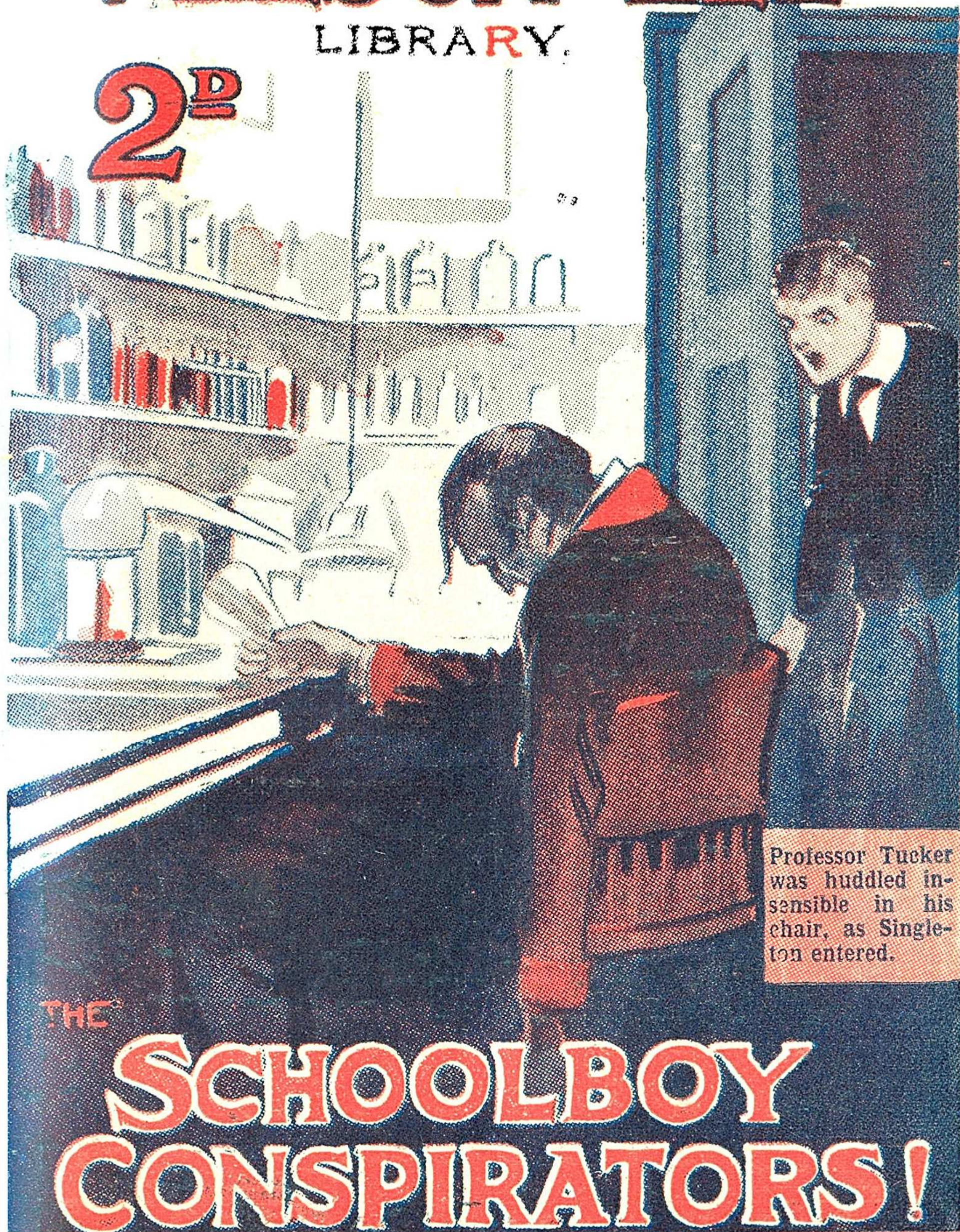


PROFESSOR TUCKER'S INVENTION OF THE AGE! SEE THIS WEEK'S STORY!

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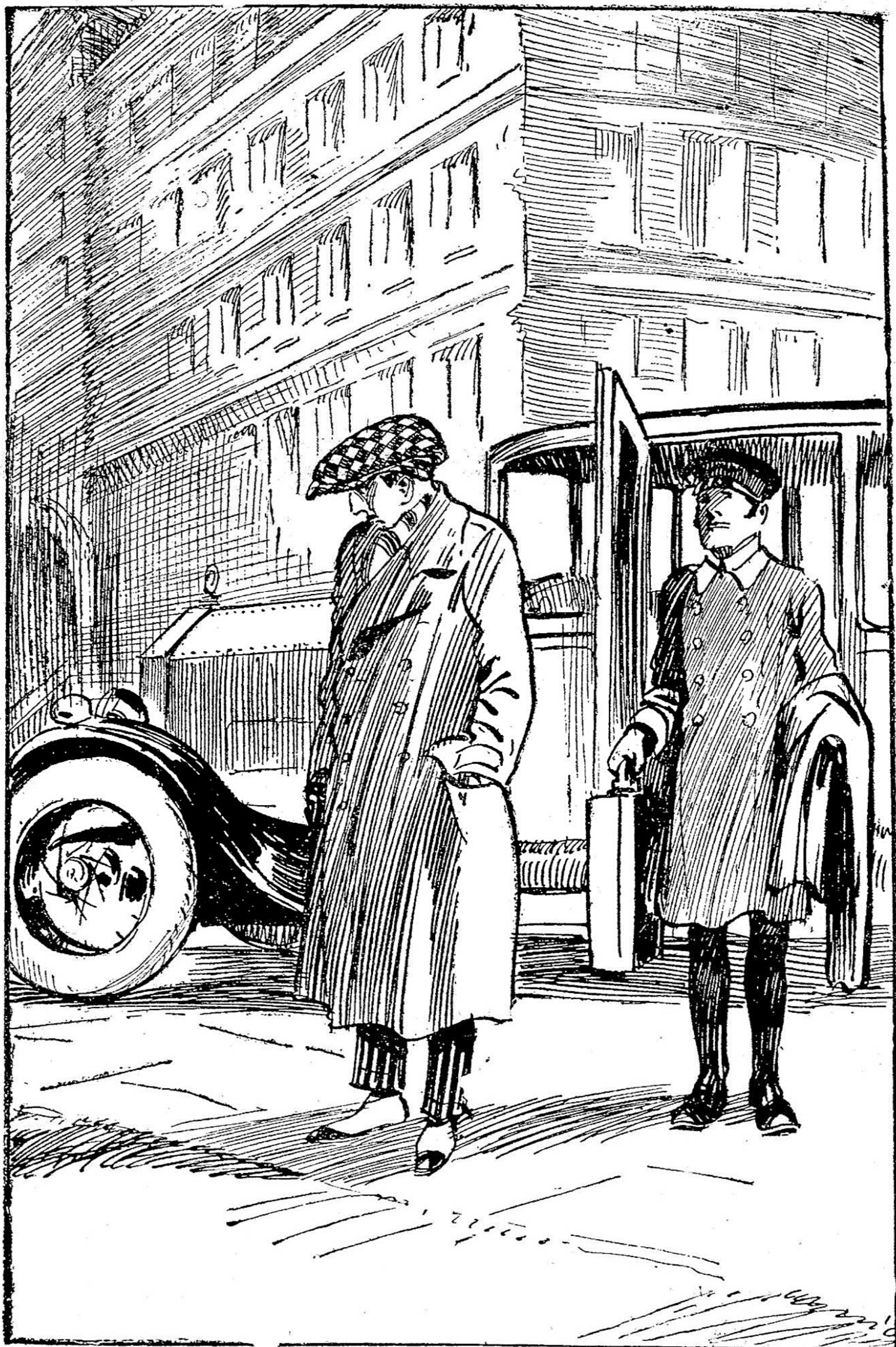
Professor Tucker was huddled insensible in his chair, as Singleton entered.

THE SCHOOLBOY CONSPIRATORS!

No. 548.

Out on Wednesday.

December 5, 1925.



"Good!" he said. "That's it, Groves. You can go now, you know. I mean, if we're here, we're here. I can't go indoors in the car, can I?"



THE SCHOOLBOY CONSPIRATORS!



In this week's St. Frank's story, the Compact of Ten continue their investigations of the extraordinary manifestations by Ezra Quirke, the mysterious new boy, whose claim to the possession of occult powers is challenged by Nipper, Pitt, Browne and Co. You will also read more about Professor Tucker's wonderful invention, and of the arrival of a laughable new boy at the school, the fabulously wealthy but slow-witted Lord Pipinton. It is a capital story in which humour, mystery and excitement, as of old, keep you enthralled from the first to the last page.

THE EDITOR.

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERY OF THE WEST ARCH.

BERNARD FORREST, of the Remove, sat up in bed as the school clock solemnly chimed the hour of eleven. The great Tudor buildings of St. Frank's were quiet and still, and the wintry moonlight was stealing softly through the mullioned window.

Forrest slipped out of bed and padded across the small dormitory to the other two beds against the opposite wall. Both were occupied, and Forrest seized one of the sleepers by the shoulder and shook him.

"Come on, Gully—eleven o'clock!" he murmured.

"Eh? What the——"

Gulliver sat up and blinked. He had been fast asleep and dreaming, and for a moment he was bewildered. Then he grunted, and snuggled down between the sheets again. There was a cold, bitter look about that moonlight, and the bedclothes were particularly attractive.

"Here, I say, chuck it!" protested Gulliver weakly. "Let's stick in bed, Forrest, old man. I'm not keen on that trip now. It's all very well to arrange these things in the study——"

"Don't be an infernal ass!" snapped Bernard Forrest. "An appointment's an appointment. I told old Porlock that we should be down at the White Harp at half-past eleven, and we shall only just do it."

He turned to the other bed and gave Bell a vigorous shake. Bell was already awake, however, and he seemed inclined to share Gulliver's reluctance.

"What does it matter?" he growled. "It isn't important——"

"By gad!" interrupted Forrest sourly. "What a couple of bally weaklings! We arrange this thing definitely, and just because the moonshine looks a bit chilly you try to back out. It's the finest opportunity for a game of poker that we've had for weeks. We'll win quids, too!"

"I always lose money at poker!" said Gulliver miserably.

"So do I!" declared Bell.

Forrest looked at them very grimly.

"I'll give you two ticks!" he snapped. "If you don't turn out by the time I get to the cold-water tap, I'll jolly well drench you! I'm not going to be made a fool of like this! I told Porlock we should be there, and we're going!"

Under this sinister threat, Gulliver and Bell apparently came to the conclusion that their beds were extremely uncomfortable. Judging by the manner in which they

hopped out, one might have assumed that they hated the sheets like poison.

By the time they had dressed themselves they were fully awake, and their views on life had undergone a complete change. The fascination of one's bed is only at full strength when one is snugly tucked in.

"Good thing you forced us out, Forrest, old son," said Gulliver, as he buttoned his collar. "I've got an idea I shall win some cash to-night. We're going to play with some mugs, aren't we?"

"You bet!" said Forrest. "They've got the tin, too."

The cads of Study A seldom went out on these night expeditions. For one thing, they were too risky—discovery might lead to expulsion—and, for another thing, it wasn't always easy to find a retreat where they could indulge their gambling propensities.

But it so happened that Forrest had dropped in at the White Harp during the afternoon. It was the most-disreputable inn in Bellton, and Mr. James Porlock, the landlord, was never averse to permitting quiet parties after legal hours. It was all good for business. Forrest had learned that some youths from Bannington had won a lot of money in a steeplechase, and were keen on getting up a little gaming-party at the White Harp that night.

It was certainly an occasion to be present. Forrest & Co. felt they would have no difficulty in beating the rustics. Poker needed brains, and although they were juniors, the cads of Study A were fairly expert. They were quite willing to pit their skill against any local talent.

It was such a glorious night, too—frosty, moonlight, and peaceful. Rather too peaceful, perhaps—and rather too moonlight, also. A dark, windy night would have been preferable. But there was a certain element of spice in the very danger of sneaking out.

Forrest was one of those fellows who needed a thrill now and again to keep him from being bored stiff. The ordinary routine of school life was hateful to him. He felt that things needed bucking up occasionally. And Gulliver and Bell—weaklings both—were always ready to be led.

Since the old days, when they had been swayed by the leadership of Ralph Leslie Fullwood, they had become even worse. For Bernard Forrest was a far greater scamp than Fullwood had ever been.

"Ready?" whispered Forrest briskly.

"Hold on!" muttered Bell. "How the dickens can I see in this beastly light? I can't get my tie straight. Why not switch the electric light on? Nobody will take any notice—"

"You'd get the three of us sacked in half an hour!" snapped Forrest. "We can't take risks of that sort, you idiot! Can-

found your tie! Leave it until we get down to the inn."

They crept silently out of the dormitory, and stole down the corridor to the staircase. Everything was still. The Ancient House appeared to be completely asleep.

Forrest had made one or two preliminary preparations, and he led the way straight to a lower passage window—one that faced the Junior Wing of the School House. It was safer to sneak out that way, for there was always a certain amount of danger in venturing directly into the square. All the West House windows overlooked it, and in the moonlight a wakeful master might easily spot the creeping figures.

The School House was deserted at night, so there was no fear of being overlooked. Besides, it was so easy to slip round the end of the Ancient House and climb over the West Gate into the private road. After that it was a mere matter of seconds to get into the lane.

But things don't always go smoothly.

The three young rascals got out of the window all right, but they hadn't moved a couple of yards before Forrest halted. A light was gleaming from one of the Ancient House windows further down the wing.

"Confound it!" muttered Forrest irritably. "One of the masters still in his study, by the look of it! We daren't risk it, you chaps. The window's open a bit, and he might hear us creeping by."

"We shall be sacked—"

"Shut up, you scared fathead!" snapped Bernard. "We'll dodge round into the Triangle and go through the arch. We shall have to risk the square, after all. Better than going past that window, anyhow."

The Triangle was looking cold and ghostly in the pale moonlight. The fountain stood out like some spectral sentinel, and the shadows from the Houses were intensely black. The leafless chestnuts raised their stark branches to the night sky.

The entrance to the West Arch was as black as pitch. And the West Square, beyond it, was half-flooded with moonlight and half in shadow. Forrest felt pleased as he noted this fact. There wouldn't be much danger, after all.

Gulliver was the first one to penetrate the arch. He was a thin, weedy junior, with a nervous disposition. He wanted to get through that black patch as quickly as possible.

Suddenly he gave a gasp of horror and fell headlong. Forrest and Bell were practically upon him, and they paused, startled.

"Something grabbed me!" gasped Gulliver in a fever of terror. "Something caught me round the ankle—"

"Don't be a fool!" hissed Forrest. "Get up, and don't—"

"I tell you it grabbed me!" breathed Gulliver, nearly fainting with fright. "I don't know what it was—I felt a bony hand on my ankle——"

"There's nothing here—nothing at all!" broke in Forrest. "You must have tripped on a stone. Get up, confound you!"

He looked up and down keenly. A shaft of moonlight fell slantwise into the further end of the arch, but where the three juniors were standing all was pitchy black. Their voices echoed strangely under the stone archway. Even a whisper became a throbbing rush in the ears.

"You infernal baby!" snarled Forrest. "Get up! There's no need to lie there like a frightened kid! You must have tripped——"

"I didn't—I didn't!" panted Gulliver, scrambling to his feet and clutching at Forrest in a panic. "Let's get back indoors! There's something ghostly here—I know there is! Hasn't Quirke been warning us that——"

"Hang Quirke, and hang your nerves!" broke in Forrest sharply. "Why drag Quirke into the thing? He's fast asleep in bed by this time——"

"It's pretty queer, though," put in Bell nervously. "Quirke's been saying that there are all sorts of spirits about. And don't forget the rummy things that have been happening! That affair of the guy that wouldn't burn, and the run of bad luck, and Quirke's chamber of horrors! I believe there's a curse on the school!"

Gulliver and Bell were both thoroughly frightened. Bell had felt nothing, and he had seen nothing, but the very mention of Ezra Quirke, the strange Fourth-Former of the East House, had set his flesh creeping. The darkness and the moonlight added to the effect. It seemed to be just the right occasion for a spectral visitation.

Gulliver was even more frightened, because he swore that he had felt something grip him round the ankle—and yet he knew that nothing tangible had been there. Something unknown and unseen was even more nerve-shattering than an actual visible presence. There is always horror in the unknown.

"Pull yourselves together!" growled Forrest, who was beginning to catch some of the panic. "Let's hurry out, and we shall be in the cosy parlour of the White Harp before you can count a score!"

Bell gripped himself and made a move towards the moonlight at the end of the arch. Then he came to an abrupt halt, trembling in every limb. He wanted to yell with maddened fright, but his vocal chords were paralysed.

Something was touching his ankle—distinctly, with an uncanny caress!

CHAPTER II.

THE ALARM IN THE NIGHT.



GEORGE BELL was absolutely rooted to the ground.

He dared not move his foot, and for one awful moment he felt that his heart would stop beating.

There was no imagination about that touch. He could feel it on his ankle. Yet, when his frightened eyes were cast downwards, he could see that nothing was there.

All the juniors were accustomed to the deep gloom of the archway now, and they were able to distinguish their own figures, and to satisfy themselves that no other living presence was near them.

Bell could see his feet fairly clearly, for the shaft of moonlight nearly reached them. And there was nothing there to account for that ghostly, sinister touch.

"It's got me!" he screamed suddenly.

"What the—— You idiot!" gasped Forrest, startled. "What on earth—— Grab him, Gully!"

Bell turned to flee. And although he put his foot forward, some unseen object seemed to clutch him and hurl him headlong. He crashed to the hard stones with such force that he was momentarily knocked out. He lay there, nearly unconscious with panic-stricken terror.

"It's here—it's with us!" he croaked. "It grabbed my ankle, too! Let's get out of this—— Look—look!" he shrieked madly.

He saw something which partially restored him. Sitting up, he pointed with a quivering, unsteady finger. Low down, near the wall of the arch, two greenish eyes were glaring balefully at the juniors.

"By gad!" breathed Forrest, aghast.

They all stared, struck helpless by this new horror. Just two eyes. Nothing else—no body, no sign of any solid presence.

The eyes blinked and moved.

"It's coming for us!" panted Gulliver helplessly.

He fancied he saw a grotesque shape forming itself out of the darkness. And then, without the slightest warning, the eyes seemed to flicker and vanish. Forrest felt something touch him, something soft and horrifying. And then the West Arch was empty again, except for the three juniors.

"We—we'd better get indoors!" breathed Forrest. "Come on—quick! You chaps are right, after all; this rotten place is haunted. Let's get away from it!"

Somehow they managed to get back into the Triangle. Bell was swaying dizzily, for he was not only unnerved but dazed from his fall. The Triangle seemed different. It had lost its peaceful air of quiet placidity. There was something sinister about it, something grim and ugly.

The very atmosphere seemed to be charged with hidden peril.

Bell nearly fell over as he swayed onwards, and Forrest and Gulliver seized him. And then at that moment the climax came. Forrest came to a halt in his tracks, and bit his lip so fiercely that he gave a cry. He was staring upwards—staring with horrified eyes into the night sky.

A weird, awful object was floating downwards.

For the first instant Forrest thought of Ezra Quirke's owl, that uncanny bird of prey which the East House junior had made a pet of. But this was no owl. It was only partially an owl.

There were the strange ears and the great, saucer-like eyes, the flapping wings; but the rest of the creature was too fearful for words. It was like some monstrosity out of a nightmare—half owl, half animal. There were legs and arms, and it was swooping down towards the horrified cads of Study A.

"It's coming for us!" screamed Gulliver.

The creature descended to within a yard or two of them, and then swerved with an eerie rustle, and vanished into the West Arch. And on the air there was a sickly, dank smell like the grave.

Forrest & Co. scarcely remembered what happened after that. They knew they ran madly round the Ancient House, and they had a dim recollection of getting through the window. And at last they reached their dormitory. They tumbled in, and Forrest snapped on the electric light, regardless of consequences. Not one of them would have cared if they'd got the sack. Anything to be in a place where there was light.

All three juniors were as pale as sheets. Gulliver fell, panting, on the bed. Bell had collapsed in a heap on the floor, and Forrest, the stronger of the trio, stood in the centre of the room, trying vainly to control himself. But even he was scared as he had never been scared before.

