

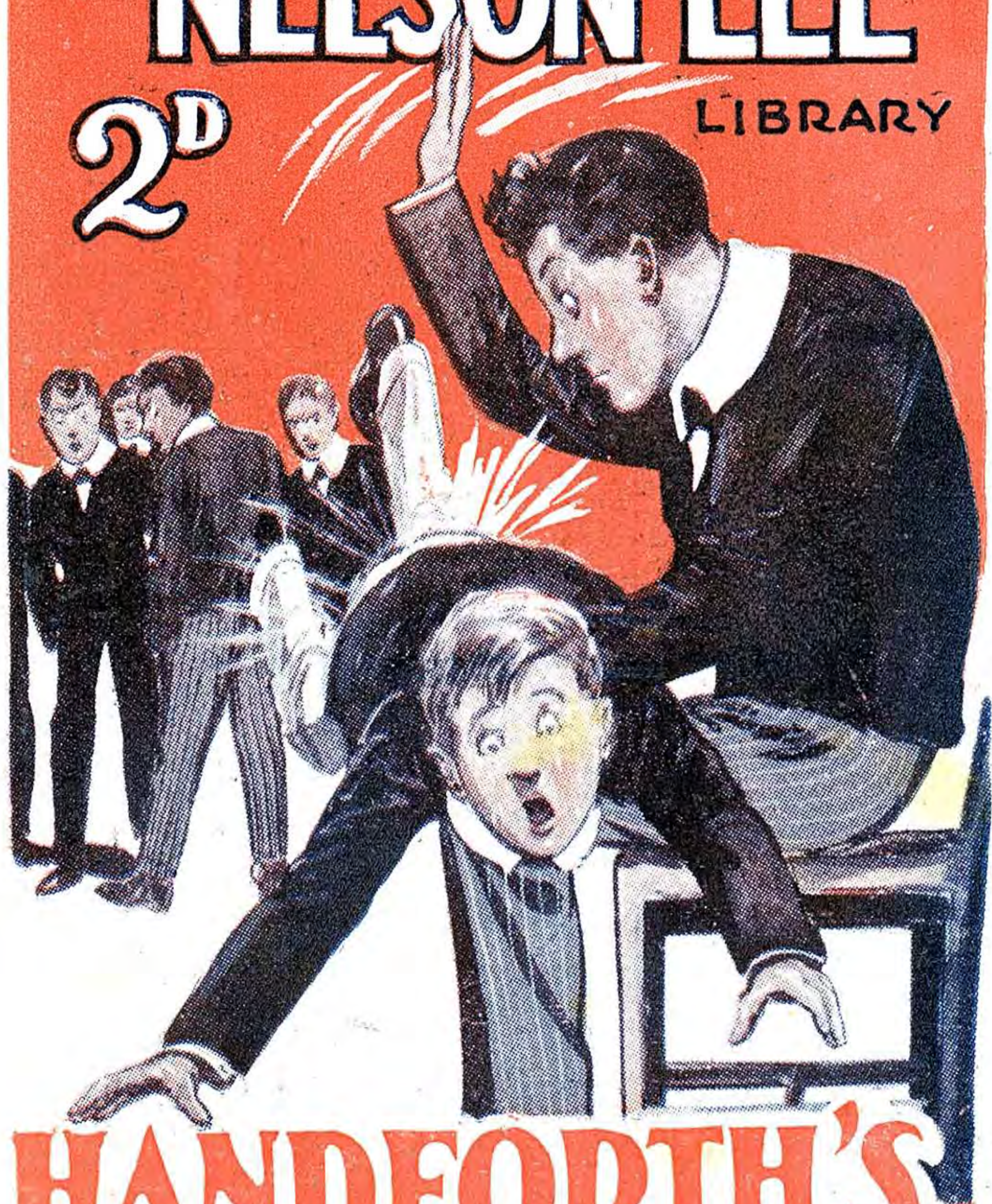
ROLICKING STORY OF THE BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S!

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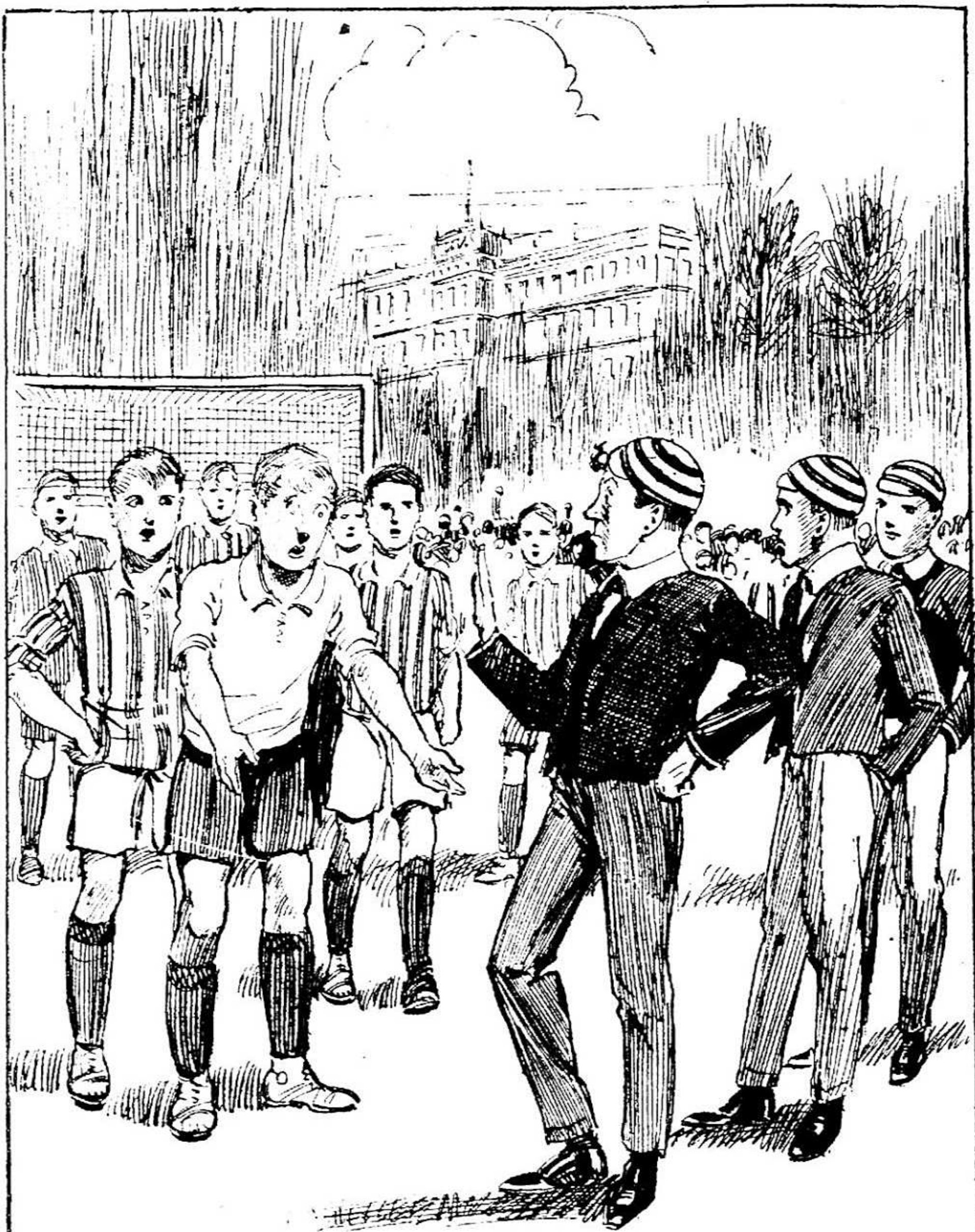


HANDFORTH'S IRON RULE!

New Series No. 24.

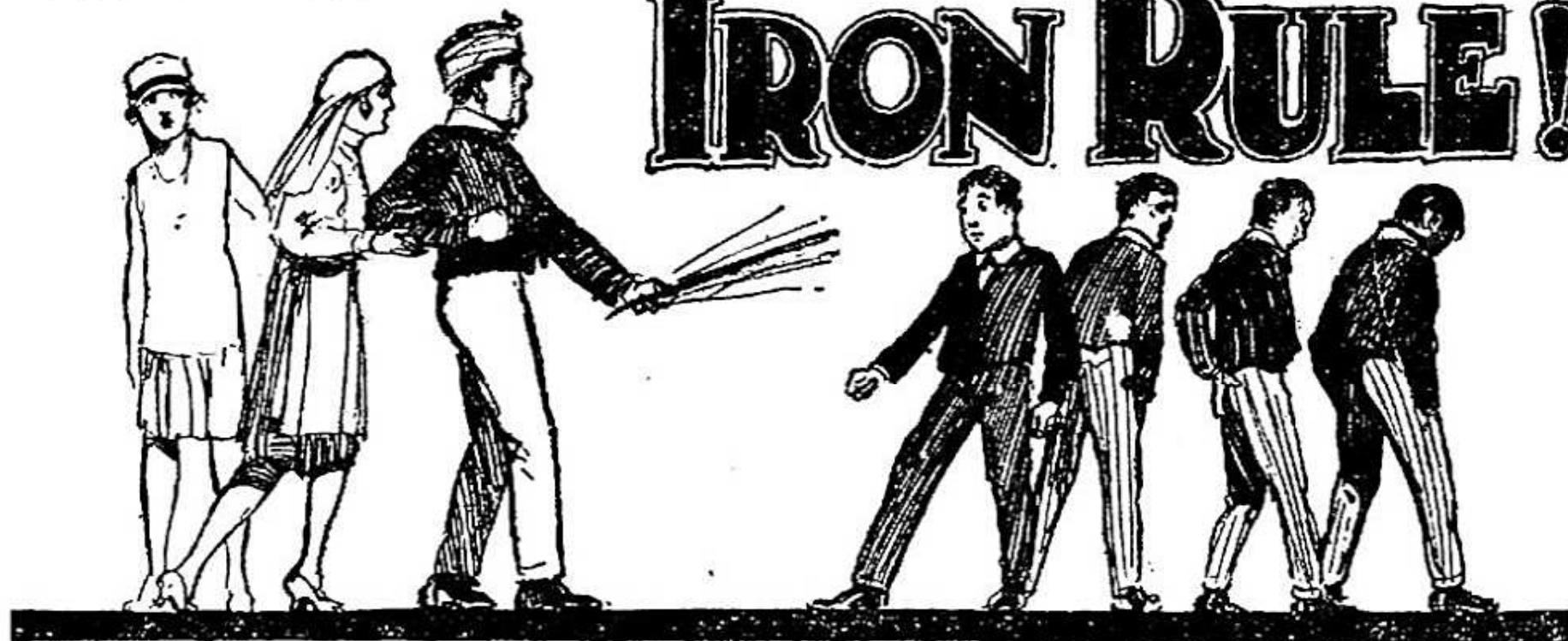
OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

October 16th, 1926.



"I'm here," said Handforth decisively, "and the game's got to start all over again! It's like your cheek to begin without me!" Brewster and the rest gasped aloud. Handforth—because he was the captain of the Remove—expected the match to be re-started, simply because he had been late for the kick-off!

HANDFORTH'S IRON RULE!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

The Remove made Handy skipper, and now it wishes it hadn't. You'll yell with laughter when you read this stunning long complete story of the Boys of St. Frank's.

CHAPTER 1.

HANDFORTH SAYS "STOP!"

"**S**HOOT, Hal—shoot!"
Hal Brewster shot, and St. Frank's were two down.
"Goal!"

"Oh, good kick, Hal, old man!"

The Junior Football Ground at the River House School was well surrounded by enthusiastic supporters. The game was only twenty minutes old, and the home team was two goals to the good. The St. Frank's Junior Eleven was not playing up to its real form, and these early disasters were the result.

The October afternoon was mild and sunny, and when the teams lined up again, the juniors were looking hot and flushed. But while the River House footballers were cheerful and gay, the St. Frank's players were desperately grim.

"We shall have to get a move on, you chaps!" said John Busterfield Boots, of the Fourth. "Great Scott! What the dickens will Handy say if we lose this match? We shall never hear the last of it!"

"Hang it all, Buster, he couldn't have done much worse than you!" growled Cecil de Valerie, of the Remove. "You've missed two lovely openings."

The leader of the Fourth grunted, but made no lucid reply.

"Crowe's the chap who failed!" said Fullwood tartly. "He let Brewster get through twice, and we're two goals down in consequence. If McClure had been playing, he wouldn't have made such a mess of it!"

"Crowe's all right!" said Boots indignantly.

Crowe was a Fourth Former, so Boots felt compelled to stick up for him, although Buster knew, in his heart, that Crowe was playing badly at right-back.

The game restarted, and Hal Brewster and his men continued playing with enthusiastic vigour. They had a good lead, and they were intent upon making it even better. The St. Frank's players felt that they were fighting a losing game.

And this was the first away match of the season! And they had always regarded the River House as easy game, too. What would Edward Oswald Handforth have to say if the Eleven returned to St. Frank's badly trounced?

For Handforth was the Junior skipper—the captain of the Remove—the autocratic dictator of the Ancient House juniors. He would not only have a great deal to say, but he would probably have a great deal to do!

Handforth dearly loved an argument, but he preferred to help it along with his fists.

Nobody knew why he wasn't playing in this game, for he had been talking about it for days beforehand. His usual place was goalie, but now that he was skipper, he had given himself the centre-forward position.

And then, at the last moment, for some reason that none of the other fellows could possibly guess at, he had calmly announced that he wasn't appearing! And, on the top of this, he had gone off somewhere in his Austin Seven with Church and McClure—two other important members of the team.

Handforth had failed to explain that he had fallen into a trap, and that he had definitely promised to be elsewhere—forgetting all about the match, and ignoring Church and McClure's efforts to remind him.

He couldn't very well admit his blunder—it wasn't a Form captain's place to make such admissions—so he had refused to make any explanation at all.

And now St. Frank's were two down!

In addition to a large number of River House fellows round the ropes, there were a great many St. Frank's Removites and Fourth Formers. The River House School was only a mile or two away, so the Saints' supporters could easily be on the scene.

They were tense and anxious. And the game hadn't been going for another minute before a change came about. Cecil de Valerie, the St. Frank's pivot, sent a long pass over to the left-wing, and Reggie Pitt was away.

"Hurrah!"

"Go it, Reggie!"

Pitt was a demon outside-left, and there were very few schoolboy defenders who could check him. He ran swiftly down the touch-line, with the leather in perfect control at his feet. And then, with beautiful judgment, he centred.

"Off-side!" yelled a dozen River House voices.

But Fullwood, who pounced on the ball, was well on-side; he leapt forward, and took a powerful drive at goal. The leather shot low and true, and the home goalie just succeeded in fisting it out.

"Oh, well saved!"

But the ball went straight back to Fullwood, and his head met it neatly. In a flash, the ball was at the back of the net, well out of the reach of the disconcerted custodian.

"Goal!"

"Well done, Fully!"

"Hurrah!"

A soft purr sounded, and a red Austin Seven sports car came to a standstill just beyond the ropes. Handforth leapt out, followed by Church and McClure. The captain of the Remove was looking excited.

"Who scored?" he asked breathlessly.

"Fullwood—a lovely header!" said Tommy Watson, with delight. "Hallo, Handy! So you've shown up, eh? Why the dickens weren't you here to play?"

"Never mind about that!" said Edward Oswald Handforth. "It's all right. you

chaps," he went on, turning to Church and McClure. "We're one up!"

"Good!" said his chums.

"One up?" roared Owen major. "You silly ass, we're one down!"

"What?"

"That's the first goal we've scored, and the River House bounders have got two!"

"Oh, have they?" snapped Handforth. "Like their giddy nerve! Not that it matters much, anyhow! This game's going to start all over again."

"Chuck it, Handy!" said Church. "You can't play about like that!"

"Can't I?" said Handforth grimly. "Who's the skipper?"

"You may be the captain of the Remove, but you're nothing in this game," said Church. "You're not in the team—"

"Not in the team?" said Handforth, staring. "I'm centre-forward!"

"Oh, what's the use?" said McClure. "You can't be centre-forward, Handy—not in this game, anyhow! It's well on the way now—"

"Any more comments from you, Arnold McClure, and you'll feel the weight of my fist," said Handforth sternly. "Am I Form captain, or am I not?"

"You seem to think you're the whole giddy school!"

McClure turned away, breathing hard. He and Church were Handforth's staunch chums, but at times he exasperated them to the point of revolt. How on earth could the silly chump expect to play in this game now, after he had definitely given up his place in the team?

The Study D trio had been in Bannington. Handforth having had a wonderful idea of collecting money for the local hospital. But it had turned out to be a frost, so he had calmly dashed off to the River House School, his chums expecting that he would be content to watch the match.

But, apparently he wanted to play in it, too!

And this, as any rational Form captain should have known, was out of the question. Once a football match was started, the team was irrevocably settled. If half the players were crooked, there couldn't be any substitutions. One can't mess about with a football team in that way.

But Handforth was a law unto himself.

The game had hardly been going for a minute after that encouraging goal of Fullwood's when Handforth, much to the amazement of the immediate spectators, walked straight on the field of play—just as Crowe had quite failed to stop one of the River House forwards from breaking through.

"Hi!"

"Get off the field, you idiot!"

Handforth took no notice of the shouts. He rather aggravated his offence by taking the ball off Dave Ascott's toe and kicking it into touch. The referee's whistle was blowing furiously.

"What's the idea of this?" shouted Ascott indignantly.

"This match has got to stop!" retorted Handforth.

"What the——"

"I'm not speaking to you, either," went on Handforth. "Where's Brewster? He's the captain. Oh, there he is! Hallo, Hal! I'm not sure that I ought to be pally with you, you rotter, after the way you japed me the other day with your dotty tricks!"

Brewster was in no mood to discuss the subject, and if Handforth had had a little tact he would not have raised it at such a time.

"Confound you, Handforth, haven't you got any sense?" asked Hal, genuinely annoyed. "What's the meaning of this? Can't you keep off the field when the game's in progress?"

Handforth stared in amazement.

"Are you having the nerve to object?" he asked grimly.

Brewster pointed.

"I'll give you ten seconds to get off this field!" he retorted angrily.

"Brewster's right!" put in the referee, one of the older River House boys. "Do you know that Ascott was just about to score, you young ass? I've a darned good mind to award a penalty, and blow the rules!"

"Come off the field, Handy!"

"Hi! Chuck him off!"

"Hear, hear!"

Handforth looked round in dazed astonishment. He—the actual skipper—being hooted at and ordered off the field! He was so dumbfounded that he could only stare. He didn't seem to realise that he was committing an almost unpardonable offence.

"Rats!" he said at last. "Don't you realise that I'm here?"

"Realise it!" gasped Brewster. "That's just the trouble! But you won't stay here for long, my lad! I don't want to quarrel——"

"I'm here, and the game's got to start all over again!" went on Handforth coldly. "I'm playing centre-forward, Boots can go in goal, McClure plays left-back, and Church right-half. That's the team as I originally picked it. So as soon as you're ready, we'll start the match!"



CHAPTER 2.

A BIT OF BOTHER!

FOR about ten seconds nobody spoke.

Nobody, in fact, was capable of speaking. There was something about Ed-

ward Oswald Handforth's cool pronouncement that almost deprived his listeners of their breath.

And the extraordinary part of it was—he hadn't the faintest idea that he was doing anything outrageous. Being Junior captain, he seemed to think that he had a perfect right to play fast and loose with everything and everybody. Ever since he had been skipper, he had acted the dictator. He appeared to think that he was a lord of everything. And, instead of getting better, he was growing worse. This calm interruption of an important match was about the worst offence yet.

"Look here. Handy, I don't altogether blame you!" said Hal Brewster, at last. "I don't suppose you can help it. We've got to make allowances for the mentally deficient! You're dotty! That's what's the matter with you, my son! You're simply up the pole!"

"You silly ass——"

"Unless you get off this field, we'll pitch you off!" roared Brewster violently. "I've never heard of such a thing! What do I care how you originally picked the team? We started this game with eleven of your fellows, and I'm not sanctioning any alterations."

"Hear, hear!" said Fullwood.

"Quite right!" agreed Reggie Pitt. "Cheese it, Handy!"

"Clear off, you ass!" said half the St. Frank's team.

Handforth stared at them in pained astonishment.

"Am I the captain, or am I not?" he asked hotly.

"You may be the captain of the Remove—although I'm blessed if I know why the Remove sticks you!" retorted

Brewster. "It was an accident, wasn't it? You were elected by mistake, or something, and your Form-master failed to see the joke?"

"Something like that," said Pitt. "He can't last long, anyhow—only until Dick Hamilton comes back. In the meantime, we've got to put up with this sort of thing every hour of the day! The poor old chump thinks he's the cock of the roost."

Brewster looked grim. He was quite a sunny-tempered youth as a rule, and one of the best. True, he had played a jape upon the Remove recently, and particularly upon Handforth, but it had only been in the natural order of things. He tried to keep calm.

"We don't want any bother, Handforth," he said quietly. "By what I understand, you backed out of this match at the last minute, and took your chums with you. Well, it's ridiculous to suppose that you can calmly barge in and have your place."

"But we're here!" said Handforth blankly. "I find that that other business isn't important. There's plenty of daylight, so why shouldn't we start the game again, and play it properly?"

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"Ye gods and little fishes!" gasped Brewster. "Did you hear him, you chaps?"

"The poor old fish doesn't understand!" said Fullwood. "He means well, but he's so full of the captaincy that he's lost all sense of proportion."

Handforth looked round coldly.

"And what's more," he said, "unless this game does start again, with me as centre-forward, I shall call all my men off! I shall order them back to St. Frank's! You can't mess me about like this!"

"Mess *you* about!" breathed Hal. "Of course, you're not messing us about, are you? I always thought you were a sportsman, Handforth—"

"He's a sportsman, Hal, but he doesn't understand," put in Fullwood generously. "It's this captain's job that's done it."

"Well, he'd better understand now," rapped out Brewster. "Are you getting off this field, Handforth?"

"No, I'm not!"

"Then in ten seconds we'll throw you off!"

"The first chap who touches me will be sorry for himself!" roared Handforth aggressively. "I came here in a peaceful spirit, perfectly willing to start the match again with the real team."

"Chuck him off!" said Brewster desperately.

He made a lunge at Handforth as a start, knowing that his fellow players would rush to his support.

Crash!

