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THE SECRET OF THE BOX ROOM

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's College, introducing **NELSON LEE, NIPPER**, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "£10,000 to a Shilling," "For His Parents' Sake," "The Fifth at St. Frank's," and many other **Stirring Tales.**

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

MYSTERY!

BANG! Crash! Bump!

Teddy Long descended the stairs to the lobby. He didn't usually do it in this way, but it was a matter which was quite beyond his personal control. Ten seconds before, strong arms had propelled him along the upper passage, a boot had been implanted firmly upon his rear, and he had commenced the descent of the stairs with far greater speed than elegance.

"Yow—yaroooh!" howled Teddy wildly. "Ow! Ah! Whoop!"

He hit the stairs about a third of the way down with a crash, rolled over, and concluded his descent in a series of bumps, jerks, and twists. Finally, he landed upon the mat at the bottom upside down, with his head tucked under his left knee. And even in this extraordinary position he found it quite possible to roar.

"And the next time you come nosing about you'll get it worse!"

It is hardly necessary to explain that the threat was uttered by no less a person than Edward Oswald Handforth,

of the Remove. Handforth stood at the top of the stairs, regarding his unfortunate victim with extreme satisfaction.

Teddy Long rolled over, and moaned. "Oh—ow!" he groaned. "I—I'm dying!"

"Good!" said Handforth callously. "What a merciful relief for the Remove!"

"You—you murderer!" howled Long. "After I'm dead, you'll be arrested and tried at the Old Bailey, and—and then you'll be hanged!"

Handforth grinned at the prospect.

"Well, it would be something worth hanging for, anyway," he said calmly.

"And don't forget what I told you about nosing into things that don't concern you. And don't die on the mat there—a prefect might come along. The best thing you can do is to crawl away in some corner and peg out in solitude."

Teddy Long groaned louder than ever, and made no effort to rise.

"You—you heartless assassin!" he mumbled in an agonised voice. "My spine's broken! Three of my ribs are hanging loose! My left leg is fractured in three places! My head's all cracked!"

"I seem to have made a pretty thorough job of it!" remarked Handforth, gazing down upon the wreck without a trace of sympathy. "But your head was cracked long before I started—it was cracked when you were born!"

At that moment Morrow, of the Sixth, hove into view. Handforth saw him before Teddy Long did, and for a second the leader of Study D thought about fading discreetly away. But then he stood his ground. He wasn't afraid of Morrow.

"Hallo!" said the Sixth-Former, coming to a halt. "What on earth are you doing there, Long?"

"It's all right," said Handforth. "He's only dying!"

"Dying?" repeated Morrow sharply.

"So he says, anyway," went on Handforth; "and he ought to know. I should think. He fell down the stairs," he added glibly. "I wonder if we shall have to wear black?"

Morrow looked up the stairs suspiciously.

"Fell down?" he repeated. "Didn't you touch him?"

"Well, I'll admit I helped him a bit," confessed Handforth. "He was a bit reluctant to go, so I started him off. It's about the sixth time he's been dying this term; but I've got a ripping method of reviving him——"

"You lemme alone!" roared Long, sitting up suddenly.

"Get up from that mat, and don't be a young ass!" said the prefect grimly. "I'm not going to have you sprawling there and moaning over nothing."

"Nothing!" hooted Teddy Long. "That—that bullying beast half-killed me! He smashed my arm in two places, and my neck's broken! Ow! I'm dying! Handforth'll be arrested for this!"

"He won't; but he'll write fifty lines for causing a disturbance!" said Morrow calmly. "No, you'd better not start, Handforth—I know all about it. Take my advice, and don't take up murder as a hobby!"

"Fifty lines!" roared Teddy Long. "Ain't you going to report him to the Head? I'm injured, I tell you, and I'll jolly well go to the Head myself if you won't do your duty as a prefect!"

Morrow frowned.

"That's enough!" he snapped. "And I think I know the best remedy for your complaint. Let's see if it'll work!"

He seized Teddy Long by the ear, and exerted gentle pressure. The sneak of the Remove was on his feet in a second, howling afresh. Morrow had a cane in his hand, and he swished it suggestively.

Teddy Long wrenched himself away, and fled.

"Yah, beast!" he howled defiantly.

He ran down the Remove passage like a hare; and, considering that his spine was broken, that his left leg was fractured in three places, and his ribs were hanging loose, this was a remarkably creditable performance.

"As for you, Handforth, you'd better come down——"

Morrow paused, for he found that he was talking to the thin air. Edward Oswald Handforth had vanished from his elevated post at the head of the stairs. And it was a question of considerable doubt whether Morrow would ever see the imposition of fifty lines that he had inflicted. Morrow was a good prefect, but he was easy-going, and he had a habit of forgetting to ask for imposts. Needless to say, the juniors were equally forgetful on their own side.

Teddy Long crawled into Study B, rubbing his left elbow. This member, as a matter of fact, was the only part of him that had suffered during the fall downstairs.

It was evening, and, strictly speaking, the Remove fellows ought to have been busy at their prep. Some of them were; but, on the other hand, some of them were not. Outside, a fine, miserable drizzle was falling, and all the buildings at St. Frank's were dripping, and the air was bitingly cold.

It was a regular November evening, and not a fellow of either House set foot out of doors unless he was compelled to do so.

In Study B, Teddy Long found Hubbard. The pair shared the study between them, and Hubbard, at the moment, was on board a three-masted schooner with a gang of pirates. In other words, he was lolling before the fire, deep in the pages of a thrilling adventure tale.

"I say——" began Teddy.

"Shut up!"

"But look here——"

"Don't jaw! I'm right in the middle of the most interesting part," snapped Hubbard. "If you're going to jaw, I'll kick you out!"

Teddy Long was generally treated in this way, since it was really the only way in which he could be treated. He wouldn't take any notice of gentler methods. Hubbard's lot in Study B was not an enviable one, for Long was the Paul Pry of the lower school, and he was about the most barefaced liar that one could possibly meet. Hubbard ruled him with an iron hand.

"Oh, ease off!" said Teddy Long, coming towards the fire. "Handforth's just been bullying me—the rotter!"

"Good for Handforth!" said Hubbard, turning over a page.

"The beast chucked me down the stairs!"

"I hope he hurt you!"

"Look here! Are you going to side with that rotter against me?" roared Teddy Long wrathfully. "There's something on, I tell you—something pretty big. And it's something mysterious, too!"

He waited for Hubbard to be impressed.

"Yo-ho, ye lubberly scum!" said Hubbard absently. "Avast there! Another word, and I'll fling ye into the scuppers! Ye scum!"

"What?" gasped Long faintly.

Hubbard turned from his book, and glared.

"Don't bother!" he roared. "Can't you see I'm reading?"

"Oh, was that rubbish something out of the book?" asked Long. "There's something on in the Remove—something big and mysterious," he added eagerly. "I jolly well know it, and I'm going to find out what it is!"

Hubbard was slightly interested at last.

"Something on?" he repeated. "What are you getting at, you young ass?"

"I know what I'm getting at," said Teddy Long knowingly. "You can't diddle me! I've been keeping my eyes open——"

"And glueing your ear to keyholes, I suppose?"

"You know jolly well I never listen at keyholes!" said Long indignantly.

"I wouldn't descend to such a thing!"

"There's no need to descend—all the keyholes are pretty high in our doors," said Hubbard.

"I don't want to hear any of your blessed tittle-tattle, you worm! If you don't dry up I'll pitch

you out of the study on your griny neck!"

Long looked aggrieved.

"But it's true—I'm serious!" he said insistently. "There's something on—really. Haven't you noticed it? Nipper and the other chaps—Tregollis-West, and Watson, and Pitt, and Handforth—they're all in it."

"All in what?"

"In this—this something," said Teddy vaguely.

"And is this your marvellous discovery?"

"Oh, come off it!" said Long. "I found out a lot more than that. Those chaps disappear from their studies every night; they've been doing it all the week. You must go about with your eyes closed if you haven't noticed it!"

Hubbard grunted.

"I've got my own business to notice," he said. "I don't go about nosing into what doesn't concern me. If Nipper and the rest like to disappear from their studies—well, they're welcome to do it."

"Ah, but you don't know where they disappear to, do you?"

"No, and I don't care!"

"They go to one of the box-rooms," said Long, in no way disheartened by Hubbard's lack of interest. "To box-room number twelve, to be exact—that big empty one at the end of the corridor."

Hubbard looked at his study mate curiously.

"They go up into the end box-room?" he repeated. "What rot!"

"'Tain't rot!" said Teddy eagerly. "I've watched 'em, and I know! I've followed the bounders two or three times. They all sneak into that box-room, and lock the door after them. That's why Handforth kicked me down the stairs—because he happened to spot me when I was following him."

"And serve you jolly well right!" said Hubbard. "But I'll bet it hasn't taught you a lesson. Of course, you tried to squint through the keyhole of that box-room, didn't you?"

Long snorted with disgust.

"The rotters have blocked it up!" he said indignantly. "Just as if anybody would try to spy on the cads!"

"Ridiculous thought!" said Hubbard, with heavy sarcasm. "If you ask me, they were pretty wide. And so you

haven't been able to discover anything, my precious little spy? Awful hard lines! You have my sympathy. And now dry up, or I'll biff you one on your inquisitive nose!"

"But—but I want to talk about this!" protested Long. "What do you reckon those chaps are up to in that box-room? It's jolly mysterious! And they're keeping it so quiet that no other chap has a chance of getting a look in. The window's too high up, and there's no balcony or ledge. It doesn't give a chap a chance!"

"Awful!" said Hubbard. "You have my sympathy."

But, although he gave Teddy Long no encouragement, he was, nevertheless, rather struck by what the other junior had been saying. As a matter of fact, Hubbard had noticed something rather peculiar in the Remove during the present week; but he had noticed it subconsciously, and it was only now that he came to think of it that it assumed any special significance.

"It certainly does seem a bit queer," he went on thoughtfully. "I've noticed that those chaps in Study C have been away during the evenings. Handforth's been looking a bit strange, too. I suppose they're up to some dodgo of their own; and it's no business of ours, anyway."

And Hubbard dismissed the matter, and went on with his book. Teddy Long was rather disgusted, and after a few minutes he passed out into the passage, wondering if he would be able to get somebody else interested.

But he had not gone far before he noticed Tommy Watson coming out of Study C. Long dodged into a doorway, and watched; and certainly Watson's movements were somewhat suspicious.

He looked up and down the passage with a kind of exaggerated caution, and then walked swiftly and silently to the lobby, and hastened upstairs. Teddy Long was after him like a flash.

His former experience did not deter him. Spying into the affairs of other fellows was the breath of life to him, and the hope of discovering what this mystery was, urged him to take risks which he would never otherwise have chanced.

By the time he got to the top of the stairs, Tommy Watson had vanished round one of the other corridors; but

Long knew which one it was, and he tiptoed towards it. Gazing round the angle of the wall, he just caught sight of Watson standing outside the door of the box-room at the end.

Long watched, fascinated.

Tap! Tap-tap-tap! Tap!

It was a soft rap, and obviously a pre-arranged signal.

"The night is cold!" came a subdued voice through the door.

"Yes, and frost is in the air!" said Watson deliberately.

The key turned, the door slightly opened, and somebody looked out.

"Enter, brother!" said a solemn voice.

Watson slipped in, the door was closed, and the key turned in the lock. Teddy Long stood out into the passage, fairly quivering with excitement. His face was flushed, and his eyes were gleaming.

"I knew it!" he muttered. "It's a secret society, or something; and that was the password just now! Those bounders are plotting something!"

And then, as he stood there, a thought came to him—a daring, appalling thought which almost caused his heart to stop beating. Would it be possible? Was it worth the risk of receiving a licking?

Teddy Long considered for a few moments.

He was a frightful coward, and the slightest pain would make him howl. If there was any way of avoiding personal suffering, he would avoid it. But now it was a battle between his cowardice and his curiosity—and curiosity won. He decided that he would risk the consequences.

Pulling himself together, he clenched his fists, and tiptoed softly towards the door of the mysterious apartment. He raised his hand, prepared to knock, and then his courage oozed away. Three times he braced himself up for the ordeal, but he could not gather the nerve necessary to knock.

"Oh, my hat!" he muttered. "I might as well do it; if they cop me here I shall get licked in any case. And they can't kill me; and I might be able to nip off before they can grab hold. And I stand a chance of seeing right into the room. Yes, by Jingo, it's worth it!"

This time, feeling somewhat more confident, he raised his hand firmly.

Tap! Tap-tap-tap! Tap!

