

Morrison Gertrude W.

The Girls of Central High: or, Rivals for All Honors



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Содержание

CHAPTER I – A BLOW AT THE HIGH COST OF LIVING	5
CHAPTER II – ATHLETICS – PRO AND CON	9
CHAPTER III – A REAL ALARM	12
CHAPTER IV – “POOR BOBBY!”	16
CHAPTER V – WHOM DO YOU BELIEVE?	18
CHAPTER VI – FALSE EVIDENCE	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

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CHAPTER I – A BLOW AT THE HIGH COST OF LIVING

“Hey, Laura!”

The side window of James Belding’s jewelry store was open behind the grillwork of strong steel bars. Laura had just finished dusting the inside of the last show case in the row on that side of the wide shop, and had replaced the trays. This was Laura Belding’s usual Saturday morning task; her father would not trust Chet to do it, although the lad often waited on customers.

Just now Mr. Belding was at the front of the store, showing a tray of his most valuable rings to a customer. The shopper was a stranger to both the jeweler and his daughter, who were alone in the place; therefore Mr. Belding’s eyes did not leave the tray before him.

“Hey, Laura!”

The call was repeated in a loud “stage whisper”; the sound came from the open window. Laura started and turned to look. She could see a fly-away mop of flaxen hair, a line of forehead, and two sparkling brown eyes.

“Bobby Hargrew!” she cried, and went to the window.

“Oh, Laura! I want something,” whispered her friend, fairly dancing up and down outside the window. “I’ve got *such* a scheme!”

“What is it now?” asked Laura, sedately. “Bobby” Hargrew’s schemes were often very crack-brained indeed. Everybody – except her grandmother – called her “Bobby” instead of “Clara.” There were no boys in the Hargrew family; but her father, Tom Hargrew, declared that Clara was just as much fun as any boy. And she certainly was a “fly-away.”

“Get your father to let you have that big magnifying glass we were looking at last week, and bring it along to the store,” whispered Bobby, chuckling while she preferred the request.

“What for?”

“Never mind! I’ll show you when we get to the store. Dad’s about to shut up. Hurry, now!”

Tom Hargrew’s grocery store was on the block just beyond the Belding shop.

“I – don’t – know,” murmured Laura, glancing at her father and his customer. “Pa’s busy.”

“Oh, come on!” cried the harum-scarum Bobby. “I won’t hurt the old glass.”

Thus adjured, Laura put on her hat and walked slowly to the front of the store with the magnifying glass in her hand.

“Father,” she said softly, touching his arm, “I want to borrow this for a little while. I will bring it back.”

He nodded. He could not leave his customer then. So Laura walked out of the store and joined her school friend in Market Street. The girls were sophomores in Central High School of the city and they had always lived in adjoining streets, so were very good friends. Bobby was so full of mischief that it was hard to keep her out of trouble; but sometimes the more quiet daughter of the jeweler had a restraining influence over the younger girl.

“Oh, I’ve got the greatest scheme!” gasped Bobby, choked with laughter. “Hurry up before Daddy closes.”

“What have you been doing now?” asked her friend, admonishingly.

“Just dressing one of the store windows – honest to goodness! that’s all I’ve been doing.”

“But why the magnifying glass?”

“That’s it. You’ll see the joke. Hurry,” urged Bobby, pulling Laura along the walk.

They came to Mr. Hargrew’s grocery store and Bobby halted her friend before the first window. It was tastefully arranged with canned goods and package products; but in the center, in a bed of different colored tissue paper, was an ordinary loaf of bread of small size. Above it was a freshly lettered card bearing the legend:

Why Worry About

THE HIGH COST OF LIVING?

ONLY 5 CENTS

“But I don’t see the joke,” murmured Laura, turning to her giggling friend, curiously.

“Wait!” cried Bobby. “You’ll see. Give me that glass.”

She snatched the magnifying glass from her friend’s hand and whisked into the store. In a moment she had set the glass in such a way before the loaf of bread that anybody passing the window must look at the bread through it – and the loaf certainly looked to be a huge one for the stated price on the card above.

Laura had to laugh. And she knew it would make many other people laugh before Monday morning. Such little jokes attracted trade, too, and Bobby Hargrew was full of novel ideas. Her father came outside and viewed the advertising display admiringly.

“Hasn’t that young one got a great head?” he said. Bobby’s capers usually “tickled” her father. Having no son, he made her his companion as though she were a boy.

Already pedestrians had begun to stop before the window and laugh over the joke. Laura turned to go back to her father’s store.

“You’re coming up to the school this afternoon, Bobby?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” returned her friend, slowly. “I wanted to see the East High boys beat the West High boys. First baseball game of the season, you know; I just hope Central will win the pennant.”

“So do I,” murmured Laura. “But I think we girls should have some interest in athletics besides our loyalty to the boys’ baseball and football teams. I want the girls of Central High to organize for our own improvement and pleasure. Don’t you?”

“Do you suppose anything will come of the meeting this afternoon?” queried Bobby, doubtfully. “Old ‘Gee Gee’ is opposed to it.”

“How do you know Miss Carrington doesn’t like the idea?” asked Laura, quickly.

“She told us if we did not stand well in deportment, as well as in our studies, we could not belong to the new association – if it was formed.”

“Well, why should we? We’ve got to play the game, Bobby. It’s only honest in us to do our work well if we want the fun of playing basket-ball, and learning to dance, and row, and swim, and all the rest of it.”

“Well, it’s little fun I’ll get out of it,” sighed Bobby. “Gee Gee is forever putting black tally-marks down against me.”

“Miss Grace G. Carrington, whom you so impolitely term ‘Gee Gee,’” laughed Laura, “is thoroughly familiar with you, Miss Bobby Hargrew. You cannot fool her for one little minute – that’s why you don’t like her.”

The grocer’s daughter flushed; but she laughed, too.

“Perhaps you’re right,” she admitted. “She always *does* catch me at things.”

“Then don’t do ‘things,’” advised Laura Belding, with a smile.

“Can’t all be ‘Miss Prims,’ like you, Laura,” cried Bobby saucily.

