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THE FRESH AIR FIENDS!

*Meet the famous Boys of St. Frank's in this breezy opening
story of a stunning new school-life and fun series.*

New Series No. 55.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

May 21st, 1927.



Not content with throwing Lord Pippinton and Tucker into the fountain to cool, Handy seized the hose and directed a stream of water over the grinning juniors, drenching them from head to foot. Just then Lady Honoria, the Head, and Mr. Pyecraft came through Big Arch. It looked as if Handy, in keeping others cool, was going to get himself into hot water.

Startling New Series Begins To-day!

THE FRESH AIR FIENDS!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

The opening long complete story of a rousing new series of school-life and adventure yarns, featuring the Boys of St. Frank's.

CHAPTER 1.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE DRAGON.

THE Remove Form-room literally sweltered.

In spite of the sun-blinds, the heat was stifling on that close, sultry, May afternoon. The whole of St. Frank's sizzled. There was scarcely a breath of wind to relieve the heat, and the sun was blazing down out of a cloudless sky.

"Phew! It's getting worse!" grumbled Tommy Watson, as he ran a sticky finger round the inside of his collar. "Over an hour to go, too! It's more like August than May."

Nipper chuckled.

"You wouldn't complain about the weather if you were free to go outside," he murmured drily. "Try to think of to-morrow, Tommy. A half-holiday - and cricket!"

"Yes, and it'll pour with rain!" grumbled Watson. "Isn't it always the same? You know as well as I do, Nipper, that the fine weather only comes when we're bottled up in the class-rooms."

"Begad I can't quite agree with that, old boy," whispered Sir Montie Tregellis-West, from the next desk. "It's chiefly your imagination—it is, really. On the whole, we've had some frightfully decent weather on half-holidays since the cricket season began."

Mr. Crowell, the Form-master, looked up from his desk.

"Now, boys," he said wearily, "you really mustn't talk."

The murmur of voices died away.

Mr. Crowell was far too hot to be severe. As long as the Form behaved itself within reasonable bounds, he allowed it to have its head. Work was more or less of a pretence, and even Mr. Crowell felt like dozing. It

was with great difficulty that he kept himself from nodding.

He glanced longingly out of the window at the green expanse of playing fields. He sighed, and turned back to his work. A gentle snore arose on the air. Mr. Crowell sat up.

"Somebody," he said severely, "is asleep!"

"I'm not surprised, sir," remarked Handforth. "I was nearly nodding off myself just now. By George, it's about two hundred degrees in this giddy room!"

"It is quite pointless to grumble, Handforth," said Mr. Crowell. "I always deprecate these criticisms of the weather. Happily it is not within our power to rule the weather individually, according to our own desires. We must take the weather as it comes."

"But this heat is a bit thick, sir," said Church.

"You boys are utterly inconsistent," growled the Form-master. "If it rains, you go about the school wailing and bemoaning your luck. And you are no less discontented when the sun shines."

"It all depends on the circs., sir," grinned Handforth. "If you were suddenly to make up your mind to let us off this afternoon, we'd vote the weather topping."

"We need not pursue the subject, Handforth, because, curiously enough, I am still in possession of my senses," interrupted Mr. Crowell tartly. "This interruption has persisted long enough. Get on with your work!"

The Form-master's eagle eye swept round the room.

"Glenthorne!" he snapped curtly.

Archie Glenthorne made no reply. In fact, he was in no fit condition to make any reply. The Genial Ass of the Remove was reclining back in his seat, his head was resting against the desk behind him, his mouth was wide open, and there was an expression of happy contentment on his face.

"Glenthorne!" thundered Mr. Crowell.

"I think he's asleep, sir," remarked Edward Oswald Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I can see very well that Glenthorne is asleep!" retorted Mr. Crowell, leaving his desk, and striding forward. "I do not need these comments from you, Handforth."

He seized Archie by the shoulder, and shook him.

"What ho! Morning, and all that sort of thing!" murmured Archie, opening his eyes and blinking. "Dash it, Phipps, old lad, you needn't yank the young master's head off when you trickle up with the old cup of India's best!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Archie started, blinked, then gasped.

"Good gad!" he ejaculated. "I mean— Mr. Crowell, what? Frightfully sorry, sir! That is to say, tons of sorrow, old fright! I mean— In other words—"

"Glenthorne, you were asleep," said Mr. Crowell curtly.

"Just a dozen of the best, sir," confessed Archie penitently.

"A dozen what?"

"A sample of the good old forty winks, sir—"

"The Form-room is no place for sleeping, Glenthorne," broke in Mr. Crowell. "I will admit there is some excuse for you this afternoon, and if you attend to your lessons, I will overlook the matter."

"That's frightfully decent of you, sir," said Archie. "Thanks, frightfully! The fact is, the old gear-box was never particularly strong on geography. All this mapping business, dash it."

"Much as I hate to disturb your afternoon's rest, Glenthorne, I am afraid I must insist," retorted the Form-master. "All the rest of you had better get on with your work."

He went back to his desk, and the Remove continued to swelter. Collars were sticking to necks, and there was no relief. Even with the doors wide open, and all the windows letting in the maximum amount of air, there was no appreciable breeze. The atmosphere was heavy, sultry, and still. The hum of insects droned lulling.

Archie braced himself up, continued his mapping for about half a minute, and then peacefully dozed off again. The pen drooped from his fingers, and a gentle snore quivered through the Form-room.

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Crowell, with a sigh. "Brent, be good enough to give Glenthorne a vigorous shake."

Alf Brent obliged.

"Hey! What-ho! I mean— Good gad!" spluttered Archie, jerking himself into semi-wakefulness. "Odds backsliding and slipping! Did I drop off into the good old dreamless?"

"Glenthorne, this heat is too great for me to deal with you as you deserve," said Mr. Crowell wearily. "Leave the class-room, and go into the open for five minutes. Wake yourself up thoroughly, and then come back."

"Dash it, sir, I don't need—"

"Argument is unnecessary, Glenthorne— go!" said Mr. Crowell.

And Archie, very unwillingly, left his place, and wandered out. The other juniors watched him enviously, and many began to wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea to doze off, too. This sort of punishment was worth earning!

But the noble Archie felt very guilty.

"I mean to say like being sent into the dashed corner," he murmured, in distress, as he emerged into the blazing Triangle. "Dashed upsetting to the good old dignity!"

All the same, it was very pleasant in the shade of the leafy chestnuts. There was even a faint breeze, and Archie felt considerably braced. He decided to go back at once, and to express his sincere apologies.

But then he changed his mind.

He was in the act of turning towards the School House when he halted.

He jammed his monocle into his eye and

stared fixedly. Gradually an expression of incredulous horror came into his eyes.

"Odds sights and nightmares!" he breathed. "I mean to say, is it absolutely poss.? Is the old vision betraying me or do I actually see it?"

His gaze remained fixed.

There, in the shadow of the Ancient House, stood a lady, strangely garbed. She was stout, she was hatless, and her bobbed hair was yellow. She was attired in breeches, brogue shoes, and a man's Fair Isle pullover completed her attire. As a freak, she was evidently qualifying for the first prize.

To be exact, the Dragon had arrived!



CHAPTER 2.

LADY HONORIA LOOKS ROUND.

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE shuddered slightly.

"Good gad!" he breathed. "It's absolutely alive!"

Now that he had steeled himself against this sudden shock, he took a second look. The lady had evidently just descended from a large, expensive open car, and she was accompanied by a male companion. This gentleman was a queer-looking specimen of humanity.

He was thin, bony, and his face was cadaverous. In spite of the hot weather he was attired in a long frock coat, but he favoured a wide black felt in place of the conventional topper. Taking him altogether, a forbidding-looking gentleman.

Archie suddenly had a thought.

"Visitors, what?" he ejaculated with a start. "Absolutely! Strangers within the good old gates and all that sort of thing! It seems to me that a certain amount of rallying round is indicated."

Archie was always keen to do the honours. He hurried forward, and bowed with grace.

"If there's anything I can do, dear lady, kindly give the good old commands," he said accommodatingly. "If there's any assistance—"

"Who," demanded the cadaverous gentleman, "is this?"

Archie gave a little gulp. Now that he was at close quarters, this ill-assorted pair looked more fearsome than ever. The man, indeed, was even sinister in aspect. And the lady looked like nothing on earth. Her face was fat and round, but it possessed the saving quality of being benevolent.

"There is no need to be so rough, Lucian," she said, giving Archie a smile which nearly caused him to reel. "This is evidently one of the junior boys of the school."

"Oh, rather," said Archie. "Glenthorne, as it were. That is to say, Archie Glenthorne, of the good old Remove. Ancient House chappie, and so forth. If you are keen on being shown to the good old Head's department—"

"You need not trouble, boy!" said the lean gentleman. "It so happens that I am one of the Governors of this school—"

"Sir Lucian Dexter," explained the lady obligingly. "My husband does not, however, interest himself to any great extent in the school customs. My brother will, no doubt, be very surprised to see us."

"Oh, rather!" said Archie. "Brother, what? I mean—"

"Dr. Stafford is my brother," smiled the freak. "I am Lady Honoria Dexter, your Headmaster's sister."

"Good gad!" bleated Archie.

He wondered if he had heard correctly. The shock was a fearful one for his system. Until now, he had not even known that Dr. Malcolm Stafford had a sister. And a sister of this sort was, in Archie's opinion, more like a liability than an asset.

"This, of course, is quite ridiculous," said Lady Honoria, pointing an accusing finger at Archie's spotless collar. "What did I tell you, Lucian? Is it not outrageous?"

Sir Lucian Dexter started, and frowned.

"The collar?" he said curtly. "My dear Honoria, I am not interested in linen. Let the boy wear what he chooses. It is no business of mine."

"But the thing is horrible," said Lady Honoria, with a grim note in her voice. "I will soon bring about some changes, Lucian!"

Archie felt rather dazed.

"Without wishing to be absolutely inquisitive, might I ask if you are referring to the priceless old neckwear, madam?" he asked stiffly. "I trust there is nothing wrong with it?"

"It is all wrong!" said Lady Honoria promptly.

Archie opened his mouth, but said nothing. Why this lady should pick on his collar was quite beyond his understanding. It was clean, it was uncrumpled, and it was undoubtedly the finest collar in the Remove.

"However, we will not discuss the matter now," continued Lady Honoria. "Why are you here, young man? It is barely three o'clock, and I understand that all the boys were in their class-rooms."

"Absolutely," replied Archie. "The fact is, the good old lesson department was so dashed frightfully hot that Mr. Crowell sent me out to get some air. I mean to say, ovens aren't in the same old breath. The poor chappies are positively roasting in the place."

Lady Honoria gave a cry of triumph.

"There! What did I tell you, Lucian?" she exclaimed, turning to her husband. "These boys are compelled, as you see, to work in conditions that are little better than the Black Hole of Calcutta! Stifling rooms, unhygienic clothing, and utterly unhealthy surroundings generally. It is high time I came here to institute some reforms."

"Really, Honoria, it would be advisable for you to proceed rather less precipitately," said Sir Lucian Dexter gruffly. "It will be better if we go straight to Malcolm, and—"

"Nothing of the sort!" interrupted Lady Honoria firmly. "Dear me, no! I am going

to this boy's class-room before I do anything else. It is a splendid opportunity to inspect the actual conditions as they really are. I would not miss it for worlds."

"But, my dear——"

"Lucian!" said the lady, in a terrible voice.

"Very well, my dear!" said Sir Lucian meekly.

Archie blinked. All the gentleman's sinister aspect seemed to wither and decay. Under his wife's blazing eye he positively crumpled up. But the change was only momentary. He was himself again at once, and he looked at the elegant junior with dark, lowering gaze.

"Boy, escort Lady Honoria to your class-room at once," he said curtly. "Since you insist, Honoria, I will leave you to your own devices."

"Oh, rather," said Archie. "I mean, this way, dear lady, if you are anxious to view the good old oven at close range. But I warn you, you'll be frightfully frizzled."

"I am anxious to be frizzled," replied Lady Honoria firmly.



CHAPTER 3.

WELCOME, STRANGER!

MR. CROWELL glanced at the clock, and frowned.

"Hamilton," he said tiredly.

"Sir?" said Nipper, looking up from his work.

"I think you had better go out and look for Glenthorne," said the Form-master. "He has been absent for over fifteen minutes, and I fear he has fallen asleep again. I shall really punish him severely."

"Oh, go easy with him, sir," said Nipper good-naturedly. "It's tremendously hot this afternoon, and Archie has enough trouble to keep awake at the best of times."

"Well, bring him here as soon as you find him," said Mr. Crowell, without committing himself.

Many envious glances followed the Remove captain as he passed out through the wide-open doorway. Even to get outside for five minutes would be a glorious relief.

Nipper turned the corner of the passage and then halted. He had come face to face with Archie and Lady Honoria, and for a moment even his self-possession forsook him.

Archie gave a glad yelp of relief. He was only too anxious to get the lady off his hands. As a matter of fact, the Genial Ass of the Ancient House was beginning to have grave fears for Lady Honoria's sanity. He was mortally offended by her comments on his collar. Archie took a great pride in his spotless neckwear, and he was especially proud of the fact that his collar was uncrumpled and uncreased even on a blistering afternoon like this.

"Cheers and so forth," he said. "Nipper,

old saviour, kindly dash forward. Lady Honoria Dexter—Dick Hamilton, the skipper of the jolly old Remove. Kindly get together, and all that sort of rot. Lady Honoria, allow me to leave you in charge of the captain. The master of the good old ceremonies on all State occasions."

Nipper smiled.

"Please take no notice, madam," he said. "Glenthorne's all right, but he's a bit of an ass, and——"

"Disgraceful!" interrupted Lady Honoria, fixing a stern eye on Nipper's collar. "The same suffocating abomination. The same preposterous clothing. It passes my comprehension that healthy boys can be condemned to such atrocities."

Nipper said nothing. He was too surprised. The lady's appearance had been startling, but her words were incomprehensible.

"Where is this apartment?" went on Lady Honoria. "Which is the room you belong to, young man? I am determined to see it at once—to inspect it with my own eyes."

"That will be quite easy, madam," smiled Nipper. "If it's the Remove Form-room you're talking about, it's just round the corner. But it's no different from any of the other rooms. They're all baking hot this afternoon. We can't expect anything else with the thermometer registering eighty-something in the shade."

"Lead the way," said the lady firmly.

Nipper gave Archie a curious little glance, and Glenthorne shrugged his shoulders. It was as much as to say that he accepted no responsibility whatever for Lady Honoria Dexter.

A moment later the Remove was effectually startled out of its lethargic sleepiness.

"Great Scott!"

"Who's this?"

"My only hat!"

"Look what the heat's brought out!"

"What—what is this?"

All sorts of murmurs went round. Geography was forgotten, and every eye was turned upon the visitor. Lady Honoria seemed utterly indifferent to the general scrutiny.

A sensitive person might have been embarrassed by the concentrated gaze of a whole class-room of junior schoolboys—for there is, indeed, something rather fearsome in that combined stare. Nervous people have been known to quail miserably under it. But Lady Honoria Dexter was unaffected.

She strode into the centre of the class-room, and made puffing noises.

"Poof! Poof! Outrageous!" she exclaimed angrily. "This atmosphere is stifling! It is a shame and a disgrace to keep these helpless boys hemmed in like this! I am shocked—I am overwhelmingly indignant!"

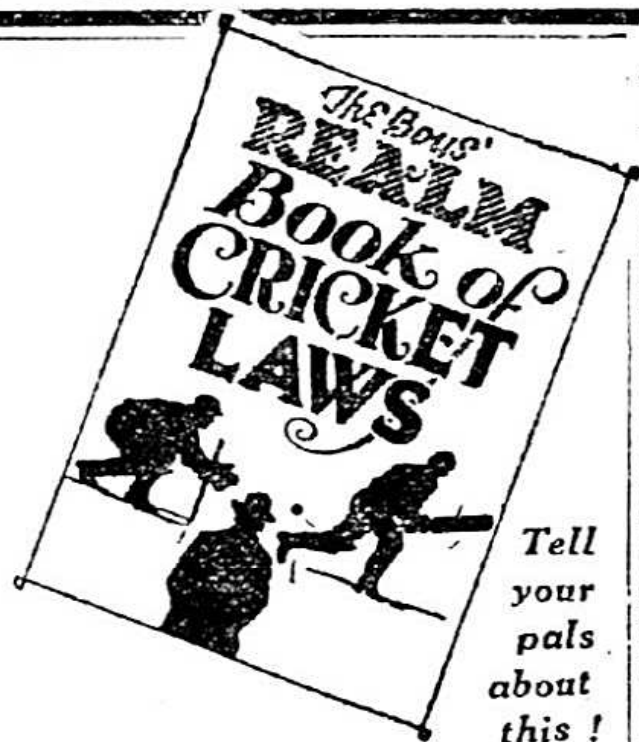
"Really——" began Mr. Crowell in amazement.

She turned on him with a frown.

"And you, sir!" she went on. "What have you to say with regard to this appalling state of affairs? Why do you keep these

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boys imprisoned in such a deadly atmosphere?"

Mr. Crowell was too startled to speak for a moment. He was a man of some dignity, and it was one of his pet aversions to be interrupted during his work. He hated people to butt in. But when a lady adopted this sort of tone he was out of his depth, for it was an experience without precedent.

"I—I— Really, madam, I hardly know how to answer," he stammered at length. "The day is extremely hot, and one cannot expect— But pray forgive me," he added stiffly. "Might I have the honour of your name?"

"I am Lady Honoria Dexter!"

"I trust your presence here is sanctioned by the headmaster, Lady Honoria?"

The lady waved her hand.

"I don't care whether the headmaster sanctions my presence here or not," she retorted. "He is probably unaware of my arrival, but that's a detail. I came to inspect the conditions, and I am thoroughly appalled. Do you hear me, sir—appalled!"

The Form-master regarded her helplessly.

"If—er—if you will come with me, madam, I will take you to Dr. Stafford," he said nervously. "No doubt, if you have any complaints to make, he will listen to you—"

"He will listen when the time comes—make no mistake of that!" interrupted Lady Honoria grimly. "Is there no humanity in

this school? Is there no sense of proportion? Why are these boys crowded into these rooms, stifled and kept away from the fresh air?"

"We have the windows open, and the door is wide——"

"That is a mere trifle," interrupted Lady Honoria. "The boys should not be hemmed in like this. I not only disapprove of it, but I will not permit it. It is an outrage against Nature. Youth demands the open air—the clear sky—the freedom of movement!"

"Upon my soul!" said Mr. Crowell feebly.

"And here, in this—this den of super-heated horror, I find the poor boys not only half-dead with fatigue, but——"

"Really, madam, I cannot permit this!" protested Mr. Crowell, recovering himself.

"I take it that you are a visitor to the school? Kindly let me point out that this interference in the work of the boys is totally opposed to all regulations."

The Form-master was exasperated. St. Frank's was often visited by cranky reformers, but they were generally kept well in hand. Lady Honoria seemed to be a particularly robust specimen of the breed, and she had evidently wandered in unnoticed. Mr. Crowell felt that it was up to him to assert himself.

"Regulations?" repeated Lady Honoria. "Pah! It is high time that these ridiculous regulations were abolished. I refuse to let these boys swelter in this appalling atmosphere any longer."

"You—you refuse?" gasped Mr. Crowell.

"Yes, sir, I do!" retorted the lady. "Boys," she added, turning to the Form, "leave this room at once! Go out into the open—into the fresh air."

The Remove received this order with sudden interest. But every fellow looked at Mr. Crowell uncertainly. Lady Honoria's idea was a good one, but was it safe to carry it out? Evidently not.

"Keep your seats, boys!" shouted Mr. Crowell excitedly. "If any boy moves, I will punish him severely. Really, madam, this is beyond all bounds! I am in authority here, and I must ask you——"

"Be silent, sir!" broke in Lady Honoria. "Your authority counts for nothing. I am Dr. Stafford's sister, and my orders must be obeyed! Boys, leave this apartment at once!"

Mr. Crowell fell back feebly, and mopped his brow. The Remove gave a cheer, then swept out of the room. The headmaster's sister! No wonder she had adopted such an authoritative tone!

"Welcome, stranger!" grinned Reggie Pitt, of the West House. "If she's got any more orders of this sort up her sleeve, good luck to her!"

"Rather!"

"Free for the rest of the afternoon, you chaps!" yelled Handforth.

"Hurrah!"

And the Remove rejoiced in its unexpected liberty. Everybody felt that there would be some startling developments, but "sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof." They were free, and if anybody got into hot water, it would be Lady Honoria. So why should they worry?



CHAPTER 4.

THE HEAD WORRIED!

R. MALCOLM STAFFORD was agitated.

He stood at the window of his study, and stared unseeingly across Inner

Court. Behind him, seated on the edge of a chair, was Sir Lucian Dexter.

"Really, my dear Malcolm, there is no reason for you to be so startled because your own sister has come to visit you," Sir Lucian was saying. "It is a most unnatural attitude on your part."

The Head turned.

