

UNDER PADLOCK AND SEAL



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Author: Charles Harold Avery

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UNDER PADLOCK AND SEAL

BY HAROLD AVERY

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[BOOK COVER](#)

The children leant forward and peered down into this wonderful box.

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UNDER PADLOCK AND SEAL.

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CHAPTER I.

DOWNSTAIRS IN THE DARK.

E

lsie pushed away the bed-clothes which were covering her ear, and listened; then

she sat up in bed, and listened again.

There was no doubt that it was an actual sound, and not mere imagination. How long it had been going on, or when it first began to mingle in a confused manner with her dreams, she could not say; but now she heard it plainly enough, and recognized what it was—the peculiar, grating hiss of a grindstone, punctuated every now and then with a subdued little squeak made by the treadle.

ELSIE

Who on earth should want to be grinding anything at that time of night?

The Pines was a rambling old house; the girls always slept with their window open; and just below was an outbuilding, part of which was used as a tool-house, in which stood the grindstone; and thus the sound had reached Elsie at a moment when perhaps her slumber was not as deep as usual. The noise continued, with pauses at regular intervals, when whatever was being sharpened was removed from the stone. Taking care not to disturb her elder sister, Ida, whose heavy breathing showed that she was sound asleep, the little girl slipped out of bed, and crept softly over to the window. By straining her neck, and pressing her cheek close against the pane, she could just get a glimpse of the tool-house window, which she noticed was faintly illuminated, as it might have been by the feeble rays of a night-light.

A sudden thought occurred to Elsie that it must be her cousin, Brian Seaton, who lived at the Pines, and went to school with her brother Guy. Brian was always boat-building; sometimes he sat up later than he ought to have done, and continued to work long after every one else was in bed. No doubt the rascal was doing so now, and had stolen down to put a fresh edge on his chisel. Elsie was a spirited young monkey, and she and Brian were great chums.

"I'll just creep down and show him I've found him out," she said to herself. "What fun to take him by surprise!"

To put on dressing-gown and slippers was but the work of a few moments. Softly opening the bedroom door, she passed out on to the landing, and groping in the darkness until she found the rail of the banisters, she proceeded down the stairs.

How still and quiet the house seemed! Nothing broke the silence but the solemn "tick-tack" of the big clock in the hall, which had been ticking in the same sedate manner since the days when Elsie's grandmother had been a little girl. Feeling her way down the length of the hall, not without an occasional bump against chairs and other such obstacles, Elsie came to a little lobby or cloak-room, having at the farther end a half-glass door, which opened on the yard, and from which the tool-house was distant not more than a dozen paces. She quite expected to find this door open, and was surprised to discover that it was not only shut, but locked on the inside.

"What a beggar Brian is!" thought the girl. "He must have climbed out of his window, and come down the water-pipe, as he did one day last summer."

She laid her hand on the key, when a low growling noise gave her quite a little fright, until she remembered that it was the old clock in the hall preparing to strike—"clearing his throat," as Ida called the operation. The next moment the bell struck—

"Ting! ting!"

Elsie listened with a gasp of astonishment; the old clock ignored the halves and quarters, so the time must be two o'clock in the morning! She never remembered having been up so early or so late before, and the thought that she was wandering about the house at that unearthly hour made her feel quite queer.

"What can Brian be about?" she murmured. "He can't have been sitting up working till this time."

She turned the handle of the door, and stepped across the threshold. The cold night air made her shiver, the whir of the grindstone came clear and distinct from the tool-house, and the window still gleamed with the same subdued, ghostly light. Elsie had intended to rush across the flagstones, fling open the door, shout "Brian, go to bed!" and then herself beat a hasty retreat; but, just when she was on the point of doing so, she hesitated.

What if it shouldn't be Brian after all? And if it were not her cousin, who or what could be there in the tool-house turning the grindstone at two o'clock in the morning?

It is when we pause to think that fear often takes hold of us. Elsie was a brave child; but, somehow, just then her courage seemed to desert her. She remained for an instant listening to the whispering of the night wind, and the mysterious sound which had first roused her from her slumbers; then she drew back in sudden panic, locked the door as if in the fear of some lion, and went quickly back the way she had come.

"Tick-tack! tick-tack!" muttered the old clock. He never felt afraid at having to stand alone all night in the darkness. Elsie hurried past him, and after one or two stumbles on the stairs, regained her bedroom.

"Ida! Wake up!"

"Every one of my sums is right," murmured Ida drowsily. "You can always get them right with a blue pencil."

"Wake up, Ida! I want to tell you something."

"Oh, bother!" grumbled the elder girl. "What's the matter, Elsie? What d'you want to keep shaking me for when I'm sound asleep?"

"Why, I want to tell you there's some one turning our grindstone."

"Well, what if they are? I suppose it's meant to be turned."

"But not now. It's two o'clock in the morning. No one ought to be about there at this time."

Ida sat up, rubbed her eyes, and yawned.

"What d'you mean?" she exclaimed.

"Listen!" was the answer. "You'll hear the noise. Some one was working the grindstone. Why, I heard the little squeak of the treadle as plainly as anything."

"You have been dreaming, you little silly!"

"No, I *haven't*! What I say is quite true."

There was something in the speaker's tone which showed that she was very much in earnest.

"And you mean to say that you've been all the way downstairs?"

"Yes; I went to the yard door. I meant to have gone across to the tool-house, but I was frightened."

"Well, if any one was there, it must have been Guy or Brian—probably Brian, for he's the only one who can sharpen tools. I'll go across and ask."

Throwing the dressing-gown over her shoulders, Ida left the room. She still did not believe that either of the boys had been up at that unearthly hour using the grindstone, but she wished to prove to Elsie that it was all imagination. As she passed the head of the stairs she suddenly stopped. Somewhere, down below, she distinctly heard a soft noise like the patter of slippers. Ida leant over the banisters.

BOB

"Brian!" she cried in a whisper. "What are you doing?"

There was a scuffling noise, and a moment later, to the girl's astonishment, a black dog came jumping up the stairs as fast as it could go.

"Why, Bob, you rascal, whatever brings you in here?"

The dog capered about with a whining noise, which showed his delight.

"Hush! don't bark!" commanded the girl; "you ought to be in your kennel. Go downstairs, and lie on the mat."

The dog obeyed, and pattered off down the stairs, while Ida went on and tapped at the door of the room in which the two boys slept. The knocking had to be repeated several times before there was any answer. At last there came a sleepy, "All ri'. What 'er want?"

"Have you been down turning the grindstone in the tool-house, Guy?"

"No, of course not."

"Has Brian?"

"No; he's here asleep."

"Have either of you been down there?"

"No, you stupid!"

"Well, some one's let Bob into the house."

"Oh, bother Bob! I say, Ida, you are a fool to go waking a fellow up like this. What's the joke?"

"It's no joke," she said. "Good-night; go to sleep."

"You are a little noodle, Elsie!" Ida exclaimed as she jumped back into bed, her teeth chattering with the cold. "The boys are both in bed, and haven't been near the tool-house. And d'you know what you've done? You've let in Bob."

"I'm sure I didn't."

"But you *did*. He's just run upstairs. He must have slipped in when you opened the yard door. His collar's broken, and he gets loose sometimes."

"I'm sure he didn't come into the house when I opened the door," persisted Elsie. "I only stood there half a minute. The servants must have let him in when they were locking up."

"Well, if it was a robber working the grindstone," answered Ida jokingly, "he can't get into the house without Bob barking and waking everybody up. Now, good-night; don't wake me up again."

Ida's breathing soon showed that she was once more in the land of dreams, but try as Elsie would she could not get off to sleep. As often as she closed her eyes she seemed to see the dark outline of the tool-house, the single window illuminated with a ghostly glimmer, and again she heard the hiss and whir of the grindstone as she had heard it before.

Who could have been at work there, if Guy and Brian were both in bed? If she had run across and opened the door of the little den, what would she have seen? She was still lying awake thinking, when the old clock downstairs struck three. Gradually her excitement gave place to a sensation of drowsiness, and at length she fell asleep. Even now her puzzled brain was not quite content to let her rest. In her dreams she once more went downstairs, and this time the door of the tool-house opened, and out came the grindstone of its own accord, staggering along on its wooden stand, and whizzing round all the time with a buzzing sound like a big angry bee. It chased her along endless passages, and up and down countless flights of stairs. Then Brian appeared on the scene; she rushed forward to beg his help, and in doing so awoke to find that she was in bed.

THE GRINDSTONE



CHAPTER II.

THE LOST CARVING-KNIFE.

T

here was a great deal of chattering going on at the breakfast table next morning, seldom less than two people talking at once.

"Look here, Ida," cried Guy; "next time you come waking me up in the middle of the night, I'll have a sponge of cold water ready for you; see if I don't!"

"I tell you it was Elsie's fault," was the answer. "She declared she heard some one turning the grindstone."

"Well, so I did," persisted Elsie, who did not like her word being doubted. "I heard it quite plainly; and there was a light in the tool-house."

"Are you sure you were not dreaming?" asked Mrs. Ormond.

"Yes, quite sure, mother."

"Did you grind any of your tools last night, Brian?"

"Oh no, aunt. I haven't touched the grindstone for a week at least. Besides, I'm too fond of bed to get up and sharpen chisels at two o'clock in the morning."

The speaker was a sturdy, good-natured boy, two years older than Guy, and greatly distinguished this term by having received the cap of the Rexbury Grammar School football team.

"You two girls are a couple of noodles," went on Guy. "I suppose you thought it was a ghost working at the stone?"

"Well, look here," cried Ida, anxious to turn the conversation; "who let Bob in last night? Elsie says she didn't, but he was in the house when I came over to your room."

"He was fastened up when I crossed the yard about eight o'clock last night," said Brian.

"Where did you find him this morning, Jane?" asked Ida, turning to the parlour-maid.

"He was outside, chained up to his kennel, miss," was the answer.

"Outside! But when he was once in the house he couldn't possibly get out again. He came running up the stairs, and I couldn't think what it was for a minute."

"He was in his kennel when we came down this morning, miss," said Jane.

Guy burst out into a roar of laughter.

"Well, I'm blest!" he cried. "You are a pair! First there's Elsie's yarn about that grindstone, and now you try to stuff some silly story into us of Bob's running about the house when he was outside all the time."

"But he *was* in the house," cried Ida, flushing. "He came upstairs to me, and I sent him down again."

"Then if he was in the house, will you tell me how he could have got out again before the servants came down to open the door? You girls must have eaten something for supper last night that didn't agree with you, and both had nightmare. Next time you get it, don't come across to our door."

"Now, now!" interrupted Mrs. Ormond, who saw that Ida was about to make an angry retort, and judged that the discussion had gone far enough. "Come, you boys will be late if you don't make haste with your breakfast. Are you going to play football this afternoon, Brian?"

"Yes, aunt; it's a match."

"Shall you want to take your things with you?"

"No, thank you. The game's on our ground, so I shall come home to change."

Mr. Ormond, who had not been paying much attention to the conversation, now laid aside the newspaper he had been reading, at the same time remarking,

"I see that the *Arcadia* left the docks in London yesterday bound for Australia, so I suppose by this time Mr. William Cole has begun his first experience of being 'rocked in the cradle of the deep.'"

"Was the *Arcadia* the ship he was going out on?" asked Ida.

"Yes," replied her father; "that was the one in which he had booked his passage."

"Old King Cole was a merry old soul," chanted Guy, with his mouth half full of toast and butter. "I wish he hadn't gone. I'm sure we shan't ever have such a nice man again."

"He was a civil, sharp young fellow," said Mr. Ormond. "I suppose he hopes to do better in the Colonies than by staying on in the old country. Well, it's very possible he may get on. He's a handy sort of chap, and can turn his hand to all

kinds of jobs."

William Cole, the subject of these remarks, had, until about a week previous to the commencement of this story, been gardener and man-of-all-work at the Pines. Being easy-going, and clever with his hands, he had been a great favourite with the children. Whether it was to clean a bicycle, splice the broken joint of a fishing-rod, blow birds' eggs, or cut the fork of a catapult, William was always the man to whom to apply; and he never failed in the performance of these services to win the entire satisfaction of his youthful admirers.

"I am sorry he's gone," said Ida. "He was always so polite, and never grumbled when you asked him to run an errand."

"It's time we were off," exclaimed Brian, glancing at the clock.—"Will you excuse me, aunt? I've got to find my books."

The children rose from the table, and rushed out into the hall, where a fresh dispute, though of a friendly nature, occurred between Ida and Guy with regard to the ownership of a certain book-strap. There was a good deal of racing up and down stairs, and at length the bang of the front door proclaimed the fact that they had all started—the boys for the big school in the centre of the town, and the girls for one a little nearer home.

"It seems strange that both Ida and Elsie should have had such queer fancies last night," said Mrs. Ormond to her husband as they remained seated together at the breakfast table.

"What was it? I didn't quite catch what they were saying."

"Why, Elsie says she was awakened by hearing the grindstone turning in the tool-house. She went down to see if it was Brian sharpening his chisels, but she got frightened, so returned and woke Ida. Then Ida declares that, when she went across to the boys' room to see if they were awake, Bob was in the house, and came running up the stairs to her; but Jane says that, when they came down this morning, Bob was outside in his kennel."

