

DIFFERENT PACKET OF STAMPS WITH EACH COPY!

THE **NELSON**
Library **LEE**

2^D

The **MYSTERY**
of **STUDY 20**

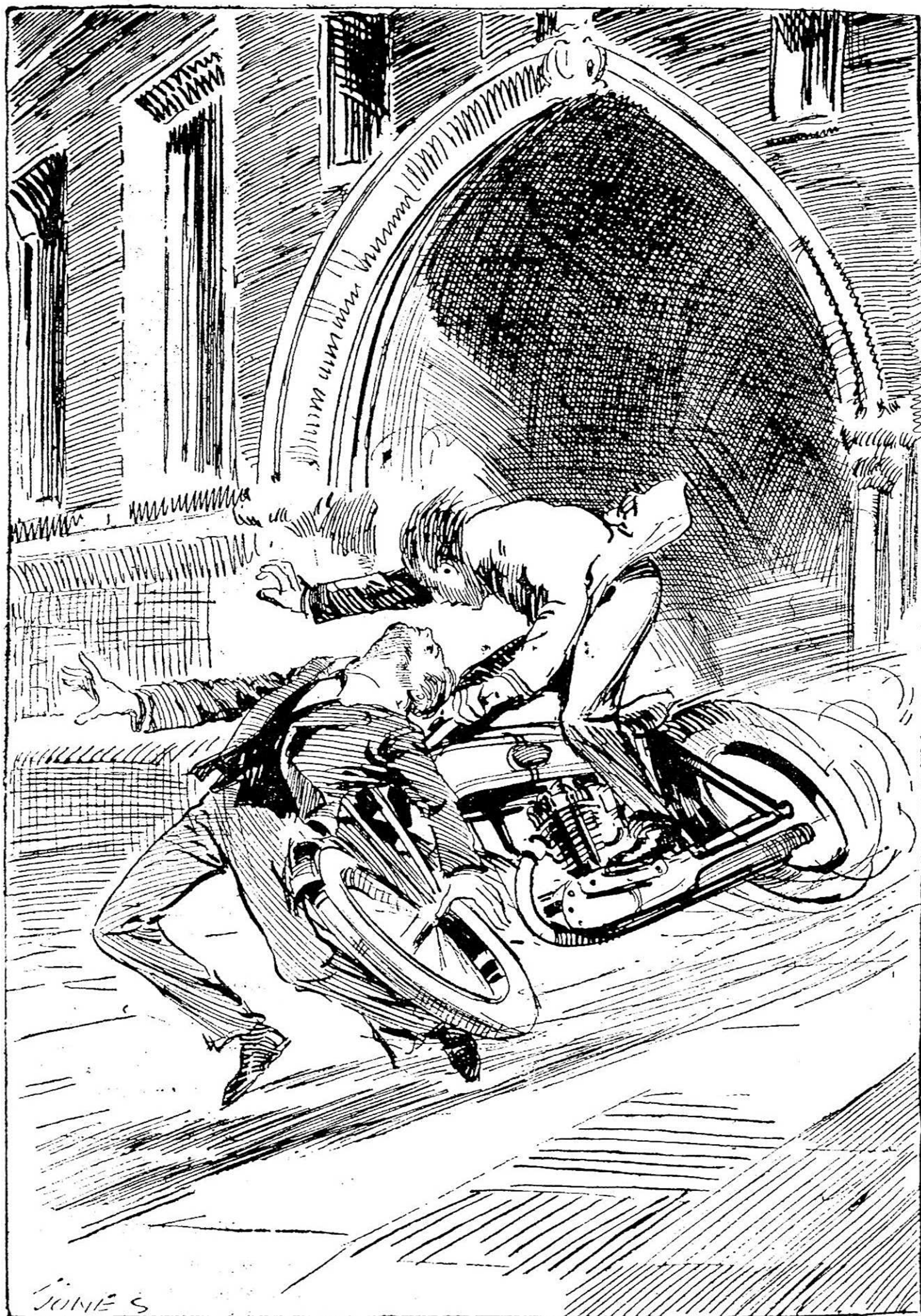


With a
scream of
terror Teddy
Long tore
madly out
into the pas-
sage.



Read what
happened in
Study 20 in
this week's
exciting St.
Frank's
story of the
ripping new
series just
begun.

FREE **FOREIGN**
STAMPS



Crash ! It was over in a moment. Chambers took Long fairly and squarely in the centre.

The MYSTERY of STUDY 20

By
Edwy Searles
Brooks



Ezra Quirke, the new arrival at St. Frank's, has created a big sensation by his magical powers. His superstitious belief in signs and portents are ridiculed and held in open contempt by his schoolfellows, but it is noticed that whenever Quirke's warnings are disregarded his scoffers invariably suffer some misfortune soon afterwards. Whether these evil consequences are directly due to Quirke's influence or trickery, he has certainly aroused a great stir throughout the school. More about the strange happenings at St. Frank's attributed to Quirke is related in this week's grand long story.

Another Packet of Assorted Foreign Stamps is GIVEN AWAY with this copy of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

NEWS OF GREAT IMPORT.

WALTER CHURCH, of the Remove, dashed headlong into the Ancient House, and nearly came into violent collision with a tall, thin junior, who was absent-mindedly running his lean fingers through his mop of sandy, curly hair.

"Heard the news, Trotty?" gasped Church, pulling up abruptly.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the thin one mildly. "Really, my dear Church! You quite startled me. Is it essential to hurt yourself indoors with such force? These shocks, you know——"

"Don't be an ass!" interrupted Church. "The news is enough to make anybody excited. Haven't you heard? Considering you're in the team, you ought to be more interested than anybody."

Church was labouring under the delusion that Nicodemus Trotwood faced him. As a matter of fact, the thin one was Cornelius—Nick's junior by an hour or so. The Trotwood twins were always causing these little confusions. The celebrated West House pair were as alike as two peas.

"Really, I fail——" began Cornelius.

"It's about football, Nick, you fathead," said Church. "I've got the London evening paper here, and there can't be any mistake."

"Of course I am," said Trotwood junior firmly.

"Of course you are what?"

"Awake," said Cornelius. "It is ridiculous to state that I am not awake——"

"My only hat!" groaned Church. "I thought you were Nick—and you're that deaf idiot of a Corny! You can go and eat coke!"

"Oh, if it was only a joke, it makes a difference," beamed Cornelius.

"I didn't say anything about a joke!" howled Church. "Let me pass, you walking dummy! You're getting deafer every day. You ought to wear megaphones in your ears!"

"I ought to telephone the dears?" asked Cornelius, startled. "Dears? Which dears? If you are referring to the Moor View girls——"

"Oh, help!" said Church feebly. "Brandy, somebody!"

He staggered off, and Trotwood junior gazed after him in astonishment, with a vague impression that Church had said that somebody was bandy. It was sad, but true, that Cornelius only heard about ten per cent of any remark—and he generally received that proportion in a distorted condition.

Church went down the junior passage and entered Study D. That celebrated apartment was looking very cosy. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate, the curtains were drawn, and the electric light was gleaming. Handforth and McClure were apparently busy at their prep, and silence reigned.

"Heard the latest?" said Church boisterously.

Handforth waved an imperious hand.

"Dry up!" he commanded. "Don't interrupt, fathead!"

"Yes, be a sport and simmer down, old man," pleaded McClure. "I'm right in the middle of this rotten grammar, and Handy's quiet for once. It hasn't been so peaceful in here for days. Don't upset the tranquil calm."

Church frowned. His news was sensational, and he was particularly anxious to bring it out with full dramatic force. It was far more satisfactory to make the announcement in person—there wasn't much fun in letting his chums read the news item for themselves.

"What's Handy doing, then?" he asked curiously. "Not his prep, I'll bet! He's never quiet over prep——"

"This famous cricketer scored three thousand leaks," murmured Handforth, shaking his head. "That can't be right, you know. A cricketer can't score leaks."

"Perhaps it means Welsh onions!" suggested McClure.

"Don't be an ass!" snorted Handforth. "I'm generally hot stuff on these picture puzzles. 'This famous cricketer scored three thousand.' I've got that bit right, anyhow. Then it shows a saucepan with water running out of it. That's a leak, isn't it? But how can a cricketer score leaks?"

"When there's a hole in a saucepan it runs," said Church impatiently.

Handforth started.

"I've got it!" he said triumphantly. "Of course—'This famous cricketer scored three thousand runs'. Funny thing I didn't spot it at first. It must have been at the back of my mind——"

"Bother that giddy puzzle!" interrupted Church. "I've got some important news here. I thought you weren't doing your prep, Handy! There's an item on the sports page here——"

"In accomplishing this—— This what?" murmured Handforth. "In accomplishing this boots—— No, that's wrong! Yet it's got a pair of boots here, clear enough——"

"Feet!" suggested McClure tartly.

"By George, yes!" said Edward Oswald. "That's it—'In accomplishing this feat'—— Get out of it, Church! Take that silly paper away! Can't you see that I'm busy?"

"I've got some news here——"

"Go and eat coke!"

"What about my grammar?" howled McClure despairingly. "I had a whole string in my mind—I got it all fixed lovely! It's all your fault, Churchy, for butting in——"

"But I've got some news, I tell you!" roared Church.

"I don't care——"

"It's about football—St. Frank's football!"

"My hat!" said McClure. "In a London paper?"

"Yes!"

"But St. Frank's wouldn't be mentioned——"

"St. Frank's IS mentioned!" insisted Church excitedly. "Haven't I been trying to tell you for five solid minutes?"

"You haven't been in the room for more than two minutes——"

"Why quibble about a minute or two?" yelled Church. "You've heard of Victor Mason, haven't you?"

"Vic Mason, the Aston Villa pivot?"

"That's the chap."

"Have I heard of him!" sneered McClure. "Isn't he one of the most famous centre-halves in England? He's played in scores of international matches, and he's got ump-teen caps——"

"You're mad!" interrupted Handforth. "This thing's about cricket, not football! Besides, Vic Mason's retired now—I saw it in the paper weeks ago. Crooked his knee last season, and can't attain his usual form. Hard lines on the chap, of course——"

"He's coming here!" interrupted Church impressively.

McClure stared.

"Vic Mason—coming to St. Frank's?" he ejaculated. "I suppose you mean for a visit?"

"He's coming to stay—as footer coach to the school."

"Coach!" said Handforth promptly. "That's the word! I thought the thing was a carriage, although it looks a bit like a taxi-cab. But coach just fits in right—But it doesn't make sense!" he added blankly. "No, it must be a growler. That's it—the very word!"

Church boiled over.

"Can't you leave that idiotic thing alone?" he roared. "All you can do is to babble about growlers and leaks and feats! Don't I keep telling you that Vic Mason is coming to St. Frank's?"

"I say, is this really true?" asked McClure, forgetting all about his grammar.

"Absolutely," said Church. "Look what it says in the sports column here—No, don't grab! I'll read it out! Listen carefully, my lads!"

And Church, receiving his opportunity at last, proceeded to read aloud the item with due impressiveness and reverence. There it was, in black and white. The famous international, Victor Mason himself, had accepted the appointment of Soccer coach to St. Frank's College, the great Sussex public school.

The rest of the newspaper was mere padding as far as Church and McClure were concerned. The political news—the crisis in India—the alarm in Mesopotamia—the everlasting London traffic problem—all these things were trifles as light as air. The newspaper contained only one interesting fact—the item contained in one paragraph of the sports gossip.

"My only hat!" said McClure, leaning back, and scratching his nose with the end of a penholder. "Vic Mason for St. Frank's, eh? Things are looking up in this corner of the world! Not that we really need a coach," he went on thoughtfully. "What's wrong with our footer, anyhow?"

"Nothing—with OUR footer," replied Church promptly. "With Nipper at the head of things, the Junior Eleven has been doing fine. Fullwood's doing marvellous things at inside right, too. To-morrow, for example, we're going to wipe the Grammar School off the map!"

"Oh, rather!" agreed McClure. "That's a foregone conclusion. Everybody knows that the Grammarians are as good as licked. Some of the chaps are rehearsing a kind of funeral dirge for 'em already. It's a dirty trick I'm not in the team."

"Well, I'm playing—and that's two out of this study," said Church. "We've got nothing to grumble at."

"A fat lot of consolation to me!" snorted McClure. "Didn't I play well in the House match the other day?" he demanded. "I'm not so sure about Nipper as a good skipper! He doesn't appreciate talent when he sees it!"

Church grinned.

"You're not a bad back, but Doyle's more certain in his kicking," he replied firmly.

"I don't think much of Doyle, but he's a ripping back. Dash it all, Mac, you've got to admit—"

"Well, never mind," growled McClure. "Oh, blow this grammar! I'll give it a rest for a bit. Let's go along to the common-room, and startle the crowd with the news."

CHAPTER II.

MR. CROWELL COMES DOWN HEAVY.



EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH looked up, frowning.

"Stop that noise!" he ordered majestically. "How the dickens can I think while you're gabbling away like a couple of old hens?"

Church and McClure were standing over the fireplace, arguing heatedly. Instead of going to the common-room, as they had intimated, they were discussing the respective merits of the First Eleven men.

"Hens don't gabble—they cackle!" retorted Church tartly. "Can't we talk in the study now?"

"No, you can't!"

"Can we whisper?"

"Not while I'm thinking!" replied Handforth sternly.

"Perhaps you'll be good enough to let us breathe?" suggested McClure. "Please, Your Majesty, may we poke the fire—or would it disturb your august thoughts?"

Handforth frowned more deeply.

"I don't want any rot!" he said, pushing his writing block aside. "Can't you realise that I'm working for the general benefit? I shall win the first prize of a hundred pounds in this competition. In fact, I've planned out exactly how the money's going. I shall buy a motor-bike, and a new wireless set, and some more furniture for the study, a turkey carpet, and I shall give a Form feed—"

"Aren't you going to lend us anything out of it?" asked McClure.

"I never lend!" replied Handforth.

"But I'm going to give you chaps ten quid each, just for luck."

"You seem pretty sure, don't you?" grinned Church.

"My dear ass, it's a cert!"

"Then how about a quid each on account?" suggested McClure carelessly.

"As a matter of fact, I'm a bit broke just now," admitted Handforth. "That's one reason why I'm going in for this competition. To-day's Tuesday, I ought to hear the result by Friday—"

"You hopeless duffer, you won't hear anything for weeks!" interrupted Church. "In fact, you won't hear anything at all—unless you get a sixpenny pencil as a consolation prize. You never know your luck!"

Handforth sniffed.

"I've set my heart on the hundred pounds——" he began.

"Besides," went on Church, "haven't you made a bloomer, old man? This competition is a kind of serial—it goes on for weeks. That's the fourth set of pictures you're looking at now—I expect there'll be twelve sets altogether."

Handforth picked up the weekly journal and gazed at the puzzle pictures. He paid particular attention to the fatal words, "Set No. 4," at the top.

"My only aunt!" he ejaculated dazedly. "Do you mean to say I've spent the whole evening over this thing, and it isn't complete in itself? I found this paper in the common-room, and I thought I'd go in for that competition——"

"Poor old Handy!" said McClure tragically. "There's something else you've overlooked, too. This is October, you know. That's an August paper—it's out of date by two or three months! The giddy competition's finished, and that first prize has been spent long ago!"

Handforth fairly gaped.

"I thought it was this week's number!" he roared. "Who left it in the common-room? I'm going to smash him up! I've been tricked! I've spent hours of hard mental strain all for nothing!"

"Don't worry—it's all good brain exercise," chuckled McClure. "We're going along to the common-room, Handy. Coming?"

"Not yet," said Handforth, picking up Church's evening paper.

He sought to restore his disturbed tranquillity by reading the news. Church declared that Wilson was absolutely hopeless in the half-back line, but McClure maintained that he was not so bad. Reynolds, on the other hand, was no better than a crock, and Morrow wasn't revealing such good form as he ought to.

"By George," ejaculated Handforth abruptly, "look here!"

He leapt to his feet, his eyes gleaming.

"Look at this!" he shouted. "By George, you buy a giddy paper, and you didn't see the news in it! Vic Mason's coming to St. Frank's!"

"Wha-a-at?" gasped Church and McClure.

"Fact!" said Handforth excitedly.

"You—you dithering idiot!" hooted Church. "Haven't I been telling you about Vic Mason for the last twenty minutes? Didn't I read that paragraph out? My goodness, you must be as deaf as a post!"

Handforth looked rather blank. It annoyed him to find that all his thunder was suddenly dissipated.

"Then you know all about it?" he asked.

"Help!" groaned McClure. "Of course we know all about it. You were so buried in that silly competition of yours that you missed everything else. You even mentioned Mason's name, too! What do you think of it?"

"I think it's all rot!" retorted Handforth promptly. "Huh! As if we need a football coach at St. Frank's! Why, we're in fine form this year!"

"Just what I was saying," agreed McClure.

"In that case, perhaps there's something in it," said Handforth. "And a chap like Vic Mason ought to wake things up generally. I suppose he'll confine himself to the First Eleven. They're doing fearfully this season."

"Only won one game so far," said Church.

"Not that it matters much," continued Handforth. "After all, First Eleven football doesn't count. It's the Junior Eleven that matters. Who worries about those giddy seniors, anyhow?"

McClure grinned.

"I've got an idea that the Upper School regards First Eleven footer as something of importance," he chuckled. "Only yesterday I heard old Browne of the Fifth remarking that the First Eleven was in the ox-tail—and sinking for the third time. When I mentioned what we'd done he looked surprised, and seemed to learn, for the first time, that there was a Junior Eleven at all. It all depends upon the point of view, Handy."

"Oh, well, perhaps this professional will have a good effect," said Handforth. "At last I shall be appreciated," he added, with satisfaction. "Of course, my goalkeeping is a sort of by-word at St. Frank's, but it will be rather nice to have expert criticism. When's the man coming, anyway?"

"It doesn't say," replied Church. "Let's go and ask Nipper. By jingo, what a deep bounder! Nipper, as sports captain, must have known about this for days! And yet he hasn't said a word. He'll be ragged no end."

They crowded into the corridor, and wended their way towards the common-room, discussing the situation in all its aspects. Handforth was inclined to blow hot and cold—nothing new for him.

If Church and McClure approved of the new innovation, Handforth naturally gazed upon it with a frown. If they changed their minds and said there was no need for any coach, Handforth veered round on the instant. It was a matter of principle with him to disagree with his chums on any and every subject. Arguing was as the breath of life to him.

They had just reached the Ancient House lobby when a little local disturbance took place. Church suggested that Handforth had played superbly at a recent House match. And Edward Oswald, as a matter of course, insisted that he had been very off-colour. Whereupon, Church admitted that Handy had made a grave mistake in letting the leather get past him on two occasions. And Handforth replied to this not verbally, but fistically.

"Oh," he roared, "so you're running down my goalkeeping, are you? How the dickens

could I save those shots in the pouring rain——"

"Oh, all right!" said Church hastily. "I was only agreeing with you——"

Biff!

Church staggered back as Handforth's fist caught him in the chest. Quite inadvertently, the newspaper—which Church had regained possession of—flew out of his hand over the balustrade.

It was a trifling incident, but Mr. Crowell, the master of the Remove, happened to be coming downstairs at the moment. The newspaper opened out, and wrapped itself round Mr. Crowell's left foot. In consequence, he missed a stair, and the immediate result was highly entertaining.

Mr. Crowell arrived on the mat in a disorderly heap, having skidded down ten stairs on his back. He sat up, gazed round dazedly, and then leapt to his feet. He wasn't exactly hurt, but his dignity had been destroyed. And Mr. Crowell was a man who held that dignity was an essential part of his life.

"Handforth!" he thundered.

"Sorry, sir——"

"Did you throw that newspaper at my feet?" roared Mr. Crowell.

"No, sir," stammered Handforth. "I——"

"It slipped out of my hand, sir," put in Church quickly. "I didn't know you were coming downstairs, sir. Frightfully sorry, sir——"

"You will write me two hundred lines, Church, for utter carelessness!" stormed the Form-master. "Unless they are delivered to me by lunch-time to-morrow, you will be detained in extra lessons for the entire half-holiday."

And Mr. Crowell stalked off, feeling that the matter was fully adjusted. He had come down the stairs heavily—and he had come down on Church heavily!

CHAPTER III.

HANDFORTH, THE AUTOCRAT.



"TWO hundred giddy lines!" said Church feebly.

"Hard luck, old son!" murmured McClure.

"The blessed old tyrant ought to be boiled!" exclaimed Handforth indignantly. "Two hundred lines for a sheer accident! I've never heard of such a thing! Of course, it was your own fault——"

"It was your fault!" stormed Church. "What was the idea of biffing me in the chest like that?"

