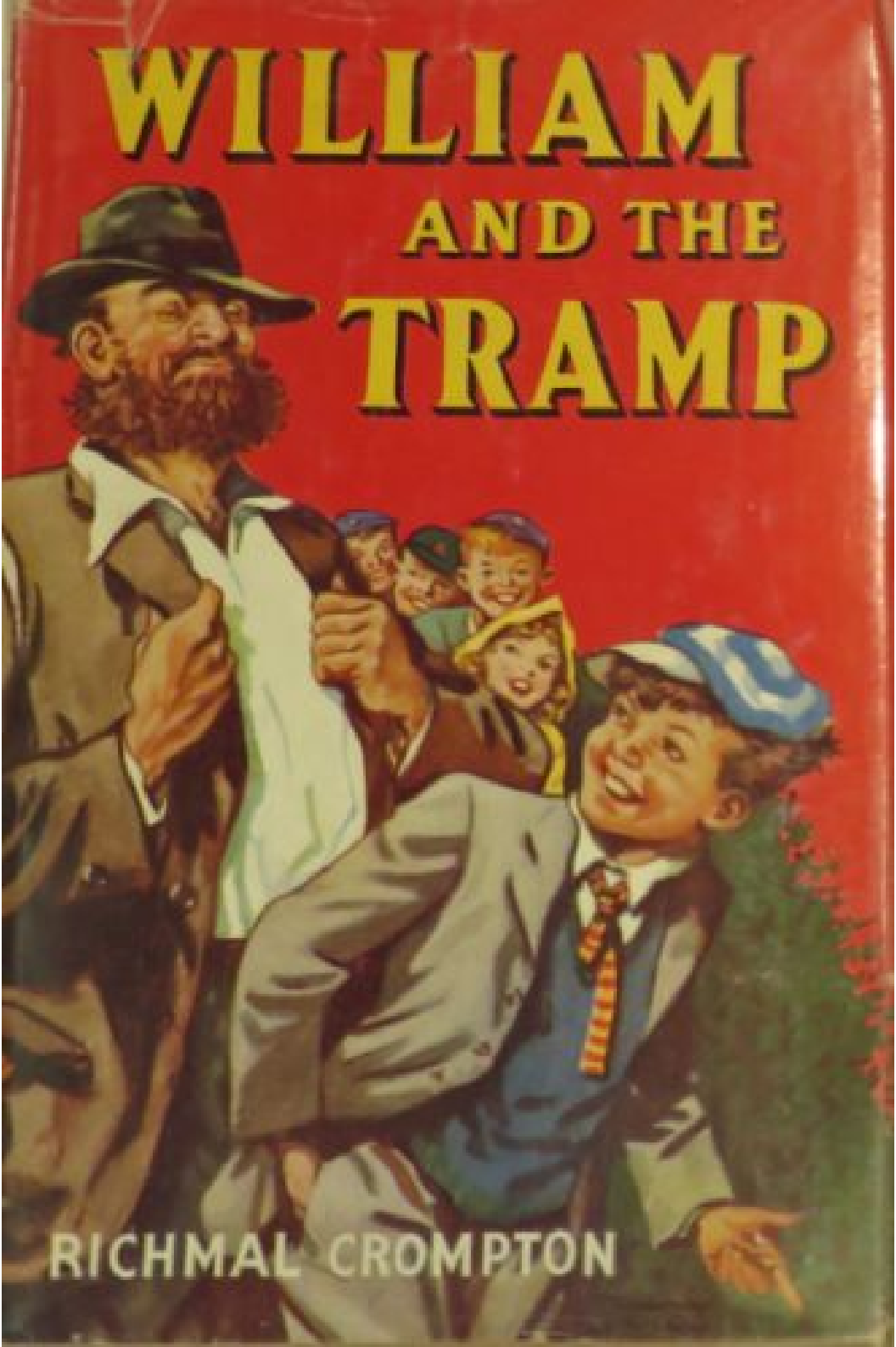
WILLIAM AND THE TRAMP



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By the Same Author

(1) JUST WILLIAM
(2) MORE WILLIAM
(3) WILLIAM AGAIN
(4) WILLIAM—THE FOURTH
(5) STILL—WILLIAM
(6) WILLIAM—THE CONQUEROR
(7) WILLIAM—THE OUTLAW
(8) WILLIAM—IN TROUBLE
(9) WILLIAM—THE GOOD
(10) WILLIAM
(11) WILLIAM—THE BAD
(12) WILLIAM'S HAPPY DAYS
(13) WILLIAM'S CROWDED HOURS
(14) WILLIAM—THE PIRATE
(15) WILLIAM—THE REBEL
(16) WILLIAM—THE GANGSTER
(17) WILLIAM—THE DETECTIVE
(18) SWEET WILLIAM
(19) WILLIAM—THE SHOWMAN
(20) WILLIAM—THE DICTATOR
(21) WILLIAM AND A.R.P.
(22) WILLIAM AND THE EVACUEES
(23) WILLIAM DOES HIS BIT
(24) WILLIAM CARRIES ON
(25) WILLIAM AND THE BRAINS TRUST
(26) JUST WILLIAM'S LUCK
(27) WILLIAM—THE BOLD
(28) WILLIAM AND THE TRAMP
(29) WILLIAM AND THE MOON ROCKET
(30) WILLIAM AND THE SPACE ANIMAL
(31) WILLIAM'S TELEVISION SHOW

(*See page 127*)

“IS HE STILL THERE?” ASKED ARCHIE IN A HOARSE WHISPER.
WILLIAM AND GINGER LOOKED CAUTIOUSLY OUT OF THE WINDOW.

WILLIAM AND THE TRAMP

BY

RICHMAL CROMPTON

ILLUSTRATED BY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

WILLIAM AND THE TRAMP

"WILLIAM, do stop messing about with your food," said Mrs. Brown.

"I'm not messing," said William with dignity. "I'm pretending that that pea on the top of that pile of potato's me on the top of a mountain, an' I've gotter get down an' there's this precipice here an' this swamp here an'——"

"Hurry up with your lunch and stop talking, dear," said Mrs. Brown.

"Yes, but listen," said William earnestly. "If I try to come down by this path I'll as likely as not fall into the precipice, an' if I come down by the other path I'll fall into the swamp. Look! You can see it's a swamp 'cause ——"

"William!" said Mr. Brown.

William relapsed into silence, contemplated his mountain scene with frowning perplexity for some moments, then, tiring of the problem and realising that everyone else had nearly finished, demolished mountain top, precipice and swamp in one gigantic landslide and dealt with the results in a summary if inelegant fashion.

So deeply absorbed was he in this work of demolition that it was some time before his mind was free to listen to the conversation going on around him.

"Don't be back late from golf, dear," his mother was saying. "Remember, we're going to the Botts' this evening."

"The Botts'?" said Mr. Brown, in pained surprise.

"Yes, don't you remember? A Mr. Bumbleby is coming to speak to the Literary Society to-morrow and he's arriving to-day and spending the night with the Botts, and Mrs. Bott has asked everyone in to meet him this evening."

"Bumbleby?" said Mr. Brown. "Never heard of the chap. Didn't even know they knew anyone of that ridiculous name."

"They don't exactly know him, dear," said Mrs. Brown. "Actually, they've never even seen him, I believe, but Mr. Bott's the President of the Literary Society——"

“He provides all their funds, so he has to be,” put in Robert.

“And they like to put up the speaker,” said Ethel, “and invite a select circle of their friends to show him off to. I’m only going because I enjoy watching Mrs. Bott being refained.”

“This Bumbleby’s a well-known literary figure,” said Robert. “He’s travelled all over the world and he published a book last spring that made quite a stir.”

“I hate listening to speeches,” said Mr. Brown irritably.

“He’s not going to make a speech,” said Ethel. “He’s just going to eat the Bott food and meet the Bott friends and answer any questions the Bott friends may like to ask him. Mrs. Bott told me that it was to be all quite irregular. I think she meant informal.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to go, dear,” said Mrs. Brown firmly. “She’s most anxious for everyone to be there. She’s even asked William.”

Ethel groaned, Robert said “Good Lord!” and William hastily swallowed the remains of his landscape before entering into a spirited defence of his manners and appearance—a defence that proved beyond dispute the desirability of his presence at any social function.

He had arranged to meet the Outlaws at the old barn after lunch, but it began to rain and Mrs. Brown said that he must stay indoors till it stopped. William did not believe in wasting time. The Outlaws were organising a show that was to take place at some indefinite date when enough “turns” had been prepared, so William decided to fill in the interval by practising his tight-rope act. He had never actually practised it yet. He had merely enjoyed glorious mental visions of himself walking with airy nonchalance at a dizzy height with crowds of cheering spectators far below. The only practical step he had taken towards the materialisation of this vision was the appropriation of a length of clothes line from his mother’s washing basket. He stood now with the rope in his hand, his brows drawn together in frowning concentration, his eyes roving speculatively round the room. Then, with the air of a general marshalling his forces, he tied one end to the door handle, stretched the rope across the room, and tied the other end to the top handle of his chest of drawers. Having done that, he stood on his bed, bowed low to the imaginary crowds, spat on his hands and stepped on to the rope. The resultant crash brought the entire household out into the hall.

“Are you hurt, dear?” said Mrs. Brown, in a voice of tender concern.

“What on earth are you up to now, William?” said Mr. Brown, in a voice that held concern but little tenderness. “Come down here at once.”

William’s dishevelled figure appeared on the landing and began to make its way slowly downstairs. His face wore the vacant expression with which he was wont to meet the concerted attacks of his family.

“I’ve not hurt myself an’ I’ve not done any harm,” he said, forestalling the inevitable queries and accusations. “Not any *real* harm, I mean. The handle came off the chest of drawers, but I bet it must’ve been loose to start with. Well, I bet real tight-rope walkers have somethin’ on their feet to make ’em stick. They must have. Glue or somethin’. Well, I’m jolly good at balancin’, but I went right over at once, so——”

“Be quiet, William,” said Mr. Brown, who knew that William’s eloquence, if not checked at its source, could grow to an overwhelming torrent. “Why don’t you try to help instead of playing these fool tricks?”

“Yes, but listen,” protested William. “I *was* tryin’ to help. I mean, if I learnt to be a real acrobat I’d be able to earn my livin’ an’ you wouldn’t have to pay any more money for me. They earn pounds an’ *pounds*, do real acrobats, an’ I bet they’ve all gotter start same as I did with a rope in their bedrooms, an’——”

“Be *quiet*, William,” roared Mr. Brown, stemming the torrent as best he could. “I don’t want to hear any more about it. You’ve damaged your chest of drawers and you’ll have no more pocket money till it’s paid for.”

WILLIAM STEPPED FROM THE FOOT OF THE BED ON TO THE ROPE.

"All right," said William, who had expected this, adding, without much hope, "I'll mend it for nothin' for you if you like. I bet I could with a few nails and a hammer."

"*No*, William," said Mrs. Brown, who knew by experience what wholesale destruction could be wrought by William with a few nails and a hammer.

William looked out of the window.

"I say!" he said eagerly. "It's stopped rainin'. May I go out?"

"*Yes*," said Mr. Brown, Mrs. Brown, Robert and Ethel, in a chorus of heartfelt assent.

It had begun to rain again by the time he reached the old barn—a steady downpour that was discovering the many weak places in the roof, and sending trickles of varying amplitude on to the ground beneath. The three other Outlaws were already assembled there. Ginger held a cardboard box and was anxiously watching its occupant—a guinea-pig curled up on a bed of cotton wool. Douglas was practising handsprings and had already

transferred to his person a large part of the mud that formed the floor of the ramshackle edifice. Henry was making unsuccessful efforts to climb the wall. Ever since they had begun to use the old barn as a meeting place, Henry had had a theory that, if he could get up to the roof, he would be able to swing himself right over from one side to the other by the wooden beam that spanned it. So far he had not been able to climb more than a yard or two up the wall. . . .

"I bet if I carved footholes all the way——" he was saying, as he picked himself up for the tenth time that afternoon.

"Hello, William," said Ginger. "I don't think he'll be able to learn any tricks, after all. He doesn't seem any better. . . ."

William gazed solicitously at the invalid.

"It's your own fault," he said sternly. "You shouldn't have given him that tonic of your mother's."

"It did my mother good."

"Well, she's not a guinea-pig, you idiot."

"It said on the bottle that it invig'rated the whole system, so I thought it'd help him do his tricks."

"It seems to have uninvig'rated *him*, all right. We'd better let him sleep it off."

At that moment Henry fell down once more, this time on the top of Douglas, whose handsprings had taken him into the neighbourhood of the wall, and the ensuing scuffle landed the two of them into the puddle that had formed under the largest hole in the roof. There they brought their scuffle to a satisfactory conclusion and sat up, looking at William.

"About this show," said Henry breathlessly. "Have you started practisin' your tight-rope walkin' yet?"

"Well, sort of," said William evasively. "It's a jolly sight more diff'cult than what it looks, but I bet it only needs a bit more practice. I could have gone on practisin' to-night, if the handle hadn't come off, an' if I hadn't to go to that ole thing at the Botts'."

"Gosh, yes!" groaned Ginger. "I've got to go to it, too."

"So've I," groaned Douglas.

"So've I," groaned Henry. "My mother's jolly lucky, not bein' able to go to it."

"Why can't she?" said William.

"She's gone up to London to a meetin', an' she can't get back in time."

"What sort of a meetin'?"

"It's a meetin' about gettin' holiday homes for poor ole people what have never had a holiday."

"What!" said William, aghast. "Never had a holiday!"

"No. They're tryin' to get houses for these poor old people to have holidays in, an' they say that everybody ought to help."

"Gosh! I should jus' think so," said William earnestly. "Gosh! Jus' think of it! Never had a holiday!"

"Well, there's nothin' we can do about it," said Henry.

"I bet there is," said William. "I bet if we look round we can find somethin' to do about it."

At this point a small figure in a mackintosh, with a sou'wester perched on its curls, appeared in the open doorway.

"Can I come in, pleathe, William?" said Violet Elizabeth humbly.

William looked at her warily. He always distrusted Violet Elizabeth's humility.

"No, you can't," he said shortly.

Violet Elizabeth stepped into the barn with a radiant smile.

"But I've come," she said.

"Then you can go away again," said William. "We're busy."

"I'll be buthy, too," said Violet Elizabeth serenely. "I like bein' buthy."

"Then you can go and be busy somewhere else," said William.

"But I don't want to be buthy thomewhere elthe," said Violet Elizabeth. "I'd rather be buthy with you. What are you buthy doin'?"

They looked at her helplessly. She had selected one of the drier spots on the ground and had seated herself cross-legged, with the air of one prepared to make an indefinite stay.

"Well, now," said William, shifting his position so that his back was turned on the intruder and trying, without success, to ignore her presence, "about these poor people without holidays. We've gotter *do* somethin' about it."

"What *can* we do?" said Ginger. "It's big houses they want an' ours are too small."

Reluctantly they turned to Violet Elizabeth.

"There's yours," said William. "There's *heaps* of room in The Hall."

"Yeth, there ith," agreed Violet Elizabeth complacently. "We've got ten bedroomth and a garath and a coal thed. Ith a lovely coal thed. Ith got little windowth like a little houthe and a little door that lockth."

"Ten bedrooms!" said William. "Then you oughter take some of these poor people into it for a holiday."

"I bet we could get the whole lot into it if we packed 'em tight," said Ginger.

"No, you couldn't," said Henry. "It's somethin' to do with carbon peroxide."

"Well, thereth the greenhouth and the garden frame," said Violet Elizabeth, pleased to find herself the centre of the discussion and anxious to prolong it as far as possible. "You could get two people in the garden frame if they didn't mind being a bit thquathed up. And one could thleep in the wheelbarrow in the tool thed. Ith quite comfy. I've tried it."

"Oh, shut up," said William impatiently. "You'll be sayin' next that we could get one or two in the rain-tub if they didn't mind gettin' a bit wet. It's bedrooms they want, not garden frames an' wheelbarrows."

"I don't think Mummy would let them have bedroomth," said Violet Elizabeth doubtfully. "Thomeone athked her oneth and thee thaid thee liked to keep herthelf to herthelf, and Daddy thaid that an Englithmanth houthe wath hith cathle."

"That's rot," said Henry. "A house isn't a castle. A castle's got a thing like a sort of frill on the top and holes to pour boiling oil from."

"Ith got a balcony," said Violet Elizabeth. "You could pour boiling oil from that if you liked."

"I wish you'd all shut up talkin' an' talkin'," said William sternly. "What we've gotter do is to find some poor people an' get 'em into Violet Elizabeth's house for a holiday."

"I bet her mother wouldn't let them stay," said Douglas.

"I don't think she could turn 'em out," said Henry, assuming his air of omniscience. "It's the lor that if people are axshully *in* a house, you can't turn 'em out. My mother knows someone that's got someone in her house an' can't turn 'em out. Even the p'lice can't turn 'em out."

"My Mummy'll thend for the poleeth," said Violet Elizabeth, with a smile of blissful anticipation, "and we'll pour boiling oil on them from the balcony. I've got a bottle of cod-liver oil we could uthe. Won't it be fun!"

“I wish you’d shut up talkin’ an’ wastin’ time,” said William, frowning round at the company. “We’ll never get anythin’ done at this rate. What we’ve gotter do first of all is to go round to Violet Elizabeth’s house an’ see how many poor people without holidays we can get into it. Are your mother an’ father at home, Violet Elizabeth?”

“No,” said Violet Elizabeth. “Mummy’th gone to London, and Daddy’th at the offith, but they’ll be coming back early ’cauthe we’ve got Mithter Bumbleby coming to dinner and there’th a party afterwardth.”

“Don’t we know that!” groaned William. “We’re all supposed to be comin’ to it.”

“It’ll be a nithe party, William,” said Violet Elizabeth. “There’th going to be thauthage rollth.”

“We’ll need ’em,” said William succinctly. “Well, come on. It’s stopped rainin’.”

It was just as they were approaching the Hall that they saw the bearded, tousled man sitting by the side of the ditch eating something out of a piece of grimy newspaper. He was ragged and dirty, but he wore his rags and dirt with a jaunty air, undaunted, as it seemed, even by the raindrops that dripped steadily upon him from the tree above. The four stood in a little group, watching him.

“He looks poor,” whispered William.

“He looks a bit like Mr. Rose,” said Violet Elizabeth, remembering a tramp who had made free with her mother’s possessions last summer.

“No, he doesn’t,” said William. “He’s got more hair an’ more beard an’ a nicer face. I think he’s jus’ a poor person what wants a holiday.”

“All right. Go on. Ask him,” said Ginger.

“All right. I’m goin’ to,” said William. “I’m jus’ thinkin’ out what to say.”

He hesitated a few more moments, then stepped forward and cleared his throat.

“G’d afternoon,” he said.

The tramp looked up from his meal.

“HAVE YOU EVER HAD A HOLIDAY?” ASKED WILLIAM.

"Good afternoon, young 'un," he said easily. "An' wot can I do fer you?"

"Well," said William, "we were wonderin'—er—I mean, we were thinkin'—er—I mean—— Well, have you ever had a holiday?"

The tramp cut off a piece of crust with a villainous-looking knife and chewed it thoughtfully.

"Not ter my knowledge, young 'un," he said at last.

"Would you—would you like one?" said William tentatively.

The tramp cut off a piece of mouldy cheese rind, surveyed it without enthusiasm and threw it into the ditch.

"That depends on circs, young 'un," he said. "It depends on wot sort of an 'oliday an fer 'ow long an' various other things too noomerous to mention. At this 'ere precise moment you finds me hempty within an' wet without, so the prospect of a refuge from the elements, as the poets say, is not unwelcome."

"He'th too big for the garden frame, William," said Violet Elizabeth, "unleth he had hith head thticking out of the top."

"Oh, shut up about the garden frame," said William. "It's a bedroom he's goin' to have, not a garden frame. Look here," he went on, turning to the tramp, "if you like to come along with us, we'll find you a place for a holiday, an' you'll get a jolly good dinner there, too."

“I don’t think Mummy’th going to like him much, William,” said Violet Elizabeth. “I think thee’th going to think he’th common.”

“Never mind that,” said William. “He’s poor an’ that’s all that matters.”

The tramp had risen from the grass and was adjusting his shabby coat around him.

“Lead on, young ’un,” he said. “Never yet did Marmaduke Mehitavel refuse the challenge of fate.”

“Is that your name?” said William, impressed.

The tramp winked at him.

“One of ’em, young ’un,” he said.

“Have you got alibis—I mean aliases?” said Ginger eagerly.

“Plenty o’ both,” said the tramp with a wink.

“Leth call him Mithter Marmaduke,” suggested Violet Elizabeth. “Ith a nithe name and ith eathier to thay than the other. Are you hungry, Mithter Marmaduke? I know there’th chicken for dinner.”

The tramp raised his nose and sniffed the air rapturously.

“Lead me there, little lady,” he said. “Lead me there.”

“Let’s go through the hole in the hedge,” said William. “That’s the way we gen’rally go into Violet Elizabeth’s garden.”

He led the way and the others followed, Douglas bringing up the rear.

“I think all this is jolly *dangerous*,” he said. “I shouldn’t be surprised if we ended up by gettin’ into a row. We did that time we found homes for people.”

“Well, this is different,” said William. “Holidays is diff’rent from homes, an’ anyway Henry’s mother said we ought to do it so it can’t be wrong.”

In the shrubbery they stopped to consider the situation. Mr. Marmaduke lounged against a tree and watched them with an air of philosophic detachment. He took an old clay pipe from one pocket, a box of matches and some stray pieces of tobacco from another and began to smoke.

William gazed through the trees at the impressive masonry of the Hall. “Who’s in this afternoon, Violet Elizabeth?”

“Nobody’th in now,” said Violet Elizabeth. “Cook’th thuppothed to be in, but thee ran out of cloveth for the bread thauthe, tho thee’th gone to the village to get thome. An’ the garage key fith the kitchen door, tho I can get in all right.”

“Good!” said William, assuming his commander-in-chief manner, brows knit, face set and stern. “Now, the rest of you stay here with Mr. Marmaduke, an’ Violet Elizabeth an’ me’ll go ’n’ look round the bedrooms an’ find a nice one for him. . . . Come on, Violet Elizabeth. We’ve gotter be quick or your mother’ll be back before we’ve finished. You don’t mind stayin’ here, do you, Mr. Marmaduke, while we find a room for you?”

“Any place hunder the sky is ’ome to Harchibald Mortimer,” said Mr. Marmaduke amiably.

“Is that another of ’em, Mr. Marmaduke?” said Ginger.

“That’s another of ’em, young ’un,” said Mr. Marmaduke.

William stood in the middle of the bedroom and looked round appreciatively.

“This is the nicest,” he said. “He can have this.”

“Oh, but, William,” protested Violet Elizabeth, “thith ith Mithter Bumbleby’th room. Why can’t Mithter Marmaduke have one of the otherth?”

“I don’t like the others,” said William. “Their beds aren’t made an’ they haven’t got flowers an’ tablecloths an’ things.”

“Well, thath becauthe they’ve got thith one ready for Mithter Bumbleby.”

“There’s a nice fire here, too,” said William. “I don’t see why this ole Mr. Bumbleby should have it. He’s not a poor person what wants a holiday.”

The argument seemed unanswerable, so Violet Elizabeth contented herself by saying: “But what will Mithter Bumbleby do, William?”

“I dunno,” said William, knitting his brows into their most complicated pattern. “We’ve gotter think about that. It all needs a bit of plannin’, of course. What time is he comin’?”

“I’m not thure, William. I know he’th being here for dinner, ’cauthe Mummy thaid thee wath going to have a thlap-up dinner for him with chicken and a thoufflée.”

“Well, let’s go an’ fetch him up to see his bedroom, anyway,” said William.

As they reached the hall, the kitchen door opened and Ginger entered.

“I say!” he said. “How much longer are you goin’ to be? He’s gettin’ tired of waitin’.”

At that moment the telephone bell rang. “I’ll anther it,” said Violet Elizabeth, taking up the receiver. “I can anther a telephone ath well ath a grown-up.”

William and Ginger could gather little from her conversation, which seemed to consist chiefly of “Yeth, Mithter Bumbleby,” but at last she put down the receiver and turned to them, beaming triumphantly.

“He’th not coming to-night. He’th jutht finithed giving a lecture at the plathe where he ith and the trainth to Hadley don’t fit in, tho he’th thtaying where he ith till to-morrow morning. He told me to tell Mummy. Ith *lovely*, ithn’t it? Mithter Marmaduke *can* have hith room now.”

“I bet your mother’ll turn him out when she finds him,” said Ginger.

The complicated pattern of William’s brow unravelled itself. His face shone with the light that heralded one of his ideas.

“*Tell* you what!” he said. “I *know* what we’ll do. Why shouldn’t Mr. Marmaduke pretend to be this ole Mr. Bumbleby? No one’s seen this ole Mr. Bumbleby, an’ I bet Mr. Marmaduke could talk as well as him. He seems jolly good at talkin’. Anyway, we promised him a nice dinner an’ a holiday, an’ we’ve gotter give it him.”

“No one would think he was a real lecturer—not with those clothes,” objected Ginger.

“Why shouldn’t people with holes in their clothes give lectures?” said William.

“I don’t know,” said Ginger, “but they don’t.”

“I know what we’ll do,” said Violet Elizabeth excitedly. “Daddy put some clotheth out for Mummy’th jumble thale an’ they’re all in a pile in the bocthroom. They’re much better than Mr. Marmaduke’th clotheth, an’ Daddy’ll never remember them. I’ll borrow Daddy’th rathor for him, too, and a collar and tie.”

“Yes, that’s a jolly good idea,” said William judicially.

“But what about his dinner?” said Ginger. “Your father an’ mother’ll smell a rat if he has dinner with them. I ’spect, with him bein’ used to picnics, his table manners are diff’rent from other people’s.”

“He could send a message that he wants to have dinner in his room ’cause he’s tired,” suggested William. “I bet people do get jolly tired lecturin’.”

“But what about this party afterwards?” said Ginger. “They’re all goin’ to ask him questions. I was in the post office this mornin’ an’ Gen’ral Moult

an' Colonel Pomeroy were talkin' about it. Gen'ral Moult said he was goin' to ask him questions about South Africa."

"Well, *that's* all right," said William. "You know what Gen'ral Moult is. All he wants to do is to talk about South Africa himself. He'll go on for hours an' *hours*, spoutin' this ole book he's writin'."

"Yes," said Ginger, "but Colonel Pomeroy said he was goin' to ask him how the rope trick was done. In this book of his, Mr. Bumbleby said he'd found out how it was done."

"What's a rope trick?" said William.

"Ith it the thame ath cath cradle?" asked Violet Elizabeth.

"No," said Ginger, "it's a boy what climbs down a rope he hasn't climbed up or up a rope he hasn't climbed down—I forget which."

"I bet it's climbin' down a rope he hasn't climbed up," said William, "an' I bet I could do it all right. It'd make a jolly good acrobatic trick for our show, too. I don't s'pose they'll let me do any more tight-rope walkin' at home, so this'll come in jolly useful. An' I've got the rope."

The kitchen door opened again, and Henry and Douglas looked in.

"I say!" said Douglas. "Are you *never* comin'?"

"We're jus' gettin' it fixed up," said William. "We won't be a minute now. Where are you havin' this party to-night, Violet Elizabeth?"

"In the garden room," said Violet Elizabeth. "The fire in the library smoketh an' the drawin'-room carpet'th jutht been cleaned, tho Mummy doethn't want people trampling over it in muddy thoeth. Bethideth, thee'th only jutht had the conthervatory turned into a garden room, tho thee wanth people to thee it."

"Gosh! That's all right, then," said William. "It's got a skylight window, hasn't it?"

"Yeth," said Violet Elizabeth. "It hath."

"Well, then, I could take up my rope an' wait up there by the skylight till I hear them talkin' about the rope trick, an' then I could let down the rope an' climb down an' they'd think it was the real rope trick 'cause they hadn't seen me go up."

"I still think we're goin' to end up by gettin' into a row," said Douglas, apprehensively.

"Well, it doesn't matter if we do," said Ginger. "It'll have been worth it."

“An’ we’ll have given him a good dinner an’ a holiday same as we promised,” said William. “We can look out for somewhere else for him to-morrow, when Mr. Bumbleby’s here. Come on now back to the shrub’ry.”

At first they thought that Mr. Marmaduke had grown tired of waiting and had continued his leisurely career of vagabondage, but he soon came strolling back through the bushes, completely at his ease.

“Jus’ takin’ a look round,” he explained. “I’m of a naturally curious turn of mind.”

“Now listen,” said William earnestly. “We’ve got this good dinner an’ bed, but you’ve gotter pretend to be Mr. Bumbleby.”

Mr. Marmaduke did not seem to be at all perturbed by this.

“Anythin’ to oblige, young ’un,” he said. “One halias is the same ter me as another. A citizen of the bloomin’ world, that’s what I am.”

“An’ will you put on some clothes that Violet Elizabeth’s goin’ to get for you?”

Mr. Marmaduke looked down at his bedraggled garments.

“I got a mind above clothes, same as the lilies of the field,” he said, “but, as you may ’ave observed, a change can ’ardly be for the worse.”

“An’ then,” said William, “when you’ve had this dinner we’re goin’ to fix up for you, will you come down an’ talk about travels to people?”

“Wot travels?” said Mr. Marmaduke, with a shade of pardonable perplexity in his voice.

“Any travels. I mean, if people ask you about South Africa, I suppose you can make somethin’ up?”

“You suppose right, young ’un,” said Mr. Marmaduke, his equanimity restored. “Never-at-a-loss, that’s me second name. Talked meself into more situations an’ out o’ more situations than hany other man in Hengland.”

“That’s all right, then,” said William. “I expect it seems a bit funny to you, but, you see——”

Mr. Marmaduke waved a horny, unmanicured hand.

“Why waste time in hexplanations, young ’un?” he said. “Take each step as it comes, that’s my rule. The hunexpected’s the very sauce of life, as the poet says. There ain’t no hemergency in the bloomin’ hencyclopaedia that Horatio Grimble ain’t equal to.”

“Is that another of ’em, Mr. Marmaduke?” said Ginger.

“That’s another of ’em, young ’un,” said Mr. Marmaduke.

"Well," said William doubtfully. "It *ought* to be all right. There's no reason why it *shouldn't* be all right. We'll take you up to this bedroom now."

Then, headed by William, the strange procession went up the stairs to Mr. Bumbleby's room.

Mrs. Bott's "garden room" suggested a suburban drawing-room transplanted into the heart of a tropical jungle. Heavily upholstered settees and arm-chairs stood about in nests of palm trees and flowering shrubs. Creepers festooned the glass walls, and plants of various kinds straggled from the roof. Carpets covered the floor, and the whole was illuminated by a torch held aloft in the hands of a marble female who had formed part of the Italian garden before Mrs. Bott had had it transformed into a tangled mass of sweetbriar and chilly stone seats described by the gardening expert who had transformed it as an Olde English Pleasaunce Garden.

HEADED BY WILLIAM THE PROCESSION WENT UP THE STAIRS.

Mrs. Bott, her mauve satin bosom overlaid with sequins and her cockney accent with a careful if unconvincing veneer of refinement, moved about

this scene of tropical luxuriance, greeting her guests.

"*Sow* glad to see you, General Moult! *Sow* good of you to come!"

General Moult wore an air of abstraction. He had spent the last few days preparing the questions about South Africa that he intended to ask Mr. Bumbleby, and had managed to incorporate into them the bulk of his Boer War diaries.

"I'm very much looking forward to meeting Mr. Bumbleby," he said. "I have several questions that I should like to ask him." He glanced round the room. "He's arrived, I suppose?"

"Ow, yes, 'e's arrived all right," said Mrs. Bott. "But, to tell you the truth, I 'aven't seen 'im myself yet. I bin up to London for a bit o' shoppin' an' when I got back 'e'd come. A bit earlier than what we expected. But Violet Elizabeth received 'im an' took 'im up to 'is room. A proper good little 'ostess she was, an' all. 'E'd bin lecturin' all week an' 'e was that tired 'e sent a message 'e'd like 'is dinner in 'is room an' not to be disturbed. Gettin' 'is notes ready, I suppose, an' collectin' 'is thoughts an' what not. Them clever people need a lot of time to themselves, you know, to rest their brains in. I always say that people like you an' me's got a lot to be thankful for—not bein' brainy."

"Quite," said the General, rather coldly.

" 'E said in this message 'e'd be down at nine o'clock exact. . . . Ow, there's Colonel Pomeroy. *Sow* glad to see you, Colonel Pomeroy! *Sow* good of you to come!"

"Not at all, not at all," said the Colonel. "Delightful of you to ask me. It's the rope trick I want to ask about. Mr. Bumbleby says in his book that he has discovered how it is done. Now when I was in India in 1903——"

"The rope trick's nothing to what some of the witch doctors in South Africa could do," said General Moult. "I remember when I was there in 1899——"

Mrs. Bott disentangled herself from one of the straggling plants and passed on to her other guests.

"*Sow* glad to see you, Miss Milton! . . . *Sow* good of you to come! . . . Ow, there's Mrs. Brown. An' Mr. Brown. An' Robert an' Ethel. *Sow* good of you all to come!"

"Very good of you to ask us," said Mr. Brown, with such lack of enthusiasm in his voice that Mrs. Brown hastily broke in with: "How charming you've made this room, Mrs. Bott!"

"Yes, I've always wanted a garding room," said Mrs. Bott. "I think Nacher's sow beautiful, don't you. . . . Now I 'ope you've brought William along. A real eddication, I always think, for children to listen to someone with brains same as this 'ere Mr. Bumbleby. I'm lettin' Vi'let Elizabeth stay up for it. Ever so excited, she is, about it. I don't think you'd find many children of 'er age so keen on 'earin' about travels as what she seems to be. I always said that child 'ad brains if only you could find 'em."

"William's been to tea with Ginger," said Mrs. Brown. "I expect he'll be coming along with the Merridews."

Mrs. Bott turned her devastating hostess's smile upon the Vicar.

"Ow, Mr. Monks, *sow* glad to see you! *Sow* good of you to come!"

"Not at all, not at all," said Mr. Monks, throwing a quick glance round the room and greeting his parishioners with a series of brisk nods. "I'm very anxious to meet Mr. Bumbleby. A strange eccentric character, I've heard, who has slept in—er—doss houses and mingled with tramps and criminals in order to get some of his material. By the way, speaking of tramps, that reminds me, Mrs. Bott, that a very doubtful character has been seen hanging about the village to-day. I believe it's the same man who broke into the Vicarage last year. If so, he's only just out of prison. . . . I saw your man Tonks cleaning the car as I passed the garage, and I took the liberty of telling him to keep an eye on the grounds this evening."

"That's ever so good of you, Mr. Monks. I do so 'ate doubtful characters. . . . D'you hear that, Botty?"

Mr. Bott, who was wandering about in the background—short, stout and perspiring—explaining to anyone who would listen to him that these do's were not much in his line, but the missis said they ought to do their dooty by the commoonity, brightened visibly at the prospect of a little diversion and said: "Yes, love, I 'ear."

"Well, mind you keep a look-out for him. . . . Ow, good evenin', Mrs. Merridew. *Sow* glad to see you! *Sow* good of you to come! Do them boys good to be somewhere where they've got to sit still and listen fer a change. . . . Where's William Brown?"

Ginger raised an expressionless face.

"He's comin' along later, Mrs. Bott."

"Not tryin' to get out of it, is 'e?" said Mrs. Bott grimly.