"I expect Ida was more than half asleep," answered her father, "and thought she saw the dog. I know I've still gone on dreaming when I've been roused up

suddenly out of a sound sleep. What Elsie heard was, no doubt, the wind."

"But she says there was a light in the tool-house."

"Oh, nothing but the reflection of the moonlight on the glass, you may depend. If there had been any one about who had no business there, the dog would have barked."

The boys were rather late in getting back to dinner, and when they arrived they were in a hurry to get the meal over and be off again. Brian had to change and walk to the football ground, while Guy intended to go with him and watch the game.

"Whom is the match against?" asked Mrs. Ormond.

"Against Newford College, mother," was the reply. "We ought to lick 'em this time. We've got a ripping strong team."

"I expect you'll come back with that nice red and white shirt of yours mud all over, Brian," said Ida.

"Oh, that doesn't matter so long as we win," answered her cousin.

"If the ladies will excuse it, I think I'd better serve you first, Brian," said Mr. Ormond, as the cover was removed, disclosing a couple of roast fowls. "Then you'll have time to get into your war paint.—My dear," the speaker continued, addressing his wife, "I wish I could have the proper poultry-carver instead of this big knife."

"Isn't it laid?" inquired Mrs. Ormond.—"Jane, you should have put the smaller carving-knife."

"Please, 'm," answered the maid. "I meant to do so, but I can't find it."

"Can't find it! Doesn't Sarah know where it is?"

"No, ma'am; she says she remembers it being brought in the last time it was sent out to be cleaned, but we can't find it now. We turned the cupboard out just before dinner-time."

"Are you sure that Henry hasn't had it to clean, and left it behind in the tool-house when he brought in the other knives?"

"Yes, 'm; we've looked there."

"Oh, never mind," said the master of the house; "I'll make this knife do now; you'll find the other somewhere."

"But there's no reason why it should have been lost," replied Mrs. Ormond. "I can't imagine where it's gone to."

"I say," cried Guy, "perhaps it was the poultry-carver that Elsie's ghost was grinding last night! Ha! ha! That's where it went!"

"I never said it was a ghost, you stupid," answered Elsie, a good bit nettled.

"Well, some one said it was."

"You said so yourself, Guy; and it's not fair to put it off on me."

"You were the person who heard it; and so, if it was a ghost, it was your ghost."

"It *isn't* my ghost!" cried Elsie, thumping the table, and getting very red. "It isn't a ghost at all, so shut up, Guy."

"How d'you know it wasn't a ghost? If you didn't see what it was, it might as well be a ghost as anything else."

"Come now," interrupted Mrs. Ormond; "I think we discussed this matter quite enough at breakfast, so now you'd better let it rest. Your father thinks that it was nothing but the wind whistling through some crack that Elsie mistook for the noise of the stone."

"But, mother—" began the little girl.

"Never mind, Elsie," interrupted Mrs. Ormond; "we won't talk about it any more just now. There's nothing to be ashamed of in mistaking one sound for another, especially when you wake up in the middle of the night, and everything

seems strange."

Elsie subsided, but she was far from satisfied, especially as Guy covertly pulled a face at her across the table. She ate her dinner in silence, and as soon as the meal was over left the room and went outside in a pet. As the tool-house had been uppermost in her mind lately, she naturally found her way there, and sat down on an old hamper to think. Though sensitive, she was a courageous child, and she did not like being made fun of, especially when the taunt implied that she had been frightened at nothing.

There before her stood the grindstone, looking exactly the same as it had always done. The girl rose, walked over to it, and put her foot on the treadle.

"Squeak! squeak!" Yes, that was exactly the noise she had heard in the night, coupled with the grate of the stone against the hard metal. She felt more than ever sure that she had not been mistaken.

At that moment the door opened, and Brian appeared. In his short blue knickers, and with the gaily coloured shirt showing beneath his coat, he looked what he was—a thoroughly manly boy. He and Elsie were always the best of good comrades, and the latter was always ready to tell Brian her troubles, feeling sure of a sympathetic hearing.

"Are my football boots out here?" he asked.

"Yes, they're over there. And, I say, Bri, I *did* hear the grindstone turning last night, and it's too bad of them to say I didn't."

"Well, if you did, you did," answered Brian consolingly. "There's no reason to fret yourself about such a trifle."

"But Guy tries to make out I was frightened at nothing, and I wasn't."

"Not you," grunted Brian, dragging on his boots. "You're a good plucked un, I know."

"D'you really think so?" answered Elsie, much relieved. "Bri, you're a brick. I hope you'll kick ten goals this afternoon."

"I shall be content if I kick two," answered the boy, stamping his feet on the flagstones to settle them into his stiff boots. As he went out he paused for a moment to look at the grindstone. On the wooden framework were some dark spots; he examined them more closely, and scratched one with his nail.

"Humph!—candle-grease!" he muttered.

BRIAN



CHAPTER III.

UNCLE ROGER'S BOX.

H

ullo! What d'you want?"

BOTTLE"Come here a minute."

In three days the incident of the grindstone had been almost forgotten, and Elsie was no longer troubled by any more of Guy's chaff on the subject of her night alarm. At the present moment she was standing in her father's library, and had called to her cousin, who happened to be passing outside in the passage.

"Well, what d'you want?" he repeated as he entered the room.

"Look!" said Elsie, pointing with her finger; "only two more days, and it'll be time to open *that*. Aren't you longing to know what's inside?"

The object in question stood stowed away in a dark corner of the room, and the children all knew its history. It was an oak box or small chest, dark with age and strongly bound with bands of iron; the panels were ornamented with rough

carvings of dragons and other curious beasts, and where the iron clamps met they were secured with good-sized padlocks.

UNCLE ROGER'S BOX

This box had stood in its present position ever since the children could remember, and, indeed, it had been there before even Ida, the eldest of the three, was born. It had been left to Mr. Ormond by an eccentric old relative, who had given special instructions in his will that the chest should not be opened for twenty years after the date of his death. The children were never tired of speculating as to what would be found in "Uncle Roger's Box," as it was called; and of late their interest in the legacy had steadily increased as the time drew near when the riddle would at last be answered.

"Father says he is going to open it on Thursday morning," continued Elsie. "November the third; that's the exact date. I say, Brian, what d'you think's inside?"

"I'm sure I don't know," answered the boy, laughing. "Old clothes, perhaps."

"Oh, no; it's sure to be something valuable. Just fancy—it hasn't been opened for twenty years! T-w-e-n-t-y years! That's twice as long as the whole of my life!"

"Then," said Brian, who was good at mental arithmetic, "it's been shut up for 7,300 days, all but two."

"And on Thursday morning it's to be opened!" cried Elsie, dancing round the room. "I'm simply dying to know what's inside. I asked Sarah once what she thought it would be, and she said she believed it must be money. I dreamt once that I came down and saw it open, and that it was full of the most lovely jewellery—chains, and rings, and bracelets, with the most beautiful precious stones set in them, all colours of the rainbow!"

"Good-night! Why didn't you collar a few? You might have grabbed a handful, and given some to me."

"I was just going to, when I woke up," answered Elsie. "That's always the way

in dreams."

"I know," replied Brian, laughing. "I've dreamt I was turned loose in a confectioner's shop, and I could have anything I liked; and just when I was going to start on a plate of cheesecakes, Jane came hammering at the door, saying it was time to get up. It's a queer old thing," he continued, alluding to the box. "Let's have a look at the gentleman."

"It's pretty heavy," he continued, as he lifted the box out into the light of the window; "but that may be the weight of the wood and iron. I'm afraid it isn't full of gold, Elsie; if it were, I shouldn't be able to move it at all."

"Look!" cried the little girl. "The locks can't be opened because they are sealed. That thing like one of the chessmen with a leopard standing on top putting his tongue out was Uncle Roger's crest. He did that himself just before he died."

The front of each of the padlocks was ornamented with a big circular lump of dark blue sealing-wax, on which the impression of the old gentleman's seal was distinctly visible. While these remained unbroken it was impossible to put a key into either of the locks.

"I suppose he did that to make sure that no one should open the box before the proper time?"

"Yes," answered Elsie. "You see, even if a person had keys which would fit the locks, he couldn't use them unless he first broke the seals; and no one would do that, because it would show that the box had been meddled with."

"But supposing you got some more blue wax of the same colour—" began Brian. "But, no; of course you'd want the seal. What became of it, d'you know?"

"Father's got it. He keeps it locked up in one of the drawers of the big safe at his office. He showed it to us once. It's on the end of one of those chains that old gentlemen used to wear hanging down under their waistcoats."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Guy and Ida, who had just returned from a walk.

"Hullo!" cried the former. "What are you two doing with Uncle Roger's box?"

"Only looking at it," answered Brian.

"What a crank the old chap must have been!" continued Guy. "Why didn't he leave it in his will to be opened at once?"

"I've heard father say that he was always doing queer things," remarked Ida. "Long after his wife died he wouldn't eat his meals unless her place was laid for her opposite to him at table, where she used to sit. For the last five years of his life they say he stayed in the house, and never put his foot outside the door."

"Silly old chump!" remarked Guy. "I wonder if there really is anything in this old box of his. Look here; I'll turn it up, and you listen and tell me if you hear anything move inside."

"O Guy, don't! You may break something!" exclaimed his sister.

"Not I. I'll do it gently. Now listen." Slowly and cautiously he turned the box on end, but its contents did not appear to move.

"I believe the blessed thing's empty!" cried the boy.

"I fancied I heard something sort of trickle about inside," said Elsie.

"Oh, you're always fancying something," said her brother. "You'll say the grindstone's in there next."

"I thought I heard something too," exclaimed Brian. "But it was only a very slight sound, such as a bit of loose wood might make—a chip, perhaps, from off the inside of the lid."

Guy lowered the box, and turned it up again. "I do hear something," he admitted. "It's a bit of wood, I expect. What a sell! I'm certain the box is empty."

"Oh, nonsense; you can't tell," answered Ida. "It may be quite full of something, and so tightly packed that the contents are wedged together, and can't shake about when you move the box. Uncle Roger would never have taken the trouble to seal the locks, and leave those instructions in his will, if it were just an

empty box."

"Well, here goes," said Brian. "I'm going to put it back in its place again." And with these words he lifted the chest in his strong arms, and returned it to its old corner. Guy remained for a moment balancing himself on one foot.

"Let me see," he said; "what was it I meant to do? Oh, I know! Mend the ring in Bob's collar. He's always getting loose. First I must get the tweezers."

He ran off at once to find the tool, but on entering the kitchen was at once pounced upon by the cook. Sarah had been at the Pines for many years, and the young Ormonds had grown to regard her as quite one of the family.

"Now, Master Guy," she began, "what business had you got to go and take all my methylated spirit?"

"I haven't touched it," was the answer.

"Yes, you have, now. You've been and taken it for that there model steam engine of yours. Why didn't you come and ask if you might have some?"

"I tell you I *haven't* had any," persisted the boy.

"Now, Master Guy, you're telling fibs. The bottle was half full, or nearly so, last week; and when I come to it this afternoon there wasn't a drop left, and too late to send down into town and get any."

"Look here, Sarah; you can say what you like, but I haven't touched your silly old bottle, so there! Jane must have taken the spirit, or else you used it yourself."

The boy found the tweezers, and ran out into the yard. But Sarah was still unconvinced. She had found her remaining stock of methylated spirit entirely vanished; and as Guy had been known, on one or two previous occasions, to borrow the bottle and help himself to its contents when fuel was required for his model steam engine, she naturally supposed him to be the culprit in the present instance.

Later on, when the family were assembled at the tea-table, Mrs. Ormond herself referred to the matter.

"Guy," she said, "are you sure you haven't taken cook's methylated spirit?"

"Quite sure, mother."

"I should be sorry to think that you weren't telling me the truth about such a small matter, but I must say it does seem very strange. Sarah goes and finds the bottle standing uncorked and empty, and I know myself that there was some spirit in it a few days ago."

"Perhaps if the cork wasn't in the bottle the spirit had evaporated," suggested Elsie.

"I don't think it would do that," replied her mother, laughing. "I'm rather inclined to think that it evaporated into the lamp of somebody's steam engine."

"No, it didn't!" cried Guy. "Look here, mother; you might as well believe a fellow when he tells you the truth."

"Well, if you tell me you didn't take it," replied Mrs. Ormond, "I must believe you. All I can say is, it's very strange."

The meal over, the boys and girls retired to the breakfast-room; and there, seated at the usual places round the table, they began to prepare their work for the following day.

"Guy," said Ida suddenly, "are you *sure* you were telling the truth about that methylated spirit?"

"Of course I was! D'you think I'd lie?"

"You *do* tell crams sometimes," put in Elsie, who was not going to see her brother pose as an angel of light without having a word to say.

"Shut up, Elsie! I tell you I haven't been near the bottle. It's weeks since I last worked the engine.—Isn't it, Brian?"

Brian looked up from his book. "Yes," he answered. "It's a month, I should say. There was something wrong with the cylinder, and Cole put it right."

"There, I told you so!" retorted Guy. "Now, perhaps you'll believe what I say."

