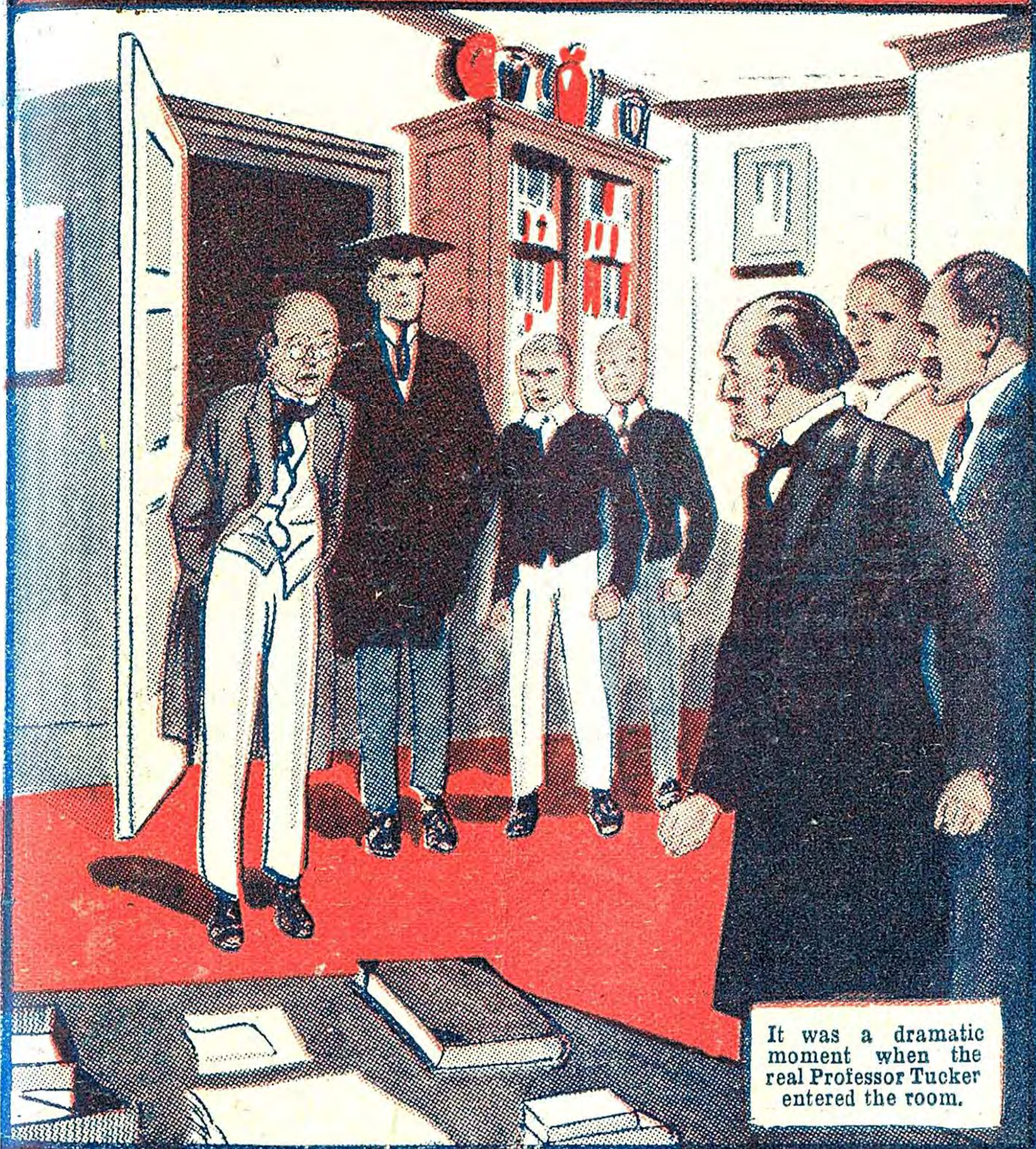


THE AMAZING PLOT AGAINST SINGLETON

THE NELSON LEE 2^D

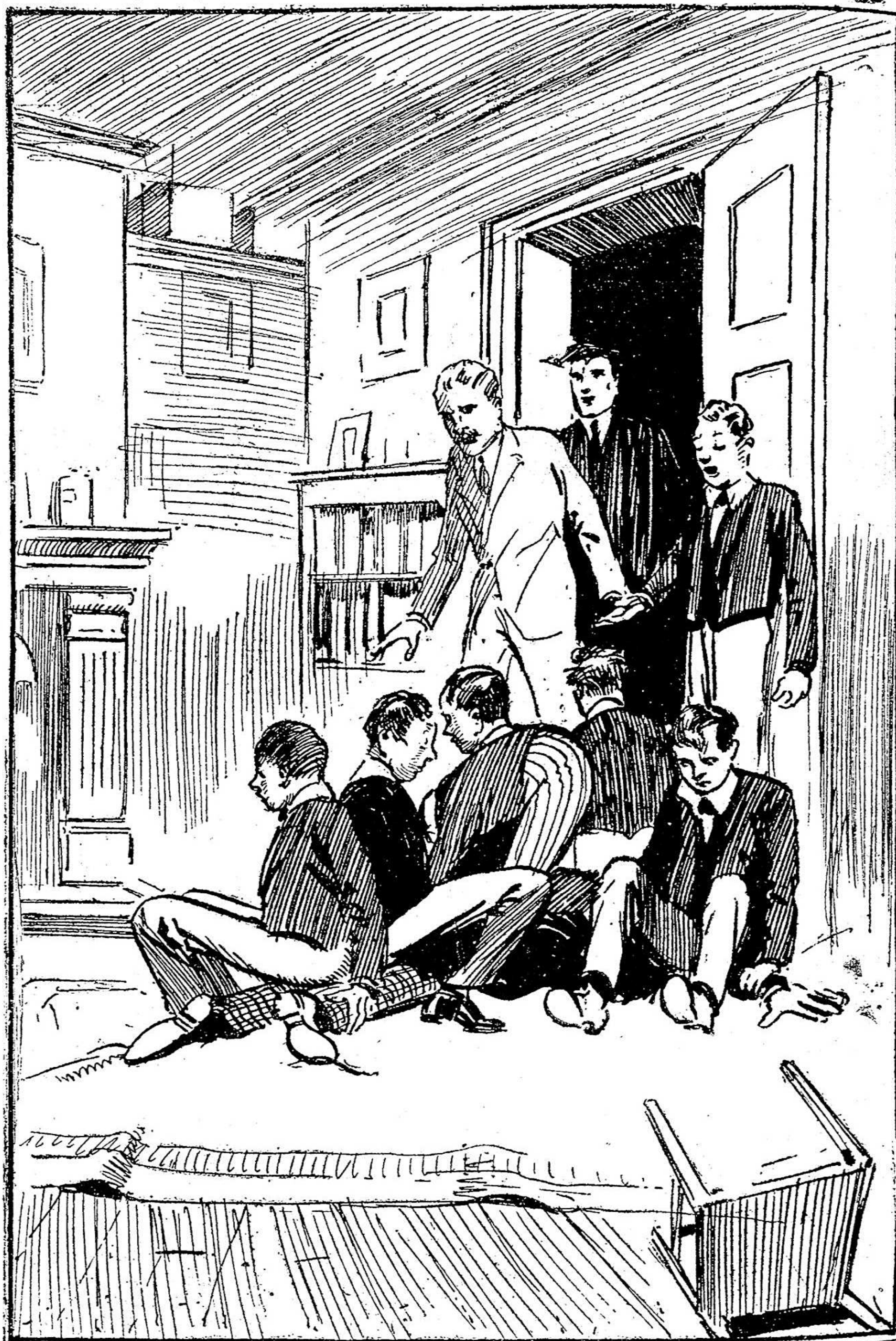
LIBRARY



It was a dramatic moment when the real Professor Tucker entered the room.

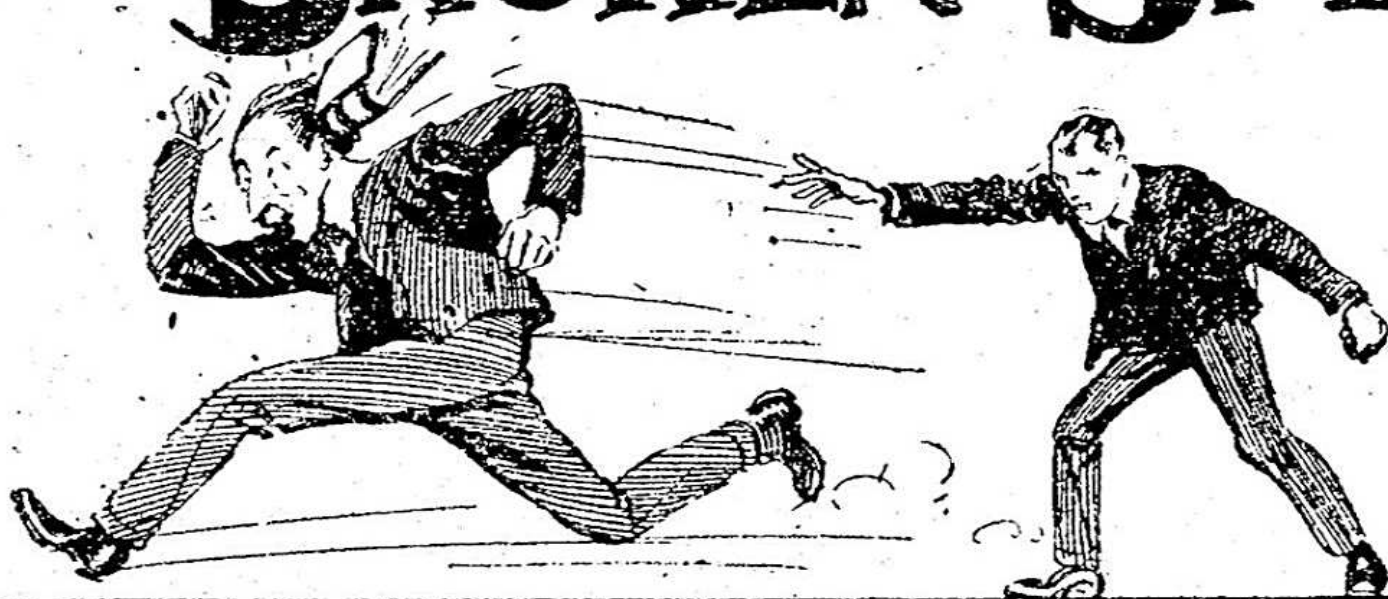
THE BROKEN SPELL

A top-hole story of the Boys of ST. FRANK'S, featuring the unmasking of Quirke by the "Compact of Ten."



Willy Handforth waved a significant hand.
"There you are, gentlemen!" he said calmly. "You may not be able to see him, but he's there."

The BROKEN SPELL!



In this, the final story of the great mystery series, the curtain is lifted, revealing the true nature of Quirke and his amazing plot to fool the school. To ensure that you will enjoy the story to the full, I must ask you to refrain from the natural curiosity to pry into the last pages before the proper time. I shall be delighted to hear from any readers who care to write and let me know what they think of this series.

THE EDITOR.

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER I.

THE REGISTERED LETTER.

HUSSI RANJIT LAL KAHN, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's, opened his eyes lazily as the unwelcome note of the rising bell clanged out. Then he suddenly sat up, and stared across the little dormitory.

"But why this wondrous burst of disgusting energy, Duggy?" he asked mildly. "It amazes me to see that you are already attiring yourself in the ridiculous raiment for the day."

The Hon. Douglas Singleton paused in his dressing operations and frowned. He and Hussi Kahn shared the same dormitory in the West House, and it was a most unusual thing for any fellow to turn out before the second bell. And the Hon. Douglas had apparently been dressing even before the first bell.

"You go to sleep again, Hussi, old man," said Singleton. "There's ten minutes before the second bell goes. I couldn't sleep this morning. You know what it is on a fine morning. The call of the sun, and all that."

The Indian junior raised his eyebrows and glanced through the window. A fine drizzle was falling, and the December morning was

depressing. The West Square was looking drab and uninviting.

"There is something irrationally the matter, Duggy," he declared. "You are not your preposterous self. You speak of the sun, and the glory of the morning. But neither are apparently visible to the inquisitive eye."

Singleton glanced out of the window.

"Hallo! Rain!" he ejaculated. "By Jove, I didn't know that! Well, never mind, Hussi—I simply had to get up. Don't bother."

He continued his dressing, and seemed obviously disinclined for conversation. Hussi Kahn remained in his own bed, watching. But he did not question his chum. Of late a certain coolness had sprung up between them. It was not because of any disagreement or quarrel. But the Hon. Douglas Singleton had been drifting into Ezra Quirke's set, over in the East House. He was one of Quirke's staunch supporters, or had been until recently. Hussi Kahn had no faith in the schoolboy magician. Something else had affected Singleton, too. For days he had seemed abstracted and thoughtful, and had taken no interest in sports or in the usual school events. And he had consistently refrained from taking Hussi Kahn into his confidence.

Having finished dressing, he left the dormitory, and silently closed the door. Then he passed down the corridor and rather startled two grimy youths who were holding a heated discussion halfway up the stairs.

The two grimy youths were Williams and Tubbs, the pageboys of the West House and Ancient House respectively. Tubbs had come across to borrow a broom or something, and the conversation had unaccountably drifted round to detective stories. The two pageboys were now hotly comparing the merits of their favourite fiction sleuths.

"Go it!" said Singleton, grinning. "Only you might choose a better place for these debates. You don't need all the stairs, I suppose?"

"Sorry, Mister Singleton, sir!" ejaculated Williams, pressing himself against the wall. "It ain't my fault. Tubbs comes over 'ere, interruptin' my work. Like 'is nerve, too! Just as if Hawk-eyed Horace can 'old a candle to Lightning Luke. Why, Lightning Luke can track a dozen crooks down in no time with the 'elp of 'is wonderful assistant, the Nimble Kid——"

"I'm not at all interested in your horrible bloods!" interrupted Singleton. "It's a pity you can't read more elevating literature, my lads. Tubbs, I'm surprised at you."

"Yes, sir," grinned Tubbs. "Thank you, sir!"

He scuttled off to his own duties, and Singleton passed down into the lobby. He didn't like Williams much, for Williams was a youth who always had an eye to the main chance, and only performed services in the expectation of financial gain. Tubbs, on the other hand, was a good-natured youngster with a most willing disposition. He never refused tips, but on the other hand he didn't possess that nasty habit of hanging about with an outstretched palm.

Not that the Hon. Douglas gave two thoughts to the pageboys. Something of a far more important nature was occupying his mind. He went to the letter-rack and frowned. All the divisions were empty.

"I say, Williams, what about the post?" he demanded.

"Not in yet, Mr. Singleton," said Williams.

"It's beastly late, isn't it?"

"No, sir," said the pageboy. "Beggin' your pardon, Mr. Singleton, it's you wot's beastly early."

"Well, look here," said Singleton. "I'm expecting an important letter. If you can get hold of it bring it to me and I'll give you a bob. You'll find me somewhere about."

Williams, thus incited, neglected his work in the most shameful manner, and hurried away to the domestic quarters to see about

the letters. They were probably in, but not yet sorted out. In a great school like St. Frank's each House had to have a sort of miniature post-office.

Singleton went into the Common-room, mooched about for a minute or two, and then went out into the lobby again. His thoughts wouldn't allow him to keep still. He was terribly anxious about that letter. It was from his bank, and he had given instructions for it to be sent the previous afternoon by country mail. If it hadn't arrived——

But Singleton refused to think of this possibility. He was a junior of immense wealth. When he had first come to St. Frank's he had been known as the Spend-thrift. Money was no object to him. In spite of his youth he was able to throw it about with impunity. It was only necessary to instruct his bankers and they would send him cartloads of the stuff.

For some considerable time, however, Singleton had sobered down. He was still lavish, but reckless waste was not one of his sins.

The Remove, however, would have been considerably surprised had it known of the sum which Singleton was expecting this morning. It was a colossal one, even for the Hon. Douglas.

He was just about to turn out of the lobby again when Williams came running up with a triumphant rush.

"Got it, Mr. Singleton!" he panted.

"Good man!" said the Hon. Douglas. "Yes, by Jove, this is the fellow! I haven't got a bob, Williams. You'll have to make do with a half a crown."

"Yessir! Thank you, sir!"

Williams went off in a condition of delirious joy. He was probably thinking that he would be able to lay in a huge stock of "Lightning Luke" stories. And Singleton regarded his letter with an intense thrill. It was a bulky registered letter, smothered in enormous seals. The letter was not only registered, but insured in other ways, too.

Singleton tore it open, and pulled out a thick wad of crisp banknotes. The denomination of each one was startling. They were not merely fivers. Each note in fact represented no less a sum than one hundred pounds, and there were one hundred notes. By a lightning effort of calculation the sum of ten thousand pounds is reached.

"Good egg!" murmured Singleton, with relief. "They've sent it! I thought there might be a hitch. Everything's all serene now."

A heavy load was lifted off his mind. He was so abstracted that he wandered out into the Triangle without a hat, and didn't notice it was raining until he reached the fountain. He dodged back, and went to

Study N, in the Remove passage. Then he sat down and gave himself up to thought.

A pleasant smile played about his face. Professor Tucker would be all right now. The thing was certain; all doubts were set at rest. With that ten thousand in his hands the kindly old science master would be freed from all his recent anxieties.

And Singleton felt curiously elevated. He was quite a generous fellow, but there was no question of generosity in this particular instance. He was merely investing his money in Professor Tucker's amazing invention. It was a business deal, pure and simple.

Singleton recalled the wonderful nature of the professor's healing apparatus. After many years of scientific research, Professor Tucker had succeeded in harnessing a wonderful new element. With this strange power under control he was able to restore the sick in a miraculously short space of time. Singleton himself had seen flesh-wounds healed in a minute or so; he had seen a withered, paralysed arm restored to normal health. Poor, deformed cripples who had no earthly hope of recovery would be turned into hale and healthy people. Singleton dreamed as he sat there in the chair. What was a mere ten thousand pounds, compared to the possibilities of Professor Tucker's invention?

And yet the poor old chap had been nearly on the point of despair. He had spent his last penny on his experimental apparatus. He had mortgaged his salary. Summonses and writs were flooding upon him. His credit was exhausted. And he had been unable to afford the expense of recharging his "machine." It was a terribly costly business, so Singleton understood, to capture that element which wrought such miracles upon human tissue. And even the sum of ten thousand pounds would only just see the professor through before he was called upon to give a demonstration before a convention of the world's greatest scientists.

There was something big in the thought of all this. Unable to get capital from any recognised source—unable to raise money for that vital demonstration—Professor Sylvester Tucker had found a backer in this junior schoolboy! It was an astonishing situation—but a logical one, nevertheless.

Those who supply capital are invariably business men—bankers and financiers who demand securities before they will part with a penny. And Professor Tucker was unable to give the satisfaction they demanded. The Hon. Douglas Singleton, on the other hand, required no security. He was a schoolboy—not a business man. He was willing to take the kindly old professor's word. It was a case where human nature triumphed over sordid business methods.

Singleton was doubly pleased because he would be able to keep his word. The previous evening he had promised Professor Tucker that the money would be in his hands on the morrow. The morrow had come—and the money was here. The poor old professor could scarcely believe that the great promise would materialise. He would soon be made easy in mind now!

It was The Day!

Singleton rose to his feet, flushed, and with gleaming eyes. Then another thought came to him. By Jove, Lord Pippinton! He'd promised a similar sum! Late the previous evening he had expressed his willingness—

The Hon Douglas frowned at his own forgetfulness. He literally leaped to the door, and bounded up the stairs four at a time.

CHAPTER II.

OLD PIPPY COMES UP TO THE SCRATCH.



LORD PIPPINTON wasn't asleep.

He reclined in bed, gazing at the ceiling, deeply interested in the movements of a small spider. Trifles of this nature were

always calculated to keep his lordship engrossed for hours at a stretch.

He was a new fellow in the Remove. In fact, he had only arrived the previous day, and he wasn't quite certain of his whereabouts yet. He was fully awake, but it generally took Lord Pippinton an enormous time to get his brain into a state where it would function correctly. Even when he was walking about, he lived in a kind of trance. It was only when he was jerked into a state of alertness that he became lucid. Then he rather compensated for his shortcomings by revealing a certain flash of intelligence.

He was a fair-haired youth—so fair, indeed, that his hair, at a distance, looked almost white. And if Singleton was rich, Lord Pippinton was richer. In cold truth, he was a millionaire.

He had inherited a great fortune from one of his uncles. Not that he really needed it. His father, the Duke of Walsham, was one of the greatest landowners in England, with a fabulous rent-roll. But it generally happens that fortunes fall where they are least needed. Certainly, Lord Pippinton had no need of an independent fortune—but he had got one.

He had created a sensation the previous afternoon by throwing fivers about as though they were cigarette pictures. It was the honest truth that he had no conception of their value. To him, money was a thing of distaste. He always had such a lot of it that he abhorred the sight of it. His

lightest wish had always been granted. He had only to express a desire for a certain thing—the cost of it was immaterial—and he got it. Mere money, therefore, became like so much waste-paper. Furthermore, he had his own banking account exactly the same as Singleton, and could draw upon it for any amount he pleased.

By a lucky chance, he and Singleton were acquainted. Singleton's pater and Lord Pippinton's pater were close friends. The families had been on intimate terms for centuries. And although the Hon. Douglas had hitherto thought little or nothing of Pippinton, the latter had now assumed a big importance in Singleton's eyes.

He was rich—he could lay his hands on what money he pleased!

The Hon. Douglas burst into the new junior's bed-room, and closed the door. He flung the curtains aside, and then went to the foot of the bed.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "You're awake! What about that promise of yours, Pippy, old son?"

