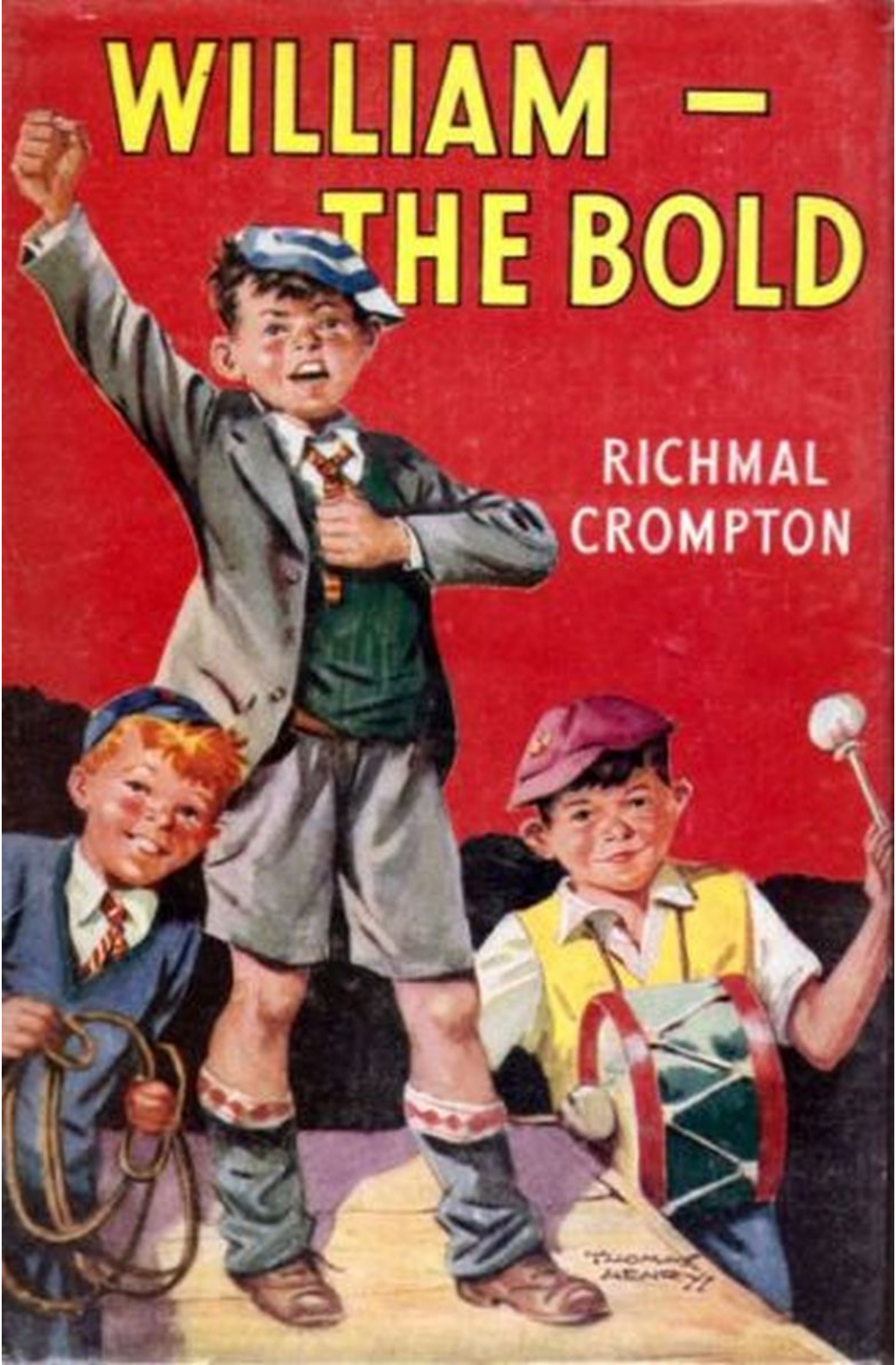
WILLIAM — THE BOLD

RICHMAL CROMPTON



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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
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(9) WILLIAM—THE GOOD
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(28) WILLIAM AND THE TRAMP
(29) WILLIAM AND THE MOON ROCKET
(30) WILLIAM AND THE SPACE ANIMAL

JIMMY
JIMMY AGAIN

(See page 94)

PURPLE WITH FURY, THE GENERAL ADVANCED ON THEM, BRANDISHING A CARROT

WILLIAM—
THE BOLD

BY

RICHMAL CROMPTON

ILLUSTRATED BY

THOMAS HENRY

LONDON

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CHAPTER I

VIOLET ELIZABETH WINS

"IT'S a long time since we did a play," said William, kicking a stone from one side of the road to the other.

"Well, the las' one we did wasn't much good," said Ginger, stopping the stone more by luck than skill and returning it to William together with a large part of the road's surface.

"That was 'cause you all started fightin'," said William, falling into the ditch in his efforts to stop Ginger's stone from going there.

"Well, it was about a war, wasn't it?" said Douglas, helping to pull him out. "People do fight in wars, don't they?"

"Yes, but you needn't have gone on fightin' all the time," said William, removing some of the mud from his person with a perfunctory movement of a grimy hand.

"Well, some wars do go on a long time," said Henry with a modest air of erudition. "There was one in hist'ry that went on for a hundred years an' ours only went on for about half an hour."

"Well, you fought so much there wasn't any play left," said William.

"You fought, too," Douglas reminded him.

"I was fightin' to stop you fightin'," William explained and added, after a slight pause, "well, I did sort of get int'rested in fightin', but I didn't start it. An' anyway it spoilt the play, 'cause we'd forgot what the play was about by the time we'd finished fightin'."

"It was a jolly good fight," said Ginger a little wistfully.

"It was a jolly good play, too," said William. "I wrote it, so I ought to know."

"Well, what about this new one?" said Douglas.

The four Outlaws were walking along the road towards the village. They had, as a matter of course, spent their pocket money on the day they received it, but they were going to inspect the sweet shop window with a view to planning future purchases. This process was a never failing source of interest both to the Outlaws and the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper had served as a commando during the war and he found that the Outlaws' daily

visits kept him in practice and imparted a little zest to a drab peacetime existence.

"I've been sort of thinkin' about it," said William slowly. "I was thinkin' about it while ole Markie was tellin' us about opticians in arithmetic yesterday."

"Octagons," said Henry.

"Well, I said that, didn't I?" said William pugnaciously.

"No, you didn't."

"I did."

"You didn't."

"I did."

"You didn't."

A spirited wrestling match decided the point in William's favour, and they continued their progress down the road.

"I think a hist'ry play'd be a nice change," said William.

"They fought in hist'ry," said Ginger with anticipatory relish. "They fought all the time."

"Well, you're not goin' to fight in this one," said William firmly. "There were bits of peace here an' there in hist'ry an' we're goin' to have one of them."

"Which?" said Douglas.

"Well, we could have that bit when Queen Elizabeth had finished fightin' the French an' before she started fightin' anyone else."

"What did she do when she'd finished fightin' the French?" said Ginger, looking at Henry as their usual source of information.

"She got 'Calais' carved on her chest some time or other," said Henry vaguely.

"She *couldn't* have," said Douglas. "You mus' mean tattooed."

"All right. Tattooed, then," agreed Henry.

"That'd take a bit of time," said William. "There mus' have been quite a bit of peace then."

"Can I be Queen Elithabeth, pleathe, William?" said a small shrill well-known voice behind them.

They wheeled round and stood scowling fiercely down at Violet Elizabeth Bott. She looked up at them, smiling appealingly, fluttering long

lashes over forget-me-not blue eyes, exerting all her six-year-old charm. Few hearts so stony as not to be melted by the sight . . . but the Outlaws' hearts were among the few. They continued to scowl at her in resentment and disapproval.

"Who said *you* could come tagging along with us?" said William.

"No one did," said Violet Elizabeth serenely. "I juth came."

"Well, now you've come, you can kindly go away again," said William.

He spoke with more conviction than he felt. Never in the whole course of his acquaintance with Violet Elizabeth had he known her to comply with that particular request—or indeed with any other.

"Go away," said Ginger.

"An' scream if you want to," said Douglas, anticipating her plan of campaign. "We don't care."

"You can cry if you want to, too," said Henry. "We don't care about that either."

Violet Elizabeth threw them a speculative glance, and, deciding that both those particular tactics would be wasted on this particular occasion, contented herself by letting the corners of her mouth droop wistfully and heaving a deep sigh.

"All right," she said and, turning away, began to walk slowly back along the road.

This feint did not for a moment deceive the Outlaws. They were too much accustomed to it. They walked on for a few yards in a strained and unnatural silence, then Douglas threw a wary half-glance round.

"She's comin' along after us again," he said morosely. "I knew she would."

"Well, we'll jus' take no notice of her," said William. "We'll jus' carry on as if she wasn't there. She'll soon get tired of it."

Experience should have taught him the falsity of this last statement, but William was ever an optimist.

Their arrival at the sweet shop drove Violet Elizabeth's unwelcome presence from their minds, and they stood in a row, flattening their noses against the glass, surveying the tantalising feast outspread on the other side.

"Bulls' Eyes!" said William. "Those big striped ones. I bet," gloomily, "they'll be gone by nex' Sat'day."

"Go in an' ask him to keep us some," said Ginger.

“He never does,” said William. “The last time I asked him, he nearly pulled my ears off.”

“Lollipops!” breathed Douglas ecstatically. “They’re super, those lollipops are.”

“Jelly babyth are nithe, too,” said the small shrill voice behind them.

With a great effort of will, they ignored it.

“Look! There’s some real stick-jaw toffee,” said Henry. “I had some las’ month an’ it was wizard.”

“I onthe had a tooth pulled out by thtickjaw toffee,” said Violet Elizabeth proudly. “It wath loothe an’ the thtickjaw toffee got thtuck on it and it came right out. I wath very brave. I didn’t cry.”

Again they ignored her.

“Wonder if he’d let us have some if we promised to bring our money first thing Sat’day mornin’,” said William.

“No, he won’t,” said Ginger. “He jumped over the counter an’ only jus’ missed murderin’ me the las’ time I asked him.”

“Well, we could give him somethin’ for them,” said William thoughtfully. “We’ve never tried that. I’ve got lots of things I bet he’d find useful. I’ve got this handkerchief my aunt sent me las’ Christmas.” He took a dubious-looking object from his pocket. “I bet it cost more than a few ole humbugs. It’s got pictures on it. At least”—inspecting it—“it has when it’s clean.”

“Yes, an’ look!” said Ginger, suddenly becoming fired by enthusiasm for the idea, “I’ll throw my garters in.” He stripped off those much-enduring articles and inspected them critically. They wore a strained and battered look, as the result of their part-time occupation as catapults. “They’re jolly good garters an’ garters are jolly useful things. They cost a lot of money, too. My mother’s always grumbling about what a lot of money she spends on ’em. I bet they’re a jolly sight more valu’ble than a few ole lollipops, anyway.”

“Do you think he’d give me thome jelly babyth in exchange for one of my thockth?” piped Violet Elizabeth.

“No, of course he won’t,” said William.

A slow complacent smile overspread Violet Elizabeth’s small countenance. Sooner or later she could always goad William into a recognition of her presence.

“Let’s try, anyway,” said William.

Henry added a small shrivelled apple from his pocket and Douglas a Canadian stamp, then William, as delegate, entered the shop, his expression conveying a mixture of hopefulness and apprehension.

"He can only say 'no,' " said Henry with a man-of-the-world air.

"I've known him say more than that," said Douglas darkly.

Douglas's fears were justified. A bellow of rage from inside the shop was followed by William's hasty exit, accompanied by his collection of offerings. William picked himself and his collection of offerings up from the pavement and rubbed the side of his head.

"Well, it didn't come off," he said, "but"—philosophically—"it was worth tryin'."

"Saucy little 'ound!" said the shopkeeper, appearing at the shop door. "Off with you!"

"All right," said William, "and"—untruthfully—"we wouldn't eat your rotten ole sweets now—not if you *gave* them us."

With that, the Outlaws hastened their steps down the village street. The shopkeeper made a feint of pursuing them; then, cheered and invigorated by the little scene, returned to his uninspiring daily round.

"I put my tongue out at him ath far ath it would go," said Violet Elizabeth when they stopped to draw breath.

"Don't take any notice of her," William warned the others.

"Well, let's get back to this play idea," said Henry. "Who shall we be?"

"Well, who *was* there in hist'ry?" said William. "Besides Queen Elizabeth, I mean."

"I'm going to be Queen Elithabeth," said Violet Elizabeth.

"You are *not*," said William.

"There was Thomas à Becket an' Henry the Fifth an' Dick Turpin an' Friar Tuck," said Henry.

"It's goin' to be jolly difficult dressin' up as all those," said Douglas. "You've gotter have historical clothes to act historical people."

"Queen Elithabeth walked about on people'th coatth," said Violet Elizabeth. "I onth thaw a picture of her in a book and thee wath walking about on people'th coatth."

"She's thinkin' about that man Raleigh that made cigarettes," explained Henry.

"Don't take any notice of her," said William.

"*Tell* you what!" said Ginger.

"Yes?"

"Archie's got some acting clothes. He sometimes paints hist'ry pictures, you know, an' he dresses up that ole dummy thing of his in them."

"All right," said William. "Let's go an' ask him to lend us some."

Tristram Archibald Mannister, known to the whole neighbourhood as Archie, was an artist who lived in Honeysuckle Cottage at the end of the village. He belonged to the aggressively "modern" school of painting, but, when hard pressed for cash, would return to more conventional methods and paint idealised scenes from history, which appeared before the public in the form of calendars and Christmas cards. When first he came to the village his twin sister Auriole had shared the cottage with him, but Auriole had now set up an Arts and Crafts centre in the Lake District, where her disciples wove and dyed and carved and embroidered with an enthusiasm equalled only by their lack of skill, and Archie occupied the cottage alone.

There were no signs of activity about the cottage as the Outlaws and Violet Elizabeth approached it. The garden was wild and overrun, for Archie was no gardener. Through the open kitchen window could be seen the remains of what sketchy meals Archie had consumed during the last few days, for Archie was no housekeeper and his "daily woman" was away ill. Saucepans and crockery covered the table and overflowed on to the floor. Among them a packet of salt had spilled its contents into a tin of shoe polish, while in the sink a flue-brush appeared to have made its nest in a dish of mashed potato.

Archie himself opened the door to them. Everything about him that could be long and thin was long and thin. His body was long and thin, his face was long and thin, his nose was long and thin. His beard was of recent cultivation and had a sheepish, slightly furtive air, but it was obviously doing its best to be long and thin. His face wore that look of startled exasperation common to the faces of those who answered William's assault upon their door knockers. The echoes of that sustained operation was only now beginning to die away.

"You needn't break the whole place down," he said. "I'm not deaf."

So accustomed was William to this greeting that he did not trouble to reply to it.

"Can we come in, Archie?" he said and, before Archie could rally his shattered forces, the four Outlaws, with Violet Elizabeth at their heels, had entered the narrow passage-way.

"No!" said Archie, then, realising that it was too late, added irritably: "What do you want?"

William knew that demands such as he had in mind must not be blurted out in the first moment of a visit. The path to them must be paved by polite if meaningless social trivialities.

"I hope you're quite well, Archie," he said, assuming the glassy smile and slightly imbecile expression that constituted his "company manners." "We're quite well, thank you."

"I've got a bit of a cold," said Douglas, who was a stickler for accuracy.

"I had a bit of a chilblain las' week," said Henry, not to be outdone, "but it's better now."

"It wasn't much of a chilblain," said Ginger. "I saw it."

"Well, I never said it was, did I?"

At this point Violet Elizabeth found her way into the kitchen and gave a scream of delight.

"Oo, what a lovely meth!" she said. "I'm goin' to clean up."

"We'll come into your studio an' sit down a bit if you like, Archie," said William, realising that, in Archie's present mood, it devolved upon him, William, to play the parts of both host and guest.

"Well, I don't like," said Archie bluntly.

There was no doubt that Archie was not at his best. Actually Archie was at his worst. He had been planning an exhibition of his work in London, but at the last minute had had to give up the idea owing to lack of funds. His finances had, indeed, reached so low an ebb that he had reluctantly decided to abandon his "modernistic" efforts for a time and set about a picture that would look well on calendars and Christmas cards and bring in a bit of money. He had started one the day before, but couldn't get on with it.

"We don't mind jus' stayin' a minute or two," said William, tactfully ignoring his host's outburst of irritability, "but——"

At this moment a crash of crockery from the kitchen caused a diversion, and Archie threw a harassed glance in its direction.

"It's only Violet Elizabeth cleanin' up," said William, closing the kitchen door, so as to spare Archie the painful spectacle of Violet Elizabeth sweeping cups, plates, saucers together and carrying an armful of them towards the sink. "Let's leave her in there. She can't bother us while she's in there. Well, come on in."

With a lordly gesture he ushered his band into the studio. Archie followed helplessly.

"Look here, boys," he said, "I'm very busy. I'm——"

The rest of the sentence was drowned by another crash from the kitchen. Archie's face, twisted in anguish, was again turned in its direction. He was obviously in something of a dilemma. If he went into the kitchen to put a stop to Violet Elizabeth's activities there, he would have to leave the Outlaws to their own devices in the studio, and he had had bitter experience of what the Outlaws could do when left to their own devices.

"She'll be all right," said William carelessly. "If she hurts herself she'll yell out quick enough. . . . Well," he waved an imperious hand at his followers, "go on. Sit down."

They sat down, and there was a short silence, during which Archie's hunted look went from one to another. Then William cleared his throat and returned to the social small-talk that was to pave the way to his request.

"It's a nice day, isn't it, Archie?" he said in the high-pitched unnatural voice that went with the glassy smile and imbecile expression.

"It's not very," said Douglas. "It's been rainin'."

"Well, it's cleared up, hasn't it?" said Ginger, supporting William.

"An' anyway," said William with spirit, "it's jus' one of the things you say, like 'how are you.' It doesn't axshully mean it's a nice day."

"Why did you say it was, then?" said Douglas.

"Oh, shut up," said William.

Archie turned to them with the courage of despair, but before he could give vent to his feelings William had risen from his seat and approached a painting on the easel. It represented a long white road, bordered by trees.

"What's that?" he said.

Archie looked at it, and gloom enveloped his long, thin countenance.

"It's called 'The High Road'," he said.

"What's that thing in the middle?" said William.

"It's a tramp," said Archie rather coldly.

"Doesn't look like a tramp to me," said William. "It looks more like a tree."

"Looks a bit like a horse to me," said Ginger.

"Or a pillar-box," said Henry.

"Or a tent," said Douglas.

"Anyway it doesn't look like a tramp," said William, summing up their impressions.

"I know it doesn't," snapped Archie testily. "I've been trying to make it look like a tramp and I can't."

"Well, never mind what it looks like," said William. "Things do look like other things sometimes. You can't help it." Then, thinking that he had wasted enough time on preliminaries, he went on, "What we really wanted was, will you lend us some of your acting clothes for our hist'ry play?"

"My what?" said Archie, outraged.

"Your acting clothes," said William. "Those things you dress that doll thing of yours up in."

"I have a few historical costumes," said Archie frigidly, "that I use occasionally on my lay figure, but I do not lend them to children."

"Well, we're not really children," said William persuasively. "I mean, after all, we're eleven. I mean, we've got a bit of sense."

"I'm eleven and three quarters and a bit," said Henry.

"I bet we could take care of a few hist'ry clothes all right," said Ginger. "I once got eight out of ten for hist'ry. At least," with a burst of honesty, "it looked like eight."

"It turned out to be three," Douglas reminded him.

"I once had to write out the date of the battle of Waterloo a hundred times," said William, "so I ought to know a bit of hist'ry."

"What was the date of the battle of Waterloo?" Henry challenged him.

William hesitated.

"Ten sixty-six," he said at last uncertainly.

"It wasn't," said Henry.

"It was," said William, gathering certainty from opposition.

"It wasn't."

"It was."

"Will you all please go away!" said Archie desperately. "I tell you I'm busy. I don't want you here. Go—*away*!"

He advanced upon them. There was a gleam in his eye suggestive of a wild animal at bay. They retreated. Another crash from the kitchen diverted his attention for a moment—but only for a moment. The Outlaws backed

before him into the narrow passage hall. And then—quite suddenly as it seemed—they found themselves outside the closed front door. The slamming of the door coincided with a clatter of falling saucepans from the kitchen and Violet Elizabeth's voice upraised lightheartedly if unmelodiously in a snatch of song.

The Outlaws walked slowly down to the gate.

"Well, *that* wasn't any good," said Douglas. "I knew it wouldn't be."

"He was in a rotten temper," said William. "I wasted a jolly lot of p'liteness on him, but it wasn't any good."

"P'raps we'd better give up this hist'ry play idea," said Ginger.

"No, we won't," said William, who never admitted the failure of his plans. "We'll wait till he's in a good temper an' then try again."

"We'll probably have to wait till we're old men," said Douglas, giving his wit the tribute of a hollow laugh.

"My aunt once went to a play," said Henry, "where a man called Hamlet acted Shakespeare in ordin'ry clothes. So it would be all right to act a hist'ry play in ordin'ry clothes. We could jus' wear a few saucepans an' things to show it was hist'ry."

"No, we won't," said William. "We'll do it in hist'ry clothes. We'll get Archie in a good temper an' borrow his hist'ry clothes."

"An' p'raps you'll kin'ly tell us how you're goin' to do that," said Ginger with a somewhat laboured imitation of William's sarcastic manner. "P'raps you'll kin'ly tell us how you're goin' to put someone in a good temper that you've jus' been pushed out of his house by."

"Well, people *do* get back into good tempers out of bad ones," said William. "My father does sometimes. He comes in from the office in an awful temper an' then if there's chicken or somethin' for dinner he gets back into a good one."

"An' p'raps you'll kin'ly tell us," said Ginger, "how we're goin' to get Archie chicken for dinner. P'raps you'll kin'ly tell us——"

"Oh, shut up sayin' that," said William irritably. "You're always the same. You go on makin' objections an' objections. . . ." He stopped suddenly in the middle of the road, obviously struck by an idea. "*Tell* you what!"

They gathered round him expectantly. Whether practical or not, William's ideas were always worth listening to.

"Yes?"

“Well,” said William slowly, “I bet he was really in a bad temper about that picture, ’cause he couldn’t get that tramp right. It looked like a tree.”

“A horse,” said Ginger.

“A pillar-box,” said Henry.

“A tent,” said Douglas.

“Well, we can’t do anythin’ about that,” said Ginger.

“Yes, we can,” said William.

“What can we do?”

“We can find him a model.”

They considered this in silence for some moments, then:

“I’M CLEANING UP FOR YOU, ARCHIE,” SAID VIOLET ELIZABETH.

“My aunt’s got a new dress that’s a model,” said Ginger vaguely, “but I don’t s’pose she’d lend it us. She made an awful fuss jus’ ’cause I dropped a bit of ice cream on it.”

“Well, we don’t want a dress anyway,” said William. “We want a tramp. Artists’ve got to have *people* for models when they’re paintin’ people.”

“Why?” said Douglas.

“Well, so’s to be sure to get their faces in the right place an’ that sort of thing,” said William impatiently. “I wish you’d try’n’ have a bit of *sense*.”

“I know a boy that’s got a model motor launch,” said Douglas, “an’——”

“Oh, shut up!” said William. “It’s a *tramp* we want, I tell you, not a dress or a boat. Now listen. If we got Archie a tramp for a model, then he could draw it prop’ly an’ get into a good temper again an’ then he’d let us have his actin’ clothes.”

“But how can we?” said Douglas.

“There aren’t any tramps now,” said Henry, “ ’cause the government make ’em have doctors an’ wear spectacles an’ that stops ’em bein’ tramps.”

“P’raps you’ll kin’ly tell me——” began Ginger and stopped abruptly, quelled by the light of battle in William’s eye.

“Now listen,” said William again. “We’ve got to go an’ have a good look for a tramp. I bet they’ve not all got doctors an’ spectacles. Anyway, we can go’n’ *look*, can’t we?”

“We’ve never had much luck with tramps,” said Douglas despondently. “When we *do* find ’em, it gen’rally turns out we’d have been better off if we hadn’t.”

“Well, we’re not goin’ to get anythin’ done if we stay here arguin’ an’ arguin’ an’ arguin’,” said William. “I’m goin’ to look for a tramp, an’ if you don’t want to come you needn’t.”

“Yes, we’ll come,” chorused the other three.

They began to walk on down the road.

“Where are you goin’ to start lookin’?” said Ginger.

“I’m goin’ to start lookin’ in the woods,” said William. “Most of the tramps I’ve found have been in woods. They go to woods so’s they can sit down an’ eat their dinners without bein’ run over.”

They scrambled over the stile and made their way across the field towards the wood. Suddenly William stopped and a slow smile overspread his face.

“We’ve got rid of Violet Elizabeth, anyway,” he said. “We’ve left her in Archie’s cottage.”

The same thought had just struck Archie. He stood, the harassed, hunted look still on his face, outside the kitchen door; then, gathering his courage, flung it open. A scene of hideous devastation met his eyes. The floor swam in soapy water, on the surface of which floated a small fleet of broken crockery, together with half a loaf, a packet of cigarettes, some bills and circulars, a tie, a pair of braces, a tea cosy and various kitchen implements.

In the middle of all this knelt Violet Elizabeth, enveloped to the chin in the charwoman's apron, slopping blissfully about with a dishcloth and Archie's best clothes brush. She raised a face that was streaked with dirt but radiant with joy and pride.

"I'm cleanin' up for you, Archie," she said. "I'm thcrubbing the floor."

"Oh, my gosh!" groaned Archie.

"I've wathed up thome of your thingth," said Violet Elizabeth, "but they got a bit thlippery with the thoap and thome of them got broken but I thpect they'll mend."

"Oh, Jehosophat!" moaned Archie as his eye took in further details.

"I found thome thtuff in the cupboard called 'Plate Powder'," said Violet Elizabeth, "tho I wathed your plateth with it. It made a lovely meth. I'm going to clean your windowth when I've finithed thcrubbing the floor."

"No, don't," said Archie wildly. "Please don't."

"It ithn't any trouble at all," Violet Elizabeth assured him graciously as she sluiced the water round and sent little cascades up on to his trousers. "I'm going to uthe pumith thtone to clean your windowth with."

"No, please——" wailed Archie, but at this point he was summoned to the hall by the rat-tat-tat of the postman's knock. The letter was from his eldest sister. He took it to the studio and opened it with a sense of misgiving. Archie's eldest sister disapproved of Archie. She disapproved of his beard, his colourful low-necked shirts, his Bohemian tendencies and his artistic activities. Her letters were never very pleasant reading.

DEAR ARCHIBALD [he read],

Aunt Georgina is over in England and is coming to see you to-morrow afternoon. She wants to take you by surprise, but I thought I ought to let you know. She hasn't seen you since your christening, and I've done my best to prepare her for the worst. I've warned her about your beard and the extraordinary way you dress and talk and behave. She doesn't appear to mind that, but she seems to have a sort of superstitious feeling about the Georgian silver tea-pot that she sent you on your twenty-first birthday. It's evidently a family heirloom. If you've treasured that, I gather that there's nothing she won't do for you—even to financing the exhibition of your pictures in London. I hope that you will make a favourable impression, but I'm afraid that I have little confidence in your doing so.

Your affectionate sister,

The hunted expression on Archie's face changed to one of nightmare panic. The Georgian tea-pot. He had vague memories of a Georgian tea-pot, but he didn't know what he'd done with it. It must be somewhere. He opened a tall cupboard that stood behind the door, full to overflowing of all manner of junk, and began to burrow in it like a terrier after a rat. Paint pots, paint brushes, sketching blocks, boots, shoes, cushions, an old tennis racket, an older pair of skates, a still older pair of household scales, books, magazines, a barometer, a fur-lined waistcoat, flew out in a shower around him. Things he hadn't seen for years appeared as if by magic. But the tea-pot was not among them. He bundled the things back and stood there considering. . . . Perhaps it was in the garden shed. He might have used it for nails or labels, or for mixing his tomato fertiliser in one of his short-lived spasms of gardening enthusiasm. Then he re-read the letter and another thought struck him. Aunt Georgina was coming this afternoon. She would be here for tea.

His mind went over his sketchy domestic arrangements. He had some tea and he had some milk, but he had no cake. One always gave aunts cake for tea. He would go out and buy some cake before he continued his search for the tea-pot. He went to the front door, then paused, arrested by fresh sounds from the kitchen. He opened the door. The room was full of acrid smoke. Violet Elizabeth, now sodden with water and covered with soot, was in the process of cleaning the stove both outside and in, with the help of a bucket of water and a feather duster.

"Go away, Archie," she said imperiously. "I'm buthy. I'm thpring-cleaning. Ithn't it kind of me to thpring clean your houthe for you?"

Archie gulped and swallowed.

"Yes—er—thank you so much," he said, "but I have to go out and get some cake now, so I—I think you'd better go home."

"Don't be thilly," said Violet Elizabeth. "I can't go home yet. I haven't finithed. I than't have finithed for ageth and ageth."

Archie summoned what remained of his fighting spirit.

"You're making a dreadful mess," he said.

"People alwayth make a meth, thpring-cleaning," said Violet Elizabeth. "Thath why they do it. Now go away and thtop being a nuithanthe, thereth a good man."

"I wish you'd——" began Archie, but Violet Elizabeth, abandoning finesse, had taken the floating half-loaf and flung it at him. It hit him full in

the face, and he instinctively turned to flight, closing the kitchen door to serve as a bulwark between him and the redoubtable child. There seemed nothing left for him to do but go out and buy a cake. I expect she'll soon get tired of it and go away, he assured himself, as he wiped the half-loaf off his face with his handkerchief. . . . And at least I've cleared those boys off, he thought as he got out his bicycle and pedalled away in the direction of Hadley. I've cleared them right off and they aren't likely to come back. . . .

That, of course, was where Archie was wrong. The Outlaws were already on their way back, in company with an individual whose reddish beard, open-necked shirt of nondescript hue and bedraggled velveteen jacket struck a note that was both casual and picturesque. He walked with a jaunty swing, carrying a knotted twisted stick and a large bundle enveloped in a faded red handkerchief.

The Outlaws had found him, as William had predicted, in the wood, and he had shown, from the first, considerable interest in their proposition.

" 'E'll make it worth me while, o' course," he had stipulated. "I'm in great demand fer tramp pictures. Hartists all over the world—well, they queue up fer me, as you might say. I've got a waitin' list a mile long. I'm on me way now from one famous hartist to another. Royal Arcadians, they are, both of 'em."

"Academicians," said Henry.

"Well, one of them things, anyway," said the tramp with lighthearted indifference. "There's paintings of me in hevery British Museum in hevery city throughout the world. So, much as I'd like ter do it fer nothin', I've gotter charge, an' my charges is——" He threw them a speculative glance. " 'Ow much does 'e pay?"

"Well, I dunno quite," said William.

"Gardeners get about two shillings an hour," said Henry.

"Ah, yes," said the tramp, "but this 'ere modellin' wot I do's more skilled work than gardenin'. All a gardener's got to do is to shove a spade into the earth, but this 'ere modellin' takes skill. It takes skill an' imagination an' knowledge of the world same as I've got, an' you've gotter pay for them. Five shillin's an hour they're worth to any hartist. Why, I've bin offered five guineas an hour by Royal Arcadians to let 'em paint me to 'ang in the British Museum, but, o' course, I won't charge this 'ere friend o' yours that much."

"No, he couldn't afford that," said William, remembering Archie's chronic state of impecuniosity.

"Well, seein' 'e's a pal of yours, I'll do 'im cheap," said the tramp, twirling his stick jauntily through the air. "I'll do 'im dirt cheap. I'll put 'im in now in front of all this waitin' list an' I'll only charge 'im 'arf a crown an hour."

"That's jolly good of you," said William gratefully.

"Yes, I 'spect he'll pay that," said Ginger.

For Archie, though generally in sore financial straits, was notoriously lavish. He paid anyone anything they asked and seldom counted his change. If ever he did count it, he counted it wrong.

"An' he'll be so grateful to us he's bound to let us have his acting clothes now," said William.

"Well, come on," said Henry. "Let's go back quick to the cottage. . . . I say, if he's got a suit of armour I could be Henry the Fifth."

"No, you couldn't," said William. "If anyone's going to be Henry the Fifth, it's me. You can be one of his wives if you like. He had six, an' one of them haunts the Houses of Parliament."

"You're thinkin' of Guy Fawkes," said Henry.

"I am *not*," said William. "I ought to know what I'm thinkin' of, considering it's me that's thinkin' of it. Quite a lot of hist'ry's comin' back to me. I know a jolly lot more than I thought I did when I started thinkin'."

"It's a tirin' job, this 'ere modellin'," said the tramp. "I 'opes a little refreshment's thrown in, as it were. I can't give me best if I'm 'ungry an' thirsty. Thirst's the greatest torment to a modeller."

"That'll be all right," Ginger reassured him. "I know he's got some lemonade."

"Oh, 'as 'e?" said the tramp without enthusiasm.

Only Douglas seemed to feel some slight misgiving about the undertaking.

"I hope it's going to be all right," he said. "I've got a sort of feeling that something's goin' to go wrong with it."

"You always have," said William. "I've never known you do anythin' without havin' a sort of feeling that somethin's going to go wrong with it."

"Yes, an' it gen'rally does," said Douglas.

The tramp was evidently warming to the prospect of his new employment.

"If there's anythin' else he'd like me ter model for," he said, "I'll do it willin' fer a consideration. 'Igh-ups or anythin'. I can act posh as good as anyone."

They were approaching Archie's cottage now, and instinctively they slackened their pace. A faint anxiety invaded William's countenance.

"Of course," he said thoughtfully, "we'll have to 'splain about you. I 'spect, when we've 'splained about you, he'll be grateful all right. P'raps—p'raps you'd better stay at the gate while I 'splain."

The three Outlaws and their new friend stood at the gate while William performed his famous tattoo on the knocker. There was no answer. Cautiously William opened the door and went inside.

"Archie!" he called.

There was still no answer.

He opened the kitchen door. Violet Elizabeth had finished the floor and the stove. The floor still swam with water, on which floated most of Archie's domestic equipment. The stove still emitted clouds of acrid smoke. Violet Elizabeth now stood on a chair "cleaning" the window with a piece of pumice stone.

"Go away," she ordered imperiously. "I'm buthy. I'm thpring-cleaning. I don't want boyth in here."

"And we jolly well don't want to be in here," said William. "Where's Archie?"

"He'th gone out," said Violet Elizabeth, gazing with mild interest at the crack that had suddenly appeared in the window's surface, then setting to work again with renewed vigour.

"Where?"

"I don't know. He'th gone to get thome caketh an' if you don't go away, I'll thcream an'——"

But William had rejoined his friends at the gate.

"He's out," he reported. "It's a bit of a nuisance, isn't it?"

"Well, what are we goin' to do now?" said Douglas. "I *told* you it was goin' to get us into a muddle."

"Well, it's *not* got us into a muddle," said William with spirit. "It's quite an ordn'ry thing for a person to go out shoppin', isn't it? Everyone goes out

shoppin', don't they? Well, stands to reason they do, or there wouldn't be any shops . . . *Tell* you what!"

"Yes?"

"We'll go and look for him, and you," to the tramp, "can wait here for him, can't you? You can go into his studio an'—sort of start practisin', so's to be ready for him when we find him. I bet we don't take long findin' him. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," said the tramp genially as he accompanied his new friends into the cottage.

"Look! Here's the studio," said William, throwing the door open.

The tramp entered and looked round with interest.

"That's the picture on the easel," said William.

"Oh, yes," said the tramp, appraising the brass candlesticks on the chimneypiece and deciding that they wouldn't fetch much.

"Well, we'll go now," said William. "I don't 'spect we'll be long findin' him. You'll be all right, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, I'll be all right," said the tramp, absently taking up and examining a spoon that lay on the carpet—part of the flotsam and jetsam left by Archie's search for the tea-pot.

"Well, come on then," said William. He went to the door, followed by the other Outlaws, then stopped, struck by a sudden thought. "Oh, I nearly forgot to tell you. There's an awful girl messing about in the kitchen, but you needn't take any notice of her. . . . Well, g'bye."

