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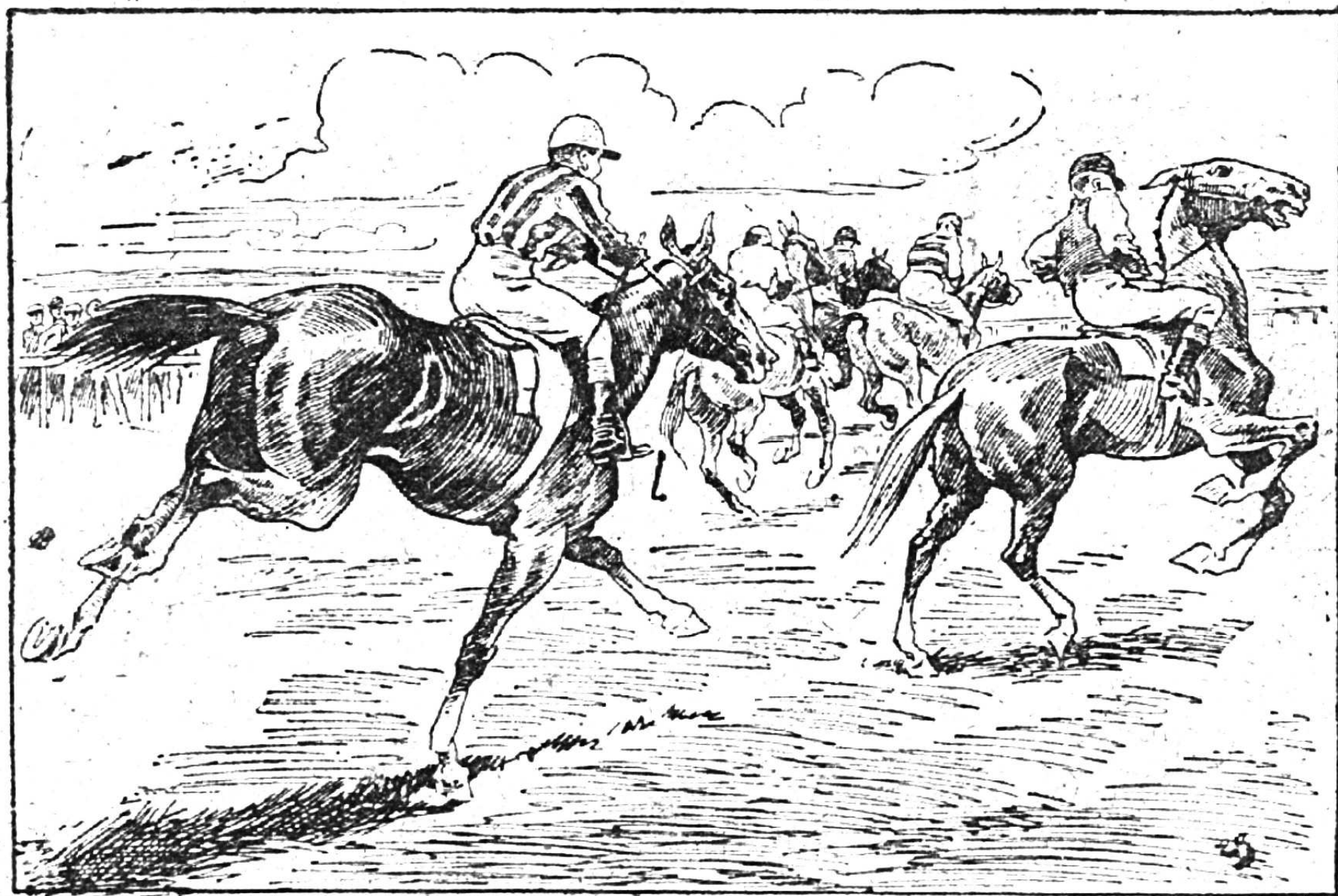
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

RAGGING THE NEW MASTER.

"I WONDER how he'll shape?" remarked Tommy Watson thoughtfully.

"Eh?"

"Speakin' to me, old boy?"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West turned to Watson politely, and I did the same. But Watson was apparently unconscious of our presence.

"Personally, I've got an idea that he'll be a bit of a dud," he went on, still in the same absent-minded manner. "There's no telling, of course."

"Dotty?" I inquired, giving Tommy a shake.

"Eh? What the——" Watson broke off, and stared at me. "What's wrong, you ass? What's the idea of shaking me like that?"

"I simply wanted to bring you to your senses," I replied. "You've been talking to yourself, and that's a habit that isn't good for anybody. You were wondering how somebody will shape."

Tommy Watson nodded.

"Yes, that's right," he agreed. "I was referring to Mr. Heath."

"Oh!"

"He takes us at lessons this morning for the first time," said Watson. "Everybody's rather curious to find out how the new man will get on with the Remove."

It's my opinion that he won't be up to much. He looks too jolly meek."

We were standing on the steps of the Ancient House at St. Frank's, basking in the bright sunshine of the early May morning. Other juniors were there, too—waiting for the bell to ring which would summon them to the Remove Form-room. It was liable to clang out at any moment.

"Hallo! Here comes the new merchant now," remarked Church suddenly.

All eyes were directed out into the sunlit Triangle. A figure had just appeared round the gymnasium, and it was making straight for the Ancient House doorway. The figure was that of Mr. Clement Heath, M.A., the new master of the Remove.

He was only a temporary master, strictly speaking—a locum tenens for Mr. Crowell, who had left St. Frank's for a long rest. Mr. Crowell had been very near to brain fever and insanity, having been working altogether too laboriously, combining his school work with a heavy scientific book. The strain had been too great, and, after showing several signs of a breakdown, Mr. Crowell had been advised to go away.

And Mr. Clement Heath had come to St. Frank's in order to fill the temporary vacancy. We regarded the new master rather curiously as he approached us. He had only arrived the previous evening, and so far we had had very few oppor-

tunities of inspecting the man who was to preside over us during lessons for the next six or seven weeks.

He was by no means an elderly man. In fact, he was decidedly young, and I set his age at about twenty-seven or twenty-eight. He walked with a slight limp of his left foot, due to a bullet wound which he had received while on active service.

His figure was comparatively slight, and he possessed dark hair and rather ordinary features. In no way was he distinguished. Compared to Mr. Crowell, in fact, Mr. Clement Heath was quite insignificant.

His face wore a very meek expression, and he did not seem to be capable of strong action, if any occasion should arise where strong action was necessary. He even seemed nervous as he approached the Ancient House dormitory.

Handforth and Co. were at the bottom of the steps. They raised their caps politely as Mr. Heath passed them.

"Good morning, sir!" said Handforth.

"Beautiful morning, sir!" remarked McClure.

"Just like summer, sir!" said Church.

"Er—yes, boys—yes!" said Mr. Heath mildly. "Quite so. The morning is certainly most pleasant."

There was a kind of shake in his voice, and it was plain for us all to see that the Remove master was distinctly nervous. He refrained from looking at any particular boy, but kept his gaze cast downwards in almost a furtive manner.

He walked past us, his gown rustling, and found the way barred by Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, of Study A. I frowned as I watched them, for Fullwood and Co. were obviously intent upon a little joke. And their idea of a joke was generally unpleasant. They could see an opportunity of taking a rise out of the new master.

"Good morning, sir!" said Ralph Leslie Fullwood, raising his cap.

"Good morning, my boy!" replied Mr. Heath.

"Nice weather for the time of the year, sir!" said Fullwood. "If things don't alter, they'll remain as they are."

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Heath.

"An' if we have some rain, sir, it'll probably be wet," went on Fullwood, still with the same air of exaggerated politeness.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other juniors chuckled somewhat loudly.

Mr. Heath seemed at a loss for a moment, and was unable to make any reply. At that moment, however, he was relieved by the sudden appearance of Nelson Lee, the House-master of the Ancient House.

The gov'nor's arrival on the scene caused Fullwood and Co. to melt away rather hurriedly, and Nelson Lee walked through the lobby accompanied by the new master. The juniors remained collected about the steps and in the Triangle.

"You cad, Fullwood!" I said sharply. "I don't approve——"

"Nobody asked you to butt in," sneered Fullwood. "You can go an' eat coke, Nipper. It doesn't matter a toss to me whether you approve or not. Heath is absolutely a worm, an' he'll soon find that we ain't standin' any of his wishy-washy ways. I'm goin' to rag him to death in the Form-room."

"Take my advice, and don't do it," I said.

"I don't want your advice——"

"Then take a warning," I said grimly. "If you deliberately insult Mr. Heath this morning, Fullwood, you'll have to settle with me afterwards. You'd better understand that quite clearly."

"Hear, hear!" said Handforth. "He'll have to settle with me, too. I believe in having a bit of fun with a new master, but not Fullwood's kind of fun."

"Oh, dry up!" snapped Fullwood sourly.

He strolled away, and Sir Montie shook his head.

"He means it, dear boys," he remarked. "Fullwood is goin' to cause trouble in the Form-room, this mornin'. It's just like his vindictive nature to take advantage of Mr. Heath's meekness. I'm seriously afraid that Mr. Heath is booked for a most unpleasant time."

I shook my head.

"I'm not so sure about that," I said. "He hasn't got his bearings yet, remember—he's strange to us all, and to his surroundings. He expects a bit of a ragging—all new masters are prepared for it. But when he's shaken down he'll probably begin to show a bit more pep."

"Pep, dear old boy?" repeated Montie, adjusting his pince-nez. "I really fail to understand."

"Pep—spirit, energy," I explained. "It's just a little word the Yankees use, and you can't tell me that you haven't heard it before. Hallo! There goes the bell. We'd better get in at once, and show Mr. Heath that we're good little boys for being punctual."

But when we arrived in the Remove Form-room we found that the other fellows were not quite so punctilious. They came in leisurely, in twos and threes, and even a minute after the proper time there were still two juniors absent. One of them was Fullwood, and I noticed that Gulliver and Bell were grinning and chuckling.

"There's something on," I remarked grimly. "Fullwood means to show his contempt for the master by arriving late. It's just one of those little tricks he takes a keen pleasure in playing."

"Well, I hope he gets lines," said Watson.

Mr. Heath arrived a moment or two later. He entered, closed the door, and went to his desk. He sat down, fingered his books for a moment or two, and the Remove sat at attention, curious and silent.

Mr. Heath stood up, cleared his throat, and then sat down again. The Form giggled, and there were many grins. It was quite clear that the new master was far from comfortable. He rose to his feet once again.

"Well—er—boys, it is to be my pleasure to give you instructions during Mr. Crowell's absence," he said, clearing his throat. Before commencing the geography lesson, I should like to have a few words with you all. You are aware, of course, that I am only a temporary master. But during my stay at St. Frank's I sincerely hope that we shall get on well together. I am very pleased with my appointment, and I hope that you will be equally pleased."

"Yes, rather!"

"I also wish to tell you that I shall allow this morning's lessons to be fairly easy," went on Mr. Heath. "I must grow accustomed to your ways, and you must grow accustomed to mine. After two or three days we shall probably understand one another better, and——"

Mr. Heath paused, and gazed at Fullwood.

The oad of the Remove had just entered the Form-room. He had taken particular care to slam the door with some violence, and he was strolling to

his place unconcernedly, with his hands in his pockets.

"Er—excuse me," said Mr. Heath mildly. "One moment, my boy."

Fullwood took no notice whatever, but went to his place, sat down, and lounged back in his seat, with an air of profound boredom. The Remove looked on with a certain amount of disdain. Mr. Heath certainly had no spirit.

But the Remove master was not quite a dud.

"My boy, tell me your name," he said, pointing to Fullwood.

Ralph Leslie yawned, and said something to Gulliver. It was a deliberate rag, and Fullwood intended to make Mr. Heath look small before the whole class.

"I think your name is Pitt," said Mr. Heath, looking at Reginald Pitt, who sat in the front row. "I heard another boy addressing you this morning."

"That's right, sir. I'm Pitt."

"Kindly tell me the name of the boy who just walked in," said Mr. Heath.

"Fullwood, sir," replied Pitt.

"Thank you!" said the new master. "Fullwood, stand up!"

Fullwood yawned again.

"Speakin' to me, sir?" he inquired lazily.

"Yes, Fullwood; I am speaking to you," said Mr. Heath. "You will come down here, and stand in front of my desk."

"What for, sir?"

"I will tell you what for when you arrive."

Mr. Heath's voice was still meek, but it was firm, and the Remove began to get interested. Perhaps the new master would not be such a duffer, after all. Fullwood could not very well ignore an order of that sort, or he would be liable to be reported to the House-master. He lounged out of his seat, walked down the classroom, and halted in front of the desk.

"Well, sir?" he yawned. "What is it?"

He flicked a speck of dust from his waistcoat, and condescended to look at Mr. Heath.

"Well, Fullwood, I am really at a loss to know," said the master. "You ask me what it is, and I imagine that you are referring to the garment which you just touched. It closely resembles a waistcoat in shape, but in colour it forcibly reminds me of a futurist painting."

The Remove giggled, and Fullwood turned rather red.

"This waistcoat is very tasteful, sir," he said sourly.

"I am afraid that my own opinion is very different from yours, Fullwood," said Mr. Heath. "I do not intend to commence my sojourn at St. Frank's by inflicting punishments, but I will have you know that when I address you I expect an answer. Furthermore, it is your duty to be here at nine-thirty, and not a moment later. Why were you late in arriving?"

"I've just come from Yorke, sir," said Fullwood.

"From York!"

"Yes, sir," said Fullwood calmly.

The Remove chuckled again. We knew, of course, that Fullwood was referring to Yorke, of the Remove, a College House fellow, who was suffering at the moment from an injured foot, and who was allowed to remain in his own study for a day or two, as moving about was painful to him. Mr. Heath was probably unaware of the fact that any boy was named Yorke, and he imagined that Fullwood was referring to a place.

"Let me understand this quite clearly, Fullwood," said the Form-master. "You say that you have just come from York?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't know whether you are deliberately attempting to be humorous, Fullwood, but I don't approve of this attitude," said Mr. Heath. "Less than fifteen minutes ago I passed you in the lobby. Do you mean to imply that you went to York and returned since then?"