Lord Pippinton removed his gaze from the ceiling, and regarded the Hon. Douglas Singleton with an absolutely blank expression. He only knew that something had appeared at the foot of his bed, but so far he hadn't realised what it was.

"Don't goggle, my lad!" said Singleton. "I had a heart to heart talk with you last night. I told you I wanted ten thousand quid for a certain purpose—and you promised to come across. What about it?"

"Eh?" said Lord Pippinton. "I mean, promise? Did I? Just as you say, old lad. Why, by Jove, it's Duggy!" he added brightly. "Duggy, by Jove! Dashed if I saw you enter the old bedchamber. It seems to be morning, or something of that sort."

"It's time to get up, you lazy chump!" said Singleton. "But what about that ten thousand?"

"Yes, rather," said old Pippy.

"You'll pay up?"

"Eh?"

"Ten thousand pounds——"

"Oh, I say!" protested his lordship.

"Look here, you just promised——"

"Money!" said Lord Pippinton, in a pained voice. "Can't you talk of something cheerful, or something interesting? Something bright, or something?"

The Hon. Douglas breathed hard.

"I'm talking about ten thousand pounds!" he exclaimed grimly. "Look here, Pippy, I'm fed up with your messing about! Wake up, man! Pull yourself together! Do you remember our chat last night?"

"Yes," said Old Pippy. "Yes, rather! Yes!"

"Then what about that cash?"

"Yes!" said his lordship. "Every time, old sport!"

"You—you——" Singleton grabbed his lordship by the shoulders, and jerked him

into a sitting posture. "Now then!" he said tensely. "Listen! Gather your wits together, and listen!"

Lord Pippinton made a huge effort.

"You want me to listen?" he asked brilliantly.

"Yes, I do!"

"My dear old Duggy, I'm a mass of acute intelligence."

"Thank goodness!" said Singleton. "Can you manage to get that ten thousand pounds to-day?"

His lordship winced.

"Ten thousand pounds?" he repeated. "What—money again? Oh, I say! Cheese it, old boy! I mean, old boy, cheese it! Money, don't you know! Anything more frightful I can't imagine——"

"Don't you remember last night?" hooted the Hon. Douglas.

"Last night?"

"You promised——"

"Eh? Oh, yes!" said Lord Pippinton, with a start. "Oh, yes! We were talking about cash, weren't we? You want ten thousand pounds for some ghastly purpose, or some such style of thing. Good! It's yours, Duggy. Say the word, Duggy, and it's yours."

"Well, I want it—now!"

"Yes!"

"Can you let me have it?"

"Yes!" said old Pippy. "That is, of course, no. I mean, I'm generally weltering in the stuff, but hardly that amount. I could manage a couple of hundred——"

"What's the good of a couple of hundred when I want ten thousand?" growled Singleton. "Have you got your cheque book?"

"No. Sorry, Duggy——"

"My hat! You haven't got it?"

"Frightfully sorry, but no," said his lordship. "No, I haven't. If there's anything you can suggest——"

"Where is it?" asked Singleton grimly.

"Where's what?"

"You howling dummy, your cheque book!"

"Oh, yes!" said old Pippy, beaming.

"Where is it?" panted Singleton, nearly exhausted.

"Where's what? Oh, the cheque book!" said his lordship, with a sudden start. "Really, I don't seem to know—— Yes, by Jove! Of course! In the top drawer of the dressing-table! That's where it is, Duggy! That, absolutely, is where it is!"

Singleton reached the dressing-table in one leap.

"You're enough to drive a chap crazy!" he said, exasperated. "All this time to answer a single question! Where's your pen—— No, it's all right," he added hastily. "I've got one. Sign this!"

Lord Pippinton meekly signed a blank cheque.

"Now, look here," said Singleton grimly. "You thoroughly understand, don't you?"

You've signed this cheque, and I'm going to fill it in for ten thousand pounds. That's clear, isn't it?"

"Clear?" said old Pippy vaguely.

"I mean, you know what you're doing?"

"But I'm not doing anything!" said his lordship. "What's that," he added, as a bell sounded somewhere. "Duggy, you might be a sport. Where am I? I don't seem to remember this foul apartment at all."

"You're at St. Franks."

"St. Frank's?"

"You're a new chap here——"

"Here?" said Pippy. "What is St. Frank's?"

"Anybody coming into this bed-room would take it for a lunatic asylum—but it's a school!" said the Hon. Douglas. "Goodness only knows why your pater sent you here! You'd be far more comfortable in a home!"

Lord Pippinton looked pensive.

"The fact is, I need help," he said sadly. "Where's my man? How can I get up without any help? You might tell somebody, or something, Duggy."

"You're as bad as Archie!" growled Singleton. "It wouldn't be a bad idea for you two to go shares in Phipps! He'd probably be willing enough to valet for the pair of you. But he'd go grey within two weeks—and expire before the end of term!"

He tore out the cheque, and filled it in.

"I don't want to be shoved in chokey for embezzlement, or getting money under false pretences," he said deliberately. "Have I your full permission to send this cheque to your bank, and draw the money?"

Lord Pippinton waved a feeble hand.

"Take it away!" he pleaded. "You can get what you like. Only, Duggy, don't bother me about it!"

The Hon. Douglas felt that he had done all that the case demanded. And he left the bed-room with a sense of relief. He was quite certain of the validity of that cheque. And what a fine thing it would be to hand the old professor double the promised amount!

The only problem was to get Lord Pippinton's cheque cashed. It was a Bank of England cheque, and the account was at the head office, in London. Singleton thought of handing the cheque to Professor Tucker. But that wouldn't be half so good as the solid cash.

There was a way to get over the difficulty—and Singleton thought of it.

CHAPTER III.

TONS OF MONEY.



TUBBS scratched his head dubiously.

"I dunno as I dare, Mister Singleton," he said.

"But, my dear kid, it's easy enough," said the Hon.

Douglas. "All you've got to do is to take

this letter to London, go to the bank, and wait for an answer. They'll give you a package, and you'll come straight back. Anything difficult in that?"

"Easy, sir," agreed Tubbs. "But I'm on duty to-day, Mr. Singleton. What's going to happen when I get back? I might get the push——"

"Can't you trust me to make things right?" interrupted the Hon. Douglas. "You can take my word for it, Tubbs, that I'll see you right. And there'll be a whole fiver for yourself, too. For two pins, I'll go myself! You'd better hurry up and decide!"

"I'll go, sir," said Tubbs promptly. "I don't care if I do get the sack," he added defiantly. "A chap like me can't get five quid every day! You want me to catch the first train?"

"There's one goes in half an hour," replied Singleton. "And remember—be very careful with that package after you've got it. It'll be very valuable. Stick to it like glue."

"Trust me, Mr. Singleton," said Tubbs.

Singleton did trust him—otherwise he wouldn't have sent him on the mission. Tubbs was a capable youngster, and as honest as the day. He was the very fellow to send to London to get that money. And he would be back long before tea, anyhow. Professor Tucker wasn't expecting any of the cash until tea-time.

If there were any inquiries about Tubbs' unlawful absence, Singleton would explain to Professor Tucker, and the science master would undoubtedly point out that Tubbs had gone to London for him—which was quite true. So there was no risk in sending the page-boy.

After a considerable struggle, Singleton succeeded in getting Lord Pippinton to write a special note to the bank, requesting them to cash the cheque, and hand the notes to the bearer of the letter in a sealed package.

So Tubbs went off soon after breakfast. And morning school was a somewhat trying experience for the Hon. Douglas. The Remove as a whole, however, regarded that particular morning as one of the really bright periods of the term.

For Lord Pippinton made his first appearance in class, and he provided the Form with great amusement. Mr. Crowell had a terrible time for the first hour, but after that he began to appreciate the fact that Lord Pippinton was a hopeless case. Then he left him severely alone. Punishing him was useless, since he had no idea that he was doing anything wrong.

Afternoon lessons were even more trying for the Hon. Douglas. He was expecting Tubbs back by the mid-afternoon train, and he was on tenterhooks all the time. Twice he attempted to get out by making an excuse, but Mr. Crowell would have none of it. He was very firm. Singleton was compelled to remain at his desk.

Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt and Handforth were among the Remove fellows who



noted Singleton's unusual agitation. They couldn't quite understand it, either. It wasn't like the Hon. Douglas to be on the jump in this fashion. He was usually such a languid, easy-going fellow.

The climax came when Singleton stood on his seat to glance out of the window. He fancied he had heard a sound outside—and it was just about the time that Tubbs would be expected. There wasn't any possibility of Tubbs passing the windows of the Remove Form-room, but Singleton couldn't resist himself. He was brought to his senses by a cold voice.

"When you have quite finished, Singleton, I shall be gratified if you will resume your seat," said Mr. Crowell icily. "This habit of performing gymnastics in the middle of lessons must be discouraged."

The Remove gave a dutiful titter. Mr. Crowell was being sarcastic, and it was up to the Remove to show their appreciation. Singleton sat down with a jerk, flushing.

"Sus-sorry, sir!" he stammered awkwardly.

"No doubt you will have ample time to express your sorrow after lessons, Singleton," said Mr. Crowell smoothly. "When the Form is dismissed, you will remain at your seat."

The Hon. Douglas was staggered.

"You're not going to detain me, sir?" he asked.

"That was the general idea, Singleton," said Mr. Crowell.

"Oh, but really, sir!" protested the Hon. Douglas. "Please, sir——"

"We are merely wasting time, young man," interrupted the Form-master. "Another word, sir, and I will not only detain you, but flog you into the bargain! Upon my soul! What is the matter with you to-day, Singleton? It seems that I am to have no peace to-day at all!"

The Hon. Douglas was filled with dismay, but he knew better than to goad Mr. Crowell further. And when the Remove was dismissed, he was compelled to remain—for Mr. Crowell stayed behind to see that he did so.

Out in the Triangle Tubbs was hovering about, waiting for the juniors to emerge from the School House. They flooded out, and Tubbs eyed them anxiously. He had expected Singleton to be among the first.

"Ain't Mr. Singleton comin', Mr. Handforth?" he inquired, as Edward Oswald Handforth passed by.

"Singleton?" said the leader of Study D. "You're unlucky, my lad! And so's Singleton! He's detained. Goodness knows when he'll escape from Crowell's clutches. The old boy's like a tiger to-day!"

Tubbs hardly knew what to do. Then he caught sight of Lord Pippinton, and the problem was solved. After all, the package from the bank was addressed to his lordship, so there was no need to find Singleton. Tubbs approached and respectfully touched his cap.

"Beggin' your pardon, your lordship——" he began.

"You clear off, Tubbs!" interrupted Bernard Forrest. "It's no good you hanging round for tips——"

"Sorry, Mr. Forrest, but I want to speak to 'is lordship on business," said Tubbs coldly. "It's very urgent."

He produced the packet, and handed it to Lord Pippinton.

"Eh?" said old Pippy. "What's this? I say, really——"

"It's for you, your lordship——"

"Don't!" protested Lord Pippinton. "I don't know who you are, old thing, but don't! Don't say 'your lordship.' If you're bursting to be polite, you can call me 'sir,' but I bar anything else."

"Very good, sir," said Tubbs. "I've brought the package from the bank, sir."

"Bank!" said Forrest, pricking up his ears.

"Bank?" echoed a dozen other juniors.

"Bank?" said Lord Pippinton.

He took the packet and inspected the imposing seals. The crowd stood round, watching expectantly. This was evidently a matter of some importance. It wasn't every junior who could boast of receiving sealed packages from banks. Everybody assumed that Tubbs had merely come from Bannington.

"Yes, rather!" said old Pippy.

He was about to stow the precious consignment of notes into his pocket, when Gulliver stopped him.

"Aren't you going to show us what's in it?" he asked pointedly.

"In it?" asked Lord Pippinton. "Oh, this? It's nothing. Nothing at all. Only money. It must be money. The banks always send money."

"Only money!" echoed Forrest. "I'll bet there's a hundred quid in there!"

The schoolboy millionaire wearily tore it open and produced a thick wad of banknotes. Everybody took them for fivers—but even so the effect was staggering. Fortunately, their true worth was not revealed, for the Hon. Douglas Singleton came rushing up, and he grabbed the wad before Lord Pippinton could spread them out.

"You silly ass!" said Singleton breathlessly. "Haven't you got more sense than to flaunt all this money before the eyes of the multitude. I'd better take charge of it."

"By Jove, it's Duggy!" said Lord Pippinton. "Good! Take it! Why do these banks send me money? The foul stuff is no good to me!"

"No good to him!" gasped Gulliver. "We'll take some!"

"It's like your nerve, Singleton, to grab it!" protested Forrest. "The chap's only half there, and you take advantage of him. That money's his! Give it back to him!"

"Rats!" snapped Singleton.

He rushed Lord Pippinton into the West House, and didn't stop until they had

reached Study S. Then he closed the door and locked it. Poor old Pippy was utterly bewildered.

"What's all this business?" he asked plaintively. "Don't we have some peace, or something of that kind or description? Why push me about from pillar to post, and post to pillar?"

"You're a hopeless chump!" growled Singleton. "You've got no more sense than to flash ten thousand quid in front of the chaps! Think of the temptation! Fellows have been murdered for half that amount."

Old Pippy started.

"Ten thousand?" he echoed. "There? Why?"

"Didn't you send your cheque to the bank?"

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did!" snorted Singleton.

"Oh, well, if you say so, I suppose it's all right!" said Lord Pippinton. "And now what? Do we distribute it to the masses, or is there some scheme in view?"

Singleton was too busy counting the money to answer at once.

"Good business!" he said exultantly. "It's all here—every cent. Thanks awfully, Pippy! I'll explain what it's for later on. But no money could be invested in a better cause."

CHAPTER IV.

THE BEGINNING OF AN EVENTFUL EVENING.



PROFESSOR SYLVESTER TUCKER sat back at his desk with a rather dazed expression in his kindly old eyes.

"Is it possible?" he murmured. "Good gracious! This is too much, Singleton! My dear boy, I can't realise——"

"But it's there, sir—all of it," interrupted the Hon. Douglas smilingly. "The whole twenty thousand. You see, Lord Pippinton came up to the scratch and doubled the amount. We're both investing ten thousand. And we wish you good luck, sir."

Professor Tucker took a deep breath.

"But does this—this young friend of yours know for what purpose the money has been handed to me?" he asked. "Have you revealed——"

"I haven't told him anything, sir," said Singleton. "He doesn't even know that the money is for you. I think, perhaps, we ought to tell him some time this evening——"

"Good gracious, yes!" interrupted the professor. "Most decidedly! When a large sum of money such as this is involved we cannot be too careful. Indeed, I am quite nervous, Singleton."



"Very good, sir," said Tubbs. "I've brought the package from the bank, sir."

"What on earth for, sir?"

"Being so young, you probably fail to realise the delicacy of the situation," said Professor Tucker quietly. "Dear me! I am half-frightened! Here we have two junior schoolboys handing over an enormous sum like twenty thousand pounds. You deliver this money into my keeping, and in return I can offer you no security."

"That's nothing, sir——"

"My dear, dear boy, it is everything," broke in the professor. "Why, if these facts were published I might even find myself in the dock! We know that everything is honest and straightforward. But the general public would come to a very different conclusion. Yes, Singleton. A very different conclusion. Therefore, I insist upon taking precautions."

"But I really don't see——"

"Please don't misunderstand me, my dear boy, but in this particular affair I must absolutely insist," said the old scientist firmly. "Please return to me at seven-thirty. Bring Pippinton with you, and I will accept the loan."

"But why not now, sir?"

"Because I have an appointment at seven-thirty with my lawyer," explained the professor. "He will bring documents with him. This transaction must be absolutely legal, or I will have nothing to do with it. It

is as much for your sake as for my own that I am firm, Singleton."

The Hon. Douglas could not fail to see the force of Professor Tucker's argument. Unless the affair was actually made legal, there might be some awkward complications. Pippinton was an easy-going ass, and he hardly realised that he was investing his money. Once legally clinched, the professor would be safe.

"Well, look here, sir," said Singleton. "I don't feel comfortable with all this money on me. Do you mind if I leave it with you? Then we can have it all legally fixed up at half-past seven."

"I was about to suggest the same thing," beamed the professor. "You can, of course, trust me with the money just as you would trust Mr. Crowell, or Mr. Lee, or any other masters. But before I take absolute possession of it those documents must be signed and sealed. Don't misunderstand me, my boy. It would be terrible if a word of this leaked out—"

"That's all right, sir," smiled Singleton. "I expect you're doing the best thing. You see, Lord Pippinton and I have got so much money that we don't realise the value of it. We get a bit careless. But it's just as well to be on the safe side."

"Half-past seven, then," nodded the professor. "Good gracious! Twenty thousand pounds! I shall have to be careful with this. Now, let me see. Ah, yes! The cash-box! It is strong, with a good lock. Nothing could be better."

He locked the money up, and Singleton paused for a moment, watching. There was something inexpressibly satisfying in the situation. At last the scientist was free of all suspense. His terrible worries of the past week or so were over. And the Hon. Douglas Singleton felt that glow of warmth which comes to one who has done something really decent. The money was nothing to him, but it would make all the difference between disaster and glorious success for Professor Tucker. For with that money he would be able to demonstrate his apparatus to the satisfaction of the entire world.

Singleton went outside again, intending to return to the West House. The Triangle was dusky, and he noticed one or two groups of juniors hanging about, talking in low voices. Apparently something was in the wind. Otherwise, the fellows would have been in their studies preparing tea.

"What's up?" asked Singleton, approaching a group.

Reggie Pitt turned.

"You know about the meeting, don't you?" he asked.

"Meeting?"

"My dear chap, Quirke."

"Oh, Quirke!" said Singleton, frowning. "You mean that challenge of old Browne's?"

By Jove, yes! Quirke's going to answer it to-night, isn't he? When's the affair due to start?"

"Directly after tea," said Jack Grey. "Personally, I think it's a lot of rot. We all know that Quirke can do marvellous things without any apparatus. Goodness knows how. At one time I didn't believe in sorcery and magic, but Quirke's converted me."

Singleton nodded.

"Quirke's a queer fish," he agreed. "I was one of his most rabid supporters a few days ago, but, somehow, I've got an uncomfortable feeling that he's not absolutely straight."

"Marvellous!" said Pitt sarcastically. "The fellow's as crooked as the footpath through Bellon Wood! He's a twister! He'd led you chaps by the nose for weeks."

"I don't believe it," said Jack Grey obstinately.

"All right—you needn't," smiled Reggie. "You'll know the dire truth very soon now. I forgive you, Jack. I thought better of you, but you have the full pardon of your doting uncle."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" growled Jack. "It's all very well to sneer about Quirke like that, but he's proved himself a magician scores of times. What about that cellar of his?"

"What about it?"

"Hasn't he produced the most marvellous effects in there?"

"He has," said Pitt. "One can but admit it."

"And haven't we examined the cellar?" demanded Grey. "Haven't we found it solid concrete, without a trap-door or a crevice?"

"Alas! it is only too true that the credulous can be easily gulled," sighed Pitt. "I'll admit Quirke's a tricky customer, but if I'm any judge, he'll meet his Waterloo to-night. The climax, my sons, is at hand. In other words, this is where Quirke goes 'phut!'"

Other groups of juniors were discussing the subject in the same strain.

Ezra Quirke had succeeded in gripping a great number of Removites and Fourth-Formers. He had forced them, against their own common sense and better judgment, to believe in him and his occult powers. By actual demonstration he had convinced them that sorcery was no mere fable of the Middle Ages. He had practised the obscure art with astonishing success for weeks. And he claimed that all his effects were produced by magic alone.

An extraordinary number of fellows had fallen under his sway. But through all this period a certain band of die-hards had held out. They included Dick Hamilton, Reggie Pitt, Handforth & Co., Fullwood, Nick Trotwood, and Buster Boots—to say nothing of William Napoleon Browne and Horace

Stevens, or the Fifth. In fact, it must be confessed that Browne was the most prominent figure in this anti-Quirke movement. He had even taken the lead over Nipper's head. And Nipper raised no objection, because the Fifth-Form skipper had come out very strongly.

He had created a sensation the previous evening by giving a wonderful performance of conjuring in the old Ancient House Lecture Hall. Browne's illusions had startled the audience—and he had frankly admitted that they were all tricks. Indeed, he confessed that not one of them was new or novel—but merely the stock-in-trade of the ordinary professional illusionist.

To add to the sensation, Browne had openly challenged Ezra Quirke to produce similar effects in his Cellar of Secrets.

Quirke had been caught in a cleft stick. To refuse the challenge would have been fatal—for his own supporters would have concluded that he was incapable of duplicating Browne's illusions. So Quirke had boldly stated that he would hold a meeting on the following evening.

The time for the great test was near at hand.

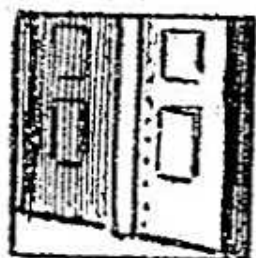
In order to convince his supporters and confound the sceptics, Quirke would have to perform his magic without the aid of any wires, trap-doors, or other apparatus. He had certainly delighted his supporters by insisting upon a preliminary examination of the cellar. He was fearless. He declared that his enemies could make what investigations they pleased. He would triumph over them with supreme ease.

The whole Junior School was in a state of ferment. Quirke's followers were confident of an overwhelming victory. The neutrals were merely curious. But the Compact of Ten was quietly gloating.

They knew something—and their confidence was supreme.

CHAPTER V.

THE CELLAR OF SECRETS.



EZRA QUIRKE smiled with calm confidence.

"There is nothing to fear, my friends," he said. "When I accepted Browne's challenge I did so with a full knowledge of

what it meant. This evening I shall send these sceptics back to their Houses in confusion."

"Rather!" exclaimed Skelton. "You're sure it'll be all right, Quirke?"

"Nothing is more certain," replied the schoolboy magician. "The conditions are very favourable just now. I shall triumph."

