

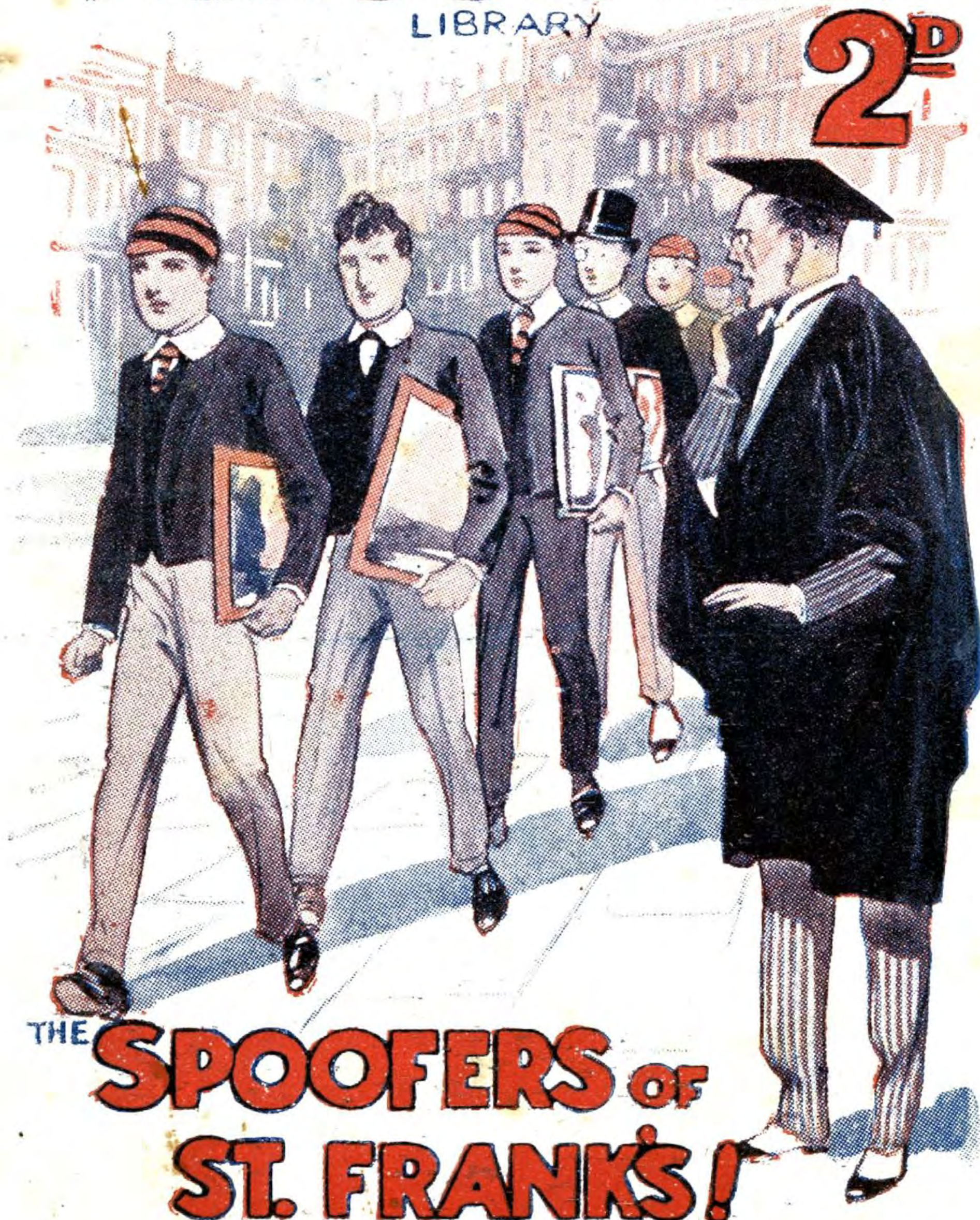
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THE

SPOOFERS OF ST. FRANK'S!

A grand long complete yarn of schoolboy fun and adventure, featuring Nipper, Handforth, and many other popular characters.



Lord Pippinton gave a frantic cry as he found himself pushed over the lip of the quarry. Next moment he was falling down—down towards the terrible rocks which reared their jagged edges below!

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THE SPOOFERS OF ST. FRANK'S!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

The Boys of St. Frank's in an enthralling long complete yarn of fun, mystery and adventure.

CHAPTER 1.

The Worried Housemaster!

"JUST a minute, Handforth!"

Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's, came to a halt, and glanced round. "Speaking to me, Castleton?" he asked coldly.

"Yes!"

"Then don't!" said Handforth, walking on.

Alan Castleton, the new fellow in the West House, bit his lip. It wasn't the first rebuff he had had that day or the previous day, or the one before that, either. Castleton was decidedly unpopular. Since his arrival at St. Frank's, he had proved himself to be a rotter and a cad. The only real friends he could count upon were Gordon Wallace and his despicable pals of Study A, in the Ancient House.

Handforth joined Church and McClure near the fountain, in the middle of the Triangle.

Nipper and Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West were there, too.

"I can't stick that chap!" growled Handforth. "Had the nerve to talk to me just now!"

"Shocking!" said Church, shaking his head.

"The best thing we can do is to ignore him," said Nipper. "The fellow isn't worth any consideration, anyhow. He came here with the reputation of being a great sportsman—a fine boxer and a wonderful footballer. But he's only a fraud. Forget him!"

Even the shrewd Nipper—the Junior skipper of St. Frank's—did not guess that there were two Castletons! He did not know that the reputation which had heralded Alan's arrival, had really been the reputation of Arthur Castleton—Alan's twin brother, who was now at St. Jim's. The twins were so absolutely alike that even their own father could scarcely tell them apart. It was in their natures that they differed so greatly.

For Alan was a rotter, and Arthur was one of the best fellows breathing.

John Busterfield Boots and Percy Bray came up, and Boots nodded cheerily.

"So you fellows are going to dine with us in the Modern House to-day?" he asked. "You'd better behave yourselves—or we shall pitch you out on your necks, you know!"

"Rats!" said Handforth, frowning. "Do you think we want to dine in your beastly old shed?"

"You needn't come in unless you like!" grinned Bray. "You're quite welcome to go without your dinner, old man!"

Nipper smiled.

"It's only a temporary expedient, anyhow," he said. "They're pulling up the floor of our dining-hall—something wrong with the electric light wires underneath, I think—and the place is in the hands of the workmen. We've been distributed throughout the other Houses for a day or two. Let's hope that everything is normal again to-morrow."

"Hear, hear!" said Tommy Watson. "Goodness knows what kind of rubbish we shall get to eat in the Modern House!"

"Well, there goes the bell—so we shall soon see," said Nipper. "Don't look so warlike, Buster. We're only chipping you!"

"We're your guests, don't forget," grinned Watson. "You can't touch us, Buster! House japes are decidedly off for to-day."

"You're lucky!" said Buster Boots significantly.

They all laughed, and went into the Modern House. Nipper and his chums, Handforth, and several others, were among the Ancient House group which had been added to the Modern House dining-table for this special occasion. As it happened, Nipper and Handforth found themselves at Mr. Stockdale's own table. Mr. Stockdale was the House-master of the Modern House, and he was a quiet, reserved, elderly gentleman. "Old Stocky" was deservedly popular among his boys.

"Can't understand what's wrong with him lately," murmured Bob Christine, of the Fourth, who found himself sitting next to Nipper. "He's been getting worse during this last week, too. Just look at the poor chap! As haggard as the dickens!"

Nipper glanced at Mr. Stockdale.

"He certainly looks a bit worried," he admitted.

Mr. Arthur Stockdale was very haggard indeed. There was an expression on his face which denoted great mental stress. His forehead was lined, and he was strangely untidy in his appearance—a most unusual thing for Mr. Stockdale.

"Some family worry perhaps," breathed Nipper. "Even schoolmasters, you know, have their own troubles, Bob. Don't you know why he's been so worried?"

"Haven't the faintest idea," replied Bob Christine, shaking his head. "We don't like it at all. Of course, we can't ask him anything—it wouldn't be the thing. But something ought to be done."

"By George! Look what he's doing now!" said Handforth, from further along the table.

In an absent-minded way, Mr. Stockdale was tipping the sugar-sifter over his soup. Several of the fellows were staring at him, but he took no notice. He was evidently in a very absent-minded state.

"Does he usually take sugar with his tomato soup?" asked Handforth, turning to Bob Christine.

"No, of course not!" growled Bob, with a frown. "I say, he's getting a lot worse! He's never done anything like this before! Poor old scout!"

Mr. Stockdale was totally unaware of the whispers that continually went round the table concerning him. He was so preoccupied that all the fellows could have talked in quite loud voices, and he would not have noticed it. A few of the juniors—the more callous ones—were rather glad of Mr. Stockdale's condition, since it allowed them a much greater laxity than usual. They were able to talk, and there was no danger of being pulled up.

When the meat course came along, Mr. Stockdale scarcely ate anything. And, later, he merely toyed with his marmalade pudding.

Somebody passed the mustard, winking to the other fellows near by. And Mr. Stockdale opened the mustard-pot, and proceeded to smear some of the condiment over his pudding!

"Great Scott!" muttered Bob Christine. "Look at him! He's putting mustard on his sweet now!"

"The fellow who passed it to him ought to be boiled!" murmured Nipper, with a frown. "That was a dirty trick! I don't like to see a man ragged when he is so worried as this."

"The trouble is, we didn't see who did it," said Bob. "Of course, old Stocky will soon find out—My only aunt! He's eating the stuff! He's actually eating that giddy marmalade pudding, and doesn't even know that there's mustard on it! Phew! He must be absent-minded!"

"It's very rummy!" said Handforth. "I think he ought to see a doctor, or something."

And later, when the meal was over, Buster was looking very concerned.

"I say, you fellows, what about old Stocky?" he asked. "We're jolly worried about him, I can tell you. Something ought to be done."

"But what can we do?" asked Bob Christine.

"I don't know—but isn't there anybody here with a wheeze?" asked Buster. "Old Stocky has been getting worse and worse every day. He was the limit at dinner-time! There's something on his mind—something pretty big, too. I wish we could help him!"

But it was a very difficult problem. It was equally impossible to spy on him, and discover his trouble by stealth. It really seemed as

though the Housemaster of the Modern House would have to bear his secret worries entirely alone



CHAPTER 2.

The Caddishness of Castleton!

ALAN CASTLETON glanced round as he heard a hail. He was wheeling his bicycle across the Triangle towards the gates. It was a half-holiday that day, and Alan was bent upon a little trip to the village. To be quite frank, he wanted to send off a telegram in connection with the three-thirty race at Kempton Park.

He frowned as he saw Mr. Stockdale on the Modern House steps. What on earth did Mr. Stockdale want with him, anyhow? But he was a Housemaster, and Alan could not very well ignore him.

"Speaking to me, sir?" he called.

"Yes, my boy—yes!" replied Mr. Stockdale, as Alan approached. "I want you to do me a little favour, if you don't mind."

"That's all right, sir," said Alan ungraciously. "What is it?"

"You are going to the village, are you not?" asked Mr. Stockdale. "I saw you wheeling your bicycle towards the gates—"

"Yes, sir: I'm going to the village."

"Then be good enough to post this letter for me," said Mr. Stockdale. "I have no stamp, and it is very important. Thank you, my boy—thank you."

Alan took the letter, and glanced at it.

"Do you want me to buy a stamp for it, sir?" he asked pointedly.

"Ah, yes, to be sure!" said Mr. Stockdale. "How forgetful of me! Here is the money—er—er—I don't seem to know you," he went on, looking at Alan searchingly. "Surely you must be a new boy?"

"My name's Castleton, sir—West House."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Stockdale, as he handed over the necessary coppers. "Castleton, of the West House? Very interesting—very interesting, indeed! Splendid!"

He went off, still very much preoccupied, and Alan pursed his lips as he put the money into his pocket.

"Queer sort of old bird!" he murmured.

It was only by chance that Mr. Stockdale had requested him to do this little favour. There had been no other junior in sight at the moment. Naturally, the Housemaster would have preferred to make the request of one of his own boys. But in his present mental condition he hardly knew one fellow from the other. His worry was evidently very serious.

And then Alan Castleton noticed something. Just as he was about to tuck the letter into his pocket, he saw, with surprise, that the flap of it was unsealed! There seemed to be no end to old Stocky's absent-mindedness! Not only had he given the letter to Alan without any money for

the stamp, but he had even forgotten to seal it! And it was an important letter, too, by the look of it, for it was marked "Private." Alan looked at the name and address with frank curiosity.

"Dr. James Martin, Gossmore House, Wigmore Street, London, W." That was the superscription on the envelope. Evidently it was addressed to a West-End specialist of some kind.

Alan Castleton was thoughtful. Quite possibly Mr. Stockdale was suffering from some secret ailment or other—something which he didn't want to tell anybody about. Alan's curiosity was aroused. And the temptation was great! Here was this letter, absolutely unsealed, asking him to look into it.

"Hallo! What have you got there?"

Castleton turned sharply, and found Gordon Wallace beside him. Gulliver and Bell were there, too, and Alan felt slightly relieved. These fellows were his own type.

"It's a letter," said Alan. "Old Stocky's just asked me to post it."

"Like his cheek!" said Wallace. "Why the dickens can't he post his letters in the school box?"

"He hadn't a stamp," replied Alan. "I'm going to the village, anyhow."

"It isn't stuck down," said Bell, in surprise.

"No, I noticed that, too," replied Alan, with a grin. "Old Stockdale is fearfully absent-minded, I suppose. Jolly careless of him, anyhow, to leave his letter unsealed."