For some time no one spoke. Elsie finished one of her lessons, and sat back in her chair for a moment's rest.

"I say," she murmured, "suppose Uncle Roger's box was full of bank-notes, d'you suppose father would let us have a pony? I think I should ask him to buy one."

Guy and Ida both looked up from their books.

"Get away!" cried the boy. "What rot! I wouldn't mind offering to pay you a shilling for every bank-note that's found in that stupid old chest. But, I say," he added, "fancy having a real live pony! It would be ripping!"

ELSIE



CHAPTER IV.

THE BOX OPENED.

I

It seemed as if Thursday would never come. The four children were longing to know what was inside the box. Even Guy was inclined to abandon his idea that it was empty, and Elsie had quite made up her mind that it contained something wonderful. The excitement increased as the time drew nearer when the big blue seals would be broken, and the wonder seemed to be how any one could have waited twenty years for this to take place.

THE FAMILY On Wednesday, when the family were gathered at dinner, Mrs.

Ormond made a suggestion which was not at first received with unanimous approval.

"As all you children are anxious to see the box opened," she said, "I think instead of its being done at breakfast time to-morrow, it had better be postponed till after tea."

"O mother!" protested Guy and Elsie in the same breath. "What d'you want to do that for?"

"It's always a rush to get you started for school in the morning," was the answer. "If there's anything to hinder you, you're sure to be late. Considering that the box has been waiting to be opened for so many years, I'm sure a matter of a few hours can't make any difference."

"Oh yes; we'll wait till after tea," said Ida, "and then we shall have plenty of time for a grand opening ceremony."

With some reluctance Guy and Elsie agreed to this new arrangement. To them an extra ten hours or so seemed a very long time. The boy sat silent for a while, making a kind of switchback with his napkin-ring and the bread-knife.

"Mother," he said at length, "did you ever find the carver that was lost?"

"No; I'm sorry to say I haven't," was the reply. "We've searched and searched, but we can't find it anywhere."

"That's strange," remarked Mr. Ormond from his end of the table. "Does Harry know anything about it?" he added, alluding to a boy who had come in as a makeshift to clean knives and boots since the departure of William Cole.

"No; I spoke to him at once, and made him search the tool-house, but he couldn't find the knife. He says he never remembers having seen it, which I believe is true, for I don't think he's had it to clean since he's been here."

"It ought to be somewhere," remarked Mr. Ormond. "The lad's perfectly honest, I should say, and can't have walked off with it. At the same time, a carving-knife isn't a thing that disappears into thin air."

"Oh, I dare say we shall find it before long," was the answer. "Sometimes things do slip away in the most unaccountable manner, and you never discover where they are gone until perhaps you come across them quite by accident—often when you are looking for something else."

Elsie could hardly go to sleep that night for thinking of what was going to happen on the morrow. It would be nice, she imagined, to have a mysterious box like that to open every day of the year, and so ensure a constant succession of fresh surprises. Once more the chest was the subject of her dreams; and this time, instead of being found full of treasure, it simply would not open at all. Brian, Guy, and her father were all trying to force up the lid, but the iron bands held it firm. The only tool they had with which to work was the poultry-carver, and this bent up like a strip of paper.

"Oh, bother!" cried Elsie, and stamped her foot. With that the whole room seemed to rock and totter, and Ida's voice was heard complaining in sleepy tones, "I wish you wouldn't kick me and shout 'bother.' Do lie still!"

At length Thursday evening arrived. Blinds were lowered, curtains drawn, and lamps lighted. At the tea-table, as might be imagined, there was but one topic of conversation.

"Well, Brian," said Mr. Ormond, "what'll you give me for what's inside the box?"

"I should want to see first what it is, uncle."

"Very likely; but I want to know what offer you are inclined to make before it is opened. Come now—a speculation."

Brian laughed, and Elsie, who seemed unable to sit still on her chair, burst out with—"Father, if it is full of bank-notes, will you buy us a pony?"

"I think I must take an example from Brian, and be cautious," answered her father, laughing. "There are bank-notes and bank-notes. They might each be worth five pounds or five hundred; and between the two there is a considerable difference."

"If it's full of five-pound notes, would you buy us a pony?"

"Well—yes. I think I may safely say I would," answered Mr. Ormond, with another laugh. "But," he added, "I'm afraid, Elsie, that I shan't be called upon to fulfil my promise."

Elsie clapped her hands. Her mother smiled, and paused in the act of raising the silver teapot.

"Come, now," she remarked; "suppose each of you say in turn what you think will be found inside this wonderful box that has been shut up for twenty years."

"Father, you begin," said Ida—"you guess first."

"I'm sure I can't form any idea," was the answer. "What does your mother say?"

"I'll guess it's full of old letters and papers," was the reply.

"O mother, how uninteresting!" exclaimed Ida. "I'll say it's jewellery and silver plate."

"I'll say a bag of money!" cried Brian.

"I'll say old clothes!" shouted Guy. "What d'you say, Elsie?"

"A pony—no, I mean bank-notes," was the prompt reply, received with a fresh outburst of merriment.

"Well, come along," said Mr. Ormond, rising from the table. "Come along, and we'll see which of you has guessed nearest the truth."

The children all sprang from their chairs.

"A procession! a procession!" cried Ida. And one was immediately formed. Mr. Ormond went first, carrying the lamp; Guy followed, beating a tray to represent a drum; Ida, Elsie, and Brian improvised musical instruments out of the fire-irons, and Mrs. Ormond brought up the rear.

"Now," said Mr. Ormond, when the library was reached and the band ceased

its triumphal march, "suppose you strong young men lift the box out into the middle of the room, and then we'll commence operations."

Guy and Brian soon had the chest in the position indicated; the lamp was put close by on an adjoining table, and boys and girls gathered round, one and all on the tip-toe of eager expectation.

"The first thing will be to get these seals off the padlocks," said Mr. Ormond. "Now, how are we going to do that? Old Uncle Roger certainly wasn't sparing of his wax."

"I've got an old chisel that'll do it!" cried Brian. "I'll fetch it, if you'll wait half a minute."

"Well, make haste!" cried Guy impatiently.

"It seems almost a shame to break the seals," said Ida, stooping to examine them. "The impression is so clear that I can read the words of the motto."

"Oh, bother the seals!" said her brother. "We can't see what's inside the box until they are broken."

A moment later Brian came bounding back with his chisel. Mr. Ormond took the tool, and soon chipped the wax away from the face of the locks.

"Now," he remarked, with a smile, "what should you say if we found I'd lost the keys?"

"Say!" cried Guy. "Oh, I should say, Burst it open somehow. Get the wood-axe, or the coal-hammer."

"I don't think there'll be any need for such extreme measures," answered his father. "Go to the top drawer on the left-hand side of that writing-table, and in it you'll find two keys on a steel ring."

The keys were produced, the padlocks unfastened and removed. The supreme moment had arrived, and the children crowded round holding their breath.

"Now then, children," said Mr. Ormond, preparing to raise the lid. "Are you

all quite ready? Very well, then. One—two—three!"

There was a moment of astonished silence as the whole company bent over the opened chest. With a sort of gasp, Ida broke the spell. "*Empty!*" she cried.

It was perfectly true; the box was as empty as Mother Hubbard's famous cupboard.

"What a sell!" cried Guy, and burst out laughing. The disappointment was almost too much for Elsie; the tears came into her eyes, and her lips trembled.

"Cheer up, little woman!" said her father kindly. "It might have been worse. D'you remember the story in the 'Arabian Nights' of the fisherman who dragged a brass bottle out of the sea, and when he had broken the seals and taken out the stopper a great genie rushed forth in a cloud of smoke, telling the unfortunate man to choose what death he would die? Suppose, now, the same sort of creature came out of this box."

"I do call it a lot too bad!" exclaimed Ida. "D'you think Uncle Roger really did it on purpose, and left you only an empty box?"

"I'm sure I don't know," replied her father. "It seems like it. Perhaps he did it for a joke."

"A very silly sort of joke, then," continued the girl snappishly, "to make people keep a stupid old box for twenty years, when it was empty all the time."

"D'you think, uncle," began Brian, "that there was something in it once, but that it's been stolen?"

"That's impossible," was the answer. "No one could open the box without breaking the seals on the padlocks, and there you saw them just now intact, as they have always been. Supposing a thief had broken them, he couldn't have made fresh ones unless he had had the old man's seal, which I keep locked up in one of the drawers of my safe at the office."

"I suppose it would be impossible to break into the box through the bottom or one of the sides?" said the boy thoughtfully.

"Oh yes," answered Guy. "You couldn't possibly do that. It's made of solid oak, and see how strongly it's bound with iron. If you wanted to break into it at all, you'd have to smash it all up with an axe or sledge-hammer."

"I can't believe that anything has been stolen," said Mr. Ormond. "No; I think old Uncle Roger must have done it as a queer sort of joke. He was a strange old fellow."

"Well, it's a horrid, mean thing to do," cried Elsie, still half inclined to give way to tears. "It's perfectly hateful. Now we shall never have the pony."

The group continued to linger round the open box, as if still hoping that some treasure might be found.

"I think you'd better all come back into the warm room," said Mrs. Ormond. "It's very cold here.—Brian, will you put the box back in its old place? Some one may fall over it in the dark."

The boy prepared to do as he was asked.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "There is something in the old thing, after all."

"What?" cried all three of his cousins at once.

Brian laughed, and held up something between his finger and thumb. "A cork!" he answered.

BRIAN



CHAPTER V.

A NAVAL DISASTER.

A

cork?" cried Ida. "Let me see it."

Brian handed over the small object which he had seen lying in a corner of the empty box. It was an ordinary cork, such as would fit a good-sized medicine bottle.

SHIPWRECK

"That's what we must have heard the other day rolling about when we turned the chest up on its end," said Guy.

"What's the good of it? Throw it away!" cried Elsie, who could not get the bank-notes out of her mind.

"I wonder how it can have got there!" said Guy, as the family prepared to move back into the warmer room. "What could be the good of locking up and sealing a cork in an iron-bound box for twenty years?"

"I don't suppose it was put there on purpose," answered his father. "It dropped in by mistake."

"Oh, come on! Let's get to our lessons," said Ida. "I'm sick of that stupid box."

At that moment Brian, who had stayed behind to put the chest back in its

place, appeared in the room.

"Uncle," he said, "this cork has got a little round label on the top, with the name of a chemist on it—'Greenworthy.'"

Mr. Ormond took the cork, looked at it, held it nearer the lamp, and looked at it again.

"This is curious," he muttered.

"What's curious, father?" asked Elsie.

"Why, this cork has Greenworthy's name on it, and Greenworthy hasn't been in business for more than ten years at the outside, so how can one of his corks come to be inside a box that has been shut for twenty?"

"Then the box has been opened," said Brian.

Mr. Ormond seemed to doubt this. "One of you children must have dropped the cork in just now," he said. "Are you sure you didn't, Brian?"

"Quite sure, uncle," answered the boy.

"And I'm sure neither of us did," added each of his cousins.

"Perhaps there's a knot-hole in the box through which the cork might have been poked some time," suggested Elsie.

"I don't think there is," said Guy, moving towards the door. "But I'll soon see."

He returned a few moments later, but only to report that there was not the smallest crack or hole in the wood through which a pin could be dropped.

"It's certainly very funny," said Mr. Ormond. "The cork must have fallen out of some one's pocket after we'd opened the box. I may have dropped it in myself."

"But we heard it rolling about in the box some time ago," remarked Elsie.

"Well, it's a mystery," answered her father, laughing—"one which I can't

explain."

The children prepared to retire to the breakfast-room and begin their day's lessons. Brian, however, had still one more question to ask.

"Uncle," he said, "supposing a thief had opened that box, wouldn't it be possible for him to imitate the seals?"

"Of course it would be possible to get a duplicate die made," was the answer. "But I'll tell you why I feel sure that in this case the locks have not been tampered with. Uncle Roger's seal came into my possession directly after his death, and has been in my safe ever since. In one place it was slightly damaged. There was a peculiar cut or scratch on the metal face, and I noticed that this cut was visible in the impression on the seals we broke just now. That could not have been imitated, and I'm quite convinced in my own mind that the box has not been opened."



By Saturday the keen edge of the disappointment had somewhat worn off, though Elsie had hardly recovered her accustomed spirits, and still grieved for the pony which she had quite made up her mind was to have been a black one, with white socks, and a white star on its forehead. Perhaps the boys felt the failure of their hopes and expectations less than the girl, from the fact that they had something on hand just then which occupied a considerable amount of their attention, and a good portion of their spare time.

Brian's great hobby was ship-building, and the fact that there was a fish-pond in the garden at the Pines enabled him to give each fresh model a practical test as soon as it was ready to be launched. He had constructed vessels of all descriptions—ships that sailed, and ships that didn't; gunboats which mounted a brass cannon, and peaceful merchant traders which carried cargoes of earth and stones across the water from one shore to another.

Now he had upon the stocks a vessel of an altogether novel design, and this

latest addition to his miniature navy had cost him a great many hours of work and the exercise of no small amount of patience before it could be pronounced ready for use. It was said to be a "torpedo-boat destroyer," and was constructed out of the hull of an old tin boat. Her engines had once formed the motive power of a clockwork locomotive, but they had now been adapted to marine requirements, and made to turn a small screw.

