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On the Loose

John Stroud

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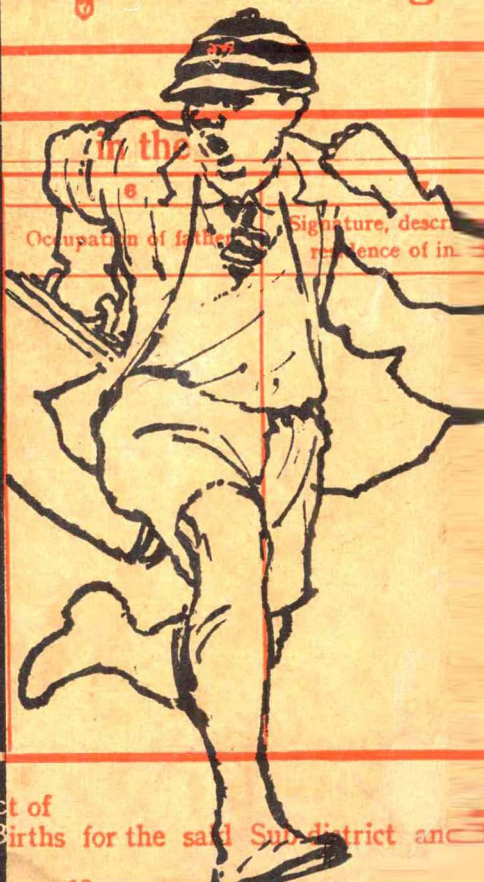


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PENGUIN BOOKS
1974
ON THE LOOSE
JOHN STROUD



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PENGUIN BOOKS

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TO
EILEEN EDWARDS
WITH LOVE

I

THE gears clanged together, there was a shrill cheer from the boys, and the coach lumbered out of the forecourt and down the drive, bouncing ponderously as it hit the pot-holes. The six ugly little boys on the back seat grinned out of the window, their faces like a line of masks hung on a string. The first six to get aboard always hurtled straight into the back, where they played the fool.

The headmaster stood by the steps outside the front door and watched the coach out of sight, not waving, but holding one arm up straight above his head. There were crinkles round his eyes – he thought he felt quite fond of the noisy crew as they disappeared; but it was wearily, almost bitterly, that he re-entered the school. The end of the summer term, the end of the long school year, did not make him feel glad, regretful, or relaxed; his predominant feeling was that he was both old and unsuccessful. The months ahead would be very wearing financially, there was at least one new staff-member to engage, and the paint was peeling in the dining-room. . . .

His wife came across the hall and dumped an armful of grubby sheets in the laundry basket. 'That's that, then,' she said. 'Alone at last!'

The headmaster nodded in silence. He didn't like her very much.

'Morton's left his blazer,' she said, 'and Henry seems to have forgotten to wear any underclothes. And what on earth are we to do with Dumbleton's rabbit? It's still in its hutch.'

'Oh, curse the boy!' muttered the headmaster. 'We shall have to have a *No Pets* rule. I can't wet-nurse the confounded thing. Tell George to kill it and eat it.'

'You can't, Bill! Dumbleton will probably ring up this evening and ask for it.'

'Oh -' His high bald dome was wrinkled with perplexity; the rabbit, at this leaden moment, presented a tiresome problem. 'Let George take it down to the cottage and look after it. Are you making any tea?'

'Yes, the kettle's on. Go and put your feet up for half an hour and read the paper; I'll bring your tea in to you. You can relax for a bit now they're all off the premises.'

'All right; then I'll do that wretched condemning.' He moved across the hall and in the corridor said: 'Oh, damn, Joyce, what's this, here's all Beedman's stuff.'

His wife turned back from the kitchen and gazed helplessly at the suitcase and mac and paper bags. 'Beedman? Has he forgotten his things? Surely he can't have forgotten everything.'

'Has he gone?'

'He must have done, his father was coming before lunch.'

'Did you see him?'

'No, I thought you had.'

'I haven't seen him.' The headmaster felt utterly despondent. 'What the devil's the matter with the man? I can't pack this rubbish up and send it through the post.'

'Perhaps Beedman's still here.'

The headmaster gazed at her sullenly. Was there no end to his responsibilities?

'Beedman!' he barked. He went back into the hall and hurled his voice up the stairs. '*Beedman!*'

Far down at the end of the corridor behind him a door opened, emitting a shaft of light. A small figure trudged slowly along, emerged into the hall and stood blinking at them.

