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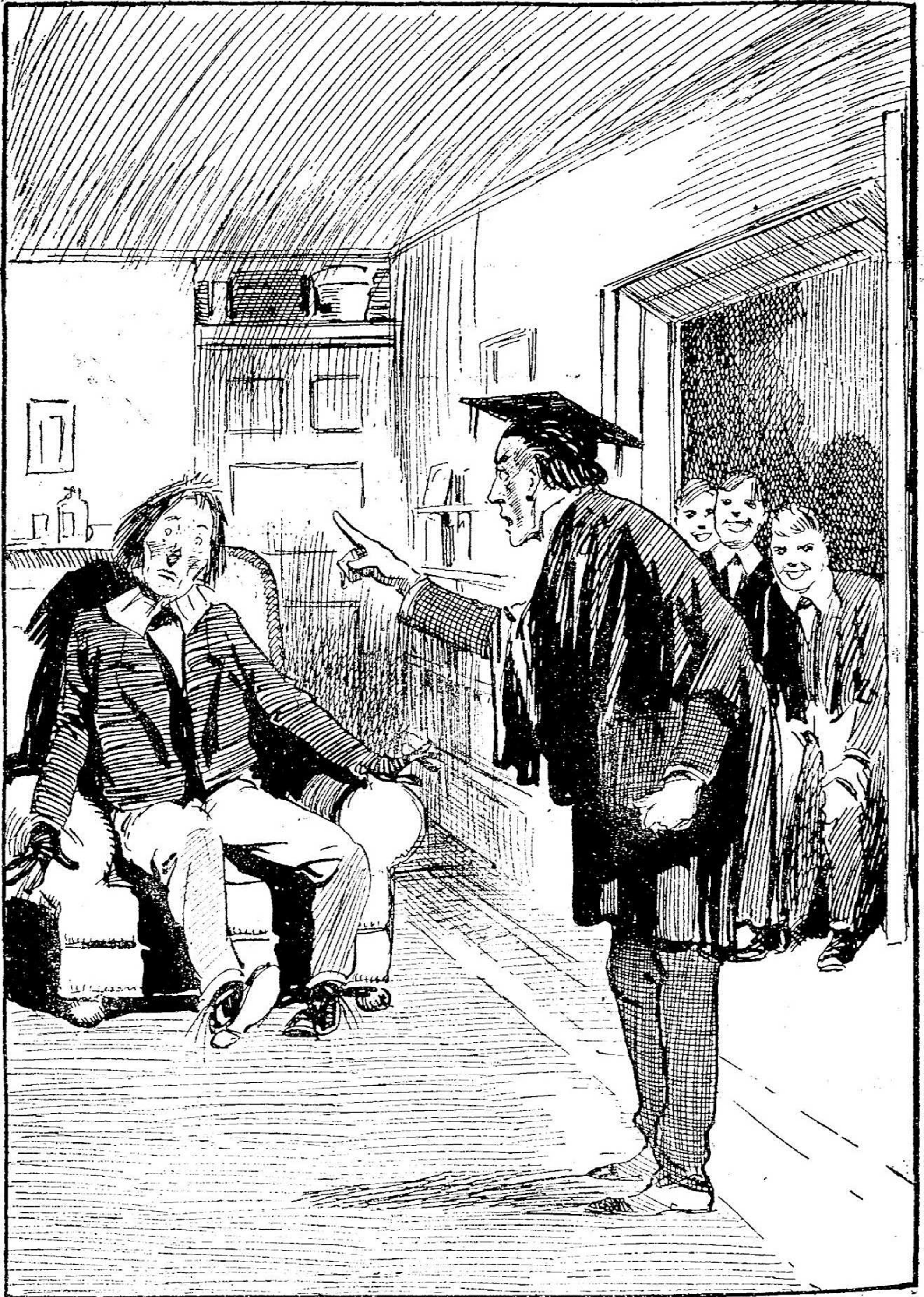
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**FOREIGN STAMPS.
DIFFERENT ASSORTMENT
*With Each Copy***

No. 544.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

November 7, 1925.



Immediately behind Professor Tucker three faces looked in at the doorway—three grinning, cheerful faces. This jape was working out far better than Willy & Co. had hoped for.

THE 13 CLUB!



A wave of superstition has crept over St. Frank's, due to the influence of Ezra Quirke, a new boy of remarkable powers of magic, and well versed in the occult, the signs and portents of fate, and superstitious lore. Whether by coincidence or trickery, Quirke has succeeded in winning a large number of supporters. But there still remains a section who regard him and his superstitions with distrust and open hostility, and these disbelievers form themselves into a society which they call the 13 Club. Composed of thirteen boys, the 13 Club sets out to violate all the popular omens known to superstition before the horrified Quirke, who prognosticates ill-luck to follow in their wake. Does Quirke's prophesy come true? That will be revealed in the story below.

I have great pleasure in announcing another **GIFT PACKET** of Foreign Stamps this week, and, as before, your Packet is quite a different set to that of any of your fellow-readers, and in some packets a stamp of rare value is included.

Look out for another **GIFT PACKET** next week!

THE EDITOR.

By *EDWY SEARLES BROOKS*

CHAPTER I.

SPOOFING THE PROFESSOR.



PROFESSOR SYLVESTER TUCKER looked up from his book with a sudden start.

"Extraordinary!" he murmured, frowning.

The St. Frank's science master was quite alone in his study in the Ancient House. The door was closed, the window curtains were drawn, and a cheerful fire blazed merrily in the open grate. Yet the professor could have sworn that a distinct cough had sounded in the apartment.

He looked round searchingly, peering over the tops of his glasses. Unfortunately, Professor Tucker was very short-sighted, and his reading glasses were of little use at any

range beyond eighteen inches. Unassisted, his eyesight was hopeless. Everything was a mere blur.

"The wind, no doubt," he told himself. "The wind will play curious tricks at times—and there is quite a gale to-night."

"Cheese it!" said a loud voice.

The professor jumped, and swung round in his chair. The words had sounded in his very ear, and he was particularly startled by their raucous tone. It wasn't the voice of any junior schoolboy.

"Upon my soul!" he gasped. "Who—who is that? Where are you, sir? What are you doing in my room? How dare you lurk—"

"Fathead! Clear out of this study!"

This time the professor leapt to his feet in real alarm. The voice had actually come from beneath his chair. He swung the chair aside, and stared at the floor. There wasn't

a sign of any human being—although he fancied he saw a kind of blob vanish under the desk. But it was no larger than a kitten.

"This—this is absolutely amazing!" panted Professor Tucker, wiping his brow. "Come out, sir! Do you hear me—come out at once! I won't have this ridiculous trickery! Show yourself this instant, sir!"

"Go and eat coke!" said the voice contemptuously.

"Good gracious! I—I—"

"Make the fire up, and don't be lazy!" continued the intruder. "If you don't, I'll shove your giddy head in the coal-box! Yah! Go it, you chaps!"

Professor Tucker was utterly flabbergasted. The voice was actually emanating from the lower drawer of his desk—which was four or five inches open. And no human being, however diminutive, could squeeze himself into that confined space.

Taking his courage in both hands, Professor Tucker pulled the drawer open, and peered within. He caught sight of two bright eyes.

"Hallo, old son!" said the raucous voice. "How goes it?"

"Good heavens!" breathed the professor.

"What about some tea?" asked the individual in the drawer.

The science master peered closer, for he couldn't see much except the two eyes. But at close range everything came into sharp focus. He beheld a somewhat ruffled parrot—and the mystery was explained.

"Bless my soul!" said the professor, with relief. "Of course—of course! How absurd of me not to guess the truth at once. Now, sir—come out of that drawer! Leave this room at once!"

"What about some tea?" repeated the parrot impatiently.

"How dare you bandy words with me, sir?" roared the professor. "Leave my study at once! I won't have—Dear me!" he added mildly. "How ridiculous! Of course, the bird must be forcibly ejected. Naturally, it cannot open the door unassisted."

The absent-minded professor had almost mistaken the parrot for a human being, but he now rectified the error. His intention was to take the parrot and deposit it in the corridor. But, on second thoughts—and it was a rare phenomena for Professor Tucker to have any second thoughts at all—he decided that the proceeding wouldn't be exactly wise.

As a matter of fact, the parrot made a distinct peck at the professor's hand, probably guessing that some sort of violence was intended. For a moment, the science master was nonplussed.

"This is awkward—distinctly awkward," he murmured, frowning. "I cannot work with this disturbance in the room! And yet I cannot get rid of it! I wonder to whom the wretched bird belongs? I seem to remember—Why, yes, to be sure! Hand-

forth minor, of the Third Form! This is undoubtedly his property! Disgraceful!"

He looked at the parrot severely. It was certainly Priscilla—Willy Handforth's talkative pet. Willy had all sorts of pets, but Priscilla was a particular favourite. How she had wandered into the professor's study was a mystery.

At least, it was a mystery to Professor Tucker. He might not have been so puzzled if he had pulled the window-curtains aside. It is sad, but true, that Willy Handforth, Chubby Heath, and Juicy Lemon were ensconced behind the curtain, enjoying the entire proceedings.

Willy had foreseen exactly what would happen, and he had made due preparations. It was rather good fun, japing Professor Tucker. He was such a fine subject for all kinds of spoofery.

"We've only got to get in his study five minutes before he arrives from the lab., shove Prissy under the desk, and everything will be all serene!" Willy had declared. "He'll never look behind the curtains, and we can get a free show."

"But what about afterwards?" demanded Chubby doubtfully.

"Leave it to the professor—it'll work like a charm!" retorted Willy. "We shall have some ripping fun, and the beaks won't be able to prove a giddy thing!"

And it seemed that Willy was right—as he usually was. The professor, unconscious of the murky plot, gazed at Priscilla with worried lines furrowing his massive brow.

"Oh, rats!" said Priscilla disgustedly. "There goes the bell!"

"Indeed?" ejaculated the professor. "I didn't hear—Good gracious! Of course, the bird is merely repeating words in the inconsequent way of any parrot. What on earth shall I do?"

"Cave!" said Priscilla warningly.

"Eh?"

"Old Suncliffe, by the sound of those flat feet!"

Professor Tucker pulled himself together. Priscilla was such an intelligent bird that her speech was uncannily human. Behind the curtain Willy & Co. were hugging themselves with sheer delight. Even Willy had never dared to hope that Priscilla would further the plot so admirably.

"You young rascal!" said the professor sternly. "I shall lock you in this room until I have found Handforth minor! The whole thing is preposterous, but he seems to be the only person who can deal with you!"

"Yah! Rats!" said Priscilla insultingly.

Fortunately, the professor failed to hear a gurgle from behind the curtain. The fags could scarcely contain themselves. Priscilla was utilising certain phrases of their vocabulary in consequence of the professor's tone. And her words came in very aptly.

"My hat!" breathed Juicy. "He's going to look for you, Willy!"

"Didn't I say he would?"

"Yes; but it's marvellous!"

"Rats!" murmured Willy. "He couldn't do anything else! Always rely on Uncle William, and he won't let you down! The fun hasn't started yet, my sons!"

"How can we be your sons if you're our uncle?" asked Chubby.

"Dry up, and don't be funny!" said Willy tartly.

Professor Tucker had reached the door by this time, and he passed out into the corridor, securely closing the door behind him. He had a suite of three private rooms, all to himself—a study, a bed-room, and a secluded laboratory of his own. It was his custom to spend hours in making elaborate experiments—for science and astronomy were his two interests in life, to the exclusion of all else. Indeed, on the hundred and one everyday subjects of life, Professor Sylvester Tucker was as simple and as ignorant as a child of two. Hence his popularity among the juniors as a subject for jokes.

Before the professor reached the ground floor of the Ancient House—his rooms were at the end of the upper corridor—Willy & Co. were downstairs by the other way, and Priscilla had been stowed in a box-room. And three figures lurked in the angle of the Third-Form passage.

Professor Tucker marched grimly towards Willy's study. His one thought was to get rid of Priscilla as quickly as possible. He hadn't the slightest suspicion that the whole affair was an elaborate plan to spoof him.

Sizzle! Bang! Zizz! Bang! Zurrh!

Professor Tucker leaped a clear yard into the air. Without the slightest warning, a devastating series of explosions occurred beneath his feet. The passage was deserted, and he hadn't heard anything suspicious. But now it seemed that pandemonium had broken loose.

"Help!" gasped the professor. "Good gracious me! What—what—Help, I say! Upon my word! This—this—"

He danced like a frenzied Dervish, and half a dozen splendid jumping-crackers continued their work with astounding energy. The amount of fizz and go in one jumping cracker is astonishing. When six happen all at once, and without any warning, the effect is shattering.

But something else happened.

There was an abrupt rush, and Professor Tucker was swept off his feet. He hadn't the faintest idea what had happened. He fancied he caught a glimpse of youthful forms, but he wasn't sure.

He sat up, dazed.

There was a smell of gunpowder in the air, but there were now no crackers to be seen. The corridor was as empty as ever. And Professor Sylvester Tucker became aware of the fact that his glasses were missing.

He sat there, bewildered and breathless, but quite unhurt. It had all happened so quickly that he couldn't be sure that there had really been any figures at all. But his glasses were certainly missing. And

although he groped in every direction, he found no sign of them.

It was merely part of the plot. Cunningly, the unfortunate professor's spectacles had been deftly removed.

CHAPTER II.

A COMPLETE SUCCESS.



"COME back, you ass! He'll spot you!" hissed Chubby Heath.

"Rats!" murmured Willy. "He's as blind as a bat, without his giddy specs!"

Good! He's getting up! Everything's working like an oiled machine!"

At the end of the passage the three young rascals of the Third were watching with keen interest. Although Willy was half in view, he had no fear of being spotted by the professor. Without his glasses, everything was blurry and indistinct.

The professor was still nonplussed. His mind was invariably intensely occupied with scientific matters, and it was only by an effort that he could concentrate upon any commonplace subject.

By the time he got to his feet he was quite at a loss to understand his presence in this part of the Ancient House at all.

"Most astonishing!" he murmured, puzzled. "What am I doing here? Where, indeed, am I? Upon my soul! Something remarkable has happened! I don't even know why I left my study!"

He blinked round rather dazedly.

"This is ridiculous!" he went on, frowning. "Not merely ridiculous, but preposterous! Undoubtedly, I ventured forth for some definite reason. Now, let me see. Let me think—Good gracious, yes! That infernal parrot! That impudent, outrageous bird! I knew there was something!"

Now that he had remembered the parrot, he knew that he was here for the purpose of visiting Handforth minor's study. He had a vague idea that this apartment was farther down the passage, and he strode on grimly. By this time he had forgotten the firework incident, and he didn't even know that the celebrated Fifth of November was on the morrow. A less occupied gentleman would have recognised the echoing sounds of various crackers and squibs exploding in the Triangle and in the square. Lots of juniors were too impatient to wait for the actual date.

More by luck than anything else, the professor reached Willy Handforth's study, and walked in. The light was gleaming, and a figure sat in the easy-chair. The professor gave a kind of bark, like a hound when it catches sight of the fox.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "There you are, sir!"

The figure remained discreetly silent.

"How dare you allow your wretched parrot to invade my study?" went on the professor indignantly. "Come with me at once, and remove the offending creature! At once, sir!"

Still the seated figure said nothing.

"Do you hear me, young man?" demanded the science master.

The figure displayed cheeky indifference. He neither spoke nor moved—which, after all, was not surprising, considering that it was merely a cleverly constructed dummy.

To be exact, it was Willy & Co.'s "guy," specially manufactured for the morrow's celebrations. Willy always did things thoroughly, and this guy was a work of art, in its own way. All the joints were made to move, and the figure was sitting back in the chair in the most natural attitude.

It was fully dressed in Etons, and the head was provided with a mask which bore a vague likeness to Ezra Quirke, of the East House. Willy & Co. considered that the guy and Ezra Quirke were identical—but their minds were somewhat prejudiced. They thought it rather a good scheme to burn, in effigy, the new fellow in the East House who had brought such a train of bad luck with him.

"Upon my word!" said the professor hotly. "How dare you sit there and ignore me in this fashion? How dare you, sir? Stand up at once! Stand up, sir, and let me have no more of this nonsense!"

The guy rudely remained immobile.

"This is positively outrageous!" stormed Professor Tucker. "Good gracious! Can the boy be asleep?" he went on, as a thought struck him. "Boy! Wake up! Wake up this instant!"

He took a stride forward, and peered closely. The figure was still blurry, but the professor could see the outline of the Etons, the pale face, and the staring eyes. Quirke was a boy of peculiar pallor, and this characteristic was intensified in the dummy.

"Good heavens!" panted the professor. "The boy is ill—his face is ghastly! Come, sir—come! Pull yourself together!"

He groped forward, and shook the dummy's shoulder, now thoroughly alarmed. The head of Quirke's double shook ominously, and wobbled from side to side in the most distressing fashion.

And immediately behind Professor Tucker three faces looked in the doorway—three grinning, cheerful faces. This jape was working out far better than Willy & Co. had hoped for.

"I fear the poor boy is gravely ill!" muttered the professor frantically. "Come, young man! This won't do! Wake up, sir! Wake up!"

He gave an extra vigorous shake, and the figure's head rolled sideways, hung for a moment, and then dropped into its lap. Professor Tucker, who could only see these

things in an indistinct way, started back with a gurgle.

"What have I done?" he breathed hoarsely. "The boy's head—Great heavens! Help! Help!"

The professor was staggered and horrified. He backed away, reached the door, and lurched out. Willy Handforth, in the shadows further up, was half-inclined to dash forward and explain things. The professor's distress was so acute that Willy's heart was softened. Even at the risk of spoiling the jape, he would have to relieve the unfortunate science master of his horror. Willy had never suspected that the practical joke would take a turn like this.

But a footstep sounded further along the corridor, and Willy hesitated. While he was hesitating, Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon dragged him back into another doorway.

"It's Lee!" hissed Chubby. "Cave, you ass!"

The fags easily recognised that firm stride—the stride of Nelson Lee, the Housemaster of the Ancient House.

Professor Tucker lurched fairly into Lee's arms.

"Is anything wrong, professor?" asked the Housemaster-detective.

"Wrong!" gasped the science master. "I fear there is a tragedy, Mr. Lee! Young Handforth is dead!"

"Dead!" echoed Nelson Lee, aghast.

"There is nothing else to believe!" panted the professor. "I found his parrot in my study, so I came down to inform the young rascal. He was sitting in his chair, and he failed to answer when I spoke to him."

The professor paused for breath, and Nelson Lee pursed his lips. A grim light was creeping into his eyes.

"Well?" he asked quietly.

"The boy failed to answer!" repeated the professor agitatedly. "I shook him, and his head—Good gracious me! The boy's head actually rolled off into his own lap! A most staggering occurrence, Mr. Lee!"

"I don't doubt you in the least," agreed Nelson Lee drily. "At the same time, Professor Tucker, I have a feeling that your alarm is quite needless. Handforth minor's head is not so loosely connected to his trunk, as you seem to imagine. I suspect trickery here."

Professor Tucker started.

"You—you suspect—" He broke off, staring. "Upon my word! It is possible that I have been deceived?"

"I shouldn't be surprised even at that!" said Lee briefly.

He walked towards Willy's study, and the professor toddled with him. The door was now closed, and the Housemaster tapped, and walked in. He paused, for there was nothing to substantiate the professor's extraordinary story.

Willy Handforth & Co. were seated at the table, engrossed in their prep. Lesson-books were open, pens were scratching, and there was an air of feverish industry in the study. Willy Handforth looked up, and nodded brightly.

"Hallo, sir!" he said. "Anythin'; we can do?"

"How long have you been in this study, young man?" asked Nelson Lee.

"How long, sir?" said Willy thoughtfully.

"Oh, I don't know— How long have we been in the study, Chubby?"

"All the evening, on and off," replied Chubby Heath promptly.

The professor pushed forward, and peered closely at the trio.

"This is remarkable!" he ejaculated. "Where is the dead boy?"

