

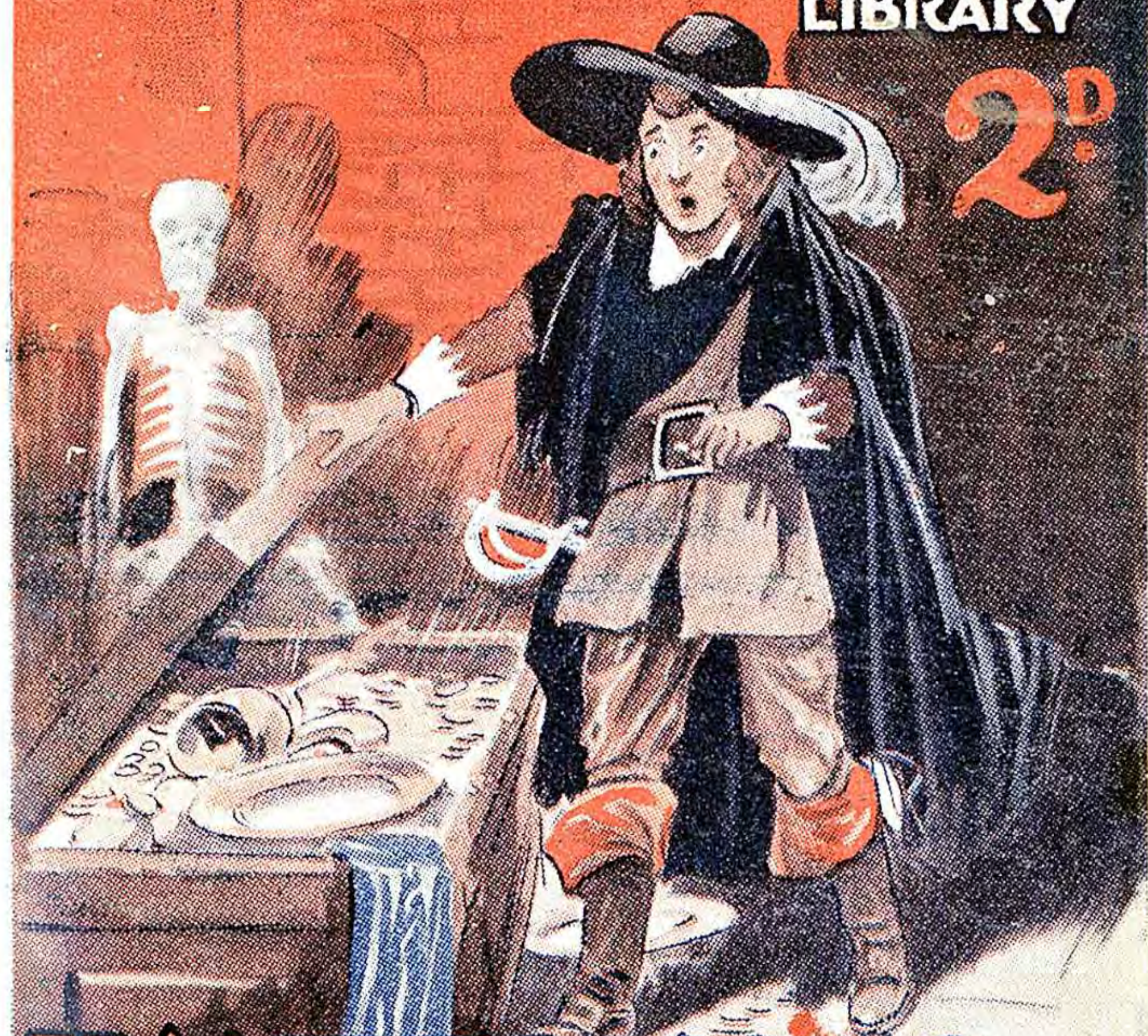
Mystery, Thrills and Schoolboy Adventure—Inside!

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HANDFORTH'S GHOST HUNT

New Series No. 35.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

January 31, 1927.



As the Pirate Chief sank into the thick snow, a distinct feminine scream caused Handy to start violently; when he looked down he discovered that his victim was not Willy, but his girl chum, Irene!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

Handforth and Co. have many startling adventures in this week's spanking long complete story of the Boys of St. Frank's.

CHAPTER 1.

BOXING NIGHT AT HANDFORTH TOWERS!

WILLY HANDFORTH entered his major's bed-room breezily.

"Ted," he said, "I want you to do me a favour."

Edward Oswald Handforth, who was just straightening his tie in front of the mirror, turned round and frowned.

"If you're going to ask me for five bob—" he began coldly.

"Don't worry—I'm rolling in cash," said Willy. "Uncle Gregory has tipped me so much that I'm like a miniature Rockefeller! No, it's not cash—I want you to lend me your dagger."

"My which?"

"Your dagger," said Willy.

"Dagger!"

"The thing you dag people with," grinned Willy. "I mean to say, the thing you tickle their ribs with—dagger! You know, a kind of knife, with a point at the end."

His major glared.

"You—you young fathead!" he roared, as he noticed the grins of Church and McClure, his long-suffering chums. "Do you think I don't know what a dagger is?"

"Well, you seemed a bit hazy—"

"Do I go about with daggers all over me?" snapped Edward Oswald. "Why not ask for my revolvers while you're about it? And

how about my stiletto, to say nothing of my pet bomb?" he added sarcastically.

"You can keep all those," said Willy. "I only want to borrow your dagger. Aren't you going to appear as Porthos, at the ball to-night? Well, there's a dagger in your outfit, and I don't think you need it. So hand it over."

Handforth realised what his minor was driving at.

"Oh!" he said grimly. "You're talking about Church and Mao and me dressing up as The Three Musketeers?"

"Church and McClure may be all right as Athos and Aramis," said Willy, "but I'm afraid poor old Porthos is going to be a bit messed up."

"I'm appearing as Porthos," said Handforth curtly.

"Exactly," said Willy. "That's why he's going to be messed up. But don't let's argue over trifles. Where's that dagger? Just hand it over, and you'll get rid of me. Refuse to hand it over, and I'll haunt you like the Lady of the Tower!"

His major pointed to the door.

"Get out!" he said ominously. "It's nearly tea-time, and I haven't finished dressing. I'm expecting the gong to sound every minute—"

"There it goes now!" said Willy cheerfully. "All the more reason for you to hand over that dagger without quibbling."

"You'll get it where you don't want it if you keep pestering me like this!" snorted Handforth. "You young ass, that dagger is a part of the equipment! The impersonation wouldn't be complete without it. And what do you want a dagger for, anyhow, you dangerous young beggar?"

"I've only got five," said Willy, "and I want six."

"Six!" gasped his brother.

"Yes."

"Six daggers?"

"Oh, cheese it, Ted," said Willy impatiently. "You know jolly well that I'm appearing as a Pirate Chief! And, naturally, I want my belt to be stuffed with daggers, don't I? I don't like odd numbers, so I want yours to make up the half-dozen!"

Edward Oswald fairly gaped. He knew that his minor was a cool customer, but this request was about the finest sample of unadulterated nerve that Handforth could remember. Willy confessed to having five daggers, but he wasn't satisfied. So he wanted his major's only one!

"You—you awful bounder!" gasped Handforth. "Get out of this bed-room! Church! Mac! Come and help me to pitch him out!"

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to humour him?" asked Church.

"Give him that dagger, you mean?"

"Not exactly," said Church. "Let's give him a taste of it."

"Business end first!" added McClure, grinning.

But Willy could see that for once his luck had failed him. He went towards the door, and waved his hand.

"All right—don't bother!" he said. "I know when I'm whacked. All the same," he added as he went out, "I'll have that dagger before the evening's over!"

"Cheeky young ass!" said Church. "A Pirate Chief, indeed! I'm glad we know, Handy. If he starts any of his tricks, we shall be able to spot him. He's bound to be up to a lot of games."

The fancy-dress ball was to be a masked one, and all the guests were taking particular care to keep secretive about their costumes. It would spoil half the fun if they talked beforehand. Unmasking was always the best part of the evening.

Handforth Towers was filled with Christmas guests; and the St. Frank's juniors, numbering about a dozen Removites and three Third Formers, were ready to vote that it was the merriest Christmas party on record.

General Gregory Bartholomew Handforth, D.S.O., was uncle to the famous leader of Study D at St. Frank's. He was a bluff, hearty old gentleman with a voice like thunder—and a heart as generous as Edward Oswald's own. He liked nothing better than giving pleasure to others, and this Yuletide party under his roof was a glorious success.

Ena, the sister of Edward Oswald and Willy, had brought five of her own girl chums

from the Moor View School—an added cause for satisfaction to the St. Frank's party. For they were on the very best of terms with Irene Manners & Co. And they had all been enjoying themselves to the full.

There were other guests, too—one of them particularly well known to the St. Frank's crowd. In fact, none other than that genial sportsman, Lord Dorrimore, who was spending Christmas at Handforth Towers, prior to starting off on some expedition, the object of which he was keeping a profound secret.

Christmas Day had been one long round of happiness, and now Boxing Night had arrived. The morning had been spent skating, and in tobogganing, and in the enjoyment of other winter sports.

For Handforth Towers was situated near the Norfolk Coast, not so many miles from Mundesley. The whole countryside was under the grip of frost, and snow lay thick everywhere. It was a Christmas of the real, old-fashioned type.

Handforth was particularly delighted. He had often wanted to show the St. Frank's fellows that the Handforth family could do things in style. And there wasn't a boy or girl present who didn't consider himself or herself lucky for being under this roof as a guest.

In fact, they were having the time of their lives.

As General Handforth was a bachelor, his sister-in-law—Handy's mother—was officiating as hostess. And Mrs. Stokes was included in the party—to say nothing of Barry Stokes, her husband, and Mr. Nelson Lee. From every point of view, it was just that sort of party which made everybody happy to be alive.

At tea-time, the forthcoming ball was the one topic of conversation.

Handforth found himself in one corner of the lofty reception hall, with Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt. Irene Manners, Doris Berkeley, and Mary Summers were there, too.

"I wish it was dinner-time, you fellows!" Irene was saying. "We shan't start any of the fun until after dinner. But, my! What a rush there'll be then! As soon as dinner's over we're going to dress, and then for the ball!"

"The time'll soon be here," said Mary cheerfully. "I wonder if any of the fellows will be able to spot us, Irene?"

"They won't spot me!" said Irene, with conviction.

"O-ho! Don't you be so jolly sure!" grinned Handforth. "I don't know about the other girls, Renie, but it won't take me two ticks to pick you out from the rest of the crowd."

She looked at him in alarm.

"You wretch!" she cried. "Has somebody told you about my fancy dress?"

"Of course not," laughed Edward Oswald. "But it doesn't matter to me what you'll be wearing. Do you think I can mistake

your walk, and your mouth, and everything? Your mask will only cover the upper part of your face——"

"Oh, then you don't know?" asked Irene. "That's good! So you're going to spot me, are you, Ted? I dare you!"

"Go it!" grinned Reggie Pitt. "I shall have my eyes open for you, Doris."

"You'll be clever if you discover me!" teased Doris.

"Wait a minute!" said Handforth. "Irene has just dared me! Do you think I can let that stand? I'll not only spot you in two ticks, Renie—but, what's more, I'll kiss you under the mistletoe!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Boaster!" laughed Mary. "If you're not careful, you'll kiss the wrong girl!"

"No fear!" replied Handforth. "Irene has challenged me, and I'm going to accept it! I'll see through her disguise, and get her under the mistletoe, and kiss her! That's my answer!"

"Handy, old son, you're an optimist!" chuckled Dick Hamilton. "I've planned to do the same thing with Mary, but I'm not any too hopeful. I believe these girls are planning all sorts of deceptions, and we shall be hopelessly muddled when we try to spot them."

Handforth smiled in a superior way.

"Of course, you may be hopelessly muddled," he said indulgently. "Don't think I'm boasting, or anything, but I'm not the kind of chap to be spoofed by a fancy-dress costume and a mask. And I'm going to spot Irene, and kiss her——"

"Before you talk about kissing again, Ted, I'll add to that challenge of mine," said Irene laughingly. "You can go ahead with your little plan—recognise me, and take me under the mistletoe! And as soon as ever you do it, I'll give you all the rest of the dances!"

"Spoken like a sportsman!" smiled Doris.

"By George!" said Handforth eagerly. "You mean that?"

"It's official—spoken in the presence of all these witnesses," replied Irene merrily. "But, mind you, there are to be no conditions whatever, and I can wear any costume I please?"

"That's a bargain!"

"All right!" chuckled Irene. "But don't forget, Ted—if you don't succeed in kissing me under the mistletoe, you won't get a dance at all!"

"You'll have to work fast, Ted, old son!" said Mary.

"Just a minute—let's get this straight!" put in Edward Oswald. "Supposing I spot you, Irene? Have I got to unmask you then——"

"No fear!" replied Irene indignantly. "Why, that would be a fine game! You would simply go to every girl and unmask her until you'd found me! No, you've got to make sure of me, take me under the mistletoe, and if you win, every dance is yours from that minute onwards."

Reggie Pitt shook his head.

"This is going to be a bad business!" he said solemnly. "Before the ball has been in progress ten minutes, Handy will have kissed every girl there is!"



CHAPTER 2.

A LITTLE PLOT!

HERE was a roar of laughter at Reggie's prediction.

"He'll have a job!" smiled Mary. "If he grabs me, I'll soon let him know I'm not Irene!"

"You needn't worry!" said Handforth, with calm composure. "I shan't make any mistake at all—I shall twig Irene first off, and win every dance. That'll make some of you other chaps wild, won't it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Nobody took him seriously, and as someone came along with a suggestion about parlour games to fill up the time between tea and dinner, the subject was dropped. But not for very long.

The six schoolgirls enjoyed the parlour games for an hour, and then Doris hinted that she wanted her companions alone, in her bed-room. They had two bed-rooms between them, as a matter of fact. Within five minutes they were by themselves.

"What's the idea, Doris?" asked Ena. "You know what Ted is. As soon as he finds we've gone, he'll start making inquiries——"

"Never mind about Ted!" interrupted Doris briskly. "I've got an idea."

"Lock it up, and protect it well!" said Irene gravely. "Ideas are precious nowadays——"

"It's about Ted!" went on Doris. "Girls, this opportunity is too good to be missed! In fact, it would be a wicked, sinful shame to let it slip by."

"Which opportunity?"

"Why, that boast of Ted's that he'll twig Renie at once, and kiss her under the mistletoe," continued Doris, her dark eyes sparkling with fun. "What a chance to play a joke on him! Don't forget, there are no conditions. Renie can wear any costume she pleases——"

"I'm going to be an Irish Colleen," said Irene, with a nod. "Don't forget that I've got a wonderful wavy wig, too—all dark and lustrous. Ted will be looking for fair hair——"

"That won't do!" interrupted Doris firmly. "The Irish Colleen is good, but we can't afford to take any chances. We've got to fool Ted as he's never been fooled before. It's Boxing Night, and we want all the fun we can get."

"What's the idea?" asked the other girls eagerly.

"Well, first of all, we've got to have an accomplice," said Doris. "And there's one fellow——"

"Fellow?"

"Fellow!" said Doris firmly. "There's one fellow who will be a great and glorious success. In other words, Ena, that impish young brother of yours, Willy."

Ena started, and shook her head.

"Never!" she declared. "I wouldn't conspire with Willy for anything in the world! Hasn't he been playing tricks on us ever since we came here? What about yesterday? The terror! Look at the way he fooled us at breakfast-time! And then again in the evening——"

"That doesn't matter—he's a sportsman," broke in Doris. "And there's a point that we've got to remember. He's almost exactly your size, Renie. He's just about the same height, the same slimness, and everything."

Irene Manners started.

"What are you suggesting?" she asked.

"Can't you guess?" chuckled Doris.

"We'll drag Willie into the plot, and get him to swap costumes with you. Just picture Willy as an Irish Colleen, with wavy hair!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The girls shrieked with laughter at the thought.

"Doris, you're a terror!" said Irene. "I believe Willy could do it, but why should Ted go for the Irish Colleen? He won't have any reason to suspect——"

"Don't go so fast—that comes in later on in the plot," said Doris gently. "First of all, we've got to find Willy. And here's the important point—we've got to know what his fancy dress is!"

"Because you've got to wear it, Renie," said Mary.

"But—but it may be something dreadful!" protested Irene. "You know what Willy is! It would be quite like him to dress himself up as a Hottentot! How should I look as a Hottentot? I couldn't, Doris!"

"Well, let's fetch Willy, and hear what he says," replied Doris hastily. "Don't jump to conclusions. If you'll wait here, I'll run down and collar him. Promise you won't go away?"

They promised, and Doris ran off. She went downstairs three at a time, and nearly winded the unfortunate Lord Dorrimore, who was just coming out of the smoking-room. She ran into his arms with a thud.

"Oh, sorry!" she gasped.

"Don't mention it," smiled his lordship. "I don't want to be inquisitive, but what's the idea of this gymnastic display? Do you know that you took those stairs in three leaps?"

"I was lazy—I meant to do it in two!" replied Doris cheerfully. "Have you seen Willy about anywhere?" she added breathlessly.

Lord Dorrimore winced.

"I have!" he replied painfully. "Not five minutes ago Master William invited me to sit in a chair so that we could have a chat. I sat. Need I say more?"

"I can guess the rest," said Doris. "I know what a terror he is. But just at the

moment I need him rather badly. But you needn't worry—I shall be on my guard."

She hurried off, and located Willy in a corner of the drawing-room, where he appeared to be engaged upon an earnest task. He was sitting on Chubby Heath's back, and pushing the unhappy Chubby's face hard against the floor. Juicy Lemon was standing by as referee.

"Now!" said Willy firmly. "Do you agree to help——"

"Just a minute, Willy," said Doris, seizing him by the shoulder. "I expect you're planning some terrible mischief, but you can leave it for a bit. I want you at once—and it's important."

Willy looked round, and released his victim.

"Ted again, eh?" he asked. "What's he done this time—fallen out of one of the upper windows into a snowdrift or something?"

He went off with her, and was rather puzzled when she led the way upstairs. But Doris took care to choose her time—so that nobody saw them going. Within a minute Willy was whisked into the presence of the other girls.

"I got him!" said Doris triumphantly.

"Here, steady!" exclaimed Willy, backing away in alarm. "What's this—an organised plot? I may be a match for half the Third, but I'm blessed if I'll tackle six of you girls!"

"You needn't worry—it's not a plot against you, Willy," said Doris. "We want your help in a glorious jape against Ted."

A serene smile came over Willy's face.

"I'm yours," he said promptly.

"First of all, we want to know what costume you've planned to wear for the carnival," said Irene eagerly. "Quickly, Willy!"

But Willy looked dubious.

"I say, chuck it!" he protested. "You know as well as I do that we're keeping our costumes a secret. I'm not giving the show away! You girls can never keep secrets, and you'll tell everybody——"

"No, we won't," put in Doris. "Look here, Willy, here's the game in a nutshell. We want you to wear Irene's costume, and to lend her yours. Don't you see? Ted will mistake——"

"Enough!" said Willy, as his quick brain grasped the situation. "My costume is yours, Irene. By Jingo, what an idea! Where is the genius who thought of it? I'm booked to appear as a Pirate Chief."

Irene Manners reeled.

"A Pirate Chief!" she breathed helplessly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other girls held their sides with laughter.

"Yes, a Pirate Chief," said Willy. "You'll look ripping, Irene. What's the idea of turning pale? Don't you realise that I'm making a great sacrifice? I'm only doing it because it's against poor old Ted!"

"A sacrifice?" said Irene faintly.

"That costume of mine is a corker!" said

Willy, nodding. "Five daggers go with it! And two whacking great pistols, and a sword, and a hat, with a skull and cross-bones on it—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The room echoed with the girls' silvery laughter, and Irene slowly recovered. After all, it wasn't so bad as it might have been. In fact, when she came to analyse it, Willy's costume would be rather wonderful. Doris was bubbling over with enthusiasm.

"This was meant to be!" she said, her eyes sparkling happily. "A Pirate Chief, Renie! If there is one boy's costume you could wear safely, without fear of being spotted as a girl, it's this one! Think of it—sea boots, and a long coat, and a blued chin—I suppose a blued chin is included, Willy?"

"Rather!" said Willy. "And a fierce black moustache, too!"

"Help!" murmured Irene.

"But it'll be all the better," urged Doris. "We'll get Willy to help us with your make-up. Do you think Ted'll ever spot you?"

Irene suddenly looked startled.

"But—but we've forgotten something!" she gasped. "Oh! Ted probably knows about Willy's costume—and he'll think that I'm Willy!"

"That," said Doris sweetly, "is just what I am relying on!"



CHAPTER 3.

HELPING IT ALONG.

RENE MANNERS sat down abruptly on the bed.

"That's what you're relying on?" she repeated breathlessly.

"Of course!" said Doris. "Willy, I hope Ted knows that you've got a costume as a Pirate Chief?"

"Of course he does," replied Willy. "And, as you say, it'll help the joke along famously. I tried to borrow another dagger from him, but the bounder wouldn't part. It doesn't matter now—five'll be enough for Irene."

"I—I don't think I shall need five," said Irene, shaking her fair head.

"Here's the Irish Colleen costume," went on Doris, producing Irene's fancy dress. "You'd better take it now, Willy, and smuggle it away. There's everything in the box—the whole outfit, complete. We'll take yours, and as soon as Renie is all dressed up, we'll call you in to help with the face decorations."

"There's one thing certain," grinned Willy. "Ted will get the shock of his life at that ball." He closed his eyes dreamily. "Think of it!" he went on. "He'll avoid Irene like the plague—thinking she's me! And all the time he'll be looking for her!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, but that's not the best of it," said Doris, as she held her sides. "Ted will have

to be caught in the trap, and I'm afraid you're going to have a bad five minutes, Willy."

Willy gave a violent start.

"You—you don't mean—" he began.

"I do!" said Doris sympathetically.

"Poor old Willy!" murmured Ena sadly.