"Some of the fellows are talkin' about Mr. Stockdale," said Gulliver. "They're worried about him, the silly fatheads! What the dickens does it matter to us whether old Stocky is in trouble or not? We have our own worries, without bothering about masters!"

Alan looked thoughtful.

"I was just wondering whether it wouldn't be a good idea to take a peep into the letter," he suggested tentatively.

"Oh, cheese it!" said Bell, with a rather scared look.

"Why not?" asked Wallace. "If Stocky is so dashed careless as to leave his letters open, he can't expect anything else. Who's it addressed to, anyhow?"

"A doctor—in Wigmore Street," replied Alan. "I've got an idea that Stocky is suffering from some secret illness. We might be able to discover the truth if we take a glance at this letter. What do you say? A bit of sport, what?"

"Of course!" replied Wallace. "I don't believe in openin' people's letters, but when they're left open for us to look at—well, that's a different thing."

"Quite a different thing!" said Alan coolly.

He knew well enough that his suggestion was despicable in the extreme. Mr. Stockdale had left the letter open in sheer absent-mindedness, and it was a blackguardly thing to open it, and to pry into his private

affairs. But it was quite characteristic of Alan Castleton to regard the act as "a bit of sport." He appeared to have no scruples.

"Let's get behind the gym," suggested Gulliver eagerly. "Nobody can see us there, and it won't take us more than a couple of minutes to read through the letter."

"We might be able to make something out of this," went on Alan, as they all moved off towards the gymnasium. "It's useful sometimes to know something about a Housemaster!"

"Oh, rats!" said Wallace, frowning. "You're not suggestin' that there's anythin' squiffy about it, are you? Old Stockdale is a straight old stick. He couldn't do anything wrong if he tried. That letter will prove as dull as ditchwater, I expect. A note about old Stocky's deafness, or about his liver, or something disgustin' like that. You know what these old codgers are—always full of fancies and fads. Let's read the thing and get it over. If anybody spots us, we'll be slaughtered!"

"I don't think we ought to read it," said Bell bluntly.

"Squeamish?" sneered Alan.

"No, I'm not!" retorted Bell sullenly. "But some things are a bit too thick, aren't they? Anybody might have seen you take that letter from old Stocky, and anybody might have seen us come behind the gym here. And if the Head got to know of it, it would mean a floggin' all round—a public floggin', too! It's not worth the giddy risk!"

Castleton laughed.

"You can go away, if you like," he said. "I'm goin' to read the letter, anyhow."

And he removed it from its envelope and unfolded it.



CHAPTER 3.

Quite a Joke!

"It's gone!" said Handforth, in a strained voice.

"Gone?" echoed Church tragically. "Your pound-note?"

"Yes!" replied Handy dismally.

"Gone!" said McClure. "Do you mean to say you've lost it?"

"How should I know?" asked Handforth gruffly. "I put the thing in my pocket before dinner, and now there's no sign of it. It's a giddy mystery! I can't understand what's—"

"Which pocket did you put it into?" asked Church.

"This one," said Handforth.

"In your handkerchief pocket?" yelled Mac. "Oh, you hopeless ass!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I put it at the bottom of the pocket, and my handkerchief on the top of it—to keep it down! I'm jolly careful with my money!"

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" said Church bitterly. "Of all the idiotic pockets to put a quid-note into! Naturally, when you used your handkerchief, you whisked the note

out! That's the only possible explanation. It's probably lying about the Triangle somewhere."

"And it's the only quid you had, Handy!" said Church. "The last money of all! Mac and I are broke, and now—"

"Oh, don't be dotty!" interrupted Handforth. "We've only got to look for it, and we shall find it. We'll go out into the Triangle now and search about."

Edward Oswald's optimism was famous. He seemed to take it for granted that he would be able to find his missing pound-note without any trouble at all. But Church and McClure were somewhat dubious. It was rather windy that afternoon, and a loose pound-note would not be long in floating away somewhere—into a nook or crevice, where it would be effectually concealed. It was rather a waste of time to go out in search of the thing.

"It's no good railing at the old fat-head!" said Church, as he and McClure went out together. "He can't help being careless; he was born like that. Look at the idiot now—going over into the East Square. And I don't believe he went in that direction once this morning."

"We'd better separate," said McClure. "You go towards Big Arch, and I'll work towards the West Square. If you find the note, give a yell."

"You bet I will!" replied Church.

They separated, and the search proceeded. Handforth, quite certain that he would soon locate the missing note, worked his way round the East Square, passed along the rear of the building, and came within sight of the gymnasium. In ordinary circumstances, Handforth would never go near this place alone. He didn't know how fortunate it was that Fate had led his footsteps in this direction now. Much was to develop in consequence of this chance happening.

Intent upon the ground, Handforth did not notice any other presence until he heard the sound of voices. He knew those voices—and he didn't like them.

"Castleton!" he muttered. "Castleton and Wallace and those other cads! What the dickens are they up to behind the gym? Smoking, I'll bet! By George! I'll sail in, and smash the whole crowd of 'em!"

Handforth was always spoiling for a fight, and he instinctively pushed his sleeves up as he prepared to go into action. He had forgotten all about his pound-note now.

But perhaps it would be as well to make absolutely sure before he took drastic action. Edward Oswald was no spy, but he didn't want to smash the cads unless they deserved it. So he approached the corner cautiously, and peeped round.

As it happened, Wallace & Co. and Castleton had their backs towards him, and did not know of his proximity. They were all laughing uproariously, Alan in particular. And Alan was holding a letter in his hand.

"Let's have a look at it, you ass!" Wallace was saying.

"Rats!" said Alan. "I haven't finished reading it myself yet. By gad! Poor old Stocky! So he's been trying to sell his rotten old paintings, has he? Some hopes!"

"Not so loud, you ass!" said Bell uneasily. "What's that about paintings, anyhow? You might let us hear!"

"All right, I'll read it out!" said Alan. "No wonder old Stockdale has been looking so down in the mouth recently. I expect he thought he was going to be hung in the Royal Academy. And, in all probability, he deserves to be hung for his nerve in thinking that he can do any painting!"

"Well, let's hear the letter, you ass!" said Wallace, moving closer.

Alan Castleton read aloud:

"Modern House,
"St. Frank's College,
"Sussex.

"Dear Dr. Martin,—Your letter has given me very grave worry. I really had no idea that my sister was in such a weakened condition. It appals me when you say that the only chance of saving her life is for her to take a long trip to a tropical climate. As you say, this will be a very expensive undertaking, and I am seriously afraid that it is quite impossible for me to hope for any such thing.

"As I think you know, I have recently been trying to sell my landscape paintings. But they are very slow in selling. I spent practically the whole of my summer holidays at work on these paintings, and I dreamed of selling them for good prices. But they hang fire badly. I am beginning to realise that my dream was indeed a dream.

"Nobody wants my work, and I have only sold one very small painting during the past month. And, as I was rather hoping for a considerable success in this direction—in order to raise the necessary money for my sister's expenses—I can now do nothing but tell you that such a trip as you outline is quite impossible.

"It is altogether beyond my means, and I have really no hope of raising the money in any other direction. Unless a miracle happens with regard to my paintings, I must take my sister away from the nursing home, and send her to some other relatives in the Isle of Wight. Perhaps your fears are unfounded. At least, I sincerely hope so. Please let me know as soon as possible how my sister is progressing.

"Yours very sincerely,

"ARTHUR STOCKDALE."

Gulliver uttered a chuckle.

"By gad!" he said. "So old Stocky was fool enough to believe that he could sell his mouldy paintin's? Well, of all the silly old idiots!"

"I didn't know he went in for paintin'," said Wallace.

"Oh, in the summer time you can often see him goin' out with his easel and his

paint-box," said Gulliver. "Of course, his daubs are no good. No wonder people don't buy them! This is one of the richest jokes I've heard for a long time!"

"Rather!" agreed Alan. "Well, we've seen the letter, and now we know the explanation of the mystery. I suppose we'd better seal it up—"

"Cave!" said Bell hurriedly.

They all turned round, and found Edward Oswald Handforth just behind them!

CHAPTER 4.

Less Than They Deserved!



HANDFORTH was looking very dangerous.

"Give me that letter!" he said ominously.

Alan Castleton scowled at him, and adopted a truculent attitude.

"Mind your own confounded business!" he said, flaring up. "Who told you to come here interfering, Handforth? If you start any of your nonsense we'll all sit on you, and give you what you deserve! Go away and mind your own business!"

Handforth said nothing for a moment. He was disgusted and dismayed. In spite of himself he had felt compelled to listen to Castleton as the latter had read that letter aloud. At first Handforth had not quite realised the purport of it. But he instinctively knew that Alan was up to something despicable—something characteristic of his nature. And then, in a flood, Handforth had realised the truth.

That letter had been written by old Stockdale! Handforth knew that long before Alan had read out the signature. And here were these rotters, laughing over the unfortunate Housemaster's troubles! Laughing when they knew that Mr. Stockdale's sister was dangerously ill, and in peril of losing her very life!

"Yes, clear off, Handy!" said Wallace uneasily. "This is none of your business!"

"Isn't it?" thundered Handforth. "None of my business, eh? You dirty rotters! You spying, contemptible cads! What do you mean by reading Mr. Stockdale's letter? How did you get hold of it, anyhow?"

Castleton stared at him.

"Oh-ho!" he said sneeringly. "And who the dickens are you, to talk about spying? What have you just been doing? Who told you to creep up behind us, and listen to our private affairs? If that wasn't spying and eavesdropping, what was it?"

Handforth went nearly purple with rage.

"I was justified in listening!" he roared. "I suspected what your rotten game was, and any decent minded fellow would know that I listened with a good motive. I'm going to smash you, Castleton! Put up your hands!"

"Steady, Handy—steady!" said Nipper, from the rear.

And at the same moment Church and McClure appeared—to say nothing of Reggie Pitt, Tommy Watson, Fullwood, Archie Glenthorne, and one or two others. Handforth's roaring voice had attracted them all.

As a matter of fact, Church and McClure had called the others, for Handforth's chums had believed that their leader had found his pound note, and that there was some trouble over it. But they could now tell that they had made a mistake. This was something very different.

"What's wrong?" asked Nipper, as he looked from one to the other.

"Everything's wrong!" snarled Alan. "This interfering rotter comes pushing his nose——"

"I'll tell you what's wrong!" interrupted Handforth, with surprising calmness. "I was looking for a pound note of mine. I've dropped it somewhere, but that doesn't matter now. And, as I came behind the gym. here, I heard these cads laughing and cackling. I wondered what they were amused about. And then Castleton started reading a letter out."

"Yes, and you listened to it!" sneered Alan.

"That letter is from Mr. Stockdale to a doctor!" went on Handforth accusingly. "It's about his sister, who is lying dangerously ill, and about Mr. Stockdale's paintings that he's trying to sell!"

Handforth turned to the other juniors, his eyes blazing.

"Poor old Stocky's trouble is out now," he went on. "His sister must go on a long sea voyage, to save her life, and old Stocky has been trying to sell his paintings to raise the money. But they won't sell—and that's why he's so terribly troubled and worried. And these beastly rotters have been laughing over the business!"

"Well, isn't it funny?" asked Alan, with a curl of his lip. "It's like the old fool's idiocy to believe that he can sell any of his silly paintings!"

"You'd better go carefully, Castleton," said Nipper quietly. "Let me have that letter."

"Be hanged to you!"

"Let me have it!" said Nipper dangerously.

And there was such a look in his eye that Alan sullenly handed the letter over. Nipper licked the flap and stuck it down.

"I'll post this," he said curtly. "Did you open it? The gum seemed to be unused——"

"And so it was unused!" interrupted Wallace. "Mr. Stockdale gave it to Castleton, and Castleton found that it was unsealed. If Stocky leaves his letters in that condition, he can't blame people for reading——"

"You despicable cad!" said Nipper, turning to Alan. "It was your plain duty to seal that letter and to post it. Haven't you any sense of honour at all? By Jove! You're something new in despicability!"

Alan winced.

"You'd better go easy!" he muttered.

Nipper's tone had cut him. Even his thick hide had been penetrated.

"Clear off—all of you!" said Nipper grimly. "And don't breathe a word of anything in that letter, either! If you spread this story about the school, we shall know—and we'll deal with you drastically!"

"We'll make your lives so miserable that you won't want to live!" added Reggie Pitt. "Nobody else here will spread this unhappy tale—so if it gets about we shall know the truth. You deserve to be horsewhipped—all four of you!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Hold on!" said Handforth. "We're not going to let these cads go, are we? I think we ought to wipe them up now! We're behind the gym—it's quite private here. Let's sail in and do a bit of damage!"

"Hear, hear!" said Church hotly. "Come on!"

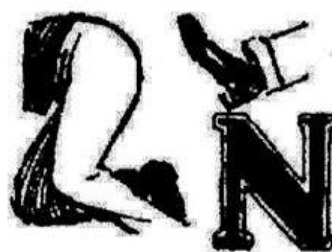
"Hurrah!"

And Nipper approved of this suggestion. Alan Castleton and Wallace & Co. were seized. They were forced to fight—and, incidentally, they were thoroughly thrashed. Handforth made a very complete job of Alan. He blacked one of his eyes, he gave him a thick ear, and he administered a general battering which left Alan dizzy and dazed.

Wallace & Co. were almost as unfortunate. By the time they staggered away they were in a very wrecked condition. And they came to the conclusion that it would be very unwise for them to say a word about Mr. Stockdale's private affairs in public. It would be far safer to keep mum!

