



The Scandal Detectives
Fitzgerald, Francis Scott

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About Fitzgerald:

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (September 24, 1896 – December 21, 1940) was an American Jazz Age author of novels and short stories. He is regarded as one of the greatest twentieth century writers. Fitzgerald was of the self-styled "Lost Generation," Americans born in the 1890s who came of age during World War I. He finished four novels, left a fifth unfinished, and wrote dozens of short stories that treat themes of youth, despair, and age.

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Chapter 1

It was a hot afternoon in May and Mrs. Buckner thought that a pitcher of fruit lemonade might prevent the boys from filling up on ice cream at the drug store. She belonged to that generation, since retired, upon whom the great revolution in American family life was to be visited; but at that time she believed that her children's relation to her was as much as hers had been to her parents, for this was more than twenty years ago.

Some generations are close to those that succeed them; between others the gap is infinite and unbridgeable. Mrs. Buckner—a woman of character, a member of Society in a large Middle-Western city—carrying a pitcher of fruit lemonade through her own spacious back yard, was progressing across a hundred years. Her own thoughts would have been comprehensible to her great-grandmother; what was happening in a room above the stable would have been entirely unintelligible to them both. In what had once served as the coachman's sleeping apartment, her son and a friend were not behaving in a normal manner, but were, so to speak, experimenting in a void. They were making the first tentative combinations of the ideas and materials they found ready at their hand—ideas destined to become, in future years, first articulate, then startling and finally commonplace. At the moment when she called up to them they were sitting with disarming quiet upon the still unhatched eggs of the mid-twentieth century.

Riply Buckner descended the ladder and took the lemonade. Basil Duke Lee looked abstractedly down at the transaction and said, "Thank you very much, Mrs. Buckner."

"Are you sure it isn't too hot up there?"

"No, Mrs. Buckner. It's fine."

It was stifling; but they were scarcely conscious of the heat, and they drank two tall glasses each of the lemonade without knowing that they were thirsty. Concealed beneath a sawed-out trapdoor from which they presently took it was a composition book bound in imitation red leather which currently absorbed much of their attention. On its first page was inscribed, if you penetrated the secret of the lemon-juice ink: "The Book

of Scandal, written by Riply Buckner, Jr., and Basil D. Lee, Scandal Detectives."

In this book they had set down such deviations from rectitude on the part of their fellow citizens as had reached their ears. Some of these false steps were those of grizzled men, stories that had become traditions in the city and were embalmed in the composition book by virtue of indiscreet exhumations at family dinner tables. Others were the more exciting sins, confirmed or merely rumored, of boys and girls their own age. Some of the entries would have been read by adults with bewilderment, others might have inspired wrath, and there were three or four contemporary reports that would have prostrated the parents of the involved children with horror and despair.

One of the mildest items, a matter they had hesitated about setting down, though it had shocked them only last year, was: "Elwood Leaming has been to the Burlesque Show three or four times at the Star."

Another, and perhaps their favorite, because of its uniqueness, set forth that "H. P. Cramner committed some theft in the East he could be imprisoned for and had to come here"—H. P. Cramner being now one of the oldest and "most substantial" citizens of the city.

The single defect in the book was that it could only be enjoyed with the aid of the imagination, for the invisible ink must keep its secrets until that day when, the pages being held close to the fire, the items would appear. Close inspection was necessary to determine which pages had been used—already a rather grave charge against a certain couple had been superimposed upon the dismal facts that Mrs. R. B. Cary had consumption and that her son, Walter Cary, had been expelled from Pawling School. The purpose of the work as a whole was not blackmail. It was treasured against the time when its protagonists should "do something" to Basil and Riply. Its possession gave them a sense of power. Basil, for instance, had never seen Mr. H. P. Cramner make a single threatening gesture in Basil's direction but let him even hint that he was going to do something to Basil, and there preserved against him was the record of his past.

It is only fair to say that at this point the book passes entirely out of this story. Years later a janitor discovered it beneath the trapdoor, and finding it apparently blank, gave it to his little girl; so the misdeeds of Elwood Leaming and H. P. Cramner were definitely entombed at last beneath a fair copy of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

The book was Basil's idea. He was more the imaginative and in most ways the stronger of the two. He was a shining-eyed, brown-haired boy

of fourteen, rather small as yet, and bright and lazy at school. His favorite character in fiction was Arsène Lupin, the gentleman burglar, a romantic phenomenon lately imported from Europe and much admired in the first bored decades of the century.