"That's right, sir," said Fullwood. "I thought I'd have a look at Yorke before lessons, and I didn't allow myself quite sufficient time to get back."

"I am well aware of the fact, Fullwood, that you are not referring to York in Yorkshire," said Mr. Heath. "I presume there is a York in Sussex?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" said Fullwood calmly. "Just across the Triangle, in fact."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth jumped up in his seat.

"Why don't you punch his nose, sir?" he roared. "The cad's only trying to be funny! He means Yorke, of the Remove—one of the chaps. He's only saying all this to make you look small!"

"Sneak!" hissed Gulliver.

"What's that?" bellowed Handforth.

"You—you wait until after lessons, Gulli—"

"Order—order!" exclaimed Mr. Heath sharply. "I thank you, my boy, for the information you have given. I was not aware of the fact that one of the boys here was named Yorke. Fullwood, you may go to your place, but I must warn you that any further attempts at humour on your part will be punished."

"Thanks awfully, sir," said Fullwood languidly.

He strolled back to his desk, bestowing a fierce glare on Handforth as he passed that junior's place.

"The silly rotter!" he mumbled to Gulliver, after he had sat down. "I was goin' to keep it up for a long time. Never mind—I've got another idea. I'll catch Heath on the same stunt before long—by makin' a play of words. It always goes down well, an' it's a good way of raggin' a master."

"There must be no talking!" said Mr. Heath firmly.

After some little delay the lesson started, and the Remove was already gaining more respect for the new master. He was certainly slow, but perhaps that was an advantage. Personally, I had an idea in the back of my head that Mr. Heath was not such a fool as he looked. I also had an idea that Fullwood was by no means finished, and this surmise turned out to be quite correct.

The geography lesson had been proceeding smoothly and easily for, perhaps, twenty minutes, when Fullwood rose in his place.

"May I ask a question, sir?" he asked politely.

"Certainly, my boy."

"I've just been looking at Greenock, on my map," said Fullwood. "Wasn't some famous man born there? I can't quite remember, sir, but I've got an idea that somebody named Knott was born at Greenock. Wasn't he connected with the invention of the steam engine, sir?"

It was quite an innocent question, and on the face of it it seemed that Fullwood was honestly asking for information, and that he was desirous of improving his mind. Mr. Heath could hardly see that Fullwood was laying a trap.

"I think you are wrong, Fullwood," said Mr. Heath. "The man who invented the steam-engine, or who was credited with doing so, was James Watt."

He was born in Greenock, as you say, in the year 1736."

"Watt, sir?" asked Fullwood.

"I think you heard what I said, my boy," said the Form-master.

"Of course I did!" went on Fullwood, looking surprised. "But, somehow, sir, I had an idea that it was Knott."

"It was not what?"

"But you just said it was Watt, sir—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You distinctly told me that Watt was the man, sir," went on Fullwood. "An' then you said it was not Watt! I don't quite know which to believe, sir. If it wasn't Watt, then it must have been Knott. I always thought it was Knott, sir."

Mr. Heath looked rather grim.

"It seems to me, Fullwood, that you are getting yourself in a bit of a knot," he remarked smoothly. "Now, let us have it clear. The inventor of the steam engine was born at Greenock, and his name was Watt——"

"Knot, sir," said Fullwood, pretending that he had been asked a question.

"It was not Knott!" said Mr. Heath sharply. "He was Watt."

"What, sir?"

"Yes!"

"I say, this is a bit too bad," murmured Tommy Watson into my ear. "The joke's as old as the hills, anyhow. We can't help grinning, but I don't like to see Fullwood taking a rise out of the new master like this."

"I fancy Fullwood will get the rise," I whispered.

"But I don't think you quite catch my meaning, sir," said Fullwood, with perfect coolness. "The man I'm referring to is Knott, and the man you're referring to is Watt. I don't see how it's possible for Watt to be the man if he is Knott. An' if Knott is not Watt, then what is Knott?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Remove simply howled.

"You see my meanin', sir, don't you?" went on Fullwood calmly. "Knott is the man I mean, an' it's clear that Watt can't have anythin' to do with it. What I want to know is this—did Knott invent the steam engine, or did Watt? If Knott invented it, then it stands to reason Watt did not. Do you follow me, sir?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, I follow you perfectly," said Mr. Heath, with icy calmness. "I quite understand your motive in asking me these questions. Not only do you wish to waste the time of the class, but you are also anxious to make fun of me. There is just a little advice I should like to give you, and I trust it will be beneficial."

Mr. Heath turned to the blackboard, seized a piece of chalk, and rapidly wrote some words on the black surface. Then he stood away, and the Remove was able to read the words.

"Glance at that, Fullwood," said Mr. Heath, "and perhaps you will appreciate it—since you appear to be so keen upon words with double meanings."

We read the sentence with sheer delight, for it ran:—

"A head full of nonsense is equivalent to a head of wood. If I, Fullwood, of sense were full would I act so foolishly?"

The words "full" and "would" were heavily underlined, and the Remove did not fail to grasp the pun. Fullwood had certainly asked for it, and Mr. Heath had been very prompt to reply in the same coin.

Fullwood looked absolutely idiotic.

"By gad!" he muttered, staring at the board.

"You must memorise that sentence, Fullwood," said Mr. Heath smoothly.

"What—what for, sir?"

"Because I require you to write it two hundred times," replied the new master. "You will present the lines to me this evening, not later than seven-thirty. You may go to your place."

"But—but—but——" gasped Fullwood.

"That is enough, my boy. Go and sit down."

"I'm not going to do any lines like that!" roared Fullwood defiantly.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Heath. "You will either go to your place at once, Fullwood, or you will write the sentence five hundred times. You may choose. And if you are impertinent again I shall be reluctantly obliged to report you to your House-master. You have interrupted the lesson long enough."

Fullwood went back to his place utterly squashed. His little "rag" had recoiled upon himself, and Mr. Heath had

proved that he was far from being the duffer he had seemed to be.

The grins of the juniors nearly caused Fullwood to do something desperate. He had set out to make Mr. Heath a laughing stock, and Mr. Heath had made Fullwood look exactly what he was—an insolent young idiot.

And the Remove continued lessons in a happy frame of mind.

CHAPTER II.

SOMETHING WRONG WITH HANDY.

CHURCH and McClure strode briskly along the Remove passage, their hands filled with paper bags. They had been paying a visit to the tuck-shop, and were just returning to Study D.

It was nearly tea-time, and lessons were over for the day. Mr. Heath had impressed the Remove very favourably. Handforth had certainly made one or two vague remarks about Mr. Heath's eyes. According to Handy, there was something about the new master's eyes which was not quite satisfactory. But even Handforth couldn't define what this something was.

"I think it's all rot," said Church, as they walked along the passage.

"What is?" asked McClure.

"What Handy says about Mr. Heath," replied Church. "He seems a jolly decent sort to me, and not half so soft as he looks. But Handy keeps on saying that he has got queer eyes."

"I didn't notice it."

"Neither did I," said Church. "It's all rot for Handy to say that Heath kept looking at him on the q.t. out of the corner of his eye. Handy's all right, but he's got a habit of imagining things."

McClure nodded.

"Well, we'd better not say much about it," he exclaimed. "If we get arguing with Handy he'll only kick up a fuss, and I don't see why we should have our tea spoiled. We're having an extra good spread this evening, too."

"And we shall have to buck up," added Church. "Nipper wants us out for cricket practice by six o'clock, and it's past five already."

They turned into Study D, expecting to find it empty. They had left Handforth some little time earlier, arguing in the Common-room. But, rather to their surprise, they found their redoubtable leader reclining in the arm-chair.

Handforth was not in an elegant attitude. He sprawled over the chair, and his legs overflowed into the fender. His eyes were open, and was looking straight at the wall opposite.

"So you're here?" said Church. "Well, I think you might have laid the tablecloth, instead of lolling there, doing nothing."

Handforth didn't reply.

"Deaf?" asked Church, staring.

"Gone!" said Handforth dramatically. "Great pip!"

"Oh, quite," agreed Church. "I always know you were going, but I'm glad to hear you admit that you've gone—clean off your rocker!"

Church, as a precautionary measure, possessed himself of a cricket stump while he was making that remark. But, rather to his surprise, Handforth did not even look round. He simply ignored the insult.

"What's the matter with him?" asked McClure wonderingly.

"Blessed if I know."

"He was all right when we left him in the Common-room—as sane as—well, as sane as he usually is," went on McClure. "Now he seems to be deaf and dumb and everything else. Handy, what's wrong with you?"

"Gone!" muttered Handforth huskily.

"There he goes again—repeating it!" said Church. "This looks rather serious, you know. What ought we to do?"

"Stick a pin into him," suggested McClure.

"Do you think we can risk it?"

"Yes, if we jump back quickly enough."

The two juniors were discussing their leader as though he were some animal, unable to understand their remarks. And, certainly, there was some cause for this attitude on their part. For Handforth remained absolutely inactive, and that far-away expression was still evident in his eyes.

"Handy!" roared Church, "ain't you going to wake up?"

"Poor little Edith!" said Handforth dreamily.

Church and McClure exchanged startled glances.

"Great Scott!" gasped Church. "I—I didn't think it was so bad as this! I can understand now! Poor old Handy!"

"He—he must be in love!" said McClure, in alarm.

"Yes, I—I suppose so!"

"What shall we do? What the dickens——"

"Shush! He's talking again!"

They remained quiet, gazed at Handforth, and listened.

"What a rotten shame!" muttered Handforth. "It ain't fair! Poor little Edith—gone! I might never see her again! I might never be able to kiss her again."

"My only topper!" gasped Church. "We—we were right! He's dazed about it—I don't believe he knows we're here, looking at him! I've heard of chaps going melancholy because they've been crossed in love, but it ain't often they go dotty!"

Handforth's chums were greatly alarmed.

"You can easily guess what's happened," said McClure. "He must have been meeting a girl named Edith, and I dare say her parents didn't like it, so they've taken her away so that Handy can't see her any more."

"That's about the size of it," agreed Church. "But I can't understand it. He was all right half-an-hour ago—and he hasn't had a chance to see a girl during that time. It's a mystery."

"I don't know much about that," said McClure. "Handy may have had a letter——"

"My only hat!" exclaimed Church. "I remember now! One of the chaps came into the Common-room just as we were going out, and told Handy there was a letter for him in the rack."

"Well, there you are, then!"

"But fancy a letter bowling him over in this way," went on Church. "And it's pretty evident he was on rather pally terms with the girl, too. He must have been kissing her! Just fancy! Handy in love! It's—it's staggering!"

Handforth suddenly sat up in his chair, and looked at his chums dreamily.

"Why can't you chaps go away?" he demanded, in a weary, irritable voice. "What do you want to come bothering here for? I suppose you're only jawing

about your own little affairs. Go away!"

"We—that is——" Church paused. "You see, Handy, we—we thought you weren't quite well, and we were wondering——"

"Then go and wonder somewhere else," interrupted Handforth. "As a matter of fact, I'm not well, I feel rotten."

"Didn't you hear what we were talking about just now?" asked McClure.

"No."

"Didn't you hear me asking you questions?"

"I've got something more important to think about—something that you chaps wouldn't understand," said Handforth, with unusual quietness. "Be good sorts, and buzz off. I want to be alone."

Church and McClure were quite sure that Handy was in love—badly.

"It's all very well to talk like that," said Church, "but this is our study as well as yours, Handy, and we naturally want to be in it. Besides, it's tea-time, and we've brought some extra special tuck."

"That's all right—eat it."

"Don't you want any?"

"No!"

"You don't want any tea?" asked Church curiously.

"No!" roared Handforth.

"But—but not half-an-hour ago you told us you were famished," said Church. "You gave us five bob to lay in a special feed—and it's all here, on the table. We're going to make tea now——"

"You're not!" said Handforth, rising to his feet, and glaring at his faithful chums. "I'm not going to have anybody in this study just now! I'm worried—I've had some rotten news—and I want to be alone."

"News?" said Church. "What about?"

"Edith—— About something that wouldn't interest you," said Handforth, with some confusion. "Are you going to clear out, or not?"

"Dash it all, Handy, there's no need to be nasty about it," said McClure. "I can see you've got a letter in your hand——"

He paused as Handforth jammed his fist into his pocket. The two juniors regarded their leader with curious expressions. They had never known him

to act in this way before, so it was obvious that something unusual had occurred. Moreover, his own words had told them how the wind lay.

"About Edith?" said Church. "Who's Edith?"

"Clear out!" roared Handforth. "Can't you see I'm worried? I'll give you just ten seconds to shift, and if you don't go I'll pitch you out on your giddy necks. I don't feel like talking now—I don't feel like anything except being alone."

"Yes, but look here——"

Handforth did not wait any longer. He simply hurled himself at his chums, and succeeded in knocking Church flying. McClure fled to the door, with Handforth after him. The next second McClure was hurled forth.

"Yar-oo!" he howled wildly, as he sat down in the passage. "You—you dangerous lunatic!"

The next second Church came hurtling out. He collided with McClure as the latter was rising, and the pair collapsed on the floor in a heap. The door of Study D closed with a slam.

"Oh, my only hat!" said Church breathlessly.

"He's a bit off his rocker this time, and no mistake!" groaned McClure. "And all because he's fallen in love and been carrying on with some girl named Edith! I'm blessed if I can understand——"

"Hallo!" said Watson, coming out of Study C. "Trouble in the family?"

"Dear old boy, it certainly looks like it," smiled Sir Montie, who had followed Watson out.

I was behind the pair, and we smiled as Church and McClure picked themselves up somewhat painfully. They were looking rather untidy and worn—and they were now considerably incensed.

Handforth's drastic treatment of them had not improved their tempers, and if they had ever had any thoughts of keeping his secret, those thoughts were now abandoned. Any fellow who could treat his chums as Handforth had done was only deserving of exposure.

"The rotter!" panted Church.

"Just a little argument?" I inquired politely.

"No!" snorted McClure. "Handy's got a letter, and it's completely bowled

him over. We went into the study to tea, and he turned on us like a tiger!"