With the determination to be up to date, Brian had resolved to have no woodwork about this war vessel. With considerable labour he had cut decks, funnels, and other fittings out of tin; to fix these in place it had been necessary to acquire the art of using a soldering-iron, and this he had done, though at the price of at least one rather bad burn and a blistered finger.

Evening after evening, when lessons were done, he had devoted his spare time to work on his model, fixing the engines, soldering down the decks, and putting in ballast, so as to balance the boat and keep her on an even keel. At length the work was finished; the *Fury*, as she was called, was painted all over an orthodox black, and when given a trial trip in the bath, ran from end to end in a manner which was quite satisfactory. Brian's next wish was to prove that the little vessel was equal to a trip across the fish-pond.

SAILING THE FURY

Saturday afternoon was fixed upon for the experiment, and soon after dinner Guy, Elsie, and their cousin assembled at the water-side, Ida having gone out with a friend. The pond was circular in shape, with a brick bottom, and was perhaps about thirty feet in diameter. It was shallow near the shore, and in one or two places were large pots in which water-lilies were planted, these forming dangerous reefs on which an unskilful captain of a model craft might well run his vessel aground. Brian wound up the engines of the *Fury*, keeping his finger on the screw to prevent it starting off with a whiz; then, adjusting the rudder, he lowered the "destroyer" into the water.

"Doesn't she look fine?" cried Guy, as the little vessel started off in good style. "Just like a real little steamer. Wouldn't it be fun if we could have two fleets, and make them fight? Hullo! She's changing her course."

The last remark was occasioned by the small craft bearing round in a curve,

and making for the shore in another direction.

"It's the rudder," said Brian. "It doesn't work right. Give me a bit of string, and I'll see if I can't fix it properly this time."

After some little delay, the *Fury* was ready for another voyage. In moving round the pond Elsie had found a broken lead soldier lying on the brick-work, a relic of some bygone naval engagement.

"Here!" she said; "let me put this man on board."

Brian seldom refused any of Elsie's requests.

"All right," he said; "put him on the bridge."

The lead soldier was propped up against the little wire railing. "There!" cried Elsie; "that's William Cole going out to Australia."

Once more the little vessel was placed in the water, and her propeller allowed to revolve. Away she went in grand style, straight across the pond, and leaving quite a miniature wake in her stern.

"Oh, bother!" muttered Brian, as again the straight course became a curve. "There she goes! That rudder *will* work round."

"Hullo!" exclaimed Guy. "Look out! She'll be wrecked in a minute!"

The "destroyer" was now heading for one of the submerged pots; a moment later she struck, and remained with her screw still working, but with her bow entangled in a bunch of weed.

"I shall have to court-martial the captain for running his ship ashore," said Brian.

"Poor William!" cried Elsie; "fancy being shipwrecked on his first voyage!"

For some minutes the children stood gazing idly at the disabled craft; her engines had stopped working, and it was evident that she would have to be towed into port.

"We must get a long stick—a fishing-rod, or something of that kind," said Guy. "Hullo!" he added. "Look, Brian! I believe she's sinking."

It was only too true; the "destroyer" was slowly settling down, stern foremost.

"Oh, do get it!" cried Elsie; but the wreck was well out of reach—at least ten feet from the shore. For a minute the spectators stood hesitating, undecided what to do; then the vessel gave a lurch, her bows slipped from the edge of the flower-pot, and down she went.

"O Brian, I am so sorry!" exclaimed Elsie. "You've taken so much trouble to make it, and poor William's drowned!"

Brian laughed. "Oh, we can get her out again," he said. "I think she must have been leaking where the propeller shaft goes through her stern."

If it had been summer one of the boys would probably have rolled up his trousers and waded into the water to recover the boat. As it was, they had to improvise some form of drag.

"We must get that big rake," said Brian. "We can lash it to one of those clothes-props, and then we shall be able to reach her and haul her out."

The rake was found, and bound with stout cord to the clothes-prop, and the process of "salving" the wrecked steamer commenced.

"I must mind and not damage her with these iron spikes," said Brian, carefully thrusting out the head of the rake and lowering it into the water.

"Hullo! I've got something," he remarked an instant later, as he hauled in the drag. "But it isn't the boat. What can it be?"

The prongs of the rake grated on the bricks, and there, amid dead leaves, rotten twigs, and muddy sediment, lay something which at first glance might have been mistaken for a dead fish. Guy stooped down and picked it up out of the water. For a moment he gazed at it in utter astonishment.

"Why, it's the missing carving-knife!" he exclaimed.

CARVING KNIFE



CHAPTER VI. MORE MYSTERY.

I

t's that poultry-carver right enough," repeated Guy—"the one the mater said was lost."

His sister and Brian all crowded round to have a nearer view of the object in question.

GUY

"So it is!" cried Elsie. "How on earth could it have got into the pond?"

"I suppose some one threw it in," answered her brother. "It couldn't have walked or flown there of its own accord."

"But why should any one throw a knife into the pond? Who could have done such a silly thing?"

"Oh, ask me something easier," laughed Guy. "All I know is, 'twasn't my doing."

"Let's have a look," said Brian, holding out his hand. "The point's broken, and the little plated knob from the end has gone."

He took the knife and examined it more closely.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "Look at the blade. That's queer."

"What? what?" demanded the others.

"Why, something's been done to it; it's as thin as paper."

The knife blade certainly presented a curious appearance. Though maintaining its original form and size, it seemed to have wasted away until it was scarcely thicker than a sheet of note-paper. It was probably owing to this fact that the point had snapped off when it came into contact with the bricks at the bottom of the pond.

"Perhaps the water has made it go like that," suggested Elsie.

"Oh no," answered her cousin. "You can see where it's rusty. It must have been ground or rubbed down on a stone."

"But why should any one grind a knife blade as thin as that?" asked the girl. "If you tried to cut anything, the blade would bend all up or break."

"The best thing for us to do will be to take it indoors and show it to the mater," said Guy. "I expect she'll be jolly surprised when she hears we found it in the pond."

"Wait half a minute," answered Brian, who was always practical. "Let me get my ship out first."

The rake was once more thrust out, and the end lowered into the water; after two unsuccessful attempts the whereabouts of the sunken *Fury* was discovered, and she was carefully dragged to the edge of the pond.

"There!" said Brian, as he carefully emptied the water out of the little craft. "That's where she leaks. I'll stop that up before we try her again. Now let's go and find aunt, and show her the knife."

Elsie walked along beside the others in silence; she was dying to say something, but was afraid to speak. Brian's statement that the knife blade must have been reduced by grinding or rubbing on a stone had at once reminded her of her midnight, or, rather, early morning adventure. Could it have been this

poultry-carver that the mysterious intruder was working at when she had awoke and seen the faint light in the tool-house? She longed to hazard the suggestion, but Guy and Ida had already made so much fun of her story that she feared to mention the subject again lest it should occasion a fresh teasing.

The children found Mr. and Mrs. Ormond in the hall, just preparing to start out for a walk.

"Mother, we've found the carving-knife!" cried Guy. "'Twas at the bottom of the pond."

With three people all assisting one another in the telling, the story did not take long to relate. Mr. and Mrs. Ormond seemed equally astonished.

"Look, uncle, how thin it is," said Brian. "It must have been ground down carefully on a stone."

"So I see," was the answer. "It's very extraordinary."

"Most extraordinary," echoed Mrs. Ormond. "Then, who could have thrown it into the pond?—Guy, are you sure you know nothing about it?"

"Quite sure, mother."

"I don't like to doubt the honesty of that boy Henry," began Mr. Ormond, "but the thought has just occurred to me that he might, when he was cleaning the knives, have tried to put an edge on this one, and ground it too much; then, being afraid to bring it back to the house, have thrown it into the pond."

"Oh, I don't think that," answered Mrs. Ormond. "I'm quite sure Henry's honest. I asked him about the knife, and he said he never remembered having seen it; in fact, as I said before, I don't think he's had it to clean since he's been here."

"Besides, if he had wanted to put an edge on it, he'd never have ground the whole blade thin like that," added Brian.

"Put it away somewhere," said Mr. Ormond, "and I'll have a look at it again when I come back."

The little group dispersed. Brian and Guy went away to mend the boat, while Elsie, left to herself, wandered out into the yard and entered the tool-house. There stood the grindstone in its usual place, looking a very unromantic object indeed; but the girl viewed it with almost bated breath. She had quite made up her mind that connected with that grindstone was a mystery in which the poultry-carver was somehow concerned. What this secret was she could not imagine; but the belief grew in her mind that if she had been able to summon up sufficient courage to have crossed the yard that night, and to have peeped round the door of the tool-house, she might now be able to explain how and why the poultry-carver had found its way to the bottom of the pond.

She longed to tell the others what was in her thoughts, but pride made her hold her tongue. She did not like being made fun of, and she felt sure that any reference to what Ida called her "dream" about the grindstone was certain to be received with nothing but ridicule by both brother and sister.

In one corner of the tool-house stood Uncle Roger's iron-bound box, which, since the eventful evening when it was opened, had been banished from the library in disgrace, Mr. Ormond wishing to put a small bookcase in the space which the box had hitherto occupied.

Elsie tried to lift the lid, but the two padlocks had been refastened to prevent their being lost. She sat down on the chest, and began drumming her feet on the dark oak planks.

"What a disappointment that old box has proved!" thought the girl. "I wonder if there ever *was* anything in it. Father seems to think it couldn't possibly have been opened, but then how did that cork with Greenworthy's name on it come to be inside? I do wish it had been full of money. It would have been jolly to have had a real pony, and to have learned to ride."

"If wishes were horses," runs the old proverb, "then beggars would ride;" and Elsie had to rest content with a short day-dream, from which she at length awoke with a little sigh of regret.

An hour or two later, as Guy unstrapped his pile of school books and flung them down on the breakfast-room table, he referred to the discovery which had been made earlier in the day.

"The pater can't understand that carving-knife. I wonder how in the world it got into the pond!"

"Yes, I wonder too," said Ida, rather suspiciously. "And I wonder if you, Guy, could explain it if you chose."

"I explain it!" exclaimed the boy. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know you *have* done things like that," returned his sister calmly. "You smashed a big flower-pot the other day, and threw the pieces away into the hedge."

"Look here, Ida," cried Guy, with a great show of indignation. "You're always accusing me of doing things, and it's not fair. The other day you tried to make out I'd taken cook's methylated spirit when I said I hadn't. What's the good of a fellow telling the truth if he isn't believed?"

"Shall I tell you what I think about it?" asked Brian, looking up from the open book before him, with his finger at the spot where he had left off reading.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Well, the idea's come into my head that some one was grinding the knife that night when Elsie woke up and heard the stone turning."

Elsie clapped her hands with delight; her cousin's words were exactly what she herself had been longing to speak.

"That's just what I've been thinking, Brian!" she cried. "I'm sure that's right."

"What nonsense!" ejaculated Guy. "You never did hear any one working at the grindstone. It was a dream."

"I'm not sure about that," answered his cousin. "When I looked at the grindstone next day there were spots of candle-grease on the wooden frame."

"What if there were?" interrupted Guy. "Henry may have taken a light in there late in the afternoon. Because there were a few spots of grease about, it doesn't prove that some one was working there in the middle of the night. Besides,

supposing the knife was ground on our stone at that unearthly hour, it doesn't explain anything. It doesn't show what earthly object there could be in making the blade as thin as possible, and then throwing it into the pond."

"Oh, of course it doesn't," answered Brian; "but if you're ever going to get at the explanation of a thing like that, you must begin at the beginning, and ravel it out bit by bit. I believe it began that night when Elsie heard the stone turning, and I shall continue to think so until I have reason to believe otherwise."

"Oh, you're talking nonsense!" said Guy, who could think of no better reply to make. "Now, let's get on with our work."

It so happened that at the same time the children were talking over the strange loss and reappearance of the carving-knife, the subject was also being discussed in the dining-room.

"If I hadn't been quite sure that Guy was speaking the truth, I should have set it down as his doing," said Mrs. Ormond.

"It's neither of the boys' doing," answered her husband from behind his newspaper. "I saw that at once."

"How?"

"Why," replied Mr. Ormond, laying down his paper, and reaching for the knife, which lay on a side table, "it's a difficult matter to grind a blade as thin as that. No boy did it; at least that's my opinion. It was done by a man, and one who knew what he was about.

"I shall be at the police court on Monday," the speaker continued after a pause, "and I have a good mind to ask Evans, the sergeant, to step round and have a look at it. I'm inclined to think there's more in this matter than may appear on the surface."

MR ORMOND



CHAPTER VII.

SAD NEWS.

D

ear me!" exclaimed Mr. Ormond, opening his morning paper and glancing at one of the headings printed in big black letters. "Heavy loss of life at sea again; two vessels in collision, and both sunk. Why! good gracious!" he continued; "the *Arcadia*—that was the ship William Cole sailed on!"

NEWSPAPER BOY

There was a dropping of knives and forks all round the table, and a general exclamation of dismay.

"O father!" cried Ida. "You don't mean to say that the *Arcadia* is lost?"