Handforth's right shot out, and Hal Brewster staggered. That hefty blow had caught him on the jaw, and he reeled over and went sprawling.

"I warned you!" snorted Handforth. "I'm a peaceful chap— What? You want some more? All right—come on!"

Slam! Biff! Crash!

Handforth was quite ready for a scrap. Indeed, a fight was always welcome, and there was always a certain amount of keen rivalry between the juniors of the two schools. And he was feeling exasperated now, too, because these silly fatheads were so ridiculously unreasonable.

"Rescue, Remove!" he roared violently.

He was hard pressed, and Reggie Pitt and the other Remove fellows looked at one another helplessly. Although they were totally against their captain in this scrap of his, they couldn't very well stand by and see him slaughtered. The River House boys were on him like a pack of wolves, and he had sent out the cry for help!

It was a most delicate situation.

Church and McClure, at least, answered that call without a moment's hesitation. They were always faithful to their leader, and even when he was in the wrong they would generally support him.

They entered the fight grimly, and lashed out with tremendous force. Kingswood and Norton went down, howling. Glynn got in a terrific swipe at Church, but Church dodged, and Buster Boots received it. And Buster

Boots, without more ado, sailed into the scrap with a will.

Littlewood called Fullwood an idiot, and Fullwood thought that Littlewood's appearance would be improved by a black eye. In about twenty seconds the fight had spread.

Within thirty seconds the two teams were far too busy to bother about such a commonplace thing as football. This wasn't merely a scrap, but a free fight! And the spectators stood round, aghast. This was about the most dramatic row that had ever happened between the juniors of the two schools.

Some would have said, perhaps, that the visitors were to blame. After all, they were attacking their hosts. But this wasn't quite true, for there wouldn't have been any fight at all if the River House boys hadn't threatened Handforth with physical violence. All the same, there was no denying that Handforth was the instigator of the whole unfortunate business—although he hadn't interfered with a malicious intent.

But what did it matter how it had started?

There was no question about the fight! It was rapidly assuming the proportions of a riot. Crowds of the River House boys rushed on to the field to the assistance of their comrades. And, with a series of whoops, the St. Frank's contingent followed their example, and entered the fray.

Players and spectators were soon intermingled in a hopeless confusion of yelling, struggling, lashing figures. The football field was becoming a battle-ground. And Handforth, who had been hard pressed from the very start, was something of a wreck, but still fighting doggedly.

One eye was blackened, one ear was puffy, and his lip was swollen. But he was hitting out with deadly effect, although the fighting was so congested near him that he couldn't obtain the elbow-room he needed for a really successful onslaught.

Hawke, of the River House, met with disaster. He also met Boots' knuckles with the point of his chin, and reeled over backwards. At the same moment, Handforth spun round to find some fresh opponent, having dealt with his original assailant.

In the crush he tripped, and fell flat on his back. And by an unfortunate chance, Hawke crashed on the top of him, the two falls having been nearly simultaneous. Hawke's doubled knee took Handforth in the midriff, and the unfortunate Edward Oswald writhed—knocked out!

It had been a fearful blow—but quite accidental. Any other fellow but Handforth might have been severely injured, but, fortunately, the leader of Study D was as hard as nails. He lay there, moaning in agony, his face pale and drawn, but he was still full of fight.

"Go it, St. Frank's!" he croaked. "Keep it up! I'm coming in a tick! Ouch! By George, I'm half dead, but I'm coming!"

He tried to get to his feet, but he simply couldn't stand upright to save his life. It seemed to him that something had battered

his interior to wreckage. And while he was reeling about, like a human imitation of a half-closed pocket-knife, two other combatants crashed into him sideways, biffed him over, and somebody trod on him in the very same place.

"Urrrgggh!" gurgled Handforth feebly.

This time he was really clobbered. To add to his woes he received a nasty kick from somebody's heel on the back of his head. Perhaps it was retribution—a kind of poetic justice for having precipitated this unholy row. But the poor old chap was undoubtedly in a bad way.

He was in the very thick of the press. Church and McClure were somewhere nearby, still fighting grimly, and without any time to think of their leader. Half the football field was occupied by the warring juniors.

And then, in the thick of it, Dr. Hogge arrived.



CHAPTER 3.

THE REMOVE IS FED UP.

TO say that the headmaster of the River House School was shocked is a mere shadow of the truth. Dr. Molyneux Hogge was absolutely dumbfounded. Arriving on the field, he stood there for a moment, hardly able to believe his eyes.

Passing through his garden, a minute or two earlier, he had chanced to hear some unusual sounds from across the hedge. He had paused, wondering, puzzled at such sounds from a mere football match. He had strolled to the gate, and taken a look.

Instead of a football match, he beheld a battlefield, with the wounded staggering about, or lying outstretched on the grass. Fellows were running wildly about, and others were shouting at the top of their voices.

Mr. Bernard Wragge, one of the under-masters, came up at the double, and paused at the sight of the Head.

"The boys are killing themselves, sir!" he shouted breathlessly.

"Good heavens, Mr. Wragge, what is the matter?" asked the Head. "Are the boys demented, or what? Upon my soul! We must put a stop to this without a second's delay!"

"It appears to be dangerous to approach," said Mr. Wragge nervously.

Dr. Hogge took no notice, and forgot his dignity to such an extent that he fairly ran on to the field. And as he ran, his amazement gave place to anger. He was furious that such a scene as this should occur on the playing fields of his school.

"Stop!" he thundered. "Boys! Behave yourselves! Cease this hooliganism at once! Stop, I tell you!"

He ran into the thick of the fight, shouting his orders. And the effect was rather magical. In all directions the boys were falling away.

Within a minute the rival factions were separated, and the battle was over. With the arrival of authority the riot had collapsed.

"Good heavens!" said Dr. Hogge, in horror.

The scene was indeed startling. Most of the boys were now on their feet, but there was scarcely one with normal features. Blood was streaming from countless noses, eyes were becoming closed, lips were puffy and swollen. Many of the fellows were staggering about with a limp, and many others were holding their heads.

And on the ground lay a certain number of more serious casualties, Handforth being included among the latter. But with the advent of Dr. Hogge, he managed to struggle to his feet, and to reel into the arms of his chums.

"Never," thundered Dr. Hogge, "have I witnessed such a disgraceful scene. Who is responsible? Brewster! How did this fight start? Answer me, sir!"

"I—I don't know, sir," muttered Brewster dazedly. "At least, I'm not quite sure. One of these St. Frank's chaps interfered with the game, and we were going to put him off the field. Then he jibbed, and—and after that I don't seem to remember much more."

"These St. Frank's boys started it, did they?" snapped the Head. "I shall make a very serious complaint to Dr. Stafford—"

"Please don't, sir!" urged Brewster. "It wasn't their fault any more than ours!"

"We're awfully sorry, sir!" said Fullwood penitently. "It—it just sort of developed."

"In two minutes we were going hammer and tongs, sir."

"That is no excuse!" rapped out Dr. Hogge. "I am shocked. I am amazed and pained. Instead of behaving like the sons of gentlemen, you have copied the ways of the riff-raff!"

"We've had our scrap, sir, and it's all over," muttered Brewster. "Nobody's hurt, sir—"

"You wretched boy! Half of you will have to go to hospital!"

"Oh, we shall be all right after we've had a wash, sir," urged Brewster.

"Every St. Frank's boy will leave these premises at once!" commanded Dr. Hogge angrily. "It is quite immaterial how this disgraceful fight started. But one thing is certain. There could have been no fight but for the presence of the St. Frank's boys. They will leave at once!"

"But our match isn't finished, sir!" groaned Handforth, staggering up.

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Dr. Hogge. "And do you suppose, young man, that I will allow this match to be resumed?"

"I'm the junior captain of St. Frank's, sir—"

"I do not care who you are!" shouted the Head. "You and every other St. Frank's boy will go! And, what is more, I will take

no further risk. There shall be no repetition of this—this hooliganism!”

“We’ll be all right in future, sir!” said Handforth anxiously.

“I have not a doubt of it!” panted the enraged headmaster. “For there shall be no more matches between my boys and St. Frank’s.”

“No more matches, sir?” shouted the crowd.

“Not another one!” vowed Dr. Hogge. “Furthermore, from this hour, every St. Frank’s boy is forbidden to come near these premises! I cannot possibly risk another such catastrophe as this.”

“But—but——” began Handforth.

“Enough!” barked the Head. “Go!”

“But look here, sir——”

“GO!” thundered Dr. Hogge. “Every one of you!”

There was no mistaking the tone of his voice. The St. Frank’s juniors left the field, many of them thoroughly scared. Now that the “riot” was over, they were beginning to realise the enormity of it.

The River House fellows were too worried about their own troubles to say anything. But they watched the St. Frank’s contingent with worried eyes and generally mournful expressions. Never had there been such a prohibition as this!

It was a mournful, woebegone procession that started off for St. Frank’s. A dilapidated crew, indeed! With torn clothing, swelling bruises, and begrimed appearances generally, they trailed off, some walking, some on their bicycles.

The game was left unfinished. And all future games were forbidden! Here was a pretty kettle of fish!

Here was a reflection on Edward Oswald Handforth’s wonderful captaincy!

For there was not a junior in that motley throng who didn’t nurse a bitter grievance against Handforth. This was his doing! If he hadn’t barged on to the field, there wouldn’t have been any fight.

His arrogance had precipitated the whole trouble. His mule-headed, stubborn obstinacy was the direct cause of it all. A fine skipper! A great leader!

Not that Handforth was in any fit condition to care precisely what happened to him. He just managed to drive his Austin Seven, but that was about all. But he was slowly recovering—and instead of being aghast at what he had brought about, his chief emotion was one of indignation against the River House fellows for having rejected his original suggestion!

Handforth wasn’t built to be a leader. He was too drastic. He was too extreme. He was not only tactless, but amazingly thoughtless. And yet, truly enough, he was one of the best-natured fellows in the world at heart. Without the fascination of the captaincy to obsess him, he was a good sort from head to feet.

And he was only captain by accident! That was the bitter pill which the Remove had to swallow! Everybody had thought that it would be a joke at first—but it was no joke when they were barred from the River House School like a lot of undesirables, and forbidden to play any more matches!

It was only just half-past three when Handforth drove his little car into the Triangle at St. Frank’s. There were very few fellows about, for on such a fine half-holiday, everybody was taking advantage of the sunshine.

Handforth put his car away, and then allowed Church and McClure to help him into the Ancient House. They had a wash, and then went down to Study D, in the Remove passage. Handforth flopped down on the couch, and stared in front of him rather glassily.

“By George!” he muttered. “What a business!”

Church and McClure wisely refrained from comment. They felt, like the others, that Handforth’s responsibility was great. But they were too loyal to him to show it. Besides, he was hurt. He tried not to let it be seen, but he was by no means his usual self. And he was irritable because he felt crooked. Handforth was a fellow who chafed under any kind of indisposition.

That double blow in the region of the belt had bruised him considerably, and he was in pain, too. His face was rather haggard, and one eye was puffed up.

“The fellows are coming in,” said Church, at the window.

“Blow the fellows!” said Handforth.

“What about tea?”

“It isn’t four o’clock yet——”

“That doesn’t matter—I want some tea,” interrupted Edward Oswald. “Can’t one of you fatheads put the kettle on?”

He went to the window and stared out. Most of the juniors were out of sight, in the Triangle, but a few groups were trickling into the West Square.

And everywhere it was the same story.

The Remove was of one solid opinion—Edward Oswald Handforth would have to go! There were no two ways about it—he would have to resign. The Remove fairly seethed with that verdict. Even the level-headed fellows like Fullwood and De Valerie and Pitt and Grey were as excited as the others.

It was all very well for Handforth to amuse himself at the Remove’s expense, but this was altogether too thick. If he was going to perform these tricks, he would have to get out of the captaincy, and leave it to somebody else.

Indignation meetings in the Triangle were supported by Fourth-Formers, who were indirectly affected. For they were forbidden to go to the River House, too. They, of the Fourth, were included in that prohibition—and all because of Handforth’s silly rot!

It simply wasn’t to be stood.

“Resign! Make Handforth resign!”

“Kick him out of the captaincy!”



"You look awful, Ted," exclaimed the nurse. "Unless you give up the captaincy, you'll go absolutely potty—I mean, the strongest brains will give way under a strain." Handforth began to feel as though his own brain was reeling—he didn't know he was being spoofed. "I ought to resign, eh?" he said thickly.

Handforth heard these shouts, and acted promptly.

Forgetting his pains, he strode grimly out of the Ancient House, and stood on the top of the steps. His appearance was greeted by a roar of indignant voices.

"You want me to resign, do you?" shouted Handforth.

"Yes!"

"We're fed up with you!"

"Then I can tell you now that I'm the elected skipper, and I remain skipper!" roared Handforth aggressively. "If any fellow wants to kick up a fuss, let him come here! I'll knock him down in two shakes!"

"Resign, you rotter!"

"You can all go and eat coke!" thundered Handforth. "Why, you miserable weaklings! It's all your fault for not supporting me at that match! By George! I'm going to have obedience before I've done, though. I am captain, and I mean to rule!"

"Come off your perch, you silly ass!"

"I'm going to rule!" repeated Handforth aggressively. "The more you jib, the more I'll keep your noses to the grindstone! An iron rule, by George—that's my policy! And anybody who doesn't like it can come to me!"

He gave the crowd a final glare, turned on his heel, and walked in.

CHAPTER 4.

ANOTHER DISASTER!



CHURCH was just pouring the boiling water into the teapot when Handforth came charging into Study D again. His face was grimly set, and his chums had never seen it quite so stubborn. Until now, the Remove had been more or less indifferent. It had treated Handforth as a joke. But the present angry opposition aroused all his obstinacy, and he was as firm as a rock.

And it wasn't quite fair to blame him for that free fight, either. He had certainly acted the silly goat by demanding a re-start of the game, but if the other fellows had kept their tempers, there wouldn't have been any scrap. One junior was almost as much to blame as the other.

And the fact that Handforth received the whole blame hardened him. He'd show them what was what! He'd show them whether they could play old Harry with their captain in this fashion!

"Let's have some of that tea, Church!" he said gruffly. "I feel a bit wonky inside. A cup of tea and some grub will probably put me right. And I need to be right!" he added. "I can see there's going to be a lot of work this evening, one way or the other."

"Hadn't you better be a bit mild, old man?" suggested McClure, shaking his head. "It won't do any good to keep up this 'iron rule' business. The chaps will get fed up, and take action——"

"Let them try it!" interrupted Handforth. "A Form captain can't allow any of his men to revolt! They'll find no weakness in me! Not likely! I'm skipper, and my word is law!"

McClure gave it up, and went to the cupboard. He thoughtfully brought out a jar with some potted meat in it, and gave it a suspicious sniff before putting it on the table. But he was too abstracted to notice what he was doing.

It was just like Handforth to calmly partake of tea in the midst of all this excitement. Nobody else in the Remove gave a single thought to tea. They were wondering how on earth they could get rid of their ram-headed captain.

About the only thing was to make him resign.

No Form captain at St. Frank's could be officially dismissed. It had been the custom, from times immemorial, to show a skipper that he wasn't wanted—and then he would naturally bow to popular opinion, and gracefully resign.

But, then, there had never been a skipper like Handforth before.

He held that the Remove didn't know what was good for it. It was all very well to get excited, and to demand a resignation, but where were they going to get a better captain?

"It's likely I'm going to resign, isn't it?" said Handforth, as he helped himself to the potted meat. "These fatheads don't know when they're well off!"

"All the same, it'll get a bit uncomfortable," said Church.

"It'll be uncomfortable for any idiot who dares to question my authority!" retorted Handforth. "They can't kick me out, and I'm not going to resign. So that's that! Pass me some tea, and don't look so jolly down in the mouth! There's nothing to worry over. I'll soon put that River House affair right! Leave it to me, and I'll have it fixed up in no time."

"Yes!" said Church dully.

"It's just a matter of tact, that's all," went on Handforth, as he smeared the meat paste over his bread-and-butter. "I'm not going to be pitchforked out of my job, and the chaps can hold as many meetings as they like."

"But I say!" ejaculated McClure, in alarm. "Are you eating that paste?"

"Yes, I am," said Handforth.

"Well, wait a minute, old man——"

"Rats! You can have the sardines!"

"But you don't understand——"

"Don't be greedy!" interrupted Handforth gruffly, as he partook liberally of the meat paste. "I'm surprised at you, Mac! I never thought——"

"But——"

"That's enough!" snapped Edward Oswald. "If sardines aren't good enough for you, you can go hungry."

"But that meat paste is squiffy!" roared McClure.

"Eh? It's what?"

"It's gone a bit off!"

"A bit off!" said Handforth, startled.

"Yes, I tried to tell you, but you kept on eating!" said McClure. "You'd better not take any more of it."

"You ass, I've eaten the lot!" said Handforth, gazing at the empty pot in horror. "Here's a fine thing! Letting me eat squiffy meat paste, and then telling me about it afterwards! If I die——"

"Oh, cheese it, Handy!" said McClure, looking rather pale. "I tried to tell you, but you kept shutting me up. I didn't notice what you were doing until you were well into it!"

"Who put the beastly stuff on the table?"

"I don't know," said McClure.

"Why, you put it on yourself, Mac!" put in Church.

"I did?"

"Yes, I saw you take it out of the cupboard."

"That's what comes of being worried," said McClure, scratching his head. "I don't remember taking it out at all—and I put it round the corner, too, so that I should shove it in the dustbin."

"Dustbin!" said Handforth feebly.

"Well, I noticed it niffed a bit yesterday," said McClure. "At least, I thought it did. So I didn't want to take any chances, and I put it away. Now you've scoffed the lot!"

"This is simply a case of murder!" said Handforth, in a hollow voice. "The whole giddy Remove wants to get rid of me, and my own chums give me poison for tea! Why, squiffy meat paste is awful! People can die in no time from it! You get cocaine poisoning, or something."

"You mean ptomaine poisoning?" said Church.

Handforth took a huge gulp of tea, and glared.

"Even when I'm dying, you've got to quibble!" he said hoarsely. "What does it matter about the name? Here am I, sitting here, with a lot of beastly germs in me! Poison bacteria! A fat lot you care about my life when you deliberately put squiffy meat paste on the table for me to eat!"

"But I didn't do it on purpose," said McClure anxiously. "I'm awfully sorry, Handy, old man. But I did try to warn you, and you kept on eating—— I say, what's the matter?"

Handforth was staring in front of him fixedly.

"I can feel rumbles!" he said huskily.

"Rumbles!" gasped Mac.

"Funny shooting pains down here," said Handforth, holding his middle. "It's working! In ten minutes I shall be writhing on the floor——"

"Oh, Handy!" muttered Church, genuinely scared.

"I've read all about it in books!" said Handforth, taking another gulp of tea. "The victim doesn't feel much at first, and then he suddenly has a kind of spasm. Then he has more spasms, and rolls to the floor—and never gets up again! Well, I didn't think I'd resign the captaincy like this!"

He rose from the table, and tripped against one of Church's football boots. This caused him to overbalance, and he sat down heavily.

"He's rolled on the floor!" gasped McClure. "That means he'll never get up again! It must have been a spasm——"

"It's come!" muttered Handforth hollowly. "Oh, my goodness!"

He managed to haul himself on to the couch, and he sprawled there with an expression of real alarm on his face. There was no question whatever about the spasm. The entire region beneath the lower waistcoat-button was in pain. But what else could one expect after receiving two independent crashes below the belt in a free fight? But Handforth didn't think of this simple explanation.

He had pains in his interior, and he had just eaten some meat paste which McClure had reserved for the dustbin! It was simply a case of two and two making four!

Handforth closed his eyes, and moaned slightly.

A spasm of pain crossed Handforth's face. "I'm worse!" he said dismally.

In all probability, the meat paste was now in the process of purely normal digestion. After all, judging by what the juniors sometimes devoured, the meat paste wouldn't do any harm, even if it was slightly squiffy. In the Third, it was well known that many of the fags had digestions like ostriches. And the Remove was, in a way of speaking, more mature in this respect.

"I'd better go and get a doctor!" said McClure hastily.

Even he had forgotten about that catastrophe on the football field. If an average man had received that knee in his stomach he would have been utterly incapacitated for a week at least. But Handforth was composed of brawn, indiarubber, and wrought-iron.

McClure hurried out without another word, and he came upon a crowd of grim-looking Removites in the lobby. It wasn't tea-time even yet—not the normal tea-time. And the Remove, having verbally kicked Handforth completely out of the captaincy, and into the middle of the forthcoming week, was wondering how to do it in reality.

"Where's that ass Handforth?" demanded De Valerie, as McClure appeared.

"In the study—dying!" said McClure.

"Dying?"

"So he says," gasped McClure. "He ate some wonky meat paste just now, and he's got terrific pains in his tummy, and

lying on the couch, moaning. I'm going to fetch a doctor."

"Cease this prattling," interrupted Reggie Pitt. "You say that Handy has got spasms in his tummy?"

"Spasms!" nodded McClure. "That's it!"

"And do you expect him to have anything else but spasms, after having his tummy biffed in by somebody's knee?" asked Pitt. "Why, he was fairly winded during that fight. One of those River House chaps tried to bore a hole through him!"

"My hat!" said McClure, with a start. "I'd forgotten that."

"Then you'd better remember it," said Fullwood. "You can't make us believe that a bit of tainted meat paste would upset an inside like Handy's! It's made of gutta-percha! I've seen him eating kippers that would knock down a row of nine-pins! Those pains are nothing but the after-effects of the River House scrap."

McClure waxed indignant.

"By Jove, I believe you're right!" he said warmly. "It's only his silly imagination. I'll go and tell him——"

FREE! ++++++

**SOMETHING
FOR
NOTHING!**

**All about it Next
Wednesday!**

CHAPTER 5.

A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY!



"HANDY!" said McClure frantically.

"Handy!" gasped Church, dropping his tea-cup with a crash to the

floor.

Edward Oswald languidly opened his eyes. "It's all right, you chaps," he said. "Don't worry. You needn't send for a doctor. These poisons act quickly, and by the time the doctor came I should be beyond all human aid. I forgive you, Mac——"

"Forgive me!" gurgled McClure. "But I've done nothing!"

"Didn't you poison me?" demanded Handforth indignantly.

"You silly fathead!" roared McClure. "I didn't tell you to eat that stuff! If you make a grab at it, and scoff it all down——" He paused, gulping. "Sorry, Handy!" he went on. "But it's not fair to accuse me! You don't seem quite so bad now, anyhow."