'Yes, sir?'

The headmaster stared at him crossly. 'Haven't you gone, Beedman?'

'No, sir.'

'Your father was supposed to be here before lunch!'

'Yes, sir.'

'Had you better ring them up, Bill?' asked his wife.

'Where do you live, Beedman?'

'Francombe, sir.'

The call would cost at least 1s. 6d. The headmaster stared at

the boy moodily. Then he glanced at his watch. 'I'll give your father another half-hour, then I'll have to telephone. What are you doing?'

'Reading, sir.'

'Well, you'd better – oh, all right, go on reading.'

Half an hour with his feet up now seemed highly desirable to the headmaster. He dragged himself into the study and sat down. Then he began to fidget. How the hell could he deal with this intrusive boy? Francombe was across country and the rail journey would mean at least two changes; he could hardly send the boy unaccompanied. The bus route was no better. So long as Beedman remained on the premises the headmaster felt insecure and uneasy. After twenty minutes he began walking to and fro irresolutely. Then he picked up the phone, obtained the Francombe number from Directory Enquiries and got himself put through.

A woman's voice answered. 'I'm afraid I don't understand,' she said. 'My husband left here this morning to drive down and fetch the boy. I really can't help you: I have a visitor.'

'All the boys have left here except little Royston,' said the headmaster, trying to be silky because the Beedmans paid the fees regularly.

'You mean you're afraid of being saddled with him?'

'Oh, no, no, not that; I wondered if there had possibly been a change of plan?'

'No,' said Mrs Beedman. 'Gilbert was going to see some people down your way somewhere; I expect he's been hung up.'

'If there has been an accident –' suggested the headmaster delicately.

'Oh, no, I'd have heard by now. Gilbert'll be along. Or can't you put the boy on the train?'

'I'd much prefer you to come over and –'

'Couldn't possibly,' she said. 'Look here, I must go. Ring me in half an hour and tell me what's happening, yes? Good-bye.'

'Could I beg you to –'

But she had quickly rung off.

The headmaster replaced his own phone and gazed glumly

at it. His shoes were beginning to feel too small. He went down and got the boy to help with sorting out text-books. The half-hour dragged past. The headmaster felt reluctant to spend more money on telephone calls about the wretched boy who was working so silently beside him; it was a relief when the phone rang and Mrs Beedman came through.

'Hasn't Gilbert got there yet? What the hell's the man playing at? Can't Royston come by train, for God's sake? He's old enough.'

'There isn't a train now till eight tonight.'

'Oh, God. I'll have to come down. Look here, if Gilbert turns up, will you tell him I've got Sheila's car and I'm on my way. Have you got that?'

'Yes.'

'Damn it. I'll be there in two hours.'

Twenty minutes later there was an echoing blare on a horn, the gravel scrunched and a scarlet car came to a plunging halt outside. Gilbert Beedman didn't climb out, but waited for them to come running. He was a short, stout man with a round bald spot and the habit of carrying his head flung back, his jaw jutting.

'Hallo, Dunnet.'

'Good afternoon, Mr Beedman. We were getting quite worried about you, as you said you would come at -'

'I know. Had an appointment at eleven with some fellers at Larchfield and they kept me on for lunch there, you know how it is. How are you?'

'Pretty fair. And you?'

'Can't grumble.'

'Your wife telephoned.' And the headmaster gave the message.

'Now what the hell does she want to do that for? She knew I was coming. Put your stuff in the boot, Royston. Oh my God, what a stupid thing!'

The headmaster was silent, stooping awkwardly by the car window and looking at his shoes. Royston closed the boot and stood uncertainly on the other side of the car.

'I'll keep a look-out for her on the way back, that's all I can do,' said Mr Beedman, drumming his stubby fingers impatiently

on the steering wheel. 'If she turns up, tell her I've gone on, will you? Ridiculous nonsense, fussing over nothing. How's this one?'

The headmaster glanced covertly at Royston and said: 'Oh, pretty fair. Making progress.'

'Got rid of those moods yet?'

'He does have his moods at times,' admitted the headmaster.

'Huh. Flipping family I've got. Get in, Royston, we must be off.'

The boy sidled into his seat and closed the door, too gently: his father leant across and slammed it. 'That's it, well - look after yourself, Dunnet.'

'And yourself, Mr Beedman. Good-bye, Royston.'

