

Chapter 10 - *The Case*

During the next seven weeks the leaves floated and twirled from the trees, and a light hoarfrost covered the fields in the early mornings.

Matthew Parfitt, who was in the reserves, had been called up, and May Thorne, to the surprise of everyone, volunteered to deliver the post. She unearthed an ancient bicycle from some forgotten shed corner and proceeded to ride it from cottage to cottage, her sackful of letters stuffed compactly into a basket in the front.

"I thought that they were extinct," Zach had said on first seeing her riding it. "Looks like a fossil on wheels. I am, of course, referring to the bicycle frame and not Miss May," he added. Michael Fletcher, who had signed up in September, had at last, after much impatient waiting, also been called up. He and John Barnes traveled into Weirwold together to catch the train.

Mrs. Miller had been rushed into the hospital with a concussion after having walked into a tree in the pitch dark. When news of the event reached the graveyard cottage, Willie overheard Tom muttering something to the effect that it was a wonder the tree didn't have to be taken too. Meanwhile, the government had asked for a money contribution from the parents of evacuees. Since many parents were miserable at being separated from their offspring and it would be a struggle for some to pay money for their misery, they finally decided to have them home again. Half of the evacuees in Little Weirwold and the surrounding area had already left. This meant that the classrooms were not so crowded, but there was still a shortage of paper and pencils. Willie longed desperately to be in Mrs. Hartridge's class, even though he had since grown quite fond of Mrs. Black.

Every day before and after school he faithfully practiced reading and writing, and occasionally when Emilia Thorne returned from the library she would pop round, when Tom was out on fire duty, and sit with him. She soon discovered that he had a remarkable aptitude for learning words, especially if he liked them. She started to teach him rhymes and poems, and then she would write them down on scraps of paper so that he could follow the letters through when he was on his own. By now Tom had related the whole of *Genesis* to him and had read *the Just So Stories* twice. He and Willie were now in the middle of *Exodus* and had just begun *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

Willie and Zach managed to see each other every day as well as weekends and odd evenings, and they, the twins and George would walk and play in the fields together.

One dull afternoon, on the last day of October, Zach and Willie were kneeling on the window ledge in the sitting room of the Littles' cottage. A slow icy drizzle of rain splattered and ran in tiny rivulets down the window. Zach squinted through the glass and wiped his breath away from the pane.

"Where is he?" he moaned. "He's taking an age." He turned despondently from the window.

"It'll soon be dark and then we won't be able to see him coming at all."

He was cut short by a loud knocking at the front door.

"Yippee! Wizzo!" yelled Zach, leaping up and running out of the kitchen. "Callooh! Callooh! Callooh! Callay!"

He switched the hall light off, stumbled to the front door and flung it open. His face fell. It was George and the twins.

"There's a welcome," said Carrie.

"It ent arrived, has it?" said George as they stepped into the dark hall.

Zach slammed the door behind them in a disgruntled manner and turned the light on.

"We can only stay for an hour," said Ginnie.

Mrs. Little leaned against the kitchen doorway, a freshly lit cigarette in her hand.

"You'll have to take them upstairs, Zach. First aid begins in fifteen minutes."

Zach groaned.

"Unless, of course, you want to volunteer to be a body."

"No, thanks," said Zach hurriedly. "Quick, let's go."

The five of them scrambled up the narrow carpeted stairway.

"And don't forget to put up the blacks," yelled Mrs. Little after them. "I don't want Charlie Ruddles wagging his finger at me again."

"I won't," answered Zach.

Zach's room seemed more like a study than a bedroom. One wall was filled to overflowing with medical books, and against the back window overlooking the Littles' straggly but unsuspectedly organized garden stood a large rolltop desk and chair. Along the wall opposite the bookcase was a bed, and under the front window, which looked out over the tiny arched lane and fields, was a small table with a photograph of a young dark-haired woman and a slightly older man with large penetrating eyes and a broad grin. They each had an arm around the other. On the floor beside Zach's bed was a small pile of books. The twins perched themselves on the bed, Zach sat on the chair by the desk and George and Willie sat cross-legged with their backs leaning against the bookcase. Carrie picked up some of the books. "*To Save His Chum*," she read aloud. "*Stalky and Company*. *The Golden Treasury of Verse*, *Great Actors I Have Known*—what an odd mixture!"

"Not at all," exclaimed Zach.

"Well, I think it's odd."

There was another loud knocking from downstairs. Zach leaped from his chair.

"It's Mister Tom!" said Willie suddenly, and he flushed at having betrayed his excitement so openly.