Tap, tap!

"What's that?" croaked Gulliver, shivering afresh.

Even as he spoke the door opened, and a white figure stood in the passage, in the gloom. Gulliver screamed, and leaped across his bed like a monkey. Bell crouched on the floor, helpless.

"What on earth's the matter in here?" asked the latest apparition, striding in.

"Nipper!" ejaculated Forrest, with intense relief.

"What did you think I was—a ghost?" asked Dick Hamilton, staring. "I heard you fellows out in the passage, and I wondered— Why, you're all dressed! Just going off on one of your beastly night parties?" he added tartly. "Or have you just come back?"

The captain of the Remove regarded the trio contemptuously. He was in his pyjamas, and he had been disturbed by Forrest & Co., as they had blundered in. They had taken little care to maintain silence.

"We were going out, but—but something happened!" muttered Gulliver, from the other side of the room. "We've seen ghosts. Awful things down there in the West Arch!"

"It serves you right!" said Hamilton grimly. "You'd better go easy, Forrest. I'm not preaching to you; it's not my business what you do after lights-out; but unless you're jolly careful you'll get yourself into a fine mess of trouble—"

"Confound you, I can attend to my own affairs!" interrupted Forrest angrily. "We wouldn't be here now if these funks hadn't got the wind up. It was all sheer imagination—"

"You rotter!" panted Bell, scrambling up. "You were just as scared as we were. We've seen things, Nipper—felt them, too. There's something awful prowling about the school buildings!"

Dick Hamilton closed the door.

"Something awful?" he repeated quietly. "Come on, let's have the yarn. What's all this rubbish about a ghost? I expect you saw your own shadows in the moonlight—"

But Gulliver and Bell interrupted, and gave a graphic account of their recent experience. Their imaginations were excellent, for they added many picturesque details to the actual adventure.

"Goodness knows what grabbed our ankles, but we saw the thing with the green eyes!" said Gulliver. "A great black thing—a grotesque shape, like nothing on earth. And then that—that vampire in the Triangle!"

"Vampire!" repeated Nipper.

"That's what it was, or something like it!" insisted Gulliver. "Half an owl and half a man. We could see the face, a bit like an owl's, but more like a demon's, with yellow teeth and a hooked nose. The thing had great hands, with claws on the end, and it's a wonder we're not all dead. As it went by we could smell a horrid niff, just like a churchyard!"

Nipper looked more grim than ever.

"You fellows had better get into bed and go to sleep!" he growled. "If you think I believe all this tosh, you're a trio of optimists. It's all rank nonsense. You've just had a fit of nerves, and you've imagined everything. Get to bed!"

"I tell you it all happened—" began Bell.

"And I tell you that you're an ass!" interrupted Dick. "The sooner you get those fantastic ideas out of your head the better. And don't keep this light on,

either, or there'll be trouble. I've never heard a more preposterous tissue of piffle in all my life!"

"Quirke's at the bottom of it," declared Gulliver. "He's brought a curse on the school. I don't believe he's human at all; he's one of those elementals. He's a materialised spirit, in the shape of a human being. He can produce all sorts of effects——"

"Oh, you make me sick!" interrupted Nipper contemptuously. "Quirke's a clever chap, but he's just as human as you are. He happens to be tricky, too, or he wouldn't have got so many supporters."

Nipper went out of the dormitory after a brief nod to the three Removites. He was thoroughly disgusted. He was quite certain that they had been led astray by their own imagination. It was clearly a case of auto-suggestion. They had been fed on Ezra Quirke's mysticism for weeks, and that food, combined with the moonlight and the black shadows, had had due effect.

Dick Hamilton set his jaw grimly as he returned to his own dormitory. He was more than ever determined to sound the death-knell of Ezra Quirke's activities. At that moment Quirke was all-powerful. He had practically the entire Junior School behind him—all confirmed supporters.

Even Nipper's own chums—the one and only Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson—were held under Quirke's sway. In consequence, a certain coolness had sprung up in Study C, and Nipper was greatly worried.

There were certain staunch diehards, however, who steadfastly refused to believe in Quirke's magic. They had banded themselves together under the title of the Compact of Ten. And they were working secretly and persistently to expose Ezra Quirke in his true colours.

Unfortunately their efforts always came to nothing. No matter how they tried to trip up the schoolboy magician, he always emerged triumphantly. Their efforts indeed had in every case served to strengthen and solidify Quirke's position.

Nipper was just going to enter his dormitory when he paused. A dim figure was standing a little distance along the corridor, and it approached.

CHAPTER III.

THE INVESTIGATORS.



"ONE moment brother!"

The figure resolved itself into a lanky youth, attired in silken pyjamas of a startling hue. Over these a light

wrap was worn, and the wrap itself was no less vivid.

"What are you doing out of your cradle, Browne?" asked Dick.

"Hearing sounds of prattling, I thought it necessary to inquire into the cause," murmured William Napoleon Browne, of the Fifth. "I am delighted to observe, Brother Hamilton, that you are attired in the correct gent's wear for night use."

"What are you getting at?" asked Nipper, grinning.

"For one fearful moment the thought seared itself across my brain that you might be indulging in the perilous pastime of breaking bounds," said Browne, shaking his head. "Knowing the adventurous nature of you Removites, the suspicion was——"

"You silly ass, I've just been talking to Forrest & Co.," interrupted Nipper. "They were going out on the razzle, by what I can understand, but they got a scare down in the Triangle, and bunked back. You never heard such a wild yarn in all your life!"

"True!" agreed Browne. "I agree with you heartily, Brother Hamilton, for I haven't heard the yarn at all. Attempting to slide gracefully off into a peaceful chunk of the dreamless. I was rudely disturbed by divers noises, and unless matters are rapidly repaired, there will be a worn-out wreck in the Fifth to-morrow."

"I wish you'd come along a minute or two sooner," said Hamilton. "Those idiots were as pale as ghosts. It seems that they were going through the West Arch, and Gulliver fancied that something tripped him up, caught him round the ankle. Then they saw green eyes, and after that a sort of vampire swooped down out of the night sky. All rot, of course."

Browne regarded Nipper quizzically.

"Much as I admire your sagacity, Brother Hamilton, I suspect that you have overlooked an important point," he observed. "Kindly relate the full facts. I might mention that I am anxious for an earful."

"But it's all nonsense——"

"There is always a certain amount of grain in every bushel of chaff," interrupted Browne kindly. "You, in your childish innocence, fail to remember these salient facts. I should like to point out that my brain is working at excessive pressure. I am convinced, Brother Hamilton, that a considerable quantity of dirty work is toward."

Nipper lost no time in explaining all the details. And Browne listened with careful attention.

"A singularly diverting narrative," he commented, at length. "I have nothing but admiration for the inventive genius of our three young friends. At the same time, I suspect the existence of a framework on which this entertaining effort of imagination has been draped. It would be nothing



short of criminal to leave the matter as it stands."

"What do you propose, then?"

"A brief adjournment to our respective chambers, a swift donning of suitable raiment, and an adventurous quest into the night," replied Browne smoothly. "I have a conviction that we shall click. Rely upon me, Brother Hamilton, and all will yet be well."

"But, my dear man, it's a waste of time!" protested Nipper. "If any of the other fellows had told this yarn I might have thought there was something behind it. But Gulliver and Bell are two of the biggest funks in the Remove. They'd leap a yard into the air at the sight of a cow looking over a gate!"

"I am prepared to accept your word on that point, but at the same time, I never under any circumstances ignore a hunch," replied Browne. "And at the moment I have a feeling that dark doings are the order of the hour. I might mention that I gazed through my window a few minutes ago and I distinctly saw a lurking presence in the middle distance."

"By Jove! You did?"

"I did," declared Browne. "Now when one observes a lurking presence in the middle distance at the hour of eleven-thirty, one is apt to conclude that murky deeds are in the offing. Let us venture forth, Brother Hamilton, and inquire into this sinister affair. For once we will risk the perils of going without sleep, and throw ourselves heart and soul into the Cause."

Nipper agreed, and went back to his own dormitory. Browne's reference to a mysterious figure made all the difference. He wasn't the kind of fellow to imagine things, and it put a new complexion on the affair. It suggested, indeed, that Forrest & Co. had been deliberately scared back indoors.

And that, in turn, suggested something of an even more sensational character. If it was necessary to scare the juniors back to bed, then, obviously, something was going on outside which would not bear the light of investigation. Nipper found himself eager to be out.

He and Browne met in the corridor three minutes later, and they were both armed with electric-torches and wearing shoes with crepe soles. They stole down the corridor without a sound.

"By Jove, Browne, I believe we're on the track of something at last!" murmured Nipper. "We've never been able to connect Quirke with any outside influence—with any confederates. Yet we're both convinced that he's got some. Perhaps we'll strike lucky to-night!"

"We can but live and hope," nodded the Fifth Form skipper. "Naturally, there is every reason to anticipate unqualified suc-

cess, for am I not at the head of this expedition? We Brownes are famed throughout the land as conquerors. Failure is unknown to us. It is a word which seldom, if ever, enters our vocabulary."

"I am still worried about that cellar over in the East House," murmured Nipper, as they sought an exit. "Remember the way we manufactured a key to fit it, and set all sorts of traps the other night?"

Browne winced.

"Alas! I fear that was one of our mottled days," he sighed. "We cannot always wield the mallet and make the bell ring. Occasionally, a chunk of grit will get into the works and stop the machinery. Fate is always lurking round the corner with a knuckle-duster on hand."

Nipper was thinking of that "frost." Ezra Quirke had a special cellar of his own in the East House—one that he had rigged up as a meeting chamber for his supporters. Here he performed his feats of sorcery and magic.

The sceptics—in other words, the Compact of Ten—were firmly convinced that Quirke employed trick apparatus for the production of his wonders. Quirke's supporters, on the other hand, stoutly echoed their leader in the assertion that his only allies were the Black Arts—that the phenomena were produced by magic, and nothing but magic.

And it had to be admitted that the schoolboy conspirators had failed to trip Quirke up on any single occasion. The recent affair had seemed an absolute stunner for Quirke. They had got into the cellar, they had prepared hidden traps, and had later attended the meeting to enjoy the results.

That meeting had been one of the most successful that Quirke had ever held! All sorts of mysterious things had happened. But when the plotters had entered the cellar immediately afterwards to examine their traps, not one of them had been disturbed! It seemed a certain indication of the fact that Quirke employed no apparatus whatever.

And yet this assumption was opposed to all rational common sense. And Dick Hamilton was sorely puzzled and worried.

The mystery of that cellar concerned him deeply. Just when Quirke had seemed to be on the verge of exposure, he had confounded the conspirators, and their traps had been for nothing. How had he produced those effects in the cellar in spite of the traps? That was the question which the Compact of Ten had asked one another a hundred times during the last two or three days.

And they had apparently reached a deadlock.

It wasn't any good setting more traps, for Quirke obviously treated them with contempt. And the more the sceptics

thought of it the more they found themselves inclined to the view that Quirke's uncanny mysteries were far more complicated than they had first supposed.

One thing was obvious. He couldn't be working alone. His effects were of such a nature that he either had confederates of a solid type, or confederates from another world. And as the Compact of Ten ruled out the latter theory, they had set themselves the task of proving the former.

But it seemed a hopeless sort of quest. Quirke was a quiet fellow, and although he occasionally wandered out for a walk, he had never been seen to speak to any

yourself into a state of alertness," murmured Browne. "It is one of my peculiarities that I object to walking with an animated statue."

"Sorry!" said Nipper, coming out of his thoughtful condition. "I was just wondering about Quirke, you know. I can't understand——"

"For the moment, let us consign Quirke to the demons he claims friendship with," whispered Browne. "We will wend our dainty footsteps towards the West Arch and make a few close investigations."

By this time they had left the Ancient House and were in the Triangle. They were



"By gad!" breathed Forrest, aghast. They all stared, struck helpless by this new horror. Just two eyes! Nothing else—no body, no sign of any solid presence.

strangers. He had been watched constantly. But not once had the investigators received a hint of a possible conspiracy. Quirke seemed to be absolutely alone.

Browne's mention, therefore, of a lurking figure interested Dick Hamilton exceedingly. He was beginning to share Browne's conviction that this expedition would bear fruit. Perhaps Quirke made his plans after lights out! Perhaps he met these elusive confederates of his—if they actually existed—when the rest of the school was asleep.

"Pardon my intrusion upon your reverie, Brother Hamilton, but kindly yank

just passing the main steps when they both paused. From round the angle of the steps two greenish eyes were regarding them with steady balefulness.

CHAPTER IV.

A FEW DISCOVERIES.

DICK HAMILTON caught his breath in. "By Jove!" he breathed. "What— Look out!"

The green eyes moved, and an object seemed to form



itself out of the surrounding blackness and approach. William Napoleon Browne uttered a soft chuckle.

"Well, I'm hanged!" grinned Nipper. "The beastly thing gave me a start for a moment. It's only Mrs. Poulter's tom cat!"

So here was one of Forrest & Co.'s "ghosts" laid before any investigations had actually started! The cat was an enormous one, and a great favourite among the fellows of the Ancient House. He was pitch black, and in the gloom he certainly looked a great deal larger than he actually was. He came purring round Nipper's ankles.

"To anybody in a condition of nerves, this beggar's greenish eyes would certainly provide a bit of a shock," remarked Nipper softly. "They even gave me a start for a second. He must have brushed past one of those funks, and they took him for a spectral presence."

"Anything is possible, Brother Hamilton, when one is dealing with superstitious fables of the Gulliver and Bell type," said Browne. "A harmless mouse will become a giant of horror. A fluttering moth will assume the proportions of a floating spectre. When one touches upon the subject of auto-suggestion, a wide field of research is opened. I remember on one famous occasion at Uxton a fellow named Winstanley passed into a state of coma for five days after meeting a pair of flannel trousers on the clothes-line on a certain murky night——"

"We don't want to discuss your questionable pals of Uxton," interrupted Nipper briskly. "We've discovered the explanation of the green eyes, but what about the other business? Who grabbed Gulliver and Bell round the ankle and tripped them up?"

"I fear it would be unfair to accuse the cat of that little affair," replied Browne. "But if we venture into the archway, we may find traces of the horrible truth. We can, I think, dispense with the services of Moggy, or whatever his cognomen happens to be."

They penetrated the arch, and they were both struck by the eerie nature of it. The contrast between the pitchy blackness and the bright moonlight was deeply impressed upon them. They stood in utter darkness, and could easily appreciate the nervousness of Gulliver and Bell.

Those two youths were funks of the most pronounced type. William Napoleon Browne and Dick Hamilton were possessed of strong nerves, however, and they had no fear that an unseen hand would clutch out and grip them. But such a sensation was possible to any fellow of a nervy disposition.

"Do you think it will be safe to use our torches?" whispered Nipper.

"It may be perilous, but we have no other alternative," murmured Browne. "A swift once-over will be sufficient, I should imagine. You take one side, brother, and

I will take the other. And let there be zip in our movements."

They both switched on their electric torches at the same moment, and the blackness of the arch was dispelled. Not that any discovery was made. The sudden light revealed the fact that the stone walls and the paved pathway were bare.

But Nipper suddenly drew his breath in and switched off his torch. Browne extinguished his own light at the same moment. They had only been on for a few seconds, and unless a watcher had actually been on the look-out, there was little risk of a surprise.

"By Jove!" breathed Nipper in a curious voice.

"Forgive me if I am wrong, Brother Hamilton, but do I detect a note of satisfaction in your tones?" asked Browne. "I trust you are not about to crush the hope that is welling up in my breast?"

"I have seen something!" muttered Nipper.

"Splendid!"

"Just down here, against the wall."

"It is impossible to contain myself!" exclaimed Browne. "I urge you, Brother Hamilton, to relieve me of this suspense. What is the nature of your momentous discovery? Hold yourself steady, and give tongue!"

"Look here!" whispered Nipper, kneeling down. "No, we don't need the light," he added, groping along the wall. "Where's your hand? Feel this! Got it?"

"By Jove! A wire!"

"The broken end of a wire, anyhow," said Dick. "They haven't had time to remove the traces."

"All is explained," nodded Browne. "Two wires, stretched at intervals under the archway—six inches or more from the ground. A crude device, Brother Hamilton, but nevertheless effective. In a similar case, I should never have resorted to such prehistoric methods. It gives my old heart a spasm of hope. Our quarry is not such a mass of brains, after all."

"The thing becomes as clear as daylight," went on Nipper thoughtfully. "So jolly absurd, too! Those idiots entered this arch, and Gulliver tripped over the wire. Of course, he broke it, and there was nothing left to show what had hooked him over."

"And the sensation, as you will readily realise, was precisely that of a bony hand gripping the blighter round the ankle," said Browne contentedly. "Bell thereupon obliged with his own act, and walked into the second wire."

"He touched it lightly first, and thought the ghost was after him," grinned Nipper. "My only hat! What trifles can scare a chap at dead of night. Bell, of course, flew into a panic, and ran forward. The wire tripped him up, and he came an awful cropper. Ghost No. 2 laid!"

"We are progressing famously," said the Fifth-Former. "Alas! I fear our young friends are not made of the stuff of which heroes are chiselled. A moment's grip of themselves, and they would have known all. But let us rejoice, for we are getting hotter every moment."

Nipper was feeling thrilled, too. "By Jove, yes!" he agreed. "We've proved that there's trickery at work here. Those wires were deliberately placed in position so that an unwary prowler would be scared out of his wits. And that indicates a plot."

Browne nodded. "We are not actually at the cross-roads, but there is no question of the dirty work," he said softly. "It is possible that these wires were set for a double purpose. Firstly, to scare any prowler into a state of lunacy, and secondly, to give warning to the unknown gents who are operating in the background. Let us pursue our investigations further."

They went out into the West Square, but took care to keep to the dense shadows. Creeping like ghosts themselves, they turned to the left, and came round by the rear of the chapel into the Triangle once again.

They crossed over by the gymnasium, skirted the East House, and turned into the East Square. Then, having completed the circuit of the Modern House, they found themselves again in the Triangle. And during this round they had seen nothing of a suspicious nature.

"Much as I hate confessing it, I fear we have failed to qualify," murmured Browne sadly. "It appears, Brother Hamilton, that more intensive methods will have to be instituted if we are to—"

"Great Scott! Look up there!" murmured Nipper abruptly.

Browne stared upwards to the point where his companion was indicating. Right over the East Tower a strange flapping figure had made itself apparent against the starlit sky. The two investigators stood there, watching fascinatedly. And, in spite of themselves, they felt something grip their hearts. There was an air of horror about this fresh mystery.

Without the slightest question, this floating shape was the monster which Forrest & Co. had referred to—the owl-like creature which had brought the smell of death with it. It was coming closer, too.

The dreadful thing swooped down, and the outline could be plainly distinguished. The upper part was an owl, but beneath there was a ghastly resemblance to a human form. For an instant the pair could see the saucer eyes, and then the thing was flying off over the Ancient House.

It left a dank odour on the atmosphere, and as it vanished from view there came the sound of a soft, mysterious screech.

CHAPTER V.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT IN THE MORNING PAPER.



WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE took a deep breath.

"A somewhat diverting adventure, Brother Hamilton," he murmured. "Singularity enough, however, it fails to leave me prostrated. My hand is still steady. My heart still continues the normal plodding."

"A fake, of course," agreed Nipper. "But, by Jove, an apparition of that sort is liable to give anybody a nasty turn unless he's prepared. Browne, old man, there's something splendid about this."

"I must confess I cannot quite fathom—"

"Don't you see?" went on Nipper keenly. "It absolutely verifies our suspicions of Quirke. That owl belongs to him—it's an uncanny beast, and it obeys him like a dog. Who else but Quirke could have faked it up to represent a vampire-like spectre?"

"There is no question that the old cerebellum is working overtime," murmured Browne approvingly. "You are right, Brother Hamilton—you are undoubtedly on the spot. Either Brother Quirke or one of his allies prepared this little episode. The evidence is accumulating rapidly."

"The thing didn't stay long enough for us to give it a close examination, but I'll bet it's a simple device," declared Dick Hamilton. "Just a light figure, made of black crêpe or something, fixed to the owl's legs. When it flies it naturally trails that appendage behind it. The stuff is probably treated with some chemical, too, to give that rummy odour."

Browne nodded.