Riply Buckner, also in short pants, contributed to the partnership a breathless practicality. His mind waited upon Basil's imagination like a hair trigger and no scheme was too fantastic for his immediate "Let's do it!" Since the school's third baseball team, on which they had been pitcher and catcher, decomposed after an unfortunate April season, they had spent their afternoons struggling to evolve a way of life which should measure up to the mysterious energies fermenting inside them. In the cache beneath the trapdoor were some "slouch" hats and bandanna handkerchiefs, some loaded dice, half of a pair of handcuffs, a rope ladder of a tenuous crochet persuasion for rear-window escapes into the alley, and a make-up box containing two old theatrical wigs and crêpe hair of various colors—all to be used when they decided what illegal enterprises to undertake.

Their lemonades finished, they lit Home Runs and held a desultory conversation which touched on crime, professional baseball, sex and the local stock company. This broke off at the sound of footsteps and familiar voices in the adjoining alley.

From the window, they investigated. The voices belonged to Margaret Torrence, Imogene Bissel and Connie Davies, who were cutting through the alley from Imogene's back yard to Connie's at the end of the block. The young ladies were thirteen, twelve and thirteen years old respectively, and they considered themselves alone, for in time to their march they were rendering a mildly daring parody in a sort of whispering giggle and coming out strongly on the finale: "Oh, my *dar-ling Clemon-tine.*"

Basil and Riply leaned together from the window, then remembering their undershirts sank down behind the sill.

"We heard you!" they cried together.

The girls stopped and laughed. Margaret Torrence chewed exaggeratedly to indicate gum, and gum with a purpose. Basil immediately understood.

"Whereabouts?" he demanded.

"Over at Imogene's house."

They had been at Mrs. Bissel's cigarettes. The implied recklessness of their mood interested and excited the two boys and they prolonged the conversation. Connie Davies had been Riply's girl during dancing-school

term; Margaret Torrence had played a part in Basil's recent past; Imogene Bissel was just back from a year in Europe. During the last month neither Basil nor Riply had thought about girls, and, thus refreshed, they become conscious that the centre of the world had shifted suddenly from the secret room to the little group outside.

"Come on up," they suggested.

"Come on out. Come on down to the Whartons' yard."

"All right."

Barely remembering to put away the Scandal Book and the box of disguises, the two boys hurried out, mounted their bicycles and rode up the alley.

The Whartons' own children had long grown up, but their yard was still one of those predestined places where young people gather in the afternoon. It had many advantages. It was large, open to other yards on both sides, and it could be entered upon skates or bicycles from the street. It contained an old seesaw, a swing and a pair of flying rings; but it had been a rendezvous before these were put up, for it had a child's quality—the thing that makes young people huddle inextricably on uncomfortable steps and desert the houses of their friends to herd on the obscure premises of "people nobody knows." The Whartons' yard had long been a happy compromise; there were deep shadows there all day long and ever something vague in bloom, and patient dogs around, and brown spots worn bare by countless circling wheels and dragging feet. In sordid poverty, below the bluff two hundred feet away, lived the "micks"—they had merely inherited the name, for they were now largely of Scandinavian descent—and when other amusements palled, a few cries were enough to bring a gang of them swarming up the hill, to be faced if numbers promised well, to be fled from into convenient houses if things went the other way.

It was five o'clock and there was a small crowd gathered there for that soft and romantic time before supper—a time surpassed only by the interim of summer dusk thereafter. Basil and Riply rode their bicycles around abstractedly, in and out of trees, resting now and then with a hand on someone's shoulder, shading their eyes from the glow of the late sun that, like youth itself, is too strong to face directly, but must be kept down to an undertone until it dies away.

Basil rode over to Imogene Bissel and balanced idly on his wheel before her. Something in his face then must have attracted her, for she looked up at him, looked at him really, and slowly smiled. She was to be a beauty and belle of many proms in a few years. Now her large brown

eyes and large beautifully shaped mouth and the high flush over her thin cheek bones made her face gnome-like and offended those who wanted a child to look like a child. For a moment Basil was granted an insight into the future, and the spell of her vitality crept over him suddenly. For the first time in his life he realized a girl completely as something opposite and complementary to him, and he was subject to a warm chill of mingled pleasure and pain. It was a definite experience and he was immediately conscious of it. The summer afternoon became lost in her suddenly—the soft air, the shadowy hedges and banks of flowers, the orange sunlight, the laughter and voices, the tinkle of a piano over the way—the odor left all these things and went into Imogene's face as she sat there looking up at him with a smile.

