

A LODGING *for the* NIGHT



by

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CHAPTER I

TWO IN THE RAIN

"**B**OTHAH THE WRIN!"
Jack Free looked round.

It was raining hard on the road over the Sussex cliffs. It had been a fine autumn afternoon, but the rain had come on suddenly and hard.

"Jack of All Trades", with his coat-collar turned up, and his head bent to the wind and the rain, tramped on as cheerfully as he could. He was wet, and every moment getting wetter. But there was not a building in sight, and the wayside trees, dripping with rain, did not look inviting; and as there was no shelter to be had, he made up his mind to it. With his head bent, he did not observe that he was overtaking another wet pedestrian on the road, till that exclamation caused him to look up and glance round.

"Bothah this howwid weathah! Bai Jove, this is weally wotten!"

Jack smiled, as he peered through the falling rain, at a youth a little younger

than himself, who was pushing a bike wearily along the muddy road. Why he was pushing it was clear at the second glance—one of the tyres was flat. The unlucky cyclist was afflicted with a puncture at a very unfortunate time.

It was a very elegant youth in a school cap at whom Jack was looking. But it was his accent that drew the boy's attention. Jack of All Trades had knocked about in many places, and heard all sorts of voices, but never one quite like this before. The schoolboy with the bike was evidently speaking to himself, or to space, not being aware of the boy coming up behind him. And as Jack regarded him with interest, he went on, still addressing himself or space:

"Bai Jove! Tom Mewwy was wight—he said it was goin' to wain! Bothah it! It would have been all wight but for that wotten puncture! I weally think my legs will dwop off, if I have to push this jiggah mach furthah. It must be anothah mile at least to the Wock. Blow!"

Jack accelerated, and overtook the weary pusher of the bike.

"Can I help?" he asked.

The schoolboy gave a start, at the unexpected voice at his elbow, and looked round. An eyeglass, wet with rain, glimmered at Jack of All Trades.

"Bai Jove! I did not know there was anybody else on the woad! Where did you spwing fwom?"

"Tramping," said Jack, with a smile. "I'm heading for Ridgate—"

"Widgate? That's near Carwoft—miles fwom heah. You are goin' to get vewy wet befoah you awwive at Widgate."

"I'm fairly wet already! But can I give you a hand pushing the bike? We soon to be going the same way."

"Yaas, wathah! But I am goin' only as fah as the Wock—about anothah mile. It is vewy decent of you to offah to push the bike—I have been pushin' it for miles and miles since that wotten tyre petahed out. If you weally don't mind lendin' a hand—"

"O.K." said Jack, cheerily, and he took the bicycle from the elegant youth's hands, and pushed. The road was rough and muddy, and pushing a bike with a flat tyre was not easy work: but it was Jack's way to be good-natured and obliging, and the schoolboy was evidently fatigued, and immensely relieved to get rid of the task of pushing that troublesome "jigger".

"That's weally feighfully decent of you," he said. He extracted the wet eyeglass from his eye, rubbed it with his handkerchief, and restored it to its place gleaming, and this also seemed a relief to him. "I wouldn't land it on you only I weally am feahfully tired of pushin' it. I will take it again soon."

"That's all right," said Jack. "It won't hurt me to push it a mile."

They walked on through the rain, Jack pushing the bike, the elegant schoolboy walking by his side, both of them thoroughly wet, and getting wetter.

"This beastly wain took me wathah by surprise, you know," said the

schoolboy. "Tom Mewwy said it looked like wain, but it did not look like wain to me. But of course you don't know Tom Mewwy."

"No," said Jack, smiling.

"A man in the Shell, you know."

"A-a-a what?" ejaculated Jack, with a stare. He had heard of eggs in the shell, but not of men in the shell.

"I mean, a chap at my school. I'm in the Fourth form, and Tom Mewwy is in the Shell—the next form up, you know."

"Oh! I—I see."

"But it would have been all wight but for that beastly puncture. I should have weached the Wock befoah the wain came on."

"The Wock?" repeated Jack, puzzled.

"Yaas, that's the name of my bwothah's seaside bungalow. It is called the Wock because it looks out ovah the wocks."

"Oh! The Rock?"

"Yaas—I said the Wock!"

"Oh! Yes! I see."

"It's only ten miles fwom St. Jim's—quite an easy wun on a bike on a half-holiday—but for the wain and the puncture, you know."

"St. Jim's?"

"Yaas, my school, you know. Pwobably you have heard of it."

"I—I—I don't think—I don't remember—"

"Bai Jove! That is vewy wemarkable! I thought ewerybody had heard of St. Jim's."

"Well, I've heard of it now," said Jack, with a smile. "Are you allowed so far from your school on a half-holiday?"

"No feah—this is miles out of bounds. But of course I asked leave fwom Wailton."

"Railton?"

"My housemastah, you know. I'm in the School House. That's cock-house at St. Jim's. The New House is simply nowhah. Wailton is the House beak in the School House. He gave me leave to wun acwoss to the Wock on my bike. I say, shall I take it now?"

"No, that's all right."

"It is wathah a welief to get wid of it for a while, if you weally don't mind pushin' it—"

"Not a bit."

"Vewy many thanks, deah boy. My name's D'Arcy," went on the elegant youth, "Arthur Augustus D'Arcy."

"Mine's Free—Jack Free."

"I am vewy pleased to make your acquaintance, Fwee. It was vewy lucky you turned up on this woad—vewy lucky for me, I mean. You are pushin' that jiggah evah so much quickah than I was."

"I'm more used to hard work, you know," said Jack, smiling.

"I don't know—we work pwetty hard at St. Jim's," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Form every day, you know, and pwep aftah tea, and then the games. It's wathah a stwennous life, weally."

Jack chuckled. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not look, to him, a youth who led a very strenuous life—not, at all events, in comparison with his own. But his own way of life was evidently far out of the experience of the schoolboy.

"But what are you doin'—hikin'?" asked D'Arcy.

"Well, sort of," said Jack. "Hoofing it, at any rate. I'm in hope of picking up a job at Ridgate, on a coasting vessel."

"Bai Jove! Weally!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "It must be wippin' to go to sea. I wathah think I should like it—a life on the ocean wave, a home on the wollin' deep, you know, where the scattahed watahs wave, and the winds their wewels keep, what?"

"I can't quite see you in the foc's'le of a coasting tramp," said Jack, laughing. "A fellow has to rough it."

"Oh, I can wuff it all wight! Nothin' soft about us at St. Jim's," said Arthur Augustus. "The fact is, deah boy, that fellows have to wuff it at school—it's vewy different from home. Fwinstance, I bwush my own hat—"

"Do you, really?" gasped Jack.

"Yaas, wathah! And I help Blake and Hewwies and Dig to wash up the cwocks in the study aftah tea. Nothin' soft about us, I can tell you. We can work!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Have I said somethin' funnay?" asked Arthur Augustus. "I weally did not know that I was makin' a joke."

