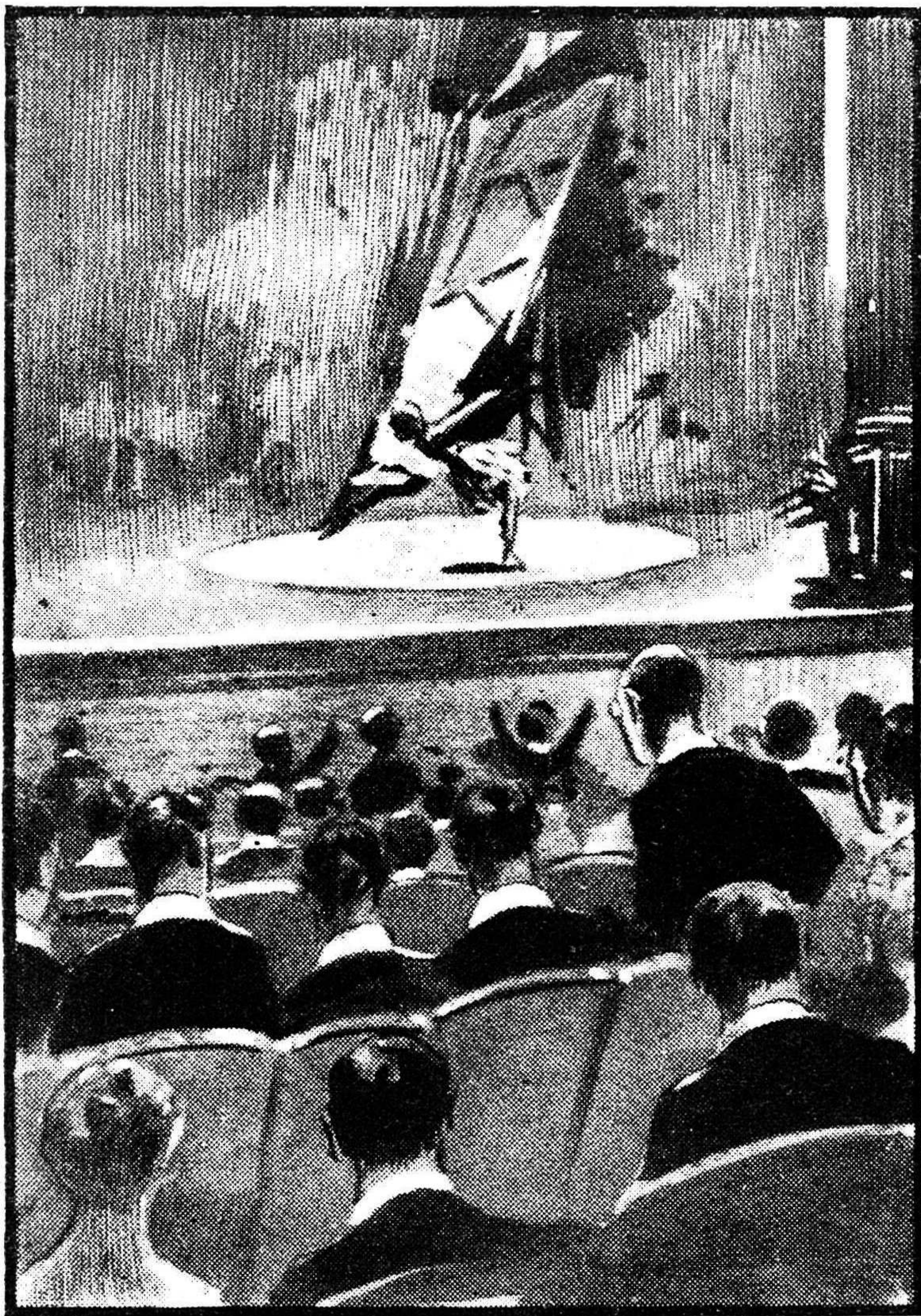


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ARCHIE'S PANTOMIME FAIRY! A Scream-
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The whole mass of scenery fell with a swishing crash upon the stage, burying the little dancer amid the debris.

ARCHIE'S PANTOMIME FAIRY!



The irresistible charm of Archie, his choice flow of ornate language—a slang peculiarly his own—and his fastidious taste in dress make

him a central figure of attraction at this time of the year. In this particular story, Archie's latest adventure provides such a fund of laughable episodes that the reader is advised not to read it all at one sitting in case the continuous laughter might inflict too great a strain on him.

THE EDITOR.

(RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER)

CHAPTER I.

A SOMEWHAT FOUL PREDIC.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH grunted. "Disgraceful!" he exclaimed, glaring. "They've got the nerve to call this an up-to-date railway, and they keep you waiting half an hour at a giddy junction!"

"Well, after all, half an hour isn't so long," said Church. "At some junctions a fellow is kept waiting for a couple of hours. And don't forget that when the train does come in, it'll be a non-stop, right to London."

"That's no excuse," said Handforth. "If I was the managing-director of this line I'd soon make a few alterations."

"I expect you would!" grinned Reginald Pitt. "For instance, the trains would be about five hours late, and the ticket collectors would be trained boxers, so that they could punch the heads of the dissatisfied passengers."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Handforth's always got a policy of violence!" went on Pitt, with a chuckle. "If ever he becomes a business man, he'll be a terrific tyrant!"

"I'm not so sure!" I put in. "Handy's got a soft heart."

"Thanks awfully!" sneered Handforth. "I don't want any sarcasm! And what the dickens do you mean by squinting at me through that fat-headed eyeglass?" he added, turning to an elegant junior who stood near by.

"What? What? I mean to say, talking to me, dear old lad?" inquired Archie Glen-thorne mildly. "Dash it all! Rather a priceless thing to say that I was squinting, don't you know?"

"You worry me!" said Handforth roughly.

"Absolutely!" replied Archie. "That is, I mean—"

"Oh, take it away!" interrupted Handforth. "It gives me a pain!"

He made a grab at the cord which secured Archie's monocle. It came away completely, although Handforth hadn't expected

it. He put the monocle into his pocket, and condescended to grin.

"A chap with perfect eyesight doesn't need a Piccadilly window!" he said. "You won't get that eyeglass again till we're in London, my lad! It's about time somebody taught you a lesson!"

And Handforth strolled away, leaving Archie gazing after him in blank dismay. This was quite a characteristic example of Handy's autocratic methods. Yet he really hoodwinked himself into believing that he was doing Archie a good turn.

"I say, that was a bit high-handed!" protested McClure.

Handforth sniffed.

"Monocles!" he sneered. "They ought to be prohibited by law! They give England a bad name!"

"A bad name?" asked Church, staring.

"Yes, rather!" said Handforth. "Look at the American films we see in our cinemas! If the Yanks put an English character into their pictures they make him a silly-looking fop with an eyeglass! In America they seem to think that every Englishman is a giddy Piccadilly Johnnie! And chaps like Archie are the cause of it!"

Handforth was rather indignant, and he stamped up and down the platform—partly to work off his feelings, and partly to keep warm.

For it was a cold, winter's day, and snow lay thickly over the whole countryside. There were twelve of us in the party—twelve St. Frank's juniors. And we were bound for London.

We had had a perfectly glorious Christmas with the youthful Duke of Somerton, at his magnificent ancestral palace, Somerton Abbey. The house-party there had been one of the happiest and cheeriest I had ever joined.

True, we had had a bit of excitement during the early part of our visit, but our Christmas had not been marred by any unpleasant incident, or any dullness. And now, with the festive spirit still with us, we were bound for Reginald Pitt's place in London.

Pitt's pater had very decently asked us to spend a few days with him before sorting ourselves out, and going to our various homes for the conclusion of the holidays.

Mr. Pitt had outlined a fine programme of entertainment, and not one of the fellows had been able to resist it. We would go to pantomimes, cinemas, and other shows.

Therefore, it can hardly be said that we were an unhappy lot. On the contrary, we were in the highest possible spirits, and looking forward with lively anticipation to our stay with Pitt and his people.

Half an hour's wait on a junction platform was not a very great hardship, and nobody thought of grumbling except Handforth. But as Handforth was always grumbling, it didn't matter.

Archie hardly knew what to do for a few moments—after the pugnacious leader of

Study D had taken his monocle. But, at length, Archie pulled himself together, and squared his shoulders.

"Now that, so to speak, was dashed uncalled for!" he observed stoutly. "I mean to say, when a chappie pinches another chappie's eyeglass it's time that something was done. In large quantities, what? It seems to me that Phipps ought to be here."

"Poor old Archie!" grinned Pitt. "Where are you without the faithful Phipps?"

"Absolutely like the chappie on the Atlantic liner—that is to say, at sea!" replied Archie. "It begins to surge into the old bean, dear ones, that I was slightly unwise in sending Phipps on ahead with the old bags and packages. I need the blighter—absolutely!"

Archie walked up the platform, determined to recover his monocle at all costs. But before he had gone far there was a rumble and a roar, and the fast train for London pulled up against the platform with a grinding of brakes and a hissing of steam.

"Here we are!" sang out De Valerie. "Plenty of room, you chaps. Jump in! Here's an empty compartment!"

Half a dozen fellows crowded in after Cecil De Valerie. Church and McClure were about to make for the same door, when Handforth pulled them up.

"Not likely!" he said. "We don't want to travel with that crowd! Here's another empty compartment—we'll be by ourselves. Don't let Fatty Little in under any circumstances."

"You needn't worry about Fatty," grinned Church. "He's still in the refreshment-room!"

They entered the compartment, and sat down. Handforth took a seat near the window, and glared out with a fierce, forbidding expression. He had an idea that this would stop anybody else from entering.

But it didn't stop Archie.

Archie was determined to get his eyeglass. He considered it a piece of perfect impudence on Handforth's part to take the thing at all. What did Handy want it for? Besides, Archie had a horrible kind of fear that Edward Oswald would pitch the monocle out of the window.

"Clear out!" said Handforth, as Archie presented himself.

"Absolutely not!" said Archie firmly. "The fact is, old thing, I'm frightfully keen upon getting that eyeglass back. I mean to say, I absolutely hate starting a bally row."

"I don't mind it at all!" said Handforth. "Go ahead!"

"Pray listen!" went on Archie. "The fact is, I'd rather like to have that window back again. You gather the old trend? You see, dear one, I'm bally well lost without it. So I've just flowed in, what?"

"You can flow out again!"

"Dash it all!" protested Archie. "I mean to say, dash it all! It puts a chappie off his stroke; don't you know! Not long ago

I was feeling considerably braced. I mean, I've been thinking of this and that, and it seemed to me that everything in the garden was somewhat lovely. And now, as it were, you proceed to shove the old lid on it!"

"His name ought to have been Brook—he goes on for ever!" groaned Handforth. "Did you ever know such a chap for jawing? I'll give you just three seconds to clear out, Archie!"

"But, I mean——"

"We want this compartment to ourselves!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "And I want my monocle to myself! As one chappie to another, you can't seriously say that one dashed monocle can be shared between two, eh? Kindly come across, old turnip!"

"I'll come across with one of my special lefts if you're not careful!" growled Handforth. "I've never known such a nuisance——"

"But—but you don't seem to grasp the scheme!" said Archie feebly.

"Clear out!" roared Handforth.

"Absolutely! When you've handed over——"

"I'm fed-up with you!"

"I mean to say, the old feelings are somewhat reciprocated!" said Archie mildly. "That is to say, what about it? The old eyeglass, as it were? I think I've explained——"

"I've had enough of this!" snapped Handforth grimly. "Grab him, you chaps!"

"What for?" grinned Church.

"We'll shove him under the seat—he's too noisy!"

"What-ho!" said Archie hastily. "Absolutely not! I mean to say, I positively refuse to allow—— Dash it! Dash it! In fact, kindly take the old digits away, lad!"

But Handforth was determined. Why he should persecute Archie in this way was a bit of a mystery, and probably Handforth himself didn't understand. But he was determined to finish this scene at once.

Much to Archie's dismay, he was grasped, and before he could offer any serious resistance, he was pushed under the seat of the compartment. And Handforth and Co. spread themselves out in such a way that their legs prevented Archie from getting out.

"Now you can stop there!" said Handforth triumphantly. "And if you dare to move, we'll give you something else!"

A murmur came from beneath the seat, remarking that the whole thing was becoming dashed poisonous. And then Church, who was looking out of the window, gave a bit of a start.

"I say, there are two men coming towards this compartment!" he said hastily.

"Keep 'em out!" snapped Handforth.

"We can't keep 'em out if they mean to come in!" said Church. "Better keep still, Archie. It wouldn't look well if anybody saw you under there. They might think you were trying to travel without a ticket!"

"How absolutely ghastly!" came a

mumble from beneath. "The fact is, laddies, I'm feeling dashed rotten! Shabby treatment, and what not! Rather beyond the limit, if you know what I mean! Don't you think so? Or do you rather like this kind of stuff?"

"Dry up, fathead!" hissed Church.

Archie groaned as he heard the door of the carriage wrenched open.

"Yes, this one'll do, Radmore," said a deep voice. "The train seems to be filled up with these infernal boys! There's more room here than anywhere else, anyhow."

"You can't come in here!" said Handforth aggressively.

"Oh!" retorted one of the men staring. "Why not?"

"Er—these chaps are lunatics, and I'm just taking 'em to the asylum!" said Handforth, indicating Church and McClure. "They're rather dangerous, too!"

"Fathead!" said McClure indignantly.

The men entered and sat down. Handforth glared at them; he glared at his chums, and then he gave an expressive snort.

"Well, I'm blessed if I'm going to stop here!" he said sourly. "Come on, you chaps—we'll find another compartment. I'm rather particular about who I travel with."

And Handforth and Co. bustled out, and slammed the door. But as they were looking for another compartment, Church suddenly stopped.

"My only hat!" he gasped. "We left Archie under the seat!"

Handforth grinned.

"Yes, I know," he said heartlessly. "Rather rich, eh?"

But Archie didn't think so at all!

CHAPTER II.

THE UNWILLING LISTENER.



"GOOD," said one of the men in the compartment. "I was rather hoping that would happen, Radmore. If the train gets off quickly now we shall be by ourselves all the way."

"That's fine," said Radmore. "We've got plenty to talk about."

And Archie crouched under the seat, confused and bewildered, and with a dim realisation that a somewhat poisonous trick had been played upon him.

He reviewed the situation. Should he make a dive for it, and get out at once? Or should he wait a bit. It was rather a knotty problem. The whole thing was ghastly and absolutely fearful. For a chap to slither out from beneath a railway carriage seat was a horrible sort of thing. Archie hadn't the nerve to attempt it.

And while he was trying to make up his mind the train started.

"Gadzooks!" he groaned, as he felt the motion. "I mean to say, this is what a

lad might call the absolute essence of all that's fearful! Here I am, as it were, absolutely in the old soup! I mean to say, I daren't move, or these blighters will find me!"

Archie could not remember having been in such an unpleasant predicament before. And he lay there, hoping against hope that he would not be discovered. His only chance was to remain in concealment.

Thus, if he was lucky, he would be able to get to London without these two men knowing anything about him. So he resolved to remain quiet, and he would fill in his spare time by inventing a suitable means of revenge.

"I mean to say, Handforth has got to go through it!" he told himself. "Treating a chappie like this is rather a step beyond the old limit! I'm not the kind of lad to grumble—I don't mind a joke. Absolutely not! But this is just over the edge!"

He pressed himself back as far as he could, and was very thankful that the two men were sitting on the seat above him. If they had been opposite, they might have caught sight of him under there.

He throbbed with horror as he thought of the position if he was hauled out. What could he say? How could he explain the thing? It was rather more than a chap's brain was capable of.

But he needn't have worried.

The two men were quite convinced that they had the compartment to themselves, and they had now settled down, and were smoking comfortably.

"By the way, Radmore, you were telling me something about that man Reynolds!" exclaimed one of the strangers. "Have you fixed him up yet?"

"Of course I have," said Radmore. "A pretty good thing for me, too. Do you know, Gilbey, I shall draw in a clear hundred over that man? I've settled a contract for him that'll take him to some of the best halls in the country. Only a small turn, of course, but he's the right stuff."

"Oh, I agree," said Gilbey. "I met him in the Strand the other day, and he seemed a bit downcast——"

"That was before I fixed him up," said Radmore. "But I haven't told you about that girl yet. Why, man alive, it's the finest snip I've ever come across! If I work the thing properly, I'll make a fortune out of her!"

Archie felt very uncomfortable. In spite of the roar of the train, he could hear every word that was being spoken. This was quite understandable, because the two men were talking loudly. Having the compartment to themselves, there was no reason why they should do otherwise.

It appeared to Archie that the men were somehow connected with the stage. He didn't quite like it. He was compelled to listen to a conversation which was not intended for his ears. At the same time, there

was nothing particularly private about it so far.

"A fortune—eh?" exclaimed Gilbey. "You're rather optimistic, old man. There aren't many fortunes to be made by a theatrical agent."

"You don't know this kid!" said Radmore confidently. "She's a youngster—a beginner—and she's got the talent. I don't mind betting you a level fiver that she'll be topping the bills in another three years. Topping them, my lad—at the best halls, too!"

"As clever as that?"

"Clever isn't the word!" said Radmore enthusiastically. "She's simply a kid—a child. And she can sing in the most amazing way, and she gets hold of her audience as only a true artist can. When she's on the stage, you can hear a pin drop. She's a perfect little genius."

"Some of these perfect little geniuses peter out," said Gilbey.

"This kid won't!" replied Radmore, with conviction. "I could have got her an engagement for the pantomime season at ten quid a week—but I didn't. I worked things deliberately, and she's appearing as a fairy in one of the London theatres at a salary of two pounds."

"But what on earth was the idea of that?" inquired the other, in surprise. "What about your commission?"

Radmore chuckled.

"Ah, my boy, you don't understand!" he exclaimed. "If I let her know her true worth, she might rumble things. I know what she can do, and I know what she'll become in the course of a few years. A star—a tip-top star, booking at the highest figure. But I haven't told her! I've made her believe that she's just ordinary, and that she's confoundingly lucky to get an engagement at all."

"But, my dear man, she'll soon find out the truth—unless she's a fool."

"You can take it from me she isn't a fool," said Radmore. "She will find out—and probably within a week or two. But I mean to have that contract signed to-morrow—a ten years' contract!"

"But will she sign it?"

"Good heavens, no!" laughed Radmore. "She hasn't got to. Haven't I told you that she's a kid? Her father's got to sign the contract. He's her legal guardian. He's a drunken sot of a fellow who doesn't understand the value of his own girl. I shall be able to wangle him without any trouble!"

"And make a good thing out of it?"

"I'll make a fortune!" said Radmore comfortably. "It'll be a ten year contract at five quid a week. Think of that, my lad! Five quid a week! And at the end of a couple of years she'll be worth fifty quid a week! I'll be booking her as the star turn at the finest halls in five years, and I'll be living on the fat of the land—with a Rolly Royce to take me about!"

"Good luck to you!" said Gilbey. "Of course, it's a bit hard on the kid, but that's all in the game!"

"Oh, I'll treat her well!" said Radmore, with a chuckle. "That's just the cinch! She'll be absolutely under my thumb; and in another two or three years she'll be a nice little thing—eh? I can raise her salary a bit, too. She'll get her reward when the contract's ended."

"Yes—perhaps!" said the other. "By that time she'll be past her glory, I should think."

"That's why I'm making the contract for ten years," said Radmore, with oily satisfaction. "You won't find any flies on me, my boy! It's absolutely amazing how you can fool these people. If this man Wickham had any sense he'd know that his girl was worth a mint of money. But he's always drunk—which is good for me!"

"I think you mentioned you had a photograph of the kiddie," said Gilbey. "I'd like to have a look at it."

There was a silence, and Archie judged that the other man was searching through his pockets. The unfortunate junior had been growing hotter and hotter with indignation as he listened to the conversation.

He knew practically nothing about theatrical agents, and still less about contracts. But he had enough sense to realise that there are black sheep in every walk of life.

And Mr. Radmore was very obviously an exceedingly black sheep. For he had plainly stated that he was determined to make a fortune out of some innocent child by getting her father to sign a contract which had been devised for the especial purpose of benefiting the agent.

