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The cabinet was
empty—Quirke
had gone.



The **UNKNOWN HAND**
or The Mystery of the Cabinet

How does Quirke dis-
appear in the cabinet?
Read the story and see
if you can solve the
mystery !



Handforth & Co.'s beautiful wireless set was scattered over the floor in wreckage. It was literally burst into fragments.



The remarkable powers of Ezra Quirke, the schoolboy magician of St. Frank's are again demonstrated in this week's story, "THE UNKNOWN HAND!" a title which implies that a veil of mystery hangs over the working of Quirke's wizardry. For instance, the settee floating in mid-air and the disappearance of Quirke in the cabinet, which occur in the story, may be very clever illusions, and, if so, I should like to hear from any reader who can give an explanation of how these supposed illusions are accomplished.

DON'T FORGET TO TELL YOUR CHUMS ABOUT THE FREE GIFTS OF ASSORTED FOREIGN STAMPS, AND THAT ANOTHER PACKET IS PRESENTED THIS WEEK WITH EVERY COPY OF "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY."

THE PACKETS OF STAMPS WE ARE GIVING AWAY COVER A WIDE SELECTION, SOME OF WHICH ARE OF EXCEPTIONAL VALUE.

THE EDITOR.

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER I.

SOLOMON LEVI'S LATEST.

DICK GOODWIN, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's, paused in the doorway of Study O in the West House, and stared.

"By gum!" he ejaculated in astonishment.

"Come in!" sang out Solomon Levi briskly. "Don't keep the door open, Dick—there's a draught. Whoa! Look out! There go some application forms!"

"Some what?" asked the Lancashire boy, as he closed the door. "Eh, lad, you've made a champion mess of the study! What are all these papers for? What is it—a new game?"

Dick Goodwin shared Study O with Solomon Levi, the Jewish boy. They were quite good chums, too, and generally got on very well together. Goodwin had been out for over an hour—helping two or three Ancient House fellows to fix up a wireless set. He had known that Levi was busy on some scheme of his own, but he had hardly expected to find the study in such a condition on his return.

It was simply littered with papers on every available inch of space. The centre table was full of them. They overflowed on to the top of the cupboard, and even the window-ledge was pressed into service, to say nothing of the mantelpiece.

Solomon Levi had his shirt-sleeves rolled

up, and he was smudged with ink. The air was filled with a vague odour of printing.

"What's all this stuff?" demanded Dick Goodwin.

"Just a few forms and things to start with," explained Levi. "Steady, you ass! Don't mess them about! I'm getting up a new insurance scheme. You can have the first policy, if you like."

"An insurance scheme?" echoed Dick. "You're crazy!"

"It's the greatest thing I've ever thought of—"

"But I don't understand!" interrupted Dick Goodwin. "How the dickens can you start a private insurance company? What's the object of it? You're champion on new schemes, Solly, but this seems a bit too thick!"

"That's only because you don't understand it," said Levi crisply. "It's not an ordinary insurance company—it's something special. You can take out a policy for a shilling. That'll last you a week."

"By gum!"

"It's a business proposition, first and last," went on Levi. "I'm not saying that I don't hope to make a bit of profit out of it, but I'm ready to take all ordinary risks. Anybody can afford a shilling a week, and think of the advantages—"

"But what have I got to be insured against?" asked Goodwin, grinning. "Lines, or canings, or accidents, or what?"

"Not one of them!" said Solomon.

"Then what?"

"Bad luck!"

"Which?" yelled Dick.

"This is the Bad Luck Insurance Company," explained Levi blandly. "Just an ordinary policy—one shilling a week—insures you against bad luck while the policy holds good."

"You're mad!" snorted Goodwin. "You can't work an insurance scheme of that sort, Solly! It's too uncertain! There are thousands of forms of bad luck, and any policy-holder could make out a convincing case every day of the week! Some chaps are always claiming bad luck! Luck isn't a thing you can define, like a bike accident or a swishing!"

Solomon Levi smiled calmly.

"By my life!" he ejaculated, his expressive face revealing his pity for Dick's intelligence. "Didn't I tell you this is an insurance company? I'm not here to whack out payments twenty times a day! I'm not a philanthropist! I'm after business!"

"But, my dear chap—"

"The policy can be taken out by everybody—it costs one bob!" said Solomon briskly. "If everything goes well during the week I keep the bob. If something goes wrong, I hand over a quid!"

"A quid?" gasped Goodwin. "Do you mean to say you'll accept a shilling from me, and pay me a whole pound at any time

during this next week if I've got a valid claim?"

"This insurance company pays every claim spot cash!"

"I'd better fetch Dr. Brett!" said Dick grimly. "You're not merely dotty—you're dangerous! I suppose you haven't got two or three hundred quid behind you, to pay all the claims that'll come rolling in?"

The Jewish boy grinned more broadly than ever.

"I'll admit it sounds too good to be true, but I'm not quite such a duffer as you imagine," he said. "These policies are specialised."

"They're which?"

"They only apply to bad luck of one kind."

"Oh!" said Dick. "I thought there was a catch in it."

"Listen to me!" interrupted Solomon grimly. "There's no catch in my schemes. I'm keen on business, but it's always straight. I'll take a risk as well as anybody—I'll take more risks than most people, believe me!"

"Sorry!" grinned Goodwin. "But what's this one kind of bad luck?"

"Quirke, of the East House!"

"Eh?"

"Buy a shilling policy, and you'll be insured against any of Quirke's bad luck for one week!" said Solomon. "What could be more simple?"

Dick Goodwin stared blankly.

"But—but—"

"Ezra Quirke's a queer feller," said Solomon. "According to that American chap, Adams, he's hoodoo! Wherever he goes, he takes bad luck with him. And anybody is liable to catch a dose of it."

"By gum! That's true enough!" admitted Dick thoughtfully. "Remember what happened to Kenmore, of the Sixth—and Teddy Long! There's Handforth, too—he's lost his position in the Junior Eleven! And what about the other day? When the First Eleven played Yexford, Pitt and Hamilton and Fullwood all met with bad luck—all through Quirke, too!"

"Under my scheme, they'd have got a quid each!" said Levi promptly.

"Do you mean to say you'd have paid up?"

"I should live so sure!" retorted Solomon. "Believe me, this insurance company is alive! Anybody who comes into contact with Quirke is liable to meet with bad luck. And we're all taking a big chance—we're bound to meet Quirke at different times. One shilling a week for one of my policies is a sound insurance."

"It's not a bad idea!" admitted Dick slowly. "It'll catch on, too—the chaps are as windy as anything about Quirke. Don't forget what happened to Willy Handforth's guy on the night of the Fifth!"

"Willy could have had a quid for that affair!" said Levi, nodding.

"There's any amount of bad luck going on," said the Lancashire boy. "Quirke seems to have cast a spell over the giddy school, and, what with his rotten conjuring tricks, and his magician business, he's making everything lively. He's an uncanny sort of lad!"

It was just like Solomon Levi to take advantage of the feeling which was spreading throughout St. Frank's. He was always full of business schemes, but it had to be admitted that he was strictly honest. He would buy up stocks of penknives, foreign stamps, silver pencils, and similar articles, and sell them to his schoolfellows. He was always active in one way or another.

Nobody knew exactly how much profit he made on these deals, but it was generally believed that he cleared a comfortable little sum every time. But it was equally true that he gave full value for money. His customers always obtained genuine bargains. They weren't likely to quarrel over Solomon's profits. If he was businesslike enough to get the stuff in bulk from some bankrupt stock—at rock-bottom prices—his returns on the deal were his own concern.

This insurance scheme, however, was something new. Solomon had never promoted anything of this nature before. Ezra Quirke, of the East House, was an extraordinary boy. He claimed to be a modern sorcerer—a worker of magic. And it was a curious fact that those who jeered at him generally suffered in some way or other. Bad luck of the most persistent kind haunted them. And anybody outside of Quirke's "circle" was liable to be a candidate for misfortune. Not the ordinary misfortunes of school life—but something more serious.

And if, for the sake of a mere shilling, one could be insured against this form of bad luck, it would surely be imprudent to hold back. Levi would pay out a whole pound to any luckless fellow who could prove that he had had direct association with Quirke within forty-eight hours of any personal disaster.

That "direct association" clause in the policy was Levi's safeguard against false claims. If he didn't make a rule of this sort, any policy-holder could make out a case for almost anything. And the "personal disaster," too, must necessarily be something of a totally unforeseen nature.

Just at the moment, Quirke was one of the chief topics of the school.

He was full of extraordinary superstitions, and it was a remarkable fact that his warnings had an unpleasant way of coming true. He claimed to be a seer—he had gazed into his crystal, and had looked into the future on several occasions.

In fact, Quirke was becoming a sort of vogue. At first he had found some difficulty in persuading two or three juniors to

attend his strange meetings. But now these gatherings were always crowded. Every day there would be more converts. And every day further juniors were voicing their implicit faith in Quirke's marvellous abilities as a magician.

CHAPTER II.

THE CLUB OF THIRTEEN.



"READY?" asked Solomon Levi briskly.

"Eh?" said Goodwin, starting. "I was thinking, Solly. I've a good mind to have a bob's worth, you

know——"

"Sign here!" interrupted Levi, whisking up a form and planking it in front of his study-mate. "One shilling down, please! That makes you safe until this hour next week!"

Dick Goodwin took the policy and glanced at it. It was quite simple, and the wording was plain. For the premium of one shilling, the policy-holder was insured for one pound for the period of seven days. It was strictly stated that no claim would be considered unless a clear case of bad luck was made out, and such bad luck must absolutely be laid at Ezra Quirke's door. If necessary, the company would permit a party of three disinterested judges to decide the validity of the claim.

"Good!" said the Jewish boy, as he pocketed Dick's shilling. "Better hold it tight, you know—no claims paid unless the policy is produced! Now we'll get along to the other studies, and find some customers."

"What about these application forms?"

"We don't need those, you ass!" said Solly. "They're only to be used in the event of a claim. These policies are all we need. Let's go next door, to start with."

They marched into Study Q, and discovered the lanky figure of Clarence Fellowe reclining in the armchair. Tucker and Canham, who shared the study with the school-boy poet, were absent.

"My life!" breathed Levi. "Might as well leave this chap——"

"No harm in trying," said Dick, grinning.

"Come inside and close the door," said Fellowe pleasantly. "You're welcome here; you may be sure. But what's that paper I can see? Anything to do with me?"

"We're wasting our time here," growled Solly. "Look here, Clarence, I've got an insurance scheme. It's about Quirke, you know. Have a look at one of these policies. One shilling a week, and you're insured for a quid. If you fall foul of Quirke, and he puts the 'fluence on you, you're safe!"

Clarence looked astonished.

"A strange affair. I must confess; it interests me, none the less," he observed.

"But do we really fear this Quirke? And is he up to dirty work?"

"My dear chap, he's wallowing in it," grinned Solomon. "My hat! Can't you speak without rhyming everything? I believe you do it unconsciously, you lanky bouncer!"

Fellowe shook his head.

"If I try straight speech I always flounder," he replied. "Oh, really. There I go again! I hope I haven't given you a pain. The rhymes occur without my knowledge; I'm just the same all over college. At lessons when the masters rave I cannot make my tongue behave!"

Solomon Levi sighed.

"It's a downright shame," he said regretfully. "You can get money for that sort of thing, and you waste it on us. Why, you could make hundreds of quids writing verses. Why the dickens don't you employ somebody to take everything down in shorthand? You could sell most of it afterwards."

"You're trying to be funny," said Clarence stiffly. "Why not talk about this money? I pay a bob and get a paper?"

"Exactly."

"I trust you're not a funny japer?"

"He can't help it, poor chap," said Dick Goodwin sorrowfully. "Look here, Clarence, whack out your bob, and you'll be safe for a week. Think of it—a whole quid if you meet with any misfortune owing to Quirke."

"But do these dangers really lurk?" asked Clarence.

"They're surrounding us!" said Levi grimly.

"In that event, I'll take a chance—pray let me at the paper glance," replied Clarence. "You see, I can't escape the verse, and that one was even worse."

He took the policy and read it with interest. Clarence was by no means a duffer, and he could see that the scheme was genuine. At the same time there wasn't much chance of him falling foul of Ezra Quirke.

"Am I the first to have this honour?" he asked.

"Goodwin's got policy No. 1."

"Then I, too, will be a goner," replied Fellowe readily. "I trust you'll change a ten-bob note? If not, I'll search my overcoat."

"I've got change for a fiver if necessary," said Levi promptly. "This insurance company is starting out with plenty of capital; all claims met on the spot. You don't think I'm going to pay out on takings only?"

Clarence signed the form and paid his shilling. And then Solomon Levi and Dick Goodwin escaped, rather overcome by Fellowe's unconscious rhyming. They

looked in Study M, but the apartment was empty.

"We'll find 'em in the Common-room later, I expect," said Solomon. "Let's try Study K. and see if we can find Pitt and Grey."

"By gum! You've caught Clarence's complaint!" grinned Dick Goodwin.

"Believe me, that chap would make me meshuga within an hour," said Levi, with conviction. "He'd drive anybody mad."

They entered Study K, and found the electric light burning, and the fire crackling merrily. It was a chilly November evening outside, and most of the juniors were concluding their prep.

"Welcome!" said Reggie Pitt cheerfully. "Enter, fair youths. But kindly mind the wet paint. Our esteemed friend, Jack, has developed a mania for enamelling his bicycle in sections."

"My goodness!" said Levi. "What a niff!"

"Just one of the tortures we must all suffer," said Reggie.

The study certainly reeked of enamel. Papers were spread on the floor, and Jack Grey's bicycle was littered all over the place. Pedals adorned the mantelpiece, cranks and accessories reposed on the cupboard. And the frame was slung in the centre of the room, on strings. Jack Grey himself was busy with the brush.

"Don't come bothering now!" he said tartly. "Hi! Look out, Goodwin, you fat-head! Don't touch that bit; I've just finished it!"

"Are you enamelling the bicycle or yourself?" asked Goodwin politely.

The question was excusable, for Jack Grey was nearly as black as the bicycle. Solomon Levi shook his head rather sadly as he gazed upon the scene.

"It's a waste of time and money," he said. "Home enamelling is never satisfactory; it'll chip like the dickens when it's dry. I could have got the job done for you—properly stoved, you know, as cheap as dirt. When will you chaps realise that you'd better come to me?"

"It's a sad world," said Pitt. "But there's always a remedy, Solly, my son. If the chaps won't come to you, you've got to go to the chaps. I take it that you have blown in with some new scheme at the moment?"

"Insurance!" admitted Levi.

"We're progressing by leaps and bounds," declared Reggie Pitt. "I'll take out a policy at once. I'd like to be insured against lines and swishings—yes, and indigestion. I'm still suffering tortures from the effects of Handforth's patent toffee—"

"My insurance is specialised," interrupted



Solomon briskly. "One subject only—bad luck!"

"You'll insure us against bad luck?"

"Absolutely!"

"I'll have two-pennyworth as a sample," said the junior captain of the West House. "My neck's still stiff from that Yexford match. How much shall I get, for example, if I fall downstairs and go knock-kneed? That would be a shocking piece of bad luck. Imagine the awful feeling of your knees knocking together——"

"Don't be funny!" interrupted Solomon gruffly. "This isn't a joke; it's a sound proposition."

"Kindly expound, O Wise Man of the East!"

Levi obligingly expounded, and although Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey grinned at first, they soon grasped the possibilities. Pitt himself had been one of the unlucky ones recently, mainly owing to Quirke, too.

"This is good!" he said at length. "In fact, it's positively brainy. Mr. Levi, forward. One bob's worth, please. This young gentleman is anxious to join the happy throng!"

"It'll be two bob to you," said Levi.

"Two bob?"

"Sorry, but it'll have to be double rates."

"But why am I honoured in this painful way?" demanded Pitt. "I'm always ready to admit that exclusiveness is desirable, but when one's pockets are light one needs to think twice."

"How about me?" asked Jack Grey.

"You'll have to pay two shillings, too."

"But Goodwin only paid a bob?" asked Reggie. "I don't entirely approve of this favouritism. I should hate to make any mention of a certain Mr. Shylock, but under the circumstances——"

"You howling fathead!" roared Levi. "I couldn't possibly accept you chaps at the ordinary rate. You belong to the Thirteen Club."

Reggie Pitt started.

"Like a flood, light dawns!" he said. "By jove! So we've got to pay double rates because we belong to the Thirteen Club. Yes, perhaps you're right. Allow me to instantly withdraw all mention of aforesaid Mr. Shylock. You're a business man, Levi, and you couldn't do anything else."

"You'll take the two-shillingsworth, then?"

"The exchequer is very low at the moment, so you'll have to make a special cut price, and charge one-and-ninepence," said Reggie. "But I've got a couple of three-halfpenny stamps——"

"Don't be an ass!" grinned Grey. "Here you are, Solly—take four bob out of this pound note. Where do we sign?"

CHAPTER III.

THE HON. DOUGLAS IS CONVINCED.



REGGIE PITT was rather amused at Levi's latest enterprise. But he had to admit that there were golden opportunities. Scores of fellows would take out Levi's policies without hesitation. Bad luck was making itself felt everywhere, and Ezra Quirke was generally indirectly connected with the trouble.

Besides, Pitt could see some fun brewing. There would certainly be a shoal of false claims before long, and Solomon Levi would be kept very busy dealing with them. As junior skipper of the West House, Pitt would have dropped on the scheme with a heavy hand if he had suspected any monkey business. But he knew Levi to be thoroughly straightforward.

And Reggie was rather tickled about double rates for Jack Grey and himself. They were both members of the Thirteen Club, a humorous organisation founded by Reggie himself as a kind of countermove against Ezra Quirke's mystic society. There were only two members of the Thirteen Club in the West House. The other eleven all belonged to the Ancient House, and the whole thirteen were Removites.

The club members had made a practice of defying every superstition, and always in front of Quirke himself. They didn't believe in occult phenomena, and regarded all Quirke's mysticism with contempt. They had boldly stated their intention of defying the Unseen Powers to do their worst.

Quirke had warned them grimly, urging them to disband the club and refrain from this madness. And the Thirteen Club had practised their defiance with greater gusto than before. They took a particular delight in ragging Quirke at every opportunity.

Curiously enough, bad luck had resulted.

Quirke had repeatedly warned the fellows that his superstitions were well-founded, and that any defiance of them would mean disaster. And, sure enough, the Thirteen Club had met with catastrophe on the day of the Yexford match. Edgar Fenton, the popular captain of St. Frank's, had played three juniors in the First Eleven—Reginald Pitt, Dick Hamilton, and Ralph Leslie Fullwood. All were members of the club. And all three, although proving their worth on the senior football field, had met with misfortune. Not one of them had remained on the ground at the end of the game.

Owing to their mishaps, St. Frank's had lost the game. So the bad luck was no mere personal affair, but it affected the entire school.

Nipper and Pitt, however, maintained that the accidents were sheer coincidence, and their convictions were not in the least altered. Handforth and Glenthorne and other prominent members of the Thirteen Club also refused to be scared.

Solomon Levi, having gained two new customers in Study K, went elsewhere. In Study L the Trotwood twins and Fatty Little enthusiastically paid their shillings. But in Study N the Hon. Douglas Singleton flatly refused to have anything to do with the insurance scheme.

"You can take it away, Solly, old man," he said pleasantly. "Nix doing here. I'm not afraid of any bad luck."

"It's just as well to be prepared," declared Levi firmly. "Why do you expect to be immune, anyhow?"

"Because I believe in Quirke."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated the Jewish boy. "You BELIEVE in him?"

"Firmly."

"You're talking out of the back of your neck!" said Solly with a sniff. "The man's a fraud. He's only a conjurer—a trickster with a lot of patent gags to help him. That sort of rubbish doesn't fool me!"