"There was no need for you to chuck the paper in the air!" retorted Handforth. "It's all torn up now! It's a funny thing you can't keep your wits about you when I give you a light tap!"

"Old Crowell is generally decent," said McClure. "He might have known it was an accident. In any case, he ought to have made inquiries, and then he'd have given you the two hundred, Handy."

"Me?"

"Yes, for starting the thing," said McClure. "But he came downstairs beautifully, didn't he? It was worth a few lines to see him!"

Church gave a bitter laugh.

"Oh, rather!" he agreed sarcastically. "It's easy enough for you to say that—when you haven't got to write any! Oh, well, it's no good growling. Let's get to the common-room before there's any other casualty."

They proceeded to the Junior common-room, and found that their great news was stale. Everybody was already discussing the subject of Vic Mason, the ex-Aston Villa centre-half. There wasn't a great deal of excitement on the subject, for it was generally felt that the professional would confine his attentions to the Upper School.

"When's he coming, anyway?" asked Church.

"To-morrow, I think," said Dick Hamilton, the junior skipper.

"And when did you know about this, Nipper?"

"Oh, days ago!" replied Dick, smiling. "As a matter of fact, I didn't say anything, because it wasn't officially fixed. I only had it definitely from Mr. Lee an hour or two ago."

"The man's necessary, by what I can see," remarked Reggie Pitt sagely. "The First Eleven's in a pretty bad way. It may be bad luck, of course, but the First can't seem to win anything this season."

"There's all sorts of bad luck going about," declared De Valerie. "In fact, ever since that chap Quirke turned up there's been trouble. I'm not a superstitious ass, but it looks a bit funny."

Reggie Pitt grinned. He was junior sports skipper of the West House, and was a mere visitor in the Ancient House common-room, having strolled in with Jack Grey a few minutes earlier.

"There's nothing very magical about Ezra Quirke," he replied. "The chap's pretty deep, but he doesn't fool me. He's keen on impressing everybody, and I dare say he's rather clever at these mystical fakes. That owl of his, too—is only for effect. Don't take any notice of the beggar."

"Hear, hear!" said Handforth approvingly. "If Quirke was over here, instead of in the East House, I'd shove him in his place in about two ticks! We wouldn't stand any of his rot on this side!"

"No fear!" agreed Nipper. "Armstrong keeps talking about squashing the man, but he never does it. That's Armstrong all over. All talk, and no do. I wonder how long he'll keep the East House junior captaincy?"

"All term, I expect," said Pitt. "There's nobody else over there—they're practically all duds in Goole's House. Let 'em stew in

their own juice—that's my remedy. And as long as Quirke doesn't interfere with our chaps, why worry?"

"My argument exactly," agreed Nipper.

"But if Quirke starts any of his games on this side—look out for squalls!" said Handforth darkly. "I've got my eye on the chap—I've got him taped! Any of his superstitious rot on this side of the Triangle, and down comes the chopper!"

The conversation continued on the subject of Ezra Quirke for a time. Quirke was a comparatively new boy in the Fourth, and he had already won a certain amount of fame in the East House as a magician. He was full of superstitions, and he was always ready to bring out big talk on the subject of "evil elements," "the unseen powers," and similar sinister terms.

He was believed to be an adept with a crystal, too. Some of the juniors were saying that he could tell the future with ease—that he was a wonderful seer. But the level-headed fellows received these yarns without being impressed.

Simon Kenmore, the head prefect of the East House, had only recently come out of the sanatorium after a mysterious occurrence in the Triangle. In his official capacity, Kenmore had come down heavily on Quirke in the midst of one of the latter's "performances." And Quirke had made it known far and wide that the "unseen powers" would bring punishment upon Kenmore.

Surely enough, Kenmore had gone temporarily blind while crossing the Triangle one night, and he had dashed into the Ancient House steps, screaming madly. And he had been found babbling out some extraordinary story of having heard a voice out of the air. But Kenmore was practically himself again.

Other fellows had met with unaccountable bad luck—and in every case Ezra Quirke was indirectly connected with the cause. But it was impossible to prove that the school-boy magician had attempted any trickery. Indeed, it was widely believed that coincidence was largely responsible for the curious effects.

Nothing could alter the fact, however, that Quirke was winning some support from juniors in his own House. Clifton and Simons and one or two others were now openly pro-Quirke, and believed in him and his superstitions with a blind faith that none of the other juniors could shake.

It was neither Nipper's nor Reggie Pitt's business to interfere. And even Buster Boots, the junior skipper of the Modern House, took no steps—although the East House was on his side of the Triangle.

"The chap's in the Fourth, I know," said Boots. "And I'm captain of the Fourth. But this is more of a House matter than a Form affair. As long as he doesn't convert any of our chaps, he can go on his own sweet way."

And that was the general feeling. Handforth, for one, was rather indignant about

it. It almost seemed as though he wanted some Ancient House juniors to fall under Quirke's spell—so that he could point out the error of their ways. As it happened, the opportunity soon arrived.

Upon leaving the common-room, Handforth & Co. went over to the gymnasium before returning to their study. And just outside the Ancient House they espied two figures crossing the Triangle.

The evening was dark and cold, with a cutting wind blowing round the picturesque Tudor buildings.

"I say, look at these two!" murmured Church, nudging his leader.

The pair were Hubbard and Long, of the Remove. Never a very bright couple, Arthur Hubbard and Teddy Long were now looking pale and uneasy. There was a scared look in their eyes, and Handforth pulled them up.

"What mischief have you bounders been up to?" he asked bluntly.

"Oh, don't be an ass, Handy—" began Hubbard.

"And I don't want any evasions, either!" interrupted Handforth sternly. "You've got guilt written all over your ugly faces! I'll bet you've been up to some dirty work at the cross-roads!"

"We haven't," denied Long. "We've just come from the East House!"

Handforth started.

"The East House!" he repeated. "And you're looking scared and white about the gills! I say, have you been chumming up with that cad Quirke?"

"We haven't seen the chap!" said Hubbard promptly.

"We only went to his study—I—I mean—"

Teddy Long paused, confused—realising that his own words were conflicting with his companion's.

"I knew you were a fibber, Hubbard, but there's no need to tell whoppers like that!" roared Handforth. "So you've been to Quirke's study, have you? What for? What have you been doing there?"

"Mind your own business!" said Hubbard nastily. "Hi, steady! Hold him back, Church! He's got no right to question us—"

"I've got every right!" interrupted Handforth autocratically. "You're both in my House, and you need looking after! Quirke's an evil influence. I bar all evil influences."

"He's a marvel!" breathed Teddy Long dreamily. "He saw things in that crystal of his—he saw what my pater was doing! He even told me things about my family that—"

"By George!" snorted Handforth. "So you've properly mixed yourselves up with the young swindler? You idiots, he was only spoofing you!"

"He wasn't!" denied Long. "He can see things and do things that any ordinary

chap couldn't even attempt! And that crystal of his——"

"That's enough!" interrupted Handforth fiercely. "As long as Quirke confined his attentions to the East House it didn't matter—but now that he's dragged some Ancient House chaps into his beastly net I'm going to take action!"

"Oh!" said Hubbard uneasily.

"If you ever go to his study again I'll smash you!" said Handforth grimly.

"Who do you think you are—the Head?" yelled Hubbard. "We're not taking any orders from you——"

"By George!" snorted the leader of

The pair crawled away hastily, and Handforth carefully dusted his hands. But he hadn't reckoned on Teddy Long's capacity for sneaking. And half an hour later Nelson Lee himself button-holed Edward Oswald in the Ancient House lobby.

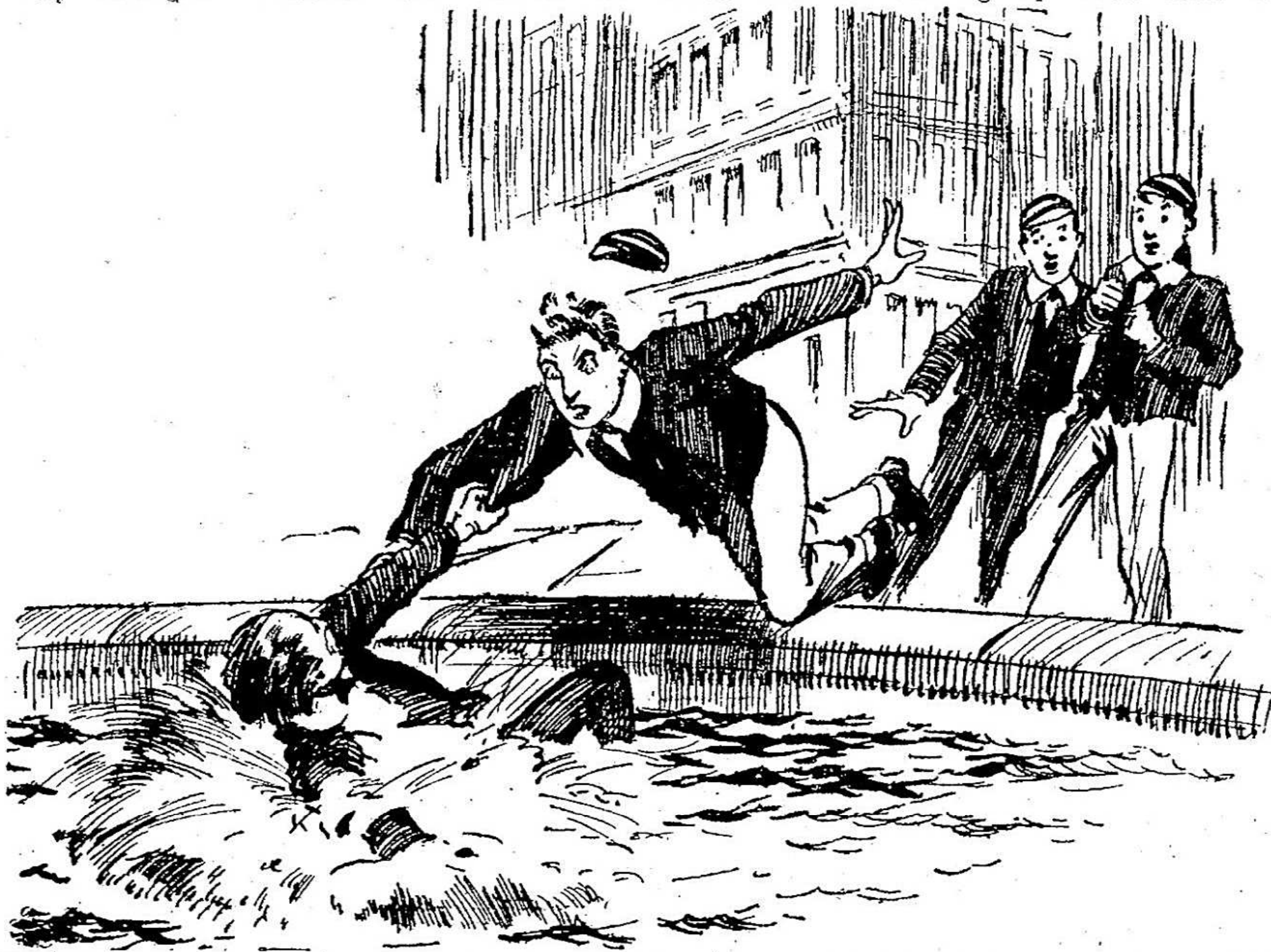
"One moment, Handforth," said the Housemaster-detective. "Did you make a brutal assault upon Long half an hour ago?"

Handforth started.

"No, sir," he replied promptly.

"Long has informed me——"

"It wasn't a brutal assault, sir—I just biffed him for mixing up with that cad



A second splash came on top of the first—and Church and McClure stood looking on in consternation as their leader followed his victim into the fountain.

Study D. "You're not taking any orders, eh? Then you'll take this!"

Crash! Biff! Thud!

He went for the chums of Study B like a whirlwind. It was very brief, but both Hubbard and Long were more than satisfied. Before Church and McClure could attempt to interfere, the miserable pair were flat on their backs. Hubbard was in a semi-dazed condition, and Teddy Long enjoyed the delights of a beautiful black-eye. It wasn't black yet, but there were great hopes.

"Now get indoors!" ordered Handforth breathlessly. "And the next time you cultivate Quirke I'll biff you properly! This was only a taster!"

Quirke," explained Handforth. "It was necessary, sir——"

"At the same time, Handforth, I cannot allow you to take matters into your own hands like that," said Nelson Lee sternly. "If I had witnessed the attack I should have recommended you for a flogging. But as I have only Long's word to rely upon—to say nothing of his obvious injuries—I shall give you an imposition of one hundred lines."

Handforth staggered away in a kind of daze. He wasn't overcome by the sentence which was a light one—but once again bad luck had followed in the train of Ezra Quirke.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GREAT MAN ARRIVES.



CLANG-CLANG-CLANG! The rising-bell boomed out its unwelcome note through

the junior dormitories on the following morning. Edward

Oswald Handforth sat up in bed, rubbed his eyes, and grunted.

"Hallo! Where's Church?" he said, yawning.

"My only hat!" ejaculated McClure, gazing at Church's empty bed. "He's up already! Before rising-bell, too! I've never known him to do a thing like that before! What's wrong with the man?"

"Crazy!" said Handforth flatly. "Any fellow who gets up before he's compelled to must be off his rocker! Clothes gone, too—he must be fully dressed. Poor chap—clean dotty!"

McClure stretched himself.

"That doesn't tally with a few remarks you made yesterday," he grinned. "Just because Church and I wouldn't jump out an hour before rising-bell, you called us every name under the sun. Said that it was our duty to set an example to the Remove by getting up without compulsion!"

Handforth waved an imperious hand.

"You're dreaming!" he said gruffly. "As a matter of fact, I meant it! It's sheer weakness to lie in bed until the bell rings! Come on—out of it! We've got to find out what Church is up to."

However, there was nothing very mysterious in Church's movements. Twenty minutes later his chums found him in Study D. He was seated at the table, and writing furiously, and with a pained, constrained expression on his face.

"What the dickens—" began Handforth.

"Lines!" rapped out Church. "Clear off! Crowell wants 'em by lunch-time—two hundred. Extra lesson if I fail—no footer—and I'm in the Eleven! Buzz off!"

Church delivered this disjointed speech without pausing in his labours. And Handforth and McClure, with a thorough understanding of the situation, left the study and made for the Triangle.

"That reminds me," said Handforth, frowning. "I've got a hundred lines to do for Mr. Lee. I'd forgotten all about them, too. Where's Long? I couldn't find him last night—but he's going through the mill this morning! My hat! I'm going to tear him to bits and distribute him over the Triangle!"

McClure shook his head.

"No need to make a nasty mess like that," he said. "The best thing you can do is to forget the whole affair. If you slaughter Long, he'll only sneak to Mr. Lee again—and then you'll get it hotter."

Handforth grunted. There was blunt truth in his companion's observation—and

Handforth hated admitting it. He always liked to disagree with his chums. But this time he couldn't. Teddy Long was such a sneak that it would be a perilous undertaking to take further action.

"That beggar Quirke again!" growled Handforth fiercely. "If it hadn't been for Quirke, I shouldn't have got that impo! There's something rummy about the beast!"

"You said a mouthful!" observed Ulysses Spencer Adams, strolling up. "Say, that bird's a hoodoo!"

"He's a which?" asked Handforth.

"A hoodoo—a jinx!"

"Jinx!"

"Gee! Ain't you guys dumb?" asked Ulysses, with his exasperating contempt for British ignorance of American slang. "Jinx—hoodoo—in real language, means unlucky. I'm handing it to you that Quirke is sure nifty when it comes to passing the bull."

"Passing the bull?" repeated Handforth, staring. "I've never seen Quirke passing any bull! There are some cows in one of the meadows—"

"My land!" broke in the American boy pitifully. "The more I try to teach you the more you misunderstand! Passing the bull is just handing out the dope—spilling the spoo. That Quirke bird is a sure crackerjack in the magician business. But I've got a line on him, I guess—he doesn't get by with that bunk of his when I'm around. No, sir! He may be a smart Alec to you, but I guess he's just a cheap skate!"

Ulysses strolled off, leaving Handforth and McClure glaring after him. The American boy generally spoke excellent English in the presence of a master, but it tickled him pink—to use one of his own expressions—to string out yards of American slang to the juniors.

"The chap's mad!" said Handforth. "If he expects us to learn that fat-headed language of his, he'd better go on expecting! I don't believe in slang, anyhow—English or American. A chap who uses slang ought to be biffed until he's groggy at the knees! Hallo! What's the shindy over there? Let's buzz over and have a squint!"

McClure grinned, but thought it unnecessary to point out the reason for his amusement to Handforth. They both walked up the Triangle in the direction of Big Arch. A number of West House juniors were collected round a medium-sized, sturdy stranger with a clean-shaven, bronzed countenance.

"Who's the gentleman?" asked McClure.

"My dear chap, don't show your ignorance like that!" said Reggie Pitt severely. "You've seen his photograph enough times! Make obeisance, O stupid one, to the great Victor Mason!"

"My hat!" said Handforth. "Is this Vic Mason?"

He stared at the famous professional footballer with great curiosity—and it must be

confessed that Handforth rather overlooked his manners. Vic Mason nodded cheerfully.

"Some more of you, eh?" he said, in a breezy voice. "I can see I'm in for a lively time at this school!"

"Jolly glad to meet you," said Handforth, shaking hands. "Of course, we don't need you, really—not in the Junior School, anyhow. But there's no telling what these dotty Governors will do, you know! So you've got the appointment as footer coach to St. Frank's?"

"That seems to be the idea," smiled Vic Mason.

"Well, you needn't bother about the Junior Eleven," said Handforth confidentially. "We're in ripping form just now. Of course, you can watch our matches if you like," he added generously. "I'm rather keen on having expert opinion."

"I imagine that you're in the junior team?" grinned the professional.

Handforth stared in amazement.

"In the team!" he roared. "Don't you recognise me? I'm Handforth—junior goal-keeper! My hat! I thought everybody knew me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Victor Mason bowed solemnly.

"You must pardon the omission, but I only arrived about five minutes ago," he chuckled. "Strictly speaking, I'm not here until this afternoon, but as I was staying in Bannington I came over first thing. The manager of the Bannington Club is a friend of mine, you know."

"Funny thing you've never heard of me, though," said Handforth puzzled. "What about Pitt here? Haven't you any idea of his fame? The fastest outside-right in school football."

"Cheese it!" said Reggie gruffly.

"Pitt?" repeated Mason. "Young Reggie Pitt? Put it there, sonny!" he added, grabbing Pitt's hand. "Have I heard of you? Have I heard of Steve Bloomer. Didn't you play for Bannington once?"

"More than once," smiled Pitt modestly.

"You're in the First Eleven, surely?"

"No, I'm outside-right for the junior team."

"That's sheer madness!" said the professional grimly. "Why, a youngster of your capabilities ought to be playing for the school. It's about time somebody came along to look after your senior football."

Handforth made a feeble grab at McClure. He had been listening in a kind of dream, and his expression was now mixed. Slowly but surely a deep flush of indignation was suffusing his face.

"Did—did you hear that?" he breathed into Church's ear. "Never heard of me; but he knows all about Pitt."

"Horrible!" said McClure scandalised.

"It's—it's sheer rot!" said Handforth thickly. "Goodness knows I'm not jealous, but what about my goalkeeping? Why

hasn't he heard of me? There's something funny about this—"

"Better ignore it, old man," said McClure softly. "The poor fellow can't help his ignorance, I suppose. Show a lofty disdain, that's the best line you can take."

Handforth gave a bitter snort.

"It's always the case!" he said tensely. "A chap never profits by what he gets in his own country."

McClure grinned.

"I suppose you mean a prophet is never respected in his own country?" he asked politely.

"Same thing!" grunted Handforth. "I'm fed-up. Let's get indoors!"

And he stalked into the Ancient House, boiling with indignation.

CHAPTER V.

GATHERING AT THE FOUNTAIN.



APPARENTLY the great man of Study. D was thoroughly upset. He wasn't a conceited junior in the ordinary sense, although his words and actions sometimes led people to believe so. But nothing "touched him on the raw" so much as being ignored.

He was deeply wounded by the fact that Vic Mason knew all about Reggie Pitt, but knew nothing about him—Handforth. It preyed upon Edward Oswald's mind throughout morning school. He was absent and dreamy, and more than once Mr. Crowell had to touch him up in no uncertain manner.

Indeed, Handforth was confined during the interval, and after that he received two batches of fifty lines for inattention. He only escaped a caning by the skin of his teeth. Irritated by these minor punishments, his temper was even more tried by the generous chipping of other Removites.

