

## CHAPTER XXIII

### A SURPRISE FOR MR. APPLEBY

"You may not know it," said Wyatt to Mike in the dormitory that night, "but this is the maddest, merriest day of all the glad New Year."

Mike could not help thinking that for himself it was the very reverse, but he did not state his view of the case.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Neville-Smith's giving a meal at his place in honour of his getting his first. I understand the preparations are on a scale of the utmost magnificence. No expense has been spared. Ginger-beer will flow like water. The oldest cask of lemonade has been broached; and a sardine is roasting whole in the market-place."

"Are you going?"

"If I can tear myself away from your delightful society. The kick-off is fixed for eleven sharp. I am to stand underneath his window and heave bricks till something happens. I don't know if he keeps a dog. If so, I shall probably get bitten to the bone."

"When are you going to start?"

"About five minutes after Wain has been round the dormitories to see that all's well. That ought to be somewhere about half-past ten."

"Don't go getting caught."

"I shall do my little best not to be. Rather tricky work, though, getting back. I've got to climb two garden walls, and I shall probably be so full of Malvoisie that you'll be able to hear it swishing about inside me. No catch steeple-chasing if you're like that. They've no thought for people's convenience here. Now at Bradford they've got studies on the ground floor, the windows looking out over the boundless prairie. No climbing or steeple-chasing needed at all. All you have to do is to open the window and step out. Still, we must make the best of things. Push us over a pinch of that tooth-powder of yours. I've used all mine."

Wyatt very seldom penetrated further than his own garden on the occasions when he roamed abroad at night. For cat-shooting the Wain spinneys were unsurpassed. There was one particular dustbin where one might be certain of flushing a covey any night; and the wall by the potting-shed was a feline club-house.

But when he did wish to get out into the open country he had a special route which he always took. He climbed down from the wall that ran

beneath the dormitory window into the garden belonging to Mr. Appleby, the master who had the house next to Mr. Wain's. Crossing this, he climbed another wall, and dropped from it into a small lane which ended in the main road leading to Wrykyn town.

This was the route which he took to-night. It was a glorious July night, and the scent of the flowers came to him with a curious distinctness as he let himself down from the dormitory window. At any other time he might have made a lengthy halt, and enjoyed the scents and small summer noises, but now he felt that it would be better not to delay. There was a full moon, and where he stood he could be seen distinctly from the windows of both houses. They were all dark, it is true, but on these occasions it was best to take no risks.

He dropped cautiously into Appleby's garden, ran lightly across it, and was in the lane within a minute.

There he paused, dusted his trousers, which had suffered on the two walls, and strolled meditatively in the direction of the town. Half-past ten had just chimed from the school clock. He was in plenty of time.

"What a night!" he said to himself, sniffing as he walked.

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Now it happened that he was not alone in admiring the beauty of that particular night. At ten-fifteen it had struck Mr. Appleby, looking out of his study into the moonlit school grounds, that a pipe in the open would make an excellent break in his night's work. He had acquired a slight headache as the result of correcting a batch of examination papers, and he thought that an interval of an hour in the open air before approaching the half-dozen or so papers which still remained to be looked at might do him good. The window of his study was open, but the room had got hot and stuffy. Nothing like a little fresh air for putting him right.

For a few moments he debated the rival claims of a stroll in the cricket-field and a seat in the garden. Then he decided on the latter. The little gate in the railings opposite his house might not be open, and it was a long way round to the main entrance. So he took a deck-chair which leaned against the wall, and let himself out of the back door.

He took up his position in the shadow of a fir-tree with his back to the house. From here he could see the long garden. He was fond of his garden, and spent what few moments he could spare from work and games pottering about it. He had his views as to what the ideal garden should be, and he hoped in time to tinker his own three acres up to the desired standard. At present there remained much to be done. Why not, for instance, take away those laurels at the end of the lawn, and have a flower-bed there instead? Laurels lasted all the year round,

true, whereas flowers died and left an empty brown bed in the winter, but then laurels were nothing much to look at at any time, and a garden always had a beastly appearance in winter, whatever you did to it. Much better have flowers, and get a decent show for one's money in summer at any rate.