"Oh! No! Not at all. Is that the Rock?" asked Jack, with a nod towards a handsome bungalow that stood back from the road, towards the cliffs.

Arthur Augustus glanced round.

"Yaas, wathah! We have weached it much more quickly than if I had wheeled that w'etched bike! Bai Jove! I shall be jollay glad to get out of this wotten wain. So will you, deah boy. You're comin' in out of the wain."

Jack Free stopped at the gate, with the bicycle. He looked at the elegant swell of St. Jim's. Then he looked at the bungalow—an extensive and expensive-looking building in its own grounds: and then he looked down at his own well-worn clothes. Then he shook his head.

"I think I'll push on to Ridgate," he said.

"Not in this wain, deah boy."

"Well, I can't get much wetter, and—"

"But you can get vewy much dwyah, befoah a fish," said Arthur Augustus. "Come in with me, and get yourself dwy, Fwee."

"But—" Jack hesitated.

"I shall have to scwounge some tea heah, too. Owin' to that wotten

puncture, I shall not be back at St. Jim's for tea. We'll scwounge tea togethah, what?"

"But your friends here—"

"Nobody there, deah boy."

"Nobody?" asked Jack, in surprise.

"Wathah not! You see, my bwothah Conway doesn't come down till the week-end," explained the St. Jim's junior. "I've wun ovah this aftahnoon to open up the bung weady for him—openin' the windows, you know and airin' the place— I've a latch-key in my pocket—"

"Oh!" said Jack.

"I should have been on my way back now, but for that wotten puncture. I shall have to mend it, befoah I can get goin' again, though. Pway come in out of the wain, Fwce."

"Oh, all right! And thanks," said Jack.

Arthur Augustus opened the gate, and Jack pushed the bike up a gravelled drive, into a roomy wooden porch before the front door. Both of them were glad to get into the porch out of the falling rain.

"Bai Jove! This is wathah bettah," remarked Arthur Augustus. "Now we'll be inside in a jiffy, and get a fiah goin' to dwy our clobbtah."

Arthur Augustus groped in his pockets for the latch-key. Having found it, he inserted it in the lock of the door, and in a moment more, the swell of St. Jim's and the waif of the roads were in the bungalow.

CHAPTER II

JACK FINDS A LODGING FOR THE NIGHT

"TOFFIN!" SAID Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Fine!" agreed Jack Free, with a cheery smile.

It was quite a pleasant picture in the bungalow. Jack Free, accustomed to turning his hand to any kind of work, soon found all that was wanted, and had a fire going in a big wide fireplace in the lounge hall. Half a dozen rooms opened from the hall: and from one of them, a bedroom, Arthur Augustus sorted out a couple of dressing gowns, and slippers. With a big log fire blazing and crackling, wet clothes were hung up before it to dry, and the two boys donned the dressing gowns—rather large for them, but an agreeable change after wet clothes. Then Jack, with the assistance of Arthur Augustus, sorted out various things from the larder, jammed a kettle on the fire and made tea: and they sat down to a cheery meal. Outside, the rain was still coming down hard and fast, dashing on the windows, and rattling on the roof. But within, all was cosy and comfortable. Arthur Augustus was serenely content: and Jack's face was very bright.

To the swell of St. Jim's, scrounging a tea in this picnic fashion, while his clothes dried at the fire, came under the head of "roughing" it. To the waif who had known the seamy side of life under many aspects, it was the last word in comfort, if not luxury.

Jack Free had been on the road for a good many days, picking up a job here and there, always cheerful, and looking on the bright side of things, making the best of good luck when it came, and keeping a stiff upper lip when the luck was bad—and roughing it in a way that the younger son of Lord Eastwood had never known or envisaged. To Arthur Augustus, the "Rock" was a seaside bungalow where his brother, Lord Conway, came occasionally, with a party of friends. To Jack of All Trades, it seemed a mansion. Pleasantest of all to him, was the cheery friendly manner of the St. Jim's junior, who seemed wholly unaware of any distinction between himself and his new acquaintance, and treated him exactly as he would have treated Blake or Herries or Digby at St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus was quite unconscious of the impression he had made on the waif of the roads, and would have been surprised to learn that Jack Free, after a couple of hours' acquaintance, would willingly have gone through fire and water for him.

"Yaas, toppin'," went on Arthur Augustus. "I was more than weady for my tea, you know. You seem wathah a handy chap at scwoungin' a meal, Fwee."

"I've scrounged a good many," said Jack, with a smile.

"It's wathah like tea in the study, weally," remarked Arthur Augustus. "Wathah lucky that old Conway had laid in the gwab for his week-end party, what? It's wathah a lark fellows waitin' on themselves at meals, isn't it?"

"Oh, quite!" grinned Jack.

"The fact is, it's wathah a good thing for a fellow to learn to look aftah himself, Fwee," said Arthur Augustus, wisely. "It pwevents him fwom gwowin' soft, and all that. We scwoungs tea in the study at St. Jim's, and fw the sosses on the study fiah, and wash up the cwocks ourselves. We nevah tea in hall unless we are stony broke."

"Oh!" said Jack. Looking at Arthur Augustus, he could not imagine that magnificent youth ever being "stony broke".

"That wotten wain is still comin' down," said Arthur Augustus, with a glance at the window. "Looks like lastin' till dark. I shall have to plough through it to get back—mustn't miss woll."

"Woll?" repeated Jack.

"Callin', ovah, you know: Waiton would give a man lines for cuttin' woll," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "Howevah, old Conway has left a waincoat heah, and I shall bowwow it, so that will be all wight. Bai Jove, though, I must get on to that puncture, or I shall be late."

"Leave that to me," said Jack, getting up out of a comfortable armchair. "I'll set that right for you."

"Not at all, deah boy—couldn't impose on you like that," said Arthur Augustus. "Those clothes look dwy now. Bettah change, and get goin'."

Jack Free was changed in a few minutes. But it was a long process with the swell of St. Jim's: and he was still busy when Jack opened the door, up-ended the bike in the porch, unpacked the puncture outfit, and got to work. Arthur Augustus's voice reached him from within.

"Bai Jove! The clobbah's dwy all wight but it looks feashfully wumpled. It's wathah wuff on a fellow to have his clobbah wumpled. Howevah, it won't show undah a waincoat—that's wathah a comfort. What are you doin' with the bike, Fwee?"

"Getting it ready."

"Thank you vewy much, deah boy. If you get the tyre off, weady for me, it will save time."

Jack Free grinned. The puncture was already in process of repair. It was likely to be finished a long while before Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was ready to begin.

Having, at length, encased himself in his elegant though rumpled clobber, Arthur Augustus had a great deal of brushing to do, and a good many final touches to give: and when, at length, he emerged into the porch, the puncture was finished, and the bike right way up again.