By the time lessons were over Handforth was in a thoroughly bad temper. And practically over nothing, too. Church and McClure could see the signs, and wisely refrained from saying much.

Handforth was human, the same as everybody else, and he was subject to these little fits of temper. Fortunately they were rare. He was usually one of the most genial of mortals, although, of course, he was always liable to flare out at the slightest provocation. These outbursts, however, were well-known, and generally caused amusement.

It was when Handforth got into a real bad temper that it was necessary to be wary. Curiously enough, an affair which

ought to have angered him frequently left him amused. His rare periods of sulky temper were generally due to absurdly trivial causes. That was Handforth all over.

After lessons he marched to Study D, and planted himself in front of the window, staring out across the West Square. His brow was black, and his eyes were glowering. The very fact that he had no actual cause for ill-humour only made him worse.

"Seen my footer boots?" asked McClure in a low voice. "We might as well get out on Little Side, Churchy—"

"Can't come just yet; I've got to pay a visit to old Crowell," said Church, opening the table drawer, and removing his neatly written lines. "By jingo, I'm glad these are done!"

He regarded the imposition with pride. He had put extra effort into those lines, because he couldn't afford to take any chances on a day like this. There was the match against Bannington Grammar School that afternoon, and Church was in the Junior Eleven. Mr. Crowell, like other Form-masters, displayed a lamentable indifference towards junior football. With the slightest excuse he would detain Church for the whole afternoon. So those lines were exceptionally good.

"It won't take you two minutes to hand 'em in," said McClure, with a wary glance at Handforth. "Buck up—"

"You'll stay where you are!" broke in Handforth curtly. "No footer practice, my lads. That rotten Mason may be looking on. Have nothing to do with him. He's no good!"

"Oh, cheese it, Handy!" said McClure. "Vic Mason's one of the most famous footballers in the country—"

"Yet he never heard of ME!" roared Handforth violently.

"Oh, well—"

"You're not going out— By George!" breathed Handforth, staring out of the window. "Look there! Look THERE!"

He pointed with a quivering finger, and Church and McClure half expected to see a dragon or some prehistoric monster rushing to the attack. As a matter of fact, the cause of Handforth's sudden outburst was merely Ezra Quirke, of the East House. The new boy was quite alone.

"I can't see anything," said Church staring.

"Quirke!" breathed Handforth thickly. "There he is!"

"Oh, Quirke!" said McClure. "What about him?"

"I'll show you what about him!"

Handforth made a dash for the door and rushed out. Church and McClure followed him. They reached the Triangle just as Ezra Quirke was appearing through the West Arch. It seemed that Handforth was

bent upon exploding some of his temper on Quirke.

The schoolboy magician was a queer-looking fellow. His face was excessively pale, and his eyes were sunken. He had long, sinuous hands, and there was an indefinable "something" else. He had the very appearance of a mystic. Mere contact with him was liable to produce an uncanny sensation.

Handforth strode up, grabbed Quirke by the shoulder, and spun him round. That action looked like trouble.

"I've been looking for you since last night!" said Handforth grimly. "What the dickens do you mean by dragging two of our chaps into your rotten study? What do you mean by enticing them into your den of mystery?"

Quirke shook himself free.

"You are needlessly violent," he said smoothly. "I have dragged nobody—I have enticed none. However, I presume you are referring to Hubbard and Long?"

"Yes, I am!"

"Then let me assure you that they joined my circle uninvited by me," said Quirke. "They were brought by others, more enlightened boys who had already become members of the circle."

"Circle?" snorted Handforth. "What circle?"

"It is merely a name for a little private society we are forming in the East House," said Quirke. "Some of the boys are foolishly calling it the Mystic Circle. That, let me tell you, is not my wish. The aim of the society is to bring enlightenment to the ignorant. It is my wish to dispel many of the shadows which now hover over you all."

Handforth was in no humour for talk of that kind.

"You jibbering idiot!" he roared. "You can't fool me with that stuff. Two of our chaps were caught in your net—and don't you ever touch 'em again. They're a pair of rotters, I know, but they belong to the Ancient House. And just you remember my warning."

"I fail to see that it is your concern," replied Quirke coldly. "These boys are not obliged to consult you before deciding—"

"Hands off the Ancient House!" bellowed Handforth furiously. "That's all I've got to say—hands off the Ancient House. You can convert as many idiots as you like in the East House—that's your affair!"

Quirke remained perfectly impassive.

"You are exciting yourself needlessly," he said calmly. "I am afraid you are venting your temper upon me without any actual cause, Handforth. When you are cooler I will invite you to attend my next meeting."

"You'll do WHAT?" gasped Handforth.

"I feel that you need enlightenment far more than any of the others," explained

Quirke. "It would indeed be a triumph if I could lead you into the ways of light—away from your present darkness—"

"Are you inviting me to one of your rotten meetings?" demanded Handforth.

"Not exactly. But later on, perhaps—"

"By George!" roared Handforth. "I've stood just about enough. You're going in the fountain, my lad. You need cooling off—that's what's the matter with you!"

At any other time Handforth would have laughed uproariously at Quirke's suggestion. But in his present mood he resorted to violence. He was always ready to punch a fellow on the nose, but just now he regarded such a prospect with sheer delight. He had to blow off steam somehow, and Quirke had provided the opportunity.

Biff!

Quirke expected the blow, and dodged. Instead of landing on his nose it caught him on the shoulder, and he swung round. Before he could regain his balance, Handforth had picked him up. Then he dashed towards the fountain, Quirke kicking and gasping.

"Steady, old man!" gasped Church. "You might be spotted—"

"Mind your own business!" snorted Handforth.

With one heave he pitched Ezra Quirke into the deep pool of the fountain. Quirke descended into the icy water with a terrific splash. Unfortunately he had secured a grip on Handforth's jacket, and he clung like a leech.

A second splash came on top of the first, and Church and McClure stood looking on in consternation as their leader followed his victim into the fountain.

CHAPTER VI.

ROUGH ON POOR OLD CHURCH.



WHAT-HO! The good old sea-lions and all that sort of thing!"

Archie Glenthorne, the dandy of the Remove, paused upon the Ancient House steps and adjusted his celebrated monocle. He was accompanied by Brent, his study-mate, and Nipper & Co. were just behind.

"Just having their midday dip, I suppose," grinned Brent.

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "At the same time, laddie, I regard the whole affair with horror. I mean to say, wallowing in the fountain pool, what? Somewhat detrimental to the old dig., as it were!"

They approached the fountain. By this time other juniors were crowding up, including Reggie Pitt & Co., and a number of Modern House fellows.

Handforth was just crawling out, and it cannot truthfully be said that his temper in any way was relieved or improved. If anything, he was rather more irritable than before. And when all is said and done, an unexpected soaking is not precisely the correct way to sweeten one's temper.

"He—he pulled me in, the rotter!" gurgled Handforth wetly.

"My dear chap, you absolutely asked for it!" said Pitt kindly. "I saw the whole thing, and my only regret is that I didn't have my camera handy. Why did you decide to give Quirke a bath? Was he dirty?"

"Never mind, let us forget the unfortunate affair," said Quirke, struggling out. "Handforth was in a temper, and I fear I inadvertently provoked him. If we hurry we may possibly avoid official notice."

"That's a good spirit, anyhow," said Boots, of the Fourth.

"I'm going to smash him!" panted Handforth fiercely. "He dragged me in deliberately—"

"Well, you chucked him in deliberately, didn't you?"

"That's got nothing to do with it!" stormed Handforth. "He invited me to one of his rotten meetings—"

"I say, come on!" interrupted Church urgently. "If a prefect or a master spots you, there'll be trouble. It's a marvellous thing you haven't been seen as it is. Grab him, Mac—indoors, quick!"

In spite of Handforth's protests, he was forcibly dragged towards the Ancient House. When Church and McClure liked, they could be very determined. They liked now. Almost before Handforth knew it, he was in his dormitory and his chums were pulling off his wet things.

"You'll only catch a cold if you stand about," panted Church. "Buck up!"

"Leave me alone!" howled Handforth aggressively. "Can't I change myself?"

"It wouldn't be a bad idea!" said McClure tartly. "You're not yourself this morning, anyhow! But we're talking about changing your clothes—"

"Lemme alone!" hooted Handforth.

His chums stood back and watched Handforth while he changed. Somehow they felt that it would be rather dangerous to leave him alone. His mood was even more violent than before. To be absolutely exact, he was in a most vicious temper. He was capable of almost anything.

But at last he had changed, and the dry clothing had a subtle effect. He was calmer, and there was not much fear of sudden violence. But there was an ugly glint in his usually pleasant eyes.

He was silent, too. Even when his chums spoke to him, he refused to reply. He was sullen and sulky. Church and McClure had a kind of feeling that they were on the

edge of a volcano. They were almost afraid to breathe.

Church slipped off at the first opportunity, having suddenly remembered that imposition. It was nearly time for luncheon, and Mr. Crowell was a stickler after exactitude. If Church didn't take the lines in before the bell rang, there might be trouble.

He reached Study D, and was just moving out with the im-po. in his hands when Handforth and McClure appeared.

"Who told you to go off like that?" demanded Handforth harshly.

"I only came for these lines, you ass!" said Church. "I've got to hand 'em to old Crowell before lunch."

"Oh, you have?" said Edward Oswald deliberately. "So old Crowell's more important than I am? You'll desert me for the sake of a rotten im-po.? Let's have a look!"

There was something in Handforth's attitude that caused Church to retreat.

"I say, chuck it!" he gasped. "Go easy, Handy! These lines took me an awful time—"

"Let's have a look!" repeated Handforth harshly.

"No fear! You might crumple—"

"By George!" thundered Handforth.

He leapt forward, grabbed the imposition out of Church's hand, and crumpled it appallingly in the process. Church gave a cry of agony as he saw this disaster, and he even turned pale.

"Look out!" he wailed. "You know what old Crowell is! He'll make me do 'em again if they're crumpled—"

"What about if they're torn up?" asked Handforth viciously.

"Look here, you idiot—"

"Like this!" said Handforth, deliberately tearing Church's beautiful imposition into shreds. "Do you think Crowell will like 'em now?"

Church looked on in dazed agony. McClure was too startled to make any comment. But Handforth enjoyed a moment of supreme bliss as he felt the pages tearing in his fingers. He felt quite capable of wrecking the study itself. Destruction of anything valuable was a pleasant pastime to him in his present evil temper.

"You've—you've torn 'em up!" panted Church dully.

"Exactly!" grinned Handforth. "Look pretty, don't they?"

He tossed the fragments into the air and turned aside. Church suddenly went red, and grabbed his leader by the arm. He swung him round with unusual violence.

"You—you cad!" he burst out passionately.

"Eh?" said Handforth, starting.

"You mean, contemptible rotter!" panted Church. "Just because you're in a temper,

you've torn up that im-po.! I didn't think you were such a cad, Handy!"

"For two pins I'll slaughter you!" roared Handforth.

"I don't care if you do!" retorted Church miserably. "I must have those lines—I must! There goes the bell, too!" he added, in anguish. "What am I going to do? Old Crowell will shove me in extra lesson this afternoon—and I'm on the list for the Grammar School match!"

"That means you'll be detained!" said Handforth. "Good job, too! They'll have to play a substitute! Detention's what you need, my lad! You can't play football, anyhow—you always were a dud!"

"Oh, you—you—"

Church's feelings were beyond words. Disappointment—anger—anguish—amazement—all fought for expression. And in the end he resorted to silent action. Words were utterly inadequate.

Crash!

With all the force within him, Church lunged out at his leader. The punch caught Handforth fairly on the nose, and he reeled back against the table. Church didn't wait to see what else happened. He strode out, and made straight for Mr. Crowell's study. And as it happened, the Remove master was just leaving the apartment, and they met in the corridor.

Church strove to calm himself, and to look normal. But Mr. Crowell could instantly see that something was wrong. Church was flushed and ruffled, and he was breathing hard.

"About—about those lines, sir," he began breathlessly.

"I was expecting you, Church," said Mr. Crowell. "I am glad to find that you have just saved your skin. Another minute, and I'm afraid—"

"I haven't got them, sir," burst out Church.

Mr. Crowell frowned.

"You haven't got them?" he repeated sharply. "Why not?"

"I did them, sir, but there was an accident," explained Church, trying to make his words sound convincing. "Honestly, sir! They got crumpled, and torn, and I couldn't bring 'em like that."

Mr. Crowell's frown deepened. He could be excused for discrediting Church's statement. He assumed that it was merely an excuse—and it sounded a very bad one, since a deliberate lie was implied.

If Church had adopted different tactics, he might have won Mr. Crowell over—for the Form-master wasn't half so bad as he was painted. But by saying that the im-po. had been done, and then torn up, he had wrecked every chance. It sounded a bit too thick.

"I am surprised, Church, that you should bring me such a ridiculous story," said Mr. Crowell angrily. "It is quite obvious that

you have not done the lines, and I shall detain you—"

"But I did do them, sir!" burst out Church desperately.

"Do not make matters worse by repeating that absurd statement!" interrupted Mr. Crowell. "You will attend extra lesson this afternoon, Church, and will be detained for the entire—"

"Please, sir!" pleaded Church. "I haven't told any lies—honour bright! I'm in the Eleven, sir—we're playing the Grammar School this afternoon! I don't mind doing five hundred lines to-morrow, if you'll let me play—"

"Nonsense!" snapped Mr. Crowell curtly. "You have neglected my orders, and you must pay the price. I am rather glad you will be deprived of your football match—since the experience may teach you a well-deserved lesson."

Mr. Crowell strode off, and Church leaned against the wall in abject misery. And a thought occurred to him—a thought which obtruded itself upon his burning anger against Handforth.

Ezra Quirke!

Although Handforth was undoubtedly the cause of this disaster, it had come about as a direct result of that affair with Quirke. He was always in it—always at the bottom of every piece of bad luck that happened! There was something uncanny about the persistence of these misfortunes.

CHAPTER VII.

HANDFORTH'S REMORSE—AND THE RESULT.



NICODEMUS TROTWOOD was chosen to fill the place unfortunately left

vacant on account of Church's detention. Nipper

was sorry to lose one of his halves—for Church was a keen, capable player.

However, Trotwood major was quite good in the half-back line, and made an excellent substitute. And there was nothing particularly urgent about this game. The Bannington Grammar School team was a good one, but the Saints were confident of an easy victory.

Nipper made no close inquiries concerning Church's unexpected detention. He knew of Handforth's ill-humour, and could easily guess the rest. Since luncheon, Edward Oswald had mooned off by himself. Even McClure had deserted him—for McClure, to tell the truth, had decided to stay in detention voluntarily, just to keep Church company. He wasn't playing in the match himself, anyhow, and he wanted to get right away from Edward Oswald. Just at present, McClure was at bitter enmity

with his leader. He had made up his mind that he and Church would clear out of Study D after tea. There were the makings of a serious split in the situation.

Alone, Handforth mooched about, convincing himself that everybody was conspiring against him. A small voice kept whispering that he was entirely to blame, and that he was a cad. And although he ignored the voice, it persisted.

As for Church, it served him right!

Handforth tenderly felt his nose as he thought of Church. The latter had delivered a powerful blow, and Edward Oswald's nose was not only tender, but somewhat swollen. There wasn't an ounce of remorse in Handforth's heart for having sentenced his chum to an afternoon's detention.

"You playing this afternoon, Handy?"

Handforth looked round as he heard the voice. Dick Hamilton strolled up—they were in the private road which encircled the school grounds. Handforth had been loitering up and down for some time.

"Eh?" he said. "Talking to me, Nipper?"

"What's wrong, Handy?" asked Nipper curiously. "I suppose you know the match starts in about five minutes, don't you? Do you want me to play a reserve in your place?"

Handforth started.

"Five minutes!" he ejaculated. "By George! I thought there was nearly an hour! Am I playing? Of course I'm playing, you ass! I'll be ready in two ticks! Are the Grammarians here?"

"They came ten minutes ago," said Nipper. "You'd better speed up."

Handforth dashed off, brought to his senses by the urgency of the case. The very thought of being left out of the match alarmed him. Things were bad enough already, without a disaster of that kind.

So, when the rival teams took the field, Handforth was in his usual place. Once, he scanned the ropes in the hope of seeing McClure. But McClure was nowhere within sight. The other juniors took no notice of the quarrel—they assumed that it was just one of the ordinary Study D scraps.

The St. Frank's Junior Eleven consisted of the following:

Handforth; Doyle, Burton; Kahn, De Valerie, Trotwood major; Grey, Boots, Nipper, Fullwood, Pitt.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood, the former cad of Study A, had proved himself such a vigorous forward that Nipper was playing him regularly. And Fullwood was proving worthy of the choice. He and Reggie Pitt made an ideal right wing. They formed one of the most persistent wings the Junior Eleven had ever possessed. There were brains at the back of all their movements.

The ropes were crowded with Removites and Fourth-Formers. Even Willy & Co., of the Third, condescended to look on. Willy

Handforth generally held that the only football worth watching was played by the Third Form. But as the Third had no match this afternoon, the fags honoured the Junior Eleven by taking up a solid position behind the home goal.

In the pavilion, Vic Mason was an interested spectator, too. He was accompanied by Mr. Clifford, the sports master, and Edgar Fenton, the captain of St. Frank's. The seniors had no match, either—although they were playing Helmford First Eleven on the morrow.

The game started rather slowly, but even so, it was some minutes before Handforth realised that the match was actually taking place. He was leaning against one of the goal-posts, a far-away expression in his eyes, lost in a reverie. In fact, it was his minor who woke him up.

"Going to sleep, Ted?" called Willy, from behind the goal. "Better look out—those Grammarians will take a pot-shot in a minute!"

Handforth started violently.

"By George!" he gasped. "Are they playing?"

"Did you hear that?" breathed Willy, clutching at Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon. "Are they playing? He didn't know it! And he's goalkeeper!"

"One of your major's little jokes!" grinned Juicy.

Fortunately for Edward Oswald, the other fags went upon the same assumption. They couldn't possibly believe that Handforth had really meant it. But it was an absolute fact.

Handforth was now watching the game, and he dismissed all the recent misadventures from his mind. His eyes followed the leather. An excellent pass gave the ball to one of the Grammarian forwards, and he sped on. Nicodemus Trotwood tackled, but failed to rob his opponent.

"My hat!" muttered Handforth. "Old Churchy wouldn't have made a bloomer like that! He ought to have been playing——"

The thought was a particularly uncomfortable one. But for that ill-tempered scene in Study D, Church would have been playing. It was all his fault—Handforth's! A wave of remorse swept over him.

For the last half-hour he had been convincing himself that he had been justified in all his actions. But that small voice wouldn't let him alone. He knew perfectly well that he had acted caddishly.

And suddenly his whole attitude changed. This was quite characteristic of him—he generally went from one extreme to the

other. And once having admitted his guilt, he was torn to the quick by grief and mortification. He was startled, too.

He was stunned by the realisation of his own contemptible behaviour. For the life of him, he couldn't understand what had possessed him. Poor old Church had done nothing—not a thing! And yet he was doomed to lose his place in the match, and languish in detention for the entire afternoon!

And this had been caused by Handforth's ugly temper! It wouldn't have been so bad if there had been a reason for his temper. But there was none—as Handforth himself could clearly see. He had acted the cad without any justification whatever.

"Poor old Church!" breathed Handforth huskily. "You rotter!" he added to himself. "You miserable worm! By George, I didn't know I could be such a rotten outsider!"

He was whole-hearted in his condemnation. He abused himself bitterly and roundly. But what was the use? It was too late now—the match was well on the way. And even McClure wasn't in sight! Of course, he was taking sides with Church, and couldn't be blamed, either!

Handforth pictured Church in the Form-room, in extra lesson—with Mr. Crowell reading a book with one eye, and keeping the other on the few unfortunates who were detained. There were always a certain number of delinquents in extra lesson every half-holiday. Quite possibly a prefect was on guard.

"Hi! Wake up, Handy!"

"Look out, you ass!"

"What's the matter with you?"

Handforth dimly heard the shouts, and he came to himself. He suddenly realised that he was supposed to be in the game. Something had evidently happened, but he wasn't quite sure what.

As a matter of fact, one of the Grammarian forwards had tricked the St. Frank's left-back, and was streaking for goal. And as Handforth seemed unaware of the coming peril, the numerous shouts were not without justification.

Slam!

Something went past Handforth into the net—it was far too swift for him to see. The spectators, however, were only aware of two facts—that the Grammarians were one up, and that Handforth had made not the slightest attempt to save. He had stood there, indifferent to his surroundings.