For a moment it was too much for him. He let it go, incapable of exploiting it until he had digested it alone. He rode around fast in a circle on his bicycle, passing near Imogene without looking at her. When he came back after a while and asked if he could walk home with her, she had forgotten the moment, if it had ever existed for her, and was almost surprised. With Basil wheeling his bicycle beside her, they started down the street.

"Can you come out tonight?" he asked eagerly. "There'll probably be a bunch in the Whartons' yard."

"I'll ask mother."

"I'll telephone you. I don't want to go unless you'll be there."

"Why?" She smiled at him again, encouraging him.

"Because I don't want to."

"But why don't you want to?"

"Listen," he said quickly, "what boys do you like better than me?"

"Nobody. I like you and Hubert Blair best."

Basil felt no jealousy at the coupling of this name with his. There was nothing to do about Hubert Blair but accept him philosophically, as other boys did when dissecting the hearts of other girls.

"I like you better than anybody," he said deliriously.

The weight of the pink dappled sky above him was not endurable. He was plunging along through air of ineffable loveliness while warm freshets sprang up in his blood and he turned them, and with them his whole life, like a stream toward this girl.

They reached the carriage door at the side of her house.

"Can't you come in, Basil?"

"No." He saw immediately that that was a mistake, but it was said now. The intangible present had eluded him. Still he lingered. "Do you want my school ring?"

"Yes, if you want to give it to me."

"I'll give it to you tonight." His voice shook slightly as he added, "That is, I'll trade."

"What for?"

"Something."

"What?" Her color spread; she knew.

"You know. Will you trade?"

Imogene looked around uneasily. In the honey-sweet silence that had gathered around the porch, Basil held his breath. "You're awful," she whispered. "Maybe... . Good-by."

Chapter 2

It was the best hour of the day now and Basil was terribly happy. This summer he and his mother and sister were going to the lakes and next fall he was starting away to school. Then he would go to Yale and be a great athlete, and after that—if his two dreams had fitted onto each other chronologically instead of existing independently side by side—he was due to become a gentleman burglar. Everything was fine. He had so many alluring things to think about that it was hard to fall asleep at night.

That he was now crazy about Imogene Bissel was not a distraction, but another good thing. It had as yet no poignancy, only a brilliant and dynamic excitement that was bearing him along toward the Whartons' yard through the May twilight.

He wore his favorite clothes—white duck knickerbockers, pepper-and-salt Norfolk jacket, a Belmont collar and a gray knitted tie. With his black hair wet and shining, he made a handsome little figure as he turned in upon the familiar but now re-enchanted lawn and joined the voices in the gathering darkness. Three or four girls who lived in neighboring houses were present, and almost twice as many boys; and a slightly older group adorning the side veranda made a warm, remote nucleus against the lamps of the house and contributed occasional mysterious ripples of laughter to the already overburdened night.

Moving from shadowy group to group, Basil ascertained that Imogene was not yet here. Finding Margaret Torrence, he spoke to her aside, lightly.

"Have you still got that old ring of mine?"

Margaret had been his girl all year at dancing school, signified by the fact that he had taken her to the cotillion which closed the season. The affair had languished toward the end; none the less, his question was undiplomatic.

"I've got it somewhere," Margaret replied carelessly. "Why? Do you want it back?"

"Sort of."

"All right. I never did want it. It was you that made me take it, Basil. I'll give it back to you tomorrow."

"You couldn't give it to me tonight, could you?" His heart leaped as he saw a small figure come in at the rear gate. "I sort of want to get it tonight."

"Oh, all right, Basil."

She ran across the street to her house and Basil followed. Mr. and Mrs. Torrence were on the porch, and while Margaret went upstairs for the ring he overcame his excitement and impatience and answered those questions as to the health of his parents which are so meaningless to the young. Then a sudden stiffening came over him, his voice faded off and his glazed eyes fixed upon a scene that was materializing over the way.

From the shadows far up the street, a swift, almost flying figure emerged and floated into the patch of lamplight in front of the Whartons' house. The figure wove here and there in a series of geometric patterns, now off with a flash of sparks at the impact of skates and pavement, now gliding miraculously backward, describing a fantastic curve, with one foot lifted gracefully in the air, until the young people moved forward in groups out of the darkness and crowded to the pavement to watch. Basil gave a quiet little groan as he realized that of all possible nights, Hubert Blair had chosen this one to arrive.