"The mass of data is heaping itself up with pleasing speed," he observed. "Boiled down to a sentence, it means that Quirke is perilously near to the abyss. He is hovering on the edge, and doing his utmost to maintain his balance. In other words, he is engineering all these dodges in order to keep up the mystery and supernatural effect. Simple methods are losing their novelty, and thus we see these elaborate efforts. But where does it all lead? I am convinced that there is a definite climax in view. Quirke must have a positive goal at the end of his field of play. He wouldn't take all these shots unless he was hoping to score."

"That's what we've got to find out," agreed Nipper grimly. "I'm jolly glad we came on this investigation, Browne. We've satisfied ourselves that Quirke is mixed up in a plot. He wouldn't resort to hidden wires and an overdressed owl if all the resources of sorcery were at his command. This evidence may not be enough

to convince the faithful, but we know, don't we?"

"We do!" agreed Browne. "Unfortunately, we don't know enough. That, if I may say so, is the earwig in the teacup. Much as I realise that sleep is essential, I propose another stealthy prow!"

They went round the Modern House again, and turned into the East Square. It was past midnight now, and St. Frank's was utterly quiet and restful. Not a light was gleaming from any window. The great college was wrapped in sleep.

Keeping to the shadows, Browne and Nipper stealthily crossed the East Square, and it was Nipper who suddenly halted and held up his hand.

"Look!" he murmured in scarcely a whisper.

"A diverting spectacle, brother!" breathed Napoleon Browne.

They were both in the black shadow, and invisible. And at the end of the East House a figure had come into view. It was the figure of a human being, rapidly crossing a patch of exposed moonlight. He was only visible for a second, and then he was swallowed up amid the shadows.

The watchers didn't hesitate a moment. They pressed on, turned the angle of the East House wing, and halted. They were just in time to see the mysterious figure dropping down into the earth itself.

"My only hat!" whispered Dick Hamilton.

One of the big flagstones near the East House wall was raised. It slowly dropped into position, and the faintest echo of a dull thud came to the ears of the watching pair.

"This is far more than we could have hoped for," declared Browne exultantly. "Dare we venture forward, brother?"

They not only ventured forward, but they examined the flagstone with minute care. Now that it was in position, it was impossible to detect any recent disturbance. It seemed to be absolutely solid, and a part of the paved path which adjoined the East House. There was no ring, or any device by which the flagstone could be raised from the outside.

"I'll tell you what," whispered Nipper. "We'll take up our position close by and watch. We don't know what it all means, but we can guess. We may have to wait an hour, but I'm game."

"Let us sacrifice sleep in the cause of justice!" nodded Browne. "In this great enterprise, Brother Hamilton, I am with you heart and soul, to make no mention of the tissues."

It was precisely two hours later when they entered the Ancient House again. There was no trace of sleep in their eyes.

They were alert and flushed. Even the imperturbable Browne was looking somewhat excited.

"Upon the whole, Brother Hamilton, I think we can regard this as one of our happiest moments," said the latter softly. "From first to last it has been one big triumph. It would be no exaggeration to state that we hold the key in our fingers."

"I can't believe it!" exclaimed Nipper, taking a deep breath. "Now, of course, we can understand those miracles. By Jove! What a colossal discovery, old man!"

"Indeed, with no fear of contradiction, I can observe that Brother Quirke is now standing with one foot over the precipice," declared Browne. "A slight shove from us, and his descent will be swift and hard. Let me suggest that we delay that shove, Brother Hamilton. Let us toy with our victim and watch him at his final gambols. A most amusing experience, I can assure you."

Nipper nodded.

"We mustn't move just yet," he agreed. "We've made some discoveries, Browne, but before we show our hand we've got to make more. And I think it's a good idea of yours to give Quirke a bit more rope before we draw the noose tight."

They shook hands on it, parted, and went to their respective beds. They hadn't yet decided whether to keep the night's discoveries to themselves, or to hold a conference of the Compact of Ten. They were rather inclined to keep their own counsel for the time being. Edward Oswald Handforth was a prominent member of the Compact of Ten, and one needed to be cautious. While being a thoroughly stout fellow, Handforth was undoubtedly a bit of an ass. His greatest sin was incaution. One entrusted a secret to him at one's own peril. He would rather cut his right hand off than wittingly betray a trust, but old Handy let things out simply without knowing it.

After having four or five hours sleep, Browne and Nipper consulted again, and decided to let things stand exactly as they were for the present. Their hands were greatly strengthened by keeping their own counsel. They came to this decision in Browne's study just before breakfast-time.

"Assuredly, Brother Hamilton, let us wrap this secret in cotton-wool and stow it away," said Browne earnestly. "Let us place it in the safe, and let none but ourselves know the combination. Greatly as I admire Brother Handforth's fistic ability, I have certain dubious fears regarding his discretion. A mere prejudice on my part, perhaps, but we are but human."

Nipper grinned.

"As a matter of fact, old man, I agree with you," he said. "Handy will be frightfully wild when he knows we have been keeping this from him, but we shall have to risk his wrath. All right. Mum's the word until we're ready to make the next move."

Dick Hamilton nodded, and went off to the Remove quarters. As he entered the Common-room he observed a number of fellows gathered round Fullwood, who was the possessor of a morning newspaper. There seemed to be quite a lot of comment going on.

"Well, what about it, anyhow?" Handforth was saying. "We've got two or three titles in the Remove already, including a giddy duke! Not that Somerton looks much like a duke," he added, giving Somerton a severe glance. "By George, De Valerie, why the dickens don't you look after that chap? He's a perfect sight!"

"I'm not his keeper!" said Cecil de Valerie indignantly.

"Yes, but you share the same study," said Handforth. "Look at him! Baggy trousers, inky collar, two buttons off his waistcoat, and I'm hanged if there isn't a gap in one of his shoes! You might think he was a tramp!"

The youthful Duke of Somerton chuckled.

"You leave my shoes alone!" he grinned. "They're the most comfortable pair I've got. That's my motto—comfort! Appearance doesn't matter a toss."

"Yes, but you're a duke!"

"Everybody knows it, so why should I worry?" asked Somerton. "And when I'm amongst strangers nobody knows me, so I'm all right, anyway. Life's too short to worry about dress."

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie Glen-thorne, horrified. "Laddie, laddie! I mean to say, a time has arrived when a fatherly word seems to be indicated. I appeal to you, Tregellis-West, old article. Is this chappie a decent member of the Remove or not?"

"Dear old boy, he's a most frightful blot!" agreed Tregellis-West heartily. "When it comes to a matter of dress, I feel it necessary to assert myself. I think something ought to be done about it—I do, really."

"Go ahead!" grinned Somerton. "If it pleases you to discuss me like this——"

"What's that in the paper, anyhow?" interrupted Nipper. "Silence, everybody! Fullwood, what's the news?"

"Nothing much," grinned Ralph Leslie Fullwood. "Only there's a report here—quite a column—saying that young Lord Pippinton is being sent to that famous Public school, St. Frank's College. Things are looking up in the world. We're in the papers."

CHAPTER VI.

SINGLETON'S SUSPICIONS.



"**L**ORD PIPPINTON?" repeated Dick Hamilton.

"I don't suppose the poor chap can help it," said Fullwood. "If I had a name like that, I'd change it to Smith, or something. It reminds you of apples!"

"Old Pippy?" ejaculated the Hon. Douglas Singleton, pushing the outskirts of the crowd. "Who's talking about old Pippy?"

"Old Pippy?" repeated Fullwood. "There's an item here about Lord Pippinton——"

"That's the chap," said the Hon. Douglas. "I know him."

"The dickens you do!"

"A most frightful chump!" went on Singleton. "One of the world's errors, I should imagine. As far as I can make out, he spends most of his time in a sort of trance, and only comes out of it occasionally by a superhuman mental effort."

"Something like Archie?" asked Handforth.

"Odds slurs and insults!" ejaculated Archie Glen-thorne. "I mean, dash it, what?"

"Archie's an electric wire compared to old Pippy!" chuckled Singleton. "Quite a harmless fellow, of course. In fact, I couldn't imagine anybody more inoffensive. And as for money, he's filthy with it. I believe he goes to bed in silken sheets! And his jacket is always creased because of the wad of fivers in his breast-pocket."

"What's that?" asked Bernard Forrest, lounging up.

"You're sure to butt in when you hear something about cash, aren't you?" growled Handforth. "Clear off, you bounder!"

"I met him once or twice at my pater's place," went on Singleton. "His pater and my pater are thick, you know. Our families have known one another for centuries—both in the same county, you see."

"And you're both rolling in wealth!" said De Valerie enviously. "I'm dashed if that's fair! We poor chaps have to grub along on a few measly bob a week, and you can afford to buy up the school if you take a fancy to it!"

"I'm pretty comfortable, when it comes to that," admitted Singleton. "But old Pippy's an absolute terror. A most generous bounder, and as loose as you like with his cash. I know for a fact that he used to keep the whole Third Form supplied when he was at Baggleby. I thought he was there now. When's he arriving?"

"It doesn't say, but I expect he'll roll up within the next day or two," replied Fullwood. "There's a long account of his

ancestry, and all that. It seems that he's a giddy millionaire—got pots of tin from one of his uncles, who died two or three years ago. And his pater, the duke, is fairly bloated, too. It strikes me that we ought to get up a brass band to welcome this fellow."

"He wouldn't appreciate it," said Singleton. "He probably wouldn't know anything about it until it was all over. Don't I keep telling you that he's a frightful chump? When you speak to him he doesn't know what you're saying until about five minutes afterwards!"

But the fact that the youthful Lord Pippinton was extremely wealthy made up for his shortcomings in the eyes of the Remove. It was generally felt that something special ought to be arranged. The fact that he was a lord carried little or no weight. But when the Remove heard that he bulged with fivers, the Remove thought it high time to prepare.

All sorts of inquiries were made during the morning. But no definite information could be obtained. Mr. Crowell thought that "Lord Pippinton" was an invention on Handforth's part. Nobody could find out when this walking bank was due to arrive.

Just after tea, Singleton happened to be walking across to the gymnasium. He ran into Ezra Quirke opposite the East House steps, and the schoolboy magician buttonholed him.

"I have been worrying about you, Singleton," said Quirke in his even tones. "I am afraid you did not attend our last meeting?"

"What about it?" asked the Hon. Douglas.

"I hope you are not losing interest?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," admitted Singleton. "This magic is all very well as a novelty, Quirke, but one gets a bit sick of it, you know."

"The other fellows are not sick of it," said Quirke quietly. "The more I give them, the more they want. There is something else on your mind. There is something disturbing you—something occupying your thoughts to the exclusion of all else."

Singleton looked at him sharply.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I know."

"Yes, but——"

"You forget my power with the crystal," interrupted Quirke. "In my crystal, Singleton, I see many things which are denied to others. I know, for example, that you are wrapped up in a great and wonderful secret. Unfortunately I am not permitted to see too clearly. Would it not be better to take me into your confidence? You trust me, and I could help you."

Singleton compressed his lips. A vague suspicion of his was becoming an acute suspicion. Several times during the past few days he had believed that Ezra Quirke

was trying to pump him. After Quirke's last words there could be no shadow of doubt. He was not only pumping, but asking for the other's confidence, point-blank.

"I'm sorry, Quirke," said Singleton gruffly. "I can't tell you anything. If there's a secret at all—and I don't admit it—it's no concern of yours. I wish you wouldn't ask these questions. It makes it dashed embarrassing for a chap."

Quirke shrugged his shoulders.

"We will change the subject," he said. "I hear you are expecting a friend of yours in the Ancient House?"

"You mean Lord Pippinton?"

"I think that is the name."

"As far as I can gather he's due for the East House," said the Hon. Douglas. "And look here, Quirke, you steer clear of him. He's a harmless fellow, and it wouldn't be fair to get him mixed up in your occult stuff. The man's more like a lamb than a human being."

"If Lord Pippinton desires to join my Circle, am I to deny him?" asked Quirke. "It is not my way to solicit converts. They come without any pressure from me. Do I understand that Lord Pippinton is rich?"

"My hat!" growled Singleton. "Everybody seems more interested in his cash than in the chap himself. What's cash, after all? I'm sick of the way some of the fellows grovel to me. Sometimes I wish I only had two bob a week!"

"Riches are not always as advantageous as one would imagine," agreed Quirke. "Well, Singleton, I am sorry that you should adopt such an antagonistic attitude. I was hoping——"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted the Hon. Douglas. "Are you busy for the minute?"

"No."

"Then how about looking into that crystal of yours?" asked Singleton. "If I come into your study can you have a go at it?"

"Certainly," said Quirke eagerly. "I shall be only too pleased."

Singleton nodded, and they went indoors. There was rather a grim look about the Hon. Douglas' eyes. He had changed his front quite suddenly, after getting a swift idea.

He was uncomfortable about Quirke. Was the fellow pumping him or not? By arranging this crystal-gazing affair he might possibly find out for certain. Singleton's idea was to put Quirke to the test. And the East House junior would probably give himself away once he had his crystal in front of him. If he already knew something of the secret he would probably pretend to "see" it in the crystal, and thus persuade his sitter to become confidential. Singleton was fully on the alert, and prepared for any subtle trickery.

He was rather surprised with himself for doubting Quirke in this fashion, for only a few days earlier he had staunchly believed in the fellow. For some strange reason his faith in Quirke was dwindling. He was beginning to fear that the Fourth-Former was far from genuine.

And the seed of Singleton's suspicion was a tiny one.

The secret concerned Professor Sylvester Tucker, the genial, absent-minded St. Frank's science master. More by accident than anything else Singleton had discovered the amazing secret of Professor Tucker's stupendous invention—a strange apparatus which was capable of curing any human ill almost within a few minutes.

Finding that the boy knew a little, the professor had wisely taken him into his full confidence, and had bound him to secrecy. The Hon. Douglas was as straight as a die, and the professor ran no risk. He would never have confided in the junior otherwise.

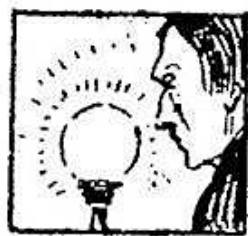
And strangely enough, Ezra Quirke had forseen two or three of Singleton's meetings with Professor Tucker in his crystal. At first Singleton had marvelled. But now he suspected.

Professor Tucker's secret was so vast, so huge in its possibilities, that the Hon. Douglas wondered if Quirke was playing a deliberate game to get hold of the details of the invention. A few days earlier he had met Singleton after the latter had been with Professor Tucker. He had pumped him, and that tiny seed had been sown.

The Hon. Douglas wondered if this fresh test would bear fruit.

CHAPTER VII.

QUIRKE'S ASTONISHING REVELATION.



EZRA QUIRKE gazed steadfastly into the crystal.

The scene was rather an impressive one. It was nearly dark, and Quirke had not turned his study lights on. He sat with the crystal in front of him, and the Hon. Douglas Singleton was seated just opposite. The crystal seemed alive with mysterious inner fires. It was not merely a globe of dead glass, but something uncannily animated.

Singleton watched with a renewal of his old fascination. Certainly there was something rather compelling about Quirke's personality. It was no use denying it. Although he spoke no word he held Singleton enthralled.

Singleton's thoughts were concentrated on the subject. He remembered his encounters

with Professor Tucker. The marvellous apparatus which had cured a gashed finger and a cut hand within a minute or two. Singleton had seen these things with his own eyes, and he had listened in a state of enraptured interest while the professor had talked of the possibilities of his discovery.

It was nothing much to look at. Just a box-like contrivance, with a few dials on it, and some terminals. Singleton had been present when two famous Harley Street specialists had come down from London, bringing with them a patient with a paralysed arm. The unfortunate man had seemed beyond all hope. But after twenty minutes treatment that poor, withered arm had been restored to complete health.

The memory of that affair stuck in Singleton's mind constantly. During every minute of the day since then he had pondered and marvelled. And he gloated in the fact that he shared this shattering secret—a secret which, when it burst upon the world, would cause the greatest scientific sensation of the age.

Immediately after that test Singleton had gone out into the Triangle in a dazed condition, hardly able to believe the evidence of his eyes and ears. He had met Ezra Quirke, and Ezra Quirke had plied him with insidious questions. Quirke knew that he had been with Professor Tucker. And Quirke wanted to know why.

Then it was that the Hon. Douglas had become suspicious. Was Quirke playing a deep game? Was he deliberately placed at St. Frank's by somebody who desired to get hold of Professor Tucker's secret? It was worth thousands—millions. Indeed, Singleton judged that its worth could not be computed in mere figures. Perhaps Quirke had used Singleton as a tool the whole time! It was an uncomfortable thought, and the Hon. Douglas wanted to be sure.

"I see many things," droned Quirke dreamily.

"Eh? Oh!" said the Hon. Douglas with a start. "All right. Go ahead. Sorry, Quirke; I was forgetting myself——"

"You are standing with an elderly gentleman," murmured Quirke, concentrating upon the crystal with almost painful intensity. "I cannot see the features, and yet I seem to know—— But wait. No, it grows dim. You have recently had dealings with an elderly gentleman?"

Singleton compressed his lips.

"With several!" he replied grimly. "The Head, for one. I met him in the Inner Court yesterday, and he reported me to——"

"This elderly gentleman is not the Headmaster," interrupted Quirke tensely. "You are both standing in a strange room. It is a room filled with strange articles. There are bottles, test-tubes, retorts. You are

both gazing at something— At something—

"At what?" asked Singleton.

"I cannot see; it is all so indistinct."

The Hon. Douglas looked positively dangerous. He was convinced now. Quirke knew that he had been with Professor Tucker, and there was nothing very magical in his describing a laboratory. But he didn't know what the professor and Singleton had been looking at. When pressed, that part of the vision had grown indistinct. Quirke was attempting to worm the information from his sitter.

"Go on," said Singleton. "This is very interesting."

"The scene has changed now," said Quirke quietly. "You are no longer there, Singleton. The elderly gentleman is alone. He is pacing up and down, his hands clasped behind his back. He seems to be acutely distressed; his mental agony is pitiful."

"Is he in trouble?"

"Apparently so, although I cannot see as clearly as I would like," replied Quirke. "He has paused now, and is standing before a desk. He opens a drawer. He takes something from it. I cannot quite distinguish— It appears to be a weapon of some kind. Yes, a pistol!"

"A pistol!" said Singleton, startled.

"A revolver," went on Quirke droningly. "The old gentleman is hesitating. He is in a greater state of mental agony than ever. I believe he is about to attempt— No, he puts the revolver back. Again he paces up and down. But now he is in a different room. There are benches and shelves containing bottles. He searches among these bottles, and selects one—a small, blue bottle, with a red label—"

"Poison!" breathed Singleton.

"He is pouring some of the contents from the bottle into a drinking glass," continued Quirke, as though he knew nothing of Singleton's presence. "Now he is adding water, and he is holding the glass up. I cannot quite see— It becomes blurry. There is an indistinct, vague impression of— No, it is useless. Everything has gone. The crystal has become blank."

His voice died away, and Singleton bent forward.

"Hang it all, you can't stop like that!" he protested. "Look again, Quirke. Can't you see what the old fellow was doing with that glass?"

The Hon. Douglas experienced a curious sensation. He instinctively distrusted

Quirke now, and yet at the same time he found himself eagerly listening to this discourse. He had an uncomfortable idea that Quirke was seeing into the future.

But why should Professor Sylvester Tucker desire to take his own life? The very thought was preposterous, beyond the range of all common sense. The professor was on the threshold of the greatest fame any man had ever known. He would go down in history as the world's most famous benefactor.

To even dream that he would take his own life was unthinkable. There was every possible reason to assume the opposite. What axe had Quirke to grind in "seeing" such an extraordinary scene? Singleton was completely puzzled, and not a little annoyed.

"It is quite useless," said Quirke steadily. "The vision has completely faded. I see nothing in the crystal but blackness."

"But can't you look—"

"There is nothing!"

"And there never was anything!" snapped Singleton. "You can't fool me with an idiotic yarn like that, Quirke. What on earth's the idea of stuffing me up with—"

"I have told you what I have seen," interrupted Quirke tensely. "It is not my habit to invent these visions. I make no claim to be clever at these things. I am different from others; I am permitted to see these distant scenes. But when my crystal becomes blurred I let the matter rest there. It is not my way to invent things in order to satisfy my sitters. Be advised by me, Singleton, and regard this as a warning. I do not know who your friend is, but he is evidently in terrible trouble. He is agonised by acute worry. The vision possibly was symbolic, but we cannot tell. Do not scoff at that which you cannot understand."