At the gate the four stood for a moment, irresolute.

"He might've gone to Hadley or he might've gone to the village," said William, "so let's split up. Ginger 'n' me'll go an' look for him in Hadley an' you two go'n' look for him in the village. I bet he'll be jolly glad when he finds we've got him a tramp."

"It's a jolly good tramp," said Ginger complacently.

"Yes, we mustn't keep him waitin' too long," said William, "but, of course, there's lots of things in Archie's studio, so I 'spect he'll find it int'restin'."

William was right. The tramp was finding Archie's studio extremely interesting. Years of practice as a picker-up of unconsidered trifles had given him a quick eye and an unerring judgment. His quick eye swept the room,

coming to rest on the top of the tall cupboard in which Archie had lately been burrowing. Between the piles of books and magazines, precariously stacked there, came a faint gleam of metal. Nimbly the tramp leapt upon a chair and took down a tarnished tea-pot. He carried it to the window and examined it. Solid silver. Good condition. Obviously antique. Quickly he slipped it into his bundle and made for the back door. The moment for a hasty and unobtrusive exit had, he considered, arrived. He opened the back door, then closed it quickly. A policeman was strolling idly past the gate. The policeman was wrapped in his own thoughts—in roseate dreams of football pool prizes, cinema stars, spectacular promotion to high places at Scotland Yard—and the tramp, who was a considerate man, did not wish to disturb him. He stood for some seconds in the tiny passage, waiting, and, while he waited, there came a sharp series of knocks at the front door. The tramp glanced from the back door to the front door, obviously weighing up the possibilities of escape offered by each. And at that moment the kitchen door opened, and a small tousled head came round it. Beneath the tousled head was a small face streaked with soot and dust. Beneath that was a blackened, waterlogged apron. Despite all this, there was about the whole apparition an impressive air of dignity and self-confidence.

"Go and anthwer the door," it said. "I can't do everything. I'm buthy thpring cleaning."

So peremptory was the voice that, before the tramp quite knew what he was doing, he had slipped his bundle inside the kitchen for safety and was opening the front door.

A middle-aged lady stood there. She was short, but something about her made her look taller than she was. The eyes, behind large rimless glasses, held a gleam of determination. The mouth was set in lines that showed her to belong to the class of those who stand no nonsense.

As she looked at the tramp, an expression of horror spread slowly over her countenance.

"Archibald!" she gasped.

The tramp coughed. He had been in many tight corners in his somewhat colourful career, and he had always found a cough useful. It gave one time to think, to adjust oneself to circumstances, to plan one's next move.

"You don't remember me, of course," went on the lady. "I'm your Aunt Georgina."

The tramp bared his teeth in a smile of welcome. He had decided to take the way of least resistance. The lady, though plainly dressed and not

particularly comely, carried with her the indefinable atmosphere of the well-to-do. She was obviously an aunt whom anyone would be glad to possess. The situation held possibilities, and the tramp decided to make what use he could of them in the short time at his disposal.

"Aunt Georgina!" he said on a note of rapture. "Well, fancy me not recognising you! Come on in."

"It would be strange if you did recognise me, Archibald," said the visitor with some asperity as she stepped into the little hall, "considering that we haven't met since your christening."

"Of course, of course," said the tramp. "Fancy me forgetting that! Come in."

He threw open the door of the studio and she entered, eyeing her host with ever-deepening horror.

"But this is dreadful, Archibald," she said at last, as if the words had been torn from her, despite herself, by an emotion too strong to be contained.

"What is, Aunt?" said the tramp, giving her an ingratiating smile.

"Your sister had prepared me for your beard and your—outlandish costume and your general affectation of Bohemianism, but I was not prepared for the depths to which you appear to have sunk."

"Sunk, Aunt?" said the tramp.

"Yes, sunk, Archibald," said Aunt Georgina. "It is not my habit to mince my words or to shirk an unpleasant duty, and I must tell you that your whole appearance shocks me. I realise, of course, that you probably suffer from the artistic temperament."

"Something cruel," said the tramp, introducing a professional whine into his voice. "A little holiday's what the doctor says I need. It wouldn't cost more than a couple o' quid, but——"

Aunt Georgina interrupted him.

"You're practically in rags," she said. "Can't you even afford a decent suit of clothes?"

"I been through some bad times, Aunt," said the tramp, "but I'd like to please you. Now, listen. I'd like to buy a new suit o' clothes in honour of your visit."

"It would certainly be an improvement," said Aunt Georgina, "and I confess that I should like to think that my influence had helped to restore something of your self-respect."

“Well, I’ll do it for your sake, Aunt,” said the tramp, twisting his villainous features again into the ingratiating smile. “An’—well, I’d treasure them more if I could feel they were your gift to me. Only a couple of quid, lady. I mean, Aunt. I can get a real slap-up new suit fer a couple o’ quid.”

“Archibald!” gasped Aunt Georgina. “I——” Her gaze wandered to the window. “Who is that young man just coming in at the gate?”

The tramp blenched.

“Well, I’ll be off,” he said, making for the door. “I got a very important engagement.”

“But, Archibald,” said Aunt Georgina, “you can’t go now with a visitor just arriving at your front door.”

“It’s the back door I’m goin’ by,” said the tramp.

He went into the passage, opened the kitchen door, snatched up his bundle and took himself off with such nimbleness that he seemed almost to have vanished into air.

Aunt Georgina sat down weakly and put her hand to her head. Then the door opened and a young man, with a thin harassed face and an armful of paper bags, entered the room.

“Oh, Aunt Georgina,” he panted, “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here to welcome you.”

“Who are you?” said Aunt Georgina faintly.

“I’m Archibald. Your nephew,” said Archie.

“Then who,” said Aunt Georgina, “was the other?”

Archie stared at her in bewilderment.

“What other?” he said.

“Doubtless a joke,” said Aunt Georgina. “Ill-timed and in extremely bad taste, but still—— Now let me look at you, Archibald.”

Archie let her look at him.

“Well, I must say,” continued Aunt Georgina, “it’s something of a relief to learn that your humorous friend is not my nephew, after all. No, don’t apologise,” she went on, misunderstanding the interruption that the bewildered Archie was obviously about to make. “A misplaced sense of humour is, I know, one of the marks of youth, but I think that you’re old enough to have outgrown it, Archibald. Now I can only pay you a short visit and I don’t want to waste time, so let us discuss this exhibition of your work

that your sister says you are anxious to hold in London. I am quite willing to finance it——"

"Oh, Aunt!" said Archie with a gesture of excitement that shed currant buns all over the carpet and sent an iced cake rolling across the floor to settle —iced side down—in the hearth. "How *kind* of you!"

Aunt Georgina raised her hand.

"One moment, Archibald," she said. "I must make sure first that you are worthy of my confidence, that you share my ideals of family obligation." Her eyes went round the room. "Where, Archibald, is the silver tea-pot that belonged to your great-great-grandmother and that I handed on to you as a sacred trust?"

VIOLET ELIZABETH ENTERED, CARRYING A SILVER TEA-POT.

Anxiety and bewilderment returned to Archie's face. He looked desperately around.

"Archibald," said Aunt Georgina portentously, "you've not—you've not *lost* it?"

"No, no," stammered Archie. "No, no, of course not."

He was just on the point of diving into the cupboard again when a diversion was caused by what sounded like a collision between a tank and an express train in the kitchen.

Aunt Georgina started.

"What was that, Archibald?" she said.

Before he could reply another diversion was caused by the clamorous arrival of the Outlaws. Both search parties had missed Archie, but a small boy had informed them of his return and they had come, eager to witness the success of their plan.

"Where's our model?"

"We found you a model, Archie."

"Where's he got to?"

"He was a jolly good one."

"He'd got a beard an' holes in his boots."

"He's got a jolly long waiting list."

"He's in every British Museum in the world."

"Where *is* he?"

"Boys! Boys!" pleaded Archie almost tearfully. "Please don't make so much noise."

The uproar continued.

"He was jolly cheap, Archie."

"Only a bit more than a gard'ner."

"An' mod'lin's skilled work. He said so."

"I bet you can make that tree look like a tramp now."

"Horse."

"Pillar-box."

"Tent."

Aunt Georgina raised a hand.

"*Silence!*" she said.

So quelling were both voice and gesture that the Outlaws were, temporarily, quelled. The uproar died away.

"And *who*," said Aunt Georgina, "are these children?"

Before anyone could answer, the door opened and Violet Elizabeth entered. She carried a silver tea-pot and she gazed round the assembly with an air of authority that rivalled Aunt Georgina's.

"Whereth the gentleman?" she demanded.

"What gentleman?" said Archie.

"He wath here," said Violet Elizabeth, "an' he'd got hith thingth in a little parthel in a handkerchief, and I opened it to thee what he'd got in it and he'd got thith tea-pot in it and it wath all dirty tho I thought I'd clean it for him for a thurprithe tho I did. I put a tin of cocoa in hith parthel for another thurprithe, but—where ith he? I want to give him hith tea-pot all nithe and thining."

They stared at her—except Aunt Georgina, who had seized the tea-pot and was examining it with such absorption that she obviously had not heard a word that Violet Elizabeth had said.

"Oh, Archibald!" she murmured, "how I have misjudged you! I'll confess now that I was beginning to suspect that you had lost or sold it."

Archie blinked and gulped. Events had been moving too quickly for him to keep pace with them, and silence seemed the best policy. Events had been moving too quickly for the Outlaws, too, but silence never seemed the best policy to them.

"Oh, shut up about your rotten old tea-pot. Where's our model?"

"I don't know. I've never touthed it. Whereth the gentleman the tea-pot belongth to? I don't want him to mith hith thurprithe."

"He was here when we went. Our model, I mean. What's happened to him."

"I said it would get us into a muddle."

Archie had now gathered together his scattered forces.

"Go away, children," he said. "Go away at once."

Aunt Georgina was still fondling the tea-pot.

"I'm so glad you treasured it, dear boy," she said. "And now let us discuss the arrangements for that exhibition of your work."

"Oh, *Aunt*!" said Archie, his voice tremulous with gratitude.

Aunt Georgina turned to the Outlaws, and it was clear that their dismissal was a matter of seconds. William leapt at his chance. He had no idea what had happened, but there could be no doubt that Archie was back in a good temper again.

"Will you lend us your actin' clothes now, Archie?" he said.

"Certainly," said Archie with a beaming smile.

Violet Elizabeth looked round at the company. Like William, she had no idea what had happened, but the tea-pot seemed to be the key to the situation.

"It wath me that cleaned it," she said in a voice of serene confidence, "tho you'll *have* to let me be Queen Elithabeth now."

CHAPTER II

WILLIAM—THE BOLD

"WHAT about that play you were goin' to write?" said Ginger.

The Outlaws were whiling away a wet afternoon in William's bedroom, and—an unusual state of affairs with them—time hung rather heavy on their hands.

"Oh, yes," said William, brightening. "Yes, I'd forgot that. Yes, that's a good idea. I'll write it now. It won't take me long. I'm a jolly quick play writer."

"Thank goodness we needn't have Violet Elizabeth for Queen Elizabeth now, anyway," said Ginger.

For, the very day after she had secured the part, Violet Elizabeth had developed mumps and had withdrawn tempestuously from public life.

"I dunno that I want to have Queen Elizabeth at all," said William. "She wasn't very int'restin'. She didn't do anythin' but go trampin' about in puddles over people's coats. Gosh! I bet they got into rows when they got home."

"She beat the Armada," said Henry.

"No, she didn't," said William. "Nelson did that."

"Drake."

"Well, Drake, then. But *she* didn't. I 'spect she jus' swanked about in an A.T.S. uniform, same as Ethel did in our war, but she didn't do any fightin'. I don't want to write a play about a woman, anyway. I don't like women an' I don't see why I should write plays about them." He looked at Henry. "Who else was there in hist'ry?"

Henry considered.

"Perkin Warbeck," he said at last.

"What did he do?" said William. "I'm not goin' to write about him if he jus' discovered America or somethin' like that. I'm only goin' to write about him if he did somethin' int'restin' like killin' people."

"Well, he was a rebel," said Henry, "so I bet he killed people."

"All right," said William, "I'll write a play about him an' I'll be him an' the rest of you can be policemen."

"There's got to be a king," said Henry.

"I'll be him, too," said William.

"You can't be the king *an'* the rebel," objected Ginger.

"Yes, I can," said William. "I've acted plays when I've been every single person in them. I've killed someone an' then been the ghost of the person that was killed hauntin' the person that killed him, an' I only got in a bit of a muddle over it. A king an' a rebel's nothin' to me."

"All right," said Ginger. "I'll be the detective."

"I don't think there was a detective in it," said William uncertainly. Again he looked at Henry. "Was there?"

"Well, I don't quite remember," said Henry noncommittally. "There might have been."

"I bet there was," said Ginger. "If he killed people it was a crime, an' there's always a detective in a crime."

"I'll be a ghost," said Douglas, who always liked to appropriate the less adventurous rôles.

"Whose?" said Henry.

"Anyone's," said Douglas.

"Yes," said William judicially. "All the mos' excitin' plays have ghosts in 'em. There was one in the play Shakespeare wrote. He came to dinner an' shook gory locks at 'em. He was called Scrooge or some such name."

"What am I goin' to be?" said Henry.

"You can be the army of rebels," said William. "You can carry that banner your uncle gave you. It's only a little one, but it's a nice colour."

"It's a naval one," said Henry doubtfully, "an' he said it meant 'Yellow Fever on Board.' "

"That doesn't matter," said William. "No one can read banners an', even if they can read it, it makes it more excitin'."

"But, listen," said Henry. "I've got that new fancy dress I had for Victor Jameson's fancy dress party. It's George Washington an' it's got an axe. It's only cardboard, but it looks like a real one."

"Yes, I remember," said William. "It was jolly good. All right"—generously—"you can be Perkin Warbeck."

"Well, aren't you goin' to start writin' it?" said Ginger.

"All right, all right," snapped William. "I've gotter have time to *think*, haven't I? I've only got one brain, same as anyone else."

Ginger, anxious not to waste any more time, repressed the obvious comment, and William, taking from his pocket a piece of paper so grubby that it could only be called "blank" by courtesy, and a battered pencil of the "indelible" variety, lay down on his stomach on the floor (his usual attitude for literary composition), with the paper in front of him, his brow ravelled into the complicated pattern that betokened mental exertion. For some minutes there was no sound but the sound of William's teeth chewing away absently at the point of his pencil, while a tide of purple colouring spread slowly over his features.

"Well, get on," said Henry at last. "Thought you were goin' to write a play about Perkin Warbeck."

"Well, how can I," said William in the tone of one goaded beyond endurance, "with you all goin' on an' on at me all the time? I bet Shakespeare didn't have a lot of people sittin' round him all the time sayin' they thought he was goin' to write a play about Perkin Warbeck."

"All right," said Henry. "We won't say anythin' more. Now get on with it."

Heaving a sigh so long and deep that the paper fluttered several feet away and had to be recaptured, manipulating the pencil carefully so that the fraction of the point that had survived the onset of his teeth could be made to function, William set to work. The others gathered round him, peering over his shoulder.

seen one pallis king seeted enter perkin warbeck
disgized as george washington,
king. hello george washington cum in I'll ask my
mother if thou can stay to tea theres creem buns
and sum jelly left over from sundy.

"You see, he doesn't know he's a rebel," explained William in parenthesis. "He thinks he's jus' an ordin'ry visitor."

george washington (throing off disgize). I am not
george washington thou villun I am perkin warbeck
and I hav cum to waid in thy blud.
exit king run after by perkin warbeck with ax.

"Yes, but look," said Henry indignantly. "I can't throw off the disguise. Not like that—all in a minute in brackets. That George Washington costume buttons tight all down me an' it takes hours to get into an' out of. Besides, there isn't room for anything but my underclothes underneath it, an' I'd look a jolly silly rebel jus' in underclothes."

"I do wish you'd stop makin' objections," said William testily. "Here I am, tryin' to write a great play, an' all you can do is to go on an' on makin' objections. All right. Take your rebel clothes with you in a parcel an' change into them if there's not room for them under George Washington."

"Yes, an' what's the King goin' to do, while I'm doin' that? Jus' sit there watchin' me changin' into my rebel's clothes? That's goin' to look jolly silly."

"He can be readin' a newspaper," said William, "an' look as if he couldn't see you."

"Well, it's still goin' to look jolly silly," said Henry.

"When do I come in?" said Ginger anxiously. "I ought to be on in the first scene lookin' round for clues."

"There can't be any clues till someone's killed someone," said William. "Use a bit of sense. An' "—with a fresh burst of irritation—"I wish you'd all stop crowdin' round me an' breathin' down my neck. How d'you think great plays like Paradise Lost'd have got wrote if everyone Shakespeare knew had come crowdin' round him breathin' down his neck?"

The three withdrew to a respectful distance, and William continued his literary efforts.

Seen two a corpse enter rebbles.
Rebbles. Theres a pretty shady corpse over yonder
lets sit on it.

The three had gathered round him again.

"What do they want to sit on a dead body for?" said Henry.

"It's *not* a dead body," said William in exasperation. "Corpse means 'wood' in plays an' po'try. An' it's not 'on.' It's 'in.' "

"Why don't you cross your i's, then?" said Henry. "An' I've never come across 'corpse' meanin' 'wood.' It always means 'dead body' in the books I've read."

"Well, you've not read everything, have you?" said William crushingly. "I can't help you bein' so ign'rant that you don't know that 'corpse' means 'wood' in plays an' po'try. If I've got to write plays for people that don't

know any English, I might, as well stop writin' them altogether, an' I've a jolly good mind to."

"When do I come in?" said Ginger, his anxiety deepening. "Seems to me the play's got about half-way through an' I've not come into it at all yet."

"Anyway, whose *was* this corpse?" said Douglas. "If I've got to be a ghost I ought to know who I'm the ghost of."

"It's a rotten play so far," said Ginger.

"All right, write it yourself," said William, screwing up the piece of paper into a ball and throwing it across the room. "I'm sick of it, an' anyway the pencil's stopped writin', so I couldn't go on with it even if I wanted to." The final abandonment of his literary project seemed to restore his good humour, and he sat up, a thoughtful frown on his face. "You know . . . I think it's time there was another rebellion. There's not been one since the ones in hist'ry. I mean, when people put the days we're livin' in now into hist'ry books in a hundred years' time, it's goin' to be jolly dull without a few rebellions."

The other three considered this point with interest.

"There aren't any rebels," said Douglas, "an' there can't be rebellions without rebels."

"Well, anyone can be a rebel, can't they?" said William impatiently. "Come to that, we could be." He was silent for a few moments while the light that generally heralded one of his ideas broke slowly over his sombre freckled countenance. "Come to that," he went on, "I don't see why we shouldn't be, either."

"We couldn't be," said Douglas. "All the rebels in hist'ry were grown up."

"Well, all the more reason why we should have a turn," said William. "It'd be a change from grown-ups. I think we ought to do somethin' to make hist'ry a bit more int'restin'." He looked at Henry. "What did people rebel about?"

Henry considered.

" 'Cause they had grievances," he said.

William gave a short ironic laugh.

"We've got plenty of *them*," he said. "Gosh! when I think of the amount of *them* we've got, it's a wonder we didn't start rebellin' years ago."

"There was a sort of rebellion not very long ago," said Henry thoughtfully. "I heard my father talkin' about it las' week. It was the Irish,

an' they rebelled 'cause they'd had their priv'leges took away an' they wanted them back. They used to have a Parliament an' such-like an' they got 'em took away an' they made a rebellion to get 'em back."

"That's what we'll do," said William. "Jus' think of the priv'leges *we've* had took away! Think of the days when children used to work in the mills an' down coal mines an' up chimneys. It mus' have been wizard! I went to a mill once with my uncle an'—gosh! It was grand! Wheels whizzin' round all over the place, an' you put stuff in at one end of a thing an' it came out diff'rent at the other! An' they let me help take somethin' from one place to another in a sort of cage that went whizzin' along the ceiling right high up jus' like an aeroplane. It was abs'lutely *grand*! And jus' *think* of workin' in a place like that every day 'stead of goin' to school—same as children used to in the old days. An' think of goin' down underneath the earth messin' about with coal. An' goin' up chimneys. An' jus' think that children used to do all these things every day till grown-ups stopped them 'cause they didn't want them to have a good time. They wanted us to have a rotten time doin' sums an' French verbs an' g'ography instead."

The Outlaws had frequently heard William give voice to these opinions, but they still found them inspiriting. They gave a murmur of agreement, and William continued.

"Well, now, that's all fixed up. We're goin' to have a rebellion to get back the priv'leges that grown-ups took off us an' then we're goin' to have a jolly good time in mills an' up chimneys an' down coal mines."

"How do rebels start?" said Ginger.

"Well, there's got to be a leader," said Henry.

"I'll be him," said William.

"An' this leader's got to rouse followers by makin' speeches."

"I can do that all right," said William confidently. "I'm jolly good at makin' speeches. What happens after that?"

"Didn't you listen to the hist'ry lesson on Monday?" said Henry.

"No," said William. "I was too busy. I was racin' my furry caterpillar against Ginger's."

"Mine won," said Ginger.

"It did *not*."

"It did."

"It didn't."

"It did."

“Well, never mind now,” said William. “We’ve got to get on with this rebellion. Anyway,” to Henry, “what was it about? This hist’ry lesson, I mean.”

“It was about a man called Warwick that was a sort of rebel,” said Henry, “an’ he captured the King.”

William looked slightly taken aback.

“That’s goin’ to be a bit difficult,” he said. “I mean, the King lives a long way off, an’ it’d take us all day to get to his house, to start with.”

“Yes, but there’s people that repr’sent him,” said Ginger, “an’ if we captured one of those it’d count the same.”

“Who repr’sents him?” said William.

“Well, my aunt gave me a book las’ birthday, you know, called *Civics* or somethin’ like that, an’ it was so dull that I didn’t read it till las’ week when I was in bed with that cold an’ I felt so mis’rable that I wanted to read a mis’rable book, so I read it.”

“An’ who did it say repr’sented him?”

“I think it was the army,” said Ginger vaguely. “I’m not quite sure, ’cause I was sneezin’ all the time, but I think so.”

“Well, I don’t see how we can capture the army,” said William frowning thoughtfully, “not the whole of it, anyway.”

“P’raps it wasn’t the army,” said Ginger. “No, I don’t think it was. I think it was the p’lice.”

William considered.

“Well, I bet it’s no good tryin’ to capture the p’liceman here,” he said. “He’s jolly strong an’ jolly bad-tempered. Besides, it wouldn’t be excitin’ enough, ’cause we know him so well.”

“I don’t think an ordin’ry p’liceman counts, anyway,” said Ginger. “It’s got to be someone high-up.”

“My father knows a Chief Constable,” said Henry. “He’s called Mr. Wakely an’ he’s comin’ to play chess with my father to-night. Would he do?”

“Yes, I bet he’d do,” said Ginger. “I ’spect he’s the high-up one round here that repr’sents the King.”

“What do we do when we’ve got him?” said Douglas a little apprehensively.

"Well," said William, considering this for the first time, "I 'spose we send a note to the government sayin' that we won't let him go till they've put our grievances right an' let us go back to mills an' coal mines an' sweepin' chimneys. An' then"—simply—"they will."

"I bet it doesn't turn out as easy as that," said Douglas gloomily.

"I bet it does," said William with spirit. "Of course," he admitted after a slight pause, "there's a few things to get fixed up before we axshully start."

"What'll we do first?" said Ginger.

"We've gotter get an army of rebels together first," said William. "Jus' four rebels isn't enough. They mightn't take any notice of us. It's stopped rainin' so we can start straight away. I'll rouse 'em by makin' a speech, same as you said. We'll have a meetin' an' I bet everyone'll come to it when they know I'm goin' to make a speech."

"I'll bring my trumpet," said Henry.

"I'll bring my drum," said Douglas.

"I'll bring my lasso," said Ginger, "then I can chuck 'em out when they start int'ruptin'."

William took up his stand on a packing-case in the old barn, and the audience drifted slowly in. There was generally an audience when the word had gone round that William was going to make a speech. It wasn't so much the prospect of the actual speech that roused their interest. It was the prospect of the events that usually followed in its train. Life at the moment was a little dull and they welcomed the thought of the excitement that William's projects were apt to infuse into it. The other members of William's gang were there, together with a smattering of village children. Arabella Simpkin, a pugnacious-looking child with red hair, had arrived first, trundling a go-cart in which sat a pugnacious-looking baby with red hair, who brandished a fish slice in the intervals of chewing a raw carrot. Arabella looked round with a contemptuous sniff, then stood, hand on hip, in an attitude copied from her favourite film star. The others straggled in—small boys, small girls, a few toddlers and a couple of dogs.

"Ladies an' gentlemen," began William, "I'm glad you could all come to-day an' I think you're goin' to have a very int'restin' time."

"Speak for yourself," said Arabella Simpkin.

"Shut up!" said William. "Well, now, listen. I'm goin' to make a very int'restin' speech."

The audience raised a ragged cheer. The dogs barked. Arabella gave a high-pitched, sarcastic laugh, rather like a horse's neigh, and the baby hit the nearest toddler on the head with the fish slice.

"Now listen, everyone," said William. "You'd rather work in a mill with big wheels whizzin' round an' things goin' in at one end an' comin' out diff'rent at the other an' riding in carts that go shootin' along the ceiling like aeroplanes, 'stead of goin' to school, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," agreed the audience.

"An' you'd rather be underneath the earth messin' about with coal than do sums an' g'ography, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," agreed the audience.

"An' you'd like to go sweepin' chimneys an' messin' about with soot an' stuff, wouldn't you?"

"*Yes!*" shouted the audience.

"Well, those are our priv'leges that got took off us an' we've got to get 'em back an' the only way we can get 'em back is by bein' rebels. D'you want to be rebels?"

"YES!" roared the audience.

"Well, then, you're a rebel army an' I'm the leader an' we've got to capture someone that's the same as the King an' then they'll have to let us all go back to havin' a good time bein' chimney sweeps an' such-like."

"Won't make much diff'rence to you, far as your face goes," said Arabella with a snort.

"You shut up," said William, passing a hand over that member. "My face is all right."

"Might be if you could see it," retorted Arabella, "but I doubt it."

"Well, shut up, anyway."

"No, I won't shut up, either. 'S a free country, isn't it? I can say what I like, can't I?"

"You'd've got your head cut off in hist'ry, carryin' on like this," said William sternly.

"All right, you try it," challenged Arabella. "You jus' try cuttin' my head off."

Ginger made an effort to lasso her, but the loop caught Douglas round his shoulders and brought him down on top of the red-haired baby, who began to belabour him with carrot and fish slice.

"Now listen," said William, raising his voice above the uproar. "You're a rebel army an' you've got to get weapons—bows an' arrows an' pistols an' pokers an' things—an' you've got to come when I blow this whistle (he took a whistle from his pocket and blew a piercing blast) 'cause that's the sign for the rebellion to start. See?"

Henry blew his trumpet, Douglas beat his drum. Ginger began to sing "God Save the King," then stopped abruptly, realising that it was hardly appropriate to the occasion. Arabella Simpkin took the baby's carrot and threw it at William, hitting him neatly in the eye, the baby began to howl, the dogs began to fight, and the meeting broke up in general disorder.

But William, walking home with the Outlaws, felt well satisfied with his afternoon's work.

"We've got an army," he said. "All we have to do now is to capture this Mr. Wakely."

"Yes," said Douglas, "an' if you think that's goin' to be easy——"

"We'll prob'ly have to use a bit of cunnin'," said William, "but if that other rebel leader could do it, I don't see why I shouldn't. Anyway, I'm goin' home to tea now an' I'll have a think about it while I'm havin' tea."

The only other members of his family present at tea were Mrs. Brown and Ethel. Ethel, it seemed, had been to London with Jimmy Moore the day before and had found the expedition unsatisfactory.

"You'd think taxis hadn't been invented," she was saying bitterly. "You'd think it was a treat to stand in a bus queue. Wouldn't you have thought he'd have had the sense to book a table for lunch? But—oh, no! We trailed about from place to place and found everywhere full and had to have lunch in a ghastly hole with dead flowers on the table and darns in the table-cloth and only rabbit left."

"Well, what's wrong with rabbit?" said William. He gave a short sinister laugh. "People have to live on worse things than rabbit in rebellions. Rats, I shouldn't be surprised."

"Don't talk such nonsense, dear," said Mrs. Brown. She looked at his features, which could be dimly discerned beneath their covering of indelible pencil. "And what *have* you got on your face?"

"Pencil," said William simply, "an' I did wash it."

"It doesn't look as if you had."

"No, it's that sort of pencil. It's one of those indelicate ones."

Mrs. Brown gave a helpless sigh and turned again to Ethel.

"But you saw a nice film, didn't you, dear?"

"Oh, yes," said Ethel indifferently, "but it wasn't the one I'd wanted to see. More bus queues. More trailing about. And then we just had to go where we could get a seat."

Again Mrs. Brown sighed.

"But he's such a nice boy."

"I know," said Ethel. "That's what makes me so mad. He's asked me to go up with him again next Saturday, but I've told him I'd rather die. Anyway, Colonel Maidstone will be home on Friday and I've promised to go up with him to a dinner and dance on Saturday. He knows how to do things properly."

"Y-yes," said Mrs. Brown, "but I don't like him as much as I like Jimmy."

"Neither do I," said Ethel, "but he does know how to take one out. Taxis, tables booked, sprays of carnations, stalls . . . Everything goes like clockwork and is wonderful. It makes me feel like someone on the films."

William automatically accorded this statement a snort of derision, but it was an absent-minded snort. His thoughts had turned to Colonel Maidstone —a quiet, retiring middle-aged man who had recently taken The Limes furnished and had attached himself to the Brown household, playing golf with Mr. Brown and paying marked attentions to Ethel. William had not till now taken much notice of him, but it suddenly occurred to him that he might be useful. . . . He frequently found Ethel's admirers useful. They were apt to labour under the delusion that to ingratiate themselves with William helped to win Ethel's favour, and a certain amount of advantage could generally be wrung from the situation before they realised their mistake. Stretching out his hand absently for his fifth sandwich (for anxiety never impaired William's appetite), he continued to give the conversation his close attention.

"It was awfully good of him to let us keep the tennis tea things in his garage while he's away," said Ethel.

William remembered that the tennis pavilion had been undergoing repairs and that Ethel had been using Colonel Maidstone's garage as a parking place for the tea equipment in his absence.

"I hope you haven't lost the key," said Mrs. Brown.

"Oh, no," smiled Ethel. "I keep it on a string pinned to the pocket of my big coat, so that I can't forget where I've put it. He's got another, of course,

so it wouldn't be fatal if I did lose it. And we moved the things back to the pavilion this morning."

"Where has he gone to?" said Mrs. Brown. "France, isn't it?"

"No, Italy," said Ethel. "His sister's a contessa there, and he often goes over to see her." She sighed. "It's terribly thrilling and romantic. We've never had anyone half so exciting living in the village before."

Then they both became aware of William watching and listening with an intensity that made them vaguely uneasy. Experience had taught them that when William's face wore that particular expression, strange and unexpected things were wont to happen.

"Now, William, this is nothing to do with you," said Mrs. Brown. "If you've finished your tea, go out."

William had finished his tea. He went out. His brow was corrugated with thought, his eyes gleamed with purpose. For suddenly he saw his way clear before him. The actual capture of the King's representative had never presented much difficulty to his mind, but the place of detention had been causing him a certain amount of anxiety. How could they keep their captive so that he should not be immediately discovered and rescued? And Colonel Maidstone's garage seemed to be the answer to the problem. It was empty, the key could easily be detached from Ethel's pocket, and—best of all—Colonel Maidstone was one of Ethel's admirers and so must perforce endure without retaliation whatever inconveniences might result from the unofficial requisitioning of his premises. Moreover, Mr. Wakely, the "King's representative," was coming to play chess with Henry's father that very night. The stage was set. The train was laid. The standard of rebellion could now openly be raised. There were probably a few points that would still need adjusting, but they could be adjusted as they arose.

“ALL THOSE PRIV’LEGES THAT WERE TOOK OFF US,” SAID WILLIAM. “THEY’VE GOTTER COME BACK.”

It was a fine night, and Mr. Wakely, Chief Constable of the County, had decided to walk the few miles from Hadley to the village. He strolled slowly along the pleasant country road, stopping as he reached the outskirts of the village, to compare his watch with the church clock. It was then that he became aware of a motley band of children following him. They carried bows and arrows, toy pistols, rolling-pins, pokers, stair-rods. . . . One wore a Red Indian costume, another a pirate's costume, another a bus conductor's uniform. One had a saucepan on his head, another a tea cosy. One walked slowly and with difficulty, encased in a fire-guard. Another brandished a cricket stump. One held aloft a rusty potato masher of ancient design. Another carried a bedraggled banner on the end of a broomstick, while another made ferocious passes at the air with a tin-opener as he walked. Mr. Wakely smiled at them benignly and stood aside to let them pass. They hung back, unwilling, apparently, to take precedence of him.

Still smiling benignly, Mr. Wakely continued on his way. Nice to see the little fellows enjoying themselves at their childish games, he thought. . . . Then he became aware of two boys, walking on either side of him. One was a boy with a shock of untidy red hair. The other was a stocky boy whose brows were drawn into a ferocious scowl and who walked with an assumption of dignity oddly at variance with a purple-streaked face, stockings that had sagged over his shoes (the garters were in his pocket ready for use as catapults should the need arise) and a tie worn at an unusual angle. He recognised them as school friends of Henry's and turned his benign smile on them, happily unaware that he had been captured by a rebel army and was being marched to a place of imprisonment.

"Now, let me see . . ." he said genially. "I know you, of course, but I've forgotten your names."

"William," said one shortly, and "Ginger," said the other.

"Yes, yes, of course. I remember now. Friends of Henry's, aren't you? Lovely evening, isn't it?"

" 'S all right for people that can enjoy it," said William. "People that can work in mills an' sweep chimneys."

Mr. Wakely looked at him in pardonable surprise.

"Er—what did you say, my boy?" he said, thinking that he had not heard aright.

"All those priv'leges that were took off us," said William earnestly. "They've gotter come back. We're same as the ones in hist'ry, but the King lives too far off an' anyway you're the same as him, aren't you? That mill I once went over was wizard. An' I bet *you'd* rather go up chimneys an' go shootin' across a ceilin' than do sums. An' it's all been took off us, an' we've got to get it back."

Mr. Wakely's bewilderment was increasing.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow," he said. "Perhaps . . ."

They had reached the gate of Colonel Maidstone's house. William and Ginger stopped short. Mr. Wakely, finding his way barred by the two boys, stopped short. The whole procession stopped short. It occurred to William suddenly and for the first time that the imprisoning of his captive might be rather a tricky business. Mr. Wakely, in real life, looked larger and more powerful that he had looked in William's imagination of the scene.

He nodded his head in the direction of the garage and spoke in a tone that was intended to be ingratiating, but that actually suggested an acute attack of laryngitis.

“Wouldn’t you like to go in there an’ have a nice rest?” he said. “I ’spect you’re feelin’ a bit tired, aren’t you, an’ it’s jolly comfortable in there.”

“No, thank you,” said Mr. Wakely. “I think perhaps I’d better be getting on.”

William quickly turned to other tactics.

“Listen,” he said earnestly. “There’s somethin’ in that garage we want you to see particular. It’s somethin’ jolly important. It’s somethin’ you *ought* to see. It’s somethin’ you’ll be sorry all the rest of your life if you don’t see. It’s somethin’—well, it’s somethin’ you’ve *got* to see, isn’t it, Ginger?”

“Yes,” said Ginger.

Mr. Wakely looked from one to the other. There was something strangely convincing in their earnestness. In any case he was a little early for his game of chess with Henry’s father and it would do no harm to while away a few minutes joining in their childish games. He walked up the short drive with William on one side, Ginger on the other and the rebel army in the rear. William took out a key and opened the door. Mr. Wakely stepped inside. Quick as lightning William slammed the door and turned the key. But in the moment of slamming the door, he had seen something that puzzled and surprised him. Colonel Maidstone’s car was back in the garage. Evidently he had returned from Italy earlier than he had expected. This, of course, complicated a situation that was far from simple to start with, but, William decided with a shrug, there was nothing he could do about it. At any rate, he had led his rebel army to victory. The King’s representative was safely captured and imprisoned.