“You’ll come to the meeting, just the same?” urged her friend.

“Oh, yes; I’ll come. I hope we’ll get a girls’ athletic association formed, too. The boys won’t let us play with them if we want to, and I’d like to learn how to play some game beside Puss in the Corner and Drop the Handkerchief. We’re all getting so dreadfully lady-like and grown up. I *hate* to grow up. If I’ve got to be all stiff and starched all the time, I’d rather be a boy. Why! Nellie Agnew looks so much like her mother, back to, when she’s dressed up, that last Sunday I asked after her rheumatism in my best-bred voice before I saw ’twas Nell!” and again Bobby broke into one of her jolly laughs.

“You come to the meeting. Mr. Sharp approves, and maybe he’ll be there; so will Mrs. Case, our gymnastic teacher.”

“I’ll come, Laura,” promised the harum-scarum, as the jeweler’s daughter went on to her father’s shop. The customer had gone when she arrived and Mr. Belding was putting up the grating at the door. The more valuable articles of the stock had been put into the huge safe at the back of the room, and the safe locked.

“We’ll go to Mostyn’s to lunch in a minute, Laura,” said her father. “Your dusting is done, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Laura, smiling.

It was a regular Saturday treat to accompany her father to the fashionable restaurant for luncheon. Laura did not begrudge the time she spent helping in the store during that forenoon, when the treat followed.

Most of the stores on Market Street closed for the Saturday half holiday, even if, like Mr. Belding’s jewelry store, they opened again for the evening trade. For the town was interested in athletics, and Saturday afternoon in pleasant weather the year around was given up to field sports of some kind.

Centerport was advantageously located for both land and water sports, being situated on the level shore of a beautiful lake, many miles in extent, with a range of low hills behind it to shelter the city from the north.

The boys of the three High Schools of the city – East, West and Central – were rivals in baseball, football, rowing, and track athletics; and on this particular Saturday the first baseball game of the season was to be played between East and West High School nines. Central High, which Laura Belding and Bobby Hargrew attended, had a good team, too, and the girls – loyal to their boy friends – would have “rooted” for the home team had the Central club been playing.

However, the girls of Central High – especially the Sophomores and Juniors – had a particular reason for attending no baseball game on this afternoon. As soon as her luncheon was finished, Laura excused herself and hurried away from Mostyn’s restaurant toward the schoolhouse.

Her route lay past Mr. Hargrew’s grocery – one window of which was the scene of Bobby Hargrew’s latest practical joke. The sun was very hot for so early in the year, and the grocery was on the sunny side of the street. It was long enough past noon for the sun’s rays to pour into the wide window.

Just before Laura reached Mr. Hargrew’s store she saw a tow-headed boy, with a baseball cap stuck on the very back of his head, coming whistling along the hot walk with his hands in his pockets.

“Billy Long might just as well not have any hat on at all,” thought Laura, smiling as she beheld the freckled, good-natured face of the towhead.

And then, quite suddenly, Billy Long’s actions amazed Laura Belding.

He halted, as though struck motionless by the sight of Bobby’s joke in the store window. Then he leaped to the window, leaped back, turned to look up and down the almost deserted street (there was nobody in sight but Laura for two or three blocks) and then dashed toward the corner which the girl had but a few seconds before passed.

“What’s the matter with you, Billy Long?” cried Laura.

“Fire!” bawled the boy. “Mr. Hargrew’s store’s afire! Fire!”

“Nonsense!” cried Laura, and ran forward. “Are you fooling me, Short and Long?”

But in a moment she saw smoke rising from the very middle of the show window – in the heart of the bed of tissue paper.

CHAPTER II – ATHLETICS – PRO AND CON

Billy Long (called “Short and Long” because of his diminutive stature) galloped on to the street corner, shouting “Fire! Fire!” in an astonishingly weak voice. Billy was so excited that it choked him!

On the corner was one of the city fire-alarm boxes. There was no place of deposit of the key indicated upon the box; but it had a glass front. Billy looked wildly about for a stick, or stone, with which to break the glass. There appeared to be nothing of the kind at hand.

Down the side street, not half a block away, was the fire station; but that fact never crossed Master Billy’s mind. Besides, the importance of having a legitimate reason for sending in an alarm was the prominent idea in Short and Long’s mind at that moment.

He glanced back once and saw the spiral of smoke rising behind the broad plate glass window of the grocery store. Laura Belding stood before it unable, as he had been for the moment when he first sighted it, to do a thing. Indeed, what was there to do but turn in the alarm for the department?

The loaf of bread nestling in its bed of tissue paper was already burned to a cinder; the paper would soon be in flames.

Billy hesitated only a moment when he reached the box and found no weapon with which to break the glass. He pulled out his handkerchief, wrapped it about his knuckles, and splintered the glass with one blow. At that he cut his hand a little; but he scarcely noticed this in his eagerness.

Standing on his tiptoes he was just able to pull down the hook inside. He could hear the alarm bell sound in the station half a block away at almost the instant he set the telegraph to working.

By this time several citizens had run to the store front. They were all quite as excited as Billy Long, the short boy.

“Tom’s locked up and gone!” cried one, shaking the latch of the store door.

“Of course he has – gone to the ball game!” said another.

“This door’ll have to be smashed in.”

“No! break the window pane!”

“Lock will cost less than the glass,” cried another man.

“That burning glass is what did it,” said one more reflective man. “Fool trick – that was.”

“That young one of his did it,” declared the first speaker. “Always up to some trick or other.”

“Say! where’s the fire department? They must have all gone to the ball game, too.”

“I’m going to break the glass in this door!” shouted the first man to arrive.

“What good will that do?” cried his friend, mopping his brow. “There’s the wire screen behind it. You can’t bust *that* with your fist.”

“Break the big window, then!”

“No! Smash the lock of the door.”

But they had no tools with which to do this. Had there been a loose paving block in the street the urgent man would surely have burst in the big plate glass. Just then a man with a helmet on his head and an axe in his hand rushed around the corner – the first fireman on the scene.

“Where is it, boy?” he demanded of Billy Long. “You rang in the alarm, didn’t you?”