He spoke with such intense conviction that Singleton was impressed. He couldn't help being impressed. There was something about Quirke which compelled him to take heed—in spite of his now deeply rooted suspicions.

"I'd better be going!" he said gruffly.

"Then remember what I have told you," said Quirke. "I regret that you should treat me with such scant courtesy, Singleton. Something has apparently disturbed you. There is some great problem on your mind—one that eclipses your interest in my own affairs. Would it not be better to tell me of your worries? I do not press you, but—"

"That's just as well, then," interrupted Singleton, as he rose to his feet. "Sorry, Quirke, but there's nothing that I can tell you. Thanks for the crystal-gazing stunt. You do see some queer things in that up-turned goldfish-bowl, don't you?"

Ezra Quirke frowned, but made no comment as the Hon. Douglas walked out of the

ANSWERS

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study. Outside, Singleton paused under the stars of the Triangle, and remained thoughtful for a few moments.

Although he intended going into the West House, to his own study, he found his footsteps straying towards the Ancient House. He knew why. Professor Tucker's rooms were in the Ancient House, and Singleton felt drawn towards them.

In Quirke's study, he had told himself that that vision of the professor's mental agony would soon fade. But it seemed to grow upon him minute by minute. Could there possibly be any truth in it?

Anyhow, there was no need to be uncertain. He could easily invent an excuse for

Professor Sylvester Tucker was huddled in his chair, sprawling over his desk. In his hand was an empty glass!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PROFESSOR'S PREDICAMENT.



THE HON. DOUGLAS SINGLETON turned white.

"Professor!" he panted, starting forward. "Professor, what have you done? Good heavens! I—I

believe—"



They were just in time to see the mysterious figure dropping down into the earth itself.

going to the old scientist's study. He suddenly made up his mind, and hurried into the Ancient House.

Passing upstairs, he went down the long corridor until he arrived almost at the end. He tapped upon a door here and waited. There was no response. He tapped again, but the result was the same. Yet a gleam of light was glistening beneath the door.

Singleton felt a sudden spasm of vague alarm. He remembered what Quirke had seen— With a steady hand, he grasped the door handle, and broke in. Then he paused, his eyes wide and staring.

Professor Tucker looked up, blinking.

"Eh? What? What's that?" he asked dazedly. "Who is it? Upon my word! Why should I be bothered in this unseemly fashion? Go away, boy! Go away this instant! How dare you! How dare you!"

Singleton was so relieved to hear the science master's voice that he just stood there, bewildered and confused. There was certainly no indication that Professor Tucker had taken poison. And yet that glass—

"Are you all right, sir?" asked the junior anxiously. "I'm awfully sorry for bursting in like that, but I thought—"

"What did you think?"

"I don't know, sir—I mean, I had an idea that you were terribly worried, or something," said Singleton. "I didn't mean to disturb you—"

"Shut the door, Singleton—shut the door," said the professor, rising to his feet, and passing a weary hand across his brow. "That's better. I am rather glad you've come, my boy. I need somebody to speak to—and I can speak to you safely, for you already know the facts. Yes, Singleton, I am worried. Intensely worried."

"I'm awfully sorry, sir—"

"Tut-tut! I don't ask for your sympathy!" growled the professor, frowning. "Where are you? Confound it, I can't see a thing—Where are my glasses? Good gracious! What has become of my glasses? Somebody is always interfering and—"

"Here are your glasses, sir," said Singleton, picking them up from the desk. "There's a glass here, too," he added, picking it up gingerly. "Shall I put it on the sideboard, sir?"

The professor rammed his glasses on his nose.

"Ah, that's better!" he said gruffly. "No, Singleton, leave the glass there. What is the matter with you? Why are you holding it in that strange fashion? Do you think it contains poison?"

Singleton was so startled that he dropped the glass with a splintering crash.

"Nun-no, sir!" he gasped. "I—I mean—Oh, I say I'm terribly sorry, sir! I didn't mean to—"

"A trifle, Singleton—a miserable, insignificant trifle," broke in the professor curtly. "Leave the glass alone—don't interfere with it. I half-wish it had contained poison—I half-wish I had partaken of the contents!"

Singleton stared.

"You don't seem to be well, professor—" he began.

"Rubbish!" rapped out Professor Tucker. "I am perfectly well—bodily. But I trust, my boy, that you will never suffer the mental torture I have endured during these past twelve hours! Torture, Singleton! I do not know how I can bear it. I am no longer young—I cannot stand these periods of acute suspense."

He sank down into his chair, and relapsed into silence. He even trembled, and Singleton watched him with mingled emotions—surprise, consternation, and pity. It was distressing to see a learned professor of science giving way in this startling fashion.

And Ezra Quirke, too!

The professor hadn't actually taken poison, but there was no question of his mental torture. In that respect, at least, Quirke had been right. He had freely admitted that his vision was probably symbolic—that the poison was more or less a method of indicating the nature of the old gentleman's frame of mind.

And Quirke was right! That was the astounding part of it all. Again, Quirke had proved himself to be possessed of un-

canny powers! Was he genuine, or was he a fake? What was a fellow to believe?

"I say, sir!" muttered Singleton uncomfortably. "I didn't know—Is there anything I can do, sir? It's pretty rotten to see you worried like this. I thought everything was so ripping, too. Last week you told me that the future was—"

"Last week is not this week, Singleton," interrupted Professor Tucker, almost fiercely. "Circumstances have changed. Delay—delay! Always delay! Was ever a man so harassed?"

He was on his feet again, pacing up and down, driving a fist into his other palm. The Hon. Douglas had never seen Professor Tucker so alert before. In nine cases out of ten, he was absent-minded and indifferent to the things that went on around him. But now he seemed to be concentrated on his subject.

"Delay!" he repeated fiercely. "They may be weeks—months! Who is to tell? These commissions drag on endlessly, Singleton. I am within an ace of success, and at the last moment a crash may come."

"Commissions, sir?"

"Yes, boy—commissions!" snapped the professor irritably. "Don't you remember? You were here when those specialists tested my apparatus, were you not? Good gracious, have I unwittingly—"

"Yes, I was here, sir," said Singleton hastily.

"Of course you were!" said the professor, relieved. "Why on earth didn't you say so, Singleton? Not satisfied with the evidence of their own eyes, these gentlemen have thought fit to set up a commission of the medical profession. You know what that means! A long succession of irritating delays—and in the meantime my position grows worse."

"But your invention is a success, sir," objected Singleton. "Those specialists were staggered by it. They could hardly believe their senses—"

"That, Singleton, is the point—the whole point," interrupted Professor Tucker, glaring. "That is the crux of the matter. In spite of the terribly severe nature of the test—in spite of seeing it with their own eyes—the result was so phenomenal that they cannot credit their senses. And so they must resort to an elaborate commission—when, no doubt, they will require a further demonstration. Indeed, such a thing is inevitable. And that second demonstration, Singleton, would probably be even more severe than the first."

The Hon. Douglas was sorely puzzled.

"But you can convince them, sir," he protested. "Your apparatus—"

"I can't convince them!" shouted the professor. "I can't! I can't! Do you think I should be in this state of nervous prostration if I could? When the time comes, I shall fail. I shall be set down as a charlatan, and I shall be discredited in the

eyes of the whole medical profession! The scientific world will regard me as a laughing stock! Could any position be more appalling?"

"But I don't understand, sir!" exclaimed Singleton, staring. "Why can't you give this second demonstration? You cured that man's paralysed arm in the most amazing manner——"

"Money!" rapped out Professor Tucker grimly. "Money, Singleton! A small matter, eh? A trifle?" He laughed bitterly. "Perhaps you thought that money took no part in this business? But it does—but it does, my boy! It does! My position is well-nigh hopeless!"

"Oh, hang it all, sir——"

"I have poured my private fortune into this invention," continued Professor Tucker, his agitation becoming more acute. "I have met with success, too—amazing success. You will think I have nothing to grumble at. But I'm not grumbling—I am simply unable to think of any way out of this position. My salary is mortgaged already for the next six months. I have accumulated debts. There are writs issued against me. And there, on my laboratory bench, lies a fortune. It is farcical, Singleton. But it is a tragedy. Until my apparatus is proven, I am a pauper."

"But it has been proven, sir——"

"To the satisfaction of two doctors—but that will be insufficient," said the old scientist. And you do not seem to realise that any second test is impossible."

"Why? Why is it impossible, sir?"

"Because my apparatus is exhausted," replied the professor huskily. "You were here, were you not? There was scarcely enough energy to complete the cure of that one patient. It costs money to harness the element which causes these miracles. Money, Singleton—big money. I was foolish enough to imagine that one demonstration would suffice. It will not—and I am facing the abyss of disgrace. With a fabulous fortune within my grasp, it eludes me. Singleton, I am at the end of things!"

He sank down, and his final words were only a mere whisper. The junior was startled and pained beyond all expression. He didn't know what to do—he didn't know what to say. Never before had he felt so acutely distressed.

And then, like a flash of light, an idea came to him. He flushed at the very birth of it, and started forward.

"Money, sir?" he breathed. "If you get money, will everything be all right?"

"I cannot get it—I have tried!" whispered the professor. "The banks are tired of me. I am overdrawn—my trifling personal properties are mortgaged to the hilt. I have no securities to raise any funds whatever. No, Singleton, I must face the dreadful truth——"

"But what about me, sir?" asked Singleton excitedly.

"You!"

"I've got money, sir!" panted the Hon. Douglas. "Let me supply it!"

CHAPTER IX.

TEN THOUSAND POUNDS.



PROFESSOR SYLVESTER TUCKER was so astonished that he momentarily came out of his depression, and stared at Singleton.

"My poor boy!" he said sadly. "I appreciate your generous spirit. It is splendid, Singleton. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. But such a course as you suggest is impossible."

"But look here, sir——"

"Impossible!" repeated the professor. "Good gracious, do you imagine for one moment that I would borrow money from a schoolboy? It is crazy! Don't refer to the subject again, Singleton! Upon my word, it almost amounts to an affront!"

"But I didn't mean it in that way, sir——"

"No, no, no—of course, you didn't!" broke in Professor Tucker quickly. "Of course, you didn't, Singleton. Forgive me! I didn't mean to upset you, but can't you realise how utterly impossible your suggestion is?"

"I don't think it's impossible, sir," declared Singleton. "You've told me that your apparatus is useless unless it is recharged. And this commission will want a demonstration. Those writs and things, too—they're worrying you. If I could help, sir, I would take it as an honour."

The professor looked at him with kindly eyes.

"You have got a wonderful spirit, my boy," he said gently. "I cannot express my appreciation, but your suggestion is totally out of the question. Quite apart from the fact that such a loan would be unacceptable, have you any conception of the money I require?"

"Well, not exactly, sir," confessed Singleton.

"Then we had better let the matter rest as it stands," said Professor Tucker. "Thank you for the offer——"

"But I realise, anyhow, that it must be a pretty big sum, sir," interrupted Singleton quickly. "I don't think you understand that I'm in deadly earnest, sir. I'd just love to supply you with a big lump!"

The professor eyed him indulgently.

"And what is your idea of a big sum, Singleton?" he asked.

"Oh, say a thousand pounds, sir."

Professor Tucker leaped to his feet.

"A thousand pounds?" he echoed, aghast.

"Boy, are you daring to make jokes with

me? Get out of this room at once! How dare you make fun of my confidences? I am pained beyond words——”

“But I mean it, sir!” protested Singleton. “I’m not joking at all! I can let you have a thousand pounds to-morrow if you want it, sir!”

“But, good heavens!” ejaculated the professor, startled. “You don’t mean—— No, no, of course not! Ridiculous! You, a mere schoolboy! A junior in the Remove Form! Of all the absurd notions——”

“You seem to forget, sir, that I’ve got pots and pots of money,” put in Singleton, speaking rapidly. “Why, when I first came to St. Frank’s, I chucked it about like water! Everybody nick-named me the Spendthrift! I even bought a school, because there was some trouble——”

“You bought a school?” echoed the professor faintly.

“You weren’t here then, sir,” went on the Hon. Douglas. “That was before your time. It cost me thousands, too. I’ve got a big fortune—I’ve got a banking account of my own. I can lay my hands on awfully big sums of money if I want to—and there’s nobody to question me! Look at this, sir!”

He was eager—intently eager—to convince the professor. He pulled out his wallet, and opened it. He flooded the table with five-pound notes. The old scientist looked at them in a dazed fashion.

“Are you serious, Singleton?” he asked huskily. “My boy, remember what this means to me! Are you absolutely in earnest?”

“Yes, sir—absolutely!”

Professor Tucker seemed on the verge of breaking down.

“But it is incredible!” he whispered. “You, a junior schoolboy! I cannot believe that you actually—— And yet I do—you have given me your word,” he went on. “Singleton, Singleton! I am tempted to accept this wonderful offer of yours. And yet it cannot be—it would be little short of criminal on my part to take advantage of your innocent good-nature.”

“Oh, rats, sir!” protested the junior. “It’s nothing to me, anyhow. Dash it all, for once I should do a bit of good with some money. And could I use it better? This invention of yours will revolutionise the hospitals—benefit humanity more than anything in the whole world.”

“Yes, it will do all that,” admitted the professor slowly. “Indeed, that is one of the reasons for my anguish. To know of all the suffering, and to realise that my hands are tied! But, Singleton, I doubt if it would be honest. A secret alliance between you and I—— No, no! I cannot permit such——”

“Please, sir!” pleaded Singleton eagerly.

“What security can I offer?” asked the professor, in despair. “I have nothing—literally nothing. Heaven knows, I am tempted! You have given me evidence of

your earnest intentions,” he added, indicating the notes on the table. “But such a huge sum——”

“A thousand pounds isn’t so very huge, sir—to me,” broke in the Hon. Douglas. “I can get it by to-morrow. There’s nearly fifty pounds on the table, sir. Please accept that to be going on with—just to meet a few of these writs and things. You don’t know how pleased I’ll be, sir.”

The professor was on his feet, clenching and unclenching his hands.

“A thousand pounds by to-morrow!” he whispered. “It would save me, Singleton. It would even help to defray the cost of recharging my apparatus. I am sorely tempted——”

“Help to defray the cost, sir?” repeated Singleton. “Help? Wouldn’t a thousand pounds be enough, then?”

The professor laid a kindly hand upon his shoulder.

“I cannot expect you to understand these matters,” he said gently. “You must realise that this apparatus of mine is merely an experimental one. The cost of trapping the new element is staggering. Yes, Singleton, staggering. With one thousand pounds I can secure a partial charge. But in order to assure the maximum efficiency of my apparatus, the cost would run into something like—— Something like—— But I won’t shock you——”

“Please tell me, sir.”

“Ten thousand pounds, Singleton,” said Professor Tucker quietly. “Ah, I knew how dumbfounded you would be. It is a big sum, my boy—a colossal figure. And yet, actually, how absurdly insignificant!”

“Ten thousand pounds!” said Singleton slowly.

He was looking serious now—and worried, too. But he was by no means discouraged. He might have a little trouble with his father—for he would be unable to explain why he needed such a big sum. But he grimly made up his mind that he would get it. The money was his—hundreds of thousands! Yes, by Jove, he’d get it!

“Ten thousand pounds, sir,” he repeated. “I didn’t quite realise——”

“Of course, you didn’t,” said the professor, patting him. “Don’t let it worry you. We shall manage with less. Good gracious, you have given me new courage already! I am a changed man, Singleton! Hope dawns once again, and——”

“You’re right about it being an absurdly insignificant amount, sir,” interrupted Singleton thoughtfully. “It seems colossal in one way—but yet it’s really nothing! Why, there are men who would willingly pay ten thousand pounds for one operation!”

The professor nodded.

“You are shrewd, Singleton,” he replied. “I know of a millionaire with a poor, crippled son. My apparatus is capable of restoring the boy to complete health within

one hour! What would that millionaire pay? Ten thousand? Fifty—a hundred thousand! Yes, it is an insignificant amount when one realises the stupendous possibilities. But you must take my machine on trust—”

“It’s all the security I need, sir,” said Singleton stoutly. “Haven’t I seen what it can do? Look here, professor, I can let you have one thousand pounds to-morrow, and I’ll get the other nine thousand within a couple of days. Will that be in time, sir?”

“In time?” echoed Professor Tucker, his eyes gleaming with hope. “Am I dreaming? You don’t actually mean—”

“I’ll get it, sir!” insisted Singleton grimly.

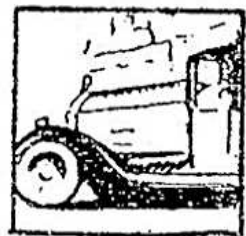
“But, my dear boy, think!” urged the professor. “Think! You have my confidence—you mustn’t breathe a word to a single soul! You can’t explain for what purpose you need this money. My reputation would be shattered if the world discovered that I was accepting money from a schoolboy! Good heavens! The very possibility appals me! And you must realise that there are unscrupulous people who would go to untold trouble to get possession of my secret.”

Curiously enough, Singleton thought of Ezra Quirke.

“I believe it, sir,” he said, setting his jaw. “Perhaps they’re after it even now! But we’ll beat them—and I’ll get that money! I give you my word, sir, that I won’t explain any reasons at all. It’s mine. I’ll get it. Trust me, sir!”

CHAPTER X.

THE ARRIVAL OF OLD PIPPY.



A HUGE Rolls-Royce glided gracefully through the gateway of St. Frank’s, and rolled silently up the Triangle. The chauffeur appeared uncertain, and the

magnificent car came to a halt.

“Will this do, your lordship?” he inquired, turning.

Seated in the rear of the car was a scrupulously attired youth of about fifteen. He was in Etons, with a heavy overcoat, and a huge wrap. Upon his head there was an enormous cap of sporting pattern.

Lord Pippinton had arrived.

It was the following morning, and St. Frank’s was busy at morning school. The Triangle was quite deserted, and the chauffeur’s uncertainty was easily excusable. With so many imposing Houses, he hardly knew which one to stop at. He should, of course, have gone straight on through Big Arch, across the Inner Court, and on to the Head’s private residence.

“Will this do, your lordship?” he repeated, a trifle more loudly. Shall you alight here?”

“Eh?” said Lord Pippinton. “Oh!”

He appeared to come to the conclusion that something had to be done. He sat forward, looked about him, and gazed steadfastly at the Modern House. It seemed to fascinate him. He gazed so long, in fact, that the chauffeur looked in that direction, too.

“Quite a charming place, your lordship,” he remarked deferentially.

“Eh?” said Lord Pippinton. “Oh!”

“Extremely picturesque buildings, your lordship.”

“Eh?” said Lord Pippinton. “Yes.”

He aroused himself so thoroughly that he actually stood up. Gradually it dawned upon him that the journey was over, and that he was supposed to alight. As Singleton had said, his lordship appeared to live in a kind of trance. It was no exaggeration at all.

Lord Pippinton removed his cap, and revealed a head of well-brushed hair that was so excessively fair that it seemed almost white. His face was fresh, and his chin tried hard to make itself apparent, but gave up the struggle half-way. By comparison, Archie Glenthorne was a highly energetic, intellectual giant.

“We have arrived, your lordship,” said the chauffeur. “I was wondering if I should make some inquiries. Possibly somebody will come out to take charge of you.”

“Eh? I mean, what?” said Lord Pippinton. “What’s this, Groves? I mean, all this?” he added, waving towards the school vaguely. “What is it? I mean, why?”

“We have arrived at St. Frank’s College, your lordship.”

His lordship concentrated fiercely.

“St. Frank’s College?” he repeated. “Eh? I seem to— What? Oh, rather! Of course, Groves! Isn’t this where we tear ourselves away? By Jove! Somewhat topping sort of place! All stones, and all that. Ivy, and the rest of it.”

Having realised the exact position, Lord Pippinton dragged himself out of the car, and waved a weary hand.

“Good!” he said. “That’s it, Groves. You can go now, you know. I mean, if we’re here, we’re here. I can’t go indoors in the car, can I?”

“Would you care for me to escort you, your lordship?”

“Eh?” said his lordship. “Yes?! That is, of course, no! Certainly not, Groves! What do you think I am? By Jove, wait! Frightfully sorry, Groves. Nearly forgot!”

