

THE RIVAL MAGICIAN OF ST. FRANK'S!

SEE THIS
WEEK'S STORY!

THE NELSON LEE

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The Fourth gave one long yell and pandemonium followed. (See This Week's Thrilling Yarn.)



The HAUNTED FORM-ROOM *Or, The Fanatics of the East House*

A Story of Ezra Quirke, the schoolboy magician, and of strange, mysterious happenings at St. Frank's!



It was impossible to tell what this something was. A vague, black shape, not pale or grey, like the popular impression of a ghost—but black, intensely black. It floated into the moonbeam like a thing of gossamer, and hung there.

The Haunted Form-room



Here is another clever story of the boys of St. Frank's, introducing the mysterious Ezra Quirke, whose remarkable demonstrations in Black Magic have led over half the school to believe in his occult powers. Is he only a trickster, after all? I will leave you to form your own conclusions after you have read this week's absorbing story.

THE EDITOR.

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER I.

STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF AN EMPTY DESK.

CRASH!

Mr. Horace Pycraft twirled round from the blackboard, glaring.

"Who did that?" he barked angrily.

The Fourth Form remained discreetly silent. Apparently, nobody had caused the sudden noise—which had closely resembled the slamming of a desk-lid. Mr. Pycraft advanced ominously.

"That is the second time it has happened!" he said curtly. "I command the culprit to stand up! Come along—no nonsense! Who slammed that desk? I won't be defied in this disgraceful manner."

Still there was no response. The Fourth Form of St. Frank's was in morning school, and it was that dull period between the interval and the end of lessons. It had become rather a habit among certain misguided youths to rag Mr. Pycraft at this hour of the day.

For some reason, the master of the Fourth was unusually irritable this morning, and the form had consequently been wary. It was a half-holiday, and nobody was particularly anxious to be booked for extra lesson

during the afternoon. Detention was bad enough at any time, but when the day was sunny and frosty and gloriously fine, detention became a thing of dread.

The Fourth Form-room was situated in the junior wing of the School House, and overlooked the paved path running from the Triangle to the playing-fields, with the Ancient House immediately opposite. The sunshine was streaming through the windows, and Nature was calling to the juniors in no uncertain voice that it was a sin and a shame to remain bottled up indoors.

"I shall not ask again!" stormed Mr. Pycraft savagely. "Somebody has deliberately——"

"Please, sir, it wasn't——"

"Sit down, Christine!"

"Yes, sir, but the sound came from the other corner of the room," said Bob Christine firmly. "All those three desks are empty——"

"Rubbish!" interrupted Mr. Pycraft. "Sit down at once, sir!"

Christine resumed his seat, and the other members of the Fourth glanced at one another in a rather puzzled fashion. In one corner of the room the glances were positively suspicious. Without any question, the

desk-lid had been slammed in that particular section. Oldfield, Clapson, Nation, Armstrong, and Griffith were all in that zone.

"Get up, Oldfield, you rotter!" whispered Armstrong, with a hiss. "You know jolly well it was your desk——"

"It wasn't!"

"We shall all be detained if you rag old Pycraft——"

"I tell you it wasn't me!" breathed Oldfield indignantly. "It was this desk further along! I can't make it out—there's nobody sitting within two yards of it! I distinctly heard——"

"Oldfield!"

Mr. Pycraft rapped out the name like the crack of a pistol.

"Sir?" said Oldfield feebly.

"You were talking, Oldfield."

"Please, sir, I was only telling some of these other chaps that the desk that slammed was one of these empty ones——"

"You will attend extra lesson this afternoon, Oldfield, for one hour!" interrupted Mr. Pycraft, with a kind of savage enjoyment. "Once and for all, I mean you to understand that——"

Crash!

Mr. Pycraft fairly jumped, and the Fourth Form was freshly startled. Without a shadow of doubt, that slam had come from one of the unoccupied desks. Nobody had actually seen it, for all eyes had been on the master. But the direction of the sound was unmistakable.

"There you are, sir!" panted Oldfield. "That wasn't me, was it? I was standing up! Didn't I tell you chaps——"

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Pycraft. "Good gracious me! Are we to suffer these interruptions throughout the entire morning? Oldfield, sit down! Do you hear me, sir? Sit down! The boy who slammed that desk will——"

"It wasn't anybody, sir!" put in John Busterfield Boots, the burly Captain of the Fourth. "Perhaps there's something wrong with one of those desks, sir?"

"What arrant nonsense——"

"Perhaps a stray cat's got trapped in one, sir, and it's trying to get out," went on Boots. "It's no good accusing us, sir—we didn't slam the desk. We wouldn't dream of annoying you like that."

"Never, sir!" said the Form, in one voice.

"Will you be silent!" roared Mr. Pycraft.

He stalked over to the empty desks, and flung open each lid in turn. As he had known from the start, the desks were quite empty. There wasn't even a book, or an inkpot, in them. They were desks which had not been occupied since the beginning of term. There was a draught in that corner, and all the boys shunned it. Practically all the class-rooms at St Frank's had several spare places in them.

"Well, it's jolly queer, sir," said Clapson. "I believe I saw that end desk move

just now. At least, the lid came up a bit—and there wasn't a soul within two or three yards of it!"

"You saw it move, Clapson?" demanded Mr. Pycraft.

"Well, I wouldn't absolutely swear, sir——"

"That is quite sufficient!" snapped Mr. Pycraft. "One boy in this corner is deliberately creating these disturbances. I will give him one minute to confess. If he fails to do so, the entire form will be detained."

Mr. Pycraft went back to his blackboard, and scribbled so furiously upon it that he broke his chalk. And the unfortunate juniors in the suspected corner found themselves glared at by dozens of fierce, angry eyes. Oldfield and Clapson were the two chief suspects, and they were both looking highly indignant. They were quite innocent, and resented this unjust suspicion.

"Buck up, you chaps!" hissed Armstrong. "Own up!"

"You silly ass——"

Slam!

"There you are!" yelled Oldfield, leaping up. "I saw it go that time—the end desk! I saw the lid drop——"

"Silence!" hooted Mr. Pycraft, rushing up. "Who did that? Upon my soul, this is getting beyond all bounds! Who did it? I demand an answer this instant! You hear me? This instant!"

Half the form was on its feet now, and Oldfield was so excited that he had left his desk, and was examining the end one. Mr. Pycraft had brought the pointer with him, and he rapped it across Oldfield's knuckles.

"Sit down, Oldfield!" he panted.

"Ooooh!" gasped Oldfield. "Steady, sir!"

"Sit down at once!"

"But that desk, sir——"

"I saw it with my own eyes!" declared Mr. Pycraft. "It was certainly the end desk! Unmistakably it was the end desk! There is trickery here—and I mean to uproot it! Never have I been so outrageously insulted!"

Mr. Pycraft was bubbling over with rage. The Fourth was in a bit of a stew, but there was one thing to be thankful for at least. Mr. Pycraft had seen the desk move, and so no particular boy was under suspicion. That end desk was well clear of all the others.

The Form-master tore open the lid, and peered within. He suspected a hidden string, or some other mechanical device. Such tricks were by no means uncommon in his experience. He had come to the conclusion long since that boys will go to endless trouble in order to annoy a master.

"Somebody will suffer for this!" panted Mr. Pycraft fiercely. "Good heavens! Am I to be deliberately—— But this is strange! There is nothing here! No strings—no wires! Extraordinary!"

He went over the desk from top to bottom. There wasn't the slightest suspicious sign. All the desks were of heavy wood, and they were screwed to the floor. If a wire had been fixed, it would certainly have been visible under such a close scrutiny as this. But there was nothing.

"I say, it's uncanny, sir!" said Skelton. "That desk moved without anybody touching it. I don't believe it was a trick at all——"

"Perhaps Quirke can explain it," put in Boots facetiously. "Quirke's an expert on occult phenomena, isn't he? Come on, Quirke—now's your chance!"

Ezra Quirke frowned. He certainly had a reputation as a magician. He was believed to be in league with the Black Arts, and he had recently produced some extraordinary effects. But at the moment he seemed as puzzled as the others.

"This is absurd!" he said coldly. "I know nothing."

"Wasn't it one of your unseen pals at work?" asked Boots, grinning. "One of your friends from the Other Side? They do queer things at times——"

"I know nothing!" insisted Quirke obstinately.

"Silence!" yelled Mr. Pycraft, becoming thoroughly excited. "Boys—boys! Be seated! How dare you leave your places and all talk at once? Unless the perpetrator of this trick owns up——"

"But it wasn't us, sir!" interrupted Oldfield. "How could it have been? There aren't any strings or anything! That desk is just the same as ever—there's no fake about it anywhere!"

"I'll bet Quirke's responsible, all the same!" said Simmons, shaking his head. "All these meetings of his have aroused the ghosts. There must be lots of ghosts at St. Frank's. It used to be a monastery in the old days——"

"Shut up, you ass!" whispered Skelton. "Don't bring Quirke into it!"

"Ghosts?" snapped Mr. Pycraft, with a start. "What nonsense!"

"It must be, sir," said Simmons doggedly. "It's a spirit presence, sir—one of the old monks, perhaps."

Mr. Pycraft backed away from the desk rather hastily, gazing at it with a sudden expression of awe. The total absence of any natural explanation affected him very considerably.

"It is certainly uncanny!" he muttered. "Good gracious me! It is certainly an extraordinary affair!"

CHAPTER II.

THE SHRIVELLED HAND.



M R. HORACE PYCRAFT was thoroughly startled.

Secretly, he was a man who dabbled in occult phenomena. He was just the type. A clever scholar, Mr. Pycraft was, nevertheless, an ill-tempered, mean-spirited gentleman, who always took a morbid delight in spying upon his own boys. He had a great contempt for any fellow of humble origin, and he was always ready to toady to those boys of aristocratic birth. In every sort of way, in fact, Mr. Pycraft was a nasty mistake.

Not for worlds would he have acknowledged that he was interested in spiritualism and occult phenomena. But he was. He had even heard rumours concerning Ezra Quirke, and badly wanted to confide in the junior. But his position forbade any such association. Although he knew of the recent "occult gatherings," he had taken no action—for he secretly approved of it.

But it was a horse of another colour when a manifestation occurred in the very form-room. Never for an instant had Mr. Pycraft looked for anything so startling as this.

For weeks St. Frank's had been dogged by bad luck—individual bad luck and general misfortune. Matches had been lost when everything was in favour of a win. Fellows had met with accidents. The weather had been atrocious on holidays, and gloriously fine on other days. It seemed as though some Unseen Power was hovering over the school, wreaking its impish mischief.

Naturally the more sensible fellows put it all down to mere chance—to coincidence. But Ezra Quirke and his followers were convinced that the spirits were at work, visiting these misfortunes on the school in order to teach the unbelievers a lesson. Quirke was always declaring that the bad luck would continue until complete faith was secured. Then, but not until then, would peace be restored. And, extraordinarily enough, there were plenty of fellows ready to agree with this fantastic assertion. Quirke's influence had spread widely—particularly in the East House, where most of the juniors were, almost fanatical on the subject.

"We must get to work again!" said Mr. Pycraft gruffly. "Oldfield, you are nearest this desk. I charge you to keep your eye upon it. At the first sign of—— Good heavens! What—what——"

"Look!" panted two or three of the boys. Everybody stared, fascinated.

The lid of that empty desk was slowly raising itself! There was nobody near it—nobody within six feet! And yet the desk lid was slowly coming up! The effect was

uncanny in the extreme. Mr. Pycraft had gone a shade paler, and he was staring with goggling eyes.

"Quick!" yelled Boots. "Open it, somebody!"

Bob Christine made a dash, and nearly reached the desk, when it slammed down with a crash. Bob tore the lid up in almost the same second.

There was nothing!

"Well, I'm blessed!" breathed Christine blankly. "We all saw this lid come up, didn't we? But the desk's empty! And there's no trickery, either!"

"What does it mean, Quirke," asked Griffith.

"I don't know," said Quirke huskily. "I don't know!"

His complete mystification rather surprised the others. Quirke generally had an explanation on the tip of his tongue if anything of an unaccountable nature took place. But this time he was obviously non-plussed. In fact, he was baffled.

"I know what it is, sir," said Skelton suddenly.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Pycraft.

"A Poltergeist, sir."

"A what?"

"A Poltergeist, sir!"

"Good gracious!" breathed Mr. Pycraft. "I seem to remember reading— Yes, yes, of course! A Poltergeist—an Elemental! A well-known form of spectral manifestation. But surely——"

"What's a Poltergeist, sir?" demanded a dozen voices.

"I am afraid you wouldn't understand, boys—the subject is a purely psychical one," replied the Form-master, frowning. "In effect it means a noisy ghost, the word being derived from the German. You have no doubt read of cases where furniture has been moved, crockery smashed, and where similar mysterious material manifestations have occurred. Although there is no actual ghost to be seen these happenings are said to be caused by an Elemental—an uneasy spirit which is technically known as a Poltergeist."

"You seem to know all about it, sir?" asked Quirke quietly.

Mr. Pycraft started.

"I am a well-read man," he replied. "It is necessary to be acquainted with every subject. Naturally, I look upon such things with a purely open mind. The suggestion that a ghost is at work in this room is, of course, preposterous. There is doubtless some simple explanation—if we can only fathom it. But we cannot do so. Time is going, and we are neglecting our work. Return to your books at once."

"Aren't we going to do anything about this desk, sir?" asked Boots.

"Don't be absurd, Boots. What can we do?"

"Somebody could sit on it, sir, and see what happens."

"Boots, sit down!" roared Mr. Pycraft. "Take fifty lines for being ridiculous!"

Buster Boots sat down with a snort. And work in the Form class-room continued—not, however, with its former smoothness. A good many whispers passed to and fro, and for once Mr. Pycraft ignored them. He was, in fact, keeping a sharp eye on that desk.

He was sorely puzzled. He had examined the desk, and knew there were no strings or wires. In fact, he was quite satisfied that none of the juniors were indulging in trickery. What, then, was the explanation? A Poltergeist—an unseen ghost which caused a disturbance? Such a theory seemed fantastic. Even Mr. Pycraft, with his leanings towards the occult, was unsatisfied.

Click!

The sound could be heard in every corner of the room. It was quite peculiar—different to anything that had happened before. Moreover, it seemed to come from high above.

"What was that?" demanded Mr. Pycraft nervously.

"We don't know, sir," said Clapson, looking round.

"The ventilator!" yelled somebody. "Look!"

"Upon my word!" breathed Mr. Pycraft.

High up in the wall—only a foot or two from the ceiling—a small ventilator was set. It was fitted with an ornamental grating, and assured a continuous current of air through the big apartment. Every other class-room at St. Frank's was similarly appointed. But at the moment the ventilator was swinging open!

"Somebody's opened it, sir!" said Simmons huskily. "Or, at least, something's opened it! Nobody in this room——"

"Extraordinary!" muttered Mr. Pycraft, walking up the class-room, and staring above. "The grating appears to be hinged. An insecure catch, possibly. I shall have it examined——"

"But it couldn't come open of its own accord, sir," protested Skelton. "It's that Thing at work again! What did I tell you? I knew there was something queer going on! There's only a narrow brick shaft behind that ventilator. It's not more than six inches square——"

"What's—what's that?" gurgled one of the others, with a yelp.

Everybody stared, gripped by some strange influence. Out of the black opening of the grating something had appeared. It came slowly, hovering uncertainly for a moment or two. Then it came out, inch by inch, revealing itself as a human hand! It was shrivelled and mummified—a ghastly sort of thing to appear, even in the broad light of the forenoon.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Christine, with a gulp.

The hand came out even further, and

before the eyes of everybody it lost its shrivelled appearance, and filled out by some miraculous process into a full-sized hand, with the healthy appearance of normal life. It was pointing, too—pointing at Mr. Pycraft with one finger.

"It's impossible, sir!" gasped Clifton. "That shaft isn't big enough— Oh! We'd better clear out of here——"

"Run for it!"

"The room's haunted!"

Crash!

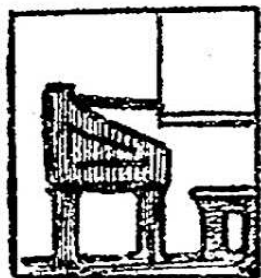
Everybody in the Form-room leapt. That desk-lid had thudded down again, and for a second all eyes were turned upon it. The nerves of the Fourth-Formers were on edge.

"Look!" croaked somebody. "The hand's gone!"

Sure enough, the hand had not only vanished, but the ventilator grating was closed again!

CHAPTER III.

THE HAUNTED FORM-ROOM.



FOR a moment there was a tense silence, and if Mr. Pycraft had seized his opportunity, he might have quelled the rising panic. But, truth to tell, he was just as scared

as any of his boys.

He had gone white, and was staring dazedly up at the closed ventilator. His common-sense told him that the thing was ridiculous. Here, in the very Form-room, in broad daylight! How could an occult manifestation occur under such conditions? It was palpably absurd.

But Mr. Pycraft's common-sense was completely overshadowed by his superstitious fear. He didn't pause to reason. A human hand had appeared through that grating—from a shaft where no living person could possibly be! To Mr. Pycraft, it seemed that an occult explanation was the only possibility.

Slam! Crash!

This time the desk-lid fairly danced up and down. Before the eyes of the startled Fourth, the lid seemed to go mad. Without a soul being near it, and in full view of all eyes, the uncanny thing took place. And every boy in that room knew that there was no suspicion of a rag about the mysterious business.

It must be regretfully confessed that Mr. Pycraft failed at the crucial moment. With something which sounded very much like a howl of fright, he turned towards the door, wrenched it open, and fled.

It needed only this lead to precipitate a general panic. The Fourth gave one long yell, and pandemonium followed. Everybody tried to escape at the same second. The doorway wasn't big enough. A hope-

less jam followed, and then the windows were resorted to.

Those in the rear were nearly fainting with terror—believing that something unseen was going to grip them, and drag them back. And at least twice during the exodus the desk-lid slammed its uncanny tune.

It was all the more extraordinary, because the majority of these Fourth-Formers were staunch believers in Ezra Quirke—and therefore believers in the occult. After Quirke's teachings, one might have supposed that the juniors would examine this phenomena with keen, intelligent interest. Instead of doing this, they gave way to the sheerest panic. Perhaps Quirke himself was responsible—for he had denied all knowledge of the manifestation.

If he had assured the others that there was nothing to fear—that he could explain matters—they might have remained calm. After all, they had seen things of a more uncanny nature at Quirke's own meetings.

But because he denied any hand in this business, the Fourth forgot everything they had learned, and became normal school-boys again—thoroughly scared of something which nobody could explain.

When it was too late, Ezra Quirke realised that he had acted foolishly. Although he was as mystified as anybody else, he could easily have professed knowledge of these strange happenings. And a few words from him would have been enough. His power in the Lower School was immense.

Quirke, of course, had refrained for a very obvious reason. He suspected a clever trick on somebody's part. And if he declared the manifestations to be of a psychic character, and the truth afterwards came out, he would find himself discredited for all time. So his caution was well considered.

After the appearance of that grisly hand, however, Quirke's suspicion of trickery weakened. He came to the startling conclusion that the spirits were at work, after all—even without his aid!

Imagine the surprise of Dr. Malcolm Stafford at that particular moment. Quite by chance, the headmaster emerged from Big Arch into the Triangle, having business with Mr. Stokes in the West House. It was a quiet period, when all the school was at lessons.

But as the Head entered the Triangle, he paused. An extraordinary sight met his gaze. First of all, Mr. Pycraft—tearing down the steps of the School House junior entrance, with a dozen Fourth-Formers at his heels. They might easily have been demons, judging by Mr. Pycraft's desperate panic.

With his gown flying in the wind, he never paused—but rushed straight on towards the East House. And Dr. Stafford was further stupefied to see another crowd

of boys pouring out of the class-room windows.

"Mr. Pycraft!" thundered the Head.

In spite of his amazement, he managed to put great power into his voice. And Mr. Horace Pycraft pulled up short, panting heavily. The voice of authority was even greater than the fear within him.

"Oh, really!" panted Mr. Pycraft. "I beg your pardon, sir! I—I— That is— Boys—boys! Good heavens! Control yourselves at once!"

Dr. Stafford strode up to the Form-master.

"Before ordering the boys to control themselves, Mr. Pycraft, would it not be better to control yourself?" he asked curtly. "Perhaps you will be good enough to explain this outrageous scene?"

"I—I— Really, Dr. Stafford—"

"I am waiting, Mr. Pycraft," said the Head coldly. "You are as white as a sheet, sir! What has happened? What is the meaning of this extraordinary lapse of discipline? Get your boys in order at once!"

"The Form-room is haunted, sir!" panted Mr. Pycraft.

"Good heavens! Haunted!"

"It sounds absurd, but it is, nevertheless, the truth!" went on the Form-master, pulling himself together. "Really, Dr. Stafford, the most grotesque things have just happened!"

The Head was thoroughly startled. It was quite obvious that events of an unusual character had occurred. The whole Fourth Form—including the master—would never have dashed out into the open in this manner otherwise. The juniors had all come to a halt upon seeing Dr. Stafford. His very presence was calming.

The Head's stern figure—his stately personality—was sufficient alone to bring the Fourth Form to its senses.

"Please explain, Mr. Pycraft," he said grimly.

"A remarkable affair, sir," panted Mr. Pycraft. "It started by the banging of a desk-lid—"

"Good gracious!"

"Yes, sir!" said Mr. Pycraft feverishly. "A desk-lid that banged without any aid whatsoever. I—I quite failed to fathom—"

The Form-master paused, confused. To his horror, he found it impossible to give any lucid explanation. And somehow Dr. Stafford's stern gaze seemed to be boring holes into him. He felt shrivelled. His one desire was to sink through the paved path.

"This is indeed grotesque," said Dr. Stafford quietly. "So, Mr. Pycraft, you flew into a panic because your desk-lid banged?"

