

CHAPTER THREE

WHERE IS THE AEROPLANE?

‘IT’S GONE!’ said Susie, looking quite heartbroken. ‘My beautiful aeroplane! Oh, I wouldn’t have let you fly it, Jack, if I’d thought you’d lose it on its very first flight. It will be smashed to pieces!’

‘I didn’t know it would do that!’ said Jack. ‘Whoever saw a model plane fly like that before? I never guessed it would be able to fly right across this big field. Oh, Susie – I’m awfully sorry, really I am.’

‘Who lives in that place?’ asked Peter, looking towards the high wall. ‘Is there a house there?’

‘Yes. It’s called Bartlett Lodge, and it’s a very big house,’ said Jack. ‘It’s been shut up for ages, because the owners left to go abroad.’

‘Oh, well, we could easily go and get the plane then,’ said George. ‘No one will shout at us or chase us if we look for it.’

‘There’s a gardener there,’ said Jack, doubtfully. ‘He’s not very nice. When Susie and I lost our ball over there he wouldn’t even let us climb over the wall to get it, though *he* couldn’t find it. So we lost it.’

‘*I’m* not going over,’ said Barbara. ‘I’d be scared. I don’t like cross gardeners.’

‘None of you girls will go over,’ said Peter, firmly. ‘We four boys will climb up to the top of the wall and see if the gar-

dener's there. If he is, we'll be awfully polite, and apologetic, and ask if he's seen our plane. If he's *not* there, we'll go over and hunt.'

'Hadn't you better ask permission before you do that?' said Janet.

'Who from?' said Jack. 'There's nobody in the house to ask. Come on – we'll see what we can do.'

All the eight, and Scamper too, went across the field to the high wall. 'How are you going to climb that?' said Barbara. 'It's terribly high.'

'We'll shove each other up,' said Jack. 'I'll go first and have a look from the top of the wall to see if the gardener is anywhere about.'

George and Peter pushed him up, and at last he was on the top of the wall. He looked down into the overgrown shrubbery on the other side. Through a

gap he could spy an unmown lawn, but there was no gardener to be seen. He put his hands to his mouth and shouted.

‘Hey! Anybody there?’ He listened, but there was no answer. Jack called again. ‘Can I come over the wall and look for our aeroplane, please?’

Then a voice suddenly shouted back.

‘Who’s that? Where are you?’

‘Here, on the top of the wall!’ yelled Jack. He turned and looked down at the others. ‘I can see the man. He’s coming. Perhaps he’s got the plane.’

A man came quickly through the gap in the trees. He was thick-set, and broad-shouldered, and had a ruddy, surly face, with screwed-up eyes. In his hand was a spade.

‘Now then, what are you doing on that wall?’ he said, threateningly. ‘You get off. This here is private property and well you know it! Do you know what I do to children who come in here? I chase them with a spade!’

‘We don’t want to come in,’ said Jack, rather alarmed. ‘We just wanted to know if you’ve seen our aeroplane. It flew right over the—’

‘No. I’ve not seen *any* aeroplane, or *any* ball, or *any* kite, and what’s more if I find one it can stay here,’ said the surly fellow. ‘You’ve got a big enough field back there to play in without throwing things over here. If I find a plane, I shall put it on my bonfire.’

‘Oh, *no!*’ said Jack, in horror. ‘It’s a very valuable plane – a real beauty. I say, *do* let me come down and look for it, it belongs to my sister, and I—’

‘If it belonged to the queen of England I’d not let you come in here,’ said the man. ‘Understand? I’ve got my orders, see? I’m in charge of this place while it’s empty, and I’m not having any boys coming in here to steal the fruit, or—’

‘I’m not a thief!’ said Jack, indignantly. ‘I just wanted our plane. I’ll tell my father, and *he’ll* come and get it for me.’

‘*That* he won’t,’ said the surly gardener. ‘Now you clear off that wall this minute, or I’ll tip you off!’ He held up his spade as if he meant what he said. Jack didn’t want to be shovelled off like a sack of potatoes, and leapt down very hastily into the field.

‘What a beast!’ said Peter to poor Jack as the boy sprawled heavily on the grass, for it was a high jump down from the wall.

‘YOU SEND ME BACK MY AEROPLANE!’ suddenly shouted Susie, stamping her foot on the grass, tears in her eyes at the thought of losing the aeroplane on its very first flight. But there was no answer at all from over the wall.

‘Oh, Susie – I’m so sorry,’ said Jack, getting up. ‘Listen, I’ll go and get the plane for you, really I will, as soon as that horrible man has gone off for his dinner. I expect he goes at twelve o’clock like our gardener.’

Everyone crowded round Susie, feeling really upset about the lovely plane. ‘Didn’t you even *see* it anywhere?’ asked Susie, in a fierce voice, turning to Jack. He shook his head dolefully.

‘Listen,’ said Peter, taking command again. ‘Two of us will go and watch at the front gates of that house, and then, as soon as we see that horrible gardener

going off for his midday dinner, we'll know it's safe to slip over the wall and hunt for the plane. We won't go in at the front gates in case anyone sees us and tells the gardener.'