CHAPTER 5.

Boots and Co. Hear the News!



NIPPER was looking rather serious as he and the other fellows tidied themselves up before emerging from behind the gymnasium.

"Of course, we must keep this affair to ourselves," he said. "Poor old Stocky! We don't want to make his trouble any the worse. It'll be an awful shock to him if the school gets to know about his worry."

"We'll keep mum about it, never fear," said Handforth. "And I don't think Wallace and those other chaps will say anything. Not after what we've done to them, anyhow! They'll be too jolly scared, the rotters!"

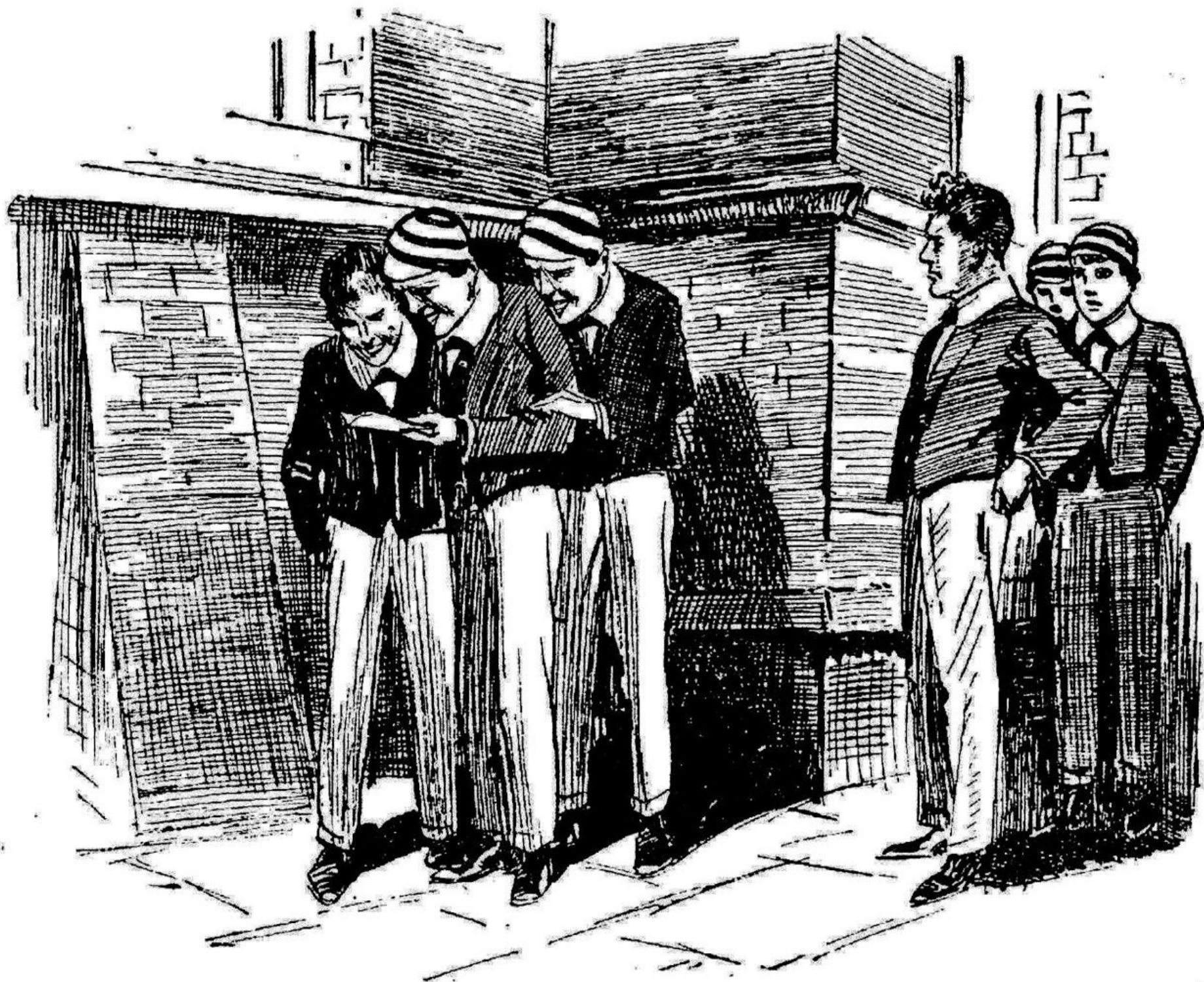
He flung his jacket on, and something white fluttered to the ground. Church and McClure stared at it dazedly.

"Isn't that your quid-note, Handy?" asked Church quickly.

"By George, so it is!" said Handforth, picking it up. "Where the dickens did it come from?"

"Out of your jacket, of course!" said McClure in a disgusted voice. "Just like you! The thing was in your inside coat-pocket all the time!"

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth. "So it was! I remember now! I put it in there for safety."



Gloatingly the three cads perused the letter—a letter given them by Mr. Stockdale to post. “This is one of the richest jokes I’ve heard for a long time!” chuckled Wallace. And then, just at that moment, Handforth, looking very warlike, came up behind them!

“You ought to have padlocks on your pockets!” said Church with a sniff. “Still, we’re not going to growl at you, Handy. It was because of that pound-note that we found out this affair of old Stockdale. We’ve probably saved the yarn from being broadcast all over the school.”

“That’s true enough,” said Nipper. “So even old Handy’s carelessness comes in handy at times. No pun intended. Please note! But about Stocky,” he went on, becoming grave. “Isn’t there something we can do?”

“How can we do anything?” asked Reggie Pitt, scratching his head. “We haven’t seen that letter, remember—at least, we’re not supposed to have seen it. That affair of Mr. Stockdale’s sister is entirely his own concern. As for his paintings, I thought he only dabbled in art as a hobby.”

“So he does,” said Nipper. “But, in desperation, I expect he’s been trying to raise money on his pictures. Poor old chap! I feel awfully sorry for him.”

“I think we’d better tell Boots about this,” said Fuliwood thoughtfully. “Boots and Christine, say. They can easily be trusted—and Mr. Stockdale is their House-master, don’t forget. I think they ought to know.”

Nipper nodded.

“Yes, we might as well tell them,” he agreed.

But when Boots and Christine were sought for, it was found that they had gone off to Bannington.

“Well, it’s all right—we shall probably spot them there,” said Nipper. “We’re just going into Bannington, as it happens. Are any of you other fellows coming?”

“Yes, we’re booked for Bannington, too,” said Handforth.

“Are we?” said Church.

“First I knew of it!” said McClure.

“Well, we’re going, all the same!” said Handforth grimly. “There’s an art shop in the High Street. You’ve seen it, haven’t you? I’ll bet a penny to my best footer boots that old Stocky’s paintings are in that shop! Where else could he take them round here? I want to go and have a look, anyhow.”

The others were equally interested, and so, very soon afterwards, they left in a group on their bicycles and rode into Bannington.

On the way, Nipper posted Mr. Stockdale’s letter, and felt more comfortable after it had left his possession.

They soon arrived at the art shop—quite a smart place, where all sorts of water-colour paintings were displayed in the windows. There were a few oils, too—and any amount

of inexpensive prints. Mr. Piper, the proprietor, was somewhat surprised when he saw a large crowd of schoolboys gathering round the window, eagerly looking at the oil-paintings. Schoolboys didn't usually display such an interest in his wares.

"There you are!" said Nipper, pointing. "You're quite right, Handy. There are two of old Stocky's efforts! Jolly good, too!"

"By Jove, yes!"

The two oil-paintings were quite small. They were unframed, and the "A.S." in the corner denoted that Mr. Arthur Stockdale was the artist. Handforth was very shocked when he observed the price-ticket on each of the paintings.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "Five bob each! Why, it's disgusting!"

"So it is!" agreed Fullwood. "Those paintings must have taken old Stocky hours and hours to do. Five shillings each! It's terrible!"

"And even at that price there's no sale for them!" said Nipper sombrely. "It's a bit pitiful when you come to think of it, isn't it?"

"Pitiful isn't the word!" growled Handforth. "It's wicked! There's poor old Stocky, wanting to raise money to send his sister away to recuperate, and he can't even get five bob for the oil-paintings! What's the matter with the people of Bannington! Don't they appreciate art?"

Nipper coughed.

"Well, as a matter of fact, old man, I'm afraid that Mr. Stockdale's paintings can't exactly be classified as art. They're very good—for an amateur. But anybody can see that they're only crude. Jolly good impressions, in their own way, but—"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I think they're ripping!"

But as Handforth was no judge of art, nobody else took any notice of him. And there was a diversion at that moment, because John Busterfield Boots and Bob Christine came along. They observed the other juniors gathered round the window, and wondered what the interest was about.

"Something special?" asked Boots, pushing through the group.

"Yes—old Stockdale's paintings," said Nipper, with a nod of his head towards the two oils. "Have you seen them, Buster?"

"By jingo, no!" said Boots. "Those things? Did old Stocky paint them? Good man!"

Bob Christine was looking at the Removites, and not at the paintings.

"But why all these serious faces?" he asked curiously. "You're all looking as though you had just come from a funeral! What's the matter?"

"Matter enough!" growled Handforth. "Come over towards the Green, and we'll sit down there and I'll tell you. We can't very well speak here—in front of the shop."

And, within five minutes, Bob Christine and Buster Boots had been acquainted with the facts. Both of them were much con-

cerned. And both of them were quite at a loss.

"This is pretty awful!" said Boots, frowning. "Poor old Stocky! Trying to raise money on his paintings! What can we do to help him?"

"Well, to begin with, let's think," said Nipper. "Let's put our heads together and think hard."

CHAPTER 6.

A Perplexing Problem!



HANDFORTH grunted.

"Oh, what's the use?" he asked. "There's nothing we can do—absolutely nothing! I've been thinking for ten solid minutes, and there's no result."

"Don't let that discourage you, old man," said Nipper soothingly. "We're all in the same boat. We've all been thinking—and we can't arrive at a solution."

"It beats me," confessed Buster Boots. "I'm usually pretty quick on ideas, but this time I'm stumped. How about you, Archie?"

Archie Glenthorne started.

"Good gad!" he ejaculated. "Me? That is to say, I? My dear old chappie, you surely don't expect me to get ideas? The good old grey matter is absolutely stationary. Not a sign of movement, as it were."

Nipper shook his head.

"As far as I can see, there's nothing we can do," he said. "Even if we buy the paintings, old Stocky will probably get to hear of it from the art people—and then he'll refuse to let us keep them."

"And at such prices it wouldn't be much good, even if we did buy them," said Handforth. "I mean, five bob each! It's—it's outrageous! How much do you reckon old Stocky wants to send his sister away for that tropical voyage?"

"Nothing less than a hundred pounds," said Boots, shaking his head. "A hundred and fifty would be nearer the mark."

Handforth screwed his face up acutely as he made some mental calculations.

"A hundred quid!" he said, with a startled expression. "Why, at five bob each, old Stocky would need to have five hundred paintings."

"Go to the bottom of the class!" said Church. "You mean four hundred."

"Well, what's the difference?" demanded Handforth, with a glare. "Four hundred! I don't suppose he's got more than twenty or thirty for sale—and if there was any appreciation of art in this town, they'd fetch the money, too. Those oil paintings we saw in that window are worth ten quid each any day!"

"Well, they're worth a lot more than five shillings, I'll say that much," remarked Nipper. "The dealer has evidently priced them low because he wants to get rid of

them. He probably paid Stockdale much less than that—or he may be just an agent. Perhaps old Stocky doesn't touch a penny until the paintings are actually sold."

Handforth rose to his feet, and looked round the open space.

"Well, it's pretty cold here," he said, buttoning his overcoat. "Why should we stay? There's nothing that we can do. You're a fine lot of chaps, I must say! Not an idea among the lot of you!"

"I haven't heard many brilliant suggestions from you, Handy," said Bob Christine.

"Well, I'm going to make one now," said Handforth triumphantly. "When we get back to St. Frank's, we'll get up a deputation, and go to Mr. Stockdale."

"Fine!" said Boots. "And what then?"

"We'll offer to lend him a hundred and fifty pounds," said Handforth firmly. "We can make it up between ourselves—especially if we get old Pippy on the job, and Singleton, and all the other chaps who are rolling in cash. We'll tell Mr. Stockdale that we want to lend him the money, and——"

"That's enough!" interrupted Boots. "Nothing doing!"

"What?"

"That idea is absolutely hopeless," said Boots. "In the first place, old Stocky wouldn't listen to it for a minute. Do you think he'd accept money from juniors?"

"He needs money, doesn't he?" asked Handforth defensively.

"Of course he does, but he wouldn't accept it from us," growled Boots. "What about his dignity?"

"What about his sister's life?" asked Handforth. "When it's a matter of life or death——"

"No, Handy, it wouldn't do," put in Nipper. "We couldn't possibly offer to lend Mr. Stockdale any money. There's another reason why it's impossible—one that you seem to have forgotten."

"Well, and what is it?" asked Handforth.

"My dear man, it's as obvious as daylight," replied Nipper. "If we go to old Stocky, and offer to lend him money, he'll know that we have learned his secret."

"By George! So he will!"

"And he'll naturally make inquiries," went on Nipper. "He'll want to know how we found out. And then we shall have to explain about that letter, and that would be awful."

"Too frightfully awful for words, laddies," agreed Archie Glenthorne. "Odds brainwaves and wheezes," he added, with a start. "An idea, old cheeses! Absolutely an idea!"

"Bravo!" said Fullwood. "Trot it out, Archie! What's your solution?"

