

## CHAPTER V

### REVELRY BY NIGHT

A succession of events combined to upset Mike during his first fortnight at school. He was far more successful than he had any right to be at his age. There is nothing more heady than success, and if it comes before we are prepared for it, it is apt to throw us off our balance. As a rule, at school, years of wholesome obscurity make us ready for any small triumphs we may achieve at the end of our time there. Mike had skipped these years. He was older than the average new boy, and his batting was undeniable. He knew quite well that he was regarded as a find by the cricket authorities; and the knowledge was not particularly good for him. It did not make him conceited, for his was not a nature at all addicted to conceit. The effect it had on him was to make him excessively pleased with life. And when Mike was pleased with life he always found a difficulty in obeying Authority and its rules. His state of mind was not improved by an interview with Bob.

Some evil genius put it into Bob's mind that it was his duty to be, if only for one performance, the Heavy Elder Brother to Mike; to give him good advice. It is never the smallest use for an elder brother to attempt to do anything for the good of a younger brother at school, for the latter rebels automatically against such interference in his

concerns; but Bob did not know this. He only knew that he had received a letter from home, in which his mother had assumed without evidence that he was leading Mike by the hand round the pitfalls of life at Wrykyn; and his conscience smote him. Beyond asking him occasionally, when they met, how he was getting on (a question to which Mike invariably replied, "Oh, all right"), he was not aware of having done anything brotherly towards the youngster. So he asked Mike to tea in his study one afternoon before going to the nets.

Mike arrived, sidling into the study in the half-sheepish, half-defiant manner peculiar to small brothers in the presence of their elders, and stared in silence at the photographs on the walls. Bob was changing into his cricket things. The atmosphere was one of constraint and awkwardness.

The arrival of tea was the cue for conversation.

"Well, how are you getting on?" asked Bob.

"Oh, all right," said Mike.

Silence.

"Sugar?" asked Bob.

"Thanks," said Mike.

"How many lumps?"

"Two, please."

"Cake?"

"Thanks."

Silence.

Bob pulled himself together.

"Like Wain's?"

"Ripping."

"I asked Firby-Smith to keep an eye on you," said Bob.

"What!" said Mike.

The mere idea of a worm like the Gazeka being told to keep an eye on him was degrading.

"He said he'd look after you," added Bob, making things worse.

Look after him! Him!! M. Jackson, of the third eleven!!!

Mike helped himself to another chunk of cake, and spoke crushingly.

"He needn't trouble," he said. "I can look after myself all right, thanks."

Bob saw an opening for the entry of the Heavy Elder Brother.

"Look here, Mike," he said, "I'm only saying it for your good----"

I should like to state here that it was not Bob's habit to go about the world telling people things solely for their good. He was only doing it now to ease his conscience.

"Yes?" said Mike coldly.

"It's only this. You know, I should keep an eye on myself if I were you. There's nothing that gets a chap so barred here as side."

"What do you mean?" said Mike, outraged.

"Oh, I'm not saying anything against you so far," said Bob. "You've been all right up to now. What I mean to say is, you've got on so well at cricket, in the third and so on, there's just a chance you might start to side about a bit soon, if you don't watch yourself. I'm not saying a word against you so far, of course. Only you see what I

mean."

Mike's feelings were too deep for words. In sombre silence he reached out for the jam; while Bob, satisfied that he had delivered his message in a pleasant and tactful manner, filled his cup, and cast about him for further words of wisdom.

"Seen you about with Wyatt a good deal," he said at length.

"Yes," said Mike.

"Like him?"

"Yes," said Mike cautiously.

"You know," said Bob, "I shouldn't--I mean, I should take care what you're doing with Wyatt."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he's an awfully good chap, of course, but still----"

"Still what?"

"Well, I mean, he's the sort of chap who'll probably get into some thundering row before he leaves. He doesn't care a hang what he does.