"You say you're going to the lakes this summer, Basil. Have you taken a cottage?"

Basil became aware after a moment that Mr. Torrence was making this remark for the third time.

"Oh, yes, sir," he answered—"I mean, no. We're staying at the club."

"Won't that be lovely?" said Mrs. Torrence.

Across the street, he saw Imogene standing under the lamp-post and in front of her Hubert Blair, his jaunty cap on the side of his head, maneuvering in a small circle. Basil winced as he heard his chuckling laugh. He did not perceive Margaret until she was beside him, pressing his ring into his hand like a bad penny. He muttered a strained hollow good-by to her parents, and weak with apprehension, followed her back across the street.

Hanging back in a shadow, he fixed his eyes not on Imogene but on Hubert Blair. There was undoubtedly something rare about Hubert. In the eyes of children less than fifteen, the shape of the nose is the distinguishing mark of beauty. Parents may call attention to lovely eyes, shining hair or gorgeous coloring, but the nose and its juxtaposition on the face is what the adolescent sees. Upon the lithe, stylish, athletic torso of

Hubert Blair was set a conventional chubby face, and upon this face was chiseled the piquant, retroussé nose of a Harrison Fisher girl.

He was confident; he had personality, uninhibited by doubts or moods. He did not go to dancing school—his parents had moved to the city only a year ago—but already he was a legend. Though most of the boys disliked him, they did homage to his virtuosic athletic ability, and for the girls his every movement, his pleasantries, his very indifference, had a simply immeasurable fascination. Upon several previous occasions Basil had discovered this; now the discouraging comedy began to unfold once more.

Hubert took off his skates, rolled one down his arm and caught it by the strap before it reached the pavement; he snatched the ribbon from Imogene's hair and made off with it, dodging from under her arms as she pursued him, laughing and fascinated, around the yard. He cocked one foot behind the other and pretended to lean an elbow against a tree, missed the tree on purpose and gracefully saved himself from falling. The boys watched him noncommittally at first. Then they, too, broke out into activity, doing stunts and tricks as fast as they could think of them until those on the porch craned their necks at the sudden surge of activity in the garden. But Hubert coolly turned his back on his own success. He took Imogene's hat and began setting it in various quaint ways upon his head. Imogene and the other girls were filled with delight.

Unable any longer to endure the nauseous spectacle, Basil went up to the group and said, "Why, hello, Hube," in as negligent a tone as he could command.

Hubert answered: "Why, hello, old—old Basil the Boozle," and set the hat a different way on his head, until Basil himself couldn't resist an unwilling chortle of laughter.

"Basil the Boozle! Hello, Basil the Boozle!" The cry circled the garden. Reproachfully he distinguished Riply's voice among the others.

"Hube the Boob!" Basil countered quickly; but his ill humor detracted from the effect, though several boys repeated it appreciatively.

Gloom settled upon Basil, and through the heavy dusk the figure of Imogene began to take on a new, unattainable charm. He was a romantic boy and already he had endowed her heavily from his fancy. Now he hated her for her indifference, but he must perversely linger near in the vain hope of recovering the penny of ecstasy so wantonly expended this afternoon.

He tried to talk to Margaret with decoy animation, but Margaret was not responsive. Already a voice had gone up in the darkness calling in a

child. Panic seized upon him; the blessed hour of summer evening was almost over. At a spreading of the group to let pedestrians through, he maneuvered Imogene unwillingly aside.

"I've got it," he whispered. "Here it is. Can I take you home?"

She looked at him distractedly. Her hand closed automatically on the ring.

"What? Oh, I promised Hubert he could take me home." At the sight of his face she pulled herself from her trance and forced a note of indignation. "I saw you going off with Margaret Torrence just as soon as I came into the yard."

"I didn't. I just went to get the ring."

"Yes, you did! I saw you!"

Her eyes moved back to Hubert Blair. He had replaced his roller skates and was making little rhythmic jumps and twirls on his toes, like a witch doctor throwing a slow hypnosis over an African tribe. Basil's voice, explaining and arguing, went on, but Imogene moved away. Helplessly he followed. There were other voices calling in the darkness now and unwilling responses on all sides.

"All right, mother!"

"I'll be there in a second, mother."