"A praiseworthy idea, O hasty one; but linger awhile," interrupted Pitt genially. "Handy's in no danger, so why worry? Methinks we might make capital out of this."

"Capital?" repeated McClure, staring.

"Exactly," said Pitt. "I'm not sure whether I ought to tell you—you're too much on his side! We want to make him resign—"

"And Church and I don't, of course?" asked McClure sarcastically.

"You'd rather go back to the old life?"

"Rather go back to life, you mean—we're not living at all now," said McClure bitterly. "There can't be an old life if there isn't a new one! We're simply existing."

"Then leave this to us, and say nuffin," said Pitt crisply. "Go back to the patient, and watch over him with care and solicitude. And under no consideration let him think that he's getting better. You needn't exactly tell him he's on the point of expiry, but work it up a bit."

"What's the wheeze?" asked McClure suspiciously.

"Little boys should be seen and not heard," replied Pitt. "Run away, and you'll learn everything in good time."

McClure went, frowning—not altogether pleased with this callous attitude of the Remove's. After all, Handforth's chums were loyal to him, notwithstanding their desire to see him ejected forcibly out of the captaincy. And McClure wasn't thoroughly convinced about that meat paste yet. Of course, that biff in the stomach provided a plausible explanation, but one couldn't be certain.

He went back to Study D in a rather mixed frame of mind, and found Handforth still on the couch, and still sprawling there with closed eyes.

"Well?" asked Church softly. "Have you told the doctor?"

"No, not yet," whispered McClure. "How is he?"

"Asleep!" breathed Church.

"Asleep?" said McClure, with a start. "I—I suppose he—he hasn't lost consciousness, or anything?" he added, glancing anxiously at Handforth. "Poor old ass! He's not a bad sort, in spite of all his faults."

Handforth recovered consciousness.

"Who's got any faults?" he demanded grimly. "If you're going to insult me, Mac, while I'm lying here in a dying condition—"

"I thought you were asleep!" said McClure hastily.

"I'm not—I'm just waiting for the coma to steal over me," said Handforth. "I once read in a detective story that a chap took poison, and then flopped down on a lounge, and waited. Before he knew where he was, he had relapsed into a state of coma. I'll bet that's what's happening to me!"

And while Handforth was busy relapsing, the main body of the Remove was holding an important meeting in the crowded lobby. The news that Handforth was in a weakened condition offered great possibilities. Now was the chance to act!

"There's one thing certain," Fullwood was saying. "We can't stick Handforth as captain any longer. Is that agreed?"

"Carried!" said Pitt.

"And if we don't get him to resign now, when he's half dead, he'll stick in the captaincy until Hamilton comes back," went on Fullwood. "And another week of Handy would finish the lot of us!"

"You're right," agreed De Valerie. "Our only hope is to catch him on the hop while he's weak. Once he resigns, we've got him."

"Absolutely," agreed Pitt. "He's only got to give his word, and there's an end of his reign. Let's get up a deputation now, and secure that resignation before he can get his strength back."

"Hear, hear!"

"It's a chance in a thousand!"

"Now or never!"

The voting was unanimous, and the deputation was formed without any delay. There were six members in it—Pitt, Fullwood, De Valerie, Watson, Grey, and Singleton. They marched to Study D with high hopes.

Once Handy resigned, his power would be gone! There would be six witnesses to the resignation, without counting Church and McClure, and if he tried to deny it after he had got well, he would simply be squashed. Handforth's iron rule was apparently on the verge of collapse.

Rap-rap-rap!

Church and McClure looked at the door as that imperious knock sounded. Handforth languidly opened his eyes, gave a low moan, and closed them again.

"Tell the doctor I'm beyond all human aid!" he said listlessly.

"Come in!" said Church.

The door opened, and the deputation filed solemnly in. Handforth kept his eyes closed, and didn't know anything about the invasion until he heard Reggie Pitt's voice.

"My hat!" said Reggie. "He looks a bit seedy, doesn't he?"

Handforth opened his eyes, and sat bolt upright. A sharp spasm of pain shot across his face, he groaned, and flopped back again.

"Oh, crumbs!" he murmured. "I'm getting worse!"

The deputation inwardly congratulated itself.

"We came to see how you were, Handy," said Pitt gravely. "I've heard all about that poison, and you appear to be in a bad way."

"I'm dying," said Handforth sorrowfully.

"In that case, you won't need to retain the captaincy," said Fullwood, in a gentle voice. "Why not resign before you go? It would be a graceful act, old man. Something to remember you by."

"Resign?" repeated Handforth, sitting up again.

The words seemed to act as a powerful stimulant. Some of his old grimness came back, and a light of battle entered his eyes.

"I'm not resigning for anybody!" he retorted curtly.

"But, my dear man, you can't carry on

while you're dying," argued Pitt. "Who ever heard of a Form with a dying captain? It's your plain duty to resign while you've still got enough breath to pronounce the words. Come on, Handy, old man. 'I resign the captaincy.' That's all you've got to say."

"And you expect me to say it?"

"It's your duty," declared the deputation.

"And what about my duty to the Form?" asked Handforth, with dignity. "I am captain, and I've got to carry on. Although I'm in a helpless condition, I've got to look after the Form, and guide it."

"But while you're ill, the Form can guide itself, old chap," said Pitt smoothly. "Of course, it'll be very difficult for us to get on without you, but we'll make a great effort and try. Anything to give you peace and quietness."

Handforth slowly rose to his feet, his face expressing pain.

"Outside!" he said coldly.

"But listen, Handy——"

"Outside!" repeated Handforth, in a stern voice.

"But, my dear old scout, we want to relieve you——"

"I'll give you ten seconds to push off!" said the dying one. "Do you think you can make me resign by this stunt? Not likely! I'm still captain, and anybody who disputes it had better say so! Outside, the whole collection of you!"

"You've got to resign, blow you!" said De Valerie indignantly.

"Oh, have I?" roared Handforth. "By George! I'll show you whether I'm going to resign or not! The giddy nerve! Coming here and asking me to give up the captaincy! Put up your hands!"

Crash! Biff! Thud!

The deputation dodged to right and left, with Handforth charging in amongst them like a bull. Judging by the force of his blows, he wasn't particularly ill, after all!

Church obligingly flung the door open, and the deputation hurried out into the corridor, one after the other. They might have put up a fight, and they might have reduced Handforth to pulp, but they couldn't very well biff an injured man.

The door slammed, and Handforth looked round triumphantly.

"Resign, eh?" he snorted. "Likely, isn't it?"

"Not very!" said Church, taking a gulp of tea.



CHAPTER 6.

IRENE'S COUSIN.

MINUTE later, Handforth was sprawling on the couch again, moaning as hollowly as before. But Church and McClure

weren't quite so sympathetic now. A fellow who could be expiring one minute, and throwing a deputation out of the study the next, was hardly the subject for sympathy.

But, as a matter of fact, Handforth was really in pain. The exertion had strained him a bit, and his bruised tissues were reminding him of the fact that he was by no means himself.

"That poison's working!" he muttered. "I may not be actually pegging out, but I think you fellows ought to get me some physic of some sort. I've got horrid pains, you know."

Outside, the deputation dusted itself down, and briefly discussed the new situation.

"I half expected it," said Pitt, grinning. "Hang it, you can't help handing it to the chap! He's got plenty of spirit. No resignations for Handy! My sons, we're dished!"

"And his iron rule continues," growled Fullwood. "I don't see any particular reason why you should stand there grinning like a Chinese cat!"

"Sorry—but it is a bit funny," said Pitt lightly. "Perhaps I've got a keener sense of humour than you fellows, but the more we try to make him resign, the firmer he sticks in the captaincy."

"I don't call that particularly laughable!" said De Valerie, with a snort. "It was a tragedy when he was elected. Just look at the chaos he's created. Trouble everywhere—in all directions—and this bust-up with the River House is the latest! What's he going to do if we let him carry on?"

"The imagination reels at the thought," replied Pitt solemnly. "And I'm afraid it'll have to reel. The old beggar is no more ill than I am—he proved that just now! And the harder we press him, the more obstinate he'll get. What a life!"

"But we've got to do *something*!" said Grey.

"Exactly—we've got to have tea," replied Pitt. "I see no valid reason why Handy should interfere with the normal panderings to the inner man. After tea we may get some fresh ideas. Tea's wonderful stuff for bucking you up."

And the deputation dispersed.

Tea wasn't a particularly happy meal in most of the junior studies that day. Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey went down to the village on their bicycles. There were various delicacies they needed—delicacies that Mrs. Hake failed to stock in her little school shop.

"This business about Handy is getting serious, you know," remarked Grey, as they coasted down the hill. "What on earth can we do, Reggie?"

"Well, if the fellows would only take my advice, they'd let him go his own sweet way," replied Pitt. "Handy's all right, but he requires delicate handling. Church and McClure are past-masters in the art. They can get anything they like out of him, and they can make him do any old thing they please. It's just because they know how to go to work."

"H'm!" said Jack. "There's something in that."

"There's everything in it, my lad," declared Reggie. "Handy's one of those fellows

who won't be driven. You can coax him, you can persuade him, but you can't drive him. And that's just where the chaps are wrong. They're trying to drive him."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Why, let him go ahead, and take no notice," replied Pitt. "If the whole l'orm didn't object to his wild-cat ideas, he wouldn't have a leg to stand on. When Handy suggests something particularly dotty to Church and McClure, they serenely agree, and then just as serenely get him to adopt their own ideas."

"It's a gift!" said Jack Grey, with conviction.

Further discussion was delayed by an unexpected meeting. Turning a bend, the two Removites came within sight of two girls, who were walking up the lane. One of them they instantly recognised as Irene Manners, of the Moor View School. But the other was a stranger. Irene waved, and the juniors dismounted, doffing their caps to her.

"You haven't met my cousin, have you?" asked Irene, smiling. "Dora, these are two of my friends from St. Frank's—Reggie and Jack."

The other girl blushed as she shook hands.

"Awfully pleased to meet you," she murmured shyly.

"Same to you, and many of 'em," smiled Pitt. "By jingo, Irene, we didn't know that you had a cousin as pretty as yourself!"

"Oh, none of your silliness!" laughed Irene.

Dora was more crimson than ever, and Irene glanced at her with a twinkle in her blue eyes.

"You mustn't take any notice of these chaps," she said lightly.

"But it's true!" said Jack Grey promptly.

And it was. Dora Manners was every bit as pretty as Irene, but in a different way. She was just about the same size, and she had dark fluffy hair and brown eyes—in contrast to Irene's fairness. And she was attired in the quiet costume of a nurse—a uniform which only served to add to her charm.

"We were hoping to see Ted," said Irene. "I wanted to introduce him."

"Oh, he's indoors," said Reggie. "A bit seedy."

"Oh, really?" asked Irene, with concern.

"Nothing much—a slight biff in the midriff," explained Reggie politely. "A small kosh in the diaphragm, received during the course of duty."

"Oh, well, perhaps we'll see him this evening," said Irene. "We won't delay you. So long!"

They raised their caps, and went their way.

"Jolly pretty cousin!" said Jack Grey approvingly. "But I must say she wasn't particularly loquacious. A bit shy, by the look of her."

"That's better than being too forward," said Pitt, with a thoughtful expression on his face. "I just had a fleeting idea, Jack. A

kind of hazy suggestion occurred to me, but it won't quite come. If only we can——"

He paused, and leapt off his machine.

"What's the matter—puncture?" asked Jack, glancing at Reggie's tyres.

"No, by Jove—a brain-wave!" said Pitt, with a gleam in his eye. "I couldn't discuss it riding along. Look here, Jack, Handy's a susceptible bounder, isn't he?"

"Susceptible?"

"I mean, he's a one with the girls."

"I don't know about that," said Grey. "I believe he's a bit soppy about Irene——"

"My dear chap, he's like putty in the hands of any girl, providing she's pretty and flattering to him," interrupted Pitt keenly. "He can be as hard as iron with the Remove, and just like melting wax with a pretty girl! Irene's cousin gave me the idea—that nurse's uniform of hers."

Jack Grey stared.

"I don't catch on," he said.

"Well, why shouldn't a nurse go up to the school directly after tea?" asked Reggie. "Why shouldn't she see Handy, and convince him that he's worn out, and run down, and too ill to carry on the duties of skipper?"

"You mean—Irene's cousin?"

"My dear, dense chunk of granite, of course not," said Pitt. "I'm afraid she'd be too shy. Besides, we couldn't ask her to do a thing like that. It needs a cool brain—a quick mind—a brilliant personality."

"And where is this marvellous nurse?" asked Jack sarcastically.

"Here—looking into your soft brown eyes," replied Reggie. "Complete with cool brain, quick mind, and brilliant personality. And, when dolled up, by no means unpleasing to gaze upon."

"You!" gasped Jack, taking a deep breath.

"You needn't be so shocked."

"But—but——"

"I dressed up as a nurse once before," went on Reggie reminiscently. "Don't you remember? When there was all that trouble at Moat Hollow? I spoofed old Archie, too, to say nothing of spoofing a good few others. And can you tell me of an easier subject for spoofing in the whole wide world than Handy?"

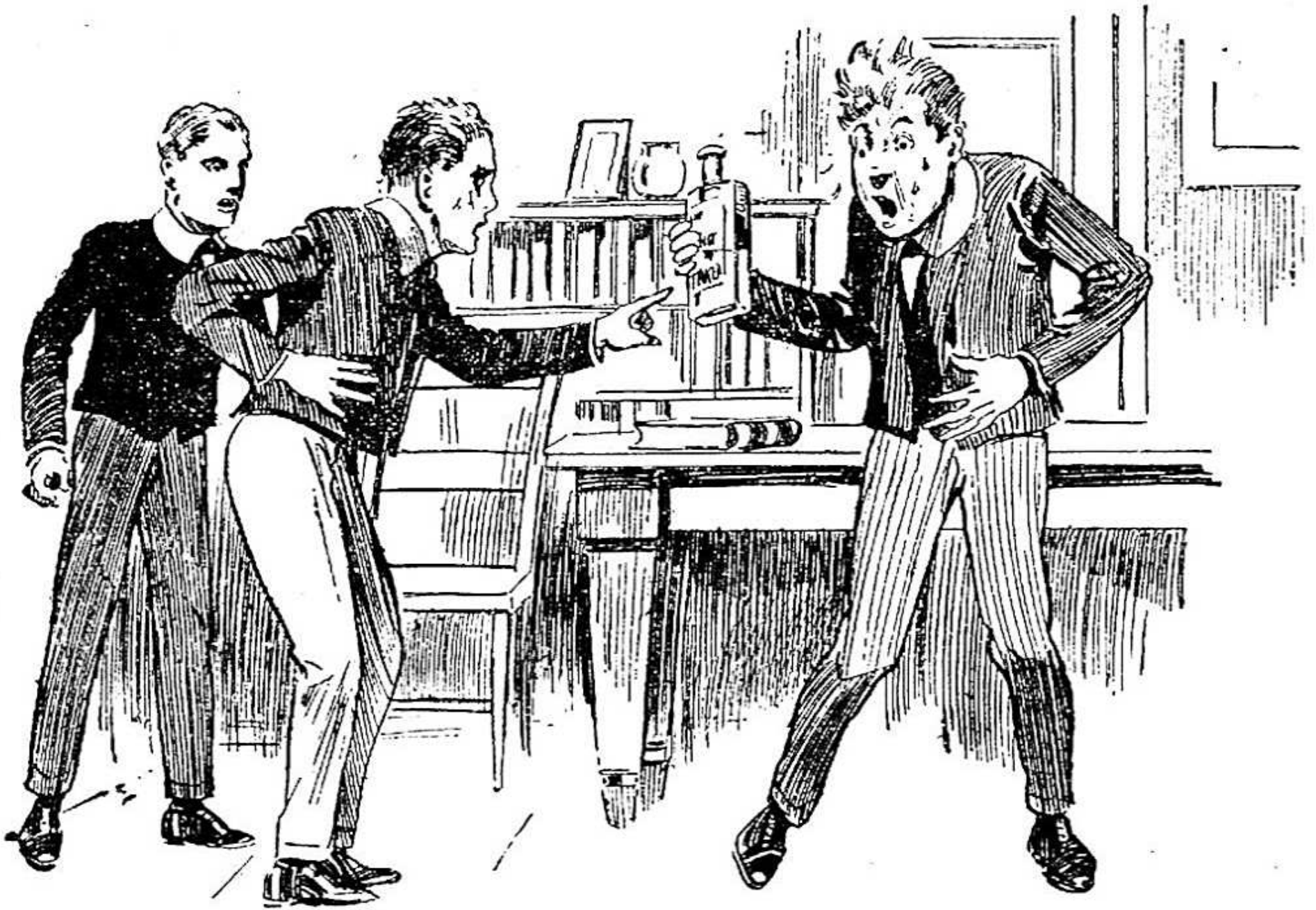
"I—I believe you could do it!" said Jack breathlessly.

"For those kind words, many thanks."

"But even now I don't quite see——"

"Listen!" interrupted Reggie. "Handy thinks he's poisoned, but we know that he's suffering from a bruised bread-basket. In other words, he's had a poke in the pantry. I go to him as a nurse—a pretty nurse—and tell him that he's ill. I admire the colour of his eyes, and tell him what lovely hair he's got, and generally stuff him up with the prescribed blarney. I convince him that if he keeps up his strenuous programme, he'll lose all his good looks, and reduce himself to a shadow. Wouldn't it work? Wouldn't he resign? Jack, my sweet one, it's a cert!"

"Well, you needn't start your endearing



"That embrocation's for external use only!" exclaimed McClure. "And you've drunk nearly half the bottleful, you ass!" "What?" hooted Handforth, as he gazed with startling eyes at the bottle. "I'm—I'm poisoned!"

terms on me!" said Jack. "And I like your nerve—calling yourself pretty!"

"It's wonderful what paint and powder can do," replied Reggie dreamily.



CHAPTER 7.

AN UNEXPECTED COMPLICATION.

DORIS BERKELEY shook her pretty head.

"It's rather a pity you didn't see Ted!" she said regretfully. "I was won-

dering what he would have to say to Dora."

"You'd better wonder what Dora would have to say to him!" laughed Irene. "She's terrible! All the time I was talking to Reggie and Jack, she just stood there, and said nothing."

"But I don't know them!" protested Dora indignantly.

"What difference does that make?" demanded Doris. "I don't want to be personal, but it strikes me that you're too shy with the boys, Dora. There's nothing to be frightened of—they're very commonplace articles. And you're nearly seventeen, too! You've left school—you're a nurse—and you're more shy than——"

"Oh, don't be silly!" interrupted Dora

lightly. "I haven't lived next to a big boys' school like you have. Besides, I'm not so saucy. You're even worse than Renie!"

"Thanks awfully!" said Doris.

They were in Irene Manners' comfortable little study at the Moor View School, having just come in. And Doris Berkeley and Mary Summers had been listening to Irene's account of their meeting with Jack Grey and Reggie Pitt. Dora was on a brief visit, and had only arrived during the day.

"Oh, now I've forgotten something!" she said suddenly. "I meant to buy some picture postcards of Bellton, and I clean forgot them. I want to post them to-night, too. Isn't that silly?"

"Quite dotty!" agreed Doris. "You can borrow my bike if you like——"

"No, I can walk down to the village again while you're getting tea ready," said Dora.

"What a brilliant idea!" said Irene. "We do all the work! And you come in at the last moment and calmly sit down."

"What's the good of being a guest, anyhow?" laughed Doris. "I shan't be a minute—I'm just popping upstairs to get some more money. I'll see you before I go."

She went out, and the other girls laughed.

"Nobody would take her for seventeen," said Mary. "She doesn't look any older than we do, Renie. And that nurse's costume of hers is too killing for words. I wonder what effect she would have on Ted?"

"She doesn't stand a chance against Renie," said Doris solemnly. "Ted likes fair hair and languid blue eyes."

"Are you looking for trouble?" asked Irene indignantly.

"I say, though, wouldn't it be rather a lark to send her to St. Frank's?" went on Doris, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "She's terribly shy of the boys—and there she'd be right in the thick of them."

"Oh, it would be too bad!" said Mary.

"I don't know!" murmured Irene thoughtfully. "It'll do her good. It's silly, being so scared of boys. What is there to be scared of, anyhow? In most cases, they're a lot more scared of us!"

"My argument exactly," agreed Doris.

"Oh!" cried Irene. "I'll tell you what!"

"Got an idea?"

"A ripper!" said Irene gleefully. "She's going down to the village, isn't she? Well, let's tell her to call in at St. Frank's on her way back, and introduce herself to Ted! Then he's to bring her along to tea with us."

Considering that Reggie Pitt was working out a brilliant scheme to send Handforth a pretty nurse, it seemed highly probable that some interesting complications might occur. But how was Reggie to dream that anything like this would sail into the wind?

"She wouldn't do it!" said Mary, shaking her head.

"Of course she'll do it, if I ask her nicely," went on Irene. "I'll tell her to go to the Ancient House and ask for Handy. Instead of that, she'll find herself surrounded by chaps, and they'll all be falling over themselves to escort her to Ted's study."

"I say, what a lark!" chuckled Doris.

"Yes, rather—and as she's going to the village first, it'll give us time to get tea ready," said Irene. "We shall have Ted here, and we shall be able to see what effect she has on him. Wouldn't it be a scream if he went soft on her?"

"You'd be jealous!" said Mary, with a smile.

"Don't be ridiculous!" retorted Irene. "Of all the silly——"

She paused as the door opened, and Dora stood there.

"I shall be back in about half an hour, I suppose," she said. "I promised to send these cards to-day, so I can't get out of it——"

"Oh, by the way, Dora," said Irene carelessly. "We were thinking of having Ted Handforth to tea this evening. We've told you about him, haven't we? That clumsy, ram-headed chap at St. Frank's."

"She's only saying that!" murmured Doris. "Don't believe a word! Renie thinks he's perfectly handsome, and——"

"Ted's a good chap, but nobody could call him handsome!" interrupted Irene coldly. "You might pop into St. Frank's on your way back, Dora, and call at the Ancient House for him."

Dora looked quite startled.

"Oh, but I couldn't!" she protested.

"Why not?"

"I don't know him!"

"That's only a detail," said Irene. "You've only got to ask for Ted Handforth, and—and there you are! You'll know him by his masterful manner. Tell him that we've invited him to tea, and he'll come like a shot."

Dora shook her head.

