LITTLE TENNIS

THE next day turned out to be as fine as the preceding one had been wet, and the disgusted middle school people of Dormitory Three said many hard things about Miss Oswald when they realized that, fine as it was, they would have to go to bed as she had said, to make up that lost two hours of sleep.

Miss Oswald herself was sorry, when she saw the early morning sunshine, that she had made this her punishment, but she knew better than to go back on her word. Once let her do that, and all chance of maintaining discipline would be at an end. So after dinner she sent the fifteen upstairs, and arrived herself ten minutes later to settle them. They were all on their beds, and as it was a hot day she made no attempt to cover them. She went to the big windows at each end of the dormitory, and the three smaller ones at the side, and drew close the jalousies which covered them, darkening the room, but, since the slats were opened, admitting plenty of air. Then she left them and went down to her sitting-room, where she put in the time writing a letter to Miss Lessing of all people!

As she had taken the precaution of putting them on their honour to be silent, they were deprived of even the pleasure of talking, and in less than ten minutes, several of them were well on the way to making up the slumber they had lost the night before. Even Clare was soon sleeping peacefully, and presently only Barbara and Gwen were left awake. Gwen was going over in her mind a story she had begun to invent, and was perfectly happy. Not so Barbara. She was one of the unfortunate people who cannot sleep during the day—as a little child she had rarely had all the sleep that her people thought necessary for her—and she was too angry, still, to rest. She tossed uneasily from side to side, hating Miss Oswald more every minute. The even breathing on all sides got on her nerves, and she felt ready to scream with

irritation when finally the bell sounded and they were able to get up. And there was still another hour of this *footling* punishment to be got through! Barbara felt that she couldn't bear it.

Their first period was games, and they all dressed in their white games frocks, and then streamed downstairs. Clare slipped her arm through Barbara's as they went.

"Play with me if Taffy lets us, old thing, will you?" she said. "Taffy" was, of course, Miss Morgan.

"Yes; *if* she lets us, which she won't!" said Barbara pessimistically. She was prepared to look on the black side of everything to-day.

"She may. And we'll ask Gwen and Marjorie to play us, shall we?"

"What's the use of planning? Taffy's sure to say we've got to muck about with some hopeless people like Olive and Dorothy, or Gladys Turner and Maisie Calthrop!"

"Oh, well, you never know," said Clare, who was of too sunny a nature to be downcast for long.

As they had reached the courts by this time, and Miss Morgan was there waiting for them, she withdrew her arm, since "linking" was forbidden, and they came up to the mistress very demurely.

"Oh, there you are," she said brightly. "I want you two to split up and play with Gladys Anderson and Lois Henfrey. Go to court eleven. Miss Oswald will be there to coach. And, Barbara, remember what I've said to you about poaching. You seem to think that when you have a bad partner you must do all the work, and it isn't good for either of you. Let her do her share. Now run along, both of you. Gladys and Lois have the balls."

She turned away to adjust fresh setts, and the two went off in a melancholy silence which lasted nearly till they reached the court, which was at the other side of the garden.

Then Barbara turned to Clare.

"What did I tell you?" she said. "Gladys *and* Lois! Oh, my aunt!"

"Well, Lois isn't so bad," said Clare consolingly. "If we get through soon enough we may get in a singles. We can try, anyhow!"

"And that *beast* Miss Oswald for coach!" burst out Barbara.

Clare glanced round nervously to see if any one in authority were within hearing. "Beast" was a forbidden word, and Barbara had plenty of order-marks as it was. Luckily there were no mistresses nearer than the court, and

the only prefect in sight was Ailsa Cunningham, who was far too occupied with the four she was coaching to pay any attention to outsiders.

Barbara gripped her racket fiercely, and went on with a scowl on her face that quite outdid any previous efforts of hers.

Miss Oswald was waiting for them, with Gladys and Lois, two nice children from the Upper Third, but neither with much idea as yet of tennis. Lois would probably play well some day, but Gladys was very poor.

Barbara and Clare, two of the best players in the middle school, felt indignant that they should be asked to spend their games time with the pair. But Miss Morgan had a theory that it did the weak players good to work with good ones, and was not bad practice for the brilliant people, since it enabled them to learn how to carry a bad partner while giving her her fair share of the work.

Miss Oswald came forward briskly, though inwardly she was rather dismayed at her task. She had a very good idea of what the pair just arriving were feeling about her, and though it is impossible to pay much attention to feelings of that kind in schoolgirls, she wished Miss Morgan had given her another four to coach. However, the girls knew nothing about this; and all they saw was that she was coming to meet them with a smile that, under the circumstances, was irritating to say the least of it.

“Come along,” she said. “Will you toss for partners?”

They spun their rackets, and “of course,” as Barbara put it, she got Gladys, who was decidedly the worse of the pair. They spun for service, and she found herself taking the shady side, while Clare and Lois crossed over into the sunshine. Then the game started.

Clare served first, to Gladys. It was quite an easy ball to take, perfectly straightforward, and not too high. Unfortunately Gladys ran in too close, and the ball struck the ground at her feet. She was unable to run back quickly enough, so there was a point simply *given* away to their opponents.

Miss Oswald made no comment. It might have been nervousness that made Gladys do that. Barbara stood ready to take service next, and Clare, with no idea of letting her off, whatever she might do with Gladys, sent her a swift one. To her amazement Barbara let it go past her.

“Was it out?” she called, for to her mind that could have been the only reason for no return.

Barbara shook her head, and, greatly wondering, Clare changed courts again with Lois and served to Gladys, who managed to send a feeble return that skied horribly, but still got over the net. Clare smashed it down, but not

so badly that Barbara couldn't have returned it if she had chosen. She didn't choose, and they had won three points of the game. Clare served to her friend a ball that was meant to be a smasher. Just at the crucial moment, however, her racket slipped, and it lobbed gently across. Barbara took it, and returned it with all her force, so that it fell dead along the ground—an absolutely untakable return.

“Good!” said Miss Oswald. “Forty-fifteen.”

The next service, to Gladys, decided the game, for Gladys ran in as usual, and couldn't touch the ball in consequence.

“Game!” called the mistress. “Gladys, you must stand farther back to receive service. You run in too close! Barbara, it's your service, isn't it?”

Barbara took the balls Gladys offered her, and sent her first service to Clare. It was a beautiful stroke, one inch above the net, and so swift that it completely beat Clare. The next, to Lois, was almost exactly the same, and Lois uttered a little squeal of dismay as she saw it coming. Barbara and Gladys won that game completely on Barbara's service; and then, having shown the mistress what she *could* do, Barbara settled down to give the worst performance she had ever given since she was ten. When she got her balls over the net she skied them atrociously. Her service was disgraceful, one game going to Clare and Lois by a series of double faults of which even Gladys would have been ashamed. Miss Oswald's face hardened as she watched the exhibition. It was quite obvious to the meanest intelligence that Barbara wasn't attempting to play. They won the last game but one of the sett, and then again off Barbara's service. For the final game, she simply let the balls go past her, or else sent them into the net. When it was over, Miss Oswald set Gladys and Lois to play a singles, and sent the other two off to Miss Morgan in case they were needed to make up another sett. Miss Morgan, however, was full up, and didn't want them, so she sent them over to the special court to have a singles by themselves; and there they fought out a hard battle, into which Barbara put most of her ill-temper, with the result that when it was over she was feeling nearly normal again. Miss Oswald, who had finished with her other pair, came over and watched it, and as she saw that both girls were unusually good for young players her lips tightened. She was prepared to forgive a good deal, but that doubles on court eleven seemed to her simply an exhibition of childish bad temper and unsporting feeling.

The two girls were in the midst of a fierce rally when the bell rang, and they had to stop.

“Hard luck!” called Miss Morgan, who had spared a minute or two at the end of the period to come and watch. “You must finish it another time. How are the games?”

“Four-three,” panted Clare, as she wriggled into her blazer.

“Well, get up early to-morrow, and you can finish before breakfast. Run along in now, or you’ll be late for your next lesson.”

The two girls ran off, and Miss Morgan, after receiving the reports of the prefects on duty in other courts, strolled back to the house with Miss Oswald.

“What do you think of Barbara?” she asked. “Clare’s a very good player, of course; but she simply isn’t in it where Barbara’s concerned.”

“I think she’s the most unsporting girl I ever came across!” burst out Miss Oswald. The next minute she could have bitten out her tongue for having voiced her feelings like this.

Miss Morgan stared at her. “Barbara unsporting!” she cried. “What *can* you mean? She’s one of the best girls we have. Fiery-tempered, of course, but still ‘unsporting’ is the last adjective I should have chosen to describe her. She is absolutely game, and she can take a beating splendidly. My dear, what are you talking about?”

Miss Oswald murmured something about having made a mistake, and Miss Morgan, after another curious look at her colleague, turned the conversation by asking how she had got on with her four.

“Gladys is very poor,” said Miss Oswald, “but Lois ought to be quite good later on. She’s too careless at present, and, of course, she hasn’t much strength. But she has some idea of service, and she does try to place her balls.”

As Clare and Barbara were, to the games mistress’s mind, as good as she could expect for their age, she made no remark about them, and since the Third Lower were just coming out for their tennis, she let the matter drop, and joined them, while the new mistress went on to school, where she wanted to see Miss Blake about some things wanted for Middle House.

All the same, she wished she had held her tongue about Barbara Allan. She had fancied at first that the girl’s bad play had been the result of sulkiness over having to play at all with Gladys and Lois. Now she was inclined to think it had a good deal to do with the attitude adopted by the middles towards herself. She wondered how long it would take them to come to their senses.

“I suppose I *could* make it easier for myself if I would let Miss Blake tell them,” she said to herself as she turned down the corridor leading to the Head’s study, “but, somehow, I’d rather she didn’t. I’d far rather win them myself.”

CHAPTER V

BARBARA RECEIVES A LETTER

“BARBY! a letter for you from India.”

Barbara turned round as Clare came racing across the grass to her, the precious letter in her outstretched hand.