"Phipps!" replied the Genial Ass of the Remove.

"Eh?"

"Phipps!" repeated Archie.

"What the dickens do you mean—Phipps?" asked Handforth, glaring. "Do you call

Phipps an idea? If you can't say something sensible, Archie——"

"But, my dear old teacup, it's absolutely the stuff to ladle out!" said Archie. "Phipps is the man with the brain. Phipps is the chappie who shakes ideas and suggestions out of his dashed shirtsleeves! A conjurer, if you know what I mean. I've only got to put the thing to Phipps, and in two jiffs he'll have the whole business mapped out."

The others were not particularly impressed.

"If we can't get an idea, Phipps can't," said Fullwood. "And I'm not sure that you ought to tell Phipps anything about it, Archie. You seem to have forgotten that this is a very private matter."

"Yes, of course," said Boots. "Phipps is only a valet—a manservant. You can't tell him Mr. Stockdale's private affairs, Archie!"

"Odds slurs and insults!" protested Archie Glenthorne. "Kindly remember, you foul blighter, that Phipps is a confidential adviser! Why, good gad, he knows the Glenthorne history from start to finish. He knows more family secrets than any lawyer chappie! And Phipps can be relied upon. His discretion is positively guaranteed in every hole, I mean. That is to say, jewelled in every hole, to be precise."

But still the others were unimpressed, and Phipps was forgotten. The juniors were compelled to admit themselves beaten. Even Nipper was stumped. It seemed that there was no way in which they could help the unfortunate Housemaster of the Modern House.



CHAPTER 7.

The Man of Brain!

"Is anything wrong, sir?"

It was tea-time in Study E, and Archie Glenthorne was gazing pensively at the blazing fire. Alf Brent, his study-mate, was not in evidence, but Phipps was hovering about with the teapot and the buttered scones. But somehow Archie seemed to have no interest in the "good old brew," and Phipps was mildly astonished, although, being a well-trained manservant, he showed no sign of it.

"Eh?" said Archie, glancing up and adjusting his monocle. "Oh, Phipps! What-ho! The doings, and all that sort of thing, eh?"

"Your tea, sir," said Phipps.

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Kindly shove it across, laddie. Now you come to remind me of it, the old tissues are absolutely switching on all five valves!"

Phipps handed the toast, but Archie shuddered slightly, and waved it away.

"Not to-night, Phipps—not to-night!" he said firmly. "Food is not for the young master this evening. You may have observed a somewhat wrinkled condition of the old brow."

"To be quite frank, sir, I have certainly noticed that you are not yourself," said Phipps.

"Oh, rather!" agreed Archie. "I mean, somebody else—what? No, not exactly that — The fact is, Phipps, old bean, I'm deucedly worried. The pride of the Glenthornes is in the throes!"

"Perhaps I can help, sir?" suggested Phipps politely.

"That, laddie, is absolutely the stuff!" agreed Archie, as he sipped his tea. "It may interest you to know that I was waiting to broach the subject. But I didn't like to disturb you while you were wrapping yourself round the teacup and the other thingummy-jigs. All clear now, as it were?"

"You have my full attention, sir."

"And what," said Archie, "could be nicer? Well, Phipps, be good enough to tack back the earflaps and listen. Words of much import are about to flow from the young master's lips. To be absolutely precise, and to get down to brass nails or tacks, or whatever the dashed things are, some poor merchant is in frightful trouble."

"I gathered as much, sir."

"Of course, you would," said Archie, nodding. "You're a wonderful gatherer, Phipps. Dashed rummy, when you come to think of it! You gather everything! Well, to carry on, this is absolutely for your private ear. Kindly understand that, Phipps—confidential and private. Mum, so to speak, is the good old word. I trust you gather my meaning?"

"Quite, sir," said Phipps. "I hope you will realise that anything you tell me will be absolutely sacred. You have never had cause to question my discretion, sir."

"Good gad, no!" replied Archie, with a start. "Odd slurs and evil suggestions, no! But this is something particularly juicy, Phipps—something positively ripe!"

And Archie proceeded to tell Phipps all about it.

Phipps listened deferentially at first, with much interest. But before Archie had proceeded long the valet was very concerned. He had merely thought that Archie was about to recite some trouble—or imaginary trouble—of one of the juniors. But Phipps was much exercised in mind when he heard about Mr. Stockdale's unhappy predicament.

"And so, Phipps, it's up to you," proceeded Archie. "The lads have absolutely failed. Wheezes refuse to flow, and there is nothing doing. What about it, Phipps? Trot out the good old ideas!"

"I must confess, sir, that the problem is somewhat difficult," said Phipps gravely. "It is naturally impossible to approach Mr. Stockdale himself on this delicate subject. Whatever is done must be done by stealth."

"Stealth?" repeated Archie. "Oh, I see. You mean stealth—a sort of detective business?"

"Not exactly, sir," said Phipps. "Perhaps I might be able to suggest something if I am allowed to think for a few minutes."

"Absolutely!" said Archie heartily. "Think

for as long as you like, Phipps. Sit down in one of the good old lounges, and allow the forehead to swell. Take your time, laddie. The young master is relying upon you."

It was not long before Phipps glanced across at his young master, with a quiet gleam in his eye. He had not accepted Archie's invitation to sit down on the lounge, but was standing by the fireplace.

"I should suggest, sir, collusion with the art dealer," he said at length.

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie, frowning. "You should suggest what with the art dealer, Phipps?"

"Collusion, sir."

"My dear old crumpet, I thought you said a collision with the art dealer!" said Archie, with relief. "Collusion—what?"

"Precisely, sir," nodded Phipps. "It would be a good suggestion, I imagine, to see this Mr. Piper, as I think you said his name is, and to swear him to silence."

"Swear him?"

"Yes, sir," said Phipps firmly. "Make an arrangement with him for a special art exhibition—a Stockdale exhibition. This will take place on a certain day, and will be immediately followed by an auction. Naturally, the art dealer will come to Mr. Stockdale and arrange the details, and there is no reason why Mr. Stockdale should not imagine it to be genuine."

"Eh?" said Archie, groping. "This sale business—the good old auction—won't be genuine at all?"

"So far as the money is concerned, sir, it will be genuine enough," replied Phipps. "But I am about to propose that your young friends of the Remove and Fourth Form should attend this sale in the guise of genuine buyers—art lovers. Perhaps it might be as well for Master Browne to be the auctioneer. I believe that Master Browne is somewhat gifted in the matter of speech."

"You've hit it!" echoed Archie. "Good gad, that laddie is absolutely a genius when it comes to exercising the lower jaw!"

"With such an auctioneer, sir, and with such buyers, any preposterous prices can be bid," proceeded Phipps. "And thus, you see, the necessary amount will be raised, and Mr. Stockdale will be none the wiser. He will, of course, believe that the sale has been bonafide."

Archie lay back in his chair, fanning himself. He felt rather faint. This scheme of Phipps' was too colossal for words!



CHAPTER 8.

The Mysterious Stranger I

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE rose slowly to his feet.

"Phipps, old cheese, let me get this quite clear," he said dazedly. "First of all, we have a collision with the art dealer—that is to say, we collude with him. I mean to say, we absolutely get together—what?"

"That expresses it very neatly, sir."

"We arrange with Mr. Piper to have an auction—a special Stockdale Exhibition, and all that sort of stuff," proceeded Archie. "And then on the appointed day, Browne takes the good old chair, and the rest of the lads rally round and do the buying?"

"That is the suggestion, sir," said Phipps.

"But mightn't there be a snag, old article?" asked Archie. "What if this dashed art dealer shoves the veto on the whole suggestion? He might not be willing to join in this collusion stuff."

"That is hardly likely, sir, since Mr. Piper will naturally receive his ordinary commission, with some extra commission on the top, no doubt."

"Oh, yes!" said Archie. "Absolutely! Phipps, laddie, you think of everything, don't you? Kindly let me stagger forth and pass the idea on to the chappies without. This is too big for me to keep to myself."

And Archie wandered out of Study E, and went along the corridor. John Basterfield Boots, Bob Christine, Percy Bray, and Len Clapson were coming along from the lobby, and they stopped outside Study C. The Modern House Fourth-Formers were all looking grave and troubled, and Archie guessed what their errand was.

"Just a minute, lads!" he sang out. "Allow me to come forward with the idea of the century!"

They all went into Study C, and found that Handforth & Co. were visitors there already. By the time they were all in, the apartment was pretty well filled.

"Any ideas?" asked Buster Boots, without much hope.

"Nothing yet," said Nipper. "We're all trying hard, though."

Archie Glenthorne beamed.

"The problem, old sausages, is absolutely solved," he said smoothly. "Phipps has done the good old trick. Always rely on Phipps. The man with the brain! The chappie with the dome!"

Handforth looked at Archie without much enthusiasm.

"Well, get it out!" he said. "We might as well hear it. It's better than hearing nothing."

And Archie proceeded to outline Phipps' plan of campaign. At first the juniors listened without acute attention, but by the time the long-winded Archie had finished they were all looking flushed and excited.

"There's only one word for an idea of that sort," said Nipper at length. "It's a gem!"

"By George," said Handforth, "a corker! It's a funny thing, but I had a glimmering of an idea like that—"

"Cheese it, Handy!" grinned Church. "Give old Phipps his due."

"It's a gem!" repeated Nipper. "I can't see a single thing wrong with it. And old Browne as the auctioneer will be a scream."

"It'll be a first-class rag!" grinned Boots. "Of course, Stocky himself won't be there. We shall have to make certain of that. And

I don't suppose any ordinary customers will be there either. But we'll go through with the thing—hold the exhibition, and then have the auction. Mr. Piper will naturally say to old Stocky afterwards that everything went off smoothly, and that the sale was a great success. And it'll all be true, too."

"Exactly!" chuckled Nipper. "We'd better call another meeting later on this evening. And I'll suggest that we arrange the exhibition for Saturday morning, and the sale for Saturday afternoon. That's a half-holiday, and there's no important match on. We can all get off."

"Great!" said Handforth. "Of course, we shall want Old Pippy there, and Singleton, and the Duke of Somerton, and all the other chaps with lots of money."

"Oh, rather!" agreed Archie. "I shall withdraw certain chunks out of the bank in readiness, don't you know. Nothing like being well armed with the good old splosh!"

There was no doubt about the reception of Phipps' idea. Everybody was enchanted with it. It seemed to solve the complete problem. And Phipps went up greatly in everybody's estimation.

There was a good deal more discussion, and then the little meeting broke up, with the arrangement that a bigger meeting should take place later on in the evening—with all the prospective "art lovers" on hand.

Emerging from Study D, Handforth & Co. came face to face with Alan Castleton. Handforth barred the way, and Alan looked at him with cool insolence.

"Want all the passage?" he asked.

"What are you doing in this House?" demanded Handforth aggressively.

"I can visit my friends, I suppose?"

"Then you suppose wrong!" roared Handforth. "Reptiles aren't wanted in the Ancient House! You rotten cad! Get out of here!"

"I'll get out when I like!" retorted Alan hotly.

"Then you'll like now!" snorted Handforth. "Come on, you chaps—grab him! Pitch him out! He doesn't belong to this House, anyhow! He's not wanted!"

And, forthwith, Alan Castleton was booted down the passage, booted across the lobby, and booted out into the Triangle. He was shown, very plainly, that his company was undesirable.

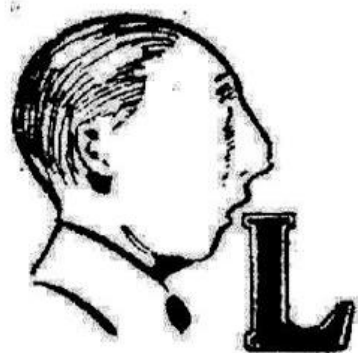
"Stay out, and don't come back again!" roared Handforth, as a final sally.

Alan Castleton went over to the West House, sullen and sore. He was glowering with rage. He went into his own study, and found Lord Pippinton there.

"Eh?" said Old Pippy, starting up from the lounge. "Oh, rather!"

He promptly got up, gave Castleton a cold glance, and walked out. The action was significant. Lord Pippinton, it seemed, was not quite such a simpleton as he looked. He, too, didn't like Alan's company.

He went out into the dusky Triangle, and saw a queer, gaunt old stranger near the gates.



CHAPTER 9.

Old Pippy's Peril!

LORD PIPPINTON only saw the gaunt old stranger when he was actually upon him. He had strolled towards the gates in one of his trance-like conditions, hardly knowing where he went, or why he went there. And there seemed to be nobody else in sight.

For some reason, the stranger looked at him closely—and then a queer gleam came into his eyes.

"A pleasant evening, my young friend," he said in a curiously soft, husky voice.

"Eh?" said old Pippy. "What-ho! Oh, rather!"

He looked at the stranger wonderingly. The old man was tall, with rounded shoulders. Iron grey hair fell about his neck. His frame was obviously wiry, and his face was lined and wrinkled. In the evening light, indeed, he looked rather sinister.

"We can never equal the glories of nature," proceeded the stranger. "What can be more wonderful than a walk on such an evening as this? Perhaps you will care to come for a stroll, my young friend? The exercise is good. There is nothing better than walking."

"Oh, rather not!" said Pippy. "I mean, walking isn't absolutely my style."

"Come, come!" laughed the other. "It will do you a great amount of good."

"Really?" said Lord Pippinton. "Oh, well, of course, if you put it like that—"

He passed through the gateway, and went up the lane with the stranger. He didn't quite know why, but he went. Old Pippy was a very simple youth, and he had practically no will-power of his own. The mere suggestion that he could go for a walk seemed to indicate that he had to go for a walk. And it never occurred to him to turn back, and to leave this old stranger to go his own way.