"Bai Jove! Have you done it?" asked Arthur Augustus, in surprise.

"O.K. now," said Jack, with a smile.

"That's vewy good of you, Fwee. It would have taken me much longah. You are a handy chap, and no mistake. I am vewy much obliged. Bai Jove, that beastly wain is still comin' down." Arthur Augustus gazed into the falling rain, and shook his noble head. "I shall have to chance it."

"You must get back for roll?" asked Jack.

"Yaas, wathah."

"I've noticed that there's a telephone here—couldn't you ring them up and say you're waiting for the rain to stop?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy chuckled.

"We're not quite so fwee and easy at school as you are on the woad, deah boy," he answered. "I can see Waitton's face if I wang him up to tell him that! No, if the bike's weady, I'll wush off."

Buzzzzzzzzzzzz!

It was the ring of the telephone bell, from the cabinet that opened off the lounge hall. Arthur Augustus gave a little jump, as he looked round.

"Bai Jove! that's wathah queeah," he remarked.

"The telephone," said Jack.

"But who can be wingin' up? Conway's fwiends know that he won't be heah till the week-end," said Arthur Augustus, puzzled. "If I hadn't wun ovah this afiahnoon, there would be nobody heah to take the call. It is weally vewy peculiah for the telephone to wing in an unoccupied bung, isn't it?"

Buzzzzzzzz!

"Vewy curious indeed," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "I weally don't undahstand it."

Jack grinned.

"Why not take the call, and see who it is?" he suggested. That did not seem, so far, to have occurred to Arthur Augustus.

"Yaas, wathah," he assented, and he crossed the hall, opened the door of the telephone cabinet, and took up the receiver. "Hallo!"

"Is that the Rock bungalow?" came a voice over the wires.

"Yaas."

"Lord Conway there?"

"No, my bwothah does not come down till Saturday."

"Your brother?"

"Yaas: I am Conway's bwothah."

"Oh!" The voice sounded startled. "Are you staying at the bungalow, then?"

"Oh, no! I came ovah fwom St. Jim's this aftahnoon to open it up and look wound. I am just off back to school," answered Arthur Augustus.

"What is wanted, please? I can take a message for Lord Conway."

"Never mind, if you are going back to your school. No friends of Lord Conway's have arrived yet?"

"No! They're all comin' togethah on Saturday. Who is speakin'?"

"Then I'll ring up again on Saturday. Thanks."

The unknown interlocutor rang off.

Arthur Augustus rejoined Jack Free in the hall.

"Only somebody wantin' to speak to old Conway," he said. "He wouldn't have got an answah if I hadn't happened to be heah. Now I shall have to push off. What are you goin' to do, deah boy?"

"Push off too," said Jack, smiling.

Arthur Augustus wrinkled his noble brow in thought. Then he shook his head.

"Not in this wain," he said. "I shall covah the ground like anythin' on the bike, and I shall have old Conway's waincoat, too. Are you in a special hurwy to get to Widgate to-night?"

"Oh, no! But—"

"It's comin' down vewy heavy, deah boy."

"Yes, but—"

"Somebody expectin' you at Widgate?"

Jack laughed.

"No! I know nobody there. But I shall have to find a lodgin' before dark if I can, and—"

"A lodgin'—aftah miles in the wain! Wubbish!"

"But, you see—"

"If you want a lodgin' for the night, deah boy, stay heah till mornin'," said Arthur Augustus. "The beds are vewy comfortable, and there is plenty of gwub for suppah and bweakfast—"

Jack stared at him blankly.

"But—my dear chap—" he stammered.

"Don't you like the ideah?"

"Oh! Yes! But—"

"Of course, it's wathah wuffin' it, campin' out in a bungalow for the night. But bettah than miles in the wain, and gettin' dweached, and huntin' for a lodgin' in a stwange town. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," gasped Jack. "But—"

"I wish I could stay on and keep you company; but there would be a feahful wov at St. Jim's if I didn't turn up," said Arthur Augustus. "You're not nervous about campin' in a place on your own?"

Jack laughed.

"I've done that too often to care about it," he said. "But—my dear fellow—what would your brother say, if you let a perfect stranger stay in the bungalow—"

"That's all wight: Conway would say the same. He's a vewy good-natured chap."

"But—!" stammered Jack.

"Bai Jove, you keep on buttin'. What is it now?"

"But I'm a stranger to you, D'Arcy. How do you know you can trust a stranger in the place—all sorts of expensive things about—"

"Wats!"

"Eh?"

"I wepent, wats! My fwends at St. Jim's know that I am a fellow of tact and judgment, deah boy. Think I don't know when a chap's all wight?"

"You're very kind," stammered Jack. "But—"

"Pway don't be an ass, Fwee," said Arthur Augustus. "You wathah offend me by suggestin' that I couldn't twust you. I wegard you as wathah an ass, if you don't mind my sayin' so."

"But—"

"You are certainly not goin' through this howwid wain, Fwee. Camp heah for the night, deah boy, and mind you lock the fwont door safely when you go in the mornin'. That will be all wight."

Jack gazed at him. He felt something like a lump in his throat for a moment. He nodded at last.

"I'll be jolly glad to lodge here for the night, D'Arcy," he said. "I'll be jolly careful to lock up when I go in the morning. I don't know how to thank you—"

"Wubbish, deah boy. Now I'll be pushin' off," said Arthur Augustus. "Pway make yourself at home, and don't spare the gwub."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy shook hands with his new acquaintance. Enveloped in a raincoat several sizes too large for him, he pushed out his "jigger", mounted, and pushed off in the falling rain.

Jack Free stood watching him, as he went down the rainy road. He had known the St. Jim's junior only a couple of hours or so, and it was not likely that he would ever see him again: but he had taken a tremendous liking to him. In his rough and tumble wandering life, he had met and known all sorts of men and boys: and had made both friends and foes: but seldom had he met a fellow whom he liked so much as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of St. Jim's.

Not till the cyclist had long vanished in the rain, did Jack turn, and re-enter the bungalow. Then, with a thoughtful face, he went in, and shut the door, and made his preparations for "camping". The rain was still falling in the falling dusk: but the waif of the roads had found his lodging for the night.

CHAPTER III

FALLEN AMONG THIEVES!

JACK FREE AWOKE SUDDENLY.

He had been fast asleep, and dreaming, curled up in a deep, wide, soft-cushioned settee in the lounge hall of Rock Bungalow.

Although the St. Jim's junior had told him to make himself at home in the bungalow, Jack had decided not to take that too literally. He did not feel that he could venture to disturb any of the beds, or occupy any of the rooms that were to be occupied by Lord Conway and his guests at the week-end. All he wanted was shelter from the weather, and a night's sleep: and he intended to be on the road at the first glimmer of dawn. So not very long after Arthur Augustus had departed, he turned in on the settee in his clothes, covered himself with a rug, pillowed his head on a cushion, and went to sleep.

