

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH A TIGHT CORNER IS EVADED

For a moment the situation paralysed Mike. Then he began to be equal to it. In times of excitement one thinks rapidly and clearly. The main point, the kernel of the whole thing, was that he must get into the garden somehow, and warn Wyatt. And at the same time, he must keep Mr. Wain from coming to the dormitory. He jumped out of bed, and dashed down the dark stairs.

He had taken care to close the dining-room door after him. It was open now, and he could hear somebody moving inside the room. Evidently his retreat had been made just in time.

He knocked at the door, and went in.

Mr. Wain was standing at the window, looking out. He spun round at the knock, and stared in astonishment at Mike's pyjama-clad figure. Mike, in spite of his anxiety, could barely check a laugh. Mr. Wain was a tall, thin man, with a serious face partially obscured by a grizzled beard. He wore spectacles, through which he peered owlshly at Mike. His body was wrapped in a brown dressing-gown. His hair was ruffled. He looked like some weird bird.

"Please, sir, I thought I heard a noise," said Mike.

Mr. Wain continued to stare.

"What are you doing here?" said he at last.

"Thought I heard a noise, please, sir."

"A noise?"

"Please, sir, a row."

"You thought you heard----!"

The thing seemed to be worrying Mr. Wain.

"So I came down, sir," said Mike.

The house-master's giant brain still appeared to be somewhat clouded.

He looked about him, and, catching sight of the gramophone, drew inspiration from it.

"Did you turn on the gramophone?" he asked.

"Me, sir!" said Mike, with the air of a bishop accused of contributing to the Police News.

"Of course not, of course not," said Mr. Wain hurriedly. "Of course not. I don't know why I asked. All this is very unsettling. What are you doing here?"

"Thought I heard a noise, please, sir."

"A noise?"

"A row, sir."

If it was Mr. Wain's wish that he should spend the night playing Massa Tambo to his Massa Bones, it was not for him to baulk the house-master's innocent pleasure. He was prepared to continue the snappy dialogue till breakfast time.

"I think there must have been a burglar in here, Jackson."

"Looks like it, sir."

"I found the window open."

"He's probably in the garden, sir."

Mr. Wain looked out into the garden with an annoyed expression, as if its behaviour in letting burglars be in it struck him as unworthy of a

respectable garden.

"He might be still in the house," said Mr. Wain, ruminatively.

"Not likely, sir."

"You think not?"

"Wouldn't be such a fool, sir. I mean, such an ass, sir."

"Perhaps you are right, Jackson."

"I shouldn't wonder if he was hiding in the shrubbery, sir."

Mr. Wain looked at the shrubbery, as who should say, "Et tu, Brute!"

"By Jove! I think I see him," cried Mike. He ran to the window, and vaulted through it on to the lawn. An inarticulate protest from Mr. Wain, rendered speechless by this move just as he had been beginning to recover his faculties, and he was running across the lawn into the shrubbery. He felt that all was well. There might be a bit of a row on his return, but he could always plead overwhelming excitement.

Wyatt was round at the back somewhere, and the problem was how to get back without being seen from the dining-room window. Fortunately a

belt of evergreens ran along the path right up to the house. Mike worked his way cautiously through these till he was out of sight, then tore for the regions at the back.

The moon had gone behind the clouds, and it was not easy to find a way through the bushes. Twice branches sprang out from nowhere, and hit Mike smartly over the shins, eliciting sharp howls of pain.

On the second of these occasions a low voice spoke from somewhere on his right.

"Who on earth's that?" it said.

Mike stopped.

"Is that you, Wyatt? I say----"

"Jackson!"

The moon came out again, and Mike saw Wyatt clearly. His knees were covered with mould. He had evidently been crouching in the bushes on all fours.

"You young ass," said Wyatt. "You promised me that you wouldn't get out."

"Yes, I know, but----"

"I heard you crashing through the shrubbery like a hundred elephants. If you must get out at night and chance being sacked, you might at least have the sense to walk quietly."

"Yes, but you don't understand."

And Mike rapidly explained the situation.

"But how the dickens did he hear you, if you were in the dining-room?" asked Wyatt. "It's miles from his bedroom. You must tread like a policeman."

"It wasn't that. The thing was, you see, it was rather a rotten thing to do, I suppose, but I turned on the gramophone."

"You--what?"

"The gramophone. It started playing 'The Quaint Old Bird.' Ripping it was, till Wain came along."

Wyatt doubled up with noiseless laughter.

"You're a genius," he said. "I never saw such a man. Well, what's the game now? What's the idea?"

"I think you'd better nip back along the wall and in through the window, and I'll go back to the dining-room. Then it'll be all right if Wain comes and looks into the dorm. Or, if you like, you might come down too, as if you'd just woke up and thought you'd heard a row."

"That's not a bad idea. All right. You dash along then. I'll get back."

Mr. Wain was still in the dining-room, drinking in the beauties of the summer night through the open window. He gibbered slightly when Mike reappeared.

"Jackson! What do you mean by running about outside the house in this way! I shall punish you very heavily. I shall certainly report the matter to the headmaster. I will not have boys rushing about the garden in their pyjamas. You will catch an exceedingly bad cold. You will do me two hundred lines, Latin and English. Exceedingly so. I will not have it. Did you not hear me call to you?"

"Please, sir, so excited," said Mike, standing outside with his hands on the sill.

"You have no business to be excited. I will not have it. It is exceedingly impertinent of you."

"Please, sir, may I come in?"

"Come in! Of course, come in. Have you no sense, boy? You are laying the seeds of a bad cold. Come in at once."

Mike clambered through the window.

"I couldn't find him, sir. He must have got out of the garden."

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Wain. "Undoubtedly so. It was very wrong of you to search for him. You have been seriously injured. Exceedingly so"

He was about to say more on the subject when Wyatt strolled into the room. Wyatt wore the rather dazed expression of one who has been aroused from deep sleep. He yawned before he spoke.

"I thought I heard a noise, sir," he said.

He called Mr. Wain "father" in private, "sir" in public. The presence of Mike made this a public occasion.

"Has there been a burglary?"

"Yes," said Mike, "only he has got away."

"Shall I go out into the garden, and have a look round, sir?" asked Wyatt helpfully.

The question stung Mr. Wain into active eruption once more.

"Under no circumstances whatever," he said excitedly. "Stay where you are, James. I will not have boys running about my garden at night. It is preposterous. Inordinately so. Both of you go to bed immediately. I shall not speak to you again on this subject. I must be obeyed instantly. You hear me, Jackson? James, you understand me? To bed at once. And, if I find you outside your dormitory again to-night, you will both be punished with extreme severity. I will not have this lax and reckless behaviour."

"But the burglar, sir?" said Wyatt.

"We might catch him, sir," said Mike.

Mr. Wain's manner changed to a slow and stately sarcasm, in much the same way as a motor-car changes from the top speed to its first.

"I was under the impression," he said, in the heavy way almost invariably affected by weak masters in their dealings with the obstreperous, "I was distinctly under the impression that I had ordered you to retire immediately to your dormitory. It is possible that you mistook my meaning. In that case I shall be happy to repeat

what I said. It is also in my mind that I threatened to punish you with the utmost severity if you did not retire at once. In these circumstances, James--and you, Jackson--you will doubtless see the necessity of complying with my wishes."

They made it so.