"Oh, no," said Ginger. "He's not tryin' to get out of it."

He made his way quietly to the door that led into the garden, where Violet Elizabeth was standing—a vision of infantile innocence in a white party frock with a blue sash.

"Where's Mr. Marmaduke?" he whispered anxiously.

"He'th upthairth. He thaid he'd come down at nine o'clock. He'th enjoyed hith dinner. It wath *very* thlap-up. . . . If he dothn't come down, I'll go up and fetch him. He wath lying on hith bed when I went in latht. I hope he hathn't gone to thleep. Where'th William and the otherth?"

"William's up on the roof gettin' his rope trick ready, an' Henry's helpin' him, an' Douglas is comin' on later. His mother made him go back to wash his face again 'cause he'd left some of it out. I'm stayin' down here to catch hold of the end of the rope when William lets it down, an'—— Gosh! There he is!"

For Mr. Marmaduke was entering the room by the other door. He had changed into Mr. Bott's discarded suit. It was a little too short and hung loosely on his figure, but his appearance on the whole betrayed only such negligence as might be attributed to the absent-mindedness of genius. He had put on Mr. Bott's shirt, shoes, collar and tie. He had washed his face and had evidently passed a casual comb through his hair and beard. It was clear that he was by no means overawed by his surroundings. Even Mr. Bott's sober city suit and decorous tie could not quite quell his air of jaunty insouciance.

"OW, THERE YOU ARE, MR. BUMBLEBY," SAID MRS. BOTT. "SOW PLEASED TO SEE YOU!"

Mrs. Bott swept up to him, bridling with pride and pleasure.

"Ow, *there* you are, Mr. Bumbleby. *Sow* pleased to see you! *Sow* good of you to come! A real honour, I can assure you. Sorry I wasn't 'ere to receive you, but my little girl did it for me, I 'ear. I do 'ope you're rested an' all by now. Well, I won't go introdoocin' everyone an' stringin' off names what I don't expect you'll ever remember, but these are all our kind friends an' neighbours what have come to 'ear what you 'ave to say. Will you sit at this 'ere table, Mr. Bumbleby, an' the others can shoot questions at you from where they're sittin', like. . . ."

Mr. Marmaduke took his seat at the table and swept an unabashed glance round the room.

"Evenin', all," he said.

"Rather a rough diamond," whispered Mr. Monks to Colonel Pomeroy.

"Yes," said Colonel Pomeroy. "Some of those writing chaps are . . . Hello! The General's wasting no time."

For General Moult had risen to his feet and taken a sheaf of notes from his pockets. An audible groan went round the room.

"I should like, sir," said General Moult, ignoring the groan, "to ask you a few questions about South Africa, which I understand you to have visited recently. I have not been there myself since the time of the Boer War, and I expect there have been many changes during the interval. I went out in 1899 and . . ."

Ginger felt himself grabbed by the arm from behind.

"Come out," whispered Douglas urgently. "Come out quick. Somethin's happened."

Ginger rose and crept quietly out into the night through the garden door, followed by Violet Elizabeth.

"What's the matter?" he said, when they reached the safe shelter of the shrubbery.

"The real one's come," said Douglas.

"*What?*"

"The real one's come," repeated Douglas.

"He—he can't have," gasped Ginger.

"Well, he has. I was comin' out of our house an' I ran into him an' he asked me the way to the Hall."

"He thaid the trainth were impothible," said Violet Elizabeth. "He *thaid* tho on the telephone."

"I know," said Douglas, "but a friend who was comin' this way brought him along in his car an' dropped him at the cross-roads. He's walkin' from the cross-roads now, an' he'll be here any minute. I ran across the fields to get here first. What're we goin' to do? We mus' tell William quick."

"We can't do that," said Ginger. "William's up on the roof gettin' his rope trick ready. We can't shout to him or everyone'd hear. We've gotter do somethin' ourselves."

"What can we do?" said Douglas.

"Leth pour boiling oil on him, thall we?" said Violet Elizabeth brightly. "It wouldn't take any time at all to boil up my bottle of cod-liver oil."

"Be quiet, Violet Elizabeth," said Ginger sternly. "Now listen. This Mr. Marmaduke is our friend an' it's our fault he's here, so we've gotter hold

Mr. Bumbleby at bay till we've warned Mr. Marmaduke of danger."

"How can we?" said Douglas.

"Oh, shut up sayin' 'how can we'," said Ginger, adopting William's manner together with his position as leader. "We've *got* to. I gotter sort of plan comin' to me if only you'd stop talkin' an' let me *think*. . . . Let's see . . . Your coal shed's the other side of the shrubbery, isn't it, Violet Elizabeth?"

"Yeth," said Violet Elizabeth. "Why?"

"Never mind. It's to do with this plan that's comin' to me. Let's go to the gate an' meet him."

"I thtill think it would be nither to pour boiling oil on him," said Violet Elizabeth wistfully.

Together the three walked down the drive. . . . The night was dark, and it was only by the sound of his footsteps that they knew Mr. Bumbleby was approaching. Ginger planted himself firmly in the middle of the drive, with Douglas on one side of him and Violet Elizabeth on the other. Mr. Bumbleby, hurrying blindly along, gave an exclamation of annoyance as he walked into them.

"What on earth——?" he said irritably.

"Good evening, sir," said Ginger.

"Good evening, good evening," snapped Mr. Bumbleby. "This is the Hall, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Ginger blandly.

"Well, I'm expected here. My name's Bumbleby. I'd no idea it was so far from the cross-roads. And it's so dark I've nearly been in the ditch several times. Most annoying!"

"Yes, it is dark, isn't it?" said Ginger. "We—we've come to show you the way."

"I'm afraid I'm late," said Mr. Bumbleby, "but I didn't expect to be able to get here at all to-night. Did Mrs. Bott put off her—er—gathering?"

"No," said Ginger. "They're all in the garden room."

"Sorry to have kept them waiting like this. Where is the garden room? I'd better go straight there."

"This way," said Ginger.

He began to lead Mr. Bumbleby along a small path through the shrubbery. The other two followed. Mr. Bumbleby allowed himself to be led

along the small path, making noises suggestive of annoyance and impatience as he stumbled into various obstacles.

"I ought to have brought my torch. I can't see a thing. I nearly fell over something then. . . . Where on earth are we going? Where *is* this garden room?"

They had reached the other side of the shrubbery.

"Here we are," said Ginger, opening the door of the coal shed.

"What? Where?" sputtered Mr. Bumbleby, who had just tripped over an uneven piece of ground. "I can't see a thing. I——"

"Straight in, sir," said Ginger respectfully.

Mr. Bumbleby never knew whether he stepped into the coal shed of his own accord or whether he was gently propelled into it by the three children. All he knew was that he found himself inside and heard a key being turned in the lock.

"There!" said Ginger, with a sigh of relief. "We've got him at bay, all right. Now we've gotter go an' warn Mr. Marmaduke quick."

Followed by the sound of banging on the door and cries of "Let me out," the three made their way back to the garden room. There they found the situation more or less unchanged. General Moult was still on his feet, discoursing on South Africa and ignoring the growing signs of restiveness in his audience. He was, in fact, so much accustomed to growing signs of restiveness in an audience that he never even noticed them.

"In 1900," he was saying, as they entered and took their seats, "came the Relief of Mafeking. I was present myself at that historic occasion, and I remember . . ."

His voice droned on.

Ginger and Douglas made determined efforts to attract Mr. Marmaduke's attention, but Mr. Marmaduke's attention was past attracting. He had succumbed to the after-effects of a large dinner and the soporific influence of the General's voice, and was slumped in his chair, hands in pockets, eyes closed. Ginger fidgeted and coughed, but everyone round him was fidgeting and coughing. He stood up and made signs, but no one noticed him except Mr. Monks, who whispered sharply: "Sit down, my boy, and try to be patient, like the rest of us."

"Thall I thout 'Fire!'?" said Violet Elizabeth in a resonant undertone.

"No," said Ginger.

Miss Milton and Mrs. Monks had been exchanging glances for some time, and now both had reached a point where they could stand it no longer. With a brisk movement Miss Milton rose to her feet.

"Excuse me, General, but don't you think it's time you allowed Mr. Bumbleby to tell us something of modern conditions in South Africa?"

General Moult looked surprised and a little hurt by the interruption.

"Certainly, Miss Milton, certainly. I was merely giving a short résumé of conditions as I remember them myself."

Miss Milton snorted eloquently, and the General sat down with an air of offended dignity.

"Now, Mr. Bumbleby," said Miss Milton, "perhaps you'll tell us how far conditions have changed in recent years."

The clear incisive notes of Miss Milton's voice dispelled the mists of sleep that had been gathering round the guest of honour. He rose to his feet and surveyed his audience with unruffled calm.

"Well, that's a question that takes a lot of answering," he said. "Conditions 'ave changed in some ways an' not in others. Wot I mean ter say is——"

It was at that moment that Tonks, the chauffeur, appeared in the open doorway, holding a blackened, dishevelled figure by the neck.

"What's this, Tonks?" said Mr. Bott, trying to look severe but secretly delighted that the hoped-for diversion had actually happened.

"I got that doubtful character Mr. Monks warned me of, sir," said Tonks. "Proper desp'rate, 'e is, too."

"This is an outrage," sputtered Mr. Bumbleby.

"Caught 'im climbin' out of the coal shed winder," said Tonks. "Bin 'idin' up there, I'll be bound, till 'e thought you was all safe inside 'ere."

"I repeat, an *outrage*," shouted Mr. Bumbleby.

"Go an' ring up the police, Botty, quick!" said Mrs. Bott. She turned to Mr. Monks. " 'E *is* that desp'rate character you warned us of, isn't he?"

Mr. Monks adjusted his spectacles and inspected the dishevelled figure that was wriggling ineffectually in Tonks's firm grasp.

"As far as I can see beneath his covering of coal dust and grime," said Mr. Monks, "he most certainly is."

"Murder us as soon as look at us, 'e would," said Mrs. Bott. "You can tell it by 'is face."

Ginger and Douglas watched helplessly and in silence. The situation had got so far beyond them that there was nothing to do but watch helplessly and in silence.

"You'll pay for this," choked Mr. Bumbleby. "My name's Bumbleby. I'm a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. I was asked here to lecture ——"

"You'll have to think up a better excuse than that, my good man," said Miss Milton sternly. "Mr. Bumbleby's here. Mr. Bumbleby——"

They all turned to look at the chair in which, a few minutes before, the guest of honour had been sitting. It was empty.

"Mr. Bumbleby's gone," said someone.

There was a short, tense silence, broken by General Moult.

"Good Lord!" he said. "So has my watch."

"And mine," said Mr. Monks.

"Botty, me diamond brooch's gone," screamed Mrs. Bott.

It was clear that in the confusion caused by the entrance of Tonks and his captive, Mr. Marmaduke had passed swiftly through the crowd, using his light feet and lighter fingers to their best advantage as he did so.

The Brown family, who had not been in the path of the departing guest, had escaped spoliation. They gathered together, congratulating each other.

"And it's quite a refreshing change," said Mr. Brown, "to be present at a contretemps in which William can have had no hand."

WILLIAM WAS PRECIPITATED ON TO THE HEAD OF THE UNFORTUNATE MR. BUMBLEBY.

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Brown complacently. "He isn't even here."

Above the uproar rose General Moult's booming voice.

"I say, Pomeroy, he evidently knows a trick worth two of the rope trick."

William and Henry, on the roof, had been waiting for this moment. So intent had they been on arranging the rope that the drama enacted immediately below them had escaped their notice. . . . The moment they had been preparing for had arrived. Someone had mentioned the rope trick. . . .

Suddenly the air was rent by a piercing scream from Miss Milton.

"There's a confederate up on the roof! The window's opening! A rope's coming down!"

“Surely,” said Mr. Brown, “something else isn’t going to happen.”

But he was wrong. It was.

Above the babel (for Mr. Bumbleby still had plenty to say and was saying it with pungency and directness) a well-known voice was heard shouting, “Hi! The rope’s breaking. Help!” and William was precipitated on to the head of the unfortunate Mr. Bumbleby, bringing with him a cascade of ferns and flowering plants, and throwing the marble female into the unwilling arms of Mr. Monks.

“Oo, lovely, William!” said Violet Elizabeth, with a cry of rapture. “That’th muth better than boiling oil.”

It was a sad and sorry band of Outlaws that assembled the next day in the old barn.

“What did your father say to you when he got you home, William?” said Ginger.

“He didn’t *say* much,” said William bitterly.

“Neither did mine,” said Ginger, with a short, mirthless laugh. “Didn’t even wait to let me explain.”

“Neither did mine,” said Douglas. “Said I could explain afterwards.”

“Ole Mr. Bumbleby wasn’t too bad when we went to ’pologise, was he?” said William meditatively. “He told us some jolly int’restin’ things about head hunters.”

“An’ ole Mr. Bott wasn’t too bad either, givin’ us half a crown each.”

“Sorry they caught Mr. Marmaduke,” said Ginger. “I hope they don’t send him to prison.”

“I don’t s’pose he’ll mind much,” said William. “He doesn’t seem to mind things. . . . Anyway, the poor ole people without holidays can jolly well stay without holidays now for all I care. They can’t blame me. I’ve done my best for them an’ had no gratitude from anyone.” But William was a boy who lived wholly in the present, and already the stirring events of the previous day were fading into the limbo of the past. “Come on,” he ended. “Let’s go to Crown woods an’ play head hunters.”

CHAPTER II

WILLIAM MEETS THE PROFESSOR

WILLIAM entered the gate with a jaunty swagger, glancing cautiously at the windows of his house, then beckoned to Ginger, Henry and Douglas, who stood hesitating in the road. They entered with a sheepish air. William's invitation had been given with a nonchalant assurance that had, for the moment, made them believe themselves welcome guests in any home, but the impression faded as they neared the gate, to be replaced by memories of the many occasions on which they had been summarily ejected by Mrs. Brown at tea-time, despite William's pleas.

"P'raps I'd jus' better ask her first," said William, trying to retain his jaunty air. "I'm sure it'll be all right, but——" He advanced towards the front door, adding hopefully, "She may be out. . . ."

But Mrs. Brown was not out. The front door opened as William approached, and Mrs. Brown, accompanied by Mrs. Monks, Miss Milton, Mrs. Bott and Mrs. Beacon, emerged from it. William remembered that this was the day on which members of the Women's Institute Committee met at his mother's house.

"Oh, there you are, dear," said Mrs. Brown absently. "We're just going over to the Village Hall to discuss the colour scheme for the decorating. No one else is in, but your tea's on the dining-room table."

"Oh—er—I s'pose Ginger an' Henry an' Douglas can come to tea," said William as if a matter almost too trivial to be mentioned had just occurred to him.

Mrs. Brown's thoughts were obviously elsewhere.

"Yes, dear," she said vaguely and continued her conversation with the others as she passed him.

"I don't like that dreary green it was painted the last time it was done."

"I always think there's something a bit common about green, anyway," said Mrs. Bott. "It's not really a classy colour."

"What about maroon?" said Mrs. Monks, "or is that too daring?"

Their voices died away in the distance.

"Come on in," said William, ushering his followers into the house with a lordly gesture. "I said it would be all right. They're always jolly glad to have anyone I invite to tea."

Forbearing to remind him of various incidents that clearly disproved this statement, they trooped into the dining-room, where William's tea was laid. It was limited in quality, but not in quantity. There was a large loaf on a breadboard, a large dish of jam, a large jug of the orange squash that William preferred to tea and a plate of large, if somewhat arid-looking buns.

" 'S all right, isn't it?" said William with a touch of modest pride. "I mean, if she'd asked you I 'spect she'd've got somethin' a bit better, but for a tea you've not been asked to it's not bad."

"Well, *you* asked us, didn't you?" said Ginger, stung by the implication that he was ignorant of the rules of polite society. "We've got a *bit* of manners. We don't go to tea where *no one's* asked us. 'Least, not often."

"Yes, I know I asked you," said William, "but I wasn't sure if it'd work. . . . Come on. Let's get some more plates an' knives an' glasses. It's good jam, too. It's raspberry. I helped to make it. 'Least, I picked the raspberries for it. . . . 'Least," after a moment's thought, "I b'lieve I ate all the ones I picked, but I did acshully mean 'em for jam when I picked 'em. . . . Well, some of the time I did . . . Come on. There's plates an' things in the kitchen."

They stampeded into the kitchen, found the plates, knocked over a clothes horse, precipitating Ethel's stockings into the hearth, picked them up, shook them perfunctorily to get rid of the coke and replaced them . . . examined the coffee-grinder, played with the idea of putting a piece of firewood through it in order to reduce it to sawdust, decided that they hadn't time . . . tested the egg-beater on a saucepan of soup that stood on the draining-board, wiped up the resultant mess from the floor as best they could with a duster, then returned to the dining-room and set to work on the tea. For some minutes there was silence. Tea was not an occasion of social relaxation to the Outlaws. Gradually, however, as the more violent pangs of hunger were assuaged, they unbent, and a desultory conversation ensued.

"My father was goin' on at me again about that hist'ry essay last night," said William indistinctly, secure in the knowledge that there was no grown-up present to tell him not to talk with his mouth full. "He says he'd have written one if he'd been a boy. Said he enjoyed writin' hist'ry essays when he was a boy. I bet he didn't. Well, if he did why doesn't he go on doin' it now? There's nothin' to stop him. He could write one every Sat'day afternoon 'stead of goin' to golf."

He laughed so heartily at this joke that he had to take a deep draught of orange squash in order to recover himself.

"Hubert Lane's writing one," said Henry. "He's got a whole lot of books out of the library and he's muggin' them up."

"He would," said William scornfully.

"Tryin' to soap up to ole Golly," said Douglas, " 'cause he wants to be asked to the end-of-term party at her school."

"He's heard that they're goin' to have four diff'rent kinds of ices as well as jelly an' strawberries."

"Well, even that wouldn't make up for havin' to be p'lite to ole Golly," said Douglas.

"An' why's she got that rotten ole nephew of hers stayin' with her?" grumbled William. "Messin' everythin' up with his ole hist'ry essays!"

"Golly" was Miss Golightly, the head mistress of Rosemount, a large girls' school on the outskirts of the village. She was a redoubtable lady, and the Outlaws had learnt to confine their intercourse with her to the minimum. At present she had a nephew staying with her, who, after a brilliant scholastic career, had been appointed Professor of History at one of the older universities, and she had chosen to mark the occasion by offering a prize for the best historical essay written by any boy or girl in the village under the age of fourteen—the essays to be judged by her nephew. Not content with that, she had by sheer persistence enlisted the co-operation of Mr. Marks, the head master of the school the Outlaws attended, and he was urging his pupils to enter for the competition, and his pupils' parents to use what persuasion they could to that end.

"Professor Golightly," he had said, addressing the school on the subject, "is one of the most distinguished scholars of the age. We cannot let him go away with the impression that our children are devoid of intellectual interests."

"I don't see why we shouldn't," said William. "I'm jolly well devoid of 'em an' I don't know anyone that isn't."

"Dunno what good they'd be to us anyway," said Ginger. "I want to be a juggler when I grow up, an' a juggler doesn't need to know any hist'ry."

"Nor an explorer," said Henry, who had lately seen the film *Scott of the Antarctic*.

"Nor a diver," said William, who had decided to embrace that calling because he wanted to own a frigate and could think of no other means of

obtaining one.

"Nor a lion-tamer," said Douglas, as William reached out for the last bun, divided it into four in a primitive fashion and handed one piece to each of his friends.

"I want to start practising to be a juggler now," said Ginger. "You can start with quite small things. Spinnin' pennies an' things like that. Anyone got a penny?"

William gave a sardonic laugh.

"Yes, we're likely to have, aren't we, after goin' to Hadley Fair yesterday."

There was a silence, as each was wafted back on a wave of memory to the glorious atmosphere of Hadley Fair . . . the noise and shouting and blaring music . . . the Dodgems and High Flyer and Sky Rocket and Wall of Death . . . the shooting galleries and distorting mirror . . . the bags of peanuts and Monster Humbugs.

"The Wall of Death was the best," said William. "Gosh! Jus' think of it!"

Another drugged silence fell as they thought of it. Ginger was the first to emerge. He was a determined sort of boy, tenacious of any idea that had once occurred to him.

"I could try with a plate, if none of you've got a penny," he said.

"Well, you're not throwin' any of our plates up in the air," said William sternly. "They always get broke, 'cause I've tried it myself. I asked you to tea, but I didn't ask you to go smashin' everythin' in the house."

"I'm not goin' to smash anythin'," said Ginger. "I'm jus' goin' to spin a plate on the table. It can't do any harm *on* the table. Well, it can't, can it?"

"All right," said William, who was secretly eager for the experiment.

"I'll be jolly careful," Ginger assured him. "Look."

He took up a plate and spun it. It careered across the table and, before anyone could stop it, crashed on to the floor, breaking into three pieces.

"Told you so!" said William. "There you go—smashin' everythin' in the house an' gettin' me into rows!"

"It's not everythin' in the house," Ginger pointed out. "It's only one plate an' I'm sorry an' there mus' be somethin' wrong with it 'cause it ought to've jus' gone on spinnin' at the same place it started at. They've prob'ly made the balance wrong—put too much stuff at one side or somethin'."

Henry was examining the pieces.

"I bet we could mend it," he said.

William's face brightened at the suggestion.

"Yes," he said. "I know where the glue is. Wait a sec."

He vanished for a few moments and returned with a small tube.

"You take out this pin at the end," he said, "then the glue comes out. . . . Well, I've taken the pin out, but the glue won't come."

"Stick the pin in somewhere else," suggested Henry.

"Yes, that's a good idea," said William. "I'll stick it in a good lot of places to make sure. . . ." He proceeded to carry out the idea. The glue co-operated with unexpected eagerness. "Gosh! It's comin' out everywhere now. Crumbs!"

"It's all over your suit, William."

"Look! It's goin' all over the tablecloth. You're squirtin' it out too hard."

"Well, I can't help it. I'm doin' my best, aren't I? . . . Where's those pieces of plate?"

"Here they are . . . Look out!"

But it was too late. The pieces had slipped from William's glue-covered fingers and broken into a dozen fragments.

"Well, *now* what are we goin' to do?" said William gloomily. "It wasn't my fault. It was the glue's. It seemed to go mad all of a sudden."

"Yes, glue does," said Henry. "Once I tried to mend a jug I'd broke, an' it got all over a hyacinth in a pot that was miles away an' that I hadn't even touched."

"Well, we can't do anythin' more about it," said William. "Let's go to the ole barn." He suddenly remembered his duty as a host and glanced round the empty table, its emptiness relieved by shining pools and trickles of glue. "Anyone want anythin' more to eat?" he said, adding simply, "There isn't anything, anyway, so come on."

They followed him into the hall. There Douglas, always curious, opened the sitting-room door and peeped inside.

"Gosh!" he said. "They've had a good tea."

The others craned their heads over his shoulder. The room was just as Mrs. Brown and the members of the Women's Institute committee had left it. Cups and saucers and plates lay about on the tables. The laden cake-stand and tea-waggon stood on the hearthrug. A thoughtful look had come into William's face.

“Tell you what,” he said. “Let’s clear away an’ wash up. It’ll put my mother in a good temper so’s she won’t mind so much about that plate an’ the glue.”

With an eager murmur of agreement they set to work. Soon everything had been cleared away and the cake plates, still laden with cakes, ranged on the kitchen table.

“What are we goin’ to do with these?” asked Ginger.

“Dunno,” said William, considering them thoughtfully. “We can’t wash them up while they’ve still got cakes an’ things on ’em, can we?”

“I was helpin’ my mother wash up after tea the other day,” said Henry, “an’ there was jus’ one sandwich on one plate an’ she said ‘Eat that up so’s I can wash the plate, dear.’ So I did. You see,” elaborating his explanation, “she wanted to get the food eaten up so’s she could wash the plate.”

They gazed with rising spirits at the tempting array of food.

"GOSH!" SAID WILLIAM, "I DON'T KNOW THAT WE OUGHT TO'VE ET UP EVERYTHIN'."

"Well, there's jus' four of those little cakes," said William, "so, if we each have one, we can wash the plate."

They munched happily in silence for some time, then Ginger said:

"There's five of those cookies, so one of us'll have to have two."

"No, we needn't," said William. "We'll break it in four an' have a quarter each. Look! 'S quite easy. They're jolly fair quarters, aren't they?"

"Yes," said three muffled voices.

"That iced cake's all right," said Henry. "There's eight pieces of it so that's two each."

The Outlaws were not the first people who, in pursuing the means, had lost sight of the end. The dividing of the food had by this time become an end in itself. The washing-up had faded from their minds. . . .

"Six biscuits . . . That's one an' a half each."

"Two bits of bread an' butter. I'll eat 'em."

"All right. I'll eat this scone."

"Look! I'll cut this bit of currant cake into four. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Bags me the slice with the cherry on."

"No, bags *me*. . . . All right! Bags me the ginger biscuit."

"There's five of these little cakes with nuts on. Let's draw lots for the odd one."

"No, let's toss for it."

"Well, you can't, 'cause I've eaten it."

"Look! I'm goin' to throw this shortcake into the air an' the one that catches it can have it."

Hilarity reigned for some minutes, then gradually it died away, and the Outlaws stood gazing at the row of empty cake plates. A look of doubt spread slowly over William's face, deepening gradually into dismay as he took in the full extent of the devastation.

"Gosh!" he said. "I didn't mean to eat up *everythin'*. I dunno that we ought to've et up *everythin'*."

"Well, we can wash up the plates now," said Henry, pointing out the one redeeming feature of the situation.

"Y-yes," said William, "an' we'd better start doin' it, too."

They carried the crockery into the scullery, and William took up his position at the sink.

"Look out!" said Ginger suddenly.

But the warning was too late. Hubert Lane, passing along the road at the back of the house and seeing his enemy neatly framed in the open scullery window, had found the temptation too much for him. He had crept through the gate and taken up a handful of soil . . . and William raised his head to receive the impact of the moist ball full in his face.

"Come on," he said grimly, flinging down the dishcloth, and the four sped out of the house in pursuit of their foe.

They started off in the wrong direction, thus losing some valuable time, but in the end they found Hubert lurking behind the hedge. William, cheered on by his friends, dragged him into the ditch, rubbed his face in the mud, then let him go. Howls of rage and incoherent threats of vengeance floated back from him as he ran off homewards.

"That ought to teach him," said William with satisfaction.

Then his satisfaction faded.

"We didn't do the washin'-up after all, did we?" he said.

"Let's go back," said Ginger.

"N-no," said William. "I don't think we'd better go back jus' yet."

He spoke absently, his brow drawn into a thoughtful frown. Through the memories of a broken plate, a glue-covered tablecloth, a row of cake plates cleared even of crumbs, another memory was looming . . . becoming more and more distinct . . . the memory of his mother saying, "I've made enough cakes for two days, then they'll do for the Parkers as well as the W.I. Committee. Well, they'll have to, because I've used up all my rations."

The Parkers were coming to tea to-morrow and there would be no cakes for them . . . no rations to make cakes with, even. If his mother had returned from the Village Hall by now, his welcome would be a chilly one. Suddenly his face cleared.

"Tell you what!" he said. "I'll write that hist'ry essay. They've been goin' on an' on an' on at me about writin' that hist'ry essay, so it ought to put 'em in a good temper if I do."

"You'll have to go home to write it," said Ginger.

"No, I won't," said William. "I'll go'n' write it in your house. I don't want to go home for a good long time yet."

He stooped down, took a cap from the ditch and slipped it on his head, then quickly snatched it off again.

"It's not mine," he said. "It's too big." He examined the lining. "It's Hubert Lane's. Gosh! He must've forgot to pick it up. I'll give it back to him next time I meet him. I've no time to bother about it now. Let's go'n' write that hist'ry essay."

He rammed the cap into his pocket and led his band round to Ginger's house.

Reaching Ginger's bedroom, they sat on the floor in silent concentration. William had been supplied by Ginger with a piece of crumpled paper and a short stubby pencil. In the anguish of spirit attendant upon mental effort, he had already chewed half the latter away. He sat, staring fixedly in front of him, his brow deeply corrugated.

"Well, come on," he said at last in a tone of irritation. "Think of somethin', can't you?"

"I thought you were goin' to write it," said Ginger.

"Well, it's your fault I've got to write it, isn't it?" said William indignantly. "You started breakin' plates an' messin' about with glue an' eatin' up the whole place, an' if you can't think of a bit of hist'ry——"

"It was you that squirted the glue out an' I bet you had as much to eat as anyone," said Ginger with spirit.

"Well, never mind that," said Henry pacifically. "Let's all have a think about hist'ry."

They had a think about history. Their eyes were glassy, their foreheads furrowed with the effort of it. Douglas broke the silence.

"What about Alfred an' the cakes?" he said.

"I'm not goin' to write about *him*," said William. "I'm sick of cakes. I'm not goin' to write about Alfred an' the cakes *or* Alfred an' the glue, so you can shut up about them."

"What about King Arthur?" said Henry. "He was washed up by the sea."

"No, that was King John," said Douglas.

"I'm not writin' about washin'-up, either," said William. "If it hadn't been for ole Hubert Lane we'd have done the washin'-up an' then p'raps they'd have forgotten about the other things."

"I bet they wouldn't," said Douglas gloomily. "I've never known 'em forget anythin' yet 'cept things you wanted them to remember."

"Well, that's not hist'ry, is it?" said Henry. "Let's get back to hist'ry."

"There was a man called Clarence once," said Ginger thoughtfully, "who was killed by a but of something."

"Of a goat?" suggested Douglas.

"P'raps," said Ginger vaguely. "I don't jus' remember."

"Well, I'm not goin' to write about him," said William. "I've been nearly killed by a but of a goat myself. There's nothin' historical about it."

"There's Victoria," said Henry thoughtfully.

"That's a station," said William.

"It's a person as well," said Henry.

"Well, I'm not goin' to write about that," said William. "They'd get muddled up, wonderin' which I was talkin' about."

"What about that film we saw?" said Ginger. "Bonnie Prince Charlie."

William sat up suddenly. His mind went back to thrilling memories of waving swords, swirling kilts, heart-stirring strains. . . .

“Gosh!” he said with interest. “Was he in hist’ry?”

“Yes,” said Henry. “ ’Least, he was pretendin’ to be. That’s why they called him a pretender.”

“I’ll write about him,” said William, taking up his position full length on his stomach on the floor, which was his usual attitude for literary composition. “Now, don’t make a noise, any of you, or I’ll forget what I’m goin’ to put.”

They sat, tense and silent, watching respectfully while William, breathing heavily with the effort of concentration, drew his stumpy pencil over the paper slowly and laboriously—so laboriously that in many places the paper was scored right through.

“There!” he said at last. “I’ve finished it.”

“Read it,” said Ginger eagerly.

William gave a sheepish smile. He was evidently well satisfied by the result of his efforts.

“You can read it,” he said, handing it to them.

They read it. It was an impressive document.

Bony prince charly.

He came bekause they playd skotsh chunes on bag peips he dansed with ladies and fort a battel and fel into a bogg and then there wasent ennything elce to do so he went hoam in a bote.

“It’s jolly good,” said Ginger.

“I don’t know that all the words are spelt right,” said Douglas.

“Yes, they are,” said William, gaining confidence from Douglas’s tone of uncertainty. “I’m a jolly good speller. Sometimes I spell a bit diff’rent from other people, but I b’lieve in—in”—he searched for the word in his mind then finally brought out—“this deformed spellin’ that Parliament’s goin’ to make a lor of.”

Henry was now reading the paper.

“Yes, it’s jolly good,” he said judicially, “but it’s not punctured. It ought to have a comma somewhere.”

“No, it oughtn’t,” said William. “You put in commas to make it sound sense an’, if it sounds sense without commas same as mine does, then it’s all right. I can write sense without commas, so I’m jolly well not goin’ to waste time on ’em.” He took the paper from Henry and put it in his pocket. “I’ve

done it anyway, so they oughtn't to mind so much about the glue an' things now I've shown 'em I'm not devoid of int'lectual int'rests, same as they wanted me to be. What'll we do now?"

Ginger's mother solved the problem at this point by calling Ginger down to do his homework and dismissing the other Outlaws.

They parted at the gate, and William began slowly, very slowly, to wend his homeward way. More and more slowly . . . because, the nearer he got to his home, the more vivid became the memory of the presence of glue on the dining-room tablecloth and the absence of cakes on the cake plates in the kitchen and the less effective as a means of atonement seemed the literary composition he carried in his pocket.

It was almost a relief to see Joan coming towards him down the road. Joan was the only little girl whom William admitted to his friendship. She was nine years old, with a round dimpled face and dark hair and eyes. Her father went abroad on frequent business trips, and Joan and her mother generally accompanied him, so that the friendship was never put to any great strain, but at present the family was in England, and Joan was attending Miss Golightly's school.

"Oh, William," she said, "I've been trying to find you everywhere."

William gave a self-conscious smirk. He was always flattered by Joan's interest.

"Oh, well," he said, "I've been havin' a sort of busy day to-day, but—well, I'm here now."

There was no answering smile on Joan's small attractive face.

"I'm in terrible trouble, William, and I want you to help me. You're the only person in the whole world who can help me."

The dark eyes were fixed on him beseechingly . . . Joan's implicit faith in him always went a little to William's head.

"All right," he said airily, secretly glad of any undertaking that would delay his return to the bosom of his family. "I've got a bit of time now. What is it? Has that pedal come off your bike again?"

"No, William. It's something much worse than that. It's—it's a matter of life and death."

"Oh," said William, a little taken aback. "I dunno that I've got time enough for that. Things like that take a good long time, you know."

"Oh, William, you must. You said you would."

"Well, what is it?" hedged William.

The two began to walk along the road.

"OH, WILLIAM, I'M SO MISERABLE," CRIED JOAN, "AND I WANT YOU TO HELP ME."

"Well, you see, William, it's Mummy's birthday to-day, and I'd got her a lovely powder compact for a birthday present and filled it with her favourite powder and I was showing it to Rosemary yesterday in arithmetic and Miss Golightly saw me and took it from me, and she won't give it back to me. She has a rule that she never gives confiscated things back till the end of the term and she won't break it. I've told her that it's Mummy's birthday present, but she still won't give it me back and I haven't any money to buy her anything else."

William considered the problem, frowning.

"But it's after tea-time," he said. "Your mother mus' know by now that you've not got a present for her."

"No, William, she doesn't. She had to go to London and she won't be back till half past six, and we thought we wouldn't start the birthday till she

got home. She asked some people in for drinks and she said I could have some friends in, too, at the same time and she said I could ask you and you will come, won't you, William? We're going to have a birthday cake and ice cream and meringues and éclairs and lots of lovely things. I've been trying to find you all day to ask you. You *will* come, won't you, William?"

"Well, it sounds jolly good," said William, "but——"

"Oh, thank you, William. Hubert Lane keeps trying to get me to ask him, too, but I'm not going to."

"I should think not!" said William, outraged by the idea.

"But, William, if I haven't got that powder compact to give her, I shan't enjoy any of it. William, you will help me, won't you?"

"Well—er——"

"But, William, you're so clever. You can do *anything*. You do the most *wonderful* things. You're the most wonderful person I know."

Again the sheepish smile spread slowly over William's homely countenance.

"Well . . . I dunno," he said modestly and gave a self-conscious cough.

"Oh, William, I'm so miserable I don't know how to bear it."

Her dark eyes filled with tears.

Beneath William's rugged exterior there beat a very tender heart. He could never resist tears—Joan's tears especially.