“Thank goodness!” she ejaculated, as she took it. “It’s about time I had a letter! They’ve sent me nothing but post cards lately.”

She fingered it lovingly. It was a fat one this time. Major and Mrs. Allan were stationed at Agra, and though Mrs. Allan was a very charming mother, as a correspondent she left something to be desired. Sometimes, for weeks on end, there were nothing but post cards for Barbara, which said, “All well, and having a good time. Hope you are, too. Write soon, darling. Love from us all. Mother.” On rarer occasions there would come a long letter such as this was, which contained an account of the doings of Father, Mother, Roger the five-year-old brother, and Elizabeth and Althea the two baby sisters. Barbara had never even seen baby Althea, who had been born the year after her father’s last furlough, and was now two. Elizabeth she only remembered as a baby of seven months, and Roger had been two. Between herself—the eldest of the family—and Roger, came two brothers, Tony and Philip, who were at a “Prep” school in Somerset.

The last three post cards had hinted at some weird happening about which mother would tell her when she got time to write a decent letter, and the last one had said that it was such a mercy to know that Roger and Elizabeth were still safe and *alive*. From this she had gathered that Master Roger, who was a little pickle, had got into some worse mischief than usual, and had dragged his small sister into it with him. She had wondered what it could be. Now she would learn.

Flinging aside her racket—she had just come up from the courts with Marjorie—she tore open the letter, and sat down on the veranda steps to devour it. Two snapshots fell out, one of the children, and another of the

bungalow in which the Allan family—such of them as were in India—were living at present. She put them aside to be looked at later, and began to read.

“MY DARLING BARBY,—This is going to be a really long letter for once. I have written a short account to Tony and Phil, but I feel as if I must tell it all to you just as it happened. Then, perhaps, I shall get a little peace. For though it all happened three months ago, I still keep remembering the awfulness of it, so that I have to get up through the night and go and look at my babies to be sure that I have them all three quite safe.

“I have hesitated about telling you at all, because it was so very awful, and I know how you brood over things. But there is no need to be afraid, dear, for we are very, very careful with them all, and, as father says, things like that don’t often happen twice in a lifetime.

“Well, I suppose you are wondering what all this long preamble is about, and feeling very impatient with me for not getting on to the story. I am glad it has turned out so differently, Barby, for I might have been writing to tell you that Roger and Beth were no longer with us. As it is, I can’t be too grateful to God for sparing us that dreadful loss.

“Three months ago we went to spend a short holiday with some friends at Parteli, a tiny village not very far from Ambala. We took the babies with us and, of course, Ayah. She has always been very careful with all of you—do you remember her, my Barby? She always adored you, and asks to have your letters read to her whenever they come—and we had no fear about leaving her with the little ones when we wanted to go for a ride with the Kestevens, our friends. We had a delightful time, and Parteli seemed to suit the children splendidly, even Roger, who usually is better in the hills.

“Then one day we were invited to take part in a moonlight picnic to an old temple about fifteen miles away. It was a hot day, and we should be late home, so I decided to spend the day resting. Baby Althea had been cutting some double teeth, and was very fretful. Ayah had her on the veranda most of the morning, with the other two playing beside her. In the afternoon they all went to sleep as usual, and I took Babs with me, so that Ayah might get some rest, as she had been up most of the night before.

“She was still fractious, and I had no chance of a siesta, for she wanted to be nursed all the time, and cried pitifully, poor mite, with the pain in her gums. I was getting rather worried about it, and wondering whether we ought to take her to the doctor to have the gums lanced, when Ayah came to me at about four o’clock, asking if I had seen anything of Roger and Beth. It seems that they had been asleep when she had lain down, and she was so

worn out she had dozed off almost at once, and had slept soundly most of the afternoon. She had wakened a short while before, and found their cots empty. How Roger managed to unfasten the mosquito net and get out of his own bed we have never found out. At any rate, that is what he did, and then he freed Beth, and the two little monkeys managed to steal out of the room without waking Ayah.

“I’m afraid I forgot about poor Babs and her sufferings. Roger is such a little pickle, one never knows what he will do next. I simply dropped Baby down on to my bed, called to Moti Ayah to come and look after her, and then rushed all through the bungalow, calling to the other two. They weren’t there, nor were they in the compound, though by that time most of the servants were hunting too. Mrs. Kesteven had come from her room, where she had been lying down, and I begged her to go back to Babs, for I could hear her wailing, and Moti Ayah, though devoted to the children, is not much use with them. She refused, however, and kept with me. Neither Mr. Kesteven nor father was at home, and I got more frantic every minute.

“At length we met a sais from the next compound, who said he thought he had seen the children heading for the river. We made for it at once, the sais joining us. I cannot tell you, Barby, what I felt. There are muggers there, as you know, and at the time there was a bad man-eating one who had pulled down a native girl only two days before. The girl was saved, for some men who were passing heard her screams, and they managed to get her away, but the poor thing lost a leg, and died only a few days after this.

“You can imagine my horror when we reached the river banks and saw those two children in an old boat, pushed from the bank, and drifting steadily downwards. Ayah was with us, and when she saw them, the poor woman gave a cry which attracted Beth’s notice. She turned round, poor baby, and saw us all on the bank. She jumped to her feet with a little triumphant call, and the next moment she was in the water!

“Poor little Roger kept his head wonderfully. He leaned over the boat-side and tried to catch at her clothes, but she had fallen too far away. Then, as I was about to spring into the water, we heard a splash, and there was a girl swimming towards Beth. She got her, and made for the boat, which she soon reached. By this time the natives were racing along the banks, shouting madly, and thrashing at the water with sticks. I was so thankful to see Beth safe in the girl’s arms, that I never even thought of the mugger till suddenly I saw a little ripple in the water. The thing was making straight for them, and I knew that she could not get into the boat in time.

“She knew her danger, for she managed to push Beth in somehow, and tried to clamber on board herself. But the boat heeled over, and she evidently decided that it was no use. I heard Mrs. Kesteven scream, and I knew the natives were doing all they could to attract the brute’s attention, but it would have been useless. Then we heard a crack! and the mugger gave a horrible roar and sank. Your father and Mr. Kesteven had been coming up and had seen it all, and your father had killed the thing just in time.

“They got the girl out, and Mr. Kesteven took her before him on his horse, and rushed her off to the nearest bungalow, for she was wet through, and very sick, though she was quite conscious. Your father swam out to the boat and brought it back, and we took Beth home.

“She was all right next day, though Roger was very poorly for a week or two, poor little fellow. He still gets dreadful nightmares, and screams about the mugger. Father and I have taken him into our room, and he is getting better now, though the doctor thinks it will be a little while before he really picks up. We are going to the hills next week, and I hope he will be better then.

“But the funniest part of the whole affair is that the girl simply vanished. She borrowed some clothes from Mrs. Dickenson, the people to whom she was taken, and set off for Ambala that night. The clothes were returned with a note of thanks signed A.—something beginning with O. It is so badly written that it is impossible to make it out. She seems to have been a tourist passing through, and no one knows anything about her. However, it is certain that she saved Beth from a dreadful death, and probably Roger too. Even if I had gone in, I couldn’t have got there in time, and father, who saw most of it, says that he couldn’t either. He would have killed the mugger, but our little Beth would have been gone.

“And now, darling, you know all about it. Don’t worry about it any more, though, for the children are never left for an instant, and we are all coming home next year. Father can’t get furlough before then, and I don’t want to come home just when the winter is starting. It would be so bad for the children. If Roger had been well enough, I believe that the babies and I would have come before this, but the doctor wouldn’t agree to our bringing him until his nerves were in better condition. I wish we could find that girl again. I should like to thank her personally for saving my children as she did.

“Well, darling, this *is* a long letter. My hand is quite aching with so much writing. I hope you are well and very happy at St. Helen’s. How is that nice mistress of whom you have written so much? When we come home next

year we must come and see you, and get to know all your friends. How glorious that will be!

“Have you written to grannie lately, dear? What are you going to do these summer holidays?”

“Write and tell me all your news.

“With best love from us all, your affectionate mother,

CECILIA ALLAN.”

Barbara sat where she was on the steps, realizing to herself all that had been happening in India. She could remember from her own early childhood the quick rush of a crocodile, and she could picture most of the horrible scene to herself. What a narrow escape Beth had had! The horror of it would probably have killed Roger, too!

“I wish I could meet that girl, and tell her how much I love her for what she did,” she thought.

She was roused from her dreams by a hand laid on her shoulder, and a voice saying, “Well, Barbara! And why were you not in to prayers?”

She sprang up with a cry of surprise, to face the Head, who was looking very stern.

“Oh, Miss Blake,” she cried, “I am so sorry, but I never heard the bell! I’ve just had a letter from India, and it was so full of news—the most awful things have been happening there! Beth nearly got eaten by a mugger, and Roger was there too, only they were saved by the *pluckiest* girl!”

“So your mother has told you, Barbara?” asked the Head, a queer look on her face.

“Why? Did you know, Miss Blake?” asked Barbara, in astonishment.

“Yes, I knew, dear. Your father wrote and told me about it shortly after it happened. He said your mother thought it better that you should not know just yet, though he thought you would rather know, and not be kept in the dark.”

“He was right,” replied Barbara. “It was awfully horrible, but I’d rather know a big thing like that. Only think, Miss Blake! If it hadn’t been for that girl I might—there might——” She paused, unable to go on.

“Ah, we won’t think of the ‘mights,’” said Miss Blake gently. “Remember what really *is*, Barbara. Now you must go to your form room, dear. Tell Miss White that I have excused your being late.”

“Yes, thank you, Miss Blake,” replied Barbara.

The Head looked at her again. “Well, what is it, dear?”

“Do—do you think, Miss Blake, that I shall ever see her—that girl, I mean, who saved Beth from the mugger?”

Miss Blake looked as if she wanted to laugh. Then she said, “Yes; I think it is very possible that—you will.”

“I’d like to do something to show her how grateful I am,” went on Barbara wistfully.

“I expect you will be given an opportunity some day,” said the Head.