"You know quite well, Lucian, that Honoria is a most—a most forceful woman," he said desperately. "You know that she has an extraordinary will—a determination of character which is singularly unusual."

"Yes, I know," said Sir Lucian feelingly. "I know!"

"Why did you bring her here?" went on the Head, in a tone that was fraught with anxiety. "Why, in heaven's name, Lucian, did you bring her?"

"And can you tell me how I could prevent her?" asked Sir Lucian tartly. "When Honoria makes up her mind I can do nothing. I am a mere cipher. I came solely and entirely for your sake, Malcolm. I thought I might possibly be able to mitigate some of Honoria's activities."

"Activities?" gasped Dr. Stafford, with a violent start. "Good heavens, you are not telling me, Lucian, that she intends to foist some of her—her insane idiosyncrasies on this school? I cannot allow it! I cannot possibly permit such nonsense!"

Sir Lucian shrugged his shoulders.

"You had better tell that to Honoria," he said gruffly.

Dr. Stafford winced. The very thought of speaking to Honoria in that strain appalled him. His sister was one of his secret horrors—a sort of skeleton in the family cupboard. An exceedingly fleshy skeleton, it is true, and one that was bustling with life. And this creature had come to St. Frank's at last!

The Head had always feared the evil day. The thought of his sister descending upon St. Frank's had often haunted him, but he had resolutely brushed it aside. And now she was here!

Dr. Stafford had no reason to feel proud of his younger sister. She had always been a stormy petrel. There was nothing dishonourable in her character, of course—the Head had nothing to fear on that score—but she was a Modern Woman, with a capital "M" and a capital "W." In her various vicissitudes she had been a Suffragette, a Social Reformer, a Prohibitionist, and a hundred and one other things. In brief, a handful.

On different occasions during the past year or so Lady Honoria had talked about visiting her learned brother at St. Frank's. But the Head, by dint of much tact, had succeeded in choking her off. He was in no way ashamed of his sister, but he was mortally afraid of her. And he was particularly scared of her fads. He never knew what she was going to be up to next.

Quite apart from this, Dr. Stafford, as headmaster of a great Public School, had his dignity to maintain. And he had a vivid fear that his energetic sister would do much to hold him up to ridicule.

It had been his constant hope that she would be kept so busy with her crazes that she would never find time to visit St. Frank's.

And now she was here—on the spot!

The Head had had no opportunity of choking her off, because she had arrived unannounced. He readily believed that she had dragged Sir Lucian down to the school against his will, and that she had come by surprise so that the Head could offer no excuse. She was here, and he could hardly fail to make her welcome—no matter what his inward thoughts were.

Dr. Stafford felt helpless. Honoria had always had this effect upon him. She was a woman, and he could not use force with



"Be silent, sir!" exclaimed Lady Honoria, thrusting the protesting Mr. Crowell aside. "Boys, leave this apartment at once!" Mr. Crowell fell back feebly, while the Removites gave a cheer and swept out of the stuffy form-room.

her. And when it came to a battle of tongues, the unfortunate Head was hopelessly out of the running. His nature was benevolent and peaceful. Her nature was arrogant and warlike. She thrived on battle.

"These—these activities, Lucian," said the Head suddenly, turning upon his brother-in-law. "Have you any idea what Honoria intends? Can you not give me some warning?"

Sir Lucian Dexter had been staring out of the window in an absent-minded manner. There was a strange, far-away look in his eyes—a queer expression of intensity, as though he were inwardly excited. He started violently, and flushed. One might have said that he flushed guiltily, as though the Head had surprised him in some sinister thoughts.

"Eh?" he said hastily. "I beg your pardon."

"Do you know the nature of Honoria's proposed activities?"

"Well, yes," admitted Sir Lucian. "You need not be alarmed, Malcolm. At the moment, my wife's energy is being expended in a very harmless direction."

"What do you call harmless?" asked the Head tensely.

"Well, she is President of the Open Air Society, an organisation which won many

adherents this spring," replied Sir Lucian. "Quite a number of branches have been formed all over the country—and Honoria, I need hardly say, has been responsible for their inception and development."

"Open Air Society?" repeated the Head, with a slight measure of relief. "H'm! I must confess I had feared worse. What does Honoria hope to achieve at St. Frank's?"

"Her object, as you may well imagine, is to form a branch of the society here among the boys," replied the other. "Her intention is to open up a camp, and—"

"Ridiculous!" interrupted the Head firmly. "I won't allow it, Lucian. Positively, I won't allow it. I am the headmaster of this school, and even Honoria cannot talk me into —"

"One moment, Malcolm!" said Sir Lucian coldly. "You may recall that I am a governor—although I did not wish to remind you of that fact. Much as I disapprove of Honoria's methods, in this particular instance I believe that her object is sound and praiseworthy. If you will be sensible, you will give her a free hand."

"I shall do no such thing!" said the headmaster stoutly. "Never, Lucian! Giving Honoria a free hand is tantamount to hand-

ing her my reins of authority. Good heavens! Why did she come?"

Sir Lucian looked at him intently.

"Remember, I shall support Honoria," he said, in a voice tense and grim. "Be careful, Malcolm."

The Head looked at his brother-in-law sharply. There had been something strange in his tone—an unnecessarily determined note.



CHAPTER 5.

STIRRING UP THE SCHOOL.

LADY HONORIA DEXTER strode into the Third Form class-room and threw the Third into confusion.

Her appearance came as a shock—both to the Third and Mr. Suncliffe, the Form-master. Not only was Honoria grotesque in appearance, but she seemed to exude Force and Determination.

"Ha, just as I thought!" she said impatiently. "This room is even worse than the other! A stifling oven! Boys, you may dismiss. Go out into the open, where you may breathe."

The Third made no move. The Form's surprise was too great.

"Did you hear me?" said Lady Honoria. "Dismiss!"

"My only hat!" breathed Willy Handforth.

A slow grin overspread his features. The redoubtable Willy was always quick to seize a chance. This afternoon he had exhausted all his ideas owing to the heat, and had resigned himself to the stress of lessons. He jumped to his feet.

"Thanks!" he said briskly. "Come on, you chaps! We shall just have time for a game of cricket!"

"One moment!" shouted Mr. Suncliffe. "Keep your seats boys! Handforth minor, sit down!"

He turned to Lady Honoria.

"Madam, do you realise that this is an unwarrantable intruder?" he went on heatedly. "This Form is under my control, and I cannot permit——"

"You should be ashamed to admit it, sir," interrupted Lady Honoria. "Any man with an ounce of humane feeling would not keep these poor boys hemmed in this room like slaves in a tropical prison. It is disgraceful, and I refuse to permit it."

"But——"

"My name is Lady Honoria Dexter. I am the headmaster's sister."

"Oh!" chorused the Third.

"I am sure the school will be honoured by your presence, Lady Honoria Dexter, but, at the same time, I would again remind you that I am in charge of this Form," said Mr. Suncliffe firmly. "No boy will leave his place until I give the order."

The Head's sister turned curtly to the Form.

"Boys, dismiss!" she commanded.

"Upon my word!" gasped Mr. Suncliffe. "This is outrageous——"

"Silence, sir!" ordered Lady Honoria.

"What?" breathed the Form-master.

"Boys, dismiss!" repeated the lady.

And the Third, to save all further argument, went out of the Form-room in a flood. The order was one which they were only too glad to obey, or they might not have shown such alacrity.

When they streamed out into the Triangle, they found the Remove already there. The juniors were standing in groups, mostly where the shade was to be found, and Lady Honoria Dexter was the sole topic of conversation. Judging by the general trend of talk, she was already on the high road to popularity.

"Well, I must say the Head's got a jolly good choice of sisters," Fullwood was remarking, with a chuckle. "Anybody who lets us out from lessons on an afternoon like this is worth encouraging."

"Yes, rather!"

"She's the right sort!"

"I suppose there's nothing squiffy about it?" asked Handforth. "I suppose we're not being japed? It's the first time we knew the Head *had* a sister!"

"That's true," said Church thoughtfully. "Still, I suppose the Head can have a sister without taking the school into his confidence, can't he?"

"Oh, she's his sister all right," declared McClure. "If you look closely there's a certain family likeness. But she's so fat, and she's made such a freak of herself that it's difficult to notice. If you ask me, Lady Honoria is going to stir things up a bit. Let's hope she's come to stay for a few days."

"We need some excitement," said Handforth. "Things have been pretty quiet since Gresham went away last week. It was a bit thick on his mater to cart the chap off until after the Whitsun holidays. He's such a ripping cricketer that we need him."

"Oh, we can manage to rub along without Harry Gresham," grinned Church. "His mother hadn't seen him since he was a little kid, remember, so she naturally wants to make a fuss of him. He'll be back for the new term—and there'll be plenty of cricket then."

"Hallo!" said Mac. "Here comes the Third!"

Willy and his men came pouring out.

"I'll bet that young minor of mine has been up to mischief!" said Handforth darkly. "Just like him to take advantage of Lady Honoria's rot!"

"You didn't take advantage of it, did you?" grinned Church.

"Eh? Oh, well, I'm different," said Handy. "I'm capable of keeping my balance—— Hallo! Well, I'm jiggered! Here comes the Fourth now!"

"She's dismissing the whole giddy school!" chuckled Duncan.

And so it seemed. The Lower School, at all events, had gained its liberty a full hour

before the recognised time. Perhaps Lady Honoria decided that she had gone far enough for one afternoon, for there was no sign of the Fifth or the Sixth.

The juniors were too surprised by the whole unusual happening to utilise their liberty. They just stood about in groups, talking.

Then Lady Honoria herself appeared.

"Look out, you chaps!" sang out somebody. "She's here again!"

"Cave!"

"Cave be blowed!" said Handforth. "She's on our side!"

Lady Honoria advanced towards the curious juniors, and there was a silence. On principle, the fellows did not approve of women giving orders at St. Frank's. They had had one experience of "petticoat rule" in the past, and they were never likely to forget it. But, then, they didn't take the Head's sister seriously.

But the Head's sister evidently meant business!

"I am amazed!" she said, addressing everybody in general, and nobody in particular. "I am utterly amazed that you boys can be comfortable in such thick clothing, and in such stiff, preposterous collars!"

"Who said we're comfortable, ma'am?" asked Fullwood. "These Etons of ours are regulation, and the collars go with 'em!"

"They're awful in this weather," agreed Russell.

"Good gad! How utterly ridie!" protested Archie, shocked. "I mean to say, it's a bit frightful when you chappies run down the good old clothing department!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "We're not dudes like you, Archie! We believe in comfort—and we can't get it!"

"Only when we're playing cricket," said Pitt. "You see, Lady Honoria, we can't wear flannels unless we're in the Eleven, or unless there's definite cricket matches arranged. At all ordinary times we're obliged to go about in these things."

Several juniors pulled at their collars. This talk of clothing had made them feel hotter than ever. And, without question, those stiff collars were frightful things to wear on a hot day. Lady Honoria's eyes glittered as she noted these movements.

"The whole costume is ridiculous," she declared. "Those preposterous collars are unhealthy, stifling, and unhygienic. Remove them at once."

"Remove them?" asked a dozen voices, aghast.

"Yes—remove them, and obtain freedom to breathe," replied Lady Honoria firmly. "I preach the doctrine of Fresh Air. Take those abominable collars off. Allow the fresh air to perform its true duty! Enough of this hide-bound nonsense!"

"By George!" roared Handforth. "Lady Honoria's right, you chaps! I've been wanting to take my giddy collar off all the afternoon. It's the best idea we've heard this week!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Off with 'em!"

And collars came off by the dozen.

Lady Honoria stood looking on, much gratified. It pleased her to see how enthusiastically the boys were adopting her principles.

But even Lady Honoria was somewhat startled by the way in which Handforth took her at her word. She wanted them to be cool, and he saw no reason why the job shouldn't be done thoroughly. Handforth was always an extremist, and he proved it now more than ever before.



CHAPTER 6.

DOING IT THOROUGHLY!

HANDFORTH was very hot — exceedingly hot — and perhaps that was some excuse for him.

"It's all very well to take off our giddy collars," he said, looking round at the other fellows. "But what about our jackets and waistcoats? Why not peel them off, too? It's about ninety in the shade this afternoon!"

"Chuck it, Handy!"

"Go easy, old man!"

Handforth nodded.

"Exactly!" he agreed. "I'm going easy, I believe in being easy, and Lady Honoria's idea is absolutely right. Here you are, Church. Hold my giddy jacket! And here's my waistcoat, Mac!"

He stripped them off, and stretched himself luxuriously.

"By George!" he said, looking round at the others. "That's better!"

"You silly fathead!" shouted Church, in alarm. "If a master comes along and sees you, you'll get swished!"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "If I shall get swished, then so will you. We might as well do the job properly while we're about it. That's me—whole hog all the time!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lady Honoria had strolled off, being interested in the architecture of Big Arch. And perhaps she felt that this one particular junior was going a little further than she had originally intended.

"Isn't anybody else going to peel like this?" asked Handforth, glaring at the others. "What about you, Pippy?"

Lord Pippinton, of the West House, started round as he heard his name called. As usual, he had been in one of his trance-like conditions—in a state of coma owing to the heat.

"Eh?" he said. "I mean, oh, rather!"

"Then take off your giddy jacket and waistcoat!" ordered Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The expression on Lord Pippinton's face was worth watching.

"Oh, I don't think so!" he said. "I mean, take them off? The idea, I take it,

is to remove them? It couldn't be done, thanks all the same!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Isn't anybody going to follow my example?"

"Why don't you go even further, Handy?" asked Reggie, with a grin. "If you want to get cool why don't you get into the fountain and swish about a bit?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dry up, Reggie!" said Church uneasily. "For two pins Handy will get into the fountain. You know what an obstinate chap he is!"

"I was only rotting!" said Reggie, with a chuckle. "Of course, he daren't get in, really."

Handforth jumped.

"Daren't?" he shouted. "By George! I'll show you whether I daren't or not! As a matter of fact, it's a jolly good idea! Just the thing to get cool!"

A yell of laughter went up as Handforth ran to the fountain pool, in the centre of the Triangle, and hurled himself into the cool water.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!"

The rest of the fellows gathered round, and they ragged Handforth unmercifully. It was quite characteristic of him to go to extremes. It was one thing to be cool, but another to make an ass of himself like this.

"Come on!" he roared as he stood up, dripping. "It's glorious! Absolutely lovely! Isn't anybody else coming in?"

"Not to-day, thanks!"

"We'll see about that!" shouted Handforth, leaping out and grabbing Lord Pipinton with one hand and Timothy Tucker with the other. "Come on, you chaps—in you go!"

"My dear sir!" protested Tucker. "Dear, dear! This is altogether too outrageous—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Splash—splash!

Both the unfortunate juniors were tipped backwards into the fountain pool.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Church. "He'll get the sack for this if a master comes along. Right in the open Triangle, too! Did you ever know him to ask for trouble in such a loud voice before?"

"Never!" grinned Nipper. "He'll get it, too!"

But Edward Oswald Handforth hadn't done yet. His gaze suddenly lighted upon a hose-pipe, left against the wall of the Ancient House by one of the gardeners. It was very handy, and it looked very inviting. Handforth gave a roar as he spotted it.

"All right, my sons!" he said triumphantly. "If you won't get into the fountain pool, then I'll show you what I'll do. There's nothing like being healthy—nothing like being cool. And a shower-bath is just as good as a dip in the fountain!"

He had reached the hose-pipe before anybody realised his true intention. With a gasp of joy he found, when he turned

the tap on, that there was a plentiful supply of water. He swished the hose round, and there was a wild stampede.

"Look out!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Stop it, Handy, you madman! Turn the giddy thing off!"

Swish—swish!

The hose-pipe swung round, and about half the fellows in the Triangle were smothered in a wet shower.

"There's nothing like getting cool!" roared Handforth, grinning. "Now I'll show you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

All the fellows who weren't soaked yelled with laughter. There was something indescribably comic in the antics of Handforth with the hose-pipe. And then Church gave a tremendous yell, and stared dazedly through Big Arch.

"Cave!" he gasped. "Old Pycraft!"

"Great Scott!" muttered Nipper. "Old Pycraft, of the Fourth! He'll go dotty with rage over this!"

"Cave!" panted somebody else. "The Head's with him, too!"

"Oh, corks!"

"Run, Handy!"

Handforth, turning round in surprise, swung the hose pipe in the same direction. Nothing could have been more unfortunate.

For that stream of water, hissing forcefully out of the nozzle of the hose-pipe, caught Mr. Pycraft fairly and squarely in the middle. The master of the Fourth gave a fiendish yell, and leapt about three feet into the air. And the hose-pipe, continuing round in an arc, delivered a splashing cascade upon Lady Honoria herself!

"Oh, goodness!"

Everybody halted in their tracks, collarless as they were. The presence of the Head made it impossible for them to bolt.

Handforth dropped the hose, and stood there, frozen.

And then Dr. Stafford emerged from Big Arch, and he saw the crowds of juniors walking about without their collars—and he saw Lady Honoria. The unfortunate Head nearly had a fit on the spot!

CHAPTER 7.

COLLARS OFF!



GOOD heavens!"

Dr. Stafford breathed hard with dismay. His worst fears were realised. Much as he had dreaded that his sister would make herself ridiculous, he had never anticipated anything quite so appalling as this.

Lady Honoria's very appearance was enough to stagger him.

And she certainly did look an awful freak. The Head was apt to be old-fashioned in his ideas, and to him a woman in breeches was a scandalous spectacle. People with

more modern ideas are growing accustomed to such calamities. The modern woman is a creature of surprises, and one never knows what she will do next.

But Lady Honoria was Dr. Stafford's sister, the wife of one of the governors. And here she was, complete with her breeches, her mannish pullover, and her short-cropped, bobbed hair. A slimmer woman might have looked graceful even in those clothes—even feminine—but Lady Honoria had physical disadvantages which were better concealed rather than exaggerated, and her soaked condition did not improve her looks.

"This—this, is terrible!" murmured the Head hoarsely. "Already she is a laughing-stock. I shall never be able to hold my head up again. Never! How truly appalling! Why did I not come sooner?"

For a moment he hesitated. He thought about turning on his heel, and resorting to flight. But the fellows had seen him, and it would be impossible for him to run from his own sister in sight of the Junior School.

"Here's the Head, you chaps!" shouted Handforth enthusiastically. "Come on—let's show him that Lady Honoria's popular! Three cheers for the Head's sister! Now then—all together!"

"Hurrah!"

"Hip—hip—hurrah!"

"Welcome to St. Frank's, Lady Honoria!"

The juniors were only too ready to adopt Handforth's suggestion, and the old Triangle echoed with the rousing cheers. Nobody had ever believed it possible that the staid old Head could have had such a sporty sister.

There was another reason for those cheers, too. The fellows realised that they were liable to get into hot water—and if they could only please the Head by showing that they liked his sister, it might be all the better for them. Handforth had seized upon that chance at once. But Mr. Pycraft tried to spoil everything.

"This—this is terrible!" he shouted, dancing about, with water splashing down from him. "I am soaked! I am drenched! This—this is an absolute outrage!"

"Really, Mr. Pycraft!" exclaimed the Head, agitated. "I—I hardly know—"

"I demand to have these boys thrashed, sir!" shouted Mr. Pycraft excitedly. "Handforth is the culprit! He was the young rascal with the hose-pipe! Look at me, sir—look at me!"

Lady Honoria looked at him coldly.

"If it comes to that, sir, look at me!" she said. "I am nearly as drenched as you are yourself. And yet I do not get excited!"

Mr. Pycraft started.

"Really, madam, I—I—"

"Malcolm, I do not think that this boy deserves to be punished," went on Lady Honoria, turning to the Head. "It was I who advised him to remove his collar, and it is only too clear that he has been doing his

best to follow out my principles—he has been attempting to keep cool on this hot afternoon. And what can be cooler than a shower-bath from a hose-pipe? I do not want him to be punished."

"Hurrah!"

"Good for you, Lady Honoria!"

"Three cheers for the Head's sister!" roared Handforth, much relieved.

"Hurrah!"

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated the Head in amazement.

A feeling of intense relief swept over him. She wasn't a laughing-stock, after all. The boys were cheering her—showing him, as plainly as possible, that they were glad to welcome her! And there was no spoof about it, either. Those cheers were the real thing.

Lady Honoria herself became benevolent. This was what she had dreamed of. She had come here to conquer the school—to win the boys over to her ideals. And within the first hour she was well on the road to success.

The Head came forward, reassured, but still alarmed. The sight of all these boys in a collarless condition pained him. He was a great stickler for the conventions. And it was a strict rule at St. Frank's that the fellows should wear Etons and stiff collars.

"Ahem! I am pleased to see you, my dear Honoria," said the Head, as he came forward. "It is—er—good of you to come and see us."

"I think it is high time I did come!" retorted Lady Honoria. "Where is Lucian? I wish to have a very serious talk with you, Malcolm, and—"

"Quite so, my dear," interrupted the Head hastily. "But please remember the boys—This spot, after all, can scarcely be called private. If you will go indoors, I will join you almost at once."

