THE DESTRUCTION OF ST. FRANK'S! SEE THIS WEEK'S STORY!

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BURIED ALIVE

or The Last of the Modern House.

A thrilling story of the great disaster at ST. FRANK'S and of the terrible experiences of HANDFORTH and CO. in the mysterious cavern.

No. 521. OUT ON WEDNESDAY May 30th, 1925

The North wall of the Modern House suddenly came outwards, and there was a thunderous, appalling crash. Clouds of dust arose.

BURIED ALIVE!

or,

THE LAST OF THE MODERN HOUSE!

A thrilling story of the Boys of St. Frank's, and how Handforth and Co. investigate the mystery of the cavern, leading to the great explosion which demolishes completely the Modern House. Amazing revelations concerning the association of Goolah Kahn with Chandra Jungh are brought to light as the result of Nelson Lee's recent activities.

THE EDITOR.

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER I.

SOMETHING WRONG.

WILLY HANDFORTH, of the Third Form at St. Frank's, came to a halt in the middle of the Ancient House lobby, and looked round with a puzzled expression on his fresh, innocent face.

"Jolly queer!" he said thoughtfully.

Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon, his inseparable chums, looked at Willy, and saw that he was gazing straight at a dusty-looking cap, which lay in a corner.

"Nothing queer about it to me," said Chubby Heath. "Some of the chaps have been larking about, I expect——"

"Shut up, ass!" interrupted Willy briefly.

"But don't you want to find out whose cap that is?"

"Cap?" repeated Willy. "What cap?"

"That one in the corner."

"Which corner?" asked Willy, with a start. "Oh, that thing? I didn't see it before! I was just thinking, that's all. Can't I think now without asking your giddy permission, and without you interrupting me with all sorts of silly questions?"

Handforth minor put his head on one side, and stood quite still. There was something he couldn't understand, or at least, he pretended there was.

"It's too quiet here!" he announced at last. "My major must be out. I haven't known it so still and silent for weeks. But how is it? It's past locking up, and Ted ought to be in his study."

"Let's go along and see," said Juicy Lemon.

"Not a bad idea," agreed Willy. "I want to have a word with him about the pater. I managed to wangle ten bob, but what's ten bob on gala day? I've got an idea that Ted twisted the old man out of a fiver. If so, I'm going to have a quid of it."

"Your major will never part!" said Chubby, shaking his head.

The leader of the Third laughed.

"My dear pessimistic fathead," he said witheringly, "if I liked to be greedy, I could get the whole giddy fiver out of Ted. It's only a matter of rubbing him the right way. He pretends to boss me, but when you come down to brass tacks, I can twist him round my little finger!"

The mighty Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Fourth Form, would have been startled had he heard these words. Naturally, he would have scoffed at them, and would probably have done serious damage to his minor. But, curiously

enough, Willy was exceedingly near the truth.

The fags went along to Study D, and found, as they had expected, that it was deserted.

"I knew it!" said Willy. "You wouldn't get all this silence in the place if Ted was about. Oh, I've got it! He must have gone off with the pater. Having a word with Ena, perhaps, or something of that sort. Anyhow, we needn't bother. I can get that quid to-morrow."

Willy was quite confident about it.

It was a very special occasion, too. It was evening—nearly bed-time, in point of fact, for the Third. And St. Frank's was quietening down after one of the most exciting days of the term. For this particular Monday had been a gala day—the occasion of the Yexford match.

To open the excitement there had been a lot of trouble with the Modern House seniors, mainly owing to the intense feud which had been growing stronger and stronger in power. For weeks the fellows of the Modern House had been "up against" the Ancient House, and vice versa.

And the Modern House seniors had attempted to stop the First Eleven's match with Yexford. But after a lot of trouble the game had started, only to be finally stopped soon after lunch by Mother Nature.

A thunderstorm had swept down, stopping all play.

Rain had fallen in torrents, and cricket was simply out of the question. But as the sky had cleared by tea-time and the evening had proved glorious, everybody had managed to enjoy themselves to the full.

Willy & Co. were feeling tired and happy after a really good time.

"Just a minute, Handforth minor," said Nipper, looking out of Study C, as the fags were moving down the passage.

"Hallo!" said Willy. "Want me?"

"Well, strictly speaking, I want your major," replied Nipper. "Do you happen to know where he is?"

"Haven't the ghost of an idea," replied Willy. "Of course, he's not in the school; anybody can tell that. We can't hear his voice; there's no sound of howling, and there aren't any bumps and thuds. He's bound to be out."

Nipper grinned.

"Handy isn't always scrapping like that, Willy," he said. "He has peaceful moments sometimes."

"He keeps 'em jolly quiet, then," said Willy doubtfully. "Whenever he comes our way he sounds like that thunderstorm we had this afternoon. Not, of course, that we can really compare Ted to a thunderstorm. He's more like a cyclone."

Willy & Co. went to their own quarters, and Nipper walked thoughtfully along the passage and went to the Common-room. He found this apartment fairly well filled. But there were no signs of Handforth & Co.

"Anybody seen Handy?" he asked, looking round.

"Not that I know of," replied Reggie Pitt, looking up.

"Perhaps he's gone off to the cavern to have a look for those Indians? What do you think, Jack?" he added solemnly.

"That's about it!" grinned Jack Grey.

Nipper stood in the doorway, startled. There were all sorts of laughs in the Common-room, and everybody was grinning. There was apparently some joke, although Nipper couldn't see it.

CHAPTER II.

SOMEWHAT ALARMING.

NIPPER had every reason to be startled. Not long since he had emerged into the open air with Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West, after an exciting visit to those very Indians whom Reggie Pitt spoke of so jokingly.

Even Nipper didn't know who these Indians were, but that they were deadly and dangerous went without saying. For they had once attempted to stab Nelson Lee in the back, and had afterwards captured the great detective, and had kept him chained up to a wall.

Nipper & Co. had found Lee in this unhappy predicament, and had helped him to escape. And Nelson Lee was now in another part of the school, and Nipper was waiting an opportunity to go to him, so that he could learn some of the facts of the case.

And here were the Fourth-Formers joking about this affair.

Nipper was alarmed. He hated to think that the story was general property, and for the life of him he couldn't understand how anybody had got to know the facts. He had kept strictly silent, and he knew well enough that he could trust his two chums. He felt that a few cautious words would not be out of place.

"What's the idea," he said carelessly, entering the Common-room. "Are you trying to be funny, Reggie?"

"That's a hard one!" said Pitt sadly. "I thought I was being funny."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Quite a number of juniors laughed loudly.

"If I were you, Nipper, I'd go down in that cavern and collar the Indians!" said Armstrong, of Study J. "And while you're about it you might as well round up the idols, and see what's cooking in the electric furnace."

Nipper was further startled.

This was another remarkable truth. There actually was an electric furnace in that cavern, so there could be no coincidence about all this talk, which seemed to be the property of the entire Fourth.

"What do you mean—cavern, Indians, idols?" asked Nipper, pretending not to be serious. "Where on earth did you get that story?"

"Observe the celebrated author!" replied Pitt, pointing a dramatic finger at Teddy Long, the sneak of the Fourth. "There he stands in all his glory. I never knew he had such wonderful powers of imagination."

Teddy Long stood near the wall, and he looked at Nipper with scared eyes. He had gone pale, and he was shivering. Then, with a gulp of terror, he rushed to the door and fled.

"Oh!" said Nipper slowly.

"You wouldn't believe it, would you?" asked Reggie. "The young fathead has been going about with that Hindu yarn, trying to sell it. I must say he's got plenty of persistence."

"Trying to sell it?" repeated Nipper.

"Yes. He said that he heard you and Watson and Tregellis-West talking," grinned Pitt. "He tried to make out that you were going down into that cavern to investigate, and that some of us ought to find out what you were up to. And the scream of it is, he actually thought that we should believe him! A wild, hair-brained yarn like that!"

"Oh, let's talk of something sensible!" said De Valerie.

"Blow Teddy Long, and his silly whoppers!" said Grey. "I shouldn't be at all surprised if Handforth swallowed the yarn, and he's probably dragged his chums down into the tunnels."

"Oh, they'll soon be back!" remarked Johnny Onions

Nipper went out of the Common-room after a few minutes, and his expression changed as soon as he got outside. Now he knew. What the juniors thought to be an invention of Teddy Long's, what they refused to credit, happened to be the exact truth!

Nipper was both alarmed and relieved.

In the first place, it was comforting to realise that the juniors discredited the highly-coloured story, and regarded it as a joke. Within an hour it would be forgotten.

But in the second place, there was the possibility that Handforth & Co. had run themselves into danger. And Nipper knew what a determined fellow Handforth was. There was only one thing to be done. Teddy Long must be found, and closely questioned.

After a brief search, Nipper found the frightened Teddy skulking in the cloakroom, and he grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

"Now, you little worm!" said Nipper grimly. "What's this yarn you've been spreading over the House? You heard me talking to Watson and Tregellis-West, I suppose, earlier in the evening?"

"Please, Nipper——"

"Answer me!" snapped Nipper.

"Yes, I—I happened to be passing your study door," gasped Teddy, frightened. "It was ajar, and I heard——"

"You listened at the keyhole—and don't deny it!" interrupted Nipper.

"Please, it doesn't matter, Nipper!" panted Teddy. "Nobody believed me! The rotters all laughed, and told me that I was dotty."

"You'd better keep quiet about this, you miserable little sneak!" exclaimed Nipper angrily. "And look here—did you go to Handforth with that yarn?"

"Yes, but Church and McClure kicked me out."

"Good luck to Church and McClure!" growled Nipper. "You young toad! It seems impossible to speak privately while you're alive! You're always listening and spying——"

"I think Handforth's gone off to investigate," went on Teddy eagerly. "Anyhow, I saw him and Church and McClure sneaking round the shrubbery half an hour ago. They were off to the ruins, so that they could go down to the tunnels and investigate. And the rotters didn't even give me a measly bob for my information!"

Nipper set his teeth, and threw Teddy Long aside.

"You may have caused some serious trouble with that tittle-tattling tongue of yours!" he said angrily. "My only hat! Handforth & Co. down in that tunnel! Something's got to be done!"

CHAPTER III.

HANDFORTH ON THE TRAIL.

THERE was every reason for Nipper's uneasiness.

Setting out from Study C to find Handforth—merely to ask him a few questions about his wireless set—he had little dreamed that he would discover these startling facts.

Handforth, naturally, had swallowed Teddy's yarn whole, and had probably gone off to investigate. The story, as told by Long, had sounded wild and farcical, and although it was mainly the truth, the juniors had simply scouted it as the invention of Teddy's imagination. They knew what a born fibber he was!

But Handforth was different. Handforth would believe anything. And when it was something about a mystery, or criminals, he

would accept the bait without pausing to question the authenticity of the information.

Nipper decided to see Nelson Lee as soon as possible. Something had happened down in that cavern since Nipper had been there himself, and he didn't think it wise to go without first seeing his "guv'nor."

In the meantime, it wouldn't be a bad idea to find Handforth & Co. and discover exactly what they were up to.

Nipper was right in assuming that the great Edward Oswald had bitten the bait. He had. Church and McClure were very sad about it all, but they could do nothing to dissuade their leader.

And Handforth & Co. were now in the vault, beneath the monastery ruins. They had started on the first stage of their investigation. They were hardly a united trio.

While Handforth was convinced that he was on the track of a gang of coiners, Church and McClure were equally convinced that they were on the track of a wild goose. So perfect harmony was somewhat difficult.

The vault was well known to them—a gloomy, eerie place, with an arched roof, and damp, earthy stone walls. There was an unpleasant, musty odour in the centuries-old crypt.

"Ugh!" shivered Church, as he looked round into the gloom. "Reminds me of a graveyard!"

"Oh, dry up!" growled McClure.

"I'd better go first, and you chaps can follow," said Handforth practically. "And I'll take the electric torch, too. Hand it over, Church!"

"Rats! This is mine!" said Church. "You've got one in your pocket—it belongs to Archie, but that's a detail."

"My hat! I'd forgotten," said Handforth.

He pulled out a superb torch, and switched it on, and more light was added to the scene. Apparently, Handforth & Co. had come well prepared. They were carrying ropes—although Church and McClure couldn't possibly imagine what they wanted them for—and while Church nursed a packet of sandwiches, the necks of two bottles protruded from McClure's pockets.

Handforth seemed to have an idea that they were going to be on the trail all night. And yet he knew, perfectly well, that he and his chums would have to get back soon in time for bed. But Handforth believed in being prepared for emergencies.

"It's rather a pity we haven't got a revolver!" he said thoughtfully. "I don't mean a real one—but one of those water-squirters. It looks genuine, and if it came to a pinch we could use it to frighten the burglars into surrender."

"I thought we were going after coiners?" asked McClure sarcastically.

"Well, it's all the same — burglars, or coiners, or whatever they are," said Handforth. "The main thing is for us to get busy. We shall be here all night if we stand talking."

They moved across the vault, and entered the mysterious stone tunnel. This penetrated right through the hillside, and finally emerged in the old Moor quarry, long since disused and deserted. There were veritable catacombs here—the old quarry workings which had not been operated for many, many years. There were natural caverns, too, mostly of rock formation, and there was a certain fascination in exploring the place.

Of course, Handforth & Co. were out of bounds—not that Handforth worried over this detail. These old quarry workings were considered to be unsafe, and there were all sorts of dangers and pitfalls. So the boys were not allowed to penetrate them.

Having entered the tunnel, the chums of Study D had no inclination to look in their rear. Their interest lay ahead. If, however, they had glanced behind, they might have received a bit of a shock.

For a form was lurking in the dimness—intangible, mysterious and silent. But it

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was not one of the Indians, as you may be guessing. The figure was nothing more harmless than the person of Ralph Leslie Fullwood, of the Fourth.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ADVENTURE IN THE CAVERN.

FULLWOOD was unusually curious.

He had thought very little of that story of Teddy Long's at the time. The sneak had brought it to him first of all, and Teddy had been thrown out with little or no ceremony.

Later on, however, Fullwood had had reason to pause.

He had noticed Nipper & Co. coming from the monastery ruins. It was only by chance that Fullwood had seen this incident, and he might not have wondered but for one fact.

Nipper and his chums, instead of coming straight into the Triangle, had made a detour with the obvious intention of avoiding publicity. This, taken into conjunction with Teddy Long's story about tunnnels, seemed very significant.

Indeed, there was almost a possibility that Long was right. Perhaps that yarn wasn't so preposterous, after all. And Fullwood, without saying anything to anybody, went off on his own.

Whatever his faults, he was not a curious, inquisitive junior. His vices lay in another direction. But he had no great admiration for Nipper, and it would be rather good, he told himself, if he could discover something which would come in useful for scoring off Nipper.

But even then Fullwood hesitated.

He didn't quite like the idea of going down in those tunnels alone, and he had almost abandoned the plan when Handforth & Co. hove in sight. And the chums of Study D were very obviously equipped for business.

The matter took on a different aspect.

By following Handforth & Co. Fullwood would not only have company, but in the event of any sudden alarm he would have plenty of support. But he concluded that it would be better to follow at a distance. Handforth might object to his presence—and Handforth had his own ways of objecting.

And so it came about that when the investigators entered the tunnel Fullwood was close in their rear. Being such an expert detective, Handforth ought to have known this from the first, but apparently this was one of his off days.

"Now, all we've got to do is to go straight along this tunnel, turn down one of the side passages, and there we are!" said Handforth briskly. "And if we find any Indians we'll scare 'em——"

"Yes, we'll go straight along the tunnel!" interrupted Church blandly.

He flashed his torch upon the great obstruction which filled the tunnel from floor to ceiling. In a word, it was impossible to pass. And while Handforth viewed this circumstance with dismay. Church and McClure were overjoyed.

"Good!" said McClure. "Now, we'll turn back, I suppose?"

Handforth stared at the mass of rock and stone with indignation.

"Well, of all the nerve!" he said. "Somebody's been here! They must have known I was coming, and blocked the tunnel! But don't worry—all detectives have to contend with these set-backs!"

He examined the debris with care. And Handforth's mind was at work. If Nipper & Co. had visited the cavern, it stood to reason that they had got past this obstruction. Or, on a closer examination, Handforth saw that it was an old-standing complaint.

"What's the good of wasting time?" asked Church. "We can't go any further. Might just as well give it up!"

"I never give up until I'm beaten!" retorted Handforth tartly. "And as I'm never beaten, I never give up! There must be some way of wangling this. These rocks look solid enough, but—— By George! Did you see that?"

He had pushed against a big stone slab, in order to demonstrate its solidarity. And, to his surprise, it moved. He pushed again, and this time the slab went right back and stopped. It was balanced in a peculiar way, and could easily be manipulated.

"My hat! It's a kind of door!" said Handforth excitedly. "Come on, my sons, we've got to get through here!"

He proceeded to crawl in.

"Come out, you ass!" gasped Church. "The whole mass might fall!"

"Rot!" came a muffled voice from Handforth. "You might have some sense, but there's not much hope! Hallo! There's another rock here. If I just give it a push ——"

"Don't!" yelled his chums desperately.

They heard the sound of the rock being moved, and they held their breaths. They expected to see the entire mass fall down, and crush Handforth beneath its weight.

But no such disaster occurred.

Church and McClure didn't know that Nelson Lee himself had prepared this secret way through the apparently obstructed tunnel. There was no danger at all. And Handforth reached the other side without mishap.

"Come on!" he called. "Safe as eggs!"

This was not very re-assuring, if taken literally, but Church and McClure gingerly crawled through, and reached their leader's side. He was looking very triumphant.

"Now we're fairly in the swim of it!" he

declared tensely. "I'd better go first, and you fatheads can follow in single file."

And with the electric torches blazing, they penetrated the tunnel, and at the first narrow side passage, Handforth ventured into it. They were soon in one of the old workings, twisting and turning, with other passages branching off bewilderingly.

"We shall get lost in here!" muttered Church.

"Rats! I know my way about!" said Handforth. "I've made a mental note of all the tunnels, and I could find my way back in the dark!"

CHAPTER V.

ALARMING DEVELOPMENTS.

HANDFORTH'S confident statement was received in cold silence by Church and McClure. They hadn't the faintest hope of Handforth finding his way back, even with the aid of a searchlight. And so they kept their own eyes well open, and took note of the tunnel's twists.

Every now and again, Handforth paused and listened.

Once it seemed that a slight sound came from the rear, but when the light was flashed there, nothing could be seen. In the nick of time, Pullwood had dodged into a recess.

And even Handforth was beginning to get rather jumpy after a certain amount of this exploring. There seemed to be no Indians about, and as for the rest of the story, Handforth couldn't even locate the main cavern.

"Look here, hadn't we better be going back?" asked Church, glancing at his watch. "It'll be bed-time soon——"

"Going back?" interrupted Handforth. "Do you think I'm chucking up the sponge like that? We haven't started this investigation yet. I'm going straight through with the business!"

"But we shall be late!"

"What does that matter?"

"I expect Mr. Stokes will think it matters," growled McClure. "I'm not anxious to have five hundred lines, even if you are! It's a jolly serious thing to be out of bounds at bed-time. I say, Handy—chuck it up! Let's come down here to-morrow, when we've got more time!"

"Great!" agreed Church. "We'll get up at five, eh? Have three hours exploring work before breakfast!"

For a moment Handforth hesitated, toying with the thought.

"It's a fine wheeze!" urged Church, following up his advantage. "We can go back now, and have a good night's rest, and be fresh for it to-morrow. It doesn't matter about these crooks now—they'll still be here in the morning."

Church and McClure waited breathlessly. They knew well enough that Handforth would no more awaken at five o'clock in the morning than a log of wood would. And there would be no further opportunity during the day, and by tea-time his enthusiasm would have completely waned. They knew him like an open book.

But they were doomed to disappointment—little realising that their own words had caused Handforth to make his final decision.

"It doesn't matter about the crooks, now, eh?" repeated Handforth grimly. "I thought that was rather a good idea of yours at first—but now I don't! Why, these beastly Indians may be on the run by to-morrow. We can't risk it! They're going to hop off with their spoils! They've been making dud Indian rupees down here!"""

And Handforth went on with his mind fully made up.

Church and McClure, inwardly groaning, followed him. Heroically, they had done their best. But failure was theirs. And now they could picture endless wanderings through these empty passages, a return somewhere about midnight, and a painful—a very painful—interview with Mr. Beverley Stokes.

Perhaps Church and McClure were rather pessimistic. But the programme they had in mind was a picnic compared to what they were actually destined to pass through!

Handforth, turning a corner, suddenly gave a gasp. His electric light turned full upon something which took him quite by surprise. A man was standing in the other tunnel!

He was an Indian—a tall man with hollow cheeks, dark skin, and strangely burning eyes. He wore an ordinary serge suit, but there was a loose garment flung over this, and a turban adorned his head.

"Great pip!" ejaculated Handforth blankly.