"But what about the negative influence?" asked Ellmore anxiously. "There'll be lots of disbelievers in the cellar, Quirke. I hope they won't upset the usual manifestations."

Quirke shook his head.

"My influence is extremely powerful to-day," he replied quietly. "I have a strong feeling within me that nothing whatever can mar my supreme victory. Browne merely presented the usual stage conjuror's illusions. I shall present similar effects—but without the aid of any trickery. Never have I used trap-doors and wires and such-like crudities."

Hubbard nodded.

"No need to tell us that, Quirke, old man," he replied. "We've seen—and we know. You can rely upon us to back you up all through."

Quirke was standing in the East House lobby, surrounded by a group of his most ardent supporters. They were mostly non-entities—fellows who had only recently come into prominence, owing to their pronounced belief in the occult. They had seized the chance of getting into the limelight.

Outside, certain activities were afoot.

It was dark now, and tea was over. It had been a hurried, scrappy meal. For once the fellows had raced over tea—usually the most popular meal of the day, since it was partaken of in the privacy of one's own study. But there was something more important than tea in the wind.

In the Remove and the Fourth, there was such a demand for seats in Quirke's cellar that the audience promised to be altogether too large for the auditorium. So Dick Hamilton, as captain of the Remove, and Boots, as captain of the Fourth, had taken matters firmly in hand.

By a system of drawing lots, they had eliminated the surplus number. The cellar could only hold a certain amount, and all these lucky fellows were now gathering for the fray. The ones who had been left out in the cold could make no fuss, since they had had as fair a chance as the others. A few of Quirke's most faithful supporters had failed to qualify, as it were, and they were particularly disappointed.

There was no doubt, however, that the meeting would be an enthusiastic one. The Remove and the Fourth would be well represented, by fellows who were anti-Quirke and pro-Quirke.

It was distinctly understood that horse-play was barred. Once within the cellar, the juniors must preserve order. A pledge to this effect had been given by everybody. After all, it was only fair that Ezra Quirke should have a full and satisfactory showing. He was to be given every chance to answer William Napoleon Browne's challenge.

As a kind of preliminary, an Investigation Committee was appointed, with Browne to the fore. It was impossible for all the audience to examine the cellar in advance—and unnecessary, too. It would be quite sufficient if the committee pronounced itself satisfied.

"Remember, brothers, that this is a most solemn occasion," Browne was saying. "I beg of you to preserve a calm exterior. Brother Quirke is about to be placed on the carpet. Let us be just—let us be generous. Let us give him every opportunity to extricate himself from the meshes."

"He isn't in any meshes!" sang out Clifton. "He's going to show you bounders up properly this evening!"

"You bet he is!" agreed Griffith.

"That, of course, is as may be," beamed Browne benevolently. "Personally, I venture to suggest that Brother Quirke is now shimmying somewhat like a jelly, in anticipation of the coming holocaust."

"The coming what?" demanded Armstrong.

"It is idle to waste time on explanations," said Browne gently. "Let it be sufficient for me to add that Brother Quirke has already started a spin. Something tells me that it will soon develop into a nose-dive, and a crash will then be inevitable. When one is flying, one must be cautious, and Brother Quirke's present course is undoubtedly carrying him towards a veritable cyclone."

"Dry up, Browne, and do something!" suggested Handforth tartly. "You were pretty wonderful last night, I'll admit, but there's no need to stand there jawing now! What about this investigation?"

"The voice of impatience is heard in the land, so we must hoist up our slacks, and start something," agreed Browne. "Come, brothers, let us seek this wondrous cellar, and make our examination."

The Investigation Committee consisted of eight picked fellows, including Browne, Nipper, Pitt, and one or two other prominent juniors. Ezra Quirke was quite ready, and he led the way to the rear of the East House.

The seniors and some of the prefects had a general idea of what was going on, but they made no attempt to interfere. After all, it was only some nonsense of the juniors, and as long as they didn't make too much noise, no questions were asked.

In one of the rear passages, a door was unlocked, and the committee passed down some stone steps into one of the wide cellars. It was a kind of hall, with a concrete wall in front. In the centre of this wall another door faced the investigators. It was closed, and Quirke produced a Yale key. He inserted it in the lock and turned it.

"You may enter, and examine the cellar from floor to ceiling," he invited. "I have nothing to fear. I employ no tricks, so my mind is perfectly easy. It is only the liar who needs a good memory."

"Singularly apt, Brother Quirke, but it is hardly fair to count one's chickens before they are hatched," observed Browne. "Let me remind you that you have yet to give your performance. Alas, I fear it will be

devoid of those sensational effects for which you are justly famous!"

The committee entered the cellar, and lost no time. Only a single electric light was gleaming, and this was so closely shaded that it gave only a dull glow. But the fellows had come armed with powerful torches, and by the time they had finished their examination, not a single inch of the cellar had escaped their scrutiny.

It was exactly as it had been on former occasions. Except for the black hangings—which were merely for effect—the cellar was composed of solid concrete. Walls, ceiling, and floor were solid beyond doubt. There was no trace of a trap-door—no sign of a hidden retreat. The committee was thoroughly satisfied that the cellar contained nothing of a material nature which could assist Ezra Quirke in the production of an illusion. If he indeed succeeded in his magic, it would be a case of purely occult phenomena.

"You are satisfied?" he asked, as the investigators trooped out.

"Perfectly!" said Nipper, nodding.

"You agree that my cellar is unprepared?"

"I venture to suggest that Mr. Maskelyne himself would have a somewhat murky task in producing a satisfactory manifestation within this apartment of mystery," said Browne calmly. "Proceed, Brother Quirke! Let the revels commence! We are ready to give you your head."

"If I duplicate your illusions of last night you will admit that I am no mere trickster?" asked Quirke.

"We'll not only admit it, but we'll offer our sincere apology," replied Nipper promptly. "So it's up to you, Quirke. Go ahead, and do your stuff—as Adams would aptly term it."

"Remember, Brother Quirke, your reputation depends upon this meeting," said Brown warningly. "Failure to produce the desired effect will lead to certain disaster. Success will earn you a special medal, which I will have cast out of my own pocket. So do what you can. Call upon your friends of the Outer Darkness to rally round. I assure you you will need them."

Quirke smiled.

"You are facetious at the moment, Browne, but this test will lead to my greatest triumph," he said quietly. "You will observe that I am locking the door securely. I hope you are satisfied that no human agency can tamper with the cellar during our brief absence?"

"That's all right," said Handforth. "Let's get upstairs and tell the others. I suppose there'll be no delay? We can have the meeting at once?"

"Immediately," replied Quirke.

The appearance of the Investigation Committee was greeted with eager shouts.

"Any sign of tricks there?"

"Has Quirke got his cellar all faked up?"

"It's all right, you fellows—you can troop in now," called out Nipper. "We've examined the place, and it's barren. If Quirke can give us a show like Browne did, we'll crown him King of the Magicians!"

"Good! Let's get inside!"

And the audience made a bee-line for the fateful cellar.

CHAPTER VI.

NOTHING DOING!



"**H**USH!" "Silence, you chaps!" "Give the fellow a chance!"

The murmur of voices died away, and a tense silence fell. The meeting had just settled down to watch the proceedings. The last member of the audience was in, and the last seat had been taken. The cellar was crowded as it had never been crowded before.

At the end, Ezra Quirke sat in his customary chair. On every side the black hangings were adding an air of mystery to the scene. Overhead gleamed the single electric lamp, shaded and eerie.

"Look at Quirke!" murmured Reggie Pitt softly.

"Yes, he seems a bit uneasy," whispered Dick Hamilton.

There was rather a grim note in his voice. There was certainly something unusual about Quirke. They had been to these meetings before, and the schoolboy magician had always opened the proceedings in a calm, confident manner. He had been calm and confident this evening—to a point. But now that the actual time of the test had arrived, he seemed changed.

Perhaps it was the importance of the occasion—perhaps he was affected by the very nature of this test. Perhaps, even, the necessary concentration was such that he could not conceal his emotion. At all events, he was pale and haggard. A hunted look had crept into his eyes, and he sat there with the air of a trapped animal.

At one time he had even started up, as though to make some protest. This had occurred just after he had entered the cellar—and every member of the Compact of Ten had noted the fact. And every member of the Compact of Ten exchanged significant glances.

Quirke had apparently thought better of his intention, for he was now sitting quietly in his chair. He was engaged in his usual task of concentrating. Nothing could happen until he had gained "touch," as he called it. Before any phenomena could take place, Quirke had to communicate with his ghostly helpers. For he had consistently maintained that his only confederates were those of an intangible, unseen type.

His uneasiness appeared to be increasing. Once or twice he shifted in his chair. He looked round at the black hangings. He breathed hard, and found it impossible to maintain his usual air of immobility.

"I say!" whispered Tommy Watson.

"Eh?" said Nipper, turning.

"Where's the owl?"

"Seems to be missing this evening."

"Can't understand it," murmured Watson. "That giddy owl has always appeared within the first minute or two at other meetings. In some uncanny way, it's flown from behind the curtains."

"Yes!" said Nipper, with a strange note in his voice.

"I expect it'll show up soon," breathed Watson anxiously.

"Somehow, I've got an idea it won't," replied Nipper. "And just look at Quirke! He's not making much progress, is he? He's never kept his audience waiting all this time before."

There were others who were curious, too.

Quirke's close supporters were anxious and worried. They expected their idol to produce something startling within the first minute. They had expected him to confound his critics at the very opening of the meeting. But so far nothing had happened—absolutely nothing. And the audience, which had always been so creepily entertained, grew impatient.

"Buck up, Quirke!"

"Show your speed, old man!"

"Let's have a ghost or two!"

"I beg of you, brothers, to cease this unnecessary disturbance," said Napoleon Browne severely. "We must remember that Brother Quirke has entered upon a task which even Hercules would shiver at. Let him wrestle with it in peace. I have every reason to fear that the undertaking will twist our host into a few knots before he has coped with it."

Quirke suddenly stood up.

"I can do nothing—nothing!" he burst out passionately.

"What?"

"Here, I say, Quirke——"

"Buck up, man!"

"I can do nothing!" repeated Quirke, his voice thick and tense. "There are too many disturbances—too many negative influences at work. The forces of the occult will not assist me."

"Alas!" sighed Browne. "Are we to be disappointed so early?"

Quirke's supporters were dismayed and staggered. But the others—quite a fair proportion of the audience—rose to their feet with considerable indignation and excitement.

"Chuck it, Quirke—you can't fool us with that rot!"

"Not likely!"

"You had plenty of time to beat Browne's illusions!" shouted Boots. "We want to see something!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I tell you the negative influences are too strong!" snarled Quirke desperately.

"Rats! That's a different story to what you told before the meeting!" roared Handforth. "You said you were afraid of nothing! Come on—show us some startling effects, or you'll be exposed as a fraud!"

Quirke was absolutely perspiring with desperation. More than ever, he looked like a trapped animal. There was a wild look in his eyes.

"It's not fair!" he burst out. "This is no test! Browne was permitted to work in silence. And it is more than ever important that I should have similar conditions. I give up the attempt——"

"No—no!" panted Skelton. "You can't do that, Quirke!"

"You've got to go on!" insisted Clifton. "You can't let us down, Quirke! Didn't you tell us you were confident of success? You've got to go through with it now—you'll be ruined if you don't!"

"Silence, you chaps!" shouted Nipper. "Let's give him another chance. How about a limit of five minutes? All sit down, and keep absolutely silent for exactly five minutes. That'll give Quirke a chance to get in touch with the spirits. That's fair, isn't it?"

Skelton nodded excitedly.

"Yes, rather—a jolly sporting offer!" he declared. "Come on, Quirke, you can't jib against that! We'll back you up, old man! Silence for five minutes!"

All Quirke's followers were acutely anxious. The very thought of abandoning the meeting appalled them. They knew that it would mean the utter discrediting of their idol. And Nipper's offer was certainly a sporting one. If Quirke couldn't produce anything within five minutes he would be an obvious fraud.

The meeting settled down, and Quirke resumed his seat. But there was still that same hunted, desperate expression in his eyes. It was as though he knew the end of his career was at hand.

And it was all the more astonishing to his Circle, too, because he had always produced his effects so easily. He couldn't bring forward the excuse of "negative influences." They had been present on other occasions, and the most amazing phenomena had taken place.

It was utterly staggering that he should fail now—at the one meeting where success was vital. It was a test. It was an answer to Browne's challenge. Failure at this meeting would be little short of ruinous.

The silence was oppressive.

True to their word the "negatives" were maintaining utter peace. They were giving Quirke a fair showing. He could not possibly accuse them of wrecking his chances. And Quirke's own crowd knew it. Accordingly they were all the more anxious to see some big results.

The minutes ticked by, so slowly that it seemed more like a quarter of an hour before four minutes had elapsed. And during this time Ezra Quirke had remained as motionless as a stone image. The Compact of Ten watched him with curiously assorted expressions. Reggie Pitt and Nipper were quietly serene. William Napoleon Browne was amused. Handforth was on the verge of gloating. But all the other members of the audience were tense and mystified.

Just as the time-limit was up a queer little flash came into Quirke's eyes. He rose to his feet with compressed lips.

"You're beaten, Quirke!" sang out somebody.

"One moment!" panted Quirke. "You will have observed that my owl is absent. My failure is due to that fact——"

"Oh!"

"You may not believe me, but I can but state the fact," continued Quirke steadily. "The owl is unwell, unable to leave its home at the top of the East Tower. It possesses even more power than I—the power of Black Magic. Without the owl I am helpless. I must ask you to regard the meeting as over."

"Rats!" shouted Hubbard. "We've always supported you, but I'm blowed if I'm going to take that as an excuse!"

"Not likely!" agreed Armstrong. "If the owl's possessed of all that power why the dickens can't it heal itself? You've failed, Quirke. You've let us down!"

Browne rose to his feet.

"One moment, brothers," he said smoothly. "It seems to be indicated that a certain explanation is necessary. Allow me to step into the breach and give the cause of Brother Quirke's lamentable failure!"

Quirke looked at Browne, startled and numbed.

"You—you don't mean——" he gasped.

"Unhappily, yes," sighed Browne. "I fear, Brother Quirke, the time has arrived for the sordid truth. Seldom in the course of a varied career have I seen a fellow hovering so near the edge of the oxtail!"

CHAPTER VII.

A STARTLING SURPRISE.



EZRA QUIRKE started forward, as pale as a sheet.

"Stop!" he breathed. "Let me explain! Why, what— Let me go! What does this mean?"

Quietly, insidiously, four juniors had surrounded him. They were Handforth, Church, McClure, and Buster Boots. They

ranged themselves on either side, so that escape was impossible.

"Better not make any fuss, my lad," said Handforth grimly. "We're here to guard you. There's no escape. You've got to stand by while all these chaps learn the truth. By George! You're in for a hot time!"

Quirke seemed about to fight, but he checked himself.

"I can do nothing against this exhibition of force!" he muttered feebly.

The fellow seemed absolutely stunned. Hitherto his manner had been conspicuous by its calm confidence. But now he realised that the climax was at hand. And escape was certainly out of the question. Every step he took was accompanied by his four guards.

He had failed.

In front of his own supporters, in front of a representative gathering, he had succeeded in producing precisely nil. All his boasted powers had failed him at the crucial test.

And his supporters were not only anxious, but suspicious. At last the seed of doubt had taken root in their minds. Was it possible that they had been fooled, after all? Was it conceivable that Quirke had used trickery at his other meetings? But how? That was the vital question—how?

"Let me plead for calmness and composure," said Browne. "If this investigation is to be conducted satisfactorily, we must have no unseemly rioting. I beseech you, brothers, to keep cool. Follow me, and I will remove the film from your poor, deluded eyes."

"Look here, Browne——"

"Patience!" interrupted Browne. "In one minute you will know all."

Nipper and Pitt were already at the door, and the gathering trooped out into the outer cellar. Brilliant electric lights were blazing here, in strange contrast to the gloom within the cellar.

The audience was mystified. Why should it be necessary to go out at all? What could Browne explain out here?

The last fellow emerged, and the door was closed. It snapped to with "the decisive click of the Yale lock."

"Observe!" said Browne impressively.

"I say, Browne, chuck it!" protested Hubbard. "This isn't a time for fooling about. There's nothing to be seen out here."

"Of course there isn't."

"Let's go back into the cellar again and examine it."

"Hear, hear!"

"Such a course will be fruitless," said Browne patiently. "I am aware that this suspense is somewhat trying——"

"Why do you take notice of this madman?" demanded Quirke passionately. "You

all know that Browne is a joker. He is never serious—he is never in earnest. This is merely a dodge on his part to discredit me. I want you all to disperse, and give me another chance to-morrow night."

"You've failed, Quirke!"

"I will admit it!" shouted Quirke. "But I only ask for this one concession. To-morrow night I will make amends. Go! I cannot always induce the elements to come to my aid——"

"That's reasonable enough," put in Skelton eagerly. "Why not wait?"

"Pretty ingenious, Quirke, but it won't do," said Nipper grimly. "We can't do any waiting. We knew you'd produce nothing in that cellar, and we know the whole bag of tricks. So why delay? These other chaps may as well know the truth at once. Go ahead, Browne."

"Yes, we will certainly go ahead," nodded Browne. "I deprecate these interruptions and disturbances. As I mentioned once before, brothers, observe!"

There was not much to observe, for Browne switched off the lights, and plunged the outer cellar into darkness. He thudded heavily upon one of the concrete walls with a small mallet, keeping his other hand over the switches. There was a confusion of shouts.

"What's the idea, Browne?"

"Turn the lights on, you Fifth Form ass!"

"It is a trick!" came Quirke's voice. "You must take action, you must seize this madman, and——"

"Peace citizens!" interrupted Browne. "While regretting this slight delay, it is nevertheless necessary. I assure you this is no attempt at theatrical effect. Just a few moments—— Ah! The welcome signal! We will illuminate the scene once more."

The switches clicked, and the outer cellar became flooded with light again. The Compact of Ten had fitted up two or three extra lamps, although nobody had known of these until they were switched on. Previously this outer cellar had been rather dim, with only a solitary lamp of modest power.

"Well, I'm blessed if I can spot your game, Browne!" said Armstrong, looking round. "Nothing's happened. I thought you were going to surprise us, by the tone of your voice."

There was nothing for the juniors to see. The outer cellar remained the same. Apparently the lights had been extinguished for no good purpose. But William Napoleon Browne was looking serene. He was in his element in an affair of this kind.

"Much as I hate to bother you, Brother Quirke, may I crave the loan of your Yale key?" he asked calmly. "I have come to

the conclusion that it will be an excellent scheme to enter the cellar."

Quirke started.

"No!" he panted. "You shall not have it. Are you going to stand this?" he went on, appealing to the others. "Browne is fooling; he is making a laughing-stock of you. You have just left the cellar, and you know that it is barren of trickery. Why go back?"

It seemed a reasonable argument, and the crowd growled.

"We're fed-up with you, Browne!" snorted Hubbard. "Look here, Armstrong, why don't you do something?"

"Alas, I fear that patience is a little known virtue among the youthful!" sighed Browne. "I take it, Brother Quirke, that you decline to produce your Yale key?"

"You shall not have it!" declared Quirke tensely.

"In that event I must use my own," said Browne deprecatingly. "A pity, but we must bear these blows with fortitude—"

"Your OWN?" shouted Quirke. "You have got no—"

"A thousand pardons, but allow me to disillusion you," interrupted the lanky Fifth-Former.

He strode to the door of Quirke's cellar, slipped a key in the lock, and turned it. It was the key which Dick Hamilton had made some days earlier from a wax impression, obtained from Quirke's own key by a trick. The Compact of Ten had used that key at the time, but had made no enlightening discoveries.

The cellar door opened, and Browne stood aside.

"While my myrmidons retain their clutch on Brother Quirke, I urge the rest of you to enter the cellar, and take your former seats," said Browne smoothly. "Nay, ask no questions! Above all, make no individual investigations. Leave it all to me. Walk in, gentlemen, and assort yourselves in the original formation. You may take it as absolutely official that the feverish suspense is now near its climax."

The juniors, thoroughly mystified, were nevertheless impressed by Browne's tone. They were even more impressed by Ezra Quirke's obvious alarm. But Quirke could do nothing—his guards held him tightly.

"Oh, well, might as well go in, I suppose," said Armstrong gruffly. This business of entering and re-entering the cellar had been done on several previous occasions—but nothing had ever come of it.

Everybody trooped in, and took their former seats. They half expected to see something different in there, but there was no change. The same shaded light, the same draperies, and all the rest of the stuff.

Browne entered, and Quirke was left in the doorway, in charge of Handforth and the other warders.

"You are all assuming that there is nothing to be gained by an examination of this cellar," observed Browne calmly. "Many of you have been behind these black hangings. All members of the Investigation Committee will vouch for the fact that the hangings conceal nothing but bare concrete walls."

"That's right," said Griffith. "There is nothing in here, Browne."

"No?" smiled the Fifth-Former. "Allow me to differ."

With one sweep he wrenched down the black hangings on the right-hand wall. Ezra Quirke uttered a choking sort of cry. The rest of the audience started to its feet in amazement. Every one of them would have wagered a term's pocket-money that there was nothing behind the black curtain except a bare wall.

But as the curtain came down, a big space was revealed—a deep section of the cellar which had hitherto been unknown. And at the same moment a powerful electric light snapped on, revealing cabinets, strange contrivances of metal rods, and many other forms of apparatus which were instantly recognisable as the stock-in-trade of a professional illusionist.

"Here, brothers, you will observe Brother Quirke's allies of the mystic world," said Browne calmly. "Are they not pretty to look upon?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EXPOSURE.



FOR a moment or two there was a silence.

The juniors were stunned by this dramatic revelation. It seemed impossible—absurd! They had examined this cellar before, and they had known that those black hangings concealed nothing but solid concrete walls. Yet here was this big space—filled with conjuring apparatus! And there was a door, too—just an ordinary door, leading, apparently, to another cellar.