The Head turned to the collarless groups. Truth to tell, the majority of the fellows were now feeling ill at ease. The Head's presence always had a subduing effect, but in their present unconventional condition the juniors felt as though they were hardly decent to appear in public.

"What is the meaning of this?" continued the Head, frowning upon all and sundry. "How dare you remove your collars? Such a thing is opposed to all rules, and I shall punish—"

"You will do no such thing, Malcolm!" interrupted Lady Honoria firmly. "The boys removed those ridiculous collars at my suggestion."

"But, my dear—"

"It is disgraceful to keep them at work in those stifling Form-rooms," continued Lady Honoria angrily. "I am delighted that I arrived unannounced, and that I was thus enabled to obtain first-hand knowledge. I am shocked at the conditions. Growing boys should be allowed to spend every available minute in the open air—"

"But, really, Honoria—"

"They should be permitted to dress hygienically, and not in these atrocious, tight-fitting abominations. As for collars, they are an absolute outrage against nature. In such weather as this it is little better than torture to condemn the boys to wear such relics of barbarism."

The Head began to feel beyond his depth.

"You must allow me, Honoria, to know best——" he began. "Please remember that I am the headmaster of this——"

"It seems to me that you forget it!" snapped his sister. "If you had any true feeling for your scholars, you would not permit them to endure this undeserved penance. Everything has got to be changed. I am an advocate of hygienic clothing. Open necks, bare legs, sandals. I am a believer in fresh air."

"But I must insist——"

"I have come to St. Frank's to bring this cruelty to an end!" said Lady Honoria relentlessly. "I shall not rest content until my mission is fulfilled. St. Frank's is going to lead all the Public schools of the country in a great campaign of rationalism! Away with fusty old woollens! Into the dust-heap with stiff collars! Fresh air! The open sky and the sun! That is the doctrine I preach, Malcolm."

The Head succeeded in getting his breath.

"Quite so, my dear—quite so!" he said feebly. "We—we will talk about it. We will discuss the subject in all its aspects."

And, somehow, he managed to lead her away.



CHAPTER 8.

HANDY CATCHES THE FEVER.
CATTY!"

"Absolutely off her nut!"

"Mad as a giddy hatter!"

These were the uncomplimentary comments concerning Lady Honoria's mental condition. The juniors now had the Triangle to themselves, and they were thoroughly enjoying the mild sensation that the advent of the Head's sister had caused. And they were revelling in their collarless state, too. It was a great relief to dispense with those stiff "relics of barbarism."

"Of course, she's crazy about fresh air," chuckled Nipper. "But there's method in her madness. I don't think many of us will grumble at being in the open air when we ought to be stewing in the class-room."

"No fear! Good luck to her!"

"And I don't think we shall mind going about collarless on an afternoon like this," continued the junior skipper with a grin. "For this relief, much thanks! I have never parted with anything so willingly before."

"All the same, she's crazy," said Reggie Pitt. "As long as her crankiness takes this

shape, though, we'll encourage her in the good work, and help it along."

"Rather!"

"Why not take our jackets off like Handy, just to show her that we approve of her policy?" suggested Fullwood.

"Hear, hear!"

"Odds disasters and calamities!" said Archie Glenthorne in distress. "I trust, laddies, that this frightful fever is not likely to persist? Good gad! The old optics are strained enough as it is!"

Archie, of course, had resolutely refused to remove his collar, and he eyed the other fellows with disdain and disapproval. But Archie was a walking fashion-plate, and the slightest disarrangement of dress in any of his companions was an eyesore to him. At the present moment the entire landscape was filled with eyesores. It was littered with them.

"You buzz off, Archie!" said Handforth grimly. "You're not in this act! Lady Honoria is a woman with wonderful ideas! She's showing the Head a thing or two—and it's high time, too."

"Cheese it, Handy!" said Church in alarm. "You'll get a swishing if you don't go in and change those wet things. You're an awful sight!"

Handforth looked at him coldly.

"I'm cool!" he retorted. "It's the first time I've felt cool to-day!" He tore his shirt open at the neck. "By George! That's better! Freedom at last! I can breathe now!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Handy's caught the fresh air fever!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!" grinned Pitt. "We can always trust him to go the whole hog!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Any more cackles, and I'll biff a few noses!" roared Handforth aggressively. "When I take up a scheme, I take it up in earnest! I don't play at it! Lady Honoria is here to benefit the whole school, and if we only encourage her in the right way we shall have an easy time."

"Yes, but you've got to go gently!" protested Church. "You mustn't walk about the school like that, Handy, dressed only in your bags and a pair of braces!"

"I've got a shirt on, haven't I?" demanded Handforth.

"Well, I mean——"

"I'm taking up this Doctrine of Health," said the leader of Study D firmly. "If anybody doesn't like my appearance, he can lump it!"

"Perhaps Irene will like your appearance?" asked Nipper casually.

Handforth gave a violent start.

"Irene?" he said, with a gasp.

He looked round wildly, and beheld three figures in white which had just entered the gateway. Irene Manners, Doris Berkeley, and Winnie Pitt, of the Moor View School! The girls were looking gloriously cool in their white attire.



Both Church and McClure gasped as they realised that the bundle contained Handy. Then, running forward, they unfastened the ropes encircling the sack, and drew their leader out, only to find that he was bound hand and foot!

"These girls have all the luck!" said Fullwood enviously. "They can go about on a hot day wearing muslin and stuff. No wonder they look cool!"

"If Lady Honoria has her way, she'll be shoving us into muslin next!" grinned Nipper.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth was looking round wildly.

"Where's Mac?" he asked, in a thick voice.

"He's just gone indoors," said Church casually. "I think he took your jacket and waistcoat in."

"Oh, help!" moaned Handforth.

Church did not think it necessary to explain that McClure had bunked off after an exchange of winks between himself and Church.

"I—I'll go and find him!" said Handforth, trying to speak carelessly.

"No, you won't!" said Nipper.

"Eh?"

"You'll stay here, and greet the girls."

"But—but I'm in my giddy braces——"

"That's your own fault," interrupted Nipper coolly. "Hold him, you chaps! I call for witnesses. Didn't he distinctly say that if anybody didn't like his appearance they could lump it?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Then you can't grumble, Handy, if you meet the girls like this," said Nipper blandly.

"But I am grumbling!" hooted Handforth. "I don't care what I said just now! How the dickens was I to know that the girls would come in at an hour like this? Lemme go, blow you!"

But it was impossible to escape. In any case, the girls were already joining the throng, and they had sensed that something unusual was in the wind, quite apart from the fact that three-quarters of the juniors were walking about collarless.

"It doesn't look very respectable, Ted, but I expect you feel cool," said Irene, smiling. "Is this one of the Head's new rulings? If so, he's a brick!"

"I—I was hot!" said Handforth desperately.

"I don't wonder at it," put in Doris. "You fellows are martyrs! It's awful, the way they make you wear these thick suits during the hot weather. Look at us!"

"We're looking," said Pitt enviously. "And we're jealous. By Jove, sis, you were jolly lucky to be born a girl!"

"Don't be silly, Reggie," smiled Winnie Pitt. "Men's and boys' fashions are too hard and fast—that's the trouble. If you would

all make a stand against these old conventions, instead of being slaves to them, you'd soon be wearing something cool. Look at Ted! He's the most sensible one of you all!"

Handforth forgot his embarrassment.

"There you are!" he said triumphantly. "Doesn't that prove that my idea is worth taking up? Away with the old-fashioned habits! Let's have something modern—let's have freedom and coolness!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Look out!" gasped Church. "Here comes Mr. Lee!"

Several of the juniors scooted. Mr. Nelson Lee, the Housemaster of the Ancient House, was approaching with a severe frown on his face. He was concentrating his attention upon Edward Oswald Handforth.

"What is the meaning of this, Handforth?" he said sternly. "Where is your waistcoat? Where is your jacket? How dare you appear publicly in this half-dressed condition?"

"It's Lady Honoria's idea, sir," said Handforth, with perfect coolness. "She advised all the chaps to take their collars off——"

"Yes, so I am aware—and I have no doubt the headmaster will adjust the matter before the day is out," interrupted Lee. "But Lady Honoria made no suggestion that you should discard your jacket and waistcoat, Handforth. Where are they?"

"Indoors, sir."

"Then go indoors, and put them on," ordered the Housemaster. "While you are there, you might as well write me a hundred lines, Handforth. I hope you will not be so foolish again."

"But—but Lady Honoria——"

"It will pain me to cane you, Handforth—and I have no doubt that it will pain you, also," interrupted Nelson Lee drily. "That is enough! Go indoors at once!"

And Handforth went—very red in the face. When Nelson Lee looked round again, he observed that practically every collar had been re-donned, and the Triangle was again looking respectable.

"What's the good of being a reformer?" sighed Reggie Pitt, as Nelson Lee walked away. "As soon as a reformer starts something new, somebody else comes along and chucks a bomb into the works."

The three Moor View girls were laughing merrily.

"Hard luck!" said Irene. "Let's hope that Dr. Stafford's sister proves strong enough to conquer! But there's something I'd like to know," she went on. "Who's that queer-looking man over there, and what in the world is he doing?"

The juniors looked round. Sir Lucian Dexter was wandering about in the distance, near the shrubbery which half-screened the ruins of the old monastery. And Sir Lucian, apparently oblivious of the observing eyes, was scouting about like a retriever, darting keen glances at the ground, and pausing now and again to gaze absentmindedly into the infinite.

"Scatty!" said Cecil de Valerie. "If you ask me, Lady Honoria and her husband are a pair! I wonder which asylum they escaped from?"



CHAPTER 9.

LADY HONORIA MEANS BUSINESS.

R. STAFFORD sank limply into his chair.

"Where is Lucian?" he asked, in a tired voice.

"Why has he deserted me so suddenly?"

"You will get no sympathy from Lucian," said Lady Honoria coldly. "He has promised to support me, and I shall see that he does. We will leave Lucian out of this discussion."

"Yes, but, my dear——"

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Malcolm!" went on Lady Honoria. "Oh, I know that you are my elder brother, and that your position in this school is a dignified one. But you men are all the same—you make me thoroughly angry. Will you never learn that times are changing, and that the old order should give place to the new?"

"Nonsense!" said the Head, with spirit. "Sheer nonsense, Honoria! You are so steeped in your preposterous reforms that you have lost all sense of proportion. I must tell you plainly that I cannot allow this interference. You have already caused much harm, Honoria. It must go no further. Do you understand? Please remember that I am in authority here!"

She regarded him with composure.

"I don't want to question your authority, Malcolm, but these old-fashioned ideas of yours must be swept overboard," she said. "I have already told you that I am the President of the Open Air Society, and I have come to St. Frank's to organise a branch——"

"I cannot allow it!"

"And I shall invite the boys to join."

"I tell you, Honoria——"

"There will be no entrance fees, and everything will be provided," continued the Head's sister calmly. "Fortunately, Lucian is a rich man, and he is willing enough to spend some of his money for the benefit of his fellow beings."

"But these boys don't want charity!" shouted Dr. Stafford angrily. "The whole thing is preposterous. St. Frank's is one of the proudest colleges in the kingdom!"

"You may be proud of it, but I'm not!" retorted Lady Honoria. "The simple truth is that you're mortally afraid to disturb any of your fusty old conservative methods. The school has always had these regulations, and so they persist! I don't agree with it!"

The Head quivered.

"Whether you agree or not, Honoria, is entirely beside the point," he said hotly. "I should like to welcome you here as a guest—as a brother should naturally welcome his sister. But you make it very difficult for me. Your mission at St. Frank's seems to

be an impertinence. Yes, an impertinence! I have nothing against you in all ordinary matters, Honoria, but these cranky schemes of yours must be taken elsewhere. They can have no place at St. Frank's!"

"You are very trying, Malcolm," said Lady Honoria patiently.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the Head. "And what of yourself? What is your record, Honoria? Ever since you were a mere girl you have swept up and down the country, foisting your infernal reforms on people who have no use for them. You mean well, no doubt, but you are utterly misguided. Thank Heaven this present disease of yours has taken a fairly rational form. Fresh air is good for all, and it is even conceivable that you may do a certain amount of good. But I will not have my school turned upside down by you or by anybody else. I will not be held up to ridicule by my own scholars! That is absolutely final, and the sooner you realise it the better."

The Head felt rather pleased with himself. Seldom had he spoken to his dragon-like sister so plainly. He felt that he was redeeming his self-respect. No, she wasn't going to ride roughshod over him again! He marvelled that he had ever been afraid of her.

He glanced at his sister. A little of his satisfaction oozed away. Lady Honoria was looking at him in a very straight way, and there was a glint in her eye which boded ill.

"Have you finished, Malcolm?" she asked coldly.

"Forgive me if I spoke roughly, my dear," replied the Head. "I was angry, and I don't want you to think that I have any desire for a quarrel. At the same time, I must reiterate my firm resolve——"

"You needn't trouble," said Lady Honoria curtly.

"You are welcome to remain at St. Frank's as my guest for as long as you please," continued Dr. Stafford. "It is a very delightful spot at this time of the year, I can assure you. Give up this nonsense, Honoria—allow yourself to relax. Lucian, I am sure, will be only too glad——"

"We will leave my husband out of the argument for the moment," interrupted Lady Honoria. "And whether you desire my presence, or whether you disapprove of it, makes no difference. My mission is above all such petty trifles. I intend to open a branch of the Open Air Society forthwith, and I shall urge the boys to rally to my banner—the banner of Health and Strength; the banner of Freedom and Liberty!"

The Head started.

"Upon my word, Honoria, I cannot permit——"

"Yes, Malcolm, I heard all that just now," interrupted his sister calmly. "If it relieved you to say it, well and good. But I take a strong view on this subject. These boys are not slaves, and if they choose to join my

society, I cannot see that it is any business of yours."

"No business of mine!" shouted the Head desperately. "What of my authority? What of the school regulations?"

"The school regulations are ridiculous."

"Whatever you may think of them, Honoria, they persist, and it is my duty, as headmaster, to enforce them," said Dr. Stafford heatedly. "How many more times must I tell you that I cannot countenance this interference?"

His confidence had left him. The ground seemed to be slipping from under his feet. There was something inexorable about Lady Honoria's expression.

The Head could deal with a dozen school-boys at once; he could make them quail before his very glance. He could even cause his under-masters to shiver in their shoes as they stood before him. But his sister was a different proposition. The greatest disadvantage of all was that she was his sister.

Other people had a fitting respect for his decision, for his exalted position. But no man can expect such deference from his own sister—especially when that sister is as strong-minded as the Lady Honoria.

There was a pitying look on her face as she regarded her brother with a cold and calculating eye. Somehow it made the Head's heart beat faster. It caused him to grip his chair for support.

"I shall commence operations to-morrow," said Lady Honoria simply.

The Head wilted visibly. After all his strength of purpose, after all his insistence, she merely made a simple statement. But that statement possessed the property of a law. If she had been a man, the Head could have stormed at her. But she was a woman—a self-willed, obstinate, purposeful woman. And she was his own sister! He felt exhausted.

"You cannot be serious, my dear——" he began feebly.

"We shall see about that to-morrow," interrupted Lady Honoria in a calm, contented voice. "Of course, if you wish to maintain your dignity, I have no objection to your giving the necessary orders. But if you fail to do so, I shall take matters into my own hands."

The Head made a final struggle.

"I shall insist upon Lucian taking you away," he said hoarsely. "You are too much for me, Honoria! I cannot stand these upheavals——"

"You can spare your breath so far as Lucian is concerned," said his sister calmly. "My husband has promised to support me, and you may remember that he is a governor of this school. Since he sanctions my programme, it is hardly for you to raise these ridiculous objections. No, Malcolm, you had better admit yourself beaten."

The Head admitted nothing of the sort—but he was.



CHAPTER 10.

JUST LIKE HANDY!

"H, rats!" said Church disgustedly.

The chums of Study D were strolling in West Square, enjoying the delightful coolness of the evening. But it was rather a matter of comparison. The evening was actually still and close, but it seemed positively refreshing after the burning heat of the afternoon.

It was still daylight, of course, for at this time of the year, what with the lengthening evenings, and the Daylight Saving Act, the fellows always went to bed in daylight.

And the bell for retiring was just going.

"Rats!" said Church again.

"And that's another thing," said Handforth darkly. "That's another iniquity that's got to be abolished! Fancy sending us off to bed in full daylight—up into those stuffy dormitories! I've a good mind to ignore the bell altogether, and stay out here!"

"Do as you please, of course," said McClure. "We shan't try to hinder you, Handy. You can rely upon Churchy and me to think of you to-morrow, and to sympathise."

"To think of me?" repeated Handforth.

"Yes, when you're stewing in extra lesson all the afternoon," explained Mac. "Churchy and I are going down the river. You were coming, too, to-morrow being a half-holiday; but as you'll be kept in detention——"

"You howling ass!" roared Handforth, "I haven't been detained!"

"No, but you will be if you ignore the bell!" replied Mac pointedly. "It's no good, Handy—you can't jib at the school rules."

Handforth grunted. He was feeling vaguely disappointed. He had expected Lady Honoria to sweep through the Houses like a tornado during the evening, condemning this and disapproving of that. But the Head's sister hadn't even shown herself.

And it seemed only too clear that Dr. Stafford had subdued her. It was a sad thought. Lots of fellows had been relying on Lady Honoria to create a welcome diversion. But she had, apparently, petered out.

"Oh, well, I shall have to carry on single-handed," said Handforth grimly.

For the redoubtable Edward Oswald hadn't petered out, and he had no intention of petering out. The Head's sister had put this stunning idea into his head, and once Handforth grasped a new idea, it clung tenaciously.

Fellows were drifting into their various Houses from all parts of the school grounds. Handforth & Co. went round the end of the Ancient House, and took a look at the green expanse of Little Side before going indoors.

The Junior playing-fields were empty—save for a solitary figure in the far distance.

There was something peculiar about that figure.

It was moving alongside the far hedge, the head bent down, as though its owner was searching for something. Now and again the figure would turn, and it even seemed that he was taking measured strides, as though attempting to calculate distances.

"Who the dickens is that?" asked Handforth, frowning.

"Looks like Lady Honoria's husband to me," said Church, concentrating his gaze. "Sir Lucian somebody or other—Dexter, isn't it? There's something funny about that chap!"

"He's probably off his rocker," said McClure. "He must be, or he wouldn't have married a freak like Lady Honoria."

Handforth frowned.

"You'd better not insult the Head's sister like that!" he said curtly. "Lady Honoria is the brainiest person who's been at St. Frank's for months! And if the Head's bottled her up, I shall jolly well tell him what I think of him!"

"Well, let's go indoors," said Church soothingly. "We shall be late unless we're quick, and that'll mean lines. You know what these prefects are. They jump on a chap for nothing."

They went indoors, and ascended to their dormitory in the Remove passage. Handforth strode into the little bed-room first, and he halted just inside, beating the air with exaggerated gestures.

"Whew!" he gasped. "It's stifling in here! The window's wide open, too! How the dickens can we sleep in this heat?"

Church grinned.

"It's no worse than it was last night," he pointed out.

"These dormitories are unhygienic and unhealthy," declared Handforth. "We ought to have big rooms."

"Rats!" said McClure. "You were one of the first to cheer when the old dormitories were done away with, and when we were given special bed-rooms to ourselves. There's no pleasing some people."

All the same, the room was certainly hot. Outside, the air had cooled somewhat, but indoors the upstairs rooms were stuffy and hot.

Handforth stood at the window, looking absentmindedly across the Square.

"By George!" he said suddenly. "I've got it! I've got the wheeze! Why should we stew in this deadly atmosphere? As soon as it's a bit darker, we'll take our mattresses and steal out, and sleep on the veranda of the Junior Pavilion! How's that for a brainy idea?"

Church and McClure gave him one concentrated look of scorn.

"Rotten!" they said in unison.

CHAPTER 11.

NIPPED IN THE BUD.



HANDFORTH started.

"What's that?" he demanded. "What did you say?"

"Rotten!" repeated his chums with emphasis.

"Why, you fatheads, it's the idea of the term!" snapped Edward Oswald. "Everybody knows that sleeping in the open air is the finest thing for health. Look at the way consumptives in those homes sleep on verandas!"

"But we're not consumptives!" howled Church.

"That doesn't make any difference," said Handforth waving his hand. "If fresh air is good for invalids, it's good for everybody! You can't get away from a fact like that! Besides, if we sleep night after night in this beastly atmosphere, we *shall* get consumptive! And I say that prevention is better than cure!"

Church sighed.

"Cheese it, Handy," he said patiently. "There's no law against us leaving our door wide open, and you know jolly well that the room gets cool after midnight. Why, only last night we had to pull the blankets over us because we felt chilly."

But Handforth brushed aside this objection.

"That's beside the point," he said curtly. "I'm a believer in the Open Air, and from now onwards I'm going to live out of doors as much as I can. To-morrow, I'll even do my prep. outside, under the hedge! And to-night we'll sleep on the pavilion veranda."