"I'm afraid so," was the reply. "Yes; it says, 'which sailed from London on Friday, October 28th.' It must be the same boat."

"But perhaps William wasn't drowned," exclaimed Elsie. "Doesn't it say if any of them were saved?"

"Only fourteen souls from the liner," was the reply. "Ten of the crew, and four passengers. Their names are given here, but poor William Cole isn't mentioned."

"How dreadful!" exclaimed Ida. She pushed away her plate, and the tears started to her eyes. Elsie, too, leant back in her chair, the corners of her mouth beginning to turn down.

"She must have sunk very quickly, uncle," said Brian. "How did it happen?"

"She seems to have come in collision with a sailing ship named the *Cumberland*," answered Mr. Ormond. "It was in a fog, and during the early

hours of the morning, when all the passengers were below in their berths. The *Arcadia* sank almost immediately. Two boats were filled and lowered, but one capsized as it touched the water. The survivors were taken on board the *Cumberland*, but that vessel was so badly damaged that it was found impossible to keep her afloat. Fortunately the rockets she sent up were seen by a merchant steamer, which took the *Cumberland's* crew and the survivors from the *Arcadia* on board, and eventually landed them at one of the Spanish ports. One man on the sailing ship was killed and another injured by the falling of spars from aloft, which were brought down by the blow."

"But isn't there any hope that William was saved?" asked Elsie in a choking voice. "Has he really been drowned?"

"I'm afraid so," was the reply. "The names of all those saved were telegraphed at once by the British consul."

"I can't think how a big ship like that can possibly sink so quickly," said Guy.

"You wouldn't wonder at it if you saw the size of the hole that one vessel can make in another's side," answered his father. "It's very sad. Poor William! If he'd only known what was before him, he'd have been content to stop in England."

A dark shadow seemed to have fallen on the breakfast table. The children went on with their meal in silence. William Cole had always been popular with them, for reasons which have already been given. He was a civil-spoken, dapper-looking young fellow, perhaps not over fond of work, and a little too ready for a half-hour's gossip, or for spending his time making the tail of a kite, when he should have been cleaning the yard or digging in the garden. But whatever his faults had been, they were for the time forgotten, and only his better qualities remembered. Even Guy seemed shocked and subdued by the terrible news.

"I say," he remarked, as he and Brian walked along on their way to school, "it's awful to think that William's drowned! Somehow, I can't believe it's true. He was such a sharp, lively sort of chap, it seems almost impossible that he's dead, and that we shall never see him again. Even now I feel inclined to shout for him, and ask him to do things, just as if he were still at work somewhere about the place."

Mr. Ormond, who was a magistrate, had to attend at the police court that morning, and was rather late in returning home to dinner.

"By the way," he said, speaking to his wife, "I mentioned that carving-knife to Evans, our police sergeant, and asked him to call in when he's passing, and just have a look at it; so he says he'll be round some time this evening. I'll see him here in the dining-room, if he comes when the children are at their lessons. They needn't know the reason why he called."

"You don't suppose either of them threw the knife into the pond, do you?" asked Mrs. Ormond.

"Oh no!" answered her husband, laughing. "Only I thought that if they heard that a policeman had been called in, it might fill their heads with all kinds of fancies, and I don't want to do that. Elsie, especially, seems highly nervous, and is blessed with a rather too vivid imagination. If it got on her mind I don't know what blood-curdling story she wouldn't be telling us next."

Punctually at the time appointed, Sergeant Evans presented himself at the Pines, and was ushered into the dining-room. He was a stout, rosy-cheeked man, and so tall that he seemed almost obliged to stoop as he entered the door.

"Good-evening, sergeant," said Mr. Ormond. "This is the knife I spoke to you about. What d'you think of it? Look at the blade."

The officer laid down his helmet and walking-cane, and, taking the carver, subjected it to a careful examination.

"Where did you say it was picked up, sir?" he asked.

"It was at the bottom of our little pond," was the answer. "The boys had one of their toy boats sunk, and, in dragging for it with a rake, they brought up this."

"At the bottom of the pond," murmured the policeman thoughtfully. "Then it is evident that the person who ground it down threw the knife into the water, so that it shouldn't be found again.—You don't remember on what day the knife was lost, I suppose, ma'am?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't tell you that," answered Mrs. Ormond. "We missed it

first last Saturday week; but we don't use it every day, so it might have been before then."

"You've no idea who could have done this?"

"None whatever. We had an idea that one of the boys might have been the culprit; but, as I said to Mrs. Ormond, I don't think a boy could have ground a knife blade down as cleverly as that."

The sergeant held the carver nearer to the lamp, and looked at it for a few moments in silence.

"I've seen some queer tools," he said, "manufactured by what's called a thieves' blacksmith, and sometimes by the men themselves—all kinds of odd contrivances, made out of the most unexpected things you can imagine, from a knitting-needle to a steel fork or a poker."

"You don't think that was done by a robber, do you?" exclaimed Mrs. Ormond, looking up from her work.

SERGEANT EVANS

"No, ma'am; I can't see what the use of it could have been, it's so thin and fragile. Now, if it had been turned into a fine saw," the speaker continued, feeling along the edge of the blade with his finger and thumb, "it would have made me feel a bit suspicious.—I suppose, sir, you've had no cause lately to think the house has been broken into—no drawers forced, or windows opened?"

"Oh no!" answered Mr. Ormond. "Nothing of the kind."

The sergeant nodded. "It's difficult to understand," he said, "why any one should take the trouble to grind a knife like this, and then throw it into a pond, unless they was trying their 'and to see how thin the blade could be made."

The speaker stood thoughtfully balancing the carver across the palm of his large hand; then a close observer might have seen the ghost of a smile appear on his ruddy face.

"I expect, sir, you've got a grindstone on the premises?"

"Yes, there's one out in the tool-house."

Evans made no reply, but after a moment's pause laid the knife down on the table, and prepared to go.

"Then you don't think it was the work of a thief?" inquired Mrs. Ormond, smiling.

"Oh no, ma'am," was the answer. "It don't strike me as being that."

"By the way," said Mr. Ormond, "I suppose you saw the account in the paper to-day of that terrible shipwreck? You remember William Cole, my gardener? The *Arcadia* was the ship he sailed on, and I'm afraid there's very little doubt but that the poor fellow's drowned. At all events, he's not mentioned as one of the four passengers who were saved."

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed Evans, the little twinkle in his eye disappearing in an instant. "So Will Cole was on board that ship! Well, well, it's sad news, very!"

"It is," answered Mr. Ormond. "He had his faults, but he seemed a sharp, promising young fellow; and I hoped he'd do well in the Colonies."

"So did I, sir. When I heard he was going abroad I thought it was about the best thing that could happen. I was afraid that if he stayed on much longer in these parts he'd find himself in trouble."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir," continued the man in blue, slowly, and with his eyes bent on the tablecloth. "One don't wish to talk ill of the dead, and I don't know as I've got anything to say against Will himself more than this, that of late he seemed to be getting mixed up with them as would have done him no good."

"I knew nothing of this," said Mr. Ormond.

"No, I don't suppose you would, sir; but such things naturally come under our notice, and he wouldn't have been the first young chap I've seen get associated with an idle, drinking, betting lot, and then come to grief. However, the poor fellow's beyond all that now, and I can only say I'm sorry to hear of his death."

As Mr. Evans walked home, cogitating on the interview which has just been described, the sly smile once more returned to his face; and on entering his own door, and being greeted with the savoury smell of something hot for supper, his good-humour was so far increased that he laughed aloud. Seated at table, he entertained his wife with an account of his visit to the magistrate's house.

"Well, what could have been the meaning of it all?" inquired Mrs. Evans. "Where's the sense in treating a knife in that fashion?"

The sergeant leant back in his chair and chuckled. "It beat me for some time," he answered. "But then I saw through it clear enough."

"And who done it, then? A burglar?"

"Burglar my grandmother!" replied Mr. Evans. "No, 'twas like this—so at least I puts it together. The servant gal, who ought to have kept the knife in its proper place, leaves it lying about in the damp, and lets the blade get rusty. Then, instead of telling her mistress, she gets Cole to put it on the stone, or else does it herself, and they keeps grinding away till the knife's spoilt, and then, to end the matter, one of 'em chucks it into the pond, and so it gets lost."

"And didn't you tell Mrs. Ormond?"

"No fear! I couldn't say for certain. I wasn't going to get the pore gal out of her place, so I gave her the benefit of the doubt."

"Pore gal!" cried Mrs. Evans indignantly. "I'd pore gal her, the careless hussy! I don't consider you've done your duty, Samuel."

"Well, if I didn't," replied the culprit, "'twas because I was reminded of the fact that you was once in service yourself, Sarah."

"Get along with you!" cackled Mrs. Evans, trying hard not to laugh, but failing in the attempt. "If I was in service I didn't throw no carving-knives into no fishponds."

MRS EVANS

CHAPTER VIII.

ELSIE HAS A FRIGHT.

I

t's my birthday on Thursday, mother," said Guy. "Have you decided what you're going to give me?"

"That sounds as if you quite expected a present," answered Mrs. Ormond, laughing.

GUY AND NAYLOR SEARCH

"Of course I do," continued the boy. "And, I say, mother, can I ask Naylor to come to tea and spend the evening? He's one of the boarders, and a great friend of mine. I think his Christian name is George, or Gerald, or something of that sort."

"Would you prefer to ask him on some half-holiday, when you can spend the afternoon together?" asked Mrs. Ormond.

"Oh no, mother! I'd rather have him on my birthday. We'll do our prep. work as soon as ever we come back from school, and then we shall have the whole evening free."

"What shall we do?" asked Ida. "Play games?"

"Yes, I suppose so; but we shan't play any baby games like 'Snap,' or 'Hunt the Slipper,'" answered Guy loftily. "I think I'm going to invent a game specially for the occasion."

The following day Guy returned home in high spirits. He said he had been talking the matter over with Naylor, and the two, between them, had planned out

a game which would be simply "ripping." Having thus aroused every one's curiosity, the boy refused to say any more, and, in answer to numerous questions, merely answered, "Wait till to-morrow evening, then you'll see."

Guy was greatly pleased with his presents, which included a chest of carpenter's tools, the gift of his father and mother, a book from the girls, and an air-pistol from Brian. He was full, too, of mysterious hints as to the new game, but refused to enter into explanations till the time arrived for giving it a trial. The boys were home early, and got through their lessons for the next day before a ring at the bell announced the arrival of the guest.

NAYLOR

Naylor was a small boy, with rather a deep voice. He wore a spotless turn-down collar, his hair was carefully brushed, and he evidently had on his "company manners," which seemed to fit him rather badly, like ready-made clothes. He spoke to Brian in quite a deferential manner, calling him Seaton, and he was evidently shy of Elsie and Ida.

"Hullo, Nails, old chap!" cried Guy, seizing hold of his guest, rumpling his hair, and giving him a slap on the back which made him stagger. "Have you come prepared for a good feed?"

"Shut up, Ormond," murmured the unfortunate Naylor, glancing in the direction of the girls, and flushing crimson. "Why can't you leave a fellow alone?"

"You look so jolly tidy," laughed Guy.—"He's usually all over ink—isn't he Brian?—and goes about with only the lining of a cap on his head."

"It got torn," explained Naylor, in an apologetic tone. "But I only wear it in the playground. I've got a better one."

"I'm sure *you* needn't talk, Guy," put in Ida. "You're untidy enough. I don't know what state your clothes would get into if you lived away from home."

"Oh, fiddles!" answered her brother. "Have you brought your bicycle lamp, 'Nails'? Yes? That's all right, then! Because if you hadn't I should have sent you back again to fetch it, so it's lucky you remembered. It's for the game we've

invented," he continued. "No, I shan't tell you what it is now. I'll explain it after tea."

Brian had left the room, and Guy rushed away to ask him something. Master Naylor, left unceremoniously alone with the two girls, drew a long breath, and nervously twisted his steel watch-chain. No one would have supposed that that very morning he had been sentenced to a term of extra drill for riotous behaviour in the classroom; but "Nails" had inherited the instincts of a gentleman, and he made a heroic attempt to enter into conversation.

"You—er—you know Seaton?" he began.

"You mean Brian, I suppose," answered Ida, smiling. "He's our cousin."

"Oh, of course," answered the visitor. "I remember now. Ormond—that is, your brother—told me so. Seaton is a fine chap; he plays in our football team."

"Yes, I know," chimed in Elsie, who always liked to hear Brian praised. "He's 'inside right.'"

The visitor began to feel more at home with the girls.

"The best of Seaton is he doesn't stick on side," he continued. "You know what I mean—isn't conceited. Most fellows are when they get their cap. I wonder if I shall ever play in the first team."

"I expect you will, some day," answered Ida kindly.

"D'you really think so?" inquired Master Naylor. "I'm not very big," he continued, surveying himself in a neighbouring looking-glass, with rather a wistful look; "but I'm growing," he added with more confidence.

At that moment Mrs. Ormond entered the room, and a few minutes later the company sat down to tea.

"Mother, may we go out to the garden?" asked Guy.

"Why, it's quite dark outside," was the reply. "Can't you play indoors?"