He pulled out a handful of currency notes, and gave the chauffeur a couple of pounds. Groves took them without turning a hair. He gazed rather wistfully at his lordship as he thanked him. He was probably thinking that there wouldn’t be

many more tips of that size in the immediate future.

At this point Tubbs appeared in the doorway of the Ancient House. In some extraordinary way, the page-boy seemed to have an unerring scent for tips. He dashed down the steps, and seized upon Lord Pippinton as a tiger fastens upon its prey.

"Any baggage, sir?" he asked briskly. "Where to, sir? If you want the Head—"

"What," said Lord Pippinton, "is this?"

He gazed at Tubbs with exquisite distaste, and the chauffeur looked severe.

"Not so much of it, my lad!" he said.

"This is the Right Honourable Lord Pippinton. His lordship has just arrived—"

"That's right—I knew he was comin'," interrupted Tubbs eagerly. "Rely on me, your lordship! I'll take you straight to the 'Ead. Let me carry your bag, your lordship."

"Bag?" said Lord Pippinton, looking round. "Bag, Groves? By Jove! I must have lost it—"

"There is no bag, your lordship," said Groves. "Not so much fuss, young 'un, and don't speak when you're not spoken to," he added to Tubbs. "His lordship's baggage ought to have arrived long before this."

Lord Pippinton looked worried.

"Why?" he asked. "I mean, what is all this confusion? You're still here, Groves. Eh? Oh, yes! We're at St. Frank's, aren't we? And this green thing is worrying me!"

He looked at Tubbs with acute distress, and even Tubbs was taken aback. He was extremely proud of his uniform, and it was a bit thick to hear himself referred to as "a green thing." But he couldn't very well voice his indignation.

The Rolls-Royce glided off after Groves had touched his cap, and for about a minute Lord Pippinton watched the place where it had disappeared out into the lane. He had apparently gone to sleep standing still. At least, Tubbs thought so.

"Where to, your lordship?" asked the pageboy at last.

"Eh?" said Lord Pippinton. "Oh! Where to? Why, what? It's here again! Where's the Remove? I can't see it anywhere. I was told to go into the Remove. What have you done with it?" he asked severely.

"The Remove, your lordship?" said Tubbs briskly, grasping at something lucid at last. "Do you want to go to the 'Ead first, or straight to the Remove?"

"Yes!" said Lord Pippinton.

"Which first, your lordship?"

"Absolutely!" observed his lordship heartily.

Tubbs gave it up in despair, and marched into the Ancient House. He had got half-way across the lobby before he found that Lord Pippinton wasn't with him. He went

back, and found his lordship in exactly the same position.

"This way, your lordship," said Tubbs loudly.

"Eh?" said the new boy. "What? That way? Which way? Oh! Through the old door? I suppose that would be right!"

He mounted the steps, and followed Tubbs without a word. Tubbs led the way straight into the Housemaster's study. For Tubbs had come to the conclusion that he had better deliver his charge over to Nelson Lee without any delay.

But the Housemaster's study was empty.

"There's nobody here, your lordship," said Tubbs, scratching his head.

"Nobody where?"

"The Housemaster's away, sir—I mean, your lordship."

"Yes, rather!"

"He's not here, your lordship."

"Not here?" said Lord Pippinton. "No, he doesn't appear to be," he added, looking up and down the corridor. "Whom? Where are we? What are we doing in this foul place? Why," he added, "have you brought me here?"

"To see the Housemaster, your lordship," replied Tubbs. "But as he's away, I suppose I'd better take you straight to Mr. Crowell. That'll be in the Remove Form room, your lordship."

Lord Pippinton came to himself for a moment.

"That's it!" he said, looking at Tubbs fixedly. "The Remove! I knew we had to go somewhere. Where is it? Why are we standing here like this? Why do I have to look at you? By Jove! It hurts me!"

"Yes, your lordship," said Tubbs.

He walked off, his only thought being to palm Lord Pippinton off on to somebody else at the earliest possible moment. The new boy was too much for Tubbs. Tubbs felt helpless. He nearly reached the end of the passage before he found that Lord Pippinton was going the other way.

"This way, your lordship!" he panted, racing after him.

"Exactly!" said Lord Pippinton. "We're going this way."

"But it's the other way, your lordship."

"I believe," said Lord Pippinton, "that this is a joke. You bring me in here, you upset me with your face, and that uniform makes me bilious. Where's Groves? This is getting serious."

"If you'll come with me, your lordship, I'll hand you over to Mr. Crowell," said Tubbs, in desperation.

He didn't quite know how he got Lord Pippinton outside, but he managed it. Then he directed him into the Junior Wing of the School House, and straight into the Remove Form-room. Tubbs opened the door with a flourish, and stood aside.

"Lord Pippinton, sir!" he announced.

Mr. Crowell started, and adjusted his glasses. And the Remove, which had been gradually settling into a state of coma, brought itself up with a jerk and took notice.

CHAPTER XI

A SHOCK FOR THE REMOVE.



LORD PIPPINTON had gone off into one of his trances again. He had started following Tubbs with an alert mind, but the walking had caused him to drop back into his customary state of dreaminess. He took no notice of Tubbs, and walked straight into the Form-room—and kept on walking until he was brought up by the front row of desks. He found himself staring straight into the face of Edward Oswald Handforth.

Lord Pippinton jumped a yard.

"What," he gasped, "is that?"

Instinctively, he put up his hands, and gazed at Handforth with a dazed expression of horror in his eyes. Handforth was so surprised that he simply lay back and returned the gaze.

"Where did this crawl from?" he demanded. "Who let this thing come out of a crevice? Great pip! It's alive!"

Mr. Crowell strode forward.

"What is the meaning of this unseemly interruption?" he demanded warmly. "Tubbs, how dare you burst in—"

"It's Lord Pippinton, sir," said Tubbs. "He said he wanted the Remove, so I brought him to the Remove."

"Oh!" said Mr. Crowell. "Lord Pippinton! Of course! He is the new boy in my Form, is he not? I am quite delighted to have you, Pippinton. You understand that titles are quite ignored here."

He held out his hand to his lordship, but it was ignored. Not that Lord Pippinton was snobbish in any way. He simply didn't see the hand at all. He was still staring at Handforth's face. Anything that interested Lord Pippinton fascinated him. His gaze was almost glassy.

"What's the idea?" demanded Handforth gruffly.

"Eh?" said his lordship. "Oh! Sorry! Frightfully sorry! I didn't quite grasp the fact that you were absolutely human. Hallo! There seems to be lots of you," he added, allowing his gaze to pass over the Form. "By Jove! I seem to have got somewhere! A good old meeting, what?"

"Pippinton, this is the Remove Form-room!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell patiently. "When you can spare me a moment of your attention—"

"What-ho!" said Lord Pippinton suddenly. "Duggy, by Jove! I mean, by Jove, Duggy!"



"But I mean it, sir!" protested Singleton. "I'm not joking at all! I can let you have a thousand pounds to-morrow if you want it sir!"

So that green thing knew what he was doing, after all! Duggy, by Jove!"

"Hallo, Pippy!" grinned the Hon. Douglas Singleton, from the third row. "Glad to see you, but—"

"Singleton!" thundered Mr. Crowell. "How dare you engage this boy in conversation while he persists in ignoring me! Pippinton," he added angrily, "is this a deliberate affront?"

Lord Pippinton turned and started.

"Why, hallo!" he observed. "Hallo! What?"

"I am your Form-master, sir!"

"Yes!" said Lord Pippinton.

"What did you say?"

"Old Duggy!" murmured Lord Pippinton. "I mean, here! Hallo, he's gone! No, by Jove, he hasn't!" he went on, looking at Singleton again. "Duggy, old top, where are we? I mean, all these queer-looking things strewn about? A sort of kind of gathering of sorts, I gather? Some of the lads, what? All merry and bright, as it were."

"Good gad!" observed Archie Glenthorne. He probably recognised in Lord Pippinton a fellow of his own stamp. Old Pippy was undoubtedly one of the ones. But even Archie Glenthorne was startled.

"I mean to say, some chappies can't help being chumps!" he remarked. "But, dash

it, this chappie is absolutely the limit! This is where Phipps ought to rally round and do something. Dashed rummy, and all that."

Mr. Crowell was becoming black in the face.

"Pippinton!" he bellowed. "You are a new boy, and I have put up with your nonsense for three minutes with considerable patience. I do not propose to stand this treatment a moment longer. Are you aware that you are disturbing the lesson?"

Lord Pippinton raised his eyebrows, then contracted them. He concentrated fiercely for a moment. And he suddenly grew alive to the truth. It was only by these forced mental efforts that he succeeded in getting a grasp of things.

"That's funny!" he said, beaming. "I mean, a master of sorts, what? Yes, by Jove! Of course! Hallo, sir! Dashed glad to meet you! Are you the lad who henceforth trains the old intellect?"

"I am your Form-master, Pippinton," said Mr. Crowell, somewhat mollified. "I have been given to understand that you will enter this Form. Have you been sent here by the headmaster?"

This needed a little consideration.

"The headmaster?" repeated his lordship. "Where? I don't seem to see the old boy—"

"The headmaster is not here, Pippinton," interrupted Mr. Crowell. "I take it that you have interviewed Dr. Stafford already?"

"No, sir, we came straight here," put in Tubbs.

"Good gracious, Tubbs, where are your wits?" demanded Mr. Crowell angrily. "Take Lord Pippinton to the headmaster at once. He is probably expecting him."

"Yessir!" said Tubbs dubiously. "The fact is, sir, I thought, perhaps, you— I mean, sir, Lord Pippinton seems— Well, sir—"

"Perhaps you are right Tubbs," admitted Mr. Crowell. "I will take the young gentleman to the headmaster myself. Kindly bring Biggleswade here at once."

"Yessir!" said Tubbs, relieved.

"Hallo! Wait!" said Lord Pippinton, as Tubbs was about to leave. "I think you've got a frightful face, but— Oh, well, I mean! One of life's misfortunes, eh? Take it, boy, and leave me in peace."

Tubbs nearly fainted when he received a pound-note. Lord Pippinton handed it over as though it were a mere sixpence. And Tubbs vanished before Mr. Crowell could interfere.

"Upon my word, Pippinton, do you always give such outrageous tips?" asked Mr. Crowell severely. "I really can't allow such ridiculous extravagance. A shilling would have been ample."

Lord Pippinton had wandered to one of the windows, and was looking out with interest. Before long, the Remove would

grow accustomed to his curiously detached habits. But at the moment they were receiving a bit of a shock. Lord Pippinton was not exactly vacant, but he always went through life in a condition of complete isolation. He never knew what was going on around him until he was jerked into activity by sheer force.

Biggleswade arrived a few seconds later. He was one of the Ancient House prefects, and a popular favourite—on account of his easy-going ways. The Remove, in spite of its shock, was beginning to regard Lord Pippinton as a life-saver. He had just rolled in at the most dreary part of the morning. And any kind of diversion was better than none.

"Now, Pippinton," said Mr. Crowell, "you ignored my comment on the question of tips, but I am beginning to understand that— Pippinton! I am talking to you!" said Mr. Crowell tartly.

"Hallo! Somebody wants me?" said his lordship, looking round. "Oh, rather! So we're here again? All of us, I mean. Don't we do something? Work, or something foul like that?"

"You will come with me, Pippinton," said Mr. Crowell.

"I thought there was something ghastly about to push along," said Lord Pippinton regretfully. "Right-ho! Oh! So we're going? That's rather topping, when you come to think of it! Outside, what?"

Mr. Crowell shepherded his charge out into the corridor, and the instant the door closed, the Remove let itself go with one voice. And every member of the Form had a different comment to make on the subject of Lord Pippinton.

"Now then, chuck it!" said Biggleswade, frowning. "What's the idea, you young sweeps? What do you think this is—a gassing competition?"

"Go easy, Biggy!" protested Handforth. "Can't we talk now?"

"You can talk later on—but not now!" retorted the prefect.

"Har-har!" laughed Handforth sarcastically. "He thinks we're going to keep quiet, just because he's in charge! I say, what do you think of that new chap? He strikes me as being loony!"

"Clean off his rocker!" agreed Church.

"Up the pole!" said De Valerie.

"The new chap hasn't got anything to do with your lessons!" said Biggleswade, asserting his authority. "I'll give you just ten seconds to get back to your work. Any funny business, and I'll report you."

Nobody took the slightest notice, and Biggleswade pulled a book out of his pocket, sat in Mr. Crowell's chair, and gave the Remove its head. Whenever he was left in charge, he always made a pretence of keeping order, admitted himself beaten, and then thoroughly enjoyed himself.

"You'll get used to Pippy in time," grinned Singleton. "He's a bit queer in his habits—never fully alive to what's going on. But he's quite a decent chap in the main."

"He must be wallowing in money!" said Hubbard enviously.

"Wallowing isn't the word!" replied Singleton. "I've got a good bit, but Pippy throws it about like waste paper. He can lay his hands on wads of it without the slightest trouble—"

The Hon. Douglas broke off suddenly, and a startled expression came into his eyes. His own words had put a thought into his head. Lord Pippinton! Money! Singleton took a deep, deep breath.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WALKING BANK.



"T HERE he is!"
"On him!"

The Remove had just been released. Morning lessons were over, and most of the juniors were keen upon seeing the latest acquisition to the Form. Lord Pippinton was not booked for the East House, as Singleton had supposed, but for the West House. And as this was where the Hon. Douglas resided, he was particularly pleased.

The Remove had seen no more of the new boy since Mr. Crowell had carried him off. Mr. Crowell himself had returned—and by sheer good fortune somebody had heard him coming along the passage in time to give Biggleswade a word of warning. It was considered a point of honour among the juniors to protect Biggleswade from trouble. He was such an easy-going prefect that it would never do for a Form-master to catch him unawares.

As the Remove poured out of the School House, Lord Pippinton was espied on the far side of the Triangle. He was standing in the sunshine, gazing steadfastly at the architectural beauties of the chapel. It was quite a mild day, and his lordship was sunning himself.

His luggage had evidently arrived, too, for he was now wearing a glossy topper, which was set at an acute angle on the back of his head.

About two dozen juniors swarmed round him like a host of hornets. Some of them—such as Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt and Handforth—were merely curious to make the new fellow's acquaintance. The rest were after blood. In other words, they remembered that the school shop was very handy, and Lord Pippinton was simply weighted down with money.

"Hallo! What?" said his lordship, as the crowd surged round. "By Jove! Where's the fire? Or is it football? I say, go easy—"

"So you're Lord Pippinton!" roared Handforth, clapping his lordship on the back in a playful manner. "Glad to meet you—Hi! What the—"

That playful clap of Handforth's had sent old Pippy lunging forward into the arms of Pitt and Grey. His topper went flying, and somebody trod on it in the confusion.

"What?" gasped his lordship. "Where are we? Off the train first, please! I mean, where's a strap? This sort of thing positively kills a chap. Who told me that St. Frank's was quiet?"

"Good old Pippy!" said Singleton, pushing forward. "At any rate, you've got a pal in me. Don't take any notice of these other chaps. They mean well, but—"

"Duggy, by Jove!" ejaculated Lord Pippinton, clinging to Singleton like a drowning man. "By Jove, Duggy! Haven't seen you for years! Which ward do you live in?"

"Ward?" grinned the Hon. Douglas.

"Isn't this the County Asylum?" asked Lord Pippinton. "I mean, these dotty blokes all over the place! There's one in particular," he added, looking fixedly at Handforth. "Dash it, I believe he's dangerous! Where's the strait-jacket?"

"Are you calling me mad?" demanded Handforth aggressively.

"Yes! Of course, that is to say—"

"Out with it!" snorted Handforth. "Am I mad or not?"

"Rather!" said old Pippy. "Ah! I'm beginning to gather a few things. The lads, eh? I knew there was something in the air. The dear old chaps of the Remove? Gather round! I'm Pippy, don't you know."

"It's all right," grinned Singleton. "He's only just realised who you are. It always takes him about five minutes. Whenever he goes to catch a train he always waits on the platform until it's gone, and then wonders when it's coming in."

"What about the tuck shop?" asked Hubbard pointedly. "A new chap is generally supposed to stand treat. Are you game, Pippy?"

"I'm afraid not," said Lord Pippinton, shaking his head.

"What?" howled the crowd.

"Well, I mean, games are hardly in my line—"

"You chump!" said Fullwood. "Are you game to stand treat at the school shop? That's what we're asking you. Tuck! Standing treat! Grub!" he added, with emphasis.

Lord Pippinton beamed.

"Absolutely!" he agreed. "Where is it? Don't forget, I pay!"

"We shan't forget that!" grinned Hubbard.

"Everybody welcome," said old Pippy.

"Any old thing you like—as much as you like. I mean, why not? A chap doesn't come to school every day. Pile in!"

There was a sudden rush, and the crowd vanished. Only Singleton and Nipper and one or two others remained.

"Hallo!" said old Pippy, looking round. "Where are all the blokes legging it to? Something pretty popular, by the length of their stride. I appeal to you, Duggy—"

"They've gone to the tuck shop," said the Hon. Douglas. "We'd better go along, too, or Mrs. Hake will have a fit. She'll be anxious to see the colour of your money."

Mrs. Hake, as a matter of fact, was nearly on the verge of collapse. Without the slightest warning, a perfect horde of raving maniacs had invaded her sedate little shop. At least, so it seemed to her. They didn't wait to be served. They just helped themselves. And the stock was vanishing at lightning speed.

"It's all right, Mrs. Hake!" shouted Singleton, pushing through. "This is Lord Pippinton—he's paying for everything. Don't trouble to make any bill—he's not particular about details."

By the time the feed was over, Mrs. Hake hadn't a crumb left in the shop. Everybody had taken Lord Pippinton at his word. Not only food was demolished, but every bottle of toffee, every box of chocolates, and every tin of biscuits was cleared out. There wasn't enough left in the shop to revive a starving mouse.

But Lord Pippinton paid up as though he liked it. It cost so many fivers that many of the juniors felt scared when they saw them being paid over. But old Pippy seemed positively disappointed when Mrs. Hake refused another batch. He replaced them in his pocket regretfully.

"But all that stuff!" he protested. "Fair's fair! We can't rob you, what? Have another two, just for luck. Or one?"

"You ass, you've squared up handsomely already," said Singleton, who had taken Pippy in tow. "Come outside—and put that money away safely. You'll be burgled in no time if you don't!"

He managed to get his lordship out into the Triangle.

"By the way, how much have you got?" he asked pointedly.

"Got?" said old Pippy.

"Money, you chump!"

"Oh!" said his lordship. "Yes, rather!"

"What do you mean, 'yes, rather'?" How much cash do you possess at this moment?" demanded Singleton.

"Oh, cash?"

"Money!" howled Singleton.

"The stuff that talks?"

"Yes, you dummy!"

"But, really!" said his lordship. "How on earth should I know? Money? I've got a bit, I suppose."

"Don't you count it?"

"Too much bore," said Pippy. "Money always is. As a matter of fact, I hate the stuff. I mean, it's only a nuisance."

He pulled out a silk handkerchief, and about half a dozen fivers floated away on the breeze. The Hon. Douglas recovered them just as they were in danger of falling into the clutching hands of a number of Fourth Formers. He went back grimly.

"Do you know you nearly lost twenty quid just then?" he demanded.

"Eh?" said Lord Pippinton. "Oh! Don't bother, Duggy! Keep it! The foul stuff is always getting in the way. I mean, just look at this! It's such a frightful nuisance!"

From almost every pocket he produced bundles of notes. The fellow was literally reeking with it. Singleton couldn't gauge the amount, but Lord Pippinton must have possessed over a hundred pounds in cash at that very moment.

"I knew you were pretty flush," said Singleton, "but I never dreamed that you wore the confounded stuff instead of underclothes! Why, you're simply padded out with it! Who gave it to you?"

Lord Pippinton looked vaguely surprised.

"People don't give it to me," he explained. "I just take it, you know."

"You take it?"

"From the bank," said old Pippy. "It's quite easy. You've only got to sign cheques, and things. Most frightfully obliging, these banks. I don't know where they get all the money from!"

"Do you mean to say that you can get hold of as much cash as you like?" asked Singleton. "You can send to the bank, and have the stuff delivered in lorries?"