"We shall get swished——"

"Rot! Lady Honoria will stick up for us," put in Handforth. "She's on our side, and she won't let the Head jump on us."

"She's been squashed herself," said McClure sadly. "I expect the Head's put the kybosh on her little game, so you can't rely on any support from that quarter. No, Handy, you'd better chuck it up."

"Rot! We're going!"

And Handforth prepared to haul his mattress off the bed. Even he felt that it would be advisable to take a certain amount of sleeping comfort along with him.

Church and McClure watched him in grim silence, and made no attempt to follow his example.

"Buck up!" said Handforth. "We're going!"

"Are we?" snorted Church. "You can go, if you like, but we're staying here! We don't want to be detained all to-morrow afternoon, you silly chump! It's still daylight—we shall be seen. The seniors aren't even in bed yet, and you know how the prefects spot things. We don't want to be hauled before the Head for breaking bounds."

"H'm! Perhaps we'd better leave it for a bit," said Handforth grudgingly.

He sat on the edge of his bed, but made no attempt to undress. And when Church and McClure commenced operations on their apparel, he sternly ordered them to cease.

"I don't want to be nasty, but if you chaps refuse to back me up, I'll lick you to a standstill," he said. "This Fresh Air stunt is healthy and beneficial, and there's no fear of getting punished, even if we are spotted. In fact, blow you, we'll go now, and I don't care who sees us!"

"But it's crazy!" protested McClure. "It's absolutely potty! You know it's against all the rules to——"

"I don't care about the rules," said Handforth. "In this kind of weather all sorts of things are allowable, and rules don't count."

His chums argued in vain. Handforth had made up his mind, and the only possible course was to humour him. Resistance meant an unholy scrap in the dormitory, and Church and McClure felt that it was altogether too hot for exercise of that kind.

"It'll be as easy as falling off a log," declared Handforth. "We've only got to slip down the back stairs and sneak off to Little Side; there's not a chance of us being spotted. And think of the glories of sleeping in the open air!"

There was something in this, and his chums resigned themselves.

And the scheme, strangely enough, seemed to prosper. Handforth & Co. were lucky. They smuggled their mattresses out of doors without anybody spotting them, or interfering. They got across to Little Side, and finally arrived on the veranda of the pavilion. And there was no denying that the coolness of the late evening was grateful.

The sky was clear and serene, with one or two stars beginning to twinkle. Over in the West, a glowing radiance still remained. On every side the fields and meadows were still peaceful.

"Now what about it?" asked Handforth triumphantly.

"Well, by Jove, it's pretty good!" admitted Church. "The pav.'s locked, though."

"What does that matter?"

"We might want to dodge in, if it rains," said Church. "There's not much shelter on this veranda——"

"Don't be an ass!" said Edward Oswald. "Fancy talking about rain on a night like this! And what about the glass? It hasn't been so high for weeks. This fine weather is going to last."

They placed their mattresses in a row on the floor of the veranda, and prepared to undress. The gloom of the night was now beginning to fall in earnest. They had each brought their sheets, and two blankets apiece.

And then a couple of forms loomed up.

"As we suspected, Brother Fenton, there are lurking figures on the veranda," came the familiar voice of Browne, of the Fifth. "I fear there's dirty work afoot. Not that I

approve of this investigation. Kindly remember that I distinctly advised the adoption of a blind eye."

"That's all very well," said Edgar Fenton, the stalwart captain of St. Frank's. "If these juniors are up to mischief— Well, I'm hanged! Handforth! What on earth are you up to, young 'un?"

Handforth & Co. were thoroughly startled. They had believed themselves to be safe, and now the head prefect of the school had found them! They had had no opportunity of escaping.

Handforth adopted bold tactics.

"What's the idea of that tone, Fenton?" he asked. "We've come out here to sleep, of course. Can't you see our beds? It's so jolly stuffy in the dormitory that we've decided to sleep out here, on the veranda."

"Oh!" said Fenton. "So that's what you've decided?"

"Yes."

"Then you'd better decide to come indoors again," said Fenton coolly. "And if you've got any sense, you'll decide quickly."

"Pray refrain from including me in this piebald business, Brother Handforth," said William Napoleon Browne. "Happily, I am not a prefect, and therefore these onerous duties do not come within my sphere. You will be gratified to hear that I am entirely on your side."

"That's not the right sort of talk, Browne," objected Fenton gruffly.

"Alas! I am compelled to speak the truth," sighed Browne. "And, much as I hate upsetting you, Brother Fenton, I must observe that this out-of-doors-sleeping wheeze strikes me as being singularly ripe."

"There you are!" said Handforth. "Chuck it, Fenton! We're doing no harm out here. It's cool, and——"

"Sorry, but it's against the rules," said Fenton.

"Blow the rules!"

"Under the circumstances, I am willing to smuggle you back indoors and forget the whole incident," went on Fenton generously. "But only on condition that you obey orders, and come at once. No nonsense, Handforth! You can't sleep out here—and that's final!"



CHAPTER 12.

VERY MYSTERIOUS.

CHURCH and McClure felt enormously relieved. Handforth felt disgusted. Fenton had acted very decently, and Handforth's

chums considered that they had escaped easily. They had been right, after all, for from the very first they had feared that a watchful prefect would spot them in the dusk. Handforth was disgusted because his plan was ruined. Even Handy had more sense than to argue with the captain of the school.

"Oh, all right!" he said grudgingly. "I'm surprised at your lack of vision, Fenton, but there's no accounting for people. I'm blessed if I can see any harm in sleeping in the open on a hot night like this."

"There's no harm at all, you young ass."

"Then what's the idea of ordering us indoors?"

"Because regulations are regulations," retorted Fenton. "If you were allowed to sleep out here to-night, and the school heard about it to-morrow, there might be hundreds trying the dodge to-morrow night. And then where do you suppose we should be? There'd be chaos."

"We won't tell anybody," began Handforth.

"I don't suppose you will—because you're not staying out!" interrupted Fenton. "Come along, my sons! No more of this nonsense!"

And the chums of Study D, their little plan ruined, were escorted back to the Ancient House by Fenton and Browne. The school captain did not leave the juniors until he had seen them into their dormitory.

"Now get to sleep like reasonable human beings," he said. "I've let you off this time, Handforth, but if you repeat the offence, I shall have to come down heavily. Bear that in mind."

He bade them good-night, and went.

"All moonshine!" said Handforth discontentedly. "Poof! It's still as hot as the dickens in here. How can we sleep in this atmosphere? It's stifling! I'm choking!"

Church and McClure paid no attention. As usual, their leader was grossly exaggerating. The dormitory was close, but there was no call for Handforth's grumbles. In fact, Church and McClure were beginning to feel glad that they had come back.

They undressed speedily and got into bed. It was only possible to bear a single sheet over them.

"Well, Fenton was jolly decent," said Church sleepily. "The wonder is he didn't give us detention for to-morrow afternoon."

"I'll bet old Browne influenced him," said McClure. "Browne's a good sort."

A sudden grunt came from Handforth.

"Where are my pyjamas?" he demanded.

"How should we know?" said Church, peering at Handforth's unadorned form in the gloom. "When I saw them last they were slung over the rail of the pavilion veranda."

"What!" roared Handforth.

"Didn't you bring them in?"

"No, I didn't!" said Handforth. "I thought you——"

"That's right—blame us!" said Church indignantly. "It's a pity if you can't look after your own giddy pyjamas! Well, you needn't worry. Nobody will pinch them. They'll still be there in the morning."

"And what am I going to do to-night?"

"Haven't you any other pyjamas in the drawer?" asked Mac. "Don't make such a

fuss, Handy! Take out a clean suit, and —"

"And lose those others, eh?" broke in Handforth. "Not likely! One of you chaps is going out to fetch them!"

"Don't be funny!" growled Church. "Blow your beastly pyjamas! You left them there through your own carelessness, and you can go and eat coke! Are we going to sleep to-night or not?"

Handforth breathed hard.

"All right, you faithless rotters!" he said fiercely. "I'll go and fetch those pyjamas, and I'll deal with you to-morrow!"

His chums sat up.

"Don't go out again to-night, Handy," urged McClure. "You'll only get spotted, and——"

"Rot! The prefects are all in bed."

"But the masters aren't!" said Church quickly. "And if you're caught a second time, you ass, you'll be flogged. Breaking bounds after lights-out is a serious business. No master will believe that you're only out to get your pyjamas."

Handforth considered for a moment.

"All right, I'll leave it for a bit," he conceded. "I'll wait until all the masters are sound asleep, and then sneak out. I'll have a nap till midnight, and go out then. Does that satisfy you?"

"Fine!" said Church.

"Absolutely brainy," commented McClure.

They were reassured. Their leader, of course, would fall asleep, and he wouldn't wake up until the rising-bell went—next morning. Handy had never been known to wake up at a given hour, just because he had made up his mind to do so.

But for once in a way he succeeded.

True, he didn't wake up till nearly one a.m.—and this was because he had gone to sleep uncovered, and the chill air of the night had effectually aroused him. He awoke, shivering.

"My goodness!" he breathed. "What's the time? Where the dickens are my bed-clothes? Who's been messing about?"

Then he suddenly remembered. He hastily donned a cricket-shirt and a pair of flannel trousers, then went to the window. The moon was up now, and the summer's night was perfect.

Handforth cogitated.

Perhaps it would be as well to leave those pyjamas over until the morning. It was a lovely night, but still—— He yawned. Yes, he'd get into bed again, and be up half an hour before the rising-bell, so that he could recover those pyjamas before anybody else was about.

He felt his way back to his bed, and accidentally put a hand on McClure's face en route. McClure gasped and sat up.

"What the—— That you, Handy?" he asked. "My hat! What's the time? What are you doing in those flannels?"

Handforth gritted his teeth.

"Just going out to get those pyjamas," he retorted promptly. "Didn't I tell you I'd wake up at midnight, and——"

He broke off as the school clock began to chime.

"One o'clock," said McClure with sarcasm. "You must have meant midnight according to Greenwich time!"

"Don't be funny!" retorted Handforth. "I shan't be long."

Never would he admit that he had forsaken the project, and that he had been on the point of getting back to bed again. There was nothing else for it but to go out on the mission.

"Here, hold on!" said McClure hurriedly. "You're not going out to that pavilion now, Handy, are you?"

"Yes, I am!"

"You silly ass, it's one o'clock in the morning!"

"I don't care about that," said Handforth, with all his characteristic obstinacy. "I said I was going—and I'll go! You chaps needn't trouble to get out of bed, I shall be back in ten minutes."

And off he went, leaving Church and McClure in a state of uncertainty.

"Oh, rats to him!" said McClure gruffly. "If he gets himself collared it's his own look-out, and it's quite likely that a master will be up and about on a perfect summer's night like this. One o'clock isn't too late for a master to be awake."

"Oughtn't we to go after him?" suggested Church anxiously.

McClure yawned, and turned over in bed.

"Oh, he'll be all right, I suppose," he growled. "Let's get to sleep again!"

In the meantime Handforth had crept silently downstairs, and had emerged from the Ancient House by means of the study window. Then, creeping cautiously round the West Square, he climbed the two pairs of gates, and found himself on Little Side.

Clink! Clang! Click!

Handforth paused, staring. A curious muffled sound of metallic blows was coming from the other side of the playing fields.

Handforth wondered what it could be. The moon was low in the sky, and just at present a few clouds obscured it. Everything was in deep shadow.

But, in spite of this drawback, Handforth managed to see two or three dim forms near the centre of the pitch. He caught his breath in. Who were they? What were they doing there?

Handforth was not the kind of fellow to leave things in doubt. He ran across the grass softly, making no sound as he progressed. He was going to investigate this mystery without any delay.

And, suddenly, there were one or two startled exclamations. He beheld the figures at close quarters now. Two of them were carrying spades, and another held a pickaxe. Handforth nearly reeled. Was it possible that some vandals were injuring the pitch? His brain tottered at the very thought of it. The Junior pitch was a



Handforth gave a startled exclamation when he saw the three figures at close quarters. Two of them carried spades, while the third shouldered a pickaxe. "Hi!" he shouted, as he ran forward. "What are you rotters doing here?" The mysterious trio suddenly rounded on him. "Hold him! Don't let him get away!" one of them snarled.

sacred spot. Hours—days—weeks had been spent in laboriously bringing that strip of turf to perfection.

"Hi!" said Handforth hotly. "You rotters! What are you doing there?"

He ran up, and a hissing voice sounded from one of the men.

"Hold him!" it came, in great urgency. "Don't let this young idiot get away! He'll rouse the whole school! Hold him—hold him!"

There was a clatter as the men allowed their tools to fall. And then, with one accord, they sprang upon Edward Oswald.

Crash! Biff!

Handforth hit out, and his blows went home. He fought desperately, for it suddenly occurred to him that he was absolutely outnumbered, and that he was alone.

"By George!" he roared. "I don't know who you are, but I'm going to smash you!"

And he fought on, vainly trying to see the faces of his opponents. But the gloom was so dense that he could not distinguish any features. He only knew that these men were strangers, and that it was up to him to show them what was what.

Unfortunately, Handforth's optimism was greater than his strength.

For the end of that battle was inevitable. There was a sudden rush, and Handforth found it impossible to cope with it. With a crash and a thud he was borne to the ground. He went over, sprawling, and the strangers fell upon him, holding him down. Panting heavily, they kept him there, and one of them held a cap over his mouth so that he should give no outcry.

"Bring him along!" was the tense voice. "We've got some rope over by the hedge."

And Handforth, dizzy and dazed, was carried swiftly along, helpless in the grip of these enemies.

And by this time Church and McClure had fallen asleep again, and were totally unconscious of their leader's predicament.

Two hours passed—three hours. Then, at about a quarter-past four, McClure awoke. It had grown rather chilly with the dawn, and Mac only had a sheet over him. He sat up sleepily, reaching for the single blanket. It wouldn't matter about the quilt. The blanket would be quite enough—

"My hat!" he said, with a start.

For, glancing across at Handforth's bed, he found that it was unoccupied! Daylight—and Handforth had not returned! McClure was wideawake in a second. He leapt out of bed and thumped Church heavily.

"Hi!" gasped Church. "What the——"

"Quick!" said McClure anxiously. "Handy hasn't come back!"

"Eh?" said Church, blinking. "Hasn't come back? But I didn't know he'd gone—— Oh, yes! You mean at one o'clock?"

"Yes!" said McClure, looking at his watch. "Great Scott, it's about twenty-past four! It's daylight, too! I'll bet the



Handforth gave a startled exclamation when he saw the three figures at close quarters. Two of them carried spades, while the third shouldered a pick-axe. "Hi!" he shouted, as he ran forward. "What are you rotters doing here?" The mysterious trio suddenly rounded on him. "Hold him! Don't let him get away!" one of them snarled.

silly fathead is sleeping out on that veranda, after all!"

"But he can't be!" protested Church. "He didn't take any blankets with him!"

"That wouldn't stop Handy!" replied Mac. "You know what a crazy fathead he is when he gets an idea into his head. Come on! Let's slip some things on and go and fetch him. Thank goodness we woke up so early. We shall probably be able to smuggle him back again, and nobody will be any the wiser."

They hastily dressed, and then crept down. They got out of their study window, and then ran lightly through West Arch and turned out of the Triangle. Their idea was to skirt round the Ancient House, and to reach Little Side without delay. But, as they passed the Ancient House steps they came to a sudden halt, amazed.

"My only Sunday topper!" gasped Church.

"What—what is it?" asked McClure, staring.

There was something on the Ancient House steps—a huge, cumbersome sack. And it



was filled with something. In point of fact, it was filled with Edward Oswald Handforth! What was more, Edward Oswald Handforth was gagged! A scarf was tied completely round his face, and nothing but his face was clear of the sack. All the rest of him was inside.

"What does it mean?" gasped Church, in alarm.

"Goodness knows!" said Mac. "Let's undo the poor chap!"

They ran forward, and with nimble fingers they unfastened the ropes that were completely encircling the sack. Then they drew their leader out, only to find that he was bound hand and foot. They released him, and were greatly relieved to find that he was still conscious and quite unhurt.

"Handy!" said Church breathlessly. "What's happened? How did you get like this?"

Handforth was making fearful grimaces as he stretched his cramped limbs.

"I don't know!" he said vaguely. "I've had a terrible time! When I went on to

Little Side I found that some men were there, messing about with the pitch!"

"You must have been dreaming!" said Church.

"I suppose I was dreaming when they shoved me into that sack?" demanded Handforth fiercely. "I don't know who they were, or anything; but they pounced on me, held me down, and then shoved me into that rotten sack and gagged me. Then they brought me here, and left me on the steps."

"Returned with thanks, eh?" grinned McClure. "I—I mean—Ahem! Poor old Handy!" he added hastily. "You must have had a terrible time!"

And, although they pressed him for details, he was unable to supply them. He did not know who his assailants had been—he did not know why he had been bound and gagged. But there was no doubt that his chums were more or less correct.

Edward Oswald Handforth had interrupted the mysterious labours of those strangers, and they, not desiring his interference, had rendered him harmless, and had returned him to St. Frank's with thanks! Or perhaps it would be better to say that they had returned him without thanks!

And the whole affair remained a complete puzzle.



CHAPTER 13.

NIPPER'S DISCOVERY!

NIPPER sat up in bed as the school clock was chiming the half-hour. The sun was shining dazzlingly through the window, and the air was filled with the bewildering song of numerous birds. Outside the morning looked too perfect for words.

"Half-past six!" said the Junior skipper briskly. "Good egg! Up you get, Tommy! Out of it, Montie!"

He relentlessly dragged the bedclothes from his chums, and they looked at him sleepily and with a certain amount of annoyance.

"Begad! This is too bad, Nipper, old boy," protested Tregellis-West. "The risin' bell hasn't gone yet—"

"Never mind the rising bell," put in Nipper cheerily. "Take a look out of the window. It's a sin and a shame to stay in bed on a morning like this. Besides, I've arranged to give Fullwood and Handforth and some of the others a shake. Yes, and Reggie Pitt bet me a ginger-pop that he'd be on the field before any Ancient House chap. Buck up! We can't let those West House fellows beat us!"

"Not likely!" said Tommy Watson, looking out of the window. "By jingo! You're right about the weather. It would be sheer wickedness to go to sleep again now!"

They dressed quickly and cheerfully. Then Nipper went down the corridor, and aroused a number of other juniors. It was cricket

practice this morning, and who could hope for better conditions?

Seven minutes later the chums of Study C dashed out of the Ancient House, looking business-like in their white flannels, and carrying cricket bats, balls and stumps, to say nothing of leg-pads. At the same moment Reggie Pitt, Jack Grey and two or three other West House juniors swept out of their own quarters.

"Buck up!" yelled Nipper. "We're first!"

There was a wild race for Little Side, and Nipper & Co. just won by a short head.

"That's a bottle of ginger-pop I owe you, old man!" grinned Reggie Pitt.

"Rats!" said Nipper. "It was a tie. Well, how goes it this morning? What price this for cricket weather?"

"And it's a half-holiday this afternoon," said Trotwood contentedly. "No big match on, though, worse luck! I wonder when——"

"What's that over there?" interrupted Nipper abruptly.

"Eh? What?"

"There!" said Nipper, pointing.

The others stared, struck by the skipper's sharp tone. There was nothing particularly extraordinary in the view. Little Side looked very much the same as usual. The pitch was green and smooth, and—— But what was that in the grass? A pile of earth, by the look of it!

With one accord the Removites ran forward, dropping their bats and other impedimenta as they ran. And then they made an amazing discovery.

There, on Little Side, perilously near to the sacred pitch, was a hole! A deeply-dug hole! There had been some attempt to fill it in, but nothing could disguise that ugly scar.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Tommy Watson breathlessly.

"Who's done this?" asked Pitt, in a startled voice.

"Either a lunatic, or somebody who owes us a grudge. I should think," said Nipper fiercely. "What a rotten shame! What a dirty trick! Thank goodness they didn't ruin the pitch itself!"

"But—but it's frightfully mysterious, begad!" said Sir Montie, gazing in wonder at the ugly hole through his pince-nez. "There's no object, dear old boys! Why should somebody come here in the middle of the night and create this damage?"

At that moment, Handforth & Co. came striding briskly on to the field. And when they saw that deep hole in the turf Handforth gave a sudden roar.

"Look at this!" he shouted, turning to Church and McClure. "So this is what those rotters were up to!"

"Which rotters?" asked Nipper sharply. "Do you know who did this, Handy?"

"Yes!"

"Who?" asked a dozen voices.

"I don't know!" said Handforth.

"You fathead! You just said you did!"

"Well, I know that some trespassers were here during the night, because I saw 'em, but I'd no idea they were up to a game like this," said Handforth excitedly. "We ought to tell the police——"

"Bother the police," interrupted Nipper. "When did you see these people?"

"At about one o'clock in the morning."

"Rats!" said Watson. "You must have dreamed it."

But Handforth explained the circumstances, and the others listened with growing mystification.



CHAPTER 14.

SOMETHING NEW!