It was a somewhat tentative knock, but it was exactly the same as Tommy Watson had delivered. Long waited with his heart in his mouth, and then came the voice from within.

"The night is cold!" it said cautiously.

Teddy gulped, and pulled himself together.

"Yes, and frost is in the air!" he stuttered thickly.

The key turned after a brief wait, and then the door softly opened. But if Teddy Long thought that he was about to see within the apartment, he was very sadly mistaken.

The only thing he did actually see was a hand. It shot out, grasped him by the neck, and twisted him round. The hand was followed by a body and some legs—which were the sole property of myself. I propelled Teddy Long along the passage until we were a safe distance away.

"Now, you little worm, I've a good mind to lick you until you can't stand!" I said grimly. "What do you mean by spying round that door, and repeating our special password?"

"Lemmo alone!" said Teddy plaintively. "I—I was only trying to play a joke, you know. I didn't really want to see into the room. I—I didn't think you'd rumble me so quickly!"

"You young idiot!" I exclaimed. "Do you think I didn't recognise your voice at once? It's no good you hanging about here; there's nothing that you'll discover. And the next time I find you prowling I'll give you a good licking!"

"I've got as much right up here as you have!" growled Long. "Why shouldn't I be here? And why shouldn't I know what you're doing in the box-room? I'll bet you're up to something clever," he added eagerly. "I—I say, Nipper, you might let me into the know. I wouldn't breathe a word—honest, I wouldn't."

"I believe you!" I said, nodding.

"Then you'll tell me all about——"

"You wouldn't breathe a word—you'd yell about a thousand words!" I went on. "Look here, my son, I'll have pity on you this time, but it's the last chance you'll have. Slide—skip—vamoose! And be sharp about it!"

I released him, and he fled to the end of the corridor, and then turned. He

rudely made a grimace at me, and then put out his tongue. Teddy was quite an artist at this kind of thing—when he was at a safe distance.

"Yah! I'll bet I know what you're doing!" he yelled tauntingly. "Blessed snobs and hypocrites! So jolly goody-goody, and I'll bet you're smoking and playing cards! You can't do it in the studies, and so you come up here——"

He didn't get any further, for he found it imperatively necessary to remove himself at lightning speed. With me on his track, he shot down the corridor, and descended the stairs.

I went back to the box-room, entered, and closed the door. Tregellis-West, and Watson, and Handforth were there, and they looked at me inquiringly.

"Teddy Long again!" I said briefly.

"That young bounder ought to be kicked round the Triangle six times!" said Handforth, with a snort. "The blessed little spy, nosing about from morning till night!"

"I knew it was him all the time," I said. "The young ass thought he'd disguised his voice, but it didn't deceive me. I'm afraid we can't keep this thing secret very much longer, my sons. Teddy Long will be spreading the yarn all over the House, and we shall be pestered out of our lives."

"Well, nobody will be able to know anything for certain," remarked Tommy Watson, "and we'll keep it secret as long as we can. We don't want those College House bounders to get wind of the wheeze."

"Rather not!"

And while we were talking in this way, Teddy Long descended to the common room, and broke in. There were not very many fellows there, but quite sufficient to provide Teddy with an attentive audience.

"Heard the latest?" he said importantly.

"Rats! We don't want any of your yarns!" exclaimed Owen major. "If you're going to tittle-tattle, you'd better stop before you begin! Shall we kick him out, you chaps?" he added, looking at the others.

"You—you rotters!" shouted Long, backing away. "I've got as much right in here as you have, and if you touch me I'll tell a prefect——"

"Shut up, you sneak!"

"Well, you shouldn't threaten!"

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exclaimed Teddy. "I've got some important news to tell you, and if you don't like to listen—well, you needn't. But I know what I know, and I'm jolly well going to show Nipper and his crowd up!"

"Show them up?" repeated Fullwood curiously.

"Yes, rather!" said Long. "The bounders pretend to be as good as gold, and they wouldn't do anything wicked, and yet they're up in one of the box-rooms now, smoking like the dickens, and playing cards!"

"What?"

"You little liar!"

"It's the truth!" roared Teddy indignantly. "I've seen 'em—I—I mean I know they're in the box-room, and —"

"What proof have you got?" asked Solomon Levi grimly.

"Well, there's plenty of proof," replied Long. "If those chaps ain't up to something off-side, why should they lock themselves in a box-room, and use secret taps and passwords, and all the rest of it? It's a giddy smoking club, or something."

Solomon Levi looked round.

"Believe me, this chap can beat every one of us when it comes to imagination!" he exclaimed. "I'll put it to the vote. Hands up everybody who

offers to help in the pleasant task of kicking Long into the passage!"

A dozen hands were raised, and Teddy Long jumped back in a hurry.

"Don't touch me!" he roared.

"Collar him!" said Levi sharply. "By my life, we'll teach the young bouncer a lesson! Grab hold of him!"

Long looked round wildly, saw that there was no hope, and made a dash for the door. Then he gave a squeal of terror as he found that his retreat was cut off. Owen major, and Somerton, and Burton were there, and Master Teddy was grabbed by many willing hands. He kicked and struggled in vain.

"Lemme go!" he howled. "I—I —"

"Dry up, you worm!" said Somerton grimly. "We want to know what proof you've got that Nipper and his pals are smoking and gambling in the box-room. If you can't produce positive evidence, we'll rag you until you can't stand!"

Teddy Long breathed hard.

"I—I didn't exactly mean—that is, I saw the oads in the box-room, and I know it's true!" he stuttered. "They—they are up to something fishy—I—I mean they're not doing anything wrong at all!" he added hastily, as the grip on him was tightened.

"Souise my main-deck!" exclaimed Tom Burton. "This lubber is a disgrace to the whole ship! I reckon we'd better put him in irons!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you touch me, I'll yell the place down!" roared Long. "I—I made a mistake about Nipper. He wasn't smoking at all, and he wasn't even in the box-room! I didn't see Nipper at all! I—I don't know anything about the box-room!"

Somerton stared.

"Well, for sheer unadulterated nerve, you're about the limit!" he exclaimed. "We can't stick him any longer, you chaps. Lend a hand, and we'll pitch him out!"

Teddy Long howled and yelled in vain. Somebody obligingly opened the door, and the spy of the Remove was propelled swiftly and noisily towards the exit. When he arrived he was hurled out like a stone from a catapult.

He rose in the air, emerged into the passage, with his arms and legs flying; then he descended with a thud, and rolled over against the wall.

"Yow—yaroo!" he bellowed. "I—I'm killed!"

"That's twice you've been dead to-night!" grinned Owen major. "Somebody told me that Handforth killed you on the stairs. We shall have to revive you——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Long needed no further reviving. He leapt to his feet, and raced down the passage at top speed. When he arrived at the corner he turned, breathless and dishevelled, and executed the extremely rude performance of poking out his tongue.

"Yah! Cads!" he howled. "Rotters! Beasts!"

And, feeling somewhat relieved in mind, but aching considerably, the precious young boulder disappeared.

CHAPTER II.

TROUBLE IN STUDY D!

HANDFORTH entered Study D—and peace departed.

This, of course, was quite the usual order of things. Church and McClure were busy at their prep., eagerly seizing upon the quiet spell in order to get the work finished and done with.

They had hoped to conclude their labours before Handforth barged in; but this hope was in vain, for Handforth had now arrived. Church sighed, and McClure groaned; but they took the precaution to do these things very softly.

Handforth had been rather queer of late, particularly since the morning. He had gone about the school with a frown upon his mighty brow, as though some dread secret weighed upon his mind.

Church and McClure had questioned him until they were tired. Their inquiries only resulted in contemptuous replies from Handforth. He informed them, bluntly and pointedly, that they didn't possess enough brain-power to understand the great scheme which was afoot.

And Church and McClure, after a while, gave it up, and adopted different tactics. They became supremely indifferent, knowing full well that Handforth would give the whole thing away before many hours had elapsed. To question

him was fruitless; to ignore him would have the opposite effect.

But, at the moment, Handforth hardly seemed himself.

Glancing cautiously up, Church saw that his mighty leader had an absent look in his eye. His lips were moving, as though he were in the midst of a complicated sum, and he stared straight before him with a far-away expression.

"The great one thinketh!" murmured Church softly.

McClure grinned.

"Wisely spoken, O oracle!" he chuckled.

Handforth took absolutely no notice. At any ordinary time, Church and McClure would have suffered severely for these pleasantries, but now Handforth was apparently quite oblivious of his surroundings.

He sat down in the big armchair, and gazed dreamily into the fire; then he performed an extraordinary action. He raised his hand slowly and deliberately, clenched his fist, and then brought it down with considerable force upon his heart.

"Ugh!" he grunted. "By George!"

Apparently he had struck too hard in his absent-mindedness, for he rubbed his chest tenderly, and then became aware of two chuckles. He came back to earth for a second, and then glared.

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But, for a wonder, he didn't speak.

A moment later he was again contemplating the fire; and Church and McClure, glancing significantly at one another, proceeded to discuss the question.

"What's up with him?" whispered Church. "What did the ass want to punch himself in the chest for?"

"Goodness knows!" replied McClure. "I don't think he's well. Look at that line on his forehead—look at the dull expression in his eyes! I think we'd better ask him if he's feeling O.K."

"Good idea," said Church. "Handy! I say, Handy!"

Handforth maintained a stony silence, then he performed another queer action. Without the slightest warning, he jumped to his feet, grabbed at the air, and brought his clenched fist down with full force upon the back of the easy-chair.

"My hat!" gasped Church. "He's gone off his rocker!"

"I say, Handy what's the matter?" asked McClure sharply.

"Stabbed to the heart!" exclaimed Handforth in a hollow voice.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Murdered!" said Handforth. "Yes, and by heavens, the varlet that committed this base crime shall be hanged on Tyburn tree!"

Church and McClure stared in blank amazement.

"Great Scott!" panted Church. "He's properly dotty!"

Handforth rose to his feet, and made a sweeping gesture.

"The highwayman fled with fleet foot!" he roared, with sudden fierceness. "Upon his magnificent steed, Pink Beauty, he charged down the village street to the toll-gate. What cared he whether the gate was open or shut? With a wild cry of triumph, Jack Plunderer raised his horse to the leap. Over they went together, and raced on into the night. Only by a hair's-breadth had they escaped being dashed to pieces by the London to York express which roared past at the moment!"

Handforth's voice had been trailing away towards the end, and he mumbled the latter part of this extraordinary narrative to himself. Then he sank back into his chair, and grinned with secret satisfaction.

"My goodness!" said Church. "I always thought he'd go off his chump one day, but I never dreamed it would be as bad as this!"

"Poor old Handy!" murmured McClure sadly.

"Great!" said Handforth. "Absolutely a masterpiece! And then Jack Plunderer halted by the wayside inn, stamped his way into the tap-room, and called loudly for the landlord. 'Ho, ye provider of good ale!' he quoth. 'Bring me a tankard of the strongest rum, dog! Fail, and I will slice thee in two! That's the giddy stuff! By George, it ought to fetch 'em properly!'"

"Highwaymen—wayside inns—tankards of rum!" said Church dazedly. "Oh, he's as mad as a hatter! No doubt about it at all."

McClure nodded.

"Yes, Handy was reading one of those Dick Turpin stories last week, and I'll bet it's turned his brain!" he said, in alarm. "We'd better go carefully. It's always dangerous to deal with dotty people. We'll humour him!"

"That's it," agreed Church.

They advanced towards Handforth slowly, ready to back away if necessary; and Handforth, suddenly becoming aware of their close attention, started and looked up at them.

"What's up with you asses?" he asked irritably. "Gone dotty, or what?"

"They always think other people are mad!" whispered Church.

"Eh? What's that?" asked Handforth. "Don't mumble, you fathead! What on earth's the matter with you? Don't stare at me like that!"

McClure nodded and smiled.

"It's all right, old son," he said gently. "We—we're not going to hurt you. Just keep calm, and everything'll be all right. We'll fetch a doctor——"

"What?" snapped Handforth.

"You mustn't excite yourself," interrupted Church. "And don't keep thinking about Jack Plunderer, the highwayman, or Tyburn tree——"

Handforth leapt to his feet, and his chums backed away hastily.

"Jack Plunderer!" shouted Handforth. "Who told you anything about Jack Plunderer?"

"Why, you—you were saying something about him," explained McClure. "You said he jumped over an express,

and landed in the four-ale bar of a tavern, or something like that. Didn't he, Church?"

"Rather!"

Handforth glared ferociously at his chums.

"You—you eavesdroppers!" he said witheringly.

"Eh?"

"You—you listeners!"