How could such a thing as this be explained?

Finding it impossible to reconcile the facts, a great many juniors seized upon the one obvious truth. It stood out like a beacon. Ezra Quirke was exposed as a hollow fraud!

"He's a fake—he's a swindler!" shouted Skelton. "Look there! There's that cabinet he used in one of his tricks—and there's a couch, with metal rods sticking out of it,

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and a kind of machine behind it! That's how he did that levitation stunt!"

"The chap's a rotten spoofer!"

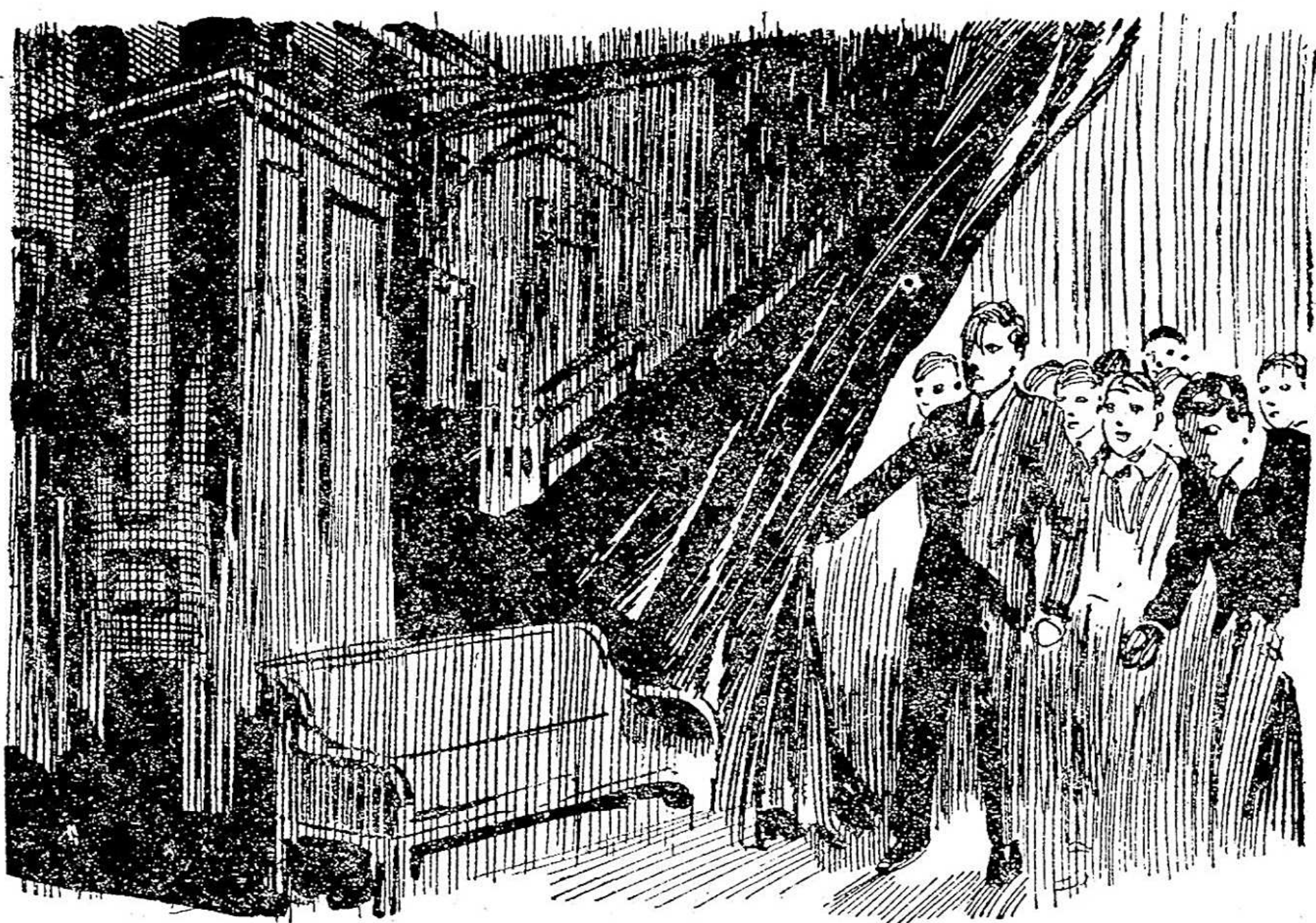
"What about this?" asked Nipper, pulling back the carpet, and exposing a trapdoor in the floor. "No concrete here, eh? Just an ordinary trapdoor!"

"But—but we've examined this cellar lots of times!" gasped Watson. "There was no trapdoor then! It was all solid concrete!"

"Absolutely!" nodded Archie Glenthorne. "Odds spooks and swindles! The good old bean is buzzing somewhat noisily! I mean to say, it seems to me that there's dashed

"It is scarcely necessary to go into a long and detailed account of Brother Quirke's various illusions," he said. "You all saw my masterly efforts last night, but I have not explained them. They are merely produced by cleverly devised mechanism, such as any reputable firm will provide. This is no time to disclose such childish secrets. Let it suffice to know that every trick was a commonplace dodge of the professional conjuror. Trapdoors, faked tables and cabinets—all had their share in the magical triumphs."

"We understand that now," said Skelton furiously. "Think of it, you chaps! Quirke's



"Here, brothers, you will observe Brother Quirke's allies of the mystic world," said Browne calmly. "Are they not pretty to look upon?"

discrepancy, what? Ridic, of course, but this isn't the same dashed cellar!"

"Good old Archie!" grinned Nipper. "He doesn't boast much about his brains, but he's got more than anybody!"

"Brother Glenthorne has undoubtedly smote the nail on the head," agreed Browne. "This must unquestionably be chalked up!"

"Not the same cellar!" yelled Griffith. "But we came in the same door!"

"I will grant you that——"

"Besides, these forms are the same, and the chairs, and table—everything's the same!" panted Skelton. "Oh, corks! I'm all muddled! I can't understand what the dickens has happened!"

Browne held up his hand for silence.

fooled us all along the line! We took him for a sorcerer—we believed him when he said he was a genuine magician! And he's a rotten fraud all the time!"

"It wouldn't matter if he'd been like old Browne—a professed conjuror," roared Armstrong. "But he's made us a laughing-stock! Come on! Grab him! We'll show him——"

"Wait—wait!" urged Browne. "You may slaughter Brother Quirke later on; but for the moment I claim your attention. You are all puzzled regarding this cellar. But, in reality, it is just as simple a trick as any of the others. As Brother Glenthorne has brainily remarked, we are not in the apartment which Brother Quirke has so repeatedly

urged us to investigate. Come with me, and all will be made clear."

They trooped out of the cellar again, Ezra Quirke still in the grip of his guards. The exposed "magician" was looking dazed now. He was stunned by the shock of his dramatic downfall.

"Perhaps I'd better do a little explaining now," said Nipper briskly. "The whole secret you chaps, is in this doorway. It's the most ingenious dodge you ever heard of. You'll notice that the door and the surrounding frame project more than usual. Nothing particularly suspicious in that—it only looks like a peculiarity of construction. But now watch closely."

He rapped sharply on the solid concrete to the left of the door—which was now closed. Almost immediately a section of the wall, about four feet wide and the same height as the door frame, separated itself and slid behind the door, as though on rollers. An entirely new opening was revealed. And then Nipper seized the door frame, and heaved.

It rolled noiselessly over the opening, covering it completely, and coming to a halt with a little thud. Everybody watched, fascinated. The wall was now apparently as solid as ever—for that slab of concrete which had moved had filled up the space left vacant by the door and the frame.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Armstrong, staring.

"You see, the door's in a different position now, but in this big wall it isn't noticeable unless you know about it," said Nipper. "I pride myself on having a pretty keen sense of observation, but I'll confess I never noticed any difference in the position of this doorway until I had reason to suspect a trick dodge."

"But—but—" began Griffith.

"You can go into that cellar if you like, but it's quite unnecessary," said Nipper, throwing open the door. "It looks exactly like the other one—the same hangings, the same chairs, the same in every detail. At least, it's the same until one starts investigating."

"But why on earth didn't we spot this before?" asked Armstrong.

"Because it defied all the usual methods of investigation," replied Nipper. "You see, we never started any examination until we were actually inside the cellar. And therefore we only found concrete walls and floor. It was the outside that needed a close scrutiny. But who would have dreamed of looking out here when all our suspicions were centred on the inner cellar? Once through that doorway, you can investigate with hammers and chisels and searchlights, and you'll find nothing suspicious."

"You will also recollect a certain occasion when we laid traps within the cellar," observed Browne drily. "Alas! Wasted labour! Did we not fix various tin pans, stretched cottons, and so forth? All to no purpose! And quite naturally—since when

Quirke performed his magic, he used the other cellar!"

"And we sealed up the door, too," grinned Reggie Pitt. "Remember that time we put seals all over it? Naturally, we took it for granted that nothing had been touched, because we found the seals intact. How the dickens were we to guess that the door and the frame could be shifted bodily?"

"But how the dickens does it work?" demanded Freeman. "Who shifted that chunk of concrete just now?"

Nipper grinned, and rapped on the wall again. The sliding concrete came into operation again, and Nicodemus Trotwood emerged. Nobody had noticed that he had been absent during the earlier proceedings.

"Everything all serene?" he asked genially.

"Trotty, by Jove!"

"What the dickens—"

"We left Trotty in charge behind the scenes," explained Nipper. "Quirke's usual confederates happen to be absent, so everything went wrong for him. There's something pretty deep behind all this, you chaps—deeper than you think. You mustn't imagine that Quirke fixed up all these trappings."

"It must have cost an awful lot of money!" said Skelton, in a scared voice.

"Nothing under a hundred pounds—and probably a lot more," agreed Dick Hamilton. "You see, originally, this was just an ordinary doorway leading into the second cellar. But two complete concrete walls have been built—extra ones. This had the effect of dividing the cellar into two, leaving the pair of them identical—but only when the hangings were in position. That's why we never suspected anything. I can't explain when these extra walls were built, but we shall probably know sooner or later."

He pulled out a notebook and a pencil. "Look here," he went on, "I'll just scrawl a rough chart of the East House cellar plan. There are three cellars in addition to this lobby place. You've always thought there was only one—but there are three. If you glance at these charts, you'll find out the thing in a tick. Chart A shows the cellars as they were originally built. Chart B shows the alteration. The figures 1 and 2 indicate the added walls. That curly dotted line is an indication of the black curtains. You'll see that both cellars look exactly the same from within the curtained space.*

The juniors had no difficulty in grasping the cunning nature of the plan, and after looking at the charts, they examined the two cellars afresh. They were particularly interested in this sliding section of concrete.

When in position, it was impossible to detect the place where it joined the actual wall—particularly in the dim light which

* See diagram on page 21.

had always prevailed. Concrete walls of this type invariably show the ridges of the planking which is used in the course of construction. Outer walls, of course, are smoothed over and painted or distempered. But down here, in the cellars, the concrete had been left in a rougher state.

And that false piece of wall had been so made that the join coincided with a ridge. Under close examination it was revealed. But that was just the point. The investigators had never examined this lobby before. They had always confined their attentions to the cellar itself. And there was nothing within that apartment to give the show away. For, of course, they had always been permitted by Quirke to enter the duplicate cellar—the one that was safe.

It was found that the trap-door in the secret cellar led into a kind of pit, which, in turn, communicated with the adjoining cellar. All manner of trick devices were found. The juniors had no desire to find out how they worked. It was quite sufficient for them to know that Quirke was a fraud.

And Quirke wasn't going to get off scot-free, either!

CHAPTER IX.

THE BROKEN SPELL.



“OUT of the way, Handy!”
— “None of your rot, Buster!”
“Let's get at him!”

Led by Armstrong, a crowd of incensed Fourth-Formers surged round Ezra Quirke and his guards. There was no denying them. Without the slightest question, they meant grim business.

“Steady!” said Handforth gruffly. “We've got to keep Quirke under our eye, so don't start any—”

“Rats! We're going to scrag him!”

“Yes, rather!”

All the furious Fourth-Formers were Quirke's former supporters. Those fellows who had been his staunchest allies an hour ago were now his bitterest enemies. It was just the effect of reaction.

The juniors who had always suspected Quirke were not particularly angry with him. They just felt immensely pleased with themselves for having seen through the trickster all the time.

But the others—the members of Quirke's special circle—were literally after his blood. The fact that he had used duplicate cellars—that he had fooled them all along the line—drove them into a frenzy of excited anger. Even Singleton was enraged. Of late, he had suspected Quirke, but he had never dreamed of such a conspiracy as this. It was obvious to Singleton that

Quirke's game was much deeper than the majority of the fellows believed.

“I beseech you, brothers, to calm down,” shouted Browne. “Allow us to keep charge of Brother Quirke for the time being. Later on you may have his body, and you may tear him limb from limb to your heart's content. But at the moment I must insist—”

“Rot! We're going to have him!”

And, with a yell of triumph, the crowd seized Ezra Quirke, and his guards were helpless. There was no controlling this excited mob of disillusioned Fourth-Formers.

In the midst of a yelling horde, Quirke was whirled up the cellar steps, out into the corridor, and so on until the Triangle was reached. Fellows came out of the other Houses, wondering what the commotion was about. There were many inquiries as to the exact nature of the murder.

Masters and prefects were ignored, and for a hectic five minutes, Ezra Quirke had a vague idea that he would never come through alive. He was compelled to run the gauntlet, he was frog's-marched round the Triangle twice, and then, as a final touch, half a dozen fellows swung him to and fro in the vicinity of the fountain-pool.

“One—two—three!” roared Armstrong. “Go!”

Quirke flew into the air like a stone from a catapult. He described an erratic arc, his arms and legs waving wildly. Then he descended with a dull, sickening splash into the very centre of the pool.

“At last we observe Brother Quirke fairly up to his neck in the clear,” remarked Browne benevolently. “I deprecate this scene of violence, but one must observe that justice is merely being ladled out.”

Quirke managed to crawl out of the pool, looking more like a drowned rat than a human being. He was permitted to find his way indoors, and the excited crowds dispersed, breaking up into knots.

Of course, the whole school knew the facts within five minutes. The seniors didn't take much notice, because they never believed all the impossible stories of Quirke's powers. But the juniors of all Houses were full of the thing. It was a sensation of the first magnitude.

To Quirke's infinite relief, his guards no longer haunted him. Once in his dormitory, he changed into dry clothing, and then sped downstairs. He was aching in every limb, and he felt exhausted—but there was a light of tense anxiety in his eyes.

The shock of exposure had come upon him so unexpectedly that he was still partially dazed. He knew that the entire Junior School was still agog. And it would only be a matter of time before the story reached the ears of the masters—and then the Head. And Quirke seemed even more anxious than the occasion demanded.

He rushed to his study, escaping recapture by mere inches—for there were still plenty of fellows who were anxious to keep the ball rolling. He slammed his door and locked it. One glance told him that he was alone. He pulled out a key, and unlocked one of the drawers of his desk.

And from his drawer he produced a small private telephone—of a type that is used in City offices, to communicate from one room to another. He pressed a bell-push just inside the drawer and waited.

"Hallo!" he muttered tensely. "Hallo! It doesn't seem to— The line's dead—absolutely dead!"

He dropped the receiver with a dull kind of fear. Without question, the line was dead—and it could only mean that the wire was cut. Yet he had absolutely relied upon that telephone for a fixed, definite purpose—a purpose that was acutely vital.

"They've done everything—everything!" panted Quirke, actual fear alight in his eyes. "The hounds! I'm done!"

He closed the drawer and relocked it. Then, with compressed lips, he opened the door and came to a dead halt, staring. Just outside were six Remove fellows. They appeared to be engaged in casual conversation. But when Ezra Quirke took a step out they all moved nearer.

He slammed the door and locked it again.

"A prisoner!" he breathed. "Trapped!" Desperately, he rushed to the window. He knew what to expect—and wasn't disappointed. Dimly visible in the square were six other Removites. There was no doubt that Quirke was a captive in his own study.

He savagely pulled the curtains over and sank back into a chair. His pale face became even more sallow. His frightened expression changed to a look of hopeless resignation. All the fire and spirit seemed to have died out of him. He was done.

"It's the end," he muttered huskily. "The end!"

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER DRAMATIC DEVELOPMENT.



THE HON. DOUGLAS SINGLETON glanced at his watch.

"Twenty-five past," he murmured, with a nod. "H'm! I'd better find old Pippy and take him along to

the professor's study. We might as well be there on the stroke of time."

In the excitement, Singleton had been carried away by the rush of things. He hadn't forgotten his appointment with the professor—it was impossible to forget such a vital appointment as that—but he was in a bit of a tumult. His recent suspicions regarding Ezra Quirke were becoming decidedly grim.

For some few days he had had an idea that Quirke was a fraud and that his crystal gazing, and his other pretences of magic were a mere cloak to conceal his real purpose.

And what was his real purpose?

Undoubtedly, decided Singleton, to root out Professor Sylvester Tucker's secret! More than once Quirke had seen extraordinary things in his crystal connected with the professor. He had, indeed, gained a certain measure of Singleton's confidence. But the Hon. Douglas had always been guarded—he had never once revealed the secret, or the nature of his association with the professor. Quirke had pumped him in vain.

But Singleton was beginning to see things now.

Everything was becoming clear to him. In fact, the sequence of events was obvious. Quirke, of course was in league with grown-up confederates. They were the mysterious helpers who had assisted him in his Cellar of Secrets. And their real motive was not to convert the juniors to occultism, but to get hold of Professor Tucker's invention! And they had been trying to use Singleton as a tool! The Hon. Douglas was startled when he came to this conclusion—which seemed to him the only possible one.

"Well, anyhow, they're dished now!" he muttered. "Nicely dished! Quirke will probably get the sack to-morrow—the Head's bound to hear of all this conspiracy. And the old professor will have that money, and his invention will be safe."

There was a good deal of satisfaction in this thought. Singleton wandered into the Remove passage of the West House, and entered Study S. By this time most of the excitement had died down, and the Houses were quiet. Lord Pippinton was at home.

He was sitting before the fire, gazing dreamily into the glowing embers. He didn't look up as Singleton came in.

"Oh, here you are, Pippy," said the visitor. "Pull yourself together, old man, and come with me. This is an important occasion."

Lord Pippinton took no notice.

"Hang it all, Pippy, jump out of that trance of yours!" said Singleton. "Can't you hear me? Wake up, ass!"

"Oh!" said old Pippy. "What? Eh? By Jove, it's Duggy! I didn't see you, old boy. Duggy, by Jove! What is it? I was just thinking of— No, I wasn't."

"It isn't necessary for you to think, old man—you haven't got the machinery, anyhow," said Singleton briskly. "It's about that ten thousand quid."

Lord Pippinton winced.

"Oh, I say!" he protested. "You haven't come here to talk of money?"

"You haven't forgotten that ten thou., I suppose?"

"Have I?"

"Have you what?"

"My dear old Duggy, change the subject!" said his lordship. "I've only been here two days, and every time you see me, you talk of money, or some foul subject of that kind, or sort, or order. It's too bad!"

"But you got ten thousand pounds from the bank this morning."

"Did I?" asked Lord Pippinton, with a start. "I say, I must be one of those blokes who do things without knowing it. Fancy going to the dashed bank and getting money, and forgetting all about it!"

"I'm not going to argue," said Singleton patiently. "You signed that cheque in my presence, and you saw me fill it in. Now you've got to come with me and see exactly what's happening to the money. This is a straightforward business deal, and there's going to be no backing out."

"Oh, really!" protested his lordship. "Must I come, Duggy? Can't you do all this horrible thing without me? I'm not feeling well. As a matter of fact, I'm not feeling well. What?"

Singleton wasted no further time. He was late for his appointment already. He seized old Pippy firmly by the arm, and hustled him out of the study. The school-boy millionaire didn't mind. He went quite meekly. Once on the move, he was resigned to anything that might occur. And almost before he knew it, he was in the Ancient House.

They went straight upstairs to Professor Tucker's private rooms, and Singleton tapped on the door.

"Come in—come in!" came the professor's invitation. "Ah, Mr. Pringle, this is splendid—Eh? What's this? How dare you burst in here—" The professor paused, and glared at the two juniors. Obviously he had been expecting somebody else.

"That's just what I say!" exclaimed Lord Pippinton stoutly. "How dare we, what? Duggy, we'd better retire. This venerable old bloke looks somewhat antagonistic. What about an orderly retreat?"

"It's all right, sir," said Singleton. "Don't take any notice of Lord Pippinton. He can't really help it, sir."

"No," said old Pippy. "Rather not! I mean, what? I say, Duggy, isn't that a bit personal? Or isn't it? I don't know. Just as you like, old boy."

"Oh!" said Professor Tucker, adjusting his spectacles. "Why, of course! I beg your pardon, boys—forgive me! Come in. Singleton—come in! And you, too, my young friend! This, I take it, is the junior to whom you referred earlier?"

"Yes, sir," said Singleton. "Lord Pippinton."

"Indeed?" said the professor, raising his eyebrows. "I really shouldn't have thought—But no matter. I am delighted to

meet you, young man!" he said, pumping Lord Pippinton's arm. "You know the facts, of course? No words of mine can express my true feelings."

Lord Pippinton looked rather blank.

"Yes, of course," he said vaguely. "Feelings, what? I don't absolutely grasp—"

"Are you not the young gentleman who has invested ten thousand pounds—"

Old Pippy gave a pained cry.

"Oh, I say, sir!" he protested. "I mean! Really! Isn't it a bit rough on a chap when you talk about cash? I've heard nothing else—"

"He's very modest, sir," interposed Singleton. "He doesn't like you to say anything about that money. In fact, it makes him feel fearfully uncomfortable. He'd much rather you didn't refer to it at all."