It was impossible to arrive at any satisfactory solution.

Handforth's story sounded fantastic, and but for the positive corroboration of Church and McClure it is doubtful if the other fellows would have believed it. But they could hardly dispute the testimony of three witnesses.

The whole affair seemed so utterly senseless.

Why should anyone dig a hole in Little Side?

"I'll bet it was done by some rotter who has a grudge against us," said Fullwood. "That's the truth of it. Wellbourne, of the River House, perhaps. Or some of those village louts. They've done this for revenge."

"You've hit it!" said Watson fiercely. "We'll round them up, and smash 'em——"

"Steady on!" interrupted Nipper. "We can't smash them unless we have proof of their guilt. Besides, you're wrong, Fully. Those louts didn't do this. In fact, it wasn't done for revenge at all."

"How do you know?"

"Because the circumstances all point to something else," replied Nipper keenly. "If this mutilation of the playing field had been done for revenge, the perpetrators would naturally have chosen the pitch itself."

"They might not have found it in the dark."

"Oh, that's too thin," said Nipper. "It wasn't dark, either. Didn't Handy say the moon was shining? Anybody with half an eye could have found the actual pitch—moon or no moon."

"Well, if the outrage wasn't committed as an act of revenge, what's the explanation?" demanded Fullwood.

"I don't know," said Nipper thoughtfully. "The thing seems just crazy. I shall have to tell Fenton as soon as he comes out, and we ought to get the groundsman on the job. With a little care this place can be patched up."

Fenton was very concerned when he heard. All sorts of investigations were made, but nothing came of them. The generally accepted explanation was that the mutilation

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had been performed by some maliciously-inclined person unknown.

And immediately after prayers the subject was quite forgotten in view of an announcement by the Head. St. Frank's was thrown into a state of amazement and excitement.

"As the weather is so oppressingly hot just now, I have decided to conduct one or two experiments for the general comfort of the school," said Dr. Stafford. "This sort of weather has taken us by surprise—we are not quite prepared for such heat at the end of May. However, as the weather is so oppressive, we must do what we can to mitigate the conditions. A heat-wave is always more upsetting when it comes unexpectedly. I have been making various inquiries, and I understand that the class-rooms are apt to become oppressively hot and stuffy."

"Hear, hear, sir!"

"They were unbearable yesterday, sir!"

"It is not my wish that you should suffer unnecessarily," continued Dr. Stafford. "I can quite believe that the class-rooms become irksome during this hot weather—particularly in view of the fact that you are wearing Eton suits and stiff collars. This latter comment is intended, of course, for the Junior School."

"I have come to the conclusion that the open air would be beneficial to all concerned," pursued the Head. "This morning, therefore, we shall adopt an experimental plan. Instead of taking lessons in the class-rooms, you will work in the open air."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Hurrah!"

"Lessons in the open air, by jingo!"

"One moment!" shouted the Head anxiously. "I hope you will not look upon this as an excuse for slackness. The change is being made for your benefit, and I am trusting you to comport yourself with dignity and decorum. Another concession I favour will be in regard to dress. All boys who wish can discard their ordinary clothing, and substitute flannels and open shirts. I trust the school not to abuse these privileges."

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for the Head!"

"You mean, three cheers for Lady Honoria!" shouted Handforth.

"Hurrah!"

The cheers were given with a greater will than ever. For Handforth was not the only fellow who detected Lady Honoria's influence here. Without any question whatever, the headmaster's sister was responsible for the new order.

And Lady Honoria's popularity soared up by leaps and bounds.

Lessons that morning were eagerly looked forward to—instead of being loathed, as usual. And the various Forms, instead of trooping to their class-rooms, made for various sites in the open.

Flannels were the general order. Loose, comfortable flannels, with cool tennis shirts and blazers. Collars were dispensed with, and open necks were general. The school hadn't enjoyed such comfort in its whole history.

The Remove, by general vote, elected to take lessons in the Triangle, under one of the big chestnuts. The Fourth and the Fifth had vanished in the direction of the playing fields, and Mr. Sutcliffe took the Third in the grateful shade of the gymnasium.

Mr. Crowell was an outraged man.

He regarded the whole business as a farce. The master of the Remove was a great stickler for the proprieties, and even though he enjoyed the grateful coolness of the morning breeze, he would have preferred to endure the super-heated atmosphere of the Form-room.

For, as he had very truthfully prophesied, work was practically impossible. Out in the open air, away from all atmosphere of work, the juniors allowed their attention to stray continually.

Diversions came in a continuous stream. Visitors would arrive, and pause to have a good look at this unusual spectacle. Birds would constantly create distractions, and bees and other insects were on the job in earnest. To make matters worse, a considerable breeze had sprung up this morning, and the Remove spent half its time chasing papers across the Triangle, and retrieving them.

It all depended upon the point of view.

The Remove thought it was the finest morning's sport that it had had for many a day. Mr. Crowell suffered torture.

And in the middle of it all, Lady Honoria Dexter went round from class to class, triumphantly viewing the result of her handiwork. Knowing very little about boys, she honestly believed that the whole school was benefiting. And so it undoubtedly was—from the point of view of health. But when it came to a question of study, St. Frank's might just as well have been granted a whole holiday.



CHAPTER 15.

THE FRESH AIR CAMP!

"GOOD luck to Lady Honoria!"

That was the general comment after the different Forms had been dismissed for the day. For it was a

Wednesday, and a half-holiday.

"Let's hope this fine weather lasts for weeks!" grinned Handforth. "We shall have lessons in the open every day as long as this heat-wave persists. It'll be just like a long holiday!"

"Rather!"

"It's all very well, but poor old Crowell will be in his grave by the end of a week," said Nipper, shaking his head. "Lady Honoria has got the right idea, but it's a bit too sudden to be successful."

"Rats! It was the Head's plan," said Watson.

"That was just bluff," put in Handforth. "Lady Honoria put the ideas into his head, and he passed them on to us. After all, he's the big noise here, and he doesn't want

everybody to know that he's under his sister's thumb!"

"But everybody does know it!" grinned Reggie Pitt.

As soon as dinner was over, the juniors set about their various recreations for the afternoon. There was a cricket match among the juniors, but none of the prominent fellows was playing. Handforth & Co., for example, had arranged to take Irene and two of her girl chums for a run down to the river. And Handforth, resplendent in flannels, dashed off to the boathouse immediately after dinner. Church and McClure went with him.

"Everything's going well," said Handforth cheerfully. "The glass is still high, and I heard Lady Honoria saying that she means to stay on at St. Frank's for two or three weeks."

"Well, as long as she's here, we can be sure of some sport," grinned Church. "By the way, where did we arrange to meet the girls?"

"They're coming here," replied Handforth, looking at his watch. "And, by George, they're due, and we haven't got the boat out yet!"

"We'll let you do all the rowing, Handy," said McClure generously. "You're the Open Air Fiend, and rowing is one of the healthiest exercises under the sun. We wouldn't deprive you of the privilege for worlds."

"Not likely!" said Church stoutly.

Handforth regarded them with disdain.

"You can't bluff me like that, you fat-heads!" he said. "You chaps are going to

do the rowing, and I shall entertain the girls. I'm thinking about catching some fish, too."

"That's all it'll amount to," said Church, nodding.

"Eh?"

"You can think about it, but I wouldn't like to bet on the catch!" said Church, shaking his head. "I'm afraid you're not much of an angler, Handy. You're too noisy—and fish like quietness."

"Rats!" said Handforth.

He went into the boathouse, and emerged again carrying a truly wonderful fishing rod. Only a few days earlier he had purchased it cheaply from a local worthy in the village who had been short of cash. Handforth had got a bargain. That angling-outfit was a corker.

"I thought about giving it a good trial to-day," said Handforth importantly. "While you fellows do the rowing, I can fish and entertain the girls at the same time."

"Why not use a net, and drag for them?" suggested McClure sarcastically. "You silly ass! You can't catch fish unless you're on the bank, or unless the boat is still."

"What does it matter?" asked Church. "He'll catch just as many, whatever the conditions. Here come the girls, anyhow, so we needn't argue any more."

Irene & Co. arrived, looking radiant.

"Everything ready?" asked Irene cheerfully. "Doris and Marjorie have arranged to desert us after an hour, Ted. They're going off for a ramble with Reggie Pitt and Archie Glenthorne."

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"Just like those two fatheads to mess the afternoon up!" said Handforth. "I'm blessed if I'll let you go, you girls! They can take you for a rumble this evening! Although I'm blessed if I can see why you should want to ramble at all, on a hot afternoon like this!"

"We're going into the woods to look for ferns," exclaimed Doris naively.

"Ferns!" said Handforth, staring. "My only hat! I wouldn't give you tuppence for all the ferns in the world! You'd better stay in the boat, and help me to catch some fish. After we've caught them, we'll make a camp fire on the bank and cook them for tea."

"Never count your fish before they're caught," warned Irene.

They were soon off, and Church and McClure did very little work. There was no hurry; there was no particular place to go to, and they just allowed the boat to drift. Handforth was fooling about in the stern, casting his line, and generally making an ass of himself.

Irene seemed slightly disappointed. Edward Oswald gave the girls no attention whatever, and his idea of entertaining them was scarcely successful. He made a bad start by fishing out a can of worms and passing it round for inspection.

"Is that hour up yet?" asked Doris politely, after about five minutes.

"Long ago!" said Marjorie. "If you'll row us to the bank, we'll be going——"

"Oh, what rot!" said Handforth. "You're not going yet! I haven't caught any fish, and besides, we haven't been on the water for more than ten minutes."

He stared at Church, and an astonished look came into his face. Church was giving him a warning look, and making grimaces.

"What's the matter?" asked Handforth. "Got a pain?"

Church turned red.

"No, you ass!" he snorted. "But can't you chuck up that idiotic rot, and do something sensible? Throw those worms overboard! You'll never catch any fish!"

"Another word from you, my lad, and I'll put one of these worms down your neck!" said Handforth, forgetting, for the moment, that Irene & Co. were present.

But Church didn't forget it.

"I'd like to see you do it!" he grinned.

Handforth grabbed a worm and hurled it at his chum. Unfortunately, it flew wide, and fell on Irene. For the next few moments sundry screams rent the air, and the boat was nearly overturned. But in the end the worm was sent to a watery grave, and Handforth spent the next five minutes in apologising.

"It's no good, Ted—we want to go ashore!" said Irene coldly. "We thought you were going to take us for a row on the river. This fishing expedition is more than we bargained for. So you can——"

"Hallo!" interrupted Church. "What the dickens is all this?"

The diversion came at an opportune moment. Everybody turned and looked at the river bank ahead. There had been surprise in Church's tone, and there was ample reason for his astonishment.

The boat had just glided lazily round a bend of the river, bringing another reach into view. Just ahead lay Willard's Island, and practically opposite, on the meadowland which sloped gently upwards in the direction of the school, were dozens of tents.

A great camp was being erected.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth, staring. "What's the idea?"

"There's Lady Honoria there!" put in McClure. "I say, this is evidently one of her stunts. What on earth is she up to?"

They allowed the boat to drift and watched curiously. Men were busy about the camp—perspiring men in shirtsleeves. Tents were being erected with great speed, and the camp was growing enormously. And Lady Honoria Dexter was unquestionably superintending the operations.

What was she contemplating now? The Head's sister had only arrived at St. Frank's on the previous afternoon. Even her worst enemy would have been compelled to admit that she was a fast worker.

CHAPTER 16.

LADY HONORIA HAS HER WAY.



THE boat drifted past, and its occupants were none the wiser.

Handforth, of course, had been intent upon calling to Lady Honoria, and asking her for details. But she had vanished behind a number of the tents, and Church and McClure made no effort to row the boat towards the bank.

"Who is this Lady Honoria?" asked Irene curiously. "Of course, we've heard a lot about her, and we know she's your headmaster's sister, but we want to know more. What's she doing at St. Frank's?"

"Turning the whole place upside down, I should imagine," grinned Church. "My hat! She must be a handful, or the Head wouldn't let her have her own way. But this camp is a complete surprise. We didn't know anything about it."

Handforth gave a start.

"Why, of course!" he ejaculated, his eyes gleaming. "Isn't Lady Honoria the president of the Open Air Society? Hasn't she started branches all over the country?"

"And now she's going to start a branch here, eh?" asked Church.

"Of course!"

They were all intrigued by the possibilities.

"I wonder if she's going to get any of us chaps to join?" asked McClure at length. "I'm not sure I should like to. I'm always scared of these freak societies. Fresh air is

all very well in its way, but you can overdo it."

"Well, it's no good guessing, is it?" asked Doris practically. "If there's really going to be a club, we girls might join, too."

"There's not much chance of that," said Irene, shaking her head. "Miss Bond won't allow us to forsake lessons, and fritter our time away on these recreations. We've got to work, and stew in the class-rooms, too. We may look cool, Ted, but you can't always judge by appearances."

In the meantime, Lady Honoria was standing near the river-bank, watching the approach of Dr. Malcolm Stafford. The Head had come over at her express request, and he had already experienced his first shock.

The Head had known that a camp of sorts was to be set up, but the magnitude of this canvas city staggered him. When he joined his sister, his expression was one of alarm and consternation.

"My dear Honoria, this is impossible!" he exclaimed agitatedly.

"Which is impossible?"

"This—this enormous camp," said the Head, looking at the vista of tents.

"It can't be impossible, because it's here," replied Lady Honoria. "Do try to be sensible, Malcolm. The men will be all the afternoon before they have got the rest of the tents up."

"The rest of them?" ejaculated Dr. Stafford.

"Yes, I have planned everything for the reception of at least two hundred members of the St. Frank's branch," replied Lady Honoria calmly. "I want you to come and have a look at these tents—"

"My dear Honoria, this is simply ridiculous!" protested the Head. "And think of the cost! Have you no regard for poor Lucian's pocket? This camp must have cost an enormous amount of money."

"Never mind what it cost," replied Lady Honoria. "And as for having mercy on my husband's pocket, every penny of this expense is being borne by me. You seem to have forgotten, Malcolm, that I have money, too."

Her learned brother shook his head.

"I am afraid Lucian is very careless with you, Honoria," he said. "He should not allow you to indulge in these absurd fancies. I have already acceded to several of your requests, but I shall put my foot down strongly if you attempt to influence my boys with regard to this Open Air Society."

"Have you no regard for the health of your school?" demanded Lady Honoria sternly. "This morning the boys were happy. They were under the open sky, they were breathing the pure air—"

"And, incidentally, they were doing no work," said the Head grimly. "No, Honoria, this sort of thing can't go on. You descended upon the school without any warning, and—"

"I did so intentionally," interrupted the lady. "I know what you are, Malcolm, and being forewarned is being forearmed. I suspected that you would raise all sorts of unnecessary objections, and so I forbade Lucian to even write you of our coming. The boys will be happy here," she went on, looking round the camp beamingly. "It is really the most complete branch of the society I have yet organised. There is everything here. Tents, cooking utensils, beds, and—"

"Yes, Honoria, but—"

"I have no fear that I shall be unable to obtain the necessary membership," continued the Head's sister. "There is nothing like the appeal of the open air life. I shall admit boys from every section of the school, no matter what their age. All will be welcome."

"But, good gracious, have I no say in this matter?" demanded the Head. "I tell you, Honoria, that the whole idea is preposterous and impracticable. You may form as many branches of this society as you please, but I will not have my boys dragged in."

"They won't need any dragging," said Lady Honoria calmly.

"But what of their lessons?" asked Dr. Stafford desperately. "How do you suppose they can continue their studies if they fool their time away—"

"Fresh air is more important than lessons," interrupted Lady Honoria. "Health comes first, Malcolm. In any case, it is only a week or so to Whitsuntide, and then the school will go away for a holiday. What does it matter if the boys are released from their duties some days in advance?"

"What does it matter?" echoed the Head, staring. "Don't you realise, my dear, that you are suggesting a perfectly impossible state of affairs? You do not understand the routine of a Public school."

"I am glad I don't!" snapped Lady Honoria. "That is all to the good, Malcolm. The less I know of your hide-bound conventionalities, the better! How many more objections are you going to make? Have you no heart? Are you not willing to let these boys enjoy life in full measure?"

"Yes, but—"

"Do you intend to hinder and criticise me continually?" went on Lady Honoria, her jaw becoming firm. "Not that it matters in the least. I shall proceed with my pre-arranged plan, whether you approve or not. You had far better let me have my own way, Malcolm."

The Head groaned.

"There seems nothing else for it," he said in despair. "When a woman of your type makes up her mind, mere man is beneath consideration. My school stands for nothing. My dignity is a plaything in your hands. My very authority is flouted and ridiculed. I do not wonder that Lucian lets you have your own way! I imagine that it is the only possible method of gaining any peace!"

His sister looked at him coldly.

"You seem to be forgetting, Malcolm, that



The man struck Reggie Pitt a terrific blow between the eyes. As Reggie reeled back, the captive wrenched himself free from Nipper's detaining grasp and succeeded in making his escape. He did not realise, however, that in the struggle he had dropped the parchment, but that fact had not escaped the notice of the keen-eyed Nipper!

my husband is an important member of the St. Frank's board of governors," she said. "Furthermore, Lucian fully approves of my scheme, and is even anxious that the boys shall join the camp in great numbers."

The Head sighed.

"I can only conclude that Lucian has been deprived of all his spirit," he said wearily. "Upon my word, Honoria, you are a most determined woman. Much as I fear this programme of yours, it seems that I can do nothing to prevent it."

"Does that mean that you sanction the formation of this camp?"

"It means that I am helpless in the matter," replied the Head sombrely. "If you were not my sister, it would be a different matter. I cannot help thinking, Honoria, that you are taking an unwarrantable advantage of our relationship."

He strode off, highly incensed, and Lady Honoria smiled in triumph.

CHAPTER 17.

RALLYING TO THE BANNER.

"COMING?" sang out Bob Christine breathlessly.

"Eh?" said Handforth.

"Coming where?"

The Modern House Fourth-Former had paused on the towing-

path for a moment, and he was looking excited. Handforth & Co. were seated in the middle of the river. That is to say, they were seated in a boat in the middle of the river. And Handforth was supposed to be fishing. So far he had lost two worms.

Irene & Co. had been gone for an hour past, and the afternoon was wearing on. Church was asleep in the stern, and McClure was idly swishing his hand about in the water over the side of the boat. It was very pleasant on the river, in the shade of the willows.

"Haven't you heard?" asked Christine.

"Heard what?"

"About Lady Honoria."

"What about her?"

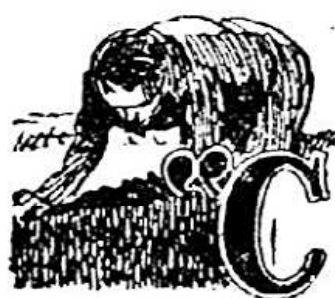
"Why, she's going to make a big speech in the Triangle," grinned Bob. "She's going to appeal for recruits. Members for her giddy Open Air Society, you know. It ought to be worth listening to. Come on!"

"I'm busy!" said Handforth coldly.

"He's feeding the fish!" explained McClure. "I expect he thinks the poor things are half-starved."

"You silly ass!" roared Handforth. "How do you expect me to get a bite when you keep swishing your paws about in the water? You're disturbing the fish deliberately."

"It doesn't help angling much if you yell like that, either," chuckled Bob Christine. "Better chuck it up, Handy, and come and



listen to the fun. You're a keen supporter of Lady Honoria, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'll come," said Handforth promptly.

He had been worrying about his bad luck, and this interruption would provide him with a good excuse for having caught no fish. Besides, he was keen to hear Lady Honoria's speech.

Church was rudely awakened by Handforth digging him in the ribs with one of the oars, and Church bitterly complained because the entire front of his shirt was smothered in mud. Handforth had just been using the blade of that oar on the bottom of the river.

"You silly ass!" said Church, in horror. "Look at me! Look what you've done! I'm an absolute sight!"

"I didn't do that!" said Handforth coldly. "You mustn't blame me for Nature's pranks."

"You insulting rotter——"

"Oh, dry up!" said Handforth. "We've got to go along to the Triangle, and hear what Lady Honoria's spouting about. There's something on this afternoon—something big!"

"There's something on the front of my shirt!" said Church bitterly. "It's a pity you can't wake a chap up decently, instead of smashing a lot of his ribs, and smothering him with mud. This is the last time I come out fishing with you!"

"It's not even the first time!" said McClure. "Who told you Handy's been fishing?"

"Hasn't he caught anything yet?" asked Church blankly.

"Only a couple of crabs, when he was rowing upstream half-an-hour ago," said McClure.

"Crabs!" said Handforth. "I never caught any crabs! You silly ass, crabs don't live in rivers!"

"Oh, he's hopeless!" groaned McClure. "He doesn't know that 'catching a crab' is only another name for rotten rowing!"

"If you accuse me of rotten rowing——"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Church. "Let's get to the bank before we have a row, for goodness' sake! Otherwise we shall have to swim ashore!"