It was yet early—far earlier than bedtime for Arthur Augustus at St. Jim's. There was still a glimmer of watery sunshine through the rain on the Channel when Jack turned in. But he had had a long day on the road, and he intended to turn out at dawn: and he wanted all the sleep he could get before he went on the road again. About a minute after his head lay on the cushion, he was asleep. Dreams came in his slumber, of old days with a caravan on the road, of riding in the circus ring, of a windjammer rocking to a gale—the kind pleasant face of the St. Jim's junior mingling with many other faces from the past. And then, suddenly, he awoke, without quite knowing what had awakened him.

It had still been raining heavily when he turned in. But the rain had ceased now: there was no longer the dashing of raindrops on the windows, nor the rattling on the roof. It was early evening—but silence as of the tomb lay on the lonely road over the Sussex cliffs: yet he knew that there must have been some sound that had awakened him from slumber.

In a lonely building, at least a quarter of a mile from any other, some fellows might have been nervous in the dark hours. But the boy who had tramped solitary roads, and camped in strange places, had nothing in the way of nerves. He sat up on the settee, to listen: and from the silence came sounds from outside the bungalow.

There were footsteps on the gravel drive from the gate to the door. Jack's first thought was that D'Arcy might have come back for something. It was densely dark in the hall: the last glimmer of the fire had died out. He could not see the clock, and did not know what time it was: but he knew that it was yet early in the evening. Someone, certainly, was coming up from the road to the bungalow, and he could not imagine who it could be, unless it was the St. Jim's junior.

He pushed off the rug, and stepped off the settee. If D'Arcy, for some inexplicable reason, had come back, he was going to let him in without delay. But he had to know first. On that lonely road, there were probably tramps about; he did not intend to open the door, after dark, till he was sure that he would not be letting in some lawless character who might have nefarious designs on articles of value in the bungalow.

He crossed to the window beside the porch, drew the blind a little aside, and looked out.

The rain had entirely ceased, and it was a fine autumn evening. Over the cliffs gleamed a silver crescent of moon, the light falling clearly into the garden surrounding the bungalow.

"Oh," murmured Jack, as he looked.

On the gravel drive a large van stood. The lights were out, but he made it out quite clearly in the moonlight. He knew now that it was the sound of the car grinding up the gravel to the porch that had awakened him. It was a long motor-van, and the moonlight glistened on lettering painted on the side: SMITH'S REMOVALS.

Jack stared at it.

It was a furniture-van: and why it was there was rather a puzzle. The bungalow was fully furnished, and it could hardly be a consignment of furniture that had arrived at the Rock.

But it seemed less likely still that it was there to take furniture away, as D'Arcy had told him that the week-end party were coming down on Saturday.

The arrival of the van was quite a puzzle to Jack, and he could only stare at it and wonder.

He caught sight of the driver, who had got down from the driving-seat, and

was standing by the van smoking a cigarette. There was a sound of footsteps, from someone else whom he could not see.

But a moment or two later, another figure came into sight. It was that of a man in a dark coat and a bowler hat, with sharp features, and extremely sharp eyes, that seemed to glint as the moonlight fell on his face.

His voice came to Jack's ear, as he spoke to the driver.

"O.K., Sam! I've looked round. Not a sign of a soul."

"There wouldn't be, boss, if the party ain't coming along till the end of the week."

"No! But the 'phone was answered. Can't be too careful."

"There ain't nobody now. There'd be a light."

"It's all right! Get the van open, ready for loading. Safe as houses, but the sooner we're through, the better."

"You got your keys?"

"Do I ever forget them?"

"O.K., boss."

The driver went to the rear of the van, and began to open the double-doors. The man in the bowler hat disappeared into the porch, and there was a sound of a key at the lock.

Jack Free stepped back from the window.

His heart was beating a little fast.

Every word uttered by the men outside, only a few feet from him, had come distinctly to his ears.

The van was there to remove a load. A furniture-van, with *SMITH'S REMOVALS* painted on it, certainly seemed commonplace and reassuring enough. But what he had heard was far from reassuring.

It was possible—though it seemed unlikely after what D'Arcy had said—that a removal firm had instructions to remove furniture from the bungalow. But there was something stealthy in the look of these two men, and if all was above board, why had the man in the bowler hat scouted round the building, and referred to the 'phone call?

Jack breathed rather hard.

He had heard of residences being cleared out, during the absence of their owners, by crooks coolly arriving with a furniture-van, sometimes carrying out such raids in broad daylight under the eyes of unsuspecting passers-by. And the Rock bungalow was a solitary building: there were no passers-by to see what was going on. If this was a robbery, it was, as the man in the bowler hat had said, "safe as houses".

But was it?

It looked like it, to the boy standing there, breathing hard in the dark. But he could not be sure.

If the man had a key to the door, surely he was entitled to enter! Jack listened to the sound at the lock.

The man was trying one key after another. That did not look as if he had been given a latch-key to carry out a job of removal. On the other hand, he might have put it on a key-ring, with others.

Key after key was tried. Then suddenly there was a click, and a cold breath of air told Jack that the door had opened.

"O.K., Sam," came the sharp voice. "It's open."

"Put on a light, George."

"Sure! But we don't want a lot of light on this job."

"Nobody on the road."

"You never know."

"We got to 'ave a light for moving the stuff, George."

"I know that! One light'll be enough. I'll find the switch in a tick."

Jack's heart thumped.

Every word he heard confirmed his suspicion that this was a planned robbery. The 'phone call that D'Arcy had answered was another confirmation. He knew the old trick of thieves in ringing up on the telephone, to make sure that a house was unoccupied before carrying out a raid.

He could not be sure, but he was almost sure. And as he heard the man fumbling in the dark for the lighting-switch, he realized, suddenly and very clearly, that he would be revealed immediately the light came on—and if these men were thieves—

Swiftly, he backed to the settee, and ducked down behind its high back.

He was only just in time. A moment after he had ducked, the light came on. The driver came in, and joined the sharp-faced man. Jack, out of sight, could not see them now. But he could hear.

"Nobody at home, George," said the driver, with a husky chuckle.

"No! But it gave me a start when that schoolboy answered the 'phone this afternoon. I never expected an answer."

"He's gone all right."

"He said he was just off! If he came from the school he names, that's ten miles off, and he's safe enough now. All clear."

"A bit of a surprise for his lordship on Saturday," said Sam, with another husky chuckle.

"Get going. Begin with the big things—"

"That settee—"

Jack's heart throbbed, behind the settee.

"No: the piano first. Run in the trolley."

"O.K."

The driver tramped out again.

Jack heard the scratch of a match. "George" was lighting a cigarette, while he waited for the driver to run in the trolley—some sort of hand-vehicle on which the piano was to be run out to the van. If they were not genuine removal-men, they evidently had the outfit for the business.