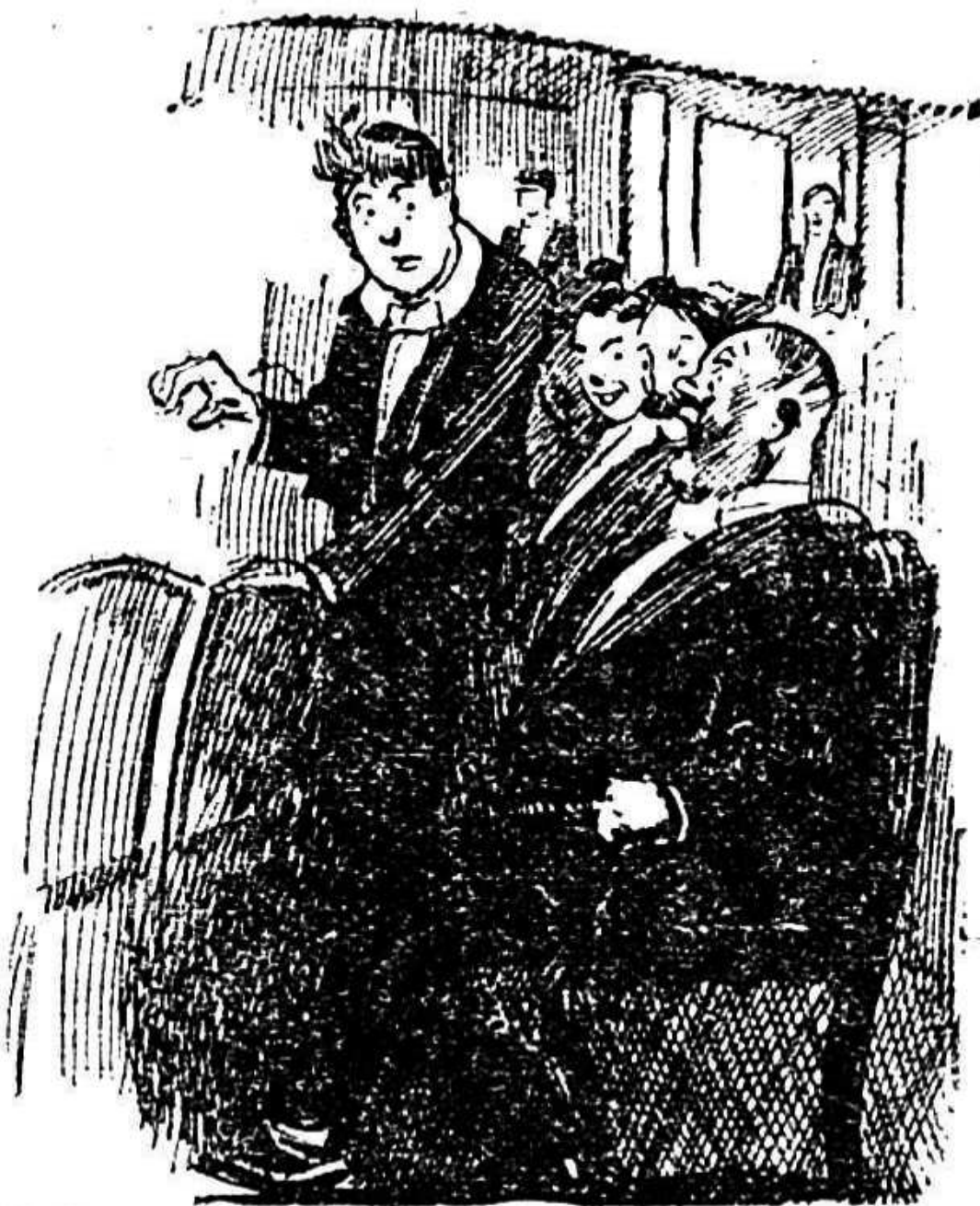
The girl herself—the young actress who was destined to become a star—would receive nothing but a miserable five pounds a week, even after she became famous. And she would be compelled to fulfil the contract by law. For this sort of thing, although morally criminal, was quite legal.

Archie had dim recollections of having heard his father talking about stage stars who were in the hands of their agents—mainly through signing contracts during the early part of their careers.

And it seemed to Archie that these two men in the train were about as despicable a pair of rogues as one could meet in a day's march. And the unfortunate part about the whole business was that he didn't know who the girl was, or where she was appearing. In the goodness of his heart, Archie felt that he would like to warn the child of this plot.

And he was just puzzling how he could get to work when something dropped down from above, and slipped half underneath the seat. He gave a gasp, and crouched further back.

For he had an awful fear that the men would bend down, recover the object, and see him at the same time.



Handforth's method of getting out was quite simple. He swept along the row, utterly careless of the confusion he caused.

But the thing which had fallen remained there. And after five minutes had elapsed, Archie came to the conclusion that the loss had not been noticed. He turned his head slightly, growing more confident, and was then able to see that the thing was a photograph.

"What-ho!" he murmured. "I mean to say, Fate, and all that! It's the girl's photograph! It seems to me that the first job on the programme is to grab the thing and give it the jolly old once over!"

He reached out his hand, and cautiously edged the photograph further and further under the seat. Then, when he felt that it was safe to do so, he picked it up and held it close to his face.

There was quite sufficient light for him to see the likeness.

The picture was that of a charmingly pretty girl—a girl dressed in short frocks and little, white socks. She was about ten years of age, at the most, with a mass of golden curls hanging about her shoulders.

Archie felt furious.

So this was the child they had been talking about. These scoundrels were planning to live in luxury upon her earnings—at least, Radmore was. It was a despicable business.

And such a youngster, too! No wonder they had referred to her as a kid! It seemed a shame to Archie that the law could allow a drunken father to sign a contract which would mean poverty for his

daughter—poverty, even when she was at the pinnacle of fame.

After all, what was five pounds a week? A pretty good salary for some people—but where would it go with a girl on the stage? She would have to spend the bulk of it on fares and dresses and things. Archie was a bit hazy, but he was quite convinced that five pounds was a miserable pittance for an actress. Which proved that Archie was not such an ass as he looked.

After that the men got talking about other subjects. It was clear enough that Radmore thought that he had put the photograph back in his pocket. It must have slipped down unnoticed, and Archie was glad.

Radmore and his companion talked about golf, and then entered into a long discussion on racing. This made Archie nearly weep with boredom. He heard nothing but the names of horses and racecourses and jockeys. But, somehow, the time passed. And at last the train drew up with a grinding of brakes. And to Archie's infinite relief, the two men gathered up their bags, opened the door, and passed out.

CHAPTER III.

THE PANTOMIME PARTY.



"ALL here?" I asked briskly. "We don't want any stragglers—Hullo! Where's Archie?"

"Haven't seen him for ages," said Pitt.

Handforth grinned.

"He was under one of the seats when we started from that junction," he observed, with a chuckle. "Of course, he showed himself after a bit, I expect, but he shouldn't be such an ass!"

"Under a seat?" I repeated, staring.

Handforth explained, amid much laughter. I could hardly help grinning on my own account.

"It was rather a dirty trick on Archie," I said severely. "But where is he? Why hasn't he appeared?"

We had arrived at the terminus. We were in London—with the noise and hustle of the great station in our ears. And all the St. Frank's crowd, with the exception of Archie Glenthorne, had gathered together in a clump.

We looked up and down the wide platform, but we could see no sign of Archie's elegant figure. And so, at last, we set out upon a systematic search. Handforth couldn't remember the compartment, and so we had to look through every one, and after about five minutes we met with success.

Something dark and bulky was tucked away beneath a seat in one of the empty compartments. I put my head into the carriage, and looked closer.

"That you, Archie?" I inquired.

"What-ho! What-ho! What-ho!" gasped Archie, popping his head out from beneath

the seat. "So there you all are, what? And here, as it were, I all am! Absolutely! Are we there? I mean to say, are we here? Kindly extend a few dozen helping hands!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dash it all!" protested Archie. "Hardly the occasion for ribald merriment, what? I mean, you don't seem to realise that I've been having a perfectly foul time! All the same, I'm glad—pricelessly glad!"

"Because you were pushed under this seat?"

"Absolutely!"

"You liked it?" I grinned.

"Absolutely twice!"

"Well, of course, there's no accounting for tastes!" said Pitt.

"I don't mean to say that I liked the journey—absolutely not with the addition of knobs!" said Archie. "The journey was ghastly. Not only ghastly, but worse than a bally dose of arsenic! I mean to say, poisonous isn't the word! All the same, I'm glad!"

Archie was hauled out. And before allowing him to step out on the platform we gave him a good brush down—using our caps for this purpose. Archie was duly grateful. He had been afraid to get out because he didn't exactly know that we had arrived at the terminus.

Nobody could quite understand what he was glad about, but there was no question regarding his gladness. After being brushed down, he positively beamed. And yet I could detect a certain worried look in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Archie?" I asked curiously.

"She's dashed pretty!" said Archie, in an absent kind of way. "Curls, and so forth—Gadzooks! I—I mean—"

He paused, and blushed furiously.

"What's that?" I asked.

"I—I mean to say!" gasped Archie. "Absolutely! Didn't—didn't you see her, laddie?"

He looked round rather wildly, and nodded towards the first child within vision.

"Dashed pretty? What?" he said weakly. "The kid you're looking at is about as ugly as a door knocker!" I replied. "All right, my son—don't get confused. I won't probe into your guilty secret. But you can't spoof me!"

Archie gulped, but said no more. But I couldn't help being rather surprised. It wasn't like the genial Archie to talk about girls of any kind. And I wondered who he had been referring to when he mentioned the "dashed pretty" person. As it happened, it wasn't necessary for me to wonder long.

We were just outside the station, and had paused in the big courtyard to decide whether we should go to Pitt's house by bus, or by taxi. Furthermore, we were waiting for Fatty Little, who was paying a visit to the refreshment-room. Unless we dragged him away, he would never leave.

Archie was quite himself again now, and looked just the same as ever. It was Pitt who asked him about a certain ticket—an invitation card which had arrived while we were at Somerton's place.

Archie dived his hand in his pocket at once, pulled out the ticket, and something fell to the ground. Handforth bent down, and picked it up. Then he stared at it. Handforth was not one of those polite fellows who could be trusted to return a thing without looking at it.

"Hallo! What's this?" he demanded.

"Looks like a photograph," said Church.

"By George! She's a pretty looking kid!" said Handforth enthusiastically. "One of the prettiest little girls I've ever seen! What the dickens was it doing in your pocket, Archie?"

Glenthorne went as red as a beetroot.

"I—I—I— That is, you—you—"

He paused, realising that he was somewhat incoherent.

"Well?" said Handforth.

"Gadzooks! You fluster me, dear old tulip!" said Archie, breathing hard. "You absolutely put me all of a doo-dah, don't you know. The good old red corpuscles are chasing about like one o'clock!"

"What!"

"I mean to say, the rich blood of the Glenthornes is stirred!" said Archie vaguely. "In other words, I'm dashed hot and bothered! The photograph, what? Oh, rather! Absolutely!"

"What do you mean—Oh, rather, absolutely?"

"Nothing—absolutely nothing!" said Archie hastily. "That is, no! Not exactly, if you grasp my meaning! The fact is, precisely! You see, the—the photograph dropped—No, not at all! I don't mean that, old fruit. It just slipped out, as it were."

"But where did you get it from?" roared Handforth.

"Oh, I see!" said Archie, becoming more involved. "Where did I get it? The old bean, as it were, is grasping the trend. Of course! Well, what about it? Shall we be staggering?"

"You haven't answered my question yet, you fathead!"

"Question!" said Archie vaguely. "Oh, ah, yes! How ridic! You want to know, old thing, where the photograph came from? Of course! The fact is, it dropped out of my pocket!"

"I know that, you dummy!"

"Then, as it were, why ask?"

"But how did it get into your pocket, you exasperating fathead?"

"Well, that's rather a lot!" said Archie. "I don't mind standing a few gentle terms of friendliness, but when a chappie calls me an exasperating fathead—well, hardly the thing, what?"

Handforth fairly danced.

"If you don't tell me——"

"Dry up, Handy, for goodness' sake!" interrupted Pitt. "Why the dickens can't you

mind your own business? There's no reason why Archie should go into a long, detailed explanation over a kid's photograph. If he doesn't want to tell you, you oughtn't to press him. Don't be so nose!"

"By George!" exclaimed Handforth warmly. "Why, you ass, I'll punch your nose if you talk to me like that! Still, I don't want to inquire into Archie's business if he doesn't want to tell me! But it's the first time I knew he had secrets about girls!"

"Well, dash it all!" gasped Archie. "That's rotten——"

"Peace, children—peace!" broke in Pitt. "Don't argue so much—we shall never move a yard! I want to get home, and my people are expecting us, too. Come on! Here's Fatty Little, for a wonder—and we'd better buzz off before he gets hungry again!"

We managed to bring the discussion to a close—much to Archie's relief. And he was tremendously glad, too, to get the photograph back into his own possession. He stowed it away very carefully.

And so, after crowding on to a 'bus, we made our way towards No. 59, Duncan Square—where Pitt's people lived. When we arrived we were accorded a very cheery welcome, and we were all made to feel very much at home.

It was impossible not to be comfortable in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Pitt. Our host was a fine, well-built man, and Mrs. Pitt was a dear, motherly soul, who seemed to take particular delight in making us feel at home.

And we were soon sitting down to a solid, substantial tea.

"Well, boys, I'm glad to see you all—and I'm going to give you a treat while you're in London," said Mr. Pitt genially. "In fact, several treats. I hear you've been enjoying yourselves down at Somerton Abbey."

"Rather, sir," said De Valerie. "We had a ripping Christmas."

"And now you've come up to London for the shows, eh?" smiled Mr. Pitt. "Good! I mean to take you to a pantomime this evening—I've got the seats all booked in readiness."

All the fellows were overjoyed.

"Pardon the old interruption, but I've heard something about a genius, sir," said Archie. "Possibly you can tell me her name, what?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand, my boy."

"The fact is, to be absolutely exact, a rather priceless little girl!" said Archie boldly. "You know what I mean—curls, and what not! Short frocks, and all that kind of rot. A priceless singer, and a genius on the jolly old stage! I thought, perhaps you could put me on the track, sir?"

Mr. Pitt looked thoughtful.

"If you had asked about two young ladies, I might have been able to answer," he said. "There are the Duncan Sisters. They possess true genius, and are certainly the most entrancing pair of young ladies I have

ever seen performing! A wonderful turn, in fact."

"I've heard about 'em, sir," said Handforth.

"Who hasn't?" smiled Mr. Pitt. "They are very famous, indeed—and deserve to be. I thought, perhaps, you were referring to the Duncan Sisters, my boy."

"I rather fancy not, sir," said Archie. "In fact, absolutely not! I've no doubt they're priceless, and all that sort of thing, but I'm looking for one girl—not two."

"You young rascal!" smiled Mr. Pitt.

"I—I mean to say—"

"Only my joke!" said our host, with a chuckle. "You want to see this girl's performance, eh? Well, I'm sure I don't know who you mean. I'd like you to be a little more definite, Archie. What is her name?"

"Wickham, sir, I believe."

"Wickham!" mused Mr. Pitt. "No, I've never heard of her."

"Then she can't be very famous!" said Handforth. "Blessed if I know what's the matter with Archie to-day! I believe he must have fallen in love!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, we won't discuss the matter," smiled Mr. Pitt. "We shall see plenty of clever young ladies at the pantomimes—and clever comedians, too. To-morrow evening I shall take you to the Hippodrome. And before we've done you will have seen such famous fun-makers as Stanley Lupino and Harry Herbert and Jack Hulbert. Oh, and Tubby Edlin and Miss Maisie Gay, and hosts of others. I can tell you, my boys, this will be a crowded week."

But even Mr. Pitt didn't know of the unexpected events which were destined to take place in the immediate future!

CHAPTER IV

HANDFORTH AT THE PANTO.



"**T**OPPING!" said Reggie Pitt cheerfully.

We had arrived at the Majestic Theatre, in the heart of the West End, and we were already in our seats. Mr. Pitt had done the thing properly, and we found ourselves in luxurious, comfortable stalls, ten or twelve rows from the stage. And our host had booked the seats in such a way that we occupied the central portion of two rows—which was better than stretching us all out in a line.

"Ten minutes before the curtain goes up!" said Handforth. "That's good, because I want to pop out and get some ginger beer. I'm thirsty."

"Good!" said Fatty Little. "I'll come with you."

"No, you won't!" declared Tommy Watson grimly. "Why, you walking barrel, you had three bottles only five minutes ago! And you'd better not go out, Handy—you'll only disturb everybody in the row."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I'm not going to be hemmed in here!"

He proceeded to push his way past the unfortunate people who were seated between Handforth's place and the central gangway. Handforth's method of getting out was quite simple.

He swept along the row, utterly careless of the confusion he caused.

Everybody who visits theatres is well aware that the designers hardly ever leave enough space between the rows. Consequently, anybody who wants to pass out is obliged to walk sideways, and to walk carefully, too.

Handforth walked sideways—but he wasn't careful.

In about ten seconds he had knocked an old gentleman's cigar half down his throat, he had trodden on the feet of two ladies, and he had swept somebody's coat completely away.

And he went on, serenely indifferent to the confusion. He marched up the gangway as though he owned the whole theatre, and nearly knocked one of the programme-girls into somebody's lap. Handforth thought that the single word "Sorry!" was quite sufficient to meet the demands of the occasion.

About five minutes later he was back, refreshed, but just as clumsy as ever. I watched him with rising wrath as he pushed his way along the row.

I could see that the unfortunate people were getting rather irritable. The old gentleman with the cigar saw Handforth coming, and he hastily took his cigar out of his mouth—just in time for Handforth to sweep it away with his coat-tails. The cigar, emitting countless sparks, disappeared into the old gentleman's gaping waistcoat.

"Good gracious me!" gasped the luckless old chap. "I—I—how dare you, sir? I shall complain to the manager! It is positively disgraceful, the way you come pushing past, as though nobody else existed!"

Handforth looked round in surprise.

"Oh, sorry!" he said casually.

He stood watching while the old gentleman rescued the cigar, and threw it down. And Handforth didn't seem to realise that he was standing firmly in the middle of another gentleman's bowler.

"Sorry!" stuttered the old gentleman. "And so you ought to be! So you ought to be! A clumsy young jackanapes, sir! That's what you are!"

"Why, what the thunder do you mean?" demanded Handforth wrathfully. "It was your own fault for holding the cigar out like that! I'm not supposed to look after your cigar, am I?"

"Don't be impertinent, boy!"

"Sit down, Handy—sit down!" hissed Church, from along the row.

"I can't sit down here, can I?" roared Handforth, so that the whole house could

hear him. "Hallo! What the dickens is this kicking about down here? Great pip! Who shoved a hat under my foot?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Half the audience roared, highly amused.

Handforth picked the hat up, and there was a perfect yell of merriment. The bowler hat was a crumpled-up wreck. And a gentleman in the next row turned round and gazed at it in utter dismay and anger.

"That—that is my hat!" he gasped. "How dare you tread on it, young man?"

"Well, that's the limit!" said Handforth. "If you shove your hat on the floor, how can you expect anything else?"

"What do you say?" demanded the owner of the hat.

"It's no good blaming me, is it?" said Handforth. "Here's your hat—sorry I crumpled it. You'd better hold it in your lap!"

"Nap?" said the other. "Certainly not! This is not the place to indulge in a nap!"

"I said you'd better keep it in your lap!" shouted Handforth. "You can understand plain English, I suppose?"

"How dare you refer to my nose!" snorted the gentleman.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was quite obvious that the man was very deaf, and it was a bit of a puzzle why he had come to the theatre at all—he certainly wouldn't be able to hear much. His nose was very red, and the audience roared.

By this time Handforth had got to his seat and he sat down with a shock which nearly broke the springs. Church and McClure glared at him with fierce indignation.

"I knew what it would be!" muttered Church angrily. "That ass can't go anywhere without creating a disturbance."

"Yes, do sit quiet, Handy!" begged McClure.

"Why, you thumping idiot, I haven't done anything!" said Handforth warmly. "I can't be responsible for these fidgetty people, can I? By George! I've forgotten something!"

"What?" gasped Church, in alarm.

"I haven't got a programme——"

"It's all right—there's one here," said Watson hastily.

"Keep it," said Handforth. "I want one of my own."

And, just as the luckless people in the row had become settled, Handforth came sweeping past again. From the point of view of the bulk of the audience, the whole thing was very amusing. But the victims did not think so.

The old gentleman had got quite enraged.

"This—this is monstrous!" he stormed. "I can't sit comfortably in my seat for a minute without this clumsy young hooligan elbowing past! The thing's unbearable!"

"Hear, hear!" said the other victims.

"I shall call upon the manager to throw him out!" shouted the old gentleman. "Hi! You!" he added, waving to an attendant.