“But the world is so big, Miss Blake. And no one knows who she was, for they couldn’t read her writing in the note she sent when she returned the clothes she had borrowed.”

“My dear Barbara,” replied Miss Blake, “as you get older you will realize more and more what a really little place this world is. Now you must go, dear, or you will miss all your first lesson. Run along!”

Barbara went, pondering on the Head’s words.

“I do believe she has an idea who it was!” she thought, as she turned the handle of the door.

CHAPTER VI

BREAKING OUT

THAT afternoon, during their free time, Barbara read aloud the story of the rescue of Beth to a thrilled audience that consisted of the rest of the Octave, reinforced by Mollie, Violet, Lois Henfrey, and Maisie Calthrop. Loud were their ejaculations of horror as they listened, and when the letter was finished they all acclaimed the unknown rescuer as a heroine of the first water.

“To go in when she knew the river was alive with crocodiles! I don’t know how she *could!*” said Winifred, who was *not* of heroic material.

“I think the pluckiest part was to put the baby into the boat first,” said Marjorie. “She must have known how near the horrid thing was, and that she might be eaten.”

“She was jolly plucky!” Enid summed up the feeling of the meeting. “It’s almost the bravest thing I’ve ever heard of!”

The bell for school rang just then, cutting short their discussion, and Barbara folded the letter, and tucked it into the pocket of her tunic. They had

swimming that afternoon, and Miss Morgan was charmed at the way in which many of the girls tried, even Winifred Chester managing to overcome her fears and allow herself to be towed to the deep end, where she kicked out wildly with Barbara and Clare on either side of her, watching till she reached the side in safety.

“Well done, Winifred!” said the games mistress, as Winifred came up the steps, not a little proud of having conquered her nerves. “If you can only go on you’ll soon swim as well as any one else.”

Then she left the girl and went to see what Violet and Mollie were doing.

“There you are,” said Barbara, who was paddling about contentedly. “I always told you you could do it if you tried! You’ll have to go on now, Win, and a jolly good thing, too! You’ve played about in the shallow end nearly the whole season, and got no forrader. Aren’t you glad you tried to-day?”

“Yes,” said Winifred, who had got back into the water, and was now clinging to the rail at the side rather like a species of water-monkey. “I say, Barby, if you and Clare will swim with me again, I believe I’ll try to do the breadth.”

“Good for you!” said Clare. “Come on!”

With Clare and Barbara guarding her, Winifred managed to swim the breadth, and then she decided that she had had enough for one day, and retired to the shallow end, where she played about with the others, while Barbara and Clare, both good swimmers, challenged each other to a race, and came down the bath at full speed, scattering the rest with loud, warning cries. Barbara won by half a yard only, and, when the pair had rested, they trotted up the side to the deep end and practised diving till Miss Morgan’s whistle warned them that the bath had to be cleared.

“Oh, just three minutes more, Miss Morgan!” pleaded Clare.

The mistress shook her head. “Not even three seconds. Come along out! You people have been in quite long enough now. Make haste, both of you!”

They got out and raced along to their cubicles, where they speedily dried and dressed. Barbara was one of the first out. She was standing wringing out her suit into the narrow gutter provided for the purpose, when Mollie Robson came out of her cubicle and began to do the same thing. Mollie had been fairly subdued this half term. The Head’s warning about what might happen if she played any more risky pranks had gone home, and she had managed to keep out of mischief on the whole. She never fooled about in the swimming-bath, for she was rather timid in water, the remnant of a fright she had received as a little child, when an elder brother had swum out to sea

with her, and then been seized with cramp. There had been people boating all round them, and they had been got out, but it had affected Mollie badly, and she still kept to the shallow end of the bath, and was careful what she did, much to the relief of Miss Morgan.

As the two girls stood there, wringing out their suits, Jessie Barton suddenly came running along the side, followed by Gladys Anderson, whose cap she had snatched. Jessie was never famous for looking where she was going. On this occasion she bumped into Mollie, who gave a scream, tried to recover her balance, and rolled into the water. Barbara dropped her suit and plunged in after her, for this was the deep end, and Mollie would be well out of her depth. Half a dozen other people, all more or less dressed, followed, and when Miss Morgan, who had been drying herself, emerged from her cubicle, five drenched figures were scrambling out on to the side, while Barbara was bringing in Mollie, who was very white.

“What on earth——” began the mistress.

“It wasn’t Mollie’s fault!” cried several voices.

“Please, it was me,” said Jessie meekly.

Miss Morgan paid no attention to her. She was helping Barbara to get Mollie out of the water. The girl was half-unconscious with shock. Like all high-spirited people, she was finely strung, and the horror of going down into the green depths had affected her badly. They laid her down on the side of the bath, and while the mistress attended to her, the others began to wonder what they were to do for clothes. All the people who had gone in had been more or less dressed. Barbara and Marjorie had been completely so. It was a good twenty minutes’ walk to Middle House from the swimming-bath, which had been built at the far end of the grounds, and they were all streaming wet.

Mollie recovered fairly quickly, and sat up with an apology for being so silly and making a fuss. Then the mistress managed to take in the situation, and coped with it at once.

“Get out of your wet clothes, girls! Those of you who were not fully dressed put on what you have dry. The others can borrow something from those of you who did not go into the bath. Winifred Chester, Gwen Ferrars, and Lois Henfrey, I see you are ready. Run to Middle House as quickly as you can and bring fresh garments for these people. Tell matron what has happened, and ask her to have some hot milk or cocoa ready when we come back. Who is the prefect on duty to-day?”

“I am, Miss Morgan,” replied a voice, and they turned to see Janet staring at the dripping girls, while behind her stood the Fifth, whom she had brought down.

“Ah, Janet. Take those of the Lower Fourth and Upper Third who are ready back to school, will you, and then come back here. Ask if Gillian and Greta may come, too, and bring their swimming things. Now, girls! out of the cubicles!”

They streamed out, and while the eight wet people were left to wrap up in what garments the rest could spare them till their own arrived, Janet marched the others up to school, sought Gillian and Greta, and came back in time to take the eight up to Middle House, where matron seized on them and dosed them with hot milk, after which she sent the rescuers into school to prep. Mollie she ordered off to bed as the best means of curing the shivers that were still running down her, and tucked her up with a hot-water bottle. Janet, meanwhile, had gone to tell the Head what had happened, and Jessie and Gladys were called to the study, where they received short shrift for playing tricks in the baths.

Miss Morgan, when she came up, went straight to the study, and the upshot of her interview was that for the future two prefects were put on duty in the baths themselves. It was practically impossible for her to keep an eye on the girls all the time, and the Head decided to safeguard her pupils in this way for the future. The prefects might grumble about this docking of their time. It couldn't be helped.

Jessie came worst out of it, for every one “jumped on her,” as she said. The Head had been most severe with her. The prefects had her before a prefects' meeting, and managed to make her feel a mere worm, after the immemorial custom of prefects in a big school. Her own clan told her what they thought of her in most unvarnished terms. Altogether, she wished she had never been inspired to make that raid on Gladys's property.

As for the rescuers, Miss Blake merely told them that she was glad to see that they had been prepared to help, and left it at that. She had no notion of patting them on the back for heroines!

The affair, following so quickly on the disturbing letter she had received from India, had upset Barbara. After lights out that night she tossed restlessly from side to side in her bed, and finally she got up and went to one of the windows and looked out. It was a glorious night. A full moon shone down, silvering the roses in the garden, and washing the lawn in a flood of soft light that gave to the familiar spots an air of eeriness and mystery that was enchanting to the girl.

“I wish I were outside,” she murmured to herself.

She glanced round the dormitory. All curtains had been thrown up in accordance with rules, so that the air might circulate freely while they slept. Every one was peacefully slumbering—even Mollie, who had been restless earlier in the evening. She, only, was awake on this gorgeous night. She turned from the sleepers to the open again, and her desire to be out in that moon-washed loveliness grew more and more.

“Why shouldn’t I?” she thought. “It’s not as if I was going to do anything *wrong*! All I want is to run about the lawn for a few minutes. If I did, I believe I could go to sleep when I came back.”

With Barbara, to think was to act. Five minutes later the door of the dormitory opened and closed again with a cautious quietness, and a slim figure was gliding down the corridor, slippers in hand. The windows admitting that flood of silver light made the dusky passage as bright as day, and she easily passed along it, and downstairs into the hall. It was useless to attempt to open the door, and Barbara turned off to the house mistress’s sitting-room, where she knew she could get out by the French window. She listened at the door for a moment, for it was quite possible that Miss Oswald had not yet gone to bed, since the hall clock had shown her that it was only little past midnight. Not a sound came from the room, so she opened the door and peeped in. Everything was in the usual condition of exquisite neatness that was peculiar to Miss Oswald.

“Thoroughly old-maidish!” sniffed Barbara, as she made her way across the room to the long window.

She opened it with the same caution as she had opened the dormitory door, and stepped out on to the narrow path that ran all round the house. Then she drew the window close, and a minute later was frolicking wildly over the lawn.

It was a glorious night, and the garden perfumes seemed to intoxicate her. She had put on her slippers before she went on to the grass, but now she stooped down and pulled off both slippers and stockings. Then, humming softly to herself Anitra’s Dance from the Peer Gynt suite, she threw her arms wide, and began to dance solemnly, gracefully. It was a most uncanny sight for any one who was awake to see it, the slim girlish figure in the centre of the lawn, her thick, bobbed hair floating round her face, which gleamed white and rapt in the moonlight.

Dancing with Barbara was always something of a craze. She was wonderfully graceful, and there was in her movements something of the passion and beauty sung by writers of old Greece. She floated over the grass

in a maze of movement, completely forgetful of where she was, the tune, rules, everything but the fact that she was dancing, and that the whole moonlit world seemed to be making music for her. Her own humming had ceased almost at once, but the music rang on in her head.

She was far away from the earth, drifting in an atmosphere of beauty which seemed as if it must continue for ever, when a hand was suddenly laid on her shoulder, and a horrified voice exclaimed, "*Barbara!* What does this mean?"