"Hold on!" said Willy grimly. "I thought there was a catch in it somewhere. Do you expect me to— Oh, it's too awful! I couldn't! You don't want me to stand under the mistletoe, and let him— Girls, it's off!" he added coldly. "Flatly and absolutely—it's off!"

They crowded round him in great alarm.

"If you do it, Willy, we'll all kiss you afterwards!" said Doris quickly.

Willy wasn't at all impressed.

"You needn't make things worse," he said tartly.

"Worse!" cried Irene indignantly.

Willy Handforth waved his hand.

"Some of those Remove chaps may like being kissed by girls," he said, "but not me! My only hat! Fancy suggesting that as an inducement! Do you want to add insult to injury?"

Doris smiled, and took him by the shoulders.

"Very well, Willy, do it as a favour," she said coaxingly. "We're awfully keen on this jape, and we want you to be brave—for our sakes. We won't offer you anything—we won't reward you. But do it as a pal—as a sportsman!"

Thus appealed to, Willy thawed.

"It's practically sending a chap to the torture, but I'll do it," he said resignedly. "After all, it's Boxing Night, and we're out for fun, aren't we?" He slowly grinned. "Yes, I'll do it," he repeated. "By jingo! I've just thought of Ted—when he finds out the truth! It'll be worth it for that alone."

And soon afterwards Willy went down, so that his absence would not be commented upon. He took the precaution of going down by means of the back staircase, and was gratified to find that it led into the kitchen, where he had a full view of the dinner before it was sent to the table. He took a few samples before the housekeeper hustled him out.

After all, there were compensations, he decided, as he made his way among the other guests. And now that he came to consider the case from every angle, he was certain of a big laugh later on. He had left the Irish Colleen costume upstairs, locked in a cupboard. Handforth had a habit of barging into his minor's bed-room, and Willy didn't want any hitch.

It was even decided that he shouldn't tell Chubby Heath or Juicy Lemon—for, although they were loyal to him, they would probably give the whole thing away by giggling at the wrong moment. He would let them think that he was still the Pirate Chief, and he complacently concluded that Irene would probably get a few shocks.

Just before dinner, and after everybody had smartened themselves up, Willy singled out his major, and gave him a mysterious wink.

"Just a minute, Ted," he said softly.

"Eh?"

Willy repeated the mysterious wink, and Handforth stared.

"Want you outside!" murmured Willy, with a nudge. "Something important. Come on—sneak out without the others seeing."

Handforth's curiosity was aroused, and he followed Willy out into the lounge hall, and they seated themselves in a deep nook, where there were comfortable cushions. The staircase was just behind them.

"What's the big idea?" asked Handforth suspiciously. "By George! If you've dragged me out to ask for that dagger again—"

"No, it's not the dagger," interrupted Willy. "As a matter of fact, it's about that ghost hunt we've planned for to-night—after the ball. I suppose it's all fixed?"

Handforth nodded and lowered his voice.

"Yes," he murmured, "but I've only told a few of the chaps—Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt and one or two more. Somehow the asses didn't seem to show much enthusiasm. They thought I was pulling their leg."

"That's what I thought," whispered Willy.

"Well, I suggest that you leave them to me. I'll tip them the wink— Look out!" he added cautiously. "Don't speak for a bit. Somebody coming downstairs."

Irene and Doris were descending, just at the back of the two juniors, and apparently unaware of their presence. Handforth, without the slightest hint of suspicion, kept silent, waiting for the girls to pass down.

"I'm dreadfully worried about that wig," Irene was saying confidentially. "It's dark, you know, with lots of curls, and it might clash with my fair hair."

"We'll fix it up," said Doris promptly.

"But are you sure that it's right for an Irish colleen to have dark curls, reaching to her shoulders?" asked Irene, with a dubious air.

"What does it matter?" asked the other girl. "It's only a fancy dress costume, after all, and—" She broke off suddenly. "Shsssh! Mustn't talk now!"

They had got down into the hall, and Willy grunted.

"Good thing we stopped talking," he said.

"Those girls have got jolly good hearing, in spite of their shell-like ears. It would have been all up if they had heard us discussing that ghost hunt. They would have told Uncle Gregory, and he would have put his foot down."

"Yes," said Handforth, in a peculiarly detached voice.

Willy looked at him out of the corner of his eye, and saw that his major was staring straight in front of him, with a gleam of ex-

citement in his eyes. In fact, Handforth was flushed with a sudden joy.

"Now, about our plans—" began Willy.

"Dark curls!" murmured Handforth breathlessly. "Eh?" he added, with a violent start. "Plans? What plans?"

"Why, that ghost hunt—"

"Blow the ghost hunt!" said Edward Oswald, his voice thick with emotion. "Clear off, you young boulder! What do you want to bother me with that affair for? We're not starting till after the ball."

"Oh, all right!" said Willy, with a great appearance of annoyance. "If you like to be so jolly snappy about it, I'll leave you to yourself."

He stalked off, and when, a minute later, he strolled past Irene and Doris, he gave them a cheerful wink. Words were quite unnecessary. That wink told them all they wanted to know.

"Willy's a marvel!" declared Doris, with frank admiration. "It was his idea to entice Ted out on to that seat in the nook, and to hush Ted into silence as we came down the stairs. I wonder how he did it?"

"Goodness knows," said Irene. "But Ted has bitten. In fact, he's swallowed the bait, hook, line, and everything. He knows—or thinks he knows—that I'm going to appear in the fancy dress ball as an Irish colleen."

"What a lark!" murmured Doris happily.

But Handforth, who had no idea of these sinister schemings, was overflowing with delirious joy. Although people were always pulling his leg, he never profited by his lessons.

He went away in a corner, all by himself, and stood there, staring blankly at the wall, never imagining that this procedure might cause comment. He was thinking deeply. There was nothing dishonest in taking advantage of what he had overheard. It was the fault of the girls, for being so incautious.

Why, he would spot Irene during the first minute, yank her under the mistletoe, kiss her, and win every dance throughout the ball. It would be as easy as falling off a form.

Church and McClure came along, and looked at him curiously.

"What's the idea, Handy?" asked Church, staring. "What are you looking at that panel for? There's not even a picture there."

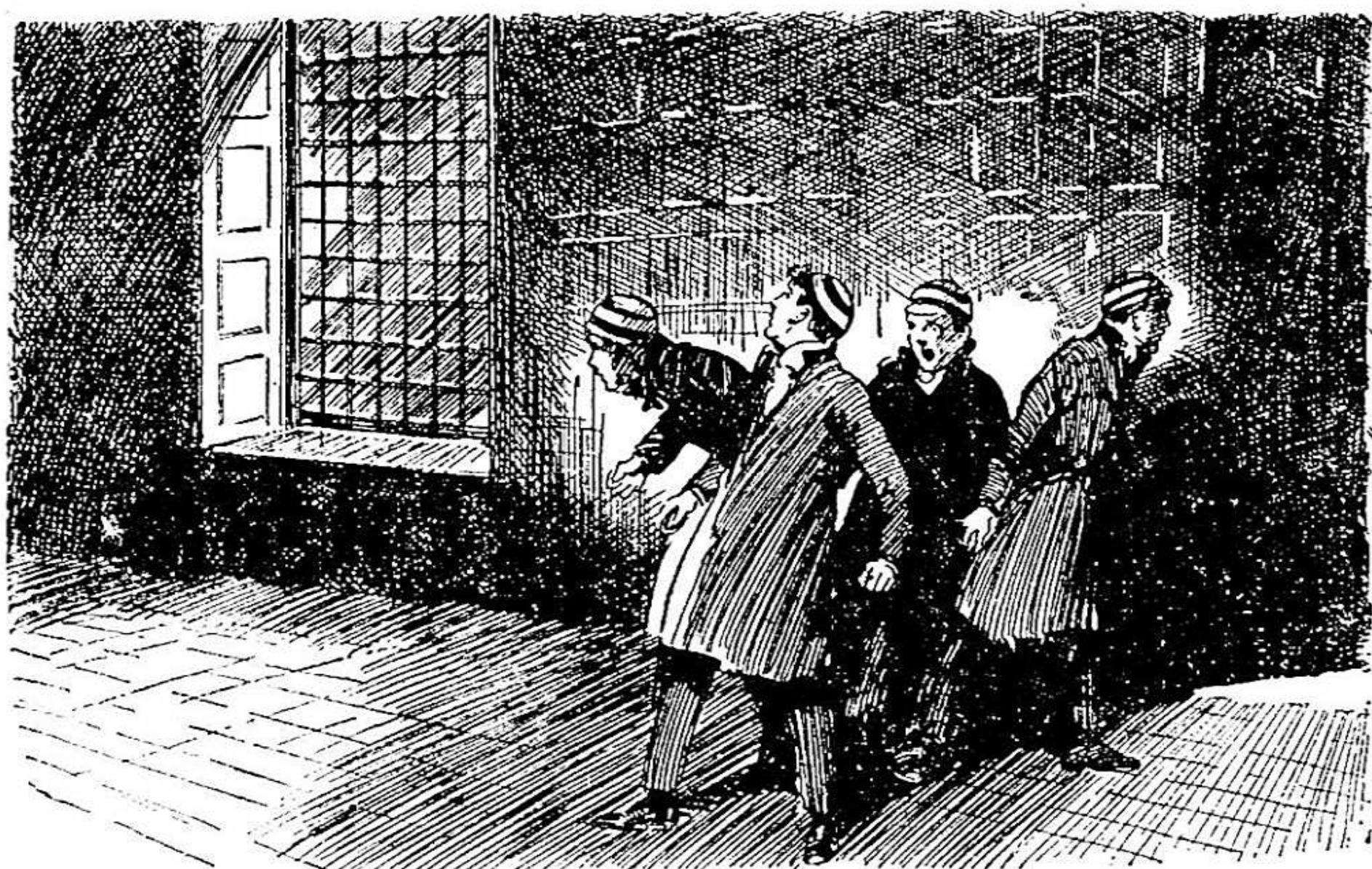
"Eh?" gasped Handforth, turning. "Oh! I—I was thinking."

"You think in funny places," said McClure tartly.

He seized them and grinned happily.

"Wait, my sons!" he said gloatingly. "Just watch me as soon as the ball starts! Irene's going to get the shock of her life, my lads. I'll have that kiss before she can take a dozen breaths!"

He went off, and he was so light-hearted that walking was not good enough for him. He fairly danced his way down the hall.



The startled juniors stared about the bleak, empty place in blank amazement as a ghostly voice sounded in unearthly fashion on the still air. "Leave this house!" the weird tones ordered. "Leave—or death will follow!"



CHAPTER 4.

THE THREE MUSKETEERS.

AFTER dinner, with everybody in the happiest of moods, there was a rush to dress. The ball was timed to start at approximately nine-thirty. And dressing, of course, was a preliminary piece of fun.

Everybody was as secretive as possible.

Most of the guests had kept their costumes dark, as it were—but in little groups. Dick Hamilton and Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West, for example, knew how each other would be dressed, but they took care to tell nobody else. The same with Handforth & Co. And Willy, and his two chums of the Third, had their own little secrets.

Half the fun would consist of concealing their identity until the time came to unmask. Not that there was anybody in the party who had any doubts regarding Handforth and Church and McClure. Everybody knew that they would be the Three Musketeers. Church and McClure had done their best, but Handforth had defeated them. By one or two incautious remarks, he had got people talking, and, in the end, it was openly confessed that they would be Porthos, Athos, and Aramis.

"It's a pity we haven't had time to get these giddy costumes changed," remarked Church, as he took out his fancy dress and

looked at it. "I was rather keen on spoofing the chaps. But they all know I'm to be Athos."

"It is too late," growled McClure. "You can't get fancy dress costumes at a minute's notice, especially up here, miles and miles from any big town. It doesn't matter much, though, we shall still have plenty of fun."

Handforth nodded gaily.

"Yes, I shall be dancing with Irene all the evening," he said, with a happy smile.

"You seem pretty sure of yourself," said Church, with a stare.

"I am sure."

"Sure that you can spot Irene before the first dance?"

"I'll spot her as soon as ever she comes downstairs," grinned Handforth. "I'll waltz her off to the mistletoe, and give her that kiss."

"Well, we've always said you were an optimist, Handy, but this time you've beaten your own record," declared McClure. "Why are you so positive? How do you know you'll be able to see through her disguise?"

"Because——" Handforth paused. "I've got eyes, haven't I?" he added vaguely.

"We've all got eyes, but it's not so easy to detect people at a fancy dress ball," replied Church. "You see, it's so jolly easy to alter your appearance. For all you know, Irene may appear dressed as a ballet girl, or a Spanish dancer, or a newspaper, or something."

"Rats!" said Edward Oswald. "I shall spot her!"

He was very cautious. He did not want his chums to know that he had accidentally received a clue. At least, he thought he had actually received it. And when his chums continued the subject, he thought it advisable to switch off on to another line.

"I was having a word with Willy about our plans for to-night," he said. "Don't forget that we're starting off as soon as the ball's over."

"Starting off where?"

"For the old Towers, of course."

His chums stared at him.

"My hat!" ejaculated Church, as he proceeded to get into a part of his costume. "Have you still got that affair on your mind? You're dotty, Handy! We can't go on that ghost hunt to-night!"

"Why not?"

"Because it'll be so late, for one thing," said Church. "The ball won't be over until two o'clock the earliest. And after dancing for over four hours, we shan't feel particularly like trudging through the snow, and exploring that old place, shall we?"

Handforth compressed his lips.

"We're going, anyhow," he said coldly. "I have made up my mind, and there's an end of it."

"There can't be an end of something that doesn't begin!" snapped McClure. "You're talking about your mind, I suppose?"

But Handforth refused to answer. Although he pretended to be interested in the forthcoming ghost hunt, he was thinking of the dance all the time—how he would triumph over Irene, and win that challenge.

Church and McClure naturally failed to share their leader's enthusiasm for the ghost hunt. Willy was more keen on it, but this was because he knew the inner facts.

Two nights before Christmas the St. Frank's party and the Moor View girls had come down from London, and General Handforth, who was a great practical joker, had fooled the juniors very thoroughly—with Willy's help. They had all gone to an ancient old place, situated on the other side of Handforth Park.

This house, indeed, was the original Handforth Towers, an old, fortress-like building which had stood there for centuries, and was, indeed, of Norman origin. The juniors had thought that this was the real Handforth Towers, and there had been a ghost, and uncanny happenings of all kinds. But they had learned the truth in the end, much to their relief.

For even Handforth had never visited his uncle's place before, and had not been able to detect the game. However, in the course of the night's adventures, Handforth had stumbled through a rotten flooring in one of the ancient towers. He had fallen through into a kind of crypt, and Willy had rescued him.

And there, in that accidentally discovered place, they had found a bound oaken chest, with a skeleton stretched across it. Nobody else knew of this. It was Handforth's secret, shared only by his minor.

Then, in getting back to the other part of the house, they had seen a strange, ghostly figure. And all this could not be accounted for. It had not been included in the trickery!

So Handforth had declared that he would organise a ghost hunt, and make some investigations. He wanted to examine that chest, for he had a shrewd idea that it contained hidden treasure. Edward Oswald's mind always flew to something romantic or dramatic.

But when he had suggested this ghost hunt, the other juniors had displayed no enthusiasm—for he had given no explanation of that strange chest, and had made no mention of the skeleton. So it was only natural that they should regard the whole affair as a fool's errand. Somehow they did not have much faith in Handforth's "investigations."

"No, it would be silly to go to-night," declared Church. "We shall all be tired out, and why go ghost-hunting when there's no ghost?"

"There is a ghost!" said Handforth.

"You ass, that was only Willy, dressed up—"

"Yes, but there's another ghost, and Willy saw it with me," replied Handforth, with an obstinate air. "We're not going to delay any longer. We haven't had any chance yet, but now we can do the thing."

"What's the matter with to-morrow night?" argued McClure. "We're not going away for several days, perhaps not until after the New Year. So I can't see why—"

"My mind," said Handforth, "is made up."

"Caesar has spoken!" said Church solemnly. "Better chuck it up, Mac. After he's had every dance with Irene he'll be too tired to do any ghost-hunting."

So they dismissed the subject and hurried on with their dressing. Handforth was particularly keen to get down, for he wanted to be in the ball-room, waiting, when Irene appeared. There was a bunch of mistletoe hanging handily over in one corner of the room, not far from the windows, and Handforth had already decided upon this bunch for his own particular purpose.

So the Three Musketeers presently marched downstairs.

They came with a clattering of spurs and a clanking of swords. And, undoubtedly they made an impressive picture—which would have looked better, perhaps, if Handforth had had his sword on the right side, and his hat in correct position. It was not so impressive, back to front.

"Bravo!" thundered out the enormous voice of General Gregory, as he stood in the hall, watching. "Splendid, Edward! A fine picture, egad!"

"I'll bet you wouldn't have known me if the chaps hadn't been talking, uncle," said Handforth. "By George! What are you supposed to be?"

"Can't you see that I'm an officer of the Roundheads?" roared his uncle. "But you'd better fix that wig of yours a bit more securely, my lad! It doesn't look any too safe!"

"That's all right, sir," said Handforth. "Any of the girls down yet?" he added carelessly.

His uncle bellowed with laughter.

"Ah-ha! After the young ladies already?" he smiled. "You want them to admire you, eh? Well, I don't wonder! I was young myself once, egad! But stay! Why, Edward! You're Porthos, aren't you?"

"Of course I am, uncle."

"Then, confound you, where's your beard?" demanded General Handforth. "Where's your moustache? Up you go, and put them on! The other musketeers have got them, so why not you?"

Church grinned.

"The fact is, he's got a challenge to kiss Irene under the mistletoe," he explained, "and a beard and moustache might hinder things."

The general roared with mirth, and went into the library to join Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee, and one or two other gentlemen guests.

And Handforth found that he had come down much too early. He was still red over Church's explanation, and it embarrassed him all the more, because it had been perfectly true. He vowed that he would get even with Church.

He hovered near the bottom of the staircase, and the library door was still half open. His uncle's voice came out like the booming of cannon, and he was talking on a subject which interested Handforth exceedingly.



CHAPTER 5.

HANDFORTH KNOWS!

It was only after a few moments that he gathered the trend of the conversation, for his thoughts had been elsewhere. His eyes

were searching the staircase—waiting for the first sign of that Irish Colleen.

But the general's words temporarily distracted him.

"Yes, Mr. Lee, it's been a long search, and I'm still unsuccessful," he was saying. "But I'm not giving in—I'm still a trier!"

"Have you no clue as to the actual spot where the treasure is buried?" came the voice of Nelson Lee.

"None, except that it was hidden somewhere in the old towers, or in the grounds," replied the general. "So, you see, it has been a difficult task. I have had experts on

the spot, but, egad, they're not worth their money! Egad, I can do better myself!"

"Treasure!" murmured Handforth. "That's funny! I wonder——"

"This old ancestor—a fine old sea dog he was—buried this treasure centuries ago, so the records have it," continued the general. "But, confound him, he didn't leave any details. It makes it hard for us to locate the exact spot."

Handforth did not listen to any more—mainly because some of the guests were now coming down the stairs, and he did not want them to think that he was deliberately listening to his uncle's conversation—although, of course, there was nothing private about it. If it came to that, the general would need sound-proof walls if he wished to speak privately.

But Handforth had heard quite enough.

"Quick, you chaps!" he said to his chums, as he led them clankingly into the ballroom. "I've just heard something, and perhaps you'll agree to come on that ghost-hunt stunt now!"

"Oh, goodness!" groaned Church. "He's on that subject again!"

"A treasure!" murmured Handforth tensely. "Didn't you hear what Uncle Gregory was saying? An old ancestor of ours, so the legend goes—buried treasure in the old towers! My sons, we've got it!"

"Got what—the treasure?" asked Church.

"Yes—we've located it!"

"Take the poor chap away, and put his head under a tap!" said McClure, with a snort. "Not content with ghosts, he's got to drag a buried treasure into it!"

"You didn't hear anything about smugglers, I suppose?" asked Church sarcastically.

Handforth seized them firmly by either arm.

"Listen to me, my lads!" he whispered. "I haven't told you this before, but I'll tell you now. You remember that night in the old towers? Well, Willy and I came upon a peculiar crypt—a kind of dungeon place. But, mind you—not a word! And in that dungeon we found an iron-bound chest, with a skeleton lying across it!"

"You're dreaming!" said Church, staring.

"I'm not—this is honest injun!" breathed Handforth. "And now we hear uncle talking about an old ancestor who buried a treasure in the towers! Don't you think that's pretty conclusive?"

His chums were impressed at last.

"I say, is this really a fact?" asked McClure. "An oak chest, by Jupiter, and a skeleton! But—but what about the ghost?"

"The ghost appeared after we had found the chest," replied Handforth solemnly. "I don't quite know what to make of it, but it's fishy. That's why I'm so keen on an investigation."

It certainly did seem to be something more than a coincidence. And there was a touch of irony in the situation, too. That which the general had sought for in vain, for months, Handforth had apparently stumbled

upon by accident! It was enough to make any schoolboy feel thrilled.

"I'll tell you what!" went on Handforth excitedly. "Why shouldn't we go there now? Why not get up a party——"

"But—but what about the ball?" asked Church, aghast.

"Bother the ball!"

"Then what about your kissing Irene under the mistletoe?"

Handforth started.

"By George, yes!" he gasped. "I mustn't forget that! Blow the treasure!"

It rather startled him to find out how nearly he had forgotten all about the Irish Colleen and his plans to kiss her, and win every dance during the ball.

What on earth did it matter about the treasure, or the ghost? They could wait until the ball was over—and better, too. For by that time everything would be quiet, and the party would have the towers completely to themselves, without any fear of interruption.

Handforth was famous for the manner in which he would change his mind at a moment's notice. And now, once again, much to the satisfaction of his chums, he completely dismissed the ghost hunt, and gave all his thoughts to the ball.

"By George!" he said, looking round. "Perhaps the girls have come down while we've been talking!"

"It's more than likely," agreed Church.

But they still had the ball-room very much to themselves, except for a few other juniors. But the guests were appearing now in threes and fours—clowns, pierrots, Chinamen, and a miscellaneous assortment of picturesque characters. The colours were dazzling, and the whole scene was brilliant and gay.

