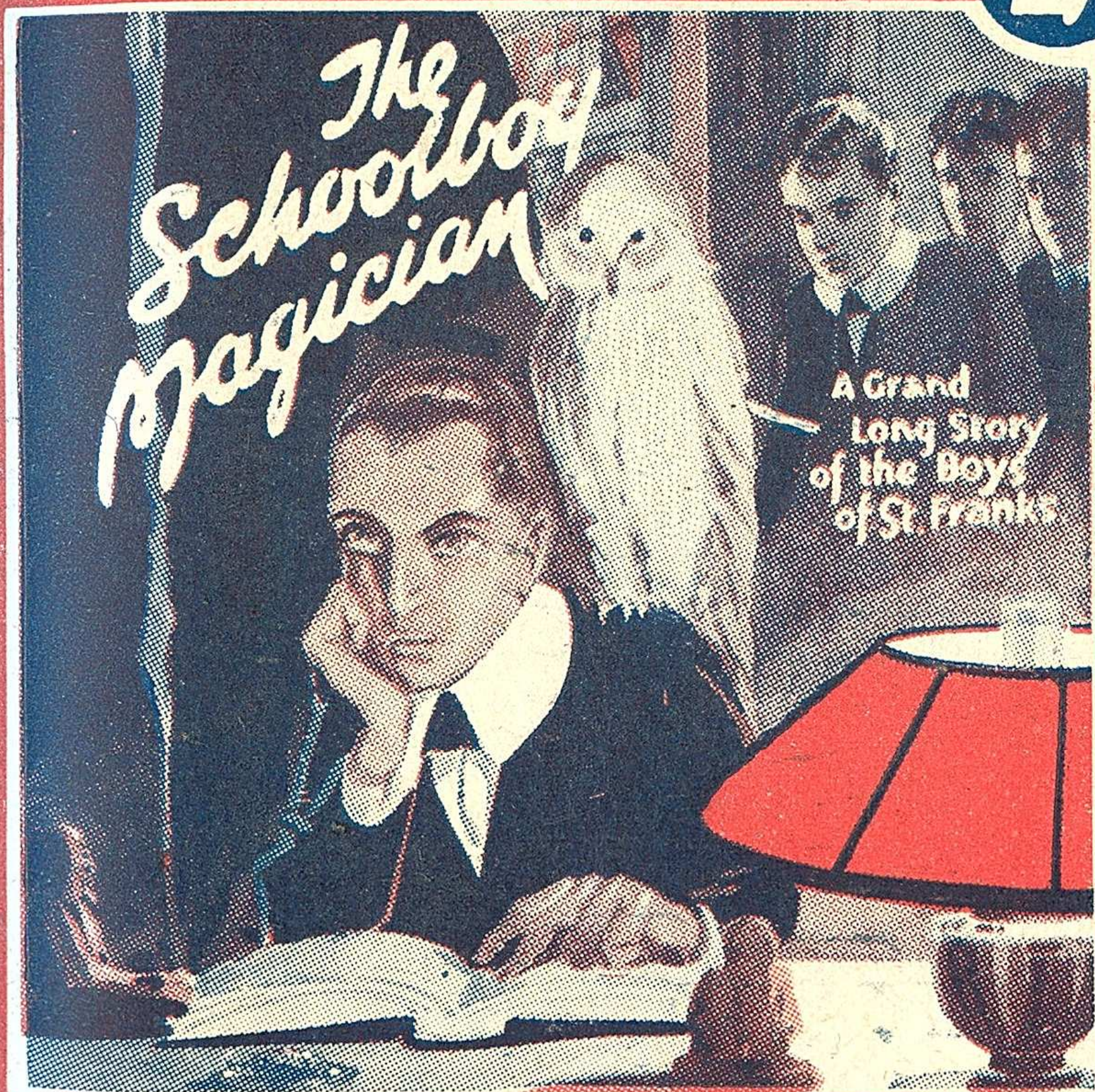


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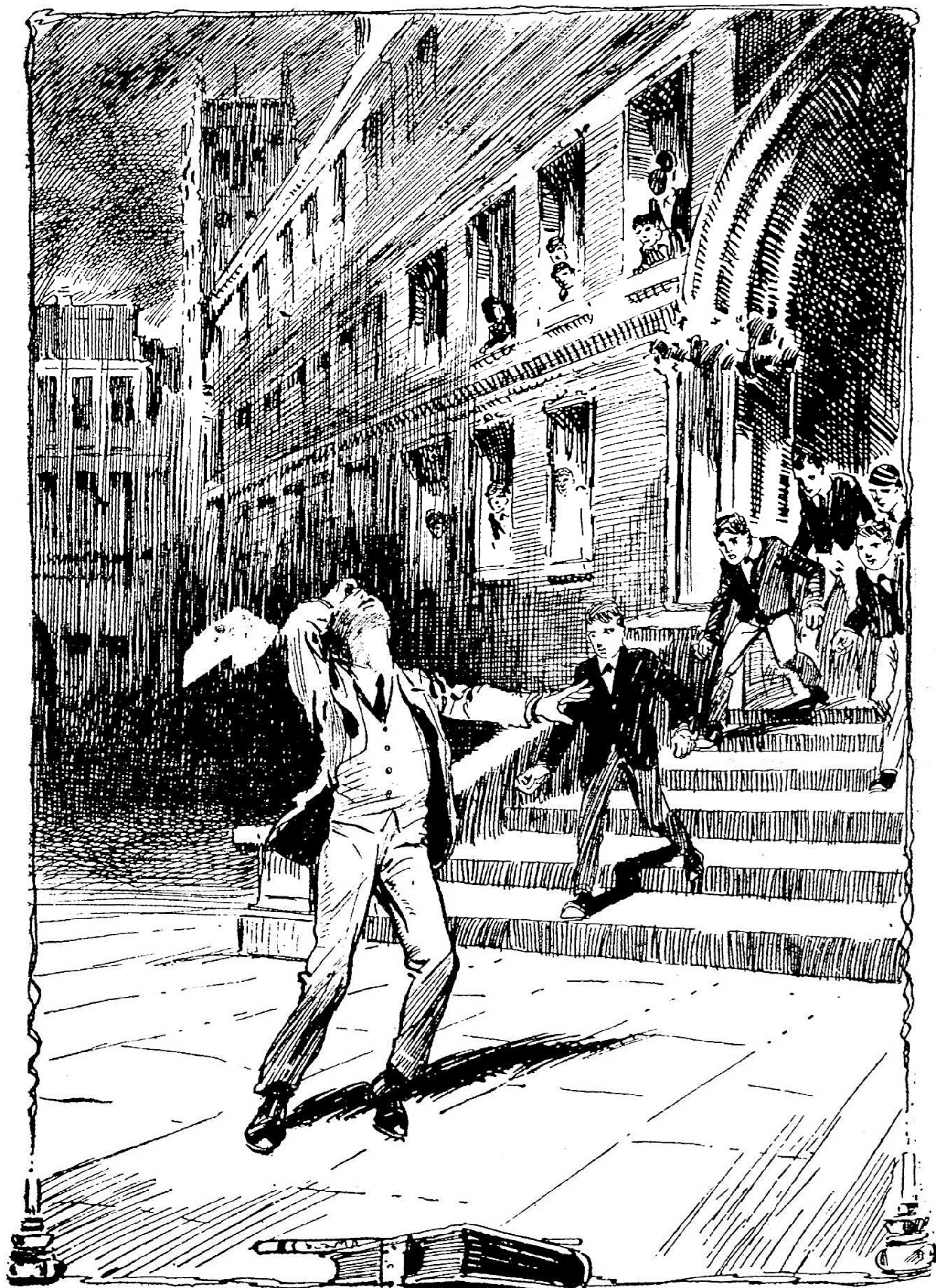
A Grand
Long Story
of the Boys
of St. Franks

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No 542.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

October 24, 1925.



Kenmore felt everything was dark—horribly, mysteriously dark. He clapped his hands to his paining eyes. And then, with a terrible cry, he knew. "I'm blind!" he screamed. "I'm blind!"

The SCHOOLBOY MAGICIAN!

By
**EDWY SEARLES
BROOKS**

The series which opens with this week's story will undoubtedly rank as the finest that has ever flowed from the facile pen of the illustrious author of our St. Frank's stories. Magic, mystery, humour, sport and detective adventure are all represented in their turn, but the central figure, the mysterious Ezra Quirke, is always lurking somewhere near, and by his magical powers performing strange wonders that influence the whole course of events at St. Frank's during this memorable winter term.

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THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE SCREECH IN THE NIGHT.

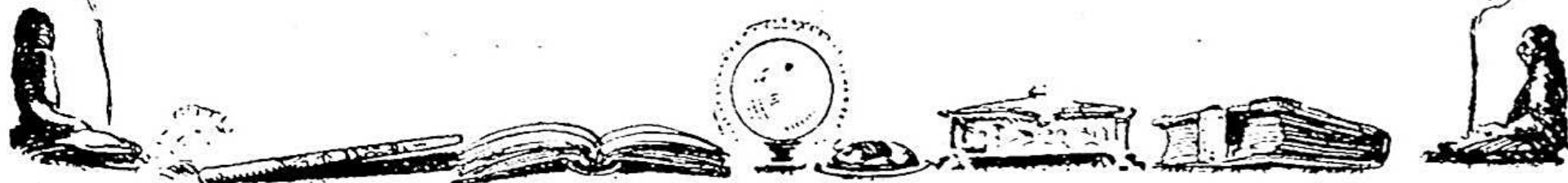
THE wind howled and moaned round St. Frank's with a steadily increasing force. Now and again it rose to a mighty shriek, and the solid old piles fairly shook under the force of the elements.

It was a wild October night.

The gale was sweeping in from the Channel, and even here, three miles from the coast, the air had a tang of the sea about it. No rain was falling, but massed regiments of clouds were marching hurriedly across the sky.

The famous old school was asleep—or should have been. Not a single light was gleaming from any window of the five big Houses. Beyond the Inner Court, however, a warm glow showed in one of the rooms of the Headmaster's private residence. But that was a long way off—isolated from the school proper.

(Continued on page 2.)





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(Continued from page 1.)

With a perfect scream of destructive glee, the gale whipped round the West Tower, and caught one of the upper casement windows of the Ancient House. It stood slightly open, and was fixed. But this time the gale won, and the window smashed back with a splintering crash.

Dick Hamilton, of the Remove, sat up in bed with a start.

That window belonged to his dormitory, and the sudden sound had aroused him on the instant. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, who shared the dormitory with him, were undisturbed. The window, now loose, was banging and clattering urgently.

"By jingo!" murmured Dick. "It's blowing hard!"

He slipped out of bed and went to the window. There was no need to switch on the light. There was nearly a full moon overhead, and at the moment the scurrying clouds had left it free.

Nipper stood at the window, looking out across the West Square. It was almost as light as day. The West House stood there, revealed in every outline. There were dense black shadows, and the absence of any living movement only added to the effect.

"There'll be a few tiles off to-night," Nipper told himself. "We shall be lucky if we don't have some trees down, too. Not much chance of footer practice in the morning with a gale like this."

He gave his attention to the window, and found that the fastening was snapped in half. Two of the glasses were broken, so Nipper decided to close the window, and tie it up. Plenty of fresh air would come through. He was just finishing the job when the brilliancy became dulled, and he found it difficult to see what he was doing. Opening the window again, he

looked out. A dense pack of clouds had come up, and the moon was obscured. The West House was now a mere blurr across the square.

"Rain!" muttered Nipper. "Plenty of it, too, by the look—"

He broke off, catching his breath in. An extraordinary sound had come to his ears, a sound which rather startled him. It was a long, drawn-out screech, a shuddering wail which arose on the night air, and died away into throbbing silence.

"What—what was that?"

Tommy Watson sat up in bed and asked the question rather shakily. Perhaps Nipper's movements had disturbed him, and that extraordinary sound had aroused him to wakefulness. He was sitting up in bed, staring at the window.

"Hanged if I know!" said Nipper huskily.

"What are you doing there?" asked Watson. "What's the time? Why aren't you in bed—"

"A gust of wind broke the fastening, and I've just been fixing the window," interrupted Nipper. "I can't understand— Hush! There it is again. By Jove, it's enough to give you the creeps!"

That uncanny screech was repeated, the same drawn-out wail, and the same dying-away throb. On this occasion the wind had lulled for a moment, and the night cry was intensified.

"Can't you see anything?" asked Watson, getting out of bed. "It sounded like somebody being murdered. I say, I hope there's nothing wrong in one of the other Houses. I've never heard such—"

"Dear old boys, what's wrong?" interrupted Tregellis-West sleepily. "Begad! You're both out of bed. Is there anythin' happenin' out in the square? You seem frightfully interested."

He wasn't inclined to leave his own warm bed, and he lay there watching the others. Tommy Watson joined Nipper at the window, and they both stared out. There was nothing within sight to account for the weird cries. And now the wind was rushing down with added velocity.

"Must have been the gale," declared Nipper at length. "The wind makes all sorts of uncanny sounds, you know. Round one of the angles, perhaps. Anyhow, we needn't worry ourselves."

But he spoke without conviction, and Tommy Watson knew it. That second screech had come while the wind was low, and Nipper's explanation was obviously at fault. He only suggested it in the hope of calming his chums. And the ruse didn't work.

"It couldn't have been the wind," said Watson nervously. "I'm not a jumpy chap, but that sound fairly made me shiver. I'm like a blessed jelly. It was so unearthly—so uncanny!"

Even as he spoke the screech came for the third time. And it was different. At the moment the wind was rushing past the Ancient House in a boisterous flurry of energy. Accompanying that rush, came the sound of the screech. It was nearer than before, and the shuddering throb of it could almost be felt.

"Begad!" breathed Sir Montie. "How absolutely frightful!"

He hopped out of bed and joined his chums. Tregellis-West was a calm junior, and he took life with urbane serenity. It required a great deal to ruffle him, and his nerves were strong. But at the moment his face had paled slightly.

"This is rummy if you like," said Nipper softly. "Don't get alarmed, you chaps—there's some natural explanation. We don't get sounds in the night like that without a logical reason. I don't think it's the gale; but it might be some animal——"

"We've never heard a sound like that before," objected Watson. "It couldn't be a gull, or——"

He broke off with a gulp, and pointed tensely.

"Look!" he breathed. "Look down there!"

CHAPTER II.

THE FIGURE OF MYSTERY.



NIPPER and Tregellis-West felt themselves become rigid as they stared in the direction of Watson's pointing finger. A curious tingling sensation assailed their

scalps, and their hearts throbbed.

A figure had appeared from the West Arch, coming through from the Triangle. The figure had come noiselessly, and there was something unreal and spectral about it. The moon came out full at the moment, and shone with all her white brilliance.

"Who—who is it?" muttered Watson.

"Hush!" breathed Nipper. "I can't understand——"

He stared, his words unfinished. The figure below was moving out into the middle of the square, and walking with a curious deliberation that seemed almost inhuman. As far as the watching trio could see, the stranger was a boy. He was attired in a curious cloak, and wore no hat. His long hair was waving weirdly in the wind, and his white face looked utterly ghostly. It was even possible to see the fixed expression of the eyes.

He was certainly no inhabitant of St. Frank's.

A stranger—a wanderer in the school grounds without any apparent reason. His slow, deliberate style of walking was

impressive in itself, and the effect of the moonlight added to the air of unreality.

"It's a ghost!" muttered Watson hoarsely.

"Begad!" whispered Sir Montie. "Dear old boys, I believe——"

"By Jove! Look there!" broke in Nipper. "What on earth——"

Something was fluttering in the air—hovering over that spectral figure in the square. At first sight it resembled a gigantic bat. Its wings made no sound on the air, and the creature was just as ghostly as the human form above which it circled.

Then with a swoop it dropped, and preched itself upon the shoulder of the walker. The whole experience from start to finish was unnerving. Even Nipper was strongly affected.

"It's an owl!" he breathed. "Can't you see? It's a long-eared owl! But what's it's doing with that chap? Who is he? And why are they here? There's something pretty beastly about this!"

"Nipper, old boy, what about that screech?" suggested Tregellis-West. "The owl, don't you know——"

"The owl!" repeated Nipper. "Why, yes, of course. Some owls screech, don't they? You've got it, Montie. That sound we heard must have been caused by that ghastly bird."

"But it doesn't seem real, and that chap doesn't seem real, either," said Tommy Watson unsteadily. "What are we going to do about it? I think we ought to go and wake up Mr. Lee, or——"

"Begad!" interrupted Sir Montie. "They've gone!"

"Gone!" panted Nipper.

They stared out, aghast. A cloud had drifted across the moon, bringing complete darkness for a moment. And now that the white light was streaming across the square again, it fell upon the blank gravel and pathways. Both the mystery figure and the owl had vanished.

"I knew it—I said so at first!" whispered Tommy Watson. "It was a ghost!"

"Don't be an ass!" muttered Nipper. "Pull yourself together, Tommy. You know as well as I do that ghosts are all tommy-rot. That fellow was human—and the owl was solid, too. They must have walked away during that patch of darkness. Even so, it's rummy!"

They craned out of the window, starting. But the West Square was now as deserted as it had been originally. Solemnly the hour of midnight boomed out from the main clock-tower. This in itself was significant.

"Midnight!" said Watson. "Just the very hour. Oh, all right, Nipper," he went on. "I suppose you're right—I don't believe in ghosts any more than you do."

But it's jolly queer, happening just at this time. And why? Who could the chap be? Why should he walk through the square at midnight with an owl on his shoulder?"

"It's so frightfully uncanny, old boys," said Sir Montie.

"I can offer no explanation, and I hardly know what to do," said Nipper, frowning. "It's no good getting up and rousing the House. We should only look silly. Nobody would believe us, anyhow."

They waited another five minutes, but there was nothing else to be seen. The gale continued its playful tactics, and at length Nipper closed the window, and they all got back into bed. But sleep wasn't so easy now. They all found themselves with nerves on the stretch, and with their ears sharply attuned.

"The best thing we can do is to say nothing," advised Nipper. "It'll sound silly to ourselves in the morning, so what would it sound like to the other fellows? They'd only say we'd had nightmare."

"But we couldn't all have the same nightmare at once," objected Watson. "I think we ought to go to Mr. Lee and tell him—"

"And get chipped for our pains," interrupted Nipper. "Not likely. No, my lad, we'll get to sleep again, and make some inquiries in the morning. I dare say there's a perfectly natural explanation, although it's hard to find one now."

Fully twenty minutes elapsed before Nipper's chums dropped off. Even then their sleep was rather restless and fitful. Nipper himself couldn't help remembering that white face, the staring eyes, the curious cloaked figure. It was all so unreal, so opposed to any logical theory.

"Oh, well, it's no good worrying!" muttered Nipper.

He turned over in bed, and settled himself for sleep. But as he pulled the bedclothes higher over his shoulders, he suddenly raised himself, listening. He may have been mistaken, but he could have sworn that the screech had come to his ears again—this time from afar.

He listened intently, but only the sobbing of the gale came to him. But the recurrence of that other sound had disturbed him afresh, and it was a considerable time before sleep came to him.

CHAPTER III.

HANDFORTH'S LITTLE WAY.



CLANG-CLANG! The rising-bell sounded loudly throughout the dormitories at the Ancient House. The October sun was shining rather wanly through the windows, and the gale had expended

most of its force. A stiff breeze was still blowing, but it was a mere ghost of the giant of the night.

A few clouds were drifting aimlessly across the sky—ragged, untidy-looking clouds, like a straggling remnant of a beaten army. And the sky itself was washed out in appearance.

In one of the junior dormitories, Edward Oswald Handforth sat up in bed at the first clang of the bell, and blinked. He looked across at Church and McClure, his two special chums. They were still sleeping the sleep of the just, ignoring the rising-bell with superb indifference.

"Disgusting!" said Handforth loudly.

Church was flat on his face, with his head buried in the pillows. How he could breathe at all was a mystery to Handforth, but Church seemed perfectly alive, judging by the persistent heaving of the bedclothes.

McClure was reposing more rationally. He lay on his side, one hand grasping an upper bed-rail, and the other was waving uncertainly to and fro in the air. His mouth was wide open, and he was apparently in the midst of a painful dream.

"It's a good thing there's somebody in this dormitory who doesn't sleep like a log!" said Handforth, as he leapt out of bed. "Now then, you sluggards! Out of it!"

Edward Oswald was never gentle. He didn't know how to be. Rough and ready methods were characteristic of him, and he always treated his bosom chums as though they were his slaves. Actually, he was very fond of them—but to judge by his behaviour, one would take it for granted that he had a permanent grudge against them.

With one sweep, he yanked McClure's bedclothes clean off. The unfortunate McClure was left there, like a freshly-landed fish. He sat up, gasping, for the morning was chilly.

"Hi!" he gurgled. "Who—who did that? You fathead, Handy! Gimme back those sheets and blankets! What's the silly idea? Have you gone dotty, or what?"

"Time to get up!" said Handforth curtly.

"The rising-bell hasn't gone yet!" snorted McClure.

"It went two minutes ago!"