"But—but——"

"Do you call yourselves my chums?" went on Handforth, with bitter contempt. "Pretend to be pally, and all you can do is to spy on me and eavesdrop! What do you mean by listening to what I said?"

Church recovered himself somewhat.

"You dotty fathead!" he shouted. "How could we help listening, with you bawling all over the study? Do you think we're going to shut our ears up, or stuff them with cotton wool, just to please you?"

Handforth grunted.

"Huh! I suppose I've been a bit careless," he admitted gruffly. "Well, you'd better forget all about what you've heard. I've got a secret, and you won't learn anything about it. Understand? You can't be trusted with anything of a private nature—you'd let it out!"

"Oh, yes!" said Church sarcastically. "I suppose you're so jolly mum? Why, once you've got a secret, it's everybody's property within a few hours!"

Handforth rolled up his sleeves.

"You—you insulting bounder!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "So I can't keep a secret, eh? What about the secret that you've been trying to pester out of me? What about this ripping idea of Nipper's to bring out a new—er—that is, I mean to say—I'll show you whether I can keep a secret!"

Handforth concluded in dire confusion, which really added to his anger. For he suddenly realised that he was giving the show away, and that was just what he wanted to avoid. There was, therefore, only one course to adopt.

Whenever Handforth was in a corner he always resorted to the same policy—he went for his chums bald-headed; and any attempt to reason with him was out of the question. He pointed a quivering finger to the door.

"Outside!" he roared.

"Look here——"

"Outside—both of you!" bellowed Handforth. "Do you think I'm going to stand here and listen to your rot any longer? No, yo spying varlets—I—I mean you rotters! I'll jolly well slice thee in two with my trusty blade!"

Handforth was evidently getting somewhat mixed, and he realised it. So he didn't wait for any further argument, but charged forward, seized Church by the collar, and whirled him towards the door.

Church had absolutely no chance.

He went hurtling out into the passage, collided with the opposite wall, and sank limply to the floor. That particular portion of wall was considerably scratched and dented, for Church and McClure had made close acquaintanceship with it on many other occasions. To Church, it was quite like meeting an old friend—or, perhaps, an enemy.

"Now, you're going as well!" roared Handforth, twirling round. "Why, what—where the dickens have you got to?"

He stared round the study, but McClure, anxious to avoid all trouble, had slipped behind Handforth, out of the doorway, and Edward Oswald had known nothing about it. McClure was now helping Church to get to his feet.

"Oh, there you are!" snorted Handforth, as he turned round. "All right, you don't come back into this study; I'm going to be in peace for the rest of the evening."

Slam!

He strode in, and pushed the door to violently. His chums glared at it with ferocious expressions, and Church rubbed the back of his head tenderly.

"The—the rotter!" he panted. "I don't think he's mad, after all; he's only full up with one of his dotty schemes. Goodness knows what it is, or what it will end in. A chap like that ought to be restrained!"

As it happened, at that moment I came along the Remove passage, en route for Study C, and I could not avoid seeing Church and McClure. I regarded them curiously, as I could see that something was wrong.

"Trouble?" I inquired sympathetically.

"It's Handy again!" growled Church.

"So I gathered," I said. "What's he been up to this time?"

"Oh, I'm blessed if I know!"

exclaimed McClure. "Got another of his brain waves, and won't tell us anything about it—some dark and dire secret. We've tried to get it out of him, but he won't say a word."

"Why, hasn't he told you about my new wheeze?" I inquired, in surprise.

"No."

"The ass!" I grinned. "I thought you knew all about it, and I wondered why you didn't come along to the office."

"The office?" repeated Church, staring.

"Come inside, and I'll tell you all about it," I said briskly. "If Handforth can be trusted, so can you chaps."

"I say, you'd better go carefully," exclaimed McClure. "He's inclined to be violent, and you've no idea what gibberish he's been talking. We thought he'd gone off his rocker at first."

"Gibberish?"

"Rather! He called us varlets, and said he'd slice us in two with his trusty blade!" said Church. "But before that he was worse—he was talking about Jack Plunderer, the highwayman, and Tyburn tree—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" I roared.

"Blessed if I can see where it's funny!" growled McClure.

"Ha, ha, ha!" I yelled. "It's very funny, my sons! So old Handy has been going the pace, eh? Well, we shall have to look into this; and I'll admit you into the dreadful secret. Come on."

I seized the handle of the study door, and strode in.

"Clear out!" bawled Handforth. "By my halidom—Great pip! I—I mean—Hallo! What do you want?" he added, glaring at me.

"Take my advice, Handy, and go a bit easy," I said. "I hear that Church and McClure are quite in the dark about the new wheeze."

Handforth nodded.

"Of course they are!" he said promptly.

"Why 'of course'?"

"Because I can't trust them with your secret—"

"That's all right—I'll trust them," I said. "In any case, the whole Remove will know about it soon, so I sha'n't be telling much. You see, my children, it's this way," I went on, turning to the others. "Last week I was struck by an idea—not exactly a novel one, but quite new to St. Frank's."

And Church and McClure listened eagerly and intently while I told them what the big scheme was. They were eager and interested, and their eyes were gleaming by the time I had finished.

"Great!" said Church, at length. "We might have guessed it! I wish you luck, Nipper, and hope everything turns out all serene."

"Rather!" agreed McClure. "It's a gorgeous idea!"

"But don't forget—no jawing," I said warningly. "We don't want any of the chaps beyond our own circle to know anything. The whole thing has got to be sprung on Christine and Co. as a great surprise. The College House, above all, mustn't hear the slightest inkling."

"You can trust us," said Church and McClure.

"Oh, yes—I don't think!" sneered Handforth heavily. "Just you wait. Nipper, and I'll bet the whole school will be talking about it before bedtime. You're dotty to tell these fatheads; but, after all, it's your lookout, and I'm not going to say another word."

And Edward Oswald bent over the table, and picked up his pencil. The next minute he started scribbling away as hard as he could go. Church and McClure could now understand much that had previously been obscure.

CHAPTER III.

PROWLERS OF THE NIGHT!

TEDDY LONG was feeling disconsolate.

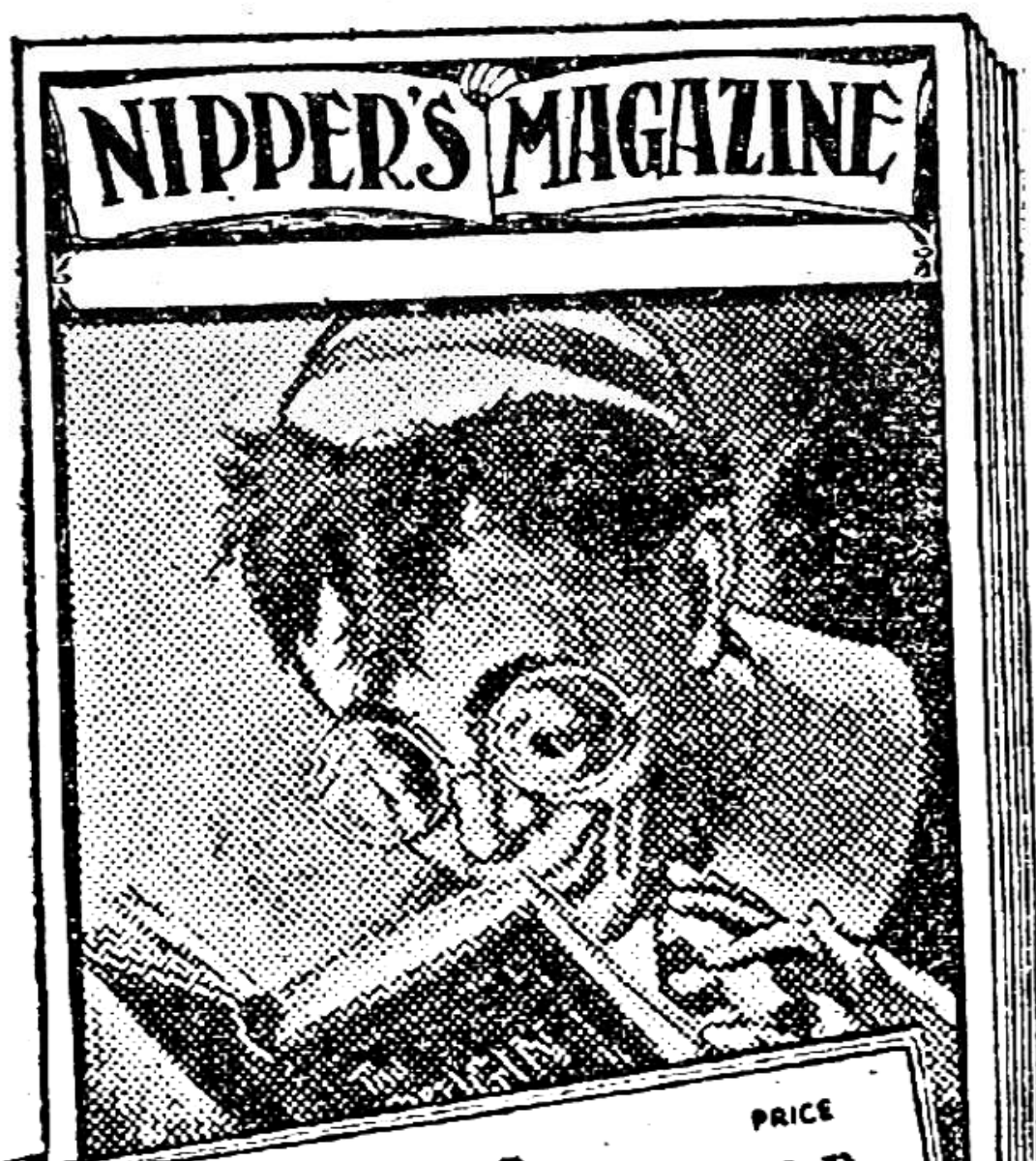
He was greatly irritated by the fact that he had not been able to discover the secret of Box-room 12. He only knew that something was going on behind that locked door which was being kept from the bulk of the fellows.

And anything in the nature of a secret was like a magnet to Teddy. He was inquisitive to a remarkable degree, and would undertake all sorts of risks in order to satisfy his great curiosity.

But what could he do here?

He had already made several attempts to get near the box-room, but he had always been spotted and sent about his business, generally suffering from a few odd bruises. Handforth had thrown him

(Continued on page 12.)



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(Continued from page 10).

down the stairs, and other fellows had been nearly as drastic.

There was obviously nothing to be gained by lurking about the upper corridor. All the fellows who went into the box-room were in the "know." Before they were admitted they had to give a password, although this appeared to be more or less of a joke.

Teddy Long's effort to give the password and thus sneak in had ended in disaster; and, on top of this, the chaps in the common room had refused to believe any evil of the plotters.

Therefore, Long was feeling miserable.

He lounged through the lobby, with his hands in his trousers pockets, and looked out into the Triangle. The drizzle had stopped, but the evening was still murky and chilly. It was not a very inviting prospect out there, and Teddy half-turned back into the lobby.

But at that moment he saw something which aroused his curiosity.

Two juniors were wandering about the Triangle, near the old chestnut trees, apparently examining the ground. One held an electric torch, which did not give much light. They appeared to be searching for something, and had obviously come out now because the rain had stopped.

Teddy Long wondered what they were looking for. It was absolutely impossible for him to go indoors without finding out. His inquisitive nature demanded that he should proceed at once and make investigations.

So he passed down the Ancient House steps, and ran across to the chestnut trees. The two juniors looked up as he approached.

"Buzz off!" said one. "We don't want your help, thanks!"

"Have you lost something?" asked Long.

"We'd much rather lose you!" said Bob Christine—for these two juniors were Christine and Talmadge, of Study Q, in the College House. They had no particular desire for Teddy Long to bear them company.

"Oh, I say!" protested Teddy. "I'm only asking because I might know what you lost, and I can lend a hand—"

"Thanks all the same, but you're not wanted," said Christine bluntly. "Talmadge has got a hole in his pocket, and he dropped two half-crowns some-

where in the Triangle. We're looking for them now."

"Oh, good!" said Teddy Long. "I'll help!"

"No, you won't!" growled Talmadge. "I remember you helped a chap to find some money last term, and then demanded half because you happened to spot it first. You can buzz off!"

Long snorted, and turned away. As he did so, Talmadge gave a little chortle of satisfaction, and bent down. The next second the welcome sound of silver smote Teddy's ears.

"Good!" said Talmadge. "Got 'em! I thought I must have dropped these half-crowns just against the trees. They were both together, half hidden in a puddle. Come on, Christy—we can go indoors now."