"There is frost in the air," continued the old man. "There is frost on the ground. See the blades of grass—see how they stand up crisply from the hedge-rows. There is music in every scene."

"You think so?" said Lord Pippinton. "I mean, rather!"

"But what beauty is there more great than the beauties of the moor in the eventide?" went on the gaunt one. "Let us wander to the moor, my young companion. Let us taste of the delights of the great open space!"

"The great open spaces!" said old Pippy. "I saw something of that in one of those dashed cinema places once. Deserts, and so forth."

"The beauty of the bleak countryside is far greater than any desert," replied the old stranger in a severe tone. "What can be more exquisite than the moorland on a wintry evening? Let us examine it closely—let us taste the pure, rich air coming from the sea. The air that is laden with ozone—the air

that goes into our lungs, and gives us fresh life."

Lord Pippinton was rather taken off his feet. And the stranger continued in that same eloquent strain. The junior scarcely found a chance of getting a word in. Not that he really wanted to. His one desire was to get back to St. Frank's, and to find some place where he could have a rest. But he didn't quite know what to do. He was hoping, every minute, that the stranger would turn back. But nothing like this happened.

And before long they found themselves not only on the edge of Bannington Moor, but progressing across it.

By this time the queer old man had placed one of his arms into Lord Pippinton's, and they were strolling along briskly. There was something very peculiar in the whole circumstance.

It was growing very dark now—and a stiff wind was coming across the moor—a cold, bitter wind. Lord Pippinton had no overcoat on, and he was beginning to feel chilly. Only the brisk walking saved him from being actually cold.

And then, on the edge of the old, deserted quarries, the stranger came to a halt. If Lord Pippinton could have seen his eyes, he would have noticed a curious, baleful light in them.

Baleful eyes!

Were these the same eyes that had looked through the window of Lord Pippinton's study one evening, only recently?

The gaunt stranger was now pointing up towards the sky, where the stars were beginning to peep.

"If you will observe closely, you will see the curious formation of the planets," said the old man, pointing. "Look—this one high above! Does it not twinkle with every colour of the rainbow?"

Lord Pippinton looked up.

"Oh, that chappie?" he asked. "Rather! But isn't it somewhat chilly here, as it were? Wouldn't it be a brainy idea to—"

His words broke off with a gasp.

For, without any warning, he had received a push in the very centre of the back. He could not possibly have been aware of what was coming, for he was staring upwards, and he did not know that he had been standing within five or six feet of the edge of the quarry. Only the gaunt old stranger had known that.

"Here!" gasped Lord Pippinton. "I mean—"

That tremendous heave had sent him forward so that he could not possibly pull himself up. And then he saw the edge of the quarry in front of him. There was the abyss—sheer and awful!

Pippy gave a frantic cry—a rather wild sort of cry, for he realised his danger. But it was too late!

He grasped at the grass growing on the edge of the quarry, but he could not gain any hold. And he went down—down—towards the terrible rocks which reared their jagged edges below!

"At last—at last!" muttered the gaunt old man, in a quivering, shaky voice.

He turned on his heel, and walked away into the gloom—vanishing utterly!



CHAPTER 10.

Not Believed!

DOWN—down!

The unhappy Lord Pippinton fell sheer. And then—crash!

But it was a curious crash, followed by a loud splashing of water. And Old Pippy, half stunned and half winded, struggled frantically in the icy water, and then struck out for the bank. For he had fallen into a deep pool of water caused by a recent storm, and there was a thin sheet of ice on the top of it.

There was something almost miraculous about the way in which Lord Pippinton had fallen feet first into this one particular spot—the only spot where there was any safety. He was, indeed, scarcely hurt at all. Shaken, perhaps, and bruised in one or two places, but otherwise uninjured.

And the gaunt stranger, hurrying away, was telling himself that there would be no tell-tale footprints on the frozen ground. He was telling himself that Lord Pippinton's body would be found on the hard rocks at the foot of the quarry, and that at the inquest there would be a verdict of accidental death. Everybody would believe that the schoolboy had wandered off, and had met his end by a sheer mischance.

A deliberate attempt at murder.

That was the long and the short of it. But why should this stranger attempt to take the life of such a simple youth as Lord Pippinton? He was the son and heir of the Duke of Walsham, and there were no other relatives. His death would only mean that the Walsham fortune would go to charity. So what could be the meaning of this extraordinary attempted crime?

The stranger had made a miscalculation, due solely to the gloom of the night. He had taken his intended victim to the wrong spot. It was only a matter of a few feet, but it had made all the difference.

Pippy, of course, had no coherent thoughts at all as he crawled out, and ran towards the sloping ground which led up from the quarry. There were many sheer cliffs here, but in other places the ground was rough, and one could reach the moor again without much trouble.

And Pippinton had enough sense to know that it would be madness for him to hang about. He was soaked to the skin. He was bewildered, but he knew that he had to get back to St. Frank's and change his clothing.

He hardly knew how he got out of the quarry.

Certainly he did not remember it afterwards. He was so dazed and shaken that

he had run half way to the school before he remembered that he had been pushed from behind. He was quite certain, in fact, that the stranger had deliberately tried to kill him. But why? Lord Pippinton was more bewildered than ever.

But his prompt activity had saved him from catching a chill. By the time he reached the school he was in a fine glow. And he had also managed to throw off most of the ill effects. He had got his wind back, and there was very little danger that he would have any bad effects afterwards.

By another queer chance he got into the West House without anybody spotting him. He even got to his bed-room without meeting a soul, and, then and there, he tore off his clothing and made a complete change. And half an hour later, when he came downstairs, he was looking just the same as usual. There was nothing about him to show what he had just been through. A little scared look in his eyes, perhaps, but nothing more. He rather wondered what he should do. He thought it was his plain duty to go to his Housemaster, and to report the matter. But perhaps it would be as well to tell some of the juniors first.

And with this idea in mind, Old Pippy wandered along to Reggie Pitt's study. Pitt, after all, was the junior skipper, and he was the one to tell.

His lordship went in, and found Pitt and Grey hard at work on their prep. They had just come back from a meeting in the Ancient House, and they were both feeling very bucked. They were taking great interest in the Stockdale affair.

"Hallo, Pippy!" said Reginald Pitt briskly. "Just the man I wanted to see. I want you—or, at least, we shall want you on Saturday."

"Oh, ah!" said Pippy. "But I wanted to tell you—"

"That's all right—tell us another time!" interrupted Jack Grey. "We're hard at work. If you can help me with this beastly grammar—"

"Oh, but really!" said Lord Pippinton. "It's frightfully serious. Really! Very serious. Some awful chap tried to murder me just now."

Pitt and Grey stared at him.

"Somebody tried to murder you?" repeated Reggie.

"Absolutely!" said Pippy. "A frightful cove with a lined face and bowed shoulders. A queer-looking merchant. Absolutely tried to murder me!"

"My dear chap, you've been dreaming!" said Pitt.

"No, really!" insisted Old Pippy. "I went for a walk with him."

"A walk?"

"Yes, rather!" said his lordship. "A walk on to the moor."

"You certainly *have* been dreaming," said Pitt, grinning. "Nobody but a born idiot would go for a walk on the moor at this time in the evening—when it's practically dark. It's cold and windy, too."

"I went to the gates, don't you know," said Lord Pippy. "The chappie was there, and he asked me to go with him, and I didn't like to refuse, so there you are. And we went to the moor, and he biffed me over the quarry."

"And you bounced up again, I suppose?" asked Jack Grey, grinning.

"As it happens, I fell into a frightfully big pool!" said Lord Pippinton.

"And you didn't even get splashed!" said Pitt dryly. "That's quite enough, Pippy! You've been dreaming! You've been walking about in one of your trances! That story is a bit too thin!"

"But I want you to tell me what I ought to do about it," said Old Pippy.

"Forget it!" replied Pitt promptly.

"Forget it?"

"Yes, that's the best thing you can do," replied Pitt. "Forget it completely."

"Oh, all right, then!" said his lordship, with relief. "Perhaps you're right."

And he wandered out, leaving Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey chuckling. Never for an instant did they believe that there was any truth in the story!



CHAPTER 11.

Preparing the Stage!

MR. PIPER looked rather dubious.

"Am I to understand, young gentlemen, that you are quite serious in this?" he asked. "Do you realise what you are asking me?"

"We are perfectly serious, Mr. Piper," said Nipper. "We want you to arrange this exhibition for Saturday morning. And we want you to allow Browne here to act as the auctioneer on Saturday afternoon. If any members of the ordinary public come in, so much the better, but whether they come or not, we want to hold the sale."

"A genuine sale, you understand," said Buster Boots. "No fake about it. Any prices that we bid will be paid. The auctioneer will collect every penny."

"You can leave that to me, brother," nodded William Napoleon Browne, of the Fifth.

It was the next day, and a deputation had gone to see Mr. Piper, the art-dealer, in Bannington. The general outline of the scheme had been given him, and he didn't seem to think much of it.

"The most important thing of all is that Mr. Stockdale should know nothing of our part in the game," went on Nipper earnestly. "We want it to be kept completely from him. You see, the idea is for him to raise a lot of cash—by selling his pictures."

"I am afraid there's not much chance of them selling in the ordinary way," said Mr. Piper, shaking his head. "I have more than a dozen of Mr. Stockdale's paintings

here now, and although they are quite good for an amateur, I cannot sell them as genuine works of art. It is only by marking them at a very low price that I can get rid of them at all."

"Well, you'll get rid of them quickly enough, if you hold this special exhibition on Saturday morning," said Nipper. "There won't be a picture left after the sale. They're all going under the hammer! Now, Mr. Piper, it's a purely business deal, and I know you won't turn it down. Don't forget that you get your commission on every picture, and the more money it's sold for, the greater profit you'll get. There's no fake about it."

Mr. Piper look suspicious.

"Are you quite sure of this?" he asked. "I must warn you that I cannot possibly allow any—er—ragging in my show-rooms. I know what you schoolboys are, and it would do my business a great deal of harm if —"

"Brother Piper, allow me to enter a word at this juncture," put in Browne gently. "As a responsible member of the senior school, I vouch for the good behaviour of these juniors. Usually, I will confess, they are high-spirited and obstreperous. But always remember that they will be under my care. As auctioneer, I shall make a point of keeping order among the buyers."

For a solid hour the juniors talked to Mr. Piper. And by the end of that time he was appreciating the situation. Indeed, he proved himself to be a sportsman. He entered in the thing heart and soul. What was more, he promised to see Mr. Stockdale that very afternoon, and to further the whole plan by proposing the exhibition at the sale as though it was entirely his own idea. In this way, Mr. Stockdale would guess nothing.

Browne had a great deal to do with Mr. Piper's capitulation. Browne had a very able tongue, and by the time he had finished with Mr. Piper, that unfortunate gentleman was rather weak. It was really impossible to choke Browne off, once he started. And the lanky Fifth-Former had thrown himself whole-heartedly into this effort on Mr. Stockdale's behalf.

And, sure enough, while the school was at lessons that afternoon, Mr. Stockdale had a visitor.

The Housemaster of the Modern House was momentarily alarmed when he beheld Mr. Piper. He regarded the art-dealer's coming with apprehension. For it immediately came into his head that the tradesman was about to tell him that he could take no more of his paintings.

Mr. Stockdale was looking weary and worn. Seldom had the school seen him so utterly dejected. His shoulders were greatly bowed, and his whole bearing was careworn. During the past two or three weeks he had aged several years. It was a tragic change, for usually Mr. Stockdale was cheery and bright.

"Ah, Mr. Stockdale," said the art-dealer,

"I am glad that you can spare time to see me. I have a proposition to make. I have come especially to see you, as I am enthusiastic about it. With your permission I am going to hold a special exhibition of your paintings on Saturday morning."

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Stockdale, startled.

He stared at the art-dealer in amazement, and a flush had come into his cheeks.

"You mean to hold an exhibition of my paintings?" he asked incredulously.

"Quite so, my dear sir," said the other. "And, what is more, I want every painting that I can lay hands upon. I shall make a big feature of this exhibition. And in the afternoon I am planning an auction sale—a very big sale in which all your paintings, I hope, will be disposed of."

"But—but this is so unexpected!" said the Housemaster. "Did you not tell me that my paintings were of little use?"

Mr. Piper rubbed his hands.

"Since then I have had one or two clients to see me," he said vaguely. "Wealthy clients. I may say. Several people have taken a great fancy to your particular style of work, Mr. Stockdale. I have every reason to believe that this sale will be an immense success. There is no reason why we should not realise a considerable sum—always providing, of course, that you have a sufficient number of paintings——"

"I have many—many!" interrupted Mr. Stockdale breathlessly. "Did I not tell you that I have at least two dozen canvases which you have never seen? You wouldn't let me bring them to you, Mr. Piper."

"But I want them now, sir—I want them all!" said the art-dealer. "And the more the better. This Stockdale exhibition will be something big—something very unusual for Bannington. Leave it entirely in my hands. I rather think you will have a pleasant surprise on Saturday evening after the auction sale."

It was only natural that Mr. Stockdale should suspect nothing. Here was the art-dealer himself mooted an idea which seemed to be his very own. And Mr. Stockdale, who knew practically nothing of the sale, assumed that Mr. Piper was inspired only by his own business instincts. And when later the art-



Smack! Irene brought her hand round and slapped Castleton's face with such force that he staggered back. "You cad!" she exclaimed indignantly. Just then Mr. Stockdale, looking very grim and angry, came striding up.

dealer took his departure, old Stocky was looking like a different man.