Handforth simmered down, and his chums were relieved when they reached the safety of the bank. And before long they were hurrying across the meadows towards St. Frank's. Handforth suddenly paused, and stared.

"Well I'm jiggered!" he said. "There he is again!"

"Who?" asked Church.

"Lady Honoria's husband—Sir Lucian Dexter," said Handforth suspiciously. "There's something rummy about that bird! He's always on the prowl! Haven't you noticed the way he potters about, sticking his nose in everywhere? Look at him now?"

Church and McClure were impressed.

In the distance, the lean, bony figure of Sir Lucian Dexter was visible. He was only just in sight through a break in the trees, and he apparently believed that he was unobserved.

The monastery ruins were close at hand, and

Sir Lucian was doing strange things with his walking stick. He was tapping the ground, his whole attitude tense and alert. He seemed to be listening.

"What's he up to?" asked Handforth curiously.

"Seems to be sounding the ground for some reason," said Church. "In my opinion, the man's off his rocker. My hat! Look at him now! Did you see the way he dropped down on his hands and knees?"

Sir Lucian was giving every indication of lunacy. He was on all fours now, and crawling about excitedly. Now and again he would pause to tap with his stick. And, finally, he vanished behind a clump of bushes, and did not reappear. And this man was one of the school governors!

Edward Oswald Handforth was torn.

He badly wanted to hear Lady Honoria's speech, and he was equally anxious to creep to the monastery ruins, and to watch Sir Lucian Dexter. Already Handforth's vivid imagination was at work.

"He's not off his rocker!" he said grimly. "There's more in this than meets the eye, my sons! If you ask me, Sir Lucian is trying to find that underground passage—the one that used to run from the vaults to the old quarry. By George! That's it!"

"But what the dickens does he want with that underground passage?" asked Church, staring.

"That's what we've got to find out," replied Handforth firmly. "That's what we've got to investigate, my lads. Lady Honoria may be all right, but I'm jolly suspicious of her husband. He's probably making plans to put up some rotten buildings near the school, and he's making sure that the foundations are sound."

"Either that, or he's a coiner, looking for a den," said Church sarcastically.

"Fathead!" snorted Handforth.

They continued their way, and soon forgot all about the mysterious Sir Lucian. For the Triangle was thronged with cheering fellows. Most of them were juniors, but there was quite a sprinkling of Fifth and Sixth Formers. And all of them were grinning with complete enjoyment.

Lady Honoria Dexter was standing on the steps of the Ancient House, talking fluently.

She had discarded her mannish attire, and was now wearing a simple frock of silk, which did nothing, however, to disguise her bulk—particularly as the skirt was as short as a schoolgirl's.

"The Open Air Society is one of the greatest movements in the country," she was saying. "I have personally organised branches in Brighton, Bournemouth, Hastings, Eastbourne, and many other well-known places. I have now decided to bring the Open Air Society to St. Frank's."

"Hurrah!"

"We'll support you, Lady Honoria!"