"I know that! But it was only the first one!" roared McClure. "Gimme back those bedclothes! Nobody ever dreams of getting up until the second bell—"

"You're not dreaming about it now—you're getting up!" retorted Handforth briskly. "Come on, Church, my son! Sorry, but it can't be helped! We've only got ten minutes to dress."

Church shared the same fate as McClure. They both seemed reluctant to leave their beds, although there was no further comfort to be obtained. They sat there, hunched up, hugging their knees. They

knew very well that it would be hopeless to expect to get their bedclothes back.

"You're mad!" said Church, irritably. "You're always mad—but you're madder than ever this morning! The second bell hasn't gone yet, and it's as cold as the dickens! What's the matter with you?"

Handforth glared at his chums.

"What about that furniture?" he demanded.

"What furniture?"

"Our study furniture."

"What about it?" asked Church blankly.

"Didn't we arrange to shift it this morning?" demanded Handforth. "Are you going to sit there, Walter Church, and deny it? Didn't we make plans to rearrange the whole study?"

Church scratched his head.

"First I've heard about it," he said, in amazement. "And what do we want to shift the furniture for? It's all right where it is. Do you know about this, Mac?"

"Not a thing!" replied McClure tartly. "Handy dreamed it?"

As a matter of fact, Handforth had made all his plans overnight, but he had thoughtlessly neglected to consult his chums. He had decided that they would hop out at the first bell, and make a complete rearrangement in Study D. It was one of his little habits to make such plans, and to expect Church and McClure to know all about them without being told.

"Of course he dreamed it!" went on McClure. "Handy, be a sport, for goodness' sake! Get back into bed until the second bell, and let's have our clothes back. We're frozen."

Handforth didn't reply verbally. He made a move across the dormitory to the corner, where a big porcelain wash-basin was built into the wall. Hot and cold water was laid on, and Handforth gave the cold-water tap a twist.

"You've got just ten seconds," he said calmly. "When I make plans, they've got to be carried out! Any insubordination, and you'll know something! Who's going to be first out?"

He held the drinking glass under the tap, and filled it. With astonishing alacrity, Church and McClure raced to the floor, and made a dead heat of it. Handforth set the glass down with a grunt of triumph.

"That's better!" he said pleasantly. "Now get dressed!"

Church and McClure looked at one another helplessly.

"Oh, we might as well, I suppose," growled Church, speaking tensely between his clenched teeth. "We shan't get any peace, anyhow! I'll wash first," he added carelessly.

He went over to the basin, and Handforth was unsuspecting. The next moment Church whisked up the glass of water, and held it ready. For once he was looking very grim.

"Are you going to allow us to get back to bed, or do you want this down your chest?" he asked fiercely. "You've got two seconds! Your word of honour that you won't touch us until second bell, or you'll have the whole glassful in one spot!"

"Good man!" said McClure breathlessly.

Handforth gave one gasp, and stared.

"By George!" he ejaculated. "Are you threatening me? Put that glass down, you fathead! If you throw that——"

"Your word of honour, or——"

"Not likely!" roared Handforth.

Swish!

Church was as good as his word. The contents of the glass hit Handforth's bare chest in one solid, icy slab. Edward Oswald gave a fiendish yell, and after that things began to happen.

CHAPTER IV.

ROUGH ON ARCHIE.



"WHAT - HO! The good old cheery cup, as it were."

Archie Glen-thorne, of the Remove, sat up in bed with a bright chirrup. Phipps was standing next to him with a small tray containing a cup of steaming-hot tea. The swell of the Remove beamed.

"Morning, and so forth, Phipps," he observed. "Kindly whisk the old curtains aside, and allow the sunshine to illuminate the young master's intellectual features. Sunshine, Phipps, is the best thing in life—after one has made an exception of tea."

Phipps went round the bed, and pulled the curtains. And Archie sipped his tea, and became more chatty than ever. He was a privileged junior—being the only fellow at St. Frank's, indeed, who had his own valet. Nobody else was jealous, for it was generally recognised that the one and only Archie was as helpless as an infant.

"Dash it all, Phipps, what about it?" said Archie, frowning at the window. "The good old sun appears to be having a bad time. A somewhat watery countenance, as it were. Kindly hold forth on the subject of the weather. Will it rain, or otherwise?"

"The glass is quite steady, sir," replied Phipps. "I rather think the weather will remain blustery, but fine."

"In that case, laddie, what about the good old grey tweeds?" asked Archie. "Be good enough to bring them forth——"

"I should not advise the grey tweeds this morning, sir," said Phipps. "The wind is easterly, and somewhat cutting. I should suggest something warmer, sir."

"Oh, but really—— I mean—— Good gad, Phipps, if I say the grey tweeds, kindly produce the grey tweeds," exclaimed Archie frigidly. "I mean, I allow you a certain

amount of latitude, dash it, but on the matter of clothes I must be firm."

"Certainly, sir," agreed Phipps readily. "Just as you say, sir."

These little arguments were of almost daily occurrence. And although Phipps always agreed to his young master's whims, Phipps always had his own way in the end. Without his valet, Archie would have startled the school. He had a painful tendency towards colour, and it was Phipps' life work to keep Archie in check.

Phipps went to the ample wardrobe, and returned with a grey tweed suit. He proceeded to prepare it for donning, and Archie looked on with approval. This was the sort of thing he liked. Complete willingness from Phipps always put him in a good humour.

"You may remember, sir, that there was some talk of your father coming over this morning," observed Phipps. "Colonel Glen-thorne will be in Belton, and he may possibly call upon Dr. Stafford—"

"Odds tweeds and chevots!" ejaculated Archie. "In other words, gadzooks! In that case, the old tweeds are absolutely off the map, Phipps! I couldn't allow the pater to see me in those frightful rags!"

"I was thinking the same thing, sir."

"Then dash about, Phipps, and get the old gear box into working order," said Archie. "I mean, you've got to think for both of us. You know very well that the young master's brain is always stagnant in the morning."

Phipps quietly went to the wardrobe, and returned with Archie's latest suit—a brand-new creation for the late Autumn. Archie regarded these manoeuvres with intense satisfaction. The grey tweeds were discarded. As a matter of fact, the suit was perfect, but as it had been worn for over a month, its best days were over, as far as Archie was concerned.

"Topping, Phipps—absolutely the stuff," declared Archie. "One of the silk shirts, what? The pink stripe with the green background, Phipps. Whizz hither and thither, and produce it!"

"The shirt you mention, sir, is destroyed," said Phipps, with a slight shudder. "In your own interests, Master Archie, I thought it better to dispose of it. I should suggest the plain buff."

"Absolutely impos!" said Archie flatly. "Not only impos. but dashed ridic!"

Nevertheless, when Archie dressed, he donned the buff shirt without a murmur. And it was a fact that he presented a perfect picture of elegance as he surveyed himself in the mirror at the completion of the activities.

Phipps always came with Archie's morning cup of tea some little time before the rising-bell—for Archie took about three times as long to wash and dress as any other fellow. With him, the morning toilet was a kind of

religion. To hasten over it was nothing short of a crime.

He emerged triumphantly while many of the Removites were still rushing through their final ablutions. The upper corridor was busy, and Archie sauntered along it with a feeling of perfect satisfaction. In fact, he hadn't felt so comfortably attired for days.

Ominous sounds came from one of the dormitories just ahead. To be exact, Handforth & Co. were warming to their work. The row within that room, which had started with a glass of water, was waxing fierce.

And just before Archie drew opposite, the door flew open, and Church flew out. Strictly speaking, he was unfit to be seen in public, being attired in pyjama trousers only. Church ducked mechanically, and a slab of soap struck the opposite wall, and swerved off. Nothing could have been more unfortunate for the innocent Archie Glen-thorne.

If he had rehearsed the thing for weeks, he couldn't have done it half so well. The soap skidded along the polished linoleum, and tucked itself under Archie's left foot as he set it down.

The next second Archie performed a few miracles.

The soap wedged itself firmly under his instep, and immediately converted itself into the most efficient skate ever devised. Archie's left foot shot away from him as though the corridor had been covered with ice. Unfortunately, Archie accompanied his left foot wherever it went.

He careered down the corridor at lightning speed, gathering momentum as he went.

"Hi! I mean— Good gad!" gasped Archie feebly. "Phipps—help, laddie! Odds-life! This is simply frightful!"

CHAPTER V.

ARCHIE GOES GREEN.



WILLY HANDFORTH, of the Third, held up his woollen cardigan for inspection. He was entirely satisfied with the scrutiny, although Chubby Heath and

Juicy Lemon uttered startled cries of horror.

"Not so bad, eh?" said Willy. "It used to be grey, you know. There's something bright about this green, my lads."

"Bright!" gasped Chubby. "It's horrible!"

"We shall see you miles away!" said Juicy Lemon. "You can't wear that thing, Willy! If you go out like that, you'll frighten all the birds away! Burn it, for goodness' sake!"

Willy looked at his chums coldly. He had just dyed that cardigan, and had taken considerable trouble over it. Perhaps the green was a bit bright, but Willy was a firm believer in bright colours.

He dropped the article of apparel back into the bowl of vivid dye, and gave it another soaking. Then he looked at his hands. They were dyed, too, but Willy was hoping that the stain would come off. He wasn't sure, but he didn't worry about it. Life was too short to worry about trifles.

"She'll do now," he said briskly. "I'll buzz along to the bath-room, and give it a rinse. This dye only cost sixpence, and if I'd sent that cardigan away, it would have been an expensive job. I always believe in saving money, my lads."

He seized the bowl, and marched out of the Third-Form dormitory without further ado. He was certainly rather careless as he went through the doorway, for he deposited about half a pint of dye on the floor. Then he reached the turn of the corridor, and swung round as though he were the only junior in the entire House.

He came to a dead halt, staring.

A human projectile was shooting towards him with fearful speed. It was only Archie Glenthorne on the piece of soap. The swell of the Remove came along dizzily, balancing himself on one leg. The other leg was high in the air, and his arms were flying. How he kept his balance was a marvel that nobody could ever fathom.

"Hi! Look out!" howled Willy desperately.

Crash! Swoooooob!

Archie's right foot took the bowl of dye in the very centre, and it rose to the ceiling, tipped up, and deposited its entire contents upon the elegant Removite. Archie subsided on the floor in the centre of the flood, and he turned completely green with consternation.

"Odds avalanches and landslides!" he breathed faintly. "Be good enough to sound the good old S.O.S.! Women and children first, by gad! We're absolutely sinking!"

"You—you clumsy ass!" said Willy indignantly. "Look at my cardigan! It wanted another soaking before I threw the stuff away."

The cardigan was reposing on Archie's head, and drippings were running down Archie's face and over his chest. He feebly dragged it away, and then beat the air.

"Phipps!" he murmured. "Phipps, dash it! I say, this is simply frightful! What's happened? Where am I? Good gad! I've got a frightful feeling that all is not well!"

Church came along the passage, grinning.

"That's the best thing you've ever done, Archie," he said cordially. "You'd get a



As far as the watching trio could see, the stranger was a boy. He was attired in a curious cloak, and wore no hat. His long hair was waving weirdly in the wind, and his white face looked utterly ghostly.

hundred quid a week for that on the stage! You ought to practise it as a star turn!"

"Laddie, I—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Church violently.

He had just caught sight of Archie's face, and he stood there yelling. Willy gave him a severe glance.

"Get back to your room, and dress yourself," he said tartly. "What's the idea of coming out in the corridor nearly naked? I'm surprised at you, Church."

"My hat! I forgot that!" gasped Church, in alarm.

He made a dive back to his dormitory, hoping that most of the trouble would now be over. And Phipps came along the corridor, and hurried to his young master's assistance. Phipps was a man who never showed his emotions. His face remained a mask under the most trying circumstances. But it must be confessed that he was shaken to the very core as he gazed down at the prostrate Archie. For a moment Phipps was stricken, and his face turned pale.

"Master Archie!" he ejaculated, his voice horrified.



"Absolutely," said Archie. "I don't know what happened, Phipps, but it did! The bally floor positively whizzed away beneath me! Just like one of those dashed escalator things gone mad!"

"Allow me, sir!" said Phipps huskily.

He held out his hand, and Archie rose to his feet. Unhappily, he had failed to remove the soap, and his left foot had only just touched the floor when he shot forward again, and collapsed in a confused heap about three yards further down the corridor. By this time quite an audience had collected, and their smiles were audible throughout the House.

"Poor old Archie—he's gone absolutely green with worry," said Willy Handforth. "Well, I'd better be getting along. Sorry I can't stay, Phipps. I'll take that bowl, if you don't mind—"

"Did you do this, Master Willy?" asked Phipps reproachfully.

"Oh, come off it!" retorted Willy. "Archie kicked the stuff into the air before I could take two breaths. You needn't worry—it'll come off. It may take a day or two, but it'll be all right in the long run."

The leader of the Third hastened off before he could be associated with the disaster. A master might come along any moment, and it was always an awkward job explaining things to a master. Somehow, they never seemed to understand.

As for Archie, he was helped into his bed-room by the trusty Phipps. Considering that he had done absolutely nothing to deserve the disaster, it was rather rough on him. His superb suit was ruined, but that wasn't the worst.

He got into his room, and caught sight of himself in the long mirror. He started, and shied.

"What's that, Phipps?" he asked, pointing.

"Sir?"

"Dash it, that frightful green thing?" gasped Archie. "Good gad! Take it out of my room, Phipps! Of all the bally monstrosities—I mean to say—Oddslife! It's pointing at me!"

Phipps was very gentle.

"Calm yourself, sir," he said softly. "You are merely gazing at your own reflection in the mirror."

Archie jumped as though he had been stung by a hornet.

"That!" he gurgled. "That thing in there—But, I mean, it's all green! It can't be me—"

He gave a lurch towards the mirror, and the horrid truth was only too apparent. He was one solid green—hair, face, collar, and everything. With a low moan, Archie fell back into Phipps' arms.

CHAPTER VI.

EZRA QUIRKE, OF THE EAST HOUSE.



DICK HAMILTON & Co. were just ready to leave their dormitory. They had washed, dressed, and made their final preparations without any reference to that midnight adventure. And there had been a certain air of restraint between them.

Nipper paused as he was about to open the door.

"Look here, what's the good of beating about the bush?" he growled. "We're all thinking about the same thing, and we're all keeping quiet. It's much the better to be open. What about last night?"

"Dear old boy, you're right," agreed Sir Montie. "I was beginnin' to think I'd dreamed it all, begad! It really happened, then? We actually saw that chap in the square?"

"Thank goodness!" said Tommy Watson. "I thought it was a nightmare, too!"

"You didn't think anything of the sort," declared Nipper grimly. "Yes, we saw it—all of us. How does it strike you this morning?"

"I can't believe it," said Watson. "It seems too dotty for words! That screech, too—and the owl! Why, it's—it's impossible! Are you sure we didn't imagine it all?"

"There was no imagination about it," replied Nipper. "We heard that screech, and we saw the ghostly figure of a boy in the West Square—a fellow in a queer cloak, and with a white face. We'd better keep quiet about it."

"You don't think it was a ghost, or anything?" asked Sir Montie.

"It wasn't a ghost—and yet I can't see how it was a real human being," replied Nipper slowly. "The whole thing's mysterious. Take my advice, and keep mum. We may be able to find something out if we make a few discreet inquiries during the day. But if we talk, we shall only make ourselves a laughing-stock."

They went downstairs, and emerged from the Ancient House by the rear door. They wanted to have a look at the West Square at once—although even Nipper had no hope of making any discoveries.

The square was just the same as usual, and there was no possibility of finding footprints, for the gravel was hard and beaten down. In any case, it was difficult to believe that the incident had actually happened.

"Might as well go through into the Triangle, and forget the thing," said Nipper, at length. "I'll get busy again after breakfast."

They passed through the West Arch, and received startling confirmation of their curious adventure in the next minute.

boy had just emerged from the East Arch, opposite, and he was a stranger.

"By Jove!" said Nipper, staring.

The stranger approached, although he had obviously no intention of addressing the chums of Study C. He was looking round, taking a kind of melancholy interest in his surroundings. It was the boy's face which attracted Nipper's immediate attention.

"Don't you see?" he whispered. "That's the chap!"

"Eh? What chap?" said Watson.

"The fellow we saw last night in the square!"

"Begad! I believe you're right!" ejaculated Sir Montie, startled. "Then it wasn't a ghost—I'm not sure, though," he added. "The bally fellow looks like one even now!"

As the stranger approached, Nipper & Co. regarded him with open curiosity. He was certainly one of the most striking personalities they had ever encountered. In figure he was quite normal, and he was dressed in ordinary Etons. It was his face itself that struck one so forcibly.

It was a face that more closely resembled a mask than anything Nipper had ever seen. It was utterly expressionless and white. The cheek-bones were high, and the cheeks sunken in. And the deep-set eyes were black and mysterious. Indeed, but for the evidence of animation in the eyes, the face would have been like that of a statue.

The boy's lips were thin, and Nipper noted that his hands were long and tapering, with sinuous fingers. In every way he was a character unto himself—different from any other type.

"Good-morning!" said Nipper pleasantly.

He was relieved to discover an early explanation of the mystery. There had been no ghost—no supernatural visitation—but a mere crossing of the West Square by this extraordinary-looking newcomer. But even now there was no explanation of the mysterious owl.

"Good-morning!" said the boy, pausing.

"Just having a look round?" asked Nipper, eyeing the other casually.

"Yes."

His voice was soft and in keeping with his general appearance—mysterious. It had a curious silky quality, but was utterly toneless. And even when he spoke, his face maintained its mask-like appearance.

"A visitor here, aren't you?" asked Tommy Watson bluntly.

"No—I'm in the Fourth."

"My hat! A new fellow?" said Watson staring.

"Yes."

"That's funny, we haven't heard anything about you," said Nipper. "What House do you belong to?"

"East House."

"We're in the Ancient House," said Nipper. "Any objection to telling us your

name? We always like to get acquainted, you know."

"My name is Ezra Quirke," said the new boy. "You need not trouble to tell me yours. As we are in different Houses we are not likely to meet much."

He passed on, and Nipper & Co. felt a curious sense of relief. While Quirke had been with them the very atmosphere had seemed chilly. It was as though he carried an icy draught with him. It was an uncanny sort of feeling.

CHAPTER VII.

THE OPAL TIEPIN.



HANDFORTH turned abruptly and frowned. He had just emerged from the Ancient House, and was standing on the steps.

Church and McClure were behind him, and he regarded them frigidly.

"Don't follow me," he said in a cold voice. "I don't know you!"

"Look here, Handy——"

"I'm finished with you for good," said Handforth curtly. "It's no good—you can't wheedle me round. Go away, and never speak to me again!"

McClure sighed.

"Oh, well, we might as well take him at his word, Churchy," he said. "He's as hard as nails; he won't budge an inch. All we can do is to go away and find somebody else. Handy's finished with us, and so there's nothing else to do."

"Nothing," replied Church in a hollow voice.

Edward Oswald glared.

"Oh, so that's the game!" he said bitterly. "Just because we have a bit of a dust-up you decide to desert me. If you do anything like that, my lads, I'll never forgive you. Aren't we chums?"

"But you told us to go away——"

"I don't care what I told you!" roared Handforth aggressively. "If you haven't got any more sense—— Hallo!" he added, with a start. "What's this thing? Where did it blow up from?"

He was staring at Ezra Quirke, who had paused near the bottom of the steps. Handforth & Co. forgot their difference as they examined the latest arrival.

"Must have come on the gale," said Church. "It's not human, anyway."

"In order to save you trouble, I'll explain that my name is Ezra Quirke, and that I am a new boy in the East House," said Quirke. "I am in the Fourth Form, and I am just taking a look round the school."

The chums of Study D were more than ever surprised at this gratuitous information. Quirke made as if to pass, but Handforth wasn't the kind of fellow to let a prize of this sort escape him. He was always keen on new juniors, and Quirke seemed to be something extra special in that line.

"Oh, you're in the East House?" said Edward Oswald. "I pity you. Don't you know we call it the Dog's Home? It's the worst House at St. Frank's—full of wasters and outsiders. There aren't more than half a dozen decent fellows in the whole place."

"There are seven now," said Quirke unemotionally.

"I like your giddy conceit!" growled Handforth. "I like it about as much as I like your appearance," he added critically. "What's the matter with your face? Were you born like that, or have you had an accident?"

Handforth was always personal to a painful degree, and he never seemed to realise that he might be causing embarrassment. But Ezra Quirke showed no trace of resentment.

"I presume you are joking?" he said quietly.

Handforth would probably have continued the cross-examination, but Ralph Leslie Fullwood came out of the Ancient House at that moment, arm-in-arm with Clive Russell, the Canadian boy. The chums of Study I were looking as bright and cheery as usual. They glanced at Ezra Quirke as they passed. Then they looked again—harder. They had paused, frankly curious.

Quirke returned their gaze, and he had opened his mouth to speak when he started back. For the first time he expressed animation on his face. His jaw dropped, and his eyes blazed with anxiety.

"Don't come near me!" he panted. "Don't come near me!"

"Talking to me?" asked Fullwood, in astonishment.