A perfect howl went up from the on-lookers.

"What—what was that?" gasped Handforth.

But he knew what it was now. Dazedly he turned and gazed at the leather in the corner of the net. His heart pumped madly, and he was filled with acute alarm. Not only Church was deprived of taking part in the game, but Handforth was a miserable failure!

ANSWERS

Every Saturday. Price 2d

CHAPTER VIII.

PROFESSIONAL OPINION.



A MAZEMENT was the chief sensation of the onlookers.

That shot had been a comparatively tame one. The Grammarian forward had finished quite weakly. With an open goal in front of him, he had delivered a moderate shot. Everybody had expected Handforth to deal with it contemptuously, in his usual manner. It was a shot that wouldn't have got past Handforth

chair? You absolutely gave that goal away! I've never seen such a thing in all my giddy life!"

The immediate spectators were waiting for Handforth to flare up; but he didn't. He was thoroughly subdued. The knowledge of his own failure came as a dreadful shock right on top of his remorse. He knew that Doyle's condemnation was thoroughly deserved, and he made no protest.

"Sorry!" he muttered. "I shall have to buck up."

He picked the ball out of the net, and kicked it to mid-field. The game was restarted brilliantly, and Handforth watched



Something went past Handforth into the net—it was too swift for him to see. The Grammarians were one up, and Handforth made not the slightest attempt to save. He stood there, indifferent to his surroundings.

even at practice, when he was notoriously careless.

Yet he had let it go by without attempting to save.

"Oh!"

"Goal, by jingo!"

"Handy, you ass, why didn't you stop it?"

"What's wrong?" panted Doyle, running up in consternation. "Why didn't you stop that shot, Handy?"

"I—I didn't see it!" muttered Handforth dazedly.

"Didn't see it!" gasped the back.

"I—I was thinking—"

"Thinking!" howled Doyle. "What do you think this is—a football field or an arm-

with the greatest anxiety. His relief was enormous when Fullwood and Pitt, working like a well-oiled piece of machinery, cut through the Grammarian defence. Their passing was so accurate, and so brainy, that the defence was at sixes-and-sevens.

At the last minute Pitt centred, and Nipper delivered a crashing first-time shot which a professional goalie would have failed to stop. St. Frank's had equalised, and Handforth breathed again.

"Goal!"

"Hurrah!"

"By jiminy!" ejaculated Vic Mason, in the pavilion. "That was pretty work! I didn't know these youngsters had it in 'em!"

"They're smart, aren't they?" asked Fenton.

"Smart isn't the word, Mr. Fenton," said the professional enthusiastically. "Who's the centre-forward?"

"Fellow named Hamilton—better known as Nipper."

"Glory! Not Mr. Nelson Lee's assistant?"

"That's the chap," said Fenton.

"Ye gods!" ejaculated Mason. "He can play football, that boy! And the wing, too—Pitt and the other youngster!"

"You mean Fullwood?" asked Mr. Clifford. "We're particularly proud of Fullwood, you know. He's never seriously played before this term, and he's already proving himself a keen forward."

"They'd beat many defences in the First Division," declared the International. "And do you mean to tell me, Mr. Fenton, that you don't play these youngsters in the First Eleven?" he went on, turning to the school captain.

"Well, no—"

"And yet you admit you're weak in the forward line!"

"That's our chief fault, I'm afraid," said Fenton. "But we've never called upon the Junior Eleven for players."

"Then why, in the name of goodness, haven't you?" demanded the new coach. "Are there any men in the First as good as Nipper or Pitt? Are there any forwards who could slice through the defence like these youngsters did five minutes ago?"

"No, we need some fast players," admitted Fenton.

"Then why not use these?"

"Well, they're juniors, and they're a bit small for senior football—"

"Rubbish!" interrupted Vic Mason.

"Pardon my bluntness, Mr. Fenton—but rubbish! Size doesn't matter a toss! What about Fanny Walden, of the 'Spurs? He was with the 'Spurs, anyhow. As for age, that's immaterial. It's skill you want—not size or age."

"By Jove, I believe you're right!" said Fenton thoughtfully. "It was the same with cricket, you know. We brought one or two juniors into the First Eleven, and they performed wonders. It might be a good idea to play Nipper and Pitt against Helmford to-morrow."

"A good idea!" echoed the professional. "It's the only thing to do! I'd suggest playing Fullwood in addition— But what's wrong with this goalkeeper?" he went on, frowning. "He doesn't seem to know his job at all!"

"Upon my word!" ejaculated Mr. Clifford. "Look at that!"

The Grammarians had made another break-away, and were on the offensive. It wasn't at all a dangerous raid, but Handforth seemed confused and awkward. He fisted out a weak shot, and it rebounded from one of the backs. The visiting outside-left nipped in and took a pot-shot. It was a hundred-to-one chance, and it skimmed

gracefully under the bar—although Handforth could have saved it easily had he been fully on the alert.

"Goal!" gasped Fenton. "Well, I'm hanged!"

"Ah; Butter-fingers!"

"Go home, Handy!"

"You're no good!"

"That's twice you've muffed!"

These shouts of scorn—to say nothing of a hundred others—hit Handforth like a solid blow. He was such a good goalkeeper normally, and he was so accustomed to shouts of praise, that this universal condemnation stunned him. And it stunned him trebly because he knew he deserved it.

"I say, old man, aren't you feeling well?" asked Nipper, running up. "If you're unfit, I'll put Doyle in goal—"

"I'm all right!" muttered Handforth. "Awfully sorry, Nipper—I'll buck up. Had a row with Church, you know—feeling a bit rotten about it. I'll look alive for the rest of the game."

"You'd better!" said Nipper sharply. "This is neither the time nor the place for thinking about quarrels! You're playing football now—and unless you can show some decent form, you'd better get off!"

Nipper couldn't help speaking plainly. He felt thoroughly annoyed. The Grammarians ought not to have scored a single goal. With any capable goalkeeping, the total would have been one—nil. Handforth was simply giving the game away.

It was all the more exasperating because the ex-Aston Villa man was in the pavilion, watching. And Nipper had been particularly anxious to win this match by a big margin—just to show the new coach what the Junior Eleven could do.

All the St. Frank's players were exasperated, for it was now necessary for them to make up for Handforth's inexplicable deficiency. The game continued on totally unexpected lines. For the Grammarians were heartened by their second goal, and were playing above their usual form in consequence.

"I'm surprised the juniors have no better goalkeeper," remarked Vic Mason, shaking his head. "That fellow's hopeless."

"There's something wrong with Handforth this afternoon," declared Fenton. "He's usually as hot as mustard—the best goalie the juniors have ever had. Consistent, too—he hasn't missed a match as far as I can remember. He's completely off form to-day."

The professional shook his head.

"I can't imagine him being any different," he said. "He looks clumsy, awkward and incapable. He ought to be given a rest."

If Handforth could have heard those words he would have writhed. He, who had been indignant because Vic Mason hadn't heard of him. In fact, his ill-humour could be timed from that unfortunate moment. And now, in front of the professional, he was putting up an appallingly weak display.

He was so worried that he found it impossible to concentrate. He wanted to find Church and make things right. He was bursting to admit himself wrong. It was one of Handforth's good traits, that he would apologise openly if he was convinced that he had acted wrongly. But he wanted to get it over without any delay; he couldn't wait.

His failure, too, preyed on his mind.

Although he concentrated on the game he was nervous and jumpy. He seemed to be under a kind of spell, and nothing went right. For the first time in his football career he was actually anxious when any kind of attack developed. As a general rule, he dealt with any and every shot coolly and with excellent judgment.

But this afternoon his judgment was faulty, and his coolness had vanished. He was a mass of nerves. The result was inevitable.

Just before half-time there was a scramble in front of the home goal. Handforth dashed out recklessly, a thing he would never have done at any other time. And while he was being charged by one Grammarian forward, another hustled the ball into the net. It was all a scramble, and it was over in no time.

But the Grammarians had scored again.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BAD LUCK CONTINUES.



MR. CROWELL closed his book and glanced at his watch.

Then he adjusted his glasses, and looked at the four or five weary juniors who were seated in the front row of desks. The Remove Form-room was dreary and desolate with so few occupants.

"You have all worked hard, and have given me no trouble this afternoon," said Mr. Crowell pleasantly. "There is another hour to go yet, but perhaps—"

"Yes, sir?" chorussed the unfortunates eagerly.

"But perhaps I will be unusually lenient," said Mr. Crowell genially. "In fact, providing you dismiss quietly, with no unseemly commotion, you may consider yourselves at liberty."

"Oh, thanks awfully, sir!"

"You're a brick, sir!"

The released prisoners left the Form-room like shadows, creeping gingerly, lest Mr. Crowell should change his mind. Church and McClure were particularly pleased. McClure had kept his promise, and had gone into extra lessons with Church. And now they made a beeline for Little Side.

"Still in time to see twenty minutes of the game," said Church eagerly. "Good old Crowell! He's getting almost human in his old age. Wonder how the game's going? I'll bet the Grammarians are three down!"

"Three at least," agreed McClure. "By jingo! Did you hear that yell just now? Let's buck up!"

They fairly raced past the Junior Wing of the School House, and dashed through the double gates which led across the private road to Little Side. A considerable crowd was watching the junior game.

Church had forgotten his bitter anger against Handforth by now; he wasn't the kind of fellow to bear animosity against anyone. And he was always ready to make excuses for the impulsive Edward Oswald.

"Handy's all right at heart," Church had confided to McClure during detention. "Everybody's liable to get into a temper once in a while, and everything seemed to go wrong with him to-day. I'm not going to keep it up."

So Church came on to Little Side with all the ill-feeling forgotten. At a time like this he remembered Handforth's good qualities, his generosity, his genuine affection for his chums. This latter was frequently revealed in a somewhat curious way, but Church and McClure knew that it existed.

"How's the game going?" asked McClure eagerly, as the hustled up to the ropes.

William Napoleon Browne, of the Fifth, glanced round and shook his head sadly. The lanky senior was grave.

"Steel your heart, brother McClure," he said sorrowfully. "Much as I hate to deliver these words, I fear your youthful friends are up to the eyebrows in the morass. In other words, in most expressive terms, the Junior Eleven is splashing wearily about in the mulligatawny."

"Aren't we winning?" asked Church, aghast.

Browne gave a hollow laugh.

"If you call it winning to be three goals down—yes," he replied.

"Three goals down!" gasped McClure.

"Such, brother, is the bad news."

"But it's impossible!" roared Church. "You Fifth Form fathead, I don't believe you. You're trying to pull my leg. Why, the Grammarians are weak this term—everybody knows it. We expected to wipe 'em up."

Browne shrugged his shoulders.

"How often have I not brainily observed that expectation and realisation are two distinctly different propositions?" he observed, appealing to the atmosphere. "I can assure you, Brother Church, that it stabs me to the very quick, but my news is absolutely official—copyright by Reuter,

the Press Association, the Central News—"

"You gassing ass!" snorted Church. "You're spoofing us!"

"Such is the reward for being truthful," sighed Browne, turning to Stevens, his faithful chum. "Come, Brother Horace, let us away from this unhappy atmosphere. The pain is too great for me to bear."

Within a few moments Church and McClure knew that the game was indeed in a parlous condition. The exact score was 4-1, and it was the Grammarians who had scored the four!

The Saints were now pressing hard, and doing all the attacking. But the visitors, thoroughly satisfied with their big lead, were concentrating entirely upon defence. Even the forwards were assisting the half-backs in keeping the Saints out. The Grammarians were practically besieged in their own half, but it seemed impossible to smash down their determined defence.

The latter was quite strong, and always had been. It was in the forward line that the visitors were weak. And under any ordinary circumstances they wouldn't have scored at all. Edward Oswald Handforth's goalkeeping was solely to blame for the catastrophe.

Two of the goals he had simply given away, and the other two he could have saved with any ordinary ability. The Grammarians hadn't delivered one really stinging shot. All their scoring had resulted from Handforth's inexplicable failure.

There were two important results from this position. Firstly, the visiting team was encouraged to do deeds of valiance which weren't really in them, and secondly, they were able to concentrate their defence, thus making the home team's work trebly hard.

Attack after attack developed. The St. Frank's forwards worked magnificently, and the Grammarians goal was in constant peril. But in some uncanny way it seemed to be charmed.

And then, ten minutes before the final whistle, Fullwood scored with a glorious shot from an almost impossible angle.

It had a bad effect. The Grammarians lost some of their confidence, and the Saints pressed harder than ever. Handforth by now was a mere spectator, for his half of the field was practically deserted.

The result was almost inevitable. Just before the finish Reggie Pitt ran clean in and scored by an individual effort. But the time was too brief. Before any further attack could develop the whistle blew.

Three-four! St. Frank's had lost by one goal!

"Splendid!" said Victor Mason

enthusiastically. "Honestly, Mr. Fenton, I didn't expect to see such finished football as this in a Junior School match. These young forwards are superb."

Fenton frowned.

"The youngsters ought to have won this match easily," he said. "The Grammarians were frightfully weak in attack, and only Handforth's atrocious goalkeeping can be blamed for this result."

"He's certainly no good," agreed the professional.

On the field, Nipper was talking to Handforth very quietly but very firmly.

"I'm sorry, old man, but you'll have to stand down after this," he was saying. "We shall have to give somebody else a chance."

Edward Oswald nodded miserably.

"Of course," he agreed. "I was rotten—absolutely frightful. I admit it; I can't do anything else. By George! I don't know how the dickens I let those shots through, you know."

"Nobody else can make it out, either," replied Nipper. "But I can't afford to take any more chances, Handy. I'm afraid I can't include you in the list for Saturday's match against Redcliffe."

"I shall be all right by Saturday—"

"All the same, I shall have to drop you," interrupted Nipper grimly. "After to-day's display, old son, I couldn't possibly include you in the team again. Sorry, but there it is."

He walked off, and Handforth compressed his lips. He made no protest, because he knew that he deserved the rebuke. But it hurt him deeply. He wasn't so devoid of feeling as many fellows believed. And he had grown so accustomed to having his goalkeeping praised that this dismissal from the team stunned him.

The worst of it was, he knew his failure was only temporary—a condition caused by his remorse on account of Church. Once that affair was put right, he would be himself again. And when the next big match came round he would be up to his old form. But what was the use? He was practically kicked out of the team now, and it might be weeks before he regained his place.

It was just one long string of bad luck, and even the school was sharing it now, for this unnecessarily lost match was not merely a personal affair. Handforth had brought trouble on the whole team. And it came to him as a bit of a shock that Ezra Quirke was in the background. Indirectly the mysterious new boy was behind all this.

And just as Handforth was thinking these things he caught sight of Church and McClure.

CHAPTER X.

MORE MISFORTUNES.



"HARD luck, old man!" said Church awkwardly.

He was particularly anxious to be his usual self, in order to make Handforth comfortable. But he only succeeded in turning red, and looking thoroughly self-conscious.

"Hard luck—yes!" replied Handforth gruffly. "Hard luck for the school! I'm kicked out of the team—and I deserve it!"

"Kicked out of the team!" said Church and McClure in one voice.

"Nipper gave me my marching orders five minutes ago."

"He's mad!" said McClure. "You're our best goalie—"

"I'm the rottenest goalie that ever walked on a football field," interrupted Handforth tensely. "You ought to have seen me in the first half. You ought to have seen me, I say. I was rotten—awful. If Nipper hadn't booted me out of the team he wouldn't be any skipper."

Such frank admission of failure from Handforth was rather startling.

"And I deserved all I got!" he went on. "I say, Church, old man, why the dickens are you speaking to me? It's a wonder you don't cut me dead!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!"

"I'm a rotter; I acted like a cad!" went on Handforth, glaring at Church fiercely. "I'm blessed if I can understand myself. Tearing up your lines like that, you know; it was a ghastly thing to do. If you'd been playing—"

"Cheese it, Handy!" muttered Church. "That's all over now."

"If you can ever forgive me, old man!"

"I've forgotten it," said Church gruffly. "I say, let's talk about something else. We don't want to keep these things up, do we?"

"I'm awfully sorry, honestly I am," said Handforth, gripping Church's arm and pressing it. "I was a beast, and I'd like to do something to make up for it. Still, I've been punished," he went on bitterly. "I made a hopeless mess of things, and I'm chucked out of the team. It serves me right!"

"I expect Nipper will change his mind."

"I don't want him to!" interrupted Handforth. "After what happened this afternoon my place is off the field, and not on it. It'll be a lesson to me not to get into such rotten tempers."

"We're all liable to slip now and again," said McClure.

"Oh, are we?" roared Handforth. "That's all the more reason we ought to hold ourselves in check! I admire any chap with

a temper—he isn't worth his salt if he hasn't got a temper! But if he can't keep it under control he's a giddy weakling! I'm a weakling," he went on firmly. "At least, I was a weakling this morning!"

"What about tea?" asked Church gently.

But Handforth wasn't going to be put off so easily. He was thoroughly enjoying himself. The average fellow would have mumbled out some sort of regret, and let it go at that. But Handforth wasn't the average fellow. When he had transgressed, and when he fully realised it, it positively uplifted him to confess his faults.

"It all started with that chap Vic Mason," he went on. "I got into a temper because he hadn't heard of me. What rot! He's heard of me now all right—he's seen me, too! By George, and he's our new coach! I can see myself getting back in the team when I'm about ninety!"

"It's an awful pity he was watching," said Church, with concern.

Handforth laughed mirthlessly.

"It was the finest thing in the world!" he retorted. "That Aston Villa chap knows what kind of a footballer I am now! There's Quirke, too—I got worse when he dragged me into the fountain this morning. Then old Crowell went for me in the Form-room—"

"Everything happened to upset you, old man," interrupted Church gently. "But it's all finished with now, and we're pals again. Let's forget all about it, and go indoors for tea."

"Might as well, I suppose," agreed Handforth reluctantly. "But I can't help thinking about Quirke. I'm not superstitious, but there's something rummy about all this bad luck. It's spreading."

"Oh, it's only coincidence—"

"Don't you believe it, Mac!" interrupted Edward Oswald. "Everything's been going wrong ever since that beggar came here! It's been one long string of misfortunes! There'll be something else soon. You mark my words—bad luck will dog us while Quirke's here!"

Church and McClure were certainly astonished. Handforth was the last fellow in the world they would have suspected of making such remarks. He had a wholesome contempt for superstitions and the occult. Yet he was practically accusing Ezra Quirke of causing all manner of uncanny misfortunes.

The chums of Study D walked towards the Triangle, and Church and McClure stated their intention of getting tea ready while Handforth changed. They were all feeling happy again—for even Handforth gained a certain amount of satisfaction from his ill-luck. This feeling would pass, of course, and in due time he would become righteously indignant at being dropped from the team.

"Shan't be more than five minutes," he said, as they paused in the Ancient House

lobby. "Get something special for tea, you chaps. A glass tongue, or salmon, or something——"

"Yes, but——" began Church awkwardly.

"No cash?" said Handforth. "That's all right—tell Mrs. Hake I'll settle up after tea—I don't carry money in these togs!"

He went upstairs, and Church and McClure went out again into the Triangle, and made for the school shop, which was tucked away in a corner near the chapel, surrounded by trees.

Mrs. Hake was quite agreeable. There were many fellows she wouldn't allow credit to, but Handforth was different. He had never been known to fail in a promise, and his money was always certain.

Returning with the spoils, Church and McClure went briskly round the Remove Passage, their faces aglow. They met Dick Hamilton and Tommy Watson just outside the door of Study C.

"Hallo! You seem pleased over something!" said Watson bluntly.

"I say, Nipper!" exclaimed Church, ignoring Tommy's remark. "What about Handy? He wasn't himself this afternoon, you know—and everybody's liable to be off colour——"

"I can forgive a chap for being off colour," said Nipper grimly. "But Handy was worse than a kindergarten infant!"

"He was worrying about me," explained Church. "We had a row this morning, and——"

"Yes, I know all about it," interrupted Dick. "It's a good thing I know Handy's little ways. I expect he'll be all right by Saturday."

"And will you put him in the team again?" asked McClure quickly.

"No fear!" replied Nipper promptly. "He's got to have his lesson—and this is in confidence, remember. He'll probably get his place back next week, but not before. And in future I shall be jolly careful to see that he's in a good temper on match days!"

Church and McClure felt relieved, and they assured Nipper that they wouldn't "let on." They marched into Study D, and practically fell over themselves in getting out again, their packages flying in all directions.

"What — what's happened?" gasped Church frantically.

"The study's on fire!" yelled McClure. "Quick! Get the hose! Hi, you chaps! Lend a hand here! My only hat!"