"All right," he said. "Don't worry. I'll get it back for you. Don't cry. There's no need to cry. I'll get it back for you. I promise I'll get it back for you."

The tears vanished from Joan's eyes. She gave a joyful little jump in the middle of the road.

"Oh, William, I knew you would. I knew how wonderful you were."

"Y-yes," agreed William. There was a far-away look in his eye and a feeling of apprehension at his heart. "I dunno quite—I mean, it's goin' to be a bit difficult. I mean, I'm not sure——"

"William, you've *promised*, and it's made me so happy. All the time I was so miserable, I kept saying to myself, It'll be all right when I've found William. William'll get it for me because he's so wonderful."

"Y-yes, I know . . ." said William, torn between a reluctance to dispel this illusion and secret consternation at the thought of the magnitude of the task that he had undertaken, "but—well, I've got some rather important

things to do to-day. I mean, I've not got as much time as what I thought I had at first. I'm—I'm sort of busy with int'lectual int'rests jus' now, an' they take a bit of time, do int'lectual int'rests, you know."

"But, William, you *promised*."

"Yes, I know I did. . . . Yes, I'll do it all right. . . . Yes, I'm not worryin' about that—not a little thing like that. I'm jus' wonderin' how to fit it in. I'm jus' a bit full up to-day an'——"

"But you'll do it quickly, won't you, William? 'Cause Mummy'll be back soon now. Oh, William, I do love you. I'll run home now to help get the party ready." Her voice floated back to him as she danced down the road. "You'll come early, won't you, and bring it with you?"

William turned and began to walk slowly in the direction of Rosemount School. His heart sank lower at every step. It never occurred to him to abandon the enterprise—he had definitely undertaken it and somehow or other it must be carried through—but he had an uneasy suspicion that the day's misfortunes had only just begun.

At the gate of the school he stopped, pulled up his socks, rubbed the dust from his shoes with his handkerchief, passed it over his face in order to clean that, too, ran his fingers through his hair, so that it stood up in a circle of spikes, assumed a glassy ingratiating smile and began to walk slowly up the drive. He had not yet decided on any definite plan of action. He might plead Joan's cause openly and eloquently . . . He might pretend to be collecting powder compacts in aid of some charity. . . . He might pretend to have come to tune the piano . . . or, if his reception proved too discouraging, he might simply ask for a drink of water and retire to rally his forces.

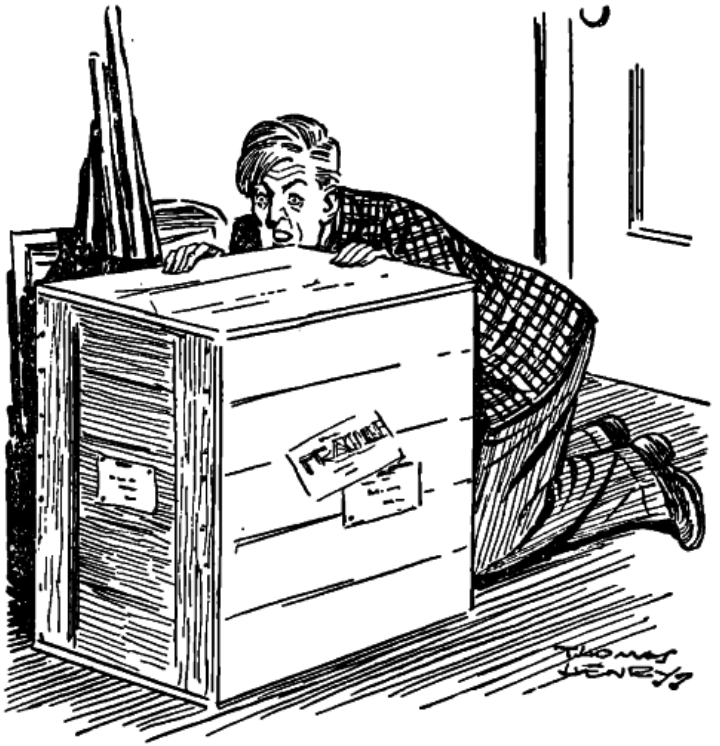
Miss Golightly's residence was a neat Georgian-styled house attached to the long school buildings. A small drive, skirted by laurel bushes, led up to the porticoed front door. William walked up the drive, his glassy smile growing glassier every moment as he rehearsed the various opening gambits. "Please, Miss Golightly, will you please let Joan have her mother's birthday present back?" . . . "Please, Miss Golightly, have you got any old powder compacts? I'm collectin' them for charity." . . . "Please, I've come to tune the piano. I'm older than what I look." . . . "Please, can I have a drink of water?" There was, of course, a fifth contingency in which he simply took to his heels.

Slowly and more slowly till he reached the front door. The front door stood wide open. The hall was empty. There was no sound but the distant murmur of voices from the school buildings. William put his hand to the bell and then withdrew it. Through a half-open door he caught sight of a writing-

desk and bookcases against a wall. It must be Miss Golightly's study. Coming to a sudden decision, he entered the front door, streaked across the hall and went into the room. It was certainly Miss Golightly's study. Piles of exercise books on the desk. Framed time-tables on the wall. He darted to the desk and opened the middle drawer. Yes, there it was—a bright shining powder compact in the very front. He slipped it into his pocket and returned to the hall. And there he stopped short with a gasp of horror. For through the open front door he could see Miss Golightly coming up the little drive.

She marched as if leading an army. Under a grim little hat her grim little face wore a set and resolute expression. He glanced round in sudden panic. There seemed no way of escape. Then suddenly he noticed the door beneath the stairs. It must be a cupboard of some sort. It would serve as a temporary hiding-place till the coast was clear. He opened the door and plunged into the cupboard, drawing the door to behind him. He was only just in time. No sooner had the door closed than he heard Miss Golightly's brisk footsteps entering the hall and crossing to her study.

"GOSH!" SAID WILLIAM. "ARE YOU JUSTINIAN?"



There were two largish packing-cases in the cupboard and a shelf containing several bags and tins. His first thought was to take measures against possible discovery. He edged his way round the packing-cases till he was in the farthest corner of the cupboard. Then he waited. . . . There was no sound. Emboldened by this, he put out his hand to examine the articles on the shelf. He took down a bag and opened it. Sultanas! William had a weakness for sultanas, and already his tea, even with the various additions to it, was a far-off memory. He looked longingly at the sultanas, then his attention was diverted by the sound of Miss Golightly's voice:

"Justinian! Where are you, Justinian? It's time to start for the Literary Society meeting. Justinian!"

There was no answer.

"Justinian!"

There followed the sound of footsteps, and the voice became more distant, as Miss Golightly went into the garden to pursue her search.

"Justinian!"

Then quite suddenly the door of the cupboard opened and a young man plunged into it, closing the door behind him. He was a tall, thin young man with a harassed-looking but pleasant face and long, lank hair. He crouched behind the packing case nearest the door. There was silence except for the distant sound of Miss Golightly's voice calling "Justinian!" in the garden. Unable to repress his curiosity, William craned his head over the packing-cases in order to get a closer view of the newcomer. At the same moment the newcomer sat up in order to get a better view of his surroundings. Their eyes met over the packing-cases and for some moments they remained staring at each other in silent amazement.

"Good Lord!" said the young man at last.

"Gosh!" said William.

"Who are you?" said the young man.

"I'm William. Are you—are you Justinian?"

"Yes."

"Are you her nephew?"

"Yes, I'm her nephew."

"Gosh! Are you Professor Golightly?"

"Yes."

"Well—what are you doin' here?"

"I'm hiding from her. What are you doing?"

"I'm hidin' from her too."

"Why are you hiding from her?" said Professor Golightly. "Look here—let's get together. She won't hear us if we whisper."

Each crawled round his packing case to the space in the middle, William still clutching his bag.

"Have a sultana," said William. "It's all right for you to have them 'cause you live here, an' if you say 'Help yourself' to me, then it'll be all right for me to have them too."

Professor Golightly selected a sultana.

"Thanks," he said, "and—help yourself, by all means."

"Thanks," said William and, his conscience appeased, set to work.

"Now tell me why you're hiding from her," said Professor Golightly.

William told the story of the powder compact, and the Professor nodded approvingly.

"Your action was a little high-handed," he said, "but on the whole, I think, justifiable."

"Why are you hidin' from her?" said William. "Have another sultana. Have a lot. A lot tastes better than jus' one."

"Thanks," said Professor Golightly, taking half a dozen sultanas and putting them into his mouth. "Well, you see, I said from the beginning that I didn't want to speak to the Literary Society, but she simply ignored everything I said and went on fixing it up. I loathe Literary Societies and the thought of addressing one simply freezes my blood."

William nodded understandingly.

"I know. Same as int'lectual in'rests do mine."

"Yes. Something like that. Anyway, they're having the meeting this evening, and I'm determined not to go, so—so I'm hiding."

"Yes, but you're grown-up," said William. "Why don't you jus' go out an' tell her you won't go? Grown-ups needn't ever do things they don't want to."

"It's not as simple as that," said Professor Golightly. "You see, she brought me up and—well, to tell the truth, I'm a bit scared of her."

"I'm scared of her too," said William. "I say,"—as a sudden thought struck him—"you're goin' to judge those hist'ry essays, aren't you?"

The young man sighed.

"Yes. She bludgeoned me into it. I couldn't get out of it."

"Well, I've done one," said William. "Would you like to see it?"

"Very much," said Professor Golightly.

"It's in my pocket somewhere," said William. "Wait a minute."

He burrowed in his pocket and brought out a crumpled bit of paper. Several odds and ends fell out at the same time, and he did not trouble to retrieve them.

"Here it is," he said, smoothing out the paper as best he could. "Have some more sultanas while you're readin' it."

"Thanks," said Professor Golightly, absently dipping his hand into the bag and conveying a cluster of them to his mouth. " 'Bony Prince Charly.' Yes, I like that. Now for the rest."

He read it in silence then folded it up and returned it to William.

"I like it," he said simply. "I like it very much indeed."

"D'you think it'll get the prize?" said William hopefully.

"Frankly, no," said Professor Golightly, "but I shall like it better than the one that gets the prize."

"I'm glad," said William, nattered. "Douglas thought some of the spellin' wasn't right."

"It's the spelling I like best of all," said Professor Golightly.

"I said I thought it was all right," said William. "Well, can I tell my father that I've written an essay an' that you like it?"

"Certainly."

"It might put him in a good temper."

"Why do you want him in a good temper particularly?"

"Well"—vaguely—"there's a bit of a mess-up at home. Glue an' stuff. Cakes an' things. Too long to tell you about."

The Professor glanced at him.

"I'd noticed you were rather gluey," he said.

"Yes. It sort of sprang at me. Out of holes. Same as snakes."

"I know. It does that with me sometimes."

"Anyway—have another sultana. . . . Oh, sorry. You can't. They're all finished. Anyway, he can't stop me goin' to Hadley Fair, 'cause I've been. I went yesterday. Gosh! It was wizard. Have you ever been to Hadley Fair?"

"No," said the Professor. "Fairs were left out of my education. My aunt didn't approve of them."

"They had Monster Humbugs, only three-halfpence each. Gosh! Aren't Monster Humbugs wizard!"

"I don't know," said the Professor. "My aunt didn't approve of sweets."

"That was rotten luck," said William sympathetically. "But the Wall of Death was the best of all."

"What's the Wall of Death?" said the Professor.

"Gosh!" said William, shocked by this colossal ignorance in one who was supposed to be a fount of learning. "Don't you know? It's wizard. He goes round an' round an' faster an' faster an' faster. Crumbs! You ought to see the Wall of Death. Well, what I mean is, what's the use of you knowin' all that hist'ry an' stuff if you've never seen the Wall of Death?"

The Professor sighed.

"There's quite a lot in that," he said.

The sound of footsteps brought the conversation to an abrupt conclusion.

"She's comin' back," whispered William.

Silently they crouched behind their packing-cases as Miss Golightly's footsteps echoed across the parquet flooring of the hall.

"Hannah!" she called.

Footsteps came from the kitchen region.

"Yes, miss?"

"I think the Professor must have gone on to the Church Room for the meeting, so I'll go there now, but, should you see him, will you tell him to come on after me to the Church Room?"

"Yes, miss."

Footsteps returning to the kitchen regions . . . the opening of the front door . . . footsteps down the drive.

The coast was clear.

William raised himself from his cramped position.

"Well, she's gone now, so I'd better take this ole compact thing to Joan," he said. He paused and added a little bitterly, "She's jolly well messed up my afternoon."

"My aunt's messed up mine, too," said the Professor with equal bitterness.

"They're a bit of a nuisance, women, aren't they?" said William.

"They are indeed," said the Professor. "They can't take 'no' for an answer. It's—wearing."

"Yes, it wears me, too," said William. "Well, I'll be goin' now. G'bye for the present."

"Good-bye," said the Professor, who was also raising his long thin form from its cramped position.

William crept cautiously out of the front door and down the drive to the gate, keeping well in the shelter of the bushes. Then he swaggered down the road, his spirits and self-esteem rising at every step. He had done something that no one had ever done before. He had gone, he felt, into the very jaws of death and come out unscathed. He was a hero, a superman, a demigod. . . . He wanted to tell someone about it. And at the turn of the road he met Hubert Lane. Hubert Lane was slouching back disconsolately from Joan's house, having spent the last quarter of an hour trying to persuade her to invite him to her party and having been, in the end, summarily dismissed.

William looked at him without rancour. Hubert had thrown a handful of mud at him and had had his face rubbed in the ditch. They were, felt William, for the time being at any rate, quits. And William could not contain his jubilation any longer. He would have preferred some other audience than Hubert but, as Hubert was the only audience available, he must make the best of it.

"I bet you don't know what I've been doin'," he said with a swashbuckling jaunty air.

"What?" said Hubert, giving him a sour look.

"Well, ole Golly took the powder compact that Joan'd bought for her mother's birthday present, an' I've been right into her study an' got it back."

"I bet you haven't," said Hubert.

"I have," said William, taking the compact out of his pocket.

Hubert gazed at it, and gradually the sour look vanished from his face, to be replaced by a sly smile.

"That was jolly good," he said. "Jolly good."

He turned and began to walk down the road with William.

"You're jolly clever, you know, William," he went on, instilling a note of wistful envy into his voice.

William's swagger increased.

"Oh, I gen'rally do a thing I say I'll do," he said airily.

"Fancy goin' right into old Golly's study!" said Hubert admiringly.

"Huh! There's not many things *I'm* afraid of," said William with a dare-devil laugh.

"I know," said Hubert humbly. "I wish I was as brave as what you are." He stopped just beneath a tree that grew by the roadside. "When I was comin' down here a minute ago, I looked at that tree an' thought, Well, I couldn't climb it. I dunno anyone who could except William Brown."

HUBERT WAS TAKING SOMETHING FROM THE POCKET OF WILLIAM'S COAT.

"Gosh, yes!" said William, now completely above himself. "A tree like that's nothin' to me. Nothin'! I bet I could climb any tree anywhere."

Hubert was looking up at the tree with a thoughtful frown.

"I dunno," he said. "It's a bit more difficult than I thought it was. I dunno that you could climb it, after all, William."

"Couldn't I!" said William, stung by this reflection on his omnipotence. "Jus' you watch!"

He took off his coat, flung it on to the grass and set to work on the tree. It was certainly more difficult than it looked, but he swung himself up determinedly till he was nearly at the top. Then he looked down at Hubert.

For a moment he couldn't think what Hubert was doing. Then he suddenly understood. Hubert had waited till William had reached a stage in the climb from which it would be difficult to extricate himself and was now taking the compact from the pocket of his coat. Having done so, he slipped it into his own pocket, then ran off down the road. Mocking laughter came from his plump figure as he ran.

"Yah! Think yourself so clever, William Brown! Yah!"

His voice died away as he turned the corner of the road, going in the direction of Joan's house.

William descended slowly from the tree. He saw Hubert's plan quite clearly. He intended to present the compact to Joan, claim William's exploit as his own and win an invitation to her party.

And suddenly, rather to his own surprise, William found that he didn't care. He didn't even want to reinstate himself in Joan's eyes. He thought of her party—a crowd, probably, of giggling, chattering schoolgirls to whom he would be expected to hand plates of food and generally pay polite attentions—and found that he didn't want to go to it. The demands of womankind in general and Joan in particular were incessant and exacting. He had enjoyed his man-to-man conversation with Professor Golightly in the cupboard and was anxious to resume it.

Moreover, the thought that such a man—a man with the sense and taste to appreciate his essay on Bony Prince Charly—had never been to a fair or tasted a Monster Humbug still shocked him deeply. Such a state of things should not be allowed to exist. It should be remedied—and the sooner the better.

He put on his coat and retraced his steps to Rosemount School.

"I've got it," panted Hubert. "I've got it, Joan. I went right into Golly's study and got it for you out of her drawer. That ole William Brown funked it, so I did it for you all by myself."

"How sweet of you, Hubert!" said Joan.

She spoke a little absently. She was engaged in setting out glasses of jelly on the table in the dining-room, where she was to hold her party, while the grown-ups drank cocktails in the sitting-room . . . and Joan was the type of child who was always wholly absorbed by whatever task she had in hand.

"Will you put it in its box?" she went on, without raising her eyes from the glasses which she was trying to arrange in a circle and which seemed

intent on forming a square. “It’s on the hall table ready in case I got it in time. And the label’s there too. Will you tie it on? It is kind of you, Hubert.”

Hubert put the case into the box, attached the label, then joined Joan in the dining-room.

“I can come to your party now, can’t I, Joan?”

“Yes, of course, Hubert.”

Then Joan’s mother arrived and all was confusion and excitement.

“Darling, how sweet of you! It’s just what I wanted. . . . Yes, I opened it in the hall and put it straight into my bag. And now I must simply fly round and get things in train. People will be arriving any moment.”

“I’m staying for the party,” said Hubert with an oily smile.

“Yes, dear. . . . Just stand out of the way, will you? Good Heavens! Is that the first guest already?”

But it was not the first guest. It was Miss Golightly. She entered the sitting-room with her firm, resolute tread and addressed Joan’s mother.

“I’m so sorry to trouble you, Mrs. Clive, but I wonder if you’ve seen anything of my nephew. He’s expected at the Church Room to give a lecture, but he doesn’t seem to have turned up. He’s rather absent-minded and he may have lost his way. I thought that as this road leads to the Church Room you may have seen him passing.”

“No,” said Mrs. Clive. “I’m afraid I haven’t . . .” She caught sight of her face in the mirror and, opening her bag, took out the powder compact. “I am in a mess, aren’t I?” she laughed, drawing a powder puff over her face. “I’ve only just got back from London.” She closed the compact and handed it to Miss Golightly. “Joan gave me this for my birthday present. Isn’t it lovely!”

Miss Golightly examined it. Her face grew longer and longer . . . grimmer and grimmer.

“This, Mrs. Clive,” she said at last, “is *my* powder compact. I do not encourage the use of cosmetics, but I keep a powder compact in the drawer of my desk for emergencies, and this is it. It was given to me by a dear old school friend.” She opened the lid. “Here are my initials. P. G. Priscilla Golightly.”

“But what on earth has happened?” said Mrs. Clive faintly. “I don’t understand.”

“Oh, dear, we’ll have to tell them, Hubert,” said Joan. “Well, you know, Miss Golightly, you took the compact I’d got for Mummy’s birthday present, and I did so want to give it to her to-day and I asked William to get it for me

and he didn't, but Hubert did. He went right into your study this afternoon and took it out of your drawer, and I s'pose he took the wrong one."

Miss Golightly turned upon Hubert a face in which every feature—every eyelash almost—registered majestic wrath.

"How *dare* you break into my private room, Hubert Lane?"

"I didn't," squeaked Hubert on a high note of terror. "I d-d-didn't."

"But you told me you had done, Hubert," said Joan.

"I didn't really," gibbered Hubert. "Honest, I d-didn't. William Brown did. I only p-pretended I did."

"Don't add the crime of falsehood to that of theft and house-breaking," said Miss Golightly sternly.

"Oh, dear!" said Mrs. Clive, "it's all very confusing."

The telephone bell rang and she went to answer it.

"It's for you, Miss Golightly," she said.

"Oh, yes," said Miss Golightly. "I told my housemaid that I was calling here and that if she had any news of Justinian she could get into touch with me through your number." She took up the receiver. "Yes? . . . *What!*" The grimness of her face deepened to horror. "Good heavens! . . . How dreadful! Thank you, Hannah."

She replaced the receiver and turned to Hubert, fixing him with a gaze before which strong men had been known to quail. Hubert was no strong man. He quailed abjectly.

"Are you aware, Hubert Lane," she said, "that you have eaten every sultana in my house?"

Hubert's mouth dropped open. His eyes goggled.

"I haven't," he squeaked. "I've never touched your sultanas. I've never been near your house."

"Oh, Hubert, you have," said Joan reproachfully. "You told me you had."

"Hubert Lane," said Miss Golightly, "my maid Hannah was about to prepare a bread-and-butter pudding for to-night's dinner and went to the cupboard under the stairs where some of our housekeeping stores are kept. There she found the bag that she knew had been full of sultanas this morning lying empty on the floor and by it your cap. *Your* cap, Hubert Lane. *Now* what have you to say for yourself?"

Hubert had nothing to say for himself. He gibbered wildly for a few moments, then, bursting into howls of rage and fear, fled from the house and

across the fields homewards.

"An ill-conditioned boy," commented Miss Golightly. "I hope it has taught him a lesson. . . . But I cannot think what has happened to Justinian."

"And I can't think what has happened to William," said Joan. "I told him to come early."

"They can't be far away," said Mrs. Clive in vague reassurance.

Actually they were about three miles away. They were seated side by side in the front row among the spectators of the Wall of Death at Hadley Fair.

Their eyes grew wider and wider as they watched the daring revolutions of the cyclist . . . but their jaws never ceased to move rhythmically around a couple of Monster Humbugs.

CHAPTER III

WILLIAM BEATS THE RECORD

"ALL very well sayin', start with a little money an' make more money out of it," said William. "Where's the little money comin' from to start with? Kin'ly tell me *that*."

"Well, there's pocket money," said Ginger tentatively.

The two were sitting in the wheelbarrow at the bottom of the garden, munching a couple of carrots given to them by Mrs. Brown on condition that they went out of the kitchen and stopped bothering her. Jumble stood with his forefeet on the edge of the wheelbarrow, intent on appropriating his share of the spoil as opportunity offered. Every now and then William would throw a piece of carrot into the air, and Jumble would leap up with a snap of his jaws, occasionally catching it but more often missing it, when he would fall on it as it lay on the grass, growl at it, worry it, and finally chew it up with noisy enjoyment.

"Pocket money!" echoed William in disgust. "I never have any. Either it's took off me 'cause things get broke—— Well, it's not my fault. You wouldn't think anything ever wore out nat'ral, the way they go on at me. Look at that window that got broke with my cricket ball las' week. That window's been there ever since I can remember. It mus' be jus' about wore out nat'ral by now, an' my cricket ball only jus' *touched* it. Stands to reason it was wore out nat'ral, breakin' when a ball jus' *touched* it. An' then they blame me!" He threw a piece of carrot into the air and Jumble caught it neatly as it descended. "Gosh! Look at that! I bet there isn't another dog in England could have caught that one."

"Well, there's weeks when they don't take it off," said Ginger. "Pocket money, I mean."

"Well, it goes by itself, then," said William. He bit off a large chunk of carrot and continued indistinctly. "Goes in five minutes as like as not. There's never enough to last more'n five minutes."

"Let's not bother about it at all, then," said Ginger. "Ole Frenchie can't *make* us."

"Well," said William slowly, "it's gettin' to the end of the term an' I know he's goin' to give me a jolly rotten report if I don't do somethin' to

stop him an' my father was jolly disagreeable over my last report an' I've got a sort of feelin' he's goin' to be disagreeabler still over this one, so I'm goin' to join in with this new gym. thing same as old Frenchie said."

"Frenchie" was Mr. French, William's form master, and the new gym. had long been a cherished project of the head master's. The sympathy of friends and parents was now being actively enlisted in the project and a fete was being held in the school grounds in order to extort what money could be extorted from the immediate neighbourhood. Meantime each boy was urged to make a contribution according to his means, less in the hope of obtaining any considerable sum than in order to instil into the pupils a sense of joint responsibility for the undertaking.

Mr. French had spoken to his form at great length on the subject.

"You can start with a small sum of money," he said, "and gradually increase it. You can make some useful object, for instance, and sell it to some friend or relation and with the sum thus earned buy materials for some further piece of handiwork, increasing the sum earned at each transaction. I once knew a boy who in this way increased sixpence to ten shillings by making and selling such simple things as toast-racks and clothes-hangers."

"I'm not goin' to make toast-racks or clothes-hangers," William had said firmly afterwards. "I made a toast-rack once in carpentry an' it fell to pieces the first time a piece of toast was put into it, an' I made a clothes-hanger, too, an' all the pegs dropped off as soon as clothes were put on it. It mus' have been rotten wood. I'm not goin' to waste any more time makin' things out of rotten wood like that."

"Well, I keep sayin'," said Ginger patiently, "let's not go in for it at all. He can't make us. An' he'll prob'ly give us an awful report, anyway. He always does."

"I know," said William. "I think it's 'cause he can't spell words like 'excellent' an' 'satisfactory.' He puts 'poor' to everything jus' 'cause it's an easy word to spell. An' anyway I'm *goin'* to go in for it. He looked at me in a nasty sort of way when he'd finished talkin' about it, you remember, an' said, 'I don't suppose you'll cut much of a figure in this, Brown,' so I'm jus' goin' to *show* him."

He threw a piece of carrot into the air. Jumble sprang up, missed it by several inches, then fell upon it, worried it, growled at it and finally ate it.

"It was a bad throw," said William, "an' anyway he likes eatin' some of them from the ground. He can taste them better than when he swallows them whole in the air."

"Well, it's the Fête this afternoon," said Ginger. "You've left it jolly late."

"Yes, I know," said William a little irritably, "but I've been busy till now. Anyway, there's a whole mornin', isn't there? An' there's four hours in a mornin' an' that's eight half hours an' sixteen quarter hours an' "—he wrestled with the sum and finally gave it up—"hundreds an' *hundreds* of minutes. Well, if a person can't make a bit of money in hundreds an' *hundreds* of minutes, he mus' be bats."

"How're you goin' to start?" said Ginger.

"Well, the first thing is to get a bit of money to make some more money out of an' I've got an idea about that. It came to me quite sudden while I was talkin' . . . You know those shoes I had soled las' week?"

"Yes."

"Well, they cost seven and sixpence an' I haven't worn 'em yet, so I'm goin' to take 'em back to the cobbler an' ask him to take the new soles off an' put the old soles on again an' give me the seven and six."

"I bet he won't," said Ginger.

"I don't see why not. He can put the new soles on someone else's shoes. My mother said I'd got to have them soled 'cause I'd get my feet wet if I didn't, an', if I don't mind gettin' my feet wet, I don't see it matters to anyone else. They're *my* feet an' I like 'em wet. I'm goin' to be a diver when I grow up an' it'll be good practice, gettin' my feet wet."

"Well, I dunno . . ." said Ginger doubtfully.

"All right," challenged William. "Think of somethin' better, then."

"I can't," admitted Ginger, "not jus' at the moment."

"Come on, then," said William. He started towards the house, then stopped, struck by another idea. "Tell you what. I'll let him have those soles back for three shillings. It'll be a bargain. I bet he'll be jolly grateful to me."

He disappeared into the house. Ginger went slowly round to the front garden and down to the gate. From the open window of the sitting-room he heard the sound of Robert's voice declaiming passionately . . . then a girl's voice . . . then Robert's voice.

William came down to the gate, his shoes thrust bulkily under his coat, Jumble leaping up at them excitedly.

"I say!" said Ginger. "Robert's in, isn't he? He might give you some money if he's in a good temper. He does sometimes. Then we needn't bother about the shoes."

"Well, he isn't in a good temper," said William. "He's quarrelling with Dahlia Macnamara, an' he's always in a bad temper when he's quarrelling with Dahlia Macnamara."

"What's he quarrelling with her about?" said Ginger with mild interest, as a high-pitched ironic laugh from Dahlia floated out from the sitting-room window.

"Oh, somethin' about goin' to the pictures," said William carelessly. "He didn't turn up or somethin'. Anyway, she's mad an' he's gettin' mad. They're both bats, they're not worth botherin' about. . . . Oh, come on!"

The two walked off together down the road towards the cobbler's.

"It makes me laugh," said Dahlia, suiting the action to the words. "It's too terribly funny. Me standing waiting for you outside Hadley Cinema for a quarter of an hour. *Me!*"

She gave another peal of ironic laughter to show her amusement.

"Listen, Dahlia," pleaded Robert. "I wanted to go to the pictures with you. I *asked* you, didn't I? And you said you couldn't manage it."

"Then I said I could."

"Yes, and then you said you couldn't again after that."

"Yes, but then I said I could again."

"Well, the impression I got at the end was that you couldn't."

"It shows how much you care for me that you wouldn't even take the trouble to find out whether I could go to the pictures with you or not."

"I spent a whole afternoon trying to find out. Every time I asked you, you said something different. . . . Dahlia, I'm terribly sorry—it was just a misunderstanding."

"That's all right, Robert," said Dahlia, speaking in a tone of distant graciousness. "You've apologised and I shall say no more about it. I'm not one to harp on things, but to think of me waiting for you—waiting for *anyone*—outside a public cinema for a whole quarter of an hour—well, it's just funny, that's all."

"I'm sorry, Dahlia," said the wretched Robert for the hundredth time.

"Well, let's not talk about it," said Dahlia with a frigid smile. "Let's forget it and let bygones be bygones. As far as I'm concerned, I shall never refer to it again, but how you could have thought that I wasn't going when I'd said distinctly that I was going——"

"Yes, and then you'd said you weren't. You said that you'd met someone who'd seen the film and didn't like it."

"Quite obviously you didn't want to go with me," said Dahlia, with another high-pitched ironic laugh. "Any excuse better than none. Not that I *wanted* to go with you. Please don't think that for a minute."

Robert was tired of grovelling and was feeling a rising urge to hit back.

"Well, if you go on saying one thing one minute and another the next," he said, "I don't see how anyone's to find out what you really want to do."

"That's right," snapped Dahlia. "Tell me I don't know my own mind."

"Well, I've told you, haven't I?" said Robert.

Dahlia rose to her feet.

"How *dare* you!" she said dramatically. "I shall never speak to you again. Never as long as I live. Not from this very minute. Why couldn't you tell me straight out that you were tired of me? Well, let me tell you here and now that I'm as tired of you as you are of me, though I wouldn't stoop to such a mean trick as to pretend I thought someone meant something I knew quite well they didn't mean and keep them waiting for hours outside a public cinema for everyone to see and talk about, and think they were the sort of person that people could keep waiting for hours outside public cinemas for people to see and——" She stopped for breath then continued: "I shall send you back your presents the minute I get home. Your present, I should say, because all you've ever given is that brooch that isn't any use, anyway, because the pin's always coming undone."

"All right," muttered Robert sulkily. "I'll send back that cigarette-case you gave me."

He refrained, by a supreme effort of gallantry, from adding that it wasn't any use, anyway, because it only held ten.

"If you do I shall throw it into the nearest pond," said Dahlia. "I never want to see anything ever again that reminds me of you, but"—with dignity—"I shall certainly return your brooch."

"All right," said Robert savagely. "I'll throw that into the nearest pond, too. And don't think I don't know the reason for all this. Don't think I haven't seen you and that oaf, Oswald Franks——"

"How *dare* you!" said Dahlia, so shrilly that her voice broke on a high note and she hastily changed it into a cough, then continued: "And while we're on the subject of home truths, what about you and Dorita Merton? You had plenty to say to her last Saturday at the Tennis Club."

“We were fixing up the tournament list,” said Robert sulkily. “I can’t stand the girl. . . .” The note of pleading returned to his voice: “Look here, Dahlia——”

But Dahlia, with a haughty gesture of repudiation, had swept from the room and out of the front door. She did not see William and Ginger walking slowly round the side of the house, the pair of shoes still bundled under William’s coat. Passing the open window, they had heard the end of the conversation, and William’s dejected countenance had brightened. The cobbler had received William’s suggestion with a burst of laughter that had offended William deeply, but his sense of outrage was melting in the light of a new idea that had suddenly occurred to him. He clutched Ginger by the arm and drew him down to the bottom of the garden.

“Listen,” he said. “I’ve got another idea.”

“Gosh!” said Ginger. “Not another!”

“Well, he was jolly mean about those shoes. I think he was jealous ’cause it was such a good idea, but the one I’ve got now’s better still.”

“What is it?”

“Well, you heard what they said, didn’t you?” said William. “They’re both goin’ to throw their presents into the nearest pond. Well, that’s Jenks’ pond. That’s the nearest pond to both of them, so that’s where they’ll throw them. Well, if we fish ’em out we can sell them at the junk shop in Hadley an’ that’ll give us some money to start with.”

“It might take us weeks, fishin’ them out,” said Ginger. “It’s a jolly big pond.”

“No, it’ll be as easy as easy,” said William. “We’ll watch where they throw ’em an’ I’ll tie a walkin’ stick on to the end of my fishin’ rod an’——”

At that moment Robert emerged from the house. He wore a pale, exalted look. His eyes flashed with noble rage. His lips were set in a line of heroic suffering. In his hand he carried a small packet wrapped in brown paper and secured, plentifully if somewhat erratically, with sealing wax.

“William!” he called.

“Yes?” said William, approaching him.

“Take this round to Dahlia Macnamara’s house,” ordered Robert, “and give it to her with my compliments.”

“How much will you give me for takin’ it?” said William, trying to wrest what financial benefit could be wrested from the situation.

But Robert was in too lofty a mood to stoop to bargaining with a small brother.

"Nothing," he snapped. "Do as you're told for once."

"All right," said William, taking the packet and slipping it into his pocket. "Come on, Ginger."

Together they made their way through the village to the small detached house occupied by the Macnamara family. Jumble trotted behind them in a somewhat dejected fashion. He'd enjoyed jumping up into the air and catching bits of carrot and he wanted to go on doing it.

"She might not throw it into the pond till to-night," said Ginger gloomily. "It's goin' to be a rotten waste of time hangin' round all day an' night . . ."

"That's right," said William bitterly. "Start makin' objections. Whenever I get a really good plan you always start makin' objections. Think of that man Bruce that made spiders' webs an' all the weeks an' weeks an' weeks he mus' have took doin' it, an' you start makin' a fuss jus' 'cause you've got to wait a few minutes to see a girl throw a brooch into a pond."

"What did he make spiders' webs for?" said Ginger, interested despite himself.

"I've forgot jus' for the moment," said William vaguely, "but it's in hist'ry, so it mus' be true. . . . Anyway, I bet she'll do it quick because she said she never wanted to think of him again."

"Yes, but——" began Ginger.

At that moment the door opened and Dahlia Macnamara came down to the gate. She carried a small packet in her hand, holding it well away from her and averting her face from it with an expression of fastidious disdain.

"Kindly give that to your brother," she said, thrusting the packet into William's hands, "with my compliments."

Then, twisting her lips into a smile that was intended to convey bitterness, irony, disillusionment and sardonic amusement, she turned abruptly and went back into the house.

The two boys stood staring after her.

"You never gave her Robert's parcel, William," said Ginger.

"No," said William. "She went off too quick, an' anyway another idea came over me quite sudden while she was givin' me this."

"What was it?"