It wasn't a very pleasant experience. The new boy was staring at Ralph Leslie in absolute fear, as though he had seen some awesome sight. He was pointing, too—a long, sinuous finger. The other fellows watched this extraordinary exhibition in amazement.

"What on earth's the matter?" demanded Fullwood, striding up. "If my face pains you I'm sorry. But it's the only one I've got, and it's like your confounded check to—"

"The pin—the pin!" breathed Quirke, backing away.

"Eh? The pin?" said Fullwood. "What? This opal tiepin? It's not going to bite you. What's the matter with it?"

"Take it off—throw it from you as you would cast away the plague!" said Ezra

Quirke, his voice trembling and impressive. "Put it from sight, at least. You are mad to wear such a thing; it will bring you nothing but evil."

"Well I'm hanged!" said Fullwood.

Handforth touched his head significantly.

"Dotty!" he said sadly.

Out of sheer curiosity Fullwood removed the tiepin, and put it in his pocket. He was rather pleased with it, for it was a new treasure, a most valuable pin which had been presented to him by his father.

"Is that better?" he asked.

"It is from my sight, and that is to the good," replied Quirke. "But the opal is still with you; you are still harbouring evil. While you possess that stone you will meet with misfortune and tragedy. I am warning you, and I am one who knows of these things. Take heed while there is time."

"Well I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Handforth. "The chap's as superstitious as a Russian peasant. Fancy being afraid of opals. I thought those dotty ideas were only cherished by old women!"

"He's pulling your leg!" said Nipper.

Ezra Quirke turned to him.

"I am not one to joke," he said quietly.

"Joking is foreign to me. I only speak when I have something of import on my lips. And I earnestly tell you that opals are evil—evil. I know. You, in this school, are mere novices in such matters. But do not tempt the black forces too strongly."

"Black forces!" ejaculated Handforth, staring. "He talks like the demon in the pantomime. And if he's superstitious, what about my minor? He ought to be struck down in a few minutes!"

Handforth pointed across the Triangle, grinning. Ezra Quirke and the others turned and looked.

Cuttle, the porter, was at the top of a ladder, fixing some unruly creeper, a result of the night's gale. And Willy Handforth, deep in the pages of a story-book, was about to pass under the ladder. And that, according to all rules of superstition, was a most fatal thing to do.

"Poor Willy!" grinned Fullwood. "He's in for it now!"

Ezra Quirke started back with a cry. And then, without uttering another sound, he ran madly forward.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT THE THIRD THOUGHT.



"STOP—stop!" "Eh? What the— Talking to me?" asked Willy, coming to a halt a yard from the ladder and staring at Ezra Quirke in astonishment.

"Hallo! I haven't seen you before. What funny things the sun brings out!"



"Don't go under that ladder!" exclaimed Quirke tensely. "Foolish fellow! You will have nothing but bad luck if you defy the evil force. Come away—come away!"

Josh Cuttle stood on his ladder, and looked down sadly.

"There was an escaped lunatic about," he remarked, addressing the ivy in a melancholy tone. "And why was there an escaped lunatic about? Because he just spoke not two yards away."

"You're about right, Josh," grinned Willy. "He's dotty—clean off his rocker. And I must say he looks it. Unlucky to go under a ladder, eh? What rot!"

At the same time, Handforth minor took great care to avoid the danger. With exaggerated precaution he stepped outwards, and passed the ladder on the right side. Quirke breathed a sigh of genuine relief. By this time the other juniors had gathered round again, with a few additions.

"Am I safe now?" asked Willy.

"Always remember—always remember!" exclaimed Quirke. "He who passes beneath the ladder will meet with trouble—indeed, tragedy. These are laws that you and I cannot govern. You may say I am superstitious—"

"We may!" agreed Willy. "In fact, we do. And who do you happen to be, anyhow? Haven't you made a mistake? The lunatic asylum is on the other side of the moor, beyond Bannington."

"Poor chap, leave him alone!" chuckled Reggie Pitt. "He can't help it. He nearly had a fit over Fullwood's opal tiepin. What would he say if we opened a lot of umbrellas indoors?"

"Let's try it and see!" suggested Church.

Ezra Quirk shook.

"You are all playing with 'fire!'" he exclaimed fiercely. "You don't know of what you speak. You regard these things as trifles—as insignificant jests. They are not. Each has its own meaning. Do you think these superstitions were merely invented? They have come to us from the dim ages of the past—when Black Magic was one of the arts, when Sorcery was practised by the ancients. Modern civilisation scoffs at such things, but the same forces are at work, and none can stop them."

"My only hat!" said Handforth blankly.

"I believe he means it!"

"I will prove that I mean it," said Quirke. "But how, now—we have dealt with the subject sufficiently at the moment."

"That's where you've made a mistake," said Handforth gruffly. "Look here, Willy, you young ass. If you don't go under that ladder I'll wipe you up. What do you mean by taking notice of this chump?"

Willy grinned.

"All in good time, Ted," he said calmly,

"I do things my own way, thanks. No assistance from the Remove required."

"You cheeky young ass—"

"Study D in particular," added Willy carelessly.

He turned aside, and placed two fingers to his mouth. The next second he gave vent to a shrill, piercing whistle of a peculiar note. It was a well-known whistle at St. Frank's, and Willy was the only living person who could perform it. Others had tried, but had failed miserably.

The effect was somewhat magical.

From every doorway, from every arch, from every conceivable quarter, fags appeared. They left whatever they were doing and came up at the double. The Remove fellows watched in amused astonishment. They had seen this sort of thing before, but it always surprised them.

As supreme leader of the Third, Willy had only to give his call and the fags would flock up from far and near. There was something rather uncanny about it. The fags not only came up, but they immediately formed in a double line, at attention. Willy watched contentedly.

"And it's all done by kindness!" he explained.

"That kid's a positive danger!" remarked Chambers, of the Fifth, who had come up. "When he gets older he'll be leading some new-fangled secret society, or something."

Willy marched down his troops briskly.

"All here?" he asked. "Where's Conroy minimus? What about Bobby Dexter? Where's Jimmy Hope— Never mind; we've got enough. See that ladder?" he added, pointing.

"We're not blind!" said Juicy Lemon.

"Follow me under that ladder and you can dismiss," said Willy crisply.

Ezra Quirke started forward.

"Stop!" he shouted. "This is sheer madness—"

"Sorry, but rodents to you!" retorted Willy sweetly.

And to Quirke's horror, Willy calmly led the entire Third under the fatal ladder. The Removites looked and yelled. There was something exceedingly funny in Willy's method of doing things. He had waited until he had got all his fag-army before defying Quirke's impressive warning.

"Good for you, Willy!" ejaculated his major. "By George! I couldn't have thought of a better idea myself! That'll show this superstitious ass how much we think of his giddy warnings."

"And we're ready for any other tests!" said Willy calmly.

The new boy stood there, his lips compressed, and his fingers working convulsively.

"You will see—you will see!" he exclaimed tensely. "You ignore me now—but you will

not always do so! Because you have passed beneath ladders at other times with safety, you think you can do the same now with impunity. But this is different."

"How is it different?" asked Nipper amusedly.

"You are deliberately defying the evil elements," replied Quirke, his eyes gleaming with earnest conviction. "When one merely offends them, one may still be safe. But to deliberately defy them is fatal!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Ezra Quirke's audience yelled with sheer amusement at this original theory. And there might have been some more talk, only the breakfast-bell rang. And when the breakfast-bell rang, the Triangle was a place to be distinctly out of. There was some place far more desirable.

CHAPTER IX.

MORE SUPERSTITIONS.



MR. BARNABY GOOLE presided over the dining-hall in the East House, and he was a gentleman who had his own peculiar ideas regarding food. He was a vegetarian, and his one desire was to see his pupils sharing his views on the subject of food.

Upon his arrival, Mr. Goole had attempted to force his vegetarianism upon the East House—he was a comparative newcomer to St. Frank's. But before there could be any real protest, the headmaster had advised Mr. Goole to confine his food laws to his own person. The boys must have the fare guaranteed in the school prospectus.

Mr. Goole, therefore, was a man with a grievance. He somehow felt that he had been basely swindled. He had hoped that he would convert his boys to vegetarianism by force, and rope them in en masse. But now he was compelled to lure them into his food traps. And, as a lurer, Mr. Barnaby Goole was a shocking failure. He hadn't lured a single convert.

Consequently, the advent of a new boy was something of an occasion. There was always a chance that he would be willing to regard meat as a palatable, but fatal form of prussic acid. To Mr. Goole, meat was poison, but to his boys it was meat.

As soon as Ezra Quirke appeared at the Fourth Form table in the East House dining-hall, Mr. Goole fixed his eagle eye upon him. He had heard that a new junior was due, but he hadn't seen him yet. And his hopes were dashed to the ground when he saw Quirke accepting a couple of healthy-looking rashers.

Quirke was sitting next to Armstrong on one side, and Kemp on the other. Arm-

strong was the junior skipper, and he took charge of Quirke at once—Armstrong being a burly, bluffing, self-important sort of fellow.

"So you're Quirke, are you?" he said softly. "Queer-looking cove!"

"My appearance is my own affair," said Quirke coldly.

"Touchy, are you?" said Armstrong. "We'll soon cure you of that in the East House, my son! What school have you come from?"

"That is my own business."

"Look here, you new kid—"

"Silence on that table, please!" barked Mr. Pycraft, the Fourth Form-master. "Good gracious! This chattering is getting unbearable!"

"Don't take any notice of old Pieface!" murmured Armstrong. "He's always like that—our Form-master, you know. I hear you're jolly superstitious, Squirt. We don't allow that sort of thing—"

"My name is Quirke!" interrupted the new boy icily.

"Oh, Quirke?" repeated Armstrong. "Well, it's a rotten name, anyhow. Does this sort of thing give you the shivers?"

He took a couple of knives and crossed them. Ezra Quirke winced, and reached across and separated the cutlery. The fellows on the opposite side of the table watched with much amusement.

"You don't know the risks!" muttered Quirke. "This deliberate defiance of the unseen law is absolute madness! Rest assured, my friend, there will be trouble after this morning's work!"

"I'm not your friend—and don't want to be!" said Armstrong tartly. "What about this little trick? Pass the salt, Griffith!"

"Certainly!" said Griffith. "Oh, sorry!"

He pushed the salt-cellar clumsily across the table and upset it. Ezra Quirke leaned over, quivering.

"Throw some over your left shoulder—quick—quick!" he said.

"Rats!"

"I warn you—"

"Rats with knobs on!" said Griffiths.

"This is sheer idiocy—"

"Rats with adjustable brass fittings!" observed Griffith genially.

"Silence!" stormed Mr. Pycraft. "Must I come to that end of the table in person? What is the matter up there? Who is that boy leaning across? I don't remember him—"

"It's Zebra Squirt, the new fellow, sir," said Armstrong calmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What name did you say?" demanded Mr. Pycraft.

"My name is Ezra Quirke!" shouted the new boy, standing up. "I object to these parodies on my name!"

Mr. Pycraft couldn't help smiling.

"In that case, young man, I am afraid you will have to object!" he retorted. "It



is no use appealing to me. I cannot control such matters. You had better ignore them as they deserve. But that is not the point. Why are you causing such a commotion?"

"He's full of superstitions, sir!" explained Griffith. "He nearly fainted because I upset the salt, and you should have seen him in the Triangle before brekker. He went green all over because Fullwood was wearing an opal tiepin! The chap's crazy on the subject!"

"What preposterous nonsense!" said Mr. Goole, from the other end of the room. "Quirke, be good enough to stand up again. Is it true that you are afraid of the consequences if these childish superstitions are defied?"

"They are not childish, sir——"

"Answer my question, young man."

"Very well, I will, sir!" exclaimed Ezra Quirke, his voice vibrant and mysterious in its toneless timbre. "I am thrown amongst unbelievers! You are all convinced that these superstitions mean nothing. But you are wrong—and one day you will all realise that you are wrong! There is evil all around us—there is a mischievous element ever ready to strike down those who defy it. You may call me superstitious, but I am merely cautious. I know of these dangers, and I guard against them. That is all, sir. In sunlight or in darkness, the spirits are ready. Some are eager to help—but there are many others on the watch for the opportunity they desire. These latter are powerful elements of evil——"

"Sit down, Quirke!" shouted the House-master angrily.

"Babbling young fool!" said Kenmore of the Sixth—the head boy of the East House. "He deserves a tanning for that sort of mischievous talk!"

"Let me hear no more of that nonsense, Quirke!" continued Mr. Goole. "Upon my soul! I've never before listened to such outrageous rubbish. Not another word!"

Ezra Quirke sat down, his colourless face as great a mask as ever.

CHAPTER X.

ASKING FOR TROUBLE.



"THERE'S something about the chap, you know," said Jack Grey.

"That's how I felt," admitted Cecil De Valerie.

"What do you mean—something about him?" demanded Armstrong.

"I can't quite explain—something intangible," replied Grey. "It may be imagination, of course, but I went all shivery when I was near him. He's like some blessed spook! His very appearance is enough to scare you!"

"That's all piffle!" said Armstrong gruffly. "He's a queer-looking merchant, and he's trading on it—likes to make himself out to be somebody of importance. We'll soon knock that right out of him!"

They were chatting on the East House steps, and the two Removites had strolled across to inquire about the new boy. They were much amused by the story of what had happened at the breakfast-table.

"But that's nothing," grinned Armstrong. "Wait until we've finished with him—we're preparing something now. I've given my orders, and I'm waiting for the signal—By George, there it is!"

One of the study windows had been flung open, and several heads appeared. Timothy Armstrong hurried in, and found Griffith and Turner and Page and a few others waiting in the Fourth Form passage.

"He's in his study—No. 20, at the end," said Griffith, grinning. "Now's our chance. We've got everything ready."

"Good!" said Armstrong. "We'll tickle him up a bit."

The crowd of juniors pushed along the passage, and burst into Study No. 20. Ezra Quirke was standing in the middle of the room, looking about him dreamily. He started back with burning eyes.

For, as the door opened, three juniors marched in, and immediately opened umbrellas, examining them with exaggerated care, as though unconscious of Quirke's presence.

"This is my study!" exclaimed Quirke tensely.

"Oh, hallo!" said Armstrong. "You here? Didn't see you before, Quirke—never mind us—carry on with what you're doing."

"Just seeing if our umbrellas are fit," said Griffith carelessly.

"This is a deliberate attempt to foul my study!" exclaimed Quirke, his voice throbbing. "You are angering the evil spirits against me——"

"Rats!"

"This room will become the haunt of evil things——"

"Oh, well, we might as well do the job thoroughly," said Turner. "Anything to oblige, you know."

He brought a pair of shoes from behind his back, and placed them on Ezra Quirke's table. The new boy seized upon them in a flash, and hurled them to the floor.

"Madness—insanity!" he panted. "Go out of this room—it is mine—you have no right here! You are polluting the atmosphere. It will take me weeks to get it cleared of these influences——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Quirke!"

"As mad as a hatter!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors stood round him, yelling. Considering Quirke's sensitiveness on the subject, the jape was rather ill-natured. But the fellows could scarcely be blamed.

They regarded all these superstitions with a healthy disdain. To come across a fellow who believed in them as earnestly as Quirke believed in them was a novelty.

It was felt that the new boy needed a sharp lesson, and he was having it. Armstrong's main idea was to knock such foolishness out of Quirke's head once and for all. But Quirke was apparently a fanatic on the subject. His eyes, mysterious before, were now burning with such a strange light that his tormentors began to feel uneasy.

"Remember my words!" said Quirke passionately. "Remember what I have told you! This morning you have defied me, you have defied those things which are beyond our control. And you will suffer."

"I can't see any spirits appearing," grinned Griffith.

"You will see nothing—you will feel nothing!" retorted Quirke. "The harm may not come to you for days—for weeks. But it will come! At the time, you will scoff, and say the two incidents are not connected. But they are—they will be! Those who defy such laws are always punished!"

Armstrong sniffed.

"And those who hold these fatheaded ideas always talk in general terms!" he said tartly. "If you can tell me how I'm going to be punished—and when—I'll be on the look-out. And when it comes true, I'll apologise."

"That is impossible——"

"You needn't tell me that—I know it!" said Armstrong. "All this superstitious twaddle is as unhealthy as taking drugs! If you don't change your views, Quirke, you'll be in for a lively time! We'll either cure you, or make your life a misery."

Ezra Quirke stood there, unemotional and impassive.

"This is my study!" he repeated. "It was allotted to me by Mr. Pycraft. Is there no privacy here? Must I always lock my door?"

"Oh, come on!" said Page. "It's no good talking to this chap—he's a hopeless case. We've had our sport, and there's an end of it. We'll see if we can think up some more superstitions, though."

"Good idea!" agreed Griffith. "Come on!"

They crowded out, leaving Ezra Quirke alone. And when they reached the passage, all the juniors felt as though an unseen influence was removed. They could scoff as they pleased; but there was no denying that Quirke was an uncanny sort of fellow.

He had a convincing way, too. But for the fact that the juniors were keen on their

japing, they might have been influenced. Once out of Quirke's presence, his personality lost its effect.

No matter how events developed, Ezra Quirke was unquestionably the most remarkable junior the Fourth Form had ever seen.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST VICTIM!



"THE funniest thing you ever saw!" chuckled Armstrong. "He nearly had a fit when we opened those umbrellas in his study!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The japers were talking to a group of other Fourth-Formers and Removites near the fountain in the middle of the Triangle. There was plenty of sports rivalry between the four boarding Houses of St. Frank's, but in all general affairs the juniors mixed freely, with only occasional rags.

"It would be a lot better if the fellow was a plain jackass," said Handforth, frowning. "We could jape him then, and everything would be O.K. There's something funny about ragging a fathead!"

"But he isn't one!" said Church.

"I know that!" said Handforth, turning a cold eye upon his chum. "Isn't that what I'm just saying? Quirke's a brainy beggar—a chap who brings out long words, and twists up his sentences to make 'em sound clever. You never find me doing that!"

"Saying anything clever?" said Armstrong. "No, never!"

"Look here, you cheeky East House dummy——"

"You dotty Ancient House chump——"

"Here, steady!" grinned Reggie Pitt. "No need to start a House rag three minutes before lessons! Quirke says that you'll all be punished, doesn't he? I wonder who'll be the first?"

"Goodness knows!" said Armstrong.

"And how will you be punished?" asked Fatty Little, pushing up, and wiping a few crumbs off his waistcoat. "If you have a cold next week, I suppose he'll say the evil spirits gave it to you?"

"That's about it," nodded Griffith.

"By pancakes, what piffle!" said Fatty, producing a banana, and demolishing it. "I never heard such babbling nonsense! I wonder if Quirke's got any supersitions about grub?"

"Bound to have," said Armstrong. "I suppose I shall get some punishment first, as I was the ringleader. Perhaps I shall fall down and break my leg, or something. These spooks are pretty cunning, you know!"

He chuckled, and walked off.

But he hadn't taken two strides before his foot shot from under him, and he lurched wildly in order to maintain his balance. The

ANSWERS

Every Saturday. Price 2d.

next second, completely thrown, he caught his knee against the stonework of the fountain basin, and he dived head first over the rim.

Splash!

Timothy Armstrong was wallowing in the fountain like a drowned rat.

"Great Scott!" gasped Griffith. "Who did that?"

"He went of his own accord—nobody touched him!" panted Jack Grey. "My goodness, I wonder if there's anything in that superstitious stuff after all? Just as he was talking about it, too!"