Hidden behind the settee, the boy tried to think it out. He was certain—almost certain—that this was a bare-faced robbery—a couple of thieves clearing out an untenanted house. Yet it was possible—

But if they were thieves, what was going to happen to him, when they found him on the spot? As soon as they moved the settee, they would see him. Jack Free had plenty of pluck: but he knew that he had no chance in the hands of a pair of crooks—and there was no help at hand: no one to hear the loudest shout.

He was not, however, thinking much of his own danger. He could have dodged out and escaped while the thieves were ransacking the house. But he did not think for a moment of doing so.

If this was a robbery, he was going to prevent it, somehow. It was a chance to repay that kind-hearted schoolboy, and at any risk to himself, he was glad of the chance.

But he had to keep out of their sight.

There was a sound of wheels in the hall. Sam was wheeling in the trolley for the conveyance of the piano. Probably the settee would be next on the list. The piano was in a room that opened off the hall. Jack heard a door open and, Sam wheeled the trolley in, followed by the sharp-faced man.

This was Jack's opportunity. He had to remain undiscovered, while he thought out what he could do. He lifted his head cautiously, and peered over the settee. The two men were in the adjoining room, and he heard a grunt as of exertion: they were getting the piano on the trolley. For the moment—probably for some minutes—they were busy, and out of sight.

He rose silently to his feet, moved out from behind the settee, and darted into the telephone cabinet.

That was a secure spot: there was nothing in it but the telephone and a chair: the thieves—if thieves they were—would probably not look into it at all. It was, at all events, a safe spot for the present.

He closed the half-glass door behind him, his heart beating. Obviously they had not the slightest suspicion that anyone was in the house: but they were wary and alert, and a sound would have betrayed him. But he made no sound.

The telephone was under his hand. That was a means of giving the alarm—but he could not telephone without being heard, while the two men were in the house. But if they both went out to the van—

They were fairly certain to do so. One man could hardly have handled the piano by himself, even with the trolley to wheel it to the van. Once they were both outside, he could chance it.

A ring to the police station at Ridgate—!

It looked like robbery. Yet there was a chance, at least a chance, that it was not so. He could not be certain—hardly certain enough to call up the police. But another idea came into his head, as he thought it over. D'Arcy would know—and it was possible to get D'Arcy's school on the 'phone.

As soon as that thought came into his mind, Jack picked up the directory that lay beside the instrument. He remembered the name D'Arcy had mentioned—Railton, his housemaster. There was an electric lamp in the cabinet—but he could not venture to switch it on. But sufficient light came through the glass of the door from the hall, to enable him to look through the telephone directory.

He opened it at the R's, and ran his finger down till he came to Railton. There were several Railtons; but he soon found the one he wanted: Railton, V. St. James's School, near Rykcombe. That was, and must be, the housemaster D'Arcy had mentioned. As soon as he was safe from being overheard, he could ring up Mr. Railton, and ask to speak to D'Arcy. Then he would know!

He noted the number, and then waited, with beating heart. There was a sound of wheels again.

Peering from the cabinet, through the glass of the door, he saw the trolley emerge into the hall, with the piano on it. Both men were handling the trolley. They rolled it to the front door, and rolled it out, and Jack heard it grinding on the gravel of the drive.

Now was his chance. They would be five minutes, at least, getting the piano into the van: probably longer. It was his chance—and probably the only chance he would have of telephoning unheard.

Swiftly, he dialled Mr. Railton's number at St. Jim's, and waited, almost trembling with eagerness, for an answer from the school.

CHAPTER IV

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS KNOWS BEST!

"**W**UBBISH!"
 "My dear ass—"
 "Wats!"
 "Now, look here, Gussy—"
 "Wot!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the St. Jim's Fourth, was not often emphatic. But he was most emphatically emphatic now.

Prep was over in No. 6 study in the School House at St. Jim's. An argument was proceeding in that study. Jack Blake, Herries, and Digby were all arguing with their noble chum, and finding that their arguments rolled off him like water off a duck.

"Wubbish, wats, and wot!" repeated Arthur Augustus, firmly. "I should

have thought that you fellows had wealized, by this time, that I have some tact and judgment. I twust that I am not likely to be mistaken in a chap."

"Fathead!" said Blake.

"Ass!" said Herries.

"Chump!" said Digby.

"Weally, you fellows—"

"Hallo, what's the row in this study?" The door of No. 6 was pushed open, and Tom Merry looked in, with Manners and Lowther, on their way down after prep.

"We could hear you down the passage," said Manners.

"Little birds in their nest should agree," said Monty Lowther, solemnly.

"Otherwise they fall out."

"Bai Jove! Is that one of your wotten jokes, Lowthah?"

"No: one of my good ones."

"That ass—!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"That image—"

"I wefuse to be called an image, Blake."

"That chucklehead," continued Blake. "What do you think he's done this time?"

"It will surprise you, even in Gussy," said Dig.

"My dear chap," said Tom Merry. "Could anything Gussy does surprise anybody? But what is it—give it a name—"

"It's nothin' weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Well, hear what it is," said Blake. "Gussy cut over on his bike this afternoon to open up that bung on the coast—naturally he would choose a rainy afternoon for opening up a bung—"

"It was not wainin' when I started, Blake. The wain came on vewy unexpectedly."

"Then he goes and gets a puncture," continued Blake. "Sort of thing he would get. If there's any punctures lying around, Gussy's the man to collect them."

"Weally, Blake—"

"So he wheels his bike in the rain," said Blake, "and a tramp—"

"He was not a twamp, Blake."

"My mistake—a gentleman of the open road. Is that right?"

"Wats!"

"A gentleman of the open road lends him a hand pushing the bike. So Gussy takes him in and stands him tea in the bung. So far, so good. Then, instead of seeing the gentleman safe off the premises before he left, and locking up after him, he offers him a lodjing for the night in the bung—"

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"And leaves him there in possession," said Blake. "He'd never seen the man before—"

"He was not a man, Blake—he was only a little oldah than myself, and a vewy nice chap indeed—"

"He'd never seen him before, and didn't know him from Adam," said Blake. "All he knew about him was that he offered to push the bike."

"That was vewy kind and considerate of him, Blake, as I was vewy fatigued pushin' that beastly jigger—"

"And he lets him camp in old Conway's bung!" said Blake. "He's there now, it seems—unless he's walked off already with the piano in his trouser's pocket."

"You uttah ass—!"

"You know what that bung's like," went on Blake. "Not a common or garden bung, like ordinary mortals have. Bung full of expensive things. Gold and silver plate studded with diamonds—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Nothin' of the kind," exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"Chairs and tables encrusted with pearls—"

"You feahful ass—"

"Anyhow, jolly expensive," said Blake. "And Gussy's left a tramp—"

"I wepeat that he was not a twamp."

"I mean a young gentleman of the road—Gussy's left a young gentleman of the road in that bung, to carry on just as he likes. Is that the limit?"