“Here it is, Ned!” yelled one of the men in front of the grocery store. “You’ve got to break down this door to get to it.”

“You got to break the window – that’s quickest!” declared the insistent man.

The fireman ran to the door. He poised his axe for a blow as the others stood back. But suddenly Laura Belding halted the whole proceedings.

“Wait! wait a moment!” she cried, darting to the side of the window.

The fireman looked over his shoulder at her. The girl, with nimble fingers, released the awning ropes. In half a minute the heavy awning dropped over the walk and shut out the hot rays of the sun. The cinder of bread stopped smoking. *The fire was out!*

“Well! don’t that beat all?” cackled one of the men.

The fireman grinned sheepishly and walked to the middle of the show-window to make sure that the danger was really over.

“You’ve got a head on you – that’s what you’ve got!” he said to Laura.

“She’s Belding’s daughter – a smart little girl,” declared another of the men.

The engine and hose carriage came tearing around the corner just then. From up the street thundered the ladder-truck, three huge horses abreast. A crowd came running to the scene.

Laura slipped away, and found Short and Long at her side.

“Huh!” he said, with a grimace. “I thought I was going to be a hero. You’ve got me beat, Laura. You stole my laurel wreath right off my head!”

“You ought to have used what’s in your head a little better, Billy,” returned the girl, laughing. “What is your gray matter for? – as Professor Dimple would say.”

“Huh! Old Dimple! That’s exactly what he would say. He certainly does stick the gaff into us,” grumbled the short boy. “I’ve got a page of Virgil extra to translate between now and Monday morning. He’s a mean old hunk.”

“Such language!” sighed Laura. “I should think you needed extra work in English, not Latin, Billy.”

“I don’t need extra work at all,” proclaimed Master Billy, with scorn. “I’ve got too much work as it is. And he and Mr. Sharp between them threaten to cut me out of the ball team altogether this season if I don’t catch up. And what’s the team going to do for a short stop?”

“Well, Miss Carrington tells us girls that if we are going in for athletics we have all got to have good marks, too. Only the girls who stand high can join the new athletic association. Some of the lazy girls will be disappointed, I fear.”

“Are you girls really going in for athletics?” demanded Billy.

“We are. Why shouldn’t we? It isn’t fair for you boys to have all the fun.”

“And they say they are going to start girls’ branches in East and West High, too?”

“Yes. We want to have inter-school matches. Inter-class matches are forbidden right at the start. The doctor says there must be no rivalry among classes.”

“Yah! but there will be,” said Billy. “There always is. Purt Sweet pretty near broke up the ball team this season because he couldn’t play.”

“Now we girls will show you how much nicer we can conduct affairs,” laughed Laura. “We sha’n’t squabble.”

“Oh, no!” scoffed Billy. “What do you s’pose Hessie Grimes will do if she isn’t allowed to boss everything? Didn’t she and that chum of hers, Lil Pendleton, break up the class supper last year – when we were freshmen? Oh, no!”

“Well, that won’t happen again,” said Laura, firmly.

“Why not?”

“Because the rest of us girls will not agree to follow her,” declared Laura, confidently.

“You know she won’t play if she can’t be ‘it,’” grinned Billy.

“Now you see,” returned Laura, good naturedly, and a moment later she parted from the short boy.

She had not walked another block toward the schoolhouse when she heard a voice calling her name:

“Laura! Laura Belding!”

“Why, Jess!” exclaimed Laura, eagerly. “I was afraid you wouldn’t come.”

Josephine, or “Jess,” Morse was a taller girl than her friend, with bright gray eyes, and hair of that “fly-away” variety that never *will* look smooth. Despite Miss Morse’s bright eyes she often did the most ridiculous things quite thoughtlessly. Her mind was of the “wandering” variety. And almost always one could find an ink stain on her finger. This marked her among her girl friends, at least, as

being “literary.” And, as the old folk say, “she came by it naturally.” Her mother, Mrs. Mary Morse, had some little reputation as a writer for the magazines.

“Yes,” said Miss Morse, putting her arm around her chum’s waist as they walked on together. “I just *had* to come. If you are going in for athletics, Laura, of course I’ve got to.”

“Too bad,” laughed her friend. “You’re just whipped into it, I suppose?”

“I just am.”

“Why, it will be fun, Jess!”

“Who says so? I’d lots rather go to the theater – or to a party – or even go shopping. And you can’t dress up and play those horrid games the gym. teacher tells about.”

“But you like to play tennis.”

“Er – well – Yes, I play tennis. I like it because there aren’t many of the girls – nor the boys, either – who can beat me at that. I’ve got such a long reach, you see,” said the tall girl, with satisfaction.

“Then you’d like any athletic game in which you could excel?”

“Why – I suppose so,” admitted Miss Morse.

“That’s a poor attitude in which to approach school athletics,” said Laura with a sigh.

“Why is it?”

“Because, as I understand it, we should play for the sport’s sake, not so much to win every time. That’s the way to play the game. And that is what Mrs. Case will tell us to-day, I know.”

“She will be at the meeting, I suppose?”

“And Miss Carrington.”

“Oh – Gee Gee! Of course. To keep us up in our deportment,” said Jess, making a face.

“You all find her so strict,” observed Laura, seriously. “She treats me nicely.”

“Why, you know very well, Laura, that you never in your life did anything to get a teacher mad.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that. We don’t go to school to play tricks on the teachers. I want them to respect me. And father and mother would be disappointed if I brought home a bad report, especially in deportment.”

“Oh, I know!” said Jess. “For a girl who likes fun as you do, you do manage to keep concealed all your superabundance of spirits – in school, at least. But some of us have just *got* to slop over.”

“Slop over!”

“Yes, Miss Nancy. Don’t be a prude in your English, too,” laughed Jess. “Say! did you hear how Bobby got Gee Gee going yesterday in chemistry class?”

Laura shook her head, seeing that it would be useless to take her chum to task further on the topic of slang.

“Why, Gee Gee had been expatiating at great length on the impossibility of really creating, or annihilating, anything – the indestructibility of matter, you know.”

“I see,” said Laura, nodding.