"Have the young man turned out at once!" Handforth turned round and stared.

"Did you call me a hooligan?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir, I did!" shouted the old gentleman.

"By George! I'll—I'll——"

"Now then, sir—now then!" exclaimed somebody at Handforth's elbow. "I must request you to keep quiet."

"Oh, must you?" said Handforth, turning round and starting.

A huge attendant stood before him, looking glorious and massive in a brilliant uniform. The man's size rather took Handforth's breath away.

"We can't allow this, young gent," said the attendant severely. "I don't know whether you know it or not, but you're creating quite a disturbance. It won't do."

"I'm creating a disturbance!" repeated Handforth faintly. "Why, it was these people here—I can't walk down the row without they kick up a terrific fuss! I can't help people being clumsy, can I?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sorry, sir, but I can't argue here," said the attendant. "If you can't go back to your seat quietly, I shall have to ask you to leave the theatre. Better sit down!" he added, in a low voice. "It don't look well in the stalls, sir! An' I shouldn't like to do anything drastic!"

"You'd better try it—that's all!" snorted Handforth. "My hat! All this silly fuss over nothing! Blessed if I can understand why people want to be so unpleasant! Blow you! Go and eat coke!"

He turned his back, and surged up the row again. A yell of laughter went up as all the people in the row jumped hastily to their feet, so that Handforth could have a clear passage. He needed it.

But, at last, he got back to his seat, and sat down. I was sitting just in front, and I turned round and glared at Edward Oswald.

"I'm not going to start an argument, but you ought to be skinned!" I whispered severely. "Mr. Pitt takes us out like this, and all you can do is to upset everybody! For the love of goodness, keep still!"

Handforth was about to make some wordy rejoinder, when the orchestra opened fire with a perfect blare of music. And Handforth contented himself with an answering glare, and then he buried himself in the programme.

Five minutes later the curtain went up.

CHAPTER V.

THE FALLING SCENERY.



THE show had started, and we settled down to thoroughly enjoy ourselves. And, glad to relate, Handforth created no further uproar. He was too engrossed in the show to make himself objectionable.

And it certainly was an excellent pantomime.

The comedians were really funny, the music was tuneful, and the songs went with a swing and a dash. Almost before we knew it the first part was drawing to a close.

The last scene of the opening half was a glimpse into fairyland, according to the programme. And, judging by the effects on the stage, the producer of the pantomime knew quite a lot about fairyland. It was a wonderful piece of stagecraft, and there was much applause.

And then, when about fifty fairies of assorted colours were gathered about the stage in various formations, another fairy appeared. This fairy was obviously of greater importance than the others.

She was small and dainty, all dressed in gleaming stuff which reflected thousands of lights and flashes. And from beneath a similar golden headpiece, her curls came down in entrancing profusion.

She danced her way on to the stage, and the very instant she appeared I could see that this little girl was not of the ordinary kind. There was something exquisitely finished and bewitching about her movements.

Not only this, but her smiling face was gloriously pretty, and her eyes flashed as she began to dance.

At the same time, Archie Glenthorpe appeared to be suffering from some kind of internal complaint. First of all, he clutched at the seat in front of him. Then a queer, little, gasping sound came from between his lips. His face was flushed and excited, and, finally, he jumped up.

"What-ho! What-ho! What-ho!" he observed loudly. "I mean to say, so here we are! Bally amazing, if you follow me!"

"Sit down, young man—sit down!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "The very image of the old photograph! And it's rather more than the old thatch can stand! What I mean to say is, she's here! Absolutely on the jolly old spot!"

"Sit down, you fathead!" hissed Pitt.

"Eh?" said Archie, as he felt a tug.

"I mean——"

"Don't stand up like that, you duffer!"

"Stand up? Oh, sorry!" gasped Archie, coming to himself. "In fact, huge consignments of sorrow! Kindly allow me to beg about a thousand pardons! You want me to sit down? Absolutely!"

He sank back into his seat, confused and excited. But he still kept his gaze fixed upon the girl on the stage. Archie was one of the most polite fellows in existence, and when he had jumped up he hadn't realised that he was obstructing the view of other people.

And the knowledge of his crime upset him a bit. But he soon forgot everything else in watching the performance of the pantomime fairy. And it was hardly surprising that Archie was staggered.

For the girl on the stage was the girl of the photograph.

It may have been a somewhat remarkable coincidence that we should visit this very pantomime on our first night in London. But, after all, there was nothing much in it. Coincidences of a far more extraordinary nature are always taking place.

Archie didn't exactly know how to sort out his feelings. He was pleased—certainly he was pleased. And, at the same time, he was confused in mind. He wanted to get the hang of the thing a bit more clearly. So this was the child performer that the rascally Mr. Radmore was determined to exploit—and get into his power!

"Why, dash it all, it's a shame!" muttered Archie, hot and indignant. "A priceless little cove like that! I mean to say, a perfectly ripping kiddie of about ten, you know! Five pounds a week for ten years! Dash it all, she's worth four times as much already! Absolutely!"

He stared at the stage, entranced.

The child was singing now—singing in a sweet, clear voice which brought a complete hush over the great audience. There was no doubt about the power of this little girl to "get over" the footlights. She held the audience with perfect ease.

And her singing and her dancing were perfection. But the management did not seem to realise her capabilities, for she was only allowed two or three minutes. And then several larger fairies arrived, and the spell seemed to be broken.

Archie lay back, frowning deeply.

"Something's got to be done!" he told himself. "This can't go on! Absolutely and positively not! It seems to me that we've got to rally round and do a few things, what?"

Then he remembered that the child performer was only getting two pounds a week for this pantomime engagement. And he went hotter than ever. It was a crying scandal! The management ought to be bally well prosecuted and shoved into the dashed cells! Absolutely!"

"The worst of it is, the grey matter appears to be dormant," murmured Archie dismally. "That is to say, the old brain box is failing to whizz! I keep on thinking, dash it, but nothing happens! This is where a brainy cove like Phipps is required. He'd do it like a bally shot! Trust old Phipps to come across with the good old scheme! But Phipps is far distant!"

Archie was so engrossed in his thoughts that he paid practically no attention to the show. But, suddenly, he sat forward. He pulled himself out of his trance-like condition.

For he could see that the little fairy was dancing again. But now there was something different, somehow. She swayed in a peculiar kind of way. It seemed to Archie that everything was not right.

A moment later he was certain of it.

For the little girl stumbled, fell sideways, and clutched at a piece of scenery in order to save herself from falling completely. Her effort was useless, for she did fall.

And then disaster happened.

The whole piece of scenery, looking so solid, with its mass of gilt, toppled, and then fell with a swishing crash upon the stage. And a shriek arose from hundreds of throats in the audience as it was seen that the little dancer was buried amid the debris.

Confusion and panic took place on the stage. Then, as Archie was leaping up, the curtain swirled down, and hid the scene from view. The audience was in an uproar.

"Oh, my goodness!" muttered Pitt, looking pale. "Poor little kid! She must have been half killed by that fall! She was buried!"

Archie tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come.

I looked at him closely.

"All right, old man!" I exclaimed. "Perhaps it isn't so bad as it looked. You needn't get scared——"

"But—but I mean to say!" panted Archie, finding his voice. "That is, I mean—— What a perfectly ghastly accident! What an absolutely foul shame! That poor little girl, don't you know! She——"

"Hush!"

Many members of the audience uttered that admonition. For a man in evening dress had suddenly appeared before the curtain, and he was holding up his hand for silence.

"I regret that there should have been a slight accident, ladies and gentlemen!" he exclaimed, when he could make himself heard. "Happily, I am able to announce that the little lady was only slightly hurt. Fortunately, the scenery was light, and caused no serious injury."

A perfect storm of clapping arose, and Archie looked particularly relieved. I couldn't understand why. And his previous outburst puzzled me, too. Did he know anything about this little dancer? Apparently he did.

"Well, thank goodness for that," I said. "If the girl had been injured it would have spoilt the whole evening."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "But, dear old lads, it's queer. I might even say it's fearfully queer. Didn't you notice that the little girl swayed like anything before she grabbed at the old scenery stuff?"

"Yes, it seemed as though she felt faint," said Pitt.

"That, so to speak, is the absolute word," agreed Archie. "The kiddie did faint, old lads. She positively wilted away, as it were. Why, dash it all, the poor little boulder wasn't fit to do all that stuff! I mean to say, I don't suppose she was in condish. The old tissues must have been somewhat deprived of the rightful amount of vim!"

I nodded.

"You put it a bit strangely, but I know what you mean," I said. "And I think you're right, too. Plenty of these people on the stage smile and look cheerful, and yet they may be nearly on the verge of



"I don't know what you want, young man, but you ain't allowed to come round here," said the stage-doorkeeper. "It's against regulations. I can't answer no questions."

penalties of stage life. It looks easy enough, but it's a hard kind of existence. I don't envy an actor or an actress!"

Archie passed a hand over his forehead.

"The fact is, you know, I'm feeling most dashed hot!" he observed. "It seems to me that the old frame is calling somewhat urgently for fresh air. Excuse me, laddies—I go in search of a few gulps!"

He left his seat, and disappeared. It was the interval, anyhow, and the whole audience was discussing the recent mishap. Archie got outside, took his few gulps, and then strolled round the theatre.

"What-ho!" he muttered. "So there it absolutely is!"

He was gazing at a side entrance. Just over the top there was an illuminated sign which read "Stage Door."

Archie walked towards it with a firm tread.

CHAPTER VI.

A SURPRISE FOR ARCHIE!



THE stage door, upon close inspection, was not very attractive.

There was a certain dingy look about the entrance, and just inside there was a kind of glass-fronted

box. Archie could see a man sitting in there, reading a newspaper, and smoking a pipe.

The man was big and burly, and even his best friend could not have called him handsome. Apparently, this fellow was the stage doorkeeper. After all the glitter and brilliance in the auditorium, Archie was rather staggered to find such dullness here.

He had half-expected to see a brilliantly illuminated, gaily decorated entrance, with all sorts of people in evening dress walking about. This was his first acquaintance with a stage door, and he was rather shocked.

But he had made up his mind, and he did not hesitate.

He walked boldly inside, and tapped upon the glass of the doorkeeper's box.

"What-ho within!" said Archie. "Kindly emerge, old lad!"

The stage door keeper put down his paper, gazed at Archie, and then rose to his feet. It was not customary for school-boys to make their appearance here.

"Well, my lad, what is it?" asked the man.

"What is it, what?" replied Archie. "Absolutely! Possibly you want to gather a few facts, as it were. I've just trickled round to make the old inquiry. How about Dainty Dolly?"

The name sounded rather good to Archie. He had found it out by looking at the programme. Dainty Dolly was the name of the little fairy. And Archie considered it was a priceless kind of a name.

"I don't know what you want, young man, but you ain't allowed to come round here," said the doorkeeper. "It's against regulations. I can't answer no questions."

"But, dash it all, be civil!" said Archie. "Be civil, old sport! I saw the accident, don't you know! Dainty Dolly fainted, or something, and the fairy palace fell over, or something. Is she all right?"

"Lot o' fuss over nothin'!" grumbled the doorkeeper. "Of course she's all right. The young 'un was hardly hurt. There, young man, you'd best be off."

Archie stood there, hesitating.

"I was just wonderin', don't you know," he said tentatively. "Would it be possible

for me to have a few words with the young lady? I mean to say, is there any chance, old tulip? Or don't you think so? What?"

The man frowned heavily.

"Well, perhaps not!" said Archie. "Just a suggestion, you know! But it seems that you don't approve. The old brow was rather wrinkled. No hope, what? Well, of course, that's dashed rotten!"

"I don't want to be nasty, young gent, but this sort o' thing won't do," said the stage doorkeeper severely. "At your age, too! Comin' round here, inquire after the young ladies! I'm surprised at yer!"

Archie started, and went crimson.

"Oh, come!" he protested hastily. "I mean to say, come! Come! Come! Not a bit like it, old horse. Absolutely not! In point of precise fact, you've made a dashed foul accusash! I merely popped round to have a few private words with Miss Dolly—business, you know. Absolutely! But you don't think it could be managed? You've got an idea that I'm sort of dreaming without any actual hope?"

"That's a fact!" said the doorkeeper. "I don't think you're a harmful young gent, but you shouldn't have strayed away from your keeper! Some folks is too careless! They'll be looking for you if you don't get back!"

Archie drew himself up, and adjusted his monocle.

"Well, of course, there you are!" he said firmly. "That's a bally insinuation! I don't want to argue, laddie, but I should just like to inform you that there's nobody searching for me!"

"Well, there ought to be!" said the man. "Now, we've had enough of this. Be off before the stage manager comes and finds yer! It would take him about two seconds to kick you out on your neck!"

"Gadzooks!" said Archie. "The stage-manager appears to be a somewhat swift blighter! I mean to say it couldn't be done! Two seconds, don't you know! Quite imposs., dear old onion!"

"And I ain't no onion, either!" said the doorkeeper darkly. "Any more lip, my lad, and hout you goes!"

"As a matter of fact, I've already decided to go hout!" said Archie. "That is to say, out. Dash it, I'm catching the good old accent! Most embarrassing, don't you know! Well, so long, old friend! I had an idea that the quest would be somewhat barren!"

Archie was very disappointed, and as he turned away to make his exit he paused. The sounds of an altercation came to his ears. He could hear two people talking just up the passage, and he looked round. There was a young lady there, with her side view towards him. And a burly, aggressive-looking man was talking to her. The girl was about fifteen, Archie judged, and rather shabby. His heart sank. He had half hoped that she might be Dainty Dolly.

"I'm very sorry, my girl, but the show's

got to go on!" the man was saying roughly. "We've got a matinee every day, and if you don't turn up an hour before the show to-morrow, I shall have to engage an understudy."

"I'll try, sir!" said the girl, in a tired voice. "I do hope I shall be feeling better. Really, sir, I will try to be here!"

The stage-manager nodded.

"All right, we'll leave it at that," he said. "But I can't give you any hope if you turn up late. You'll find the job gone, and somebody else in your place. That's absolutely final. We can't mess the show about because you don't happen to feel very well."

"Yes, sir," said the girl meekly.

Archie's gore arose within him. His natural chivalry absolutely rebelled against this kind of thing. He was gaining an insight into theatrical affairs which he had never dreamed of.

So this was the way they talked to the actresses behind the stage! The man was a bully—a low-down scoundrel! Just because the poor girl felt a bit ill she was going to lose her job! It was more than frightful.

"The best thing you can do is to get off home now," went on the stage-manager.

"You can thank your lucky stars you didn't cause more damage. And don't forget to be here on time for to-morrow's matinee. One minute late, mind you, and it'll mean the chuck!"

"Great absolutely gad!" murmured Archie. "The foul brute!"

The stage-manager, fortunately, did not hear the words. He turned on his heel and walked away. And the girl gave a little sigh, and came towards the exit. And now Archie could see her face. It had previously been hidden by a hat.

And Archie came all over faint.

The passage appeared to be whirling round, somehow. For the face which looked at him was the face of Dainty Dolly! She wasn't a child, as he had thought—she was fifteen or sixteen, if a day!

CHAPTER VII.

THE KNIGHT ERRANT.



EVERY one of Archie's cherished notions came tumbling about his ears, as it were. All his preconceived pictures of Dainty Dolly faded away. He had imagined her to be

a pretty, little romping child.

And here she was, within a couple of yards of him, as old as himself! Archie was so confused that he could only stare at her in a blank, dazed kind of way.

Through a sort of mist, in which everything was rocky, he dimly saw that the girl had wet eyes. She was crying—actually sobbing. And, gadzooks, she looked even prettier than ever!

Yes, Archie was quite sure of that. As he

reconstructed all his ideas, the new Dainty Dolly took on a definite shape. She looked much bigger now that she was dressed in a plain tweed walking costume. It was fearfully shabby, Archie told himself.

It was an awful shame that she should be obliged to wear such a costume. But even the drawback of such clothing could not possibly hide the girl's daintiness. In fact, Archie concluded, she was about fifty times more attractive as he now saw her.

She was small, and neat, and there were the curls, just the same, but neatly tucked away into her hat. And the face, although marred by tears, was even prettier than it had been on the stage. And Archie boiled with rage to think that the stage-manager had spoken to this girl—this one girl—in such an overbearing, bullying manner. It was an outrage that could be only wiped out in mortal combat!

At least, that's how Archie felt at the moment. He also felt tremendously sorry for Miss Dolly. He had seen her on the stage, and he knew how astonishingly clever she was. And she was the girl that that blighter, Radmore, was attempting to get into his coils, through the medium of her father.

It was bad enough to think of a child being tricked in that way. But it was all different now. This girl was nearly a young lady—nearly a woman. And how on earth could she manage on five pounds a week after she had become a star? The thing was a swindle—an outrageous piece of robbery! She would have to fulfil a contract for ten years which would not expire until her best earning period was over.

Archie was quite shrewd enough to see that. The contract meant that the rascally Radmore would gain all the fortune that this girl was capable of earning. The junior, young as he was, determined that such a thing should not be. He'd do the best he could, anyhow.

And the most important thing in the world at that moment was to tell Dainty Dolly of Radmore's scheme. Possibly she knew nothing about it. And if she wasn't warned, she couldn't be on her guard. By hook or crook Archie had to speak to her.

And then, before he could really collect his wits, the girl came past him. She seemed quite oblivious of his presence, and there was nothing in this. A girl leaving a stage door does not always take notice of those who are half-blocking the passage.

Archie had completely forgotten the

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theatre and his companions who were still in the auditorium. He had no room in his brain for anything but this girl and her affairs.

It must not be imagined that Archie had any silly ideas. He wasn't that kind of a fellow. He hadn't fallen in love—but he was undoubtedly filled with admiration for Miss Dolly.

And he had a heart of gold. He was so soft that anybody's misfortune touched him. He always felt that he had to do something. If he came upon a beggar in the street he couldn't pass without diving into his pocket.

And his only reason for wanting to talk to Dainty Dolly was for the purpose of warning her against Radmore. The man was her agent—and he was a rascal. Archie felt that he had to put things straight.

And then he found that the girl had gone by, and he started violently. Unless he was tremendously quick, his opportunity would be lost.

Then Fate came to his aid. Fate is sometimes kind in that way. In brushing past Archie, her handkerchief—which was just protruding from a side-pocket—caught against one of Archie's coat buttons. There was a hole in the handkerchief, which was eloquent enough in itself. A second later the little scrap of white linen was caught on Archie's jacket.

But the girl did not know—she walked on.

Archie took the handkerchief in his hand, and was aware of a rather ripping perfume. Then he came to himself. Why, by Jove, here was the chance he wanted! He hurried outside after the girl.

"Er—that is—pardon me!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

Dainty Dolly turned.

"I—I think this is yours, don't you know?" said Archie, raising his hat and bowing. "Your jolly little handkerchief, what? Awfully pleased to be of some little old service! I mean to say, charmed to meet you, and all that kind of thing!"

"Oh, thank you so much!" said the girl, taking the handkerchief. "I didn't know that I'd dropped it."

"Absolutely not!" said Archie. "You see my coat button, as it were, positively got in the way. Dashed ridiculous, and so forth. But there you are—these things will happen."

"I am so sorry," said the girl, turning. "Thank you!"

"Oh, but really!" said Archie, hastening forward. "I—I haven't finished! The fact is, I just wanted to say one or two words, as it were. I think you're Miss Dainty,

what? I—I should say, Miss Dolly! Or, to be absolutely exact, Miss Dolly Wickham?"

The girl looked at him very curiously. He was not at all the type she had learned to steer clear of. There was something very charming about Archie—something so ingenuous and frank that it was quite impossible to suspect him of anything wrong. He was so openly a genial good fellow.

"Yes, I am Miss Wickham," said the girl softly. "But, really, I can't stop now. I hope you'll forgive me for—"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "But, I mean to say, there's nothing to forgive! I thought perhaps a few words in private—what? I mean, there's something most frightfully important I've got to say. Or don't you think so? It's really dashed urgent—"

The girl pulled him up with a cold look.

"Thank you, I must be going!" she said stiffly. "I am sure there is nothing you can want to say to me in private."

"But, honestly, there is!" persisted Archie, in alarm. "By gad! You've absolutely frozen me up, don't you know! The glassy eye, and all that! But, really, honour bright! Honest injun, and that stuff! It's bally important that you should know it, Miss Wickham."

"Please let me go—"

"It's about a frightful cove named Radmore—"

"Mr. Radmore?" she said quickly.