The juniors exchanged startled glances. There was certainly something uncanny

"But—but——"

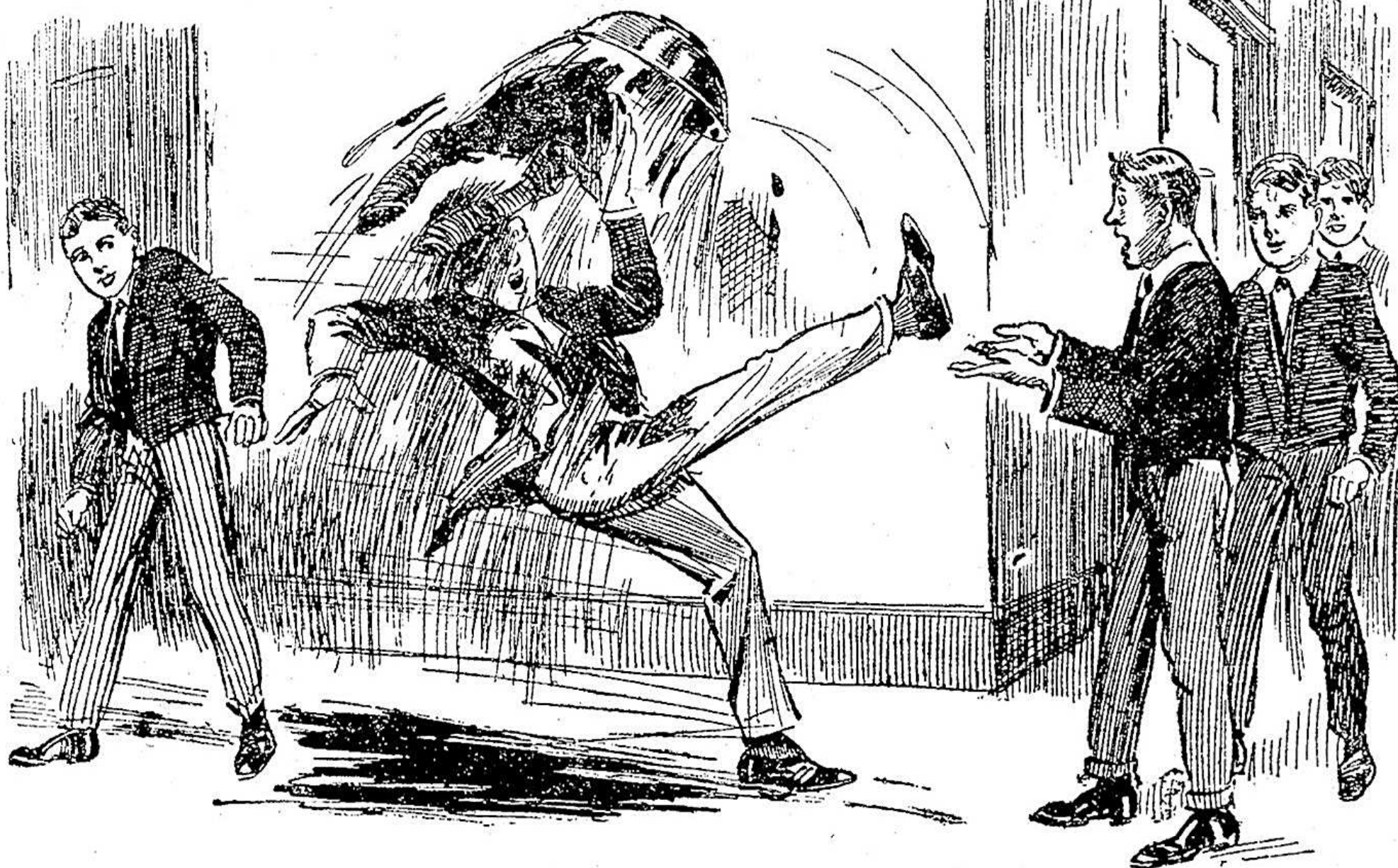
"It's simple," explained Pitt. "Didn't you see Fatty throw a banana skin away two or three minutes ago? Armstrong must have trodden on it— Yes, there it is, all squashed," added Reggie, pointing. "So much for Quirke's wonderful superstitions!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Old Fatty and his banana skin!"

The explanation was so childish that even Armstrong grinned in a sheepish kind of way. He hurried indoors, vowing vengeance upon Fatty on a later occasion. He wasn't going to get off scot-free! Carelessness ought to be punished.

"All the same, you can't get away from



"Hi! Look out!" howled Willy desperately.

Crash! Swoooooob!

Archie's right foot took the bowl of dye in the very centre, and it rose to the ceiling, tipped up, and deposited its entire contents upon the elegant Removite.

about the occurrence. Armstrong had plunged into the fountain in the most extraordinary fashion. He struggled up, gasping for breath.

"Who—who pushed me?" he gurgled. "My knee! Oh, I believe something's broken! Of all the dirty tricks——"

"It was the curse!" muttered Griffith, genuinely alarmed.

"The curse?" asked Armstrong, with a start.

"You know what Quirke said——"

"Hold on, you fatheads!" interrupted Reggie Pitt gruffly. "There's only one explanation of this mystery—he's walking across to the school shop now. The one and only Fatty!"

the fact that Armstrong met with a minor disaster!" said Clifton, of the East House, shaking his head. "Quirke didn't say how or when it would happen—he can't know those things. To my mind, it's pretty significant."

"Oh, rats!"

"Pure coincidence!"

All the same, plenty of juniors were impressed—particularly the weaker ones. But they kept their ideas to themselves. It wasn't any good talking on the subject—they were only scoffed at.

Just before lessons, Nipper happened to meet Nelson Lee in the West Square. The famous Housemaster-detective opened the

very subject which Nipper himself desired to bring forward.

"I know Quirke isn't in our House, Nipper, but you may have heard something about him," said Nelson Lee casually. "A rather queer youngster, isn't he?"

"Extraordinary, sir," said Nipper. "Full of superstitions, and his face gives you the creeps. When did he arrive? There was no sign of him last night at bed-time!"

"No; he didn't arrive until midnight."

"Midnight!" repeated Nipper, staring. "That was a queer time to get here!"

"I don't know the exact facts," said Nelson Lee. "Quirke was expected much earlier, but he was delayed somewhere. He arrived quite alone at about midnight. The boy is peculiar—he doesn't say much."

"Wasn't the Head wild, sir?"

"Very angry indeed," said Nelson Lee, nodding. "He is communicating with the boy's parents, with the object of gaining the full truth. But I expect Quirke got here as soon as he could. No boy would deliberately arrive at school at such an unearthly hour by design."

So there was nothing uncanny about that affair in the night, after all. Nipper & Co. had merely seen Ezra Quirke on his arrival, and the new boy had probably passed through the West Square by mistake—for he needn't have gone that way in order to reach the Head's residence.

But that peculiar affair of the screeching owl was still unexplained.

CHAPTER XII.

THE 'FLUENCE AGAIN.



MR. AUSTIN SUNCLIFFE was suffering from toothache.

It was by no means usual for the Third Form master to be indisposed in this fashion, and he was consequently caught without any remedies for relieving the pain.

The Third, knowing nothing of Mr. Suncliffe's pain, wondered why he was so irritable during calling-over. He was even worse after prayers, and when the Third settled itself down for morning school, Mr. Suncliffe was so touchy that lines had already been freely distributed.

"Upon my word, Owen minor, your ignorance is colossal!" snapped Mr. Suncliffe, jumping upon the unsuspecting Owen minor for a very trivial offence. "I can't stand this sort of thing!"

"But I didn't know——"

"You don't know anything, Owen minor!" rapped out Mr. Suncliffe. "You will write out that sentence fifty times this afternoon!"

"But, really, sir——"

"Another word, Owen minor, and you will be caned into the bargain!"

"Yes, sir."

Owen minor sat down, fuming, after bestowing a glare upon his immediate neighbours, which was intended to convey his feelings. Willy Handforth winked sympathetically, and gave his attention to the Form-master.

"Anything the matter, sir?" he asked, standing up."

"No, Handforth minor, there is nothing the matter!" said Mr. Suncliffe, peering over the top of his glasses, and slamming his book down. "And why, pray, should you assume that there is something the matter?"

"You don't seem quite yourself, sir."

Mr. Suncliffe assumed his most formidable aspect.

"Indeed, Handforth minor!" he said. "I don't seem quite myself, eh? And what business is it of yours? I am well aware that you are the cheekiest boy in this class. I am also aware that you frequently practise your art with impunity. But be careful this morning, sir! Sit down!"

"Yes, sir," said Willy, without sitting down.

"You heard what I said?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Then why don't you sit down?"

"Because I want to say something else, sir," replied Willy calmly. "I believe I know what's the matter with you, and if there's anything I can do to help——"

"This is most interesting!" broke in Mr. Suncliffe, in a kind of bark. "The boy is endowed with a sixth sense! If you can tell me what is the matter, Handforth minor, I will not punish you. But if you cannot tell me what is the matter, you will be detained for the whole afternoon."

Willy smiled sympathetically.

"You've got toothache, sir," he replied.

Mr. Suncliffe started.

"Good gracious!" he ejaculated. "As a matter of fact, I have got toothache. An atrocious toothache! And you boys can do nothing but irritate me——"

"We don't mean to, sir," said the Third, in one voice.

"How did you know of my suffering, Handforth minor?"

"Easy, sir," said Willy. "You've been holding your face nearly all the time, and you poked a penholder in your mouth twice. I shouldn't do that, sir. You'll only excite the nerve, and make things worse."

"Since when did you become a dentist, Handforth minor?" demanded Mr. Suncliffe tartly. "I presume you know you are merely wasting time——"

"Have you tried mustard, sir?"

"Mustard?"

"Finest thing out!" declared Willy. "If you've got a hollow tooth, mix a little mustard, and fill the tooth. Better than all the stuff you get from the chemist. Take my tip, sir, and give it a trial."

"I am very much obliged to you, Hand-

forth minor, but I prefer to take my mustard with my meals," retorted Mr. Suncliffe. "That is enough. You may sit down. The matter is closed."

Willy sat down, and again he winked to those near him. He knew Mr. Suncliffe of old. And, sure enough, within five minutes the Form-master made an excuse, and took his departure—saying that he would be back within a minute. He further warned his class that the slightest commotion would be amply rewarded.

"Mustard!" observed Willy, as the door closed.

"Of course," agreed Chubby Heath. "But supposing it doesn't work?"

"It's bound to work."

"I'm not so sure," growled Chubby. "I tried it once, and only burnt my mouth to bits. A jolly silly thing, if you ask me! He'll probably come back like a raging bull—Who threw that pellet?" roared Chubby, turning round and glaring across the room. "Young Button, did you do that?"

Button denied all knowledge of it, and Freddy Mason supported him. But Parry minor deposed that they were telling fibs. Witness further declared that he had actually seen the pellet shoot from Button's mouth.

As a consequence, Chubby Heath made a trip across the Form-room, and several of his immediate friends thought it just as well to accompany him. And when Mr. Suncliffe unexpectedly returned within the specified minute, the Third Form was in a considerable tangle.

"Good heavens!" roared Mr. Suncliffe. "What is this?"

The effect was magical. The fags dived back to their places like rabbits bolting to their warrens. Two or three, indeed, crawled underneath the desks, and bobbed up, dusty and red—foolishly believing that Mr. Suncliffe would not notice them.

"I cannot leave the room for one minute without you turning the place into a shambles!" thundered the Form-master.

"As for your mustard cure, Handforth minor, I have a mind to flog you on the spot!"

"But it's really good, sir," urged Willy.

"You will remain in detention for the whole afternoon, sir!" stormed Mr. Suncliffe, his mouth smarting painfully. "In fact, the whole Form will remain in detention for the afternoon."

"Oh!" groaned the Third, in dismay.

"Enough!" hooted Mr. Suncliffe. "Another animal-like sound of that description, and I will deprive you of every half-holiday for a month!"

The Third, utterly cowed, said nothing. If their looks could have had effect, Mr. Suncliffe wasn't in need of a dentist at the moment, but an undertaker.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CURSE OF 13.



"DETENTION—all the afternoon!" "Don't talk about it!"

"And it was all Willy's fault, too!" said Fullerton aggressively. "That rotten idea about the mustard—"

"Say that again, my lad, and I'll biff you over!" interrupted Willy, pushing back his sleeves. "That applies to everybody else, too! It wasn't my fault that you scrapped while Sunny was out of the room, was it? I might have been detained, but you would have saved yourselves if you'd behaved like human beings, instead of a pack of wolves!"

Lessons were over, and the Third was out in the triangle—in a series of glum-looking groups. It was a half-holiday that day, and the weather looked like being fine. And detention stared them in the face.

"The whole Form, too!" groaned Chubby Heath. "Old Sunny's never done that before—"

"I say!" shouted Jimmy Hook, running up. "I've just remembered that new chap in our House! Quirke, you know."

"What about him?" asked Willy.

"Didn't he say we should all suffer?" asked Hook excitedly. "It's unlucky to go under a ladder, you know, and we all passed under that one this morning! And this is what happens!"

"My only hat!"

"That giddy ladder!"

"Rubbish!" said Willy, with a snort. "Before long, you'll be as superstitious as that new Fourth Form freak! There's no connection between the two at all—it just happened like that."

"Yes, but that's how these curses work!" said Juicy Lemon. "I was reading a book last week, all about a witch. She shoved some curses on a Prince, and he didn't know anything about 'em. He thought everything was happening by accident—"

"My goodness!" interrupted Willy. "Do you still read fairy tales?"

Juicy stared, and turned red.

"I—I mean—I wasn't actually reading it!" he blustered. "I just picked the rotten thing up—"

"That's enough!" interrupted Willy coldly. "And it's enough about that Quirke chap, too! We've got our gruel, so we'd better eat it without making too much of a grimace!"

Willy Handforth's point of view was quite sound. But lots of other fellows in the Third were impressed by the coincidence. They had all passed under that ladder—and Ezra Quirke had told them to look out for trouble. And now, the same day, the entire

Third had met with disaster. Detention on a half-holiday—a sheer tragedy!

In the East House, the Fourth Formers were talking about the affair, too. Turner and Page and Harron were standing in the lobby, discussing the matter when Ezra Quirke came by. They paused at the sight of him, and watched. Even his very movement was eerie. He scarcely made a sound, and he was like some ugly spirit going by.

Just as Quirke drew opposite, he shuddered violently, and edged away. He cast a strange glance at the three juniors, as though they were contaminated.

"What on earth's the matter?" asked Harron bluntly.

"No need to shrink from us, is there?" demanded Page.

Ezra Quirke passed a hand over his eyes.

"There is something evil in the air," he muttered. "It is not your fault, but it is in connection with you. You are accursed."

"Look here, you funny fathead——"

"You'd better be careful——"

"You are accursed!" repeated Quirke earnestly. "It is not your fault—it is not associated with your own characters. It is only something that hovers round you—Ah! Your study!" he said tensely.

"What about our study?" demanded Turner. "It's as good as yours!"

"Go and look at it!" growled Page. "No. 13, just along the passage——"

"No. 13!" shouted Quirke. "I knew—I knew! That number—that evil, accursed number! Get away from that room—never enter it again! As long as you remain there, bad luck will haunt you."

Turner, Page and Harron gazed at one another grimly.

"Shall we?" asked Turner.

"I think so," said Page.

"Something to do, anyhow," observed Harron.

And, with one accord, they fell upon Ezra Quirke, swept him off his feet, and bore him to the floor. The mat was rather muddy, so they rubbed Quirke's face in it, and his appearance was completely changed. Nobody could now say that Quirke hadn't got a colour.

"Now we'll bump him!" said Turner grimly. "He and his blessed unlucky thirteen! Superstitions morning, noon and night! If No. 13's unlucky, we ought to get a packet or two of trouble for this!"

And, remarkable to relate, they got it!

For unfortunately, Mr. Pycraft strode down the lobby at that very moment—for it was a habit of Mr. Pycraft's to appear when he was least wanted. Within two minutes, the chums of Study No. 13 were the richer by three hundred lines apiece. They gazed at one another mournfully.

"Bad luck again!" said Page, startled.

"The Third's detained—we've got lines—Armstrong got ducked in the fountain! My word! I wonder if there's anything in these superstitions, after all."

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT NIPPER & CO. SAW.



"LISTEN!" exclaimed Nipper, holding up a hand.

Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West halted. The chums of Study C were half-way

across the Triangle, passing from the gymnasium to the Ancient House. It was mid-evening, and the night was inclined to be rough again. The wind was gusty, and the moon shone down from a cloudy sky.

At the moment, the Triangle was empty, save for the three juniors. Lights gleamed from all the houses, looking warm and cheery against the surrounding gloom.

"What is it, Dick?" asked Tommy Watson softly.

"I don't know—I thought I heard a kind of hoot," said Nipper.

"You don't mean a screech, dear old boy?" suggested Sir Montie.

"No. It was different——"

Nipper broke off. There was distinctly a hoot this time—and it came from the direction of the East Arch. They made a move towards the East Square, and at the same moment they heard that queer, throbbing screech which had startled them so much the previous night.

"By Jove!" breathed Nipper. "That's an answer! Quick!"

They ran through the arch, and caught sight of a black object as it sped noiselessly down from the heights. Twice the object circled—dim and mysterious. Then, without a sound, it approached one of the dark windows on the ground floor of the East House and vanished.

"It was that owl!" declared Nipper grimly. "And, what's more, it went into Quirke's study. That's as clear as daylight! Quirke gave that hoot, calling the thing—and it answered him."

"Oh, but I say, this is a bit uncanny!" muttered Watson. "The chap can't have that owl as a pet——"

"It's no good saying he can't—we know for a fact that he has," interrupted Nipper. "Didn't we see it on his shoulder last night? I expect he's called it to his study so that he can feed it—— He wouldn't do that, either," went on Nipper. "Owls can look after themselves—they're birds of prey, and go after their victims at night."

"The whole thing's frightfully mysterious, it is, really," declared Sir Montie uncomfortably. "What with all these supersti-



tions, an' Quirke havin' this owl— Begad! It's a pity the bounder ever came! It's so fearfully disturbin' dash it!"

"I think we ought to do something about this," said Nipper, after a moment. "I don't usually interfere in the affairs of another House, but this time I'm curious. I think we've got a right to know something for certain. Supposing we go and tell Armstrong."

"Why Armstrong?"

"He's junior skipper in the East House, isn't he?" asked Nipper. "If he cares to take any action, we'll see what happens. It'll be up to him, of course."

Before entering the East House, they crossed the Square, and took particular notice of the windows. That of Study No. 20 was in utter darkness, indicating that the room was empty. But Nipper wasn't satisfied. The owl had certainly gone into that window—and it was now closed.

The three Ancient House juniors went in by the rear door, and marched to Study No. 12. Armstrong and Griffith were at home, settling down to their prep. They looked up in surprise as the three Removites entered.

"Honoured, I'm sure," said Armstrong cordially.

"Rather a peculiar thing happened outside just now," said Nipper. "We thought you ought to know about it, Armstrong. You're junior skipper in this House, and it's about Quirke."

Armstrong pulled himself up with some importance.

"More superstitions?" he asked sharply. "That chap's getting on my nerves! We'll boot him out of the place before long—"

"No, not superstitions this time," interrupted Nipper. "We were crossing from the gym. to our own House, and we heard a hoot—"

"A hoot?"

"Yes."

"From a motor car?" asked Griffith.

"No not that kind of hoot," said Nipper.

"It was a peculiar sound, I believe Quirke made it from his study window. Anyhow, there was an answering screech from the top of the East Tower, and an owl swooped down, and went to the window of Study No. 20."

"An owl?" said Armstrong, staring. "You've been dreaming!"

Nipper frowned.

"I'm not the kind of chap to come here with a fantastic yarn of that sort if it wasn't true, Armstrong," he retorted. "We saw it distinctly—all three of us. We thought you ought to know—that's all. This man, Quirke, is a queer fish, and as leader in this House—"

"You're right!" said Armstrong, nodding.

"Thanks, Nipper. I'll go along to Quirke's study, and find out what he's up

to. Owls now, by George! What next, I wonder? This is getting a bit too thick!"

He marched to the door, and Griffith accompanied him. Nipper & Co. followed, but hesitated in the passage. They didn't want to thrust themselves forward in a rival House. But Armstrong solved the difficulty.

"You fellows come along, too," he said. "We shall want you."

So they all went to Study No. 20, and Armstrong tried the door. It refused to open in response to his thrust.

"Hallo! Locked!" he said grimly, bending down and peering at the keyhole. "No light inside; but the key's in there. That's queer. Has that rummy fathead locked himself in in the dark?"

"Looks uncommonly like it," said Tommy Watson.

Thump, thump, thump!

Armstrong hammered on the door with considerable gusto.

"Open this door, Quirke!" he roared. "None of your silly nonsense. If you don't open this door in two ticks we'll smash it in!"

No sound came from within the study. There was nothing but complete silence, and the juniors glanced at one another with strange expressions.

CHAPTER XV.

AN AMAZING DISCOVERY.



"WHAT'S the row here?"

Kemp and Conroy minor came out of Study No. 17 and joined the little throng. Other study doors opened,

too, and the gathering grew. Armstrong didn't waste his breath by giving any explanations.

"Come on, lend a hand," he said. "We'll put our shoulders to it."

"Better be careful!" warned Nipper. "You'll get into trouble—"

"I'm in charge here!" interrupted Armstrong gruffly. "I'm not the kind of chap to be defied by a new kid. He's in that room, and we know it. The door's locked on the inside. Ready, you chaps?"

Nipper & Co. stood back a little. They were content to watch, but they would take no part in this smashing-in business. It wasn't their business, in any case. They were only spectators.

Armstrong charged at the door. There was a splintering of wood, and the door flew open with a crash. Armstrong was a powerful fellow, and he had plenty of weight.

"Good!" he panted. "Now we'll—"

He paused, his jaw dropping. He and

Griffith stood there, staring into the study. And those behind crowded up, peering over their shoulders. For a moment they were too thunderstruck to say a word.

None of the juniors knew what they had expected to see within Study No. 20—at the most a dark room, and Ezra Quirke in the easy chair. The actual sight that met their gaze was an amazing discovery. The room wasn't black, as everybody had supposed. There were shaded lights—soft, mysterious, and hidden. The study was completely transformed. No window could be seen, no walls, no fireplace. All around were black; mysterious hangings of some dark material.

And Ezra Quirke himself was sitting in the very centre, oblivious of the juniors in the doorway, unconscious of the crash that had announced their arrival. His eyes were wide open, but he appeared to be in a sort of trance. In front of him stood a quaint Moorish stool. And on this was a big, gleaming globe—a crystal. It seemed to glow and burn with strange interior lights and fires. Ezra Quirke was staring into it with a fixed, intense gaze.