CHAPTER VII

RETRIBUTION

"WHAT does this mean?" repeated Miss Oswald, giving her a little shake as she spoke. Barbara said nothing. Rudely awakened from her dream, she stood there, the raptness in her face giving way to a sullen expression. One moment she had been a nymph, dancing under the moon as nymphs had done in the days of ancient Greece; the next she was just a naughty little schoolgirl, who had been breaking rules wholesale, and was in for an outsize in rows. She had never heard Miss Oswald's steps on the thick grass, had never known that there was any one near her till she had felt her hand on her shoulder, and heard her horror-stricken voice.

As for Miss Oswald, she was still rather inclined to doubt the evidence of her own senses. Like Barbara, she had found it difficult to sleep, and, getting up to switch on her light and find her book, she had heard the noise of the French window closing. Slipping on her dressing-gown, she had come downstairs to investigate, and had been stricken almost dumb at the sight of the dancing figure on the lawn. At first she had been under the impression that this must be a dream. Then the chiming of the old grandfather clock in the hall had re-established her common sense, and the child turning to the window just then, she had seen who it was, and had come out to bring in this girl whom she was inclined to think had taken utter leave of her senses.

At the sight of the child's face Miss Oswald's grip relaxed, and her voice insensibly became gentle as she said, "You must come in at once, child. And where are your shoes and stockings?"

"I took them off," replied Barbara sulkily.

"Where did you leave them? Your feet must be like ice, dancing on the dewy grass!"

“They’re over there, somewhere.” Barbara pointed to where she had left them.

“Go and get them then, and put your shoes on.”

The girl went and got them, and then came back. All the beauty which the pleasure of dancing had called into her face had faded, and it was a very sullen child who followed Miss Oswald into the sitting-room.

“You must have something hot to drink,” said the mistress, after she had bolted the window. “Wait here till I get some milk heated.”

She left the room, and Barbara stood by the table, playing with some roses in a bowl there. She couldn’t quite decide from Miss Oswald’s manner whether there was going to be a fuss or not. She had seemed angry enough at first, but since they had come in she appeared to be taking it as quite all right that a girl of fourteen should be dancing outside on the lawn after midnight.

“Drink this, Barbara.” Miss Oswald had come back, and was holding out to her a glass of hot milk.

Barbara took it, and the mistress sat down in a chair, and waved her to another.

“Why did you go out like that, child?”

Barbara looked down at her glass. It wasn’t going to be easy to explain. You can’t explain to a mistress that something in the moonlight made you go—well, mad! So she said nothing, but sat there looking sulky.

Miss Oswald looked at her. “Aren’t you going to tell me, Barbara?”

“You—wouldn’t understand,” muttered Barbara.

“Still—you might try me.”

Something in the low, clear tones almost forced her to it. Then she drew back. “I can’t!”

“It was the moonlight, I suppose?” Miss Oswald spoke in almost dreamy tones. “That, and the smell of the flowers. That was it, wasn’t it?”

Barbara looked up. “I suppose so.”

“Well, I can understand it. I felt much the same way myself once. But I was never able to express it as you did just now. Barbara, I had no idea you could dance like that. I almost thought for a moment that I was dreaming about old Greece, and was seeing a wood nymph.”

“I like dancing.”

Miss Oswald suppressed a little sigh. Of all the middles, she was most interested in Barbara Allan. The child's name had an attraction for her, coming as it did from an old ballad. There was something, too, in the easy grace with which Barbara moved that drew one's attention. She was not pretty, by any means. Winifred Chester of the yellow curls and blue eyes, and rose-petal skin, was far prettier than Barbara would ever be. But she was not like other schoolgirls.

Barbara finished her milk and set down the glass firmly. She could scarcely get up and go, though this was what she wanted to do. Still, she had to wait to see what was going to happen to her.

Apparently nothing. Miss Oswald rose and glanced at the window fastenings to be sure that they were all right.

"Put on your shoes again, Barbara," she said. "I don't think it's likely that you will awaken the others if you go upstairs in them, and you might hurt your feet if you went without. Be as quiet as you can in going to bed. I will see you in the morning."

She stood at the door waiting for her unexpected guest to go, and Barbara went, for there seemed to be nothing else to do.

She got upstairs and into bed without waking any one, and, since she was tired out, soon fell asleep. She only woke up when Monica, who, by right of seniority of years, was head of the dormitory, pulled the clothes off her, exclaiming, "Get up, you lazy wretch! It's only five minutes to brekker, and you'll be late!"

Barbara tore through her dressing, and, thanks to help from the rest of the Octave, managed to be down just as the bell rang. They, on their side, were amazed at her sleeping so long. As a rule she was first up in the dormitory.

"She must be ill," whispered Enid to Monica as they went into the dining-room.

"Taken a leaf out of your book, more likely!" retorted Monica.

Miss Oswald said grace just then, so Enid had to be content with a fearful grimace at her friend, and when they sat down Mollie Robson was so full of a splendid new idea for a circus to be performed by the Octave to the rest of the middles some Saturday night, that there was no opportunity for any one to go on with a squabble.

After breakfast Miss Oswald called Barbara into her sitting-room, and pronounced judgment. She was a very different person from the Miss

Oswald of early that morning. Her crisp frock of green linen seemed to emphasize the difference, and Barbara felt no desire to confide in her at all.

“Well, Barbara,” she said briskly, “you must know that you can’t do mad things, especially such a mad thing as breaking out at night and dancing to the moon.”

“No, Miss Oswald,” replied Barbara.

She spoke so listlessly that the mistress looked more keenly at her. “I hope you have not taken cold?”

“No, thank you, Miss Oswald. I am quite well.”

“Very well. You are probably tired to-day, but that is part of the penalty you have to pay for using up your hours of sleep in that way. As for the rest _____”

She paused, and Barbara began to wonder if she were to be reported to the Head. There *would* be a row in that case! Miss Blake was very kind, but she would be exceedingly angry with any girl who broke rules so flagrantly as that!

Miss Oswald, watching her, guessed what was in her mind, and wondered if it would be the best thing to do. Then she decided against it.

“You had better write me an essay on dancing in olden times,” she said finally. “I am sorry to have to punish you again so soon, but you must realize that rules are made to be kept. That is all. You may go.”

Barbara turned and went. Inwardly she was wondering why on earth she had been given such a small punishment. She loved essay-writing, and the subject was one to appeal to her.

“What did she want?” asked Winifred, as she entered the dormitory to make her bed.

“Row,” replied Barbara laconically.

“*Another* one? Help! What have you been doing?”

“Breaking rules. Don’t bother now, Win. I’ve got my bed to make, and Clare and I want a game if we can bag a court.”

Winifred moved away, and Barbara made her bed with a speed that accounted for matron’s wrath when she caught her later on, and insisted that it should be done all over again. Barbara did it with an absent air that infuriated matron more than ever. When it was done the girl escaped to the common room, and set to work on her essay.

It was an interesting subject, and she found lots about dancing that she had never known before. It ran to ten pages of her untidy writing when she

finally handed it in. Miss Oswald raised her eyebrows at the sight of the full sheets, but she said no more. Later on, however, she gave it to Miss Browne to read, quite unofficially, and that lady gave Barbara Allan more attention in the English lessons than the recipient of it quite appreciated. That, however, was part of the retribution she had brought on herself.

CHAPTER VIII

A LITTLE EXCITEMENT

“THINGS are frightfully dull!”

It was Mollie who made this statement. She was sitting in a hammock which the Octave had slung between two trees that morning before breakfast, and now three of them were in it, Mollie having been crowded in in some miraculous fashion, while the others, reinforced by Violet Mayne and Lois Henfrey, sat on the grass in front of it, with due regard for their Sunday frocks.

They had finished their home letters and divinity prep, and were now whiling away the hour that remained till tea-time. Mollie and Violet had wandered out ten minutes after the Octave had settled itself, and, despite loud shrieks of protest from Gwen, Clare, and Monica, who had been occupying the hammock, Mollie had squeezed herself in beside them, while Violet dropped down on the rug with Barbara and the twins. Lois Henfrey had joined them a little later, and they had been discussing school politics, which, however, had palled as a subject. There was little to discuss. Janet, Gillian, Greta Worsley, and Ethel Hayes, the school librarian, had all gone up to London the day before to enter for a scholarship exam. Most of the tennis heats for the inter-form cup had been played off the week before, and there was nothing much to look forward to till the return of the scholarship people, when the finals would come off between the Lower Fourth and the Sixth. Hence Mollie’s complaint.

“I don’t know,” said Marjorie Lennox, rolling over luxuriously. “There’s the exams next week—you can’t say *they* aren’t exciting!”

“Nerve-racking, I should call *them!*” declared Mollie, whose work was so erratic that she headed her form one week, and was somewhere near the bottom the next. “And I don’t mean things like that, anyway. What I meant was something *thrilling!*”

“Well, what do you want?” demanded Barbara, who felt that for the present, at any rate, she would prefer a quiet life.

Things at Middle House were in much the same condition as they had been since the half term. Miss Oswald went on her way without seeming to bother much over the unveiled hostility of her charges. They, on their side, had been rather too busy during the past week to trouble about feuds, even with a house mistress. However, now that the tennis fever was over for the time being, and they knew that Barbara and Clare had managed to get into the finals, they were prepared to take a little more interest in the affair. Barbara was alone in her desire for peace.

The exams might be exciting, but no one could call them thrilling, and Mollie had voiced the feeling of the entire meeting when she had declared them to lack this quality.

“We ought to do something,” said Enid Treherne, who was nearly as harum-scarum as Mollie herself, while her twin followed her lead at a respectful distance. “The question is, what can we do?”

A dejected silence was the only answer she received. No one had any brilliant ideas forthcoming at the moment.

“We haven’t outed that creature yet,” said Clare, who had come into violent collision the day before with her house mistress over a little matter of leaving the house tennis balls out on the court all night. As it had poured during the night, the said balls would never be the same again, and they had been new ones.