He stood listening outside the garage for a few moments, but there was no sound from within—no shouts of anger, no threats or appeals for help—only a strange and disconcerting silence. He walked down to the gate, where his rebel army awaited him.

“Ladies an’ gentlemen,” he said, giving a military salute, “we’ve captured the King’s representative an’ that means we’ve won the war.”

QUICK AS LIGHTNING WILLIAM SLAMMED THE DOOR.

A ragged cheer rose from the ranks.

"Now you can all go home," continued William, "while we get things fixed up, an' you can come along later an' see what's happened an' when you can stop goin' to school an' start chimney sweepin' an' such-like."

Another cheer arose. The little boy in the bus conductor's uniform turned head over heels. The little boy with the potato masher started a fight with the little boy in the fire-guard. The little boy with the stair-rod, who was extremely vague about the whole thing, began to sing "Good King Wenceslas" and was extinguished by the little boy with the tea cosy.

"Well, you'd better go now," said William, who was beginning to feel slight—very slight—qualms about the whole business. "If you don't go quick, we may not be able to get it fixed up so's you can start cleanin' chimneys an' goin' down coal mines first thing on Monday mornin'."

With another cheer the rebel army straggled off. The four Outlaws (Henry had concealed himself in the ranks of the rebel army in order not to

be recognised by the captive) stood at the gate, looking apprehensively at the garage door. The strange silence continued.

"Well, come on," said William. "The nex' thing we've got to do is to write a letter to the gov'nment, tellin' them we've captured him, an' that we'll only let him out if they'll promise to give us back our old priv'leges, sweepin' chimneys an' workin' in mills an' such-like."

"Why's he so quiet?" said Henry with an uneasy glance at the garage door.

"P'raps he's died of fright," said Douglas gloomily, "then we'll all get hung for murder."

"Oh, shut up," said William impatiently. "It's you that's more likely to die of fright. We've won the war an' you go on grousin' an' grumblin' as if we'd lost it. I 'spect he's quiet 'cause he's fed up at gettin' conquered so easy. You'd be fed up if you'd got conquered as easy as that. Come on. Let's go to Ginger's house 'cause it's nearest, an' write the letter."

The letter was composed by William, lying full-length on his stomach in Ginger's bedroom.

Deer guvenment [it read],

Weve conkered the kings reppersentative an put him in prizon but weel let him out if you prommis to give us bak our old privledges. If you dont we will waid in your blud for our rites.

Yours truely,
William Brown and the rebble army.

"There!" said William. "That's a jolly good letter. I bet it scares them. Come on. We'll address it to the P'lice Station, Hadley, 'cause it's the p'lice that repr'sents the King an' we'll take it to Hadley an' post it so's it'll get to them quick."

"Yes, an' who's got a stamp?" said Douglas sarcastically.

"You don't need a stamp when you write to the gov'nment," said William. "You mus' be jolly ign'rant not to know that. They put the stamp on themselves at the other end."

"Why?"

"Well, it gives 'em somethin' to do. . . . Oh, come on an' stop wastin' time."

They trooped into Hadley, posted the letter, then returned by the short cut across the fields. Beneath their natural exhilaration at having brought the

affair to such a satisfactory conclusion was a faint undercurrent of anxiety. The whole thing seemed too simple to be true.

WILLIAM STOOD GLUED TO THE SPOT WITH AMAZEMENT.

"Gosh! There's one thing I never thought of," said William suddenly. "We've got to take some food to him. We can't let him starve to death."

"Why not?" said Ginger. "They did in hist'ry."

"Yes, but I nearly starved to death myself once," said William, "so I know what it's like. I once went without food from breakfast till nearly tea-time 'cause it was a picnic an' we'd forgot the basket. All that time I only had some sweets an' ice cream an' a few apples an' biscuits, so I know what it's like to nearly starve to death an' I don't want even a villain an' tyrant like him to do it."

"That's all very well," said Henry, "but how can we get him food?"

"Well, there's half an apple turnover in our larder," said William, "an' I bet I can find some bits in the chicken bucket that aren't too bad. I've et bits out of the chicken bucket myself when I've been rav'nous with hunger. Bits of cheese an' pastry an' crusts an' things. They tasted jolly good."

"Yes, an' who's goin' to take it to him?" said Douglas. "He's prob'ly so mad with rage he'll kill you soon as he sees you."

"No, I 'spect he'll be so hungry he won't think of it," said William. "Anyway, I'll jus' open the door an' shove it in an' then shut the door quick before he's time to get at me."

"Well, I'll be jolly s'prised if you come out alive," said Douglas.

"Oh, will you?" said William. "Well, I'll be jolly s'prised if I don't. . . . Come on. I've got to get that apple turnover an' those bits from the chicken bucket before it gets dark. An' you'd better not come with me. My family might start gettin' suspicious if we all went together. They start gettin' suspicious jolly quick, do my family."

He made his way home, took the apple turnover from the larder, filled his pockets with the more edible portion of the chicken scraps and was tiptoeing across the hall past the half-open door of the sitting-room, when he saw a sight that held him as if glued to the spot by amazement. For there, standing on the hearthrug, large, genial, unperturbed, stood Mr. Wakely, Chief Constable, the King's representative, whom William had left safely imprisoned in Colonel Maidstone's garage not half an hour before. Mrs. Brown, Ethel and Jimmy Moore sat round him, listening to him with expressions of eager interest. None of them noticed William.

"Yes, the kids put me on to it," Mr. Wakely was saying. "How they found it out is a mystery, but they told me that there was something in the garage that I ought to see, so in I went."

"Rather trusting of you," said Jimmy.

"Oh, I don't know. I could see they weren't pulling my leg. They were obviously in earnest and I'm an inquisitive man by nature, you know. Anyway I saw a car there and—well, as the kids had warned me that there was something fishy in the place, I took a good look at it. I've got a rather observant eye, and the first thing I noticed was that the upholstery of the car was covered with dirty covers but that they were sewn on with clean cotton and I wondered why. So I poked around a bit and finally took them off and investigated the upholstery and, to cut a long story short, there were over a thousand pairs of nylons hidden in the stuffing of the seats and arms and back."

"And he never gave me one," said Ethel with a wail of anguish.

"They were smuggled, young woman," said Mr. Wakely.

"I shouldn't have minded that," sighed Ethel.

"You mean—he's a black marketeer?" said Mrs. Brown.

"Oh, yes. We've been on to Scotland Yard, and, if it's the man they think it is, they've been trying to get him for some time. He's gone up to London

to-day to fix things up with the rest of the gang, I suppose. We've got someone waiting at the station for him now."

"Oh, dear!" said Ethel. "He was so charming and aristocratic. I simply can't believe it. A colonel with a sister who's an Italian contessa!"

Mr. Wakely smiled.

"He's not a colonel and his sister isn't a contessa," he said.

"He seemed so fond of me," said Ethel with a far-away look in her eyes.

"That's his technique, if he's the man they're after," said Mr. Wakely. "He takes a furnished house in the country and attaches himself to the most ordinary and innocuous family in the neighbourhood (the Browns tried not to flinch at this), as a sort of family friend and if there's an attractive unmarried daughter he pays marked attention to her. Then there's no mystery about him. He's accepted as an ordinary member of the community, and no one wonders why he's there or what he's doing. Smuggling, of course, is only a side-line, but he does quite a lot of it, and he's an expert at vanishing without leaving a trace. At the last place where he lived he posed as a naval commander, and he vanished in a night so completely that Scotland Yard have lost track of him ever since."

"But do you mean to say that it was William who told you about him?" said Mrs. Brown incredulously.

"Yes. That's really what I came along for. To thank him and ask how he got on to it. Sorry he's out."

Then suddenly they turned to see William standing in the doorway.

"Oh, there you are, dear," said Mrs. Brown. "Come on in."

William came on in. His face wore the look of wooden imbecility that it was wont to assume in times of crisis. The hand that clutched the remains of the apple turnover was held rigidly behind his back.

"Congratulations, young man!" said Mr. Wakely "I don't know what made you suspect the fellow, but you and your pals have done a fine piece of detective work. You made one mistake, however. You were quite right in shutting the garage door on me, because naturally one didn't want a crowd of onlookers, but what you didn't realise, my boy, was that when you locked them out you locked me in."

He laughed heartily. William blinked, gulped and bared his teeth in a glassy smile.

"However, I got out quite easily by the window," went on Mr. Wakely, "but what made you suspect him in the first place?"

They all looked at William expectantly. He maintained his glassy smile with an effort.

"Well, I can't quite remember jus' at the minute," he said vaguely. "I jus' sort of forget. I mean——"

At that point the apple turnover that he was holding behind his back disintegrated and fell with a "plop!" on to the carpet.

"Oh, William!" groaned Mrs. Brown. "If you were hungry, why didn't you *ask* for it and eat it in the kitchen? What on earth was the object of carrying it about with you?"

William glanced at the "object," who still stood on the hearthrug smiling at him benignly, then plunged desperately into an explanation.

"Well, I sort of took it 'cause—well, I thought I might—might meet a hungry person. You never know when you're goin' to meet a hungry person an'—an'—well, it's nice to have a bit of somethin' to give 'em if you do, jus'—jus'—jus' to stop 'em starvin' to death."

"William, what *nonsense*!"

Mrs. Brown had seized the coal shovel and was gathering up the fragments of apple turnover. William bent down to help her, sending a small cascade of cheese rinds and crusts from the pocket where he had secreted the chicken scraps.

"William!" gasped Mrs. Brown, "what on *earth* have you got those chicken scraps for?"

"He thought he might meet a hungry hen," suggested Ethel.

"Yes, that was it," said William, grateful for the explanation. "I'm—I'm jolly fond of hens an'—an' it mus' be rotten for a hen—bein' hungry, I mean—I mean, jus' think of bein' shut up in a prison slowly starvin' to death."

"William, *who's* shut up in a prison?" said Mrs. Brown in exasperation, removing a piece of cheese rind from her shoe.

"This King's repr'sentative. I mean, this hen . . . I mean—well, I bet Perkin Warbeck did worse things than take a few scraps out of his mother's chicken bucket jus' to stop Mr. Wakely starvin' to death . . . I mean, this hen . . . I mean . . ."

He gave it up and took refuge again in his glassy smile.

Under cover of William's eloquence, Jimmy had turned to Ethel.

"You will come up to town with me on Saturday, won't you, Ethel?"

"Yes, Jimmy," said Ethel with a sigh.

"Thanks," said Jimmy, his voice hoarse with gratitude. "I'll do things differently, Ethel. I promise I will. I'll have taxis everywhere even if I have to buy one of the darn things and I'll book a table at a decent place. . . ."

Mr. Wakely had taken out his note-case and was handing a ten-shilling note to William.

"That's a slight expression of my own personal gratitude, my boy," he said. "And now, tell me what put you on the fellow's track?" He looked at the clock and gave a start. "Good Heavens! Is that right? I ought to be at the station by now. . . . Well, we'll go into all that later, my boy, and I shall look forward to hearing your story. Good-bye for the present."

When he had gone, Mrs. Brown, Ethel and Jimmy all turned to William.

"Now tell us, William," said Mrs. Brown, "how did you discover that this man was a criminal?"

William looked out of the window and gave a start. His army of rebels was marching down the road towards the house—banner flying, potato masher, stair-rod, poker well in evidence. William had told them to come along later to see what had happened, and they were coming along later to see what had happened. About twenty of them. He glanced down at the ten-shilling note in his hand. A sixpenny ice cream each. They'd be disappointed about the result of the rebellion, of course, but a sixpenny ice cream can salve most disappointments.

"Yes, do tell us, William," said Ethel. "It was rather wonderful of you."

"I should think it was," said Jimmy.

William looked at them thoughtfully. Their attitude was flattering, of course, but it would not, he knew, survive a knowledge of the facts of the case. A knowledge of the facts of the case might even imperil his newly-found wealth.

He went to the door, turned there to say, "All right, I'll tell you. I'll tell you after I've bought the ice creams," then ran quickly out to meet his rebel army, waving his ten-shilling note exultantly aloft.

CHAPTER III

WILLIAM AND THE BROWN CHECK SPORTS COAT

"IT'S jolly rotten," said William bitterly. "Fancy callin' this a free country! Well, it jus' makes me laugh when I hear people callin' it a free country."

To prove his words he uttered a hollow laugh, suggestive of a corn-crake's note, then resumed his expression of deep melancholy.

"It serves you right," said Robert, with elder brother severity. "You think you can go messing up other people's property with impunity, and it's time you learnt that you can't."

"I haven't messed up anyone's prop'ty with that thing you said," replied William indignantly. "I haven't got one, so I can't have. An' if it means makin' fires, we've never even made one in the Little Wood."

Robert sighed hopelessly.

"It's impossible to talk to you," he said. "No wonder father says you can't speak English."

"It's the King's English he says I can't speak," said William. "I can speak my own all right. And I think it's jolly mean to take our short cut an' the Little Wood away from us."

"Personally," said Robert, "all my sympathies are with General Moult."

William, who had liked the sound of his hollow laugh, repeated it.

"They would be," he said. "Grown-ups always stick together. It's a rotten field, anyway, but it was a good short cut to Ginger's, an' it had the Little Wood at the end. We'd got some jolly good games for the Little Wood, an' no one ever stopped us goin' there till Gen'ral Moult bought it, an' he only wants it to keep his ole hen-houses in. We wouldn't do his ole hen-houses any harm. *Or* his ole hens. We aren't int'rested in hens, an' I can't understand a man what's lived in Africa an' known lions an' zebras an' ostriches an' things bein' int'rested in hens, either. It shows his brain mus' be goin'—if he ever had one to go."

This neat piece of sarcasm pleased William so much that a certain complacency invaded his gloom and he repeated it with modest pride: "If he

ever had one to go," adding, "An' I jolly well don't think he ever did have one. He oughter be in a lunatic asylum."

"You should know about that," said Robert cryptically. "Anyway, he's written a very strong letter to father and you just can't go there any more, so it's no good talking about it."

"I never thought it was any good," said William with dignity, "but I don't see why I shouldn't talk about it if I want to. Same as father talkin' about the Gov'nment an' you talkin' about the laundry spoilin' your pink shirt an' mother talkin' about queues. People can talk about what they like, can't they?"

"Well, you'll have to talk about it to yourself, then," said Robert, "because I'm going off to cricket now."

The telephone bell rang, and Robert went into the house to answer it. William remained in the garden, hands dug deeply into his pockets, brows drawn together in a frown, ruminating on his wrongs.

"Everythin' gets took off us," he said, fixing a stern eye upon the nearest object, which happened to be the bird bath. "When it's not bows an' arrows an' pocket money, it's woods an' fields an' things. They seem to get meaner an' meaner every day, do grown-ups."

Then he remembered that his bow and arrows had been restored to him that morning by his father after a fortnight's compulsory retirement due to a broken garden frame and, despite himself, something of his natural cheerfulness returned to him. "But it doesn't make up for that field," he muttered, clinging to his grievances. "Nothin' could make up for that field."

The field at the back of General Moult's house was bounded by a spinney that had lately been the scene of most of the Outlaws' activities. There was a pine tree that formed the mast of their pirate ship and from which they could look out over uncharted seas. . . . There was an elm tree whose lower branches formed seats in which the Outlaws could recline in comfort with bottles of lemonade and such refreshments as could safely be abstracted from their home larders. . . . Between the hedge and a tall, thick bramble bush they had made a leafy hide-out in which they were invisible from all sides, and which formed a convenient refuge from real or imaginary foes. The news that General Moult had bought this piece of land and was determined to put a stop to trespassing had been a staggering blow to them.

"Him and his South Africa!" muttered William, addressing himself now to a dandelion that had eluded Robert's haphazard week-end "weeding" and flourished brazenly in the top niche of the rockery. "Him and his South

Africa! You'd think that anyone what was as keen on South Africa as what he thinks he is, wouldn't grudge other people a bit of ole felt. . . . That's what they call fields in South Africa," he explained, a little self-consciously, turning his frowning gaze to a stone frog that had been given to his sister Ethel on her last birthday by a boy friend and that seemed to be staring at him inquiringly from a cluster of nasturtiums.

"You going to be in this afternoon, William?" said Robert, coming out of the house.

"No, I'm goin' to meet Ginger an' the others at the ole barn," said William.

"Oh." Robert glanced at his watch. "Well, I've got a man coming about that coat."

"What coat?" said William.

Again Robert sighed hopelessly.

"Do you ever listen to *anything*?" he said. "I was talking about it at lunch."

"I've got other things to do at lunch than listenin' to you talkin'," said William loftily. "I was pretendin' that I was shipwrecked on a raft, an' that that mince was the last ship's biscuit left."

"You certainly wolfed it up as if you were starving," said Robert, "but then you usually do." He was tempted to enlarge on the theme of William's table manners, but realised that this was no moment for hostilities and continued more pacifically: "Anyway, you know I've been selling some clothes, don't you?"

Robert, on being demobilised, had discovered, to his dismay, that the war, in addition to disorganising the entire universe, had put two inches on to his chest measurement and that few of his pre-war coats could now be worn with comfort. "It's not that I've grown fat," he was careful to explain to his friends, "it's that I'm more muscular."

"Yes," said William. "I know you sold that ole overcoat las' week an' that the man what bought it said it was a bit noisy, but that it took all sorts to make a world."

"The word was 'loud,' not 'noisy'," said Robert coldly. "And actually the thing was in perfect taste, but that's not the point. The point is that I put an advertisement of my brown check sports coat in the paper shop in Hadley yesterday, and someone's just rung up to say that he's coming to see it, and that he'll be here at two. Well, the cricket practice starts at two, so you see it's a bit awkward."

William saw that it was . . . Ethel and Mrs. Brown had gone to London for the day, and Mr. Brown was at the office.

"I'll see to it for you, Robert," he offered. "I needn't go to the old barn till after two."

Robert looked at him with a distrust born of long and bitter experience.

"I've never known you see to anything yet," he said, "without making a mess of it."

"I could tell you hundreds of things I've not made a mess of," said William.

"All right," challenged Robert. "Tell me one."

"I can't think of one jus' at the moment," admitted William, "but I bet I could if you gave me time."

"You'd need a lifetime," said Robert, "and even then there'd be something phoney about it."

"Oh, all right," said William distantly, "if you don't want me to . . ."

"Yes, I do want you to," said Robert hastily. "It's all right. I do want you to. I'll give you sixpence if you do it without making a mess of it."

"Gosh! Thanks *awfully*," said William.

"Now listen carefully," said Robert. "This chap—his name's Mr. Cooper—is coming at two, and all you have to do is to give him my brown check sports coat and take ten bob from him. Don't take a halfpenny less than ten bob."

"I don't see that a halfpenny makes all that difference," said William the literal. "S'pose he offers nine and elevenpence halfpenny?"

"Ten bob," said Robert firmly. "Ten bob or nothing. Well, I must be getting along now. . . . He'll be here by two, and then you can run off to Ginger and the others."

He went into the hall, took up his cricket bag, and strode down to the gate. At the gate he turned.

"Not a halfpenny less than ten bob, mind," he said. "And if you make a mess of it you can jolly well look out for yourself."

"That's all right, Robert," said William easily. "There's nothin' for you to worry about."

Robert vanished down the road, and William turned again to the bird bath.

“Gosh!” he said, with a short, amused laugh. “Anyone’d think I hadn’t any sense, the way they go on. Fancy thinkin’ that someone what’s dived into rivers from aeroplanes goin’ at top speed, an’ captured whole tribes of Red Indians an’ rounded up whole gangs of crim’nals can’t sell an ole coat. . . .” He paused for a few moments, remembering that the exploits he had just enumerated had been largely imaginary, and ended somewhat lamely: “Anyway, I bet anyone can sell an ole coat, whether he’s done things like that or not.”

He went into the hall to look at the clock. Ten to two. The man was coming for the coat at two. . . . Well, he’d get the coat and have it ready. He went to the tool shed, took the well-worn brown check sports coat from its hook behind the pile of beezums, and put it on the chair in the hall. Eight minutes to two. Gosh! It was a jolly long ten minutes. It was goin’ to be worth a bit more than sixpence hanging round like this all afternoon. He decided to renew acquaintance with his recently-restored bow and arrows. “But it was a rotten bad shot,” he said gloomily, as he brought it out into the garden. “Some of ’em are. Mine always seem to be. This one’d broke two windows an’ the garden frame that first day before father took it off me, an’ I was aimin’ at somethin’ diff’rent each time. There mus’ be somethin’ wrong with the balance.” He threw a frowning speculative glance round the garden. “I’ll aim at that tree an’ I bet I hit it all right. I *bet* I hit it. . . . That tree’s a enemy tribe’s council of war, an’ they don’t know I’m here. It’s a jolly dangerous thing to do. . . . I’ll be jolly lucky if I escape with my life.”

He crept a little nearer the tree under cover of a watering can that Robert had left on the lawn, took long and careful aim and shot. The arrow vanished, and at once the air was rent by loud and discordant squawkings.

"IS THIS FER ME?" SAID THE MAN. "THANK YOU KINDLY, YOUNG SIR."

"Gosh!" said William, aghast. "Killed one of her ole hens, I shouldn't wonder."

He crouched behind the summer house, but no indignant next-door face appeared over the fence, and he remembered with relief having seen its owner setting out immediately after lunch with a shopping basket. He approached the fence and peeped across it. . . . The arrow had embedded itself harmlessly in the centre of the chicken run, and the chickens were running round it in that state of moral disintegration to which their kind is prone. He picked up a twig, conveniently shaped like a pistol, climbed over the fence and advanced into the chicken run, hunching up his shoulders in a manner suggestive of a Hollywood gangster, and moving the pistol quickly from side to side, making short sharp clicking sounds with his tongue as he did so, to mark the ceaseless flow of the unerring bullets. Then he seized his arrow, brandished it exultantly above his head, and climbed back into his own garden.

"Ha-ha!" he taunted the still demoralised fowls. "Twenty to one against me and not one of you could stop me rescuing my trusty tomahawk. Poltroons and cowardy-custards——"

He turned suddenly to find a man standing on the garden path watching him. Gosh! thought William. The man for Robert's coat! I'd almost forgotten it. . . .

"That was pretty good," said the man. "Made 'em sit up, all right, didn't you?"

William grinned. "Yes, I jolly well did," he agreed. "I won't be a minute gettin' the coat."

He ran into the house, brought out the coat, and thrust it into the man's arms.

"There you are," he said.

It occurred to him on closer inspection that the man was a very shabby man. But then, the coat was a very shabby coat. . . .

"That fer me?" said the man.

He had an unshaven face, a husky voice, and a jovial eye. William took a liking to him. He decided that he should have the coat for nine and elevenpence halfpenny if he wanted it, and that he, William, would make up the odd halfpenny.

"Yes," said William. "It's Robert's coat."

"Not 'arf bad, neither," said the man. "Thank you kindly, young sir. A coat same as this 'ere was just wot I wanted."

"Your name *is* Mr. Cooper, isn't it?" said William.

"Oh, yes," agreed the man, after a few seconds' hesitation. "Me name's Cooper, all right."

"Well, Robert wants ten shillings for the coat. It said so on the advertisement, didn't it?"

"Y-yes," said the man thoughtfully. "Ten shillin's. That were it, weren't it?"

"And Robert had to go to cricket, so he left me to see to it. I told him it'd be all right. He's only been gone a few minutes, but his cricket practice started at two, you see, so he couldn't wait. But he said that if you gave me the ten shillings you could take the coat."

"Yes, so he told me," said the man.

"Oh, you know Robert, do you?" said William, surprised.

" 'Course I knows Robert. Robert an' me's ole friends. I ought to've told you at the beginnin' that I met 'im at the end of the road an' giv 'im the ten bob fer the coat an' 'e said jus' to cut along an' get it an' tell the nipper it were all right about the ten bob."

"Oh," said William.

"But I thought I wouldn't tell you till I'd seen 'ow you 'andled the job, an' I mus' say you 'andled it in a proper business-like way an' no mistake. I'll tell Robert so when nex' I see 'im."

William's heart swelled with pride.

"Oh, I can manage things all right, really," he said airily. "I'm jolly good at managing things really. It's only that they've got a sort of idea that I'm not, that's all."

"They'll 'ave a pretty diff'rent idea after this," said the man. " 'Andled it good an' proper, you did. . . . Well, I mus' be gettin' on. So long, young un. Remember me ter Robert."

He ambled down the path, out of the gate, down the road and disappeared from view.

William stood motionless, considering the situation . . . and the warm glow of complacency that the man's words had sent through his heart began to give way to a slightly chilly feeling. It was all right, of course. Of *course*, it was all right. The man had given Robert the ten shillings and then collected the coat. It *must* be all right. . . . He'd go to the old barn now, anyway. He was late already. He picked up his bow and arrow and again stood motionless, his horrified eyes fixed on the gate. A small neat man in black jacket, striped trousers and bowler hat, was just coming in. He had a small neat face with small neat features and he wore a small neat pair of spectacles.

"My name's Cooper," he said, in a quick, high-pitched voice. "I've come about that sports coat that was advertised in the paper shop in Hadley by—your brother, wasn't it?"

William's throat was dry.

"My—my brother's out," he said desperately.

"But I understood that he was leaving some message about it," said Mr. Cooper irritably. Mr. Cooper was evidently a man who didn't like having his plans upset. Certainly he was not a man to whom the true facts of the case could be divulged with any hope of sympathy.

William stretched his lips in a ghastly smile of propitiation.

"I—I'm sorry, he's out. He—he sort of said he'd—he'd sort of got to be at cricket at two o'clock."

"If he left no proper message I won't waste any more time on it," snapped Mr. Cooper. "It's very annoying, but I'm going over to see some friends at Marleigh and I'll call on my way back."

With that he turned on his heel and went briskly out of the gate and down the road. His small neat figure vanished into the distance.

William stood staring after him blankly.

"Gosh!" he gasped, then, feeling the expression to be inadequate, added: "Crumbs!"

It was not the thought of Robert's reception of the news that filled him with horror (though the thought of that was enough to fill anyone with horror). It was the thought of having let Robert down, of having undertaken to do something for Robert and failed. . . . He decided that, at all costs, Robert's sports coat must be retrieved from its unlawful possessor before Mr. Cooper returned from Marleigh. And there was not a moment to be lost. He went to the gate and looked up and down the road. The road was empty in both directions. The tramp might have gone towards Hadley, towards Marleigh, across the fields, or through the woods. . . . William decided that it was not a job he could tackle alone and unaided. He must enlist the help of the Outlaws. . . .

Ginger, Henry and Douglas were at the door of the old barn waiting for him.

"Hello, William," said Ginger, mildly interested in William's meteoric arrival. "Is someone after you?"

"No," panted William, "but you've gotter help me catch a thief. He's stole Robert's sports coat—at least, he's same as stole it—an' we've gotter get it back before this Mr. Cooper comes. Listen . . ."

He told the story as quickly as he could.

"We've gotter spread out an' look for him," he said.

"We never have any luck with tramps," said Douglas. "We didn't with that one of Archie's."

"Never mind that," interrupted William impatiently. "He can't've gone far. You go on the Hadley road, Douglas, an' Henry on the Marleigh road, an' Ginger 'n' me'll go to the village. We'll meet back here when we've finished searchin' an' I bet one of us'll have found it."

"S'pose he's desp'rate," said Douglas nervously. "Wish I'd got my water pistol."

"Shall I go home for our Father Christmas beard?" said Henry. "It's a jolly good disguise. He'd think I was an ole man an' let me get right up to him."

"*No*," said William firmly. "You've gotter be quick. Every minute he's gettin' further an' further away. We mustn't waste any more time."

The four set off at a brisk run. Douglas disappeared in the direction of Hadley, Henry in the direction of Marleigh, William and Ginger reached the

outskirts of the village then slowed down to a walking pace.

"We've gotter search every inch," said William. "He might be in a hen-house or a greenhouse or anywhere, hidin' up till nightfall when he can escape with his loot."

"Thought you said it was a sports coat," said Ginger.

"I can't waste time teachin' you English," said William sternly. "Not now, when every minute's a matter of life and death. Come on. We've gotter search every *inch*."

The ensuing search resulted in their violent ejection from two back gardens, and a physical assault at the hands of an indignant householder, who discovered them in his shed turning over his store of carrots and onions.

"*And* you can think yourself lucky I've not handed you over to the police, you young rascals," he said, with a final cuff.

He was a stalwart householder and it was the cuff of an expert, depositing William neatly in the middle of the road.

"Gosh! I forgot he gave boxing lessons," said William, picking himself up and holding his head with both hands to make sure that it was still attached to his neck. "An' I like that! Callin' *us* thieves! Serve him right if the crim'nal *is* hid up among his carrots an' onions. It'd be a jolly good place to hide. All he'd gotter do was jus' to cover himself up with carrots an' onions an' no one'd think of lookin' under 'em. Like that man in the story of the barber and the forty thieves."

"Come on, William," said Ginger nervously. "He's watchin' us out of the window an' he's lookin' madder than ever."

"I'm not scared of him," said William, hurrying down the road as he spoke. He laughed shortly. "I bet he's scared of me, though. He went in jolly quick after he'd hit me, didn't he? He took jolly good care not to wait to be hit back, didn't he? *An'* he didn't come out again either. Huh! Serve him right if that ole tramp stole everythin' he'd got. An', if he does, he needn't come round to *me* for sympathy."

"I don't s'pose he would, anyway," said Ginger simply. "Well, the nex' house is Gen'ral Moult's. I don't s'pose he's hidin' there with the Gen'ral havin' 'Beware of the Dog' up."

"He's got no business to have that up when he hasn't got a dog," said William. "It's the same as tellin' a story."

"Well, he's got a cat with a jolly good scratch, 'cause we've tried it."

"Then he oughter have 'Beware of the Cat.' He—Gosh! Look, Ginger."

The door of the garage was open and inside the garage the General could be seen pottering about among his rabbit hutches. But it was not the rabbits or the rabbit hutches that made the eyes of William and Ginger almost start out of their heads. It was the brown check sports coat that hung loosely from the General's shoulders.

"That's it!" gasped William excitedly. "Gosh! That's Robert's sports coat. I'd know it anywhere."

"That man must've heard we were on his track," said Ginger, "an' he got scared an' sold it to the Gen'ral or gave it him or somethin'."

"It may be worse than that," said William darkly. "Gen'ral Moult may be the sort of head of a gang for stealin' clothes. He may be in this crime wave what's in the newspapers. Come to think of it, a man what stops people goin' into fields for no reason at all—well, he'd think nothin' of stealin' clothes. Anyway, stoppin' people goin' into that field shows he's got somethin' to hide. P'r'aps he's got boxes an' boxes of black market sports coats an' things buried in it."

"I don't think so," said Ginger, whose imagination, though lively enough, was incapable of the heights to which William's could soar. "Not Gen'ral Moult."

"P'r'aps not," admitted William, coming down to earth reluctantly. "Anyway, we've gotter get that coat back. We'll jus' have to go an' tell him that it was stole off Robert an' that he's gotter give it us back."

They gazed uncertainly and a little apprehensively at the figure of the General who, unconscious of their presence, was distributing vegetables to his charges, barking out orders to them in his most military fashion.

"Come along, there, come along! Don't dawdle. Now, that's enough, you! Back to barracks with you. If you two are going to quarrel you shan't mess together in future. Quiet, there, quiet!"

"What are you goin' to say to him?" asked Ginger.

"Dunno yet," said William. "I'm thinkin'."

"You couldn't bring the Boer War into it, could you?" said Ginger. "He'd do anything for the Boer War."

"What d'you mean, he'd do anything for the Boer War?" said William irritably, but he knew quite well what Ginger meant. General Moult had fought in the Boer War as a young officer, and in his eyes it was the most outstanding event in the history of the world. He was aware that there had been two minor skirmishes since then, in which both his country and himself had played their parts, but nothing had yet happened, he considered, to equal

the importance of the Relief of Mafeking or the Battle of Talana Hill. He was engaged in writing his memoirs, and had that morning written the greater part of the chapter on witch doctors. He stood now, a carrot in one hand and a brussels top in the other, his lips moving soundlessly as he went over the best bits of it.

Then two boys approached him. He knew them, of course. They were that couple of unruly young hooligans—William Brown and that friend of his—who had dared to make free with the field that was now his private property, rampaging about as if it belonged to them . . . shouting . . . climbing trees. Well, he had put a stop to that by writing very firmly to their fathers, and the matter should have been finally settled. But here the boys were, coming, of course, to ask permission still to use the field in spite of his orders. The impudence and persistence of the modern boy, was, the General decided, beyond all bearing.

"Please, Gen'ral Moult——" began William.

"No, you shall *not*," said the General angrily. "I've written to your fathers and you must abide by what I've said. That field is my private property, and I will not have hooligans rampaging over it."

"Yes, but, Gen'ral Moult——" began Ginger.

Again the General interrupted him.

"What d'you think I bought it for?" he shouted. "D'you think I bought it for you to use as a playground? D'you think I went to all that trouble and expense just so that you could have somewhere to rampage and—and shout and—and climb trees and——"

The General was becoming almost inarticulate with rage.

"But we've come about the sports——" began William.

"*Sports!*" interrupted the General. "Call it sports indeed! Rampaging's what I call it. And, in any case, I did not buy that field to be used as a sports ground by all the boys in the village. I don't know how you dare to come to me after what I wrote to your fathers. The first time I catch either of you in that field I shall issue a summons for trespass. Sports indeed!"

Purple with fury, he advanced upon them, brandishing his carrot so threateningly that the two fled back to the road.

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

"I bet he knew what we wanted really," said William. "He was tryin' to put us off the scent. Well, you could see he'd got a guilty conscience,

carryin' on like that. He went all red an' hot same as people do with guilty consciences."

"I think that was 'cause he was so mad," said Ginger.

"He was pretendin' it was 'cause he was mad," said William, "but it was a guilty conscience really. I bet he knows he's got Robert's sports coat, an' I bet he's scared stiff now he knows we're on his track. Well, I'm not goin' back without it. Dunno why I didn't jus' take it off him. He couldn't've stopped me with that ole carrot. Look! He's goin' in now."

From under cover of the hedge they watched the General, still muttering angrily to himself, shut up the garage and return to the house.

"He's in his bedroom," said William. "I can see him movin' about. I bet he's goin' to write his book. He gen'rally writes his book in the afternoon. An' he wears that ole velvet jacket for writin' his book. . . . Yes, look. There he is!"

Through the hedge they could see General Moult entering his study, wearing the velvet jacket in which he always carried on his literary activities, and taking his place at the writing table near the window. The writing table was piled high with the forty diaries that the General had made during the Boer War. He had reached the five thousandth page of his manuscript and the third volume of the diary. As he said, the subject appeared to be inexhaustible. . . .

"He must've left Robert's sports coat in his bedroom," said William. "I'm goin' round to the side of the house an' I'm goin' to climb up that tree that you can see into his bedroom from, an' if it's there we've gotter get it."

"It's goin' to be jolly difficult," said Ginger, following William round to the side of the house, "an' I bet we'll both end up by bein' sent to prison."

"I wouldn't mind that," said William, as he swung himself up on to the lowest branch of the tree. "I've often thought I'd like to go to prison. You wouldn't have to go to school if you were in prison."

"They have rotten things to eat," said Ginger.

"They'd be a change from some of the things we have," said William, vanishing from sight into the leafy heights. "I say!"—his voice floated down—"I can see it. It's over the chair by his bed." He swarmed quickly down again, dropping from the lowest branch to join Ginger by the hedge. "We've gotter get it back. It's Robert's coat an' he's no right to keep it."

"We can't jus' take it," objected Ginger. "That'd be stealin'. P'r'aps he bought it. If he did, we oughter leave some money for it."

"We haven't got any money," said William simply.

"No, I know we've not. But we can't jus' go in an' take it."

"I s'pose we can't," agreed William reluctantly. "*Tell* you what! We can leave the value."

"What d'you mean, leave the value?" said Ginger.

"Well, s'pose he gave this tramp five shillin's for it—an' I bet he didn't give him more—we can leave five shillings' worth of things for him 'stead of the coat."

"We've not got five shillings' worth of things."