Singleton frowned.

"We won't argue," he said quietly. "One day perhaps you'll realise the truth. I've had more experience of Quirke than you have. He's capable of things that we don't even dream of."

"Some of Quirke's doings are nightmares, believe me," said Solomon. "I'm surprised at you, Singleton, old man; I thought you were made of sterner stuff. It's only the duds who have been fooled. What about you, Kahn? Won't you have a bob's worth, and make yourself secure?"

The Indian boy smiled.

"Much as I admire your beautiful scheme, I regretfully announce my disgusted intention of having everything to do with it," he replied. "If Duggy has so politely turned you down, I must ridiculously follow his esteemed example."

"But you just said you'll have everything to do with it!"

"He means he'll have nothing to do with it!" growled Singleton. "And quite right, too. Good old Hussi! You chaps can buzz off!"

Solomon Levi shrugged his shoulders.

"We'll go, but I'll have another shot at you to-morrow," he said. "An insurance canvasser is a persistent fellow. You'll have to dodge me if you want to escape this live-wire company!"

They went out, and Singleton continued his prep. without comment. But Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn had something on his mind.

"The splendid Levi has opened a subject which I exquisitely desired to refer to,"

he said. "Why is it that you are so enthusiastically dotty about Quirke?"

The Hon. Douglas looked up.

"I believe in him, that's all," he replied.

"I have noticed with much observation that you have superbly changed," said Kahn. "It grieves me to witness this preposterous alteration. You are no longer your ghastly self."

"My dear chap, I'm just the same as ever," said Singleton tartly. "Can't I believe in Quirke if I like?"

"You are your own ridiculous master, of course——"

"I'd like you to believe in Quirke, too," went on the Hon. Douglas. "Honestly, Hussi, he's an uncanny beggar. I can't forget what he saw in the crystal the other day."

"Did he then witness such wondrous adventures?"

"He saw some pretty rummy things—vague, but rather disturbing," said Singleton. "I ridiculed them at the time, but I'm not so sure now. Don't forget about Snipe and the stopped clock!"

"You are hopelessly filled with presumptuous superstitions," said Hussi Kahn, shaking his head. "Your cantankerous mind is obsessed."

"Rats!" said Singleton. "I'm just the same as ever; I pride myself upon being level-headed. Quirke hasn't affected me like that. Plenty of chaps are dotty about him, but I'm not."

"Yet your words are suggestively filled with conviction."

"I'm surprised at you, Hussi. You ought to be one of the first to believe in Quirke. You Indian chaps are full of magic——"

"Alas! In India, too, there are wonderful people who produce the ludicrous fakes," said Hussi Kahn. "It is the same in every nonsensical country. Always there are people to prey upon the credulous misunderstandings of the simple."

"Then you think I'm simple?"

"I think you are being prettily spoofed."

"It's all very well to talk like that!" growled Singleton. "I thought the same, too; but you can't get away from facts, Hussi. Quirke's done some marvellous things, and I've simply GOT to believe in him."

"Is that not an admission of Quirke's successful spoofery?" asked the Indian boy. "I confess that I am not impressed by his contradictory miracles. One is always apt to judge by appearances."

"Look here, old man, this is deeper than you imagine," said Singleton quietly. "The other day Snipe's clock stopped, and Quirke said it was a sign of death in his family. The other chaps yelled, didn't they?"

"Even we smiled with dastardly pleasure," admitted Kahn.

"We didn't know so much then," said Singleton. "The same day Snipe sat in front of Quirke's crystal, and Quirke told him that a death had really occurred—a elderly, white-haired man was seen in the crystal—"

"But not by Snipe," put in Kahn quickly. "This hospitable vision was only witnessed by the sinister Quirke himself."

"But, hang it, Quirke must have seen it or he couldn't have told about it!" said Singleton impatiently. "And sure enough the next morning Snipe heard that his grandfather had died at the very hour the clock stopped. How was Quirke able to tell all that?"

"I suggestively venture that Quirke must have known something."

"But that's impossible—he couldn't have known," said the Hon. Douglas. "I had a go, too—but I haven't told you about it before. Quirke saw some queer things in the crystal."

"This is interestedly getting absorbent," confessed Hussi.

"Everything was vague, and Quirke was quite concerned," continued Singleton. "He saw a finger—a finger with a gash on it. And he saw a withered arm, too—although the arm and the finger weren't connected."

"Truly a pestilent vision."

"Quirke saw an elderly gentleman, too, although he couldn't say who he was," went on Singleton. "These things were all connected—the cut finger, the withered arm and the queer old gentleman. Yet, although connected, there was no evidence that they were part of the same man."

Hussi Kahn grinned.

"You will observe that Quirke was vaguely indirect," he said. "He takes exquisite care to see only misty things in his crystal. What is more likely than for one of the preposterous fellows to gash his finger? And then you will say that Quirke is a real magician!"

"Oh, but look here——"

"And it is not commonplace to pass an antique individual with a paralysed arm?" asked Hussi. "Such prepossessing people are frequently met with. I am sorrowfully equipped with regret, Duggy, but I cannot swallow all this diametrical bunkum."

"Quirke's holding another meeting tomorrow evening——"

"I am thinking of visiting the disgusting cinema," said Hussi Kahn. "The excruciating Douglas Fairbanks is on view, and is he not preferable to Quirke?"

"Oh, all right!" growled Singleton. "I don't want to force you into anything, old man. But you're missing something by not attending Quirke's meetings. They're too marvellous for words!"



The flash came—a blinding, searing mass of white flame which seemed to hit the very ground near the base of the Ancient House Wall.

CHAPTER IV.

HANDFORTH'S GENTLE WAY.



"INSURANCE?" said Edward Oswald Handforth, staring.

"Yes."

"What rot!"

"It's a fact, I tell you," insisted Church. "I've just had it from Fatty Little—I met him in the school shop. Lots of the West House fellows have taken out policies already."

Handforth and McClure were at the table of Study D, in the Ancient House, busy with their prep. Church had finished his prep earlier, and had been out for some light refreshment in the shape of hot pies. Mrs. Hake was famous for her hot pies. She always had a supply on chilly evenings.

"It's not a bad idea," grinned McClure. "A bob a time, eh? And if any bad luck happens, you can claim a quid? It's a great scheme!"

"It's a drivelling piece of insanity!" said Handforth promptly.

"Sorry! I thought——"

"I don't care what you thought!" interrupted the autocrat of Study D. "You've

got no right to think at all! In fact, it isn't your place to think! You two chaps have got to remain neutral. I'm the brains of this study!"

"We're just bits of furniture, I suppose?" asked Church tartly.

"Furniture is generally ornamental!" retorted Handforth. "Furniture's useful, too. And whoever said you were useful? Let Solomon Levi keep his silly insurance to his own House!"

"He's over here already—canvassing the studies," grinned Church. "I expect he'll be at our door before long."

"Let him come—that's all!" snorted Handforth. "The nerve of the chap! I've a good mind to go and find him—By George, I will!"

"Hold on!" said Church hurriedly. "Don't make an ass of yourself, Handy. Levi's insurance dodge is first-rate—he's giving full value for money. You know as well as I do that he's straight——"

"That's nothing to do with the question at all," interrupted Handforth curtly. "He's a West House chap, and it's like his cheek to butt in here! Besides, I was thinking of getting up an insurance company of my own."

"But I thought you said it was drivelling insanity?"

"That's Levi's scheme—not mine!" hooted Handforth. "Mine's full of sound common-sense. I shall only charge a penny for the policy, and any good claim would be eligible for a fiver!"

"I pity you if you had a hundred policies, and ten claims came in!" grinned McClure.

"Ten out of a hundred wouldn't be bad!"

"Why, you ass, you'd only get eight and fourpence for the policies—and you'd have to whack out fifty quid!" said McClure. "If that's what you call business, you must be off your rocker!"

"Never mind about business—I'm going to find Levi!" said Handforth, rising to his feet and going to the door. "I'm going to tell him to keep to his own preserves! You chaps had better come too, in case there's trouble."

They left Study D, and went in search of the business man of the Remove. Handforth wasn't really opposed to Levi in the least. But as Church and McClure had thought fit to praise the insurance proposition, Handforth had been compelled to run it down. He regarded it as one of life's principles to always oppose the views of his two chums.

They had only just reached the lobby, en route for the common-room, when they came face to face with a strange-looking junior with unnaturally pale cheeks, and deep-set, burning eyes. He was so pale, indeed, that he looked almost ill, although this was not

the case. There was something strange about him—something almost suggestive of a ghost.

"Hallo!" said Handforth, halting.

"What are you doing over here?"

Ezra Quirke looked at Handforth steadily.

"Am I obliged to tell you my business?"

he asked, in a soft voice.

"Yes, if I order you to!"

"I am sorry, but I take no orders from you," replied Quirke. "Cannot I visit a friend in this House without interference——"

"You've got no friends in this House!" interrupted Handforth grimly. "If you have, you'd better tell me who they are, and I'll dot them on the nose!"

Quirke ignored the remark, and walked on.

There was plenty of rivalry between the various Houses of St. Frank's, but any junior could visit another House without fear of being ragged. It was only when whole parties of fellows invaded a rival House that trouble ensued.

"Let him go, Handy!" murmured Church.

"Not likely!" hissed Handforth. "What about our Thirteen Club? We can't let a chance like this slip by! Besides, I don't like that beast under our roof! He'll only bring bad luck!"

"The Thirteen Club always works in a body," said McClure. "We can't work any dodge on our own."

"Yes we can!" said Handforth, running after Quirke, and grabbing him by the shoulder. "Just a minute, my lad! We want you for half a tick. No struggling, mind. Take it quietly, and we'll let you go."

Quirke made no attempt to get free.

"Well?" he said briefly.

"Hold him, you chaps," said Handforth. "Hold him tight, mind! If he's gone when I come back I'll slaughter you!"

Church and McClure seized Quirke, and Handforth vanished into the cloak-room. In less than a minute he emerged with one of the interior window-cleaning ladders, which went to a point at top. Handforth set it against the wall of the lobby at a steep angle.

"A ladder!" muttered Quirke. "What are you going to do?"

Handforth brushed his chums aside, and took Quirke firmly by the arm.

"We're going for a little stroll," he said pleasantly. "You chaps can follow behind—and give Quirke a push if he starts any of his rot! We're going under this ladder, Quirke, old man. It's quite a pleasant little walk."

Quirke held back fiercely.

"Stop!" he said hoarsely. "I have warned you against passing under ladders! It will bring disaster—dreadful disaster! It

is bad enough for you to go—but the result will be dreadful if you compel me——”

“Come along!” said Edward Oswald sweetly.

He exerted his full strength, and although Quirke struggled, he was like a baby in Handforth's iron grip. Church and McClure grinned—they were quite enjoying this little rag.

Quirke was fairly panting with superstitious terror as he neared the ladder. His efforts, however, were useless. He was forced under it, and Church and McClure followed. The dread deed had been done.

“Is it unlucky if we go back again?” asked Handforth politely. “Or will it nullify the dire effect?”

“Don't—don't!” gasped Quirke. “It is bad enough as it is—but if we go under the ladder twice it will be appalling!”

“Good!” said Handforth heartily. “Come along!”

And back Quirke was forced. Probably he would have been compelled to pass under that ladder half-a-dozen times—only Fullwood happened to appear with the news that Mr. Crowell was in the vicinity. Handforth somehow felt that Mr. Crowell would misunderstand the proceedings, and Quirke was released.

He apparently forgot his mission in the Ancient House, for he dashed out into the Triangle, and sped towards his own House. Without doubt, he had been scared badly. And Handforth & Co. felt that they had upheld the traditions of the Thirteen Club in a most praiseworthy manner.

Just inside the East House, Ezra Quirke ran into Clifton and Simmons, two of his most ardent followers. He came to a halt, breathless and panting with agitation.

“Hallo! What's happened?” asked Clifton curiously.

“They shall suffer for this—the Powers of the Unseen will never allow it to pass unheeded,” declared Quirke. “They are fools—fools! They don't know the nature of these hidden perils!”

“But what——”

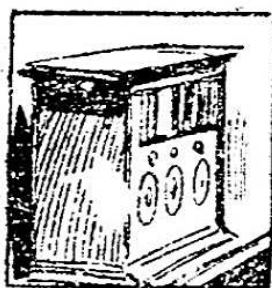
Quirke briefly explained, and Clifton and Simmons listened with genuine concern. They were as superstitious as the schoolboy magician himself. He had filled them with his own fantastic ideas and beliefs.

“Just like Handforth, of course,” said Clifton slowly. “It was bad enough for those three fatheads to walk under the ladder. But they forced you under, too, Quirke! That makes it a lot worse, doesn't it?”

Quirke stood there, his eyes smouldering. “Wait!” he said impressively. “In some way—I am not permitted to know how—disaster will overtake those reckless fools! Such defiance can have only one result! They will suffer heavily!”

CHAPTER V.

THE SUPER-WIRELESS.



EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH came to a sudden halt.

“By George!” he breathed tensely.

He stood there, in the Remove corridor of the Ancient House, like a hound who has just run the fox to earth. Solomon Levi was knocking on the door of Study D, and entering.

“Steady, old man,” said Church. “Go easy, you know. Better not slaughter Levi here—it'll only result in a House row. Those West House chaps are always ready for a scrap——”

“Mind your own business!” said Handforth tartly.

He strode forward, and dashed into Study D just as Levi was coming out.

“Oh, good!” said the Jewish boy briskly. “Just the chaps I was looking for. I've got a scheme here—insurance, to be exact. Policies a shilling each, and they're valid for one week——”

“I know all about it!” interrupted Handforth coldly.

Much to the relief of Church and McClure, their leader had assumed one of his cool, indifferent attitudes. There was never any telling with Handforth. Sometimes he would be violent, and sometimes deadly calm.

“I know all about it!” he repeated. “You can take your giddy insurance scheme to the dickens! It's like your nerve to butt into this House with your fatheaded ideas!”

“That's just where you make a mistake,” said Levi. “This is the most novel insurance stunt ever invented. One shilling for a policy, and you ensure yourself against bad luck. The policies will be two bob each for you chaps.”

“How's that?” demanded Handforth. “Why double for us?”

“You all belong to the 13 Club,” said Levi. “Double risks, you know.”

“Rot!” snorted Handforth. “I'll pay a bob, or nothing!”

“Believe me, I couldn't take the risk!” declared Solomon, shaking his head. “I ought to make the rate still higher, but I'll chance it.”

“You're taking an awful hazard, Levi, old man,” said Fullwood, strolling up. “These three chaps have just pushed Quirke under a ladder.”

“My life!” said Levi, startled.

“They pushed him back again, too,” grinned Fullwood. “According to all the rules and regulations, they ought to meet with bad luck within twenty-four hours. And I can give direct evidence that they've had association with Quirke. So go easy with those policies of yours. If I were you, I

wouldn't insure Study D under five bob a head!"

"You funny fathead!" roared Handforth. "I wouldn't take out an insurance policy if they were only sixpence a time! I'm not saying there's anything squiffy about Levi's scheme, but my principles won't allow me to touch it. Insurance is nothing but a swindle."

"You call me a swindler?" demanded Levi warmly.

"A chap insures himself, and he lives for years without anything happening!" said Handforth firmly. "He pays his giddy premium month after month and year after year, and it costs him an awful lot. Then one day he forgets the exact date, and his policy lapses. Then he gets under a 'bus, or something, and the insurance company doesn't pay a cent! Don't you call that a swindle?"

"The insurance would have been paid if the policy had been kept valid," retorted Levi. "You can't expect any company to pay out on an out-of-date policy. It just shows how necessary it is to keep up your payments——"

"Well, we're not making any payments, so there'll be no need to worry," interrupted Handforth firmly. "You can take your giddy papers away, Levi—we're not touching them!"

"But look here——" began Church.

"We're not touching 'em!" said Handforth.

"After what we did to Quirke, it might be a good thing, or——" put in McClure.

"We're not touching 'em!" insisted Handforth calmly. "You'd better understand, Levi, that Study D can look after itself! We don't need insurance—we're safe without it. With a chap like me at the head of things there's not the slightest danger. So you can go and eat coke!"

Handforth's decision was final—although it seemed that Church and McClure were rather inclined to take out policies for themselves. In face of their leader's firm stand, however, this step was hardly wise.

Solomon Levi shrugged his shoulders.

"All right—just as you like," he said. "You'll be sorry for it afterwards—and I shall be glad. But, as a business man, I was ready to accept the rough with the smooth."

He walked off, and Handforth frowned.

"By George!" he said, with a start. "Was that ass calling us rough? He was willing to take us, you know! The rough with the smooth! I'll jolly well slaughter him——"

"Only a figure of speech," interrupted Church hurriedly. "Let's get into the study and turn on the wireless. There's something extra special on to-night. A kind of radio revue, or something."

They went into Study D, and closed the door. Church and McClure were glad to get their leader on another topic. And just now wireless was one of his current crazes. He had spent quite a lot of his money on his

set, and even Church and McClure had shares in the instrument.

It stood on the top of the cupboard, and was an imposing affair in mahogany, with folding doors and a concealed loud speaker. The whole school had heard about the famous wireless set of Study D. It was certainly one of the best in the Junior School—a four-valve set, with all the latest improvements.

It had actually cost Handforth & Co. no less than fifteen pounds, and even at this price it was a great bargain, for they had bought it second-hand from one of the Modern House seniors. The latter had grown tired of wireless, and had let his set go at half its real worth.

And Handforth & Co., having made several additions, and a great many improvements, were the proud owners of the best set in the junior quarters of the Ancient House. Handforth had paid ten pounds of the money, and Church and McClure had shared the remaining fiver between them. And it had been necessary to write many loving, persuasive letters home before the necessary cash had been forthcoming.

At the mere touch of a couple of levers, the loud speaker awoke to activity.

"Only Bournemouth," said Handforth, with a sniff. "We don't want any of this local stuff. Let's try Daventry."

"Why not Paris?" suggested Church.

"Or Madrid?" said McClure.

"It's going to be Daventry!" insisted Handforth.

It only took him a moment or two to tune in to the high-power station, and there were some very entertaining items on the programme. Church and McClure settled themselves to listen with keen enjoyment.

But Handforth wasn't satisfied—he never was. Having got Daventry to perfection, he suddenly thought it would be a good idea to tune in to America. Of course, there wasn't the slightest hope of getting anything, but Handforth was an optimist. For three or four minutes Study D was filled with wild and anguished sounds of wailing atmospherics.

"Chuck it, old man!" said Church impatiently. "Let's get back to Daventry. That revue thing was ripping——"

"Shush!" interrupted Handforth. "I've just got KDKA."

A perfect storm of horrors came forth from the loud speaker.

"If that's KDKA, the Pittsburg listeners in have got my sympathy!" groaned McClure.

"You ass, you've got a lot of Morse mixed up with it now! What's the good of messing about like this?"

Many and many a time Church and McClure had longed for a wireless set that could only tune in one station—so that there couldn't be any of this painful business. Handforth always wanted to get "something else." No matter how good the programme, his one desire was to tune in some remote station which probably wasn't broadcasting at all. In vain Church and McClure pointed

out that Pittsburg time was five hours behind the English.

"You can't get anything, Handy!" growled Church. "It's only three o'clock in the afternoon there—or just after—and even if you get 'em, the programme won't be worth listening to. Now, Daventry——"

The door opened, and Willy Handforth looked in. He was greeted by a fiendish outburst from the loud speaker, and the leader of the Third shook his head.

"Not so bad, but there's a lot of distortion," he said critically.

"Eh?" said his major, looking round. "Clear off, young Willy! You'll make everything go wrong if you stay here! I'm just tuning in KDKA!"