Most extraordinary of all, a big owl was perched upon his shoulder—a strange creature with long ears and great, unblinking eyes. The very sight of it was enough to startle the strongest nerved.

The air of the study was slightly perfumed, as though with some subtle, elusive incense. No more dramatic scene could have been discovered in a junior school-boy's study. It was so unexpected, too, so absolutely bizarre and unbelievable.

Ezra Quirke had only arrived the previous night. And now, unknown to a soul, he had prepared his study like this, and was in the midst of some weird, spiritualistic seance. Utterly alone, he was conducting the affair, oblivious of the commotion.

"Good heavens!" muttered Armstrong aghast.

"What—what's he doing?" breathed Griffith huskily. "I say, this—this is ghastly! The chap's mad—"

"Not mad!" interrupted Nipper. "He's a crank—that's certain. His superstitions don't end here. He's probably a mystic, a kind of medium. All rubbish, of course; but the fellow's been fooling himself until he actually believes—"

"But why doesn't he take any notice of us?" panted Watson. "And that owl? Is it alive? I don't like it, Nipper—"

"Quirke!" shouted Armstrong, taking a step forward. "Quirke!"

Ezra Quirke made no response. He still continued to gaze into the crystal, and there was something rather awful about his fixed stare. Armstrong hesitated to approach nearer, for the owl was an ugly-looking brute.

"I don't like this!" said Armstrong shakily. "We'd better shut the door, and fetch Kenmore. He's the head boy of this House, and I'll leave all responsibility to him."

"Why not tell Mr. Goole?" suggested Griffith.

"Kenmore first; he can tell the House-master if he wants to," replied Armstrong. "Ugh! I'm all shivery. Let's get out of here!"

They crowded out, and the door was pulled to. Armstrong rushed off to the Sixth Form passage to fetch Simon Kenmore. And Nipper & Co., finding themselves in the midst of a rapidly gathering crowd, edged their way out.

"We'll clear, I think," said Nipper. "We've seen quite enough, anyhow—"

"But I want to know what Kenmore does," objected Watson.

"The same here, dear old boy," declared Sir Montie.

So Nipper decided to wait in the lobby. In the meantime, the commotion in the junior passage was increasing. Kenmore soon arrived, and he was accompanied by Grayson, of the Fifth. Both seniors were known as bullies of the worst type. Kenmore was frankly incredulous.

"If this is a spoof yarn, somebody's going to pay!" he said grimly. "I don't believe a word of it. Black draperies, crystals, owls, and Quirke in a trance. What absolute nonsense!"

"All right—see for yourself!" said Armstrong.

Simon Kenmore thrust open the door of Study No. 20, and strode in.

Everything was exactly the same. Ezra Quirke sat there in his trance-like condition, with the unblinking owl, eerie and mysterious, on his shoulder.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Kenmore, aghast.

He hadn't believed Armstrong's extraordinary story. At least, he had taken it for granted that Armstrong had exaggerated the situation out of all proportion. But this first glance into Quirke's study proved that the truth was even stranger than Armstrong's version.

"What's the young fool doing?" asked Grayson of the Fifth. "There's something beastly fishy about this—"

"Leave it to me!" said Kenmore grimly.

CHAPTER XVI.

DRASTIC MEASURES.



EZRA QUIRKE seemed absolutely oblivious of the figures in the doorway, and the excitement in the passage. Even the owl was indifferent. One or two of the juniors were beginning to suspect that the creature

was stuffed, and that the whole affair was some sort of colossal jape.

But Simon Kenmore took Quirke seriously, and he had made up his mind to act with drastic speed. Kenmore was head-boy of the East House, and he wasn't going to have any of this sort of jiggery-pokery under his roof.

"Quirke!" he said sharply. "Stop this piffle!"

As he spoke he reached forward, and nearly grasped Ezra Quirke's shoulder. He was prevented from doing so by the owl, which suddenly sprang into life, and gave forth a loud, startling screech.

"Look out!" yelled Grayson in alarm.

"Hear, hear!"

"That's the way, Kenmore!"

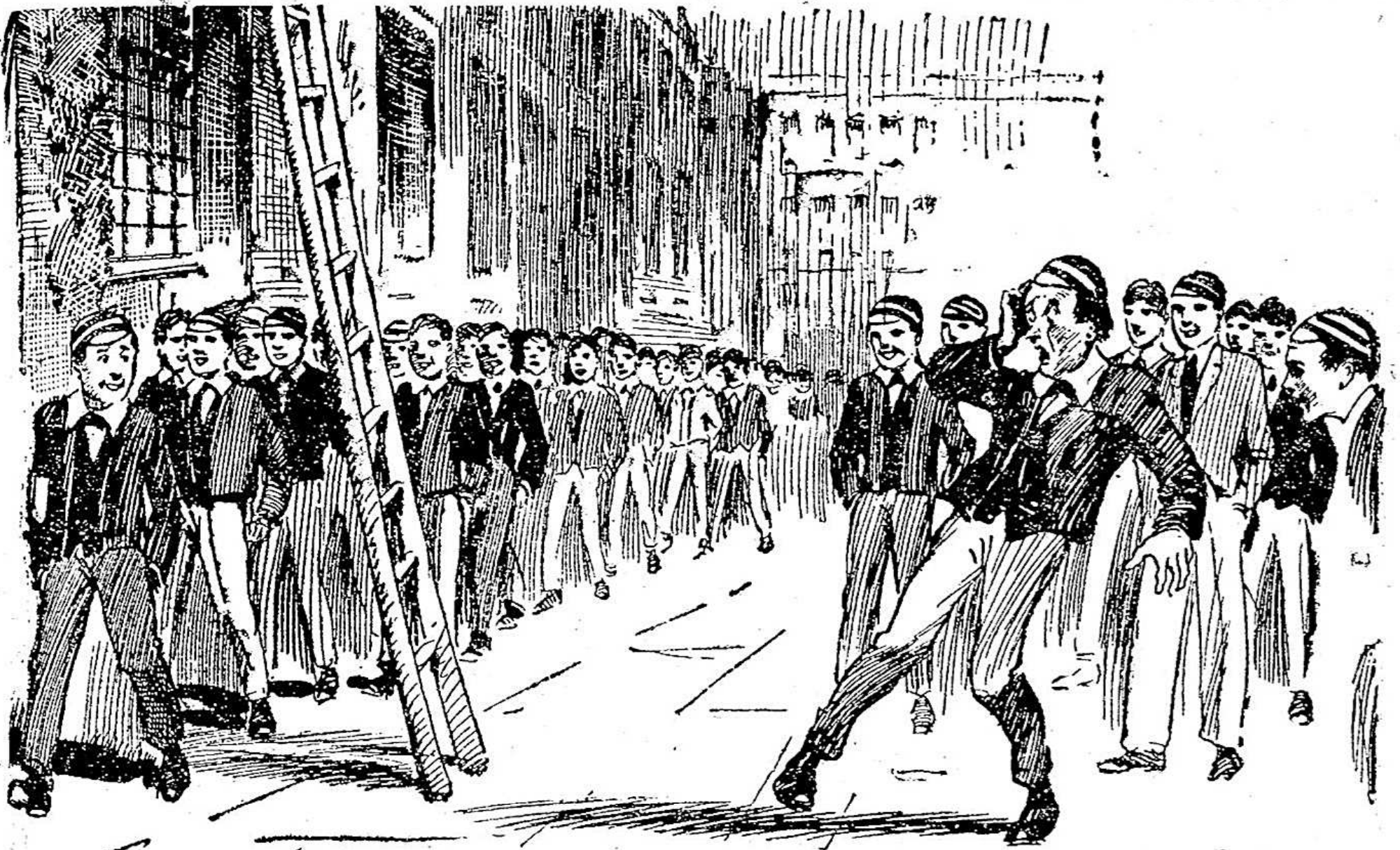
"Chuck him out!"

"We don't want any spiritualists here!"

A chorus of approval came from the juniors in the passage, and Simon Kenmore felt strengthened in his resolve. He looked at Quirke queerly. The new boy's staring eyes had a peculiar effect on the prefect. There was something so mysterious and uncanny about them.

"Quirke, you young fool!" snapped Kenmore. "Stop this idiocy! By gad! I'll soon show you whether I'm in earnest or not!"

Kenmore had brought a cane with him,



And, to Quirke's horror, Willy calmly led the entire Third under the fatal ladder. The Removites looked on and yelled:

Kenmore leapt back wildly, but the owl made no attempt to attack him.

"You confounded jackass!" gasped Kenmore. "What did you yell like that for?"

"I thought it was going for you!" said Grayson shakily.

"I'm not afraid of an owl!" snapped Kenmore. "If you're nervous, Grayson, you'd better get out of this!"

"Oh, don't talk rot!" said Grayson, flushing. "Take my advice, Kenny, and leave the young idiot alone until he's come out of this trance. There's no telling what—"

"Leave him alone?" repeated Kenmore.

"Not likely. I'm not having any of this nonsense in my House, particularly from a new kid. He's going out of this study on his neck!"

and his irritation at being ignored gave him quite a lot of courage. He brought the cane round, and it hissed past the owl at close quarters.

The bird of prey gave another screech, and fluttered wildly into the air. It vanished into the shadows beyond the dim radiance from the shaded lamp. And Kenmore felt more comfortable.

He grabbed Quirke by the shoulder, and shook him violently.

"Confound you!" he shouted. "Wake up!"

The remarkable new boy was limp and passive, and offered no resistance. But he showed no signs of intelligence or consciousness. That unseeing stare remained in his eyes, and his expression was unaltered.

"Better fetch the Housemaster?" suggested Grayson.

"Or the doctor!" put in one of the juniors.

"Rubbish!" snapped Kenmore. "This kid doesn't want a doctor—he needs some lively cuts with this cane. You don't believe all this bunkum, do you? The crazy young idiot is only doing this for effect. I'll show him the effect it produces!"

Slash!

The head prefect of the East House brought his cane down viciously across Quirke's shoulders. It was a severe cut, but Quirke didn't even wince. He only uttered a low, strange crooning sound, and rose slowly to his feet, his hands still outstretched in front of him.

"They are here!" he murmured. "They are round me!"

"What's that?" said Kenmore sharply.

"Do not disturb the spirits——"

"Well I'm hanged!" roared Kenmore. "We've had enough of this!"

He was furious and exasperated. And somewhere behind these emotions he was dimly aware of another sensation. He couldn't exactly define it, and didn't try to. But he was rather uncomfortable and alarmed, and felt that he was a fool for being so. His rage smothered all.

"Out of this!" he thundered. "I'll teach you a lesson you won't forget in a hurry, my lad. I'll deal lightly with you this time, but if there's any more of this foolery you'll smart for a month. Out of it, and move quickly, or you'll get hurt!"

Slash, slash, slash!

Quirke's defiance, unconscious or deliberate, brought everything bad in Kenmore to the surface. He was a bully at all times, but defiance from a junior generally converted him into a brute. The cane swished down remorselessly upon Ezra Quirke's back, and the new boy swayed and staggered.

"Come back!" he muttered. "I wish to communicate—— Come back! They are slipping away; they are fading——"

Kenmore would stand no more. He grasped Quirke by the shoulders, swung him round, and hurled him through the study doorway with tremendous force—such force, indeed, that Ezra Quirke crashed into two or three of the watching juniors, and then collapsed into a heap.

"Steady, Kenmore!" said Armstrong gruffly.

"Another word from you, my lad, and I'll give you a taste, too!" shouted Kenmore. "Let this be a lesson to everybody. I'll have no foolery of this kind in the East House!"

"Yes; but Quirke doesn't seem himself——" began Griffith.

"It's all faked!" snarled Kenmore. "He ought to think himself lucky I haven't

dragged him in front of the Head. Why, Dr. Stafford would give him a public flogging for starting this business in his study!"

Quirke was left where he had fallen. Somehow, none of the other juniors cared to touch him. They stood round in an awed crowd, and even Grayson was at a loose end.

"The chap doesn't seem to know anything," he muttered. "Perhaps he's really in a trance, Kenmore. We can't tell. I don't believe in being so drastic. I think the doctor ought to be fetched——"

"I'm the only doctor he needs," interrupted Kenmore, swishing his cane through the air, "and this is the medicine I prescribe!"

He made for Quirke again, but the new boy—very fortunately—came out of his trance at that moment. He shook violently in every limb, sat up, and looked round dazedly. Kenmore lowered his cane, and his face was set and sneering.

"Oh!" he said sourly. "That swish didn't sound nice, did it? Get up, or I'll give you another taste! I thought you'd soon come round."

Grayson gave a short, relieved laugh.

"That medicine of yours seems effective!" he observed.

CHAPTER XVII.

QUIRKE'S DRAMATIC WARNING.



EVERYBODY was relieved. While Ezra Quirke had remained in his trance, there had been a kind of tension in the air. The fellows hadn't been sure whether he was

shamming or not. Even now there was no evidence one way or the other. The new boy slowly rose to his feet.

"What—what has happened?" he asked dully. "My back—it is burning fiercely—I don't understand——"

"Still keeping up the farce, eh?" interrupted Kenmore nastily. "That sort of pretence doesn't wash with me, Quirke! I know your game! Seeking after effect, eh? Trying to impress these young idiots with your mysterious importance, eh? Well, you don't impress me!"

"I—I don't remember——"

"Oh, well, we won't argue," snapped Kenmore. "I found you in your study, with an infernal owl on your shoulder, and with a bleary look on your face. If I ever find you like that again, I'll tan you within an inch of your life! Have you got that straight?"

Quirke looked at Kenmore with evil eyes.

"You do not understand!" he said softly. "These things are not of my doing. I am merely a medium through which the departed spirits communicate——"

"I knew it!" roared Kenmore. "Spiritualistic tosh! What did I tell you?" he went on, turning to Grayson. "It's all bunkum,

of course—he doesn't communicate with any spirits because there aren't any!"

"You are unwise to interfere," said Quirke, his voice quivering with intense feeling. "You regard me as a trickster—a fake. I am not surprised. All pioneers are doomed to such scorn and contempt. But one day you will know the truth. One day you will remember this moment——"

"I've had about enough of this," interrupted Kenmore curtly. "Grayson, lend me a hand. We've got some work to do."

"Work!" repeated Grayson, as though he had never heard the word before.

"All these trappings are coming down!" said Kenmore, striding into the study. "Everything, mind you—even the crystal! Chuck everything outside."

"What if Mr. Goole comes along——"

"Let him come!" interrupted Kenmore. "I'm head prefect here, and I'll take full responsibility."

There was no question that Simon Kenmore was acting in a thoroughly decisive manner. He was revealing a thoroughly commendable strength. And he was not afraid to shoulder the responsibility for his actions. Unfortunately, Kenmore spoilt all his good qualities by executing his ideas in a brutal, domineering manner. Except for his bullying nature, he would have made a good leader.

This present instance was an example of his harsh methods.

Assisted by Grayson, he converted Quirke's study into a wreck. All the trappings were torn down by sheer force—and with a viciousness which was hardly justified. And everything was flung out into the corridor, where the crowd had increased enormously.

A more level-headed prefect would have ordered Quirke himself to dismantle the room, and would have stood by while the task was being accomplished. But Simon Kenmore was not level-headed by any means.

The new boy made no objections. He stood just out in the passage, watching everything with a strange fire burning in his remarkable eyes. His trance-like condition had completely left him now, and he was normal. Only when the crystal was seized did he spring into activity.

"I will take that!" he said tensely.

"I've a good mind to smash it up!" growled Kenmore.

He made as if to hurl it to the floor, but hesitated. And during that moment of hesitation, Ezra Quirke seized the crystal and held it tightly. Kenmore thought it better to drop the matter. The Housemaster would not approve if he learned of deliberate destruction.

"All right—take it!" said Kenmore. "But never bring the infernal thing out again! I give you fair warning, Quirke—any more crystal-gazing, and I'll smash it with a hammer!"

Quirke made no reply. He darted across the room, and placed the crystal in his cupboard. One glance inside was enough. The owl was within, crouching in a corner—where it had retreated at the first sign of commotion, the door being open behind the black draperies. Quirke closed the cupboard, and locked it.

Scarcely anybody noticed his action; but even those who did merely believed that he had locked the crystal away. The owl was forgotten—until Grayson happened to mention it.

The study was now looking almost normal again. The impressive hangings were removed, and were lying in a heap in the passage. Grayson was over by the window, which was securely closed.

"I say, what about that owl?" he asked abruptly.

"Eh?" said Kenmore.

"It's not here—and the window's closed."

"Never mind the owl——"

"But it must be somewhere!" insisted Grayson nervously. "It couldn't have gone up the chimney—there isn't room. Good heavens, the thing seems to have vanished into thin air!"

"I don't believe it was an owl at all!" muttered one of the juniors in the doorway. "It was a sort of ghost——"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Stop that, you ass!"

"Well, the owl's gone, hasn't it?"

"You are all very ignorant!" said Ezra Quirke tensely. "There are things of which you know nothing—which you do not even guess at. You take me for a fraud and a fake. But you are wrong. Let me tell you that I have been in communication with the spirits——"

"Stop that!" ordered Kenmore.

"I will not stop it!" shouted Quirke defiantly. "I am telling you the truth, but you are too blind to see it. Yes, blind! But you will suffer for this—you will be repaid!"

"Oh?" sneered Kenmore. "How?"

"I do not know how—the unseen ones work mysteriously and cunningly—but with certainty, nevertheless. They were with me when you interrupted my meditations. And they are angry—oh, yes, they are angry!"

"I'm shivering with fear!" said Kenmore.

"You disbelieve—you think my words are froth!" went on Quirke. "But before long the spirits will punish you for your interference. In what way I cannot tell you. Even I, with all my experience, am ignorant of the Beyond. But be sure that you will be punished."

"At that rate, we're all in for disaster," jeered Kenmore. "You kids had better look out!" he added, turning to the door. "The spirits will be after you to-night! They'll yank you out of bed——"

"Oh, dry up, Kenmore!" said Armstrong uncomfortably.

"The others will not suffer," said Quirke. "They took no part in this scene. You are the one, Kenmore—you and none other. And the spirits will have their revenge. They are as sensitive to insult as you or I, and they have their own methods of dealing with offenders."

"Splendid!" said Kenmore drily. "I'm perfectly prepared for anything that comes along. But you'd better give your pals a tip. The first ghost I see will get the toe of my boot!"

"Better go easy," advised Grayson. "Quirke's an uncanny kid, you know—he may raise a ghost in front of our very eyes."

"I'll give him a fiver if he does," retorted Kenmore promptly. "He may pretend to be a mystic—but he's not a magician."

Ezra Quirke slowly shook his head.

"And what is the difference?" he asked quietly. "A mystic—a magician. Are they not the same? I profess to be nothing out of the common. My powers are not my own—they are given to me by the unseen elements. And therefore, in your way of thinking, I am a magician. Before so very long you will discover this for yourself."

Kenmore turned on him grimly.

"Does that mean you'll continue these infernal seances?" he asked. "You'd better realise at once, young 'un, that I won't stand it!"

"It is not for me to decide," replied Quirke. "I am helpless—the mere tool of the spirits who control me. If it is their will that I should act, then I must act. My own will is as nothing. And remember—your punishment will surely come. My words are not empty and hollow!"

Quirke passed out of the study, and walked down the corridor. The juniors pressed their backs against the wall, in order to give him passage. All eyes were upon him—some curious, some frankly contemptuous, and others half-filled with awe. There was certainly something about Quirke which left a big effect. And as soon as he had gone the sensation died. The passage became normal, and Study No. 20 was no different from any other study.

"Well, that's that!" said Kenmore, tucking his cane under his arm, and moving out. "You kids had better clear off," he added. "There's been quite enough commotion for to-night. Fifty lines to anybody within sight after I've counted twenty!"

The crowd vanished as though by magic. It required none of Ezra Quirke's mysticism to engineer this disappearing act.

Kenmore and Grayson returned to the senior passage, and parted at Grayson's door. Kenmore went on to his own study, highly satisfied with the way in which he had dealt with the whole situation.

But, somehow, after he had closed his door, he didn't feel quite so pleased. He sat down, aware of a feeling of discomfort. He was uncertain. Quirke's words lingered in his memory.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HANDFORTH SPEAKS HIS MIND.



"HOW'S Kenmore?"

The whole school was facetiously asking that question the next day. Fellows of all Houses met one another, and put the query. It was becoming a standing joke—much to Simon Kenmore's annoyance.

Of course, the story had got about within an hour of the affair, and the rival Houses found much amusement in it. All sorts of exaggerated stories had been told in connection with Quirke's mysterious warning.

"Kenmore still alive?" asked Reggie Pitt, after morning lessons, as he met Armstrong in the Triangle. "Or has he been struck down by the hooded spectre of the moated grange?"

Armstrong frowned.

"Chuck it!" he growled. "You fellows make me tired!"

"That's because you don't make yourself tired in any other way," retorted Pitt. "What about football, for instance? How about that House match we were going to fix up? You East House fellows haven't practised at all!"