"The dead what, sir?" asked Willy, in well-feigned astonishment.

"Good heavens! Is that you, Handforth minor?"

"Yes, sir."

"But, good gracious, you are dead!" said the professor.

"Sorry to disappoint you, sir, but I don't think so!"

"Don't contradict me, sir!" snapped the professor. "I distinctly saw your head drop into your own lap!"

"All right, sir," said Willy calmly. "Just as you say, sir!"

"One moment, professor," put in Nelson Lee. "Handforth minor, have you had anybody in this study this evening—other than yourselves?"

"Nobody, sir—not a soul!" replied Willy brightly.

"Have you, by any chance, had a dummy in your easy-chair?"

"A dummy, sir?" repeated Willy, in surprise. "Chubby was sitting there not long ago—"

"Are you calling me a dummy?" demanded Chubby Heath indignantly.

"Where is your parrot, Handforth minor?" demanded Lee, going off on another tack.

"Oh, safely stored away, sir—she's all right," replied Willy. "In one of the box-rooms, just along the corridor. I'll bring her in if you'd like to see her. She's learned lots more since—"

"I have no particular desire to listen to the slang of your parrot, Handforth minor," interrupted Lee, failing to conceal the twinkle in his eyes. "Upon the whole, Professor Tucker, I think we should be wise not to press our inquiries too far."

"But, my dear sir—"

Nelson Lee gently led Professor Tucker out of the study, and the door closed. Willy Handforth rose to his feet, and a smile of serene happiness appeared on his face.

"How's that, my lads?" he asked carelessly.

"Willy, you're a giddy marvel!" breathed Juicy Lemon.

"Good work, eh?" said Willy, going over to the cupboard, and producing the guy. "We've given old Ezra some good practice, and we've had a bit of sport. Who said life wasn't worth living?"

CHAPTER III.

THE SIGN OF "13."



RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD opened the door of Study I, and strode in. Clive Russell was close at his heels. They had just returned from Bannington, having spent an enjoyable two hours at the picture theatre.

"Good!" said Fullwood briskly. "The fire's still in. Of course, the radiator is warm enough, but there's something cheerful in a blazing grate. Shove some coal on, old son."

"You English people can't get on without an open fire, I guess," grinned the Canadian boy. "Well, I must admit they're pretty good. You might as well pull the curtains, and make it more cosy."

But Fullwood had paused against the table.

"Hallo! What's this?" he said curiously. "By gad! Who's been having a game?"

Russell turned, and looked. Propped against the ink-pot was a white card. And on the card was the sign "13," printed in large, written characters, in red ink. Fullwood picked it up, grinning.

"I suppose we've got to guess what it means?" he suggested. "Thirteen, eh? But what on earth— Wait a minute, though!" he went on thoughtfully. "Wasn't Pitt saying something in the common-room the other night?"

"Pitt's often saying something," agreed Clive, nodding.

"No, I mean about thirteen, something-or-other," said Fullwood. "A club, or— Hallo! We're progressing!"

He had absent-mindedly turned the card over, and the move brought enlightenment to the chums of Study I. In the same printed characters, but smaller, were the words, "You are numbers 9 and 10. Remember. Gym.—8 sharp."

Fullwood glanced at his watch.

"A quarter to," he chuckled. "We're in heaps of time. There's going to be a meeting of the Thirteen Club, by what I can make out. At any rate, they're going to form the club."

"Anything for a change," said Russell cheerfully. "I'm not superstitious, anyway—I'll join any old club you like. The asses! Fancy making all this mystery about it!"

"One of Reggie's little jokes," said Fullwood. "Supposing we go along now, and

see what's happening? They're bound to be there before time."

They walked out, and hadn't proceeded more than twelve feet down the corridor before the door of Study D opened, and Handforth & Co. came out. Edward Oswald Handforth was looking flustered, and Church and McClure wore expressions of resignation.

"No. 6, am I?" Handforth was saying. "I like that! I'll either be No. 1, or I'll stay out of the silly Club altogether! Then where will it be? Then what's going to happen to it?"

"At a wild guess, I should say it would flourish," said Church.

"You—you—"

"Steady, Handy!" interrupted Fullwood. "We don't want to witness a gory combat in the passage. What's the trouble, anyhow?"

Handforth frowned mysteriously.

"As a matter of fact, it's a dead secret," he replied, attempting to appear indifferent. "You chaps aren't in this act at all! It's no good asking questions, because I shan't answer any."

"It's not about a club, by any chance?" asked Fullwood.

Handforth laughed mockingly.

"A club?" he repeated. "What rot! Just as if we'd get up any dotty club against Quirke's Research Society! And they expect me to be No. 6! Not likely! I've got to be the leader!"

"Then it is a club, after all?" asked Russell, politely.

"Who told you?" demanded Handforth, with a start. "It's a complete secret, and I'm not going to breathe a word!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't worry, Handy!" grinned Fullwood. "Clive and I are members No 9 and 10, so the secret isn't such a terrible one, after all. I suppose you fellows had a card like this in your study?"

He displayed the mystic sign, and Church and McClure chuckled. Handforth looked at the card and frowned.

"By George!" he ejaculated. "So somebody's been distributing those giddy things all down the passage? Why, it's a fraud! I thought we were exclusive! There's nothing of a secret society about it at all."

"Haven't we been telling you so for half an hour?" demanded McClure tartly. "Of course it's not a secret society. All the fellows know about it—and if they didn't know, the club wouldn't be any good."

"Why not?"

"Why not!" breathed McClure. "He stands there and asks why not! My dear ass, aren't we going to flout every known superstition? The chief object of the club is to inspire the wrath of the Unseen Powers, and then see what happens! It's no good doing that if we keep our movements secret, is it?"

"The more publicity, the better," agreed Fullwood, nodding. "Anyhow, let's get along to the gym., and see what the President's got to say."

"The President isn't there yet!" interrupted Handforth gruffly.

"How do you know?"

"Because he's here!" retorted Edward Oswald.

Fullwood and Russell looked up and down the corridor.

"I can't see him!" said Fullwood mildly.

"I'm the President, you ass!" roared Handforth. "I shan't come into the rotten club unless I'm made No. 1! This thing's got to be done thoroughly, and it needs a capable leader. It's likely we're going to have a West House fathead in the chair!"

"But, my dear chap, it was Reggie Pitt's idea in the first place—"

"I don't care—"

"But you've got to give him credit—"

They went down the corridor, still arguing. Emerging from the Ancient House, they found the Triangle windy and cold. But it was only a minute's run across to the gymnasium. As they passed the lighted doorway of the East House, they caught sight of Ezra Quirke in the lobby. The strange new boy was talking earnestly with a group of his fellow Fourth-Formers.

The five Remove juniors passed on.

"Funny thing we should spot Quirke at a moment like this," said Fullwood thoughtfully. "He's an uncanny beast! I'll bet he knows all about this club already. Perhaps he'll fake something up to-night, so that we're unlucky at the very beginning."

"Gee! Do you really think he fakes things?" asked Russell.

"Of course he does!" replied Ralph Leslie. "You're not going to tell me that that pasty-looking rotter can work miracles! He's a deep beggar, and he's clever, too. You can take my word for it—I know!"

Fullwood spoke with conviction. He had had plenty of acquaintance with shady types in the past, and he recognised all the signs. Nowadays he was thoroughly decent—and one of the finest forwards in the Junior Eleven. Many fellows had declared that Fullwood would gradually sink back into his bad old ways, but there were no signs of back-sliding yet.

His companions were thoughtful as they entered the gymnasium—which was officially closed for the night.

Quirke was the kind of junior who made them think deeply. Since his arrival in the East House, he had caused a considerable stir. And yet he was an insignificant, pale-faced fellow, with nothing striking in his appearance beyond his pallor and his curious eyes.

His personality was powerful, however.

In some subtle, remarkable way, he was capable of exerting a strong influence.

When other juniors were near him they felt cold and chilly. His very presence was sinister—it could be felt. His own explanation of this—and the explanation accepted by his supporters—was that he was psychic. He was accredited with occult powers. And the more “negative” the scoffer, the more he felt Quirke’s influence. Those who believed in him, and shared his views, declared that they felt nothing peculiar in his presence.

He had held several meetings in his own study. The last one had been mystifying in the extreme, and not the slightest explanation had been forthcoming. He

The proposed Thirteen Club was a step to combat this new influence in the school.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PLAN OF ACTION.



REGINALD PITT, the genial junior skipper of the West House, strolled into the gym. just as eight o’clock was striking. He was accompanied by Jack Grey and Nicodemus Trotwood—two other West House Removites.



Sizzle! Bang! Zizz! Bang! Zurrh!
Professor Tucker leaped a clear yard into the air. Without the slightest warning a devastating series of explosions occurred beneath his feet.

claimed to be a magician—not a stage magician, but one who could produce manifestations without any apparatus.

He was not a spiritualist in the accepted sense—he never attempted to produce spirit voices or spirit forms. His one great feature was magic. He was a kind of modern wizard, and he boldly declared that he was hand-in-glove with the mysterious powers of the Unseen.

Most of the fellows were sceptical. They regarded Quirke’s talk as so much highly-sounding rubbish. But nothing could alter the fact that Quirke had gained a wide circle of credulous adherents.

“All you Ancient House chaps here?” he asked briskly, looking round.

Ten juniors were waiting in the gym., and they all glared.

“Yes, we are!” said Dick Hamilton tartly. “What’s the idea of keeping us waiting, you bounder?”

“My dear chap, don’t blame me!” said Reggie. “Didn’t I say eight o’clock on all the cards? The last note hasn’t struck even yet!”

“All right—we’ll forgive you,” said Nipper. “We thought you’d be here a few minutes before time, though.”

“Absolutely!” complained Archie Glen-

thorne. "Odds spooks and superstitions! I mean to say, I'm ready to dash into the good old fray like anything, but this waiting game is frightfully fagging, you know! Alf absolutely disturbed the good old nap after I'd only obtained ten per cent. of the usual forty!"

"You'll sleep all the better to-night," grinned Alf Brent. "Now, Reggie, what about this club? I take it that you're the Great Number One?"

"Well, it was my suggestion, you know," said Reggie. "Perhaps Nipper ought to be the leader——"

"No fear!" interrupted Dick Hamilton. "I'm not stealing your thunder, old man. Not that there's much need for a leader in a club of this sort. We're not going to hold any meetings, or anything like that."

Handforth stared.

"Not going to hold any meetings?" he repeated. "Why not?"

"Well, they won't be necessary—not secret meetings, anyhow," replied Nipper. "Most of our activities will be in the open."

"What rot!" snorted Handforth. "What's the good of a secret society if we do everything in the open?"

"But it isn't a secret society!" said Pitt. "It's a Thirteen Club. After this first meeting, we shan't need to have any more discussions. One of us will send the word round, and we can do our stunts at a moment's notice."

"Absolutely!" said Archie, nodding. "Stunts, what? Good gad! The old heart is beating somewhat feverishly, laddie! I trust these aforesaid stunts will not require vast slabs of energy?"

"You needn't worry—they'll be quite simple, Archie."

"What-ho!" said Archie, with relief. "That is to say, bally good! No slabs! Just an occasional slice, what?"

"I'm blessed if I can get the hang of it!" growled Handforth tartly. "We're not going to hold any meetings, there's no energy required, and we're going to perform stunts! For two pins I won't be a member!"

"What's the exact idea, Reggie?" asked Fullwood.

"In a nutshell, just this," replied Pitt briskly. "The main thing is to defy superstitions—the everyday, common or garden ones will do to begin with. We'll all act in unison, like a row of wooden soldiers. All we've got to do is to flout Quirke's cranky theories."

"And then wait for the bad luck to roll up?" grinned Russell.

"Exactly!"

"Well, if you call that a good scheme, I'm sorry for you!" said Handforth contemptuously. "My only hat! I thought there was going to be something exciting in this club! Fighting and ragging, and

all that sort of thing. And it'll be as tame as a giddy tea-party!"

Reggie Pitt's eyes twinkled.

"Don't you be too sure of that," he chuckled. "As a matter of fact, I thought about starting a rag now—to-night. If you fellows are game, we'll be on the job in less than ten minutes."

The fellows were not only game, but eager. And for some little time the gym. was full of lowered voices and soft chuckles. Then the Thirteen Club dispersed, and complete peace reigned.

In the meantime, the junior Common-room in the East House was a scene of tranquility. It was a very select, comfortable room—identical with all the other Common-rooms at St. Frank's.

There was a cheerful open fire in addition to the radiators. Several East House Fourth-Formers were sitting round the fire, chatting and roasting chestnuts. Two others were engrossed in a game of chess, while several onlookers tendered their advice free gratis. One or two other juniors were sprawling on the lounge, or in the chairs, reading their favourite periodicals. It would be bed-time soon, and the fellows were making the most of their limited spell of liberty.

Even Ezra Quirke was in the Common-room. Over in the corner lounge, he was quietly explaining the mysteries of medieval sorcery to a select group of interested listeners. Witchcraft and the art of black magic were subjects of great interest in the East House just now. And Quirke was continually fostering the growing movement. Even when he wasn't holding any of his celebrated meetings, he continued his subtle efforts.

And tales of the ancient sorcerers were always certain to attract a number of interested listeners. Quirke had a peculiarly compelling way with him. He told of things with a quiet intensity which never failed to impress those around him. Some of his stories, indeed, were quite gripping.

Superstitions and folk-lore were favourite topics of his, too. For one so young, he had a remarkable fund of information on such subjects. He was literally steeped in tales of mysticism and magic. He had countless historical examples of sorcery at his finger-tips.

Some of the juniors listened to him just for amusement, while actually discrediting his preposterous statements, and laughing at them. His superstitions, too, were almost comic in the light of modern knowledge. But he seemed to believe in every known and unknown superstition with an intense fervour, which commanded a certain amount of respect—especially in those who were drawn under his spell.

His pale, immobile face—his deeply burning eyes—his long, sinuous, expressive hands—all helped to create the impression of

mystery which Quirke so much desired. At the moment, he had his little audience gripped by a weird story of the Spanish Inquisition.

And then the door of the Common-room was rudely thrust open.

A curious procession marched in. First and foremost, came Reggie Pitt, of the West House. And in his rear were twelve followers. On every chest was a big white card emblazoned with the figures "13" in great daubed characters. They filed in without uttering a word, and with solemn faces.

"What on earth——" began Armstrong, staring.

He was at the fireplace eating chestnuts, and he jumped to his feet. Timothy Armstrong was the leader of the East House juniors. At least, he believed he was. But nobody took much notice of him. Armstrong was all bounce and brag. As a leader, his powers were negligible.

"What's all this?" he roared.

Armstrong believed in making a lot of noise—he had the impression that it was effective. Edward Oswald Handforth generally made a lot of noise, too—but the leader of Study D had plenty of grit and forcefulness to back it up with. Armstrong had neither.

"Ancient House chaps, by jingo!" said Griffiths. "All except three of 'em, anyhow—and they're from the other side, too! What do these Remove chaps want in this part of the world?"

"Their place is on the other side of the Triangle!" bellowed Armstrong. "Clear out, you cheeky-bounders——"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Freeman, staring.

"They're mad!" ejaculated Conroy minor.

There was certainly something very mysterious about the invading host. This wasn't an ordinary House rag. It was something deeper and more subtle. The thirteen intruders lined up smartly and stood there motionless. By this time, the entire Common-room was watching with growing curiosity and excitement.

Ezra Quirke had abruptly ceased his narrative and was staring at the newcomers with burning eyes. Those fatal cards seemed to fascinate him. For such a superstitious fellow as Quirke, what could be more baleful than thirteen "13's" all in a row?

"This is insanity!" he muttered tensely.

"I'm blessed if they haven't got umbrellas!" ejaculated Clifton.

"What for?" asked Simmons. "It's not raining——"

Solemnly and deliberately the members of the Thirteen Club held their umbrellas out straight in front of them, and with a simultaneous sweep the whole thirteen were opened. Ezra Quirke fairly shivered.

"Stop!" he shouted. "You are mad—mad!"

"My hat!" gasped Simmons. "It's unlucky to open umbrellas indoors!"

Armstrong strode up to the silent ones.

"What's the silly game?" he demanded wrathfully. "Have you all gone off your rockers, or what?"

The Removites still maintained their silence. With one accord they closed the umbrellas, and there was something machine-like in their actions. Some of the onlookers were grinning hugely. They could easily tell that this was a junior rag.

"You fathead, Armstrong!" chuckled Turner. "They're spoofing old Quirke, that's all. Flouting his giddy superstitions!"

Quirke leapt forward, his eyes blazing.

"Turn them out!" he panted. "Not only will they bring disaster upon their own heads, but upon the East House, too. Turn them out before it's too late!"

CHAPTER V.

SOMETHING LIKE A RAG.



ARMSTRONG was nearly purple with indignation.

"Blow your rotten superstitions!" he thundered.

"I don't care a snap about 'em. But these Remove asses

have come here to jape us. Come on, the Fourth. Chuck 'em out!"

"Dry up, Armstrong!" put in Page. "It's only a rag, and it's against Quirke, not against the Fourth. Don't make a fuss over nothing."

"Look!" screamed Quirke.

His voice was so horrified that the others were startled. And there seemed to be nothing particularly alarming to look at, either. The Thirteen Club—still silent—had produced thirteen pairs of footgear. There were all sorts and conditions of footer boots, worn-out tennis shoes, slippers, and similar decrepit pedal coverings.

"Don't let them put those things on the table!" shouted Quirke urgently. "Stop them—stop them! It'll mean dire catastrophe!"

"Who for—us or these Remove chaps?" grinned Griffith.

"Mostly for them, but we may be involved!" panted Quirke. "Quick! Stop them——"

"Too late!" groaned Turner, who was completely out of sympathy with Quirke's superstition. "The cry goes up—too late! It's a sad, sad world!"

Turner's voice was hollow, but his face was set in a broad grin. And he spoke the simple truth. Without question it was

too late to avert the disaster. Reggie Pitt and his twelve staunch followers had planted their relics on the various Common-room tables. The deed had been done—the Unseen Powers were defied.

"Turn them out—turn them out!" shouted Quirke passionately. "Look! Green! That colour is unlucky; it is fatal—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody except Quirke's sympathisers and Armstrong yelled. They were beginning to enjoy the joke. Thirteen hands had produced thirteen green handkerchiefs. Many of the juniors were unaware that green was an unlucky colour, and Quirke's alarm seemed to be altogether too ridiculous for words.

Armstrong, however, took a different view.

"It's an insult!" he roared. "Can't you understand? These confounded Remove asses have come here to insult the East House!"

"Rats! It's a jape on Quirke!" said Page.

"Isn't Quirke one of us?" demanded Armstrong fiercely. "Isn't he an East House chap? If it's against him it's against us. Where's Boots? Hi! Can't somebody fetch old Buster?"

"Buster Boots is a Modern House chap," said Griffith.

"But he's in the Fourth, the same as we are!" bellowed Armstrong. "Up, the Fourth! Down with these cheeky Remove rotters! Come on! Chuck 'em out!"

"Good idea!"

"Let's have a real rag!"

All sorts of shouts went up, and the excitement grew. Quirke and his superstitions were forgotten. But of late a rivalry had been springing up between the Fourth Form and the Remove, and it just needed an incentive of this kind to cause an explosion.

All the Remove fellows at St. Frank's boarded in the Ancient House and the West House, on one side of the Triangle. The Fourth boarded on the other side, in the Modern and East Houses. It was only natural that there should be a sort of friendly antagonism between the two Forms.

"Peace, fatheads!" said Reggie Pitt calmly.

"My hat! One of 'em's spoken at last!" grinned Page.

"Yes, and I'll speak, too!" snorted Handforth, who had been nearly bursting for the last minute. "It was Pitt's dotty idea to keep silent. You mouldy Fourth-Form lunatics. Chuck us out, will you? Try it on, and see what happens. You daren't!"

"Daren't?" hooted Armstrong.