The ball-room was a great apartment, with brilliant electric lights, and endless decorations. Carnival balloons were soaring everywhere, and there was a sense of Christmas in the very atmosphere.

"By jingo!" breathed Church. "Here they are!"

But Handforth was staring, fascinated.

At last! A group of girls had appeared, chattering gaily, and laughing. They were arm-in-arm—Pierrette, Spanish Dancer, Geisha Girl, Irish Colleen, and—— But Handforth had no eyes for the others. There she was—the Irish Colleen.

He remembered those words—those whispered confidences between Irene and Doris as they had been coming down the stairs. But he had no qualms. There had been no conditions about that challenge, and he was perfectly justified in using the advantage that chance had given him.

His chums turned upon him, grinning.

"Well?" said Church. "Where is she? Ten-to-one you don't spot her, Mr. Smarty!"

"He couldn't spot her if he had eyes like a hawk!" grinned McClure. "They're all wearing wigs and fussy costumes and wonderful head-dresses. It's impossible to know one girl from another."

The girls came nearer, and they waved

their hands to the Three Musketeers. All of them were masked—deep masks which came down well over their faces, making it impossible for anybody to recognise them. But Church suddenly caught his breath in.

"By Jove, you know, I'm not so sure about that Pierrette. Did you notice the way she tossed her head just now? Just like Irene——"

"Don't be dotty!" interrupted Handforth, with supreme confidence. "I'll tell you which is Irene. There she is—in the green-and-red—the Irish Colleen, my lads!"

Church and McClure concentrated their gaze upon the Irish Colleen.

"I wouldn't swear to it," said Church, shaking his head.

"By George!" said Handforth. "Who could mistake her? You asses! There's no chance of being wrong! Just look at that exquisite poise!"

"My only hat!" exclaimed Church.

"And those graceful ankles!" went on Handforth enthusiastically. "Did you ever see another pair of ankles like those? I'd know Irene anywhere by her ankles! And her walk, too—that wonderful, graceful walk! Yes, by George, I've spotted her!"

There was such a world of certainty in his voice that his two chums were almost convinced. But when they looked at the Irish Colleen again, and compared her to the other girls, they were not so sure.

"Her figure!" breathed Handforth. "By George, doesn't she look lovely? Doesn't that dress suit her down to the ground?"

"Hardly," grinned Church. "It ends just above her knees!"

"You ass!" snapped his leader. "And what knees, too!"

"My dear chap, I don't see why you're so certain," said McClure, frowning. "If it comes to that, all these girls are graceful and pretty. What about the Spanish Dancer? Isn't she graceful? How do you know that she isn't Irene? Or the Pierrette? There's a pretty costume, if you like—and a pretty pair of ankles to go with it! I believe she's Irene!"

Handforth smiled at these wild conjectures. Fortunately, he was in a better position than his chums! They were going by guesswork—but he *knew*!



CHAPTER 6.

TWO SHOCKS FOR HANDY!

LATTERING noisily, a Pirate Chief came swaggering in.

Handforth turned with amazement, and his expression became fierce.

"Willy!" he burst out thickly. "Just like that young monkey to come in, swanking about, and making all this commotion! Just wait until I get him by himself—I'll give him a few things that'll make his ears burn!"

"He looks pretty good, though," said Church admiringly.

They gazed at the Pirate Chief, and grinned—as, indeed, most of the other guests in the room were smiling. For the Pirate Chief was one of the most picturesque figures in that whole assembly. Doris and Mary and the other girls watched with interest and admiration.

"Isn't she wonderful!" whispered Doris. "I would never have believed it! She's strutting about just like Willy might do! Oh, look! Look at the way she's pulling out her pistols, and——"

She broke off, gasping with laughter. For Irene Manners, as the Pirate Chief, was acting her part with astonishing skill. In fact, she was so skilful that Handforth accepted her as his minor without the slightest shadow of suspicion.

But if Irene was doing well, Willy was equalling her.

His ears might have burned, had he heard Handforth's complimentary remarks concerning his ankles and his figure, and his other charms. Willy looked exactly like a girl in that dress, and all his actions were helping to create that impression. The Pirate Chief noisily came across the floor, with a rattling of pistols, and a clanking of his other accoutrements.

The sound caused Handforth to turn again. He removed his eyes from the Irish Colleen with something like an effort.

"I'll have a word with that young bounder in a minute," he said fiercely. "If I get hold of him I'll shake him until he can't see straight!"

Perhaps he might have carried out this threat on the moment, only the Colleen just then made a move which caused Handforth's heart to jump into his mouth. She was detaching herself from the other girls, and strolling innocently across towards the mistletoe.

"My hat!" breathed Handforth, his heart thumping.

He could not afford to miss a chance like this!

It was no time to worry about his minor, or to think of any of the other girls. His great plan was to get Irene, and to kiss her at once—and thus get the laugh over everybody. He would triumph completely! And Irene would not be able to refuse him every dance. They would be his, in a way of speaking, by right of conquest.

And the Colleen was now perilously near to the mistletoe—so near, in fact, that a few of the other fellows were getting ready to move, in case she went right underneath. They could not afford to lose any opportunities! Handforth saw the danger, and acted.

"By George!" he said tensely.

He ran forward, intending that run to be dignified, in spite of its haste. But, unfortunately, he forgot his sword. It clanked round, shot between his shin and his calf, and the next second he went sprawling with a terrific crash.

He slithered on that shiny floor for about two yards, his sword in one direction, his hat in another, and his spurs rattling noisily.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was rather impolite, but everybody roared heartily. They simply couldn't help it. They knew it was Handforth, and the sight of him sitting there, in the middle of the ball-room, was extremely funny. And when he looked round, he found that the Pirate Chief was standing near by, his legs set apart, his hands on his hips, and rocking with laughter. The sight made Handforth see red.

"You—you young rotter!" he gasped fiercely.

The Pirate Chief ran off, and sought security behind a group of other guests—where he ran into the arms of two comic sailors.

"We've been trying to get hold of you, Willy!" said one of them breathlessly. "Come outside, quick—we've got hold of a lot of tuck!"

Irene gave a little gasp. She suddenly realised that she was in the presence of Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon—and they, too, mistook her for Willy! In a way, it was rather a compliment. She acted quickly.

"Shssh!" she warned, holding up a finger.

"Rats!" said one of the pair. "We don't want to mess about in this ball-room, do we? What do you say, Chubby?"

"Not likely!" said Chubby. "We came here to enjoy ourselves—not to dance! Those fatheaded girls can get on with it!"

"Girls!" said Juicy sourly. "What are they good for, anyhow? Come on Willy, let's buzz off!"

Irene was so indignant that she nearly let the cat out of the bag. And she was anxious to get off, too—she had a horror of what these young demons might say next! And it would be fatal for her to speak, for it would be quite impossible for her to mimic Willy's actual voice.

So she turned away, and walked over towards the other side of the ball-room, adroitly picking her way so that the two Third Formers could not follow easily. And Irene was just in time to see something of a very interesting nature.

Handforth had got to his feet, and now he was making a dash for the Irish Colleen. Irene came to a halt, and held her breath.

"Irene!" said Handforth breathlessly.

He seized the Colleen, and dragged her forcibly towards the mistletoe. The other girls stood watching their eyes gleaming with amusement. Handforth was evidently going to do it!

The Colleen struggled hard, and tried to escape from his bear-like embrace. But it was impossible for her to do so. Handforth was determined, and he pulled the Colleen right under the mistletoe.

"Now I've got you!" he said triumphantly.

And then he delivered a full kiss—a beauty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The girls nearly shrieked themselves into hysterics with merriment, and most of the St. Frank's fellows laughed heartily at Handforth's piece of nerve. And the other guests—the elder ones—were greatly amused.

"Like the fellow's saucer!" said Tommy Watson. "How the dickens does he know that it's Irene?"

"He must have guessed, I suppose," chuckled Reggie Pitt. "Hallo! She doesn't seem to approve of it, though!"

Slap!

The Irish Colleen, to Handforth's blank amazement, had pulled herself free from his embrace after that kiss. And then, with a gasp of indignation, she had slapped Handforth's face with such force that it sounded like a clap.

The unfortunate Porthos staggered back, aghast.

"Why, what——"

He stared. The Colleen was running away—holding an arm up in front of her face as though she wanted to conceal the redness of it. In front of all those people! And Handforth went pale.

"But—but it was Irene!" he breathed dazedly.

For an awful moment he wondered if he had made a mistake. But no! He couldn't have made a mistake! He suddenly jumped to the truth. She had slapped his face like that because he had dragged her under the mistletoe. By George! Irene evidently thought that he wasn't supposed to kiss her until she walked beneath that magic sprig of her own accord.

"Oh, corks!" groaned Handforth. "Now I've done it!"

His former joy turned into dismay. He was hardly conscious of the fact that most of the people in the ball-room were looking at him. He didn't hear the orchestra striking up for the first dance. He only knew that he had offended Irene.

And then he saw the Pirate Chief.

Seeing the Pirate Chief wasn't sufficient to make him go suddenly hot all over—it was the Pirate Chief's attitude which had that effect. For the blue-chinned sea rogue had strutted across his path, and was cackling derisively. His very posture was indicative of scorn and ridicule. And at such a moment it was more than Handforth could stand.

Something had to happen—either he had to burst, or he had to smash Willy into pulp! And he went for that Pirate Chief with such a rush that there was no chance of escape.

"You rotter!" shouted Handforth. "I'll teach you to cackle at me!"

Before the Pirate Chief could even hazard his intention, Handforth had whirled him right off his feet. And there was another roar as this unexpected development took place. The girls nearly fainted into one another's arms. They hadn't anticipated anything of this kind!

Handforth rushed his burden across the floor of the ball-room. The Pirate Chief kicked and struggled, but it was of no use.

His efforts—which, after all, were not quite so violent as Handforth had expected—did not avail him. Church and McClure, greatly amused, rushed after him. They thought it just as well to rescue the unfortunate Willy at once. They hadn't the faintest inkling of the truth!

"I'll teach you a lesson, my lad!" said Handforth thickly. "By George!"

He had suddenly noticed an open window—a French window, which led out on to the snow-covered terrace. The lounge hall was very hot, and somebody had probably opened the window to let a little fresh air in. It was a fine chance for Handforth. He dashed through, and was across the terrace in four strides. And now he stood against the balustrade, with the lawn stretching away, on a lower level. Immediately in front of him, on the other side of the stonework, was a deep snowdrift.

"You'll laugh at me, will you?" roared Handforth. "All right, this will cool you off a bit!"

He gave a tremendous heave, and the Pirate Chief was tossed out of his arms, to fall with a scream into the thick snow. That scream caused Handforth to start violently. It was so very feminine!

He looked down, and then everything seemed to swim in front of his eyes. The Pirate Chief was sitting in the snow until it almost came up to his neck. The mask had fallen off, and in spite of the blue chin and the grotesque moustache, Handforth could make no mistake, for the wig had become dislodged, too, and some fair, bobbed hair was visible.

"Irene!" he said chokingly.

CHAPTER 7.



TRYING TO PUT THINGS RIGHT.

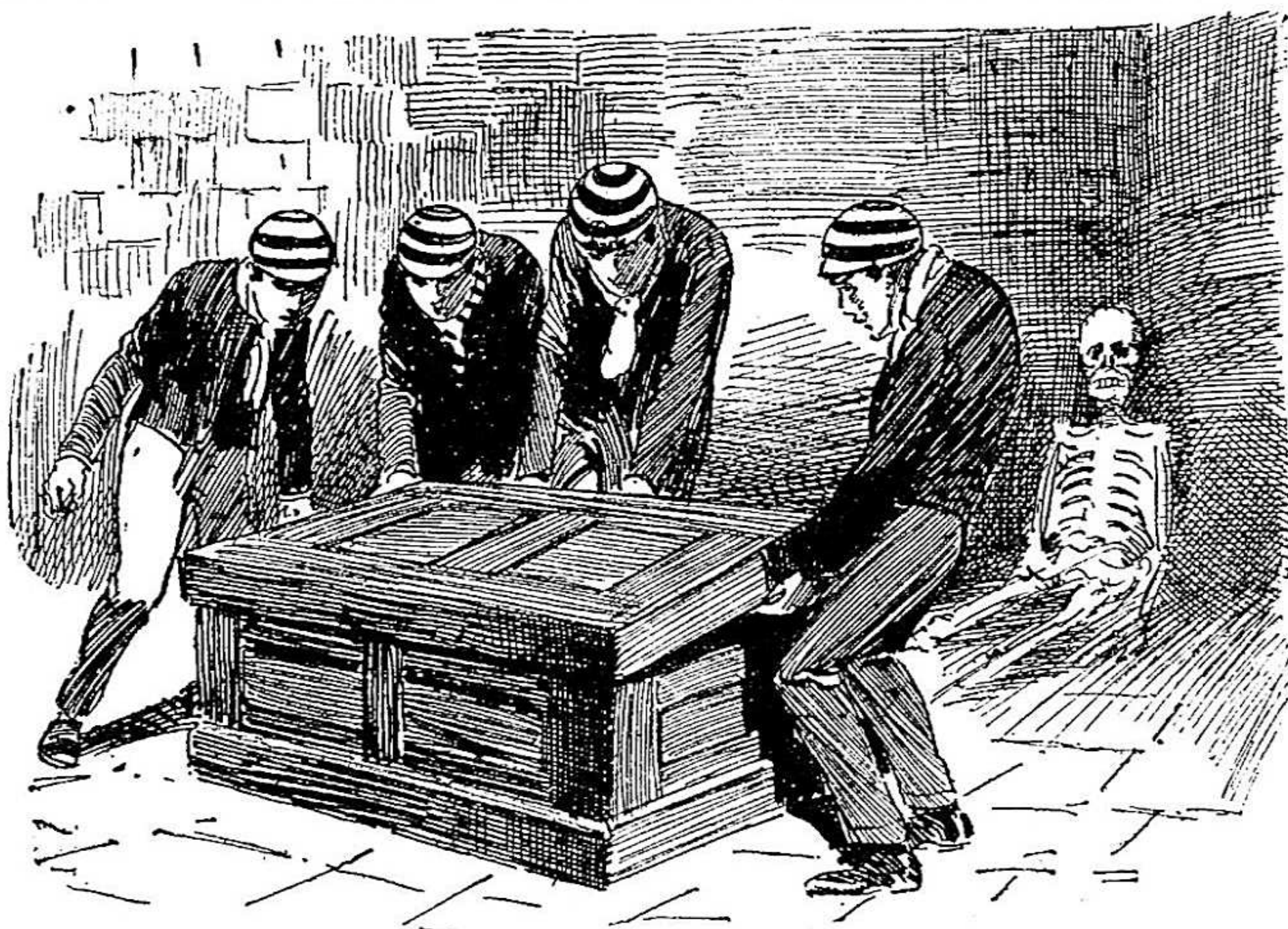
FOR a moment Handforth thought that he was out of his mind.

Irene!

It was unbelievable, incredible. He had known from the very start that Willy was to appear as a pirate chief. Irene was the Colleen—that was a certainty, too. And here, in the snowdrift, was the girl he had vowed to kiss under the mistletoe—and he had just flung her over the terrace balustrade!

During those tense moments Handforth's heart nearly ceased its beat. He remembered now, in a vague sort of way, that his burden, whom he had assumed to be Willy, had tried to speak to him during that rush from the ball-room. He dimly remembered that Willy's voice had seemed strangely high-pitched. But he had been too excited to take any notice. Besides, it had all happened within a few seconds.

"Oh!" exclaimed Irene tragically.



Thrilled at the prospect of the wonderful treasure they might find in that chest, the juniors forgot their recent terror. "Together, you fellows—heave!" said Handforth excitedly. They tugged and wrenched at the heavy lid. At last it gave way completely, and—

The look she gave Handforth was not angry, but purely startled. She knew that she had precipitated this affair herself, but she had never dreamed of an ending like this.

"Renie!" gasped Handforth. "I—I didn't know!"

"Oh, Ted!" she cried. "How—how could you?"

That was all she said, and then she scrambled out of the snow, clutched her displaced hat, wig, and mask, and fled. Handforth tried to stop her, but she was too quick for him. His own movements were sluggish, owing to the dazed condition of his wits. He was not only aghast, but his mind was filled with something like horror.

He was just trying to head the girl off when Church and McClure rushed up and seized him.

"Lemme go!" he panted desperately.

"Steady, Handy!" said Church. "Don't you know? We—we just saw her. The Pirate Chief was Irene all the time!"

"I—I chucked her into the snow!" said Handforth dully.

"Oh, so that's how she got smothered like that?" asked McClure. "You—you mad-man! Do you mean to say you threw her right over this balustrade into that snow-drift?"

"Yes!" said Handforth dimly.

"You might have hurt her," said Church. "She's not a chap—she's not your minor! Why the dickens didn't you make sure? Just like your impulsive recklessness! She'll never speak to you again, I bet."

"Where is she?" asked Edward Oswald hopelessly.

"I don't know. She ran indoors," said Church, glancing round. "I expect she's gone upstairs. If she appears in the ball-room again to-night I shall be surprised. You've done it, Handy, you've done it properly."

"I know—I know!" moaned the unfortunate leader of Study D. "But there's been trickery!" he went on fiercely. "And Willy was in it! That—that impish minor of mine must have worked it, by George! Don't you see? I knew all about that pirate dress—I saw it yesterday. Of course, he lent it to Irene, and—"

"And Willy must have dressed as the Irish Colleen!" gasped Church, a sudden dawning light bursting over him. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled McClure wildly.

Handforth looked at them with growing amazement.

"Such graceful ankles!" said Church, holding his sides.

"What?"

"Such poise—such a lovely walk!"

"You—you——"

"And such shapely knees!"

"I—I'll smash you!" roared Handforth, turning as red as a beetroot.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you don't stop——"

"And it was Willy all the time!" gurgled Church. "Oh, hold me, Mac! I'm in pain! I haven't laughed so much for years. Poor old Handy! He was so jolly sure, too!"

"Great jumping corks!" shouted Handforth hoarsely.

A thought had suddenly struck him, a thought which left him utterly stunned. The flush left his cheeks, and he even seemed to turn pale. With horrified eyes, he clutched at his two chums.

"It—it was Willy!" he breathed, as though in a trance. "The Irish Colleen was Willy! Do you understand? The Colleen was Willy!"

"Yes, we know," said Church. "We're nearly dead at the very thought of it. What an ass you were, Handy——"

"But wait!" interrupted Handforth, his voice dropping to a trembling undertone. "You don't seem to understand! That Irish Colleen! I—I kissed her under the mistletoe!"

His chums gave another united yell.

"Then you kissed Willy!" howled McClure.

"Oh, poor old Handy!" moaned Church.

"I—kissed—Willy!" said Handforth, like a fellow in a dream, his voice sounding hollow and unreal. "Willy! Think of it! Willy!"

And then, suddenly, he seemed to recover the use of his limbs. He had been swaying there, nearly on the point of a faint by the look of it. But now he rushed to the nearest snow, and he grabbed up a handful. He snacked it to his mouth and wiped it vigorously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I might recover, but I doubt it!" he said as his chums continued to yell. "But I suppose you know I'm poisoned?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you cackling idiots——"

"Oh, Handy, if you were in our place you'd see the funny side of it!" panted Church. "Just think of it! You kissing your own minor! But it's not so bad; he looked very inviting, I must say. I would never have believed that that charming lump of feminine grace could have been your minor! He did it to perfection. The chap's an absolute artist!"

"He won't be an artist when I find him again!" said Handforth, with a sound of terrible menace in his voice. "He won't even be a human being! When I've finished with Willy there'll be no more Christmas party for him! One of you chaps had better ring up the nearest hospital and tell them to send the ambulance!"

And Handforth went off, only to be ragged unmercifully by Reggie Pitt and Fullwood, and a few of the other juniors, who had seen Irene come in, and had guessed the truth.

But the joke was over at last, and Handforth found himself in peace. And the ball was now in full swing, too, with an orchestra playing tantalising fox-trots and haunting tangoes.

What he was missing!

And he had planned to have every dance with Irene! He had meant to kiss her straight off, and—— But his thoughts wouldn't formulate, and he wandered into the ball-room in a condition of helpless misery. And as the music got hold of him, so his courage returned. And everybody was dancing, too, and he was not even noticed.

"Why should I give in?" he asked himself fiercely. "Irene must have wangled that trick with Willy, and she'll know that I was spoofed. By George, I'll ask her to forgive me. And then, if I get that kiss, I can claim all the rest of the dances."

He looked round, momentarily forgetting Willy. At that moment he wouldn't have taken much notice of the Irish Colleen if he had seen her, for he spotted Irene herself. The Pirate Chief was sitting over on one of the lounges, between two of the other girls. Handforth half jumped. It was something, at least, to know that she had come back into the ball-room.

He ran across to her, but as he did so, she leapt up and ran into the conservatory, which adjoined the ball-room. It was warm in there, and the electric lights were soft and shaded.

And, better still, it was deserted, save for Irene, sitting on one of the seats, with palm-trees on either side.

"Oh, I say, Irene!" murmured Handforth, approaching her and sitting down. "I—I'm terribly sorry about that——"

"Ted!" she whispered. "How could you?"

"But I didn't know!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were Willy. I was so sure of it that I didn't even stop to think, or—or anything. I say, Renie, forgive me, you know!"

She placed one of her hands over his.

"Silly!" she whispered. "There's nothing to forgive. You weren't to blame, Ted."

Handforth's heart jumped. Her voice was so soft—the whisper was such a nearly inaudible one that he could hardly hear it. But he had heard. And she had said that there was nothing to forgive, that he wasn't to blame!

"Oh, that's ripping of you, Renie!" he said happily. "I—I thought, perhaps, that you were going to cut up rusty."

"No, Ted," she breathed. "It was too bad to trick you like that. And—and you deserve your reward."

"Reward!" he repeated, his eyes gleaming.

And then he went all hot with joy. For the girl had produced a little sprig of mistletoe, and she reached up, and tucked it into one of the palm-fronds. It was immediately above them. Handforth went dizzy. She was asking him to kiss her. And that meant that she wanted all his dances!