Teddy Long snorted.

"Ain't you going to give me something?" he asked indignantly.

"Give you something? What for?"

"Why, for helping—"

"Oh, yes, of course!" said Talmadge. "What are we thinking about, Christy? This generous chap has lent us his assistance, and we must reward him in a fitting manner. He's asked us to give him something. I call upon you as a witness to prove that he used those very words!"

"Quite correct!" said Christine. "He did."

"Well, we'll give him something straight away," grinned Talmadge; "something to be going on with, in fact. Grab him!"

Before Teddy could dodge, he was seized.

"Ow!" he roared. "What's the idea? Lemme go—"

"We're going to give you something, my beauty!" chuckled Christine. "You asked for it, and we never like disappointing people. And you shall have your choice, too. What's it to be—a thick ear or a punch on the nose?"

Long struggled wildly.

"You—you College House cads!" he howled. "You rotten monkeys! If you touch me I'll have all our chaps on your track, and—"

"Rats! Nipper and his set will be quite delighted when they hear that we've taught you a lesson," said Christine. "You must learn not to be inquisitive, my son. You must also learn not to be greedy and covetous."

"Lemme go!" panted Teddy. "I—I

say, I'll tell you something!" he added eagerly. "If you'll let me go, I'll reveal a secret to you; it's a most important one, too, and it's right that you should hear it."

Talmadge snorted with disgust.

"You young spy!" he snapped. "Do you think we want to hear your secret? I'll bet you've been nosing about somewhere, and listening at keyholes! Why, if you were over in the College House, we'd smother you within the first hour. We haven't got any use for worms!"

Teddy struggled wildly.

"I haven't been spying! I haven't been listening!" he gasped. "It's a secret—really! Everybody in our House knows it!"

"That's a new kind of a secret!" grinned Christine.

"I don't mean they know it——"

"But you just said they did!"

"I—I mean they know it, and yet they don't know it!" stammered Teddy. "Don't you understand?"

"Oh, perfectly!" said Christine.

"Clear as mud!" remarked Talmadge. "In fact, it's about as clear as you'll be in a few seconds, because we're going to give you a mud bath instead of a black eye! It'll probably make you wash yourself for once!"

"You—you cads!" panted Teddy desperately. "It's a real secret, but nobody knows exactly what it means. But Nipper and his gang are up to something; they're as hot as mustard upon a new wheeze. And I wouldn't mind betting ten-to-one that it's some huge jape against the College House!"

"What?" said Christine.

"Don't you believe him!" said Talmadge. "It's all spoof——"

"Tain't spoof—it's all true!" shouted Long. "You needn't believe me——"

"We don't!"

"All right; ask Hubbard—ask Singleton, or Watson!" went on Long. "Everybody knows there's something special being prepared over in the Ancient House. Nipper's as keen as anything about it; and it is sure to be up against you chaps."

"There may be something in it," said Christine thoughtfully. "Things have been rather slack of late. If Nipper's really getting up a jape against the College House, it's quite time we made inquiries. Look here, Long—what is this new wheeze?"

"The beasts won't tell me!" replied Teddy.

"Well, I'm not surprised at that," said Christine. "But you must have some inkling surely! Remember, if you don't tell us what you know, we'll sit you in one of these puddles. You're a prisoner, and you've got to answer all questions. How much do you know about this giddy secret?"

"Nothing at all—I—I mean I know a good bit, but not a tenth of what I'd like to know," said Teddy Long. "Why do Nipper and the others sneak off to that box-room whenever they can get the opportunity? That's what I'd like to know. What are they doing there?"

"Oh, they sneak off to a box-room, do they?" asked Christine.

"Yes, rather."

"How often?"

"Whenever they can slip away," replied Teddy. "The door's locked, and the suspicious cads have put something over the keyhole, so that you can't see in. They're doing something queer, I can tell you!"

"Which box-room is it?" asked Christine keenly.

"Number twelve, in the upper corridor," replied Long. "I can tell you, they go in there, and plot and plan. It's a kind of secret society, and you can't get in the box-room without giving the password."

"Password?"

"Yes; and secret taps on the door, too!" said Long mysteriously. "There you are—I've told you now! If you were sports, you'd let me go. And I advise you to be on your guard, because there's bound to be something happening soon!"

Christine and Talmadge looked at one another.

"Are you trying to spoof us, you little blighter?" demanded Bob suspiciously.

"Of course not!" snorted Teddy. "It's the truth!"

"Well, it doesn't sound like it," remarked Talmadge. "Secret taps! Passwords! What rot! Let's drop the young beggar in a puddle!"

Teddy Long panted with alarm.

"You—you rotters!" he gasped. "It's true, I tell you! If you don't believe me, ask some of the others! I'm not asking you to take my bare word, although you ought to do that without making all this fuss. I'm a truthful chap—I never tell any whoppers."

Bob Christine staggered.

"Hold me up; I feel faint," he said weakly. "Oh, my hat! What a nerve! He never tells whoppers—and he's the most expert liar in the whole giddy Remove! Well, you little worm, you deserve to escape for having such a nerve! Now let's have some more details."

"I—I don't know any more details," protested Long. "Ain't I told you enough? Nipper and his blessed crew are up to something fishy in that box-room, and I'll bet it's against you Monks."

"Box-room No. 12, you said?"

"Yes, at the end of the corridor."

Christine and Talmadge looked at one another again.

"Well, I think we'll let him off," said Christine. "I'll bet he's telling whoppers, but we shall have to chance that. Clear off, you little worm!"

Teddy Long, only too glad to be released, scuttled off across the Triangle. He disappeared into the Ancient House, and the two College House fellows stood for some few moments under the old chestnuts.

"I've got half an idea that there's something in this," said Bob Christine. "Nipper and his lot have been too quiet just recently; and when they're too quiet it means that there's something brewing. You can bet your last cent that there's something in the wind against us."

Talmadge scratched his head.

"Yes; but dash it all, what can they do in a box-room?" he asked. "They may be plotting something, of course, but—I'll tell you what," he added suddenly. "Let's go round the Ancient House and have a look up at the window of that box-room. If there's a light there, it'll prove that Long was telling the truth."

This seemed a good suggestion, and the two juniors hurried across the damp Triangle, until they could gain a clear view of the west side of the Ancient House. They were fairly well versed in the geography of the school, and they knew where to look for the box-room windows. Number twelve, as Teddy Long had said, was at the end of the corridor; therefore it would be the last window.

"My hat!" said Christine. "There's a light there right enough."

It was not very noticeable, for the heavy blind was drawn closely, and only one or two cracks of light leaked out. But it proved beyond doubt that Teddy Long had been telling the truth—to a certain extent, at all events.

"Well, what shall we do?" asked Talmadge.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," replied Bob Christine grimly. "We'll buzz indoors, and call a council at once."

"A council?"

"Yes. We'll hold a giddy meeting, and discuss the matter in all its bearings," said the leader of the College House juniors. "We're certainly not going to sit still and let these blessed Fossils get ahead of us. If there's some jape in the wind, we'll find out what it is, and then turn the tables."

As a matter of fact, the pair were rather excited, and they immediately hurried indoors, and went straight to Study Q. Then Talmadge went round to the other studies, and collected a number of fellows—Clapson, Oldfield, Page, Harron, Yorke, and a few others.

By the time they all crowded into Christine's study, that apartment was fairly well packed; and all the juniors were anxious to know what this hurried meeting had been called for.

"Don't all jaw at once!" said Christine, holding up his hand. "It's jolly important that we should deal with this thing at once. Nipper and his gang have got some wheeze up against us, and the only course for us to adopt is to spy out what it is, and then deliver a counter-stroke."

"A wheeze?" said Clapson. "What kind of a wheeze?"

"My dear chap, that's what we've got to find out," said Christine. "Lend me your ears, my children, and I'll whisper sweet nothings into them!"

And Christine proceeded to tell his followers what he had learned. They were somewhat sceptical when they heard that Teddy Long was the source of information. However, Bob somewhat convinced them after he explained how he and Talmadge had seen the crack of light proceeding from the mysterious box-room.

"Whether there's anything in the yarn or not, we've got to take action," went on Christine. "We simply can't afford to stand still and let these Fossils get ahead of us."

"What's your idea, then?" asked Oldfield.

"Well, to begin with, we've got to discover what those chaps are doing in that box-room," replied Christine. "There's only one way to get to work. It'll be a sheer waste of time to ask questions. We must look into it for ourselves."

"Yes, but how?" asked Yorke.

"How? By going to the box-room and looking round, of course!"

The other juniors stared.

"Dash it all, that's easier said than

evening. The thing's got to be done secretly—in other words, after lights-out, when everything's still and calm."

"Phew!" whistled Yorke. "But that'll be pretty risky!"

"We can't expect to achieve any object unless we take a few risks," said Christine. "I want one or two picked chaps with me, and then we'll sally out upon this tour of investigation to-night. By hook or by crook we'll get into that box-room and probe the mysteries of this dread secret!"

"Good idea!"

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done!" exclaimed Oldfield dubiously. "What's going to happen if we sneak into the Ancient House? It's a ten-to-one chance we shall be spotted and kicked out on our giddy necks. And even if we manage to escape that, we shall find the box-room locked when we get to it. It's not worth chancing. Bob, old son."

Christine smiled patiently.

"My dear, fathheaded asses!" he exclaimed. "You're all off-side—you're groping in the dark. I'm not suggesting that we should enter the Ancient House now, or at any time during the

"I'll volunteer, Christy," said Talmadge.

"Count me, too," put in Clapson.

"Same here," said Yorke.

"Good—that's enough!" said Bob Christine. "It would be too risky for more than four of us to go. We'll fix the time at half-past ten. So you three chaps have got to keep awake after the prefect has put the giddy lights out."

"You can trust us," said Talmadge.

"It's not often we have anything up against the Ancient House, so we sha'n't miss this chance of scoring. Personally, I reckon we ought to wait until eleven.

By that time most of the masters will have gone to their rooms, and there'll be less risk of us being spotted."

Bob Christine nodded.

"Perhaps you're right," he agreed. "Right-ho—we'll say eleven o'clock, sharp on the stroke!"

There was a considerable argument for some little time, many of the juniors considering that at least six or eight fellows ought to be in the expedition. But Christine was firm. He maintained that four would be ample. A larger party would be more inclined to give itself away, and four, in any case, would easily be able to give a good account of themselves if it came to a scrap.

And so, after a lot of unnecessary talking the meeting broke up. The Monks kept their plans very secret, and not a word of what was afoot leaked out. They were determined to discover the truth about box-room No. 12 in the Ancient House, and they were certainly not going to let their rivals have any inkling as to their intentions.

Bedtime came at last, and Christine and Co. went up to their dormitory in the ordinary way. A keen observer might have noticed that there was a slight air of subdued excitement among certain of the juniors, but upon the whole the Monks managed to keep themselves well in control.

Carlile of the Sixth was the prefect who saw lights-out in the Remove dormitory. He certainly noticed that things were slightly different to usual. The juniors did not seem to be quite so sleepy, and just before he had entered there had been hasty warnings whispered round. But Carlile was not a suspicious fellow, and he did not think much of these little signs. So he turned out the lights without asking any questions, and went his way.

"Good!" murmured Bob Christine.

The dormitory was in total darkness, and was now left to itself for the night.

Unless something of an unusual nature took place, no prefect or master would visit the dormitory until the morrow. And the time was just after nine-thirty. And Christine warned his companions against talking, for a prowling master or a prefect might hear, and commence investigations.

The old clock boomed out the hour of ten, and the Remove dormitory in the College House was still and quiet. All

talk had died away, and now only the steady breathing of the juniors could be heard in the long, dark room. The fellows were taking heed of Christine's warning in a very thorough manner.

And the explanation, of course, was simple.

They had all fallen sound asleep, and there was about one chance in ten thousand of them awakening at the stroke of eleven, according to the carefully prepared programme. But, happily for the Monks' plan, Bob Christine himself remained awake. He was the leader, and under no circumstances could he allow himself to doze.

"You chaps asleep?" whispered Christine cautiously.

No reply.

"Jolly enthusiastic, ain't you?" growled Christine disgustedly. "Can't even keep awake for a half-hour. We should look pretty blue if we relied on any of you bounders to keep awake."

As nobody heard this remark it remained unanswered.

And by a quarter-past ten, Christine himself was feeling decidedly sleepy. He heard the quarter hour chime out. And then, a few seconds later the half hour chimed out—at least, so it seemed to Christine.

He sat up with a jerk and rubbed his eyes.