"I'll jolly well biff you—"

"Shut up, Handy, you ass!" hissed Dick Hamilton. "Our policy is to get out

quietly; there are only thirteen of us here—"

"Thirteen Remove chaps are equal to three dozen Fourth-Formers any day!" interrupted Handforth aggressively. "Who wants the first punch?"

It only needed something of this kind to precipitate a whole peck of trouble. It was literally a challenge, and the East House juniors could do nothing but accept it.

Nipper and Pitt and the more prudent Removites had merely intended to rag Quirke, and then file out as silently as they had entered. But things don't always happen as they are planned to happen. And Reggie could easily see that trouble was brewing. He had tried to pour oil on the turbulent waters, but Handforth, as usual, had spoiled everything.

"Hold on!" said Pitt, attempting to stem the rising tide. "No need to get excited, Armstrong. We've had our jape, and we're ready to go. Of course, if you want a scrap, we're willing to supply one. But take my advice, and don't start anything!"

"Go and eat coke!" retorted Armstrong furiously.

He lashed out as he spoke, and Pitt dodged. And that was the commencement of it. Within ten seconds the junior Common-room was converted into a kind of miniature battlefield.

Handforth was sailing in for all he was worth—in his element. For days he had been longing for a really old-fashioned House rag of this type. He made hay while the sun shone, to say nothing of distributing sundry black eyes, thick ears, and similar adornments.

In the middle of it all John Busterfield Boots, of the Modern House, appeared with a strong army of reinforcements. The Modern House section of the Fourth was only too willing to join in anything warlike against the Remove.

And the Thirteen Club was in dire distress.

They were a mere handful against a horde, and things were in a serious condition. Far from their own quarters, help was out of the question. They could do nothing but fight for liberty, and keep up the traditions of the Remove.

"Out with 'em—on their giddy necks!"

"Hurrah!"

"Chuck 'em out!"

"Come on—Handy first!" shouted Boots joyously.

Taking everything into consideration, the Remove fellows covered themselves with glory. Although tremendously outnumbered, they provided the Fourth with one of the stiffest tasks they had ever taken on. But the odds were too great, and one by one

the valiant thirteen were hurled forth into the Triangle.

De Valerie, Somerton, Levi, Goodwin, Singleton, and a few other Remove fellows, got wind of the trouble, but they unfortunately arrived too late. By the time they reached the enemy side of the Triangle, the invaders had been forcibly ejected, and were attempting to crawl away.

The East House lobby was packed with the excited and victorious Fourth-Formers. How on earth the affair escaped the attention of the masters and prefects remained a mystery. Mr. Goole, the House-master, was out, and Mr. Pycraft, of the Fourth, probably concluded that he was safer in his own study. There was nothing he loved better than jumping upon his unfortunate boys, but when they were in force he steered clear of them. Mr. Pycraft was not a man of courage.

The prefects did turn out eventually, but as usual, they were too late. It would have been very different in any of the other Houses. In the East House, Simon Kenmore was the head boy, and the discipline of this bullying young rascal was not of the type to inspire a love of order.

Most of the East House prefects were too lazy to move unless they were compelled by duty. And so the battered members of the Thirteen Club dragged themselves across the Triangle with no other punishment beyond the trouncing they had received at the hands of the Fourth.

They were in a considerably wrecked condition.

Every one of them was battered and bruised, and tears and rents and crumpled collars were general. Even Archie Glen-thorne was a sorry spectacle, for he had fought as valiantly as any of the others. He was quite happy, too. Once Archie's clothes were completely ruined he felt resigned, and was always ready to let himself go.

"What-ho!" he observed, as he dabbed at rapidly swelling eye. "A dashed exciting piece of work, laddies, but who cares? I mean to say, we did the trick somewhat fruitily, what!"

"Rather!" grinned Nipper. "Anyhow, Quirke knows what to expect in future. As for the rag, we'll pay those Fourth-Formers out before long!"

"What the dickens have you fellows been up to?" demanded De Valerie, staring.

Reggie Pitt beamed.

"Just a little gentle treatment of our own," he explained. "You'll hear all about it, inquisitive one, in due course. But for the moment kindly allow us to withdraw from public gaze and remove the scars of battle!"

The Thirteen Club dispersed, highly satisfied with their first move.

CHAPTER VI.

MAINLY ABOUT FOOTBALL.



BERNARD FORREST, of the Remove, frowned as he halted before the notice-board in the Ancient House lobby. Gulliver and Bell halted, too, for the Study A trio were arm-in-arm.

"Like their infernal nerve!" said Forrest sourly.

"What's bitin' you, old man?" asked Gulliver.

"Look at that notice!"

Gulliver and Bell looked more closely, and then their own expression changed. They became rather contemptuous, in fact.

"What rot!" said Bell, with a supercilious sniff, and a shrug of his drooping shoulders. "Fenton will be sorry for this before to-morrow's out. Those three chaps will mess up the match."

"Absolutely kill it," agreed Forrest.

Strictly speaking, the three Removites ought to have been very elated at the sight of that notice, which was a list of players for the important First Eleven fixture against Yexford College, on the morrow.

But the cads of Study A had no sense of loyalty towards their own form. And they regarded all sports with disdain. It annoyed them to see three of their fellow juniors honoured by their inclusion in the great and glorious First Eleven at St. Frank's.

The notice was quite brief and to the point, and ran as follows:

"Team for match against Yexford First, Thursday, November 6th:

Morrow; Wilson, Swinton; Stevens, Browne, Phillips; Rees, Hamilton, Fenton, Fullwood, Pitt.—EDGAR FENTON, Captain."

Those were the three magic words—"Hamilton, Fullwood, Pitt." For the very first time three Remove fellows were included in a team to play for the First Eleven. There had been some talk of the juniors being included in the eleven which had been beaten at Helmford. But Fenton had hesitated on that occasion, and the match had been lost in consequence.

Fenton was usually a strong, capable skipper, but he knew that he was taking a big risk in introducing three juniors into his forward line. After the Helmford match, he hesitated no longer.

The First was strong in every department of the game except attack. Morrow was a magnificent goalie, and no better pivot could have been found than William Napoleon Browne, the lanky captain of the Fifth. Browne was a wonderful cricketer, and his work in the football field was just as good.

It was the forward line that had failed

again and again. There was no lack of enterprise in the centre-forward—Fenton himself. But one forward cannot maintain an attack throughout ninety minutes of fast football. Fenton had fed his wings faithfully, and seen his passes missed and muffed. The right wing had been particularly weak.

Rees, at outside-left, was one of the best wingers the seniors had ever produced. The small, wiry Welsh Sixth-Former had grown accustomed, however, to seeing his centres and corner-kicks frittered away and wasted. Fenton couldn't always be on the spot to accept them.

And so the weak patches in the forward line were filled in by Dick Hamilton as inside-left, and Fullwood and Pitt as a new right wing.

Fullwood had done such splendid things this term in the Junior Eleven that his inclusion in the lucky trio was justified. He and Reggie Pitt had lately formed a combination of really startling efficiency. Pitt, of course, was celebrated for his work on the outside-right, but he had never before had such a dazzling partner as Fullwood. Their understanding was perfection, and to see them cutting through an ordinarily strong defence was a sight to be seen to be believed.

Forrest & Co. were utterly contemptuous, however.

"Fullwood, too!" said Bell sourly. "Old Fully wastin' his time with football! The man's sunk to nothing since last term! It's hard to believe that he was the most sporty blade in the Ancient House!"

"The fellow's as good as finished!" said Gulliver. "Personally, I wouldn't touch him with gloves on! Besides, Bernard's ten times better than Fully was, any day!"

"Thanks awfully!" said Forrest drily.

"Well, I mean, you've got more zip about you," Gulliver. "We're havin' a rippin' time this term—"

"Do you fellows want all the notice-board?" asked Handforth, striding up and glaring. "Clear out!"

"Talking to us?" asked Forrest coldly.

"I'm talking to three chunks of rubbish!" retorted Handforth, with a sniff. "By George, the list for the Yexford match! What the dickens do you want to look at that for, you unsporty rotters? Clear out, and let's have a look!"

"Bet your name isn't down, Handy!" said Church.

"No such luck!" growled Handforth. "Morrow's too good to be dropped out of the Senior Eleven. Of course, if he's unfit, or— Great Scott! Look at this—three of our chaps are down here!"

"Nipper and Fullwood and Pitt!" ejaculated McClure. "That's topping!"

"You won't say that by tea-time to-morrow!" sneered Forrest.

"Oh! Why not?"

"Because those three chaps will make a hopeless mess of things," replied the new

leader of Study A. "You can't expect them to do anything big in a First Eleven match! I shall watch that game with interest—"

"Cheers!" said Church feebly. "Forrest is going to watch football!"

"I shall watch it with interest—because those pals of yours will be shown up as duds!" went on Forrest coolly. "I shall be the first to grin when they make a hash of the game."

Handforth slowly rolled back his sleeves.

"How would you like it—on the nose, or on the chin?" he asked deliberately. "You'd better say quickly, because you've just got two seconds. Up with your fists, you cad!"

Bernard Forrest backed away scowling.

"None of that, confound you!" he snapped. "Look out!"

"One—two!" interrupted Handforth curtly.

"Now, my lad— Er— By George, come and have a look here, Nipper!"

Handforth suddenly dropped his fists, and assumed an air of innocent indifference. Fortunately, he had caught sight of Mr. Crowell in the nick of time. Church and McClure had spent a moment of agony. They fully expected to see Handforth floor Forrest under the full gaze of the Remove master.

Mr. Crowell walked by, and gave the juniors a nod. And Forrest & Co. took advantage of the opportunity to make themselves scarce. Dick Hamilton & Co. came up smiling. It wasn't breakfast-time yet, and the chums of Study C had removed nearly all the traces of the previous evening's strife.

"You're down for the match to-morrow, Nipper!" said Church eagerly.

"Yes, I know," said Dick. "Pretty good, isn't it? Pitt and Fullwood, too. It's our big chance in the First—and we've got to thank Vic Mason for it. By the way, he's going to referee the match."

"Vic Mason is a sportsman!" said Tommy Watson bluntly.

"Begad! Just the very man we needed," agreed Tregellis-West.

Things had certainly hummed since the advent of the celebrated Victor Mason—the ex-Aston Villa centre-half, with countless International caps to his credit. Mason was the new Soccer coach at St. Frank's, and it was upon his suggestion that Edgar Fenton was playing three juniors in the Yexford match.

The Hon. Douglas Singleton strolled up with Hussi Kahn, the Indian junior. They both shared Study N, in the West House.

"Do you think it's all right about Fullwood?" asked the Hon. Douglas.

"What do you mean—all right?"

"Well, his past reputation, you know—"

"Bother his past reputation!" interrupted Dick Hamilton, frowning. "Hang it all, Duggy, let's forget the man's past! He's a sport this term—and he's proved himself to be a genius at football. If ever a chap deserved his place Fullwood does!"

"I expect you're right," said Singleton. "Sorry if I sounded nasty. I'm as keen on Fully as anybody—but those Yexford men are a snobbish lot, I believe. They might cut up rusty."

"Let 'em!" growled Handforth. "I've never taken an interest in First Eleven football, but I've got an impression that Yexford seniors are a bit of a dirty lot. They'll find out what real football is to-morrow."

Singleton was about to make another comment when he felt a tug at his elbow. He turned, and found Timothy Tucker and Canham there. This pair shared Study Q in the West House with the one and only Clarence Fellowe—the amateur poet of St. Frank's.

"Just a minute," said Canham. "Want you, Singleton."

"All right—anything to oblige," said the Hon. Douglas good-naturedly.

They passed out into the Triangle, where the early November sunshine was doing its utmost to disperse the morning mists. The Hon. Douglas had an idea what was coming. Canham and Tucker were two of Ezra Quirke's most enthusiastic converts, and Singleton had happened to express an interest in the remarkable East House junior in Canham's hearing the previous evening.

Canham was a quiet, shy fellow, and very likeable. But he was easily led, and he had soon fallen under Quirke's hypnotic spell. His love of scientific matters was probably one reason for this.

Singleton was slightly amused. He was a languid fellow, but had plenty of energy when the necessity arose. He was so easy-going that he was celebrated for lending money on a lavish scale, and never collecting it. Quirke only interested him in a mild, half-hearted fashion.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SINISTER AFFAIR OF MARRIOTT'S CLOCK.



"WELL, what's the trouble?" asked the Hon. Douglas, pausing near the fountain.

"No trouble at all," said Canham. "But what about coming to that meeting to-night?"

"What meeting?"

"Quirke's getting up—"

"Oh, Quirke!" said Singleton, smiling. "Chuck it, Canham! I don't want to go to any of his lunatic meetings. Don't drag me into an affair of that kind, for goodness' sake."

"I thought you were interested last night," said Canham. "You seemed quite keen when we were having a chat in the common-room—"

"My dear fellow, I was slightly amused," admitted Singleton. "Quirke doesn't appeal to me in the least, really. As for going to

one of his meetings, I'd rather be excused, if it's all the same to you."

Timothy Tucker shook his head.

"My dear sir, you are making a grave mistake!" he said, in his high-pitched voice. "You are making a grave mistake! Quirke is an amazing personality. On the subject of metaphysics—"

"Be hanged to your infernal metaphysics!" growled Singleton.

"Really!" protested T. T. "My dear sir, your ignorance on these important subjects is colossal. It pains me beyond measure to hear you speaking so lightly. Dear, dear! I am grieved—"

"Dry up, T. T.!" interrupted Canham. "About this meeting, Singleton," he went on. "It's going to be something special."

"Crystal-gazing, and all that rot?"

"More than crystal-gazing," said Canham. "I tell you, Quirke's an absolute marvel! You've only got to see him to be convinced. There's quite a crowd of converts booked for this evening, so why not join in?"

The Hon. Douglas frowned.

"There are too many of these converts," he said. "I don't like Quirke and his confounded mysticism. Besides, I'm hanged if I'm going to miss the firework celebrations for Quirke's piffle!"

"That won't be necessary!" put in Canham quickly. "I know it's the Fifth to-day—but nothing's going to happen until half-past seven. And this meeting is due for six-thirty. Why not come?"

Singleton hesitated.

"Oh, rot!" he growled. "What's the use? I don't want to be jammed up in that stuffy study for an hour—"

"You won't have to be," put in Canham quickly. "Quirke isn't using his study any more—it's too small for his increased Circle. To-night he's going to hold his meeting in one of the big cellars."

"My hat! It's got to that, has it?"

"More private," said Canham. "No chance of being dropped on by a prefect, you know. When they put up these new Houses, they provided plenty of huge cellars. Quirke's fixed one up in fine style—big enough to hold fifty, if necessary. Why not come?"

"There goes the bell!" said the Hon. Douglas cheerfully. "Well, I won't promise anything—I'll think it over. Food is the most important matter at the moment. I tell you frankly, I've got no more faith in Quirke as a magician than I've got in Josh Cuttle as an athletic expert!"

They went indoors, and Singleton almost forgot the discussion by the time morning school was over. Canham, however, saw Quirke just after luncheon, and told him that Singleton was a likely convert.

"I am entirely indifferent," said Quirke. "Indeed, I dislike this persuasive method of yours, Canham."

"Hang it all, I'm only trying to make the fellows see sense—"

"They will see it in good time—without any coaxing," interrupted Quirke quietly. "Have no fear—they will all come round. Nothing else is possible. And the more opposition I get, the sooner will be my triumph. Opposition helps me."

"Something like that Thirteen Club?" asked Canham, frowning. "I say, that was a bit thick, wasn't it? Absolutely asking for trouble—opening umbrellas in your common-room! I'm glad I wasn't there!"

Canham was becoming as superstitious as any.

"Have no fear," said Quirke smoothly. "All the bad luck will be sent upon the heads of the perpetrators. It is inevitable. There can be no escaping. Those mistaken boys will suffer severely."

They parted, and Canham went back to the West House. Quirke looked in Study No. 15 as he was going by. He wanted to have a word with Merrell—Merrell having promised to help with the seating arrangements in the new meeting-chamber. But the study was empty, save for Marriott. And Marriott wasn't so keen on Quirke's mysticism as Merrell and Snipe, the other fellows who lived in Study No. 15.

"Hallo," said Marriott, "what do you want?"

He was an unpleasant-looking junior, with a receding chin and shifty eyes. His hair was smothered in grease, and brushed straight back. Quirke hesitated in the doorway.

"I was looking for Merrell," he replied.

"You'll probably find him down in the village," said Marriott. "He and Snipe went out together——"

"What has happened to your clock?" interrupted Quirke suddenly.

Marriott, struck by the other's tone, turned sharply.

"The giddy thing's stopped!" he said, frowning. "Funny, too! I wound it up this morning, as usual. It stopped exactly at half-past-twelve for some reason."

Quirke crossed to the mantelpiece with his silent tread, and touched the clock. It instantly started going again, and the tick was strong and robust. There was obviously nothing wrong with the mechanism.

"That's jolly rummy," said Marriott, taking the clock and setting the hands to the right time. "Why on earth should it stop at half-past twelve?"

"There is nothing particularly unusual in the occurrence," replied Ezra Quirke. "The clockwork is in perfect order, so the stoppage was not due to any mechanical defect. Clearly, it is an omen."

"None of your superstitious rot!" growled Marriott.

"You may choose to ignore my warning, if you wish——"

"Warning—what warning?"

"When a clock stops without apparent cause, it is a sign of death in the family," said Quirke impressively. "Prepare yourself for bad news, Marriott. There can be only one explanation——"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Marriott, startled. "My pater is ill, too! He got a bit worse last week—— Oh, but what piffle!" he went on angrily. "Are you trying to make out that somebody died at twelve-thirty?"

"The clock is never wrong!" said Quirke.

Marriott was flushed and uneasy. There was something about Quirke's manner which had a big effect. And it was certainly rather queer about the stopped clock—for it was now ticking away with perfect regularity.

"Of course," went on Quirke, "it is possible that death may have occurred in Merrell's family, or Snipe's family. They both occupy this study. Who actually owns the clock?"

"It's mine."

"Then I am afraid——"

"At least, it is nominally mine," said Marriott. "Snipe bought it, but he has agreed to sell it to me. I haven't actually paid him yet—he wants the money on Saturday, and I promised——"

"Then I fear that Snipe is the unhappy boy who will receive news of a bereavement sooner or later," said Quirke quietly. "Perhaps it will be better to say nothing to the poor fellow——"

"Oh, rot!" interrupted Marriott. "I'll tell him as soon as he comes in. I'm curious about this. I don't believe in your silly superstitions, and I'll bet there hasn't been a death at all. Hang it, you nearly convinced me! Clear out of here with your mouldy ideas!"

Quirke shrugged his shoulders, and left the study. But Marriott's very manner was significant. In spite of his words, he indicated that he was actually deeply impressed. He had heard of this particular superstition—a stopped clock being a sign of death. But he had always laughed at it along with other superstitions of a similar nature.

Quirke went out into the Triangle alone. He walked slowly, thinking deeply. For some little time he wandered beneath the elms, as though concentrating upon deep subjects. Clifton and Simmons joined him, and they were looking rather flushed.

"Better look out!" said Simmons hurriedly. "Those prize idiots of the Remove are just coming through the West Arch."

"You mean the Club of Thirteen?" asked Quirke, his eyes burning.

"Yes, the whole collection——"

Simmons broke off, and stared. Through the West Arch a solemn procession was making its appearance. And not only Quirke looked, but all sorts of other fel-

ANSWERS

Every Saturday. Price 2d

lows who happened to be in the Triangle at the moment. On the Ancient House steps, William Napoleon Browne smiled benevolently upon the scene.

"You will observe, Brother Horace, the innocent antics of our young friends at play," he observed, turning to Stevens, of the Fifth. "Quite a charming and delightful spectacle."

"It's those young fatheads of the Thirteen Club," grinned Stevens.

"To make use of a classical quotation, more power to their elbow," said Browne enthusiastically. "There is nothing more delightful than to watch extreme youth in its exuberant moments. Ah, but what is this? Brains, Brother Horace. Without question, a distinct exhibition of brain. It is something that even I might have thought of!"