“Oh, she brought up the illustrations in ranks and platoons, and regiments. I guess she thought she had got the fact hammered home at last, for she said: ‘You absolutely cannot make *anything*.’ And then Bobby speaks up, just as innocent, and says: ‘But, Miss Carrington, can’t we make a noise that didn’t exist before?’

“And what do you think?” cried Jess, giggling, “Poor Bobby got a black mark for it. Gee Gee said she did it to make the class laugh.”

“And Bobby did, didn’t she?” said Laura, but laughing, too.

“Oh, we laughed all right. But the lesson was practically over. Gee Gee ought to be glad if we can leave her class room in anything but a flood of tears!” completed Jess, as they came to Central High School.

CHAPTER III – A REAL ALARM

A bevy of girls were lingering on the steps and in the portico of the High School building. Mr. Sharp had given permission for the girls interested in the formation of the athletic association to meet in the small hall – “the music room” it was called, – on the third floor of the building, next to the suite given up to the teachers’ offices and studies.

Laura and her dearest friend, Josephine Morse, were welcomed vociferously by many of the waiting girls. Among them was Bobby Hargrew, but Laura did not tell her of the result of her practical joke in the window of the grocery store. Indeed, there was no opportunity to speak privately to Miss Harum-scarum. She came running to meet the chums just as Dora and Dorothy Lockwood, who were twins, crossed their path, arm in arm.

“There!” cried Jess Morse, “which of you two girls did I lend my pencil to yesterday in chemistry class? I declare I meant to mark the one I lent it to somehow; but you were dressed just alike then, and you’re dressed just alike now. How do you ever tell each other apart?” she added, shaking both twins by their arms.

“Only one way there’ll ever be to tell ’em apart,” broke in Bobby Hargrew. “When they get good and old, mebbe one will lose her teeth before the other does – like the twins back in the town my father lived in.”

“How was that, Bobby?” asked Jess.

“Why, those two twins, Sam and Bill, were just like Dora and Dorothy. Their own fathers and mothers didn’t know them apart. But Bill lost all his upper teeth and wouldn’t buy store teeth. So folks that knew got to telling them apart. You see, if you put your finger in Bill’s mouth and he bit you, why ’twas Sam!”

A rather tall, stately looking girl – taller, even than Jess Morse – drew near the group while the girls were laughing over Bobby’s story.

“Oh, Nellie!” cried Laura. “I’m glad to see you here. What does the doctor say about the scheme of our forming an athletic association?”

“I don’t know what he thinks about the proposed association,” returned the physician’s daughter; “but I’m sure he approves of athletics for girls. He told mother only yesterday that I ought to do at least half the sweeping, and so relieve mother and the maid,” and Nellie Agnew laughed. “What do you think of that? Father says I am getting round shouldered and flat chested. I do hope we’ll go in for athletics. I don’t like housework.”

“Lazy girl!” said Laura. “That is the way it will be with lots of them – I know. If it is play, they’ll like it; but anything like real work – ”

“There goes Laura Belding again – telling us all how we should be good and proper,” said a sneering voice behind Laura. “Really, I should think you’d be tired of telling us all how to conduct ourselves. You ought to run a ‘Heart to Heart Talks’ department in the *Evening Awful*.”

“Hessie Grimes! Mean thing!” hissed Jess in Laura’s ear. But the latter turned an unruffled countenance upon the rather overdressed, red-faced girl whose strident voice had broken in upon the good-natured conversation of the group.

“Oh, no, Hester. I don’t think my forte is journalism. We’ll let Jess take that position,” Laura said. “I see you and Lily Pendleton are both here, so there is nobody else to wait for. We can go upstairs, I guess.”

“Oh, I don’t know as I want to join the silly old society,” giggled Lily, who was a slender, white faced girl, who always clung to Hester and instead of giving the more assertive girl the benefit of her support, “clung like the ivy to the oak-tree’s branch.”

“Lil and Hessie expect to be ‘touched’ for the M. O. R.’s,” said Jess, quickly.

“Huh!” exclaimed Bobby Hargrew. “Perhaps they’ve another guess coming. The Middle of the Road Girls are not taking in many Sophs – we can make up our minds to that.”

“And do Hessie and Lily wish to join such a solemn conclave as the Mothers of the Republic,” demanded Nell Agnew, laughing, and making another play upon the initials of the most popular society of Central High. “I wouldn’t believe it.”

“You don’t know whether I wish to join or not, Miss!” snapped Hester Grimes.

“Say!” cried Bobby. “Heard the latest? Know what Chet and Lance and Short and Long call the M. O. R. girls?”

“What is it?” asked the twins, in chorus.

“The Mary O’Rourkes! And Mary O’Rourke is a member – she’s a senior, you know, and just the nicest girl! But her initials are the same as the society’s – and nobody knows what the initials stand for. That is, nobody outside the society.”

There had begun a general advance into the school building and up the broad stairway, ere this. Chattering and laughing, in little groups and by couples, the girls mounted the two flights and advanced slowly into the hall, or into the main office next to it. The windows of this office were over the front entrance of the building, and although the room was a very long one, it was brilliantly lighted, the windows reaching almost from ceiling to floor.

A large globe of water with goldfish and some aquatic plants and coral in it had the post of honor on a stand in the center of the bowed windows. Before the window was Principal Franklin Sharp’s great table-desk, and a big rubbish basket beside it. The janitor had not yet dusted and cleaned these rooms for the week, knowing that the girls were to hold their meeting there.

“Mrs. Case and Gee Gee are here already, girls,” whispered Bobby Hargrew, after peering in somewhat cautiously at the door of the music room.

Laura and her chum, with the doctor’s daughter and some of the older girls, approached the hall where the meeting was to be held. There were already fifty or more girls gathered in the music room and as many more were strolling through the corridors, or in the office.

Suddenly a burst of half-stifled laughter arose from the office. A crowd of the more mischievous girls were about Bobby Hargrew. Miss Carrington stepped down from the platform at the end of the music room and marched steadily toward the office.

“Oh! Bobby’s going to catch it again!” whispered Jess in Laura’s ear.

