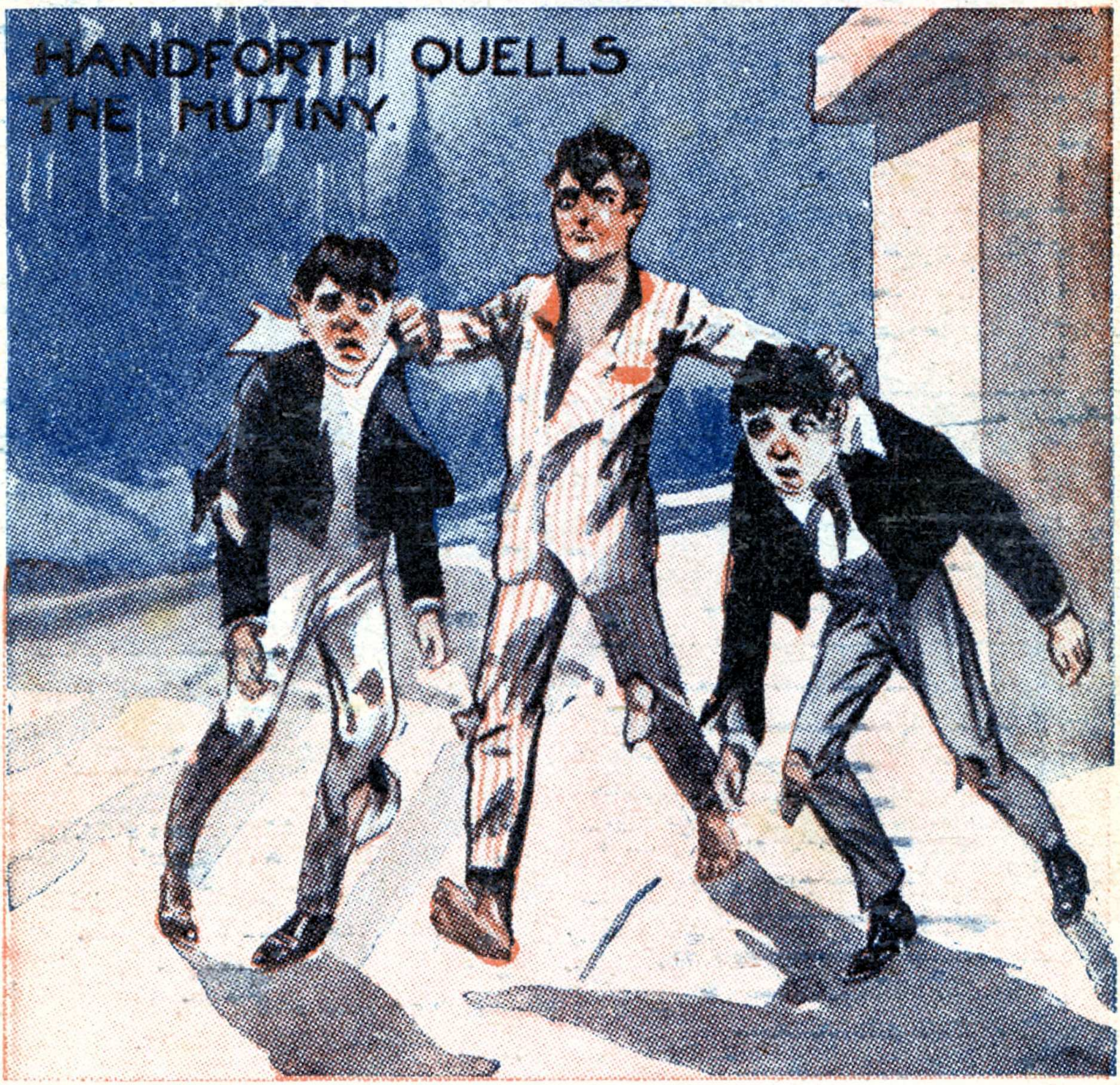
No. 260.—How Heath Gets Into the Clutches of the Count!

THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY 1½D.

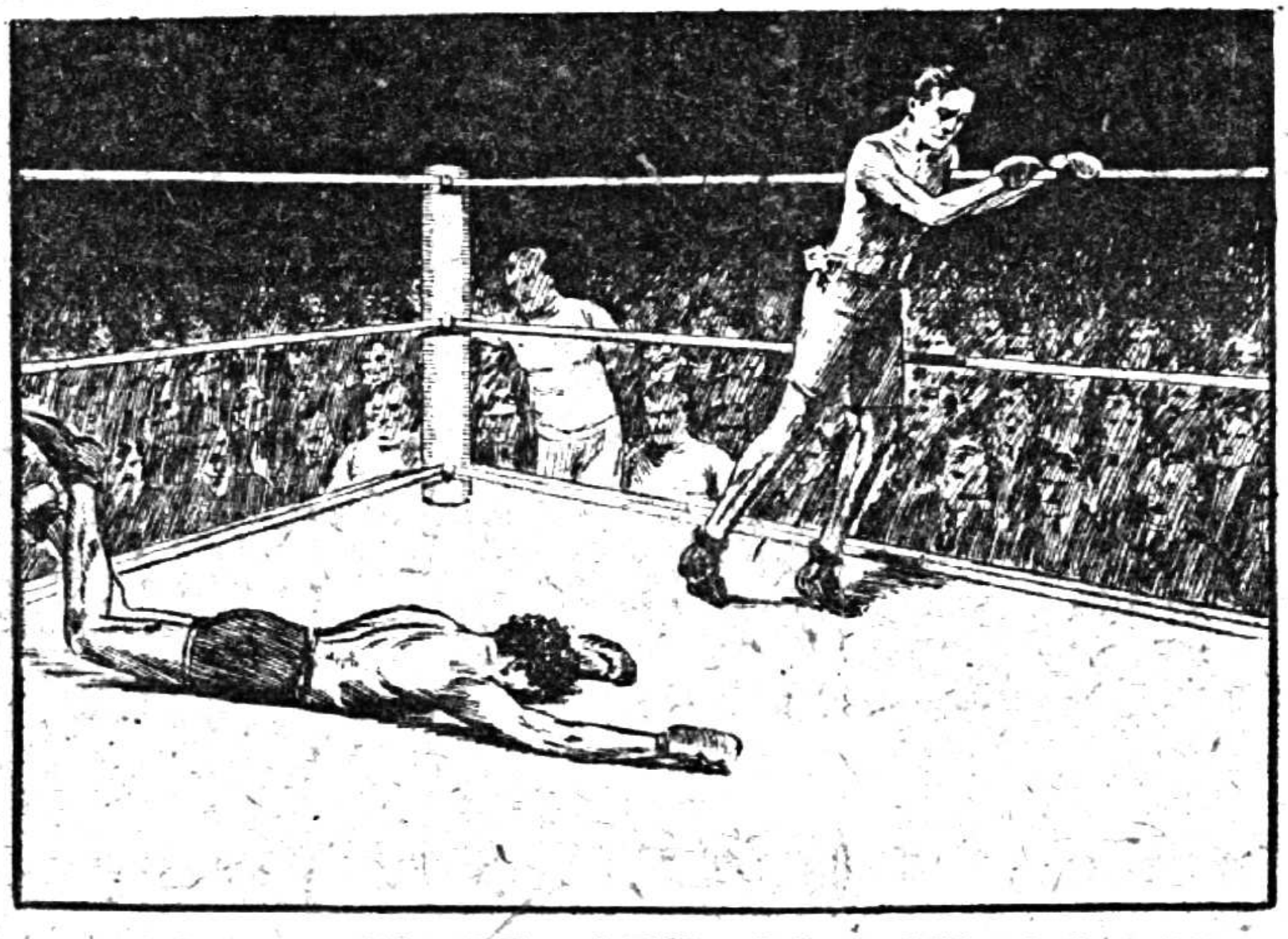


THE DIAMOND OF FATE

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Master of Mystery," "Handforth's Handful," "The Riddle of Bellton Wood," etc.

May 29. 1920.

IN QUEST OF A WORLD CHAMPION:



A Splendid New Series of Boxing Stories, by

WALTER EDWARDS,

is just starting in

THE

BOYS' REALM.

PRICE - 1½d.

Every Friday.

The Paper for Boys' Sporting Stories, which also contains weekly a Story of

NIPPER AND CO. AT ST. FRANK'S.

LATEST POPULAR BOOKS.

EACH A 65,000-WORD NOVEL COMPLETE IN ITSELF.

NOW ON SALE.

DETECTIVE TALES.

SEXTON BLAKE LIBRARY.

Sexton Blake Figures Prominently in all the following stories:

No. 128.—THE PALZER EXPERIMENT
A story of the Secret of Life, introducing Sexton Blake, Tinker, and the Hon. John Lawless.

No. 129.—THE CASE OF THE NAMELESS MAN
A Thrilling Story of Mystery and Intrigue. By the author of "The Branded Spy."

No. 130.—AFRICAN GOLD; or, THE KAFFIR'S SECRET.
Introducing that Battle-worn Zulu Warrior, Shumpozaas, the Staunch Friend of Sexton Blake in the Past.

No. 131.—THE AFFAIR OF THE BLACKFRIARS FINANCIERS.
A City Mystery of Superb Situations and Developments.

SCHOOL, SPORT AND ADVENTURE TALES.

BOYS' FRIEND LIBRARY.

No. 510.—QUINTHRED'S QUEST.
Topping Yarn of the Cricket Field.
By HARRY HUNTINGDON.

No. 511.—THE CARAVAN CHAMPIONS
Splendid School and Holiday Tale.
By HERBERT BRITTON.

No. 512.—THE RED CITY.
Magnificent Adventure Story.
By ALFRED ARMITAGE.

No. 513.—ON THE WAR PATH.
A Magnificent Complete School Tale of Greyfriars.
By FRANK RICHARDS.

PRICE 4d. EACH. **DON'T HESITATE** GET YOUR COPY **NOW** PRICE 4d. EACH.

EVERY NEWSAGENT SELLS THEM.

The Diamond of Fate!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Master of Mystery," "Handforth's Handful," "The Riddle of Bellton Wood," etc.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE MISUNDERSTANDING.

DRIP! Drip! Drip!

Everything was weeping with rain. The old trees in the Triangle at St. Frank's were glorying in the downpour: the flowers in the Head's garden were in the seventh heaven of delight; and the gardeners who attended to the flowers were smoking their pipes and regarding the sky with hearty approval.

But in the lobby of the Ancient House a number of juniors were staring gloomily out into the soaking Triangle. It was just after dinner-time, and afternoon lessons would shortly be commencing.

"Ghastly weather!" said Hubbard viciously.

"Rotten!" agreed Owen major.

"Well, we must have rain sometimes, you know," said Reginald Pitt, strolling up. "See how the trees are revelling in the wetness! As for Broome, the head-gardener, he's like a dog with two giddy tails!"

"Oh, rats!" grumbled Owen major. "I was going over to Bannington this evening, on my bike!"

"Perhaps the rain will be stopped by then."

"That's very likely, ain't it—with the glass falling all the time," said Owen.

"Whenever I decide to go out for a bike ride, it always rains!"

Pitt grinned.

"That's because you decide the wrong time," he explained.

"I must remark that I agree with our comrade," observed Timothy Tucker, of the Remove. "Personally, I am highly delighted to see this downpour. I am deeply impressed by the turn of the weather. Exactly. The position is this——"

"Oh, blow the position!" snapped Hubbard. "Go and eat coke!"

"Really, my worthy comrade——"

"Go and fry your ugly face—it needs re-moulding!" said Hubbard crossly.

T.T. adjusted his spectacles.

"What is this—what is this?" he said, peering forward. "Do I hear aright? Is it possible that I have been advised to fry my face? Good! Are you aware, my friend, that my face is exceedingly handsome?"

"Handsome!" yelled Hubbard. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Furthermore, my face is perfectly proportioned," proceeded Tucker. "Admitted. You must realise that there are only a few fellows who possess all the natural charms which Nature has so bountifully bestowed upon my own person——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, T.T.!"

"I have every intention of addressing

this meeting on the subject of the human race, and the various types of humanity," said Tucker, with dignity. "It is a large subject, and I shall find it necessary to discourse at some length."

"Hear, hear!"

"On the ball, Lunatic!"

Tucker mounted to the third stair of the staircase, and addressed the "meeting"—which consisted of about a dozen juniors. They had nothing particular to do, but they were not quite prepared to stand much of T.T.'s spouting.

At any and every opportunity Tucker would get on his hind legs and make a speech. It was a mania with him. Just as Fatty Little was always feeding his face, Timothy Tucker was always delivering lectures—and he did not confine himself to one subject.

He would touch upon politics, Bolshevism, natural history, Determinism, the origin of species, and occasionally upon such a perilous subject as Spiritualism. But, as he was always taken as a joke, it didn't matter much.

"Comrades and friends," said T.T., after clearing his throat, "a moment ago I found occasion to remark upon my own natural beauty—my handsome features——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dear, dear, dear! It is no laughing matter, I can assure you——"

"Rather not!" said De Valerie. "Your chivvy is enough to make a chap weep!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I deplore this ribald merriment," said T.T. severely. "I am addressing you upon a serious subject. It is not my wish to boast or to brag about my own charms, but it must be admitted that the average faces at St. Frank's are strikingly unhandsome—not to say ugly!"

"Is he talking about my face?" demanded Owen major grimly.

"Goodness knows!" grinned Pitt. "But, if he calls his own dial handsome and ours ugly, it's a cert. that he's got a loft to let in the upper storey!"

"There are, of course, many types of humanity," went on Tucker, warming to his work. "The lowest type, as everybody knows, exists in Australia. The Australians are the most animal-like creatures honoured by the name of human being——"

"They fought pretty decently in the war, anyhow!" said Hubbard warmly.

"Dear me! What is that? Do I hear aright?" asked Tucker, blinking. "My dear friend, we are at cross purposes, I fear. I am not referring to the Australian white people—to our Colonial cousins—but to the depraved aborigines!"

"Oh!"

"To the blacks," proceeded T.T. "They are of such a low type that it is almost impossible to describe them as belonging to the human race. It is difficult for me to describe their appearance. But wait! One moment, my comrades! Perhaps a comparison will be illustrative of my point. We have in the Remove a certain boy who somewhat resembles an Australian aborigine!"

"Who's that?" inquired Pitt.

"I am referring to Handforth——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Handy!"

"It's a good thing he's not here—he'd slaughter this ass on the spot!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Exactly, my friends—exactly!" shouted Tucker. "You have grasped my point!"

"Eh?"

"You realise what I have been attempting to describe," said T.T. "Handforth, you declare, would—er—slaughter me! There you have the matter in a nutshell. Handforth is a savage by nature! His actions prove this to be so. Admitted. The position, therefore, is this: Handforth, being a savage, cannot help his savage actions. It is a great delight with him to punch noses, and to draw blood. It is the wild, brutal instinct with him which compels this behaviour. One glance at his face is sufficient to tell any observant person that Handforth is of a low type of humanity. I am not blaming the fellow—he cannot help it in the least. I am, indeed, inclined to sympathise with him!"

"You'll need some sympathy of your own soon," grinned De Valerie.

Other fellows were grinning, too—and not without reason. For Edward Oswald Handforth himself was descending the staircase, behind Timothy Tucker! The Lunatic of St. Frank's was quite unaware of his impending fate.

In the rear of Handforth came Church and McClure—and it was fortunate for

them, perhaps, that their hard-hitting leader did not see those grins. Church and McClure were inclined to agree with T.T.'s argument. Handforth was undoubtedly something in the nature of a savage when it came to scrapping.