"You—you don't quite understand, sir," said Mr. Pycraft feebly. "This lid crashed down without any cause. I examined the desk personally. There were no wires—no strings. And then a hand appeared through the ventilator. It came out—"

"A hand?" interrupted Dr. Stafford, giving Mr. Pycraft a very strange look. "A hand coming through the ventilator? Are you serious, Mr. Pycraft? Perhaps you had better take a few days' rest—"

"Not at all, sir—not at all!" protested the Form-master. "Are you suggesting that I have suffered from a delusion? Do you imagine that I am subject to hallucinations? I deny it, sir! The hand actually came through the ventilator—"

"You must see the doctor at once, Mr. Pycraft," said the Head anxiously. "Upon my word, you are positively ill—"

"It's quite true, sir!" broke in Skelton. "We all saw that hand!"

"Indeed!" ejaculated the Head.

"All of us, sir!" put in a dozen other voices.

And during the next few minutes the Head was given a complete account of what had happened in the haunted Form-room. In every way Dr. Stafford was startled. One could imagine an overworked brain seeing things that didn't exist. But the Head was under no misapprehension regarding the Fourth Form. There were no overworked brains there! And the general corroboration of the story was conclusive.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Pycraft," said the Head at length. "I must confess that I doubted the accuracy of your story at first. In the light of this universal substantiation, however, it is quite obvious that these strange events actually took place. But surely you do not attribute them to occult influence?"

"No," replied Mr. Pycraft promptly. "No, certainly not, sir! At the same time, in the absence of any other explanation—"

"My dear sir, that is ridiculous!" interrupted the Head testily. "Is your knowledge of boys so limited that you cannot see through this trick? I fear, Mr. Pycraft, that you have been the subject of an elaborate practical joke."

"Impossible, sir!" gasped Mr. Pycraft.

"We will go to this Form-room at once!" said Dr. Stafford sternly. "Boys, form up at once, and return to your room. I cannot allow this scene to continue. I will accompany you, and make a complete examination."

Less than three minutes later the Fourth was back in its class-room.

Most of the fellows were now wondering why they had fled. Some of them vaguely believed that they had imagined that grotesque hand and the open ventilator.

The Head was very interested in the desk. Certainly, he found nothing suspicious, and he came to the conclusion that the story of the banging had been grossly exaggerated. Clearly, there was nothing faked here.

A ladder was brought, and Josh Cuttle was given instructions to examine the ventilator. The school porter obeyed with alacrity. His report was hardly calculated to clear up the mystery. The grating was

fastened, and the shaft was absolutely clear. There was no cunning apparatus concealed there. In fact, there was absolutely nothing to account for the startling things that had occurred.

And when Dr. Stafford left the Fourth to the tender mercies of Mr. Pycraft once more, he was very thoughtful. He couldn't possibly accept the story. And yet why did the whole Form substantiate it? It was altogether puzzling, and Dr. Stafford thought it better to take no immediate action. But he would certainly advise Mr. Pycraft to take a week's rest if he heard any more about it.

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER INVESTIGATION.



EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH stared. "Ghosts?" he said. "Yes!"

"In your Form-room?"

"Yes!"

"Rot!" said Handforth flatly.

"Piffle! Rubbish! Nonsense!"

"All right—you can sneer as much as you like!" snorted Bob Christine. "I'm not a superstitious chap—I don't believe in Quirke and all his rot. At least, I'm not so mad as some of the other chaps about Quirke. He's a queer chap, and I believe he's got queer powers——"

"You mean he's a tricky rotter!" interrupted Handforth coldly. "He did some rummy things at that meeting of his the other day, and we couldn't find any explanation in that cellar. But he's no more in league with the Black Arts than I am. He sets himself up as a sorcerer, but he's only a faker."

"We're not talking about Quirke, anyhow," growled Christine. "These things happened in the Form-room this morning—less than an hour ago. All the chaps are saying that Quirke is responsible."

"Of course he's responsible!" put in Church. "It's another of his mystic displays. He ought to be stopped."

"He swears he knows nothing about it," said Christine.

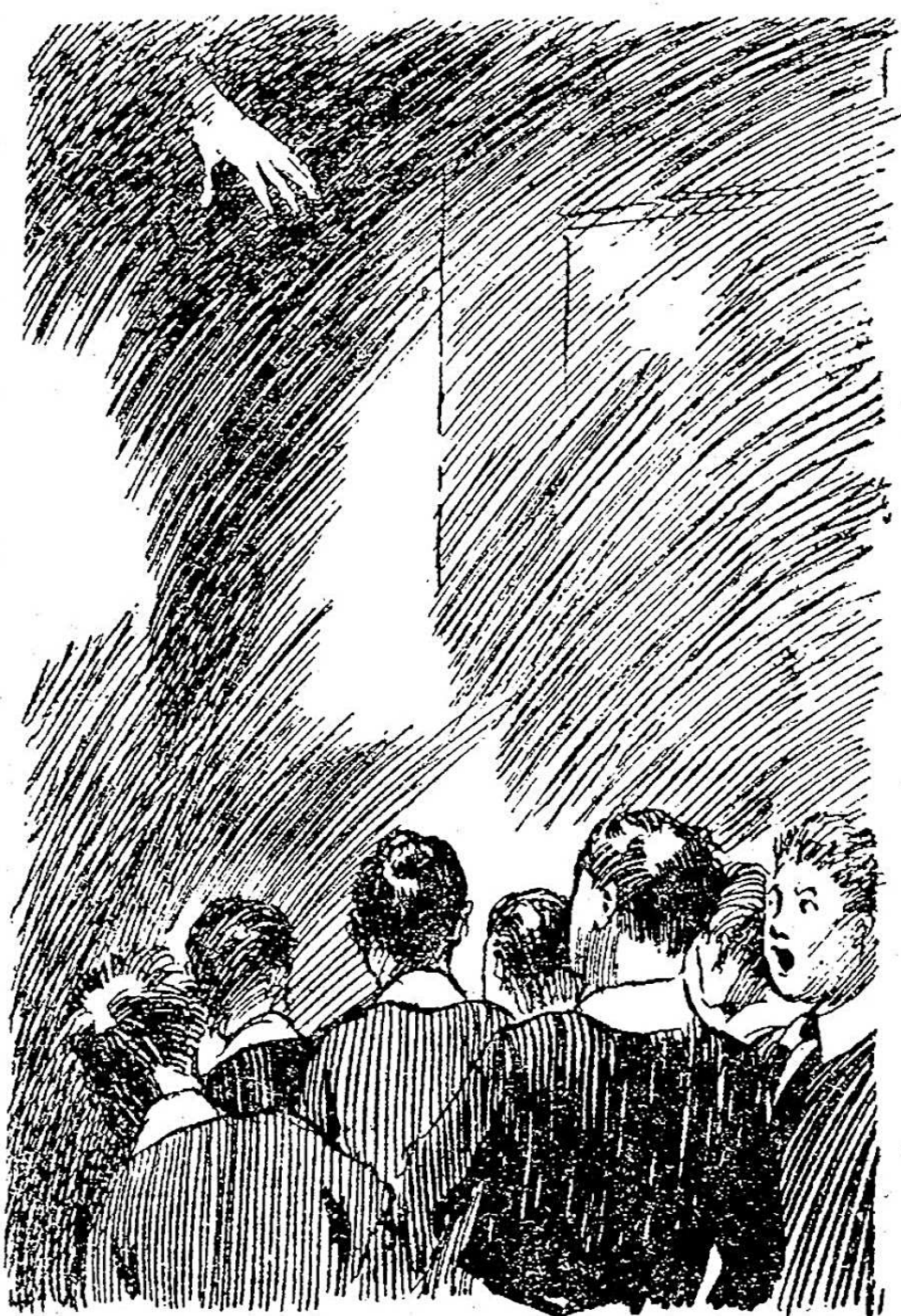
"Don't you believe him!"

"I don't like the man, but I can't help believing him," retorted Christine. "Up till now he's always been keen on associating himself with these rummy happenings. But this time he was as baffled as anybody. He went absolutely pale. No, he was as much in the dark as we were."

"Then who did it?" demanded Handforth.

"I'd like somebody to tell me!" said Bob gruffly. "The chaps are saying that Quirke has lost control of the spirits, and they're getting to work on their own! They say there'll be all sorts of ghostly happenings now—all over the school, too! The giddy spectres are loose!"

Handforth & Co. regarded Bob Christine pitifully. They had always respected Bob.



Everybody stared at the grating, through which a human hand had slowly hovered into view.

He wasn't much of a leader—being too easy-going—but he was first-rate at sports, and a thoroughly good fellow. It pained them to hear him talking rubbish of this sort.

"This boulder Quirke seems to be poisoning everybody!" said McClure sorrowfully. "You don't seriously believe in that piffle, Bob? How the dickens could a desk-lid bang up and down without anybody touching it?"

"I don't know—but it did!"

"And that shrivelled hand——"

"I tell you I don't know!" snapped Christine. "It sounds dotty, I'll admit. In fact, I can hardly believe it happened now. But we couldn't all have been mistaken—including old Pycraft—could we? Why, he was nearly fainting with fright!"

Christine was talking to the three Remove fellows just near the fountain in the Triangle. Morning school was over, and all the juniors were buzzing with the sensational news concerning the Fourth Form. The Remove heard the story with amusement at first—then realised that it wasn't merely a joke. There were too many corroborations.

Dick Hamilton was rather impressed. He and Reggie Pitt were on the West House steps, discussing the affair, having heard all about it from Boots.

"Some of Quirke's jiggery-pokery, of course," said Pitt.

"But Quirke professes ignorance——"

"Let him profess it," interrupted Pitt. "Look here, Nipper, you don't think there's anything in this yarn?"

Dick Hamilton smiled.

"Of course there's something in it," he said calmly. "Either Quirke is trying a new stunt, or somebody is taking a leaf out of his own book. I had a word with him five minutes ago, and I'm inclined to believe that he's flummoxed. This needs investigating, my son."

"Why not go along now?"

"Just my idea," agreed Nipper briskly.

"Mine, too!" said Handforth, bustling up. "I'm not altogether sure that I want you chaps to come—you'll only take all the credit after I've elucidated the mystery! It needs a trained mind for a job of this sort——"

"Cheese it, Handy, old man," pleaded Reggie. "Why butt into these scientific affairs? Why not play marbles with Willy?"

"You silly fathead!" howled Handforth. "It's my idea to investigate the Fourth Form-room, and I'm not allowing any interference! If you chaps come, it'll only be with my strict permission!"

There was, of course, only one thing to be done. Handforth was firmly seized, dropped on his face in the Triangle, and left there, gasping for breath. The other Removites marched towards the School House as though the matter was over.

But Handforth didn't think so. He picked himself up, gazed round dazedly, and rushed up.

"Put up your hands!" he roared. "Somebody's going to pay for that——"

"One minute!" interrupted Nipper. "On second thoughts, we'll let you do your investigations alone. Then you can have all the credit. How's that?"

"You won't interfere with me?" asked Handforth suspiciously.

"My dear chap, you can have a clear field."

And Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt walked off, chatting. Reggie was rather surprised at first, but he soon understood.

"Let 'em have their fling," explained Nipper. "Handy won't discover anything, and we can conduct our inquiry in peace later on. There's no hurry, anyhow—it's a half-holiday to-day. Besides, the Form-room's bound to be overrun with sightseers."

Dick was quite correct in this assumption. When Handforth & Co. arrived they found a dozen Removites in possession of the Fourth Form room. The haunted desk was being examined closely, and even the ventilator was being subjected to a close scrutiny.

It is hardly necessary to add that Handforth's investigations were futile. The school was coming to the conclusion that the Fourth had suffered from hallucinations. Indeed, by the time luncheon was over, the seniors were treating the whole affair as a

joke. Only Ezra Quirke's "circle" believed that a ghostly influence had been at work. And all sorts of plans were being made in the East House—plans to precipitate further manifestations.

As Nipper had foretold, a great deal of interest had died out by the end of the afternoon. And in the dusk Nipper and Pitt decided to make their own inquiry—feeling sure that they would not be disturbed. Even Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West were excluded from this investigation.

Indeed, Nipper had no desire for them to be present. Both his chums had professed their faith in Quirke's activities. They had been converted, and were no longer opposed to the schoolboy magician.

It was the same with Reggie Pitt's chum—Jack Grey. He was a member of Quirke's ever-growing circle. Nipper and Reggie, however, were as firmly convinced of trickery as ever. Not for one instant would they admit that Quirke was a genuine worker of magic.

"I don't guarantee we shall make any discoveries, but there's no telling," said Dick, as they mounted the steps of the Junior Wing. "For one thing, I can't understand why Quirke should start his tricks in the class-room——"

"Ah, Brother Hamilton!" interrupted a voice. "Greetings, Brother Pitt! If I may make so bold—where away? Why this unseemly haste? Let me join you in this——"

"Sorry, Browne, old man!" said Nipper, coming to a halt. "We're busy!"

William Napoleon Browne, the tall and immaculate skipper of the Fifth, had just emerged from the School House, and he stood there beaming upon the two Removites.

"While professing to have absolutely no knowledge of thought-reading, I venture to suggest you are seeking enlightenment in the torture chamber of the Fourth Form?" he suggested. "Am I right? If so, speak. I am listening with rapt attention."

"As a matter of fact, you're right," admitted Nipper.

"Those words, Brother Hamilton, are soothing to the ear," smiled Browne benevolently. "In spite of the fact that I am the busiest man in the Senior School, I will grace this investigation with my presence. In fact, I will take full command. Leave everything entirely in my hands."

"Look here, Browne, you can go and eat coke!" said Pitt pointedly.

"It is a habit I seldom indulge in," replied Browne. "Coke, while being an excellent fuel, has certain drawbacks when taken as a diet. There is a gritty something which undoubtedly detracts——"

"Are you going to let us pass?" demanded Nipper grimly.

"Alas! I fear I detect a certain strain of impatience in your tone, brother!" sighed Browne. "But we will not let that delay

us. Come! Pin your faith in me, and I can guarantee unqualified success."

He seized Reggie Pitt by one arm and Dick Hamilton by the other and marched them into the School House. And they gave up protesting as a bad job. There was something about William Napoleon Browne which could not be denied.

CHAPTER V.

BROWNE ON THE JOB.



WHEN the Fourth Form-room was reached, the three investigators found that they had the apartment entirely to themselves. Indeed, the whole Junior

Wing was practically deserted. There was an air of peace and silence about the building.

It was even gloomy. No lights were burning, and the November evening was drawing in rapidly. William Napoleon Browne stood just inside the room, surveying the scene with a critical eye.

"Splendid!" he observed. "We could not have arrived at a more favourable moment. The atmosphere has a certain aura of psychical promise. In such surroundings anything might happen. We must be prepared for startling things, brothers."

Nipper frowned.

"You don't believe in that rot, do you?" he asked.

"To which particular rot are you referring?" inquired Browne. "Unfortunately there is rot of various types constantly around us, and it is extremely difficult to differentiate——"

"About Quirke and those ghosts!" interrupted Nipper.

"Ah, yes!" said the Captain of the Fifth. "Brother Nipper, allow me to seize your hand firmly and to shake it vigorously. I take it that we are in one accord? We all regard Brother Quirke as one of life's errors? We all agree that he is obtaining cheap notoriety by a well-assorted selection of whiskery wizardry?"

"We all think he's a fraud, if that's what you mean," said Pitt.

"Better and better!" beamed Browne.

"But I'm not sure about the tricks being whiskery," went on Reggie. "I'm hanged if I can explain how he does these things——"

"Ah! There, if I may say so, is the spot where we must alight," interrupted William Napoleon gently. "We have, in fact, arrived at our destination. A pause, brothers, to discuss this interesting matter."

"Look here——"

"You have distinctly stated that Quirke's wizardry is not encumbered with fungus," interrupted Browne firmly. "That is a point I strongly dispute. Why do you come to such conclusions? Open your orifices, and I will expound. Simply because you can find no explanation, simply because there is no logical shaft of light, you conclude that Brother Quirke's magic is hot from the press. Nothing could be further from the truth. The most aged and decrepit stunts can be worked with ease upon a credulous populace. And the aforementioned populace will swallow it as easily as a monkey swallows a nut."

"But what are you getting at?" asked Nipper grinning.

"You pain me, Brother Nipper," said Browne sadly. "I am using my vocal chords to enlighten you, and it appears that my efforts are unavailing. I maintain that Brother Quirke's machinery is of the old single-cylinder order. In no circumstances can it be placed in the 1926 class. He is successful because he is dealing with an unenlightened mass of human putty."

"You're jolly sure, aren't you?" asked Pitt. "Perhaps you can explain the mystery of this class-room?"

"Nothing," replied Browne, "is beyond my powers."

"Well, let's have a look at this desk, and get something done," said Nipper briskly. "Talking won't get us anywhere."

"A grave reflection upon myself, but we will let it pass," said Browne. "Always remember that I am by your side. If the fluence suddenly springs into life, fear nothing. We are united in our strength."

Crash!

Without the slightest warning the lid of the desk banged down. In that silent room the effect was startling. Reggie Pitt jumped and hesitated. But Nipper leapt forward and yanked the desk open. It was perfectly empty, and a thorough examination revealed no mechanical device.

"Well I'm hanged!" said Nipper slowly. "I saw the thing; I actually saw it rise up and drop!"

"And yet there is nothing to account for it," murmured Browne, frowning.

"Singular! Indeed, it is even plural in its mysterious character. I beseech you, Brother Nipper, to bring all your investigating powers to the fore. I have heard on the highest authority that you are an expert in such matters."

Nipper made no reply. He opened the desk again and examined it with minute care. Browne and Pitt watched him, both knowing that they were amateurs by comparison. But even Nipper made no discoveries.

"Well, it beats me!" he confessed at length.

"Look!" yelled Pitt.

They were only a foot from the desk—Nipper, in fact, was leaning against it. The lid sprang up without being touched and crashed down again. In a flash Nipper pulled it open. There was nothing.

"I say, this is uncanny!" he gasped, thoroughly startled.

"Being, however, a man of brains, you naturally exclude the occult from your calculations," remarked Browne. "What, then, is your theory? Here we have something which has no natural explanation—something which defies the celebrated laws of gravity. Give tongue, Brother Hamilton."

"I'm hanged if I can suggest anything," growled Nipper. "You didn't lift that lid, I suppose?"

"Alack!" groaned Browne. "Even I come under suspicion——"

"But you were nearest——"

"It wasn't Browne, old man," interrupted Pitt. "He had his hands behind him, and he couldn't have done anything with his foot."

"No words, Brother Pitt, can express my gratitude," said Browne. "I trust I am now fully exonerated? At the same time——"

Click!

They all turned, and stared up at the ventilator, knowing instinctively that the sound came from that spot. In the gloom they saw that shrivelled hand appear. They saw it grow fuller, and point with an accusing finger. The effect was much more terrifying than it had been during the morning. For the class-room was now dim and silent.

Exactly as before, the desk slammed, and the attention of the trio was distracted for a moment. And when they looked up again the ventilator was closed, and everything was normal. Reggie Pitt and Nipper glanced at one another.

"It is possible there's something in this spirit business, after all!" muttered Reggie. "By Jove, I'm feeling groggy! That hand was pretty ghastly. I'm almost beginning to doubt——"

He paused, breathing hard. Nipper felt a trifle uncertain, too. The utter absence of explanation was baffling. William Napoleon Browne shook his head, and looked grave.

"It is even possible that you may fall under the spell unless drastic measures are taken," he said. "Can one wonder that Brother Quirke is gaining strength daily? And these tricks are so elementary that I almost feel inclined to disclose them. It pains me to witness your distress."

Nipper stared.

"Do you know anything about this?" he asked quickly.

"With all truth, I may safely say that I know all, Brother Hamilton."

"You know all?" yelled Pitt. "You've been spoofing us?"

"Could anything have been easier?" asked Browne. "With devices of the crudest order I have succeeded in creating a sensation. What, then, may I expect when my inventive genius is given full sway?"

The two Removites looked at him blankly.

"Look here, Browne—no fooling," said Nipper sharply. "Do you really know how these effects were produced?"

"They are my own inventions," replied Browne proudly. "At this moment Brother Horace is manipulating the simple controls. I need scarcely add that I gave him full instructions in advance."

They still looked at him in astonishment. Nipper was one of the shrewdest fellows in the school, but he admitted himself beaten now. The same thought occurred to Nipper and Pitt at the same moment—that Browne was joking.

"Correct me if I am wrong, but do I detect doubt in your looks?" asked the Fifth-Former. "If so, let me hasten to dispel it. At my command the desk-lid will again give its famous performance."

He pointed dramatically to the desk. They were all on the other side of the room, but the desk-lid simply flew up and crashed down again. Browne beamed genially upon the puzzled juniors.

"So staggering and yet so simple!" he murmured.

"But—but how——"

"Brother Stevens can hear every word we utter," smiled Browne. "Consequently he obeys my command. Brother Horace, two crashes, please!"

Bang, bang!

Twice the desk-lid jumped up and down. Nipper and Pitt looked round the room blankly. They even went to the cupboard and searched it. But there was no sign of Stevens—Browne's inseparable chum of the Fifth.

With one accord Dick Hamilton and Reginald Pitt grasped Browne, and held him firm. They were both looking dangerous.

"Come on, out with it!" said Nipper grimly. "You're not going to leave this room until you've explained the whole giddy process!"

CHAPTER VI.

SO SIMPLE.



WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE chuckled.

"Is this Ku Klux Klan business absolutely necessary?" he asked mildly. "If you will unhand me I will proceed to deliver the goods."

Forgive me for tricking you, but I merely wished to show, in the most convincing manner possible, that the crudest trickery will deceive the two master minds of the Remove. What hopes then have the more feeble?"

"By Jove, Browne, you're a genius!" said Nipper.

"Modesty forbids me to agree with you, but we Brownes have always made our mark," admitted William Napoleon. "In earlier days some of us made our mark because we had not learnt to write, but it is hardly necessary to go into family history. Let us pass on to more modern topics. It will help matters, no doubt, if Brother Horace joins us."