"I bet we have if we look round."

"He wouldn't want the sort of things we've got."

"I bet he would. He likes anythin' to do with South Africa an' I've got a Rhodesian stamp what my uncle sent me. I bet it's worth a lot of money. An' I say! What about your leopard claws off that rug what got the moth in. That came from South Africa, didn't it? An' I bet it was jolly valu'ble."

"Gosh! Yes, so it did," said Ginger.

For Ginger's mother had possessed a leopard skin rug into which the moth had made such inroads during the preceding summer that she had had to have it destroyed. Ginger had begged for the claws and they had been for some time his most valued possession.

"P'r'aps you don't want to give 'em up," said William, adding generously: "It doesn't matter if you don't want to. I bet we can find somethin' else."

"No, that's all right," said Ginger. "I'll give 'em up. I've shown 'em to everyone I know an' done all the things you can do with leopard claws. I don't want 'em any longer."

"Well, that's the stamp an' the leopard claws—I bet those leopard claws are jolly valu'ble—an' I'll fetch my penknife. A penknife's always useful, an' I've got two, 'cause Robert gave me another for my birthday. I bet that's about five shillings' worth. Can you think of anythin' else?"

"Gosh, yes, I can!" said Ginger. "It's Henry's, but I know where he keeps it an' he wouldn't mind us gettin' it. Don't you remember that wooden thing his uncle sent home? Jus' cut out of wood anyhow by natives in the shape of a sort of person with its eyes an' hair an' things done in what they call poker work. He sent it to Henry's sister really, but it made her cry, so they gave it to Henry, but Henry didn't want a rotten ole doll, so he jus' chucked it into his cupboard an' left it there."

“Yes, I remember. An’ it came from South Africa, didn’t it? Gosh! That’s all right. That’s four jolly valu’ble things. We’ll go ’n’ get ’em as quick as we can, an’ we’ll take the coat an’ leave ’em there instead. We can get up into his bedroom easy by the tree, an’ I know his ole housekeeper sleeps all afternoon. Come on. We’ve gotter be jolly quick. Let’s run.”

General Moult laid down his pen and leant back in his chair, frowning. He was feeling worried. He had finished the chapter on witch doctors, treating the subject lightly with a man-of-the-world amusement and incredulity. And he wasn’t quite happy about it. Beneath his fire-eating exterior the General was a simple, credulous and rather timid man. He kept thinking about a witch doctor he had known in South Africa, who had escaped from any imprisonment however closely shackled and guarded. The General had become quite friendly with him, and they had had several long talks together.

“My magic is greater than time or space,” the man had said. “However far you go from me, *baas*, I can always reach you if I want to.”

Certainly some very peculiar things had happened to the witch doctor’s enemies, however far they had gone from him. Sometimes he took some intimate personal possession of the enemy’s and worked his magic through that. Sometimes he left a symbolic warning before he struck. Sometimes he struck without warning. Yes, some very peculiar and very unpleasant things had happened to people who annoyed that witch doctor. The General’s feeling of nervousness increased. Perhaps it would be better to treat the subject a little more seriously. The man, if still alive, was a long way off, of course, but—one never knew. The memory of the thin face and deep-set eyes became strangely vivid, and he remembered that nothing had so much annoyed the witch doctor as any belittling of his magic powers. . . . He drummed his fingers on the desk nervously. He was feeling thoroughly put out. First those wretched boys coming to pester him about the field in spite of the letters he had written to their fathers, then this absurd nervousness about the witch doctor. It *was* absurd. He must just try to conquer it. He would go upstairs and put on his old gardening coat and, after ten minutes’ digging in the open air, he would realise how childish his fears had been.

WILLIAM WALKED BEHIND THE THREE STRANGE FIGURES,
WATCHING THEM WITH A DOUBTFUL FROWN.

He went upstairs, took off his velvet jacket, turned to the chair by the bed, and stood transfixed by horror. His well-worn gardening coat—his most intimate personal possession—had vanished, and in its place was a collection of objects that turned his blood to ice. The roughly-carved wooden figure—obviously the work of a native—bearing an uncanny likeness to the witch doctor, the stamp of Rhodesia, where he had first met the witch doctor, the leopard's claws and knife, both suggesting unpleasant forms of death. He told himself that such things didn't happen, and immediately afterwards told himself again that they did. He came to a sudden decision. The warning must be heeded, the curse averted while there was yet time. He went downstairs, took up his witch doctor chapter, tore it across with trembling fingers and thrust it into the waste paper basket. Then

he stood, considering. . . . Was there any other means by which he could avert the threatened doom? He remembered his last conversation with the witch doctor. The old chap had had a bee in his bonnet about land. It should not be enclosed, he had said in his shrill staccato voice. Every man, woman and child should have free access to the land. Evil would come to the man who enclosed it and shut his fellow creatures out of it. Perhaps—it seemed fantastic, but perhaps . . . Better be on the safe side. The General sat down at his table and wrote a letter to the father of each of the Outlaws, saying that he had reconsidered his decision and that the boys might continue to use his field on condition that they did no damage.

He stamped the letters and took them out to the post. As he dropped them into the pillar-box he had a curious feeling as if the curse were being lifted from him. . . .

William and Ginger reached the old barn, carrying the brown check sports coat. Henry was its only occupant.

"We've got it," said William triumphantly. "Ole Gen'ral Moult had it an' we bought it back off him. At least, we sort of bought it back."

Then they stood staring at Henry in amazement, for Henry, too, held a brown check sports coat.

"But *I* got it," said Henry. "I jus' looked in at the Village Hall an' there it was on Miss Milton's jumble stall. I thought he'd guessed we were after him an' took fright an' slipped it on the stall, so I—so I jus' slipped it off again."

"Crumbs!" gasped Ginger, "but there can't be two of them."

At this point Douglas arrived. He carried a brown check sports coat.

"I've got it," he said triumphantly. "It was on Farmer Jenks's scarecrow in Three Acre Meadow."

Then he saw the others and his jaw dropped open.

"Gosh!" he stammered. "There can't be *three* of 'em."

William collected his scattered forces with difficulty.

"Well, one of 'em mus' be Robert's," he said, "an' we've gotter find out which. . . . Come on. Let's take 'em home an' see."

They set off down the road, Ginger, Henry and Douglas each carrying a brown check sports coat over his arm.

"I votes we put 'em on an' wear 'em," said Ginger. "It'll look more nat'ral than carryin' 'em like this."

Pleased with the suggestion, they put them on and wore them. The ends of the coats reached their knees. The shoulders dangled almost to their elbows. William walked behind the three strange figures, watching them with a doubtful frown.

"It does look more nat'ral, doesn't it?" asked Ginger anxiously.

"Well," said William, "I dunno that I'd call it *nat'ral* but, anyway, it doesn't matter. We're nearly home now."

They reached the gate of William's house and stood there uncertainly.

"I b'lieve Robert's back," said William, looking up at the window of Robert's bedroom. "Yes, I can see him brushin' his hair. You stay behind the hedge where he can't see you an' I'll try 'n' find out which *is* his coat."

The three small figures, each swamped in its brown check sports coat, withdrew into the shadow of the hedge.

"I bet it's mine," said Henry. "I took an awful lot of trouble gettin' it off ole Miss Milton's stall."

"I bet it's mine," said Douglas. "It took a bit of nerve, I can tell you, takin' it off that scarecrow right in the middle of the field."

"Huh!" snorted Ginger. "William an' me went into the very jaws of death for ours. I bet ole Gen'ral Moult'd've murdered us if he'd come in an' found us."

William entered the house and stood for a moment in the hall. The door of Robert's bedroom opened and Robert appeared. He descended the stairs slowly, fixing William with a stern accusing gaze.

"I say, Robert," began William nervously, "about that sports coat."

"Yes, a nice mess you made of it, didn't you?" said Robert.

"But, you see, Robert——" began William, playing for time. Robert interrupted him.

"Why on earth didn't you give it to the man when he came?"

William moistened his lips.

"Well, you see, Robert," he said. "It was this way, Robert. You see, this other man——"

"What other man?" snapped Robert. "I don't know what you're talking about. What I want to know is, why didn't you give Mr. Cooper the coat when he called for it?"

"I've got it now," said William. "Well, as a matter of fact, I've got three of 'em now. You can choose one an' we'll take the others back."

Robert stared at him helplessly.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," he said. "Mr. Cooper called back for the coat after he'd been to Marleigh, and I gave it him and got his ten bob. I might have missed it altogether with you playing the fool like that."

William's mouth opened and shut like the mouth of an expiring fish. It was some moments before he found his voice.

"You—you gave it him?" he gasped.

"Of course I did."

"But—but where did you find it, Robert?"

"Find it? In my wardrobe, of course, where it's always been."

"N—n—n—not in the tool shed?"

"Tool shed? Of course not."

"But—but there *was* one in the tool shed," said William desperately.

"Oh, that old thing," said Robert. "I thought mother had sent that to a jumble sale months ago. I'd said she could."

"Oh," said William blankly.

"And you darn well won't get that sixpence now. Messing things up like that!"

"No, Robert," agreed William dazedly.

Dazedly he went out to join the strange group by the gate, huddled together in brown check sports coats.

"I say," he whispered. "We've gotter get 'em back, all of 'em, quick. None of 'em's Robert's. Come on, Ginger. We'll go back to Gen'ral Moult's, an' you, Henry, go back to——"

He looked down the road and his voice trailed away into silence. General Moult was approaching and even from the distance it was plain that he was a very angry man. Behind him walked Miss Milton, indignation in every line of her thin angular figure. He looked up the road. From that direction Farmer Jenks was bearing down on them, his face purple, his arms swinging aggressively. The Outlaws realised with sinking hearts that their depredations had not been without witnesses and that the witnesses had taken the first convenient opportunity of informing the owners of the exact circumstances in which their property had disappeared. All three had traced the "thefts" to William's house and were out for vengeance and their sports coats. General Moult was the angriest of them all because he could not bring

himself to cancel the permission to use his field that he had just posted to the Outlaws' fathers. (You never know, he couldn't help thinking. There might be something in it . . . Better be on the safe side.) But he meant to take it out of those young rascals, none the less.

Helplessly the group by William's gate awaited its fate, shrinking so far into its sports coats that nothing seemed to be left of it but expanses of brown check.

"Gosh!" groaned William. "Fancy there bein' four of them!"

But he had forgotten.

There were five.

At that moment the tramp who was the original cause of all the trouble was curled up on a comfortable bed of bracken in a sheltered corner of the wood, snug in Robert's old sports coat, deep in a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER IV

A WITCH IN TIME

WILLIAM read the letter several times with frowning concentration.

"DEAR WILLIAM,

"We can't come home because we let it to Miss Evesham unfurnished and we can't get her out and Mummy and I want to come home and do you remember when we were turned out because of that bomb you got us back and *please*, William, will you get us back again because Mummy and I are both so homesick and you're so clever I know you can.

"Love from

"JOAN."

His feeling of importance at receiving a letter (for his correspondence was a very limited one) was mingled with a feeling of uneasiness. He had heard his parents discussing the situation. He knew that Joan's mother had employed a solicitor to try to evict Miss Evesham and that the whole power of the law had been unable to accomplish it. Miss Evesham clung grimly to her rights, and to Joan's home, refusing all "alternative accommodation."

In face of this, William found Joan's faith in him touching but a little embarrassing. True, he had been the instrument of Fate in restoring their home to her and her mother on the occasion when they had been ejected for a supposed "delayed action bomb," but this was a very different matter. Difficulty, however, was always a challenge to William, and—he wanted Joan back. He liked Joan. She was quiet and shy, and amenable and dependable, and he was a god in her eyes. The last alone would have endeared her to William, who was a god in very few people's eyes. He had never failed her yet, and to fail in this task she so disconcertingly thrust upon him might be to lose her admiration for ever. But he thought of the hatchet-faced, keen-eyed, slit-mouthed solicitor who had visited Miss Evesham in a final effort to eject her and had retired completely routed. How should he, William, succeed where such a man had failed?

And yet—it would be nice to have Joan and her mother back in place of the obnoxious Miss Evesham. For Miss Evesham *was* obnoxious. Even Mrs. Brown, notoriously charitable in her judgments, said that she was the most

disagreeable woman she had ever met. And her cat, Hector, was, if possible, more unpleasant even than his mistress. He was a black cat with a white muzzle and a villainous expression. He came through the hedge into the Browns' garden and lay in wait for their birds. Mr. Brown was a bird lover. He had a bird bath and a bird table and a tame robin and chaffinch. Or rather he had the last two before Hector's arrival. Hector made short work of them, and of the other birds who had come to regard the Browns' garden as a sanctuary.

Mr. Brown wrote an angry letter to Miss Evesham. Miss Evesham replied by informing Mr. Brown that to eat birds was a cat's instinct and that she had always encouraged Hector to follow his instincts. She added to this a page of complaints about William, whom she accused of taking short cuts through her garden to the detriment of both lawn and flower beds, of making her head ache with his mouth organ, and of taking pot-shots at Hector through the bathroom window.

Mr. Brown sternly warned William against any further hostilities.

"She's an odious woman and he's an odious cat," he said, "but we put ourselves entirely in the wrong by that sort of thing. You can chase the creature out of the garden if it comes in, but otherwise you'll leave it alone or you'll have me to deal with."

Since then, William had confined himself to "chasing the creature out of the garden" in as many ways as he could devise, and pulling faces at it over the fence. He had known cats who could be driven to frenzy by this last treatment, but Hector merely gazed back at him with sleepy green eyes.

William read the letter again. He would have to think out a plan, but it wouldn't be easy. . . . And there wasn't time even to start thinking it out to-day, because to-day was the day on which his air-gun was being restored to him by his father after one of its recurrent periods of retirement. The occasion of its retirement had been the breaking of a pane of glass in Miss Milton's greenhouse, and his father had been grimmer than usual over it.

"The next time anything of this sort happens, my boy," he had said, "you can say good-bye to it for good. I'm getting tired of these complaints."

To-day Ginger was going to call for him, and the two were taking the newly restored air-gun out for a morning's exercise.

"It's jolly mean of him to keep taking it away like this," said William. "I get all out of practice. Serve him right if we lose the nex' war with me not bein' able to shoot straight. Let's go'n' practice in your garden."

They practised in Ginger's garden, but neither Ginger nor William seemed able to hit anything they aimed at. Bottles remained unbroken, tins undented.

"It's all *his* fault," said William gloomily. "He mus' have messed it up somehow. Jus' chucked it down anywhere, I 'spect, an' got somethin' bent inside it. . . . Well, it mus' be that 'cause it always hits somethin' I'm not aimin' at. Hits somethin' about six inches away. Stands to reason he's got it bent somewhere."

It was now lunch-time, so the two decided to meet again in the afternoon and work on that theory.

"I bet we find that's it," said William. "If we want to hit anythin' we've got to aim about six inches to the side of it."

The church clock struck one as William sauntered homewards, his air-gun under his arm.

"Gosh, I'd better hurry," he thought.

He was passing Miss Evesham's garden. The short cut—through a hole in Miss Evesham's hedge, across her garden and over the fence—would save time, and he decided to risk it. Miss Evesham, he knew, was not at home. He had seen her waiting at the bus stop to go into Hadley. He scrambled through the hole and began to walk over the lawn. Well, he justified himself, she can't say I'm doin' any harm. What's grass for but to be walked on?

Suddenly he saw Hector crouching by the edge of the lawn, watching him with a sardonic leer. About six inches away from him was a rose pole.

I bet, if I aimed at that cat, I'd hit the rose pole, thought William. Couldn't do it any harm. It looks a jolly strong rose pole.

He took careful aim at Hector and fired. . . .

After his chastening experiences of the morning he was prepared to miss the rose pole. What he was not prepared for was to see Hector leap two feet into the air, descend to the earth and lie still.

"*Gosh!*" said William, aghast.

Trembling with apprehension, he approached his old foe and examined him. There was no doubt of it. Hector's troubles were over. William's, it seemed, were just beginning. . . .

The first thing to do, of course, was to dispose of the body. William looked round guiltily. There seemed to be no witnesses of the crime. Bundling Hector under his coat, he scrambled over the fence, concealed

Hector in the pile of leaf mould at the bottom of the garden, and went indoors to lunch.

"You look rather pale, dear," said Mrs. Brown solicitously. "Do you feel quite well?"

William assured her that he felt quite well and, in spite of the weight on his mind, proceeded to prove it by disposing of three large helpings of shepherd's pie and three large baked apples with custard.

"Did you have a good morning's sport with your gun?" said Mrs. Brown cheerfully.

William gave a bitter laugh.

"Oh, yes . . . a jolly good morning's sport!" he said.

Immediately after lunch he made his way down to the heap of leaf mould and disinterred Hector. Impossible, of course, to leave him there. If he did, the gardener would be certain to start burrowing in the heap first thing to-morrow morning. Impossible for the same reason to bury him anywhere in the garden. With the perversity of Fate, that would be the exact spot out of the whole garden that the gardener would choose to dig over the next time he came. Jenks's pond in Three Acre Meadow was the best solution, but there were drawbacks even to that. It was in full view of the road, and anyone passing and seeing William engaged in his sinister task would remember the fact and later connect it with the disappearance of Hector. Miss Evesham herself even might chance to be passing on a bus. . . . Still, the risk must be taken, so William picked up Hector, bundled him again under his coat, and set off for the pond. Even his passage along the road was fraught with danger. Hector was a big cat and William, though strong and healthy, was not a big boy. Any officious neighbour, meeting him, might demand to know the nature of the strange excrescence beneath his coat.

He was relieved to see that the road was empty except for a boy about his own age coming from the opposite direction, carrying a basket covered with sacking. Even he, however, gave proof of the curiosity that the contours of William's torso were likely to excite. He stopped.

"What've you got under your coat?" he demanded.

"What've you got in your basket?" countered William, scowling aggressively.

"A cat," said the boy.

"Oh," said William, taken aback.

“A cat, an’ I’m sick of it,” added the boy with feeling. “It’s as heavy as lead an’ it keeps tryin’ to get out. . . . What is it under your coat?”

“A cat, too, an’ I’m sick of it, too,” said William.

“Where are you takin’ it?”

“To the pond. Where are you takin’ yours?”

“To the vet. to be put to sleep. It’s ole Miss Peter’s an’ she’s let Honeysuckle Cottage to someone an’ she’s goin’ up North an’ she doesn’t want to take the cat with her, an’ she doesn’t think he’d be happy with this person that’s comin’ to Honeysuckle Cottage an’ he’s gettin’ old, anyway, so she’s havin’ him put to sleep. An’ she’s only givin’ me sixpence. Gosh! I’m wore out with it already.”

“Let’s have a look at it.”

Cautiously the boy removed the sacking. William gasped. It was a black cat with a white muzzle—the spit and image of Hector.

“I say!” he said excitedly. “Will you swop?”

“How d’you mean, swop?” said the boy suspiciously.

“Well, mine’s dead. It’ll save you goin’ to the vet.”

“Yes, but I’ve got to take it on to the taxi person in Hadley afterwards. He’s goin’ to stuff it for her. She says it’s been her only friend for five long years an’ she wants to have its dear face to look at.”

“Gosh! She mus’ be bats.”

“I’ll say she is! I’d had enough of its dear face, *an’* its dear claws, in five long minutes.”

“What’s its name?”

“Lucifer. Lucy for short. . . . I say, what are you carryin’ a dead cat about for?”

"OH, WILLIAM, HOW GOOD OF YOU!" EXCLAIMED MISS EVESHAM.

"Never mind that," said William. "Look here, if we swop, you needn't bother to go to the vet. at all. You can jus' take my cat straight to that man in Hadley to be stuffed. It'll save you a lot of trouble. An' they're just alike. She'll never know."

"Gosh! They *are* alike, aren't they?"

"Yes, an' you won't have any trouble with this one. He was somethin' awful when he was alive, but he's all right now."

"Very well," said the boy, after a moment's hesitation. "It's her own fault, only givin' me sixpence, but——"

Quickly, without giving him time to reconsider the matter, William snatched Lucifer from the basket, bundled Hector into it, and with a

“Cheerio” set off briskly down the road.

“Here! I say!” called the boy, but William, pretending not to hear, climbed the stile into the field and disappeared.

Lucifer was inclined to resent this sudden change, but William pinioned him firmly under his coat and carried him towards his new home. As he neared the new home he slackened his pace somewhat and began to wonder how to introduce him into it. If he just put him down in the garden he would probably make off at once to his old home. The best thing would be to slip him through a window, close the window and leave him to it. But as he approached the house the front door opened and, to his dismay, Miss Evesham came out. She looked pale and anxious.

“William,” she said. “I can’t think what’s happened to Hector. Have you seen him anywhere?”

William opened his coat and brought out Lucifer.

“I saw him on the road an’ brought him along,” he said, with a glow of virtue at the thought that he was only speaking the exact truth.

“Oh, William,” said Miss Evesham, deeply touched by this unexpected kindness. “That was very good of you. Bring him in. . . . Poor old Hector! Why did you run away, my precious? He’s in a very nervous state, isn’t he? I hope he’s not been run over or anything.”

“I think he’s all right,” said William.

Miss Evesham was anxiously feeling Lucifer’s joints.

“Yes, he seems all right. . . . He must just have had a fright. Perhaps some horrible dog chased him, or perhaps he was nearly run over. . . . Here’s your tea, Hector darling.”

Lucifer suddenly espied the two saucers on which his “tea” was spread —top of the milk bottle on one and four sardines in the other—and his nervousness perceptibly diminished. He set to work at once, crouching over the saucers and only stopping occasionally to purr. Miss Evesham watched him fondly.

“You’re all right now, aren’t you, darling!” she said.

Evidently he was. Gorged with cream and sardines, he staggered to the nearest chair, flopped down into it, and went sound asleep.

“*That’s* my Hector,” said Miss Evesham, little knowing how far from the truth this simple statement was.

William crept quietly away.

That should have been the end of it, but it wasn't.

The next afternoon, Miss Evesham's face, wearing a woebegone expression, appeared suddenly over the fence.

"William," she said, "he's gone again."

William was annoyed. He was trying to think out a plan for ejecting Miss Evesham from her house, and he didn't want to be interrupted.

"Has he?" he said coldly.

"Yes. I want you to take me to the place where you found him before."

"It was jus' on the road. I told you," said William.

"But, William, please come with me and show me exactly."

The sight of Miss Evesham, humble and suppliant, went to William's head. Never before had that face appeared over the fence except in frowning displeasure.

"All right," he said, with the air of one reluctantly conceding a favour. "I'll come."

He led her across the field to the point in the road where he had met the boy with the basket.

"I met him jus' here," he said.

"Coming from that direction?" said Miss Evesham.

"Yes," said William.

"Let's go along the road a little further," said Miss Evesham. "We may find him. . . ."

And they found him. . . .

He was sitting on the doorstep of Honeysuckle Cottage, calmly washing his face. On seeing them he stood up and went indoors, tail erect.

Miss Evesham hovered irresolute in the open doorway.

"Hector!" she called pleadingly, in an undertone.

There was no answer.

Miss Evesham knocked at the door.

An old lady came to the door. She had white hair, a nut-cracker nose and mouth and she walked with a stick. In spite of all this, she looked quite a pleasant old lady.

Miss Evesham fixed her with a stern accusing eye.

"I've come for my cat," she said.

“Oh, your cat,” said the old lady. She looked over her shoulder. “Is he your cat? I didn’t know whose he was. He comes and goes. I give him milk when I have any. I’m not really a cat lover. Come in, won’t you?”

They followed her into the little sitting-room, where Lucifer was curled up in a chair by the fire. On the table was a typewriter and a jumble of manuscript.

“My name’s Miss Perrott,” said the old lady, “and I’ve come here to do a little writing in peace and quiet. I’m afraid the cottage is damp, though, because my rheumatism is much worse since I came here.”

“My name’s Miss Evesham,” said Miss Evesham, unsmiling. “And I’ll take my cat now if I may.”

“Certainly, certainly,” said Miss Perrott, seating herself at the table in front of the typewriter. She smiled faintly as Miss Evesham approached Lucifer. “He doesn’t seem to know you very well, does he?”

Miss Evesham looked at her darkly.

“He did before he came here.”

The old lady smiled again.

“Really?” she said.

Miss Evesham set off for home with Lucifer in her arms and a deep frown on her brow.

“I didn’t like her,” she said to William, “not from the minute she answered the door, I didn’t. She’d got witch written all over her.”

“There aren’t any witches nowadays,” said William.

Miss Evesham gave a snort.

“People *think* there aren’t,” she said, “but it’s a subject I happen to be interested in. I read a book on witches just before I came here, *proving* that they’re still about and just as powerful as they ever were. And a sister of mine once stayed in a village in Cornwall, where there was a woman who could ill-wish anyone she liked. . . . Didn’t you *smell* evil in the atmosphere as soon as she came to the door?”

William said that he thought he’d smelt gingerbread but that was all.

“And what’s she doing *luring* my cat from me?” continued Miss Evesham earnestly. “That’s where he must have been that first afternoon when you found him. Never wandered before in all his life, and then suddenly starts going to *her* cottage. He’d never go of his own accord. She must have put a spell on him.”

"Why should she?" demanded William.

"They've got to have cats, haven't they?" said Miss Evesham. "Perhaps she couldn't bring hers, and that's why she's trying to get mine. Perhaps they have to be black with just that white spot. I don't know. . . . But she shan't have my Hector . . . I'll save you from her, my precious."

Her precious, confronted again with cream and sardines, ate with every appearance of enjoyment and again went to sleep on the chair.

His mistress watched him with anxious affection.

William returned slowly and thoughtfully to his own garden. He had discovered the weak spot in his enemy's armour. He must now try to devise some way of using it. . . .

As far as the Browns were concerned, Lucifer was an improvement on Hector. He did not trespass in their garden and he had no taste for birds. He divided his time between his old home and his new—drawn to the old by the force of association, and to the new by top-of-the-bottle and sardines. Miss Evesham seemed to have quite forgotten her feud with William and regarded him as her friend and ally.

"William," she said one morning, meeting him in the village, "he's gone off to that witch again."

"I don't think she's a witch," said William mildly.

"How does she manage to lure him to her cottage like that if she's not put a spell on him? He goes as if something *drew* him there. And it's not only that. His whole nature's changed. He's not the same cat as he was before she put this spell on him. Everything about him's different. His ways are different. Even his purr seems to have a different note. And he's lost all his affection for me."

"It'll come back," William assured her.

"It's not so much the *cat*, William," said Miss Evesham, lowering her voice, "as what it stands for. I've always been interested in the subject, as I told you, and I've read a lot about it. I know that witchcraft still goes on—chiefly in small, out-of-the-way villages like this. Casual visitors, of course, never see it. It goes on *beneath* the surface of normal uneventful village life. I read a story once about a village like this—quite an ordinary village on the surface and, in the day time, everyone peacefully pursuing their occupation, but at night the whole village would meet secretly and indulge in *orgies* of witchcraft. I haven't a suspicious nature, William, but if everything is as it

seems to be in this village, why is that woman here, and why is she putting a spell on my cat? There's some reason behind it."

William saw a dim light very far ahead. It wasn't bright enough to be called an idea, but it might lead to one. . . .

"It's funny you should say that," he said slowly.

"What, William?"

"About the village and—witchcraft and that sort of thing. Lots of things have been happening here that I couldn't quite understand."

"What sort of things?" said Miss Evesham eagerly.

"I don't think I'd better talk about them," said William, giving a convincing performance of nervousness. "I—might get into trouble."

"Oh, but you can to *me*, William. I won't tell a soul. I'll do my best to put a stop to it, but I won't betray you."

"Well," said William, as if the confidence were being dragged out of him against his will, "There *have* been some funny goings-on here. Meetin's and things in the Village Hall after dark. Everyone went to them. They were supposed to be jus' ordinary meetin's with speakers, but—well, there was somethin' funny about them an' I've often wondered what really happened at them."

"Did your father and mother go to them?"

"Oh, yes . . . after I was in bed. I once got up to look out of the window, an' it was moonlight, an' the road was full of people goin' to one of these meetin's an' they all had a—funny sort of look."

Miss Evesham shuddered.

"How horrible! That's just as it was described in this story I told you of. . . . Something must be *done*, you know. I don't suppose you realise that these orgies sometimes entail human sacrifice?"

"Y—yes," admitted William, "an' people *have* disappeared. Not people who live here, but people who were jus' stayin' here."

He looked at her hopefully, but evidently the hint of this danger was not sufficient to make Miss Evesham vacate the commodious premises in which she was now so snugly ensconced.

"It's too terrible to think of," she said. "Now, William, I want you to help me. You're only a child, but I see that you're not yet tainted by the poison. I want you to report to me anything suspicious you may see or hear. I realise, of course, that I run a certain risk by staying here at the heart of this evil and working against it, but I was never one to be turned from duty by danger."

"Well, there's one other thing," said William, with a burst of inspiration. "My father's got a book with *Laws of Banking* on the outside, but I think there's something quite different inside. Once I got hold of it an' he shouted 'Leave that alone'."

"Can you get the book, William, and bring it to me?"

" 'Fraid I can't. He'd miss it at once an' he's a very savage man."

"I'm sure he is. This sort of thing has a very brutalising effect on the character. . . . But perhaps you could just peep into it when no one's looking and tell me what you see."

Fate seemed to be on William's side, for the next time that Miss Evesham went in search of the errant Lucifer it happened to be a very misty morning, and it happened, too, that Miss Perrott was having her chimney swept. Through the mist, Miss Evesham just saw the end of a brush vanishing down the chimney. She turned pale and fled back to the shelter of her own home. Lucifer's arrival a few minutes later, his coat bearing distinct traces of soot, confirmed her worst suspicions. . . .

"People laugh at these old ideas of the witch flying through the air on her broomstick," she said to William, "but they're not invented. They're traditions, handed down from the days when such things were openly done and accepted. Now they are only done in secret, but the—the *ritual* is the same. . . . Have you been able to look at that book of your father's yet, William?"

"Not yet," said William.

He was feeling a little troubled. His plan had seemed at first a brilliant one, but it was defeating its own ends. Instead of frightening Miss Evesham away from the neighbourhood, it was making her more determined than ever to stay and investigate the mare's nest which he had been at such pains to provide for her.

He was frequently sent to Honeysuckle Cottage to bring back the errant Lucifer, and had struck up a friendship with Miss Perrott. He liked her. She was vague and friendly and inconsequent, gave him any sweets or biscuits she happened to have, and encouraged him to talk to her. Visiting her one afternoon, he was considerably startled to find the stuffed figure of Hector standing in a life-like attitude on her table.

"The wretched owner of the cottage has sent it down," she explained. "It evidently belonged to her and died, and she's had it stuffed and asks me to keep it safe for her here as she's paying a series of visits and it's an awkward thing to travel about with. I'm sure it is. . . . It's not unlike that horrible cat

that keeps coming here, is it? But all cats are the same. I dislike them intensely. They're so feline, though I suppose one can't justly blame them for that. I'll put the ghastly thing away somewhere where I can't see it." She bundled Hector unceremoniously into a large cupboard and closed the door. "Now, William, I wonder if you'd do something for me. I want to get up an Anti-Vivisection meeting while I'm here. I'm not keen on Causes on the whole, but I really have that very much at heart. No one seems to have done anything to rouse interest in it here, so I thought I'd start the good work. . . . Do people come to meetings here?"

"Oh, yes," said William. "They like 'em. There's nothin' much else to do."

"Well, then, if I type the notices, will you take them round for me? I'd be most grateful if you would."

William agreed and went home thoughtfully. He felt that this should be his opportunity of speeding up the plan that was so lamentably hanging fire, if only he could see how to do it. . . . He put in a bit of spade-work by calling on Miss Evesham and saying, in the conspiratorial whisper they used in discussing the question: "I've found out what Hector's witch-name is."

"Witch-name?" said Miss Evesham perplexed.

"Yes. They give 'em a different name when they've taught them to do witch work. They call Hector Lucifer."

Miss Evesham paled and looked at the lawn where Lucifer lay enjoying the sunshine.

"Call him by it an' see what he does," suggested William.

"L—l—lucifer," called Miss Evesham nervously.

Lucifer sprang up and ran to her, rubbing himself against her legs.

"Oh, my poor Hector!" she moaned. "What *have* they done to you?"

All this, however, didn't seem to be getting William any nearer his aim, which was the removal of Miss Evesham from the house she so wrongfully occupied. He couldn't blame Miss Evesham herself. She was so credulous as to make the whole thing child's play. But he didn't seem able to lead her credulity in the right direction. . . .

She was full of excitement when she received the notice of the meeting on Anti-Vivisection.

"It's one of those meetings you told me of, William," she said. "Got up by that woman, too. That in itself would be proof, if proof were needed. I shall certainly go and see with my own eyes what happens. Do try and look

at that book of your father's before the meeting. I believe that each centre has its own ritual, handed down through the generations and, of course, they all differ in detail."

A gleam came into William's eyes. Faintly in the distance he saw his nebulous plan taking more definite shape.

The next day he paid three calls.

First he went to Miss Perrott's.

"Why don't you have that stuffed cat on the table for your meeting?" he said. "I bet people would like it."

"That's quite an idea," said Miss Perrott. " 'I love little pussy,' you mean. Yes, it might touch some heart's chord. It's worth trying."

"I'll carry it down for you," offered William.

"Thank you. That would be a help. I have so many papers and things, and my rheumatism isn't getting any better."

"An'—there's one other thing. You know Miss Evesham?"

"That stupid woman who comes here for her cat? Yes."

"Well, I think she'd give you a lot of money for the Society in Aid of Vivisection."

"Anti-Vivisection, William dear."

"Yes, that. But she likes to be important. She'd like to be on the platform."

"Well, there's no reason why she shouldn't be. I'll send her a note."

"N—no, not that way," said William slowly. "She was tellin' me about a meetin' she'd been to, an', when everyone was there an' the meetin' was jus' goin' to begin, the person on the platform saw her down in the audience an' called her up to the platform an' she liked it, 'cause everyone heard it an' watched her goin' up to the platform. It made her feel sort of important. She gave 'em quite a lot of money."

Miss Perrott smiled—a smile in which pity and contempt were mingled.

"I know the mentality only too well. But I do need money for the funds, so I'll pander to it."

"You'll call her up to the platform jus' before this meetin' in aid of Vivisection begins?"

"Anti-Vivisection, dear. Yes, I certainly will."

So far, so good, thought William. But there was still a lot to be done.

He next approached Mr. Westonbury.

Mr. Westonbury was the self-appointed Master of Ceremonies of any function in which he found himself. He fussed about and opened windows and closed doors, or closed windows and opened doors, and gave directions to everyone whether he knew what they ought to be doing or not. He was a sidesman in church and showed every member of the congregation to his seat, though there was no need to do it as the same people had sat in the same seats ever since anyone could remember. At concerts he "gave out" the items, at dances he "gave out" the dances, at plays he "gave out" the *dramatis personæ* and scenes. It was torture to him to have no official part in any proceeding. If he hadn't one, he pretended to have one. If he could do nothing else, he stood up in the front of the hall and looked important. He was a tall, thick-set man with beetling eyebrows, a tense expression, and a habit of saying: "Yes, yes, yes."

"Mr. Westonbury," said William, accosting him the next morning in the village.

"Yes, yes, yes," said Mr. Westonbury, as if he could hardly spare the time to say it.

"You know Miss Evesham, what's come to live nex' door to us?"

"Yes, yes, yes," said Mr. Westonbury.

"An' you know Miss Perrott what's gettin' up this meetin' in aid of Vivisection?"

"Anti, my boy, anti. Yes, yes, yes."

"Well, I think Miss Perrott's goin' to ask Miss Evesham to go up to the platform an' if she does Miss Evesham *wants* to go up to the platform, but she doesn't think she can manage the steps. They're a bit steep, you know, an' she's afraid of fallin'; so would you help her up them to the platform?"

"Yes, yes, yes," said Mr. Westonbury, brightening perceptibly.

"But don't say anythin' to her about it if you see her. She's a bit shy about it, an', of course, Miss Perrott may not ask her up, but if she does she'd be very glad if you'd help her up them. She asked me to ask you an' to ask you not to say anythin' to her about it, 'cause she feels a bit shy about it. . . ."