The situation was dramatic. Now that he had actually come upon one of the Indians, Handforth was startled out of his wits. Church and McClure were scared. Never for a moment had they believed that the yarn was true! But here was confirmation of it!

The Indian uttered some strange words, and advanced towards the juniors grimly. A knife flashed in his hand. But he was staggering as he walked, and was obviously injured in some way.

"He's got a dagger!" yelled Church. "Run for it!"

And even Handforth took the tip. As Church and McClure fled, he followed their example. They ran back on their own tracks, helter skelter. There was something about the appearance of that Hindoo that warned them to go, and not stand upon the order of their going.

Luck was with them.

They were able to make tremendous speed.

while the Indian, unsteady and slow, reeled from side to side of the tunnel as he gave chase. Moreover, he was fairly tall, and the tunnel was low. It was far more difficult for him to make speed than for the juniors.

Suddenly, Church gave a gasp.

"There's another one!" he ejaculated hoarsely. "They're all round us!"

Before they could stop themselves, they almost crashed into another figure. And the light from Church's torch played upon it.

"Fullwood!" he gasped blankly.

"Yes!" said Fullwood. "I came along to see what you idiots were up to——"

"Run!" roared McClure, at the top of his voice. "Hi! Steady, Handy! You're pushing me sideways!"

Handforth was no coward, but he was at the end of the line, and he had a horrible feeling that that Indian was gaining on him with the knife. But this disastrous development did not take place.

The juniors didn't know which tunnel they took—they simply ran on, never pausing in their flight. But at length they were too breathless to continue, and they all came to a halt in a group. And when they intently listened, there was no sound of pursuit.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RAJAH OF KURPANA.

NELSON LEE moved quietly up and down his study in the Ancient House, and glanced occasionally at the figure on the couch.

The Rajah of Kurpana was just showing signs of real activity. For some time he had been lying there in a kind of sleep. But now, as he paused, he half-raised himself.

"Mr. Lee, I would like to talk to you," he said gravely.

"If you think you are sufficiently recovered——"

"I am myself," interrupted the young Indian. "What is more, I know full well what has happened, and I need advice. Badly, Mr. Lee—I need it badly. There may be dreadful peril."

Goolah Kahn was looking intent. His dark eyes were bloodshot, but there was a light of sanity in them now.

Lee had seen him in that underground cavern—a wild, frenzied fanatic, as unlike his usual self as it would be possible to imagine. For the time being, the young rajah had been demented.

Goolah Kahn was the heir to the great Province of Kurpana, and in due course he would become the reigning Maharajah of the entire State. It was one of the richest of all India. Incidentally, this young

"Now, you little worm," said Nipper grimly, "what's the yarn you've been spreading over the House?"

Oriental was the brother of Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn, of the Fourth, and he was a St. Frank's Old Boy.

He was closely connected with the mysterious Indians who had been operating in the cavern of late. And although the facts indicated that Goolah Kahn had been engaged in some grim, nefarious undertaking, Nelson Lee did not believe that this was the case.

"What do you think of me, Mr. Lee?" asked Goolah. "I remember that you came to me while I was in my frenzy. I see it all—but it is like a nightmare. It always comes back like a nightmare. And for days I strive and strive to rid myself of these dreams. But in spite of all my efforts of will, I drift back into the fanatical state."

"I fear that Chandra Jungh is responsible," said Nelson Lee quietly.

The young rajah suddenly sat forward.

"Chandra Jungh!" he muttered, his eyes glittering. "Yes, yes! He has been my evil genius, Mr. Lee. I have been under his influence for years—and never realised, until now, that it was an influence of evil. But you do not believe me—you think I am hiding my own faults——"

"No, Kahn, I am well aware of Chandra Jungh's record," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I have made it my business to inquire. Not only has Chandra Jungh been twice deported from England in previous years, but he is even forbidden to set foot in India. A schemer—a firebrand—a dangerous, fanatical plotter, with his hand against all society."

"And yet I had thought Chandra Jungh's ideals to be the finest," muttered the rajah. "Mr. Lee, what can I say? You were imprisoned in that cavern! I knew of your presence, but dared not act. Chandra Jungh held me under his influence. But I gave orders that you should be preserved ——"

"I thank you for that consideration," smiled Nelson Lee drily. "But I am waiting, Kahn, to know the truth. In your fanatical excitement you declared that you had discovered the secret atom, and that your experiments had been a complete success? What is the exact nature of this discovery? What have you been planning?"

The rajah rose from the couch, and insisted upon walking up and down. He was jumpy, and the exercise calmed him.

"It has been going on for years," he replied. "In India I had a leaning towards science. At Oxford I became known as a laboratory fiend—I was always haunting the place. Nothing but cricket would ever drag me away from my beloved chemicals and test tubes."

"You were doing this merely for the love of it?"

"As you say—merely for the love of it," agreed Goolah Kahn. "Then it was that Chandra Jungh came to me. He put the scenes of great ideas into my head. He talked to me of Rishnir—which, as you may know, is the neighbouring province to Kurpana. Rishnir is richer—fabulously richer than my own country."

"And you had dreams of imperial greatness?" asked Lee gently. "I fear, Kahn, that you are not the first to succumb to such a lure."

"Yes, I wanted to become master of Rishnir as well as master of Kurpana," replied Goolah Kahn grimly. "It was a dream—a mad, fanatical dream. But it was Chandra Jungh who thought rather than myself. They were his ideas—they were his aims and ideals. He held me in his grip."

"And now?"

"I feel free—in some strange, unaccountable way, the influence has gone," said the rajah. "Perhaps, Mr. Lee, it is my doing. I cannot help thinking that you have helped me to find my own true self—and to rid me of that base understudy which has been taking possession of my soul. But can I undo the harm that has already been accomplished?"

CHAPTER VII.

THE NEED FOR ACTION.

FOR a moment or two there was silence. Nelson Lee had seated himself, and Goolah Kahn was still slowly pacing up and down. He paused suddenly, and looked at his companion.

"What do you know, Mr. Lee?" he asked.

"Comparatively little," replied Nelson Lee. "But I am able to hazard a guess. I take it that your experiments in the cavern were instituted at Chandra Jungh's suggestion. You paid for the apparatus, and for all expenses, and Jungh supplied materials, the men, and——"

"Yes, yes—you have stated the truth there," interrupted Goolah Kahn. "And my object was to discover the secret of controlling the atom. Fool—fool! In my frenzied moments I believed that I had accomplished this impossible end."

"But surely your experiments were partially productive of success?"

"Even that I do not know," replied Goolah Kahn. "But I do know that I have trifled with death. Explosives, Mr. Lee—the most deadly combinations known! I have repeatedly been in risk of blowing myself to fragments by my electrical experiments, and the furnace."

"What was in the furnace when I found you this evening?"

Goolah Kahn took a deep breath.

"It was something big — something enormous!" he replied tensely. "At the time I believed that I had discovered the secret. And even now, Mr. Lee, there may be an appalling catastrophe. Sufficiently heated, the chemical concoction in that furnace may blow the whole hillside to atoms."

"I think there is comparatively small danger," smiled Nelson Lee. "The explosion would have occurred before now if it had been actually coming."

But the rajah shook his head.

"We do not know," he replied. "The furnace is slow in heating—on many occasions it has taken hours to generate the sufficient intensity required. And such may be so now. Even as we sit here, the most stupendous explosion of modern times may take place."

"Then we will deal with it as swiftly as possible," said Lee crisply.

But he was not to be blamed for thinking that Goolah was wrong. The young Indian scientist had been experimenting for weeks, and had done himself no harm. His latest "concoction" was probably just as innocuous as all the others.

"And this explosive—what was its purpose?" asked Lee. "Why did you desire to discover such a deadly secret?"

"It was not I," replied Goolah Kahn. "It was Chandra Jungh, the firebrand, who influenced me. Not once, but thousands of times, he has urged me. With such an explosive as he outlined it would be possible for me to conquer the powerful state of Rishnir—and thus become reigning prince of the twin provinces. As I told you before, Mr. Lee, it was a dream. And I am thankful that it is over."

"Doubtless you paid Jungh well?"

"He has had thousands—he has drained

me constantly and consistently!" replied Goolah, shaking his head. "What a fool I have been, Mr. Lee—and yet I could not help myself. The fiend had me in his grip."

Nelson Lee smiled rather strangely.

"I have some news for you, Kahn, that will come as a surprise to you. This Chandra Jungh, in whom you placed so much faith, was a traitor of the worst kind. For he was not only in your pay, but mainly in the pay of Rishnir. He wanted the explosive so that it could be used against your own province—so that you would destroy your own future, and play into the hands of your enemies."

Goolah Kahn shuddered.

"It is not the surprise you expect, Mr. Lee," he muttered. "I have suspected it—but I have always thrust the deadly suspicion aside. But you, I can see, have been hard at work—you have been inquiring. And with your usual skill, you have found the truth. But now it is all over—and I will return to India, and have done with these fanatical nightmares."

"Upon the whole, it will be better to keep everything secret," said Nelson Lee gravely. "I have visited the India Office, Kahn, and they know everything. Secret Service men are being sent down to take Chandra Jungh—quietly, and without anybody knowing. It is arranged that I shall meet them to-night; I did not expect this early development. Neither, for that matter, did I expect to be captured by your associates."

"But the furnace?" asked Kahn quickly. "Let me go, Mr. Lee! Let me make one last visit to that cavern, and render that deadly thing inactive! I want this terrible affair to close peacefully."

"We will go together," declared Nelson Lee. "Chandra Jungh may have recovered consciousness; he was senseless when I left the cavern earlier. I fear that he has had some hypnotic power over you. And your present freedom from his influence indicates that he is still unable to use his full will. I cannot risk your meeting him alone."

"But we must go—I tell you we must go!" urged the rajah. "You do not believe in this danger, but it is very real, nevertheless! That fiendish mixture of chemicals is liable to destroy the cavern, and everything within the range of miles. Let us go, Mr. Lee."

Nelson Lee was quite willing.

All along, he had guessed that the truth was something like Goolah Kahn had outlined. A prince in the grip of a scheming plotter—the desire for imperial power. Goolah Kahn was not the first!

As for this supposed explosion, it would be better, perhaps, to take steps at once. For even Lee was now beginning to suspect that there might be something in it. Hitherto, he had had every reason to believe that there was no actual danger. But the rajah's attitude was alarming.

They went to the door just as the school clock was beginning to chime. And at the second note there came, deep and resonant, an appalling, booming explosion— a dull, thudding sound, which hit the ears and caused the eardrums to contract.

And then, following instantly upon the footsteps of that ominous sound, the very building itself rocked and heaved.

Goolah Kahn's words had not been idle—the explosion had occurred!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CATASTROPHE.

BOOM—BOOM—BOOM! Nipper started to his feet with an ejaculation on his lips. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West gazed at one another with scared eyes. That sound had come in the window out of the evening's silence.

"What was——" began Watson.

The words were drowned by a closer crash—and by the sudden collapse of the study ceiling. The Ancient House seemed to be caught suddenly in the waves of a terrible earthquake.

The walls fairly rocked as the juniors stood there, transfixed with horror. They expected to see the place crash upon them, and bury them amid the fearful debris.

And it really seemed that this thing occurred.

For the ceiling cracked, splintered, and descended in a devastating hail. The study was filled with dust, and the three juniors fought madly for the window. And all this time the commotion was continuing.

Chimneys fell, windows shattered, walls cracked in every part of the school, and parapets came tumbling and crashing to the ground. St. Frank's was rocked and shaken to its very foundations.

Never had there been such a disaster!

And never, for that matter, had there been such an appalling danger of death for the hundreds of boys. The whole terrible thing was over in a few seconds, but it seemed like hours.

For a brief second or two there came a silence—uncanny and weird.

And then it was followed by a pandemonium of wild sounds. Shouts, screams, shrieks. Boys came running from every part, and all made for the open air.

It was dreadful to witness.

Out in the open country the damage was comparatively slight. Bellton village suffered, for several buildings cracked, and every window in the place was shattered.

The Moor View School suffered in almost the same way, but only windows and chimneys were damaged. And some late wayfarers in the lane had caught sight of something which staggered them.

Just beyond the wood, near the moor, a sudden column of fire had shot skywards. The earth itself had opened, and had belched forth a lurid flame—a column which arose like the concentrated flashes from a thousand fifteen-inch guns.

The earth collapsed round the man-made crater, and stones, trees, and tons of rock were flung high into the sky. It was a miracle that nobody was killed by this debris. But where the explosion had taken place—in the cavern—there were no habitations. The ground above the spot was woodland and meadow country.

It was at St. Frank's that the most appalling damage occurred.

Owing to some peculiarity in the earth's strata, no doubt, the earthquake-like wave struck the old school with the full force of the explosion. No other building in the neighbourhood suffered a tenth of the damage.

It was another miracle that no boys were killed.

The Ancient House stood the shock bravely. Windows were shattered, ceilings fell, and walls cracked. But all the inhabitants, after the first dreadful minute, were able to rush for the open air.

The entire Ancient House was emptied within a minute. Some of the domestic staff had fainted, but they were in no immediate danger. For the sturdy old Ancient House still stood, solid and immovable.

The Triangle was like pandemonium.

Shouting boys, shrieking women, and fags screaming with excitement and sudden terror. They could be excused in the midst of a terrible catastrophe of this kind.

The Head, bewildered beyond measure, had been talking with Mr. Stokes. They both staggered into the open, and came face to face with Nelson Lee and Goolah Kahn.

Nelson Lee was pale, and his face was set and tense. He had regarded this explosion as a myth—an impossibility! And now St. Frank's was practically wrecked before his eyes!

The young rajah's face was almost grey. He was responsible for this destruction; and the fear gripped his heart that lives had been lost—that there would be a heavy death-roll.

And this assumption on his part was justified. For if the Ancient House had braved the storm, the Modern House was tottering to fragments before the very eyes of the school!

CHAPTER IX.

ALL OUT!

DURING those first few minutes, activity of any kind was practically impossible—except the instinctive rush of everybody for the open air. Once outside the school they could only stand and gaze at the scene in dumb horror.

All were dazed—struck helpless.

The Modern House was still standing, but it had suffered to an appalling degree. It was a recent building, and did not contain the heavy walls and the fine workmanship which the labourers of centuries ago had put into the Ancient House. This fine building, in spite of its age, stood there like a rock.

And the Modern House was tottering to destruction.

At the first explosion almost every ceiling had crashed down—every window had splintered. Parapets fell, chimney-stacks crashed through the roof, and the thunderous, appalling noise caused all the occupants to believe that their last moments had come.

Had this disaster occurred half an hour later, the majority of the boys would have been upstairs—and the death-roll would have been terrible. But Fate had been kind. Not a soul had gone to bed, and the upper part of the Modern House was empty.

And although the walls were cracking and shivering in a most ominous way, a flood of humanity poured safely out. Boots & Co., Christine and his companions, Grayson and Shaw, Carlile of the Sixth—every Form came tearing blindly into the Triangle. Some unerring instinct warned everybody that death lurked in the building. They seemed to know that the walls would soon collapse and allow the entire building to wreck itself.

But the Modern House still stood.

Great gaps showed in the walls, and every light had been extinguished. Many were still glowing in the Ancient House, and there was the imminent peril of fire. But nobody thought of this at the moment.

The crowd in the Triangle was dense; and everybody was talking at once, and asking thousands of questions, and gasping out thousands of startled exclamations.

The most wonderful thing of all was that the worst injuries were cuts and bruises and grazes. Most fellows imagined that others were buried and mangled in the debris.

And Nelson Lee was one of the first to realise that something drastic had to be done.

"Fire-drill!" he shouted. "Everybody, attention! Pull yourselves together, boys, and march for the playing fields! Do not venture near the buildings!"

Nelson Lee's clear voice, calm and commanding amid all that turmoil, had a magical effect.

"Hurrah!"

"Don't get into a panic!"

"Let's form up into line!"

They were all shouting, but Nelson Lee's suggestion was seized upon swiftly. Fenton and many of the other seniors came to themselves, and shouted order. And everybody remembered the instructions of the ordinary school fire-drill.

Instinctively they shuffled into line, and formed themselves into something like order. The first dreadful panic had passed, and there seemed to be no immediate danger. Apparently, everybody was out of the buildings. But this had to be verified.

Nelson Lee and Mr. Stokes were most prominent in organising immediate activity. Groups of seniors were formed together, and while one band entered the Modern House, the other went for the Ancient House.

Their object was to search for any possible casualties. The buildings might collapse, but this work had to be done. The most important and vital thing of all was to see that everybody was out. Afterwards, when this was settled, further arrangements could be made.

The Ancient House search-party had an easy task.

The searchers went from room to room, from study to study, and through passages, upstairs and down. Not an inch was left unexamined. And the searchers gradually recovered their nerves.

For the Ancient House was so obviously safe that alarm was needless.

But it was a different matter on the other side of the Triangle.

Nelson Lee himself led this party, for he knew most of the danger lurked here. And it was characteristic of Nelson Lee to choose the most hazardous undertaking. He had no lack of volunteers. Fenton and Morrow, of the Sixth, Browne and Stevens of the Fifth, and many more, followed Nelson Lee's lead. It mattered nothing that they were Ancient House fellows, and that they were penetrating the enemy's camp.

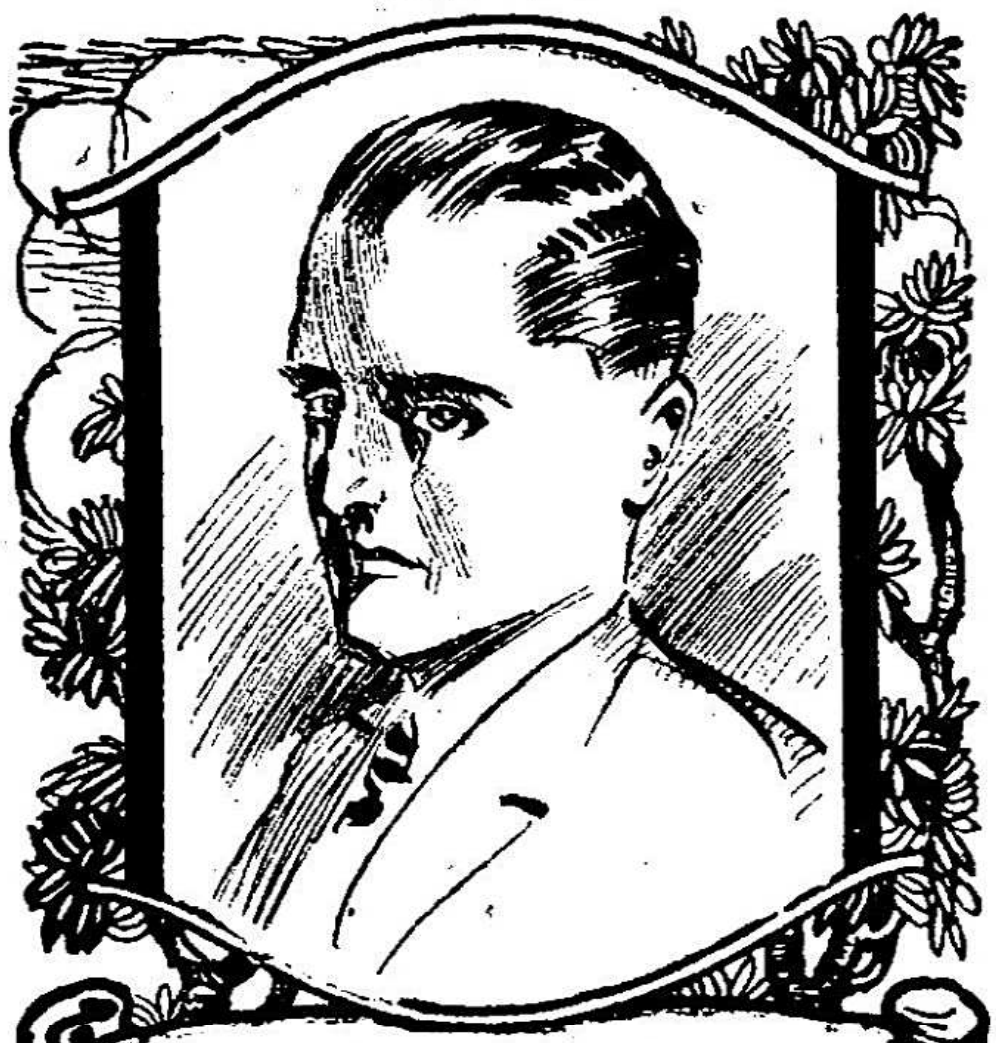
The recent feud was entirely forgotten. There were no enemies now. Just when the hatred and enmity had been at its height, this catastrophe had come along to restore universal peace. Ancient House and Modern House were mingling and talking together with no thought except for the safety of the school and the lives of others.

Nelson Lee received a great shock as soon as he entered the Modern House.