Barbara sat up at the words. “She’s the sort of creature that simply won’t *see* she’s hated!” she complained. “What can we do to show her that we don’t care a hang for her?”

“Let’s rag her sitting-room,” suggested Winifred, who had got this idea from her last library book.

“Talk sense! That sort of thing may do for a rotten story-book, but you can’t do it in real life!” was the squashing reply. Barbara read Kipling and Buchan for preference, and had no taste for the school stories in which her friend revelled.

“I know!” cried Elaine excitedly, speaking before her twin for once, “let’s get up a play and invite the other dormies to come and see it!”

This was more feasible, and they considered it in silence for a moment.

“Where are we going to get the play?” asked Monica presently.

“Write it—or some of us, anyway! Barbara can! She’s supposed to be It at comp!”

“I daresay; but I’m not going to do all the work for you lazy objects! If you want a play, we’ll all write it! I’m not going to be the only one to have all the fag!” protested Barbara. “It’s not a bad idea, though, and we might manage it. There’s an hour after tea till church-time. Let’s bring some paper out here and begin it then. And if some of you sluggardious creatures——”

“Some of us *what?*”

“Sluggardious creatures! It means people who lie in bed till the last minute,” explained Barbara placidly. “Well, if some of you can part from your precious beds at half-past six to-morrow morning instead of snoozing till three minutes before first brekker bell, we might get it finished then.”

“It’s all very well talking,” complained Winifred, who was one of the most notorious “sluggardious creatures” in question. “You don’t need half so much sleep as I do, I’m sure!”

Barbara raised herself on her elbow. “If you’re not careful you’ll get fat, and then you won’t be even respectable looking,” she said kindly. “It’s always the people who love their beds most who get fat—really fat, you know—earliest. You’re plump now. What you’ll be like in a year’s time if you go on, goodness knows!—a sort of show, I should think!”

“You’re a pig!” pouted Winifred. “I’m not plump, either! I’m only not a scrag like you!”

“Oh, dry up, you two!” interrupted Mollie impatiently. “Let’s talk about the play. It’s a topping idea, and I don’t see why we shouldn’t do it. It’s not as if we were going to make pigs of ourselves by feeding out of hours like the Second last term! Let’s do it!”

“Righto!” agreed Barbara lazily. “Anything for a quiet life! What sort of a play do you want?”

They wrangled over this question till the tea-bell sent them indoors, for Winifred wanted a fairy play; Clare and Mollie were in favour of something with cowboys in it; and Gwen insisted that something historical would best meet the case.

Finally, they decided—it was Violet’s brilliant suggestion—to do the story of the original Barbara Allen.

Barbara herself was wild with indignation, but it was of no use. The others were charmed with the idea, and promptly awarded to Violet the part of “Young Jemmy Grove.”

“Barby must be the heroine, of course,” said Clare. “I’ll be ‘Jemmy Grove’s’ greatest pal, and Monny can be ‘Barbara Allen’s’ mother.”

“And what about the rest of us?” demanded Lois, speaking for the first time.

“You can be her little brother, and take messages from ‘Barbara’ to ‘Jemmy,’ ” decided Clare. “Mollie shall be his mother, and rag ‘Barbara’ for being horrid to her son.”

“Then I’ll be the sexton and dig the graves,” said Marjorie startlingly. “Win had better be a girl madly in love with ‘Jemmy,’ and weep bitter tears over his corpse, and Gwen can be ‘Barbara’s’ father, and lecture her on being so horrid.”

They managed to evolve other characters for the rest of the party, and agreed to bring in the rest of the dormitory as programme sellers and door-keepers, and curtain managers.

“Though how we’re going to arrange curtains in the dormy I’m bothered if I know?” put in Enid.

“Rig up something across the space between Monny’s cubicle and the window. That’ll be our stage, and the others can sit on the floor in front of it. Then we can use the cubey next door for a dressing-room,” said Barbara, who was recovering from her wrath at the nature of the play. “I wish you’d let me be something less sickly than ‘Barbara Allen’ though! She was an ass!”

“Can’t be done,” said Clare inflexibly. “Why, your very name fills the part!”

“Well, I think it’s rotten of you!”

However, they were all too well pleased with the arrangements to pay any heed to her grumbling, and they spent every spare moment during the next two days in writing the play and learning their parts.

It must be admitted that they went a great deal further than the ballad, and gave “Barbara” all kinds of excitements that are not even hinted at in it. She was supposed to have two other lovers, beside “Jemmy Grove,” whom she treated in a way that would have sent him headlong to the other fair maid had he been a real man. Her “Mother” was painfully pious, prophesying all kinds of evil for her hard-hearted daughter. “Mrs. Grove” was a scold, pure and simple, who would have been ducked in those days, not once, but several times. “The Sexton” insisted on intoning the Lykewake Dirge all the time the graves were being dug, and “lifted” most of her part bodily from the grave-diggers’ scene in *Hamlet*. Still, they enjoyed it

thoroughly, and it certainly was a welcome break in exams, which were every bit as nerve-racking as Mollie had prophesied they would be.

It was decided to give the play on the Friday night when exams would be finished, as a grand wind-up to the week's work. Invitations were not to be issued till the last moment, in case any one should inadvertently let slip what was afoot. The whole dormitory was sworn to secrecy, and Middle House was wild with curiosity, for the actors and attendants lived in a chronic state of giggles all the week.

It is true they managed to control themselves during the exam periods, but out of them they lived, thought, and, Barbara declared later, *dreamt* play! Never had preparation for the papers been so skimped, the result being that those who had worked well during the term did excellent papers, while those who hadn't fell down badly. Winifred was one of the worst of these, but luckily no one expected anything else from her. Mollie, who crashed badly over her geography paper, rather regretted that she had spent the entire evening before in getting her "lines" word-perfect.

In their free time, when other people were busily revising, the members of Dormitory Three were hard at work making their costumes. Barbara managed a very good imitation of a Royalist dress out of her dressing-gown, a silk petticoat, and three lace-edged handkerchiefs sewn together. "Jemmy" stitched ruffles into the wrists of his white coat, and tacked on little bunches of ribbon wherever he could put them, the whole being more in keeping with the times of the Merry Monarch than of his father when it was done. The "Mothers" used *their* dressing-gowns, and also two table-covers "borrowed" from the common room. The "Sexton" helped himself to some dark-green draperies from the art room, and fashioned a gloomy-looking affair in which he intended to roll out his Lykewake Dirge with great effect.

In short, every one was so busy that no one had time to be anything but law-abiding, and Miss Oswald heaved a sigh of relief over it. She, naturally, had no idea what was in the wind, or she would have put a stop to it at once.

There was no real reason why they should not have given their performance to the whole school on Saturday night. The Head rather welcomed new ideas from her girls, and they could have had hall, and the stage there, and all they wanted from the acting cupboard. But that would not have been half so thrilling as this stolen performance, and they would have scouted the very thought had any one suggested it. The best part of the whole affair from their point of view was the fact that it was to take place in unlawful hours and under strict secrecy. The fact that if they were caught they would be involved in the row of their careers added a fearful joy for

most of them, though Winifred had periods of wondering what would happen if such a thing took place. She was in the minority, however, and they went on with their preparations, little recking what the Friday night was to bring forth.

CHAPTER IX

FIRE! FIRE!

FRIDAY came at last, and after prep Gwen Ferrars went round distributing little notes of invitation to the rest of Middle House. It had been left as late as this by Barbara's advice. She was afraid lest the others should show by their manner that something was up, so had chosen this means of keeping it from the authorities.

She had been wise in doing this, as was shown by the instant excitement of the guests. Most of them replied that they would come with joy. One or two rather demurred, and one girl, Maud Evans, refused point-blank to turn up.

"If you're caught there'll be a fiendish row," she said. "It isn't worth it!"

"Prig!" retorted Gwen.

"You can call me what names you like! I don't care! But when you're all on the carpet with the Head raging like a mad hyena, don't say I didn't warn you!" replied Maud, with an effort of imagination which startled Gwen, who carried a full report of it to her chief at once.

"Silly ass!" commented Barbara. "She must be mad to call the Head a hyena! Besides, she never rages, anyhow! She's a jolly sight too dignified!"

So the one dissentient didn't upset plans, as, indeed, she had never expected to do.

"Bring candles with you if you have any. Flashes better still," had been written at the bottom of the invitations, and the guests turned up with fifteen candle-ends of various lengths—most of them came from dark-room lamps—and seven electric torches, with which the attendants proceeded to arrange lighting details. The door had been firmly shut, and a pillow laid along the bottom of it to exclude any light that might escape to the corridor beyond. Barbara had closed the jalousies, and seen to it that the slats were shut, and as it had been arranged that the visitors should come in twos and threes to

avoid discovery, they all managed to reach Dormitory Three without any trouble.

Maud the immaculate was not there, of course. Neither was Dolly Stone, who had been very sick just before going to bed, and had been whisked off to the sanatorium, where matron soon found out that she had been eating green peas raw from the kitchen garden. A stiff dose of unpleasant medicine had been meted out to her, and matron was in san, in case she were needed. Miss Oswald, though this they did not learn till later, had gone over to school to attend a staff meeting, so they were exempt from any fear of discovery, and the play began.

According to their story, Barbara Allen, the daughter of the Squire, was a hard-hearted coquette, who had three lovers, among them Jemmy Grove, whom she secretly adored. She kept this from him, because she liked to feel her power—Winifred was an inveterate “film-fan” in the holidays—and drove him nearly mad with jealousy by pretending that she liked one of the others better. At the same time she sent him messages by her small brother Charles—Lois—and once, a rose, over which he sentimentalized with various extracts from the poets. The fact that they had placed the action of their play in the reign of Charles the First did not prevent him from quoting Shelley, Byron, and Keats!—in a way that thrilled the audience. The mothers of this cheerful pair spent their time in encouraging Jemmy, and scolding Barbara, together with “reminiscing” about the time when *they* were young, while the other lovers appeared at various intervals in order to give Barbara a chance to work up her unfortunate lover still more. Caroline de Vere, Barbara’s cousin and foster-sister, was also in love with Jemmy, who hadn’t anything to say to her, and she generally appeared in tears and wringing her hands, or else upbraiding Barbara for her cruelty. To make things still more exciting, the Sexton made several surprising entrances, moralizing on the shortness of life, and its vanities and emptiness. It must be confessed that the audience choked over these speeches in a most unseemly manner, and on one occasion the leading lady was moved to hiss, “Shut up, you silly asses! Do you want to bring Matey or Miss Oswald here?”