"But where the dickens is Brother Horace?" demanded Pitt.

"Come with me and all will be clear," said Browne. "It pleased me to make this experiment, as I wished to exhibit my prowess in the art of magic. But at the moment you are both pledged to deep secrecy. Kindly keep this affair sub rosa. Sheer disaster would follow if my startling powers were revealed at this early epoch. I believe in practising to some purpose. At the same time, there is no reason why you should not share my secret."

Nipper and Pitt were thoroughly surprised. Not for one moment had they suspected that Browne himself was responsible for the manifestation. No wonder Ezra Quirke had been so sorely puzzled.

While the East House juniors were in a regular ferment about this latest "occult phenomena," Browne was calmly making it clear that the whole affair was nothing but a fake from beginning to end.

Incidentally, the imperturbable Fifth-Former had proved something of a very conclusive nature. He had made it evident that an apparently inexplicable case of haunting could be explained with simple ease. That, in fact, was just Browne's point. Ezra Quirke had produced some extraordinary effects, and the fellows believed that he was a modern sorcerer. The mere fact that Browne had duplicated these effects—and by admitted trickery—was a very important matter.

There seemed to be no logical explanation of Quirke's mysteries. There seemed to be no logical explanation to this Form-room occurrence. Even Nipper was ready to show them the absurd materialism of the affair. And if one mystery could be explained, why not the others?

"It is merely a matter of knowing the secret," observed Browne calmly. "I am about to reveal mine, but Brother Quirke, I am afraid, will fail to come up to the scratch, and do likewise. Be very sure, however, that his wonders are no more spiritualistic than mine. I am simply indicating, Brother Nipper, that one is safe

until one is found out. Need I have revealed my secret? Assuredly not! But, in your honour, I have done so."

"I'm waiting to see how the dickens you managed it," said Nipper.

"Patience, brother—patience," said Browne. "All in good time. Let me impress upon you the fact that I am honouring you with my confidence. This also applies to you, Brother Pitt. To none others would I divulge the secret. But you are stalwarts both, and I am anxious to strengthen your hands against the common enemy. My one desire is to see Brother Quirke swishing about in the broth. And, with our united efforts, he will soon take a header therein. Already he is hovering dangerously near the rim of the tureen."

"You think he'll come a cropper?" asked Pitt.

"For the moment he is safe," replied Browne slowly. "I will confess myself non-plussed by his efforts, but you may take it from me that they can be explained as easily as mine. Unfortunately, we have no key to his methods. Once we obtain that, Brother Quirke will be undone."

"I didn't know you were so interested, Browne," said Nipper.

"I am a man of few words," replied Browne simply. "I am one of those strong, silent individuals who prefer action to speech. You will have observed that I never use an unnecessary syllable. But while I sit silently to and fro, I interest myself in the simple doings of my fellow-beings. At the moment, Brother Quirke occupies the first name on my list of fame, and I shall take no rest until he has received his due portion. It requires but one slip on his part to precipitate the destruction of his entire fabric."

"That's what I believe, too," nodded Nipper. "He's something like these spiritualists—these mediums. They fool people for years—rich, distinguished people, too. Then somebody bowls them out over some trifle, and they're discredited for good. But until that weak spot is found, they flourish. Quirke's flourishing like the dickens just now."

William Napoleon Browne nodded.

"That is the reason I desire my activities to be kept secret," he said. "I may tell you—also in strict confidence—that I am one of the world's greatest magicians. It is ever my habit to be modest in these matters. I might say that I am the greatest conjurer alive, but I will leave such praise to you. Who am I to sing my own praises? Moreover, I have yet to reveal my singular prowess. This present trifle is too insignificant for serious consideration. But do I observe a touch of impatience in your manner?"

"You do!"

"It pains me to see this champing on the bit," said Browne. "Let us join Brother

Horace and view the simple apparatus. I can assure you it is elementary. Strictly speaking, I am quite ashamed of this preliminary trick. I trust you will not take it as a sample of the goods to be delivered at a later date."

Browne left the Form-room, and the two Removites followed him. They had been wondering how much longer he would talk. Not that they weren't interested in his conversation. They were. Browne was revealing himself in a new light, and Nipper and Pitt were keenly appreciative of his efforts. But they badly wanted to see this "elementary apparatus" of his. For even though he had confessed himself as the ghost, they couldn't possibly understand how he had produced those uncanny effects.

Just outside in the wide passage they came upon Horace Stevens. And Horace Stevens was grinning.

"Everything work all right?" he asked.

"Splendidly, Brother Horace," beamed Browne. "You deserve well of your country. Here we have two earnest citizens from the Remove. Introductions, of course, are needless. Being anti-Quirke, they are our friends for life. Fear nothing, Brother Horace, for they know all.

"Don't jaw so much, old man," said Stevens. "It may not interest you particularly, but it's tea-time. I've been in that confounded store-room for twenty minutes, and I'm dying—positively dying—for a good cup of tea. Get this business over quickly, or I'll clear off without you."

Browne sighed.

"I greatly fear that you regard this whole affair in a spirit of levity, Brother Horace," he said sorrowfully.

"I do," admitted Stevens. "It's one of the best rags I've ever heard of. Ye gods! The way we scared old Pycraft this morning! What a darned shame we can't tell the whole school, and set the place in a cackle!"

"All in good time," said Browne. "At no very distant date we shall be famed throughout the length and breadth of the land. You have, I take it, left the gadgets in perfect order?"

"Everything's there," said Stevens.

Browne was exasperating in his languid calmness. He led the way along the corridor until they reached a small side passage. Down this was a door, and when he opened it a gleam of light came out, for there were no windows here, and a small electric bulb was burning. The place was a store-room, where books, ink, and similar articles were kept.

"My hat!" breathed Nipper. "Of course, this is immediately behind the Form-room, isn't it?"

"You are not merely getting warm, Brother Hamilton, but distinctly hot," nodded Browne. "Observe the ventilator above. Within easy reach, as Brother

Horace will readily assure you. With his customary agility, he has been clinging to several of those shelves for some little time."

They entered the store-room and closed the door. Somebody might come along, and it was just as well to be on the safe side. First of all, Browne invited the Removites to gaze under the lower shelf. They did so, and beheld a kind of lever. It was, in fact, the handle of a bicycle brake.

"What the dickens—" began Pitt.

"One pull of that, and the desk-lid operates with charming ease," explained Browne. "Merely a Bowden cable, cunningly laid beneath the floorboards of the Form-room, and thence into this operating chamber."

"But how does it work?" asked Nipper curiously.

"Just the same as a bicycle brake," grinned Stevens. "Browne's a cute beggar, I can tell you. We took hours to fix this thing up, but it was worth every minute of the time. It must have cost Browne over a quid, too."

"A detail, Brother Horace—a trifle," said Browne deprecatingly. "Is it really necessary to go into these financial trivialities?"

"But there's no sign of any cable on the desk," said Pitt.

"Oh, come!" protested Browne. "Am I as clumsy as all that? We will view the desk presently. For the moment, gaze at this."

From an upper shelf he took down a flabby affair of rubber. It turned out to be the spectral hand—a perfectly harmless contrivance which took on a shrivelled appearance when half-blown up, and which filled out with a pointing finger when fully inflated.

"No need to tell you how it was done," said Stevens. "This ventilator is about four feet lower than the one in the Form-room, and they both enter the same shaft. We simply pushed this apparatus up the shaft and held it ready. Of course, there was a wire to open that catch—"

"That's enough!" interrupted Nipper, taking a deep breath. "Now that we know the truth, it seems ridiculous, and I can hardly believe that we were fooled. But it's clever—thundering clever!"

CHAPTER VII.

EZRA QUIRKE DOESN'T LIKE IT.



THE lanky captain of the Fifth was lighted.

He had succeeded in impressing Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt, and he knew them to be level-headed, sensible fellows. Indeed, Browne had half-

suspected that Nipper would solve the problem on his own. But Nipper freely admitted that he had been at a complete loss.

Browne's trickery was clever in the extreme. And its chief cleverness was its simplicity. Much thought had been employed here, for it is the simple things which always require the most attention.

Stevens spoke the truth when he said it was unnecessary to go into details. Neither Nipper nor Pitt wanted to know how the apparatus had actually worked. A wire or two up the ventilator shaft, a rubber tube to blow up the spectral hand—such things as these were the only necessities for the complete success of the trick.

The banging desk was equally childish. The Fifth-Formers had caused that lid to crash down at will—by the mere pulling of that brake lever. And with one ear to the store-room ventilator, practically everything spoken within the Form-room could be heard.

The all-important point had been proved. Dozens of fellows had been scared by a seemingly supernatural manifestation in the broad light of day—and not one of them had suspected the truth. And even under close examination the Form-room had seemed to be barren of trick apparatus.

If William Napoleon Browne could create such a sensation by these simple devices—and in the sunshine—what could not Ezra Quirke produce in his darkened cellar, where all his meetings were held?

True, the cellar was of concrete, and the most extraordinary things had happened there. Even after a search of the place by sceptics, these phenomena had taken place just the same. Many of the sceptics were now converted. But Hamilton and Pitt were among the diehards. They and two or three others such as Handforth were still convinced that Quirke was a faker. It was only necessary to prove the method of his trickery. And that was the big stumbling-block, for up to now Quirke had been engagingly open in his doings, and had always invited investigation. The most searching inquiries had failed to trip him up, and he seemed so obviously genuine that his supporters were staunch.

Browne was another sceptic—and an immense one. It pleased the great Napoleon to dabble in these junior affairs. He had confided to Stevens that it was his intention to land Quirke in the morass.

"You will quite understand that this trivial affair is a mere preliminary canter," explained Browne, as he and the others left the store-room. "Caution forbids me to reveal the great thoughts now stirring in my mind. But I may hint that they are stirring to some purpose."

"Why shouldn't we all work together, Browne?" asked Nipper.

"A praiseworthy suggestion," nodded Browne calmly. "When the right moment arrives I will unlock the floodgates of my genius, and admit you into the Hall of Great Thoughts."

They arrived in the Form-room again, and this time Stevens switched on the lights—for it was growing very dusk. They all went over to the haunted desk. Another close examination revealed nothing.

"Let me urge you, Brother Horace, to nip back to the control-room and turn on a few of your celebrated volts," said Browne. "A certain amount of demonstration is required at this point."

Stevens left them, and they all watched the desk. Without warning the desk flew up and dropped again.

"Hanged if I can see it now!" growled Pitt, frowning.

"The method's easy enough," said Nipper. "Of course, there's a kind of plunger—a rod which comes up and lifts the lid. I expect it's on a spring, and drops back instantly that brake lever is released."

"A splendid example of deductive force," admitted Browne. "You are right in every detail, Brother Hamilton. But if you can find the said plunger without actually tearing the desk to pieces, I will willingly forfeit my entire fortune to the cause of charity."

He held the lid wide open this time, and the secret was revealed.

Quick as a flash the little brass lock at the front of the desk shot upwards, and dropped back into place. It was so swift that the movement was scarcely seen.

"Slow, Brother Horace—slowly!" called Browne.

The lock came up again—completely out of its socket. And now it could be seen that a rod was soldered to the base of it—the rod penetrating the woodwork of the desk.

"You'll observe that the screws are filed off, and soldered," said Brown. "Thus, when the lock is in position, it seems to be screwed firmly down. As a matter of fact, it is attached to the rod, and a spring arrangement connects up with the Bowden wire. One pull of the lever, and up comes the rod. A quick pull sends the desk-lid flying up. And I will guarantee that a close watcher in broad daylight would not see the lock come out of its socket. It is speed, brothers, that deceives the eye."

Browne must have gone to a lot of trouble over this contrivance. A hole was bored clean through the woodwork of the desk, and then through the floor. The desk being screwed down, it was impossible to shift it, and thus upset the mechanism.

As Browne explained, he had deliberately chosen the end desk for two excellent reasons. Firstly, it was one of the unoccupied ones; and, secondly, because there

was a fairly loose floor-board immediately underneath. The task had been simplified.

It had been comparatively easy to unscrew the desk from the floor, and to use a bell-fitter's drill, specially improvised by the ingenious Browne—to bore the necessary holes. And once placed in position again, the desk revealed utterly no trace of having been tampered with.

The plunger device was particularly ingenious, for the brake lever was connected by a Bowden cable to a powerful spring. One sharp pull on the lever, and the plunger worked with absolutely certain action. The front part of the desk, where the lock was fitted, was quite hollowed out, containing the plunger mechanism and the spring. From first to last, it was an engineer's job—and only by such thorough methods could the "uncanny" effects be obtained. That was the keynote of William Napoleon Browne's policy. He wouldn't have attempted this trick unless he had been certain of results. As he had said, the only way of detecting the fake was to tear the desk to pieces.

"There's not one chap in a thousand would have thought of this!" said Nipper. "I searched for a wire, or something of that sort. Look at that lock now—it seems to be screwed firmly home. Who on earth would believe it could shoot up, and then whizz back again?"

"Anyway, it took us hours to fix the thing up," said Stevens, as he came in again. "Do you know that we worked for three hours into the night, after light's-out? These schemes of Browne's are jolly cute, but they're strenuous. I say, what about that cup of tea?"

"We will adjourn forthwith," agreed Browne. "I take it, Brothers Hamilton and Pitt, that you will seal your lips concerning this trifle?"

"Of course," replied Nipper. "We'll keep mum, Browne. And perhaps we can help with something bigger later on. Poor old Quirke must be in a blue funk over this—he knows it was faked by somebody, but he can't possibly guess the truth. And the mere knowledge that somebody else is stealing his thunder will put him on edge."

Browne nodded.

"I venture to predict that Brother Quirke will feel a decided eddy in the near future," he observed. "A few more of these opposition manifestations, and he will put up the shutters. My plan is to gradually but surely put him out of business."

"That's our plan, too," declared Nipper. "Let's work together, Browne. How about

meeting later on this evening, and fixing up a few details?"

"Call round to the private office at any time you like," replied Browne promptly. "If we are not at home, you will probably find us in the Senior Day-Room, lightly discoursing upon the events of the moment. But I fear we must tear ourselves away. Brother Horace is impatient for his bowl of nectar. And I must confess that I, myself, am feeling slightly exhausted. I must learn to use my voice more. These long silences of mine are apt to get my throat into a sluggish condition."

The two Fifth Formers strolled out of the School House, and Pitt and Nipper followed. They paused near the Ancient House steps before parting—for Reggie was a West House fellow.

"It's one against me this time, Reggie," said Nipper thoughtfully. "I'm jiggered if I suspected the real secret of that Form-room! Browne's as cute as the dickens——"

"Oh, here you are!" said Tommy Watson, walking up in company with Singleton. "We've been looking everywhere for you, Nipper. What about some tea?"

"Just coming in," replied Nipper.

"There's a terrific affair booked for to-night," went on Watson eagerly. "Most of those East House chaps are boiling with excitement. And I've got to admit I agree with 'em. You can't seriously pretend that you don't believe in the occult now?"

Nipper took his chum by the arm.

"Sorry, Tommy, but I'd like to convince you——" he began.

"You can't!" interrupted Watson obstinately. "I've seen enough of Quirke's power to convince me. And those happenings in the Form-room are conclusive. We're going to hold a meeting there later on—and we're going to make an attempt to get communication with the ghost!"

Nipper pursed his lips.

"That's all rot!" he growled. "Take my advice, and chuck it up——"

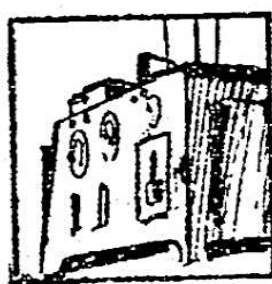
"It's no good saying that," put in Watson. "The East House is solid. They've made up their minds to try this experiment——"

"What about Quirke?" asked Pitt curiously.

"Quirke's against it," replied Tommy Watson. "He's urging the chaps to give it up, but they're firm. They're going to make him get in touch with the ghost, too. It's all arranged!"

CHAPTER VIII.

PROFESSOR TUCKER'S SECRET.



DICK HAMILTON and Reggie Pitt glanced at one another.

This was a piece of unexpected news, indeed! Ezra Quirke's followers were so impressed by what had hap-

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pened in the Form-room that they had made up their minds to meet in the apartment itself, in order to invoke the "Poltergeist" into another manifestation!

Being pledged to secrecy, Nipper and Pitt couldn't explain that the "Poltergeist" was a mere Bowden wire and a rubber bladder! There were elements of humour in the entire situation. And it proved conclusively how fanatical the juniors could be when thoroughly worked up by Quirke's unhealthy influence.

"Oh, it's all arranged, eh?" repeated Nipper slowly. "And when is this interesting meeting taking place?"

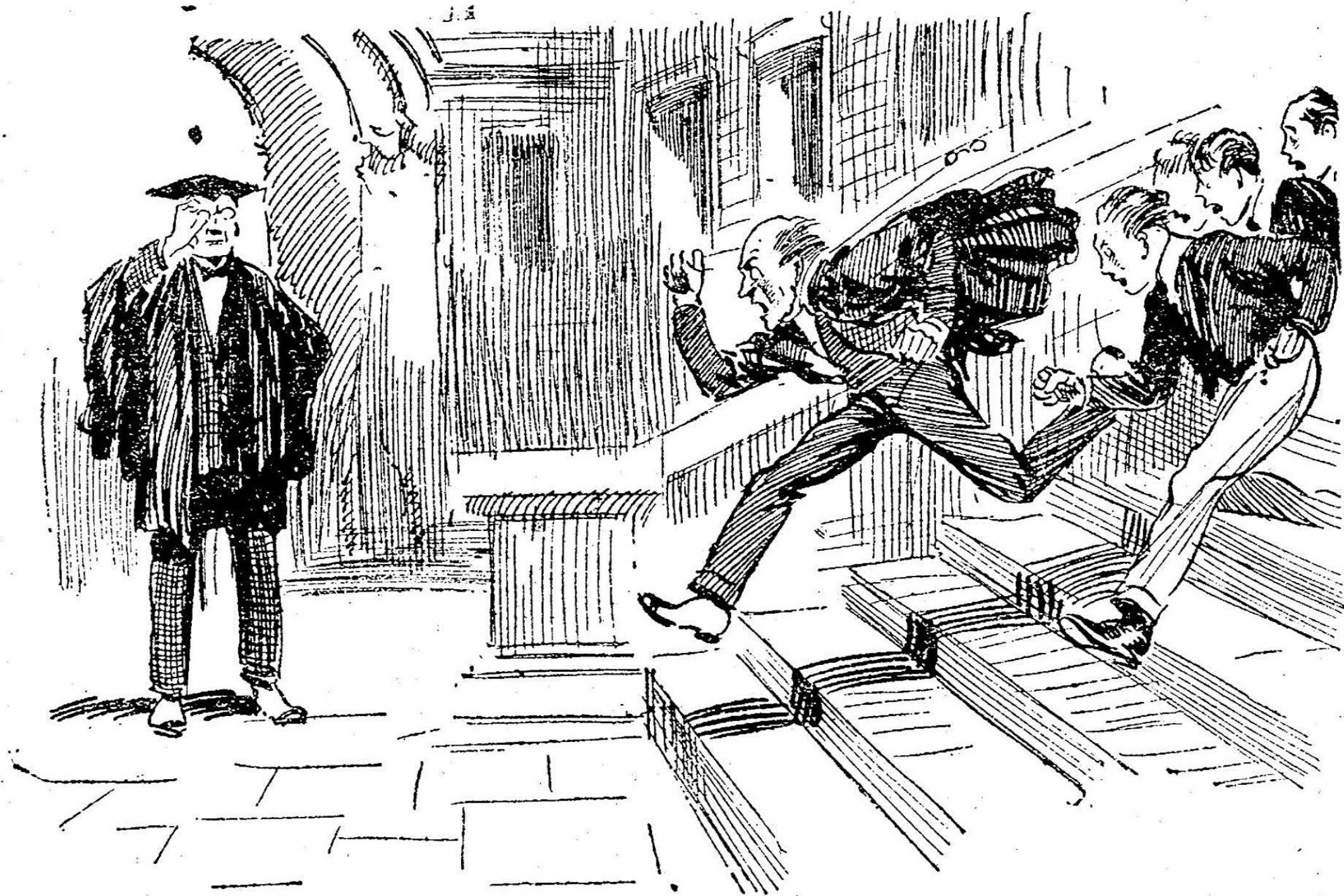
will be all to the good. It'll teach the asses a lesson."

"I wish you wouldn't be so pig-headed," groaned Watson. "I was just as unbelieving as you are a few days ago—but I can see the truth now. Quirke's genuine. He's a real magician."

Nipper laughed.

"You'll learn the truth one day, old man," he said gently. "I don't blame you for going over—everybody's doing it. It seems to be catching."

"Your attitude is beyond me, Hamilton," put in the Hon. Douglas Singleton. "With all this evidence in front of you, you're



But as the Head entered the triangle, he paused. An extraordinary sight met his gaze.

"Later on—in about a couple of hours."

"Are you going to it?"

"Rather!" replied Watson. "Everybody's going. They say it'll be pretty marvellous. Skelton and one or two of those other chaps are well up in these psychic subjects, and they want to use Quirke as a medium. It's quite possible there'll be a materialisation."

"Don't you believe it," said Pitt promptly. "The best thing we can do is to squash this piffle at once—"

"No, let it go on," interrupted Dick, giving Reggie a warning look. "If these fatheads are given enough rope, they'll hang themselves! This attempt to materialise the ghost is bound to fail, and the effect

just as negative as ever. You'll have to come in with us sooner or later. Why not now? I know more than you think. I've had PROOF that Quirke's an uncanny beggar. There's no trickery about him—he's in real earnest."

"In that case, why is he against this meeting?" asked Pitt pointedly.

"He's opposed to it on principle," replied the Hon. Douglas. "He admits himself to be a magician—a sorcerer—but he never dabbles in spiritualism."

"Rats!" said Nipper. "They're both the same thing."