"Well, not exactly lorries," said Lord Pippinton. "Although, of course, I dare say it might be possible. But it would take a frightful lot of money to fill a lorry, wouldn't it?"

"That's only a figure of speech, you ass!" said the Hon. Douglas. "What's the utmost you can get out of the bank without causing any commotion?"

"Yes," said old Pippy, nodding.

"I'm asking you how much."

"Oh? How much? I don't know! Hundreds," said his lordship. "If it comes to that, thousands. There's plenty of it there—they always let me have it. But what does it matter? I loathe it!"

"It matters a great deal," replied the Hon. Douglas grimly. "Pippy, old lad, you must have been sent by Providence! For once in your empty young life you're going to be useful!"

CHAPTER XIII.

WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE'S BOMBSHELL.



WITHOUT resorting to actual bombast, I think I may say, without exaggeration, that we have excelled ourselves," said William Napoleon Browne benevolently. "You will observe, Brother Hamilton, that the outward signs of trickery are conspicuous by their absence. Could any Chamber of Magic look less magical?"

Strictly speaking, this room was out of bounds—for it was supposed to be locked up and empty. But Browne and Stevens, of the Fifth, had been busy for nearly two weeks, on and off. They were now ready to the last detail—although there was nothing whatever to show for their labours.

Mysterious crates and boxes had been arriving for Browne for some days past. Many of the Fifth-Formers had been curious, but they had gained no information from their skipper. And Nipper was the only one who had been taken into Browne's confidence.

"It looks fine!" he declared. "But do

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"You've certainly done wonders, Browne," admitted Nipper.

"No draperies, no shaded lights, no effects," continued the Fifth-Former. "I rather fancy that we shall stagger the natives. We must not forget Brother Horace, who has assisted right nobly."

They were standing in the lecture hall of the Ancient House. It was a fairly small hall, but quite large enough for Browne's purpose. It was rather grimy and dusty, too—for the lecture hall was a part of the original Ancient House which had been standing prior to the recent rebuilding. All the lecture halls were now situated in the School House, separate and apart from the boarding establishments.

you think you'll be able to produce anything as mysterious as Quirke produces? It requires a trained illusionist to do those things well, you know."

Browne looked hurt.

"A remark, Brother Hamilton, which is tantamount to a slur," he said regretfully. "I am never one to blow my own trumpet. But, in self-defence, I must remind you that I am the world's greatest exponent of magic. I am daily expecting a visit from Mr. Maskelyne—to say nothing of Mr. Devant. On their knees, they will beg of me to tell them my secrets. But I shall be firm, and refuse."

"Well, there's nothing like modesty,"

chuckled Nipper. "And you mean to give this show to-night, Browne?"

"To-night."

"Within two hours from now?"

"Within two hours from now."

"But you haven't even announced it," said Nipper. "You haven't put a notice on the board, or anything. The fellows won't know."

Browne smiled indulgently.

"I venture to predict that the walls of this crumbling pile will billow outwards like a sail before the winter's blast," he declared. "Our audience will overflow to the very rafters. One word whispered round now, Brother Hamilton, will have a startling effect. We shall be unable to cope with the rush. Is it not better to give our young friends the benefit of a glad surprise? Why make them suffer the torture of endless waiting? Suspense is always trying. Moreover, it will be much more effective for my performance to hit them between the eyes while they have yet had no opportunity to prepare themselves for it."

There was a great deal in Browne's point of view. He had made up his mind to out-Quirke Quirke at his own game. Not until the last moment had he breathed a word. But the show would be all the more effective on that account.

And, as he had pointed out, it would have been a mistake to give a day or two's notice. The fellows would have had time to discuss the coming performance. They would have prepared themselves for the magical effects. And those effects, consequently, would have lost half their value. It was altogether better to spring the thing suddenly.

Fortunately, Browne had enough money to indulge his fancy. He was by no means wealthy, and he had had to screw in order to obtain the apparatus he needed. Even so, they were only hired. He and Stevens had rigged everything up—but Browne's had been the guiding brain.

Some little time later a notice was posted in every common-room, junior and senior. It was an elaborate affair, and couldn't fail to attract notice:

TO-NIGHT! TO-NIGHT!! TO-NIGHT!!!

KISMET, THE NAPOLEON OF MAGIC!

At 7 o'clock precisely, the world's most celebrated Illusionist will rock St. Frank's to its foundations by his stupendous performance. Absolutely regardless of expense! The most hair-raising, breath-taking, flesh-creeping, eye-opening, skin-tingling, mouth-gaping show under the sun! Everybody welcome! Come one, come all!

It is not Kismet's policy to boost his own prowess, and so he will welcome wayfarer's from far and wide to witness his amazing skill. Admission only on condition that no eggs or over-ripe vege-

tables are brought as companions. Remember! This is a serious performance! There is no waiting—there is no delay.

ADMISSION ABSOLUTELY FREE! AND DON'T FORGET—SEVEN O'CLOCK, PROMPT!

"It's one of old Browne's wheezes, of course," said Fullwood, as he looked at the bill in the Ancient House Junior common-room. "We can't miss it, you chaps. With Browne in charge, it ought to be a scream."

"Rather!" grinned Nick Trotwood. "It's a take-off on Quirke, I should imagine. I'll bet it'll be an exhibition of comic conjuring. Browne's a dabster at it, too."

There wasn't a soul in the Junior School who didn't know of the coming performance by six o'clock. And there was every indication that the lecture hall would be besieged long before opening time. Browne's calculations had been correct. It was far better to take everybody by surprise.

The seniors smiled, but most of them declared that it would be *infra dig* to attend the show. All very well for Browne, of course, but he was a fellow who felt just as much at home among the inky members of the Third as he felt among the lordly members of the Sixth. It was just like old Browne to indulge in a spoof of this kind.

So the seniors chuckled, and decided to give the performance a miss. There were certainly one or two Fifth-Formers who promised to be on hand—just to keep order, as they put it. But the prefects and the other members of the Sixth thought it wiser to assume an air of complete ignorance. As for the masters, they knew nothing about it whatever. At any rate, they pretended not to.

It was generally acknowledged that William Napoleon Browne was intent upon giving Ezra Quirke a nasty knock. In the East House the juniors were indignant and in high dudgeon. Most of Quirke's supporters openly declared that they wouldn't go within a mile of the affair—and most of them were fully determined to be the first on the spot.

As Skelton pointed out, it was essential for them to go, so that they could see the difference between Browne's crudities and Ezra Quirke's polished magic. Browne would have confederates and apparatus. Quirke had none of either. He was a true magician—a genuine sorcerer.

Quirke himself pretended to be amused. Actually, he was alarmed. But he urged his supporters to go to the show, and in this he was clever. He assumed that it would be a poor exhibition compared to his, and such a comparison would certainly add to his own laurels. At the same time, he had an inward feeling that this public "take off" would do his prestige harm.

In the West House, the Hon. Douglas Singleton read the notice, and decided to

go. He would take Lord Pippinton, and keep him out of harm's way.

By six forty-five the old lecture hall was packed. Every member of the Remove and Fourth was present, and there wasn't a single Third-Former who hadn't squeezed in some corner or other. William Napoleon Browne was a popular favourite, and he had the reputation of being a comedian. The audience was preparing itself for a huge laugh.

But, then, Browne was always full of surprises!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHALLENGE.



K ISMET, the Napoleon of Magic, advanced to the edge of the platform.

"Good old Browne!"

"Start the show, Napoleon!"

"Hurrah!"

"Speech—speech!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

William Napoleon Browne had made no attempt to disguise himself. His only change from the normal was a long, flowing, Oriental gown, which enveloped him to his ankles. It was impressive, and he looked even taller than usual.

"One moment, gentlemen!" he said genially. "I fear that many of you have entered this Hall of Mystery under the mistaken impression that it is a Hall of Mirth! Let me eradicate that error as rapidly as one would extract a thorn from one's anatomy. We are not here to indulge in ribald laughter. Indeed, I urge you to store up all the breath you can hold, for you will assuredly need it."

"Go it, Browne!"

"We know your little jokes!"

"I am about to present a programme of unexampled magic," continued Browne. "If you are in any way sceptical on this point, let me begin by producing a few trifles from the surrounding atmosphere."

Browne made a casual grab at the air, and the audience started. In some unaccountable way a perfectly live rabbit had materialised in the Fifth-Former's grasp. He made another grab with his left hand, and a birdcage sprang into being.

"You see," smiled Kismet, "these little things are not easily performed. One must have the assistance of hidden allies. No, not the cheery demons of the Black Arts. We are no dealers in such merchandise. We frankly admit that our effects are produced entirely by sleight-of-hand and all the recognised tricks of legerdemain."

Browne calmly waved his hands in the air, and then proceeded to rub them gently together. The rabbit and the birdcage had mysteriously vanished. And the next second Browne was adroitly manipulating a pack of cards.

The audience had ceased to chuckle. Noises had come to a stop. Everybody was watching with astonished attention. They had expected a travesty of the usual conjuring performance. And here was Browne calmly doing tricks as though he were a professional performer!

His art was polished, too.

There was not the slightest trace of the amateur conjuror about him. His assurance was colossal, and everything he did was finished to the last degree. Stevens, of course, knew that Browne had had a considerable reputation at Uxton, his old school, as an amateur conjuror. But William Napoleon had improved out of all knowledge.

It was a policy of his to say nothing. Nobody at St. Frank's knew that he was skilled in the art of conjuring. Perhaps Browne was capable of all sorts of unsuspected talents. He never admitted them.

"These trifles, of course, are by the way of preliminary," he observed, as he tossed the pack of cards into the midst of the audience. "These, brothers, you may keep as souvenirs. Preserve them well. In later years you will hand them to your children, telling them in hushed voices of your presence at this epoch-making performance."

Browne retreated to the centre of the platform, and took a small bamboo table. Ezra Quirke's supporters watched keenly. That table bore a strange resemblance to one in Quirke's own Cellar of Mystery. It was, indeed, a bamboo table of exactly the same pattern.

Browne thumped upon it, and then calmly pushed his hand through the top and drew out an enormous bronze casket. It had seemed impossible that any such object could be within. For one could see right through the table without any difficulty.

"Here," said Browne, "we have a feat which seems opposed to the laws of nature. And yet I do not mind admitting that this is a trick table. But can you detect it? I will willingly forfeit the sum of five thousand pounds to any member of the audience who can truthfully say that he can spot the deception."

From the casket he produced an enormous bowl of flowers. They came up in endless profusion. And then, at one wave of his hand, the flowers disappeared, and the bowl was found to be filled with water, in which goldfish were swimming.

Most of the tricks were the well-tried stunts of the professional magician. But Browne carried everything through with such delightful smoothness that the audience sat enraptured.

Everybody had forgotten his intention of laughing. The show was proving to be a masterpiece of finesse and skill.

And Browne went on to bigger things, too. Stevens came on the platform as an assistant, and several huge cabinets were brought into use. Stevens was placed in one of these; he was locked in, and all the

usual precautions were taken to prove that he was still there.

But when the case was opened he was gone. And the platform was brilliantly lighted, and there were no black hangings.

The thing seemed impossible. The audience could see round the cabinet, behind it, under it, and over it. Yet it was an absolute fact that Stevens apparently vanished into thin air.

Many of the watchers declared that he was still in the cabinet—hidden behind a false wall. But these brainy fellows were confused a moment later when Stevens appeared at the back of the hall.

"Now, you will all agree with me that Stevens is as solid as any human being can be," observed Browne calmly. "Under no circumstances can we accept the view that he converted himself into a formless spectre, and floated off the platform. You see the locked cabinet before you. You have seen that it was empty. Your eyes have told you that Stevens could never have escaped. And yet, brothers, he did escape. And it was all done by trickery. I confess it. I am no dabbler in the occult."

"Good old Browne!"

"How the dickens did you do it?"

"We will now reopen the cabinet, and see what it contains," went on Browne.

"Nothing, you will say. But I venture to predict that we shall be more lucky."

He snapped open the catches of the door, swung it open, and a curly-haired spaniel jumped out, barking joyously. He was none other than Boz, Dick Hamilton's little dog. It wasn't often that Boz was allowed indoors, but this was a very special occasion.

You will all say that this thing could not be done without the aid of demoniac influence," declared Browne. "But it has been done—and that is just my point. I fear that Brother Quirke is wilting visibly. Alas, this is one of his mottled evenings."

Ezra Quirke sat in his place, pale and still. Many of his supporters had been glancing at him rather strangely. For Browne had been producing some of the very effects that Quirke produced! And Browne was doing it all on the open platform, in the full glare of the electric light.

He wasn't finished, either.

Stevens obliged by taking a rest on a comfortable-looking lounge. And in a short time Stevens rose gently from the lounge, and hovered in mid-air with perfect ease. Browne even encircled him with hoops, showing that he was unsupported by any wires or stays. And Stevens apparently enjoyed himself. It was a cleverly performed example of levitation.

"Here we have a case where gravity is coolly defied," observed Browne, as he passed the hoops over the floating form. "But that, brothers, is just where you are wrong. We cannot defy gravitation. The laws of nature are as hard and fast as the tides and the changing moon. Brother

Stevens appears to be floating in the air—but he isn't. You cannot see how he is supported. But what the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve about. Be satisfied that this trick is well worth watching. I am merely proving that all these things can be done by human agency. It is hardly necessary for me to add that Brother Quirke is on the verge of collapse."

"I do not fear you!" shouted Quirke passionately. "These are only commonplace tricks—"

"Shut up, Quirke!"

"Squash that East House fraud!"

"Jump on him!"

"Yah! Swindler!"

A perfect yell of derision went up from half the audience, and Ezra Quirke sat back in his chair, biting his lip. This was a different tone from the one he had grown accustomed to! As he had feared, Browne's performance was doing him irreparable harm. His prestige was being lowered with every second that passed. Even his own supporters were looking doubtful.

At last the show was over—and the applause was genuine and generous. Browne had provided a far better entertainment than anybody had anticipated. But although he had finished his performance, the one important thing had yet to be accomplished. He came to the edge of the platform, and raised his hand.

"There is just one little thing I wish to mention, brothers," he said, as silence fell. "Many of you are earnest believers in Brother Quirke—"

"Yah! He's a fraud!"

"Quirke's finished now!"

"We are in no position to set ourselves up as judges—yet," proceeded Browne gently. "Let us not be harsh. I propose to give Brother Quirke an opportunity to prove his magical powers. In other words, I issue a challenge."

"I accept!" shouted Quirke, leaping up.

"You have not heard the conditions—"

"I care not for conditions!" panted Quirke fiercely. "You may make your own! I am ready to prove that my magic is genuine! Yours is frankly false—you have admitted it! You have thrown down the gauntlet! I accept!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE COMPACT OF TEN GETS READY.



THE lecture-hall was filled with an excited buzzing.

Ezra Quirke's dramatic acceptance of the challenge filled everybody with interest. His own supporters were wild with enthusiasm. By that prompt action Quirke had restored their faith in him.

"I am gratified, Brother Quirke, that you should act in this sensible way," observed

Browne. "My conditions are simple. This evening I have given a performance of magic. You have all seen remarkable things happen on this platform. I tell you frankly that they were all brought about by deception and trickery. I confess this. It is the one point I wish you to grasp with both hands, and hold on to."

"You're a clever chap, Browne!"

William Napoleon bowed.

"While admitting that some kind friend has expressed the obvious, I, nevertheless, bow my gratitude," he remarked. "The majority of you know that Brother Quirke has consistently maintained a solid front. He has declared that his own magic was performed by sorcery alone. He makes use of no apparatus. He produces his miracles by the aid of the Black Arts."

"It is true!" declared Quirke fiercely.

"I propose that Brother Quirke holds a meeting in his own Chamber of Mystery," continued Browne. "I impose no conditions. I do not even insist upon a preliminary search. But I defy Brother Quirke to produce a single phenomenon which can compare to my own effects. This meeting can be held when Brother Quirke pleases—"

"To-morrow evening!" shouted a dozen voices.

"Very well—to-morrow evening!" exclaimed Quirke, his eyes gleaming. "Your terms are generous, Browne. You do not insist upon a preliminary examination of my cellar—but I am perfectly willing that it should be examined from end to end. That will prove, I think, that I am unafraid. I will convince all and sundry that the walls of my cellar are concrete, and that there is no possibility of apparatus or confederates. I am ready to undergo this test to-morrow evening."

"Good for you, Quirke!"

"We'll all be there!"

"I fear that will be impossible," continued Quirke. "Only a limited proportion can be admitted—for the space is far smaller than this. However, the audience will no doubt be representative. In order to prove my good faith, I demand a preliminary examination. I will convince you that I can afford to laugh at this exhibition of commonplace conjuring."

Soon afterwards, the gathering broke up. Browne's magical performance was the talk of the Junior School for the rest of the evening. And interest in Quirke's coming test performance was at fever heat.

There were a few fellows, however, who seemed to take it for granted that Ezra Quirke was not destined for a very happy time. Quirke's own confidence was unbounded. He was certain of success.

But in Browne's study, in the Fifth-Form passage, ten fellows were filled with jubilation. The Compact of Ten had met, and congratulations were numerous. Apparently, Browne and Hamilton had confided certain things to the others.



"So you're Lord Pippinton!" roared Handforth, clapping his lordship on the back in a playful manner.

"Browne, old man, you're a genius!" declared Ralph Leslie Fullwood enthusiastically. "The way you worked that challenge up was marvellous. Quirke had to accept—he couldn't do anything else."

"He thinks he's on velvet!" chuckled Church. "My hat! What a shock he's in for!"

Browne nodded.

"Yes, I rather fancy that Brother Quirke is perilously near the ox-tail," he agreed. "Curiously enough, he thinks he is safe. Actually, the doom of his regime awaits him. In other words, he's for it!"

"We've got him in a cleft stick!" declared Dick Hamilton. "When that meeting takes place to-morrow—By Jove! What a climax! We'll break the spell to-morrow, or I'm a Dutchman!"

In the meantime, the Hon. Douglas Singleton and Lord Pippinton were having a quiet talk in Study S, in the West House. This was the study which had been given to old Pippy. He was delighted to find that he could have it entirely to himself.

And that conversation was significant. For it was all wrapped up in the same sequence of intrigue. Ezra Quirke was, for some reason only known to himself, intensely interested in Professor Sylvester Tucker's secret. He had proved this fact to Singleton beyond doubt.

And Singleton had seen an immense possibility in the advent of Lord Pippinton. The

fellow was a prize ass, but that was all to the good, perhaps. And he was certainly trustworthy. Pippy may have been a chump, but he was the soul of honour.

"About this money of yours, Pippy, old man," Singleton was saying, trying to make his tone careless. "How much have you actually got?"

"Money?" repeated Lord Pippinton languidly. "Oh, rather! Beastly stuff! Gives me a pain when I think about it."

"I can't help your pains," said the Hon. Douglas. "You're a kind of millionaire, aren't you?"

"Some foul thing of that sort."

"But how much can you touch without your pater nosing in?"

Lord Pippinton looked rather blank.

"The subject feeds me up," he confessed. "I mean, this money business. I don't like the bally stuff. I suppose it's because I've got so much of it. A chap sort of kind of gets fed up with it."

"Look here, Pippy, can't you be lucid for once?" demanded Singleton grimly. "Listen to me!" he added, shaking his lordship by the shoulder. "How—much—can—you—get—hold—of?"

Old Pippy was jerked into alertness.

"Oh, rather!" he said. "How much. My dear old boy? Why didn't you say so? As much as you like!"

"Five thousand pounds?"

"Twice as much!" said old Pippy.

"You really mean that you can lay your fingers on it?"

"But I don't want to," said his lordship. "As long as I've got enough to grub along with—"

"Look here, if I ask you for ten thousand, will you let me have it?" asked Singleton tensely. "You'll have to trust me, too. I can't explain why I want it, or when you'll get it back. But if I want ten thousand pounds, can you supply it? Will you trust me?"

Lord Pippinton was keenly alive to the scheme now.

"Duggy, old lad, it's yours!" he said promptly. "A frightful sum, by Jove, but it's yours! I mean to say, by Jove, a frightful sum! Ten thou, what? A bit of a staggerer, Duggy!"

"I know that—"

"Duggy, a bit of a staggerer," said old Pippy. "At the same time, if you say so, it's got to be done. And I'm not to inquire into the whys and wherefores and whatnots? You're not, by any chance, building a factory, or anything? Or starting a bally business?"