The Club of Thirteen had filed completely through the West Arch by this time, and had formed up in a long line. Deliberately, in full view of Quirke, each member produced two knives. And, with exaggerated actions, they held the knives out, and crossed them—a truly deadly defiance of the celebrated superstition.

Ezra Quirke winced visibly.

"Go!" he shouted hoarsely. "Fools—fools! You do not realise what madness you are practising! The punishment for this defiance will be great! Continue this course, and you will bring disaster upon the entire school!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The onlookers yelled with amusement. And the Club of Thirteen wheeled about and vanished through the arch again. William Napoleon Browne gently rubbed his hands together.

"Remind me, Brother Horace, to congratulate these brainy youths at the first opportunity," he said kindly. "Seldom have I seen such an inspiring sight. It does my old heart good to realise that the school still contains such sound, stable material. Without question, these lads are of the three-star brand!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GATHERING OF THE CIRCLE.



ST. FRANK'S was all agog by the time darkness fell.

Contrary to expectation, the evening was bright and fine, with even a nip of frost in the air. Everybody had prophesied that the Fifth of November would be rainy and miserable and utterly impossible for firework celebrations.



Propped against the inkpot was a white card with the sign "13" printed in large-written characters, and in red ink. Fullwood picked it up, grinning.

Everybody, in fact, had been prepared for the worst.

And such is the fickle nature of the weather-clerk that he thereupon decided to confound everybody by providing a fine evening. And St. Frank's was duly grateful—indeed, jubilant.

There was a big programme planned—a huge, official firework display in the playing-fields, timed for eight o'clock sharp. Previous to this, the fellows would hold numerous private displays of their own. And as long as they didn't explode fireworks in the near vicinity of the school buildings, no notice would be taken of sundry crashes and booms. But bonfires, of course, were a speciality. The junior forms had their own.

There was, naturally, an official bonfire, too, but this wouldn't take place until later. The fellows naturally took a delight in a little free and easy practice on their own account. Tea was accordingly a hurried, scanty meal. Everybody wanted to get outside to witness the fiery destruction of several weeks' pocket-money.

Willy & Co., of the Third, were already extremely busy. Crackers were their chief pleasure. And it was looked upon as an all-important factor that no cracker should be exploded unless it took somebody un-awares. The fags were lurking everywhere, startling innocent fellows at every oppor-

tunity. The Third's own particular bonfire was reserved until later on.

"Don't forget we're going to burn old Quirke to-night!" said Willy confidentially, to a few of his cronies. "It's no good burning him now——"

"Why not?" asked Owen minor promptly.

"Because the prize ass is holding one of his rotten meetings in the East House," said Willy contemptuously. "It's no good burning Quirke unless he's there to see his own destruction! They'll be out soon after seven, so we shall have heaps of time. And there's a lot to do until then. What about those giant crackers we made, Chubby?"

"I've got 'em," said Chubby Heath happily. "But we'd better go carefully—they'll make an awful din!"

"Didn't we make 'em on purpose to get a din?" demanded Willy. "Come on, let's buzz into the East Square, and shove one under old Pycraft's window!"

The fags continued their simple pleasures, and in the meantime the Hon. Douglas Singleton was hesitating on the steps of the East House. Both Canham and Tucker were urging him.

"Come on—it won't last much more than half an hour," said Canham. "Be a sport, Singleton—don't condemn the chap without seeing what he can do."

"Hang it, it's Guy Fawkes evening——"

"Yes, but there's nothing doing for an hour," declared Canham. "Only the fags are getting busy now—come on in!"

"I suppose Quirke put you up to this?"

"As a matter of fact, Quirke slanged me for speaking to you at all," said Canham. "He doesn't want any converts unless they come of their own accord. You've got him all wrong, Singleton. He's absolutely sincere—and he's a wonder!"

The good-natured Singleton succumbed.

"Oh, all right!" he said lightly. "I'll chance it."

Canham didn't look extremely pleased. Human nature is a queer thing, and now that Singleton had decided to join the Circle, Canham felt a bit doubtful. Quirke had always warned him against a "negative" atmosphere. And the Hon. Douglas was obviously negative. But it was too late to make any alteration now.

They went into the East House, and proceeded along the corridors until they reached the very end of the building—where the rear tower arose. One doorway led to the domestic quarters, and another led directly down to the spacious cellars. This second door was supposed to be kept locked, and was out of bounds. But that was only a mere detail.

A key had easily been found to fit it, and the cellar was open to the seekers after Light. Truth to tell, Singleton had come out of mere curiosity. He rather wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Most of Quirke's converts had paid their initial

visit under the influence of that very human weakness—curiosity. And one visit was generally enough to convince them.

There were some stone steps leading downwards into a wide kind of lobby. And immediately in front stood a strong door. It was the only door in sight, and Canham made straight for it. A candle burned in the neck of a bottle.

"Rather appropriate for Guy Fawkes night!" said Singleton. "This reminds me of the giddy gunpowder plot in the Parliament vaults. I hope Quirke isn't planning to explode St. Frank's to-night?"

"Cheese it!" said Canham gruffly.

He didn't like Singleton's spirit of levity. He rapped on the door, and Singleton observed that it was fitted with a Yale lock. This was obviously a recent addition—probably by Quirke himself. The door was opened, and Simmons stood there.

"Oh, all right—come in!" he said. "You're late!"

"Better late than never," remarked Singleton cheerfully.

"Hallo! You've brought Singleton, then?" said Simmons, peering forward in the gloom. "Newcomers always welcome!"

"It's like a bally secret society!" said Singleton, as he passed through the doorway. "Well, I'm hanged! What on earth——"

"Hush!" came Quirke's tense voice.

The Hon. Douglas somehow felt that it was necessary for him to change his tone. He had decided to be very free and easy, and to treat the whole affair in a spirit of chaff.

But he changed his tactics now. The scene within the cellar was decidedly impressive—very different from what Singleton had pictured in his mind. He had assumed that these juniors were more or less playing at sorcery. But, in some vague way, there was an element of real mysticism in the atmosphere.

The cellar was large—a long, deep place, with a comparatively low ceiling. The entire portion next to the door was filled with forms and chairs, and here sat the audience. Further down, in the depths of the cellar, Ezra Quirke was sitting under the soft glow of an electric lamp, with dense blackness in his rear.

Singleton stood there, staring.

Quirke's owl was perched on his shoulder—a sinister, motionless figure. And Quirke himself was holding his hands above a big crystal, which stood on an Oriental stool. In front sat Marriott, looking rather uncomfortable.

The Hon. Douglas had heard of these sittings, but he had had no idea that they were so impressive. The actual cellar was invisible, for the entire meeting-chamber was surrounded by black curtains. They were even gathered up overhead, covering the ceiling. And with just that one soft light, the audience sat in almost total

darkness. Quirke and the owl, although only dimly visible, seemed to stand out with vivid prominence.

"Sit down!" murmured Canham. "And don't be surprised at whatever happens. You've got good nerves, haven't you?"

"Don't be a fathead!" retorted Singleton gruffly.

"All right, you can scoff—you'll need good nerves," whispered Canham. "Young Long was scared out of his wits once, and he's in the sanny now with a broken wrist."

"By Jove!" breathed Singleton. "Do you mean to say that when Chambers ran into Long with his motor-bike the other night, Long was bunking from his chamber of horrors? I say, this is pretty serious, you know!"

"Hush!"

Singleton had food for thought. Lots of fellows couldn't understand how Teddy Long had run blindly into Chambers' motor-cycle. But Singleton was learning quite a lot of things this evening.

He sat down and watched Quirke. The schoolboy magician was gazing into the crystal and shaking his head.

"There is nothing—nothing," he said. "You need not fear, Marriott—there has been no death in your family. I would suggest that Snipe should sit before me—"

"Please, no, Quirke!" said Enoch Snipe cringingly.

"Would it not be better to have your doubts set at rest?" asked Quirke.

Snipe was urged forward by several of the others, and at last he consented. He was a thin, weedy junior, with a cunning, venomous nature. He had really entered Quirke's circle in the hope of making money out of it somehow. But by now he was a confirmed believer in Quirke's magic.

Singleton watched with greater interest than before. He had heard all about that rumour concerning that clock in Study No. 15 in the East House. In fact, the whole school was talking about it in an amused way. The clock had stopped at 12.30, so somebody in Snipe's family must have died at that minute! Of course, it was all rank foolishness.

Snipe sat in front of the crystal, and Quirke concentrated deeply.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SCHOOLBOY SORCERER.



EZRA QUIRKE gave a sudden start, and breathed hard.

"What—what do you see?" breathed Snipe feverishly.

"Wait—wait!" said Quirke tensely. "It is coming—slowly and vaguely—Yes! I see death! I see death!"

Enoch Snipe shook and shivered.

"It isn't true!" he wailed. "I'm not going to die yet—it can't be true! Please, Quirke, what can you see?"

"It is clearer—much clearer!" murmured Quirke dreamily.

"Confound the chap!" growled Singleton, leaning forward. "No need to torture the kid like that! It's all rot, of course—I don't believe a word of those idiotic warnings! How on earth can Quirke know there's a death in Snipe's family?"

"Quirke can see things that we don't dream of!" muttered Canham.

"And at exactly twelve-thirty, too!" went on Singleton. "Hang it all, there's a limit to these—"

"Yes, I see death!" came Ezra Quirke's voice, droning and mechanical. "I see an elderly gentleman—"

"Then it's not me that's going to die?" said Snipe feebly.

"The death has already taken place—at precisely the hour of twelve-thirty," said Quirke. "I see it clearly—I see a white-haired gentleman— No, it is going—it all becomes vague again. Everything has gone—everything has become indistinct."

"Perhaps it's one of my uncles!" breathed Snipe. "Please, Quirke, can you tell me if it's one of my uncles?"

The schoolboy seer seemed to come out of his trance.

"I can tell you nothing more," he replied quietly. "But you need not fear, Snipe. You are safe. The omen of the clock was revealed to us in connection with another. But he is undoubtedly connected with your family. I shall be interested to hear if you learn any news of this death during the next day or two."

Singleton felt himself wavering. After all, there was something remarkable about Quirke's confident tone. He spoke as though he knew things definitely—as though the crystal told him absolute facts. On the face of it, such a thing was ridiculous—unthinkable. How could any human being know what had happened in the outer world through the medium of that crystal globe?

But in this atmosphere of gloom and mystery, one received different ideas. If Quirke intended his chamber of magic to get his audience into a receptive frame of mind, he could not have chosen more suitable surroundings. The very place itself was charged with suggestion.

"Is there another here who would like to sit before me?" asked Quirke, turning his eyes upon the audience. "Do not hesitate. I am willing to tell you what I can see—and I only see the truth."

"Go and try, Singleton," murmured Canham.

"Oh, rot!" growled Singleton. "I don't believe in the thing—"

"That's the very reason you should go," interrupted Canham. "If you think it is a fraud, you will soon prove it if his words turn out untrue. Is it fair to judge him unless you have some evidence to go on?"

"H'm! Something in that, of course!" admitted Singleton. "Dash it, I'll have a shot if you like! I'll try anything once!"

He left his seat and advanced towards the crystal. And as he neared Quirke he had an uncanny sensation of discomfort. There was something about Quirke's eyes which unnerved him. The whole experience, too, was calculated to have a deep effect.

"You wish to sit before the crystal?" asked Quirke smoothly.

"Go ahead!" replied Singleton. "By Jove! You give me the creeps, Quirke! And you'd better not see any deaths, either—I don't want any shocks like that. It's Guy Fawkes night, remember!"

"I shall only tell you what I see," said Quirke. "I fear that you suspect me of trickery. It is bad—it is increasing the difficulty of my task. Implicit faith helps me more than anything. A negative subject is almost impossible to deal with."

"That's all very well," said the Hon. Douglas. "Convince me that your magic is genuine, and there'll be nothing negative about me then. But I might as well tell you that I shall want a lot of convincing, my lad. So you'd better go easy!"

Quirke looked at Singleton with an intense, steady gaze. Singleton felt as though those eyes were peering through him, and his sense of discomfort increased. That confounded owl, too! The wretched thing was perched on Quirke's shoulder, staring straight at Singleton with a baleful light in its unwinking eyes.

The Hon. Douglas was relieved when Quirke dropped his gaze, and concentrated his attention upon the crystal. Singleton watched it closely. There was undoubtedly something remarkable about that globe. From a distance it looked something like an inverted goldfish bowl, but at close quarters it became a thing of life and mystery. There was no actual light within, but it nevertheless smouldered in some strange fashion. It seemed to be moving within itself, as though filled with animation.

But Singleton could see nothing definite. He only knew that the crystal was far more fascinating than he had supposed. And then Quirke began to speak.

"Yes, I see something!" he murmured. "It is strange—very strange. I am at a complete loss. And yet these things are here—and they are somehow connected with you."

"What things?" asked Singleton.

"There is a hand—no, a finger," murmured Quirke. "Yes, distinctly a finger. And the

finger is cut—badly gashed. And yet it seems to me that the finger is healed again— No, the gash is distinct. It is bleeding."

"Well, I'm hanged!" muttered Singleton, startled.

"I see a withered arm, too," whispered Quirke.

"Great Scott! A what?"

"An arm—an arm that has been long paralysed."

"Anything to do with the cut finger?"

"They are connected—and yet they are totally apart," replied Quirke dreamily. "I cannot explain who these members belong to, but they are clearly connected with you, Singleton— But wait! I see— Yes, there is a figure now—a strange man of learned appearance."

"We're getting on, anyhow," said the Hon. Douglas.

"He is strange, and yet somehow familiar," said Quirke tensely. "Yes, I can see who— No. It has gone again. I was not permitted to recognise the face of the figure. And now everything is blank."

"Is this the finish?" asked the subject.

"I can see no more."

"Well, it's a pity you couldn't choose something a bit more cheerful," said Singleton. "A gashed finger, a withered arm—a paralysed old man—"

"No, the arm was paralysed—not the old man," interrupted Quirke.

"Oh, well, it's all the same," growled the Hon. Douglas. "Sorry, Quirke, but I'm afraid it doesn't wobble. You can't fill me up with that sort of bunkum. Withered arms and gashed fingers! Rot!"

Quirke compressed his thin lips.

"I am sorry that you should think it fitting to insult me," he said.

"Oh, look here—"

"I have told you what I have seen—and it appears that you would have had me tell you otherwise," went on Quirke. "It is not my habit to tell of fictitious happenings. One day, perhaps, you will find that the strange things I have mentioned will enter your life. How they will enter I do not pretend to know. They are in the future. I can say no more."

"All right—go ahead with the next subject," said Singleton.

He went back to his seat, relieved to be at a little distance. And although he affected open scepticism, he was nevertheless impressed. The bizarre nature of Ezra Quirke's revelations was in itself enough to startle anybody. But Singleton was a fellow with a powerful will, and he had strength enough to throw off the growing sense of enveloping mystery.

CHAPTER X.

STILL MORE REMARKABLE.



THE HON. DOUGLAS SINGLETON stared.

For a few minutes he had been lost in thought, chewing over what Quirke had "seen" in the crystal. But now, at a nudge from Canham, he took an active interest in the proceedings.

Quirke had removed his crystal, and was standing in front of a small bamboo table. Even in that light it was possible to see under the table, and to be assured that there was no trickery about it.

There was a low, flat box on the table—a kind of black cabinet, but no deeper than four inches, with two hinged lids. Quirke had just pulled these lids back, and was producing something from the box.

"Watch—watch!" breathed Canham.

Singleton not only watched, but he was considerably startled. Gradually, Quirke drew out a grotesque bronze idol. It came up and up, and when it was finally in Quirke's hands, it measured at least eighteen inches in height.

And this had been produced from a box only four inches deep! There was no well in the table, and no cloth upon it. The effect was rather weird. But Singleton shook himself, and grunted.

"Only the ordinary conjuror's trickery!" he muttered. "The thing folds up, I expect—and collapses when he puts it back."

But the other members of the audience were not so unconvinced. They accepted all Quirke's phenomena as genuine magic. Quirke claimed to work with no apparatus—to produce his effects solely by the aid of the Hidden Elements, as he called them.

The schoolboy magician did not replace the bronze idol in the black box. He placed it upon the floor at his feet, and it struck the stonework with a metallic clang. It certainly sounded substantial enough.

At this moment the owl lifted up its head and gave forth a loud screech—unexpected and alarming. The audience fairly jumped, and Quirke spoke a few rapid words to the owl in an undertone. Immediately, the creature settled down again.

"What the dickens caused it to do that?" muttered Singleton. "I say, how long is this business going to last? I'm fed-up—"

"Look there!" whispered Canham tensely.

The Hon. Douglas rubbed his eyes. There was either some clever trickery here, or Ezra Quirke was indeed in league with the Black Arts. Something extraordinary was happening to the bronze idol.

It was no longer a thing of metal—a lifeless image. Instead, the arms were gradually unfolding, and the whole grotesque monstrosity was writhing. With-

out any visible sign it had become imbued with life. And Singleton had heard it clang metallically upon the floor.

"What on earth—" he began.

And then he paused, holding his breath. A haze had sprung up round the animated apparition. A kind of vapour enveloped it, growing more and more pronounced until there was nothing but a hovering ball of opaqueness.

This, in turn, grew less and less, and finally faded away. And there was nothing—absolutely nothing left to bear witness of what had been there. The bronze idol, the writhing image, had completely disappeared. And the solid concrete floor was perfectly smooth.

"Well I'm hanged!" said the Hon. Douglas Singleton huskily.

He was aware of a strange feeling within him. A growing conviction was creeping over him, a feeling that Ezra Quirke was indeed a worker of magic. Singleton had seen many clever conjuring shows in his life, but he had never seen anything so absolutely staggering as this.

A dead silence followed the vanishing of the white vapour. And in that silence sounded the faint, far-away echoes of several rapid explosions.

"Hallo!" muttered somebody. "Fire-works!"

It was rather good to be brought back to the real world with a jerk. In this place everything was fraught with unreality. There wasn't a single member of the audience who didn't feel a desire to escape. And yet at the same time they wished to remain. There was a strange fascination about Quirke and his methods. The fellows were gripped.

But Quirke himself sounded the signal of dismissal.

"Under the exceptional circumstances, perhaps it will be better if I curtail the meeting," he said softly. "There are outer disturbances to-night. They penetrate but dimly into this retreat, but the Unseen Powers recognise the difficulties, and are reluctant to obey me. Let us quietly disperse and join the celebrations outside."

Singleton shook himself, and strode forward.

"Look here, Quirke, how did you do that just now?" he asked bluntly.

Quirke shrugged his shoulders.

"Is it for me to give explanations?" he asked. "Do you take me for a faker? I merely precipitate these acts of magic. It is not possible for me to control them. There is no explanation!"

"But that thing absolutely vanished!" said Singleton. "Where did it go to?" he went on, stamping on the floor. "There must be a trap here—"

Quirke laughed softly.

"There is no trap; I employ no such

tricks," he replied. "You still seek for an explanation by those crude methods of reasoning. You are wrong. I could produce the same effect in the steel strong-room of any bank. Once you are convinced of that you will cease to wonder at what you see. Sorcery is an ancient art, but unfortunately the modern idea is to laugh at it. Many of the ancient arts are lost for ever, hidden in complete obscurity. But there are still one or two people who can practice sorcery with success. I am one, although I claim no credit for that. Furthermore, I have no dealings with dangers or horror. All my manifestations are innocent and harmless. But they are none the less interesting on that account."

"By Jove, you're a queer card!" said Singleton.

He found it impossible to get to the bottom of Quirke. The fellow seemed so absolutely sincere that it was difficult to accuse him of trickery. Singleton even found himself wondering if he wasn't a true magician, after all. All the other members of the Circle were thoroughly convinced. They accepted Quirke's mysteries as true examples of Black Magic.