There was new hope in him; and his gleaming eyes and his flushed cheeks were worth seeing.

CHAPTER 12.

The Bombshell!



SATURDAY morning dawned clear. And there were many fellows in the Remove and the Fourth who got up that morning with a particularly light-hearted feeling. They were the plotters—the fellows who were arranging to help Mr. Stockdale by stealth.

They had not failed to notice the extraordinary change in the Housemaster during the past day or two. Indeed, since Mr. Piper's visit, old Stocky had been a different man. Once again he had regained his hope.

Nipper and his co-conspirators were particularly pleased because nobody else in the school knew of this little game. It was just a secret of their own. There weren't many in it really. Just about a dozen all told. And every arrangement had been made. No stone

had been left unturned to make the sale a complete success.

The exhibition, of course, would be a mere fiasco, since none of the Bannington inhabitants would go to it. One or two people might drop in, perhaps, but they would not be allowed to buy anything. None of the pictures were for sale until the afternoon, when the auction would be held.

All the plotters had gathered as much money as they possibly could. Nipper had managed to get a couple of fivers out of Nelson Lee. Handforth had wired to his pater to send him some cash at once, and he, too, had obtained a tenner. Archie Glen-thorne, naturally, had gone the whole hog, and was simply wallowing in notes. Altogether, he had two or three hundred pounds on him. The others had laughed at him, for this was an outrageous amount of money.

"All the same, laddies, it's just as well to be on the safe side," declared Archie firmly.

"Yes, my dear ass. But if we raise a hundred pounds for old Stocky's pictures it'll do fine," said Nipper. "We're not going to let you bid any fancy prices, you ass. There's no sense in going to extremes."

It was nearly time for prayers, and the juniors were waiting near Big Hall. Reggie Pitt was there, and Lord Pippinton, too. Pippy, of course, was essential to the success of this sale, for Pippy had pots of money, and he had been told to bid heavily. He was quite ready to join in, too, for he knew that it was for a good cause. And all the other moneyed youths of the Lower School were rallying round nobly. Anything to help old Stocky.

"It's good to see the light in Stocky's eyes just now," said Buster Boots as he joined the others. "I passed him in the Triangle a minute ago, and he's looking ten years younger already. He doesn't suspect a thing, either. We've got him spoofed beautifully."

"Yes, and we'll keep him spoofed, too," said Handforth. "He'll never know a thing. He'll always think that he sold his paintings in the ordinary way. I say, what a lark!"

There was something rather fine in the way these juniors were rallying round to the Housemaster. They didn't want him to know anything about it. They were doing it all by stealth. The very knowledge that he was being provided with the money that he so badly needed was all the reward they wanted.

And then, just when everything seemed all right, the bombshell crashed.

Immediately after prayers, Dr. Stafford made a brief announcement. It was only short, but it was enough to strike consternation into the hearts of the plotters.

"I have to tell you, boys, that Bannington is strictly out of bounds," said the Head in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Out of bounds, sir?" shouted Handforth, startled.

"There is no need for you to shout in that fashion Handforth," said the Head, frown-

ing. "I do not suppose the town will be out of bounds for more than a few days."

"But—but——"

"Silence, there!" sang out one of the prefects.

"There has been a case of smallpox in Bannington," proceeded the Head. "I think it is only mild, and there is very little danger of it spreading. But you will all please understand that the town is strictly prohibited. Any boy, senior or junior, who enters Bannington until this order is rescinded will be very severely dealt with. Juniors, I may say, will be flogged. That is all. You may dismiss."

And the school dismissed.

Nearly everybody took the news with calmness. It didn't matter much to the majority. If Bannington was out of bounds for a few days no great harm would be done. It was a bit of a nuisance, of course, but there the matter ended.

There were others, however, who thought different.

William Napoleon Browne gathered his fellow plotters together. Nipper & Co., Handforth, Reggie Pitt, Buster Boots and all the others joined forces in the Triangle, and their expressions were ones of deep concern.

"What about our auction this afternoon?" asked Handforth breathlessly. "Bannington banned! It—it's awful!"

The others nodded gloomily. Dr. Stafford's ban had certainly complicated matters.

"Yes, what about it?" said Nipper. "You heard what the Head said, didn't you? Anybody who's seen in Bannington will be flogged. How can we defy an order like that?"

"It's a bit of a problem," agreed Pitt, frowning. "We're bound to be seen if we go, and it isn't an ordinary case, either. There's smallpox in the town, and we don't want to risk infection, do we? I'm blessed if I know what to suggest."

"Brothers, the situation is serious," agreed Browne. "It really seems that we must abandon our entire scheme. It is the irony of fate that some misguided person should contract smallpox at this juncture. But fate is always waiting round the corner with a sledgehammer. We must face these trials with a stoical calmness."

"That's all very well," growled Handforth, "but are we going to let old Stocky down? Are we going to see this thing fizzle out?"

"We can't!" replied Nipper between his teeth. "We've got to go through with it—and hang the consequences!"

And the others agreed, although they were looking grave and troubled. It was a very serious matter to ignore the Headmaster's order. Bannington had been put definitely and completely out of bounds. And this was the very day on which the auction sale of Mr. Stockdale's paintings was to be held! Could anything have been more unfortunate?



CHAPTER 13.

Worth the Risk!

NOTHING definite was settled then.

The more the fellows thought of it, the more they realised that they were called upon to do much more than they had bargained for. It was one thing to go to this fake sale and to have a little sport, and to bid exorbitant prices for Mr. Stockdale's paintings.

But it was another thing to face the certainty of a public flogging!

Handforth suggested that they should all disguise themselves, and go to the sale-room as genuine customers. He was full of the suggestion, and when morning lessons were over he told all the others.

"It ought to be easy," he declared. "We've only got to dress up and put on false whiskers and things, and we shall trick everybody. Besides, it'll make the sale seem a lot more genuine. Even old Stocky could come along, and he won't even guess!"

Nipper shook his head.

"Don't you believe it, Handy," he said. "That sort of thing can be done in a comic paper, but not in real life. The only safe way is to keep Mr. Stockdale right out of it. And we must go in our own personalities, and not faked up like a lot of guys. We should have crowds after us if we wore those disguises, as you suggest. No, it can't be done."

And all the others heartily agreed.

"All right! Have your own way!" growled Handforth. "You always sit on my suggestions! But I say it's a jolly good idea! And there's something else, too, now I'm about it. I think I ought to be the auctioneer."

"Rats!" said Buster Boots. "That's Browne's job."

Buster was looking very worried. Mr. Stockdale was his own Housemaster, and Buster knew that Stocky was one of the best. All these Modern House fellows were grateful to the other juniors for the help they were extending. But it was a bit thick if they were to land themselves in for a flogging as a reward for their good-nature.

They were out in the Triangle, near the fountain, and it so happened that Mr. Stockdale himself came by. The Housemaster walked with a springy step. His eyes were gleaming, his colour had returned, and he was upright and straight. He nodded cheerily to the juniors.

"A splendid day, my boys," he said. "Wonderful weather—wonderful!"

"Rather, sir!"

"Sometimes," said Mr. Stockdale, "we believe that everything is black and hopeless. But we mustn't allow ourselves to get into that condition, boys," he went on, with a far-away expression in his eyes. "Let us always look on the bright side. That is the

best way to go through life. Well, well! Yes, a beautiful day—a beautiful day!"

He walked off rather hurriedly, probably realising that he had been saying a trifle too much. But the juniors glanced at one another after he had gone.

"Well?" asked Boots defiantly.

"My dear chap, there's nothing else for it," said Nipper. "We've got to go through with the scheme! If we don't, poor old Stocky will know everything."

"That's just it," agreed Boots. "Mr. Piper will have to confess that the whole thing was a fake, and that the art lovers didn't turn up because they were confined to gates! And then old Stocky will know everything, and that bright look will go out of his face. Those paintings of his will be on his hands again."

"They'll never be on his hands!" declared Handforth. "We're going to that sale. We're going right through with it, and nothing is going to stop us. Smallpox, eh? Blow smallpox! There's no danger at all, in my opinion. I never heard of such an idiotic thing!"

"My dear ass, there's no danger of smallpox," grinned Nipper. "That's not the trouble. But it seems to me that there's a pretty strong danger of a flogging."

"Well, we can stand a swishing for once, can't we?"

"We've got to," replied Reggie Pitt cheerily. "It's all in a good cause, so why should we worry? Besides, if we're lucky, we might get to Bannington, and even get back without being spotted. It's worth the risk."

"I am delighted, brothers, that I should hear you voicing such views," said Browne as he joined them. "Undoubtedly there is but one course for us to pursue. We must go."

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old Browne!"

"I will confess that I view the prospect with many misgivings," continued Browne calmly, "but we must steel ourselves. We must hope for the best, and we must be prepared for the worst."

"That's all very well for you," said Church. "But if you're collared you won't be flogged. I wonder why they don't flog seniors nowadays?"

"Let us not go into these painful subjects," said Browne. "I am about to make a suggestion, brothers, and I desire your ears. It is my plan that we should leave singly after the meal is over."

"How do you mean singly?" asked Handforth.

"Well, I venture to suggest that a few suspicious might be aroused if we all went out in a bunch," continued Browne. "Therefore would it not be better for us to wander forth alone? In twos and threes, perhaps, but not in greater numbers. We could sneak into Bannington by the by-ways and by the alleys. Let us all make a bee-line for Mr. Piper's establishment—and, indeed, there is no reason why we should not slip in by the

back door. I will make a point of that. I will ring up the gentleman, and obtain the precise information we need. It will be far better than proceeding along the High Street, where we stand many murky chances of being observed."

"That's a brainy notion!" grinned Nipper. "If we go in by the back way, we can avoid being seen by anybody who knows us."

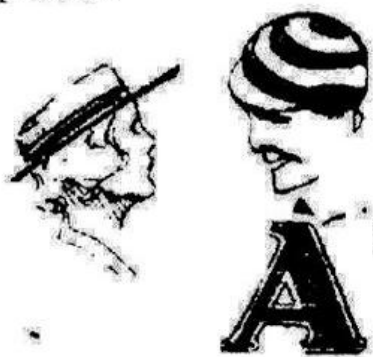
And when the juniors dispersed, to go to their various Houses for the mid-day meal, they were all agreed. It made no difference to them that Bannington was out of bounds. They would go to Mr. Piper's art shop that afternoon, and carry on with the sale, so that Mr. Stockdale could raise the money he needed.

Any other thought was absolutely out of the question.

It was impossible to let the Housemaster down now. He was living in a new world. He was living in a dreamland of hopes and contentment. He had seen the preparations in the art shop, and Mr. Piper had led him to believe that the auction sale would be a great success.

How could the boys desert him now? How could they back out, just because Bannington was placed out of bounds? For if they failed to hold that sale, old Stocky would know everything, and then his misery would be ten-fold. The reaction would be so great that he might even suffer a general collapse.

No, Mr. Stockdale's hopes had been raised, and that auction sale was going to take place!



CHAPTER 14.

Castleton's Threat.

ALAN CASTLETON looked very thoughtful.

He was lounging on the Ancient House steps, wondering what he should do that afternoon. His thoughts, indeed, were mainly connected with the affairs of Mr. Stockdale. For Alan was no fool.

He knew about that letter; he knew of Mr. Stockdale's trouble. And he had not failed to notice the signal difference in the Housemaster's mien of late. Alan had also seen the various meetings of Nipper and Handforth, Pitt, and Boots, and the rest. By keeping his ears open, he had caught words here and there, and he knew exactly what was going on in Bannington.

"Silly fools!" murmured Alan to himself. "They think nobody knows, eh? But I know! They're getting up that giddy sale at Piper's shop, so that they can raise the money for old Stockdale. Well, let them get on with it! They're crazy!"

And he dismissed the matter from his mind. Castleton had more sense than to take any action on his own account. He knew that the fellows would make things terribly hot for him if he breathed a word to the school in general. So far the whole affair had been

kept secret, and Alan had no intention of talking. The risks were too great; the costs would be too heavy.

But he knew, all the same.

"Oh, ho!" he murmured, with a grin. "What have we here?"

Irene Manners had just walked in through the gateway, and the Moor View girl made a very pretty picture as she came daintily towards the school buildings. Irene was quite a pretty girl, and at present, in her winter coat and her small hat, she looked particularly attractive.

Alan had passed one or two of the Moor View girls on different occasions, but he was not yet acquainted with them, and, in his opinion, Irene was the fairest of them all. He was particularly attracted by her blonde beauty.

He went forward, raising his cap.

"Good-afternoon!" he said genially.

Irene halted, and looked at the Remove fellow steadily.

"I don't think I know you," she said, in her frank way. "You're a new boy, aren't you?"

"Castleton," nodded Alan. "Alan Castleton. Entirely at your service, Miss—Miss—"

"I'm Irene Manners," replied the girl. "Perhaps you can tell me where I can find Handforth?"

"Handforth minor or Handforth major?"

"I want Ted Handforth, of the Remove," replied Irene.

"Then I'm afraid you won't see him just yet," said Alan, with a grin. "Handforth has gone out to Ban— Anyhow, he's gone out. And, what's more, his cheeky young minor has gone with him. They won't be back until this evening. I'm sure."

Irene looked rather disappointed.

"That's a pity," she said. "I wanted Ted to come out with me."

"Ted?"

"Handforth major," explained Irene.

"That's all right," said Alan. "Don't worry about Handforth. He's a loud-voiced ass, anyhow. If you want somebody to come out with you, I'm perfectly willing."