"Yes!" said Singleton. "You might call it that—starting a business. But I'll let you know about this later, Pippy. If I go away for ten minutes, shall I find you here when I come back?"

Lord Pippinton sank back in his chair.

"I hope so," he murmured uneasily. "But one never knows, Duggy. Some of

the blokes may come along, and take a fancy to my carcase. I have a foreboding that evil times lay ahead."

"Nothing'll happen until you get into your dormitory," said Singleton comfortingly. "See you in ten minutes, Pippy."

He hurried out, dashed to the Ancient House, and sped upstairs. A minute later he was knocking at the door of Professor Tucker's study.

CHAPTER XVI.

TO HELP THE PROFESSOR!



"WHAT is this interruption?"

Professor Sylvester Tucker looked up from his desk, adjusted his glasses, and frowned. He gazed at Singleton severely. The desk was strewn with papers. The Hon. Douglas noted that columns of figures were on some of them. And one or two of the papers were of an ominous blue, suggesting writs.

"I didn't mean to disturb you, sir—"

"You are disturbing me!" interrupted the professor. "Upon my soul! I won't be interrupted and distracted— Good gracious! Singleton! Of course—of course! Come in, my boy! For the moment I was forgetting."

Singleton closed the door, and advanced.

"Reckoning things up, sir?" he asked, smiling.

The professor's kindly face became grave.

"Yes, indeed!" he admitted. "A strenuous task, Singleton. And how I hate figures! And yet, my boy, how they must be wrestled with! I fear I was too optimistic during our earlier interview. But you are looking anxious? There is no hitch?" he went on, with a catch in his breath. "You have not come to tell me—"

"No, no, sir," interrupted Singleton hastily. "I'll be able to get that money just as I promised—by to-morrow, I expect. I'll try and get the lot. You don't know how I appreciate your kindness, sir."

"Good gracious! My kindness?"

"Yes, sir."

"Nonsense! It is you—"

"That's just your way of looking at it, sir," said Singleton. "I take it as an honour that my useless money can be employed in such a wonderful way. And I was thinking that you might be able to achieve an even greater success if you had more."

"More? More than ten thousand?" ejaculated the professor, startled. "No, no! You mustn't think of it, Singleton! I will admit my figures were on the wrong side, but— It would be too risky, Singleton—your father might institute inquiries."

"I'm not thinking of myself, sir," said the Hon. Douglas. "But it so happens that a new chap arrived to-day. He's an old

friend of mine, too. I've known him for years. Lord Pippinton, sir."

The professor was agitated.

"You mustn't, Singleton," he said huskily. "Lord Pippinton! For Heaven's sake, do not betray my confidence to a man of such rank——"

"He's only a boy, sir—in the Remove," put in Singleton. "Haven't you heard? He's terribly rich. He can whack out ten thousand without knowing it. Wouldn't it be better if he supplies you with that sum, too?"

"Better!" breathed Professor Tucker. "You actually mean that this schoolboy can lay his hand on ten thousand pounds? What is the world coming to? Am I dreaming? One cannot obtain a tenth of that sum from a bank unless one produces cast-iron securities. And you talk of a school-boy——"

"He's different to the others, sir."

"But you are different, too," said the professor. "This is altogether too astounding! I might credit one boy having such powers. But two! It is an astounding coincidence——"

"It seems like it to you, sir, but when one's got piles and piles of money, a sum like ten thousand seems nothing," explained the Hon. Douglas. "I consider myself rolling in it, but Lord Pippinton can do practically anything he likes. You see, he's inherited the money from an uncle, and although he can't touch the bulk of it until he's of age, he can always get a substantial sum if he wants it."

The Professor held his head.

"My brain is throbbing!" he muttered. "My boy, you don't know what joy you have already brought me. But this fresh news is too stupendous. And it cannot be. It would involve taking another into our secret. I dare not risk——"

"It's all right, sir—I needn't tell Pippy anything," interrupted Singleton. "He trusts me, and he'll hand the money over. There's just a possibility that he might like to know where it's gone. I think it would only be fair to him, too. If he can get another ten thousand to add to mine, will you object to my bringing him to you after you have got the money? Then we can tell him everything, and make him comfortable. He's a frightful ass, sir, and I don't suppose he'll understand anyhow."

Professor Tucker looked at Singleton warmly.

"You have got the right spirit, my boy," he said. "It would indeed be wrong if I accepted this money—even for such a good purpose—without your friend knowing the truth. Certainly you may bring him to me, and I will assure him that he is doing right."

"That's all serene then, sir," said Singleton happily. "I don't want to tell Lord Pippinton in advance, in case there's a slip. Then we should have admitted him into the secret for nothing. It's a lot better to leave it until afterwards."

Professor Tucker gazed dreamily towards the ceiling.

"Twenty thousand pounds!" he breathed. "I am sure that I am asleep—that I shall presently awaken to the stark realities of the bitter truth. It is too much, Singleton. My old brain is throbbing."

"I wish I had the money now, sir," said Singleton wistfully. "I'd put it in front of you, and then you'd be free of all doubt——"

"Good gracious, no!" interrupted the professor, with a start. "You surely don't imagine that I would accept the money in the absence of witnesses? No, Singleton, never! It would be little short of criminal to take advantage of your trust in me."

"I don't understand, sir."

"When you pay me that money, Singleton, there will be a lawyer in this room," declared Professor Tucker firmly. "Probably I shall obtain a local solicitor of high standing from Bannington—one who is well known at the school. He will be a witness, and the documents will be legally signed. It is the only way in which I can accept these wonderful loans. I am thinking of my invention, Singleton. It is the dream of my life—and for the success of that, I am ready to go to any lengths. But, above all, everything must be straight and above board."

"It's absolutely unnecessary, sir, but if you wish it, we'll agree," said Singleton smiling. "Rely on me to keep everything mum until the money's actually here. Thanks awfully, professor. Good-night, sir."

"Are you going, Singleton?" asked Professor Tucker. "Good-night, my boy—good-night! And thank you a thousand times. You must forgive me if I am still a little anxious. I cannot quite believe that this dream will materialise."

"You won't say that when you see the money to-morrow, sir," replied the Hon. Douglas. "We'll have it, never fear!"

He hurried back to the West House, and burst into Study S. Lord Pippinton was still lounging in the chair, staring at nothing. He wasn't asleep, but he had a habit of lying quite still, with all animation suspended.

"It's all right Pippy!"

"Eh?" said Lord Pippinton. "Yes! That is, what? Oh, Duggy! Roll in, old top! I was just thinking—— At least, I believe I was. I don't seem to remember."

"Look here, Pippy, concentrate!" said

(Concluded on page 33.)



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"IN the left hand pocket of my overcoat," said Blake, closing the knife, "you will find a couple of gags. Help yourself to one of them and to a couple of these pieces of rope. We had better be quick, for at present these two fellows are alone."

"Sarjo has a good name for hospitality, Excellency. The others, no doubt, are eating and drinking in his kitchen," said Rivastoff. "It is as well we eluded Veilburg's spies, for a man who walks about Kamfak at night with a rope round his waist and gags in his pocket would arouse their curiosity."

"No doubt; but don't waste time, my friend. Though you are unable to drive a car, I trust you are able to tie a knot."

"Excellency," said Rivastoff, "as from my early youth I have been warned that my death will be caused by a loose knot—meaning, no doubt, the hangman's—I always take good care to make very tight ones."

"Good, my friend!" said Sexton Blake. "Take both gags, then, and all the rope, and hand me your revolver. There are suitable trees in the shrubbery, so make your

knots good ones, and put the gags on artistically, for I appreciate neat work. When you have disarmed these fellows, take them one at a time, and if we are disturbed jump into the car, and I promise you quite an exciting ride. Come!"

They crept back to the gate and saw the two gamblers still seated in the brilliantly lighted car, intent on the game. The man in plain clothes seemed to be holding a good hand. After some deliberation he added three or four greasy Carlovian banknotes to the little heap in front of him. The other also hesitated, and then put down three notes of the same value.

"I play two kings," said the man in plain clothes. "There they are."

"And I play two aces," said a quiet voice, "and there they are. One shout, gentlemen, one word, and I fire—so hands up!"

A masked man with a revolver in each hand was at the near-side door of the car, and as the startled card-players saw the weapons levelled at them, another masked man opened the off-side door.

"The other way out," he said. "Gentlemen, forgive me if I take a liberty. A loose knot for once, two of them, in fact. Gentlemen, we are taking a brief walk into the Prime Minister's shrubbery. Let us go together."

Rivastoff took their weapons, removed their hats, dropped a noose over the head of each man, and, grasping the centre of the rope himself, he hustled his prisoners out of the car. Close by, a path led into the shrubbery. The ex-bandit told them to stop after they had gone a dozen yards.

"My friend with the pistol wishes to borrow your coat," he said to the chauffeur. "He has taken a fancy to the pretty buttons, and as the night is warm, you will not miss it. Do not drop it in the dust, but hand it to him politely. I thank you. Now let me beg of you to open your mouths in turn. I do not wish to use force, but if I have to pull on this rope you will open them quickly enough. Ah, this vice of gambling! Had you been doing your duty, instead of trying to cheat each other at cards, you might not have met with this little misfortune."

In Carlovía, a threat to shoot was generally more than a threat, so the prisoners grunted

(Continued on page 34.)

"The Schoolboy Conspirators"

(Continued from page 31.)

Singleton tensely. "Can you manage to get hold of that ten thousand pounds by to-morrow afternoon?"

"Ten thou?" repeated old Pippy. "Oh, that! Money again! I say, be a bit sporty, you know—"

"Can you get hold of it?" demanded the Hon. Douglas.

"Yes—yes—why not?" said his lordship. "Anything you say, Duggy. But how? A special messenger to the bank, what? Good! So that's all fixed. But, I say, do change the rotten subject!"

The Hon. Douglas Singleton was satisfied. He knew that Lord Pippinton was a hopeless fathead, but when it came to a question of money, his word was good.

The morrow was likely to prove a stirring day!

Not only would Professor Tucker be provided with the money he so urgently needed, but Ezra Quirke would be dealt with by the Compact of Ten! A climax was approaching.

But not one of the schoolboy conspirators had the slightest conception of the real possibilities. That climax was destined to be far more staggering in its amazing revelations than anybody dreamed of!

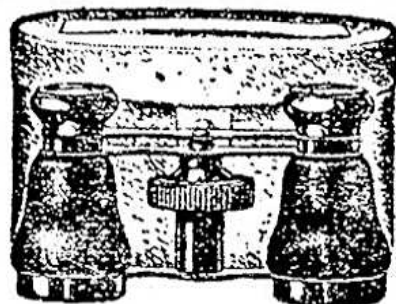
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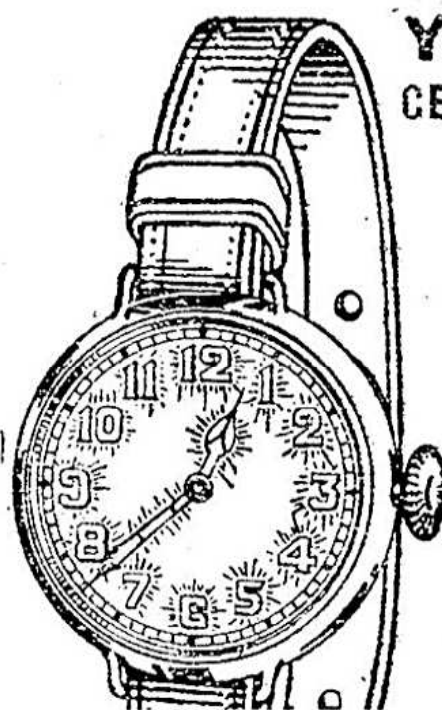
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(Continued from page 32.)

a few curses, scowled hideously, and opened their mouths, and Rivastoff gagged them. A couple of saplings growing side by side were quickly found, and to these the ex-bandit tied the prisoners in a workmanlike manner that spoke of much experience. Having satisfied himself that they were too well gagged to raise an alarm and too tightly bound to make their escape, Sexton Blake and the ex-brigand returned to the car.

Putting his own hat and overcoat on the driver's seat, Blake donned the uniform coat and braided cap they had taken from the chauffeur. They lighted cigarettes, and the ex-bandit blew two jets of smoke down his nostrils and chuckled.

"Ah, Excellency," he said, "you are a man after my own heart, a man I can follow, though hitherto I have always led! That was all so quiet, so neat, but poor game—very poor game! And yet there is a pleasure in being neat; but you were wrong. In this card game which they were playing, which we call 'Badzdja,' the kings are the highest cards, not the aces, Excellency, as you told them."

"But my two aces won the game."

"Yes, I believe you there; but it was against the rules," said Rivastoff, with another chuckle. "Excellency, we have both forgotten something."

"What is that?"

"Firstly, that these other low people will return and notice a difference—but, of course, you had not forgotten that. We have forgotten how Veilburg will summons his car when he needs it. It will be by whistle, for that is the rule here; but we had better learn whether it is one, two, three, four, or even five blasts. It would make us foolish if we heard the call and took the car up to the door, to find that it was Bizer or Colonel Zuss. I will ask the chauffeur, and then, Excellency, if you will seat yourself, I will teach you the rules of Badzdja and how to play it."

The ex-brigand vanished into the shrubbery and was away some time. He brought back some of the rope with him.

"Three calls, Excellency, unless the rascal lied," he said, "and as I threatened to return and strangle him if I found he lied, I fancy he told the truth. Here is some spare rope, for a night in the fresh air would give Veilburg time to think over his sins, and Kamfak is full of quiet spots and useful trees. Good, here is money! As I am almost certain to win at first, unless you prove yourself an apt pupil, let us play with their money. There is much chance in the game, but there is also skill."

Sexton Blake was getting along very well, when a whistle was blown from the house, and two men came running down the drive.

They shouted "Good-night!" to the card-players, and took away the first car, and presently passed through the gateway with a passenger.

"That thief of a lawyer, Bizer!" said the ex-bandit. "The rogue who taxes us and puts much of it into his own pocket and Sarjo's. The meeting is over. Two blasts this time. Unless the chauffeur lied that is the colonel's car. Yes, here come his men! That dog of a policeman is sure to be late. As he does the dirty work for his master, he'll stay to the last for instructions."

About five minutes later they heard the whistle again, and it was blown three times. Rivastoff put away the cards and took the seat behind Sexton Blake, who drove slowly up the dark avenue and stopped before the door of a handsome modern house. A butler threw open the door, and Rivastoff clicked his tongue against his teeth. The chief of the secret police came out of the house and down the steps, but he was not alone, for Brentschi, the secretary, was with him.

"Well, Excellency, I think I have enough rope for two," muttered the ex-bandit, "and any old rag will make a gag."

"To the palace, and then to headquarters," said the chief of the police. "After you, Mr. Secretary."

"Lighted streets all the way, Excellency," whispered Rivastoff, "and well policed. If you take those orders, everything goes for nothing."

"I'm not going to take those orders," said Blake quickly. "I shall stop at the bottom of the drive. Jump down and cover them."

As the car stopped so unexpectedly, Veilburg put his head out of the window to ask what was the matter. He did not manage to finish his question, for the cold muzzle of a revolver was thrust almost into his open mouth. On the other side of the car a masked man wearing a chauffeur's cap with the police band and star took the secretary by the collar and hauled him bodily over the sash of the window. Brentschi gave one strangled cry, and received a shake that silenced him and half-throttled him.

"Stand still, be silent, and keep your hands up!" said a deep, threatening voice. "How are you going, comrade?"

"Oh, this is a tame dog!" answered Rivastoff coolly. "I have his gun, and I will bring him round to you and share the rope. Be careful of that rogue of yours, for he is slippery dirt. Be quick, for I hear it striking eleven, and at eleven the police patrols are relieved."

Blake caught sight of Veilburg's face as Rivastoff brought him past the headlamps of the car, and the chief of the secret police was not smiling.

He was white and haggard, and there was terror in his eyes, for he knew that, next to Sarjo and the lawyer Bizer, he was the most hated man in Carlovina, and he was sure that his end had come, and that they intended to assassinate him.

"Have you searched him?"

"Unless he has secret pockets cunningly

concealed, I have everything he carried," answered the ex-bandit. "I will gag him with his own handkerchief, and blindfold him with my own, for it is the custom to blindfold a man before you shoot him. It is a wise custom, for by so doing the executioner avoids the evil eye. It is a pity we have so little rope, for a bullet is too good for the other rogue. Oh, there will be gay dancing and jolly drinking of wine in Kamfak to-morrow when the bodies are found and the news is told. A great day for Carlovica, comrade."

"Gag them and bind them, friend, and don't talk so much," said Sexton Blake. "I think I hear the patrol."

"Only a car going to the opera house," said Rivastoff. "It is a short performance to-night, unless the king chooses to prolong it."

The ex-brigand applied gag and cord in his efficient way, and the chief of the secret police was hustled down the pathway. As Rivastoff had used up his rope, he tore the lining out of the chauffeur's overcoat and used that instead to fasten the prisoner to the trees. Then he riddled his pockets of everything he had taken from Johann Veilburg except a packet of papers.

"I trust this is what you want, excellency," he said, handing Blake the packet,

"for if it is not we have gone to much trouble for little profit."

Blake put on his overcoat and hat, and put the packet with the papers he had taken from the secretary, and then switched off the lights of the car. A bleak wind was blowing across the square, and the sky was dark with the threat of heavy rain.

"It would be wiser to leave the headlights on, I think, excellency," said Rivastoff. "If the prime minister's man comes to shut the gates, and the lights are burning, he will not be suspicious, nor will the police. They will think they have only left it for a short time."

"It will make no difference," said Blake. "If people recognise it as a police car nothing will be said or done. They're all too afraid of the police here. Shall we meet later at the sign of the Red Dagger and drink a bottle of wine, friend?"

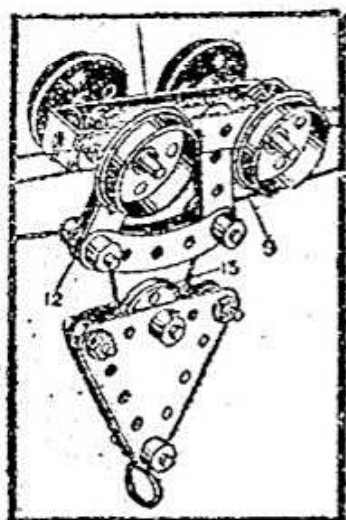
"Cafés are dangerous places on opera nights, excellency."

"Then why not at the opera itself?" said Sexton Blake. "I fancy we shall be able to drink our wine in comfort and safety as guests of the captain of the Royal Guard."

"A good idea, excellency. Though the wine they sell at the opera house is not of the best, I have had all I wish of the police for one night."

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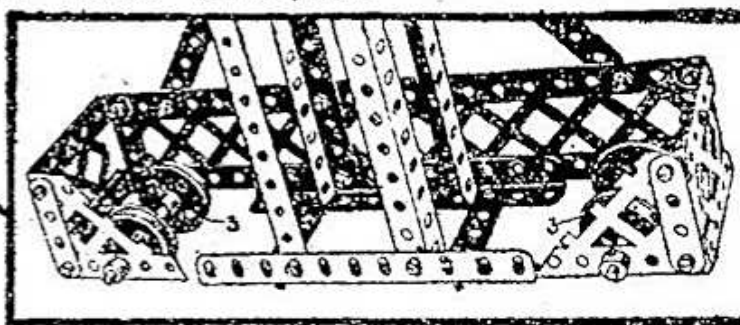
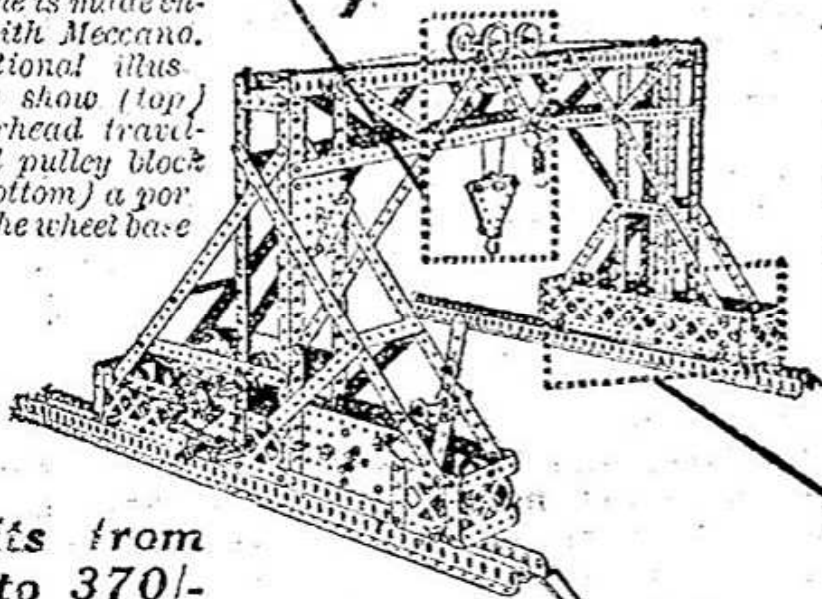
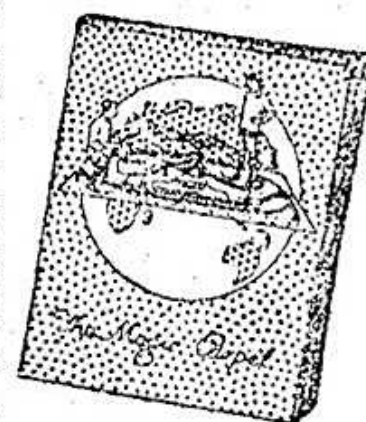


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A DOCUMENT OF DEATH.