Zach gave out a yell, threw the bedroom door open and almost flung himself down the stairs. The others clattered on behind him. Tom was standing in the hallway, his cap and overcoat covered with a thin layer of drizzle.

"I've tried to keep it dry," he said, indicating a large battered suitcase by his feet. "Best to wipe it, though."

He looked at Willie. "S'pose you'll be wantin' to stay fer a bit, eh?"

"Yeh, can I?"

"I'll collect you in thirty minutes. Mind you come immediate, like."

Zach and George dragged the case up to the bedroom and laid it on one side. It was a brown leather case with two straps that buckled on either side of the handle. The leather was soft and faded with age. Both sides of it were covered by labels of all colours and shapes with the names of towns and countries on them. Two thick pieces of cord were tied horizontally and vertically around it.

"Has you been to all them countries?" asked George.

"My parents mostly. They used this when they were one-night-standing and eventually they gave it to me."

"One-night-standin'?" repeated Willie.

"Yes. There are some companies that perform in a different venue every night."

"Venyew? What's that?"

"A place. A place where a show is going to be performed. Usually the show is already booked in advance. Anyway," continued Zach, "my parents kept their ordinary clothes in one suitcase and their costumes and makeup in another."

"Does your father wear makeup?" asked George.

"Sometimes," answered Zach, still struggling with the cords.

"Gosh, they certainly did a good job on this."

"Do you mean like a lady?" said Willie.

Carrie burst out laughing.

"Here," said Ginnie, "I'll help you," and she knelt by Zach, who was by now hot with frustration. He leaned back on his heels and looked at Willie. "Haven't you ever seen a show?"

Willie shook his head. "Me mum ses that theaters and pitcher houses are dens of sin."

"Rot," exclaimed Zach. "I was practically born in the theater. I was breast-fed in theater dressing-rooms."

Willie blushed. "That's swearing," he said.

"I learned to walk and talk in theaters," said Zach. "And I'm not sinful, am I?"

"You're just an angel, ent you," said Carrie, her hands clasped.

"And you're cracked," said Zach. "Come on, let's open this beastly case."

At last the stiff damp straps were unbuckled and the two large clips unfastened. Zach threw back the lid in triumph and the twins and George gathered round to look at the contents. Willie hesitated.

"Come on, Will," said Zach, seeing him hang back. "I want to show off to everyone."

"When do you stop?" remarked Carrie.

Zach gave her a withering glance, but it was so over-dramatic she and the others burst out laughing. He gave up and looked inside the case. An envelope with "Zach" written on it in bold lettering was stuck to the inside of the lid. He tore it off and ripped open the envelope.

"It's from Mummy and Daddy," he yelled.

"Surprise, surprise," said George. "Come on. We've got to go home soon. You can read that later."

"Oh, all right," said Zach, stuffing it into his pocket.

The case was packed very tightly. He peeled off a large piece of newspaper from the top and unwrapped five small parcels, inside which lay several home-baked cakes.

"I ent never seen cakes like that afore," said George.

"My grandmother taught my mother to make these when she was a girl."

Underneath were two jars of pickled herrings and three bars of chocolate.

"Wizzo!" he yelled, pulling out an assortment of much-loved and battered objects. "Books!"

"What you want with those?" said George. "Thought you'd have enough of that at school."

Carrie began to flick through them. Willie tapped Zach's shoulder, but he had already read his mind and he handed him a couple. The words were laid out in a strange manner.

"It's all talkin'," said Carrie. "There ent no description."

"There's some in the dialogue," explained Zach. "The words have to set the atmosphere, you see. They're plays."

"How d'you play wiv 'em?" asked Willie, his curiosity aroused.

"You are an ass, Will. They're theater plays. Scripts." He pointed to the lines. "See here, that's that character's lines and that's the other person answering. Actors learn them off by heart and then they rehearse them masses and masses of times until it sounds as if they've just thought of them."

George held up one thick battered tome. "*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Ugh!" and he dropped it in disgust.

"How dare you!" cried Zach, picking it up hastily. He looked at Willie, sensing that he wouldn't have heard of him. "William Shakespeare was one of our greatest playwrights. A playwright is a man who writes plays like the one in your hand, only he wrote plays nearly four hundred years ago and people still go and see them being performed."

"William Shakey," said Willie quietly to himself.

"Shakespeare!" hooted Carrie.

"William Shakespeare," he repeated. "William." So he had the first name of somebody famous.