"Oh, sorry!" grinned Willy. "I thought it was somebody singing from Bournemouth. No wonder it sounded a bit wonky."

He closed the door, and stood there, watching.

"You were dished over that set!" he said sadly. "If you want to hear real wireless, come along to my study. I'll back my set against this for any old sum you like to name!"

"You young ass!" roared Edward Oswald. "Your set's only made of cigar-boxes and cardboard and glue! You don't expect that silly thing to give any results, do you?"

"We don't have to expect—it gives 'em!" retorted Willy. "Fifteen bob, all told—including the loud speaker! That's how much it cost me. It's not much to look at, but, by jingo, it gives the results!"

His major grew more impatient than ever, and the reason was simple. He knew that Willy was speaking the truth. That weird contrivance of his minor's actually did work to perfection. Willy could tune in almost any station he liked, and the set had the great advantage of being a Chinese puzzle to anybody but the owner. There wasn't a soul in the school who could work Willy's set but himself. But by some magical touch he always got perfect results.

"Here we are!" said Handforth excitedly. "Got 'em!"

Strains of music came forth, mixed with Morse and a few other choice interruptions.

"KDKA!" breathed Handforth. "Good!"

Willy shook his head sorrowfully.

"Poor old Ted!" he said, with a sigh.

"When will you learn to tune in right? It's only Bournemouth, and anybody can get 'em on a crystal set!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE ALARM IN THE NIGHT.



CHURCH and McClure grinned. They recognised the Bournemouth programme, and were not in the least astonished. This kind of thing had happened repeatedly.

They only really enjoyed the wireless when Handforth was out somewhere.

"Better get Daventry again, old man," said Church. "It's no good messing about with these distant stations——"

"Especially to-night," put in Willy. "Why especially to-night?" demanded his major.

"Thunder."

"Thunder?" said Handforth, staring. "You young fathead! We don't get thunderstorms in November! Clear out of this study before I biff you——"

"I only came along to warn you," interrupted Willy. "I know what a careless chap you are with this wireless, so I was going to advise you to switch it off properly. You need to earth your aerial when there's a thunderstorm about——"

"Do you think I don't know that?" howled Handforth.

"You're so forgetful, Ted," said Willy.

He thought it better to take his departure, so he discreetly vanished. And Handforth & Co. forgot all else in the enjoyment of the programme—for Edward Oswald at last tuned in Daventry again and let it stand.

And, naturally, at the most interesting point, the bell rang, announcing bed-time. Handforth was extremely indignant.

"It's always the same!" he said disgustedly. "I'm going to write to the B.B.C. about this. They ought to finish their programmes just before bed-time! It only means starting a bit earlier!"

"But we're not the only listeners," said McClure gently. "Most people go to bed between eleven and twelve, you know——"

"They ought to be ashamed of themselves!" interrupted Handforth firmly. "Huh, going to bed at midnight! Perfectly disgraceful!"

He turned off a couple of switches, and Daventry ceased to broadcast its programme into Study D.

"Not that it'll be much good writing to the B.B.C.," went on Handforth thoughtfully. "I've written a dozen times already, but they've never taken my advice! They're just like everybody else, pig-headed and obstinate! I've given them heaps of brainy ideas! And they haven't used one!"

"Shocking!" said Church, shaking his head.

"Perhaps it would be better to interview the Head," said Edward Oswald. "Yes, by George, that's a scheme, you know! Let's get up a round-robin, or something—a giddy petition—and ask the Head to alter the hour of bed-time so that we can hear all the programmes."

"In that case, we shan't go to bed till half-past eleven on some nights."

"Exactly."

"But I thought you said it was disgraceful——"

"I'm not going to argue!" interrupted Handforth firmly. "I've a good mind to go to the Head alone—— Hallo, what the dickens was that?"

A faint, far-away rumble had sounded. "Thunder!" said McClure. "My hat, Willy

must have been right, then! Fancy having a thunderstorm in November!"

"Let's go and have a look!" said Handforth briskly.

They sped out-of-doors by the rear way, and stood in the West Square. The night was as black as pitch, and not a breath of wind stirred. For November, it was unusually mild, and the entire sky was thickly overcast. As Handforth & Co. stared upwards, a faint flash lightened the horizon.

"It's a thunderstorm all right," said Church. "Not much of it coming here, though—it's dozens of miles away. I say, we'd better buzz in—there'll be prefects after us if we don't."

They went to bed, and in due course dropped off to sleep with their usually healthy ease. Lots of other fellows had been talking about the threatened storm, too, but it only seemed a mild affair. All the same, the storm was undoubtedly gathering.

By ten o'clock rain was descending in torrents, and an occasional lightning flash was followed by dull, distant thunder. In one of the junior dormitories in the Ancient House Dick Hamilton was wakeful. Tregellis-West and Watson, who shared the dormitory with him, were sound asleep, however.

"Looks like coming over in earnest," murmured Dick, as the lightning flashes became more brilliant, and the thunder louder. "I thought we'd done with thunderstorms this year."

The rain was so heavy that Nipper got out of bed to pull the window to. He could hear the drops pattering on the linoleum. As he reached the window another brilliant flash came, and for a second he saw the West House outlined against the black sky—he saw the driving rain, too.

He was vaguely reminded of another occasion when he had gone to the dormitory window during a night storm. That had been on the night of Ezra Quirke's arrival, and although it was a fairly recent affair, it seemed quite remote to Nipper. Quirke had made such a stir in the school that he seemed to have been at St. Frank's for months.

For some minutes Nipper stood at the window, watching the storm. He was always rather attracted by thunder and lightning. There was something fascinating in the vivid flashes, and the following rolls of thunder. The pouring rain, too, was soothing in its insistent, drumming note.

It was by no means a violent storm. The lightning didn't seem to be forked or dangerous—just vivid sheets which illuminated the heavens for a second or two. And at last Nipper closed the window.

But just as he did so the most vivid flash of all came.

Even Dick Hamilton was startled—and it took quite a deal to startle a fellow of his nerve. The flash came—a blinding, searing mass of white flame, which seemed to hit the very ground near the base of the Ancient House wall. It was accompanied

by a curious bursting noise—not exactly explosive, but much softer.

Nipper flung the window open, and stared down.

"By Jove!" he murmured. "I believe that hit the school!"

All was pitch black now. It had seemed to Nipper that the lightning had struck the ground just near the building—down towards the left, in the vicinity of the junior studies. And as Nipper leaned out, and the rain pattered upon his head, a strange odour assailed his nostrils.

He couldn't exactly define it. It was a curious smell of burning—but there was nothing to account for it except that tremendous flash of lightning. Below, everything was dark.

All the same, Nipper closed the window again, and slipped on his dressing-gown. He wouldn't feel comfortable until he had gone downstairs and had a look round. He wanted to feel certain that everything was in order. He was puzzled, too. He couldn't get to the bottom of that strange explosive noise.

Without awakening his chums, he passed out into the corridor, and came face to face with Fullwood.

"Hallo!" said Nipper. "Where are you off to?"

Ralph Leslie was wearing his dressing-gown, too.

"I'm going downstairs," he replied. "I say, did you see that terrific flash a minute or two ago? I thought it hit the school——"

"So did I," said Nipper. "Were you at your window?"

"No, I was in bed."

"We'd better go down together," said Nipper briskly. "As far as I could see, the lightning struck the ground just near my study. It may have done some damage, for all I know. There's nothing like making sure."

They went downstairs together, and heard various sounds from other corridors—proving that they were not the only wakeful ones. That blinding flash, apparently, had brought other people out of their beds.

"Something funny here!" said Fullwood, as they approached Study C. "By gad! What a smell! Like rubber, or something——"

"A fused electric wire, I believe," said Nipper quickly. "There's no mistaking that smell, Fully. I hope to goodness—— No, everything seems to be all right. Nothing wrong here."

He had switched on the electric light in Study C, and everything was in perfect order. They went next door, and here was a different story. As soon as they flung open the door of Study D they halted. A mass of choking fumes surged out.

"Great Scott!" gasped Fullwood. "What the——"

Nipper pressed the switch down, and the light came on—proving that nothing had

gone wrong with the circuit. But other things had happened. The comfortable apartment was in a state of disorder.

Handforth & Co.'s beautiful wireless set was scattered over the floor in wreckage. It was literally burst into fragments. Bits of glass from the valves gleamed on the linoleum, and the air was heavy with a thick, pungent haze.

CHAPTER VII.

TOO MYSTERIOUS FOR WORDS.



DICK HAMILTON whistled.

"By Jove, this is a piece of rotten luck!" he exclaimed. "That first-rate wireless set smashed up! Look at it! Nothing

but matchwood! It's wrecked beyond all hope! A good thing it didn't set the place on fire."

"But how on earth did it happen?"

"That flash of lightning must have struck the big aerial, and run down this particular lead-wire," said Nipper slowly. "Perhaps all the other instruments were earthed, and this one wasn't. You know what a careless chap Handforth is. This was the bursting noise we heard."

"Hard luck!" said Fullwood, picking up some of the remains. "Look at this! The thing must have gone off like a gun!"

Nipper went to the wires, and examined them. Where they had originally entered the instrument they had fused right off—melted as though by the touch of some gigantic heat. There wasn't any question of the cause. A fearful charge of electricity had ruined Handforth & Co.'s radio.

"It's bad enough, of course," said Nipper. "But it might have been a lot worse. We'd better make sure there's nothing on fire, though. There might be something smouldering."

In the meantime, Church couldn't sleep very well. The storm disturbed him, and although he knew nothing of that dazzling flash, the occasional bursts of thunder kept him awake. McClure and Handforth were entirely oblivious of their surroundings.

Church was just feeling sleepy again—for the centre of the storm was now passing—when he sat up. He heard voices out in the corridor, and a natural curiosity took possession of him. Why were some of the fellows up at this time of night? Was it a raid of some kind? In any case, it would be better to steal out, and make certain.

He went to the door, and opened it. Nipper and Fullwood were in view, to say nothing of Wilson, of the Sixth. The latter was looking rather startled.

"Smashed it all to bits!" he was saying, in surprise.

"Smithereens!" declared Nipper.

"We'd better go down and have a look,"

said the prefect. "Handforth will be cut up in the morning, I expect. No need to tell him to-night. I expect he's only got his own carelessness to blame—"

"What's happened?" demanded Church, rushing up.

"Of course, you would come!" growled Fullwood, turning. "Sorry, Church, old man, but your study's in a bit of a mess. One wireless set gone west to be exact."

"Our radio!" gasped Church. "Has anything happened to it?"

"It's only in about a thousand pieces," said Nipper gently. "Take it like a man, Church. It's a sad, sad blow, but this world is full of worries. Your wireless set was struck by lightning, and it's— Well, it isn't! That's all about it!"

"It isn't!" said Church, staring. "Isn't what?"

"It just isn't!" said Fullwood. "It's ceased to be!"

Church didn't wait to hear any more. He was thoroughly alarmed, and he dashed back to his dormitory, and grabbed Handforth violently by the shoulder. Edward Oswald awoke with a start.

"Shoot!" he said tensely. "Now then, you chaps— Eh? What the— Chuck it, you ass! Don't shake me—"

"Wake up, Handy!"

"You dotty ass!" snorted Handforth. "I was just dreaming that the St. Frank's Junior Eleven was playing Tottenham Hot-spurs! It was nearly half-time, and we were leading by fifteen clear goals—"

"Never mind the 'Spurs!" interrupted Church. "Leave your dream till afterwards. Our wireless set's busted!"

"What!" yelled Handforth, leaping like a startled stag.

"Smashed to bits!" said Church, taking a certain melancholy pleasure in relating the dreadful truth. "All our money gone—yours, mostly, of course. They say the whole set's smashed to splinters."

"You're mad!" roared Handforth. "Of all the drivel—"

"It was struck by lightning," explained Church.

Handforth was out of bed in one leap. Without waiting to put on any clothes, he dashed out into the corridor, and sent Wilson flying. The unfortunate prefect toppled over backwards, sat down with a crash, and caught the back of his head against the opposite wall with a crack that sounded dreadful.

"Sorry!" said Handforth casually.

He rushed on without making any solicitous enquiries regarding the injured, with Church and McClure at his heels—for McClure had aroused himself, too.

Nipper and Fullwood picked Wilson up.

"Where is he?" asked Wilson dreamily. "I'll skin him alive for this! The reckless young ass—butting me like that! I've got a bump on the back of my head like an ostrich egg! Ooooh! I'm nearly brained!"

A door opened further down the corridor.

"Without wishing to intrude upon this cheery confab, may I inquire if it is absolutely necessary to make the welkin ring with childish prattle?" asked Browne, of the Fifth. "Ah, Brother Wilson, I am grieved to see you indulging in these midnight orgies in the company of mere juniors!"

"Go back to bed!" growled Wilson. "Nobody asked you to butt in, Browne. Ten minutes ago the school was struck by lightning——"

"That accounts for the somewhat dithery sensation which passed down my spine at that precise moment," interrupted Browne benevolently. "I will be confidential with you, brothers. Failing to woo sleep successfully, I set myself the task of thinking out a wonderful plan for making a human being disappear in mid-air——"

"Dry up, you ass!" snapped the prefect. "I've got enough trouble without listening to your drivel."

Browne, who was attired in a silken wrap of startling colour and design, waved a deprecating hand.

"Alas, that I should live to hear my efforts referred to in such disparaging terms," he sighed. "You must always remember, Brother Wilson, that Brother Quirke is not the only wizard in this noble establishment. In a very short time I shall be able to whizz with just as much effect."

And while they were discussing the affair, Handforth & Co. were viewing the wreckage in Study D. Church and McClure were deeply upset, but the effect upon Handforth was different. He became angrier and angrier.

"Quirke!" he said fiercely. "This is Quirke's doing!"

"Oh, rats!" said Church. "Somebody forgot to switch off! The aerial ought to have been properly earthed, and then this wouldn't have happened. Didn't Willy tell you about it?"

"It's your fault!" stormed Handforth.

"Our fault!" howled McClure. "Why, you dotty lunatic, you'll never let us touch the thing! We reminded you——"

"Never mind about that!" interrupted Handforth. "It would probably have happened just the same—whether the aerial was earthed or not! It's just an example of sheer bad luck. Quirke again!"

"It's—it's uncanny!" muttered Church. "I say, there's something pretty beastly about this, you know! Right on the heels of that affair with Quirke this evening, too!"

"It seems more than coincidence," said McClure, scratching his head. "Why should our wireless be busted up? There are tons of sets in the school, and I'll bet plenty of them were left switched on. Why should ours be the one to go?"

"Quirke!" said Handforth again. "His rotten influence!"

"But we don't believe in his influence," said Church. "It's just a coincidence—that's all. At the same time, it makes a chap think."

Handforth & Co. were all thinking—hard. This experience was extraordinary. Their wireless set was about the best instrument in the Ancient House. And it had been the one to suffer! The full significance of the affair was only apparent when one remembered that Handforth & Co. had deliberately goaded Quirke an hour or two earlier.

"It's a jolly good case for Levi, anyhow," remarked McClure. "We've got direct evidence of having associated with Quirke—and if this isn't bad luck, what is?"

"Yes, Solly will have to pay up and look happy," agreed McClure.

Handforth stared.

"You asses, we didn't take out any policies!" he growled. "If you'd only taken my advice, we might have had a bit of compensation——"

"Your advice!" gasped Church.

"Yes!"

"But you refused to insure, you dummy!"

"Did I?" roared Handforth. "A good thing, too! What's the good of a mouldy quid to compensate us for a disaster like this? All the same, I distinctly advised you chaps to take out policies!"

"In that case we're safe," said Church blandly. "As a matter of fact, Mac and I DID take out policies! We got in touch with Levi while your back was turned for five minutes. We'll draw a quid each in the morning. I hope you've got your policy safe?"

Handforth breathed hard.

"You insured yourselves behind my back?" he said thickly. "You—you traitors! Why didn't you take one out for me?"

"Couldn't be done," said McClure. "We tried it on, but Solly wasn't having any. Every policy has got to have the proper signature. We couldn't commit forgery—even for your sake."

They went back to bed, uneasy and disturbed. This succession of misfortunes was getting on their nerves. To put the latest affair down as a coincidence was the only reasonable explanation.

But it seemed altogether too thick. Why had their wireless set been the only one to suffer? Somehow, the chums of Study D couldn't help believing that an unknown hand was at work somewhere.

But was it a deliberate hand—or the work of some evil influence which Quirke had called upon to demonstrate his occult power?

ANSWERS

Every Saturday. Price 2d

CHAPTER VIII.

PAYING UP!



"FORTY-SIX, forty-seven, forty-eight," said Solomon Levi with satisfaction.

"Not bad for a first bag!"

The offices of the Levi Insurance Company—in other words, Study O' in the West House—looked very businesslike this morning. Levi, in fact, like a certain celebrated king, was sitting in his counting-house counting out his money.

All told, he had got rid of forty-eight of his novel insurance policies, the net

"By gum! You look like a miser gloating over his hoard!"

Solomon was sitting at the table, and immediately in front of him were numerous little piles of silver, all stacked up neatly. He gave the Lancashire boy a severe glance.

"Just making up my accounts," he explained gruffly. "I've got to keep a strict record of all these moneys——"

"You'll need to," chuckled Dick. "How much have you got?"

"Three quid, exactly."

"Then you'll still have a pound to play with," said Goodwin. "Rough luck, having a couple of claims on the very first morning——"



The bicycle lurched violently from side to side, and Professor Tucker ran full tilt into Fullwood and Russell, who had just turned into the archway.

financial result being sixty shillings. For twelve members of the 13 Club were insured, and had paid an extra shilling each. Handforth was the only club member who had failed to take out a policy.

"Three quid!" said Levi. "Pretty good—but not good enough! If I have three or four claims all at once, I shall be in the cart! Not that any claims are likely," he went on, with a grin. "It's all square and above-board, but I shall have to have plenty of proof before I shell out!"

Dick Goodwin came in, and paused in the doorway.

"Hallo! What's this?" he asked, staring.

"Believe me, you're mad!" interrupted Levi, with a sniff. "I shan't get any claims to-day——"

"Oh, didn't you know?" interrupted Goodwin. "Church and McClure are on your track—I thought they'd been here already. Better look out, Solly—they're after your blood!"

"They should live so sure!" retorted Levi promptly. "They can't spoof me up with any claims——"

At that moment Church and McClure arrived—to say nothing of Handforth. The latter had come along to watch the proceedings. A rather disquieting fact was that Handforth had his coat-sleeves rolled up. He

was either expecting trouble, or he wanted Levi to thoroughly understand that the visitors were on the spot for business.

"One pound, please!" said Church briskly.

"Same here, if you don't mind!" added McClure.

"Not so fast!" growled Levi. "If you fellows have come here to make any claims, you'll have to fill in these forms——"

"Rot!" interrupted Handforth. "Either you whack out two quid, my lad, or I'll bill you——"

"You've got a nerve!" interrupted Solomon. "You're not even on my books as a policy-holder, and you come here and threaten me! My life! I'll trouble you to leave these offices!"

"I'll trouble you to hand out two quid first!"

"Look here——"

"For two pins——"

"I say, chuck it!" interrupted Church hastily. "If there's going to be a row about it, Levi, we'll let the thing drop. But I thought this insurance company was a sound one. I thought it paid out all genuine claims on the spot."

"So it does!" retorted Levi. "All right—we'll dispense with forms for once. State your claim!"

Church stated it—with a good deal of assistance from McClure. Solomon Levi listened with growing dismay. Any disinterested judge would have declared that it was a clear case of bad luck.

"If you don't call it a misfortune to have our wireless set destroyed by lightning, what is?" concluded Church.

"This wireless set was owned by you?"

