

SECRET OF THE GORGE

By Malcolm Saville

The Lone Piners' search for the Whiteflower Diamond Necklace has reached a critical stage. The two strange men who are also looking for the treasure have succeeded in kidnapping Nicholas. One of them threatens the Lone Piners that unless they leave Bringewood Manor, they will not see the boy again. David agrees to go, but instead, they pack their gear and set out to look for a new camp. Jenny, Tom, and the twins set off for Bringewood Chase to look for Nicholas, leaving Peter and David behind to find the new camp.

18. Rescue

"DARLING Mackie will have to ride all the way in his basket," Mary said, and she glanced round to see that the little dog was safe at the back of her bicycle. "We shall have to hurry because he doesn't like being there too long and I don't like it when he is unhappy."

It did not take Jenny, Tom, and the twins long to reach the road, and then the going was much easier.

None of them had seen Bringewood Chase before, but as there did not seem to be very much of it, Tom suggested that they should leave their bikes under the trees by the bus stop.

"We'll split up," he said. "Mary with me and Dickie with Jenny; each pair take one side of the High Street."

It was Dickie who found the clue they needed, but even he admitted later that he was lucky. The bus from Ludlow arrived and a woman with a loaded string bag got out, passed them with a smile, and went into the butcher's shop a few yards ahead.

"She's got a lucky face," Jenny whispered. "Let's ask in the butcher's."

Dickie nodded solemnly and went into the shop.

Yes, the butcher said he knew Nicholas Whiteflower, but he hadn't seen him for many weeks, and Dickie was about to leave feeling rather disappointed when the woman with the string bag overwhelmed them with words. She knew Nicholas. It was a shame about the Whiteflowers. How was the poor lamb? Yes, she had seen him this very morning. While waiting for the bus to move off she saw him speak to the driver of a housebreaker's lorry which had pulled up in the shade of the trees. No. The driver was not wearing a black beret, and Nicholas got into the cab with him.

"And I'll tell you something, my dears. That lorry calls every day at Blandish's inn. Down Sun Lane, it is, and it's called The Two Bells. I was thinking to myself this very morning that Blandish seems to be mighty interested in the Manor now that it's being pulled down, but I was wondering why young Master Nicholas should be in that lorry —"

She was still talking when Jenny and Dickie, after thanking her for her help, dashed out of the shop waving frantically to Tom and Mary.

They were all thrilled by the news and agreed that they should find the Two Bells at once.

It was not very long before they saw the shabby-looking inn in Sun Lane, but they did not go up to it.

"We've got to be careful," Tom warned. "You all wait about here while I run down and have a look. No sense in us all going. I won't be long. Cheerio."

He was back in ten minutes—the longest ten minutes they had ever known.

"The inn is closed," he said excitedly, "but I've found Nicholas. He's a prisoner in a room at the back. He saw me but signalled that he can't open the window. There's a ladder in

answered their knock on the door. This was the sort of situation they enjoyed, and the woman, who was Mrs. Blandish, was no match for them.

Meanwhile, in the yard behind the inn, Jenny and Tom struggled to set the heavy ladder against the wall of the house below the sill of the room in which Nicholas was imprisoned.

While Jenny stood on the bottom rung, Tom climbed up and signalled to Nicholas to smash the glass from inside when they had got out of the way. Nicholas, without making much noise, had to smash the wooden window frames too, but was soon climbing down the ladder, the whole operation taking only a few seconds. Then they all three raced round to the front of the inn, gave the peewit call to the twins who were still inside keeping Mrs. Blandish occupied and ran as hard as they could to the High Street. The twins joined them there a minute or so later looking smugly satisfied.

Into a trap

The rescue had been carried out in so short a time that they felt sure no one had seen them. Twenty minutes later they were turning into the track that led to the gorge.

Nicholas, riding on the crossbar of Tom's bike, did not have much chance to talk, except that he knew he was a fool! When Peter was in the surgery he had seen and recognised the housebreaker's lorry, and, thinking to be clever, had asked the driver if he knew a man who looked like "Pudding Face." The driver had said that he did and knew where he lived and that he would show him. He seemed friendly enough, but as soon as he was in the cab of the lorry Nicholas was sure that he had made a mistake. The man drove straight to the Two Bells, yanked Nicholas out, and pushed him into the hall. He had no chance because Blandish and the man in the brown suit were standing there evidently waiting for the lorry.

New place to camp

"Must say they seemed surprised to see me," Nicholas admitted. "I tried to fight but it was no use. They shoved me in that filthy little bedroom. I couldn't open the window from inside, and if I'd bust the glass I was too high to jump. They told me to behave myself and I'd be all right, but I'd never have thought I could be such a fool... How's Peter's knee?"

"She should be waiting for us with David in that old punt right now," Jenny explained. "We've got to find a new place to camp, and Peter and David have been hunting for one while we rescued you."

They hid their bicycles and ran down to the river. There was no punt, but as they stood on the bank the bushes on the opposite

bank parted and Peter's fair head appeared.

"Jolly good to have got Nicky," she called out softly. "Listen! We managed to get the punt across here, but we can't get it back against the current. All go up to the bow bridge and cross it one at a time, making sure that you're not being spied on from anywhere—especially from the hill. David and I will meet you once you're over, but don't make a sound. We've been lucky. Tell you all about it in a minute. Cheerio." And she disappeared.

Tom led the way along the track they now knew so well. They all realised that Peter and David must have found a new and secret camp and that the most exciting part of their adventure was still to come. They had not gone many yards towards the bridge when the swirling waters of the river were suddenly patterned with raindrops. There was a roll of thunder overhead and they realised that the storm for which they had

been waiting had broken at last. Then the rain began to pour down in earnest. They raced for the bridge and sheltered under some nearby trees.

"Over you go," Tom ordered. "One at a time now, as Peter said, and keep ducked down all the way. Wait for us by those bushes."

The rain was blotting out the landscape, so it would have been doubtful if anyone could have seen the five figures and Mackie doubling across the bridge. They did it one by one and met, wet and breathless, as arranged.

"Now where?" Tom said.

As if in answer to his question, David, followed by Peter, pushed his way through the thick undergrowth by the edge of the river.

"Hallo there, so you got Nicholas all right?" David said as they crowded round him.

"We did. But what about you. Peter sounded as though you've got something to tell us," Tom replied. "I can tell there's some-

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Tom signalled to Nicholas to smash the glass from inside

the yard, but I'm not sure that it will reach. Come on. We've got to be quick... You twins go to the front and keep whoever is there busy. Say you want to buy some ginger beer or something. When we are ready we'll give the peewit call."

It so happened that the rescue of the kidnapped Nicholas was almost as simple as Tom's plan. Fortunately, the twins did not have much trouble in occupying the attention of the woman who



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