They backed away, choking. Masses of thick smoke were rolling out of Study D in dense volumes. The interior of the room was invisible. There was nothing but a great pall.

Nipper & Co. and a number of other fellows crowded up, and there were one or two shouts of "Fire!" In fact, but for Dick's prompt action, there might have been a panic.

"Stop that!" he shouted swiftly. "It's only smoke! The chimney's blocked up, I expect! Come on—let's make sure!"

He plunged into Study D, with Church and McClure close behind him. While Nipper made for the window, Church and McClure approached the fireplace. The window was flung open, and the sudden current of air had an immediate effect. The masses of smoke rolled out in packed clouds.

"Hop out of the window, Church, and say it's all right if anybody comes running up," said Nipper briskly. "We'll have the school fire brigade out if we're not careful. It's only a choked chimney!"

Within two minutes the room was comparatively clear, and the cause of the trouble could be seen. The entire fender was choking with soot—black masses of smouldering soot which sent out clouds of smoke. It had evidently fallen down the chimney at least an hour earlier, and had been slowly burning in the fireplace.

The result was appalling.

Every inch of the study was coated with soot—books, papers, furniture—every tiny thing—was smothered. It would take hours to clean up, and even then the furniture would be partially ruined, and all the personal belongings of Handforth & Co. would show the signs of the catastrophe.

"It's a mystery to me!" said Nipper, as he frowned into the fireplace. "This building's practically new—the chimney hasn't been used. How on earth did all this soot come down?"

"Somebody's idea of a jape, perhaps?" suggested Watson.

"That wouldn't be a jape—it would be a vindictive outrage," said Nipper. "And there's nobody at enmity with these chaps. No, it must have been caused by something else—a faulty chimney, probably."

"Great pip! What's all this?"

Handforth stood in the doorway, aghast. He had just come down, bright and cheerful, expecting to find tea ready. The spectacle he actually saw staggered him. He came into the study and looked round dazedly.

"What's happened?" he asked blankly.

Church and McClure explained. And, gradually, Handforth's expression altered. He compressed his lips, and he nodded slowly.

"I'm not surprised!" he said grimly.

"You know who did it?" asked Nipper.

"Quirke!" replied Handforth.

"But my dear chap——"

"I don't mean Quirke actually shoved the soot down the chimney, but it's his influence," said Edward Oswald. "Didn't I say we'd have some more bad luck?" he demanded, turning to his chums. "This is only the beginning! It's one long string of misfortunes! I'm not surprised in the least!"

CHAPTER XI.

REGGIE PITT'S GREAT IDEA.



"COINCIDENCE!" said Nipper briefly. "Yes, but—" "Nothing but coincidence, you ass," insisted Dick. "I don't believe in all these wild yarns. You're not going to tell me that a chap like Quirke can wave his hand and bring misfortune on the school!"

"Oh, well, it's jolly rummy—that's all," said Cecil de Valerie. "Ever since Quirke's been here we've had these troubles. And to-day we've lost a game that we ought to have won hands down."

"Don't you call that bad luck?" asked Watson.

"My dear idiots, there's a perfectly logical explanation," smiled Nipper. "Handforth was off colour—"

"Oh, it's easy enough to say that. But why was he off colour?" interrupted Hubbard. "Because of Quirke! And look what happened in Study D! There's something uncanny about all this bad luck! I shall take more notice of Quirke and his superstitions in future! He told us what would happen if we put boots on the table, and opened umbrellas indoors!"

"And we did it on purpose, too—we defied him!" said Hubbard. "And we're getting all this bad luck! It's too transparent to be ignored!"

The Removites were collected round the cheery fire in the Ancient House common-room. Tea was over, and outside the October night was dark and cold. It was very cosy in the well-lit common-room.

And Nipper was slightly concerned. In his own level-headed fashion he was convinced that all the recent events had a logical explanation. Even if Quirke was indirectly responsible, the other fellows had brought the misfortunes on themselves, by a process of auto-suggestion.

"Take Handforth, for example," argued Nipper. "He made a mess of things this afternoon, and you say that Quirke is responsible—"

"He cast a spell over Handy!" said Hubbard.

"You babbling ass!" grinned Nipper. "You must have been reading fairy tales! This isn't the age of witchcraft!"

"Well, it's jolly queer—"

"It's as simple as A B C," interrupted Dick. "Handy was irritable this morning; he had had a row with Church, and during the game he was preoccupied. There's the explanation in a nutshell."

"What about Kenmore?" asked De Valerie.

Nipper looked more thoughtful.

"I'll admit there's something queer about that affair," he replied. "Kenmore went temporarily blind, and thought he heard



They marched into Study D, and practically fell over themselves in getting out again, their packages flying in all directions.

voices in the Triangle. But there's no evidence that Quirke had a hand in it—"

"Kenmore smashed Quirke's study up, and Quirke said that the Unseen Powers would take revenge," interrupted Hart. "Dash it all, I'm beginning to believe that Quirke is something more than a giddy conjuror! Anyhow, I'm going to steer clear of him!"

"By jings! Same here!" said Jerry Dodd, nodding. "I'm not superstitious, but I believe in the open air! None of these secret meetings for me! They say that Quirke is holding regular seances over in the East House!"

"There's one on to-night," said De Valerie.

"Aw, gee! You guys make me tired!" said Adams, lounging up. "I guess that bird is a jinx, sure enough. He's hoodoo! I'm handing it to you that I've got a line on him. He won't pull any of that stuff on me. No, sir."

"You think he's responsible for all the bad luck?" asked Nipper.

"You said a faceful!" nodded the American boy. "I've met guys of that sort over in the States. Say, he'd been run out of town in no time if he started that bunk over home!"

"Bunk?" asked Watson. "But I thought you believed in him?"

"Where do you get that stuff?" asked Adams. "He's a hoodoo, I tell you—which means he's unlucky. There's no wizardry about him, I guess, but it's best to leave a bird like that alone."

Adams was somewhat contradictory. He wanted the others to believe that he was contemptuous of Quirke—but, actually, he was half-inclined to believe in the "spell" which Quirke had cast upon the school.

At this point in the argument two visitors arrived—Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey, of the West House. And they were soon drawn into the discussion.

"I've been thinking about Quirke," said Reggie, after he had listened for a few minutes. "Get ready, you chaps—hold yourselves firmly by the shoulders, and stand tight. I've got an idea."

"Wonders will never cease!" said De Valerie, grinning.

"Why aren't we organising some sort of opposition?" demanded Pitt. "Quirke has formed a sort of society already—an Occult Research Club. He's got plenty of members, too!"

"The thing ought to be squashed," said Grey. "It's unhealthy."

"The more unhealthy it is, the more difficult to squash!" said Reggie wisely. "That's the way of things in this sad life! And the very way to make it thrive is to try to squash it. Look at alcohol in America, for example. Under Prohibition, there's more drinking than ever!"

"Say, can that dope!" growled Adams.

"Sorry!" grinned Pitt. "But you know the argument, don't you? I'm just explaining that we couldn't do worse than squash this Occult Club. It's the very way to strengthen it. And it'll be ten times more difficult to deal with then, because it'll become a sort of secret society."

"The boy has brains!" said Nipper, nodding. "He's dead right."

"But what's he leading up to?" asked De Valerie.

"Ridicule is the only cure for Quirke's bunkum," explained Reggie. "It's more effective than any methods of violence. My idea is to form a rival club. We'll call it the Club of Thirteen."

"That confines us to thirteen members," said Nipper.

"All the better," replied Reggie. "Thirteen will be quite enough—and it'll be more exclusive. I suggest that thirteen of us get together, and defy every superstition that's known! Get the idea? We'll make a regular practice of it. Ten times a day we'll walk under ladders, and spill salt, and do things that mean bad luck."

Nipper chuckled.

"It's a pretty good scheme," he admitted. "You can count me in that club, Reggie."

"Same here!" said Handforth. "I'll be the President, if you like!"

He had just come into the common-room with Church and McClure, and had listened with interest. He hadn't wanted to come at all, but his chums had persuaded him that it would look better.

"Good old Handy!" said Reggie Pitt. "If it's all the same to you, I think I'll be the Chairman. We shall have to get together, and discuss this thing more thoroughly. There are tons of stunts we can work—and we'll show the school what we think of these dotty superstitions!"

"Jolly good!" said Handforth. "Why not start the club to-night?"

"Well I'm jiggered!" ejaculated Church. "Not two hours ago you were saying that Quirke was responsible for all the bad luck! You said he cast a spell over the school! And now you want to join this Thirteen Club."

"Nothing very surprising in that, is there?" chuckled Pitt. "Handy always changes his opinions as quickly as a chameleon changes his colour!"

"As a matter of fact, I've been thinking," said Handforth firmly. "I don't actually believe in Quirke's rot, but it's no good fighting against him. It only means more bad luck. The best way is to start this club, and defy him. Let him do his worst! Then we shall know where we are!"

The discussion went on, and although nothing came of it that evening, the suggestion had taken root. Reggie Pitt was quite keen, and he was determined to get the club going at the earliest possible moment.

In the meantime, Quirke's Occult Research Society was holding another meeting. It was astonishing how many converts Quirke had made. Only two days earlier he had been laughed at, and the juniors had heaped scorn upon his head. But now there were quite a number of fellows ready to go to his mysterious meetings.

Hubbard and Long, of the Ancient House, were two of the latest recruits—but they took great care to keep their movements secret.

At seven-thirty they left Study B. and sneaked out into the Triangle. Nobody saw them go, and they made straight for the East House.

"Good!" murmured Hubbard. "We dodged out in fine style. I was afraid of that interfering beast, Handforth! If he knew a word about this he'd smash us up before letting us go across!"

"I say, do you think we'd better go?" asked Teddy Long nervously. "They say there's going to be something special to-night. Quirke's a queer beggar—he gives me the creeps! Perhaps we'd better not—"

"You funk!" interrupted Hubbard tartly. "Of course we're going! The more weird it

is, the better! I believe in the chap—I'd bet anything he's got uncanny powers!"

"Look!" breathed Long. "Oh, my hat, what's that?"

He pointed upwards, and Hubbard started.

CHAPTER XII.

THE STUDY OF MYSTERY.



OVERHEAD, the night sky was dull and cloudy.

Something had swooped down over the two juniors as they approached the East House. It was silent and mysterious, and Hubbard only just caught a glimpse of wide-spread wings—although he fancied he saw two luminous eyes.

"Great Scott! That ghastly owl!" he muttered.

"I knew it was!" whispered Long. "I say, let's chuck it!"

"Not likely!" retorted Hubbard.

At the same time, he spoke unsteadily. He had seen that owl on Ezra Quirke's shoulder, and it hadn't seemed so weird then. But it was unquestionably a queer kind of pet for any schoolboy to own. There was something even more remarkable about the owl.

Quirke never kept it confined—he never restricted its liberty. Its home was somewhere at the top of the East House, and it seldom appeared except at night time. And when Quirke gave a peculiar cry, the owl would come swooping down on the instant—obeying the call of its master.

The fellows had never heard of an owl which could be trained so perfectly as this. They didn't believe it possible—and this alone added strength to Quirke's mysticism. It was felt that he had some unseen power over that ugly bird of prey.

Hubbard and Long continued their walk, and saw no more of that hovering shape in the sky. They entered the East House, and found Skelton and Ellmore just inside the lobby. These juniors belonged to the Modern House, and they regarded Hubbard and Long rather curiously.

"Is it time yet?" asked Skelton hesitatingly.

He had been at one of the previous meetings in Quirke's study, and was just the type of fellow to be drawn into an Occult Society. He was cranky and extreme, and something of a visionary. His only chum in the Fourth was Eugene Ellmore—and Ellmore himself was a studious, absent-minded, inoffensive junior.

"Yes, we're just going in," said Hubbard. "It's past the half-hour."

"I've brought Ellmore along this time,"

exclaimed Skelton. "He didn't want to come, but it'll do him good."

"Personally, I think it is all nonsense," said Ellmore, shaking his head. "I don't believe in this spiritualism. I've read deeply on the subject——"

"But it isn't spiritualism," interrupted Skelton. "Quirke doesn't claim to be a spiritualist, either. He's a magician."

"In that case, it is merely trickery," said Ellmore mildly.

"There are two kinds of magicians," put in Hubbard. "The stage type is a fake—and let's everybody know it. But Quirke's a genuine magician—he does things that can't be accounted for by any scientific reasoning. That crystal of his, too——"

"We needn't discuss the subject here," interrupted Skelton, as a door banged somewhere. "Besides, we shall be late."

They went along towards the Fourth Form passage, and Teddy Long was thoroughly unnerved. At the same time, he was thrilled. He was every kind of a funk, but he thought it was big and important to become a member of Quirke's mystical club. He gathered his few shreds of courage, and swore that he would see the affair through.

Quirke's study was No. 20, at the extreme end of the passage, where there was a kind of dead end. The new boy was glad of this, since it meant greater privacy—and there was a sharp turn in the passage just there, too.

The four juniors reached this turn, and paused. There was usually a bright electric light at the end, but now it had been shaded until it was a mere dim glow. Quirke was wise. That mere glow of light added an air of mystery to the study-approach.

As the quartette moved forward, a figure loomed out of the gloom.

"Oh!" breathed Teddy Long, with a kind of yelp.

It was Quirke. Even under normal conditions, he looked strange enough. But in this extreme dimness he was positively unearthly. His deadly pallor, his long, sinuous fingers—his staring eyes—these were the things which one saw most prominently. He looked like some ghost as he came silently forward.

"Welcome!" he said softly. "There are others already here!"

"You gave me a turn, you ass!" muttered Hubbard. "What's the idea of nearly blotting that light out?"

"The Unseen Elements are unfriendly towards light," replied Quirke.

Dimly, his study door loomed on the left, with its neatly painted "20" on the upper half. Quirke opened the door, and the new arrivals passed in. Within the room, all was mysterious.

Black draperies were hanging from the walls—even the ceiling was concealed by them. One solitary shaded light glowed.

and there was a faint smell of burning incense in the air. Several dim figures were seated in chairs, and there were other chairs empty. The newcomers tip-toed in—for the very atmosphere of the place warned them that noise of any kind was taboo.

The door was closed, and the four juniors sat down. Quirke remained outside—waiting to welcome two or three more expected visitors.

"Hallo! You Ancient House chaps here again?" said one of the dim figures on the other side of the draped chamber. "Quirke's getting on! He'll have to enlarge his quarters at this rate!"

The speaker was Merrill, of Study 15. Marriott and Snipe were with him. Near by were Clifton and Simmons. Practically all the "occult researchers" were fellows of no particular account. But it was this minority of nonentities which could exert a great deal of influence in the school. It is always curious how the least important of beings can cause big upheavals.

"Who else is coming?" asked Hubbard.

"Tucker and Canham, of the West House, I think," said Clifton.

"Then all Houses will be represented here," remarked Skelton thoughtfully. "That is distinctly to the good. It is better to have a representative meeting. Let us hope we gain other supporters in the near future. I should like this movement to spread."

The door opened, and three figures entered—Timothy Tucker and Robert Canham, of the West House, and Ezra Quirke. The latter closed the door softly, and turned the key.

"We are all here now," he murmured. "Let me urge you to make absolutely no noise. It will be better, indeed, if you speak only in whispers—and better still if you do not speak at all. I am bent upon trying some difficult experiments this evening, and silence is essential."

"My dear sir, quite so!" said Tucker, blinking. "At the same time, I disagree with your practices and theories. These problems of metaphysics are intriguing, but I totally repudiate the fundamental basis of your psychological argument. I maintain that everything in this world is material, and that occult phantasms are a mere mental—"

"Wait until Quirke's done!" interrupted Hubbard gruffly. "Dry up, T.T.! We don't want any of your gas here!"

"Really, my dear sir—"

"It is a matter of regret that you should be negative," put in Quirke gently. "Any negative effect at my meetings is detrimental to the experiment. More than anything else, I desire a positive atmosphere."

T.T. nodded and smiled.

"In that case, my dear sir, I will certainly remain neutral," he beamed. "It is

far from my desire to influence the negative sense at this meeting. I will remain neutral—certainly, I will remain neutral. And in the event of my becoming convinced—"

"Another word, my son, and you'll go out on your neck!" interrupted Canham. "I brought you here, and I'm responsible for you! Dry up!"

Tucker subsided, mildly astonished. And Quirke pulled one of the drapings aside, and vanished. His movements were so silent that he was more like a ghost than ever.

"What's behind these hangings?" breathed Ellmore.

"Nothing!" replied Clifton. "I looked. I thought there might be some trick wires and things, but there's nothing at all."

Quirke reappeared, and his aspect was now more grotesque than ever, for he was wearing a kind of black cloak, and on his shoulder sat the uncanny looking owl. The effect on the audience was subtle. Somehow, they felt more in the atmosphere of mysticism.

Quirke took his seat well in front of the circle of "researchers," and he was clear of all the surrounding draperies. Before him stood a quaint Moorish stool, and with a light touch he removed a black cloth, revealing the gleaming, glowing crystal. The audience watched breathlessly. This was no mere globe of glass. The crystal seemed to burn with inward fires.

"What are you going to do?" breathed Clifton.

"Wait!" murmured Ezra Quirke. "This evening the elements are friendly. I am convinced that our experiments will meet with great success."

CHAPTER XIII.

WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE MEANS BUSINESS.



WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE, of the Fifth, stretched himself luxuriously, and rose from his chair.

"I trust, Brother Horace, that your weary labours are nearing an end?" he asked concernedly. "Do not disappoint me—"

"Just finished!" said Stevens. "Don't bother now, old man. Buzz along to the Common-room and I'll follow in five minutes."

The pair were in the study in the Fifth Form passage of the Ancient House. Browne smiled and shook his head.

"Another of your little errors, Brother Horace," he observed. "I fear that you are prone to take things for granted. The Common-room is no place for us this evening. We have other ideas. It would be no exaggeration to say that we have a brainwave."

Stevens looked up from his prep. "We can't go out," he said. "We haven't got any passes. Besides, we arranged to go to the pictures to-morrow evening—"

"Pictures!" interrupted Browne sadly. "Alas, that you should allow your thoughts to descend to such mundane topics. No, Brother Horace, we are seriously thinking of dipping somewhat deeply into the unknown depths of mysticism."

"What on earth are you gassing about?" asked Stevens impatiently.

"You have probably heard of one, Ezra Quirke?"

"Quirke? That weird kid in the Fourth?"

"As you so aptly observe, that weird kid in the Fourth," agreed Browne gently. "It has occurred to us, Brother Horace, that we might improve our minds by paying a surprise visit to the young gentleman."

"You're mad!"

"I have heard on the highest authority that a special meeting is about to commence," went on Browne, unperturbed. "The time is exactly seven-forty, and the meeting was due to commence at seven-thirty. Allowing the usual fifteen minutes' grace, we shall probably arrive before the first turn is over."

"My dear chap, you're kidding," said Stevens, sitting back. "You can't seriously suggest that we should go to that dotty kid's meeting? It's only a lot of foolery; they're just playing about. What about the dignity of the Fifth?"

"In the interests of scientific research, dignity can be jolted somewhat," replied Napoleon Browne. "It pleases me to visit this den of magical phenomena. This may seem incomprehensible to your feeble intellect, Brother Horace, but I will forgive you."

Stevens rose to his feet.

"What's the idea of spoofing me like this?" he asked impatiently. "What do you care about Quirke, Browne? There's all sorts of talk about him being a rummy kid, but he's not your style. You're not interested in magic."

"Possibly not," agreed Browne. "But one never knows, brother. Magic is a somewhat wide term. You are doubtless unaware of the fact that I was famous throughout the length and breadth of Uxton as a distinctly capable magician?"

"Goodness knows what you were famous for!" growled Stevens. "But you can't fool me that you dabbled in magic."

Browne beamed.

"While admitting that fooling you is a simple enough feat, we will not pursue the subject," he observed. "Alas, my powers are unknown, my praises unsung. It pleases me to visit this Quirke, and find out the exact nature of his experiments."

Who knows, Brother Horace, but that we may not duplicate these magical acts, and thus confound the natives?"

Stevens became more interested.

"I'm beginning to see the idea now," he said slowly.

"Ah, the grey matter is stirring?" inquired Browne benevolently. "It is even possible that your cerebellum actually does contain other than a sponge. We live in hopes, Brother Horace. And now for the Great Adventure. Cast your books aside, and accompany us."

"If you really mean it——"

"Have I ever given you cause for doubt?" asked Browne reproachfully. "Are not all my words weighed before delivery? Alas, I fear that you suspect me of giving short measure! Come, or we may be late for the star attraction. Furthermore, there may be some slight difficulty in gaining admission. I fear these misguided youths will misunderstand our motives."