"But it's our new game," said the boy. "It's meant to be played in the dark. I'm sure it wouldn't hurt us; it's not been raining, and the paths are quite dry."

"Well, if you wrap up warm, I don't suppose it would hurt you to go out for a bit," answered Mrs. Ormond, smiling. "What is the new game? Don't you think it's time you let us into the secret?"

"Shall we tell them, 'Nails'?" asked Guy.

Master Naylor's mouth was full of cheesecake, but he nodded to show his consent.

"All right; I'll explain," continued Guy. "It's going to be just like 'I spy,' only it's played with bicycle lamps—that is, there will be two to seek, and the rest will hide, and the seekers will have a lamp each, so that they can find people in the dark. They'll shout out, 'I spy So-and-So,' and then run back to the den. If the person who's found can get home first, then he's safe; but if he doesn't, then he's got to be one of the seekers next time."

"Only one person seeks in 'I spy,'" said Ida.

"But it'll be more difficult to find people in the dark," returned her brother, "and much easier to hide."

"Take care you don't set fire to anything with your lamps," said his father.

"Mind you don't get oil on your clothes," added Mrs. Ormond.

"No fear," answered Guy. "We shall be all right. Will you excuse us, mother?"

"Yes. Let me see you're well wrapped up, and don't stay out longer than half an hour."

The night was still and dark. The two rather grubby bicycle lamps were at length induced to burn, and the little party made their way into the garden.

"Now," said Guy; "this summer-house shall be 'home.' You know the rule; Ida and Naylor shall seek first. Count fifty slowly, to give us time to hide."

Brian, Guy, and Elsie scuttled away into the darkness, while the two whose duty it was to search for them began a monotonous chant of "One—two—three!" ending with a triumphant shriek of "Fifty!" and a warning cry of "We're coming!"

The game was a great success. There was plenty of fun in finding hiding-places, and then crouching down watching breathlessly as the lamps went flashing up and down the paths, now coming dangerously near, and then moving off again. Nor was it less exciting, when seeking, to creep about, sending beams of light into dark corners, as a policeman might when hunting for a burglar. Then would come the shout of "I spy!" followed by the mad rush back to the summer-house, finder and found not infrequently arriving at the den at the same moment.

There was no end of critical moments and hair-breadth escapes; with one searcher it would have been comparatively easy to work round and get to the den unseen, but with two lamps flashing like miniature search-lights in the darkness it was more difficult. Once Guy nearly fell into the pond, while a little later on Brian, blindly attempting to force his way into the midst of a thick holly bush, gave a yell which discovered his whereabouts to the enemy.

Warming up with the game, Naylor came out in a manner which surprised the girls, who had hitherto thought him rather quiet. He rushed about, and seemed in all parts of the garden at once. No one was safe when he was seeking, and where he managed to find such secure hiding-places was a thing only known to himself. Once only did he find himself in difficulties.

"I spy 'Nails!'" shouted Guy. "Why don't you run?" he added a moment later, as no one stirred.

"I can't!" was the plaintive reply heard in the darkness.

"Why not?" demanded the searcher, coming back a few paces, and directing his lamp towards his chum.

The redoubtable Naylor was seen crouching awkwardly in a gap in the hedge at the bottom of the garden.

"I say," he remarked in accents of distress, "this beastly barbed wire has

hooked my trousers leg and the back of my coat, and I can't stir."

GUY SEARCHING

Guy roared with laughter, and proceeded to set his friend at liberty. The half-hour would soon be up, and the duty of seeking devolved on Elsie and Brian. Ida was soon found, Naylor was discovered up a tree this time, but Guy seemed to have disappeared from off the face of the earth.

"I wonder where the fellow has got to," said Brian.

"He may be somewhere in the yard," answered Elsie, "though he said that it was out of bounds."

She ran off, followed by her cousin. There was no Guy behind the pump, and she made straight for the tool-house. Lifting the latch, and standing just inside the door, the light from her bull's-eye fell on the old familiar objects. There was the grindstone, there the iron-bound box, and there—

Suddenly the lamp dropped from Elsie's hand, and fell with a clatter on the stones. With a shriek of terror she turned and rushed across the yard.

"What's the matter, Elsie?" cried Brian, who had been exploring the coal-hole, and now ran after his little cousin, catching her up as she arrived at the glass door of the house.

"I saw it! I saw it!" panted the child, hardly knowing what she said. "Let me go in!"

"Saw what?" asked the boy, endeavouring to soothe her. "What's the matter? Are you frightened?"

"Yes," answered Elsie, catching hold of his arm, and looking over her shoulder. "But—but don't tell any one, Bri. You won't, will you?"

"Well, tell me what you thought you saw. I won't make fun of you."

Elsie, however, would give no reply, but refused to play any more, and went indoors. Brian went across to the tool-house, flashed his lamp up and down, but could see nothing beyond what was to be found there any time.

The half-hour being up, and Guy having disclosed his whereabouts, which turned out to be a snug retreat between the back of a cucumber frame and the wall, the party returned to the house, and spent the rest of the evening till supper time playing indoor games.

"I don't think Elsie's quite well," said Mrs. Ormond later on, when Master Naylor had departed, and the children had gone upstairs to bed. Brian happened to be still in the room.

"I think she was frightened at something she imagined she saw in the dark, when we were playing 'I spy,' aunt," he remarked.

"What a nervous child she's getting!" was the reply. "I can't understand it. She used to be brave enough, and now she's as timid as a kitten."

LAMP



CHAPTER IX.

A FRESH DISCOVERY.

S

aturday had come round again, and as the children started for school that morning not one of them guessed what an eventful day it was going to prove. Meeting in the road outside the Pines on their return, they passed together through the gate, and along the drive.

GUY WITH THE AIR PISTOL

"Hooray!" exclaimed Guy, swinging his bundle of books round and round at

the end of the strap. "No more work till Monday! I thought I should have been kept in for Cæsar to-day, but I just happened to get an easy bit with words I knew."

"It's a wonder you ever know anything," remarked Ida, who was rather fond of reproving other people. "You are always drawing, or cutting up pen-holders with your knife, or doing something of that kind, when you ought to be preparing your work. Elsie's getting just the same. She sat staring at the wall all yesterday evening, and the consequence was that this morning she got both lessons returned. She's getting such a little funk, too, that she won't go up to bed alone, but waits on the stairs till I come."

"Oh, what a cram!" exclaimed Elsie, rather feebly.

"It's not a cram," returned her sister. "You know it's perfectly true, and you look under the bed too, expecting to find a hidden robber, I suppose."

In a playful manner Brian caught hold of Elsie by the back of the neck, much in the same way as he might have done a small boy at the Grammar School, but with perhaps a lighter touch.

"Come, what's the matter with you?" he asked. "You never used to be afraid of the dark; you were as bold as brass. What have you done? Murdered somebody?"

"No," answered Elsie, laughing. "I'm only—only a bit silly."

She looked up with a smile as she spoke. No one ever doubted Brian's pluck, and the fact that he did not think her a coward encouraged Elsie to be brave. Brian knew that something really had frightened the child on the previous Thursday evening, but he had not mentioned the matter to any one except Mrs. Ormond, for which Elsie was in her heart devoutly thankful to him, as she knew what a "roasting" she would receive from Ida and Guy if once they got hold of the story.

But though Brian forbore to tell what he knew, or even to question her further, yet the incident had been constantly in his mind. He wondered greatly what could have been the cause of his cousin's alarm, and why she should refuse to

explain this when hitherto he had always been in her confidence. On Friday, without saying anything to anybody, Brian made a careful examination of the tool-house, hoping to find some clue to the mystery; but his search proved fruitless.

There was nothing in the place calculated to alarm the most timorous of mortals; and as the boy glanced round he saw simply just what he had seen there many times before—the grindstone, Uncle Roger's box, some gardening tools, and sticks for rose-trees and other plants, a quantity of matting stuff which had been wrapped round some plants and shrubs when they came from a nursery, some old hampers, and a short wooden bench on which the new boy, Henry, cleaned the knives and boots. There was certainly nothing here to cause any one to drop a lamp and run screaming into the house.

Still, Brian was not satisfied. He was perhaps rather pleased to think that there was some mystery connected with the tool-house; it was like trying to solve a very interesting puzzle.

"If only I had a clever detective here, like Sherlock Holmes!" he said to himself. "I suppose he'd just look round and find some clue which would explain the whole matter. I must confess I can't see anything. Now *that's* what began it all," he continued, as his eye rested on the grindstone. "I believe Elsie really did hear some one turning that stone, and it's my opinion that he, or she, whoever it might have been, was grinding the carving-knife; but there the story stops short, and doesn't seem to go any further. Besides, that doesn't explain what frightened Elsie the other evening. I wish she'd tell me, but I'm afraid she won't."

Brian went over and began carelessly working the grindstone with his left foot on the treadle. "I know what I'll do," he thought. "Each night I'll come out and tie the crank of this thing to the stand with a piece of thin black cotton; then I shall soon find out if any one comes and works here at night, for if they do, the thread will be broken in the morning."

Without saying anything to the others, he slipped out on Friday evening and set his trap; but when he went to examine it on the following morning the cotton was still unbroken, though it snapped at once the moment he pressed down the treadle. Nothing daunted by his failure, Brian made up his mind to try the same thing several nights running, and with this determination had hurried away to

join his cousins as they started for school.

"Where's father?" inquired Ida, as the family assembled at the dinner-table.

"He's gone to Ashvale on business," answered Mrs. Ormond. "He won't be back before this evening."

"There's no football this afternoon, is there, Brian?" asked Guy.

THE AIR PISTOL

"No practice game," was the answer. "There's a second-eleven match, but I don't think I shall go to the field. It's too cold to stand doing nothing."

"Then look here," continued Guy, "I'll tell you what well do; we'll make a target, and try my air-pistol. I know where there's a piece of board that'll do, and we can mark it out with rings and a bull's-eye with your compasses."

"By the way, Guy," said Mrs. Ormond suddenly, "I knew there was something I wanted to speak to you about. You remember the cork that was inside Uncle Roger's box? Well, I've found where it came from."

There was an exclamation of interest from the two girls as they raised their heads to listen.

"Have you, mother?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Ormond, with a half-smile on her face. "It came out of cook's methylated spirit bottle. You may remember that some little time ago she found it standing empty."

"But how could the cork have got into the box?" cried Ida.

"It seems to me," answered her mother, "that it must have been dropped by accident into the chest by the person who emptied the bottle, and therefore that same person must have been helping us when we opened the box."

"I know what you're driving at, mother," exclaimed Guy. "You think I used the spirit, and I've told you heaps of times I didn't. How does cook know it's the

same cork? There may be hundreds of corks exactly the same size, and you couldn't tell one from another."

"There was no mistaking this one for another," was the answer. "It had once been stuck in a bottle of red ink, and the end was stained."

"Well, I don't know anything about it," said Guy. "Perhaps," he continued, struck with a bright idea—"perhaps father cribbed the spirit to fill that thing he lights his pipes and cigars with, and he may have dropped the cork into the box. You'd better ask him when he comes home."

There was a laugh, in which Mrs. Ormond joined. "I don't think your father is the culprit," she answered.—"Of course, if Guy says he hasn't touched the bottle, we must believe him.—Ida, did you or Elsie use the spirit for anything?"

Both girls shook their heads, and Brian also declared himself innocent.

"It's a rum thing how it came to be inside the chest," he remarked. "It's just like a conjuring trick."

"It certainly seems very funny," replied his aunt; "but, like most conjuring tricks, I dare say the explanation would be very simple if it were ever given."

Guy was impatient to test the power and accuracy of his birthday present. He painted a bull's-eye on a piece of board, with rings numbered 1, 2, 3, each about two inches wide, and then the question was to find a suitable place for practice.

"It's a beastly cold wind outside," he said; "I know what we'll do. We'll hang it up in the tool-house. Come on, Ida and Elsie; we'll all have a try."

IDA

The elder sister responded readily, but Elsie hung back, made some excuse, and went off in another direction.

"What a little noodle she's becoming!" remarked Ida to Brian, as Guy proceeded to hang up the target. "I believe, for some reason or other, she's taken it into her head to be afraid to go inside this tool-house. She won't go near it, not even in broad daylight."

"Let's go and bring her," suggested Guy.

"Oh, I shouldn't," answered Brian. "You'll never cure her that way. The best thing is to leave her alone, and take no notice. She'll get over it in time."

The air-pistol was great fun. Ida proved as good a shot as either of the boys, and it was difficult to decide which could lay claim to being the best marksman of the three.

"We'll have six shots each, firing in turn," said Guy. "Ida shall begin, and I'll put down the scores on this bit of paper."

The contest was an exciting one. Ida, unfortunately, missed the target twice, and so got behind the others, but Brian and Guy were so close together that it remained for the last shot to show which had won the first place. Brian fired, and the little steel dart struck close to the bull's-eye.

"Now, then!" cried Guy, reloading the pistol. "I must take extra good aim this time and get a bull. Oh, bother!"

He had been standing looking at the target as he spoke, and holding the pistol with the muzzle pointing upwards. Incautiously his finger had tightened on the trigger, with the result that the little weapon suddenly went off.