"Yes, I am certainly inclined to sympathise with Handforth," went on Tucker complacently. "In some ways he is a very good fellow—I freely admit it; but, at the same time, it is a matter of common knowledge that Handforth is utterly depraved in his habits and customs."

"Explain yourself, you ass!" grinned Pitt.

"That is quite simple," said T.T. "To begin with, Handforth has a particular liking for punching fellows on the nose—a most depraved custom, you will agree. He takes a particular delight in joining in a gory battle—another savage habit. Then we have his face——"

"We haven't got it, thank goodness!" said De Valerie.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am speaking metaphorically," continued Tucker. "I am greatly pained to find that so many of you are lacking in even the most rudimentary knowledge of manners. This feature, I am sorry to say, is very prominent in Handforth."

Handforth, who was creeping down the stairs, came to a halt.

"Ain't you going to slaughter the ass?" whispered Church, grinning.

"By George!" breathed Handforth. "Wait! You'll soon see something!"

"Go it, T.T.!" said Pitt encouragingly, with half an eye on Handy. "Let's hear some more about poor old Handforth!"

"I have hardly entered upon my subject yet," declared Tucker. "Leaving Handforth's desire for fighting alone for the moment, we will discuss his face. It is, as you will all agree, a most remarkable face."

"A wonderful face!" said Pitt drily.

"A face in a thousand!" said De Valerie. "If you went all over the world, you wouldn't find a face as bad—I mean, a face like Handy's!"

"Admitted," said Tucker. "You have all observed the low forehead—a sure mark of savage nature! Mind you, Handforth himself is not responsible, and never for an instant do I blame him. It is a pure misfortune. His eyes, set closely together, after the manner of a pig—— What—what—— Dear me! I must insist upon your releasing me ——"

"You insulting little worm!" bellowed Handforth, into Tucker's ear.

"Ow! I am surprised at you, Handforth!" gasped Tucker. "I was merely passing a few truthful remarks——"

"Eyes like a pig!" roared Handforth. "Low forehead! An Australian aborigine! Great pip! If you get out of this alive, it'll be a wonder!"

Tucker had been taken in the rear, otherwise Handforth would not have gained such an advantage—for T.T. was by no means a fool when it came to scrapping. On the contrary, he was a very formidable customer to tackle.

But Handforth had him firmly.

Coming down the stairs in T.T.'s rear, Handforth had obtained a firm grip on Tucker's collar, and the seat of his trousers. The next second T.T. was being propelled swiftly and ignominiously across the lobby.

"Really, Handforth, I must insist—— Yaroooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This way, my son!" gasped Handforth breathlessly. "You need cooling! Your brain's got overheated!"

Tucker was rushed out of the lobby, he was rushed down the Ancient House steps, and he was rushed across the Triangle. The rain was soaking down, and there were big, muddy puddles everywhere.

"Now!" roared Handforth. "You're a bit tired, I expect—take a seat!"

Splash!

Timothy Tucker was lifted off his feet bodily. Then—plonk!—he descended into a miniature lake with a terrific splash. He lay there floundering on his back, and Handforth dodged back into the lobby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Perhaps that'll teach the ass a lesson!" said Handforth grimly.

"It's only strengthened his opinion that you're a savage," grinned Pitt.

Handforth twirled round.

"Do you want to sit in that puddle?" he roared.

"No thanks!" said Pitt, chuckling. "I wasn't calling you a savage, Handy—I was only saying what Tucker would think. But if you've got an idea that you can sit me down in that puddle—why, you're at liberty to try!"

Handforth looked at Pitt, and decided not to attempt the task.

"I'll let you off," he said loftily. "Come on, you chaps!"

Church and McClure followed their leader to Study D—leaving the unfortunate T.T. to crawl in, a sadder and a wiser youth—to say nothing of being a wetter youth. He was not likely to "spout" again for some time—an hour, at least!

"That ought to teach the lunatic to keep his trap closed," said Handforth grimly, as he and his chums entered Study D. "An Australian aborigine, indeed! Of all the terrific nerve!"

"All the chaps were grinning at him," said Church. "You oughtn't to take these things seriously, old man. T.T.'s a comedian—he can't help it, you know. He must have been born in a lunatic asylum!"

"I don't care where he was born, and I don't care where he dies," said Handforth. "Rats to him! He's one of life's worries. Lessons start in five minutes, and I want to know what we're going to do on Wednesday afternoon."

"Why, it's only Monday!" said McClure.

"I know that, you ass!"

"There's no need to make plans in advance, is there?" asked Church. "There's no telling what the weather will be like——"

"Oh, after all this rain, it's bound to be fine," said Handforth. "We shall have more rain to-day, it'll be dull to-morrow, with patches of sunshine, and on Wednesday the sky will be cloudless."

"How do you know?" asked Church.

"It's the natural order of things," explained Handy. "At the end of May we don't get days and days of rain. It's going to be fine on Wednesday—a blazing, scorching day. I vote we go out on a special mission——"

"O-o-oh!" groaned Church and McClure.

"What's the matter, you asses?"

"Detective work!" they exclaimed miserably.

Handforth grinned.

"No, not detective work," he said. "We'll give it a miss for Wednesday. I was suggesting a run over to Caistowe on our bikes——"

"Yes!" said Church eagerly. "To bathe, you mean?"

"Exactly!"

"Good egg!" exclaimed McClure. "That's the ticket! We haven't had a bathe this season—not in the sea. We've tried the river, but it ain't like the real article! I'm with you, Handy."

"Same here," said Church promptly.

"We're all agreed, then?" asked Handforth, in surprise.

"Yes, of course."

Handforth still seemed to be astonished—and, as a matter of fact, it was rather extraordinary. It was very seldom indeed that the three chums of Study D agreed upon a point without any argument.

But this was different.

Handy's ideas were generally bizarre; he often wanted to go prowling about in the woods on alleged detective work—and his chums knew what that meant. A trip to Caistowe to enjoy the sea bathing was a different matter.

Before the plan could be discussed further, the bell clanged for afternoon lessons. Mr. Heath was quite at home in the Remove by now, and most of the fellows were beginning to like him better than they had liked Mr. Crowell—who was away on an extended holiday, owing to a breakdown of health.

When lessons were over, Handforth stopped behind in the passage, arguing with a group of juniors. Church and McClure thought they might as well occupy the time in preparing tea.

It was still raining, and the juniors considered that it would be only right to have a particularly decent tea that day. It was impossible to go out, so there would be no hurry to have the evening meal cleared out of the way.

"Good idea of Handy's to go to Caistowe on Wednesday afternoon," remarked Church, as he laid the tablecloth.

"Yes, rather!" said McClure. "He does act sensibly sometimes, you know."

"It'll be great sport," went on Church. "We can take grub with us, and have a giddy picnic on the beach after the bathe."

"Rather!"

They went on with their preparations, and a good many minutes had elapsed before Handforth put in an appearance. And, instead of bringing in a long tale of his late argument—a favourite custom of his—he looked extremely thoughtful and far-away. He sat down in the easy chair, and gazed unseeingly at the well-spread table.

"Well?" said Church. "What about it?"

"Eh? What about what?" inquired Handforth, with a start.

"The table, of course! A decent tea, isn't it?"

"Seems all right," said Handforth. "But we shall want something better than this on Wednesday, you know. A clean tablecloth, and some new crocks. We can easily borrow some for the occasion. An extra ripping spread will be necessary, too."

"On Wednesday?"

"Yes, of course."

"But we sha'n't have tea here on Wednesday," said McClure.

"Rot! Of course we shall!" declared Handforth. "We shall have a terrific tea, too. Extra good grub, and clean things, and all the rest of it. In fact, we've got to make a special effort."

Church and McClure stared.

"On—on Wednesday?" asked Church.

"Yes, you fathead!" roared Handforth. "What's the matter with you?"

"There's nothing the matter with me," replied Church tartly. "But you seem to be a bit dotty this evening."

Handforth pushed back his cuffs.

"I'm dotty?" he repeated, with grim deliberation.

"Oh, don't make a fuss!" said Church. "You know jolly well that we sha'n't be here to tea on Wednesday, and yet you talk all sorts of rot about having special crocks and clean tablecloths, and all that sort of rot. We're going out all the afternoon to Caistowe for a picnic."

Handforth looked at Church witheringly.

"You poor fathead!" he said, with infinite pity.

"I'm not poor, I've got thirty bob!"

"If you're going to start being funny, Walter Church, I'll kick you out of the study!" bawled Handforth. "I won't stand any rot from outsiders, and I'm not going to stand any rot from my own chums!"

"But——"

"Don't interrupt!" roared Handy. "You know as well as I do that we can't go bathing; you know we can't leave St. Frank's."

"Why can't we?"

"Because we're expecting—— And don't you grin at me, Arnold McClure!" broke off Handforth, turning to the other junior. "If you stand there grinning like a Cheshire cheese any longer I'll squash your face!"

"Cheshire cheeses don't grin," said McClure, "they hum!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth tore off his jacket.

"I'm not going to stand this sort of thing!" he bellowed. "You start chipping me as soon as I come in, you ask all sorts of unnecessary questions, you talk rot about going to that picnic on Wednesday, and you finish up by being funny! Clear out, the pair of you! Clear out before I chuck you out!"

"You silly ass!" howled Church. "Didn't we arrange——"

"I don't want any arguments!" snapped Handforth.

"But we all agreed to go to Caistowe."

"Still the same old record!" groaned Handforth. "I'm fed up with this, and I'm not standing any more of it!"

He rushed forward like a whirlwind. Church and McClure dodged, but they were not quite active enough. The next second they were hurled towards the door at lightning speed, and they knew nothing else until they bumped out into the passage, one on top of the other, in a considerable state of disorder.

The door slammed and they sorted themselves out.

"A little argument?" inquired Pitt, coming along the passage.

"Oh, no!" snapped Church, with bitter sarcasm. "We like this! We came out of the study on purpose! An argument! That fat-headed idiot ought to be taken out into mid-Atlantic and dropped overboard!"

"Have pity on the fishes!" grinned Pitt. "It's amazing to me why you chaps stand so much of it. You're not funks, and you're not weaklings. You could pitch Handy out as easy as pie if you wanted to. Why not give him some of his own medicine?"

"What's the good?" snapped McClure. "You don't know him the same as we do. All he can do is to argue and hit out and then argue again. It's often the best way to finish up a row like this, it saves hours of jaw!"

"Oh, well, you know best, of course!" said Pitt.

He strolled on, and Church and McClure re-entered Study D. They stood in the doorway, stared, and looked fierce.

As though to add insult to injury Handforth was sitting at the table, calmly demolishing the feed which Church and McClure had prepared. He looked up and nodded.

"Feeling a bit subdued—eh?" he asked. "Come in and have tea!"

"There's not much fun in having tea when there's a raving lunatic about the place," growled Church. "Why the dickens can't you be sensible, Handy? You know well enough that we all agreed about that Caistowe trip for Wednesday. It was fixed and settled. We're going to bathe and have a picnic."

"It was your own idea, too!" said McClure warmly.

Handforth sighed.

"Why is it that I have to put up with such idiots as these?" he inquired, appealing to the plate of bread-and-butter. "They know jolly well that any cycling trip is out of the question."

"We don't know it!" snapped Church.

"How the merry dickens can we go over to Caistowe on Wednesday afternoon and entertain my pater here as well?" demanded Handforth, glaring.

"Your—your pater?"

"Yes!"

"Entertain your pater here?" gasped McClure.

"Of course! You know all about it."

"Rot! This is the first we've heard about your pater," said Church. "We didn't know anything about him coming down on Wednesday."

Handforth scratched his head.

"Didn't I show you that letter?" he inquired.

"We haven't seen any letter."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" Handforth grinned. "No wonder you couldn't understand, then! I was under the impression that you knew all about it, you asses! My pater is coming down on Wednesday afternoon, and he'll be here to tea."

"Oh!" said Church. "So that's why the Caistowe trip's off! Why the dickens couldn't you tell us before, instead of getting into a terrific temper?"

"I'm sorry—honest, I am!" said Handforth earnestly, although he was still grinning. "Don't make a fuss!"

"Oh, we won't make a fuss," growled McClure. "But it's a pity you can't think of these details before you start landing out! What time will Sir Edward be here?"

"About three o'clock, or just before," said Handforth. "I got the letter twenty minutes ago, it came by the second post. We can't go out on Wednesday, of course. We shall have to get something special."

"Of course," agreed Church. "We know that now. What's your pater coming down for?"

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"Goodness knows!" he replied. "Coming to see if I'm still alive perhaps, and to do some business with the Head. And it's quite likely that he's coming to jaw at me about Edith—my sister, you know."

"Yes, she ran away and got married to a chap your people didn't approve of," said McClure, nodding. "And now she can't be found, and her hubby is working in a glue factory, or something!"

Handforth glared.

"You silly ass!" he said warmly. "Mr. Kirby—that's her husband—is a gentleman. I've never seen him, but he must be a gentleman, or Sis wouldn't have married him. I'm jolly worried about her myself."

Handforth was telling the truth.

He had been very worried indeed. When he first learned the news he had been almost off his head. But then a note had come from his sister, without any address, and posted in London, saying that she was happy, and that her husband had a good position. She gave no details, but Handforth was relieved.

"Of course," he said, stirring his tea, "it was the mater's fault really, although the pater had a lot to do with it. Queer thing, but my dad is a frightfully obstinate sort. He gets an idea into his head and nothing will shift it! And he lashes out at anybody before he knows the whole yarn. He's a terror!"

Church and McClure nodded. They understood where Handy's own temperament came from. But Handforth seemed to be quite indignant about his father; he did not realise that he was as bad himself.

And while the study tea went on the three chums discussed the coming visit to St. Frank's of Sir Edward Handforth.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS "TWENTY."

MR. CLEMENT HEATH rapped his desk sharply.

"Attend to your lessons, Handforth!" he exclaimed. "Do you hear me?"

Handforth apparently did not. He was sitting in his seat, gazing unseeingly at one of the oaken beams which supported the ceiling. He was also chewing a pen-holder, and chewing it to such good purpose that there was very little of it left. Church nudged him urgently.

"Wake up, you ass!" he hissed.

Mr. Heath stood watching grimly, waiting for Handforth to come to earth.

"Silly bounder!" grinned Tommy Watson. "He'll get it in the neck!"

"So will you, if you jaw!" I whispered warningly.

"Begad, it is extraordinary," declared Tregellis-West, adjusting his pince-nez, and regarding Handforth curiously. "It is amazin' why the dear fellow doesn't hear. He must be dreamin'—he must, really!"

I chuckled.

"He gets moony fits like this now and again," I said. "I expect it's because of his sister. Since she bunked from home on that runaway marriage stunt Handy has been a different chap."

"Boys, you will be silent, please," said Mr. Heath sternly. "And when Handforth is ready to attend to my questions I shall be most delighted. Do you hear me speaking to you, Handforth?"

He raised his voice considerably, and Handforth started.

"Eh?" he said. "I—I—— Oh, yes, sir?" he gasped. "Speaking to me?"

"I have been speaking to you for some little time, my boy," said Mr. Heath grimly. "I am waiting for you to answer my question regarding the Gold Coast of Africa."

Handforth looked rather blank.

"Oh, I—I see, sir!" he stammered. "The—the Gold Coast? They—they find gold there! It's a great gold-mining country, sir!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is quite obvious, Handforth, that you have no knowledge of the question I asked you," said Mr. Heath severely. "I wanted you to tell me what mountains exist in that region, if any, and you reply by telling me that gold is found on the Gold Coast! You have been grossly inattentive!"

"Yes, sir," said Handforth meekly.