The scene ended with Barbara parting from Jemmy after a furious quarrel with him, in which he had accused her of playing with him for the purpose of breaking his heart, while the lady herself sneered at him, winding up by making the unaccountable—for a Caroline lady—remark, “You’re a poor fish, anyhow!”

In the next scene Charles was sent by Barbara to find Jemmy and tell him to meet her at the “blasted oak”—no one was very sure what it meant,

but it sounded interesting—as she repented of her unkindness, and wished to be friends with him again.

Jemmy believed this, and turned up, to find Lionel, another of the lady's suitors, already there, and waiting for her. The two fell into conversation, and began to quarrel. Swords were drawn, and before any one could prevent it, they were locked in mortal combat. Lionel was killed and Jemmy was wounded when the Sexton came in, and after binding up the hero's wounds, with the illuminating remark, "All flesh is as grass!" dragged him off the field of battle. Really, he should have been carried, but Violet was half a head taller than Marjorie, and the task was beyond the latter's strength.

Act three found Jemmy in bed, recovering from his wounds, with his mother and Mrs. Allen in close attendance, while the Sexton, who presumably added the calling of surgeon to his proper trade, flitted in and out, giving directions to the nurses as to the care of the patient. Suddenly he became worse, and began to rave, calling for Barbara, who was sent for. She came to him, and after regarding him fixedly for a minute, gave utterance to the famous words of the ballad, "Young man, I think you're dying."

After this she stalked out, with a dignity somewhat marred by the fact that her underskirt was slipping, and had to be held on with both hands as she crossed the stage. Jemmy, on hearing these unfeeling words, burst into tears, and then, helped not at all by the prayers and entreaties of his mother, died most artistically, forgiving his cruel lady with his last breath.

The fourth act opened on a graveyard scene, in which the Sexton was in his element, and became so thoroughly gruesome, that one or two of the more nervous among the audience gripped the person next them. Marjorie was a capital actress, and the ghoulish way in which she soliloquized on the "bones"—a couple of rulers and a tennis ball—which she turned up while digging Jemmy's grave, was horrid enough as it was, without her humming the Lykewake Dirge at intervals. Half the candles had burned down by this time, and two torches had given out, and as the managers had reserved half of what was left for Barbara's death-scene, the effect was uncanny, to say the least of it.

In the middle of the scene Jemmy's mother suddenly came on, and proceeded to curse Barbara most thoroughly. She had just finished when the sole remaining lover also appeared, accompanied by Barbara's father and Caroline, and after the latter had begged Mrs. Grove to desist, but all in vain, while the father giggled a good deal, and made his speeches in a choked utterance which precluded much of their sense reaching even the front seats, they were all hustled off by the Sexton, ejaculating, as he pushed Mr. Allen

firmly before him, “Wad ye not respect the sleeping places o’ the dead?” in such funereal tones that little Nora Stone, Dolly’s sister, burst into frightened tears, and could only be consoled by a large piece of chocolate, which was taken from the feast in the final act.

The fifth and final act opened in the banqueting hall of the Squire’s house. Here the family were discovered feasting off the remains of a slab of chocolate, two bananas, and some bread and butter, saved from supper. For wine, they drank water from their tooth glasses, and the effect was quite good. The Squire, Mrs. Allen, Charles, and Rupert, supposed to be the eldest of the family, were all there. Barbara came in to them, and took her place. She had just begun on a quarter of banana, after a long aside in which she revealed her future plans to the audience, when the Sexton, ubiquitous as ever, entered, and bade them all come to the funeral.

Barbara requested to know whose funeral it was, and on being told that it was Jemmy’s, swooned most realistically. Her agitated family crowded round her, and after determined efforts at resuscitation, brought her to. She rose to her feet and uttered a long speech, in which she bewailed her own wilfulness and cruelty. Then, while her mother attempted to administer consolation by pointing out that she still had one lover left, she sank down on the floor, and from there, supported by her father and brothers, spoke the verse of the ballad:

“Oh, mither, mither, make my bed,
And make it saft and narrow;
My true love died for me yesterday—
I’ll die for him to-morrow.”

Complete collapse of Mrs. Allen, who sobbed at her daughter’s feet, and besought her to live! The Squire and his heir, it is regrettable to state, bent their heads to hide their giggles from the audience while this was going on, and the Sexton, who still remained in the room, voiced a few more pious remarks in suffocated tones—Marjorie was on the verge of wild laughter, and she had the greatest difficulty in keeping a straight face—and then Barbara half sat up, and repeated the last verse with great effect:

“Farewell, farewell, oh, maidens all,
And shun the fault I fell in:
Henceforth take warning by the fall
Of cruel Barbara Allen.”

Then she sank slowly back against the Squire, who nearly let her drop, and closed her eyes.

Mrs. Allen, on finding that her daughter was dead, promptly expired herself, presumably of a broken heart, and the Squire committed suicide in

his grief at the loss of both wife and daughter, whereupon Charles burst into tears and dropped beside his parents, so that the play finished with Rupert and the Sexton standing over a row of corpses in the most approved manner for a tragedy.

Subdued but enthusiastic applause brought the actors to the front of the stage, Jemmy holding Barbara's hand, and the rest grouped picturesquely round them, and the play was over.

"Jolly good!" was the unanimous verdict, followed by every one's rising to their feet, and a general exodus.

The entertainers devoted themselves to getting the room put to rights, and had just got into bed when they heard the front door of the house close quietly. Miss Oswald had returned from her staff meeting, and the company had only just dispersed in time. Most of the girls fell asleep at once, but Barbara, excited by the events of the evening, lay wakeful for some time. At length she too drowsed off, and for an hour or more the house lay in stillness, broken only by an occasional cry from Mollie, who was given to talking in her sleep, and was dreaming wild things.

Barbara was now sleeping heavily, for she was tired out, both mentally and physically, and it would take a lot to arouse her. Suddenly a terrible cry rang through the house, followed by shouts of "Fire! Fire!"

Most of them awoke to find that their dormitories were filled with smoke, and from the lower regions came the dull roar of flames. Miss Oswald, sketchily clad in pyjamas and big coat, rushed in, and ordered the girls to go to the windows, and begin going down the big canvas shoots which the steadier ones already had in position. She tore through the cubicles, making sure that every girl was awake, and understood what she was doing. Then she left them to the dormitory prefects, and went off to the servants' quarters to perform the same office there.

In Dormitory Three, Monica, with Barbara to help her, got the shoot into position, and the girls began to go down as rapidly as they could. They were accustomed to fire drill, of course, but there was something awe-inspiring about this which made them silent. Even Winifred shed no tears on this occasion, and when her turn came, went with a meekness that would have been surprising to the girls who knew what a fuss she always made about it, had it not been that they had too much else to think of. When the dormitory was clear, Monica motioned Barbara to go, but Barbara shook her head.

"You go first, Monny, old thing! I can manage the window better than you."

The rule was that the girl last down was to shut the window as close as she could, so as to exclude as many draughts as possible. Monica was not nearly so athletic as her leader, and she went without making any trouble over it, for she knew that much might depend on the shutting of the window.

A call from the garden below warned Barbara of the fact that she had reached the bottom in safety, and she prepared to wriggle into the mouth of the shoot. By this time the room was full of smoke, and a red glow was beginning to show under the door, on which the paint was rising in great blisters. The smoke made her cough, and her eyes were smarting. She was dead-tired, and half-choked with the thick atmosphere she had been breathing. A little gust of wind sent a huge volume of smoke eddying in at the window from the room below, which was now burning. It caught the girl in the face, just as she got over the window-sill, and completed what weariness and the heavy air had already done. To the horror of those watching below, she fell back, half over the sill, and lay there without moving.

CHAPTER X

THE RESCUE

BY this time the middles on the lawn had been reinforced by several members of the staff who slept in a house in another part of the grounds, and some of the seniors. Matron, who had brought out Dolly, the latter young lady still looking very green and shaky after her attack of sickness, had taken things in hand with her usual initiative, and while the house mistress rounded up stray members of the house, got them into their dormitory order, and began to call over their names; while Miss Morgan, aided by the staff and the prefects, got to work with the little hand-engine which belonged to the school, and managed to get a good jet of water playing on the flames.

Screams from the Octave, who had seen Barbara's peril, stopped the roll-call, and even as Miss Oswald came round the corner of the house with three of the younger middles, Janet and Greta, who had come back the day before, made a bolt for the stable, where the ladders were kept.

When they got there they found it in flames too, and the ladders beyond reach. They turned with white faces and raced back to the house.

The Head had got there by this time, and was looking up at the still little figure lying across the sill with a face that said nothing, though the elder

girls realized something of what she was feeling. Miss Morgan and her band were still doing their best with the hose and the pump, though they, too, looked ghastly.

“The ladders?” said Miss Blake sharply as the two prefects reached them.

“In flames,” replied Janet briefly.

A shuddering groan arose from those who had been near enough to hear the words, and a little gasp, followed by the thud of some one falling on the turf, told them that Winifred had collapsed. With commendable presence of mind Clare and Marjorie dropped on their knees beside her, raising her feet, and turning her on her back. The rest had no attention to spare from the window.

There were no creepers on the wall at this point, and in any case it would have been death to any one who tried to climb it, for the ground-floor room was a mass of flames, and the one above was little better. The little hand-engine was not enough to make much difference. The fire had got too firm a hold for that.

The town engine had been telephoned for, but the town was five miles away, and the man at the phone had said that the men were already away fighting another fire. Before they could arrive it looked as though the house would be in ashes.

