

CHAPTER XXIV

CAUGHT

"Got some rather bad news for you, I'm afraid," began Mr. Appleby.

"I'll smoke, if you don't mind. About Wyatt."

"James!"

"I was sitting in my garden a few minutes ago, having a pipe before finishing the rest of my papers, and Wyatt dropped from the wall on to my herbaceous border."

Mr. Appleby said this with a tinge of bitterness. The thing still rankled.

"James! In your garden! Impossible. Why, it is not a quarter of an hour since I left him in his dormitory."

"He's not there now."

"You astound me, Appleby. I am astonished."

"So was I."

"How is such a thing possible? His window is heavily barred."

"Bars can be removed."

"You must have been mistaken."

"Possibly," said Mr. Appleby, a little nettled. Gaping astonishment is always apt to be irritating. "Let's leave it at that, then. Sorry to have disturbed you."

"No, sit down, Appleby. Dear me, this is most extraordinary. Exceedingly so. You are certain it was James?"

"Perfectly. It's like daylight out of doors."

Mr. Wain drummed on the table with his fingers.

"What shall I do?"

Mr. Appleby offered no suggestion.

"I ought to report it to the headmaster. That is certainly the course I should pursue."

"I don't see why. It isn't like an ordinary case. You're the parent. You can deal with the thing directly. If you come to think of it, a

headmaster's only a sort of middleman between boys and parents. He plays substitute for the parent in his absence. I don't see why you should drag in the master at all here."

"There is certainly something in what you say," said Mr. Wain on reflection.

"A good deal. Tackle the boy when he comes in, and have it out with him. Remember that it must mean expulsion if you report him to the headmaster. He would have no choice. Everybody who has ever broken out of his house here and been caught has been expelled. I should strongly advise you to deal with the thing yourself."

"I will. Yes. You are quite right, Appleby. That is a very good idea of yours. You are not going?"

"Must. Got a pile of examination papers to look over. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Mr. Appleby made his way out of the window and through the gate into his own territory in a pensive frame of mind. He was wondering what would happen. He had taken the only possible course, and, if only Wain kept his head and did not let the matter get through officially to the headmaster, things might not be so bad for Wyatt after all. He hoped they would not. He liked Wyatt. It would be a thousand pities, he

felt, if he were to be expelled. What would Wain do? What would he do in a similar case? It was difficult to say. Probably talk violently for as long as he could keep it up, and then consider the episode closed. He doubted whether Wain would have the common sense to do this. Altogether it was very painful and disturbing, and he was taking a rather gloomy view of the assistant master's lot as he sat down to finish off the rest of his examination papers. It was not all roses, the life of an assistant master at a public school. He had continually to be sinking his own individual sympathies in the claims of his duty. Mr. Appleby was the last man who would willingly have reported a boy for enjoying a midnight ramble. But he was the last man to shirk the duty of reporting him, merely because it was one decidedly not to his taste.

Mr. Wain sat on for some minutes after his companion had left, pondering over the news he had heard. Even now he clung to the idea that Appleby had made some extraordinary mistake. Gradually he began to convince himself of this. He had seen Wyatt actually in bed a quarter of an hour before--not asleep, it was true, but apparently on the verge of dropping off. And the bars across the window had looked so solid.... Could Appleby have been dreaming? Something of the kind might easily have happened. He had been working hard, and the night was warm....

Then it occurred to him that he could easily prove or disprove the truth of his colleague's statement by going to the dormitory and

seeing if Wyatt were there or not. If he had gone out, he would hardly have returned yet.

He took a candle, and walked quietly upstairs.

Arrived at his step-son's dormitory, he turned the door-handle softly and went in. The light of the candle fell on both beds. Mike was there, asleep. He grunted, and turned over with his face to the wall as the light shone on his eyes. But the other bed was empty. Appleby had been right.

If further proof had been needed, one of the bars was missing from the window. The moon shone in through the empty space.

The house-master sat down quietly on the vacant bed. He blew the candle out, and waited there in the semi-darkness, thinking. For years he and Wyatt had lived in a state of armed neutrality, broken by various small encounters. Lately, by silent but mutual agreement, they had kept out of each other's way as much as possible, and it had become rare for the house-master to have to find fault officially with his step-son. But there had never been anything even remotely approaching friendship between them. Mr. Wain was not a man who inspired affection readily, least of all in those many years younger than himself. Nor did he easily grow fond of others. Wyatt he had regarded, from the moment when the threads of their lives became entangled, as a complete nuisance.

It was not, therefore, a sorrowful, so much as an exasperated, vigil that he kept in the dormitory. There was nothing of the sorrowing father about his frame of mind. He was the house-master about to deal with a mutineer, and nothing else.

This breaking-out, he reflected wrathfully, was the last straw.

Wyatt's presence had been a nervous inconvenience to him for years.

The time had come to put an end to it. It was with a comfortable feeling of magnanimity that he resolved not to report the breach of discipline to the headmaster. Wyatt should not be expelled. But he should leave, and that immediately. He would write to the bank before he went to bed, asking them to receive his step-son at once; and the letter should go by the first post next day. The discipline of the bank would be salutary and steady. And--this was a particularly grateful reflection--a fortnight annually was the limit of the holiday allowed by the management to its junior employees.

Mr. Wain had arrived at this conclusion, and was beginning to feel a little cramped, when Mike Jackson suddenly sat up.

"Hullo!" said Mike.

"Go to sleep, Jackson, immediately," snapped the house-master.

Mike had often heard and read of people's hearts leaping to their

mouths, but he had never before experienced that sensation of something hot and dry springing in the throat, which is what really happens to us on receipt of a bad shock. A sickening feeling that the game was up beyond all hope of salvation came to him. He lay down again without a word.

What a frightful thing to happen! How on earth had this come about? What in the world had brought Wain to the dormitory at that hour? Poor old Wyatt! If it had upset him (Mike) to see the house-master in the room, what would be the effect of such a sight on Wyatt, returning from the revels at Neville-Smith's!

And what could he do? Nothing. There was literally no way out. His mind went back to the night when he had saved Wyatt by a brilliant coup. The most brilliant of coups could effect nothing now. Absolutely and entirely the game was up.

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Every minute that passed seemed like an hour to Mike. Dead silence reigned in the dormitory, broken every now and then by the creak of the other bed, as the house-master shifted his position. Twelve boomed across the field from the school clock. Mike could not help thinking what a perfect night it must be for him to be able to hear the strokes so plainly. He strained his ears for any indication of Wyatt's approach, but could hear nothing. Then a very faint scraping noise

broke the stillness, and presently the patch of moonlight on the floor was darkened.

At that moment Mr. Wain relit his candle.

The unexpected glare took Wyatt momentarily aback. Mike saw him start. Then he seemed to recover himself. In a calm and leisurely manner he climbed into the room.

"James!" said Mr. Wain. His voice sounded ominously hollow.

Wyatt dusted his knees, and rubbed his hands together. "Hullo, is that you, father!" he said pleasantly.