"You will write me one hundred lines and bring them to my study before six o'clock this evening," said Mr. Heath. "Quite sufficient time has been wasted, and we will get on with the geography lesson."

Handforth sat down and glared at his chums.

"Why didn't you tell me, you faithless rotters?" he demanded.

"My hat, we kept nudging you until you nearly sat on the floor!" whispered Church.

"You ought to have been more drastic!" growled Handforth. "I've got to do a hundred lines now——"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Heath, seizing a pointer. "It is fairly evident, Handforth, that you wish me to increase that imposition to two hundred lines. Unless you cease talking at once I will be compelled to take drastic action."

Handforth subsided, and he delivered two further glares upon his chums which were truly ferocious. Not that they had done anything whatever to be blamed for. On the contrary, they had tried their utmost to save their leader from punishment.

Morning lessons proceeded fairly evenly after that, and when dinner-time came Handforth had practically forgotten all about the hundred lines. He didn't remember them again, in fact, until about tea-time, when he advised his chums to hurry up so that they could all get out on to the playing-fields. Then Church reminded him.

"What about those lines for Heath?" he asked.

"Oh, rats!" exclaimed Handforth, frowning. "I'd forgotten all about the blessed things!"

"You've got to take them to Heath's study before six," said McClure. "Look here, we'll get tea ready while you do the lines. They won't take you long."

Handforth took his chum's advice and forthwith sat down and commenced scribbling the lines as hard as he could go.

"Finished?" asked Church, after a while.

"No, you ass!"

"Tea's ready, anyhow!"

"Oh, well, I'll have tea, and polish off

the last thirty lines afterwards," said Handforth, laying down his pen. "I reckon Heath's a beastly rotter for piling lines on like this. I always thought he was a wrong 'un!"

Although they did not voice the opinion, Church and McClure considered that Handforth had escaped very lightly with a mere hundred lines. But it was useless saying anything like that to Handforth. It would only have given rise to an argument.

Tea over, Handforth wrote out the final thirty, and then sallied out to Mr. Heath's study while Church and McClure cleared up the tea-things.

Handforth arrived and tapped upon the door.

There was no answer.

He tapped again, but, receiving no invitation to enter, he turned the handle and peeped inside. The Form-master's study was empty.

"Naturally!" muttered Handforth, with a sniff.

He wondered what to do for a moment, and then decided that he would be carrying out Mr. Heath's instructions if he left the lines on the master's desk. There was no need for him to hang about waiting until Mr. Heath returned. Handforth wanted to get off to the playing-fields, and he also wanted to avoid trouble by handing in the lines before going.

So he stepped into the room and placed the sheets of paper on the blotting-pad which adorned Mr. Heath's desk.

While he was doing this his gaze rested quite naturally upon the assortment of penholders and pencils which filled the pen-rack. The glance was quite careless, and indeed, almost unconscious.

But certainly Handforth's attention became fixed. It was no longer a subconscious gaze, but a keen, active stare. At the same time Handforth uttered a little exclamation and bent over the desk eagerly.

He selected a black fountain-pen from the rack and turned it over in his fingers. It was, in the main, quite an ordinary pen, an article of a famous make, similar in most respects to thousands of others But Handforth seined quite dazed as he looked at it. He had started visibly upon picking it up, and now he held it in front of his eyes, his expression being one of blank astonishment and incredulity.

"It's impossible!" he muttered.

Turning the pen over again he noticed that the gold nib was broken, and the pen was practically useless in consequence. It had not been used for some time. But this was not the item which claimed Handforth's full attention.

He seemed to be strangely attracted by a little ornamentation on the vulcanite barrel—the word "twenty" set in tiny imitation pearls. The job had been very neatly executed, and the result was quite pleasing

But there seemed to be no reason for the word being there, let alone for it to be set in those tiny glistening, faked pearls. As Handforth could understand, it was obviously not a standard design, but merely somebody's little freak idea.

Handforth hardly seemed to know what he was doing. The expression in his eyes was one of dreamy amazement, and, as though in a dream, he passed out of the study, failing to close the door completely behind him.

He passed down the passage, still holding Mr. Heath's fountain pen. One or two juniors saw him, but he did not seem to see them. De Valerie, indeed, asked him a question. Handforth was quite unconscious of the fact.

"Must be deaf!" said De Valerie.

Handforth passed into Study D, walked straight to the table, sat down in a chair, and placed the pen in front of him. Never for an instant did he take his gaze from it. He seemed to be absolutely fascinated.

Church and McClure watched his movements with interest at first, and then with surprise. He appeared to be unconscious of their presence.

"It's absurd!" muttered Handforth, in a curious voice. "Oh, it's impossible—positively preposterous!"

"What's the matter with him?" asked Church, in a whisper.

"Goodness knows!"

"I say, Handy," went on Church, raising his voice, "what's that pen you've got there? It's not yours——"

"It's out of the question!" said Handforth dreamily.

"Eh?"

"It simply can't be true——"

"What can't be true, you silly ass?" asked McClure. "What's wrong with you now? Got one of your moody fits again?"

Handforth took no notice—indeed, he did not hear.

"I can't believe it," he muttered. "This—this pen! Why, it's too preposterous to think about! And yet—yet ——"

He broke off, his face flushing with inward excitement.

Church and McClure were more astonished than ever.

"There's nothing especially peculiar about that pen," said Church. "What's the matter, Handy? Why can't you tell us the reason for all this rot? Why can't you answer us?"

"And yet it must be!" said Handforth dully.

"What?"

"There's nothing else for it," went on Handy. "But what does it mean—what can it mean? It's—it's positively startling! I've never been so staggered in my life!"

"You seem to look a bit bowled over," said Church.

"He's not listening to you," said McClure. "I don't believe he knows we're here! What the dickens gives him the funny fits he's been having lately? They seem to be getting worse and worse, instead of better!"

"But why the dickens should this fountain pen set him off again?" demanded Church. "There's nothing special about it—it's only an ordinary Landman, the same as they sell in thousands everywhere."

"There seems to be something engraved on it——"

"That's nothing much," said Church. "Just a special mark, I expect, showing it's a more expensive pen than most of the others. Just look at him! I'm blessed if I don't believe he's going off his rocker!"

They regarded Handforth with real concern. Their leader was still staring at the mysterious fountain pen. That dazed, far-away expression was in his eyes, and it conveyed the idea that he was in a stupor of utter astonishment. Handforth regarded the pen as if he could not believe the evidence of his own eyes.

And Church and McClure, because they could see no rhyme or reason in his actions, began to get somewhat impatient. Church took hold of Handforth's shoulder, and shook it vigorously.

"Wake up, you ass!" he shouted.

"Go away—don't bother!" muttered Handforth irritably. "I—I——"

"What's the idea of bringing that pen in here?"

"Pen?"

"Yes; where did you find it?"

"Find it?" repeated Handforth vaguely.

"Who does it belong to?"

"Belong to?"

"You—you giddy parrot!" howled Church. "Can't you act sensibly? Why the dickens don't you tell us why you're acting the giddy goat like this? Where did you get that pen from?"

"It's impossible!" declared Handforth, shaking his head.

"Eh?"

"Yet, at the same time, it can't be impossible," said Handforth. "This pen is too jolly—— Go away! Can't you leave me in peace for five minutes? If you don't clear off I'll punch your heads!"

Church and McClure brightened up. This was more like the real Handforth.

"Don't be an ass, old man," said Church. "We're a bit anxious about you."

Handforth tore his gaze away from the fountain pen.

"Anxious about me?" he repeated irritably. "What for?"

"You're acting so strangely——"

"Rot!"

"That pen seems to have fascinated you," went on Church. "When you went out of the study you were as right as anything, but you came back all flushed and excited, and that pen was in your hand. Where did you find it?"

Handforth's eyes were gleaming.

"It was in Mr. Heath's study," he replied. "It was there—on his desk: I saw it—and my heart gave a jump!"

"Why should it give a jump?"

"I couldn't believe it at first," said Handforth. "I thought I was dreaming, or seeing double. But it was there all right! Now I've got it in my hand! Look at it—just look at it!"

Church and McClure looked.

"I'm blessed if I can see anything particularly startling about it," said McClure.

"The rotten thing's smashed, anyhow," added Church.

"It seems impossible, and yet it must be true," said Handforth. "In Heath's study! On his desk! Great Scott!

Did you ever hear of anything so staggering in your life? I can't seem to realise that it's true!"

"Oh, you're mad—clean off your rocker!" said Church impatiently. "You can only talk rot whenever we speak to you. If you found that pen in Mr. Heath's study, you oughtn't to have taken it away. He might be back by this time, and if he misses it you'll get it in the neck. He'll think you've pinched it!"

Handforth started.

"Eh? He mustn't know!" he exclaimed. "Great pip! What made me bring it away? Why didn't you tell me about it before, you idiots?"

Church and McClure felt rather helpless.

"Why didn't you shake me, or something?" demanded Handforth, jumping to his feet. "This pen belongs to Heath's study. I don't remember bringing it out—in fact, I hardly remember anything! You must be dotty to have let me come here with this pen in my hand, like this!"

"You hopeless ass!" snapped Church. "We've been jawing at you for ten solid minutes, trying to get some reason out of you! And now that we've done it, all you can do is to rail at us! Thank goodness you've got your senses back—that's one thing! What's all this rot about that giddy pen?"

Handforth looked rather startled.

"Have—have I been saying things?" he asked sharply.

"You've been talking rot!"

"Yes; but what have I said?"

"Nothing with any sense in it," declared McClure. "You've been staring at the pen, saying it's impossible, and out of the question, and you've looked like an escaped lunatic, and you've been fairly dotty all round. What's the matter with that fountain pen, to make you so insane?"

Handforth looked relieved.

"I—I hardly knew what I was doing, you know," he confessed. "Thank goodness, I didn't make an ass of myself! I'll take the pen back to Heath's study at once—before he misses it."

"Hold on!" said Church. "Can't you explain?"

"Explain what?"

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Church. "Explain what, indeed! What is there about that pen which makes you so extraordinary? Why can't you tell us why it made such a tremendous change in you?"

Handforth looked grim, but shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, it's nothing much," he said carelessly. "Or, at least, it wouldn't be much to you. You wouldn't understand, even if I told you. It's a matter that would be beyond your limited comprehension."

His chums glared.

"We never have secrets," said Church warmly. "Study D has always been open and above board. If you're going to start being secretive, Handy——"

"Oh, don't talk rot!" said Handforth. "There's nothing in a fountain pen to make a fuss of. I'm surprised at you! Going on like this just because I brought this pen out of Mr. Heath's study!"

He spoke accusingly, and passed out of the study, leaving Church and McClure staring after him, in a considerable state of indignation and anger. After all the terrific fuss he had made, it was certainly the limit to accuse them of the same thing.

Handforth himself, still looking excited, made his way back to Mr. Heath's study. He was feeling rather worried now, for it would be very awkward if the Remove-master got to know that Handforth had taken the pen. There was nothing wrong in it, but it would require an explanation—and that would be difficult.

However, Handforth needn't have worried, for when he arrived at the study, he found it was still empty. He quickly crossed to the desk, and replaced the fountain pen in the rack.

"Well, that's one good thing!" he said, with relief. "There's no need for me to keep it. I know it's here, and that's good enough."

He was still standing at the desk when there was a sound from the half-open door, and Handforth looked round quickly. Mr. Clement Heath had just entered. He regarded Handforth with mixed surprise and anger.

"What are you doing here, Handforth?" he demanded sharply.

"I—I——"

"How dare you enter my study in my absence?" rapped out Mr. Heath. "You will understand, Handforth, that I will have no impertinence of this

nature. You will explain what you were doing at my desk!"

Handforth wasn't a liar, and he realised that any excuse would sound palpable. But his glance fell upon the lines he had brought earlier, and he saw a way out of the difficulty.

"That imposition, sir," he said confusedly.

"What?"

"You gave me a hundred lines this morning, sir, and told me to bring them before six," said Handforth. "They're here, sir, on your desk. You weren't in, so I thought I'd better leave them."

Mr. Heath nodded, and his gaze grew less severe.

"Oh, I understand," he said. "You have brought lines, Handforth? Let me see them?"

Mr. Heath examined the imposition, and nodded.

"The writing is somewhat careless in places," he said critically, "and I object to these blots and smudges, Handforth. A boy of your age ought to be capable of writing an imposition without such defects. However, I will excuse you, as I am in a hurry. You may go."

"Thank you, sir," said Handforth.

He turned to the door, but, as he grasped the handle, his eyes suddenly gleamed, as though he had thought of something.

"Are you going out this evening, sir?" he asked casually.

The new master looked round.

"Yes, I am," he said. "Why do you ask? I am running into Bannington, as a matter of fact, to make a few purchases."

"I thought perhaps you were going there," said Handforth. "I was wondering if you'd mind getting a bottle of ink from the stationers?"

"I have no objection, my boy," said Mr. Heath. "Yes; I will certainly get your ink for you. I will give it to you in the morning, unless I happen to see you later on in the evening."

"Thanks very much, sir!"

Handforth passed out of Mr. Heath's study, and he was looking very pleased with himself. But there was something else. Handforth was not only pleased, but he was also suffering from unusual inward excitement.

What had he discovered.

CHAPTER III.

THE DIAMOND OF FATE.

CLICK!

Mr. Heath quietly turned the key of his study door. Handforth had only just gone, but, for some reason, Mr. Heath apparently wanted to be assured of complete privacy. Having seen that the door was securely fastened, he went across to his desk, and sat down.

A slight change had come over the Remove-master.

He, too, was evidently suffering from inward excitement. There was an expression in his eyes which did not usually find a place there, and which made him look rather less simple than was customary.

He took out a bunch of keys, unlocked the top drawer of his desk, and produced a small cash-box. Another key was brought into use, and the cash-box stood open. Mr. Heath lifted a curious object out of the box, and placed it on his blotting-pad.

There was no fear of his being interrupted, and nobody could glance in through the window. Yet Mr. Heath looked at both the door and the window before confining his attention to the object which lay before him.

"Upon my soul!" he murmured. "It's genuine; there's not the slightest doubt about it! The more I see of it, the more certain I become!"

He picked the thing up, and turned it over between his fingers, examining every atom of it closely and searchingly.

At first glance the thing seemed to be quite valueless—a large piece of curiously formed crystal, and somewhat dull at that. Its shape, in the main, was oval, with one or two rough edges. The stone was quite whole, and perfect in its construction. No flaw of any sort was visible.

"Yes; the thing is a diamond—there is not the slightest doubt," Heath told himself. "And a diamond of such size as this must be worth a fortune. I can hardly realise that the stone actually exists."

He continued to turn it over in his hands, and he was not far wrong in his conjecture that the thing was actually a diamond. It was, as a matter of fact, a rough, uncut stone of extraordinary

purity and quality, to say nothing of being an immense size.

Mr. Heath recalled the manner in which he had found the stone.

Only a few nights ago, he had had occasion to pass through Bellton Wood, and while there had found the stone lying beneath an oak tree. He had put it in his pocket quite carelessly, never thinking that it was of any value.

But, upon examination, he changed his view. He was quite certain now that his find was one of the most startling nature. At the time he had been with a curious old gentleman from Bannington, the Comte de Plessigny.

This quaint old fellow had not been in Bannington long, having rented a furnished house for a certain period. Handforth had every cause to know the genial, good-tempered count, for Handforth had mistaken the old nobleman for a forger!

Mr. Heath remembered that he had been searching, with the count, for a specimen—some night insect or other—beneath the oak tree, when the diamond had been seen. Not knowing what it was at the time, Heath had pocketed it, out of pure curiosity.

And now he thought of the Comte de Plessigny.