"What on earth for?"

"Because he's in love!" growled Church.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Which?"

"In love!" repeated Church. "Head over heels!"

"Begad!"

"Well, I'm not surprised," I grinned. "Handy's capable of anything. But I didn't know that it was a sign of love to pitch one of his chums into the passage. But Handy always does differently to everybody else."

"It's because he's been found out—that's why he's wild," explained McClure. "We heard him talking to himself about Edith——"

"Oh, chase me!" grinned Tommy Watson.

"That seems to be the girl's name," said Church grimly. "Edith, mark you!"

"Well, it's a good name, isn't it?" I asked.

"You may think so, but I don't," said Church. "I've got a cousin named Edith, and she's a little bounder. Well, Handy was talking to himself, and it seems that this girl has gone away. I expect her people found out what was in the wind, and stopped it all. But, just fancy! Old Handy being in love!"

"Well, it does need a bit of believing, I'll admit," I remarked. "Still, he's been in love before, so I expect he's got a return of the fever. But even now I can't see why he should pitch you out."

"Neither can I," said Church gruffly. "I want you chaps to come into the study with us, and we'll bring Handy to his senses. The more the merrier. We'll make him sit up for treating us like that."

"Anything to oblige," I said pleasantly. "Who's game?"

The seven or eight juniors who had collected round us all agreed to lend a hand, and there were many chuckles. It was regarded as a huge joke that Handforth should have fallen in love with some unknown damsel.

"Well, let's get it over," I said briskly.

I opened the door of Study D, and marched in. But before I had taken

two steps forward. I paused, and regarded Handforth curiously. He was sitting at the table, his chin was resting in his hands, and he was staring unseeingly straight before him. It was a most unusual attitude for the vigorous Handforth.

"Pile in!" grinned Pitt, from behind. "You're blocking the doorway."

I walked into the study, and the other fellows crowded in after me. Handforth looked up with a rather startled expression, and became suddenly aware of the invasion. He jumped to his feet, glaring.

"You—you rotters!" he exclaimed warmly. "What's the idea of this? Can't you leave a chap alone when he's worried?"

"What does she look like, Handy?" grinned Pitt.

"What colour are her eyes?" asked Grey.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How tall is she?" asked Singleton. "Personally, I don't care for tall girls, and I shall admire your choice if Miss Smith is small and dainty."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How many times have you kissed her?" asked De Valerie sweetly.

"How much tuck have you treated her to?" came Fatty Little's inquiry, from the door. "Girls are frightfully expensive when it comes to tuck and ice-creams."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Fatty!" grinned Hart. "Always thinking of grub!"

Handforth stood quite still. We had expected him to fly into a tearing rage, and to hurl himself at the lot of us, regardless of the odds. But Handforth did nothing of the kind. He stared at us in a dazed, pained kind of way.

"You—you miserable rotters!" he said bitterly.

"Rats!" said Pitt. "If you choose to make an ass of yourself, Handy, you must be prepared to accept the consequences. We know all about it."

"You—you know all about it?"

"Yes."

"All about the letter I received?"

"Of course."

"From Edith, you know," grinned Watson. "You were jawing to Church and McClure about it—"

"I didn't tell them a word," retorted Handforth sharply.

"Yes, you did," said Church. "When we first came in you talked all sorts of rot about Edith. Said she'd gone, and you mightn't see her again, and that you'd probably kissed her for the last time—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Stop!" shouted Handforth hoarsely. "I'd better give you chaps warning, now at once: if there's any more of this contemptible behaviour I'll fight the whole crowd of you! I'm absolutely surprised—I'm pained—I'm disgusted! I thought you were all decent chaps, and not rotters of this sort."

"Come off it, Handy!" I grinned. "You can't expect to have everybody sympathising with you because your best girl has given you the chuck."

"My—my best girl!" gasped Handforth.

"At your age you oughtn't to be in love at all," I went on. "I'm surprised that you should make such an ass of yourself—and that's the truth. If you can't be good tempered about some simple chaff, we'll clear out."

Handforth clenched his fists.

"Hold on!" he said. "Who told you I was in love?"

"Church!"

"What else did he say?"

"He explained that you'd let the cat out of the bag—that a girl named Edith had gone away, and that you wouldn't be able to kiss her any more," I grinned. "That was good enough, wasn't it?"

"As it happens, it wasn't," said Handforth quietly. "There seems to be a misunderstanding—and perhaps I'm to blame—for jawing to myself and letting those bounders hear me. But they got hold of the wrong end of the stick?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I've had some bad news—rotten news, in fact," replied Handforth, looking straight at us. "There's no joke about it, and it's not news concerning any silly girl. I'm not in love in the way you mean, so the best thing you can do is to apologise and clear out."

"Steady on!" said Pitt. "There's no need to apologise for nothing! You can't get over the fact that you're worried over a girl named Edith—"

"I'm not trying to deny it," said Handforth. "I am worried about her."

"Oh! You admit it?"

"Of course I do."

"And perhaps you'll admit that you've kissed her?" chuckled De Valerie. Handforth nodded grimly.

"Yes. I'll admit that, too," he replied.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The brazen bounder!" said De Valerie. "Boasting about his kissing and canoodling! I should think that sort of thing ought to be kept private—"

"You'd better be quiet before you go too far," interrupted Handforth, his voice quiet and dangerous. "I'm not joking now, and I can understand that all you fellows are labouring under a false idea. Seeing that that's the case, I might be able to overlook all these sneers and jibes—but I can tell you straight from the shoulder that they cut me pretty deeply."

"Go hon!"

"Poor old Handy!"

"Not so much of it, you fellows," I exclaimed. "You ought to see that Handforth is quite serious—there's no joke about this affair. I think we've got hold of something we ought to have left alone, and if I have butted in, I apologise. It's as plain as anything that Handy is genuinely upset."

"Thanks, Nipper," said Handforth quietly. "It's a good thing to know that somebody possesses a grain of sense. I always knew you were a keen chap, and it's decent of you to give these sneering asses a word of advice."

"If you call me a sneering ass," began De Valerie.

"You've all been sneering!" shouted Handforth, with blazing eyes. "Church and McClure started it; but I don't blame them because they haven't got any sense, and they don't know any better."

"But you admitted everything about this girl, Handy," said Church.

"Perhaps I have," agreed Handforth. "And perhaps you'll have the sense to clear out of this study—the whole crowd of you. This girl, Edith, doesn't happen to be a silly flapper I'm in love with, as you fondly imagine, but a relative."

"Oh!"

"A—a relative?"

"To be more precise," said Handforth quietly—"my sister."

"You—your sister?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my only hat!"

"We—we thought——"

"I say, Handy, we didn't know!" exclaimed De Valerie concernedly. "I'm awfully sorry I spoke as I did. I thought it was merely a joke, you know. Your sister! It seems that we've made proper fools of ourselves."

"I'm glad you acknowledge it," said Handforth.

"Is it anything serious old man?" I asked, looking at him anxiously. "You mustn't take any notice of what these fellows have been saying—they didn't know the matter was really private or personal. I don't want to interfere with your family affairs, Handy, but would it be rude to ask if anything's happened to your sister?"

"Well, no," said Handforth. "It wouldn't be rude. I can't tell you any details, because the whole affair is private. But Edith has disappeared, and my pater and mater don't know where she is. I only heard the news this afternoon, and it rather bowled me over. And Church and McClure can do nothing better than to spread the silly yarn that I'm in love."

"We—we didn't know, Handy!" gasped Church. "We—we thought——"

"You'd better not think," interrupted Handforth tartly. "People with only small brains are better off without thinking—it's too much of a tax on their mental powers. It's a pity you couldn't mind your own business."

The crowd of fellows retired gracefully from Study D. Some of them wanted to ask Handforth further questions, but I hustled them out into the passage as quickly as possible. This was no time for asking questions.

"Thank goodness they've gone!" exclaimed McClure, at last. "I say, Handy, I hope you'll forgive us—we didn't realise——"

"That's all right," growled Handforth. "Don't make a song."

Although he was such a fire-eating junior, and although he was ready to punch any fellow's nose on the spot, Handforth was really soft hearted. A junior had only to ask his forgiveness, and it was granted on the spot. Handforth was disarmed in a moment.

"You see, old son, we heard you talking about Edith, and we naturally thought you were in love," said Church. "We've never heard you saying anything about a sister—at least, we've

never heard her name——"

"I generally refer to her as Sis," said Handforth. "She's a lot older than I am, of course—she's twenty-one, in fact. She's a jolly good sort, and we always got on famously together. And now she's gone!"

McClure was about to ask a question, but Church put a finger to his lips to signify that it would be better to keep quiet. They set about getting tea ready as quietly as possible, leaving Handforth sitting in the easy-chair.

He glared at them rather bitterly as they busied themselves with the table.

"Fine sort of chums, ain't you?" he snapped.

"Eh?"

"A fat lot you care about my troubles," said Handforth, with a sniff. "You haven't got the decency to ask what's happened to my sister! You don't care a jot! The fact is, you're callous!"

Church and McClure flushed—not with shame, but with indignation. Handforth's words were rather unjust, considering that they had refrained from putting questions on purpose to spare his feelings. But it was just like Handforth to misunderstand them. He generally misunderstood things.

"I say, go easy, old man," said Church. "We care a lot, you know——"

"It seems like it, doesn't it?"

"You told us the matter was private, and we didn't want to butt in," said Church. "As a matter of fact, we're tremendously anxious to hear what's happened to your sister—and I think it would be only decent if you told us. We don't keep secrets from one another in this study."

Handforth nodded.

"That's right enough," he agreed. "And, since you've apologised, and everything's all right, I'll tell you all about it. The letter I've got is from the mater, and it's properly upset me for the time. Still, I'm better now, and perhaps things ain't so bad as they seem to be on the surface. But I think my pater and mater ought to feel pretty rotten about it. They deserve to."

"Deserve to?" repeated McClure, starting.

"Yes," said Handforth grimly.

"But why?"

"I'll tell you," went on Handforth, sitting forward in his chair. "It's this way.

My sister fell in love with a jolly decent chap named Arthur Kirby. He used to call at home sometimes—months ago—but I never happened to see him. The last time I was home Mr. Kirby had been burred."

"What for?" asked McClure.

"Oh, because he didn't suit my people," said Handforth bitterly. "Sis was tremendously in love with him, and she was awfully upset about the whole business. She told me all sorts of things. Somehow, she felt she could jaw at me—let off steam, sort of thing. We've always been jolly pally together. She's a sport, and we got on rippingly. I've always loved Sis terrifically—that's why this news has come with such a jolt. It's bowled me over."

"What news?" inquired Church.

"Ain't I telling you?" demanded Handforth, glaring. "Don't be so jolly impatient, you prize ass! This chap, Kirby, is a journalist, or something like that, and he's not particularly rich. In fact, he's poor. How can you expect a young fellow of about twenty-six to have tons of money? It ain't reasonable! By what I can understand, he works on the papers, and he's making jolly decent headway. Edith reckons that he'll be earning thousands a year before he's thirty."

"Journalists are generally poor, though," said Church, shaking his head.

"Rot!" said Handforth. "Some writers earn tons of tin, and Mr. Kirby has only just found his feet, so to speak. Anyhow, my pater and mater didn't like him. They said he wasn't well off enough to keep Sis as she ought to be kept. The fact is, since my dad was knighted he's been getting a swelled head!"

Handforth sniffed disdainfully.

"Sir Edward Handforth!" he said, with a glare. "What's the good of having a title like that? Titles ain't what they used to be! Everybody's getting knighted nowadays. I shouldn't be surprised to hear that the giddy crossing-sweepers have been made baronets for valuable service to the country! Blessed rot! My pater did nothing to deserve a knighthood—just went on with his business the same as usual, and because it happened to be war-time he was made a 'Sir'! And since then he has been having weekly attacks of swelled head!"

Church and McClure grinned.

"Plenty of other people are suffering from the same complaint," said Church. "And I suppose it's only natural for your pater to be conceited and think a good bit of himself. Becoming a knight has rather upset his balance."

"You—you insulting rotter!" roared Handforth.

"Eh?"

"If you say beastly things about my pater, I'll jolly well punch your nose," said Handforth warmly. "Conceited, indeed! Why, I'll——"

"But—but you just said your dad has got swelled head," gasped Church.

"That doesn't matter! It's my privilege to run my pater down," said Handforth. "If you start on the same game I'll soon show you something!"

Handforth proceeded to show Church something on the spot—a somewhat large list, which he projected under Church's nose in the most aggressive manner. Church backed away, and realised more than ever how hopeless it was to please his leader.

"Well, don't start an argument," said McClure. "Go on with the yarn."

"That's what I'm trying to do," snapped Handforth. "But how can I keep my thoughts together when some ailly ass keeps interrupting? I was telling you about my sister and Arthur Kirby. Well, as I was saying, my people liked Kirby all right, but they reckoned he wasn't suitable for Edith. They admitted he was square and a thundering good sort, and that he was working his way up in the world—but, at the same time, they reckoned that Kirby would never earn enough money to keep Sis in real comfort. So Kirby was politely given to understand that he wasn't welcome, and that his attentions to Edith were off-side."

"That was a bit rough on your sister," said Church.

"Beastly rotten, I call it," said Handforth. "I believe the mater had got somebody else in mind—a blithering ass named the Hon. Bertie Smythe-Fennant, or some fat-headed name like that. A proper Johnny, you know, with about as much brains as—as you fellows have got!"

"Thanks awfully," said McClure, glaring.

"Oh, well, you never reckon that you're strong in brain power," said

Handforth. "This fop chap was a smart-set bounder, I believe, and the mater wanted Sis to get into the exclusive circle. So Arthur Kirby was chucked, and Sis was told to get busy with the Hon. Bertie. I can tell you, I felt pretty bad about it, especially when Edith told me that she hated the beggar, and loathed the very sight of him. In one way, I am glad things have turned out as they have."

"Then what's the idea of being upset?" asked Church.