"No, I won't," she said firmly. "I'm not going into that boys' school! I've never seen Ted Handforth, and it wouldn't be right to introduce myself like that! Why can't one of you go for him while I'm in the village?"

"Because you're going right past the school."

"Well, I'm sorry—but I don't like it," said Dora uncomfortably.

"Afraid?" smiled Doris. "Frightened of the boys?"

"No, I'm not!" flashed Dora indignantly.

"That means you'll fetch him?"

"I've got to go, I suppose," said Irene's cousin, biting her lips. "It's only a trick—and I fell right into the trap! Oh, you wretches! But I'm not going to have you chipping me that I'm afraid!"

She went off with another sniff of indignation, and Irene looked rather penitent.

"I say, isn't it a bit too thick?" she said doubtfully.

"Of course, it's not thick!" laughed Mary.

"Anybody might think that St. Frank's was a den of thieves by the way you talk! It'll do her good to go among all those boys by herself. Let's hustle with the tea."

"All the same——" began Irene.

"Now then—no wavering!" said Doris firmly. "Dora is altogether too shy, and a dose of St. Frank's will do her good!"

So they made preparations for tea without any further qualms. It was quite an innocent joke, planned on the spur of the moment. And if Dora had followed her instructions correctly nothing very alarming would have happened.

But she was so nervous of St. Frank's, and so full of the proposed fetching of Handforth, that she went straight to the school first—before going to the village. And this, of course, meant a difference of about twenty minutes—a difference that was to mean a whole lot!



CHAPTER 8.

CHURCH HEARS SOMETHING FISHY!

IN the meantime, Church and McClure were very concerned over Edward Oswald Handforth. After the expulsion of the deputation from Study D, Handforth had apparently suffered a relapse.

He was still on the couch, and he still uttered occasional moans—sounds which re-

sembled, according to Church, the wail of a banshee.

Study D was no haven of comfort.

That Handforth was in pain there could be no question. Any of the other juniors would have callously ignored the patient's symptoms of distress. But Church and McClure had a soft spot for their leader. And McClure, in particular, was worried about that meat paste. He knew more about it than Church. He had smelt it, and he had a dim recollection that it had been mouldy.

Perhaps Handforth's pains were caused by his sufferings in the River House scrap, but it was just as likely that the meat paste was seriously getting to work. And McClure had a horror of ptomaine poisoning, as his father had once nearly died from it. The state of uncertainty was worrying him.

"Feel any better, old man?" he asked at last.

"No!" grunted Handforth.

"Pains any worse?"

"Yes!"

"Do you feel dizzy and sick?"

"Well, not exactly——"

"Then it can't be ptomaine poisoning," said Church.

"Oh, can't it?" growled Handforth, turning over, and glaring. "I should like to know who's poisoned, anyhow? Can't I have a few symptoms now without you chaps accusing me of lingering?"

"I suppose you mean malingering?" asked McClure. "That means pretending."

"Are you trying to teach me English?" demanded the patient aggressively. "I know what my pains are, and I don't want any rot from you chaps!"

"But we're trying to help you!"

"That's jolly kind of you, and I appreciate it," said Edward Oswald. "But I shall appreciate it a lot more if you dry up. How do you suppose I can get a nap if you keep jawing?"

"You never told us you wanted a nap!" said Church.

"You ought to have enough sense to know it, without any telling," retorted Handforth, whose pains had made him rather peevish. "I don't like to keep rowing with you chaps, but I'm feeling off colour. Be a couple of sports, and leave me alone for a bit. Anyhow, those other fatheads aren't going to make me resign!" he added gruffly. "I'm Form captain, and I'll remain Form captain, whether I'm poisoned or not!"

His chums went out, and gently closed the door.

"You needn't worry about that meat stuff," said Church. "I don't believe it was bad——"

"My dear ass, it niffed frightfully!"

"It couldn't have done," argued Church. "Handy couldn't have eaten it if it was as wonky as all that. It's a pity you told him anything about it."

"Handy would eat anything!" said McClure. "What about last week? Didn't we catch him on the point of scoffing some

salmon that had been left in the tin for three days? He'd have been dead by this time if he'd eaten that!"

Church sighed.

"Well, look here, as you're so jolly worried, I'll pop down to the telephone, and ring up the chemist," he said. "I'll ask him if there's anything we can give Handy to put him right quick. We don't want to bother the school doctor until we know something for certain. And Handy would pound us to splinters if he was carted off to the sanny."

"He's a sore trial!" said McClure soberly.

Church went off, leaving McClure on guard outside the door of Study D. If anybody came along to see the patient, he was to be told that the patient was asleep, and couldn't be disturbed. Handforth's chums were very faithful to him.

Rather to Church's surprise, he found the Common-room nearly empty, and he was pleased. He went across to the telephone-box, and enclosed himself in it. All the St. Frank's Common-rooms were provided with their own telephones. They were, indeed, public telephones, and the users were required to put their coins in the box if they wanted a call.

The chemist's number was engaged. So Church had to wait. And while he was waiting, he opened the door slightly, as the confined air was rather stuffy.

Archie Glenthorne and Alf Brent had strolled into the Common-room, and they apparently knew nothing of Church's presence in the telephone-box. And it never occurred to him to make his proximity known. He just waited for the ring, and watched Archie in the meantime, speculating as to the approximate cost of Archie's latest necktie.

"Oh, absolutely!" Archie was saying. "Not a word, eh?"

"Not to Church and McClure, anyhow," said Brent. "They're as faithful to old Handy as a couple of Newfoundland dogs, and they'd peach in a minute if they got wind of this."

Church, bristling with indignation, was about to burst forth and demand an apology for being likened to a Newfoundland dog, when he checked himself. There seemed to be something fishy about this business!

"And the dear old laddie is popping into the nurse's outfit now?" asked Archie. "I must remark that it's a frightfully juicy scheme, as schemes go. I mean, Handforth is easy game when it comes to a girl, what?"

"Any girl can twist him round her fingers!" grinned Brent. "And a nurse, mind you! A pretty nurse, who'll pay him all sorts of flattering compliments. He'll fall into the trap gloriously."

"You think the dear old boy will absolutely make himself look like a real girl?"

"Leave it to him!" said Brent. "You know as well as I do——"

The door opened, and Tommy Watson looked in.

"Quick, you chaps!" he grinned. "We're not quite ready, but we want you to come and have a look. They're over in the West House—it's safer there. We don't want Church or McClure to spot anything."

Church's luck was phenomenal. For the Common-room door had hardly closed before the telephone bell tinkled. If the juniors had remained a few moments longer they would have heard, and Church's presence would have been discovered.

Church lifted up the receiver.

"I want something for ptomaine poisoning——" he began.

"Two pennies, please," observed a cold voice.

"Oh, blow!" growled Church. "Always a bother over these giddy pennies! Well I'm jiggered! I'm broke—— No, half a tick! Just found a couple of pennies in the lining of my waistcoat."

He put them into the box, and was soon talking to the chemist. He briefly explained Handforth's symptoms, and the chemist said that he could not do better than come down at once, and explain more fully. And he was to be sure and bring at least half-a-crown.

"And I'll bet the stuff costs about fourpence!" said Church, as he hung up the receiver. "I'll be a chemist when I grow up!"

He nipped out of the box, and hurried from the Common-room. His mind was full of that other matter, but he had had to attend the 'phone call. McClure was still outside the door of Study D when he arrived.

"I say! I've heard something!" said Church tensely.

"About Handy?" gasped McClure. "Is he liable to die——"

"It's about Handy, but it's nothing to do with his complaint," replied Church. "I can't talk here, either—let's go inside."

"But he's having a nap."

"Then he'll have to wake up," said Church grimly.

They went into the study, and found Handforth rolling about on the couch in evident pain. There was no pretending about it. Unquestionably, Handforth's tummy was in a very bruised condition, and he was suffering accordingly. He could hardly move without being racked with spasms. Anybody who has been drastically winded in a rough-and-tumble will appreciate Handforth's plight.

"Go away!" he said irritably. "My only hat! Can't you leave me alone for ten giddy minutes? A fine pair of chums, to keep butting in——"

"They're getting up a rag, Handy," interrupted Church.

"A which?"

"They're going to play a trick on you, old man," said Church. "I heard it quite by accident just now. They've planned to keep Mac and I out of it, but we're up to their dodges."

Church and McClure were probably as keen as any of the other fellows to see Handforth

deposed. But, somehow, they didn't like the idea of their leader being hoodwinked. And the very fact that they had been kept out of the game annoyed them. If the other juniors had taken Church and McClure into their confidence, it would have been different. They felt, somehow, that it was now their duty to stick to Handforth.

"They're going to trick me, are they?" said Handforth, slowly sitting up. "Let 'em try it! What's the game, anyhow?"

"I don't know all the details, but one of the chaps is dressing up as a nurse," said Church.

"Oh, goodness!" said McClure.

"A nurse?" repeated Handforth ominously. "Well?"

"And he's coming here to get round you," explained Church.

"To get round me?" said Handforth.

"What does he want to get round me for?"

"You ass, I mean he's going to spoof you up with a lot of flattery," said Church. "I can't tell you any more, because I don't know any more, but it's up to you to be on your guard——"

Tap-tap-tap!

A rather timid knock sounded on the door, and Handforth & Co. started.

"Come in!" said Handforth thickly.

The door opened softly, and the chums of Study D stared. A demure-looking nurse stood in the doorway, and she looked so much like the real article that Handforth & Co. could do nothing but gaze at her, dumbfounded. And she even flushed under the close scrutiny.

Which wasn't surprising, for the girl was Dora Manners herself!



CHAPTER 9.

HANDY MAKES A MISTAKE!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH changed his attitude, and beamed invitingly.

"Come in!" he said sweetly. "You chaps can buzz off!" he added. "I'll deal with this young lady! You'd better go to the chemist's while you're away, and get that stuff for me."

Church and McClure went out, eyeing Dora with frank amazement as they passed. In fact, they were quite rude, giving Dora a totally wrong impression. For Church and McClure were not rude fellows at all, and they wouldn't have dreamed of subjecting any girl to such a frank stare. But this was different. She was one of the fellows dressed up! And they were wondering who on earth "she" could be. Anyhow, the impersonation was thundering good! The chap looked like a girl from head to foot!

Church and McClure went away, not only puzzled, but filled with admiration for the unknown spoofer. They even stared as they went down the passage, and Dora was well

aware of this prolonged inspection. She hesitated before entering the study.

"Come in!" said Handforth. "I don't know who the dickens you are, but come in!"

Dora still hesitated, her heart fluttering.

By one of those strange chances which seem to assist misunderstandings, the only person she had encountered in the Triangle had been Tubbs, the page-boy. And Tubbs had escorted her to the Ancient House, and had told her to walk straight down the passage to Study D—Dora having inquired for Handforth.

And Tubbs, being in a violent hurry on an errand for Browne of the Fifth—a fat tip being tacked to it—had left her more or less stranded.

However, Dora was comforted by one pleasing feature. This boys' school wasn't half so seething with rough youths as she had pictured it. There was quite a simple explanation for this—for practically the entire Ancient House contingent of juniors were over in the West House, helping Reggie Pitt to get into his wonderful disguise. And the seniors were at tea in their studies.

So, perhaps, it wasn't so much a matter of chance after all. The circumstances had come about in a perfectly natural manner.

Although seventeen, Dora looked much younger; she was one of those timid, retiring girls, although by no means soft. Among her feminine companions she was as spirited and as gay as the rest. But she had been brought up in the secluded atmosphere of a quiet country home, and it was only recently that she had assumed her nurse's avocation. To be quite frank, she hadn't actually assumed it yet, and was just giving the uniform a sort of trial run.

"No," she said nervously. "I don't think I'll come in, thank you. Are you Ted Handforth?"

"Am I 'Ted Handforth?'" snorted Edward Oswald. "You know jolly well I am!"

They couldn't fool him like that! But Handy grudgingly admitted to himself that the chap was a pretty good "girl." He was wondering who the dickens he could be. It wasn't an Ancient House fellow, as far as he could make out!

"But I don't know you at all," protested Dora, startled by his brusque manner. "Irene asked me to come——"

"By George!" breathed Handforth, under his breath. "The rotters! Bringing Irene's name into it! Before I've done, I'll push this fathead's face into the coal-box, and biff him out! But I'll spoof him first! I'll play his own giddy game!"

"I beg your pardon!" said Dora timidly.

She didn't like Handforth's curious muttering, and his aggressive glare.

"Oh, nothing," said Handforth, seizing her arm, and pulling her roughly into the study. "Don't stand there in the draught! I want to have a word with you on the quiet. What's your name to begin with?"

"Oh!" said Dora, rather frightened.

His fingers had closed round her arm so powerfully that she gasped. And the next moment she was in the study, and the door was closed. She had thought that Church and McClure were very rude, but this fellow was a perfect wretch. What could Irene be thinking of to make friends with him?

"Now then," said Handforth, "name!"

"Dora," said the startled girl.

"Don't think much of it," said Handforth frankly.

"Oh, really——"

"And what's your other name?" he demanded.

"My name is Dora Manners——"

"Don't tell fibs!" interrupted Edward Oswald indignantly. "It's a bit thick, to come here, spoofing me up—— I—I mean Dora Manners, eh?" he repeated hastily. "And you're a nurse?"

He had pulled himself up, remembering that he was supposed to be hoodwinked. But they would have to get up pretty early to catch E. O. H.! He was deliberately using a rough and uncouth manner—just to give a gentle hint that he wasn't easy game!

Dora was nearly scared out of her wits.

"And you're a nurse?" repeated Handforth, eye-

ing her with frank curiosity. "I like the way your hair curls round that little hat of yours. By the way, hadn't you better take it off? I don't allow hats on in my study."

A brilliant idea occurred to him, and he reached for the hat. It would be rather rich to pull off the chap's wig at the same time, and expose him as a fraud. Then he'd kick him out on his neck!

"Off with it!" said Handforth briskly.

He grabbed at the hat, and pulled. But, somehow, the wig was fixed on very tightly, for although Handforth tugged at a stray curl, the wig refused to budge. Dora gave a little scream, and backed away, freeing herself.

"How—how dare you!" she cried angrily. "Oh, you cad!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Handforth mockingly.

Dora looked at him, genuinely frightened. This fellow was mad! There could be no other explanation for his extraordinary conduct.

"Please—please let me go!" she panted.

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"Not likely!" said Handforth, who seemed to have recovered very rapidly from his poisoning. "You'll go when I let you go, my girl, and not before! I should like to know what you came to me for, anyhow?"

He wasn't going to let this spoofer escape without learning the meaning of the jape!

"I think you're a blackguard!" panted Dora hotly. "Oh, I can't credit it! You—whom Irene calls her friend! She asked me to come here to see you, and to introduce myself. And this—this is how you treat me!"

Handforth grinned.

"You can tell that yarn to the marines!" he said lightly.

"Are you daring to disbelieve me?" she cried.

"Daring!" jeered Handforth. "I should be a fine idiot if I believed all your bunkum, shouldn't I?"

For a moment Dora was speechless. This was simply outrageous. From the very instant she had entered his presence, he had insulted her! And now he was openly accusing her of lying! Timid though she was, this treatment aroused her to unaccustomed strength.

"Stand away from that door!" she commanded hotly. "I won't stay here another second!"

"Oh, won't you?" said Handforth. "We'll see about that! You'll stay here just as long as I like to keep you!"

Inwardly he was chuckling. Defeat! This vanquished japer had found him too difficult to fool, and was seeking escape! Well, he wasn't going to let "her" go until he had thoroughly revealed the fact that he was aware of the dodge. Incidentally, he was jolly glad that Church had given him the tip, because his visitor was so much like a real girl that he might easily have been spoofed! All the same, any fathead could tell that "she" was only a chap dressed up!

"I'll scream if you don't let me go!" cried Dora desperately.

"Good!"

"Oh, you cad!"

"Scream away!" grinned Handforth calmly. "But you needn't think that you'll get any help! You want the chaps to come, I suppose, so that they can save you? But I'm jolly well going to give you something to be getting on with before you leave this study!"

Dora recoiled, alarmed by his changed manner.

"Yes," said Handforth grimly. "I've decided to end this rot! Do you think I don't know you? Huh! You must take me for a chump! It's just about time this foolery was finished, and I'm going to send you back to those jokers who asked you to come here, with a few souvenirs!"

"I—I don't know what you mean!" said Dora breathlessly.

"Well, my souvenirs are pretty well known at St. Frank's, I should think," said Hand-

forth, with heavy humour. "Black eyes and thick ears principally! It'll be a pity to spoil all that paint and powder on your face, but it's got to be done!"

"Help!" cried Dora frantically. "Oh, help!"

By this time she was thoroughly convinced that she was dealing either with a lunatic or a young hooligan. He seemed sane, but there was no question of his brutality!

"That's right—yell away!" said Handforth, grinning. "You're pretty scared now, eh? The trick hasn't worked, has it? It was like your nerve to think it could! I'll spoil your pretty features, by George!"

What a joke! The chap had certainly made himself look like a girl, but she wouldn't look much like one by the time she got away!

Dora made a frantic attempt to open the door, but Handforth seized her arm, swung her round, and grabbed for an open fruit tart which lay on the table—the tea-things being still uncleared.

"The very thing!" said Handforth gleatingly.

With one sweep, he swung that jam tart round, and Dora screamed. The tart all but struck her when she managed to break clear—the next moment she was outside.

A twinge of pain made Handy give up the idea of pursuit. He slammed the door, and felt so chirpy that he soon recovered from his interior pains. By George, he was going to let the Remove know that he was boss!

And Dora, outside, was more humiliated and distressed than she had ever been in her whole life. This treatment would have been serious enough for a girl like Doris Berkeley, but Dora was much more timid natured.

There was nobody in sight, and as she fled like a frightened fawn through the lobby and out into the Triangle, she was mercifully swallowed up into the dusk. And thus another stroke of chance was furthering the evening's caprices! For none of the fellows knew that Dora had come, and none had seen her go.

And Reggie Pitt was still making his preparations!

Out in the lane, Dora ran on and on until her panic abated slightly. And then she came to a frightened halt, for there were figures in the dusk ahead—St. Frank's boys!

"Oh!" she panted helplessly.

She couldn't be seen like this! With a quick glance, she noted a gap in the hedge, and she ran through it, and plunged into a meadow. And then she ran. Her impression of St. Frank's was an appalling one—and her impression of Edward Oswald Handforth was so terrible that it was impossible to visualise it.

And Handforth, in Study D, was chuckling with pure and adulterated joy. Little did he know that he had unpardonably insulted a real young lady! He would sooner have cut off his right hand than act in such a blackguardly manner. But Handy didn't know!

CHAPTER 10.



AND STILL HE DIDN'T GUESS!

EVERYTHING had been happening so quickly that there was really no time for the real truth to assert itself. It was just one event after another, and they were so cunningly interwoven that misunderstandings were inevitable. By all appearances, this was not exactly one of Handforth's lucky evenings.

He cooled down after a while, wondering, rather, why the fellows didn't come and congratulate him for having spotted the spoof. At least, they might as well give him the credit for being smart!

But no, he reflected bitterly, they were all against him. They were trying to make him resign—trying to weaken him—trying to biff him out of the captaincy. By George! He'd let them know whether he was going to give in just because he was seedy for once!

The recollection of being seedy reminded him of his pain, and he gave a start. Why didn't Church and McClure come back with that physic? What did they care? They were probably gorging in the village tuck-shop, and here he was, in danger of pegging out!

He sat down on the couch, and reflected.

It was rather rummy, but the passage seemed strangely silent! There appeared to be nobody about at all, and he was disappointed at the lack of noise. But yet it was perfectly natural. The fellows were so sick at being dished that their voices were small and subdued. They had probably crawled away, sick and disgusted at the whole frost.

Or, more likely, they were plotting again!

"By George, that's what they're doing!" said Handforth grimly. "They're faking up another jape to make me resign. But I won't resign! I won't give in! I'm going to stick to this iron rule, and nothing is going to shift me! *Nothing!*" he thundered, crashing his fist on the table.

In order to accomplish this thump, he had leaned forward, and now he sank back with a hollow groan. The effort had exercised the bruised tissues underneath his waistcoat. Handforth's agony was no myth. He had been really and truly hurt during that fight, and if the school doctor had known anything about it, the leader of Study D would have been in the sanny by now.

But Handforth was a fellow who took bruises and hurts in his stride, ignoring them as trifles. The fact that he was now aware of his acute pain was proof positive that he was really crocked. But he kept thinking that these pains were due to the squiffy meat paste.

"Oh, my hat!" he muttered huskily. "I'm poisoned all right!"

He lay there, breathing hard. And his mind was full of suspicions. What were the chaps planning now? Some fresh trick, of course! The mean rotters! They were try-

ing to get rid of him while he was incapacitated! But he would be ready for them at every turn!

Curiously enough, Handforth was convinced that his own methods were the correct ones, and he was angry with the Remove for desiring his dismissal. For Handforth was a fellow who could never be in the wrong—in his own opinion. If he planned a thing, it was naturally right.

Tap-tap!

Handforth sat forward, suspicious on the instant.

"Come in!" he said grimly.

He instinctively reached for a cricket stump, which rested against the wall near by. But the visitor was only Tubbs. And Tubbs was looking very bright and cheery, Browne having sprung three shillings, when Tubbs had only expected two.

"You're wanted on the 'phone, Master Handforth," said Tubbs brightly.

Handforth gave a hollow laugh.

"Oh, am I?" he said heavily. "How much did they pay you to tell me that?"

The page-boy appeared surprised.

"Pay me, Master Handforth?" he repeated. "Who?"

"Those who sent you!"

"But I ain't been sent, sir," declared Tubbs. "I heard the bell ringing in the Common-room, and so I answered it, as there didn't seem to be nobody about. It's a fair rum 'un, Master Handforth," he added, shaking his head. "There don't seem to be nobody about nowhere. All the young gents have cleared hoff!"

"Well, you can clear hoff, too!" said Handforth.

"But about this telephone call, sir?" asked Tubbs, astonished.

"Rats! You can't kid me——"

"Honest, sir, you're wanted!" urged Tubbs, wondering what was the matter with Edward Oswald. "In fact, sir, it's Miss Irene!" he added with a stage wink. "Miss Irene, of the Moor View School, Master Handforth."