"It's a jolly good idea," said William complacently. "It's better even than the one about the shoes."

"Well, *that* wasn't much good," said Ginger.

"You're jealous 'cause you don't get any ideas yourself," said William, "so you go on grumblin' an' grumblin' at people that do."

"Well, never mind that now," said Ginger, reluctantly forgoing what might have been an interesting argument. "What's this new idea?"

"It came to me all of a sudden," said William, "an' it's a *jolly* good one. If Robert's goin' to throw Dahlia's present into the pond an' Dahlia's goin' to throw Robert's into the pond an' we're goin' to fish them out—well, I don't see why I shouldn't save all of us the trouble."

"How d'you mean?" said Ginger.

"Well, listen," said William. "If we don't give Dahlia's brooch back to Robert, it'll save him the trouble of throwin' it into the pond, an', if we don't give Robert's cigarette-case back to Dahlia, it'll save her the trouble of throwin' it into the pond an' it'll save us both the trouble of fishin' them out. Seems to me," self-righteously, "it'll be doin' everyone a good turn same as what people are always tellin' us we ought to do to people."

"An' what'll we do with them?" said Ginger.

"Same as I told you," said William. "We'll have got 'em without the trouble of fishin' them out of the pond, so we can take them straight down to the junk shop an' sell 'em."

"Gosh, yes!" said Ginger, impressed. "That's a jolly good idea."

"All my ideas are jolly good," said William, adding with a burst of honesty, "only some of 'em come off an' some don't."

They made their way across the fields to Hadley and entered Mr. Marsh's shop. It was a small inconspicuous shop in a small inconspicuous street, and its stock-in-trade consisted chiefly of such Victorian relics as croquet mallets, Venetian blinds and gas brackets.

Mr. Marsh inspected the cigarette-case and brooch without enthusiasm. Living and moving and having his being against a background of the 'nineties, he considered them both flashy and vulgar. Gentlemen of the 'nineties did not use chromium cigarette-cases and ladies of the 'nineties did not wear plastic brooches, however elaborately fashioned.

"One and six each," he said shortly, pushing them to one side with a gesture of distaste.

"I say!" said William, deeply impressed by the sum. "That's three shillin's. Thanks *awfully*!"

Mr. Marsh handed over the three shillings and said "Good morning" in a tone of dismissal. He didn't like modern small boys either. He preferred the small boys of the 'nineties in their Norfolk coats and long black stockings and neat little Eton suits. He had, in fact, a whole drawer full of Eton collars, which he was keeping against such time as the world should come to its senses again. Jumble, who had been on a journey of investigation in the back of the shop, emerged suddenly with a photograph of Mrs. Patrick Campbell in his mouth. William hastily took it from him and slipped it on to a battered rush carrier that was nestling lovingly against a dilapidated carpet bag.

"I say!" said Ginger, who was examining a tricycle of ancient design that stood in a corner of the shop. "I bet you could turn this into a bicycle all right. You could chop off one wheel an'——"

"Good morning," said Mr. Marsh again firmly.

"Good morning," said William. "Come on, Ginger. We've got a jolly lot to do this mornin'."

Securing Jumble, who was burrowing in a pile of engravings, they went out into the street.

"Three shillings!" said Ginger. "That's jolly good."

"Yes, but we've got to make it more, remember," said William. "You start with a small sum like he said an' do somethin' with it to make it more."

"What'll we do with it?"

"Well, you get somethin' bigger with the money an' sell it for more money an' so on."

"Well, we'll get somethin' bigger then. Where'll we get it?"

"Might as well get it here," said William, who was reluctant to leave Mr. Marsh's shop.

They stood with their noses pressed against the glass.

"Not much for three shillings," said Ginger.

"Yes, there is," said William excitedly. "Look! There's a concertina. It's a jolly big one, too. It's bigger than the brooch an' cigarette-case put together."

"I bet it doesn't play," said Ginger.

“That’s right. Start makin’ objections again,” said William. “ ’Course it plays. Let’s go in again, anyway.”

They entered the shop again.

“Does the concertina play?” asked William.

“Oh, yes, it’s in perfect working condition,” said Mr. Marsh, relaxing the grimness of his expression.

He liked concertinas. Young men in straw hats used to take concertinas with them on picnics in the ’nineties. He lifted the concertina from its place in the window and, a dreamy smile on his face, drew it in and out. The slow —and somewhat uncertain—strains of “Just a Song at Twilight” filled the little shop.

“Gosh!” said William, breathless with delight. “Can we have it?”

He laid the three shillings on the counter as he spoke.

“Certainly,” said Mr. Marsh, adding: “For a picnic, perhaps?”

A SHATTERING NOISE RENT THE AIR.

"Well, no," said William, then, considering that it might eventually find its way to one, added: "Not all at once."

"It would come in handy at a picnic," said Mr. Marsh wistfully.

"Yes, it would," agreed William. "Well, good-bye."

He took up the concertina and went out of the shop, followed by Ginger. They had gone some distance before they saw that Jumble was trotting after them with a moth-eaten antimacassar in his mouth. Ginger took it back while William stood gazing with rapture at his concertina.

"A concertina!" he said blissfully when Ginger rejoined him. "Gosh! A *concertina*!"

"We've gotter sell it, you know," Ginger reminded him. "We've gotter sell it for four shillings an' then buy somethin' else an' sell it for five an'—an' so on."

"Yes, of course," said William, adding with interest: "It's a jolly easy way of makin' money, isn't it? I wonder everyone doesn't do it."

"Well, who'll we sell it to?" said Ginger. "The concertina, I mean."

"There's no hurry," said William a little testily. "Don't start fussin' about that already. I want to try it out first. It looked jolly easy. I bet I could play that tune he played. He jus' sort of pulled it in an' out like this." He drew the concertina in and out, producing a raucous blast. "I 'spect everyone makes that noise when they start. You've got to have a bit of practice before you can play proper tunes. An' anyway there was jus' a bit of a tune in it. A bit of a *sort* of a tune, anyway. Come on . . . Let's take it somewhere quiet an' have a bit of practice."

They went back across the fields to the village and sat down on the grass verge by the roadside.

"I'm not goin' to sell it till I've learnt to play it prop'ly," said William. "I bet it won't take me more'n a few minutes. You jus' pull it in an' out same as Mr. Marsh did. I'm goin' to try 'God Save the Queen' first."

He drew it in and out again, producing another devastating blast. Jumble joined in, barking joyfully.

"I think that was better," said William uncertainly. "There seemed to be more of a tune in it."

"We're sittin' jus' outside Miss Milton's gate," Ginger warned him.

"Well, I don't s'pose she'll mind," said William. "She's fond of music. She got up a concert in the Village Hall las' winter an' charged two-an'-six a ticket. It was rotten music, too, by a man called Listen."

"Liszt," said Ginger.

"Well, that's only an old-fashioned word for listen," said William. "It's all the same. Anyway, I bet I can make up tunes as well as him once I find out how this concertina works. . . . Come to that," reflectively, "I don't see why I shouldn't make a bit of money playin' it before I start sellin' it. I'll jus' practise a bit more an' then I'll go'n' ask Miss Milton if she'd like me to play to her an' I'll only charge her sixpence. I'm goin' to try 'God Save the Queen' again."

A shattering noise rent the air, to the accompaniment of shrill barks from Jumble.

"It was a bit like it, wasn't it?" said William. "I mean, it wasn't as much not like it as the other was. It——"

At that moment Miss Milton's face appeared over the gate.

"So it's *you*, William Brown," she said sternly. "I might have known. How *dare* you make that horrible noise just outside my house! Go away at once."

The milkman's call echoed from her back door and they heard the sound of her footsteps returning to the house.

"*Well!*" said William bitterly. "Says she's fond of music an' can't even listen to music for two minutes together. Jus' cause I've not got mine printed on paper same as that man Hark. . . . That las' one I did was jolly good. It wasn't far off 'God Save the Queen,' anyway. I did it a diff'rent way an' I think it made a better noise."

"What way?" said Ginger.

"I pulled it in an' out quick. Like this."

The concertina emitted two piercing squawks and again the face of Miss Milton appeared over the gate. It was tense and set with anger.

"Give me that concertina at once, William Brown," she said.

"Yes, but——"

Her arm shot out, and before William could protest she had seized the concertina and vanished into the house with it.

"*Well!*" gasped William indignantly. "She's jus' nothin' but a robber! It's like one of those daylight smash an' grab raids you read about in the newspapers. We ought to go to the p'lice about it."

"They wouldn't do anythin'," said Ginger gloomily.

“No, they’re in league with them,” said William, his interest in the subject conquering his sense of grievance. “Someone once told me about them bein’ in league with them. I bet Miss Milton’s in league with the p’liceman here. Well, I saw her talkin’ to him yesterday an’ I bet they were plannin’ it together.”

“They didn’t know about the concertina then,” Ginger reminded him, “an’ I bet she was askin’ him how his wife was. She’s in hospital.”

“No, she wasn’t,” said William. “They were plannin’ smash an’ grab raids same as the one she’s jus’ done now.”

“Well, anyway, we’re back where we started,” said Ginger.

“No, we’re not,” said William doggedly. “We’ve got a concertina.”

“No, we haven’t. She’s taken it.”

“Yes, but we paid for it, so it’s ours an’ I’m jolly well goin’ to sell it. I don’t care whether she’s got it or not. It’s ours an’ I’m goin’ to sell it.”

“Who to?” challenged Ginger.

William was silent. They had walked some distance past Miss Milton’s house and the road was empty except for the figure of Frankie Parker, who was coming towards them, walking with his usual jaunty air.

“Hello, Frankie,” said William, as he approached them.

“Hello,” said Frankie.

“Would you like to buy a concertina?” asked William.

Frankie considered.

“Yes,” he said at last.

“Well, you can,” said William graciously. “I’m sellin’ one.”

“How much is it?” said Frankie.

“How much have you got?” said William.

“Sixpence,” said Frankie.

It was William’s turn to consider. Sixpence was an unusual price for a concertina, but then the conditions of the sale were unusual.

“All right,” he said. “You can have it for sixpence.”

Frankie brought sixpence out of his pocket and handed it to William.

“Thanks,” said William, putting it into his pocket.

“Where’s the concertina?” said Frankie.

“It’s at Miss Milton’s,” said William.

Frankie did not seem surprised. Few things surprised Frankie.

"Thanks," he said, and set off down the road, entering Miss Milton's gateway with his jauntiness undiminished.

William and Ginger stood watching anxiously, ready to turn to flight at the first appearance of Miss Milton. But, instead of Miss Milton, Frankie emerged from the gateway, still walking jauntily, carrying the concertina.

"Gosh!" gasped William as he joined them. "How did you get it?"

"I went round to the back," said Frankie, "and the kitchen door was open and it was on the table, so I just took it."

"Crumbs!" said William, then, gathering his scattered forces: "But look here! It's a jolly good concertina. It's worth more than sixpence. It's worth four shillings."

"You said sixpence," said Frankie firmly, and went on his way down the road. As he went he pulled out the concertina with the flourish of an expert and the strains of "Bonnie Dundee" floated harmoniously from the departing figure.

William stood watching, his mouth wide open.

"Gosh!" he said again.

"Come on quick," said Ginger, looking round nervously. "If she finds it's gone she'll think it's us an' she'll be mad. Come on!"

The two ran down the road, with Jumble leaping at their heels, slackening their pace when they found that no infuriated Miss Milton was pursuing them.

"Well, what do we do now?" demanded Ginger. "We're right back where we started an' it's nearly the end of the mornin' an' it's the Fête this afternoon."

"We're not back where we started," said William. "We've got sixpence an' you can do a jolly lot with sixpence. I bet people have got to be millionaires from less than sixpence."

"Well, what are you goin' to buy with it this time?" said Ginger resignedly.

"I dunno," said William. "I've got to have a bit of time to think."

"Let's give it up," suggested Ginger.

"No, I'm jolly well not goin' to," said William. "I said I was goin' to show 'em an' I jolly well am."

“Well, let’s go’n’ do some work for someone an’ get paid for it,” said Ginger. “That’s easier.”

“It’s not as easy as it sounds,” said William bitterly, “ ’cause I’ve tried it. They pretend you’ve done it wrong to get out of payin’ you.”

“Well, it’s easier than buyin’ an’ sellin’ things.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is.”

“It isn’t.”

“It is.”

“Let’s toss for it.”

“What with?”

“With the sixpence,” said William, bringing it out of his pocket.

“All right.”

“Heads we go on buyin’ an’ sellin’ things an’ tails we do some work for someone an’ get paid for it.”

He spun the sixpence in the air. Jumble leapt up, snapped his jaws and—the sixpence vanished.

“Gosh!” gasped William. “He’s swallowed it.”

They stood gazing at Jumble in consternation. Jumble sat down and thumped his tail on the ground in a self-congratulatory manner. That particular bit of carrot was of an odd consistency and had a peculiar taste, but he considered that he had done his trick and done it well.

“Well, it was jolly clever of him,” said William with a mixture of ruefulness and pride, “catchin’ it like that. I bet there aren’t many dogs that could have done it.”

“Yes, but what about our sixpence?” said Ginger.

William looked thoughtfully at Jumble.

“Let’s make him sick,” he suggested.

“What with?”

“Well, I once knew a boy that was sick with ice creams.”

“Yes, an’ how are we goin’ to buy him ice creams with all our money inside him?”

“P’raps the sixpence’ll make him sick,” said William hopefully.

But Jumble, diving into the ditch to worry a stick, then darting down the road in pursuit of a leaf, was obviously not suffering from any qualms of nausea.

"Let's give it up now," said Ginger. "We've had a jolly good try."

"No, we won't," said William firmly.

"Well, we can't do any more buyin' an' sellin'."

"No," admitted William. "I s'pose we'll have to earn money by doin' some work for someone an' gettin' paid for it same as you said."

"Let's fix up the money part, though, before we do the work," said Ginger. "I once worked hard for a whole afternoon cuttin' up wood for my aunt, an' she didn't pay me anythin' 'cause she said that a kind action should be its own reward."

"Yes, I've got one that says things like that, too," said William, then, after a moment's silence: "Gosh! I've got another idea."

"What?" said Ginger, a little gloomily.

"You know Miss Thompson at The Larches. . . . Well, I heard my mother say that she was removin' to-day, an' there's always lots of work to do when people are removin'. Let's go to her an' tell her that we'll do somethin' for her if she'll give us—how much shall we ask for?"

"Two shillings?"

"Why not three shillings?"

"No, that's too much. She'd never give us that."

"All right. Two-an'-sixpence halfpenny."

"Yes, that's all right. Two-an'-sixpence halfpenny."

"Well, I'll take Jumble home first. He might start on a job of work on his own—he does sometimes—an' it might turn out wrong, an' then she wouldn't pay us. . . . 'Sides, I don' want to risk him gettin' lost with our sixpence inside him."

They took Jumble home and tied him up to his kennel. Jumble was reluctant to be left. Shrill barks of protest followed the two as they made their way down to the gate. William paused.

"Let's go back an' see if he's barked up that sixpence," he said.

They crawled round the kennel examining the grass, but their search had no other result than a spirited attack from Jumble, who worried their shoes and succeeded in pulling William's tie adrift from its moorings.

“Oh, come on,” said William at last, giving the remains of his tie a perfunctory twitch. “Let’s go now or we’ll never get there. Prob’ly he’ll go to sleep if we leave him an’ he snores when he’s asleep so p’raps he’ll snore it up.”

Together they made their way to The Larches and knocked at the door. The house wore a derelict air. No curtains at the windows. No furniture in the rooms. Miss Thompson answered their knock. She wore a grubby overall and a streak of dust across her forehead.

“Yes, children?” she said. “What do you want?”

William assumed his blank expression and glassy smile.

“Pleasecanwedosomethingforyoufortwoan’sixpencehalfpenny?” he said all in one breath.

Miss Thompson’s vague, good-natured face lit up with pleasure.

“How kind of you!” she said. “Do come in. The removal’s over. I mean, the removing men have been and gone and taken the furniture, but I’m such a scatter-brain, you know, that there are a hundred and one things I’ve forgotten to see about. It’s so kind of you to come and give a hand. Come through to the back garden.”

They followed her through the empty house to the back garden, where the lawn was littered by small sawn-up logs.

“Look!” said Miss Thompson. “They took the shed away and just threw the logs out anyhow. I meant to tell them to stack them up again but I forgot, and I promised the new tenants I’d leave everything in apple-pie order, so if you’d just collect the logs and stack them against the fence, I’d be most grateful.”

William cleared his throat.

“You—you did say you’d give us two-an’-sixpence halfpenny, didn’t you?”

“Of course, dear,” said Miss Thompson. “I shall be most pleased to. Now you’ll set to work as quickly as you can, won’t you? I’ve still got so much to do that I simply don’t know where to start.”

They set to work, carrying the logs from the lawn and stacking them neatly against the fence.

“It was a jolly good idea of mine,” said William complacently, “an’ she didn’t mind payin’ two-an’-sixpence halfpenny. Wish I’d asked her for two-an’-sevenpence now.”

About half an hour later they presented themselves at the back door. Miss Thompson opened it. Her overall was grubbier than ever, cobwebs festooned her hair, but her smile was still bright and eager.

"Thank you so much, boys," she said. She looked at the back garden. "Yes, you *have* done it nicely. I'm so grateful."

"You—you did say you'd give us two-an'-sixpence halfpenny, didn't you?" William reminded her.

"WELL, WE'VE GOT SIXPENCE," SAID WILLIAM, "BUT IT'S IN A DOG."

He spoke a little anxiously. After the set-backs of the morning, things seemed to be going too smoothly to be true.

"Yes, of course I did," said Miss Thompson, "but"—she laughed gaily —"the most ridiculous thing has happened. I haven't a penny. Literally not a penny."

They gaped at her.

"I meant to go to the bank yesterday and somehow I forgot. I'm such a scatter-brain, you know. Then I meant to go this morning, and time went on till I realized that they'd have closed by the time I got there. They close on

Saturdays, you know. I thought I had enough change to see me through, but, while you were in the garden, the baker and fishmonger came for bills that I'd clean forgotten about and they took my last halfpenny. Literally my last halfpenny." She gave another gay laugh. "It's too funny, isn't it?"

There was no answering amusement on the faces of William or Ginger.

"Can't you pay us, then?" said William.

"I'm afraid I can't, dear," said Miss Thompson. "What a ridiculous situation! Are you penniless too?"

"Well, we've got sixpence," said William, "but it's in a dog."

"Oh," said Miss Thompson a little blankly. Then she brightened. "I've got an idea. Just come in here a moment."

She led them into a room at the back of the house. On the floor were ranged a number of small "curios" such as used to inhabit old-fashioned china cabinets.

"Look!" said Miss Thompson. "I've done the stupidest thing. I told you I was scatter-brained, didn't I? I told the man who moved the furniture to leave these here and not touch them because I said I was going to pack them myself, and then it went clean out of my head, so there they are still! Isn't it ridiculous! Now I'll tell you what you can do. You can choose any one of them you like and have it in payment for having stacked my logs so nicely."

They gazed morosely at the array of little objects. Small ivory figures that would, William considered, break as soon as you put them in your pocket . . . small china figures that would break even sooner than that . . . small boxes with coloured lids. He picked up one of the boxes.

"We'll have this, please," he said.

"Yes, do, dear," said Miss Thompson. "It's a snuff box. I dislike them all intensely. I used to have to dust them when I was a girl."

William slipped the box into his pocket and set off homeward with Ginger.

"Of all the rotten luck!" he said. "All that trouble an' endin' up with a snuff box."

"P'raps we could sell it," said Ginger.

" 'Course we can't sell it," snapped William. "Who wants a snuff box these days? People gave up takin' snuff *years* ago. Kin'ly tell me if you've ever seen anyone takin' snuff." He gave his short sarcastic laugh. "It's news to *me* if you have."

"Well, no, I haven't," admitted Ginger.

“There you are, then! No one uses ’em an’ no one wants them, so it’s abs’lutely useless. An’ it’s time for lunch, too, an’ there isn’t time to do anythin’ else. An’ it’s that ole Fête this afternoon. I’ve a good mind to sprain my ankle or somethin’ so’s I needn’t go.”

“They won’t take any notice if you do,” said Ginger gloomily. “They made me go to school even when I told them I’d got sciatica in both my arms. They make enough fuss when *they’ve* got anythin’ wrong with them, but we can go about dyin’ for all they care.”

“Well, anyway, let’s go’n’ see if Jumble’s snored up the sixpence,” said William.

Jumble had not snored up the sixpence, lunch was ready and immediately after lunch William started out with his family for the Fête. He walked slowly and dejectedly behind them, hands thrust into pockets, feet dragging in the dust. . . .

The Fête was a scene of cheerful activity. There were stalls, competitions, sideshows and raffles. William surveyed it gloomily. At a table at the end of the lawn sat the head master and the Chairman of the Governors, and a queue was already forming of those boys who had earned money for the new gymnasium during the week. Mr. French stood by the head master’s chair with a sheaf of papers in his hand. His eye seemed to rest on William with a sardonic gleam as if he were already enjoying his discomfiture.

To escape the eye, William turned to the garden beyond the lawn, where seats were set beneath the trees, then hastily turned back again. Robert and Dahlia were wandering about beneath the trees, studiously avoiding each other. William did not want to meet either Robert or Dahlia. He was beginning to feel certain secret doubts about the cigarette-case and the brooch, which he imagined to be still reposing among the junk in Mr. Marsh’s shop. Actually they were no longer there. Though in an inconspicuous street, the shop was in the direct route of a short cut from the centre of the town to the bus stop. Oswald Franks had taken the short cut soon after William’s visit to the shop. He had seen the cigarette-case in the window and, considering it both cheap and convenient (for he was only a moderate smoker), had bought it. Dorita Merton had passed the shop at the end of her morning’s shopping. The brooch was exactly the colour of the dress she was going to wear this afternoon. So she bought it and was wearing it now on the front of her new blue two-piece. She strolled up to Dahlia.

“Hello, Dahlia,” she said pleasantly.

“Hello, Dor——” began Dahlia, then her eyes fell on the brooch and she gave a little scream.

“What’s the matter?” said Dorita.

“*Oh!*” said Dahlia and went in search of Robert.

She found him standing in the shade of a Monkey Puzzle, staring gloomily in front of him.

“I shall never speak to you again, Robert,” she said, “but, before we part for ever, I must just say this. How you had the heartlessness, the—the—the *effrontery* to give it to that girl the very minute you got it back from me, is simply beyond me.”

“What girl?” said the bewildered Robert. “Got what back?”

“Oh, don’t pretend not to understand,” said Dahlia.

“But I don’t understand,” said Robert.

And then Oswald Franks strolled past them, pausing to take a cigarette from his new case. Robert’s mouth dropped open, his eyes goggled as he stared at the case in fascinated horror. There was no mistaking it. The sunlight even showed the dent where he had left it on the ground while he put up the tennis net and had dropped the post on it. . . . He gave an ironic laugh that was almost as good in its way as Dahlia’s.

“You didn’t waste much time, did you?” he said. “Giving it to a conceited puppy like that!”

“Giving what?” said Dahlia, so surprised that she forgot to be haughty. “What conceited puppy?”

“Don’t pretend not to understand,” said Robert.

“PLEASE, SIR, GINGER AND ME GOT THIS GIVEN US FOR STACKIN’ LOGS FOR MISS THOMPSON,” SAID WILLIAM.

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about,” said Dahlia, recovering her hauteur. “What’s more, I really don’t care.”

“We know where we are now, at any rate,” said Robert bitterly. “I send you back your cigarette-case and within five minutes——”

“You never sent me back my cigarette-case. I sent you back your brooch and——”

“You never sent me back my brooch.”

“I did. I sent it back by William.”

“William?” A thoughtful look had come into Robert’s face. “Let’s go and find William,” he said shortly.

So they went to find William. And William saw them coming. Moreover, they were not coming alone. Miss Milton had left her White Elephant stall and was making her way to him across the lawn. She was coming to demand an explanation of the disappearance of the concertina from her kitchen table. There was no doubt in her mind that William had feloniously entered her premises and retrieved his confiscated property.

There was only one way of escape and William took it. He slipped hastily into the queue of boys who were waiting to offer the results of their week’s toil to the Chairman of the Governors. It was shepherded and guarded by masters. There was a forbidding air of officialdom about it. Robert, Dahlia and Miss Milton retired, baffled. William had meant to slip out of the queue again before he reached the table, but too late he realised

that this was impossible and, before he had made up his mind what to do, he found himself at the table fronting the head master, the Chairman and Mr. French.

"And how much have you earned for the Cause, my boy?" said the Chairman.

Desperately William plunged his hand into his pocket and brought out the snuff box.

"Please, sir, Ginger an' me got this given us for stackin' logs for Miss Thompson," he said hoarsely.

"Ginger and I," said Mr. French.

William stared at him in indignant surprise.

"You weren't even *there*," he said.

The head master and the Chairman were examining the snuff box.

"Pretty good specimen, isn't it?" said the head master.

"It's a little gem," said the Chairman. "I'll willingly give five pounds for it myself."

"Good!" said the head master. "Put down 'William Brown. Five pounds.' That beats the record so far, doesn't it, French?"

"Yes," said Mr. French with a sour smile.

William edged away and looked cautiously around. Robert and Dahlia had forgotten him. They were sitting on the seat beneath the Monkey Puzzle, and Robert was telling her yet again that she was the only girl he had ever really loved.

Miss Milton was back at her White Elephant stall. She had found a customer for a petunia-coloured tea cosy that she had been trying to sell at her White Elephant sales for years past, and she had, for the moment, thought for nothing else.

William would have liked to stay a little longer to savour his triumph, but discretion won the day.

"Come on, Ginger," he whispered.

Warily, silently, unobtrusively, the two made their way to the exit.

CHAPTER IV

WILLIAM AND THE RETURNED TRAVELLER

WILLIAM and Ginger walked slowly and aimlessly down the road from William's house. It was the first day of the holidays, and there were so many things to do that it was difficult to select any one of them.

"Let's go'n' finish that wigwam we were makin' in the wood," suggested Ginger.

"No," said William. "We'd nearly finished it an', anyway, I bet it's got blown down by now."

The wigwam had been a precarious structure, built chiefly of bracken balanced on upright pieces of wood that they had found lying about in the undergrowth. It was the sort of structure that would yield swiftly and inevitably to the force of gravity without even waiting for the assault of the elements.

"I bet there's nothin' of it left by now," said William, who had long experience of the erection of wigwams from inadequate materials.

"Well, let's prospect for gold, then," said Ginger. "We nearly found some las' time we tried. I bet there is gold in some of those streams in the wood."

"Y-yes," said William, "but my mother was mad when she found I'd borrowed her vegetable sieve for it. Anyway, I think that's a thing to leave to the end of the holidays when we've tried everything else."

"Well, let's jus' go for a long, long walk," said Ginger.

"That's a bit dull," said William.

"Let's go round to Archie's cottage, then," said Ginger. "He got back from abroad yesterday. He might've brought somethin' int'restin'."

"No, I don't like goin' to see people that have been abroad," said William. "They go on an' on an' on showin' you picture postcards. It's put me right off ever goin' abroad. There doesn't seem to be anythin' there but picture postcards. I'd sooner go to a circus any day."

"So'd I," agreed Ginger, "but there isn't a circus now. An' Archie might have brought us somethin' back. I once knew a boy that his uncle brought him back a snake from abroad. 'Least, he brought its skin."

"Yes," said William bitterly, "an' I once knew one that his uncle brought him back a book written in some rotten abroad language. French, I think it was. *French!*" he emphasised with horror and disgust.

"Well, anyway, we're nearly there now," said Ginger, "so we might as well go in."

"All right," said William, "but I don't s'pose he's brought us anythin'. He never thinks of anyone but Ethel. I 'spect he'll have brought somethin' back for *her*, all right."

Archie's admiration for William's grown-up sister, Ethel, was an established part of William's family background. Ethel's position as the prettiest girl of the neighbourhood was also established, but, though she was generally involved in a series of swiftly changing romantic entanglements, she found time at intervals to be kind to Archie.

"Can't see what he sees in her," continued William, who had had a difference of opinion with Ethel that morning on the subject of his having housed a collection of caterpillars in her week-end suit-case. "Can't see what any of them see in her. She's the bossiest bad-temperedest girl I've ever met."

They had reached the cottage where Archie carried on his precarious career as an artist, hovering wildly between the modern and classical schools of painting. They stood for a moment at the gate.

"P'raps he's out," said William, torn between a natural desire to share the spoils of Archie's foreign travel and a fear lest Archie should make him pay for his share by a prolonged session over picture postcards.

But Archie wasn't out. They saw his long thin face at the window. Archie's long thin face (adorned by a straggling half-hearted growth of beard) generally wore a worried look, but there was something almost anguished in its expression this morning. Seeing the boys at the gate, he beckoned to them.

"Come on," said William, adding, with rising hopefulness, "he looks a bit worried. P'raps he'll have forgot the picture postcards."

"Well, so long as he's not forgot the presents . . ." said Ginger.

They went up the little path and entered the cottage. It bore all the usual traces of Archie's occupation. His charwoman had cleaned and tidied it for his return and he had returned only the previous evening, but already waves of disorder were spreading slowly and surely over every room. Archie never put anything back into its place. When hunting for the things he had lost (an occupation that filled the greater part of each day) he turned everything out

and left it where he had turned it. He had obviously just come back from a shopping expedition in Hadley. The rucksack that he used as his shopping basket lay overflowing in the middle of the floor in a sea of papers, shoes, groceries, and household utensils. He wore the raincoat in which he had unsuccessfully tried to "decorate" the kitchen before setting out on his holiday. Most of the decoration had fallen on his raincoat, which was freely bespattered with yellow distemper and green paint.

"Hello, Archie," said William, adding politely, "I hope you've had a nice holiday an' thank you very much, but we've seen all the picture postcards of abroad."

Archie, however, was evidently not in the mood of the returned traveller. He did not bring out photographs marked with crosses, snapshots in which the object snapped was wildly out of focus if not out of the snapshot altogether; did not relate amusing encounters with comic foreigners or even expatiate on the "wonderful food". The anguished expression on his face did not relax as William greeted him.

"Come in, boys," he said. "I'm terribly worried. I've had a shattering experience. I've been followed."

"Followed?" said William and Ginger simultaneously with rising cheerfulness and interest.

"Yes . . . I went down to the farther end of Hadley to do a little shopping and then I took the 'bus to Hadley Market Square to do some more shopping and, when I got out, the man who'd been sitting next me in the 'bus got out, too, and—well, he followed me."

"P'raps he jus' happened to be goin' the same way," suggested William. "I mean, there's got to be people followin' other people in a big place like Hadley. They follow 'em natural. I mean, if everyone walked side by side they'd stretch right across the road an' even then they wouldn't all get in."

"No, no," said Archie impatiently. "I was followed. I tested it. I crossed the road and he crossed it too, and I crossed it again and he crossed it again, then I turned back on my tracks and this chap was always there. The place was crowded, but he was keeping me in sight all the time."

"Crumbs!" said William, with mental pictures of crooks, gangsters, spies, secret service agents, kings of the underworld, smugglers and even spectral apparitions flashing through his mind. "Are you sure it was a real man? Might have been a ghost hauntin' you."

"Of course it wasn't a ghost," interrupted Archie testily. "I got on the 'bus at Hadley Market Square to come home and he got on it, too. It was

crowded and I was right at one end and he was at the other but he kept his eye on me all the time. Then, when I got out, the Botts were passing in their car and they gave me a lift and I think I've shaken him off, but I'm not sure."

"Corks!" gasped William. "Listen. P'raps you're someone's double an' this person you're the double of is king of some foreign country that's got to be king by murderin' the one that was king before an' this man that's after you's the friend of the man you murdered—I mean the man you're the double of murdered—an' he's swore to have your blood an'——"

"No, no!" said Archie. "I'm sure the man's just a plain-clothes policeman."

"Gosh! Are you a crim'nal?" said Ginger, looking at Archie with a new respect.

Archie's long face lengthened still further.

"It's all a mistake," he said. "You see, I promised to bring Ethel some scent back from Paris and I got a cut-glass spray and had it filled with the best scent and I forgot to declare it. I honestly *did* forget to declare it. I put all the things I'd bought in one case and declared them, but I was in a bit of a muddle over packing and this scent spray got packed in the case with my clothes and quite inadvertently I didn't declare it and the Customs must have found out somehow and put this man on my track."

"Oh, well," said William, absently slipping into his mouth a piece of sugar from an open sugar bag, that was reposing inside a brown shoe of Archie's on the table, "you've shook him off, anyway."

"I think I have," said Archie anxiously, "but"—he glanced down at his distemper-bespattered raincoat—"this is what might give me away. I mean, my face is pretty much the same as anyone else's." William looked in surprise at Archie's long thin face with its timid growth of beard, but forebore to make any comment. "It's the raincoat that might give me away. He'll be on the look-out for it."

"It's a good camouflage if they are after you from the air," said William thoughtfully, putting two more pieces of sugar into his mouth, "We could stick a bit more distemper on it."

"Or we could paint it black," said Ginger, discovering a bag of carrots in a saucepan, selecting one, giving it a perfunctory brush on his coat and beginning to munch it, "then he'll think you're somebody else in a black raincoat."

“No,” said Archie, “I’m going to get rid of it altogether . . . I was down at Jenks’ farm shortly before I went abroad, making a few sketches of animals that I thought might do for Christmas cards or calendars, and old Jenks was joking about my coat and I said he could have it for his scarecrow . . . So I want you boys to take it across to the scarecrow now. Actually I have another raincoat. I generally have several raincoats because I lose them and buy another and then they turn up.”

He took off the raincoat, bundled it into a ball and handed it to William.

“Shall I wear it an’ sort of draw him off from you?” said William. “I’d rather like to get into a tangle of crime. I’m always gettin’ into ordin’ry tangles, but a tangle of crime’s more excitin’.”

“No, certainly not,” said Archie firmly. “Take it to that field where the scarecrow is and put it on the scarecrow. I’d take it myself but I don’t want to run into that plain-clothes policeman again.”

“And then we’ll come back, shall we?” said William, slipping a few pieces of sugar into his pocket, “so’s you’ll know we’ve not been kidnapped.”

“Or murdered,” said Ginger.

“If we vanish, leaving no trace,” said William earnestly, “you’d better write a letter to Scotland Yard. You needn’t put a stamp on. Just write ‘Urgent’ in one corner.”

"I TOLD OLD JENKS HE COULD HAVE MY COAT FOR HIS SCARECROW," SAID ARCHIE. "I WANT YOU TO TAKE IT ACROSS NOW."

"Good heavens!" said Archie, his look of anguish turning into one of panic. "I never thought . . . Perhaps I'd better go myself . . ."

"No," said William hastily, bundling the raincoat under his arm, "We'll go. Come on, Ginger."

"You don't mind me havin' another carrot or two, do you, Archie?" said Ginger, putting a handful of carrots into his pocket. "They make you see in the dark, an' if we're kidnapped we may have to find our way out through underground passages an'——"

"Oh, come on," said William impatiently.

The two set off down the road.

"I don't think it was that scent thing," said William. "I believe he's got entangled in crime."

"If he's the double of this man——" began Ginger.

"No, I don't think he's a double," said William. "Come to think of it, he's not got the sort of face that could be another face's double."

"D'you think he's a *real* crim'nal?" said Ginger.

"Well, he might be," said William slowly. "He might be, easy. Real crim'nals seem like ordin'ry people livin' ordin'ry lives an' he seems like an ordin'ry person livin' an ordin'ry life, so there's no reason why he shouldn't be a crim'nal."