"Then in that case—"

The professor paused as a tap sounded on the door. Singleton strode across, and threw it open. A stranger was standing outside—an elderly, benevolent man with iron-grey hair and a scrubby moustache.

"Professor Tucker?" he asked mildly.

"Come in, sir," invited Singleton. "Yes, Professor Tucker's here. I suppose you're Mr. Pringle, sir?"

"I regret to say so," replied the stranger. "Good evening, Professor Tucker. Unfortunately, Mr. Pringle is most unwell, and I have come in his stead. I am Mr. Ward—of the firm of Pringle, Pringle & Ward."

Professor Tucker glanced at Mr. Ward sharply, and nodded.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "It makes no difference, of course. Why should it? One lawyer is just the same as another lawyer. I trust Mr. Pringle has acquainted you with the full facts?"

Mr. Ward entered, removed his overcoat, and sat down.

"Precisely," he replied. "Yes, professor, I know the exact nature of this little commission. It is in connection with a sum of twenty thousand pounds. You are receiving it from these two young gentlemen? They are, in fact, investing this money in your wonderful healing apparatus?"

Professor Tucker nodded.

"I am glad that you have all the facts at your finger-tips, Mr. Ward," he said. "All matters of business confuse me. I detest them, sir. But they must be seen to, I suppose—we can't neglect such duties. I only trust that we shall get the details over as quickly as possible."

"They won't take longer than five minutes, sir," said Mr. Ward briskly. "I have all the documents ready. We only need one or two signatures to put everything in order."

He fussed about with his bag, producing important-looking papers, and the Hon. Douglas watched with interest. Lord Pippinton was standing quite still, gazing at

nothing. Until shaken into consciousness again, he was just as good as asleep.

"We have the money here?" asked Mr. Ward, looking up.

"Yes, yes, of course," replied the professor, unlocking the cash-box and producing the notes. "I would not, however, take actual possession of it until you were present, Mr. Ward. It is necessary to be very cautious—very cautious indeed. When one is dealing with such a large sum, one must be careful."

"Quite true, professor," nodded Mr. Ward. "You have agreed to accept this sum? That is quite certain?"

"The boys insist that I shall do so," replied the old scientist. "I must confess I do not relish the idea, but it means everything in the world to me. I shall certainly accept the money."

Mr. Ward took the bundle of notes, and glanced through them with a professional air. Then he stuffed them into his pocket, and rose to his feet.

"It'll come as a bit of a shock to you, Jim Roach, but the game's up!" he said calmly, and with a different note in his voice. "I've got a warrant for your arrest, and—"

Professor Tucker started back with a hoarse cry. He leapt to his feet with such violence that his chair crashed over backwards. His lined face was flushed with sudden alarm.

"Are you mad?" he gasped hoarsely.

"Not bad, Jim, but it doesn't affect me in the least," said the other coolly. "I don't think you've ever had the displeasure of meeting me before? I'm Detective-sergeant Melrose, of Scotland Yard. The game's up, old man, and you'd better take it quietly!"

CHAPTER XI.

ANOTHER STAGGERER.



FOR a few seconds there was dead silence.

The Hon. Douglas Singleton was so bewildered that his brain was in a whirl. For a moment he wondered if

he was dreaming. Professor Tucker arrested! It seemed incredible—impossible!

Lord Pippinton was quite unaffected. He was still looking at nothing, and even the crashing over of the professor's chair had only momentarily jerked him out of his trance.

Professor Tucker was standing there, breathing hard. His glasses had fallen off, and he was gripping the edge of the desk tightly. And a dull look of bitterness had crept into his eyes.

"You infernal spoil-sport!" he ejaculated disgustedly, his whole voice changed—his

manner completely altered. "By glory! I thought I had got everything fixed this time—and you butt in at the last minute! Absolutely the last minute. Twenty thousand! What a cursed shame!"

"It's a bit rough, Jim—but you've got to expect these little surprises," said Detective Melrose. "I'd better give you the usual warning that anything you say will be taken down, and may be used in evidence against you. All right, chief!" he added loudly.

The door opened, and Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of the C.I.D., strode briskly in. Singleton knew the inspector well, and he started forward, jerked out of his dumb amazement.

"There's some mistake!" he panted. "Look here, Mr. Lennard, Professor Tucker's all right! We're letting him have the money willingly——"

"Steady, young man—steady," interrupted the chief inspector gruffly. "Take my advice and keep in the background. Things aren't exactly what you think they are."

He pushed past Singleton, and glanced quickly from his subordinate to Professor Tucker.

"Taking it quietly, Jim?" he asked drily. "That's the best way. The world's using you pretty badly, eh? Haven't seen you for two years—since that Birmingham affair. Remember the dance you led me?"

"What's the use?" grunted the professor, his entire manner different. "Ye gods! And I've worked on this thing for weeks and months! It makes a man sick! How in the name of wonder did you get on to me?"

"Wasn't it a bit risky coming right here—under the nose of Mr. Nelson Lee?" asked Lennard. "I'm surprised at you, Jim! I gave you credit for better judgment!"

"I didn't know he was here until I got everything fixed," growled the other. "Besides, I thought he was retired——"

"He's just about as much retired as I am," interrupted the inspector. "Melrose, you'd better take him to his bed-room, and wait while he shifts all that make-up. We're going to take you back to-night, Jim. We've got a car waiting outside. It may interest you to know that two of your pals are already enjoying our hospitality."

"I knew there was something wrong!" growled Jim Roach, between his teeth. "I knew there was something wrong directly Melrose walked into the room. I was expecting Pringle——"

"You mean Gentleman Bob?"

"What does it matter?" demanded Roach. "Of course, you nabbed him first? It's a pity I didn't know Melrose by sight. I'd have tricked the whole crowd of you, in spite of your precautions!"

"That's why I sent Melrose in first," said the chief inspector. "Oh, hallo! The more the merrier!"

He turned towards the door as two other figures appeared. The Hon. Douglas was shaking with emotion. He was moved to the core by this staggering shock. Never for a second had he dreamed that he had been victimised by a professional criminal! Never for an instant had it occurred to him that the man he took for Professor Tucker was one of the cleverest confidence tricksters known to Scotland Yard! That, however, was the reputation of Mr. James Roach.

Even Lord Pippinton was beginning to grasp the fact that something very unusual was taking place. He was just beginning to realise that it wouldn't be a bad idea to concentrate on the thing.

"This way, professor," came a voice. Singleton fairly jumped.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"So I see," he replied. "We left it until the last moment, Roach, because it was necessary to catch you with the money actually in your possession. This is the man, Professor Tucker," he added. "I am thankful to say that the whole unfortunate business is now over."

The genuine Professor Tucker frowned.

"I am glad to hear it!" he said tartly. "Good gracious! What an extraordinary likeness! I trust, however, my features are not quite so lined as this man's? Good gracious! The impudence! How dare you, sir? How dare you play this scoundrelly trick?"

"You've got nothing to grumble at," retorted Roach. "You were well looked after,

CHART 'A'

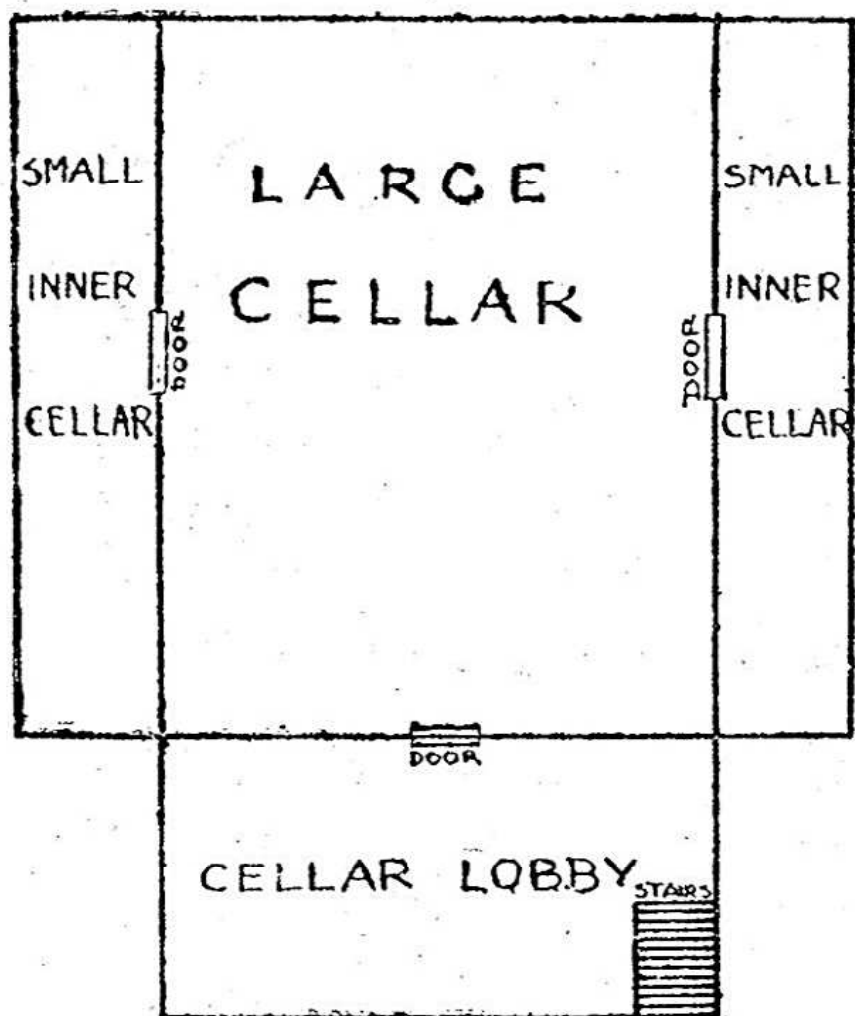
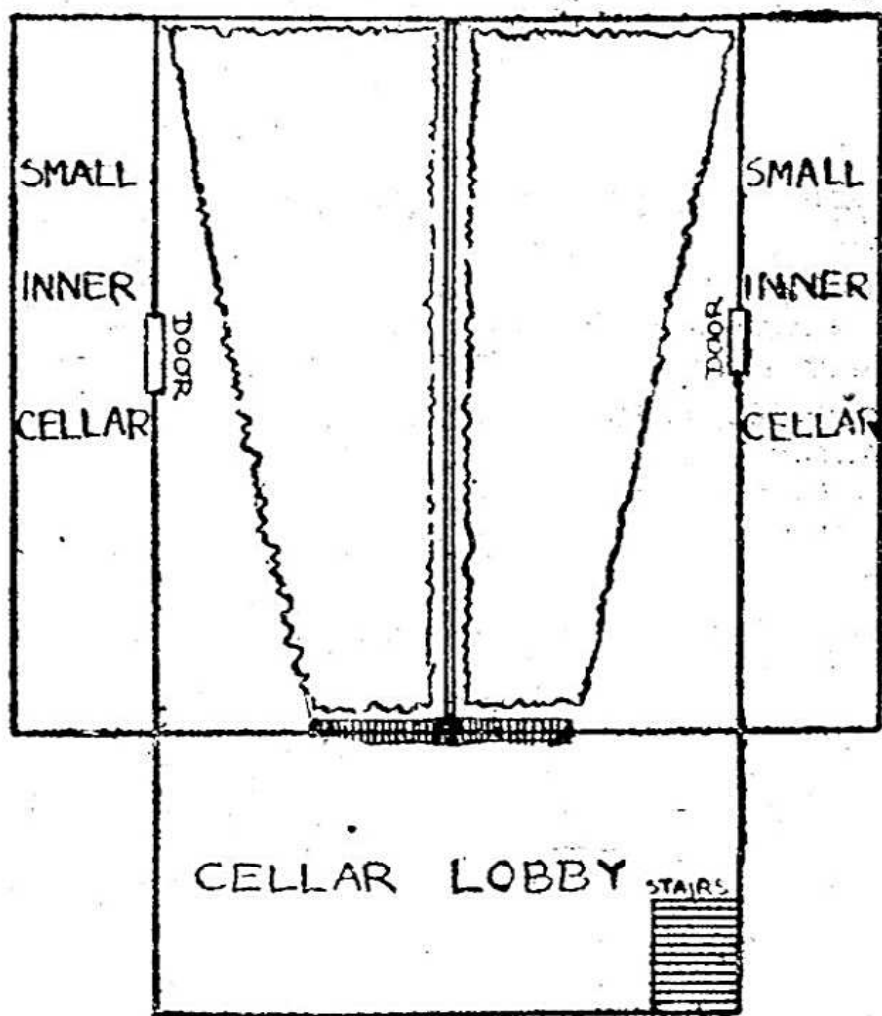


CHART 'B'



Reference to the above diagrams is given on page 16.

Nelson Lee entered the room, accompanied by no less a person than Professor Sylvester Tucker. It was a dramatic moment. Singleton gazed from one Professor Tucker to the other, and marvelled at the consummate cleverness of the man who had carried on the impersonation.

Roach was careless now—he had thrown aside the mannerisms he had practised for so many weeks. Even so, his resemblance to the real Professor Tucker was little short of marvellous. Singleton was no fool, and he was grasping the full truth of the situation.

"Then it was all a trick!" he muttered. "I've been the mug! It was just a dodge to get cash!"

"The old confidence trick, young 'un," nodded the chief inspector. "The same old stuff—but in a different cloak. It's all right, Lee. We've got him beautifully."

and you had your telescopes to play with —"

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Professor Tucker, with a start. "That reminds me! There is a most curious phenomenon expected this evening! The passage of one comet through the tail of another! Where is my telescope? Let me hasten—"

Without waiting to finish, he bustled out of the room, agog with excitement. This was the true Professor Tucker, indeed! With a shock, the Hon. Douglas Singleton realised that the whole fabric of "the healing apparatus" was crumbling to atoms. There was no such medicine! It was nothing but a myth! And yet, how could it be? Singleton had seen the apparatus in action! He had seen— It was all so confusing. Yet, instinctively, he knew that he had been tricked there, too. And Quirke! Great Scott! Was it possible that Ezra Quirke

had been hand in glove with this impersonator? Were they employed in this game together?

Everything was so muddled that Singleton felt dazed. He was suffering as many others had suffered upon discovering that they had been fooled and tricked for weeks on end. It was the cold truth that one of the most elaborate confidence tricks of modern times had been enacted within the ancient walls of St. Frank's. And it had come within an ace of success!

"It's beyond me, sir!" muttered Singleton blankly.

"And yet it is quite simple, my boy," said Nelson Lee quietly. "You have been the victim of a huge confidence trick—one of the cleverest, indeed, that I can remember. Roach and his associates took the most elaborate precautions to ensure success. I need hardly tell you that your money would never have been invested—but stolen. By to-morrow Roach would have been far away."

"In Paris!" said Roach gruffly. "And the next day in Vienna! I had it all planned—every move. If things had gone right, these boys would have kept mum, and there wouldn't have been any questions asked about those notes. By to-morrow every one of them would have been changed into ordinary currency, and we should have been off. Why, I reckoned upon a clear fortnight before the slightest suspicion was aroused. Confound the lot of you! I've failed, but it was worth it. I've enjoyed myself during these last few weeks."

"So has that nephew of yours, I should imagine," said Lennard grimly.

"Quirke?" said Roach, with a smile. "Yes, he played his part well. That cellar of his worked the boys up to a fine pitch, and got Singleton into the very state I wanted him."

"You rogue!" ejaculated Singleton hotly.

"Sorry, old chap," said Roach. "You've been a young brick, and no mistake! It gave me a pain sometimes when I could see the faith you had in me! But business is business, and I went through with it. Do you realise that I started my preparations for this coup in the middle of the summer? Yes! Before the rebuilding of the school was completed! It cost me hundreds of pounds—but I was close upon ten thousand—with an added ten thousand unexpectedly at the finish!"

"It was that final ten thousand which tripped you up, Roach," said Nelson Lee. "But we trapped you—and that's enough."

"Well, we might as well be getting on with it," growled Roach, rising to his feet. "I'm finished, and there's nothing else to be said. All the same, you'll never get me to London!"

Quick as a flash, he whipped something out of his waistcoat pocket. The two Yard men leaped forward, each expecting a bullet. But Roach placed the object to his mouth, and tipped back his head. And, to the hor-

rified gaze of Singleton, he could see that it was a blue phial.

"Now!" panted Roach, tossing the little bottle away. "Now take me!"

He swayed as he spoke. His voice was thick. Then, with a low gurgle, his knees sank, and he crumpled into a heap on the floor.

CHAPTER XII.

WILLY & CO. COME IN HANDY.



CHIEF DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR LENNARD bent over the fallen man.

"Water!" he snapped! "Confound it! This is my fault, Lee! I ought to have

been ready for this! Somebody fetch a doctor! Melrose! Rush to the telephone, and see what you can do!"

Nelson Lee had picked up the blue phial. Singleton and Lord Pippinton were staring with startled eyes. This tragedy had thoroughly awakened Lord Pippinton to the full truth.

Then came another surprise. With one bound, the "poisoned" man leaped to his feet, rushed to the window, and burst clean through in one desperate dive. Detective-inspector Lennard emitted a veritable roar.

"Tricked!" he bellowed. "Of all the infernal—"

He ran to the casement window, which was partially shattered. The West Square was immediately below, and Jim Roach was just in the act of picking himself up. He had made a desperate bid for liberty, risking his very life in the attempt.

But he had known that the drop was not particularly great. Barring broken limbs, he reckoned that he might be able to get clear of the school grounds, and thus vanish into the darkness. His elaborate scheme had miscarried, but his liberty was dear to him.

It wasn't the first time in a long career that he had worked for months on a scheme, only to be foiled at the last hour. It was one of the drawbacks of his profession.

He was a clever man. He had only needed a bare second or two to get to that window, and he had not spoilt the effort by carrying it too far. He had seen Nelson Lee pick up the blue phial, and he had known that the famous detective would jump to the true nature of the ruse within a few moments. So he had made his leap while there was still the chance.

It had all happened within a mere second or so.

"Where's Melrose?" panted the chief inspector, as he turned from the window. "Melrose! Confound it—Which is the best way out, Lee? You know these passages and corridors better than I do.

"We've got to get the fellow—we can't let him slip through our fingers now!"

They hurried downstairs, with Singleton and old Pippy close behind. Melrose joined in the chase, after realising that he had fetched a glass of water for nothing. And, whether Roach escaped or not, the plot was foiled. Melrose had the twenty thousand pounds in his own pocket.

Outside there was no trace of the fugitive. The West Square was completely deserted. And when the Scotland Yard men scoured the school grounds, they were compelled to admit defeat. Their man had completely disappeared.

Singleton was still numbed by the disclosure. He was beginning to realise how completely he had been fooled. In the opening stages, he had fallen under Quirke's spell. He had taken heed of the things which Quirke had seen in his crystal.

And thus, in due course, he had become acquainted with Professor Tucker and his secret. Then he had suspected that Quirke was in league with some plotters who were after the invention.

He was wrong all along the line!

Never for an instant had he suspected that the professor himself was a fake. But with the knowledge of that fact now, the rest became crystal clear. Quirke was no "seer," and never had been. He had simply arranged everything with Roach—who was apparently his uncle—and Singleton had been caught in the meshes. All the rest of Quirke's mysticism was part and parcel of the plot.

The Hon. Douglas marvelled at the amazing thoroughness of the conspirators. Before attempting to get at their real victim, they had worked the entire Junior School up to a state of superstitious tension. Then, at the right moment, they had started upon Singleton. The whole scheme, from start to finish, had been organised for his benefit.

Quirke's mystery cellar, his superstitious beliefs, his owl—all these things were effects. And they had been done so well that Singleton had fallen into the trap with his eyes wide open—but without seeing. Without Quirke and his pretence of sorcery, a level-headed fellow like Singleton would never have become enmeshed. The confidence men had known this, and so they had led up to the big climax with supreme patience.

And the prize was well worth the trouble, too. Not many gangs of confidence men succeed in netting a clear ten thousand pounds from a victim. And yet they had come within an inch of getting away with twice that sum.

Singleton was so engrossed in his thoughts that he didn't realise his whereabouts until the voice of Willy Handforth came to him. Then he started, and found that he was on the steps of the Ancient House. The

two Scotland Yard men and Nelson Lee were near by. They had searched in vain, and were discussing the next move. It was obvious that Roach had escaped in the darkness.

"Looking for somebody, sir?" was Willy Handforth's inquiry.

"Don't bother now, Willy," said Nelson Lee impatiently.

"Sorry, sir!" said Willy. "I didn't mean to bother. But there's something special on, isn't there? What with old Quirke being bowled out, and Nipper and the others guarding him in his study, there's apparently some trouble afoot. Mr. Lennard, too——"

"Is that boy being guarded, then?" put in the inspector.

"He's bottled up, sir!"

"It was at my suggestion that Nipper took some of his friends and kept their eyes on young Quirke," put in Nelson Lee. "The other members of the gang are, of course, safely in Bannington Police-station by this time. It's a pity we should lose the ringleader."

"I knew it!" said Willy, nodding. "You'd better let me help you here, sir," he added calmly. "I can be quite useful."

"The best thing you can do is to run away——"

"Half a tick, sir!" interrupted the leader of the Third. "You're looking for Professor Tucker, aren't you?"

"Well, we are—and we're not," admitted Nelson Lee.

"I understand sir," said Willy brightly. "You're looking for the imitation professor? It's all right. We've got him!"

"You've got him?" shouted Lennard.

"Half our chaps are sitting on his head, sir!"

"Sitting on his—— What on earth——" The chief inspector paused and seized Willy by the arm. "Look here, young man, out with it! It seems to me you know too much about this affair!"

Willy snorted.

"Too much?" he said warmly. "Well, I like that! You let your man go, and waste all this time searching the grounds, and when I come along with some real information, you rag me! That's a bit thick, isn't it?"

"What exactly do you know, Willy?" demanded Lee.