The next article that Zach dragged out was a stiff black circular object. He shook it and in one second it became a shiny top hat. He placed it on his thick wiry hair and cocked it slightly to one side. Everyone was terribly impressed. He then pulled out a small black suit. The jacket of the suit curved in at the waist, and at the back were two buttons above a pair of tails. There was a stiff white object called a dicky. It was a collar and bow tie and the front of a shirt. Dangling from it were two thin cords to be tied at the back. Zach put it on, and when the jacket was done up it looked as if he was wearing a proper dress shirt. Imitation white cuffs were attached to the ends of the jacket sleeves.

"Proper job," remarked George.

Ginnie examined the whole suit very closely. She turned back the sleeves to see exactly how the cuffs had been sewn in.

Zach unwrapped a pair of objects wrapped in newspaper.

"My taps!"

He held up a pair of shiny black patent shoes. On each sole were two pieces of metal, one at the tip and one at the heel.

"What kind of shoes is they?" asked George, puzzled.

"Tap shoes. You've seen Fred Astaire dance, haven't you? Well it's . . ." He stopped. The others were all shaking their heads from side to side.

"I've heard of Fred Barnes," said George. "He owns the Big Farm up at . . ."

"Will. You're a Londoner. You must have seen him at the pictures."

"I ain't allowed," emphasized Willie. "I don't do that sort of thing."

Zach was astounded. He thought the whole world had heard of Fred Astaire.

"Well, there's only one way to explain tap." He moved the case to one side, rolled back the carpet and told the others to sit by the bookcase. He then put the shoes on and laced them up. He did look strange in the elegant black shoes, darned woolen socks, threadbare shorts, top hat and tails.

"Now this is what's called a tap spring," and he lightly tapped his right foot along the floorboards and hopped neatly onto it, leaving his left leg raised slightly behind him. Carrie smothered a giggle. He glared at her.

"If you don't want to see what it's like I shan't bother wasting my time."

Ginnie gave her sister a dig in the ribs.

"Come on," said George. "Take no notice of her."

If it hadn't been for Willie's attentive expression Zach would have stopped.

"All right," he said. "Here goes. And a one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight." And with that he danced around the room, his shoes tapping rhythmically on the floor, springing and twirling around, and as he tapped and stamped, he yelled out, "Shuffle hop, cramp roll, Buffalo."

He concluded the dance with a double spin, springing sideways in the air and kicking his feet sharply together, and as he did so he landed in a heap on the bed. George, the twins and Willie broke out into applause. Zach grinned sheepishly at them. They were interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Little. She stood and, brandishing a hefty piece of ceiling plaster in her hand, glared at them.

"Zach," she said, looking directly at him, "I presume you are responsible for this."

He looked up at her from the bed, his cheeks flushed with the exertions of his performance, the taps on his shoes exposed to her scrutiny.

"Sorry, Aunt Nance," he began earnestly.

"I know it's difficult," interrupted Mrs. Little, "but we don't want to treat real casualties just

yet, so keep the noise down, will you?"

Zach nodded, and she opened the door out onto the landing and closed it behind her. They sat silently and listened to her footsteps fading away down the staircase. Zach undid his shoes.

"Never mind," said Ginnie quietly. "You can show us again, another time."

"Not if this wretched drizzle continues and we have to stay indoors," he said. "It's awful having to creep around all the time."

"You was fine," broke in Willie. "You was really fine."

Zach beamed.

"Come on, slowcoach," urged George.

Zach hurriedly unpacked a soft, flat parcel.

With a flourish he pulled out a jersey of many colors. The body and sleeves were knitted in colored squares, red, yellow, green, black and orange. He struggled out of his old jersey and put it on. He even had to turn up the sleeves.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" he remarked. But the others could only stare at him in speechless amazement.

"You ent goin' to wear that, is you?" said George.

"Whyever not?"

"Well, 'tis a bit bright, ent it?"

"You'll have Charlie Ruddles after you with blackout curtains," said Carrie. Ginnie giggled.

Zach turned to Willie.

The jersey had a polo-neck collar in red. The cuffs and the waistband were ribbed in the same color. Willie thought that next to Zach's deep complexion and black hair the red looked pleasing.

"I think it's fine," he said quietly, and Zach knew he was speaking truthfully.

There were socks in the case, a scarf, a cape and colored tights, scraps of material and a pair of old black ankle boots with a label hanging on them. It read, "Found these in the theatre wardrobe. No use for them. Too small. Have had them resoled. Hope they fit you. If too big you can always stuff the toes. Love, Mum."

Zach closed the case and passed the cakes around.