"He'd get into an awful muddle bein' a crim'nal," said Ginger. "He gets into enough muddles jus' bein' an ordin'ry person, so he'd get into an awful one bein' a crim'nal."

"Well, it looks as if he *had* got into an awful one," said William. "He might not be a crim'nal, of course. I've read stories about people that gave signs an' passwords an' things by mistake an' got drawn into jolly big tangles. Well, Archie might have said, 'It's a fine evenin'' or stood somewhere eatin' an orange an' that might have been a secret sign that the person that did it was head of a gang or somethin' an' p'raps this man that's followin' him's head of another gang that's out after this first head's blood."

"Gosh!" said Ginger with relish. "It's goin' to be jolly excitin'."

They had reached the field where the scarecrow—dressed in a short ragged coat of Farmer Jenks' and a battered bowler hat—stood holding out "arms" that were serving as a landing ground for a rook, a starling and a couple of sparrows, which flew off at the approach of William and Ginger. Carefully they slipped the "arms" through the arms of the raincoat, then buttoned up the front.

"It'd be a joke if this man thought it was Archie an' came up here to kidnap it," said William.

"Or tried to fight it," said Ginger.

"Or stuck a dagger in it."

"Or gave it a drink of poison."

Chuckling at these humorous possibilities, they turned and went back to Archie's cottage. At first it appeared to be empty. Then they discovered Archie crouching on the floor of the little sitting-room.

"Look out of the window, boys," he said in a hoarse whisper. "Is he still there? A man with a squint and a long mouth and a check cap. He's been

walking up and down the road ever since you went, watching the cottage. He—he's tracked me down."

William and Ginger looked cautiously out of the window. Yes, a man with a squint and a long thin mouth, wearing a shabby overcoat and a check cap, was standing in the shelter of the hedge opposite the cottage, obviously watching it. When he saw William and Ginger at the window he began to stroll down the road but turned after a minute or two and retraced his steps, keeping his eyes on the cottage.

"It's the plain-clothes man from the Customs who was following me this morning," said Archie. "Let's go into the studio. He won't see me there."

Crawling on all fours, followed by the spellbound boys, Archie made his way to the studio at the back of the little cottage. Then he stood up and closed the door.

"We'll be all right here," he said.

William and Ginger looked round with interest. It was here that Archie had deposited the mementoes of his foreign travel. On the top of the usual litter of paint boxes, paint brushes, paint rags, palettes and canvases was a litter of picture postcards, guide books, maps, paper wrappings and packages of every shape and size.

"Oh, look, boys," said Archie, diving into the flotsam and jetsam that washed around his feet. "I brought you these."

"Gosh!" said William and Ginger faintly as each received a large package of milk chocolate. "*Gosh! Thanks*, Archie!"

"That's all right," said Archie vaguely. He had dived into the flotsam and jetsam again and brought up an ornate cardboard box. "Look! This is what I brought for Ethel." He took off the lid, revealing a handsome cut-glass scent spray filled with scent. "I had the very best scent put in and, as I said, I forgot to declare it. That's why this plain-clothes man is shadowing me."

"Shall I take it out to him?" suggested William, "then he'll clear off and leave you alone."

Archie's long thin mouth tightened obstinately.

"Certainly not," he said. "I brought it for Ethel and Ethel's going to have it. She's coming to tea this afternoon and I'm going to give it to her then."

"He might jus' be a man wantin' a cottage," suggested William, over whose face a tide of milk chocolate was slowly spreading. "He might've took a fancy to your cottage an' be hangin' round hopin' you were goin' to sell it."

Archie's lugubrious expression brightened.

"Yes," he said, "there is that possibility."

"Time will show," said Ginger indistinctly through a mouthful of milk chocolate.

And time showed . . . William and Ginger returned to the cottage immediately after lunch to find Archie in a state bordering on frenzy.

"The most dreadful thing has happened, boys," he said. "I went down to the village to get some potatoes and when I came back the whole place had been ransacked."

William looked round. The place certainly appeared ransacked, but no more ransacked than it had appeared before lunch. It was Archie who pointed out that his locked bureau had been forced open and its contents scattered, that the drawers in his bedroom had been emptied on to the bedroom floor . . . and it was William who found the note propped up on the top of the bureau, written in a forceful if illiterate hand: "Cough it up or it will be the worse for you."

"Nothing's been stolen," said Archie. "It's the scent they're after, of course, and he couldn't find it or was disturbed by my return. They want it as evidence to prosecute me. There's no doubt about it now."

"No," said Ginger. "They're on your tracks, all right."

"Well, you've not murdered anyone," said William reassuringly. "They can't hang you. They can't do more than put you in prison an' lots of people in hist'ry got put in prison. You can always escape."

"We'll send you a file in a loaf of bread," said Ginger.

"Or come an' see you an' bring you a charwoman's overall," said Ginger, "so's you can go out wearin' it an' they'll think you're jus' a charwoman that's been cleanin' up the prison."

"Nonsense!" snapped Archie. "Now listen, boys. I have to go out again to get some bread and cakes for tea" (Archie's shopping was of a piecemeal nature. When he found that he hadn't any potatoes, he went out and bought some, and when he found that he hadn't any bread he went out and bought some, and when he found he hadn't any butter he went out and bought some . . . Occasionally he made lists, but he always lost them.) "I won't be long, but if you see this man coming will you run down and fetch me?"

"Oh, I bet we can manage him all right, Archie," said William. "I felled a boy bigger than me with one blow las' week so I bet I can fell this man with one. Of course" thoughtfully, "he may need two."

“I could pour boiling water on him out of a kettle from your bedroom window,” suggested Ginger “or hurl boulders down on him . . . if I could find any boulders.”

“No, no,” said Archie. “You mustn’t do anything like that. Just stay here and fetch me if he comes.”

“All right,” they agreed reluctantly.

They stood at the window and watched Archie creep furtively out of the gate and down towards the village, clinging to the shadow of the hedge. Then they returned to the studio.

“I’m goin’ to do somethin’ about that scent thing,” said William firmly, “so’s if the man comes again an’ finds it he won’t find any scent in it an’ it’ll be sucks to *him* . . . That ole glass bottle isn’t anythin’. It’s the scent in it that matters. Glass bottles are ordin’ry enough. They *give* ’em with orange squash, so no one’d mind about that.”

“It was sort of chopped up,” said Ginger, remembering the intricate pattern of the cut glass.

“Oh, yes,” said William. “They’d messed it about a bit, but it was jus’ an ordin’ry glass bottle all the same. Anyone could chop a pattern on an ordin’ry glass bottle. I bet I could if I tried . . . Anyway, I’m goin’ to take the scent out an’ put somethin’ else in an’ that’ll be a jolly good joke on this Customs man, won’t it?”

“Yes, that’s a jolly good idea,” agreed Ginger. “An’ we ought to help Archie a bit after all that milk choc’late he gave us. I’ve finished mine, have you?”

“Yes. Did you feel sick?”

“Jus’ a bit. Did you?”

“Jus’ a bit. Now, where’s that ole scent bottle?”

William unearthed the scent bottle and squeezed the bulb tentatively.

“Gosh!” he said, wrinkling his freckled nose. “It smells awful. Well, nothin’ could smell worse, so it doesn’t matter what we put in it. Let’s find how you open it.”

After a little preliminary investigation he withdrew the stopper. “Now where’ll we put it where that ole Customs man won’t find it?”

Ginger had gone into the kitchen and was rummaging about among the chaos that filled it.

“Look! Here’s an empty tin,” he said at last. “It’s got ‘Orange Juice’ on, but there’s nothin’ inside. It’ll do to put the scent in.”

"Yes," agreed William, "then when this man's given up tryin' to find it, we can give it back to Archie an' he can give it to Ethel."

"P'raps we ought to ask him first," said Ginger, beginning to feel a few faint qualms.

"No, we won't," said William firmly. "He'll only say he's brought it for Ethel an' he's goin' to give it to Ethel, same as he did before. We've gotter save him from himself."

"All right," said Ginger, his qualms vanishing.

The scent spray was taken into the kitchen and the scent poured slowly and carefully into the empty tin.

"Now we've got to find somethin' to put in this ole chopped-up bottle 'stead of the scent," said William. His eye roved round the assortment of objects that filled every available space. "Methylated spirit! That'll do. Gosh! It's a jolly good joke to play on that Customs man. He'll come here to take Archie to prison an' there won't be anythin' in that ole scent bottle but methylated spirit, so he won't be able to."

Zestfully they poured the methylated spirit into the scent bottle, took it back to the studio, replaced it in its ornamental box, then stood inspecting the litter strewn over the floor, reluctant to leave the fascinating spot.

"What's that?" said William suddenly.

"What?" said Ginger.

"That thing that looks like a rolling pin," said William. He picked it up. "Gosh! It's made of cardboard an' there's somethin' inside it." From the cardboard "roller" he drew out a piece of paper, unfolded it and examined it. It was a water colour painting and beneath it was written, "Madonna by Baldovinetti. The Louvre." His eyes and mouth opened to their fullest extent. "Gosh!" he said faintly. "*That's* what he's done. He *is* a crim'nal."

"Why?" said Ginger eagerly.

"Well, this Loove's a picture place in Paris—I know because I heard someone talkin' about it not long ago—an' this mus' be a picture out of it an' Archie's *stole* it. He's *stole* a famous picture out of the Loove. Gosh! No wonder the p'lice are after him."

"Well, we can't do anythin' about that," said Ginger.

"Yes, we can," said William firmly. "After him givin' us all that milk choc'late we *got* to do somethin'. He'll get sent to prison for years an' years an' *years* for stealin' a famous picture out of the Loove if we don't do somethin'."

"There isn't anythin' we *can* do," said Ginger.

"Yes, there is. We can hide it an' put somethin' else in its place, same as we did with the scent, then if this man comes an' finds it he'll think he made a mistake an' go away again . . . . Now where's some of Archie's ordin'ry drawings?" He took up a pile of sketches from the window sill. "Here's the things he did at the farm the week before he went away. Let's put one of them in." After several attempts William managed to roll up one of the drawings and slip it into the cardboard "roller". "Now let's send the one he stole back to the Loove an' they'll never know who stole it. Well, it's years since I felt sick with milk choc'late an' I want to show him I'm grateful. . . . Let's look for an envelope for it."

A search of Archie's waste-paper basket provided a long envelope into which the sketch was put, then, taking a fountain pen that he found in a tea-pot, William crossed out Archie's name and address and wrote instead "The loove, Parris."

"That's all right," he said, drawing a deep breath of satisfaction. "It doesn't need a stamp. The one that's on already'll do. An' if it won't I bet they'll be so glad to get it back they won't mind payin' for another. I bet they're in an awful state, wonderin' what's happened to it. I bet that man that's followin' Archie's come all the way from Paris after it. Gosh! Archie'd have got into an awful row if we hadn't found it."

At this moment Archie arrived, looking tense and anxious, hung round with bags of cakes and buns, with a loaf under his arm and a cucumber sticking out of his pocket.

"Has he been?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"No," said William, hiding the envelope under his coat. "No, he's not been. Gosh! What a lot of stuff you've bought!"

"Yes, I told you. Ethel's coming to tea," said Archie, his anxious expression fading into a blissful smile. "I thought I'd make cucumber sandwiches."

"You needn't bother to get any tea for Ethel," said William carelessly. "She's given up tea. She's slimming."

WILLIAM AND GINGER APPROACHED THE PILLAR BOX ON HANDS AND KNEES.

"Oh, dear!" said Archie, scattering his purchases into the sink because the table was already full.

"We've got to go out to the post now," said William mysteriously. "We'll come back."

"No, you needn't come back," said Archie, picking up a couple of buns that had fallen into the rubbish pail. "Thank you so much for all you've done for me, boys, but I'm expecting Ethel shortly and you needn't come back."

"Yes, we'd better," said William firmly, " 'case this man comes along again an' starts tryin' to take you to prison. We won't get in your way. We'll do a bit of gardenin' for you." The harassed expression returned to Archie's face. "No, it's all right, Archie. We'll do it diff'rent from how we did it las' time. I know we got in a bit of a muddle las' time tryin' to make a fountain, but there mus' have been somethin' wrong with the kitchen tap or the hose pipe to make all that mess . . . We won't try to make a fountain this time."

Archie stood at the front door, the harassed expression still on his face, watching them till they were out of sight, then threw a hunted glance up and down the road and went indoors to prepare for his visitor.

William and Ginger did not go straight to the pillar box. They pulled up their coat collars, hunched their shoulders, walked down the road, then

doubled back in the ditch, entered Ginger's front door and crept out by the back, hid for ten minutes in the garage of William's house, climbed out by the window and finally approached the pillar box by crawling on hands and knees behind the hedge of the field that bordered the lane. Then, dusty, dishevelled and triumphant, they stood upright and slipped the envelope through the slot.

"Well, I bet we threw him off our tracks all right," said William as they walked back to Archie's cottage, "an' I bet they'll send over to stop this man followin' Archie now that he isn't a thief any more. Gosh! He ought to be jolly grateful to us."

"We'd better not tell him, though," said Ginger. "He'd be mad with us for sendin' it back when he took all that trouble stealin' it."

"His better self ought to be grateful to us," said William unctuously.

"Yes, but we'll have to wait till he's got back to his better self," said Ginger. "How long does it take?"

"Years, sometimes," said William. "That man Bill Sikes in Shakespeare went on bein' a crim'nal till he died."

Ethel had arrived when they reached Archie's cottage, and they withdrew tactfully into the back garden, where, after much consideration, they decided to re-turf that part of Archie's lawn that was under the hawthorn tree and where the grass grew somewhat scantily. Collecting such tools as they could secure from the back premises—a coal shovel, a toasting-fork and a fish-slice—they set to work stripping the other end of the lawn and conveying the resultant mangled "turves" to the hawthorn tree in Archie's washing-up bowl.

Inside the cottage, Archie, his thin face wreathed in smiles, was presenting the scent spray to Ethel.

"I do hope you'll like it, Ethel," he was saying. "I wanted to get you something you'd like. It isn't worthy of you, of course. I mean, I'd have liked to bring you diamonds and rubies and emeralds and—and—and a ham, but my stuff was over-weight for the plane as it was and I couldn't have brought anything else."

"Don't be so idiotic, Archie," said Ethel, whose melting blue eyes and cherubic mouth promised a sweetness of disposition that in fact her disposition frequently lacked, "but", relenting, "it is lovely. It was nice of you to bring it."

"You press that rubber thing," said Archie, glowing with delight.

"Yes, I know," said Ethel.

She threw back her head, closed her eyes and, pointing the nozzle at her neck, pressed the bulb. At once her expression of dreamy expectancy changed to one of outraged horror.

"*Archie!*" she said furiously. "Is this your idea of a joke?"

"W-w-w-what?" gasped Archie.

"It isn't scent at all. It's methylated spirit. *Ugh!* It's disgusting."

She took out her handkerchief and wiped off as much as she could of the offending liquid.

"But I don't know what's happened," stammered the bewildered Archie. "I told them to put the best scent in it. I did honestly, Ethel. There must be some mistake. I *paid* for the best scent, Ethel. I did honestly."

"I'm *soaked* in the beastly stuff."

"Ethel, I'm so sorry," wailed Archie. "I'll write to them about it. I'll write a strong letter. I—I'll *sue* them. I can't tell you how sorry I am. I'll spend the rest of my life trying to prove how sorry I am."

"Well, *do* something," snapped Ethel. "I'm reeking with it."

"Oh, Ethel, yes . . . Yes, of course . . ." said Archie, dashing into the kitchen and returning with a dubious-looking floor-cloth that he had found on the plate rack.

"You are an *idiot*," said Ethel. "I've wiped it off more or less now, but if you think——"

"Come and have some tea," pleaded Archie. "You'll feel better when you've had some tea. I've got it all ready in the sitting-room."

Still wiping her neck with her handkerchief and wearing a look of angry disgust, Ethel went into the sitting-room and stood looking at the array of cakes, buns, biscuits and sandwiches outspread there.

"I know the cucumber sandwiches are a bit queer," apologised Archie.

"They certainly are," said Ethel, gazing at the curious edifices that Archie had built up out of thick slices of bread and butter and still thicker slices of cucumber, "but I don't have tea in any case, these days. I'm slimming. I don't eat anything at tea-time."

"Oh, Ethel," wailed Archie. "I'm so sorry. Just a cup of tea!"

"No, thank you," said Ethel, sitting down in the arm-chair. "I'll have a glass of water. Unless——"

"Yes?" said Archie eagerly.

"Unless you happen to have any fruit juice."

“I know I had some,” said Archie, looking harassed. “I had a tin of orange juice, but I’ve got an awful feeling that I finished it. I’ll just see.” He went into the kitchen, rattled about among tins and crockery and suddenly gave a cry of joy. “Yes, I’ve found the tin and it’s half full. I’ll pour it into a glass for you.”

After a few moments he re-appeared, beaming rapturously, carrying a small tumbler full of orange coloured liquid. Then he stood, sniffing the air and looking round till his eyes rested on a moribund geranium on the window-sill.

“How lovely that flower smells, doesn’t it?” he said.

“I can’t smell anything but this beastly meths,” snapped Ethel.

She took the glass and raised it to her lips then put it down, spluttering violently.

“This is the end!” she said, springing to her feet. “If you think I’ve come here, so that you can play a series of practical jokes on me——”

Archie stood, petrified by amazement, till the slamming of the front door recalled him to his senses.

Ethel was half-way down the lane when he caught up with her and began to pour out a stream of confused apologies.

“I simply can’t explain it, Ethel . . . It must be something the charwoman put into it . . . I’d no idea . . . I’d rather have died . . . It drives me frantic just to think of it . . .”

“I DUNNO ANYTHING ABOUT A PICTURE,” SAID THE POLICEMAN. “I’VE COME ABOUT A DIAMOND RING.”

"It drove me frantic to drink it," said Ethel, still fuming with anger.

"Ethel, I'll go down on my knees to you."

"I've been made enough of a laughing stock without that, thank you," said Ethel. "Soaked in meths . . . given that filthy poison to drink! If that's what you feel for me . . ."

"Listen, Ethel, I can *prove* what I feel for you. When I was in Paris, I saw a picture that—well, to me it was *you*. It was your face and—Oh, it was *you*, Ethel. And I copied it and brought it back just so that I could have it to look at when you weren't there . . . Ethel, if you'd come back and see it, you'd *know* what I feel for you."

Ethel would have liked to continue haughtily on her way, but her curiosity got the better of her.

"Well, I can't stand here brawling with you on a public road," she said distantly. "I'll give you one more chance. If this is a trick, too . . ."

"Trick?" groaned Archie reproachfully. "Oh, Ethel, how could you think that I could play a trick on you?"

"Very easily after this afternoon," said Ethel tartly.

They returned to the cottage—Ethel in icy silence, Archie burbling incoherently. So distracted was he that he did not even notice the state of his lawn, which by this time closely resembled a ploughed field.

In the studio he burrowed wildly for some minutes, then brought out the "roller".

"Take it out and look at it," he said, handing it to Ethel. "I copied it because—well, because it was *you*, because, when I looked at it, I just saw *you* . . ."

Ethel drew the paper from the cardboard "roller" and opened it.

The bloated face of Sally, Farmer Jenks' prize cow, sketched in Archie's most erratic draughtmanship, leered inanely over a lop-sided feeding trough.

It was just as she was tearing the paper across in speechless rage that the policeman appeared. William and Ginger, still carrying their tools, followed him into the studio.

"You can't take him to prison," said William earnestly, " 'cause we've sent it back."

The policeman, Archie and Ethel stared at him.

"Sent it back where?" said the policeman.

"To the Loove," said William.

“Sent what back?” said the policeman.

“The picture.”

“I dunno anything about a picture,” said the policeman. “I’ve come about a diamond ring.”

“Gosh!” said William. “Has he stole a diamond ring, too?”

“Diamond ring?” said Archie wildly, his eyes nearly starting out of his head.

Ethel sat down weakly on the nearest chair.

“Have you in your possession, sir,” said the policeman, “a diamond ring with one large stone and two smaller ones?”

“N-n-no!” bleated Archie.

“Take your mind back to this morning, sir,” said the policeman. “Do you remember sitting in the ’bus next a man with a check cap?”

“Y-y-yes,” squeaked Archie.

“Where’s the coat you were wearing on that occasion?”

“On a s-scarecrow,” said Archie.

“Will you take me to the scarecrow, sir?” said the policeman.

The strange procession—the policeman, Archie, Ethel, William and Ginger—wended its way across the field to the distemper-bespattered raincoat, fluttering in the breeze.

The policeman put his hand into the pocket and brought out a diamond ring.

“There it is, sir,” he said. “It was stolen from a house in Hadley last night.”

“I never . . . I never . . . I swear, I never . . .” whinnied Archie frantically.

“That’s all right, sir,” said the policeman with a smile. “It was this chap and some others did it, and this chap was taking it home with him in the ’bus, as his share of the loot, this morning, when he saw one of our plain-clothes men get in and thought he was on his track. You were sitting next him and he slipped it into your pocket on an impulse. Thought if he was nabbed he wouldn’t have it on him and if he wasn’t he could get it back from you easy. We’ve just pinched him for another job he did over at Marleigh, and he told us the whole story. . . . Well, that’s the explanation, sir, and I needn’t trouble you any further.”

They watched his retreating figure in silence.

Then Ethel turned to Archie.

“That’s not the whole explanation, Archie,” she said. “There are still a few explanations I’d like to have.”

Archie turned to William.

“Yes,” he said. “There are a few I’d like to have, too.”

William had turned to Ginger.

“Come on, Ginger,” he said. “Let’s do what you said. Let’s go for a long, long walk.”

CHAPTER V

WILLIAM AND THE HAUNTED COTTAGE

WILLIAM ambled slowly down the road and in at the gate of his home. There was a packet of lemonade powder in his pocket, a Monster Humbug, in his mouth, school had ended yesterday and four weeks of holiday stretched ahead of him; but, in spite of all this, he felt bored and depressed. He had been reading a story about a boy who had rounded up a gang of international thieves, discovered a hidden treasure and, on a flying visit to Africa, saved his host from the attack of a marauding lion . . . and his own life seemed tame and uneventful in comparison. All the criminals he had ever unmasked had turned out to be law-abiding citizens, all the hidden treasure he had ever found had turned out to be someone's private property and, though he had searched the neighbouring woods for wild fauna, he had never found anything more exciting than a weasel and an owl's nest.

He entered the front door and stood for a moment, listening. The kitchen was generally the centre of interest in the house and to-day seemed to be no exception. He heard the voice of Mrs. Peters, his mother's "daily," upraised on a high note of emphasis and made his way in its direction. Opening the kitchen door, he found his mother busy with preparations for a cake at the table and Mrs. Peters standing in the middle of the room, one hand on a broom handle and the other on her hip. Her long thin face was lengthened to its fullest extent and she was obviously labouring under some strong emotion.

"I can't 'elp it, mum," she was saying. "Go through the wood again I couldn't—not if me life 'ung from it by a thread, as it were."

"Oh dear!" said Mrs. Brown, arrested in the act of cracking an egg into a basin and gazing at Mrs. Peters in dismay over two dripping half shells, "But you could come by the main road instead, couldn't you, Mrs. Peters, if you feel like that?"

Mrs. Peters heaved a long sibilant sigh.

"Well, I could an' I couldn't, mum," she said. "What I means is, the main road's there, all right. It's me feet that's the trouble. I'm 'eavy on me feet an' I'd be wore out before I got 'ere, comin' all that way round."

"Oh dear!" said Mrs. Brown again, absent-mindedly pouring the egg into the flour without beating it and adding yet another, "Oh dear!" when she saw

what she had done. “But what exactly is the trouble about the wood, Mrs. Peters?”

“The ’aunted cottage, mum,” said Mrs. Peters in a hollow voice.

“You mean the keeper’s cottage?” said Mrs. Brown, who had decided to cut her losses on the egg and the flour and start again. “Oh, but it’s not haunted, Mrs. Peters. It was blitzed by that rocket in the war and it’s practically in ruins, but it’s not haunted.”

“That’s all you know, mum,” said Mrs. Peters, setting her lips grimly. “I seed what I seed.”

“What have you seed, Mrs. Peters?” said Mrs. Brown distractedly. “I mean seen.” Then she noticed William hovering in the doorway and added, “Go and wash your face, William.”

“It’s clean,” said William indistinctly, for the Monster Humbug had not yet reached manageable proportions.

Mrs. Brown looked at it in more detail and found to her surprise that it was clean. The morning’s boredom had acted as a sort of shield between it and the outside world.

“Well, your hair’s at all angles,” she said.

“It grows at all angles,” explained William, passing his hand over it and giving it a fresh assortment of angles to grow at.

“That there chimbley!” said Mrs. Peters. “It seems to turn its ’ead to look at me when I goes past. It seems to pull ’orrible faces at me.”

Mrs. Brown thought of the chimney that rose over the roof of the blitzed cottage.

“It’s the cowl, you know, Mrs. Peters,” she said. “It moves about with the wind. That’s what you must have seen.”

“It makes ’orrible faces at me,” persisted Mrs. Peters, “through the trees. ’Aunted, that’s what it is. An’ I seed somethin’ white a-movin’ about in that there downstairs room.”

“There must be some explanation,” said Mrs. Brown.

“ ’Aunted, that’s the explanation,” said Mrs. Peters darkly. “That there chimbley pullin’ ’orrible faces at me through the trees an’ that there white thing movin’ about downstairs. Me feet won’t stand the main road an’ me nerves won’t stand the lane through the wood, so that’s ’ow I’m fixed.”

“I once made up a jolly good tale about a ghost,” said William, neatly extracting a handful of currants from a bag on the table. “It was about a ghost what was hauntin’ another ghost what was hauntin’——”

"Leave those currants alone, William," said Mrs. Brown. "You've got your mouth full of sweets to start with."

"Yes, but they mix jolly well," said William. "I'm s'prised no one's ever made them. To sell, I mean. Humbugs with currants in 'em. And a bit of lemonade powder, too. It's a jolly good invention. I'll do it when I'm grown up an' I bet I make my fortune."

He put his hand into his pocket and conveyed a handful of lemonade powder to his mouth, leaving a yellow trail down his jacket.

"Oh *William*!" groaned Mrs. Brown, then turned again to Mrs. Peters. "You know, Mrs. Peters, there aren't any such things as ghosts."

"It's all right comin' 'ere first thing in the mornin'," said Mrs. Peters. "It's not 'aunted then. But when I goes back with the dusk a-comin' on an' that there chimbley a-pullin' faces at me through the trees an' that there white thing a-movin' about in the downstairs room—well I'm only yuman an' it's more'n flesh an' blood can stand."

"Oh, Mrs. Peters, I do hope it doesn't mean that you're going to leave us," said Mrs. Brown.

"I'll do me week out," said Mrs. Peters, setting her lips grimly. "I may 'ave me faults, but no one's ever bin able to throw in me face as I've not done me week out. I'll do me week out, then I'll make other arrangements. I don't mind fer meself, but I've got me nerves an' me feet to study, so—well, that's 'ow it is."

"Oh dear!" said Mrs. Brown again, sitting down despairingly at the kitchen table among the ruins of her cake.

"They vanish at cock-crow," said William suddenly. "Couldn't you sort of get a cock an' sort of train it to keep on crowin' so's this ghost'd have to keep on vanishin' an'——"

"Oh, go away, William," said Mrs. Brown impatiently.

William went away. He went to the sitting-room, where Robert was ensconced on the settee with Dolores Forrester in a sea of manuscript. William remembered that Dolores had written a one act poetic play called "Melisande" for the Hadley Dramatic Festival and that Robert was acting it with her. Dolores was a beauty of the Rosetti type, slender and willowy, with large dark eyes, cloudy hair and a round white column of a neck, and Robert had fallen for her heavily at the Tennis Club dance. She was, he said, the most beautiful girl he had ever seen; life, he said, had had a new meaning for him since he met her; she had, he said, rapt him into another world. It was a somewhat unfamiliar world to Robert—a world of poetry that hadn't

any rhyme, music that hadn't any tune and pictures that hadn't any resemblance to the things they were supposed to be pictures of. He was making manful efforts to find his feet in it, but so far had only partially succeeded. He sat now frowning perplexedly at a sheet of manuscript.

"But what exactly do the words mean?" he was saying.

At that moment William opened the door and stood on the threshold. They gazed at him in a cold silence, broken only by the sound of the crunching of William's humbug.

"What do you want?" said Robert at last, shortly.

William swallowed the remains of his humbug and advanced into the room.

"I was jus' wondering if there was anythin' I could do for you," he said affably.

He was still feeling bored and depressed and was willing to while away a few moments in conversation with Robert and Dolores. He was always interested in Robert's girl friends, and Dolores seemed a particularly interesting specimen.

"Yes, there is," said Robert still more shortly. "You can clear out."

But William didn't want to clear out. He searched in his mind for some piece of news that would interest them and so postpone his dismissal.

"Mrs. Peters is goin'," he said at last. "She says she can't keep on comin' 'cause of passin' that blitzed keeper's cottage in the wood. She says it's haunted."

The ruse was successful.

"What nonsense!" said Robert. "A place can't possibly be haunted. There aren't such things as ghosts."

"Oh, but there are, Robert," said Dolores earnestly. "And there are haunted houses, too. I've known people who've known people who've actually lived in them."

"I don't see how a place *can* be haunted," said Robert. "It isn't sense."

"Yes, it is, Robert dear," persisted Dolores. "You see, some tragedy takes place—some act of violence or passion—and the emotions that caused it are so strong that they—they sort of take human form and go on enacting the tragedy through the ages on the spot where it happened."

"WILL YOU CLEAR OUT!" SAID ROBERT.

"Gosh!" said William. "I'd get jolly sick of doin' the same trag'dy all that time if I was a ghost. I'd think up some new ones an' I bet I'd think up some jolly good ones. I'm jolly good at thinkin' up trag'dies. I once——"

"Will you clear out!" said Robert. "And what's that stuff you're dropping all over the carpet?"

"Lem'nade powder," said William. "I've got a jolly good idea for an invention, too. I'm goin' to mix currants an' lem'nade powder an' humbug an'——"

But Robert was rising from the settee with the light of purpose in his eye and William hastily withdrew.

"Thank Heaven!" said Robert as he closed the door. "The little brute's always barging in when he isn't wanted." He took his seat by Dolores again, slipped an arm along the back of the settee and gazed down rapturously at the top of her head. "I've never seen anything as lovely as your hair, Dolores. Except your eyes, or course, and—and everything else about you."

But there was a preoccupied expression on Dolores' lovely face.

"I'm just thinking, Robert——" she began.

"Yes, dear?" said Robert hopefully. "What about?"

"About the rehearsal."

"Oh," said Robert.

"William's given me an idea. That cottage in the wood. Half ruined. Covered by ivy. It's a most romantic spot. It would be an ideal background for the rehearsal."

"Do you think so?" said Robert doubtfully.

"It would be *perfect*, Robert. So full of atmosphere! It would get us right into the spirit of the thing. The action begins, you remember, outside Golaud's castle, and we could have the cottage for the castle and—Oh, it would be perfect!"

"Well—er——" began Robert, who remembered how near the cottage was to the lane that ran through the wood and had an uncomfortable vision of an audience of jeering rustics. "It's a bit—public, darling, isn't it?"

"We'll rehearse in low voices," said Dolores. "In whispers if you like . . . Oh, Robert, the whole thing is beginning to come *alive* to me, isn't it to you?"

"More or less," said Robert.

"It's a wonderful scene, you know. You find me hiding outside the castle and you say—well, you know your lines, don't you?"

"Up to a point," said Robert.

"Then you pursue me into the castle and plunge the dagger into my breast and I scream."

"Y-yes," said Robert and added tentatively, "I sometimes think it would have been better to have had something—well, something a bit more cheerful. We did a play at the Rugger Social that went down awfully well. It was about two men who mistook each other for escaped lunatics and there were a lot of complications and it ended by one of them dressing up as a woman and—well, it was just one scream from beginning to end."

Dolores shuddered.

"Oh no, Robert," she said. "That sort of thing is so crude. It isn't Art."

"No, I suppose it isn't," said Robert regretfully.

"We haven't had a proper rehearsal yet, of course. When we've had one, I know that the whole thing will *grip* you just as it grips me. We'll rehearse

at the cottage this evening and then, I'm sure, you'll find that you've got right inside the atmosphere."

"Y-yes," said Robert. "What time shall we rehearse?"

"About dusk, I think. There's more *atmosphere* about dusk than any other time of the day. And," she sat up suddenly, disturbing the carefully graduated movements of Robert's arm. "*Robert!*"

"Yes?"

"Suppose the cottage really is haunted, we might see something of the tragedy that was once enacted there. It would be a wonderful experience."

"But, dash it all, Dolores," said Robert, "you don't honestly believe in spooks, do you?"

"Of course I do, Robert," said Dolores earnestly. "I know someone who knows someone who's actually seen ectoplasm."

"Ecto—— what?" said Robert, puzzled.

"Ectoplasm. It's a sort of white stuff that spirits are made of and it sort of winds off."

"Oh," said Robert blankly.

"And psychic people have actually seen it . . . It must have been a wonderful experience, mustn't it?"

"Yes," said Robert. He leaned a little nearer her and, making a resolute effort to bring the conversation on to his own ground, went on, "Do you know, Dolores, you've never looked as lovely as you look to-day."

"Me?" said Dolores, turning a wide innocent gaze on him. "But, Robert, dear, I'm quite ordinary looking."

"Ordinary?" said Robert, struggling with deep emotion. "Why, you—you——"

Then it occurred to him that, before going on with what promised to be a highly satisfactory scene, he might as well make sure that there would be no further inopportune interruptions from William. He went to the door, opened it and glanced up and down the passage.

"What are you doing, dear?" said Dolores.

"Just making sure that that little blighter isn't anywhere about," said Robert, taking his seat again by her on the settee and resting his arm on the back of it with a more boldly encircling movement than he had yet attempted. "I simply can't tell you what knowing you has meant to me, Dolores. When I think of the days before I met you . . ."

The “little blighter” was well on his way to Ginger’s. He walked briskly, with a suggestion of purpose and confidence in his bearing. There was a thoughtful look on his lemonade-powdered face that suggested the dawning of an idea. He paused occasionally in his progress to kick a stone across the road, climb a gate and attempt (unsuccessfully) to walk along the top, fish a stick out of the ditch and hurl it at a telegraph post, vault over a low stile into a field and then vault back again into the road . . . but these were merely the mechanical actions of any small boy on any country road, and it was clear that his thoughts were elsewhere. As he approached Ginger’s house, he gave the ear-splitting “yodel” that was the secret signal between them—a signal calculated to attract the attention and shatter the nerves of everyone within a radius of two miles.

“Hello,” said Ginger, coming down to the gate. “That was a jolly good one.”

“My yodel?” said William complacently. “Yes, I thought it was, too. I’ve been practisin’ it all this week. ’Least, I did till my family stopped me.”

“You did the one that means ‘Urgent,’ didn’t you?”

“Yes,” said William. “Up three times an’ down three times. If I’d done up four times an’ down four times it’d have meant ‘Deadly Danger’.”

“Well, I could see you standin’ there doin’ it, so I’d have known you weren’t in deadly danger.”

“You mightn’t have. There might have been a lion comin’ after me down the road that you couldn’t see for the trees.”

“Well, you’d have come in at the gate then, not stood there in the road doin’ yodels.”