He's that sort of chap. He's never been dropped on yet, but if you go on breaking rules you're bound to be sooner or later. Thing is, it doesn't matter much for him, because he's leaving at the end of the term. But don't let him drag you into anything. Not that he would try to. But you might think it was the blood thing to do to imitate him, and the first thing you knew you'd be dropped on by Wain or somebody. See what I mean?"

Bob was well-intentioned, but tact did not enter greatly into his composition.

"What rot!" said Mike.

"All right. But don't you go doing it. I'm going over to the nets. I see Burgess has shoved you down for them. You'd better be going and changing. Stick on here a bit, though, if you want any more tea. I've got to be off myself."

Mike changed for net-practice in a ferment of spiritual injury. It was maddening to be treated as an infant who had to be looked after. He felt very sore against Bob.

A good innings at the third eleven net, followed by some strenuous fielding in the deep, soothed his ruffled feelings to a large extent; and all might have been well but for the intervention of Firby-Smith.

That youth, all spectacles and front teeth, met Mike at the door of Wain's.

"Ah, I wanted to see you, young man," he said. (Mike disliked being called "young man.") "Come up to my study."

Mike followed him in silence to his study, and preserved his silence till Firby-Smith, having deposited his cricket-bag in a corner of the room and examined himself carefully in a looking-glass that hung over the mantelpiece, spoke again.

"I've been hearing all about you, young man." Mike shuffled.

"You're a frightful character from all accounts." Mike could not think of anything to say that was not rude, so said nothing.

"Your brother has asked me to keep an eye on you."

Mike's soul began to tie itself into knots again. He was just at the age when one is most sensitive to patronage and most resentful of it.

"I promised I would," said the Gazeka, turning round and examining himself in the mirror again. "You'll get on all right if you behave yourself. Don't make a frightful row in the house. Don't cheek your elders and betters. Wash. That's all. Cut along."

Mike had a vague idea of sacrificing his career to the momentary pleasure of flinging a chair at the head of the house. Overcoming this feeling, he walked out of the room, and up to his dormitory to change.

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In the dormitory that night the feeling of revolt, of wanting to do something actively illegal, increased. Like Eric, he burned, not with shame and remorse, but with rage and all that sort of thing. He dropped off to sleep full of half-formed plans for asserting himself. He was awakened from a dream in which he was batting against Firby-Smith's bowling, and hitting it into space every time, by a slight sound. He opened his eyes, and saw a dark figure silhouetted against the light of the window. He sat up in bed.

"Hullo," he said. "Is that you, Wyatt?"

"Are you awake?" said Wyatt. "Sorry if I've spoiled your beauty sleep."

"Are you going out?"

"I am," said Wyatt. "The cats are particularly strong on the wing just now. Mustn't miss a chance like this. Specially as there's a good moon, too. I shall be deadly."



"I say, can't I come too?"

A moonlight prowler, with or without an air-pistol, would just have suited Mike's mood.

"No, you can't," said Wyatt. "When I'm caught, as I'm morally certain to be some day, or night rather, they're bound to ask if you've ever been out as well as me. Then you'll be able to put your hand on your little heart and do a big George Washington act. You'll find that useful when the time comes."

"Do you think you will be caught?"

"Shouldn't be surprised. Anyhow, you stay where you are. Go to sleep and dream that you're playing for the school against Ripton. So long."

And Wyatt, laying the bar he had extracted on the window-sill, wriggled out. Mike saw him disappearing along the wall.

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It was all very well for Wyatt to tell him to go to sleep, but it was not so easy to do it. The room was almost light; and Mike always found it difficult to sleep unless it was dark. He turned over on his side and shut his eyes, but he had never felt wider awake. Twice he heard the quarters chime from the school clock; and the second time he gave

up the struggle. He got out of bed and went to the window. It was a lovely night, just the sort of night on which, if he had been at home, he would have been out after moths with a lantern.