"We had shares in it—all three of us," said McClure. "Church and I naturally claim insurance according to our policies. The best thing you can do is to hand over that cash——"

"I'll pay up promptly enough if the claims are good," interrupted Levi. "But you haven't explained where Quirke comes in? I can't pay up on ordinary bad luck, you know—that's not in the contract. Quirke's got to be directly connected——"

"That's easy," interrupted Handforth. "Only last night we grabbed Quirke and shoved him under a ladder. And I can bring two or three witnesses to prove that he foretold all sorts of horrible disasters for us. Isn't that good enough?"

Levi smiled ruefully.

"Sign these receipts, please," he said, in a hollow voice. "This insurance company is sound to the backbone. All claims paid out on the spot! No hanky-panky business! Sign here!"

Church and McClure signed, and Solomon made a virtue out of a necessity, and paid up with apparent cheerfulness. He seemed to become very happy, and his only worry now was that he hadn't got a lot of other claims to pay.

But as soon as Handforth and Co. had gone he raised his hands in despair.

"Such misfortunes!" he groaned. "I collect three pounds, and pay out two! I'll soon be on the wrong side at this rate."

"Poor old Solly!" grinned Goodwin. "You'd better get a lot more policies ready, and grab new customers. Either that, or raise your premium! You don't realise what a run of bad luck there is through Quirke!"

"Bunkum!" said Solly gruffly. "Do you think I'd have started this insurance business if I'd have thought Quirke had any power? Why, I'd be paying out all the time! It's just my luck to have these two claims on me at the very beginning! But I'm a business man—and I'll take anything that comes!"

"Including a few dozen more premiums, eh?" chuckled Dick Goodwin.

He went out, leaving the Levi Insurance Company to itself. And Solomon gazed with a forlorn eye at the sadly depleted piles of silver. In fact, there was only one left—representing twenty shillings. One more valid claim, and he wouldn't show a penny of profit on his balance-sheet! And all his hard labours would have been for nothing! Somehow, this insurance business wasn't panning out so well as he had at first believed.

Outside, in the Triangle, a number of Remove fellows were discussing the strange accident to Handforth and Co.'s wireless. It was even more extraordinary than it had seemed overnight.

No damage whatever had been done by the thunderstorm otherwise. All sorts of experts declared that Handforth's aerial wire **COULDN'T** have been struck by lightning. It wasn't the kind of lightning to strike anything. Even the masters maintained that there was something fishy about the whole business.

Dick Hamilton was sorely puzzled. He had actually seen that dazzling flash with his own eyes, and knew that it had struck Handforth's study during the height of the storm. And the wreckage of the radio proved beyond question that it had been struck.

But if the lightning had been of the harmless kind, why had one flash streaked down and destroyed that instrument? It was not surprising that Quirke's supporters seized upon the affair as another example of the schoolboy magician's uncanny power.

"Why, it's obvious," declared Hubbard. "We all know that Quirke can do these things——"

"We don't know anything of the sort," interrupted Jack Grey. "He's a clever chap, but he's only human. He can't perform miracles!"

"What about the way he prevented that guy from burning on the fifth of November?" demanded Hubbard. "Wasn't that a miracle? He said it wouldn't burn—and it

didn't! Yet it was made of paper and hay!"

"It's jolly rummy!" admitted one of the others.

"What's more, other misfortunes are coming," said Hubbard darkly.

"That's right—pile it on!"

"I'm only telling you what Quirke's been saying for days!" said Hubbard. "The Thirteen Club are going to get it in the neck, particularly. You can see what's happened to those Study D chaps, as a start!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE PROFESSOR AND THE BICYCLE.



"PROFESSOR SYL-
VESTER TUCKER,
the absent-minded
St. Frank's science-
master, emerged from the
rear door of the Ancient
House into the West Square.

He was wheeling a bicycle, and Willy & Co., of the Third, paused to watch.

Breakfast was over, and morning lessons would soon be starting. Solomon Levi was busy in the Modern House, getting new customers. And Willy Handforth, having gone to his major with words of sympathy over the wireless set, had come out for a breath of fresh air. For some reason, Edward Oswald hadn't accepted his sympathy in the right spirit. And Willy felt that he needed fresh air to revive him.

"What's this?" he said, as he tenderly rubbed his knuckles.

"Dirt, by the look of it," said Chubby Heath.

"Dirt?"

"On your knuckles——"

"You funny ass!" roared Willy. "I was talking about Professor Tucker! What's he up to? He's grabbed somebody's bike. It can't be his own—he doesn't ride one." He rubbed his knuckles again. "Besides, this isn't dirt at all—or, if it is, it came off Ted's left ear!"

They watched Professor Tucker with greater interest than ever. The absent-minded old gentleman was just mounting the machine. As a matter of fact, it was his own—he had recently invested in one, thinking that it would come in useful for riding down to the village, or running over to Bannington. He was losing trains so consistently that he wanted to have a means of locomotion always with him.

"By jingo, he can ride!" said Juicy Lemon. "Look there!"

One might have supposed that Professor Tucker was a performing monkey, or something of the sort, judging by the way the fags were discussing him. Undoubtedly he was an exceptional cyclist. In the first place, he was wearing an ulster which came almost to his heels, and a quaint old top-

hat, which was not at all suitable for cycling. Secondly, his trousers were unclipped, and they were of the wide variety. Willy thought it just as well to stroll across and point out a few of these things. He did so.

"Going for a ride, sir?" he asked casually.

"Go away!" retorted Professor Tucker, frowning. "Go away! I won't be disturbed! And shut the door after you, young man. There is a most piercing draught!"

"Yes, sir," grinned Willy. "Considering it's November, and we're out in the square, it's just about what we'd expect. If you'd like a hand with the jigger, sir——"

"Oh, of course!" said Professor Tucker, with a start. "Dear me! For the moment I had overlooked the fact that I am about to ride down to the village. Would I like a hand? What hand?"

"With the jigger, sir."

"The jigger?" repeated the professor. "I must confess that I am unfamiliar with that part of the bicycle. No doubt you mean the brake? It seems to be somewhat loose——"

"I mean, would you like a leg up, sir?" asked Willy. "You jump on, and we'll push you off, sir."

"A remarkably senseless suggestion," said Professor Tucker severely. "Indeed, I suspect you of deliberate impertinence, young man. How dare you suggest that you should push me off! Once I am on this machine I shall remain on!"

Willy sighed.

"I don't mean push you off like that, sir," he explained patiently. "What about giving you a shove?"

"These slang terms——"

"A start, sir," said Willy in desperation.

"Ah, to be sure!" beamed the professor. "Now, of course, I understand. Splendid! Thank you, my boy—thank you!"

He swung one leg over the machine, and his long ulster got entangled with the saddle. In spite of this, however, he prepared to start.

"Ready!" he said briskly. "Now, boys!"

"Hold on, sir!" gasped Willy. "You'll get all tangled up. You can't start like that——"

But the professor, without waiting for any shove, was already on his way. Once in the saddle, he pedalled briskly towards the West Arch, gathering considerable speed. His ulster flapped in the breeze, and Willy & Co. watched with a happy feeling that something was going to happen.

Something did.

Just as the professor was halfway through the arch his trouser-leg caught in the chain. There was an alarming sound of ripping cloth, the bicycle lurched violently from side to side, and Professor Tucker ran full

tilt into Fullwood and Russell, who had just turned into the archway.

Crash!

The sound was heard all over the West Square and the Triangle. At the moment the professor had been careering along at about fifteen miles an hour. By some miracle his bicycle was unhurt—but he wasn't. Neither were Fullwood and Russell.

They sat there in a confused heap, and gradually sorted themselves out. The first thing Fullwood discovered was his gold watch on the ground. The glass was smashed, and the next second Professor Tucker trod upon it with all his weight as he scrambled to his feet.

"Hi!" howled Fullwood desperately.

But the damage was done. The watch was an absolute wreck. Fullwood was terribly upset; that watch had been a present from his pater, and had cost nothing under ten pounds.

Clive Russell was hardly more fortunate. He had been carrying a microscope that had arrived only that morning. Clive had been saving up for several weeks in order to purchase it. It was now a mass of wreckage on the ground.

"My microscope!" he gasped in anguish.

"My watch!" groaned Fullwood.

"Good gracious me!" ejaculated the professor. "What—what has happened? How dare you! I shall make it my business to report you to the Head for this deliberate attack. I am considerably hurt."

"What about my microscope, sir?" shouted Russell. "It wasn't our fault! You ran right into us. You didn't even ring your bell—"

"Besides, you steered straight into us, sir!" added Fullwood.

"He couldn't help it," put in Willy. "It was a sheer accident—just a piece of bad luck."

"Bad luck!" interrupted Fullwood. "We can collect a quid each from Levi, anyhow."

"Say, that's a brain-wave!" said the Canadian boy. "I can get this repaired for five dollars, I expect. Good! Where's Levi? Let's go and find him."

Even Fullwood had a faint hope that a pound might restore his watch to something like its original condition. Fortunately, the professor had trodden it into the sodden ground, and the damage wasn't so great as Fullwood had supposed.

They both started to hunt down Solomon Levi, and the professor picked up his bicycle and wheeled it through the arch. He wheeled it back towards the Ancient House doorway, however, and Willy pulled him up.

"Aren't you going out, sir?" he asked.

"Going out?" repeated the professor. "Nonsense! Can't you see I am just coming back, boy? Don't bother me now—"

"But you haven't been anywhere yet, professor," grinned Willy. "On the whole, perhaps you'd better not start," he added thoughtfully. "Once you get out on the road you'll be a common danger."

Professor Tucker didn't even listen. He went straight indoors, and it was quite likely that he wouldn't discover his mistake for some time. He was always absent-minded, but sometimes he was excessively so.

Meanwhile, Solomon Levi was run to earth in the Modern House, just after Boots & Co., of Study No. 6, had taken out three of the famous policies. Levi was all smiles. He had collected another fifteen shillings by this time.

"Just the man we want!" said Fullwood briskly. "A quid, please!"

Solomon staggered slightly.

"You're making a claim?" he asked huskily.

"We're both making claims, I guess," said Clive Russell.

Levi clutched at the air.

"I can't do it!" he shouted. "I've only got thirty-five shillings in hand. And I've just got fifteen new customers, too. By my life! This is all going wrong!"

"We can't help your troubles, my lad," said Fullwood firmly. "We hold policies which entitle us to claim a pound each in the event of bad luck. Is that right, or is it not right?"

"It's right, of course," admitted Solly.

"What's this, if it isn't bad luck?" demanded Ralph Leslie.

He displayed his battered watch, and Solomon Levi looked at it with horrified eyes. Then he caught sight of Clive's microscope. The evidence was appalling. In a dull kind of way he listened to the story of the accident. And John Busterfield Boots and Percy Bray and Walter Denny formed themselves into a committee of judgment, and pronounced the claims valid.

"Pay up, Solly," said Boots briskly. "There's no escape."

"Wait!" panted Levi. "Why be in such a hurry? Wait! It's one of the conditions that direct association with Quirke must be shown. And you can't show it. I'm not paying these claims; they're not included in the policy!"

CHAPTER X.

PILING IT UP.



RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD looked grim. "You're not paying, eh?" he repeated. "These judges have just pronounced our claims valid."

"Of course we have," said Boots. "Why,

"hang it, it's your own idea, Levi! You distinctly state that three chaps can appoint themselves——"

"But this is different," insisted Solly plaintively. "I can't afford it! I haven't sold enough policies to cover an expense like this. My insurance company isn't a philanthropic institution. I'm out for business——"

"Well, isn't this business?" asked Russell. "You say you won't pay because there's no proof of direct association with Quirke? I guess that's rot. We're both members of the Thirteen Club."

"Good enough!" said Buster Boots. "That settles it!"

"Pay up, Solly!" said Bray and Denny, grinning.

And Solomon Levi was compelled to admit the validity of the claims. He couldn't do anything else. But this insurance business was something of a frost. He had gained far more customers than he had ever hoped for, and yet he was already five shillings on the wrong side. He was actually compelled to break into his own capital to pay the claims.

But after a moment he changed, he became brisk and business-like. He realised, in fact, that it was better to inspire the fellows with confidence. It was his scheme, and he was quite honest about it. But he was inwardly determined to make the thing pay in the long run. This stream of bad luck couldn't go on for ever.

But this morning there was a perfect avalanche of misfortune. First Handforth & Co., then Fullwood and Russell, and now Archie Glenthorne and Alf Brent. These latter young gentlemen didn't know it yet, but the bad luck was well on the way.

Phipps happened to meet Browne of the Fifth in the upper corridor of the Ancient House. Phipps was generally an unemotional man, which, of course, was quite in order, seeing that he was Archie's valet. And every good "gentleman's gentleman" is trained to sink all his emotions behind a mask of studied imperturbability.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but have you seen Mr. Archie?" asked Phipps.

"Sad to relate, Brother Phipps, I have not yet had that exquisite pleasure this morning," replied Browne regretfully. "But if you are bursting with anxiety to round him up I will see what can be done."

"I want him urgently, sir."

"In that case, allow me to take charge of the entire hunt," said Napoleon Browne firmly. "One clarion call from me, and a host of trusty valiants will answer the summons."

"One moment, sir—one moment!" urged Phipps.

"That, I take it, means two moments?" asked Browne. "Being ever generous, I will even allow you three, and possibly four."

Correct me if I am wrong, Brother Phipps, but I think I detect a few mottled lines upon the manly brow. If there is any great strain upon your mind, confide in me. I am one of Life's Great Consolations."

"I would like you to come into Mr. Archie's bed-room, sir."

"Splendid!" said Browne. "The honour, I need hardly tell you, is overwhelming. Little did I guess that I, a humble Browne, would be exalted by viewing the interior of that noble chamber. But let us hasten into this place of sartorial wonder."

Phipps led the way towards Archie's bed-room, and Browne followed. They entered, and Phipps made an expressive gesture towards the massive wardrobe. This was Archie's own property—a very special piece of furniture, containing innumerable suits, all hanging on their special hangers. There were drawers, too, filled with socks, shirts, neckties, and every other article of male personal adornment.

"I'm afraid it will be a dreadful shock for Mr. Archie, sir," said Phipps.

"Indeed!" asked Browne politely. "I must confess that I do not grasp the exact influx of——"

"A wardrobe, sir!"

"A noble monument to the art of some master craftsman——"

"But look at it, sir!" insisted Phipps. "It's drenched. Look at the ceiling. The water's been pouring down like that for hours!"

Browne gazed at the ceiling immediately over the wardrobe, and he started. A great patch of the plaster had come away, revealing the bare laths. And in this spot water was streaming down in a rapid succession of drops.

Browne took a stride to the wardrobe and flung open the doors. His face blanched. Every one of Archie's wonderful suits was dripping wet. The water was soaking down into the heavy piece of furniture like rain.

The captain of the Fifth stood there, his expression one of pained grief. He was something of a dandy himself—being the best-dressed fellow in the Fifth, even outshining the celebrated Cuthbert Chambers. And it pricked Browne to the quick to see this appalling disaster.

"I feel, Phipps, that a stimulant is the only resort at the moment—but I will be firm and deny myself," he said huskily. "What is the meaning of this ghastly tragedy? Do not spare me! Tell me the full dreadful details! I am strong—my shoulders are broad—I can bear these dreadful blows!"

"I'm sure I can't explain it, sir," said Phipps sadly. "Obviously, a water-pipe has burst——"

"But when?" asked Browne. "This seems to have been going on for epochs! Why did

you not observe it at an earlier age? I should have thought, when you tripped lightly into this chamber with the morning brew, that you would have heard sounds of sinister splashing—"

"It's more than I can understand, sir," declared Phipps. "The pipe must have burst during breakfast—and perhaps a great deal of water came down during the first ten minutes or so."

"What-ho! So here we are, what?"

Archie Glenthorne strolled in, his monocle gleaming, and his face alight with geniality. Browne took a long stride towards him, and grasped him by the shoulder.

"Prepare yourself for sad news, Brother Archibald," he said firmly. "It is far better to break it gently. And who can break news gently better than I? I fear you will have no change of attire for the afternoon."

"Good gad!" said Archie. "I mean to say—"

"Precisely what you mean to say is of no consequence," interrupted Browne. "As delicately as possible, I should like to impart the news that you are up to your neck in the tureen. In this particular case it is not soup, but water. At this very moment, you are splashing about in it."

"Odds mysteries!" ejaculated Archie. "In other words, gadzooks! I absolutely fail to follow, laddie!"

"Observe!" said Browne in a choking voice.

He pushed Archie in front of the wardrobe, and Archie leapt a foot into the air.

"Good gad!" he moaned. "My clothes! I mean to say, Phipps! Water! Bring the young master water!"

"Help yourself, Brother Archie!" offered Browne. "Squeeze out the blue serge, and I have no doubt you will obtain a few gallons. But I fear that brandy is required. Brother Phipps, this may be serious. Our charming young friend has lapsed into a state of coma!"

Archie reeled to the bed, sat down upon it, and gazed at the wardrobe with a glassy eye. With two glassy eyes, in fact—not even including his monocle. His gaze had become fixed and glacial.

"I must tear myself away," murmured Browne. "Curiously enough, although I claim to be a man of strength, scenes of sadness always affect me deeply. I must seek consolation in the company of Brother Horace. He, no doubt, will pass me a word of good cheer."

Browne went out, and found Horace Stevens—his own particular chum in the Fifth. Unfortunately, Stevens grinned heartlessly as he listened to the sad tale of woe. Perhaps this was partly due to Browne's extreme gravity—which Stevens couldn't possibly duplicate.

As for Archie Glenthorne, he was distracted. Clothing was a sort of religion with him. Take his wonderful suits away, and he was like a mother who had lost her baby.

That morning he went about in a daze, and in the Form-room Mr. Crowell excused him from lessons, feeling sure that he was seriously ill.

Brent was included in the disaster, too. His own best suit had been in the wardrobe—a very special concession on Archie's part. For Brent's best suit was a commonplace thing compared with Archie's Saville Row triumphs. Brent, however, was considerably upset, for his suit would never be the same again, and he had been particularly fond of it.

The anguish of Glenthorne and Brent, however, was a mere nothing compared to Solomon Levi's horror. For Archie and Alf made their claims under the insurance policies. It was a clear case of bad luck—and they were both members of the Thirteen Club! Solly had to pay up—and he was now deeper and deeper in the mire. In his wildest moments of pessimism, he had never expected such a run of bad luck as this.

Archie Glenthorne was quite indifferent about the insurance money, but Alf Brent wasn't. Quite correctly, he declared that it was a matter of business, and if Archie didn't want the pound, he did. It would help towards a new suit! Not that Brent need have worried. A pipe had burst, and the school itself would have to make due compensation for the damage. But that, after all, was not much consolation for the immediate inconvenience.

The Unknown Hand was at work as hard as ever.

And even now nobody could tell whether it was a real hand or a mysterious influence brought about by Ezra Quirke's intangible allies.

CHAPTER XI.

THE NEED FOR ACTION.



THE Thirteen Club was in council.

It was evening now, and thirteen Remove juniors were packed into Reggie Pitt's study, in the West House. Pitt, as founder and president of the club, had the honour of entertaining his fellow-members.

"Well, we're all here," Handforth was saying. "If you want somebody to make a speech, I'm ready to—"

"Order for the chair!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Dry up, Handy!"

"Gentlemen, allow me to say a few words," exclaimed Pitt briskly. "I called this meeting because I thought it a necessary step. In some sections of the school an outcry has been made against us."

"Yes, it's a bit thick," snorted Jack Grey. "It's like their nerve to order us about! Lots of the chaps are saying that we ought to be disbanded—that the club ought to be squashed. Are we going to knuckle under?"