The inner walls were no longer true! They were sagging distinctly, and while floors were uneven, doorposts were so wrenched that the doors themselves could be neither opened nor closed. It needed no expert eye to see that the Modern House was in immediate danger of collapse.

PORTRAIT GALLERY AND WHO'S WHO.
Fourth Series—Sixth Form.

NOTE.—The average age of Sixth Form boys is 18.



No. 2.—George Wilson.

A learned sort of fellow, and a terror to all fags, owing to his passion for orderliness. Everything must be "just so" with Wilson, and any kind of disorder makes him thoroughly unhappy and miserable.

CHAPTER X.
THE SECOND DISASTER.

FIVE minutes sufficed to search the unsafe building.

The seniors, led by Nelson Lee, scoured the Modern House from end to end, and they were thankful to find only two casualties. These were fags who had been buried beneath the mass of plaster from one of the fallen ceilings.

Both the unfortunate youngsters were unconscious, and they were carried out into the open amid shouts of dismay. But a swift examination proved that they were comparatively slightly hurt. For the rest, there were no human beings left in the Modern House.

Nelson Lee himself went through the upper rooms, flashing his electric torch swiftly and decisively. He thoroughly satisfied himself that the building was deserted.

And while he was engaged upon this task he felt continuous quiverings. At one moment there would be a crash of plaster from a ceiling, at another moment debris would fall in an upper room. The walls shook, and Lee had the uncomfortable sensation that the building was standing upon a quagmire, without any solid foundations.

This was not the case. The foundations were secure, but the walls were cracked and buckled. And the enormous weight of the roof, bearing upon these shattered supports, was proving too much.

Just as a wall will crash during a big fire, so the Modern House was in danger of

destruction. It might come within five minutes, and it might not happen for a week or two—until a gale, perhaps, provided the necessary last straw.

But Nelson Lee was not optimistic. At one time, he thought he would never be able to get clear in time. The rumblings and the crashes were too significant. Fresh cracks were occurring all the while, and every crack meant that the structure was weaker. Soon there would be a bigger crack than usual, one more would burst, the next would follow, and then——

But Lee and the seniors finished their task, and fled out into the open, satisfied. The Modern House was empty.

And Nelson Lee had further cause for relief.

The Triangle was now more than half-deserted. Seniors and juniors alike had obeyed the fire-drill orders, and were marching to the safety of the playing fields. Nevertheless, there were still many foolish and reckless boys whose curiosity kept them near the school.

They were ordered to leave, and before another three minutes had elapsed the Triangle itself was deserted. The entire school personnel was out of danger. And it was something like a miracle that all this was done so quickly.

"It was the only way, Mr. Stokes!" panted Nelson Lee, as he hurried up the lingering laggards. "I believe the Modern House will soon go, and until all danger is past we can take no chances. Even the Ancient House may be involved."

"But what caused it?" gasped Mr. Stokes. "The Headmaster is convinced that it was an earthquake, and fears another one. But it seemed like an explosion to me——"

"It was an explosion," interrupted Lee. "There is no time to explain now, Mr. Stokes. We must concentrate all our attention——"

"Look!" shouted somebody, in a shrill voice.

Scores and hundreds of faces were turned towards the school. It was not pitch dark yet. Indoors lights were necessary, but out here the dusk was lingering. Over in the west the sky was red, and the glow from it enabled the school to be distinctly seen.

The north wall of the Modern House suddenly came outwards, and there was a thunderous, appalling crash. Clouds of dust arose.

"Oh, my hat!" shouted Reggie Pitt hoarsely. "It'll all go now—nothing can save the rest of the building. And perhaps the Ancient House will be caught in it, too!"

"Oh, goodness!"

"Can't we do something?"

"Isn't there any way to save the school?" roared Buster Boots. "Have we got to stand here and see it wrecked? Look there! There's another wall going now! Oh! Look—look at that!"

It was unnecessary for the Modern House junior to point. He watched the destruction of his House dazedly. For now the full disaster was taking place.

Weakened by the continuous cracks in the walls, the Modern House was no longer able to withstand the strain. Another wall crashed, and then the roof itself took matters in hand. And that, as may well be supposed, was the end of it.

With a noise that sounded like continuous thunder, the roof fell in. Some of the walls splayed themselves outwards, and sent masses of brickwork crashing into every corner of the Triangle—into the very Ancient House itself. Other walls dropped inwards, and the roof thundered down in fragments.

It was a terrible sight to witness.

That fine building—the pride of all the Modern House boys—tumbling and falling to destruction in front of their eyes. The noise was deafening, and after the spectacular collapse, nothing could now be seen except an enormous cloud of impenetrable dust.

It rose like a sullen cloud, blotting out everything, and attempting to hide the fearful debris. But gradually the evening breeze took the choking dust away, and then the wreckage stood revealed in all its ugliness, in all its stark horror.

Of the Modern House there was no sign.

Nothing remained but heaps of brickwork—timbers sticking out gauntly, and confused debris of every possible description. The catastrophe was complete.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ROLL-CALL.

"GOOD heavens!" exclaimed Dr. Stafford, his voice husky and thin.

"You must do your best to keep calm, sir!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, who was by his side. "There is nothing to cause you anguish. By some gift of Heaven, all the boys are safe—as far as I know, nothing worse than a few minor injuries have been sustained. Under the circumstances, it is astounding."

The Head pointed with a shaking finger.

"But the school—the school!" he muttered brokenly. "Mr. Lee! St. Frank's is no more! Our wonderful school——"

"Please, sir!" urged Lee gently.

The headmaster's anguish was pitiable. He was thankful, indeed, that all lives were safe; but the school was dead.

True the Ancient House still stood, but even this fine old building now had its share of wounds. The collapse of the Modern House had carried on the destruction caused by the original explosion.

Nipper, Tommy Watson, Pitt, Archie Glenthorne, and other juniors had ventured forward after the last clouds of dust had blown away. And from the edge of the playing-fields, and near the edge of the Triangle, they could see with greater distinctness.

The Triangle itself was almost buried.

The wreckage lay everywhere. And in the Ancient House there was a deep, ugly gash—one end of the fine building being smashed in and ruined. Hardly a chimney was left standing, and it seemed likely that the Ancient House itself would be the next to fall.

"This—this is too awful for words!" muttered Reggie Pitt, his face pale and drawn. "Look at it—a mere heap of ruins!"

"But what caused it?" asked Watson, aghast. "Was there an earthquake?"

"Dear old boy, it's the only explanation," moaned Sir Montie.

"You're wrong; it was an explosion!" said Nipper tensely. "It was an explosion in the old cavern. Don't you remember, Tommy? The Indians—the electric furnace——"

"Great Scott!" gasped Watson, staring with wide eyes.

And Reggie Pitt was staring, too.

"Indians—furnace?" he ejaculated. "But—but you don't mean to say that that yarn was TRUE?" he burst out.

"Yes, it was true all right," replied Nipper. "It doesn't matter now; there's no longer any secret. Before to-morrow everybody will know where the explosion occurred. There must be a gap there as big as the crater of Vesuvius!"

"Good heavens!"

"Begad! It's—it's appallin'! It is, really!"

"And there's something else!" muttered Nipper, between his teeth. "There's something else!"

He turned aside, but said no more. He felt almost afraid to give voice to what was in his mind. Handforth & Co! As far as Nipper knew, the chums of Study D had ventured down into those tunnels. And Nipper had been waiting to speak to Nelson Lee about it when the very explosion had occurred.

Where were Handforth & Co. now?

In the tense excitement of the moment Nipper had had no time to think of anything until now. But there was a possibility that Handforth & Co. had come back unharmed. During the last ten minutes people had been flocking up to the school grounds from surrounding farms, from the village, and from every quarter.

Handforth & Co. might be somewhere amid this mass of humanity. It was like looking for three needles in a haystack.

And in the meantime the prefects were getting back to duty.

Orders were being given. Forms were being collected together, and the next thing was to call the roll. Only in this way could it be discovered if there were any absentees. It was the most important—the most vital—move to be made.

For if some were missing, then the ruins would have to be searched.

Although the search-parties had satisfied themselves that the buildings were empty, there was a chance that they had overlooked some unfortunate fellow who had been trapped beneath the debris.

The roll-call was urgent.

And Nipper was not the only one who was anxious about the chums of Study D.

Handforth minor was going about with his chums of the Third, hurrying from group to group, asking questions here, and asking questions there. And now it was a completely changed Willy. No longer the cheeky, irresponsible fag, but a pale, strained youngster with only one thought in his mind.

Where was his elder brother?

What had happened to Edward Oswald? Willy knew nothing about the projected trip into the tunnel at first, but as he went from group to group of juniors, he caught a suspicion here and there. And his anxiety grew until he was in a fever of intensified worry.

"What can we do, Chubby?" he asked helplessly. "What can we do?"

"I don't know!" said Chubby, with a miserable gulp.

For once the redoubtable Willy was without any ideas; he could think of nothing. his brain was clogged. There was only just that one thought—where was his major?

He stared towards the wreckage which had once been St. Frank's, and felt terribly alone. Even his father and mother had gone home, for they had been at St. Frank's on this gala day.

Gala day!

The mockery of the expression seemed to hit Willy like something solid. On this day of all days the great college of St. Frank's had practically ceased to exist. The living school was there, mercifully saved, but the bricks and mortar were no more!

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT HAPPENED TO HANDFORTH & CO.

JUST before the explosion, Handforth & Co. were in the tunnel, and they were breathless from the chase. And as they paused and listened, they could hear nothing but their own heavy breathing and the thumping of their hearts.

The pursuit seemed to have been abandoned.

Fullwood was with them now, and Fullwood was not only scared but furious. He had not meant to be caught in this way, exposed as a spy.

All the four juniors were in darkness, except for the light from Handforth's torch. They could remember the sinister figure of that Indian, who was none other than Chandra Jungh. And the knife in his hand had told of his deadly purpose.

"My only hat!" muttered Handforth, at length.

"We'd—we'd better not wait!" breathed Church. "It's no good, Handy; we shall only give that fiend a chance if we do! Come on, we'd better make a dash for the exit!"

"But where is the exit?" snapped Fullwood harshly.

Handforth flashed his light upon the cad of Study A.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "Were you following us, you rotter? Spying, eh?"

"You idiot! I came after you to see what your game was!" retorted Fullwood. "I thought you were up to some mischief, and I was going to warn you to be careful. Which is the way out of this infernal place? You ought to know more about it than I do!"

Handforth compressed his lips.

"I'll deal with you later!" he said grimly. "The first thing is to get out."

He flashed his torch round, and nodded.

"Blessed if I know how we got here, but we're in that tunnel which leads to Willard's Island. We must be somewhere under the giddy playing-fields!"

"My hat!" ejaculated McClure. "What about that shaft?"

"Shaft?"

"Yes. You know—we used it terms ago," said McClure. "It leads up behind the pavilion. Yes, that's right. It's only a little way from here. If we go on another twenty yards we shall get to it."

"Good!" said Handforth. "Come on!"

It was pure luck which had led the juniors here, for they had fled blindly. They couldn't follow their own movements; they didn't know which course they had taken. Indeed, they couldn't remember this tunnel joining up with the other one. No doubt the Indians were responsible for this state of affairs. They had been working down here for weeks, and had made alterations.

Handforth & Co. started off for freedom, thinking only of being in the upper air. Even Handforth, with all his enthusiasm, had had quite enough of these dreadful catacombs.

But they had hardly taken two steps before the earth seemed to heave, and it was like the end of the world. It was at this moment that the explosion occurred.

The four juniors really knew nothing about it.

There was an upheaval of the floor, a thunderous crashing, and then it seemed that a terrible concussion took place, accompanied by such a fearful rush of air that they were swept off their feet.

All four were knocked unconscious on the second.

The last Handforth remembered was being swept against the wall of the tunnel and falling. As a matter of fact, he had caught his head with a terrible crash against the stonework.

When he came to himself he had no idea of his surroundings.

Indeed, except for the pain in the back of his head, his mind was comparatively blank, and he just lay there, staring into the darkness. He knew he had a pain, but he didn't know why.

And Handforth took it for granted that he was in bed in the Fourth dormitory of the Ancient House. He was rather uncomfortable, and his pillow seemed strange. But that was nothing. He had often awakened in the middle of the night in a cramped attitude.

But why was it so pitchy dark?

And why was there such a peculiarly dank smell in the air? Handforth thought it rather strange that he couldn't see the outline of the dormitory windows. He was, in fact, only just recovering, and he was altogether too dazed and dizzy to think very clearly.

Then a sound came to him. It was a kind of groan, followed by an exclamation.

"Oh, my arm!" came McClure's voice. "I believe it's crushed, or something! I say, you chaps! I say! Are you all right? Can't you hear me? I say, Handy!"

There was something queer about McClure's tones—something which seemed to indicate that he was in a panic—in terror. Handforth dimly realised this, and his wits returned more quickly.

"Hallo!" he heard a voice say, in a queer tone—and didn't realise it was his own until a second afterwards. "My only hat!" he went on, sitting up, with his head swimming. "Where are we?"

"Oh, thank goodness!" came the voice of McClure. "I—I thought you were all killed! What happened, Handy? Was it an explosion, or what? Where's the torch?"

And then, in a flood, Edward Oswald remembered.

CHAPTER XIII.

TRAPPED!

THE tunnel—the sudden rumble—the rush of air!

It all came back to Handforth, as he sat there. He forgot about the pain in his head, and he was too startled to speak for a moment. McClure was right! It must have been an explosion. If so, it had been a long way off, or they wouldn't be alive at all. Rather queer that the roof hadn't caved in and buried them.

"I must have biffed my head against the wall, or something," growled Handforth. "I'm all right now, though. Where's that torch? I know I had it somewhere—— Well, I'm jiggered!"

Without knowing it, he had been clutching the torch in his hand all the time—just as it had fallen. For an awful moment he believed that the filament of the lamp was broken. That would be a catastrophe!

But when he felt for the press button, and gripped it, a sudden stab of light cut the darkness.

It was dazzling in its intensity at first.

The light played upon the stone walls—the ancient walls and roof of this almost forgotten subterranean tunnel. Then, bringing the beam down, Handforth saw McClure. The latter was only two or three feet away, and he was nursing one of his arms.

"Thank goodness!" panted McClure. "I should have gone dotty in that darkness. I thought my arm was broken, but it's only bruised. My heads' swimming like——"

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth. "Look here!"

He had just thrown the beam of his light upon two huddled forms near by. They were both still and absolutely silent. For a tense second Handforth and McClure stared in

He was an Indian—a tall man with hollow cheeks, dark skin, and strangely burning eyes. He wore an ordinary serge suit, but there was a loose garment flung over this, and a turban adorned his head.

horror—the same dreadful thought in both their minds.

The huddled forms were lying in distorted positions.

Church was underneath, and his face, as white as chalk, was in clear view. His eyes were wide open, and there was every reason for the alarming thoughts which crowded into the minds of his chums. Fullwood lay across the unhappy Church, face downwards.

"They're—they're——"

McClure choked, and could say no more. He gave a gulping sob, and covered his face with his hands. But Handforth was made

of sterner stuff. He set his teeth, and held out the torch to the whimpering McClure.

"Take this!" he said grimly. "Here, Mac! Take this!"

McClure looked up, shivering.

"Hold it!" commanded Handforth fiercely.

McClure held the torch, and Handforth gently pulled Fullwood back. And at the same second Church opened his eyes, and a a sigh escaped between his lips. It was the first sign of returning consciousness. The relief that his chums felt was too overwhelming for any verbal expression.

Without giving Fullwood any attention at the moment, Handforth devoted himself to Church. The unfortunate junior was bleeding rather badly from an ugly gash on the left side of his head. The hair was matted, and for an instant Handforth feared that his chum's skull was fractured.

"We want some water!" said Handforth quickly. "Dash off, Mac, and—— But there isn't any here!" he added blankly. "The poor chap is in an awful way."

"What about the ginger-beer?" interrupted McClure tensely. "You remember, we brought two bottles. They were in old Church's pockets——"

"By George!" ejaculated Handforth.

Feverishly, he turned Church over. One bottle was smashed, and had caused a nasty cut in the junior's side—but only a superficial wound, as it afterwards proved. But, happily, the second bottle was intact.

Handforth uncorked it, and then forced some of the cold liquid between Church's lips.

At first there was no sign of recovery, but after a few minutes a spot or two of colour appeared in his cheeks. His eyelids fluttered once or twice, and there was every sign that he would soon be alive to his surroundings.

"There you are!" said Handforth gloatingly. "Ginger-beer! Better than brandy any day! I've always said it's wonderful stuff."

"What—what's happened?"

The voice came from behind, and Fullwood was just reeling to a kneeling position. His recovery was swift. And by the time he had grown accustomed to the dazzling light and the recollection of everything had come back, Church was back to reality.

"I—I don't know what's happened!" he muttered. "I think I hit my head on the floor. Oh, corks! It's all going round! Let's get out of this, for goodness' sake."

"Yes, we'd better!" declared Handforth. "For all we know, there might be another explosion. It's only a few steps to that shaft, and we'll——"

"The light—the light!" shouted Fullwood, his voice rising in panic. "Quick! The light! I don't believe we can get out of here! Haven't you seen that the tunnel's blocked? Show the light——"

Alarmed by his tone, Handforth flashed his light down the tunnel. He hadn't given a thought to this before, for all his attention had been on his chums.

The beam of light from the torch fell upon a massed pile of stones, rock and earth. The tunnel was completely and hopelessly blocked!

"We shall have to go back the other way!" panted McClure.

Handforth, with an unsteady grip, turned the light in the other direction. And then every one of the four knew the dreadful truth. The tunnel was just the same on the other side—smothered from floor to roof with debris, and impassable.

They were trapped!

CHAPTER XIV.

FOUR MISSING.

THERE was intense excitement now mixed with the consternation among the boys of St. Frank's. The roll-call had been taken. Every form had been martialled under its own master, and the whole thing had been organised thoroughly.

And it was discovered, after a hard hour's work, that four juniors of the Ancient House were not present. Handforth, Church, McClure, and Fullwood were nowhere to be found!

At first it was feared that seven fellows were missing. But the other three had been to the village, it seemed, and turned up soon after the roll-call had been taken. It was definitely established, after searching in every possible place, that the missing numbered only four.

And there was great excitement.

Fullwood hardly received a thought. Even Gulliver and Bell, his own chums, did not worry about him. This was not because they were callous or indifferent—but Fullwood's ways were well known. That day had been a whole holiday, and discipline was lax. It was assumed by practically everybody that Fullwood had seized the opportunity to go off somewhere—perhaps to Bannington. His companions felt sure that he would soon turn up, breathless and alarmed, but safe.

It was different with Handforth & Co.

Handforth was known to be a reckless fellow, and the Fourth-Formers, at least, remembered the story that Teddy Long had been telling. And, since Handforth & Co. had not been in the Ancient House, and since they had not turned up since the disaster, there was only one conclusion to come to.

They had penetrated the tunnels!

And the very thought of this was staggering.

If all this damage had been caused above ground, what chance could those three hapless juniors have in the tunnel? In the Fourth, Handforth & Co. were given up as lost. Fellows were already beginning to talk of them as though they were dead.

And poor Willy, talking with Nipper & Co., was as pale as a sheet. Nipper had explained the circumstances.

"But he might be somewhere else—they may have gone to the Moor View School," said Willy dully. "Even Ted wouldn't be such an ass as to go down into those tunnels!"

"He couldn't have been at the Moor View School, Willy, because your sister's already here—she's with Mrs. Stokes and the other girls now," put in Nipper. "They haven't seen your brother."

"It's no good—I mustn't kid myself!" exclaimed Willy. "I know all the time that Ted did go down in that tunnel! But can't we do something? Can't we get up a rescue-party?"

Nipper was silent.

He felt that any rescue-party was futile. The explosion had occurred in the cavern, and the chances were that the tunnel had ceased to exist. He had been thinking of it throughout the roll-call. If Handforth & Co. had escaped, they would have been here long before now. For well over an hour had elapsed, and something like order had been restored.

Nelson Lee was even now organising a rescue-party. He had heard about Handforth's supposed expedition, and Lee was also convinced that the chums of Study D had gone into the cavern.

And although there was little or no hope, something had to be done.

By now the Ancient House had been found safe. A careful examination had made it clear that only a small portion of the building had suffered. The rest was still solid and secure. So the school, at least, had shelter for the night.

On the morrow the boys would go home—but what was the use of thinking of the morrow? More important than anything else was the safety of Handforth & Co. So far it had been regarded as a miracle that nobody had lost their lives—that nobody had been seriously hurt. But here Handforth and Church and McClure were the only exceptions. Had they perished, or was there some slender chance of saving them?

Nelson Lee meant to penetrate the tunnel at once—if, indeed, this was possible. The search party was made up of Nelson Lee, Fenton, Browne, and Nipper and Willy. Lee had only allowed the latter two to come at the last moment. For there was danger, and the fewer lives risked, the better.