"My only hat!" he gasped. "I must have dozed! What a lucky thing the chiming of the clock woke me up. This won't do!"

He slipped out of bed, paced up and down until he felt chilly, and then stood looking at the cosy sheets and blankets just dimly visible in the gloom.

They looked tremendously tempting, and for a moment he was half inclined to slip back into bed. But this, as he knew, would probably be fatal. And so he donned his clothing and then sat on the edge of the bed—half-doing, half-awake, but unable to sleep properly in such a position.

And as eleven o'clock struck he roused himself and shivered slightly.

"Thank goodness!" he muttered. "I couldn't stick that much longer. Once we're on the move it'll be O. K."

He proceeded to the beds of Yorke, Talmadge and Clapson, and he gave each junior a vigorous shake in turn.

"Hi! What's up?" grumbled Talmadge sleepily. "Lemme alone! I



The door opened slowly and then a hand shot out, grasped Teddy Long by the neck, and twisted him round.

was just dreaming that I had a new motor-bike——"

"Never mind your dreams!" interrupted Christine briskly. "It's eleven o'clock—time to get up. Nice bright chaps, ain't you? All falling off to sleep and forgetting about the wheeze. Buck up, my sons!"

"Goal!" said Yorke absently. "That makes three up!"

"Eh?" grinned Christine. "Another chap dreaming!"

"I—I—— Why, hallo!" muttered Yorke, sitting up. "What the dickens are you doing out of bed, Christine?"

"Waiting for you to get up."

"But it's dark—— Oh, I remember!" said Yorke. "Here, I say! Let's chuck it up! After all, we couldn't find out much by going over to the Ancient House. It's cold, and shivery, and——"

"You—you backsliders!" said Christine witheringly. "I'll give you just ten seconds to get out of bed. If you haven't moved by that time I'll get one of the giddy water jugs!"

The threat had due effect, for all three juniors hopped out of bed and hastily commenced dressing. Once they were into their clothes they forgot all about sleepiness. And then they stole out of the dormitory like so many shadows. But in the corridor all was silent and dark, but it was necessary to go very cautiously, for it was quite possible that a master or two would be about.

"Follow me, and don't breathe a sound!" whispered Christine.

They passed downstairs in single file, creeping carefully, and secretly alarmed at the extraordinary number of creaks which the stairs set up. This was curious, too, for the stairs never seemed to creak during the daytime.

However, the four conspirators arrived in the lower passage without mishap. This was by no means the first time they had slipped out of doors after lights-out, and they knew an easy way. There was a little window at the end of the study passage which led directly out into a corner of the Triangle.

This window, of course, was always kept securely locked at night time, and there had been some talk about having bars fixed across it on the outside. If this was done it would put a stop to the juniors' goings and comings. Not that the juniors were worried. There were other ways of getting out.

However, this was the easiest, and Bob Christine softly slipped back the catch and raised the lower sash. It was only a very small window, and with the sash fully up there was just sufficient room for a lithe junior to slip through. The four Removites managed to make the passage, and they found themselves out in the cold, dark Triangle under the cloudy sky.

It was rather windy, and there was a cold rawness about the air which made the juniors pull their jackets tighter round them. So far as they could see there were only one or two lights showing in upper windows—indicating that everybody had already gone up to bed, even if they were not yet asleep.

The four conspirators did not cross the Triangle directly, but made their way round, skirting the old walls. And at last they arrived at the Ancient House. Thus far their progress had been simple, but something of a problem now confronted them. How would they be able to get into the building on this side?

There was a passage window closely corresponding to the one in the College House, but this was securely locked on the inside. Christine tried it just to satisfy himself, and then stepped back shaking his head.

"No, we can't get in that way," he said softly. "There's only one thing for it, I reckon. I shall have to shin up the ivy on the other wall and nip into one of the landing windows. That little one at the corner is generally open at the top."

"Too risky!" said Yorke.

"Of course it is," agreed Clapson. "You might fall and break your silly leg or something. Better go round the back and squeeze into a pantry window."

"After pulling out the iron bars, I suppose?" suggested Christine tartly.

"By Jingo! I'd forgotten the bars!"

"I hadn't!" said Bob. "All the windows on the domestic side are barred. No, my sons, the only way is to climb up the ivy. You needn't be afraid. It's thick enough, and the roots are strong. I sha'n't fall."

"Yes, but we shall all have to climb up," said Talmadge. "Not that I mind—I'm game if you are. I was only thinking that the ivy will probably be a bit weakened when the fourth chap starts climbing up."

Bob Christine sighed.

"Why is it I chose a dotty lunatic to come along?" he asked plaintively. "I'm going up the ivy alone, and when I get inside I shall slip down and open the little window in the lower passage. Haven't you got brains enough to see that?"

"All right—keep your hair on!" said Talmadge. "I understand."

And without any further ado Bob Christine commenced the ascent. It was not at all difficult, and by no means dangerous, provided that due precaution was taken. And Bob was very careful.

He arrived at a small landing window, and he had no difficulty in pushing it up. The next second he was inside, and the other three juniors went round to the little corridor window on the other side.

"They had not long to wait.

Three minutes had scarcely elapsed before the window was cautiously pushed up.

"All quiet," whispered Christine, looking out. "Slip in, and don't talk!"

Yorke and Talmadge and Clapson slipped in. They were filled with subdued excitement, for there was something about this expedition which thrilled them. They were on a voyage of discovery—they were about to learn the big secret.

And they were already in the enemy's country!

CHAPTER IV.

THE GREAT SECRET!

SHADOWS stealing along—stealthily and noiselessly.

This is what Christine and Co. resembled as they made their way along the upper corridor of the Ancient House. They felt fairly safe now—they had passed through the danger zone without any untoward incident.

And now they had arrived at the corridor where the box-rooms were situated, and this corridor was quite isolated from the inhabited portions of the building. So long as they exercised reasonable precaution there was no chance of their being discovered. And they could talk in low voices without much risk.

"Now, that's the door," whispered Bob Christine; "that one at the end. Within that apartment, my sons, is the grim and sinister mystery of the Ancient

Order of Fossils. It is our business to find out what that mystery consists of."

"There's no need to make a song about it!" breathed Yorke. "Let's get inside!"

But this was easier said than done.

Christine had come armed with an electric torch, and he flashed the light upon the door. He tried the handle, but the door refused to budge; it was, in fact, securely locked.

"Thought so!" muttered Bob. "And it's no good trying any other keys, either. The rotters have fixed a new lock on this door—can't you see? They've put one of those new patent latch locks on!"

"Phew!" whistled Clapson. "That's pretty significant."

"Of what?"

"Why, it's evident that this secret is being carefully guarded," replied Clapson shrewdly. "Locks of that kind cost money, and Nipper and Co. wouldn't buy one especially for this door unless they were jolly anxious to keep strangers out. No, we can't do anything here."

"Then we've had our journey for nix!" said Yorke gruffly.

Christine frowned.

"Looks like it," he muttered. "Dash it all. I don't like to give it up so jolly quickly, though. Still, we can't bust the door down, can we? For one thing, it would make too much noise, and it wouldn't be cricket, either. And it's absolutely hopeless to attempt to pick the lock."

"Then what's to be done?"

Christine considered before answering. Matters did not look very hopeful at the moment, and there was not the slightest doubt that the Monks had met with a serious check.

"Now, let me see," murmured Christine. "There are five box-rooms in this passage—a fairly big one at either end, and three small ones in between. Yes, that's right; they're underneath the gables."

"The what?"

"Haven't you ever studied the giddy architecture of the school?" demanded Bob. "You know this is a jolly old wing, and from outside there are two triangular gables, exactly matching one another. Each gable has a window underneath, and there are three windows in between—they're the windows of these five box-rooms."

"This is getting us a long way, isn't it?" asked Talmadge tartly.

"Well, you don't know," said Christine thoughtfully. "Let's go into the other box-rooms. It's struck me that there might be a little ledge running along, and if we can slip along that, we can get in by the window——"

"But there isn't a ledge!" protested Yorke.

"There isn't one visible from below, but there might be one, all the same," went on Christine. "Anyhow, I'm not going to give it up without a big effort. Yorke, you watch at the end of the passage, and give us the tip if somebody comes along."

Yorke didn't quite like it, but he agreed.

Christine and Talmadge and Clapson went into the nearest box-room. It was empty, except for some dusty trunks and articles of a similar nature. The juniors tried the window, but it was stuck.

They went into the next box-room, which was the end one—the box-room under the further gable. It was much larger than the three small apartments in the centre of the passage; the window was larger, too. The juniors moved across to it, and the lower sash was cautiously raised.

Christine looked out, and then withdrew his head.

NIPPER'S MAGAZINE!

THE REMOVE JOURNAL.

Edited by NIPPER.

All about ST. FRANK'S. Bright and interesting Contributions by the JUNIORS. A Free Supplement to Next Week's Number of

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Out on Wednesday. Price Twopence.

"No good!" he announced. "A giddy fly couldn't do it!"

The window was closed, and the juniors turned to go out of the apartment. They were feeling somewhat disappointed, for it was becoming more evident than ever that they would have to return to their own quarters empty-handed.

And then Bob Christine came to a halt.

"My only hat!" he breathed softly.

"What's the matter?" asked Talmadge.

"Look—look up there!"

Bob directed the light from his torch upon the ceiling, and there, in the centre of it, was a little square trap-door, obviously leading up into the roof space beneath the gable. The other juniors examined it casually.

"Well, what of it?" said Clapson. "I can't see anything startling."

"That only proves you haven't any brains," replied Christine politely. "The smaller box-room we went into just now didn't have any trap-door in the roof like this. But this room exactly corresponds to No. 12—it's beneath the opposite gable."

"Well, we know that; you needn't tell us something we're already aware of," whispered Talmadge. "What if it does correspond?"

"If you'd only use your wits, you'd be a bit more astute," said Christine. "It's not at all certain, but there's quite a big possibility that the large box-room at the other end has got a trap-door in the roof just like this one. Don't you see?"

Clapson breathed quickly.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "You—you mean that we might be able to get up here, and crawl over the rafters to the other trap-door?"

"Exactly."

"Of course, it's just possible," said Talmadge dubiously. "I catch on to the wheezo now all right. But there won't be any other trap-door, my sons. This one was made so that the builder chaps could go up to make repairs, if necessary. One's quite enough; they wouldn't have provided two."

"Well, you never know," said Christine. "I reckon it's quite likely that there's one in each gable. It's worth trying, anyhow. Fetch Yorkey, and we'll hoist ourselves up."

The Monks were alive with fresh hope.

Yorke was fetched in, and he announced that everything was still. The door of the box-room was closed, and the juniors proceeded to pile up the trunks and boxes in a kind of pyramid.

"It doesn't look particularly safe, but I dare say it'll bear the weight all right," said Christine. "If that lot topples over there'll be a fearful crash, and we shall be caught red-handed; so you chaps had better hold on tight."

The juniors promised to do so, and Christine cautiously climbed up until he was standing on the topmost box. From this position he was able to just reach the trap-door. He pushed hard, and the wooden covering was forced up. Incidentally, a cloud of dust descended into Christine's face.

But he didn't care. He grasped the edge of the opening, and swung himself up. A moment later he was standing precariously on the rafters, with the two sloping roofs of the gable coming down to a point. He switched on his electric torch, and searched round. His only fear was that there would be no way through to the corresponding gable.

Then he caught his breath in. There was just a little space between the brickwork and the roof. At first sight it seemed too small; but Christine managed to squeeze through. He now found himself over the three smaller box-rooms, and the space between the rafters and the roof was so restricted that he was obliged to crawl on his hands and knees. Again he squeezed through between the brickwork and the roof. He paused, only half-way, for the light of his torch revealed a trap-door, exactly similar to the one he had passed through.

"Ripping!" murmured Christine, with a chirrup.

He pulled himself back, and returned as quickly as possible to the open trap. He looked down, and those below saw a grimy, flushed face.

"It's O.K.—I was right!" panted Christine. "There's another trap-door, and we can get through. One of you chaps can come up, and the other two must remain on guard."

There was a bit of wrangling as to who should remain, and it was finally decided by a toss. Yorke was the one who accompanied Christine. In a few moments he was up in the roof space beside his leader.

And the pair proceeded to crawl along

'TOM TARTAR AT SCHOOL.'

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until they arrived at the other trap-door. They were dusty, grimy, and hot; but they didn't mind this. Success was within their grasp, and they had no thoughts for anything else.

Yorke held the light while Christine cautiously pulled open the trap-door. It responded easily, and came up at once. Then, with the light turned downwards, the two juniors stared into the room of mystery.