"Yes, yes, yes," said Mr. Westonbury, squaring his shoulders and bending his arms as if to encircle Miss Evesham's far from faëry form. "Delighted, of course. I quite understand. Yes, yes, yes."

And he went on his way, his grim face relaxed almost to a smile. . . . For that evening, at any rate, he was saved from obscurity.

There was still Miss Evesham to be tackled—the most tricky part of the whole thing. William had the wisdom to wait till she tackled him, and to appear to be reluctant to give his information. She lay in wait for him the next afternoon and tackled him as soon as he reached the road.

"William," she said, "have you looked at that book of your father's yet?"

"Well, yes," said William. "An' it is about witchcraft, but I couldn't understand it. I don't think it would int'rest you."

"It *would*, William," said Miss Evesham. "You must tell me every *word*. It's most important, with this meeting coming on."

"WILL YOU COME UP ON TO THE PLATFORM, MISS EVESHAM?" SHE SAID. THE BLOOD FROZE IN MISS EVESHAM'S VEINS.

"Well, you know . . . about those meetin's an' how they could pretend they, were about things like Vivisection so as not to arouse suspicion in outsiders, an'—but it sounds so silly," he ended.

"William, you must tell me *everything*," persisted Miss Evesham.

"Well," continued William, "It seemed to be somethin' about a sort of wooden altar with a hypnotised cat on it."

"A *what*?"

"A hypnotised cat."

"How extraordinary!"

"That's what I thought," said William. "That's why I thought it was too silly to tell you."

"What else did it say?" asked Miss Evesham excitedly. "Did it say anything about human sacrifice?"

"Y—yes," said William. "It seemed to be somethin' about a—a priestess standin' behind this wooden altar with this hypnotised cat on it, an' that the human sacrifice mus' be the person this cat belongs to, an'—then I heard my father comin' an' had to put the book back."

"I shall be there," said Miss Evesham firmly. "I shall sit right in the front so that I can see *everything* that happens. I shall watch so carefully that nothing can escape me, and then, even at the peril of my life, I shall expose the whole diabolical business."

As the day of the meeting drew near, William became more and more anxious. His calculations depended largely on chance, and chance, as he had learnt by experience, was not always to be depended on.

The village turned out in force for the meeting, less owing to any strong local interest in Anti-Vivisection than to a dearth of rival attractions.

Miss Evesham entered the hall, wearing a grim set look, casting challenging glances at the faces around her. Most of the faces wore a bored expression for, though their owners had come for want of something better to do, they cherished no great hopes of the evening. How *satanic* they all look, thought Miss Evesham, with a shudder, as she made her way to the front row. . . .

The curtains dividing the platform from the hall were drawn, for no other reason than that Mr. Westonbury enjoyed drawing them back. The clock struck eight and Mr. Westonbury, with his own inimitable air of providing the most important item of the evening's entertainment, drew them back.

Miss Evesham gave a gasp of horror. For there on the platform was the wooden table (the altar, she supposed) and on it was Hector . . . *her* Hector, whom she had left asleep by the fire, now spirited here by some infernal means and standing motionless, not moving a muscle or twitching a whisker . . . *hypnotised* . . .

And behind the altar was Miss Perrott, looking more witch-like than ever —hatless, her white hair falling about her face, wearing a long black coat and leaning on a stick.

Then came the culmination of the horror.

For the witch hobbled to the edge of the platform, looked down into the well of the hall, fixed her gimlet eye on Miss Evesham, and said in a voice that froze the blood in Miss Evesham's veins:

"Will you come up on to the platform, Miss Evesham?"

Too late did Miss Evesham realise the implication of William's words: "The human sacrifice must be the person the hypnotised cat belongs to." Before she could collect her senses, a bestial-looking man with gorilla-like arms leapt to her and seized her roughly (for Mr. Westonbury had been tormented all evening by a fear that someone might forestall him in performing the friendly office). Here Miss Evesham's paralysis left her. With a piercing scream she pushed him aside and, turning, fought her way through the crowd to the door. It seemed to her that each member of the audience did his best to bar her progress, but, endowed with superhuman strength (as she said, when describing the affair afterwards), she fought her way to safety. Once outside, she did not stop to look back, but fled as if a hundred devils were at her heels. . . .

Miss Perrott watched the scene with raised eyebrows. A most extraordinary performance, and one best ignored. She had thought for some time that the woman was mental, hanging about her cottage and scowling at her whenever they met.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she began, "the subject on which I am going to speak to you is one which, whether you realise it or not, is of vital importance to you all . . ."

It was William alone who witnessed the next stage in the drama.

Miss Perrott felt a little worried after the meeting. The woman was evidently in the throes of a serious nervous breakdown. It would be only right and neighbourly to call on the way home and ask how she was.

So William, looking out of his bedroom window, saw Miss Perrott in her long black coat, with Hector under her arm, opening the gate of Miss

Evesham's garden. The moonlight lent her a sinister air, accentuating her witch-like appearance and giving Hector's eyes a green and wicked light. But even William was not prepared for what happened next. Miss Evesham's window was thrown open and Miss Evesham's voice, raised to a shrill scream, rent the silence of the night: "Get *out*, you she-devil!"

Some heavy object was hurled at Miss Perrott. It missed her but caused her unceremoniously to abandon her neighbourly intentions and make her way homeward as quickly as she could.

Early next morning a taxi drew up at the door of Miss Evesham's house, into which Miss Evesham and her belongings hastily transferred themselves.

Later in the day a furniture van drew up and removed Miss Evesham's furniture.

Later still, William sat down to write to Joan. He had meant to give her a full account of what had happened, but it was a long and complicated story, and William was, at the best, a poor letter-writer.

"DEER JOAN (he wrote),

"It's orl rite, you can cum bak now.

"luv from

"*William*."

CHAPTER V

THE BATTLE OF FLOWERS

"WE'VE gotter get somethin' ready for Vict'ry," said William. "Everyone else is doin'."

"What sort of thing?" demanded Ginger.

"Some people are gettin' up Vict'ry balls . . ." said Henry.

"We jolly well don't want a Vict'ry ball. Dancin' with rotten ole girls! We get enough of that at the dancin' class. I never have seen what people see in it, dancin'."

"They're gettin' up a pageant where my aunt lives," said Douglas. "She's goin' to be Queen Elizabeth."

"I thouldn't mind bein' her," said Violet Elizabeth graciously. "It wath only 'cauth of mumpth I wathn't her before."

"You won't be in it at all," said William sternly. "No one asked you to the meetin' anyway."

"If Joan can come, why thouldn't I?" demanded Violet Elizabeth.

" 'Cause we asked Joan. She helps. You only mess everything up."

Violet Elizabeth looked at Joan who sat, small and shy and earnest, on an upturned packing-case in a corner of the old barn.

"Thee's got thoot on her nothe," she remarked dispassionately.

Joan took out her handkerchief and rubbed off the infinitesimal speck.

"We had the chimney sweep this morning," she explained.

"You leave her alone," said William indignantly to Violet Elizabeth.

"I only thaid thee had thoot on her nothe," said Violet Elizabeth with devastating sweetness. "I thought thee'd like to know. I'd like to know if I had thoot on my nothe. Anyway"—she smiled on them serenely—"you can't turn me out. If you try I'll thcream an' thcream an' *thcream*."

William sighed, deciding for the hundredth time that girls complicated every situation into which one admitted them. Joan was a different matter. She lacked the ruthlessness and dominating personality of Violet Elizabeth. She was quiet and amenable and willing to help. She joined the Outlaws as a

slave. Violet Elizabeth, despite the disarming camouflage of meekness that she could assume for her own ends, joined it as a tyrant.

"Well, we aren't havin' any girls in whatever we do for this Vict'ry show," said William.

He spoke firmly, but there was something in the curve of Violet Elizabeth's cherubic lips and in the light of her wide blue eyes that made him feel a good deal less confident than he sounded.

"You can help if you want," he added, "but that's jolly well all."

"That'th all we want to do, ithn't it, Joan?" said Violet Elizabeth.

"Yes," agreed Joan earnestly.

"What do they *do* in pageants?" asked William.

"They sort of act things out of hist'ry," said Henry.

"You'll have to have girlth if ith hithtory, William," said Violet Elizabeth with quiet satisfaction. "Hithtory'th full of them—queenth and thingth."

"They sort of act without talkin'," said Henry, ignoring her.

"How do people know what they're actin' if they don't talk?" said William.

"They've jus' gotter guess, I s'pose," said Henry.

"I see," said William thoughtfully. "If a man comes on in a crown, wearin' a rose, it'd be Charles I in the Wars of the Roses, or somethin' like that."

"Yes, somethin' like that," agreed Henry doubtfully, "but I don't think it was Charles I in the Wars of the Roses."

"Well, Charles II, then," said William impatiently. "An' if someone comes on an' puts a coat over a puddle it'd be that man who put his coat down for Queen Elizabeth. The Black Prince, wasn't it?"

"Sir Walter Raleigh," murmured Henry.

"Yes, I knew it was either him or the Black Prince," said William.

"I thaid you'd have to have girlth," said Violet Elizabeth with a radiant smile. "I *thaid* tho."

"Well, we're not goin' to," said William. "I bet I could do Queen Elizabeth all right."

"I'm sure you could," said Joan, but Violet Elizabeth burst into a peal of silvery laughter.

"I'd love to thee you," she said. "You'd look tho funny."

"Anyway, we're not doin' that," said William irritably. "We're not goin' to copy anyone. We're goin' to think out somethin' of our own."

"Sometimes they have someone readin' aloud in po'try what they're actin' while they're actin' it," said Henry, reluctant to leave a subject on which he felt himself to be an authority.

"Well, we're not goin' to have anythin' out of hist'ry," said William firmly. "We get enough of that in school. All that fuss las' week jus' cause I said that ole Caxton invented the steam engine 'stead of Wat Tyler or whoever it was!" Henry opened his mouth to protest then closed it again as William continued: "Anyway, what does it matter what they're called? It's jus' a name their mother happened to think of an' she might jus' as well have thought of somethin' else. I bet she'd have called him Wat Tyler, or whatever it was, if she'd thought of it. I've got an aunt that always calls me Robert an' Robert William an' no one tells her that she's a monument of c'lossal ignorance an' crass stupidity an' all the things ole Markie called me. What does it matter what people's names are, anyway?"

He paused for breath, and Ginger said mildly:

"Well, we aren't any nearer findin' what to do for this Vict'ry show."

"No, but we can jolly well keep off history," said William, in a voice that still held the aftermath of bitterness.

"If it's a Vict'ry show," said Joan, "let's have somethin' about Vict'ry."

"That's a good idea," said William, impressed.

"I wath juth going to thuggetht it," said Violet Elizabeth serenely.

"We could have Britannia," said Joan, "riding in a sort of chariot. A wheelbarrow would do. Or that box on wheels you've got."

"I'll be Britannia," said Violet Elizabeth. "My mother'th got a Britannia fanthy dreth cothtume."

"You jolly well won't," said William. "If we have girls in it at all, Joan's being Britannia."

"Thee can't be," said Violet Elizabeth. "Thee hathn't got a Britannia fanthy dreth cothtume."

"You could lend her yours, couldn't you?"

"Yeth," said Violet Elizabeth, still smiling serenely. "But I won't. . . ."

"Then you're a rotten mean ole girl."

"And after Britannia we could have some British soldiers," said Joan, hastily intervening before the quarrel could reach such proportions as to

hold up progress indefinitely. “We could easily get some boys to be those. And then we could have Germany and captured German prisoners.”

“Who’d be them?” said Douglas doubtfully. “I bet no one’d want to be them.”

“We could fix that up later,” said William. “It’s a jolly good idea, anyway.” He turned to Violet Elizabeth. “Would you like to be Germany? It’s a jolly good part.”

“What thould I wear?” said Violet Elizabeth. “It dependth on what I’d wear.”

They considered the question.

“Swashtikas,” suggested Henry.

“No,” said Violet Elizabeth firmly. “I don’t like thwathtikath!”

“Sackcloth,” said Ginger.

“No,” said Violet Elizabeth, still more firmly. “I don’t like thackcloth.” Suddenly her small face beamed. “*Tell* you what! I’ve got a fanthy dreth at home I could wear. Ith a fanthy dreth of a rothe. Ith got a thkirt of pink thilk petalth, all thtanding out, and pink thilk thtockingth and thoeth. And ith got a pink rothe-bud for a cap. A couthin of mine had it before the war and thee sent it to me ’cauth thee’d grown out of it and it would juth fit me now. I wouldn’t mind being Germany if I could wear that.”

“Well, you can’t,” said William shortly.

“But, William, ith a *pretty* dreth,” she assured him earnestly. “You could thow a thwathika on if you like,” she conceded. “Thomewhere where it wouldn’t thow.”

“If you think——” began William portentously, but she interrupted him.

“And I muth ride in the chariot and I muth go on firtht in front of Britannia.”

She smiled at them radiantly, as if she had completely solved the problem.

“You can’t do that if you’re Germany,” said William.

“Why not?”

“ ’Cause—’cause you’ve gotter be sorry for all the wrong you’ve done.”

“Well, I’m not,” said Violet Elizabeth with spirit, “and I haven’t done any wrong.”

“You started the war.”

“I didn’t,” snapped Violet Elizabeth. “I wath in bed with a billiouth attack the day the war thtarted. Athk the doctor if you don’t believe me.”

“You’re bats,” said William. “It’s no good talking to you. An’ we jolly well don’t want you in the show anyway.”

“Then you can’t have the Britannia cothtume.”

“We don’t want it,” said William untruthfully.

“I don’t mind Violet Elizabeth being Britannia,” said Joan, anxious that the success of the pageant should not be jeopardised by jealousy among the cast.

“Well, we do,” said William. He turned to Violet Elizabeth. “You’re not going to be in it, so you can clear off. We’ve got a lot of things to discuss.”

“I’ll thtay and lithen to you dithcuthing them,” said Violet Elizabeth, with the air of one granting a favour.

“People with manners,” said William crushingly, “don’t stay where they’re not wanted.”

“I’m not a perthon with mannerth,” said Violet Elizabeth, uncrushed, “and I like thtaying where I’m not wanted. It’th gen’rally more interethting than where I am wanted.”

“We’ll carry on as if she wasn’t there,” said William to the others. “She’s just not worth taking any notice of. I’m glad she’s not going to be in it. She’s always more bother than she’s worth.”

He could not help glancing at Violet Elizabeth as he spoke, hoping to see her look conscience-stricken or at least abashed, but she met his glance with a smile of shattering sweetness.

“Well, now,” he went on hastily. “We’ve got a lot to arrange. Joan’ll be Britannia, and we can easily fix up a costume for her with flags and things an’ she’ll come on in this cart, drawn by two of us, an’ we’ll write some po’try for someone to say when she comes on. Who can write po’try?” He looked round the circle, carefully avoiding Violet Elizabeth’s eye.

“I can thay *Cargoeth*,” said Violet Elizabeth proudly.

They ignored her.

“You can, can’t you, Joan?” said William.

“I can try,” said Joan doubtfully. “I once wrote a poem about a mouse.”

“Thay it,” challenged Violet Elizabeth.

Again they ignored her.

"Then we'll get some boys to be soldiers," said William. "Marchin' an' drillin' and so on. . . ."

"I don't thee what mithe have got to do with a Victory pageant," said Violet Elizabeth.

"Nobody asked you," said William. "I wish you'd shut up."

"All right," said Violet Elizabeth, with unexpected meekness. "I only thought it was thilly thaying po'try about mithe at a Victory pageant and it *ith*."

"Well, let's get on with things," said William. There was no doubt that Violet Elizabeth's interruptions had a disintegrating effect on the discussion. It was difficult to pick up the threads again. "After these soldiers, we'll have Germany. I bet we'll get a jolly good Germany an' we'll get a jolly good dress for whoever it is, too, with sackcloth and swastikas and things."

"It'th *thuth* a pretty pink thilk dreth, William," said Violet Elizabeth wistfully. "It'th got little pearl beadth thewn on for dew dropth. I don't know why you won't let me wear it."

"Well, we won't," said William testily. "We only want you to shut up." He turned to the others. "Then, after Germany, we'll have the captured German prisoners . . . I *say*! Couldn't we get Hubert Lane and his gang to be the captured German prisoners?"

The Outlaws thought of the Hubert Laneites, between whom and the Outlaws a feud had existed as long as any of them could remember.

"They'd make jolly good German prisoners," agreed Ginger, "but I bet they wouldn't do it."

"Couldn't we capture them?"

"If we did, we couldn't keep them till the pageant."

"Let's ask them to do it. Let's make out that it's the most important part. They're jolly stupid."

"Yes, but they're not quite as stupid as that."

"Where shall we have it, anyway? Where do people have pageants?"

"They generally have them in the grounds of castles or big houses," said Henry.

"Our houthe ith the only big houthe in the village," said Violet Elizabeth triumphantly, "an' I won't let you have it in our garden unleth you let me be Britannia and wear my pink thilk dreth, tho there! I don't thuppothe," she added thoughtfully, "that my mother would let you have it there, anyway, 'cauth thee doethn't like you. Thee thayth that you're rough, an' rude, an'

badly behaved, and you *are*, and I'm going home now, and you'll be *thorry* one day that you've been tho nathty to me."

Thereupon, Violet Elizabeth withdrew with an impressive air of dignity which did not quite desert her even when she turned at the door and put out her tongue at them.

"Well, thank goodness she's gone!" said William. "Now we can get on with things a bit."

But their project was still beset with difficulties—Germany, the German prisoners, the scene of the pageant. . . .

"We can't have it at the Hall now Violet Elizabeth's not in it."

"There's the Manor at Marleigh," said Joan.

"They wouldn't let us have it there."

"They're away. I heard my mother saying that Sir Gerald and Lady Markham had shut up the Manor and gone to Scotland. And they've let nearly all the garden to a market gardener at Marleigh. They've only kept the lawn and the part just outside the house and one old gardener."

"That sounds all right," said William, brightening. "An' I bet they won't be there for Vict'ry. They'll go to London for it. High-up people do. I bet he'll be carryin' a banner or holdin' a sceptre or somethin' in the procession. An' I know that ole gardener. He's got an arm-chair in the greenhouse, an' he does his Football Pools there all day, an' he's deaf an' nearly blind, an' never takes any notice of anythin'. He'd probably think we'd got permission. . . ."

This was felt to be a little over-optimistic, but it seemed to be the best plan in the circumstances.

"We'll rehearse ordin'ry in the old barn," said William, "but we'll have the dress rehearsal an' the real show at the Manor. You'll start writin' your po'try, won't you, Joan?" and, with a somewhat confused memory of Violet Elizabeth's strictures, added: "It needn't be about mice, you know."

"Of course not," said Joan, a little irritably. "I only said I once wrote a poem about a mouse."

"An' we'll get some boys for soldiers, an' "—not very hopefully—"I'll try an' fix up with the Hubert Laneites to be German prisoners."

He approached Hubert Lane the next day.

"Say, Hubert," he said. "We're goin' to get up a sort of Vict'ry pageant."

Hubert's fat face spread into a grin.

"Yeah?" he said.

There seemed to be something more offensive than usual in the grin, but William ignored it.

"I wonder whether you an' your gang'd like parts in it?"

Again Hubert said: "Yeah?"

"They're the best parts in the show," said William. "We thought it wasn't worth offerin' you anythin' but the best parts. We don't mind takin' the worst parts ourselves 'cause we're gettin' it up an' we don't want the best parts. We want you to have 'em."

"Kind of you," said Hubert, with a sneer, but the sneer was so much his usual expression that, again, William ignored it.

"Well?" he said.

"What parts are they?" said Hubert.

"Jolly important ones," said William. "They're—they're German prisoners."

"Funny, that," said Hubert ruminatively.

"What?"

"I was jus' goin' to ask you an' your gang to be German prisoners in our pageant."

"Your pageant?" said William.

"Yeah," said Hubert, with an intensification of his sneer. "We're gettin' up a Vict'ry pageant. Violet Elizabeth's goin' to be Britannia—her mother's got a jolly good Britannia costume—an' we're goin' to be British soldiers, an' we're goin' to get someone to be Germany, an' we were goin' to ask you to be German prisoners. All you'd need would be a rope tied round your necks. . . ."

William stared at him, speechless with horror. He had not thought even Violet Elizabeth capable of such depths of perfidy. . . .

"It ought to be a jolly good pageant," continued Hubert suavely. "Mrs. Bott's goin' to let us do it on the lawn at the Hall, an' all the children in the village have promised to come. We're goin' to give 'em tea. . . . Well, what about it? Will you be German prisoners? You'd make jolly good German prisoners."

Then, seeing the light of battle in William's eye, he took to flight. William pursued him half-heartedly for a few yards, then returned to break

the news to the others.

"She's pinched our pageant an' she's gettin' it up with the Hubert Laneites," he announced. "Would anyone have thought she'd be as mean as that?"

"Yes, I would," said Joan simply.

"What are we goin' to do?" said Ginger.

"We're goin' on with it," said William firmly. "We're not goin' to give it up jus' for a mean ole girl like that. *Gosh!* Would you have thought it? Jus' because she couldn't be Britannia! Sickening! I bet even Hitler wouldn't have done a thing like that."

So, doggedly, they continued their preparations for their pageant, but somehow the zest had gone out of it. It wasn't only the fact of the rival pageant that was being organised and rehearsed in the grounds of the Hall under Violet Elizabeth's despotic rule. It was the absence of Violet Elizabeth herself. They had resented her presence among them and heartily wished her away but, now that she had gone, they missed her—missed her dynamic personality, her unreasonableness, her contrariness, her varying moods, her uncertain temper, even her lisp. . . . Their loyalty to Joan was unchanged, but she was almost too docile and amenable and ready to fall in with their suggestions. She failed to provide the stimulus that Violet Elizabeth had always provided. And, though they would not have admitted it, they felt wounded and betrayed. That Violet Elizabeth, their most troublesome but most loyal follower, should have joined the Hubert Laneites was almost too monstrous for belief.

Joan did her best. She wrote her "poetry" with frowning concentration, sucking her pencil to induce inspiration and drawing it across her forehead in moments of deep thought till her brow resembled a complicated railway map. For the Britannia costume she had decided to stitch flags on to her white frock, but she had not yet been able to obtain any flags. Everyone who had them was keeping them for their own Victory decorations and the village shop was sold out.

"I'm sure to get some before the day," she said. "I expect there'll be heaps in the shop by then."

William concentrated his efforts on drilling his band of soldiers. He had found no difficulty in obtaining recruits. The only difficulty was in organising them. They were apt to scuffle and scrimmage and indulge in horseplay highly unsuitable to British soldiers in a Victory parade. The rehearsals offered an excellent opportunity of paying off private scores and

generally ended in a free fight in which everyone joined just for the fun of the thing whether he had any private scores to pay off or not. William tried to divide them into groups of soldiers, sailors, airmen, commandos and paratroops, but the free fight would break out again immediately and the ranks would become inextricably mingled.

"You can't go on like this," he said despairingly, "fightin' all the time."

"That's what soldiers are for, isn't it?" they replied.

"They're for fightin' an enemy, not each other," said William.

"Give us an enemy, then."

"I tried to," said William. "I tried to get the Hubert Laneites, but they wouldn't come."

The Hubert Laneites were keeping well out of the Outlaws' way, while carrying on energetic preparations for their own pageant. The Outlaws watched them from the road through the hedge, as Violet Elizabeth rehearsed them ruthlessly in the garden of the Hall.

"Gosh! She's puttin' 'em through it," said William. "Thank Goodness it's them, not us, now!"

"Thank Goodness!" echoed the Outlaws with relief that did not ring quite true.

Once they met Violet Elizabeth in the road outside the Hall. She passed them without looking at them, head in air. They passed her in silence, refraining by tacit consent from jeers or hostilities. Her treachery went too deep for that. . . .

They gathered that the Hubert Laneites, like themselves, had been unable to persuade anyone to take the parts of Germany or of the German prisoners. Otherwise their preparations were on a lavish scale. Mrs. Bott had promised cakes, lemonade and ice cream. . . .

"I don't see what good it is, goin' on with the thing at all," said Ginger gloomily. "No one'll come to it, anyway, with the Hubert Laneites havin' it at the Hall on the same day an' givin' them tea."

"I'm not goin' to stop it 'cause of *them*," said William firmly. "I'm jolly well goin' on with it, whether anyone comes or not."

The dress rehearsal was fixed for the next Saturday, and the cast assembled in the old barn early in the afternoon. Joan had tried up to the last minute to obtain some flags but without success, and had had to content

herself with pinning a red, white and blue rosette and a Royal Engineers' badge on her white frock and putting a green silk tea cosy on her head. She carried a toasting fork for a trident and the costume was considered by the others to be an adequate, if not striking, representation of Britannia. William, as Commander-in-Chief, wore a tin hat and his father's Home Guard boots. The others, who had been told to collect "uniforms" from whatever sources they could, presented a motley spectacle. One wore a fancy dress costume of Robin Hood and carried a poker. Another wore a very ancient fancy dress costume of Henry the Fifth, the coat of mail knitted in dishcloth cotton from which the aluminium paint had long since disappeared, and from which dangled several tempting odds and ends of dishcloth cotton. Another wore a red Indian costume with feathered head-dress. Another, who had once taken part in a charade as an Ancient Briton, wore a fur rug, with a tray for a shield. One wore a gas mask, another a saucepan, another a fire guard. . . .

Putting an end, as well as he could, to the inevitable skirmish, William addressed them in his most impressive manner.

"Now look here," he said. "Stop messin' about an' listen to me. We're goin' over to Marleigh Manor for the dress rehearsal an'—stop bangin' your tray, Victor Jameson—an' we'll go by the fields an' keep by the hedge 'cause we don't want a lot of people seein' us—stop blowin' that trumpet, George Bell—an' we'll go on to the lawn through the shrub'ry from the road an' do it under the tree at the end of the lawn same as we said—stop pullin' the fur out of his rug, Ginger. He told you it'd got the moth in—an' I bet it'll be all right with it bein' Sat'day. That ole gardener always takes Sat'day off, so we can go right through the pageant without bein' int'rupted. Stop unwinding his coat of mail, Freddie Parker. I don't care if you are windin' it into a nice ball. What's he goin' to do with only about an inch of coat of mail left? Now get into line—Joan first, then me, then the rest of you—an' don't make so much noise. We don't want everyone knowin' about it before the day."

It had been decided to dispense with the chariot for the dress rehearsal, so Joan, looking solemn and intense in her white dress and green tea cosy, the exercise book containing her "poetry" under her arm, set off at the head of the procession. William followed, leading his motley band of warriors, still scuffling and scrimmaging but in a more subdued manner.

"I'VE GOT A LOVELY THURPRITHE FOR YOU, WILLIAM," SAID VIOLET ELIZABETH.

They climbed the hill to Marleigh by way of the fields, keeping to the shadow of the hedge, as William had directed, and attracting no attention except from an old horse, who gazed at them with an expression of incredulous amazement and then uttered a neigh that sounded like a burst of derisive laughter.

“Shut up!” said William. “You look a jolly sight funnier than we do, anyway.”

They made their way through the shrubbery and on to the front lawn of Marleigh Manor.

And there they had their first shock.

For the lawn was full of children—bored, listless-looking children—sitting in serried rows facing the empty space under the copper beech where William had planned to hold his pageant. For a few moments he was much too taken aback to do anything but stare at them; then, reacting automatically to the situation, he led his band on to the open space and started proceedings.

"Ladies an' gentlemen," he began. "This is our Vict'ry pageant, an' this is Joan—I mean Britannia. Go on, Joan."

Joan opened her book, glanced at it for a moment or two to refresh her memory, and began her recital.

> "I am Britannia, ruling the waves
> And Britons that never, never, never,
> Never shall be slaves."

She stood aside and motioned forward the motley band of warriors.

> "These are British soldiers that won the war
> And aren't going to fight any more.
> Soldiers on land and sailors on the seas
> And commandos jumping down from trees,
> And paratroops coming down from the skies,
> And now the war's over it's going to be very nice."

Here each branch of the services, as drilled by William, was to have given a display of its particular activity. The soldiers were to march and make a show of shooting with imaginary rifles, the sailors to scan the horizon with imaginary telescopes, commandos and paratroops to swarm up the copper beech and drop lightly from its branches. This had never yet gone according to plan, and it was obvious that it was not going to do so to-day. In fact, the usual scrimmage was just in process of forming itself, when——

The Outlaws received their second shock.

For Violet Elizabeth, dressed in her pink silk rose costume, appeared at the head of the Hubert Laneites and led them up to William, smiling radiantly.

"I wath only teathing you, William," she said. "I've got a lovely thurprithe for you."

She turned the radiant smile on to the audience and, striking an attitude, proclaimed:

"An' I am Germany, an' thethe"—pointing to the Hubert Laneites—"are German prithonerth. I've not made a piethe of poetry about mithe, but I

could if I tried."

The Hubert Laneites glared at her in impotent fury, aghast at the trick she had played on them.

For Violet Elizabeth had joined them, offering to organise their pageant and play the part of Britannia, and even help them capture the Outlaws for German prisoners. She had insisted on wearing the rose costume instead of the Britannia one because she said that pink suited her better than red, white and blue. Finally she had told them that the Outlaws were having their dress rehearsal to-day, and had persuaded them that it would be an easy matter to break it up and force the Outlaws to play the part of German prisoners. Instead of which she had shamelessly delivered them into the hands of their enemies, making them play the hateful and humiliating part themselves in the Outlaws' pageant.

She stood there, smiling proudly.

"Ithn't it a lovely thurprithe, William?" she said.

The infuriated Hubert Laneites flung themselves upon the Outlaws. The Outlaws flung themselves upon the Hubert Laneites. The battle spread to the audience, and the audience, losing its air of listlessness, flung itself upon both sides impartially.

Struggling masses of children surged to and fro over the lawn. Hubert Lane dodged round the summer house with William in hot pursuit. A member of the audience had got Bertie Franks down on the ground and was filling his mouth with grass. Claude Bellew (another Hubert Laneite) was half-way up the copper beech with Ginger hanging on to his leg and trying to pull him down. Henry the Fifth was wrestling with his own disintegrating costume, his ankles pinioned by yards of tangled dishcloth cotton. The peaceful summer air was rent by shouts and yells and war-whoops.

Then a sudden silence fell.

Lady Markham was making her way to them over the lawn from the house.

And here the Outlaws got their third shock.

For she was smiling in unmistakable welcome. She held out her hand to William and clasped his warmly.

"Thank you, my dear boy," she said. "*Thank* you."

Every summer Sir Gerald and Lady Markham invited a party of slum children to spend an afternoon in the grounds and partake of a tea that had

continued even in wartime to be comparatively lavish. They were a conscientious couple, deeply sensible of their obligations to the community in general and, though they had closed the Manor and were spending the summer in Scotland, they decided to come back for the usual Saturday of the children's visit and do the thing in style, as they had always done. They had prepared the lavish tea. They had engaged a conjuror to do conjuring tricks on the lawn. They had engaged a Punch and Judy show to follow. And then, when the audience had arrived—shy and ill-at-ease and even slightly resentful, as it generally was at first—the conjuror rang up to say that he had sprained his ankle, and a few minutes later the Punch and Judy man rang up to say that he was down with 'flu. Lady Markham telephoned every entertainment agency she knew. No one was free on such short notice. Frantically she rang up all her friends. None of them had any suggestions except one who offered to recite passages from Shakespeare, and another who offered to give a lecture on "Home Life in the Eighteenth Century" which she had given at the Women's Institute the week before and which had, she said, been well received by the few who had turned up to listen to it. Meantime the audience sat, bored and impassive, waiting. . . .

And then the miracle had happened.

"I don't know who sent the children," said Lady Markham afterwards. "Or whether it was their own idea. They must, of course, have heard of the dilemma I was in, because I'd simply rung up everyone I knew to tell them about it. I was feeling simply *desperate*, when I looked out of the window and saw these children coming to my rescue. It really was a charming idea. A children's Battle of Flowers. First came a little girl dressed as a snowdrop, followed by her pages, then came a little girl dressed as a rose, followed by her pages. The pages, of course, were rather strangely dressed, but, considering the war and everything, it was excellent. Then they started this Battle of the Flowers and invited the audience to join in, and then the whole thing went like a house on fire. It became just a little bit rough, I admit, but the children enjoyed it and that was the chief thing."

"Splendid effort, my boy," said Sir Gerald, grasping William's hand in his turn. "Simply splendid! I can't tell you how grateful my wife and I are to you. . . . Ice broken all right now, eh?"

The ice was certainly broken, together with most of the chairs and benches on which the audience had been sitting, but host and hostess gazed at the chaos with smiles of unalloyed pleasure.

“Such a relief!” said Lady Markham. “These afternoons have always been a success. I should have been miserable if this one had been a failure. You and your friends will stay to tea, won’t you, and help us till the little visitors go?”

Dazedly William promised that he would. Dazedly he returned to the fray. The Battle of Flowers had developed into a game which everyone played according to his own rules, and in which everyone seemed to know what he was doing, though no one else did. The little visitors leapt and screamed and shouted and pushed.

“It’s the best party we’ve ever ’ad here,” said one of them to William. “I’m jolly glad they asked you.”

They clustered round the trestle tables in the hall, dishevelled and panting, and began the attack upon jellies, sandwiches, cakes, buns. Sir Gerald and Lady Markham hovered gratefully about William, pressing delicacies upon him.

“It really is good of you, you know,” said Sir Gerald, “giving up your Saturday afternoon to getting us out of a hole like this.”

William grinned sheepishly and took another slab of chocolate cake.

Violet Elizabeth and Joan stood on one side and watched proceedings with an air of aloofness, daintily nibbling chocolate biscuits.

“It’s a very pretty frock,” said Joan generously.

“Yourth ith pretty, too,” said Violet Elizabeth, not to be outdone in generosity, and added. “An’ yourth wath a very nithe piethe of poetry.”

“I ’spect you could have done one just as good,” said Joan.

“Yeth, I ’thpect I could,” said Violet Elizabeth complacently.

They watched the boys scuffling round the table, wolfing the lavish tea.

“Jutht look at them,” said Violet Elizabeth, elevating her small nose. “Aren’t they dithguthting?”

“They haven’t any manners, boys,” said Joan.

The two felt themselves to be withdrawn into a rarified atmosphere of feminine superiority.

“They haven’t any mannerth and they haven’t any thenth,” said Violet Elizabeth severely. “I thay, will you come to tea at our houthe to-morrow, and we won’t have any boyth?”

“Yes, I’d like to,” said Joan.

William approached them, his mouth still full of chocolate cake.

"We're goin' out to play rounders," he said indistinctly. "Come on."

Violet Elizabeth looked at him disdainfully.

"What a meth you're in!" she said, with an odious imitation of grown-up disapproval. "Joan and I don't care for thothe childith gameth. We're going to walk round the garden, aren't we, Joan?"

"Yes," said Joan.

They walked off, arm in arm, without looking back.

William stood staring after them, baffled and crestfallen, pondering on the incomprehensibility of the female sex. Then he shrugged his shoulders, dismissed the problem, and ran to join the riot on the lawn. . . .

CHAPTER VI

ESMERALDA TAKES A HAND

WILLIAM was finding life rather interesting. His home was in the hands of "the decorators," and William was enjoying the experience. It didn't matter how untidy you were because everything was all over the place anyway, and you never knew where you were going to sleep. He had even offered to sleep in the coal cellar, so that he could pretend to be a stowaway on a ship, but the offer had been refused. He had slept, last night, on a camp-bed in the dining-room with his air-gun by his side, because he understood that thieves always gained access to a house by the dining-room window, but his rest had been broken by nothing more exciting than a miauling cat. Still, in spite of these disappointments, he enjoyed the importance that the position gave him among his friends and did his best to convey the impression that the workmen accepted his help and deferred to his judgment with gratitude and humility.

He was holding forth now to the three other Outlaws in the garden of his house, while Jumble, his mongrel dog, occupied himself by burying a paint brush that he had found among the workmen's things in the garage. It was an odd sort of bone, thought Jumble, and had a peculiar taste, but he hoped it would improve with keeping. . . .

"I told 'em I thought it would be a jolly good idea to put distemper on the furniture, too," said William. "It'd make it look a bit more exciting. Wood's jus' brown an' brown's a jolly dull colour."