“Well, never mind,” said William, realising that the argument was leading him away from his main purpose. “We’re both gettin’ jolly good at it for me to do the ‘Urgent’ and you to rec’nise it.” He plunged his hand into his pocket. “Here’s a bit of lemonade powder. It’s got a funny colour with bein’ loose in my pocket, but it tastes all right . . . Here, you’d better lick it off my hand. Some of the bits of black are currants an’ some aren’t, but they taste all right all mixed up together.”

“Thanks,” said Ginger, demolishing the dubious-looking contents of William’s dubious-looking palm with every appearance of enjoyment. “Yes, it was jolly good . . . Well, what’s urgent that you were yodellin’ about?”

“Oh, yes,” said William. “Come on, an’ I’ll tell you about it.” They began to walk down the road. “Well, it’s this. I’ve got somethin’ jolly

excitin' for us to do."

"What?" said Ginger.

"Unhaunt a cottage."

"Unhaunt a cottage?" repeated Ginger in bewilderment.

"Yes," said William. "Let's go to the old barn an' think out a plan."

They crossed the field to the old barn and there, squatting on the remains of the derelict packing case that was its only furniture, William told Ginger the story of Mrs. Peters and the cottage in the wood.

"So if we can unhaunt the cottage," he ended, "I bet my mother'll be jolly grateful to us."

"Yes, but it's goin' to be a difficult sort of thing to do," said Ginger, "unhaunting a place."

"I bet it won't be, once I've got an idea," said William.

"Have you got one?"

"Not yet, but I've got a sort of one jus' beginning to come. I'm tryin' to remember——"

A shadow fell over the open doorway, and they looked up to see Violet Elizabeth standing there.

"Go away," said William sternly. "This is our place an' we don't want you here."

"Ith not your plathe," said Violet Elizabeth serenely. "It dothent belong to you. You haven't bought it. I know you haven't bought it 'cauthe I know you haven't any money."

"We're not talkin' about money," said William loftily, "an' I've got a jolly sight more money than you think I've got. I've got some in the post office that an aunt put in for me when I was born." There was in his voice the bitterness that always invaded his spirit when he thought of the fortune standing to his name in the records of the government. "It's five pounds an' I'm goin' to buy an aeroplane with it when I get it, if I ever *do* get it"—his bitterness increased—"if the post office hasn't spent it all by then. I bet it has. Always havin' cups of tea an' biscuits. Jolly nice for me goin' in to buy stamps an' things an' seein' 'em all havin' cups of tea an' biscuits out of my five pounds. They mus' have used about half of it by now . . . Anyway"—he turned his frowning gaze on to Violet Elizabeth—"we've got somethin' jolly important to fix up an' we don't want *you* hangin' round."

"What are you ficthing up?" said Violet Elizabeth, who was edging her way by slow and almost imperceptible degrees into the barn.

"Never you mind," said William, and added, because, even in discouraging her interest in his activities, he could never resist trying to impress her with their importance, "We're unhauntin' a cottage, so you can jolly well keep out of it."

"Wath unhaunting a cottage?" said Violet Elizabeth.

"It's catching a ghost," said Ginger, "an', now you know, you can clear off."

But Violet Elizabeth was by this time sitting cross-legged on the ground beside them.

"Oh, pleathe, William," she said earnestly, "if ith a teeny weeny little ghotht, may I have it for my dollth houthe? I would love to have a little ghotht in my dollth houthe."

"Oh, shut up," said William, adding savagely, "an' can't you understand English? Are you foreign or something? Don't you know what 'go away' means?"

"Yeth, William."

"Come on, Ginger. Let's push her out," said William, rising from his seat to make the attempt.

"If you do, I'll thcream and *thcream*," said Violet Elizabeth, "an' then thomeone'll come an' tell you to thtop being unkind to a dear little girl and thend you home."

This seemed so likely that William sat down again.

"We'll take no notice of her, Ginger," he said. "We'll jus' go on as if she wasn't there."

He moved his position so as to exclude her from the conversation. Ginger did the same. Both threw an uneasy glance at her over their shoulders.

"Has your idea come yet?" said Ginger.

"It's still comin'," said William a little irritably. "You can't get ideas all in a minute."

"I can," said Violet Elizabeth complacently.

They ignored her.

"What sort of an idea is it?" said Ginger.

"Well, it's a play I once heard about," said William. "It was a man with a name like Dr. Foster what sold his soul to a ghost with a name like Methylated."

"Sounds a bit queer," said Ginger.

"Yes, it is," admitted William, "but, anyway, this man with a name like Dr. Foster drew a circle to catch this ghost an' he caught it with drawin' a circle."

"What with?" said Ginger.

"With anythin'," said William testily. "Gosh! Haven't you any common sense? There's a tin of red paint in our garage we could use, or—yes, red paint'd be best. I bet red paint'd catch it better than anythin' else."

"If ith a brownie, it'd rather have a thauther of milk, William," said Violet Elizabeth.

"Oh, be quiet," said William. "It isn't a brownie. It's a ghost. An', anyway, we're not listenin' to you."

"A brownie'th the thame ath a ghotht only a brownie'th brown," said Violet Elizabeth.

"If you think——" began William indignantly then ended hastily, "Don't take any notice of her, Ginger."

"I've suddenly thought of something," said Ginger.

"What?"

"Well, I remember once hearin' someone say that in China they scare ghosts away with bangs. That's a jolly good idea."

"Yes, it is," said William. "What sort of bangs, I wonder?"

"I can make a bang with a cracker if thomeone holdth the other end," said Violet Elizabeth proudly. "I got a dear little whithle out of one latht Chrithmath."

Again they ignored her.

"Tell you what!" said Ginger. "There's one of those things for cleanin' chimneys at home. Dad got it for cleanin' ours, but Mother was scared of it, so we didn't use it an' it's still at the back of the cupboard in the kitchen. I can get that easy, an' I bet it'd make a bang that'd scare any ghost out of its life."

"Y-yes," agreed William. "But I think a circle's a jolly good idea, too."

"Well, you do the circle an' I'll do the bang," said Ginger. "If you don't catch it in the circle, I'll scare it off with the bang."

"An' I'll give it a thauther of milk," said Violet Elizabeth happily.

"You keep right out of this," said William. "We don't want you in it at all. You've no right to *be* here, anyway, an' we aren't takin' any notice of

you. D'you understand *that*!"

"Yeth, William," said Violet Elizabeth with disarming meekness.

"An', I say, Ginger," said William, lowering his voice to a whisper, "p'raps we'll see somethin' of this trag'dy that Dolores was talkin' about. It'd be jolly excitin' to see that."

"Gosh, yes!" said Ginger. "What time shall we start?"

"Mrs. Peters says it starts at dusk so we'd better start then. It's white an' it flutters at her in the room downstairs an' makes faces at her out of the chimney."

"Gosh!" said Ginger a little apprehensively. "It'll take some catchin'."

"Well, with the circle an' the bang we ought to get it," said William.

"An' the thauther of milk, William," said Violet Elizabeth.

"Come on, Ginger," said William, rising from his seat. "We've got a lot to fix up, so we'd better not waste any more time. An' we'll be goin' into deadly danger so let's practise the deadly danger signal."

Ignoring Violet Elizabeth, they set off across the field, their strong young voices hideously upraised, the dignity of their progress slightly impaired by Violet Elizabeth, who trotted along a few yards behind them, caterwauling shrilly.

William and Ginger met at the end of the lane that led to the cottage as dusk was falling. In order to emphasise the hazardous nature of the undertaking, they had made their way there separately by circuitous routes and had exchanged the password, "Down with Ghosts," in assumed voices on meeting. William carried his tin of red paint, Ginger his chimney cleaner. All was set for the adventure. Their courage was high, their hearts undaunted . . . till suddenly they saw a small figure approaching them carrying a bottle of milk.

THEY MADE THEIR WAY TO THE HALF-RUINED COTTAGE.

"Gosh!" groaned William. "I thought we'd thrown her off."

"I couldn't find a thauther, William," said Violet Elizabeth, "tho I brought the whole bottle. I dare thay it can drink from a bottle. Tom-tith do."

"I thought we told you not to come," said William in a ferocious whisper.

"Yeth, William," said Violet Elizabeth, "but I won't be a nuithanthe. I only want to give the ghotht ith milk. I'll go away when ith drunk it."

They stared at her helplessly. When Violet Elizabeth used her weapon of aggressiveness they could sometimes cope with her. Her meekness she used as a last resource and they had never yet learnt how to deal with it.

They made their way along the lane to where the cottage stood back among the trees, then up the little path to the door. The cottage was half ruined and held together, as it seemed, only by the ivy that covered it. Above the ivy the cowl of the little chimney moved slightly in the breeze.

“Come on in,” said William. “There’s a downstairs room left an’ an upstairs room an’ the stairs are all right.”

They entered the downstairs room. It was dank and cobwebby. Ivy trailed through the broken windows and across the floor, which was covered with plaster fallen from the ceiling. A large piece of wallpaper hung loose from the wall, giving a slight flutter as they entered.

“Gosh! Isn’t it grand!” said William, gazing round. “It’s just the place for a ghost. Now let’s go’n’ have a look upstairs.”

They ascended the ramshackle staircase and entered the upstairs room. Like the other, it was dank and cobwebby. The floor boards were cracked, the wallpaper hanging in shreds, the plaster fallen from the ceiling.

“Let’s do it here,” said Ginger. “There’s a better fireplace for my chimney thing. There’s only bits of straw an’ soot in this one an’ the other was all choked up with bricks.”

“An’ you can see better here, too,” said William. “There isn’t so much ivy in the windows.”

“Ith a nithe plathe,” said Violet Elizabeth wistfully. “I with I wath a ghotht an’ could live in it.”

“How soon shall we start?” said Ginger.

“Well,” said William, “we’ve got to wait till we see or hear this ghost an’ then I’ll make my circle an’ you do your bang.”

“I couldn’t find a cracker, William,” said Violet Elizabeth, “but”—rummaging in a miniature pocket—“I’ve brought my dear little whithle.”

She put the whistle to her mouth. . . William advanced on her threateningly.

“If you dare blow that, Violet Elizabeth,” he said, “I’ll—I’ll—I’ll smother you.”

“Very well, William,” said Violet Elizabeth resignedly, replacing the whistle in her pocket.

“I’m goin’ to take the lid off my tin of red paint,” said William, “so’s I can pour it out quickly.”

“And I’ll take the top off my bottle of milk,” said Violet Elizabeth, “tho’th I can pour it out quickly, too. I thpect it can drink milk off the floor. Our puthy can.”

“Shut *up*!” said William. “Look, Ginger. I’m goin’ to clear away some of the plaster from the floor to make room for my circle.”

"Yes," said Ginger, "an' I'll clear some of this rubbish away from the chimney place to make room for my bang."

"There'th a nithe lot of cream on my milk," said Violet Elizabeth. "I'm going to drink thome. I don't think the ghotht will mind."

"Will you——" began William fiercely.

"Yeth, William," said Violet Elizabeth complacently, removing a cream-ringed mouth from the top of her bottle. "I thaid I wouldn't be a nuithanthe, an' I'm not being."

They busied themselves clearing up the floor and the fireplace, so intent on their work that they did not hear the sound of lowered voices approaching the cottage.

Robert and Dolores had met in the lane outside the cottage and were walking slowly up the path to the front door.

"It's simply perfect," whispered Dolores, gazing about her. "I hadn't realised how perfect it was. The whole place seems to be under a spell."

But Robert had eyes only for the graceful willowy figure in the dark cloak and white dress.

"You look simply marvellous, Dolores," he said.

"I thought I'd wear the white dress I'm going to wear for the performance," said Dolores, "just to get the atmosphere . . . Oh, Robert, it's going to be the most wonderful experience. But we mustn't waste time." She took off her cloak and hung it on a low bush by the door. "Are you word-perfect, dear?"

"Well, I can remember them if I look at them occasionally," said Robert, "but, when I'm with you, Dolores, everything else goes out of my head."

"Yes, dear, but we must take our responsibilities seriously. Our responsibilities to our public, I mean . . . Now let's start the scene. You're Golaud, you know, and you've discovered my love for Pelleas and you come upon me in the wood. Then you pursue me into the castle and kill me. I have a little monologue first, you remember. I'll do it now in a whisper." She struck a dramatic attitude, vaguely suggestive of someone peering through a fog and trying to hail a taxi, and spoke in a low, tremulous voice.

"Oh, how eerie is this place,
How full of ghostly presences,
Of horror and of tragedy!"

"Well, don't be all day, Robert," she continued a little irritably. "That's your cue."

"Oh, yes," said Robert. "I'm sorry . . . Just for the moment I thought I heard something."

"What did you think you heard?" said Dolores.

"I don't quite know. Like—like—well, it sounds absurd, but like a—a sort of smothered whistle."

"Don't be ridiculous, Robert. Of course," thoughtfully, "there *are* unseen presences about us in a place like this. Even Mrs. Peters felt them. But—well, go on, dear. Say your lines."

Robert drew his crumpled manuscript from his pocket and studied it in the half-light.

" 'I see you there, Melisande,' " he read " 'larking about in the bushes.' "

"Lurking, Robert," corrected Dolores a little sharply. "Can't you read?"

"I'm so sorry, dear," said Robert apologetically. "The writing's not very distinct and the light isn't very good. 'I see you there lurking about in the bushes. Your face gleams wanly through the dust that covers it.' "

"*Dusk*," snapped Dolores. "You just aren't giving your mind to it, Robert. It's one of the most wonderful experiences I've ever had in my life and you just aren't giving your mind to it."

"I'm sorry, Dolores," said Robert, adding tactfully, "Being here alone with you like this seems to drive everything else out of my head."

"Oh, well," said Dolores, mollified, "just say it again."

Robert said it again.

"Can't you put a little more feeling into it, Robert?"

Robert put a little more feeling into it.

"Don't *shout*, Robert. We agreed to whisper. Whisper it."

Robert whispered it.

"Yes, but do stop holding yourself so stiffly."

Robert stopped holding himself so stiffly.

"There's no need actually to *sag*, dear. Can't you get something in between?"

Robert got something in between by holding himself stiffly up to the waist and sagging above it.

"Well, next comes the pursuit into the castle," said Dolores. "I think we'll omit that because pursuits on a stage are always a little difficult. They need very careful rehearsing. I mean, in a small space, there's always the

danger of getting mixed up as to who's pursuing who." She gazed round with a far-away look in her eyes. "Oh, Robert, it really is a wonderful experience, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Robert.

"And now let's go indoors."

They entered the downstairs room. Robert looked at the fluttering festoon of wallpaper and tore it down from the wall.

"I expect that's what the idiotic woman saw," he said.

"Now we must get on with the rehearsal," said Dolores. "I cry 'Mercy!' and you plunge your dagger into my breast and I scream . . . Have you anything that will do for a dagger?"

"Only my fountain pen," said Robert, taking it from his pocket and unscrewing the cap. "I'm afraid it leaks."

THERE CAME A SHATTERING EXPLOSION, AND WILLIAM, GINGER AND VIOLET ELIZABETH WERE BORNE INTO THE ROOM ON A CREST OF RUBBLE.

"Well, do it with the cap on," said Dolores, "and don't jab too hard." She looked round the dim ivy-shrouded room and sank her voice to an almost inaudible whisper. "Robert, I feel I'm being watched by unseen presences. . . ."

She was being watched by one unseen presence, at any rate. William lay stretched on the floor above, his eye glued to a crack of the floor boards.

"Gosh!" he whispered, "I can jus' see it. The ghost, I mean. It's white an' it's walkin' across the room. I bet it's goin' to start that trag'dy soon. It's whisperin' somethin', but I can't hear what."

Then clearly rose the scream with which Dolores received the point of Robert's fountain pen in her bosom, a scream rendered more heart-stirring by the fact that Robert in his excitement had forgotten, after all, to replace the cap.

"Gosh!" said William, leaping to his feet. "It's startin' now! Quick! Where's that paint?"

"Did I jab too hard, dear?" said Robert solicitously.

"It doesn't matter," said Dolores. She stood, looking about her, an expression of rapt attention on her face. "Robert, I've got the most peculiar sensation . . . I hear whisperings and movements all round me . . . I'm certain that the tragedy is going to be enacted here . . . now . . . at this very moment. . . ."

And at that very moment a stream of dark red liquid began to trickle slowly through the cracks of the ceiling above.

"Blood!" cried Dolores.

Almost at the same moment a stream of milk descended from another part of the ceiling.

"Ectoplasm!" said Dolores uncertainly, then, with gathering conviction, "Yes, ectoplasm!" She raised her voice and proclaimed, "Speak, whoever you are! Let me hear . . ."

And she heard . . . For suddenly there came a shattering explosion, together with the sound of falling masonry, and, at the same moment, as it seemed, William, Ginger and Violet Elizabeth were borne into the room on the crest of a wave of rubble, floor boards, red paint, straw and soot.

A day had passed since the episode of the haunted cottage. William and Ginger were walking down the road together. William was slightly cut about the face, and Ginger's knee was bandaged. Otherwise, miraculously, they had escaped injury. Violet Elizabeth had escaped it altogether, but she was being kept indoors by her mother, lest she should again be "led into mischief by those nasty rough boys."

"Well, we unhaunted it all right," said William, "an' all they can do is to go on an' on an' on at us. Mrs. Peters came this mornin' an' she's took back her notice 'cause the chimney's gone an' there's nothin' movin' about in the

front room, an' she's not scared of it any longer. We did all that for my mother an' you'd think she'd be a bit grateful to me, wouldn't you?"

"No," said Ginger.

"Well, she's not," said William, slightly put out by the answer. "Goes on at me as if I was a murderer an' a gangster an' a smuggler an'—an'—an' a forger an' a pirate an' I don't know what. Makes me want to turn into all of them jus' to *show* her!"

"We've tried bein' most of 'em," Ginger reminded him, "an' it didn't come off."

"Well, anyway, you'd think Robert'd be grateful to me, wouldn't you?" said William.

"No," said Ginger again.

"Well, he isn't, either. I gave them a jolly excitin' evenin' an' I got him out of doin' that awful play an' he can't call me anythin' bad enough. Or rather," with a reminiscent look in his eyes and a reluctant admiration of Robert's vocabulary, "he can."

For Robert and Dolores had decided not to go on with "Melisande." Dolores said that she found the emotional strain of it too great. Instead they had decided to join with the Hadley Thespian Society in the Trial Scene from the Merchant of Venice, in which Dolores was to be Portia in black alpaca and Robert an attendant in red sateen.

They were discussing the details now in Dolores' house, and Dolores, who was still feeling the strain, lay back against the cushions of the settee and occasionally closed her eyes. Robert sat beside her, his arm hovering along the back of the settee.

"You see, Robert," she was explaining, "Melisande's emotional and Portia's intellectual. I'm both, of course, but emotion seems to wear me out, and intellect, somehow, doesn't."

"Yes, I see," said Robert sympathetically, then, dropping his arm, as if casually, lower on the settee back, "I simply can't tell you, Dolores, how sorry I am about what happened yesterday."

Dolores shifted her position a little in order to facilitate Robert's next move.

"Oh, no, Robert," she said. "Don't say that. It was a most wonderful experience."

CHAPTER VI

WILLIAM AND THE PETS' CLUB

"IT'S funny," said William. "There's times when things happen an' there's times when they don't, an' this has been a jolly long time with things not happenin' an' I'm gettin' fed up with it."

The Outlaws were walking down the road towards the field that led to the old barn. They walked without scuffling or kicking stones, their whole attitude indicating a deep and unusual boredom. It wasn't often that the Outlaws were bored, but to-day a sense of the sameness of things weighed heavily on their spirits. Jumble, alone, was unaffected by the general atmosphere, leaping about in his usual exuberant fashion, worrying sticks and stones, growling at an old boot he found in the ditch, chasing a butterfly with shrill barks of excitement, then leaving it to investigate a suspicious-looking hole on the bank.

"Well, we can't help things happenin' or not happenin'," said Henry with an air of philosophic resignation. "It's hist'ry that settles that, not us. What can't be cured mus' be endured."

"Well, when there's a will there's a way," said William, not to be outdone. (They had recently found an old copy book of Ginger's father's and had been studying it with interest at intervals.) "I don't see why we shouldn't make somethin' happen."

"What?" said Ginger.

"We could get Robert to show us his birds' egg collection," suggested Douglas, who had not a very original mind.

Robert had, in his younger days, made a collection of birds' eggs that was a treasured family possession and when he was in a good temper he would sometimes lend it to the Outlaws.

"That's not very excitin'," said Ginger gloomily.

"Well, he wouldn't, anyway," said William. "He's still keen on that awful Dolores Forrester girl, an' she reads po'try an' stuff to him an' it makes him bad-tempered."

"Why?" said Douglas.

"Po'try makes anyone bad-tempered," said Ginger. "It can't say what it means straight off 'cause it's got to rhyme, an' it makes the person readin' it bad-tempered wonderin' what it means. I once had to learn one about a tiger burnin' bright an' it nearly drove me mad."

"Then there's that awful brother of hers called Pelican," said William.

"Peregrin," corrected Henry.

"Well, whatever it is," said William. "It's an awful name anyway. He makes him bad-tempered, too."

"How does he make him bad-tempered?" said Ginger.

"She keeps sayin' he's so much better behaved than me, though he's so much younger, an' it sort of makes him think I'm worse than what I really am. Not that he thinks much about anyone these days but that ole Dolores. Wouldn't care what happened to anyone but that ole Dolores. Goes over to see her nearly every day."

"What do they do?" said Ginger curiously.

"They talk. They go on talkin' an' talkin' an' talkin'."

"What do they talk about?"

"Their ole dramatic club, I 'spect, an' their ole tennis club an' their ole lit'ry club. They think they're everyone 'cause they've got clubs. . . . Well, we could have clubs if we wanted to, an' a jolly sight better than theirs." He gave a short laugh. "Look at ole Jumble." Jumble had foregathered with a few friends in the middle of the road and was engaged in a hilarious game of Catch-as-Catch-Can, to the fury of a passing motor cyclist. "Jumble could have a club if he wanted to." He stopped short and drew in his breath. "*Gosh!* That's an idea!"

"What?" said the others.

"An animal club. Well, yumans are always havin' clubs, so I don't see why animals shouldn't. They've got a jolly sight more sense than yumans, anyway. We wanted somethin' to happen an' I don't see why we shouldn't make an animals' club happen."

"How could we get 'em to join, pigs an' cows an' horses an' things?" said Douglas doubtfully. "They might turn out a bit rough, too, when they all got together."

"We won't have that sort of an animal," said William. "We'll have people's pets. People can make their pets members an' bring them along to meetin's."

"Yes, it's a good idea," said Henry judicially. "What shall we call it?"

"Pets' Club!" suggested Ginger.

"Yes, that's not bad," said William with grudging approval.

"When shall we start it?" said Henry.

"Now," said William. "We'll go to Ginger's an' write the notice."

The notice was duly written and pinned up on the door of the old barn.

petts klub

Pleese bring your annimals to a meating tomorro afternune at harf past too for a petts klub all are welkum small and grate taim and savvidge except maneeting things like snaiks and crockerdiles insex dont count entrunse fre.

(cined) William Brown.

"I bet they won't come," said Douglas gloomily. "They didn't come when we had that sale."

"Well, we'd only got two things to sell," said Ginger, "an' they knew what they were an' they didn't want to buy 'em."

"It was a jolly good sledge," said William.

"No, it wasn't," said Ginger. "You'd made it out of that old tray of your mother's an' it didn't work."

"Well, it was still all right as a tray," said William vaguely, " 'cept for those few bits I'd sawed off . . . An' that waterin' can was all right."

" 'Cept for the holes in the bottom," said Douglas. "Your gardener wouldn't have given it you if it hadn't had holes in the bottom."

"Well, it's a jolly good idea for waterin', havin' holes in the bottom," said William with spirit. "It makes it easier for waterin' than pourin' it out of a spout. It makes it more nat'ral, too. More like real rain. Well, clouds are the same as waterin' cans with holes in the bottom. 'Least," sarcastically, "it's news to *me* if they aren't."

"Clouds are collections of vapour," said Henry. "I was readin' about them in a book the other day an' it said——"

"Well, never mind that," said William hastily, knowing that when Henry had acquired any piece of information he was apt to impart it at length. "It's this pets' club we've got to think of now. I bet," optimistically, "everyone'll come to it. Well, las' week there was a meetin' at Hadley that a cab'net minister was speakin' at an' so many people went that there wasn't room for them all an' animals are a jolly sight more int'restin' than cab'net ministers any day."

“I bet, whoever else comes, Arabella Simpkin will,” said Douglas gloomily.

Arabella Simpkin was a formidable child of about twelve with flaming red hair and an aggressive personality. Her mother officiated as charwoman-in-chief to the neighbourhood generally, and Arabella was seldom seen without a younger brother or sister in pram or push-cart, which she drove before her with the air of a tank corps going into action.

“I don’t think she’s got a pet,” said Ginger.

“That won’t stop her,” said Douglas sombrely.

“GET IN A QUEUE,” SHOUTED WILLIAM, “AND WE’LL TAKE DOWN YOUR NAMES.”

The afternoon of the meeting was fine and sunny, and the Outlaws took up their position in the old barn shortly after two o'clock. Ginger had brought an old diary that his mother (who was an indifferent cook) had found when 'turning out' an old drawer, in the empty spaces of which he meant to enrol the names of the pets and owners who joined the club. The names of Jumble, Hector (Henry's tortoise), Dasher (Ginger's cat) and Monty (Douglas's white rat) had been inscribed between the entries, "Made blackberry jam. Too runny" and "Made gooseberry jam. Too stiff."

"That's four pets, anyway," said William. "I bet we could have a jolly excitin' club out of jus' four pets."

The four were certainly doing their best to provide excitement. Jumble was struggling to get at Monty and Dasher, Dasher was struggling to get at Jumble and Monty, and even Hector was craning his long neck out of his shell as if struggling to get at something.

"We'll carry on with them even if the others don't come," said William.

But the others did come. First a straggling vanguard, with a canary in a cage, a goldfish in a bowl and a dormouse in a boot box; then the main body with dogs, cats, guinea-pigs and rabbits. One carried a minnow in a jam jar, one a mouse in a mouse-trap, one hugged a reluctant hen to his bosom, one a stuffed parrot. A toddler trailed a teddy bear by its ear. Last of all came Arabella Simpkin, the inevitable pram hurtling before her as if discharged from a catapult. Even William was slightly disconcerted by the pandemonium that filled the old barn. The mouse escaped, the hen escaped, the dogs began to fight.

“Get in a queue,” he shouted. “Get in a queue an’ we’ll take down your names an’—an’ elect secret’ries an’ things. It’s got to be a proper club like Robert’s with proper rules an’ proper meetin’s an’—an’——”

“An’ proper lunies like you,” shrilled Arabella.

“Shut up!” said William. “Well, come on! Get in a queue!”

They got in a queue and straggled up to the packing case where William sat with the diary, entering names of owners and names of pets.

Even that part of the proceedings did not go smoothly.

Victor Jameson headed the queue with a cigarette-case containing a caterpillar.

“It’s called Moses,” he said.

“It’s an insect,” said William. “It doesn’t count.”

“It isn’t an insect,” said Victor.

“It is.”

“It isn’t.”

“It is.”

“It isn’t. An insect’s got to have wings.”

“How d’you know?”

“Well, I do know.”

“Well, prove it. *Prove* an insect’s got to have wings.”

“Well, prove it hasn’t.”

“Well, anyway,” said William, shifting his ground, “animals can understand things an’ insects can’t. That’s the diff’rence.”

“Well, Moses can understand, all right,” said Victor. “Look at him turnin’ his head to you while you’re talkin’.”

“Doesn’t think much of you, either, by the look of his face,” said Arabella with a shrill cackle.

During the argument William, closely hemmed in by the crowd of aspirants to membership, had been bitten by a dog, scratched by a cat, and pecked by a hen, and he brought the argument to a close, less because he considered himself worsted in it than because an escaped rat was beginning to nibble his ankles.

“All right,” he said, retrieving the rat and handing it back to its owner. “I’ll let it in jus’ this once.” He wrote, “catterpiller Moses” in the diary and turned to the surging throng of applicants. “Who’s next?”

After further lively argument, he enrolled the minnow as Frederick and the hen as Gladys. Next came a small, square boy with a stag beetle in a highly perfumed powder box.

"A beetle *is* an insect," said William, recoiling slightly from a strong whiff of Fleurs d'Amour.

"But a stag's an animal," said the boy with a note of triumph in his voice.

"It isn't a stag," said William firmly. "You can't say *that's* a stag. Look at it. It's a stag *beetle*. It isn't a stag."

"Well, it's half a stag," persisted the boy. "Half an animal ought to count for a pet. . . . Well, listen. It's called Bertie. I'll call it Bert. That's half a name for half an animal. That's all right, isn't it? Well, I can't cut it in two, can I? You'll jus' have to let the stag part come in as a pet an' bring its beetle part with it."

"It's an insect," said William but with failing conviction, for he seemed to have met his match in eloquence.

"Insec' yourself!" said Arabella indignantly. "Ought to be ashamed of yourself, cuttin' animals in two!"

"Shut up!" said William, writing "Harf stag Bert," in his register.

Arabella continued to enlarge on the theme, but William's attention was now taken up by a little boy with spiky hair and a snub nose, who was presenting him with a match box. William opened the match box and looked at the tiny thread-like creature inside.

"What's this?" he said.

"A maggot," said the little boy proudly. "It's called Arthur."

"You can't have a *maggot* for a pet," said William indignantly.

"Why not?" enquired the boy.

"It—it's too small."

"It looks big under a microscope. I've seen it."

"Well, it isn't big."

"If it looks big, it mus' be big."

"It doesn't look big."

"It looks big under a microscope. I've seen it."

William realised that it was the sort of argument that can go on for ever. Reluctantly he inscribed "magott Arthur," in the list of members.

"I'm goin' to be more partic'lar over the rest," he said sternly.

The next was a stuffed parrot, presented to its owner by a great-aunt because of the widespread ravages of moth. William tried to stand firm over its exclusion from the register, but the owner was both vociferous and abusive and he was relieved to discover, at the height of the argument, that the parrot, which had been carelessly placed on the floor, in order to enable the owner to give her whole attention to championing its claims, had been dismembered by a small fox terrier. There was little left of the parrot, but the fox terrier, deeply embedded in feathers, now suggested some strange exotic form of life.

The owner of the parrot contemplated the sight with dispassionate interest.

"I didn't know it was *that* sort of stuffing," she said. "I thought it was the sort they used in turkeys."

"Well, you can't have it for a pet now," said William triumphantly.

The owner considered the problem in silence for a few moments.

"Can I have its ghost for a pet?" she said at last.

"No," said William firmly.

He intended to be equally firm with the owner of the teddy bear, but the owner raised his voice in such passionate protest ("He *is* alive, he is . . . He *can* think, he can . . . He isn't an insec' so he *mus'* be a pet, he *mus'*!"), Arabella returned to the charge with such ferocity, and the general feeling of the meeting was so obviously against him, that he finally inscribed the teddy bear, too, in his list of members, salving his dignity as best he could by enrolling it as "brown bear Edward" and hoping that, if his records ever reached posterity, posterity would envisage a more dignified member than the small tubby creature who had actually been enrolled.

There followed another lengthy argument over a chrysalis in a potted meat jar, which was finally enrolled as Victoria. Last of all came Arabella Simpkin, charging up to the packing case with her pram.

"What's your pet?" said William coldly.

" 'Im," said Arabella, pointing to the pram's occupant.

William looked down at the features of Arabella's baby brother—repulsive even in sleep.

"You *can't* have him," he said, outraged. "He's not an animal."

"That's right!" shrilled Arabella. "Insult a pore kid wot can't stand up for itself. . . . 'E's as *good* as an animal, isn't 'e? 'E's as good as a tiddler in a

jam jar or a maggot in a match box, isn't 'e? All right! You wait till I tell 'is mum what you said about 'im, that 'e's no better than a tiddler in a jam jar or a maggot in a match box. *She'll* have somethin' to say to you!"

Again the feeling of the meeting seemed to be with Arabella. Even the feathered fox terrier appeared to support her, worrying William's shoe laces and trying to unravel his stockings.

William enrolled the repulsive baby among the pets; "Baby George Tommus Simpkin."

Arabella watched him suspiciously.

" 'Ere! What's this?" she said, reading the entry that was written just beneath the name. " 'Baby pancakes. Flat and sodden.' Startin' insultin' of 'im again, are you?"

"Oh, shut up!" said William. "That's what Ginger's mother wrote years an' years ago."

"That's a nice tale!" said Arabella with a sniff. "An' this!" She continued to read. " 'Tried baby pancakes again. Soggy and shapeless.' Soggy an' shapeless yourself! You wait till I tell 'is mum what you said about 'im. Soggy an' shapeless an' no better than a maggot in a match box."

"Shut up!" said William again.

Arabella relapsed into indignant mutterings.

The register of the Pets' Club was now complete. Dogs, cats, guinea-pigs, rabbits had all been entered, together with the more dubious applicants, and William stood up to address the assembly, raising his voice to be heard above the barking and mewing and squeaking of the members.

"Ladies an' gentlemen an'—an' lady an' gentlemen pets," he began, "now we've got nearly every sort of animal for our club——"

" 'Cept a monkey an' you'll do for that," put in Arabella.

"Shut up!" said William. "An' the next thing we've gotter do is to elect secret'ries an' things, same as they do in Robert's clubs, an' I'm goin' to do that 'cause it was all my idea. I'm goin' to start by 'lectin' Jumble Pres'dent an' Dasher—that's Ginger's cat—Secret'ry an' Monty—that's Douglas's rat—Treas'rer an' Hector—that's Henry's tortoise—assistant Treas'rer an'——"

A chorus of protest arose, in which the owners of the minnow and the maggot were most vociferous in demanding office for their pets.

"Shut *up*!" said William. "If you don't want to do it my way, you can jolly well go home."

The owner of the teddy bear and the owner of the stuffed parrot departed together, the owner of the stuffed parrot casting speculative glances at the teddy bear as if anxious to investigate the interior of that tight plump figure. The others remained, contenting themselves with frequent interruptions as William's speech proceeded.

"We'll have meetin's every week an' we'll have animal shows an'—an' animal races an'—an' teach them tricks an' I bet we could get up a circus with them if we tried. Anyway, we'll all meet this time nex' week an' we'll try'n' get 'em to be friends with each other a bit more than what they are now," as a cat and dog fight started at the further end of the barn, "an' now we'll all go home 'cause it's tea-time."

They secured their pets and streamed out of the barn to the accompaniment of barks and mews and squeaks. The owner of the stag beetle was challenging the owner of the caterpillar to a race, and the owner of the maggot was inspecting his match box with an air of anxious solicitude.

"I don't think it's feelin' well," he said. "It looks to me as if it'd got a headache."

Arabella drove her pram homewards as though forcing a way through the ranks of the enemy.

" 'E's as good as a maggot in a match box any day," she muttered fiercely. "Wait till I tell 'is mum. *She'll* baby pancake 'em."

The Outlaws made their way across the field. Douglas was inclined to be doubtful of the success of the meeting, but William's enthusiasm was undamped.

"It was jolly good for a first one," he said, "an' I bet, when they've got a bit more used to each other, they won't fight so much. Anyway, we've got to think out things for them to do. We've got lots of time 'cause there's nothin' much else to do jus' now."

But he reckoned without Miss Milton and the Festival of Britain.

Miss Milton's clear precise voice met him as soon as he opened the front door of his house. She was evidently having tea with his mother in the sitting-room.