They were expecting to see something very unusual and out of the common. The secrecy of the whole business hinted that Box-room No. 12 contained something of an extraordinary character.

And Bob Christine and Roddy Yorke were keenly disappointed.

For they could see nothing out of the ordinary. Down below, in the apartment, there were several trunks, and a couple of tables. The tables were covered with various piles of papers. There were ink-pots, and there was even a drawing-board. But this was not particularly startling.

"Well, I'm blessed!" whispered Yorke. "It's a swindle!"

"We don't know yet—we'll see," said

Christine. "I'll drop down first, and you'd better lend me a hand. I don't want to descend with too much of a bump."

Christine lowered himself, and then, when he was hanging in mid-air, he grasped Yorke's hand, and was thus enabled to drop still lower before letting go. He descended upon the floor with only a slight bump.

"What about me?" whispered Yorke.

"You'd better stay up there," replied Christine softly. "I can have a look round here all right; and I shall want you to lend me a hand when I come out—"

"Rats!" said Yorke. "The door's fitted with a latch lock, and we can get out that way."

"By Jove, so we can!"

Christine tried it, and found that the door opened at once. When the juniors left, it would only be necessary to pull the door to and it would again be locked, and nobody could know that the room had been entered.

Yorke replaced the cover of the trap, and made his way back over the rafters. It was his intention to return to Talmadge and Clapson, and, after leaving everything in its normal state, the three juniors would come along to the secret box-room, and Christine, of course, would at once admit them.

Bob, in the meantime, was making good use of his time.

He looked round carefully, and then centred his attention upon one of the tables. There were all sorts of papers lying there, with close writing upon them, to say nothing of sundry blots at intervals.

But the thing which interested Christine most was a neatly pinned together little book, about seven inches by five in size, and consisting of eight pages. It was not a printed journal, but apparently a preliminary make-up of one. There was a heading, executed in ink, and a rough pen-and-ink sketch below. Turning the pages over, Christine's heart beat more swiftly. The pages inside were blank, but each was ruled off into columns, numbered, and each page had its proper heading; and here and there were titles of various contributions.

"Well, I'm blessed!" muttered Christine excitedly.

He knew at a glance that this was not a finished article, but merely a skel-

ton of what the real thing would be like. However, it was tremendously interesting and instructive. It told Bob Christine all he wanted to know.

"So that's the game, is it?" he breathed. "I thought it was something special. The bounders! The artful rotters! They mean to spring a surprise on the whole giddy school with this—but they jolly well won't do it!"

He picked up other papers, and commenced reading them. They proved to be greatly interesting, for he hardly heard a faint tap which sounded upon the door. It was repeated, and Christine walked swiftly over.

He turned the knob of the latch lock, and cautiously opened the door. His three chums were outside, eager and expectant.

"Come in, and don't make a noise!" whispered Bob. "Don't touch anything; we mustn't let Nipper and his crowd know that we've been here. And if we leave any clues behind, they'll jump at the truth in a minute."

Talmadge and Clapson looked round. They couldn't see much, because the light from the electric torch was centred upon the floor.

"Why, there's nothing much here!" said Talmadge.

"Isn't there?" asked Christine grimly. "Listen, my sons! Nipper and Co. are planning the biggest thing that's ever been brought off by the Remove! And we're out of it—we're left absolutely in the cold! These Ancient House chaps are planning to spring the biggest surprise that's ever been worked."

"Yes, but what is it?" asked Yorke quickly.

"A mag!"

"A which?"

"A what?"

"A magazine!"

"A—a magazine?" repeated Yorke, staring. "But—but—"

"A giddy school magazine, run entirely by the Remove!" went on Bob Christine grimly. "Now do you freeze on to it? It's here—not the finished article, but a kind of general make-up. The price is going to be a penny, and all the contributions are by Remove chaps. By what I can see, it'll be a junior mag, appealing particularly to the lower school; but it'll probably circulate among the seniors and the masters, too."

"My only hat!"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"A—a magazine! And we're left out of it!" said Talmadge. "No wonder the bounders were so secretive! I can understand it now. My goodness! What are you going to do about it, Christy?"

Bob Christine looked grim.

"I don't know yet," he replied.

"Something's got to be done, of course. We simply can't allow this to go on—we can't allow these Fossils to steal a march on us like this. Just have a look at it, my sons. I reckon it's going to be a pretty decent mag. by the time it's done."

The three juniors examined the preliminary copy with much interest.

"There's going to be a drawing on the front page by the look of it," said Yorke. "Then inside there'll be something by the editor—'Topical Mixture,'—which will probably be a collection of funny remarks. Then there's an article by Handforth, and a piece of giddy poetry! And look here! I'm blessed if there isn't a page reserved here for an article by that ass, Tucker!"

"And a serial story, too!" interrupted Talmadge. "I say, this is a bit rotten, you know. These Fossils will be swanking about like the dickens after this mag. has been produced. We're left out of it—we're nowhere! We sha'n't be able to hold our giddy heads up!"

"We'll see about that," said Christine gruffly. "You needn't think I'm going to let this pass unheeded, my sons. And look here—this is evidently the copy for a poster."

"A poster!"

"Yes, you know—a placard!" said Christine. "Perhaps they're going to have some printed and they'll hang about the school a few days before the rag is published. I expect they'll produce a lot of copies on one of those duplicating machines. Lots of school magazines are produced like that."

Christine held up a large sheet of paper which he had found on the table. Unfolded it was seen to have the following words printed upon it in large, rough, capital letters. It had evidently been executed with a paint brush dipped in ink.

"Look Out! It's Coming!! It's Nearly Here!!!

On Wednesday, November 23rd!!

Be Ready For It!

For What?

The Neatest, Brightest, Snappiest, Wittiest School Magazine That Has Ever Been Produced!

Full Of Ginger From Cover To Cover!

Price 1d.—Worth 1/-

Be Ready For It Next Wednesday!

You Can't Mistake The Title—

Nipper's Magazine!!!

"They mean big business, anyhow," said Clapson. "My hat! I can't help admiring the bounders, you know. This is a ripping stunt, and a magazine of this sort will go down tremendously. Everybody in the school will get a copy, and it'll be a roaring success."

"Will it?" said Bob Christine. "Don't you believe it, my lad. We've made this discovery, and we're going to take the wind out of Nipper's sails. We're jolly well going one better!"

"I'll tell you what!" put in Yorke. "What's wrong with the idea of wrecking the whole giddy place? We'll pinch all this copy, and make it impossible for them to bring the mag. out?"

"Jolly good idea!" said Talmadge promptly.

Bob Christine shook his head.

"No, I draw the line at that," he said. "It would hardly be playing the game. After all, this stunt isn't anything up against us. We're left out of it, certainly, but it's not a House jape. Therefore it wouldn't be cricket to make mincemeat of this box-room. I've got a better idea."

"What is it?"

"We've got practically a week," said Christine—"five days, anyhow. Why shouldn't we produce a school mag. of our own?"

"Eh?"

"Christine's Journal!" That sounds all right," went on Bob enthusiastically. "How does it strike you, my children? By working hard and rushing it we can get the whole thing finished by Tuesday, the 22nd. Then we can flood the whole giddy school with copies the day before Nipper's rag makes its appearance. That'll be one in the eye for the Fossils!"

The other juniors were flushed with excitement.

"Oh, gorgeous!" said Talmadge.

"That's the idea, Christy! There's nothing to beat it! We'll be out with a

magazine first, and teach these Fossils a thing or two! College House for ever!"

"Hurrah!"

"You—you asses!" gasped Christine. "Don't make all that noise. "Now let's slip out quietly and get back to our own dormitory."

Very carefully they replaced the papers exactly as they had been found. Then like shadows they crept out of the box-room and pulled the door to with a click behind them.

Exactly fifteen minutes later everything was still and quiet, and Christine and Co. were back in their beds. Their mission had been successful—and the great secret was in their possession.

CHAPTER V.

MANY CONTRIBUTIONS.

HANDFORTH entered Study C with a sheaf of crumpled paper in his hand, and a dreamy look in his eye.

It was just after tea-time on the following day, and Tommy Watson and Sir Montio and I were busy at our prep. As a matter of fact, we were hurrying somewhat, as we wanted to get upstairs to the Editorial Office.

The secret's out now, so I might as well be frank. Between ourselves we call box-room No. 12 "The Editorial Office." Not very many fellows in the Remove knew the secret—only those who could be trusted. I wasn't quite sure about Handforth, but I had only told him because I knew well enough that he would have scented something unusual, and would have noised it throughout the Remove. So I had taken him into the secret almost at once.

Other fellows who were "in the know" included Church and McClure, Watson and Tregellis-West, Fatty Little, Timothy Tucker, Pitt, Goodwin and Jack Grey. All these fellows could be trusted—even Tucker. And we were keeping it entirely to ourselves until the first number of the new magazine was ready for publication.

The idea, of course, was by no means a new one. There were hundreds of school magazines in existence already—there was even one at St. Frank's. But this was a stodgy affair produced monthly by the seniors, and the junior section of the school never even condescended to

glance at it. It was dull from the first line to the last.

I had therefore decided to bring out a little journal which would appeal to the Remove in particular and the whole school in general. It was, of course, an experiment, but I was fairly certain that it would be a moderate success.

And I thought the effect would be all the better if the whole thing was kept quiet until a few days before the first number was due to appear. Even Christine and Co. were kept out of it—although it was my intention to invite the leading lights of the College House Remove to contribute short stories and articles in due course. I had certainly no suspicion then that the Monks were already in possession of the secret.

Handforth closed the door of Study C, and looked us over.

"I've just brought the first instalment of my new serial—" he began.

"Cut it out!" I interrupted briskly. "My dear old Handy, haven't I told you that these things are only to be discussed within the sacred portals of the Editorial Office? Wait until later on."

Handforth looked rather blank.

"Oh, yes—I forgot that!" he said. "Well, let's go up now."

"We shall be there in ten minutes' time," I replied. "We've practically got the first number all ready for press, and to-night we shall be busy on the make-up of No. Two."

"This mag. is taking up a lot of time," remarked Watson.

"Well, naturally, it takes up a certain amount," I agreed. "You can't expect to run a mag. without devoting a good bit of attention to it. But once we're on the run it'll be easier. The first few numbers are always the most difficult. When it's really going it'll practically look after itself—the printers will know precisely how to bung the stuff in, and we shall only have to read the proofs. But, as I said before, this is no place to discuss the matter."

So Edward Oswald was compelled to wait for another quarter of an hour. By that time our prep. was finished, and we hurried up to the Editorial Office, without any undue show of haste. Handforth was already there, to say nothing of Pitt, and Grey and T. T.

We entered the box-room and carefully closed the door. Two or three candles were lit—for electric light was

not laid on in the box-rooms—and the blind was closely drawn.

"Heard from the printers?" asked Pitt.

"I don't expect to hear until to-morrow," I replied. "Everything's going on all right, and there's no need to be impatient. What we've got to do to-night is to sort out some contributions for No. Two. This magazine is going to be run on proper lines, and the only

you know the stuff is absolutely ripping," said Handforth airily. "I'm the last chap in the world to boast, and I'm simply speaking the truth when I say that this serial is the most extraordinary highwayman yarn that's ever been penned."

"Highwayman yarn?" I repeated. "Who's it about—Dick Turpin?" Handforth smiled pityingly.

"Just like all the other editors—

FROM NEXT WEEK & ONWARDS
our LONG COMPLETE STORY will
be INCREASED to 30,000 WORDS.

THE HEAD'S OTHER SELF

Is the Title of Next Week's Story,
 and as it is the opening of a Grand
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IT IS IMPORTANT



that you should make sure of Next Week's
 Number by ordering **THIS WEEK.**

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

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way to do it is to get the copy well in advance."

"About my serial——" began Handforth.

"As a matter of fact, we sha'n't have room for another serial for five or six weeks," I interrupted. "The paper is not particularly big, and we can't give too much space to serial stories."

"Why, you—you rotter!" snorted Handforth. "I've written this yarn specially for the magazine! It'll increase the circulation by thousands! It'll be the talk of the whole country! It's the finest serial that was ever written!"

"Nothing like being modest," murmured Pitt.

"There's no need to be modest when

always want to stick in the same old rut!" he exclaimed, with withering scorn. "Dick Turpin's played out—finished! My yarn's about a wonderful new character. His name's Jack Plunderer, and he's as fearless as a lion, as strong as a bull, and as sure footed as a cat! He's got eyes like a lynx, and he's as cunning and as clever as a fox!"