"And some over," said Herries.

"Ten to one he's gone by this time, with everything he can cram into his pockets," said Dig.

"Wats!"

Tom Merry whistled.

"Wasn't it a bit reckless, Gussy?" he asked.

"Not at all, deah boy."

"You'd never seen the chap before?"

"Not till he offahed me a hand with the bike."

"You don't know anything about him?"

"Oh, yaas. He told me some things."

"Hem! Nothing but what he told you?"

"No!"

"And he's camped in Conway's bung?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"Um!" said Tom Merry.

"Oh, he went on as soon as the rain stopped," said Blake. "Let's hope he locked the door after him, so that other young gentlemen of the road won't be able to barge in and take a cut."

"He did nothin' of the sort, Blake! I invited him to lodge there for the

night, and he is doin' so. He will lock up safely when he goes in the mornin'."

"Dear old Gussy!" said Blake, affectionately.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Anybody could pull Gussy's leg, of course—"

"Wats."

"Sort of gold mine, that bung, for any tramp who could get in," remarked Herries. "And Gussy's let him in, and left him there."

"Weally, Herries—"

"Can you beat it?" asked Dig.

"I wepeat, you duffahs, that my fwiend Fwee is a vewy decent chap," said Arthur Augustus. "I twust I know a decent chap when I see one."

"But—if you've made a mistake—!" said Tom.

"That is all wight, Tom Mewwy—I haven't."



"Do you ever make anything else, old bean?" inquired Monty Lowther.

"Wats!"

"By gum," said Manners. "Gussy may be right—the chap may be straight. But—"

"But—!" said Blake.

"Jolly risky," said Tom.

"I do not see any wisk in it whatevah, Tom Mewwy. The chap is stwaight as a stwing."

Six jammers looked at Arthur Augustus, and looked at one another. What his "friend Free" might be like, they had not the faintest idea. It was possible that Arthur Augustus had judged him correctly, and that it was all right. But—to six fellows it seemed that there was a very considerable "but". To leave an absolute stranger, of whom he knew nothing except that he was on the roads, in sole occupation of a lonely building full of expensive things, undoubtedly seemed to Tom Merry and Co. rather the limit. If Free, whoever Free was, was straight, it was all right. But if he wasn't—! And the only fellow study who had real faith in Gussy's tact and judgment was Gussy in the himself!

"Well, it's done now," said Tom Merry, at last. "Let's hope for the best."

"That's all very well," said Blake. "But something ought to be done, before Gussy's tramp gets clear with everything he can lay his hands on. Railton would let him use his 'phone for a telephone call to the police station at Ridgate—and the bobby on the beat would give the place a look-in."

"That's not a bad idea, Gussy," said Tom.

"I wegard it as an uttishly wotten ideash, Tom Mewwy. It would imply distwust of that vewy decent chap Fwoe."

"But as you don't know the chap, he might be anything—"

"He is all wight."

"Well, how do you know he's all right?" demanded Herries.

"I can twust my own judgment, Hewwies."

"Now, look here, Gussy—" said Dig.

"Wats!"

"You can't leave it as it is," said Blake.

"Wubbish!"

"Ten to one, he's got all the spoons in his pocket at this very minute."

"Wot!"

"Suppose you go and ask Railton!" suggested Manners.

"I hardly think that Wailton's opinion would be worth more than mine, Mannahs, as he has nevah seen the chap."

"But look here—!" roared Blake.

"Pway don't wear at a fellow, Blake! I have told you several times that it throws me into a fluttah to be woreed at."

"You howling ass—"

There was a tap at the study door. Blake broke off, and seven juniors looked round, and Toby, the House page, appeared in the doorway.

"Master D'Arcy here?" said Toby.

"Yaas, wathah! Heah I am, Toby."

"Mr. Railton wants you in his study, sir."

"Bai Jove! What the dooce can Wailton want, aftah pweep!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Is anythin' up, Toby?"

"Mr. Railton had the receiver off the telephone, sir! I think he has taken a call for you," said Toby.

"Oh! Fewwaps I had bettah go," said Arthur Augustus, and he left the study, and followed the page down the stairs.

Tom Merry and Co. exchanged rather startled glances. A telephone call for a junior was an extremely uncommon occurrence, more especially after prep. It was a sufficient indication that something uncommon had occurred.

"By gum!" said Blake, with a deep breath. "I—I wonder if it's from Ridgate—something happened at the bang—!"

"Copped that tramp walking off with the spoons, perhaps," said Herries.

"That's it, very likely," said Dig, with a nod.

"Poor old Gussy!" said Tom Merry. "If it's something like that—!"

"The ass!" said Blake.

"The fathead!" said Herries.

"The chump!" said Dig.

Six fellows waited rather anxiously for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy to return to the study. They had no doubt that something had happened—and they were very anxious to learn what! And as the minutes passed, and Arthur Augustus did not return, they went down to look for him.

CHAPTER V

A TIP ON THE TELEPHONE

JACK FREE listened.

He could hear sounds from the drive outside the bungalow. The two men were getting the piano into the van, and there was a certain amount of noise in the proceeding. But if they were speaking—as doubtless they were—he could not hear their voices. So he knew that they would not hear him, in the telephone cabinet, if he could get through before they came back into the building. How long they would be, he could not tell—surely five minutes at least. But he was feverishly anxious to get through.

A deep voice came over the wires.

"Hallo!"

"Is that St. Jim's?" asked Jack, breathlessly.

"Yes! Mr. Railton speaking," came the deep, pleasant voice. "What is it?"

"I'm speaking from Rock Bungalow, on the coast—Lord Conway's sea-side bungalow—the brother of Master D'Arcy of the school—"

"Well?"

"Can I speak to Master D'Arcy? At once! It's very urgent—"

"Who are you?"

"My name's Jack Free."

"You belong to the place?"

"Oh! No! Master D'Arcy let me stay here to lodge for the night—"

"What?"

"Do let me speak to Master D'Arcy! Some men are removing furniture from the house, and I—I think it's robbery! I want to ask Master D'Arcy whether it's all right."

"Bless my soul!"

"If they catch me at the telephone they'll stop me—if it's thieves, as I think! Just a word to Master D'Arcy—"

"I will send for him at once! Hold the line."

"Yes, yes."

There was silence on the telephone. Jack waited feverishly. He understood that some time must be taken in sending for D'Arcy: but the house-master, surely, would understand that it was urgent. Every minute was precious. If the thieves came back into the house—and he was practically certain that they were thieves—!

A long, long minute passed, and another. They seemed almost like hours to the excited boy in the telephone cabinet at Rock Bungalow. He could still hear faint noises from the drive outside. The piano was heavy and cumbersome: and the two men had plenty to do to park it in the van. They were still busy with it—but for how long?

An age seemed to have elapsed, when a voice he had heard before that day came through from the school ten miles away.

"Is that young Fwee?"