"My team isn't ready yet," retorted Armstrong. "We've got all the duds in our House, don't forget. But I'm putting 'em through their paces, and one of these days we'll wipe you up!"

Reggie Pitt grinned. As junior captain of the West House, he had nothing to fear from Armstrong. At St. Frank's, all the Houses had their own junior teams—and the actual School Eleven, skippered by Nipper, was selected from the House teams.

So far, the East House had done nothing to boast about. Armstrong was no leader. He thought he was, and he pretended to be, but his methods were too aggressive and pompous. Furthermore, the East House was the worst House at St. Frank's—with a dearth of sporting talent.

"I've just seen Kenmore!" remarked Handforth, coming up with Church and McClure. "Funny thing, he looks as well as anything!"

"I don't see anything funny in it!" said Armstrong snappily.

"I thought the spirits were going to get him?" asked Handforth in mock surprise. "One of the chaps told me that Kenmore is going to be struck down by an Unseen Hand, and that gnomes and things were dancing all along his bedrail last night."

Armstrong glared.

"Blow Kenmore—and blow you!" he snorted. "There's been enough of this foolery. I thought you didn't believe in ghosts!"

"You poor, pitiful chump!" said Handforth tartly. "I was only pulling your



leg. Ghosts!" he went on. "Huh! I've never believed in the things, and never will. The spirits are just pigments of a deluded imagination."

"I suppose you mean figments?" asked Pitt politely. "Or are these deluded imaginations painted? I've got a hazy idea that pigments are something to do with paint—"

"Pigments?" repeated Handforth, with a start. "I said figments, you ass! And I meant figments. Hysterical people see funny things in their mind's eye, and think they're real. Then they gabble about ghosts. Thank goodness I'm not superstitious."

tempt. As for Quirke being a magician, the very idea was ridiculous. The Remove affected a lofty indifference.

But in the Fourth it wasn't quite the same.

In the East House, especially, some of the fellows were beginning to take notice of Quirke's mysticism. They were coming to the conclusion that there was something in the fellow, after all. Certainly he wasn't a normal junior. There was an indefinable "difference" about him.

It was felt as soon as he drew near. Some of the juniors declared that they felt cold and chilly when Quirke came up, just as though he brought a whiff of the grave

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"Better not let Quirke hear you," grinned Church.

"Oh, bother Quirke—and blow Kenmore!" said Handforth gruffly.

The chums of Study D walked off, and the subject was dropped. The interest in Ezra Quirke was rapidly dwindling. Except in his own House, he was scarcely ever referred to. The other juniors had ceased to concern themselves regarding the new boy.

He wasn't even chipped in the Form-room. The Remove, practically solid, decided to ignore him, as he deserved. A fellow with his superstitious ideas was beneath con-

with him. His pale face, his queer eyes, his mysterious personality, all contributed to the general ceriness.

"It's all very well to scoff," said Clifton of Study No. 14. "I'm beginning to get scared of the chap."

"Same here," said Simmons, shaking his head. "Not exactly scared, though. Impressed would be a better word. I believe he's capable of doing things, you know."

"Doing things?" asked Conroy minor.

"You know, rummy things," said Simmons vaguely. "There's no telling with a chap like that. Where is he now?"

"In his study, I believe," said Conroy minor.

"Let's go and take him by surprise," suggested Clifton.

They hesitated for a moment, and then went along the passage. Clifton was a rather aristocratic junior, quiet and studious, and incapable of appreciating a joke. He took life very seriously, and was a deep thinker in his own way. Incidentally, he was the mathematician of the Fourth—a perfect fiend for figures. Simmons, his study mate, was just the opposite, a happy-go-lucky youngster who devoted most of his spare time to cookery.

They arrived at Study No. 20, and tried the door. It opened, and they stood there, looking in.

"My hat!" said Conroy minor, staring.

There was nothing particularly startling, but the scene within the room was nevertheless strange. The study was quite normal, except for heavy curtains across the windows. Ezra Quirke was sitting at his table, with his back to the door. A little table-lamp was beside him, shedding a warm glow upon the immediate surroundings. Somehow, Quirke seemed to prefer gloom.

Nearby, a grotesque, quaintly carved ornament was standing, with a stick of burning incense in it. And Quirke, with his strange owl on his shoulder, was deep in the pages of a book.

"Busy?" asked Simmons uncertainly.

Quirke turned, and the owl left his shoulder almost without a sound, and vanished behind the window curtains.

"Come in," said the new boy. "No, I'm not busy."

He put the lamp out, walked to the window, and pulled the curtains back. The daylight flooded in. The owl had gone, for the window was partially open. Probably Quirke preferred the gloom for the sake of his strange pet, which was essentially a creature of darkness.

"I say, what's the idea of shutting out the daylight?" asked Clifton.

"The daylight is splendid in its own sphere," replied Quirke. "But when I desire to meditate, when I feel the elements calling me, then the daylight is unwelcome. And so I shut it out."

"You're a queer fish," said Simmons frankly. "What the dickens were you doing last night, when you looked into that dotty crystal? You're not pretending that you can see anything in it, I suppose?"

"I do not pretend," replied Quirke quietly. "To you the crystal is a mere globe of glass—a thing of manufactured materialism. But I see wondrous things in the crystal."

"Can you tell fortunes?" asked Conroy

minor sarcastically. "Can you look into that crystal, and gaze into my future? It would be rather topping to know where I shall be and what I shall be doing this time next year!"

Quirke shook his head.

"You are still full of unbelief," he said regretfully. "Come this evening, and I will show you something; I will convince you. Let it be a private matter between ourselves. I desire to prove that I am no faker, as you believe. Will you come?"

The three Fourth-Formers looked at one another.

"We might as well," said Clifton. "What do you chaps say?"

"Any old thing," grinned Simmons. "But you'd better do something impressive, Quirke, or we'll sit on you and push your head into the coalbox."

At that moment a commotion sounded in the passage, and Handforth appeared in the doorway. He looked round the study searchingly, and then gave a snort of disgust.

"Why, there's nothing rummy here!" he said, glaring at Quirke. "I thought you had your study all draped up like Maskelyne and Devant's?"

"My study is as you see it," replied Quirke.

"Well, now I'm here, I might as well tell you something," said Handforth grimly. "I don't believe a word of your rotten spiritualism tosh. And if you start any of it here I'll smash you!"

"Steady!" said Conroy minor. "You don't belong to our House—"

"But I belong to St. Frank's—and Quirke belongs to St. Frank's!" interrupted Handforth firmly. "The House he's in doesn't matter a toss. He's a St. Frank's chap, and I'm not going to let him bring the school into disrepute!"

"You need fear nothing," said Quirke quietly. "My activities are honourable and harmless. I take it that you are a pronounced sceptic? You disbelieve everything in connection with psychic phenomena and occult research?"

Handforth stared.

"Occult research!" he snorted. "You dithering lunatic. Of course I'm a sceptic. I wouldn't touch your rotten practices with a barge-pole. I don't believe in ghosts, because there aren't any ghosts. As for these dotty occult manifestations, they're all piffle. And don't let me hear any more about this!" he added grimly. "I've warned you, and that's enough!"

He stalked out, and Quirke shook his head.

"It is a pity!" he murmured. "He will soon know different!"



CHAPTER XIX.

THE HOVERING HAND.



THAT evening the darkness closed down with an unusual calmness in the air.

The recent high wind had completely gone, and there was a promise of rain.

Clouds massed in the sky, drifting slowly overhead. Occasionally the moon would peep out for brief intervals.

Handforth & Co. had paid a visit to the village, and got back just in time for locking up. They came by way of the towing-path, and then across to the playing-fields, entering the school grounds by the East Gate.

"We shall have to hurry," said Handforth briskly. "There's our prep to do yet, and then we've got to get on with that furniture shifting."

"What furniture shifting?" asked Church.

"My dear chap, didn't we fix it all up?" demanded Edward Oswald. "I planned it days ago—"

"My goodness!" groaned McClure. "I thought it was all forgotten. Look here, Handy, what's the good of messing the study about? Things are a lot better as they are—"

He broke off and grunted. He realised that it was useless to argue. It would only make Handforth worse. Both Church and McClure had hoped that their leader had forgotten the wretched business altogether. But Handforth had a way of bringing these things up at unexpected moments.

They crossed the East Square, passed through the arch, and started across the Triangle towards the Ancient House. Lights were gleaming from many windows, and there was a prospect of cheery warmth indoors.

"I shall be glad to get in," said Church. "I wonder if Nipper's fixed up that Redcliffe match yet? We shall have to go along and see him—"

"Eh?" said Handforth suddenly. "What the—"

He broke off, and looked sharply over his left shoulder. Church and McClure were on the other side of him and slightly ahead. Yet Handforth had an impression that somebody had touched him on the left shoulder. It was impossible that Church and McClure could have been responsible.

Even as Handforth glanced he told himself that he must have been mistaken. He and his chums had the Triangle to themselves. It was faintly moonlight, and there were obviously no other human beings present.

Tap!

This time Handforth started violently. There was an unmistakable pressure on

his shoulder, just like the sharp touch of bony fingers. Church and McClure were discussing football, and knew nothing of Handforth's strange experience.

Edward Oswald felt a queer sensation run down his spine. That unseen touch was positively unnerving. Perhaps it was just a twitching muscle, a perfectly natural—

At that second Handforth's thoughts were shattered. He saw something hovering near him, hovering just against his shoulder. A startled yell escaped his lips, a wild cry which half-choked itself before it became full-throated.

There, right near his shoulder, Handforth saw a hand!

A human hand, not an ordinary one, but a vague, white, indistinct thing, with long, tapering fingers. But the most startling fact of all was that the hand had no support. There was no body, no substance to the thing. It just hovered there, near him in the moonlight.

Church and McClure stopped abruptly.

"Handy!" said Church sharply. "What on earth—"

That cry of Handforth's had been almost scaring in its sudden alarm. It wasn't like the celebrated leader of Study D to be scared of anything. But the note of his voice was eloquent of his sudden terror.

Church and McClure ran up.

"What's wrong?" asked McClure breathlessly.

"Look!" panted Handforth. "Can't you see? A hand—a bony hand hovering in the air! It just touched me on the shoulder—Great Scott! It's not there now; it's gone!"

He stared, his breath short and sharp. There was nothing to be seen. The hand had absolutely disappeared—silently, and without him being aware of the fact. It had been there a moment before—he had seen it clearly and distinctly, in spite of its vague outline, but now it was gone.

Handforth was trembling in every limb, and he was white. It wasn't a case of fright or fear; nothing normal was likely to scare the redoubtable Handforth. But the very eeriness of this experience unnerved him.

"A hand?" said Church, staring. "Where?"

"A bony hand hovering in the air!" repeated McClure. "You're dreaming! Pull yourself together, Handy!"

"It was there, I tell you!" muttered Handforth. "I saw it as clearly as possible. It tapped me on the shoulder. I felt it twice. And I saw it, too—a kind of ghostly hand—"

"You're mad!" exclaimed Church, startled. "What's wrong with you, Handy? You haven't started seeing things, have you? How the dickens could you see a hovering hand? I didn't know you were a

seer! And you don't believe in ghosts, either."

"Ghosts!" said Handforth softly.

"Better go and consult old Quirke," suggested McClure. "He might be able to explain—although he can't be responsible for this business. We've got the Triangle to ourselves. You've imagined it, Handy!"

"Quirke!" muttered Handforth. "By George! I wonder if there's something in— Oh, what rot!" he went on gruffly. "What absolute rot! I'm going dotty, or something!"

He gave himself a severe shake, and looked over his other shoulder. But there was nothing to be seen now. There was no hand—no mysterious presence. In the most extraordinary manner, the apparition had faded. And Edward Oswald Handforth was left shaky and nervous. If he had only felt something he wouldn't have thought any more about it. If he had only seen something he wouldn't have thought any more. But he had both felt and seen—and it was impossible for two of his senses to have lied at the same moment.

And Quirke! The new boy's words came back to Handforth as he stood there, in the Triangle. Quirke had said that he would soon change his opinion regarding occult manifestations. Was it possible that a ghost of some kind had deliberately appeared in order to convince him?

Handforth shook himself again. It was all too fantastic. He must have imagined the thing. There was no other solution.

"Come indoors!" said Church, taking Handforth's arm. "Why, you're trembling, old man! As for that hovering hand—"

"Which hovering hand?" growled Handforth.

He suddenly pulled himself free, and roared.

"You asses!" he snorted, with a return to his old style. "Ha, ha, ha! I spoofed you beautifully! So you thought there was something there? By George, I can pull your legs beautifully!"

He strode towards the Ancient House, satisfied that Church and McClure would think no more. But Handforth, with his usual bull-headedness, had gone to work in the wrong way. Church and McClure were more than ever convinced that their leader had seen something. And they, themselves, were uneasy.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MAGICIAN OF THE EAST HOUSE.



RAP! Rap! Rap!
"My only hat!"
breathed Clifton
tensely.

"Hush—hush!" murmured
Ezra Quirke. "There must
be no speaking from the

circle! The spirits are near us—they are in the very air."

Study No. 20, in the East House, was a place of strange events.

The little room was transformed again. In spite of Simon Kenmore's warning, Quirke had fitted up the black hangings again, having rescued them from one of the lumber rooms immediately after tea. And the apartment was looking dim and mysterious in the faintest of faint glows from one of the electric lights. It was practically blotted out altogether—only the dimmest radiance percolating through.

And in this gloom sat four figures round the little oriental stool. They were all holding hands, and the stool stood quite to itself, without any hands or feet near it.

The owl was not present at this secret meeting. Just the four juniors—Ezra Quirke, Conroy minor, Clifton and Simmons. The three Fourth Formers had come to Quirke's study in the spirit of fun—bent upon taking a rise out of the new boy.

But they had been rather impressed by the preparations—the dim light, and the mysterious, earnest tones of Quirke. And then had come those three raps—clearly and distinctly.

Without any visible means, the raps had sounded upon the surface of the oriental stool. Simmons was next to Quirke on one side, and he could see that the new boy was well clear of the stool.

"What—what was it?" whispered Simmons.

Rap—rap—rap!

They came again, this time louder. The three sceptics were beginning to feel queer. Their flesh was creeping, and they had a longing to get out of the room at great speed. Indeed, panic was on the verge of breaking out. There was something rather awful about those raps.

And then, before anybody else could speak, another extraordinary thing happened. The stool tipped slightly, righted itself, then tipped the other way. Finally, it left the floor, and floated. It hovered there, rocking from side to side, a clear six inches above the linoleum. And no hands were near it! It hovered there, isolated.

"Oh, my goodness!" breathed Conroy minor.

He stared, fascinated, and Clifton and Simmons were held equally enthralled. Although they could see distinctly, the light in the room was negligible. It was just sufficient for the floating stool to be distinguished from the surrounding gloom.

"Let's—let's get out!" muttered Simmons shakily.

"Wait—wait!" breathed Ezra Quirke. "Fear nothing. The spirits are friendly—they wish to communicate with us. Faith is all you need, my friends. Have faith in these unseen companions, and they will comfort you. But without faith they will reveal their temper in no uncertain way. For

these spirits have tempers the same as we have."

The stool dropped an inch or two, and then hit the floor with a little thud—proving conclusively that it had been no optical illusion.

"Look!" panted Simmons, suddenly.

He broke his hand away—for all the juniors had been holding hands in the circle—and pointed. Just beyond Quirke, against the background of blackness, something dim and uncertain had appeared. It was like a small ball of fluffy smoke, which increased and spread. And then, gradually, it resolved itself into a human shape—but in miniature.

"Join hands!" breathed Quirke urgently. "Our power is being lost! Quickly, before— Too late—too late! What a pity! Just when a successful materialisation was near at hand."

The filmy presence had faded away like dissipating smoke. And Quirke rose to his feet, and pulled away the gauze from the electric light. The sudden radiance was rather dazzling. But it came as a great relief to the three Fourth-Formers. Conroy minor shook himself angrily.

"It's all spoo!" he said, glaring. "There's nothing mysterious about it—you faked it all, Quirke! You're only a common-or-garden magician!"

Quirke looked at him unemotionally.

"You think so?" he asked. "Perhaps I am a magician; indeed, it is an established fact. For I am a dealer in magic—in things that you do not yet understand—"

"I mean a stage magician!" growled Conroy minor.

"That is an insult!" said Quirke fiercely. "A stage magician is a professed faker—he lets the world know that he glories in his fakery."

"And he uses black backcloths and all the rest of the trappings," said Conroy minor shrewdly. "If there wasn't any spoo about your precious manifestations, why do you require a dark-room?"

"The spirits prefer the darkness—a fact which is well known to every creature of intelligence," replied Quirke quietly. "But stay. You shall see for yourselves. Examine the room. Do as you will with all my black backcloths, as you call them. I have no confederates—no secret wires and appliances."

With two or three movements, he tore down the hangings, and in a couple of minutes the study was normal again. And the juniors could see that there was nothing whatever in the nature of apparatus. Conroy minor picked up the oriental stool, examined it, and stared at the floor. There were no wires. There was nothing to explain the strange manifestation.

"Well I'm blessed!" he muttered softly.

"I don't care what you chaps say—I believe in Quirke," exclaimed Clifton, with



Armstrong charged at the door. There was a splintering of wood, and the door flew open with a crash. Armstrong was a powerful fellow, and he had plenty of weight.

an air of defiance. "He's straight—he's shown us that there's nothing faked. I'd like to have a look into the crystal."

"Not this evening," murmured Quirke softly. "Not this evening. The strain has already been great, and I am reluctant to go too far. Let us await a more fitting opportunity. And you will keep your word that nothing of this will be spoken to the others?"

"Not a word—honour bright," agreed the three.

They departed—Conroy minor still uncertain, but Clifton and Simmons both converted. They had seen enough to convince them that Ezra Quirke was a genuine magician—not a mere faker.

But Conroy minor couldn't bring himself to believe that spirits had actually been in that study with them. It seemed too fantastic—too wild.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHAT HAPPENED TO KENMORE.



"HALLO! Nearly bed-time for the juniors," said Edgar Fenton, of the Sixth. "We shall have to be moving, I'm afraid. Duty calls, you know."

"Oh, confound duty!" growled Wilson, yawning.

They were in the Senior Day-Room in the Ancient House, and Simon Kenmore rose to his feet. He and Sinclair had come over to have a word with Fenton about a forthcoming football fixture, and they had got talking with some of the other seniors.

"Coming, Sinclair?" asked Kenmore.

"Not yet," replied Guy Sinclair, looking round. "It's not one of my nights, anyhow—I'm not on duty, thank goodness. Don't go yet, Kenmore—wait for me. I shan't be long——"

"I can't wait," growled Kenmore. "I'm on duty, worse luck."

"All right—see you later."

Kenmore nodded good-night to the others, and strode out. It was his task to round up the juniors, and see them upstairs to their dormitories in the East House. It was one of the duties he detested, for it always interfered with his evening leisure. But, as Head Prefect, he couldn't possibly make any serious objections. He was supposed to set a good example.

He emerged from the Ancient House, and grunted.

It was raining slightly—a nasty, unpleasant drizzle. There was no moon now, and the darkness was pitchy. The lights of the Modern House and the East House gleamed warmly on the other side of the Triangle. Kenmore turned up his coat collar, and strode out.

"Kenmore!"

It seemed to the prefect that a voice had called him—but it was probably a trick of his imagination. The voice had sounded almost in his ear, and it wasn't an ordinary voice. A mere whisper—a faint sound, which could scarcely be regarded as a real voice.

"Funny!" muttered Kenmore, frowning.

He walked on, glancing about him quickly. He was certainly alone. There wasn't another soul out—and not likely to be at such an hour, and in such unpleasant weather.

"Kenmore!"

The voice came again—and this time louder, and more distinct. It was right in his ear—a mysterious, unnatural voice. It was so strange that Kenmore halted in his tracks, his heart beating with increased rapidity.

"Kenmore! Simon Kenmore!"

"Who's that?" muttered the prefect, a catch in his voice. "What's the idea of this foolery? Who's that, I say? Show yourself, confound you!"

With trembling hands, he pulled out a box of matches, and struck a light. In the still air, the flame flared up, and revealed to Kenmore that he was standing in the middle of the Triangle, absolutely alone. A rain drop struck the match, and the light spluttered out.

"Kenmore! Simon Kenmore! Kenmore!"

The voice just repeated his name. There was a mocking note in it—a hollow unearthly note. It was a human voice, and yet it wasn't. It was unlike anything Kenmore had heard in all his experience. A sudden chill came over the prefect. He shivered violently.

"Can't make it out!" he muttered. "I'm crazy, or something!"

"Kenmore! The fountain, Kenmore! Come to the fountain, Kenmore!"

This time there was something definite—something with command. Automatically, Kenmore looked towards the fountain. It was quite near him—within a few feet. And the voice had come from that side.

"By gad!" breathed Kenmore. "So it's trickery, after all!"

He was no fool, and his brain acted swiftly. He remembered the talk that had been going on all day—facetious inquiries concerning his welfare. The school was pleased to imagine that something was going to happen to him—just to make Ezra Quirke's prophecy come true.