"A whole giddy zoo, in fact!" grinned Tommy Watson.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle!" snorted Handforth. "You wait until I start reading it out to you. You'll soon be so enthralled that you'll fall back staggered and exhausted with wonder. This yarn simply

puts every other highwayman story into the shade—it eclipses the lot!"

"Well, I'm the editor, and it's my job to read the yarn," I said. "If my opinion of it is the same as yours, Handy, it'll be altogether too good for a school magazine! We'll send it up to a big London firm, and you'll get a thousand quid for it on the nail!"

Handforth stared at me.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "That's not a bad idea! As a matter of fact, I was thinking that the stuff was miles ahead of your rag. It'll be a pity to waste it in a miserable thing like——"

"Steady on!" I interrupted. "Don't start running the paper down before the first number appears! With regard to your serial, there won't be any room for it, but to avoid all argument you'd better hand it over, and I'll have a glance through it. How many instalments have you got ready?"

"Two—four thousand words each!"

I grinned.

"My dear old ass, we couldn't possibly publish more than one thousand words in an instalment. But we'll let that pass—we're simply wasting time. Hand over the piffle, and I'll look through it——"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth. "I'll read it out."

"My hat!" groaned Pitt. "Have we all got to suffer?"

Handforth glared, struck a dramatic attitude, and commenced reading. We stood round in various attitudes, keen upon hearing this marvellous literary effort. And I must admit that Handforth's description of it was perfectly accurate. It was, without doubt, the most extraordinary highwayman yarn that had ever been penned.

"Now, pay attention," said Handforth importantly. "Ahem! 'The Robbers Of The Turnpike Cross-Roads; or, Jack Plunderer, the Purple-Masked Pilferer of Putney Common——'"

"Ripping!" said Pitt. "Is that the first instalment?"

"You—you fathead!" roared Handforth. "That's the title!"

"Oh, sorry!" grinned Pitt. "My mistake! Carry on!"

"I've just brought the first instalment 'Chapter One,'" said Handforth.

"Grim Doings on the York Road. 'Hold!' The voice rang out like a clarion-call. It was powerful, strong, and full-toned, and charged with sinister

forebodings. The stage-coach, en route from York to London, was rattling along the highway at a smart pace, laden with passengers and luggage. Sam Penny, the old driver, was letting his horses go for all they were worth, and the stage was roaring down the long hill. The man on the box next to Sam Penny was lustily blowing a long horn. 'Hold!' Again came that clarion-call, and Sam Penny turned a fearful face into the darkness. Then he beheld a horseman riding alongside the coach—a man upon a coal-black horse, wearing a purple mask——"

"You ass!" said Grey. "Horses don't wear masks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth glared.

"Who said the horse was wearing a mask?" he snapped. "It's the man who's wearing the mask! And don't interrupt so much! Where was I? Wearing a purple mask—yes, that's it. The man looked grim and powerful; and even as Sam Penny looked, he drove his spurs into his steed's flanks. At the same time he produced two glittering revolvers, and levelled them at the driver's heart!"

"Here, steady on!" I put in. "What period is this yarn?"

"Oh, about 1750," said Handforth.

"Then what the dickens is this chap in the purple mask doing with a couple of glittering revolvers?" I asked. "They only had pistols then——"

"Oh, if you're going to quibble, I'll dry up!" said Handforth stiffly. "Just as if it matters about a little detail like that! How do you know revolvers weren't invented at that time? Of course, you're jealous—that's what it is."

"Well, continue!" I grinned. "Is there much more?"

"Why, you ass, this is only just the beginning!" said Handforth. "Sam Penny was made of stern stuff, however, and in the flash of an eye he whipped out two revolvers, which glittered even more than the highwayman's. He held them in both his hands, and fired. While he was doing so he pulled in his horses sharply——"

"With his feet, I suppose?" inquired Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The coach swayed and rolled," continued Handforth, ignoring the inquiry. "Both Sam Penny's shots had missed,

and the highwayman was still riding along. The stage driver was doing his utmost to reach Putney Common within the next minute or so, for there he would find assistance——"

"Here, hold on!" I broke in. "I thought this coach was travelling from York to London?"

"So it is."

"Then it must be going by a round-about route to touch Putney Common," I said. "Putney's on the south side of London——"

"Are you going to let me read or not?" roared Handforth. "What does it matter which way the coach goes? An author is always allowed a certain amount of licence. Sam Penny was trying to get to Putney Common. But then one wheel of the coach struck a boulder, and the next second the heavy vehicle rolled over into a ditch, and the brave driver was caught beneath the heavy body, and crushed to death. Sam Penny had ridden his last ride. 'Stand, everybody!' shouted the highwayman. 'I am Jack Plunderer, and I demand your gold and valuables. Resist me, and you will be sliced to bits! I am desperate. Now, varlets, bring out your wealth!' The situation was tense and terrible. Those amongst the passengers who were not injured and dying brought out everything they owned, and Jack Plunderer seized them. But Sam Penny's eyes blazed with fury, and defiance was in his bearing. 'Never!' he thundered. 'Thinkest thou I wouldst hand over my gold to thee, scum of the roads? Get thee hence, rogue, or thou wilt be cut in twain by my lance!'"

Pitt clung to Grey for support.

"Oh, wonderful!" he gasped. "What a marvellous chap that Sam Penny is!"

"Rather!" said Handforth. "He's all through the story!"

"And does he often get killed like that?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Killed?" said Handforth, with a start. "By George, I'd forgotten—— Well, it doesn't matter; I could easily make that right in the proofs. Jack Plunderer seized the faithful Sam by the scruff of the neck, and hurled him over the hedge. And just then, at that moment, a large force of Metropolitan Police hove in sight on their bicycles——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's not funny!" snorted Handforth.

"Sorry! I thought it was!" I grinned. "The Metropolitan Police weren't formed until about 1829, and they certainly didn't have bicycles!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Jack Plunderer knew that he was trapped, and he was in a hopeless plight," went on Handforth, ignoring our remarks. "He whirled his horse round, and before the startled police could think, the highwayman was over the hedge. Like a whirlwind he thundered over a ploughed field in a cloud of dust, and this was all that the police could see in the pitchy darkness. The rain, which had never ceased, was pelting down harder than ever."

"Laying the dust, I suppose?" grinned Watson.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Over the hills went Jack Plunderer," said Handforth. "His spurs bit deeply into his steed's sides, and ere long they were speeding through London town. Jack Plunderer waved a defiant hand as they passed Tyburn tree. Then on he went—on, on into the night. He was bound for Bath, and long before the morning that city was reached. Both Jack and his steed were as fresh as paint, in spite of their long ride. They breakfasted in a wayside inn——"

Handforth paused, and looked round. His audience, for some reason or another, appeared to be in a state of convulsions. Pitt was leaning against Grey, and Grey held limply on to the table. Tommy Watson clung round my neck, and we were all sobbing. The moment Handforth paused, however, we could contain ourselves no longer.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

We simply howled, and Handforth glared ferociously.

"You—you idiots!" he hooted. "What's the matter with you?"

"Oh, Handy!" I gasped. "That yarn's worth quids! But don't read any more out, or we shall have half a dozen fits! As a humorous effort, it's unique!"

"Humorous!" roared Handforth. "It's a dramatic story!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's too good for the mag!" I said, shaking my head. "I couldn't think of publishing it, Handy. It's altogether above the Remove—they wouldn't appre-

ciate it. There's one good place for that story."

"And where's that?"

"There!" I grinned, pointing.

It was some moments before Handforth realised that I was indicating the wastepaper-basket, and it was quite five minutes before he had cooled down. In the meantime we busied ourselves with the work that had to be done. Then Church arrived, and I groaned as I saw that he had some sheets of paper in his hand.

"What's that?" I asked suspiciously.

"Nothing much—only a piece of poetry," said Church modestly. "I'll read it out, if you like——"

"Don't!" howled the Editorial Staff, in one voice.

"But—but it's rather good," said Church; "at least, McClure reckons so. I can't judge it myself very well, you know. It's about football, and it goes like this:

"Football is a ripping game.

It's the finest sport of all,

Although it sometimes makes you
lame.

After kicking the giddy ball.

The forward line is very keen.

The half-backs sharp and sure.

There's nothing like the Remove
team,

And we wish we had some more!"

"No thanks—that's quite enough!" I said firmly. "As a poet, Church, my son, you don't shine. Perhaps you'd do better at limericks——"

"Limericks?" said Handforth, with a sniff, before Church could answer. "Anybody can make up limericks. They're as easy as pie! Listen to this one:

"A fellow whose name was Nipper.
Considered himself a good skipper.

But all the other chaps

Thought different, perhaps,

And didn't think him quite such a
ripper!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not so bad—for a hurried one." I grinned. "How does this go?:"

"Ho isn't exactly a dandy.

His temper is not quite like candy;

From swelled head he suffers,

He's the rankest of duffers.

And the name of the fellow is
Handy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's one for you, Handy, old son!" chuckled Pitt.

"You—you insulling fathead!" roared Handforth. "And, anyhow, that limerick's not half so good as mine."

"Hold on—somebody at the door!" whispered Pitt.

But it was only McClure, who had brought up a short story—which, with one accord, the Editorial Staff refused to hear. McClure was rather upset; but we had heard enough contributions for one evening. And then Timothy Tucker, who had been very quiet all the time, produced a bundle of papers from his pocket.

"H'm! H'm!" he said. "Quite so! I feel sure, my dear friends, that you will now be able to pay some slight attention to me. I have here a most remarkable paper upon the anthropoid ape. I may say it is a masterpiece of literary effort, and it is my intention to——"

"Dry up!" I interrupted promptly.

"Really, my dear sir!" protested T. T. "How dare you? Do you realise that this article is of world-wide importance? Do you realise that it will create a sensation when it appears in print?"

"I realise that you're either going to dry up, or make a hurried exit," I interrupted. "Choose, my lad—and be quick about it."

T. T. did choose. He commenced reading out his marvellous paper on the anthropoid ape. His exit was swift, sudden, and violent. And while he collected his wits and his papers together in the passage, the Editorial Staff commenced real business.

CHAPTER VI

SOMEWHAT MYSTERIOUS!

BOB CHRISTINE scratched his head.

"Things don't seem to be coming right," he grumbled irritably. "This short story I've written doesn't seem to be so bad. But, after all, it's all true—it's simply an account of what happened in Study Q, when we bought that giddy oil-stove a week or two back. It can't be called a real short story."

"That's what I said at the start," exclaimed Talmadge. "Still, I suppose it's better than nothing——"

"Better than nothing!" echoed Christine. "It's a fat lot better than the muck you other chaps have turned in! I've never seen such piffle! Some of it's supposed to be funny, some of it's intended to be dramatic—and it's all rank rubbish! A decent editor wouldn't dare to print it!"

Christine and Co., in fact, were in trouble.

They were rapidly discovering that the production of a journal was by no means as easy as it had originally seemed. Difficulties had cropped up at every turn—and the chief stumbling-block of all was the lack of good copy.

Yorke, and Talmadge, and Clapson, and several others had set their wits to work, but their efforts could not exactly be called masterpieces. Harron, of Study X, had perpetrated a sketch for the cover, and the Editorial Staff had made wild guesses at what it was supposed to be. Christine thought the drawing represented a house; Talmadge declared it to be a landscape; Yorke was quite positive that the drawing was a picture of St. Paul's Cathedral. It came as a great surprise, therefore, when Harron declared that the masterpiece was a brilliant caricature of Chambers, of the Fifth. What Chambers would have thought if he had seen the effort, the juniors hardly liked to imagine—and what Chambers would have done was simply too horrible to contemplate.

There were one or two topical articles ready; but the grammar was bad, the spelling worse, and the articles seemed to have no beginning and no ending. Bob Christine, in fact, was in a bit of a muddle.

Then, again, there was the question of printing.

One copy wasn't sufficient for the whole school, and it was obviously impossible to have the new journal sent out to a big firm of printers. The expense would be too great, and, moreover, there was no time. The only solution was to purchase a duplicating machine.

Yorke had seen one for sale in a shop in Bannington. It was rather expensive, but Yorke pointed out that it was simple to work. The stuff merely had to be written on a stencil, and then any number of copies could be taken off. There were to be twelve pages in "Christine's Journal," so a very elementary calculation made clear the fact

that the Monks had an enormous amount of work in front of them.

"Still, we've started it now, and we can't back out," said Christine. "We shall have to club together and buy that giddy duplicating machine. We shall need some paper, too. But that can wait until to-morrow. The main thing to-night is to get all the contributions ready. These blessed things will have to be revised and re-written; they're hopeless as they stand!"