They found the monastery ruins damaged, but the stairway was still intact. And they started on their quest. But there was nothing but despair in every heart.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PENKNIFE!

NELSON LEE led the way across the vault, and he caught his breath in with surprise when he found that the tunnel was still there—still yawning black, as before. Down here there was no sign that a disaster had occurred. Not even a brick was displaced.

There could be only one explanation.

The force of the explosion had rocked the mere surface, and that was why St. Frank's had suffered so appallingly. Deep down here, the effect had been less evident, and the tunnel had withstood the strain.

They went on, and soon stood before the blocked mass which Handforth & Co. had conquered so shortly before. The search party stopped, and Fenton uttered an ejaculation.

"It's no good, sir—the tunnel's fallen here——" he began.

"No, Fenton, this has been done for months," interrupted Nelson Lee. "There is a way through. But we must be very cautious—it may have become weakened."

He gingerly moved the pivoted rock, and he was relieved to find that it worked the same as ever. The shock must have been very slight here. After removing the obstructions, the party was able to crawl through. Fullwood, it will be seen, had taken care to replace the rocks before following in the track of Handforth & Co.

"Now I'm afraid we shall meet with our difficulties," said Nelson Lee. "I am even beginning to wonder if the boys are down here at all. They knew nothing of that secret way past the obstruction, and I doubt if they knew the trick of it."

"Handforth is pretty smart, sir—although he's an ass in many other ways," Nipper put in. "And if he was determined on that investigation, he might have found the loose rock. It only needed a touch, you know."

"Well, we will see—for our only course is to go onwards," said the great detective. "But I fear we shall not go far. Although the force of the explosion did not extend to here, we shall soon see the effects of it."

And he was right.

Less than a hundred yards further on they came upon loose blocks of stone littering the floor, and the roof was in a precarious state. A further collapse might occur. But the rescue party took no heed of this peril. They went on.

The little side passage was open, but in a short time this, too, proved to be impenetrable. The roof had crashed down, and made further progress out of the question. But there was a narrow passage which branched off—in the opposite direction to the cavern.

And since it was the only possible field of search, the party took it. But it seemed hopeless, since they were getting further and further away from the scene of the disaster.

This narrow passage sloped upwards, proving that it was gradually approaching the surface. It seemed to go on endlessly. Here and there a loose rock or stone, and cracks in the wall, proved that the explosion had expended its force in this direction. And when it seemed that the tunnel was endless, the party arrived at another cul-de-sac.

Ahead of them the whole earth had collapsed, and even a mouse could not have progressed any further. There were no branch passages out of this tunnel, either. So the search had failed. There was no other possible place in which to look.

"It seems impossible that they could have come here, anyway, sir," muttered Fenton. "Why should they be along this tunnel? And whereabouts are we?"

"I believe that my sense of direction is fair," said Nelson Lee. "Unless I am mistaken, we are standing beneath the ground somewhere near the school pavilion. Further along this tunnel there is an exit, but it is useless to talk of that. We can only retrace our steps."

"Then you don't think they came along here, sir?" asked Nipper.

"I think not, Nipper," said Lee, giving him a strange look.

Nipper knew what was in his master's mind. Handforth & Co. had not come here because they had gone in the other direction—towards the cavern. And this cavern was now solid earth! It had caved in like a broken bladder, and any living thing that had been in it was now buried beneath thousands of tons of rock and earth.

"Oh, my goodness!" murmured Nipper, in horror.

It seemed all too conclusive. Poor old Handforth—a clumsy, obstinate ass, but absolutely one of the best! And he had gone! Gone for good! And Church and McClure——

"Look!" yelled Willy, suddenly. "The light, sir—let's have the light! Oh, quick!"

Willy had been a very silent member of the party up till now. And the poor youngster's silence had in itself been tragic. For Willy had been thinking the same as Nelson Lee and Nipper—that Handforth and Church and McClure had gone into the cavern—had, possibly, been responsible, innocently enough, for the explosion itself! This latter thought had occurred to Lee several times.

But now Willy was a changed boy.

His eyes gleamed, his face was flushed, and he was intensely excited. But there was no hope in his gaze. Only horror.

"The light, sir!" he panted.

Nelson Lee gave him the light, and Willy dashed back on his own tracks. He went two or three yards, and bent down. And he held up a battered pen-knife. A minute earlier he had caught the gleam of it on the floor.

"My major's, sir!" said Willy tensely. "I remember now—he always kept it in his waistcoat pocket, and I expect there was a hole in it. My major's knife, sir! They were here—they must have come along and—and passed——"

He could say no more. He was staring at that solid mass of earth and stone which blocked the tunnel ahead.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MUFFLED SHOUT.

THE search party was silent for a moment. The dramatic find was terribly significant. If this knife had belonged to Edward Oswald Handforth, it proved beyond question that he and his chums had recently been along this particular passage.

And it indicated, although it did not prove, that they were now buried beneath that massed debris in front. At least, the unfortunate trio had not been blown to fragments in the cavern. This much seemed fairly clear.

"They came this way!" panted Willy, running forward, and standing before the obstruction. "We want picks and shovels! Anything! Perhaps they're still alive—buried——"

"Steady, young 'un—steady!" interrupted Lee quietly.

"Ted! Ted!" roared Willy, desperate with anguish and wild alarm. "Ted! TED!"

He fairly screamed the words, for he was almost demented.

"My poor boy, you must not——"

"Listen, sir!" breathed Willy hoarsely. "Oh, listen!"

They all stood there, listening intently. Not one of them—except, perhaps, Willy—believed for a moment that there would be any response to his wild cries. But in deference to his agony, they remained quiet.

At ordinary times it seemed that there was no love between Handforth and his minor—they were utterly indifferent to one another's existence. But in a moment like this, when Edward Oswald's life seemed to have been tragically taken, Willy was showing his true feeling.

He cared nothing for the others. It didn't matter to him what they heard, or what they saw. His one and only thought was for old Ted. And as he stood there, his expression was tense and drawn—his eyes showing, for the first time, a trace of hope.

"Ted!" he bellowed desperately.

Again the search party waited, agonised at this hopeless quest. And then, faintly,

they thought they heard a sound. Nelson Lee gripped Nipper's arm silently.

"Help!"

It came again, and Willy clutched at Nelson Lee madly.

"They're alive, sir!" he shouted, his voice shrill and excited. "Did you hear, sir? They're behind all this——"

"Yes, I heard!" muttered Nelson Lee, the relief evident in his voice. "They must be buried in the further part of the tunnel—but we don't know their exact condition. Wait! Let me shout, and if we are still, we may hear more."

Nipper and Browne and the others were now thrilling with intensity. A few minutes earlier they had looked upon the quest as hopeless, but now, in a flash, the whole situation had changed. From the very ground itself had come a cry. The missing ones were located!

"Handforth!" shouted Nelson Lee.

It was a loud, penetrating cry—far more penetrating than Willy's high-pitched, excited shout. And the party stood there, stretching their ears for the answer.

"Help!" it came. "Four of us! Safe!"

The search party looked at one another, and Willy, in spite of himself, found the tears streaming out of his eyes. The relief was so great that his heart thumped, and seemed to come into his mouth.

"Safe!" he breathed huskily.

And then, for a moment, he seemed to go off his head. He turned to Nipper, shook his hand, and simply gulped.

"Safe!" he panted. "You heard, didn't you, Nipper? I wasn't wrong, was I? They're safe!"

"Yes, Willy; it's all right!" muttered Nipper, swallowing something. "Four of 'em, too! Fullwood must be with 'em. But they must be desperate, all the same. It was your major who shouted out——"

"Good old Ted!" said Willy breathlessly.

It was some moments before he could completely control himself. And in the meantime Nelson Lee had given another shout of encouragement. He called through the dense mass of earth and rock that efforts would be made at once.

And then he turned to the others.

"Thank Heaven they are alive," he said quietly. "But we must use every effort if we are to rescue them in time. We shall want helpers—not a dozen, but scores! The tunnel has crashed down, and I doubt if the trapped juniors will have enough air to last them for more than an hour or two. Everything depends upon speed."

"We'll have the whole school on the job, sir!" declared William Napoleon Browne. "Leave this matter entirely in my hands, Brother Lee, and I can assure you that success will crown your efforts."

And the rescue-party rushed off for reinforcements.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE TUNNEL.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH laughed gaily.

"No need to worry now," he said. "They're going to rescue us. And we shall be out of this in less than half an hour! And we thought we were going to be buried alive, eh? What rot!"

Church and McClure laughed, too—but it was a cracked kind of laugh.

"I—I suppose they'll get through all right?" asked McClure.

"Get through?" repeated Handforth. "Of course they'll get through! Don't be such a fathead! I tell you we shall have 'em pushing their heads into view in less than half an hour."

The four juniors were sitting with their backs to the tunnel wall. They were still dizzy with the shock of the explosion, and under any other circumstances they would have been positively ill.

It was cold, too—icily cold in this tunnel. And the Fourth-Formers were only clad in light flannels. But it was too much effort to get up and take exercise—they were too weary, and too much pained to even make the attempt.

Handforth made a fair success of his gay laugh, and only he knew that it was deliberately forced. He had used that light-hearted tone on purpose to give his chums some cheer.

But he was by no means optimistic inwardly.

Handforth, super-optimist, was pessimistic to a degree! And certainly he had every reason for it. But never would he let his companions know his true feelings.

That shout had come audibly, but that was about all. And the tunnel was blocked so completely that no air could reach this space. It wouldn't last long. In a very short time it would become foul—and then would follow a struggle, a battle for life, with only suffocation at the end of it.

The collapse was serious, as Handforth well understood. There was not merely a brief fall of roof, something that could be cleared with picks and shovels in a few minutes. The collapse probably extended for many yards. And as the rescuers worked, the tunnel would give way further.

Indeed, there was more than a chance that the roof itself would crash down upon their heads before help itself arrived. And these fears of Handforth's were by no means idle.

He had gained a full and true idea of the dangers. But he sat there, looking as cheerful as possible, and he talked lightly about what they would do on the morrow, how the Yexford match would go, and dis-

cussed other matters with equal carelessness.

And then Fullwood took a hand.

"You're pretty confident, aren't you, Handforth?" he asked, his voice grating harshly. "What's the good of foolin' these poor chaps? They know as well as I do that we don't stand much chance. Even though they do know we're here—we're doomed!"

"Doomed!" echoed McClure, starting.

"But—but they're digging!" exclaimed Church. "Handforth says they've started digging already——"

"It'll take them six hours!" exclaimed Fullwood, his terror and alarm getting the mastery over him. "We can't last six hours—we can't last three!"

"You be quiet, Fullwood!" said Handforth grimly. "What do you want to put those fears into their heads for? You know as well as I do that we shall soon be rescued——"

"We shan't!" muttered Ralph Leslie, pacing up and down. "I'm not a fool! We shan't be rescued! We shall die of suffocation before they reach us."

"Rats!" said Church, with a sniff. "Don't take any notice of him, Clurey. The rotter's all in a funk!"

"An' so are you—only you haven't got the courage to admit it," snarled Fullwood. "Haven't you read about men being entombed in mines? Haven't you heard about their tortures——"

"Shut up!" exclaimed Handforth, getting to his feet and standing there unsteadily. "If you can't behave yourself, Fullwood, I'll biff you in the face! You weren't asked to come with us—it's your own doing that you're here."

"You liar!" raved Fullwood. "It's all your fault! You led me into it——"

"Why, you cad, you spied on us!" shouted Handforth. "You followed us, and now that you're in this fix with us, you haven't got enough decency to take your gruel! I tell you we're going to get rescued! Do you hear that? We're going to be rescued!"

"They'll never reach us!" moaned Fullwood, looking at the obstruction with startled eyes.

"They can't—they can't! It'll take hours! I know! I've read accounts of it! Why, months ago there was a man who wasn't reached for seven days, an' then he was found dead!"

Handforth drew a deep breath.

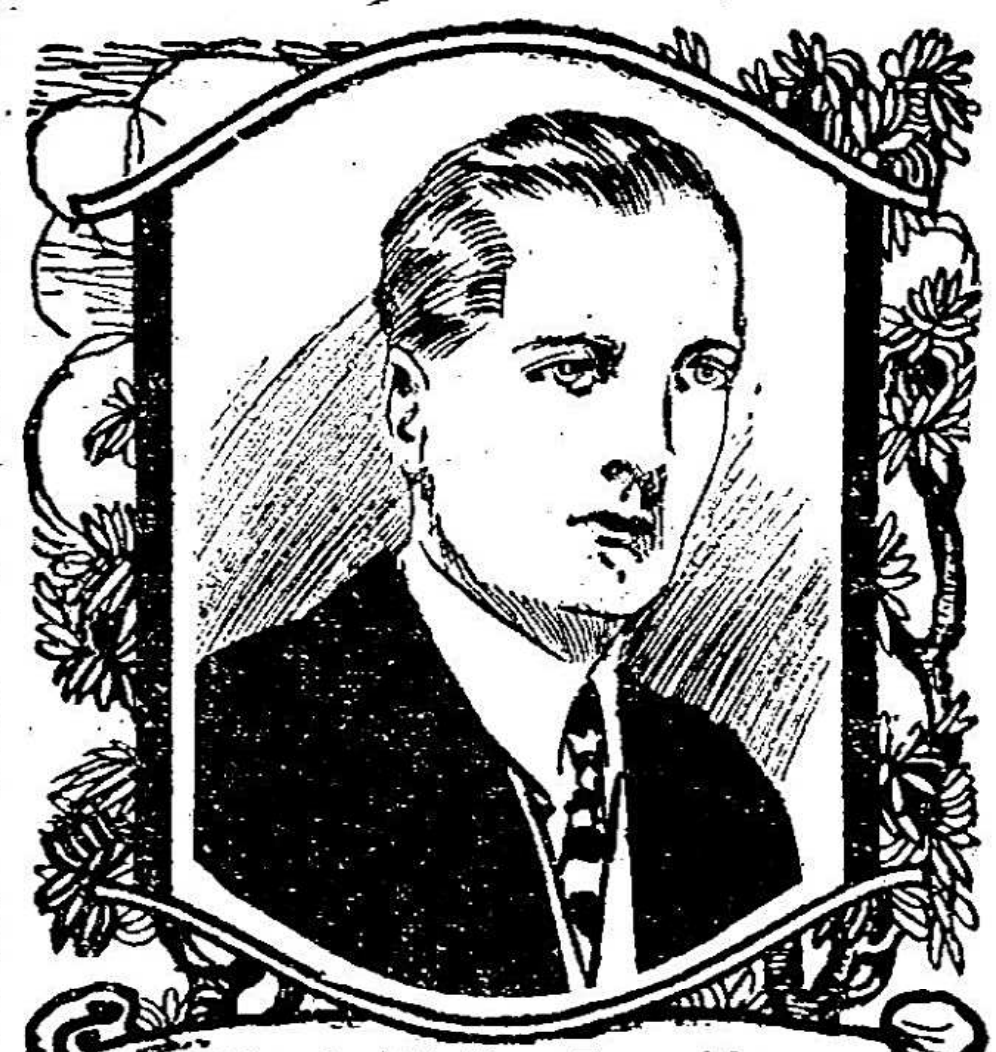
"Don't take any notice of him, you chaps," he said, turning to his chums. "I never thought he was such a worm! I always believed he was a cad, but I thought he had pluck. But now I know!"

He uttered the words with such scorn and contempt that Ralph Leslie Fullwood winced. But such was his panic that he could not bring himself to make any reply. He slunk back to his place and sank down.

PORTRAIT GALLERY AND WHO'S WHO.

Fourth Series—Sixth Form.

NOTE.—The average age of Sixth Form boys is 18.



No. 3.—Walter Reynolds.

An easy-going senior with a mania for chemicals. Is generally to be found in the "Lab," making the most dangerous experiments, and it is generally believed in the school that he will end up by blowing himself to fragments.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FIRST SIGNS.

"WHAT was that?" asked Church suddenly.

For some little time the prisoners had been sitting in silence. Fullwood was in a place to himself, and Handforth & Co. ignored him. The electric torch was switched out, and complete darkness surrounded the entrapped juniors.

The silence had been almost solid. Not a sound of any kind except their own breathing reached their ears. They were all thinking the same. They were all wondering how the rescue work was going on, and were worried by the absence of any sounds.

And then at last came a peculiarly faint, muffled thud.

"Did you hear it?" whispered McClure.

"Yes—I told you about it just now," said Church. "They've started! They must be using pickaxes. Listen!"

They all remained tensely silent.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The sounds now came regularly and continuously. Without any question, the rescue party had started on its errand of

mercy. But the sounds seemed dreadfully remote and distant.

"What did I tell you?" came Fullwood's voice in the darkness. "Can't you hear? Do you mean to tell me that you're such fools that you think they'll get to us in time?"

Handforth & Co. made no reply.

For one reason, they hated the sound of Fullwood's wailing voice, and they were also thinking the same thing. The sounds of the rescue party were so remote that they were startled.

If the blocked portion was comparatively small—thus meaning a quick rescue—there would not merely have been thuds, but decided knockings. The distant sounds were all too significant.

For it proved beyond all doubt that the collapse of the tunnel was extensive. They found themselves calculating. Working with pickaxes in that narrow space, not many could labour at once, and so the work would be necessarily slow.

And it would certainly take hours. Would they be able to last out? That was the main question. It was all a matter of time. If they had plenty of air it wouldn't matter. A current through their prison would render their position secure—for they could last without food or water for twenty-four hours and even double and treble that time.

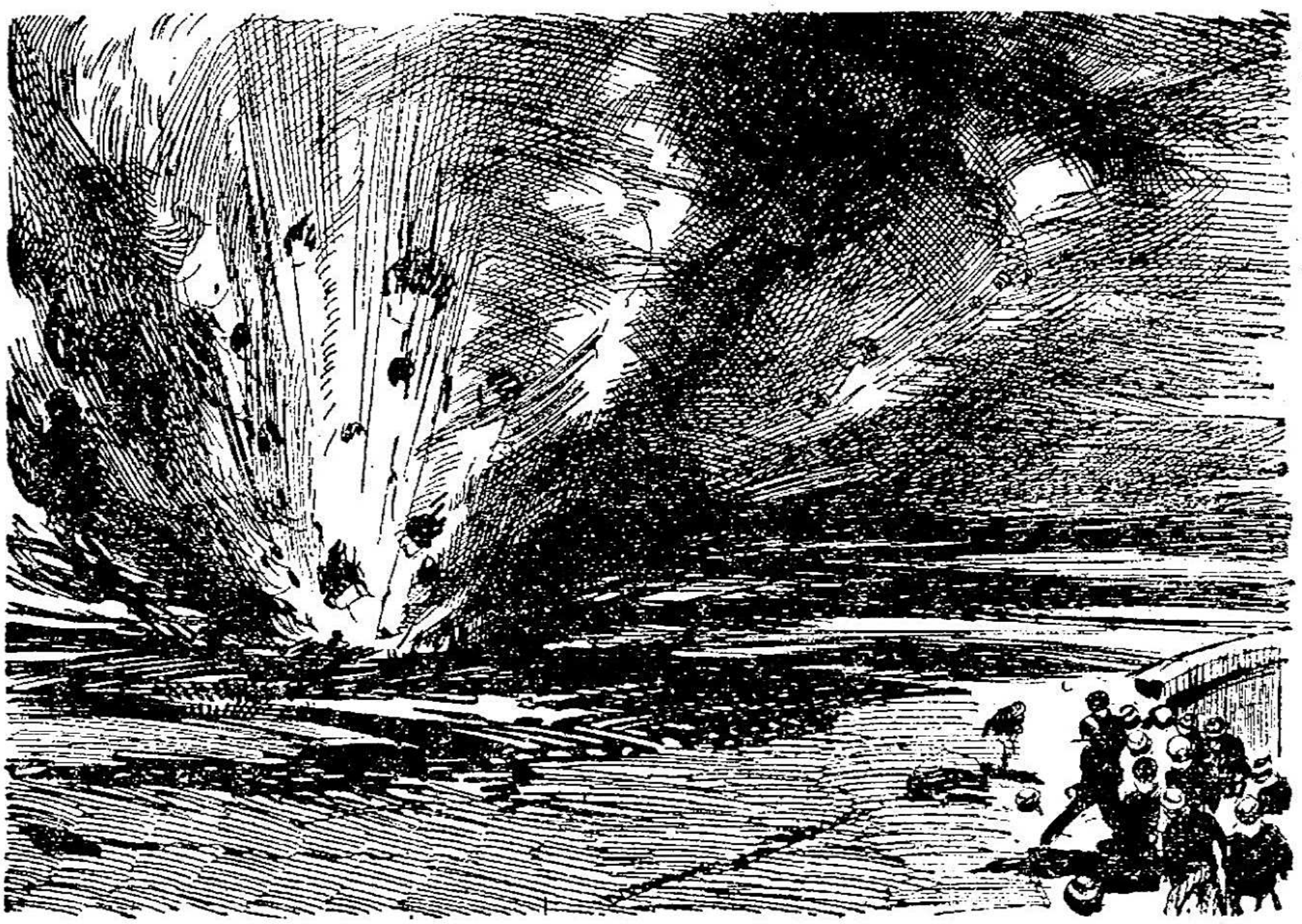
But the lack of air was fatal.