"Well, Chubby and Juicy and I happened to be in the West Arch about ten minutes ago," said Willy. "Young Owen and Hobbs were with us, too. We saw somebody drop out of the window, and went along to see what the trouble was, sir. Finding Professor Tucker with a twisted ankle, we decided that he needed attention."

"The deuce you did!" growled Lennard.

"So we took him indoors, sir, pushed him into our study, and sat on his head," explained Willy. "It's not the usual method

of treating a sprained ankle, but in this particular case we thought it was the best thing. I came along to tell you all about it."

Nelson Lee was rather startled.

"Upon my word, Willy, you are a most astonishing boy!" he exclaimed. "You seem to know everything. What caused you to imagine that this man was not the real Professor Tucker?"

Willy smiled indulgently.

"That's an easy one, sir," he replied in a fatherly way. "Not two minutes before we'd ragged Professor Tucker—I mean, we'd passed Professor Tucker on the other side of the Triangle with a telescope."

"Well, I'm hanged!" said the chief inspector.

"There couldn't be two professors, and we know the old boy too well to assume that he'd jump out of his own window," explained Willy. "Besides, Mr. Lennard, we heard you cursing a bit, and it struck us as a good idea to yank the fellow indoors until further orders. But we couldn't find you anywhere."

"You deserve a medal for this, young 'un," said Lennard briskly. "Lee, old man, it's a real example of acute presence of mind. We'd better go along and look into this without any delay."

CHAPTER XIII.

SINGLETON LEARNS A FEW THINGS.



WILLY HANDFORTH waved a significant hand.

"There you are, gentlemen!" he said calmly.

"You may not be able to see him, but he's there. It's all right, you chaps—you can dismiss!"

Nelson Lee and the chief inspector were in the doorway of Willy Handforth's study. The entire floor-space in front of them was filled by a mass of youthful humanity. There was no sign of the prisoner.

But, at the word of command from Willy, the fags sorted themselves out. And Mr. James Roach was revealed upon the floor—dusty, dishevelled, and perspiring freely. During the past ten minutes he had been nearly smothered. The fags had made certain of their prisoner.

"What's the use?" panted Roach, sitting up dazedly. "I thought I'd put one over on you, Mr. Lennard, but I hadn't moved a yard before these kids swarmed over me like a pack of rats! At one time I thought I was nearly dead!"

Roach was certainly subdued. After being handled by Willy's formidable gang, this was not surprising. The Third-Formers were singularly callous and cold-

hearted in their dealings with humanity in general.

Roach was taken straight back to Professor Tucker's rooms, for there were one or two points which the chief inspector wanted to clear up on the spot. Willy received a word of commendation from Nelson Lee—which was really the only reward he desired. Lee also advised the fags to say as little as possible at the moment. Not that this warning was much good. The school was already beginning to scent the truth, and excitement was general.

Roach had certainly sprained his ankle badly. He could hardly walk, and his leg was swollen. There was no fear of another dash for liberty. Crooked, he could do nothing but submit.

Singleton took care to be in the professor's rooms, too, and he was not denied. Lord Pippington had wandered off somewhere during the search for Roach, and he was probably in his own study by this time.

"There's one thing I want to say," remarked Roach, while he was slowly recovering from the effects. "Go easy with that nephew of mine. You're not going to nab him, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid he'll have to come along," said the chief inspector.

"Hang it, that's rubbish!" snapped Roach. "The boy's innocent!"

"Judging by his recent actions I should hardly describe him——"

"I tell you he's innocent!" insisted Roach. "He only acted under my orders; I was directing everything the whole time. Why, I fitted up a private telephone from his study to this room. Every time he looked into his crystal for Singleton I listened in, and knew everything that was arranged. He's not crooked. I forced him into the whole game. I had to—he was essential. It would be a filthy trick to pack him off to a reformatory. The boy's too young to understand——"

"In any case, this is no time to discuss the matter," interrupted the inspector, while Melrose took down Roach's words in shorthand. "Quirke was involved in this conspiracy, and he'll have to answer for it. I'm sorry for the boy, but he's not such a baby as you make out."

"He didn't know why I wanted Singleton; he didn't know anything!" growled Roach. "I took him away from a private school to bring him here; you don't know the trouble I had to fake up credentials so that he could enter St. Frank's. He's regarded the whole business as a kind of practical joke. He's enjoyed fooling these boys with his occult nonsense."

Singleton was beginning to understand more and more. He remembered his first encounter with "Professor Tucker." He recalled that meeting in the lane, when the false professor had been apparently unconscious with a badly cut finger. Quirke

had "seen" that incident in his crystal a day or two beforehand. Of course, it had all been fixed up. Roach had watched for his opportunity, and had faked the accident while Singleton was coming up the lane. And all the subsequent incidents had obviously been engineered in the same way.

Singleton was startled by the remembrance of that gashed finger. It brought to his mind the astounding nature of the cure.

"Can I speak, sir?" he asked, turning to Nelson Lee.

"Certainly, my boy."

"Well, look here," said the Hon. Douglas. "How was that gashed finger healed? And what about those specialists who came down? And the man with the withered arm? Why, I saw those cures with my own eyes!"

"The specialists were Roach's two confederates," explained Lee. "You see, Singleton, you have been in the hands of a gang of confidence tricksters—men of refined, gentlemanly aspect, and with convincing genius in the art of acting. Such talents are the stock-in-trade of the confidence man."

"Roach expected one of them to turn up in the guise of the lawyer," put in Lennard. "But Melrose came instead. Roach thought he was in the know—sent by one of his friends. But it wouldn't have mattered much, in any case—we'd got him by that time."

Jim Roach was smiling.

"As a matter of fact, I was very suspicious," he declared. "But there wasn't time to take any action, and with that money in my hands I couldn't very well chuck the game up. I hoped for the best, although somehow I knew that there was trouble about."

"But you haven't explained the cut finger," said the Hon. Douglas.

Roach, who was sitting near the desk, opened a drawer, and pulled out the knife which Singleton had seen a week or two earlier. With a deliberate movement he slashed it across his hand. Even Nelson Lee was startled. There was an ugly gash across Roach's knuckles, and it oozed with blood.

"Quite simple, isn't it?" smiled the crook.

"Yes; but—"

Roach pulled his handkerchief out, wiped his hand, and there was no sign of any cut.

"I could have done that before, but I preferred to use my marvellous invention," he said drily. "Do you remember how I absently-mindedly 'healed' that first cut, Singleton? That was merely to get you into my confidence by chance. I've been deucedly pleased with myself over this affair. From first to last it's been a gem.

And this is the result of it all," he added bitterly.

He picked up the knife, and held it out. "These little dodges always work best when they are simple," he explained. "The edge, you see, is blunt. It wouldn't cut butter. I never let you examine it closely before, did I? Just at the tip of the blade a little bladder of red dye is concealed, inside a hollow cavity. It was only necessary to draw the blade sharply over my hand, and the dye was released, leaving an apparently ugly, dripping wound."

"Well I'm dashed!" said Singleton blankly.

"As for the two specialists and the withered arm, I fancy we worked that up rather well," went on Roach thoughtfully. "Of course, the patient had a false arm in his sleeve—his own arm being concealed. It was simply a mummified arm. But when the bandages were applied we took care that you didn't get too close. At the end of the 'operation' the false arm was smuggled away, and the real arm was exposed, apparently a marvellous cure."

"By Jove, I've been a fool!" muttered Singleton aghast.

"Not such a fool!" said Roach. "It would be more correct to say that I was infernally clever. Naturally, I wouldn't have dared to try these tricks on a grown-up. I could never have fooled a doctor with my apparatus. But I was dealing with a boy, and all my stunts were prepared accordingly."

"You learned, no doubt, that Singleton was able to lay his hands on big sums of money?" asked Nelson Lee. "So you thought it a good idea to come to St. Frank's and rob him?"

"I heard about Singleton months ago," replied Roach. "It was my original idea to take a house close by, in the guise of a retired scientist. But Quirke came here first, to pave the way, as I have already explained. And he was struck by the fact that Professor Tucker was absent-minded, easy to impersonate, and almost the same build as myself. It was my nephew who suggested that I should come right into the school in the professor's shoes."

"And you say the boy isn't crooked?" remarked Lennard drily.

"I tell you he didn't realise what it all meant!" snapped Roach. "It was easy enough to get Professor Tucker away. A telegram, apparently from a fellow astronomer, brought him to town by the first train. We took him to the house of one of my friends, and kept him there. For a few days I studied his mannerisms and speech—years ago I was on the Halls as a mimic, you know, but the life was too quiet for me. At the right time I came down to St. Frank's as Professor Tucker, and nobody even questioned me. He was

such an easy subject to impersonate. In the meantime, the professor was well looked after, and he didn't seem to mind, particularly as we had provided him with telescopes."

"It may interest you to know that I saw through your disguise from the very first day of your arrival," said Nelson Lee quietly. "You wonder why I said nothing? I didn't want to scare you away! I decided to find out what your exact game was. I also communicated with Scotland Yard, and they instituted a search for the vanished professor."

Singleton was freshly surprised. So Nelson Lee had been working on the case for weeks. Quietly, without any sign of his activities, he had been keeping his eye on affairs. Perhaps that explained why the Head had consistently been blind to Ezra Quirke's operations. The confidence men had been led on, thinking they were on safe ground. If they had been clever, Nelson Lee had been brilliant.

CHAPTER XIV.

EZRA QUIRKE EXPLAINS.



EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH looked grim.

"Of course I knew it all the time!" he said firmly. "My hat! You surely don't imagine I was

fooled? Just as if I didn't know that the professor was a fake!"

"You kept it jolly dark, then," said Church sarcastically. "Why didn't you let us into the secret if you knew it all the time?"

"There are some things I can't trust with you chaps," replied Handforth calmly. "The first rule of an investigator is to keep his own counsel. I'm not saying that I knew for certain, but there was a suspicion in the back of my mind——"

"Good old Handy!" grinned Nipper. "Always wise after the event. It's no good, old man, you can't spoof us with that yarn. You're bowled over as completely as everybody else. Why, even I didn't know it until a day or two ago, when the gov'nor told me."

"And you call yourself smart at detective work?" said Handforth tartly.

"My dear ass, I don't call myself anything," replied Nipper. "How the dickens could I spot the professor when I hardly ever came in contact with him? I haven't met him twice during the last month. And I'm not saying that I should have suspected anything, either; it was a wonderful impersonation."

All the school had got hold of the story. And the school was thrilled. Coming immediately on the top of Quirke's exposure, the sensation was all the greater. The fellows were having something to talk about this evening with a vengeance.

"They say there's a connection somewhere between Quirke and the fake professor," went on Handforth. "A sort of game to get money out of Singleton. But I want to know how the dickens Quirke performed all his giddy miracles. I'm going to question him!"

"Hear, hear!"

"That's a good idea!" said Church. "Let's invade him!"

For a moment Dick Hamilton hesitated, and then he agreed. As a matter of fact, he was quite as curious as the other fellows, and was keen upon having a heart-to-heart talk with Ezra Quirke. Nelson Lee had given instructions that Quirke was to be watched and guarded, and talking to him would not make any difference.

Reggie Pitt and Buster Boots and Archie Glenthorne and Armstrong and a good many others were equally eager. Even Browne, of the Fifth, came along and expressed a desire to have a few words with the prisoner.

Accordingly, the invading host which entered Study No. 20 was of such proportions that it overflowed into the passage. The study itself was packed to suffocation, with Quirke in the centre.

"Can't you leave me alone?" he asked, glaring round at the horde. "I'm down—I'm beaten. Must you come here to gloat over me?"

"Alas, that we should be so misunderstood!" sighed Browne. "We are not of the type, Brother Quirke, who wipe our feet on a fellow when he has already plunged into the mire. We are merely here to elicit a few necessary facts. Apparently, you are the only source of enlightenment."

Quirke looked less sullen.

"You admit, then, that my mysteries were puzzling?" he asked.

"What-ho!" said Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say, they were dashed rummy. Why, even Phipps jibbed when I shoved one or two of the propositions under his notice. And Phipps is one of the brainy coves of the world. I mean, if Phipps jibs, there's something dashed foul about it."

"How the dickens did you do all those miracles?" demanded Handforth gruffly. "We knew they were tricks all along—especially those stunts in the cellar."

"You don't need any explanation in that direction, surely?" asked Quirke. "My disappearance from the cabinet, the floating table, the magical transformation of the bowl of goldfish—all the manifestations of that type were pure illusions. They were mechanical——"

"You rotter!" roared Skelton. "You told us they were occult!"

Quirke smiled.

"I was merely playing upon your credulity," he explained. "You all know my object—so why deny it? It was to get Singleton into the net. I started on the less intelligent fellows first, and gradually and persistently worked up the element of mystery."

"Why didn't you go straight for Singleton?"

"That would have been fatal," said Quirke. "Singleton is a shrewd, level-headed fellow. He would have suspected at once—particularly when the question of cash cropped up. My uncle was very careful on that point—"

"Your uncle?" asked Handforth.

"My Uncle James—the man who has so cleverly impersonated the professor," said Quirke. "He was cautious from the very start. You see, without my aid, nothing could have been accomplished. It was my task to work up the mystery, and then, at the right time, Singleton involved himself voluntarily. That was the development we sought after. All this elaborate preparation was performed with one object in view—the trapping of Singleton. My superstitions, my secret meetings, my dabbings in the occult—all were engineered with the same object."

"You simply made tools of everybody," declared Nipper. "Singleton was the fish for whom you laid the bait?"

Quirke nodded. He was looking more composed now. He seemed to take a great pride in his recent activities. The fellow was obviously unconscious of the fact that he had been doing wrong. Normal enough in most things, he probably had a moral kink somewhere. Apart from his elaborate game of pretence, he was a queer sort of youngster.

"What about the affair of Kenmore?" asked Armstrong. "He's our head prefect, and he met with a frightful adventure soon after you arrived, Quirke. Remember how he heard voices in the Triangle?"

"Yes, by George!" said Handforth. "And on that same night a hand touched me on the shoulder—a hovering sort of hand. Church and McClure thought I was dreaming, but I know I saw it!"

"Have you forgotten one very obvious fact?" observed Quirke smoothly. "Until to-day you have always believed that I worked alone. In reality, I have not only had my uncle, but two other men. These other two have always been in the cellar during the meetings—helping with the illusions."

"We're not talking about the cellar—"

"The hovering hand was a simple device operated by a wire," explained Quirke. "It was night time, you remember. The wire was stretched across the Triangle, and the hand was dangling from this, operated by the men I have mentioned. Quite simple—but very mystifying. As for the voice, there was a wireless receiver concealed in the front—a kind of loud speaker device. This was worked from the school wall. The operator merely switched on his batteries,



The "poisoned" man burst clean through the window in one desperate dive.

spoke into his transmitter, and the voice sounded from the centre of the Triangle—apparently from nowhere. You must remember that all traces were removed immediately afterwards, so that an investigation would reveal nothing. And I generally took care to be in the presence of other fellows at such times, so that I could not be suspected."

"What about that rummy affair of Snipe's uncle, or grandfather?" asked Armstrong. "His clock stopped at half-past twelve, and you looked into your giddy crystal, and said it was a sign of death."

"Another childishly simple affair," replied Quirke. "One of my uncle's friends saw the report of the death in the morning edition of a London evening paper. He immediately telephoned to my uncle, who passed the information on to me. Knowing the facts in advance, it was quite easy for me to 'foretell' the death. Snipe heard nothing until the next morning, and that made it all the more convincing. Naturally, it was I who secretly stopped the clock at the given hour."

"Well, how about those queer things that happened in this very study?"

"More illusion," replied Quirke. "That was before I shifted to my cellar. One of my uncle's friends was concealed behind the curtains, and acted as my assistant—"

"But Browne locked the study up, and we examined it afterwards," put in somebody. "And there wasn't any trace. There wasn't even a footmark outside the window."

"For the simple reason that my assistant lowered himself by a rope from an upper window," said Quirke. "We knew that an investigation might be made, so we were prepared."

"By jingo, you had everything fixed, didn't you?" asked Reggie Pitt. "I'm particularly puzzled over one trick, though. You remember Guy Fawkes night? How in the world did you prevent the guy from burning? You warned Willy not to put it on the fire, but he ignored you. And the guy wouldn't burn—although it was only made of straw and stuffing. It even put the fire out!"

Quirke hesitated.

"I don't know why I should tell you all these things," he replied. "But perhaps it is only fair. It can do no harm now, anyhow. The idea was my uncle's. He has a considerable knowledge of chemicals. When

guy from burning, but extinguished the fire itself."

"Well, I'm jiggered! That was a cute dodge!"

"It was fortunate for me that the guy was pulled from the fire and torn to pieces," went on Quirke. "Had it been left in position the chemical would have become exhausted, and the guy would have burned. But you fortunately helped me by pulling the guy free. And when you tore it to shreds, the remaining gas was instantly liberated by the wind."

"Just as I thought!" said Nipper. "Tricks, tricks—nothing but tricks all the time. What about our Club of Thirteen?"

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I discovered that those Third-Formers had prepared a guy—a likeness of myself—I realised that it was a good opportunity for exploiting my supposed power."

"But what did you do?"

"The guy was made a day or two in advance," said Quirke. "The night before the Fifth my uncle and I went to Handforth minor's study and concealed a large number of chemical balls just within the guy's clothing—cunningly concealed, so that they could not be detected. They were odourless and useless until subjected to intense heat. But when the guy was flung on the fire, these chemical balls instantaneously formed into gas. And this gas not only prevented the

Aren't you fellows feeling a bit small now?"

Skelton grinned sheepishly.

"It strikes me that we're the mugs!" he admitted. "My hat, I can hardly believe that we really swallowed all Quirke's piffle!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE FINAL POINTS.



"HOLD on!" said Handforth gruffly. "There were some rumny things during a foot-
ball match. Reggie Pitt and Nipper were carried off the field—"

"They were pure accidents," put in Quirke. "They helped my cause a lot, for it seemed as though the bad luck was spreading over the school. With regard to Fullwood's mishap in the same match, I will admit that we were involved in that particular incident."

"Yes, I've often wondered about that," said Fullwood interestedly. "I was all right until the game was nearly ended, and then I went all dizzy. How on earth did you wangle it?"

"Your handkerchief was drugged," said Quirke.

"Drugged!"

"A harmless enough device. I doubt if it would have acted under normal circumstances; but you happened to graze your face, and you used your handkerchief repeatedly to dab the blood away. In so doing, you inhaled a good proportion of the drug—which had the effect of making you dizzy."

"I'd like to know what happened to Handforth's wireless set," put in Church grimly. "Everybody said it was smashed up through your influence, Quirke. Were you involved in that, too?"

"My uncle was, at all events."

"By George!" roared Handforth. "You destructive rotter—"

"Steady, Handy!" interrupted Nipper. "I'm curious about this. There was a thunderstorm that night—although the lightning didn't seem dangerous to me—"

"My uncle seized upon the chance of that thunderstorm to make it appear that bad luck had visited Handforth," said Quirke. "He simply connected the wires of the radio to the ordinary electric light power—and when he switched on, of course the apparatus was shattered. I believe he used some means of increasing the charge, too. At the same time, one of my uncle's friends fired a charge of magnesium against the school wall, near Handforth's study."

"That was the flash I saw!" exclaimed Nipper.

"Yes—it was imitation lightning," replied Quirke drily. "Naturally, you all believed that Handforth's wireless set had been struck. You may remember Glenthorne's wardrobe, too? It was soaked through, and all Glenthorne's clothing was ruined. It was regarded as bad luck—but my uncle, of course, caused the leak in the pipe!"

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie. "How perfectly mouldy! I mean to say, when one chappie deliberately ruins the wearing apparel of another chappie—Odious scoundrels and rogues! Words absolutely fail Archibald!"

"Then there was that affair in Study D," continued Quirke, volunteering the information. "All these things come into the same category. While Handforth and his chums were away at a party, my uncle and I entered the study, and we prepared the walls with a chemical solution—quite invisible and actionless until the light was switched on."

"And the mirror, too?" demanded Handforth eagerly.

"The mirror was smeared with a preparation which had the effect of distorting the reflection—"

"I knew it!" roared Handforth. "Don't you remember how I saw an awful monstrosity in the mirror! It was me all the time!"

"Anybody could have told you that!" grinned Reggie Pitt.

"I mean, it was distorted by that rotten solution, or whatever it was!" snorted Handforth. "You rotter! You tricky beast—"

"The effect of the light destroyed the illusion almost at once," continued Quirke. "The writing on the wall, and the hideous face—they, too, were produced by the action of the light—only to fade immediately."

"What about that ghost we saw later on?" asked Church.

"That was caused in the same way," said Quirke. "But the effect, in that case, was the opposite. The invisible solution absorbed the light and retained it. Thus, when the light was switched off, the ghostly vision remained—luminous, but vague. And once it had evaporated, there was no trace of the actual cause."

"Well, it's something to know that all these things were faked," growled Armstrong. "It'll be a long while before I'll believe in sorcery again! I didn't realise these things could be done so easily! You deserve to be boiled in oil, you tricky rotter!"

"I daresay I shall suffer," said Quirke quietly.

There was something in his tone which made the fellows feel rather uncomfortable. They questioned Quirke further, but he had already explained all that was necessary. If there were one or two points he had not cleared up, the fellows could clearly see that they were all in the same class. From first to last, Quirke's followers had been duped and fooled.

As it happened, Nelson Lee and Chief Detective-inspector Lennard came along a few minutes later. The Scotland Yard man had come for Quirke. There was no suggestion of arrest, however.

Nelson Lee dismissed the juniors promptly, and even Nipper was not allowed to remain—for that would only have led to jealousy.

"We want you to take us down into that cellar of yours, Quirke," said Lee quietly. "We know how your tricks were performed, but we should like an actual demonstration. I am curious about that cellar in one or two other ways, too."