In the meantime Barbara lay there, and how to get her out was a question no one liked to ask. Miss Morgan, with a grimly-set face, played her hose-jet all round the window, keeping the flames under a little, but not doing much else.

Monica, with a white face, turned away to Marjorie, who was standing with the tears rolling down her face.

“Will they get her soon?” she asked, in tense tones.

Marjorie shook her head, unable to reply, and Monica turned away, her hands clenched. Suddenly there was a cry of, “The tree—the tree!”

The girls turned, and looked up at the chestnut tree that stood at that side of the lawn. They had often complained that if it had not been there, they could have had another tennis court, and Miss Blake had even discussed the question of having it uprooted with the gardeners. Now they were to thank God that it had been left.

Climbing up it with a steady speed that yet had nothing hurried in it was Miss Oswald, a coil of rope over her shoulder. There was a silence as she reached a bough a little above the window in height, and began straddling

along it as far as she could go. She paused at length, and took aim with steady arm, while those below watched her with bated breath. Then she cast, and the cast fell well and truly over one of the hooks which secured what was left of the canvas shoot to the wall. She jerked, and the noose drew tight. Then she leaned back and secured the other end of the rope to a branch.

What was she going to do?

No one had the slightest idea, but the next minute they saw, as she left her bough, and went along that frail bridge, hand over hand.

“Quick, girls! The sheets!” said Miss Blake.

Even as she spoke some of them had run to the jumping sheets, which had been brought, and lay in a forlorn pile at one side of the lawn. They brought them, and held them out, those of the staff who were not already at the engine taking the dangerous side near the house. Miss Morgan and her satellites were working like slaves to keep the jet playing on the flaming house.

Miss Oswald swung herself across and reached the window. With unexpected strength she reached forward one hand and swung herself up on to the window-sill. Then she vanished in a great swirl of smoke. At the same time there was the clanging of a bell, and the noise of wheels. The next minute, even as a white-faced Miss Oswald appeared at the window and lifted Barbara upon her shoulders in “fireman’s lift,” and began tying her feet and wrists together, the town engine came tearing into sight. As the mistress stepped out on to the hot window-sill, it stopped, and the men were off and fixing the fire-escape even while Miss Oswald, who had no idea of their arrival, swung out on to the line once more.

Some of the men had gone to take their places at the sheet, and several of the girls hid their faces rather than look at those two figures advancing so terribly from the burning house, where others of the men were already playing a much stronger jet than anything the hand-engine could produce on the flames.

Suddenly there was a cry. The rope had given, and the two fell into the sheet, which luckily held, though the strain on one or two of the smaller girls was great.

A cry from Miss Blake kept the girls back, and they advanced to the tumbled heap in the middle of the sheet. Barbara was still unconscious, but Miss Oswald was able to look at them and smile before the exquisite agony of being moved, however gently, made her faint.

The doctor had arrived by this time, and, with the help of all three matrons, they were able to take the two into the school san, where their injuries were attended to at once. Then Miss Blake was able to think of the other girls, while the men got the fire under, and at once sent them off to the school, where, with the rest of the staff, she was soon at work arranging for beds for the middles.

Winifred, who had come round, but was still very shaky, Dolly, Monica, and Marjorie were sent over to san. They were all done, and would need a few days in quiet.

Miss Blake's own bed was given over to two of the Octave, and the rest of the staff took in some of the girls. The seniors doubled up, and beds were arranged for the remaining few, so that by the time the fire was out, and Middle House had been saved—all, that is, save the west wing—the greater part of the school was in bed again, and some of them had even managed to fall asleep.

Meanwhile, over in the san the two doctors summoned from the town, and Dr. Foster, the school doctor, bent over the two who had so nearly died. Barbara was suffering from the effects of the smoke, a sprained wrist, and two or three burns. It was a miracle that she had escaped so lightly, but the doctors were all agreed that she would be almost herself again in a week or two. The sprained wrist would take longer to heal, but it was a minor matter.

Miss Oswald was a different matter. As she had fallen she had managed to poise herself so that she had come on her face, to save Barbara, who was round her shoulders. She had done it, but at heavy cost to herself. One arm was broken, she had dislocated an ankle, and she was terribly burnt. She had strained her shoulders, too, and the doctors looked very grave over her injuries.

“If she has the strength to hold out we shall pull her through,” said white-haired Dr. James, who had been a well-known surgeon at one of the big London hospitals in his younger days. “We can say no more.”

Poor Miss Blake, looking old and worn, listened to this with a sinking heart. Miss Oswald was, like Barbara, the child of Anglo-Indians, and of her family not one was nearer than Malta, where a young brother was stationed with his regiment. She went to her study and sat down, without troubling about the loss inflicted by the partial gutting of Middle House.

“That brave girl!” she thought. “And she has not had too pleasant a time this term. Only she insisted on fighting her own battles. How am I to let her parents know?”

Matron from the school came in on these reflections, and told her that Barbara Allan had roused up, and was asking for her. Miss Blake rose at once, and followed her over to the san, where Barbara, with over-bright eyes and crimson cheeks, was waiting for her.

Miss Blake came in quietly and sat down by the bed.

“I am here, dear,” she said gently.

“Is every one safe?” asked Barbara feverishly. “I know *you* ’ll tell me the truth!”

“Every one got safely out of the house,” replied the Head.

“Was any one hurt?”

Miss Blake raised questioning eyebrows at the doctor who stood near, and he nodded.

“Miss Oswald has a broken arm,” said the Head, going as near to the truth as she dared.

“No one else?” Barbara’s eyes were searching her face.

“One or two of the others are very much upset, and we have brought them here to be quiet for a day or two,” said Miss Blake quietly. “You and Miss Oswald are the only two who are really hurt though, and the doctor thinks you will be all right in a week or so.”

She spoke without emphasis, and Barbara took her “you” to mean both of them. She lay still for a little. Then she opened her eyes, and looked at the Head again.

“How did Miss Oswald hurt herself?” she asked haltingly, for her fever was rising, and it was a tremendous effort to talk clearly. Miss Blake was moving up and down in a way that made Barbara feel seasick, and she would have liked to ask her to sit still, but she was still sensible enough to know that you can’t talk to your Head like that.

“She had a fall,” replied Miss Blake. “Now you must close your eyes, and try to sleep.”

She spoke to unresponsive ears. Barbara was already beyond understanding, and the doctor was motioning her away.

“I hope I have done her no harm by telling her so much?” said the Head anxiously when she had left the room.

The doctor shook his head. “She was worrying to see you, and to know what you had to say. You did exactly right, Miss Blake. She is naturally inclined to wander—all these highly-strung, nervous children turn light-headed when they run a temperature. Don’t worry about her; she will be all

right soon. This is merely the result of pain and shock. She'll get over it pretty quickly, if I know Miss Barbara. Now you must go to bed, or I shall have another patient on my hands, and we can't have that."

Miss Blake went to bed as he told her, but she lay tossing through the hours that remained of the night, thinking of the news she might have to send to India where the Oswalds were, and wondering what she could have done to prevent this happening.

CHAPTER XI

BARBARA FINDS THE TRUTH

WITH BARBARA in san, and very poorly indeed, Miss Oswald slowly creeping back to life after three days of lying close to the gates of death, and last, but by no means least, the awful knowledge that the fire at Middle House had been the doing of the actors in that marvellous play, *Barbara Allen*, the middles were feeling very humble.

After searching inquiries it turned out that Mollie Robson had tossed a still-lighted candle-end out of the window. So far as could be guessed the end had not been extinguished by the fall, but had ignited some long ribbon grass which grew in the border just beneath. What had occurred after that had largely to be guessed at. Presumably the wooden frame of the French window of Miss Oswald's sitting-room had taken fire, and that had been the beginning of it all.

Mollie, who had owned up about the candle-end as soon as the girls had been sufficiently relieved to discuss the cause of the fire, and who had only just escaped being sent away from the school altogether, was a melancholy person these days. Her escapade after half term had nearly cost her her own life, and had been quite serious enough. This last affair, which might have ended so tragically, had given her a shock that would last all her life. For the future she would be far more responsible and steady, and when, four years later, the head girl of the school said "good-bye" to the Head, it was to be told that her year as head girl had been one of the best that St. Helen's had ever known. And that head girl was the one-time careless, irresponsible Mollie Robson!

However, that was all in the future. At present Mollie was just a thoroughly unhappy middle, who had nearly caused the death of two people,

and who didn't know even yet that she wasn't to blame for hurting Miss Oswald so badly that she would never be the same again.

The rest of the Octave felt their responsibility in the matter, for if they had never had the play, there would have been no fire. The only moderately contented person at the time was Maud Evans, who had the satisfaction of saying, "What did I say?" It must be owned that Maud was rather unbearable these days.

When finally the week ended, and the girls were told that Miss Oswald would be all right, though it would be a long time before she was so, while Barbara was to be allowed visitors that afternoon, things began to go back to their normal state. Miss Morgan, who considered that the girls had moped sufficiently, called Gillian to her, and informed her that the final of the inter-form tennis had better be played on the Monday. They would break up on the Thursday after that, and Tuesday to Thursday would be busy days.

"But Barbara is unable to play, Miss Morgan," said Gillian.

"Well, I suppose you can get some one else in her place," retorted Miss Morgan. "Who are the second strings for the Lower Fourth?"

"Monica Cliveden and Mollie Robson," replied Gillian, "but Mollie is hopeless just now."

"Then she can just pull herself together," returned Miss Morgan vigorously. She was a very healthy-minded person herself, and she thought that Mollie had fretted over things more than sufficiently. "Monica had better partner Clare, and—let me see, I think Marjorie Lennox is next best. She can play with Mollie. Whom will you get for umpires?"

"I thought perhaps you would be one," said Gillian, "and Mary Setoun-Smith for the other."

"Yes; that will do very well. Then that is arranged. I will see Miss Blake, and have all arrangements made. We'll play on the special court and the third senior—I think they are the best. Will you ask George to re-mark them, and you might look at the balls. I don't want to open a new box just at the end of term if it can be helped."