It was hardly surprising that the Hon. Douglas was bewildered when he reached the open air again. It felt to him as though he had just awakened from a dream, not exactly an unpleasant dream, but a grotesque one. It was good to be under the stars again, too. Over in the west paddock considerable excitement was brewing.

Within a few minutes Singleton was quite himself again. He had shaken off that sense of unreality. There was nothing unreal about the activities in the paddock.

Several bonfires were going, and fireworks were being let off by the hundred. Everybody seemed to be doing it. And this was a mere preliminary to the big official display, which had been fixed up on the playing-fields, where the two pavilions would be used as grandstands.

"Anything doing yet?" asked Singleton, as he joined a group of revellers.

"Not much," said Handforth. "Those Third Form kids are making a fearful noise with their fatheaded crackers and squibs. My minor's up to something, too."

"Nothing very unusual in that, is there?" said Singleton.

"He and his chums have made a guy," went on Handforth approvingly. "Old Quirke, you know—Quirke to the giddy life. As a matter of fact, I thought about burning the ass in effigy, but Willy pinched the idea."

"He'd pinch anything," declared Singleton, with a chuckle. "But, I say, isn't it a bit thick?"

"Which?"

"Burning Quirke as a guy."

"Thick!" snorted Handforth. "It's a great scheme. Don't I tell you I thought of it myself? It's just what Quirke deserves. I'm not altogether sure that he oughtn't to be pitched on the bonfire himself. If he's such a marvellous power of magic, he'd be able to stand the heat without flinching."

"I don't think his powers extend as far as that," grinned Singleton. "By Jove! Those kids are smart!" he added, as he caught sight of Willy & Co., trundling their guy into view. "It's Quirke himself. A marvellous likeness!"

Ezra Quirke, together with Clifton and Simmons, and a few more of his intimate circle, watched the Third Form procession in silence. Quirke was under no misapprehension regarding that guy. He had no difficulty in recognising that caricature of himself.

It was, of course, the deadliest insult that could be offered to him, the greatest libel that could be issued against him. It is always considered to be the last word in degradation to have oneself burnt in effigy. But Willy & Co. were serenely indifferent to any possible consequences. They had their own opinions about Ezra Quirke, and meant to let everybody else know.

"Aren't you going to do anything, Quirke?" asked Clifton hotly.

"What can I do?" asked the new boy.

"If they were burning me like that I'd protest to one of the masters, and make 'em stop it!" said Hubbard fiercely. "It's an insult; it's a libel! It wouldn't be sneaking to tell one of the masters—"

"Calm yourself!" interrupted Quirke. "The dummy will not be burnt!"

He strode forward, and intervened just as Willy and his chums were about to throw the guy on to the Third Form bonfire—a roaring, blazing mass of fire which sent the flames leaping skywards in livid tongues.

"Stop!" shouted Quirke. "Take warning—"

"Hallo! Clear out of it, Quirke!" interrupted Willy impatiently. "You're in danger here; we might mistake you for the guy!"

"You had better heed my words—"

"Accidents WILL happen, even in the best regulated sprees," went on Willy calmly. "My only hat! I didn't realise how good our guy really was. I can't tell t'other from which. You're liable to be chucked on the bonfire any minute, Quirke. Buzz off while you're still safe!"

"I am merely warning you for your own good," said Quirke smoothly. "I do not blame you for your insult; it is the penalty one has to pay in all pioneer work. But do not put that effigy on the fire. If you do, the result will be very different to your anticipations."

"What's going to happen?" asked Willy.

"The figure will not burn!" said Quirke fiercely. "You may laugh at me, but I am telling you the truth. The Unseen Powers are on my side, and they will not see this disgrace put upon my head. Attempt to burn that guy and your fire will be extinguished instantly, and my power will be established."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crowd yelled at these ridiculous words. Willy & Co. were more determined than ever to burn the guy; it was a splendid opportunity of showing Quirke up as a bombastic fraud.

"It won't burn, eh?" grinned Willy.

"Come on, you chaps!" he said breezily. "The marvellous miracle-worker is about to perform. We'll shove this guy on the fire; Quirke will wave his wand, and, lo, the fire will wither away and breathe its last!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old maghish!"

"Go it, Quirke!"

"Let's see the miracle!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A number of Removites and Fourth-Formers had collected round, and were grinning hugely. Most of them approved of Willy Handforth's novel guy. It was rather good to see Quirke taken down a peg



The effigy of Quirke sat there in the heart of the fire, and not a single flame touched it. Within a confined circle the fire was dead—black! And the guy was as whole and perfect as ever!

"More than that, it will extinguish your fire!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE PHENOMENON OF THE BONFIRE.



WILLY HANDFORTH was intensely amused. He didn't care a snap of his fingers about Quirke and his mysterious warnings. Willy was an open-air junior, with wholesome contempt for everything occult.

or two in this drastic fashion. It would convince him, once and for all, that the bulk of the school didn't care a jot for his boasted mystic powers.

As for his threat, it was too comic for mere words. The crowd yelled when the story was passed round. Some genius hit upon the idea of forming a complete double circle. The fire was surrounded, and the whole circle waved their hands at a word from the genius.

"On with the 'fluence, Quirke!" yelled a dozen voices.

"A quid if you can put the fire out—minus water!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's got to shove it out by just looking at it!"

There was another yell, and Quirke smiled.

"I am glad of this opportunity," he said smoothly. "It was not of my own seeking, so do not accuse me of adopting any trickery. I came upon this scene by sheer chance, and I have no apparatus with me."

"Poor old Quirke!" chuckled Reggie Pitt. "This time you're dished, aren't you? You thought you could wangle it with a few impressive words, but we want deeds."

Quirke clenched his fists.

"This is unjust!" he shouted passionately. "I have never asked anybody to believe my mere words; I have always provided deeds."

"Yes, with the help of trick apparatus."

"No, with no help whatever," declared Quirke.

"Well, here's your chance now!" roared Handforth. "We're satisfied you've got no help this time. Go ahead, you spoofing bounder, and see what you can do. We're under the open stars here, with the wind blowing on us, and there aren't any draperies or curtains or secret wires!"

"Go it, Quirke!"

Willy Handforth gave his chums a nod.

"Come on, we've had enough of this!" he said crisply. "Blow Quirke and all his works! Grab hold firmly, and heave!"

Juicy Lemon, Chubby Heath, and Owen minor assisted Willy in the task of raising the effigy. They swung it to and fro to the accompaniment of general laughter from the encircling crowd.

"One—two—"

"Wait!" shouted Quirke, striding forward. "Be warned in time!"

"Three!"

With superb judgment, the caricature of Ezra Quirke was heaved into the air and deposited into the very centre of the fiercely burning bonfire. The great flames licked round it with a triumphant roar, sparks shot skywards, and the fire appeared to redouble its intensity.

"Hurrah!"

"Poor old Quirky!"

"This is where he goes up in smoke!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is where he crawls away with his tail between his legs, too!" said Handforth contemptuously. "What about it, Quirke? Would you like me to give you a start with the toe of my boot?"

Ezra Quirke was watching the fire with a fixed intensity.

"You are very sure of yourselves!" he said, between his teeth. "It is never wise to be over-confident! Watch!"

"Eh?"

"Watch the fire!"

"You fat-headed lunatic!" snorted Handforth. "Are you still trying to spoof us

that you can work miracles? That guy will be burnt up in about two minutes! You can't stage any of your giddy conjuring here——"

"Great Scott!" gasped McClure suddenly. "Look!"

"My only sainted aunt!" breathed Church dazedly.

They were staring at the furious bonfire with a kind of awed fascination. Even Pitt and Hamilton and Watson were looking impressed, too. The rank and file of the juniors stared dumbly. A strange silence had fallen.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Willy Handforth blankly.

Ten seconds earlier they had all yelled in derision at Quirke's preposterous warning. The very statement that his effigy would extinguish the fire had been looked upon as so much nonsense. It was, indeed, sheerly impossible for Quirke to perform any such phenomenon.

He was standing a clear six yards away from the fire, in full view of the other fellows, and under no possible circumstances could he have resorted to trickery. And, as he had said himself, he had arrived on the scene quite by chance. He had had no opportunity of making any preliminary preparations—for he had walked straight from the East House to the paddock, in the company of several others.

But the fire was dying!

Unquestionably, it was changing with a strange, rapid effect. During the first moment the flames roared higher, and the guy could be seen, luridly illuminated in the blaze. But, almost at once, the great flames seemed to hesitate.

Instead of leaping up in undisputed control they lost their strength. The flames seemed to pause, and their intensity grew less and less. The heart of the fire was smothered. The effect was utterly startling to the watching juniors.

The effigy of Quirke sat there in the heart of the fire, and not a single flame touched it! Within a confined circle the fire was dead—black! And the guy was as whole and as perfect as ever! The edges of the fire still continued to burn—a circle of merrily leaping flames and crackling faggots. But the great bulk of the bonfire was dead—instantly and mysteriously extinguished.

"This is a bit steep, if you like!" said Reggie Pitt softly.

"It's fishy—confoundedly fishy!" declared Nipper, with a grim note in his voice. "And yet I can't see how Quirke—— Jove! Look at that!"

The influence was even spreading to the outer edges of the fire, and the figure of the effigy stood out in sharper contrast than ever. It wasn't even scorched. And Ezra Quirke himself stood by, calm and composed. His pale face was expressive of inward satisfaction.

"It is a pity you do not heed my warnings," he said quietly. "I did not wish this

incident to happen—but you forced it on me in spite of my advice.”

“What have you done?” demanded Willy aggressively.

“I have done nothing.”

“But the fire’s gone out——”

“I told you it would go out!”

“You’ve been up to your tricks——” began Chubby Heath.

“That’s impossible!” put in Hubbard. “Quirke’s been with us for the last hour or two—he hasn’t been out of our sight for a minute. Besides, how the dickens could he do anything to stop that guy burning? There’s something mysterious in this—and only Quirke knows! He’s a lot more marvellous than you fellows believe!”

“By Jove!” said Owen major. “I didn’t believe in the fellow before this—but I do now! It’s convinced me!”

“Same here!” declared Denny, of the Modern House.

And there were several other fellows who declared their faith in Ezra Quirke. He had given them a concrete example of his mystic powers. Without the help of any apparatus, he had caused that effigy to extinguish the bonfire!

The incident had gone entirely in Quirke’s favour. Instead of him being discredited, as many of the fellows had expected, his position was now far stronger than it had ever been.

CHAPTER XII.

NO EXPLANATION.



DICK HAMILTON was looking rather grim.

“I’m not satisfied, anyhow!” he said gruffly. “There’s more in this than meets the eye, my sons!”

“The fire’s out, isn’t it?” demanded Hubbard.

“Well, yes——”

“Then Quirke’s proved that he can do things that are opposed to all natural explanation,” said Hubbard. “Look here, Nipper, it’s no good fooling yourself! Quirke’s a worker of magic! This is nothing to what he has shown us! I tell you, he’s a giddy marvel!”

Nipper nodded.

“I’ll admit that Quirke’s a clever magician,” he replied. “But there’s no smoke without fire! And there’s no phenomenon of this kind without a natural cause! I’m going to examine that guy!”

Quirke gave a soft laugh.

“You suspect a wonderful fire-extinguishing apparatus concealed within the stuffing?” he said sneeringly. “Go ahead! Do just as you please—you will find nothing whatever! I will watch you! When will you realise that I am no mere trickster?”

Nipper didn’t answer the question. He was feeling annoyed. This sort of thing was ridiculous. Of course, there was a perfectly

logical explanation of the mystery. Never for an instant did Nipper credit Quirke with such black powers as were necessary for the production of these effects. He felt convinced that there was a key somewhere.

“Let’s have a look at that guy!” he said briskly.

He and Reggie Pitt and Buster Boots approached the fire, and pulled the effigy away. It was quite warm, and the clothing was scorched here and there. But there was no actual burn. It was dry, too—so there was no possibility of the figure having been soaked with water. Besides, Willy was ready to swear that it had been as dry as tinder all the time.

The guy was laid upon the ground, and a crowd collected round it.

“Jove! Look at the fire!” ejaculated De Valerie.

“Odds sparks and flames!” said Archie Glenthorne, adjusting his monocle. “I mean to say, this is somewhat bally mysterious, laddies! The good old blaze is recovering at a ripe speed!”

“It’s beyond me!” said Brent bluntly.

Now that the effigy was removed, the bonfire was beginning to gather strength again. The flames were creeping higher and higher, and the heart of the bonfire was again kindling and burning.

This impressed the onlookers more than anything else perhaps. Quirke had warned them that that caricature of himself would obliterate the fire—and it had done so. And now that it was removed, the fire was blazing again.

With a frown, Nipper got down to his knees, and closely examined the effigy. He and Willy Handforth were unbuttoning the clothes. A number of other fellows pressed round, watching eagerly.

“What’s the meaning of it, Nipper?” asked Willy.

“Goodness knows!”

“Don’t you suspect anything?”

“I suspect Quirke of bringing off a clever coup,” replied Dick grimly. “I’ll never believe that he did this thing by sorcery! Hang it all, we’re living in the twentieth century—not the Middle Ages!”

Willy scratched his head.

“I think the same as you do—but I’m flabbergasted, all the same,” he admitted. “We took particular pains with this guy, and we thought it would flare up like a torch. It’s only made of hay and old rags, and things like that.”

“When did you make it—and who helped you?”

“We made it in our study, the day before yesterday,” said Handforth minor. “Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon helped me. We meant to keep it a secret, but you know what some of the chaps are.”

“And where did you keep it?”

“In the cupboard in our study,” replied Willy. “Are you suggesting that it might have been tampered with? But that’s impossible, Nipper! We should have known

in a minute. Besides, no amount of tampering could alter the inflammable stuffing. Have a look yourself!"

The guy was ruthlessly torn open, but the result was disappointing. Pulled to shreds, nothing was discovered beyond hay, old rags, screwed-up paper, and such like. And everything was bone-dry.

"It's uncanny—that's what it is!" said Reggie Pitt. "What's your idea, Nipper?"

"I'm whacked for the moment," confessed Dick Hamilton.

"I was thinking that some chemical might have been used——"

"That was my idea, too," interrupted Nipper. "That's why I tore the thing to

subtle point? Take, for example, this bunch of hay. We will cast it into the flames. If it burns, then we must dismiss the chemical suggestion. If it fails to burn, I think we can claim to have proved a case—and analysis will no doubt prove instructive."

This reasoning seemed sound enough, and the fellows watched with interest while Browne flung a handful of hay into the fire. Instantly, it flared up with a burst, and was gone. Nipper and Browne looked at one another queerly. Further proof of Quirke's wonderful power!

He had declared that he would extinguish the fire if the effigy was placed on it. But it was no insult to him to burn a handful

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shreds. But there's nothing. There's no evidence at all—and without evidence, how can we form any conclusions?"

"Allow me, Brother Hamilton!" said Browne, of the Fifth. "Singular to relate, I, too, suspected chemical agency. An example of great brains working in unison. And if chemicals were actually employed, it does not necessarily follow that we should see them, or even smell them."

"What are you getting at?" asked Nipper.

"I may be wrong, but if this guy would not burn as a whole, it necessarily follows that it will not burn in sections—providing a chemical agency was used," said Napoleon Browne calmly. "You no doubt grasp the

of hay. And the hay burnt! There was certainly no fire-extinguishing chemical mixed with it.

"You are merely wasting your time," said Quirke amusedly. "You may, if you wish, burn the remains—I do not object to that. My protest was against the libel upon myself. I think I have shown you all that I am no mere charlatan."

He turned, and walked away.

Some of the others drifted off, too—spreading the story of this latest wonder. It was a huge feather in Quirke's cap. Nipper and Pitt and Willy Handforth and a few more re-examined the remains.

"It's no good—there's nothing here," said

Reggie, at last. "I hate being dished, but we've got to admit it, Dick. The man's a giddy mystery! How on earth did he do it?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," admitted Nipper.

"But you still think it was a clever piece of stage-managing?"

"Yes!" said Dick promptly. "We've got to keep level heads—it's no good being fooled. I'm afraid some of the fellows may desert the Thirteen Club after this—but we can only hope for the best."

"You won't catch me deserting it!" said Handforth. "It's jolly rummy, but there must be some logical explanation. Leave it to me, you fellows, and I'll do the trick. It won't take me ten minutes to get to the bottom of this mystery."

"Poor old Ted!" said Willy, shaking his head. "If I'm dished, I'm jolly certain you are, too! I can't get the hang of it—I'm flummoxed! I'd have wagered a whole term's pocket-money that that guy would have blazed like tinder! How the dickens did Quirke do it? How the dickens did he do it?"

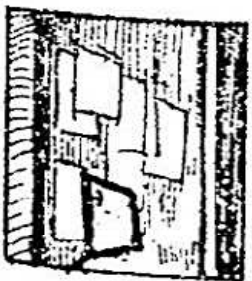
There was nobody to answer the question. Even Nipper was at a total loss. Every possible explanation had been exhausted. Water was out of the question—for, in any case, water itself would not have had such an effect. It might have caused the guy to remain whole for a time, but it would never have extinguished that bonfire. And even chemicals were ruled out. What remained? Nothing! Nothing beyond the theory that Quirke had employed Black Magic.

It was an extraordinary puzzle. And Ezra Quirke's reputation went up with a bound.

For the rest of the evening the fellows enjoyed themselves with the Fifth of November celebrations. But after all the fun and excitement ceased, there were still many who remembered that incident of the guy. And Quirk's next meeting was likely to be overcrowded—in spite of his spacious new quarters!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BLACK-EDGED ENVELOPE.



ENOCH SNIPE started slightly, and turned pale.

"A letter—for me?" he asked feebly.

"In the rack!"

"With—with black edges?"

"Yes!"

"You're kidding me!" said Snipe, with a gulp. "It—it can't be true, Merrell! Quirke told me— That stopped clock, you know—it stopped going at half-past twelve yesterday. And Quirke told me that there was death in the family—"

"That was all bunkum," interrupted Armstrong, striding forward. "Look here, Snipe—you'd better leave Quirke alone! He's a queer chap, but I don't believe in all this mystical rot. As for his seeing death in his rotten crystal, it's all piffle! It's impossible for any human being to look into the future."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Merrell. "You haven't had experience of Quirke like we have. The chap's uncanny—he's weird!"

"All the more reason to leave him alone!" grunted Armstrong curtly.

It was the following morning, and they were in the East House common-room. It wasn't yet breakfast-time, but even at this early hour the junior school was discussing Quirke—not in the East House alone, but in all the other Houses. That affair of the bonfire was too big to be dismissed without a great deal of talk.

That tale of the stopped clock had leaked out, too. Practically everybody knew that Quirke had predicted a death in Snipe's family, and the majority of the fellows laughed at it—and expressed it as their opinion that Quirke would get a severe knock when he was proved all at sea. It was naturally absurd to assume that he had actually seen anything in the crystal. As for the superstitious nonsense of the stopped clock, it wasn't worth considering.

All the same, lots of juniors were keen upon hearing fresh news from Snipe. And even while Snipe hesitated in the common-room, the door opened, and a number of Removites crowded in, headed by Handforth.

"Oh, there you are!" said Edward Oswald. "There's a letter for you, Snipe!"

"With a black-edged envelope!" said De Valerie.

"It's a trick, of course," went on Handforth. "I shouldn't be surprised if Quirke posted it himself in Bellton last night! He'd do anything to make himself right."

"That's not fair!" said Merrell, glaring. "Quirke's never gone out of his way to fake things up. That's the rummy part of it. He can do these things, and he knows what's coming in the future—and there's no explanation."

"We brought that letter, in any case," said Handforth. "Open it!"

"Oh, please, Handforth!" wailed Snipe. "I daren't!"

"Don't be a young idiot!"

"It's not your business, anyhow!" said Merrell sourly. "It's like your nerve, you Ancient House bounder!"

Handforth turned red.

"Are you calling me a bounder?" he roared.

Merrell backed away hastily.

"I—I didn't exactly mean—" he began.