"O Guy, you should be more careful!" exclaimed Ida. "You might have hurt somebody."

"Hang it all!" muttered her brother. "Now I've lost the dart."

"There it is," said Brian—"straight over your head."

He pointed as he spoke to a little red tuft that showed the dart was firmly embedded in one of the beams which supported the roof.

"Good business!" cried Guy. "We'll soon have it down. Ida, drag over that old chest, and if Brian will stand on it with me hoisted on to his shoulders, I believe I can reach it right enough."

The experiment was tried, but the beam was still just out of reach of Guy's

hand.

"I'll tell you what we can do," he said; "turn the chest up on end, and that'll make it higher."

As Guy moved the box into the required position there was an audible rustle and bump.

"Hullo, there's something inside!" he exclaimed.

GUY MOVES THE BOX



CHAPTER X.

ELSIE'S CONFESSION.

S

omething inside!" exclaimed Ida, as the trio stood for a moment staring at Uncle Roger's box.

"Yes," answered her brother. "Didn't you hear it move? You listen; I'll do it again."

There was not the slightest doubt that the chest was no longer empty.

"But it's locked," said Ida, "and has been ever since the evening when it was first opened; and father has the keys of the two padlocks."

"Well, it's not empty now," returned her brother. "I say, I wonder what on earth it can be? Let's go in and ask mother if she put anything inside."

The air-pistol was forgotten, and the party at once adjourned to the house to make further inquiries. They found Mrs. Ormond in the dining-room, but she was unable to throw any light on the subject.

"Neither your father nor I put anything into the box," she said. "It was locked up and taken straight out into the tool-house. Of course, he may have put something in since, but I think it hardly likely."

"But what can it be then, mother?" exclaimed Ida anxiously.

"I'm sure I don't know," was the answer. "You'll have to wait till your father returns before you can find out, for he has got the keys of the padlocks on his bunch."

"When will he be back?"

"Not before seven o'clock, I expect."

"Oh, bother!" cried Guy. "Fancy having to wait all that time!"

There was no alternative but to curb their impatience as best they might, and the young people strolled back to the tool-house to have another look at the chest.

"Listen while I turn it up," said Guy, "and see if we can guess what's inside."

It was impossible to determine the contents of the box in this manner.

"I should think it was a parcel of some kind," said Ida. "You'd better not do that any more, Guy. It may be something that will break if it's rolled and banged about."

"Whatever it is," remarked Brian, "I expect uncle put it inside before he locked the box again."

"But mother said he didn't," persisted Guy. "I do believe the old thing is bewitched. First, after it's been locked and sealed up for twenty years, and was supposed to contain all kinds of precious things, it was found to have nothing at all in it but a cork (which doesn't count); and now, when every one declares it

was put away empty, there's something inside."

No further discovery was likely to be made by simply lingering about staring at the outside of the chest, so, having recovered the air-pistol dart with the aid of a pair of steps, the trio dispersed, and went their several ways.

Brian strolled off down the garden, but had not gone far when he heard some one running after him, and turning round saw Elsie.

"O Bri!" she cried, "is it true that there's something in Uncle Roger's box?"

"It seems so," was the answer.

"Well, *how* can it have got there?" cried the child, her eyes growing rounder with excitement. "Isn't it wonderful? D'you think it's anything valuable?"

"I think we'd better not make any more guesses about that box until we see it opened," answered the boy, laughing; "though if you like to come and listen I'll turn the chest over. You'll then hear the hidden treasure moving inside, and can decide whether it sounds like a bundle of bank-notes, silver-plate, or bags of money."

If he had proposed a visit to the dentist, Elsie could not have shown greater reluctance to accept the invitation.

"I shan't go near that old tool-house again," she said slowly.

"Why not?"

"Will you promise you won't say anything? I wouldn't tell any one else but you, because I know they would only laugh at me, and say I was a coward."

"I won't say anything," answered the boy, smiling. "Come on—out with it! What's been the matter with you the last few days?"

Brian never broke his promises; his word was always to be trusted. It was with almost a sigh of relief that Elsie prepared to unburden herself of a secret which she had hitherto been keeping locked within her own bosom.

"I had an awful fright," she began. "You know when we were playing 'I spy' I went into the tool-house, and I—I saw something."

"Well, what did you see?"

"O Bri!" continued the girl, lowering her voice, and the startled look appearing once more on her face, "*I saw William Cole!*"

"Saw William Cole!" repeated Brian in astonishment. "What on earth d'you mean? Why, William, poor fellow, is drowned, and at the bottom of the sea, hundreds of miles from here."

"I know," gasped Elsie breathlessly. "But I saw him, all the same. The light of the lamp fell right on him. He was standing quite still, looking at me. I saw him as plainly as I see you now; and—O Bri," the child continued, covering her eyes with her hands, "I'm afraid to be left alone in the dark for fear I should see him again."

Brian felt sorry for his little cousin.

"Oh, nonsense, Elsie!" he said, taking her arm after the manner of a good comrade. "Don't go imagining that you've seen a ghost, because you haven't. It was all fancy. Look here; after you'd gone indoors I went myself and looked into the tool-house to see what had frightened you, and there was nothing there. You must buck up, and make up your mind you won't give way to your fears. Now come on with me, and we'll explore the tool-house together."

It cost Elsie a great effort, but she at length allowed herself to be persuaded; and, arm in arm, the two cousins made their way to the tool-house. There was certainly no sign of poor William, but that Elsie was firmly persuaded in her own mind that she had seen him was evident enough.

BRIAN AND ELSIE

"He stood there," she whispered, pointing with her finger, and shivering at the recollection. "He never moved, and never spoke, and then I let the lamp fall and ran away. You won't tell any one, will you, Brian? Remember, you've promised."

"Oh, I won't tell," answered the boy good-naturedly; "but the sooner you get

rid of these fancies the better."

The curtains had been drawn and the lamp lit; it was nearly tea-time, and Jane was then laying the table.

"There, now!" exclaimed Mrs. Ormond suddenly; "I've let Henry go home without asking him to leave word at Mrs. Budd's for her not to come on Monday. How forgetful I'm getting!"

"Is it anything I can do for you, aunt?" asked Brian.

"Oh no, my dear; thank you," was the answer. "I wanted Henry to tell Mrs. Budd, the washer-woman, not to come on Monday."

"Shall I take the message for you?"

"Oh no, Brian; she lives in Bridge Lane—right on the other side of the town. If it had been nearer I would have asked you to go."

"Oh, it wouldn't take me long, aunt," answered the boy. "I'll ride on my bicycle; the lamp is trimmed; and I can have my tea when I come back."

"It's very kind of you to offer," answered Mrs. Ormond, hesitating. "I almost think I will ask you to go, if you're sure you aren't tired. I don't want to bring the poor soul all this way on Monday morning for nothing."

Brian started off at once, saying he should be back in half an hour; and his aunt and cousins sat down to tea.

"I hope father won't be later than seven," said Guy, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. "I want to know what's in that chest."

"Brian's been longer than he said," he remarked when, at the end of the meal, he pushed back his chair and rose from the table. "I expect he hasn't been able to find the old woman's house, or perhaps his tyre's punctured. Hullo! There's father!"

The boy's quick ears had caught the rattle of a latch-key, and immediately there was a rush into the hall. Mr. Ormond entered with the collar of his

greatcoat turned up.

"Phew! it's cold," he said. "Hullo! What's the matter now?" Guy and Ida were both speaking at once.

"Father, did you put anything in Uncle Roger's box? It isn't empty now; there's something inside!"

"What d'you mean? I don't understand."

Hurriedly Ida gave the necessary explanation.

"I never put anything into the chest," said Mr. Ormond, with a puzzled look. "I locked it up, and told Henry to carry it into the tool-house."

"Well, there's something in it now!" cried Guy. "Father, lend us your keys, and let us go out and open it at once."

"Oh, nonsense!" was the answer. "Wait until Monday."

"We've been waiting all the afternoon," pleaded Ida. "Do let us have the keys!"

"Very well," laughed her father, producing a bunch from his pocket. "These are the ones. If you take a light out, don't set the place on fire."

"Won't you leave it till Brian comes back?" suggested Elsie; but her brother and sister had already started off in the direction of the yard door.

Elsie had shuddered at the very thought of going near that tool-house in the dark; but, ghost or no ghost, she meant to see that box opened. As the saying goes, she took her courage in both hands, and ran quickly after Guy and Ida.



CHAPTER XI.

UNCLE ROGER'S LEGACY.

H

er brother and sister were already in the tool-house when Elsie arrived at the door. She so far conquered her fears as to enter, but could not help one timid glance round, as though she might once more be confronted with the ghost of William Cole. Dead or alive, however, there was no sign of the gardener, and nothing more terrible to be seen than her old friend the grindstone.

PAPERS

Guy carried a candle which he had procured from the kitchen, and which guttered and smoked in the draught.

"Do be careful with that light," said Ida. "You'll burn the place down if you don't mind what you're about."

"Oh, all right!" answered Guy, preparing to drag the chest out into the middle of the floor. "I don't think it's much heavier than usual. I do wonder what's inside."

"Well, be quick and open it!" cried his sister, taking the candle and holding it so that its light would fall into the chest when its lid was raised. "Let's see for ourselves, and then we shall know for certain."

There was a moment's delay while Guy found the proper keys. First one and then the other padlock fell with a clank on to the bricks, the iron hasps were raised, and, with a "Here goes!" Guy flung back the lid.

Once more the children leant forward and peered down into this wonderful box. Elsie was the first to speak, and all she said was "Oh!" But the tone of her voice was enough to proclaim another disappointment.

Jewellery? Bank-notes? Bags of money? What was it they beheld? None of these things, but only a bundle of papers, tied together with a piece of faded red

tape.

"Well!" cried Ida, flushing with vexation, "I'll never hope for anything again!"

Guy picked up the bundle, and examined it more closely. The documents were all neatly folded, and were mostly docketed on the outside in heavy black writing. Some were of parchment; and one, he noticed, had in one corner three small red seals on a narrow strip of green ribbon.

"I wonder what these are!" said the boy. "Bah!" he added, holding the packet to his nose; "they smell musty enough. Let's take them in and show them to father."

Mr. Ormond had sat down to his tea, and seemed to have already dismissed Uncle Roger's box from his mind; the sight, however, of the children entering the room brought it back to his remembrance.

"Well," he said, jokingly, "have you found anything?"

"Nothing particular," answered Guy. "Only this old bundle of papers."

Mr. Ormond was in the act of raising his cup of tea to his lips; he paused, then lowered it without drinking.

"Papers!" he repeated, gazing at the packet with a puzzled look on his face. "What papers are they? Let me see."

"Oh, never mind about it now," said Mrs. Ormond. "Drink your tea while it's hot."

"One moment, mother," answered her husband. He untied the tape, and glanced first at one then at another of the clearly-written inscriptions on the folded documents. As he did so, the expression on his face became one of unbounded astonishment; and the children, quick to observe the change on his face, began to wonder what could be the cause of his surprise.

"You say you found these in the old box?" he asked.

"Yes, father. What are they?"

Mrs. Ormond rose from her chair at the end of the table, and came round to where her husband was sitting. She, too, had seen his look of amazement, and wondered what it could mean.

"What are they, father?" repeated Guy.

"What are they?" was the reply. "Why—why, I'll tell you what they are. This is Uncle Roger's legacy."

"Uncle Roger's legacy!" cried Ida. "D'you mean to say that all he left you, father, was that dirty old bundle of papers? Pooh! he might have kept them to himself!"

"You don't understand, Ida," was the answer, in a voice which showed that her father himself was not a little excited. "These papers are valuable."

"Oh!" cried Elsie suddenly. "Are they as valuable as bank-notes?"

"Well, yes," replied Mr. Ormond, laughing. "I think one may say they are. They are deeds and securities which represent a nice bit of property; and a good sum of money must have accumulated on some of them in twenty years. In fact, I'm not sure, Elsie, if we shan't be able to consider that promise about a pony."

There was a yell from Guy. He, Ida, and Elsie all tore round and round the room in a state of frantic excitement.

"Hurrah! hurrah for old Uncle Roger!" cried the boy.

"But, father," exclaimed Ida, pausing at length, completely out of breath, "if he meant it to be yours, why did he make you wait twenty years?"

"I'm sure I can't explain," was the reply, "more than this, that he was a curious old fellow, and often did the most eccentric things. What puzzles me more than that is to know where these papers have suddenly sprung from. You say you found them in the box. When did you first discover that it had anything inside?"

"Only this afternoon," answered Guy. "We turned it up, and heard something slide along the bottom and go bump against the end."

"Then how in the world was it that when we opened the chest the other day it was empty?"

"We thought you must have put it in," murmured Ida. "It is strange. How can it have happened?"

"D'you think they really were in the box all those years?" asked Mrs. Ormond.

"Undoubtedly. Where else could they have been?"

"O father," cried Ida suddenly, "I believe you knew about them all the time! You took them away yourself just to tease us. It's some joke."

"Indeed it isn't. I know no more about them than either of you children; but it's a most astonishing thing, and one I should like very much to have explained."

"Well, come out and have another look at the box," suggested Guy.