"They're not!" denied Watson. "Spiritualism is a kind of religion—but Quirke's only interested in magic. He likes pro-

ducing these miracles of his. They're not horrible—they're not ghostly."

"So he's against this seance in the Form-room?" asked Nipper thoughtfully. "That's what it amounts to, of course—a seance. Oh, well, we're not interested, Reggie. Let's go indoors."

Nipper pulled Reggie Pitt into the Ancient House with him. He could see the drift of affairs. Obviously, Quirke's supporters had got out of hand. Not content with his leadership, they were determined to go a step further. In fact, Quirke had produced a monster which he couldn't control.

"It's all right—you can go across the Square to the West House by the back door," said Nipper, as he marched Reggie down the Remove passage. "Look here, it'll be rather a pity if those fanatics don't get any results out of their seance, won't it?"

"A pity?"

"Well, it'll be a fiasco."

"Of course it will," agreed Pitt. "Didn't you tell Watson——"

"I've been thinking since then," interrupted Dick, with a twinkle. "Rush through your tea quick, Reggie—have it with me if you like—and then we'll go up to old Browne's study, and have a jaw. It would be a sin and shame to let this chance go by."

Reggie looked at him eagerly.

"You mean——" he breathed.

"Exactly!" grinned Nipper. "Coming into Study C for tea? Good!"

Outside in the Triangle, the Hon. Douglas Singleton had parted with Watson, and was just entering the West House. He came face to face with Ezra Quirke, the latter moving up from the shadows of the chestnut trees. He appeared so silently that Singleton was rather startled.

"My hat! You gave me a turn!" he said, halting.

"I am sorry," said Quirke smoothly. "Merely a little walk, Singleton—I was anxious to be alone. I am distressed."

"What about?" asked the Hon. Douglas.

"This madness is all wrong!" exclaimed Quirke fiercely. "There must be no meeting in that Form-room to-night! We have our own place in the cellar—where the Unseen Powers are ready to help us. But it is stark insanity to attempt this seance to-night."

Singleton stared at him. Quirke was almost passionate in his intensity, and his strange eyes were burning.

"Steady on!" growled the Hon. Douglas. "I don't see why you should be so opposed to a simple seance. Those happenings in the Form-room this morning must have been caused by an Elemental, and it's only natural that the fellows should want to materialise it——"

"That is the terrible danger!" put in Quirke breathlessly. "They don't realise

what perils they precipitate! They have no idea of the dangerous path they tread! A Poltergeist—an Elemental—is the most deadly form of occult materialisation! If this unknown thing is actually produced it may kill somebody! An Elemental is a thing of horror."

"Hang it all, there's no need to——"

"Furthermore, I refuse to be dragged into this insane affair!" went on Quirke angrily. "I have warned you all, and you ignore me! What more can I do? Continue with this madness, and there will be disaster."

Singleton was rather impressed by Quirke's earnestness. He failed to see that Quirke was thoroughly alarmed—and, in any case, Singleton could not have known Quirke's cause for alarm. It was, however, simple.

Quirke was thoroughly unsettled by the events of the morning. He had had nothing to do with the mystery of the Form-room, and whether he thought it was a genuine spirit manifestation, or a trick, cannot be told. At all events, he knew that he had done nothing to bring about such results. And he was downright afraid of the possible results now. He desired, above all else, to bring his followers to their senses.

Judging by the subdued excitement in the Fourth—particularly in the East House—his task would be a formidable one. Events were moving rapidly, and Quirke was powerless to call a halt. His one hope was delay, and he was trusting that the juniors would be calmer in two hours time.

"I'll come over after tea," said Singleton. "Perhaps we can persuade the chaps——"

"Ah, boys, good evening!"

Professor Sylvester Tucker, the absent-minded science master, came bustling through the West Arch in the dusk. He approached the pair with a deep frown wrinkling his massive brow.

"Good evening, boys," he repeated. "I am looking for Singleton. Please tell me where I can find Singleton. It is ridiculous! Whenever I want a certain boy, he is never to be found! I have been here, there——"

"It's all right, sir, I'm here," said the Hon. Douglas.

"Good gracious, can't I see you're there?" snapped the professor. "What interest is it to me where you are? I want Singleton!"

"But I am Singleton, sir."

"Bless my soul, so you are!" ejaculated Professor Tucker, peering at the Hon. Douglas. "Splendid! Come with me at once, Singleton."

"It's tea-time, sir——"

"Tea-time," repeated the science master. "What has tea-time got to do with it? I want you at once on a most important—— Good gracious!" he went on, looking startled. "What do I want you for, Singleton?"

"No good asking me, sir."

"But this is preposterous!" frowned the professor. "I have been searching for you for twenty minutes. I need you! But why? I am really afraid that my memory is failing at times. . . Ah! Of course—of course! How absurd! I knew the matter was important."

He seized Singleton by the arm, and hustled him off. Within five minutes they were within Professor Tucker's cosy study in the Ancient House. The science master had quite a little suite of rooms to himself, including a study, a bed-room, and a laboratory.

In the study a fire was burning, but there were no signs of tea. Singleton had half hoped that a meal would be included in the programme, but he was disappointed. He had an idea why the professor wanted him, and he was quite curious.

"Now, sir—now, Singleton," said the professor, sitting down. "I wish to take you seriously to task. I have reason to believe that you have betrayed the confidence I bestowed on you a few days ago—"

"No, sir!" interrupted Singleton promptly. "That's not true!"

"I hope you are right, Singleton," said Professor Tucker, adjusting his spectacles. "I sincerely hope you are right. You still keep my secret? You have revealed it to nobody?"

"Not to a soul, sir!" said the Hon. Douglas with warmth. "I say, it's a bit thick, professor! I'm not the kind of chap to—"

"Tut-tut! Don't get indignant, my boy—don't get indignant!" interrupted the professor. "If I have slighted you, I apologise. I have your word of honour that my secret is quite safe with you? Splendid! That is all I wish to know—that is the only reason I brought you here. I am satisfied."

CHAPTER IX.

THE BOX OF MYSTERY.



THE HON. DOUGLAS SINGLETON was mollified.

If Professor Tucker had actually suspected him of divulging the secret, the old gentleman's sharp manner could be forgiven. For it was a secret of the most extraordinary nature.

And Singleton couldn't help remembering that Ezra Quirke was wrapped up in the whole affair. Not directly, but from the outside, as it were. Quirke had indulged in some crystal-gazing a week or so earlier, and he had warned the Hon. Douglas to be ready for some strange things.

In the crystal he had seen a gashed finger, a withered arm, and an elderly gentleman who struck a familiar chord—but whom

Quirke couldn't exactly place. At the time Singleton had thought nothing. He had laughed.

And then, when he had nearly forgotten the crystal incident, he had discovered Professor Tucker in surprising circumstances. It was on this very subject that the science master was talking now.

"You may remember, Singleton, the exact nature of our previous confidence," said the professor, lying back in his chair, and placing the tips of his fingers together. "You found me in the lane, did you not?"

"Yes, sir. You'd fallen off your bike."

"A ridiculous business altogether," growled Professor Tucker. "I can't even remember what I was doing on the bicycle. Why, indeed, should I use such a treacherous contrivance? Bicycles are not for me, Singleton. Certainly not! I detest the things!"

"That's what I always thought, sir," smiled the Hon. Douglas. "Anyway, you came an awful cropper into the hedge, and you gashed your finger—"

"Exactly!" interrupted the other. "I gashed my finger. A nasty, ugly wound, was it not?"

"An awful jab, sir, by what I could see."

"And yet, within five minutes of my returning to these rooms, my finger was healed," mused the professor. "A truly miraculous recovery, Singleton. You were quite startled at the time, eh?"

"I've been puzzling ever since, sir," said the junior. "I wish you'd explain a bit more—I'd love to know. How on earth did you cure yourself like that? After all, it's only fair—"

"Not to-night, Singleton—not to-night!" interrupted the professor, jumping to his feet. "Dear me, no! Under no circumstances can I—H'm! And yet, why not?" he went on thoughtfully. "Perhaps it would be the better way. Half a confidence is always irritating. I have already suspected you of betraying me. An unjust suspicion, I know."

"I hope I'm trustworthy, sir."

"To be sure you are, Singleton," said the professor promptly. "And if you knew all it would be far better, perhaps. Yes, yes! Certainly! Come with me into the laboratory! I will show you something!"

Apparently Professor Tucker had finally made up his mind. As he had said, it was just as well to tell Singleton all—for by so doing he would be more certain of the junior's integrity. The subject had been worrying him for days, and it was now a positive relief to take action. Moreover, Professor Tucker was only human, and he was fairly bubbling over with eagerness to fully share his secret with another.

The Hon. Douglas was very curious as he entered the laboratory. He had never been there before—for it was a sacred apartment. The quaint old science master was a

very particular man, and he would never allow others in his laboratory while he was conducting his experiments. At St. Frank's he was so well known that nobody minded His eccentric ways were understood.

The laboratory was about the untidiest place Singleton had ever seen. The experimental benches were clean, and such things as test-tubes and retorts were glittering. But the corners of the room were simply littered with all manner of kelter—the accumulation of months. Shelves were packed with countless empty bottles and miscellaneous rubbish.

"Now, Singleton, I am going to surprise you," said Professor Tucker impressively. "Quite unwittingly, I betrayed the world's greatest secret to you the other day—the most amazing scientific discovery of the age."

"Yes, sir?"

"Yes, indeed!" declared the professor. "I am not boasting, my boy. It is not my habit to indulge in that form of self-advertisement."

"But I don't quite understand, sir," said Singleton. "You healed your finger in some way, and I can't make out——"

"Exactly," interrupted Professor Tucker. "You can't understand. It is not natural to suppose that you should understand. Even after I have told you everything, it is doubtful if you will appreciate the vast potentialities of this miraculous scientific wonder. You must realise that I am sharing my life's secret with you."

"Yes, sir."

"And I don't like doing it," went on the professor, with a frown. "Distinctly, I don't like doing it, Singleton. But I've got to. A little knowledge in your hands may be far more dangerous than the full knowledge. My aim is to guarantee your silence. One word of gossip from you might set the school talking. And then what? Rumours—tittle-tattle—exaggerated reports—and, finally, the scientific world would learn of my secret before I am ready. So my only course is to take the bull by the horns, and deal drastically with the problem."

"You needn't tell me anything unless you like, sir," said Singleton, nettled by the suggestion of doubt in the professor's words. "I've given you my word that I won't mention——"

"Rubbish, Singleton—rubbish," said the science master testily. "Good gracious me! You are extremely touchy, young man! I'm only attempting to make the position clear. There is no need for you to be offended. I merely wish to impress you with the appalling importance of this confidence."

"All right, sir—go ahead!"

"I will go ahead when it pleases me to go ahead!" snapped the professor. "It is a pity—a great pity—that my hand should be forced in this way. Confound it, boy, I

don't like telling you at all. But I am in a cleft stick. I've got to! H'm! Annoying—very annoying!"

He paced up and down for a few moments, frowning heavily. And the Hon. Douglas Singleton watched with slight inward amusement. He was impatient, too—he hadn't had any tea, and it seemed that he was doomed to miss it altogether. And Hussi Kahn, Singleton's study mate in the West House, had prepared an exceptionally ripping tea this evening, too. The Indian junior was in funds, and was standing treat. It was rather a dirty trick to leave him flat, without any sort of explanation. But Singleton could do nothing.

He had an idea that Professor Sylvester Tucker was making a great deal of fuss over something which was of merely nominal importance. The professor was undoubtedly an exceptionally clever scientist—his lectures at St. Frank's were always eagerly attended—but he probably had a bee in his bonnet. Lots of these scientific men, Singleton told himself, were a bit touched on certain subjects. And the professor was notoriously "dotty."

"Very annoying!" repeated the science master, coming to a halt and looking at Singleton abstractedly. "Very annoying indeed! Eh? What are you doing here, young man? Leave me alone! How dare you enter my laboratory in this outrageous fashion?"

"But you invited me in, sir——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" snapped the professor testily. "Go away this instant! I don't even know—Upon my soul!" he added, with a start. "Of course—of course! I really beg your pardon, Singleton! For the moment I had forgotten! I was going to show you my apparatus, was I not?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know?"

"It's the first I've heard of any apparatus, sir," said Singleton.

"Yes, yes, to be sure!" nodded the professor. "But we will soon remedy the matter, my boy. I think it will be better to carry out a little demonstration. Far more effective than mere words. I wish to convince you, Singleton, and that is the only way of doing so."

The junior was still puzzled—still half inclined to believe that Professor Tucker was rambling. But there was something unusual about the science master just now. His eye was brighter, and he was concentrating on one subject to the exclusion of all others. He had only had one lapse of absent-mindedness since Singleton had entered the laboratory—a clear record for the professor.

His whole being was fixed upon the subject of this secret. And his reason for confiding in Singleton was a good one. As matters stood at the moment, the junior might easily drop a hint to the other fellows without

actually realising it. But with the professor's full confidence he would be much more careful.

"First of all, we will perform this simple operation," said Professor Tucker, picking up a wicked-looking surgical knife from the bench.

Singleton watched with a sudden quickening of his heart-beats. The glittering blade—the gleam in the old scientist's eyes—his unusual manner—all made the junior uneasy.

"Thus!" said Professor Tucker briskly.

With one movement he slashed the knife down across the back of his left hand. There was a spurt of blood, and Professor Tucker gave vent to a wild, triumphant laugh.

CHAPTER X.

THE WIZARD OF SCIENCE.



THE HON. DOUGLAS SINGLETON started back.

"Oh!" he gasped, horrified.

He stared fascinatedly at the professor's streaming hand. Great drops were oozing from the white skin, and dripping down. And Professor Tucker was standing back, regarding his injured hand as though it were a work of art. The knife was still held in his grip.

"You've wounded yourself, sir!" panted Singleton hoarsely.

He was pale to the lips, and for one moment he was on the point of fleeing madly from the laboratory. Professor Tucker was mad! His mental balance had suddenly snapped. And all that talk of a great discovery was so much delirium. Within a second he would attack the junior!

Singleton pulled himself together for his bid for liberty.

"Exactly—exactly!" said the professor, with a soft laugh. "I have wounded myself, Singleton. Quite a nasty gash, isn't it? If I may say so, a pretty gash! A clean cut across the—"

"Don't, sir!" panted Singleton.

"Tut-tut! Don't be alarmed, young man—don't be alarmed!" said the professor genially. "Good gracious! You're looking quite pale, Singleton! There's nothing to be upset about."

"But—but your hand, sir——"

"A trifle—a painful, ugly wound under ordinary circumstances, but in my case a trifle," interrupted the professor. "Remember my finger, Singleton. I can assure you there is nothing——"

"Your finger!" echoed Singleton dazedly.

"You mean—you mean——"

He paused, unable to form his words. A staggering thought had occurred to him.

On that earlier occasion the old gentleman's gashed finger had been nearly as ugly as this self-inflicted wound, and it had been healed in some miraculous manner within a few minutes. Was it possible—— But Singleton's mentality failed at such a staggering possibility.

His colour was coming back. He was enthralled now, for he could see that Professor Tucker was perfectly sane. There was even a gleam of amusement in his kindly old eyes.

"Forgive me, my boy—forgive me!" said the professor softly. "I didn't mean to upset you like this. Never mind, we'll soon put everything right. Watch closely!"

He quickly went to a fitted porcelain bowl, and turned on one of the taps. Singleton watched him while he bathed that livid gash, and while he applied a neat bandage of lint. It was a wound that would take weeks to heal by the ordinary methods of surgery, judged Singleton. And there would probably be a scar for life.

He prayed that everything would be all right. He dimly remembered having read of scientific men whose faith in their own freak inventions had led to their deaths. Was Professor Tucker in this class? He had certainly taken an extraordinary method of demonstrating his mysterious apparatus which so far Singleton hadn't even seen.

"Now watch even more closely," said the professor briskly.

Having made the bandage secure he proceeded to put on a curious-looking glove, a cumbersome contrivance with wires attached to it. He snapped it securely over his wrist by means of a push-button.

"What's that, sir?" asked Singleton curiously.

"You will soon see."

Professor Tucker stepped to the bench and whisked a cloth cover from a bulky object there. It was a kind of metal box—a curiously shaped affair with two or three dials on the face of it. Singleton deemed it to be electrical, although it was in no way connected with the ordinary house-current.

With a quick movement the professor attached the glove wires to the metal box. And once the terminals were fixed he pulled down a black knob.

Instantly the contrivance emitted a low, musical hum.

"There we are, Singleton," said the professor pleasantly. "Quite simple, isn't it? Take no notice of that slight purr. It is all part and parcel of the cure."

Singleton stared with bulging eyes.

"But—but you don't mean to say——" he began.

"I don't mean to say anything," interrupted the professor. "Words, in any case, are inadequate. I desire you to see this

thing with your own eyes, Singleton. I am not foolish enough to hope that you will believe this scientific miracle without witnessing a demonstration. It has been well and truly said that seeing is believing."

With his free hand the professor was holding his watch. He consulted it now and again, and there was a silence except for the mysterious humming of the instrument. It seemed to Singleton that five minutes must have elapsed, but actually only two minutes were taken.

"Now!" exclaimed the professor crisply.

He pressed down the switch and the humming ceased. Then with a snap he unfastened the glove and withdrew his hand. The bandage was in place just the same, and the professor unwrapped it.

The Hon. Douglas Singleton hardly knew what to expect. His common sense told him that that fearful gash could not be healed, although it was clear enough that the professor expected it to be. This demonstration could have been employed for no other purpose. But it was impossible—ridiculous.

"Good heavens!" muttered Singleton aghast.

The last fold of the bandage had come away. There were traces of blood upon it, and traces of blood on the back of Professor Tucker's hand. But of that ugly gash there was no sign.

"One moment," said the science master.

He hurried to the wash-basin, placed his hand under the running tap, and then used the towel. Then he held out his hand for Singleton's inspection.

"But—but—" began Singleton.

"Examine it closely, young man."

The Hon. Douglas did so. The skin was smooth and perfect. Not only had the gash healed, but there was no trace of a scar. There was nothing. It was just as though the slash had never been made. Singleton felt as though his brain were on fire.

"It's impossible, sir!" he burst out.

"And yet it has been done," smiled the professor.

"There's no wound at all, sir——"

"Not a trace."

"But—but how——"

"Ah! How?" interrupted Professor Tucker. "That, of course, is the vital question. Had I told you that such a thing as this were possible you would have ridiculed me. You would have set me down as a crank—a deluded lunatic. Under no circumstances would you have believed such a preposterous statement. Is that not so, Singleton?"

"Well, yes, sir."

"Exactly!" agreed the professor. "But as I mentioned before, seeing is believing. A few days ago I was foolish enough to use my apparatus while you were still within my rooms. Of course I should have

applied a bandage afterwards, and then you would have known nothing. As it is, I have thought it better to take you into my complete confidence. Now you can understand why my gashed finger was so readily healed."

The junior's brain was still in a whirl. He had seen something which was opposed to all nature. Quirke's physical phenomena were amazing enough, but this material miracle was utterly staggering. Singleton half thought that he was dreaming.

He had seen that gash made, he had seen the professor draw that wicked blade across his hand, he had seen the blood spurt forth, he had seen the livid wound. And now there was—nothing!

Again, Singleton examined the hand. He felt that there must be some deception about it. Such a feeling, of course, was purely natural. When one sees something opposed to nature for the first time, one's whole being revolts against the idea. And it was some few moments before Singleton could convince himself that the professor's hand was whole. Even the evidence of his own eyes was insufficient, until his brain had accepted the obvious truth.

"It's—it's staggering, sir!" he muttered.

"A crude word, Singleton—a poor word," declared Professor Tucker. "It is not merely staggering, but stupendous. It is overwhelming. Our language contains no adequate words. Even I cannot express myself as I would like. What you have seen is a mere tithe of the actual possibilities."

CHAPTER XI.

PROFESSOR TUCKER'S AMAZING DISCOVERY.



THE junior found himself looking at the metal box, with its peculiar dials. It revealed nothing. There was nothing there to explain the phenomena.

"Forgive me, sir, for being a bit doubtful," said Singleton huskily. "Hang it all, I couldn't help it! But I believe you now, of course; I can't do anything else. Supposing I received a fearful kick on the football field, and had an awful bruise? Could this instrument do anything?"

"Within fifteen seconds the bruise would vanish."

"What if I broke my leg, sir?"

"That I am afraid, would be a more serious affair," replied the professor. "However, half an hour's treatment would suffice."

"Half an hour!" gasped the Hon. Douglas.

"I am perhaps unduly pessimistic," said the professor. "A simple fracture might be

dealt with in twenty minutes. A compound fracture, however—"

"Do you mean to say this apparatus will heal a chap's broken leg within half an hour?" asked Singleton dazedly.

"Quite easily," replied the scientist calmly. "And I will guarantee that the patient will never suffer any recurring pains. Under our present surgery a broken limb is always apt to give twinges at various periods. But this instrument of mine restores human tissue to its original form as perfectly as though there had been no breakage."

"My only hat!" muttered Singleton.

"A bruise, of course, is so simple that a few seconds will suffice," explained the professor. "A skin wound, such as I just inflicted upon myself, is scarcely any more serious. Even a deep flesh wound reacts instantly to the treatment. And moreover, there is not the slightest possibility of a complication. The instant these terminals are applied the tissues become healed, and thus mortification of any cell is out of the question."

Singleton walked up and down for a minute or two, trying to take it all in.

"But if all this is true, sir—" he began.

"My boy, do you doubt me?"

"No, sir—of course not," said Singleton.