"I don't want to pry into Snipe's family affairs," went on Handforth grimly. "We don't want him to read the letter out! But we just want to be certain that there

wasn't a death in his family yesterday! If we don't take steps like this, Quirke will claim all sorts of credit."

Snipe opened the letter hesitatingly, and his eyes widened.

"It's—it's awful!" he muttered. "This is from my father, you know. My grandfather died yesterday—"

"What?"

"My grandfather—Dr. Raymond Snipe! He died just after mid-day!" panted Snipe breathlessly. "That—that clock must have stopped at the exact minute! Old Quirke was right—I knew it all the time!"

The other juniors looked at one another blankly.

"I say, this is getting a bit s'leep!" ejaculated Trotwood major. "More evidence of Quirke's power! How in the name of all that's uncanny did he know about the death of Snipe's grandfather? And what caused that clock to stop? I'm beginning to get the creeps!"

There was a bit of a sensation when the news got round.

The letter was perfectly authentic. It had been posted in London by Snipe's father, and was just a brief note to the effect that Snipe would be required to leave St. Frank's for a few days to attend the funeral. The Head himself had received a letter, too—which proved beyond question that Quirke could have nothing to do with it.

Snipe's grandfather had died in Scotland, and it was quite true that he had breathed his last at about the hour of twelve-thirty. The clock in Study No. 15 became famous. Juniors crowded in to gaze at it, and to see if it was still running. It was. There was nothing wrong with the clock at all. Then what had caused it to stop? It almost seemed as though Quirke's superstitions were well-founded, after all.

But the members of the Thirteen Club remained unchanged. All of them ignored this latest example of Quirke's influence—which had followed so closely upon the bonfire incident.

"Better resign from that Club before the match this afternoon!" said the Hon. Douglas Singleton, as he came across Dick Hamilton & Co. in the Triangle, after lunch. It'll be tempting Providence too much if you don't."

"I'm not resigning," declared Nipper.

"Well, it's the first time you've played for the First Eleven, and Quirke's been saying that you're certain to meet with bad luck," observed Singleton. "Why not leave the Thirteen Club severely alone?"

Nipper looked at him curiously.

"Are you caught under Quirke's spell?" he asked.

The Hon. Douglas flushed slightly, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Rats!" he replied gruffly. "There's no spell about it. The fellow's genuine."

"By George!" said Handforth, as he

came up. "That's not what you were saying yesterday!"

"Several things have happened since, yesterday," replied Singleton. "Anyhow, I'm satisfied that Quirke is no trick-monger. I can't attempt to explain his methods, but he's sincere enough!"

"And you think that if we still keep in the Thirteen Club we'll meet with bad luck this afternoon?" asked Fullwood amusedly.

"It's inevitable!"

"Rats!" grinned Fullwood. "Not to say rubbish! In fact, piffle! The sooner you get rid of those dotty ideas, Singleton, the better! I gave you credit for more level commonsense. I'm as keen on the Thirteen Club as ever. I spilt the salt this morning, and didn't even throw any over my left shoulder!" he added, grinning.

"And I walked under a laddled!" chuckled Reggie Pitt, joining the others. "The Thirteen Club for ever! We're stronger than we were before, my sons! Quirke's latest mysteries have only made us more determined."

"Hear, hear!"

"In fact, we'll defy the Unseen Powers to do their worst," smiled Nipper. "Somehow, I don't think they'll have much effect on the game this afternoon. Football is something solid and tangible. And in nine cases out of ten 'bad luck' is merely an excuse for bad play."

"And these chaps aren't likely to play badly to-day!" said Handforth. "They've got to show heaps of speed, or they won't be included in the First Eleven again. Strictly speaking, I ought to be playing in goal, but Morrow's so pig-headed! He can't realise that I'm a better man."

So the subject of the Thirteen Club was dismissed, and when the St. Frank's First Eleven took the field its three junior representatives were all members of the unlucky club. They had seen no reason for resigning just because of a lot of superstitious talk.

As Handforth remarked, according to all the rules, Nipper and Fullwood and Pitt ought to make a hopeless hash of things. But as they didn't care a toss for any kind of superstition, they trotted out upon Big side with perfectly clear minds.

The Yexford Eleven was composed of all seniors, and many of them were inclined to be amused. When they found that three Remove juniors were included in the St. Frank's team they considered the game a walkover. Yexford had the reputation of being a rather rough crowd, and not averse to a little fouling if the situation became critical.

"We're on a soft thing to-day," said one of the Yexford players. "If St. Frank's has got to play three reserves—and juniors at that—it shows they're in a pretty hopeless condition!"

"We'll romp home!" said one of the others.

Most of the Yexford fellows were gravely informed that Hamilton and Pitt and Fullwood were the hottest of hot stuff, but they didn't take much notice. They were juniors—and the Yexford seniors had a wholesome contempt for all junior football.

But it wasn't long before their eyes were opened.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BLIGHT CONTINUES.



ALTHOUGH St. Frank's won the toss, there was practically nothing to choose, for it was a dull afternoon, and there was scarcely any wind. One end was as good as the other.

For five minutes after the kick-off the play was quiet, although the visitors attempted one or two attacks. The lanky Napoleon Browne, however, was a giant in defence. He was one of the most successful centre-halves the First Eleven had ever possessed. He generally subdued the opposing centre-forward, and fed his wings with judicious passes. It was very seldom indeed that one of Browne's kicks went astray, and in tackling he was a genius.

There was a large and enthusiastic crowd. Practically the entire senior school was on the ground—ready to criticise the three juniors at every move. If Nipper and Pitt and Fullwood didn't put up a good show they would be in for some bitter criticism, indeed!

Victor Mason, the old International and Aston Villa player, was acting as referee. It was his idea that the juniors should be included in the St. Frank's team, and he was particularly confident. And a better referee could not have been desired by either side.

For the first five minutes or so the St. Frank's front line was a trifle ragged. Fenton, at centre-forward, was not as comfortable as usual. He seemed to feel the strangeness of the three juniors with him, and on two or three occasions he clung to the ball when he should have passed. It wasn't customary for Fenton to be selfish. His present tactics were probably born of insufficient confidence in his junior forwards.

But he soon changed.

The left wing got busy, Rees, the outside-left, streaking away down the touchline, with Nipper in close attendance. Between the two of them they tricked the Yexford back with a superb coolness and ease, and Nipper accepted a pass which most fellows would have taken advantage of to shoot. But Fenton was better placed, and a tap sent the leather to his waiting foot. Fenton

shot, but he missed by a mere six inches or so.

"That was good!" he said approvingly.

"Hard luck, Fenton," replied Nipper.

"Rotten play, you mean," said Fenton. "That was a sitter!"

Within two minutes another attack developed, and the Yexford backs were just awakening to the fact that the junior forwards were even more dangerous than the seniors!

It was Nipper this time. He accepted a beautiful pass from Browne, and streaked for goal. The crowd yelled as Dick made rings round two opponents, one after the other. As it happened, there was nobody to pass to—Dick was compelled to make an individual effort, or lose the chance. And with all his usual energy, he tackled the job.

There was danger in every inch of him. The Yexford goalie could see it coming, and he was leaping about between the sticks, preparing to receive the inevitable shot.

The Yexford right-back charged down upon Nipper at full speed, but he was a fraction of a second too late. Nipper steadied himself and—

Slam!

The goalie never saw that shot at all. It was low, wicked and deadly—a regular pile-driver. It was in the back of the net before anybody realised it—a devastating shot that not one goalie in ten could have saved.

"Goal!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Nipper!"

The crowd yelled with glee, and then their shouts suddenly changed. Something had happened. As a matter of fact, the Yexford back had collided violently with Nipper immediately after the latter had made his shot. It was quite an accident—one of those collisions which are always liable to happen on the football field. Fortunately it came after the ball had reached its destination.

The goal was scored—but Nipper was lying on the ground, hunched up, and with his face screwed with agony. Fenton and Browne rushed up just in advance of Fullwood, and Pitt. Nipper was pulled to his feet.

"Whoa! Steady!" he gasped.

"Splendid, Hamilton!" said Fenton enthusiastically. "By Jove, that was the best shot I've seen for weeks!"

"Brother Hamilton is no doubt delighted to hear these expressions of praise, but he appears to be slightly hors de combat," said Browne swiftly. "Point out the injury, Brother Nipper, and we will apply hot bandages and all the necessary apparatus for a swift cure."

"Sorry!" gasped Nipper. "I'm afraid it's serious. My ankle, you know—twisted like the dickens—Steady, there! Great guns!"

He tried to set his foot to the ground, but the agony was excruciating. And Vic Mason gave one look at the ankle, and shook his head. Even in this brief space of time a slight swelling was visible.

"Hard lines—you'd better go off, young 'un," he said grimly. "That ankle's going to give a heap of trouble if you attempt to use it. You've done your bit, anyhow—you mustn't play any more to-day."

"Alas! I fear we shall miss Brother Nipper to no small extent," sighed Browne. "Can this be another of Brother Quirke's selected items from his repertoire? May he suffer much torment for this day's dirty work!"

Nipper was helped off, and the game proceeded.

Handforth, Grey, Glenthorne, Tregellis-West and many others surrounded Nipper as he attempted to recover. Massage was resorted to, and other measures, but the swelling continued.

"It's no good—I'm crocked," groaned Nipper, at last. "If that's not hard lines, what is? Only fifteen minutes from the start, too!"

"Never mind, old man," said Watson. "You scored a glorious goal, and you're certain of your place in the next big match."

"Absolutely!" declared Archie. "Good gad! I might even say odds pains and groans! That dashed goal was dashed swift, dash it! I mean to say, the bally thing whizzed in like a six-inch shell! You're certain of your posish., laddie."

"That's one consolation, of course," groaned Nipper. "But of all the bad luck——"

He paused, and looked at the others curiously.

"Just what I was thinking!" said Handforth gruffly. "Bad luck! By George! Quirke again! You played all right, you scored, and Fenton's got you in mind for the next big match. But in spite of all that you're crocked—you're out of the game! And it was a sheer accident, too."

"It's uncanny!" declared De Valerie.

"Nothing of the sort!" said Hubbard. "Didn't Quirke warn you? You persisted in that rotten Thirteen Club, and this is the result! Things will happen to those other chaps on the field, too!"

"I say, look at Pitt!" yelled Grey excitedly.

For the moment, Quirke was forgotten, and everybody gazed excitedly on the field. The St. Frank's forwards had developed another attack, and the right wing was working like a piece of machinery. Fullwood and Pitt were slicing clean through the Yexford defence—a perfect exhibition of accurate passing and ball-control. Even the seniors gazed, spellbound.

At the last second Fullwood steadied himself and shot. It was well-timed, and

swift—but the visitors' goalie just managed to tip the ball round the upright, conceding a corner.

"Well played, Fully!"

Rees took the kick, but the leather dropped just short of the goal-mouth, and was cleared into mid-field before any of the St. Frank's forwards could get near it. And Yexford took full advantage of the opportunity.

Their own centre-forward pounced on the ball, and streaked off at full speed. It was one of those swift reverses which frequently happen. At one second the Yexford goal was in danger, and the next second the danger was transferred to the St. Frank's goal.

And Morrow was taken unawares. The shot was an excellent one, a long, oblique drive which deceived the goalie. Morrow touched it, but just failed to save. The leather rolled over his shoulder into the net.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Handforth. "They've scored!"

"Marvellous!" said Church. "It was a good shot—and even Morrow isn't a human gate! It needed you in goal, Handy!"

Handforth snorted.

"I should think it did!" he retorted. "I'd be ashamed of myself if I couldn't keep a shot like that out! But what's the good of talking?" he added bitterly. "What chance have I got? I'm even chucked out of the Junior Eleven!"

Handforth was very sore over that affair. Owing to bad play the previous week—when he had been conscience-stricken over a quarrel with Church—he had lost his usual place in the Junior Eleven. And Ezra Quirke was blamed for the catastrophe. It was very singular that bad luck had dogged the school ever since Quirke's arrival. And now Nipper was out of action, with no possibility of playing again for several days.

The score was now equal, and Yexford pressed hard in order to gain the advantage. They had suffered no injuries, and were at full strength. If they couldn't beat St. Frank's now, it would be a pity! St. Frank's were playing two juniors, and were a man short.

But one of those juniors, at least, was harrassing the Yexford left-back as he had never been harrassed before. The duels between this man and Pitt were constant—and Reggie always won.

At first the Yexford back had been careless, feeling that he could beat this impudent junior with ease. Afterwards, he had used every ounce of cunning and skill—but all to no purpose. The nimble St. Frank's winger was the best man. Reggie Pitt always got his centres over to perfection.

Five minutes before half-time Fenton scored with a well-timed header, and the spectators gained heart once more. That

goal, incidentally, had been Pitt's—for Reggie had sent the ball over for Fenton to head it with ease into the net.

The Yexford back—a burly, aggressive-looking fellow—was becoming rather nasty. He had been outwitted by Pitt so many times that he foolishly lost his temper. It was an inexcusable attitude, for Reggie had played like a sportsman throughout the game.

The match had hardly got underway again before Browne sent out another pass to the right-wing. Like a flash, Pitt snapped it up, and was off along the touchline to the roar of the crowd. These runs of Pitt's were famous, and always aroused intense enthusiasm.

The Yexford back rushed up, was again beaten, and he deliberately shot his foot out, and hooked Pitt round the ankle. The unfortunate Reggie turned two complete somersaults, and lay motionless.

CHAPTER XV.

JUST A BIT TOO THICK!



FOUL!"

"Oh, you dirty cad!"

"Send him off—send him off!"

A perfect storm of angry shouts went up. It was the most deliberate foul St. Frank's had seen that season. Under ordinary circumstances, the Yexford back would not have resorted to such a measure, and he was probably sorry that he had done so. But he had acted in the heat of the moment—infuriated at being outwitted yet again. He had lost his head, and Reggie Pitt was lying motionless on the grass.

The whistle blew shrilly, and Fullwood and Phillips picked Pitt up, and found that he was practically unconscious. He had pitched on his head, and was half stunned.

"He's done!" said Phillips anxiously.

"You infernal cad!" shouted Fullwood, turning to the back. "I thought you were a sportsman? Of all the dirty fouls—"

"Leave this to me, please, young 'un," said Vic Mason, pushing through. "How's the boy? Crooked, eh? A pity—he was doing so splendidly! I'm afraid he'll have to be taken off."

"I'm awfully sorry," began the Yexford back.

"What's your name?" demanded the referee.

"Bevan—"

"You'll leave the field, Bevan," said Mason curtly.

"Oh, I say!" protested the back. "You're not going to do that, are you? I didn't mean to trip him up—"



The Yexford back rushed up, was again beaten, and he deliberately shot his foot out and hooked Pitt round the ankle.

"Lying won't help you!" snapped the referee. "I've seen a few deliberate fouls in my time, and I'm not likely to be deceived! I order you to leave the field, Bevan!"

"But—but I tell you—"

"At once!" ordered Vic Mason.

The Yexford back turned, biting his lip. With a pale face and hanging head, he went off towards the pavilion. A storm of cheering arose when the referee's decision was understood. And the vicious Bevan was hooted to the echo as he made a dash for the obscurity of the pavilion.

Shouts of concern followed when Pitt was carried from the field by the linesman and another senior. Reggie was just coming round, but he was badly crooked.

The whistle blew for half-time almost immediately afterwards—leaving the score two—one.

"There's something funny about this!" said Jack Grey breathlessly. "Two of our chaps crooked—and they're both in the Thirteen Club! Oh, I know it's easy enough to say that they were mere accidents, but you can't get away from facts. Our chaps have had rotten bad luck."

"It's like a blight!" said De Valerie, with concern. "What's going to happen to Full-

wood? He's the only Junior left in the team—and he's in the Thirteen Club, too! He'll probably get his in the second half!"

"Don't make a song!" muttered Pitt. "It's only coincidence——"

"I'm not so sure about that," growled Buster Boots. "Hang it, Val, it's a bit too thick! Why weren't two of the seniors crooked—instead of you fellows? Why should it be you and Nipper to go under?"

"Because they belong to that rotten Thirteen Club!" said Singleton.

"Rats!" said Pitt. "Don't talk rot!"

But even Reggie couldn't help feeling impressed. This run of bad luck was phenomenal—particularly by reason of its affecting the juniors only. Quirke wouldn't have been thought of at all if two of the seniors had been injured—for, after all, accidents are common enough on the football field.

But it certainly was extraordinary that out of the eleven players, Nipper and Pitt should be the two to go under. Fortunately, they had won their spurs beforehand. For Pitt, too, had proved himself worthy of First Eleven football. He was certain of a place for the rest of the season.

Fullwood was the only fellow who remained and when St. Frank's took the field for the second half, they were two men short. This was a very serious handicap, for although the missing two were juniors, they had been the life of the St. Frank's attack.

Yexford were one man short, too—but this was not much compensation for the loss of those two forwards. Pitt was unable to resume, for he was dizzy, and his head had received such a crack that he would probably have a stiff neck for days. In addition, his whole body was racked with aches. He had fallen very heavily, sustaining many bruises.

The interest in the game was now feverish.

In spite of the concentration required for watching football, well over half the juniors were thinking of Quirke. Would anything happen to Fullwood? He was the last member of the Thirteen Club to remain in the team. Would he, too, meet with some disaster on the field?

His movements were watched with anxiety, but it wasn't long before he covered himself with glory. Within five minutes of the re-start, Yexford scored again, equalising.

But almost immediately afterwards Fullwood received a pass from Phillips—who had gone to outside-right—and sent in a first-time shot which had the goalie guessing all the way. It was a high shot, which entered the net just at the angle of the upright and the crossbar—a perfectly-timed kick, with any amount of sting behind it.

"Goal!"

"Oh, well played!"

"Good old Fully!"

"Played, Fullwood!"

Ralph Leslie Fullwood flushed slightly as Fenton added his own word to the general applause. And William Napoleon Browne slapped Fullwood on the back and congratulated him in his own quaint style.

Even now, Fullwood was finding this a new experience. It seemed only yesterday since he had sneered at football. And he had never before realised the joys of hearing the applause of his fellow-beings. More than ever was he convinced that his present road was the only true one.

With the score three—two, and only twenty-five minutes left to play, the result seemed fairly obvious. During the last ten minutes the Yexford players had been hemmed in their own half, and all the attacking had been done by St. Frank's. One goal up, the Saints were confident of victory.

A yell went up when Fullwood was seen to trap the ball again, but he slipped and fell. When he got up, there was a red smear on his cheek, where he had grazed himself on a stone.

"There you are—bad luck again!" shouted De Valerie. "Fully's crooked!"

"Don't you believe it!" said Handforth.

Fullwood, indeed, was playing harder than ever. He made light of the injury—which looked worse than it actually was, being merely a jagged cut on the cheek.

And he continued to harass the Yexford defence. Fenton was greatly in the limelight at this period, leading raid after raid. And he was finding that Fullwood was a shrewd, able partner. Fenton was under no misapprehension regarding the juniors now. They had proved themselves worthy of inclusion in the First Eleven.

Browne was doing the work of two men in midfield. He not only smashed up almost every Yexford attack, but he kept his forwards well supplied with accurate passes. And ten minutes before the whistle Fullwood again came into prominence. He had received a surprise pass—really a mis-kick from one of his opponents. He was beautifully placed, and there was practically an open goal in front of him. He took instant advantage of the opportunity.

"Shoot, Fully—shoot!"

Fullwood prepared himself for the shot, and then suddenly stumbled. Without any opponent within yards of him, he swayed, and fell over backwards. And during that tense second a Yexford defender dashed up and safely cleared. The whistle blew, and Fullwood was surrounded.

"Hurt?" asked Fenton anxiously.

Fullwood sat up dazedly.

"Can't make it out," he muttered thickly. "I came all giddy. I feel weak—my head's swimming like the dickens——"

"Pity you lost that chance just now," said Fenton. "Come on—get up."