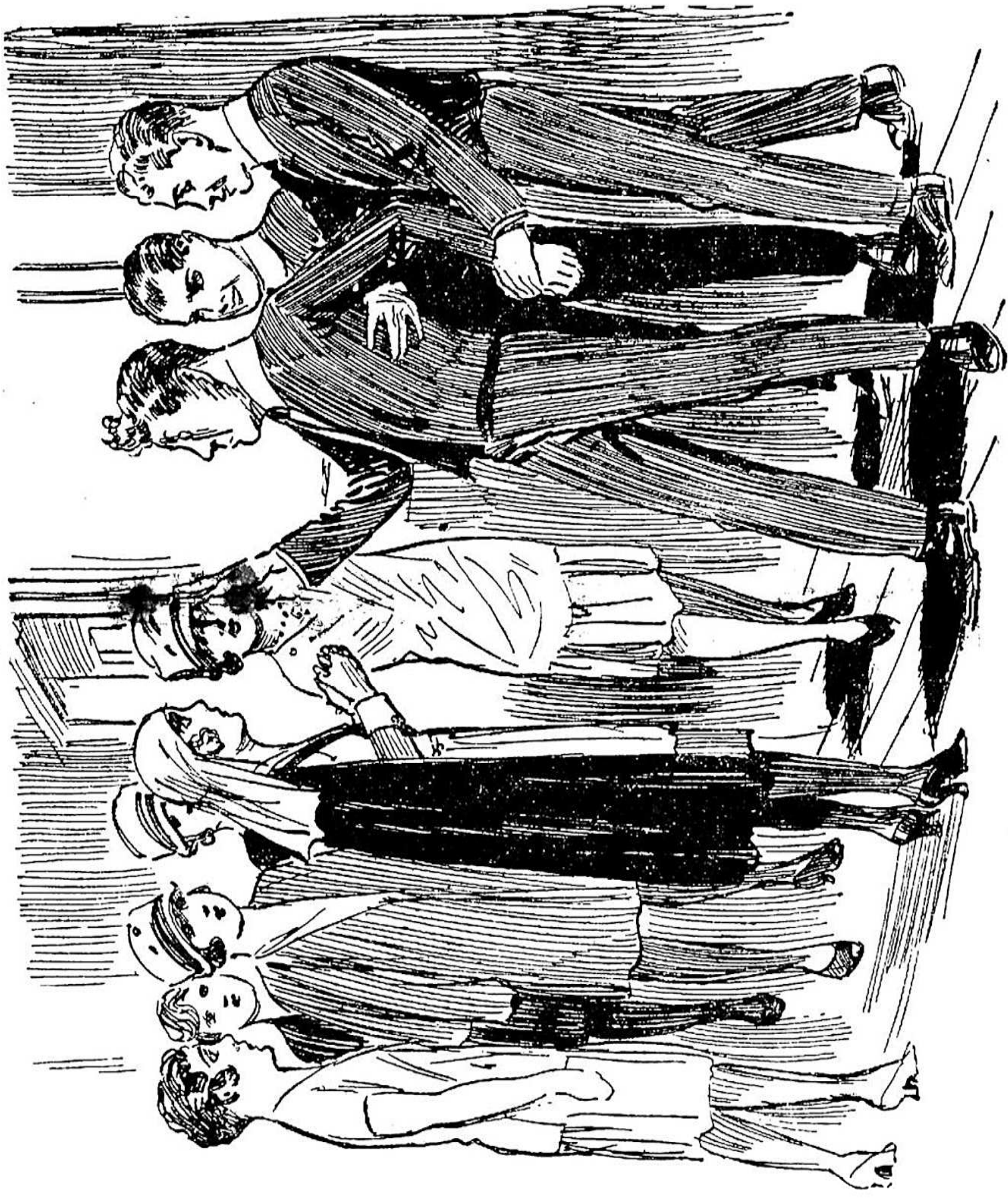
"Look here, are you telling me the truth?" asked Handforth sharply.

"Why, yessir—honest!"

Handforth rose from the couch, and winced. He could hardly move without feeling pain. He was torn. Was this a genuine call from Irene, or were the Removites trying on another dodge? He believed Tubbs to be sincere, but Tubbs might easily have been deceived by a voice over the 'phone.

Anyhow, he couldn't afford to risk it. He would have to go and see. He was just in that state when he was suspicious of everything and everybody. He even gave Tubbs a very sharp look, to make sure that he was Tubbs.

He went out without saying a word—much to the page-boy's surprise—for Handforth was generally good for sixpence, and sometimes a bob. Going down the corridor, Edward Oswald recollected that that japer—that chap dressed up as a girl—had used



At sight of the girls Handy was immediately restored to health. Then he recognised the nurse. "What are you doing here, Pitt P," he asked angrily. "I thought I'd kicked you out of the study! You may be able to deceive the girls, but you can't fool me, you know." "There must have been some mistake," said Irene. "Ted, let me introduce you to my cousin, Dora," she waved a hand to the nurse!

Irene's name. Surely they wouldn't try the same trick twice? No, this was probably a genuine call.

"Anyhow, they can't beat me!" he muttered.

He put on a fierce, aggressive glare just before opening the Common-room door. But that effort was entirely wasted, for the Common-room was empty. It certainly *was* queer, where all the fellows had got to!

He went to the telephone-box, and put the receiver to his ear.

"Hallo!" he said cautiously.

"Oh, Ted, is that you?" came Irene's musical voice.

Handforth's frown vanished, and his pains disappeared. He forgot the Remove, he forgot his woes, and life became sweet.

"Yes, rather!" he said eagerly. "Thanks awfully for ringing up, Irene! As a matter of fact, I'm feeling a bit blue this evening, and I need something to buck me up. Your voice is ripping."

Irene laughed—a sure enough indication that she was, as yet, in ignorance of the startling fate which had befallen her cousin. There could be no mistaking that merry laugh of hers. There was no japing here!

"You need something to buck you up, eh?" she asked. "Well, in a few minutes you'll probably be receiving a call from my cousin, and she's going to bring you back to tea. Everything's nearly ready."

"I say, how jolly nice!" said Handforth, with forced enthusiasm—for he was not feeling fit enough to go visiting, although he was far too gallant to admit this. "Thanks, Irene!" Something stirred in his memory.

"Your cousin, you said?"

"Yes, Dora Manners."

Handforth started so violently that the telephone-box quivered.

"Dora Manners!" he shouted.

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"Nun-nothing!" gasped Edward Oswald. "I—I was wondering if—if she could have been here——"

"Oh, no, she won't be there for another five minutes," replied Irene, who was under the impression that Dora had gone to the village first. "Why, Ted? You seem rather startled, or something?"

Handforth breathed a great sigh of relief.

"Oh, no!" he said hastily. "It's nothing—nothing at all!"

Idiot! Fathead! Imbecile! Why the dickens hadn't he jumped to it in the first second? Of course, some of the other fellows must have met Dora Manners already, and that had given them the idea of spoofing him! Church had been positive about the jape—and, besides, Irene had said that her cousin wouldn't be at St. Frank's for another five or ten minutes. Still, it would be just as well to make sure.

"I say, Irene," he said, "have any of the chaps met your cousin yet?"

"Yes—Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey were introduced to her——"

"I knew it!" roared Handforth.



At sight of the girls Handy was immediately restored. "You doing here, Pitt?" he asked angrily. "I thought deceive the girls, but you can't fool me, you know."

"Ted, let me introduce you to my cousin"

"Eh?" came Irene's surprised voice.

"Sorry!" said Handforth hastily. "Oh, so they were introduced?"

"Yes, in the lane," explained Irene. "And that's really why I'm ringing up. Dora is rather reserved—quite shy, in fact—and so we told her to come and fetch you. But perhaps it was a little mean of us, and I'd like you to meet her in the Triangle, if you can, before any of the other fellows can bother her. Then come straight on, will you? Oh, by the way, she's a nurse, you know."

"Yes, I know that," said Handforth promptly.

"Who told you?"

"Nun-nobody!" said Edward Oswald, covering up his slip. "That's all right, Irene. I'll pop out at once and meet her. Don't you



health. Then he recognised the nurse. "What are you kicking me out of the study! You may be able to help me. There must have been some mistake," said Irene. "Dora," she waved a hand to the nurse!

worry—I won't let the chaps bother her."

"Good-bye, then," said Irene. "Expect you in about twenty minutes."

"That's it," said Handforth. "Good-bye."

He hung up the receiver, and was so fascinated by his own explanation of the mystery that he allowed the truth to pass by unnoticed. Just for one horrifying second it had half come to him—only to be dismissed. And when he heard that Pitt and Grey had already met Dora, the thing was obvious!

She had given them the idea of the jape. They had tried to forestall the real Dora, and had actually done so, only to see their game fail. Well, it served the beggars right!

From Handforth's point of view, everything now seemed perfectly clear. But in reality, Handforth was more mixed than

ever, and going full speed ahead towards a second frightful blunder!



CHAPTER 11.

POOR OLD HANDY!

"MARVELLOUS!" said Jack Grey enthusiastically.

"By Jove, Pitt, old man, you're a wonder!" grinned Fullwood. "Unless I knew the truth in advance, I couldn't possibly guess. You're a girl to the life—and you'd fool anybody in that get-up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Buck up, Reggie—get busy on the job!"

The Common-room in the West House was just as lively as the Ancient House Common-room was deserted. This was because all the Ancient House Removites were over there. And in their midst stood a very charming young girl—a girl in the demure dress of a nurse.

"She" was not only exceedingly pretty, but looked shy and sweet. And when she spoke, her voice was soft and gentle. Reggie Pitt was a past-master in the art of feminine make-up—as he had proved on other occasions. His own personality had vanished, and so clever was his work that he no longer looked like himself in any way, and his every mannerism was changed.

"Oh, Ted!" he cooed. "You mustn't say such sweet things!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Reggie, you're a scream!" gasped Tommy Watson.

Little did they know how near their scheme had come to disaster! If Edward Oswald Handforth had only seen the truth when it was in front of his very eyes, the jape would have come to naught. But there were two reasons for Handforth's present attitude. Firstly, the thought that he had pushed a jam tart into the face of Irene's real cousin was so stupefying that he thrust it aside; and, secondly, he was convinced that his own analysis of the affair was correct. The fellows had seen Dora, and so they had tried to kid him! But Dora herself would be coming along in five minutes!

The juniors crowded towards the West House lobby, but Reggie Pitt pulled them up before they passed out into the Triangle.

"Just a minute!" he said, in his natural voice. "Not so much cackling, my lads. We don't want Handforth to get a suspicion of the truth—and this isn't an ordinary jape, played just for the sake of a laugh. There's an object in it—a serious object, too."

"By jingo, so there is!" agreed Fullwood.

"Church and McClure have gone to the village," put in Jack Grey. "I was doing some scouting, and I saw them hurry out. Gone to fetch some medicine, or something, I believe. Now's your chance, Reggie—before they get back."

Pitt nodded.

"My object in fooling Handy is to make

him resign," he said. "That's what we're out for! Once we've got him to throw up the captaincy, we shall be all right. And you can trust me to work my hardest. We've simply got to finish up this idiotic iron-rule business. Handy's a fine chap as Handy—but as a skipper he's worse than torture."

"All right—go ahead, and for goodness' sake wangle the thing," said Fullwood. "We'll hang behind here for a bit, and then steal across to the Ancient House Common-room in a few minutes. You come there and report as soon as you finish the good work."

"Right!" said Reggie briskly. "That's settled."

And as Handforth entered the Ancient House lobby, he glanced out into the dusk, and saw a dainty figure in nurse's uniform crossing the Triangle. He started, and then smiled with superior self-complacency.

"Just five minutes," he murmured. "So this is Irene's cousin!"

If Reggie Pitt had wanted Handforth to be in a ready mood for the jape, nothing could have been better than this. Handforth was expecting Irene's cousin—and here she was, prompt on time!

Even if Handforth had had any lingering doubts about his earlier visitor, they were now dispelled. Here was the real Dora, just as Irene had said.

For he had made up his mind that this second nurse was the genuine one, and there was no thought of suspicion. And when Handforth made up his mind, it was like a mixture of concrete and glue. Not only was it as hard as iron, but absolutely unstickable.

Pitt, as he approached, congratulated himself upon the very fortunate chance meeting.

"Good-evening!" said Reggie, in a soft, low voice as he paused.

"Oh, good-evening!" replied Handforth. "Awfully pleased to meet you!"

Pitt gave him a shy glance. In the dusk, this visitor looked very alluring and sweet, and Handforth's mood became softer still. It stood to reason that any relative of Irene's would be the right sort.

"I—I am just wondering if you could direct me to a boy named Handforth," went on Pitt demurely. "Perhaps you know him? A tall, handsome boy with a wonderful figure and strong, manly features?"

Handforth started, and unconsciously pulled himself up to his full height.

"Oh, rather!" he said. "That's me! I'm Handforth, you know."

"Oh, really?" said Pitt, with a delightful little upward glance into his face. "I ought to have known! I can see now!"

Handforth was delighted. Jolly good of Irene to give Dora such an impression of him! He little realised that Pitt was uncon-

sciously adopting the very methods that were certain to be successful.

"I was expecting you, you know," went on Handforth, much to Pitt's astonishment. "You're Dora Manners, aren't you?"

Reggie covered his surprise with a clever little laugh of musical delight.

"Oh!" he murmured. "How did you know?"

"Why, Irene rang me up not long ago, and told me about you," replied Handforth. "You'll come in, won't you? I ought to escort you back to the Moor View School, but I'd rather like you to see my study first."

Again, Handforth was working directly in the enemy's interests. For if he had carried out Irene's expressed wishes, he would have tried to take Reggie Pitt straight off.

As for Reggie, his momentary fear had vanished. The fact that Irene had rung Handforth up made things better, for he now had an identity. Handforth had mistaken him for Dora, so he would remain Dora.

And he had already planned to beg of Handforth to show him his study—hardly expecting that Handforth would play up to him so admirably.

"I'm not sure I ought to come in!" said Pitt softly. "And can you spare the time?"

"Of course," said Handforth. "I've got heaps of time."

"How wonderful!" said Reggie coyly. "I heard that you were the captain of the Form and that you were always so busy that you couldn't spare a minute for anybody. It must be dreadful having all the cares of the Form on your shoulders. But they're so big, aren't they? And you're so strong—and handsome," he added naively.

"Oh, I say!" murmured Handforth.

By George, he wasn't so sure that Dora wasn't even better than Irene! At least, she seemed to get hold of a chap's character so well! He led Pitt towards Study D in an ecstasy of satisfaction.

They went in, and Reggie took great care to remain where the full light did not fall upon him. And he kept his head partly down, too.

"Not a bad little room," said Handforth. "Of course, Church and McClure mess it up a good bit, but it's no good trying to make them tidy——"

"Oh!" said Pitt, his voice soft, and full of deep concern. "You're not well! Oh, why didn't you tell me before?"

"Not—not well!" said Handforth. "I feel all right, you know. At least—— Well, I suppose I am a bit seedy, but it's nothing."

"Nothing!" echoed Reggie, horrified. "What was it I heard about you? That you were injured in a fight this afternoon? That some rough boys set upon you brutally and cruelly——"

"That's not exactly true!" interrupted Handforth hastily. "Somebody must have told you wrong, Miss—Miss Dora. I had a bit of a scrap, but I'm not blaming anybody——"

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"But you're looking so pale—so haggard!" whispered Reggie. "Oh, please sit down—please lie on the couch, and be completely rested. I can see how you must have suffered. You ought to be in bed. You're too ill to be up like this. But that's how all these strong, powerful men go on. They never realise the danger."

"Danger!" repeated Handforth, with a start.

"I do hope you won't suddenly collapse," said Pitt, shaking his head, and looking at Handforth with an expression of acute worry. "Please, please do as I ask, and lie down! Can't you see that I am qualified to know what is best? Oh, let me nurse you! Wouldn't it be wonderful?"

Handforth sat down on the couch, his heart beating rapidly. Somehow, he felt rather bad again. And, after all, it would be rather ripping to be nursed by Irene's pretty cousin!

Deeper and deeper went Handforth into the meshes!

meat paste that McClure gave me. I've had rummy pains ever since then. Not that I'm really ill!" he repeated firmly. "Let's be going——"

"No!" said Reggie quickly. "Please, please!"

This piece of information was an unexpected gift.

"Now I can understand it!" said Reggie, shaking his head. "Under no circumstances must you move. And you mustn't do any work—you mustn't think of working. You ought to relieve yourself of all responsibilities at once. Oh, won't you be guided by me? Don't you see my uniform? Won't you, please?"

His voice was so pleading, that Handforth fairly melted.

"Yes, of course!" he said huskily. "If—if you really think so——"

"It's so important!" went on Reggie, seizing the advantage. "How dreadful it would be if you collapsed. Imagine the horror of St. Frank's if you overworked yourself, and had to be taken away to a nursing home."

"Nursing home!" repeated Handforth faintly.

"Don't you realise the danger?" asked Pitt, his voice more concerned than ever. "You are big and strong, and you grapple with these captaincy duties so bravely that you don't appreciate the peril."

"My hat!" breathed Handforth.

"You are in pain even now," declared Reggie. "Tell me the truth, Ted! Please be quite frank. You're in pain, aren't you?"

"Yes!" admitted Handforth truthfully.

"I knew it!" said his visitor, with a shake of fluffy curls. "Do you think I can't see the haggard lines?"

"The haggard lines!" panted Handforth.

"The careworn expression, and the blood-shot eyes!" went on Pitt tensely. "What is going to happen if you keep on? The strongest men collapse if they don't heed the warning in time! In your determination to carry on with your duties, you are prepared to sacrifice your own health!"

"Great corks!" murmured Handforth, aghast. "You—you think I—I might crumple up, or something?"

"Crumple up!" said Pitt. "What would all your friends say if you were carried away in an ambulance? A day longer, perhaps—with your stern will, perhaps even a week. And then, suddenly, without any warning—Oh, Ted! You won't let it come to that, will you?"

Handforth, spoofed completely, was feeling dreadful. His real pain was supplemented by an imaginary assortment of ills. She ought to know! Wasn't she a nurse? And wasn't she Irene's cousin?

"You—you think I ought to ease up a bit?" he asked hoarsely.

"It'll be no good at all if you only ease up," replied Pitt, his voice soft and thrilling. "You must stop altogether. Oh, I know how terrible it will be for the Form—how dread-

CHAPTER 12.

THE CLOSING OF THE NET.



WITH Handforth sprawling on the couch, and with the growing conviction that he was thoroughly unwell, he was now practically at Reggie Pitt's mercy. Handy had fallen completely under the spell of his visitor's charm—and, when Reggie liked, he could be remarkably fascinating.

He sat with his back to the electric light, so that his face was in shadow. From Handforth's position, his visitor's face and head were in a kind of halo, and he could just see the pretty face, and the soft curls, falling over the ears. And Reggie was looking at him, too, with anxiety in those dark, expressive eyes of his. With their prepared lashes, they now looked uncannily feminine.

"You must give up all idea of moving again to-night," said Reggie softly. "I didn't realise how unwell you were——"

"Oh, but I've got to take you to the Moor View School!" said Handforth, sitting up with a start. "I told Irene——"

"You mustn't, Ted!" interrupted Reggie. "You don't mind me calling you Ted, do you? I think it's such a wonderful name, and it seems to fit you so beautifully."

"I say!" murmured Handforth huskily.

"Are you sure that your duties are not too hard for you?" went on Reggie, his voice quivering with anxiety. "It is so very easy to overdo it! And the duties of a Form captain are so exacting, aren't they? You'll let me guide you, won't you?"

"Well, I'd like to, but I'm not ill!" said Handforth uncomfortably. "There's nothing the matter with me, Miss Dora. I've only had a nasty biff, you know. And then there was that stuff I had for tea. Some squiffy

fully it will miss you! But won't they be willing to make a little sacrifice for your sake?"

"They're a hard lot to deal with!" said Handforth dubiously.

"But if you resign, they——"

"Resign!" said Handforth thickly. "No! No, I can't do that! They've been trying to make me—— I—I mean——"

"They've been trying to make you promise to stick to your duties?" asked Pitt softly.

"I don't wonder at it! How proud they must be of you! But please, please let me advise you. Even the strongest brains are liable to crack under such terrible stress!"

"Crack!" gasped Handforth.

"And once they crack, what remains?" asked Pitt, his voice trembling with emotion. "What remains? The asylum!"

"Oh, crumbs!" moaned Handforth.

"And then, dreary years with other lunatics," said Pitt, pressing his advantage.

"Oh, Ted, you mustn't let it come to that! You must act now! You must be brave and strong!"

"But you just told me to——"

"Ah, don't you realise that in order to be cured, you must be strong-willed and resolute?" asked Reggie. "You are weak now, and think how the whole Remove will rejoice if you show the bold spirit of self-sacrifice, and resign the captaincy!"

"They'll rejoice all right!" admitted Hand-

forth. "But—but I don't think they're quite the chaps you believe——"

"We mustn't talk about them—we must talk about you!" interrupted Pitt hastily. "Look at you now! A wreck of your real self! And what happens to wreckage if it is not towed into harbour?"

"Wreckage!" said Handforth, looking down at himself in horror.

"If it isn't towed into harbour, and cared for, and repaired—built up strongly again—it drifts and drifts," said Reggie impressively. "It drifts into the shoals, and crashes upon the rocks, and becomes destroyed. Please, Ted! For my sake! For Irene's sake! For the sake of the whole Remove!"

"You—you really think it would be best?" asked Handforth, a sudden light coming into his eyes.

"Oh, I know it—I know it!" murmured Pitt, bending over him, so that his nostrils were filled with the fragrance of parma violet—borrowed for the occasion from Mrs. Beverley Stokes' supply. "Won't you promise me, Ted? Must I ask you in vain?"

Handforth's brain was reeling slightly.

"But—but they'll chip me!" he breathed feebly, in a last struggle.

"Oh, they won't be so cold and cruel!" said Pitt, his voice full of scorn. "They wouldn't be so cold and callous. When I think of that brain of yours—when I think of the possibility that it might suddenly

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snap!" He covered his face with his hands. "And Irene?" he whispered. "Don't you think that she cares? Don't you think that she is worried over your terrible cares as captain? Oh, Ted, I want you to promise!"

Handforth's last atom of strength vanished. "All right!" he muttered. "After all, it's not worth it! They don't appreciate me—it'll serve 'em right to leave 'em in the lurch!"

"Do people ever appreciate true value?" asked Pitt bitterly.