"I can't, after what I've just seen. But why haven't you used the apparatus on young Long? He's been in the sanny with a broken wrist and a cracked head—"

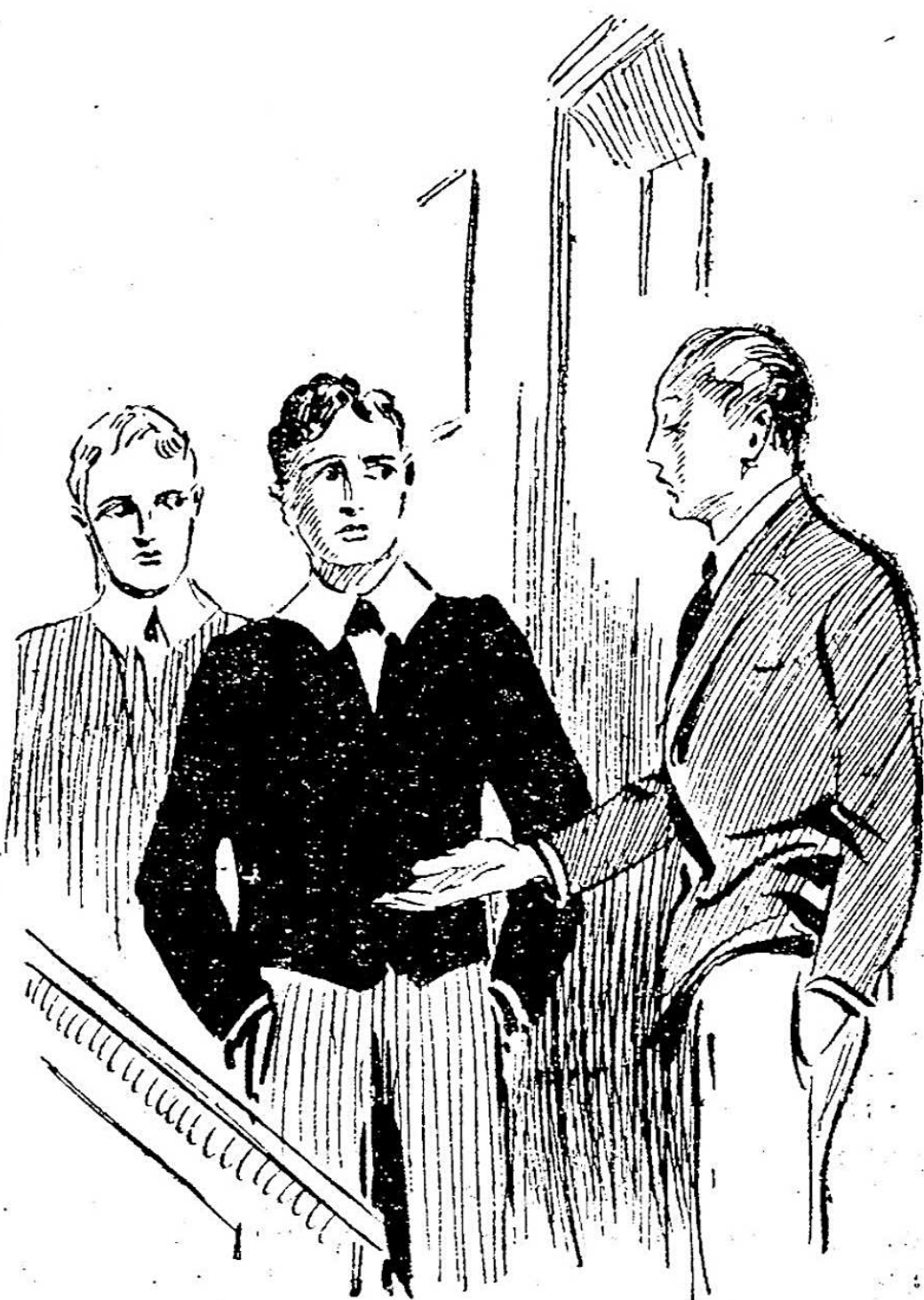
"Alas, it is my one regret that I have not been able to use my apparatus for the succour of the schoolboys!" interrupted the professor sadly. "It is all a matter of cost, Singleton. That indeed is the one drawback to my invention. To have healed Long would have cost at least fifty pounds. This present demonstration has left me at least five pounds out of pocket. You will realise that the whole thing is in an experimental stage, and I am not a man of wealth. My entire life's savings have been poured into this apparatus. Indeed, I am now a beggar. But what is money compared to the amazing benefit to mankind?"

"But if it's so costly, sir—"

"On a commercial basis, Singleton, it will be an entirely different thing," interrupted the professor. "When these instruments are produced on a large scale an application of the force, such as you have just seen, will cost a mere shilling or so. Thus every hospital will include a number of these instruments in its equipment. No hospital in the world can afford to be without one. It is no work of wizardry, but a purely scientific invention."

"Electrical, sir?"

"Not exactly electrical, Singleton, but partially so," admitted the professor. "I can tell you that wireless has had a great



"These tricks are so elementary that I almost feel inclined to disclose them," said Napoleon Browne.

Nipper stared. "Do you know anything about this?" he asked quickly.

deal to do with my discovery. I need not go into technical details, but you know what a wireless valve is? There are valves within my instrument. Not wireless valves, but valves of a somewhat similar construction. Their energy is my own secret, collected from—well, collected from the elements around us."

"It's amazing, sir."

"I have spent twenty years in research work," went on the professor, pacing up and down, and talking as though to himself. "And at last my triumph is at hand. The invention of the wireless valve provided me with my missing link. I fear I have neglected my duties here, but no doubt the Headmaster will forgive me when he knows all. My absent-mindedness, Singleton, has not been entirely without reason."

"We always thought you were keen on astronomy, sir."

"I am very keen indeed," replied Professor Tucker. "But I will confess that I have sometimes used astronomy as a blind. With a secret of this kind in my possession I have had to employ every possible precaution. Possibly you have

heard of an instrument known as the Abram's Magic Box?"

"The invention of an American doctor, isn't it, sir?"

"Exactly!" said the professor. "There has been a great deal of controversy concerning this magic box among the medical profession. We need not discuss it now. I merely refer to it because my invention may be classed as a super magic box. I have succeeded in capturing and controlling an entirely new element. That is the secret of my valve. This element is absolutely unknown to science generally. I am the only man in the world who has succeeded in harnessing it. The effect upon human tissue is so startling that the Rontgen Ray, known more familiarly as the X-Ray, is childish by comparison. And this new element is absolutely harmless. So many of these newly discovered rays are deadly unless handled with exquisite care. My element is safe under all conditions. Its only effect is for the good."

"Supposing it is used on healthy flesh and blood, sir?"

"The effect is negative," replied the professor promptly. "But that is scarcely accurate. The effect is for the good—it must be for the good—since in these days of unnatural living there is no healthy flesh and blood. The normally healthy man is suffering from countless minor disorders of which he knows nothing. Under my new treatment he can only be improved in health. As I have already told you, it is absolutely harmless."

"Why, it's the most wonderful thing I've ever heard of, sir!" declared Singleton enthusiastically. "Thanks awfully for telling me. You needn't worry—I won't breathe a word to a soul."

"I am sure I can rely upon you."

"Of course, the instrument's only good for cuts and wounds, isn't it?"

"Good heavens, boy—what put that ridiculous idea into your head?" demanded the professor angrily.

"I'm sorry, sir—"

"Dear, dear!" said the old gentleman, frowning. "It seems that I have not made myself clear, even now! My dear boy, this amazing element is all-powerful. I have already demonstrated how it can restore human tissue within a few minutes. But that is the least of its accomplishments. It can restore the paralysed—it can cure consumption—it can conquer every human disease known—and all within the space of an hour or two. The most stubborn cases known to science will respond on the instant to my treatment. It is all a matter of cost—cost—cost!"

Professor Tucker had worked himself up into a fever of excitement, and he thumped his palm vigorously as he stood before the junior, quivering in every limb.

"Cost!" he added bitterly, suddenly relaxing. "A deadly word, Singleton. Here am I, with this marvel in my hands, and my banking account is overdrawn! I was not exaggerating when I called myself a beggar. Literally, I am down to my last sovereign. But there"—he pointed to the instrument—"is something which compensates for all my poverty."

Singleton felt deeply touched.

"But surely you'll get it all back, sir?" he asked.

"A thousandfold," replied the professor. "A thousandfold—if our doctors only see the possibilities. Not that I care for money," he went on. "As far as my own personal needs go, I am a simple man—the smallest income suffices me. I merely require money to further my experiments."

"But they're concluded, sir, aren't they?"

"Thank heaven, yes," replied the professor fervently. "And I will tell you something else, Singleton. Two of the most famous specialists in Europe—I will not mention names—are coming down from London next week. They are to witness a demonstration. That will be the day of my triumph. Breathe no word of this to any of the others. Keep my secret well, Singleton. Your lips will not be sealed for long. Within a very few weeks the whole world will be ringing with the news of this marvel of the age."

"You ought to be a millionaire, sir," said Singleton warmly. "It's a downright shame that you should use all your money like that! Look here, can't I— Oh, hang! I don't like to say it," he added awkwardly. "But I've got pots of tin, sir, all in my own right, too! I can whack out any amount necessary—hundreds—"

"Good gracious me!" ejaculated the professor, aghast. "Are you suggesting, Singleton, that you should lend me money?"

"Well, sir, I—"

"Ridiculous, Singleton—absolutely ridiculous!" interrupted the professor angrily. "Upon my soul! What a grotesque suggestion! Why, good gracious, you'll think that I told you my secret for the very purpose— No, no! Don't refer to this matter again, Singleton, please."

He calmed down slightly.

"Well, sir, I only meant—"

"A kindly thought, young man—a generous impulse," smiled the professor. "Well, well, I am afraid I am keeping you. You'll remember your promise, won't you? I don't need another assurance, Singleton."

The Hon. Douglas felt himself hustled out, and as the professor's outer door closed upon him, he stood there in the corridor, dazed and bewildered. He had come out of an unreal world into the hustle and bustle of school life again.

And, somehow, Singleton's brain felt numbed.

CHAPTER XII.

OUT OF HAND.



DREAMILY, the Hon. Douglas Singleton made his way downstairs, and found himself out in the Triangle.

He had intended going to his study in the West House, but he walked aimlessly, hardly realising which way his footsteps took him. The happenings of the last half-hour had left him in a dulled condition. His brain refused to accept all that he had seen and heard. And yet, at the same time, he knew that everything had been absolutely real.

His sensations were curious. He dearly wanted to get some of the fellows together, and tell them of Professor Tucker's stupendous discovery. But he couldn't. He was a fellow of honour, and his lips were sealed. Not in the strictest confidence would he breathe a word to another soul.

For that is the way in which secrets leak out. One tells another under the pledge of secrecy, and so it goes on—until all know. The only safe way is to keep a still tongue.

"Oh, hallo, Singleton!" said somebody, bustling up. "Aren't you coming to the meeting?"

The Hon. Douglas found himself looking at Canham—another West House fellow.

"Meeting?" he repeated. "What meeting?" Canham stared.

"Don't be an ass!" he said impatiently. "Goodness knows there's only one meeting on to-night!"

"Is there?"
"Ye gods and little tadpoles!" ejaculated Canham. "What the dickens is the matter with you, Singy? We're all in this—the whole Circle. In fact, some of the sceptics are coming in, too. Can't keep 'em out, worse luck!"

Singleton tried to bring himself to earth.

"Oh, you mean that seance affair?" he said, recollection dawning. "Oh, I don't know. I'm not so keen—"

"Rats!" said Canham. "You can't afford to be left out. This isn't like one of Quirke's ordinary meetings—it'll be extra-special. We're going to materialise that Elemental."

Somehow, Singleton felt that all this occult business was singularly small and unimportant. An hour ago he had been enthusiastic about it. But with such a secret in his breast, he could scarcely think of anything else. His mind continually reverted to that scene in Professor Tucker's laboratory. He compelled himself to get a grasp of things.

"Yes, I suppose it'll be interesting," he admitted. "I'm not sure about materialising that ghost. It's not so easy. Besides, Quirke says it isn't in his line—"

"Blow Quirke!" interrupted Canham. "The rotter's refused to have anything to

do with the meeting. Says he won't come! Let him keep out, then!"

"But we can't do anything without him—"

"Why not?" demanded Canham. "We're not obliged to rely on Quirke for everything. If this isn't in his line, he can go and boil himself! We've all decided to lay that Form-room ghost. And the only way to lay it is to hold a seance, and get into communication with it."

"When's it going to be?"

"Almost at once—"

Even as Canham was speaking a number of fellows came bustling out of the East House. All the prominent "occultists" were to the fore, including Skelton and Ellmore, Clifton, Simmons, and similar earnest thinkers. Ordinarily, they were commonplace fellows enough—quiet, studious chaps who found it difficult to gain any prominence.

But the coming of Ezra Quirke had made a difference. These nonentities were finding themselves in a position of importance. They were well-read—they were sincere students of Thought. And, as such, they were the leaders of any movement of this kind.

Actually, the juniors were merely making fools of themselves—although they would have been indignant and shocked if they had been told this. Not one of them knew his subject deeply. Not one of them had the faintest conception of the true science he was delving into. But, with a mere smattering of knowledge, they deluded themselves into believing that they were in deadly earnest.

The truth was, they had got beyond Ezra Quirke's control. He had worked them up to such a pitch of unhealthy excitement with his "miracles" that they were ready to believe anything possible. They had become fanatical. They were convinced that the Fourth Form-room was haunted by an uneasy spirit, and that a seance would help them to get into communication with the thing.

Nothing could have been more ridiculous—nothing more outrageously impossible. But the self-deluded juniors were positively certain of definite results. The movement had spread like a wave.

If any of the masters had heard of this projected meeting, there would have been short work of the whole affair. The heavy hand of authority would have come down with a crash, and a certain number of earnest Fourth-Formers would have smarted mightily.

But the authorities knew nothing. The "beaks"—as they were disrespectfully termed—hadn't the faintest idea of the coming seance. The juniors had taken good care to keep it mum.

Two or three masters and quite a few prefects were aware of an unusual excitement. But they took no notice of this. Meetings of one kind or another were always

stirring in the Junior School, and the majority of them came to nothing. It would have been a sheer waste of time to investigate every little burst of enthusiasm.

"One moment, my dear friends—just one moment!"

Singleton and Canham turned, and found one of the Trotwood twins at hand.

"Oh, hallo, Nick!" said Singleton. "Are you coming to this meeting, too? I thought you were dead against the occult?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"My hat! I believe it's Corny!" groaned the Hon. Douglas.

"Really?" asked Trotwood. "I thought it would continue to be fine."

"Eh?"

"Didn't you mention that the weather was getting stormy?"

"No, I didn't!" roared Singleton. "By jingo! We live in the same passage with this ass, Canham, and we can't tell him from his giddy brother! Why, he's actually next door to me!"

"What's the use?" asked Canham. "I've given up trying to tell 'em apart long ago. Clear off, Corny—we're busy. We're just going over to join in the big meeting."

"Meeting?" repeated Cornelius Trotwood, catching the word. "Splendid! That is just what I wish to speak to you about. I am interested in this movement. I wish to join —"

"My aunt!" grinned Singleton. "Are you a convert, too?"

"I am anxious to join the party this evening," said Cornelius firmly.

"All right, join it—don't ask me!" said Singleton. "As far as I can see, every Tom, Dick, and Harry is going to the meeting. It isn't merely confined to Quirke's set. You can go if you like."

"But why?" asked Cornelius.

"Why? Didn't you just ask—"

"Why should I go on my bike?" asked the deaf junior. "I understand that the meeting was to be held in the Fourth-Form class-room—"

"I didn't say anything about your bike!" shouted Singleton, exasperated. "Come on, Canham—let's clear off before he turns our hair grey!"

They joined a crowd of other fellows, and Cornelius drifted away. But a moment later Singleton came to a halt as somebody jostled him in the gloom.

"My hat!" he groaned. "You again! Why on earth—"

"What's the matter?" asked Trotwood. "Anything wrong?"

"I've had enough of you, you deaf fat-head!"

"First time I knew I was deaf," grinned the other. "I'm Nicodemus, you ass! It's no compliment to me to mistake me for that dotty brother of mine!"

"Oh, it's you, Nick!" growled Singleton. "Why can't you keep Corny in order? Buy him some ear-trumpets, or something?"

"He's tried all sorts of appliances, but he loses 'em!" grinned Nicodemus. "I say, are you going to that rotten meeting over in the School House? I gave you credit for having more sense, Duggy! It's a mad business!"

"Aren't you coming?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Nick promptly. "D'you think I take an interest in that filthy rot? You'll do yourself a lot more good if you go to the gymnasium and do some exercises!"

Singleton snorted.

"You'd better have a go at your brother, then!" he retorted.

"Poor old Corny—he can't help it," sighed Nicodemus. "His brain's a bit spongy, you know, and it soon soaks in poison of your sort. I believe he's going to this meeting, and I think I'll let him. It might teach him a lesson— Now, I don't call that very polite," he added sadly.

The Hon. Douglas Singleton had marched off without waiting for Nick's final words. And Trotwood major, shaking his head over the foolishness of his brother, went into the West House and settled himself down with a story-book, which was much more healthy than dipping into the occult.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE FOURTH FORM CLASS-ROOM.



EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH placed his right fist squarely under Church's nose, and held it there, hovering.

"See that?" he said menacingly.

"Look here, you ass—"

"See that?" roared Handforth.

"Of course I can see it!" shouted Church hotly.

"Well, in two ticks you'll feel it unless you come along without any further rot!" said Handforth threateningly. "It's not my habit to use force, but I adopt it as a last resort. Are you coming quietly, or shall I carry you?"

"Oh, I'll come!" growled Church.

"You, too?" demanded Handforth, turning to McClure.

"Might as well, I suppose," sighed McClure. "Anything for a quiet life. We're not scared of your giddy fists, Handy—don't think that! But if there's going to be any unpleasantness, we'll give in."

Edward Oswald cooled down. He had been urging his chums to come with him to the seance in the Fourth Form-room, but they had pointed out quite a number of good reasons against the proposition. Prep. was one of them, wireless was another, and Church badly wanted to finish reading a serial instalment. But it was no good. Handforth squashed the lot.

"We've got to go to this meeting," he declared. "We've got to see what these asses are up to. Unless we keep 'em in check they'll get completely out of hand."

"But they won't let us in!" protested Church, as a final feeble effort. "Only Quirke's set will be admitted. We're negative, as they call it. We shall spoil the whole meeting if we go there."

"I believe it!" murmured McClure.

"Won't let us in, eh?" laughed Handforth derisively. "I'd like to see the chap who's going to stop us! You poor, pitiful ass, lots of our chaps are going! Hamilton, Pitt—all sorts of others! It's a regular rag! If those Quirkeites think they're going to have everything their own way, they're jolly well wrong!"

And Handforth marched out of Study D, and his chums followed him. In the Ancient House lobby they encountered Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt, to say nothing of Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and Jack Grey. The latter three were members of Quirke's Circle, and they were rather uncomfortable about these unbelievers attending the seance.

"Just in time," said Handforth briskly. "We'll all go over together."

Nipper looked at the leader of Study D closely.

"I say, Handy, are you going over there to stir up trouble?" he asked.

"I am!"

"Then don't!"

"Eh? What the——"

"Don't!" said Dick. "I know it's an awful blow to a chap of your meteoric temperament, but do your best to cork yourself up. It'll be an awful pity if that seance is ruined by black eyes and thick ears!"

Handforth stared.

"Why, you ass, that's the very reason I'm going over!" he snorted. "I'm going to sail into those fatheads, and make mincemeat of 'em!"

"It wouldn't be quite fair, old man," put in Reggie Pitt. "We're all agreed that they're off their rockers—present company excepted—but they're certainly in earnest!"

"You needn't except us," said Tommy Watson, with a glare. "And you're the chaps who're off your rockers—not us! It'll be a dirty trick if you come to that meeting and spoil things——"

"Of course it will," admitted Nipper promptly. "Let's just act as silent watchers, Handy. We'll see everything that happens, and take action afterwards—if necessary. But let's be sports—let's play the game."

Handforth breathed hard.

"Nobody ever accused me of not playing the game without suffering for it!" he said thickly. "All right—we'll sit quiet, and see what happens. But I'm not guaranteeing anything."

Dick Hamilton was quite satisfied that Handforth would hold himself in check. And a moment later they all moved out into the Triangle, and merged into the gloom. It

was by no means an easy matter to get into the Fourth Form class-room.

At this time of the evening the School House was locked up and deserted. It wasn't a boarding-house—it only contained class-rooms and such like. The key of the Junior Wing had been obtained by a stratagem. Somebody had asked a prefect for it, on the excuse that a book had been left behind. The key had been given back—but the door had been left on the latch.

The juniors were now sneaking in in twos and threes, and there was always the possibility of a master or a prefect spotting them. So it was a somewhat perilous business.

Furthermore, no lights of any kind were allowed. That would have been fatal. The faintest gleam from the School House would have led to an investigation by some dutiful prefect or other. There wasn't any blind in the Fourth Form-room either, so nothing could be done in the way of illumination.

The junior Occult researchers were quite pleased. The sceptics didn't matter. Darkness, after all, was the right atmosphere for a seance. Electric light—shaded or unshaded—would have ruined everything. No respectable seance is conducted in brilliant light. There's altogether too much chance of something being spotted.

When Nipper and Pitt and the others reached the Form-room they found that the conditions weren't so bad, after all. There was quite a sizable moon this evening, and the rays were dropping in through the tall windows and making patterned patches on the far wall.

Every other part of the big Form-room was in utter blackness. A low murmur filled the air. Juniors were sitting at the desks, on the desks, and even on the floor. A mere handful of fellows might have been nervous, but there were so many here that they only experienced a kind of unnatural thrill. This was something new—something worth trying!

"Let's have a bit more room, somebody!" said Reggie Pitt, as he sat down in one of the front desks. "Move up, there!"

"Yes, I am afraid the air is a trifle stuffy——"

"Is that you, Corny, you chump?"

"Yes, it is I—but I certainly haven't got the hump!" replied Trotwood. "Kindly refrain from pushing——"

"Rats! We're all squashed together here," said Pitt cheerfully. "Well, what about the doings? Who's going to start the ball rolling?"