"Yes, yes," panted Jack.

"Mr. Wailton has told me what you said to him—what—"

"Yes, yes! Two men are here removing furniture from the bungalow—"

"Bai Jove!"

"Just at this minute they're getting the piano into the van—"

"Gwrat Scott!"

"—so I'm able to speak: but when I hear them coming back, I shall have to cut off at once—if they're thieves. Are they?" panted Jack. "You must

know whether any orders have been given for the furniture to be removed this evening."

"Nothin' of the kind, deah boy! It is vewy astonishin'! My bwothah Conway is comin' down on Saturday, as I told you—"

"No removal has been ordered?"

"Not at all."

"Then these two men are thieves, as I thought."

"Yaas, wathah! If they are takin' anythin' whatevah away fwom the Wock, they are burglahs."

"I was sure of it—but I had to ask you. Look here, D'Arcy, I may have to cut off any second. I think they intend to clear everything out of the house, from what I have heard them say—"

"The wottahs!"

"—It will take them some time—an hour at least! Lots of time to get through to the police at Ridgate, and ask them to send constables here to stop them—"

"Bai Jove! That's a vewy bwight ideah."

"They've got the piano out so far! There are two of them—they call one another Sam and George. I was sure they were thieves, from what I heard—but I had to make quite certain. Will you 'phone Ridgate police, D'Arcy? I may be interrupted any moment here."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Lose no time, will you?"

"Wathah not! But haven't they spotted you about the bung—?"

"No;—I dodged into the telephone cabinet. They've no idea that anyone is in the house—so far, at any rate."

"Pway keep doggo, deah boy. You might be in dangah if they see you." There was an anxious note in D'Arcy's voice. "Pway be vewy careful!"

"That's all right." Jack caught a sound of footsteps. "No more now—they're coming back."

"Wight-ho—mind you take care, deah boy."

Jack did not venture to speak again. Feet were grinding on the gravel: the two men were coming in from the van. Jack ducked his head below the level of the glass in the door, and listened, his heart beating wildly.

He knew now—for certain! And now D'Arcy, at St. Jim's, knew: and a call would go to Ridgate Police Station. The thieves would be interrupted before they could finish that "removal". The police, once they got word, would lose no time.

That he was in danger, if the rascals discovered him there, Jack was well aware. But he was glad he was there, all the same. He knew that he was saving a loss of hundreds of pounds—if the police were in time, as he was sure they would be. In giving the waiif a lodging for the night, Arthur Augustus had little dreamed what the outcome would be!

CHAPTER VI

GUSSY WAS RIGHT!

"Gussy!"

"What's up?"

"Anything happened at the bung?"

"Yass, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Somethin' wathah excitin', deah boys—a wobbewy!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was standing in the doorway of the School House, in coat and cap, when Tom Merry and Co. came down to look for him—and found him. Apparently he was prepared to go out—which was evidence in itself that something had happened—hours after lock-ups. There was a trace of excitement on the aristocratic visage of the swell of St. Jim's. Twice his eyeglass fell from his noble eye and he had to replace it.

"A robbery!" repeated Tom Merry.

"Yass, wathah."

"What did I tell you?" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Just what you might have expected, old chap," said Herries.

"Letting tramps into the place!" said Dig, shaking his head.

"Weally, you fellows—"

"But where are you going?" asked Manners.

"Wailton is goin' to wun ovah in the car, and he is goin' to take me with him," explained Arthur Augustus. "Vewy decent of old Wailton, what? Of course I am feahfully anxious about what is happenin' at the Wock, with my broothah comin' down on Saturday, you know."

"But who sent the news?" asked Lowther. "Was it a telephone call from the bung, or what?"

"Yass! It's weally extwaordinawy, you fellows—fancy a gang takin' a furniture van to cleah out old Conway's bungalow, you know."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Such things happen," said Tom Merry. "I've read of them in the newspapers, at any rate."

"Quite a post war industry," said Monty Lowther.

"And the tramp let them in?" asked Blake.

"Eh! What? Weally, Blake, I should be vewy much obliged to you if you would try not to be such an ass—"

"Well, didn't he?" demanded Blake.

"I have already told you that my fwend Fwee is not a twamp, Blake."

"Well, did the young gentleman of the road let them in?"

"I wegard you as a fathhead, Blake!"

"Well, who sent the news?" asked Tom.

"Fwee, of course."

"Eh?"

"Jack Fwee wang up on the telephone to Wailton, to tell him."

"To tell him that he was walking off with the goods?" gasped Blake.

"You uttah ass!" hooted Arthur Augustus. "If Fwee hadn't been on the spot, and taken the wisk of bein' caught at the telephone, they would have got away with the wobbewy all wight. I am feahfully anxious about what may happen to him if the wogues spot him there. It was feahfully wisky to wing up on the 'phone with two wascally cwooks on the spot."

"Oh, my hat!"

"They may knock him on the head or somethin'. I wondah how long Wailton is goin' to be with that cah!"

"But—but—" stuttered Blake. "Mean to say that the tramp—"

"I wepeat—"

"I mean Free—mean to say that Free 'phoned to give the alarm, while a couple of thieves were about the place—?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"By gum!" said Blake. "He could have hooked it by a back window. Must be a plucky tramp—I mean—"

"Wailton has 'phoned the police at Widgate," said Arthur Augustus. "We shall be there almost as soon as the bobbies, cuttin' acroos country in the cah. It is vewy decent of Wailton—he's a friend of old Conway's, you know. I am feahfully anxious to see Fwee—"

"Here comes the car!" said Blake.

There was the purr of an engine from the shadows, and a gleam of lights. Mr. Raiton's voice called.

"D'Arcy!"

"Weady, sir!" Arthur Augustus ran down the steps, and vanished into the car. The lights gleamed away to the school gates, already opened by Taggles. Tom Merry and Co. stared after the red rear-light as it winked away.

"Well!" said Jack Blake, with a deep breath.

"Well!" said Tom Merry.

"Who'd have thought it?" said Blake. "We've been ragging Gussy for being such an ass as to let that tramp into the bung—"

"Spot of luck that he did, as it turns out," said Tom.

"Yes, rather. But—"

"Gussy was right all the time!" said Tom, with a smile.

"Yes—that's what beats me!"

"Wonders will never cease!" remarked Monty Lowther.

"But—what may be happening to that chap at the bung!" said Tom Merry.

"I shall be jolly glad to get news that he's safe."

"Same here!"

The red light winked away into the night, and disappeared. With Victor

Railton at the wheel, the car ate up the miles, under the moonlight. Tom Merry and Co. were eager for news of what might have happened at the bungalow—Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in the car, was deeply anxious.

He watched the trees and shadowy hedge-rows as they flashed by. What had happened—what might have happened—to Jack Free, since his voice had been heard on the telephone? Swift as the car was, it seemed slow to Gussy's anxious impatience.