"Mother, can't I please stay out five minutes more?"

"I've got to go," Imogene cried. "It's almost nine."

Waving her hand and smiling absently at Basil, she started off down the street. Hubert pranced and stunted at her side, circled around her and made entrancing little figures ahead.

Only after a minute did Basil realize that another young lady was addressing him.

"What?" he demanded absently.

"Hubert Blair is the nicest boy in town and you're the most conceited," repeated Margaret Torrence with deep conviction.

He stared at her in pained surprise. Margaret wrinkled her nose at him and yielded up her person to the now-insistent demands coming from across the street. As Basil gazed stupidly after her and then watched the forms of Imogene and Hubert disappear around the corner, there was a low mutter of thunder along the sultry sky and a moment later a solitary drop plunged through the lamplit leaves overhead and splattered on the sidewalk at his feet. The day was to close in rain.

Chapter 3

It came quickly and he was drenched and running before he reached his house eight blocks away. But the change of weather had swept over his heart and he leaped up every few steps, swallowing the rain and crying "Yo-o-o!" aloud, as if he himself were a part of the fresh, violent disturbance of the night. Imogene was gone, washed out like the day's dust on the sidewalk. Her beauty would come back into his mind in brighter weather, but here in the storm he was alone with himself. A sense of extraordinary power welled up in him, until to leave the ground permanently with one of his wild leaps would not have surprised him. He was a lone wolf, secret and untamed; a night prowler, demoniac and free. Only when he reached his own house did his emotion begin to turn, speculatively and almost without passion, against Hubert Blair.

He changed his clothes, and putting on pajamas and dressing-gown descended to the kitchen, where he happened upon a new chocolate cake. He ate a fourth of it and most of a bottle of milk. His elation somewhat diminished, he called up Riply Buckner on the phone.

"I've got a scheme," he said.

"What about?"

"How to do something to H. B. with the S. D."

Riply understood immediately what he meant. Hubert had been so indiscreet as to fascinate other girls besides Miss Bissel that evening.

"We'll have to take in Bill Kampf," Basil said.

"All right."

"See you at recess tomorrow... . Good night!"

Chapter 4

Four days later, when Mr. and Mrs. George P. Blair were finishing dinner, Hubert was called to the telephone. Mrs. Blair took advantage of his absence to speak to her husband of what had been on her mind all day.

"George, those boys, or whatever they are, came again last night."

He frowned.

"Did you see them?"

"Hilda did. She almost caught one of them. You see, I told her about the note they left last Tuesday, the one that said, 'First warning, S. D.,' so she was ready for them. They rang the back-door bell this time and she answered it straight from the dishes. If her hands hadn't been soapy she could have caught one, because she grabbed him when he handed her a note, but her hands were soapy so he slipped away."

"What did he look like?"

"She said he might have been a very little man, but she thought he was a boy in a false face. He dodged like a boy, she said, and she thought he had short pants on. The note was like the other. It said 'Second warning, S. D.'"

"If you've got it, I'd like to see it after dinner."

Hubert came back from the phone. "It was Imogene Bissel," he said. "She wants me to come over to her house. A bunch are going over there tonight."

"Hubert," asked his father, "do you know any boy with the initials S. D.?"

"No, sir."

"Have you thought?"

"Yeah, I thought. I knew a boy named Sam Davis, but I haven't seen him for a year."

"Who was he?"

"Oh, a sort of tough. He was at Number 44 School when I went there."

"Did he have it in for you?"

"I don't think so."

"Who do you think could be doing this? Has anybody got it in for you that you know about?"

"I don't know, papa; I don't think so."

"I don't like the looks of this thing," said Mr. Blair thoughtfully. "Of course it may be only some boys, but it may be—"

He was silent. Later, he studied the note. It was in red ink and there was a skull and crossbones in the corner, but being printed, it told him nothing at all.

Meanwhile Hubert kissed his mother, set his cap jauntily on the side of his head, and passing through the kitchen stepped out on the back stoop, intending to take the usual short cut along the alley. It was a bright moonlit night and he paused for a moment on the stoop to tie his shoe. If he had but known that the telephone call just received had been a decoy, that it had not come from Imogene Bissel's house, had not indeed been a girl's voice at all, and that shadowy and grotesque forms were skulking in the alley just outside the gate, he would not have sprung so gracefully and lithely down the steps with his hands in his pockets or whistled the first bar of the Grizzly Bear into the apparently friendly night.