"I'll dish them all by resigning!" said Handforth, with sudden emphasis. "That'll teach them a lesson they'll never forget! I'll go to the common-room and tell them!"

"Oh, how good you are!" murmured Pitt. "No, no!" he added, in alarm. "You mustn't move yet! You mustn't dream of disturbing yourself! Wait at least five minutes, so that you can compose your shattered nerves."

"Yes, I suppose I'd better!" said Handforth faintly.

"I will go back to Irene, and gladden her with this wonderful piece of news," continued Reggie, tiptoeing softly to the door. "You will promise me that you will go to the common-room in five minutes?"

"Yes, I promise!" murmured Handforth, in a listless voice.

"Thank you, Ted—thank you so much!" said Pitt happily.

He slipped out of the study, and those last few words of his had come from his very heart. Never had he said anything truer!

In three seconds he had nipped into the next study, which was normally occupied by Tregellis-West and Watson. But now there were about half a dozen fellows there, all eager and anxious.

"Well?" went up a breathless chorus.

"He's resigning!" whispered Pitt. "It worked like a dream!"

"Great Scott!" breathed Fullwood. "He's promised?"

"Absolutely!" grinned Reggie. "I'll tell you all about it later—he's coming to the common-room with the great news in five minutes, so we shall have to get a hustle on."

Everything was ready, and in a very brief space of time, Pitt had shed his feminine attire, and he became himself again. But very little was said there, since Handforth might hear the talk through the wall, and become suspicious.

Swiftly, they all sped to the common-room.

"It's worked—it's worked!" shouted Jack Grey excitedly. "Reggie's done the trick, and Handforth's going to resign."

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Reggie!"

"By jingo, he's a magician!"

"If you'll make less noise, and talk sense, we shall all be pleased!" said Reggie Pitt tartly. "Handy hasn't resigned yet, so don't cackle before the egg's laid!"

"*There's Many A Slip 'Twixt The Cup And The Lip*, as Billy Nation might put it," grinned Fullwood.

"I'm glad you realise it," said Reggie. "So don't make too much noise—don't give him any warning. But as soon as he has officially resigned, we shall be safe. We've just got to wait now."

And the Remove waited, expectant and happily excited.



CHAPTER 13.

EXPLANATIONS NEEDED!

RENE MANNERS tossed her pretty curls.

"Oh, it's too bad!" she said indignantly. "The tea's getting stewed, and

the toast will soon be hard, and boiled eggs are never much good if they're left until they're lukewarm!"

"It's just like Ted!" said Doris Berkeley. "This is what comes of leaving things to him! Did he say he'd bring Dora straight along?"

"Of course, he did!" said Irene. "I don't believe it's his fault at all!"

"You wouldn't!" laughed Winnie Pitt.

They were in Irene's study, and all the preparations for tea had been completed. But Dora had not returned, and there was no sign of Handforth. And they had been expected a full quarter of an hour since.

The girls naturally assumed that Dora had been delayed.

"I warned him, too," said Irene, with a frown. "I particularly asked him to take care of Dora as soon as she arrived. Perhaps she was delayed in the village——"

"Here they come!" cried Mary suddenly.

Steps had sounded in the passage, but before anybody could open the door, it flew back, and a dishevelled figure entered. All the girls stared, horrified, and cried out with alarm.

"Dora!" exclaimed Irene, in a strange voice.

Dora had entered, and had slammed the door behind her. She now stood with her back to it. There was a hunted look in her eyes. She was untidy, her hat had gone, and her smart uniform was sadly soiled.

"Thank goodness!" she panted. "I got in without being spotted!"

"But what's happened?" shouted all the girls in one voice.

"Oh, it was dreadful!" said Dora weakly.

She sank into a chair, and Doris quickly poured out a cup of tea, and made her sip some, and she gradually recovered. The other girls crowded round her, amazed and mystified.

"I—I got lost!" said Dora, at last. "There was somebody coming along the lane, so I dodged through a gap and ran. Then I got into a kind of wood, or something, and I must have gone wrong in the dusk, because I came out on the road

miles away. I've been all this time getting back!"

"But where's Ted?" asked Irene blankly.

Dora looked at the girls with flashing eyes.

"Don't mention that terrible boy to me!" she said huskily. "Oh, what a cad!"

"Dora!" cried Irene.

"It's true!" insisted Dora. "He's either mad, or he's a hooligan! A tramp would have treated me better than he did! Savages of the jungle would have shown me more respect! Oh, Renie, I've had a perfectly terrible time!"

She leaned back for a moment, and then rose to her feet.

"I must go and change!" she said hurriedly.

"Yes, but——"

"I must!" she insisted. "Just look at me!"

She hurried upstairs, and all the other girls hurried up with her. They couldn't wait until she had changed before hearing her story. And so, in Dora's bed-room, she told them the extraordinary tale.

"He insulted me every minute!" she concluded indignantly. "From first to last, he was a perfect beast! He barked at me, and he demanded to know my name as though I were a common little urchin, and he told me not to tell fibs, and——and—— Oh, I can't remember half of it!"

"And Ted did this?" asked Irene incredulously. "Dora, I can't believe it! Are you sure it was Ted?"

"Of course, I'm sure——"

"It might have been that cad, Forrest," went on Irene quickly. "Perhaps he was posing as Ted! It's just the kind of cad-dish thing he would do. What was he like?"

Dora gave such an accurate description that Irene sighed.

"That's Ted, all right!" she admitted. "There aren't two boys at St. Frank's like that. But I can't understand it, Dora! Ted's always so gallant."

"Gallant!" said Dora bitterly. "He's a— a brute! I hadn't been there three minutes before he tried to pull my hat off, and he disbelieved everything I told him—he even said I was talking bunkum! And he threatened to black my eyes, and punch me on the ears!"

"It—it sounds impossible!" said Doris soberly. "We know that Ted is a rough and ready sort of chap, but he's always a gentleman!"

"A gentleman!" cried Dora. "I tell you he's a cad! Oh, I go all hot and cold when I think of it!"

"What did he do?" they asked breathlessly.

"He took up a jam-tart, and flung it into my face!" said Dora, her voice low with anger. "Renie, are you serious when you tell me that you're friendly with this terrible boy?"

While the other girls talked with wild excitement, Irene remained cool.

"We're going to St. Frank's!" she said grimly.

"I wouldn't go there again if you paid me a million pounds!" said Dora.

"You'll go again for nothing!" declared Irene. "There's something wrong, Dora. All this is too ridiculous!"

"But—but don't you believe me?" asked Dora, aghast.

"You silly, I believe everything," replied Irene. "But, at the same time, it's too ridiculous for words! There must be some awful mistake about it. You say that you went to St. Frank's first—before going to the village?"

"I haven't been to the village at all!"

"And you went straight to St. Frank's from here?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, there's proof of it!" said Irene triumphantly.

"Proof of what?"

"Proof that there's something wrong," nodded Irene. "When I rang Ted up, you must have left by then—and he didn't seem to know anything of your having been there, and he promised to meet you, and bring you here, so you can see that there's something very peculiar about it. We've just got to go to St. Frank's, to straighten it out."

"I agree," said Doris, nodding. "We can't leave a thing like this as it stands, you girls. And we all know that Handforth wouldn't act like that if he was sane."

And Dora, under the pressure of her companions—and with the knowledge that she would be provided with a strong escort—agreed to go back.

And in the meantime, another step in the sequence of events was taking place at St. Frank's. Church and McClure had got back with the medicine, and they hurried into the Ancient House in a rather peevish frame of mind.

"Goodness knows what's been happening while we've been away," Church was saying. "These chemists ought to be boiled! Fancy keeping us waiting all that time while they made this up!"

He was holding a bottle, and he eyed it aggressively.

"They always play those tricks," said McClure. "I suppose they shove the stuff in a bottle in two ticks, and then keep you waiting for half an hour to make you think it's a marvellous concoction. Besides, they can charge more if they keep you waiting!"

They hastened to Study D, and softly entered.

Handforth was stretched on the couch, his eyes were closed, and there was an expression of contentment on his rugged features. As a matter of fact, he was on the point of going off to the Common-room to make his vital announcement, and he had come to the conclusion that the charming Dora was right. The Remove wasn't worth bothering about! And if there was any risk of his brain cracking, or his general health petering out—



A great transformation had come over Handforth, and he strode through the doorway like a hurricane. The invalid had recovered and he was now very much himself again! "You spoofing rotters!" he roared. "I'll teach you to fool me!"

"Hallo!" he murmured, opening his eyes. "Back, then?"

"Yes," said Church, eyeing his leader cautiously. "How do you feel, Handy? Pains any worse? Any more symptoms?"

"I'm ill!" said Handforth sadly. "I'm a broken man!"

"Well, take some of this medicine——"

"I'm going to resign the captaincy," said Handforth steadily.

It was only by the merest fluke that Church saved the medicine from crashing to the floor.

"You're going to resign?" he gasped, with mingled amazement and joy.

"Yes, Dora pointed out that it was my duty."

"Dora?" said McClure, with a start.

"Irene's cousin," murmured Edward Oswald dreamily.

"But—but——"

Church and McClure exchanged amazed glances.

"But we warned you, Handy!" breathed Church. "We told you there was a spoof——"

"Oh, that?" said Handforth, with a faint grin. "You don't suppose I was fooled, do you? I soon sent the fathead off about his business! The real Dora came to see me, and she's persuaded me to resign. She thinks it's better. And she's right. So I'm just going off to the Common-room to announce it."

"Oh!" said Church and McClure.

Any other words were beyond them. They

were deeply suspicious. They felt that strange things had been happening during their absence. But Handforth was going to resign! He had made up his mind!

Outwardly, Church and McClure were grave—inwardly, they were joyful!

CHAPTER 14.

THE MAGICAL ELIXIR!



HANDFORTH was still looking rather dreamy.

"Yes," he said, "I'm going to resign—and dish everybody! They'll appre-

ciate me after I'm out of the captaincy. But what's the good of going on at the expense of my health? What's the good of wrecking my life for the sake of these thankless beggars?"

"Not a bit!" said Church stoutly. "They don't deserve it!"

"They never did!" snorted McClure. "All your work—all your boundless energy—wasted on the Remove! It'll be a lot better to let them get along without you, old man."

"Yes, Dora convinced me on that point," said Handforth. "A jolly ripping girl, my lads! How can she help being, seeing that she's Irene's cousin?"

"No, of course not," agreed Church. "And she came to see you?"

"Yes—she's only been gone a minute or two," said Handforth carelessly. "It's a funny thing you didn't meet her. A jolly nice girl—a regular ripper. All over sympathy, and full of concern. Different from you chaps!"

"Well, I like that!" said McClure indignantly. "After we've been messing about at the chemist's for half an hour or more! You look pretty groggy, old man. You'd better take a dose of this physic."

Handforth raised a feeble hand.

"I don't want any physic!" he retorted.

"Don't want it?"

"No!"

"After we've specially got it for you?"

"No!"

"But, look here——"

"I only want rest!" said Handforth huskily. "That's what Dora told me—and she's right. I've been overworking myself—I've been straining my brain. And if I don't stop, I shall go cracked!"

"Yes, you'd better be careful," admitted McClure. "It wouldn't take much!"

"What do you mean—it wouldn't take much!"

"In your present state, I mean!" said Mac hastily.

"By George, I admit it!" murmured Handforth. "Yes, I'm a broken man!"

"Then have a go at this physic—it'll mend you!" said Church temptingly.

"Take the beastly stuff away," commanded the leader of Study D. "I'm going straight to the Common-room, and—— Hi! What are you doing with that bottle, Church?" he added curtly.

Church had just slung it into the waste-paper basket.

"The stuff's no good to Mac and I!" he said tartly. "We haven't got ptomaine poisoning!"

Handforth had a sudden spasm, and winced.

"My hat! I'd forgotten that!" he said weakly. "Here, gimme a dose! Perhaps I'd better have some, after all! Did the chemist tell you that this is especially for ptomaine poisoning?"

"We explained your symptoms, and he gave us this," replied Church.

Handforth took the bottle, and uncorked it. He sniffed.

"H'm! Smells pretty beastly!" he said. "But I'll chance it!"

He took a long swig, deeming it quite unnecessary to ascertain the correct dose. Then he spluttered, gasped, and tears started to his eyes. He opened his mouth, and took in a huge breath.

"Phew!" he breathed. "My hat! It's jolly powerful!"

He set the bottle down, and gulped. Then he seized the milk jug, and swallowed its contents.

"I can feel the giddy stuff working its way right down!" he said, holding his waistcoat. "Crumbs! Talk about elixir! By George! I'm a new man already! I'm repaired!"

"You mustn't be too sure!"

"Who ought to know whether I'm repaired or not, Walter Church?" demanded Handforth aggressively. "That chemist deserves a medal! My tummy feels hot and robust again! In fact, I'm not so jolly sure that I need to resign now! Why should I resign if I'm well?"

Church wondered what freak of madness had possessed him. Why hadn't he thrown that bottle into the fire, instead of into the waste-paper basket? The prospect of Handforth resigning had been so alluring that Church and McClure had enjoyed a brief spell of supreme happiness. And now it was to be shattered!

"But, Handy, you can't expect to be cured in one minute!" urged McClure. "It's only a false alarm, I expect. It's rest you want—you said it yourself. Dora says that you've got to resign, so you've got to!"

Handforth glared at them.

"Do you want me to resign?" he demanded.

"Well, I mean—— That is—— Duty, you know!" said Church feebly.

"That's settled it!" declared Handforth. "I'm feeling so much better that I've changed my mind! Resign, eh? Huh! Not likely! That medicine's put me right, and I'm as fit as a fiddle! In fact, I'll take another dose, just to make sure."

But Church was staring at the bottle in horror.

"Great guns!" he gasped. "Look—look there!"

"Look what it says on the label!" panted Church. "'Not to be taken'!"

"'For external use only'!" shouted McClure, aghast.

"What?" hooted Handforth wildly.

He grabbed the bottle, and the fatal words were there, sure enough! And he had swallowed about a quarter of it!

"We told the chemist you'd had a biff in the tummy, so he probably made up an embrocation!" said Church desperately. "No wonder the stuff was strong! This is awful, Handy—it's serious——"

"I'm in awful agony!" moaned Handforth, collapsing into a chair.

His chums flashed a glance at one another. Here was a chance! And they proceeded to point out that he was looking awful, that he couldn't possibly dream of changing his mind about resigning. For the sake of his health, it was necessary to spare himself from all troubles and worries.

"What a life!" muttered Handforth dismally. "First you try to poison me with potted meat, and then you try to kill me with this awful stuff! And you call yourselves my pals!"

"It's all right—we don't bear any malice," said Church. "They're waiting for you in the Common-room, or somewhere, I expect. Don't forget what you promised Dora."

"You've got to resign, and climb slowly back to health!" said McClure. "Come on, old chap, we'll help you along."

And, seizing his arms, they led him firmly

NEXT WEDNESDAY!

"KNOCKED OFF HIS PERCH!"

At last!

Handy's had a long run—but he gets it in the neck in the end!

The Remove have been fed up to the teeth for a long, long while, and they teach Handy a lesson.

But does he profit by it? Not he!

Read this great concluding story of the present series next week—and look out for a stupendous announcement. If you miss next Wednesday's issue, you'll be missing something mighty good.

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ORDER IN ADVANCE!

out of the study. They weren't particularly worried about the medicine. If it was only embrocation it wouldn't do much damage, even if it had been taken internally. Besides, after that potted meat, it was obvious that Handforth could swallow anything.

He was a forlorn figure as he went down the corridor, staggering along between his chums.

"Yes, I'll resign!" he said, in a hollow voice. "It's the only way! I'll be strong—I'll be stern—and leave the giddy Form to fend for itself!"

Within twelve seconds these words were being repeated in the Common-room—a scout, secreted in the lobby, having heard the joyful pronouncement. And the Remove, which had begun to grow a little anxious at the delay, gave a great sigh of relief, and waited.

Handforth was coming—and once he had officially resigned, the tension would be over. The Remove had already planned that it would give one big yell, and then blandly acquaint him with the facts. Having resigned, he couldn't back out—for when a

Form skipper at St. Frank's officially resigned, he could only regain the captaincy by being re-elected. That was an unwritten law. And Handforth had about as much chance of being re-elected as a snowstorm on the Equator!

He could rave, and he could roar, but it wouldn't make any difference. All the Form needed was that resignation—and it was on its way!

But as Handforth & Co. entered the lobby from the Remove passage, the main doorway became filled with girlish figures.

Irene & Co. had arrived—on business!

CHAPTER 15.

SOMETHING LIKE AN EYE-OPENER!



RENE MANNERS was the first in, and she gave a hail.

"Oh, good!" she exclaimed. "Ted's here!"

Handforth came to a halt, and his weakness

dropped from him like a cloak. In fact, his weakness had been performing this trick, on and off, throughout the evening.

"Oh, my hat!" he ejaculated. "Leggo my arms, you fatheads!" he added fiercely. "Hallo, Irene! Hallo, you girls! Didn't expect you——"

"Is this the boy?" asked Irene steadily.

Her cousin, who had been pushed forward by the others, recoiled.

"Yes!" she said hotly.

Handforth was looking at her with indignant amazement.

"You here again?" he said warmly. "Look here, Irene, you mustn't let that chap fool you! I kicked him out once——"

"There you are!" cried Dora. "He's admitted it!"

"But he called you a chap!" ejaculated Irene, in amazement. "And he said 'him'! Ted, what are you talking about?"

Handforth gave a snort.

"Well I'm jiggered!" he said. "Fancy you being deceived! Girls, too! All you girls being spoofed by one of our chaps in disguise!"

The Moor View girls were frankly stupefied.

"Say that again!" said Doris steadily.

"I'm not sure whether I heard it right. One of your chaps in disguise? Are you trying to tell us that she's not a girl?"

"Of course he's not a girl!" laughed Handforth.

"He's not!" breathed Irene. "But—but——"

"Well, I should have thought that girls ought to know their own giddy sex!" said Handforth tartly. "This is one of our chaps! He came to my study about an hour ago, and tried to kid me that he was your cousin! I told him a few things, chucked a jam tart——"

Church and McClure reeled.

"Handy!" they gurgled, in horror.

Irene's face had cleared.

"I *knew* there would be an explanation," she said happily. "I knew Ted wouldn't deliberately act like that, Dora. Don't you understand? He thought you were just trying to fool him—he thought you were a boy dressed up as a girl!"

"Oh, he can't be such a fool as that!" said Dora, her incredulity making her forget that Handforth could hear. "Still, it explains——"

Handforth was standing there, his jaw slowly gaping.

"Ted, let me introduce my cousin, Dora," said Irene sweetly. "I think you must have made a mistake. She is a girl—really and truly!"

"I tell you it's one of our——" Handforth paused, and something in his head seemed to burst. He stood there, his face flushing until it was fiery red. His eyes were wide open, and his expression was one of untold dismay.

"She's a real girl?" he blurted out.

"I've always thought so!" said Dora genially.

"But—but——" Handforth broke off, clutched at his hair, and gulped. "But—but I thought—— Oh, help! And I spoke to her——"

Again he paused, unable to continue.

He was picturing that earlier meeting. The things he had said—the way he had clutched at her hair! No wonder her wig hadn't come off! The way he had flung that jam tart——

Handforth closed his eyes to shut out the dreadful sight. And he had done this—he had acted in this way—to a real girl! To Irene's cousin! He trembled from head to foot as the full enormity of his ghastly blunder came home to him. He looked round in an agony of despair. Many times he had felt that he would like the ground to open up and swallow him, but just now he wanted to get right off on to another planet!

"How could you have made such a mistake?" asked Irene softly.

She was genuinely sorry for her boy-chum. His distress was so acute—his agony so apparent—that all the girls were ready to forgive him on the spot. Even Dora, who had suffered the humiliation, melted. One look at him was enough to convince her that he was thunderstruck.

"I—I think perhaps it was our fault," faltered Church. "We'd just told him that the chaps were getting up a spoof against him—that somebody was dressing up as a girl in a nurse's uniform, and then your cousin came in."

"We thought she looked rather marvellous for a fake!" breathed McClure. "And I'm afraid we were awfully rude, too! I say, we're sorry——"

"I never dreamed!" panted Handforth. "I just took it for granted that—that you—— Oh, what the dickens shall I do?"

"So these fellows told you that a fake girl was coming, dressed up as a nurse?" asked Irene. "And then Dora blew in?"

"Yes!" muttered Handforth hoarsely.

"Oh, well, in that case, you've had a certain amount of excuse," said Doris. "But you must have been a bit blind, Ted! How could any chap disguise himself so cleverly as that? You see, Dora, the poor old scout made a ghastly mistake, and thought you were a boy!"

"I'm not sure that it's much of a compliment!" said Dora stiffly.

"Oh, I don't know what the dickens to say!" groaned Handforth, with misery. "I'm terribly sorry—I apologise like the dickens! But that doesn't do much good, does it? And the way I mauled you about—— And that jam tart! Oh, I say, you'll never forgive me! I don't deserve to be forgiven!" he added fiercely. "I bet you'll never speak to me again, Irene!"

He turned away, utterly crestfallen, and now his face had gone pale with mortification. His mind couldn't grasp the full truth. It was altogether too appalling.

"That's all right!" said Dora, going for-

ward, and smiling at him. "Of course, I forgive you."

"You do?" panted Handforth amazedly.

"Yes!"

"After—after all I did?"

"But you didn't do it knowingly," said Dora gently. "Please don't look so upset. This has explained everything, and I'm not a bit cross. Let's forget all about it!"

"Good old Dora!" murmured Irene. "Ted's one of the best when you know him—but he's so jolly impulsive!"

"And he's got such a habit of blundering!" chuckled Dora.

Handforth was slowly recovering.

"I apologise—" he began.

"No, I've forgotten all about it," laughed Dora. "In fact, now that I come to think of it, it was really funny! No wonder you treated me so roughly! Oh, girls, what a scream!"

"Poor old Ted!" chuckled Irene. "Never mind—it's all over now!"

"I don't deserve it!" muttered Handforth miserably.

Church tugged at his sleeve.

"I can't understand it, Handy!" he whispered. "Didn't you tell us that Dora had been in Study D, and that she had persuaded you to resign?"

Handforth looked at him dully.

"Dora?" he said, a dawning of the full truth flickering in his mind.

And then, abruptly, he gave a wild whoop, and leapt up towards the ceiling. The girls were so surprised that they backed away.

"I've been spoofed!" hooted Handforth wildly.