At best, this part of the tunnel had been filled with stagnant, semi-foul air. The juniors had felt it all along. And now, with the tunnel blocked on both sides, and with their bodies using up the oxygen, the situation was growing more and more desperate.

It was time they wanted—and it seemed that it would not be granted. For the rescuers were terribly, terribly slow. Already two full hours had passed, and the sounds were as remote as ever.

But what the juniors thought to be two full hours were really only thirty short minutes. The time seemed to drag enormously. They were without the time, for all their watches were out of action—no doubt the movements had been upset by the concussion.

"The air's getting pretty rotten!" whispered Church, his voice coming out of the darkness eerily. "I can't breathe properly now—I can feel a catch in my throat all



The earth collapsed round the man-made crater, and stones, trees, and tons of rock were flung high into the sky.

the time. And I'm queer in my chest, too—my lungs feel funny!"

"So do mine!" muttered McClure.

"I tell you we're goin' to peg out!" exclaimed Fullwood, scrambling to his feet and stumbling about. "Can't we do somethin'? Let's try an' tear the stones away! Anythin' to help!"

"Don't be an idiot!" shouted Handforth. "We can't do any good—we may start another fall and bury ourselves!"

"By gad!" panted Fullwood. "You're right! We mustn't touch anythin'! Why don't they come? Why don't they do somethin', instead of thumpin' like that miles away? I don't believe they're tryin' properly!"

"You rotter!" said Handforth contemptuously. "If we all kept our peckers up, it wouldn't be so bad. But with you wailing like this and croaking about your troubles——"

"My troubles!" shouted Fullwood. "They're no more mine than yours! We're all in the same boat. We've got to do somethin'! They'll never get here—never! I tell you we're goin' to be left here—to die of suffocation. I can't breathe properly! I'm chokin'!"

He paused, and coughed splutteringly. Then he sank down, moaning. His attitude affected the others—particularly Church and McClure. They were a prey to every kind of imaginary trifle. The slight sound of a boot scraping across the floor would make one of them think that the roof was about to cave in. The slightest irritation of the throat led them to believe that suffocation was coming.

The air seemed much more foul than it actually was. And those sounds were just as faint—even fainter—the thud-thud continued, and it became so monotonous that the prisoners hardly noticed it. Certainly, the rescuers were getting no nearer.

But the anguished juniors were wrong. Although they couldn't recognise it, the sounds of the steady pickaxes were growing nearer and nearer. And rescue was more than a possibility.

But would those willing helpers be in time?

CHAPTER XIX.

WORKING IN SHIFTS.

"MY turn now!" said Reggie Pitt briskly.

Stripped to his waist, except for his vest, he seized the pickaxe and wielded it with all his strength. Next to him Tommy Watson was shovelling the earth and rocks away as soon as they were loosened. And in the rear there were others getting rid of the stuff, and keeping the floor clear.

Candles were burning in dozens, and further along the tunnel there were relays. Helpers there were in plenty—for everybody wanted to take a hand in this work. Five minutes at the pick was the time limit for any one fellow—and then another came and took his place.

It was a fine exhibition of organisation and mettle. As for the bitter feud which had disrupted St. Frank's for so long, it was gone, forgotten and dead. Ancient House fellows were working side by side with Modern House boys, and all were on the best of terms. The prospect of the tragedy had drawn them together.

And the rescue efforts were not being made from one side only.

Above ground, behind the pavilion on the cricket field, lanterns were gleaming, and crowds were helping. For here there was a shaft leading down into the other end of the tunnel. It was just as well to have two strings to their bow. For if one party failed to penetrate the prison, the other might succeed.

And everybody worked at top speed.

There was no confusion and no waste of time. With Nelson Lee in charge of the organisation, the rescue work went on smoothly. Even the plight of St. Frank's was half-forgotten in the intensely urgent need to rescue the imprisoned juniors.

Nipper had penetrated to the bottom of the shaft behind the pavilion—for he knew this place better than anybody else, probably. With Mr. Stokes and several seniors, he led the way down, the party using ropes and lanterns.

The tunnel was reached without any difficulty, but it was impossible to travel far along it. Great masses of debris blocked the way. But they were able to climb over it, and were then faced by a solid mass. Beyond this were the imprisoned juniors.

"Supposing we shout?" asked Nipper. "This barrier may not be so thick. Might as well see, anyhow."

They shouted in unison, and waited for the reply.

But no sounds came. They felt rather uneasy about it, and wondered if the imprisoned four were already unconscious. Either that, or this barrier was much thicker than the other.

But it was no good to waste time in idle speculation. The rescue-party got to work with feverish speed. It was more like a mine accident than ever. For all the debris had to be hauled up the shaft in baskets, attached to ropes. And while those below used the pickaxes and shovels, and filled the baskets, another army of helpers above kept the work going.

And there were constant shifts, too.

The work was altogether too exhausting to be carried on continuously by one band. They were labouring at high pressure, and while they were at it, used all their energies.

In this way an intensified system of work was kept to. The most skilful workman

could not have done more than these schoolboys. The latter, too, were actuated by the anxiety which filled them. They wanted to see Handforth & Co. safe—bring them out alive.

Even the wreck of St. Frank's seemed small compared to the prospect of Handforth & Co.'s death. And, of course, it was small. What did it matter about bricks and mortar —they could be rebuilt. But if the unfortunate chums of Study D perished, the tragedy would be grave indeed.

And so the tension was at stretching-point all the time.

Even those who were not engaged in the rescue work could not settle down to anything. They stood about in groups, discussing the situation, and wondering what on earth was to happen on the morrow, during the next term, and in the future.

"As far as I can see, we're all booked for the push!" remarked Buster Boots, as he waited near the top of the shaft for his next "spell" to begin. "St. Frank's is smashed up, and by the look of it, it'll take months and months to rebuild it. What about next term?"

"Well, there's one thing—the Whitsun holidays will soon be on us, so we should have a vacation, anyway," said Cecil de Valerie. "Perhaps the Governors will decide something in the meantime. I shouldn't be surprised if we're all divided up."

"Sent to other schools, you mean?"

"Well, that's about the only solution," said De Valerie. "It'll be rotten, of course —but what's the Head to do? We can't very well camp in tents, can we?"

"You fellows won't do so badly," growled Bob Christine. "The Ancient House is in good trim, but our poor old show is smashed to smithereens. I say, what caused the explosion?"

"Never mind that now," said De Valerie. "And what do you mean about the Ancient House being in good trim? Perhaps it is—except for cracked walls, and falling ceilings, and broken windows, and missing chimneys, and about a thousand other things!"

And De Valerie was right. Whatever was decided regarding the immediate future, St. Frank's was certainly uninhabitable.

CHAPTER XX.

GROWING DESPERATE.

NOTHING mattered at the moment, however, except the rescue of Handforth & Co. In the other tunnel, the same activity was going on. The fellows were working in relays, and there was never a pause in the actual excavating.

Willy insisted upon doing his share—and double his share.

He had been advised to wait patiently, and to stay on the surface. But he refused. Nothing would satisfy him but to take his turn at the shovel, and to help in the general rescue.

For two solid hours the parties had been at it—real hours this time—and they seemed to have made no impression. A great lot of earth and stones and rock had been taken out, but the debris remained as formidable as ever. It was a grave position.

Occasionally the rescue party would all pause, and someone would shout. And the reply would come—reassuring and cheering. Everything was all right. The rescuers tried to convince themselves that the cries from beyond the barrier sounded louder. But in their hearts they knew they were growing fainter.

After another half-hour's intensive work, Willy urged Nelson Lee to have another shout. And the rescuers paused, and Lee himself gave forth a loud cry.

All listened, but there came no response.

Startled glances were exchanged. Willy turned pale beneath his coating of grime and dust. This was the first time that any reply had failed to come. What could it mean? The fag held himself tight.

"Try again, sir!" he said quietly.

Nelson Lee needed no urging, and he again shouted. And this time, while the rescue party listened intently, they heard a faint, far-away sound. It seemed as though they were getting further from the prisoners than ever—instead of nearer. But the truth was only too plain. The trapped quartette were getting weaker—and they could no longer reply as before.

"They're sinking, sir!" exclaimed Willy, seizing his shovel. "Isn't there anything we can do quicker than this?"

"Nothing," replied Lee. "We can only carry on, and hope for the best."

And while Nelson Lee set the example by working like a nigger, he was thinking deeply. He was beginning to fear that their efforts would be useless. For the conviction was upon him that the blocked section of the tunnel was very extensive.

It would be ten hours, at least, before they got through. Nelson Lee did not deceive himself on this point—although he said nothing to the others. Most of the boys were expecting to break upon the prisoners at any moment. But they were all wrong.

As for the other side, this was even more hopeless. For from there the second rescue party could get no answer at all—proving that the blocked section was even larger. The situation, indeed, was growing desperate in the extreme, and many were fearing the worst.

And there were all sorts of troubles to contend with.

Occasionally, in spite of every precaution, there would be another fall of debris, and there were many narrow escapes—many hair-breadth shaves. Incidentally, there were heroic actions. Once, Reggie Pitt was nearly

crushed beneath a falling mass of rock. Only the swift action of Jack Grey saved him from destruction. But these incidents were swept aside as trifles. Nothing mattered except to get on with the work.

As the tunnel was excavated, so timbers were brought in and built up, so that there would be safety. And when the end of the third hour came, everybody was startled at the small rate of progress.

Yet they were doing their best—and none could do more.

Another effort to get an answer failed altogether. Although they were nearer to the trapped juniors, there was now no response—it was dreadfully significant. Willy Handforth worked silently and grimly. His display of pluck was little short of wonderful. But he never complained, and never once asked for a rest.

He had to be dragged away by sheer force, time and again, otherwise he would have worked himself to utter exhaustion. The tension, great before, was now becoming agonising.

At the other end it was the same. Work never ceased. But here the rescuers felt that they were labouring in vain. It was from the other side that the rescue would be made. But it would have been sheer madness to slacken their efforts on this account.

The tunnel was gradually cleared, but according to all rough calculations, this part of the underground passage was blocked for fully fifty yards. So the veriest novice knew that the case was hopeless.

But, hopeless or not, they worked on, always praying that success would come before the spark of life left the four unhappy juniors beyond.

CHAPTER XXI.

HANDFORTH'S EXAMPLE.

McCLURE struggled to his feet dazedly.

"I'm—I'm tired of that!" he muttered, in a husky voice. "It's too cold sitting there. Where's that light, Handy? Why not switch it on? This darkness is awful!"

"Yes, switch it on!" said Fullwood hoarsely.

For some time he had been quiet, half-dazed, and with his breath sounding loud. They were all feeling the effect of the bad air. And it was getting worse and worse all the time.

But Handforth was reluctant to switch the light on. He had a haunting fear that the sight of their faces would make them realise the true horror of their position. The darkness was better.

But as both his chums urged him, he pressed the switch, and the welcome shaft of light pierced the darkness. By chance, it fell upon the bottle of ginger-beer, which all had forgotten.

"What's that?" muttered Fullwood, making a grab at it. "I want some; my throat's parched! Why didn't you tell me it was here? We'll all have a swig each!"

He grabbed the bottle, uncorked it, and put it to his lips. Greedily, he gurgled the contents, and in his frenzied state of panic he would have finished the lot. But Handforth leapt to his feet, and pulled the bottle away by force.

"Steady!" he muttered. "Leave us some!"

"Let me have it!" gasped Fullwood. "I'm dyin'! This—this air——"

"We've all got to breathe the same!" interrupted Handforth. "Here you are, Church—take your swig!"

"Thanks!" muttered Church huskily.

He took the bottle, and the liquid was intensely grateful. It was only by sheer will-power that he stopped, and he could easily understand Fullwood's attempt to take more than his share.

"Go on!" said Handforth. "Have another go."

"But there won't be enough——"

"Yes there will!" interrupted Edward Oswald. "One more gulp."

Church took the gulp, and passed the bottle over.

"You next, Handy," said McClure firmly.

"Not likely! Oh, well—— All right!" said Handforth. "You needn't worry; I'll leave you some in the bottle."

He took his drink, and McClure listened in a kind of anguish as he heard the working of Handforth's throttle. But Edward Oswald stopped in time, and passed it on.

"Drink the lot!" he said, wiping his mouth. "No good making two bites at a cherry."

It was difficult to speak, and practically impossible to shout. It was for this reason the rescuers had heard no response to their cries. Handforth & Co. had attempted to answer, but had felt all the time that their voices would not carry.

McClure drank his share of ginger-beer with eager gratitude. Anything was a relief. It was just something to do, something to break the dreadful anxiety.

"Wait a minute; leave me some!" snarled Fullwood, clutching at the bottle. "I didn't have my share! I only had a drop——"

"You miserable rotter! You've had double as much as anybody else!" interrupted Handforth, pushing Fullwood's arm away. "That's right, McClure—finish it!"

McClure did so, and Fullwood railed and moaned. There was one thing he didn't know, and neither did Church nor Mc-

Clure. Handforth had performed a little act of grace which he thought nothing of, and which he wished to keep entirely to himself. Instead of taking his drink, he had only pretended. Not a drop had passed his lips. It was his chums he was thinking about, not himself.

Now and again Handforth would knock Church and McClure about in the most frightful manner, in ordinary life. He had sometimes been called a bully, owing to his readiness to use his fists. But when it came to a crisis of this kind, Edward Oswald's true character came to the fore. He was the same Handforth in most respects. He had the same glare, and sounds which meant so much. The thud-thud was monotonous and distant. And the conviction was growing upon the prisoners, just as it had grown upon Nelson Lee, that there was not sufficient time to break through.

And the air was now becoming so bad that every breath was difficult. The unfortunate juniors were compelled to gasp, and their lungs were heaving. The end would come rapidly now.

Half an hour—an hour at the utmost! It was humanly impossible for them to live for longer than an hour.

And yet Nelson Lee estimated that no

he refused to let his chums speak when they wanted to.

But his morale was astonishing. When hope seemed completely gone, he was as cheerful and as unconcerned as ever. Never for an instant would he accept the possibility that rescue would not come.

Fullwood, on the other hand, was doing his utmost to create a panic. Brave enough in a fight, when it came to a matter of life and death, the cad of Study A revealed his own character. He was afraid—mortally afraid. He raved at Handforth & Co. for having led him into this business.

And all the time they listened for those possible break through could be hoped for under ten hours!

CHAPTER XXII.
WILL IT MEAN DEATH?

TWENTY minutes passed.

Those twenty minutes were like twenty hours to the entombed juniors. For now the air was getting so terrible that they could only speak in whispers. And all were suffering.

Handforth had deliberately smashed the bulb of the electric-torch. For the last time he had flashed the light out; he had caught a glimpse of his companions' faces. They were changed—terribly changed. The lack of pure air had had its effect.

And Handforth thought it better to be in darkness. The darkness was more merciful. Furthermore, he had given up all hope. In his innermost heart he believed that this was the end.

He sat there, with Church on one side of him and McClure on the other. Fullwood was further along, as before. He was silent now, for it took too much effort to speak. And gradually Ralph Leslie was sinking into a sort of stupor.

"It's no good, Handy!" came a whisper from Church. "We're done, you know. We can't last! I can feel——"

"Rot!" growled Handforth. "They'll soon be here!"

"They won't, and you know they won't!" breathed Church. "Can't you hear? There are no knocks at all! There's nothing! I expect they've given it up and gone away."

Handforth was rather startled. The thudding was going on just the same, but Church didn't seem to know it. Perhaps it was just as well. Unconsciousness would be merciful.

"It's all right, old man," said Handforth, lifting a hand and putting it on Church's shoulder. "We'll soon be all right now."

"All right?"

"Yes; they'll be here——"

"They won't, Handy!" muttered McClure, from the other side. "It's decent of you to keep it up, but you know they won't. They don't seem to be any nearer at all. I—I say——"

"Well?"

"We—we'd better say good-bye!" muttered McClure, his voice thick and faint. "Do—do you know, I've got an idea that there's a light here. I keep seeing flashes. What does it mean?"

There was a pause.

"Oh, nothing!" said Handforth. "Just your imagination."

"Yes, that's what it is," admitted McClure. "Oh, if I could only have some air! This—this pain in my chest, my throat, too——"

His voice trailed away, and he seemed to go rather limp against Handforth's shoulder. Edward Oswald himself was still fully conscious, and he was now growing haggard with hopelessness.

"I say, Mac!" he whispered softly.

McClure gave no reply.

"What's—what's the matter?" whispered Church from the other side. "You—you don't mean—— He's dead! He's the first to go——"

"Keep your hair on!" interrupted Handforth carelessly. "He's all right—only dropped into a doze. Hallo! Did you hear that? Those knocks are getting a lot louder now. Good! They'll soon be here!"

"Fool!" came a moan from Fullwood. "Why can't you speak the truth? You know——"

Crash!

A piece of rock fell with a crash to the floor, and the sound, so unexpected, seemed like an explosion. Even McClure was aroused out of his stupor. Handforth, with a leap of his heart, staggered drunkenly to his feet. The stone had fallen at the other end of the prison—not where the thudding was coming from.

Reeling, and fighting for breath, he felt his way across to the mass of rock and earth which filled the tunnel. And as he was doing so, there came the confused sound of voices. They seemed far away and strange in Handforth's ears. But he could distinguish the different tones, and he could even tell that great excitement prevailed.

And just then something else happened. Into his face came a faint current of air. He didn't realise it at first, until he felt his lungs suddenly expanding. He went dizzy and almost light-headed, but then, after that first moment, he realised the truth.

"Air!" he gasped. "There's air coming in!"

"Come an' sit down," came Fullwood's droning voice. "There's no air there—it's your imagination."

Handforth wondered, for a dazed, bewildered second, whether Fullwood was right. Perhaps his imagination was playing him tricks. At all events, he reeled, failed to clutch at the wall, and fell heavily.

And he could not find strength to rise. There was no feel of that current of air now. Yet he could hear the confused voices. With a breath of horror, he feared the truth. Those voices were not real—they were just the workings of his overwrought mind.

"Church!" he whispered tensely.

"Yes?" came a reply from Church.

"Can—can you hear something?"

"Hear something?" said Church. "No—— Why?"

Handforth lay on the floor, and buried his face in his hands. And he had thought that rescue was upon them! Just his imagination!

He lay there, and gradually everything seemed to go into a floating mist, and even the breathing of his companions no longer came to his ears.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT LAST!

MR. BEVERLEY STOKES took a gulp of water and stood with his back to the wall of the tunnel, breathing heavily. He had just come off his shift, and he was badly in need of rest.

The tunnel was looking exactly the same—gleaming lanterns, half-clad figures, and the toilers at the end, where the intensive work was going on. There were boys working their hardest, and there were others waiting at the rear, eager to come forward and take their turn.

"Is it any good, sir?" asked Nipper, who was just going back for his next spell.

"No good at all!" muttered Mr. Stokes, his face haggard. "We shall never do it, Nipper—it's impossible! The headway we're making is too slow. It will take us till the morning!"

"Will—will that be too late?" asked Nipper huskily.

"We have had no replies to our calls for an hour!" replied Mr. Stokes. "It will take us another nine hours to get through! Do I need to give you any other answer?"

Nipper was silent. It seemed, indeed, that the thing was absolutely hopeless. But he went to his next shift with more vigour than ever. For, whatever the outcome, this work had to preceed. There was always a chance—always a faint glimmer of hope.

At the other end of the tunnel—down the shaft—the workers were simply toiling mechanically. They knew that nothing could result from their end, but they had to go on. And why not? It was better to do something than to stand about idle—and only a certain number could be employed in the other tunnel.

Those who were working at the moment were Reggie Pitt, Tommy Watson, and Willy. Willy had come round to this field of operation, hoping against hope that there might be something more tangible here. He had been forced to the conviction that the other party would never get through.

And this side was worse—ten times worse.

At first, the rescuers had started their work with the enthusiasm of success. Handforth & Co. and Fullwood were alive, and it seeemed an easy matter to get them out. But now that the hours had dragged by, and they were as far from the goal as ever, despair was written on every face.

Reggie Pitt was using the pick, and he was wielding it with all his energy. Even though his task was a waste of time, he went on with it with as much enthusiasm as though he were on the point of getting through.

His pick dislodged a big piece of rock, but instead of the rock falling towards him, it went the other way. It was followed by other masses of debris. And then, with a

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth. "Look here!"
He had just thrown the beam of his light upon two huddled forms near by.

sudden gulp, Pitt saw there was an opening. Feverishly, he applied his pick afresh.