And Kenmore knew how the juniors hated him—and he was well aware that japes were very much in their line. It was probably a trick to get him near the fountain, so they could push him in and give him a ducking. All his uneasiness left him, and he became hot with annoyance.

"Young demons!" he muttered harshly.

He strode towards the fountain, and halted near it. But he was on his guard. He looked round carefully.

"Prepare yourself, Kenmore!" came the mysterious voice. "Look in this direction—I am here. I have been called to punish you——"

"Come out of that!" snarled Kenmore.

He struck another match—suddenly, dramatically. The light flared, and he held himself tense. But the cold marble fountain was utterly deserted. The water of the pool was marked by tiny rings where the rain-drops fell. And one glance was enough to convince Kenmore that he was still utterly alone.

"Kenmore! Can't you hear me, Kenmore?"

The voice came from the very fountain-head—the marble face immediately in front of him—a carved face which was familiar to all the St. Frank's fellows. There were three of them on the fountain—equivalent to the three sides of the Triangle. And one of those faces had spoken! One of those carved marble images!

All Kenmore's fear returned—but this time intensified to a tremendous degree. His theory had been proved wrong. It was no jape—it was something beyond all human understanding.

"Look, Kenmore—look closely!"

The prefect felt faint and giddy. Yet he steeled himself to investigate further. His one desire was to run—to flee madly. But he was deterred by the one rational thought

which clung to him. What if it were actually a jape? How the juniors would howl with merriment if he turned and ran!

It was what they were wanting—what they planned! Kenmore knew that he would be the laughing-stock of the entire school for weeks if such a thing as that happened. And so, although every fibre of him urged him to flee, he held his ground. In this respect Kenmore revealed unsuspected strength.

He peered forward closely—trying to pierce the blackness. And then, just as he was near that grotesque marble face, something happened. Even Kenmore didn't know what it was. It was a curious tingling sensation in the very air—particularly near Kenmore's head. He felt it increase, and could not define its nature. He only knew that the atmosphere was charged with some unknown force. Not electricity—he knew the sensation of an electric shock. This was different—it was something chilly and uncanny.

His eyes hurt him, too—they pained strangely. And although he tried to see the fountain, he could not do so. All was blackness.

"Kenmore! Do you believe now, Kenmore?"

The voice was mocking and faint—fading away into the air as the words sounded. They came from Kenmore's rear, too. He turned, his breath hissing between his teeth. Then he staggered back.

The darkness was general.

All the lights had gone out in the school! He couldn't even see the buildings, the outline against the dark sky. Everything was dark—horribly, mysteriously dark. Kenmore clapped his hands to his paining eyes. And then, with a terrible cry, he knew.

"I'm blind!" he screamed. "I'm blind!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE VENGEANCE OF THE UNKNOWN.



SIMON KENMORE gave way to panic then.

Many a strong man would have given way under similar circumstances. The shock of the discovery was enough to shake a giant to the core. And Kenmore was no giant.

Blind! In some unknown way, a mysterious hand had struck the sight from his eyes. He had known nothing of it—nothing but that strange tingling. He hadn't even been aware of his blindness until he had turned. And his panic was alarming.

A thousand fears took possession of him. That voice—that ghostly, uncanny voice! It belonged to no human being, but to a spirit—to a creature from another world. There was no longer any doubt on the question

Kenmore fled—madly, precipitately. He ran blindly across the Triangle. With his hands stretched out in front of him, he tore along, screaming and gasping!

"I'm blind—I'm blind!" he shrieked. "Help—help!"

He ran at random, wildly. During that minute he had no conscious thought except that he wanted to get away. And, tearing along at full tilt, he crashed into the granite balustrade of the Ancient House steps. With a fearful smash, he toppled completely over, and landed on the steps.

He lay there, still—bleeding.

Several windows were flung open. Voices sounded. And then William Napoleon Browne and Horace Stevens, of the Fifth, came out of the Ancient House lobby. Behind them were a number of Removites.

"Who made all that noise?" shouted De Valerie, running up.

"What happened?"

"Out of the way, Browne!"

"Peace—peace!" exclaimed the captain of the Fifth. "Enough of this unseemly conduct, brothers! I fear that Brother Kenmore has crashed. Apparently, he got into a nose-dive, and failed to flatten out in time. Let us examine the poor remains."

Browne's tone was flippant, but his manner was earnest. He bent down over the prostrate figure on the steps, and lifted it with Stevens' help. The juniors crowded round. Kenmore was a sight. There was a nasty, ugly gash on his forehead where he had struck the steps, and blood was also dripping from his boots. He had gashed his leg seriously upon crashing into the balustrade.

"Can't understand it!" said Stevens, in amazement. "The poor man's been half-killed! Somebody must have attacked him—"

"Pardon my interruption, Brother Horace, but let me deprive you of the delusion," said Browne. "We arrived even as the crash came. We heard the thud. And there were no running figures. I may be wrong, but it strikes me that Kenmore must have fallen from an upper window."

"Keep it back—keep it back!"

Kenmore babbled out the words shakily. There was froth on his lips, and his eyes were staring and wild. Browne tightened his grip, and gave Kenmore a gentle shake.

"Steady, brother—steady!" he said softly. "All is well—"

"Keep it back!" panted Kenmore. "The voice—I can hear it now! That ghostly, unseen voice! I'm blind—do you hear me? Where are you? Can't somebody help me? I'm blind, I tell you! I'm blind!"

He screamed out the words as his strength recovered—as the effects of that fall began to wear off.

"Hold on!" said Nipper, pushing forward. "You can't be blind, Kenmore—your eyes are perfectly sound. Can't you see me?"

"I can't see anything!" babbled Ken-

more. "I tell you I'm blind! That—that Thing got me by the fountain. It was only a voice, but it got me! It blinded me, too!"

"The vengeance of the unknown!" said a steady, quiet voice.

Ezra Quirke had appeared—almost like a ghost himself. Kenmore started violently at the sound, and struggled.

"It must have been Quirke!" shouted Handforth furiously. "By George! That explains that hand—Quirke's been playing tricks! He must have spoken to Kenmore in the dark——"

"That's all rot!" interrupted Armstrong. "We've just come from the East House!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Quirke——"

"He's been in the common-room with us for the last hour!" interrupted Armstrong impatiently. "He's been reading in front of the fire—in sight of us all! A dozen chaps will tell you the same thing! You can't put this on to Quirke. We can prove he was with us. In fact, he didn't come out until Griffith shouted to us that something was wrong."

Several other voices in the increasing crowd added to Armstrong's testimony, and it was quite obvious that Ezra Quirke had had no hand in that mysterious affair.

"The doctor—get the doctor!" urged Reggie Pitt. "Kenmore's blind right enough—he can't see anything!"

"Let's carry him indoors!" said Nipper.

"The fountain!" muttered Kenmore. "That's where it was—just against the fountain. I didn't see anything, but I heard it. A voice—not a human voice, but a ghostly voice. And then I found that I was blind. Good heavens! I'll never disbelieve in ghosts again! They've got me—they've blinded me! I'm ruined for life!"

He babbled on hysterically.

"Didn't you see a hand?" asked Handforth quickly. "A long, bony hand? Didn't you see it hovering in the air——"

"It was a voice—just a voice!" panted Kenmore feebly. "My leg! Oh, my leg! I believe it's broken! Can't somebody help me?"

"Dry up, Handforth!" exclaimed Reggie Pitt. "What's that rot about a hovering hand?"

"Oh, nun-nothing!" said Handforth hastily.

He was glad of the commotion. It was better, after all, to keep that affair of the hand to himself. Church and McClure had remained discreetly silent, but they had given their leader some queer looks during the past hour. And Kenmore's experience—almost at the same spot—was significant, indeed. It was about the one spot in the school where there could be no trickery. In the middle of the open Triangle!

Kenmore was lifted by willing hands, and carried indoors. Nelson Lee himself heard the story, but could make nothing of it. It seemed an extraordinary jumble to him. After he had sorted things out, however,

Lee looked rather grim. He wasn't likely to leave the affair where it stood—and it was just as certain that he would take action discreetly and privately.

The blow on Kenmore's head was not so serious. His leg, just above the knee, however, was torn badly. There was a nasty, ugly flesh wound—which necessitated a number of stitches by Dr. Brett. And Simon Kenmore was carried into the school sanatorium—due to remain there for a week, at least.

And, after the excitement was over, the school talked.

Kenmore had received the fright of his life, and the school had received a shock. What was the explanation of this mysterious affair? Was there any explanation? Trickery seemed absolutely out of the question.

The next morning bands of investigators examined the fountain, and looked everywhere for a solution to the mystery. And in the end it was concluded that Simon Kenmore had imagined everything. He had got into a panic—just that, and nothing else. His blindness was due to some effect of the fall.

It was not permanent—already his sight was coming back, and the doctor was convinced that he would be normal within another day. The doctor had found no explanation of the affection of the eyes, and he was completely puzzled.

But there was one fellow who held a different opinion.

Edward Oswald Handforth was worried. He himself had experienced a remarkable adventure near the fountain. It wasn't possible that two mysterious happenings could be mere imagination. Edward Oswald had seen that hand—he knew it—it had been no illusion.

There, he believed that Kenmore had heard a voice. But Handforth knew better than to tell any of the others of his convictions. They wouldn't have believed him. So, for once, he held his own counsel.

What was the mysterious influence that was stealing over the school? Had Ezra Quirke aroused the evil spirits? Had this remarkable new boy caused occult manifestation? Or was it all imagination and coincidence? Or was it pure fakery?

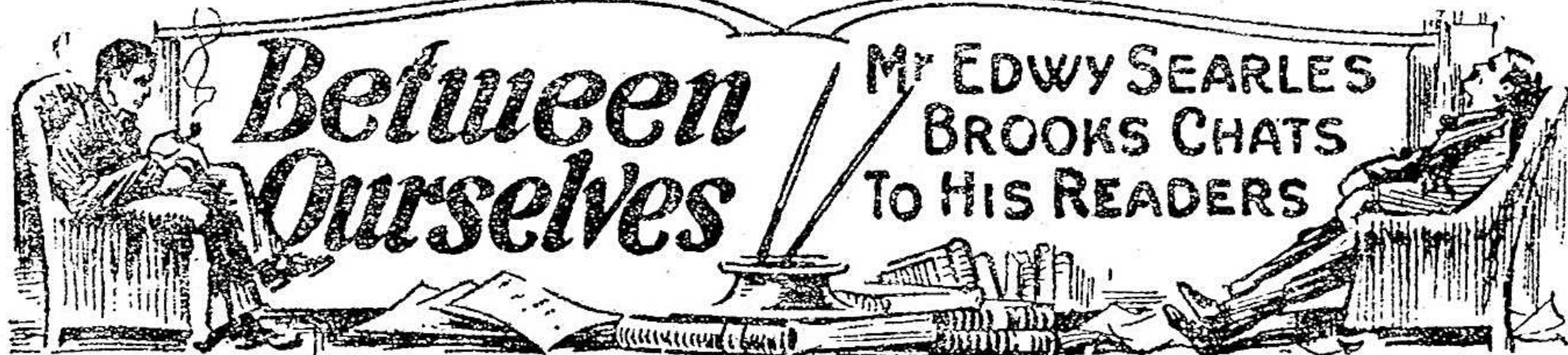
These were questions that time alone could answer! But one thing was certain—St. Frank's was booked for some very startling events in the near future!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

"THE MYSTERY of STUDY 20!"

And Don't Forget, there will be another Free Gift of Stamps!



NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. 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. Every letter acknowledged below has been personally read by me, and I thank each writer most heartily. But, although all letters afford me an equal amount of pleasure, I am reluctantly compelled to confine my individual replies to those of general interest.—E. S. B.

Well, what about it? How do you like Ezra Quirke? Do you think this new series will pan out well? I'm assuming, of course, that you've read all the pages preceding this one. If you haven't, you'd better turn back at once. No need to waste time on this page until you've read something of a more solid variety. This chat of mine is just right to fill in an odd moment when you've got nothing else to do. If you read it, all well and good—and if you don't read it, who cares? But if I run on at this rate I shan't have any room to answer all you fellows who are looking at the next paragraph to see if your names are there. Of course, my main idea is to fill the page up with any old sort of stuff as long as it's filled, but I've got an idea that you'll tick me off if I don't buck up and get busy. All right, here goes! And if your name isn't below, you'll probably find it next week.

Leslie Grace (West Ealing), L. A. Collins (Holloway), B. A. William (Rye), Roy H. Stapleton Cotton (Shortlands), R. E. Long (Brighton), Nipper III (Fulham), J. S. Ricketts (Hayle), A Hebrew Reader (Nottingham), Algy Hay (Southampton), Stanley Nelson (Grimsby), Harold Joseph Faulks (Honor Oak Park), No. 1811 (Willenhall), No. 137 (Huddersfield), Paul Williamson (Montreal, Canada), Interested (Finchley), W. Butterworth (Rochdale), A. D. Farmer (Bridgnorth), Nipper Of Remove (Brighton), Frank J. Bamber (Charlton).

Thanks for your nice, long letter, Leslie Grace. That's a good idea of yours to start a St. Frank's Club. If all you League Members will make preliminary preparations like that, it will be a lot easier for the Chief Officer when the actual time comes for club-making. A little ground-work in advance makes a big difference.

Here, what's the matter with your friends, R. E. Long? Why the dickens won't they sign their names to the coupons? They think there's something "behind it all," eh? Well, my hat! I should jolly well hope there is something behind it all! Do they think the League is just a lot of spoof, or what? Tell them to buck up and be sports. It's fellows of that sort who keep the membership down—and delay the whole organisation of the League. The Chief Officer will never get his schemes into working order if you chaps hang back like that. What next? I'm surprised at you!

Here it is! I knew I should get it! And you're not the only one who's asked the all-important question, Algy Hay—not by long chalks, let me tell you. "Where is old Josh Cuttle's lodge?" Echo answers, where? (Strictly speaking, Echo would answer "Lodge," but we won't argue.) There's nothing like the horrible truth, is there? It's a perfectly ghastly admission, but the school wall hides it up! Hang it all, the artist couldn't draw a transparent wall, could he? Cuttle's lodge is just inside the gates, hidden by the trees. If you don't believe me, consult your map, pop inside the gate, and have a look for yourself. And Mrs. Hake's shop is tucked away in the corner of the Triangle, just behind the chapel. You'll find it if you climb to the top of the wall, and look through the trees.

I say, Stanley Nelson, go easy! We haven't finished the proper Portrait Gallery yet, so it's a bit early to talk about having a special one for Willy's pets! But there's no telling!

My dear N. 1811! What a question to ask! Of course you can qualify for a Bronze Medal without being compelled to become an Organising Officer. EVERYBODY can get a Bronze Medal if they've only got a little push and go. But nobody is asked to become an Organising Officer unless they are frightfully keen on organising something or other.

I'm awfully sorry, but I can't answer some of you other fellows this week—some of you mentioned above, I mean. But I'll tell you what—I'll get round the Editor to give me two pages next week, and then I shall have heaps of room. You don't mind waiting, do you? Of course, it's all the same if you do, but it sounds better to put it like that!

E. S. B.



THE STAMP COLLECTOR

By FRED. J. MELVILLE.

A MINIATURE PORTRAIT GALLERY

MY stamp-collecting readers are in clover, for the young collector's chief problem is how to get more stamps to make his collection grow. And here is our Editor lending a hand at the game, and giving some fine stamps away each week. They will be eagerly welcomed by the collectors, and I hope will be taken good notice of by those regular readers of the "Nelson Lee Library," who are not at present collecting stamps. The latter will find that the stamps now given to them are worth taking care of, and that stamp-collecting is a splendid hobby for the winter evenings.

The first thing that interests one in stamps is the wonderful variety of their designs. Look at the half a dozen stamps in the first St. Frank's League Packet given to us this week, and in most cases I'll warrant they are six quite different designs. This leads us to consider something of the charms of the picture gallery of stamps. Every stamp is a tiny picture, and as we get fonder and fonder of our stamps, each of the little pictures will tell us its story.

The first postage stamp ever issued bore a fine portrait of the late Queen Victoria as a young woman. It was the famous penny black stamp, and was issued in 1840. Up to that time, no postage stamps were in use anywhere, the penny black stamp came as a new invention, and it caught on splendidly. When other countries followed Britain's lead in issuing stamps, many of them also copied the idea of using a portrait as the subject for the picture on the stamp.

There was good reason for selecting a portrait, because we all have a sort of instinct for recognising familiar faces, and for noticing any changes of appearance on the faces we know. So it was thought that if anyone attempted to forge the postage stamps, the forger would not be able to present the familiar features so exactly as to evade detection.

That is mainly the reason why portraits were used in the beginning, and even to this day. And the result is that our stamp albums present a wonderful gallery of portraits in miniature; thumb-nail pictures of international celebrities.

Queen Victoria's picture appeared on hundreds of British and Colonial stamps during her reign. In some there was just a simple girlish profile, others showed her

seated on the throne, with orb and sceptre, others showed her in her widow's weeds. A few, like some of the home-made Mauritius stamps, were more like caricatures of her Majesty than portraits. King Edward and King George also figure on a large number of postage stamps, and you will find on some of the Newfoundland stamps attractive portraits of the present Prince of Wales and Princess Mary.

Many other kings and princes appear on stamps, but our portrait gallery is not restricted to royal personages. We have quite a gallery of explorers and adventurers like Columbus (United States and American countries), Captain Cook (Australia and Cook Is.), Prince Henry the Navigator, and Vasco da Gama (Portugal), Cabot, the discoverer of Newfoundland, Freemont, the pioneer on the Rockies, Balboa, who discovered the Pacific Ocean (Panama stamps), Bolivar, the "liberator" of South America, Cortez, and scores of other heroes of the greatest adventures in history.

Statesmen are shown on many stamps, and most of the United States issues bear portraits of men of whom you have heard, and whose stories will be brought to mind by the study of your stamps. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln figure on numerous issues, and you will find heroes of more recent times, like Presidents McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, and the late President Harding on some of the current issues.

There is even a group of musicians. The famous pianist, Paderewski, is depicted on a stamp of his native country; and Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and others, are shown on Austrian stamps. Great authors and poets like Dante (Italy), Cervantes (Spain), Camoens (Portugal), Maurice Jokai (Hungary), Francis Bacon (Newfoundland), Lord Byron (Greece).

Concerning portraits on postage stamps, there are some interesting yarns. A postmaster in New Brunswick thought he would like to see his own portrait on the stamps, and ordered the 5 cents stamp of 1860 to be engraved with his own picture. There was a storm of protest from officials and the public when it was found that Mr. Charles Connell the postmaster, had usurped the place of the Queen on the stamps, and the gentleman had to resign his job. It was, you will admit,

(Continued on page 38).



THE CITY OF MASKS;

or, THE CASE OF THE BOY KING!

A Gripping New Tale of Detective Adventure, introducing SEXTON BLAKE and TINKER.

FOR NEW READERS.

The story takes place in the wild and mountainous country of Carlovina, infested by bandits and outlaws. Here life is held very cheaply, and it is with grave personal risk that Sexton Blake and Tinker find themselves the guests of the youthful King Peter, the new ruler of Carlovina. The great detective, in the guise of Mr. Brown, English tutor to the King, has been employed by the Foreign Office on an important mission, and Tinker is on a visit to King Peter as an old school chum. With the opening of this week's instalment, Blake has just been interrogated by Oscar Sarjo, the Prime Minister, who is suspicious of the detective's presence in Carlovina.

(Now read on.)

BLAKE knew that hidden behind the thick velvet curtains the secretary was putting down all the words in shorthand. He did not flatter his Majesty. Sooner or later, when Sarjo found him in the way, Peter would be told what he had said. Declining the Prime Minister's offer to lunch at the palace, Sexton Blake went back to his hotel.

"A wily old rogue, but I bluffed him," he thought. "He thinks I'm a complete ass, and that he can make a catspaw of young Peter. We shall see. It would have been easy enough if the boy had come alone."

As he opened the door of his bed-room a man jumped back from the bed, on which lay Blake's open attache-case, and levelled a revolver at him. The intruder lowered the weapon at once, and smiled as he recognised the King's tutor. The uninvited visitor was Johann Veilburg, of the police.

"A thousand apologies, Excellency," he said, bowing. "These unpleasant little things have to be done. Though I did not distrust your Excellency's word or his Majesty's signature, I was compelled to make sure. I will call one of my men to repack your bag, and then I trust, bearing no malice, for I earn my salary by doing this dog's work, you will drink a glass of wine with me."

"With all the pleasure in the world," said Sexton Blake.

The private detective and Veilburg drank champagne together, and Blake began to wonder whether he had bluffed Oscar Sarjo quite as successfully as he had thought.

HIS MAJESTY ENTERS HIS KINGDOM.

JUMP to it!" roared Captain Coggs. "Gawsh! Jump to it, you ragged toughs! Jump to it, before I eat a few platoons of you!"

Clad in white shorts and a singlet, Captain Coggs was drilling the Carlovian Royal Guard, while Tinker looked on, his hands in his pockets and a grin on his face. Luckily they did not know enough English to understand the names their bully captain was calling them, or some of them would have fainted and the rest mutinied. Blimp pranced about in front of them, manipulating a heavy rifle as if it had been a light walking-stick, and his big voice bellowed through the barrack square like a succession of thunderclaps.