But there was no opportunity for her friends to warn the sprightly Clara of the approach of her nemesis. And when Miss Carrington, otherwise Gee Gee, came to the doorway and through her eye-glasses beheld the heinous offense of Bobby the teacher was, indeed, very much horrified.

Bobby was perched on the corner of Mr. Sharp’s desk, in a most unladylike attitude, and apparently just removing a burning cigarette from her rosy lips! The blue smoke curled away from the horrid thing, and Bobby was leaning back, with her roguish glance following the smoke-rings, and apparently enjoying the weed immensely.

“Miss Hargrew!”

The awful voice startled everybody but Bobby herself. Perhaps the wicked one had been expecting it.

“What do I see, Miss Hargrew?” demanded Gee Gee, in a tone of cold horror.

“I really do not know, Miss Carrington,” replied Bobby, as the girls shrank away from her vicinity, and she herself hopped down to the floor, hiding her hands behind her. “I never did know just how far you could see with your glasses.”

“Miss Hargrew, come here!” snapped the teacher, in no mood for frivolity.

Bobby approached slowly. She held her hands behind her back like a naughty child.

“Let me see what is in your hand, Miss!” commanded the teacher

Bobby brought forth her right hand – empty.

“Your other hand, Miss!”

Back snapped the culprit's right hand and then her left hand appeared – likewise empty.

“Miss Hargrew! I demand that you give me what you are hiding in your hand, at once!” cried Miss Carrington.

Slowly, and with drooping mien, the culprit brought forth both hands. In the fingers of one still smoked the brown object the teacher had spied.

“A vile cigarette!” she gasped.

“No, ma'am,” replied Bobby, quite bravely. “Only a piece of Chinese punk-stick left over from last year's Fourth of July celebration. I wouldn't smoke a cigarette, Miss Carrington. I don't think they're nice – do *you*?”

It was impossible for the other girls to smother their laughter. A ripple of merriment spread back to the music room. Now, Miss Carrington was a very unfortunate woman. She had no sense of humor. There should be a civil service examination for educational instructors in the line of “sense of humor.” For those who could not “pass” would never make really successful teachers.

“Clara Hargrew!” snapped Miss Carrington, her glasses almost emitting sparks. “You will show me a five hundred word essay upon the topic ‘Respect to Our Superiors’ when you come to the classes, Monday morning. And you may go home now. Until your standing in deportment is higher, you can have no part in athletics, save those gymnastic exercises catalogued already in the school's curriculum. After-school athletics are forbidden you, Miss Hargrew.”

Bobby at first paled, and then grew very red. Tears stood in her usually sparkling eyes.

“Oh, Miss Carrington!” she cried. “I was only in fun. And – and this is not a regular school session. This is Saturday.”

“You are in the precincts of the school, Miss.” said Gee Gee. “Do as you are bid. And throw that nasty thing away.”

She swept back to the platform at the upper end of the music room, and those girls who had not already gone ahead of her were quick to leave the culprit to herself. Hester Grimes smiled sneeringly at poor little Bobby.

“Got taken up that time pretty short, didn't you, Miss Smarty?” she jeered.

Miss Grimes had often been the butt of Bobby Hargrew's jokes. And then – Bobby was Laura Belding's friend and eager supporter. The door was closed between the music room and the office and Bobby was left alone.

Mrs. Case, the girls' athletic instructor, was a very different person from the hated Gee Gee. She was a fresh-colored, breezy woman, in her thirties, whose clear voice and frank manner the girls all liked. And then, in the present instance, her proposals anent the athletic association fitted right into the desires and interests of most of the pupils present.

“The work of the Girls' Branch Athletic Association is spreading fast,” Mrs. Case said. “Centerport must not be behind in any good thing for the education and development of either her boys or girls. This is something that I have been advocating before the Board for several years. And other teachers are interested, too.

“An association will be formed among the girls of East High and West High, as well. I understand that the school authorities of both Lumberport and Keyport are to take up the subject of girls' athletics, too. So, although inter-class athletics is tabooed, there will be plenty of rivalry between the girls of Central High and those of our East and West schools, and those of neighboring cities. A certain amount of rivalry is a good thing; yet we must remember to cheer the losers and winners both. This is true sport.

“I want my girls,” continued Miss Case, with a smile, “to be all-round athletes, as well as all-round scholars. You may be rivals for all honors with those of your own age in other schools. There are most fascinating games and exercises to take up, as well as Folk Dancing. The boys have a splendid association in our school – ”

Suddenly Miss Carrington sprang up, interrupting her fellow-teacher. She stood upon the platform a moment, looking toward the office, and sniffed the air like a hound on the scent.

“Wait!” she commanded. “I smell smoke!”

She was a tall woman, and she darted down the room with long strides. She flung open the office door. Then she shrieked and fell back, and half the girls in the music room echoed her cry.

Flames rose half way to the ceiling, right near the principal’s desk, and the office itself was full of smoke!

CHAPTER IV – “POOR BOBBY!”

Ordinarily the girls of Central High were perfect in “fire drill.” But then, when ever they practiced that manoeuvre, there was no fire. For a hundred or more of them, however, to see the shooting flames and blinding smoke, and to hear a teacher who had “lost her head” screaming as loud as she could scream, was likely to create some confusion.

It was Mrs. Case who rang the fire alarm. This notified the janitor, if he was in his basement quarters, of the situation of the fire, too. He would come with an extinguisher to their rescue. But meanwhile the blaze in the principal’s office was increasing.

“That reckless girl!” shrieked Miss Carrington. “She shall pay for this!”

And Laura, who had run down the room until she, too, was at the door of the office, knew whom the teacher meant. Poor Bobby Hargrew! She and her piece of burning punk-stick must be at the bottom of the catastrophe. But Miss Carrington really spoke as though she thought Bobby had intentionally set the fire.

“Oh, she never could have meant to do it,” cried Laura, horrified.

The girls had run from the door into the corridor and nobody but Miss Carrington and Laura were at the office door.

“What shall we do? What shall we do?” moaned the teacher, wringing her hands.

“Can’t we put it out?” demanded the girl.

“No, no! You’ll be burned! Come back!” cried Miss Carrington.