"Absolutely!"

"What have you got to tell me about him?" the girl asked.

"A most frightful lot—all sorts of jolly old things, you know!" said Archie, seizing his chance. "The blighter is planning to work fearful swindles, and make you a victim of his frightful wiles! I mean to say, rather neatly put, what? Well-chosen words, and all that!"

Dainty Dolly looked thoughtful.

"How do you know anything about Mr. Radmore?" she asked.

Archie looked round.

"Well, hardly the place!" he remarked. "I mean, cold breezes, and all that sort of thing. Don't you think it would be rather a priceless idea if I saw you home? Then we could have the jolly old confab. on the way. Honour bright, Miss Wickham, it's serious. I found this out by accident, you know, and the old bean is dashed upset about it. In other words, I'm worried."

The girl looked at him closely again, and she was satisfied that Archie was deadly in earnest—that he was sincere, and that he had no intentions of fooling about.

For one thing, he was too young, and he was so obviously a gentleman. She instinctively felt that she could trust him. And a girl generally knows whom she can trust, and whom she cannot trust.

"If it's so important, perhaps it would be as well," she said quietly. "I generally catch a motor-bus—"

(Continued on page 15.)

ANSWERS
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OUR DETECTIVE STORY SECTION

No. 4. PRESENTED WITH "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY." Dec. 30, 1922

CREEPING JIMMY

Behind the scenes of a Scotland Yard Detective's experiences there are some of the most romantic and thrilling stories of modern times, as the following story bears witness.

CREEPING JIMMY had invested one shilling on a cigar, and nine shillings on a first-class ticket to Townsford. Both of these events advertised an exceptional occasion, for he was a careful man. Besides, he did not like cigars. He preferred cigarettes.

Nevertheless, one must keep up appearance. What was a shilling cigar—what, for the matter of that, was a nine-shilling fare?—with the rosy prospect of £5,000 or its equivalent in diamonds in the imminent distance?

So Jimmy, ponderous and prosperous, strode the platform at Waterloo, his little, beady eyes alert, and a comfortable glow of anticipation beneath his well-cut lounge jacket. For many long weeks he had been a habitue of Hatton Garden cafes, and the fruits of that vigil were ripening at last.

Mr. Lawrence Sheet and Mr. R. K. Adhurst stepped into the picture at the same moment. But Sheet was then the only

person who interested Jimmy. He breathed out a thankful cloud of smoke and picked up his suit-case.

Now, the senior partner of a Hatton Garden firm of diamond merchants who travels third-class is a mean man. He is not only mean, but cautious, since the publicity of the more democratic carriage is a safeguard usually as effective to the bearer of a precious burden as steel bars. Jimmy was too old a hand to swear aloud, but he was chagrined. It was at least a clean loss of four-and-sixpence, and, as if with deliberate perversity, Mr. Sheet had selected a non-smoker.

Jimmy dropped nine pennyworth of cigar on the asphalt, and, with a sigh, followed an athletic young parson into Sheet's carriage. But R. K. Adhurst, sauntering slowly by, came to a dead halt. Jimmy's luck was dead out.

"Why, Jimmy, lad. Fancy meeting you!" There was a joyousness in Mr. Adhurst's

voice that aroused no response in Jimmy's face.

He stared blankly at the detective. Beneath that round mask of a face he was swiftly considering the best way to meet the situation. He met Adhurst's greeting blankly, with a stony stare of non recognition.

"I beg your pardon," he said frigidly. "I think you've made a mistake."

Adhurst grinned confidently.

"Not on your life, Jimmy. Never mind. There's nothing doing." And he sauntered away.

There is coincidence sometimes in the affairs of the Criminal Investigation Department, but it is coincidence born of organisation. Jimmy mentally cursed the luck that had brought about the conjunction of Sheet and Adhurst. Casting his mind back he could see no flaw in the arrangements he had made for the relieving of Sheet of the small tissue-paper parcel stowed away somewhere on the person of the dapper diamond merchant. He had spent much time and patience in selecting a man who lived out of town, and who followed a not unusual custom among the jewel firms of carrying his stock about with him instead of entrusting it to a safe. By methods all his own he had found out the day when Sheet's cargo was likely to be more valuable than usual—and now everything looked like being spoilt. Sheet—whom he knew held a first-class season—was perversely travelling third, and, to crown it all, Adhurst had butted in.

Shrewd as he was he did not connect the two events. How should he have known that his discreet inquiries had reached the ears of his destined victim, and that Sheet was travelling third-class on the advice of Adhurst—that, in fact, the divisional detective-inspector was there by request, merely to see Sheet off, and, incidentally, to observe who were his fellow-passengers. The engine gave a preliminary snort, and the train drew smoothly out.

Two hours later a white-lipped porter at Townsford was babbling incoherently to the station-master that Mr. Lawrence Sheet, of the Red House, was dead in a third-class compartment, with a bullet through his heart.

In the ordinary way a murder in the provinces has no more to do with Scotland Yard than a burglary in Timbuctoo. Only by request of the local police through the Home Office does a metropolitan detective investigate a criminal case that has occurred outside London. Even then, technically, he is only an adviser to the local police.

Adhurst, as he took his seat in a second-class smoker, was not enamoured of his job. Human nature being what it is—even in police circles—it was a toss-up whether the executive officers of the county constabulary would resent his intrusion or work loyally in co-operation with him. Luckily, the case looked simple. Although pre-conceived opinions are apt to be dangerous to a police officer, he had little doubt that Jimmy was

the murderer, and equally little doubt that he would almost instantly be hunted down.

It was five o'clock on a blazing summer's day when he reached Townsford, and a little group of men moved forward as he descended to the platform. He held out his hand to an erect, soldierly looking man he diagnosed as the chief constable.

"Major Borden, I presume. My name's Adhurst. My people wired you I was coming."

The chief constable shook hands.

"Yes. I've just been speaking to Foyle on the 'phone. I'm afraid you've had rather a wasted journey."

"Oh?" Adhurst's tone was interrogative.

"That man you saw—er—Creeping Jimmy, was arrested as he returned to Waterloo. You must have actually passed him on the line on your way down."

Adhurst sucked in his under-lip thoughtfully.

"That's not like Jimmy," he said, "unless he absolutely lost his head. I can't imagine him rushing back to London by the next train and putting his head straight away in the lion's jaws. Were the diamonds found on him—or a weapon?"

"Nothing; but he'd hardly keep them about him in the circumstances. By the way, I was forgetting. Mr. Adhurst—Superintendent Trelway, Inspector Penn. This is Mr. Livrey, Mr. Sheet's brother-in-law."

The detective gravely acknowledged the introductions. As he gripped Livrey's hand it lay for a second very cold in his own, and he surprised a keen flicker of surmise in the other's eyes.

"This is a terrible business, Mr. Adhurst. Fortunately, I was staying here on a short visit. My sister is naturally much distressed."

"Naturally," agreed Adhurst.

"She asked me to say that, should you care to stay at the Red House during your investigations here, she would be most pleased."

"That is very kind of her. If it is not inconvenient I shall gratefully take advantage of the offer. It is unlikely, however, that I shall be here long. The case seems very straightforward." He turned to the chief constable. "And now, sir, it might save time if I had a look at the railway carriage in which the body was found."

"Shall I be in the way if I come?" asked Livrey deprecatingly. "I have a motor here, and we might go back together."

"By all means," agreed Adhurst. "I don't expect to be free for some little time, though. We"—he spoke significantly in the plural, so that it should not be assumed that he was running the affair—"must fix up one or two matters before I can take it easy. I'll get you to take my bag back, though, if you will."

The carriage had been detached from the train, and lay in a siding. Headed by the stationmaster, the group of men moved down across the metals towards it. Once again Adhurst, apparently languidly indifferent,

caught Livrey surveying him with a certain quality of speculation in his gaze.

The chief constable and Adhurst climbed aboard.

"Nothing much to be learned here," said Borden perfunctorily. "Sheet was sitting in that corner. The murderer must have been sitting in that farther corner on the opposite side when he fired. The bullet passed clean through Sheet's head and then through the window. There's the bullet hole in the glass."

"H'm!" grunted Adhurst. His forehead corrugated into a frown, and, thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets, he dropped lazily into the corner that had been occupied by the murdered man. He turned his eyes wearily to the window, and stood up again with a yawn.

"You're right. This doesn't seem to carry us far. I think, though, it might be locked for a while, and a man put here to see that it isn't interfered with till after the inquest. Now, if you don't mind, we'll see the doctor, and perhaps we can hunt up one or two passengers who came by this train."

A genial country practitioner, to whom murders were rare, had received the Scotland Yard man with cordiality and importance. Adhurst mingled half a dozen crisp questions with a flood of generalities, and went his way with his brain working at high tension, though his face did not betray that he had a care in the world.

He walked the one and a half miles to the Red House with deliberation. He wanted to get the bearings of his problem, for, since his arrival at Townsford, it had not seemed so simple. He was a sociable soul, and more than once he stopped to lean over the railings of a cottager's garden and admire the sweet peas. He went so far once as to buy a bunch of flowers, which he dropped into a ditch when he was out of sight. Nevertheless, by the time he passed up the gravel drive of the Red House he had assimilated a large amount of local gossip.

Livrey met him on the verandah.

"My dear man," he exclaimed, "you don't mean that you have walked out? If I'd known I'd have sent the car—"

Adhurst flashed a disarming smile at him.

"I've thoroughly enjoyed the walk, thanks. This is a beautiful district."

"Very. Well, come along in. You won't trouble to dress for dinner. You are just in time."

It was at the dinner-table that the detective caught his first glimpse of Mrs. Sheet. Somehow she was different to the type his imagination had conjured up. She was beautiful—there was no gainsaying that—but it was with a vivacious Southern beauty, now marred by the dark rings that encircled the dulled eyes. She could not have been more than twenty-five, and her voice was low and musical as she spoke to the detective

"I can't realise it," she said. "I can't realise that he is gone—that I am—"

A crash interrupted her, and Livrey, with an apology, rang for a servant to pick up the knives which he had accidentally swept off the table.

"They say that you have got the man who did it?" she went on, with a quick catch of her breath. "You think you will be able to prove that he did it? It is dreadful of me, I know, Mr. Adhurst, but"—for the moment her face flamed and she clenched her fist passionately—"I could kill him myself! For the sake of a few paltry jewels!"

She rose abruptly and left the table.

Livrey seemed little affected either by her emotion or her abrupt departure.

"Sad, very sad," he observed perfunctorily, and applied himself to the soup. Adhurst followed his example without comment. There were one or two things he would have liked to have asked Mrs. Sheet, but they could wait.

This tête-à-tête meal with Livrey had a certain piquancy for him, for he had begun to conceive that the place he occupied in the family affairs of the dead man might be worth considering.

There are always possibilities of surprise in even the most ordinary case of murder, and Adhurst had had too much experience ever to feel sure. Creeping Jimmy—though things on the face of it were against him—might be able to prove definitely his innocence. And if Jimmy was not guilty it was advisable to find out what other person might have a motive for wishing Sheet out of the way. The bunch of flowers that the detective had bought on his way outwards had gained for him the local gossip that there had been talk of a separation between Mr. and Mrs. Sheet, and that his brother-in-law was an infrequent and unwelcome visitor to the Red House. Still, it might all be country scandal without foundation.

Yet here he was, with the body of Lawrence Sheet scarcely cold, assuming all the airs of a host in the house, and reposing within the detective's breast-pocket was a cipher wire to Scotland Yard requesting that inquiries might be made into his career. It was all very hazy and indefinite, and Adhurst knew that he had to walk warily.

"What I can't understand," said Livrey "is where the diamonds have gone. It is possible, I suppose, that this man you have arrested has passed them to a confederate or hidden them?"

"Easily possible," agreed Adhurst. "We can't say till inquiries have got a bit closer."

Livrey glanced at him sharply.

"You have no doubt you have got the right man?"

"Not the least in the world," lied the detective glibly. "It is only a matter of collecting evidence now. We don't often make mistakes." That last touch of brag was unusual with Adhurst. In the ordinary way he would no more have spoken of his efficiency than of his honesty.

He believed he saw the least trace of relief in Livrey's face. Yet it might have been the passing of a shadow.

"I shall be glad, for my sister's sake, to get it all over," said the other. "By the way, I must run up to town to-morrow to see about his affairs—that is, unless you are likely to need me down here for anything."

"Not at all likely. You'll be required for evidence at the inquest, of course, but that isn't till the day after to-morrow."

"Oh, I shall be back before then. You will make your headquarters here, I hope, while you remain—eh? My sister would wish you to do absolutely as you please. If the car will be of any use to you in getting to and fro I will leave orders that it is to be at your disposal."

"That is very good of you." Adhurst had been wondering how he should lead up to the proposal that had been volunteered.

"In point of fact it would be most useful. I have to meet a colleague to-night, and if I might venture—"

"Certainly. I will tell Cody—that's the chauffeur—to have it ready."

Creeping Jimmy, very chastened, and with handcuffs spanning his broad wrists, cast a reproachful glance on Adhurst as he was assisted to alight on Townsford platform.

"I thought you would ha' known better than this, Mr. Adhurst," he said dolefully. "I had no more to do with croaking that guy than the babe unborn."

"So you say, Jimmy," assented the inspector. "Hallo, Grenfell. Shake hands with Mr. Trelway. There's a couple of men and a cab waiting to take Jimmy to the station. Suppose we go and have a pow-wow at the hotel."

He had foreseen the necessity of a conference, and arranged for a private room at the hotel adjoining the station. Grenfell caught him by the arm as they entered.

"Adhurst, old son," he said quietly, "this is a mess-up."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that Jimmy isn't the man."

Adhurst kicked the door to.

"My bright young friend," he said blithely, "you're a day behind the fair. We knew that an hour ago, didn't we, Mr. Trelway? I've got Jimmy's alibi in my pocket."

Grenfell's grip tightened.

"I don't stand for any mystification stunt," he declared. "Now cough it up. Have you got the right man?"

"I don't know. I've got hopes. Sit down and I'll order drinks and we'll get to the agenda."

"Well," he went on, when the waiter had answered the ring and gone out, "Mr. Trelway and I have been busy for quite a while. We know that Jimmy got out thirty miles up the line—at Gillington—and that Sheet was alive then, and that Jimmy couldn't have gone back to the compartment. The Gillington police have cleared all that up."

"That's what's brought me down," in-

terrupted Grenfell. "Jimmy's story is that there was a clergyman in with him and Sheet, and that the jewel merchant seemed a bit uneasy when the parson began to get out. He whispered something to the parson through the window, who stared at Jimmy hard. Taking that in conjunction with your turning up at Waterloo, Jimmy decided that it was not his day, and got out, took a stroll round the town, had some food, and returned—to find us waiting for him."

"That's so. The Gillington people have found the parson—a local curate. Sheet had asked him to take a good look at Jimmy, as he was carrying valuables and believed the other to be a crook. The parson saw Jimmy get out, and, later, noticed him in the town, so he couldn't have committed the murder. All the same, we'll hold him for a while. What do you think, Mr. Trelway?"

"That's best," agreed the superintendent sagely. "Better not let Livrey have an idea we've got the slightest suspicion that we've got the wrong man."

Grenfell held up his hands.

"You people are forgetting I don't know anything of this side of the case. Suppose we be a bit clearer."

Adhurst began to unstrap a small attache case which he carried. Like all Scotland Yard men he relied largely on method, and he had systematised the various reports gathered by the local men and sent in by telegraph and telephone, so that he could instantly lay his hands on any one.

"My dear Watson," he quoted, "it's very simple—or will be, I hope. Listen!"

For an hour the three talked. Then Adhurst flung up his arms and gave a prodigious yawn.

"Heigho!" he sighed. "I'm tired. I think that clears us up. You'll keep an eye on Livrey, Grenfell, and you'll arrange about another man meeting you at Waterloo. Mr. Trelway will swear out a search warrant, and I'll arrange with the stationmaster, if possible, about a dummy train."

Punctually at twenty minutes past nine next morning, Livrey leaned from the window of a first-class compartment to say good-bye to Adhurst, who had come to see him off. Three compartments behind Grenfell was immersed in a daily paper, but no sign of recognition had passed between his colleague and himself. He had sauntered once or twice along the platform, and he knew he could make no mistake about the suspect, who henceforth would never be out of sight until he was arrested or cleared. No bloodhound could hold more tightly to a trail than Grenfell.

As the engine gave a preliminary cough, Trelway and the chief constable sauntered up.

"Everything going smooth, I hope?" said the latter.

"Quite thanks," said Adhurst. "Well, good-bye, Mr. Livrey. See you to-morrow." The train glided out, and he turned to the

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chief constable. "I have a car waiting outside, sir. You've got the map?"

Major Borden pulled an Ordnance Survey chart from his pocket and unfolded it.

"This is the thing." His forefinger traced the course of a line in red ink that had been run along one of the roads and stopped at a cross. "There we are, I think. It won't be long before we're able to test your theory. What time's this special?"

Adhurst looked at his watch.

"A matter of ten minutes now. I think I'll be moving. We don't want to hold up traffic more than we can help."

a decent car, an' that's a fact, if I may say so, sir."

"Well, do your best, and take the last mile or two easy."

It was a picturesque drive, but the detective had no eye for scenery. Just at that time his mind was on hard business. He had achieved that perilous thing in detective work, a theory, and he had pinned himself to work it out.

They stopped at last at a point where the road for a matter of a couple of hundred yards ran side by side with a railway line. Clumps of bushes and gorse grew on



Mrs. Sheet came to them in a few minutes, her dark hair tumbling about the scarlet dressing-gown she had hastily donned.

With a nod he strode away to where Cody, the chauffeur, an alert little Cockney, was waiting with Livrey's, or, rather, Sheet's car. To the chauffeur he produced a map marked in similar fashion to that which the chief constable had possessed.

"There, Cody," he said, pointing to the cross. "That's where you've got to make for. How long is it going to take us?"

"Stoner's Cray. That's twelve miles. It's a bad road, sir, and the tyres on this old jigger are none too good. Mr. Livrey has cut 'em about something awful this last day or two. 'E don't know 'ow to treat

the open strip of waste land between the roadway and the line, and over this strip Adhurst quested to and fro like a hound at fault. Presently he called Cody to desert the car and aid him.

The keen little Cockney, though he had no idea of the ultimate object at the back of the detective's brain, joined enthusiastically, and in a little gave a yelp of triumph and pointed to a tangle of brambles and furze.

"Good boy," said Adhurst, as his eyes roved swiftly over the ground in the neighbourhood. He gave a subdued chuckle as he observed a footprint in the sandy soil.

"Cody," he remarked, "be virtuous, and Providence will always be good to you. Neither you nor I made that footprint."

"Is it a cloo, sir?" asked Cody breathlessly. This adventure with a real live detective was thrilling him.

"Something of the sort. Now we passed a house a mile or two back. You dodge along there with the car and ask if they can lend you a box or something to put over it till we're able to take a plaster cast."

A puff of smoke warned Adhurst that the special which held the local police was coming. It advanced very slowly, and Adhurst waved a handkerchief. The signal was answered, and he dropped behind a clump of bushes and sighted along his stick as though it were a rifle. Then he rose, and, taking a ball of twine from his pocket, fastened one end to the bush, and, carrying it forward, tossed the ball to Major Borden through the open window of one of the compartments.

The train halted. Borden cut his end of the string and threaded it through a bullet hole in one of the side windows. Adhurst leapt on the footboard, and the train crawled on until he held up his hand.

"How's that, sir?" he demanded.

At the other end of the compartment Trelway was holding the string above his head. The chief constable jumped on a seat, and, closing one eye, squinted along the line.

"Correct!" he ejaculated. "That explains why there was only one bullet mark."

"Tie a knot in the string, and we can work out the distance afterwards. Now, sir, if you like to get out, I'll show you something else I have found."

He took the chief constable and the superintendent back to the clump of bushes, winding up the string as he proceeded. There he pointed out the footprint.

"I don't know whether we really need it," he observed, "but it may be calculated to help. Whoever killed Sheet lay under those bushes. You'll observe he could not be seen from the line or the road."

"What's worrying me," said Trelway, "is why no one heard a shot."

"That doesn't greatly worry me. When we raid the Red House that may be cleared up. We've got everything in broad outline now, and by to-morrow we ought to be close enough up to decide. Suppose we finish here. Will you have a talk with the nearest signalman, Mr. Trelway?"

Well after midnight it was before Adhurst returned to the Red House, accompanied by his colleagues and four uniformed constables. There had been a hundred things to do, and they had been content to leave matters at the Red House till the last. There was no particular hurry, and Adhurst had wanted many details filled in.