The boy nodded without shifting his glance from the wind-screen. Then the car started and spurted over the gravel. The headmaster watched them out of sight, raising his arm once in farewell; he felt relief and also an ironic amusement over the ill-matched pair and when they were gone he shook his head and quirked his mouth resignedly. Then depression settled on him again and he trudged back to the chores of clearing up and to his wife.

Mr Beedman drove fiercely down the drive, cursing under his breath at every pot-hole, and swept on to the main road in a flurry of small stones. For some miles he drove in silence, swirling contemptuously past an L-driver on a narrow bend. After they got on to the trunk road he seemed to relax and lit a cigarette. He smelt faintly of whisky and brilliantine. Presently he said: 'So you still get in these moods, eh?'

The boy was silent.

'What do you do, throw things about? Why the hell don't you grow up?' Royston gave an almost imperceptible shrug but remained silent.

'You'll have to pull your finger out if you want to get anywhere, my lad.' Twelve years old and behaving like a great baby.'

Mr Beedman's foot slackened a little on the accelerator, but they were still doing over sixty. 'What's the school like?' he asked.

This time Royston's shrug was more pronounced. 'All right,' he said.

'So it damn well ought to be, at the price I'm paying for it. You're bloody well going to be worth it, I'll tell you now.'

Royston held his peace, and his father began to hum some sort of march. They went round Moleford in silence and Mr Beedman said: 'Have to keep a watch-out for your mother, I suppose. What's the number of Mrs Maxted's car?'

'TJH 734,' said Royston automatically.

'A Minor?'

'Yes.'

'Fat chance we've got of seeing her in all this lot.' It was around rush-hour time and traffic was quite heavy. 'Of all the chronic things to do. Your mother wants her head testing.'

Mr Beedman's fingers began to drum again and the speed of the car increased. They covered a good many miles in silence before a pretty piece of cutting-in on a round-about brought a little relaxation. Mr Beedman had another cigarette. 'Why didn't you go to camp with the Scouts?' he asked.

Royston considered and said: 'Didn't like the idea.'

'You'd have had a good time. Toughened you up, made a man of you. I was a Scout.'

Presently he added: 'I can't get away this summer. I suppose your mother'll take you out somewhere.'

They had seen nothing of Mrs Beedman and they were nearly home.

'I don't mind what you do, so long as you keep out of trouble.'

They came into the Old Town and turned left by the road-house. Shops were crowded thickly together up this road, shuttered now; here and there was a café with its lights ablaze. Knots of long-legged youths were beginning to assemble on their bikes in the gutters, and girls joined them and teetered about on the edge of the pavement. Mr Beedman went past them without noticing, and was doing forty-five over the level crossing and up into the chestnut-shadowed avenues of the New Town. But he slowed circumspectly for the tight turn into his own drive and the crunching rumble down to the garage. Then he

turned off the engine, and stretched his arm flamboyantly to look at his watch. 'That's not bad! Hour and three-quarters door to door, *and* through the rush. Out you hop, Samson.'

Royston obediently unloaded his things from the boot and held the garage door open while the car rolled in. Mr Beedman was quite jovial; he hurried from the garage with an air of satisfaction in a job well done and thwacked Royston playfully on the bottom with his paper. 'You go to camp next year and I'll buy you a bike, there you are,' he said, and strutted into the house, only to stop dead when he surveyed the dining-room.

'Bloody hell-fire!' he snarled. 'She hasn't even bothered to leave the tea ready!'

The summer holidays had begun.

ROYSTON moved very slowly through the nettles, balancing on one foot while he stretched forward with the other, making sure that when he brought his weight forward his foot would go down cleanly on a crushed bunch of nettles and he would not get stung. He was nearly out, and there was a trail through the tall stingers behind him. Up here at the top end of the field was a wide belt of nettles stretching up to the hedge, which was overgrown and hung down in great thorny sprays. The middle of the hedge seemed to be hollow, as though a series of big caves had been gouged out of the thorn. It was a very hot and silent afternoon; if he had listened, he could have heard the traffic roaring through the Old Town, but at the moment he had the sensation that he was a tiny ant moving under an immense and silent bowl. So silent was it that he could feel God's great eyes boring into his back. He took another step forward.