But the smoke had cleared somewhat now and Laura could see just what damage the fire was doing. It surely had started in the big wastebasket. If Bobby had flung the burning punk into that basket she deserved punishment – that was sure. Now the flames were spreading to the rug on which the basket stood. And they were charring the corner of the desk. Laura could smell the scorching varnish.

“Come back, Miss Belding!” commanded the teacher again.

But the girl thought she saw a chance to accomplish something. There was no use in waiting for the janitor to come to put out the flames if they could be quenched immediately. And no knowing how long before John would reach the room. He was not very spry.

Besides, to allow the fire to spread was both reckless and foolish. Laura saw just what should be done. She sprang into the room and passed the flames in a single swift dash.

She reached the window and seized the heavy bowl of water in which the gold fish swam. It was some weight for her, but she seized it firmly with both arms, and staggered toward the burning basket.

The smoke was drawn away for a moment by the draught of an opening door and she heard Miss Carrington scream again. But Laura shut both her eyes tight and staggered on.

Her foot tripped on the edge of the rug, she felt the blast of fire in her face, and then she overturned the full globe, fish and all, upon the flames!

With a great hiss of steam, which rose in her face in a cloud, the water struck the burning basket and the rug. There was enough water to saturate the place where the fire had been burning the most briskly. Not every spark was put out with this dash of water; but it took but a minute to stamp out the remainder when the steam cleared away.

But the poor fish! All four lay dead upon the floor, either trampled upon, or scorched by the flames.

“You are a very strong young girl, Miss Belding,” said Mrs. Case, hurrying in. “And a quick witted one.”

Laura was thinking that it was the second fire she had put out that day!

Miss Carrington was still sputtering. She called Laura “a dear, good girl – so bright and quick-witted!” And on the other hand she scolded about Bobby Hargrew until one would have thought poor Bobby was a monster of wickedness.

“Never mind the poor fish, Miss Agnew,” cried the teacher, as the doctor’s tender hearted daughter expressed her sorrow over the fate of those pretty creatures. “More fish can be bought – plenty more. And here is the rug ruined – and Mr. Sharp’s desk injured. But it shall be paid for – yes, indeed! Clara Hargrew’s father shall settle the bill. And Miss Clara shall pay for it, too. Careless, reckless girl!”

“Oh, but Miss Carrington!” cried Laura. “Perhaps she didn’t do it.”

“Who could have done it, then?” demanded Gee Gee, almost tempted to be angry with Laura for trying to defend the culprit.

“But nobody saw her – ”

“I do not say she deliberately set the fire,” said Miss Carrington, angrily. “But she had the lighted punk. Naturally she tossed it thoughtlessly into the basket. Behold the result!” finished Gee Gee, so dramatically that her glasses hopped off her nose.

“Oh, I can’t believe Bobby would have done so careless a thing,” murmured Laura in the ear of her chum, Jess Morse, who appeared at this juncture.

“But who else could be guilty?” demanded Jess, convinced against her own will.

“It will just about finish Bobby for this half,” groaned Laura.

“I should say it would!” returned Jess, as Mrs. Case called them back to their seats, while old John, who had now arrived, remained to clean up the debris.

The excitement had come very near breaking up the meeting. And it was some time before the athletic instructor could obtain the undivided attention of the girls.

The meeting was advanced far enough for a committee to be appointed to report on constitution, by-laws, and the like, and the government of the new organization. It was the intention of those backing the organization that the girls of Central High should govern their athletics as much as possible themselves. Too much interference by the faculty always spoils a school society.

Laura Belding and her chum were both appointed on this committee; and Hester Grimes and her friend Lily were likewise members. The committee was to report in a week, and Mrs. Case was to meet with them and advise them.

Miss Carrington burst out in her tirade upon the absent Clara Hargrew just as soon as the meeting was closed. She said to Mrs. Case:

“One of my pupils you cannot have in your association, Mrs. Case! I shall veto Miss Hargrew’s entering into any sports, or taking any ‘extras,’ during the remainder of this term. And I shall take up the matter with the principal, too. I am not at all convinced in my mind that for such an offense a girl of her age should not be suspended.”

“Why, don’t you suppose it was entirely an accident, Miss Carrington?” asked the athletic instructor, doubtfully.

“I don’t know whether it could be called wholly an accident. I shall look into it very closely,” said the other teacher, shaking her head and biting her lips.

“Poor Bobby!” repeated Laura Belding to her chum, as they went out of the school building. “She is so enthusiastic over games and athletics, too. It will be dreadful deprivation for her.”

“Do you suppose she really threw that burning punk into the papers?” asked Jess.

“Why – I suppose so. Of course, she’ll be given a chance to say whether she did or not. But how else could the fire have started?”

But Miss Morse had no answer to make to that.

CHAPTER V – WHOM DO YOU BELIEVE?

The Beldings lived in a nice house on Whiffle Street, with quite a big plot of ground about it – room for a lawn in front, a tennis court at the side, and a garden in the rear, out of which a rustic gate opened into the street where the Hargreaves lived. Mr. Belding owned the house and, with his business as jeweler, was considered, as fortunes went in Centerport, a wealthy man. But the family lived with old-fashioned simplicity.

Mrs. Belding was, Laura knew, just the dearest mother who ever lived; yet she had been brought up as a girl in a country community, had never had interests any broader than her own home while her children were small, and now that Laura and Chetwood were almost “grown up” – or, at least, *felt* they were – Mother Belding scarcely understood their plans and aspirations. The new organization was “too much” for her, as she frequently said.

“Why, how ridiculous!” Mrs. Belding once said, upon coming home from a shopping tour. “They show me exactly the same style of garment both for Laura and myself. No difference save the size, I declare! And at Laura’s age I had not even begun to put my hair up, and my skirts had not been lengthened.”

“Changes – changes! Don’t let them worry you, Mother,” said her husband, comfortably.

“Well, Milly and Frank are left us, anyway – they’re still children,” sighed the troubled lady. “But I must admit that Laura and Chet are too much for me!”