"Oh, you're a brick!" he said happily. He grabbed her clumsily and kissed her on the lips.

"Help!" said the Pirate Chief dazedly. "Water!"

The mask was torn off, and Handforth nearly expired on the spot. For he found himself looking into the mischievous eyes of—Willy!



CHAPTER 8.

PUTTING THINGS RIGHT.

FOR the second time within that hectic half-hour Handforth thought that he was going crazy. He stared at Willy through a mist. The other shock had been bad enough, but this was ten times more acute.

"That's twice!" said Willy, making an awful grimace. "I don't suppose I shall be laid up for more than six months!"

Handforth drew the back of his hand across his mouth.

"You—you little demon!" he burst out. "How—how did you do it? You—you were Irene not ten minutes ago—I mean, Irene was you—I'm blessed if I know which is which, and which is the other! Where's Irene? I'm going to take you outside and smash you up, limb by limb——"

"Go easy!" grinned Willy. "Here come the girls."

Handforth looked round, and he wanted to sink through the floor. But as it was of solid stone, this was somewhat difficult. He could do nothing but hold his ground. The girls came in, and the air rang with laughter.

"Oh, Willy, how brave you are!" said one of them. "We saw it all from the doorway——"

"You—you saw it!" interrupted Handforth miserably. "Oh, I say——"

"It's time for unmasking now, so we'll let you know who we are!" broke in the Spanish Dancer, as she removed her mask, revealing herself as Doris. "Come on, girls, let him see who we are."

But Handforth had eyes for none but the Colleen. And when her mask was removed, she turned out to be Irene herself—without any shadow of doubt.

"Thank goodness!" said Handforth. "I can't make any more mistakes now. Oh, Renie, I'm terribly sorry for chucking you in the snow!"

"All right, Ted; it was my own fault, and I suppose I deserved it," she laughed. "But we couldn't resist playing this last joke on you, just to make it complete."

"And I've kissed Willy twice!" said Handforth, with disgust. "Twice!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Once was enough to kill me, but now I'm immune, I suppose," he went on. "It must be my strong constitution."

"What about mine?" snorted Willy. "If there's any hero in this business, it's me! You kissed me, thinking that I was Irene—but I let you kiss me, knowing all the time what torture I was going to suffer!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've been a brick, Willy," said Irene warmly. "You helped with this jape wonderfully, and it's been a great success. Poor old Ted! Didn't we spoof you just gloriously?"

"It serves him right," said Doris firmly. "It serves him absolutely right! He boasted that he could do this, that, and the other, so we decided to take him down a peg or two. But now it's all over, Ted, and we're the best of friends," she added, dropping her mock severity.

"Of course we are," agreed Irene, with merry eyes. "Don't look so cross, Ted, it's all in the Christmas fun."

Handforth responded instantly.

"Oh, rather!" he agreed, with a wry smile. "But—but I can't get the hang of it, you know. That quick-change business—how did you manage it?"

"Easy!" smiled Doris. "It was another of my little ideas. I hope you won't hate me after this, Ted. But while Church and McClure were talking to you, and while you were being ragged by the other fellows, we rushed Irene upstairs and stripped off her pirate costume."

"And Willy?" asked Handforth, staring.

"Willy let his two chums into the know, and they rushed him off to their own bedroom, and he took off the colleen dress," went on Doris. "Perfectly simple, you see. Chubby rushed round to our bed-room with the girl's costume, and we handed him the pirate outfit. And in five minutes' time they were downstairs again, and you hadn't guessed anything. Phew! But it was a close thing."

"Yes, and I'm glad it's over," said Irene, sitting down. "It was rather too bad, Ted, but——"

"My hat!" said Handforth abruptly.

Irene had seated herself on that bench—right under that sprig of mistletoe that Willy fixed there. And Handforth was determined to be successful this time! He dashed at her, took her in his arms, and gave her not one kiss, but two.

"Ted!" she cried, struggling free.

"Mistletoe!" grinned Handforth, pointing upwards.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I was caught that time," smiled Irene, rather flushed. "But you've won, Ted; at least, you've kissed me. And I suppose I shall have to have the next fox-trot with you."

Handforth grinned happily.

"Yes, and all the other dances, too!" he said. "By George! The effect of kissing Willy is wiped out now. I think we can call it square."

"Yes, but where do I come in?" asked Willy. "It won't wipe out those kisses of

your's, Ted, if one of these girls kisses me! I'm not so keen on them as you are. I think I'd better go and get some Lysol——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you young monkey!" gasped Handforth. "I'm going to pay you out——"

"No, Ted," interrupted Irene. "Willy only did it to please us. If you touch him for this, we shall be very angry with you."

"All of us," said Mary and the others.

"So that's that!" smiled Willy. "Well, thank goodness I can feel safe! I was trembling in my shoes. Ted's eagle eye had hypnotised me, and I was just about to go down on my knees to beg for mercy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Willy went off with his chums, who had been hovering in the background all the time.

"Well, it was a pretty good jape," he said cheerfully. "Now we'll go and find some tuck of some sort. I must have something to wipe out the flavour."

"We've got it all ready for you, Willy," said Chubby Heath. "A nice little pile of stuff on its own. Let's go and have a good old feed."

"Fine!" said Willy. "I was thinking about making you chaps walk the plank, but I'll overlook it. A pirate chief has got to be stern with his crew, don't forget."

And the others were enjoying themselves in the ball-room. And, true to her word, Irene danced with Handforth every time, and it was generally noticed that the other fellows and girls paired off, too. But occasionally some of the other fellows had a look in, as it were. And there was general merriment and laughter.

And so Boxing Night passed with complete success.

By the time everybody went up to bed it was practically two o'clock, and those hours of dancing had had due effect. Church and McClure were feeling just contentedly tired, and they yawned happily as they undressed.

"Ho-hum!" said McClure. "I can do with a good sleep now."

"Same here!" murmured Church.

But Handforth gave one of his scornful laughs.

"You're not going to bed yet, you ass!" he said. "What about that ghost hunt?"

His chums looked at him blankly. They had forgotten all about it. They were so tired that their thoughts were all for bed, and the very idea of going out into the cold night on a ghost hunt appalled them.

"You're dotty!" said Church irritably, at last. "You don't mean to say you're still keen on that hare-brained game, Handy?"

McClure groaned. Church's impulsive out-break had ruined everything. If they had only expressed their willingness to go, Hand-

forth might have reconsidered his decision. For he always liked to be contrary. As it was, he was more determined than ever.

"We're going," he said firmly. "I planned all this for to-night, and I'm not going to make any alterations. So that's that! I'll go and rake out the other chaps now, and you had better be ready by the time I get back."

He went out, attired in his dressing-gown and slippers. The first bed-room he went to was Willy's, and it rather surprised him to find that Willy was over half-dressed in his ordinary clothing.

"Shan't be long, Ted," said Willy briskly. "These fatheads wanted to come, but I think we shall be better without them."

"We wouldn't go with you if you asked us to now," said Chubby Heath disdainfully. "Bother your old ghost-hunt! It's after two!"

"When you're ready, come to my bedroom," said Handforth crisply.

The die was cast now. For, to tell the truth, Handforth had been half inclined to give it up. He was tired, and the sight of his bed had taken away some of his resolution. If he had found Willy in a similar mood, he might have succumbed. But, under the present circumstances—never! He couldn't let his minor teach him a lesson in determination.

So he went to the other bed-rooms, with the intention of getting the rest of the party together. Dick Hamilton and Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West were quite blunt.

"Nothing doing, Handy," said Dick. "It's too late to-night—leave it till to-morrow."

"Buzz off!" said Watson.

"Begad, yes!" yawned Sir Montie. "We're all frightfully tired."

Reggie Pitt and the others were equally as firm. Handforth argued, but it was in vain. He was compelled to go back empty-handed, so to speak. Willy and his two chums would be his only companions.

"I've decided not to bother the rest," he said airily, as he went back into his bedroom. "So we're going alone."

"Oh, let's chuck it up, then——" began Church.

"We're going alone—but with Willy, of course," added Edward Oswald. "Willy was with me when I found that sea-chest, so I can't very well leave him out in the cold. Why, blow you, you haven't started dressing yet."

"We—we thought, perhaps——"

"You shouldn't think, Arnold McClure!" broke in Handforth coldly. "I'm the only chap who's supposed to think, in Study D."

"I'm glad you said 'supposed,'" retorted McClure, with bitterness. "Oh, all right—if we go, we may be back in an hour, and then we can get some sleep. If we don't agree, we shall be arguing all night!"

So they reluctantly dressed, and prepared for the adventure.



CHAPTER 9.

THE GHOST HUNTERS!

TEN minutes later they set off.

When they got downstairs, everything was dark and still. The household had retired, with the exception of General Handforth, Lord Dorrimore, and one or two of the other gentlemen—who were indulging in a final cigar in the library, over a yarn or two. But the four juniors easily avoided the library, and made their way outside by means of a side-door. They had secured their overcoats, caps, and mufflers without any trouble.

"By jingo, it's a lovely night!" said Willy enthusiastically.

They were out on the terrace, and his words were true. There was hardly a breath of wind, the moon was shining with a clear, crystal brilliance which transformed the grounds into a veritable fairyland. And the keen Norfolk air was bracing and refreshing. There was a hard frost over the entire countryside.

"Yes, it's a ripping night, sure enough," agreed Handforth. "Just the night for a ghost hunt! Look at the way you can see across the grounds—it's nearly as bright as daylight."

"But it's cold, though," said Church, pulling his muffler round him.

"All the better!" returned Handforth. "There's nothing like a cold, crisp night to make a chap feel good. Who's tired and sleepy now? And what about that treasure? I tell you, there's something to be up for!"

They set off down the terrace, reached the drive, and marched down towards the road. There was plenty of compensations for their jaunt in the small hours. On a night like this it seemed a pity to go to bed.

"Do these chaps know?" asked Willy.

"About the treasure?" said Handforth. "Yes, I told them. In fact, I couldn't do anything else—because I overheard Uncle Gregory talking about one of our ancestors. A great old sea dog, I believe, who came back from Spain, or somewhere, with loads of treasure, and buried it beneath the moat, or somewhere. Anyhow, he buried it in the towers, or the grounds."

"That sounds very concise, anyhow," grinned Willy.

"But don't you see—we've located the treasure already!" exclaimed Handforth, his interest waxing stronger. "That chest we found in the crypt must be it. And that skeleton over it must have been the old ancestor."

"You're at it again, Ted," said Willy severely. "Why will you take these things for granted? My dear chap, we don't know anything for certain. As I told you at the time, that chest is probably full of old papers, or something equally dotty. Chests only contain Spanish gold in adventure stories!"

"And even if we do find treasure, it won't be ours," complained Church.

"What does that matter?" asked his leader. "What about the glory of finding it? What about the honour? Just imagine Uncle Gregory's joy when he finds out that we've discovered the treasure that he's been searching and digging for all these months!"

It sounded very romantic, but Handforth was the only one who allowed his imagination to run loose. The others did not forget that they had come on a ghost hunt—and not on a search for treasure. Willy, in particular, was anxious to find out what that spectral figure had been.

He had played the ghost on that eventful night. But, after his own little masquerade, another ghost had appeared, and this one was of a different type—one that could not be so easily explained.

It had been no good going over the house in the daylight—although, as a matter of fact, this had been done. But as a large number of other fellows had been present at the time, Handforth and his minor had not ventured into that secret chamber of theirs. They had decided it would be better to leave the adventure for a night like this.

Having trudged along the road for some little distance, they came to another drive, and this was very different from the one they had recently left. Bleak-looking yew trees stood up against the sky, and everything was ill-kept and in a state of neglect. Going down this drive, they soon came in sight of the old, ruined towers.

"Looks a bit ghostly!" said Church, pausing.

They all halted, in fact, and stood looking at the scene.

And now that they were here, they did not feel quite so confident.

"It's not like the other place," murmured McClure, with a little shiver. "These towers send the creeps down my spine. And it's right under one of them that you found that old oaken chest. Why not leave it until to-morrow, Handy? I'm not afraid, of course, but, well— Well, you know—"

He broke off uncertainly.

"As a matter of fact, I'm feeling a bit squiffy myself," admitted Handforth frankly. "But that's nothing. It's only the atmosphere of the place. Before we know where we are, we shall be inside, and we shall be so interested in our investigations that we shall forget all about the eerie effect."

But this was not very comforting—for his chums could not see how they could forget the eerie effect, considering that they were on a ghost hunt. However, they advanced towards the house, and prepared to go ahead with the scheme.

"I suppose you brought the key, Ted?" asked Willy.

"Great Scott, no!"

"Just like your thoughtfulness," said Willy severely. "How do you suppose we can get in—"

"Oh, well, we'd better go back," said Church carelessly.

"Sorry, old man," grinned Willy. "I knew Ted would forget the key, so I brought it myself. Now look here. I don't believe in ghosts, and if there's anything rummy in this house, it's either caused by some natural trick, or there's some human agency at work."

"That's my idea exactly," agreed his major. "I'm rather anxious to find out what that thing was we saw—that funny object which fled when we tried to get near it. I'll swear it wasn't a human being—"

"You were ready to swear that that other ghost was genuine—the one I faked," interrupted Willy. "So my advice is for all of us to keep level heads, and to be ready for a scrap. You mustn't forget that this house has been left empty for years. There may be some half-witted countryman living in a cellar, or one of the disused rooms. There may be an escaped convict taking refuge in it—although that's very unlikely, because I don't believe there's a convict prison round here. But there are a hundred-and-one ways in which a ghostly effect can be produced by perfectly natural causes."

Handforth frowned.

"You seem to do all the talking, my lad," he said gruffly. "The very things I want to say, you take out of my mouth. I had that escaped convict idea, blow you! There might be a gang of coiners in the place," he added thoughtfully.

He noticed that his companions were grinning.

"Yes, you can smile!" he said. "But one of these days I shall turn out right! And an old house like this is full of possibilities. Well, here we are. Trot out your key, Willy."

They had arrived at the side of the house, for the front door was bolted and chained inside. But this side one was only locked, and Willy inserted his key, and opened the door. They all went in. And a moment later they were in the big, gloomy hall.

Both Willy and Handforth were armed with electric torches, and they flashed them on. A wide staircase led up, and they did not waste much time in getting to the scene of the recent "haunting."

"It's down this wing," said Willy softly.

They were on the landing now, and every yard of the place was known to them, for it was only a night or two since they had had their adventures here. These adventures had seemed thrilling enough at the time, but everything had turned out to be a practical joke.

Now, there was no possibility of a joke.

As far as they knew, the old house was absolutely empty. And they could not help getting the feeling that if anything happened—if they saw some mysterious presence—that it would be caused by some agency that could not be explained.

Although Handforth pretended to lead the way, it was Willy who actually did so, for

the shrewd Third Former had a very keen sense of direction, and he was not once at fault. At last he came to a standstill, and switched off the torch.

"Put yours out, too, Ted," he murmured. "Now, this is the place."

"Eh! The place?" breathed Church. "Which place?"

"This is where we first saw that rummy thing," replied Willy. "We chased it, and it rushed straight back along the passage. Let's stand here for a minute, listening."

They did so, and held themselves tense.

And was it imagination, or could they hear some curious whisperings—uncanny, mysterious croonings from somewhere in the very air?

At all events, they all stiffened, and looked at one another with startled eyes.



CHAPTER 10.

THE GHOST OF THE TOWERS!

CHURCH gave a little gulp.

"I—I say," he muttered. "Can you hear anything?"

"Hush!" said Willy putting a finger up warningly.

But when they listened again, the sounds had died away. And with this dying away the four juniors recovered the use of their limbs, and that strange sense of tension had gone. They all felt relieved.

"Look here, Willy, do you know anything about this?" asked Handforth suspiciously. "It was jolly rummy that you should tell us to stand here and listen—"

"No, old man, I don't know a thing," interrupted Willy quietly. "I can't explain why I suggested stopping at that minute, but there's nothing in it. And that peculiar sound we heard may have been caused by the wind— H'm! That can't be, though," he added. "There isn't any wind to-night."

"Just what I was thinking," said McClure. "Well, what are we going to do now? We can't stand here. What about that sea-chest? Wouldn't it be a good idea to go along and have a look at it?"

"Yes, that's what we'll do," agreed Handforth firmly. "I've got a cold chisel in my pocket, and this time we'll smash open those locks and see what's inside the thing. But what the dickens was that noise?"

He frowned, and looked about him uneasily.

"Intruders!"

The word came suddenly as Handforth paused. It seemed to emanate from the very spot where they were standing, and Willy looked at the chums of Study D sharply.

"Who said that?" he demanded.

"I—I didn't speak!" gasped Handforth. "Church, you ass—"

"Neither did I!" said Church hastily.

"It wasn't me!" vowed McClure.

They looked at one another, very startled.

For there had been no mistake about that word. It had been spoken by somebody—

"Leave this house, or death will follow!"

It was the voice again, and Willy snapped his electric torch on, and whisked it round. Not that it was of much service. For the moonlight was streaming brilliantly through the windows, and in this particular corridor the torches were hardly necessary. The juniors could see one another perfectly—and they could see also that they were alone. The passage was visible for many yards in either direction. And there were no doorways near them.

"I—I say, this is uncanny!" said Handforth, pulling himself together with an effort. "Somebody spoke just now, but there's nobody here!"

"Listen again!" murmured Willy. "I'm not denying that there may be such things as supernatural visions, but you'll never make me believe that a ghost can talk! A thing without substance can't have vocal chords! And if there's a voice here, there's a throat, too—and if there's a throat, it means a man! So be on your guard!"

"Go, intruders!" came that strange whisper again, just after Willy had finished speaking. "You are safe now—you will be safe if you go. Heed this warning!"

Handforth ran forward and burst open a door which stood eight or nine feet up the corridor. But when he flashed his torch, he saw that the room was bare and empty. One or two of the windows were smashed, and there was an air of desolation.

"It beats me!" said Edward Oswald, scratching his head. "There was a voice, you chaps! It was speaking to us as plainly as I am speaking to you. What can it mean?"

They went down the corridor the other way, but there was no explanation of the mystery. Willy directed his torch over the walls, and upwards towards the ceiling. Overhead, there were dark, oak beams, even in this corridor.

"Hallo!" he said softly. "What's this we see?"

They all stared up.

"There's nothing there!" said Handforth. "Only beams—"

"Isn't there a little hole in the plaster?" asked Church.

"I may be wrong, but if there's somebody up on the next floor, he could easily speak through that hole, and the voice would sound as though it had come out of the air," replied Willy keenly. "Anyhow, that's the only possible clue that I can think of. Let's go up and have a look round."

"Is there a staircase?" asked Church.

"Yes—further along—a narrow flight which we didn't explore when we were here the other night," replied Willy. "This isn't a high house, but I think there must be a row of attics over us."

Even Church and McClure were losing some of their nervousness now. It had gripped them rather hard at first, but now that they were in the place, and actively

engaged on the hunt, they braced themselves. They could easily have given way to panic at the sound of that mysterious voice, but it was not in their nature to show the white feather.

So they all continued down the corridor, turned into a small landing, and, sure enough, a flight of narrow stairs led upwards. Willy was about to lead the way, but Handforth pushed him aside.

"I'm leader here!" he said gruffly.

"There might be danger—" began Church.

"That's why I'm going first!" retorted Handforth. "Willy, my lad, you'd better get at the back. You're only a fag, and—"

"That's enough of your 'only a fag' business," interrupted Willy coldly. "I may be younger in years, Ted, but I'm an old man, compared to you, when it comes to brains!"

"Look here, you young ass—"

"Oh, my hat," groaned Willy, "are we going to have a slanging match in the middle of a ghost hunt?"

Handforth grunted, and said no more. The stairs creaked ominously as he mounted, and they felt none too secure. But, at length, the juniors reached another passage—and this one was very dark. It was narrow, the walls were damp, and the ceiling was sloping. Handforth flashed his torch along the length of the passage, and then cautiously proceeded.

"Nothing here!" he said in a low voice.

"This is about the spot," murmured Willy, as he bent down, with the torch focussed upon the floor. "And here's that hole. Look! It goes right through, and looks down on the other corridor. That wasn't a ghostly voice you heard, my sons—it was somebody speaking through here."

"Yes, but—but who could it have been?"

"This isn't a time to ask riddles," replied Handforth minor. "We're here to conduct investigations, and instead of being a ghost hunt, it's a man hunt! If there isn't some rotter trying to scare us off, I'm a sardine!"

A sudden intake of breath came from McClure.

"Look!" he breathed. "What's that up the end of the passage? I—I thought I saw something move. Fancy, I suppose, but—"

Handforth and his minor both directed the light of their torches up the passage, but although they were powerful beams, they could not penetrate that far, for the passage was a long one, extending from one end of the ancient roof to the other.

"Yes!" said Handforth. "There's—there's something moving!"

They all caught a glimpse of a shapeless, ghostly figure. But even as they stared, the thing passed round an angle of the passage. The juniors looked at one another excitedly.

"Come on!" roared Handforth. "After him!"

He led the way, running for all he was worth. But he had hardly gone ten feet before the toe of his shoe caught against a loose board, and the way he sprawled over was an education in falling. He went head over heels, and ended up on his back. His



Willy stopped dead as he yelled: "Back—get back!" The floorboards in front of him were broken and rotted—they had all but fallen to the depths below. The juniors stood staring grimly to where the ghostly shape had disappeared into the blackness beyond the trap.

torch had flown out of his hand, and dropped with a sickening thud, about ten yards further down.

"You ass!" said Willy severely. "You've smashed it!"

"I've smashed both of 'em!" groaned Handforth painfully, hugging his left ankle.

"I'm talking about the torch, not your silly legs!" replied Willy, without the least sympathy. "That lamp is busted, and now we've only got one torch between us. Get up, Ted—don't lay there!"

"You—you callous young bounder!" panted Handforth. "I'm hurt!"

"You deserve to be," replied Willy, as he helped to hoist Edward Oswald to his feet. "If you had let me take the lead, we should have collared that ghost, instead of letting him get away. You're such a clumsy barge!"