"My camp is ready, and it only needs you boys to convert it into a thing of life," continued Lady Honoria. "I want you all to


~~~~~ NEXT WEDNESDAY ! ~~~~~

## "ST. FRANK'S IN CAMP!"

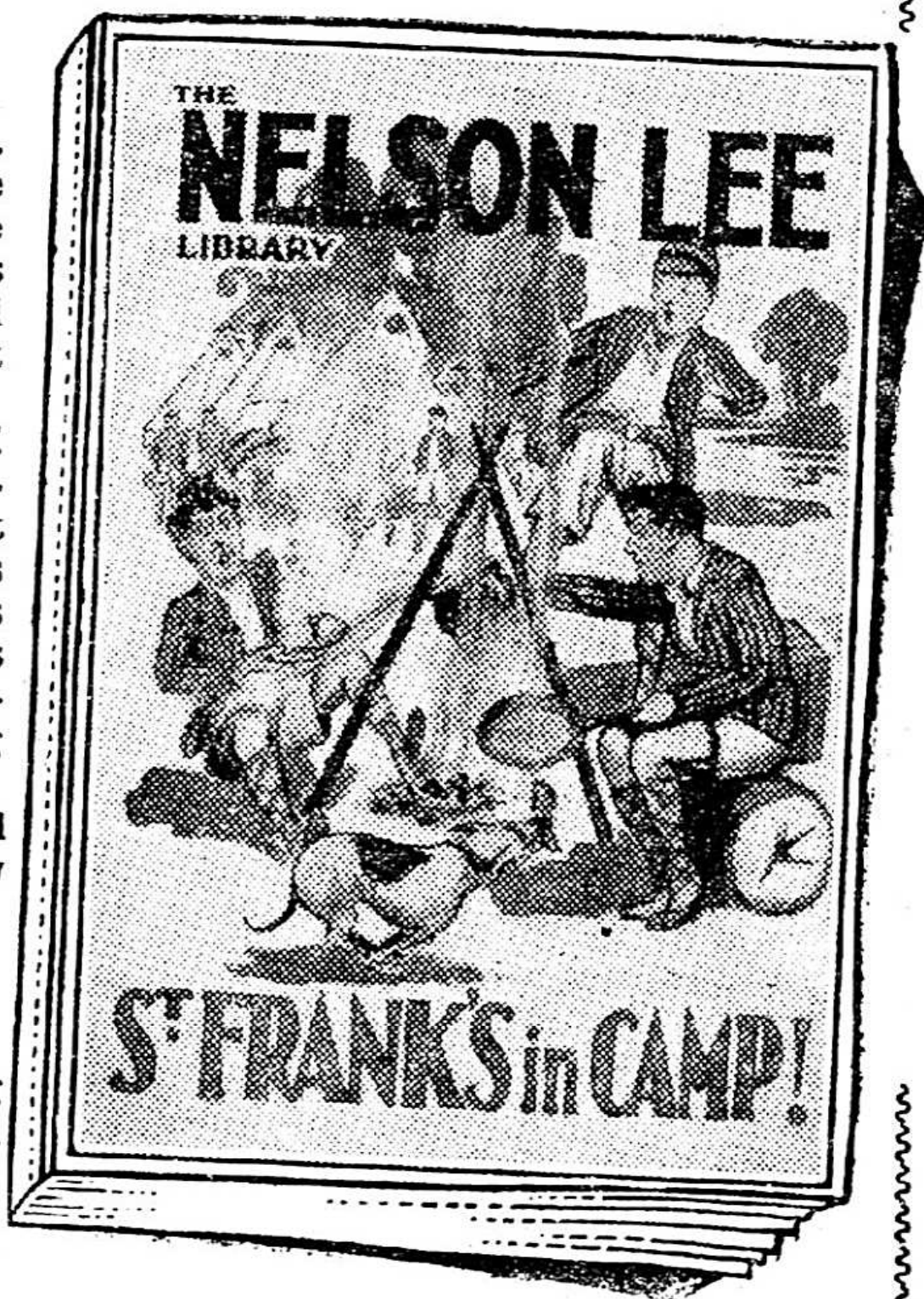
The Fresh Air Fiends under canvas. Handy insisting on eating only the food which he can catch or make with his own hands. He reckons that a nice, tasty rabbit is ideal for breakfast—but rabbits want catching!

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join—as many of you as possible! The Open Air Society has come to your door, and it paves the way to freedom and health!"

CHAPTER 18.

THE SIMPLE LIFE.



GUNDS pretty good, but where's the catch?" drawled Bernard Forrest.

"Catch?" said Gulliver.

"Of course, you simp!"

said Forrest. "Come and join the Open Air Society! Very nice, but what about the fees? You don't suppose you can join for nothing, do you? What about the cost of that camp, and the upkeep? I shouldn't be surprised if the old girl tries to sting the chaps to the extent of three or four quid a week!"

"By gad! I hadn't thought of that!" remarked Bell.

"But I had," grinned Forrest. "And I'm steerin' clear of this little game! I expect she'll get plenty of mugs to join up, though."

Handforth, who had come up just behind, had heard most of Forrest's remarks—for the

cad of the Remove had made no attempt to lower his voice. On the contrary, he had raised it. And Handforth was looking startled. He dragged Church and McClure back.

"An idea!" he whispered. "I believe Sir Lucian Dexter is a crook——"

"What!"

"Yes, and Lady Honoria is a fraud!" went on Handforth. "They've started this giddy camp as a swindle. The idea is to charge a huge entrance fee, collect all the cash, and then bolt."

"You—you silly fathead!" said Church. "What about the Head? Do you think the Head would have a sister like that?"

"No, she's an impostor," explained Handforth. "According to my theory, she's fooled him, and he thinks she's his sister, and she isn't. And he thinks Sir Lucian Dexter——"

"Oh, dry up," interrupted McClure. "There's nothing like that about it, Handy. The Head ought to know his own sister. I'm surprised at you for thinking of such a disgraceful idea! You're saying that one of the school governors is a crook!"

"He's not one of the school governors—he's impersonating him," explained Handforth.

"I believe the whole thing's a colossal wheeze to make money out of us——"

"Listen!" interrupted Church.

"That's a point you must not lose sight of," Lady Honoria was saying. "There will be no entrance fee of any kind, and no subscription. You are all at liberty to join the camp when and how you please. The Open Air Society provides everything free of charge."

"Is that what you call a fraud?" grinned Church.

"Well I'm blowed!" said Edward Oswald.

"Then I must have been wrong!"

"Go hon!"

"All the same, I still think——"

"Oh, dry up!"

They continued to listen, most of the fellows were now excited without being amused. The lady's declaration that there would be no entrance fee had come to everybody as a pleasant surprise. These camps generally charged high prices.

"You must remember that I am anxious to promote health and strength in the British public schools," Lady Honoria was saying. "The Open Air Society is at your service, boys, and once you have agreed to the rules and regulations of the camp, your only expenses will be for the provision of your own food. For every member must not only provide his own meals, but he must prepare them and cook them. That is one of the most stringent laws. Every member for himself! Help from any outside source is prohibited."

"But what about the camp, Lady Honoria?" asked Reggie Pitt. "Who's paying for all the tents, and everything else?"

"The society provides everything free," replied the president.

"And we don't pay anything at all?" asked a dozen voices.

"Nothing whatever," said Lady Honoria quickly. "Of course, this is a special camp, and therefore it has special privileges. You must remember I am your headmaster's sister, and that my husband is one of the Governors of this school. In a way, the camp might almost be called a part of St. Frank's. The camp is ready, and you can join within the hour, if you so wish."

"But what about school?" asked somebody.

"Every boy who joins the Open Air Society will naturally be excused all lessons," replied the Head's sister. "That, of course, is obvious. But the freedom and the open air life will be more beneficial than——"

But Lady Honoria could not proceed.

Over half the fellows in the Triangle were clamouring to join up.

They had learned two facts—two vital points. Firstly, it would cost no money to join, and secondly, joining would excuse them from lessons! There was a positive stampede.

"This sounds too good to be true," grinned Reggie Pitt, as he joined Nipper & Co. on the outskirts of the yelling crowd.

"Lady Honoria is a crank," smiled Nipper. "I suppose she's got pots and pots of money, and doesn't care how much it costs. These

people spend fortunes on their fads, you know."

"Are you going to join?" asked Pitt.

"Everybody else seems to be doing it, so why not?" chuckled the Remove skipper. "Anyhow, we might have a shot at it. It's not like leaving St. Frank's—we're still within earshot, so to speak. And who could think of anything more alluring than the Simple Life in this weather?"

"Glad to hear you say it!" put in Handforth enthusiastically. "Of course, we'll go round to the camp at once. We'll choose our quarters, and get established before the Head can squash the whole thing!"

Reggie Pitt grinned.

"Before the Head can squash the whole thing he'll have to squash Lady Honoria," he chuckled. "And, if you ask me, she'll need some squashing!"

Within the next half-hour there was a ceaseless procession of fellows travelling from St. Frank's to the Fresh Air Camp. Lady Honoria Dexter herself had preceded the throng. It was composed entirely of juniors—for the other Forms, as yet, hung back. Perhaps they felt that their dignity would suffer if they joined forces with this junior rabble.

Well over half the Remove gathered at the camp, and three-fourths of the Fourth turned up. The Third, under the leadership of Willy Handforth, arrived to a man. The Third had no dignity whatever to consider, and the Third regarded lessons as a totally unnecessary evil.

Then came the shock.

Everybody was handed a little printed membership form to be signed, and on this form the laws of the Open Air Society were briefly enumerated. The very signing of that paper pledged the member to honour every rule.

"What did I tell you?" said Bernard Forrest disdainfully. "Didn't I say there was a catch in it? I wouldn't join this giddy freak show for a pension. Just look at the laws!"

"I've looked!" said Gulliver, with a shudder. "Let's get back."

"What's the matter with them?" asked De Valerie. "I haven't got a membership form yet, and——"

"You can have mine," said Forrest generously.

"There's nothing wrong in this!" said De Valerie as he looked down the list. "Every member must work entirely for himself. He must lead the simple life strictly to the letter. He must fend for himself in every way. Well that's only what we expected, isn't it?"

"Rats!" said Forrest. "It simply means hard work!"

"If you join up you'll be crazy," said Gulliver. "You'll have to make your own bed, take your share in keeping the tent tidy, do your own washing up, sleep on a hard trestle, and goodness knows what else! You've even got to wear sandals!"

"Ye gods!" said Forrest. "Sandals!"

The cads of Study A went off disdainfully. The simple life had no appeal to them. A

considerable number of other fellows fought shy of the prospect of work, and some of the enthusiasm waned. However, fully a hundred juniors signed their names to those stringent laws, and the St. Frank's branch of the Open Air Society became a reality.



CHAPTER 19.

THE FRESH AIR FIENDS!

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE beamed contentedly round the comfortable tent.

"Somewhat ripe and fruity, Alf, old warrior!" he observed. "I mean to say, the good old simple life, and all that sort of thing. I don't absolutely know much about it, but we live and learn."

"Anyhow, you've signed on," said Brent cheerfully. "I suppose you read the list of rules before you signed your name?"

"The list of which?"

"Laws—rules."

"Absolutely not," said Archie. "As a matter of fact, laddie, I thought the good old sheet was innocuous. You don't absolutely mean to say that I've shoved the old signature to a legal document?"

Brent grinned.

"Well, it's not exactly a legal document, but you've pledged yourself to do a lot of work."

"Work?" said Archie reeling.

"For example, we've got to keep this tent in order entirely by ourselves," explained Alf. "We've got to do our own cooking, our own bed-making, and everything, in fact, necessary for the comfort of the home."

Archie looked rather relieved.

"You frightful fright!" he exclaimed. "Dash it, you caused the breeze to blow somewhat gustily at first, but it's ebbed away. I mean, Phipps will dash about and do the necessary. Phipps is a dashed useful chappie to have about the house."

Alf Brent sadly shook his head.

"You can't have Phipps," he said.

This time Archie clung to the tent for support. Phipps was his valet, and at St. Frank's he scarcely did anything without the assistance of his faithful man.

"Oh, look here!" he said firmly. "I mean to say, stop looking at the dashed infinite, and look here again. I mean, Phipps! Are you actually telling me, you chunk of Gorgonzola, that Phipps is disqualified?"

"A non-starter!" said Brent nodding.

"Oh, but this is too frightfully frightful for anything, old fright!" protested Archie Glenthorne. "How, I mean, am I going to dress?"

"You won't have much trouble in dressing," said Brent gently.

"But Phipps does everything, dash you!" said Archie. "What about pressing the priceless old bags?"

"There won't be any bags."

"Good gad! No bags?" gasped Archie. "Absolutely no nether wear? What about fancy waistcoats, neckties, and so forth?"

"No fancy waistcoats," replied Alf. "No neckties, and I'm not even sure about the so forth."

"Odds horrors and calamities!" said Archie, with a glassy look in his eyes. "Does this simple life business entail going about with nothing on but a girdle of grass?"

"Well, not exactly that, perhaps——"

"I mean to say, there's a limit!" protested Archie. "Upon the whole, old Arcadian, I rather fancy I'll give it a miss. I'll absolutely resign forthwith and go back to the good old humdrum."

"Can't be done," said Brent sternly. "You've signed the membership form, and you're in the society. But you needn't worry, you lazy fathead. This sort of life will do you good. It'll teach you to fend for yourself. Now let's go to the stores and get our clothes."

Archie followed Brent out of the tent in a daze. All this was new to him. He hadn't dreamed of such complications as this. He took about two paces, and then he leapt into the air like a frightened mustang.

"Steady!" said Brent, with a grin.

"Good gad!" gurgled Archie. "What is it?"

He stared dazedly at Handforth. The leader of Study D had just emerged from a neighbouring tent, and there was a great difference in Edward Oswald's appearance.

Archie had been surprisingly near the mark when he had referred to Brent as an Arcadian. For it so happened that Arcadian costume was the regulation dress of the Open Air Society.

Handforth was attired in picturesque shorts, with a loose tunic, well open at the neck. It was girdled round his waist, and his only other attire consisted of sandals.

"Odds frights and apparitions!" murmured Archie. "Alf, old lad, kindly whisper in my ear! Is it absolutely essential for me to appear publicly in such robes as these?"

Handforth frowned.

"You silly chump, they're the most comfortable things I've ever worn!" he said. "By George! Freedom! A chap can live in clothes like this! This simple life is going to suit me down to the ground."

Alf led Archie away, and the others chuckled. It appeared that there was a big supply tent at the rear of the camp. Here there were hundreds of such costumes of all sizes, enough to supply the whole school if necessary.

The tents themselves were exceedingly comfortable, and there were sets of cooking utensils in each.

The enthusiasm, naturally, was tremendous.

Not only were these campers in for a high old time, but all school work was forgotten. Being a Fresh Air Fiend was a pretty good proposition all round. Lady

Honorio's scheme was declared, by general vote, to be the brain-wave of the year.

"All the same, I can't quite get the hang of it," confessed Nipper, as he stood talking to Reggie Pitt and Ralph Leslie Fullwood. "It's all so easy. Lady Honorio has given us a free hand. She's invited us to join, and she has evidently persuaded the Head to countenance the project. But why?"

"Because she's cranky on fresh air, I suppose."

"That sounds plausible, but I'm wondering if there's something behind it," said Nipper, frowning. "Just think of the money this must have cost. These tents—all these costumes—the camp beds and the cooking utensils. Thousands, my sons—thousands of pounds."

Pitt nodded.

"Yes; but Sir Lucian is rich, and I suppose his wife has got money of her own, too," he said. "You know what these people are when they get these ideas. Why, I heard that Lady Honorio spent three or four thousand pounds over an electioneering campaign—and then she didn't get a seat! She contested another constituency later on. They don't care how much they spend, these fanatics."

"Well, you can call her a fanatic if you like; but I think she's worthy to be the sister of the Head!" grinned Fullwood. "Anyhow, St. Frank's is pleased to welcome her and take her to its heart!"



CHAPTER 20.

A MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT!

UPPER was a cheery, boisterous meal.

Everybody was in the highest of spirits, the evening was calm and cloudless, and appetites were razor-edged.

Tea, of course, had been completely missed owing to the general excitement, and there was something novel in the rules for eating. In most camps there was a general sort of kitchen, with a special staff of cooks.

But here, in this stronghold of the Open Air Society, every fellow was compelled to prepare his own meal. Even when the three fellows shared one tent, such as Handforth & Co., it was against all the rules to lump the food together. Church had to use his own utensils, Handforth his, and McClure his. It was the same with all the others. Every member was provided with the necessary utensils.

The majority of the juniors, of course, found no difficulty in attending to their own individual food wants. A junior schoolboy can generally be trusted to look after his own stomach.

But there were one or two sorry exceptions.

Archie was in a pitiful plight, and the redoubtable Handforth was not much better off. For Handforth's usefulness about the place amounted to nil. Deprived of the services of

Church and McClure, he was like a ship without a rudder.

The society's rulings on the food question was an excellent one. For it necessarily compelled every member to make himself useful. There could be no possible palming-off of work on to the shoulders of good-natured companions. No work meant no food—and no comfort, either.

Handforth made an awful hash of his supper. He started off with a bang, however.

"I'm going to show you chaps just how to cook," he said, as he and his chums sat round their own camp fire. "I don't know what you're having for supper, but I've decided to make a Welsh rarebit."

"Why go to all that trouble?" asked Church. "What's the matter with bread and cheese? I'm hungry enough to eat the rind. Bread and cheese, washed down with tea, will do for me."

"Same here," said McClure.

But Handforth laughed their suggestion to scorn.

"Where's the merit of eating bread and cheese?" he asked. "We're in camp, and half the joy of camp life is provided by cooking your own giddy meals. Think of your appetite when the stuff's ready to eat."

"All right, go ahead," said Church.

The juniors had not failed to secure plenty of supplies for supper and breakfast, and simple articles of diet had been mostly favoured. Bread and cheese, indeed, had been in tremendous demand.

"Now, where's the frying-pan?" said Handforth briskly. "There's nothing like a good Welsh rarebit for supper."

"Finest thing in the world to promote nightmares," agreed McClure, nodding.

"Rats! Cheese is all the same whether it's raw or cooked," said Handforth. "Now you break the cheese up, and shove it in the frying-pan, and in two or three minutes the stuff's ready."

Handforth's idea of a Welsh rarebit was primitive. He put half a pound of cheese in the frying-pan, broken into small lumps, and then he allowed it to melt. As a matter of fact, it caught fire, and by the time it was ready for the toast Handforth suddenly remembered that toast was essential.

So he made the toast, and then discovered that the cheese was a parched, black mass in the bottom of the frying-pan. In the end he threw it away, and had to be content with dry bread and tea, since he had used all his cheese, and it was against the rules to borrow food from anybody else.

"You can grin!" he said to his chums, as he munched his bread. "But wait until to-morrow. I'll show you how to lead the simple life to-morrow. This open air stunt is a great wheeze, and it'll make us as strong as horses."

Church and McClure were glad when darkness descended, and they turned in. They had had so much time on their hands that they had hardly known what to do with it.

It was so unusual to be freed from the responsibility of looking after Handforth.

Just before retiring to his own tent Nipper had a private word with Reggie Pitt.

"Feel like turning out at about midnight?" he said softly.

"What on earth for?" asked Reggie, with a keen glance. "Some jape, eh? A raid on St. Frank's, or something?"

"Not exactly," replied Nipper. "A bit more serious than that. I'm thinking of those mysterious marauders who dug a hole in Little Side last night."

"By jingo! You think they'll come again?"

"I don't think anything—but there's no reason why we shouldn't do a little investigating," replied Nipper. "Anyhow, I'm going to be on the scene with Watson and Tregellis-West."

"I'm your man, then," said Pitt. "I'll bring Grey, if you like."

"Good!" nodded Nipper. "We'll meet on the towing-path, and if you're not there by five-past-twelve we'll come and dig you out."

And they went off to their respective tents.

The Open Air camp settled down peacefully. Nobody from St. Frank's had disturbed Lady Honoria's protégés since they had come. Many of the fellows had expected a visit from Mr. Nelson Lee or Mr. Beverley Stokes, the Housemasters of the Ancient House and West House respectively. The Head himself had been expected, too. Many juniors had predicted that Dr. Stafford would come along and order them all back. But the Head knew enough about the warlike Lady Honoria to leave her well alone!

For she herself was in camp. She had a special tent to herself, set apart from the others. Sir Lucian, it seemed, preferred to stay in the school, for he had no sympathy with this Simple Life.

By midnight the whole camp was slumbering, with the exception of Nipper. He aroused himself as the chimes from the school clock came floating over the meadows—to be echoed, a moment later, by the chimes from Bellton church.

Nipper softly aroused Watson and Tregellis-West, and they lost no time in dressing. On the towing-path they found Reggie Pitt, Jack Grey and Fullwood.

"I heard these chaps getting up, so I joined in the fun," explained Fullwood. "I say, do you think there's any chance of spotting anybody?"

"There's just as much chance of spotting them as there is of not," replied Nipper. "People don't dig up cricket fields unless there's some object at the back of it, and they don't seem to have accomplished much last night. All ready? Come on! And don't forget—complete silence!"

They set off across the meadows, and made a wild detour so that they would approach Little Side from the further end, where there were plenty of thick trees to screen them.

There was a gentle wind, but it was quite insufficient to drown any noise, should they

make one. So extreme caution was the order. The moon was shining, and the playing fields looked ghostly and indistinct. There was not the slightest sign of any living thing.

"We'll take up our positions, and lie low," murmured Nipper. "We may have to wait half-an-hour, or it may be an hour. Anyhow, don't get impatient—and don't try to talk to one another."

"Supposing nothing happens?" breathed Watson.

"If nothing has happened by two o'clock, we'll join forces again, and go back to camp," murmured Nipper. "Is that understood?"

It was, and the watchers took up their various positions.



CHAPTER 21.

THE MYSTERIOUS PARCHMENT!

WHAT'S that?"

Tommy Watson felt a hand close over his arm warningly as he uttered the soft whisper.

"Hush!" came a breath from Nipper. "Don't talk, you ass!"

They continued to watch. The school clock had just chimed the hour of one, and so far nothing had happened. The wind had died down, and the whole countryside was still and peaceful.

Tommy Watson's question had been justified. For on the other side of the playing fields some figures had appeared. There were three of them. Three indistinct, noiseless figures. For some little time they moved about in an uncertain manner.

At this distance it was impossible to distinguish who they were, or what their character was. Were they boys, youths, men? It was impossible to tell. Once or twice came a few faint whispers, but no words could be distinguished.

But there remained no doubt on one point.

These were the same people who had been there the previous night. For, after a little more of that uncertain prowling to and fro, the sound of a pickaxe came to the ears of the watching juniors.

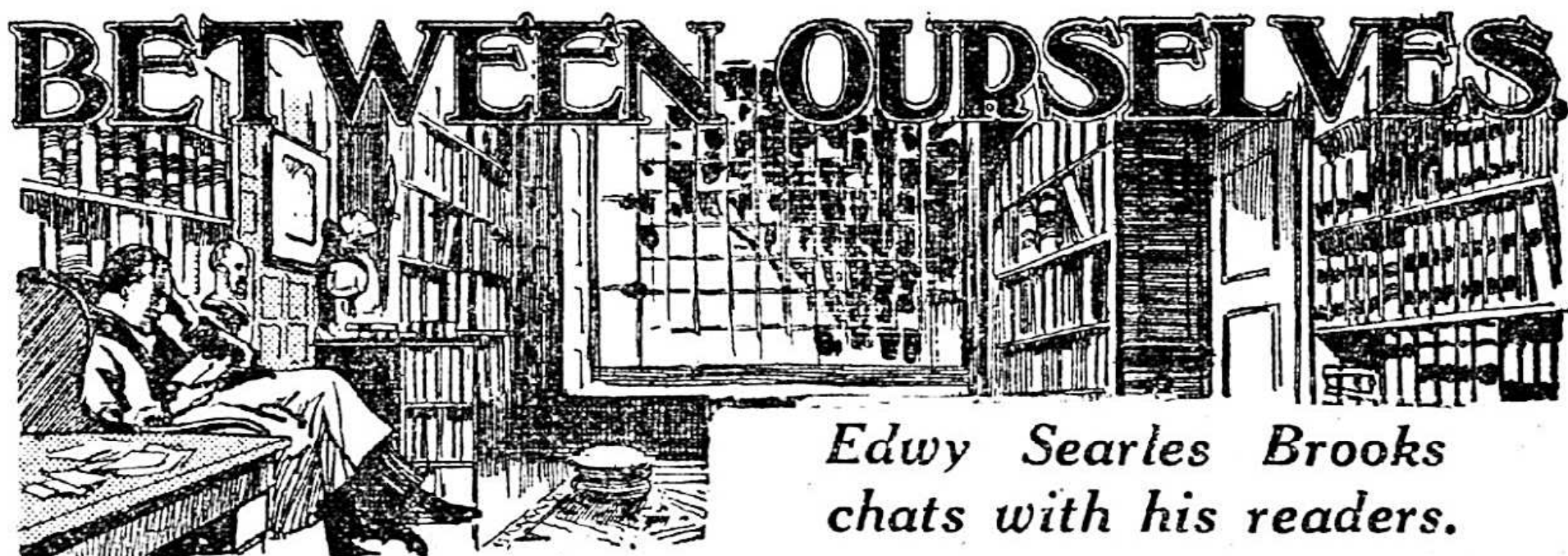
Thud, thud! Clink, clink!

There was no mistaking the metallic ring.

"What are we going to do?" whispered Tommy Watson fiercely. "They're at it again, Nipper? They're digging up the pitch!"

"No, it's not the pitch," said Nipper. "They're well to the left of it. But we shan't give them time to do much damage. You stay here, old man. I'll creep round and give instructions to the others. At a sign from me, we'll make a sudden run, and they'll never be able to escape before we're

(Continued on page 41.)



*Edwy Searles Brooks
chats with his readers.*

NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed to EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Every letter will have my personal attention, and all will be acknowledged in these columns. Letters of very special merit will be distinguished by a star, thus, against the sender's name. Communications which indicate writer's age are naturally easier for me to answer.—E. S. B.*

Oliver Evan Griffiths (Watford), Paddy Roche (Melbourne), Fred J. Potter (Biggleswade), Terence Sullivan* (Eastbourne), J. Cutting (Portsmouth), Cecil Algernon Davies (Ton Pentre, Rhondda), Hughie John Roberts (Morfa-Bychan), "Master Hopeful" (Coventry), Denis Rafferty* (Clonmel), "Query" (Ipswich), Hubert Kelk (Worksop), Victor Cole (West Croydon), Paolo Zuccerelli (East Grinstead), Dorothy Harvey (W.I.)

* * *

First of all, to keep my promise to you of last week, Charles Temple Browne. That was a great suggestion of yours—that one about doubling the size of the Old Paper, and charging 4d. for it. Readers like you would be jolly pleased—and would think it the finest innovation that we have ever brought out. Unfortunately, there are many readers who haven't a large supply of weekly pocket money, and 4d. a week would be rather too much for them. And we must remember these chaps, you know. So I rather think the price will remain at 2d., and the size as it is. And here's another very important point—in fact, the most important point of all. I am gratified to know that you like my stories so much—but if they were double the length, you might get fed up with them! Enough is as good as a feast, you know.

* * *

I hope you have joined the League by this time, Fred J. Potter. By the way, if you happen to purchase your copy of the Old Paper from Mr. A. G. Ostler (late E. V. Evans), of 3, Stratton Street, Biggleswade, you might possibly discover that Mr. Ostler and I are well acquainted. To tell you the truth, Mr. Ostler was once my own newsagent, and if you are very curious, he might even tell you what brand of cigarettes I usually smoke!

* * *

Fullwood was the first skipper of the Remove, J. Cutting. He was the captain when Nipper arrived at St. Frank's, and it did not take Nipper long to oust him—for at that time Fullwood was a rotter. The average age of the Removites is about 15. Thanks for that little sketch you sent me. It is a really splendid effort. But I would much prefer to see one that is quite original—

and not copied. Then I shall be able to judge whether you can really draw. Copying, remember, is a very, very different proposition to creating. So let's see what you can do, old man.

* * *

Yes, Paolo Zuccerelli, of course you can rely upon the adverts. in the Old Paper. If it wasn't for your name, I might think you were Scotch! Now I shall probably get lots of indignant letters from Scottish readers, asking me what the dickens I mean. Only my little joke, of course. For Scottish people, after all, are only thrifty so that they can be generous. That's right, isn't it, you Scottish chaps?

* * *

I think you'd better have a look at that paragraph of mine above, Dorothy Harvey—the one addressed to Charles Temple Browne. You say that one "Nelson Lee" a week isn't enough. Well, if there were two it would amount to the same thing as increasing the present one to double its size. And what about poor me? Don't you want me to get any sleep? Mustn't I have a walk round the garden now and again, or go to the pictures? If I had to write two of these yarns every week I should be a worn-out wreck in next to no time.

* * *

I always endeavour to make my yarns easy to read—but that doesn't mean to say that they're easy to write! In fact, it's a general axiom that when a story is particularly easy to read, it has cost its author much time and worry. So if ever you find any of my yarns jolly hard to read—well, you'll know that I must have been careless in my work, or something like that!

Edwy Searles Brooks

Thrills Beneath the Ocean!***Our Amazing Adventure Serial!***

The BURIED WORLD!

By LIONEL DAY



INTRODUCTION

Jim Maitland lives in a small shop in Stagmore. A mysterious man named Stanislaus Cripps owes money to the shop, and Jim determines to collect it. He climbs over the wall of Widgery Dene—Cripps' estate—and drops into the grounds. There he finds an amazing machine which is something between a submarine and an airship. Mr. Cripps is on board and Jim asks him for the money. The man refuses to pay, and before Jim realises it he finds the machine in the air! It travels half over the world, then dives into the ocean. It reaches the bottom, and then, instead of resting on the bed continues going downwards! It is then floating on the surface of an underground river, and Mr. Cripps explains that there must be a sort of leak in the ocean bed and they are being sucked down to the centre of the earth. They stop the machine and come on deck. But as they appear they are captured by several

amazing giants who fall on them from the shore. Jim escapes and later saves the life of a little man called Masra. In return Masra and his daughter Tinta let him live with them. Jim finds himself among a colony of dwarf men who are called the Kru people. They are at enmity with the Giants. Jim, accompanied by Masra and Tinta, rescue Mr. Cripps. To do this, Masra has to desert from the Kru people. The four set out on a journey to the Cave of Fire, where dwells He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken, the mysterious personage who rules the Kru. He tries to kill Tinta, and Cripps, to save her life, is forced to shoot him. The four intrepid adventurers then return, but find that the Kru seem to have disappeared! The three men take turns of sentry-go, and when Masra wakes Jim he says: "I fear some evil may have fallen upon my people!"

(Now read on.)

Mr. Cripp's Decision!

WITH Masra's foreboding words still in his ears, Jim began his period of sentry-go. In the corridor, out of which the sleeping apartments opened, there was fixed one of those curious instruments by which the Kru gauged the passing of time. In its primitiveness, it was not unlike the candles that King Alfred employed to divide the day up into hours.

A tall, narrow vessel was so placed that it caught the drops of water that dripped from a fissure in the rocky roof above. On the surface of the water so collected was a float, attached by a string, that passed over a wheel, and hung down on the outside of the jar. To the extremity of this other end was fastened a strip of yellow metal.

As the water rose in the vessel, so the metal bar descended down the side of the jar, which was marked out into spaces, each space representing a division of time. One of those divisions, Jim knew, from having tested it by his watch, roughly represented an hour.

Marching up and down, exploring the adjacent apartments, listening for any sound that might suggest the approach of one of the Kru, Jim carried out his term of duty. When the metal

bar of that water clock had descended one of those graded spaces, he turned back into the room and roused his companions.

Stanislaus Cripps sprang from his couch like a giant refreshed. It was difficult to imagine that such a short while before he had been so weak and exhausted that he could hardly raise his hand to his face.

"Seen anybody or anything?" he inquired.

"Not a soul, sir."

"That's curious, boy. Perhaps they're ashamed to meet us after the way they treated us. Well, if the mountains won't come to Mohammed, Mohammed, after he's breakfasted, must go to the mountains."