"You see, I want the *children* to do something for the Festival. The grown-ups are having a pageant and a concert of local talent and a flower show and a museum of local interest. The last, of course, only if anything of local interest can be discovered, but our best local brains are at work on the search and I think something should come of it. But it has occurred to no

one till now that the children should play their part, and I think it's most important that they should. It's a great historical event, you know, and I want it to be something that they'll remember all their lives. I want to *impress* it on them. I don't want them to feel *left out*. So I've undertaken that part of the Festival myself and I'm going to get up a small entertainment consisting solely of children."

"Oh . . ." said Mrs. Brown. She glanced uneasily at the door, aware of William's towsled figure hovering there, then gave a faint sigh of relief as it vanished. "Er—what sort of an entertainment, Miss Milton?"

"Nursery rhymes," said Miss Milton. "A series of nursery rhymes acted by children in costume."

"Oh dear!" said Mrs. Brown. "But, of course, only a few children will be needed."

"No, I'm determined that every child in the village shall take part," said Miss Milton. "It will be most picturesque and moving."

"Er—yes," said Mrs. Brown, "but they aren't all suitable, surely. The children, I mean. Well, William isn't suitable, for one."

"I consider it most important that they should *all* take part," said Miss Milton firmly. "I agree that there's nothing picturesque or—or *moving* about William, but the point of the whole thing is that every child in the village must take part. It must be something that the whole village—children and all—shall remember for the rest of their lives. I've picked the more picturesque children for the chief parts, of course—Little Miss Muffet, Little Boy Blue, Bo Peep, Polly Put the Kettle on, Ride a Cock Horse, Little Tom Tucker and Curly Locks (it's a pity that Violet Elizabeth can't be Curly Locks, but unfortunately the Botts will be away) . . . and all the others I'm going to lump together, as it were, for the last scene. The last scene will be 'Girls and Boys, Come out to Play' and they'll just run across the stage, dressed in Kate Greenaway costumes."

"I see," said Mrs. Brown in a tone of relief. She thought that even William couldn't go wrong running across the stage in Kate Greenaway costume. "But, you know," thoughtfully, "I still think that William would be better out of it."

"No," said Miss Milton in her firmest manner, "every child *must* take part. The whole thing should be most effective. Especially the Kate Greenaway costumes."

When she had gone, Mrs. Brown tried to break the news gently to William, but his eyes grew wide with horror as he listened.

"*Me?*" he gasped. "*Me* act in a nursery rhyme wearin' those awful frills an' pants?" (for the rough sketch that Miss Milton had left made the costume look even more fantastic than it did in the pages of Marigold's Garden). "A sash!" he went on, "and," his voice rising shrilly with horror, "Gosh! Look at the *hat*!"

"Now, William, don't be silly," said Mrs. Brown, who was also eyeing the sketch with some dismay. "It's picturesque and—and moving."

"Moving?" echoed William with a harsh laugh. "Gosh, yes! It'd move me, all right. It'd move me to the other end of the earth. An' look. I'd rather go out on one of those ships in hist'ry with slaves battened on hatches. I'd rather be tarred with feathers an'—an' drawn with quarters an'—an' hung with giblets on Tower Hill same as they did to people in hist'ry than wear those ole frills an' pants. They thought up some jolly crule things in hist'ry, but they never thought up anythin' as bad as those ole frills an' pants. 'Least," with his short sarcastic laugh, "it's news to *me* if they did."

"Now listen, William——" began Mrs. Brown, but William, embarked on the full tide of his eloquence, was not so easily checked.

"I bet if they'd used those frills an' pants 'stead of racks an' thumb screws, the crim'nals would have confessed straight off. I bet if they'd dressed up those Jews in those ole frills an' pants 'stead of pullin' their teeth out, they'd have told them where they'd hid their money, all right. I bet if ____"

"Be *quiet*, William," said Mrs. Brown, making a determined effort to stem the tide. "You'll only be wearing it once. What harm can it possibly do you?"

"Harm?" said William with another short laugh. "It's the sort of thing people never forget. Not all one's life. Not even when you're an old man. I bet even if I live to be a hundred people'll still burst out laughin' when they see me, thinkin' of those frills an' pants."

"But, William," said Mrs. Brown, "every other child in the place will be wearing them, too."

William's mind went over his contemporaries.

"They'll look diff'rent," he said darkly.

"Of course, some of them will," admitted Mrs. Brown. "Some of them are more—picturesque than you, I know, but there'll be a crowd of you all together. You won't be noticed."

William considered.

"I've not time for it," he said at last. "I'm goin' to be very busy jus' now. I've jus' started somethin' that's going to take up a good bit of time an' I'm too busy to go dressin' up in frills and pants."

"What have you started, William?" said Mrs. Brown with a distrust born of long experience.

"Nothin' much," said William evasively. He had decided that the less the grown-up world knew about his Pets' Club, the better. "Jus' a sort of—well, I mean, it's a sort of meetin'. Jus' a quiet meetin'. Jus' a few friends an'—an' we won't keep animals out if they want to come. Jus' a sort of quiet meetin' with jus' a few quiet friends an'—an' jus' not keeping animals out if they want to come."

But Mrs. Brown's attention had wandered from William's activities to the state of his person.

"Have you washed your face since this morning, William?" she said.

"I don't remember," said William vaguely. "I can't remember every single thing I do every single day of the year. I did wash my face once three times in one day an' it may've been to-day or it may've been some other day. I——"

"*William!*" said Mrs. Brown, her horror deepening as she inspected his person more closely. "*Look* at your stockings! *And* your jacket! What on earth have you been doing with yourself this afternoon?"

"No, I don't think I have washed it since this mornin'," said William, beating a hasty retreat.

His fears about Miss Milton's Nursery Rhyme performance proved, to begin with at any rate, unfounded. For Miss Milton, though a brave woman, shrank from tackling the collection of incorrigibles whom she had lumped together for the final scene, "Girls and Boys, Come out to Play." They won't really need any rehearsing, she assured herself. They'll only have to run across the stage. It's the others who'll need the polish. . . . And she proceeded to apply the polish to the others, rehearsing, exhorting, drilling and organising. Everything went smoothly. Caroline Jones looked adorable as Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary; Maisie Fellowes and Georgie Parker made a delightful Jack and Jill; Jimmy Barlow as Boy Blue raised his horn to his lips with air of seraphic innocence; Ella Poppleham put the kettle on with a suggestion of dainty domesticity; Frankie Bakers rode his cock horse with infantile dignity and Peregrin Forrester, as Tom Tucker, sang for his supper with six-year-old charm in a sweet clear childish voice.

All this, except the last, William considered beneath his notice. But he disliked Peregrin intensely. Not only was he Dolores' brother, continually held up to him as an example, despite his tender years, but he was in himself the most objectionable child whom William had ever known. He was smug, he was sly, he was unbearably conceited, he wore carefully cherished curls and little white silk blouses, embroidered in Hungarian fashion by Dolores herself. He was the apple of Dolores' eye. He had been christened Albert and it was Dolores who had decided when he was two years old that Peregrin was a more suitable name. Even this would scarcely have affected William had not Robert, in order to curry favour with Dolores, taken to giving Peregrin the perquisites that William considered to be his by right—a discarded penknife, an old fountain pen, a cracked compass, a veteran tennis ball. Peregrin didn't really want these things but he derived great satisfaction from the knowledge that William wanted them.

It was the discovery that Robert was slipping an occasional sixpence to Peregrin that roused William's indignation to its highest pitch.

"Givin' all his money away to strangers," he said, "an' lettin' his own brother starve to death for all he cares!"

"Don't be silly, William," said Mrs. Brown, to whom he was pouring out his grievances. "Peregrin isn't a stranger and you aren't starving to death."

"How d'you know I'm not starving to death?" said William. "If he'd given me that sixpence he gave to ole Pelican yesterday it might make all the diff'rence whether I grow up strong an' healthy or not. I could've bought peanuts with it an' they're nourishin', are peanuts. I've got a weak sort of feelin' comin' over me already with not havin' had those peanuts."

"Robert's a perfect right to do what he likes with his own things," said Mrs. Brown, "and it's ridiculous of you to fuss about it like this."

"I'm not fussin'," said William. "I'm only afraid that Robert'll be sorry when it's too late. I bet his conscience'll be gnawin' at him an' it'll be too late to try an' put things right on his death-bed same as people do in books. I want to save him all that trouble of repentin' on his death-bed an' tryin' to put things right when it's too late. If he'd give me sixpence or a shillin' now it'd save him all that trouble. It's Robert I'm thinkin' of more'n me. At least I'm thinkin' of both of us. An' I'm thinkin' of that ole Pelican, too, 'cause ____"

"William, do go away," said Mrs. Brown desperately. "I'm trying to count these stitches and you go on talking and talking."

"*Me?*" said William indignantly. "I've hardly spoke. All I said was that I didn't want to give Robert the trouble of repentin' on his death-bed an' that I've got a sort of starvin' feelin' comin' over me that sixpennoth of peanuts would put right an' that——"

"William, if you haven't anything else to do, go and tidy that cupboard in your bedroom. It's in a shocking mess."

"Well, I have somethin' else to do," said William, making for the door. "I've got a very important meetin' of somethin' I belong to an' I've got to go to it now."

Again suspicion stirred in Mrs. Brown's breast.

"What meeting, William?" she said.

"Oh . . . jus' what I told you the other day," said William vaguely from the hall. "Jus' a few quiet friends an'—an' a few quiet animals an'——"

"But, William," began Mrs. Brown, her suspicions gathering force, "what do you mean by a few quiet animals? Where are you going?"

It was too late, however. William was already walking down the road, his hands thrust into his pockets, Jumble at his heels, his untuneful whistle shattering the peace of the countryside.

It was the second meeting of the Pets' Club and all the members, except those whose owners were rehearsing Nursery Rhymes at Miss Milton's house, were present. The previous meeting had been a lively one. Jumble had evidently considered that his presidential duties consisted solely in chasing cats and fighting with an Airedale, a Scottie and an outsize in mongrels whenever these presented themselves to him. The maggot had died in the interval and had been buried with appropriate ceremony. The chrysalis had hatched out and had been replaced by an aggressive-looking caterpillar with projecting teeth. Much to William's relief the owner of the teddy bear and Arabella's baby brother had succumbed to whooping-cough and were not there to compromise the dignity of the proceedings. William had intended this meeting to be a "Pets' Tricks" meeting, but the pets had ideas of their own about tricks and the "trick" that most appealed to them was that of attacking and pursuing their fellow members with the maximum of commotion.

"Well, it's been a jolly good meeting," said William at the end.

"Not many tricks that I saw," commented Georgie Parker.

"Well, they're *their* sort of tricks," said William with spirit. "It's *their* club, isn't it? An' they've a right to do the sort of tricks they want to in it. Well, it's news to *me* if an'mals can't do the sort of tricks they want to in

their own club. If you'd tried to train 'em to do the sort of thing they did to-day, you couldn't have, could you, so that *proves* they were jolly good tricks. . . . An' we'll have another meetin' this time nex' week an' we'll have Animal Races. The whole lot of 'em against the whole lot of 'em."

"We can't have it this time next week," said someone, " 'cause it's the day of the nursery rhyme performance."

"An animal club's a jolly sight more important than that ole nursery rhyme performance," said William loftily. "Anyway, the ole nursery rhyme thing doesn't begin till half past seven. There'll be heaps of time to have a meetin' before then."

"Yes, but Miss Milton said we'd got to be at the Village Hall at half past five, and we don't come out of school till four."

"Jus' like ole Miss Milton," said William. "She does everything hours an' hours before she need. Anyway, I don't see why those who're only in that las' scene about girls an' boys comin' out to play shouldn't come to the nex' animal meetin'. The Village Hall's only jus' across the road an' we could jus' go across to it when it's time for it. We could come to the meetin' wearin' those ole frills and pants an' then we could go on with it to the las' minute. We'll have a nice quiet meetin' so's not to get ourselves into a mess. Jus' a quiet sort of All Against All race."

The meeting agreed. They had enjoyed the "tricks" and were looking forward with zest to the All Against All race. Happy, bedraggled, dishevelled, they led their pets home.

William and Ginger set off together across the field. Ginger carried Dasher, and Jumble raced ahead, performing a whole series of "tricks" that he had only just thought of.

"Gosh!" groaned William as he climbed the stile into the road. "There's that ole Pelican!"

For Peregrin was trotting serenely down the road, singing his "Little Tom Tucker" song to himself. He was returning from the rehearsal at Miss Milton's, where he had acquitted himself so notably that Miss Milton had said: "Peregrin dear, even if all the rest is a failure, your little scene will make amends."

William would have passed him without recognition, but Peregrin stopped in front of him.

"Hello, William," he said with a slow smile.

"Hello," said William shortly.

"Where've you been?"

"Mind your own business," said William.

"I've been at your house," said Peregrin sweetly. "At least I was at your house before I went to the rehearsal at Miss Milton's, and such a lovely thing happened, William. Robert's going to give me his collection of bird's eggs."

With that, his lips curved in their angelic smile, he proceeded on his way.

William stood staring after him, his eyes round with horror. For a moment his emotion was too deep for words. Then:

"Gosh!" he gasped. "Robert's birds' egg collection! Of all the——!"

Again emotion deprived him of speech. For Robert's birds' egg collection was a family possession, part of the background of his life since childhood. It seemed the blackest of treachery that Robert should give it to Peregrin Forrester.

William lost no time in hunting Robert down. He found him in the garden and taxed him sternly with his crime. Robert adopted a lofty and dispassionate attitude. Actually he was feeling a little guilty. He was as well aware as William of the treachery of his action, but Dolores had been so sweetly wistful, had spoken so movingly of Peregrin's love of Nature, had hinted so plainly at the joy that such a collection of birds' eggs as Robert's would give him, that, before Robert quite realised what he was doing, he had laid the offering at the beloved's feet.

"It's my own property," he said distantly to William. "I've a perfect right to do what I like with my own property."

"But your *egg* c'lection!" said William. "That ole Pelican havin' your *egg* c'lection! He's no right. It's not fair. It's—it's the same as stealin'."

"Don't be absurd," said Robert, "and his name's Peregrin."

"It can be Kangaroo for all I care," said William heatedly. "It's the meanest thing anyone's done to anyone since the world began. It's worse than Cain or Dr. Crippen or—or Guy Fawkes or—or that man called Squeers that kept a school in Shakespeare or—or——"

"The trouble with you," interrupted Robert, "is that you haven't the slightest conception of the difference between meum and tuum."

"No, an' I'm glad I haven't," said William bitterly, "if it means givin' an egg c'lection what I remember ever since I was born to that rotten ole Pelican. Why, even——"

But Robert had made good his escape and William found himself addressing a patch of denuded brussels sprout stalks.

Somewhat to William's surprise, Mrs. Brown supported him.

"I really think it's a little uncalled for, Robert," she said.

"What do you mean, uncalled for?" said Robert, trying to preserve his poise of aloof detachment.

"Giving your egg collection to Peregrin Forrester. I think that, if you're going to give it away at all, William should come first. He's your own brother."

"I don't see what that has to do with it," said Robert. "He may be my own brother, but you can't deny that he's the most destructive little ruffian within miles. He'd have the whole thing smashed to atoms in a week. Peregrin is quiet and careful and—and deeply interested in Nature."

"Well, that doesn't mean you've got to give him your egg collection. I agree with William. I think it's unnatural."

"Unnatural!" echoed Robert wildly, running his hands through his hair and making another hasty retreat.

Despite all this, he would have stuck to his guns if Mr. Brown hadn't joined the forces against him.

"Giving his egg collection to that little brat?" he said. "The boy must be crazed."

Distractedly Robert sought out Dolores.

"I don't know why it is, darling," he said, "but the family seem to have got a *thing* about that egg collection."

"How do you mean, Robert?" said Dolores.

"They seem to think that if I give it away at all I ought to give it to William."

"William?" said Dolores incredulously.

"I know. It's ridiculous. He'd have the whole thing smashed in a week."

"Surely you've a right to do what you like with it," said Dolores.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" said Robert with an ironic laugh, "but that point of view never seems to have occurred to them. . . . And, honestly, Dolores, with the whole family against me, I don't see how I can give it him."

There was a long silence during which the expression of Dolores' face changed from indignation to triumph.

"I've thought of a way, Robert," she said at last.

"What?" said Robert.

"There'd be no objection to your giving it as a prize to the best child actor in Miss Milton's Nursery Rhyme scenes, would there?"

"No," said Robert, "but I don't see——"

"But, Robert, Peregrin's *sure* to get it, then. Everyone says that his Little Tom Tucker scene is too sweet for words. He's got the dearest little voice and he looks too adorable in the Kate Greenaway costume. We had it made specially of apple green satin to suit his colouring. None of the others will stand an earthly beside him. You see, dear, don't you?"

"Y-yes," said Robert doubtfully, "but who will you get to judge?"

"Oh, Robert, I've suddenly got an idea for that, too. Sir Ross Lewes has come to live in Marleigh, you know. He's an old man now, but he was the most famous actor of his day. He was knighted for it, you remember. Let's ask him to judge, shall we? There's no doubt at all that he'll give it to Peregrin."

"Very well," said Robert, beginning to wish that he'd never had the unfortunate idea of forming the collection at all.

This news, imparted to William, did nothing to restore his equanimity.

"Might as well give it to him straight away without messin' about with Tom Tuckers an' ole actors," he said. "Well, I'm jus' not goin' to bother about it any more. I've got this Pets' Club All Against All race to plan. I bet it'll be jolly excitin'."

"I still think it's a bit dangerous, havin' it the day of the Nursery Rhyme performance," said Douglas.

"No, it isn't," said William. "We'll start it early so's not to clash with that las' scene we're in."

"It's not the beginnin' that's worryin' me," said Douglas. "It's the end."

" 'Course it'll be all right," said William. "We'll have a nice quiet race an' we'll be over at the Village Hall in time to do our Girls and Boys Come Out to Play thing. I'm jolly well not goin' to give up our meetin' for ole Miss Milton an' her rotten ole nursery rhymes."

The day of the performance was fine and every seat in the Village Hall was taken. Sir Ross Lewes, an old man with a long thin face and deep-set piercing eyes, sat in the middle of the front row. Robert, as donor of the prize, sat next to him and Dolores next to Robert.

"Peregrin's been resting all afternoon," whispered Dolores to Robert, "so as to be quite fresh for it. I sprayed his throat just before I came out. His dear little voice is just too lovely and he looks adorable. It's going to be a wonderful experience for him."

"Not much in my line—infant phenomena," growled Sir Ross, "but I know a good performance when I see it."

He had been offered a programme but had refused it.

"The scenes should explain themselves," he said. "And the names of the actors would convey nothing to me."

Behind the scenes all was turmoil and confusion. Little Boy Blue's horn suddenly refused to function, Little Bo Peep had an attack of nerves and refused to come out from under the grand piano, the Cock Horse's head came adrift and had to be fixed with string, Polly had forgotten her kettle, the King of Hearts had absent-mindedly eaten his tarts and Jack and Jill, after a short sharp exchange of insults, had set upon each other tooth and nail. Only Peregrin remained serene and unmoved, watching proceedings with his superior smile.

It occurred to Miss Milton, in all this commotion, that the actors of the last scene, "Girls and Boys Come Out to Play," had not yet put in an appearance and she was aware of a certain relief on this score. The addition of that particular group of children to the turmoil already existing in the constricted space behind the stage would have been almost more than she could bear. She decided that, even if they didn't turn up at all, it wouldn't matter. The performance was complete without the final scene. It could end with "Little Tom Tucker", the most charming scene of all. Indeed, she decided, it would be a good thing if they didn't turn up. . . .

But the turmoil that reigned behind the stage in the Village Hall was as nothing to the turmoil that reigned across the field at the Pets' Club meeting in the old barn. The All Against All race had swiftly degenerated into a series of fights in which owners and pets took part zestfully and indiscriminately. It was, perhaps, unfortunate that the owners had agreed to assemble in their Kate Greenaway costumes, so as not to waste time going home to change after the meeting. The costumes were made of the flimsiest material. At the end of half an hour they hung in rags and tatters about their wearers' forms. William presented the most deplorable spectacle. During a spirited scuffle, the owner of the goldfish had spilt the water from its bowl and William had run down to the stream to refill it. In his excitement he had slipped and fallen full length into the water. Returning, dripping and mud-streaked, to the barn, he had set to work trying to reorganise the All Against

All Race by separating the various competitors from their private fights. The Scottie tore his pants, a mastiff (a new member who had just joined) knocked him down and Jumble leapt upon him in delight as he lay on the ground pulling at any loose ends of material that he could find and generally reducing the Kate Greenaway costume to its component parts.

William, who had enjoyed the process while it was going on, rose to his feet and looked down with sudden dismay at the expanse of woollen underwear that was now exposed to view.

"Gosh!" he said. "I'm *nakid*!"

"Your skin doesn't show," Ginger reassured him. "Not in many places, anyway."

"But you can't act like that," said Henry. "You'll have to go home an' put somethin' else on."

"I can't go home," said William. "I can't go through the streets *nakid*. Well," with rising irritation, "can't you *do* somethin' 'stead of jus' starin' at me?"

"I'll go home an' get you some clothes," said Ginger. "It won't take me a minute. I can't get you any Kate Greenaway things."

"I don't *want* any Kate Greenaway things," snapped William. "I only want some *yuman* clothes."

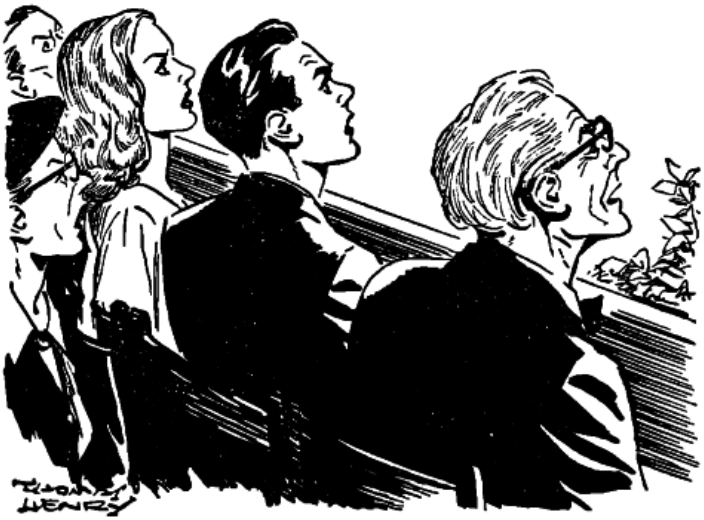
"All right," said Ginger. "I'll be as quick as I can."

He returned, breathless, a few minutes later, with something bundled under his arm.

"I couldn't get any proper clothes," he panted. "My mother'd gone to the Village Hall an' locked up the house. But I got this. It'll cover you anyway, till you get home, an' that's all you want. She'd put it out on the dust bin 'cause it'd got the moth in, but there's quite a lot of it that's not got the moth in." He shook out a dark blue chenille curtain, frayed and torn and moth-eaten into large holes. "The holes'll come in jolly useful. They'll do for your arms an' legs an' head to come through an' you can sort of wrap it round you."

William inspected the garment with interest.

"Yes," he said, "it's not bad. It's yuman, anyway."



THE CROWD OF TATTERDEMALION CHILDREN AND BARKING DOGS RUSHED ACROSS THE STAGE.

He thrust his head through one hole, his arms through two others, wrapped it about him and, picking up a bit of old rope that lay in a corner of the barn, tied it round his waist and began to strut to and fro. “It’s a jolly sight better than those ole Green Kataway things.”

The others crowded round him, relaxing their hold on their pets, and it was at this moment that Douglas’s rat escaped with a bound from his pocket and made for the open door.

Immediately Dasher leapt from Ginger's arm and set off in pursuit. After them went the dogs, barking furiously, and after them the owners in full cry. Monty had a good start. He streaked down the field . . . through the hedge . . . across the road . . . in at the small door that opened on to the stage of the Village Hall . . . and across the platform, followed by three cats, half a dozen dogs and the tattered army of pet-owners.

The whole thing was so sudden that no one quite realised what was happening till it was over. The curtain was up because "Little Tom Tucker" was just over, and Miss Milton, had decided with secret relief, to write off "Girls and Boys, Come Out to Play" altogether. Massed flowers at the edge of the platform had hidden the rat and the cats, but the barking dogs and the crowd of tatterdemalion children dashing across the stage, headed by William in his chenille curtain, were visible to the entire audience. There was a moment's petrified silence, then a roar of delight from Sir Ross.

" 'Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,
The beggars are coming to town,
Some in rags and some in tags
And one in a velvet gown.'

"No doubt about that one! And excellent! Excellent! Full of verve and dash and spirit. That's the one that has my vote. Far and away the best."

Miss Milton was past the power of speech. It was the Vicar who, by a supreme effort, rallied his forces to say:

"And which of the individual actors do you think merits the prize, Sir Ross?"

"The one in the velvet gown," said Sir Ross. "He was excellent. Excellent. He seemed to embody the whole carefree spirit of vagabondage. A most spirited performance."

"But what about Little Tom Tucker?" wailed Dolores.

"Anæmic. Pretty-pretty. Namby-pamby," said Sir Ross. "Simpering little idiot. Couldn't even sing in tune."

"Oh!" gasped Dolores.

Peregrin burst into howls of rage, and Dolores, her face tense and tragic, led him from the hall.

A few minutes later, William, dragged from the field behind the Village Hall, where he was trying to disentangle the President of the Pets' Club from a confused medley of members, was standing on the platform being presented with the birds' egg collection by Robert. And suddenly he realised

that he didn't want it. He realised that its chief attraction had lain in the fact that it belonged to Robert. He wanted to have it again in the background of his life as Robert's possession. He wanted to take a pride in it as Robert's possession, not his own.

"Will you keep it for me till I'm old," he said, "an' sort of go on pretendin' it's yours, 'cept that you won't give it to that ole Pelican?"

But Robert was already hot-foot down the path of the Village Hall after Dolores.

"And now, William Brown," said Miss Milton, when the audience had departed and she'd got him alone, "what have you to say for yourself?"

William searched frantically for something to say for himself and, rather to his surprise, found it.

"Well, I only did what you said we'd gotter do," he said.

"And what do you mean by that?" said Miss Milton sternly.

"I gave 'em somethin' to remember for the rest of their lives," said William.

CHAPTER VII

WILLIAM'S SECRET SOCIETY

"IT'S rotten," said William gloomily. "They said it was comin' at the beginning of this month an' it's the middle an' it's not come yet."

"P'raps it's had a puncture," suggested Ginger.

"P'raps the lions got out an' ate up the rest of it," suggested Douglas.

"I bet the Pig with Human Brains had somethin' to do with it," said Henry. "He was jolly clever. Gosh! The way he could add! P'raps the Gov'nment borrowed him to help with the Income Tax sums or somethin' like that an' they're waitin' till he's finished."

"I bet they're not comin' at all," said Douglas gloomily. "They've never been as late as this before."

Twice a year a fair was held in the big meadow just outside Hadley, and the Outlaws were enthusiastic patrons of it. They were familiar with all the sideshows—the Lady of Lions, the Thinnest Man in the World, the Flea Circus, the Wild West Show, the Dodgems, the High Flyer, the Sky Rocket, the Super Airways and the Wall of Death—and would have been deeply outraged by any alteration.

"Gosh! It seems years an' *years* since the las' time they came," said William, thinking of the blissful evening he had spent with Professor Golightly watching the Wall of Death at Hadley Fair.

"I got a coco-nut as near as near," said Ginger. "I bet I get one quite nex' time."

"If there *is* a nex' time," said Douglas. "P'raps they've lost the map an' forgot the way."

The Outlaws walked on down the road for some time in silence. Gradually the gloom cleared from William's countenance.

"Tell you what!" he said. "Let's do somethin' excitin' ourselves to make up."

"What?" said Ginger.

"How excitin'?" said Douglas a little apprehensively.

"We'd never do anythin' as excitin' as the Wall of Death," said Henry.

"We won't *try* an' do the things they do in fairs," said William. "We'll do somethin' quite diff'rent. Somethin' we've never done before."

"What?" said Ginger again.

William was silent for a few moments; then, with a burst of inspiration: "We'll have a Secret Society."

"Gosh, yes!" said Ginger. "That's a jolly good idea."

"An' we'll have passwords an' disguises," said William, "an' put up a notice an' have a meetin' in the old barn an' I'll make a speech."

"You can't make a speech about a Secret Society," said Henry. "If it's a Secret Society it's gotter be secret."

"Yes, I s'pose so," said William regretfully. He prided himself on his powers as a public orator and did not like to let slip any opportunity of using them. "Never mind. We can fix up some jolly excitin' passwords an' disguises an'—an' aliases. We'll strike terror into their hearts all right."

"Whose?" said Ginger.

"Crim'nals," said William. "We'll have a Secret Society for puttin' down crim'nals, an' I bet by the time we've finished there won't be a single crim'nal left."

"That's goin' to be jolly hard lines on judges an' p'licemen," Ginger pointed out.

"Y-yes," agreed William. "Well, we'll leave 'em just a few. They can keep some of the little ones to practise on, but we'll put down all the big ones. Now let's settle passwords an' disguises an' things."

They spent the next half-hour deciding passwords and disguises.

"There's that jockey cap Ethel wears when she goes ridin'," said William. "I bet no one could tell me from a jockey if I wore that."

"An' there's that tweed hat my father wears when he goes fishin'," said Douglas. "It's got flies stuck all over it an' I bet anyone'd think I was a fisherman if I wore it."

"An' there's that hat my uncle wears when he does his bees," said Ginger. "I could pinch that an' I bet anyone'd think I was a bee-man."

Henry was weighing the rival merits of his George Washington fancy dress costume (which he thought would effectively disguise him as a film star), and an overall of his mother's, irreparably stained in the making of damson jam (which, he thought, with the addition of her pastry brush, carelessly tucked in at the waist, would give him the appearance of an eminent artist) when a fall of soot in the sitting-room fireplace at home

determined him to black his face and hands in a manner that would make him indistinguishable from a professional chimney sweep.

The first meeting was held in the tool-shed of Ginger's house—a cunning step devised to put off the scent such unknown enemies as might think that they would meet, as usual, in the old barn. The members made their way to the spot by devious and circuitous routes—again in order to deceive possible enemies—giving the passwords in assumed voices before they were admitted by William. The assumed voices had been the subject of lengthy discussion. Finally William had decided to speak in a deep bass voice, Ginger in a high treble, Douglas in a quavering tremulo and Henry in a short sharp bark. Douglas, who had forgotten the password ("Death to Criminals"), was refused admittance but managed to effect an entry through the window while the other three were discussing the situation.

An elaborate oath of secrecy was then administered and a still more elaborate system of signals devised by which they were to indicate to each other various degrees of danger—no danger, middling danger, special danger, deadly danger, pressing need for reinforcement and even the immediate calling in of Scotland Yard. And then suddenly things seemed to fall rather flat.

"Well, what're we goin' to *do*?" said Ginger.

"We've settled what to do," said William a little irritably. "We're goin' to put down crim'nals."

"Well, we've got to find 'em to put 'em down," said Ginger.

"An' we've got to start on one special one," said Henry. "We can't start on the whole lot together. We don't know where they live for one thing."

"They live in the underground," said Ginger.

"You're thinkin' of the underworld," said Henry. "It's somethin' quite diff'rent."

"We ought to be a bit careful," said Douglas. "They slash with razors, do crim'nals."

"I bet I'd get a crim'nal before he'd time to pull his razor out," said William. "I'm jolly strong. Look! You can feel my muscle goin' up an' down when you put your hand on my arm. Gosh! It's *enormous*."

"It's not bigger than mine," said Ginger.

"It is."

"It isn't."

"All right. *Feel* it."

"You feel mine."

The two had a spirited wrestling match in the somewhat restricted space of the tool-shed; then, refreshed and invigorated, returned to the matter in hand.

"We've got to decide what *kind* of a crim'nal we're goin' to start on," said Henry. "There's all sorts of crim'nals. There's robbers an' murderers an' forgers an' hold-uppers an' smugglers an' kidnappers an'—an' infidels an' heretics an'——"

"They're all a bit old-fashioned," said Ginger. "I'd like to start on someone a bit new-fashioneder than those."

"*Tell* you what!" said William. "There's the new sort that go off to Russia with sci'ntific secrets. Let's catch one of them."

"Gosh, yes!" said Ginger. "That's a good idea. But"—something of his eagerness vanished—"I bet there aren't any round here."

"I bet there *are*," said William. "No one knows where they are. Well, it's news to *me*"—with his hoarse ironic laugh—"that there's anythin' about this partic'lar place that stops crim'nals comin' to it."

"What about old Stinks?" said Henry. "He's always messin' about in the lab."

Their thoughts turned to the elderly innocuous science master at the school they attended . . . and regretfully dismissed him as a suspect.

"He doesn't do anythin' but play golf an' grow chrysanthemums for the Flower Show," said Douglas.

"He's jolly old, too," said Ginger. "I bet he doesn't know anythin' about atom bombs. I bet he's still tryin' to find out how gunpowder works."

"Anyway, they find out about atom bombs in London," said William, "in places like The Tower an' the House of Commons, an' he never goes to London."

"I think we'd better be a bit careful of atom bombs," said Douglas. "They're s'posed to be dangerous."

"Anyway, I think this would be a jolly good place for an atom bomb stealer to come to," said William, "'cause no one'd ever suspect them. Someone might find out all about atom bombs in London an' then come to a quiet country place like this to write it all down an' get it ready to take off to Russia."

"Yes, but there isn't anybody——"

They stopped and stared at each other open-mouthed.

"Mr. Kellyngs!" they said, all in the same breath.

"Gosh, yes!" said William excitedly when they had recovered from their amazement. "Fancy us not thinkin' of him! There he is, stayin' at Mrs. Barnet's at Honeysuckle Cottage an' writin' all day long. 'Course he's writin' about atom bombs an' as soon as he's finished he'll be off to Russia with it."

"An' he's got a beard, too," said William. "I *bet* he's a Russian."

"He's got a funny name, too."

"Gosh, yes!" said William. "I bet it's a Russian name. *'Course* it is. It's got s-k-y in it. All Russian names have got to end in -sky, 'cept Stalin an' he's allowed not to 'cause he's the head of the gang. This man's muddled his name up to put people off the scent, but I bet in Russia he puts the s-k-y at the end same as the rest of them."

"Yes, but he's a naturalist," said Henry mildly. "He's writin' a book about insects."

William gave another hoarse ironic laugh.

" 'Course he *says* he's a naturalist. He can't *say* he's an atom bomb stealer. They'd execute him straight away if he did."

"An' he comes from London," said Douglas. "I heard someone say so."

"Well, that proves it," said William. "He's stole atom bomb secrets from the Tower of London, an' he's come here to throw the p'lice off the scent an' so's he can write it all down quietly an' then suddenly one day he'll be off to Russia with it an'—an' we've got to stop him."

"How?" said Ginger.

"We've not got any proof," said Henry.

" 'Course we've got proof," said William; then, as another idea struck him, "All right. Let's *get* proof. It'll be good practise for puttin' crim'nals down. We'll wear our disguises and use our passwords an' things an' then we'll have another meetin' this time to-morrow an' all bring the proofs we've c'lected."

He gave the complicated signal that dismissed the meeting and the still more complicated signal that meant "No immediate danger", after which the Outlaws, once more by devious and circuitous routes, made their way home.