His whistle aroused varying emotions in the alley. Basil had given his daring and successful falsetto imitation over the telephone a little too soon, and though the Scandal Detectives had hurried, their preparations were not quite in order. They had become separated. Basil, got up like a Southern planter of the old persuasion, was just outside the Blairs' gate; Bill Kampf, with a long Balkan mustache attached by a wire to the lower cartilage of his nose, was approaching in the shadow of the fence; but Riply Buckner, in a full rabbinical beard, was impeded by a length of rope he was trying to coil and was still a hundred feet away. The rope was an essential part of their plan; for, after much cogitation, they had decided what they were going to do to Hubert Blair. They were going to tie him up, gag him and put him in his own garbage can.

The idea at first horrified them—it would ruin his suit, it was awfully dirty and he might smother. In fact the garbage can, symbol of all that was repulsive, won the day only because it made every other idea seem tame. They disposed of the objections—his suit could be cleaned, it was where he ought to be anyhow, and if they left the lid off he couldn't smother. To be sure of this they had paid a visit of inspection to the Buckners' garbage can and stared into it, fascinated, envisaging Hubert among the rinds and eggshells. Then two of them, at last, resolutely put that part out of their minds and concentrated upon the luring of him into the alley and the overwhelming of him there.

Hubert's cheerful whistle caught them off guard and each of the three stood stock-still, unable to communicate with the others. It flashed through Basil's mind that if he grabbed Hubert without Riply at hand to apply the gag as had been arranged, Hubert's cries might alarm the gigantic cook in the kitchen who had almost taken him the night before. The thought threw him into a state of indecision. At that precise moment Hubert opened the gate and came out into the alley.

The two stood five feet apart, staring at each other, and all at once Basil made a startling discovery. He discovered he liked Hubert Blair—liked him well as any boy he knew. He had absolutely no wish to lay hands on Hubert Blair and stuff him into a garbage can, jaunty cap and all. He would have fought to prevent that contingency. As his mind, unstrung by his situation, gave pasture to this inconvenient thought, he turned and dashed out of the alley and up the street.

For a moment the apparition had startled Hubert, but when it turned and made off he was heartened and gave chase. Out-distanced, he decided after fifty yards to let well enough alone; and returning to the alley, started rather precipitously down toward the other end—and came face to face with another small and hairy stranger.

Bill Kampf, being more simply organized than Basil, had no scruples of any kind. It had been decided to put Hubert into a garbage can, and though he had nothing at all against Hubert, the idea had made a pattern on his brain which he intended to follow. He was a natural man—that is to say, a hunter—and once a creature took on the aspect of a quarry, he would pursue it without qualms until it stopped struggling.

But he had been witness to Basil's inexplicable flight, and supposing that Hubert's father had appeared and was now directly behind him, he, too, faced about and made off down the alley. Presently he met Riply Buckner, who, without waiting to inquire the cause of his flight, enthusiastically joined him. Again Hubert was surprised into pursuing a little way. Then, deciding once and for all to let well enough alone, he returned on a dead run to his house.

Meanwhile Basil had discovered that he was not pursued, and keeping in the shadows, made his way back to the alley. He was not frightened—he had simply been incapable of action. The alley was empty; neither Bill nor Riply was in sight. He saw Mr. Blair come to the back gate, open it, look up and down and go back into the house. He came closer. There was a great chatter in the kitchen—Hubert's voice, loud and boastful, and Mrs. Blair's, frightened, and the two Swedish

domestics contributing bursts of hilarious laughter. Then through an open window he heard Mr. Blair's voice at the telephone:

"I want to speak to the chief of police... . Chief, this is George P. Blair... . Chief, there's a gang of toughs around here who—"

Basil was off like a flash, tearing at his Confederate whiskers as he ran.

Chapter 5

Imogene Bissel, having just turned thirteen, was not accustomed to having callers at night. She was spending a bored and solitary evening inspecting the month's bills which were scattered over her mother's desk, when she heard Hubert Blair and his father admitted into the front hall.

"I just thought I'd bring him over myself," Mr. Blair was saying to her mother. "There seems to be a gang of toughs hanging around our alley tonight."

Mrs. Bissel had not called upon Mrs. Blair and she was considerably taken aback by this unexpected visit. She even entertained the uncharitable thought that this was a crude overture, undertaken by Mr. Blair on behalf of his wife.