The house was in blackness, save for a thin glimmer of light in the hall, and a sleepy-eyed servant answered the detective's ring. His face betrayed his astonish-

ment as he saw Adhurst's companions. Adhurst, however, deigned no explanations.

"Your mistress has retired, I suppose? Will you tell her maid to let her know that we wish to see her at once? Hurry up, my man, and don't stand there like a dummy. We'll wait in the dining-room. Come in, gentlemen. Will you post your men, Mr. Trelway? It may be advisable that no one should leave the house till we are finished."

Mrs. Sheet came to them in a few minutes, her dark hair tumbling about the scarlet dressing-gown she had hastily donned. She stood at the door for a second looking from one to the other of the men. Adhurst bowed gravely.

"Sorry to have disturbed you. There are one or two points of importance on which it is essential to see you."

She advanced into the room, and mechanically sat in the chair which he offered. There was an involuntary tightening of her brows, and she put one hand to her heart.

"Well?" she said.

It was Trelway who answered.

"You are aware that we are police officers. We want to inform you that we hold a warrant to search this house."

"I do not understand what you mean. Why should you search the house?" Her lips were white, and Adhurst judged that it was only by a great effort at self-control that she did not faint.

"Madam," he said, "you must understand your position. We suspect you of being concerned in the murder of your husband. You will be arrested. You need say nothing unless you choose, but anything you say may be used as evidence. I should advise you to consult a solicitor—later."

The deliberate warning, which at least had the effect of putting an end to any suspense she may have suffered, seemed to act on her like a tonic.

"This is absurd," she said, in a strained whisper. "I did not kill him."

"You will dress at once," said Trelway.

"In this room," said Adhurst briskly. "We shall leave it at the disposal of your maid and yourself, but"—his tone was significant, for he had the possibility of poison in mind—"everything that is brought in to you will be searched."

Her head dropped on to her arms on the table.

"Oh, my God!" she moaned. The police officers passed out.

The systematic search of a house for evidence in a matter of crime is not a thing airily undertaken, and daylight had long dawned ere the officers had finished. An urgent message brought in by a cycle constable had taken the chief local officers back into town about nine o'clock, carrying with them a man's shoe, a powerful air-rifle, and a bundle of letters.

Adhurst, who saw no sense in wearing himself out unnecessarily, stretched himself on a couch and seized the opportunity for a nap. To him there entered a couple of

hours later, Grenfell, who woke him by the simple process of inclining the sofa at an angle, so that its occupant rolled with a thud to the floor.

"That's a tom-fool trick!" said Adhurst irritably, dusting himself. "What did you want to do that for?"

"Do you know what the time is?" asked his colleague. "Livrey was arrested an hour ago."

"I know. There was a brass band and a procession to welcome him at the station, of course." Adhurst had not quite recovered his good humour.

"Something of the sort. The whole village seemed to know about the arrest. Your pal Trelway is in his glory. He told me how he had elucidated the case, though he was good enough to say that you had been of some trifling assistance. And now, since I've been your errand-boy in this affair, you might tell me something about it. I see they've let Jimmy go. He's made back to London in a cloud of dust. How'd you get on to Livrey, anyway?"

"Oh, blazes! How'd you find out anything? Gun-play didn't quite agree with Jimmy's record but it seemed a smashing case against him till I had a look at the compartment in which the murder took place. The local people here had taken the chief's wire that Sheet had been seen travelling with a notorious crook, too much at its face value. If Jimmy hadn't complicated matters, the possibility of the murder having been committed by someone who was not travelling on the train might have occurred to them. There was only one bullet hole in the window, and I suppose a natural conclusion would be, that if a bullet passed through a man's head from the outside of the train it would have left a hole somewhere else. But that hole in the window seemed suspiciously low down, and when I came to look at it, there were tiny shreds of glass inwards.

"Well, it seems that they had carried the body to the doctor instead of bringing the doctor to the body. If he had known which way the man had been sitting he could have told them at once that it was no one inside the compartment who fired the shot, for the bullet had entered from the right, and not from the left.

"That cleared Jimmy, in my mind. That left two possibilities. One was that it was an accidental shot fired by some fool near the line; the other, that someone had an interest in removing Sheet. It was worth looking into. So I made some inquiries both through our people in town and down here. I found that Sheet had married a girl much younger than himself, about whom very little was known, and that they did not get on well together. You know your own inquiries about Sheet in town showed that both Livrey and his sister had none too savoury a reputation before they entrapped Sheet into marriage. That confirmed local gossip about quarrels:

"Then I heard that Mrs. Sheet and Livrey were out on a motor drive by themselves, and did not return till after the murder had been discovered. I bought a shilling Ordnance map, and studied it out. Where the line ran by a lonely road some miles out seemed a likely spot, and when I heard that the down train was sometimes held up there, I gathered I was on a scent.

"The further I went the more it fitted in. There were people along that road who had seen the two in a car—and others who had seen Mrs. Sheet waiting in the car a mile away from the stretch where the murder took place.

"We searched the place, and found a clump of bushes where someone had been recently lying. A yard or two away was a footprint, of which we took a plaster cast. It corresponded with Livrey's boot. We ran out a train, as you know, and with a little juggling with a line found that from the spot where the murderer lay to the approximate position in which the train would have stopped, a bullet would have travelled through one window and out through the open window on the other side.

"When we searched this place we found a powerful air-rifle in the gunroom, and some letters from Livrey to Mrs. Sheet which more than hint at the scheme of the whole tragedy."

"But," objected Grenfell, "where are the diamonds that Sheet was carrying?"

"In a secret pocket in the waistband of his trousers. That's all there is to it."

"Well," said Grenfell, "I reckon you'll have to stay down here to give evidence."

Adhurst winked.

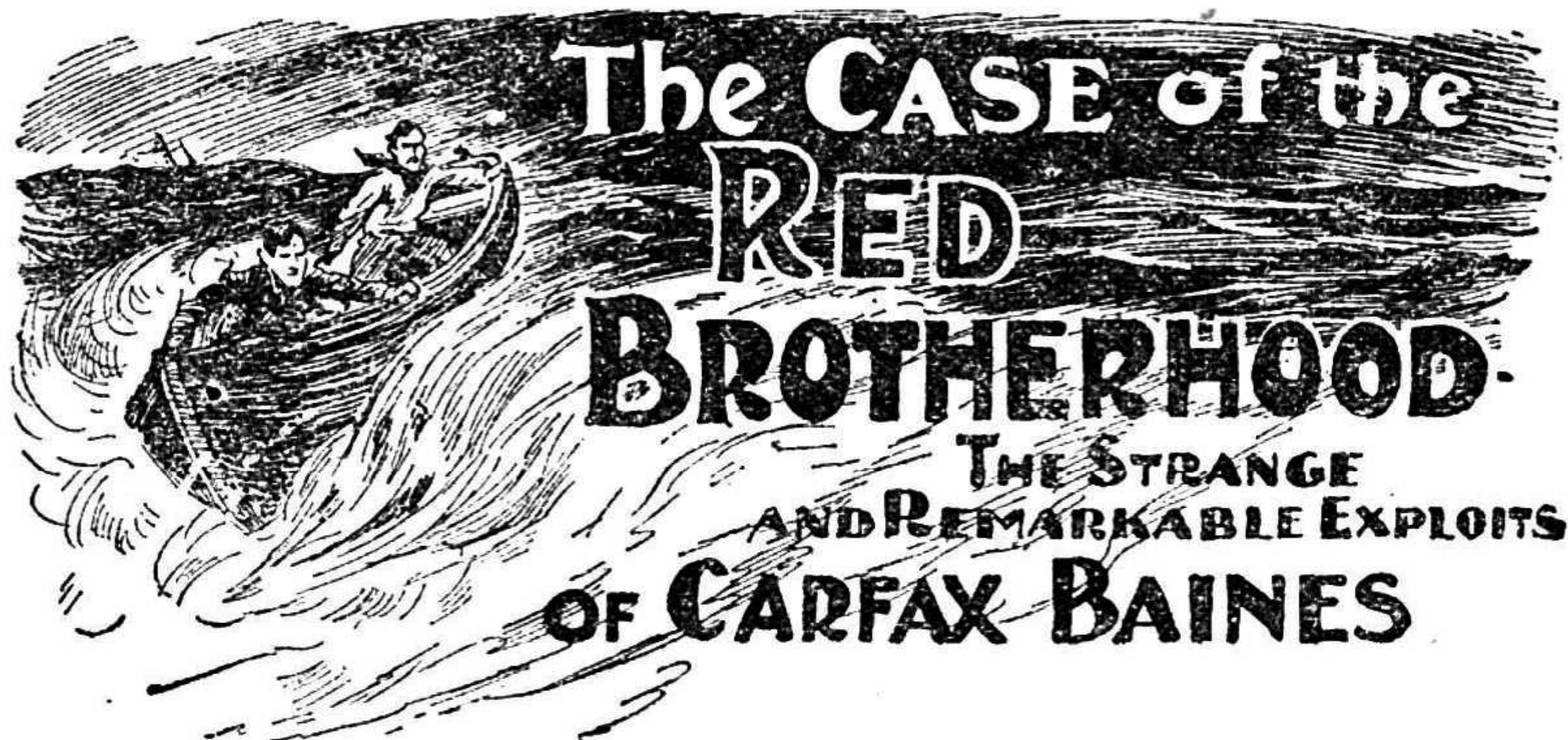
"Not me, sonny. The official arrests were made by Trelway. All the other facts are proved by different experts and witnesses. Little old London is good enough for me. I should fall a victim to mental paralysis if I had to stay in Townsford a week."

THE END.

NEXT WEEK

The Mayor's Daughter.

Another superb story of Scotland Yard.



IT was a dull October afternoon, with a biting wind driving from the sea, and grey, lowering clouds hanging from horizon to horizon. Carfax Baines felt strangely out of spirits as he stepped briskly over the marshy flats towards the ivied walls and gables of Brunstead Manor, which rose sharply against the sky half a mile distant. He had chosen to walk from Stalham, where he had arrived after a long and tiresome railway journey, and he was half sorry now that he had come to Norfolk. At this season of the year the country was execrable, and he wished himself back in the London fog, back in the ceaseless roar and clatter of Jermyn Street.

"The fact that I recovered Culverston's stolen plate from an East End fence a couple of years ago hardly warrants him in making such a demand on my time," grumbled the detective. "But his letter interested me; it must have done so to drag me one hundred and thirty miles from home. What a weird, depressing place——"

There was a sudden rustling on the left, and from the bushes across a narrow dyke that bordered the road a head was thrust out—a sinister, swarthy visage, with a black moustache and curling black hair, scowling eyes, earrings dangling from each ear, and a coloured handkerchief knotted about the throat. The head was gone as quickly as it appeared, and Baines stared at the spot as if he had seen an apparition. He could hear nothing, but he knew he had not been deceived.

"What an evil-looking ruffian!" he thought. "A foreigner, without doubt. I wonder what he's doing about here. He's not the sort of chap I should care to meet alone on a dark night."

The incident did not tend to put him in better spirits, nor was he cheerfully impressed when he turned into the densely wooded grounds of Brunstead Manor, where the breeze sighed mournfully among the trees, and the shade was as black as even-

tide. The lodge by the gates was untenanted, and he met no one as he walked up the dismal, winding drive. The sombre grey front of the centuries-old house chilled him, and no light of fire shone from window or casement to greet him as he pulled hard at the bell. The door was opened by the butler—a clean-shaven, middle-aged man.

"You—you, sir!" he stammered.

"I see you remember me, Hewett," Baines replied. "Tell Mr. Geoffrey Culverston that I am here."

"He's gone, sir! We are in great trouble——"

"In trouble? What do you mean?"

Hewett closed the door, relieved the detective of his bag, and looked at him with a pale and anxious face.

"My master disappeared yesterday morning," he said huskily, "and he has not been heard of since."

"By Jove!" gasped Baines. "Have I come too late, then?" He pulled a letter from his pocket—a brief note in which Geoffrey Culverston earnestly begged the detective's help in a matter of vital importance. "This was written last Wednesday—just a week ago to-day," he added; "but I only received it yesterday, as I was on the Continent. Your master expected me?"

"At first he did, sir, and then he gave you up, thinking you must be out of town. But I'll tell you the whole story, Mr. Baines, as soon as I've seen to your comfort. You must be tired and hungry after your long journey."

The detective confessed to an appetite, and he was easily persuaded to go into the big oak-panelled library, where Hewett lit a fire of logs, and then went off for refreshments, returning with a tempting lunch on a tray. Baines silently devoured cold pheasant and drank Chateau Margaux while he listened with close attention to as strange a narrative as he had ever heard.

"It's just a week ago yesterday," the butler commenced, "that Mr. Culverston re-

turned home after a month's trip abroad. I could see that he wasn't quite himself, and I suspected some trouble was weighing on his mind. I was sure of it when he told me he expected a visit from you, sir. Of course, you know all about the terrible storm last Monday, in which so many vessels were wrecked and lives lost. Well, sir, it was after dinner that night when a neighbour dropped in and told Mr. Culverston that a ship was on the bar off Eccles. My master puts on his storm-coat, orders his saddle-horse, and rides off to see if he can be of any assistance. I don't know what time he came back, but he was ready for breakfast at the usual hour yesterday morning, looking like the ghost of himself. He started to open his letters while I was pouring out the coffee, and suddenly he gave a sharp cry and jumped to his feet. 'Hewett, I'm called away,' he says to me. I didn't know his voice, it was so changed. 'It's uncertain when I'll be back. Tell people it's important business. Take good care of the house, and lock up well at night.' Never a word more did he say. He took a stiff drink of brandy, slipped a revolver into his pocket, and walked out of the room, leaving his breakfast untasted. The front door slammed, and that was the last I saw of him."

"Very queer, indeed," said Baines. "I suppose he had plenty of money with him?"

"He always carried a considerable amount, sir."

"And the letter that startled him—do you know anything about it?"

"I have it, sir," was the unexpected reply. "My master crumpled it up and let it fall on the floor. I found it under the table."

The butler produced both the envelope and its enclosure, which bore traces of rough usage. The detective examined them with ill-concealed eagerness. The envelope was addressed to Mr. Geoffrey Culverston in a cramped, illiterate hand. It had been posted at Palling during Monday night, and stamped at an early hour on Tuesday morning. The enclosure, half a sheet of ordinary paper, contained no writing. On the top of it was pasted a small red paper star, five-pointed, and beneath this was drawn a heavily inked circle two inches in diameter. That was all, but it was more than enough for Baines. A moment of brain-racking thought, and then what he was groping for rose out of the depths of his memory.

"Yes, I have it," he said to himself. "The star and the circle! There was a similar case in New York State a couple of years ago, and part of the truth came out. I'm not sorry now that I ran up to Norfolk. Poor Culverston! If my theory is right—"

"What do you make of it, sir?" the butler broke in. "It'll take a clever man to get any meaning out of that thing."

"I shall think it over," the detective replied evasively. Remembering the face he had seen in the bushes that afternoon, he

added: "Have any doubtful characters been prowling about the house lately?"

"Not that I know of, sir. I might ask the other servants."

"Never mind. How far is Eccles from here?"

"Two miles, sir."

"And Palling?"

"A mile further down the coast."

"Very good. I shall want to visit both places at once, so you may order a trap for me. I shall probably stop here as your master's guest for several days. By-the-by, Hewett, you were in the employ of your present master's brother, I believe."

"For a long time, sir."

"And when he died, ten years ago, wasn't there some trouble in finding the next heir, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Nobody knew Mr. Geoffrey's address, sir, but he came home unexpectedly six months after the funeral. He had been a bit wild in his time, and had gone off to foreign parts when a mere lad."

"You don't know where?"

"I never heard, sir."

"What sort of a life has Mr. Geoffrey led these last ten years, since he succeeded to Brunstead Manor?"

"Very quiet, sir. He travelled a good bit, and when he was at home he was fonder of his books and his pipe than of the company of his neighbours. He didn't often accept invitations."

Baines had no further questions to ask, and a little later—it was now past four o'clock—he drove off in the trap, accompanied by a groom. Two flint-walled cottages sheltered behind a line of yellow sand-dunes, and on the top of the latter a coast-guard's look-out platform, such was lonely little Eccles. The sea was breaking angrily, and the hard, white beach that sloped from the dunes was strewn with wreckage. The coastguard was at his post, but he grew very close-mouthed when he learned his visitor's errand. However, the gift of half a sovereign, and the assurance that the detective was a friend of Mr. Culverston's, loosened the man's tongue.

"It's a queer business," he said, "and the last ain't been heard of it yet. I don't know as I ought to speak of it, but I'll take your word for it you mean well to Mr. Culverston. It happened this way, sir. In the thick of the storm on Monday evening, the Whistling Plover, a sailing vessel, bound from Hamburg to Yarmouth, was wrecked just off here. The Palling lifeboat couldn't give any assistance, because she was busy with a couple of other vessels farther down the coast. About nine o'clock, when the Plover was going to pieces and bodies were washing ashore, Mr. Culverston came on horseback. There were only half a dozen of us all told, and we were too busy to pay much attention to him. Some time later I heard a sharp cry above the storm, and it wasn't half a minute till Mr. Culverston came climbing up the dune at that low place

yonder. As he passed me there was a flash of lightning, and I saw that his face was white and scared. He was panting for breath, and couldn't speak. The next thing I knew he was in the saddle, and galloping off like mad. And when the dawn broke——

"Go on," urged Baines, as the man paused.

"Well, sir, in the morning we found a body yonder at the foot of the dunes, just where Mr. Culverston climbed up. It was that of a middle-aged man, fairly well dressed, and he didn't meet his death by drowning, the doctor says. He came ashore alive, and then—he was stabbed to the heart!"

The coastguard and the detective exchanged meaning glances, and neither cared to put his thoughts into words.

"Where is the corpse?" Baines asked hoarsely.

"At Palling; there's an inquest to-morrow."

"And you will be a witness?"

"Right you are, sir."

It was nearly eight o'clock when the trap drew up to the door of Brunstead Manor. Baines ate a solitary dinner, served with much ceremony by Hewett, and then retired to the library, where a blazing fire awaited him, and a tray containing decanters and syphons. He lit his pipe, stretched his feet to the logs, and for a couple of hours was deeply absorbed in thought. Roused by a clock striking eleven, he sat up.

"It's not murder, anyway," he muttered. "If Culverston did it"——

Bang! The sharp report out in the garden was followed by the whizz of a bullet through the window and across the room. It grazed the detective's shoulder, and struck a decanter on the table, deluging the floor with whisky and broken glass. Baines realised what a narrow escape he had had. He lowered the light a little, and sprang out of range of the window. The next instant Hewitt burst into the library.

"What's wrong, sir?" he cried, excitedly. "Did I hear a shot?"

"You did," Baines answered. "I was very nearly killed, Hewett. Some scoundrel crept up through the garden and fired at me from the outside of the window, evidently thinking that I was your master."

"The bullet was meant for Mr. Culverston?"

"That is my opinion."

"Well, sir, we must catch the rascal!" exclaimed the butler, who was far from being a coward. "Suppose we cut around——"

"He is in full flight by this time," interrupted Baines. "I fear there is no hope of getting him. By Jove, if we only had a dog that was good at tracking! I don't suppose there are any in the neighbourhood."

"There is one here, sir," was the unexpected reply. "A fine animal of Mr. Culverston's, half bloodhound."

"That's a rare bit of luck!" Baines cried eagerly. "Where is the creature?"

"At the stables, sir; it ain't often let out."

"It'll be to-night. We're going to have a man-hunt, Hewett. Come, be quick!"

Baines was equipped with a revolver, and the butler helped himself to a rifle from the gun-room. Then the two left the house—the other servants had not been alarmed—and hurried to the stables. The groom was asleep in bed, and by the time he was up and dressed, and the dog released, nearly half an hour had elapsed since the attempt on the detective's life. The hound—a big, liver-coloured brute—went ahead of the three men, and it had no sooner turned the angle of the house than it stopped, sniffed the ground, and uttered a low, eager yelp.

"Picked up the trail already?" exclaimed Baines.

"Yes, he's on to the scoundrel," assented Hewett.

"Good dog," said the groom. "Hunt him, Zulu!"

Zulu needed no urging. He darted off with his nose to the earth, and the chase was fairly begun. Across the park, over the meadows, by the edge of a village, and then into a thick belt of timber two miles from Brunstead Manor. Here the pursuers expected to find their quarry, but they were disappointed. After darting this way and that for a time, Zulu left the woods within a hundred yards of where he entered, and headed in the direction from which he had come. He led the mystified men over several fields, and seemed to be warmer on the scent.