"Where shall we meet next time?" he asked.

"What's wrong with here?" said Carrie.

Zach pointed his thumb downwards.

"There's always something going on here in the evenings. If it's not first aid it's the Knitting Socks for Icelandic Seamen Club."

"Well, there ent much room in our place," said George. "I share with David an' he's bound to keep comin' in to see what we's doin' and Edward hasn't had a room of his own ever. Now that Mike's gone he guards it like it were a blimmin' gold mine."

Zach turned to the twins.

"How about your place?"

The twins looked at each other.

"We've a room between us," said Ginnie, "but there's Sophie."

Sophie was their eight-year-old sister.

"She'd be nosin' in on us," said Carrie.

Willie remained silent. He had a room. It was terribly private and precious, though. Dare he risk inviting them and asking Mister Tom's permission? After all, he was still wetting his bed. He would hate the others to find out.

"Zach," he began huskily. He cleared his throat. "There's my room."

"Of course," he cried. "I'd forgotten. Could we meet at your place?"

"I'll ask Mister Tom," Willie said, flushing slightly.

"Well, that's that settled," said Zach with finality. Willie was not so sure. "What's the next game to be?"

"Not Tarzan again," said George. "I've had enough of bein' an ape."

"Actually," said Zach, "I've got another idea brewing. How about Sherlock Holmes? You could be Moriarty, George."

"The archenemy?"

"Yes," said Zach, surprised. "How did you know?"

George raised his eyes. He was always the archenemy and Carrie was invariably his evil assistant.

"Does that mean I has to die or be rescued again?" said Ginnie.

"Well, not exactly," said Zach, a little perturbed. "Anyway, as I was saying, Will, you could be . . ."

"Dr. Watson," chorused George and the twins.

Willie was always Zach's faithful assistant, and it was quite obvious, as soon as Sherlock Holmes was mentioned, that Zach would be the famous deerstalkered detective.

"How about sittin' in a tree waitin' for badgers," suggested George. "Or seein' if Spooky Cott is really haunted?"

Spooky Cott was the name given to a deserted cottage. It was surrounded by an undergrowth of tangled bushes and trees. Over the years, several people had reported hearing strange sounds emanating from it. George and the twins dared not venture near it except in the broadest of daylight, and even then they usually fled at first sight of it.

"At night?" asked Ginnie, and she shivered.

"Yes, with a torch."

"Blackout regulations."

"Drat," said George.

"Goodness," Ginnie gasped, catching sight of the clock. "We'll have to go. We'll be in trouble if we don't run for it." She, Carrie and George grabbed their coats and fled out of the room and down the stairs.

"When shall we meet?" whispered Zach urgently after them.

"Friday?"

Friday was agreed.

They hurriedly whispered their good-byes to each other, and after the front door had been closed Willie followed Zach back into his bedroom.

"Now," said Zach, jumping onto the bed, "I can read my letter," and he pulled out the crumpled envelope from his shorts. "You don't mind, do you?" he said, glancing at Willie, who had sat down beside him.

"No," answered Willie, "course not."

He wriggled back farther on the bed till he was leaning up against the wall. He could hardly believe that Zach was his special friend. Zach said he was a good listener and that he was a sensitive being. Willie had thought being sensitive was being a sissie. Zach didn't think so. He admired him for it. Admired him! He glanced over at Zach. He was lying sprawled across the pillow leaning on his elbow, his head propped to one side, reading the letter. There seemed to be pages. His own mother had written to Little Weirwold only once since his arrival eight weeks ago, and the letter had been addressed to Mister Tom. He had read it out to him but he knew that he'd left out bits.

He had actually written a letter of his own to her. His first ever. He'd even addressed the envelope, bought the stamp by himself and posted it. I expect she's been too busy to answer, he thought, what with the war and everything. For a brief moment he thought of his home in London and brushed the memory aside.

There was a knock on the front door downstairs and the sound of Mrs. Little opening it.

"That's Mister Tom," said Willie, moving off the bed. Mrs. Little called up to him.

"I got to go."

"Bother," said Zach.

They were at the top of the stairs when Zach touched his shoulder.

"Don't forget about the room, will you," he whispered.

Willie shook his head and ran down the stairs.

Tom was waiting for him at the bottom. Willie put his gabardine and cap on and slung his

gas-mask box over his shoulder. The sky was almost black when he and Tom stepped outside. A strong wind tore through the trees, whipping the branches fiercely to one side while the rain swept across their faces. Tom put up the umbrella.