Fullwood got up, but immediately fell again. Something inexplicable had happened. Without being touched by a soul,

he had been stricken down. And it was impossible for him to stand. His legs were weak, and an unaccountable faintness had assailed him. He, too, was helped off.

Consternation broke out among the junior spectators.

The third disaster had happened! Fullwood, too, had fallen under the mysterious spell! All three members of the Thirteen Club had failed to last through the match. Each, in turn, had met with some catastrophe or another. The general effect was disturbing.

"Quirke's right—he's always right!" said De Valerie, with a queer look in his eyes. "Hang it all, we've got to believe in the chap—we MUST! What else can we think? What caused Fullwood to fail just now?"

"Great Scott!" yelled Handforth. "Yexford have scored!"

"They've equalised!" shouted Church. "What rotten luck!"

It was true enough. Yexford had taken advantage of the latest St. Frank's loss, and had obtained another goal.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CURSE ON THE SCHOOL.



RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD struggled up grimly.

"Let me go!" he said. "There's only five minutes left, but I'm going on again! This is sheer rot! There's nothing the matter with me—there can't be! I didn't even trip! Let me go, you asses!"

The news that Yexford had equalised hit Fullwood hard. He was furious with himself, too. He could offer no explanation regarding his unexpected weakness. It had come upon him without any warning.

"Sure you're all right?" asked Nipper.

"Of course I am," said Fullwood. "I'm a lot better now."

"Let's all go on," said Pitt mournfully. "If somebody'll put my neck in splints, I might be able to do a bit! And you can use a bath-chair, Nipper!"

Fullwood insisted on going, but he hadn't taken three steps unassisted before he again swayed, and nearly fell. He was caught just in time.

"It's no good—you can't do it," said Handforth gruffly.

"But it's madness—I can't get over it!" muttered Fullwood, exasperated. "Why the dickens should I go dizzy like this? I haven't eaten anything—I didn't even have anything at half-time."

"By George!" gasped Handforth. "You've been drugged!"

"But that's impossible," insisted Fullwood. "I tell you I haven't touched anything

since lunch-time. And I was all right until ten minutes ago! You're not going to tell me that somebody drugged my giddy lunch!"

"Besides, that's all rot," put in Church. "Nobody would dare to drug you—it would be too risky for one thing. I expect you put a bit too much speed, and overtaxed yourself, Fully. Only two minutes more to go, thank goodness—it'll be a drawn game, anyhow."

"That's better than losing," said Handforth, with a frown. "It's a pity I wasn't in goal—Great pip! Look there!"

The Yexford players were exerting their last ounce of strength in order to force a victory. With three men short, the St. Frank's team was in dire straits. And those players, although juniors, had been three of the best men in the side. The loss was a costly one.

Yexford was pressing fiercely, and the St. Frank's defence was penetrated again and again. Morrow alone saved these attacks from adding to the score. His saves were superb.

And then, a minute before the whistle was due to blow, the Yexford forwards again swept down. Wilson tackled valiantly, and in the excitement he handled. Unfortunately, it was not purely accidental—Wilson lost his head for a moment, and pushed at the ball with his fist.

The whistle blew on the instant.

"Oh, help!" moaned Pitt. "Penalty-kick!"

This was the final straw! Wilson had handled within the penalty area, and the referee was pointing to the fatal spot. With only a minute to go, and both the scores equal, Yexford were awarded a penalty-kick! Of all the appalling bad luck, this was surely the worst!

A dead silence fell as the Yexford centre-forward took the kick. He made no mistake about it, either. Slam! He sent in a swift, rising shot, which Morrow had no chance of getting at.

"Four—three!" said Handforth disgustedly. "Oh, it's all over now—they've won! Ye gods and little tadpoles! They've won! We're whacked!"

"The First's beaten on its own ground—it hasn't recorded a win this season!" groaned McClure. "Oh, I say, what putrid luck!"

A few seconds later the final whistle blew, and the fateful game was over.

With everything in St. Frank's favour, they had lost the match! It was one of the most extraordinary exhibitions the school had ever seen. From the very kick-off that game had been one long series of misfortunes. Not just the ordinary ill-luck of a "bad day," but sheer, downright tragedy.

And although the Remove players had won their places, they had all failed! That was the extraordinary part of it. Of the

whole eleven, these were the three fellows to suffer the worst. Not one of them had finished the game.

And they were all members of the Thirteen Club!

It was impossible to ignore the significance of this. If one of them had been crooked, it wouldn't have mattered so much—even if two had been crooked, it could have been looked upon as coincidence. But the whole three! That was the stunning feature of the affair.

"It's Quirke!" said Handforth fiercely. "He's the cause of all this!"

"But you don't believe in him!" said Church.

"Of course I don't, you ass!"

"Then how can this bad luck be brought on—"

"I don't know—we don't want to argue!" snapped Handforth. "But Quirke's to blame!"

"Sure he's to blame," agreed Adams. "Say, didn't I hand out this dope days ago? That bird's a hoodoo! Gee! I wouldn't like to be in mid-Atlantic with that guy! I guess the ship would never get to port!"

"Blow it, I believe you're right!" growled Handforth. "Quirke's a hoodoo! He's a jinx!"

"I guess you mean a jinx?"

"I'm not supposed to know your fat-headed American words, am I?" roared Handforth. "My hat! You Americans use a different language to us!"

"You said a mouthful!" agreed Adams. "We use the only language under the sun. Say, do you call this English stuff a language? How do you get that way?"

"There's only one thing to do with Quirke!" declared Handforth firmly. "He ought to be burnt at the stake! That's

what they did with witches and things in the old days! Why not go one better and boil him in oil?"

"Wouldn't be any good," said Church, shaking his head. "He'd like it! He'd enjoy it as much as we revel in our weekly bath! Quirke wouldn't be affected by fire or heat. Remember what happened to that guy!"

"Leave Quirke alone!" said Singleton. "I'm not sneering at the fellow any more. I believe he's genuine—he can do these rummy things, and nobody can understand how. That Thirteen Club had better be disbanded!"

But Nipper and Pitt and Fullwood—in spite of their ill-luck—were as determined as ever. And all the other members of the club agreed. They weren't going to admit themselves beaten!

"You can't convince me!" said Dick Hamilton firmly. "It's just a series of coincidences. I shouldn't be surprised at anything. There's probably auto-suggestion at work, too."

"Auto which?" asked Handforth.

"When things are going wrong, it's easy enough for people to get nervous," said Nipper. "And that affects their everyday life. And when they make a blunder, they put it down to a curse instead of to their own nerves. Anyhow, I'm as much against Quirke as ever I was."

"Hear, hear!" agreed Handforth grimly.

But there were plenty of others who felt differently. Ezra Quirke's influence was spreading far and wide, and even the seniors were beginning to take an interest in his doings.

And before long some exceedingly remarkable developments were destined to take place!

THE END.

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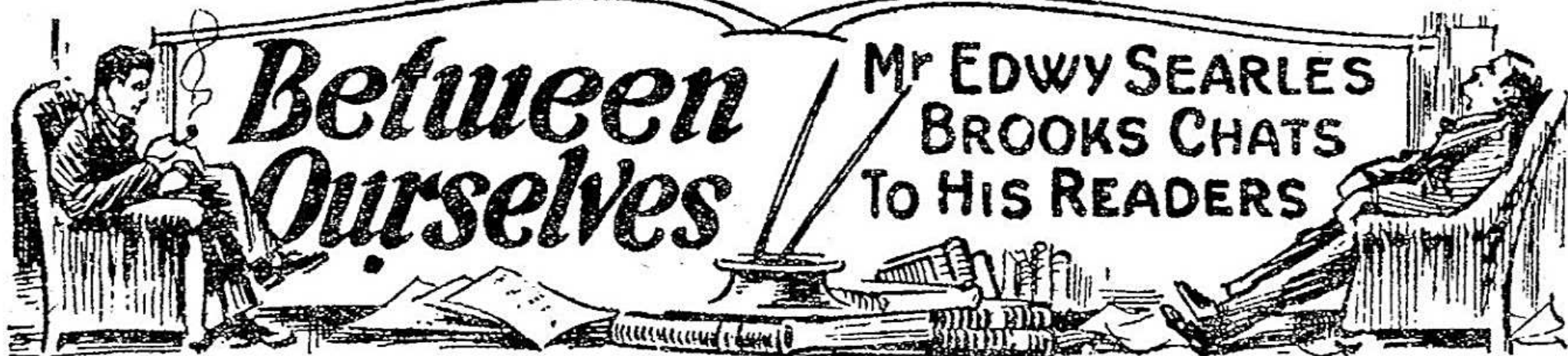
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Mr EDWY SEARLES BROOKS CHATS TO HIS READERS

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.

During the last week or two I have made one or two cryptic remarks about a surprise for this month, haven't I? Strictly speaking, I oughtn't to say anything about it until next week. But perhaps it's only fair to give you just a little hint.

Since this feature of mine was started I have had hundreds of letters asking for back numbers, and urging me to get the Editor to republish the early stories of St. Frank's. There has been a big demand for a St. Frank's Annual, too. In fact, it became pretty clear that something would have to be done. Well, it HAS been done—and you'll see the result in a week or two.

No, there's not going to be an Annual this year, but there'll be something else which will probably please you just as much. In about two weeks from now you'll be able to buy the first number of "THE MONSTER LIBRARY OF COMPLETE STORIES." It couldn't have been better named, for I can assure you it IS a monster, and you'll realise this when I tell you that it contains a whole series of St. Frank's yarns lumped into one—in fact, one huge adventure story of the earlier exploits of the St. Frank's fellows. And in spite of the enormous cost of this production, its huge size, and the length of the story, the price will be merely one shilling. The first one will be called "The Schoolboy Treasure Seekers," and if any of you are interested in this preliminary announcement of mine, take my advice, and go to your newsagent and say this: "Please reserve me No. 1 of 'THE MONSTER LIBRARY OF COMPLETE STORIES.'" By doing that you'll make sure of your copy. This isn't merely an adver-

tising stunt of mine. Only a limited number of the new library are being printed, and the ONLY way to be absolutely sure is to order in advance.

I've got an idea that this piece of news will be welcomed by practically every one of you. All you old and faithful readers—I'm talking to the Old-Timers now, who have read Our Paper since the early issues—will welcome the new venture, I'm sure, as you'll be able to read these early adventures again, not in grubby back numbers of the Old Paper, but in a magnificent production with a really wonderful cover—in four or five colours—and with gloriously big type throughout the whole book. And this new library, you can take it from me, will be something worth keeping and treasuring.

And you new readers will be even more pleased, I fancy. Lots of you, of course, have only joined the circle during the last year or so; some of you perhaps are readers of only a few weeks' standing. In this MONSTER LIBRARY you'll be able to get all the old St. Frank's yarns, and you'll get them in the most attractive way possible. All the summer adventure series—how Reggie Pitt first came to St. Frank's, the barring-out yarns, and so forth. If the first number is a success all these old series will be placed in your hands, month by month. Oh, I forgot to tell you that, didn't I? This new library isn't an Annual, but a monthly. And everything will depend upon the success of the first issue. So it'll be really necessary for you to show a bit of enthusiasm over No. 1, or the experiment may fail. It is something ABSOLUTELY NEW. It is something ABSOLUTELY NOVEL. That's all I mean to say about it this week, but in my next chat I'll go into full details, and describe it thoroughly. I've used up lot a more space than I meant to, but never mind. It's all in a good cause. Now I'd better acknowledge a few of your letters, or I can see myself getting into hot water.

J. Tym (Sheffield), J. Wilson (S.W.8), G. Payne (Devonport), Reg Dormer (Blackfriars), Basil A. Downing (Melbourne),

Row Slater (Wilenhall), An Aussie Bushite (Eyre Peninsula, S. Australia), G. Desmond Richardson (Burton-on-Trent), No. 633 (Holloway), Solomon Hershbin (Bethnal Green), Cyril A. Rundel (Blackheath), Oswald H. Tucker (Deal), Albert E. Clifton (Birmingham), Jean Bain (Edinburgh), Frank Bowden (Port Edgar, N.B.), H. Rawlings (Toronto).

* * *

I quite appreciate your desire for special Overseas Competitions, Basil A. Downing, but I am afraid it is more difficult than you imagine. Your idea is that the closing date should be three months later for Australia and other readers. It sounds quite easy, doesn't it? But, my dear chap, just think for a moment. If the Editor adopted a scheme of that sort, all our British readers would have to wait three months longer for their results—no, a lot more than three months, for your entries would have to get across to England and be dealt with. And you can't be unreasonable enough to expect tens of thousands of Home readers to patiently wait while all your letters are coming across the seven seas. The only other alternative is to organise a special competition for Overseas readers, and that, I am told, is impracticable. For example, there would have to be one date for Canada, another for Australia, and so on. It would only result in confusion. The Editor and I have often chatted on this subject, but it seems that you Overseas readers will have to be content with the League. And this, after all, is about the biggest competition going. In fact, the only one of its kind in the world. Later on there will be special League competitions instituted, and naturally, ALL members will be eligible, Home or Overseas. You see, they'll be run in such a way that closing dates won't be necessary.

* * *

Of course I want you to write again, Row Slater. As a matter of fact, your letter was particularly interesting, and there's one point I want to discuss. You say that I don't consider the School House much. In fact, you imply that I don't feature the School House as much as I ought to. That's just the point. I thought I had made it quite clear in the stories that the School House is not in the same category as the other Houses. These latter Houses are boarding-houses, where the boys live, and where there is a Housemaster presiding over each. The School House is merely a great range of class-rooms, laboratories, lecture-halls, and so forth. As it is only used for work it is naturally closed up at night, and there is no Housemaster. So why mention it? To be exact, there are four Houses at St. Frank's. The

fifth—The School House—is for school purposes purely and simply.

* * *

They say that we live and learn. Since getting letters from Australian readers I have learnt quite a lot. Thanks for calling me your "Cobber," Aussie Bushite. If I wasn't well up in these Australian terms I might think you were uncomplimentary. I know, of course, that "Cobber" means a friend, and thus I am under no misapprehension when you say that I am a cobber of yours. Over here, in the Old Country, we don't use the word, at least, I haven't heard it used. I'm awfully glad that your father has been converted, and is now a reader of Our Paper. Nothing pleases me better than to hear that readers have got their parents to approve of the St. Frank's yarns by such convincing methods as reading them themselves.

* * *

You seem really cut up about the Mag., Solomon Hershbin. I hope you'll find some consolation in the knowledge that it will be re-born in the near future. Not in its old form, but in a very much better form. But it's early for me to say anything just yet. Besides, the Editor himself will make the announcement when he is ready. All right, I'll remember to feature Solomon Levi before long. As a matter of fact, he figures quite largely in next week's story.

* * *

We haven't forgotten the Portrait Gallery, Cyril A. Rundel. As for Owen minor, Willy Handforth has gained such strength in the Third that Owen minor is rather overshadowed. Perhaps he'll come out of his shell one of these days and dispute Willy's rights. You can never tell.

* * *

I didn't actually promise to introduce a Scotch boy at any fixed time, did I, Jean Bain? Without looking up my earlier reply, I think I said that I would remember your request. I shall certainly bring in a Scotch junior when the opportunity arrives. And I'll give you my word that he'll be a REAL Scot, through and through. But please don't be impatient.

* * *

Hallo! Another request for a barring-out series! Do you know, Howard Rawlings, I've had dozens and scores of requests for a barring-out series during the last few weeks? Well, I can't guarantee anything just yet. The present series runs on until Christmas. But early in the New Year—Oh, well, that's a good few weeks ahead, isn't it?

E.S.B.

THE STAMP COLLECTOR

By FRED. J. MELVILLE.

AERO STAMPS.

MY fingers have been itching to open my "Stamp Packet No. 3," but I have restrained myself so that you and I should open our packets together. So here goes! What have I got? A quaint-looking Cossack chap on a 20 gruvni Ukraine. You might not know off-hand just what country it came from, because the lettering is that of the Russian alphabet. Then there is a pretty, pictorial stamp of Borneo, another from Liberia, a republican stamp of Austria, and—oh, great shakes!—a triangular air-post stamp of Esthonia.

I am glad to find an aero stamp among my lot, and I guess many of you will have found this or some other postage stamp that has been issued for paying postage on letters sent by air mail.

There is a fair number of them—between two and three hundred—so one could make a jolly interesting collection of what I call aero stamps alone. Some of them are quite remarkable in showing aeroplanes in flight over foreign lands, and those of you who know a lot about the mechanics of flight will be able to read from the stamps what a variety of types of machines are now in use for the rapid transportation of mails by air.

Italy was the first country to issue a stamp for air postage, but it was only for an experimental service between Rome and Turin. Look out for the 25 centesimi rose "express letter" stamp, with the words, "Esperimenta posta aerea" overprinted on it, for that is the stamp which was used for this service. Later in the same year a violet stamp of similar design was overprinted "Idrovolante," for use on a hydroplane postal service between Naples and Palermo.

But you will like best the aero stamps specially designed to show that they are meant to wing letters on their way. On some of the Austrian aero stamps you see the pilot of the air mail seated in his machine; you can even study the controls and levers. The higher values of the same series show a giant flier with a passenger cabin; she is flying high over mountains, and a weird bird near by is flapping her wings at this intrusion into the realm of the birds.

In the Albanian air stamps we get a view of a 'plane about to cross the rugged

mountains of the Balkans; there is an eagle in the picture, but the 'plane has soared high above it. There are four lovely pictorial aero stamps of the Belgian Congo showing machines in flight over native villages. An air mail service was started, covering a distance of 1125 miles in the Congo in 1920; it connected Kinshaska with Stanleyville.

Five large and handsome stamps of China depict a flight over the great wall of China. Danzig has quite an array of air stamps; the first were German stamps overprinted with a little device of a 'plane in blue or red, or a winged posthorn; the next issue showed a machine flying high above the skyline of Danzig, and you can pick out the numerous spires and name them one by one—if you know the place at all. Still another set shows a machine within the ring of a posthorn device.

Denmark shows a machine with propeller whizzing away, making such a noise, apparently that two great horses drawing a plough on the ground are evidently startled, and the ploughman is having his work cut out to control them.

I have already mentioned Esthonia, but there are several issues, all triangular in shape. It is a good idea to have aero stamps of an unusual shape, for when letters intended for air post are dropped in letter-boxes along with ordinary mail, the queer shape at once catches the eye of the postal sorter, who picks out such letters for despatching by the fast air route. Germany's air stamps include a winged posthorn, a biplane, and a Taube among the designs. Holland has a series in a mysterious design conceived on modern art lines, in which sea, sun and air seemed to get inextricably mixed up. In Hungary they are using stamps with a picture of Icarus, the flying man.

Lithuania shows us an angel holding a toy aeroplane over her head. From Morocco we get a very handsome series showing a flight over Casablanca. Newfoundland's air stamps are of exceptional interest, as associations with the historic transatlantic flights. The "Hawker" stamp is a rarity; but the "Alcock" stamp is not so difficult to get. Norway has given us the quaint stamps of the Amundsen North Polar flight, which show a bear gazing up at the new-fangled machine in the sky. Poland has just issued

(Continued on page 39.)



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. Blake and Tinker arrive at Kamfak to be present at the celebrations of the coming of the new boy king. During the festivities at the palace, Tinker slips out into the town without a pass, and gets into trouble with the police. He makes the acquaintance of a young American named Clodie.

(Now read on)

"THANKS very much indeed!" said Tinker to the stranger. "You pulled us out of that jolly well."

"I knew you at once," said the prisoner. "I had been unlucky, too, and was in the cell, but fortunately, those fools of police being so busy, had not recognised me. It is I who have to thank your friend here for permitting me to escape. You I have seen before," he added, lowering his voice. "It was in the castle of Shalvola with the king."

"Great pip!" exclaimed Tinker. "I remember you by the slow way you talk. You're Rivastoff!"

"Rivastoff, the brigand, at your service! The stone tower at Shalvola could not hold me. And so, as I take you to be a friend of the young princess—may fortune prosper her!—and also for the debt I owe this gentleman, I will help you more if I can."