"By Jove! I believe he's going home again!" exclaimed Baines.

"That's right," said Hewett. "I don't know what to make of it, unless the rascal doubled on his tracks."

"It looks that way," replied the detective, "though I hardly think the fellow can be such a fool. It's queer about the dog. The scent appears to give him a good bit of trouble, and yet it must be quite fresh."

"I've noticed he don't pick it up readily," said Hewett.

The chase was now nearing its end, and the excitement and interest waxed stronger. Zulu slipped through a hedge-gap into the park, ran on lightly amid the trees and shrubbery, whining and whimpering at every few yards, and made straight for the left wing of the house, which was of considerable antiquity, and had not been used by any of the family for more than a hundred years. Tall grass and bushes grew close alongside the ivy-covered walls. The hound stopped before a narrow, decayed archway, sniffing the flagstones at its feet. The three men stood by in dumb amazement.

"We've run the scoundrel down, sir," said the groom. "He must be hiding in yonder. Shall I flash the lantern?"

"No, not yet," Baines whispered. "Grab that dog, Hewett! Quick!"

Zulu was about to spring forward, but the

butler caught him timely by the scruff of the neck.

"What are we going to do, sir?" he asked. "It seems a bit reckless to be standing here, making fair marks of ourselves. The rascal may be just inside."

"I'm not so sure of that," Baines answered, in a perplexed tone. "Don't let the hound make any noise if you can help it. Where does this passage lead to?"

"And Mr. Geoffrey knew of it as well?"

"That I can't say; but I should think——"

"Yes, he must have known of it," interrupted Baines. "The dog has brought us to the verge of an unexpected discovery." Lowering his voice, he added: "I half believe your master is in here."

Before Hewett or the groom could find words to express their astonishment at this declaration, the hound's fur bristled from



The hound stopped before a narrow, decayed archway, sniffing the flagstones at its feet. The three men stood by in dumb amazement.

"To the old chapel, sir, which was built more than three hundred years ago," replied the butler.

"The chapel, eh? And as old as that? Then it likely has a priest's hole connected with it—a secret place where the priest used to hide in the days of persecution against the Catholics."

"You're right, sir; there is such a thing," said Hewett. "I remember hearing Mr. Geoffrey's brother speak of it once or twice in his time."

head to tail, and he uttered a rasping, angry snarl. The next instant there was the muffled report of a firearm, followed by a sharp cry, and as quickly Zulu broke loose and dashed into the darkness, baying furiously.

"Come on—stick by me!" shouted Baines. "It's a matter of life and death."

They sped along the uneven passage, the groom flashing the lantern, Hewett and the detective holding their weapons ready for use. They were not far behind the dog,

and as they ran on they heard a confused clamour ahead. The distance was short, and only a few seconds had elapsed since the alarm when they entered the chapel by a broken door that hung on one hinge. A sweeping glance showed them the little room with its worm-eaten altar and seats, its shattered windows, its mouldy tapestries and ruined walls.

Then by the yellow light they saw two men struggling in the middle of the sunken floor, but before they could reach the spot one of the combatants rose to his feet, revealing the agitated face of Geoffrey Culverston. The other, who was bleeding from a wound in the chest, struggled to his knees. The next instant he was flat on his back again, with the bound tearing at him viciously. There was a terrible scene for a moment, and then Hewett and the groom managed to drag Zulu away from his victim. Baines bent over the man, and recognised the dark-skinned foreigner who had peered at him from the roadside.

"This fellow won't do any more harm," he said. "He has a bullet in the lungs and his shoulder is badly mangled."

"He deserves his fate," hoarsely exclaimed Geoffrey Culverston, who was looking on in sullen surprise. "How do you come to be here, Mr. Baines?" he added.

The detective briefly explained. "I congratulate you," he concluded, "on the vengeance of the Red Brotherhood."

Geoffrey Culverston flushed uneasily. "So you know that much?" he replied. "Well, you are right. That ruffian there, Ignacio, was one of the evil crew. I have been hiding in the priest's hole yonder to escape from him"—pointing to an open panel behind the altar—"and he must have seen me to-night when I ventured out for fresh air, and followed me back to the chapel. Fortunately for me a glimmer of moonlight betrayed him. I fired at him and hit him, but in spite of that he would have shot me had I not leapt forward in time and grappled with him. It was his life or mine. I swear that I was justified."

"There can be no doubt about that," assented Baines. "The ruffian meant to kill you. He has been lurking about here for a couple of days, and he could not have gone far away after he fired at me to-night."

Ignacio was now unconscious, and it was evident that he was mortally wounded. He was made as comfortable as possible in a corner of the chapel, and a police-constable and a surgeon were summoned from Stalham without delay. In the meantime, pending their arrival, Geoffrey Culverston made a complete statement to Baines.

"It's not a pleasant story," he said, "so I'll cut it as short as I can. You've heard, perhaps, that I went wild as a youngster, and was finally given up as a bad lot, and shipped off to America with a few pounds in my pocket for a fresh start. It was down in Texas, years later, that I fell by

accident into the power of the Red Brotherhood, and had to join them to save my life. They were a band of daring thieves and murderers, who operated over half a dozen States, and were bound by solemn oath to kill any member who deserted or turned traitor, no matter in what part of the world the fugitive might have sought refuge. Well, two years passed on, and I managed to keep my hands free of crime, though I was in ill-favour with the gang, and was especially hated by Ignacio, the Mexican, and an Englishman named Tom Gudgeon. Then one day I saw in an old London paper that my brother was dead—my father had died some years before—and that I was heir to Brunstead Manor and its revenues. I decided to come home. I gave the band the slip—they knew me only as Jim Tarrant—and when I reached New York I read that a lot of them had been surprised and killed by a vigilance committee just after I left, and that I was supposed to have given information to the sheriff, which meant that my life would always be in danger.

"This brings me to my home-coming, ten years ago, at the age of thirty-three. What a change it was to settle on the dear old place in Norfolk, with plenty of money to spend, and the respect of my neighbours! In time I ceased to worry about the Red Brotherhood, and I had almost forgotten them, when I saw Tom Gudgeon in my hotel at Hamburg ten days ago. I returned hastily to England, Mr. Baines, and sent for you at once.

"Receiving no reply to my letter, I supposed you were out of town. Then came the memorable night of the storm, when I rode to Eccles, and saw both Ignacio and Tom Gudgeon washed ashore in a small boat. I saw them quarrel and fight. I saw Gudgeon fall, stabbed with a long knife—"

"I'm glad to hear that," Baines interrupted. "It is known that the man was murdered, and there will be an inquest on the body to-morrow."

"I came home like a man dazed," Geoffrey Culverston resumed, "and spent a wretched night. In the morning I found on my breakfast-table the warning of the Red Brotherhood—the star was their sign, and the circle meant that the line of death was drawn around me. I knew it came from Ignacio. I fled the house, and lay in some woods, a couple of miles away, until night-fall. Then I remembered the priest's hole, and back I came to hide there; I got possession of some food and water without the knowledge of any of the servants. The rest of the story you know."

Thus the mystery of Tom Gudgeon's death was cleared up; but of far more importance to Geoffrey Culverston's peace of mind was the solemn assurance of the dying Ignacio that the Red Brotherhood no longer existed as an organisation, and that the few members who survived were shut up in prison for life.

THE END.

(Continued from page 14.)

"Oh, absolutely imposs.!" said Archie. "I mean to say, scores of taxis doing nothing! Just gaze upon them! Buzzing up and down, as empty as anything, asking to be filled! What about it?"

And two minutes later they were in a taxi.

CHAPTER VIII.

DOWN BRIXTON WAY.



"THIS," said Archie, "is priceless!"

He was lounging back among the cushions of the taxi, and Dainty Dolly was sitting beside him. He couldn't think of anything more absolutely ripping. For the life of him he couldn't understand how it happened.

An hour earlier, if anybody had told him that anything of this nature would take place he would have scoffed with scorn. And yet here he was—Archie Glenthorne—sitting in a taxi side by side with the girl of the photograph.

It was all rather stunning, and fearfully jolly. He quite gave himself up to the delight of the occasion. It was something he might have dreamed about, but could never have really hoped for.

And it seemed so preposterously unreal. He had heard the girl mention Brixton, too. The taxi was going to Brixton! Archie had some vague idea that he had heard the name before, and he hazily believed that Brixton was a kind of suburb, miles and miles away. But he couldn't be sure.

The girl was waiting for him to begin, and he seemed to have no intention of beginning. He was quite content to sit there by her side. She was certainly great. After all, what on earth did it matter about being shabby? She was jolly pretty and dainty, and the scent she used was wonderful.

The girl herself was in a bit of a puzzled state. She knew well enough that Archie was as simple as a child. And she couldn't possibly understand why he had insisted upon this journey by taxi. She had always gone home by motor-bus—a No. 59 or a No. 3, from Piccadilly Circus. This, indeed, was the first time she had ever been in a taxi, and it rather thrilled her.

The hour was not very late—only just a little after ten. She did not appear in the second half of the pantomime. Her only appearance was in the Fairyland Scene, just before the interval.

At the theatre she had been feeling faint and rather weak, but this curious adventure was making her forget her faintness. Indeed, she really felt a lot better.

"I think you were going to tell me something?" she said, at length. "You know it won't take the taxi very long to get to Brixton. Not more than a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes, at the most."

Archie came to himself with a start.

"What?" he exclaimed. "What? But, dash it, the driver is going a fearful lot too fast, old fruit! I—I beg your pardon! Force of habit, don't you know! That's the way I talk to the dear chappies!"

"I don't quite understand."

"Of course not—absolutely not!" said Archie. "The St. Frank's fellows, I mean. You see, I'm up from school on the holidays."

"Oh, you're a schoolboy?"

"That, of course, is precisely the truth," said Archie. "Oh, what about it? I've just remembered! Your fall on the stage! Dashed careless of me not to ask before!"

"It wasn't really serious," said the girl. "I suddenly came over faint, and I don't know how I came to touch the scenery. Thank goodness, it was only light! I'm afraid I shall be in trouble to-morrow."

"How frightfully unfair!" said Archie indignantly. "The chappies who shoved the scenery up ought to be blamed! I mean to say, what's the good of scenery if you can't grab at it?"

"You were telling me something about Mr. Radmore—"

"Absolutely!" said Archie, accepting the hint. "Well, here it is! The whole yarn, don't you know!"

He told her everything—even explaining how Handforth and Co. had pushed him under the railway-carriage seat. It was rather a difficult job, and he afterwards wondered how on earth he had had the nerve to go through with it.

Because the girl was looking at him all the time, and her eyes were simply ripping. And he frequently found himself stumbling—the reason being that he was occasionally lost in admiration at her prettiness. It was disconcerting to have such a really priceless girl sitting so near to him, and paying keen attention to every word he uttered.

But, somehow or other, Archie told the story. And by the time it was over he was feeling more at his ease. She was so pally—so comforting to a chap. She listened just as attentively and unaffectedly as one of the fellows would have done. And for a girl to do that was frightfully jolly.

He could see that Dainty Dolly was looking very thoughtful and anxious, and a sad expression, too, had come into her face. This, of course, was too foul for words. There was no room on that pretty face for sadness. Absolutely not!

Archie started speaking again, but she stopped him.

"I really don't know how to thank you for taking all this trouble," she said gently. "Oh, but I do think you're a brick! I didn't know there were such good-hearted people!"

"Oh, come!" protested Archie, hopelessly confused. "Come! I've done absolutely nothing! In fact, I'm dashed lucky to have met you so soon. I thought I should have to search and search and search—and then,

as it were, go on searching! And here you absolutely are, right next to me!"

"Yes, it is funny, isn't it?" said the girl. "But I believe you are too late. Mr. Radmore came to see father this evening. I know that, because I heard father say that he was expecting him. The contract must be signed by this time."

"But can't you do anything?" asked Archie blankly. "I mean, it's a bit of a horrid sort of a posish when somebody signs a contract for you, and you've got to bally well keep to it! Dashed unfair, if you know what I mean! You're the one to do the signing, what?"

"Oh, but that wouldn't be binding," said Dainty Dolly. "You see, I'm only just fifteen, and I thought I was very lucky to get a contract at all. And five pounds a week seemed such a lot of money."

"This blighter says that you'll be worth fifty pounds a week in a year or two," said Archie indignantly. "Don't you see the dashed scheme? You'll be earning fifty pounds, and Radmore will collar forty-five of it! Your part will be to do all the work, and he'll grab the old takings! And you can't do anything, because you'll be bound under contract. He can book you for the highest sum he can get, and still pay you the same fiver."

"Oh, but I shall never be worth all that!" said the girl breathlessly. "But Mr. Radmore told me that the contract was only for a year. He promised that if I got on well he would get my father to sign another—for a much bigger salary. He told me that I should have to do my best to get on. He means to fix me up with a big circuit of halls—as a separate turn!"

"That, of course, is ripping, but it is a fearful shame that you should be treated in such a rotten way. This scoundrel means to make you work like anything, and grab the money. By the way, did he fix your engagement at the pantomime?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to be frightfully inquis., but is it true that you're only getting two pounds a week—with two shows daily?"

"Yes," said the girl in a low voice.

"How bally awful!" said Archie hotly. "Why, a salary like that isn't allowed nowadays! I mean, it's as clear as the good old sunlight that Radmore is taking a lot for himself! But, of course, your pater earns a fair amount of doubloons? That is, he probably rolls home with the pieces of eight?"

She was silent.

"No?" said Archie. "Of course, I don't want to—Gadzooks!"

Archie felt rather dizzy. Without warning, she had seized his arm—quite unconsciously, for she felt so warm towards this generous-hearted junior that she already looked upon him as a friend. If he had only known it, he was about the only friend she had ever had.

"Please—please don't ask me much about

my father," she said softly. "He's not really my father——"

"What?" gasped Archie.

"He's only my stepfather," went on the girl, with a catch in her voice. "You see, my mother died when I was quite a tiny girl. I—I can only just remember, and I've had—Oh, I can't tell you! I've had such a struggle to keep things going."

Archie was terribly shocked.

"To—to keep things going?" he repeated dazedly. "But, I mean to say—you! Doesn't your stepfather rally round with the good old tin? I mean, don't you have enough money to pay the servants?"

She gave a bitter little laugh.

"Oh, how can you be so silly!" she exclaimed. "Father doesn't work. He never has done. 'I've always tried to keep things going, but it's been very, very hard. It would be better if father didn't take most of the money and spend it in the public—Oh, but why am I telling you this? I shouldn't—I shouldn't! It's not fair!'"

The girl had really been carried away, and she had said a great deal more than she had ever intended. It was only Archie's comforting friendliness which had caused her to speak at all. He was so different from everybody else she had ever met. As for Archie, he could hardly think clearly.

But, in a confused sort of way he knew this girl had kept the house going. Probably she had been a typist, or something, before going on the stage. And her father took the money and spent it on drink! Now he came to think of it, Archie suddenly realised that the girl looked very wan and ill-nurtured. But nothing could cancel her dainty beauty.

And then, suddenly, she looked out of the window and gave a little gasp.

"Oh, we're just against the Town Hall!" she exclaimed. "I must get out here—I must!"

"But you don't live here, do you?"

"No; I live in a little turning off Coldharbour Lane," she replied. "But I'll walk the rest—it would be terrible if father saw me getting out of a taxi! And we really must part now——"

"Absolutely impos.!" declared Archie firmly. "I mean to say, we'll get out of the old taxi if you like but I've got to see you home—right to the bally door! I say, what a fearful district! I didn't know that we were near the harbour!"

"Harbour?" she repeated. "Oh, no, no! That's only the name of the road. Please stop the taxi at once."

Archie did so, and they got out just opposite the Pavilion. Archie paid the cabman off, and then adjusted his monocle with absolute decision.

"And now we'll trickle off home!" he said calmly. "I mean, it's absolutely no use protesting—the old mind is made up! Miss Dolly, we're going right to the jolly old doorstep!"

"Oh, you shouldn't come!" she exclaimed

nervously. "It's too good of you, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Dash it all—not mister!" protested Archie. "My name's Glenthorne, don't you know. But that sounds frightful. I'm Archie—just Archie, Miss Dolly. And now which way do we wend our footsteps?"

She could see that he was determined, and so she made no attempt to dissuade him, although, even as she led the way in the direction of Coldharbour Lane, she had an uneasy feeling that Archie was too rash.

However, she was very grateful to him for his cheering words and his big-hearted sympathy. They were silent as they walked along, and Archie's mind was in a bit of a whirl.

He was rather concerned by the fact that he must soon bid her good-night, and he felt that the whole thing was unsatisfactory. He hadn't done anything—at least, nothing that could possibly have any good result.

And then, almost before he knew it, they had turned down a narrow side-street, and Dainty Dolly halted in front of a little gate. Archie vaguely saw that the houses in this road were very small and dingy, and all in a continuous row. There were practically no gardens—only tiny enclosures, a few feet deep, separating the gate from the front door.

The girl was just about to speak, and Archie was wondering what to say, when the door suddenly opened. At the rear of a short passage there was a light, and this light revealed the outline of a big, burly man.

"Oh," panted Dolly nervously.

Archie gazed at the stranger dumbly. He instinctively knew that he was facing the girl's stepfather.

CHAPTER IX.

LOOKING FOR ARCHIE.



"BLESSED if I know where the ass has got to!"

Reginald Pitt was looking round rather anxiously. "He went out in the interval, you know, and we haven't seen a sign of him since."

Pitt was rather concerned about Archie Glenthorne. The pantomime was over, and the vast bulk of the audience had already streamed out of the big theatre. Our little party had collected together in the foyer. And everybody was talking about the strange disappearance of Archie.

"I know he went out during the interval," I said. "But as soon as the show re-started I naturally thought he came back."

"That's what we all thought," said Handforth. "Just like that fathead! You never know what he's up to! I shouldn't be a bit surprised if we found him fast asleep in one of the saloons, or somewhere."

"Archie wouldn't do that," I put in

thoughtfully. "He seemed a bit excited during the interval. Anyhow, the best thing we can do is to ask one of these attendants. They may have spotted him."

Reggie's father and Sir Montie Tregellis-West, and two or three of the others went straight off home at once, to Duncan Square. Handforth and Co. and Pitt and I remained behind to see if we could find any trace of Archie. We arranged with Mr. Pitt that if we couldn't find him within twenty minutes we'd come home.

We questioned two or three attendants without any result, and were just beginning to get a bit worried when we met with more success. One of the theatre firemen came along, and I at once got hold of him.

"A rather smart young gent?" inquired the fireman, in reply to my query. "Aristocratic-looking, with one of them eye-glass things?"

"That's him!" I said. "Have you seen him?"

"Well, I did see him, young gent, but not during the last hour or two," said the fireman. "He was round by the stage door."

"What!" gasped Handforth.

"The stage door!" I repeated.

"That's where he was, sir."

"The—the awful bunder!" exclaimed Handforth indignantly. "Fancy Archie buzzing round the stage door! What the dickens did he want there? And when was this, anyhow?"

"Just after the interval, young gent," said the fireman.

We tipped him, and went outside, and stood in a group on the pavement.

"Round the stage door, eh?" exclaimed Pitt. "It's jolly queer—"

"I'm not so sure about that," I interrupted. "Don't you remember how concerned Archie was when that girl who played the fairy fainted? She's only a little kid, and Archie has got a terrifically soft heart!"

"That's about the size of it," agreed Pitt. "He must have been worried, and went round to see what he could do. And once Archie fairly starts on a thing like that, there's absolutely no stopping him."

Handforth sniffed.

"Archie's not the kind of chap to go bothering after infants!" he said. "Why, that fairy was only a kid—about eight or nine, I should think. You can bet her mother was waiting at the side of the stage—"

"In the wings, you mean?" asked Church.

"Who's talking about wings?" snapped Handforth. "The fairy was wearing wings, I know, but that's no reason why you should interrupt me over nothing. That little kid—"

"Was about fifteen or sixteen, my son," I put in. "She certainly didn't look more than ten or eleven, I'll admit, but things are deceptive on the stage. Let's see, what's her name?"

"Dainty Dolly," said Pitt.

"Yes, that's right," I agreed. "We'll

go round the back and ask what Archie was doing round there during the interval. I'll guarantee that he made an inquiry about Dainty Dolly."