The meeting was just about complete.

Every one of Quirke's supporters was on hand—although Quirke himself was not. There were quite a number of other fellows, too. And it seemed that a link was missing. Without the celebrated Ezra, there was a kind of gap. It was soon filled up.

For Quirke himself came into the Form-

room and closed the door. A shaft of moonlight fell upon him as he walked forward. His pale face, and his deep-set eyes made a ghostly picture in that pale radiance.

"Let me urge you to cease this madness at once!" exclaimed Quirke tensely. "I have waited until you were all in, because I want to speak to you quietly. This seance is wrong. It can result in nothing but peril. I desire to have nothing to do with it."

"Too late, Quirke—we're all agreed."

"Hear, hear!"

"You can't stop the thing now!" said Skelton. "I'm willing to act as a medium if you refuse, Quirke. There is something in this atmosphere which thrills me. The spirit of the Poltergeist is with us now——"

"That is why I am pressing you to give up the project," interrupted Quirke. "Under certain conditions this spirit may materialise. And a materialised Elemental is dangerous in the extreme. If you expect to control it you are insane. It is a malign influence. At will, it can destroy every human being in this room——"

"Cut it out, Quirke!" interrupted Handforth gruffly. "By George, I thought you were the worst of 'em all! And now you've turned against your own supporters!"

"It is for their own good," insisted Quirke. "Under protest, I will agree to conduct this seance. But I warn you that it is against my principles. I can guarantee no results. I will try, but there are negative influences at work——"

"Same old yarns!" said one of the sceptics contemptuously.

"We must expect such sneers!" said Quirke quietly. "But there is truth in what I say. If I am to make the attempt to communicate with the spirit, I must have silence and dignity."

"All right—go ahead," said Pitt. "We won't spoil anything."

And Ezra Quirke prepared to act as the medium. He had made it quite clear that he could guarantee no results—because he expected none. This was not his own special draped cellar. And he had an instinctive feeling that the seance would end in a fiasco.

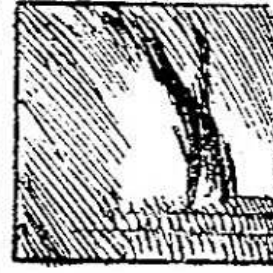
But he was in a dilemma. If he refused to take part in the affair he would lose his power completely. But by consenting he stood a chance of gaining control of his flock. Even if there were no results, he would be able to explain this away in his own plausible manner. And he was quite convinced that the results would be nil.

And so the seance commenced.

There was something very humorous in the situation for Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt. They were the only two in the company who knew the actual origin of the "Poltergeist." And Ezra Quirke would indeed be a magician if he could materialise a wire cable and a rubber bladder!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VOICE FROM THE DARK.



EZRA QUIRKE settled himself in Mr. Horace Pycraft's chair. It was on a raised platform, and he was thus in full view of the whole assembly.

He sat there as though turned into stone. With fixed gaze, and rigid features, he looked positively uncanny. His supporters were deeply impressed, convinced that he was in a trance. Nipper and Handforth and a few others weren't so sure. They were coming to the conclusion that Quirke had practised this pose of his, and that it was merely adopted for the sake of effect.

Skelton stood on one side of Quirke, and Ellmore on the other. And a complete silence fell over the Form-room. Nobody even whispered. There was a tense feeling of expectancy in the air. Most of the fellows were breathing as quietly as possible, and holding themselves in hand.

Even the sceptics felt a little thrilled. It was impossible to ignore it. To cough was out of the question—it was more than a fellow dared do. And minute after minute dragged by, and Quirke never moved a muscle.

"Nothing's going to happen—it can't happen!" Handforth told himself. "This is all sheer rot——"

It seemed to him as though a whisper came from over his head. He looked up with a start. But nothing was there. Handforth felt that it was merely his nerves, and he was annoyed with himself. He badly wanted to whisper something to Church, but in that intense silence he daren't form the words.

Rap, rap, rap!

Everybody in the Form-room took a deep breath. It sounded like one long sigh. From somewhere in mid-air had come the sound of three muffled raps. They weren't like the sound of blows on a wall, or on the floor above. They were peculiar—as though isolated in space.

"What—what was that?" breathed somebody.

It was the merest whisper, but it almost sounded like a shout amid the silence.

"Hush!" warned two or three others.

Rap, rap, rap!

They came again, vague and indefinable. It was impossible for any of the juniors to be playing a trick by tapping on the floor or on the walls, for the sounds were unlike anything of that nature.

Nipper was watching Quirke very closely—his gaze being fixed unceasingly upon the schoolboy magician. It wasn't possible to see much, for the gloom was thick. Only where the moonbeams fell into the Form-room could objects actually be picked out.

"Ah!" murmured Dick Hamilton beneath his breath.

He had distinctly seen Ezra Quirke start. It was almost imperceptible, and not even Skelton and Ellmore noticed it. But Nipper was facing Quirke—he was sitting in the very first row, having selected that seat deliberately. And there was only one possible conclusion.

Quirke himself was surprised by those unaccountable raps. He hadn't been expecting them. Consequently, when they came, he was taken by surprise. Further-

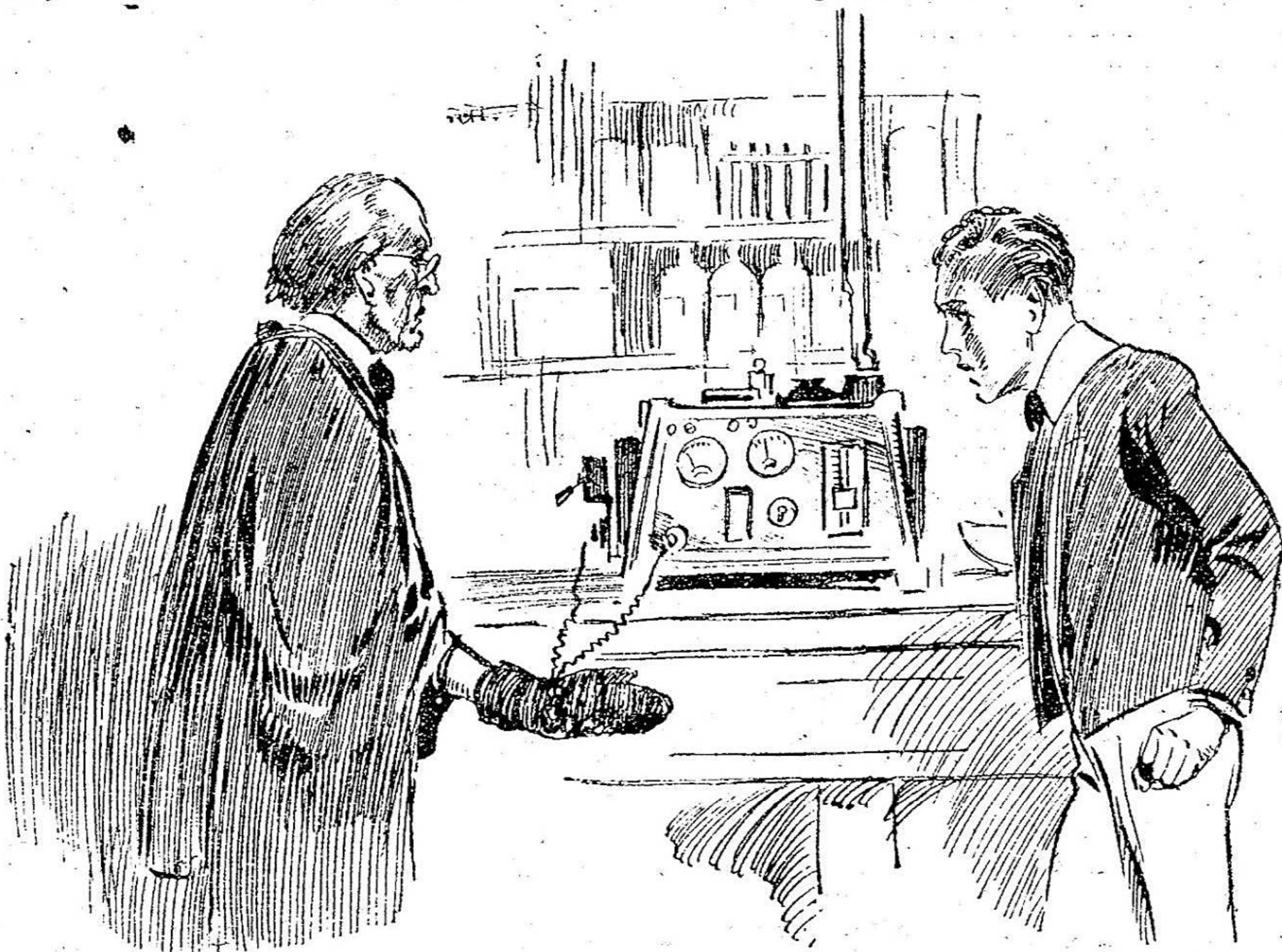
"Who—who spoke just then?" breathed somebody from the back.

"It came from over my head!" muttered Clifton hoarsely.

"Fear not!" said the voice again. "I have no power to harm you—yet. But I am angry with you all. Why have you come here to disturb me? I warn you that this is dangerous."

"Great pip!" whispered Handforth.

He felt a curious sensation in his hair. His skin was all tightened. That voice was coming from mid-air—from the dark-



Instantly the contrivance emitted a low, musical hum. "There we are, Singleton!" said the Professor pleasantly. "Quite simple isn't it? Take no notice of that slight purr. It is all part and parcel of the cure."

more, it indicated that his trance-like state was a mere pose.

"This is going to be interesting," thought Dick grimly.

There were no more raps, and most members of the company believed that the manifestation was at an end. A most unsatisfactory affair, but—

"I am here!" came a strangely thin voice. "You have disturbed my long rest. Who is responsible?"

Everybody in the room heard those words. Everybody became rigid. And a dead silence followed for a few seconds.

ness above. It wasn't on the ceiling, or against the walls, but in the very air itself.

And then Ezra Quirke spoke.

"Tell us who you are!" he said, his voice low and monotonous. "I can see you. I am in touch."

Nipper was still watching Quirke closely. He was more uneasy than ever—he was finding it difficult to maintain his assumed trance. But he was taking advantage of that voice—believing, possibly, that he had actually produced it by some occult means. For Quirke was undoubtedly a believer,

whether his own tricks were genuine or not.

"You want to know who I am?" came the voice again. "I lived on the earth many centuries ago, and took leave of my material shape by being brutally murdered. It was no hardship, since the earthly life is one of torment."

"It's a ghost!" muttered somebody loudly. "Let's get out of here! Open the door, some of you chaps!"

"Keep calm, there!"

"Hold that ass down!"

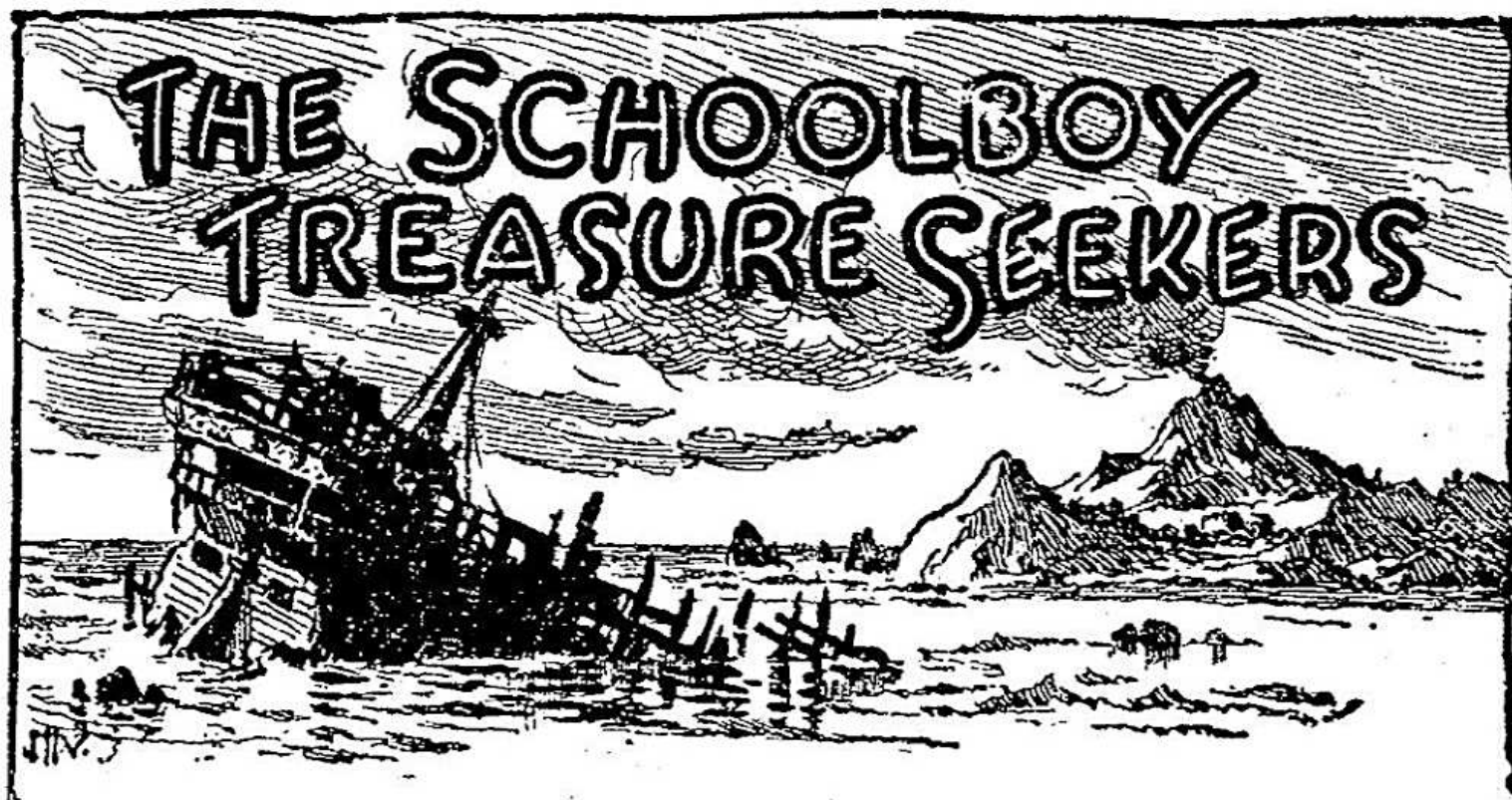
For a moment there was danger of a

There is danger. This restless spirit may prove a deadly peril."

"It is too late!" came the voice from the air. "You have given me power, and you cannot now take it away. Let none attempt to leave this room, or I shall gain the strength I need."

"It can't be a real ghost!" muttered Handforth. "It's speaking the same as we do. Hundreds of years ago people talked differently——"

"Foolish boy!" interrupted the thin voice. "You are making the mistake that is common to all unbelievers. It was only my



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panic, but it was quelled. A laugh came out of the air—soft and mysterious.

"Why should you fear me?" came the voice again. "I am but a poor specimen of the spirit world. During all these years I have been earth-bound. I only need to regain my freedom. It is all I desire."

"And how can that be done?" asked Nipper steadily.

"By many methods," replied the ghostly voice. "It is possible that I may find strength enough to materialise. If I can take one life with me I shall be freed."

"Friends, let us abandon this meeting," said Quirke, starting out of his trance and bending forward. "Have you not heard?

earthly form that died hundreds of years ago. I am as much alive now as ever. And I naturally adopt the speech of the times. I am gaining strength every moment. Perhaps I shall be able to reveal myself to you——"

"Go!" shouted Quirke huskily. "You are an evil spirit!"

"It may be so," agreed the voice. "Much will depend upon the next few moments. Ah, already I can feel my power increasing——"

"We must leave this place at once," interrupted Quirke fiercely. "Have you not heard? I warned you what might happen if we interfered. In a few moments it



will be too late. I know what I am talking about! This dreadful thing is an elemental. It will take shape and pounce——"

"Yes, let's get out of it!" panted somebody.

"Look!" came a husky whisper from another junior.

Many eyes were turned upwards. Some dared to look. They expected some horrible vision. Nipper gazed with the rest, and he gripped himself tightly. Above all was pitchy black—except for the two spots where the moonbeams came through the windows.

And in one of these moonbeams something was hovering!

It was impossible to tell what this something was. A vague, black shape, not pale or grey, like the popular impression of a ghost, but black—intensely black. It floated into the moonbeam like a thing of gossamer, and hung there.

"The ghost!"

"It's materialising!"

"Oh!"

"Let's—let's get out!"

"Stay! You need not fear me!"

The shape was speaking—clearly and distinctly the voice came from that hovering black thing. Even Nipper knew that there was no mistake in his mind. The apparition was actually there, and the voice was coming from it!

CHAPTER XV.

THE HEAD DROPS IN.



EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH stared dazedly.

"It's there!" he muttered, gripping Church's arm. "Can't you see it? Look! Am I seeing things,

or——"

"Yes, it's there!" breathed Church. "Oh, my goodness! I didn't believe in ghosts—Look, it's moving down lower!"

Half the juniors would have given a term's pocket-money to be out of that Form-room. But they were held in a state of helplessness by their own fear. They were scared into a state of inaction. One dash to the door by any single junior, and the rest would have followed like a flood. But there wasn't anybody with sufficient strength to lead the way.

The rest were believers, and they regarded this apparition as a spirit presence. There was nothing to be feared from it. It had appeared in response to their efforts.

Trickery was out of the question. No living being could hang there as this thing was hanging—hovering in the moonbeam like a black will-o'-the-wisp. It moved slowly from side to side, dipping lower sometimes, and rising again. There were

no beams up above—nothing on which this thing could have been supported. It was just in the moonbeam.

"Yes, I am getting stronger!" said the apparition, the voice losing its thin tone and becoming more powerful. "This is the moment I have been waiting for throughout the centuries. My time is at hand. Presently I shall come down, and then——"

"Look!" shouted Hubbard.

The black shape had drifted out of the moonbeam, and as it did so it vanished. The darkness swallowed it up as though it had never been. And its disappearance was the signal for an outbreak of panic.

"The door—the door!" gasped somebody.

"Quick—put the lights on!"

One fellow jostled another, and a series of yells went up. And then suddenly Reggie Pitt gave a perfect scream.

"It's coming down on me!" he shouted wildly.

His tone arrested everybody. And several of the fellows saw something black and intangible shoot down towards Pitt.

It was as though he had received a terrible blow. He crashed over backwards to the floor, and lay there struggling desperately. Over and over he rolled, right in the patch of the moonlight.

"Help!" he gasped. "It's got me!"

"There's nothing there!" muttered Handforth. "There's nothing——"

Reggie Pitt suddenly relaxed his efforts and lay still.

"Lights!" shrieked Quirke. "He's been killed!"

Quirke dashed to the switch himself, and the next second the Form-room was flooded with electric light. Nobody thought of the possible consequences. The effect was dazzling after the pale moonlight and the black shadows.

"It was an elemental!" shouted Quirke. "It got him. It has entered Pitt's own being——"

"It's all right—he's still breathing!" said Jack Grey tensely. "Where's some water? Who's got some water?"

Pitt was pulled up and held there. He seemed quite unharmed, although apparently unconscious. But gradually he came round, and at length opened his eyes. Quirke stood over him, intensely relieved.

"What—what happened?" asked Reggie dully.

"You are lucky to escape with your life!" said Ezra Quirke. "Even now there is deadly danger in this room. Let us get out of this place this instant. You have had your seance, and——"

"Good gracious!"

Everybody turned at the sound of that exclamation. Reggie Pitt was whisked away by Jack Grey and two or three others and placed in the background. In the doorway stood Dr. Malcolm Stafford.

"What is the meaning of this extraordinary scene?" asked the Head, striding into the room and looking round. "Who is responsible here?"

Nobody replied. The Head's sudden appearance had destroyed the last trace of occult atmosphere. The fellows were suddenly brought back to earth with a jar.

As for the Head, he was profoundly astonished. He had been passing the School House quite by chance, and had been startled to see the lights come on from one of the class-rooms. And now he beheld a truly remarkable scene.

Never before had he seen the juniors so pale and shaky. There was scarcely a face that wasn't showing signs of fright—scarcely a pair of eyes that weren't unnaturally dilated.

"Who is responsible here?" repeated the Head sternly.

"Nobody, sir!" said Armstrong. "We—we just came here to—to— We were just here, sir!"

"But for what reason, Armstrong?" demanded Dr. Stafford. "You were evidently in total darkness until a minute ago, for I saw the lights switched on. What were all you boys doing here without any lights? What is the meaning of it all? I must know the truth."

"There's been a ghost here, sir!" said Skelton.

"Good heavens! A ghost?"

"Yes, sir. It came down and——"

"Shush, you ass!"

"Gag him—quick!"

All sorts of efforts were made to silence Skelton's tongue. It was a fatal step to tell the Head the real meaning of this meeting. But Skelton was a true believer in the occult, and he saw no harm in stating the truth. In any case, he had said sufficient.

"Is it possible?" demanded the Head angrily. "I have heard some absurd rumours concerning a strange occurrence in the Form-room to-day. And I have further heard that some of you juniors have been holding foolish meetings. I discredited the stories—never believing that there could be a word of truth in them. What was the precise nature of this affair?"

"It was a seance, sir," said Skelton.

"This is positively appalling!" ejaculated the Head. "Every boy here will return to his own House, and will report to his House-master at once. There will be a most searching inquiry into this matter."

He gazed over the scared throng, and frowned.

"Hamilton!" he said, in amazement. "Handforth! Pitt! I can scarcely credit that such boys as you are included——"

"We only came to see what these idiots were up to, sir!" snorted Handforth. "My hat! You don't think we believe in ghosts, sir!"

"I should hope not, Handforth."

"We'll take the same punishment as the others, sir, of course," said Nipper. "But Handforth's quite right—we don't believe in any of these ghost stories. We were just here for the fun of the thing, sir."