"Oh, it's no good expecting you fellows to understand!" snapped Handforth, getting up and pacing up and down the study. "It requires brains to grasp all the points of a case like this. Still, I might as well tell you the rest—it'll relieve my mind a bit, anyhow. It's rotten, keeping a thing to yourself!"

"Well, let's hear what else there is," said McClure.

"It's not much," said Handforth, looking worried. "I knew, of course, that things were going all wrong with Edith, and she had my sympathy. I didn't dream she'd do anything rash, but this letter I've got says that Sis ran off two days ago, and got married to Arthur Kirby."

"My hat!" said Church.

"Well, I don't blame her," remarked McClure. "She's married the chap she loves—and that's the main thing. I suppose your people are furious?"

"Now it's happened, I've got an idea that they're a bit sorry," replied Handforth. "They wish they hadn't been quite so harsh. Because, with their consent, the marriage would have been a good one, and everything would have been all serene. As it is, Sis has run off and married the chap in secret, by special licence, or something. And they bunked off together, and haven't left a trace."

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"That's why I'm so jolly worried," went on Handforth. "Sis left a letter behind explaining everything, and said it would be far better to go away completely, and live her own live. She's a jolly independent sort of girl, and even if she's half starving she wouldn't appeal to the pater. She'll stick to her husband, and go through all sorts of trouble without grumbling. And—and we may never see her again!"

"Oh, rot!" said Church. "She'll turn up before long. She'll get to know that your people ain't cross, and she'll write, or call, or something of that sort. I shouldn't take it to heart so much, Handy."

Handforth grunted.

"It's all very well for you to talk!" he said. "You haven't lost your sister like I have. She's gone, and goodness only knows what's become of her. She's probably out of the country by this time, and it's rotten to think of her going off, and never being able to see her again. I don't blame Kirby a bit—he did the right thing, in my opinion—but, at the same time, it's pretty rotten for me. He gets the wife he wants, but I lose my sister! I don't suppose I shall ever see her again!" added Handforth despondently.

He sat down in the easy chair, and looked moody. After that he said very little more, and Church and McClure busied themselves with the tea. But when everything was ready Handforth wouldn't touch a thing.

Church and McClure were rather surprised. It was something new for their headstrong leader to betray sentimental emotion, and they were rather pleased with him. It proved that he was something better than a rough and ready fighter. When it came to the point, Handforth was as soft-hearted as anybody.

And the loss of his sister, even though it might only be temporary—had completely bowled him off his feet. He wasn't himself at all, and his chums hoped that the effect would soon wear off.

Study D seemed lonely and deserted without Handforth roaring about in it. To have him sitting there quietly and moodily was rather disconcerting. But, try as they would, Church and McClure could do nothing to cheer up their despondent chum.

His attack of the blues was quite a severe one.

CHAPTER III.

FATTY LITTLE TAKES A SNACK.

"COME in, ass!" sang out Church. He and McClure were busy at prep., tea having been disposed of long since. Handforth was still lounging in the easy chair, and there

was a far-away expression in his eyes. The more he pondered over his sister's disappearance, the more he worried. It was evident, in fact, that Handy was very fond of Edith.

The door of Study D opened, and a cheerful youth in buttons appeared. This was Tubbs, the pageboy, and he stood just within the doorway.

"What's the idea of bothering now?" demanded Church, without looking up. "We haven't got any ink to lend, and no spare pen-nibs, and no exercise paper——"

"Beg pardon, Master Church——"

"Oh, it's you!" interrupted Church, looking up from his work. "The best thing you can do, Tubby, is to buzz off. We're busy at prep., and if you want to say anything you can leave it until later on. I'm right in the middle of some beastly French verbs, and my head's buzzing!"

Tubbs grinned.

"That's bad, sir," he remarked. "I won't stop more than a second. I've just brought this 'ere note for Master Handforth——"

"Which note?" demanded Handforth, looking up.

"This letter, sir."

"Letter?" repeated Handforth.

"Don't talk rot! There's been no post in since this afternoon, and——"

"All the same, sir, there's a letter come for you," said Tubbs. "It was brought by hand, not ten minutes ago. Some little boy brought it up from the village, I believe. Anyhow, he gave it to Warren, an' Warren brought it in doors. It's addressed to you right enough, sir, so I thought I'd let you have it at once."

"Good man!" said Handforth.

"Let's look at it!"

There was an eager light in his eyes as he grabbed the letter from Tubbs's hand. But it died out when he gazed at the writing. The envelope was of poor quality, and it was obvious that it only contained a mere slip, for it almost felt as though the envelope was empty.

"That's all right, Tubby, you can buzz now," said Handforth. "Here's a tanner for the trouble."

Tubbs protested, but pocketed the sixpence nevertheless. And when he had gone, Handforth turned over the envelope several times, looking at it intently. Church and McClure watched their leader with much interest.

"Who's it from?" asked McClure at last.

"How the dickens should I know?"

"Well, you can open it and see, I suppose?"

"Yes, I expect I can," admitted Handforth. "But I can't understand this writing. It's all printed, and I believe it's disguised. There seems to be something fishy about it."

Church and McClure bent over Handforth's shoulder, and were quite ready to agree that there was something unusual about the communication. For the writing on the envelope was written in sprawly printed characters—in pencil. It was impossible to recognise any handwriting, although the writing was decidedly boyish.

"Some jape or other I expect," said Church. "One of Fullwood's rotten ideas, perhaps. That rotter's capable of any mean trick. Open it and see what it's got inside."

Handforth was already performing the operation. He slit open the flap, inserted his fingers, and produced a single slip of notepaper. Upon it were merely a few words, also written in pencil, and in printed characters. Handforth stared at the words, wonderingly, and his chums stared too.

"To E. O. Handforth. Be at the little stile in Bellton Lane to-night—without fail. The matter is of great importance. Do not fail!"

That was all. There was no signature, and nothing whatever to indicate the identity of the sender.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth. "What's the meaning of this? I've got to meet somebody in the lane, at the old stile, at eleven o'clock. I wonder who on earth can have sent it? There's a mystery here, my sons!"

Church shook his head.

"Take my advice, and have nothing to do with the business," he said. "Ignore it completely."

"Ignore it!"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Well, it's obviously a trick," said Church. "Some funny ass wants to get you out in the lane after lights out—Fullwood, very likely, as I said. He and his sporty pals want to rag you, I reckon."

"That's about the size of it," agreed McClure.

But Handforth shook his head.

"I'm not so sure about that," he remarked. "This doesn't strike me as being one of Fullwood's wheezes. I think we'd better go."

"We?" said Church.

"Yes, of course."

"But that's all rot——"

"If you want to desert me, say so!" roared Handforth, in his old manner.

"But I thought you were my chums, and not a pair of rotters. There might be something important in this—it's probably a mysterious communication from somebody who knows something. And I reckon the best thing we can do is to go down to the stile together."

"But if it's private business," argued McClure, "Church and I would only be in the way. We shouldn't like to interfere——"

"There's no question of interfering if I ask you to come," snapped Handforth. "If it's a jape, as you think, the jokers will only expect me to go. But we shall all be there, and it'll be easy enough for us to deal with any trouble that crops up. Yes, we'll certainly go."

"Well, I can't see the sense of it, and that's plain," declared Church obstinately. "It might be a jape in connection with the new master—just to get us into a row. It would be like Fullwood to send Mr. Heath a note, too, telling him to be in the lane at the same time. I'm suspicious, and I think we should be jolly sensible if we chucked that note into the wastepaper basket, and ignored it."

"Hear, hear!" said McClure, nodding.

Handforth sniffed.

"You needn't come at all!" he said icily. "I'll keep the appointment alone, and what you can do is to go and eat coke. Rats to you! Blow you! And if you say anything more I'll punch your faces! I'm not in a mood to stand any of your silly rot! You'll come with me or get wiped up!"

"But you just said you'd go alone——"

"Never mind what I just said!" roared Handforth. "It's like your kid's intelligence to think of a fat-headed explanation like that! This is a mysterious note—not from Fullwood, or any of those cads. There's something fishy about it—something that needs investigating. And who's better fitted for a detective's job than I am?"

Church and McClure thought it advisable not to answer that question, for they could have named any junior in the school. In their opinion Handforth was the last fellow in the world to entrust with a detective's job. He fancied he was rather keen at that sort of thing—but it was only a fancy.

The chums of Study D went on with their prep., and Handforth was rather more cheerful than he had been. That note had given him something else to think about, and it took his mind off the worrying affair of his sister.

Bedtime came in due course, and the Remove trooped upstairs to its dormitory. I was with Sir Tregellis-West and Watson, and as we made our way upstairs I noticed that the view immediately in front was obscured by the ample figure of Fatty Little. He turned on the landing, and waited for us. There was a large bulge under his jacket which was not quite natural.

"What's that you've got there, Fatty?" I inquired.

The fat boy grinned.

"This?" he asked, tapping his jacket.

"Yes."

"Well, you see, I thought it would be rather decent to have some fun," explained Fatty. "It's Mr. Heath's first night, and Morrow told me that the new master will see lights out in the Remove dormitory. It's rather a good chance to have a lark."

"What kind of a lark?" I asked.

"Something about grub, I'll bet?" said Watson.

"Well, as a matter of fact, it is about grub," said Fatty Little. "How the currant bun did you guess?"

"Considering that practically all your actions are connected with grub in some form or other, it was not very brainy of Watson to guess," I chuckled. "When you're not talking of grub, Fatty, you're eating it, and when you're doing neither, you're thinking about it."

The fat boy grinned cheerfully.

"Well, there's nothing better to think about," he said. "Grub's the finest article on the face of the earth! It doesn't matter what sort of grub—as long as it's decent. I've got a ripping feed here, and I'm going to have a snack as soon as I get into bed. It'll be enjoyable."

"Bogad! You mustn't do that, dear old boy," said Sir Montie, adjusting his

pince-nez, and regarding Fatty with concern. "Havin' tuck in bed is a frightful breach of rules. A chap isn't even allowed to eat biscuits in bed!"

"Well, I know that," said Fatty. "But Mr. Heath is a new man, and he can't do much to me, in any case. It's a chance I can't afford to miss—a chance to have a ripping feed in bed!"

"You fat ass!" I grinned. "If you don't catch it pretty hot, I shall be surprised. You must be dotty to try a game like that on, even with a new master. But I expect you're prepared to accept a hundred lines or so."

Fatty Little nodded.

"A ripping feed in bed is well worth five hundred lines, any day," he said. "I can't do it with the prefects, or any of the other masters; but with Mr. Heath it's different. It'll be a fine lark."

The other juniors were soon aware of Fatty Little's intention, and if some of the guesses regarding punishment turned out to be correct, Fatty was booked for a truly horrible time.

But Little only thought of the present, and his eyes glittered joyously as he slipped between the sheets, and hauled a bulky parcel from the floor. This was followed by another parcel, and he proceeded to unfasten them.

"You didn't have both of them under your jacket, did you?" asked Watson.

"No; only the small one," said Fatty. "I brought the other parcel up an hour ago. I didn't eat much supper, as it happens, and I'm jolly hungry. This snack will just fill me up nicely, and make me sleep like a top."

De Valerie chuckled.

"Didn't eat much supper—eh?" he grinned. "Oh, no! Only about two loaves of bread, and all the cheese you could lay your fat fingers on."

"To say nothing of a tin of sardines, and half a dozen beef patties," said Trotwood. "He demolished them in the study ten minutes ago. Where the thunder he puts all the stuff is a puzzle I shall never fathom."

"And he reckons he'll sleep like a top after this lot," exclaimed Pitt. "Ye fishes! Look at the pile! It won't be a question of sleeping at all. He'll simply lay in bed and expire from inability to breathe!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

We couldn't help roaring. Fatty's bed was a sight. He was sitting up in

his brilliantly striped pyjamas, and a flat tray reposed on the quilt in front of him. The tray was quite large, but it was positively overloaded. Sandwiches, beef patties, currant buns, jam tarts, slices of cake, and all manner of food-stuffs were piled up on that tray. There was enough food for half a dozen fellows.

I didn't tell Fatty so, but I was pretty certain that his precious tuck would be confiscated on the spot, as soon as Mr. Clement Heath appeared. Jimmy Little didn't consider this possibility evidently, or he wouldn't have risked the affair. To lose a pile of grub was, in Fatty's opinion, the worst possible calamity.

Many of the other juniors eyed the food hungrily, but they didn't venture to ask for any. Mr. Heath was practically due, and the fellows had no desire to let themselves in for heavy impositions.

Fatty himself was firing away with a will, as though he had not tasted food for many hours. His capacity was certainly amazing.

"Cave!" hissed Church suddenly. "Heath's coming!"

"Look out, Fatty!"

"Shove all that stuff under the bed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The fat boy went on with his late supper with serene unconcern. And as the door opened, the Remove watched with tremendous interest. Mr. Heath strode in with a cheerful smile on his face.

"Ready, boys?" he asked genially. "I have come to see lights out to-night, and I hope that you— Good gracious! Well, I'm hanged!"

Mr. Heath broke off, and stared somewhat dazedly at Fatty Little's bed.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed faintly.

Fatty was eating away as heartily as ever, and he took no notice whatever of the Form-master. Fatty certainly acted well, and it would seem that he was quite accustomed to feeding himself in bed in this fashion.

"Little!" shouted Mr. Heath, striding forward.

"Yes, sir?" said Fatty, looking up with his mouth full and with a sandwich held in his hand. "Mmmmm! Just a minute, sir! Mmmmm! Speaking to me, sir?"

He gave a gulp, and looked at the Form-master.

"What is the meaning of this, Little?" demanded Mr. Heath.

"The meaning of what, sir?" asked Fatty innocently.

"You are actually eating in bed!" exclaimed Mr. Heath, gazing at the spread with an expression of amazement. "Good gracious! You have enough food there to supply the whole Remove! Explain yourself, Little! How dare you bring food into the dormitory, and eat it in bed?"

Fatty looked astonished.

"Didn't you know, sir?" he asked, in surprise.

"Eh? Didn't I know what?"

"About me, sir?" said Fatty. "Didn't you know about this grub—er, food—sir?"