Handforth felt himself all over, and found that he wasn't hurt much. He picked up his torch, switched it on, and grunted. The lamp had smashed. He handed the torch to Willy.

"I don't want it," said Willy, staring.

"Perhaps you don't; but I want yours!"

"Do you know any more jokes?" asked Willy tartly.

"Look here——"

"You smashed one torch, and I'm blown if you're going to smash mine!" said the Third-Former. "Where should we be if we hadn't any torch at all? I'll do the leading after this."

And Willy hurried ahead, with Handforth fuming and fretting in the rear. But, of course, when they got to the end of the passage and turned an angle, there was nothing to show what that strange figure had been.

They continued their search, and came to another staircase, which eventually brought them back to the first floor.

"We're back at the spot we started from," said Church.

"Yes, and we're going round again," replied Willy. "That ghost, or whatever it is, doesn't inhabit this part of the building. I expect it dodged——"

"It's there!" shouted McClure, pointing.

They looked, and saw a form down one of the corridors which led out from the landing. But the mysterious presence scuttled off at once. And Willy raced after it in full cry. Handforth & Co. were close at his heels.

They could see the figure ahead of them, but after a few moments it turned off into a passage at right angles, and Willy just caught a vision of it as the thing went into a black patch. Then, with a sudden note of alarm in his voice, Willy pulled up.

"Back!" he gasped.

"But we've nearly got it——"

"Back, Ted, you idiot!" yelled Willy.

His voice was so full of warning that the other three juniors backed hastily into the main corridor. Willy joined them, and in the moonlight they could see that his face was pale.

"Rummy!" he muttered, puzzled.



Willy stopped dead as he yelled: "Back—get out—rotted—they had all but fallen to the depths but shape had disappeared"

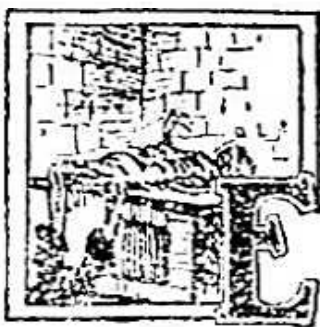
"What—what's the idea of stopping like this?" demanded his major grimly.

"I nearly went through that floor just now," replied Willy steadily. "I could feel the beams shaking, and the boards were cracking under me. I only just got back in time."

"But the ghost went that way," muttered Church.

Willy nodded.

"That's what I can't understand," he said quietly.



CHAPTER 11.

THE CHEST AND THE SKELETON.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH grunted.

"Sorry, Willy, but I don't believe you," he said. "If that figure

could go safely over the flooring of this pas-



floorboards in front of him were broken and he stood staring grimly to where the ghostly mass lay beyond the trap.

sage, so could we. Stand aside, I'm going to have a look for myself!"

"Church! Mac!" snapped Willy. "Grab him!"

They grabbed.

"You—you traitors!" panted Handforth, as he was held. "Is this the way you follow my lead and obey my orders? Mutiny, by George! Rank insubordination under my very eyes!"

"You're a fine chap in a fight, Ted, but you're no good as a ghost-hunter," said Willy, shaking his head. "Do you think I didn't gnash my teeth just now?"

"I thought I heard a sound like a grindstone!" snapped Edward Oswald.

"This isn't a time for being funny," said his minor coldly. "I had to give up that chase just when I was overtaking the thing. I should have gone right through that flooring, I tell you. Just look here!"

He went forward very gingerly, and then

he jumped up and down. The others could feel the floor shake and quiver. Willy went farther forward, foot by foot. There was an ominous sound of rotten, crumbling wood. His foot had gone clean through one of the ancient floor-boards. He backed hastily, and flashed his torch farther along the passage.

"I knew it," he said with compressed lips. "I couldn't have gone a step farther without risking my life, for there's no telling what's underneath. And just ahead there the floor's all a mass of gaping holes. How the dickens did that thing get over?"

Handforth was convinced at last.

"I don't know," he said huskily. "But I've read about things like this."

"What do you mean—read about them?" asked Mac.

"About a ghost—luring its victim over a chasm, or into some awful danger," replied Handforth impressively. "It seems to me that that ghost tried to make us run into that passage, so that we could crash through the floor."

Willy nodded.

"It looks like it," he admitted. "But, of course, it may just be that he didn't want us to follow him. Well, what's going to be done? We can't go any farther this way, anyhow."

"I say, let's have a look at that treasure chest, and then get back," put in Church earnestly. "It must be three o'clock, you know, and we can't stay here all night."

"Yes, I think we'll go and have a look at that crypt," agreed Willy, his voice unusually subdued. "What do you say, Ted?"

"All right," said Edward Oswald.

They abandoned the ghost hunt for the time being, and made their way towards the Tower. And as they progressed, they all fell silent.

They had an uneasy feeling that this whole affair was really supernatural, although they told themselves, at the same time, that such a thing was impossible. What if this was a real ghost? The ghost of that man whose skeleton was laying over the chest, in the crypt?

So far as Handforth knew, this old house had never had the reputation of being haunted. Why, then, had this apparition suddenly manifested itself? Nothing had been seen of it until Handforth had disturbed the crypt.

Could it be that the ghost had remained peaceful for all those centuries—and that the opening of the crypt had released it, to haunt the whole building?

Curiously enough, all the juniors thought of this theory independently, but they did not give voice to it.

And they tried to rid themselves of the whole fantastic possibility. Anybody with an ounce of common sense could tell that it was wild and outrageously impossible. But there was the fact. No ghost had appeared until that poor skeleton had been disturbed.

The juniors all had a desire to go back—

to return to bed without making any further investigations. The thought of going to the crypt—right to the place where that skeleton lay—scared them. But not one of them wished to show any sign of weakening. And so they all went on.

"Here we are!" said Willy at last. "Don't forget the hole in the floor, Ted. No. Wait a minute. Let's examine this door."

They had come down a passage, and at the end of it there was a solitary door. As they knew, from their previous exploration, this door led into the tower staircase. And immediately beneath was the mysterious crypt. But Willy stayed his major's hand.

"I want to have a look at it first," he said quickly.

"Have a look at what?"

"This door."

"We can't waste time!"

"Don't be so impatient, Ted," interrupted Willy. "Don't you remember that we pushed a wedge under this door when we closed it?"

"By George! So we did."

"I want to make sure that it's still in the same place," said the Third-Former shrewdly. "If so, it'll be proof that the door hasn't been disturbed since we shut it."

He went down on his knees, and invited Handforth to open the door slowly. In the meantime, Willy gazed underneath it as it opened. He uttered a little exclamation of grim surprise.

"That wedge has gone!" he exclaimed. "The door opened easily, didn't it? And there's no loose piece of wood here! Somebody's been here since we shut this place up, Ted!"

Handforth was so alarmed that he forgot his fears.

"They've pinched the treasure!" he gasped.

"We don't know that there is a treasure, or that there was one," said Willy. "Still, it won't take us long to find out now. I'll go first, and you chaps can drop down after me."

Just inside the doorway there was a jagged, uneven gash in the rotten floor. This was where Handforth had fallen through during the previous adventure. Willy quickly lowered himself into the stone apartment underneath. And Handforth & Co. followed. A glance round showed that everything was as they had left it.

"There's no chest here!" exclaimed Church. "Somebody must have come along and carried it out—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Handforth. "The treasure chest is underneath this—in the crypt."

Willy was directing the beam of light upon a flagstone in the centre of the floor. There was a rusty iron ring in it, but there was

no indication that the flagstone had been recently shifted.

"Come on—heave!" said Willy briskly.

They all took hold, and one strong heave was enough. The flagstone came up, and they laid it aside. Church backed away.

"My stars!" he muttered. "It—it smells like a grave!"

"Hi, cheese it!" muttered McClure, shivering. "There's no need to make things worse by talking about graves! It was a dotty thing to come on this expedition, anyhow. But we'll go through with it now."

Willy flashed his torch down into the depths.

"Nothing has been disturbed here," he said at once. "Look, Ted!"

Handforth looked. Immediately beneath the hole there was the heavy sea-chest, with a skeleton of a man stretched over it. A few tatters of rotted clothing were still clinging to those poor remains. Handforth had seen all this before, but it nevertheless gave him an eerie thrill.

"Yes, it's still intact," he said, with tremendous satisfaction. "Willy, my lad, it's the treasure! It's the old sea treasure that Uncle Gregory has been digging for. I say, what a yarn to tell him!"

Willy nodded.

"Rather!" he agreed enthusiastically. "But let's find the treasure first!"



CHAPTER 12.

BURIED ALIVE!

RE—are we going down there?" asked McClure dubiously.

"When you've finished with brainless questions, I shall be obliged!" replied Handforth, with sarcasm. "Of course we're going down here! What do you think we came for? Here's the treasure, right at our feet, and we should be fine fatheads if we didn't take advantage of—"

"Not so much about the treasure, Ted," growled Willy. "We'll just force the chest open, see what it contains, and then buzz off. And the sooner we do it, the better."

They all dropped down into the crypt—an easy move, for that stone dungeon was not more than five feet in depth. By dropping carefully, they avoided the chest, and its gruesome guardian. For it seemed as though that skeleton was there to protect the old relic and its contents.

"Oh, crikey!" said Church in a scared voice.

If they had felt eerie before, there was more reason than ever for them to have that sensation now. For here they were in the crypt itself, in the presence of the skeleton. What if that ghost was really the spirit of this poor remnant of humanity? None of the boys doubted that the unfortunate man had died here hundreds of years earlier.

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"It's no good being nervous," said Handforth firmly. "You hold the torch, Willy, and I'll shift these bones over to the wall."

He touched the skeleton, and it practically fell to pieces as he attempted to move it intact. The four schoolboys held their breath. They wondered if anything would happen. Church thought he heard something overhead, and looked up with a sudden gasp. But it must have been his imagination.

"I—I don't like this!" he said shakily. "Let's get out!"

"Not until we've opened this chest," replied Handforth. "Now, you hang on to this end, Willy, and I'll use the chisel."

"Right you are," agreed Willy. "But let's try to lift it first."

They tried, and it was as much as they could do to shift it from the stone floor.

"By George, it's heavy!" breathed Handforth.

"Yes, but that doesn't prove anything——"

"I'll bet it's full of gold!"

"Rats!" said Willy. "These old chests are a terrific weight, even when they're empty. Where's that chisel? Don't waste any time on the locks, Ted. Just break them as quickly as you can."

Handforth nodded, and produced a heavy steel chisel. And the locks were attacked. But it was not such an easy job to smash them off. Handforth struggled and wrenched.

"I say, wait a minute!" exclaimed Willy, after a time. "By jingo, what a lot of idiots!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, look at these catches—these locks!" said Willy. "They seem to be pretty ingenious—and there was no need to force them at all. If you push this heavy bar down, the whole thing comes open of its own accord."

He tried, but nothing budged.

"Of course not!" he growled. "It's too late now—you've twisted the bar up and jammed it. So you'd better go ahead. But if we had looked carefully at first, we shouldn't have had this trouble."

"I'm not so sure," said Handforth. "You told me to use the chisel——"

"That's all right—you would have used it just the same, without any telling," retorted Willy. "I don't suppose it matters. Go ahead!"

So Handforth went ahead, and at last the heavy metal catches were smashed away. All the juniors were now thrilled by the prospect of what they might find. They had forgotten their nervousness completely. This adventure had resolved itself into a genuine treasure hunt.

"Come on—heave!" said Handforth excitedly.

"Right you are! All together!"

They tugged and pushed, and the heavy lid of the trunk creaked as they exerted their strength. Handforth was perspiring with his exertions, and his eyes were gleaming.

"One more go, and we'll do it," he panted. "Treasure! I expect it will be packed to the brim——"

"With air, very likely," said Willy. "I don't like to encourage these ideas of yours, Ted. They only lead to disappointments——"

"Rot!" interrupted Handforth. "I tell you this is full of treasure! I can feel it in my bones!"

Again they wrenched at the lid, and this time it gave way completely. With a sudden lurch it came back and fell away on its hinges. And Handforth gave a shout of triumph.

"Now!" he gasped.

Willy flashed his torch into the interior of the chest.

"Some treasure!" he said with a grin.

"My only hat!" gurgled Handforth dismally.

For the heavy oaken chest was utterly empty! It was a big disappointment, especially for Handforth, after he had anticipated so much. All the enthusiasm died out of his face.

"It's a swindle!" he snorted.

"How can it be a swindle?" asked Willy.

"Well, it's empty, isn't it?"

"Of course it's empty, and there's no swindle about it. If somebody had told us it was full of gold, and we had bought it, it might be a swindle then. But we had no right to assume that it was full."

"All the same," said Handforth, "it's a fraud. Nothing in it at all—not even a paper, or a button, or—— Hallo! Wait a minute, though," he added keenly. "What's this? By George! What's this?"

He bent down over the chest and pulled something out from a crevice at the bottom.

"A coin!" he breathed. "Look at it! Gold, too! A Spanish doubloon, by all the saints! I knew it!"

Willy and Church and McClure examined that coin with great interest.

"He's right!" said Church tensely.

"I believe he is," admitted Willy. "But I don't compliment our worthy ancestor for using such a big purse. Unless—unless——"

"Unless what?"

"That door at the top had been disturbed," said Willy slowly, a keen light coming into his eyes. "It's some time since we were here, and I'm wondering if that ghost—the one we chased—has calmly been to the crypt here, and emptied all the gold out of the chest."

"But what about that—that thing?" asked McClure, pointing to the skeleton.

"You're wrong, Willy—the chest hadn't been disturbed," said Handforth.

"There's nothing to prove it," argued Willy. "That skeleton could have been put back, just as we found it."

"But we had to force the chest open."

"We forced it open, but there wasn't any need!" Willy pointed out. "If we had opened it by using the bar, we could have

locked it again. It's my belief that there's been some fishy business going on——"

"What—what was that?" asked Church abruptly.

"I didn't hear anything."

"Something touched my ear!" growled Church. "I expect it was only a bit of wood, or something, falling through that hole——"

Before he could get any further, an unearthly cackle sounded immediately above them. The sound was so unexpected, so grotesque and unearthly, that they all stood there, their muscles rigid. That peal of awful laughter almost froze the blood in their veins. There was something diabolical about it.

And it was all the more effective, since they had been unprepared for it. And it was followed by another peal, and a shower of fragments fell through into the crypt.

They looked up, and for a moment they caught a glimpse of a wild, awful face.

"The ghost!" gasped Handforth. "That's the face we saw before——"

"Quick!" shouted Willy, a note of desperate alarm in his voice. "The stone slab! Look! He's——"

Thud!

Before Willy could get any further, the heavy stone slab crashed down into position, and every other sound was drowned. For a moment the four juniors looked at one another with startled, horrified expressions.

"He's bottled us up!" muttered Handforth. "No ghost could have done that!"

"It wasn't a ghost!" shouted Willy desperately. "It was a maniac, by the look of his face. Quick, Ted! Bend down, double! Our only chance is to force that slab up before he can wedge it!"

"My goodness!"

"Quick! Quick!"

Handforth needed no urging. This was no time for argument, either. He bent down, and Willy jumped on his back. That slab was only a matter of five feet high, and Willy could now get a strong purchase. He placed his shoulders against the thing, and heaved with all his strength—so forcibly, in fact, that his major was nearly driven to his knees.

"Hold tight, Ted!" gasped the fag. "It's moving!"

"Help him, Mac!" panted Handforth.

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"Church, jump on Mac's back! Don't stand there doing nothing!"

"There's only room for me!" said Willy breathlessly.

He heaved again, and Church and McClure helped all they could by steadying their leader. Willy gave a huge push, and the slab rose out of its seating, and for a moment they thought they were going to send it crashing back.

But that cackle of fiendish laughter came to them again.

And the slab was driven down, and was immediately followed by some dull, heavy thuds. And when Willy pushed again, it was like putting his back against the side of a house.

He jumped down, perspiring but calm.

"Well, that's done it," he said. "We tried our best, but we couldn't beat him. No wonder. He had all the advantage."

"But—but—"

"He's wedged it—shoved a pole, or something, between that slab and one of the beams," said Willy. "Anyhow, we're as helpless as prisoners in a dungeon."

"Dungeon!" said Church huskily. "You—you mean that we can't get out of here?"

"That's impossible!" shouted McClure, with a gulp.

Handforth took a deep breath.

"I don't know what to think," he muttered. "What can we do? If that slab has been propped down, we shall all starve, or die of suffocation. My hat! What a mess I've got you into!"

Willy compressed his lips.

"We're all to blame," he said quietly. "But you're right about the mess. We didn't tell anybody where we were coming, and there's nothing to show that we're down here."

They looked at one another with growing apprehension.

Buried alive! The same thought was in all their minds!



CHAPTER 13.

HUNTING THE GHOST-HUNTERS.

"WAKE up, Reggie!"

Reggie Pitt opened his eyes, and blinked.

"Hallo!" he murmured, sitting up. "That you,

Nipper? What's the wheeze? It's still dark—"

"It's not four o'clock yet," murmured Dick Hamilton. "In fact, it's only just after half-past three."

"Thanks awfully for waking me out of a beautiful dream!" said Reggie politely. "It may be one of your little habits, but I don't appreciate this sort of joke. In other words, blow you!"

Dick shook his head.

"You don't mean that, Reggie," he said. "You know I wouldn't wake you up unless it was something important. I'm worried about Handforth."

"Is that what you call important?"

"Yes."

"Sorry, but I don't agree!"

"Handforth & Co. have been gone for over an hour," said the Remove captain quietly. "In point of fact, for an hour and a half. Young Willy went with them, but they haven't come back. I've just been to their bed-rooms, and I know. I don't like it, Reggie. I'm worried."

"H'm! Perhaps you're right," agreed Reggie Pitt. "They went ghost-hunting, didn't they—in the old Towers?"

"Yes, and that place is full of treacherous places," said Dick. "It was all right when we were there, of course, because we were only allowed to use the habitable quarter. But those idiots have gone exploring. And I'm growing uneasy. Are you game to come out on a rescue hunt?"

"If you think it's important enough."

"I do."

"Then I'm your man," said Reggie promptly. "Hunting for the ghost-hunters, as it were. What a pity we didn't go with the chump in the first place."

"Yes, I'm beginning to think that now," said Dick Hamilton. "But, to tell you the truth, I didn't suppose for a minute that they would really go. I was sure that Church and McClure would squash the whole thing. But I heard them on the terrace outside, and I saw them start off."

"When was that?"

"Not long after two, and they're still away," said Nipper. "Dress yourself as quickly as possible, Reg, and we'll hurry off. I'm getting Fullwood, Watson, Archie, and Tregellis-West, too."

"Archie!" said Pitt. "Why not let him sleep?"

"As a matter of fact, I found him awake, and he insists upon coming. Says he's not going to be left out in the cold, if any of the Remove chaps are in danger."

Dick hurried out, and in less than ten minutes the party of juniors were ready. It was rather providential that the thoughtful Dick Hamilton had remained awake, and had decided to get up this party. Indeed, that night might have had some very tragic consequences but for Dick's sagacity.

No time was wasted after they got downstairs.

"We'll rush off at once," Dick was saying. "I've got a good torch, and—"

"Just a minute," said Fullwood keenly. "I'm not afraid of haunted houses, but what you really need in a place like that is plenty of light. There's a store-cupboard just along here, with about six petrol-vapour lamps in it—storm-lanterns, you know. They burn petrol, but you've only got to light them with a match, and they give a terrific light."

Incandescent mantles, like gas, you know, only twice as brilliant."

"That's a good idea, Fully," said Dick. "We'll get 'em!"

It was only the work of a minute to seize one lantern each, and they were easy enough to carry. And a couple of minutes later they were running off down the drive, and heading straight for the old Towers at full speed.

For they were all feeling alarmed now.

They knew what an impulsive fellow Handforth was. True, Willy was with him, and Willy acted as a brake, but sometimes even Willy's influence was useless.

Dick Hamilton and the other juniors knew nothing whatever about the crypt, or the sea-chest, or the skeleton. Handforth had made a few vague statements regarding a ghost, but nobody had taken much notice of them. They knew what a fellow he was for making a mountain out of a molehill.

So they were really going to the old house without any facts. They simply knew that Handforth & Co. and Willy had gone there, but their knowledge did not extend beyond this bare fact. However, it should be a comparatively simple task to locate them, and hustle them home.

The party arrived, thoroughly warmed up. The run in the moonlight had done them good. Every trace of sleep had been driven out of them, and they were eager to find the missing ones, and hear what had delayed them.

"I think they were going in by the side door," exclaimed Dick, as they went round the snow-covered drive. "If it's still locked, we shall know——"

He broke off, and looked rather grim.

"No, here we are," he said, halting in front of the side door. "The key's in the lock, and that proves that they're still inside. Come on; and get those lamps ready at once! Light is what we need here. We're not ghost-hunting—we're Handforth hunting!"

They got into the big hall, and numerous matches were struck. And in less than two minutes the power lamps were dispatching every shadow. The light was brilliant, even more dazzling than electricity. And with six of those powerful lamps going—one for each junior—there was not the slightest fear of feeling eerie. There is nothing like light to dispel fear.

"Handy!" yelled Dick, as he mounted the landing.

There was no reply.

"Now then—all together!" said Nipper. "One huge shout!"

"They all lifted up their voices:

"HANDY!"

Then they waited. But still there was no sound—no acknowledgement of that great shout.

"I don't like it," said Dick, frowning. "They must be here still—they wouldn't go out and leave the door unlocked, with the key in it. We had better explore the whole

house as quickly as we can. And every now and again we'll stop and give a shout."

"That's the wheeze!" said Fullwood. "But wouldn't it be better to go in twos?"

"Yes, it might," agreed Dick. "Come on, Montie!"

They separated, agreeing to meet again on the landing, unless they made some discoveries in the meantime. And in that case they were to shout for the others.

The pairs went off in various directions, and now and again they paused and shouted, calling Willy's name and the names of the others. But it made no difference.

They finally returned to the main landing, having drawn a blank.