"Am I under arrest?" asked Quirke quietly.

"Not exactly—not exactly," said the chief inspector. "At the same time, I shall have

to take you with me to London, young 'un. Your uncle's two confederates are already on their way. You'll have to come along with us almost at once. You've been a tool, but I'm afraid you're not quite so innocent as your uncle tries to make me believe."

They went down the passage, and there, against the cellar door, Detective-sergeant Melrose was waiting with James Roach. There was an extraordinary change in the latter. He had removed all traces of his make-up, and he was revealed as an elderly man with a lined, kindly face. He was just the type to make a successful confidence man.

But even without his make-up, he resembled Professor Tucker in figure and poise of head. It could easily be seen that his task of impersonation had been comparatively simple.

They went down the cellar steps, and passed through the trick door into the operating chamber—the actual cellar in which all the illusions had been created.

"You want to know about this place, I suppose?" asked Roach. "Well, there's no reason why I shouldn't satisfy your curiosity. Most of these preparations were made months ago—before the boys came back from their summer holiday."

"While the school was in course of reconstruction?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Yes," replied Roach. "I had learned about Singleton some time before, and realised that he was an excellent catch. I thought I might get five thousand—and that would have been worth the candle, too. So I spent a hundred or two with impunity—a sprat to catch a mackerel, you understand?"

"You made these alterations yourself?" asked Lennard curiously.

"To tell you the truth, the night watchman was in our pay," said Roach. "All the school grounds were filled with building materials—cement and other stuff by the ton. Having squared the night watchman, we were on safe ground. The East House was already completed—except for the painters and decorators. But they didn't bother us, because we confined our attentions to the cellars."

"And you built these extra walls?"

"It was an easy job," declared Roach. "With the place to ourselves every night, we had plenty of time. We put up the two false walls, and contrived that substitute section of the wall. There was always the chance that the domestics would discover something strange about the cellars, but that was a risk we were compelled to take. Fortunately, everything worked smoothly. And when the term started, my nephew came here as a new boy, and we lost no time in getting down to business. As you see, a most elaborate course of preparation—but for such a prize it was worth it."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAST OF EZRA QUIRKE.



At first glance, it seemed incredible that such experienced crooks should make such elaborate plans for the mere trapping of a schoolboy. But there was reason in their actions. Singleton would never have been drawn into the net by any simple device. He had had people after his money on many an occasion, and was level-headed and cautious.

And he was a prize well worth going after, too.

Five thousand pounds, or ten thousand pounds, was a huge sum for any gang of confidence tricksters to aim at. And as the police records show, many a gang has spent months of preparation—and hundreds of pounds—in order to trap such a victim.

Roach had nearly succeeded. But he had made the fatal blunder of penetrating the school itself—right under the eye of such a master detective as Nelson Lee. Had he kept to his original plan to take a house locally, he might have succeeded wholly.

Nelson Lee had apparently done nothing in this case. And yet, actually, he had been engaged upon it for a week or two! He had watched Roach's every move—he had discovered the where-about of the real Professor Tucker. And he had waited until the last moment before pouncing. By so doing, Roach would have no chance of putting up a defence. He would naturally be charged with conspiracy and attempted fraud, and if he had any sense at all, he would plead guilty.

Down in those cellars, Nelson Lee inspected the various devices with interest. And James Roach was rather amused as he described how each illusion had been caused. Quirke, too, was ready enough to give the secrets away. They were all simple enough when explained.

"This trap-door here, you see," said Roach. "This leads down into a little sub-way, and then into the other cellar. We could fake up all sorts of mysteries in that way. The boys swallowed everything—"

He suddenly broke off, and gave Quirke a heavy push.

"Now then!" he shouted. "Quick!"

"What the——" began the chief inspector. "Confound you——"

Before he could complete his sentence, Ezra Quirke had vanished into the trap. Roach's movement had been totally unexpected. He made no attempt to escape himself—his crooked ankle forbade it. But there was a grim light in his eyes as he straddled the trap.

"Stand back!" he snarled. "That boy's going to get a chance! You can take me, but by Heaven, you won't take him!"

"Out of the way!" shouted the inspector.

He literally heaved Roach aside, and dropped. Down in that little subway the darkness was inky. The inspector was at a disadvantage—for he had never been down there before. Quirke, on the other hand, knew every inch by heart.

Nelson Lee could not move, for he was obliged to watch over Roach. The latter took a deep breath.

"Sorry, Mr. Lee," he said. "It's all right—I'll take my own gruel. And I've got an idea that boy will slip off."

Quirke was certainly making a bold bid for it.

Quick as a flash, he wriggled his way up into the adjoining cellar, dashed across it, and ran up a few steps at the end. Above him there was a heavy flagstone. It was hinged, however, and there was a big counter-balancing weight. A push upwards, and the flagstone rose. Quirke pushed through the opening, and found himself at the rear of the East House, under the open sky. He slammed the flagstone back into place—when it became an apparently solid part of the paved path. This was another of Roach's secrets. William Napoleon Browne and Nipper had seen that flagstone raised on one of their prowls—and they had made their plans accordingly.

When Quirke had given his last fateful meeting in the cellar, detectives had entered by that secret way, and had nabbed Roach's confederates. And when Quirke attempted his meeting, he had found himself in the wrong cellar.

The strange schoolboy now looked round him, and compressed his lips. His uncle had given him a chance of liberty! He sped off, even as the flagstone began to rise upwards.

And when Detective-inspector Lennard emerged, there was no sign of Quirke. He had vanished into the night. And it may as well be explained that the police never got hold of him. Nobody knew where he vanished to, but he was probably protected by some more of his uncle's friends. St. Frank's, however, had seen the last of him.

And most of the fellows were rather glad to hear that he had escaped. They didn't like the idea of him being put on trial, and sent to a reformatory. Perhaps he had received a lesson—perhaps he would go straight.

The discomfited inspector took his prisoner away without any further delay. And long before bed-time, St. Frank's was normal again.

The real Professor Tucker was pottering about in his familiar way, and, somehow, the East House seemed a lot sweeter and cleaner now that Ezra Quirke had gone. The spell had been broken—there was no atmosphere of sinister mystery hovering over

the House. What happened to Quirke's owl nobody knew, but it was never seen again.

The Hon. Douglas Singleton was summoned to Nelson Lee's study just before bed-time. And when he arrived there, he found that Lord Pippinton was already on the spot. Nipper was there, too.

"I have sent for you, Singleton, so that I may make some arrangement regarding this money," said Nelson Lee, getting to the point without any delay. "I have ten thousand pounds here of yours—"

"I say, sir, I feel an awful ass," confessed Singleton sheepishly. "I didn't suspect a thing—I didn't dream—"

"There is no need for you to feel foolish, Singleton," interposed Lee. "Some of the world's cleverest men—business men of vast experience—have been victimised by confidence tricksters. That you should fall into their trap—and such an elaborate trap—is not very surprising. You have no occasion to blame yourself."

"Thanks awfully, sir," said Singleton gratefully. "I suppose that money had better be sent back to the bank?"

"That was my proposal," said Lee. "By the way, Singleton, were you not surprised that the money came without any question? Did you not fear that the bank would be inquisitive?"

"Well, I did a bit, sir."

"Then you won't be so very surprised to learn that the money was sent at my instigation," said Lee calmly. "I knew what you were doing, and interviewed your bankers. That was why the cash arrived without any trouble."

"Well I'm jiggered, sir!" gasped the Hon. Douglas.

"You are rich, Singleton, and you may use large sums of money within reason," went on the schoolmaster-detective. "But when it comes to a matter of ten thousand pounds, even you cannot do just as you please, I'm afraid."

"But what about Lord Pippinton, sir?" asked the Hon. Douglas. "He sent his cheque to London only to-day—"

"Lord Pippinton acted as a bait," explained Nelson Lee. "When I learned that he was coming to St. Frank's, I realised that the time was very opportune. I made a special journey to London, and interviewed Lord Pippinton in the presence of his father, the Duke of Walsham."

Singleton stared with wide open eyes.

"Then—then it was all fixed up, sir?" he breathed.

"Precisely," chuckled Nelson Lee. "It was all fixed up. Pippinton received instructions from me to spend money very lavishly—in order to attract your special attention. He was also instructed to give way to any suggestion of yours regarding any large sum. And his bankers, naturally, were fully

aware of what might happen. Pippinton played his part excellently."

His lordship beamed.

"Rather!" he observed. "What? We members of the Walsham family do things somewhat nippily. Anything of that sort or order is just our mark. Sorry, Duggy, old boy. But you understand?"

"I'm beginning to!" confessed Singleton, taking a deep breath. "Do you know, I felt it was rather rummy that we could get hold of twenty thousand so jolly easily! I'm glad you let us go ahead, Mr Lee! At

any rate, everything's all finished and settled now."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Yes, and St. Frank's is its old self again," he said gently. "And none too soon, either. Christmas is quite near at hand, boys, and I fancy you'll be interested in the arrangements for the holidays."

"Christmas!" murmured Nipper dreamily. "By Jove, I didn't realise it was so close! Well, thank goodness the school can break up clear of mystery!"

THE END.

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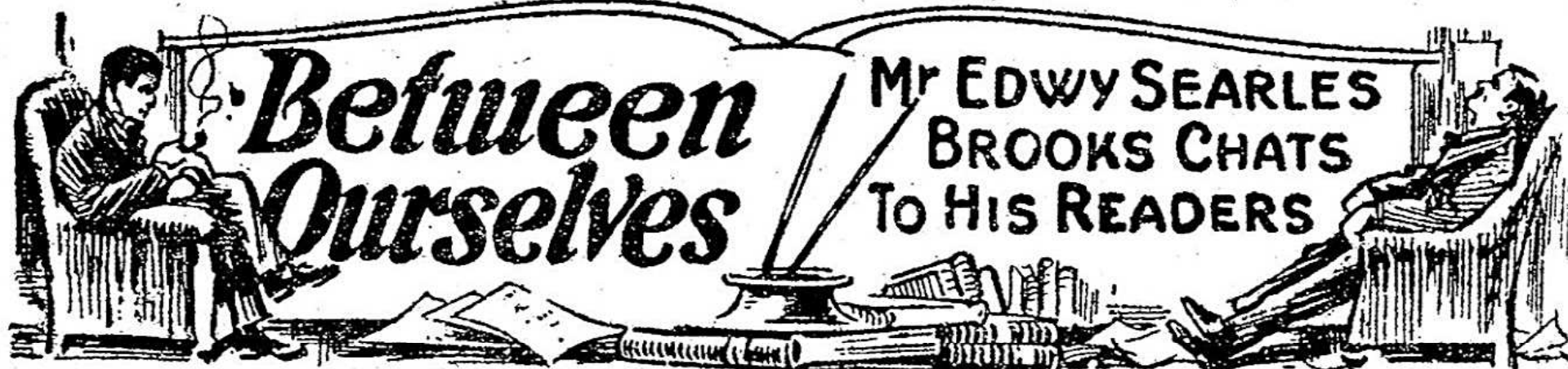
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Only one page for me this week, so I'll lose no time on preliminary remarks, but get down to work on the acknowledgments.

Kenneth Oxborow (Woodbridge), W. J. Evans (Cohat, N.W.F., India), No. 2112, (Weston-Super-Mare), Zionist (Durban, S.A.), W. R. Cobby (Atherstone), Learning Day by Day (Bloxwich), Edward A. Smith (Long Eaton), Dave (Hammersmith), G. D. W. (Bristol), H. H. S. (Stratford), Charles Orchard (Fulham), J. Wilson (Lambeth), Gerard Mercer (Liverpool), A Welsh Reader (Bristol), A Reader (Forest Hill), Allan Holland (Balham), E. C. Sergeant (Hale), Jack Tocker (Cape Town), Lancashire Lad (Blackpool), Ernest Huxtable (Taunton), Alex. Culph (Forrest, Vic., Australia), Freddie (Luton), G. Sendall (Clapton), Theo. Verschueren (Antwerp), No. 2003 (Bournemouth), Andrew Hamilton (Ashford), No. 2486 (Reading), Lionel Moxom (Rochdale), J. Hayden (Poplar), A. B. W. (Norwich), Terence E. Gibbons (Leyton).

It strengthens my arm, W. J. Evans, when I get a letter like yours from such a far-flung place as the North-West Frontier of India. I expect—as you do—that Joseph Coombs' brother will see these words. I'll quote what you say: "Perhaps J. C. will feel much easier in mind if he knows that fellows like myself, aged twenty-five years, thoroughly enjoy reading the 'N. L. L.' and pass it on to others when finished. If possible, tell Mr. Joseph Coombs that he is quite wise in still having the 'N. L. L.' as he is in jolly good company. I very sincerely hope that J. C. will not take offence, but probably he will feel O.K. when he knows that the 'N. L. L.' is quite welcome in the Frontier Province."

Yes, certainly, W. R. Cobby. When the "League Magazine" gets going, there will undoubtedly be room for the publication of sketches, drawn by League members. You'd better get busy on a few, so that they'll be ready! But they'll have to be good, you know, if they're to see the light of day. We've got some wonderful coming artists in the League already, particularly "Artist Admirer." He'll be famous one day!

Afraid I can't give you expert advice about those sixpenny packets of stamps, H. H. S. Naturally, you can't expect a marvellous assortment for that money; but for a beginner I should imagine they'll be quite useful.

So you prefer Our Paper without a serial at the back, Gerard Mercer? No, I haven't had many letters on this subject, but perhaps I'll get some after this appears. But take my advice—and be satisfied with what the Editor provides.

Horror upon horror! You're right about that bloomer, E. C. Sergeant, but, dash it, it wasn't exactly ghastly, was it? Edgar Sopp, of the Fifth, was omitted from the Portrait Gallery. But then, so were lots of other Fifth-Formers. Why, now I come to think of it, there wasn't a bloomer at all. What about it? Have I wriggled successfully?

That suggestion of yours, Alex. Culph, is one that has been used many times in school stories. Sorry, and all that, but fact is fact. I always strive to make my yarns a bit out of the ordinary, if possible. I don't say I succeed, but there's no harm in trying.

You're a nice contradiction, Freddie! After saying that you hate the Moor View girls (I'm surprised at you!), you calmly state that the "girl you introduced" has now joined the League. I don't believe a word you say!

Hallo, Lionel! What is it this time? My dear chap! Of course, you needn't become an organising officer unless you want to. What next? You can go ahead and get your bronze medal and still remain an ordinary member.—E. S. B.



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MR. ARTHUR P. CLODIE TURNS UP SMILING.

MR. SECRETARY BRENTSCHI had a very nasty cough.

"Just as if he'd got the croup, guv'nor," said Tinker with a grin. "The lieutenant advised him to go to bed and send for the doctor."

"When did he come back?"

"Soon after daylight, so he'd had a long spell of it," said Tinker. "He was wet through, but he didn't give the lieutenant any time to ask questions. I hope Veilburg has two or three coughs all worse than Brentschi's. I'll bet dollars he's not smiling much just now. I wonder what they'll do about it. I say, guv'nor, if they only knew it was you and Riv. who worked the jape, they'd boil you in tar and treacle."

"Something like that; but I don't think they'll suspect me, and although the information they obtain may be pretty accurate, they ought not to know that Rivastoff is at liberty," said Sexton Blake. "In any case, Tinker, it would be extraordinary information that would associate me with our friend the ex-bandit."

"But losing that paper ought to put the wind up them, guv'nor."

"Perhaps not to any great extent. They'll know that somebody had got knowledge of their visit to Sarjo on an opera night and suspected that the meeting meant something very serious, hence the hold-up, but the paper taken from Veilburg looked very innocent."

"And they'd think that the chaps who took it wouldn't suspect what you suspected or know the trick of bleaching off the top ink and developing the stuff written underneath in invisible ink," said Tinker. "They'd just tear it up and think they'd done no good except to give the guys a soaking."

"That's my opinion, and we shall soon know, young 'un. If the truth has been discovered—I mean, if the Sarjo gang think it has been discovered—they'll be careful. If that ghastly document went round, masks would be a poor protection in Kamfak."

"I suppose so," said Tinker, "and nobody could blame them for shooting. I think I'd shoot myself, guv'nor, if I knew they'd got my name on the black list and that the police might pounce on me at any minute. We shall see."

Sexton Blake obtained the next interesting item of news. Prince Darro was laid-up with a feverish cold, and, curiously enough, that gallant soldier, Colonel Zuss, was also indisposed and confined to his room.

"Gee! They're not sure what happened to that old paper you pinched from Veilburg then, guv'nor," said Tinker, chuckling. "They mean to lie low and keep off the streets till Veilburg tells them it's safe. Is Sarjo in bed with mumps or anything?"

"Sarjo is high game, young 'un. He's almost too big to shoot. Curiously enough, Bizer's daughter has been taken ill suddenly, and that astute lawyer has been compelled to hurry off to his country house."

"Your little jape has scared 'em," said Tinker. "Peter will like it, for he won't have to attend any Council meetings till they recover their health or their pluck. Talk of the— Cheerio! How goes it,

Peter? What has blown you this way? And where are your manners?"

His Majesty had come in, forgetting to knock, but kings weighed down by affairs of State must be excused for being forgetful.

"What manners, fathead?" asked Peter politely. "Didn't I hammer at the door? Sorry, Billy, old bean, I'll do it now."

His Majesty went out, kicked the door a few times, and then came in again.

"I've got a holiday," he said. "Darro, Brentschi, and Zuss are crooked, Bizer has hopped it to see a sick daughter, and Sarjo is taking a rest. If I didn't feel tired, I could do a few things on my own. Any special old law you'd like me to make, Billy?"

"You might settle fifty thousand a year on me and chuck in a palace or two and a yacht and a Rolls-Royce," said Tinker.

"I said law, not money. We're broke, so Brentschi tells me, so don't be surprised if I tap you for a bob or two."

"Sling over the crown jewels and I'll make it two and ninepence," said Tinker. "But you're not really hard up, are you, Peter?"

"I don't know," said Peter. "I don't understand the rotten thing much. Sarjo has been talking to me on the 'phone, Mr. Bla—sorry, Mr. Brown. It's about the State loan, money Prince Paul raised. State bonds, or something. It seems the interest has been paid, but not always at the proper time, so they were a bit rocky."

"Carlovian State bonds are not considered a very good investment, Peter," said Sexton Blake. "You can buy them for about half their face value."

"Oh, it's all Greek to me!" said Peter. "Sarjo says they're going up. I may be almost a perfect ass, but the old hunks can't pull my leg by hinting they're going up because I've come to the throne. That ought to have slumped them, if that's the name they call it when stocks and shares go down with a bang."

"They went down with a rush when Prince Paul's death was announced," said Sexton Blake, "so, you see, I don't flatter you, Peter."

"Then why are they going up?"

"Stocks only rise when there is a demand for them or a good report gets about," said Sexton Blake. "As I can't imagine anything in the shape of a good report to boom them, somebody must be buying them in large quantities. Have they risen much?"

Peter neither knew nor cared. He went fishing again with Tinker, and Blake sent for newspapers. Carlovian stock, poor stuff at the best, had made a jump of nearly eight points. The fact that the interest was almost due was not the reason, for it was well known that payment would be delayed for quite six weeks. It was the redeemable bonds that were rising. Within

five months a demand for repayment at the full issued price could be made.

"Some wealthy idiot is having a big gamble," thought Sexton Blake, who knew a good deal about Carlovian finance. "If he thinks he'll get paid out, he must be mad, for if he corners the bonds and demands the cash, the country must default or go bankrupt."

In the afternoon, when Sexton Blake returned from a stroll, he was surprised to receive a visit from the Prime Minister. A charming old gentleman was Sarjo, both to look at and to talk to. He had come to see the king, but as his Majesty was absent, he had, as he explained, taken the liberty of calling on the king's tutor to smoke a cigar with him.

"I was wondering, Mr. Brown," said the Prime Minister, after they had discussed the weather, "if you take any interest in stocks."

"And I wonder if the wily old rogue takes me for a mad millionaire in disguise and suspects me," thought Sexton Blake. "Not to any great extent," he said aloud, "but I have been looking at the newspaper, and the rise in Carlovian bonds has interested me."

"And puzzled you, no doubt?"

"Exactly. If developed, Carlovian might be a rich country, but at present she is anything but a gold-mine. Some very wealthy person or syndicate must be at work getting hold of the redeemable bonds. I don't think it's any secret that if a big parcel of these bonds was put forward to be redeemed for cash, the Treasury could not meet the payment."

"It is the sad truth, Mr. Brown," said the Prime Minister. "Prince Paul might have met them, for he was a strong man, and the bankers would have helped him out, and it is different with a boy on the throne."

"And what will happen if you default?"

"It depends," said Sarjo. "If this man or syndicate is English or French or Italian, some arrangement would be come to. The Allies would not find it to their interest to allow us to default. We are not of any vast importance, but as a buffer country we are useful, and doubtless the money would be found. If it is an American syndicate there might be complications, for—well, it is not quite easy to explain, but you will understand. I have cabled to London, Paris, and New York to try and find who is buying the bonds. If I discover, I will let you know."

And then very wisely Sarjo dropped the subject of State affairs and discussed farming and bloodstock and coal and copper mines.

"A delightful old hypocrite," thought Sexton Blake, when his visitor had gone. "I'd give something to know what he really thinks of me. It can't be possible that he imagines I swallowed Veilburg's yarn when

I found him hiding behind the cathedral pillars. They must all know Tinker had showed me the forged note and why I went there. Anyhow, they've let the youngster alone since. He's too friendly with Celia and Peter to please them, but they must be guessing hard, the blackguards."

The wetting did not appear to have damaged Mr. Johann Veilburg, for Sexton Blake saw him later in the day, and though the head of the secret police must have been in a vile temper, he was wearing his usual smile. In a day or two the storm blew over, and Prince Darro and Bizer's daughter made quick recoveries, as did the gallant colonel, for Bizer, the prince, and Colonel Zuss attended the next meeting of the Council. And, after their brief boom, Carlovian bonds began to weaken again.