"We're through!" he shouted excitedly.

"Through!" muttered Willy. "But—but——"

A lantern was rushed up, and Pitt grabbed it, and bent low. There was a clear opening! He crawled into it, in spite of warning shouts that the rocks above might collapse.

But nothing happened, and Pitt found himself past the obstruction—which had turned out to be only slight, after all! But as he stood up in the tunnel beyond he caught sight of no figures, as he had half-expected. He ran forward, swinging the lantern.

And twenty yards down the tunnel he came to another fall of roof. His heart sank. They hadn't got through, after all. But others were coming now, and they were bringing lanterns, pickaxes, and shovels. The excitement was getting intense.

"I thought we were through—I thought we were through!" exclaimed Willy desperately. "Oh, what a rotten shame! Ted! Ted!"

He raised his voice despairingly, but Fenton, who had just come up, seized him by the shoulder.

"Keep your pecker up, young 'un!" said the school captain. "This fresh obstruction can't be very big. We may get through it

in less than half an hour. Come on—all hands to the pumps!"

The rescuers redoubled their efforts. A new hope had come. They had all thought that the tunnel was filled completely. But this open space made all the difference in the world. And they used their picks, and plied the shovels with tremendous vigour.

Suddenly there as a movement among the massed debris. Some rocks started falling, and these, in turn, shifted the others.

"Back!" shouted Fenton. "It's collapsing!"

They flung themselves back to safety, but the picks had already done good work—even after the first two strokes. The great masses of rock had fallen, but there was a clear space near the roof.

"Quick! Give me a lantern!" said Fenton, between his teeth.

He took it, scrambled over the rocks, and wormed his way out of sight. Then a shout came from beyond the obstruction.

"They're here!" came Fenton's voice triumphantly. "We've got them — they're safe!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE END OF AN EVENTFUL DAY.

"SAVED!"

The word went from mouth to mouth like magic. In less than twenty seconds it was on the top of the shaft, and then it was passed on to the crowds who were anxiously waiting on the playing-fields and in the great Triangle. It flew down the other tunnel, and reached the second rescue-party. It was miraculous.

"Saved!"

Fellows started cheering, and the excitement grew.

In the meantime, the actual rescuers were silent. One by one, Handforth & Co. and Fullwood were gently and tenderly lifted over the barrier, and first aid was applied on the spot.

All the four juniors were unconscious.

And rescue, as it afterwards proved, had only just come in time. It was air they needed—and it was air they got. Once provided with this vital element, their revival was only a question of time.

Indeed, within fifteen minutes of reaching the surface, Handforth was showing signs of recovery. And the others were all pronounced out of danger by Nelson Lee. The relief to all was so great that a reaction set in, and a tense silence prevailed.

Everybody had been taken by surprise. The rescue had come when it had been least expected. Furthermore, it had come from that end of the tunnel which had been deemed hopeless. It only proved how essential it was to keep up their efforts, no matter how futile they seemed.

And after that, of course, there was time to think of other matters—time to consider the position regarding the poor, battered school.

Of the four rescued juniors, Handforth was the first to completely recover. And he found Willy by his side. From the moment of his rescue, Willy had remained there. And he was the first to speak.

"Hallo, old man!" he exclaimed softly, as Handforth showed signs of intelligence. "You've been blinking like the dickens for a long while. Feeling better now?"

'Eh?" said Edward Oswald. "Oh, hallo! So—so you got us out, then? I thought you would! Hallo, Pitt! You look a bit grubby, I must say!"

They were in one of the dressing-rooms of the pavilion, and candles were burning everywhere. Within a few minutes Handforth was sitting up, and his recovery was now rapid.

"A lot of trouble you caused us!" exclaimed Willy tartly. "Just like you, Ted, to go and act the giddy goat! Why the dickens did you go down that tunnel?"

Handforth regarded his minor coldly.

"It's none of your business!" he said. "Who told you to butt in?"

"Well, I'm blessed if you didn't deserve a lesson!" retorted Willy. "Fancy going and getting yourselves bottled up in a tun-

PORTRAIT GALLERY AND WHO'S WHO.

Fourth Series—Sixth Form.

NOTE.—The average age of Sixth Form boys is 18.

No. 4.—Percival Mills.

One of the lesser lights of the Sixth. A senior who keeps very much to himself, and is so unobtrusive that people are liable to forget that he exists. But he is quite a decent fellow in his own quiet way.

nel! It's a pity you can't spend your time better than that—especially when the school's all smashed up."

Willy's reversion to his usual manner was remarkable. Now that his brother was safe, he became his customary cool self. He was weary and tired, and ached in every limb. But he wasn't jolly well going to let everybody see that he cared! Not likely!

* * * *

Somehow, everybody was accommodated for the night. The fact that many slept on the floor, that many others didn't sleep at all, and that semi-confusion reigned all the time, was of little matter.

No lives had been lost, and the disaster to St. Frank's was not irreparable.

Handforth & Co. and Fullwood—the latter now very subdued—had been staggered to find the school in wreckage. Handforth, indeed, was quite indignant. He thought that something ought to be done about it.

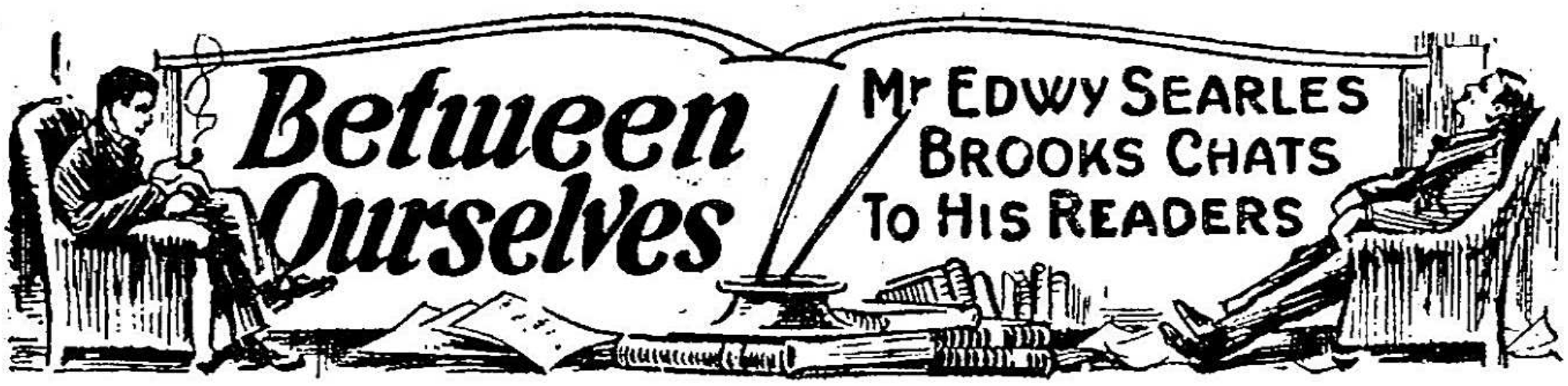
With the extraordinary buoyancy of youth, the school got over its shock in a remarkably short time. Incidentally, everybody was sent home for the holidays—quite a nice number of days before they really ought to have gone. So that was one good thing.

As for the future, the Head announced that all boys would know the new arrangements during the Whitsun holidays. St. Frank's was to be restored—and, declared the Head, the restoration would be such that much of the damage would never be known.

And when the school reassembled St. Frank's would not be a place of stark new buildings, but an improvement on its old self—a newer, better, and finer school than it had ever been in its whole history.

So the school went home comparatively happy. And what was there to worry about? In the immediate future there were the holidays—St. Frank's could wait until after they were over!

THE END.



(NOTE.—If any readers write to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. If you have any suggestions—send them along. If you have any grumbles—make them to me. All letters should be addressed to EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Remember, my aim is to please as many of you as I possibly can, so it's up to you to let me know your likes and dislikes.—E.S.B.)

Letters received: Mable Clemets (Sundown, Australia), Stephen Molyneux (Wigan), Chapman L. Wilson (Leith), Southern Admirer (Tunbridge Wells), A. Miller (Leytonstone), Anxious One (Birmingham), Sndenisnhea (Westminster), J. Redfern (Oldham), Arthur J. Barnes (Chatham), S. G. Thornton (Longreach, Australia), Ernest Eddy (Johannesburg), J. W. Boucher (Camberwell), Charles Fort (Clitheroe), Tom Hastings (Mitcham), Leslie (Brighton), T. K. C. (Wolverhampton), H. W. W. (Basingstoke), G. Hughes (Birkenhead), Fred Toms (Bournemouth), A. Country Reader (Lancaster), Alfred G. Hounslow (Kentish Town), A Soldier Reader (Tamworth), A Keen Nelson Leeist (Hornsey), Red Stubbs (Walthamstow), David McMaster (Port Glasgow), F R. M. (Leyton), John J. Bell (Peckham), Joseph S. (Kennington), 1-2-3 (Liverpool), A. G. Gregory (Westcliff), A. Enfiedji (South Kensington).

* * * *

It often happens that I get very interesting letters from readers who urgently request me to give them a long answer. In fact, there are several of that kind acknowledged above. But they are only of interest to their writers and to me, and it wouldn't be fair to the general readers if I devoted a lot of space to such individual answers. I'll remind you of my note at the top of this page. If an individual answer is particularly wanted, the only certainty of getting one is to discuss some matter which will be of general interest.

* * *

If you don't know Nipper's real name, Chapman L. Wilson, I suppose it's quite on the cards that lots of other readers don't know it, either—although I'm blessed if I can understand why. It's been mentioned often enough! Anyhow, I'll give it again—Richard Hamilton.

* * *

I'm awfully pleased you like William Napoleon Browne, Sndenisnhea (I say, what's the idea of signing yourself in that dotty fashion?). If it comes to that, I'm awfully pleased that lots of others like him, too—because nearly everybody has approved of my new character. I don't like the concluding words of your letter, though, Snd-etc. You say: "I am writing this just to prove that your reply is all bunkum. My friend said I would get a reply in your Chat, and I said I would not. This will prove it." 'Nuff said!

* * *

Regarding your suggestion for a Correspondence Page—for readers between different countries—it is quite possible that something will develop later on, when The St. Frank's League gets going. By the way, I may have something to say of an interesting nature abort the League within a week or two.

* * *

Here are a few lines from one of this week's letters, and I know the writer won't mind them being repeated: "As a matter of fact, I am not the only one who looks forward to Wednesday, for I have already introduced my mother, my two brothers (besides some other chaps and an old gentleman friend of ours about sixty years of age), and the latter says that they remind him of his Public school days in England. My father still believes that they are penny dreadfuls. I do not know why some people still believe that, since, if they read one copy of the NELSON LEE, they would kick themselves for being so narrow-minded. But I guarantee that, by the next time I drop you a line, my father will be as ardent an admirer as I am myself." My object in quoting these kind of letters is not for the benefit of all you general readers. You KNOW what our paper is like, and don't need telling that it is quite innocent and wholesome. But if anybody has a relative or a friend who remains prejudiced, please show them the above.

You'd better count again, J. W. Boucher. How on earth did you get the idea that No 49 of the Old Paper never appeared? It was called "The Forged War Orders," and featured Jim the Penman. Thanks for the little printed slips. I congratulate you upon your cute method of advertising our paper. Just fancy dropping 5,280 of those printed slips all over Camberwell, the Elephant, and Peckham on ten Tuesday nights! I say, is this honest Injun, or have you exaggerated? Excuse my scepticism, old man, but, really, it seems rather tall. If you have really done as you say, you deserve a special medal. By the way, those stories in the old Detective Library you refer to were written by Yours Truly.

* * * *

It's really not my business, Tom Hastings, but I'll ask the Editor, on your behalf, not to run the story on to the cover. And you say you don't like the portraits spread over the paper because it means cutting the pages about and mutilating the yarn. Furthermore, you say: "If I buy two N.L.'s, it means that someone else must go short of a copy." That's just where you're wrong. It may mean that someone will go short of a copy at your own newsagent's, but that someone will get it at another place. And if your own newsagent sells out, and more are demanded, he'll jolly soon get a bigger supply. So don't let that consideration stop you from buying two copies.

* * * *

Leslie, you're a lazy beggar! Fancy asking me how long our paper has been in existence! Can't you reckon them up, you slacker? This week's is No. 521, and I can reckon in my head that we're roughly ten years old. To be absolutely exact, No. 1 was published on June 12th, 1915. Fancy wasting my time and space in this way! What next? But as you've roped in three new readers I'll forgive you. Keep that rope handy, too—there are plenty of others walking about who've never heard of us.

* * * *

Here's a quotation from another letter: "I quite agree with Prairie Maid with regard to your stories setting an example to other boys. But she must remember that 75 per cent. of the characters in the St. Frank's stories are the sons of big men, and have always been brought up to look upon nothing except that which is right, whereas the common or lower class of boy has been brought up among the toil and strife of this world's life. She cannot expect them all to be as sound in the things that go to make a man as one would expect of such boys as Pitt, Handy, and the like." I don't quite agree with this reader. Many of our greatest men to-day started life amid the "toil and strife" he refers to. And a son of rich parents is, if anything, provided with more avenues of corruption than the average working-class lad. And it is this latter boy, providing he has the will, who mounts to the top of the tree. And when he gets there he has the satisfaction of knowing that he has climbed to this exalted position by his own efforts—and not through influence, as is the case with many of the gilded classes. But don't forget that a great many of the latter prove themselves to be real men when it comes to the test.

* * * *

Thank you, Soldier Reader, for your cheering and welcome letter. I am again tempted to quote for the benefit of other readers. I would like to repeat your entire letter, but I am afraid it would take up too much space. So I'll repeat those portions which will give satisfaction to those readers who feel they are getting too old to read our paper. Here goes. "Dear Sir,—Will you please give my compliments to Prairie Maid, whose letter I read in No. 515, and tell her I think she has solved a little mystery I have been trying to puzzle out for the last month or so. Several of my soldier chums who read the Old Paper do not seem to either swear or smoke half so much now, and the letter put me wise, I think. . . The boys used to call me the 'kids' book reader,' but after I had got them to read one or two they soon altered their tone, and now you cannot hold 'em back. They like it. All my chums have read Prairie Maid's letter, and agree with her in all she has said, and every one of them send their compliments to 'her, and say they would like to shake hands with her. . . Your stories should make parents pleased they have so good a paper for their children to read. If some of them saw a dozen or so soldiers sitting reading the NELSON LEE LIBRARY like good boys, perhaps they would think to themselves, 'Well, if it will keep a soldier out of the wars and mischief, it should do the same for youngsters.'—Yours, etc, A Soldier Reader." As I have said before, I don't print these quotations in a spirit of self-advertisement, but because I am doing my best to fight down the prejudice which still exists in all too many quarters.

* * * *

In fact, here's another quotation which only goes to prove my argument that a prejudice does exist. "A few weeks ago, happening to pass a newsagent's on my way home, I bought a copy of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, entitled, 'Foo'ing the School.' It did not matter to me in the least that it was a week old at the time. I can tell you that it far exceeded my expectations, and that I lost no time in getting the Easter number. For years I have never looked at your paper, and was, I fear, prejudiced until I recently tried it." This New Enthusiast, as he calls himself, can get all the Moat Hollow stories he wants to complete the series by ordering them from any newsagent. But it just shows, doesn't it? And the more we can do to kill the idea that our paper is a

"twopenny blood" the better. I know I can rely upon all of you to help me to carry on the good work. That's the main reason I'm providing you with the above ammunition for your guns. If you want to help, don't forget to shoot at every opportunity.

Other letters received: George Burgess (Selsey), W. R. Halton (Coniston), Terrible Tomboy (London, E.1.), Israel Herr (Johannesburg), A. Sterling (Stamford Hill, N. 16.), Auld Reekee (Portobello), Cyril Baggaley (Nottingham), Basil Titchbourne (Pimlico, S.W.1.), Ernie Fletcher (Southsea), W. G. Payne (Devonport), G.I.F. (Hackney, E.8.), T. W. Beay (Derby), E. A. Mittelholzer (British Guiana), J. Keith (Christchurch, New Zealand), H. Rumball (Douglas, New Zealand), William H. Wheeler (Wellington, New Zealand), Olive (Birmingham), Thomas G. Welhams (West Hampstead, N.W.6.), Derek Kerrigan (Croydon), John C. White (Southall), J. Cooke (Bournemouth), Leslie Rodwell (Cleethorpes), L. Stanley (Maidenhead), Kenneth M. Douglas (Terenure, Co. Dublin), F. Clarke (Manchester), G. Blackett (Plumstead, S.E.18.), S. Sirrah (Nottingham), Laurence S. Elliott (East Ham, E.6.).

* * *

A week or two ago I mentioned that lots of letters were jolly interesting, but that they unfortunately failed to contain anything of general appeal. Well, the same thing's happened again. So if some of you, whose names appear above, feel a bit disappointed at being passed over with a bare acknowledgment, you must blame yourself for failing to include at least one item that I can comment upon without boring other readers.

* * *

Well, now I can go ahead.

* * *

There's not much difficulty about guessing your name, Terrible Tomboy. I don't think I should be far wrong if I called you Cissie. You want me to bring Handforth and his love for Irene to the force. As a matter of fact, there isn't any love between them at all—at least, not in the love story sense. Handforth admires Irene tremendously, but he's only a schoolboy, and regards her as a friend more than anything else.

* * *

No, Israel Herr, you haven't bowled me out this time. If you will take the trouble to look up that recent statement of mine, you'll find that I said that I had written every St. Frank's story in the NELSON LEE LIBRARY. The yarn you mentioned appeared before St. Frank's was created.

* * *

Certainly not, Cyril Baggaley—I refuse to excuse you. Not likely! It was like your cheek to imagine that "Between Ourselves" was "an article to fill up with." To fill up with, indeed! That's all the reward I get for filing your letters away, marking sections that need replies, and noting down your likes and dislikes. And you didn't write me earlier because you thought the whole feature was a bluff. And if you think that, there's no telling how many other readers think the same. If any more of these doubts come along, I shall begin to lose my faith in human nature. In the name of goodness, what more can I do? I print your names at the top of my comments, and sometimes give long quotations from your letters. If anybody else thinks that these things are made up, please write to me at once. If they've got something of general interest to ventilate, they'll soon find out whether this feature is spoof or not. You are quite right, Cyril. It will indeed be a sad day when I'm involved in an accident—for me! But I am afraid you were thinking of yourself, and I suppose I ought to take it as a compliment. Still, I am living in hopes that no such calamity will occur, for either of us.

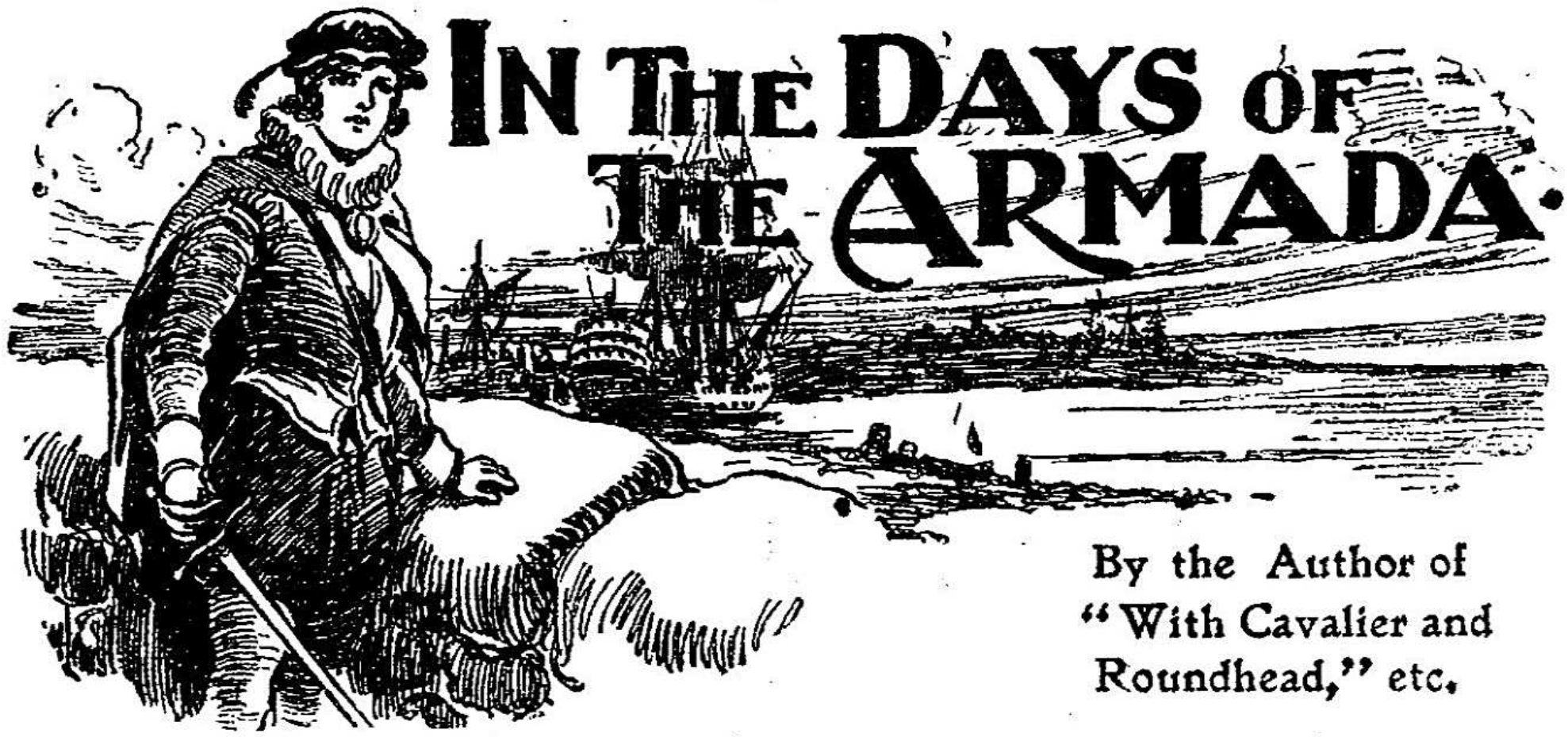
* * *

Thanks for offering to send me your copy of Our Paper every week, Basil Titchbourne, after you've done with it. But I shouldn't like to put you to that trouble. If you haven't any use for your copy after reading it—and this applies to others who are of the same mind—why not send it to a hospital, or leave it in a tramcar or railway train, or any other public place? Somebody is bound to pick it up, and there is always a chance that we shall get some new readers. I am frequently being told that one copy is enough to make a convert, and although I'm not vain enough to actually believe this, I am hoping that the age of miracles is not past, and that it may be true in some cases. Anyhow, it's always better to leave Our Paper in a 'bus than to use it for lighting the fire with.