"They're not here," said Reggie, at length. "We've been in every corridor, and in almost every room."

"Then we'd better go home," said Fullwood. "In all probability, we shall find them there, in bed. That would be nice, wouldn't it?"

"They're not in bed, they're still somewhere about this house," declared Dick.

"You seem pretty sure," said Watson.

"I am sure."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but I've just got a *feeling!*" replied Nipper. "It's a funny thing, but I know there's something wrong. I've had the same sensation at other times. Do you know, I tried to sleep to-night, but I couldn't. We've got to go on with this search until we find them, or until we find something that will give us a clue."

"Good gad!" said Archie Glenthorne. "I thought we were just coming along, as it were, to yank the laddies back to bed. You don't mean to say, old dear, that there's absolutely something to be alarmed about?"

"I'm very alarmed," replied Dick. "I didn't like to say so before, but I'm windy."

"Odds draughts and breezes!" ejaculated Archie. "Then, laddies, there must be something frightfully wrong. I mean, if this cheery lad shows signs of despair, things are in a dashed queer state."

And the others knew that Archie had hit the nail on the head. Dick Hamilton was famed in the Remove for his coolness, and he had saved many a situation in the old school by keeping his head when the other fellows would have acted according to impulse rather than according to their wits.

So when Dick Hamilton confessed himself alarmed, it was time for the others to be thoroughly scared.

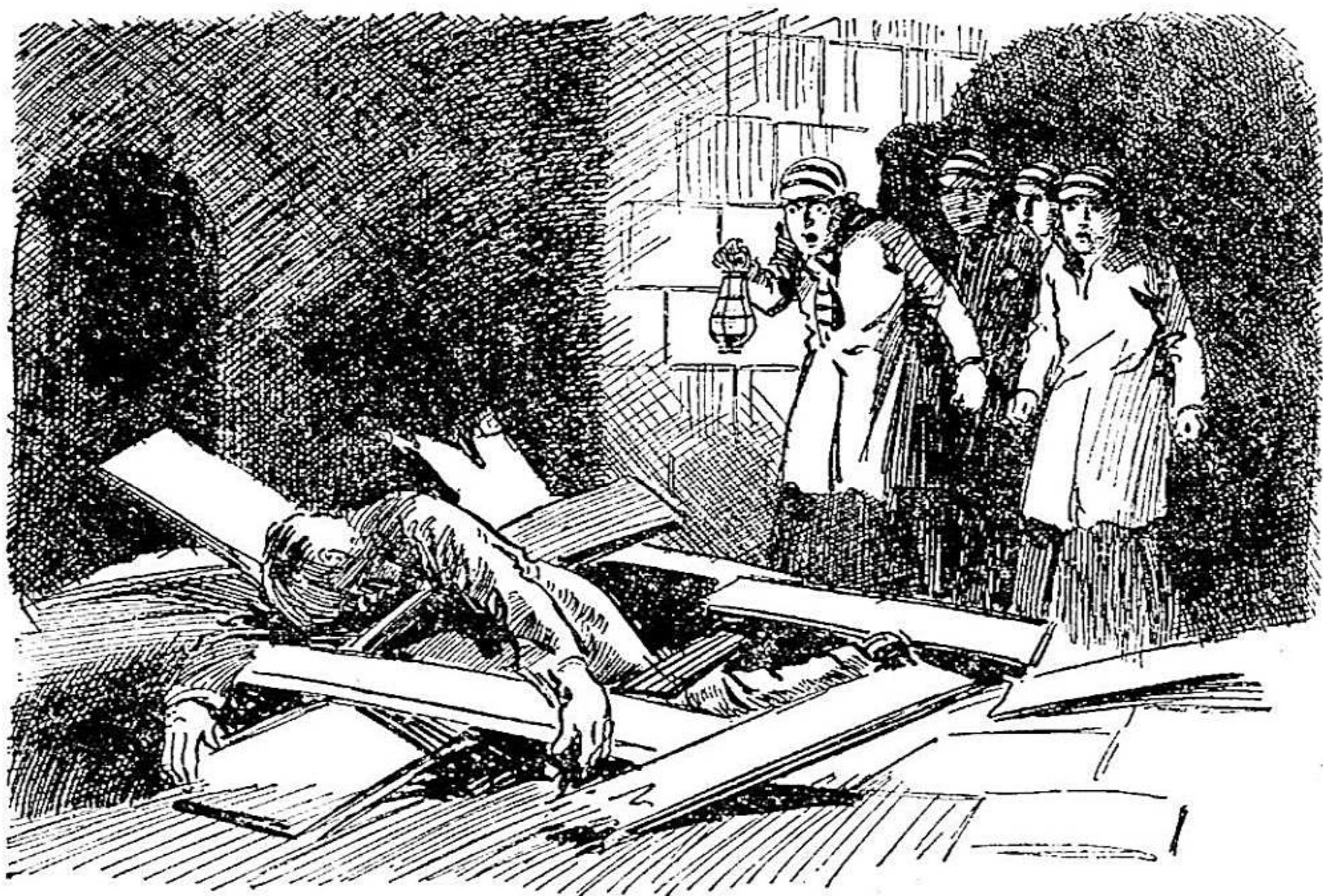


CHAPTER 14.

ARCHIE'S DISCOVERY.

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD was certainly looking very grave.

"If you'll tell us what to do, Dick, we'll get busy," he said. "And it might be a good



After a frantic search the rescue party located the wreckage in a stone-paved lower passage. Amidst the debris of shattered woodwork lay the tumbled figure of a man!

idea if you gave us an inkling of your fears. What do you think has happened? You're not afraid of anything—dangerous, are you? You don't think they've had any adventure with a ghost?"

Dick shook his head.

"They've seen no ghost," he replied. "But a house like this is full of pitfalls. Why, upstairs I came across a passage with a floor that was nearly rotted through. These old houses are death-traps sometimes. I'm going to look into the cellars, if I can find them. Supposing they went down into a cellar, and it was full of firedamp, as they call it? They would be overcome before they could get out, and——"

"But that would kill them!" gasped Tommy Watson.

"I know—so we mustn't think of it," growled Dick. "Let's go round again, and this time we'll look out for clues. Keep your eyes skinned, and if you find the slightest trace of anything fishy, sing out!"

So off they went again, now thoroughly aroused by Dick's grave fears.

And for some little time they searched in vain. No clues came to light. There was nothing to show that Handforth & Co. and Willy had been here at all, except for the fact that they had found the key in the lock. Dick's fears were not fantastic ones—as, indeed, events had proved. All manner of unfortunate things could have happened to the quartette. But, of all the possibilities, an accident seemed to be the most likely.

It fell to Archie's lot to make the first important discovery.

He and Fullwood were together, and both were carrying their storm lanterns. None of these searchers had felt the slightest tinge of apprehension, for these lights had given a great feeling of confidence.

"This doesn't seem to be much good to me," Fullwood was saying, as he and Archie found themselves penetrating one of the upper corridors. "We're just going round in circles. We're not getting anywhere, or doing anything. I wish we could get hold of something definite——"

"One moment, laddie. Be good enough to pause," said Archie. "Good gad! What have we here? Odds pieces of eight! A bally doubloon!"

"More likely a piece of lead!" said Fullwood.

Archie had picked something from the floor, and he was examining it closely. Fullwood became interested now, and he took the thing and weighed it in his hand. Then he scratched it with a pin.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "It's gold!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie.

"And I believe you were right—it's a piece of eight, or whatever they used to call those old-time coins," went on Fullwood eagerly. "Hi, Dick!" he added, raising his voice. "Nipper! Dick!"

Not only Dick Hamilton, but the other searchers came hurrying up in answer to Fullwood's hail, and they all grew excited

as they examined Archie Glenthorne's discovery.

"You found this on the floor here?" asked Dick.

"At my feet, old dear!"

"Whereabouts?"

Archie pointed, and Dick Hamilton went down on his knees and searched closely. A moment later he uttered a little exclamation, and gingerly picked up another coin of exactly the same sort.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Pitt. "What on earth can it mean? These coins can't have anything to do with the disappearance of those chaps, but——"

"I don't know," interrupted Hamilton. "There may be more of them. There's such a lot of dust on the floor, and these coins are so drab, that it was only by chance that one of them was seen. But now we know what to look for, we might find others."

"But I expect they've been here for years——"

"This coin, at all events, was only dropped just recently," interrupted Nipper.

"How the dickens can you tell that?"

"Because the dust is just as thick where the coin lay as everywhere else," replied Dick keenly. "Don't you understand? If it had been here for years, the dust would have been *on top* of the coin, instead of underneath it."

"By Jove, that's true!"

They were freshly startled by this discovery.

"Golden coins—old doubloons, or guineas," said Dick thoughtfully. "And here we find them, littered about the dusty, grubby floor of this old place. There's something very rummy here, you chaps. And we're not going to have any rest until we find out the truth."

And while they were standing there, in the corridor, animatedly discussing the strange situation, Handforth & Co. and Willy were rapidly beginning to lose all hope of rescue—of even life itself!

For half an hour they had been in that crypt, and the only light they possessed was an electric torch. For the first ten minutes of their imprisonment they had all spoken at once, wondering who had trapped them, and how they could escape. Although they had been startled, they had not feared any real tragedy.

And then had come a period of silence, with only an occasional word.

And now, at the end of the half-hour, they were ready to talk again. The light of the torch was growing dim, for no battery can carry on for long when the current is switched on continuously. The light, instead of being a brilliant beam, was now fading. But Willy Handforth, who had charge of the torch, did not switch it off.

He knew the state of his companions' nerves, and he realised the state of his own. And there was that skeleton over against

the other wall. It was not the kind of place to be in in darkness.

"We've got to do something!" burst out Handforth suddenly. "Good heavens! We can't stay here like this—standing about idle! Surely we can force that flagstone up?"

"That's what I was thinking," panted Church.

"We tried," said Willy quietly. "It was as much as we could do to get it up, even before it was jammed. But now it's impossible. I'm as keen as you are to get out of here——"

"How do we know it's jammed?" demanded his major.

"We don't know for certain, but there's not much doubt on the point," replied Willy grimly. "Didn't I feel the slab forced down suddenly, and didn't we hear those thuds?"

"I'll tell you what!" declared Handforth, his eyes glittering. "Let's all get hold of that chest and give it one terrific heave upwards. If we exert sufficient force, it might smash the stone."

"Yes," exclaimed McClure. "Let's try it!"

It certainly seemed to be an idea worth putting into practice. But their united strength was only just enough to raise the chest from the floor, and to hoist it up. When they came to apply the upward heave, the result was only a weak thud on the slab, and it was rather lucky that one of them was not injured, for the chest crashed down to the floor with a devastating crash.

"It's no good!" gasped Handforth. "We can't do it! I—I don't know why it is, but—but I feel sort of stifled! There's—there's a chokey feeling in my throat——"

"I can feel that, too!" muttered Church, clutching at his throat.

McClure laughed bitterly.

"Can you wonder at it?" he asked. "There's no ventilation in this place—not a scrap! That poor chap, over by the wall—those bones—he died, I expect, because he couldn't breathe! There's no air in here!" he added, with sudden panic. "We're all slowly suffocating!"

"And this—this place won't be opened again for hundreds of years perhaps," breathed Church. "And then they'll find four skeletons!"

"Five, you mean," pointed out Willy with sarcasm. "Well, I must say you're a cheerful lot! That chokey feeling is a bit apparent, I'll admit, but we can last for hours and hours yet. During the final two hours of life we may be unconscious, but it takes more than squiffy air to kill St. Frank's chaps! We shall get out of this all right, so don't worry."

"But—but nobody knows we're here!" said Church hoarsely.

"Yes, they do!" put in Handforth, his eyes gleaming. "Didn't I go to Hamilton and Pitt and the others? Didn't I ask them to come with us on this ghost hunt? They know all about it!"

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"But they don't know anything about this crypt," said McClure.

"No," admitted Handforth slowly.

"When the morning comes, and there's no sign of us, they'll swarm through this house like rabbits in a warren," declared Willy. "And it'll be a strange thing if they don't open that door, and see the hole in the floor. Then they'll investigate further, and haul us out just when we're beginning to get really dazed. So what about taking a nap, and switching this light off for a bit? We don't want to use all the juice out."

Handforth looked at his minor warmly.

"You're a good chap, Willy," he said fervently. "You get my rag out sometimes, you young bounder, but when it comes to an emergency, you're made of the right stuff!"

"As we seem to be paying one another compliments, I might as well say that I'm made of the same stuff as you are—only more so!" remarked Willy calmly. "Never say die! That's my motto! When things look black, just grin, and hope for the best!"

Church shook his head.

"It sounds all right, but we shall look very sick, shan't we, if we grin and wait, and then nothing happens?"

Willy smiled.

"Oh, well, we shall be worse than sick then—but there's one consolation," he said. "We shan't know anything about it!"



CHAPTER 15.

THE LAYING OF THE GHOST!

DICK HAMILTON pointed.

"There's another!" he said tensely. "You see, there's a trail of these coins! They only appear at intervals, but we've followed them up and down two passages already. If we keep on, we might discover something really important."

"What's the bag?" asked Reggie Pitt.

"Thirteen, so far."

"My lucky number!" said Reggie. "That means that we're going to push on, and meet

with success. Following this golden trail is an interesting business, but I can't see how it's going to locate Handforth & Co.!"

Dick looked thoughtful.

"Well, it's the best thing we can do, under the circumstances," he replied. "We've searched the place without finding any trace of them, but we've discovered these coins. They've been moved recently, too."

"I take it that there must have been hundreds of them, and these odd ones have been dropped during the course of shifting them. There's just a chance that Handforth & Co. are involved, and we're in such a position that we can do nothing but carry on with the likeliest method at our disposal. So let's do it!"

This seemed the most sensible course, and the corridor was filled with the brilliant lights as the juniors went over the dusty floor, inch by inch, looking for the stray coins.

But the game was not destined to go on for long.

Something caused Fullwood to glance round. He didn't know what. But he had an uncanny feeling that he was being watched. And he caught his breath in, and gave a sudden shout.

"Look!" he yelled. "There's somebody here!"

"Eh?"

"What's the matter with you, Fullwood, you ass?"

"Good gad!"

They all turned, startled by Fullwood's shout. And for a moment they caught a glimpse of a figure at the far end of the long corridor.

"I saw him looking at us!" gasped Fullwood. "A man, I believe—but the face was awful—"

"Quick!" roared Dick. "This is our chance!"

They ran frantically, and in their excitement they were so keen to overtake the intruder that all the lamps were left on the floor. They gave chase, with only the moonlight to assist them.

And that strange figure played the same trick as before.

Without warning, it spun round into a side passage, and vanished. Dick was the first to reach the bend, and as he turned it, he heard a splintering and crashing of woodwork. Then, with a ghastly sound, came a thud from below.

"Good heavens!" breathed Dick. "He's fallen through the floor!"

A moonbeam was sufficient to show him. About ten yards ahead there was a gaping hole in the floor of the passage. The "ghost," in attempting to lure his pursuers into the trap, had fallen into it himself!

Fullwood and Pitt wanted to push forward, but Nipper held them back.

"No, it's too dangerous!" he said quickly. "Besides, there's no need to take the risk. Let's get a lamp, and rush down to the ground floor. The fellow must have killed himself!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Come on—let's go and see!"

The whole incident had not occupied more than a minute, but what a different complexion it had put on the affair! The searchers instinctively felt that this Unknown would be able to throw some light on the disappearance of Handforth & Co.

So a lamp was brought, and all the juniors hurried down, and began a frantic search for the spot where the stranger had fallen. Dick had a good sense of direction, but it was some little time before he found the precise spot.

And then, in a stone-paved lower passage, the wreckage was located.

A heap of woodwork lay there, with something in the middle of it. They ran up, one of the juniors holding the lamp high, while Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt gingerly pulled the debris aside, and revealed the figure of a man.

"Is he dead?" whispered Pitt huskily.

They gently pulled the figure out of its unnatural position, and a groan sounded. A general shout of astonishment and dismay went up.

"Why, it's old Rodd!" said Dick, in wonder.

Rodd, the general's faithful old butler! The retainer who had been in the Handforth family all his life! Was it possible that he was responsible for the sinister events that had been taking place?

"He's done for!" muttered Fullwood shakily.

"I don't think so," said Dick. "The fall wasn't so great—and it wouldn't have hurt any of us chaps. But Rodd's an old man, and he's naturally come off rather badly. But I don't think he's dying."

The old man opened his eyes as Dick was speaking, and looked in front of him with a dazed, bewildered expression on his face. Then he stared round, and groaned.

"Master Edward!" he muttered brokenly.

"He's not here, Rodd," said Dick. "We thought perhaps you could tell us—"

"The crypt—in the crypt!" breathed the old man.

He spoke dully, and seemed to lapse. His wrinkled old face was weary, but there was no sign of evil there. And Fullwood looked puzzled.

"It's a funny thing!" he murmured. "I could have sworn it wasn't Rodd I saw. It was a face, but a distorted face, with wild eyes—"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Dick, with a start. "Perhaps he was mad—just temporarily insane! The gov'nor was talking yesterday. He told me not to let any of you fellows know. But Rodd was carried up to his bedroom in a kind of fit, after scaring half the kitchen staff."

"That's it!" said Fullwood, at once. "It was Rodd's face. But he was looking like a maniac—" He broke off as the old man opened his eyes again. "Rodd," he said, "don't you know what's been happening?"

"Ay, young sir," replied Rodd quietly. "I know. My head's been boiling—it's been on fire! But it's all quiet now—it's better. I'm not so wild, young sirs. And I remember—I seem to have been dreaming, but I know it all!"

"One of you fetch some water!" said Dick quickly. "There's a terrible ~~dash~~ on the back of the poor old fellow's head, and—Yes, that must be the reason! The fall brought him back to sanity, I expect."

"Ay, Master Hamilton, that must be it," agreed Rodd, who seemed to know everything that was being said, and who thoroughly understood. "The treasure! It was the treasure that did it!"

"The treasure!" echoed all of them.

"Ay, young sirs—the treasure!" muttered Rodd. "For months has the master been searching, digging here, and digging there, ay, and doing it for a hobby. Seems he has set his heart on finding it. And I tried to rob him!" he added brokenly. "I tried to rob the master!"

"Tell us how, Rodd," whispered Dick. "How did it happen?"

"It was Master Edward—ay, and Master Willy!" said the old man huskily. "That night we played the practical joke on ye all. I was in it, young sirs—I helped to fool ye!" He smiled feebly. "Ay, and we did fool ye, too! Right enough we did!"

"Yes, but what about this treasure?"

"I was in one of the passages that night, ready to make a sound that Master Willy had arranged with me," continued Rodd. "And I got into a wrong corridor, and then I found Master Edward and Master Willy down a hole—down in the crypt! And when I looked, I saw the treasure chest—I heard them talking about it."

"Didn't you let them know that you were there?"

The old man passed a hand over his pallid brow.

"I don't seem to remember!" he muttered. "But something seemed to go inside my head, young sirs. Maybe it was the sight of that treasure chest. I thought I could keep it for myself! I don't know why—I'm not a man who hankers for money. But there it was—I found myself like a demon. I knew that my eyes were wild, and that my face was like an animal's—but I couldn't alter it—I didn't want to! Ay, I must have been mad!"

"And what did you do then?" asked Dick.

"I crept away, and when the young gentlemen came up, I followed them—I threw an old piece of sacking over me, and maybe they thought I looked kind of queer in the moonlight. Heaven forgive me, but I wanted to lure them into danger!"

The old man's agony was obvious. And so he told his story. He knew the Towers from cellars to roof, having served his former master here for several years, before going into the bigger mansion. At that time they had both been occupied, it seemed.

And, in his madness, he had used his knowledge of the secret ways in order to harm the

very boys he most desired to protect. It is sometimes the way of demented people to do this sort of thing. The sight of that chest had seemed to turn his brain—probably because of the general's months of search.

There was a secret panel in that passage with the rotten floor. And Rodd, rendered as active as a young man by his insanity, had leapt into the hidden cavity, hoping that his pursuers would rush on, and crash through the treacherous floor. But on the last occasion he had forgotten himself—he had run on over that flooring before realising his action.

"Ay, but I'm glad!" he concluded. "It's helped me to know the truth. All the gold's in that secret recess. I took it all out of the chest—bagful by bagful, and carried it——"

He broke off, and he tried to struggle to his feet, but fell back, groaning with dire agony.

"My leg—my leg!" he croaked.

"Quick, help him!" exclaimed Dick. "I believe his leg's broken——"

"Young sirs—young sirs!" said the old butler, starting up again. "There's Master Edward—ay and Master Willy and the other two young gentlemen! Heaven forgive me, but I shut them in the crypt! I left them there to suffocate—so that they could never tell of what they had seen!"



CHAPTER 16.

A HAPPY CHRISTMAS!

His listeners were utterly horrified.

"So *that's* why they disappeared!" shouted Reggie Pitt. "Quick! Can't

we rush there——"

"You shut them in the crypt, Rodd!" exclaimed Dick Hamilton, touching the old man's arm, as he fell back, with closed eyes.

"May I be forgiven, young sir, but I was mad—I didn't know what I was doing!" sobbed Rodd. "Ay, and now it's too late! They'll be dead, I make no doubt!"

"Dead!" they panted.

"'Twas over an hour ago. I shut down the flagstone——"

"But where is this crypt?" asked Dick tensely. "Quickly, Rodd—quickly! There might still be time! Thank goodness we didn't waste time by carrying him away before hearing his story! If we can only find out where this crypt is——"

"Under the tower, Master Hamilton," murmured Rodd. "Under the south tower! That's where you'll find the crypt. Ay, poor boys! Poor young gentlemen! I left them there. But I was a madman then, and I don't seem to know——"

His voice faltered, and died away.

"He's swooned!" exclaimed Dick. "Two of you stop here, and the rest of us'll rush to the south tower. Give Rodd some water, and try to make him a bit easier. But we've got to find Handforth & Co. first!"

"He says they'll be dead!" muttered Fullwood, in alarm.