"I didn't know about it, certainly," said Mr. Heath. "I know now, for I can see the food with my own eyes. A most amazing spectacle, too! Is it possible that you mean to eat all that amount?"

"This pile, sir?" said Fatty. "Only a snack, you know—"

"A snack!" shouted Mr. Heath. "Are you mad, boy? And I should like to know how you dare defy the school rules in this flagrant fashion—"

"But—but you don't understand, sir," interrupted Fatty. "You—you see, I'm allowed— That is to say, I—I— The fact is, sir, I've got a bigger appetite than the other fellows."

"I am quite ready to believe that," said Mr. Heath grimly. "Well?"

"Well, sir, one supper ain't enough to keep me going through the night," explained Fatty. "You see, if I didn't have enough to eat before going to sleep I should probably have an awful nightmare—"

"You will undoubtedly have a nightmare—and a very severe one—if you demolish this pile of food before going to sleep!" interrupted Mr. Heath.

A titter went through the dormitory.

"Grub never gives me a nightmare, sir," said Fatty confidently. "I only dream and have nightmares when I'm empty, or, to be more exact, when I'm not properly filled. This lot would just about make me comfortable."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Heath, startled.

"So, you see, sir, knowing what an appetite I've got, and, knowing how necessary it is that I should have plenty of food," explained Fatty, "the Head



To the astonishment of the juniors, the new Master proceeded to climb the nearest tree.

doesn't object to me having a bigger supply of grub than the other fellows. That's why I have this feed in bed."

Fatty Little's words were quite truthful, but they were so put that Mr. Heath was almost given to understand that the Head approved of the fat boy having a late supper in bed. And, as it was the new master's first night, he was somewhat strange to his surroundings.

"Do you mean me to understand, Little, that your House-master permits you to partake of this meal in bed?" asked Mr. Heath pointedly.

Fatty was nearly bowled out, but he rose to the occasion.

"You—you see, sir, it's a recognised thing, my eating more grub than the other chaps," he said, still evading a direct answer. "I need more, sir—my appetite's a bit bigger. And there'd be a terrible trouble with me if I didn't have a decent fill-up before I went to sleep!"

Mr. Heath shook his head.

"Well, Little, I cannot say that I approve of this habit of yours," he said. "One or two mouthfuls in bed would not harm anybody, but this enormous amount of indigestible pastry appals me, and I am amazed that you can sleep at all after consuming such food. However, since it seems to be a recognised affair, I will say nothing more."

Fullwood gave an unpleasant laugh.

"He's pullin' your leg, sir," he exclaimed. "It's all spoof—"

Fullwood froze up abruptly, for he had suddenly observed that Handforth had reached down for a boot, and Handforth was quite prepared to hurt. Edward Oswald was not a safe person to tackle.

"What did you say, my boy?" asked Mr. Heath, turning.

"Nun-nothing, sir!" gasped Fullwood. "I—I was only sayin' that Fatty Little's appetite is bigger than ever."

"H'm! I don't wonder at it," said Mr. Heath. "He appears to be privileged, so I will leave the matter as it stands. Little, you had better finish your supper as quickly as possible, for I have no intention of waiting here."

"It's all right, sir," said Fatty. "I can find my mouth in the dark."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's big enough to find, anyhow," chuckled Pitt.

We were all vastly amused. Mr.

Heath was completely spoofed, and we had certainly not anticipated such a state of affairs. The new master not only believed Fatty's hints, but he was actually allowing Little to partake of his feed.

"Do you generally finish your supper after lights-out?" asked the Form-master.

"Oh, I—I often eat in the dark, sir!" said Fatty truthfully.

"Then I will extinguish the lights without further delay," said Mr. Heath. "I only trust, Little, that you will be well enough to attend lessons in the morning. Good-night, boys!"

"Ha, ha! Good-night, sir!"

"I—I say, sir," said Fatty suddenly. "Won't you join me in a bite, sir?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Begad! The silly ass!"

We all regarded Fatty wonderingly. Made bold by his success, he was actually asking Mr. Heath to join him in the forbidden spread! It was a piece of pure, unadulterated nerve, and I had not given Fatty credit for such audacity.

"I beg your pardon, Little," said Mr. Heath, turning.

"Won't you have a sandwich, sir?" asked Little politely. "They're awfully nice, sir—Mrs. Hake's best. Just try one, sir, and find out for yourself. They're simply ripping!"

Mr. Heath hesitated.

"Well, my boy, I don't like to offend you by refusing," he said, smiling. "Seeing that this is my first night here, perhaps I will make an exception to the rule, and join you. As a matter of fact, I have not yet had my supper, and I must acknowledge that your sandwiches look appetising."

"Oh, my goodness!" murmured Pitt, nearly exploding.

The Remove, in fact, was at tremendous pains to hold itself in check. Everybody wanted to yell, but any laugh at this moment would have spoiled the whole thing. And Mr. Heath would have known at once that he was being spoofed.

So the fellows manfully kept themselves serious, and the new Form-master placed a chair near Fatty Little's bed, sat down, and helped himself to a sandwich. Fatty could hardly believe it himself, and he regarded Mr. Heath rather nervously.

"Is—is it all right, sir?" he asked, with a touch of anxiety.

"Delicious, my boy!" said Mr. Heath. "Quite delicious!"

Fatty nearly choked. The very idea of this situation was staggering. To partake of grub in the dormitory was a sin punishable by nothing short of a severe caning, and here was Fatty Little sitting up in bed, with a huge tray of tuck before him, and with his own Form-master sitting by, joining in!

It was certainly a terrific jape.

Mr. Heath rose to his feet after a few minutes.

"I'm afraid I must be going now, my lad," he said. "Thank you for the sandwich; I enjoyed it extremely. But I must implore you not to over-eat yourself, Little. If there is any sign of your being unwell in the morning, I shall feel it my duty to mention the matter to Mr. Lee, with a view to curbing your appetite."

"Oh, I shall be all right, sir!" said Fatty hastily. "There's—there's no need to say anything to Mr. Lee."

The Form-master switched off the lights, and, bidding the juniors good-night once more, he passed out of the dormitory. The juniors held their breath for a few tense moments, and then burst out into a subdued roar of laughter.

"Oh, my goodness!" murmured De Valeric. "Fatty deserves a gold medal for this! Of all the terrific nerve! I didn't think he could act like this!"

"And now we'll join in the feed," said Pitt.

"Yes, rather!"

"We can find our mouths in the dark, too!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors crowded round Fatty's bed. He had certainly brought up a huge supply, and he had no objection to distributing a certain amount of his tuck. The Removites considered that Fatty was a wonder, and the dormitory feed was a huge success. Little himself consumed the bulk of the grub, and when he lay back on his pillow he did so with a sigh of complete content.

He was just comfortably full, although many of the fellows wondered how on earth he would be able to eat anything during the course of the next week or so. But it was almost a certainty that on the morrow Fatty's appetite would be as healthy—and as large—as ever!

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERY OF MR. HEATH.

HANDFORTH sat up in bed. "You chaps awake?" he murmured softly.

Nobody answered.

"Sleepy beggars!" muttered Handforth gruffly. "Nice chums, I must say! We arrange to go out, and all you can do is to drop off to sleep."

The school clock had just chimed out the half-hour, and Handforth knew that it was exactly half-past ten. If he arose at once, he would have nice time to reach the stile before eleven. And Handforth was quite determined to keep the appointment with the mysterious sender of the note.

Handforth slipped out of bed, and went softly over to the beds which were occupied by Fullwood and Co. Those unpleasant youths were all sound asleep, so it was fairly certain that they had had nothing to do with the strange communication.

Within a couple of minutes Handforth had awakened his chums, and, although they protested strongly, he fished them out of bed and compelled them to dress.

"Couldn't have a better night for the job," remarked Handforth softly. "There's hardly any wind, the air's mild, and there's a lovely moon in the sky."

"Yes, but that doesn't alter the fact that we're probably on a wild-goose chase," said Church irritably. "I don't see the fun of getting up now, Handy."

"Neither do I," said Handforth. "There's nothing funny in it, as a matter of fact, and it's my belief that we shall make some discoveries. Buck up! We shall have to be pretty quick to get there before eleven."

Church and McClure knew how useless it was to argue, so they got dressed with as good a grace as possible, and soon afterwards they followed their leader out of the dormitory, and then downstairs into the deserted corridors and studies. They emerged into the Triangle, via the window in Study D, and found that it was necessary to use extreme caution, for, of course, many of the masters were still up and about. It was quite possible, indeed, that one or more of them might be taking a stroll in the school grounds.

And, as the moonlight was quite

strong, Handforth and Co. thought it just as well to be careful. They therefore made a wide detour, in order to reach the outer wall, keeping in black shadow all the time.

They reached the wall without mishap, and without catching sight of any human being. Then, just as they were about to scramble over into the lane, Church uttered a soft exclamation, and grabbed at Handforth's sleeve.

"Sh-ss-sh!" he whispered hurriedly. "Somebody coming!"

Handforth looked round, and he did not feel particularly elated when he observed a somewhat slight figure moving across the Triangle almost directly towards the wall. The three juniors crouched behind a bush, and waited.

"One of the prefects, I believe," murmured McClure. "Sit tight, for goodness' sake—and don't even breathe! Then if we're collared, it'll mean a flogging."

They waited in absolute silence, filled with anxiety. The figure came nearer, but, somehow, it was acting in a remarkable way. It did not walk boldly across the Triangle, but slipped from shady patch to shady patch in a furtive manner. And as the figure grew nearer the juniors recognised it.

It belonged to Mr. Clement Heath!

"The new master!" murmured Church. "Oh, my hat!"

The juniors hardly dared to move a finger. For, to their consternation, it seemed that Mr. Heath was making straight for the spot where they crouched. They had been expecting him to approach the gate, the small gate which was used exclusively by the masters. But Mr. Heath was directing his footsteps towards the wall.

"We've been spotted!" breathed McClure. "The best thing we can do is to bunk, and we may not be recognised."

"Stop still, you ass!" hissed Handforth. "We won't move a hair until it's absolutely necessary. I don't think he knows we're here. Look at the way he's moving about—like a giddy burglar!"

There was certainly some cause for Handforth's remark. Mr. Heath was acting in a very strange way. Having reached the deep shadow of the tree which lined the school wall, the new master paused for a few moments, and

then crept along until he reached a spot where the big stones, of which the wall was built, were uneven.

And then, to the astonishment of the juniors, Mr. Heath silently climbed up, reached the top of the wall, and then dropped down into the lane. It was quite obvious that Mr. Heath was unaware of the fact that he had been watched.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Church. "That's rummy behaviour for a master."

Handforth nodded grimly.

"Jolly suspicious behaviour, if you ask me," he said. "I thought there was something wrong with the man right from the start. Don't you remember how I said he had fishy eyes? No respectable schoolmaster would leave the premises in this way. He's acting as though he were afraid of being seen—and that's about the truth of it. He slipped out without a soul knowing, and he's afraid of anybody spotting him."

"Well, we spotted him," said Church. "I'll admit it looks suspicious, but there's no need to exaggerate what we've seen. Perhaps he hasn't got a key of the gate yet, and slipped over the wall

"That may be true," interrupted Handforth. "But why did he come across the Triangle in such a secretive manner? If everything's above board, there's no need for him to steal about the place like a criminal. I tell you, my sons, there's something jolly puzzling about this new master. He's not exactly what he seems to be, and I'm going to watch him."

"Now?" asked Church.

"Yes. He can only have covered a few yards," whispered Handforth. "He went down the lane, too, towards the stile—"

"Great guns!" exclaimed McClure.

"What's the matter, you ass?"

"I—I suppose it wasn't Mr. Heath who sent you that note—"

McClure's other words were frozen by the cold glare which Handforth bestowed upon him.

"You—you poor idiot!" said Handforth witheringly. "A Form-master would send a secret note to a junior, wouldn't he? If you can't talk better sense than that, my son, you'd better dry up altogether. This is just a coincidence, and it's a good thing we

broke bounds to-night. We might be able to spot the chap's game."

"I expect he's only gone for a stroll and a smoke," said Church.

At the same time, Church was not quite convinced that this was the true explanation. Masters who are bent upon a final smoke do not generally creep about the grounds in a strange way, and climb over the walls. Handforth was perhaps justified in believing that there was something amiss with Mr. Clement Heath.

"We'll dodge across the lane and get into the meadow," breathed Handforth; "then we can slip along parallel with the road, and overtake the bounder. He won't know we're there, and we can watch him."

"He might hear us," said Church.

"Not if we keep quiet, you brainless chump!" snapped Handy.

Church said nothing in response to this deadly insult, but followed his leader across the lane. He had his doubts about silence. He and McClure might be able to maintain quietness, but Handforth was always a noisy proposition.

Once in the meadow, the lane was cut off by the thick hedge. The grass underfoot was soft and mossy, and the juniors' boots made no sounds as they hurried along. Some distance before they reached the stile, they heard footsteps.

A handy gap provided a spy-hole, and Church peered through. Mr. Heath was walking along as quietly as possible, and his slight limp was easily apparent. He evidently had no idea that he was being shadowed.

Curiously enough, the new master came to a halt at the stile, and the juniors halted opposite. It seemed rather strange, but Handforth was certain that Mr. Heath was not in the least responsible for that mysterious note.

His presence near the stile at this particular time was merely a coincidence—and, as a matter of fact, Handforth's opinion was quite correct.

After waiting a moment or two, during which he peered up and down the lane, the new Remove master stepped over the stile, and plunged into the wood. Handforth and Co. were rather undecided.

"What shall we do now?" whispered Church.

"Stay where we are," replied McClure. "We can't follow the chap through the wood. He'd know in a minute, and would only wait behind a tree until we came up, and dodge out on us. We'd better give it up."

Handforth bestowed a glare upon his chum which was intended to be withering, but, unfortunately, the darkness deprived it of its effectiveness. At all events, McClure was unmoved.

"You burbling ass!" said Handforth. "Give it up! We're going into the wood—now! And if you don't come, I'll—"

"Oh, all right," said Church. "Let's go."