"Not likely!" roared Handforth. "You've only got to make me president, and I'll show you how to convert this club into a roaring success——"

"It's a failure now," put in Tommy Watson. "We started the club to show Quirke up as a giddy' fraud. Even Handforth couldn't change black into white. The club's failed in its object——"

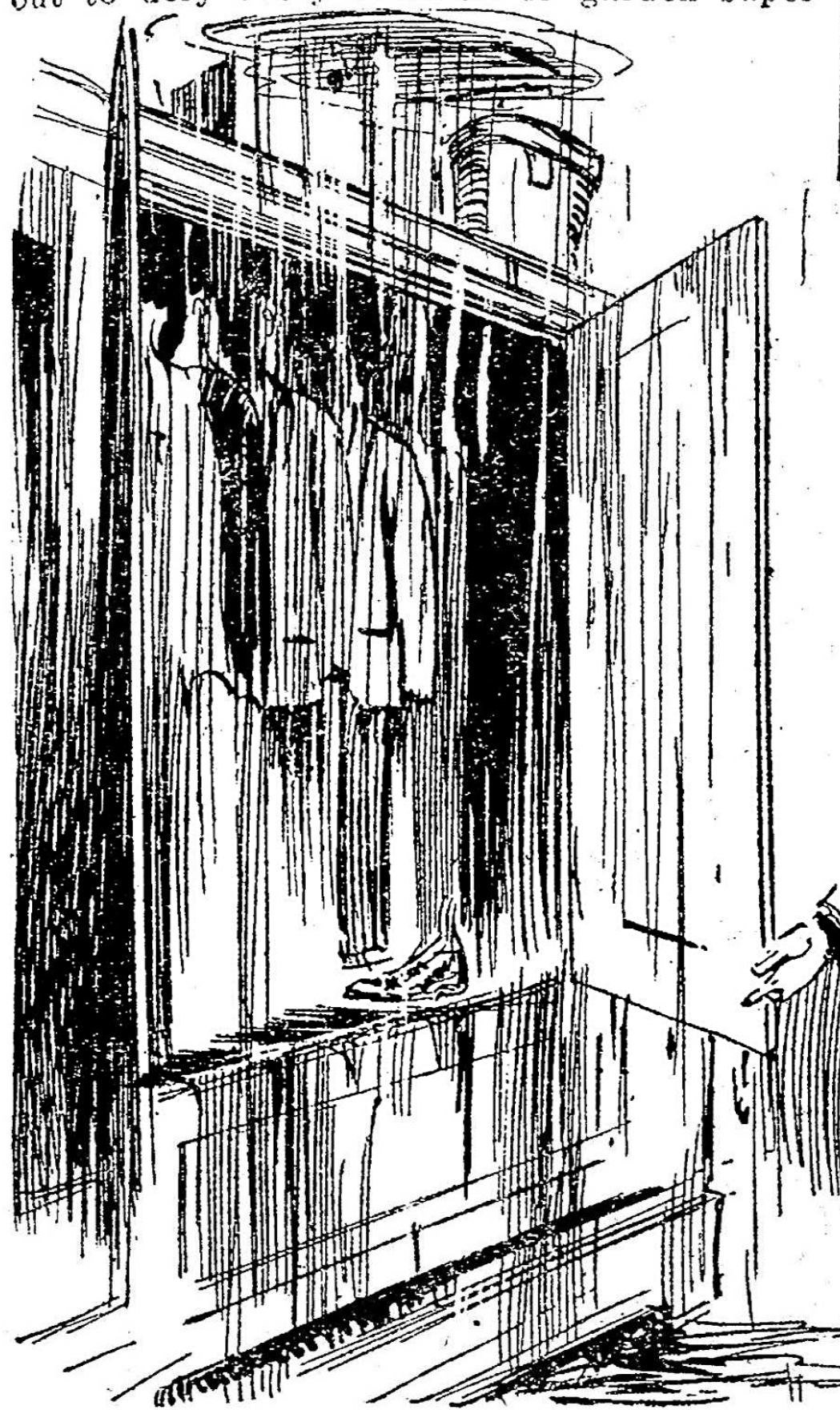
"I don't admit it!" said Pitt promptly. "It seems to have failed—but you can't always judge by appearances. We started out to defy every common or garden super-

all these mishaps. They can be explained by coincidence, and auto-suggestion."

"Auto which?" asked Handforth.

"There's nothing easier than for a fellow to fall a victim to auto-suggestion," said Dick Hamilton. "We all know that Quirke has prophesied bad luck for us, and so we're ready to seize upon any chance happening as a sign of misfortune. And some of you fellows have got yourselves into scrapes just because you're conscious of the threat of bad luck."

"There's a lot in it," agreed Pitt, nodding. "It's rather queer that these things should happen to us in particular, though. Naturally, all the other fellows are saying that we're under a kind of curse. And the



"Good gad!" he moaned. "My clothes! I mean to say, Phipps! Water! Bring the young master water!"

stition—and we defied 'em. We told Quirke that his blessed goblins could do their worst——"

"And they've done it!" growled Nick Trotwood.

"It's been one long succession of bad luck ever since the club was formed!" said Church. "The football match, and then our radio, and——"

"But, my dear chap, everything would have happened exactly the same, Quirke or no Quirke," put in Nipper gently. "You're not going to make me believe that Quirke caused

school's sharing it. They say there won't be any freedom from it until the club's smashed."

"Well, we're not going to show the white feather," said Handforth, glaring. "If any of you fellows back out, the rest of us will carry on the Thirteen Club alone!"

"But it won't be a Thirteen Club then," Nipper pointed out. "That's just it. If one of us breaks away, we must either get a new member, or cease to exist as a club. I'm urging all you chaps to sit tight."

"Hear, hear!"

"All the same, it's a bit queer," said Tommy Watson slowly. "I'm not changing, of course, but you can't get away from facts. Ever since we started defying these superstitions, we've been getting it in the neck. Instead of exposing Quirke as a fraud, we've strengthened his hand. He's gained new members by the dozen!"

"That's because we haven't tripped him up yet," explained Pitt. "A chap in his line of business has got to fool everybody all the time, or he's whacked. The first false move, and it means exposure. And Quirke's a wary bird."

"As Mr. Gladstone once said, you can fool the public all the time, but some of the time you can't!" remarked Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cackling asses——"

"You've got it wrong, Handy," grinned Nipper. "In the first place, it wasn't Mr. Gladstone who said it at all—but Abraham Lincoln."

"What does it matter about a name?" demanded Handforth tartly.

"And what Abraham Lincoln said was something like this: 'You can fool some of the people all the time, and all the people some of the time, but you can't fool all the people all the time.' And jolly true, too," added Nipper.

"That's where Quirke comes in," nodded Reggie Pitt. "At present he's fooled all the people all the time. But he can't last long. He's bound to make a slip, and then he'll be in the cart. It's something like one of these spiritualistic mediums. For years he enjoys a reputation as a marvellous chap, and then somebody finds out that he's faked something up. It's quite enough to ruin him for good."

"That's what we've got to do with Quirke," declared Nipper. "All those members of his Circle think he's in league with the Black Arts. But as soon as we bowl him over in one of his tricks, he'll be dished."

"He'll just look like two cents!" nodded Clive Russell.

"Then why not expose him to-night?" demanded Handforth excitedly. "By George, that's it! I've just remembered—he's got a meeting on to-night——"

"It starts in ten minutes," interrupted Pitt calmly. "Sorry, Handy, old man, but I called this very meeting to discuss to-night's affair in the East House. My suggestion is to take the bull by the horns, and show Quirke up as a trickster."

"Yes; but how?" asked Watson.

"It ought to be easy," replied Reggie. "We all know that he's got a cellar prepared as a kind of meeting-chamber—with black draperies, carpets, and lots of other things to increase the effect. You can bet your boots that anything happening within those draperies can be explained by the usual magician's apparatus on the other side."

"But all in the cellar, of course?" asked Brent.

"Naturally," said Pitt. "Why not go straight over to the East House in a body,

face Quirke, and ask him to let us examine his Chamber of Magic? If he doesn't agree, we shall know he's afraid to let us in."

"But other chaps go in, dear old boy," said Tregellis-West.

"Yes—but they're all his supporters," put in Nipper. "They accept him as genuine, and take his word for it that there's nothing behind the draperies. But we shall go there as investigators."

Handforth's eyes sparkled at the word.

"That's the idea—we'll investigate," he said grimly. "I'll bet that cellar won't bear a minute's examination! Even before the meeting starts we'll have the rotter on toast! In fact, he won't be able to hold the meeting after what we discover!"

"Then it's settled, then?" asked Pitt.

"Yes, rather!"

"Let's go over now!"

"Hear, hear!"

The vote was unanimous, and the Thirteen Club filed out of Study K, and went across to the East House. There couldn't be a better time for an investigation. Quirke's meeting was nearly due to start. Thus, if he had prepared any tricks in advance, they would be exposed to view by the club's searching inquiry.

And if Quirke refused to admit the investigators only one conclusion could be drawn. It would be quite sufficient to discredit the schoolboy magician among the thinking section of the school.

As it happened, the invading horde encountered Ezra Quirke in the East House lobby. He was talking with two of his supporters—Hubbard, of the Remove, and Skelton, of the Fourth. All three juniors stared at the thirteen newcomers with sudden alarm.

"Chuck it, you chaps!" said Hubbard nervously. "No larks——"

"We don't intend any larks," interrupted Pitt. "Quirke, you're the man we want to talk to. We've got a proposition to make."

"Yes?" said Quirke smoothly.

"You know that we look upon your tricks as so much spoof, don't you?" went on Pitt cheerfully. "There's nothing like being frank. We think you're a fraud, and we mean to show you up."

Ezra Quirke shook his head.

"I am sorry that you should be so foolish," he said, with regret. "One day, perhaps, you will realise that your policy is wrong. Have you not had sufficient proof yet? I warned you of bad luck——"

"Yes, we know all about that, but it doesn't happen to be the point," interrupted Pitt. "You're holding a meeting here to-night, aren't you?"

"Yes, almost at once."

"You haven't made any special preparations, by any chance?"

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't prepared your tricks in advance?"

"I have no tricks, and I prepare nothing," replied Quirke. "The things that happen during my meetings are prompted at the time—not by myself, but by others who are intangible and unseen."

"Hidden behind the draperies?" suggested Handforth bluntly.

Quirke's eyes flashed.

"No!" he retorted. "The draperies are merely for adding to the general effect. There is never anything concealed behind them."

"And you are all ready for to-night's meetings?" asked Pitt.

"Yes."

"Then we'd like to examine your cellar, if you don't mind," said Reggie calmly. "You see, we're anxious to know everything—we're seekers after the light. How about taking us straight to that cellar now?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE EXPLANATION.



EZRA QUIRKE started. "No!" he said quickly. "I cannot allow that."

"Afraid to?" demanded Church.

"Certainly not!" said the East House boy. "But your presence there just before the meeting will spoil the whole atmosphere——"

"I'll bet it will!" agreed Handforth grimly. "We'll pull a few wires down—to say nothing of opening trap-doors and secret panels——"

"I say, this is too thick!" protested Hubbard hotly. "Quirke never uses trap-doors or secret panels! We've been to his meetings—and we know! Dozens of chaps will tell you the same."

"Then you all must be blind!"

"Look here——"

"Wait!" interrupted Quirke quietly. "On second thoughts, why should I refuse this request? You are all disbelievers—you have come to me with an antagonistic spirit, hoping to expose me as a fraud. If I refuse to allow you into the cellar, you will use my refusal as a lever against me."

"Spoken like a man—we shall!" agreed Pitt.

"Come with me, then, and you shall see," said Quirke.

"Well I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Handforth. "He's going to take us to the cellar! Poor chap! He's properly done now!"

"That's all you know!" said Hubbard. "When will you understand that Quirke isn't a fraud? He's not afraid of your silly examination. There's nothing in that cellar you think there is."

The members of the Thirteen Club were certainly astonished. They had hardly ex-

pected Quirke to agree so readily. It rather took the wind out of their sails. If the cellar was indeed faked, surely he would not have consented to this examination? Nipper felt that there was a catch in it somewhere.

"Wait a moment," he said. "You're taking us to this cellar, Quirke?"

"Yes."

"And shall we have full liberty to do as we please?"

"I will not hinder you in any way."

"Does that mean we can look behind the curtains?"

"It means that you can look everywhere you like," replied Quirke. "It is a matter of indifference to me—except for the one fact that your presence will be entirely negative. And any negative influence is detrimental to the type of phenomena I specialise in. Therefore, I ask you to make your investigation quietly, and to disarrange the cellar as little as possible."

"Hang it all, that's reasonable enough," said Fullwood.

"Yes, it is reasonable," said Nipper.

"All right, Quirke—we'll go quietly."

The members of the Thirteen Club couldn't help being impressed by Quirke's readiness to facilitate their inquiry. It was something totally different to what they had expected. Two or three of the investigators, in fact, were beginning to have a dim feeling that Quirke wasn't such a fraud as they had always thought.

Numbers of Fourth Formers were beginning to gather in the lobby and in the passages—members of Quirke's circle, waiting for the evening's affair to begin. There were all sorts of inquiries as the Removites were seen. And word of the enterprise soon got round.

"It's a darned cheek!" said Clifton warmly. "It's like the nerve of these Ancient House rotters to butt in here——"

"The more the merrier," interrupted Skelton. "Perhaps Quirke will convince them that they're on the wrong tack. He's genuine enough, and he's got nothing to fear. In fact, if he refused to admit these rotters into the cellar, they'd make a big song about it."

The investigators were very curious when they reached the cellar. A door led out of a rear corridor down some stone steps. At the bottom of this was a bare cellar, with a concrete wall, immediately facing the steps. And in the centre of this wall a heavy door was placed—the entrance to one of the huge cellars which lay beneath the East House.

An electric light was gleaming, and everything was quite normal. There was nothing here of a mystical nature. Quirke approached the door in the concrete wall, and produced a key. The door was fitted with a Yale lock—and this fact, alone, was significant. It clearly indicated that Quirke

had no intention of his secrets being penetrated during his absence.

He unlocked the door, and flung it open.

"You may enter," he said softly.

"Just a minute," said Nipper. "What lights are there in there?"

"There is one."

"Shaded, I suppose?"

"Yes, heavily shaded."

"And is that the only light we can have?" demanded Pitt.

The schoolboy magician shrugged his shoulders.

"You may have whatever lights you please," he plied. "I see that many of you are holding electric torches. So what good should I do by prohibiting lights? Go inside and make your examination—but I ask you to be as brief as possible. I will not even come with you. You see, I have nothing to fear—nothing to hide."

The Thirteen Club was more impressed. They didn't like to admit it, but it was being forced upon them that Quirke was acting in an honest straightforward manner. There was nothing of the trickster about him. Indeed, nobody had ever been able to prove a single act of fakery on his part. From first to last he had maintained that he carried no apparatus.

The Removites found themselves in an impressive chamber. It was big, and contained a large number of seats. At the far end there was a clear space, with a single chair in the centre. In front of this stood an Oriental stool, and just on one side was a bamboo table.

Black draperies hung all round—even spreading over the ceiling. Ordinarily, the cellar was illuminated by a single shaded light. But now eight or nine electric torches were flashing about—searching, intensive lights.

"We know all this," said Handforth, as he looked round. "There's nothing here, of course—but what about these curtains? What's behind 'em?"

He pulled one of them up, and ducked under. Church and McClure followed him. Behind, they found another space—between the hanging and the cellar wall proper. But there was nothing in the way of a discovery.

Handforth & Co. and the others went round the cellar several times. There wasn't a single wire, or anything of a trick nature. The draperies were even held up, and pinned together—so that one could flash one's torch from wall to wall direct.

"Well, dash it, there's nothing here," said Pitt, at last. "Another knock for us, Dick, old son!"

"Looks like it," admitted Nipper.

"We thought we were going to do big

things—and we've discovered nothing," went on Pitt. "Look at these walls—solid concrete. The floor, too. That's concrete, just the same. Even the ceiling is concrete."

This was true enough. Floor, walls, roof—all were of the same solid material. There was no window—merely a grating for ventilation. It was a small, narrow shaft which would not have admitted anything larger than a cat. It was protected, furthermore, by heavy iron bars, the ends of which were set into the solid concrete.

"You know a bit about secret doors and things, Nipper," said Tommy Watson. "What about this place? Is there any possibility of a secret door?"

"None whatever," replied Nipper promptly. "In fact, there's no fake about the place at all. We needn't take any notice of these hangings—they're just here for effect, as Quirke said. After all, the chap's right. He couldn't very well hold a meeting in a bare cellar."

Handforth was thumping on the floor, having turned the heavy carpet back. But all the thumping in the world made no difference. The floor was solid. There was no getting away from the fact. Under no circumstances could any of the ordinary stage magician's trickery be employed in this cellar. There wasn't the slightest article of apparatus. And no stage magician can work without a large amount of "props."

The investigation was over at last, and the Thirteen Club gave it up as a bad job. They hadn't been able to prove a single thing against Quirke. They filed out, rather disappointed, and very puzzled.

"Well, one thing's certain—there'll be no mysteries in to-night's meeting," said Handforth. "Quirke can't make things happen if he's got nothing to work with—"

"You really think so?" asked Quirke, who was standing just outside. "While you have been in there, I have been thinking. And although you are all negative, I would like you to attend this meeting to-night."

"You'd like us to attend?" asked Nipper curiously.

"Yes—all of you."

"Well, hang it, that's sporting enough," said Jack Grey. "I suppose you don't guarantee any funny happenings?"

"I can guarantee nothing," replied Quirke.

The last investigator had left the cellar, and Quirke closed the door with a slam, and tried it. Then he turned to Nipper, and offered him the key.

"Perhaps you will keep this key until we are all ready?" he asked. "Then you will be satisfied that the cellar is exactly the same then as it is now. I really want you to know that I am making no advance preparations. Will you hold the key?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MEETING OF THE CIRCLE.



NIPPER took the key, and smiled. "Oh, all right—if it'll please you, I don't mind," he said. "When's the meeting going to start, anyhow?"

"In less than ten minutes from now." "What's the good of that key?" put in Handforth. "I expect Quirke's got another, and as soon as our backs are turned, he'll nip in with some fakes—"

The seals were placed upon the door—not merely by Nipper, but by several others. Somebody fetched some sealing-wax, and strings were stretched across from the frame to the door—and sealed there. Thread and cotton were employed, too. To open that door now without breaking the seals was beyond the powers of any living agency.

"There is one thing I must insist upon," said Quirke, when the investigators were in the lobby again. "I have done everything that reason can demand, and I expect you to be reasonable in return."

"Go ahead," said Nipper.

"I want you to give me your word of

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"That is unjust!" interrupted Quirke hotly. "I am doing my best to convince you that everything is straightforward. You may put what seals you like on the door. Why should I care? Put them on now—this minute! And if they are broken when you return for the meeting, I will let you examine the cellar again. I will even admit myself to be a fraud!"

The Thirteen Club was more and more surprised. Many of them felt that Quirke was playing a clever game—a deep game. But, for the life of them, they couldn't fathom his methods. Even Nipper was completely nonplussed. From first to last, Quirke had always been unobtrusive and convincing. There wasn't a single loose link in the chain.

honour—all of you—that when this meeting starts you will take your seats, and keep to your seats," said Quirke. "That is only fair to me."

"Of course it is," agreed Nipper promptly. "We know there's nothing in the cellar, and we know that nobody can get in without breaking those seals. Therefore, it'll be in just the same condition when we return. I give you my word of honour that I'll take my seat and keep it until the affair's over."

"You'll make no attempt to interfere with what happens?"

"No attempt whatever—honest injun."

The others readily agreed, and Quirke obtained their promised word. It was, after

all, only fair. Every precautionary step had been taken. But the Thirteen Club felt convinced that there would be nothing of a very remarkable nature to be witnessed. Perhaps Quirke would do a few simple conjuring tricks, but nothing further. How could he without any apparatus—unless, indeed, he was truly in league with the Black Arts!