"Wait till your father's finished his tea," interposed Mrs. Ormond. "I wonder where Brian is all this time," she added. "I wish he were back. He'll be interested to hear of this discovery."

The children were so excited that they found it difficult to keep still. Guy especially wandered restlessly up and down the room as though he were a wild beast in a cage.

"I'll tell you what I believe it is," he exclaimed suddenly; "that old box has got either a false lid or a false bottom. That's where the papers were hidden, and in moving it about, the spring was somehow released, and they tumbled out."

After so many surprises, the young folks were ready to believe almost anything.

"Well, let's go out and see!" cried Ida.—"Father, you come when you've finished your tea."

Once more there was a rush to the tool-house, Guy, this time, borrowing a lamp from the kitchen, which gave a better light than the candle. Certainly this old box of Uncle Roger's seemed just the very sort of chest which one might

expect to possess some concealed spring which, when touched, would disclose a secret hiding-place; but tapping and measurements inside and out proved that there was nothing in its construction which caused it to differ from any other oak chest strengthened with bands of iron.

"Well, this licks me!" exclaimed Guy, rising from his knees. "The only explanation I can give is that the thing must be enchanted."

"I *should* like to know what it all means," said Ida. "Perhaps father will be able to tell when he comes. I hope he won't be long."

"Fancy a pony!" cried Elsie. "D'you think he really will give us one?"

"He said he'd consider it," answered Guy; "but I expect that means 'yes.' Hurrah! I tell you what I shall do. I shall go hunting."

The speaker gave vent to his delight by hopping about on one leg; then, coming in contact with the grindstone, he put his foot on the treadle, and began to work it as fast as he could.

"The water's all dried up," he said at length, when the stone stopped. Without thinking what he was doing, he put his hand into the trough, and began poking his fingers into the sediment which had collected at the bottom. In the soft mud was something hard, and he picked it out. The boy glanced carelessly at the bit of metal, and was about to throw it away when its shape struck him as familiar.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "Look what I've found!"

"What is it?" asked Ida.

"Can't you see?" was the answer. "Why, it's the little knob from the handle of that poultry-carver!"

"Then that proves Brian and I were right!" cried Elsie excitedly. "It was the carver that was being ground when I heard the stone turning that night. Mother said the knob was loose, and it must have fallen off into the water."

"Get away!" answered Guy obstinately. "It might have fallen off the knife some time when William Cole had it out here to clean, and dropped into the

trough by accident. You won't get me to believe that yarn of yours, Elsie."

Elsie was about to reply, when her sister cut short the dispute by exclaiming, "Here's father!"

The carving-knife was for the moment forgotten. Mr. Ormond examined the box, turned it over first on one side then on the other, rapped the boards with his knuckles, and at length shook his head.

"I can't understand it," he said, with a puzzled smile. "It's a mystery."

"O father! don't you think we shall ever find it out?" asked Ida.

Before Mr. Ormond had time to reply there was a sound of footsteps in the yard, and Brian's voice was heard calling, "Uncle!"

"Hullo! Here I am. What d'you want?"

The boy came hurrying into the tool-house; there was a curious expression on his face of excitement mingled with anxiety.

"You're wanted in the house, please, uncle—now at once."

"What for?"

"I can't explain; but please come at once. It's very important."

Mr. Ormond turned to comply with this request.

"I say," shouted Guy, anxious to be the first to break the news to his cousin, "we've found what was in the box. It was Uncle Roger's legacy—a bundle of papers."

"I know," answered Brian calmly.

"What!" cried Ida. "D'you know how they got there?" she added eagerly.

"Yes," replied the boy, wrenching himself free from Guy's grasp, and starting off to follow his uncle into the house. "I can't explain it now, but I'll tell you presently."

BRIAN AND MR ORMOND



CHAPTER XII.

THE RIDDLE SOLVED.

W

hen Brian started off on his aunt's errand, he little thought that carrying a simple message to a washer-woman would lead him into an altogether unexpected adventure.

BRIAN SEES COLE

Hastily putting on his short overcoat and cap, he lighted his lamp, mounted his bicycle, and went swiftly off down the road. Bridge Lane was away at the opposite side of the town, a part which he had not visited before; and he had to dismount several times to make inquiries before he finally reached the door of Mrs. Budd's cottage. Having delivered his message, he had nothing further to do than turn his machine round and ride home. At this point the thought struck him that in coming through the town he had gone a longer way than he need have done, and that a road branching off to the right would be a shorter cut back to the suburb in which his uncle's house was situated.

He rode on for ten minutes, and then slackened speed, for he began to doubt whether he was, after all, on a more direct route. Though quiet and deserted, the road was lit at intervals with gas lamps, and by their uncertain light Brian saw a man some distance on ahead, walking in the same direction as that in which he himself was going.

"I'll ask that fellow if I'm right," he muttered, and increased his pace with a vigorous thrust on the pedals.

The man did not hear the noiseless approach of the bicycle until it was close behind him; then he turned quickly as the rider slowed down and spoke.

"Can you tell me—" Brian began, but he got no further. For a moment he entirely lost control of the machine, with the result that he narrowly missed being upset in the gutter. A gas-lamp was close at hand, and in its light he had a full view of the stranger's face, and recognized him in a moment—William Cole!

Brian was, perhaps, not quite so easily frightened as Elsie; it never struck him that the figure before him was anything but flesh and blood; still, the sudden appearance on a dark road of a man whom everybody believed to have been drowned so astonished him that it was a few moments before he recovered even the use of his tongue.

He put on the brake, and jumped off his machine; but the man had already turned, and was making off hurriedly in the opposite direction.

"William! Stop a moment!"

The man paid no attention. There was a stile close at hand; he turned, jumped over it, and disappeared in the darkness.

Here was indeed a mystery; and Brian, for some reason, felt that he must discover what it meant. Leaving his bicycle propped against the lamp-post, he dashed off in pursuit. Being a fast runner, and in good training from football, he soon recovered the little advantage which the man had gained at the start, and overtook him before he had reached the opposite side of the field.

"William! What brings you here? We thought you had gone down on board the *Arcadia*."

For a few seconds the man seemed too much out of breath to speak; then he gasped out a confused jumble of words, which Brian could hardly understand.

"Don't you tell the master you've seen me, Mr. Brian. I was going away to-night. I know I've done wrong; but I've put it right again, and the only one who's

hurt is myself."

"I don't understand you," answered Brian. "Look here," he continued, struck with a sudden thought; "you were in the tool-house at the Pines the other evening. What were you doing?"

"I'm afraid I frightened Miss Elsie," returned the man, evading the question. "I suppose she told Mr. Ormond."

"As a matter of fact, she didn't; but of course I shall tell him I've seen you when I get back. Come, William, what's the matter? What does it all mean? Are you in trouble? Because, if so, you know we'd any of us help you if we could."

To Brian's astonishment Cole made no reply, but in the darkness drew his coat sleeve across his eyes with an audible sob.

COLE SOBS

"I am in trouble, sir," he answered at length. "And it's trouble of my own making. I'm done for—ruined! That's what's the matter with me."

"Ruined!" repeated the boy. "What do you mean? Come back to where I've left my bicycle. Now that you've told me so much, you may as well let me have the whole story."

They retraced their steps in silence, Cole apparently making up his mind whether or not he should disclose the story of his misfortunes.

"I might as well make a clean breast of the matter," he muttered. "It'll all come out sooner or later. When you speak to the master, sir," he continued, "you'll say what you can for me, I hope. I'm sorry for what's past, and I've done my best to make amends."

Looking at his companion as they came once more under the light of the gas-lamp, Brian was astonished to see what a change had taken place in his appearance. He looked ill and careworn; his clothes were untidy, and his chin had evidently not been shaved for days.

"You needn't be afraid to tell me everything," said the boy. "I'm sorry if you're

in a mess, and I'll do what I can to get you out of it, William."

"Thank you, sir," was the reply.

They walked slowly along the deserted road, and as they did so Cole told his story.

"It was my own fault," he began. "I got to spending my evenings with a lot of young chaps at the 'Red Horse,' and soon I was short of money. They was a betting lot, and one of 'em told me if I could lay my hand on as much as fifty pound, he'd put me on to a way of making a fortune. I needn't trouble you now, sir, with a long account of how it was to be done; but it seemed simple and easy enough, and I thought about it night and day. You know that old box, Mr. Brian—the one in the master's library at the Pines? Well, of course, I'd heard the story about it, and seen it a good many times when I was in doing odd jobs or helping with the cleaning. I'd made up my mind that there must be money inside it, and the thought came over me that if I could get out enough to carry out the plan this other fellow had proposed, I might make my fortune and go abroad. The amount of money I'd taken I'd send back to Mr. Ormond, with no name, but just a note to say it had been taken out of his box."

"But why did you pretend you were going to Australia?" asked Brian.

"I'm coming to that, sir. To avert suspicion, in case anything went wrong and it was found that the box had been tampered with, I made out I was going to emigrate, and that I should have left England the very night I was going to rob the box. Mr. Brian, I'm no better than a common thief; but I tell you solemnly, I meant to return what I took."

"But how did you open the sealed box?"

"I remembered that, sir, and for some time it puzzled me to know what to do. I'm handy with tools and that kind of thing. I knew I could pick the padlocks; but if once I'd chipped the seals off, it would be seen that the box had been opened. However, there seemed no help for it, so I decided I must risk that much. Late Friday night, or early Saturday morning, I forced back the catch of the library window, and got into the house that way. I got out the box, and was going to begin by breaking the seals, when I thought of something better. I went into the

kitchen, found a carving-knife, took it out into the tool-house, and ground the blade very thin on the stone. I got some methylated spirit out of the pantry, made a flame by burning it in a tin dish, and so heated the knife. When the blade was hot enough, I was able to slip it under the seals, so that they came away whole."

"That accounts for the cork," muttered Brian.

"I got the box open," continued the man, "but only to find that it contained nothing more than a bundle of papers. I hadn't time to search them through, but I thought there might be bank-notes, or something of that kind among them, so I determined I'd take them away. I had one fright, for while I was doing this I heard the door pushed open, and Bob came into the room. Of course he knew me, and didn't bark. He must have jumped in through the window while I was in the kitchen. I chained him up again when I went away; but first I refastened the box, and warming the backs of the seals, put them in their former places, exactly as they had been before. I walked all the way to Chadstone that night, and put up at a little pub there, making out I'd come to look for work. I examined the papers, but found that they weren't of any value to me or to any one but Mr. Ormond. For several days I wandered about, hardly daring to show my face in the daytime, sleeping anywhere and half-starved, for what money I had went very fast. One thing I was determined on—that I'd return them papers; and you just about know all the rest. I came that Thursday night, found the old box out in the tool-house, picked the locks again, and put the bundle in its old place, meaning to write Mr. Ormond an anonymous letter and say where the packet was. Then Miss Elsie came to the door and run away screaming. I'd no time to escape, so I hid under a heap of old matting. I heard you come into the place, sir, but you didn't find me, and later on I crept out and made off. I hid in an old barn most of yesterday and to-day, because I was afraid Mr. Ormond would smell a rat, and set the police on my track; and now I was going to try and get something to eat and then my idea was to walk to London."

For some minutes after the narrative had concluded Brian stood hardly knowing what to say. There was no doubt that Cole had been guilty of a serious offence; yet, remembering what he had been in the past, and seeing the change in him now, together with his evidently genuine regret for what he had done, the boy could not help feeling sorry, and anxious even to render the unfortunate fellow some assistance.

"Look here, William," he said suddenly, "the very best thing you can do is to come back with me now, and make a clean breast of the matter to Mr. Ormond."

"Oh, I can't do that, sir!"

"Yes, you can. Tell him exactly what you told me. He'll forgive you, I'm sure, and he'll advise you what to do better than I can."

"He may have me sent to jail," said Cole. "Still, I would rather face it, and take the consequences."

Brian's return to the Pines has already been described, and little more remains to be told. Mr. Ormond's astonishment was as great as his nephew's had been, when he entered the library, and saw William Cole standing there, cap in hand.

As the man related his story, his former master listened with a grave face.

"I'm sorry to hear this of you, William," he said at length. "I couldn't have believed it possible. I suppose you are aware that you ran the risk of being sent to penal servitude?"

"Oh yes, that I did, sir," was the answer. "But don't give me up. Let me have another chance."

"As you returned the papers, I'm inclined to deal leniently with you," said Mr. Ormond. "I hope this may be a lesson to you to keep out of crooked ways for the future. You have a brother in the north of England, I believe? Go to him, and see if he can help you to get work away from your old surroundings. I'll lend you money for your railway fare."

Cole tried to express his thanks, but Mr. Ormond cut him short with another warning to keep to straight paths in future. This, to give the man his due, he succeeded in doing, and a few months later was able to return the sum advanced for his railway ticket.

There were no more mysteries in connection with Uncle Roger's box, while Elsie so far recovered her nerves that she soon learned to gallop round the field when the promised pony came next spring.

ELSIE ON HER PONY

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN.



TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

The following two changes have been made and can be identified in the body of the text by a grey dotted underline:

He put on the brake, and jumped of his machine but is seemed simple and easy enough	He put on the brake, and jumped <i>off</i> his machine but <i>it</i> seemed simple and easy enough
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