Gillian nodded, and ran off, and Miss Morgan went off to the Head's study.

The notice of the match created a change in the atmosphere of the school, which was just what the games mistress had intended, and for the rest of the week-end the girls were more like themselves than they had been since the fire.

In the afternoon Clare and Winifred were ushered into san, after repeated warnings from every one concerned as to their behaviour. They were not to excite Barbara; they were not to ask her too much about herself; they were to keep to ordinary school topics, and avoid all mention of the fire. In fact, as Clare said ruefully to Winifred as they went across to san, it was a wonder they were to be allowed to talk at all!

Nurse, who was able to manage now, with a little help from the three matrons, greeted them on the doorstep with the remark, "Well! have you been attending a funeral lately?"

"N-no, nurse," said Winifred, with a nervous giggle.

"Then, for pity's sake look a little more cheerful, both of you! That's not the kind of face to wear when you come to visit an invalid. Barbara will burst into tears when she sees you if you go to her looking like that. Do use your common sense, girls!"

Thus adjured, the pair replaced the funereal air they had been wearing with nervous grins, which were only one shade better, in nurse's opinion, and no more. However, she decided that once they were alone with Barbara they would speedily become their normal selves; so she took them up to where the patient was lying on a couch, waiting for them, and left them alone at once.

Barbara looked very white and fragile as she lay there. Her nerves had by no means recovered from the strain, and though her burns were healing nicely, and the wrist would soon be all right again, she was easily upset. She smiled as she saw her friends come in, and held out her uninjured hand to them.

"How jolly to see you two again! I'm sick of being here! Come on and sit down, and tell me everything that's been happening!"

Clare bent and kissed her with the air of one who feels that it must be done, so the sooner it's over the better.

"'Lo, Barby, old girl! You're looking a bit washed-out! Rotten luck about your wrist! How's it getting on?"

"Oh, doc says it'll soon be all right again," said Barbara. "Of course, I shan't be able to play tennis again this season, though!"

Winifred now came forward and bestowed her embraces on her chum. "Barby, I'm so awfully sorry you've had such a rotten time! It's dreadful to think about it!"

Her blue eyes were full of tears, ready to fall on the slightest provocation, and Clare, mindful of nurse's warning, nudged her sharply.

“Taisez-vous, idiot! No waterworks!”

Winifred looked at her with a reproachful face, but she too remembered what nurse had said, so restrained herself with heroic self-control, and sat down on a chair near by.

“What’s happening about the tournament?” asked Barbara.

“Monica is taking your place,” said Clare; “she and I are going to have a practice this evening, and another before brekker on Monday. Marjorie is to play with Mollie.”

“I only hope Mollie bucks up a little!” said Winifred incautiously. “She’s going round like a wet week just now!”

“Why ever?” Barbara was interested.

“Oh, because she started the fire,” explained Winifred before Clare could stop her. “She chucked one of the candle-ends out of the window on to that grass-stuff in the border, and as it had been such a broiling day, it was dry, and took fire, and that was how it began!”

Barbara sat up, a faint colour showing in her cheeks. “Do you mean that, Win?”

“Oh, it’s true enough,” said Clare hastily before Winifred could reply. “But it’s all over now, Barby, and Moll’s an ass to go round moping!”

Barbara paid no heed to her. “Then—then it was our play that caused it all?” she said slowly.

“Oh, rats!” returned Clare. “It might have happened anyhow!”

Barbara shook her head. “If we hadn’t had that play, there’d have been no candle-ends, and Mollie couldn’t have chucked one out. Oh, what an ass I was to go on with it!”

Clare began to feel frightened. Barbara looked so flushed, and her eyes were shining so.

“Barby, don’t bother about it! If you *were* an ass you’ve paid for it all right. What you pay for is done with.”

“Yes; but Miss Oswald is still paying, too,” put in Winifred, who, from sheer nervousness, was letting cats out of bags with fatal ease.

“*What?*”

Winifred shrank back from this Barbara who was fronting her with wide brown eyes and scarlet cheeks.

Clare rushed to the rescue. “Barby, Win’s an ass! Miss Oswald got hurt when she saved you—she broke an arm. But she’s going on splendidly now,

and they say she'll be bang all right quite soon!"

Barbara stared at them. She had never mentioned the fire to any one since that night when she had wanted to know if any one else was hurt, and the doctor had warned them all to say nothing about it to her till she asked. It had been left to Winifred to tell her what they had been keeping from her for the present.

"Miss Oswald saved me?" she repeated now. "How?"

"Barby, it can't matter," said poor Clare, who felt like kicking Winifred. "She's all right, honour bright!"

"But I want to know what she did," said Barbara impatiently. "Go on! tell me!"

Seeing no help for it, Clare told the story of that awful night of a week ago in the baldest language. "You collapsed with the smoke, and we couldn't get to you. The fire brigade in the town were at another fire, and the stables had caught, so we couldn't get at the ladders. Miss Oswald got a rope and slung it over one of the hooks, and climbed along it, and got you. When she was coming back it gave, and you both fell into the jumping sheet. She fell on her face, and broke her arm, and you sprained your wrist. That's all there is to tell."

"*All?*" repeated Barbara.

There was silence for a minute. Then she raised herself from her cushions.

"Word of honour, Clare, there is no more? Miss Oswald isn't badly hurt?"

"Well, a broken arm is rather rotten," said Clare cautiously. "But she's getting on well, and the bones are knitting splendidly. I heard Matey say so to Miss Morgan."

Barbara lay silent. Then she suddenly turned to the two girls. "I'm awfully glad you came," she said unevenly. "It's—been topping—to see—you. But do you—mind—going—now?"

Winifred opened her mouth to protest, but Clare was too quick for her this time.

"Righto," she said. "We've been awfully glad to see you, Barby, old thing! Buck up and get better! Come on, Win!" And grasping that young lady firmly by the wrist, she hauled her forth.

"Well, you *have* paid a short visit!" exclaimed nurse when she met them on the stairs. "Wasn't Barbara pleased to see you?"

“Yes; but I think she’s a bit tired, nurse,” replied Clare. “Come on, Win! We’d better be going to see that the courts are all right for to-night! G’bye, nurse.”

Winifred was dragged away to a quiet spot, where Clare told her exactly what she thought of her for telling Barbara everything like that. Winifred wept, but it had no effect on the stony-hearted Clare, who rated her soundly, and then advised her to stop “that kiddish howling!”

“You’re worse than little Nora Stone!” wound up Clare. “As for keeping a secret, I don’t believe you could if you were paid for it!”

Meanwhile nurse, disturbed by Clare’s manner rather than her words, had hastened up to the room where Barbara was lying with flushed cheeks and brilliant eyes, looking as if her temperature was up again.

In answer to nurse’s anxious inquiries, however, she said that she felt all right, but she wanted to see the Head as soon as possible. She refused to say anything more, and nurse withdrew to send for Miss Blake, wondering inwardly what Clare and Winifred had been saying, and wishing that she had stayed in the room with them. She had left them alone because she thought that they would prefer it; but now she regretted that she had done anything of the kind.

The Head was in her room, fortunately, and she came over to san at once. Nurse told her what had happened as far as she knew it, and then left her to go back to her other patient.

Barbara was watching the door impatiently, and at sight of Miss Blake she sat up with a cry. “Miss Blake, is it true that Miss Oswald saved me?”

“Yes, Barbara, quite true,” replied the Head quietly, as she came and sat down by the girl.

“Oh, and I’ve been so *awful* to her!”

“When it is a question of a life in danger, I don’t think any of us thinks of that kind of thing,” said the Head, taking one of the hot hands in hers. “I feel sure you will forget your feud against Miss Oswald after this, and I know *she* won’t remember it. I have known Angela Oswald sixteen years, Barbara, and I have always found her one of the most generous people living. She was here at school for four years—did you know? She left when she was twelve, because her people came to live in England, and wanted to have her with them. When she wrote to me from India six months ago, and said that she was coming back to England and wanted a post of some kind, I was glad to be able to offer her this—though, as a matter of fact, it was a post as my secretary that I offered her. It was only when Miss Lessing came

to tell me that her fiancé was coming home unexpectedly, and wanted her to marry him and go back with him, that I thought of making her house mistress.”

“Oh,” murmured Barbara.

Miss Blake sat looking out of the window for a moment with a little smile. Then she turned again to the girl. “It seems a strange thing, Barbara, that you should be the second of your family that she should have saved from death!”

“*What!*” Barbara was too surprised to remember that she was speaking to the Head.

Miss Blake jumped. “Oh dear! She begged me not to tell you this. I’m afraid I spoke without thinking.”

“Yes, Miss Blake; but do go on,” begged her pupil.

“You remember that you wished you might meet the girl who saved your little sister from the crocodile? Well, you have been living in the same house all this half term. But, Barbara, you must promise me not to let it go any farther. Miss Oswald was particularly anxious that none of you should know, and if I had been thinking what I was saying I should not have mentioned it.”

“*Oh!* And I’ve been such a *beast* to her!” groaned Barbara.

For once Miss Blake passed over the unconstitutional epithet. “Things will be different now, Barbara. And it seems to me that you haven’t hated her so badly all the time.”

“No,” acknowledged Barbara. “That was what made things so bad. After the first, I knew I liked her awfully, if I’d only give in. But—but——”

“It seemed to you as if it would be disloyal to Miss Lessing?” queried the Head. “I happen to know that Miss Lessing will be as glad as I am. She and Angela were great friends when they were here together, and if she knew how you had treated her chum, it would grieve her deeply. Now, Barbara, you look very tired, and should try to go to sleep. I know that next term everything will be all right, won’t it?”

Barbara nodded. “Yes. *Not* because she saved Beth and me like that, though, Miss Blake, but—but——”

“But because you find that after all you can really love your new house mistress,” Miss Blake finished for her.

And next term, it really was so.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The New House Mistress* by Elinor Mary Brent-Dyer]