"Best hang tight to my arm, boy," he yelled and together they leaned forward and tramped through the long wet grass to wrestle with the Littles' gate.

Willie clung firmly to him. He pulled his cap down over his eyes, but the wind whistled bitterly through his ears. They passed the Bush family's cottage and struggled by the vicarage. The leaves flew and scattered around in fragments, brushing their bodies and sticking to their wet cheeks. They fought with the long gate into Dobbs's field and Tom checked that she was sheltered. The wind tried to wrench the umbrella from his hands. He hung grimly on and wrestled with it until he could lower it in front of them. Half running, half walking, they fled through the back garden, narrowly missing the Anderson, and threw themselves into the passageway, the leaves swirling in after them.

They slammed the door behind them and panted and smiled in the darkness. It was as if someone had suddenly turned off the sound.

Tom opened the sitting-room door and the silence was broken by Sammy as he came bounding out, leaping up at the pair of them barking excitedly. Willie hung his gabardine and cap on his peg while Sammy stood on his hind legs and placed his paws on his stomach. Willie ruffled his fur.

"Has he been fed?" he asked.

"No, lad, I left it fer you."

Willie grinned happily. It was one of his jobs to feed Sammy in the evenings.

After he had fed him, he wiped his boots dry with an old rag, put the kettle on and sat down at the table with pencil and paper.

" 'Tis late fer that," said Tom.

"Just ten minutes," pleaded Willie. "Mrs. Black ses if I can do me letters and me capitals better, I can start joined-up writin' soon."

"No longer, though."

"Ta," and with that he began writing.

Tom made the tea and took down two large white mugs from hooks hanging by the window. One had a letter T on it, the other a letter W. Since Willie was so desperate to be accepted in Mrs. Hartridge's class, Tom had been helping in every possible way. He had stuck labels in various places so that Willie would associate an object with a word, until after a time Willie labeled them himself. He glanced at all the bits of paper hanging higgledy-piggledy on the furniture and walls. He hoped that Willie would manage to get into Mrs. Hartridge's class before she left. It had been announced only a month ago that she was expecting her first child and would probably be leaving after the spring term. He glanced at Willie, who had now finished writing. He was sitting quietly, drinking his tea. It wasn't until after he had gone to bed that Willie asked about the room. He had remained subdued for the rest of the evening, glancing at Tom and looking away. It was Tom who finally coaxed it out of him.

He had gone up as usual to turn Willie's lamp down and had found him sitting up in bed with one of his library books lying open on his knees. Instead of tracing the pages with his finger

as he usually did, he was staring vacantly into space. Tom came over to him, closed the book and put it on his table.

"Now then," he said, crouching under the rafters and seating himself comfortably at the foot of the bed, "what's it all about, eh?"

Willie looked at him, startled.

"What's eatin' you? You been in a brown cloud ever since supper."

Willie took a deep breath.

"You see," he began, "Zach made the ceiling fall on Mrs. Little's head and Edward won't let George in his room 'cos of the war and Zach ses they're knittin' boots in the sittin' room and the twins ses they might, only . . ."

"Slow down," said Tom, "and gets to the point."

"Mister Tom," he said breathlessly, "could I have George and Zach and Carrie and Ginnie up here in this room?"

"Don't see why not. They been thrown out of their homes?"

"No. It's jes' there ain't much room at George's and Zach ses . . ."

"No need to explain. This is your room. You does what you like, only," he warned, pointing his pipe in Willie's direction, "if there's any mess you has to clear it up. Understand?"

"Yeh. Course," said Willie.

"When is they wantin' to come?"

"Fridee."

"Fridee 'tis then."

Tom stood up and kissed Willie's forehead. "Night, lad," he said quietly.

"Mister Tom," said Willie, as he turned to turn the lamp down.

"Yis?"

"They don't know about—you know," and he patted the blankets with his hands.

"The bed-wettin'? You ent ashamed of that, is you?"

Willie nodded.

"Ent no need to mention it. I'll makes yer bed up before the evenin' so's they won't see the rubber. That do?"

"Yeh. Ta."

The room was blanketed in darkness until Tom removed the blackout curtain.

"Night," he said again, and he disappeared down the steps, closing the trapdoor after him.

Willie leaned his head back on his upraised hands. He glanced at the slanting windowpane.

The rain was running down the glass in tiny sparkling rivulets. He snuggled down into the warm blankets. He had never thought that he would ever come to love the rain, but he did now. The last thing he remembered before falling asleep was the *patter, patter, patter* of it gently and rhythmically hitting the tiled roof above his head.