

ton-wood and tissue paper Margery threw in the fire!"

Noreen turned so pale at the words, that no one noticed the smile which accompanied the words—no, one except Mrs Jameson, who glanced at her so searchingly that the girl flushed deeply under it, then, saying that she was tired, she excused herself, and left the room.

"It's evident it's not here," said Mrs Jameson. "Very strange, isn't it?"

"Very," replied Margery. "I call it mysterious. Wouldn't it be well, don't you think, not to have the fire touched, in case there's any trace of it there?"

"That's sensible; ring the bell, please. You are always sensible, Margery dear; if you weren't, you would never have managed to clear your brother and found the culprit who burned down your father's hayrick."

Margery smiled at the recollection, but quickly became thoughtful. She held Noreen's cold hand tightly, and glanced round at the gloomy, sympathetic faces of the girls as they turned helplessly towards her. She was used to that. When there was trouble, it was always to Margery they looked for advice.

"The parlour-maid entered. "Leave the grate undisturbed in the morning, Birding. Don't touch it on any account."

"Yes, Mem," said Birding, trying not to show the surprise she felt at such an unusual order.

"Birding!" ventured Margery, stopping her as she was going. Mrs Jameson had called Noreen on one side, and was trying to cheer her up. "Birding, one moment. When did that parcel come?"

"During lesson-time, Miss."

"But, Birding! We had been down here nearly two hours when you brought it in."

"I think not, Miss," answered the old-established maid with some asprity.

"You don't know what's happened, Birding," said Margery. "You've been asked not to touch the ashes in the morning because that valuable pearl necklace cannot be found."

"Ca-can't be found, Miss?"

"Can't be found," repeated Margery, quietly.

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed the maid. "Oh, good gracious!" she repeated.

"At what time did that parcel come?" persisted Margery.

"Birding!" called Mrs Jameson. "I hear your voice. Put the lights out downstairs, please. There, children, go to bed—we'll see to this in the morning. Good-night, dears."

"I'll tell you to-morrow, Miss Margery," whispered Birding, "when I bring your boots. Yes, Mem!" she added aloud, and hurried below.

CHAPTER III.

The grate next morning revealed no signs of anything unusual having been thrown to the flames.

"Please, Mrs Jameson, have the ashes kept," said Margery. "They may be wanted."

"What a head you've got, dear," replied her mistress; "you are right, they shall be." Then as soon as a telegram could be sent down to the station, Mrs Jameson despatched Birding with one to the Major to notify the distressing loss of his pearl necklace, as she thought he ought to know at once, in case her own private surmise was happily wrong. So the page distributed the boots, and Margery did not get Birding's promised explanation.

Mrs Jameson, much preoccupied, started her morning's work of giving orders and tending the plants. She was passing along the corridor of the small private bedrooms when, through the chink of a door ajar, she saw the reflection of Julia in the looking-glass. Julia was trying on a pearl necklace! Hearing the board creak, the girl hastily pushed the necklace under the mirror. Mrs Jameson was about to enter, when she became aware that someone was standing by her side, and she looked straight into Margery's scared face and felt that her own was equally troubled. They hurriedly withdrew together into the adjoining boudoir. Neither liked to speak for a moment; then the elderly lady said softly, with her handkerchief to her eyes:

"Last evening, I couldn't help noticing the peculiar behaviour of Julia. I'm

afraid she was painfully jealous temperament, as well as a passionate one."

Margery did not answer for a moment. She sat silent, with her hand on her chin, thinking. Then she looked up. "But she's really good-hearted, Mrs. Jameson. I think she's sure to feel sorry at Noreen's distress, although they are not very friendly—and then she'll come and—and—explain herself."

"Well, she might, if she's not too wicked. I can't bear the idea of broaching the subject to her first, although it's my duty."

During lunch a telegram from the Major was handed to Mrs. Jameson, who read it out:

"Please tell niece to be hopeful. Parcel seems to have been delayed a day, and perhaps therein lies mystery."

"Delayed a day!" exclaimed Mrs. Jameson. Margery glanced at Birding. Birding looked at Margery and spilled some of the mint sauce over the dress of the German governess, at which her pupils rejoiced, especially the little ones. In the confusion Margery, who sat at that end of the long table—in the seat facing that of the mistress of the house—dropped her bread and asked for more, and as she took it she turned her head to Birding and said, "Thank you," adding in an undertone, "Kitchen-garden at two."

At two o'clock Birding was strolling in the kitchen-garden, pretending to be much interested in the progress of the strawberry beds, which were just beginning to show what they had in store. Her eyes were red—"It's the wind, Miss," she replied, when Margery, hurrying up to her, remarked upon them.

"I think it would be well, Birding," replied Margery gently, "to say exactly what you did with that parcel. I know it was delivered into your hands the day before yesterday, because I made a point of meeting the postman this morning and asking him."

"Yes, Miss, so it was, Miss," answered Birding meekly; "and I feel that put about, because when it came it really was lesson-time, so I put it in the pantry cupboard for safety guessing what it was, and knowing what it was worth, and then I clean forgot all about it till next evening. And when you said, Miss, as no pearl necklace was inside, it gave me such a turn, why, good gracious, I thought I should have dropped! So that's all, Miss Margery. And I didn't dare say it had been lying about all that time—but who could have tampered—you believe me, Miss?" She asked the last words with curious deliberation.

But Margery had already said "Thank you," and was walking thoughtfully away. As she passed through the sweet-scented orchard, she came upon Julia, sitting on a bench under a blossoming cherry tree, in a flood of tears. Margery sat down beside her and softly laid one hand upon her shoulder and the other on the arm of the sobbing girl. At this simple touch of sympathy Julia poured forth her woes.