The Remove-master had not cared to confide in anyone at St. Frank's. He did not want to show the diamond to the other masters, or to the boys. He was afraid of being talked about; but, more important still, he was afraid of being made a fool of, for he still had a lingering fear that the stone would prove to be worthless.

And so Mr. Heath thought of the count.

This genial old chap would certainly know something about diamonds, for he had knocked about the world a good deal, and his experience on all subjects was wide. Mr. Heath felt sure that the count would help him to the best of his ability.

He carefully wrapped the stone in a piece of wash-leather, placed it in his waistcoat-pocket, and then unlocked the study door.

A few minutes later he was walking briskly across the Triangle. He went to the bicycle shed, and was soon riding away on a machine which belonged to Morrow, of the Sixth—Morrow having been only too willing to lend Mr. Heath his jigger.

It was just as well that Mr. Heath had a bicycle, for the walk was a long one, and by no means pleasant on a warm evening, and with the roads smothered with dust. True, there was not much dust now, owing to the rain of the previous day.

It was possible to go to Bannington by train, but the count lived on the extreme outskirts of the town, and far from the station. By bicycle, the trip was a mere twenty minutes' run.

Mr. Heath arrived without mishap, and paused for a moment before pushing his machine through the big gateway of the front garden. The Comte de Plessigny's house was set well back from the road, trees grew in profusion around the building, and the place was delightfully quiet and secluded.

The lawns and flower beds were kept in a state of perfection, everything being exquisitely cared for. The gravel path which led from the road to the house was innocent of even the tiniest weed, and was rolled down perfectly.

Mr. Heath walked up, and propping his bicycle against the stonework of the front porch, he mounted the few steps and pressed the electric bell push.

His ring was answered by a grave-looking manservant.

"Is the count in at present?" inquired Mr. Heath.

"If you will give me your name, sir, I will see," said the servant.

Mr. Heath supplied the information, and was only kept waiting for a few moments. Then he was ushered in, and taken straight to the library. He entered, and found his host reclining comfortably in a big, easy chair.

There was every sign of luxury about the place—beautiful furniture, soft rugs and carpet, antique bookcases, and rich tapestries. The Comte de Plessigny himself was carelessly attired in a flowered smoking-jacket and a smoking-cap to match. He rose leisurely to his feet as Mr. Heath was announced.

"Splendid! This is a most unexpected pleasure, my dear sir," he exclaimed, walking forward with extended hand. "I am delighted to meet you again—quite delighted. Please make yourself quite at home."

"I am afraid I am taking something of a liberty in coming to you in this fashion, sir," said Mr. Heath. "It is

most kind of you to make me so welcome, and I appreciate your courtesy."

The count smiled.

"A man is dull unless he can sometimes share the society of others," he said smoothly. "You have come at the right moment to save me from an attack of extreme depression, my dear Mr. Heath. I was thoroughly dissatisfied with my own company, and your advent is most welcome, I can assure you."

"It is very nice of you to put it that way——"

"You are quite mistaken," the count interrupted. "It is not one of my habits to say things I do not mean. Your arrival is most opportune, and I shall be honoured if you will make yourself perfectly at home. Try one of these cigars—and allow me to have the extreme pleasure of personally preparing a little refreshment."

The old gentleman was courtesy itself. Mr. Heath could not remember having met a man who was so absolutely genial and pleasant. Not only in his manner but in his voice, and his expression—the count was the very embodiment of good nature.

His lined face was lined up into an irresistible smile; his eyes twinkled; and there was just that air about him which set Mr. Heath at his ease during the first moment.

"I have been hoping that you would call upon me, my dear sir," said the Comte de Plessigny. "After our informal introduction in the woods a few nights ago, it is pleasant to be able to meet in more congenial surroundings. I am delighted to inform you that my head is now quite sound again. That is one advantage of having a small brain capacity—one's skull is inclined to be thick."

Mr. Heath laughed.

"You fell out of that tree with considerable violence," he remarked. "I thought your condition was far worse than it actually was, sir, and I am only too pleased that I was able to be of some trivial service to you."

"Dear, dear," said the count, shaking his head. "That will not do, my young friend. Your service was not trivial. On the contrary, it is more than possible that you saved my life."

"Oh, that's really quite wrong——"

"We do not know," interrupted the count, shaking his head. "I was stunned quite severely, and without your assistance it is quite certain that I should have remained helpless in the wood for many hours. A severe chill would certainly have resulted, and I am sure that my chest would not have survived the ordeal. So I am not exaggerating when I tell you that I owe my life to your excellent services."

Mr. Heath felt pleased—a good opening was being provided for him.

"I must confess that I have not called simply and purely for the more pleasure of doing so," he said. "I have a selfish motive in being here, and I am hoping that you will be willing to give me the benefit of your advice."

"I shall be only too honoured," said the count gracefully.

"You may remember our little search under the oak tree," went on the Remove master. "You had dropped one of your specimens, I believe, and was rather anxious to find it—although you urged me not to assist you in your search."

"That is quite correct," said the count, nodding. "I was feeling much better after your expert treatment, and did not wish to delay you further. Yes, my dear sir, I remember the incident quite distinctly."

Heath nodded, and failed to observe that his companion's eyes were gleaming rather strangely. Perhaps this was because of the fact that the count sat with his back to the light, thus leaving his face in shadow.

It seemed that he was greatly pleased with the trend of the conversation, and it was just possible that he was anticipating his visitor's next words.

Mr. Heath was undoubtedly shrewd in scholastic matters—he was expert in the art of teaching—but in the wiles of the world he was quite simple.

He probably did not guess for the moment that the count himself might have been searching for something very different to a specimen of insect life on that night.

"Shortly before I left you," said Mr. Heath, "I noticed something on the ground, half hidden by a leaf. Knocking the leaf away, I found the object to be a curiously shaped stone. I slipped it into my pocket out of mere curiosity, never dreaming for a moment that it might be valuable."

"So," said the count smoothly. "And have you now learned differently?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure," replied Mr. Heath. "This stone did not seem to be of any value at the time; but, after examining it carefully, I have come to the conclusion that it might be—well, I am quite ignorant of such matters, and I would prefer to show you the stone before I say anything further."

The count leaned forward.

"I should be charmed to give you my opinion," he observed.

Again Mr. Heath failed to notice the gleam in his companion's eyes. The count was now even more pleased than before, and he gave a quiet little chuckle to himself—as though he were pleased that an idea of his own had turned out correct.

"One moment," he said. "Have you shown this stone to anybody else?"

"No."

"Good—good! I am the first to see it?"

"Exactly," said Mr. Heath. "As a matter of fact, I have been afraid of ridicule—for I am by no means certain that my assumption is correct."

Mr. Heath took the stone from his waistcoat pocket, and laid it upon the table. The count's eyes glittered for a second, and he picked the diamond up, and turned it over between his fingers.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, after a few moments. "This is most extraordinary—most astonishing! My dear sir, you don't seem to realise what this stone actually is, or its true value."

"I suspected it to be a diamond," said Mr. Heath promptly.

The Comte de Plessigny rose to his feet, and paced up and down the room with quick nervous strides. He appeared to be greatly interested, and Mr. Heath naturally assumed that his companion was seeing the stone for the first time in his life. He certainly gave no sign that the actual truth was very different.

"This stone is, indeed, a diamond," he declared.

The Remove master jumped up.

"You mean it?" he exclaimed rapidly.

"I do!"

"And—and is it worth anything?"

"Most decidedly," replied the count calmly. "It is worth anything between twenty and twenty-five thousand pounds."

Mr. Heath opened his mouth to speak, but failed to do so. He seemed to become all limp, and he sat down in his chair, quivering from head to foot. His face went pale, but then became flushed.

"You are astonished," smiled the count.

"It—it can't be true!" gasped Mr. Heath huskily. "Did you say twenty-thousand pounds?"

"I did!"

"But—but—— Oh! I hardly know what to say!" exclaimed Mr Heath, jumping to his feet again "It—it seems altogether too absurd to be true! Twenty thousand pounds! Why, the sum will—will—— But are you sure it's a diamond? Don't you think there might be some mistake about it?"

The count shook his head.

"There is no mistake," he said. "I have handled diamonds quite frequently, and I am not in the habit of making blunders, my dear friend. The stone is a really wonderful diamond, and it is extraordinary that you should have found it beneath the oak tree in Bellton Wood."

"But I didn't find it there," said Mr. Heath quickly. "I swear to you——"

"Dear, dear! There is no necessity for you to take an oath," smiled the count. "You have told me that you have found it in Bellton Wood. So! It is sufficient. I believe you, Mr. Heath. And when I tell you that this stone is worth the sum I mentioned, I am rather under-estimating its value."

Mr. Heath simply stood at a loss for words. For a few brief moments he went off into dreamland.

In his wildest moments he had only hoped that the diamond might be worth a thousand or so. That sum was splendid enough. But twenty thousand! It would set him up, it would allow him to start a school of his own—it would put him squarely on his feet.

At present he was simply occupying a temporary job—a position he could only hold until the end of the present term. For, after the summer holidays, Mr. Crowell would come back to take up his duties.

Mr. Heath went off into glorious visions of what might be, and he sat there with face flushed, and with eyes which clearly told of his mental ex-

citement. He was oblivious to his surroundings.

But then the count brought him back to earth.

"Of course," he said gently, "there will be difficulties."

Mr. Heath started.

"Eh? Oh!" he exclaimed. "I—I beg your pardon!"

"There will be difficulties," repeated Plessigny.

"I—I don't understand you!"

"My dear sir, you must surely realise that it is impossible for you to sell such a diamond as this without a good deal of trouble."

"Why should there be any trouble?" asked Mr. Heath. "Can't I take the stone up to a diamond merchant in Hatton Garden? He will pay me the correct price, according to market value——"

"Dear me! I am afraid your ignorance on these matters is quite appalling," interrupted the count, shaking his head. "You cannot go to a diamond merchant as you mentioned, and sell the stone to him without any trouble."

"Why not?"

"Because, my dear friend, diamond merchants are very cautious people," said the count smoothly. "The instant you produced this stone, you would be asked where you obtained it from—a dealer would want to know its origin. And this applies more particularly in the case of a big diamond such as the one in my hand."

"Well, of course, I shall explain that I found it," said Mr. Heath. "Won't that be satisfactory?"

His companion smiled.

"I am afraid not," he said quietly.

"But it is the truth!"

"No doubt," returned the count. "But the truth may not sound—well, plausible. In fact, any diamond merchant would be highly suspicious."

"Suspicious?"

"Not only that, but I can safely promise you he would inform the police," proceeded Plessigny. "In fact, my dear sir, within an hour, you would be placed under lock and key—and your position would be most awkward."

Mr. Heath was startled—indeed, staggered.

"I should be arrested!" he gasped. "But—but what for?"

"Because you are what you are—an undermaster in a school," replied the count. "How is it that you—a poor man—should be in possession of such an extraordinary diamond? You found it? So! But would that story be believed? I seriously fear not. In consequence, you would be suspected of being in unlawful possession of the stone—and, once in the hands of the police, you would find it difficult to get out."

"Oh, but that's grossly unfair——"

"I am not discussing fairness or unfairness," interrupted the count, smiling. "I am simply telling you what will probably happen if you attempt to sell the diamond. However, there is no need for you to worry. I think I can help you."

"Really?" said Mr. Heath eagerly. "This is awfully good——"

"Tut—tut!" said Plessigny, shaking his head. "Anything I can do for you, my dear sir, will never repay the debt which I owe you. I am in a different position to your own. I am influential, and I can get things accomplished which would be impossible to one in your circumstances. To be quite frank, I suggest that you should have the diamond faced and polished to begin with. When that is accomplished there would be far more chance of selling it."

"But how can this work be done?" inquired Mr. Heath.

"I will attend to it personally."

"But I could not think of troubling you——"

"So?" smiled the count. "My dear young sir, you must not think it will be any trouble to me. On the contrary, it will give me great delight to be of any assistance. Once the diamond is cut—that is to say, faced and polished, there will be much more likelihood of its being readily sold."

"This is very good of you," said Mr. Heath gratefully.

"Not at all," declared his host. "Of course, if you do not care to trust the diamond with me, I will——"

"Please stop!" interrupted the Remove master. "I am quite certain that the diamond will be safe in your keeping, sir. I am really overwhelmed with gratitude for your assistance. I know very little about these matters—and you know much. I shall want to repay you for your time and trouble—but I fear

that I shall insult you if I suggest that you should take a share of the sale."

The count smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I am in no need of money," he said. "I have plenty. Why should I take from you an amount which is a mere trifle to me. No, sir; what I am doing is being done in the faint hope that I may be able to discharge a portion of the debt I owe you."

Mr. Heath was completely enraptured by the count's charming manner. He deemed his host the best fellow in the world—a true example of nature's gentlemen. And when Mr. Heath took his departure, he felt that he was treading on air.

The diamond was real, and he was to reap the profit of the sale!"

It seemed too wildly lucky to be true—but there was no doubt about the thing. It was a dead cert., and Mr. Heath simply bubbled with joy. All his troubles would soon be over, and he would be rich.

Meanwhile, the Comte de Plessigny was alone in his magnificent library. He was still sitting down; but now he lolled back among the cushions of his easy-chair, wreathes of smoke curling up from his cigar.

"Excellent!" he murmured. "Really, most excellent!"

He chuckled quietly, placed the diamond on his knee, and eyed it with extreme satisfaction. He rubbed his hands together, and seemed to be tremendously elated. Somehow, it did not seem that the count had promised to help Mr. Clement Heath out of sheer good nature!

There was something else behind it—but what?

CHAPTER IV.

THE LITTLE COTTAGE AT EDGEMORE.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was acting mysteriously.

Mr. Heath had been gone some time, and, Handforth judged, was in Bannington by this time. The evening was dull but fine. Heavy banks of thick clouds hung in the sky, making the twilight more advanced.

It was, in fact, quite dim as Handforth moved across the Triangle. There were very few juniors about, and just at the moment the Triangle appeared to be deserted. And Handforth was apparently anxious of getting out without being seen.

"I say, Handy!"

Handforth turned round, frowning. That call was most unwelcome, for it came from his own study window. And he saw that Church was leaning out.

"Half a minute, old son!" shouted Church.

"Can't stop!" said Handforth shortly.

Church jumped out of the window and ran to his leader.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"What idea?"

"Why, you haven't been back to the study yet; you haven't started your prep., and all sorts of things," said Church. "What was wrong with you before you took that pen back to Heath's study?"

"Nothing," said Handforth curtly.

"Oh, no! You only went off your rocker."

"If you're looking for a fat ear you've only got to say so!" roared Handforth, in an unexpected outburst. "Clear off! I don't want to speak to you now; I don't want to speak to anybody. Leave me alone!"

"You're going out, aren't you?" asked Church, backing away slightly.

"Mind your own business!"

"My hat, you seem to be pretty ratty!"

"That's because you keep poking your nose into affairs that don't concern you," snapped Handforth. "It's a pity if I can't move about without you following me everywhere! Rats to you! Go and eat coke!"

"But—but we might be able to help!" exclaimed Church, swallowing his growing wrath. "If there's anything wrong Handy, I would like to lend a hand. You seem to be a bit bowled over by that fountain-pen, and we can't understand it."

"And I don't suppose you ever will!" said Handforth tartly. "Can't I be bowled over now without you butting in?" he roared. "Can't I be surprised at something? I've never seen such inquisitive bounders in all my life!"

He turned away and strode off across the Triangle in the direction of the playing-fields. Church was left staring

Inch by inch Sir Edward Handforth was lugged out of the sand.

after him with clenched fists. For once Church felt that he would like to give his leader one terrific punch on the nose, and if Handforth had remained he would probably have received that punch.