"Did they do it?" said Ginger with interest.

"Well," said William evasively, "they said they'd think about it. I bet they'll do it in the end. Come on in an' have a look. All the wrong furniture's in the wrong rooms. It's wizard. It's like bein' on a desert island an' havin' things washed up."

They entered the house. It was empty. The workmen had been called away to another job, and Mrs. Brown had not yet returned from her morning's shopping.

"Look!" said William proudly. "There's no stair-carpet, an' I bet none of you can make as much noise as what I can, goin' upstairs. Come on. Let's try it."

They tried it. . . . The echoes had not yet died away when they entered Mr. Brown's dressing-room. Jumble, excited by the crescendo of their ascent and considering himself a not unworthy contributor to it, set to work on one of Mr. Brown's bedroom slippers. He'd had an idea for some time that the lining would come right out if he took enough trouble over it.

"They're not started here yet," said William, looking round the room, "but I 'spect they're goin' to. Look! There's the distemper stuff."

They gazed down at the pail of distemper that stood in front of the chest-of-drawers.

"I bet they're goin' to distemper that chest-of-drawers," went on William. "I could see they thought it was a jolly good idea when I s'gested it. I don't know why no one's ever thought of it before. I bet I've invented somethin' that'll make me famous in hist'ry."

"I think it'd look a bit funny with distemper on," said Henry judicially.

"It wouldn't," retorted William.

"I bet distemper wouldn't stay on," said Ginger. "It'd slip off."

"It wouldn't."

"It would."

"It wouldn't."

"It would."

"All right. I'll show you."

"You'd better not, William," said Douglas nervously.

But William had, for the moment, lost touch with reality. He was an inventor determined to justify his faith, an artist inspired by an ideal.

"Look!" he said, and, before even he himself quite realised what he was doing, he had taken the brush that lay beside the pail, plunged it into the pail and drawn a long sweeping line over the chest-of-drawers.

"Gosh!" said the Outlaws.

"Well, of course, it looks a bit queer like that," admitted William. "It'll look all right when the brown doesn't show."

He dipped the brush into the distemper again and drew it once more over the wood. But something of his enthusiasm was fading, and a look of anxiety had come into his face.

"Oh, well," he said, glancing round uneasily, "p'raps we'd better be goin' now. I mean, it looks jolly fine, but p'raps—anyway, p'raps we'd better be goin'. Come on, Jumble."

He retrieved the slipper, replaced the lining as best he could, put it with its fellow and turned to the door. Their descent of the uncarpeted stairs was more hasty and less re-echoing than their ascent had been. There was even a suggestion of flight in its precipitancy. . . .

Something of William's uneasiness left him as he reached the open air.

"It's a jolly good idea," he said, "but I 'spect I'll have to get people used to it gradual."

Jumble, now freely bespattered with distemper as a result of William's recent operations, was investigating every plant with patient thoroughness, trying to remember where he'd buried his paint brush.

"What's that?" said Ginger suddenly, looking at a shrouded shape inside the greenhouse.

"Oh, that's Ethel's dummy thing," explained William. "She calls it Esmeralda. Dunno why. It's like a person, but it hasn't got a head, an' she uses it when she's makin' dresses."

"But why's it in the greenhouse?" said Henry.

"Oh, well," said William, "they kept movin' it about from one room to another an' bits of plaster an' stuff kept fallin' on it an' she was afraid of the dress she was makin' gettin' spoiled, so she said she'd keep it down here in the greenhouse till the men had gone."

"Why's it got a sheet over it?" said Douglas. "Makes it look like a ghost."

"It's to keep that ole dress she's makin' clean," said William. "It looks jus' like a person when it's got a dress on it, 'cept for its head. Come on in an' have a look at it. The door's locked, but I know where they keep the key."

He took the key from the ledge above the door and unlocked it. They trooped into the greenhouse and stood gazing at the shrouded form of Esmeralda.

"Ethel'll be mad if she finds us here," said Douglas.

"Well, she won't find us," said William, " 'cause she's gone to stay with Peggy Barton while her room's bein' papered. Look!" He removed the sheet and revealed a willowy shape encased in grey *crêpe de Chine*. "That's how she does it. She jus' makes them on it same as if it was a real person 'cept it can't feel pins. She's been in a jolly bad temper over this one."

"Why?" said Henry.

“ ’Cause she had a row with Jimmy Moore over it, an’ it always makes her in a bad temper when she has a row with Jimmy Moore.”

“What did she have a row with him about?”

“He wanted her to go to the pictures with him, an’ she said she wouldn’t ’cause she wanted to finish the dress, an’ they both got mad at each other.”

“Why?” said Douglas.

“ ’Cause they’re both bats,” said William, summing up the situation as simply and concisely as he could.

Then he drew the sheet over the dummy and threw a slightly uneasy glance towards the house.

“P’raps we’d better not mess about with things any more,” he said. “Let’s go to the old barn an’ have a meeting.”

“What about?” said Henry.

“Well, there’s a lot of things we could have a meeting about,” said William. “There’s Hubert Lane. I bet he’s not stopped laughing at us yet. We’ve got to do something about Hubert Lane.”

In the intermittent warfare that had been waged between the Outlaws and Hubert Lane ever since any of them could remember, Hubert did not often score, but he had scored last week. He had “borrowed” a bear skin rug, with head attached, that belonged to his mother and hidden it—and himself—in a bush when the Outlaws were coming through the wood at dusk. The ferocious-looking head, with bared teeth, just protruded from the leafage, and the growl that Hubert uttered was so blood-curdling that the Outlaws had taken to their heels without further investigation and fled for the safety of the road.

“What can we do?” asked Henry.

“That’s what we’ve got to plan,” said William. “We’ve got to fix up some sort of trick to pay him back an’——”

“Gosh! Here he is!” said Ginger.

Hubert had just turned the bend in the road and was coming towards them. There was a triumphant smirk on his flabby face.

“Hello,” he said, stopping irresolutely, his short fat body poised for flight, should his foes show signs of immediate hostility. But William had decided on subtler methods.

“Hello,” he said.

“Where are you going?” said Hubert.

"Mind your own business. Where are you going?"

"Mind your own business."

This conventional opening did not imply any particular rancour, and the conversation would seem to have reached an *impasse*, but Hubert was the sort of boy who must boast about something even if he hadn't anything much to boast about. He dared not, at such close quarters, refer to his bear skin trick, but he had a piece of news to impart that he imagined would increase his prestige, and Hubert thought a lot about his prestige.

"My mother and me's going out to tea to the Grange to Mrs. Warwick's," he said. "She's got her sister staying with her and her sister's a high-up person. She writes stories."

"Yes, I know," said William. "Ethel's met her, an' anyway, it's nothin' to write stories. I write stories myself an' I bet mine are a jolly sight better than hers."

"I bet they're not."

"I bet they are," said William. "I bet she's never had four murders an' three burglaries an' a train accident an' an aeroplane crash an' a man havin' his head pulled off by a gorilla all in one story, has she?"

"I dunno," said Hubert, somewhat deflated by this wealth of invention. "Anyway, I'm going to have a jolly good tea there. The only thing is——" The smirk faded from his face, and a look of apprehension came into it. It was clear that Hubert was worried about something and wanted to confide in them. There was a vein of simplicity beneath Hubert's cunning that the Outlaws had often found useful.

"What?" said William encouragingly.

"Well," said Hubert, "our gardener says it's haunted by the ghost of a woman what once lived there and pined away 'cause the man she was fond of went to Jamaica or somewhere and never came back."

"Well, I wouldn't come back if I went to Jamaica," said Ginger. "There's bananas there."

"An' that's silly," said Henry; "there aren't any ghosts."

"Yes, there are," said Hubert earnestly. "I've met people that've met people that've actu'ly *seen* them. They look jus' like real people but sort of —sort of"—he shuddered—"*shadowy*."

"Well, anyway, only very old houses are haunted," said Henry, "and The Grange isn't a very old house."

"No, but it's built where an old house used to be," said Hubert, "an' when Mrs. Warwick's father was having that conservatory place built on it they found lots of bits of the old house."

"Well, you won't be havin' tea in the conserv'try."

"No, but the drawing-room's next door to it. There's only a sort of glass door between. I've a good mind not to go. I could pretend to have 'flu. I'm jolly good at pretendin' I've got 'flu."

"I keep tellin' you," said Henry, "there aren't any such things as ghosts."

"An' you're a silly baby to be frightened of them if there are," said Ginger.

The smirk returned to Hubert's fat pale face.

"Oh yeah?" he said. He climbed the stile that separated the road from the field and, with the barrier of the stile between him and his foes, gave a jeering laugh. "Yah! You wouldn't be afraid of ghosts, would you? You weren't afraid of an ole fur rug, were you? Yah!"

With that he turned and ran as fast as his fat legs could carry him across the field and towards his home.

The Outlaws stood gazing after him.

"We could catch him easy," said Ginger wistfully.

"No, we won't try," said William. "It wouldn't be any fun anyway. What we've got to do is to fix up a trick for him—an' a better trick than the one he played on us." He stood for a moment deep in thought, then the complicated maze of wrinkles cleared from his brow and a slow smile spread over his face. "*Tell* you what!"

They gathered round him eagerly.

"Yes?"

"I've got an idea an' it's a jolly good one. Listen. He said he was frightened of ghosts an' you know you said that thing of Ethel's in the greenhouse was jus' like a ghost. Well, if we could fix it up. . . ."

"Gosh! We *couldn't* do that," said Douglas in horror.

"Yes, we could," said William, his purpose hardening, as it always did, in the face of opposition. "We could fix it up in the conserv't'ry place he was talkin' about. I've seen it an' it's got a lot of big plants in it. Palm trees an' things. Well, we could put this ghost in with them an' it'd make it look sort of shadowy, same as he said they looked. He'd be scared out of his life. He'd think it was that woman that died of eatin' pineapples."

"She didn't die of eatin' pineapples," said Henry. "She pined away."

"Well, it comes to the same thing," said William impatiently. "Anyway, you can't say it isn't a jolly good idea."

"It's goin' to be a bit diff'cult," said Ginger slowly.

"I bet it ends by gettin' us into a muddle," said Douglas.

"That's right," said William in exasperation. "Start makin' objections the minute I get a good idea, same as you always do. All right, think of a better one if you don't like this." He paused for a second, then continued with an air of triumph: "There! You can't. I knew you couldn't. All right, if you don't want to do it, I'll do it myself."

"Oh, no," said Ginger hastily. "I only said it was goin' to be diff'cult."

"We don't axshully want *not* to do it," said Henry.

"After all," said Douglas philosophically, "we gen'rally get in muddles whatever we do, so it won't make much diff'rence."

They retraced their steps to the greenhouse. William threw a cautious glance at the house as he opened the back gate, but no one seemed to be about. They entered the greenhouse, removed the sheet from Esmeralda and examined her critically.

"The dress is all right," said William. "It's sort of grey and shadowy like a ghost, but it ought to have a head."

"I've heard of ghosts without heads," said Henry. "They carry them under their arm."

"Well, it hasn't got an arm," said Ginger. "At least," holding up the empty grey sleeve that hung from Esmeralda's shapely shoulder, "it's not strong enough to carry a head."

" 'Sides," said William, "if we're going to have a head at all we might as well fix it on its neck same as anyone else's."

"Yes," said Ginger, "you remember Hubert said they looked like real people but sort of shadowy, so it's got to have a head if it's goin' to look like a real person."

"*Tell* you what!" said William.

"Yes?"

"I've got that old football upstairs. It's about the size of a head. We could fix it on. . . ."

"Ethel will be mad," Douglas warned him.

"No, we'll be jolly careful," said William. "We won't do it any harm."

"How'll we fix it on?" said Henry.

It was obvious that, as usual, they had become infected by William's optimism and that, despite secret misgivings, they were now definitely committed to the scheme.

"I know!" said William excitedly. "There's some cement upstairs that the workmen were using 'cause some of the tiles in the fireplace were loose. I'll go an' get some. You'd better stay here. It may be jus' a bit dangerous if anyone's found that chest-of-drawers."

But no one had found it. The workmen were still absent, and his mother had not yet returned from her shopping. In a few minutes he rejoined them, carrying a football and a handful of wet cement. Jumble, who had accompanied him, was prancing at his heels, his patches of distemper now hidden by a fine dusting of cement.

"Here it is!" said William. "I'm 'fraid I made a bit of a mess upstairs, I knocked over the bag of cement and some of the water got spilt, but I'll clear it up when we come back."

They watched with interest as he rammed the handful of cement on Esmeralda's neck, then fixed the football on to it.

"There, that's all right," he said, holding the football in position. "I told you it would be."

"It doesn't look much like a person," said Ginger, doubtfully.

"N-no," admitted William, "p'raps it doesn't, but," seeing his handiwork through the indulgent eyes of its creator, "it's more or *less* like a person. I mean, you'd sort of know it was *meant* to be a person, an' I bet a hat'll make all the diff'rence."

"A hat!" said Douglas, aghast. "Gosh! You're not goin' to take one of her hats, are you?"

"I won't do it any harm," William assured him. "I'll take great care of it."

"It'll look a bit queer even in a hat," said Henry.

"No, it won't," said William. "This hat I'm thinkin' of's got a sort of veil that comes all over it an' hangs down."

"Yes, but people'll be able to see there isn't a face through it," said Ginger.

"Y-yes," admitted William, obviously reluctant to see any flaws in his masterpiece, "but it's a *sort* of face. It's brown, but it might be a sort of

sunburnt face. I've seen people with brown faces when they'd been on holidays."

"Yes, but they've got mouths an' noses an' things. You can't have even sunburnt faces without mouths an' noses an' things."

William frowned, torn between irritation at their criticisms and a secret suspicion that they were justified. Then his brow cleared.

"*Tell* you what!" he said. "There's that mask we had for Guy Fawkes day. That's a *face* all right."

"It's a jolly funny sort of face," said Ginger. "It's got a moustache on it."

"Well, we could take the moustache off," said William. "I bet if we took the moustache off it'd look jus' like that woman that died of pineapples."

"I can see that muddle comin' nearer an' nearer," said Douglas.

"That's right, start grumblin' again," said William bitterly. "Look. If a body with clothes an' a head an' a face an' a hat doesn't make a *person*, I don't know what does. An' if you don't want to get even with Hubert Lane over that bear trick——"

"Yes, we do," they clamoured. " 'Course we do."

"All right," said William, appeased by their eagerness. "Well, it'll be nearly dark at tea-time, so it won't look as queer as what it looks now. Pers'nally, I think it looks all right now, but when it's got its face an' its hat I bet no one'd know it from a real person."

"When shall we start?" said Henry.

"Well, Hubert said they were goin' to tea, so I 'spect they'll be there about four—that's the time that grown-ups go out to tea—so we'll get ole Esmeralda fixed up in the conserv't'ry by four o'clock. We'll fix it up so's it'll jus' show through the palm trees an' things an' so's Hubert will see it. He'll see it all right, 'cause he'll be lookin' out for a ghost an' the others won't 'cause they won't be."

So confident did William sound that all of them, except Douglas, felt their doubts beginning to vanish.

"Yes," said Ginger, "that ought to be all right."

" 'Course it will be," said William. "Well, we'll meet here at half-past three an' take it along."

"Yes, if somethin' doesn't go wrong before then," said Douglas.

But nothing did go wrong before then. The workmen had not returned from the other job and the embellishment of Mr. Brown's chest-of-drawers

had not been discovered. By quarter to four Esmeralda was complete with mask (from which the moustache had been removed) hat and veil, and Jumble (whom experience had proved to be an unsatisfactory conspirator) safely shut up indoors. Even William, optimist though he was, had had to admit that the concrete base on which Esmeralda's head rested failed to conform with the conventional idea of a human neck, but he had solved the problem by a fur necklet "borrowed" from his mother.

The Outlaws considered the final result in silence.

"Yes, it doesn't look too bad," said Ginger at last, a little uncertainly.

"It'll prob'ly look better when we've got a bit more used to it," said Henry.

"I don't see how we're goin' to get it there," said Douglas.

"No, you wouldn't," said William crushingly. "You're jus' a reg'lar Job's blanket. Well, it's quite easy. We're goin' to take it in my truck."

William's "truck" was an ancient wooden box on wheels that figured regularly in their games as chariot, caravan, waggon, battleship, aeroplane, tank and Rolls Royce. It was fetched from the garage and Esmeralda, wrapped in her sheet, laid in it carefully. The whole of the upper part of her body protruded from the truck, but, steadied by Ginger, Henry and Douglas, and pushed slowly and carefully by William, it remained more or less in position. And so, pursued by shrill barks of protest from the captive Jumble, the strange procession began to wend its way to The Grange.

Nothing untoward happened to mar the smooth running of their plan. Dusk was falling. The road was empty. . . . Only a passing motorist stared at them in amazement, turning round to watch them with such interest that he nearly ran into a telegraph pole.

WILLIAM CARRIED THE LONG-SUFFERING ESMERALDA INTO THE DRAWING-ROOM.

The gate of The Grange was open, the drive was empty, the glass door of the conservatory conveniently ajar. They felt almost awed by the ease with which the whole thing had so far been accomplished.

“Told you it’d be all right,” said William jauntily.

“It’s not over yet,” said Douglas.

“Oh, shut up,” said William. “Now let’s leave the truck an’ the sheet in these bushes an’ take Esmeralda into the conserv’t’ry. Look! We’ll fix her up behind this palm tree, then Hubert’ll see it all right, but not too plain. She’s a jolly good ghost.”

They steered Esmeralda through a forest of tall plants and ornamental stone animals and set her up behind a particularly luxuriant palm.

It was just as they were setting her up that the first mishap occurred.

"Gosh!" said Douglas. "Look!"

They looked. . . . A man had emerged from the greenhouse and was making his way across the lawn in a line that led straight to the conservatory door.

"Crumbs!" said William. "He's comin' here. Quick! You all hide behind the plants an' things an' I—I——" His eye darted round. An open glass door led from the conservatory to the drawing-room. It seemed the only way of escape. "I'll take Esmeralda in there jus' till he's gone an' then I'll bring her back here an' we'll fix her up again."

As quickly as he could he half-carried, half-led the long suffering Esmeralda through the glass door into the drawing-room, setting her up in a corner of the room near the fireplace, hastily straightening hat, veil and fur, so that, if the gardener did chance to catch a glimpse of her, he would think she was a visitor.

And then—almost before he knew what was happening—the other door opened and a woman appeared. She was a woman whom William had never seen before, but he realised that she was Miss Slater, the sister who was staying with Mrs. Warwick and whom Mrs. Lane and Hubert had been asked to meet. She gave a start of surprise as her eye fell upon William and his charge.

"Oh . . . It's Mrs. Lane and Hubert, isn't it?" she said. "I'm Miss Slater, Mrs. Warwick's sister. I'm so glad that you were able to come and I do hope you haven't been waiting long. The maid never told me you were here."

At that point, much to William's relief, a telephone bell cut sharply through the air.

"Excuse me one minute," said Miss Slater. "Do sit down. I won't be long, but I must just . . ."

She vanished, closing the door behind her. Once more William's eye darted round. The gardener was pottering about the conservatory. There were no signs of the other Outlaws, but they were probably concealed behind the banks of ferns that ran round the sides of the room. Miss Slater's voice could be heard telephoning in the hall. Every retreat was cut off.

Near the fireplace was a sofa and over the back of the sofa a rug. William's mind worked quickly. He laid Esmeralda down on the sofa and covered her with the rug so completely that only the hat was visible. It was a smart hat, crowned by an ornament that resembled a slightly dissolute dragon-fly. No sooner had he finished arranging the rug than the door

opened and Miss Slater reappeared. She gazed in amazement at the prostrate Esmeralda.

"Oh, Mrs. Lane!" she said, then, as there was no response from the figure on the sofa, turned to William. "Whatever's happened to your mother, Hubert?"

William bared his teeth in a glassy smile.

"Oh, she's all right, but she's jus' not feelin' very well. I mean, she's jus' got to lie down for a few minutes an' not talk."

"Oh, dear!" said Miss Slater, gazing in consternation at the dragon-fly. "I do hope she hasn't got 'flu. Perhaps I'd better send for the doctor."

"Oh, no," said William hastily, "she doesn't want the doctor. She's not got 'flu. She's all right lyin' down an' not talkin'. It's just somethin' that she —she gets."

"A migraine, perhaps?"

"Yes, that," said William gratefully.

"There's a lot of 'flu about. My sister's in bed with it, and of course your mother rang up this morning to say that she was afraid you were starting it and might not be able to come. She was quite well this morning herself?"

"Oh, yes," said William, "she was all right this morning. It comes on quite sudden, this—this thing you said, an', if she lies down under a rug an' doesn't speak, it goes quite sudden. She's better if she's left alone in a room. 'Cept for me, I mean. What I mean is"—he was evidently anxious to make his point quite clear—"if other people are there it takes longer to go."

"I see," said Miss Slater, edging her way to the door with an air of apprehension. "Well, we were going to have tea in the morning-room, anyway, so I'll just leave your mother in peace for a few minutes. Won't you come and have some tea, dear?"

"No, thanks," said William, repeating the glassy smile. "I'd better stay with her. She—she comes round easier if I'm here."

Miss Slater withdrew, closed the door and went to the morning-room. Tea was laid on a low table by the fire, and, sitting down, she poured out a cup. She felt in need of stimulant. Almost immediately the door opened and Ethel entered.

"The front door was open so I came in," she said.

"Oh, my dear," said Miss Slater, "I'm so glad to see you. I'm having a most harassing day. My sister's in bed with 'flu and Mrs. Lane and Hubert

are in the drawing-room and Mrs. Lane's just had one of those turns she evidently has."

"I didn't know she had turns," said Ethel.

"Well, migraines or seizures or whatever they are," said Miss Slater. "She's lying down on the sofa. Hubert said she'd be all right if she lay down a bit. I'll take her a cup of tea in a minute and see how she is. It's all very distracting. Do sit down and have a cup of tea yourself, my dear. How's the family?"

"I don't know," said Ethel, sitting down and taking her cup of tea. "I'm staying with the Bartons, you know, while my room's being done up. I'm just going along to visit the old home now and see how it's getting on, and the Bartons are giving a little cocktail party next Saturday and they want to know if you and your sister can come along, so I said I'd call on my way home and ask you."

"Oh, thank you, dear," said Miss Slater, "I'd love to but I don't know about my sister. She's got quite a bad attack of 'flu."

"I'm so sorry. No wonder you're feeling harassed."

"That's the least of it, my dear. You see, she'd asked Mrs. Lane and Hubert to tea to-day and this morning Mrs. Lane rang up to say that she thought Hubert was starting 'flu and they mightn't be able to come, so I told her to leave it and just come if she could. Well, she came and had this turn in the drawing-room. My dear, what an odd-looking woman she is!"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Ethel vaguely. "I've known her for so long that I never think about it, but I suppose she *is* odd-looking."

"The room was rather dark, of course," said Miss Slater, "and I'm a little short-sighted, but she seemed to me the most peculiar-looking woman I've ever seen in my life. . . . Hubert appears to be the most devoted little son."

"I shouldn't have thought so," said Ethel.

"Oh, yes, he wouldn't leave her for a minute even to come and have his tea. . . . It's just occurred to me, dear. Does she drink?"

"I've never heard that she does."

"Oh, well, I suppose I'd better go and see how she is and take her a cup of tea."

"I'll take it to her," said Ethel.

"Thank you, dear. I feel a little upset by the whole thing."

Ethel took the cup of tea and went to the drawing-room. Esmeralda still lay on the sofa, but there was no sign of William. William, hearing Ethel's

voice, had plunged behind the sofa, where he was crouching, his face already practising its expression of injured—and slightly imbecile—innocence, the words "Well, I didn't *mean* any harm," already forming on his lips. But Ethel had evidently little interest in Hubert. She drew a small table to the side of the sofa, then looked down at its shrouded occupant.

"How are you, Mrs. Lane?" she said.

Esmeralda made no answer.

"Here's a cup of tea," said Ethel. "I'm so sorry you're ill."

But there was a far-away note in her voice. Her eyes were fixed on the dragon-fly which was almost all that could be seen of the shrouded figure. Almost, but not quite. From beneath the rug a fold of grey *crêpe de Chine* protruded. Ethel's face stiffened. A glazed look came into her eyes. Like one walking in her sleep, she made her way back to the morning-room.

"How is she, dear?" said Miss Slater.

"I don't know," said Ethel. "She didn't say. I think she's gone to sleep."

"That ought to do her good," said Miss Slater. "I suppose I must go in and see her again soon."

"I'll go for you," said Ethel.

She must make sure that the sight she had just seen was reality and no nightmare. The hat, of course, had been advertised in a London paper and she'd sent for it by post. The grey material had been displayed in the window of Mallet's in Hadley marked fifteen and six a yard. Mrs. Lane must have seen the same advertisement and sent for the same hat. She must have seen the material in Mallet's and bought a dress length, as Ethel herself had done. It was difficult to believe that such things could happen in a world governed by a merciful Providence . . . but it had happened. Ethel sat, her eyes blank, her lips set, seeing, not the cheerful tea-table before her, but that hat, that grey material. . .

"You don't look too good yourself, my dear," said Miss Slater. "I hope you aren't starting 'flu."

"No, no," said Ethel wildly. "I'd almost welcome 'flu instead of—this!"

"Oh, my dear!" said Miss Slater, adding, with a sigh, "how strange everyone is to-day!"

"I'm sorry," said Ethel. "I'll just go in again now, shall I, and make sure that she's all right."

"Thank you, dear," said Miss Slater. "I'd be glad if you would. The whole thing seems to have got a bit beyond me somehow."

William, meanwhile, had not been wasting time. The gardener was returning to the greenhouse, the Outlaws were coming out of their hiding places, the coast was clear . . . Esmeralda must be removed from the scene of danger as quickly as possible. He came out from behind the sofa, removed the rug, placed Esmeralda on her feet, then—dived again into his hiding-place. He had heard footsteps approaching.

The door opened, and Ethel entered again. Esmeralda stood with her back to the door, the fall of veiling which trimmed the hat hiding her neck. The light was dim, but what Ethel could see was enough for her. Not only the hat, not only the material, but the very pattern of the dress was the one that Ethel had chosen herself. By some ghastly freak of chance, Mrs. Lane's mind and hers had had a single thought for their spring outfits. She gave a strangled cry and fled from the room.

Then William set to work. Ready hands assisted him, and soon Esmeralda was conveyed safely out of the drawing-room . . . out of the conservatory . . . into the darkening drive. So swift was the progress, so eager the helping hands that a whole row of potted freesias was swept off a shelf.

"Never mind!" said William. "We can't stay to pick them up . . . Where's the truck?"

"He took it," said Henry. "The gardener did. He found it there an' took it away, mutterin' to himself like mad. An' the sheet was in it too."

"It's jus' one horn of a dilemma after another," said Ginger.

"I told you it would get us into a muddle," said Douglas with gloomy satisfaction.

"Well, it hasn't done," said William spiritedly. "The ghost part didn't come off but that's all. Ethel didn't recognise Esmeralda or she'd have grabbed hold of it. An' it's goin' to be quite easy gettin' it back. We'll walk it."

"Walk it?" said Henry.

"Yes. It'll look jus' like a real person if we walk it. Ginger and me'll be on one side an' you two on the other an' we'll hold it up an' walk it along. It'll look as if we were goin' for a walk with a woman. No one'll know any diff'rent, an' I bet, even if Ethel's goin' home, we get there before her."

But Ethel was home first. She met Jimmy Moore at the gate and, letting down the defences of her pride, poured out her troubles to him in a flood of incoherent words. So incoherent were they, indeed, that at first Jimmy couldn't make head or tail of what she was saying. But that didn't matter. He

was on his way to see her in order to bury the hatchet, and the hatchet seemed miraculously to have buried itself.

"WAIT TILL I GET HOLD OF THE LITTLE WRETCHES," SAID ETHEL.

"Oh, Jimmy," she moaned brokenly, "it's the most awful thing that's ever happened to me in my life and she's come out in them first so I shall never dare to wear them and I've spent *pounds* and *hours* on them. She must have written to the same shop for the same hat and gone to the same shop for the same material and got the same pattern out of the same book and I shall have to go on wearing that ghastly blue thing I wore all last spring, and I simply don't know how to go on living."

"Darling, what does it matter?" said Jimmy, with a vague—a very vague —idea what it was all about. "You look lovely in anything."

"Don't be silly," said Ethel. "You know I don't. But, Jimmy——"

"Yes?"

"I feel it's a sort of judgment on me for being so beastly to you about it. I feel that, if I'd gone to the pictures with you when you asked me, instead of wanting to run up the seams, this wouldn't have happened. I'm sorry. Jimmy."

"Oh, darling!"

The scene was set for a tender reconciliation, but, instead of yielding to the arm that Jimmy was tentatively slipping round her waist, Ethel stiffened suddenly, staring at the greenhouse, her eyes wide with horror.

"It's gone," she gasped. "My dress . . . It's been stolen. Oh, I was crazy to leave it there!"

But Jimmy's eyes had wandered from the greenhouse to a more arresting spectacle.

"What on earth's that?" he said, gazing open-mouthed at a strange group that had just appeared. Esmeralda was making her erratic progress down the road, swaying drunkenly from side to side, steered and supported in uncertain fashion by two boys on either side of her. There was a silence as Ethel slowly took in the identity of Esmeralda's supporters.

"Wait till I get hold of the little wretches," she said between her teeth.

She advanced down the road to meet the procession. The procession stopped. Ethel was only the vanguard. Behind her came the foreman of the decorators, who had returned to find that someone had been making hay of his cement and had a shrewd idea who the someone was. Behind him came Mr. Brown, who had just discovered his distempered chest-of-drawers.

"Gosh!" said William, instinctively turning to retreat. But retreat was impossible. Two more figures were approaching from the opposite direction. The first was Mrs. Warwick's gardener, who had discovered the wreckage of his conservatory and had had little difficulty in tracing the culprits. Behind him came Miss Slater, fresh from a telephone conversation with Mrs. Lane, who had had no doubt at all of the identity of the pseudo-Hubert.

"Gosh!" repeated William. "Five! Five of 'em! I don't think anyone's ever got in five sep'rate rows at the same time before since the world began."

And then, with a certain sombre pride at his heart, still steering Esmeralda's drunken progress as best he could, he advanced to meet his fate. . . .

CHAPTER VII

WILLIAM AND THE FOUR-FORTY

"JUS' our luck if it's gone," panted William.

"I bet it won't have," panted Ginger. "Hi! Don't run so fast. I can't keep up with you."

"Well, don't talk so much," said William. "You oughter save your breath for runnin' same as me. I'm not talkin' all the time. I'm savin' my breath for runnin'."

"You've never stopped talkin' since we started," Ginger reminded him. "Anyway, we're nearly there now. I say! Let's pretend there's a herd of wolves after us. That oughter make us run quicker."

"I'm not scared of wolves," said William. "I bet if wolves were after us I'd jus' turn round an' kill 'em one after the other."

"You've got nothin' to kill 'em with."

"I'd strangle 'em. I've got jolly strong hands. I can unscrew tops of tins an' things what my mother can't."

"You'd find a wolf jolly diff'rent from the top of a tin. Let's pretend ole Jenks is after us, then."

"Gosh, yes!" said William, putting on a final spurt, as the vision of the large angry farmer on whose grounds they were wont to trespass presented itself to his mental gaze. "I'm a jolly sight more scared of him than I am of wolves."

The final spurt landed them in front of the windows of the Hadley junk shop and there they stood, gasping for breath, their eyes fixed on the magnificent penknife that lay between an incandescent gas bracket and a rusty birdcage with most of the bars missing.

"It's still there," said Ginger. "Gosh! It's still there. I was afraid ole Hubert Lane'd've bought it."

"An' it's still five shillin's," said William.

Every day for the past week William and Ginger had come in to Hadley to glue their noses against the window and gaze in rapture at the penknife. Although they had not five shillings between them, or, indeed, even the smallest fraction of one shilling (for various misunderstandings with the

adult members of their families had in each case led to a temporary stoppage of pocket money), they felt every day a fresh thrill of relief and excitement at seeing the penknife still holding pride of place in the centre of the window.

"We might get some money, you know," William had said hopefully only the day before.

"How?" Ginger had challenged him.

"Well . . . someone might die an' leave us some."

"Who?" Ginger had challenged him again.

"Dunno," William had said a little irritably. "People do in books. I once read a tale where a boy helped an ole man over the road an' the ole man died an' left this boy a fortune."

"Well, you've never helped anyone over a road."

"No, but I helped a poor ole lame woman on to a bus las' week."

"Yes, an' you nearly pushed her over doin' it. She was jolly mad at you."

"Well, she may've repented on her death bed for callin' me all those names an' left me a lot of money."

"She didn't look the sort of woman who'd repent even on her death bed. Anyway, we've not got any money, an' we're not likely to have."

But he was wrong. For Aunt Florence had come over to spend the night at William's home and, on her departure this morning, had given him five shillings. It had been an unexpected windfall (for Aunt Florence was the vague sort of visitor who is apt to leave everything behind her except a tip), and for that reason doubly welcome. Immediately on receiving it, William had collected Ginger, and the two had set off at a breakneck pace into Hadley. Habit was so strong that, though the five shillings now reposed safely in William's pocket, they stood for a few minutes, as usual, gazing at the treasure through the window.

"Four blades!" murmured William ecstatically.

"An' a corkscrew!" said Ginger.

"An' a thing for takin' stones out of a horse's hoof," said William.

"That's not much good without a horse," said Ginger.

In William's eyes, however, that particular gadget was the high light of the whole thing.

"You never know when you'll get a horse," he said, "an' you never know when it'll get a stone in its hoof. I bet that thing might save our lives

some day. . . . Anyway, I wish you'd stop breathin' on the glass. I can't see it prop'ly."

"We'll get a good laugh over ole Hubert," said Ginger, removing his breath to another part of the window-pane. "He's been crowin' over us all week an' sayin' he was goin' to buy it an' he won't have a chance now."

They stood for a few more moments gazing at the treasure and suddenly became aware that another boy had joined them.

"Hello," said the fat slow voice of Hubert Lane. "Comin' to do your spot of daily sight-seeing?"

"Yes," said William triumphantly, "an' we're goin' to do more than sight seein' to-day. We're going to buy it."

Hubert's jaw dropped. From the day the penknife appeared in the shop window, he had intended to buy it—for no other reason than that he was aware the Outlaws coveted it. But he knew that they had no money and no immediate prospect of any, and he had not been in any particular hurry to make the purchase. All he had to do was to ask his mother for five shillings, and his mother had never yet been known to refuse him anything. He was unprepared for this sudden development and had come out without his purse.

"No, you're not," he said. "I am," and, before they realised what he was doing, he had opened the door and plunged into the shop.

"I want that penknife," he said to the shopkeeper.

William and Ginger followed breathlessly, pouring out incoherent entreaties and explanations.

"Can't help that," said the man shortly. "First come, first served."

"Thanks," said Hubert, grinning maliciously. "Just keep it five minutes while I run home for the money, will you?"

"Now that's a different tale," said the man. "You was in first, so you gets the knife, if you've got the money. If not, it goes to these other lads."

And, in spite of Hubert's protests, he handed the knife over to William in return for Aunt Florence's five shillings.

The three went out together. Hubert's face wore an angry scowl, the faces of William and Ginger exultant grins. William, unwisely, began to perform a dance of triumph on the pavement, in the middle of which Hubert's foot shot out, and William, his dance coming to an untimely end, fell headlong into the gutter. When he picked himself up, Hubert was a dot upon the horizon.

“All right,” said William, brushing himself down with a few perfunctory gestures. “All right. I’ll get even with ole Hubert for that. . . . Anyway, it’s a jolly fine penknife, isn’t it?”

They spent a few minutes examining it and testing the blades, then William, with the air of one performing a difficult and intricate operation, took several imaginary stones out of the imaginary hoof of an imaginary horse.

“I bet it’s quite easy to do,” he said, “an’ it’ll be jolly useful if ever we get a horse.” He shut up the penknife and put it in his pocket. “Come on. Let’s go to the railway track.”