"We shall never get in," declared Stevens.

"There, of course, you are in error," said Browne. "We are setting forth to attend this meeting, and that is sufficient. Have you ever known a Browne to fail? It may be a rough journey, Brother Horace, and there may be some slight excitement, but we shall prevail. Since history began, the Browne's have always triumphed."

Stevens knew that it was useless to argue. And now that he had an inkling of Browne's purpose he was interested. Like most of the seniors, he had paid little attention to the rumours concerning Quirke of the Fourth. The movements of the Junior School were not of much interest to the Fifth and Sixth.

As for the masters, they had scarcely heard a word about Quirke. The new boy's doings had been kept strictly secret; his meetings were more or less mysterious, and were closely guarded. So even Quirke's own Housemaster, Mr. Goole, knew nothing about them.

And the Head, tucked away in his own seclusion, scarcely knew that a boy named Quirke existed in the school. Had things been otherwise, none of the mystical happenings could have taken place. For the "beaks" would have dropped on Quirke with a heavy hand at the slightest inkling of what he was doing.

Even the Fifth didn't know much. But Browne had heard a word here and there, and he had come to the conclusion that Quirke was setting himself up as an amateur magician. Browne had never before mentioned his own prowess in the art, and Stevens was inclined to suspect that his chum had no skill in that direction at all. But William Napoleon was always a dark horse. His accomplishments were at times startling.

Although he spoke in a bombastic fashion he was no windbag. The Fifth had never had such a capable skipper as now. Browne was always cool and calm, and he could deal with the most difficult situations with supreme tact. He had bearded his own Housemaster—and even the Head—in their respective dens on several occasions, and had requested the most outrageous favours. And he had always emerged successfully.

And although he boasted in a general way, he never actually admitted his accomplishments. Thus he was always surprising the Fifth by revealing a complete knowledge of subjects which had been unsuspected.

The Fifth had found that he was a champion boxer, although this was about the last thing one would have suspected him of. Stevens didn't actually believe that Browne was a conjurer or a magician, but Stevens wouldn't have been at all surprised at anything. He had ceased to be astonished at Browne's activities.

They entered the East House together, and made their way to the Fourth Form passage. They turned the corner and paused. Deep gloom lay ahead.

"Observe the preparatory methods," murmured Browne. "A dark passage, a mere glow of light. Auto-suggestion, Brother Horace; the victims are pitchforked into the correct mood even before entering the Palace of Mysticism."

"It's pretty cute, all the same," said Stevens in a whisper.

"Crudely expressed, but I get you, Steve," said Browne. "Let us deliver three solemn raps upon the door. Sundry yelps from within will no doubt inform us that we have startled the Circle. Raps of any kind are inclined to startle—But stay! What is this lurking form? Ah! Brother Quirke has thought it necessary to place a guard on watch!"

Browne was right. A figure approached out of the gloom. It was Fullerton, of the Third. In fact, Fullerton had been presented with half-a-crown on the understanding that he would give the warning at the sound of any unwelcome approach. The scamp of the Third peered at the newcomers.

"What do you chaps want here?" he asked suspiciously.

"We seek admittance to the Oracle," replied Browne.

"To the which?"

"I am a man of few words, Brother Fullerton, and so we will not go into any explanation," said the Captain of the Fifth. "Be good enough to stand aside. I am thankful for the friendly gloom. It is always an ordeal to gaze upon you from a distance, so we must be grateful that you are half hidden at such close quarters as these."

"Phew! A man of few words, eh?" said Fullerton. "Look here, Browne, you can't go in there. They're having a sey-once!"

Browne started violently.

"Alas! Alack!" he moaned. "Spare us, Brother Fullerton, from your alleged French! I presume you mean seance? You'll observe, Brother Horace, the delicate inward roll of the tongue? French is a language——"

"Never mind about French!" said Stevens. "What about getting into this study? The show'll be over if we're not quick."

"A necessary reminder," agreed Browne. "Must I request you to remove your person again, Brother Fullerton, or shall I exert my famous strength? I leave it entirely to you. I'm always good-natured in that respect."

The Third-Former didn't hesitate. He turned to the door of Quirke's study, and gave three sharp raps, and followed it by two more. This was the signal for an alarm.

Almost immediately the key turned in the lock, and Quirke appeared.

"What is wrong?" he asked sharply.

"Nothing, Brother Quirke," replied Browne, pushing himself forward with one long stride. "We are here to watch your astounding performance. Is this the early door? Splendid! Come, Brother Horace, if we dash in we shall still witness the rise of the curtain!"

CHAPTER XIV.

HAPPENINGS EXTRAORDINARY.



EZRA QUIRKE was swept aside before he could make any protest.

The two big Fifth-Formers pushed their way into the gloomy study, and Browne himself closed the door and turned the key in the lock. Quirke stood back, his strange eyes gleaming intensely.

"This is an outrage——" he began.

"Calm yourself, Brother Quirke! Bring those powers of restraint into action for which you are famous," interrupted Browne. "Ah! Quite a merry throng, I perceive. Seat yourselves, I beg of you. We are merely here to learn."

"It's all right, Quirke," said Stevens. "No funny business, you know. Browne and I are interested in your magic, and we thought we'd like to watch. Sorry we couldn't give you more notice."

Quirke continued to stare.

"You are not here to make fun?" he asked tensely. "You have no plan for ruining my experiments. If you are negative——"

"Far from it," interrupted Browne smoothly. "You may take it as a positive fact that we are not negative. Delve deeply enough, and you will observe some pretty wit in that last remark. The Brownes have always been famous for their wit. Ah! Two vacant seats are awaiting us, Brother Stevens. A most thoughtful arrangement."

Browne gracefully dropped into a chair near by, and Hubbard snorted.

"Hi! That's my chair!" he said tartly.

"Splendid!" beamed Browne. "I appreciate your courtesy, Brother Hubbard. I fear you must stand, for your chair is occupied, and so the poor dog had none!"

Hubbard was highly indignant, but there was no prospect of getting William Napoleon Browne out of that chair. And after a brief disturbance the meeting settled itself down quietly once more. Browne, to the surprise of Stevens, relapsed into complete silence, and concentrated upon the proceedings. He seemed to be intensely enthralled.

As a matter of fact, the experiments had only just commenced. Ezra Quirke had been conducting his crystal-gazing experiments, and he now continued. Canham was seated in front of him, and Quirke placed one lean hand upon Canham's shoulder. The owl had appeared from a fold in the curtains, and was now on Quirke's shoulder again, for he had discarded the uncanny bird upon opening the door.

"It comes back!" murmured Quirke. "Yes, I see much. At present it is dim and vague, but perhaps— There is a tall gentleman with iron-grey hair and a grizzled moustache. Yes, I see him—"

"My hat!" breathed Canham. "The pater!"

"Hush!" said Quirke. "The tall gentleman is worried—he is pale—his agitation is increasing. He appears to be standing within the vaults of a bank. Ah, now there is a policeman! They are evidently talking of a robbery. A lady is there now—I see her clearly. A graceful lady, with dark hair and a slight burn scar on the left cheek, partially concealed by powder—"

"The mater!" muttered Canham. "I say, this is uncanny—"

"Do not interrupt—"

"But you're wrong!" said Canham tensely. "My mater never keeps her jewels in a bank vault. They're always in the safe in the library at home. Are you sure it's a bank vault?"

"I cannot say—it is vague and blurred," said Quirke. "A pity—a great pity! It has gone completely. Your interruptions have had a bad effect. I can see no more."

Canham returned to his proper seat, looking startled.

"I say, did he really describe your people?" asked Hubbard.



In less than thirty seconds the vague shape resolved itself into a white-bearded man, clothed in the manner of the Middle Ages.

"As clearly as daylight!" said Canham. "I couldn't see anything in the crystal, either. That's the rummy part of it."

"What's doing now?" muttered Teddy Long.

Quirke had removed the stool and the crystal, placing them behind one of the folds of the draperies. He seated himself again, and closed his eyes. He was so still that he looked almost death-like in that weak light.

"What's the idea, Quirke?" asked Stevens sharply.

"I feel that some magical manifestation is near," said Quirke, his voice coming strangely, without his lips moving. "Hush! Let us be quiet, and wait. The Unseen Powers are friendly to-night."

"What rot!" muttered Stevens, under his breath.

The others sat in their chairs, leaning forward, watching fascinatedly. There was actually nothing uncanny, but the atmosphere of the place was charged with mystery. Stevens was more than ever convinced that it was merely a deliberately planned effect. There was nothing here that could not be explained by the simplest

solution. The audience was fooling itself all the time.

And then Stevens started. He found himself looking at a small table near the black curtains. It was empty—a light bamboo thing with an ornamental top. Stevens blinked, and stared harder. It seemed to him that the table had moved.

And then, without warning, the table rocked, and fell headlong. But there was no crash. Just before reaching the floor it hesitated, and then subsided on its side without a sound. The effect was startling in the extreme—for the phenomenon was opposed to all the laws of gravity.

into the middle of the circle, and hovered there. Then it turned completely upside down, and remained in mid-air, supported by nothing. Quirke sat in a trance-like state.

"Oh!" breathed Teddy Long, terrified. "This—this is awful!"

"Wires, you ass!" hissed Hubbard.

"But there aren't any wires—there can't be!" muttered Clifton. "They'd all get tangled up——"

The table slowly descended and touched the floor. Then it stood there as though nothing had happened. Stevens clenched his teeth, and strode forward. He was going

STORIES OF SPORT, SCHOOL AND ADVENTURE

THE Boys' Friend Library

(New Series.)

No. 17. GLADIATORS OF THE LEAGUE.

A Masterpiece of Footer Fiction. By JOHN W. WHEWAY.

No. 18. FIGHTING DAYS!

A Dashing Story of Old-time Bare-fist Scrapping. By H. WEDGWOOD BELFIELD.

No. 19. THE WINNING STREAK.

A Stirring Tale of Boxing and Circus Life. By WALTER EDWARDS.

No. 20. JIM OF "C" SQUADRON.

A Thrilling Yarn of Army Life and Fighting in Egypt. By D. H. PARRY.

THE Sexton Blake Library

(New Series.)

No. 17. ON THE NIGHT EXPRESS.

A Powerful Story of Mystery and Detective Adventure, introducing GILBERT and EILEEN HALE.

No. 18. THE ADVENTURE OF THE ALBANIAN AVENGER.

A Tale of Baffling Mystery and Detective Work, featuring GRANITE GRANT and MDLLE. JULIE.

No. 19. THE GREAT CANAL PLOT.

A Story of the SUEZ, introducing Sexton Blake, Tinker, the Black Eagle, Wu Ling, George Marsden Plummer, the Three Musketeers, Prince Menes, Madame Goupolis, and Mathew Cardolak.

No. 20. THE CASE OF THE TWO SCAPEGRACES.

A Fascinating Tale of Deduction and Stirring Adventure in England and France. By the author of "The Case of the Society Black-mailer," etc., etc.

THE SCHOOL- BOYS' OWN LIBRARY

No. 13. THE TYRANT OF GREYFRIARS!

A Sensational Yarn of Harry Wharton & Co. at Greyfriars. By FRANK RICHARDS.

No. 14. THE OUTCAST OF ST. JIM'S.

A Dramatic Story of School Life with a strong Human Interest. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NOW ON SALE!

PRICE FOURPENCE EACH!

"Great Scott!" breathed Stevens, clutching at Browne.

"Clever, Brother Horace — distinctly clever!" murmured Browne.

"You don't think——"

"One never knows!" whispered the Fifth-Form skipper. "Watch!"

The others were gripping their chairs, breathing hard. Teddy Long was quite pale, and even Hubbard looked scared. But Ellmore uttered a grunt.

"There is nothing to be startled at!" he said. "There is somebody concealed behind the curtains, and he pushed the table——"

He broke off, for the table acted in a way which proved his supposition to be wrong. It suddenly raised itself, swept out

to prove the trickery of this business. If there were wires, he would find them! Not two seconds had elapsed since the table touched the floor.

Stevens picked it up, and twirled it round.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he ejaculated, aghast.

The little bamboo table was absolutely devoid of any wire, or hook, or trick contrivance. There had been no time to detach anything—besides, Quirke was motionless, and a clear yard away.

"I say, this is positively weird!" muttered Stevens hoarsely.

"Look over there!" gasped Hubbard, pointing.

On the other side of the room, just against the curtain, a luminous spot had appeared,

hovering in the air. Everybody stood and sat perfectly still, watching. The faint glow increased, growing larger, and taking vague shape. In less than thirty seconds it resolved itself into a white-bearded man, clothed in the manner of the Middle Ages.

The figure was no longer vague, but clear and distinct. Stevens was absolutely flabbergasted—and even William Napoleon Browne found it difficult to believe the evidence of his own eyes. This figure had appeared from nothing.

"Confound it!" breathed Stevens. "There must be trickery!"

He went forward again, but Browne pulled him back.

"Wait!" whispered Browne. "Don't spoil the fun, brother!"

But Teddy Long spoiled it. He dropped out of his chair, whimpering and gasping with fright. His condition was so serious that two of the other juniors had to drag him up. And, quickly, the strange figure of the ancient faded and disappeared.

And something else was noticed. Clifton was the first to attract attention to it. He pointed with a shaky finger.

"Look at Quirke!" he muttered. "Look at the owl!"

There was something really extraordinary about the phenomena that was taking place. The owl had fixed its claws into Quirke's shoulder, and it was now stretching its wings out, and making every motion of flying. Everybody could hear the beating of the wings on the still air.

Slowly, inch by inch, Quirke rose out of his chair, and seemed to be held by the owl—which was against all reason and common-sense. But the owl actually lifted its master from the chair, and started flying across the room. At least, all those spectators were prepared to swear that the thing was happening.

It was too much for Teddy Long.

With an absolute scream of terror, he broke away from the others, and dashed to the door. He turned the key in the lock, tore madly out into the passage, and fled, screaming louder than ever.

CHAPTER XV.

UNACCOUNTABLE.



THERE was an immediate commotion.

Hubbard and one or two others rushed out after a brief pause, and Ezra Quirke was now sitting in his chair again, and the

owl was as motionless and imperturbable as ever. Quirke opened his eyes, shivered, and looked round.

"What has happened?" he asked huskily. "Who disturbed the Magical Powers? He will surely be punished——"

"It was Long!" interrupted somebody. "Quick—you'd better clear out of here! He's screaming the house down! There'll be masters here——"

"His punishment will be great!" said Quirke tensely. "We must take no further risks this evening, however. I ask you all to go."

The entire audience bustled out, and Quirke was the last one of all. He left his cloak behind, and the owl, too. He locked the door, and William Napoleon Browne gently relieved him of the key.

"What is that for?" asked Quirke, starting.

Browne smiled genially.

"If it is all the same to you, Brother Quirke, I should prefer to have this key in my possession for a brief period," he said. "Have no fear—I shall return it very shortly. But for the moment I insist."

"You cannot have it!" said Quirke fiercely. "It is the key of my study——"

"But, as I mentioned before, I insist," beamed Browne.

He walked off, and Ezra Quirke clenched his sinuous hands. There was something distinctly alarming in Browne's cool attitude. Everybody had left the study, and the door was locked—and Browne had the key! The Fifth-Former had not overlooked the window—but he knew that the window look out upon the East Square, and there was soft gravel beneath it. If anybody had entered or left by the window, there would be obvious traces. Browne was quite shrewd.

In the meantime, startling things had happened.

Considering Quirke's statement regarding "punishment," there was something almost alarming in the event. Teddy Long, fleeing out of the East House, was so overwrought and panic-stricken that he hadn't the least idea where he was going. He wanted to get as far away from Quirke's study as possible. He ran madly, gasping and screaming.

And then the disaster happened.

Unquestionably, it was sheer coincidence—a piece of unexpected bad luck. But weren't all these affairs bad luck? That was the strange feature in connection with it.

Long ran down the steps, fled across the Triangle, and at the same instant something came sweeping out of the West Arch—something which moved with great speed, and considerable noise.

"Hi! Look out!" yelled a voice. "Out of the way——"

Crash!

It was over in a moment. Cuthbert Chambers, of the Fifth, mounted on his motor-cycle, took Teddy Long fairly and squarely in the centre. Long went flying, and Chambers' motor-cycle crashed over with an appalling concussion. The engine raced furiously.

Both figures of the victims were still. There were no witnesses. For a few seconds

the scene remained unchanged. Chambers and Long were lying unconscious, and the engine was roaring fiercely.

"Hallo! What's all that din!" asked Reggie Pitt, as he entered the West House lobby with Nicodemus Trotwood and Fatty Little. "Some silly ass trying his motor-bike, by the sound of it—"

"Great pumpkins! Look here—quick!" gasped Fatty.

He ran out, and Pitt and Trotwood major followed. The accident had happened quite near by—just between the West Arch and the Ancient House steps. Teddy Long was lying flat on his face, well clear of the wreckage. But Cuthbert Chambers was perilously near to the throbbing monster.

"There's been a smash!" panted Nick. "What on earth—"

Boooop!

Suddenly, there was a soft, clap-like explosion. A sheet of flame shot up, and the next second the Triangle was luridly illuminated by the fiercely blazing petrol. The spirit had escaped on to the racing engine, and an explosion had resulted.

"By jingo! Lend a hand—quick!" yelled Pitt. "I expect the tank'll go next! It's Chambers! Come on—he'll be killed!"

Without hesitating a second, the three West House juniors dashed up, and dragged Chambers clear of the danger-zone. By this time others were appearing from almost every House. Prefects and masters were on the scene. There was a big sensation.

"It's Long!" muttered Hubbard, when he heard the news. "Chambers must have run him down! They say he's killed, too!"

"And Quirke said he'd be punished!" exclaimed Canham, his face pale. "Quirke said that, and he ran straight out to his death! I tell you, Quirke's unearthly! He knows things before they happen!"

"It can't be true!" said Stevens, of the Fifth. "Long isn't dead—he can't be dead! How did it happen, anyway?"

During those first few minutes there was hopeless confusion. But it wasn't long before more definite details were known. Chambers was unconscious, suffering from concussion—to say nothing of several serious grazes.

Teddy Long was far from dead. But he was badly hurt—his left wrist being broken, and his head fractured. The latter, however, was far less serious than everybody believed at first.

Nobody knew how the affair had happened—although it was easy to guess. Chambers was notoriously careless, and Phillips and Bryant explained that he had gone out to make some adjustments to his engine. He had obviously been testing the motor-cycle at the time of the accident. Furthermore, he had violated the school rules by riding recklessly through the West Arch—and all Arches were prohibited, except for walking.

"The silly ass wasn't carrying any light, either!" said Nipper, twenty minutes after

the accident. "There was no lamp on the bike, and he must have been blinding along in the dark."

"Even so, the affair's a mystery," said Watson. "Surely Long must have heard him coming?"

"Not necessarily," replied Nipper. "I expect Chambers swept through the Arch without any warning. He won't ride the bike again, that's one certainty. It's a mere heap of scrap-iron by now."

"I wonder if it was insured?" asked Solomon Levi. "He wouldn't be mad enough to go about without, surely?"

"Anyhow, it's not our business," said Nipper. "The poor chap won't be able to ride anything for a week or two. As for Long, nobody knows how serious his injuries are yet."

"I say, come over here!" panted Handforth, rushing up. "Stevens says that Long was in a panic when he ran out! There's something rummy about the whole affair! Come and have a talk to Stevens!"

The masters were already satisfied that a simple accident had taken place. There were no searching inquiries—for none seemed necessary. Reggie Pitt's word was enough. He and the two juniors with him had heard the roaring engine, had gone out, and had found the Triangle deserted. Obviously, Chambers had run Long down by accident while there were no witnesses. Any sort of inquiry seemed superfluous.

But Nipper was holding one of his own.

"What's this about Long?" as he came upon Browne and Stevens near the fountain, surrounded by a number of juniors. "Is it true that he was in a panic?"

"Of course it's true!" said Stevens. "We were all in Quirke's study in the East House, and so many rummy things happened that Long lost his nerve and bunked! The poor kid was nearly frightened out of his life!"

"He ran out, screaming like mad!" said Hubbard breathlessly.

Nipper pursed his lips.

"So that's it!" he said thoughtfully. "I thought it was a bit queer! Of course, Long dashed out and didn't see Chambers at all! He must have run right into the bike— Perhaps we'd better tell the Head."

"Why?" asked Browne gently. "Surely no good could come of such a step. Brother Hamilton? The affair was an accident, and the cause of the accident is immaterial. Let me urge you to keep this matter sub rosa."