At last he dismissed the panting, perspiring men, winked at Tinker, and refreshed himself with a cigarette.

"Don't overdo it, Blimp, old bean, or you'll break their hearts," said Tinker.

"I'll break some of their necks afore I've finished, sir!" said Blimp. "Looks a bit 'opeless, don't it?"

"It does," agreed Tinker.

"Well, I've had 'em nearly as bad, sir. Give me ten days, and you won't know 'em. They'll work like a machine, and be tame enough to eat out of your hand. Gawsh! I'll polish 'em up, so that the king will be proud of 'em instead of ashamed of 'em. I ain't seen the mounted lot yet, but the lieutenant says they're pretty smart. I'll shape 'em, or I'll eat 'em, so just leave it to me."

"It looks as if you'll have to eat 'em, Blimp," said Tinker; "but stick to it, my lad. Seen the colonel yet?"

"No; and I'm not keen, sir. If he's satisfied to be a colonel of that crush, what he wants is a box of tin soldiers. He's coming

along with the baggage, Lieutenant Puntz tells me. Not a bad chap, Puntz, and I've rather cottoned to him. Gawsh! He tells me the C.O. is a proper wash-out."

Tinker liked the lieutenant, who was growing grey without having made any great advance in rank, for promotion in the Carlovian army was gained by influence, not by merit. As Tinker went to find his Majesty, the tireless Blimp threw away the end of his cigarette, called out another platoon, and once more his huge voice roared and bel-
lowed:

"What a noisy merchant, Billy!" said Peter. "He must be terrifying the poor guys to death. Here's a bit of sauce! Fancy the cheek of the colonel, sending three parts of the ragged brigade along, and stopping behind himself! What about letting Blimp shoot him at dawn?"

"Just as you like, old top," said Tinker. "Make it a bit later, for that's the time I enjoy my sleep most. Wait till I'm having my bath."

"I wouldn't disturb you for worlds, so I'll hang him instead, and that won't make a noise," said his Majesty. "Well, lieutenant?"

"The colonel of your Majesty's guard, sir," said Lieutenant Puntz, at salute.

"Then let the colonel cool his heels on the jolly old doormat," said the king. "If these guys keep me waiting, I'll play the same trick. Make it twenty minutes, lieutenant. You're not afraid of your colonel, are you?"

"You are the king, sir."

"Then make it twenty-five minutes." Tinker sniggered.

"Keep it up, Peter," he said, "and you'll be assassinated in a week. You're just asking for it! You're making an enemy for life."

"Who cares, old sport?" yawned Peter. "The fact is, if Blimp can do anything decent with those ragamuffins, I'm thinking of giving him the colonel's job, and of making Puntz a major. There'll be a jolly old row, of course, and Sarjo will kick like a mule. The nuisance is how to get hold of the money. There's some silly regulation that before I can handle it, it has to be voted in council. We must try and bust that rule, Billy, my lad. What's the good of being a king if you have to kow-tow to a frowsy fossil like Sarjo for cash?"

"Why not stick a heavy tax on whiskers?" suggested Tinker. "As all the men seem to wear 'em, that ought to fetch in a fortune or two."

"If I taxed whiskers, everybody would shave, you chump!" said his Majesty. "What brilliant ideas you do get, Billy!"

"Then tax razors and scissors at the same time, and you've got 'em both ways," grinned Tinker. "Those who sliced off their whiskers would pay duty on the razors and scissors, and those who kept 'em sporting would pay on the whiskers. If I were King of Carlovian, old warrior, I'd invent lots of dodges to raise the wind. But, I say, don't keep that

guy on the mat too long. You'll only make him hate you, and I'm a bit keen on seeing what one of your colonels is like."

"Hold hard, then, while I get my kingly dignity together, and then give the bell a shove," said his Majesty.

If the rank and file of the Royal Guard had to put up with threadbare uniforms and patched boots, their colonel took care not to do so.

The colonel, was resplendent. Medals covered his breast, silver spurs clanked on his heels, and his cocked hat bore a plume of crimson ostrich feathers. His corsets were laced more tightly than usual, and his moustache had several extra waves in it. Tinker could actually hear the corsets creak as he bowed to the king.

"I have seen the Royal Guard, colonel," said Peter, "and I tell you I am not at all satisfied with their appearance."

"I regret it, sir," said Colonel Zuss. "Your late uncle, sir, if I may say so with respect, starved the army, sir—starved it, sir!"

"They seem short of a few drills, as well as of uniforms, colonel. However, I am altering all that. I have brought a military expert from England with me, and given him a captain's commission in my Guard. Lieutenant Puntz, be good enough to introduce Captain Coggs to the colonel."

With a nod and a wave of his hand, his Majesty signified that the brief interview was over.

"He's gone out frothing at the mouth," chuckled Tinker. "Short and sweet, eh? If you can keep it up, Peter, you'll make some sort of a tup'penny apology for a king yet. You've ruffled that guy's dignity, my lad, by turning him down so quickly, and he's bursting his corsets and gnawing off his lovely moustache with rage. He'll turn the whole Royal Guard loose on you."

The voice of Blimp came through the open window.

"You pretty pets!" he roared. "You lovely bunch of half-baked sheep! Jump to it! Gawsh! Get your heads out from between your knees, can't you? Straighten up, you crowd of hunchbacks, afore I eat you! Eyes right, and let me hear your eyeballs click! 'Shun!"

There was a brief silence while Captain Coggs was being introduced to the colonel, and the colonel hated Blimp furiously at first sight.

"Who instructed you to drill my men so soon after a long and tiring journey?" asked the colonel, almost choking with rage.

"King's orders, sir," answered Blimp, and went at it again.

Though Captain Coggs worked the men hard, he fed them well and gave them plenty of cigarettes, and his success was amazing. The curious part of it was that they liked him. When the new uniforms came up, and he paraded the Royal Guard

for his Majesty's inspection, the change for the better was astonishing.

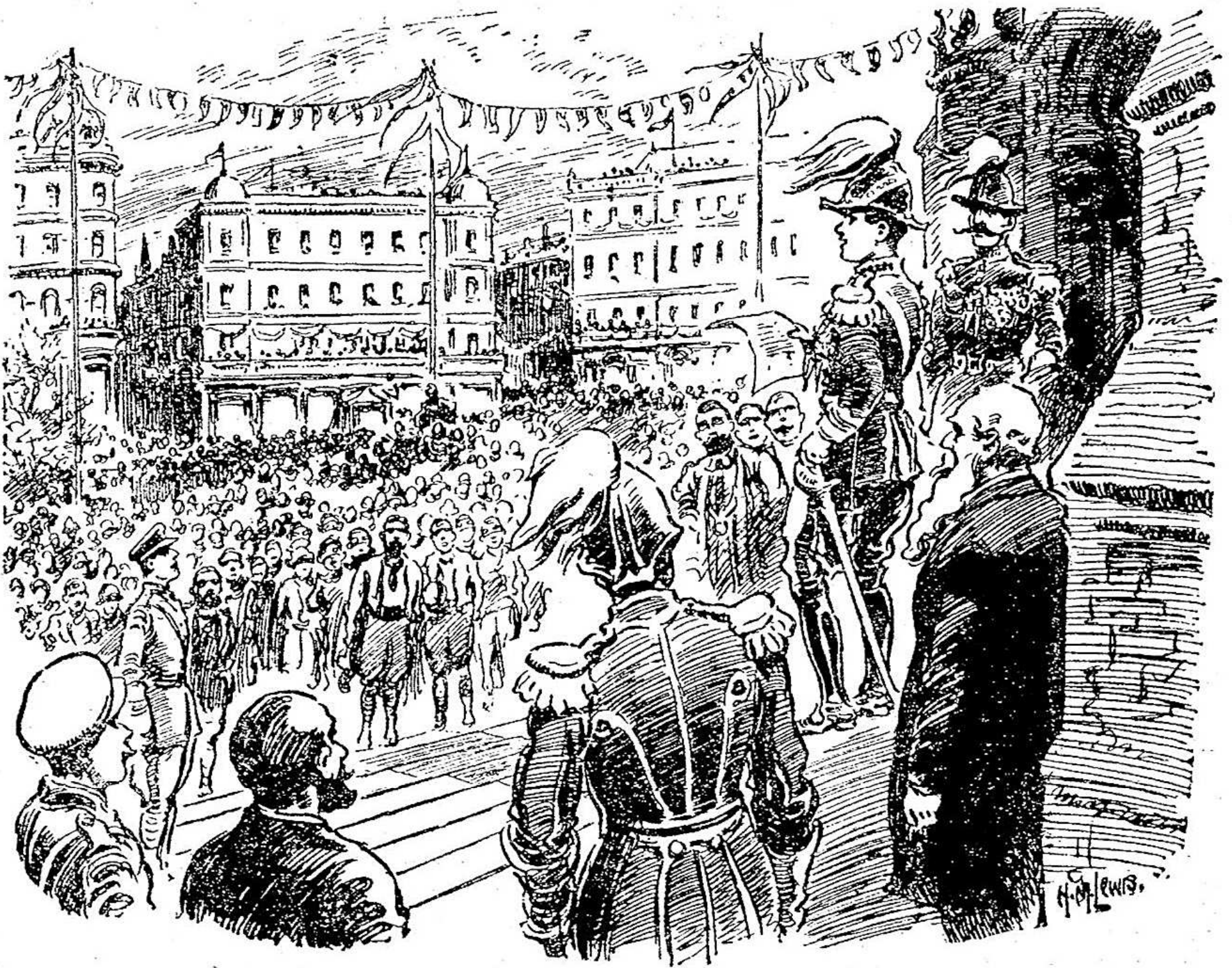
Mr. James Brown had come back, and he watched the march past from a window with Tinker. Peter, gorgeous in a field-marshal's uniform, took the salute.

"Marvellous, guv'nor!" said Tinker. "Wonderful what a bit of drill and new togs will do. Good old Blimp! I say, look at Peter with all his giddy medals and decorations. Where did he get 'em? Wow! He's going to make a speech. Celia wrote it for him, so I hope he won't forget it."

"They certainly look a useful lot, young

"In a way, with all its glitter, it is imposing, Mr. Jones," he answered; "but I hate it, for I hate militarism. I am a man of peace. Perhaps, gentlemen, you will honour me and listen to a little form of welcome I have written which is to be recited at the cathedral steps when the King enters Kamfak. After all, you know, the mightiest armies fade away, and the greatest generals die and are forgotten, but good poetry lives through all the ages. Not, of course," added the prince hastily, "that my poetry is good."

As the poem was written in the mongrel



From the steps of the cathedral, Peter read his address.

"un," said Blake, "though their uniforms are a bit too flashy for my taste; but as the Carlovians seem to be fond of bright colours, that's no drawback. I only hope they'll turn out as good as they look."

"You mean if they'll stick to the King?" said Tinker. "They will if they're not got at. I wouldn't trust that colonel of theirs further than I could see him. I think somebody is sending down news to Kamfak of what's happening. What do you think of it, prince?"

Prince Darro, who had been watching from another window, shook his sleek head.

language of Carlovian, it reminded Tinker of a lot of fowls cackling and pigs grunting, but Prince Darro gave them an English translation, and the sentiments seemed very loyal but rather too flattering. According to Prince Darro, there never was such a great and glorious monarch as King Peter, or such a great and glorious country as Carlovian.

In the afternoon the Royal Guard left Shalvola, and King Peter, his sister, his cousin, and his tutor and friend went down to the railhead where the royal train was waiting to take them to Gorful, a small town four miles from Kamfak. And there,

for the time being, he parted with Tinker and Sexton Blake.

"We'll be in the crowd somewhere to give you a chi-ike, Peter," said Tinker. "See you again after the circus."

"Unless one of my faithful subjects slings a bomb at me," said Peter. "To tell you the giddy truth, Billy, I'm not a bit keen on this job. Anyhow, if they get me they'll get Darro and Sarjo as well, for I'm going to have those two with me in the same carriage. A good notion that, but what about Celia?"

"She's taking a back seat, so she won't come to grief. I jolly well wish it was over. Try and enjoy yourselves, but don't get into mischief."

People were pouring into Kamfak, and if Blake had not reserved rooms at the Hotel Carlovica for himself and Tinker, they would have found it hard to find a lodging. There were flags by the thousand and miles of gay bunting. The revels had already begun; the cafés were crowded, bands and street musicians were everywhere, and hideous, highly coloured pictures of the boy King, that did not resemble him in the least, were being hawked about.

But even in this time of joy and gladness Tinker and Blake saw many masked faces in the streets.

"A funny game this, guv'nor," said Tinker. "I jolly well hope we don't resemble any well-known loyalists or republicans. A bit rotten if we get shot in mistake, for an apology isn't much use to a chap when he's full of lead. And I'm a bit nervy about Peter."

"He'll pull through, young 'un. If they mean to assassinate the youngster, it won't be to-morrow," said Sexton Blake confidently. "The Carlovians are too fond of a holiday to spoil it that way. I'm not looking forward to any serious trouble yet."

Sexton Blake was right. From the veranda of the hotel they watched the royal entry. From the steps of the cathedral Peter read his address, and then entered the state carriage with its eight cream ponies, and drove slowly through the packed streets amid roars of cheering and showers of flowers thrown from the crowded windows.

The most outstanding figure was Blimp. Mounted on an enormous black horse, Blimp led the procession with fifty picked men of the Royal Guard, and he received nearly as many cheers as the King himself. At last, after its long tour, the procession passed through the gateway of the palace, and King Peter's subjects went back to their music, dancing, cigarettes, and wine.

In the evening there was a reception at the palace, and when he had put on his Court dress, complete with knee breeches, cocked hat and sword, Tinker frowned at himself in the mirror, and then presented himself to the King's tutor, who was in similar attire.

"If they don't shoot us when they see us in this get-up they jolly well ought to, guv'nor," he said. "How do you wear these funny old hats? Do the points go back and front, or sideways? And what's the sword for, toasting cheese or digging winkles out of their shells?"

(Continued from page 34.)

a bit of a cheek. The Connell stamp is now scarce.

On the other hand, King Ferdinand II of Sicily did not like the idea of having his portrait on the stamps of his country. He was afraid his postal employees would relish only too well the privilege of giving him good, sound whacks with their postmarking dies. His picture did appear on the stamps, but the postal clerks were provided with postmarks of peculiar design, shaped like a frame with the top removed, the object being that the postmark would fall on the border of the stamp and not submit Ferdinand's features to the indignity of an ugly smudge.

There was a Haytian ruler, President

Salomon, who would not have his portrait on the stamps of 1881; so a head representing Liberty was used instead. But the president's enemies declared that the picture was a portrait of Mrs. Salomon, and it is said the likeness was close enough to justify their criticism. So on the stamps of 1887 you get the smug, smiling face of the president himself. He was not there long, for in Hayti they turn out governments and presidents almost as soon as they elect them. After Salomon had fled, wounded, to Cuba, the stamps with his picture were still used by his rivals; but just to show what they thought of him, the authorities insisted that the stamps should be placed upon the letters upside-down.

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THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

(Please quote your membership number in all communications to the League, which should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, London, E.C.4.)

My dear Leagueites and Readers, .

The Free Gift of a Packet of Foreign Postage Stamps, which appears this week in your copy of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, is quite a different assortment to that of any of your fellow-readers. Furthermore, it is quite certain that some of you will be lucky enough to find a stamp in your packet that any collector would highly prize—a stamp priced by Gibbons at anything from 1s. upwards. If you already know something about stamps, you may spot one of these rare specimens, should one come your way. On the other hand, if you have never collected stamps before and know nothing about this fascinating pastime, I strongly advise you to read the special series of articles by Fred J. Melville, which appear on page 34. During the next three weeks, these Free Gifts of Foreign Stamps will be continued to be given away—one packet with each copy of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, and every packet different. To League Members only I am giving opportunities to exchange their stamps, so that if you have not already joined the League, lose no time in qualifying.

In addition to the Free Gifts of Foreign Stamps, we are starting this week one of the best series of St. Frank's stories Mr. Brooks has yet written. I mention it here because I want Members and Readers to realise that now is the time for them all to unite in bringing the League up to the required membership of 10,000. There never was a more favourable opportunity for readers to qualify as members, or members to win their bronze medals, than during these special Free Gift weeks and when

these wonderful series of stories can be introduced to your chums with the knowledge that they will be read with the keenest interest. So far, we have reached just on a quarter of the numbers of members required before we can begin some of the attractive features for which the League is being formed.

From letters I have received from O.O.'s, I hear there are many readers who are only waiting to see how the League develops before they join. In other words, they are waiting for each other before any of them will make a move. At this rate, I can leave it to you to imagine how long it will take to make any addition to the League's membership.

But, of course, even the most indulgent of editors cannot wait indefinitely for readers to make up their minds to take advantage of the great opportunities offered them by the League. I shall be guided very much by the influx of new members during the next few weeks as to whether I think the majority of my readers want the League. If they do not want it, then I have no other choice but to discontinue the scheme and use the space I intended for the League for something else. It is for you, my chums, to decide whether you want the League or not. There is only one real way you can show me that you want it, and that is by qualifying for membership as soon as possible.

With every good wish,

Your sincere friend,

THE CHIEF OFFICER.

SOME ADVANTAGES OF JOINING THE LEAGUE.

- (1) Getting to know your fellow-readers from near at home to the most distant outposts of the Empire.
- (2) Joining local sports and social clubs affiliated to the League.
- (3) Entering for competitions run for the benefit of members.
- (4) Qualifying for various awards by promoting the growth of the League.
- (5) Opportunities for contributing short articles, stories, and sketches to the League Magazine.
- (6) Space for short notices and free adverts. for members in the above magazine.
- (7) Advice on choosing a trade or calling in life, on emigration to the colonies, dependencies, or abroad.
- (8) An employment bureau for members of the League.
- (9) Tours to interesting places in England and on the Continent, camping-out holidays, and sea-trips, specially arranged for members of the League.

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INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from TWO copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C by running the pen diagonally across both Sections. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. The second form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

Member Applying for Bronze Medal: It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms are needed, and these must be taken from copies of the latest issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the forms are sent in. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C,

crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided the forms are taken from the latest issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the forms are sent in.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medal can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B, which has been revised for this purpose. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members, they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

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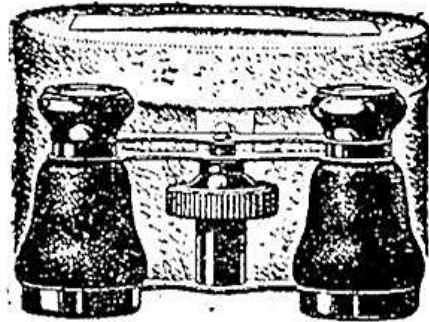
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ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 18. Oct. 24, 1925

<p>SECTION</p> <p>A</p>	<p>READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.</p> <p>Being a regular reader of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare myself to be a staunch supporter of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and that I have introduced Our Paper to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with Membership Number assigned to me.</p>
<p>SECTION</p> <p>B</p>	<p>MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.</p> <p>I, Member No.....(give Membership No.) hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me.....(state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.</p>
<p>SECTION</p> <p>C</p>	<p>NEW READER'S DECLARATION.</p> <p>I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," which I will read with a view to becoming a regular reader of this paper.</p>
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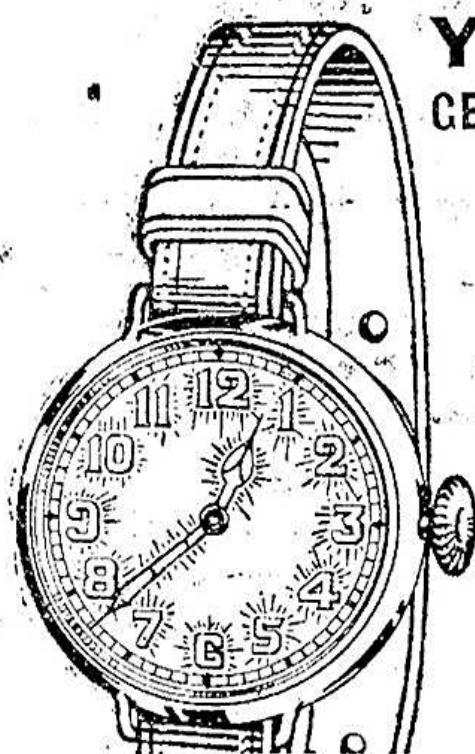
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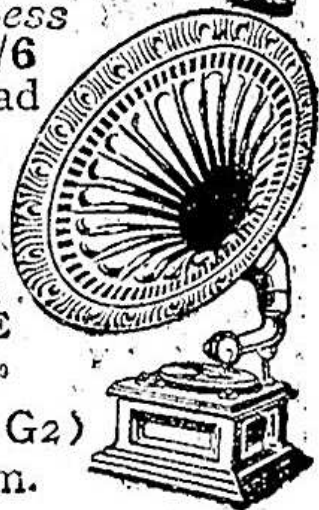
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