"Really!" she exclaimed. "Imogene will be delighted to see Hubert, I'm sure... Imogene!"

"These toughs were evidently lying in wait for Hubert," continued Mr. Blair. "But he's a pretty spunky boy and he managed to drive them away. However, I didn't want him to come down here alone."

"Of course not," she agreed. But she was unable to imagine why Hubert should have come at all. He was a nice enough boy, but surely Imogene had seen enough of him the last three afternoons. In fact, Mrs. Bissel was annoyed, and there was a minimum of warmth in her voice when she asked Mr. Blair to come in.

They were still in the hall, and Mr. Blair was just beginning to perceive that all was not as it should be, when there was another ring at the bell. Upon the door being opened, Basil Lee, red-faced and breathless, stood on the threshold.

"How do you do, Mrs. Bissel? Hello, Imogene!" he cried in an unnecessarily hearty voice. "Where's the party?"

The salutation might have sounded to a dispassionate observer somewhat harsh and unnatural, but it fell upon the ears of an already disconcerted group.

"There isn't any party," said Imogene wonderingly.

"What?" Basil's mouth dropped open in exaggerated horror, his voice trembled slightly. "You mean to say you didn't call me up and tell me to come over here to a party?"

"Why, of course not, Basil!"

Imogene was excited by Hubert's unexpected arrival and it occurred to her that Basil had invented this excuse to spoil it. Alone of those present, she was close to the truth; but she underestimated the urgency of Basil's motive, which was not jealousy but mortal fear.

"You called *me* up, didn't you, Imogene?" demanded Hubert confidently.

"Why, no, Hubert! I didn't call up anybody."

Amid a chorus of bewildered protestations, there was another ring at the doorbell and the pregnant night yielded up Riply Buckner, Jr., and William S. Kampf. Like Basil, they were somewhat ruffled and breathless, and they no less rudely and peremptorily demanded the whereabouts of the party, insisting with curious vehemence that Imogene had just now invited them over the phone.

Hubert laughed, the others began to laugh and the tensy relaxed. Imogene, because she believed Hubert, now began to believe them all. Unable to restrain himself any longer in the presence of this unhopd-for audience, Hubert burst out with his amazing adventure.

"I guess there's a gang laying for us all!" he exclaimed. "There were some guys laying for me in our alley when I went out. There was a big fellow with gray whiskers, but when he saw me he ran away. Then I went along the alley and there was a bunch more, sort of foreigners or something, and I started after'm and they ran. I tried to catchem, but I guess they were good and scared, because they ran too fast for *me*."

So interested were Hubert and his father in the story that they failed to perceive that three of his listeners were growing purple in the face or to mark the uproarious laughter that greeted Mr. Bissel's polite proposal that they have a party, after all.

"Tell about the warnings, Hubert," prompted Mr. Blair. "You see, Hubert had received these warnings. Did you boys get any warnings?"

"I did," said Basil suddenly. "I got a sort of warning on a piece of paper about a week ago."

For a moment, as Mr. Blair's worried eye fell upon Basil, a strong sense not precisely of suspicion but rather of obscure misgiving passed over him. Possibly that odd aspect of Basil's eyebrows, where wisps of crêpe hair still lingered, connected itself in his subconscious mind with what was bizarre in the events of the evening. He shook his head somewhat

puzzled. Then his thoughts glided back restfully to Hubert's courage and presence of mind.

Hubert, meanwhile, having exhausted his facts, was making tentative leaps into the realms of imagination.

"I said, 'So you're the guy that's been sending these warnings,' and he swung his left at me, and I dodged and swung my right back at him. I guess I must have landed, because he gave a yell and ran. Gosh, he could run! You'd ought to of seen him, Bill—he could run as fast as you."

"Was he big?" asked Basil, blowing his nose noisily.

"Sure! About as big as father."

"Were the other ones big too?"

"Sure! They were pretty big. I didn't wait to see, I just yelled, 'You get out of here, you bunch of toughs, or I'll show you!' They started a sort of fight, but I swung my right at one of them and they didn't wait for any more."

"Hubert says he thinks they were Italians," interrupted Mr. Blair. "Didn't you, Hubert?"

"They were sort of funny-looking," Hubert said. "One fellow looked like an Italian."

Mrs. Bissel led the way to the dining room, where she had caused a cake and grape juice supper to be spread. Imogene took a chair by Hubert's side.

"Now tell me all about it, Hubert," she said, attentively folding her hands.