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, I don't bet," he said. "Bet-ting's a fool's game, anyhow. But I don't mind betting anything you like that Dainty Dolly is only about ten years old! We'll soon find out, anyway."

"And yet you don't bet?" grinned Pitt.

We went round to the stage door, chuck-ling over Handforth, who was grimly de-termined to prove that he was right. When we got there we found many more signs of activity. The front of the theatre was now quiet and still, being all closed up. But there was plenty of life at the rear.

The stage doorkeeper looked at us very curiously as we crowded through the door-way.

"Sorry to bother you, but we'd like to make an inquiry about a friend of ours," I said. "Do you know if a young fellow came round here about half-way through the show? He was probably wearing an eyeglass—"

"That's right," said the doorkeeper. "He was here right enough."

"What did he come for?"

"I reckon he was mighty interested in Miss Wickham."

"Who?" said Pitt.

"Her they call Dainty Dolly," said the man.

"My hat!" grinned Church. "So Archie was smitten, eh? Well, I'm jiggered! Fancy him going dotty over a mere kid."

"Not so much of a kid neither, young gents," said the stage-door keeper. "Miss Wickham's fifteen, if she's a day. Anyhow, the young gent went off with her. Sorry I can't tell you no more."

Handforth looked at me blankly.

"Fifteen! Then—then you were right, Nipper! I can't believe it, you know! And think of Archie! Buzzing round here, run-ning after fairies!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't think Archie was buzzing after more than one fairy," I said. "He was very concerned when that girl fainted, and I expect he came round to see if she was all right. By the way," I added, turning to the doorkeeper, "was she hurt much?"

"Nothing to speak of," he replied.

"And you say our friend went off with her?"

"Yes."

"About what time?"

"That must have been somewhere near ten o'clock—just before, or just after," said the doorkeeper. "I'm sorry, young gents, but I can't spend my time talking to you —"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "We shall only keep you half a minute. Do you think that our friend went home with Miss Wickham?"

"Mebbe," said the old man. "Anyway,

she ain't one of them flighty kind. One of the best kids we've had round here—steady and cheerful, and as good as gold. That's Dainty Dolly! I was rather surprised at her going off with this young feller."

"Oh, Archie's all right," I said. "One of the best in the world. I expect he took her home. Perhaps you can give us the girl's address?"

"Well, I could, I dessay."

"Then don't waste time; let's have it!" put in Handforth.

I slipped a shilling across, and the door-keeper winked.

"Wunnerful how a little thing like that makes the tongue go easier!" he grinned. "Right you are, young gents. Just a minute, an' I'll let you know."

He went into a little kind of office, and returned after a moment or two, and gave us the exact address of Dainty Dolly in Brixton. And we bade him good-night, and walked off.

"Well, that's that!" said Pitt. "What's the next move?"

"Well, under the cires., I think we'd better just run out to Brixton," I said. "It won't take us long in a taxi, and it doesn't matter about being late. Your pater won't worry, Reggie."

"Of course not," said Pitt. "He knows we can take care of ourselves. But what do you think of Archie? Seeing young actresses home! He's going the pace a bit!"

"Archie in love!" grinned Handforth. "Great pip! I shouldn't have believed it! We'll chip him to death—"

"Wait until we know all the facts," I put in. "I don't think Archie is the kind of ass to fall in love. He probably went home with this girl because he was sorry for her. Anyhow, there's something behind it—something that we don't know of yet. Don't forget that photograph that Archie had in his pocket on the platform—"

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth. "The photograph! I'd nearly forgotten it—I—I mean I was just going to mention it! Of course! This Dainty Dolly is the same as that girl in the photo!"

"The plot thickens!" said Pitt.

"Not very much," I remarked. "Archie knew something about Dainty Dolly before he came to the theatre at all. He was pretty mysterious about that photograph, if you recollect. And the best thing we can do is to go to Brixton."

And so, a few minutes later, we bundled into a taxi, and started off.

CHAPTER X.

ARCHIE IN THE WARS!



ARCHIE GLENTHORNE was aware of the fact that his heart was beating rather more rapidly than usual as he stood facing the burly figure in the somewhat gloomy doorway.

He couldn't see the man distinctly, and this made matters all the worse. But he could easily judge that Mr. Wickham—for the girl used her stepfather's name—was a rather unpleasant customer.

"You see, the fact is—I mean to say, absolutely!" said Archie, in some confusion. "What? I mean—"

"Who's this young fool?" demanded the man gruffly.

"What-ho!" exclaimed Archie. "Pardon me, old carrot, but I judge that you fail to grasp the old situation. 'Under the circumstances, I will overlook the fearful insult—'"

"It's all right, father! He's only a schoolboy, and he saw me home from the theatre," put in Dolly quickly. "I came over a bit faint during my dance, and some of the scenery fell on me."

"Oh, it did—eh?" growled the man. "Then you ought to be darned well ashamed of yourself! What right have you got to go fainting on the stage? If you ain't careful you'll lose your job!"

"Yes, father!" said the girl quietly.

"And it won't be any good whining round me!" went on Wickham roughly. "If you can't earn money, you ain't any good in this house—understand? Now get inside, and I'll deal with this interfering young whipper-snapper!"

Archie pulled himself up a further inch or so.

"Dash it all!" he said. "I mean to say, a chappie doesn't like to start quarrels, and all that kind of rot, but there you are! I mean, when some foul blighter staggers along and calls me a bally whipper-snapper—Well, the good old blood of the Glenthorne's becomes dashed hot and dashed fiery!"

The girl made no attempt to move, but stood there, listening with great anxiety. Archie himself was rather overwhelmed with indignation. To hear her spoken to in such a way made him boil. This man was nothing more nor less than a poisonous blot. And something had to be done.

"I don't want any sauce from you, my lad!" said Wickham coarsely. "I'm going to give you a blamed good hiding. I'll teach you to come running after my daughter! I don't allow that kind of thing—"

"One moment!" interrupted Archie. "That is to say, two moments! In fact, I shall probably be five or six moments! It's up to you, laddie, to listen to me! Absolutely! I'd just like to explain that you're a dashed frightful kind of a brute!"

"What!" shouted Wickham furiously.

"Absolutely!" declared Archie. "That is to say, absolutely not! It seems to me, old fruit, that you're the impudent rotter! A chappie of your stamp oughtn't to be allowed to keep daughters and things! I mean to say, it's a somewhat fearful thing altogether! Here you are, doing absolutely nothing, and this girl has to go to the jolly old theatre dancing like anything when she doesn't feel like it! The whole thing's



The next moment Archie had an idea that London was the seat of a most terrible earthquake disaster. The houses rocked, and the street heaved in the most alarming manner.

wrong—absolutely near the edge! What I mean is, a great cove like you ought to be dashing about doing whole piles of work, and buzzing home with bulging pockets, and so forth!"

"By thunder!" snarled Wickham. "Do you think I'm going to stand this? You young whelp, I'll—"

"As a matter of fact, I'm expecting quite a fearful amount of bother!" said Archie calmly. "But there you are—these things come! But it had to be done! It was on the old chest, and it had to be shifted. I've had the greatest pleasure in ticking you off, old lad!"

"Please, father!" pleaded Dolly grasping the man's arm. "He doesn't mean it—really he doesn't! It's only his way—"

"Don't you interfere, you little hussy!" snapped Wickham harshly.

He pushed her aside with great violence, and the girl gave a little cry as she thudded against the doorpost, and then fell. She collapsed just inside the doorway, sobbing.

Archie's blood rose to fever heat.

"That, as it were, is absolutely too much!" he shouted. "You fearful blighter! Take that, don't you know! Absolutely!"

Crash!

His fist came round before Wickham could even be aware of his intentions. And Archie was not entirely unversed in the art of self-defence. He delivered his punch upon Wickham's jaw. And the man staggered back with a howl of rage and pain.

"Absolutely!" gasped Archie. "That is, what-ho! It seems to me, laddie, that we're off! Tally-ho, and what not! As it were, yoicks!"

Biff!

He landed another heavy punch, and was

just settling down to a keen enjoyment of the whole business. But at this point, unfortunately for Archie, Mr. Wickham awoke to a state of full activity.

He went for Archie like an enraged elephant.

And before Archie could even realise what had happened, he found himself at the gate, and he was dimly aware that something had struck him in the mouth with the force of a battering-ram.

He was just wondering how many teeth he had left when he was grasped by the back of his neck and the seat of his trousers.

"Dash it all!" he panted. "I mean——"

"Out you go, you young dog!" snarled Wickham.

The next moment Archie had an idea that London was the seat of a most terrible earthquake disaster. The houses rocked, the street heaved, and it seemed that the very earth came up to meet him.

As a matter of fact, the whole thing was quite simple.

Wickham treated Archie in very much the same manner as a dog will shake a rat. He kicked him, he cuffed him, and the unfortunate Archie was finally flung into the gutter with fearful violence.

He was really hurt—even more than he knew of.

Mr. Wickham had hurt him quite badly enough, but as he fell he caught the back of his head on the edge of the kerb, and after that Archie only took a vague kind of interest in the whole affair.

He lay there in the gutter, muddy, dishevelled, and utterly spent. As though at a tremendous distance, he heard a door slam. Then a long time seemed to pass—about an hour, at least.

In actual truth, Archie was only lying in the gutter for a minute or so. But he dimly became aware that a shabby old lady was helping him to his feet. She was not the kind of person Archie was in the habit of associating with. But her heart was certainly in the right place.

She helped him to his feet, and then led him gently through a doorway. Archie went, still in a kind of dream. And when, at last, he awoke to a full realisation of his surroundings, he saw that he was in an ill-furnished kind of kitchen.

But the couch on which he lay, although faded and torn and old-fashioned, was certainly frightfully comfortable. There was a fire, too—a cheerful kind of blaze in an ancient fireplace.

"There, there, just you keep quiet for a bit, child!" said the old woman kindly. "My, but I'd like to have the law on that brute! I've allus said that Wickham deserved gaol—an' I'm right!"

"Absolutely," murmured Archie feebly.

After that he must have gone to sleep, because he knew nothing more until he was awakened by Handforth and Pitt and several other St. Frank's fellows. Archie sat upon the couch, and looked round blankly.

CHAPTER XI.

GETTING WARM.



"WHAT-HO!" said Archie faintly. "What-ho! So here we all are, what? And here, to be absolutely absolute, here I am! At least, I believe so, laddies.

It is me, I suppose? I must say that I feel dashed fearful!"

"You look dashed fearful, too!" said Handforth.

"Really?" said Glenthorne. "Am I awfully disfigured?"

"My dear ass, you look as though you'd had a fight with Battling Siki!" said Handforth. "You're in a shocking mess! Your nose is all sideways, you've got a fearful bruise on your left cheek, and there's not much left of your ears! Have you been fighting a mob?"

"Absolutely not!" said Archie. "As a matter of fact, I don't quite remember what happened, dear old chappies. You see, I was ticking off old Wickham. I might say that I gave him the good old length of the Glenthorne tongue! And then, don't you know, trouble buzzed up in platoons! I mean to say, bombardments and barrages, and all that kind of thing!"

"I can quite understand it, if you had the nerve to tell Wickham what you thought of him," I put in.

"But the chap's absolutely foul!" said Archie.

"I can quite believe it, but you weren't very diplomatic to tell him so to his face," I went on. "That's where you made a mistake, my son. We only arrived five minutes ago, and we heard that you'd been carried in here by Mrs. Huggins. Some of the people in the street thought that you were in hospital!"

"Somebody said the mortuary!" remarked Handforth.

Archie shuddered.

"Pray don't be so frightfully frightful!" he protested. "I mean to say—the mortuary! It absolutely makes a chappie go all funny! The fact is, I'm feeling fearfully braced. The old tissues are repaired! And it's up to me to warble large doses of gratitude to the kindly soul who came along with the helping hand! Dashed priceless, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, there's no doubt that Mrs. Huggins is a brick!" I said. "But what does it all mean, Archie? What on earth have you been doing? I think you ought to explain."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "You see, I was bally worried over Dainty Dolly. It seems that a pretty scoundrelly sort of a scoundrel named Radmore has been plotting, and all that kind of stuff! Well, there you are. I mean, wasn't it absolutely the right thing to rally round?"

"You're talking double Dutch!" said Pitt. "I don't know anything about Radmore—never heard the name before."

Archie managed to tell us the whole story.

He was feeling a lot better now, although his face was very sore, and there was a lump on the back of his head as big as a pigeon's egg.

But as he told us what he knew, he grew stronger, and his indignation increased as he talked on. And at last, when he had finished, we stood round him, thoughtful and puzzled.

"So you see, dear old sportsmen, something pretty fearful has got to be done," concluded Archie. "We can't let this drunken bounder knock his stepdaughter about just as he likes."

"The position is a bit difficult——"

"Absolutely not!" interrupted Archie. "All we've got to do is to buzz into Wickham's place, knock the ruffian flat, and there you are! I mean to say, there's nothing in it! It's simply a question of rescuing the fairy from the dashed ogre, if you gather the old trend!"

I shook my head.

"This is real life, Archie—not pantomime!" I said. "It's easy enough to rescue fairies from ogres in a pantomime. But this chap is the girl's stepfather, and her legal guardian. If we interfere, we should only lay ourselves in for a lot of trouble."

"But—but I mean to say——"

"You don't seem to understand, Archie, that we should be absolutely in the wrong by taking matters into our own hands," I went on. "We can certainly do something to-morrow. But it's no good wasting any more time to-night. My dear chap, we can't go next door and take that girl away from her stepfather!"

Archie looked rather blank.

"But that's pretty awful, don't you know!" he protested. "I thought you chappies would rally round with a few yards of enthusiasm. And yet you say you can't do anything! I'm wounded!"

"I can't help that—we don't want to stir up further trouble," I said. "I'm quite certain that Wickham is a rotter. If we were in the backwoods, or somewhere like that, we'd sail in and do the rescue stunt with gusto. But here, in Brixton, it's impossible. Wickham's got the law on his side."

"Then the law's deucedly unfair!" declared Archie firmly.

"But you needn't worry," smiled Pitt. "By what Mrs. Huggins says, this girl is one of the best, and old Wickham treats her like dirt. I'll tell my pater all about it, and he'll soon have a look into matters. Wait till to-morrow, Archie, and we'll set things going."

"Rot!" exclaimed Handforth.

"Look here, Handy——"

"Rot!" repeated Handforth. "I haven't been saying much—I've been listening to you chaps. Now I'm going to speak!"

"We shall be here for hours, then!" sighed Pitt.

"I'm going to give my opinion!" declared Handforth. "You chaps ought to be

bumped! Here's one of our chaps, battered and smashed about, and yet you talk about doing nothing until to-morrow! Wickham's a brute—a drunken beast! I vote we take the law into our own hands, go next door, and give the cad a jolly good hiding!"

"Hear, hear!" said Archie. "That, I mean to say, is the stuff!"

"Oh, you can't come, Archie," said Handforth. "I'll deal with this matter. You're no good—you're a wreck!"

"Really! I—I mean——"

"A physical bundle of shattered humanity!" went on Handforth. "Your face is smashed about, you look on the point of pegging out, and your own father wouldn't recognise you."

"Dash it all!" murmured Archie faintly. "I mean to say, this is where I need Phipps! The chappie would come in frightfully handy now. Phipps has a most soothing effect upon a fellow. He just glides about, murmuring words of wisdom and sympathy."

"Never mind Phipps now," said Handforth. "You're more in need of a doctor!"

"Gadzooks!" breathed Archie. "That's shocking, don't you know! I had a slight idea that I was feeling somewhat bucked——"

"And so you are feeling bucked," I interrupted. "Don't take any notice of Handy, he's only trying to be funny. There's not much the matter with you now, Archie. The best thing we can do is to go off home."

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "I've heard quite enough about this Wickham chap! He's a brute—a ruffian! And don't forget that he's sloshed one of our chaps about. For the honour of St. Frank's, it's up to me to dot him one."

Archie nodded.

"Of course, that's a rather priceless scheme, but don't you think there might be a few drawbacks?" he asked. "I mean to say this dotting business. A fruity notion, old dear, but there might be a back-fire. That is to say, two can play at the old dotting game, if you follow."

"That's pretty obvious," said Pitt. "One look at your handsome features, Archie, convinces me that Mr. Wickham is a past-master in the art of dotting. Better not take any chances, Handy——"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth. "I'm going to slosh him!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "A somewhat different game, what? I mean, sloshing sounds more businesslike than dotting, what? Good enough, laddie! What about it? Shall we stagger forth, and attend to the blighter?"

"We shall!" said Handforth firmly.

I knew very well that if we attempted to hold Handforth back there would be a scene. Edward Oswald was quite prepared to slosh his own chums, if necessary. He didn't particularly care who he smashed about, just so long as he did the smashing. And, after

all, we were in Mrs. Huggins' dwelling, and we couldn't afford to have any upsets.

Handforth was not likely to get much satisfaction, anyhow.

He and Archie went out, and the rest of us stayed behind to thank Mrs. Huggins, and to leave her a ten-shilling note for her kindness to Archie. The latter had already decided that he would bestow a fiver on the good lady. He considered that she was one of the ones—a priceless sort of lady who came along with the helping hand when it was most needed.

The pair went out into the street, and found it very quiet and dark. For by now, of course, the time was in the neighbourhood of midnight, and although the main streets in Brixton were fairly lively, these little side-turnings were very still.

Handforth paused just before coming to Wickham's gate.

"Now, we've got to plan this carefully," he murmured. "I don't know why the dickens you've come—you'll only be in the giddy way!"

"The fact is, darling——"

"Don't argue!" interrupted Handforth. "Now that you're here, the only thing that you can do is to wait until I've finished! My hat! What's the matter with the Corporation people? There's not enough giddy light in this street to illuminate a cupboard! One rotten lamp—right at the end!"

Handforth was certainly justified in his scathing remark. The street was very badly lit, but this was partly due to the fact that one lamp, quite nearby, was temporarily out of order. Thus the neighbourhood of Mr. Wickham's door was very dim and gloomy.

"Anyhow, we can't waste time," said Handforth. "I'm going to——"

"What ho! What ho!" breathed Archie. "Observe! The bally door has just opened, and—— Why, my only sainted aunt! It's Radmore! Absolutely! The very cove himself!"

Handforth crouched against the railings.

"Radmore!" he breathed. "You mean the chap who's planned to get that contract signed?"

"Absolutely!" whispered Archie. "And, don't you know, he's probably got the dashed thing on him now! By gad! Think of it! He's buzzing off with the goods, as it were."

"Is he?" muttered Handforth. "We'll see about that."

They paused, listening, quite hidden in the gloom.

CHAPTER XII. MORE TROUBLE!



THE two men in the doorway were just in the act of shaking hands.

"Well, you'd better get off, Radmore," came Wickham's voice. "Yes, I understand;

don't worry. That contract business is settled, anyway. That's the main thing."

"Yes, I'm glad we've fixed that up," said Radmore. "It's a fine thing for the girl, Wickham. She'll be certain of five quid a week now, whether she earns it or not. That's the best of making these long agreements. You'll be able to live in comfort for years."

"Well, the girl's worth it—every penny!" said Wickham. "A saucy little cat, but she's clever enough on the stage. And if she can earn money easy like that, I don't see why I shouldn't have the benefit."

"Right you are! I'll see you to-morrow," said Radmore. "Same place, I suppose?"

"Yes—in the little back saloon."

The pair shook hands again, and Radmore turned out of the gate and swung off down the street. The door closed, and Radmore's footsteps were the only sounds which broke the stillness—except for the distant murmur of electric tramcars.

"I knew it!" breathed Handforth. "That scoundrel has got the contract on him now. Didn't I say so?"

"Absolutely not!" replied Archie. "I had an idea that I was the chappie who mentioned the fact. But it doesn't matter, old lad. Not a bit! But it really seems to me that we ought to be dashing about!"

"You bet!" said Handforth. "Now's the chance! If we can grab this contract at once, the thing's done! Before Radmore has a chance to start things off again we'll have spoilt his game. We'd better look sharp!"

"Exactly, old thing!" said Archie. "A ripe scheme!"

There was no time to be lost, and the two juniors went down the street at a run. Handforth was eager because there was a good chance here of a scrap. And Handforth had sadly missed his usual daily fights. At St. Frank's he was always in some trouble or other. And here was an opportunity of engaging in a fight that would be really worth while.

Archie's chief anxiety was to get hold of the contract, and tear it up. Things like that ought to be torn up.

The juniors overtook Radmore just as he was about to turn the corner. Handforth was never a fellow to do things in a delicate way. He didn't believe in wasting time.