It was better than arguing, anyhow. The three juniors broke through the hedge, crossed the lane, and slipped over the stile. They had not proceeded many yards along the footpath before Handforth called a halt.

"He's coming back!" he breathed. "Drop down—anywhere!"

They hastily concealed themselves behind a thick bush, and waited. The limping figure of Mr. Heath came into view a second later. The new master was walking leisurely, and his hands were in his pockets. His gaze was directed upwards, and he seemed to be greatly interested in the trees.

Handforth and Co. waited, hardly daring to breathe. Mr. Heath was quite near them, and he had come to a halt. Then, to the astonishment of the juniors, he proceeded to shin up the nearest tree!

The new master was agile, and he swung himself from branch to branch with perfect ease. The juniors watched him in positive wonder. What on earth was Mr. Heath doing up a tree in Bell-ton Wood?

It was a question which could not be answered with any certainty. Mr. Heath climbed to the very top, and, once there, he remained in his lofty perch for quite a while. He was lost to view now, but the juniors could hear him moving about among the branches. Twigs were broken, and now and again a slim limb would creak protestingly.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Church. "What's his game?"

"Perhaps he wants some fresh air—or perhaps he's looking for birds' nests," suggested McClure brilliantly. "Some of the masters have queer habits, you know."

"Shush!" breathed Handforth. "He's coming down."

Shortly afterwards Mr. Heath swung himself to the ground. His first action was to take out his penknife and make a small notch in the trunk of the tree. Then he looked about him, walked to another tree, and commenced to climb this one, too!

He disappeared among the dense foliage and the branches.

"Great Scott!" said Church. "He must be dotty!"

"Clean off his rocker," agreed Handforth. "No human being in his senses would make a hobby of climbing trees in the middle of the giddy night! The chap's certainly up the pole!"

"Up the tree, you mean," said McClure, grinning.

"Ha, ha, ha!" sneered Handforth. "I suppose that's funny!"

"Shurrup, you ass!" muttered Church. "He'll hear you!"

Perhaps Mr. Heath had heard something, for the juniors noticed that he was perfectly still for a few moments. Then he rapidly descended. On the ground, he looked round cautiously, standing quite motionless. Apparently satisfied that everything was all right, he made another notch, and walked off towards the stile. The juniors followed, after allowing a minute to elapse.

Mr. Heath had disappeared, and when the juniors looked up and down the lane they could see no sign of him. This was curious, for the dusty road was bathed in moonlight, and it was impossible for the new master to have vanished out of sight within such a short space of time.

"Where the dickens has he got to?" muttered Church.

"Perhaps he dodged back into the wood," suggested McClure.

Handforth did not think this likely, and he slipped across the road, mounted the bank, and peered over the hedge into the meadow—for Bellton Wood only lined one side of the lane. And there, sure enough, Mr. Heath's limping figure was clearly visible on the other side of the field.

"There you are!" said Handforth triumphantly. "I thought as much! We'd better follow him——"

"What about your appointment?"

"Oh, that can wait," said Handforth. He charged through the hedge, and his chums followed. By this time Mr. Heath had disappeared from view, having passed into the next meadow. The juniors ran across the intervening

space at top speed, and when they arrived at the opposite hedge they had no difficulty in picking out the new master's slim figure in the moonlight.

"He seems to be making for the moor," whispered Church. "What's the good of us following——"

"Oh, dry up!" declared Handforth. "The chap's either dotty or crooked—and it's my belief he's not exactly what he seems. I'm on the track, and I'm not going to be shaken off!"

The juniors followed over the next meadow, and after that they came out upon the Heath, where patches of gorse enabled them to seek easy concealment if necessary. The Remove master was striding away briskly towards the moor proper.

Handforth and Co. continued to follow for some little time, but then they lost sight of their quarry. Abruptly, without the slightest warning, Mr. Heath had vanished, as though he had been swallowed up by the very ground itself.

The chums of Study D pressed on cautiously until they reached the spot where they had seen the master; but, although they scouted about in every direction, they could now see no trace whatever of Mr. Clement Heath.

"Fat lot of good coming, wasn't it?" growled Church.

"If you start grumbling, my son, I'll smash you!" exclaimed Handforth warmly. "Why, Nelson Lee himself would have lost the chap on a moor like this! Never mind; we shall meet with better success another time."

"Let's hope so, anyway," said Church. "I suppose we're going back to bed now?"

"Not likely!" retorted Handforth. "We're going to the stile—to wait for the fellow who sent me that note."

"But it's long past eleven——"

Handforth would hear of no excuses, and he led his chums back to the stile at a brisk trot. When they arrived they found everything quiet and still. There was nobody waiting, and it was pretty obvious that the whole affair was a frost. Who could have sent the note? It was certainly a bit of a puzzle.

"Look here, Handy, we're fed up with this rot!" said Church grimly. "Are you coming back to bed or not?"

"I'm going back to bed when I please," retorted Handforth. "If you chaps like to go off and desert me, you

can do so—and rats to you! I mean to stay here until I discover what——”

Handforth came to an abrupt halt, for at that second a dim figure loomed out of the wood, and came to a halt on the opposite side of the stile. He stood there motionless, without saying a word.

“Oh, my hat!” murmured McClure.

Handforth was always fond of the dramatic, and, with something of a flourish, he produced an electric-torch, and flashed the brilliant light fully upon the face of the new-comer. The man’s head and shoulders were dazzlingly lit up.

“Mr. Heath!” gasped Handforth.

The Remove master was momentarily startled, but he recovered himself.

“Take that light away, Handforth!” he ordered sharply. “You will explain to me at once what you are doing out here in the lane at this hour of the night.”

His voice was cold and harsh—very different from his mild tones of the classroom. Handforth did not turn the light away immediately—he was too startled to move—and he and his chums could see that Mr. Heath’s face was somehow different. It was drawn and hard, and his eyes were glittering with anxiety and inward fury; yet he strove to remain calm.

“Answer me, boy!” he said grimly.

“We—we—— That is to say—I—I——”

Handforth paused helplessly, being unable to say anything further at the moment. He was flabbergasted at being discovered, and, in addition, he was amazed at Mr. Heath’s appearance. They had seen the new master disappear on the moor, and they had come back at the double. Yet Mr. Heath was here, in the wood! In some extraordinary way he had reached the stile first.

“Cannot you speak articulately, Handforth?” demanded Mr. Heath angrily. “What are you doing here? Do you realise that it is nearly midnight——”

“We—we came to keep an appointment, sir,” ventured Church. “You—you see, Handforth got a note—somebody asked him to be at the stile at eleven—and we came out to meet the chap——”

“That is enough!” snapped Mr. Heath. “In the first place, I do not

believe this cock-and-bull story; and, in the second place, you had no right to leave your dormitory. Things have come to a pretty pass when a master cannot have a moonlight stroll without encountering boys of his own Form—long after they are supposed to be asleep! Go back to your beds at once!”

“Yes, sir,” said the juniors meekly.

“Handforth, you will write me seven hundred lines, and the other boys will write four hundred.”

“Why—why should I be given more, sir?”

“Because you appear to be the ring-leader of this disgraceful affair,” retorted Mr. Heath. “Now go! Do not dare to argue with me, or I will increase your punishment. You may consider yourselves very lucky that I do not report you to the Headmaster—for that would mean a flogging.”

Church and McClure managed to drag Handforth away before he could enter into any argument, and they were only too glad to find themselves back in the Remove dormitory. They had seen a side of Mr. Heath’s character which had not been apparent hitherto. The new master had been cold and determined, without the slightest sign of weakness. He had been anxious, too—far more anxious than he had wanted the boys to see.

“Well, it’s a jolly queer business—that’s all I can say!” Handforth declared, as he got undressed. “It’s fishy—and I mean to keep my eye on Heath. Unless I’m mistaken, he’s not the innocent master he pretends to be!”

“Better leave him alone,” remarked Church. “You’ll only get yourself into more trouble——”

“Rats!” retorted Edward Oswald, as he slipped between the sheets. “I know what I’m doing—and I know that Mr. Heath is a crook. This is a fine chance for me to develop my detective ability—and, by the time I’ve done, I shall prove to the whole school that I’m a born sleuth!”

Church and McClure grinned in the darkness, and they felt like saying a few sarcastic remarks; but, as they were anxious to get some sleep that night, they refrained from doing so.

And the Remove dormitory was soon quiet and peaceful.

CHAPTER V.

VERY ASTONISHING

MR. CLEMENT HEATH looked just the same as usual the next morning when he entered the Form-room. He was mild and perfectly self-possessed, and there was not the slightest trace of uneasiness in his expression.

But it was an undoubted fact that he seemed to be particularly down upon Handforth. Twice during lessons he punished Handforth severely for minor offences—inattention. Handforth, for some reason, was strangely absent-minded, and there was an expression of pain and worry in his eyes which had seldom been there before.

The other fellows guessed that Handforth was worried about his sister—and this guess was quite correct. As a matter of fact, Handforth had received another letter from his mother that morning, and Church and McClure had been permitted to see it. It contained no good news.

Edith was still missing, and no trace of her could be found. She had not communicated with her parents since her elopement, and Handforth was miserable and worried. He was quite satisfied with his sister's choice as regards a husband, but Handforth was terribly upset because Edith had disappeared.

As he explained to his chums, his sister had wonderful judgment, and if Mr. Arthur Kirby was good enough for her, he was good enough for Handy. Edward Oswald was quite satisfied with his sister's choice. He had never seen Mr. Kirby, but he had heard a lot about him, and he knew that Edith loved him dearly.

At the same time, Handforth could not excuse this conduct.

"Rotten!" he declared. "I don't blame the chap for taking Sis away and marrying her at the rush—he couldn't very well do anything else. But, once married, he ought to have brought Edith back and snapped his fingers in the pater's face. It's offside to vanish in this way, and not to leave a trace behind. The mater's in a terrible state, and goodness knows what'll happen if Edith doesn't show up soon!"

It was little wonder that Handforth was pre-occupied during lessons, and that he did not give his full attention to the work. His worry increased as the

day passed, and by tea-time Handy was fairly "dippy"—as Church put it.

He was so mentally upset that he seldom replied when he was spoken to; he went about in a condition of dazed misery, and the expression in his eye was far away and somewhat wild.

Tea was a matter of no importance to him, and he didn't seem to care whether he lived or died. He was always a fellow of brisk action when he was normal, but now that he had given himself over to worry, he did the thing thoroughly. Handforth always went to one extreme or the other. Generally speaking, he never worried over anything, but now that something had turned up, he almost worried himself crazy.

And it was entirely unnecessary, too. There was no reason for him to suppose that Edith was in any trouble. She had disappeared, certainly; but she had a husband with her, and they were probably happy enough. But Handforth loved his "Sis" tremendously, and it was awful to him to realise that she had disappeared out of his life, and that there was a possibility of his never seeing her again.

"I say, Handy, there's no need to go to extremes," remarked Church, when tea was all ready. "We've got a decent spread here, and you won't help your sister by starving. Squat down, and help us to demolish this lot."

Handforth didn't reply. He was standing by the window, staring out moodily.

"Deaf?" said Church.

"Eh? For goodness' sake, don't keep jawing!" said Handforth irritably.

"Don't you want any tea?"

"No!"

"But you can't starve——"

"I don't care if I starve or not!" said Handforth dolefully. "I don't want any tea, and I don't want you chaps to speak to me. Go away! Get out of this study!"

"Oh, don't be an ass," said McClure. "We are just going to have tea. Leave him alone, Churchy. If he chooses to starve, let him. When he gets really hungry, he'll soon change his tone."

Church nodded.

"Yes, it's the only way to deal with lunatics," he said.

He and McClure had got into the habit of talking about Handforth in the most insulting terms. A day or so earlier he would have retaliated by knocking

them silly. But now it was possible to say what they pleased, and he took no notice. But on this occasion, Church's words sank in.

"Did you call me a lunatic?" demanded Handforth grimly.

"Yes, I did."

"Then take that!"

Handforth lunged out, and caught McClure a swipe on the chest, which sent him staggering back. This was somewhat unreasonable, for McClure hadn't said a word; it was Church who had intimated that Handforth was a lunatic.

"You—you rotter!" roared McClure.

He didn't care what happened for a moment, and he flung himself forward, and delivered a punch which caught Handforth fairly under the chin. Edward Oswald went to the floor with a thud which shook the whole study.

"Bunk!" gasped Church frantically.

McClure was really too staggered by his own action to move an inch. It was the first time he had really knocked Handforth down single-handed, and he was flabbergasted by his own daring.

He wasn't a funk, and he held his ground, being quite convinced that he would be wiped up on the spot. In his present mood, Handforth would literally slaughter him, and there was no escape.

"Great pip!" said Handforth faintly.

He sat up, rubbing his chin. Then he rose somewhat unsteadily to his feet, gazed at McClure absent-mindedly, and nodded.

"Get on with your tea!" he said. "I don't want any! Don't keep bothering me like this! Go and eat coke!"

Handforth sank into the armchair, and McClure nearly fainted on the spot. It was unbelievable! Handforth had actually allowed himself to be knocked down, and he had not retaliated in any way whatever!

McClure suddenly felt repentent.

"I—I say, Handy, I'm awfully sorry," he stammered. "I didn't mean to slosh you like that! I thought you'd dodge —"

"Eh? Don't keep talking!" said Handforth crossly.

"But I want to tell you I'm sorry —"

"Sorry! Sorry for what?"

"For knocking you down——"

"You brainless dummy!" sneered

Handforth. "Do you think you could knock me down? If you can't talk better sense than that, I must advise you to dry up. Leave me alone—I'm worried! I don't want any tea, and I don't want any jaw!"

McClure gave it up after that. Apparently Handforth didn't realise that he'd been knocked down, and after tea Church and McClure told the tale in the Common-room wonderingly.

Everybody grinned, and many fellows were not quite ready to believe the yarn.

"It's possible, of course," I declared.

"Handy's so upset that he doesn't know what he's doing, and——"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

"He's just comin' in, dear boy."

"Talk of angels, and they appear," murmured Watson.