CHAPTER VI

JUST IN TIME!

"WHAT SETTEE DOX!"
"Ere goes!"

Jack Free was thankful that he was no longer behind the settee, as the two men rolled it away on its castors to the door.

He wondered whether they would think of looking into the telephone cabinet at all. Until they did so, at all events, he was safe.

He peered from the glass door. If he had a chance of dodging out of the bungalow unseen—

He ducked his head again, as the two men came tramping in at the front door. There was no chance yet.

He heard them moving about the hall, taking away one article after another: chairs, tables, cushions, rugs, carpet. It was apparent that the thieves intended to make a complete clearance.

That was all to the good in a way, as it was taking time, and time was required for the police to arrive from Ridgate. That the alarm had been given promptly from St. Jim's, Jack had no doubt. But when would they come?

He listened to incessant tramping to and fro. They were losing no time—but they had plenty to do: and time was passing. Bedsteads and bedding were following the other things to the van.

Then Jack heard a sound of clattering and clashing of crockery and cutlery as Sam got busy in the kitchen.

And then, suddenly, the boy's heart almost missed a beat, as he heard the sharp tones of the man in the bowler hat.

"I'll get through to Isaacs now, Sam! Another half-hour will see us through here."

"You said it, boss."

"I'll tip him that all's clear, and to expect us about ten."

"Oh!" breathed Jack.

Every word came clearly to his ears, and his heart thumped.

So far the thieves had proceeded with their work without the slightest

suspicion that anyone else was in the bungalow. Certainly they never dreamed that warning had been given, and that the police were already on their way from Ridgate. But the moment the door of the telephone cabinet was opened—and the man was about to use the telephone—!

Jack peered from the glass in the door.

The man in the bowler hat was standing with his back turned, speaking to Sam in the kitchen, and smoking a cigarette. Was there a chance—a remote chance—of darting across to the open front door before he turned?

Chance or not, Jack had no other resource—for discovery would be immediate as soon as the glass door was opened. Jack had to take the chance.

The man still had his back to him. He was going to use the telephone: but he was in no way hurried. A few seconds—

Jack quietly and softly opened the door of the telephone cabinet. He stepped out on tiptoe.

Almost suppressing his breathing, he tiptoed across the hall towards the open doorway.

The man did not turn.

Jack's heart was beating in great throbs. But his head was cool. Swiftly, but silently, he trod across the hall. The man was speaking again.

He turned.

The next moment he gave a sudden jump and uttered almost a roar of mingled rage and astonishment at the sight of the boy, half-way across the hall to the open doorway.

Jack was on tiptoe. But he was seen and further caution was useless. He made a desperate rush for the doorway.

At the same moment the man in the bowler hat, yelling to his associate, rushed across to intercept him.

"Gosh!" came a startled exclamation from Sam, and he came running out of the kitchen. "What—"

Jack tore desperately to the doorway. He reached it—and at the same moment, the man in the bowler hat reached him, and grasped him. Another second and he would have leaped out, but that savage grasp dragged him back.

"Sam—here—quick—"

"'Old him, boss."

Jack Free turned fiercely on the man who was grasping him. Sam was running across the hall, his hand uplifted, with something in it. Desperately Jack crashed both his clenched fists in the face of the man whose savage grasp was on him. That grasp relaxed, as the man staggered.

He wrenched himself loose.

Sam was almost upon him, the "cosh" in his hand lifted to strike. But the blow missed by a foot as Jack Free bounded into the doorway.

The next moment he was dodging round the van, and running down the drive, as fleetly as a deer. He heard panting voices from the bungalow.

"After him—"

"If he gets away—"

Jack reached the gate. Footsteps were pounding on the gravel behind him. There was no time to open the gate. He placed his hands on the top bar and vaulted over, even as a hand grasped at him from behind.

He landed on the road on his feet. In another moment he would have darted away: but a grasp was laid on his shoulder, and he was stopped. In the dim moonlight the man in the bowler hat loomed over him across the gate.

"Oh!" gasped Jack. He wrenched desperately. He heard the man's savage snarling voice.

"Sam! The cosh—quick!"

In that wild moment, the boy was conscious of lights gleaming on the road, of two or three burly forms shadowy in the moonlight. There was someone on that lonely road—two or three—was it the police?

"Help!" shouted Jack.

"Who's that?" came a deep voice. "Is that the boy—?"

"Help! help!"

He glimpsed a helmeted head. The grasp on him relaxed—and he heard a howl of rage and alarm.

"The police!"

He was released. He stood panting, hardly knowing what was happening. He heard running feet—but they were receding: the two crooks were in flight, cutting across the bungalow gardens, with the constables in pursuit. Jack Free leaned on the gate, panting and panting for breath.

CHAPTER VIII

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL!

"FWEE!"
"D'Arcy!"

The car stopped, the head-lights gleaming on the boy standing at the gate. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy fairly hurled the door open, and leaped out.

"Fwee!" he gasped, "All wight?"

"Right as rain."

"Toppin'! I was feahfully alarmed for you, deah boy—feahfully a'fraid that those wottahs might get hold of you—"

Jack laughed breathlessly.

"They did! But the police came just in time! They're in the bungalow now—they've got both of them—I saw them taken in handcuffed—"

"Stunnin'! And you're not hurt?"

"Not in the least!"

"Wippin', deah boy. All's well that ends well, what?"

Mr. Railton stepped down from the driving-seat, his eyes curiously on Jack Free. Arthur Augustus turned to him.

"Is this the boy, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas, wathah—my friend Fwoe," said Arthur Augustus, and the St. Jim's housemaster, with a smile, shook hands with the waif of the roads. "Vewy lucky he had a lodgin' for the night at the bung, sir."

"Very!" said Mr. Railton.

"I'm glad I was there," said Jack. "I suppose the police will be there for the night. I'd better get on the road—"

"Wats!"

"But—"

"You certainly will not get on the woad," said Arthur Augustus. "I certainly should not dweam of allowin' you to do anything of the kind, deah boy."

"But—"

"I don't think you can go on the road just yet, my boy," said Mr. Railton. "The police will want you when those men are charged at Ridgate. It will be necessary for you to remain for some time, at least."

"Oh!" said Jack. "But—"

"But we shall find you a lodging—not in a lonely bungalow," said the housemaster, smiling. "I will speak to the inspector—and then take you back with me in the car. You would like to stay at D'Arcy's school for a few days?"

"Oh!" gasped Jack.

"Like the ideah, old boy?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"What-ho!" said Jack, his eyes dancing.

It seemed rather like a dream to "Jack of All Trades", when he was sitting in the car with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, speeding through the moonlight for St. Jim's. And the next few days seemed to him almost a happy day-dream, at the old school, with Tom Merry and Co., and the cheery Arthur Augustus—the happiest possible sequel to his adventure at the lonely bungalow where he had had a Lodging for the Night!

THE END