"Perhaps you're right," admitted Nipper. "It wouldn't do any good to explain about Quirke—in fact, it would savour of sneaking. We don't want to get Quirke into trouble."

"There's something fishy about that kid," said Stevens grimly. "The most mysterious things happened in that study this evening. No wonder Long was scared

into a panic! Tables moving without any hands—figures appearing out of nothing—that rotten owl lifting Quirke out of his chair—”

“I say, are you kidding?” asked Handforth, staring.

“No, honour bright!”

“Do you mean to say you Fifth Formers attended one of Quirke’s rotten meetings?” demanded Handforth indignantly. “I’m ashamed of you—”

“Peace, Brother Handforth,” interrupted Browne. “It was merely in the interests of science. Let me convince you that we are always eager to learn. And to-night we have seen many things.”

“You don’t believe in the boulder then?”

“Am I so little known?” asked Browne sadly. “Is it possible that you can credit me with such mental weakness? Observe!” he added, producing the key of Quirke’s study. “Here we see an interesting exhibit.”

“It’s only a key,” said Stevens.

“The word ‘only’ is scarcely apt, Brother Horace,” murmured Browne. “For this is the key of Quirke’s study, and the door is locked. In other words, by a masterly piece of strategy, I engineer things so that the Room of Mystery should remain untouched until we had time at our disposal for a complete investigation.”

CHAPTER XVI.

REALLY EXTRAORDINARY.



DICK HAMILTON gave Browne a quick look. “That was jolly clever of you, old man,” he said approvingly. “But are you sure that Quirke hasn’t got another

key?”

“The point is immaterial,” said Browne. “Acting upon my instructions, certain valiants of the Fifth have been surrounding Quirke in a solid phalanx ever since the meeting broke up.”

“You think of everything!” said Stevens admiringly.

“A word of praise from you, Brother Horace, is always grateful,” smiled Browne. “But let me inform you that my methods are thorough. Of what use to bone the key if Quirke were allowed to go free? As you will observe, poetry! There is no limit to my accomplishments! You may take it for granted that Study No. 20 has been left locked and undisturbed.”

“By Jove, that means everything!” said Stevens. “Quirke hasn’t had a chance of getting rid of his fakery! We shall expose him as a trickster!”

“My scheme, exactly,” explained Browne, kindly.

“But what actually happened?” asked Nipper.

Stevens explained as briefly as possible—feeling that too much time would be lost if Browne took on the job. Armstrong had joined the crowd by this time, and he was thoroughly unconvinced, and extremely indignant.

“So that creepy ass has been up to some more tricks, eh?” he asked. “We’ll go into that study, and tear everything down!”

“It’s a pity you can’t look after your own House a bit better!” said Handforth tartly. “If Quirke was in the Ancient House he wouldn’t be allowed to hold his rotten meetings!”

Armstrong frowned. He was Junior Captain in the East House, and he was already finding that there were several snags attached to the post. It wasn’t anything like so easy as he had always imagined. To be quite frank, the aggressive Armstrong was very much of a failure.

“Browne, you’re a genius,” said Nipper, after he had heard everything.

“I am glad that somebody appreciates me at last,” murmured Browne.

“You did the right thing,” went on Dick. “You locked the study up, and placed a guard on Quirke. Now we can go along and unmask him.”

“If you expect to find any wires, you’ll be disappointed,” said Stevens.

“Tables can be moved without any wires—ask any conjuror!” replied Nipper. “And those black draperies can hide all sorts of paraphernalia. Why do you think he had the draperies, anyhow?”

“How about having a look outside the window first?” suggested Watson.

“Some of you go to the window, while we go indoors,” said Nipper. “We’ll open the window as soon as we enter the study, and let you in. In that way we shall be more certain than ever.”

The trap was indeed complete. With Quirke held by Browne’s “phalanx” of valiants—in fact, the Fifth Formers were keeping Quirke in the gym—and the door of Study No. 20 locked, there was not the faintest chance of anything being tampered with.

And Browne and Stevens knew that Quirke had had absolutely no chance of concealing any trappings after Teddy Long had fled.

Even the passage was the same, with that shaded light. Browne inserted the key in the lock, and turned it. The inquirers all crowded in. Everything was exactly the same.

Two or three chairs were overturned, just as the juniors had left them. The draperies were in position, and there was still that faint odour of incense in the air. The juniors were keen and eager. There was something thrilling in the thought of exposing Ezra Quirke in this dramatic fashion.

It was as obvious as daylight that those “manifestations” had been caused by

trickery. And as there had been no chance of concealing the trappings, they must necessarily be here still.

"Don't get excited!" said Nipper crisply. "We'll open the window first. You fellows stay there—we don't want any confusion."

He pulled the draperies aside, and found the window with ease. It was closed and the catch was fastened. Nipper flung it open, and found two or three fellows just outside.

"Found anything out there?" asked Nipper.

"Nothing at all."

"No footprints?"

"Look for yourself," said Reggie Pitt.

He had a powerful electric torch, and he flashed it on the gravel below the window. Nipper's eye was more trained than any of the others, and he could tell at a glance that no human beings had been in or out of the window that evening. The gravel was unmarked.

"Let's have the light," said Nipper.

He closely examined the window-sill, and he was satisfied. The window had not been used at all.

"Come in!" he said briskly.

He turned into the room again, and the first move was to drag all the draperies down. The others helped enthusiastically. It would be a fine exposure!

The black curtains were pulled down, and the shades were removed from the lights. In less than five minutes Quirke's study was revealed in its normal state. And the investigators were staggered beyond measure.

"There's—there's nothing here!" muttered Watson blankly.

"I say, this is rummy, if you like!" ejaculated Stevens, with wide-open eyes.

"Distinctly clever, Brother Horace—distinctly clever!" said Browne. "Even I, with all my brains, cannot fathom the mystery."

Quirke's study was absolutely devoid of trick trappings. There wasn't a wire—there wasn't a rod. Just the heap of black curtains, and nothing else. The book-case was examined, the cupboards explored, and the

magic table was passed from fellow to fellow.

That table had floated in the air, had performed actions contrary to the laws of gravity. And yet it was just an ordinary table!

"Great Scott!" muttered Hubbard. "Then—then Quirke's experiments were genuine, after all! He's a real magician—no fake about him of any kind! I shall believe in him more than ever after this!"

"I knew he was genuine!" said Clifton fiercely. "I was one of the first to say he was genuine, too!"

Although Nipper was very startled, he said little. He came to the conclusion that the stories were exaggerated—that all the phenomena hadn't happened as described. But the fellows who had attended the meeting knew for certain—and they were impressed beyond measure.

Indeed, Browne's attempt to expose Quirke had the opposite effect. The school-boy magician was stronger than ever before. And it was a remarkable fact that all his prophecies came true. Even Teddy Long had received the punishment which Quirke had hinted at!

"You are quite satisfied now?"

Ezra Quirke himself came into the study, released at last. There was a rather mocking expression on his face. It was about the first time he had allowed any sort of expression to rest there.

"How did you do it?" demanded Handforth gruffly.

"You seem to think that I used methods of trickery," replied Quirke. "Are you not satisfied that I did not? My magic is supreme. I do not rely upon traps and wires. I am one of the few genuine magicians, and all the powers of the Unseen are at my disposal."

It was a triumph for Quirke—and he was destined to gain more supporters than ever. But, in spite of the evidence, Nipper and Browne and one or two others were positive that there was trickery somewhere. They had missed an important link. But where? What was the solution?

In any case, the forthcoming events promised to be more dramatic than ever!

THE END.

Another Capital Story of this Splendid Series Next Week, Entitled:—

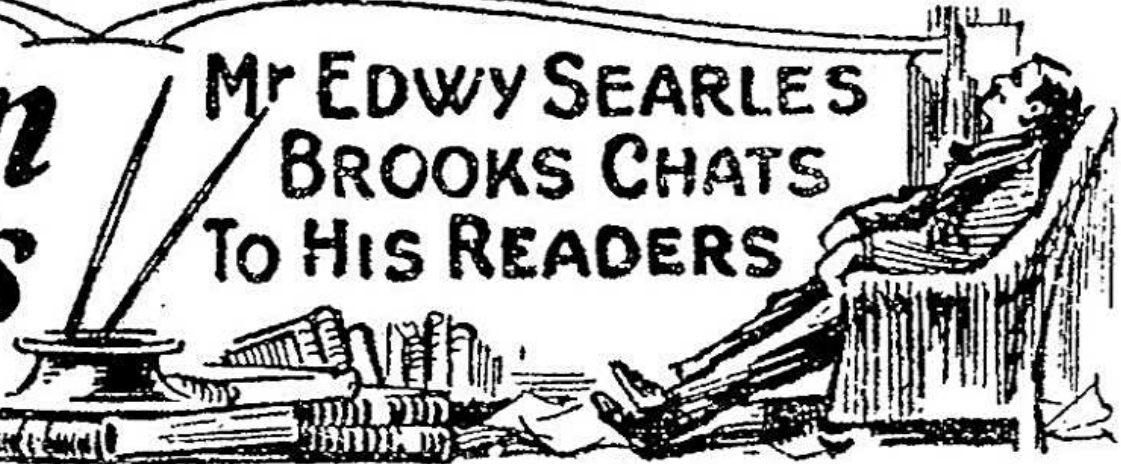
"THE THIRTEEN CLUB!"

**A FURTHER SELECTION OF FOREIGN STAMPS
COMING AGAIN NEXT WEEK!**

Order Your Copy in Advance and make sure of your FREE GIFT



MR EDWY SEARLES
BROOKS CHATS
TO HIS READERS



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

Here's a how d'you do! Here's a state of things! I was going to have two pages this week, as I mentioned in my last chat. But when I spoke to the Editor about it, he gave me a severe look, and said "Nix!" Of course, he didn't actually use that word, but you know what I mean. The fact is, I was a bit late, and he'd only allowed me the one ordinary page. So it's my fault, and you can blame me. But I'm going to have two pages next week, and a lot of you who are expecting to see your names acknowledged will probably do so. This week I've got to reply to a few readers who were acknowledged in my last chat. The first one is No. 137, of Huddersfield.

Your enthusiasm for the League, No. 137, is encouraging. I quite agree with you that the state of the membership is disgraceful. We ought to have reached the ten thousand mark weeks ago. Unhappily, there aren't many far-sighted people like you about. Most of 'em hang back, and wait to see what the next fellow's going to do! That's no good at all. But, look here, I shall get into awful trouble if I go on like this—I'm poaching on the Chief Officer's preserves.

No, W. Butterworth, I don't agree with you. With the new Houses at St. Frank's, I shall be able to have much more scope. You needn't let that fear of yours take root. I shall never neglect any of the Houses for weeks on end. In one way or another all the Houses will get a showing in every story. Sometimes, of course, one particular House will be featured, and the others only just brought in occasionally. But you can rely upon me to bring all the old characters to the fore from time to time.

I believe you're telling a fib, Lionel Moxon. You accuse me of never replying to your other letters. Why, dash it, your name is as familiar to me as the name of E.O.H.! I haven't got time to look up my files, but I'm pretty sure your memory is at fault. And now that I'm giving you an answer, there's nothing in it. And I'm short of space, too!

You've hit it, Nipper of the Remove—right in the bull's-eye! I'll just quote two lines of your letter. "Many readers start to write to you, but do not know how to commence. I have many times started—" That's just it! I'll bet there are tons of readers who have wasted sheets of paper in writing a few words, and then get cold feet, or something. They suddenly peter out, and throw up the sponge. Am I right, all you non-starters? Well, that's hardly right—because you do start, but fail to finish! Have another shot to-day, and go through it to the bitter end. I'm game to risk it if you are.

A week or two ago I answered a few readers, but the paragraphs were never printed. My fault again, of course. I made my chat too long to go in, and the Editor ruthlessly sliced a chunk of it off. What does he care about you, waiting for your replies? What does he care about me, taking all sorts of pains to answer you? Not a bit! There he sits, with his blue pencil and his scissors, carving slabs of stuff out, and laughing up his sleeve. If I'm not careful, he'll fairly roar, and use his scissors on this bit. But in that case you won't know anything about it, for it'll never appear. So I'd better ease down, and hope for the best.

Two Australian readers named M. I. Iliffe and Bushwhacker—I hope that last isn't his real name—asked me about the Magazine Overseas Correspondence, and things like that. They needn't worry, and they mustn't be impatient. The Editor will deal with all those things very shortly, in his capacity of Chief Officer of the League.

Oh, by the way, I hope you haven't forgotten about that big surprise for next month? I told you all about it, didn't I? My hat! Now I come to think of it, I didn't actually tell you what it was. Never mind—plenty of time! E.S.B.

THE STAMP COLLECTOR

By FRED. J. MELVILLE.

ROUND THE WORLD ON STAMPS

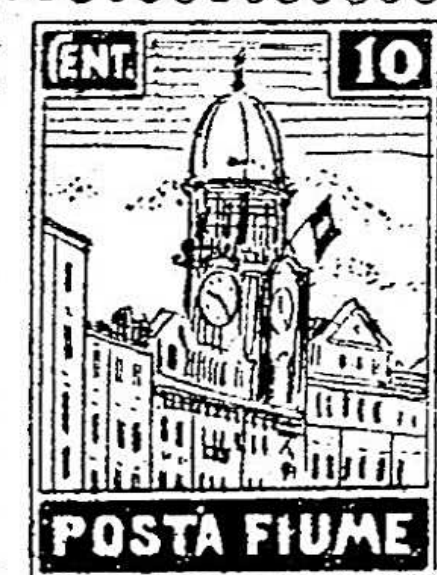
I GUESS that some of my stamp collecting readers indulged in "howls of delight" as they opened their free gift stamp packets and found that nearly all the stamps were new to their own collections. This week there is another of the Editor's splendid gifts for us, and as I opened my number two packet I confess I felt a thrill of excitement



Valetta Harbour,
Malta.

wondering what sort of a lucky bag it would prove. The first stamp that caught my eye was a Nicaraguan view (1900 issue), and there were two other stamps with views on them, one from Malta, showing a lovely little picture of the harbour at Valetta, with a battleship in the offing and the other a 2 cents

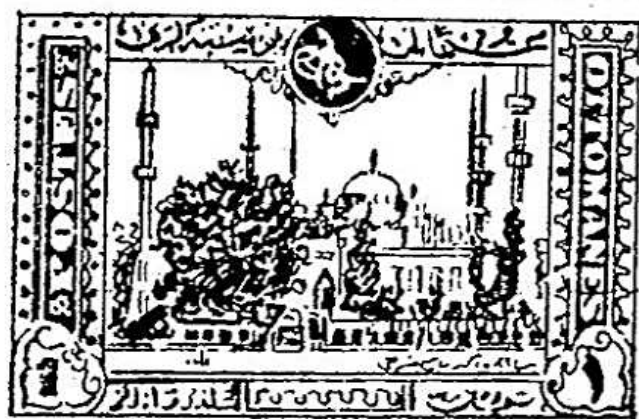
British Guiana, showing the wonderful Kaieteur Falls, of which there was a gigantic scale model at the Wembley Exhibition. So I may well chat this week about the grand tour of the world as it is pictured for us in the panorama of the stamp album. It is not easy to select a route for there are so many we might take, but let us follow the man from Cook's, and see where he will take us to. After taking off from the home country, we get postage stamp views of many famous places in Belgium, such as Ypres, Dinant, Louvain, Termonde, and we see the miles of shipping on the Scheldt (1 franc stamp of 1915), then we get some lovely peeps at little Luxemburg, views of its churches, bridges, castles, and pass on to Switzerland, where we get right up in the mountains. Here on the stamps of 1914 you can see the famous snow-capped peaks of the Jungfrau, the Rütlandi, the Mythen. William Tell and his famous son—the apple of his eye—are pictured on Swiss stamps too. In Italy we get stamp views of Venice and Rome, and the Piazza of



Market Place, Fiume.

Venice, also figures on a 2 corona stamp of Fiume. Other views of this port which was the scene of the great adventures of the poet D'Annunzio after the Great War, show us the harbour and the market-place.

Austria gives us views of her Parliament House (so does Hungary), and several cities and beauty spots including Vienna, Innsbruck, Salzburg. In Bulgaria our stamps show us some delightful views of Sofia, Turnova, Varna, the river Iskar, the Tower of King Asen, and several monasteries.



Mosque of Sultan Ahmed, Turkey.

On Rumanian stamps we see the armies crossing the Danube, and pictures of Bucharest, Silistria, and the Dobrudja. Next to Greece, where we view the Acropolis, and the Stadium of the historic games, and a recent stamp shows us the arrival of the English poet Byron, at Missolonghi, where he died when helping the Greeks to secure their independence. Look out for some more lovely view stamps from Greece, as there is a very pretty series about to be issued in that country.

From Turkey we get a guide map to the Dardanelles, views of the Bosphorus, Sultan Ahmed's Fountain, and the place strangely called the "Sweet Waters of Europe," besides several mosques. In Asia Minor we see Smyrna Harbour, and some of the most wonderful series of view stamps are at present in use in Syria, the Grand Lebanon, and in the state of the Alaouites. Did you know such famous places of the Bible were shown on stamps as Antioch, Damascus, Tyre, and Sidon, not to mention the cedars of Lebanon, and a score of other interesting subjects?

In Armenia we get stamp pictures of Mt. (Continued on page 39.)



Golden Gate, U.S.A.



THE CITY OF MASKS;

or, THE CASE OF THE BOY KING!

A Gripping New Tale of Detective Adventure, introducing SEXTON BLAKE and TINKER.

FOR NEW READERS.

The story takes place in the wild and mountainous country of Carlovina, infested by bandits and outlaws. Here life is held very cheaply, and it is with grave personal risk that Sexton Blake and Tinker find themselves the guests of the youthful King Peter, the new ruler of Carlovina. The great detective, in the guise of Mr. Brown, English tutor to the King, has been employed by the Foreign Office on an important mission, and Tinker is on a visit to King Peter as an old school chum. Blake and Tinker arrive at Kamfak to be present at the celebrations of the coming of the new boy king. After a procession through the capital, the great detective and his assistant are preparing for the evening reception at the palace when this instalment begins.

IN AND OUT OF GAOL.

THE crush at the palace was terrific, and nine men out of ten wore dazzling military uniforms, and the women were splendidly dressed. At last the turn of Sexton Blake and Tinker came. Celia, who stood beside her brother, ablaze with jewels, gave them a brave but tired little smile, and from the King they received a nod.

"So that's that!" said Tinker. "All this silly crush for that. I thought Celia looked fagged, and a bit fed-up with it, gov'nor. What's on next?"

"A ball and a state supper, young 'un. You can cut them out if you like, but I want to see who's here."

"It will keep you busy, gov'nor. Hallo, here's the prince, and I think he's looking for somebody!"

Prince Darro bowed. Much as he professed to dislike soldiering, Prince Darro was in uniform.

"His Majesty does not wish you to leave the palace, gentlemen," he said. "I will send the chamberlain to you, who will show you your private rooms, and he will obtain your luggage for you. His Majesty wishes his tutor to attend the ball and banquet, but he has no instructions for Mr. Jones."

"I thought I hadn't to leave the palace?" said Tinker.

"I do not think his Majesty meant that. Only that you were to remain here, and not to sleep at your hotel."

Presently Tinker and Sexton Blake were following the chamberlain.

"Not half bad," Tinker reflected, as he gazed round his bed-room. "Private bathroom attached. Old Peter knows how to do things nicely."

Blake's bed-room was almost a replica of Tinker's, and between the two was a sitting-room, handsomely furnished. The chamberlain bowed himself out after receiving instructions about the luggage.

"Shut and lock the doors, young 'un," said Sexton Blake. "We may make ourselves unpopular, and nasty things happen in Carlovina. These are charming and luxurious apartments; but as Peter couldn't have selected them for us, we'll see if there's another way in."

"Which sounds as if you expected some midnight assassin to come along and stab us or club us over the head in our beauty sleep," said Tinker. "How awfully jolly! It's a new palace, too, not one of those ancient ruins, full of secret corridors, sliding panels, and underground galleries. Anyhow, it's not worth while waking up dead for the sake of a potter round."

A careful search of the apartment revealed nothing suspicious. Blake left Tinker to amuse himself as best he could. In quick time the luggage came, and thinking that he would like to see Kamfak on a gala night, Tinker changed his court suit for a serge one, armed himself with an automatic, and put a mask in his pocket.