He just grabbed Radmore by the shoulder, swung him round, and then pushed his fist right under the man's nose.

"See that?" he roared. "I'll give you just three seconds to yank out that contract for Miss Wickham! Three seconds, or your nose will be made as flat as a giddy pancake!"

Radmore was utterly surprised and startled.

"What in the name of——" he began.

"One—two—three!" said Handforth grimly. "Good enough!"

Biff!

He really didn't give anybody much of a chance. After all, it was rather unreasonable to expect Radmore to take in the

situation within the short space of three seconds. Handforth's fist came round with the force of a steam-hammer. And Mr. Radmore went flying backwards with a roar of rage and agony.

"That," said Archie, "is the absolute goods!"

Radmore just recovered his balance, and saved himself from falling.

"You—you brutes!" he stuttered. By glory! I'll have the police on you for this—"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "We know your game, and we want that contract! What's more, we're going to have it."

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Hear, hear, and all that!"

Radmore breathed hard.

"If you touch me, I'll break every bone in your bodies!" he snarled. "You infernal young rogues! It'll only take me a minute to have the police on the scene! Get back! Confound you, what the blazes——"

He was interrupted in the middle of his outcry, for Handforth and Archie were determined. They piled on the man before he could make any attempt to save himself.

And, in any case, Radmore was not much of a fighter. He howled for help as he went down. Handforth's fists thudded upon the man's chest, and he went over, sprawling in the mud.

"Now we'll soon have it!" panted Handforth triumphantly. "Huh! Even Nelson Lee himself couldn't have done it better! You can't teach me much about detective work!"

Handforth was sitting across Radmore's chest, and now he was tearing open the man's overcoat. It was the work of a moment to locate the inside breast pocket. And there, sure enough, was the contract.

Handforth pulled it out, with a yell of victory.

"Help!" roared Radmore wildly. "Help! Police!"

"By George! You'd better stop that!" snapped Handforth.

He pushed his cap into Radmore's face. And, at the same moment, Archie seized the contract, and gazed upon it with intense interest. At this spot it was just possible to detect the writing, for at this corner the street was not so dim. The light from a lamp standard shone across the road.

"Absolutely!" burst out Archie excitedly. "This is it, old tulip! This, as it were, is the jolly old thing itself! Here we are! Legal words, and what not!"

"Tear it up!" panted Handforth.

"I was thinking, old bean, that it might be advisable to show it to somebody or other," suggested Archie. "One never knows——"

"Tear it up!" insisted Handforth.

It was good advice, for, once the contract was destroyed, there could be no possibility of Radmore recovering it. So Archie, having satisfied himself that this paper was the actual document, ripped it across and

across. Then he scattered the fragments into the air.

"Good work! Good work!" he declared. "In fact, dashed good work!"

Mr. Radmore didn't think so.

He was yelling at the top of his voice, for in his struggles he had managed to free his mouth. And Handforth and Archie were just about to let him go when they received a bit of a shock.

For, without warning, two burly figures loomed up round the corner. They were gentlemen in long, blue overcoats and helmets—in point of fact, a couple of constables.

"Looks like a case, Jim!" said one, as they hurried up.

Archie turned, and his jaw dropped.

"Cave!" he breathed. "I mean to say, this is where we ought to trickle away, dear old lad! I don't like the look of things—absolutely not! Trouble, like the jolly old ale, is brewing!"

Handforth jumped up.

"And about time, too!" he said tartly. "You police chaps are never here when you're wanted! You'd better arrest this rotter——"

"They've robbed me!" screamed Radmore wildly. "These young ruffians knocked me down, and robbed me!"

"We robbed you of that contract, right enough!" grinned Handforth. "Yes, and it's torn up now!"

"What's it all about?" demanded one of the policemen.

"These infernal brats knocked me down, and took a valuable contract out of my pocket!" shouted Radmore excitedly. "You heard them admit it! You've got to arrest them! They insulted me!"

"Yes, we could see that all right," said the policeman. "You'll have to come to the station—all of you. If you wish to charge these two young men, you'll have to do it in the station, sir!"

"I will charge them!" snarled Radmore fiercely.

He was beside himself with rage and mortification. The contract he had been at such trouble to get signed had been torn up before his eyes. And he was determined to take his revenge. In excited, breathless tones, he told the two policemen how Handforth and Archie had knocked him down and robbed him.

And Handforth didn't improve matters.

"It's all rot!" he declared warmly. "The man's a scoundrel! We took the contract all right—of course we did! I'm not ashamed either. And the best thing you can do is to arrest the rotter——"

"None of that—none of that!" interrupted the policeman. "You youngsters will have to come along with me. And you'd best come quiet, too!"

"What!" shouted Handforth. "Do—do you mean that you're going to arrest us?"

"Yes!"

"This is somewhat diabolical!" breathed

Archie. "I mean to say, arrested, what? But, my dear old lads in blue, you're absolutely off the track! I might even say you're somewhat snookered! The fact is, we have been doing a large chunk of good work——"

"You won't do yourselves no good by talking!" growled one of the policemen. "Come on, now! No more of this!"

And, to the alarm of Archie and Handforth, they were firmly seized and marched away. There could be no question as to the view the constables took, for Radmore was allowed to walk freely.

There was one fortunate aspect of the whole matter.

Church and McClure had come out to see what their famous leader was doing. And they arrived just in time to see Handforth and Archie being marched away. They were staggered.

"Arrested!" gasped Church. "Oh, my goodness!"

"What shall we do?" panted McClure, in alarm.

"Tell Nipper; he'll do something!"

They went rushing back, and a few moments later I was in possession of the facts. And I was by no means pleased to hear them.

"Oh, my hat!" I exclaimed impatiently. "That ass is always getting into trouble of some kind. Just fancy him getting into a scrape like this! I was half afraid that would happen if he started any of his nonsense! We shall have to go and get the fathheads set free!"

"But how can we do that?" inquired Pitt anxiously.

"I don't know; but it's just possible that the inspector in charge will know me," I replied. "If he does, we might be able to get the reckless idiots away with us."

We hurriedly thanked Mrs. Huggins once more for all that she had done, and then rushed away at full speed towards the police-station. For Handforth and Archie to be arrested was a dreadful calamity. There was really no telling how the matter would end if Radmore pressed the charge. For, after all was said and done, Handforth and Archie had acted with more impetuosity than discretion. What they had done was morally justified, but in the eyes of the law it was a different matter.

Happily, Mr. Radmore had cooled down by the time the police-station was reached. And he was just beginning to realise that it would be bad for him if he was obliged to go into a lot of details. And it would do him no good to have these schoolboys brought up before the local bench on a charge of assault.

Handforth and Archie were marched into the charge room, and the two constables commenced relating their version of the whole affair. But Radmore interrupted.

"It's all right—I don't press the charge," he declared. "It was only a trifle, and I don't want a big fuss made about it. I'd rather let the boys go free."

The inspector looked up, frowning.

"Do you charge these young men with anything, or not?" he demanded.

"No, I do not."

"Then what's the idea of fooling these constables about?" asked the inspector sharply. "It's a strange thing if people can't know their own minds! First of all you say you want these boys brought to the station and charged, and now you change your mind! I think I'd better detain them—and you, too! There's something fishy——"

"Don't be absurd!" interrupted Radmore. "And if you detain me, there'll be more than one bag of trouble for you! These youngsters were excited, and acted rather foolishly—that's all. I don't want a lot of fuss!"

Accordingly, greatly to the relief of Handforth and Archie, they were allowed to walk out of the police-station a few minutes later. They couldn't understand why Radmore had changed so quickly. And they emerged just in time to run into the rest of us.

"Oh, thank goodness!" gasped Church. "We thought we should find you in a cell!"

"I'd like to see 'em put me in a cell!" growled Handforth. "By George! I've stood enough rot already! But we dished Radmore! We got that contract away, and tore it to bits!"

This, at all events, was a very satisfactory state of affairs. Upon the whole, I willingly forgave Handforth and Archie for being so drastic in their methods. They had certainly justified themselves.

And soon afterwards, by a piece of luck, we got hold of a taxicab. The driver was homeward bound, but consented to take us through London to Duncan Square. All things considered, the evening had been an eventful one.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.



NEXT morning I was up early in spite of a somewhat short night. And my first task was to go out, and make straight for Gray's Inn Road. The gov'nor was there, in our own place. And I put the whole affair before him, just as it had happened.

And Nelson Lee promised to look into it—although, of course, the whole affair was a mere triviality.

In the meantime, Archie was very greatly worried.

He had felt intense satisfaction at the thought that Dainty Dolly was now quite safe from Radmore's wiles. But, at the same time, he still had the uneasy feeling that something more ought to be done for the girl.

When Archie remembered how her stepfather had pushed her over, his blood boiled afresh. And then, on the top of this, the thought came to him that Radmore might be preparing another contract. After all, what

was there to prevent him doing what he had done before?

Some of the fellows went out during the morning, and didn't return until well on in the afternoon, having had lunch in a restaurant. But Archie remained indoors all the time. He was certainly not quite himself. And when teatime arrived he was inclined to be absent-minded.

We were all there, comfortably spread over Mrs. Pitt's drawing-room. Archie sat in a big armchair, gazing thoughtfully at the ceiling, and polishing his monocle at the same time.

"Buck up, Archie!" I smiled. "Everything will be all right!"

"Oh, rather!" said Archie absently. "I mean to say, dashed rosy cheeks, and all that! And what priceless eyes! One look, and a chappie positively goes all hot and confused!"

"Yes, rather!" I grinned. "Dainty Dolly is a peach!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "That is, one of the real sort! You know what I mean—as pretty as anything, and all that sort of stuff! She's got eyes like lakes of azure!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody roared, and Archie was startled into full alertness.

"Gadzooks!" he gasped, turning very red.

"I—I—I— That is to say, you—you—you— What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, dear old chappies——"

"You can't get away from it, Archie—you're in love!" grinned Pitt.

"Dash it all!" protested Archie weakly.

"I mean to say, absolutely! She's stunning, and so forth, but you're positively wrong! The fact is, I was dashed worried!"

"Worried?" I repeated.

"Absolutely!" replied Archie. "Worried like those bally Heinz things—in fifty-seven varieties! Pretty apt, what? It just flashed into the old brain, you know."

"There's no telling what that brain of yours can do once it gets on the go," chuckled Pitt. "But why the fifty-seven varieties of worry?"

"Well, there you are!" replied Archie.

"I mean, that priceless girl, don't you know! Working like anything, doing the fairy stuff every bally evening, and her father taking all the tin! I mean to say, the whole thing's not only rotten, but inclined to be putrid. You grasp what I mean? And that contract business, too! The fact is, I don't know what to think, but it seems to me that something pretty serious ought to be accomplished."

"It has been accomplished," I said.

"What?" said Archie. "It's all very well to raise the old hopes, old tulip, but I'm afraid things are fearfully bad. Of course, I shall go to the jolly old theatre again to-night. It's up to me to get absolutely busy——"

"I hardly think so, Archie!" smiled Mr. Pitt. "While you have been worrying here,



For, without warning, two burly figures loomed up round the corner, wearing long, blue overcoats and helmets—in point of fact, a couple of constables.

other people have been at work—notably Mr. Nelson Lee."

Archie sat forward eagerly.

"I fail to grasp the scheme!" he exclaimed.

Before he could say anything else, the door opened and the maidservant announced that Miss Wickham had arrived. Archie went red all over again, half rose to his feet, and then sank back.

"What-ho!" he murmured. "Steady, laddie—steady! This is where a large supply of restraint is required. Absolutely!"

A moment later Dainty Dolly was ushered into the room. She was looking very neat and pretty in a warm winter coat and a small fur hat. She was rather shabby, but this did not detract from her dainty appearance. Archie gazed at her in a kind of trance.

"Awfully jolly to see you, Miss Wickham!" he exclaimed confusedly, as he rose to his feet. "That is, what priceless weather! I should say, how do you do, old carrot? I—I mean——"

Archie paused, hopelessly involved.

"I came because Mr. Lee sent me here," said the girl. "He saw me after the matinee, and told me to come straight to this address. I'm sure I don't know what it all means, but Mr. Lee was awfully kind!"

"I think the guv'nor will be here himself in a few minutes," I said. "What you've got to do, Miss Wickham, is to make yourself at home, and have a cup of tea. Now that Mr. Lee has been looking into things, you can be quite sure that your troubles are at an end."

Mrs. Pitt was very interested in the girl, and in a few minutes they were sitting together, taking as if they had known one another for weeks.

She soon supplied the information that Radmore had seen her stepfather again. In fact, she was almost certain that another contract had been drawn up—a document to take the place of the one that Archie had torn to atoms.

"But that, I mean, is simply frightful!" said Archie, with concern. "All our work for nothing, what? Labour in vain, and all that kind of stuff! I had a fearful suspicion that something like this would happen."

"Well, you needn't worry yourself, old son," I said. "I was going to leave this until the guv'nor came, but it doesn't matter much. Miss Dolly knows, so there's no reason why you shouldn't know, too."

"Know what?" asked Handforth.

"Well, the guv'nor has been making a lot of inquiries to-day, and even if Radmore gets a second contract signed, it won't be any good," I explained. "This man Wickham isn't Miss Dolly's stepfather at all!"

"What!"

"Gadzooks!"

"Not her stepfather!"

"No; and he's got no legal authority to act for her!" I said.

"But, I mean to say, really!" said Archie eagerly. "This, don't you know, is absolutely too priceless for words! But it can't be true—things like this never can be true! They're too ripping to be real!"

"In some cases, perhaps, but not in this one," I replied. "Mr. Lee has definitely established the fact that Wickham is absolutely no relation to Miss Dolly at all. She didn't know it herself until to-day. Of course, she'll never have anything more to do with the brute, and Radmore will get precious little profit out of his beautiful scheme."

Archie beamed with delight.

"So everything's absolutely all serene?" he asked.

"Of course it is," I replied. "You see, the guv'nor has interested himself in the matter, and it's a dead certainty that he'll see that Miss Dolly is fixed up fairly and squarely. So you needn't worry yourself about her any more, Archie."

Archie looked supremely happy.

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"Dash it all, it's like the bally pantomime itself!" he murmured. "I mean to say, the fairy finishes up a winner, and all that sort of thing. And the demons frizzle up in a few tons of red fire! Rather gorgeous, if you know what I mean."

And everything was all right.

Nelson Lee arrived very shortly afterwards, and he gave a few details of the inquiries that he had made. Beyond any shadow of doubt, he had established the fact that Wickham was not the girl's stepfather, and he had received an official warrant to remove the girl completely from the man's control.

This, of course, meant that Dainty Dolly was without a home—but, strictly speaking, she had never had one. It was rather splendid of Mrs. Pitt to come to the rescue. She could see that the girl was made of the right stuff, and she invited her to stay in Duncan Square until other arrangements could be made.

As for Dainty Dolly herself, her gratitude was very heartfelt. And Archie Glenthorne was as blithe as a young peacock on a fine day. He was further gratified by the news that Nelson Lee had fixed up a much better contract for Dolly for the run of the pantomime.

And on the top of this, the following day, came the welcome news that a big theatrical magnate had been immensely struck by Dolly's performance. And he engaged her for a long contract immediately the pantomime run was finished. And her salary was one that her cleverness and genius thoroughly deserved.

And so everything was all serene, and we felt that the episode had ended in the best possible way for all concerned. Archie's pantomime fairy had come out on top.

And there was not the slightest doubt that the wonderful change in her fortunes had come about solely because of Archie's astuteness. The genial ass of the Remove was not such an ass, after all!

THE END.

Editorial Announcement.

My Dear Readers,—With the Old Year nearly out, and 1923 coming between this and our next issue, it behoves me now to broadcast my very best wishes for a Prosperous and Happy New Year to every one of you.

PHOTO CARD COLLECTORS KINDLY NOTE

that No. 3 of the unique series of Modern British Locomotives will be GIVEN AWAY with Next Week's copy of "The Nelson Lee Library." It is a splendid, real photo, beautifully toned, of the latest type of L. B. & S. C. Rly. express engine. I have heard from various sources—and I am not surprised—that these photo-cards are being much sought after by collectors.

OUR VOTING COMPETITION.

A curious feature of our Story Voting Competition is that the bigger the poll (i.e. the greater number of competitors) the better chance for the average reader of pulling off the prize. At first, this may sound absurd and illogical, but when you come to consider it, you will grasp my meaning. The judgment of the many decides the winner, and the greater the number of competitors, the stronger will be the voting for the stories which are the best; with the result that the individual competitor, who feels that his opinions are shared by the majority of his fellow readers, will have greater confidence of being a likely winner. Therefore, it is up to every competitor,

who is ready to back his opinions by the views of other readers, to swell the polling by inducing as many as possible of his friends to enter for the competition.

FORTHCOMING STORIES.

Next Week's Long Complete Story of St. Frank's will be entitled, "JACK GREY'S TEMPTATION! or, The Torment of Conscience." It is a thoroughly human story of how Jack Grey endeavours to win the Lytton Trust Scholarship in order to pay his way at St. Frank's, his father having suffered a great financial loss, which means that his son would have to leave St. Frank's unless the boy can win the scholarship. After next week, I am beginning a powerful, new BARRING-OUT series. It is a long time since we ran a series, and this one, I can promise you, will be something quite out of the ordinary. Look out next week for the announcement!

OUR PRIZE ENGINE.

In the early part of January there will be an exhibition of model steam engines at the London Horticultural Hall. Messrs. Bassett-Lowke, Ltd., the makers of our Prize Engine, will be exhibiting some of their fine models in full working order. I hope to arrange for our Prize Engine to be on show at the same time, but I will let you know more definitely about this next week.

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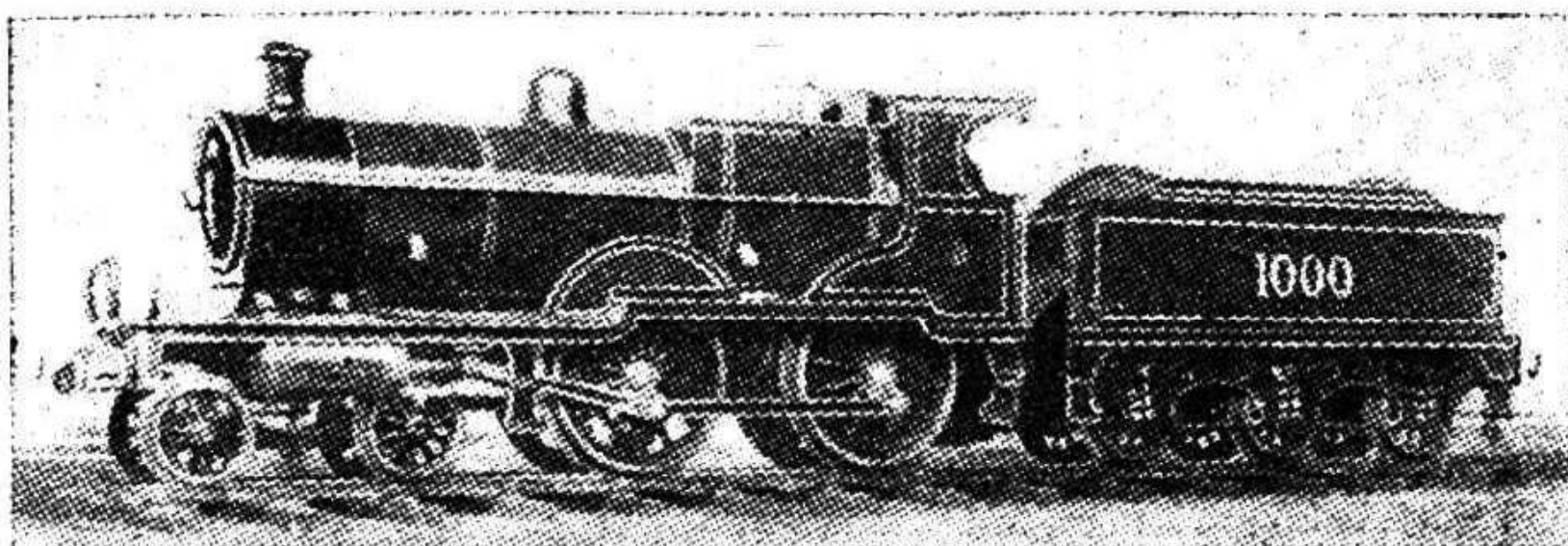
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began in the December 16 issue, and ends with issue dated January 27, when a list of the seven St. Frank's stories to be voted for will appear on a coupon.

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