Hubert ran over the adventure once more. A knife now made its appearance in the belt of one conspirator; Hubert's parleys with them lengthened and grew in volume and virulence. He had told them just what they might expect if they fooled with him. They had started to draw knives, but had thought better of it and taken to flight.

In the middle of this recital there was a curious snorting sound from across the table, but when Imogene looked over, Basil was spreading jelly on a piece of coffee cake and his eyes were brightly innocent. A minute later, however, the sound was repeated, and this time she intercepted a specifically malicious expression upon his face.

"I wonder what you'd have done, Basil," she said cuttingly. "I'll bet you'd be running yet!"

Basil put the piece of coffee cake in his mouth and immediately choked on it—an accident which Bill Kampf and Riply Buckner found hilariously amusing. Their amusement at various casual incidents at table seemed to increase as Hubert's story continued. The alley now

swarmed with malefactors, and as Hubert struggled on against overwhelming odds, Imogene found herself growing restless—without in the least realizing that the tale was boring her. On the contrary, each time Hubert recollected new incidents and began again, she looked spitefully over at Basil, and her dislike for him grew.

When they moved into the library, Imogene went to the piano, where she sat alone while the boys gathered around Hubert on the couch. To her chagrin, they seemed quite content to listen indefinitely. Odd little noises squeaked out of them from time to time, but whenever the narrative slackened they would beg for more.

"Go on, Hubert. Which one did you say could run as fast as Bill Kampf?"

She was glad when, after half an hour, they all got up to go.

"It's a strange affair from beginning to end," Mr. Blair was saying. "I don't like it. I'm going to have a detective look into the matter tomorrow. What did they want of Hubert? What were they going to do to him?"

No one offered a suggestion. Even Hubert was silent, contemplating his possible fate with certain respectful awe. During breaks in his narration the talk had turned to such collateral matters as murders and ghosts, and all the boys had talked themselves into a state of considerable panic. In fact each had come to believe, in varying degrees, that a band of kidnapers infested the vicinity.

"I don't like it," repeated Mr. Blair. "In fact I'm going to see all of you boys to your own homes."

Basil greeted this offer with relief. The evening had been a mad success, but furies once aroused sometimes get out of hand. He did not feel like walking the streets alone tonight.

In the hall, Imogene, taking advantage of her mother's somewhat fatigued farewell to Mr. Blair, beckoned Hubert back into the library. Instantly attuned to adversity, Basil listened. There was a whisper and a short scuffle, followed by an indiscreet but unmistakable sound. With the corners of his mouth falling, Basil went out the door. He had stacked the cards dexterously, but Life had played a trump from its sleeve at the last.

A moment later they all started off, clinging together in a group, turning corners with cautious glances behind and ahead. What Basil and Riply and Bill expected to see as they peered warily into the sinister mouths of alleys and around great dark trees and behind concealing

fences they did not know—in all probability the same hairy and grotesque desperadoes who had lain in wait for Hubert Blair that night.

Chapter 6

A week later Basil and Riply heard that Hubert and his mother had gone to the seashore for the summer. Basil was sorry. He had wanted to learn from Hubert some of the graceful mannerisms that his contemporaries found so dazzling and that might come in so handy next fall when he went away to school. In tribute to Hubert's passing, he practised leaning against a tree and missing it and rolling a skate down his arm, and he wore his cap in Hubert's manner, set jauntily on the side of his head.

This was only for a while. He perceived eventually that though boys and girls would always listen to him while he talked, their mouths literally moving in response to his, they would never look at him as they had looked at Hubert. So he abandoned the loud chuckle that so annoyed his mother and set his cap straight upon his head once more.

But the change in him went deeper than that. He was no longer sure that he wanted to be a gentleman burglar, though he still read of their exploits with breathless admiration. Outside of Hubert's gate, he had for a moment felt morally alone; and he realized that whatever combinations he might make of the materials of life would have to be safely within the law. And after another week he found that he no longer grieved over losing Imogene. Meeting her, he saw only the familiar little girl he had always known. The ecstatic moment of that afternoon had been a premature birth, an emotion left over from an already fleeting spring.

He did not know that he had frightened Mrs. Blair out of town and that because of him a special policeman walked a placid beat for many a night. All he knew was that the vague and restless yearnings of three long spring months were somehow satisfied. They reached combustion in that last week—flared up, exploded and burned out. His face was turned without regret toward the boundless possibilities of summer.

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