For the Outlaws had now forsaken their one-time passion, aeroplanes. Be the sky never so full of planes, they would not look up; nor would they even discuss whether it was a Lancaster Mark II or a Liberator Mark I. They had turned to an earlier delight. They had gone back to trains. Not only the different engines but everything connected with railways fascinated them—signals, signal boxes, sidings, tracks, ballast, points—anything as long as it had to do with trains.

Happy in the possession of the penknife, discussing both it and trains with an impartiality that might have confused anyone but themselves, they wandered on towards the track.

“Four’s jolly good,” said Ginger. “War-time ones only had two, even when you could get ’em. . . . Did you know that, when the automatic brakes go on, the brakes couplings don’t bang together? There’s something to stop ’em.”

“ ’Course I know,” said William. “I’ve known that for years an’ *years*. It’s somethin’ to do with air. An’ the corkscrew might come in jolly useful. S’pose we were shipwrecked. . . . We could open coco-nuts with it. It’d be a useful weapon against wild animals, too.”

“We’d have to get jolly close to ’em to do anythin’ to ’em with it, an’ I bet they’d have done somethin’ to us first. . . . Did you know those things on the wheels are called flanges?”

“ ’Course I did! The points turn ’em to go in the right direction. . . . We could open tins with it, too. We might have tins of provisions that we’d brought from the ship on a raft an’ we could pierce ’em open with this corkscrew. It’d be jolly useful.”

They were passing a coal cart and horse, drawn up by the kerb, with no one in attendance. William threw a speculative glance over the animal.

"It looks to me as if it had a stone in its hoof," he said. "Bet I'll soon get it out. . . ."

"It'll kick you," Ginger warned him.

"Bet it won't."

He bent down and put his hand cautiously on the great hoof . . . to be seized and flung several yards away by a black-faced giant, who appeared suddenly and without warning in his rear.

"I'll 'ave the p'lice on you," he bellowed. "Monkeyin' about like that. Oughter be ashamed of yourself."

"But listen," said William, picking himself up from the pavement for the second time that morning. "Listen. I only——"

Then he decided that the black-faced giant, now advancing slowly and threateningly upon him, was the type of man upon whom reason would be wasted, so, with a "Come on, Ginger," he ran down the nearest corner, doubled round another corner and did not stop for breath till they had reached the outskirts of the town.

"Gosh!" he panted. "I bet we only jus' escaped with our lives. He's a murderer all right. Bet he's part of this crime wave that's in the newspapers. If I'd not been jolly quick he'd've got me all right an' he'd've jus' shoved my body into one of his ole sacks. I bet all those sacks on the cart were full of bodies he's murdered same as he tried to murder me. I bet that's why he got so mad at me for goin' close up, 'cause he thought I'd find out about it."

"I could see coal in most of 'em," said Ginger mildly.

"He could easy put a bit of coal on top of each," said William but without much conviction. "Oh, well"—reluctantly abandoning his theory —"whether he's a murderer or not, he's a jolly nasty-tempered man. Serve him right if he gets stuck in some wild moorland place miles from anywhere an' can't get on, 'cause of that stone in his horse's hoof. I wouldn't take it out for him now—not if he asked me to."

"There aren't any wild moorland places round here," objected Ginger.

"Oh, shut up talkin' about him," said William. "I'm sick of him. You would be too, if he'd half-murdered you same as he did me. . . . Come on! Let's go to the railway."

They reached the railway track and stood looking about them. A closely-wired fence ran on either side, but the Outlaws were experts in manipulating fences.

"No one can see us, can they?" said William.

“There’s that woman with a dog comin’ along the embankment,” said Ginger. “Let’s wait till she’s gone.”

They stood staring with fixed blank faces at the far horizon as a tall upright woman with a hatchet face and grey hair approached them. Behind her waddled a small rotund Pekinese, who had evidently suffered little personal inconvenience from the world food shortage. The woman passed them without looking at them. The Pekinese paused for a moment to give them a fleeting glance of fastidious disdain. “Come on, Ching-Wo,” called the woman, and Ching-Wo waddled off after his mistress.

William and Ginger stood gazing after them.

“That’s ole Miss Surley,” said Ginger. “She’s a high-up writer an’ she’s come to Denwood to write a book an’ she won’t have anythin’ to do with the people what live round here. I heard my mother talkin’ about her.”

“I know all about her, too,” said William. “She’s got a niece stayin’ with her called Sally an’ Robert met her at the tennis club an’ fell in love with her. He says she’s the most beautiful girl he’s ever met.”

“He’s always sayin’ that,” said Ginger.

“Yes, he sort of can’t help it,” said William, who viewed the foibles of an over-susceptible elder brother with indulgence tempered by regret. “But axshully this one isn’t bad. Only, of course, with her aunt not wantin’ to have anythin’ to do with people, he can’t see much of her, so it makes him write po’try an’ get bad tempered. . . . Oh, come on,” dismissing the vagaries of an incomprehensible grown-up world, “let’s go down to the railway. She’s gone on now, an’ there’s no one about.”

They scrambled through the wire fence and down the embankment to the track. There they wandered happily along, keeping a wary eye open for any railway official. The horizon remained empty, however, except for the figures of Miss Surley and Ching-Wo. Suddenly William stopped.

“Gosh! What’s that red thing?” He stooped to pick it up. “It’s a red flag. A red flag an’ a handle. Someone mus’ have dropped it. Crumbs! We’re jolly lucky to have found it.”

“We can’t jus’ take it,” said Ginger.

“No, but we can carry it about a bit an’ then put it back where we found it,” said William. “There’s no harm in that. I’ll have the flag an’ you have the penknife and then we’ll swop an’ you have the flag an’ I’ll have the penknife.”

“All right,” agreed Ginger.

They walked on down the track. William waved the flag and Ginger brandished the penknife, then Ginger waved the flag and William brandished the penknife. They stopped imaginary trains with the flag. They did imaginary repairs to the track with the penknife. They discussed the intricacies of the railway system, each parading his knowledge shamelessly.

"There's a space left between the lengths of rails for 'spansion. I bet you didn't know that."

"I bet I've known that all my life."

"Pity it's only a single line. Did you know that on a single line the driver's always gotter carry a stick that there's only one of, so's there can't be a collision?"

"I bet I knew that before I could walk."

"I bet you didn't."

"I bet I did."

They had reached some points where a side line joined the main line.

"That goes to Dene quarry," said William. "It ends right up in the quarry, 'cause I've been there."

"I know it does," said Ginger. "I've been there too."

"I wish a train would come along."

"If you knew anythin' about trains at all," said Ginger crushingly, "you'd know that the four-forty's due any minute now."

"I bet I knew about that before you did."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

"Yes, I did."

William gave a sudden gasp.

"I *say*!"

"What's the matter?" said Ginger, but his eyes had followed William's and he, too, stared horrified at the points.

"Gosh!" he said. "They're set to go to the quarry."

"Yes," said William, "an' the passenger train'll be here any minute."

"B-but—crumbs! They mus' know what they're doin'."

"Oh, must they?" said William. "What about all those accidents there've been in the newspapers, all done by carelessness, same as this?"

"P'raps they want it to go to the quarry."

"Don't be silly. The four-forty's a passenger train an' it goes to Marleigh. They don't send passenger trains to the quarry."

"Well, they'll send this one with the points set like they are now."

"Yes, they'll all hurtle over to their deaths like they did in that picture we saw last week."

"*Gosh!* An' we can't do anythin' to stop it."

"Yes, we can. We can wave the red flag at it."

The idea was so staggering that for a few moments Ginger was deprived of the power of speech.

"We—we wouldn't dare," he stammered at last, "an' if we did I bet they wouldn't take any notice . . . I say! *Look!* There it is! You can see the smoke."

"Come on, then," said William.

They turned to give one last look at the points, still set to send the four-forty hurtling to its doom, then ran off down the line towards the distant plume of smoke. So intent were they on preventing the tragedy that they did not see the signals go up to give the train right of way or hear the click as the points behind them shifted.

They ran on, stumbling over ballast and sleepers. Suddenly the train was in sight . . . was almost upon them. Frantically William waved his flag. The train passed them, passed the points, still safely on the main line, then screamed to a stop. Heads craned from every window, the engine-driver leaned out from his cab, the guard climbed down from his van. Neither William nor Ginger hesitated for a second. There was only one thing to be done and they did it. They dashed up the embankment, through the fence, and disappeared in the direction of the woods, too much engrossed in their flight to notice Hubert Lane standing on the embankment path, staring at them open-mouthed. The guard started after them but soon gave it up. The train could not be kept waiting, the embankment was steep, the boys were nimble. He returned to the train and went along the line to the engine-driver.

WILLIAM AND GINGER DASHED UP THE EMBANKMENT.

"Nothing wrong, mate, is there?" he said.

The engine-driver, a large, hairy, philosophic man, spat on to the line.

"Naw," he said. "Boys at their tricks again, that's all it were. Knew it soon as I seed 'em with that flag, but you've gotter be on the safe side, like. If they was mine, I'd tan them good an' proper."

The guard returned to his van, fuming. He reported the incident to the station-master as soon as he reached the station, the station-master reported it to the police, the police told Sergeant Jones to see that a sharper watch was kept on the railway line in future, and Sergeant Jones said—to his cronies and with many verbal embellishments—that if he had to guard the

railway line as well as make his normal beats he might as well go into a mental home straight away.

And that, as far as the railway was concerned, was the end.

But for William it was only the beginning.

William and Ginger did not stop to draw breath till they reached the refuge of the old barn. There they stood and stared at each other, their faces red with exertion and dismay.

"The points had moved by the time it got there," panted William. "Did you see?"

"Yes," panted Ginger and added, "crumbs! We've done it now."

"Yes, we've done it now," said William grimly. "I bet they're searchin' the countryside for us. They'll have bloodhounds out before long, I shouldn't wonder."

"Will we be sent to prison?" said Ginger.

" 'Course we will, if they catch us," said William.

William had often enough said with airy nonchalance that he would not mind being sent to prison, but, now that the prospect seemed imminent, it brought a strange hollow feeling to the pit of his stomach.

"For how long?" said Ginger in a small voice.

"Ten years, I should think," said William.

"Gosh!" said Ginger, aghast. "We'll be over twenty when we come out. It'll be time to start lookin' for jobs."

"No one'll give us any jobs," said William. "We'll be branded as crim'nals for the rest of our lives."

"We'll jus' have to starve, then," said Ginger.

William said nothing. His spirit was weighed down by a load of guilt such as it had never known before. To a boy there is no mitigation in connection with the major offences. A murderer is a murderer, a thief a thief, a train-stopper a train-stopper. Actually he confused the incident with a picture he had once seen, in which desperadoes had held up a train and had been pursued by the sheriff and his men through several reels of magnificent Wild West scenery before they were finally brought to bay and shot out of hand. Anyway, he now considered himself a criminal, hunted and apart, an outcast from respectable society, living in the world that appeared in flaming newspaper headlines, "Crime on the Increase" or "What are the Police

Doing?" Already, he had no doubt, the machinery of Scotland Yard was being set in motion. Already keen-eyed, aquiline-nosed men, with little bags containing the paraphernalia of their trade—microscopes, rulers, finger-print powders—were on their way to the scene of the crime.

"What'll we do?" said Ginger apprehensively. "Shall we run away?"

"That wouldn't be any good," said William. "They've prob'ly got cordons round us by now."

"Well, I'm gettin' jolly hungry," said Ginger. "If we can't run away, shall we have to hide up in the woods eatin' berries? All the berries I've ever tried eatin' tasted rotten 'cept blackberries an' there aren't any blackberries out now."

William considered the situation. It was growing dark and a little chilly. The pangs of hunger were already making themselves felt. The thought of home and tea drew him irresistibly.

"No," he said. "It'll only rouse suspicions if we don't go home. We'd better go home an' carry on as if nothin' had happened."

"I hope we're in the same cell if they put us in prison," said Ginger.

William laughed mirthlessly.

"They put you in cells all by yourself in prison," he said. "An' everythin's got arrows all over it—cups an' saucers an' sheets an' table-cloths an' everythin'."

"Why?" said Ginger.

"Dunno . . . S'pose they started it in the days when the army fought with bows an' arrows an' they haven't used the stuff up yet. Anyway, I'm jolly hungry, too. Let's go home."

When William returned home, he found only Mrs. Brown and Robert at tea. Ethel was away, staying with a friend, and Mr. Brown had not yet returned from the office. It was one of William's fondest delusions that, by being quiet and unobtrusive and extremely polite, he would divert all attention from himself. It had, of course, the opposite effect. . . . To-day Robert was holding forth with such eloquence and animation that Mrs. Brown would not have noticed William at all if he had not refused a second piece of cake and passed the sugar to Robert without being asked. As it was, she threw him several glances of puzzled concern.

"Yes, she's invited me to tea on Saturday," Robert was saying bitterly. "After refusing to know anyone all these weeks, she's invited me to tea on Saturday."

"Well, that's very nice for you, dear, isn't it?" said Mrs. Brown, thinking that she must remember to give William a dose before he went to bed. He was looking, for him, almost pale.

Robert laughed harshly.

"Oh, it would be," he said. "It would be marvellous. Sally's the most wonderful girl I've ever met. It would make a difference to my whole life's happiness, if——"

"If what, dear?" said Mrs. Brown. "Are you feeling quite well, William?"

William turned on her the glassy and slightly imbecile stare with which he was wont to try to hide an uneasy conscience.

"Yes, thank you, mother," he said, then, thinking that some acute and, if possible, incurable disease might save him from the clutches of the law, added: "At least, no, I'm not. I'm feeling jolly ill. I've got an awful pain in my back and in my stomach an' "—he paused for a moment, decided that it would be foolish to risk omitting any convincing illness by understatement, and went on—"an' in my legs an' in both my arms an'—an' in my head." He paused again and added simply, "I've got toothache too."

"*William!*" said Mrs. Brown incredulously.

"Yes, you tried that on last week, when you wanted to get out of doing your Latin homework, didn't you?" said Robert with the indifference to the sufferings of the young that is characteristic of elder brothers. "Well, it didn't work then, and it won't work now. As an artist, you know, you overload your canvas. A little restraint would make the picture much more effective."

"Dunno what you're talkin' about," muttered William. "I've not been to the pictures. Not for over a week. An' I don't see what canvassin's got to do with it. There isn't an election on. An' let me tell you——"

"That's enough, William," said Mrs. Brown. "I'm sorry I interrupted you, Robert dear. You were telling me about Miss Surley's inviting you to tea and saying that it would be wonderful if . . . ?"

"Oh, yes," said Robert, resuming his expression of bitterness. "It would be wonderful if she hadn't invited William too. *William*, of all people! 'Please bring your little brother,' she said. My whole future happiness may depend on the impression I make on her, and I'm to take William with me!"

"Well, what's wrong with me?" said William in honest bewilderment.

Robert snorted sardonically.

"You needn't take him, you know, if you feel like that," said Mrs. Brown. "We can always say he has his homework to do."

"But I want to go," protested William. It had occurred to him that if he were at Miss Surley's, he might, by one of those threads of chance on which the fate of criminals so often depends, avoid being arrested in his own home and thus enabled—he wasn't quite sure how—to escape justice altogether. "I don't see why I shouldn't go. I've been *asked*. People don't often ask me to tea (again Robert snorted sardonically), an' when they do, I don't see why I shouldn't go."

"Oh, he'll have to go," said Robert with a bitter laugh. "It's all fixed up. And she's asked Mrs. Lane and Hubert so that William will have another little boy to keep him company. It's going to be nice for me and Sally in that mob, isn't it!"

"Hubert Lane!" said William in disgust. "Fancy anyone askin' Hubert Lane to tea!"

"I'd a darn sight sooner have Hubert Lane to tea than you," said Robert. "He doesn't eat like something out of the Zoo."

"No, he eats like something in it," said William, and was so delighted at his own wit that a bland smile overspread his countenance and the heavy weight lifted itself for a moment from his spirit. But only for a moment. Almost immediately Mr. Brown arrived, and the heavy weight fastened itself upon William's spirit once more.

Apprehensively he watched his father sit down to tea, expecting every second to hear him launch into a description of the horrible crime that had been committed in the neighbourhood. Mr. Brown, however, launched into nothing but a description of the generally unsatisfactory nature of the train service from town. Then the evening paper came, and, as Mr. Brown opened it, William was again aware of the hollow feeling at the pit of his stomach. He waited with stony resignation for his father's outburst of horror. His father read on, silent and, to all appearance, unmoved.

William moistened his lips.

"Is there—is there anythin' about crime in the paper, father?" he said in a hoarse voice.

"What d'you mean, anything about crime?" said Mr. Brown shortly.

"I mean, have any—any speshul crimes been c'mitted to-day?"

"No," said Mr. Brown, "and you shouldn't let your mind dwell on such things. Very unhealthy. Comes of going to the pictures so much."

"I've not been to the pictures, not for over a week," protested William. "Are you sure—are you sure there's nothin' speshul? I mean—I mean, there isn't any—any train hold-ups, is there?"

"Of course not," said Mr. Brown testily. "Why should there be? What on earth's the matter with you?"

"It's only that I'm jus' sort of—sort of *int'rested* in crime jus' now," said William desperately. "I don't mean that I've—that I'm—I mean, I haven't—what I mean is, I'm jus' int'rested in crime same as you might be."

"Well, I'm not interested in crime," said Mr. Brown, "and, if you gave your mind to your school work instead of lurid rubbish like this, you might get better reports."

"Yes, but listen," said William. "That Latin report wasn't fair. It said ____"

"Go and do your homework, William," said Mrs. Brown, seeing that her husband's exasperation with his younger son was reaching boiling point.

Mr. Brown returned to the City Prices with a grunt, and William sat down to do a Latin exercise that, the Latin master said the next day, would have driven him to drink if there'd been any drink to drive him to. As William sat there, sprawled over the writing table, his brows drawn into a frown, his tongue protruding from his lips (as it always did in moments of mental stress), guiding a pen that rained a gentle but unceasing shower of blots upon a handwriting aptly described in his report as "execrable," magnificently ignoring the rules of grammar, putting a nominative where there should have been an accusative, a genitive where there should have been an ablative, an infinitive where there should have been a future . . . his mind was busy over his immediate problem.

Evidently Scotland Yard had not yet released the details of the crime to the public. They were keeping them secret, he supposed, in order to throw him and Ginger off their guard. He had read stories in which that happened. Even now, probably, the keen-eyed, aquiline-nosed men were on the scene of the crime, busy with torches and microscopes, examining the railway line, the points, the—— Suddenly he remembered the flag, and his blood froze with horror. He had thrown it down anyhow after he had stopped the train with it. It would have his finger-prints on it, and Ginger's . . . *Gosh!* His pen, seeming to share his agitation, deposited six blots in a wide circle and translated "The Queen ruled" by "Mensam amabas."

He finished his homework and went to bed early. It would be too much to say that he passed a sleepless night, but he awoke at two o'clock and got

out of bed to look through the window. It was bright moonlight, and he was relieved to see the garden empty of bloodhounds and detectives. . . .

His feeling of guilt had not lessened by the morning, and his heart almost stopped beating when he saw his father open the morning paper. His eyes glued themselves to his porridge as he waited breathlessly for the outcry, "Good Heavens! Two boys held up the four-forty yesterday. Such things won't be tolerated in England." But his father merely made a few caustic references to the government, the weather and the state of the stock exchange, then folded up his paper, collected his things and set off as usual to catch his train. Scotland Yard were keeping jolly quiet, thought William. They'd probably been working on it all night. They'd probably got their bags filled with clues by now. . . .

He was putting together his school books in the hall when there came a loud double knock at the front door. Looking round desperately for escape, he plunged into the cupboard under the stairs where the brooms and brushes were kept. The postman's voice, apologising for having forgotten to bring a packet with the early post, reassured him, and he emerged, pale and dishevelled, to meet his mother's astonished gaze.

"What on earth are you doing in there, William?" she said.

William cleared his throat.

"Well, I—er—I jus' sort of thought I'd—er—jus' sort of tidy it up a bit. I thought it looked a bit sort of untidy."

Mrs. Brown gazed at him helplessly.

"What *do* you mean, William?" she said. "It's perfectly tidy, and, in any case, why ever——" She dismissed the problem with a shrug and looked at the clock. "Now do hurry up or you'll be late."

William, remembering the sketchy nature of his homework, wondered whether to plead illness again, then decided that school might at any rate put off his arrest for a few hours (the detectives would be sure to go to his home first) and provide a good starting point, by way of the playing fields, for a flight from justice that might take him all over the inhabited world and last for the rest of his life.

He pulled his cap low over his eyes, turned up his coat collar, hunched up his shoulders, and went down to the front gate, where he stood for a moment, looking up and down the road. No one was in sight. Slowly and cautiously he set out. . . . The sudden emergence of a figure from a side lane

set his pulses racing, but almost immediately he realised that it was Hubert Lane, and his pulses returned to normal. Rather to his surprise, Hubert seemed to be waiting for him. Oppressed by a crushing weight of guilt, haunted by fear of the law, expecting every moment to hear the distant baying of bloodhounds, William was not as yet so lost to a sense of his immediate surroundings as to forget that he owed Hubert one for tripping him up yesterday. He advanced upon him with the obvious intention of squaring their accounts. To his further surprise, Hubert did not turn to flight. Instead, he stood his ground, fixed William with a small malicious eye and said in his silkiest voice:

"Hello. . . . Been holding up any more trains lately?"

William paled. His jaw dropped open. For a few moments he stared at Hubert in speechless dismay, then he rallied his forces as best he could.

"Dunno what you mean," he said.

"Don't you?" sneered Hubert. "Fancy that! Fancy you not knowing what I mean! Oh, no, it wasn't you that held up that train yesterday, was it? Fancy me thinking it was you!"

William opened and shut his mouth soundlessly.

"Well, I'm going to the police about it," went on Hubert. "I think it's my duty to go to the police. I'll tell them I saw two boys just like you and Ginger holding up that train yesterday afternoon. It'll be all right, you know. All you have to do is to prove your alibi, if it wasn't you."

William blinked.

"I—I wouldn't do that if I was you, Hubert," he said hoarsely. "I mean—I mean, they're jolly busy, the p'lice. I—I don't think it's fair to waste their time on a little thing like that."

"I thought that was what they were there for," said Hubert, taking a cat-like delight in playing with his victim. "I thought they were there for catchin' criminals and puttin' them in prison."

William moistened his dry lips.

"There've been a lot of burglaries about lately, Hubert," he said, "an' I think they're too busy over them to bother about anythin' else just' now."

"P'raps," said Hubert. "But they could put it down on the waitin' list. I 'spect they'd soon work down to it. Say, in a week."

"I wouldn't, Hubert," said William. "Honest, I wouldn't if I was you. They—they might think you did it, you know."

“Oh, no, they wouldn’t,” sniggered Hubert. “The guard saw those boys, you know. He’d recognise ’em all right.”

William stood, his face set and frozen, staring in front of him. Hubert judged that the moment had come to draw the net more closely round the victim.

“Got that penknife on you?” he said casually.

“Yes.”

“Well, let me have it, will you? I’ve got several things I want to do with it an’ they’ll prob’ly keep me so busy I won’t have time to go to the police.”

William hesitated a moment, then slowly, reluctantly drew out the knife. Hubert pocketed it and swaggered off, whistling carelessly to himself.

It was William’s first experience of blackmail, but it was not to be his last. The next day Hubert demanded his mouth organ, and the next his water pistol. William handed them over, but he was not cast by nature for the rôle of worm and on the third day he turned. Hubert, complacently demanding his pencil sharpener, received instead a swipe in the eye that sent the enterprising youth rolling into the ditch and deprived him for some moments of the power of vision. He picked himself up and ran off, howling, but secretly he was not ill-pleased. He had not really wanted any of William’s possessions except the knife (for his parents indulged his every wish) but as long as William went on giving he felt he had to go on asking. He was tired of blackmailing. He felt that he would now get a far greater kick out of exposing William. He decided, however, not to report the incident to the police. The police would go to Mr. Brown and the whole thing might be hushed up. No, William must be exposed in public where no hushing up was possible. His howls died away, as he began to plan his campaign, and a slow smile overspread his fat, tear-stained face.

HUBERT RECEIVED A SWIPE IN THE EYE THAT SENT HIM ROLLING INTO THE DITCH.

So occupied had William been by his own misfortunes that he had completely forgotten Miss Surley's invitation till lunch-time on Saturday when his mother said: "Now, William, don't go far away this afternoon. Remember that you're going to tea to Miss Surley's with Robert."

William stared at her aghast.

"What," he said, "goin' out to tea with that ole woman? *An'* with Robert?"

"As I said before," said Robert grimly, "I shall be only too glad to dispense with your company. It's an occasion on which my whole future happiness may depend, and I've never yet known you go to tea anywhere without displaying the table manners of a hog and the tact of a rhinoceros."

This touched Mrs. Brown's maternal pride, and she rallied to the defence of her younger son.

"Oh, he's not as bad as that, Robert," she said. "He can behave quite well when he likes."

For answer Robert did his sardonic snort.

"You said you wanted to go, William," went on Mrs. Brown.

"Yes, I do," said William, remembering that a visit to Miss Surley had seemed to offer a temporary respite from the doom that overshadowed him.

“An’ anyway there’ll prob’ly be a decent tea. It’s ages since I had a decent tea.”

Robert did his sardonic snort again.

“Why shouldn’t I go, same as you?” said William indignantly. “I’ve gotter right. I’ve been *asked*.”

“Yes, dear,” said Mrs. Brown, “there’s no reason at all why you shouldn’t go if you want to. I’m sure you’ll try to behave like a little gentleman, won’t you?”

Robert’s snort at this seemed to shake the house to it foundations.

Robert had arranged to attend a meeting of the cricket club in the village hall that afternoon and to go straight to Miss Surley’s from there, so William would have to make his way to the tea-party alone. With only perfunctory protests he endured a strenuous half-hour’s restoration process at the hands of his mother, emerging from it so clean and tidy, so immaculately suited and stockinged and shoed as to be almost unrecognisable. His burnished hair shone, his burnished face shone, even his burnished knees shone. His gartered stockings were creaseless, his shoe laces tied in neat bows.

Mrs. Brown saw him off at the front door, smiling proudly.

“You *do* look nice, dear,” she said. “Now you’ve plenty of time, so there’s no need to hurry.”

Mrs. Brown, of course, was anxious that he should not arrive at his destination hot and sticky, but it was always a mistake to tell William that he had plenty of time.

He walked slowly and decorously down the lane into the main road, resisting even the temptation to investigate a movement in the ditch that might have been made by a water rat. His face wore the blank expression that went with his best suit. His lack-lustre eyes scanned the horizon . . . then brightened suddenly. Round the ricks in the further corner of Three Acre Meadow he could see a crowd of men and boys and dogs. A rat hunt was evidently in progress. William stopped to consider the situation. His mother had said that he had plenty of time. There could be no harm in his just watching the rat hunt for a few minutes. He climbed the stile and set off at a run across the field.

Miss Surley was not looking forward to her tea-party. A well-known literary figure, she had taken Denwood in order to have quiet and seclusion for working on her new book, not in order to join in the social life of the

village. In fact, she had made it clear from the outset that she did not intend to join in the social life of the village. She had asked her niece Sally to stay with her in the hope that she would act as her unofficial secretary and spare her the rude shocks and buffets of life by dealing with servants and tradespeople, turning away callers, and generally ensuring for her aunt the quiet and seclusion she needed.

But Sally, who was young and pretty, had other ideas. . . . She had managed to join the local tennis club, where a local youth, called Robert Brown, had become enamoured of her. As he was, Miss Surley gathered, the most personable youth in the place, Sally had, as a matter of course, become enamoured of him in return. The situation irked and irritated Miss Surley, but she could not ignore it. If Sally was going about with this local youth—and she evidently was—Miss Surley must do her duty and ask him to the house. She would ask him, she told Sally, on condition that other people were asked too, so that she, Miss Surley, might be spared the irksome task of playing chaperone. Had he a sister? Yes, but she was away from home. Had he a brother? Yes, Sally seemed to remember that he had once mentioned a young brother and then had hastily changed the subject. The young brother must come, decreed Miss Surley. And who was that tiresome woman who had called on her, though she had been careful to let everyone know that she did not wish to receive callers? Mrs. Lane, that was it. She had a small boy. They must both come. That would fulfil Miss Surley's social obligation to the tiresome woman and give the local youth's young brother a companion.

So the tea-party was arranged, and Miss Surley decided that it should be the last. She meant to freeze off the tiresome woman and the local youth so effectually that thereafter she would be left in peace.

Robert, Mrs. Lane and Hubert arrived on the stroke of four. Of William there was no sign. Robert noted this fact with mingled relief and apprehension—relief at the thought of a few minutes' respite from William's forceful personality, apprehension as to what might be delaying it.

Sally, sitting behind the tea-table, ready to pour out tea, looked adorable. Miss Surley, sitting very upright in a wing chair, managed somehow to convey the idea that she considered herself alone in the room. Mrs. Lane and Hubert, sitting side by side on the settee, smiled smugly around them. Ching-Wo, dozing on his cushion by the fire, emitted deep rhythmic snores. Robert had taken the seat next Miss Surley and, his lips fixed in a frozen smile, was trying to make a good impression on her. It was uphill work. He talked brightly of the weather, enquired solicitously after her health, and was

met by a frigidity that would have silenced anyone but a rash and infatuated youth. Sally watched nervously from behind the tea-table. . . .

Then William arrived. . . . He had realised in the middle of the rat hunt that it was after four, and, tearing himself away from the entrancing scene, had run all the way to Denwood. He still considered that he had merely watched the rat hunt, but his face and hands were black, his hair stood up in wild disorder, mud covered his shoes and clung to his bunched stockings, for he had taken off his garters to use as catapults in one of the tensest moments of the chase.

He stood for a moment or two on the doorstep, collecting his forces, then he rang the bell, gave his name and was announced by the maid, who continued to gaze at him in a fascinated manner before she finally departed. Miss Surley shook hands with him rather gingerly, noticing with the restraint of the well-bred that clumps of moist black mud were dropping from his shoes on to her Persian carpet and that ample reserves still remained in the folds of his stockings. Robert's face was a mask of horror. . . . William, happily unaware that any change had taken place in his appearance since he left his mother's hands, muttered, "How d'you do" to Miss Surley, then sat down, placing a grimy hand on each grimy knee and gazing around with that scowling intensity that marked his company manners. Robert should have nothing to complain of *this* time, he was thinking. . . .

The maid brought in tea, returning later with brush and pan in order unobtrusively to remove the more impressive mementoes of the rat hunt. A silence fell over the gathering, broken by faint titters from Hubert Lane. Robert had given up his attempt to make a good impression on his hostess. He sat, stunned and silent, amid the ruins of his life's happiness. William, still unconscious of having given any cause for complaint, sat munching chocolate cake, ignoring his fellow guests and adding an upper crust of crumbs to the mud around his feet.

Hubert, prompted by his mother, began to tell of his successes at school, repeating the more gratifying comments from his half-term report.

Suddenly Miss Surley felt that she had had as much as she could stand.

"If you'll excuse me," she said rising, "I have some letters I must write. Sally will entertain you."

Hubert drew a deep breath. He saw that he had delayed almost too long. There was not a moment to be lost.

"Oh, mother," he said, "I've got something to tell you. Something dreadful."

All eyes were turned to him. William's jaw ceased its steady rhythmic munching. Only Robert, still sitting stunned amid the ruins of his life's happiness, showed no signs of interest.

"What is it, my darling?" said Mrs. Lane.

"It's about William Brown."

William swallowed a mouthful of chocolate cake unmasticated and hastily assumed the expression of vacancy with which he was wont to meet the major crises of his life.

"Hush, dear," said Mrs. Lane. "You mustn't tell tales."

"But I *must* tell you, mother. It's worrying me so . . . William and Ginger stopped the four-forty train on Tuesday afternoon and then ran away. I don't want William to be punished, but I think the police ought to be told who did it."

"HUSH, DEAR," SAID MRS. LANE. "YOU MUSTN'T TELL TALES."

There was a tense silence. Even Robert emerged from his ruins to glare first at Hubert, then at William. Every face was transfixed by amazement—except Miss Surley's. For the first time that afternoon Miss Surley's face showed animation, even pleasure. She advanced towards William with hands outstretched.

"So *you're* the brave boy who stopped the train that afternoon when my little Ching-Wo got on to the line?"

William stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"You saved his life, my dear boy. Another minute and the train would have been over him. I wanted to thank you then and there, but you vanished as soon as your brave deed was performed."

“But he stopped a train,” protested Hubert in a voice of anguish. “He ought to be put in prison.”

Miss Surley gave him an acid look.

“I thought you didn’t want him punished,” she said.

Hubert’s face had turned a rich shade of purple.

“You shut up!” he shouted.

“Hubert, darling!” his mother admonished him.

But Hubert was beyond restraint. His great hour had come and was covering William, not himself, with glory. He burst into noisy tears.

“We’d better go,” said Mrs. Lane, rising hurriedly. “He’s very highly strung, you know. Thank you for a delightful tea-party, Miss Surley.”

She drew Hubert, still howling, from the room. Outside, they saw him kicking her legs.

“What a sweet child!” said Miss Surley. Her frigidity had vanished like snow in sunshine. “You’ll stay to supper, won’t you, Robert? I shall be too busy to entertain you, I’m afraid, but Sally will look after you. Perhaps she’ll take you into the garden now and show you the outdoor study I’m having made. I’m sure you’ll find it interesting.”

Robert and Sally beamed at each other. . . . Miraculously, incredibly, the ruins of Robert’s life’s happiness were building themselves up into quite a promising edifice. They went through the french windows into the garden, so much engrossed in each other that they passed the outdoor study without even seeing it.

William, left alone with his hostess, stared first at his feet, then at the wall in front of him, then at his feet again. His face slowly darkened to brick red.

“I—I didn’t see your dog,” he blurted out at last.

Miss Surley looked at him, and the hatchet countenance softened into what was almost a grin.

“Actually I wasn’t sure that you had done,” she said, “but I *did* dislike that Lane boy so much. And the fact remains that you saved Ching-Wo’s life. Have another piece of chocolate cake.”

Gratefully William plunged at the cake-stand.

“Ching-Wo,” said Miss Surley, “thank this kind boy for saving your life.”

Ching-Wo broke off a snore mid-way to lift his silky head from its cushion, gave William a glance of ineffable contempt, then let it fall back again and continued his snore.

CHAPTER VIII

CATS AND WHITE ELEPHANTS

"I MET MISS MILTON in the village this morning," said Mrs. Brown. "She's having a White Elephant Sale, and she could talk of nothing else."

"*Not* another White Elephant Sale!" said Ethel.

"These White Elephant Sales of Miss Milton's are approaching a national calamity," said Mr. Brown.

"Oh, I don't know," said Robert. "I don't think she's had one for at least ten days."

The Browns were at lunch, interspersing desultory conversation about local affairs with comments on William's table manners—comments that were so usual a part of any conversation at meals that they came as naturally as the act of drawing breath.

"I wonder there's a White Elephant left in the place," said Ethel.

"Yes, the breed must be almost exterminated by now," agreed Mr. Brown.

"William, *must* you drink like that?" groaned Ethel.

"I only drink same as other people," said William with spirit. "I put water in my mouth an' swallow it. It's news to *me* there's any other way of drinkin'. If you'll kin'ly tell me any other way of drinkin'——"

"Be quiet, William," said Mr. Brown.

"The pièce de résistance of the last one," said Robert, "was a shoehorn of Victorian design priced at ten shillings. . . . William, I wish you'd keep your elbows to yourself."

William assumed a crippled attitude, elbows pressed into his sides, hands hanging helplessly, but, as no one took any notice of him, he abandoned it and proceeded with his lunch.

"The last one taught her a lesson," said Mrs. Brown, "because hardly anyone bought anything. She's not going to charge more than two-and-six for anything at this one. William, don't play with your food."

"I'm not axshully playin' with it," explained William. "I'm workin' out what'd happen if this carrot was a glacier an'——"

"Be quiet, William," said Mr. Brown.

"I shall have to send something, I suppose," said Mrs. Brown. "It isn't till the day after to-morrow, but Miss Milton always has everything ready at least two days beforehand. Don't slouch like that, William. You'll be growing up round-shouldered, if you aren't careful, and then what will you do?"