"Fun!" shouted Skelton. "Pitt was nearly killed just before you came in, sir!"

"Nearly killed!" echoed Dr. Stafford. "What nonsense! How could he have been nearly killed? By what means was he nearly killed?"

"By an Elemental, sir!"

The Head started

"A what?" he demanded angrily.

"A Poltergeist, sir!"

"Good gracious me!" breathed the Head. "Poltergeist—Elemental! This matter is evidently far more serious than I had supposed. What right have you boys to dabble with such dangerous subjects? It is sheer nonsense! There is no such thing as an Elemental——"

"But there is, sir!" insisted Skelton. "Why, only this morning it caused one of the desk-lids to bang about, and it put its hand through the ventilator. And we all saw it again just before you came in. It was hovering up in the air, and speaking to us. Then it swooped down on Pitt——"

"Enough!" thundered the Head. "Skelton, I fear that you are mentally deranged! I shall certainly have you examined by the doctor. You will go into the sanatorium this very night!"

He turned to Reggie Pitt.

"What have you to say regarding this insane story?" he asked sharply.

"Nothing much, sir," replied Pitt. "It was all dark, you know, and perhaps I got a bit nervy. Of course, there wasn't a ghost, sir—I don't believe in ghosts. Somebody might have been playing a trick. In fact, I believe somebody was!" he added calmly.

"It is impossible!" interrupted Skelton. "It was no trick, sir! The spirit materialised before us, and came down——"

"Anything wrong in here, sir?" asked Fenton, of the Sixth, appearing in the open doorway. "I saw the lights on——"

"I am glad you have come, Fenton—very glad," said the Head. "Yes, there is something wrong—something very wrong, indeed! It seems that half these foolish boys have taken leave of their senses!"

"They look a bit wild, sir," observed Fenton, scanning the crowd.

"You will be good enough to take every name, and then the boys can return to their Houses," said Dr. Stafford. "To-morrow I shall inquire very closely into the whole amazing affair. And you will please escort Skelton to the sanatorium——"

"But I'm well, sir!" shouted Skelton desperately.

The Head ignored him, and went out. He was so angry that he didn't trust himself

to remain any longer. To surprise an actual seance was about the last thing the Head had dreamed of. Without any question, there was going to be big trouble.

"Look here, Fenton, we're not in this, you know," said Handforth persuasively. "We only came along to keep order——"

"Sorry, old man—nothing doing," said Fenton curtly. "You're all in the same boat, and you'll all have your names taken. Now then—let's have a look at you."

And the assembly was listed, including all those who were hardened sceptics. They didn't fear much. They could easily prove their disassociation with this kind of meeting. And if all such meetings were forbidden in the future, they wouldn't mind.

But Ezra Quirke was inwardly furious. From the very first he had been against this dangerous gathering. Now the Head had surprised it! From Quirke's point of view, it was a sheer disaster.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COMPACT OF TEN.



DICK HAMILTON grinned.

"A bit of a shock, the Head dropping in like that, but it's all in the day's work," he said cheerfully. "Reggie, old man, it worked like a dream. Nothing could have been sweeter."

"How did I do the act?" asked Reggie. "Top-hole!"

They were in the Triangle, and Handforth & Co. were near by. Lots of fellows were all over the place, discussing the recent excitement.

"What act?" demanded Handforth, staring. "Look here, I'm in the dark! What's been happening?"

"All in good time, old man," said Nipper genially. "You're not influenced by what happened in the Form-room, are you?"

"Influenced?"

"You don't think it was a real ghost?"

Handforth laughed contemptuously.

"I think some funny fathead was up to tricks!" he replied promptly. "I don't know how it was done, but I know jolly well that Quirke prepared things——"

"As it happened, Quirke didn't do anything of the sort," interrupted Reggie.

"Quirke is just as puzzled as any of the other fellows—in fact, more puzzled. The poor old chap is at a loose end for once."

"But look here——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Nipper. "There's something brewing, Handy, and you'll know all about it in a few minutes. Quirke's been bowled out, and we're hot on his track. At last we've got the facts

we need. All we're after now is some evidence."

Handforth was startled, but he said nothing. The very knowledge that Ezra Quirke was bowled out thrilled him. He had been one of the strongest die-hards ever since the start. And Church and McClure had manfully backed him up. In a way, they had been compelled to do so. What Handforth thought, Church and McClure had to think.

Over in the East House, the consternation caused by the Head's intervention rapidly died down. A feeling of triumph superseded it. Quirke's supporters claimed an overwhelming victory.

They had received positive proof that the spirits could be communicated with—and that the spirits could materialise. And Quirke himself was quick to grasp his opportunity. He claimed the credit for the seance—and his Circle allowed him the credit. It was he who had been the medium—he who had invoked the spirit presence. He openly declared that he was the only fellow who could have done so, and he was believed. But he warned his dupes that he would not attempt anything of a similar nature again.

And near the Ancient House steps six juniors had gathered. They were Dick Hamilton, Reggie Pitt, Handforth & Co., and Ralph Leslie Fullwood. And they were soon joined by Boots and one of the Trotwood twins.

"Found him!" said Boots, as he came up.

"Good!" said Nipper briskly. "Let's get along."

"What's Corny doing here?" demanded Handforth. "We don't want that deaf ass. Corny, my lad, you can bunk!"

"I am not in a funk!" protested Trotwood indignantly.

"I said you'd better bunk!" roared Handforth. "We can't be bothered with a deaf chap! Clear off to your own study!"

"I'll use the clothes-brush," beamed Trotwood.

"The clothes brush!" gasped Handforth.

"I'll admit my clothes are muddy——"

"Come along!" grinned Nipper. "Chuck it, Trotty, you ass!"

They went indoors, and marched straight to William Napoleon Browne's study in the Fifth Form passage. Browne and Stevens were at home, and evidently expecting the visitors. They burst in like a flood.

"Come in—come in!" invited Browne politely. "Surely it was unnecessary to go through the formality of knocking? Sit down, Brother Handforth, and make yourself quite at home."

This was evidently a piece of sarcasm, for Handforth was already sprawling in the easy chair. The door was closed, and the host beamed on his visitors.

"Without wishing to appear impatient, let me urge you to give voice without

delay," he said earnestly. "I can assure you that Brother Horace and myself are devoured with impatience——"

"Well, it worked fine, Browne," said Nipper.

"I am overjoyed."

"Trotwood was simply wonderful——"

"Allow me, Brother Trotwood, to offer you my hearty congratulations," said Browne gracefully. "Unfortunately, I was not permitted to share in this great achievement——"

"He can't hear you," growled Handforth.

"He's as deaf as a post!"

"Don't you believe it!" grinned Trotwood. "I'm Nick!"

"Nick!" yelled Handforth. "But——"

"Just a little precaution," grinned Nick Trotwood. "I was at that meeting——although everybody mistook me for poor old Corny. I took good care to make it known, too. Ask any chap in the East House, and they'll tell you I wasn't anywhere near the affair."

"But why?" asked Church, staring.

"Because that ghost was me!" replied Nick. "I'm a bit of a ventriloquist," he added modestly. "None of those chaps will suspect me of ventriloquism, because I wasn't supposed to be there."

"And you did it marvellously!" declared Pitt.

"That voice was yours?" breathed Handforth. "By George! You—you deep bounders! It was all a plant on your part, then?"

"It is scarcely necessary to mention that I had a hand in the conspiracy," observed Browne carelessly. "In fact, we are plotters all. Let us tell Brother Handforth of the haunted desk."

"Was that your work, too?" demanded

Handforth. "And what about the ghost? I distinctly saw something——"

"Here it is!" chuckled Pitt. "The simpler the device, the more effective! Trotty provided the voice, and I provided the shape. An ordinary toy balloon, and a piece of black silk gauze! I had it on a string, you know, and filled it with gas from a container. Browne made the gas in the lab. an hour or two ago."

"We are all brainy!" murmured Browne.

"At the right moment, I let the thing rise, and I just hung there," explained Pitt. "Then I pulled it into the moonbeam, and when the time arrived I yanked it down. While I was struggling with it, I was simply pricking it open, and stowing it in my pocket!"

"My only topper!" said Church and McClure breathlessly.

"And those East House fatheads think it was a real ghost!" said Nipper briskly. "Quirke's claimed the credit for it, too. He's given himself away. He can't explain what happened—he's as puzzled as any of the others. We've got him on toast as soon as we've collected some evidence. The chap's a trickster—and we only need to discover his methods!"

"The Compact of Ten is hereby officially organised," said Browne impressively. "We are pledged, brothers, to work in unison until Brother Quirke is up to his neck in the mock turtle. It may be a lengthy process, but we shall win. No matter how the rest of the school plots against us, we shall stand firm. Let us shake on the compact!"

And the two seniors and the eight juniors solemnly shook hands and pledged themselves. At last they had got Ezra Quirke's measure—and were about to carry the fight into his own camp! Undoubtedly, some stirring events were brewing!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK:

The COMPACT OF TEN sets to work to expose Quirke, and their efforts in this direction will be fully described in the forthcoming story of this exciting series:—

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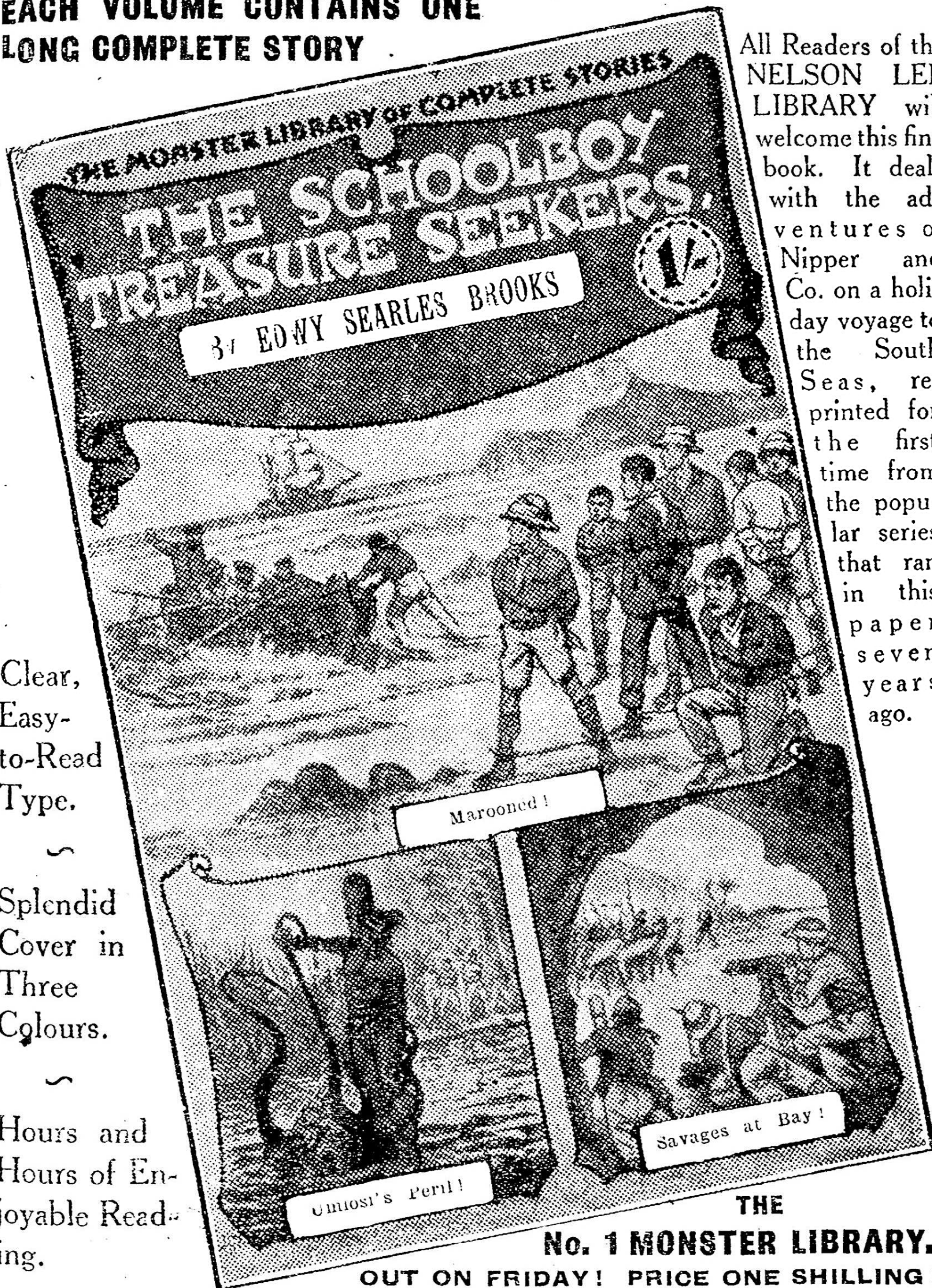
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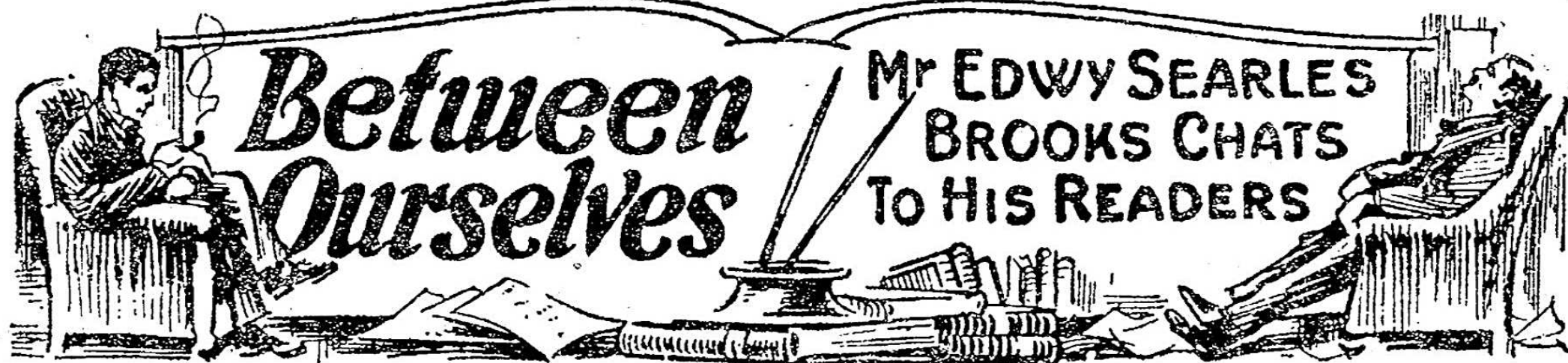
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Mr EDWY SEARLES
BROOKS CHATS
TO HIS READERS

NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed to Edwy Searles Brooks, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Every letter acknowledged below has been personally read by me, and I thank each writer most heartily. But, although all letters afford me an equal amount of pleasure, I am reluctantly compelled to confine my individual replies to those of general interest.—E. S. B.

Have you ever seen a badger? If so, think of me. Let me hasten to add that I bear no actual facial resemblance to one of these harmless creatures, but a badger is distinctly grey. And I'm in constant fear of looking in the mirror one morning and finding my hair of the same delicate tint. You wouldn't believe how I grab locks of it sometimes and pace up and down my study doing my best to tear it out. Of course, you wouldn't believe me! So what's the good of telling you?

The fact is, I'm shockingly behind in acknowledging your letters. And I'm so conscientious about this subject that every time I go near the ever-increasing pile, I shy away from it like a frightened horse. Fact! But what's the use? I'll bet you'll even refuse to believe that! The great question which throbs through my cranium is this: How am I going to appease all these impatient readers who are waiting for acknowledgments and replies? As far as I can see, all I can do is to throw myself at the mercy of your good nature, and hope for the best. I'll fill at least two paragraphs with acknowledgments, and if your name isn't included in the collection, you'll probably see it next week. And I'll try to give as many individual replies as I can. You see, last week—to say nothing of the week before—I filled up practically all my space with pointed remarks concerning "The Monster Library of Complete Stories." Yes, by jingo! It's on sale this week, don't forget! Did you take my advice about going to the newsagent's and

ordering your copy in advance? If not, you'd better— Hang it all, I'm off again! I'll tell you what. I'll acknowledge your letters first, and if there's any space later on, I'll put in a few more words about "The Monster Library." If I fill up this week's chat on the same subject, you'll probably wish "The Monster Library" somewhere in the middle of the next calendar, and you'll consign me forthwith to Timbuctoo, or some such ghastly place. I'm not taking any risks!

* * *

Here goes: J. Parr (Platt Bridge), T. Mac (Edinburgh), D. Vernon Evans (Portsmouth), Veteran Reader (Enfield), A Leagueite (Haverton Hill), A. Masters (Ashford), J. Roberts (Maidenhead), Walter H. Laight (Studley), Jack Hurley (Sorrento, Victoria, Aus.), True Blue (Chatham), Derek E. Colgate (Wallasey), A. E. Ward (Leicester), Winkle (Enfield), Walter Hancock (Snodland), J. W. Boucher (Camberwell), J. Krietzman (Stepney), A Reader (Stockport), A Hebrew (Nottingham), Holly L. Langham (New Malden), A. C. Cleeve Sculthorpe (Errington), Dinkum Aussie (Sydney), A Son of the Sea (Leeds), Harry Rumball (Douglas, N.Z.), C. J. Edwards (Eketahuna, N.Z.), Lionel Moxom (Rochdale), Brook Pishley (Victoria, Aus.), Fullwoodite (Mitcham).

* * *

Glad to hear that Miss Eileen Dare is an old favourite of yours, D. Vernon Evans. I'm awfully sorry she wasn't in the summer holiday yarns. But why not renew her acquaintance by buying "The Schoolboy Treasure Seekers" this week? As you know, it's No. 1 of "The Monster Library." Now, look here—don't blame me for bringing up that subject again! Regarding your query about Smiling Bill Gordon, yes, I plead guilty to the charge you mention. Thanks awfully for those three cheers of yours. As for your suggestion about publishing a special 4d. Library for the old series, we've gone one better, and "The Monster Library" is the result. Yes, plenty of British people do well in America. There's no personal antagonism towards an Englishman—unless, of course, he's either a fool or a rotter. Then he deserves it. When it comes down to brass tacks, the

Americans are rather fond of us—but they hate admitting it. But, after all, a fellow who knows his job, and has plenty of determination, will get on anywhere.

* * *

I'm afraid I can't obtain those back numbers you want, Veteran Reader—they're a bit too old. However, that holiday series about the White Giants in Brazil will probably appear in "The Monster Library" before long, so you needn't worry. My hat! Isn't it rummy the way this "Monster Library" keeps butting in? I can't escape it, even in my replies.

* * *

Of course, there'll be plenty of opportunities for getting back numbers, J. Roberts, when the "League Magazine" gets going (which it won't, unless some of you laggards buck up, and raise the membership to that 10,000 mark). But if it's only the earlier stories you require, what about "The Monster Library?" Heaps better than bothering about grubby old back numbers, my son! Cheaper, too!

* * *

You'll have every opportunity of selling those three hundred back numbers of yours, Walter H. Laight, when the "League Magazine" gets going. But don't blame either the Editor or me if it's a long time in appearing. Read what I said to J. Roberts above, and you'll understand.

* * *

I wonder if there are any other readers like you, J. W. Boucher? You say that you enjoyed the summer series so much that you couldn't wait for them one at a time, but put them aside, and read them all in one go. I hope there are heaps more like you—for they are the kind who will simply revel in "The Monster Library," which will contain nothing but whole series of stories in complete form. No waiting for next week, you know! It's a massive production, and I can give you my word you'll have something to go at.

* * *

Awfully sorry about that yarn featuring Hal Brewster & Co., of the River House School, Joe Krietzman. As it's all about cricket, I'm afraid it won't appear for some little time. But it's bound to come out sooner or later.

* * *

All right, Holly L. Langham, I won't abandon this little weekly chat of mine. I am glad you enjoy it so much. But I'm rather afraid there won't be sufficient room for an additional "American Notebook" as well. You are quite right about the Editor—he is a nice, kind man—but there are limits to his kindness. With regard to your special inquiry—yes.

Awfully sorry if I have offended you, Dinkum Aussie, but in future I'll never put "Australia" again after acknowledging a letter from Sydney. And I'll treat Melbourne just the same. If people don't know where Sydney and Melbourne are, they jolly well ought to.

* * *

It's no good asking for my advice, A Son of the Sea, if your father and mother are totally opposed to your going to sea. Hang it all, I should get myself into a fine old mess if I advised readers to oppose the wishes of their parents! Your plain duty is to take heed of what they say, and make yourself contented by their decision.

* * *

I don't think I shall be able to acknowledge any other letters this week, after all. Even if I did, I shouldn't have space enough for any individual replies. So I'll leave it till next week, when I shall have the space. I'd like to fill up the rest of this page with a final word about "The Monster Library of Complete Stories."

* * *

It is actually on sale this week.

* * *

In these days, I'm well aware of the fact that money is pretty tight sometimes. Some of you younger readers may find it a bit difficult to get hold of a shilling. In that case, why not go shares with three or four friends? Say there are four of you. Well, you can get hold of threepence comparatively easily, and then have a little draw as to who shall possess the book in turns. Go shares in it, if you understand what I mean.

* * *

But I expect most of you will be able to wangle that bob somehow or other. And "The Monster Library" is an extraordinary shillingsworth. It's simply an enormous size—in fact, Our Paper looks a midget by comparison. And the production is superb in every way—good paper, big, clear type, and a cover that any fellow would be proud of. And don't forget there are eight ordinary St. Frank's yarns in this one issue—all joined together smoothly, making one long story. It's marvellous value, and if you don't take advantage of this first opportunity, it may not continue. As I told you last week, the publishers have been to colossal expense, and the only way they can produce this "Monster Library" at the price is to have a huge circulation. So you won't forget to help towards its success, will you? You can rely upon my word that it's the best thing of its kind ever put on the market.