'Good idea,' said Jack, cheering up. 'You and I will go, Peter. What's the time? Golly, it's almost twelve now! Come on, let's sprint down that little lane to the road that the house faces on. Buck up!'

Jack and Peter set off down a narrow little lane that led from the field to the road on which the big house faced. They turned to the left in the road and came to the big gate that led into the drive of Bartlett Lodge. There was a second gate further on that also led into the drive.

'You watch that gate, I'll watch this one,' said Peter. 'But hide behind a tree or something – you don't want that gardener to see you. He's already seen you

up on the wall, and he may recognise you and chase you.'

'Don't worry, I won't let him spot me – and if he does, I bet I can run faster than he does!' said Jack, and set off towards the second gate.

There was a workmen's shed a little further down the road, and he decided to hide behind that. So he posted himself there. Peter went across the road and hid behind a bush that most conveniently grew there. Now, would that tiresome man soon come out?

They had waited about ten minutes when they saw someone coming out of the gate nearest Peter. Jack signalled to Peter, and he nodded back. It was the gardener, no doubt about that. Jack recognised the burly figure at once, and drew back behind the shed.

The man set off down the road and turned the corner. Jack whistled to Peter, and the two ran to the little lane together to go and tell the others that the gardener had gone.

They were in the field, playing with a ball, waiting impatiently for the boys to come back. Susie was still upset about her plane, and had been making quite a lot of rude remarks about the Secret Seven. They were getting rather tired of her!

‘Here are the boys!’ said Janet, as they appeared in the field. ‘Any news, Peter?’

‘Yes. That fellow’s gone to his dinner, as we hoped,’ said Peter. ‘Now we can try and get Susie’s plane. We’ll go over the wall as before.’

‘I’m coming too,’ said Susie, unexpectedly.

‘You are *not*,’ said Jack at once.

‘Well, it’s my plane, isn’t it?’ said the irritating Susie. ‘I’ve got every right to go and look for it. I’m coming too.’

‘YOU ARE NOT!’ said Peter, in the voice that all the rest of the Secret Seven knew well, and didn’t dream of disobeying. But Susie wasn’t going to take orders from Peter.

‘I shall do as I like,’ she said, defiantly. ‘I shall climb the wall too.’

‘Well, I don’t know how,’ said Peter, ‘because I shall certainly forbid anyone to give you a shove up.’

He and Jack were quickly hoisted up to the top of the wall by George and Colin. Susie stood by, looking sulky. She turned to the two boys near her. ‘Now give *me* a shove,’ she said.

‘Nothing doing,’ said Colin, cheerfully.
.....
‘Peter’s our chief, as you jolly well know,
.....

and he's given his orders. Don't be an ass, Susie.'

'I'll climb up by myself then,' said Susie, and she very nearly did, using every little hole and crevice for her feet and fingers! The others watched her angrily – but to their delight she could not reach the top, and fell down when she was halfway up.

'Have you hurt yourself?' asked Janet, anxiously. But Susie refused to cry or to say she was hurt. She made a rude face at Janet and stood up, brushing her skirt with her hand. She walked a little way away from the others, and leant against the wall, whistling as if she didn't care tuppence for any of the Secret Seven.

The boys had now disappeared from the top of the wall. There was a most convenient tree that leant towards the wall just there, and one by one the boys

gave the little leap towards it that enabled them to catch hold of a branch and then swing themselves neatly to the ground.

They stood there, all looking cautiously towards the house, through the gap in the shrubbery. No one was to be seen, of course, and as the house was not overlooked by any other, they felt that they could go safely forward and hunt for Susie's aeroplane.

'I hope it's not smashed to bits,' said Jack to Peter, as they made their way through the trees and bushes towards the great untidy lawn. 'If it is I'll never hear the last of it from Susie. She never forgets a thing like that!'

They began to hunt for the aeroplane. First they searched the beds round the lawn, but no plane was there, only masses of weeds that made the boys

wonder what the gardener did for his wages! They hunted in the bushes, they looked up into the trees, wondering if the plane had caught in some high branch.

‘This is maddening!’ said Jack, at last. ‘Not a *sign* of the plane! Do you suppose that gardener found it and hid it away?’

‘I shouldn’t be surprised!’ said Peter. ‘He’s surly enough for anything!’

They were now fairly near the great house. It looked very forbidding, for all the curtains were drawn straight across the windows. And then Peter suddenly saw the aeroplane.

It had landed neatly on a little balcony on the second floor of the house, and there it was, balanced on the broad stone ledge.

‘Look, there it is!’ said Peter, pointing. ‘And if we climb this tree that goes right

up to the balcony we can easily get it. It's not smashed – it looks perfectly all right!

‘You go up, and I'll keep watch down here,’ said Jack. ‘I don't know why, but I suddenly feel nervous. I hope that gardener hasn't come back!’