Irene looked him straight in the eye.

"I dare say you are," she replied. "But it so happens that I'm not."

She didn't like this new fellow. There was something too supercilious about him—something distrustful. He was getting altogether too familiar, too. Alan had a tremendous opinion of himself, and he fondly imagined that no girl could withstand his attractions. He glanced round quickly, and saw that nobody else was in sight.

"Oh, don't say that, old thing!" he murmured. "I'd love to go out with you for the afternoon! As a matter of fact, I was just wondering what to do. You've come out of a clear sky!"

"Don't be silly," said Irene. "Let me pass, please."

"All right, you can pass if you like—but you'll have to pay for it," said Castleton

coolly. "And I suppose you know what the payment will be?"

"You'd better be careful," said Irene dangerously. "I don't want any nonsense from you!"

"The payment will be a kiss," said Alan, with a grin. "Come along—let's have a kiss, old top!"

Irene laughed scornfully.

"I wouldn't kiss you for a thousand pounds!" she replied, in a contemptuous tone.

Alan flushed at her scornful flash of the eyes.

"All right!" he said, in a low voice. "If you won't kiss me for a thousand pounds, perhaps you'll kiss me for nothing?"

He was annoyed. He hated to be flouted by a girl. And the next moment he grasped Irene, and tried to force a kiss upon her. But he didn't know who he was dealing with! In a flash, Irene brought her hand round, and slapped Alan's face so soundly that the smack could have been heard on the other side of the Triangle. He staggered back, his cheek burning.

"How dare you?" asked Irene, in a low voice. "You cad!"

Whether Alan would have made another attempt was questionable. But, in any case, there came an interruption at that moment. Mr. Stockdale came striding across from the Modern House. He was looking grim and angry.

"Boy!" he said curtly.

Alan glanced round, his lips set in a thin line.

"Well?" he asked sullenly.

"What is your name?" demanded Mr. Stockdale.

"Castleton!"

"Castleton—what?" snapped the House-master.

"Alan Castleton!" replied Alan, with studied insolence.

"I am afraid, Castleton, that you are deliberately impertinent," said Mr. Stockdale, with heat. "I saw you attempt to force your attentions upon this young lady. I am extremely sorry, Miss Irene, that this boy should have——"

"Oh, that's all right!" smiled Irene. "Don't trouble, Mr. Stockdale. It was nothing."

She walked on, and Mr. Stockdale turned to Alan again.

"I shall report you to your own House-master," he said. "And I shall advise Mr. Stokes to give you a severe caning."

He walked away, and Alan scowled. Sure enough, within half-an-hour, he was instructed to go to Mr. Beverley Stokes' study. And there he passed a very painful five minutes. He came out, his hands burning, his eyes glittering with evil, vindictive hatred.

"By gad!" he muttered, as he went down the passage. "I'll get even for this! I'll make old Stockdale sorry that he ever inter-

fered with me! Yes, and I know the way, too!"

There was something very sinister in Alan Castleton's muttered words.



CHAPTER 15.

The Mysterious Stranger Again!

"O far," said Reggie Pitt, "so good!"

He was cycling along the Bannington road with Lord Pippinton and Willy Handforth. These three had elected to come together. Reggie felt that it was highly necessary for somebody responsible to take charge of Old Pippy. And Willy went with them because he had no great desire to accompany his volcanic major. Willy, of course, had been in the "know" from the very start. Willy was a very cute youngster, and it wasn't a wise policy to keep him out of anything like this.

"Of course we're safe so far," he remarked, as they cycled along. "We're not out of bounds yet. We're all right until we get within the boundaries of Bannington. It wouldn't matter if we met every master of St. Frank's here."

"Wouldn't it?" grinned Pitt. "They might smell a rat, my son! It's a pity they couldn't have waited until Monday before putting Bannington out of bounds."

"Just like 'em!" said Willy, with a sniff. "The whole thing is a lot of rot, of course. I don't suppose there's a case of smallpox at all. But you know what these schoolmasters are!" he added wisely. "They get the wind up in half a minute if a report goes out that somebody has come out in spots!"

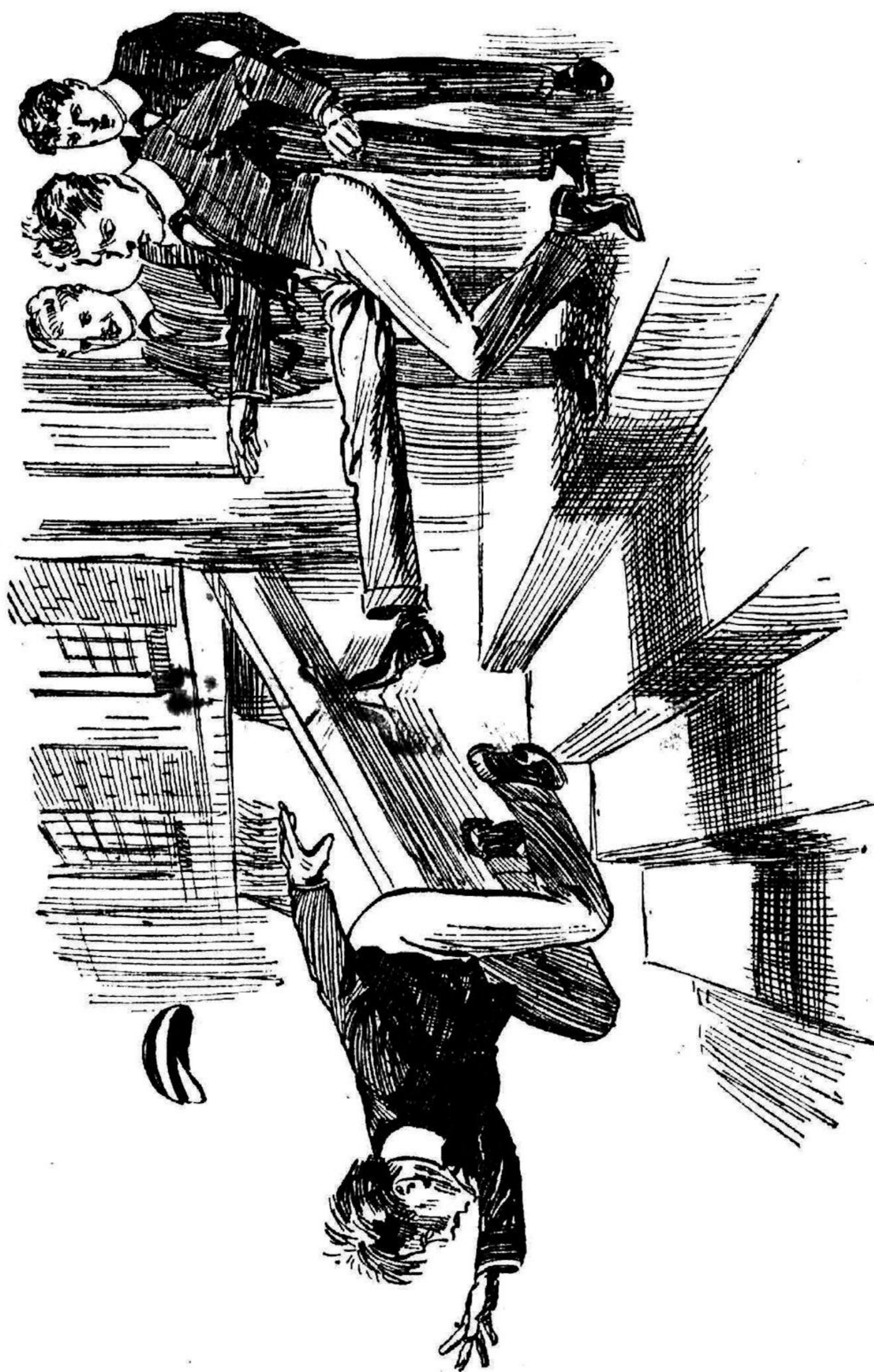
"I'm not sure they're not right, either," said Pitt. "And in any other circumstances I wouldn't break bounds like this—especially to go into a prohibited area. But old Stocky's fate is in the balance, so to speak, and it's a matter of necessity. Let's hope the sale goes off all right."

"Oh, rather!" said Lord Pippinton. "Plenty of cash is the main thing, what? I'm all over with it, don't you know. Bulging with the good old stuff."

"That's the ticket!" said Reggie. "Don't forget to make some good bids, Pippy. But don't go too high—don't be mad about it. Keep the thing within reasonable bounds. If we don't, we shall defeat our own ends, because old Stocky will smell a rat."

"Just what I was thinking," remarked Willy sagely. "We shall have to keep our eye on Archie, too. If we let him have enough rope, he'll go and bid twenty or thirty quid for a picture that's only worth ten bob. That sort of thing won't do. Stocky will only become suspicious."

They turned a bend in the lane, and beheld a small two-seater motor-car further along, pulled up against the grass border. The motorist was evidently suffering from a punc-



With a powerful kick, Handforth sent Aian Castleton tumbling down the Ancient House steps. "Stay out, and don't come back!" he roared. "Cads aren't wanted here!"

tured tyre. For he was bending over the rear wheel, tinkering with a jack.

Reggie Pitt frowned.

"This old chap seems to be all alone," he murmured. "Pity we're in such a hurry, or we'd offer to lend him a hand."

"Yes," said Willy. "Still, we might be able to do him a service, even now. Perhaps we can carry a message to the garage. There is one a little bit further along. Shall we ask him?"

"Might as well," said Reggie, as he applied his brakes.

They jumped off their bicycles, and politely raised their caps as the motorist glanced round.

"Anything we can do, sir?" asked Pitt.

"I say!" babbled Lord Pippinton. "I say! Why, this—this——"

He paused, incoherent. For he was staring straight at the gaunt old stranger who had led him towards the moor quarry an evening or two back!

This was the very man—as gaunt as ever, but apparently unaffected by Lord Pippinton's blank stare. He only gave Pippy a glance, and then smiled at Reggie. Never for one second did the stranger reveal the fact that he was face to face with a boy he had recently attempted to murder. The man's composure was extraordinary.

Was he really unconscious of the identity of his would-be victim?

"Thank you, my boys, but there's really no need for you to trouble," he said, in that same soft, husky voice that Lord Pippinton had heard before. "I don't think it is a puncture—only the valve."

"We'll take a message to the garage, if you like," offered Willy.

"No, there is really no need," said the gaunt stranger. "Thank you ever so much—but you needn't trouble."

He turned back towards the wheel, as though to signify that the conversation was over. And Reggie Pitt and Willy got on their bicycles again. Somehow, Lord Pippinton scrambled on to his own machine, but he wobbled about the road so much that his two companions looked at him curiously.

"What's the matter, Pippy?" asked Pitt, staring.

Lord Pippinton was acting very queerly. He could hardly keep on the saddle. His face was flushed, and his eyes were excited. For once, that vacant look had vanished from his face.

"The police!" he blurted out. "What about the police? I mean, where are they? Why aren't they here?"

"The police?" ejaculated Reggie Pitt, in astonishment.

"What-ho!" said Pippy. "Absolutely the police! That old chappie, don't you know! That frightful cove with the lined face!"

"You mean that motorist?" asked Willy.

"Yes!"

"What about him?"

"He's the beggar who tried to kill me the other night!" said Lord Pippinton excitedly.



With a powerful kick, Handforth sent Alan (and don't come back!)"

"Absolutely tried to kill me, you know! Shot me down into the old quarry, and I might have broken my neck!"

"He tried to murder you!" echoed Willy, startled out of his customary calmness. "You're dotty, old man! You've gone off your rocker! I've never seen a more harmless specimen in all my life. And if he tried to murder you, why didn't he bolt, or show some sign of recognition?"

Reggie Pitt was thinking the very same thing.

"Cheese it, Pippy!" he grinned. "You mustn't get these fancies into your head!"

"But, I mean, they're not fancies!" protested Pippy. "That's the man! I'd know him anywhere!"

"What the dickens is he talking about?" asked Willy.

"Oh, the other night he had a dream, or something," explained Pitt. "He came to Jack Grey and me, and said that some old fellow had taken him to the moor quarry, and had thrown him over the edge. Of course, it was all rubbish. He must have had a nightmare."

"But—but— Look here, I mean!" gasped Lord Pippinton. "You don't understand! I tell you that fellow—that old chap—absolutely the same chappie——"



down the Ancient House steps. "Stay out, you aren't wanted here!"

"It's no good, Pippy—you can't spoof us with a yarn like that," said Pitt calmly. "Didn't you tell me that it was practically dark when this gaunt stranger chucked you over the edge of the quarry?"

"Oh, rather!"

"Then, if it was nearly dark, how could you tell what the chap looked like?" chuckled Pitt. "No, it's just your imagination. That motorist was one of the most harmless chaps I've ever seen—as Willy just said. You mustn't go about accusing people of murdering you. It's a shocking thing, Pippy! You'd better go easy!"

"If you don't, you'll get into trouble!" added Willy, giving his lordship a strange look.

And the unfortunate Lord Pippinton gave it up for a second time.

That old man was certainly the stranger who had thrown him over the quarry! But what could he do? His companions flouted the very idea of it. They thought that he was going loony, or something. Never for a moment did they dream that there was an atom of truth in the story.

And they continued on their way to Bannington, dismissing the incident entirely from their minds. Lord Pippinton, however, thought over it deeply—in his own trance-

like way. And the more he thought, the more confused he became. In the end he gave a sigh; it was certainly beginning to seem fantastic and unreal now.

But Lord Pippinton knew that it was no dream. Upstairs in his bed-room were the soiled and ruined things which he had taken off after coming back from that alarming adventure!