"WE'VE GOT TO STOP THIS BLACK-HEARTED TRAITOR GOIN' OFF TO OLD STALIN," SAID WILLIAM.

The meeting next day was held with elaborate secrecy. The place of the meeting was changed from Ginger's tool-shed to Henry's coal shed (in order to throw off anyone who might have discovered the former meeting place) and the password changed from "Death to Criminals" to "The Bull-dog Grip." Douglas, who was slightly confused by the rapid development of events, gave "Death to Bulldogs" as the password and again effected an unobtrusive entry while the others were discussing whether or not to admit him.

"Ladies an' gentlemen," said William, addressing the meeting in his most oratorical fashion. "I mean, gentlemen an' not ladies. Now we've all got to stop this black-hearted deadly traitor goin' off to ole Stalin with his atom bomb secrets what he stole from the Tower of London. An' we've got to have proof it's him, though we're jolly well sure it is, to start with. I bet we all got some jolly good proofs yesterday an' I bet by the time we've all told 'em we'll have enough to send him to prison an' get him executed, same as he ought to be. I got a jolly good proof, but I'll leave mine to the end. What proof did you get, Rupert of the Fiery Heart?"

Douglas, who had forgotten the name by which he went in the Secret Society and did not recognise himself under this pseudonym, continued to stare blankly at William till he realised that the gaze of everyone was focused on him and came to himself with a start.

"Oh, me!" he said self-consciously. "Well, I found a proof, all right. I heard Mrs. Barnet talkin' about him in the post office an' she said he had lemon in his tea 'stead of milk an' I know that's called Russian tea, 'cause I saw it once on one of those cards in a restaurant, so that *proves* he's a Russian."

" 'Course it does," said William. He looked at Douglas with faint disapproval. "You didn't run into much deadly danger findin' that out."

"No," agreed Douglas simply. "I didn't mean to."

"Well, what about you, Ginger? I mean Hector the Dare-Devil."

Ginger leapt to his feet.

"I got a jolly good proof," he said. "I crept up to the window where he was writin'. There was a good thick bush to hide me, an' anyway I was wearin' my bee-man's hat, so, if anyone'd seen me, I could pretend I was a bee-man looking for bees, an' got so close I could see what he was writin' an' he went out of the room once, so I could put my head right through the window an'—— Gosh! I could tell as plain as plain he was writin' about the atom bomb. I'd got a piece of paper an' I wrote down on it what he'd put. He'd wrote"—he took a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and spelt the words out slowly—"Hypomma bituberculata. He was pretendin' it was the name of a spider, but there's atom bomb in it. The letters are all muddled up but there's the letters of atom bomb in it."

"There's other letters, too," Henry pointed out.

" 'Course there is," said Ginger. "It's a code, you chump. He'd have to put other letters in as well as atom bomb to throw people off the scent."

"You've got to use the b twice over to make 'atom bomb' out of it," said Henry.

"That's to put people off the scent, too," said Ginger, "an', anyway, I found another one. He'd wrote down"—again he consulted his piece of paper and spelled out the words letter by letter—"Salticus scenicus, an' he was pretendin' that was the name of a spider, too, but it's got Stalin in it. S-t-a-l-i-n. 'Course he had to put other letters in, too, to throw people off the scent, but that's just his cunnin'. It's as plain as plain he was writin' to Stalin about the atom bomb secrets he'd stole."

WILLIAM, DISGUISED IN A JOCKEY CAP, PEEPED IN THE WINDOW
AND SAW MR. KELLYNGS WRITING LIKE MAD.

"Yes, that's a jolly good proof," said William, "an' I did the same as you. I'll tell you what I did." He assumed his oratorical manner. "Ladies an' gentlemen. I mean gentlemen an' not ladies. Now listen to what Rudolph of the Bloody Hand—that's me—did. I went to that bush same as Hector the Dare-Devil. . . . You'd jolly well messed it about, too, Hector the Dare-Devil."

"Well, p'r'aps I did," admitted Ginger. "I had to break a few bits off to see prop'ly."

"Well, there wasn't much of it left by the time I got there," said William. "Anyway, I was wearin' that jockey cap of Ethel's so's I could pretend I was a jockey what'd lost his horse in a race an' was lookin' for it, but no one saw me an' he was writin' away like mad an' he'd got a sort of look in his eye that'd have told me he was a traitor after atom bombs even if I'd not known anythin' about him. He'd just drawed somethin' on a page an' he was writin' under it that it was a cocoon, but it was an atom bomb plain as plain an' on the other side of the page he'd drawed something that he'd wrote under was a spider's web, an' as soon as I got home I looked at a spider's

web an' it was as diff'rent as diff'rent from what he'd drawed so I know that what he'd drawed was the inside of an atom bomb. He'd drawed the outside of it on one page an' called it a cocoon, an' he'd drawed the inside on the other page an' called it a spider's web. Gosh! He's jolly cunnin'. Then I broke another branch of the bush tryin' to see closer, an' he looked up sudden an' he'd got murder in his eye, so I went off quick as quick. I only jus' escaped with my life."

"Yes," said Ginger, "he'd got a savage look about him when I was there. I 'spect he'd stick at nothin'. I 'spect he's one of those crim'nals that'd wade in people's blood soon as look at 'em."

"What about me?" said Henry in an aggrieved tone of voice. "When's someone goin' to ask me what I found out?"

"All right," said William. "I'll ask you now. . . . Henrico the Terrible, what hast thee discovered?"

"I discovered somethin' all right," said Henry, mollified by William's impressive manner, "an' I went right into the jaws of death doin' it, too. I waited till they'd both gone out—the crim'nal an' Mrs. Barnet—then I went in, 'cause she'd left the door unlocked, an' I went right into his bedroom and had a look round, 'cause I thought I might find some atom bombs hid under his clothes in his drawers. I'd blacked my face so's I could pretend to be a chimney sweep havin' a look at the chimney if they came back sudden. Anyway, I didn't find an atom bomb, but I jolly well found somethin'."

"What?" said the others eagerly.

"I found a waistcoat with fur on its inside," said Henry. "Well, that shows he comes from Russia. They wear clothes with fur on 'em in Russia. I've seen pictures of Russians dressed in clothes with fur on 'em, throwing things at wolves. I bet he thought no one'd notice a bit on a waistcoat an' he'd got it hid under a thing that looked like a box with shoe-cleanin' things in, but I bet it was really a secret wireless for talkin' to Stalin."

"Gosh, yes!" said William. " 'Course it was. Well, now we've *proved* he's an atom bomb stealer. I knew he was all along."

"Yes, but what are we goin' to do about it?" said Henry.

"That's what we've got to think out," said William. "I haven't quite got an idea yet, but I bet I get one soon. Tell you what we'll do first of all. We'll *shadow* him, same as they do in books; then, when we think he's ready to go off to Russia, we'll—we'll close in on him."

The others eagerly agreed. The position of having a convicted criminal under their observation was a pleasant one and they did not wish to

jeopardise it by any premature action.

During the days that followed Mr. Kellyngs came to the conclusion that the juvenile population of the village was larger than he had at first imagined. Small boys seemed to hem him in on all sides wherever he went. He fell over them, bumped into them, found them at his heels, blocking his path, almost, it seemed, in his pockets. They wore strange garments, they spoke in strange voices, they called each other by strange names, but, beyond a vague feeling of exasperation, Mr. Kellyngs, busy preparing his book for the press, took little heed of them.

Then, one morning, William summoned a meeting of his Secret Society in the old barn.

"He's goin'," he said, forgetting his oratorical manner in his excitement. "He's goin' to-morrow. I heard Mrs. Barnet tellin' someone in the village. We've gotter *do* somethin' now an' do it jolly quick."

"What?" said Ginger.

"We've got to stop him goin'."

"How?"

"Well, Gosh!" said William irritably. "Use a little 'magination. How *do* people stop people doin' things?"

"They kidnap them in books," said Henry, "but there's lors against it."

"Well, never mind that," said William. "Stands to reason you've got to use crime when you're fightin' a crim'nal. Still"—he stopped, mentally contemplating the stalwart thick-set figure of their intended victim—"it might be a bit difficult. . . ."

"Yes, we don't want to end up bein' kidnapped ourselves," said Douglas.

"Well, we've got to decide somethin' quick," said William. "We don't want him to get off to Stalin while we're sittin' here talkin' about it."

"I bet nothin' we could do would scare him," said Ginger. "I bet that ole Stalin's the only one those ole Russians are scared of. I bet he's as big as two ordin'ry men an'——"

"No, he's not," said Henry. "There's a picture of him in our encyclopædia an' he's a little man with a sort of bushy moustache an' he wears a sort of blouse an' a porter's cap."

"*Gosh!*" said William. "I've got an idea, then. I could dress up as Stalin an' we could tell him that Stalin's come over to fetch his atom bomb stuff an' he'd come an' give it me an'—an' we'd take it up to London to the

gov'nment an' they'd catch him an' put him to death an' I bet everyone'd be jolly grateful to us."

"No one's ever been grateful to us yet," said Douglas gloomily.

"It won't be as easy as it sounds," said Ginger. "There'll be a lot to fix up first."

"Well, let's fix it up, then," said William.

Mr. Kellyngs paid his bill, took his leave of Mrs. Barnet and set off on the road towards the station, carrying his suit-case in one hand and the attaché-case containing his manuscript in the other. He walked slowly, enjoying the peace of the countryside. He had left himself ample time to catch the eleven-thirty, and there was no need to hurry. Turning round, he saw that three or four boys were walking just behind him, but three or four boys were generally walking just behind him or just in front of him or by his side. It had never occurred to Mr. Kellyngs to notice that it was the same three or four boys who accompanied him on each occasion. He merely thought that the village was over-populated with boys of that particular size. He realised that they were now walking abreast of him—two on one side and one on the other.

"Shall I carry your suit-case for you?" said one in a quavering high-pitched voice.

"No, thank you," said Mr. Kellyngs shortly.

"Shall I carry your 'taché case?" said another in a voice so sharply falsetto that it nearly made Mr. Kellyngs drop both cases into the road.

"No, thank you," said Mr. Kellyngs.

He didn't trust children and he didn't intend to let his attaché-case out of his hand till he had deposited it safely in his publisher's office.

"It wouldn't be any trouble," barked the third child. "We'd like to help you."

"No, thank you," said Mr. Kellyngs again. "I prefer to carry my own cases."

The children exchanged significant glances.

"Well, that jolly well *proves* it, Hector the Dare-Devil," said one.

"Yes, it jolly well does, Henrico the Terrible," said another.

"Well, now I must hurry, my little men," said Mr. Kellyngs in a tone of dismissal. "I'm catching the eleven-thirty and must get on to the station."

"Gosh!" said one of them. "Didn't you know about the strike?"

"What strike?" said Mr. Kellyngs.

"The railway strike."

Mr. Kellyngs stopped short.

"Good Heavens!" he said. "No one told me and I haven't opened my newspaper this morning. What a nuisance! Just to-day when it's most important that I should get to London." His irritation rose. "But surely I can't be the only passenger. Someone must be in charge of the arrangements."

The boy with the curious bleating voice spoke.

"The person in charge of *your* arrangements is over there in the old barn."

Mr. Kellyngs looked at the ramshackle building that could be seen at the end of the field that bordered the road. Relief and perplexity was visible in his face.

"How strange!" he said. "But I suppose they're chartering a coach and assembling the passengers there. Well, I mustn't waste any more time."

"We'll take you to it," said the boy who barked like a dog. "It's this way . . . over the stile."

The procession wended its way across the field.

Ginger and Douglas fell behind the other two.

"I've not had time to show you this before," whispered Ginger, bringing a cardboard box out of his pocket, "but it's something pretty deadly. The greengrocer's boy found it in a crate of bananas this mornin' and he swapped it with me for my ninepenny 'bus ticket." He opened the box a fraction of an inch, revealing a bloated-looking spider with a furry body, then quickly closed it again. "Its bite," he continued impressively, "is certain death. The boy said it was an' he ought to know."

"Gosh!" said Douglas.

"We'll only use it if we have to, of course," said Ginger, "but he's a jolly savage crim'nal. You can see that by lookin' at him. He's prob'ly got razor blades hid all over him. We'll only use the spider 'case he gets so savage it's a matter of life an' death."

"How will it know which to bite?" said Douglas nervously. "The spider, I mean."

“Dunno,” said Ginger. “I never thought of that. Tell you what. If he starts gettin’ savage, I’ll slip it in the case where he’s got his atom bomb papers an’ then when he opens it he’ll get the bite that’s certain death. I don’t *want* to do it, of course, ’cause it’s a jolly serious thing givin’ a person a bite that’s certain death, even an atom bomb stealer. . . . Anyway, p’raps he won’t get savage. P’raps he’ll jus’ think William’s Stalin, same as we want him to, an’ give him the papers an’ go away.”

Henry and Mr. Kellyngs were just entering the old barn.

William sat in an impressive attitude on a packing case. His appearance had been copied faithfully (or rather as faithfully as possible) from the picture of Stalin in Henry’s encyclopædia. He wore a golfing blouse of Robert’s that engulfed his figure, Ethel’s jockey cap, and a large straggling moustache that Robert had once worn in some amateur theatricals and that fell off whenever he moved.

"HAIL, COMRADE!" SAID WILLIAM, HOLDING ON HIS MOUSTACHE.
"GIVE ME THE PAPERS AND BEGONE!"

Mr. Kellyngs stood staring at him, open-mouthed with amazement. William rose to his feet with an air of dignity.

"Hail, Comrade!" he said, holding his moustache on with one hand and making a sweeping gesture with the other. "I'm Stalin come over to England to fetch thy papers about the atom bomb. I'm flyin' back to Russia 'ere nightfall an' I'll take them along with me. Thee will be well paid for thy trouble, but I haven't any change on me at present. I'll send thee a postal order from Russia when I get there. Hist! Not a word! Give me the papers and begone!"

The amazement on Mr. Kellyngs' face was swiftly changing to anger.

“What outrageous trick is this?” he fumed, putting his cases down on the ground.

“He’s goin’ to get savage,” whispered Ginger. “He’ll have his razor blades out in a second an’ start wadin’ in our blood. Come on! We’ll have to do it.”

Swiftly he opened his cardboard box and slipped its occupant into the attaché-case among Mr. Kellyngs’ papers.

“What are you doing with my case, you little ruffian?” shouted Mr. Kellyngs. “How dare you tamper with it!”

“You’d better be careful,” said William. “I’ve got a hundred Cossacks hid in the wood with deadly weapons an’ if you don’t give me those papers ——”

Mr. Kellyngs had snatched up his case and opened it suspiciously in order to check its contents after Ginger’s “tampering.” Ginger had turned pale.

“Its bite is certain death,” he said in a hollow voice.

The expression on Mr. Kellyngs’ face had turned to one of delight.

“Nonsense!” he said. “It’s a Brazilian spider that I’ve been trying to find for years. This is wonderful! It——”

At that moment the vicar appeared in the doorway.

“I couldn’t think what had happened to you, Kellyngs,” he said. “I went to the station to see you off and was told that you’d been seen coming over the fields here. There’s no time to lose if you’re going to catch that train.”

“But the railway strike?” said Mr. Kellyngs.

“There is no railway strike.”

“But these boys told me there was. They brought me here to wait for some arrangements to be made about a coach or something.”

The vicar turned his frowning gaze upon the Outlaws. He might have known it! They were at the bottom of every bit of trouble that ever happened in the village.

“There’s no time to go into it now,” he said. “But”—with menace in his voice—“I shall certainly see your fathers about this.”

“No, please don’t,” said Mr. Kellyngs. He was beaming rapturously and replacing the spider in the cardboard box that he had taken from Ginger’s inert hand. “They’ve found me the tarantula I’ve been wanting to get for years. I’ll forgive them anything.”

“Well, come along. Come along. Come along,” said the vicar, and Mr. Kellyngs, snatching up his cases, set off at a run across the field.

The Outlaws stood at the door of the old barn, watching them.

“*Well!*” said William at last. “All that trouble for nothing!”

“He was a real naturalist, after all,” said Henry despondently.

“I’m glad he didn’t wade in our blood, anyway,” said Douglas.

Then Ginger gave a sudden yell of excitement.

“*Look!*” he said. “Look! There it is!”

And there it was . . . a large cumbersome van with “Blessington’s Amusements” painted on it, followed by the familiar train of caravans, ambling slowly along the country road.

“It’s come! The fair’s come!”

William stayed only to tear off his golf blouse and jockey cap, then the four of them, whooping with joy, ran down to join the crowd of excited small boys that formed the tail end of the procession.

CHAPTER VIII

ARCHIE HAS A PARTY

"IT'S a long time since we went and had a look at Archie," said William. "Let's go 'n' have a look at him an' see how he's gettin' on."

Archie's cottage held a perpetual fascination for the Outlaws. It was generally in a state of wild disorder, and states of wild disorder appealed to the Outlaws. They felt at home in them. Moreover, the states of wild disorder would often bring to light curious and interesting objects, which Archie, in his more generous moments, would bestow lavishly on whoever happened to be there.

He had recently given William a corkscrew with a handle in the shape of a fish, Ginger a compass with a miniature sundial attached, Douglas a flute from which a few strains could still be drawn and Henry a pipe with a carved bowl. Archie had had no idea that he possessed these treasures till the Outlaws discovered them among the flotsam and jetsam that filled his cottage. That, however, had been three weeks ago, and the treasures had long since been lost or broken, so that another visit to Archie's cottage seemed imperative.

As they neared the cottage they realised that some unusual preparations were afoot. There was the sound of the clatter of glass and crockery, together with the sound of Archie's voice upraised untunefully in snatches of song. Archie always upraised his voice untunefully in snatches of song when he was excited.

They went round to the back of the cottage and opened the kitchen door. The scene was, as always, chaotic, but there was an unusual note in it—a gay and festive note. Instead of pots and pans and crockery and palettes and paint brushes and odds and ends of wearing apparel and household utensils, a sea of bottles and wine-glasses filled the kitchen. Here and there—on chairs, on the floor, on the draining-board—were plates into which Archie was emptying small exciting-looking biscuits from a large selection of bags and cardboard boxes.

"What are you doin', Archie?" said William curiously.

"I'm getting ready for my party," said Archie. "Don't get in my way, children."

" 'Course we won't," said William. "We don't get in people's way. 'Least"—after a moment's thought—"we don't mean to. When we do, it's an accident."

"They look jolly good," said Douglas, inspecting the savouries that Archie was scattering in a hit-or-miss fashion on to the plates. He picked up one that had fallen into the rubbish pail and demolished it in a mouthful. "Yes, it is jolly good."

"Now, children, you're *not* to eat any of those," said Archie firmly. "They're for my guests. Eat anything else you like, but not those."

Taking advantage of the permission, the Outlaws surged into the larder—all but Henry, who made his way across the hall into the studio.

Henry took a morbid interest in the strange geometric designs and startling splashes of colour that formed Archie's modernistic paintings. He would stand looking at them in silent absorption, wondering how they could possibly be what they were supposed to be and what they could possibly be if they weren't.

Generally Archie was flattered by his interest, but to-day he called:

"Don't go in there, Henry. I don't want things in there upset."

Henry was vaguely surprised, both by the novel idea that Archie didn't want things upset and by the sudden note of querulousness in Archie's voice.

Archie was feeling querulous. He had held an exhibition of his paintings in Hadley the week before and this morning they had all been returned unsold.

Archie, who secretly longed to hand his name down to Posterity, was disappointed. He had piled them back anyhow into the studio—catalogues and all—and was trying to forget them. In order to drown the memory of them, he was throwing himself, heart and soul, into the preparations for his party. Henry rejoined the others in the kitchen.

"What are these, Archie?" William was saying.

They had emerged from the larder to help Archie pick up the remains of a plate that had slipped from the tap handles (where Archie had insecurely balanced it) into the sink.

"Cheese straws," said Archie, throwing the broken china out of the open window as the best means of disposing of it.

"Gosh! You'd want the whole plate of them to make a mouthful."

Archie's long thin face wore an expression of anguish as he rescued the plate from William's hands.

"What are these called, Archie?" said Ginger in a voice muffled by a lobster pattée. "They're jolly good."

"Go *away*, children," said Archie, setting down the cheese straws and dashing frantically to the relief of his lobster pattées. "I've told you, I'm busy. I've no time for you to-day."

"If you've got all that food for your party, you won't want this bit of meat pie, will you, Archie?" said Douglas, who had returned to the larder.

"No, no," said Archie. "Take it, if you'll only go away."

The others joined Douglas in the larder and surveyed with interest the odds and ends of food that were ranged there.

"An' you won't want this jam tart, will you, Archie?"

"No, no. Take it and go away," said Archie, uttering a wail of anguish as a jar of *paté de foie gras* slipped from his hand upon the kitchen floor. "You're upsetting me, boys. You're flustering me. I can't possibly concentrate with you here. I wish you'd *go*."

"You won't want the sardines in this dish, will you, Archie? There's only about six or seven of them."

"No, no!"

"Or these buns?"

"No, no!" A bottle of gin fell to the floor, miraculously unbroken. "I do wish you'd go *away*, children."

"There's half a jar of raspberry jam. . . ."

"Yes, take it."

"An' a nice bit of jelly. . . ."

"Yes, yes. Take it. Take it."

"An' a sandwich cake with cream in the middle an' sugar on the top. D'you want this sandwich cake with cream in the middle an' sugar on the top, Archie?"

"NO! Take anything you like if only you'll go AWAY."

"Thanks awfully, Archie," said William in a businesslike tone. "Can you lend us a basket?"

"Yes, if you can find one," said Archie, who was engaged in balancing a dish of anchovy straws on top of a pile of saucepans on the floor, which

appeared to be the only unoccupied space in the kitchen. “There’s one somewhere, I believe, but,” vaguely, “it’s never easy to lay one’s hands on things.”

Ginger, after a short but intensive search, which added another layer of chaos to the chaos already existing, discovered a basket inside the gas oven —together with a mouse-trap and a fire extinguisher—and the Outlaws set to work loading it with the contents of Archie’s larder.

“We’ll go now, Archie,” said William at last, carefully setting the dish of sardines on top of a little pile of cold potatoes.

“Oh, thank you so much,” said Archie gratefully.

William gazed round the kitchen in wonder. More bottles, more glasses, more plates of savouries seemed to have appeared from nowhere during his sojourn in the larder.

“Gosh!” he said. “You must’ be havin’ hundreds of people to your party, Archie.”

“Actually, I’m having sixteen,” said Archie, adding, with a touch of modest pride, “I always prepare for a larger number than I’ve actually invited in case of emergencies. I sent out sixteen invitations—you remember, William. You posted them—and I said: ‘Don’t answer unless you can’t come. If I don’t hear from you, I shall expect you,’ and I haven’t heard from a single one, so that means they’re all coming. It’s very gratifying. Very gratifying indeed.” A blissful smile lit up his features. “It’s Ethel I’m most pleased about, because she nearly always seems to have other engagements when I ask her.”

"GOSH!" SAID WILLIAM, "I NEVER POSTED THEM. GOSH!"

A blank look had come over William's face.

"Well, thanks awfully, Archie," he said, absently. "We'll be goin' now."

He picked up the basket and went out to the road, followed by the other three. In the road he set down the basket and turned to them.

"Gosh!" he said in a tone of dismay.

"What's the matter?" said Ginger.

"Those invitations," said William. "I've got an awful feelin' I never posted them. I remember him givin' me them. I was wearin' my raincoat an' I've not worn it since. Come on! Let's have a look."

They went to William's house and, burrowing beneath the coats that hung on the hat-rack, unearthed William's raincoat. He plunged his hand into the pockets and brought out sixteen unposted letters.

"Gosh!" he said again, his dismay deepening to horror. "They're them! I never posted them. Gosh! There's Archie gettin' ready for a party an' no one comin' to it." He crammed the letters into his jacket pocket. "Come on! Let's go to the old barn an' think out what to do."

In the old barn he placed the basket carefully in a corner and took out the letters.

"We've got to do *somethin'*," he said. "We can't jus' let Archie go on thinkin' he's having a party an' no one comin'."

"Couldn't we go round to the people an' get 'em to come?" suggested Henry.

William examined the names on the envelopes.

"No, that's no good," he said. "It's mos'ly Ethel's friends an' they're all at the tennis club havin' a tournament."

"Then let's jus' go back to Archie an' tell him we accident'ly didn't post the letters an' offer to eat up his food for him," said Ginger.

"No," said William firmly. "He's gotter have a party. We've messed up his old party, so we've gotter get him a new one. We can't let him not have a party after all the trouble he's took. . . . Come on!"

"Come on where?" said Henry.

"Come on out an' find a party for Archie."

"What about the feast?" said Ginger, looking wistfully at the basket.

"We can't waste time on that now," said William sternly. "We've gotter find this party for Archie first. . . . I bet we find plenty of people that want to come to a party. People always want to come to parties."

But a prolonged search of the countryside produced no applicants. The countryside, indeed, on that particular afternoon seemed singularly empty of inhabitants, and they only met a postman, a farm labourer and a woman with a shopping basket, to each of whom William tendered an invitation without success. The postman made no reply, the farm labourer boxed his ears and the woman with the shopping basket threatened to inform the police. It was just as William had come reluctantly to the conclusion that the only remaining course was to return to Archie's cottage and make a clean breast of the whole thing that three cars drew up in the road and four people got out of each.

William's eyes gleamed. Twelve people . . . Twelve guests for Archie's party!

The people appeared to be arguing about something. One of them unfolded a map, and they all clustered round, looking at it.

"We must be just there," said a man whose bristly moustache and short upstanding hair gave him a vague resemblance to a hedgehog. "We've just passed a cross-roads."

"No, we're miles beyond that point," said a woman with large spectacles and tiny screwed-up features. "That must be a different cross-roads."

“I don’t think we’re anywhere near the place,” said a fat man in a brightly striped pullover. He beckoned to William. “Are we anywhere near the village of Marleigh, boy?”

A woman under an enormous raffia hat, who carried a raffia handbag and wore raffia shoes, spoke in a high-pitched irritable voice.

“The boy had better understand the circumstances,” she said, “then, if there’s any difficulty, he can take us to someone in authority.” She turned to William. “We’re making our way to Marleigh, boy, to the sale of an Art Collection in order to buy some pictures. We are representatives of our Town Council and are charged with the spending of a legacy left by one of our public-spirited citizens for the enlargement of our small local Art Gallery. We were informed of the sale of a famous collection of pictures at Marleigh and wish to make our way there without further delay. Now do you know the way to this place, boy, or do you not? If you do not, say so at once and direct me to the nearest post office or police station so that I may enquire of someone responsible.”

William hadn’t been listening. His mind had been entirely taken up by the problem of how to get them by the quickest means to Archie’s cottage. He decided that the short cut across the field would bring them there in a couple of minutes and that it would be best not to waste time in invitations and explanations. When they got to the party they’d stay there. People always stayed at parties when they got to them.


THOMAS HENRY

ARCHIE AND WILLIAM WELCOMED THE GRATIFIED BUT BEWILDERED GUESTS.

"Come on this way," he said shortly, beginning to climb the stile that led into the field.

After a slight hesitation they followed him, still arguing about the route, blaming a pallid young man in baggy plus fours for having mis-read the map some ten or twelve miles back.

"A good thing we asked the boy," said the raffia-decked woman. "We might have gone *miles* out of our way."

"An intelligent child," said the woman in spectacles. "He seemed to know at once what we wanted."

The other three Outlaws followed in the rear, wary and apprehensive.

"I bet you anythin' we never get back to that feast," said Douglas gloomily.

Having arrived at Archie's cottage, William flung open the door.

"Here they are, Archie!" he called.

Archie came out, beaming a welcome.

"Come in," he said. "Come in, come in. So good of you to come!"

Gratified, slightly bewildered, the guests streamed into the cottage.

“A smaller place than I’d have expected,” said the fat man, looking round.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said the woman in spectacles. “It’s probably Tudor or Norman or something historical. They’re high-falutin’, you know, are art collectors. Things seem different to them to what they do to us.”

Archie was plunging about with glasses and plates, shedding cheese straws, chipolatas and prawn sandwiches at every step. He had no misgivings. He had asked guests to his party and guests had arrived. He didn’t seem to know them very well, but he’d asked several people he didn’t know very well. He didn’t recognise their faces, but he was so absent-minded and short-sighted that he seldom recognised people’s faces. All he knew was that Ethel hadn’t come yet and his eyes kept wandering hopefully to the gate in search of her.

“Jolly decent of him to give us all this drink and stuff,” said the young man in plus fours.

“Oh, they do,” said the woman in spectacles. “I’ve read about it in novels. They do it to put the buyer in a good temper, to oil the wheels as it were.”

“Jolly good oil,” said the fat man, draining his glass.

A woman in a fur toque and a raincoat had opened the door of the studio.

“The pictures are in here,” she called.

They streamed into the studio.

“Now we’ll set to work,” said the fat man, handing round the catalogues that Archie had laid negligently in the fireplace.

“I can’t make head or tail of them,” said the woman in spectacles, gazing about her. “They don’t seem to *mean* anything.”

“They aren’t meant to,” said the young man in plus fours. “They’re modern and modern ones don’t.”

“And we might as well get the most up-to-date ones we can,” said the fat man. “No good getting old-fashioned stuff. We must move with the times.”

“He particularly said ‘modern pictures’ in his will,” said the man with bristly hair, “and they’re certainly modern, all right.”

“They haven’t the *charm* of the old ones,” said the woman in the fur toque wistfully. “We have a beautiful engraving of ‘Monarch of the Glen’ at home. . . .”

“They’re amazingly reasonable,” said someone, consulting the catalogue in which Archie’s modest prices were listed against the titles of the pictures.

“Well, we mustn’t waste any more time,” said the fat man, who seemed to be in charge of operations. “I don’t see why we shouldn’t take the whole lot. It would save us a good deal of time and trouble. They’re well within the amount of the legacy and they’ll just about fill the space we’ve set apart for them.”

“What about having them sent?”

“We can carry them to the cars and take them straight home. Save trouble and expense. I expect the chap’ll take a cheque. Nice to get the whole thing settled up.”

Suddenly to Archie’s amazement, a cheque was thrust into his hand and his guests began to walk back across the fields with the contents of his studio under their arms.

But Archie had no time to waste upon amazement. Standing at the gate of the cottage, watching the departure of his guests, he suddenly saw Ethel and a group of her friends coming down the road from the tennis club. The rest of his party and—Ethel! Beaming with rapture, he went down the road to meet them.

“Come along in,” he said eagerly. “Come along. Come along.”

They were swept into the cottage among the glasses and bottles and cheese straws and prawn sandwiches.

“This is good of you, Archie.”

“Yes, one could do with a drink.”

The party got going with a clatter of glasses and laughter.

Archie hovered ecstatically about Ethel’s chair, raining drinks and savouries upon her.

“I was so glad you were able to come, Ethel,” he said.

“You didn’t give us much choice,” said Ethel, neatly avoiding a shower of prawns that had come detached from their moorings and were slipping down from the plate with which Archie was gesticulating above her head. “You just marshalled us in.”

“I waited for every post with my heart in my mouth,” said Archie, “but when you didn’t send an answer I knew it was all right.”

“Send an answer to what?” said Ethel.

“The invitation.”

“What invitation?”

“The invitation I sent you. I said ‘Don’t answer if you can come,’ so when you didn’t answer I knew you were coming.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Ethel, removing a prawn from her hair. “When did you send this invitation? I never got one.”

“You must have done, Ethel. I sent it over a week ago. It was last Wednesday, I remember, and I gave them to William to post.”

“William!” said Ethel.

“You all got the invitations, didn’t you?” said Archie, turning to the others.

“Invitations?” they said. “What invitations?”

“The invitations I gave to William to post.”

“William!” they echoed.

Suddenly Ethel looked out of the window.

“Four cars have just drawn up in the road, Archie,” she said, “and a lot of people are getting out of them and they’re all carrying pictures and they’re coming in at the gate.”

“Oh, Jehoshaphat!” said Archie distractedly.

The Art Delegation streamed into the cottage. There arose a confused babel of explanations and recriminations.

“. . . the art collection at Marleigh. Can’t think how the mistake arose.”

“Got lost again and passed the real place by accident and found out our mistake. . . .”

“If only some people could learn to read maps correctly. . . .”

“I *said* it was the wrong cross-roads. . . .”

“They aren’t at all the type of pictures that our citizens would want in their Art Gallery. . . .”

“We realised that as soon as we got away. . . .”

“They don’t *mean* anything. . . .”

“But why did you come here at all in the first place?” squeaked Archie, almost buried beneath his canvasses.

“A boy directed us here. I don’t know who he was. The other boys called him William.”

“*William!*” groaned everyone.

The Outlaws had gone across the fields to the old barn. From the doorway they had watched the departure of the Art Delegates and the arrival of Ethel and her friends.

"Well, *that's* all right," said William with a sigh of relief. "It's the same as if I'd posted those letters now. He's got his party an' a jolly good party, too. He ought to be jolly grateful to me. . . . Come on. Let's start the feast now."

Sitting round the basket, they set to work with zest and thoroughness.

They had worked their way through the jam tart and the buns, when suddenly Douglas, who was sitting in the doorway, keeping an anxious eye on Archie's cottage, called out, "Gosh! The people in the cars are comin' back—pictures an' all. They're goin' into Archie's cottage again."

"P'raps they jus' want another drink," said William doubtfully.

"I bet it's goin' to end in a muddle," said Ginger.

" 'Course it isn't," said William. "Anyway, let's get on with the feast. Where's that meat pie?"

Again they ate in silent enjoyment—an enjoyment marred now by a faint undercurrent of uneasiness.

"I 'spect they're all makin' friends an' havin' a good time," said William through a mouthful of meat pie. "I bet Archie won't think of askin' them if they got invitations. He never thinks of anythin', doesn't Archie. He'll think they came 'cause they got invitations an' they'll think they've jus' sort of dropped in for a drink, same as people do."

"Gosh!" said Douglas. "They're all comin' out of the cottage now. I bet they're after us. I can't see their faces, but they look sort of mad."

"What'll we do?" said Ginger.

"We might go'n' hide in the woods," said Henry. "I bet they'd never find us there. I bet we could hide there for *days* without them findin' us."

"That'd only put it off," said William philosophically. "Let's make sure of the feast, anyway. . . . Where's those sardines?"

"Here."

"Thanks. . . . There's one and a half each, an' we can drink the juice in turns. . . . They're jolly good! . . . Where are they now, Douglas?"

"They're after us, all right. They're askin' someone in the road an' the person's pointin' over here. They mus' have seen us comin' here."

“Quick, then! Where’s that raspberry jam? Look, it’s the loose sort of jam. We can drink it out of the jar. Let’s pass it round and have drinks of it in turns, same as we did with the sardine juice. . . . I’ll start. . . . It’s *jolly* good. . . . Where are they now, Douglas?”

“They’re jus’ climbin’ over the stile into the field.”

“There’s only the cake left. It looks jolly good. Cream in the middle an’ sugar all over the top. I’ll tear it up in four. . . . There you are. . . . We’ll have to eat it jolly quick. . . . Where are they now, Douglas?”

“They’re nearly here.”

“Gosh! Here’s some doughnuts. I’d forgot ’em. Cram ’em in quick.” Indignant voices filled the air, grew louder, nearer. . . . “Good! we’ve finished it all now. . . . Come on. Let’s get it over.”

Dripping with sardine oil, plastered with cream, coated with sugar, sodden with jelly, the Outlaws went out to deliver themselves to justice.

THE END

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.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *William and the Tramp* by Richmal Crompton Lamburn (as Richmal Crompton)]