He wanted to get in under the hedge and have a look round: he thought there might be a body in there. Well, there might very well be, for it was very dark and silent. Now he had come to the ticklish bit, where the last of the nettles were around his feet but the first of the thorns hung down in front of his eyes. Cautiously he trod back the nettles until he could stoop and wriggle in on to the bare moist earth under the hedge. He squatted there motionless for some time, his heart beginning to thump. It was a queer dark place; its secrecy seemed menacing and the earth under his fingers was like a dry sponge, unnatural somehow. He began to creep unwillingly forward, not daring to turn his head to glance at the sunlit meadow behind him. He thought he would see a naked foot first – that or an outflung hand. Wasn't that knobby thing a – suddenly a twig cracked loudly and a bird hurtled through the leaves just over his head. Royston froze; his forehead felt icy, his heart was thudding violently.

He stayed there, crouched close to the earth, not moving a muscle, for a long time. Then, with infinite caution, he stretched one leg backward and started to retreat on all fours. He began to feel that this dark place was alive and watchful and full of recesses into which he could not see. He did not fear the silence; rather he feared that it might suddenly be broken, perhaps by a loud and mirthless laugh. He moved backwards more recklessly, and when he had wriggled through the hole he fairly scampered through the nettles; his legs were stung, but he did not stop running until he had reached the gate. He began to scramble madly over it, but stopped and pretended to lean nonchalantly against it because some people were passing up the lane outside.

He was cross that they had seen him; he did not want to be seen by anybody, and quickly retreated into the long grass by the gatepost. Nevertheless he had had enough of the field, and though his heartbeats were now inaudible again, his mouth felt rather dry. He lurked in the long grass until a cyclist and a pedestrian had passed, both completely unaware of his existence, which gave him some satisfaction. Then he swung over the gate and went up the lane, keeping to the grass verge and trying to look inconspicuous but tough, a secret agent not yet sure of the plot.

He came into the garden by the back way, past the vegetable patch and its lines of rusty carrots. He pulled one up and ate it on the way up to the house. His father was still at work, of course, for it was only about half past three, and his mother had gone out somewhere. 'Oh, you wouldn't want to come, it's only a lot of old women,' she had said; nevertheless, she had dressed very carefully and taken great pains with her hat before she strode off.

Going into the empty house he got himself a glass of water: he put his thumb over the tap so that the water jetted into the glass and frothed, and then gulped it down. Gripping the glass, he screwed up his eyes, nodded, and said aloud to the empty kitchen: 'Now, the theory of this case, as I see it -'

He wasn't yet sure what he was doing. He took out the bottle of vinegar and poured a little into his glass and then jetted water into it: it rose into a pale brown liquid with a satisfactory

head of foam on it. Beer, he called it. He sipped his beer and put on a thoughtful expression.

'I'm glad young Beedman's taking this case; he's the most brilliant -' he said aloud again. 'Oh, yes, he's good, he's good.'

He didn't know what to do with himself.

He made himself another glass of beer but it wasn't as exciting as the first one and he poured most of it away, grimacing, and washed the glass.

Now he wanted to go up to the bathroom, but became suddenly more aware of the silence of the house. If there really were people lurking up there, wouldn't they be keeping as quiet as this, just as quiet as this? For some time he leaned against the wall at the bottom of the staircase looking alertly upwards. He could almost imagine he heard the breathing they were trying so hard to suppress. But, at last, he bent the two end fingers of his right hand and extended the first two fingers so that his hand looked like a gun; then he went up the stairs with his gun at the ready and his eyes darting from side to side and got into the bathroom like that.

He had been sitting there for some time, whispering a story to himself about the promising young Royston Beedman, when there was a sudden crash from downstairs and his heart leapt into his throat. He sat there petrified for a long time, but there were no other sounds. Presently he tiptoed out of the bathroom and stood by the top of the stairs, listening. All was quiet. He went back to the bathroom, pulled the chain, and went clattering downstairs, whistling loudly, and stopped as soon as he got to the bottom. There was nobody about. Then he saw that the tumbler he had washed had slid off the edge of a fork on the draining board, in the way things sometimes do when they are drying. That accounted for the crash. He went restlessly round the kitchen and looked out of the back door and wandered into the lounge and fiddled with the *Radio Times*, and then he went straight upstairs and into his parents' bedroom.

It was cooler and darker in there and there was a faint but exciting perfume in the air. He crept over to the wardrobe where his mother's clothes were hung and opened the door a little, and then leafed through her dresses almost as though he