E. S. B.



THE CITY OF MASKS;

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(Now read on.)

THE gorgeous fibber!" said Peter, with a grin. "I'll have that chap's napper sliced off as sure as eggs aren't onions."

"But did he look a gallant figure of fearless youth, erect and handsome in the saddle, Billy?" asked Celia, her eyes twinkling.

"If he wasn't the King with power to yank me up by the neck at one end of a rope I'd tell you he jolly well didn't, Celia!" said Tinker.

"He looked a cross between a drowned rat and a scarecrow needing a bath. Shall I read any more, Peter?"

"I'll call the guard if you do, and order Blimp to flay you alive. And I suppose I've got to grin and bear it. I'd just love to lynch that editor. What about the other rag? Is that as bad, kid?"

"They haven't got so many bullets, but it's pretty well the same. I came limping along after him, Celia, as well as I could after he'd biffed me in the ribs with his shooting boot, but I didn't notice any hail of bullets sweeping the streets, so perhaps that biff sent me blind and deaf. Some asses are sure to believe it, Peter, for they'll believe anything they see in print."

"Or the plaudits, Billy."

"Oh, he got those right enough!" said Tinker, "and that's about all the papers have got right. They cheered him like billy-o, bless 'em, in spite of the rain. There was one shot and only one shot, and I wish Blimp had collared the beast who fired it. And I think Peter did the right thing, though I did try to stop him. I'm here on a sort of holiday, you see, and just beginning to enjoy myself, and Peter's funeral would have put the lid on it."

"Don't worry about it, for it's all in the day's work," said Peter. "I'm bound to get fired at, and as long as they keep missing I don't care a rap. They're rotten bad shots, as I've always said. I'm not sure that it's wise to allow Blimp to teach my guards to shoot straight, for if they happened to turn nasty they might get me. Heigho! Never be a king, Billy, old bean. The trout will be biting like mad this evening after the rain, and instead of going fishing there's a beastly state performance at the opera. I hate operas, but I must attend the beastly thing."

"Are you going to haul me with you?"

"You bet!" said his Majesty. "If I must suffer I'm not going to suffer alone. You'll be there, Celia?"

"Not with my cousin, Peter," said Celia quickly.

His Majesty frowned.

"I wonder why you've always got your knife into Darro?" he said. "I admit he's a bit of an ass and an awful bore, but he's harmless. Besides, he's one of the family, Celia, and I have to do the decent thing. I can't turn him out of the royal box, and you can't sit anywhere except in the royal box, so that's final."

"Very well," said Celia. "I know I'm bound to go, but I shall go to the back of the box afterwards and sit with Blimp. I'm not going to be seen in public with Prince Darro, and you know why. I don't want to quarrel with you, Peter, but if I do you'll regret it."

"Do what you like, then. I wish the opera was boiled and bottled, so that I could go after that trout with Billy," sighed

the King. "Very likely there won't be another rain like this for a month to make 'em bite. Silly opera instead of fishing. Oh, beastly!"

Peter's reception at the opera-house that evening ought to have compensated him for the loss of a couple of hours' trout fishing. It was a crowded house, and when the King appeared in the royal box with Celia the packed audience rose and cheered for fully five minutes. When the curtain went up, Celia, who was seated between the King and Prince Darro, slipped back, and whispered to the prime minister to take her place.

"That little stunt hasn't done Peter any harm," said Tinker, as the princess sank into the chair beside him. "He got a jolly good welcome."

"Peter's brave enough," said Celia, "and I suppose everybody admires bravery; but I almost wish the newspapers hadn't exaggerated it so much. Our papers always do exaggerate and invent things, and that's why I don't want to be seen in public too often with Prince Darro."

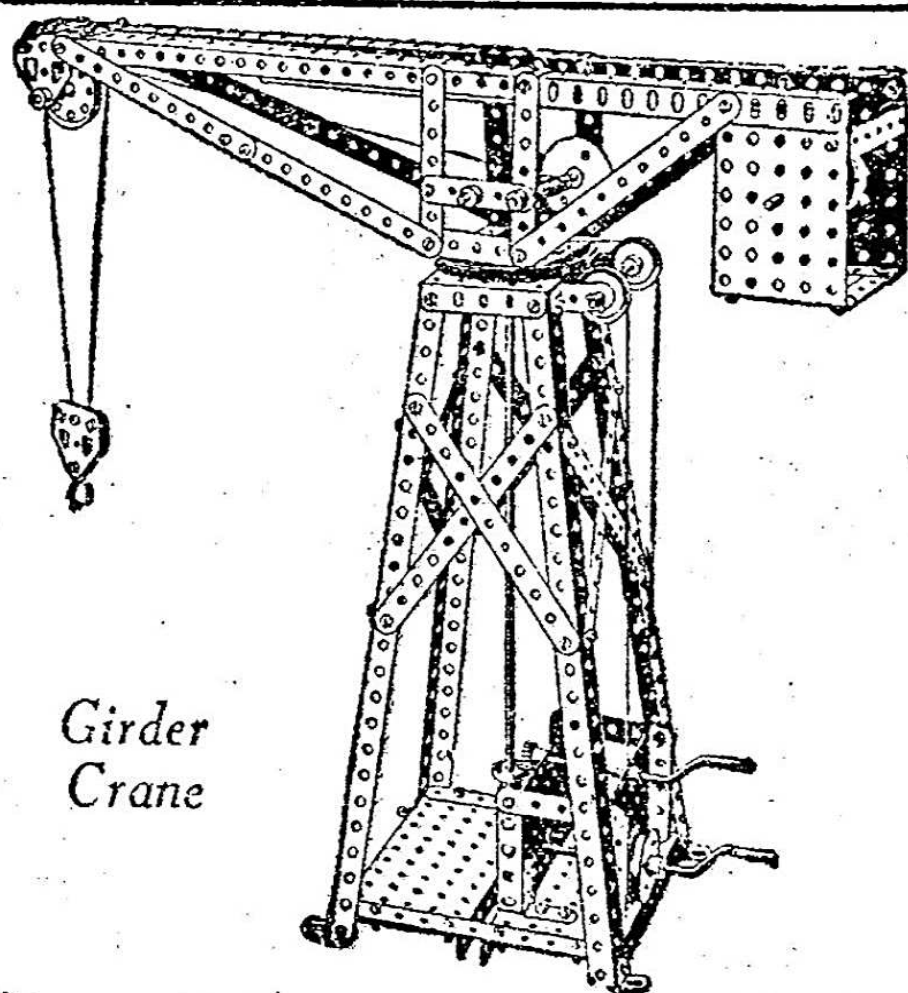
The prince could not have heard, for the music was loud and Celia spoke almost in a whisper, but he turned his head and looked back into the gloom of the box. Then the door opened softly, and Captain Coggs touched Tinker on the shoulder and slipped a note into his hand. When the lights went up Tinker gave a quick glance at the note and then a longer one.

"Meet me at the cathedral steps after third act. Only across the road, so you will have time to get back for fourth act. Urgent.—S. B."

"A fake," thought Tinker. "Jolly like the guv'nor's fist, but he didn't write it. Only across the road, eh? And plenty of marble pillars for a chap with a gun to hide behind. Somebody doesn't like me. If that somebody is here I'll jolly soon find out who it is."

As the curtain fell at the third interval Tinker made a great pretence of reading the slip of paper. The box was covered with green silk panelled with mirrors. In one of the mirrors Tinker saw the prince look round again and then touch Sarjo on the arm. The prime minister, who wore a crimson sash across his shirt-front, also looked round. As Celia had gone back to her seat next the King, as she had done during the other interval, Tinker had no apologies to make.

"That Darro's a vile hypocrite—the very vilest!" he thought. "He's dead against murder, even murdering poisonous snakes, and yet he's sending me across the road to get shot, and that white-haired old villain Sarjo knows all about it. I suppose Darro thinks I'm a bit too chummy with Celia,



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the silly ass, and in jolly little Carlovina when you don't like a chap you just hire a gunman to shoot him. Say, Blimp?"

The big captain turned.

"Who gave you that paper?"

"One of the attendants, sir," answered the captain. "He said it was for the young English gentleman who was with the King, and then buzzed off, and as Mr. B. isn't with you I thought it was from him."

"I wish to mike the guv'nor was with me!" said Tinker. "I'm asked to go across to the cathedral steps to meet the guv'nor, but I could see with one eye that the thing was a forgery, though it's a pretty good imitation of the guv'nor's fist. I think somebody wants to shoot me, Blimp."

"Gawsh! Shooting seems to be the national sport, sir," said Blimp. "I'd like to go with you, but being on duty I can't. If I was you, sir, I'd be inclined to keep the guy waiting. It's still raining, so I hope he'll get his feet wet."

"He will for me; but I'm going to mizzle for a bit," said Tinker.

Tinker slipped on his raincoat and crossed the promenade, crowded with uniformed men and well-dressed women. He had no intention of going out, but he did not mean to go back to the royal box until the curtain had gone up.

"I'm not sure yet, not quite certain, that is," he thought, "but if those two blackguards don't give themselves away when I go in late and they're congratulating themselves that my corpse has been taken to the mortuary I shall be jolly well surprised!"

"What's the game, young 'un?"

Sexton Blake had risen from one of the gilded settees, where he had been smoking a cigar and watching the promenaders.

"Gee, I'm glad you've popped up, guv'nor!" said Tinker. "Come into a quiet corner and have a look at this billet-doux. How about it?"

"You didn't think I wrote it, young 'un?"

"Well, I'm getting on that way, but I'm not absolutely daft yet," said Tinker. "Blimp handed it to me."

"Who do you think wrote it, then?"

"Either Darro or that rascal of a secretary, Brentschi, for I believe he could forge anything! I shouldn't wonder if he hasn't been in our rooms and got a copy of your handwriting, for I found the beggar moving about pretty close to us yesterday, and it wouldn't surprise me if he had a key. I made a bit of a fuss about reading the thing in the box, and I noticed the prince look round and draw Sarjo's attention to me."

"Right! I'll see you sometime after the show," said Sexton Blake. "Give them plenty of time to be wary and watchful. We know Sarjo to be a rogue who's playing for his own hand and we're more than doubtful if the prince is quite the gentle, peace-

loving poet he pretends to be. Being friendly with a pretty princess is a dangerous game in a place like this, young 'un. Take care of yourself."

"I'll watch it," said Tinker.

Sexton Blake went to the cloak-room for his coat and hat. It was still raining a little, and as the opera commenced late, shops were closed and the trams had ceased running. Cars were beginning to line up, but a space was kept open for the royal cars, guarded by troops wearing long mackintoshes. Here the lieutenant was in command. Blake had ample confidence in the man, and told him briefly what had happened.

"I should let it alone, sir," said the lieutenant. "As Mr. Jones has dodged the trap, I'd let it alone and keep a sharp lookout for others. If you go any farther with it, you may come to grief and get a very nasty surprise. From a very long experience, I tell you plainly you'll do no good."

"Then I'll take the surprise," said Blake; "but thanks all the same for your advice, which I have no doubt is well meant and excellent."

The street was fairly light, but the cathedral was lofty and it loomed through the rain like a vast grey shadow. It was surrounded by railings, and the boulevard divided there and broadened out again to its full width behind the building. Sexton Blake walked on briskly, pulling at his cigar. Once out of sight of the steps and the pillared front of the cathedral, he quickened his pace and made the circle of the railings. In the shadow of a dripping tree, he waited patiently.

As it happened, he had not long to wait. The assassin knew that if his victim did not come quickly the lure had failed.

Sexton Blake heard no sound, but he knew that someone was moving, for a shadow appeared at the head of the steps and then a silent-footed human figure appeared and descended slowly towards the street. The man's hands went up to his face to fix a mask, and at that moment Sexton Blake dived forward and took him by the throat with his left hand, and with the other he levelled Kamfak's favourite weapon—a six-chambered revolver.

"Take off that mask!" he said, and resumed his stoop.

With a gurgle in his throat, the man obeyed, and Sexton Blake dragged him forward into the light and then loosened his grip on the man's throat.

"Awfully sorry, I'm sure, Mr. Veilburg!" he said. "What an absurd mistake to make, to be sure! A thousand apologies to you!"

"It was Johan Veilburg, of the secret police, but for once he had lost his smile. His eyes were bloodshot and rocking in his head, and his mouth was twisted into a ghastly grin. He caught at his throat, uttering hoarse, gasping noises.

"There's a cafe open still, Mr. Veilburg," said Blake. "Take my arm, and I'll help

you across and give you some brandy. What an interfering fool you must think me! I had an idea that somebody was up there, and up there for no good, so I waited. It was from there the king was shot at, and I naturally concluded there might be another attempt at murder. But you, of all people, Mr. Veilburg!"

"You—you utter fool!" gasped the secret service man. "You—you— Ach! Dog of a man!"

"Pardon me, Mr. Veilburg; but I warn you to be more choice with your language," said Sexton Blake. "I have made a blunder, though I did so with every good intention,

but he was also without his bodyguard, a plain proof to Sexton Blake that he was out on some very dirty business of his own. The discovery was an alarming one, for it showed him to be one of Sarjo's paid hirelings and a man who was quite willing to commit murder at his master's command. That he had been waiting to shoot Tinker Blake did not doubt in the least; but his voice was quite sympathetic as he again apologised for his error.

"Please say no more about it, Mr. Brown," said the secret service man. "The worst that can come of it will be a stiff neck for a day or two. To look at you, I'd never dream



"If he wasn't the King with power to yank me up by the neck at one end of a rope, I'd tell you he didn't, Celia," said Tinker.

and I have apologised. Though as a scholar I may not be much of a fighting man, I allow nobody to insult me, so call me no unpleasant names, if you please!"

Veilburg blinked at the stooping, spectacled Englishman and again put his hand to his throat.

"I don't want to insult you," he said hastily. "Man, you have the grip of a gorilla, and have almost crushed the wind-pipe out of me. Yes, for me it was an unfortunate mistake. I, too, thought there might be a fresh attack on the king, and so I was watching."

Veilburg was not only without his smile,

you had such a grip, and, if it's not impertinent, may I ask who gave you permission to carry the revolver you pointed at me?"

"The king," said Blake. "Is that sufficient for you, Mr. Veilburg?"

The secret service man began to recover his politeness.

"Perfectly sufficient, Excellency!" he said. "Let us make no further mention of this unlucky and rather foolish affair. It is rather unwise of you to walk about Kamfak at this hour, for though you have no political enemies, we have not been able to exterminate all our footpads, and that

diamond pin of yours might be a temptation. I wish your Excellency good-night!"

"Good-night, Mr. Veilburg, and once more my sincere regrets—that I didn't choke you!" Blake added under his breath, "for you're a bad lot."

Sexton Blake walked back towards the theatre, keeping to the centre of the road.

"Perhaps it'd have been better if I'd taken the lieutenant's advice," he thought. "For a near-sighted, stooping tutor, I made that grip too hard. If they get it into their heads I'm not the person I pretend to be I shall have trouble. But it couldn't be helped, for they'd be suspicious in any case. The very fact that Tinker didn't show up at the cathedral after receiving the note would set them guessing. Considering all things, Tinker and myself would be a good deal safer if we were on the other side of the frontier."

As Blake entered the vestibule of the opera house the lieutenant stopped him.

"Any good, sir?" he asked.

"Well, I didn't come to grief, but I got the surprise you promised me," said the private detective. "You were a true prophet, lieutenant, and it was a big surprise."

Blake did not go to the royal box, nor did he see Tinker again until after the performance. He watched the box through his opera-glasses. King Peter, almost bored to death, was trying to look interested and cheerful. The private detective could not tell when Tinker entered, for the back of the box was dark. He could see Prince Darro and the Prime Minister quite clearly, and one thing was perfectly certain, and that was that they took no notice of Tinker's return, for all the time Sexton Blake was watching neither of them even turned his head, but kept his eyes on the stage.

"Somebody must have signalled the news of failure to them," thought Sexton Blake—"somebody in the house."

THE TELEPHONE CALL.

KING PETER made a kind of show of taking lessons from his tutor for a couple of hours in the morning, but only because Celia insisted, and Princess Celia had a will of her own that was Sexton Blake's admiration as well as Tinker's.

But his Majesty soon tired of lessons. He said that if he didn't know enough already to rule Carlovina, Tinker could have the job. The next day Celia and Sexton Blake waited in vain, and discovered later that his Majesty had gone trout fishing with Tinker and Blimp.

"I suppose we shall have to put up with it, princess," said Sexton Blake with a smile. "The king can please himself, you know."

"I suppose so," sighed the girl, "but I wish he'd try to learn. He's clever enough, but he just won't try. He's too fond of

his guns and fishing-rods and horses, but, as you say, he can please himself. The worst of it is in doing this he's pleasing Sarjo as well."

"You mean that the more he keeps away from State affairs the more the Prime Minister likes it."

"Yes, for Sarjo and his clique will have all the power. As Peter's sister, perhaps I ought to be glad of that."

"Which means that while he does not interfere too much he will be safe," said Sexton Blake. "Do you know I'm not very safe?"

"I was beginning to suspect it," said Celia. "Do you think they have discovered who you really are, Mr. Brown?"

"Not yet, but I fancy they suspect that I'm not exactly what I pretend to be," said the private detective. "It would be awkward if by some careless slip the king happened to betray us."

"Of course, Peter is careless, but he couldn't be so careless as that," said Celia. "He has one good quality, that he'll stick to his friends through thick and thin, and I know that you and Billy are his friends."

"Still, I'm being watched and dogged wherever I go," said Blake. "That has often happened before, and I'm an old hand at eluding such people, and, luckily, your secret police aren't quite the cleverest people on earth. At least, I believe I understand most of what is going on in Kamfak, and I know who are the king's real foes. I'd like to smash this junta of Sarjo, Bizer, your cousin, Prince Darro, and that cunning rascal of a secretary, Brentschi."

"Do you think it's possible?" asked Celia.

"At the moment it does seem hopeless, princess," agreed the private detective. "Sarjo has a tight hold on things and has the police at his beck and call. They're a corrupt gang and a very powerful gang. Just now it looks pretty black."

"Have you warned Peter?"

The private detective shrugged his shoulders.

"What's the use? We couldn't persuade him to dismiss Sarjo, for, after all, things have greatly improved in the last week or so. The king has made himself very popular, and Sarjo is quiet. He's plotting something big and ugly, and waiting his time. You see, I have not been idle. The king's real friends are the bitter enemies of Sarjo and his junta. The ordinary people, though shockingly overtaxed, are quiet enough, and all talk of a revolution in that quarter is pure rubbish. The trouble, if it comes, will be made by the better classes, who detest Sarjo and his junta. Unluckily, Sarjo has the whip-hand to a great extent, but he doesn't feel quite secure, so we must watch your brother, or there will be murder on a grand scale."

(To be continued next week.)

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SECTION

B

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C

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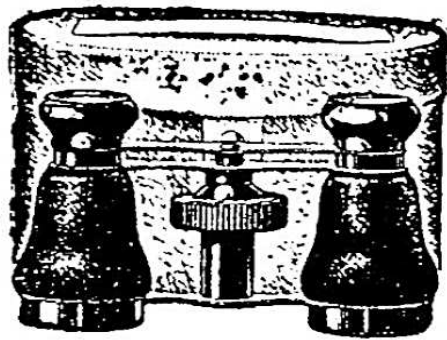
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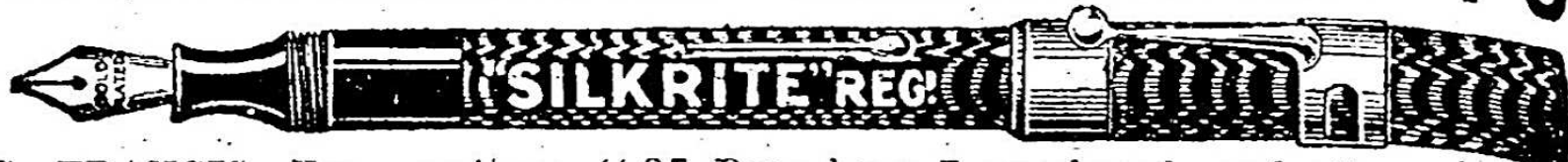
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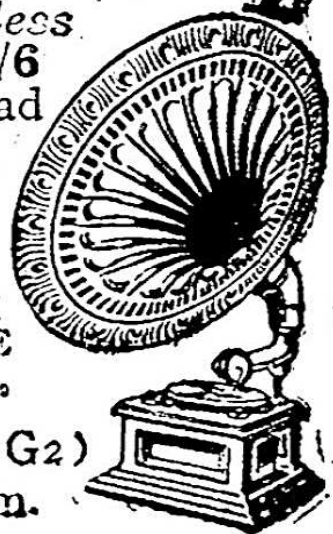
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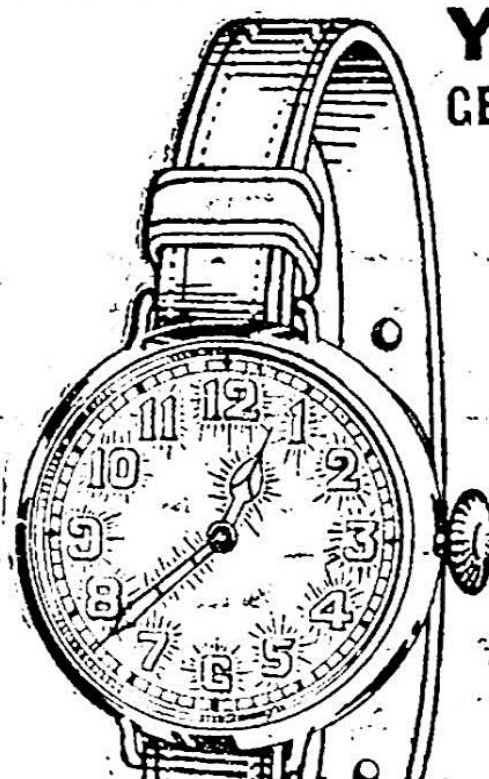
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