"Why not hold this meeting now?" asked Handforth. "Why wait?"

"Why?" said Quirke. "Just as you please. You see, I am ready to comply with any of your wishes. If you desire to go back at once, we will go."

"Better get it over," said Brent.

This was another surprise. Nipper had felt, vaguely, that Quirke was anxious for a delay. Why, Nipper couldn't explain. Certainly, nothing could happen in that sealed cellar. But even this supposition was wrong, for Quirke was ready to start at once.

Those seals, indeed, were needless, for there had been no time for any secretive preparations. Every string and cotton was found intact. There was no other possibility—for the juniors had been in the corridor all the time, practically filling it. And no living being could have got into that cellar without being seen.

The Thirteen Club, having come to the East House to expose Quirke as a fraud, found itself in the surprising position of attending his very meeting! It was a remarkable outcome to the rag—for, after all, this investigation had started more or less as a rag.

Nipper broke the seals himself, put the key in the lock, and opened the door.

"You will not use your electric torches?" asked Quirke quietly.

"Of course not," replied Pitt. "Hang it, I hope we're sportsmen! I'll tell you what—we'll leave all the torches out here. You other fellows are game, aren't you?"

They were all ready to comply with this suggestion, and no electric torch was taken into the draped cellar. Quirke had been so honest about everything that the juniors couldn't play him false. If he could produce any phenomena in that place, he would indeed be a true magician!

The audience was a large one—so large, in fact, that there was very little room left by the time they were all in. It was mostly composed of Fourth-Formers. There were only a few Removites in addition to the Thirteen Club. And these latter were looked upon distrustingly by the others. They were regarded as interlopers, for everybody knew them to be "negative."

"Quirke's a sport to let you in at all!" murmured Hubbard, as they settled down into their seats. "The chances are you'll spoil the meeting. Quirke won't be able to do a thing with you rotters here!"

"Of course, he won't!" growled Skelton. "A negative influence like this is fatal."

Nipper thought that he had detected Quirke's loophole of escape.

Naturally, there would be no magical effects. Quirke couldn't produce them unaided. And he would calmly explain, at the end of the meeting, that the presence of the Thirteen Club had spoilt all possible phenomena. It was so simple—and so easy.

Quirke's own supporters would swallow the yarn whole. They would readily believe that the Thirteen Club had ruined the show. In this way Quirke would lose none of his adherents, and he would do himself a great deal of good among the more simple-minded. The cunning of the plan was obvious.

The meeting settled itself down quietly, and watched. All the members of the Thirteen Club had come to the same conclusion as Nipper. They sat there, rather amused, and wondering what Quirke would say when the time came for him to confess his failure. Confess it he must—sooner or later.

Quirke sat in the chair in the little open space at the end of the cellar. He took care to keep well clear of the draperies, so that he was in view of all. He gave a little sound with his mouth—a peculiar mixture of a whistle and a hiss. Instantly something dropped down from the shadows, and alighted upon his shoulder.

"Great Scott!" breathed Watson. "That giddy owl!"

"But—but where did it come from?" breathed Church, startled. "It wasn't in here when we searched the cellar—and Quirke didn't bring it in with him! I say, this is rummy!"

The owl was sitting on Quirke's shoulder, mysterious and impressive. Quirke took no notice of it. He was holding his hands over the Oriental stool. And, gradually, something was rising out of the stool itself.

"The crystal!" whispered McClure.

But he was wrong. Apparently, Quirke was not intent upon using his crystal this time. The object which was rising out of the stool was a curiously shaped casket—a heavy-looking thing of bronze, which glinted dully in the shaded light. It came right out, and Quirke removed the lid. And from this he produced a kind of wand—a small metal rod, with a knob at the end.

He rose from his seat, and softly moved to one of the open spaces near by. Moving the wand to and fro in the air, he appeared to be in a kind of trance. And then, suddenly, he swept the rod round, and touched the end of it upon the thick carpet. There was a blinding flash.

"What the——" began Handforth.

"Look!" muttered Church.

Out of the very floor—which the investigators knew to be of concrete—a solid wooden settee was rising. It came straight up—there was even a great black hole in the carpet. Everybody watched with fascinated interest.

There was nothing horrible about Quirke's doings—he generally gave an enthralling performance of the magician's art. And everything he did was surrounded in dense mystery. There, indeed, lay the secret of his power.

"Well, I'm hanged!" muttered Reggie Pitt, under his breath.

"You seem surprised," whispered the Hon. Douglas Singleton, who was next to him. "Haven't I always told you that Quirke could do these things?"

"But how—how?" asked Pitt. "It's a concrete floor, and that carpet is just an ordinary one. We examined them both! How in the world does he do these things?"

"Before long you will stop asking how," murmured Singleton. "It's beyond our understanding. But he's a marvel, all the same."

To the startled astonishment of the Thirteen Club, the settee was not satisfied by merely coming to the surface. It continued rising, and remained hovering in mid-air, a clear foot from the floor, and utterly unsupported. The carpet was now whole again. There was nothing to show how this piece of solid furniture had materialised, or where it had come from.

CHAPTER XIV.

HANDFORTH ISN'T SATISFIED.



"GOOD gad!" said Archie Glenthorne, under his breath.

The settee still continued hovering in mid-air, and Quirke was now in the act of climbing into it.

His weight merely caused it to float gently up and down for a moment or two. And he was soon lying full length.

"It's jolly weird, if you ask me," said Brent.

"Absolutely," agreed Archie. "I mean to say, what-ho! Absolutely the Maskelyne stuff, laddie! But how? I mean, the bally blighter didn't even have a dozen assistants rallying round! Dash it all, I'm beginning to feel a dashed ripple down the dashed spine!"

"Rot!" said Handforth tensely. "This is faked somehow! I'm going to examine that settee—"

"Hold on!" gasped Church. "You gave your word not to interfere!"

Handforth started.

"By George, yes!" he said. "What piffle! We've got to stick here and look on, and we can't do a thing! Great pip! Look at that!"

Quirke himself was now hovering. The couch had slowly and mysteriously descended to the floor, where it was now resting as any self-respecting piece of furniture should. But Ezra Quirke was lying in the air itself.

The owl had left his shoulder, and was perched on the back of his chair. Without warning, it gave forth a loud, mournful screech. It was a sound which considerably startled the audience. And they were startled still more when the owl left its perch and circled overhead. All eyes were upon it, for everybody expected the bird of prey to alight on him.

But it went straight back to the chair. Quirke was sitting there, as though nothing had happened. And, more extraordinary still, the settee had completely vanished. It had all happened during those few seconds—while the owl was circling overhead.

Nipper felt thoroughly annoyed with himself.

He might have expected something of this kind. The Owl was Quirke's ally. That screech and the sudden flight had been deliberate—on purpose to distract the audience's attention. It was an old dodge—but it had worked, as it always does work.

Quirke was now sitting quite still, and looking straight before him. He seemed to be utterly oblivious of the audience's presence. Nipper and Pitt and most of the other sceptics were watching with careful, concentrated attention.

It cannot be denied that several of them were more deeply impressed than they cared to admit. This performance would have been startling enough under any normal conditions. But they had all examined the cellar before Quirke had started operations, and they knew that it contained no apparatus. How, then, had Quirke produced that settee?

How had it come from the floor?

The thing was impossible—a sheer contradiction of natural laws. Although the light was dim, the juniors knew that they could not have been deceived. They had actually seen all this. It was no mere illusion.

Quirke's supporters claimed that he could bring about these results in some magical way of his own. They didn't pretend to explain, because they couldn't explain. But they were all ready to swear that Quirke used no trick wires or other dodges.

And surely this affair proved it.

Even Dick Hamilton was at his wits' end to explain the phenomena. And he resolved to watch more closely than ever. Quirke was now on his feet again. This time he pulled two of the draperies aside, and a heavy cabinet came into view. It was a solid thing of metal, with ornamental sides, and a great door. Where had it come from?

"This is beyond me!" breathed Watson blankly.

They could understand Quirke's smuggling a few folding conjuring properties into the cellar on his person. They had been on the look out for such things.

But under no circumstances could he have smuggled this great metal cabinet into the cellar. It rolled forward silently, and

Quirke pulled the door open. Inside, everything was bare—just an empty space.

Quirke got into it, and left the doors open.

The interior was illuminated in some way—vaguely and mysteriously. And while the audience watched, a staggering thing happened. Quirke's figure became hazy. It gradually faded, and, before everybody's eyes, he simply disappeared into nothing—gradually, like a fading picture on the screen.

Reggie Pitt rubbed his eyes.

The cabinet was empty—Quirke had gone. Pitt shivered. Was it possible that this fellow was indeed something more than human? Pitt had always felt a certain creepy sensation when he was near Quirke. Was it because the Fourth-Former was a visitant from the spirit world? In the guise of a schoolboy, he had come here—

Pitt shook himself, and felt angry. He was mad to let his thoughts run into such ridiculous channels. Of course, the fellow was just performing some of his clever tricks. How he did them was beyond Pitt's understanding.

"I feel that we have had enough for one evening," came Quirke's voice.

It sounded from the rear, and everybody turned. There was Ezra Quirke behind them. And yet they had only just seen him vanish in that cabinet with the open door! And when they looked round again the cabinet itself had gone.

"Good old Quirke!"

"Let's have some more!"

"The strain has been too great!" said Quirke softly. "I have fought against this negative atmosphere, and I have partially succeeded in overcoming it. But it is very hard for me to concentrate under such circumstances. The Unseen Elements are difficult to control. We must finish."

He walked to the door and threw it open. The juniors filed out in silence, for they were still deeply puzzled by what had taken place. Handforth was reluctant to leave—he kept looking back. But he remembered his promise.

"Where did you go to just now?" he demanded.

"You mean when I entered the cabinet?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry," said Quirke; "but I cannot answer that question. I do not even know what the answer is. When I am in such a condition, my earthly body becomes as nothing. It can fade away—"

"Cheese it, Quirke!" growled Nipper. "You can't spoof us with that rot! It was all trickery—"

"I tell you—"

"Trickery!" said Nipper. "Goodness knows how you did it! Not many of these conjuring tricks deceive me, but I'll admit you've bowled me right over. You're jolly clever."

"Such praise is undeserved—for my cleverness is merely borrowed," replied Quirke.

"What you saw was not done by me, but by the Power of the Unseen."

"I'll agree with that, too," said Nipper, nodding. "It was the power of the unseen that did everything. But you're not going to kid me that the unseen is anything but an assistant behind those curtains."

"But you saw the empty cellar!"

"I know I did—and I'm wondering how the dickens you managed it," replied Nipper. "But nothing's going to convince me—"

"Look here, Dick, it's no good!" interrupted Watson. "I was as much against Quirke as anybody; but I'm on his side now! In future I'm not going to sneer at him any more—and I resign my membership of the Thirteen Club."

"Good for you, Watson!" said a number of Quirke's supporters.

"Another convert!"

Nipper looked at Watson reproachfully, and then turned his gaze upon Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

"What about you, Montie, old man?" he asked.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie uncomfortably. "I must confess, laddie, that I'm with Tommy. It's frightfully embarrassing—"

"That's all right, Montie," said Nipper. "We're all entitled to our own opinions. If you like to believe in Quirke, you can do so. Does that mean that you resign from the Thirteen Club, too?"

"I'm afraid so, Nipper, old boy."

Jack Grey and Clive Russell and Alf Brent were convinced, too. And nothing their chums could say altered them. They had seen with their own eyes, and they needed no other proof. Nipper and Pitt and Handforth were as firmly unconvinced as ever. They were puzzled, they were mystified, but they felt certain there was some kind of hidden explanation. Their innate common-sense told them again and again that such things as this could not happen without the aid of trickery.

Handforth, in fact, went a step further.

The audience had scarcely got out of the cellar before Edward Oswald created a bit of a scene. He went up to Quirke and caught him by the lapel of his jacket.

"Look here, my lad, I'm not satisfied with all that bunkum!" he said grimly. "We must have overlooked something when we looked over the cellar before. I want to see it again."

"I am sorry—"

"And I want to see it now!" went on Handforth. "I want to see it before you've had any chance to clear those cabinets and things away. If you're as genuine as you profess to be, you won't raise any objection."

Quirke looked flushed for a moment.

"But I do raise an objection!" he exclaimed. "This is not fair! I let you examine the cellar in advance, and you



satisfied yourselves that it contained nothing—"

"All the same, I'm not satisfied now," interrupted Handforth. "You say you didn't use any apparatus for performing those tricks? All right—let some of us go back and investigate again."

"No—I cannot allow that," replied Quirke quickly.

Handforth looked round with growing excitement.

"There you are!" he said triumphantly. "I knew it all along! That giddy cellar was tampered with!"

"I deny it!" shouted Quirke.

"It's no good denying it if you won't let us go and see—"

"Very well!" said Quirke tensely. "You shall have no cause to call me a fraud! Come! I will unlock the door, and admit you."

CHAPTER XV.

THE DIE-HARDS.



REGINALD PITT glanced at Nipper.

"This beats me hollow!" he confided.

"Quirke's even ready to let us go back into that cellar again! We saw that big cabinet, didn't we? It wasn't an optical illusion?"

"We saw it," admitted Nipper.

"And we saw that settee come up out of the floor, didn't we?"

"There's no denying the fact."

"And don't forget the carpet," went on Pitt. "We saw a hole made clean through it. Carpets can't mend themselves by magic. Therefore, there ought to be a join somewhere. If we look closely enough, we shall probably find it."

"There's the owl, too," said Handforth. "Quirke left it in there, and locked the door. It couldn't get out—there's no way. That barred grating isn't any good as an outlet."

Singleton touched Nipper's arm.

"You will do better to stay where you are," he said. "This fresh investigation won't do any good. Why not accept Quirke as a magician, and let it go at that? A few days ago I was just as sceptical as you are. But that's changed now. I've seen enough."

"You looked into the crystal, didn't you?"

"Quirke did—and he saw some rummy things."

"Have they come true yet?" smiled Nipper.

"Not yet," confessed the Hon. Douglas.

"But I am certain that— But let's go with the others. Handforth expects to find a great deal. But I can assure him at once that he will find nothing."

Handforth & Co. and Nipper and Pitt and a few others went back into the cellar after



As Singleton drew near, he saw that somebody was lying near the bicycle, face downwards in the grass—and half in the ditch.

Quirke had unlocked the door. Everything was precisely the same. Nothing had been touched. The chairs were in exactly the same disorder, and one or two were overturned—left there by the juniors as they hastened to get out.

"We'll have a look at the carpet first," said Handforth briskly.

The carpet was turned up at the exact spot where the settee had appeared. It had certainly come clean through the floor—and therefore through the carpet.

Yet the carpet was untouched!

The juniors searched every inch of it. They examined the cords and threads, but not one was interfered with. In some miraculous way the carpet had become whole again. And the concrete floor was just as much of a puzzle.

Nipper went on his hands and knees and examined the concrete at close quarters. He was more satisfied than ever that it was utterly and absolutely solid.

The juniors thumped the walls, pounded on the floor, and even examined the ceiling. And every story ended in the same way. There wasn't a trace of evidence to indicate how the "miracles" had been wrought.

The Remove juniors gave it up as a bad job at length, and Handforth was particularly subdued. He had been so certain—and yet he had been unable to prove a thing. They had seen the room before the meeting, and they had seen it afterwards. And yet, during the actual “show,” these mysteries had developed.

It was hardly surprising that several members of the Thirteen Club broke away. They were still on excellent terms with their chums, but they were certain that Quirke was possessed of occult powers.

“Well, we’ve had another failure,” said Nipper, when he got out into the Triangle. “I say, it’s good to be in the fresh air again! It seems clean after that atmosphere of mystery in the cellar.”

“You’re right about the failure,” growled Reggie Pitt. “We went over in the East House to expose Quirke as a fraud—and instead of that he’s converted several of our men! The Thirteen Club’s finished!”

“Finished?” snorted Handforth. “What rot! The club’s as strong as ever.”

“If you call it as strong as ever to be five or six members short, you’ve got a funny notion of things,” said Nipper. “Reggie’s quite right—the Thirteen Club’s finished.”

“I’m glad to hear you say it,” declared Singleton. “You chaps don’t realise what a lot of bad luck you’ve brought on the school by forming that beastly club. Take my advice, and don’t start anything of the same sort again. And let this one die quickly.”

“We can’t very well help ourselves,” said Nipper. “With half the members backing out, the club automatically comes to an end. But you don’t seriously believe in all that tosh, Singleton?”

“What tosh?”

“Well, hang it all!” growled Nipper. “You saw what happened in that cellar as well as I did. There’s one obvious explanation. Quirke’s got some way of fixing up his apparatus that we don’t know of.”

“But it’s sheerly impossible——”

“I know that,” said Nipper calmly. “According to all we saw, and according to our investigations, it was sheerly impossible. But I’m still as much a die-hard as ever. I’m not believing in the occult yet, thanks!”

“It will be far better if you become one of Quirke’s supporters,” urged Singleton. “You have a big following, Nipper—bigger than you think for. It only needs you to give them the lead——”

“Sorry,” smiled Nipper. “Nothing doing. All my efforts are going to be concentrated upon getting to the bottom of Quirke’s secrets. I’ve never been whacked yet, and I hope I shan’t be now. Although, by the way things are going, it looks very tough.”

The various juniors separated, and went to their own quarters.

Although there was a good deal of talk in the school about that meeting, most of it was confined to the Fourth and the Remove. The seniors heard a few whispers, but they took no notice. They regarded it as merely another example of junior exaggeration.

The next day the members of the Thirteen Club found it hard to believe that everything had actually happened. It all seemed so remote now—so unreal and fantastic. But the club was no more. Six of the Thirteen had gone over to Quirke’s side, and some of the others were hesitating.

And that afternoon Singleton met with a rather surprising adventure, which was particularly significant in the light of previous events. The Hon. Douglas happened to walk to the village. He generally used his bicycle, but this time his back tyre was punctured, so he went on foot.

On the way back he was just turning the bend in the lane near the old stile, when he caught sight of something glinting in the grass, a bit further along. He recognised it as the handle-bars of an overturned bicycle.

“Some careless ass!” thought the Hon. Douglas.

But a moment later his heart quickened its beat. He had just seen two feet, and he now saw that somebody was lying near the bicycle, face downwards in the grass—and half in the ditch.

“By Jove! There must have been a smash!” muttered Singleton, running forward.

He stood there, staring. The victim was no less a person than Professor Sylvester Tucker. He was lying quite still, face downwards, and for a moment Singleton felt thoroughly alarmed. Apparently the professor had crashed rather badly. The front wheel of his machine was twisted up, and he must have come a nasty cropper.

There was nothing particularly surprising in this. Everybody had been expecting to hear of a mishap to the professor for days. He was notoriously absent-minded, and about the last man in the world to be trusted alone on a bicycle. He had paid the penalty already.

Singleton bent over the professor’s prostrate form, and heaved him over.

“Come on, sir!” he shouted. “If you’ll help yourself up——”

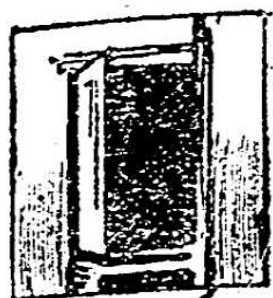
“Good gracious!” murmured Professor Tucker. “Who—who is that? Where am I? Upon my word! I think I must have fallen——”

He paused, still too dazed to give any coherent account of what had happened. Not that Singleton was listening.

He had suddenly noticed that one of the professor’s fingers on the right hand was deeply gashed.

CHAPTER XVI.

MORE MYSTERY.



THE HON. DOUGLAS SINGLETON experienced a curious feeling of awe.