* * *

What's this about a Nelson Lee Club, T. W. Beay? You tell me that you have been preparing it for months, and that you want my permission to start it. My dear old thing, you can start your club as soon as you like, and you have my blessing. When the St. Frank's League comes along, your club can then be a kind of local branch, and I shall probably have some suggestions.

A STIRRING TALE OF A BRITISH BOY'S EXPLOITS WHEN SIR FRANCIS DRAKE SAILED THE HIGH SEAS.



IN THE DAYS OF THE ARMADA.

By the Author of "With Cavalier and Roundhead," etc.

FOR NEW READERS.—The story begins in 1587, when Giles Montford, the sixteen-year-old master of Templeton, decides to take up arms under Drake against the Spaniards, in defiance of his uncle, Don Ferdinand Gonzales, who has invited him to go over to Spain. Giles is given an urgent dispatch by Sir Richard Edgcumbe to deliver to Admiral Lord Howard in London. The letter contains important information as to the presence of a Spanish vessel in the Tower pool, and also begs that permission be granted Giles and his trusty servitor, Stephen Trent, to fight under Drake. On their journey to London our heroes encounter many adventures, and unexpectedly make the acquaintance of Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex.

(Now read on.)

"A HORSE and a blade, my good fellow!" cried the earl, turning to the innkeeper. "And lose not a moment! Bring out our two steeds, Wilkins," he added to his servant.

Giles took advantage of the brief wait to brush the dirt from his clothes, and to ascertain that he was none the worse for his struggle except for a few bruises. The innkeeper produced a fairly good animal, and a blade that looked as though it might have seen service on Bosworth field. Giles hurriedly mounted, and rode rapidly up the hill between the Earl of Essex and Wilkins.

Though the time seemed very long to the lad, the runaway horse had really carried him less than a mile. The party soon saw the dark bulk of the hayrick ahead, and as they drew nearer they were delighted to hear angry voices and the occasional clash of steel.

Suddenly a yellow light shone out of the gloom, and an instant later flames and sparks were leaping toward the sky.

"Faster! Faster!" cried Giles. "They have fired the rick."

He spurred on, followed by his companions, and as they came within ten yards of the burning rick, three mounted men were seen to ride furiously up the hill, each leading a riderless horse by the bridle.

One of the animals broke loose, and turned aside into the moor. Seeing this, the sharp-witted Wilkins clattered in pursuit. The earl and Giles reined up close to the rick, and looked anxiously about for the missing man.

There was a sudden shout overhead, and Stephen Trent leaped from the smoke and flames into the roadway.

"Just in time," he cried, as he warmly wrung Giles' hand. "The scurvy knaves were too many for me, so I made a dash for the rick and got on top. There I showed them a sword-point from all sides, and as they dared not climb up they put a torch to the hay. Luckily it was too damp to burn well, else you would have found me roasted or stabbed. But how did you escape, Master Giles, and who are your trusty friends?"

Giles briefly related his adventure, and then the earl very affably introduced himself.

"I have heard good reports of your doings in Holland under Sir Richard Edgecumbe," he said. "It is a pleasure to have done you a service, my trusty fellow."

"And mine a greater one, my lord," replied Trent. "It is a common talk in

Devonshire of your service at the siege of Zutphen two years ago."

"Let us hope we may fight the Spaniards together ere long," the earl answered. "Ah, here comes Wilkins. He hath a mount to replace the one you have lost."

At that moment the servant rode up with the captured horse.

"It was an easy chase," he said. "The Spaniards cannot be far away. Are we to pursue?"

The earl shook his head. "It would be rarely to my liking," he replied, "but we dare not lose a moment. The knave who ecaped us yonder by the inn will doubtless ride straight for London, and Master Montford must beat him there with the letter."

"Ay, that's right," exclaimed Trent. "It must be hot haste by night and day if we would outwit the rascal."

"A bed and a supper await me at the inn," said the earl, "but they may wait in vain. I have chosen to accompany you to London, my good friends, since perchance you might tumble into other scrapes. And once the town be reached my presence will hasten the delivery of your letter."

"Have a look at the carrion lying yonder in the road," he added to the servant. "They may have papers about them."

Wilkins climbed out of the saddle and inspected the clothing of the two dead Spaniards. "Here is a good supply of gold-pieces, my lord," he announced, "but there is naught else to be found."

"Don't touch the dirty money," said the earl. "Leave it for the wretched peasants who prowl about the moors."

"Can De Rica be one of the two?" exclaimed Giles, as Wilkins climbed into the saddle.

"He is one of the living," Trent muttered grimly. "He was the selfsame knave who stayed to thrust with me when the other two ran at you Master Giles. I would have pricked his ribs nicely had not his comrades returned in haste."

"We may tarry no longer," broke in the earl. "Now for London."

He put spurs to his horse, and led the way down the hill at a brisk trot, leaving the burning hayrick to illumine the desolate moor for many miles around. The clouds were now breaking, and there was a promise of fair weather in the blinking moon and in the keen air that blew from the west.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH GILES AND STEPHEN TRENT MAKE A BRIEF STAY IN LONDON.

A BRIEF halt was made at the inn, where the earl paid for the bed and supper that he did not want, and Giles bargained for the host's horse and sword. A reasonable sum was quickly fixed upon, and he paid it out of the purse Sir Richard had given him.

Then the party rode on in haste, and reached Exeter just as the town folks were taking down their shutters. Here they stopped only long enough to get a supply of provisions, and they ate breakfast in the saddle as they rode over the uplands of Eastern Devonshire.

All day they spurred on unflaggingly, and the tedium of the ride was relieved by the bright wit and sallies of the young Earl of Essex. He was not yet twenty years of age, and to hear him talk, and to note his handsome face and courtly manners, made it easy for his companions to understand why the youthful nobleman was such a favourite with Elizabeth and her courtiers.

At twilight the party reached Stalbridge, where the earl's influence enabled them to speedily exchange their jaded horses for fresh ones. They pushed on through the night, and at five o'clock in the morning they clattered down the high street of Salisbury and pulled up at the Royal Arms Inn, under the shadow of the grey old cathedral.

They were badly exhausted, and had accomplished a feat of riding that was almost without a parallel in those days. As the Spaniard was no doubt far outdistanced by this time, and as, moreover, he would not dare to travel by the direct and frequented roads, the earl spoke in favour of a rest.

His companions were of the same mind, and after a hearty meal they went snugly to bed. They rose and breakfasted at noonday, and pushed on until near midnight, when they halted for a couple of hours at the village of Basingstoke to refresh themselves and steeds.

Then off again through the clear and starry night, and owing to bad roads in Surrey the sun was up when they rode through Kingston-on-Thames. The villages began to be close together, the roads waked up to busy travel, and at last Southwark was seen in the distance; with beyond it a gleam of the river, the tower of St. Paul's, and the crowded roofs of the great city.

Soon the little party were riding across London Bridge. At one of the openings they instinctively pulled up a moment to look toward the Tower pool, which was crowded with shipping of pretty nearly every nationality except Spain. The same thought entered the mind of each. Was the disguised Spanish ship lying in yonder anchorage, and had they arrived in time to frustrate its purpose?

The stoppage was but brief, and next they rode upward through narrow and dirty lanes to the bustling street called Chepe. Here they forced their way along with difficulty—for it was close to the hour of noon—and after riding round two sides of St. Paul's Cathedral they came to Fleet Street, and thence to Temple Bar.

"I could have led you a straighter course than this, my lord," said Giles, smiling.

"I doubt it not, Master Montford," replied the earl, "but there is wisdom in this apparent loss of time. The direct way from London Bridge would have brought us by

a neighbourhood where Spanish spies are said to lurk."

The party were now riding under Temple Bar, and Giles was about to offer an apology for his thoughtless remarks when the earl checked his horse, and leaned over the saddle to speak to a soldier who was on the footway, and with whom he plainly had an acquaintance.

"Do you know aught of her Majesty's movements to-day?" he asked, in a whisper.

"The queen arrived at St. James's Palace from Chelsea an hour ago," the man audibly

Soon the little party were riding across London Bridge. At one of the openings they instinctively pulled up a moment to look towards the Tower Pool.

replied. "She is now there with her advisers, my lord."

The earl turned to his companions with a meaning smile as he led them on at a trot. They passed up the Strand—by the earl's own residence, Essex House—and so on through the luxurious part of the town to the grim palace of St. James. It was guarded by a number of soldiers wearing steel breastplates and helmets, and richly dressed people were passing in and out.

The weary travellers dismounted, and the horses were given in charge of Wilkins. Giles and Trent followed their conductor into the palace, passing readily by the guards. With the impulsiveness and precipitancy for which he was noted the earl pushed on with his companions into a large room that contained a number of distinguished-looking people.

The entry of the three dusty and travel-worn figures caused lively astonishment. There was a hum of voices, and every eye turned to the new arrivals. On some faces could be read anger and indignation.

Giles was bewildered by the glitter and sheen of court attire, by the profusion of jewelled swords, by the display of rings and gold snuff-boxes and silver buckles. He saw the earl greeting various acquaintances, and then, as the courtiers fell a little apart, his heart beat with excitement when he espied Elizabeth at the farther end of the room.

The Queen was dressed most gorgeously—silken robes, prodigious ruff, and powdered hair; but her sallow and wrinkled face had a sour aspect.

The earl tapped Giles and Trent on the shoulder, and led them through the door of a smaller apartment, whence they could see plainly into the audience-room.

"You are fortunate in finding Admiral Lord Howard here," he said to Giles. "He will grant you an audience shortly. What think you of the scene yonder?"

"It is very fine and pleasing to the eye,"

Giles answered, "but such a life would not suit me. I prefer the free air of the moors."

"Yet beneath the glitter and powder there is plenty of sterner stuff, my lord," said Trent. "An old soldier like myself learns not to pass a hasty judgment on appearances."

"That is well said," replied the earl, with an approving smile. "There are men of wisdom and valorous deeds here. Those two just passing quickly are Admiral Lord Howard and Sir Francis Walsingham. The latter, as you know, is her Majesty's favourite minister. And yonder in the corner stand two of her advisers—the Earl of Burleigh and Sir Thomas Howard."

"Unless my eyes deceive me, I see the Earl of Leicester," said Trent, "under whom you fought in Holland, my lord. He hath a sad and worn look."

"He still grieves for the death of his friend, Sir Philip Sidney," replied the earl. "But look," he added, in an eager tone. "See you the courtly and handsome gentleman behind Leicester? It is Sir Walter Raleigh, who has served in France, Holland, Ireland, and North America, besides founding a colony in Virginia. He is now come up from Cornwall, where he hath command of a part of the Queen's army."

As the earl spoke Sir Francis Walsingham and Lord Howard suddenly entered the room and closed the door behind them. They greeted Giles affably, and when he had delivered the letter they opened and read it together. After a brief whispered conference, Sir Francis hastened away, and the admiral questioned Giles and Trent closely about their strange adventures at Mount Edgcumbe and on the way to London.

"You have done well, gentlemen," was his only comment. "Be assured that faithful service always brings its reward. You are doubtless in want of rest and food, and I will have your needs seen to at once. Kindly remain here, my Lord Essex. I wish a word with you."

Giles and Trent parted from the earl with an exchange of good wishes, and followed Lord Howard to a side door of the palace, where they were given in charge of an officer of the Royal Guard.

He took them to a house hard by in St. James' Street, which was evidently kept for the use of retainers and guests of the court. Here the hungry and weary travellers were given a sumptuous meal, and then assigned to separate sleeping-rooms.

Giles partially undressed, and he had hardly thrown himself on the couch when he sank into a deep slumber. It seemed but a short time until he was awakened by a pull at his arm. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, and saw a servant in the room with a light.

"What hour is it?" he asked. "How long have I slept?"

"Since two o'clock," replied the man, "and it is now past midnight. The Queen's minister waits on you below."

This piece of news brought Giles to his feet in a hurry. He pulled on his cloak, took his cap in his hand, and followed the servant to a front room on the first floor. Here a feebly burning lamp showed him Sir Francis Walsingham and Stephen Trent. Through the window a group of horses could be seen waiting in the street.

The Queen's minister seemed to be in a very sober and gloomy mood. He handed Giles two letters, from each of which dangled a couple of imposing seals.

"Her Majesty is graciously pleased to thank you and your trusty companion for your services, Master Montford," he said, "and as a proof of her esteem she entrusts you with these letters. I am bidden to tell you to ride with all haste and urgency for Plymouth. This letter you will deliver first, and without a moment's delay. It is to Sir Francis Drake, now commanding the Queen's fleet in Plymouth Harbour, and while it favourably recommends your services to him, it also treats of a most important private matter.

"The second letter is to Sir Richard Edgcumbe, and treats of affairs of State. There is good reason to believe that you run no danger of being molested in the neighbourhood which proved so perilous on your way here. An escort is provided to take you beyond the town. You will start at once."

Giles was strongly tempted to ask news concerning the Spanish vessel, but the minister's chilly demeanour restrained him. He and Trent followed Sir Francis from the house. Beyond the footway half a dozen mounted soldiers were drawn up like pieces of statuary, and close by a servant was holding the steeds on which the messengers had ridden to London.

Sir Francis bowed stiffly and vanished in the direction of the palace. Giles and his companion quickly mounted, and no sooner were they in the saddle than the officer in command of the escort gave the word to start. At a brisk trot the little cavalcade rode eastward along Pall Mall.

CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH MASTER TOMEWELL'S LITTLE REPAST IS INTERRUPTED.

ONLY one incident worth noting occurred on the way through the City. As the horsemen cantered by Essex House the earl hastened out and leaped upon a steed that Wilkins was holding in readiness by the door.

He was about to spur westward when he caught sight of Giles and Trent and nodded

to them. Then, on a sudden impulse, he urged his horse alongside the lad's.

"Off again for Plymouth, are you?" he whispered. "You have had but a brief stay in London. Did Sir Francis tell you the import of the letter you are bearing to Drake?"

Giles shook his head.

"I am to deliver it in haste. That was all."

"I'll warrant," replied the earl, with a grim smile, "it is nothing less than the Queen's countermand on the expedition which Drake was about to undertake against the Spanish ports. It is like her Majesty. She blows hot one moment, and cool the next. To-day she is all for war; to-morrow for peace. Odds fish! I don't wonder Sir Francis Walsingham loses patience."

"I had hoped that Trent and I would soon do some fighting with the fleet," Giles answered, in a low and disappointed tone.

"And you surely would have done so," whispered the earl, "for in this same letter Admiral Lord Howard most strongly recommends your services to Drake. Still, the delay cannot be long. You will have fighting in plenty betimes, Master Montford."

"It is not for me to question the Queen's command," replied Giles. "I shall bear the letter with all possible dispatch."

"But say nothing of this to your companion," cautioned the earl. "It is a State secret."

"I will be silent," assured Giles, in a whisper. "Tell me, my lord, if you may, what news there is concerning the Spanish vessel."

"None," the earl answered. "A search for it hath proved vain to this time. Sir Francis believes that it left the Pool even before you arrived in London. Had it been there, it could easily have been found by the description sent by Sir Richard Edgcumbe."

"And now I must be off," the earl added. "There is little sleep in these days for those connected with Court. I wish you good speed and safety, Master Montford, and I hope we may meet soon again."

With this, he spurred away from the lad's side, and up a cross street, and was quickly lost to sight in the direction of Holborn.

The horsemen clattered on by St. Paul's and then over London Bridge to Southwark, meeting but few people in the lonely streets. The officer in command of the party was in a sullen and silent mood, and Giles had no inclination to talk. He had looked forward to an immediate cruise against Spanish ports, and he keenly felt the disappointment. Could he have peeped a little into the future, he might have found far different matters to think about.

Trent, on the contrary, was in high spirits. In the horseman on his left he found an old comrade of his Holland campaign, and the two fought their battles over again as they rode along.

The escort went as far as the extreme suburbs of the town. Then, with a few suggestions as to the most expedient route to Plymouth, the officer and his men wheeled about and headed for London. Giles and Trent pricked up their horses and galloped rapidly over the desolate commons of Surrey. Sunrise found them many miles on their way.

They rode unflaggingly all of that day and the next, resting a part of both nights at the roadside inns. The third morning found them at Exeter, and here they chose a different route from that by which they had come. It was nearer and less rugged, and they counted on reaching their journey's end by noonday.

But when they were fairly out on the Devonshire moorland, and far from any habitation, Giles' horse suddenly went lame. They might yet have returned to Exeter for another steed, yet after a brief consultation they decided to push on, hoping that the animal's injury would not seriously disable it.

They made poor progress, however, and it became evident that they could not reach Plymouth before nightfall. They jogged slowly along, each oppressed by a fear of the possible consequences if the letter should be delayed. Giles, who alone knew the true situation, was most deeply worried. He was aware that Drake's intended time of departure was unknown even to Sir Richard Edgcumbe. By now the fleet might have lifted anchor and be sailing down the Sound.

Within an hour of sunset, and when Plymouth was yet a dozen miles away, the lad's horse lost its footing on a rocky slope and fell on its forelegs. Giles was pitched out of the saddle and escaped worse injury by bearing the brunt of the fall on his right arm. His wrist proved to be badly sprained and when the horse got to its feet it limped worse than ever.

Giles was angry and disgusted.

"The animal can't do more than walk for the rest of the way!" he muttered. "You must hurry on with the dispatch, Stephen, and leave me to follow as best I can."

"No; you go," replied Trent. "Take my horse."

Giles shook his head.

"I can only use my left hand," he said. "It might do to hold a bridle, but I should cut a sorry figure if I was attacked on the way, and could not lift a sword. Not that there is any danger to be feared; but it won't do to take chances with the dispatch."

Trent saw the wisdom of this, and reluctantly assented to the proposition.

"It ill becomes me to leave you alone on

the moor, Master Giles, and in such helpless plight," he replied; "but her Majesty's service comes before all else. I will bear the letter to Sir Francis Drake's ship in the harbour, and then sheer back to Templeton. If you have not arrived——"

"I will be there by that time," Giles broke in, "and we will cross to Mount Edgcumbe together. Now off in haste, my good Stephen. Take the direct road to Plymouth, and don't spare the spur. There are reasons for urgency—reasons you know nothing of."

With a keen glance of curiosity and a word of affectionate farewell, Trent prodded up his horse and went galloping over the moor. The lad followed on foot, leading his lame steed by the bridle, and he soon saw his companion vanish over the crest of a ridge.

The knowledge that the precious dispatch was in safe hands put Giles in good spirits, and he cared little for the pain of his swollen wrist. He went along rapidly, and an hour after dark he calculated that he was within four miles of Templeton. The thought of a good dinner quickened his steps, and as he was drawing near the mouth of a narrow ravine in which he had been travelling for the past half-hour, he heard the pounding hoofs of a large body of horsemen.

He could not locate the direction of the sound at first, so he hurried on a few yards to the open and level moor that lay beyond the ravine. Here was a cross-road running due north and south, and looking in the latter direction he saw a dark mass rapidly approaching.