Tinker did not get very far. He found a door that brought him out into the palace grounds where motor-cars were lined up in the glare of the electric arc-lamps, and was making for the main gate when he was suddenly held up at the business end of a revolver by a man who smiled at him pleasantly. Before Tinker could ask what was the matter two other men pounced on him from the shadows, tripped him up, laid him neatly on his face, and took away his automatic pistol.

"I advise you not to say anything," said the man with the revolver, who happened to be Sexton Blake's acquaintance, Johnny Veilburg, of the police. "It is death for any but the military or the police to carry weapons in the precincts of the royal palace."

Tinker, firmly pinioned and handcuffed, had been lifted to his feet.

"Oh, don't be an utter idiot!" he said. "How did I know it was against the law? My name's Billy Jones, the King's friend, and if you play the goat with me he'll hang a few of you. I was only going out to look round. Let me go, and don't be such a pack of lunatics!"

It was no use protesting. Tinker was bundled into a car and bundled out of it again, hurried up some stone steps, and without any further inquiry, pushed into a dark, chilly room, where half a dozen more unlucky prisoners sat on the flagged floor. They were all handcuffed, and all smoking strong Carlovian cigarettes that smelt like burning wool. It was a hang-dog crowd, the very sweepings of the streets of Kamfak, but they took very little notice of Tinker, except for a red-headed, bearded ruffian with one eye, who grinned at him.

"Engleesh?" he asked. "I spik him. Why they take you?"

"Hanged if I know, except they're potty!" growled Tinker.

"It not matter," said the one-eyed man. "They hang you just same. We all hang just same. In the morning. You not hang easy; so light; you kick a lot."

After this comforting statement the one-eyed prisoner, finding that his cigarette had gone out, laid his head against the damp wall and went to sleep. Another of the prisoners, who had evidently been drinking, and two others, had a wordy quarrel, and then began to fight, and then rolled about the floor pounding at each other with their manacled hands, and biting when they had the chance. The uproar brought a warder. He sluiced a bucket of water over the combatants and went out again.

Presently an eighth prisoner was rushed violently into the cell, so violently that he slid across the sloppy floor and was brought up by the wall. He clutched at the gas-bracket, which only emitted a feeble gleam of light, and it came away in his handcuffed grasp. The next instant a great tongue of flame leapt from the shattered pipe with a prolonged roar, licking the opposite side, and filling the cell with scorching heat and a choking odour of bad coal-gas.

The frantic howls of terror that arose brought the warder again, for although the prisoners did not seem very concerned about the prospect of being hanged in the morning, the prospect of being roasted alive

sent them frantic. The last prisoner still grasped the broken gas-bracket. Grasping it with both hands, he brought it down on the warder's head. He fell like a log, and the next moment they were trampling on him in a mad fight for the door. Tinker's slowness served him well, for seeing a gap in the struggling legs, he dived through it.

More warders were hurrying down the flagged corridor, and Tinker went in the other direction along a gloomy passage that ended in a flight of dark steps. He heard shots, but whether the warders were firing to kill or maim, or only to frighten, he could not tell. Someone was behind him as he floundered down the steps. A glimpse of light showed above him, and he saw a chained grating.

"Go easy," said a voice in English. "I'm the chap who knocked out the warder. A neat idea, wasn't it? Unhitch the chain, and perhaps if I shove you up you can lift the grating. Quick about it before they're on us. Up you go and shove hard. Gosh! They've scented us!"

Perched astride the man's shoulders, Tinker pushed his hardest. The grating yielded, heeled back, and toppled over with a clatter. Lying on the pavement, he helped his new acquaintance up. As they raced down a deserted side-street a man's head and shoulders appeared above the hole through which they had escaped, and a revolver banged. Luckily, it was the only shot, and it missed, for the warder had slipped and tumbled back into the cellar below.

"This way, sonny."

They plunged into an alley and along a dark, twisting lane, and then Tinker's companion stopped and began to laugh.

"A close shave," he said, "and it's sure no joke to fall foul of the police in a hole like Kamfak. Guess I was getting a little boisterous when they pulled me, dancing with a girl in a cafe. I kicked a bit too high, and my six-shooter dropped out of my pocket, and that did it. I reckon the police were on me before I could say 'knife.' It's always against the rotten law to carry a gun here, though everybody does, and there's a proclamation out which I didn't read that there's a death penalty to-night for any guy who's found with a gun within a square mile of the palace. So far, so good, but how are we going to get rid of these cheap and nasty Kamfak bracelets?"

"I'd have them off in two shakes if I only had a bit of stiffish wire," said Tinker. "American, aren't you?"

"Sure. Arthur P. Clodie, straight from little old New York, and looking for adventures, and finding 'em. Fascinated by the photograph of a charming young lady, I have meandered to Carlovian and Kamfak. Standing chin-deep in dollars in this bankrupt country, I guess I'm as good as royalty, anyhow. I've come right along here to offer my heart, hand, and dollars

to the original of that fascinating photograph, the charming Princess Celia."

Tinker began to think that Mr. Arthur P. Clodie, of little old New York, was wrong in the head, though his quick and efficient use of the gas-bracket did not point to mental disease.

"She's too young to marry," said Tinker, "and if that's your wheeze, you're asking to get shot. Let's cut that out, and think of the fatal present. If we don't get rid of these darbies, we shall find ourselves back in clink, for as ornaments they're a bit too conspicuous."

"Beastly conspicuous. Let's knock at the first door and ask for a bit of wire or a file. I'm dead sure nobody will give us away if we do that, for these Kamfak guys don't love the police. Here's a shack with a light in it, so they're not all out watching the illuminations and fireworks."

It seemed a risky thing to do, but before Tinker had time to agree or object, the American was rattling the door. After more knocking, a woman with a lighted candle in her hand opened it. By the light of the candle Tinker had his first good look at Arthur P. Clodie. He was a fair-haired young fellow of about three or four and twenty, with a healthy complexion and a winning smile.

"If you please, madam," said the American, making the best use of his smile and displaying the handcuffs, "my friend and I have received these delightful presents from the police. We have got away from the police, but we can't get away from their presents. Can you oblige us with a file or a piece of wire? You would be doing us a great service, for your police guys aren't nice to know and their cells are ghastly holes."

"Come in" said the woman, who, like nearly everybody in Kamfak, had some knowledge of English.

"Gee! We've struck lucky, old bean!" said Tinker, as the woman lighted the gas. "It's a tinsmith's shop."

There was plenty of wire and there were plenty of files, and there were dozens of bunches of keys of every kind. Tinker could not find a key to fit the handcuffs, but he found one that did so after some filing. The woman threw the discarded handcuffs into the furnace, and raked some coke over them.

"Madam," said Arthur P. Clodie, "you have sure proved yourself a friend in need, and I guess that it was a real inspiration that made me knock at your hospitable door. Please accept this little wad of five-dollar bills from your grateful servant, for I guess if we'd got into the hands of the police twice they'd have looted them. We're not out of the wood yet, but I'm scooting back to my hotel to nail the Stars and Stripes outside my bed-room door, and if the Kamfak police dare to shove past that emblem, I reckon there'll be such a row



A man's head and shoulders appeared above the hole through which they escaped, and a revolver banged.

with Uncle Sam that this one-hoss country will soon be looking around for a hole to crawl down. You'd better come along, too, bo."

Tinker did not feel much inclined to shelter himself behind a bed-room door ornamented with the American flag, but he did not think he would get back into the palace very easily.

"Where do you hang out?" he asked.

"Hotel Carlovina."

"Good enough!" said Tinker. "If I can make that, I'm pretty safe, for they know me there. I say, was there anything in that threat to hang us?"

"I guess they'd like to hang me after smashing their warder, and giving the other unlucky galoots a chance to beat it," said the young American. "And it may have happened, for the police are mighty busy and as keen as mustard to try to look big in the eyes of this new kid of a king. All the judges will be at the state ball, and so thick in the head and bad-tempered in the morning that nobody will have an earthly. The police will only have to say 'We've caught that goat with a gun, boss,' and the judge will reply, 'String him up.'

I've been close on a month in this lovely country and three weeks in this delightful city, and nothing surprises me, and I just keep guessing what's going to happen next."

All the police had taken from them were their weapons. They put on their masks, and guided by the noise and the glare of lights they quickly reached the boulevard and the hotel. The whole grown-up population of Kamfak and the thousands of visitors were masked now, and it struck Tinker that by taxing these articles his Majesty might raise the wind to some tune.

Tinker followed Clodie up to his suite of rooms, where the Yankee produced a small silk flag, bearing the Stars and Stripes, which he attached to the outer side of the door with drawing-pins.

"Wal, bo," he said, "there's old glory, the flag of the free, and I guess if the Kamfak police try to push past that they'll be biting off a bigger lump of trouble than they can ever chew. Guess we'll have some eats and drinks, so I'll say a few kind words on the 'phone to the restaurant department, and see what they can bring along. And don't worry about the police. With old glory on show you're as safe as a bean in a pod."

Tinker was not so sure that the sight of the American flag would fill the hearts of the police with terror, but as a waiter brought up an excellent cold supper he accepted Clodie's invitation to share it.

"And what are you doing in this busted old town, anyhow?" asked the Yankee, after a long stare at Tinker. "Don't say if it's a secret. I told you the magnet that pulled me along—the sweet face of Princess Celia, and I guess Princess Celia will be Mrs. Arthur P. Clodie one of these days, if I have to pay the whole national debt to get her."

"Well, mine is a bit of a secret," said Tinker. "I can't tell you without permission; but unless the police deport you I shall see you again, and then if I get leave I'll tell you a few things. But the princess is only a kid, as English and American girls go, not a day over sixteen, I should think."

"If she's not old enough to marry what's all this chatter in the cafés that she's going to marry that guy Prince Darro, bo?"

"Gee! I hope not!" said Tinker incautiously. "She's too jolly and nice a girl to marry that oily-haired idiot!"

"You know her, then?" cried the American. "You sure know the lady or you couldn't talk like that. Say, you've sure met her, what?"

Before Tinker could reply there was a knock at the locked door.

"Open this door in the King's name!" said a man's voice.

Arthur P. Clodie, who was as plucky a person as Tinker had met for some time, sprang into his bed-room, carrying a couple of revolvers and a box of ammunition.

"Say, you outside, just cast your object on that bit of silk," he shouted. "That's the Amurrican flag, and this is Amurrican property with a free-born Amurrican citizen squatting in it, so beat it. If you attempt to force that door I'll plug you as full of holes as a herring-net. Standing by, bo?"

Tinker was not in an enviable position. He did not want to be mixed up in a fight with the police; but Clodie had helped him to escape and given him supper, and it seemed a mean and cowardly thing to abandon him. As if to prove Tinker's unspoken theory that the Stars and Stripes would be of very little protection in Kamfak, a shot was fired into the lock. Clodie answered it with a bullet that crashed through the mahogany panel, and then took up the cigarette he had left burning on the side of his plate.

"Coming in," he said, "or just crawling out, bo?"

Tinker took up the loaded revolver.

"I never crawled out yet," he said; "but though you don't know it, you're getting me into an awful mess. Wouldn't it be wiser to beat it, Clodie? That chap has gone for his pals. They'll be buzzing round like flies after jam in a minute, and you'll never marry Princess Celia if you get shot."

"There's sure some sense in that remark, buddy," said the young man from New York. "Gosh! Sting-flies, too, by James!"

Tinker and the American dived under the table. The police did not stick at trifles in Kamfak. Someone opened fire on the door with an automatic pistol, making splinters fly, and spattering the opposite wall with bullets. Tinker and his new acquaintance crawled into the bed-room on hands and knees, and when Clodie had locked and bolted the door, Tinker dragged the mattress of the bed and reared it up as a shield.

"I don't think it will stop a bullet from an automatic," he said, making for the window. "What's outside?"

There was a veranda with a sheer drop into a paved area.

"Legs or necks smashed if we try that," he said quickly, as they heard the police battering at the outer door.

"Try the bath-room, bo," said the Yankee. "I'm just collecting my valuables. I guess there's a stackpipe attached to most respectable bath-rooms. Sounds as if they'd broken in, so I'll shove a little furniture in their way."

Tinker had no time to admire the young American's strength of muscle as he made a barrier of a heavy wardrobe, for he knew that if the police had any sense and a man

THE STAMP COLLECTOR

(Continued from page 34.)

Ararat, which is supposed to have been the resting-place of Noah's Ark, and in Azerbaijan, on the borders of the Caspian Sea, are views of Baku, where the oil comes from; here you will see stamps with oil gushers, oil-fields, the Hall of Judgment, and the Temple of the Eternal Fires. In Persia and Arabia we get views reminding us of their ancient glories, but India does not give us much in the way of view stamps, for so many of the native states belong to Mussulman sects, stricter than the Turkish people, and according to their belief the making of pictures of anything is contrary to the Holy Koran, the Bible of the Moslems.

But beyond India we get pretty views in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States (a real bit of jungle in the latter), North Borneo, Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand. The Tasmanians and New Zealand Stamps

present a wide range of views, and so do many of the smaller islands of the Pacific like Fiji, Cook Islands, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Nauru ("Pleasant Island"), etc. Right across the Pacific to the Sandwich Islands, called Hawaii on the stamps, we get a view of Honolulu, and then hustling homeward via U.S.A., we see the Golden Gate, San Francisco, and if we come through the Panama Canal, we can have quite a series of stamp pictures of the locks and places on the route. When we leave the Canal on the Atlantic side, we see a shoal of stamp views of Hayti, San Domingo, Jamaica, Cuba, and other West Indian Islands, and so we return home, having made a postage stamp circuit of the globe, although of course there are hundreds of other views to be seen on alternative routes, which would take us round Newfoundland and Canada, South America, Africa, the Mediterranean, and countries in Europe not visited on our express tour.

THE CITY OF MASKS

(Continued from page 38.)

or two to spare for the purpose, they would be on the watch to prevent any escape from the windows. It struck him, too, that if Clodie happened to wing or kill one of the force, even the Stars and Stripes of America and his friendship with King Peter of Carlovica would not save them, for the American consul, if there was one, and his Majesty might hear nothing at all about it until they had been shot or hanged for having dared to resist the law.

Tinker opened the bath-room window and saw a stack-pipe and an empty street. It was empty only for a second, for as he was looking down, a masked man, who wore a long, grey cloak, suddenly appeared and looked up at him.

"In trouble?" he called out.

"Police after us, trying to smash in the door," said Tinker.

"Come quickly, then, friend," said the man. "I will keep them back if they come this way."

For all Tinker knew, the stranger might have been one of the police himself. Crashing noises told him that they were battering at the door with an axe. Clodie added the dressing-table to the barricade.

"Hop it!" said Tinker. "There's a stack-pipe that will do if our weight doesn't bust it, and a guy down in the street says he'll stop the beggars if they rush round to intercept us. Gee! Don't shoot, for the sake of Mike, for you've done enough mischief now."

"Right, bo'!" said the Yankee. "Cut it!"

Tinker shinned down the stack-pipe like a monkey. The bath-room was a recent addition, and the pipe was new and sound, and Tinker reached the ground safely. As Clodie followed, three men dashed round the corner of the street, and at once their unknown friend in the mask and cloak opened fire with a revolver, and the three scuttled back into shelter.

A moment later Tinker, Clodie, and the

man in the cloak were racing for it, and as Kamfak, except for its few main thoroughfares, seemed to be all lanes and narrow alleys, they soon pulled up feeling comparatively safe.

(To be continued next week.)



Run your own Service with Bing

You can get complete railways, with engines, rolling stock, tracks, stations, signals, tunnels, buffers, signal cabins, bridges, etc. Also the Bing Miniature Table Railway, rolling stock and separate parts. Also stationary steam engines, magic lanterns and cinemas. Ask for them at any toy shop and see how surprisingly low priced they are.



FREE.

Ask at any toy shop for free Bing Booklets. No. 1.—Steam, clockwork and electric trains. No. 2.—Stationary engines, magic lanterns and cinemas. No. 3.—Miniature table railway sets.

BING

Model Toys

"Keep Boys Busy."



Bing Toys are distinctively boxed in yellow boxes with black edges.

FREE—Pocket Folder, pkt. best hinges, choice 100 stamps from large pkt. to genuine applicants for approvals. Send stamp, ask for Gift 102.—B. L. CORYN, St. Vincent, Lr. Isl. Wall, Whitstable.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

(Please quote your membership number in all communications to the League, which should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, London, E.C.4.

My Dear Leagueites and Readers,—

I suppose I am right in assuming that the first thing you all did this week was not to read this Chat—that probably comes last, and I don't blame you—but to examine, with all the tender care of stamp-lovers, the six assorted specimens presented with this issue of the "N.L.L." In doing so, I hope you have all followed the excellent advice of Mr. Melville in his first article, and provided yourselves each with a pair of tweezers for the purpose of holding the stamps, for you must never handle them or they will soon soil, and a soiled specimen is not so valuable as a nice, clean one.

What a thrilling moment when you opened the envelope and deposited the six stamps (with the tweezers, of course) on a white sheet of paper to feast your eyes upon them for the first time! Colours of every hue, portraits of famous men, landscapes representing different countries—in short, a miniature picture gallery of the engraver's art of all nations, varying in shape and in value as in design. Then, what if one of those stamps should be one of the valuable specimens that are being included in some of the gift packets?

Since no two packets will contain the same assortment of stamps, you will naturally be curious to know what kind of stamps some of your fellow-readers have got. If you are lucky enough to belong to one of the S.F.L. clubs, this will be quite easy, and you will, no doubt, be able to exchange some of your stamps with the other members. And even if you are a member of the League and not yet belonging to a local club, you will be able to exchange your stamps in the League Exchange and Mart, which I hope to start in the near future. So, if you are not a member and you wish to improve your collection, lose no time in joining the League.

There was a decided improvement in the number of new members qualifying during the week. Why, I will not venture to offer any explanation. But it is a curious fact, that many of these new members, who might have joined weeks ago, write to say that they are agreeably surprised to find the League is better than they thought it was, and that they could kick themselves for being such mugs as to have kept out of it for so long. Once awakened out of their apathy, these new members quickly become absolute enthusiasts. They all think the Member's Certificate more attractive than they expected, and it is the same with the bronze medals, which they cannot praise enough.

On looking through my list of medal awards made up to September 30th, I find that 158 members have been awarded bronze medals, and of this number, 31 are entitled to exchange their bronze for solid silver medals as soon as the League Membership reaches 5,000, while there are five members who have actually qualified for the solid gold medal, which will be given in exchange for their silver medals when the total membership is 10,000. The Member who heads the list is No. 257. He has 41 introductions to his credit, and if he can maintain this position by the end of the year, he will be awarded the special prize I am offering to the member who has the most introductions for 1925. But he has a runner-up in Member 286, who has 33 introductions. Then comes Member 141 (who headed the list in August) with 32 introductions; Member 421, with 28; Member 668, with 25; Member 793, with 22. Next come two members with 21, one member with 19, two with 18, three with 17, three with 16, one with 15, four with 14, six with 13, and three with 12.

THE CHIEF OFFICER.

SOME ADVANTAGES OF JOINING THE LEAGUE.

- (1) Getting to know your fellow-readers from near at home to the most distant outposts of the Empire.
- (2) Joining local sports and social clubs affiliated to the League.
- (3) Entering for competitions run for the benefit of members.
- (4) Qualifying for various awards by promoting the growth of the League.
- (5) Opportunities for contributing short articles, stories, and sketches to the League Magazine.
- (6) Space for short notices and free adverts. for members in the above magazine.
- (7) Advice on choosing a trade or calling in life, on emigration to the colonies, dependencies, or abroad.
- (8) An employment bureau for members of the League.
- (9) Tours to interesting places in England and on the Continent, camping-out holidays, and sea-trips, specially arranged for members of the League.

AS SIMPLE AS A B C.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C by running the pen diagonally across both Sections. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. The second form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

Member Applying for Bronze Medal: It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms are needed, and these must be taken from copies of the latest issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the forms are sent in. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C,

crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided the forms are taken from the latest issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the forms are sent in.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medal can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B, which has been revised for this purpose. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members, they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

These Application Forms can be posted for ½d., provided the envelope is not sealed and no letter is enclosed.

IMPORTANT.—Complete and post off this form before the next issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY is on sale. Otherwise the form becomes out of date and useless.

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 19. Oct. 31, 1925

SECTION A	READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP. Being a regular reader of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare myself to be a staunch supporter of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and that I have introduced Our Paper to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with Membership Number assigned to me.
SECTION B	MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS. I, Member No..... (give Membership No.) hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me..... (state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.
SECTION C	NEW READER'S DECLARATION. I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," which I will read with a view to becoming a regular reader of this paper.
(FULL NAME) (ADDRESS)	