"Mad!" sad Church hotly. "Absolutely dotty!"

He strode back into the Ancient House with fierce footsteps and told himself that he didn't care a rap what Handy did, or where he went. But, as a matter of fact, he was extremely curious regarding his leader.

In the meantime Handforth was still acting strangely. Having reached the playing-fields he dodged back, slipped along under cover of the hedge, and reached the lane. He seemed particularly anxious to avoid being seen; he wanted to keep his movements secret.

He ran down the lane quickly and soon arrived at the stile.

Then, with a quick glance to right and left, he leapt over the stile and raced through the wood at top speed, as though it were a matter of life or death. Hot, breathless, and untidy, he arrived in the hamlet of Edgemore.

He went straight to Greyhurst Cottage.

The dusk was now very deep and a light was gleaming in one of the lower windows of the cottage. Handforth watched from behind the cover of the hedge and cooled down somewhat. But he was impatient.

Certainly there was nothing to be seen which aroused his suspicions. It was this cottage that Mr. Heath visited so frequently. Handforth had believed the new master to be the head of a gang of forgers, and had been quite certain in his own mind that the cottage contained a plant for manufacturing false currency notes.

Mr. Heath's movements had certainly been suspicious. When he visited the cottage by daylight—and he frequently did on half-holiday—he took the precaution to slightly disguise himself.

This, in itself, was a suspicious action.

But Handforth did not appear to be thinking about Mr. Heath now. His sole attention was centred upon the cottage, and for some moments he stood there, apparently trying to make up his mind.

Finally he did so, and clenched his fists with determination.

"Yes, by George," he muttered grimly, "I'll chance it!"

He walked to the gate, opened it, and strode boldly up the little path, and arrived at the door. Having made up his mind he did not hesitate. He seized the knocker and brought it down hard in a series of sharp raps.

Handforth was trembling slightly with excitement. After a brief wait the door opened and a bent old man was revealed. He was a curious-looking old fellow, with rounded shoulders and a straggling beard.

"Well?" he asked wheezily. "Who is it—— Lor' sakes!"

He uttered the last exclamation in a tone of astonishment and something like fear. He was staring at Handforth's cap, a prominent advertisement that the visitor had come from St. Frank's.

"Get ye away from here," he said sharply.

"Hold on!" said Handforth. "I'm not going away yet."

"Young man, if you don't go I'll shut the door——"

"I'm not going to stand any rot from you!" interrupted Handforth gruffly. "Go inside and give this message: 'Fountain-pen; twenty; pearls; elephant.' Say those words, and nothing more."

The old man looked at Handforth suspiciously.

"I don't rightly understand," he said.

"Yes, you do," exclaimed Handforth. "Repeat what I told you."

"Fountain-pen; twenty; pearls; elephant!" said the old fellow.

"That's right," said Handforth. "Just deliver that message."

The old man shook his head doubtfully, and he did not seem to be at all comfortable. However, he withdrew, and closed the door securely, leaving Handforth cooling his heels on the step.

The junior stamped up and down impatiently.

Then the door opened again and the old man stood aside.

"Come ye in, young gent," he said shortly.

Handforth started, took a deep breath, and went in.

The door closed quietly.

What did it mean? What was the explanation of all this mystery?

Half an hour later, at St. Frank's, Church and McClure were mooching up and down the Triangle, both of them

looking disconsolate and somewhat anxious. It was nearly supper-time and practically dark. Handforth had not returned, and there was no sign of him. His chums had searched not only the whole Ancient House, but they had looked over the grounds.

"He's buzzed off somewhere," said Church. "I know he had some queer idea in his head when he had that row with me. I wouldn't mind betting a quid he's gone to Greyhurst Cottage, on Heath's track!"

"I'm fed up with his silly detective wheezes," growled McClure. "It's about time he learned more sense. I'm blessed if I can make him out."

"Ever since he saw that fountain-pen he's been off his rocker," declared Church. "I didn't know that a fountain-pen could turn anybody dotty!"

"I wouldn't mind a bit, only I'm afraid he'll get into some sort of trouble," said McClure anxiously. "You know what a ram-headed ass he is. There you are—the bell for supper!"

"And no sign of Handy," grunted Church.

They went in for supper, but during the meal there was no appearance on Handforth's part. Several juniors wanted to know where the leader of Study D was, but Church and McClure could not tell them."

Supper over, they went straight to Study D, and found that apartment empty and dark. Handforth had not returned.

"I say, this is a bit serious," remarked Church. "If the ass doesn't get back before bedtime he'll be in for a terrific row."

"He deserves it."

"Very likely, but I'm a bit concerned," said Church. "Let's go out into the Triangle and see if there's any sign of him."

They went, but there was no sign whatever.

The minutes passed slowly, and the two anxious juniors walked about aimlessly, glancing at the clock every now and again, and asking everybody they saw if Handforth had been seen.

But all their inquiries were useless, and at last they were compelled to think about going indoors. It would be bedtime in four minutes, and they did not see why they should get into trouble on account of their leader.

"Come on!" said McClure at last. "Let's go indoors; it's bedtime."

"Wait a tick," said Church. "I thought I saw——"

He stared searchingly into the gloom.

"By jingo," he exclaimed, "here he is!"

Handforth came running breathlessly across the Triangle, having just slipped over the wall from the lane. He ran right into his chums before he knew they were there, and pulled up short.

"Where the dickens have you been all this time?" demanded Church.

Handforth could not speak for a moment. He was hot, breathless, and perspiring freely. His eyes were gleaming with a strange light—a light which his chums had not seen there before. It was like a glow of triumph.

"It's not bedtime yet, then?" he panted.

"About another minute," said Church.

"Good!"

"But you've missed supper, and we've been searching for you everywhere," said McClure. "Where on earth have you been to?"

"I've been out!"

"We know that, you fathead! But where——"

"I can't answer any questions," said Handforth firmly.

His chums stared.

"Do you mean to say that you won't explain?" demanded Church warmly.

"Yes, I do!"

"You—you silly ass," snapped Church, "we've been nearly off our heads worrying about you!"

"That was your own fault," said Handforth heartlessly. "I didn't ask you to worry!"

"But—but we want to know what you've been doing," said McClure. "It's all rot to say that you won't explain."

Handforth set his teeth.

"I'm awfully sorry, and all the rest of it, but it can't be helped. "I can't tell you where I've been, or what I've been doing. It's a secret——"

"A—a secret?"

"Yes."

"But we've never had any secrets in Study D," said Church. "We've always been open, and had confidence in one another. You're not going to start being secretive now, I suppose?"

"I can't help it."

"That's all rot," interrupted

McClure. "You can help it. If you want to tell us where you've been you can do so!"

"All right, then," said Handforth grimly, "I won't tell you!"

His chums regarded him with anger and indignation.

"We don't want to be told where you've been," said Church. "We can guess that; you've been to Greyhurst Cottage."

"You blessed spies!" exclaimed Handforth hotly. "You followed me!"

"Ah, I was right, then!" said Church. "As it happens, we didn't follow you at all. But we know now. Why did you go to the cottage? And why won't you tell us anything about it? What did you see there?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

"You—you rotter!" burst out McClure. "The first time you really find something out you keep it to yourself. After all the times you've dragged us out when we didn't want to go it's only right that you should tell us——"

Clang! clang!

"Bedtime!" said Handforth briskly. "We can't jaw any more now!"

He hurried into the Ancient House, very pleased with the excuse to get away from his chums' awkward questioning. Church and McClure gazed after him, and then gazed at one another.

Speech at that moment was totally inadequate.

CHAPTER V.

DEALING WITH THE PATER.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST surveyed the sky contentedly.

"Ripping day, dear old boys," he observed. "I'm rather surprised—I am, really. It generally turns out frightfully wet on a half-holiday."

It was Wednesday morning, and the sky was clear and blue, with only a few fleecy white clouds here and there. The sun was shining down in a blaze of glory, and the view from the Remove dormitory window was highly pleasing.

"Just come right for our match this afternoon," I said. "The ground will be in perfect condition, and we ought to whack the River House into fits."

"There's no question about it," said Watson. "River House is only a small place, and their team isn't any better than the Third here. We shall wipe them completely up to-day."

"It's better not to be too sure," I said. "Still, I think we shall manage the trick all right. I'm giving some of the reserve chaps a trial, and they'll have a chance to prove what they can do."

Everybody was in a good humour.

After the rain of Monday and the dullness of Tuesday it was extremely welcome to find Wednesday a fine, brilliant day. There was every indication of the weather lasting, too, for the barometer was high.

"Handy was right," remarked Church, as he and McClure strolled out into the Triangle before breakfast.

"Right about what?" asked the other junior.

"The weather," said Church. "He reckoned it would be a fine day to-day, and I was expecting it to pour in torrents. It was only a guess, of course. I wonder what's come over the silly ass?"

It was not of much use appealing to McClure, for McClure was as much in the dark as Church. They had had no opportunity of continuing their discussion of the night before with their leader.

He had taken care to mix with the other fellows while undressing, and in the morning he had got up and dressed before the rising-bell went. Now he was on the other side of the Triangle, pacing up and down with his hands deep in his pockets.

"What's struck Handy?" inquired Pitt, grinning.

"Goodness knows!" exclaimed Church. "He's been like this since tea-time yesterday. There's something wrong somewhere, and it seems that a fountain-pen started it."

Reginald Pitt stared.

"A fountain-pen?" he repeated.

Church explained, and Pitt shook his head.

"Looks like a case of lunacy," he remarked. "No sane chap would go dotty about a fountain-pen. I expect the explanation is that Handy thought he'd got hold of a clue, and just at present he's in the throes of deduction. He's elucidating the problem, and his great mind is working overtime."

Church and McClure hardly knew what to think, and they were somewhat upset. Ever since they had been to St.

Frank's they had been Handforth's twin shadows. Where he went they went.

They had quarrelled, on the average, about six times a day—rows in Study D were merely a matter of custom. But, at the same time, the three juniors were absolutely inseparable, and, in spite of their constant disagreements, were attached to one another. Therefore, Church and McClure were worried because Handforth was showing signs of leaving his faithful followers in the lurch.

They, at all events, were not content to let matters rest.

They crossed over to their leader, and stood in front of his path. Handforth was so engrossed in his thoughts that he did not notice them, and he ran full tilt into Church.

"Look where you're going!" he snapped, glaring. "Oh, it's you! Can't you two chaps leave me alone? What's the idea of following me about like a couple of beastly shadows? Clear off!"

"My hat!" said Church. "He's just as bad as he was last night! I say, Handy, can't you explain to us——"

"No, I can't!" roared Handforth violently.

"Keep your hair on! Don't bite us!" said McClure. "If you like to have secrets, you're welcome to 'em! But I suppose you know that everybody is talking about you?"

"Eh?" Handforth started. "What's that?"

"I suppose you realise that you're making yourself the talk of the Ancient House?" asked McClure. "Everybody can see that you're moony, and that there's something wrong. Some of the chaps reckon that you've fallen in love ——"

"What!" bawled Handforth, flaring up. "Who said that?"

McClure backed away.

"I can't give any names," he said. "But it's a fact that you've been acting so jolly queerly that the chaps are talking."

Handforth clenched his fists.

"If I hear any talk, there'll be some nose-punching!" he said grimly. "And, what's more, if you fellows don't leave me alone, I'll start on you! I've never known such inquisitive rotters in all my life!"

"Oh, leave him alone!" said Church, with a sigh. "He's hopeless!"

And it certainly seemed that Handforth was. Talking to him was no better than talking to one of the gateposts. And when he went in to breakfast there was considerable trouble in the lobby.

Hubbard and Owen major genially inquired about Handforth's health, and asked when he was likely to be taken away. Pitt added to this by suggesting that the leader of Study D would be quietly removed in a closed carriage, with padded sides.

The result was somewhat disastrous.

Owen major and Hubbard entered the breakfast-room with visible signs of conflict. Hubbard's nose was much larger than its original size, and Owen major's left eye was in an extremely puffy condition.

No other juniors thought it necessary to inquire about Handforth's well-being, and it was generally accepted that he was dotty. And, certainly, his behaviour gave rise to this supposition.

Even during morning lessons he was different.

Mr. Heath found it necessary to inflict two doses of lines, and, after that, a dose of the cane.

The effect it had upon Handforth was nil.

Strangely enough, he was quite genial towards Mr. Heath. He no longer regarded the Remove-master with open hostility, as had been his custom hitherto. And when dinner-time came he marched straight to Study D, and sat in the easy chair.

Church and McClure followed him there, and regarded him with mixed feelings.

"Well, I must say that you're the limit," said Church. "If you wouldn't tell us where you went last night, you might act like a rational human being now. I can't understand why——"

Church did not wait to say any more. Handforth had sprung to his feet, and was tearing off his jacket. Church and McClure fled, and did not venture to enter Study D again until dinner was over.

Handforth had eaten very little dinner. He had left half his first course, much to the satisfaction of Fatty Little, who was only too willing to assist. And Fatty eyed Handforth's plate anxiously when it came to the sweet.

Edward Oswald did not seem to care for the currant pudding, and after one

or two mouthfuls he pushed his plate away. Five seconds later the pudding was transferred on to Fatty's plate, and there was an expression of blissful satisfaction upon the fat junior's face.

"I think it must be love, after all!" said Church, afterwards. "Chaps don't usually lose their appetites unless they're goi..g potty over a girl!"

"I'm fed up with him altogether!" said McClure. "In fact, I've a good mind to go out this afternoon, and leave him to entertain his pater alone!"

"Same here," said Church, nodding. "I'm blessed if I'm going to stop here to be snapped at and punched and goodness knows what else! What train is Sir Edward coming down by?"

"The early one, I think," replied McClure. "It gets in at half-past two, and he'll be here just before three."

It was after two already, and Handforth had gone to Study D, and was determined to be alone. He had locked the door, thus keeping out all intruders. But Church and McClure did not quite care for this treatment.

They were highly indignant when they found the door locked against them.

"Open this door, you ass!" shouted Church.

"Rats! Go away!"

"We're coming into this study!" roared Church.

"No, you're not!" said Handforth, from the other side of the door. "I want to be alone, and I'm jolly well going to be alone. I don't want you chaps to come bothering about when you're not wanted."

Church and McClure gazed at one another furiously.

"I want my strawyard!" roared McClure.

"You can't have it!"

And, although the two juniors shouted themselves hoarse, Handforth positively refused to open the door. Finally, after a great expenditure of hot words, Church and McClure sallied out into the Triangle.

The window of Study D was open, and they noted this fact.

Less than a minute later they jumped through—before Handforth could stop them. He was sitting in the easy chair, gazing dreamily at the ceiling. But he turned round fiercely as he heard the commotion.

"You—you rotters!" he bellowed. "I'll——"

"For goodness' sake, don't start now!" said Church hurriedly. "We don't want to hear any explanations; we won't ask any questions! We realise that you're off your rocker—I mean, we know that you're determined."

"I am!" said Handforth. "Well?"

"There's no reason why we shouldn't be pally," went on Church. "Dash it all, there's no fun in snapping our heads off all the time! We want to be particularly chummy this afternoon, too—for the sake of appearances."

"What appearances?"

"Well, your pater might not like it——"

Handforth staggered.

"My—my pater!" he gasped faintly. "What's to-day?"

"Wednesday, you ass!"

"Great pip!" said Handforth, with an expression of utter dismay in his face. "And—and the pater's coming down! He'll—he'll see——"

"He'll see what?"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Handforth, grabbing at his watch. "Why, the train comes in in less than ten minutes! He'll come up here, and—and—— But he mustn't come! Understand? My pater mustn't come to St. Franks!"