They were standing under a flickering oil-lamp in an alley filled with many strange smells. To the bandit Tinker rapidly explained the position. While Rivastoff was pondering, Tinker told Clodie, in a whisper, who he was.

"I guess that nothing I bump against in this weird old show surprises me," said the young American, "not even a live brigand. Say, brig, I'm sure obliged you scuttled

those police guys! How's the programme? I guess that old hotel is barred, and if we're found floating round these slums in daylight they'll jug us again, and as I think I've winged one of their police, they'll be riled and nasty."

"I will take you to a friend's, where you may hide," said Rivastoff. "Would it be of use if I could get a note from you to the palace?"

"A jolly lot of use," said Tinker; "but I don't want you to risk your neck."

"I am always risking my neck. Let us go quickly, for at any moment we may meet a police-patrol."

Ten minutes later Rivastoff knocked at a door, and Tinker and Mr. Arthur P. Clodie found themselves in a dark little room where ropes of onions hung in festoons from a low ceiling. The owner of the place, a bent old man with a white beard, held a muttered conversation with the bandit and then lighted another candle, then brought an envelope, a sheet of paper, and a dusty inkstand with a quill pen.

Tinker pondered. It was useless to write to King Peter, for at such a busy time the message would not reach him, and it was quite possible that an attempt to communicate with his Majesty would result in the arrest of the messenger. Sexton Blake was of no use, for at present, though the king's tutor, he was practically unknown. Then Tinker remembered a person of great importance, and addressed the envelope to the captain of the King's Guard, marking it private and urgent. He wrote:

"Dear Blimp,—Myself and a pal are in the cart and the police are chasing us. They want to hang us at dawn or shoot us at sight, and we're not eager. Send along an escort and fish us out of this, for they don't seem to love us a ha'porth.—TINKER."

"It's for the big Englishman who was going to shoot you," he said, handing Rivastoff the sealed envelope.

The bandit nodded, and passed the message on to the old man. When he had gone, Rivastoff bolted the door.

"Have a cigarette, buddy, and we'll try to kill the smell of the onions some," said Clodie. "I guess we're enjoying ourselves. What's the stunt?"

"I've sent a line to a fellow I know," said Tinker. "If he gets the note he'll haul us out of this mess, but I'm not too hopeful that he will get it. You've not got any grudge against the big fellow for capturing you and nearly shooting you, have you, Mr. Rivastoff?"

"Not at all." The brigand smiled as he pulled aside his cloak and showed his bandaged arm. "Nor do I bear you a grudge for doing that. It is the fortune of war. And good, perhaps, may come of it. My enemy is not the young king. Let him pardon me, and I will serve him well."

pass, sir, you were asking for trouble. Sorry to have to put you under arrest, but if I don't, the police will want you. Hi, corporal, take charge of these gentlemen!"

Blimp lifted the brigand's mask, and let it drop back again, and gave Tinker the ghost of a wink.

"Take their weapons away, corporal," he added, "and put them in the guard-room."

Tinker passed the captain's wink on to the young American, and gave the brigand a nudge to signify that all was well, and so Tinker returned to the royal palace as he



He opened the door as a dozen mounted men rode down the alley in single file. "Cheerio, Blimp!" cried Tinker.

As time went on, even William P. Clodie seemed to lose some of his high spirits. At last the brigand jumped to his feet, his finger on the trigger of his revolver. He listened with bent head.

"Troops!" he said quietly. "I hear the tramp of horses and the rattle of scabbards."

He opened the door, as a dozen mounted men rode down the alley in single file.

"Cheerio, Blimp!" cried Tinker.

The captain of the King's Guard alighted from a huge bay horse with a clank of spurs.

"Gawsh!" he said, with a slow grin. "If you went out to-night, without a signed

had left it—a prisoner under escort. They had been in the guard-room about ten minutes, Rivastoff still wearing his mask, when the sentry unlocked the door and admitted Sexton Blake. Blimp, magnificent in his new uniform, followed the private detective, and put his burly shoulders against the closed door.

"My friend, Arthur P. Clodie, of New York," said Tinker, with a chuckle, "and my friend, Mr. Rivastoff, late of Shalvola, who has done us both a very good turn. In fact, both these gentlemen have done me good turns."

"Oh, indeed!" said Sexton Blake. "I wonder!"

A SHOT AT THE KING.

TINKER'S imprisonment in the guard-room was a very short one. He took Mr. Clodie with him to his apartments and Blake stayed behind to interview the bandit, after warning his assistant to keep in his room. The Yankee was bursting with curiosity to know what Tinker was doing in the royal palace, and why he possessed influence enough to summon the King's Guard to the rescue. To quiet him, Tinker explained that he was King Peter's guest and chum.

"Shucks, that's real fine!" said the man from New York. "You're the identical guy I've been looking around for. Then I reckon, bo', you can get me an invite to breakfast and introduce me to the king fellow and his beautiful sister, Princess Celia?"

"I reckon not," said Tinker. "I don't mean to suggest that you're not as good as my pal, King Peter, but these royalties have funny ways. They might cut my head off for trying it. Besides, we haven't finished with the police yet. They've got you taped by this time, you can bet, and as you've flattened one out with a gas-pipe and shot another, you'll hear some nasty things about it!"

"You sure helped some, bo'!"

"Yes, and I may be chucked out of the jolly old country for it," said Tinker, "or get into a full-sized row for bringing you along. This isn't little old New York. By all the notice they took of your flag, you can see that in Carlovina they don't care two cents for the United States. And what could the U.S.A. do, anyhow, even if they did hang you at dawn? She couldn't very well bring her fleet along across neutral territory and then sail it over these mountains, could she? Perhaps if they did put you through it, some compensation would be paid to your relatives, but that wouldn't do you a lot of good."

"Wal, let them deport me," said Clodie. "If they do, bo', I shall just come back smiling, for I'm going to marry the princess."

There was a movement in the next room, and Tinker jumped up in some alarm, for though he had locked the door, there are such things as pass-keys. To his relief it was Sexton Blake, but he was not alone. With him was the smiling gentleman who had arrested Tinker—Mr. Johann Veilburg, of the Carlovian secret police.

"I am sorry to put you to any inconvenience, Mr. Clodie," he said. "My instructions are to have you sent under escort to the frontier. Your luggage is already on the train. You have to thank this gentleman, Mr. Brown, for being so favoured, for to break gaol and fire on the police is a capital offence, and punishable by death."

"Guess I'm not going," said the youth, folding his arms.

A moment later Arthur P. Clodie of little old New York changed his mind, as six men, each armed with a revolver, appeared behind Veilburg. He shook hands with Tinker and Sexton Blake.

"See you two guys later," he said, "for it's plumb sure it's no use kicking now, but I shall be along again presently. A little trifle like a bunch of police can't stop me when I've made up my mind to do a thing, and they'll want plenty of barbed wire round their rotten old frontier to keep me out, more than this bankrupt country can afford to pay for. So long!"

With a cheerful smile and a wave of his hand, Arthur P. Clodie left them under escort.

"I'm jolly sorry he bumped so badly, guv'nor," said Tinker, "for he's a good sort, this Yankee millionaire with a bee in his bonnet. And some bee, too, for he only wants to marry Princess Celia, having fallen in love with her photograph. Well, he's got the order of the boot, and I'm just a bit sorry. And what about the brigand chap? Have the police got him as well?"

"They don't seem to have recognised him, young 'un," answered Sexton Blake. "I fancy Rivastoff was rather a lucky find from our point of view. He used to hold strong Bolshevik views, and had to take to the mountains to save his life. He's full of gratitude to the princess, and as he knows a great deal about the party leaders on both sides, he may turn out a very useful man. That's why I let him go."

"Did you let him escape, then, guv'nor?"

"Well I told Blimp that he wasn't to have him guarded too well, which amounts to the same thing. We are smuggling him out of the palace to-night. It seems odd to make an ally of a brigand," he added, with a smile, "but this is an odd country. Here's a little silver badge I got from Veilburg, the Secret Service man. Keep it safely, and show it if you have any more trouble with the police."

"I wonder if we can trust that guy with the gun, guv'nor?" said Tinker. "Is Veilburg safe?"

"At present there are only three people in the country I do trust, Tinker—yourself, Princess Celia, and Blimp."

"Not the king?"

"Yes, but only in a way," said the private detective. "He may be influenced by some of them. Keep with him as much as you can, and don't let Sarjo and Prince Darro notice that there's anything particularly smart about you. Stick to Peter like glue, and watch out. I've got to leave the palace to you to a great extent, for I shall be busy outside mostly. Remember that if Peter doesn't do all the Sarjo gang want him to do there'll be trouble. Sit tight, watch and listen, and keep me posted."

For the next few days Tinker rode out each morning with the king, escorted by Blimp and a detachment of the Royal Guard, and by the way his subjects cheered, Peter might have been the most popular monarch on earth. Colonel Zuss may have grudged Captain Coggs the honour of watching the king, but seven o'clock was too early for the gallant colonel to get up and put on his corsets.

"I'll tell you what, sir," said Blimp to Tinker, "I ain't only got the chaps tame, but, though I nearly broke their backs drilling them into shape, the silly beggars like me. It's a funny thing, but they do. You remember when I first got hold of 'em they looked more like monkeys than men, but now if I'm not quite inclined to go about bragging that they could have won the battle of Waterloo, I don't feel as if I wanted to turn a few Lewis guns on 'em and exterminate the whole crush."

"They're not so dusty, Blimp," said Tinker. "The mounted lot are really good, and though they wouldn't look very great alongside of some of our cracks, you've done astonishing things with them. But could you trust 'em?"

"Gawsh!" Blimp gave one of his long, slow grins. "They'll eat out of my hand, as I told you they would, sir. If that colonel chap with the whiskers and stays gave 'em an order and I gave 'em another I know which they'd obey. I'd watch it."

"Keep them like that, then," said Tinker. "You've got no friend in Colonel Zuss, Blimp. How about the lieutenant?"

"He's straight, sir. Owing to the colonel he's had all the dirty work to do and no promotion for years. He's pretty popular, too, with the men, and I'm sure he'd stick to me if any shemozzle started. Oh, I've got 'em tame, tame as white mice."

"And jolly useful, too," said Tinker. "You could do a lot with eight hundred men, Blimp. How much do you think you could do?"

They were following his Majesty in through the palace gate, and Blimp lowered his voice, though there seemed no need to do so, for it had become quite husky after so much shouting.

"Gawsh! Get me about fifty machine guns and I'll eat all Carlovina," he said. "I want them guns badly. I'm jolly fond of the king, sir, but if he got biffed out, and you felt inclined to take on the job, I'll make you king in a week. Don't forget those guns. I did mention it to King Peter, but he says old Sarjo, the prime minister guy, tells him they don't want 'em and can't afford 'em."

"Right, Blimp," said Tinker, nodding. "I'm not sure that I can pull it off, but I'll have a quiet word with his Majesty about it."

Tinker breakfasted with Peter and Celia. It was a stately affair, for there were half a dozen servants to wait on them. As

Sexton Blake was not there, Peter asked what had become of his tutor.

"Cleared out for a walk, I expect," said Tinker. "He's an early bird, and he'd finished his breakfast while I was in my bath. When are you supposed to do your swotting? Has he arranged to give you any lessons yet, or are you still having a holiday?"

"If Mr. Brown has the cheek to talk any rot about lessons to me for the next six weeks I'll sign his death warrant, old top," said Peter. "I've got enough worry. At eleven o'clock I have to preside over a meeting of the Supreme Council, and there'll be yards of official documents to sign."

"Don't sign anything until you have read it, Peter, and know exactly what it means," said Celia.

"That sounds good advice," added Tinker. "Don't let 'em trick you, old bean, for if it's anything unpopular you'll get the blame."

"I seem jolly popular just now," said Peter, rubbing his shoulder. "Every time I go out the beggars cheer, and I have to keep saluting till my arm is stiff. And haven't they got quiet all at once? Nobody has been shot in the streets since the day I arrived."

"Kamfak is getting quite a dull place," grinned Tinker, "but I notice they still wear their masks. Before you attend the Council chummy, I want to speak to you on the quiet. It's about something Blimp wants."

(Continued on next page.)

THE STAMP COLLECTOR

(Continued from page 35.)

a pretty set of air stamps showing a machine over a Polish city. Siam depicts a garuda, half-man, half-bird, on her air stamps. South Africa recently issued a set of four stamps for an air post connecting the Cape Town mail steamers with distant towns.

Sweden's air stamps are ordinary stamps overprinted "Luftpost." Switzerland has quite a variety of aero designs, a winged woman; a pilot with goggles on, snapped, as it were, high in the heavens, with the peaks of the mountains showing far down below; aeroplanes over the mountains, etc.

Syria and Great Lebanon have ordinary stamps overprinted "Poste par Avion." Tunis has stamps showing the ruins of Hadrian's Viaduct, overprinted with expansive wings.

The United States give us some dainty little stamps showing beautifully engraved vignettes of postal service aeroplanes, a radiator and propeller, and the badge of the U.S. air mail. Last of all there is Uruguay, with three stamps showing a white aeroplane on a ground of solid colour.

Most of these stamps are not difficult to get, and a collection of them is just the thing to interest yourself and your chums in stamp-collecting.

THE CITY OF MASKS

(Continued from previous page.)

"Oh, I know; those machine-guns," yawned Peter. "Sarjo's dead against it. There's no spare cash, and, besides, if the news leaked out that I was arming the Royal Guard, there'd be a regular howl. We're not going to war with anybody, you see, old thing, and though it might please the loyalists, the republican lot would squeal that I was arranging for a massacre."

"Oh, all serene!" said Tinker.

Peter had dismissed the gorgeous servants, but Celia gave a quick glance round her before she spoke to her brother.

"I don't want to make any mischief, Peter," she said, "but I want you to be a real king and not a mere puppet in Sarjo's hands. Don't get slack and lazy. Read everything before you sign it, and refuse to sign anything that does not seem to be for the good of the people. I'm sure you wish to do good, but if you get idle the Supreme Council—that's Sarjo—will have it all their own way and you'd be better back at Calcroft School than in Carlovina. And I'm not so sure about all this talk about the party who want to destroy the monarchy. All they want is power, and if they were in power and had a king who was only a dummy, they'd be quite content to let you reign."

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Peter. "She's always biting my ear, Billy. If you haven't got a sister, you're lucky, my lad. I shall get fed up with you one day, Celia, and shut you up in a fortress for life. Who's supposed to be running this silly country—you or me?"

"I'm only asking you to run it, and not to let others run it for you," said Celia. "I'm not afraid of your old fortress, and I shall continue to bite your ear, as you call it. Billy knows I'm right, too. There are only two things for it—to be master of the country, or slave to the Council."

The Supreme Council consisted of Sarjo, Prince Darro, Bizer, the Attorney-General, Colonel Zuss, who represented the military, and Brentchi, the Prime Minister's secretary. These gentlemen rose and bowed as the king entered, but Sarjo and Prince Darro exchanged quick glances, and the colonel, whose stays creaked as he bowed, gave his moustache a tug when they saw that his Majesty was not alone, but was accompanied by his supposed school-chum, Billy Brown.

Sarjo was too shrewd to make any protest. He began to read an address of welcome and loyalty.

"Much obliged, gentlemen!" said Peter, taking a seat in a raised chair. "What's the business on hand?"

"Reports of the secret police, sir, affairs of State, most private, important, and confidential," said the Prime Minister.

"Well, read them slowly," said his Majesty.

"Secret and confidential, sir," ventured the

Attorney-General. "For your Majesty's ears and the Council's alone."

This was quite pointed enough for Peter.

"Oh, my friend Billy doesn't matter," he said. "He won't betray any State secrets. Please get on with it."

It was a dreary affair. The secretary did the reading, and Peter had to struggle with himself to keep from yawning before it was half over. Celia's remarks at breakfast seemed to have done him good, for he asked several shrewd questions.

"I'll look over those things before I sign any of them," he said at last. "I want the Treasury accounts as soon as they can be prepared. I hear our funds are in a bad way. I also want a list of all the big official salaries and what the officials do to earn them. You see, gentlemen, I want some money for myself, so get the figures out as soon as possible."

Tinker knew very well that the important documents mentioned by the Prime Minister and the Attorney-General had been kept back and not read at all because he was there, and that nothing of importance would ever be revealed while he was there. He told Sexton Blake so.

"It's all a flam, guv'nor," he said. "If Peter gets those papers about the salaries, they'll be faked. From the little bit I saw, these chaps have got him taped. I sized 'em up. The colonel is a complete ass and one of Sarjo's puppets. The Attorney-General chap, Bizer, though he's as fat as a barrel of whale's blubber, has plenty of brains and cunning in his bald head. I should say the secretary, Brentchi, is about as wily as the whole bunch of 'em put together. On the whole, except Zuss, they're a tough lot."

"What about the prince, young 'un?" asked Sexton Blake.

"You've got me guessing again, guv'nor," answered Tinker. "He turned up in a black velvet jacket and big bow tie, and his hair all shiny and nicely brushed. There was that order about keeping on that order for making it a capital offence for being found carrying firearms within a square mile of the palace. The order expires to-morrow, and, to keep it on, Peter had to sign it. Darro objected and made quite a song about it. He was against capital punishment in every shape and form. He talked as if he'd let a mosquito chew him all over before he'd kill it."

"And he seemed genuine?"

"Absolutely, guv'nor! Of course, he was voted down. The rest is a flam. They were very nice and polite to Peter, but they've got him. About three Council meetings as dreary as that, and he'll be bored stiff. He'll be so sick of it, he'll sign any paper they fire at him without looking at it, even if it's a blank sheet. Celia wouldn't; but there you are—Peter isn't Celia."

"I was afraid of this, young 'un," said the private detective; "but it's always the way with a boy king—always."

(To be continued next week.)

AS SIMPLE AS A B C.

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.

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ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 20.

Nov. 7, 1925

READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.

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SECTION

B

MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.

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SECTION

C

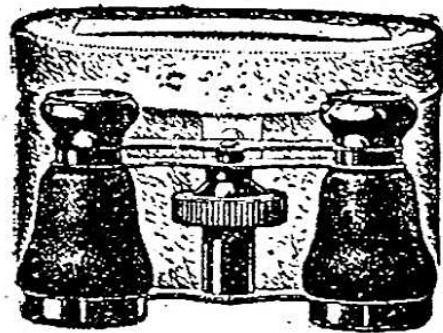
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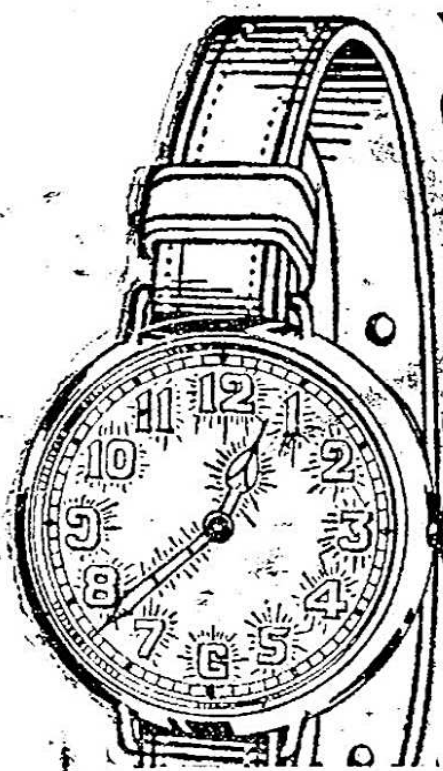
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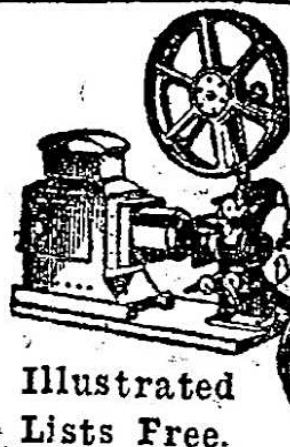
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