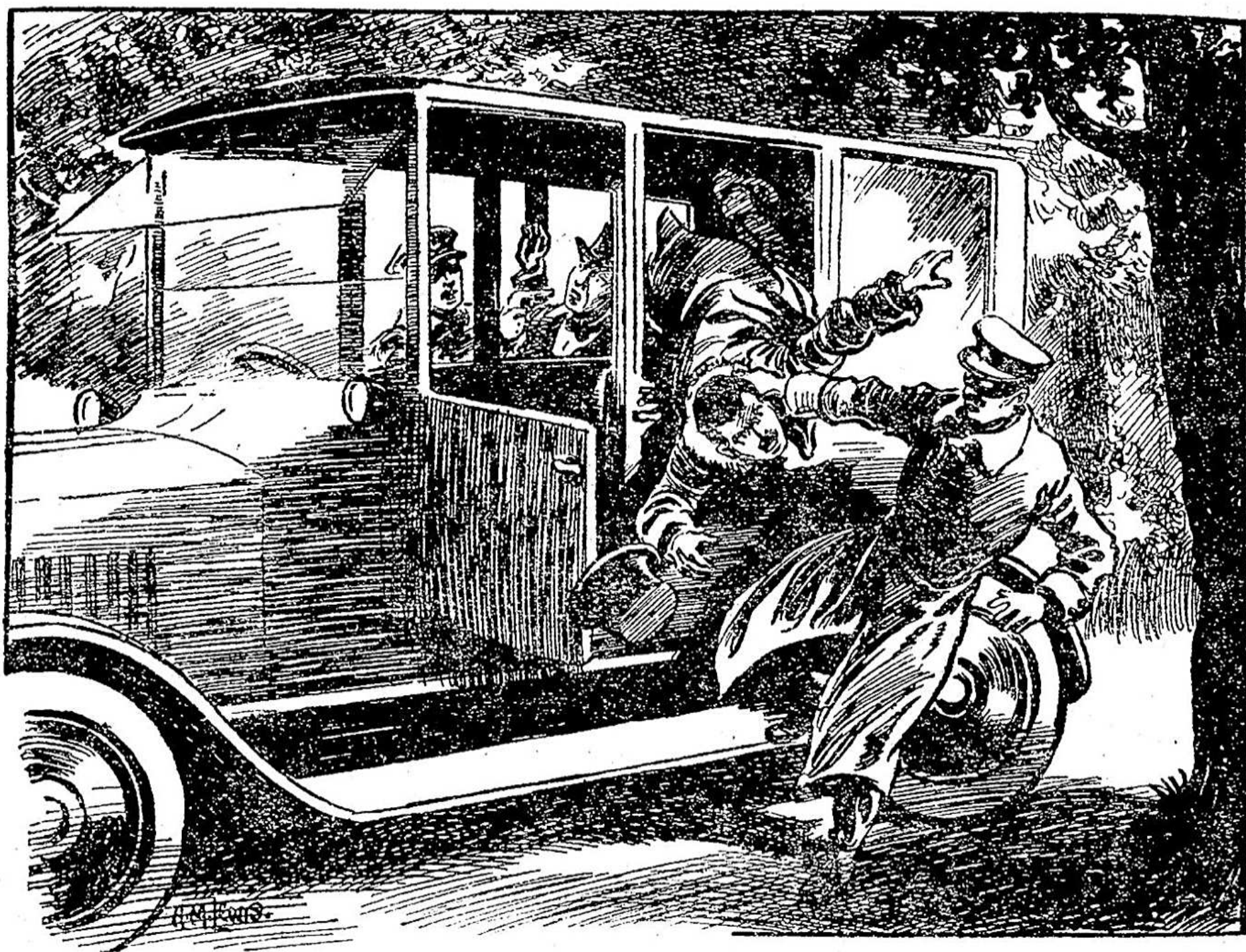
WHEN alone in his bedroom, Sexton Blake proceeded to examine the papers that he had taken so much trouble and risk to obtain. A glance at the documents abstracted from the secretary's pockets showed them to be of no value. Blake burnt them carefully, collected the ashes on a sheet of newspaper, and shook them out of the window.

It was blowing and raining, and no doubt the chief of the secret police, secretary Brentschi, the chauffeur, and the gunman were not enjoying themselves in the prime

Blake wondered why this should be written in that mongrel language known as Carlovic. He thought that Princess Celia could both speak it and read it, for she was a little lady of many gifts, but she would be in bed at this hour, and there might be something written there it would be unwise to let a young girl see.

"Dirty work, or Veilburg would not have been carrying this," thought Sexton Blake.

He pulled the electric reading-lamp closer, tilted back the lamp, and held the paper up to the light, and then he put the document to his nose and sniffed it. In the distance



On the other side of the car, a masked man, wearing a chauffeur's cap with the police band and star, took the secretary by the collar and hauled him bodily over the sash of the window.

minister's garden; but their worries did not trouble Sexton Blake. He spread out the paper Rivastoff had taken from Veilburg. It was a thick parchment paper of folio size, bearing the royal arms and the royal seal. What it did not bear was the royal signature.

"Beaten," said Sexton Blake.

The writing was in a language he did not understand. As the rulers of Carlovic had been British for generations, and English was taught in all the schools and spoken surprisingly well in the shops and streets,

he heard a faint clatter of hoofs, announcing the return of the king with his bodyguard. His majesty, who had a good appetite, would be eager for his supper, so Blake did not expect to see Tinker. Blake glanced at the telephone list that stood in a silver frame on his desk, and turned the pointer of the disc till it was opposite number 31.

"Is that the guard-room?"

"Yes," came the answer.

"Is the lieutenant there?"

"It's the lieutenant speaking, Mr. Brown."

"Good. I didn't recognise your voice at

first," said Sexton Blake. "Will you come round? I want your help rather badly."

"Why not come to us, Mr. Brown? My esteemed captain has invited me to a supper of cold trout and roast chicken, with the usual salad, and as he seems to be lucky enough to have the run of the royal cellars, there will be champagne. I have no hesitation in inviting you."

"I'll come with all the pleasure in the world," said Sexton Blake.

To be captain of the Royal Guard had its dangers and its hard work, but it was a very enviable post. Blimp was in possession of magnificent quarters, and his orders were obeyed as promptly as the king's. Of course, on important occasions the colonel took the place of honour, complete with stays and crimped moustache, but Blimp was the real commander of the Royal Guard and a favourite with the king, and every one of his men knew it. With his men he was a bit of a tyrant, but a jovial tyrant, and though they had to work and drill hard, they had never been so well housed, fed, clad, or paid.

Captain Coggs put on no airs, in spite of his sudden rise to power and luxury. He beamed with delight when Sexton Blake came in.

"Gawsh! I'd have asked you to come round before, sir, but I thought I might be taking a bit of a liberty," he said. "I'm not quite used to it yet, but I'm obliged to the lieutenant. Bit of a change this for me; sort of thing I've had in my dreams. No mess bills to pay neither, and no merry old plum and apple and bully beef, but the fat of the land. Bit of a joy-ride, barring my gallant colonel."

"If you could only steal his corsets, and make him show up on parade without them one morning, the king would retire him, Blimp."

"That's what Master Tin—what Master Jones suggested," said Blimp, as he carved a chicken. "I suppose we must have a colonel, but I could make a better one out of this old rooster's hind leg. Uncork the wine, lieutenant, like a good 'un. Personally I'd sooner have beer; but Kamfak beer isn't fit for hogs, so, with much grief, I put up with champagne. Here's very good health to both of you."

"And to the Royal Guard and its captain," said Sexton Blake. "Are you sure you've got them in hand, Blimp? Will they follow you?"

"All the way, sir," said Blimp. "I'm not boasting they'd face heavy stuff or machine-guns too well, but they'd have a go. They'll do what I tell 'em all the time, and I know the lieutenant will bear me out in that. You give me any order, sir, if it comes through the king, and I'll carry it out, if it's an order to burn down the town. The king can gamble on the Royal Guard all the time."

"I think it's true," said the lieutenant.

"Captain Coggs handles them as I could never handle them."

"I've knocked it into their thick heads that they're the king's guard," growled Blimp, "and it took some knocking into them."

"That the king comes before everyone?"

"Absolutely, sir," answered Blimp. "They hadn't been taught that before, but I've done it. If I get an order it's got to be from the king's own lips, or have his signature on it. We're the king's regiment, and above orders in council and above the law. That's what I say, and what I'll stick to."

"I've warned you, captain, that you'll come a sad cropper if anything happens to the king."

The big, red-faced soldier laughed his hoarse, breezy laugh.

"Gawsh! I'm not so sure," he said; "and I wouldn't like anything to happen to him if they were to offer me the job. Unless I'm shot I shall still be captain of the queen's guard. Gentlemen, I ask you to drink the health of Princess Celia, a princess every inch of her if there ever was one."

"You're right there, Blimp," said Sexton Blake, and the lieutenant nodded his agreement. "She's the cleverest little lady in Europe."

Blimp was called away by a message from King Peter just as supper was over and they were lighting their cigars.

"Make yourselves at home, and if there's anything you want ring for it, for it's better than a first-class hotel and no bills to pay," he said.

"Are we safe here, lieutenant?" asked Blake, when Blimp had gone out with rattling spurs and clanking scabbard. "From eavesdroppers, I mean?"

"I think so. It's a thick door. Has anything occurred to make you suspicious?"

"I'm always suspicious, so we'll get further away from the door. I want to tell you what I have been doing to-night."

The lieutenant listened with a grave face, but he laughed when he heard where the head of the secret police and the private secretary were likely to spend the night unless some good luck came their way.

"And this is what I want you to read to me before I destroy it," said Sexton Blake.

The lieutenant took the document and glanced over it.

"It is nothing at all," he said. "It is merely an order to place another small tax on wines for the purpose of raising money for the repair of some of the forts on the frontier."

"Does an order like that need the royal seal and the king's signature?"

"I should say not. It is not a new tax, only a slight increase. An order in council would be sufficient."

"Why, then, should the head of the secret police, who has nothing to do with taxation,

bring that away with him from the Prime Minister's house?"

"I don't know, sir," answered the lieutenant. "As you say, it has nothing to do with Johann Veilburg—nothing in the world."

"And why is it engrossed in Carlovic?"

"I am only a soldier, sir," said the lieutenant. "I don't think it is unusual to write a state document in Carlovic, though why such a wretched thing like this should be engrossed and made to look so important I cannot tell."

"I think I can," said Sexton Blake. "There's a smell of chemicals about the thing. The king has promised his sister and my assistant to put his signature to nothing he has not read, and I'm certain he can't read this. The trick seems to be that he'll ask the princess to read it to him, unless he has forgotten his promise. As it's nothing at all on the surface, the princess will tell him to sign it. Let us see what is underneath. I know the secret of that particular chemical. Let us go to my rooms, and leave excuse to the captain with the orderly."

Tinker was waiting there, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

"That rotten old opera house was as hot as a furnace, and it made me sleepy, guv'nor," he said. "Good-morning, lieutenant, for it's close on one, if not earlier. Do you want me for anything, or shall I stagger to my little cot while I'm awake enough to take my boots off?"

"Take the writing off that before you take off your boots, and bring the square bottle with the yellow cork out of the medicine-chest, young 'un."

Tinker caught the paper as Blake tossed it to him.

"You wicked old slave-driver, guv'nor," he said cheerfully. "Here I am absolutely perishing for want of sleep, and I've got to start messing about with chloride of lime to shift ink. I'll complain to the king and get you shoved into one of the dungeons under the moat."

The paper still bore the royal arms when Tinker brought it back and diffused a strong odour of chloride of lime. The writing had not quite disappeared, but it was only a mere grey shadow. Blake took the square bottle, shook it, and withdrew the yellow cork, to which a sponge was attached by a piece of wire. As Tinker and the lieutenant watched over his shoulder, he brushed the wet sponge swiftly to and fro across the paper.

"You suspect a palimpsest?" said the lieutenant.

"That is the old name for it; something erased or bleached out, and something else written over it," said Sexton Blake. "An ancient trick; but it would have served their purpose, no doubt. Look, the first writing

is coming through under the developer. It's Carlovic, like the other, so I shall need you again, lieutenant. Now perhaps we shall discover why Johann Veilburg was carrying this about in his pocket."

"But if it is something that requires the royal signature, what use would it be without the signature?"

"No good at all. But Veilburg may have taken it to make sure that the under-writing did not play any tricks, and show signs of coming through before it was handed to the king," said Blake. "The members of the Supreme Council are not chemists, and it may be too dangerous a thing to consult a chemist about. Now I think it is readable, lieutenant."

The lieutenant took the paper, and, as he read it, Tinker and Sexton Blake saw it begin to shake in his hand.

"A document of death," he said in his slow voice. "If you have any brandy or whisky, I should like a glass."

Blake nodded to Tinker, who mixed a fairly stiff glass of brandy and water.

"Thank you," said the lieutenant. "As an old soldier, I am not very easily upset, but this has shaken me."

"Is your own name there?"

The lieutenant put down the tumbler and nodded.

"Yes, my own name is there, sir," he answered. "I cannot read this direct from the Carlovic, for I am slow at translating into English, though I was taught your language at school. But you were right, sir. Veilburg was not carrying a harmless order about an increased tax on wines. The name of every person the Supreme Council hates or fears is on this murderous list. As I said, it is a document of death. If the king signs this, or is tricked into signing it, no man in Kamfak or all Carlovic can call his life his own. Every enemy of Sarjo and Bizer and the rest of the junta appears, and these people are all loyalists, staunch supporters of the young king and lovers of their country."

"Will it mean a round-up?" asked Tinker.

"A general arrest."

"Of how many?"

"Oh, when I spoke of all the enemies of the junta, I meant, of course, the prominent ones," explained the lieutenant. "Without counting, I should guess there are nearly five hundred names here. The police will know how to deal with the smaller fry without having their names on a royal document. There will be no trials. In Carlovic, unfortunately, with this gang in power, there is no time wasted on trials for political offences. The prisoners will be carried off to some of the mountain fortresses, and then——"

(Continued on page 40.)

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The lieutenant paused with a shrug of his shoulders.

"A jolly old country," said Tinker. "I wonder what my pal, his Majesty, would do when he found out he'd been tricked."

"What could he do?"

"Precious little if all his pals had been rounded up and imprisoned or shot," said Tinker. "Peter's difficulty is that he's fresh to the job, and doesn't know they are his pals, and Sarjo and company will take good care to tell him something very different."

"If this plot carried, the king would be completely at the mercy of the junta," said Sexton Blake.

"He would be blamed, too, however innocent, sir," added the lieutenant. "The junta would wash their hands of it, and swear they had begged the king not to do it. With the newspapers in their pay, they would manage to make many people believe they were innocent, for the king's signature is law in Carlovía. Then, if they found the king in their way——"

Again the lieutenant paused and shrugged his shoulders.

"An assassination," said Tinker, "and jolly well deserved and nicely arranged by Sarjo if one of the friends of the victims didn't do it. What a country! Picture palaces, wireless, trams and motors, and latest Paris fashions, and yet things go on like they used to go on about four or five hundred years ago in Italy or Russia. I think it's time we trekked back to merry old England, guv'nor."

Sexton Blake smiled.

"I think it is time, young 'un," he said, "but it's a pity to go when the excitement is just beginning. I want you to write me a translation of that, lieutenant, and when we have read it, we'll destroy both the original and the translation."

While the lieutenant was busy at the desk, Tinker curled himself up on the couch and went to sleep, and Sexton Blake sat

down in an easy-chair, smoking his pipe and gazing at the elaborately-painted ceiling steadily and thoughtfully.

For a long hour only the scraping of the lieutenant's pen broke the silence.

"It is done," he said at last.

"Thank you, lieutenant."

Blake read the translation, and then, rousing Tinker, told him to read it.

"I am very much obliged to you, lieutenant," said the private detective. "Somehow or other we must check this vile plot. We have delayed it, though you may be sure we have not checkmated the plotters."

The two papers were burnt and the ashes thrown out of the window by Tinker.

"A lovely night, guv'nor," he said, wiping the raindrops from his hand. "Still pouring. Peter will be off fishing again."

"He might do a lot worse," said Sexton Blake, "a great deal worse. You go to bed, young 'un."

The lieutenant went back to his quarters, after promising to telephone some news to Blake, and Blake waited for the message.

"Yes?" he asked, when the telephone-bell rang.

"No, sir," replied the lieutenant's voice.

Mr. Secretary Brentschi, who resided in the palace, had not returned, for he could not have entered the building without passing the guard. It was quite possible that he had been found and liberated, and was at the Prime Minister's house. As he listened to the streaming rain, Blake hoped that he and Veilburg were still where they had been left by Rivastoff and himself.

A night in the rain was not much of a punishment for such a pair of unscrupulous rascals, and as the chauffeur and Veilburg's gunman, in a smaller way, were as big blackguards as their masters, the private detective had no sympathy to waste on them.

"I'd like to know whom they'll suspect of playing this merry little jape," he thought, as he went to his bed-room.

(To be continued next week.)

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SECTION

B

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C

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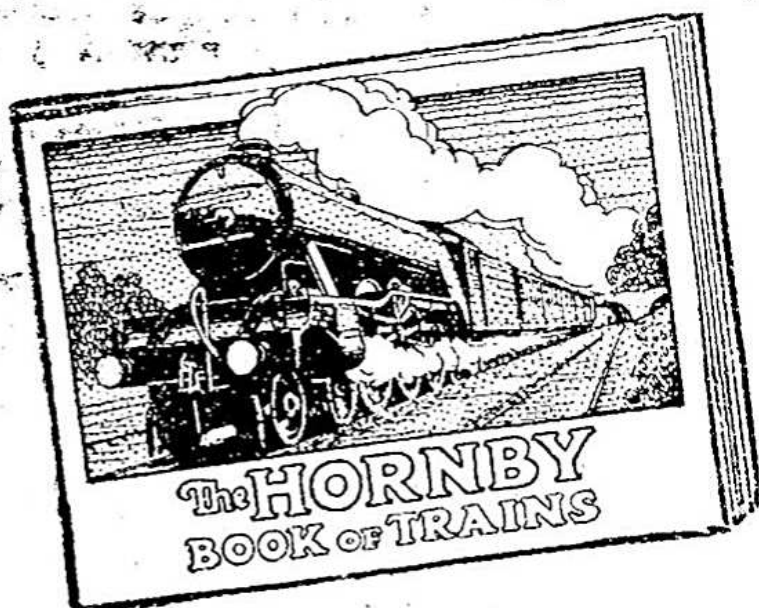
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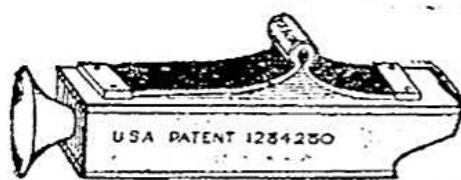
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