The other two juniors were freshly astonished. This was a new development, and it was almost time to seriously believe that Handforth was not quite right in the head. Surely he could have no earthly reason for keeping his father away from the school?

"But you can't keep your pater away!" gasped Church. "We arranged to have a special spread for tea, and you're going to—— Hold on, you ass! What's the matter with you? Where are you off to?"

But Handforth had gone.

He raced across the Triangle, and his chums, after a brief pause, pelted after him. They arrived at the gateway in time to see their leader dashing down the dusty lane in the hot sunshine.

"Oh, he's mad!" said Church faintly.

Just for a moment he and McClure were inclined to let their leader rip. But then they felt that he was in need of them, and, without thinking the matter over thoroughly, they rushed off in pursuit.

But they did not catch Handforth up until the High Street was reached, and then they were too breathless to ask any question. They could only race along

with Handforth, and hope that he would slacken speed.

He didn't. In fact, he increased his speed—and the reason was obvious. The train was just steaming into the station, and Handforth and Co. dashed upon the platform as it came to a standstill.

Dripping with perspiration, Handforth gazed wildly up and down.

"There he is!" he panted huskily.

He made a dash for a first-class compartment, and reached it just in time to prevent his father stepping out on to the platform. Handforth literally threw himself into the compartment, forcing his father backwards precipitately.

"Good gracious! What is the matter with you, Edward?" demanded Handforth senior. "I am pleased to see you, but there is no need to rush at me——"

"It's topping of you to come down, dad!" gulped out Handforth, grabbing his father, and shaking his hand feverishly. "I didn't think you'd come down until the next train—— I—I mean I thought you were coming down by this train!"

"My dear boy, you seem to be strangely excited——"

"That's because you're here, pater," said Handforth hurriedly. "The fact is, I'm so terrifically pleased that I don't know what to say! I've run all the way from the school to welcome you! These chaps here are my chums! Come in, you asses! Don't stand there on the platform! Shake my pater's fist!"

Church and McClure crowded into the compartment, being too bewildered and breathless to do anything else.

Sir Edward Handforth could hardly get a word in edgeways. He was an elderly replica of his son—a big, burly kind of man, with a genial, rugged countenance. At the moment he was looking angry and impatient.

"Are you insane, Edward?" he rapped out curtly. "The train will go off in less than a minute, and yet you act in this absurd fashion——"

"Plenty of time, pater!" gasped Handforth, still pumping his father's arm, as though he were anxious to dislocate it. "You don't know how pleased I am to see you! It's simply splendid of you to come down, dad! We're going to have a special tea, and you'll be able to see the cricket match, and I don't think it'll rain! In fact, we're going to have a fine time——"

"Edward!" roared Handforth senior.

"The fact is, pater, I'm so delighted that I can't say enough!" went on Handforth, pushing his father back, and seizing his handbag. "I'll carry this for you! It doesn't matter a bit about ——"

"Hallo!" said Church. "The train's going!"

"You infernal young idiot!" bellowed Sir Edward. "Clear the way, you boys! Jump out now, while you have time——"

"My hat!" said Handforth, startled. "I'll open the door!"

He blundered forward, tripped over McClure, and grabbed wildly at Church, as the latter was about to open the door. By the time they had sorted themselves out, the train was going altogether too fast to admit of any jumping off. And Sir Edward was simply purple in the face with rage.

Handforth flopped down into a seat—his object achieved. Church and McClure were duly amazed. They were too hot and tired and breathless to say anything, and were extremely grateful for the rest. They could only dimly wonder why Handforth had adopted this extraordinary course.

Sir Edward glared at his son ferociously.

"I always thought you were a young idiot, Edward; but I never thought you to be capable of such imbecility as this!" he thundered. "You have prevented me from alighting by your preposterous behaviour——"

"Don't get ratty, pater," said Handforth. "I'm frightfully sorry! I—I didn't realise what—— I—I mean we can easily get out at Caistowe; it's the next station. We can have a jaw there, just the same."

"Is there a train back?" demanded his father hotly.

"Not for hours!"

"Rats!" said Church. "There's one back at half-past four."

Handforth looked as though he'd like to eat his chum.

"Half-past four!" snapped Sir Edward. "That's late enough, in all conscience! We shall be compelled to cool our heels in that infernal place for over an hour and a half! What is the meaning of it, you young scamps?"

"Don't make a fuss, dad," said Handforth. "These things do happen sometimes! Caistowe's a ripping place, and we can take a stroll on the beach.

Couldn't be a better day for being at the seaside."

"I didn't come here to be at the seaside," snapped Sir Edward. "I came to see you at St. Frank's."

He was still very angry, and he glared out of the window at the passing countryside as though he owed it a grudge. Handforth winked feverishly at his chums, and they tried to understand. They only dimly realised that their leader had some wild-cat scheme for keeping his father away from the school.

"I suppose I must make the best of a bad job," said Sir Edward gruffly. "After all, you only acted in that way because you were so pleased to see me. Well, we must come back from Caistowe by the first available train."

"Oh, there's no need for that, sir!" said Handforth. "We can spend a fine time on the beach, and have tea in a restaurant. Then you'll have nice time to catch the last train—the express—back, for London."

"I have no intention whatever of remaining in Caistowe until the last train leaves for London," said Sir Edward firmly. "I have certain business to discuss with Dr. Stafford. Furthermore, I came to see you at the school—and not the seaside! What is the matter with you, Edward? You seem to be strangely excited!"

Handforth shook his head.

"No, I'm not, pater," he said. "At least, only because you've come down! It's so splendid to have you here, you know."

"Huh!" It seems that you did not care particularly to have me at St. Frank's!" exclaimed Handforth senior, with uncomfortable correctness. "Is this some mad scheme of yours, my lad?"

"Mad scheme?" echoed Handforth innocently. "Why, pater, what rot!"

"Don't you dare to speak to me in that fashion——"

"I—I mean, what a queer idea!" said Handforth hastily. "I'm tremendously pleased to see you, and I want to ask you about all sorts of things. I want to know if you've heard anything about Edith——"

"That is one reason why I came down—to talk to you about your sister," said Sir Edward. "Both your mother and I are extremely worried, and——" Sir Edward paused, and glared at Church and McClure. "But we will say no more!" he added.

"These chaps are my chums, sir," said Handforth. "They know all about it!"

"Oh, do they?" said Handforth senior. "You had no right whatever to talk about our private family affairs to these boys."

"But they're my own pals, sir——"

"I am well aware of that, and I will say no more about the matter," exclaimed Sir Edward. "Since they know all, we may as well speak: Your sister acted absolutely against the wishes of your mother and myself. However, we freely forgive her, and we are now doing our utmost to discover her whereabouts."

"Don't you know where she is, dad?"

"Of course we do not," said Handy's father. "She ran off with Kirby, got married the same day, and they have eluded us ever since. One reason I came down to-day is because I have an idea that you might know something."

"Me?" said Handforth ungrammatically.

"You mentioned that you had received a letter from Edith——"

"That's right, dad; but she didn't give any information," said Handforth. "She simply told me that she was as happy as a lark, and that everything was all serene. She didn't give the faintest inkling of her whereabouts."

"What was the postmark?"

"London."

"Huh! An exact replica of the letter we received," growled Sir Edward. "I was hoping that you might know more——"

"Here we are, at Caistowe," interrupted Handforth.

They tumbled out on to the platform, and Sir Edward followed more sedately. The afternoon was glorious, and they could see the sea quite distinctly, as they passed out of the booking-office.

"One moment," said Handforth senior. "I'll just inquire about the trains back. Perhaps there is one which leaves earlier."

He left the trio, and went to the ticket-office. Handforth seized his two chums, and gazed at them excitedly.

"This is about the only minute we shall have to ourselves!" he hissed. "Listen!"

"What's the idea of——"

"Don't jaw—listen!" exclaimed

Handforth quickly. "I've got an idea to keep the pater here. He mustn't go back to the school—understand?"

"But why mustn't he go back——"

"Don't ask silly questions!" said Handforth fiercely. "Listen to this!"

He talked rapidly, and the trio entered into a dark conspiracy. Church and McClure were rather staggered, but they understood the plan, briefly told as it was.

"Are you game?" Handforth concluded. "Will you help?"

"Yes, of course, but——"

"Shush!"

Sir Edward was just coming back, and further conversation was impossible. Church and McClure had loyally agreed to back their leader up. They positively thought that he was out of his mind, but it would have been treachery to give him away to his father. The only thing to do was to help Handforth in his wild plan.

"You're quite right!" said Sir Edward irritably. "There's no train back until four-thirty, and it's now ten minutes to three. A confounded nuisance, but it can't be helped."

"Well, let's go down to the beach, dad," said Handforth.

His father was not averse to the idea. Something had to be done to spend the time, and there was no reason why a blow on the beach should not be indulged in. So the quartette went down to the seashore.

It was certainly very pleasant on the sands. The heat did not seem so overpowering—for the afternoon was undoubtedly a very warm one. A fresh breeze was blowing in from the bay, and the waves sparkled deliciously.

"H'm! It was rather a good idea of yours to come down," admitted Sir Edward, as he stood with the sea almost lapping his feet. "It's a confounded nuisance about chairs, however. There's nothing to sit down on——"

"The sand's quite dry, sir," said Church.

"Why didn't you take me to the other part of the beach—over there?" asked Sir Edward. "I think I can see some deck chairs there."

He pointed round the bay, and the juniors looked. As a matter of fact, Church and McClure had been wondering why their leader had brought them to this particular spot. At least, they had wondered until they remembered the scheme which he was bent upon putting into practice.

Caistowe was a comparatively small place, but, at this season of the year, it enjoyed a certain reputation as a resort. There were one or two big hotels further along, and there was a pier, with a band upon it.

But this was in the other bay, round the headland. Where Handforth and Co. were standing, everything was quiet and deserted. There was hardly another soul on the whole stretch of beach; no deck chairs, no stalls, and, in fact, nothing of any note. There was not even a bathing machine. One or two private tents were perched back against the cliff, but nothing else.

"It's better here," said Handforth. "I thought you'd enjoy it more than being among the crowd. Why not go out into the bay, dad? There are one or two boats here, and we can have a nice row. It's fine on the water."

Sir Edward eyed the boats doubtfully.

"Can you use the oars?" he asked.

Handforth laughed.

"Of course I can, pater," he said.

Sir Edward was rather dubious; but, after a little persuasion, he consented to take a row into the bay, with Handforth at the oars. Church and McClure decided to have a bathe while this was going on.

Sir Edward seemed to enjoy himself, and his good humour returned. By the time he was right out in the bay he was satisfied that Handforth could row properly, and he felt secure. Church and McClure, by this time, were in the water.

Within easy reach of the boat, a rocky spur jutted out of the water. It was rugged and bare, and only a tiny place, at the best. The tide was high now, and the spur was entirely surrounded by the sea.

At low tide, as Handforth knew well enough, the spur was joined to the beach by a long strip of sand, and it was easy enough to walk out to the rocks. At high water the place became an island.

"Supposing we land for a bit?" suggested Handforth carelessly.

He did not wait for his father to consent, or to refuse. He pulled for the rocks, and a minute or two later they had both landed, and Sir Edward looked about him with interest.

"I suppose we shall be all right for that train?" he inquired.

"Oh, heaps of time!" said Handforth. "We shall be able to—— Good heavens! Look there!"

Sir Edward was startled, and he looked round. Church and McClure were in the water some distance away, but Church was apparently in difficulties. He was flinging up his hands, and shouting for help.

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Handforth. "He's sinking! Thank Heaven we've got the boat here! I shall just be in time!"

He dashed into the boat, careless of his father's shouts. A minute later Handforth was pulling away from the little island, leaving Sir Edward marooned! The scheme was working well!

Handforth senior could not very well object, for he really thought that his son was going to Church's assistance. He stood watching anxiously. He saw the boat reach Church; he saw Handforth and McClure haul their chum into the boat. Then it was rowed quickly to the shore, and Church was pulled out.

Artificial respiration was tried, and then the two juniors carried their chum behind some rocks. Sir Edward, by this time, was quite concerned. He certainly did not realise that any trickery was afoot.

Meanwhile, Church was sitting up, quite recovered.

"Now, you silly ass, what's the idea?" he demanded.

"You did the trick fine," said Handforth. "I even thought you were sinking in reality, for a tick! The pater must have been diddled properly."

"But what's the idea of it?" asked Church bluntly.

"I can't tell you," declared Handforth. "I've got a particular reason—and that'll have to be enough. My dad mustn't go to St. Frank's to-day—that's all. And don't let him catch any sight of you, or he'll suspect the truth."

Meanwhile, Sir Edward was fuming. The minutes passed, and still there was no sign whatever of his son. He had lost sight of Handforth and Co. completely, and they had apparently forgotten all about him.

After half an hour had elapsed, Sir Edward was positively red in the face with impatience and anxiety and anger. He was on that little rock, unable to get off, and it was impossible to signal to anybody—for there was nobody within signalling distance. All he could do was to wait for Handforth to return with the boat.

But Handforth did not return.

An hour elapsed, and still there was no sign. The train back to St. Frank's was lost, and Sir Edward was nearly ready to tear his hair. The tide went down, and, at last, there were signs of the wet sand. Twenty minutes later there was a distinct strip leading to the shore, and Sir Edward worked his way round, and eyed it doubtfully.

The sand was wet, but it looked solid enough. And the marooned man would, at least, be able to get to the mainland. He assumed that Handforth and McClure had rushed Church off to a doctor; but it was very thoughtless of them to forget him—Sir Edward.

"Confounded young rascals!" snapped Handforth senior.

He decided to chance it, and commenced walking ashore. But he was rather too hasty. It would have been better if he would have waited until the sand became more solid. He got halfway across all right, then he felt the sand quivering beneath his feet. It was loose, and with every step he plunged ankle deep into wet, slippery quicksand. He attempted to get back, but only made things worse. He sank deeper and deeper, and, finally, descended to his knees.

Then it was too late to extricate himself, and a terrible fear came to him that he would be swallowed up. This fear was unfounded, for the sand was not really dangerous. He was not likely to sink below his knees.

"Help! Help!" he roared.

Sir Edward really thought that the position was perilous—and Handforth allowed him to retain the delusion. For Edward Oswald came rushing up filled with assumed anxiety, and McClure was with him. Church was keeping out of the way.

"Help me out of this!" gasped the unfortunate Sir Edward. "I shall be swallowed up!"

"We'll get you out, dad!" said Handforth quickly. "McClure, rush off and get a rope. It's the only way to do it!"

McClure hurried away for a rope, and returned after an appalling lapse of time. Sir Edward had only sunk a few inches deeper. Church appeared now, and he seemed surprisingly active for a boy who had nearly been drowned.

He and his chums were standing on firm sand, and the rope was thrown to Sir Edward, and fixed about his waist. Then the juniors hauled. They tugged energetically, and inch by inch Handforth's pater was lugged out of the sand.

It was quite a comical sight, but the juniors appeared to take it quite seriously. At last Handforth senior was freed—and he was furious. He had been treated scandalously, but he had no time to say much.

It was impossible to go about with soaking legs, particularly when they were smothered with muddy sand. He had only sufficient time to rush off to a hotel, change his boots and socks, get his trousers dried and pressed, and then hurry to the station in order to catch the last express to London.

Even now he did not guess that he had been deliberately prevented from going to the school. He looked upon it as a mere matter of blundering on Handforth's part. He was angry, but there was no time to express his anger. He gasped out a few hot words as he rushed off to the station, but Handforth took no notice. The train was just in, and Sir Edward bundled into it, and was soon gone.