But Giles did not have time to feel alarmed. The moon was shining overhead, and its silvery glow flashed on a hundred bits of polished steel. With clank and clatter, a company of armoured dragoons came forward at a trot, and at sight of the lad waiting by the roadside they reined up their steeds sharply and suspiciously.

The captain of the troop was a stoutly built man of sixty, with a pointed grey beard and twisted moustache. Giles recognised Humphrey Jocelyn, a soldier of long standing, a one-time native of Plymouth, and now an officer of the garrison of that town. He bore no very good reputation, and was considered a masterly hand at dealing with cards.

"'Tis Master Montford!" cried the captain, with a tremendous oath. "What brings you here?"

Giles briefly explained the situation.

"Is Sir Francis Drake's fleet still in the harbour?" he asked eagerly.

"It was there at noonday," was the reply. "Since then we have been up the Channel shore on a wild-goose chase, and now we are heading round the Sound for the coast of Cornwall."

"For what purpose?" Giles ventured to ask.

The captain winked, and gave a vicious tug at his sword-belt.

"As like as not there's a Spanish ship lying over in the bay off Tintagel Castle," he said, "and mayhap some of the knaves are spying around on shore. Do you see, Master Montford?"

Giles nodded.

"I hope you'll get them."

"If we don't, may I never spit a Spaniard again!" muttered the captain. "We must be off now. Stay, lad! As you are on the Queen's service, I will help you out. One of my men shall give you a horse, and he can lead yours to Templeton."

Giles gratefully accepted this offer, wondering during the brief wait, why the captain was watching him so strangely, and with such lurking amusement in his half-closed eyes.

The lad was quickly mounted, and as he rode westward toward home Captain Humphrey Jocelyn and his troop clattered noisily away to the north. The dragoon followed slowly with the lame horse, cursing his luck for missing the chance of a brush with the hated Spaniards.

In thinking over the news he had heard the ride passed quickly for Giles, and he was surprised when Templeton loomed close ahead in the moonlight. The servants greeted him gladly and helped him to dismount, and, after giving orders that a fresh steed should be sent to meet the dragoon, the lad entered the house.

It was a chilly night, and Hereward Tomewell was dining in the hall, alongside a fire of blazing logs. Empty bottles and spicy dishes littered the table, and what with the good fare and the heat of the fire, the learned tutor's face was flushed to the colour of the flames dancing on the hearth.

He greeted Giles without attempting to rise, and overwhelmed him with a flood of questions.

"I am taking my evening bite and sup," he explained. "I will see to it that the servants prepare dinner at once."

"It will not be unwelcome," replied Giles, "for I am as hungry as a starved dog. I will join you presently, Master Tomewell, then you shall hear what news I have to tell."

The lad threw his cloak and sword upon a bench, and a moment later he was in his sleeping-room on the second floor of the house. His legs were so stiff and weary that he sat down for a brief rest. A lamp was burning on a shelf to one side of him, and on the other side an open casement looked toward the shrubbery of the park.

A sharp pain in his wrist called the injury to mind, and as he crossed the room to a little cabinet over his bed, he fancied he heard the faint trampling of horses at a distance. But the sound died away suddenly, and Giles gave it no further thought.

He took from the cabinet a bottle containing a healing lotion, and proceeded to thoroughly bathe his wrist. He had just replaced the bottle, and was in the act of getting a bandage, when there came a sudden and furious rush of feet outside the house, and a chorus of alarmed cries; then a couple of pistol-shots, followed by a scream of agony.

Next, and before even the lad could stir, the intruders were in the hall, with brawling and cursing and Master Tomewell's voice was lifted in accents of keenest terror.

Giles was helpless, for not a weapon was in the room. Hearing rapid and heavy footsteps on the stairs, he ran to the open casement, only to discover a group of dark figures on guard in the shrubbery. As he turned in desperation to the door, it was burst open in his very face, and five swarthy and fierce-visaged Spanish soldiers dashed into the room.

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH GILES COMES TO HIS SENSES AMID STRANGE SURROUNDINGS.

THAT the Spaniards had come to avenge their slain comrades, Giles did not for an instant doubt, especially as he recognised Francisco de Rica in the party. Believing his life to be at stake, he ran back to the far end of the room, hot pressed by his pursuers, and snatched up a low oaken stool.

This he swung round with a shout of defiance, and at the first blow, delivered with all the strength of both arms, the foremost soldier went down with a broken skull. The remaining four did not draw their swords, nor did they give the lad a chance to swing the stool a second time. They leaped upon him at once, cursing and threatening.

There was a lively scene of hitting and sprawling that made the beams of the stout old floor quiver. Giles fought with desperate valour, and his clenched fists dealt more than one staggering blow. Even when he was brought to his knees by a stroke behind the ear, he struggled on with sullen fury, breaking hold after hold, and hitting out with hands and feet.

But the arrival of three more Spaniards quickly ended the unequal combat. Giles was brutally overpowered and stunned by a rain of blows. While in this half-conscious state his ankles and wrists were securely bound, a gag was thrust between his teeth, and a folded kerchief was tied over his eyes.

All was quiet below, and after a whispered consultation three of the ruffians picked up the prisoner and carried him downstairs. The lad's brain was active, and he wondered for what fate his captors were reserving him.

As he was taken through the hall he heard an exclamation of horror from Hereward Tomewell, and a frightened gasp or two from the servants, who had evidently been captured and brought into the house. A fierce command for silence, uttered by De Rica's voice, was instantly obeyed.

The door swung open, and Giles felt the raw night air blowing on his cheeks. Now his ankle-cords were cut, and he was hurried along on foot. He knew that there was little chance of rescue, but he had plenty of pluck and grit, and did not give way to despair.

He wondered if Trent had delivered the letter, and it gladdened his heart to know that the trusty fellow could not yet be on his way to Templeton, and was therefore in no danger of being captured. The letter to Sir Richard, which he had left in his cloak, was a source of painful uneasiness.

He feared that the Spaniards had discovered it.

But on this point he was reassured when one of his captors remarked audibly:

"It was a shame to leave such rich plunder behind; the house was full of it. And we might have found something valuable in the way of letters and papers. The lad's cloak lay on a bench."

"That should have been looked to," answered De Rica, "but it is too late now. As for plunder—you know what were our orders."

"Zounds! we had time to spare," grumbled a third. "The cut-throat dragoons are off on a false scent, thanks to our good comrade Armijo's skill in writing English, and sunrise can scarcely see them back again."

"We are never safe on this accursed soil," De Rica's voice replied. "Give me the open sea for an easy mind. Ah! here we are. Now mount in haste."

The party halted, and Giles heard the restless trampling of horses close at hand. He was lifted across the saddle in front of one of the soldiers, and held there by a hand inserted under his fettered arms. A moment later the troop were riding at a gallop over level and spongy ground—no doubt the open moorland.

The ride was a long and trying one to Giles, for his sprained wrist, aggravated by the cord, pained him terribly. Harder to bear was the realisation that every minute was taking him farther from the possibility of rescue or aid.

A strong breeze blew on his right cheek, and as the wind and been from the west that afternoon he knew by this sign that he was riding southward. He was satisfied that the destination of his captors was some point on the coast, where they probably had a vessel in waiting. Very likely it was the identical ship for which the queen's minister was searching in the Thames and the Tower pool.

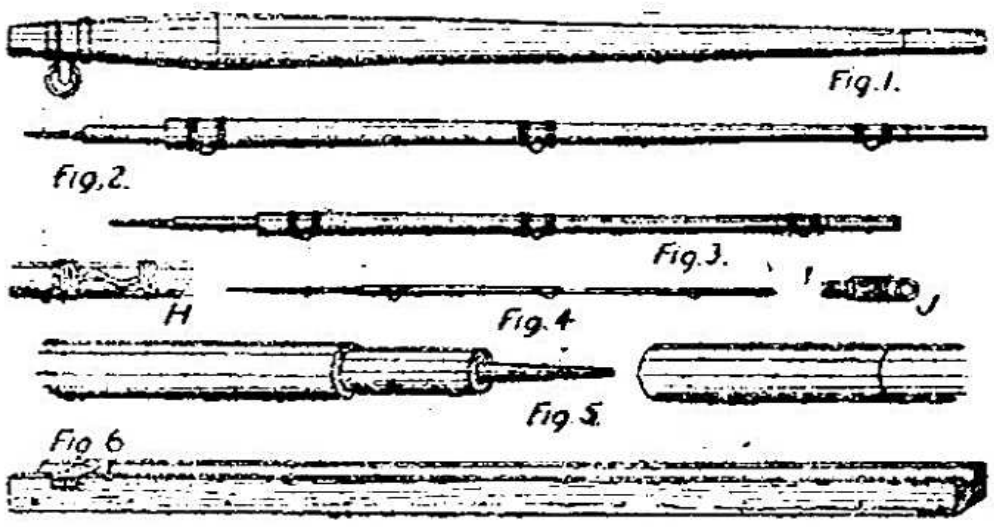
(More about the exciting adventures of Master Giles Montford will appear next week.)

FISHING RODS

Making, Repairing and Fitting.

By DICK GOODWIN

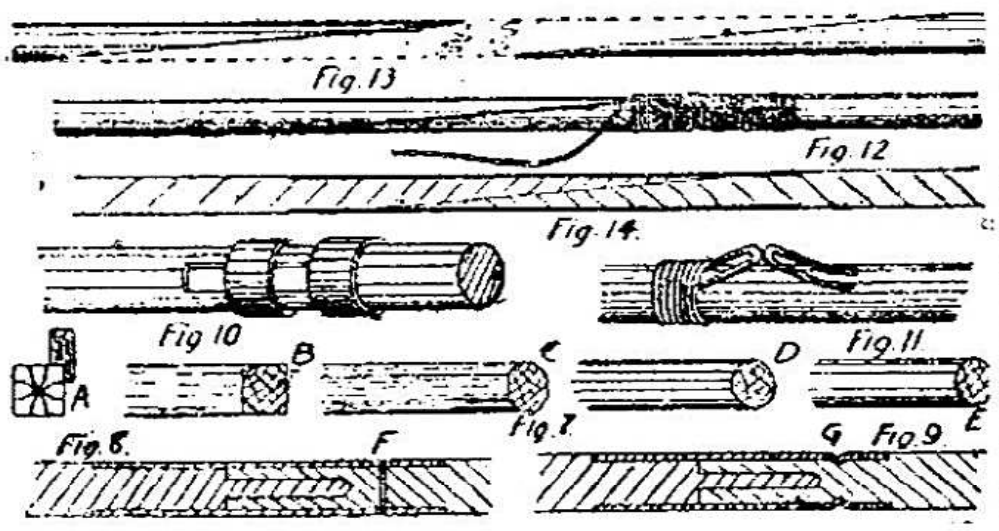
THE number of lengths in a fishing-rod depend on the length, a rod 12 to 14 feet long should have at least three parts, but it is easier to make a 12-ft. rod with four parts. The butt and the next piece to it should be 3 ft. 6 in., the third length 3 ft., and the top 2 ft. 6 in.; these are shown at Figs. 1 to 4. It is of the greatest importance to obtain the best wood, greenheart, hickory, and lancewood are commonly used on account of their strength; the former is to be preferred.



PREPARING THE LENGTHS.

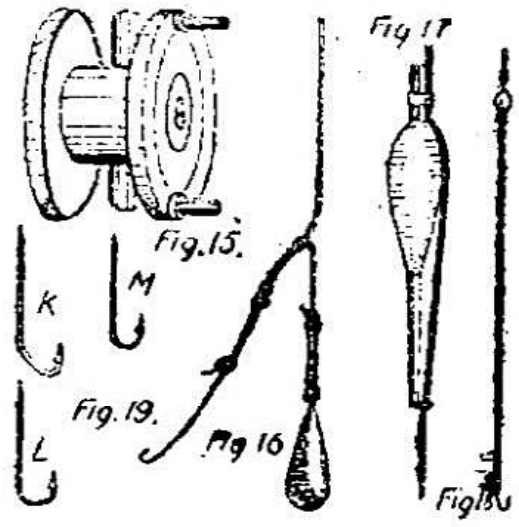
The butt is prepared from 1½ in. square wood, and is planed to approximately this diameter; it tapers from 9 in. to ⅞ in. diameter at one end to ¾ in. at the other. The next length is tapered from ¾ in. to ½ in.; the third from ½ in. to ⅜ in.; while the top tapers from ⅜ in. to ¼ in.

Although it is necessary to provide joints so that the lengths can fit together, as at Fig. 5, the wood must first of all be planed to the round and tapered. The best method of doing this is to make a V planing block, as at Fig. 6, from any suitable pieces of wood.



PLANING THE WOOD.

The method of planing is shown at Fig. 7. First set out octagons on the end, and make a thumb gauge as at A, for use of the squared wood, as at B. Next plane to octagonal form, as at C, set off circles of correct diameter, and plane off corners of octagon, as at D, and finally plane down to cylindrical form, as at E. The tapering should be done afterwards, and the lengths cleaned up and thoroughly smoothed with glasspaper. The joint shown at Fig. 5 is formed with a length of thin brass tube on one length, the other being shaped to fit and also fitted with a spike which can be of metal or wood let in a hole drilled in the wood.

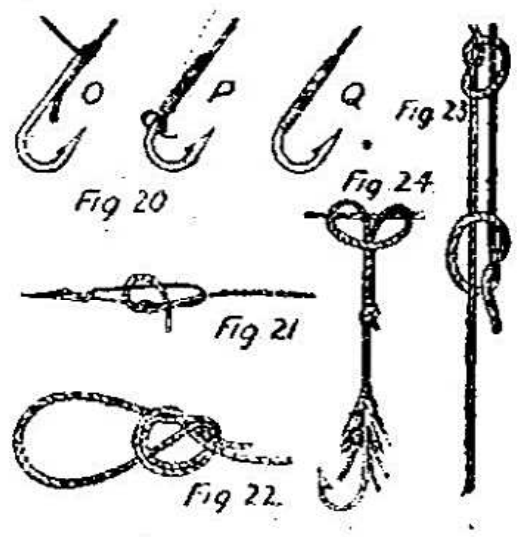


FITTING THE FERRULES.

Other methods are shown at Figs. 8 and 9, the brass ferrule being pinned through, as at F, or set with a punch as at G. A recess is cut in the butt to carry the winch, as at Fig. 10, one fixed and one loose brass collars being fitted, as shown. Many kinds of rings to carry the line are available, a simple method is shown at Fig. 11, another form is shown at H, and the method of fixing the top ring is shown at J.

SPLICING BROKEN RODS.

Broken rods are spliced as at Fig. 12, waxed silk cord being the most suitable material, the two broken pieces should be carefully planed down, as at Fig. 13, a short length can be inserted if it is desired to keep the rod the same length. Another method, suitable for lower lengths is shown at Fig. 14, and consists of fitting the splice inside a length of thin tube. Finish the rod with the finest copal varnish, rubbing down the first two coats after they have thoroughly dried.



THE REEL AND TACKLE

A 3½ in. reel similar to that at Fig. 15 will be found most useful; these, with the necessary hooks, line, casts, and floats can be obtained from a tackle maker. The methods of the usual forms of attachment are shown at Fig. 17, 18 and 19. The first is for paternostering, the second for tight corking, and the last for legering. The three commonly used forms of hooks are shown at Fig. 19, K is the Limerick, L the Kendal sneck, and M the Round.

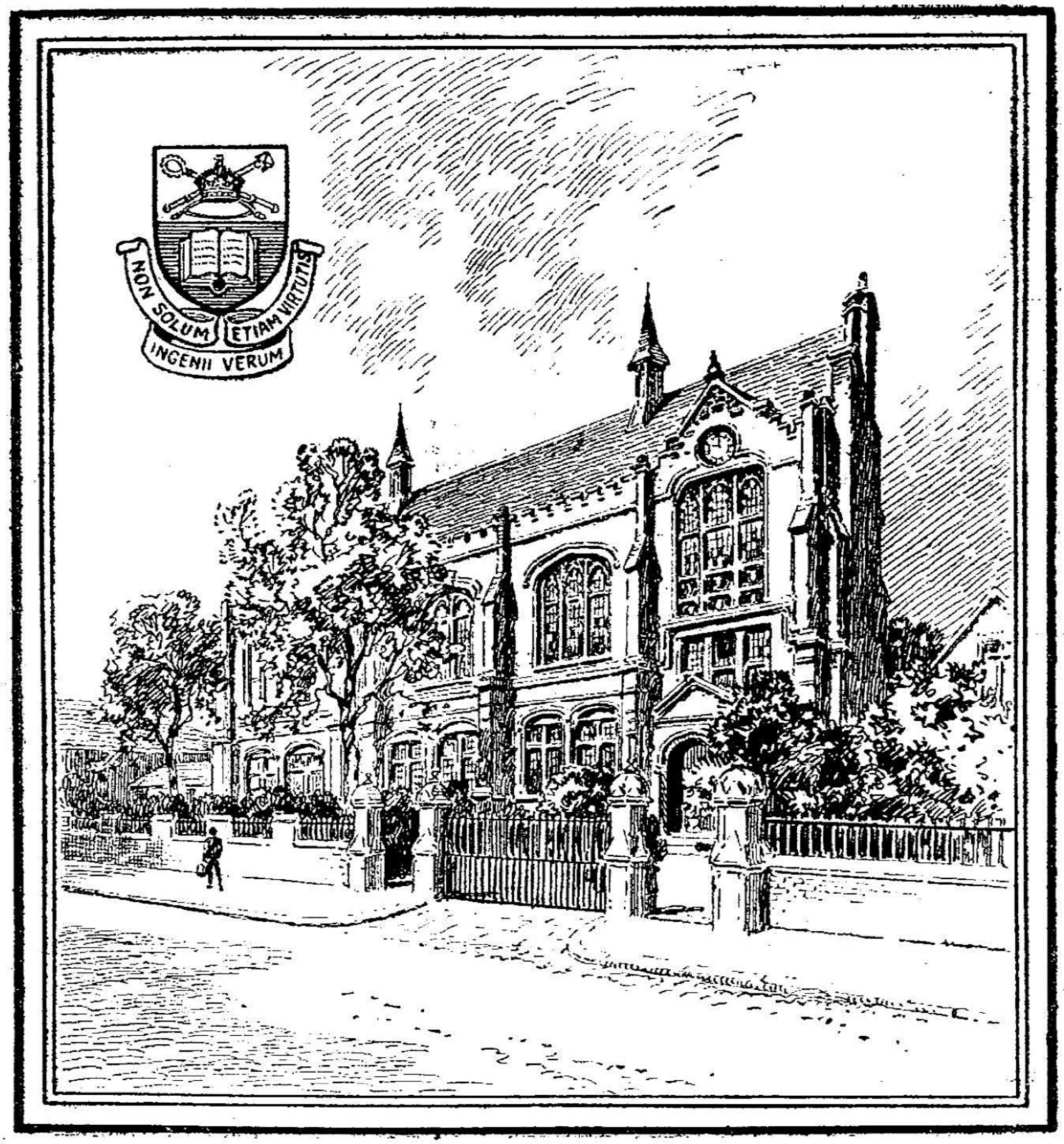
WHIPPING AND KNOTTING.

The method of whipping the hooks to the gut is shown at Fig. 20, the first stage consists in binding waxed silk to the gut and attaching the top of the hook as at O, the method of finishing off the silk is shown at P, and the finished work at Q. The knot for fixing the running line to the cast is shown at Fig. 21, a gut loop knot at Fig. 22, a fisherman's knot at Fig. 23, and the method of fastening a dropper to a cast is shown at Fig. 24.

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Special Sketch by Mr. Briscoe, for "The Nelson Lee Library," of

LIVERPOOL COLLEGE.



Liverpool College was founded in 1842, and originally occupied the site in Shaw Street. The Senior School later moved to its present new buildings, erected in 1890 near Sefton Park, and has since become known as Liverpool College. The school accommodates about 420 boys, of whom 220 belong to the Junior or Preparatory Department. The school is divided into three divisions, viz., the Preparatory, Junior and Senior Departments. Rugby football is played, and games are compulsory.

MORE ABOUT ST. FRANK'S!

Here's a treat for you, and no mistake! You certainly musn't miss this. You know what it is? Yes—your old favourite, Edwy Searles Brooks, is writing about the boys of St. Frank's in this week's

BOYS' REALM, 2D.

You've heard about it already, of course? You've probably read a part of the story in this number. But there's lots more, and you'll find it in this week's

BOYS' REALM, 2D.

Only the first story this week, mind. Next week there'll be another. And the week after that there'll be another. And so on for AT LEAST eight weeks. You must certainly go straightaway and ask your newsagent for the REALM. If this week's REALM is sold out, make sure of next week's by placing an order with your newsagent.

DON'T MISS "THE CRUSOE SCOUTS!"

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