"I could be a jockey," said William, after giving the matter a moment's deep thought. "A jockey's got to be round-shouldered. I bet jockeys *practise* bein' round-shouldered an'——"

"Be quiet, William," said Mr. Brown.

The telephone bell rang, and Ethel went to answer it. She returned a few moments later, frowning thoughtfully.

"It was Peggy Barton," she said. "She wants me to go over there this afternoon and help her with a hair perm. She can't put it off because she's going to a dance to-morrow night. And she helped me with mine last month."

"Well, you can go and help her, can't you, dear?" said Mrs. Brown.

"The nuisance of it is that I'm going to tea with Archie this afternoon."

"Archie!" said the Browns on varying notes of pity, incredulity and amusement.

"Didn't I tell you?" said Ethel, looking self-conscious. "It's his birthday, and he's been pestering me for months to go to tea with him on his birthday, and at last I said I would, simply because I couldn't keep on thinking out reasons why I couldn't."

"Well, you're a brave girl," said Robert. "I heard that the last person who went to tea with Archie got sandwiches of floor polish and salad cream in their tea."

"Nonsense, Robert!" said Mrs. Brown.

"I once drank some paraffin, 'cause it was in a lemonade bottle," said William, "an' everything I ate for years afterwards tasted of it. I'd almost got to like it in the end, 'cause——"

"Be quiet, William," said Mr. Brown.

"But you could go to tea with Archie after you'd done Peggy's hair, couldn't you, dear?" said Mrs. Brown.

"Yes, if I hadn't got to fetch the cat," said Ethel.

"The *cat*!" said the Browns with heightened emotion.

"I'm giving him a cat for his birthday present," said Ethel. "I had to give him something. He gave me that marvellous compact on my birthday, and he's overrun with mice, and he's been wanting a cat for ages. He says that one of his most beautiful childhood's memories is a ginger cat on a black hearthrug, and when I saw a ginger cat at Emmett's yesterday I bought it on impulse. I regretted it as soon as I'd done it and it seemed so silly that I didn't tell you, but, anyway, I'd arranged to fetch it this afternoon and take it straight to Archie's and—well, if I go to do Peggy's perm, I don't see how I can."

A flicker of interest had come into William's eyes.

"I don't mind fetchin' the cat for you, Ethel," he said with rather overdone nonchalance. "I've got a bit of time to spare this afternoon, an' I'd like to do a little thing like that to help you."

Ethel gave him a meaning look. It meant quite a lot of things, but gratitude was not among them.

"I remember a certain other occasion when you offered to fetch a cat from Emmett's," she said coldly.

William assumed an expression of enquiring innocence.

"When was that, Ethel?" he said.

"You remember perfectly well," said Ethel shortly. "You were supposed to be bringing me a white cat from Mr. Romford as a birthday present, and —well, perhaps you remember what happened."

William tried to retain the expression of enquiring innocence, but without much success.

"Oh, that!" he said, as if dimly recalling something through the mists of time. "I do remember somethin' about it, but it was so long ago, I'd nearly forgot. It—it sort of got out, didn't it?"

"It sort of ended up as a ferret," said Ethel bitterly.

"Oh well," said William, vaguely apologetic, "but I wouldn't let a cat out of a basket now, Ethel. I've got a *bit* more sense than that now."

"It's not noticeable," said Ethel.

"It will be in a basket, won't it, Ethel?" said Mrs. Brown.

"Oh, yes. Mr. Emmett's lending me a cat basket to carry it in."

"Well, dear, I really think you might let William do it. That is, if you really want to help Peggy with her perm."

"Of course I do. I shall want her to help me with mine again in a few months' time."

"The word 'permanent'," said Mr. Brown as he folded up his table napkin and rose from the table, "appears to be somewhat of an over-statement."

"Oh, it's permanent, all right," explained Ethel, "but it only lasts a few months."

As the door closed on Mr. Brown and Robert, Ethel turned a thoughtful look on William.

"If I could be sure . . ." she said in the tone of one who weakens against her better judgment.

William hastened to pursue his advantage.

"You needn't worry about it, Ethel," he said. "Gosh! I can do a little thing like fetchin' a cat. Think of the people that fetch bears an' lions an' tigers an' hippopotamuses to circuses an' zoos an' things, an' I bet I could do it as well as they do, so it'd be a funny thing if I couldn't fetch a cat."

The logic of this obviously failed to impress Ethel, but there was still weakening in her glance.

"I think I should let him try if I were you, Ethel," said Mrs. Brown. "He's done one or two errands for me very nicely lately."

"Yes," said Ethel, "especially the time when he dropped that bag of flour in the road and scooped half the road back into it."

"Yes, but listen," said William earnestly. "Flour's different from a cat. An', anyway, I bet you'd never have known about that bit of earth that got in with it if it hadn't been a diff'rent colour. I bet it'd've *tasted* all right. . . . An', anyway, this cat won't be in a paper bag, an' baskets don't bust open all by themselves without you doin' anythin' to them same as paper bags do. Well," with a short ironic laugh, "it's news to *me* if they do."

"William, do stop using that idiotic expression," said Mrs. Brown.

"If there was any other way . . ." said Ethel.

"I can fetch it, then, can I, Ethel?" said William.

"I suppose so," said Ethel with a shrug of resignation.

"Gosh! *Thanks!*" said William. "Well," importantly, "I'd better get started. Can't keep that ole cat waitin'."

"Now don't dash off like that, William," said Mrs. Brown. "Listen carefully and be quite sure what you have to do. You must fetch the cat from

Emmett's, take it straight to Archie's and tell him that Ethel will be with him for tea but may be a few minutes late. Now is that clear?"

"Yes," said William, adding tentatively, "I wouldn't mind goin' to tea with Archie, too. I like playin' in his rock'ry pond and somethin' int'restin' gen'rally happens when I'm there. The last time I went I opened a tin of sardines for him with the bread knife 'cause he'd lost his tin-opener an' I cut my finger an' he put cough mixture on it 'cause he thought it was iodine an' he lent me his handkerchief for a bandage."

"Yes, that reminds me," said Mrs. Brown. "I washed it and you can take it back to-day."

"He said I could keep it," said William.

"Of course you mustn't keep it, dear. It's in the hat-stand drawer all ready to go back."

"I'll write a card for you to take," said Ethel. "The creature's called Horace. He might as well know its name so that he can start making friends with it."

A few moments later, William issued jauntily from the front door, Archie's handkerchief, neatly folded, in one pocket and Ethel's card in the other.

"Jumble!" he called.

After the fifth summons, Jumble came leaping through the hedge of the next-door garden, jumping up at William in a manner that suggested joyful reunion after long and painful separation.

"Good ole Jumble!" said William and swaggered on down the road. His sense of importance rose at every step. He wasn't a boy going to fetch a cat for his sister. He was a famous circus-owner going to collect a few more lions and tigers for his circus. He had already collected wild animals from every part of the globe. His circus was world-famous. He stood in the ring cracking his whip. Lions, tigers, hyenas, bears circled round him.

"Down, there! Down!" he shouted, then, "Good ole boy!" to a lion who had just walked the tight-rope to thunderous applause. "You next!" to a panther who was just trotting into the ring. "Get back there!" he called to an attendant who had rashly advanced to the tight-rope. "He'll mangle anyone but me. I'm the only one he doesn't mangle." The panther was baring his teeth and growling. "Go on, ole chap," said William encouragingly. "Get up an' walk along the rope." Obediently the panther got up and walked along the rope. It was the end of the performance. Deafening applause arose.

William, surrounded by his wild beasts, stood bowing his acknowledgements, one hand on the lion's head, the other on the panther's.

"Ladies an' gentlemen——" he began and almost collided with Ginger, Henry and Douglas who were just turning the bend of the road.

"Hello," said Ginger. "Where are you goin'? We were just coming to fetch you."

William returned abruptly to earth.

"I'm fetchin' a cat," he said.

"Why?" said Ginger.

"Where from?" said Douglas.

"Where to?" said Henry.

Their interest was flattering, and the facts of the case were suddenly too tame to suit William's exalted mood.

"It's a specially savage cat," he said airily, "an' Ethel wanted me to fetch it 'cause she knows I'm good with wild animals. I didn't want to fetch it, 'cause I'm busy this afternoon, but she begged an' begged me to, 'cause she knew I'm the only one that wild animals don't mangle. Well," he gave a short laugh as his day-dream suddenly became real again, "cats are nothin' to me. Cats are jus' *nothin'* to me."

The Outlaws were sufficiently accustomed to William to discount something of his grandiloquence. Still—it was probably true that he was going to fetch a cat, and the situation might turn out to be interesting.

"We'll come along with you," said Ginger.

"All right," agreed William, who always liked to have witnesses of his more important rôles.

"Where are you fetching it from?" said Douglas.

"Emmett's," said William. He thought of Mr. Emmett's animal shop. It had always seemed to him a place as near paradise as earth could offer, but, with the spell of his day-dream still upon him, it shrank to pigmy proportions, became small and dull and devoid of glamour. "I bet ole Emmett'll be glad to have a chat with me. I bet lions an' tigers don't often come his way." He gave his short ironic laugh. "Well, it's news to *me* if lions an' tigers come ole Emmett's way."

"He had a dancing mouse when I was there once," said Ginger.

"Gosh! Did he really?" said William eagerly, forgetting his rôle. "I wish I'd seen it."

Discussing the subject of dancing mice and the possibility of evolving a strain of dancing hens from Ginger's mother's Buff Orpington, they made their way over the fields and down by the short cut to Hadley. Jumble frisked about them, plunging into rabbit holes, worrying twigs, disappearing into ditches after imaginary water-rats. Occasionally William would call, in a curt authoritative manner, "Hi, Jumble! To heel!"—a phrase which Jumble always interpreted as an invitation to explore the distant horizon.

"He's jolly intelligent," William would say in explanation of this, for Jumble was, in any and every circumstance, a dog without a flaw in William's eyes. "He mus' have seen somethin' int'restin' over there an' thought I was tellin' him to go after it."

The conversation then turned to the ginger cat.

"What colour *is* a ginger cat?" said Douglas.

"Same colour as Ginger's hair," said Henry.

While Ginger was wondering whether or not to resent this as an insult, William said:

"Well, I don't think it is same as Ginger's hair. I think it's yellow."

"It isn't. Ginger means brown."

"It doesn't. It means red."

"It doesn't. It means yellow."

"D'you think I don't know what ginger means? Ginger's hair's brown, isn't it?"

"No, it's red."

"You shut up about my hair," burst out Ginger, whose resentment had been silently gathering force during the conversation. "If you think you can go on an' on about a person's hair an'——"

A diversion was created by Jumble, who, becoming exasperated by his failure to unearth any rabbits, had started chasing a couple of cows across the field.

"It's jolly clever of him," said William. "He's doin' it same as those tornados do in It'ly."

"Toreadors," said Henry, "an' Spain."

"Well, there's not much diff'rence between It'ly an' Spain," said William, aggressively. "They're spelt a bit diff'rent, that's all. I've always thought I'd like to be one of those tor—bull-fighters myself. I tried once with that antelope's head in the hall, but it wasn't any good, 'cause the hat-

stand fell down. Anyway, I don't see why there shouldn't be tornado dogs same as tornado men, an' I don't see why Jumble shouldn't be one."

Jumble, however, evidently deciding against this career, abandoned his cows and returned to William; and the four Outlaws, considerably hampered by Jumble, climbed the stile that led to the main Hadley road.

Emmett's, the animal shop, was a fascinating medley of tortoises, puppies, kittens, rabbits, canaries, guinea-pigs, mice, rats and gold-fish. The Outlaws stood gazing around them, spell-bound. No spell, however, bound Jumble, and he leapt with shrill barks of excitement at the nearest rabbit hutch, precipitating it on to the floor.

Mr. Emmett came forward from behind the counter.

"No dogs allowed in here unless on a lead," he said sternly, pointing to a notice on the wall.

"I'll hold him," said William, grabbing Jumble by the collar, while Mr. Emmett restored the rabbit hutch to its original position. "He's had leads but he eats 'em."

"What can I do for you?" said Mr. Emmett impatiently. "Leave those tortoises alone, my boy."

Ginger transferred his attention to the guinea-pigs, while Henry and Douglas tried to fraternise with a couple of white rats.

"I've come for Ethel's cat," said William, restraining Jumble with difficulty, for Jumble had just caught sight of a Siamese cat and was anxious to pursue the acquaintance.

"Oh, yes . . . Miss Brown's ginger. He's all ready . . . Don't touch those rats, please, boys, and put that cage of mice down. . . . I'll just get him."

With a harassed glance at his customers, Mr. Emmett turned to go into the back regions of his shop. Jumble, having worked the Siamese cat into a frenzy of rage, now started trying to make friends with a tortoise, waving his tail ingratiatingly and planting his front paws ready for a romp.

Mr. Emmett hurried back into the shop, carrying a square basket with a handle.

"Here he is," he said. "He's had a good feed of fish and milk, so he won't need feeding again to-day. Carry him carefully. Put that birdcage down, my boy."

"What's this?" said Ginger, who had gone into the darkest corner of the shop and was examining a small cage.

"That, my boy," said Mr. Emmett, "is a jerboa. A species of rodent."

“What’s a rodent?” said Douglas.

“An animal that gnaws,” said Mr. Emmett shortly. “Now off you go, boys! Where’s that dog?”

Interest in the jerboa had made William let go his hold on Jumble’s collar, and at first it seemed that Jumble had disappeared. After a brief search, however, he was discovered behind the counter, hard at work on an open sack of dog biscuits.

Mr. Emmett heaved a sigh of relief when finally the four boys trooped out of the shop with Jumble and the cat basket. Jumble pranced on ahead, intent only, as it seemed, on getting under the feet of the passers-by and entangling himself with prams and scooters.

“I’ll carry the basket if you like, William,” said Ginger wistfully.

“No, you won’t,” said William. “I’ll carry it.”

“It’s jolly quiet.”

“P’raps it’s asleep.”

“I liked that gnawbill,” said William

“Jerboa,” said Henry. “A rodent that gnaws.”

“Well, I said that, didn’t I?” said William.

“Listen!” said Ginger excitedly.

They listened. A hissing scratching sound was coming from inside the basket.

“Gosh! It’s woke up all right,” said William.

“I should think so!” said Douglas. “Anyone’d wake up bein’ swung about like you’ve been doin’.”

“Well, a cat oughtn’t to mind a bit of swingin’,” said William, adding, with a modest air of knowledge, “They swing cats to see if there’s room enough in places.”

“Let’s have a look at it,” said Henry. “Through the chinks, I mean. We’re jolly well not goin’ to open it.”

They stood and examined the basket, pressing their eyes to the chinks.

“You can’t see much.”

“Yes, look! I can see a bit of fur. It’s brown.”

“An’ I can see a bit an’ it’s yellow.”

“I told you it was yellow.”

“I told you it was brown.”

"Well, I can see a bit an' it's red."

"Pity we can only see it in bits," said Ginger.

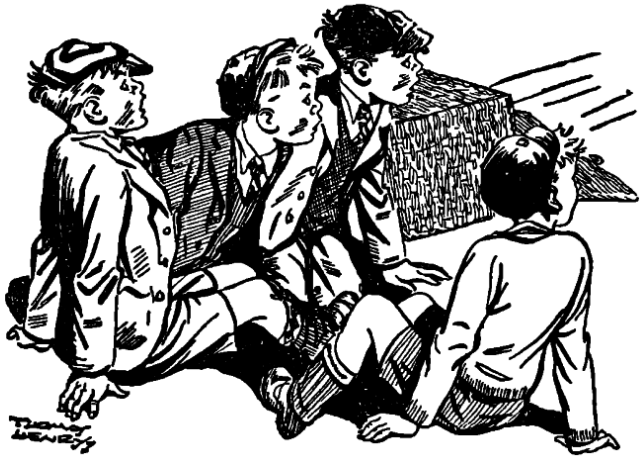
There was a silence in which the same thought gradually took shape in all their minds.

"Look!" said William, putting the thought into words. "We won't open it. Not axshully *open* it. Not *right* open. That other ole cat got away 'cause I axshully opened it. But, if we jus' undid the catch an' jus' peeped inside we could have a look at it. I only mean a teeny bit of an inch. That couldn't do any harm. Well, a cat couldn't get out of a teeny bit of an inch, could it? Stands to reason it couldn't. Not a whole cat. There wouldn't be *room* for it to get out of a teeny bit of an inch."

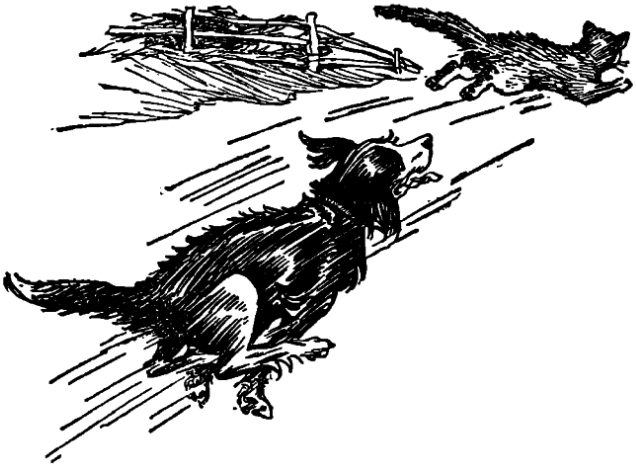
"We oughtn't to," said Douglas. "I bet it'll get us in a muddle."

"How could it?" said William, whose last scruple had now disappeared. "Jus' kin'ly tell me how it could." He repeated his short ironic laugh. "Well, it's news to *me* that a whole cat can get out of a teeny bit of an inch. 'Tisn't as if it was a little thing like a gerbeak."

"Jerboa," said Henry. "A rodent that gnaws."



JUMBLE TOOK A FLYING LEAP IN HOT PURSUIT OF THE CAT.



"Well, that's what I keep sayin', isn't it?" said William irritably. "You mus' be deaf . . . Look. I'll open it jus' a teeny bit of an inch; then we can make sure. . . ."

They crowded round him. He undid the catch and opened the basket a few inches. Then, before anyone realised what was happening, Jumble had taken a flying leap, scattered both Outlaws and basket and was vanishing in the distance in hot pursuit of a ginger cat.

"Gosh!" gasped William. "Come on! Let's catch him! Quick!"

They tore over the brow of the hill and down to the stile on the other side. Neither Jumble nor the ginger cat was anywhere to be seen.

"They mus' have gone into the woods," said William. "Come on."

"I *told* you we'd get into a muddle," said Douglas.

"P'raps it's the darkest hour before the dawn," said Ginger, who had studied a book of proverbs and proverbial sayings on the railway bookstall the last time he had gone to London with his mother.

"Oh, shut up an' come on," said William.

A search of the wood proved fruitless. There was no trace of Jumble or the ginger cat.

"We'll get in an awful row," said Douglas.

"An' it's all that ole Jumble's fault," said Ginger.

"It isn't," said William indignantly. "Jumble's a jolly intelligent dog. He knew if he was goin' to be a tornado dog, he'd got to start on somethin'

small before he could start on bulls, an' it was jolly clever of him to think of startin' on cats."

"Well, we've not got a present for Archie," said Ginger, "an' that's goin' to be jolly serious, 'cause Ethel's goin' there to tea, an' time an' tide wait for no man."

"Oh, shut up sayin' things like that," snapped William. "Tell you what! S'pose we go back to Emmett's an' see if he'll let us have that gerrybilt mouse——"

"Jerboa," said Henry. "A rodent that gnaws."

"I keep on an' on sayin' that," said William. "You don't understand English. That's what's wrong with you."

"There's not time to go back to Hadley," said Douglas. "We'd better have another try at findin' it."

"All right," said William. "Let's split up. Ginger an' me'll go along this way an' you an' Henry go along that way an' "—his optimism returning—"I bet we find it soon now."

But his optimism ebbed, as a search of the village revealed no signs of the missing pair.

"Now listen," said William at last. "I don't want Archie to think that Ethel's not got him a present when she goes there to tea. It might put him in a bad temper so's he wouldn't let us play in his rock'ry pond. I think we ought to get him somethin' jus' to be goin' on with, jus' till we find that cat."

"Well, it's early closin' day in the village," said Ginger, "so we can't buy anything."

A thoughtful look was coming over William's face.

"N-no," he said, "but I remember my mother was sayin' something about a White Elephant Sale at Miss Milton's. That's a sort of shop. We might find a nice present for him there."

"That's not till the day after to-morrow. My mother was talking about it, too."

"No, but my mother said she gets it ready two days beforehand. It'll probably be ready now. An' there's goin' to be nothin' over half a crown. How much money have you got?"

"I've got three halfpence in coppers," said Ginger. "How much have you got?"

"I've got some bits of a two-shilling piece," said William. "It was a bad one that Robert had an' he broke it an' gave me the bits."

"We could stick 'em together," suggested Ginger.

"I tried doin' that," said William, "an' it wasn't any good. I got glue all over my fingers so I had to help with my teeth an' I swallowed one of the bits by mistake, so it isn't any good now. Not as a two-shilling piece. I don't s'pose it's worth more than two-pence halfpenny now, with one of the bits gone." Then a light broke out over his sombre countenance. "*Tell* you what! I've got an idea."

"What?" said Ginger.

"There's that hanky of Archie's. He said I could keep it—he *gave* it me —an' it'd make a jolly good White Elephant. I bet it cost more than half a crown. It's a good one. It's got sewing round the edge with little holes in. We'll take it to this Sale of Miss Milton's an' ask her to change it for somethin' for Archie's birthday present. Jus' till we find the cat. We can change it back after that."

"All right," said Ginger with a puzzled frown. The whole situation was getting a bit beyond him.

"Well, come on," said William briskly. "We've got a lot to get through an' we mustn' waste any more time."

Together they set off for Miss Milton's house with an alacrity that nagged somewhat as they drew near the gate. There they stood, looking at the house in secret apprehension. Miss Milton was a redoubtable lady, and their general rule was to confine their dealings with her to a minimum.

"Well, come on," said William at last. "We'll jus' say we've come to exchange a White Elephant for another White Elephant. It mus' be quite an ordin'ry thing to do. I say!"—his spirits rising—"she might have a ginger cat for a White Elephant. It'd be jolly lucky if she did."

"I bet she wouldn't have," said Ginger.

"Well, I only said she *might*. She might have one of those geranium mice too. Those gnawin' ones. I'd sooner have one of those than a cat any day. . . . Well, I s'pose I'd better ring her bell. The las' time I knocked her knocker she said I'd never to knock it again 'cause it gave her a headache for a week."

He pressed his finger on the bell and waited. Nothing happened. He pressed the bell again. Still nothing happened.

"The door's not quite shut," said Ginger.

“Well, let’s go in, then,” said William. “I bet it’s all right. A White Elephant Sale’s the same as a shop an’ you go into shops without knockin’ at the door or ringin’ at the bell.”

He pushed open the door and entered the hall. Ginger followed a little nervously. The hall was empty. William hesitated a moment, then opened the door of the sitting-room and went in, followed by Ginger.

“Well, there’s nothin’ here,” said Ginger, looking round.

But William had espied Miss Milton’s “silver table” that stood between the two windows. On it were several snuff-boxes, a Queen Anne pepper-pot, a silver vase, the silver trowel that had been presented to Miss Milton’s grandfather on the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone of the Working Men’s Club, a silver thimble that had belonged to Miss Milton’s mother and a silver-framed photograph of Miss Milton at the age of eighteen, wearing a simpering smile and a gauze scarf.

“Look! This mus’ be it,” said William, pointing to the table. “It’s a sort of stall.”

“But they’re all silver things,” said Ginger.

“Well, that’s all right,” said William. “Robert was talkin’ about a silver shoehorn at her las’ White Elephant Sale, so I ’spect she does have silver things.”

“Well, there’s nothin’ here Archie’d want,” said Ginger. “Vases an’ awful photographs.”

“Yes, look!” said William excitedly. “There’s a pepper-pot. I heard him say las’ week he wanted a pepper-pot. It’s a silly sort of shape but it’ll be all right for pepper.”

“What’re you goin’ to do about the handkerchief?” said Ginger.

“We’ll jus’ leave it here,” said William carelessly, “same as people do pennies for newspapers. I ’spect that’s what she means people to do—jus’ come in an’ leave somethin’ an’ take somethin’ else ’stead of it.”

He burrowed in his pocket, scattering its contents round his feet, till he found the handkerchief, now firmly attached to a damp and fluffy humbug.

“I’ll put it on the table with the other things,” he said indistinctly, as he bit the humbug off and began to crunch it.

He put the handkerchief on the table, picked up the penknife, bits of string, lumps of putty, acorns, pencil, matchbox and marbles which, together with a toy pistol, Ethel’s note and some fragments of dog biscuits, formed

the contents of his pocket, took up the pepper-pot, rammed the whole collection unceremoniously back into his pockets, and prepared to depart.

"We'll go'n' give it to Archie," he said, "an' then we'll have another look for that cat an' if we find the cat we'll take the pepper-pot back to the White Elephant Sale an' get the handkerchief back."

" 'S a bit complicated," said Ginger perplexedly.

"No, it isn't," said William. "It's one of the simplest muddles I've ever been in. I keep on 'splainin' that I don't want Archie to think Ethel's not given him a present, 'cause it might hurt his feelings an' then he might stop lettin' us play in his rock'ry pond. Oh, come on an' stop wastin' time arguin'."

The two went out of the house and down the road to Archie's cottage. Archie could be seen at the bottom of his back garden. He had suddenly realised that he had no flowers in the sitting-room, where he hoped to entertain Ethel, so he had taken a vase down to the bed where a few weary nasturtiums struggled for existence in a colony of nettles. It never occurred to Archie to take the flowers to the vase. He took the vase to the flowers. He had that sort of mentality.

"We won't waste time goin' down there to him," said William. "We've got to find that cat. Come on. Let's put the pepper-pot on the table with Ethel's card an' then go back to that cat-hunt."

He opened the door and went into the sitting-room. Almost immediately Henry and Douglas arrived. They carried a gold-fish in a bowl.

"Look!" panted Douglas. "We couldn' find that cat, so we thought we'd get somethin' else, so we got this."

"Our gardener's wife gave it us," said Henry. "She won a flower vase at houp-la at the fair, an' she's got that on the table in her front room now, so she doesn't need the gold-fish. She said its face was gettin' on her nerves, anyway."

"Yes, but we've got a pepper-pot," said William. "We don't want a pepper-pot *an'* a gold-fish."

"A gold-fish is better," said Douglas, " 'cause, after all, a gold-fish *is* an animal. I mean, it's more like a cat than a pepper-pot is. If we can't find the cat, I think a gold-fish is nex' best. It's better than a pepper-pot, anyway."

"Y-yes," agreed William reluctantly, "but he hasn't got a pepper-pot."

"Well, he hasn't got a gold-fish," said Henry.

"We'll have to take the pepper-pot back, then," said Ginger.

"No, we've not time to do that now," said William. "We'll take it back when we've found the cat." His eye roved round the room. "We'll leave it here. Look! We'll put it on the mantelpiece jus' behind that calendar, then, when we've got the cat, we can take it back to Miss Milton. Where's that card Ethel wrote?" He burrowed again in his pocket and finally drew out the card, now grubby and crumpled, and propped it up against the gold-fish bowl on the table. They examined it with interest. It read: "This is Horace, with my love and best wishes for your birthday. Ethel."

"I bet he'd sooner have it than a cat," said Douglas. "It's not got claws."

"We'll, we've got to find the cat," said William, "an' I bet it won't take us long now."

"There's many a slip," said Ginger darkly, " 'twixt cup and lip."

"Quick!" said William, looking out of the window, "Archie's comin' back. We don't want him to find us here 'cause we don't want to waste a lot of time 'splainin' to him. Come on!"

The four went hurriedly out of the front door and down to the gate.

"Let's sep'rate again," said William. "I bet we find it in no time now."

Henry and Douglas set off across the fields, and Ginger and William went towards the village. Passing Miss Milton's cottage, they looked with interest through the window into the room where Miss Milton could be seen standing in earnest contemplation of her "silver table."

"I bet she's feelin' jolly pleased with that handkerchief," said William complacently.

Miss Milton stood gazing with horror and indignation at the handkerchief she held in her hand. It had slipped on to the floor from the table where William had put it, and she had found it only after discovering the loss of the pepper-pot. Her Queen Anne silver pepper-pot . . . one of her greatest treasures . . . a family heirloom. It had obviously been stolen while she was in the garage, setting out the things for her White Elephant stall on the trestle table that she kept there for that purpose. It happened that the bell was out of order, but in any case the thief would hardly have advertised his presence by ringing the bell. He had crept quietly in, stolen the pepper-pot and, had it not been that he had inadvertently dropped his handkerchief, would never have been detected. But the thief had dropped his handkerchief, and the handkerchief was Archie Mannister's. The name tab T. A. Mannister left no room for doubt. Miss Milton was shocked but not incredulous.

Archie Mannister was an artist and Miss Milton had always believed that artists were capable of anything. Archie was of good family, but the newspapers were full of stories of young men of good family who entangled themselves in crime and got themselves into police courts and prisons. The very fact that Archie was so unlike a criminal was, in Miss Milton's eyes, further proof that he was one. Her tight prim mouth grew tighter and primmer as she reviewed the situation. Her duty was plain. She would finish arranging the things for her White Elephant Sale (Miss Milton had made it a rule from childhood to finish whatever she was doing before she started anything else), then she would go to Archie's cottage and tax him with his crime. After that she would report the matter to the police.

Archie, who was not at his best as a housekeeper, had had a difficult afternoon. The flues had gone wrong; the butter, which he had taken frozen solid from the refrigerator, and put on a saucer over the boiling kettle to melt, had slid gracefully from its saucer into the boiling kettle; the scones that he was toasting at the grill had chosen the moment when he was coping with the butter to go up in flames; the sugar that he had scattered lavishly over the sandwich cake had turned out to be salt; and he couldn't find the jam . . . but the smile with which he greeted Ethel on her arrival was one of undiluted bliss. For months he had been trying to persuade Ethel to come to tea with him and now she had come. . . .

"Do come in," he stammered ecstatically. "Do come in, Ethel. This is wonderful."

"Many happy returns of the day, Archie," said Ethel kindly.

In the intervals of her more exciting love affairs, Ethel was always ready to be kind to Archie.

They entered the sitting-room. Archie drew up an arm-chair and fussed about with footstools and cushions. Ethel looked around.

"Did William bring Horace?" she said.

"Oh yes," said Archie. "I heard his voice when I was in the garden and when I came in I found that he'd left Horace with your beautiful note. It was a wonderful thought, Ethel. Thank you so much."

"Well, he should be company in the long winter evenings," said Ethel, "and they're not much trouble to feed. Just fish, and a little milk when you can spare it."

Archie looked startled.

"Oh . . . I shouldn't have thought of that."

"What would you have fed him on?"

"Well—er—ants' eggs, I think."

"Ants' eggs!" Ethel laughed. "How ridiculous! Please don't try feeding him on those. . . . He's very handsome, isn't he?"

"Er—yes," agreed Archie.

"He'll look rather sweet on your black hearthrug, won't he?"

Again Archie looked startled.

"I—I hadn't thought of putting him there," he said.

Ethel smiled.

"I expect he'll go there by himself," she said. Archie blinked. "Anyway, I hope he'll keep your mice down. Does he look as if he would?"

Archie's bewilderment was increasing.

"N-n-no," he stammered. "Actually he d-d-doesn't."

"I expect he will," said Ethel carelessly. She looked round the room. "Where is he now, by the way?"

"I've put him in the pond," said Archie. He beamed happily as he spoke. He couldn't have made a mistake there, anyway.

Ethel stared at him blankly.

"You've—*what*?" she said.

The frigidity of her voice told him that he *had* made a mistake, but he couldn't think how.

"P-put him in the p-pond," he stammered.

"And may I ask why?" said Ethel through tight lips.

"I thought it the best place for him," explained Archie simply.

And then came the rat-tat-tat at the door that heralded the arrival of Miss Milton. Archie rose with a sigh and admitted her. She stood in the doorway of the sitting-room, her eyes fixed accusingly on Archie.

"My errand, Archibald," she said, "is not a pleasant one."

Archie gaped at her.

"I have proof, Archibald," continued Miss Milton, "definite proof, that you have stolen my Queen Anne silver pepper-pot."

Archie gaped at her, but no sound came from his lips.

Ethel was the first to recover from her stupor.

"What do you mean, Miss Milton?" she said.

“I’m sorry if this is a shock to you, Ethel,” said Miss Milton kindly. “You naturally wouldn’t expect to discover that Archie was a thief.”

“There’s not much I wouldn’t expect to discover about Archie,” said Ethel bitterly, “considering that he’s just told me he’s drowned my cat.”

At that Archie found his voice—a high-pitched bleating voice of horror.

HORACE LEAPT ON TO THE TABLE, WITH JUMBLE AFTER HIM.

“Drowned your—— I don’t know what you’re talking about, Ethel. I’ve never touched your cat. I didn’t even know you had one.”

“*What?*” said Ethel, indignantly. “Do you mean to say that——”

“To return to the pepper-pot,” interrupted Miss Milton. “I repeat that I have definite proof that you have stolen it.”

"I've never even seen it," cried Archie wildly. "I think everyone's gone mad."

Miss Milton's gaze had wandered to the chimneypiece, and suddenly her eyes seemed to start from her head. She reached a hand up and removed the calendar.

"Archibald!" she said pointing to the pepper-pot, "can you *still* deny that you stole it?"

"*Yes!*" whinnied Archie. "Yes, I can . . . I do . . . I——"

There was the sound of voices and the four Outlaws were seen walking up the path to the front door, carrying a cat basket. They clattered noisily into the studio, and William put the cat basket down on the table, then a confused babel of voices arose as they all began to explain at once.

"Well, it got away——"

"So we took the pepper-pot——"

"Then we got the gold-fish."

" 'Cause she'd got a houp-la vase——"

"An' anyway, its face was on her nerves——"

"An' then we found the cat in the butcher's——"

"But we've not found Jumble yet——"

"So we've got to go out an' look for him now——"

"Well, now we've got the cat an' you've got the pepper-pot," said William, turning to Miss Milton, "can we kin'ly have our handkerchief back?"

Miss Milton, who was past the power of speech, merely looked at him, breathing hard.

Ethel had taken Horace from his basket. He sat down on the hearthrug and began to purr complacently.

"Sorry there's been a bit of a mess-up," continued William, "but we took a lot of trouble an'——"

"An' all's well that ends well," said Ginger.

But all hadn't ended yet. At that moment a brown whirlwind flung itself through the open french window and immediately the room was a bedlam of growling, spitting, hissing, barking. Horace leapt on to the table and knocked over the tea-pot. Jumble leapt after him and scattered the sugar basin. Horace dragged the table-cloth from the table, tore Miss Milton's

stockings, scratched Archie's face as he bent down to pick up the china, then streaked off through the open window, followed by Jumble.

"Come on!" shouted William exultantly. "Let's go after 'em."

"No, William," said Ethel, intercepting him and closing the french window. "Now will you please explain what's happened?"

The Outlaws walked slowly and disconsolately down the road. Jumble followed at their heels as decorously as if he had never chased a cat or wrecked a tea-table in his life.

"Well, she told me to 'splain an' I 'splained," said William dejectedly, "but she jus' didn't seem to understand. Girls never do. An' she's goin' to tell my father about it, an' I bet she makes it all sound quite diff'rent from what it really was an' I bet he won't listen to a word I say."

The other Outlaws made grunting sounds of agreement.

"It never rains," commented Ginger, "but it pours."

"Oh, shut up!" said William. "Cats an' White Elephants! There's no sense in 'em. If I was king of a country, I wouldn't have cats or White Elephants in it at all. I'd stop 'em by lor. I'd only have"—he looked down fondly at Jumble. Jumble was the cause of all the trouble, but, in William's eyes, he was still a dog without a flaw—"I'd only have dogs an'—an' "—the memory of the little bright-eyed creature was vivid in his mind, but the elusive word still eluded him—"an'—an' those little jer-gnawers." He threw a defiant glance at Henry as he spoke and added, without waiting to be corrected, "Well, that's what I *said*, isn't it?"

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—the Bold* by Richmal Crompton Lamburn (as Richmal Crompton)]