"Oh, my goodness!" panted Handforth, as he and his chums stood on the platform. "What a game! I thought we shouldn't manage it, you know!"

"It's been one rush from start to finish," said Church. "What your pater thinks, is more than I can imagine. You treated him shamefully!"

"I know I have," said Handforth. "But it couldn't be helped. He'll write to-morrow, and I shall be able to write back, expressing my sorrow, and all the rest of it. The main thing is that he didn't get to St. Frank's!"

"But why on earth didn't you want him to go?" asked McClure wonderingly.

"I had a good reason," replied Handforth.

And that was all his chums could get out of him. For some reason, best known to himself, he maintained a stubborn secrecy.

CHAPTER VI.

THE COUNT'S BOMBSHELL.

AFTER two days had elapsed, the Remove began to accept Handforth's changed attitude as a matter of course. Everybody noticed the difference, naturally, but it was a hopeless task to get him to explain anything. He simply refused, and the fellows got tired of asking. Personally, I was considerably interested. I made no attempt to question Handforth, but I decided to keep my eye on him.

Church and McClure had given it up as a bad job. The trio were still on very good terms, but there was a feeling of restraint in Study D. This secrecy had brought about a change in the three chums. Church and McClure kept more to themselves, and Handforth did not seem to object. Curiously enough, Handforth was quite unconscious of the fact that the fellows were noticing his behaviour.

Mr. Heath was aware of a difference in all three. Church and McClure were generally worried and irritable in class, and Handforth was absent minded. But the Remove master did not take very particular notice. As a matter of fact, he had thoughts of his own to occupy his mind.

On the third day he received a short note from the Comte de Plessigny, and that evening he went to Bannington, eager and anxious.

The count was as pleasant as usual. He took him into his library, closed the door, and invited Mr. Heath to make himself comfortable.

"You have something to tell about the diamond?" asked the visitor.

"Yes, my dear friend," said the count smoothly. "I am pleased to inform you that work has been progressing. The polishers have given me the diamond to inspect—before completing. I thought you might like to see it."

"I shall be tremendously interested," said Mr. Heath.

The count produced the diamond. It had been faced to a certain degree, and it sparkled and glittered in a truly magnificent way. There was not the slightest doubt that it was a stone of the purest water—a beautiful thing. Heath fingered it almost reverently, and he was overjoyed.

"When will it be finished—ready for sale?" he asked eagerly.

"That is one of the reasons I have asked you to come over," replied the count gravely. "I have discovered something, my dear friend, which, I am afraid, has placed you in a very awkward position."

Mr. Heath looked startled.

"I don't understand!" he said.

"I did not expect you would; but I will explain," said Plessigny, laying back in his chair, and regarding Mr. Heath closely through his monocle. "It is my habit to impart bad news bluntly, and I will do so now. So. I must inform you that this diamond is actually the property of the Marquis of Layham, and it was stolen from him five years ago."

Mr. Heath jumped out of his chair with a gasp of dismay.

"Stolen!" he ejaculated hoarsely. "Then—then——"

Words failed him. This bombshell was staggering.

"I regret that it should be necessary for me to disappoint you in this way," said the count gently. "I only discovered the truth by accident. The thief brought the diamond from London, but when he was captured by the police—near Bellton—the stone was nowhere to be found. It is clear that he concealed it in the wood—where you found it. The man was sent to penal servitude for five years."

"But—but this is terrible!" said Mr. Heath dully. "I have been counting on the money I should receive, and it all means nothing! I have no right to the stone!"

"So," agreed the count softly. "I am gravely worried, my dear sir, not only because of your disappointment, but of your perilous position."

"But—but I'm in no danger!"

The count shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid you are mistaken if you think that," he said. "This diamond has been cut—it has been faced, and you have thus made yourself open to grave suspicion. Indeed, if any word leaks out, you are in danger of arrest."

"Good heavens!"

"It is very unfortunate that the truth was not discovered earlier," continued Plessigny. "I have learned that there is a reward of five thousand pounds offered for the return of the diamond ——"

"Oh! Then I can claim it——"

"I'm afraid not."

"But why can't I?"

"Because the stone has been tampered with, and the police would require a very full explanation—an explanation which you could not give them," replied the count gravely. "In fact, if you mentioned one word of this affair to the police—or if I do so—you will undoubtedly be placed under arrest on the instant, and you will have extreme difficulty in clearing yourself. To tell you the truth, it is more than probable that you would be sent to penal servitude yourself for attempted theft!"

"Good heavens!"

"Not only that, but I, myself, will be implicated," proceeded the count. "My good nature led me to help you in this matter, and I have only succeeded in mixing myself in this trouble. The whole business is most unfortunate."

If it had been the count's intention to scare Mr. Heath, he had certainly succeeded. The young master was positively staggered by this news, and he hardly knew what to say.

"However, there is just a chance that everything may be all right even now," said the Comte de Plessigny. "I advise you to leave the stone with me for the time being, and to wait a day or two. The only solution that I can see is to lose the stone again—so that we cannot be connected with it. However, we must not do anything in a hurry. Do not worry yourself unduly, but trust in me."

Mr. Heath could hardly do anything else. He certainly did not realise that he was now in the count's power—and that the count had actually been working to this end. Mr. Heath was deluded completely.

He took his departure, nervous and worried.

And Plessigny chuckled afresh, and genially murmured to himself that his dupe was nearly ready for the test. Evidently the Comte de Plessigny had not finished with the master of the Remove!

But perhaps the count himself would not have been quite so confident if he had been aware of the fact that a grim shadow was lurking in his wooded garden—a shadow which somehow seemed to bear a striking resemblance to —Nelson Lee!

CHAPTER VII.

A RIFT IN THE LUTE.

HANDFORTH had completely dropped all interest in the movements of Mr. Clement Heath. He never thought of going on Mr. Heath's track, and he never suggested embarking upon any detective work.

In fact, Handforth was very quiet indeed. I made a point of visiting him to ask what had changed him so much. But I might just as well have visited a gatepost. Handforth would say nothing. He even pretended to be astonished that we should think that he had changed at all.

And a night or two later, Church and McClure sprang a surprise on their leader which considerably startled him. It was just bedtime, and the trio had sallied out into the Triangle to get a few breaths of fresh air.

The night was beautiful, a full moon rising in a clear sky over the tree tops. Hardly a breath of wind stirred, and the air was delightful.

"I'll tell you what," said Church. "It's such a jolly fine night that I don't feel much like bed. What price we take a trip to Greyhurst Cottage—just to see if there's anything doing?"

"Good idea!" said McClure. "We slip away after lights-out."

Handforth started.

"Don't talk rot!" he said sharply. "You won't do anything of the sort!"

Handforth positively refused—he was distinctly alarmed at the very thought. They did their utmost to urge him to go—but he was firm.

"It's sheer rot!" he declared. "A chap goes to bed to sleep—not to prowl about in the moonlight!"

"But you often asked us to go——"

"Never mind that!" interrupted Handforth. "I've learnt more sense now. These night trips are potty. After all, it's none of our business what Mr. Heath does, and the best thing we can do is to leave things alone. Don't be such asses! There goes the bell for bed!"

Church and McClure were not only astonished, but they were enlightened. They had received positive proof that Handforth did not want them to visit Greyhurst Cottage. And, as was only natural, perhaps, they became extremely anxious to undertake the trip.

They were getting impatient, too, and soon after lights-out they slipped from their beds, got dressed, and stole out of the dormitory.

They had decided to go alone!

Unfortunately, the door clicked slightly as they passed out. Handforth usually slept heavily—but recently he had been light. And now he found himself wakeful, and sat up in bed. One glance was sufficient to tell him the truth. Church and McClure had slipped away! They had, in fact, started off for Edgemore! And their intention was to prowl about Greyhurst Cottage!

"Oh, great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth, in great alarm.

Why he should be so concerned was puzzling; but it was quite clear that he was tremendously anxious to prevent his chums from even going near the cottage. He had apparently discovered something which he was very anxious that nobody else should discover.

He hopped out of bed like a Jack-in-the-box, dashed across the dormitory, and sped down the passage. He didn't care whether he met a master or not—his sole object was to overtake his chums, and haul them back.

And he had quite forgotten the fact—or he was careless of it—that he was attired only in his pyjamas, and that his feet were bare. He arrived in Study D, and found the window slightly open—a clear indication that his chums had passed out into the Triangle by that means.

Only for a second did he hesitate.

Then he pushed the window open, jumped out, and raced across the Triangle as fast as his legs would carry him. Pebbles bit into his bare feet, but he took no notice. He reached the wall, jumped over, and landed in a bed of nettles.

He was stung, but he didn't care.

Church and McClure were just ahead—in full sight in the moonlight. Handforth rushed after them grimly.

"You—you rotters!" he panted.

Church and McClure turned, startled.

"My only sainted aunt!" gasped Church. "It's Handy!"

"You silly ass!" ejaculated McClure. "You'll catch a terrific cold! Why, you've only got your pyjamas on, and your feet are bare! Have you gone off your rocker? Supposing a master sees you——"

"Rats to the masters—rats to colds!"

snapped Handforth. "Where are you all to?"

"Greyhurst Cottage!" said Church.

"You mad asses!" shouted Handforth fiercely. "You mustn't go there! I'm jolly well not going to let you go! You'll only get into trouble! I know something about that place that I can't tell you!"

Church nodded.

"Yes, we know that," he said. "That's why we're going! We're fed up to the neck with your rotten secrecy, and we're not standing any more of it! We're going to Greyhurst Cottage to find out the truth for ourselves!"

"And if you don't like it, you can lump it!" added McClure.

"I can lump it, can I?" he roared. "If you think you're going to Greyhurst Cottage, you're mistaken. You'll come back to bed!"

"We're not standing any more of your rot!" said Church hotly. "We're fed up with you! We're tired of your tomfoolery! We're sick of your secrecy! And, if you want to know the truth, we're acting on our own in future! You can go to the dickens—and you can go and eat coke!"

It was not only insubordination, but open rebellion. Handforth had come out to prevent his chums making the trip—and he had every intention of doing so. His wrath blazed out as he listened to their hot words.

"You—you traitors!" he shouted thickly.

Handforth fairly danced.

"You've asked for it!" he said thickly. "You'll get it!"

Crash! Crash!

His fists landed out, and Church and McClure went down. But they were upon their feet again almost at once, furious. They were all furious; in fact, if the affair had not been quite so serious, it would have been ludicrous.

A terrific battle ensued, and, somehow, Handforth got the best of it. He was a tremendous fighter, and just now he was in splendid form. He hammered his chums right and left.

He hammered them so well, in fact, they were soon incapable of defending themselves.

Church possessed a black eye, a thick ear, and a bruised neck. McClure's nose was bleeding, and he possessed other injuries which were extremely painful. And Handforth still kept up the battle.

Dancing about in the moonlight, clad only in his pyjamas, he presented an extraordinary sight. But he did not care. Two or three times his chums attempted to break away—to scoot.

But he prevented these moves, and, finally, they were subdued. At any ordinary time they would have been able to defeat their leader, but just now he was unconquerable. His determination to prevent them going was strong.

"Now!" he gasped at last. "Perhaps you'll come back to bed!"

He seized them by the scruff of their necks, and forced them back into the Triangle. They were too exhausted and in too much pain to resist.

They had certainly given up all idea of venturing out on any detective work that night! Handforth went back to bed, thoroughly tired out—but he sat there, watching. And he meant to keep awake until his chums were asleep.

But they were no longer chums.

Why was he so tremendously anxious to prevent them visiting Greyhurst Cottage? What had he discovered which he feared others knowing?

The breach between the chums was destined to widen. They were now at loggerheads—openly and defiantly—and there was no telling when they would come together again. It had all happened because of Handforth's secret policy.

"What did all this mystery mean?"

And was it possible that Handforth's strange behaviour was in any way connected with Mr. Clement Heath's dealings with the Comte de Plessigny?

Those questions would probably be answered before long—the truth would come to light—and then everything would be clear.

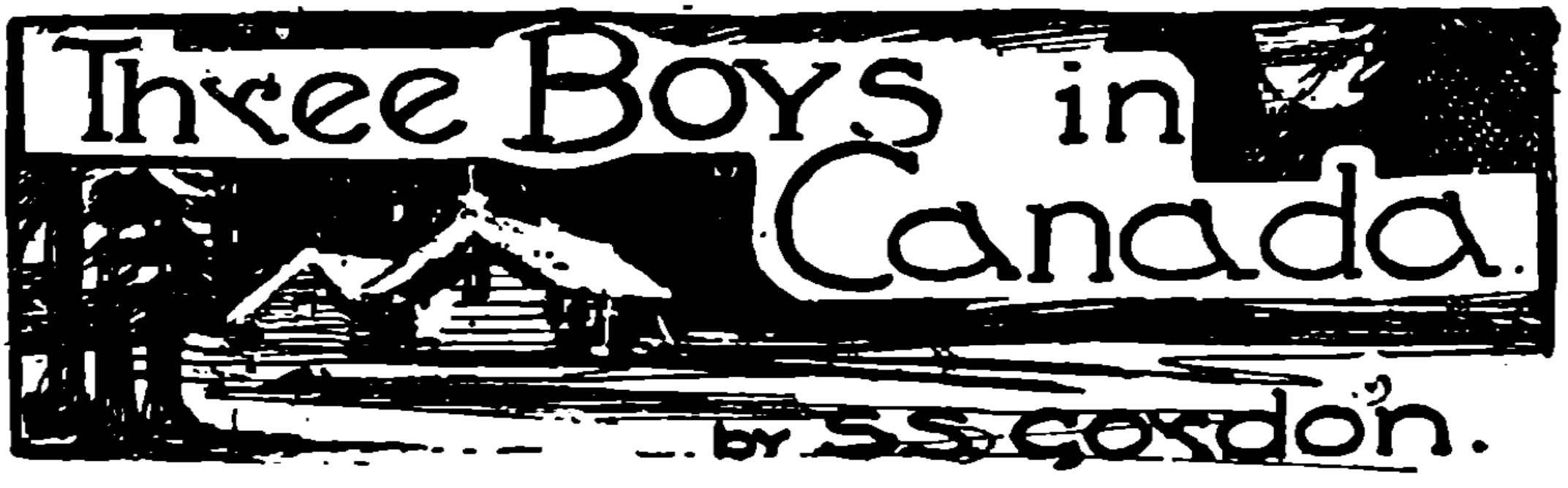
THE END.

In NEXT WEEK'S Story: "THE SPLIT IN STUDY D!"

Church and McClure act on their own and make a startling discovery.

IT IS A FIRST-RATE YARN WHICH YOU MUST NOT MISS!

YOU CAN BEGIN READING THIS SPLENDID SERIAL TO-DAY!



A Tale of Life and Adventure in the North-West.

INTRODUCTION.

Two brothers, Jack and Teddy Royce, with their chum, Gerald Telford, are trying their luck in the wilds of North-West Canada. A plan of a gold mine is stolen from them by three ruffians—Connell, Olesen and Snaith. While attempting to recover the plan Teddy and Gerald are captured by brigands.

(Now read on.)

Connell's Scheme.

"THIS Swede'll go to the help of Connell then," Gerald said; "and the cook'll not be able to handle both of them."

"H'm!" said Teddy thoughtfully. "Still, we've got ourselves to think of."

Just at that moment Snaith got his knife hand free, and the blade flashed in the firelight for a moment. The next instant it had descended, and a cry of pain broke from the cook, who took the sharp point in the shoulder.

"Hard luck!" cried Gerald. "No, old chap; we simply couldn't bolt just now. Connell's got some sort of feelings, and he's saved us, at any rate, from being killed. Wait a bit!"