Not that either of her older children gave her real cause for worry or complaint. Chet was his father’s chum and confidant; he could not go far wrong under such guidance. And Laura was a very sweet tempered and practical girl. Indeed, it was Laura’s shrewd outlook upon and her keen appreciation of things that had never entered her mother’s mind as a girl, that so startled Mrs. Belding.

At supper that night Chet was full of the ball game that his father and he had attended that afternoon.

“Well, the East High fellows beat the West High boys, just as everybody said they would. They’ve got the battery – Hanks and Doolittle – and Merryweather and Ted Doyle are some punkins with the stick. Why, Ted is a bear-cat! But I believe we Central High fellows can put up a game that will hold them for a while. I want to see Central High win the pennant this year.”

“What is a battery?” sighed his mother. “Why ‘punkins’ and ‘stick’? Is this Ted you speak of really a subject for side-show exhibition, or are you ‘nature-faking’ when you call him a ‘bear-cat’? And why should the playing of you and your friends at baseball, Chetwood, ‘hold them’ for any length of time? Please elucidate?”

Laura and the younger children burst out laughing, and the older daughter said:

“English *is* a funny language, isn’t it?”

“The American brand of it is,” said Mr. Belding, who was also smiling.

“That is not English,” remarked the mother, with scorn. “Such expressions have no relation to good English. But I grant you that the slang language is very funny, indeed.”

“Aw, mother, the trouble with you is you don’t understand athletics. Every game has its own technical phrases, so to speak. You ask Laura to explain. I hear Central High girls are going in for ‘em. Going to compete for all honors with the other schools, eh, Laura?”

“We hope to,” returned his sister.

“How did the meeting go, daughter?” asked Mr. Belding, with interest.

Laura recited the work accomplished. “Of course,” she said, “we shall found our association on the constitution of the Girls’ Branch Athletic Association. Then we can compete for trophies with inter-county and inter-state teams, as well as with the local teams. Mrs. Case says that there will be an association at both Lumberport and Keyport.”

“Do you approve of all this disturbance about girls’ athletics, James?” asked Mrs. Belding.

“It’s for after-hours. It won’t interfere with their school work. It can’t, in fact,” said the jeweler, “for only those pupils who stand well in both their studies and in deportment can take part.”

“And poor Bobby!” cried Laura, suddenly. “It does seem as though she was fated to have bad luck. She won’t be able to join, even if Miss Carrington has her way,” and she told the family about the fire in the principal’s office.

“A very careless girl,” said Mrs. Belding, yet not sternly, for she loved jolly, harum-scarum Bobby Hargrew.

“You were a brave kid, Laura, to think of the water bowl,” said Chet, with enthusiasm.

“I object, Chetwood!” exclaimed his mother. “Neither your father nor I are caprine, hollow-horned ruminants. Your sister, therefore, cannot be a ‘kid.’”

“Oh, Mother!” complained Chet. “You won’t let a fellow talk.”

“I would much prefer to hear a young gentleman converse,” returned Mrs. Belding, though smiling. “And I agree with you that our Laura is both brave and quick-witted.”

“She’ll get along in the world,” said Mr. Belding, with a satisfied smile. “But I’m sorry Tom Hargrew’s girl is in trouble.”

“Of course, I haven’t seen her since Miss Carrington sent her home,” Laura said. “Nobody has heard her side of the story.”

“Of course, she set the papers afire,” Chet observed.

“It seems impossible that it could be otherwise. Thoughtless child!” said their mother.

“But I want to wait and hear Bobby’s story. If she says she didn’t, and *knows* she didn’t, I shall believe her,” spoke Laura.

“You will not take circumstantial evidence into consideration, then?” laughed her father.

“Not against Bobby’s word,” returned Laura, confidently. “Bobby just couldn’t tell a falsehood. It isn’t in her. That is why she so often gets into trouble in school. She cannot even *act* deceit.”

“Short and Long is like that,” said Chet. “And *he’s* going to be barred from athletics if he doesn’t have a care. We would be in a mess if we lost our shortstop. Old Dimple – ”

“Professor Dimp, you refer to?” interjected his mother.

“Oh, yes!” sighed Chet. “He can’t take a joke. And Billy is full of them. Yesterday he got into trouble with Dimple – er – Professor Dimp. The professor had written something on the board – I forget the sentence; but it had the word ‘whether’ in it. Billy read it as though it was ‘weather.’ ‘Ha!’ snapped Dimple in his very nastiest way, ‘how do you spell “weather,” Master Long?’

“Of course, Short and Long saw his mistake right off, and drawled:

“‘W-i-a-t-h-e-r.’

“‘Sit down! You’ve given us the worst spell of weather we’ve had this spring. Recitation zero,’ snaps Dimple. Now, wasn’t that mean – for just a little joke?”

“It seems to me,” said his father, “that the professor had the best of the joke. There’s some wit to that Professor Dimp, after all. And your friend, Billy, is too old for childish pranks, even if he is such a little fellow.”

The topic of the girls’ athletics and the new association was discussed in many homes in Centerport that evening. Nor was it tabooed from conversation on Sunday. By Monday morning, when the pupils of Central High gathered for classes, the girls, at least, were in a buzz of excitement. But they had an added topic of interest, too. The fire in the principal’s office on Saturday afternoon was much discussed.

Laura and Jess, with some of the other girls, surrounded Bobby Hargrew the moment she appeared.

“Did you do it on purpose?”

“What are they going to do about it?”

“Is Mr. Sharp awfully mad?”

“Is Gee Gee going to have you expelled?”

These and other questions were fired at Bobby in a volley.

“Hold on! Wait! Help! I’m down!” squealed Bobby. “Give me a chance to answer.”

“Well, tell us!” commanded Jess.

“I’ll tell you; but half of you won’t believe me,” said Bobby, rather sullenly. “And that is the way it stands with the faculty. They don’t believe me.”

“Why, Bobby! I shall certainly believe what you say if you are positive in your statement,” declared Laura Belding.

“All right. I’ll put you to the test. *I did not set that fire!*”

The girls, for the most part, looked blank. Some of them whispered together. Laura only said:

“You’re sure?”

“Pos-i-tive!”

“But the burning punk – ?”