The College House journalists had taken up their quarters in a small, deserted loft at the rear of the domestic quarters of the school. Here they were quiet and undisturbed, and there was not much possibility of them being discovered by inquisitive juniors like Teddy Long.

The loft was not particularly warm, but it was tucked away over a disused stable, and there was no window to betray any tell-tale light. And the secrecy of the whole thing appealed to the juniors.

There were six of them altogether. Several candles were burning, and a number of old boxes served as editorial tables. Bob Christine, upon whom the chief responsibility rested, was greatly worried. The other fellows were content to leave the most important work to the editor, and if the whole thing went wrong—well, it would be his fault. And, secretly, Christine was beginning to have a large doubt in his innermost mind that the journal would never materialise.

But he shook this fears aside resolutely, and settled himself to the work with even greater determination than before.

That same evening, by a curious chance, I was coming up from the village. It was dark and very windy, and low clouds were scudding over the sky. I was expecting rain to commence falling at almost any minute, in fact. I had been to the post-office to dispatch some corrected proofs—for "Nipper's Magazine" was being done thoroughly, and was in the hands of a large firm of Bannington printers.

I had reached the school wall, and was making for the gates, when I noticed a man entering the Triangle. I paused, curious at once.

There was nothing particularly queer about a man entering the Triangle, but the very way in which this fellow slunk

through the gateway was suggestive. He went in like a shadow—softly, silently. And it struck me at once that his business could not be of an ordinary kind.

The wind in the trees had prevented him hearing any sound of my approach, and it was so dark in the lane that he certainly could not have seen me. I was therefore within a few yards when he actually made his stealthy entrance.

I was after him in a minute—but not through the gateway. Quick as a flash, I nipped over the wall, dropped silently into the Triangle, and watched from behind a tree. The man had paused, and was standing quite still. I could faintly see him silhouetted against the glow from the Ancient House. He was tall, slim, and wore a heavy overcoat and a soft hat, with rim turned down. And then another figure joined him. For a moment they stood talking, their voices so low that I could not distinguish any word that was said. Then together they slipped off through the gateway and vanished.

"O-ho!" I murmured softly. "That's rather queer, although I mustn't make too much of it. I wonder what our excellent science-master is up to?"

The second figure had been that of Mr. Hugh Trenton. Now, it isn't exactly customary for respectable science-masters to meet lurking strangers in the Triangle. There may have been nothing in this affair at all; but, on the other hand, it struck me as being rather significant. From the very first a vague distrust of Mr. Trenton had assailed me; and I wondered why his visitors should meet him in this way, instead of going boldly in and chatting with him in his own study. There was certainly something mysterious about it.

But I was not allowed to ponder on the subject any more just then, for two juniors emerged from the College House, and proceeded to act mysteriously, too. But for the fact that I was standing in the dark, I should never have witnessed this little incident. The two juniors came right outside, and looked about them with a great show of secrecy and

precaution; then, having satisfied themselves that the Triangle was deserted, they slipped off towards the rear.

I followed.

It's not my general habit to act the part of a spy; but this was a case of warfare—the keen rivalry which always existed between the Monks and the Fossils. I could not help thinking that the College House fellows were planning some jape against the Ancient House. Mysterious movements of that kind generally accompanied any such plan, so I thought I'd make sure.

I rounded the College House just in time to see the two juniors making for the old stable buildings, which had been disused for some months. They entered, and closed the door behind them.

"I seem to be discovering quite a lot of things this evening," I murmured. "Now, why are those Monks acting in this way?"

At all costs I wanted to avoid prying into something which didn't concern me; but I really felt that it was my duty, as the leader of the Fossils, to give this little matter a closer inspection. So I crept quietly up to the stable, found the door closed, but unlocked. I silently entered, and then saw a little patch of light coming down from a small loft in the far corner.

I paused, listening.

"No good at all," came Christine's voice. "Why on earth you can't write some decent stuff is beyond me!"

"I thought it was jolly good——"

"Look here, Page, my son, that's not a short story—it's simply a collection of rubbish," said Christine tartly. "Do you think we can produce a paper to beat this new magazine of Nipper's if we put in piffle like this?"

I didn't hear any more. For a second I was rather staggered to discover that Christine and Co. were already in the secret, and they were actually producing a paper of their own.

I thought rapidly for a few seconds. Of course, this couldn't be allowed. One junior magazine would be quite enough for St. Frank's. If Christine brought out a journal of his own, it would not only be a dismal failure—for he couldn't do it properly in the time—but it would utterly spoil the circulation of my own magazine. Under no circumstances could this business be allowed to continue.

(Continued on page 32.)

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To me, as with you, the characters at ST. FRANK'S are as living personalities. They seem to have walked out of the pages of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY into real life. And they have grown so numerous that, to do justice to them all, I have been faced with a problem similar to that of the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe. But I have overcome the difficulty to some extent by making the shoe larger, and with the additional periodical appearance of NIPPER'S MAGAZINE, I hope to bring you in closer and more frequent contact with your favourite heroes.

THE AUTHOR EXCELS HIMSELF !

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THE EDITOR.

(Continued from page 30.)

I made up my mind, strode to the ladder, and marched up. Christine and Co. stared at me blankly as they saw my face appear.

"Quick!" gasped Bob. "Shove those things away—"

"No need to get excited—I know all about it," I interrupted calmly.

"You—you rotter!" shouted Christine wrathfully. "You—you've been listening—"

"Exactly," I agreed. "Scouting is always allowed in warfare—even if it's only a peaceful warfare between two rival Houses. Somehow or other you've got hold of the truth about my new mag. and you're planning to start one of your own."

"Yes, I am!" said Christine grimly.

"Well, don't do it," I went on. "Look here, it's taken me weeks to plan this new paper of mine. I've schemed and worked, and the other chaps have helped me like bricks. And even now the first number doesn't come up to my requirements. How are you going to produce a rival paper within three days?"

Bob Christine glared.

"Never mind how!" he roared. "Here, you chaps, lend a hand! We'll chuck—"

"Pax!" I broke in hurriedly. "I walked in, you know. Pax, my children! Why not come to terms? Squabbling won't do any good."

"Terms!" snorted Bob Christine. "You ought to be boiled in oil! Starting a new paper, and keeping it from me! We're all in the Remove, and—"

"You're quite right," I interrupted gently. "But we wanted to give you a little surprise, with the rest of the school. But, since you've discovered the dread secret, we'll make an alteration. I'm willing to appoint two of you chaps to the Editorial Staff, and every College House chap will have the privilege of sending in contributions for consideration. How's that? Fair enough?"

Bob Christine, as a matter of fact, was only too delighted to have finished with his own efforts to start a school paper.

Events of a startling and extraordinary character were destined to occur at St. Frank's—events which would turn the old school topsy-turvy, and cause general excitement, and even bring the juniors to the verge of—revolt!

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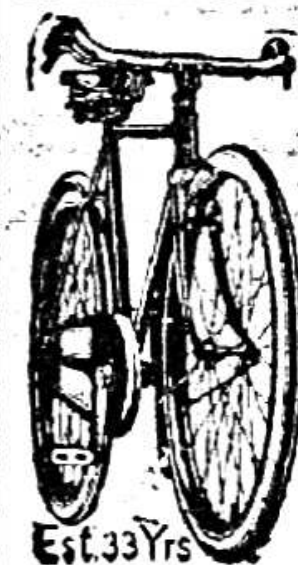
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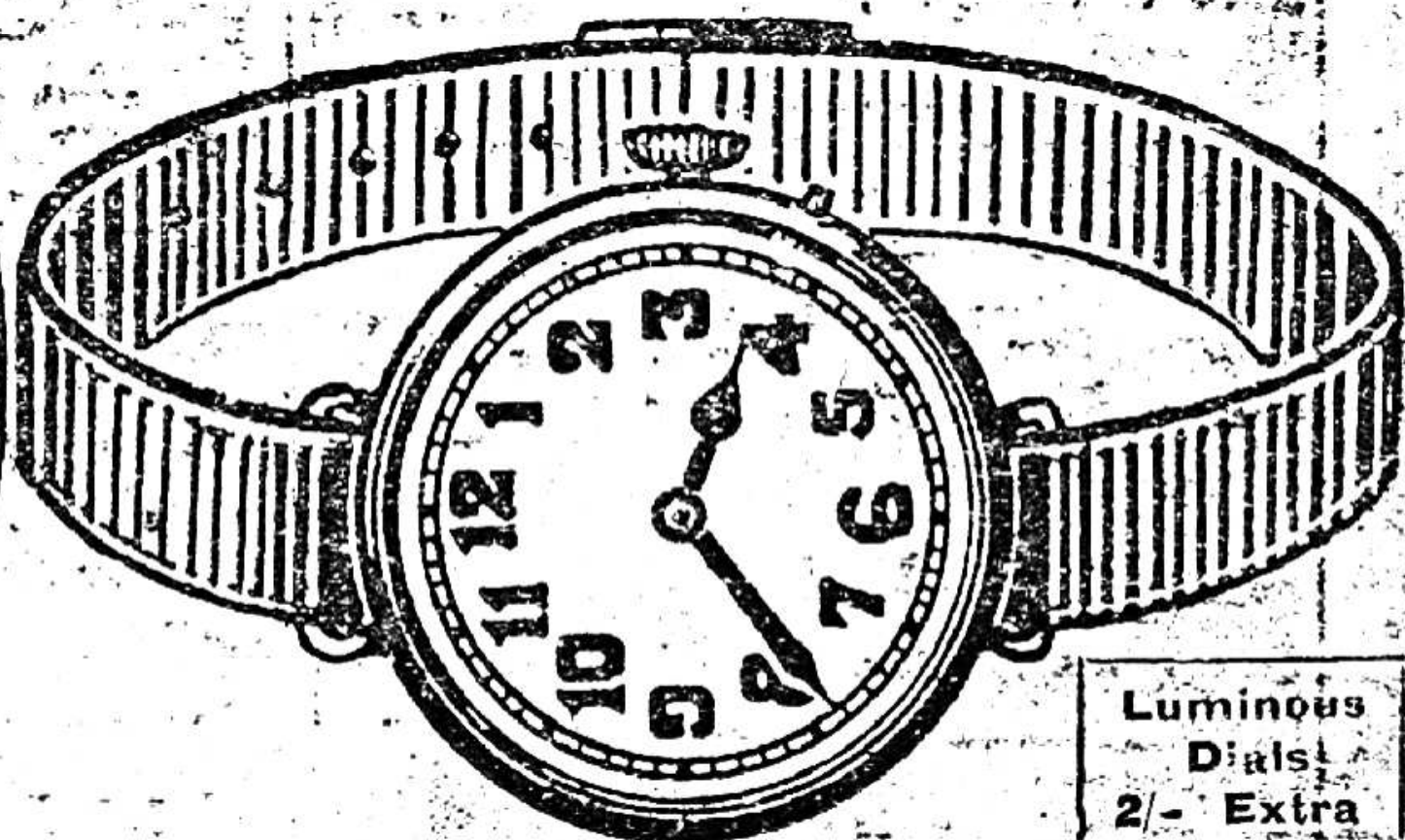
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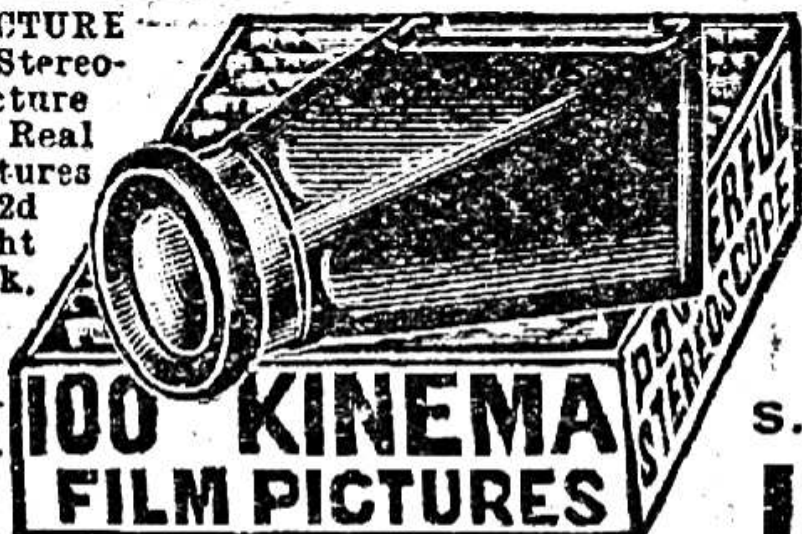
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