A sharp yowl from an unseen cat told of Wyatt's presence somewhere in the big garden. He would have given much to be with him, but he realised that he was on parole. He had promised not to leave the house, and there was an end of it.

He turned away from the window and sat down on his bed. Then a beautiful, consoling thought came to him. He had given his word that he would not go into the garden, but nothing had been said about exploring inside the house. It was quite late now. Everybody would be in bed. It would be quite safe. And there must be all sorts of things to interest the visitor in Wain's part of the house. Food, perhaps. Mike felt that he could just do with a biscuit. And there were bound to be biscuits on the sideboard in Wain's dining-room.

He crept quietly out of the dormitory.

He had been long enough in the house to know the way, in spite of the fact that all was darkness. Down the stairs, along the passage to the left, and up a few more stairs at the end. The beauty of the position was that the dining-room had two doors, one leading into Wain's part of the house, the other into the boys' section. Any interruption that there might be would come from the further door.

To make himself more secure he locked that door; then, turning up the incandescent light, he proceeded to look about him.

Mr. Wain's dining-room repaid inspection. There were the remains of supper on the table. Mike cut himself some cheese and took some biscuits from the box, feeling that he was doing himself well. This was Life. There was a little soda-water in the syphon. He finished it. As it swished into the glass, it made a noise that seemed to him like three hundred Niagaras; but nobody else in the house appeared to have noticed it.

He took some more biscuits, and an apple.

After which, feeling a new man, he examined the room.

And this was where the trouble began.

On a table in one corner stood a small gramophone. And gramophones happened to be Mike's particular craze.

All thought of risk left him. The soda-water may have got into his head, or he may have been in a particularly reckless mood, as indeed he was. The fact remains that he inserted the first record that came to hand, wound the machine up, and set it going.

The next moment, very loud and nasal, a voice from the machine announced that Mr. Godfrey Field would sing "The Quaint Old Bird." And, after a few preliminary chords, Mr. Field actually did so.

"Auntie went to Aldershot in a Paris pom-pom hat."

Mike stood and drained it in.

"... Good gracious (sang Mr. Field), what was that?"

It was a rattling at the handle of the door. A rattling that turned almost immediately into a spirited banging. A voice accompanied the banging. "Who is there?" inquired the voice. Mike recognised it as Mr. Wain's. He was not alarmed. The man who holds the ace of trumps has no need to be alarmed. His position was impregnable. The enemy was held in check by the locked door, while the other door offered an admirable and instantaneous way of escape.

Mike crept across the room on tip-toe and opened the window. It had occurred to him, just in time, that if Mr. Wain, on entering the room, found that the occupant had retired by way of the boys' part of the house, he might possibly obtain a clue to his identity. If, on the other hand, he opened the window, suspicion would be diverted. Mike had not read his "Raffles" for nothing.

The handle-rattling was resumed. This was good. So long as the frontal

attack was kept up, there was no chance of his being taken in the rear--his only danger.

He stopped the gramophone, which had been pegging away patiently at "The Quaint Old Bird" all the time, and reflected. It seemed a pity to evacuate the position and ring down the curtain on what was, to date, the most exciting episode of his life; but he must not overdo the thing, and get caught. At any moment the noise might bring reinforcements to the besieging force, though it was not likely, for the dining-room was a long way from the dormitories; and it might flash upon their minds that there were two entrances to the room. Or the same bright thought might come to Wain himself.

"Now what," pondered Mike, "would A. J. Raffles have done in a case like this? Suppose he'd been after somebody's jewels, and found that they were after him, and he'd locked one door, and could get away by the other."

The answer was simple.

"He'd clear out," thought Mike.

Two minutes later he was in bed.

He lay there, tingling all over with the consciousness of having played a masterly game, when suddenly a gruesome idea came to him, and

he sat up, breathless. Suppose Wain took it into his head to make a tour of the dormitories, to see that all was well! Wyatt was still in the garden somewhere, blissfully unconscious of what was going on indoors. He would be caught for a certainty!