A gashed finger.

Not particularly alarming, and the kind of injury one would expect in a man who had had a bad fall on a bicycle. But Singleton remembered an earlier visit to Ezra Quirke. In the crystal Quirke had seen strange things in connection with Singleton.

First and foremost, however, he had seen a gashed finger, and this gashed finger was connected with the vague figure of an elderly man, whom Quirke could not exactly place.

And here was the elderly science master was a gashed finger.

The possibility of any collusion was out of the question. Quirke had told all that days ago. And it was hardly likely that Professor Tucker should fall from his bicycle on purpose to accommodate Ezra Quirke. It was clearly a case of Quirke seeing into the future.

Singleton got a grip on himself, and shook the professor again.

"How did it happen, sir?" he asked.

"Exactly!" muttered Professor Tucker. "That is just what I would like to know, young man. How did it happen? A most astonishing affair. I seem to have no recollection. Dear me! How distressing! How extremely distressing!"

He gazed at his hand and frowned. Then he brought out a handkerchief and wrapped it round the wounded finger. Singleton was glad to see it concealed, for the gash was no pleasant sight, with the oozing blood.

"Hadn't we better wash it, sir?" he asked quickly.

"No, no; it doesn't matter," replied the professor. "This handkerchief will serve for the moment. I shall be glad if you will help me to rise—er—er— Really, I don't know who you are. Your face is familiar—"

"I'm Singleton, of the Remove, sir."

"Of course," nodded the professor. "How forgetful of me. Thank you, Singleton—capital. Capital! That's the style!"

With a few grunts and gasps, the professor rose to his feet, leaning heavily upon the junior. He was muddy and untidy, but except for the nasty wound in his hand he seemed unhurt. But this was not exactly the case. For when he attempted to walk he swayed dizzily.

"You'd better let me help you along, sir," said Singleton. "I can take your arm, and we'll go along like that. How did it

happen, anyhow? Did something knock you into the ditch?"

"Really, I am quite puzzled," said Professor Tucker. "I was cycling down the lane when I suddenly caught something with the front wheel. A stone, probably. At all events, I crashed over with considerable force, and that is really all I know."

The Hon. Douglas looked rather grim.

"You must have caught your trousers in the chain again, sir," he said severely. "That happened once before, you know. You'll have to be careful. All ready now, sir; let's be going. I shall be late for afternoon lessons as it is."

"Lessons? What lessons?"

"It's nearly time for afternoon school to start, sir."

"Why, so it is!" agreed the professor. "We must hurry. On no account must we be late. And yet, why not?" he went on. "In fact, why hurry? Far better to be late."

This seemed like sheer rambling, and Singleton was concerned. However, there was method in the professor's sudden change of front.

"Far better to be late," he repeated. "We shall be free from vulgar attention, Singleton. Indeed, I would wish this little mishap to be kept quiet, if possible. I detest publicity of any kind, particularly publicity of this sort. As for your being late, I will make that right, of course."

"Then we're all serene, sir," smiled the Hon. Douglas. "But I'm worrying about that finger of yours. It's an awful gash—"

"A trifle—a mere trifle," replied the professor gruffly. "But if it will relieve you at all, I will bathe it and dress it the very instant we arrive. Come, let us waste no further time."

By the time they arrived at St. Frank's, afternoon school had begun, and the Triangle was completely deserted. Professor Tucker was fortunate in having Singleton to help him. Unassisted, he would have had a hard task to get back to the school. He was still dizzy after he had been safely escorted to his own private suite.

"Don't go," he said, as the Hon. Douglas made a move towards the door. "Absurd! Stay just where you are, Singleton. Wait until I return, and I will personally conduct you to your Form-room, and explain to Mr. Crowell that I have kept you. Make yourself quite at home, my dear boy."

Singleton did so, by no means averse to missing the first half-hour of lessons. He was a slacker in his way, and took life very easily. Until he had interested himself in Quirke's mysticism, he had scarcely had any hobbies. Now he was heart and soul in Quirke's mysterious movement.

He thought over the recent events. Now that the Thirteen Club was dead, there would probably be a lull in the long run of bad luck. The more fellows who believed in Quirke the better for the school. That was the way the Hon. Douglas looked at it.

The unfortunate Solomon Levi had come a frightful cropper over his insurance scheme. He was out of pocket to a serious extent, but he was grimly determined to keep on until he had made good the loss. Levi was always engaged in some business deal, and he had never come out on the wrong side yet. It wasn't likely he was going to be beaten by this insurance idea.

"Ah, there you are!" came a voice from the inner door.

Singleton rose to his feet at once. Professor Tucker had returned, washed, brushed, and quite himself again. He was beaming with geniality, and he came over to Singleton, and took his hand.

"Thank you, my boy—thank you!" he said. "Without your help I really don't know what I should have done. Good gracious! I might have been lying in that ditch still. Events of that kind are better forgotten. Supposing we forget it?"

"Yes, sir," said Singleton dazedly.

The Hon. Douglas wondered if he was dreaming. Professor Tucker had just gripped him by the right hand that had been so badly injured. It was a firm, tight grip, too. And the hand was now vigorous, with no trace of bandaging. What was the explanation?

"Dear, dear! What is all this?" asked the professor, peering forward at Singleton through his glasses. "Is anything the matter?"

"Your hand, sir!"

Professor Tucker examined his left hand with great care.

"No, sir—the other hand!" said Singleton.

He watched the professor in amazement as he held the hand up and examined it.

There was no gash there now, not even a scratch. Yet in the lane Singleton had seen that torn finger with the flowing blood. He had set it down as a wound requiring some stitches in order to effect a clean recovery.

And here was the finger untouched.

"Well, I can't see anything," said the professor. "There's nothing wrong with my hand. What nonsense—"

He suddenly paused, starting violently. For a moment he staggered, and then sank into a chair and mopped his brow. His agitation was so acute that Singleton stared with increasing astonishment.

"It is nothing—nothing!" muttered Professor Tucker. "Good gracious! My absent-mindedness again. What a fool I was— Eh? It's nothing, Singleton. As a matter of fact, the wound was a mere scratch."

"But even a scratch can't heal in five minutes, sir," said Singleton.

"No, no—to be sure!" agreed the professor, recovering himself. "Singleton, can you keep a secret?"

"I think so, sir."

"Then say nothing of this incident to another soul," said the professor tensely.

"One day, perhaps, I will take you into my confidence, but not now. I must think first—I must think. You will give me your word of honour that you will keep this matter confidential?"

"Certainly, sir, if you want me to," said the puzzled Singleton.

"It is most important—indeed, vital," said the science master. "There is much more in this than you can credit. But later on, perhaps soon, I will tell you more. Thank you, Singleton. I know I can rely upon you."

What was this fresh mystery? Professor Sylvester Tucker had received a serious wound, and within five minutes all traces of it had gone.

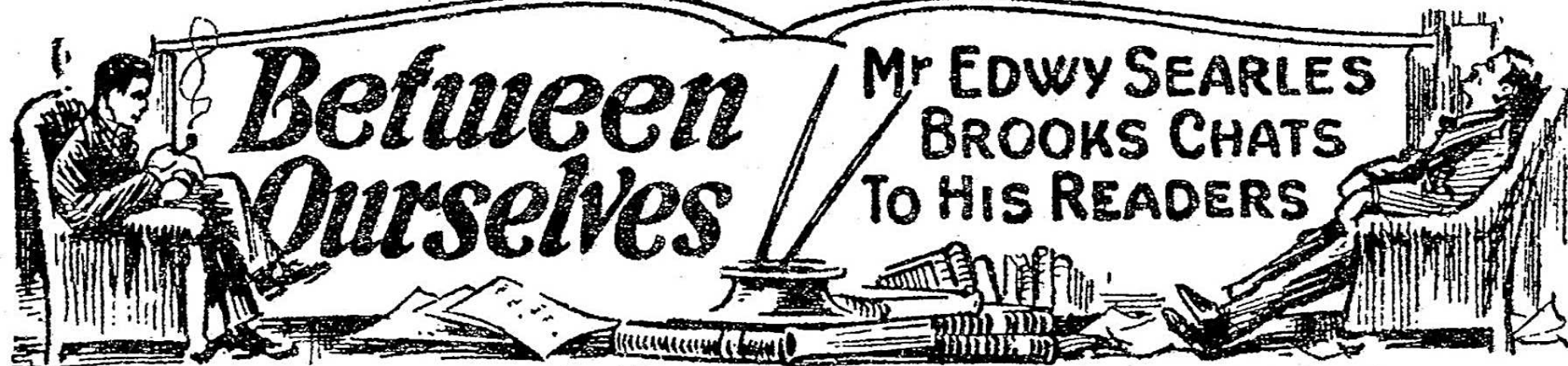
What new surprises were in store for St. Frank's now?

THE END.

*Another Thrilling Story of the Schoolboy
Magician of St. Frank's Appearing Next
Week is :—*

**"THE HAUNTED FORM-ROOM;
or, The Fanatics of the East House!"**

**IF YOU WANT TO EXCHANGE YOUR STAMPS—JOIN THE
ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE!**



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.

Have you been to your newsagent's yet?

* * *

If not, why not?

* * *

Of course, I'm addressing all you good people who read my last week's chat, and who are interested in "The Monster Library of Complete Stories." Everybody who isn't interested can turn to the adverts., or read the serial, or look at the pictures, or—as a last resort—read the St. Frank's yarn. These confidential lines are only written for the benefit of the Monsters. Hallo, that looks bad, doesn't it? I'm not calling you monsters, understand, but if you're interested in "The Monster Library" you'll know what I mean. There's no need for formalities among friends like us, is there?

* * *

I repeat: have you been to your newsagent's yet? If you think this is just a piece of spoof, remove such an idea as swiftly as you would remove a spider from your teacup. You've only got to neglect the precaution of ordering your copy in advance, and you'll find that I'm right. And with No. 1 of anything it's a matter of almost national importance. Fail to get No. 1, and where are you? Later, you may desire to take the "Monster Library" regularly, and you'll be moaning all over the place because the whole set is ruined by the absence of the first issue. So buzz to that newsagent's, and give tongue in no uncertain voice.

How many letters have I received asking me—begging me—imploping me—for No. 1 of Our Paper? How many? Odds hundreds and thousands! I simply couldn't tell you the exact number, but now and again I've come to the conclusion that every reader has a perfect mania to get No. 1. Alas, there aren't many No. 1's in existence, and the fellows who own them stick to 'em like glue. All because of carelessness in the first place! Once the issue is out of print, there'll be no hope. You might just as well go to Downing Street, and ask for one of Mr. Baldwin's pipes. You'll get a cold and curt rejoinder to the effect that nothing is doing. After all, what's the risk? If you don't like No. 1 you can probably sell it to somebody for half-price, so you'll only chance a mere sixpence. And if you do like it—well, there you are. You've got your No. 1 all secure.

* * *

Now, for a few words about the creation itself. I've used the word "creation" deliberately, for it's the only one that applies. This "Monster Library" isn't like something that has appeared before. Oh, no! It's different with a capital D. And when it comes to a question of value, I give you my word that the price of one shilling is out of all proportion. Let me go into this thoroughly. You cheerfully pay a modest twopence for Our Paper every week, don't you? As a general rule, a Series runs through eight issues. Thus, for the whole series you pay 1s. 4d. But just wait a minute! How much would you be willing to pay for those eight stories all bound together in one volume? And not merely bound together in one volume, but converted into a smooth-running, continuous story throughout the whole length? Add to these advantages a massive size, big, clear-as-a-bell type, and a superbly executed cover in many colours. As I've said, you'll pay 1s. 4d. for the eight stories in separate issues, and I'll guarantee that you'd be willing to pay double for the Series in the form I have just described. But is the price of "The Monster Library" 2s. 8d.? No jolly fear! It's ONE SHILLING! Just one merry little bob! The only way of producing the Library at this price is to have an enormous monthly circulation.

* * *

But here's the rub! Here's the rock you'd better steer clear of. Being a kind of experi-

ment, only a limited quantity of No. 1 is being printed. So where the dickens will you be if you wait for No. 2? Where? As old Browne would say, splashing about in the mock-turtle!

* * *

I'm devoting practically all my space to this subject this week, and I hope you readers who are awaiting replies will be impatient with me. The fact is, I'm very enthusiastic about this "Monster Library of Complete Stories." You don't blame me for taking a pride in it, do you? And you'll be just as enthusiastic as I am when you have this enormous production in your own hands. Honestly, it's a journalistic triumph, and all you fellows who want the earlier Series (and hundreds of you have written to me asking for the back numbers) will have your wishes granted. And instead of getting grubby back numbers, you'll have these various Series in complete form, bound in an artistically coloured cover. And you'll get these yarns at eight for a shilling—less than you are willing to pay for old issues!

* * *

As for No. 1, let me give you a hint. It's called "The Schoolboy Treasure Seekers," and it's all about the St. Frank's fellows going out to the Pacific, searching for Spanish treasure. It is a quest organised by Captain Burton—Tom Burton's father—and, naturally, Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi are to the fore, and the schoolboy treasure-seekers are up against the notorious Captain Ebenezer Jelks, and his rascally mate, Mr. Lanson. I think I've said quite enough to show you that the yarn is just the sort you like. You old-timers may possibly remember the series, but it will be absolutely new to the majority of you. And, being in a new form, it'll seem new to everybody. That's the beauty of this big new monthly. Your favourite series will be served up in such a way that you'll scarcely know them.

* * *

As for the future, well, that's a bit difficult to discuss. If the "Monster Library," is a success, Series after Series will appear—all in complete form, and artistically produced. It's quite possible that other stories will appear in the "Monster Library," too, but I'm only dealing with the St. Frank's yarns here.

* * *

How many of you have asked for the old stories concerning Reggie Pitt's arrival at St. Frank's—when he was known as The Serpent? Well, let me just whisper that this Series will appear in complete form in No. 2 of this mammoth library. Then how about Colonel Clinton, who came to St. Frank's, and used military discipline to such an extent that the fellows started a Barring-

Out? And what about the Hon. Douglas Singleton? When he arrived at St. Frank's he was an awful spendthrift, and some of you may remember the yarns. Then there's that Series about stirring adventures on the Amazon, in the land of the White Giants. And the Boxing Series concerning Ernest Lawrence's arrival at the old school. The Miss Trumble Series—when St. Frank's was under petticoat rule—the South Pole Series, when a St. Frank's holiday party discovered an unknown country called New Anglia. The Dr. Karnak Series—The William K. Smith Series—But I could mention lots more like this. I've had letters from heaps of you, urging me to get on the right side of the Editor to DO SOMETHING.

* * *

Well, that something has been DONE. Next week you'll have No. 1 of "The Monster Library of Complete Stories" in your hands. And all the Series I have mentioned above—to say nothing of lots of other yarns—will appear in due course, month by month, if the experiment is a success.

* * *

Now, that "if" is a big one—a huge one—an enormous one. Everything depends upon it. You can take my word for it that I am more interested than any of you readers, because I'd just love to please the countless enthusiasts who have written to me. They'll only be pleased if—here's that little word again—if the first one or two numbers are successful. The Editor and the publishers have been to an enormous amount of trouble to get this production out. Just imagine what a dirty trick it will be if all you readers don't rally round and make it a huge success. Because it depends upon YOU. If you fail to come up to the scratch, we can't rely upon people who don't know anything about the yarns. It's for you to tell your chums about this coming novelty, and it's for you to get them to buy the first number as an introduction to the old parent paper. And I'm in deadly earnest when I tell you that the "Monster Library" will die a natural death unless it gains a reasonable measure of support to begin with. You see, it's such a costly production that it would be absolutely ruinous to bring it out monthly for the sake of a few earnest enthusiasts. How about making a big effort? I'm sure you're just as enthusiastic as I am, and the fate of the new venture rests in your hands. So go to your newsagent's, order your copy of No. 1, and rake up that shilling in readiness for next week! If the first issue goes with a bang—well, all the others will follow as a matter of course. You see, I know what a lot of bounders you are for putting things off. Don't put it off another minute. Grab your cap, and streak to the newsagent's like greased lightning!

E.S.B.

THE STAMP COLLECTOR

By FRED. J. MELVILLE.

A PHILATELIC FEAST

I EXPECT most of you will share my regret that we have come this week to the last of the interesting little packets of stamps the Editor has been kind enough to give away these four weeks with THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. Still, such generosity can't be continued indefinitely, and we are fortunate in having been able to get quite a number of additions to our collections.

Curiously enough, my last packet contained among other stamps the six centavos bi-coloured stamp of the Mozambique Company, with a pretty vignette of a native working in a coffee plantation. Quite appropriate at the end of our feast of stamps, to get the coffee. I dare say many of you have missed the coffee, but found some other wholesome dishes, for we could spread quite a swagger meal with the edibles we find on stamps.

Suppose we set out an imaginary postage stamp meal. We shall want bread, of course. On the current penny stamp of Jamaica is a negress making cassava bread, the very thing. Cassava is also the source of our tapioca. Or you may prefer wheat, which you will find in unripe and in ripe ears on the Chinese stamps of 1912, and we could get plenty more from the harvesters on the current Hungarian low values and some of the present Chinese stamps. Our butter will come from the dairy-farm on the one dollar American parcels post stamp.

For fish we can take our choice of good Newfoundland cod or salmon, or a nice carp all the way from China. There is a bommi-fish on the fifty cents Liberia, 1918 issue; but it doesn't look good to eat, and we won't take any risks of upsetting the guests at our feast.

For our next course we have a good choice of cuts from many a joint. If you stick to beef, there is plenty of good cattle on stamps. Uruguay, the seven centesimos of 1895, always reminds me of "Alas my poor brother!" of Bovril fame. Apart from such familiar fare, we can offer such novelties as a bear steak (Norway and

North Borneo), buffalo (U.S.A.), reindeer (Tronisö), stag (Borneo), camel (Nyassa), caribou (Newfoundland), lion (Abyssinia), and many other, more or less, mostly less, tender dainties. On the whole, I think I would prefer mutton, and the lady on the ten centesimos Uruguay, 1900, is here to deliver the goods.

Of course, we can indulge ourselves, in other words, do ourselves well at this imaginary feast, for there is no limit to the number of courses. Take your choice in the poultry line from the goose (China), pigeon (Japan), ptarmigan (Newfoundland), duck (Wuhu), swan (West Australia), pheasant (North Borneo), ostrich (Abyssinia), emu (Australia), and many less familiar birds.

Then we come to the pudding, and the sago palm on the three cents pictorial North Borneo will provide this, unless you would rather have tapioca—already referred to under "cassava." For dessert, there are pineapples and bananas (Jamaica, Bahamas, and Costa Rica), breadfruit (Tonga), oranges (Mozambique), coconut (Togo), melocactus (Turks Island.)

To help in consuming so many rich and rare foods, we shall require something to drink. There is a tea merchant on the Chinese local stamps of Hankow, with boxes of the leaves to make the refreshing beverage, or there is cocoa, if you prefer it, on the Togo stamps, and coffee from Costa Rica, or on the stamp I found in my free packet this week, the six centavos Mozambique.

After such a meal let us loosen the lowest button of the waistcoat and talk of something else. In developing your stamp collection the chief thing is to be ever on the alert to add new varieties to your collection. If you have friends or relations who have correspondents abroad, they can help you by saving the stamps on the letters they receive. You will of course acquire numbers of duplicates which you will not need for your own collection, but

(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 does not trust the King's ministers, who are taking advantage of the youthful monarch's weakness of signing documents without reading them to suit their own ends. Accordingly, Blake arranges for Tinker to watch these ministers, while he disappears on some investigations of his own. In the following chapter Blake discloses to Tinker what he has discovered.

(Now read on.)

"I SUPPOSE so, and I don't see how we can help much. But how are you getting on with your job, guv'nor?"