Handforth did not look much like an angel as he crossed the Common-room. I regarded him curiously, and could see that he was so deep in thought that he was acting almost like a sleep-walker. He certainly didn't realise where he was, and he had entered the Common-room quite mechanically.

Fullwood was lounging near by, and he winked at Gulliver and Bell as he suddenly put out his foot. Handforth tripped over him, and sprawled head-long.

"Sorry!" grinned Fullwood.

Handforth sat up, blinking.

"You—you clumsy ass!" he exclaimed severely.

"Your big feet, you know," explained Fullwood. "If I were you, Handy, I should be careful where you walk in a crowd. When a chap's got feet like yours he must take care of them, in case they don't stray."

Handforth's feet were a somewhat sore point with him. They were large—he knew it—but he resented any mention of this fact. And at any ordinary time, such a remark from Fullwood would have resulted in prompt bloodshed.

But now Handforth simply picked himself up and said nothing. The Remove regarded him with wonder, and were quite ready to believe McClure's story.

"It won't last long," I said. "Some of these chaps will try the game once too often—and then they'll get a bit of a shock. They're chipping him again!"

Some of the juniors were certainly

having some alleged joke at Handforth's expense. Gulliver, for example, intimated that Handforth's tie was crooked, and offered to straighten it. Instead of doing so, he pulled it undone, and left the ends dangling.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A good many juniors were highly amused, for it was undoubtedly a strange sight to see the warlike Handforth being treated in this easy way. Fatty Little added to the general amusement by knocking Handforth over again. But this was a pure accident, and was by no means a vindictive action.

Fatty backed away from a group of juniors, and struck Handforth in the back. The fat junior's enormous weight sent Handy flying, and he slithered along the floor, and finished up in the fender. But even at this treatment he did not retaliate. He picked himself up, wandered about the Common-room for a moment or two, and then aimlessly departed.

"Great doughnuts!" said Fatty. "I didn't think he was quite so bad as that! I sent him flying, and he didn't even touch me. Of course, it was an accident——"

"Oh, yes!" grinned Fullwood. "We all know that!"

"You beastly rotter," roared Fatty. "You know jolly well it was an accident—it wasn't like your rotten tripping act!"

The whole affair was astonishing, and I was fully convinced that there would be a reaction before very long. Handforth was not the kind of fellow to remain in that condition for a very long period.

Just before bedtime I observed that many juniors were talking together in low tones, and they were all grinning hugely. Pitt and Co. were prominent, and other fellows who were in the secret were De Valerie and Somerton and Hart.

"What's all the mystery about?" I asked, approaching a group in the passage.

"Oh, just a little wheeze," grinned Pitt.

"Something to do with Handforth?"

"Oh, no."

"Then what's the idea?" I demanded.

"A jape on the new master," explained Pitt. "You remember how

Fatty had a lot of grub in bed last night?"

"Of course I do," I replied.

"Well, we're going to do the same to-night," said Pitt. "When Heath comes in he'll find nearly everybody having a feed—and if he's got any sense of humour at all he'll grin, and let us off with twenty lines each. It's worth the risk, anyhow—and it'll be a test for him."

"Well, I'm not joining in," I said. "For one thing, I don't care for eating in bed—it's not good for healthy sleep. You fellows can do what you like—and I wish you luck. But don't blame me if you get into hot water."

"Oh, we sha'n't blame you!" said Pitt.

I was rather doubtful about the scheme, but the fellows were quite enthusiastic about it, so I said nothing more. And when we got into the dormitory parcels were unfastened on every hand, and the long apartment assumed the appearance of a banqueting hall. The juniors sat in bed, with large supplies of tuck spread in front of them. Fatty, as before, had a terrific quantity, even more than on the previous night.

"This is great!" he exclaimed, with his mouth full of sausage roll. "You wouldn't believe how beneficial a feed like this is to my health! I slept like a top last night—as sound as a bell."

"You couldn't help sleeping," said Watson. "You were dazed—choked up with grub until you couldn't do anything else but sleep. It's a wonder how you get up in the morning. You looked a bit groggy——"

"Rats!" said Fatty. "I never felt better in my life. I always need a large amount of solid food to make me comfortable. Now, this is what I call the ideal. I don't exactly approve of you chaps joining in——"

"You selfish porpoise!"

"I'm not selfish," explained Little. "But Heath might forbid any grub at all to be brought up in the dormitory—and then I shall be dished. Great cocoa-nuts! It'll be tragic if——"

"Look out! He's coming!"

Hart was near the door, and he had heard footsteps approaching along the passage. The next moment the juniors were feeding themselves vigorously, so that when Mr. Heath came in he would find them all on the job

The door opened, and a figure attired in cap and gown entered.

"Good gracious!"

The juniors looked up with startled gasps. For the master was not Mr. Clement Heath—but Nelson Lee himself!

I couldn't help grinning as I noticed the look of utter astonishment on the guv'nor's face.

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Great goodness!"

"Mr. Lee!"

There was a wild scramble. Food was covered up hastily, and some of the juniors ducked down beneath the sheets without caring what happened to the grub.

Jam tarts and sausage rolls and slices of cake rolled to the floor, and there was hopeless confusion.

Fatty Little was about the only fellow who remained calm, and he continued his late supper with perfect equanimity.

Nelson Lee advanced into the dormitory, and his expression was grim. His coming was a total surprise to the Remove. They had been fully expecting that Mr. Heath would again see lights out.

"Boys, what is the meaning of this?" demanded the House-master.

Nobody replied.

"Nipper, perhaps you can explain what it means?" went on Nelson Lee, appealing to me. "Are you concerned in this disgraceful orgy?"

I grinned.

"Draw it mild, sir," I said. "It's not exactly an orgy, you know. The chaps only did it to have a bit of fun with Mr. Heath. It's come as a bit of a shock to see you instead of the new master. Everybody thought that Mr. Heath would see lights-out."

A twinkle appeared in the guv'nor's eyes for a moment.

"Oh, indeed!" he exclaimed. "So this was intended to be a joke on your new Form-master?"

"Exactly, sir."

"That, of course, certainly makes a difference," said Nelson Lee. "But I cannot permit this scene to pass without inflicting severe punishment. It is quite disgraceful. Bringing food into the dormitory is positively forbidden."

The juniors were sitting up again now, and some of them were eating—although they did so in a furtive manner.

"Go easy, sir," I said. "It's only a bit of fun."

"It is not necessary for you to speak, Nipper," said the guv'nor severely. "This kind of fun is not allowable. The boys have no right whatever to bring food into the dormitory, and such a joke, in any case, does not appeal to me. It is just as well, perhaps, that I came instead of Mr. Heath. He would have reported the affair to me, and your punishment would have been much more severe. Little!"

Fatty Little had just filled his mouth, and he looked up, and gulped.

"Mmm! Gug-gug-gugh!" he exclaimed inarticulately.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Empty your mouth at once, Little," commanded Nelson Lee. "How dare you make those ridiculous noises?"

The fat boy swallowed hard, and gasped.

"S-s-sorry, sir," he exclaimed, "I—I—"

"There is no necessity for you to make excuses, Little," said Nelson Lee curtly. "Every boy will at once clear his food away. If there is the slightest sign of it remaining within fifteen minutes your punishment will be doubled. I will return in a quarter of an hour, and all the food must be removed by then."

Nelson Lee turned on his heel and left the dormitory.

"You'd better get busy on the job!" said Watson. "The quickest way will be to—"

"Eat it!" said Fatty Little.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My dear chaps, that's just what the guv'nor meant," I said. "He saw you'd got the grub here, and he was decent enough to let you eat it. He's given us a quarter of an hour extra so that the job may be accomplished. You'll notice he didn't state how the grub was to be removed."

"He's a brick," said Pitt warmly. "There's not another master in the whole school who would have been so jolly decent."

Everybody agreed that Nelson Lee was a stunner, and conversation was at a standstill for the next ten minutes. Jaws were busy, certainly, but they were engaged upon the task of getting rid of the food.

Fatty, although he had treble the amount of everybody else, won the race

easily. Before thirteen minutes had elapsed there was no sign whatever of his enormous pile.

And when the guy'nor returned, promptly to the minute, everybody was snug in bed, and not a trace of food remained.

Nelson Lee surveyed the dormitory and nodded.

"I am glad to find that you have obeyed my orders," he said. "You'll now get to sleep at once. Little, I judge, must be in a most uncomfortable condition."

"Rather not, sir," said Fatty. "I'm feeling fine after that snack."

"In that case you will not feel very depressed at the thought of writing me one hundred lines to-morrow, Little," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "Every boy in the dormitory who brought food here will accept a similar imposition. I trust that you will sleep well."

"Thank you, sir!"

"We'll sleep like tops, sir!"

"You're a brick, sir!"

And Nelson Lee certainly was a brick. A hundred lines was a mere nothing, considering the enormity of the offence. The juniors reckoned they had got off very lightly—and the feed was worth a hundred lines, any day.

CHAPTER VI.

GOOD NEWS.

HANDFORTH was certainly mad. Church and McClure stood on the stairs, and they regarded their famous leader with concern and amazement. Edward Oswald was down in the lobby, and his antics were quite sufficient to alarm anybody.

It was not yet breakfast-time. In fact, only three members of the Remove were down—and those three were Handforth and Co.

Church and McClure had got dressed quickly in order to follow Handforth. And they had arrived at the top of the stairs just in time to discover that their mighty leader had completely gone off his rocker.

There was no doubt about it whatever. Edward Oswald Handforth was behaving in a most extraordinary fashion.

He had the lobby to himself, and he was dancing round it, kicking his legs in every direction, and singing at the top of his voice.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Church. "He's gone mad!"

"Stark, raving dotty!" agreed McClure. "Look at him! No sane chap would go on like that! And what's that he's got in his hand? What's that he's waving about?"

"Looks like a letter."

It was a letter, and, by all appearances, the letter was unopened. Handforth was still capering round, and he was still singing. His face was flushed, and his eyes were gleaming. Suddenly he caught sight of his chums on the stairs, and he finished up his song and uttered a terrific yell.

Then, with glittering eyes, he rushed up the stairs towards them.

"Good heavens!" panted Church hoarsely. "He's dangerous!"

They fled.

Along the passage they ran, at full speed. They dodged round a corner, and Handforth rushed past, in full pursuit. The next second Church and McClure dodged out again, and retraced their steps.

Handforth became aware of the trick just as they were disappearing down the stairs. He uttered another tremendous yell, and gave chase.

Church and McClure simply fell down into the lobby. They were highly alarmed, and they rushed down the Remove passage at breakneck speed. Handforth came charging after them like an infuriated elephant.

"The study—quick!" panted Church. "We can lock ourselves in."

They reached Study D in the nick of time. The very instant they were inside they slammed the door to and turned the key. But, unfortunately, Handforth had arrived, and when the key was turned the door was not fully closed.

"Push!" gasped McClure. "We daren't let him in! He's—he's dangerous!"

"You—you burbling asses!" roared Handforth, outside. "Open this door!"

"No fear!" panted Church.

"If you don't, I'll wipe you into the middle of next month!" roared Handforth. "I'll roll you in the Triangle, and I'll duck you in the fountain!"

Church and McClure held the fort with all their strength.

But it was useless. Inch by inch, Handforth was forcing the door open, and within another two or three seconds he would be in the study.

"We'd better humour him!" whispered Church huskily. "It's no good—we can't stand this!"

The two juniors relaxed their efforts, but Handforth didn't relax his. The result was somewhat disastrous. Edward Oswald suddenly found that the resistance behind the door had vanished, and he came hurtling through into Study D like an avalanche. He charged into the table, sent it flying over, and he sat in the debris.

"Great pip!" he gasped faintly.

"Now's our chance!" said Church breathlessly. "We can slip out now!"

Handforth leapt to his feet, closed the door with a bang, and put his back to it. He gazed at his chums.

"What's the idea of this, you mad idiots?" he demanded. "You might have done some damage, making me pitch into the study like that? I've got some good news, and all you can do is to dodge away from me."

"Good news!" said Church dully.

"Yes, you babbling ass!"

"Take it quietly, old man," said McClure gently. "There's no need to excite yourself, you know. As long as you keep calm, it'll be all right."

Handforth started.

"Do you think I'm mad?" he demanded warmly.

"Nunno! Of course not!" panted McClure. "Mad! What an idea! You're—you're just a bit upset about that letter from your mater——"

"Which letter?"

"That one in your hand."

"You—you balmy lunatic!" said Handforth. "This letter isn't from the mater—it's from Edith! It's from my sister!"

"What!"

"That's why I've been dancing with joy," went on Handforth. "A letter from Sis, my sons! Think of it! And when I want to tell you all about it, you can't do anything better than to rush about as if you'd suddenly gone dotty!"

"We—we thought you were dotty," explained Church feebly.

Handforth condescended to grin.

"Well, I suppose I did act a bit queerly," he admitted. "But I was so surprised and delighted that I did go a bit off for a minute. A letter from

Sis, my sons! Everything will be all right now! All my worries are over!"

"What does she say?" asked McClure.

"How do I know? I haven't read it yet."

His chums stared.

"You haven't read it, and you're dotty with joy?" asked Church.

"Oh, it's bound to be all right!" said Handforth. "It's from Sis, so it must be. I'm going to read it now. That's why I wanted you chaps to be here. I—I can't trust myself alone."

Church and McClure were greatly relieved to find that Handforth still maintained his mental balance, and they watched him with interest as he tore open the envelope and removed a plain sheet of notepaper. There was only a small amount of writing upon it, and it was executed with extreme neatness. There was no address at the top, and Handforth had already noticed that the postmark was, "London, W."

"Well, what does she say?" asked Church.

Handforth allowed his chums to read the note over his shoulder. And what they saw was this:

"Dearest Ted,—I expect you have heard all about me from mother and father, and perhaps you are worried because you don't know where I am. Please don't worry any more. I am very comfortable, and very happy. Arthur and I are just as happy as two birds in a nest. We have a dear little home, and I could wish for nothing better. Later on, perhaps, I will write and let you know where I am. But just at present you must be content with this little note. But please don't worry about me at all. Everything is splendidly glorious.

"Your loving sister,
"EDITH."