“Think I’d chuck it in that basket?” demanded Bobby, scornfully.

“Maybe you thought you put it out?”

“Maybe nothing! I know. I carried that punk out and threw it in the gutter.”

“But a spark from it might have fallen in the basket?” said Jess, weakly.

“No, ma’am! I wasn’t near the basket. I was at the other end of the desk when Gee Gee caught me,” said Bobby, firmly. “Either I did, or I didn’t. I say I didn’t set that fire.”

“Then I believe you, dear,” said Laura, suddenly hugging the smaller girl.

“Thanks, Laura. You always were a good sport,” said Bobby, having hard work to keep back the tears. “But Gee Gee won’t believe me, and if I don’t own up to what I didn’t do, she says she will ‘take it up with Mr. Sharp.’ You know what *that* means. I’ll likely have to leave school – although good old Dad has already paid for the damage done, and bought new goldfish.”

CHAPTER VI – FALSE EVIDENCE

If there was anything of importance to be threshed out for the general welfare of the school, Franklin Sharp, principal of Central High, took the topic up at the Morning Assembly. The general standing and deportment of the scholastic body as a whole, rules of conduct laid down by the faculty, or news of importance to the scholars, both male and female, were there detailed.

At 8:25 o'clock the pupils were expected to be in the various class rooms. At 8:30 the gongs called the marching hosts to the great hall at the top of the building. The boys filed in on one side, the girls on the other. Many of the classes throughout the school were mixed classes; but naturally in certain studies the girls and boys were divided, especially the Junior and Senior years.

The High School course consisted of four years of study. Laura Belding and most of her friends were Sophomores. Therefore they could join in all the advanced athletics proposed by the Girls' Branch Athletic Association.

Mr. Sharp was a tall, scholarly looking man; but his seriousness of countenance was belied somewhat by eyes that twinkled cordially behind his spectacles. He had a quick apprehension of character. He understood boys thoroughly – and most of his male pupils liked Mr. Sharp. But he gave over a deal of the management of the girls to his female assistants – especially to Miss Carrington.

The latter was unquestionably an able woman; she knew the science of teaching and her marks in teachers' examinations were always the highest of any teacher in the Centerport schools. But her outlook upon life *was* awfully serious! Mr. Sharp could have endured better an assistant with a character more lenient to the failings and weaknesses of humanity.

Of course, however, the fire on Saturday could by no means be condoned. In the first place it had come about through a flagrant piece of impudence upon the part of a pupil. The pupils expected to hear from Mr. Sharp about the fire, and they were not disappointed.

"I am compelled to call the attention of the classes to an accident which occurred downstairs in my office on Saturday," he began. "When we are good-natured enough to allow the school property, entrusted to our care, to be used for purposes aside from the regular class work, we have a right to expect those pupils enjoying the privilege to be more than usually careful of such property.

"I mean this for the attention of the boys as well as the girls," he continued. "The girls, however, are at fault in this instance. It was their meeting that was held in the music room, and they had entrance to my office. Now a new rug is to be bought and my desk repaired, to say nothing of the purchase of four goldfish – four, I believe, is the number.

"Fire is a dangerous element to play with. I understand that the accident arose out of a so-called joke that one of our brilliant young ladies evolved – and evolved particularly for the disturbance of her teacher. That was not a nice or lady-like thing to do. I believe the culprit understands that fully now.

"But there is always a greater danger than the commission of such an act. That is the denying of the act after it is committed. I hope you all understand that. The old saw of 'A fault confessed is half redressed' has no 'bromide' qualities. It is a fundamental truth. Honesty above everything – that should be the motto of us all.

"To deny a fault committed, in short, makes the fault a double one. I think I have said enough upon this topic. The faculty will, of course, judge the guilty young woman in this instance as leniently as possible; but we must be just as well as merciful. You are excused to your classes."

Not until the forenoon recess did the sophs, who were Bobby Hargrew's closest friends, have an opportunity of commiserating with her. She had regained her composure by that time, however, and showed a plucky front.

"He intimated that I was untruthful," Bobby said, angrily. "It isn't fair. There is no evidence against me but –"

"But the evidence of the fire itself, Bobby," Nellie Agnew observed, quietly.

"I realize that. It is a mystery. I was last in the office – I was there alone, too. But I know what I did with that piece of punk, and I was not near the basket at any time."

"Don't lose your temper," advised Laura Belding. "That will not help you."

"It's all right for you girls to talk," said Bobby, sadly. "But Mr. Sharp has left it to Gee Gee, and she believes I would tell a story about it."

"Have patience – and hope for the best," said Laura. "The truth will surely come out in the end."

"But when will the end be?" demanded Bobby. "Oh! I think it is too mean for anything!"

"It doesn't pay to get Gee Gee down on you," said Jess. "I'm going to be very careful myself."

"And we'll all have to be careful if we expect to join in these after-school athletics. Gee Gee doesn't fancy the new association, anyway," said one of the Lockwood twins.

"I'm not so awfully eager myself to belong," said Jess. "We've got to wear those ugly suits –"

"And no furbelows," laughed Laura. "Oh, Jess, we all know your failing. Who is more devoted to the fashion magazines and the powder-puff than Josephine Morse?"

"It is the duty of every girl to look her very best at all times," declared Jess, confidently. "My mother says so."

"And that's what makes the boys laugh at us," remarked the other twin – no use saying which one, for nobody knew Dora and Dorothy apart. Gee Gee had long since put them on their honor not to recite for each other!

It was at noon that Miss Carrington called Clara Hargrew to her desk.

"Now, Miss Hargrew, I expect you to tell me the truth about this matter," the teacher said, very sternly.

"I never in my life told you an untruth, ma'am!" exclaimed the girl.

"I have always believed you truthful," admitted the teacher. "But this is a ridiculous claim you make –"

"I *did* carry that piece of punk out and throw it in the gutter."

"Did you look for it there?" asked Miss Carrington, quickly.

"Yes. I looked yesterday morning, even if it was Sunday. But the street men had flushed out the gutters before I arrived."

"That is curious, Miss Hargrew," said the teacher, doubtfully.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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