The problem of the bed at the end of the lawn occupied his complete attention for more than a quarter of an hour, at the end of which period he discovered that his pipe had gone out.

He was just feeling for his matches to relight it when Wyatt dropped with a slight thud into his favourite herbaceous border.

The surprise, and the agony of feeling that large boots were trampling among his treasures kept him transfixed for just the length of time necessary for Wyatt to cross the garden and climb the opposite wall. As he dropped into the lane, Mr. Appleby recovered himself sufficiently to emit a sort of strangled croak, but the sound was too slight to reach Wyatt. That reveller was walking down the Wrykyn road before Mr. Appleby had left his chair.

It is an interesting point that it was the gardener rather than the schoolmaster in Mr. Appleby that first awoke to action. It was not the idea of a boy breaking out of his house at night that occurred to him first as particularly heinous; it was the fact that the boy had broken out via his herbaceous border. In four strides he was on the

scene of the outrage, examining, on hands and knees, with the aid of the moonlight, the extent of the damage done.

As far as he could see, it was not serious. By a happy accident Wyatt's boots had gone home to right and left of precious plants but not on them. With a sigh of relief Mr. Appleby smoothed over the cavities, and rose to his feet.

At this point it began to strike him that the episode affected him as a schoolmaster also.

In that startled moment when Wyatt had suddenly crossed his line of vision, he had recognised him. The moon had shone full on his face as he left the flowerbed. There was no doubt in his mind as to the identity of the intruder.

He paused, wondering how he should act. It was not an easy question. There was nothing of the spy about Mr. Appleby. He went his way openly, liked and respected by boys and masters. He always played the game. The difficulty here was to say exactly what the game was. Sentiment, of course, bade him forget the episode, treat it as if it had never happened. That was the simple way out of the difficulty. There was nothing unsporting about Mr. Appleby. He knew that there were times when a master might, without blame, close his eyes or look the other way. If he had met Wyatt out of bounds in the day-time, and it had been possible to convey the impression that he had not seen

him, he would have done so. To be out of bounds is not a particularly deadly sin. A master must check it if it occurs too frequently, but he may use his discretion.

Breaking out at night, however, was a different thing altogether. It was on another plane. There are times when a master must waive sentiment, and remember that he is in a position of trust, and owes a duty directly to his headmaster, and indirectly, through the headmaster, to the parents. He receives a salary for doing this duty, and, if he feels that sentiment is too strong for him, he should resign in favour of some one of tougher fibre.

This was the conclusion to which Mr. Appleby came over his relighted pipe. He could not let the matter rest where it was.

In ordinary circumstances it would have been his duty to report the affair to the headmaster but in the present case he thought that a slightly different course might be pursued. He would lay the whole thing before Mr. Wain, and leave him to deal with it as he thought best. It was one of the few cases where it was possible for an assistant master to fulfil his duty to a parent directly, instead of through the agency of the headmaster.

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Knocking out the ashes of his pipe against a tree, he folded his

deck-chair and went into the house. The examination papers were spread invitingly on the table, but they would have to wait. He turned down his lamp, and walked round to Wain's.

There was a light in one of the ground-floor windows. He tapped on the window, and the sound of a chair being pushed back told him that he had been heard. The blind shot up, and he had a view of a room littered with books and papers, in the middle of which stood Mr. Wain, like a sea-beast among rocks.

Mr. Wain recognised his visitor and opened the window. Mr. Appleby could not help feeling how like Wain it was to work on a warm summer's night in a hermetically sealed room. There was always something queer and eccentric about Wyatt's step-father.

"Can I have a word with you, Wain?" he said.

"Appleby! Is there anything the matter? I was startled when you tapped. Exceedingly so."

"Sorry," said Mr. Appleby. "Wouldn't have disturbed you, only it's something important. I'll climb in through here, shall I? No need to unlock the door." And, greatly to Mr. Wain's surprise and rather to his disapproval, Mr. Appleby vaulted on to the window-sill, and squeezed through into the room.