And they waited, holding Olesen down, while the fight between the other two continued.

The wound in the shoulder appeared to strengthen Connell rather than weaken him. His methods of fighting were not at all sporting, perhaps. But then, the man who was striving to gain the advantage with the assistance of a knife also was not fighting in any particularly clean style.

The cook got his teeth fixed in Snaith's neck, and he worried the scoundrel like a dog. Then, all at once, they both came crashing to the ground. Connell was uppermost, and he had his knees dug well into the chest of Snaith. He also had his fingers fixed into the throat of his adversary to some purpose.

Olesen must have seen that the tide of fortune was against Snaith, for he made another attempt to go to his assistance.

"Lie still!" Teddy growled, and dealt the Swede a blow on the mouth with the back of his hand. Olesen bawled again, but ceased his struggles for a while.

"Now, Johnson," said Connell, addressing Snaith by the name most people in Canada knew him by, "just you cut this out! You've got to show a little sense. You won't, eh?" For Johnson was still struggling, tearing with his hands at the cook's hands about his throat. "All right, then!"

Down came his fist, with a crash, into Snaith's dark visage. Twice, thrice, four times the cook struck cruel, crippling blows, and each time Snaith's struggles became weaker. At length the ruffian lay quiet, and Connell ceased his punishment of him.

That the man was severely wounded was evident from the blood the boys saw oozing through his flannel shirt, above the shoulder. The man began to dab at this spot with his hand. As the boys watched him, they saw he was standing close to a flat stone embedded in the ground, and they shuddered a little as they saw the blood drip from his wound on to this.

"Shall we bunk now?" said Teddy, in a whisper.

Gerald shook his head. There was a very big strain of sentiment about Telford.

"The big Swede would kill him, if we did," he said. "Look! The man's

wounded. We'd be leaving him at the mercy of Olesen."

"Well, I'm dashed!" cried Teddy blankly. "Well, and what if we do? The cook may have saved us, but——"

But just at this point the cook came up to them. He was grimacing with pain.

"I wouldn't let 'em kill you," he said; "but don't think on that account I'm your friend! You know too much to let you go. If I wasn't so squeamish, I'd have let him do you in. But—wal, Jim Connell's kept blood off his hands so far. Still, we've got to do somethin' with ye; and I'm darned if I know what."

He looked at the recumbent Swede; then he seized Teddy by the collar, and dragged him from Olesen's stomach. He gave Telford a rough shove that sent the lad rolling from the Swede's body also.

"Say, Hank," the cook said, "I've jest about battered Sam Hill out o' Johnson, an' I'm goin' to do the same with you, unless——"

"Ach, no!" groaned the Swede, making no attempt to rise to his feet, but gazing at the cook with his little blue eyes. "Vot you do mid dese boys?"

"Wal," said the cook reflectively, "somethin's got to be done with 'em. If we let 'em go—ha, would ye?"

For, seeing there was little likelihood of a fight springing up between these two, Gerald and Teddy had, after exchanging glances, sprung to their feet and had made a dash for freedom.

Indeed, they got out of the circle of light cast by the camp-fire, and were scrambling up the slope out of this ravine in which the camp had been pitched. But that is as far as they did get, for Connell, the cook, although he refused to commit or sanction murder, was not above using other rough measures.

The cook picked up a heavy stone from the ground, and darted off after the boys. Dimly, in the starlight, the flying figures of the lads showed themselves to him.

He was a strong man, Connell, evidently. He chased them for a matter of a hundred yards, and then, all at once, he drew back his arm, and hurled his stone straight at the flying figures of the boys.

"Ah!" gasped Teddy Royce, as something deadening caught him on the ankle.

And again the luckless lad collapsed to the ground, while Telford halted.

The next moment Connell dashed up. Gerald Telford saw him coming, and pluckily closed with him.

But the man who could put Obed Snaith, knife-armed at that, out of action, was not the man a much-battered youth of eighteen, however plucky, could hold his own against. Telford's legs gave way beneath him.

The cook—he who would not sanction murder—raised the same fist that had battered Snaith unconscious, and brought it down cruelly on Gerald's upturned face. Gerald gave a shudder, his limbs quivered, and he lay quite still.

"I won't hev ye killed, but I won't let ye go back to the survey camp to blab," the man growled; then he bent over Teddy. "And what's the matter with you?"

Teddy was sitting up now, gasping with pain, nursing the ankle that the deftly thrown stone had caught.

"You—cads, all of you!" he cried. "My hat! I never knew there were such brutes in the world!"

The cook seized him by the collar, and dragged him to his feet. Teddy had to come with him. Hobbling on one leg, he accompanied Connell back to the little camp in the ravine. There the cook threw him down to the feet of Olesen, who was now sitting and staring stupidly down in to the face of Snaith, who was showing signs of returning consciousness.

"Tie that kid up, while I fetch the other one," the cook growled.

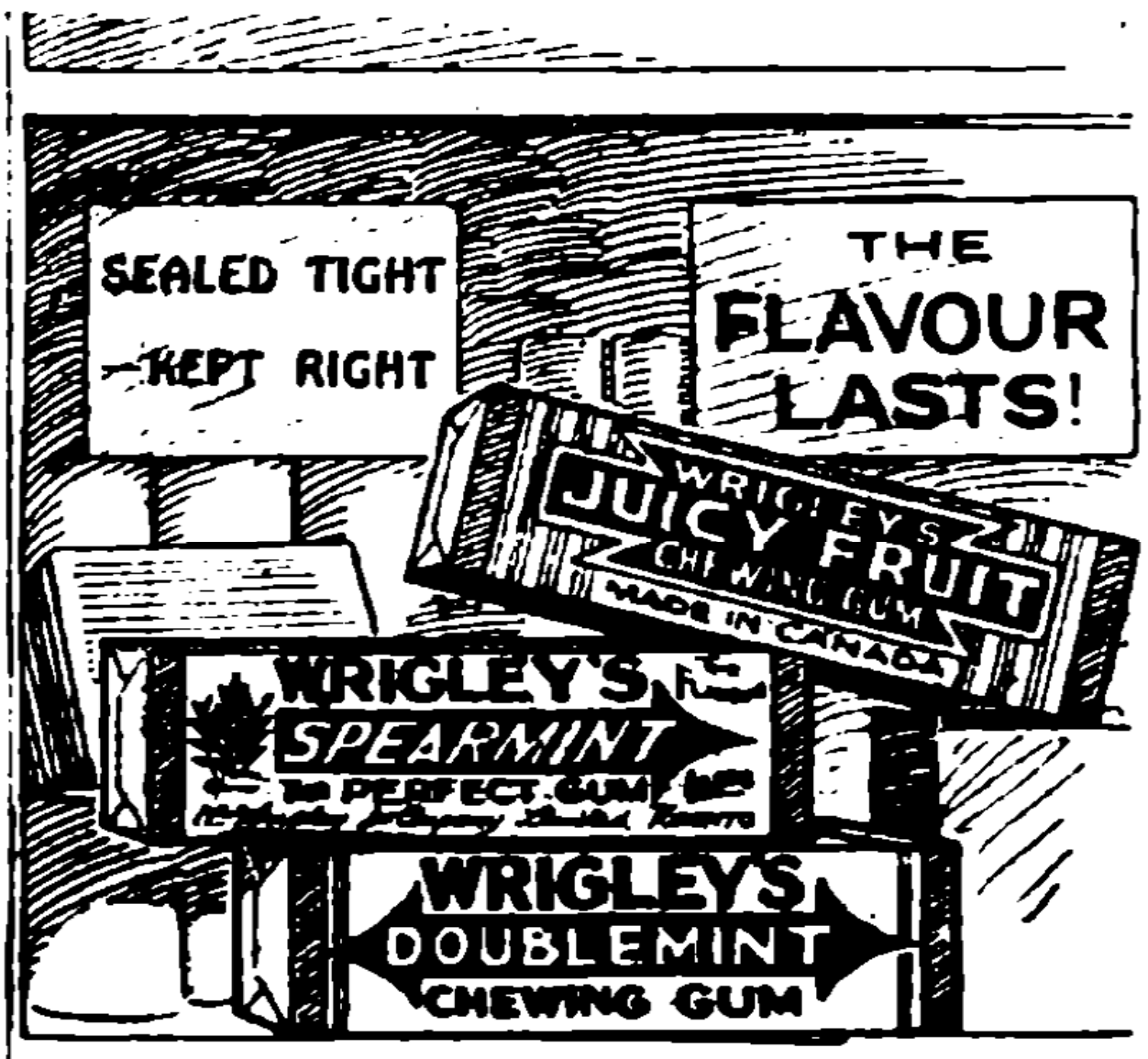
The Swede seized Teddy. Teddy was unable to struggle much; the pain of his ankle was causing him to bite his lips to keep the cries back. By the time Connell had returned, supporting the dazed Gerald, Teddy was tied hand and foot with cord the Swede had produced.

"Tie him, too," said the cook; "then I'm goin' to talk business with both o' you."

The Swede obeyed. Without doubt, Connell now had the whip hand, and was henceforth going to be the leader of this little gang of choice rascals.

Snaith's eyes came open, and he struggled to a sitting position. When he

(Continued on page iv. of cover.)



If you've only got threepence -

WRIGLEY'S

is the biggest & best threepennorth in the shop!

"Just the very ticket! Only three 'Brownies' left. Here goes for a 3d. Packet of WRIGLEY'S, which will keep me going till pocket-money pay day on Saturday.

"Gee! I guess I'm glad I saw WRIGLEY'S in the Old Tuck Shop!

"And I'm in training, too, and the old drill sergeant says it's just the stuff to train on—keeps your wind right, doesn't upset the 'tummy,' makes you eat like a horse, and so builds up muscle.

"I'll have some more of that

WRIGLEY'S JUICY FRUIT—

it's simply great—just like digging your teeth into jolly ripe fruit!"

ALL GOOD TUCK-SHOPS SELL WRIGLEY'S.

(Wrigley's, Ltd., 235, Westminster Bridge Road, London, S.E. 1.)

saw the cook still alive and busy, he tore out a curse.

"Guess I'm boss o' this crowd now, Snaith," the cook said quietly. "You were before; but I am now. We, the three of us, is goin' up to Dead Breed Lake together, to find the Mad Prospector's gold. I've still got the map here. Now, say, it's all foolishness for one man to go up alone after a pile like that. He couldn't carry enough down to make it pay; but the three of us could carry more down."

"I guess you're top dog now, Connell, but—wal, wait!"

"That's what I will do," said Connell; "but just you listen to me. Not far from here's a Redskin village, where we can get canoes. The Little Slave River's not far away, and the Little Slave River runs right into Dead Breed Lake, where the gold's supposed to be. We'll get two canoes to-morrow, and paddle the rest o' the way to the lake."

"What you want two canoes for?" Snaith growled.

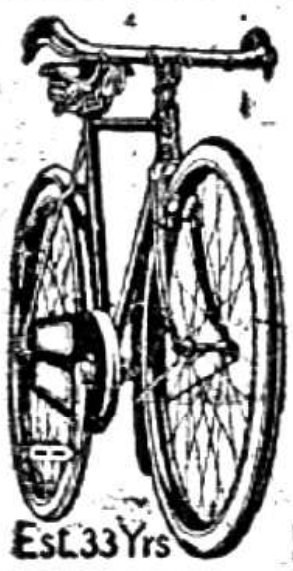
"Because we're takin' these boys with us," said Connell. "I won't have 'em killed, but we certainly cain't let 'em go yet awhile. They'll be useful, though, for odd jobs, and they'll do to dig and wash that gold for us, if it's there."

"Kind o' forced labour?" asked Snaith, grinning a little.

"Kind of," said Connell.

(To be continued.)

WATCH YOURSELF GROW by using the Girvan System. Mr. Briggs reports 5 ins. increase; Driver E.F., 3 ins.; Seaman Mosedale, 3½ ins. No drugs; no appliances. Health and physique improved. Send 3d. stamps for particulars and £100 Guarantee to the Girvan System, Dept. N.M.P., 17, Stroud Green Road, London, N. 4.



FACTORY TO RIDER

Carriage Paid. *Fifteen Days' Free Trial.*
LOWEST CASH PRICES. EASY PAYMENT TERMS.
Prompt Delivery. Second-hand Cycles CHEAP. Accessories at popular Prices. Write for **Free Lists** and *Special Offer* of Sample Bicycle.
MEAD CYCLE CO. Inc. Dept. B 607.
BALSALL - HEATH, BIRMINGHAM.

PHOTO POSTCARDS, 1/3 doz., 12 by 10 ENLARGEMENTS, 8d. ALSO CHEAP PHOTO MATERIAL. CATALOGUE AND SAMPLES FREE. HACKETTS, July Road, Liverpool.

CURLY HAIR!—"My bristles were made curly in a few days," writes R. Welch. "Curlit" curls straightest hair, 1/3, 2/6 (1½d. stamps accepted).—SUMMERS (Dept. A.P.), 31, Upper Russell Street, BRIGHTON.

CRICKET BATS, 13/6.
Fitted with cane-and-rubber handle, and well-compressed willow blade, this 33-in. Bat merits its nickname, "THESSLOGGER" (men's match size, 18/6). "THE CLIMAX," All-Cane handle, 10/6 (33 in.) and 16/- (match). Compo Match Balls, 1/1 and 1/6 (youths'), 1/9 and 2/- (men's). **Boxing Gloves,** as usual, 8/6, 13/6, & 16/6. Postage 6d. on all. Everything stocked for CRICKET, TENNIS, SWIMMING and "ALL SPORTS." Send for list. Terms to club members. Money returned if not satisfied.—TOM CARPENTER, Recognised Authority on Sports Goods, 69, Morecambe Street, Walworth, S.E. 17.

MAGIC TRICKS.—Illusions, etc. Parcels, 2/6, 5/6, and 10/6. Sample Trick 1/-. **T. W. HARRISON, 239, Pentonville Road, London, N. 1.**

"Aeroplane Model." Latest Novelty as Souvenir; Highly Finished. Only 3/6, post free. Abroad, 1/- extra. Satisfaction assured.—E. GOLTON, 13, John's Terrace, East Croydon, Surrey.

CUT THIS OUT.
The Nelson Lee Library. Pen Coupon. Value 2d
Send this coupon with P.O. for only 5/- direct to the **Fleet Pen Co., 119, Fleet St., London, E.C. 4.** In return you will receive (post free) a splendid British Made 14-ct. Gold Nibbed Fleet Fountain Pen, value 10/6. If you save 12 further coupons, each will count as 2d. off the price; so you may send 13 coupons, and only 3/-. Say whether you want a fine, medium, or broad nib. This great offer is made to introduce the famous Fleet Pen to THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY readers.
Special Safety Model, 2/- extra

BOYS, BE YOUR OWN PRINTERS

and make extra pocket-money by using The Petit "Plex" Duplicator. Makes pleasing numerous copies of Notepaper Headings, Business Cards, Sports Fixtures, Scoring Cards, Plans, School Publications, Drawings, Maps, Music, Shorthand, Programmes, Notices, etc., in a variety of pretty colours. *Send for one TO-DAY.* Price 6/6, complete with all supplies. Foreign orders, 1/6 extra.—**E. PODMORE & Co., Desk N.L. Southport.** And at 67-69, Chancery Lane, London, W.C. 2.

Be sure and mention "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" when communicating with Advertisers.

Printed and Published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Limited. The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4. Subscription Rates: Inland, 11s. per annum, 5s. 6d. for six months. Abroad, 8s. 10d. per annum; 4s. 5d. for six months. Sole Agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Limited. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Limited; and for Canada: The Imperial News Company, Limited.

No. 280. D

May 29, 1920.