"Well, guv'nor, they've all turned up again like bad pennies, so I suppose the paper you took from Veilburg proved a wash-out," said Tinker. "Veilburg has decided that the thieves thought they'd only collared a wine tax, and tore it up in disgust."

"I think that's about the size of it, young 'un," said Blake. "They've got over their scare. How's King Peter?"

"Grousing and fed-up. He'll be more fed-up when the meeting's over, for they've been at it a couple of hours now. I reminded him of his promise not to sign anything till he'd read it himself, and he got quite ratty. It's high treason to punch the king on the nose, but I shall have to do it if he gets any cheekier. It worries me."

"But he'll keep his promise, young 'un."

"Unless they catch him napping," said Tinker, "and, as I jostled him up at the last minute, I think he will. Celia jogged his memory, too. I say, if they shove a duplicate of that paper on Peter, she mustn't see it, guv'nor, for she can read the lingo."

"But she won't be able to read what's underneath," said Sexton Blake.

"I must be getting loopy," said Tinker. "Of course, she'll only be able to read what's on top. Hand out the orders, then. If Peter brings any papers out with him, I may not be able to get a squint at them, for if he's feeling tired, which is his usual state when he's not fishing, shooting, or riding, he locks them up in a drawer till he's rested. Celia can get at them. Am I to tell her to collar any paper that has to deal with a tax on wine?"

"No, that won't do, my boy," said Sexton Blake. "It may not be a tax on wine, but something equally harmless that she would advise Peter to sign without hesitation. Ask her to stop anything written in Carlovic. To make certain, she'd better stop them all, if there's more than one. If there's only one, you may be fairly sure it's what the lieutenant called the document of death."

Tinker moved about the corridors, waiting for the king. Mr. Secretary Brentschi came out of the Council Chamber first, carrying a leather despatch-box, with a silver lock, and his Majesty followed. Peter looked as bored and sickly as if he had just received four hundred lines to write from his Form-Master at Calcroft School, as he lounged along after Brentschi, his hands wrist-deep in his trouser-pockets.

"You look as if you'd been buried and dug up again," said Tinker.

"I've got the hump twice—the dromedary's hump!" grumbled Peter. "You'd have it ten times over if you had my job, Billy. That ass Darro has jawed our heads off, and wants muzzling. I think I'll marry him to Celia one of these days, and she'll settle the bounder. Put those things in my private desk, Mr. Brentschi."

"May I humbly beg to remind your Majesty that some of them are urgent," said the secretary, bowing.

He had not quite got rid of his cold, and Tinker felt quite pleased to hear how husky his voice was.

"Don't try to make such a rush of everything!" protested the King. "I'll look through them before dinner."

"Very good, sir," said the secretary, and quickened his pace.

"The shifty-eyed old hunks!" said Peter. "They're an awful crowd, Billy, and the only decent one is Sarjo. The colonel isn't so bad, for he keeps quiet, but Darro must speak. I'll have to muzzle that guy, for he's never really happy unless he's hearing himself jaw. Bizer is another of the same kidney, but he cuts it short when I glare at him. As Darro is my cousin and a prince of the Royal blood, I can't very well tell him in front of the others to dry up and shove his ugly head under a cushion."

"Send him a dog-muzzle as a present and a hint," said Tinker. "I'm awfully sorry for you, Peter. As a king, my son, you're not worth a ha'p'orth of brass farthings. Though you look passable in a uniform with all those medals on you won in a raffle, as a king you're a wash-out. I could do the job better on my head. You're ugly, you're lazy——"

"Go easy, old bear!" said his Majesty. "Slow up at the cross-roads. If I'm ugly, what about yourself? Gee! If I'm ugly, you're for it, too, my lad. Do you know, I'd never noticed that before, or is the glass a twister? Say, I'm not as ugly as that, am I?"

A tall, gilded mirror confronted them, and the two youngsters were reflected in it as they stood side by side.

"As ugly as what?" asked Tinker.

"As ugly as you," said Peter. "If I thought I was I'd take rat poison in my soup. The mirror must have the jim-jams. Tell me it's not true, Billy—that it's only a bad dream. I can't be as like you as all

that, so it must be the mirror. Chase along and get a hammer, and I'll smash the thing."

They were certainly very much alike, except that his Majesty was slightly stockier, and his hair was fairer.

"I suppose it must be," said Tinker. "The gov'nor noticed it first time. As he happened to be the gov'nor, I forgave him. It's an awful thing to be like you, Peter, and I was more like you then. Brooding over the awful fact has made me go thinner. Notice it?"

"Oh, come away," said Peter, grinning. "I'll have that mirror shifted, for if I don't it will remind me every time I pass

British youth who saved the King. Yep, boy, that's a fine idea."

"You're just great on ideas, Peter, and I'm awfully happy about it. What a brain you've got, to be sure! I'm jolly glad I met you!"

"Oh, don't mention it," said Peter, who had recovered his good-humour. "Do you know, Billy, I've got a fancy for pork-pie, one like the old lady made who kept the little tuck-shop at the corner of Caleroft Green. I wonder if there's such a thing in the Royal larder. If not, the chef will have to make one quick, and if it isn't the real goods, off goes his napper."

"Well, I don't mind having a go at a



"You look as if you had been buried and dug up again," said Tinker. "I've got the hump twice, the dromedary's hump!" grumbled Peter.

it that I look a bit like you, and that will take years off my life. And yet there might be some luck in it, after all. I think I'll chuck up wearing uniforms, and have some togs made like yours. Nobody wants to shoot you, Billy, for you're not worth the price of a revolver cartridge; but if we wore the same sort of duds, and they wanted me, they might get you, you know."

"That would be jolly, wouldn't it?" said Tinker. "Quite a scream, eh?"

"Yes. I expect you'd scream if they didn't biff you too hard," chuckled his Majesty. "You'd have a ripping funeral, and all that, and appear in the newspaper, photo, with grin complete, as the gallant

decent pork-pie with you," said Tinker. "Better send along for it now, for I may as well have a good feed if I've got to be shot in mistake for you. In an hour, say, for I want to have a whack up at tennis with Princess Celia."

The princess was with the music-master. Tinker managed to see her for a moment, and she told him she had no time for lawn-tennis.

"That's that," said Tinker. "But, look here, Celia, Peter is keeping his promise. He's got some papers to read through before he signs them. The gov'nor thinks one of them rather important, so take a dekko——"

(Continued on cover iii.)

HOW TO MAKE A STAMP ALBUM

By **DICK GOODWIN**

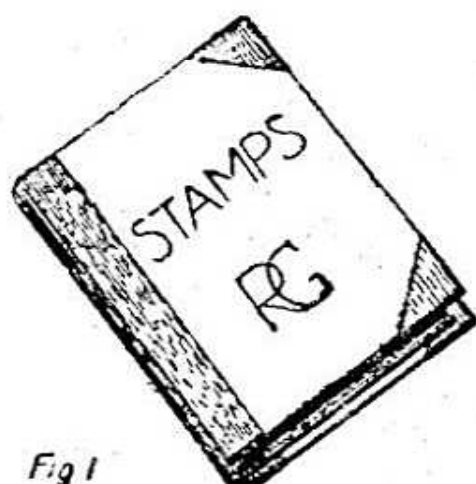


Fig 1

of paper between each page, these pieces are called stubs.

As I happened to have some thin leather handy, I bound the back and corners with it, as I have shown in Fig. 1; but there is no need for it, as bookbinders' cloth will do quite as well, although it does not look quite so smart. The paper for the leaves of the book should be fairly stiff, I obtained mine from a printer who happened to have a quantity just the size I required, 8 in. by 11 in., making an 8 in. by 5½ book when folded; but I would have used a larger sheet to make a book about an inch or so larger. As I have six books, divided among the various countries, there is no need for me to have anything much larger; but if I were making one book to hold a large collection, I should make it about 10 in. by 8 in.

Whatever size the leaves of the book are, the method of making it are the same, so dimensions can be safely left. The first thing to do is to fold the sheets, and place strips of 1 in. wide paper, folded in the centre between each sheet, as at Fig. 2.

Six folded sheets will be enough for each section, the number of sections depending on the number of pages required. The sections should be placed together under a heavy weight and then the sewing frame, as shown at Fig. 3, should be prepared.

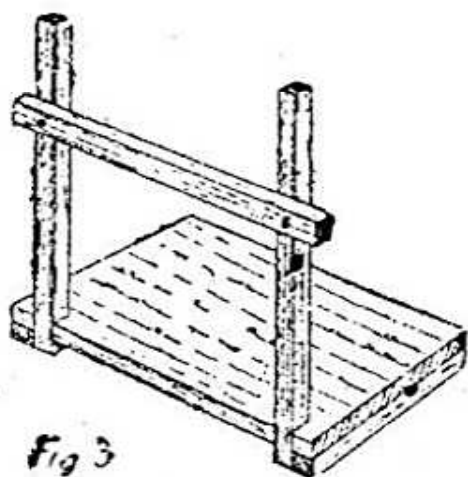


Fig 3

WHEN I started to make my first stamp album, I quite forgot about the thickness of the stamps and mounts, with the result that the book would not close properly. The next one which I am describing now, has narrow strips

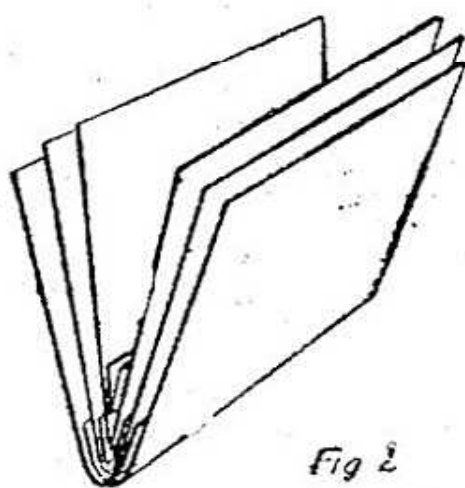


Fig 2

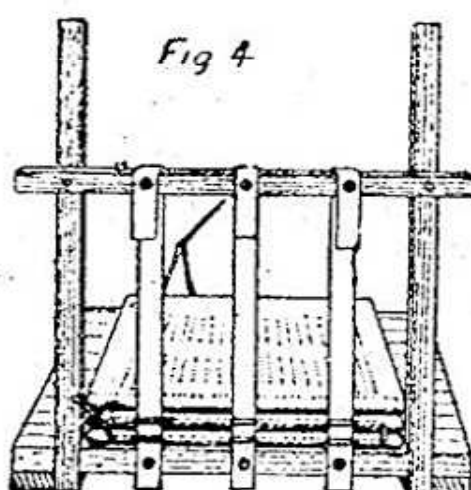


Fig 4

sewn together, as at Fig. 4.

The tape should be about ½ in. wide, and fastened to the frame with drawing-pins. The thread should be linen and the needle as long as possible. Place the first section down, run the needle through about ¼ in. from the left-hand end, and bring it out on the same side of the first tape; carry it over the tape, out again by the next tape and over again; continuing until the thread is pulled through to the front, ¼ in. away from the right end of the section. The next section is placed on top, and the same procedure followed until the thread is pulled out to the front over the commencing point in the first section. The two lengths of thread

are now tied together and a third section placed on top, the sewing being continued as before with the section. When all the sections have been sewn, place the leaves in a frame, as at Fig. 5, and press them together. Run some hot glue all over, and then prepare the cover. If the leaves are not even, they can be placed between the press and cut off with a sharp chisel, or a friendly printer may be induced to trim them up on his machine.

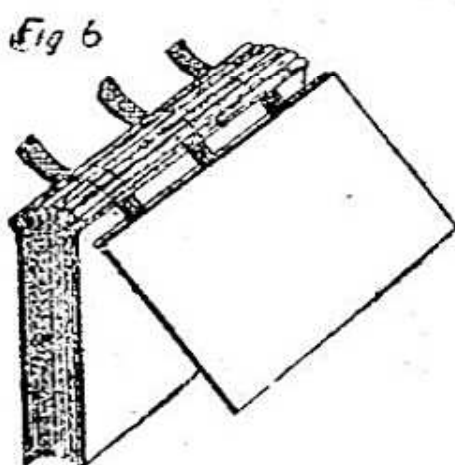


Fig 6

The cover can be attached by slipping the ends of the tapes, cut off to about 3 in. long, in between some split cardboard, as at Fig. 6, or the tapes can be pasted or glued down on a properly

The one I used can be used for large books, the uprights should be far enough for the sections to pass between. The frame can be made from any odd pieces of wood, its main purpose is to provide something to hold the tapes while the sections are being

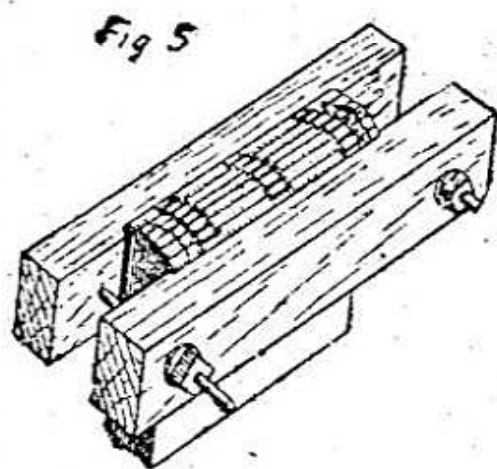


Fig 5

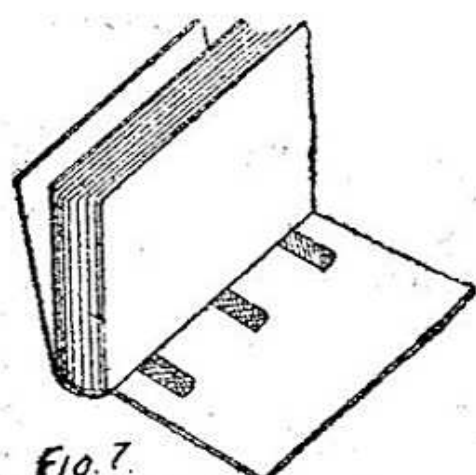


Fig. 7.

made cover, as at Fig. 7. The cover is made with stout cardboard covered with bookbinders' cloth, it should be $\frac{1}{8}$ in. larger than the leaves on three sides. The inside should be covered at the centre. The corners can be covered

with another colour cloth, as at Fig. 8, but mine are first covered with vegetable parchment with leather back and corners: you can use bookbinders' cloth for the same purpose if you like. The inside corners are finished as at Fig. 9. To complete the book, glue the tapes on as at Fig. 7, and paste in two end papers, these can be white or coloured.

The arrangement of the pages can be marked to suit, but this part of the work will not be difficult.

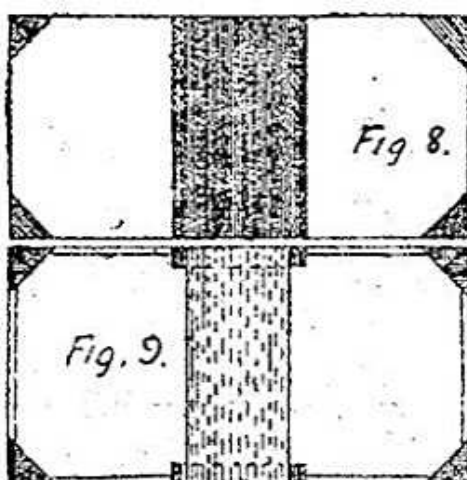
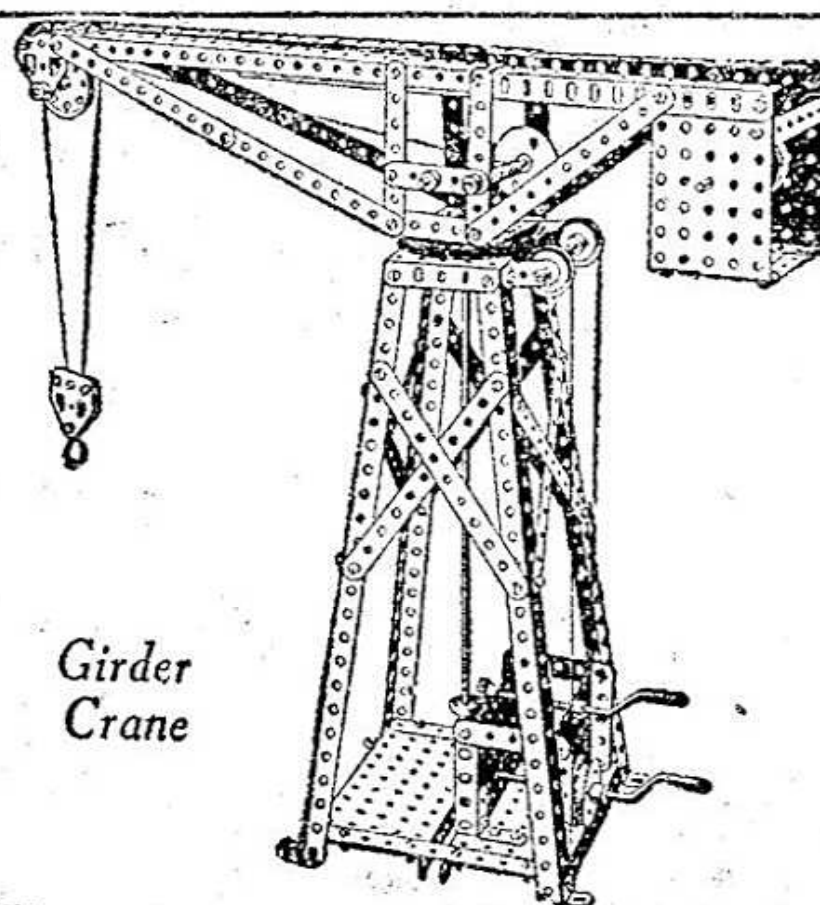


Fig. 8.

Fig. 9.



Girder Crane

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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.

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ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 25. Dec. 12, 1925

READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.

SECTION

A

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)

THE CITY OF MASKS*(Continued from page 37.)*

"Take a what, Billy? What sort of an animal is a dekho?"

"It's not an animal, but a vegetable, and may be eaten raw, boiled, or fried," said Tinker. "I mean, take a look, peep, squint, or dekho at the documents, and if there's one in Carlovic bag it and bring it to us. You can easily do that, for you can tell Peter it will take you some time to read it over to yourself before you read it over to him. And, as a further precaution, sniff it."

"I wish you'd speak plain English, Billy," said Celia.

"Sniff it, or sniff it. If it has a peculiar smell, different from the others, that's the billet-doux," said Tinker. "A sort of chemical sniff, not very strong, but I expect you'll notice it. None of them may be written in Carlovic, so find the nifty one. Even if it only talks about putting a tax on white wine or manx cats, bring it along. There's a game on with Sarjo & Company, and the gov'nor wants to bowl 'em out."

"I'll do my best, Billy," said pretty Princess Celia. "I'm sorry I can't play tennis with you, but it's music day, and I mustn't neglect it."

As Tinker was making his way back to their private suite, a magnificent flunky, in purple and velvet and gold lace, bowed before him, and then extended a tray on which lay a visiting-card.

"The gentleman awaits your honourable presence in the reception-room of the officers of the guard," said the flunky.

"You can tell him I'm coming right along," said Tinker, slowly recovering from his astonishment.

The card bore the name "Arthur P. Clodie" in print, and his address, "Hotel Royal Opera," was written boldly below the name. Tinker found him seated in an easy-chair, with his patent-leather boots on the table. Clodie took a cigar from his mouth, sprang up with a genial smile, and gripped Tinker's hand.

"Wall, here I am back again, bo!" he said. "They chucked me out, right enough, but I guess those police guys would have to get up before they went to bed, and stop up a year after supper-time to keep me out. I've got my old passport good and straight this time, signed and vised, so I meandered along, hoping to find you. I was lucky to hit against that big captain of the guard, a real fine chap; and when I handed along the proposition that I was nosing around to find you, he put me wise, and here I am."

Tinker had met a good many Yankees, and had disliked some of them, but he could not help liking Arthur P. Clodie, if only for his pluck and energy. In addition to that, the American was a well-built, handsome young fellow, and, unless his looks belied him, an honest and manly one.

*(To be continued.)***16 Weekly**

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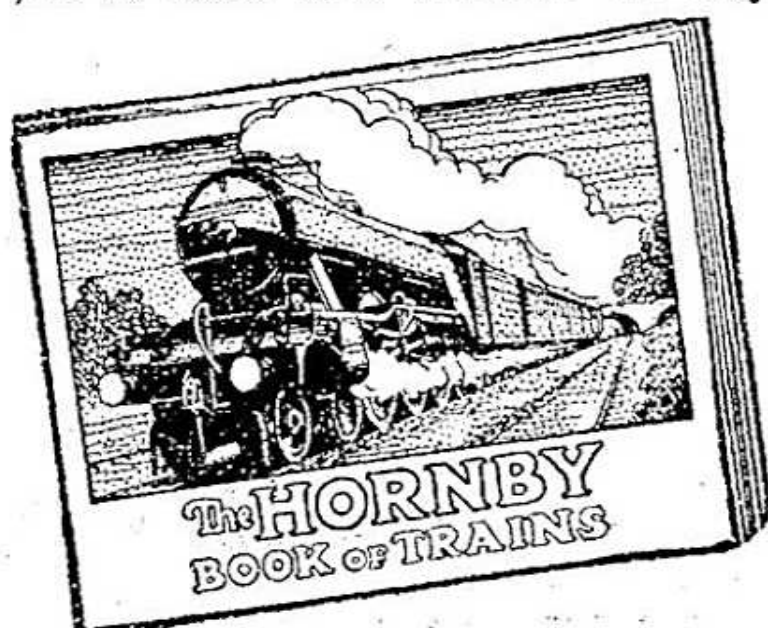
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