"That's what I thought!" nodded Church. "You took the real girl for the fake, and you took the fake girl for the real one! You've been pretty busy, Handy!"

"And this is what happens when we leave him!" said McClure indignantly.

"That—that second one was the trickster!" said Handforth, his voice unsteady with emotion. "It was one of the chaps! And—and I swallowed his yarn whole! I—I believed— Yes, by George, and I promised to resign!"

He looked round with a fierce light in his eyes. His jaw was projected, and there was battle in every inch of him. But he didn't forget the girls. His full strength had returned—his eyes were opened, and he knew exactly what to do.

"Thank goodness you came in just now!" he said fervently. "Another minute, I should have been in the Common-room, and I should have resigned! It's the one piece of luck I've had this evening!"

"But I don't understand," said Irene curiously.

"It's a plot," said Handforth tensely. "It's all a plot to make me resign from the captaincy. Don't you see? It nearly succeeded, too, and they're waiting for me to go in and fall into their hands!"

"Oh, you won't let them triumph, will you?" asked Dora.

"No jolly fear!" vowed Handforth. "Thanks awfully for being so jolly decent about it all! I want you to excuse me now! I've got some important work to do—duties connected with the captaincy," he added ominously.

"I think we can guess what it is!" murmured Winnie Pitt. "Girls, let's go!"

"Yes, I think we can safely leave the rest to Ted!" smiled Irene. "If you'll come over to tea to-morrow, you fellows, we can introduce you to Dora in the right way. Good-night!"

"Good-night!" said Handforth. "By George, you're all bricks!"

They went out, laughing merrily, and Handforth turned to his chums, the light of battle blazing in his eyes more fiercely than ever.

"Resign, eh?" he said dangerously. "We'll see!"

Church and McClure had forgotten their desire to see their leader deposed. The revelation of the plot had bound them to him more tightly, and they were glad to see him so robust again.

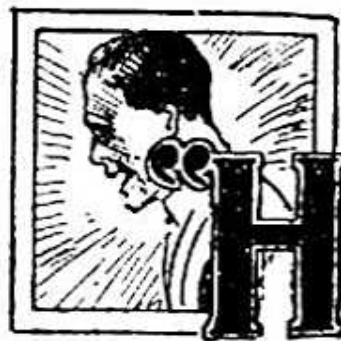
"Let the beggars catch it hot, Handy!" urged Church.

"Show 'em who's top dog!" said McClure angrily.

Handforth grinned with fierce anticipation.

"I'm going to enjoy this!" he said, in a low voice. "I don't need medicine—I don't need a rest! I've a good mind to spank a few of 'em! Exercise is the only thing I want, by George! And I'm going to get plenty of it during the next five minutes, or my name isn't Handforth!"

He made for the common-room with ominous, purposeful strides.



CHAPTER 16.

THE IRON RULE!

"HIS a long time coming," said Reggie Pitt anxiously.

"It's all right, we know Handy," grinned Jack Grey. "Perhaps Church and McClure have had to prop him up to take a rest. When Handy thinks he's ill, he does it thoroughly. Mind over matter!"

But Reggie was looking worried.

"You're sure he was coming?" he asked, turning to Owen major.

"Certain," said Owen major. "He was crawling down the passage like an old crock of ninety. I expect he's paused to have a breath of fresh air—"

"Look out!" murmured Fullwood. "Footsteps! Don't forget to look correctly grave. We can do all the laughing afterwards."

And the Remove grinned, and waited.

The door broke open with a terrific crash. The patient entered—not crawling, but after the fashion of a tornado. It was not the weak, haggard Handy of ten minutes ago,

but the aggressive Edward Oswald Handforth of old.

"You spoofing rotters!" he roared, in a voice like thunder.

"Great Scott!"

"He's recovered!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Alas!" sighed Reggie Pitt. "All my work for nothing!" He took a deep breath. "Who's done this dirty work? Who's betrayed us?"

"He's as bad as ever!"

"Look out, there!"

"Steady, Handy, you ass!"

But the captain of the Remove had no intention of being steady. He had paused for one moment only, and then he had sailed into the Remove with the force and devastating effect of a cyclone.

Crash! Biff! Crash!

Those fellows who could not dodge out of the way went down like ninopins. Handforth wasn't arguing. He wasn't asking any questions. He was simply intent upon smashing the Remove to smithereens—and letting the Remove see, once and for all, that he was the supreme chief.

"Hold him!"

"Grab the silly fathead!"

But Handforth wasn't easy to grab. If the Remove had attempted to squash him, it could have done so with comparative ease, but none of the fellows were exactly anxious to slaughter him on the spot. He wouldn't be inclined to resign if they set upon him in that fashion.

In fact, he didn't look much like resigning in any case!

The Remove was dismayed. Something had happened. They didn't know what, but the cat was out of the bag, and the elaborate jape had failed. And Handforth, instead of being weak and frail, was more aggressive than ever. It was a dreadful shock to the plotters.

And they had been so certain, too. After Reggie Pitt's good work, it was pretty hard lines.

"I'll show you!" roared Handforth, as he lashed out right and left. "So you'd show fight, would you, Thomas Burton? Take that, you son of a windjammer! I'll show you who's boss of the Remove!"

"Hold on, Handy!" gasped Pitt. "Quick, you chaps—hold him! If this goes on, we shall have a dozen prefects here, and the whole Form will be gated! We can't let this row develop!"

Pitt, Fullwood, Russell, De Valerie, and a number of others hauled Handforth back by sheer force and held him helpless. And this was the fellow who had been poisoned at tea-time!

"Lemme go!" stormed Edward Oswald. "You insubordinate rotters! I'm skipper, and I'm not going to be defied——"

"Promise you won't lash out again," said Fullwood.

"I won't!"

"All right—we'll sit on your head until you do!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Over with him!"

Handforth, realising that he had no chance against so many, suddenly changed his mind. After all, he had done a lot of damage, and his knuckles were aching. And he had shown them that he was in deadly earnest.

"All right!" he snapped. "I promise!"

He was released, and he looked round the room grimly. The juniors were picking themselves up, dazed and dizzy. Others were still strewn about.

"You blessed trickster!" said Handforth, glaring at Pitt.

"Yes, and I succeeded, too!" grinned Pitt. "Who split on us? What an ass I was not to take you to the common-room while you were in the right humour, Handy! This is what comes of cowardice! I was afraid of meeting a master—and now it's all up!"

"Of course, it isn't!" said Fullwood. "Handy has come here to resign!"

"Yes! Resign—you dangerous rotter!"

"Resign—resign!"

"We want a Form skipper—not a human traction-engine!"

Handforth faced the shouting crowd with scorn.

"You tried to trick me into chucking up the captaincy, and you've failed!" he said curtly. "Well, I shall remember this! And I'm going to maintain my iron rule more strictly than ever! Resign, eh? By George, I'll show you whether I'm going to resign or not!"

"It's your duty!" said Fullwood, hotly. "We've failed, but that doesn't alter the fact that we're fed up with you! Yes, all of us—fed up to the neck! And the sooner you know it, the better! Why can't you obey the unwritten laws of the school?"

"What unwritten laws?" asked Handforth. "I've never seen them!"

"How the dickens can you see them if they're unwritten?" demanded Fullwood, with a snort. "But you know as well as I do that a Form captain is supposed to resign if he is bluntly told by a big majority that he isn't wanted. It's the only thing he can do."

"We're not talking about suppositions!" retorted Handforth. "This is an exceptional case. You only elected me by a jape—and you tried to make me resign by a jape! Well, I'm sticking in power! And the more you oppose me, the more I'll make you sit up!"

"But—but you obstinate fathead, look at the harm you've done already!" shouted Watson. "You've got the whole Form in a state of revolt and chaos——"

"Good!"

"You've done nothing but mess up everything you've touched——"

"Fine!"

"You've made us quarrel with the River House chaps——"

"Splendid!"

"You—you rotter!" roared Watson. "There's no end to your blunders! And all this within a few days! What's going to happen if you're allowed to stick in power? Life isn't worth living!"

"Resign, Handy, you pig-headed bounder!"

"Let's have some peace!"

Handforth took no notice of these continued shouts. He was feeling triumphant. By the narrowest possible chance, he had saved himself from being the laughing-stock of the school. The fellows wouldn't dare to speak about their jape now, because they had failed. He—Handforth—was the victor in this affair. And his determination to stick in the captaincy was stronger than it had ever been before.

"I'm not going to say much more," he said sternly. "But I'm giving you fair warning. If I hear any more treason, I'll act!"

"Treason!" groaned De Valérie, in despair. "He still thinks he's a king!"

"Yes, treason!" thundered Handforth. "If I hear any more of it, I'll wipe up the floor with the rotter who utters it! I'm going

now, and you'd better not let me hear any noise from this room! If I do, I'll come back and turn you all into mincemeat!"

He drew himself up, and marched out with dignity and triumph. And the Remove was so utterly dished that nobody had the heart to do much shouting. So Handforth's autocratic order was unconsciously obeyed.

"Well, we're in just exactly the same spot as we were," said Fullwood dolefully.

"Are we?" asked Reggie Pitt. "I've got an idea——"

"We've had your ideas!"

"Forget 'em, Reggie!"

"I like that!" snorted Pitt, indignantly. "There was nothing wrong with that scheme of mine, and I worked it well, too! But this is different! Somchow, I've got a feeling in my bones that we shall be able to cast our fetters pretty soon. A little diplomacy—a little tact—and we'll win!"

But Pitt wouldn't explain his new idea just yet. One thing was certain, however, Edward Oswald Handforth was still captain; he was still the autocrat of the Remove!

THE END.

(Look out for a stupendous announcement next Wednesday! Order your copy in advance and make sure you don't miss the good news!)

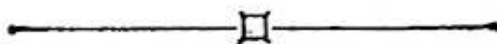
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KNOCKED OFF HIS PERCH!



Don't miss the concluding yarn of the present series—it's one long laugh.



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There is news of supreme importance to all readers in the next issue of the "Nelson Lee Library." Make sure of learning all about the big surprise that is coming.

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THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT

All LETTERS in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Any enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope.

Correspondents Wanted

Still They Come In!

I AM once again obliged to cut down my chat to the bare minimum and to devote the greater part of this page to members' correspondence notices. Although I managed to dispose of an accumulation of these notices last week, they still continue to flow in. But that is all to the good—it is one of the purposes of the League to bring its members in touch with each other. So don't hang back, my chums, if you want to find a pen chum. Send in your notices as soon as you like to the Chief Officer at the above address, and don't forget to write clearly and state your requirements as briefly as possible, so as to give the other fellow a chance.

Jack Stillings, "Beechwood," 248, Westminster Road, Morecambe, **Lancs**, wishes to hear from members in his district.

Frederick Read, 122, Salisbury Road, Reading, **Berks**, wishes to communicate with League members in British Columbia, Canada, and Western Australia.

John Edward Kinsella, 14, Hill-top Road, Arrowthwaite, Whitehaven, **Cumberland**, wishes to correspond with readers in America, Canada or Australia.

Arthur Fluck, 25, Hopkins Street, **Weston-super-Mare**, wishes to hear from readers in his district.

G. -H. Mason, The Cottage, off Station Road, Colwyn Bay, **N. Wales**, wishes to correspond with members.

Edward George Buckingham, 2, Arlington Road, Ashford, **Middlesex**, wishes to correspond with readers in Africa and Australia.

J. H. Wellan, 38, Edgbaston Park Road, Edgbaston, **Birmingham**, wishes to form a sports club in his district, and would be glad to hear personally or by letter from any possible members.

S. H. Yeo, 13, Buchanan Road, Wallasey, **Cheshire**, wishes to correspond with stamp collectors on the Gold and Guinea Coasts; also with readers anywhere.

Harry Hillgrove, 7, Dean Street, South Shore, **Blackpool**, wishes to hear from readers in the Blackpool district who will assist in starting a club.

Stanley Flanagan, 31a, Arden Street, Gillingham, **Kent**, wishes to correspond with a

reader in South America; he would also like to hear from members in his district.

Merlin Thomas, 36, Brighton Road, Birkdale, **Southport**, wishes to correspond with a reader in Australia.

V. W. Bowers, 82, Romsey Road, **Shirley**, wishes to correspond with a reader in the United States.

M. J. M., 15, Llewelyn Street, Merthyr Tydvil, **S. Wales**, wishes to correspond with a reader in Toronto.

John Franklin (O.O.), 3, Eva Street, Rusholme, **Manchester**, wishes to hear from members in his district; he is forming a club, and would like the assistance of other Organising Officers.

Stanley W. Crowe, 63, Canterbury Road, **Margate**, wishes to hear from football clubs in his neighbourhood for the fixing of matches.

Harold Dell, "Field View," Parsonage Barn Lane, Ringwood, **Hants**, desires members for his amateur club. Specimen copy of club magazine sent.

John L. Rodgers, "Birch Lee," Hollins Road, **Oldham**, wishes to hear from members interested in his club.

James Ivan Fitzgerald, 212, St. Andrew Street, Dunedin, Otago, **New Zealand**, wishes to hear from readers in London; stamp collecting and photography.

Charles Hewson, Puriri, Thames Val., **Auckland, New Zealand**, wishes to hear from readers in his neighbourhood.

Henry Sydney Skinner, "Dunrobin," 52, Gleneagle Road, Streatham, **London, S.W. 16**, wishes to correspond with members in the Colonies.

Thomas G. Mercer, 1, Sweden Grove, Waterloo, near **Liverpool**, wishes to start a Philatelic and Football Club for Waterloo, Seaforth, and Gt. Crosby. Will members write to him about this—especially stamp collectors.

B. Coward, 271, Wandsworth Road, **London, S.W. 8**, wishes to hear from philatelists overseas.

Alice Gardner, 96, Station Road, **Ashington**, wishes to hear from readers.

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Detective Adventure!***Mystery and Thrills!***

THE SLEEPING MYSTERY!

*A Clever Complete Story of
NELSON LEE & NIPPER*

CHAPTER 1.

A WEIRD ADVENTURE.

"CORINAK! Ahoy!"

Not a sound came in reply, and Nipper had the uneasy feeling that something very strange had happened aboard this ship in Surrey Docks.

It was nearly one a.m., and he was asking for trouble if caught on the dock estate at that hour; but the guv'nor was missing, and Nipper was determined to ask Tregenna, the Corinak's skipper, what time Nelson Lee had left his ship.

"Broke his appointment with Lord Wyncott, without 'phoning a word of excuse," Nipper muttered. "He told me he'd just run down here, shake hands with Tregenna after his long trip, and be back home to meet Wyncott by ten at the latest."

He again cautiously hailed the ship, but it might have been deserted for all the notice taken of him.

"I'm getting on board, anyway," he thought. "There's no gangway 'tween ship and quay, but I'm thinkin' this mooring-rope'll do just as well."

A minute later, he climbed quietly over the ship's rail and dropped on the for'ard deck without a sound. But there seemed to be a little need for caution—there was not a soul in sight, nor any evidence that a living thing was aboard.

Then he noticed a light streaming up from the companion-way and he hurried aft, wondering more than ever why his challenge had remained unanswered.

His foot was treading the first step when he stopped suddenly, as if turned to stone! There, sprawled face upward on the stairs, was Nelson Lee—his face ashen grey, his eyes glazed and fixed in a sightless stare!

"Gosh! What's happened to him?" Nipper gasped, in real fear. "If he's dead—"

The terrible thought sent him racing down the stairs, and in a second his hand was on the guv'nor's chest, his ear within an inch of the bloodless lips; but another second showed that Lee still lived, for his heart thumped, and his breath came in short, uneven gasps.

"Gosh! He's asleep—or—drugged!" Nipper whispered. He shook Lee gently, but the guv'nor simply rolled like a log of wood—and lay in Nipper's arms like one. "Great snakes! It's no ordinary sleep—there's something dashed queer about this blessed ship!"

There certainly was, else why had Nelson Lee been allowed to rest unconscious half-way up the companion stairs? Placing his coat under the guv'nor's head, and easing his awkwardly

twisted limbs, Nipper crept to the foot of the steps and peeped into the lighted cabin.

The sight that met his gaze made him rub his eyes and wonder if he were dreaming. He stared at two uniformed officers sitting motionless at the cabin table—one with a half-smoked cigar still clutched in his teeth, the other with an elbow on the table, his chin resting in a cupped hand, his wide-open eyes looking straight at Nipper!

"Gosh! They're as dead to the world as the guv'nor is!" Nipper whispered. "Seems as if a sleeping plague's fallen on the Corinak—but what's become of the crew?"

That thought sent him scurrying up on deck again, and for'ard to the fo'c'sle ladder. There was a light below, but not a sound disturbed the uncanny stillness, and it was only after a moment's hesitation that he began to lower himself down the narrow way.

Here the position was more bewildering than that aft. The crew had evidently been at supper when the strange sleep had overtaken them, for a dozen men were crouched with arms and hands on the table, crockery had smashed on the floor wholesale, and three fellows were lying in a cluster at the foot of the ladder as if they had been fighting to get on deck!

Nipper just stood and stared—then jumped, as the fo'c'sle lantern flickered and died out. In the darkness, he suddenly realised how strangely quiet everything was. There was not a breath of air stirring in the open, and a dead, terrifying silence gripped this stuffy, man-packed hold!

But, as his ears grew accustomed to the absolute stillness, he could make out little sounds that had passed unnoticed. He heard the creaking of boards in the ship's narrowings, the "lap, lap" of water trickling against the bows; and then—the "pad, pad, pad" of bare feet creeping along the deck-boards!

"That's real, anyway!" Nipper grinned in the darkness. He felt better now, for the position had been getting on his nerves—and in about two seconds he had slipped off his shoes and was shinning up the fo'c'sle ladder to the darkened deck.

For one moment he thought he could see the bulk of a creeping man against the skyline, well aft. But the figure was gone in a flash and, as he crept nearer the spot, Nipper suddenly tripped and fell over a man sprawled full length and within six feet of the cabin companion-way!

He bounced to his feet and whirled round with one movement, expecting the fellow to spring up and attack him. He had fallen full

weight on the chap, but beyond a smothered grunt, he lay as if comfortably sleeping in bed. Striking a match, Nipper stared down at the set face of a Chinaman; he was marvelling how he had missed seeing the fellow before, when a groan from the stairs made him whip round.

Nelson Lee was sitting slowly up and swaying unsteadily. Fearing that he would pitch face forward, Nipper jumped down to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Hallo, guv'nor, you're awake!" he cried. "I've had the fright of my life in this blessed ship—an' I'd like to know what game you're all playing?"

Nelson Lee groaned again, and put both hands to his aching head. But the sound of Nipper's voice quickly roused him, the colour flooded back to his cheeks, and he suddenly jumped to his feet with a wry smile.

"Hallo, young 'un, I'm wondering what that game is myself," he said grimly. "I remember yarning with Tregenna and his mate, and I was reckoning it was time I got ashore, when I noticed the skipper and mate dropping asleep in front of my eyes. I began to feel my own head clouding, and I jumped for the open—but I tripped on these stairs, and felt too tired to get up again."

"So you had a comfy sleep—and the whole ship's company have been doing the same," Nipper grinned. "That must be four hours ago, and—"

"What!" Nelson Lee cut in. "You're telling me that the fo'c'sle hands have also been drugged, and we've been sleeping for hours?"

In a few words, Nipper told of how he had found things on boarding the silent *Corinak*. Lee listened with an impatient frown, then stepped into the cabin and stared at the sleeping officers.

Tregenna and Woods might have known someone was looking at them, for they began to move and to show signs of coming back to life. The blackened cigar stump dropped from Tregenna's lips, Woods blinked and yawned—then both of them groaned and staggered to their feet.

"Ship's barnacles!" Tregenna grunted. "What a head I've got! Hallo, Lee! I thought you'd gone home long ago."

"I started, but fell asleep on the companion stairs," Lee answered quietly. "I'm thinking someone's been at your medicine-chest, skipper, and I'm not leaving the *Corinak* until I find out."

Tregenna and his chief stared at that; but when Nelson Lee told how Nipper had come aboard, and what he had found there, they understood.

"Where's Norton?" Tregenna asked suddenly.

"Just what I was wonderin', skipper," Woods said, stroking his scraggy grey beard thoughtfully. "He wasn't here to supper—I thought maybe he'd taken a jaunt ashore, on the quiet like."

"Norton's your second, isn't he, Tregenna?" Lee asked.

The skipper nodded.

"And as nice a lad as you'd wish to meet," he answered. "Leastways, he was till two months ago—but I haven't liked his ways lately."

"No, he turned powerful sulky when we were off Cape Horn," Woods agreed. "Seemed to be suspicious of everybody—ye'll recall that day he chucked Chee Kung out of his cabin, skipper?"

"Just because the Chink reckoned he'd clean th' place out a bit," Tregenna smiled sourly. "But it's strange that some drug should get loose and Norton be missing at the same time; it's more than strange—it's darned suspicious."

"But have you any real reason to suppose he'd do such a thing?" Nelson Lee asked.

"No, but I'm going to his cabin to try and find a reason," Tregenna snapped.

The others followed him to a cubby-hole that lay off the main cabin. The bunk was disordered, its blankets flung in a heap on the floor; beyond that, the place was just the ordinary cabin of a ship's officer. There was nothing to suggest that Norton had a secret to hide, or any reason why he should want to harm his shipmates.

"No good wasting time here," Tregenna said at last. "Come on, Woods, we'll rouse the hands and see if they can tell us anything about Norton. Now, Lee, if you care to come—"

"No, we'll have another look round this place first," Lee said quickly. "If your men have anything interesting to say, you can tell us after we've finished here."

Left alone, Lee and Nipper were able to follow their own methods without interference. Several interesting points soon came to light, for they were now examining floor, walls, and ceiling with the greatest care.

"Somethings hit this bulkhead a rare old clout, guv'nor," Nipper said, pointing to a long, deep scratch in the paint. "Looks to me as if a knife's stabbed into it; not straight, but a downward blow that's missed its real mark and gouged into the wood."

"Um—quite likely!" Lee muttered absently. The beam of his torch was lighting the shadows under Norton's bunk. "And here's two smears that look very like blood. A queer place, young 'un, for bloodstains."

As the torch wavered in his hand, Nipper's keen glance caught the glint of metal right away in a corner. He dropped to his knees and, an instant later, showed Lee his capture.

It was a disc of white metal, shaped to the letter "C." Behind it were two tiny eyelets, and from one of these a white thread of cotton still hung.