"I'm always in some trouble or other," she said with a little moan, "but this beats everything. Did you notice all during lunch, how Mrs. Jameson was looking at me, and avoiding speaking to me? Why, do you know, Margery, I'm certain she believes I stole Noreen's pearl necklace! She does, I'm sure she does!"

"How could she imagine such a thing?"

"Because she does."

"Without any reason?"

"I don't know. I've got a pearl necklace myself, you know!"

"I didn't know. Have you had it long?"

"No, it's new—only yesterday. But it's a secret."

"Oh! Why is it a secret?"

"Because it is."

"Who gave it to you?"

"Nobody. I went out against rules. I didn't see why Noreen should be the only one to have a pearl necklace—I did so long for one. And," she continued, "and so I bought one."

"Oh, Julia! Bought one? Schoolgirls don't buy pearl necklaces. May I see it?"

"Yes, if you like; I've got it here." And she drew the string of pearl beads from her pocket.

Margery looked at them and handed them back with a curious smile.

"What are you laughing at like that?" Julia burst out. "If you don't believe me, don't!" she added, turning white. "But remember, it's a secret." She moved away, turned her back, and said not another word.

Margery saw that she had one of her sulky fits, and left her; she continued her solitary stroll, pondering what she had heard. Suddenly she stopped and drew something from her jacket pocket.

It was the Major's envelope, which Noreen had handed to her when she read the announcement of the coming pearls—for the pupils were not allowed to strew paper in the grounds. She examined it carefully, and it was some time before she replaced it. Then the half-past two bell began to ring, and Margery had to run very fast to get indoors in time for the afternoon lecture.

Tea was always served in the conservatory, and it was then, no confession having been forthcoming, that Mrs. Jameson announced her intention—as it would probably be Major Grey's wish—to notify the matter of the delay in delivery of his parcel to the Post Office, and let them investigate the matter. She glanced at Julia as she said it, and the girl seemed to flash back a look of defiance. "Yes, I must put the matter in official hands," she repeated with a sigh. "Cheer up, Noreen!"

"Yes, don't look so hopeless, dear," whispered Margery. "Mrs. Jameson," she continued aloud, "I've a sort of idea. Please don't say anything to the Post Office just yet, because they would put it into the hands of the police, and you don't want the name of the school mixed up with police and detective reports and things, do you?"

As Margery was looking in Julia's direction, Mrs. Jameson concluded that something might probably soon be forthcoming from that quarter. She never intended getting outside help if she could help it, but was trying to work on Julia's conscience, so she replied:

"Is it a good sort of idea?"

"Never mind, please, Mrs. Jameson," pleaded Margery; "I want to think something out. I'll go to my room for a bit, if you'll allow me. I'll be down in half an hour."

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mrs. Jameson, somewhat mystified, whilst the French governess and the older pupils began whispering, and Noreen glanced around at the head-mistress anxiously.

"Very well," continued Mrs. Jameson. "I don't quite see—however, yes, I'll give our Miss 'Sherlock Holmes' her half an hour."

CHAPTER III.

Margery was walking up and down her room, and then sat down and stared at the carpet. She was thinking. After a time she raised her eyes and glanced around nervously, until for a moment they rested on a picture calendar that hung beside her bed. She started.

"That's it!" she exclaimed aloud in excitement. She pulled open her writing case and hastily took out a telegram form.

Before the half hour was up, Margery knocked at the boudoir door.

"Come in!" said Mrs. Jameson. "May I go out, Mrs. Jameson?" Margery's voice was slightly unsteady.

"No, dear. Birding will go for you."

"Please, Mrs. Jameson, do trust me—I—I don't want anyone to go instead of me."

Mrs. Jameson looked at her for a moment. Then she said: "Very well, dear; I know I can always trust you."

Margery's arms were round her neck, the young sweet face was against hers, and then without another word she left the room.

A moment later—

"Margery," called Mrs. Jameson, hurrying out, "if that's a letter you have, I think I'd rather—"

But the front door slammed to, and after-thoughts were too late. She returned to her room, feeling unusually restless for one of her placid dispositions—in fact, the events of the last two days had rather unnerved her.

It took half an hour to get to the post office. When an hour and a-half had passed and her head pupil did not return Mrs. Jameson became thoroughly perturbed. When another half hour went by, consternation stole through the school. It was getting dark now, and the pupils, who felt they must do something, began searching for Margery in the grounds, in groups, because they were not a very courageous band; and a messenger was despatched to make inquiries. She had not been seen at the post office, nor had she been to the ticket office at the railway station close by.

It was only three hours after Margery had started that news was heard of her. A telegram was brought to Mrs. Jameson, which she opened with trembling hands. It was from Euston Station, London.

In the meantime Margery had got to the station. The London train was at the platform; Margery ran and jumped into a compartment just as it began to move. She was breathless, but self-composed, and paid no notice of the ticket she had had no time to procure. She handed a telegram to the ticket-inspector with a smile and a tip, and a-k-e-d him to send it off, please, at once.

Arrived in London in the gray dawn, she was too eager to feel any sense of loneliness in the vast crowd of strangers hurrying hither and thither. She hailed a four-wheeled cab, and told the driver to take her to a house in Endsleigh Gardens, and within three minutes' time the door of Major Edward Skrimgeour Grey's study was thrown open, and the butler announced:

"Miss Margery Redford!"

"Delighted!" exclaimed her host, hurrying forward, and by twilight met a little more stiffly and in his stiff iron-grey moustache as he glanced curiously at the handsome, earnest, and blushing young face before him. "Play he sent—"

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