"There you are!" said Church. "What was the idea of you worrying your silly head off? She's as right as ninepence."

Handforth nodded slowly.

"Of course, this makes me feel a lot better, I'll admit," he said. "But, at the same time, she might have told me where she's hanging out. Surely she could trust her own brother?"

"I dare say she thought it better to be cautious," said McClure. "Anyhow, everything's all right now, and there's no need for you to go about looking like

an escaped inmate from Colney Hatch."

Handforth folded up the letter, and placed it in his pocket.

"Well, that's all right," he said, in a curious tone. "Now that I'm relieved, there's no need to worry any more. Sis has written, and she's happy—and she'll write again before long, telling me her address. Good! Now I've got something else to attend to—something important."

Slap!

His fist shot out without the slightest warning, and it thudded upon McClure's chest with terrific force. McClure sat down in the centre of the room, amid the debris of the table and its contents.

"Yaroooh!" he roared. "Oh, my hat!"

"What—what's that for?" asked Church, backing away.

"Oh, it's all right! You needn't be afraid," said Handforth blandly. "I'm not going to touch you."

"But Clurey did nothing——"

"Oh, didn't he?" demanded Handforth warmly. "What about yesterday?"

"Yesterday?"

"Didn't this silly ass knock me down?" roared Handforth.

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped McClure, getting to his feet. "Did you knock me down because I punched you yesterday at tea-time?"

"Of course! You don't suppose I was going to let a thing like that pass, do you?" said Handforth. "Not likely! Which reminds me—Fullwood tripped me up in the Common-room, Gulliver unfastened my tie, and Fatty pitched me into the fender!"

"Fancy you remembering all that!" said Church. "We thought you were dazed, and didn't know what you were doing."

"So I was dazed—dazed with misery," said Handforth. "But I knew what I was doing, and I knew what the other chaps were doing, too!"

He turned on his heel, and strode out of the study. His chums, scenting excitement, followed him, and they passed into the lobby. As luck would have it, a good many juniors were there, including Fullwood and Gulliver.

"Hallo! Handy looks more business-like this morning," exclaimed Pitt. "Anything happened, Handy?"

"No," said Handforth; "it's going to happen now!"

He strode up to Fullwood, grasped him by the shoulders, and pulled him round. The dandy of the Remove glared.

"Take your beastly paws off me!" he said sourly.

"Stand just as you are," said Handforth politely. "Now, watch!"

Slosh!

Fullwood was not prepared for any assault, and the whole thing was extremely funny to the onlookers. Ralph Leslie simply stood there meekly, and accepted a punch on the nose which sent him sprawling.

"Yaroooh!" he howled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's for tripping me up yesterday," said Handforth grimly.

He whirled round, just as Gulliver was sliding off. The next second Gulliver was pulled up short, and he, too, was sent flying. He sat on the floor, with a bump which shook every bone in his body. He howled with pain.

"That's for being funny with my tie," said Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Same old Handy!" grinned Pitt.

"I guess it's sure lucky we didn't get fresh yesterday. I'll allow Handforth's got some memory."

Fatty Little entered the lobby, whistling, and Handforth's eyes gleamed.

"Hallo! What's the trouble here?" inquired the fat boy, eyeing Fullwood and Gulliver with interest. "Who's been performing a necessary task? Why, what—Great bloaters! What the plum duff are you doing?"

"There was no doubt as to what Handforth was doing. He placed Fatty in position, brought his arm back, and then delivered a drive which would have sent any ordinary junior yards backwards. Fatty Little merely gave a grunt, swayed, and held his position. Even Handforth's punch was not sufficient to shift Fatty Little.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ugh-h!" gasped Fatty. "You—you idiot! What the currant bun——"

"You bowled me over yesterday," said Handforth grimly. "You knocked me into the fender in the Common-room——"

"Rats! That was an accident, and I apologise," said Fatty. "What's the idea of bringing it up again now?"

"You apologise?" said Handforth. "Oh, well, that's all right, then. We

won't say any more about it. But these chaps are going through the mill yet— Hi! Come back, you rotters!"

But Gulliver and Fullwood had fled into the Triangle, and nothing more was seen of them until breakfast-time. They took particular care to keep out of Handforth's way. Yesterday he had been harmless. To-day he was dangerous.

"There must be some good reason for this abrupt change, my sons," I said after breakfast. "Handy's looking himself again."

We soon found out the cause of the rapid change, and Handforth gave me some further information, which he considered to be serious, but which I looked upon with considerable amusement.

"Heath is a rotter," Handforth declared darkly. "There's no getting away from the fact—he's a crook!"

"Begud!"

"Now, look here, Handy," I said. "There's no need for you to get those dotty ideas into your head. There's not much wrong with Heath."

"That's all you know," said Handforth, with a mysterious nod. "But

I've seen things, and I know things! You'd be surprised if you only knew what I know! And I can tell you Mr. Clement Heath is a criminal!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All right—you wait," said Handforth grimly. "You won't cackle so much soon. Heath's a crook, and I'm going to make it my business to watch him and get on his track. Understand?"

"Perfectly," I smiled. "You're going to do the detective stunt?"

"Yes, I am!"

"And beat Nelson Lee and Sexton Blake and all the rest of them?"

"I'm going to do my best, anyhow," said Handforth firmly. "This is my chance, and I've seized it with both hands!"

He strode away with his nose in the air, and I grinned to my chums. But there was certainly something in what Handforth said. Mr. Clement Heath was a mysterious individual, and before long he was to be even more mysterious still.

In fact, there were to be some very strange doings at St. Frank's!

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

YOU will be puzzled, my chums, to know who had sent Handforth the note making and failing to keep the appointment at the stile. This does not seem to have worried the gallant leader of Study D, whose mind, apparently, has been too much occupied with other things. Whatever might have been the purport of the appointment, it was certainly not an idle jape, but a significant thread in the course of the narrative, as later events will show.

Of much more importance to Handforth, however, were the suspicious movements late at night of Mr. Heath in Bellton Wood. Handforth felt it his duty to investigate, and in Next Week's Story, "*HANDFORTH'S HANDFUL*," our amateur detective, accompanied by his faithful chums, sets out once more on the track of the mysterious Mr. Heath. It will have been noticed that Handforth frequently succeeds in stumbling on the right track, but at the crucial moment sees a hare and starts off in pursuit of his new quarry. The hare in this instance will be a new character of extraordinary personality. Known as the Comte de Plessigny, he is a man of noble birth, refinement, and many accomplishments. Indeed, he possesses a wit and an astuteness which many a diplomat would have envied. That he chose to make use of his abilities for ignoble ends, branding himself the most elusive and daring criminal that had ever defied the police, was a flaw or a kink in an otherwise remarkable intellect. THE EDITOR.

YOU CAN BEGIN READING THIS SPLENDID SERIAL TO-DAY!

Three Boys in Canada.



by S. S. Gordon.

A Tale of Life and Adventure in the North-West.

INTRODUCTION.

JACK ROYCE, returned from Canada, has called to see his brother, **TEDDY ROYCE**, a clerk in London. While the brothers are together, they are aroused by a loud summons at the door.

GERALD TELFORD has been set upon by roughs, and seeks assistance of the Royces. The roughs are driven off. Later, Gerald is informed by his guardian, Mr. Cardone, that the money which the lad was to inherit is lost, with the exception of £50. The three lads agree to try their luck in Canada. They set sail for Montreal, and eventually reach Winnipeg. Throughout the journey they are shadowed by a man named Obed Snaith, one of the ruffians who had attacked Gerald in London, and who is believed to be in the pay of Mr. Cardone. While in Winnipeg, the chums rescue a man, nicknamed the Mad Prospector, from ruffians. The man, however, dies of his injuries, but gives the lads a secret chart of a rich gold discovery. The three lads proceed to Medicine Hat, south of Alberta, and after some exciting times at St. Pierre, 150 miles further N.W., they are offered work in connection with the opening up of a new line from Edmonton, N.W. of the Rockies, through the Grand Cougar Pass, and touching Dead Breed Lake, which latter place, being in the vicinity of the Mad Prospector's gold mine, the three young adventurers were in luck's way. While bivouacking, the chart is stolen by Connell, a rascally cook to the party. He is observed and followed by Teddy and Gerald, who track him to his accomplices, and these prove to be none other than Snaith and Olesen, both old enemies of the boys.

(Now read on.)

Captured.

"**W**AIT till we get out of here," Teddy whispered. "Question now is—what ought we to do? They're reading the chart now."

"I—I think I'll go and ask that fellow Johnson what he means by it

all," said Gerald slowly. "I can't believe—my guardian—"

"Sh!" Teddy hissed, squeezing his friend's arm.

But the unexpected happened. The rock they had been hidden behind had been a tall, upright one, as it chanced, delicately balanced. Gerald had, in the excitement and eagerness of the moment, leaned against it, with more weight than the balance of the stone would stand. Probably that rock had stood there in that position for centuries, unaffected by the winds and storms of the north-west; but Gerald had sufficed to give it the extra weight sufficient to upset its balance.

The rock swayed over, and, as it did so, it gave a queer, sucking sound, while the base of it tore itself out of the soft ground. Then the stone fell with a thud.

"We'd better hook it!" Teddy suggested, and turned to run into the darkness.

The flickering firelight fell on the two boys, who stood there, startled by the sudden fall of their sheltering rock.

"I'm not going to run," said Gerald stubbornly. "I'm going—"

A shot sounded out, and Gerald's hat was whipped from his head. Then came another shot, whistling past Teddy's cheek.

"Stop right thar!" cried a harsh voice. "I got ye covered!"

It was Snaith, and he lay on the ground, a Winchester rifle to his shoulder. His cheek was cuddled against the butt; one evil eye was squinting along the sights. And the firelight was

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

dancing over the man's wicked, blue-stubbed face.

The boys were wise enough and quick enough to realise that another move might prove fatal to them. They faced the camp-fire again, their hands held aloft.

Snaith came to his feet, and tucked the rifle into the crook of his arm, though, as he walked towards the two cornered friends, the muzzle of the weapon pointed straight at them. There was a nasty smile on Snaith's vicious face as, close at them, he reached out a hairy hand and seized Gerald by the collar.

Now Gerald Telford was no child; and, as has been said, the last few weeks of toil and the adventurous life here in the Western wilds had toughened his muscles to a great extent. And he never had been lacking in courage.

When he was seized by this double-dyed scoundrel, and shaken like a rat is shaken by a terrier, the temper of the Britisher got the better of him. Rifle or no rifle, he could not stand this sort of treatment without making some show of protest.

His foot shot out. Telford had been a noted Rugby player in his old school. He could kick hard and true. He was wearing heavy prospector's boots, and the toe of one of them caught Snaith in the shin with a blow that must have been agonizing.

Snaith gave a yell and doubled up with pain. Quick as lightning Gerald seized the muzzle of the villain's rifle. He gave it a jerk. It came away in his hands easily, and, using it as a club, he swung it and struck heavily at the man who, on his own admission, had accepted money to murder him.

There was nothing delicate about the blow Gerald dealt Snaith. It caught the ruffian squarely on the side of the head, and Snaith collapsed.

But the other two were quick enough to act. They, too, were armed; they had revolvers; and these they had now drawn out, and, hidden behind the fire, were firing through the flames at the two lads.

Gerald felt one bullet strike the butt of Snaith's captured rifle, and the weapon was torn from his hands. He stooped to pick it up, and as he did so another bullet whizzed close over his head. Had he been standing upright

at that moment there is no doubt it would have spelt the end of his career in Canada or anywhere else.

"Run, man!" Teddy yelled.

After all, Gerald considered, it seemed the soundest thing to do. He gave another glance at the prostrate Snaith, then, throwing down the rifle, he turned to dash into the darkness.

But fate again intervened. Even as he turned, he felt something strike his heel a heavy blow. As just as that moment his foot was raised to take a stride, the bullet that had lodged in his boot-heel overbalanced him. He came to the ground with a great crash.

His forehead caught against the very boulder behind which he and Teddy had hidden to listen to these rogues' conversation. At once his senses reeled under the shock. He tried to scramble to his feet, grew dizzy, and failed.

"Run on, Teddy!" he shouted. "Don't mind me!"

For he knew he was now in imminent danger. He was only dazed, not unconscious. And he could see that Connell, the cook, and the big Swede had now risen to their feet and were rushing towards him, revolver in hand.

Teddy heard his friend's shout, and halted in his flight. He knew there was trouble in store for Gerald, and he was not the boy to desert a friend in time of need. Besides, it came to him like a flash, Jack and he had undertaken to look after Gerald.

"Where are you?" he asked. "Gerald!"

But Gerald was at that moment in the hands of Hank Olesen, the big Swede; and Olesen, with a hug like a bear, had his huge arms wrapped about Gerald in a rib-cracking embrace.

Gerald, sick and dizzy from the blow he had received, was helpless, though he kicked and struggled feebly.

"Bring him to the fire," said Connell. "Say, I hope he ain't killed Obed."

Olesen carried Gerald to the fire as easily as though he had been a baby in swaddling clothes.

Connell stooped over the unconscious Snaith, grunted, and finally jerked the ruffian to his feet, dragged an arm about his neck, and literally carried him also to the fire.

Gerald was thrown roughly to the

(Continued on page iv. of cover.)

ground, and the Swede, with a fat, oily chuckle, planted a huge foot on the boy, pinning him down firmly. Then the big brute wiped his beard and moustache with the back of his hand.

"Yoost lie dere, mein leetle boy," he said. "Don't wriggle, or I vill your back break mid mein foot—yes!"

(To be continued.)

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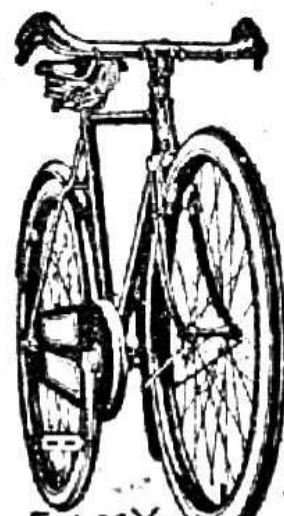
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