"Quick, laddies!" urged Archie. "I mean to say, dash it, this is no time for wasting the old flow of chat! Tally-ho! Yoicks, and so forth! To the south tower!"

They hurried off, leaving only two juniors behind. Dick Hamilton was puzzled as to why he had not located the crypt before in his searchings. But when he got to the south tower, he understood. It was only reached by a narrow passage which led nowhere else. He had forced the door open, and had seen that broken hole in the flooring, but had merely assumed that the place was part of the half-ruined section. He had even shouted, but had got no reply.

But now that Rodd had given definite information, it was a different thing.

"It'll be down here—through this broken floor!" exclaimed Dick quickly. "The crypt! By Jove, it must be a secret place—something that has never been suspected, perhaps, for centuries. And Handforth, it seems, discovered it by accident, and said nothing to any of us!"

"Let's get down!" shouted Watson.

They soon dropped into the lower chamber, and then they understood. A heavy piece of timber was firmly wedged from the beam above to the stone flag in the flooring. From below, a hundred giants could not have forced it upwards.

"Help me!" exclaimed Dick feverishly.

They forced the timber aside, and then hauled on the iron ring. The stone came up, and their hearts were in their mouths.

"Handy!" gasped Dick, holding his light over the cavity.

"What did I tell you?" came a drowsy voice. "I knew it, Ted! By jingo, fresh air! Fresh—"

"They're alive!" roared Watson.

One after the other, they dropped down into the crypt, taking their lights with them, and making that place into a blaze. Their great joy was dampened somewhat by the fact that Handforth and Church were only semi-conscious. They were pale, and breathing with great difficulty. McClure and Willy were not quite so affected.

"It's air we need!" muttered McClure. "Let's—let's get outside! Oh, thank heaven! We thought it was all up with us!"

"But I knew you'd come!" said Willy happily.

They were all hoisted out. It was a difficult task, but they could help themselves to a certain extent, although they were weak and dizzy. And then, at last, they were in the corridor, and every window was flung wide open, so that the cold night air could flood in.

And the effect was quite remarkable.

With great rapidity, the semi-suffocated juniors came round. As McClure had said, it was nothing but air they needed. And they got plenty of it now—rich air, filled with ozone, straight from the North Sea.

"My only hat!" exclaimed Handforth, at

length. "So we're out! We're saved! Who—who told you where we were, Dick?"

"Rodd!" replied Nipper.

"Good old Rodd!" approved Willy.

"But it was Rodd who bolted you down there," said Tommy Watson. "The poor old chap went off his chump, and— But, I say, hadn't we better go and see after him now?"

"That's just where I'm going!" replied Dick Hamilton quickly. "Two of you chaps stay here with these others, and bring them down when they can walk—"

"You ass, we can walk now!" said Handforth. "I—I never thought we were going to walk again, though!" he added soberly. "And what's all this about Rodd? It's all dotty!"

But later on, when they heard Rodd's story, repeated to them by the others, they knew the truth. And by this time Edward Oswald Handforth was practically himself. Uncle Gregory was on the spot, too, to say nothing of Lord Dorrimore, Mr. Nelson Lee, and many of the servants.

There was quite a deal of excitement.

Rodd was suffering from a broken leg, but had miraculously escaped any other serious injury. And General Handforth, after he had heard the full story, came to the conclusion that when Rodd recovered, he should be put in a little cottage with his wife, and medically attended regularly—in case of another outbreak. But there was little fear of this, for he was now perfectly sane again.

In that secret recess, the hoard of treasure was found—heaps of old golden coins. There were documents, too, among them, and other priceless writings which Handforth's uncle went nearly frantic about. But Edward Oswald Handforth naturally claimed all the credit.

"After all, I found this treasure!" he said, as he talked to a crowd of the boys and girls afterwards. "By George, what a night! First of all, that jape with Irene; then the ball, and then the ghost hunt, and next door to death at the finish! I don't mind a bit of excitement, but why lay it on in lumps?"

Handforth spoke lightly—for everybody was feeling happy at the merciful ending to that adventure—which might easily have been so tragic. But those words of Edward Oswald's were rather significant, as it happened.

For the St. Frank's party at Handforth Towers—little though they guessed it—were soon to be plunged into a vortex of excitement which would make this Christmas adventure seem tame and insignificant by comparison!

THE END.

(Wonderful new adventure series begins next week with: "THE KNIGHTS OF NORTHESTRIA!" You must not miss any of these yarns; they are all real stunners! Therefore, insure against disappointment by placing an order for the NELSON LEE LIBRARY with your newsagent.)

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SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!



By

ROGER FOWEY

ENGLAND INVADED!

JACK BENNETT and his two chums, TOM LEE and BUSTER KIRK, fall into the thick of the fighting around Cliff House School when Germany invades England in a War of Revenge. The enemy makes many landings and marches on London. The chums are cut off from the British, but eventually they manage to escape with a young airman in a bombing plane. They land at an aerodrome not far from Edgware. In the morning, there is no one in sight in the aerodrome, but fighting appears to be going on over towards Harrow. After a while, the chums find some

operators in the aerodrome wireless station, and learn that the enemy has advanced during the night; the Huns have flung their armies across Essex, and now the British are fighting desperately along the northern outskirts of London on a line from Woodford to Harrow. Also, the wireless station is the only one remaining station in touch with Whitehall; even as the chums learn this, a German tank lumbers off the Edgware Road into the aerodrome and the trio is sent flying as a shell from the tank bursts near the wireless hut.

(Now get busy on this week's amazing thrills!)

At Bay!

THE second shell from the German tank fell short. It sent up a plume of brown earth and torn grass, while heavy smoke billowed mistily from the burst.

Jack dug his hands in the grass and pulled himself up. His head was singing and he was deafened by the explosion of the first shell. He could see the hole it had made in the earth to one side of the wireless hut; the chief operator was crouched by the doorway, his face twisted with pain and holding a limp left arm. Evidently, he had been hit.

That wireless hut was the last link between Whitehall and the few field wireless stations working out with the fighting infantry. At all costs, the station must be held for an hour, until Whitehall could take messages direct from the battling troops.

And now this German tank had come on the scene! Plainly enough, its commander knew the value of the wireless station. The tank must have had orders to thrust ahead and to smash the station at all costs.

A third shell screeched towards the hut. Through the ringing in his ears, Jack heard the snarling rush of it over-head: "Scrow-w-w-w!" and then the fierce "Whoom-m-m-m!" as it burst yards behind.

Jack scrambled to his feet. He saw Buster and Tom staggering up a little distance away, then he looked out towards the enemy tank. He could barely see it through the smoke which had risen from the shell that had fallen short; that was why the third shell had gone overhead and had missed the hut, the tank's gunners were baulked by the smoke.

The wireless station could not hope to live long in the face of the tank's assault, but if the tank could not see the station—

Smoke bombs!

The idea flashed through Jack's brain. It was the only possible way of saving the station—to throw a smoke-cloud between it and the tank. If the Huns couldn't see the hut, they would have to fire blindly, and there was a chance that other British units might come up and distract the landship's attention.

In the aerodrome there must be smoke-bombs,

somewhere. Perhaps there were some in the cluster of buildings near the wireless hut—if only he could get them in time. Jack leaped to the side of the wounded operator.

"They've winged me—by gosh, the rotten swabs!" he heard the man gasp. "They'll smash us up here! It's—"

"Can we throw a smoke cloud out in front of the hut?" Jack demanded. "Are there any smoke bombs near here—quick!"

"Might be," the man gasped. "I don't know. What good would they be?" He stood a moment, staring before him, and then he realised just what Jack was driving at. "You're right—that's a good idea!" he exclaimed.

From inside the hut, Jack could hear the operators quietly passing messages from the front:

"We have fallen back on the barricades at Wood Green, sir. Captain Dunn reports his squadron of tanks in ambush at Bowes Park—they hope to take the enemy on the flank."

"We are retiring from Woodford Bridge, sir." "Enemy using gas at Friern Barnet. Our counter attack was a failure!"

"Colonel Lloyd cannot hold on at Mill Hill without reinforcements, sir."

"The Cheshires are cut off at Totteridge. Officer in charge has refused to surrender!"

The quiet, incisive voices came clearly to Jack's ears, then the wounded operator said suddenly:

"The second shed behind this—there are some bombs in there! It's not the magazine—they're in boxes. They may be what you want!"

Jack leaped away, yelling to his chums. They could hardly hear him, but they made out from his gestures what he wanted, and both tore after him as he sped along the side of the hut. Another shell from the tank plugged over their heads as they ran, and they saw it burst in front of the shed for which they were making.

They plunged on. In a matter of seconds they were tearing through the smoke and fumes from the shell, then, coughing and gasping, they flung themselves at the shed door. It was not locked, and Jack tore the iron hasp from its staple, then dived in with his chums at his heels.

"We want some smoke bombs—throw a smoke-screen in front of the hut!" he gasped, choking from the fumes of the shell.

There were stacks of cases in the shed. Some had been broken open, and small wooden separators crunched under their feet as they trampled through the litter on the floor. Jack peered into a half-empty case; he saw bombs lying in it—two-feet long. Heavy things intended to be dropped from the air. He struggled to get one out, then heard Buster yelling at him.

"Jack—here! Look at these!"

Buster was ripping the wooden top from a half-opened case. Inside were row upon row of bombs—hand-bombs! Each had a long wooden stave attached to a rounded, bulbous head which seemed to be made from tin.

On the side of the case was stencilled:

S/B Inf. Phos. Chl-sul. 75.

5 sec. fuse.

"That looks like what we want!" Jack said quickly. He reached for one of the bombs. There was a small ring attached to a piece of wire, which ran upwards through the handle. "Pull that and it starts the fuse!" he exclaimed. "Let's try one."

He ran to the door, pulled the ring and then flung the bomb as far as he could from him. It curved in the air, hit the grass—one tense second as the three watched it, then came a dull "Ploom!" and a sudden cloud of yellowish-white smoke flung upwards from the spot, spreading and curling over the grass.

With a yell, the three raced back for the box. They grabbed the bombs as fast as they could, loading their arms, then tore for the door. With Jack in the lead, they went racing back to the wireless hut.

The cloud of smoke still showed hazily in front of the building, but the tank was nearer now. A shell had burst at one corner, and the woodwork showed jagged and broken about a gaping hole.

From the shelter of the hut side, Jack flung the first of the bombs, sending it away with all his strength. It burst as it hit the ground, and the resulting cloud of smoke hid the tank. He dashed forward, Buster and Tom with him.

Jack heard machine-gun bullets singing through the air somewhere near: "Pew-w-w-w-w!" Some unseen hand seemed to rake grass and earth at his feet—a long brown gash which meant that a stream of machine-gun bullets had struck there. Then the three were on the fringe of the smoke cloud and flinging bombs through it as fast as they knew how.

"Chuck 'em fan-shape," Jack gasped, and Buster ran out to one side to spread the cloud as broadly as might be.

In thirty seconds a thick fog hung between themselves and the tank—impenetrable and looking almost solid. They heard the coughing bark of the tank's forward gun as it fired viciously through the screen, but the crew had lost all sense of direction and its shells crashed well clear of the hut.

"Done it!" Tom exclaimed.

"Unless the tank charges through it!" Jack told him. "We'd better get some more and screen the whole hut, all round—then they won't be able to find it at all. There are plenty more bombs in that shed! Come on!"

As they went, Jack glanced to the ridge on their right. He could see Germans coming slowly down it now. He made out machine gun parties running from out the trees while, well down the slope, khaki figures were rallying. To the right, a little knot of Britishers charged furiously, the brilliant sunlight gleamed and glittering on the chill steel of their bayonets.

Huns broke and ran, and the little group won back to the top of the ridge; more men sped after them, and for a space they enfiladed the attacking enemy. Then the whole picture was wiped out for Jack as a shell from the tank burst on a shed some distance away and hid everything in a founting cloud of debris.

They raced past the wireless hut, then all three stopped dead as some men appeared from the far end of the line of sheds. Trim, khaki-clad men, they were, wearing slouch hats, and yelling like mad as they hauled on whitened ropes.

From around the corner of the hut poked the tapering muzzle of a gun, with more men plunging at the wheels and still more running up behind, a gleaming shell under each arm.

"They're Australians!" Jack exclaimed.

"Good old Aussies!" Tom roared, and went racing forward.

A tanned-faced fellow who was pulling for all he was worth at the end of the rope greeted him with a cheerful grin.

"Hallo, digger! Good work with the smoke-bombs, eh? We brought this along—thought you'd like it to help wipe up that Jerry tank. Pull up, lads—we're in the war now!"

Bravo, Australia!

THERE were twelve or fifteen of the young Australians—big, hefty fellows, full of muscle and cheeriness. Apparently, they had found the gun from somewhere at the back of the aerodrome. As Jack pulled his weight with the big Aussie who had first spoken to them the man said:

"We saw you fellows from the road. We came

up in a lorry to give a hand to protect this radio station o' yours, it looks as though we'll be in time for the concert, and— 'Hey, haul over to the right, cobber! We want to see that tank before we shoot at it—no good goin' right into the smoke!'

He felt silent as they raced onward; on the smooth grass the gun ran more easily and they swept in a wide circle. A gust of wind rolled up one edge of the smoke-cloud, and they glimpsed the enemy tank.

The great grey craft was lumbering forward. In half a minute it would be plunging through the smoke-cloud and bearing down on the wireless hut. Jack knew what would happen then, the tank would charge it and flatten the building out.

"Right!" the big Aussie bawled, and the gun stopped, its spade digging into the ground. "Anybody know how to shoot it! Come on with those shells, cobber—that's the way! Now then, who's going to shoot the thing!"

The big fellows grinned at one another. Jack glanced round at them. Apparently, none of them knew how to handle the gun; it was just the sort of cheerfully irresponsible thing these big Aussies would have done—to get the gun into position for use and then not know how to manage it.

"I think I can fire it," Jack said quickly. He remembered how the artilleryman had loaded the big German guns at Challen Quarry, and he stepped to the breech. He snapped it open, and one of the men handed him a long, pointed shell—armour-piercing, Jack saw.

He looked at the head, and worked the dial round, setting the fuse—it was almost a point blank shot for the enemy tank, now—then slid the shell home.

"Anybody bring those white pads— Ah! Good man!" He grabbed a charge and slammed it in behind the shell, then crashed the breech shut. While he had been doing this, the big Aussie had got down to the sights.

"All right, digger!" he roared. "Stand by—here she goes!"

He jerked back, saw that Jack got clear, and then snapped the lanyard.

The gun went off with a crashing roar. Instantly, Jack was at the breech and jerking it open again, smoke writhing lazily from it. He set and slid in another shell—and then became conscious that machine-gun bullets were whipping on the steel shield. The other Australians dropped flat to the ground behind. From the tank a shell came crashing, smashing to the earth ten yards away and smothering them with fragments and upturned tufts of grass.

"Never mind that! Are you right?" yelled the gunner. "I'll get her this time—here she goes!"

Again the gun thundered, kicking back with the recoil. Jack saw a sudden burst of flame from the side of the tank, then smoke blotted it out, while the men around him cheered wildly.

"Good boy, Jason!"

"You tickled him!"

Another shell snubbed into the breech. Jason bent behind the sights, waiting for the smoke to clear. When it had gone, they saw that the tank had stopped and there was a smoke-hazed hole low-down on one side.

"Hit his tractors—that's crippled him! He won't— Ah!"

He gasped and staggered a little. A machine-gun bullet, ricocheting from the rim of the gun wheel, had slicked along beneath the brim of his hat, and blood suddenly streamed down his face. Jack caught at his arm.

"It's all right, cobber—only a scratch! We'll hand that Jerry another one in the same place for that!"

He settled behind the sights, face white and blood-smirched. His hand moved steadily as he

laid the gun, then he reached out for the lanyard and jerked it.

Once again the side of the tank was smudged out by smoke, and all firing from it ceased. They didn't wait for the smoke to clear now, but slammed shell after armour-piercing shell into the grey hulk. They had nearly a score of shells, and not until everyone of them had been plastered home, did they cease fire.

The smoke cleared away, and the little group stood staring at the result of their work. The nearer side of the tank was battered and riven and rent; holes showed clear through it, and little blue founts of smoke wreathed upwards from them. The tank now held no sign of life.

"Might shove this field dressing on for me," Jason turned to Jack, as he spoke, and he pulled off his slouch hat. The wound was not a bad one, and soon Jack had the pink gauze in place, wrapped the khaki bandage round, then pinned it.

"That's all right now," he said. "Does it hurt?"

"Feels like somebody laid a red-hot poker along there," Jason growled. "Well, here we are—what's next!"

One man had brought all their rifles and had dumped them in a pile. They sorted them out, then someone suggested going over to the tank and finding out if there was anyone in it who needed assistance.

They crossed the grass, while the smoke-cloud which the chums had laid slowly drifted away. Beyond it, they could see the fighting on the ridge to the north. Even as Jack looked he saw that, on the crest of the ridge, solid ranks of the enemy had appeared; they came swarming down at the thin khaki groups scattered on the grassy slope below.

"Won't be long before they're here, by the look o' that, digger!" Jason commented.

They reached the tank. The lights were extinguished, and the only means by which they could see the interior was by the sunshine which struck through the holes made by the shells.

Jack caught the heavy, oily odour from within, and he saw a German gunner huddled over the engine casing. Apparently, one shell had struck the breech of the forward gun, and nothing was visible there now but a shattered mass of metal. The whole interior was wrecked, with the brilliant glitter of scored metal showing where the shells had ricocheted after the impact.

Jason reached through one hole in the armour plating and managed to open a little door built low in the side of the tank. He climbed through and made an inspection of the occupants.

"No good!" he announced as he came out. "All I hope is that if I've got to go west, I do it in the open, an' not inside a tank! Let's report to the digger in charge o' the radio station."

The wounded operator was still standing by the door, but his hurt had been roughly tended now. He grinned as they came up.

"Just had a message that there was a small detachment of Aussies coming along here," he said. "You've arrived, all right. We shan't keep you long boys—we've only got to hang out here another ten minutes now—they've raced things a bit at Whitehall!"

"That looks like bein' about ten minutes too long!" Jason growled, as he gazed over to the ridge. "Here they come—thousands of 'em!"

Huns were sweeping over the ridge now in a grey horde driving down to the valley below. Jack and his chums could see Britishers massing among the buildings there; once the enemy drove through that bulwark they would have the aerodrome at their mercy.

Beyond the aerodrome—save for the waters of the Welsh Harp—the ground lay open all the way to Cricklewood. Once the enemy broke

through, they could turn the flank of the defence at Mill Hill and the whole line would then have to retreat. Plainly, this was what the Germans were trying to do.

"We came over here a couple of months back," Jason said to Jack as they stood there. "Detailed for some ceremony or other. They wouldn't let us do anything when the scrappin' started—made us stop at Whitehall until this morning, then we got sent out here. Who are you chaps?"

Jack explained that they were members of a cadet corps at Cliff House School, and that they were knocking about on their own.

"You're not the diggers that blew up the guns at Chillen Quarry, are you?" the Aussie asked, and when Jack admitted that they were, he let up a whoop and rallied his companions round.

Apparently, some news of their feat had reached Whitehall, for these big fellows all seemed to know about it. They shook hands with Jack and Tom and thumped Buster's fat shoulders. Then, right in the midst of it, someone let up a yell, and Jack felt Jason fling him full on his face.

The boy got a glimpse of the low-flying shape of a Hun aeroplane. He sighted the fuselage and glimpsed the black figure of an airman leaning over the side, a machine-gun spouting flame in his hands.

The fraction of a second later, and the wireless hut seemed to erupt. Jack saw the leaping tongue of a mighty sheet of flame, then he was picked off the earth, and slammed down again with all the breath knocked out of his body.

There was a mighty, reverberant roaring in his ears; he had a vision of woodwork shattering and flying above his head, then he went rolling over and over—blown by the force of the explosion of the bomb which the enemy 'plane had dropped, and which had blown one end of the wireless hut to smithereens.

The Retreat to London.

WHEN JACK got his breath back and struggled, gasping, to hand and knees, he saw that Jason was kneeling near him, rifle to shoulder, and blazing shots after the enemy machine as fast as he could work the bolt on his snub-nosed rifle.

The German craft passed straight across the aerodrome, and sailed over the sheds, dropping bombs as it went and destroying the hangars. Bombs burst in a line behind the 'plane—pluming grey smoke with a heart of red, and black debris flinging out from the edges of the smoke.

Right along the line of hangars the machine went, leavin' shattered buildings in a reeking trail behind. They watched the machine bank round; it came streaking back towards the wireless hut and the sheds it had missed immediately behind the station.

Every Aussie was either kneeling or standing up now, blazing at the craft as it smashed back at them. Neither of the chums had rifles—but Jack remembered the gun they had used to wreck the German tank. But it was too far away to reach in time, and in any case, there were no shells left for it. All he could do was to crouch down on the debris-littered grass and watch.

The snapping crackle of rifles all about him was drowned by the booming roar of the aeroplane's engine. The nose of the machine dipped a little—then it was over the sheds behind the hut. Jack saw the gunner peering forward again, caught the red lick of his machine-gun as he blazed at the dauntless Aussies, and then the craft soared above them.

Jack heard the smashing roar of erupting bombs, the behind him, came the thudding

explosion of one which the aviator had dropped especially for the benefit of the little group. Fortunately, it missed them by a full twenty yards, and Jack could hardly distinguish the explosion from the continuous roar that was going on a little distance away.

One bomb had hit the shed from which he and his chums had taken the smoke bombs—the whole thing was going up in a series of fierce explosions.

"Run—run!" he heard Jason yelling; the Aussie with the bandaged head hauled him to his feet, and together they raced off. Jack heard Tom yelling:

"They've blown up the bomb shed—they've scattered 'em! Bunk!"

Tom was running with Buster. Then the whole group raced away, while the series of explosions in the shed scattered bombs far and wide—bombs which went off as they struck. It was from these that they ran.

Smoke swept out in a mighty cloud, hiding the now wrecked wireless hut and rolling half across the aerodrome, concealing everything.

The chums and the Aussies were close against the Edgware road when they finally checked, clear now of the far-flung bombs.