Tinta, who had also risen, prepared the food, and, squatting on the floor, they began to eat. Jim, glancing now and again at the faces of his companions, saw that even Stanislaus Cripps' iron features bore unmistakable signs of their recent dreadful adventure. He himself had the feeling that he had suddenly passed from boyhood to manhood. He caught Tinta watching him with a question in her eyes.

"What is the matter, Tinta?" he inquired.

"I was thinking how brave and wonderful you and the Hairy One are, how much you have risked

for my sake—the journey to the Caves of the Fires—the speaking to He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken face to face—and death beyond the gates, which the Hairy One scattered by his magic.”

She gave a little sigh.

“There will be more dark paths that you’ll have to tread, O Krim! There is evil here in the Inner Cavern. There is a shadow upon my people.”

She shivered as if with the cold.

“He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken is no more. The voice will not be there to order and direct. Already they are forgetting the law and the custom. Never yet have I known those who tend the cattle and gather the food to leave their posts until their term of duty was over.”

“What’s that you’re saying, my dear?” Stanislaus Cripps inquired with his mouth full.

She repeated what she had just said to Jim.

“The cattle will die, O Hairy One, if they are not looked to, and the food will rot and grow foul if it is not gathered. And how will the Kru live then? The Falta have taken from them the fish that come by the great drain. They will die miserably.”

Stanislaus Cripps reflected for a moment on her words, and then, turning to Masra, inquired what he thought of the position.

“There is wisdom in what Tinta says. A madness must have seized upon the Kru, if they leave the cattle untended and the food ungathered.”

“It seems to me, boy, that it is a case of the sheep without a shepherd,” Stanislaus Cripps exclaimed. “I had to kill that very self-satisfied person down in the Cave of Fires—a regrettable necessity—and in doing that we would seem to have knocked the keystone out of the arch of the Kru’s domestic system. There being nobody to tell them what to do, they don’t do it. I shall have to take hold of this business.”

He finished his meal hastily, and then, rising, began to don his armour, ordering Jim and Masra to follow his example.

“As soon as the opportunity occurs, my dear, we must get you one of these costumes,” he remarked to Tinta. “In your present defenceless condition, you are not only a danger to yourself, but to us. Now, if you’re ready, we’ll be moving.”

“Are we going to find the Flying Submarine?” Jim inquired.

He desired no more adventures. His one ambition was to get safely aboard the Flying Submarine—to ascend the great shaft and escape into the outer world of sunshine.

“Not yet, boy. We shall have to reorganise the Kru first. I expressed myself strongly to He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken regarding his methods of government: it is now up to me, boy, to demonstrate that I can do better than he did. We cannot allow the Kru to perish for lack of proper discipline.”

The Submarine in Danger!

WITHOUT another word Stanislaus led the way out of the chamber into the corridor, and in single file they proceeded down along the network of tunnels. They had been walking for some twenty minutes, when suddenly Cripps halted.

“What is that?” he demanded.

From somewhere ahead of them came a faint murmur, not unlike the humming of a swarm of bees.

“The Kru are in the Hall of the People,” Tinta exclaimed. “It is their voices you hear, O Hairy One.”

“Making a dickens of a row, my dear. How do we get there?”

“We have to turn here to the left, and then, when we gain the corridor beyond, it is but a

few paces to the door. But, O Hairy One, do not run into danger.”

“I wanted an opportunity to speak to your people, Tinta, and this seems just the chance I’ve been looking for.”

He marched coolly down the passage to the left and turned into the corridor that ran at right angles. Now they could see the curtained doorway through which they had passed on the memorable day when they had rescued Tinta from execution.

That distant murmur, as of a hive swarming, had grown to a very babel of sound that died away abruptly into dead silence. A man’s voice became audible, speaking in ringing tones.

“To-day, O Kru, after the gathering of the food, my feet were led into this Hall of the People. I was here alone, and I prayed to He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken, the Lord of the Spirit of Life.”

Again those tumultuous sounds reached their ears.

“It’s what the reporters call cheers,” Stanislaus Cripps whispered. “Who is it speaking, Masra?”

“I know his voice well, O Hairy One. It is Ka-Ra. He is a great speaker of the thing that is not.”

Stanislaus Cripps grunted. Again that tumult died down, and once more they heard Ka-Ra speaking.

“I will tell you, O my brothers, what my prayer was, so that you will know I speak truth. With my head bowed to the ground I used these words: ‘O He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken, four times has the food been gathered and renewed, and yet you have sent us no counsel. The people murmur and are afraid. Speak to me, O He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken—speak, I beseech you, to thy servant, that he may give a message to thy people who know not what to do without thy guiding voice.’”

“This is very interesting, boy,” Stanislaus Cripps exclaimed. “This Ka-Ra seems to be going in for politics.”

“Then, O Kru, even as I prayed with all my heart and soul in those words which I have just recited to you, there came his voice,” continued Ka-Ra. “Many times have you heard it, but coming as it did then after it had been silent for so long, it sounded to me even more wonderful and beautiful than ever.”

As he paused with dramatic effect, several voices called out at the same moment:

“What was the message He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken gave to you, O Ka-Ra?”

“I will tell you, my brothers. I will give even the words that He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken deigned to use. They are engraved upon my mind for ever like the markings on the rocks. This is the message of which he made me, the most humble and unworthy of the Kru, the bearer.”

“Bless us, the fellow knows all the tricks of the trade,” Stanislaus Cripps muttered. “False humility—the art of suggesting something without saying it! As he can’t have learned it anywhere, he must be a politician by instinct.”

“Through the rocky void from the heart of the Cave of the Fires,” went on the voice, “He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken spoke thus to me: ‘O Ka-Ra, I grow weary of leading the Kru people. For countless ages I have tended them and looked after them like a father. Now the end has come. I have meted out justice to the girl Tinta, and the man Masra, and the two Shining Ones that you sent to me at my bidding. Now I have finished.’”

From behind the curtain there went up a groan of horror. Again Ka-Ra’s voice was raised.

“Tell my people, whom I have loved, not to be down-hearted or afraid. I have set their feet firmly on the path that they must follow. The

fact that they no longer have me to guide them need not cause them to dread the future. For lo, I have given them one to lead them who will speak with my voice, and whose wisdom will be my wisdom—even you, Ka-Ra.”

“Of all the unblushing liars!” Stanislaus Cripps exclaimed. “Masra, this fellow seems to have well deserved his reputation of saying the thing that is not.”

From within the hall came the sound of the Kru chanting their acceptance of their new leader.

“Hail to thee, Ka-Ra, who speaks with the voice of He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken, whose wisdom comes from the Master of the Spirit of Life. Thy word shall be our law. What thou sayest, that will we do.”

“It is well, O Kru,” Ka-Ra’s voice came again after that chant had died down. “Harken now to what I say. There were among us one Tinta and her father Masra, on whom He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken has done justice. Let their names be ever accursed among you. And the two Shining Ones, who sought to set aside the word of He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken, and have perished miserably, they brought certain things with them—strange magic. Even now in the Outer Cavern there floats the Flying Thing by which they came into our land. We must capture it. Then shall we be masters of the Outer Cavern and Lords of the Falta!”

Attacked By the Falta!

APPARENTLY the thought of the Kru playing havoc with the Flying Submarine was too much for Stanislaus Cripps, for with a growl he flung back the curtain and strode into the packed hall. Jim thrust Tinta into the place behind him, and with himself and Masra in the rear they walked straight to the centre of the arena.

Their entrance created a sensation. Of a sudden that vast audience became spellbound. Not one of them moved as those three shining figures and Tinta passed swiftly down the gangway that gave admission to the open space in the centre of the hall. Only Ka-Ra, who stood there, was unconscious of their presence. With folded arms he continued to address his audience in a majestic, imperious tone.

“These Shining Ones are no more. He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken has told me so. But their magic remains; it is on the Flying Thing that floats in the Outer Cavern.”

So far had he got when Stanislaus Cripps stepped on to the stone by his side, and, with one sweep of his armour-clad arm, sent him flying headlong to the floor.

“You lie!” Cripps exclaimed. “Do you imagine that a man of my eminence and attainments can be destroyed as you would destroy a pig?”

From the closely packed hall a sigh went up like the wind playing in the topmost branches of a forest. Ka-Ra was looking up from the ground at Stanislaus Cripps, a ludicrous expression of terror and chagrin on his face. And, even as that pause of astonishment lasted, Tinta, Jim and Masra joined Stanislaus Cripps on the stone.

The Kru had been dazed by the sudden appearance of the three figures in their shining armour, but at the sight of Tinta—the girl who had been sentenced to death and yet by some miracle was still alive—their feelings of rage and hate got the uppermost hand. With a wild demoniac roar, they raised their arms above their heads and hurled at her cursing and denunciations. Stanislaus Cripps turned and touched Tinta’s arm.

“Never mind, my dear. They don’t know what they’re talking about. Leave it all to me. I’ll see you righted.”

From the belt about his waist he took the cylinder that projected the sleeping gas. Waving it in front of his audience meaningly, he waited a moment. Instantly those nearest him drew back. For a moment a panic threatened. There was a rush towards the door, stayed only by Stanislaus Cripps.

“Kru,” he shouted, “listen to me.”

As he spoke he returned the cylinder to its place in his belt. It had served its purpose. He had “got” his audience.

“That man there, Ka-Ra, is a liar and the son of a liar! He was telling you that He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken had left to him the leadership of his people. But a short time ago he declared that he had this communication. Well, he can’t have had. Four times since the food was gathered and renewed, I was speaking face to face with He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken. He proposed to put to death this girl Tinta who is under my special protection. I had no choice but to kill him. Kru, He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken is no more. Henceforth I will be your leader!”

Ka-Ra, waving his arms excitedly, leapt to his feet.

“He lies. O Kru. How can He-Whose-Name-Cannot-Be-Spoken—who is master of the fire of Life—be dead? These Shining Ones are impostors.”

“Boy, I can’t waste time on this fellow,” Stanislaus Cripps exclaimed in an aside. As he spoke he took the cylinder of sleeping gas from his belt again, and projected some of that bluish vapour straight into Ka-Ra’s face.

The man dropped like a stone. In a business-like way Stanislaus Cripps returned the cylinder to his belt.

“Now, Kru, you will take your orders from me.”

Even as he uttered the words there was an ear-splitting report, and the floor shook beneath their feet—the next instant, with a shrill cry, a number of children dashed through the curtained doorway, crying at the top of their voices.

“The Falta have broken in! They are at our heels! Save us—save us!”

Cripps Takes Charge.

WITH shrill screams of terror, the mob of little children poured through the doors into the Hall of the People, crying out that the Falta had broken in—that they were close behind them—beseeching their fathers to save them. And, hot-foot after the children came a crowd of panic-stricken Kru women.

“The Falta—the Falta!” they screamed.

Every moment the Hall of the People was growing more congested, as like a flock of frightened sheep, the women and children poured in in ever-increasing numbers. But their appeals to the men to save them seemed to fall on deaf ears.

The Kru, accustomed to have all their ways ordered for them by He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken, were quite incapable of any organised initiative. There was no one there to tell them what to do, and so they did nothing, save to stand there on the stone seats—staring at that terrified mob of women and children in a kind of helpless lethargy.

The children were swarming round the stone now on which Jim’s party were standing. The boy stepped down, and, catching one of the children by the arm, lifted him to a place by his side.

“What has happened, little one?” he inquired.

The child, who was a sturdy youngster of ten, took a deep breath, and somehow managed to stifle the frightened sobs by which he was convulsed.

"We were playing near the tunnel in the entrance to the Outer Cavern. Suddenly there was a great roar. All the rocks fell away, leaving a huge hole. Then we saw the Falta. I do not know how many of them there were, because I ran. They were coming through the hole into the Inner Cavern."

Jim hurriedly repeated the information he had gathered to Stanislaus Cripps.

"This has got me guessing, boy. I wonder if they can have been monkeying about with some of those explosives we left in the tractor? We shall have to inquire into this, boy. The first thing is to get these silly sheep in hand."

He raised his arms above his head.

"Be silent, O Kru, and hearken to me, who am now what He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken was to you formerly—only a much more intelligent leader!"

His voice went booming through the cavernous hall. The effect of it was instantaneous. The authoritative tone in which he spoke—the evidence they had just had of what they regarded as his magical powers—all combined to create the effect he desired upon a people who, for hundreds of generations, had learned submissiveness to the will of someone they had never seen!

"I will deal with the Falta. You have nothing to fear. They are just exaggerated children, and, like all children, they delight in destructiveness. If they have broken into the Inner Cavern, I will drive them out again!"

The Ultimatum!

JIM could not help admiring his companion's strength of purpose, courage and self-confidence. He saw the Kru watching Cripps in mute astonishment, clearly hypnotised by his coolness.

"That little matter can wait for a moment," he continued. "Now that I have taken over the job of running you, O Kru, we've got to have some sort of system and order. Firstly, it's under-

stood that any fool sentence you have passed on Tinta and her father, Masra, are washed out. There are to be no more of those barbarous practices. Is that quite clear?"

From somewhere in the hall a man's voice was raised.

"But He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken willed it, O Shining One. They disobeyed the Ban, and the penalty is death. We cannot disobey the word of He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken."

Stanislaus Cripps clearly found this mute compliance with the wishes of the strange being who had dwelt in the Cave of the Fires—this habit of submissive obedience—utterly exasperating. He made an impatient gesture with his hands.

"You make me tired! Haven't I told you that He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken is dead—quite dead? I was compelled to kill him."

"How do we know that you speak the truth, O Shining One?" someone else shouted.

"Fools!" exclaimed Cripps impatiently. "Will you argue with me when the Falta are at your gates? You know that I and these others went down into the Cave of the Fires. You know that He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken sent for us—this girl in particular—so that he might put her to death. Well, she isn't dead, and we aren't dead. Isn't that proof sufficient that something has gone astray with He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken? You know that you closed the gates that He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken ordered should be opened to us? Yet I tore those gates away as if they were nought."

In his rising indignation he shook his gauntleted hand at them.

"You'll either believe me and do what I tell you, or I'll leave you to deal with the Falta yourselves!"

(Next week's instalment is a succession of thrills. Don't miss a word of this amazing adventure serial, but there's only one way to make sure of that—order your copy of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY in advance!)

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THE FRESH-AIR FIENDS!



(Continued from page 35.)

on them. By Jove, we'll find out who they are, anyhow!"

"Good egg!" breathed Watson delightedly.

Unfortunately for Nipper's simple but effective plan, Edward Oswald Handforth was awake. And when Handforth was awake, it meant that the normal life of the camp was put out of adjustment.

He had awakened just upon one o'clock, and hunger was undoubtedly the cause of his restlessness. He hadn't eaten much bread, and now he was feeling ravenous. He tried to get to sleep again, but could not do so.

And then, while he lay on his hard bed, a thought came to him. That unusual bed, by the way, may have had something to do with his wakefulness.

"By George, I wonder if those mysterious rotters are messing about with Little Side again?" he whispered to himself. "Anyhow, it's worth investigating. I'll go along and have a look."

Handforth's idea of going along was to arouse Church and McClure as a preliminary. He ruthlessly pulled them off their beds, and told them to dress.

Rather to his surprise, they raised no objections. On the contrary they became excited at the prospect. They were both cricketers—particularly Church—and the thought of Little Side being further mutilated aroused them.

"It's a good idea of yours, Handy," said Church. "One o'clock, eh? Just about the time the beggars will be there, if they're coming at all. It's more than likely that we shall catch 'em red-handed."

They were soon off, little dreaming that a number of other Remove fellows were on the scene well in advance of them. And if it came to that, Nipper had no inkling that Handforth & Co. were on the track. If he had known of their approach, he might have speeded up his attack.

"Not a word, remember," said Handforth, as they approached the Junior playing-fields from the other side. "We mustn't give these rotters any warning that we're coming."

"Then you'd better whisper, you ass," said Mac.

"I am whispering!"

"If that's what you call a whisper, you'd better not speak at all," murmured Church. "That voice of yours sounds like a fog-horn in this still air, old man. Tone it down, for goodness' sake!"

"Rats!" said Handforth, without any realisation of his incaution. "I'm not making any noise, you fatheads!"

But even if it wasn't a noise, it was sufficiently penetrating to reach the ears of those three diggers.

Nipper was the first to see that an alarm had been received. The men ceased their work, and stood perfectly still. Then, with one accord, they ran.

Nipper knew that the strangers had received no warning from his own party—but from the other direction. They were fleeing towards the thick trees which bordered the paddock. There was a dense patch of shrubbery here, too.

Just then a shout sounded.

"There they are!" it came. "By George! They're at it again!"

"Handforth!" growled Nipper. "I might have known it! He's ruined everything—just as we were going to pounce! Quick, you chaps! We'll cut the beggars off, if we can."

Watson, Pitt, Fullwood, and the others, leapt out of their concealment, and raced after the fugitives. Two of the latter were in advance, the third man veering off uncertainly towards the patch of shrubbery.

Nipper and Pitt went after this particular quarry, and as they plunged among the trees, they heard a crackling of wood ahead, a thud, and a gasp.

"He's over!" shouted Nipper. "Quick! We've got him!"

It was pitch dark in there. If the man had remained perfectly still, he might have escaped without further ado. But he picked himself up, and ran on. And the next moment Nipper and Pitt were on him.

"Got the chap!" panted Reggie. "Drag him out!"

They heard nothing but quick breathing—desperate breathing. Even Nipper's keen eyesight was not able to detect much. A dim, uncertain figure—nothing more.

Something swept round—a fist, by the feel of it—and struck Reggie Pitt between the eyes. He momentarily relaxed his hold, and the captive wrenched himself free from Nipper's detaining grasp. Even in that gloom, Nipper fancied he saw something whitish flutter to the ground.

After that confusion reigned.

Fullwood and Tregellis-West burst into the shrubbery from another point, and they mistook Nipper and Pitt for the enemy. They attacked, and before any explanations could be made, the real fugitive had vanished. Somehow, he had managed to get completely away in the midst of the confusion.

Nipper remembered that flutter of white.

He found his way back to the spot, and picked up a stiff, peculiarly-shaped piece of paper. He put it in his pocket and joined

the others. It seemed that nothing further could be done.

"None of them caught, eh?" he said, after they had exchanged notes. "I thought as much. Well, we'll confiscate the picks and the shovels, anyhow. Did any of you chaps see who the beggars were?"

"We never saw them at all," said Fullwood breathlessly.

"It's a pity you asses couldn't collar them while you were at it," said Handforth indignantly. "If I had been on the spot——"

"The less you say, Handy, the better!" snapped Nipper.

"What?"

"You're a blundering, loud-voiced, double-barrelled chump!" said the Remove skipper, with refreshing frankness.

"Why, you—you——"

"If you hadn't blundered along we should have captured the lot!" said Nipper curtly. "So you'd better keep quiet about your marvellous detective abilities! You've done a fine thing to-night!"

Handforth was in no way offended.

"I say, I'm awfully sorry," he said penitently. "I didn't know you fellows were on the job. I suppose it was my fault——"

"It's no good talking about it, anyhow," growled Nipper. "Let's get back to camp."

They inspected the damage, and it proved to be slight. Only a little of the turf had been removed, and the beginnings of a hole had been made. The juniors decided to leave closer investigations until the morrow.

"It's so inexplicable!" protested Reggie Pitt. "Where's the sense—— Half a minute—I've just thought of something!

Didn't I see you searching in that shrubbery, Nipper?"

"Yes," replied Nipper, "and I found this!"

He pulled the prize out of his pocket. In the moonlight, they crowded round, and could see that it was an odd-shaped piece of parchment. It was evidently of great antiquity, and one face of it was covered with curious hieroglyphics in a form of Greek which was unfamiliar to the juniors. It was impossible to decipher it or to read it.

"This is getting curious," said Reggie, scratching his head. "What the dickens does it mean? Holes dug in the ground—unknown men in the middle of the night—and now this ancient parchment!"

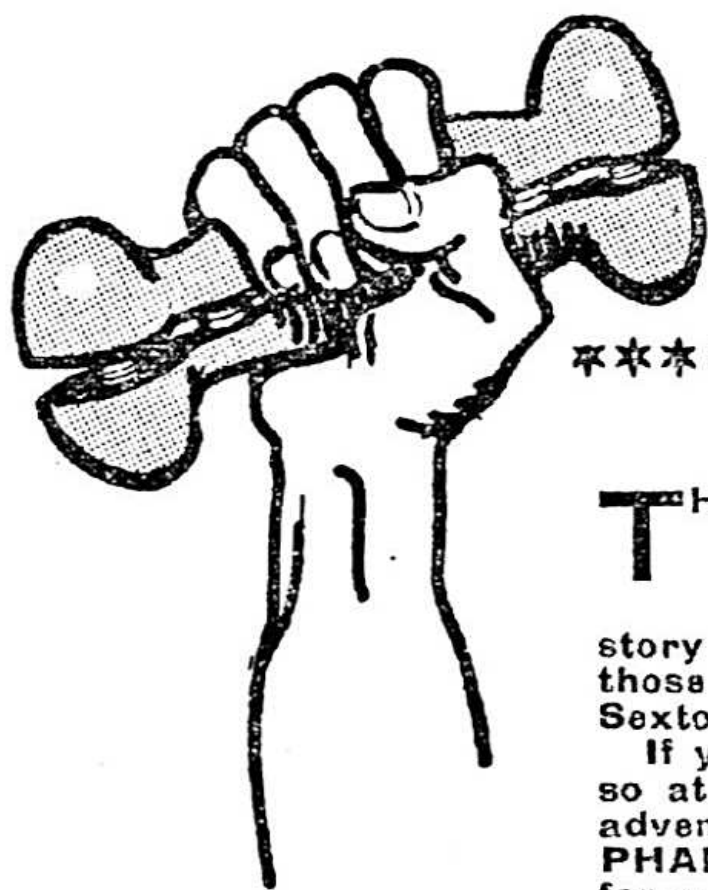
"Beats me!" said Handforth flatly.

They went back to camp in a thoughtful mood. Nipper, indeed, was even more thoughtful than the others. For he believed that the man who had stumbled in the shrubbery was none other than Sir Lucian Dexter himself!

But he kept his suspicion to himself, for the very idea of it seemed grotesque.

THE END.

(How's that for a corking story? Next week's yarn in this magnificent series—entitled "St. Frank's in Camp!"—is even better, and many more amazing things happen. Don't miss it on any account—and make sure of obtaining your copy of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY by ordering NOW!)



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THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT.

All **LETTERS** in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., London, E.C.4. Enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope.

What the League Does.

NUMEROUS letters this week show the result of the League work that is going on everywhere. I have been told more than once that the St. Frank's League should be a sports league or a hobby league. But the S.F.L. is all of these, and also much more. The organisation includes sports, hobbies, enterprise of all sorts. In addition to all that, there is the spirit of sportsmanship.

That is the meaning of our slogan. The latter may be written in a dead language, but it is very much alive in its appeal to all fellows up and down the world. "Wisdom and Boldness." Link the two together and you have something which will shift any difficulty, and which cannot be shifted itself.

Candy Making.

J. R. Wilkinson writes from Alberta to say he is keen on electrical and mechanical work. He goes right into things and is never satisfied until he has mastered all the possibilities of every tricky little gadget in a machine. Then he has another hobby. This is candy making. He has turned this pursuit into a business proposition, and sells the candy in bars at the rate of 2½d. per bar. He has already made ten pounds with his candy. To get through with the printing of labels, advertising, etc., he bought a rubber type outfit. J. R. W. is a real goer. Put him on a desert island, and I'll be bound he would have a hotel in full swing in a few months.

An Interesting Comparison.

A friend at Evandale, South Australia, says that to compare characters in other books with those in the "N.L.L." is like asking a candle to compare itself with an 80 watt globe. Thanks! I shall not dream of putting the request to the candle, but am ready to pass the resolution nem. con.

Replies by Post.

A Birmingham chum asks me whether I answer letters personally. Yes, I have been doing this hard for long past. By the way, the magnificence of the League Membership Certificate has particularly struck this reader.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

P. Young, 45, Marmaduke Street, Edge Hill, Liverpool, will be glad to hear from members in his district interested in club work.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE.

The Application Form for membership of the St. Frank's League will be published again next week. All holders of **BRONZE MEDALS** who have qualified for **SILVER MEDALS**, and wish to exchange their medals for the higher award, should send their medals together with a stamped addressed envelope, to the Chief Officer, the St. Frank's League, c/o "The Nelson Lee Library," Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

H. Le Galley, 16, Barwis Terrace, Penzance, draws the attention of all stamp collectors to a specially advantageous system of obtaining foreign stamps. Write to him for details.

Frank Benjamin, Granton House, Potchefstroom, Transvaal, South Africa, wants to hear from chums in his district to help form a club. J. Farmer, Water Street, Semaphore, South Australia, wishes to correspond with readers.

F. F. Hoser-Cook, 21, Rook Street, Poplar, London, E.14, would like to hear from his old correspondents; he also wishes to hear from readers anywhere interested in hobbies. All letters answered.

H. L. Ridgley, 85, Desborough Avenue, High Wycombe, Bucks, wishes to hear from readers in his district.

Stanley Flanagan, 31a, Arden Street, Gillingham, Kent, wishes to hear from members in his district with a view to forming a club.

Thomas G. Mercer, 1, Sweden Grove, Waterloo, nr. Liverpool, wishes to hear from stamp collectors at home and abroad.

A. Plimmer, 55, Bromley Road, Walthamstow, London, E.17, wishes to form a cycling club, and would like to hear from readers.

Jack Mahar, Crescent Theatre, Fairfield, N.S.W., Australia, wishes to correspond with readers in England and North and South America.

(Continued on next page.)

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(Continued from previous page.)

J. Innes, 19a, Tower Street, Portobello, Midlothian, N.B., has the complete "Schoolboy Magician" series of the "N.L.L.", and would exchange these for one of the "Monster" volumes, preferably "The Voyage of the Wanderer."

S. W. Le Roux, 10, Mackinnon Street, King William's Town, Cape Province, South Africa, wishes to hear from readers in his district about establishing a club.

Fred Davies, 56, Splott Road, Splott, Cardiff,

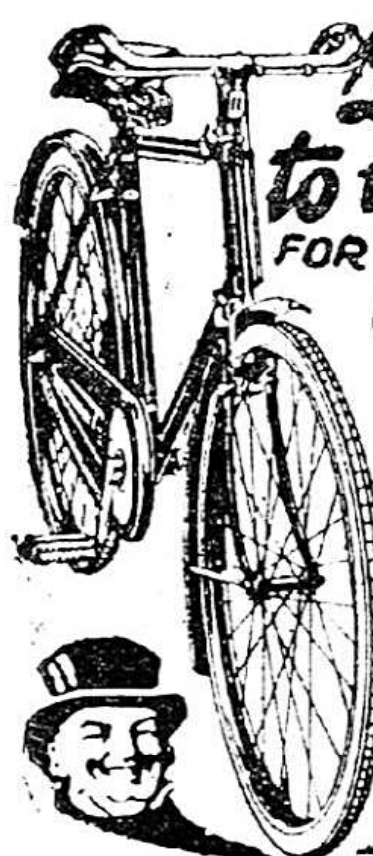
would like to hear from readers in his district for getting up cycling trips.

George Robert Gardener, 100, Mark's Road, Romford, Essex, wishes to hear from readers, especially those in the Ilford area.

A Shaw, 114, Milton Road, Gravesend, Kent, wishes to hear from readers in his neighbourhood.

Richard Greenwood, 6, Moston Street, Reddish, Stockport, wishes to correspond with readers in Australia and New Zealand who are interested in drawing and photography.

T. H. Coker, 2, Somerville Avenue, Gisborne, New Zealand, wishes to hear from readers.



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