"It's a badge, guv'nor!" Nipper whispered eagerly. "That 'C' might stand for 'Corinak'—if the chaps on this tub wear badges."

"It's a *Corinak* badge all right," Lee answered musingly. He turned the disc over in his hand, stared thoughtfully at the broken thread, then again glanced round the little cabin. "There's been a savage struggle in this place, young 'un, and Norton's absence begins to look very sinister indeed. The knife slash, the bloodstains and this badge show that a fight's been fought to a finish, though whether Norton was victor or victim we cannot say, as yet."

"And you lay asleep while all this happened?" Nipper said.

Lee shook his head. "No, we lay asleep because it happened," he answered. "The fight must have taken place earlier in the day, the loser had to be got rid of, and so the whole ship's company was drugged!"

Before Nipper could reply to this surprising theory, heavy steps came thumping down the companion-way, and Nelson Lee did a most surprising thing. Bending low, he quickly pushed the badge back to the corner from which Nipper had taken it—then sauntered out to the main cabin, just as Tregenna and Woods came blustering in!

CHAPTER 2.

NIPPER BLUNDERS!

"I'M more fogged than ever, Lee," Tregenna said sourly. "We roused the hands up, an' a nice job we had with some of 'em. But there's not a man can tell us a thing about Norton—he hasn't been seen since

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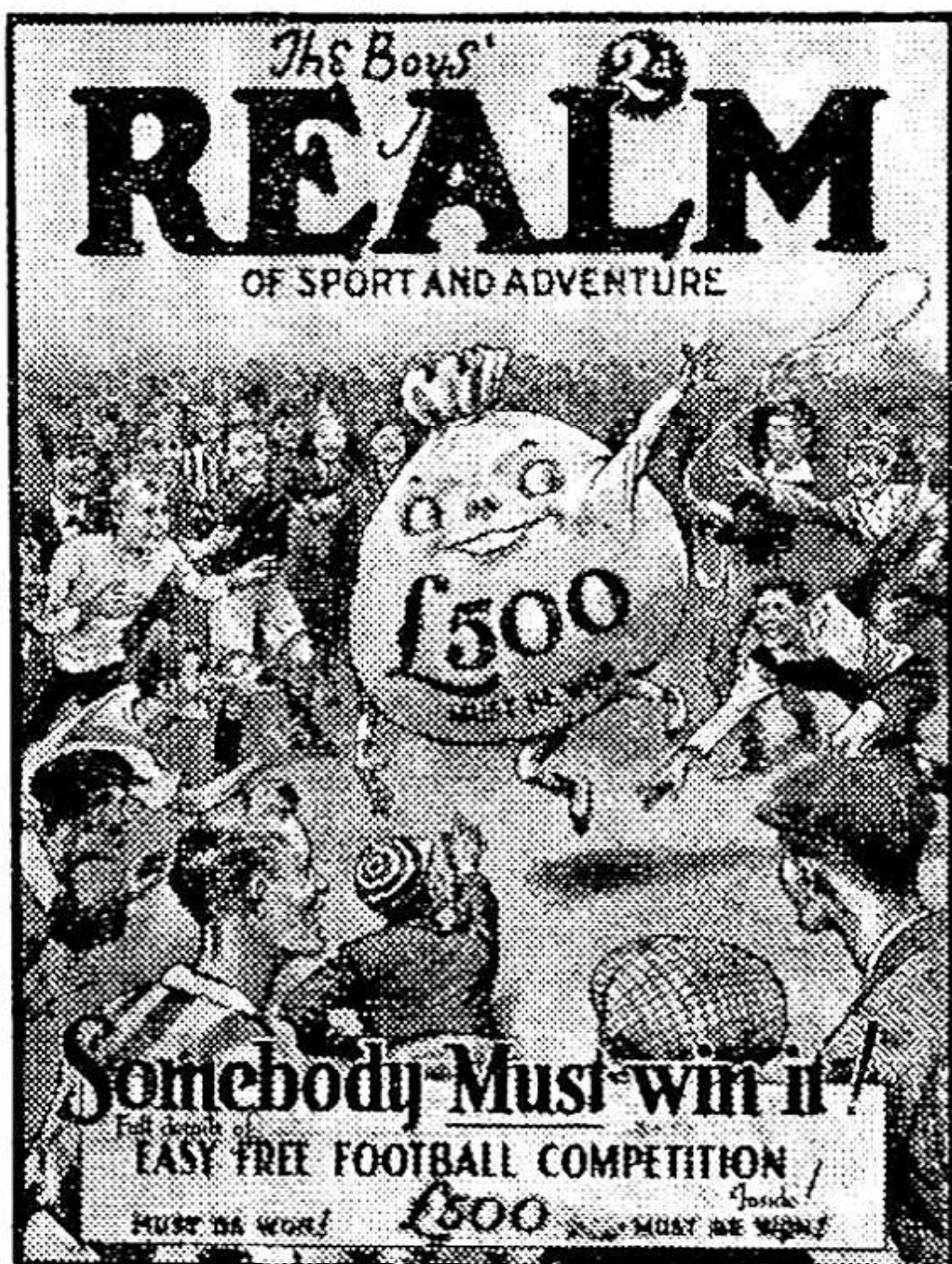
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we docked this afternoon, an' I've my own idea that he's skipped the ship without even waiting for his pay-off."

"Then it isn't my idea," Nelson Lee answered. He turned to Nipper. "I've been thinking of that Chinaman you stumbled over—and of the mysterious footsteps you heard pattering about the deck."

"But the chap was drugged, and as sound asleep as you were, guv'nor," Nipper protested. "I fell right on top of him and he never—Guv'nor! You mean he heard me coming, and was shamming all the time?"

Lee nodded.

"Tregenna, how many Chinamen have you aboard?" he asked.

"Only Chee Kung, the cabin boy," Tregenna answered. "But what are you driving at, Lee? Chee's a harmless little imp, and can be left out of this affair."

"He's the only one, outside yourselves, who has the run of the cabins," Lee said dryly. He then told Tregenna of the finds they had made in Norton's cubby-hole, and added: "Anyway, I'm going to test that yellow servant, so don't show surprise at anything I say. Order something, Tregenna, anything that will bring him down here a moment."

"You're an obstinate beggar, Lee, and I tell you Chee's all right," Tregenna muttered; but he tapped a gong sharply, and a few seconds

later a lithe, wiry Chinaman slipped into the cabin without a sound.

"Chee, strong tea, one time," Tregenna ordered sharply.

"Iss, Cap'n Tregenna," Chee lisped, vanishing from the cabin as silently as he had entered it.

"Well, satisfied now, Lee?" Tregenna grinned.

"Quite," Nelson Lee nodded. "Was that the chap you fell over, Nipper?"

"He was, and he's the chap you want," Nipper answered quickly. "There's an inch of loose thread on the collar of his tunic, guv'nor, so we know now who owns the badge in Norton's cabin."

"Yet that tells us nothing, by itself," Lee replied quietly. "He may have dropped the thing innocently enough—" He cut his words, as Chee appeared like a ghost; but he was certain the silent Chink must have heard part of them, so he continued with hardly a break: "No, Norton may have acted innocently enough in leaving the ship, Tregenna. He's been eager to get ashore, and a dozen things might have detained him. Anyway, it's time we were in bed, so we'll leave you to your tea and clear off."

He was speaking to Tregenna, but his fixed stare never wavered from Chee's collar-band. The Chink was busy with the table crockery, and his face remained absolutely impassive; but, at last, Lee saw the yellow fingers creep

up to the collar-band, hesitate by the broken thread—then quickly drop to his side again!

That was enough. Lee's glance instantly turned away, and he smilingly refused Tregenna's invitation to a cup of tea.

"It's too late, skipper," he said. "You chaps can see us off the ship, then empty the teapot yourselves."

He walked straight out of the cabin, and the Corinak's officers took the hint and followed him. The moment they reached the deck, Nelson Lee issued his orders quickly, but in a whisper.

"Chee'll watch us leave the ship, then he'll dive to Norton's cabin for that badge," he said. "Give him a minute to find it, keep him busy in the main cabin for another five—then we'll be on board again, and hidden."

"Sounds a rum game," Woods grumbled. "Why not ask Chee—"

"Ask Chee nothing!" Lee snapped. "And I can tell you, Woods, this is a game which may have a very serious ending. Settle the crew down—soon's you can—don't yell if you hear anyone creeping about." He raised his voice. "Ready, Nipper? Well, good-night, Tregenna! Night, Woods!"

There was now a narrow plank gangway from ship to shore; crossing this, Lee and Nipper walked briskly away until a huge storage shed separated them from the ship. Then they stopped.

"You're going back to watch Chee, guv'nor?" Nipper whispered.

"I'm leaving that job to you, young 'un," Lee said quickly. "Either Norton's body has been dropped into the dock, or he's somewhere aboard and in dire need of help. I'm going back to search every inch of the Corinak's innards—and you're going back to see that Chee doesn't get away. Shoes off, and not a sound from now on, young 'un."

Hidden by the huge wall of the shed, they crept along to the Corinak's gangway and came aboard again like twin shadows. Crouching behind a ventilator shaft that allowed a full view of the lighted companion, they listened impatiently to the deep rumble of Tregenna's voice from the cabin.

He was lecturing the Chink for some imagined fault, keeping him tied to the cabin as Lee had asked him to do. But they soon heard him order Chee to clear out, and the yellow lad jumped to the deck almost before Tregenna had finished speaking.

For a moment, Chee hesitated, and the hidden watchers thought he was going to clear off the ship right away. But the sound of the officers stirring in the cabin below sent him scurrying along to the deck-galley, and Nelson Lee whispered that this was probably also his sleeping quarters.

Very soon the cabin light was doused, the doors of the sleeping-cabins banged noisily, and the Corinak settled down to complete silence.

"Now, young 'un, keep your peepers on that galley door," Lee breathed softly. "If Chee tries to break away, yell. You'll find Tregenna and Woods very wide awake."

So quietly did Nelson Lee clear from the shaft that Nipper had no knowledge of his going. He only knew that he was suddenly alone, and for fifteen minutes that seemed unending he kept close watch on the dimly-outlined galley.

He never saw the door open, never even heard the creak of a hinge; but his heart jumped when some dark object flitted past within six feet of him, and it was only then that he realised Chee was loose and prowling about the deck like a skulking panther.

Nipper hadn't the least doubt that the fellow would make at once for the shore, and he was amazed when Chee crept on hands and knees to the cabin skylight and crouched motionless over it. Satisfied at length that the officers had really settled down, the mysterious yellow man then began a weird tour of the decks that puzzled and bewildered Nipper.

An eerie adventure followed, for half the time Chee was invisible in the darkness, and Nipper had to guess what he was doing. It gradually became evident, however, that the chap was searching the decks as closely as they had searched Norton's cabin—so intent on his work that he never once glanced behind to the silent shadow that watched every move he made.

And Nipper was thinking at top pressure while he crawled painfully about the Corinak's hard deck. Whether Chee had killed Norton or not, this noiseless search showed that he meant to steal something from the ship. Then it suddenly dawned on Nipper that the missing mate might have interrupted this very search, and paid for it with his life!

By now, Chee had made a full tour of the decks and was crouching under the bridge like a figure carved in stone. Nipper guessed that the Chink was racking his brain for some fresh place to peer into, and presently he shinned up the bridge-ladder like a monkey, swung out along the rail, and crawled to a boat that was slung inboard on davits.

A "zipp-zipp" told Nipper that Chee was slashing the ropes of the tarpaulin cover—then he saw the chap lift a whole section back and begin groping down in the boat. A tiny click reached Nipper's ear as the Chink forced the catch of the locker—then came a whimper from Chee, and he lifted some bulky burden from its hiding-place!

It was impossible for Nipper to get a close view, of course; but as Chee's hand came over the edge of the boat, he could just make out the dim outline of a cloth, bulged out, as if wrapped round a football!

After that, there was no hesitation about Chee's movements. He dropped to the deck, crept quickly to the gangway, and was off the ship like a shot from a gun!

"Gosh!" Nipper gasped, taken by surprise. "If I lose the beggar now, I lose him for good—and the guv'nor won't half let me know about it."

There was no time to rouse Tregenna, or to do anything except make a dash after the hurrying Chink. Jumping for the quay in his stockinged feet, Nipper ran along the shed wall and sighed with relief when he saw Chee climbing a high wooden gateway like a cat!

Once past that gate, Nipper knew the Chinaman had all London to lose himself in. He was over the thing almost as Nipper spotted him, and the lad was amazed at his quickness, until he came to climb it in turn. Then he saw that the wooden barrier was strengthened on this inner side with cross-pieces that made quite a good ladder, and he was not ten seconds in following the Chink over to the dock road.

The chap had stopped to don his shoes, and was beginning to walk quickly along Plough Road as Nipper again made out his shadowy form. The lad knew that he was plunging into a queer and dangerous district, and he flung his cap back over the gate in the hope that Lee would find it and get an idea which way he had gone.

Then he remembered a bit of chalk in his pocket, and as Chee began to dive into the network of narrow streets that hide between the railway-lines of that place, he chalk-marked every corner down which the trail led him!

Chee twisted and wriggled in and out of lanes and alleys so quickly that Nipper was forced to draw dangerously close; but the fellow went on without once turning his head, still hugging his mysterious bundle, and hurrying as if late for an appointment.

Then came one of the biggest disappointments of Nipper's life. They were now fully a mile from the Corinak, and he was wondering if the Chink meant to walk right across London when the chap slipped round a corner and simply vanished!

Following his guv'nor's methods, Nipper had hung back and given Chee time to get well down the next street. He turned the corner about six seconds after the Chinaman, but there was now no sight or sound of him, and Nipper guessed that some door must have been open and ready for him to dive into.

He crept the length of the street, examining each door and window he passed; but there was not a thing stirring, and the silence was uncanny. He had to admit at last that the yellow snake had beaten him, and it was with a sour face that he flashed his torch on the wall and made out the name of the thoroughfare—Dolly Lane.

"I'm not much wiser now, though I can't be far off the canal," he muttered. "I can hunt round for a police-station, or I can race back to the Corin—"

The word ended in a hollow grunt—for it seemed to Nipper that the four-storied building against which he stood suddenly crashed down on him! A thousand stars flashed and danced before his eyes, and he dropped to the pavement—unconscious!

CHAPTER 3.

CHEE KUNG'S SECRET.

WHEN next Nipper opened his eyes, he realised at once that he was lying on the damp floor of a cellar, and that two fellows were whispering immediately above his head. He felt sore and wretchedly sick, but he guessed that Chee Kung had been too clever for him and had cunningly led him into a trap.

As his mind cleared, he heard the lisping whisper of the Chinaman above him, and a glance through his half-opened eyes showed that Chee and a brutal-looking white man were seated and talking earnestly across a table made of three huge paving-stones. For a moment, this curious piece of furniture puzzled him; but it kept him quiet and still until the sense of their words penetrated his bemused mind—then he thanked his lucky stars that he hadn't moved or moaned, as he might easily have done.

"Chee got 'im from ship's offcl," Chee was lisping. "Im picked up in sea, 'im any man's ploperty, I say. Chee blought 'im here, 'Dab' Connol sell f' big dollar, we split 'tween us, eh?"

"Don't be so free wi' names, y'scum," Connor growled. "But the thing's worth money, an' I knows where I can place it. But yer brought summat else 'ere, you fool, an' I'm askin' fer no police trouble roun' this 'ouse."

Chee bent closer, and whispered so softly that Nipper only caught the hiss of his lisped words. He seemed to be persuading Connor to a line of action, and presently the white ruffian grinned wickedly and threw a venomous side-glance at the motionless lad.

"Y' right in that, Chinky," he said. "The tide sweeps inter this cellar soon's I open that sewer-grid—an' it's been useful 'fore to-day. If

you're sure th' kid ain't been follered as 'e follered you, then th' river can 'ave 'im wi'out us movin' a finger!"

Nipper shivered, for there was something horrible in the callous way this brute settled his fate. The mention of the tide sweeping into the cellar explained the stone furniture, and it told Nipper that the wily Chink must have walked in a big half-circle from the ship, so that they were again somewhere along the river front.

"Tide lisen' now, Dab," Chee tempted, in a whisper. "We just go upstairs, lockee this cellal up—an' nobody evel know!"

"An' if 'e comes round 'fore the tide 'as 'im, what then?" Connor growled. "Fine ole row 'e'd make—rouse th' street an' land us in the clink in no time."

"You leave me with 'im li'l minit, Dab," Chee lisped; adding softly: "'Im no wakee in time, then!"

Nipper felt as if icy-cold water was trickling down his back, for he was certain that if Chee had his way with him he would not waken at tide, or any other time. As for Connor, he grunted, hesitated, then slowly got to his feet!

"Mind yer, I knows nothin' about this," he said. "If a feller 'ides in my cellar an' gets flushed out, that's 'is look-out. You gimme th' stuff, Chinky, an' I'll wait fer yer up—"

Nipper had been gradually working himself into position for a spring, and before Connor had finished speaking he suddenly jumped to his feet! Connor's hand was hovering over the bundle that Chee was prepared to commit

(Continued on page 43.)

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THE SLEEPING MYSTERY!

(Continued from page 41.)

murder for, and for the moment the two creatures stood petrified at sight of the lad they had thought half dead.

In that instant Nipper sprang to the table, grabbed the bundle, and pushed for all he was worth! The wobbly stones crashed heavily against the men, and the tallow dip was instantly doused; but Nipper had marked the position of the stone stairs, and was streaking up them almost before the pair realised what had happened!

He trod bare boards at last, and knew that he had reached the ground floor. He would willingly have fled into the street, but he guessed the door would be bolted and barred, and the two brutes speeding after him gave him no time to fumble with fastenings.

He risked a flash of his torch and saw flights of stairs rising to unknown regions. Any chance was better than waiting for the murderous Chee, and he raced aloft at neck-risking speed!

Four steep flights he jumped, and was then faced by a long, dark lobby. He could hear the brutes hurrying after him—a glance over the rickety balustrade showed him Chee in front, with Connor blundering behind and carrying an oil lamp to light the way.

There was no chance for Nipper to hide, for any room into which he dodged might prove a death-trap. He raced down the lobby, wondering if he was diving into a blind alley, then spotted a narrow flight of steep steps and was up them like a shot!

His torch showed that he had reached a grimy garret, a place furnished with a frowsy bed, heavy kitchen chairs and a box for wash-stand.

"Gosh! That puts the lid on it!" he panted, flinging Chee's bundle on the bed.

He looked gloomily down at the two fellows now cautiously creeping along the lobby, Chee openly showing a long, thin knife, and Connor with a length of lead piping tucked under his arm! Then he called loudly for them to halt!

Chee's answer was to suddenly whirl his arm in a great sweep, and to send the knife flying upward with the force and accuracy of a well-aimed arrow! Nipper flicked his head aside the instant he saw Chee's arm move, for he guessed what was coming; even then, the knife flashed past within three inches of his neck, and, in reply, he flung the chair straight downward!

It took Chee in the chest and sent him staggering back into Connor. The surprised pair fell in a heap, the lamp carried by Connor splintered to fragments on the wall, and in a second a stream of blazing oil was licking at the rotten woodwork!

With a hoarse growl, Connor came charging up the stairs, swinging the lead piping for a knock-out—but, by then, Nipper had grabbed another chair and began defending himself resolutely.

Connor aimed one vicious blow after another at the lad, but Nipper jabbed with the chair every time Connor got too near, and nearly drove him mad with thwarted fury. He was screaming threats and literally battering the chair to matchwood, when a bullet suddenly sung past his head and the sharp crack of a revolver echoed through the house!

For a moment, Nipper thought that Chee was shooting, indifferent to whether he hit friend or foe; but he quickly saw that the Chink

was crouching midway up the stairs—with Nelson Lee guarding their foot and armed with a smoking revolver! Behind him again, the passage seemed packed with a crowd of uniformed policemen smothering the flames with blankets and bedding, and Nipper sank weakly against the wall as he realised that his terrible danger was over.

"Drop that piping, Connor!" Lee yelled.

The fight had all gone out of Chee at sight of the policemen, and he surrendered like a whipped cur. Connor half raised his weapon, as if to fling it in Lee's face—then he thought better of it, flung it down with a snarl, and slouched down the stairs with a bitter jibe at the men who awaited him.

Only then did Nelson Lee pocket his gun and rush up the stairway to Nipper.

"Just in time, young 'un," he said softly. "'Dab' Connor's as wicked a scamp as London holds—you should never have left the ship without warning me."

"Didn't have a chance to do anything, except bolt after Chee," Nipper grinned. "Seems too good to be true, guv'nor, you turning up like this."

"You could hardly have left the ship when I discovered that you had gone," Lee answered. "I found your cap and chalk marks, and this patrol of police was passing the end of Dolt Lane when I was searching the street for you. Soon as they heard of your disappearance they named Connor's house right away, for he's suspected of a dozen crimes, but has been too clever until to-night."

"I've got something for that missing mate when we find him, guv'nor," Nipper said, showing the bundle he had rescued from Chee.

"He's found now," Lee answered. "I came across Norton in the tunnel of the propeller-shaft, tied, gagged and wounded. I yelled the news to Tregenna, then rushed after you. We'll get back and hear what he's got to say, young 'un."

Thirty minutes later they were seated again in the cabin, listening to Jim Norton's strange story. His wound was only a deep scratch on the right arm, and he was making very light of this when Lee and Nipper entered.

"I was over-careful, skipper, and Chee Kung's been too clever for me," he was saying. "I found a fortune floating on the sea, and when I saw Chee was after it I hid the thing and said nothing to any of you. Better if I had done; for now, you tell me the bundle's gone, and that means the Chink's got the fortune, after all."

"Is this the thing you're after, Mr. Norton?" Nipper asked quietly.

Norton stared, then swooped on the bundle with a cry of joy. He tore the fastening away and revealed a lump of grey, greasy matter that was so ugly it made Nipper wonder what all the fuss had been about.

"Gosh!" he said. "If I'd known we were fighting for a lump of solid mud, I'd have let Chee make away with it!"

"That, young man, is the finest bit of ambergris I've ever seen," Norton answered, with a smile.

"Ambergris?" Nipper said thoughtfully. "Isn't that what they make scent of—the stuff that comes from the inside of a whale?"

"It is, and it's worth about fifteen pounds an ounce!" Norton laughed. "This little lump of mud, as you call it, will bring in at least eight hundred pounds—and we're all going to share in it!"

THE END.

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