"Fairly well. I think they got the wind up in Paris and London about little or nothing. There is a republican party, but it isn't republican enough to care whether there's a king or a president. It's really an anti-Sarjo party. Some of its leaders are Peter's good friends. In the last year or two, when Prince Paul was ill, Sarjo and his little gang got hold of the reins of government, and they're sticking to them. I've got a list of names for you, through our bandit friend chiefly. It's not safe to carry it about, for if some people knew I had it, I'd probably be found shot in the street. Sarjo would give his ears to have these people rounded up and shot. He daren't do it himself, but if he could twist young Peter into signing the order, it could be done and all the blame put on the king."

Tinker took the paper. To an English person Carlovian names were difficult things to spell, pronounce or remember, but Tinker was quick and possessed an amazingly good memory. He read through the list half a dozen times.

"Got 'em, guv'nor," he said.

"Burn the paper, then," said Sexton Blake. "The members of the Supreme Council are afraid of those chaps. If Sarjo can get the order out of Peter, there'll be a round up. Watch it, Tinker, for if the order's signed we couldn't stop it. It would be red murder, nothing else, and it would mean Peter's death-warrant as well. They'd have him then, for even a successful round up would not net them all."

"Then there's no danger that Carlovina will go Bolshevik, guv'nor?"

"It might if that happened. What they want here is a strong man. Sarjo is strong, but he and his gang are too greedy."

Tinker nodded as he struck a match and set the paper ablaze. He dropped the ashes on the tiled hearth of the grate, and crushed them to powder with his foot. Someone tapped gently at the door. Tinker opened it, and confronted Prince Darro.

"The king is asking for you, Mr. Brown," said the prince. "He is talking about shooting young wild boars, and horrified me by asking me to join him, though he knows how I detest the thought of killing anything. I am rather afraid I went too far with his Majesty when I pleaded with him not to renew the firearms order, but I still believe that it is a monstrous crime to take life in any shape or form."

"A funny thing, but I'm not so particular," said Tinker. "If there are any boars to be shot, I'll help. I thought you speared the beggars."

"I really know very little about it, but I am sure the king would not be permitted to do anything so dangerous as to attack one of these fierce creatures with a spear. But please do not keep his Majesty waiting."

Tinker returned from the exhibition rather disgusted. He had been posted with the king on a raised platform at the end of a forest glade, while the keepers rounded up the boars and drove them past. The boars knew how to run, and they made some good snap-shooting, but Tinker liked a spice of danger, and there was no danger in this. He was rather surprised to find Peter was such a good shot with a rifle, till he learned that Blimp was his instructor and that he had been the second best shot in the Calcroft cadet corps.

"A bit later on, we'll do a bit of deer-stalking, Billy, my lad," said Peter. "That sounds classy, doesn't it, better than knocking over these squeaking pigs. I only had one go, but I bagged a stag first time. I mean to do a lot of that, for it's ripping sport, every time I can get away from the king business, which is a rotten sort of stunt, old thing. Gee, ain't that old pig you just shot like Darro in the face?"

"Something—only the pig's too good-looking," said Tinker. "Well, I don't mind trying deer-stalking, but pig-shooting in this style isn't much more exciting than rabbit-

the streets, but suddenly, as they were passing the cathedral, a shot was fired, and, with a cry of pain, one of the guardsmen threw up his arms and tumbled from his horse.

"Drive like fury!" yelled Blimp.

Tinker grasped Peter by the neck and forced that surprised monarch down to the bottom of the car, while Blimp, with drawn revolver, galloped madly across the square, followed by five of his men. The shot seemed to have come from the porch of the cathedral. Blimp drove his horse up the wide marble steps. The great doors were closed, and the two cars had gone on, the



Before Tinker reached him, the King was kneeling beside the wounded guardsman. Faces appeared from windows, and there was a sudden shout. "It's the King! It's the King!"

shooting. I'd like to chase 'em on ponies, with a spear, like they do in India. I'll race you to the car for a bob!"

Leaving the keepers to collect the slain, Tinker and his Majesty galloped their horses at full speed to where the royal motor-cars were waiting, and made a dead heat of it. Rain was pouring down in Kamfak, washing the dye out of the flags and bunting that were still displayed in King Peter's honour.

They had to drive slowly to keep pace with the horses, for Blimp, with an escort of the Royal Guard, had met them on the outskirts of the town. There was scarcely a soul in

rest of the escort clattering beside them as fast as they could urge their horses over the wet, slippery road.

Peter seemed to object. He got a kick home that winded Tinker for the moment, and flung open the door of the car. He was out before Tinker could recover breath enough to seize him. He staggered on the slippery road, trying to keep his feet after his jump, and might have succeeded had not the riderless horse come along and bowled him over.

"Stop, stop!" yelled Tinker, with all the breath he could summon.

Tinker leapt out and ran back. The king

had regained his feet after his spill and was also running. He had been rolled into a puddle and was wet and dirty, and though Peter was lazy, he was as game as pheasant, and full of pluck. Before Tinker reached him he was kneeling beside the wounded guardsman. Faces appeared at windows, and there was a sudden shout.

"It's the king! It's the king!"

Peter was a very dirty king as he ordered the wounded man to be lifted into the royal car, and mounted the horse that had been captured and brought back. As if by magic a crowd had gathered, heedless of the pouring rain. They cheered frantically, as Blimp, who had failed to find the sniper, came up and ordered his men to close round.

"Oh, you push behind, Blimp, and I'll lead my own guard," said Peter, wiping the mud from his face. "If they want to shoot me let 'em shoot, for I'm not jolly coward enough to let any of my men stop bullets intended for me. Let 'em get on with it!"

There was no shooting, only enormous cheering, as his mud-stained Majesty trotted on at the head of his guards. Tinker, who had been forgotten, had to walk.

"Peter did himself a bit of good that time," he thought, as he rubbed himself, "but I wish he'd wear lighter shooting-boots, or else keep them away from my ribs. His nerves are good enough, anyhow, and if he's not as sore as I am after his spill, he must be made of india-rubber."

The rain began to fall in a deluge and Tinker took shelter under the awning of a shop. A man whose face was concealed by a flesh-coloured mask was also sheltering there and smoking on of the strong-flavoured Carlovian cigarettes.

"Was the king fired at?" he asked.

"I couldn't say," answered Tinker cautiously. "I believe one of the guard who was riding beside the king's motor-car was hit."

"Sarjo is a cunning fellow," said the masked man, as he faced the rain. "Good-day to you."

"What the thump does he mean by that?" muttered Tinker, turning up his collar. "Phew! I think I've got a notion what he did mean."

Sexton Blake, who so seldom erred, had given it as his opinion that the king was in no personal danger, and yet he had been fired at, for the shot that had struck the guardsman had, of course, been intended for his Majesty. Or, perhaps it had not been intended to leave Carlovian with a vacant throne. The man's words had set Tinker pondering.

"It was a rotten bad shot, anyhow," he thought. "Now, did they intend to biff Peter, or only to get his temper up so that if Sarjo tells the tale, shows Peter the list

of names, and rules it in that these are the chaps who employed the sniper, he'll sign their death-warrants. A nice job watching Peter and what he signs. I wish the gov'nor would take it on and let me go ferreting round Kamfak gathering information for the French and British Foreign Offices—A jolly nice day for ducks, Mr. Veilburg."

The secret service man, who was hurrying along under the shelter of an umbrella with his bodyguard not far away, stopped and smiled genially.

"Yes, when it rains here it rains hard, Mr. Jones, but when it's over we have a good long spell of fine weather," he said. "Coming from England you ought to be used to it, for it's always raining there, they tell me. Nasty business about the king, isn't it? Do you want me for anything?"

"Only to ask what became of my pal from li'l old New York, Arthur P. Clodie."

"Oh, he was escorted across the frontier and told that he would be shot on sight if he ventured to come back," answered Veilburg. "Perhaps he told you what brought him here, Mr. Brown. It would be interesting to know, for he refused to reply to any of the questions we put to him."

"Nothing doing," said Tinker.

If Sarjo, as Tinker suspected, had arranged for the royal car to be fired at with the idea of making Peter furious, the scheme had failed badly. Peter had never dreamed of advertising himself when he had jumped out to see what had happened to his guardsman, and the result of it astonished him.

There were two newspapers in Kamfak, and neither of them had made any great fuss about the return of the schoolboy king, but now they published special editions and gushed. Blimp procured the papers and brought them to Tinker, and after grinning over them Tinker went in search of the king. He found Peter looking over a bundle of fishing-rods that had belonged to his late uncle.

"Somebody left you money, kid? You've got a grin on you as long as a street," said his Majesty.

"You'll grin yourself when you read this," said Tinker. "It's thoughtful of your newspapers to print in English as well as in your native lingo, which is beastly enough to choke a bronze lion. Where were you when this happened, and where was the guy who wrote it? I'll wager he was in bed and dreamed it. Get hold of yourself tight, sonny, and keep yourself from falling through your socks."

"Oh, fire ahead and get on with it," said Peter. "Never mind about breaking it gently."

"Hallo, here's Celia," cried Tinker, as the

princess entered. "You're just in time to hear what a gallant brother you've got. Take a pew and open your ears wide. You know what really did happen, don't you? When I heard the shot, not wanting to attend Peter's funeral, I grabbed him by his royal neck and—"

"Well, don't you grab me by the royal neck next time, my lad, or I'll twist your unroyal neck for you, good and hard," interrupted his Majesty.

"And don't you kick me in the ribs when I'm trying to do a good turn or I'll twist your royal nose into a sort of royal cork-screw."

"Consider yourself shot at dawn, Billy," said Celia. "Don't read it unless it will make me laugh, for I've had a terrible fright."

"You'll laugh right enough," said Tinker, "so here goes: 'When the dastardly shot was fired, the royal car accelerated to full speed. Desperate efforts were made by his Majesty's young English friend to keep our gallant young king in the car, but felling him with a blow of his fist—I don't think papa—he hurled himself into the road, in spite

of the terrific speed of his motor. Unluckily, his Majesty flung himself under the hoofs of the riderless horse that was following at full gallop. He rose, stunned and bleeding, but happily not seriously injured and undaunted in his purpose to aid his wounded guardsman.

"By this time the would-be assassin had been joined by his bloodthirsty confederates. A hail of bullets swept the street, but scorning this deadly hail, the brave and heroic young king dashed through it as if he bore a charmed life and flung himself on the body of the guardsman to shield him from the murderous missiles.

"By this time the royal guard had rallied, and the baffled miscreants took to flight. Disdaining the shelter of the royal car, the king mounted a horse and rode away amid the frantic plaudits of his enchanted and admiring subjects, a gallant figure of fearless youth, erect and handsome in the saddle—Oh, for the sake of Mike—and, like all his race, braver than a lion."

(To be continued next week.)

THE STAMP COLLECTOR

(Continued from page 35.)

you can make good use of them by swapping them with other boys for stamps you haven't got. Here our Editor has come to our aid again, and is offering the readers of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY free facilities for exchanging stamps with each other through the medium of this paper. Make good use of this new feature and you will find it of the greatest help in making your collection grow.

Those of you who have followed my chats on stamps the last few weeks should be well prepared to enter for an interesting prize competition at the Schoolboys' Exhibition, which is to be held at the Royal Horticultural Hall, London, next January. A splendid silver challenge trophy is offered, along with heaps of other prizes for the best stamp collection. It may be either a general or a special collection, or a collection arranged to illustrate some subject like aviation, art, ships, engines, portraits, sport, or any similar subject. If you have been making good use of your opportunities these few weeks you should—provided you are within the age-limit of nineteen—go in for this stamp contest, for which there is no entrance fee. The honorary secretary, Mrs. H. P. Terry, 22, Kempsholl Road, London, S.W.16, will send you free entry forms on application.

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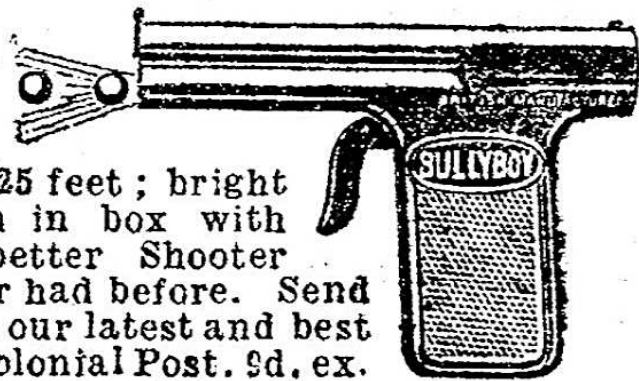
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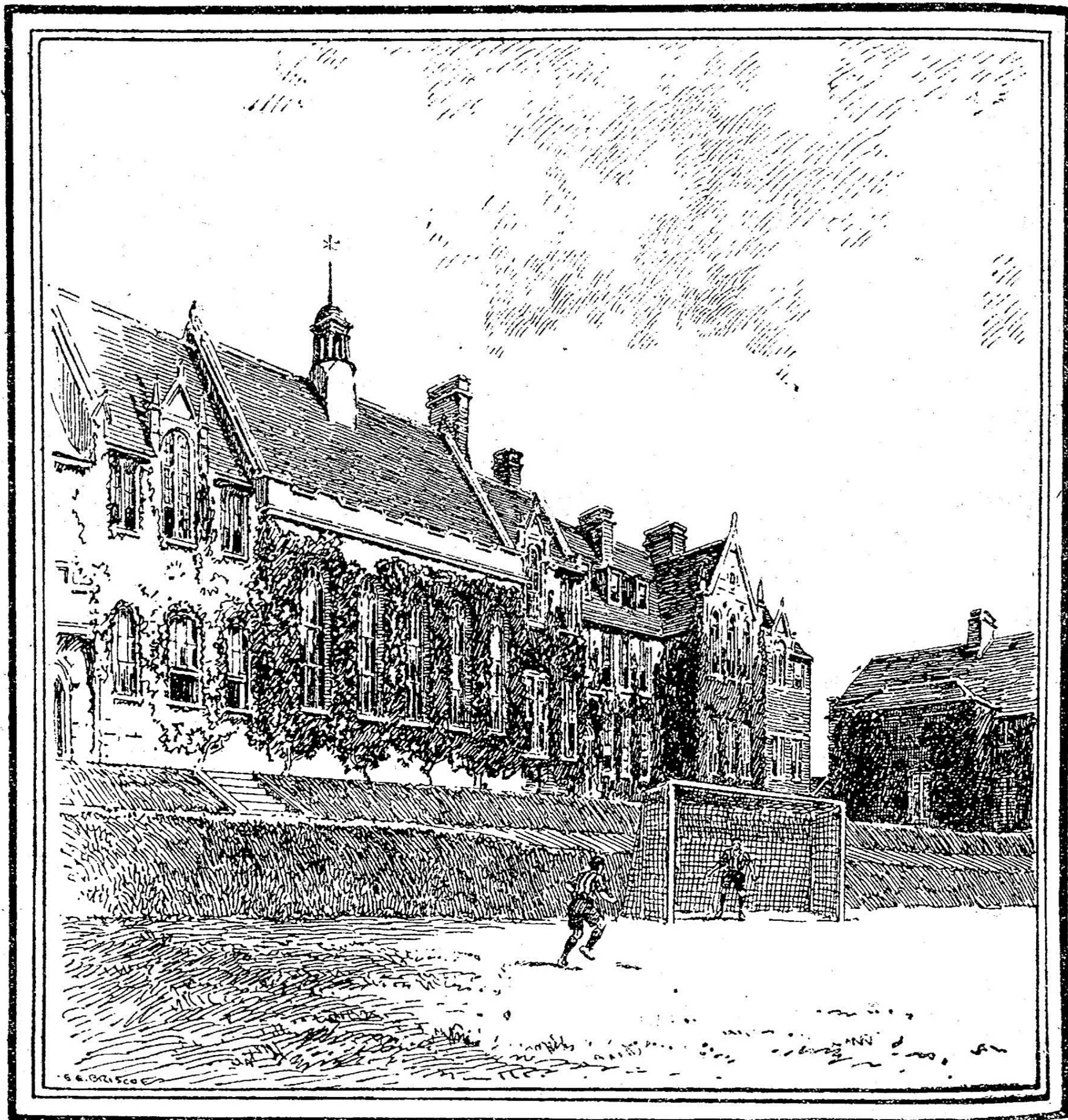
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ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 21. Nov. 14, 1925

READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.

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A

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SECTION

B

MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.

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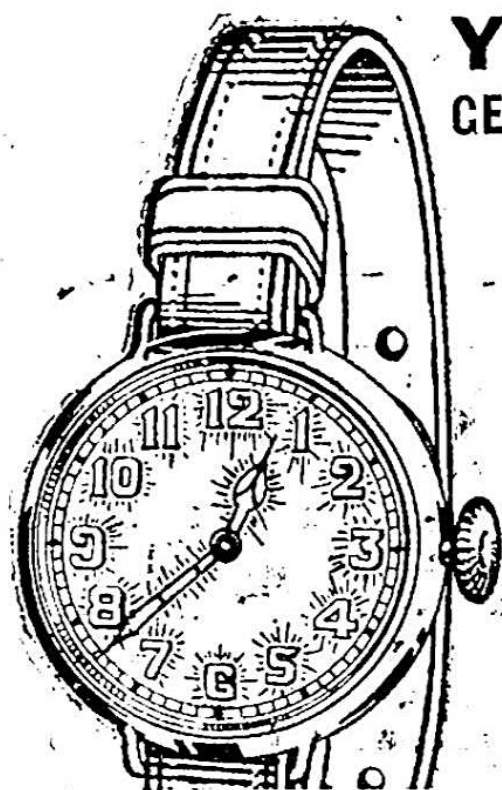
C

NEW READER'S DECLARATION.

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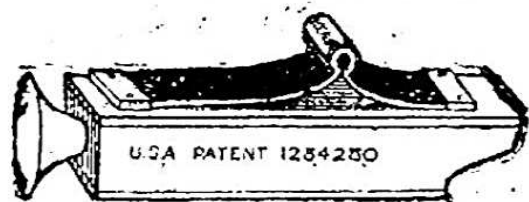
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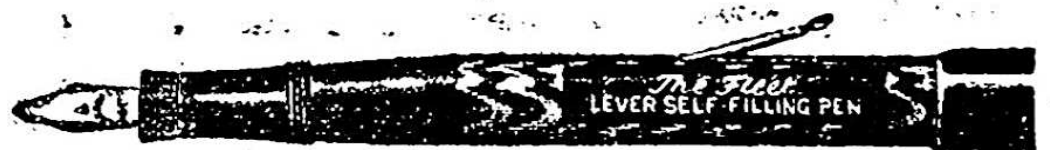
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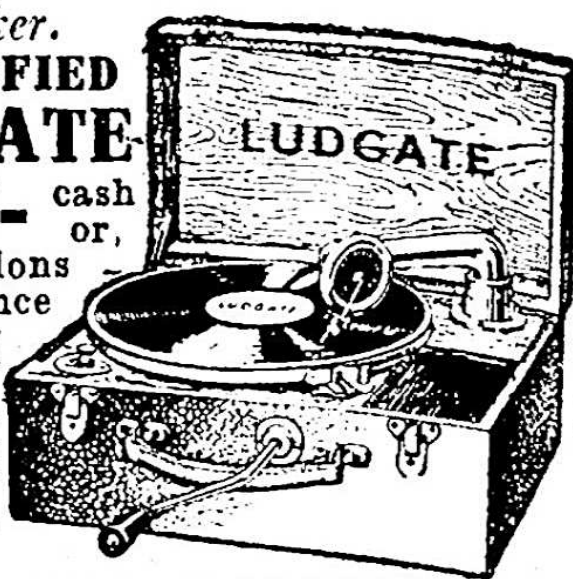
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