"Phew! That was close!" Tom gasped. "Look—the Aussies must have hit that machine!"

He pointed with a quivering finger to where the German 'plane was flopping lamely in the sky, trying to climb. It looked as though the pilot must have been hit, for Jack got a glimpse of the gunner behind him scrambling out of his cockpit and trying to reach forward. Then, very suddenly the nose of the craft dipped and fell sheer. A black, sprawling shape that was a man detached itself from the craft as it wheeled in its fall. A second later and the machine dived to earth, bounced, crashed over in a welter of dust—and then dissolved in a stupendous roar as the remainder of its cargo of bombs exploded.

"And that's that!" rumbled Jason. "They've put that radio hut of yours out of action, digger!" he grinned at Jack. "They won't want us over there any more! Hallo, aren't those ambulance men cutting over towards it!" Three brown figures were running quickly across the grass, two of them carrying stretchers, a Red Cross detachment had seen the hut hit by the bomb and were chasing across to tend any of the operators who might have been hurt.

The hut could be but dimly seen through the smoke-cloud, but clearly Jack made out a number of figures bearing towards the Red Cross men. He distinguished the chief operator, who was supporting a companion with his one sound arm; behind him, another man had a comrade across his shoulders, while two more carried yet another man between them.

"Those are the operators!" Buster yelled. "Seven of 'em—that's the lot. What's the matter with 'em? What are they hurryin' for? they must be— My hat, look there!"

His last words came in a hoarse shout. Out from the smoke-cloud, grey figures were doubling, right across the width of the aerodrome—Germans!

Some by the hut lifted their rifles and fired towards the bomb-racked wireless operators. The chums saw one of the Red Cross men pitch up his arms and tumble headlong across his stretcher.

"I'm not goin' to see that!" Jason bellowed. "Let 'em have it!"

He flung himself to the ground as he spoke, and thrust his rifle forward. The little group of Aussies sent bullets winging across the grass, towards the advancing Huns, and from the grey, smoke-misted ranks behind the fleeing wireless men, figures dropped.

The operators ran on. Jack and Tom and Buster—not being able to aid the Australian boys

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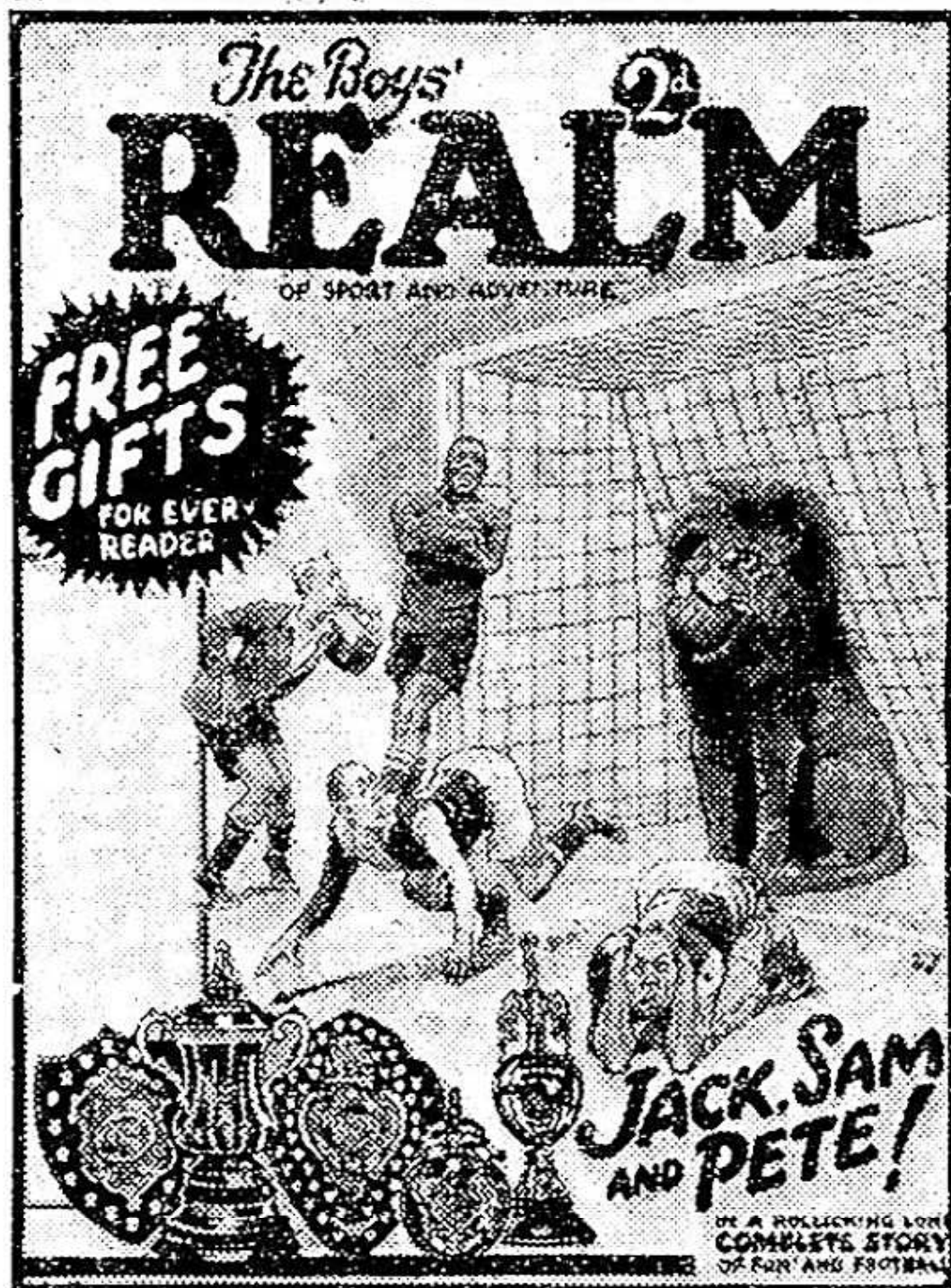
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in holding the enemy, because they themselves were unarmed—raced out to help bring in the wounded. Bullets slit the air like angry bees; little founts of dust spouted out from the dry earth; they heard the hoarse chatter of a machine-gun—and then they were up to the little group.

Jack got a glimpse of Germans running towards him, bayonets gleaming—and then from the side of the aerodrome came the throaty roar of a British cheer; tattered khaki figures came charging across from the direction of the buildings at the foot of the ridge!

Jack saw them get to work with butt and bayonet, then he had a wounded man across his shoulder and was staggering back to the road.

What followed was a mad mixture of fleeting expressions. The Huns had cut in from Harrow Weald, turning the British flank at that point. From the ridge above the aerodrome, more of the enemy had come in a ruthless charge, driving the British out of the huddle of buildings in the valley, trying to pin them against the ranks cutting across the aerodrome with the intention of capturing the Edgware Road—the main highway to London!

Jack and his chums got the operators on to a lorry that was speeding southwards, loaded down with wounded. Then the trio borrowed rifles and ammunition from the kit of the wounded men, and joined the Australians where they were now lying in a ditch close against the highway.

The Bridge-Barricade!

OUT at one side of the field, British and Huns were mixed in a tearing hand-to-hand scrap, with more men pouring into the battle every moment. Troops, retiring along the Edgware road, dropped into the ditch with Jack and the rest. Their scorching fire held the enemy as they advanced—until four German tanks came smashing down the road, advance guard for masses of infantry!

Jack saw the tanks coming. A tram had been swung across the road, together with a couple of lorries and three omnibuses, their red sides brilliant and clear. The tanks hit the barricade together: from the heart of the big vehicles piled there, Britishers stood by their machine-guns to the last. Then the tanks bore into the barricade.

The tram heeled over, and smashed in a welter of flying glass. Jack glimpsed the blunt nose of the tank rising behind it. He saw the mighty craft heave up, and the tram crumpled under its weight. A bus smashed over; another crashed with it. Britishers fired desperately at the armour-plated sides of the lumbering tanks, and then fell back as the machines crawled over the shattered wreckage and came on.

Machine-guns jutted from the flat sides of the craft, spouting leaden death. In the turret, two light guns sent shells spangling in advance, shattering amidst the ambulances and the gun

limbers, the waggon and the ruck of retiring traffic.

Shells from other enemy guns began to fall in the road, adding to the confusion. Two of the tanks eased to the side of the road, and slithered down the bank; one went over to where the British were holding the enemy at the side of the aerodrome, the other straddled the ditch and turned every available gun on to the men defending it and holding up the German advance across the 'drome.

Jack ducked instinctively as a shell from the tank burst in front of the ditch. He saw men falling on his right as the tank's machine-guns got them—then the Aussies were tumbling backwards out of the ditch, and getting on to the road. Jack aided Buster up the slope, with Tom at his side, and he became conscious of an officer yelling from the pavement:

"There are trenches at the Welsh Harp! Make for the Welsh Harp, lads—we've got trenches there! We'll hold 'em! Down the road, lads—down the road!"

The Aussies kept in a group, and the chums went with them, doubling along the pavement. The road was now choked with stopped traffic, shells plugging into it. There were trams which had tried to get down from Edgware and Canons Park with wounded, ambulances and 'busses and limbers, waggons, field-kitchens, mess-carts, lorries and cars—flung all ways across the roads.

Threading through them were soldiers aiding wounded, stretcher-bearers, hit men who staggered along as best they could—all making for the safety which lay beyond the trenches at the Welsh Harp.

Grim figures with machine-guns clambered to vantage points on derelict vehicles and poured bullets into the advancing ranks of the enemy on the aerodrome field. From the heart of the ruck of shattered traffic, a field-gun was spouting flame—blazing as fast as the half-mad gunners could cram shells into the breach, working in a desperate endeavour to stay the grey cloud sweeping down the road from Edgware.

Here and there officers were standing, urging the retiring men on to the trenches at the Welsh Harp.

"Straight on, lads—stick to the road! Down to the Welsh Harp, boys, we'll hit back from there! Reinforcements are coming lads—stick it! Straight on—straight on!"

Beyond the south end of the aerodrome, pioneers were clearing the road hastily, forming a field of fire for a barricade of smashed vehicles and sandbags. Officers urged men past the barricade, when Jack and the Australians would have stopped to man it, a staff officer roared to them:

"Straight on—don't stop! We're only going to hold them a little while here! Hurry along!"

The road narrowed a little. In the houses on either side of it, soldiers were smashing the windows and replacing the glass with breast-works of sandbags. Longer-range shells were still bursting on the road; Jack saw one hit and leave a great hole with twisted tram-lines sticking out from it. Lamp standards lay half across the roadway; telegraph wires drooped like a tangled cotton from broken poles.

Once, through a gap in the houses, the chums got a hint of fighting beyond the south end of the aerodrome, where more Germans had cut across from Harrow Hill. At three by-roads on the left, Britishers were lying behind barricades, shooting madly at some unseen target. From that, Jack guessed that the enemy had broken through at Mill Hill and had swept across the open ground beyond.

A long slope stretched out before him. He saw a lengthy hoarding and then, beyond that, a smooth, clear stretch of water—the Welsh Harp!

As he hurried down the slope with the others, he saw new dug earth on the far side of the water—the trenches! He saw artillerymen hastily digging an embrasure for their battery of guns in the embankment of the railway that ran alongside the road on the left.

They passed the end of the hoarding and the buildings beyond, then the broad waters of the Welsh Harp spread out on the right of the road as well as, to a lesser degree, on the left. Marching troops showed from Londonwards, stretching out along the far banks of the broad lake.

Where the Edgware Road crossed the water, it was something in the nature of a bridge, and as they reached the beginning of it, Jack heard an officer yelling:

"Volunteers—who'll volunteer for a job!"

Like one man the group of Australians swung towards him, Jack and his chums with them.

"I want men to hold a barricade here while the sappers blow up the road behind!" the officer said.

"We'll do it!" exclaimed Jason.

"Good lads! There's just about enough of you, we don't want to risk too many lives. There's a field-kitchen by that wall—get some grub now. The Jerries won't get here for half an hour or so!"

"Do you hold the barricade until the sappers are ready to blow—or do they blow it before we get back?" Jason asked.

"That's what you've got to chance. They may blow before you can get away!" the officer exclaimed. "That's why I'm asking for volunteers!"

"Suits us, sir," said Jason, as he saluted easily. "Scoff up, coppers!" and he led the way to the field-kitchen.

Jack could see what was going to happen. The roadway across the narrow neck of the Welsh Harp had got to be blown up, so that the enemy would be faced by an unbroken stretch of water. A barricade on the German side must be held, because the Huns would certainly have anticipated this manoeuvre and would be bound to thrust troops forward to try and capture the bridge.

If the sappers could give the men holding the barricade enough warning, they would be able to retreat before the bridge went up; if not, the bridge would be smashed and the little band of defenders would have to take their chance.

Hot soup at the field-kitchen and mugs of steaming tea—and all the while the retreat flowed past by the single road left to them. The mad hammering of enemy guns sounded nearer and nearer; shells plonked into the water behind, sending great fountains of spray up to the blue sky.

Pioneers started to clear the road before the slope. Presently the numbers of hurrying men grew less. From afar up the road there sounded a clamour of rifle and machine-gun fire as the enemy made contact with the first of the barricades. It lasted a while, and then faded away.

At the front of the bridge, pioneers were heaping sandbags for the defenders, with other troops assisting them. The officer was directing the placing of machine guns. Little groups of men came running down the road, to pass across the bridge to the safety beyond.

The piled traffic on the hill became still, save for the shells which burst occasionally amidst it.

Jack looked out across the water behind him. There was little to be seen now. The network of trenches he knew to be there was scarcely discernible. Everything within his range of vision seemed to have settled to quietness—to waiting.

On either side of the bridge, sappers were working hastily. Jack watched one man wrapping

yellowed sticks of dynamite with a length of wire about a stone pier, others were doing the same.

He turned to look up the road again. On the pavement at car side, a little group of men appeared, running madly. One who led them leaped to the side of an overturned omnibus, and above his head appeared a white signalling flag. The officer who had called for volunteers snapped his field-glasses to his eyes, and read the message flicked by the straining square of white.

"Come on boys!" he roared, as he dropped his glasses. "Those are the lads from the last barricade. This is where we get busy!"

There sounded the click of the bolts of the Australians' rifles, then Jack was walking quietly with them to the low barricade at the end of the bridge. The group of men came tearing down from the hill, gasping.

"There's millions of 'em—millions!" Jack heard a man yell as he passed, then they shot on across the bridge.

"We're all right as long as Jerry doesn't get a tank into action against us," the officer said to Jack who crouched near him behind the piled sandbags. "I don't think he can get one up, though—unless he waits. The sappers will be another ten minutes before they're ready, so

Jerry will have to be quick if he's going to do anything!"

A minute passed in silence. Four machine-guns had been placed at the barricade, each in a nest of sandbags. Jack could hear the Aussies, clicking the weapons as they made sure that all was as it should be.

"There's going to be some tough fighting before it's over," the officer went on. "If the Germans get across the Welsh Harp, there'll be no holding them—they'll be in London itself before dark!"

"Do you think we can hold them?" asked Jack.

The officer glanced at him. He looked up at the wreckage-choked road. For a moment, he fingered the drum atop the Lewis gun, which lay in a niche of the sandbags before him. His face was dead white when he met Jack's gaze again.

"No," he said.

(Read about the amazing Battle of Welsh Harp next Wednesday, and the great stand of the chums and the Australians. The enemy is thundering on the gates of London—will he smash his way through? Order your copy of the "Nelson Lee Library" in advance!)

CHUCKLE CORNER

Here are a few jokes—try them on your chums.

Inconvenient.

A gentleman emerged from a jeweller's shop, staggering along with a grandfather clock over his shoulder. Just at the moment he was turning a corner a brawny youth approached from the other direction, and as a result came into violent contact with the end of the clock.

Between howls of pain he rose from the ground.

"Hey, man, why don't you wear a wrist-watch?" he inquired indignantly.

An Unfair Advantage.

A student of ju-jitsu, of whom great things were expected by his professor, turned up at the gymnasium one day with a bandaged head, and admitted, upon being questioned, that some youth had inflicted the injuries.

"What!" exclaimed the instructor indignantly. "You mean to say that after all I have taught you, you let a stripling knock you about like that?"

"I couldn't help it," replied the damaged one.

"Why didn't you try ju-jitsu?"

"It was impossible."

"My dear sir, there is no conceivable situation to which ju-jitsu cannot be successfully applied. Show me where he gripped you."

A faint smile illuminated the injured man's face.

"He didn't grip me anywhere," he said. "He dropped a brick on my head from a third-story window."

Muzzled.

Uncle (telling of his experiences to his nephew). "We had still a mile to go to get out of the forest, and the wolves were at our heels. We could feel their muzzles touching us as we ran."

Nephew: "Weren't you glad?"

Uncle: "Why should we be glad?"

Nephew: "Well, they had their muzzles on, didn't they?"

So Noble.

"Goodness, child," exclaimed Tommy's mother in dismay.

Tommy had just returned from school. One eye was already surrounded by a dusky patch, while the lad's collar was hanging limply from a broken buttonhole.

"That's all right, mother," chirped the youthful warrior blithely. "I've just had a row with a feller. Stopped a bad chap hitting a good boy."

"Oh, how kind and noble of you!" gushed the adoring mother. "Just what I expected my son to do! And who was the good boy?"

"Me," Tommy replied modestly.

Only Once.

Tourist (looking over a steep precipice): "I suppose people fall down here often, don't they?"

Guide (fed up): "Not when they have fell down once. They are satisfied more than enough."

HOW TO JOIN THE LEAGUE

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 59.

SECTION

A

READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.

I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare that I have introduced "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with the Membership Number assigned to me, and Membership Badge.

SECTION

B

MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.

I, Member No..... (give Membership No.) hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me..... (state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.

SECTION

C

NEW READER'S DECLARATION.

I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY."

(FULL NAME)

(ADDRESS)

INSTRUCTIONS.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. The second form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. **Member Applying for Bronze Medal:** It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms, bearing the same number, are needed. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of

the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided that each pair of forms bears the same date and number.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medals can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members, they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

These Application Forms can be posted for $\frac{1}{2}$ d., providing the envelope is not sealed and no letter is enclosed.

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THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT

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Welcome the New Year!

MEET 1927! There is nothing to be said about the performances of this stranger. No time yet. That 1927 will develop into a real bright lad we need have no doubt at all, and as he has joined us it is up to me to express a sincere hope that we shall rub along well together.

Jolly Days and Prosperity.

I am wishing the best to all my chums at this season. It is a turnover of the page. Everybody starts a fresh edition to-day. Good resolutions are flying about. Nothing like making sure of a few and keeping them close company right through 1927, and afterwards, for it is the cheeriest thing possible to feel that once you have done a twelve-month of travelling with a really fine resolve, the useful thing will stick for the rest of the time. You can keep a diary in the New Year. That's A1. But there are even better things to keep, as, for instance, a promise, or the temper—it so easily gets out of gear—

or punctual hours at one's side, or a handy bit of rubber for erasing fancied wrongs which have got themselves written down on the memory. But we come back to the good wishes for the New Year. Happy days to all my friends, and thank goodness they are legion.

How's This?

H. H. Marshall, 1, Faunce Street, Kennington Park, London, S.E.17, is Member No. 5000 of the St. Frank's League. He has started nice and even, and we can wish him the best of luck.

Book Lost!

Ernest A. Dennison, 27, Northway Road, Loughboro' Junction, London, S.E.5, tells me he lent a book to a chum two years back. The chum moved. Gone, no address! It is simply that the book borrower is absent-minded. Maybe he will see this par, and communicate with the owner of the volume, who strikes me, from his letter, to be the sort of friend nobody could afford to lose.



Correspondents Wanted



Reginald Underhill, 119, High Street, Amblecote, **Stourbridge**, wishes to hear from readers interested in mechanical engineering and stamps. All letters answered.

Gordon Carless, 115, Eleanor St., West Hootscray, **Melbourne**, and Harry Bellett, Hemming Street, Dandenong, **Melbourne, Victoria, Australia**, wish to hear from stamp collectors and those interested in cross country running and cricket.

N. D. McLean, 125a, Doran Street, Jeppes Extension, Johannesburg, Transvaal, **South Africa**, wishes to hear from members in his district, also with stamp collectors in any part of the world. All letters answered.

Joseph Behan, 6, Chapel Hill, Athy, Co. Kildare, **Ireland**, wish to hear from readers in Great Britain.

Fred Norton, 15, Camden Street, Boulevard, **Hull**, wishes to correspond with readers who collect stamps; England or overseas.

Roy Durdle, 21, Kilburn Square, Kilburn, **London, N.W.6**, wishes to hear from readers interested in a hobby and correspondence club.

C. T. Browne, 74, Victoria Road, Lower Edmonton, **N.9**, wishes to hear from a reader who is willing to sell No. 1 of "The Monster Library." Will pay postage.

Miss Kittie Brownbell, 8, Chapman Street,

New Mile End, **South Australia**, wishes to correspond with readers.

Allen Neilson, Hassall Street, Harris Park, **N.S.W., Australia**, wishes to correspond with readers.

F. R. Martin, 331, Lewisham Road, **Leyton, E.10**, wishes to hear from readers proficient in the use of musical instruments with a view to forming a band.

Alfred Williamson, North Side, Mackay, **Queensland, Australia**, wishes to correspond with League members.

H. Fred Mullett, Northay, Combe-St.-Nicholas, nr. Chard, **Somerset**, wishes to correspond with readers desiring back numbers of the N.L.L. These range from 208 to present issue; also three bound vols., etc.

John Parkin, 27, The Mount, New Road, Chatham, **Kent**, wishes to hear from readers who are interested in books.

S. L. Oliver, 46, Margaret Street, **Everton, Liverpool**, wishes to hear from readers in his district who would assist in the formation of a club.

Leonard Angus, 83, Alabama Street, **Plumstead, Kent**, wishes to hear from readers.

Ivy Wade, 5, Crosby Yard, Northgate, **Cleckheaton**, wishes to correspond with girl readers in **Australia, New Zealand or South America**.

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