CHAPTER 16.

Something Like a Sale!



"GENTLEMEN, the sale is now open!" said Browne genially. "I invite you to bid. We are now about to dispose of some very valuable works of art—the entire collection of oil paintings executed by Mr. Arthur Stockdale. Allow me to draw your attention to this wonderful view of Bellton Village!"

"Go it, Browne!"

"That's the style, old man!"

There were many chuckles as William Napoleon Browne raised his hammer, and looked very solemn. The little sale-room was crowded—but only crowded with St. Frank's fellows. There was not a single stranger there!

Although the exhibition had been held that morning, and although the general public had been invited to attend—quite honestly and with bona fide intentions—none of the Bannington inhabitants had thought it worth while to come. There was no rush for Mr. Stockdale's masterpieces.

But the boys didn't mind.

They much preferred to be entirely on their own. The sale, when all was said and done, was only held so that some money could be raised for Mr. Stockdale in a legitimate way—in a way that would leave no room for suspicion. This was a genuine sale, held under the auspices of Mr. Piper, the art dealer. Mr. Stockdale would have no cause for suspicion.

The room was situated upstairs, and was, ordinarily, a mere stock-room. But all Mr. Stockdale's pictures were hung round the walls, and they made quite a brave show. There were paintings of all sizes, and the majority of them were views of St. Frank's, or Bellton, or the surrounding district. The Housemaster of the Modern House had been very industrious with his brush during the summer holidays, and many of his efforts were quite praiseworthy.

Painting was Mr. Stockdale's hobby, and he prized every one of these canvasses. Only sheer necessity would have made him sell them. And it undoubtedly seemed that he was going to sell them now!

"Here," said Browne, "we have an excellent view of Bellton Village! Gaze upon it, brothers, and let me have your bids. Do not be stingy in your offers. Let the sale open with a bang."

"Which is the painting you mean?" asked Nipper.

"This one, brother," said Browne, pointing with his hammer.

"You ass!" grinned Nipper. "That's not Bellton Village."

"No?" said Browne politely. "But do I not recognise the tuck-shop?"

"That's a painting of the West Square at St. Frank's!" said Reggie Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Upon closer inspection, I believe that you are right," said Browne coolly. "Well, brothers, let us now proceed! Here we have a wonderful view of the West Square at St. Frank's. Observe the colouring. If you gaze closely upon this canvas, you may even see the window of Brother Handforth's study! And is not that worth a high price?"

"Well, here goes!" said the Hon. Douglas Singleton. "Two pounds!"

"Splendid!" said Browne. "Now, gentlemen, what advance on two pounds?"

"Two pounds ten!" sang out Somerton.

"Come, come!" said Browne. "Surely this wonderful painting is worthy of better bidding than this? Shall we say three pounds, Brother Glenthorne?"

"Absolutely!" said Archie, with a start. "Three pounds, what? Absolutely not! A fiver, laddie—absolutely a good old fiver!"

"Five-ten!" said Singleton.

"Any advance on five-ten?" asked Browne. "No? This splendid view of Bellton Village—I should say the West Square at St. Frank's—is to be knocked down for five pounds ten? No further bids?"

Bang!

"Sold for five pounds ten!" said Browne. "Now we come to the next view. Ah, wonderful! A genuine landscape! Here we have the River Stowe flowing along between green banks——"

"You've got the green banks all right, Browne, but that's a picture of Bellton Lane!" said Handforth. "Do you think I don't know Bellton Lane?"

"Evidently you don't," chuckled Nipper, "because that particular painting is a view of the Caistowe road!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, anyhow—three quid!" said Reggie Pitt. "I bid you three quid!"

"A fiver, dash you!" said Lord Pippinton. "That's a blessed good view! A fiver, auctioneer!"

"Six pounds!" said Handforth.

"Go it!" grinned Pitt. "I give you best. Carry on, all of you! I wonder what we're going to do with the paintings after we've bought them?"

"We can send 'em home," said Nipper. "We mustn't take them to St. Frank's, of

course, or old Stocky might spot them. Rather a pity, really. They'd do fine for decorating our studies."

"The risk's too great," said Fullwood. "Whoever buys these paintings had better let Mr. Piper pack them up, and send them off to our homes."

And so the sale went on, conducted in quite the orthodox manner. Browne proved himself to be an able auctioneer, and his efforts were appreciated by the "art lovers."

And then, just when about a third of the pictures had been disposed of, Mr. Piper came hurrying into the sale-room, and his expression was one of alarm.

"Boys—boys!" he said hurriedly. "Mr. Stockdale is here!"

"What?"

"Old Stocky here?"

"Brothers—brothers!" said Browne. "Not so loud! This is indeed a tragedy! How has it come about, Brother Piper? Was it not distinctly understood that Mr. Stockdale should be kept away until after the sale?"

"I know!" said the art dealer. "I strongly advised him not to come during the sale—knowing, of course, it would be fatal. But he is here—he says that he wanted to come and see how things were progressing. Poor gentleman, he couldn't wait!"

"I can understand it," said Nipper softly. "Poor old Stocky was worried—and anxious. He wanted to see how things were going. Goodness knows what's going to happen now!"

"It appears, brothers, that we are quite in the soup," said Browne. "At all costs we must prevent Mr. Stockdale from coming into this sale-room——"

"That's impossible!" said Pitt quickly.

"Of course it is!" added Buster Boots. "He'll smell a rat in a tick if he's kept out. He thinks the ordinary public is in here—and he has as much right as any of the others. What on earth can we do?"

Willy Handforth dodged towards the door.

"It's all right—leave it to me!" he said coolly.

"And what do you think you can do, you young ass?" inquired his major.

"I think I can wangle the thing!" replied Willy. "Mr. Piper, rush downstairs and keep Mr. Stockdale in conversation for two or three minutes."

"Yes, but——"

"I'll be down in half a jiffy!" went on Willy. "After that, you can leave it to me. But, for goodness' sake, keep Mr. Stockdale down there for a bit. Show him some other paintings—get him interested in some tubes of oil, or something. Tell him the sale's going all right, and that you'll conduct him upstairs shortly."

"But, really——" began the art dealer, confused.

"That's all right—we'll wangle everything!" said Willy. "Only do go down, and grab old Stocky before he can spoil everything."

And Mr. Piper, much agitated, went down.

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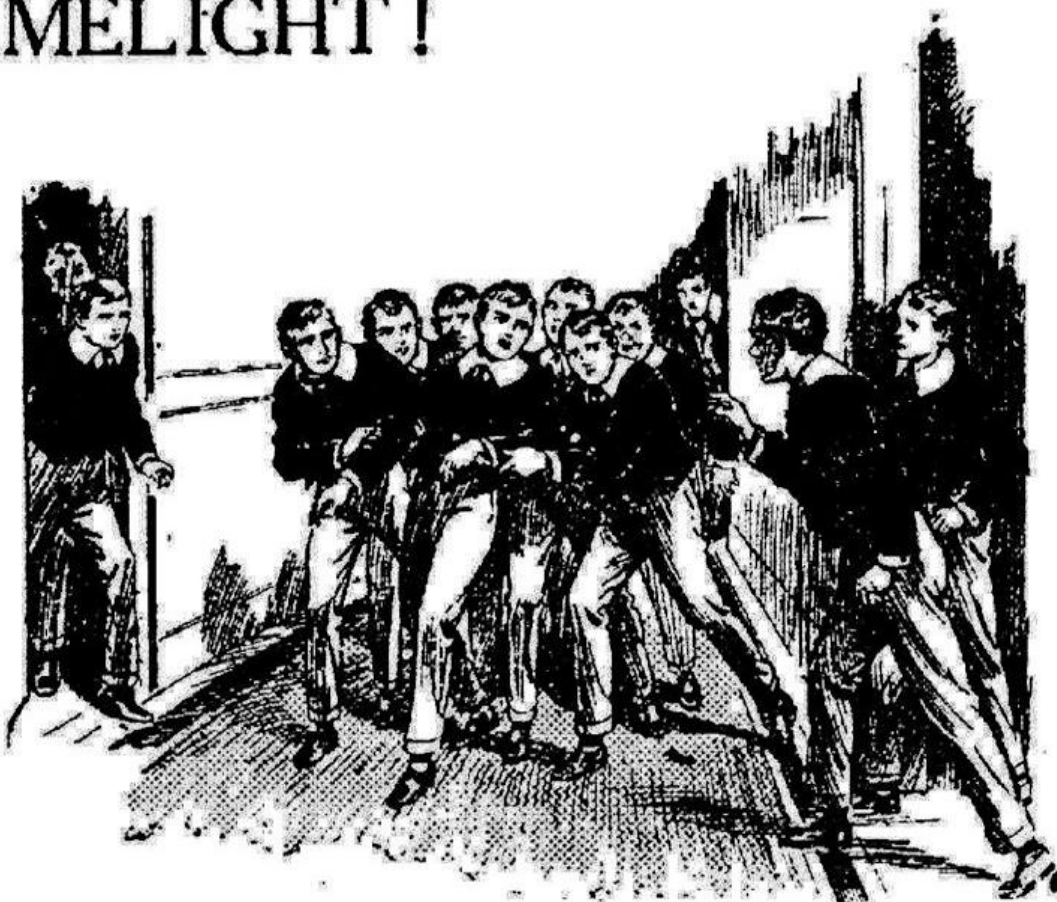
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stairs. He was only just in time, too—for Mr. Stockdale was on his way up. The Housemaster was looking eager and anxious. Even now he couldn't quite believe that this sale of his paintings was real. It seemed altogether too good to be true. He had seen the announcements outside—the big placards in the shop itself. But he wanted to see the auction-room, with the members of the general public bidding for his works of art!

"Well?" he asked, as he met Mr. Piper on the stairs. "How is it going, Mr. Piper? Please tell me! How is it going?"

"Splendidly—er—splendidly!" said Mr. Piper, with a gulp. "The bidding is quite—quite brisk!"

"Really?" murmured Mr. Stockdale. "I must see—"

"Exactly!" interrupted the other. "But there is something I want to show you, Mr. Stockdale—something new in oils. You really must come downstairs for a moment while I—"

"But surely this will do later?" asked Mr. Stockdale impatiently.

"No; you must come now!" urged Mr. Piper.

And he seized the Housemaster's arm, and led him downstairs. He didn't know what on earth to show him, but at least he had succeeded in getting the Housemaster away!

CHAPTER 17.

Willy Wangles It!



WILLY'S eyes were gleaming. "Now then, you young fathead!" said Handforth, as he seized his minor. "What's the idea of sending Mr. Piper downstairs on a fool's errand? He can't keep old Stocky there! The cat's out of the bag now with a vengeance! Why the dickens couldn't he keep away? The whole game is ruined!"

"That's the worst of it!" said Buster Boots, with deep concern. "We're doing it all for old Stocky's sake, and he's spoiling all his chances of getting the money he

needs! Oh my goodness! What a rotten mess!"

Willy looked round at the excited crowd.

"There'll be no mess if you all keep your heads," he said coolly. "If we try to keep Mr. Stockdale out of this room, he'll suspect things. If he sees any of us here, he'll suspect things, too. It won't matter if he sees just one of us—me, for example—but it'll be all up if he comes across the whole crowd."

"Of course it will," said Nipper. "He'll know in a moment that it's a put-up job. What do you think you're going to do?"

"There's one chance!" said Willy shrewdly. "Old Stocky is shortsighted!"

"Good gad!"

"What has Stocky's short-sightedness got to do with it?" demanded Boots gruffly.

"Everything!" replied Willy. "He's like a bat without his glasses, and I'm going to see that his glasses are removed!"

Nipper started.

"Willy's got it!" he said, nodding. "It's the only thing to be done."

"By jingo!" said Buster Boots, staring at Willy.

"But I don't see what you're driving at!" said Handforth major.

"My dear old chap, don't you understand?" said Boots. "Mr. Stockdale is terribly short-sighted. If he doesn't wear his glasses, everything is a blur—everything is all shadowy and indistinct. We know that—don't we, you chaps?"

"Rather!" said Bob Christine and Len Clapson, of the Modern House.

"As soon as old Stocky loses his glasses, he's like a bat, just as Willy says!" went on Boots. "If he comes into this room without glasses, he'll never see any of us. We shall all be so many blobs, indistinguishable from the furniture!"

"But, you fathead, he can hear our voices, can't he?" asked Jack Grey.

"Not if we disguise them," said Willy quickly. "Carry on with the sale, and all of you adopt gruff voices. It doesn't matter what you sound like, or how you grin at one another. Alter your voices, and try to act like adults!"

"By jingo!"

"The scheme might work!"

"It's got to work!" said Willy grimly. "If necessary, disguise yourselves a bit. Turn your coat collars up, and don't forget about the voices. I can't wait now. I've got to get busy on the other business."

He hurried off, and Browne's voice boomed through the sale-room.

"Gentlemen, here we have an excellent example of landscape painting," he said impressively. "Shall we start the bidding at five pounds for this fine specimen?"

"My only hat!" murmured Handforth, staring.

Browne's voice had utterly changed—his whole manner had changed. He was no longer Browne, of the Fifth, with his suave,

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easy-flowing manner. His voice was deep, and he spoke in a business-like manner. He had taken Willy Handforth's tip, and he was acting his part to perfection.

"Three pounds!" said Nipper, in a gruff voice.

"And ten!" sang out Pitt professionally.

"Any advance on three pounds ten?" asked Browne. "Gentlemen, this is a very wonderful painting!"

And while they were putting in some practice like this, Willy Handforth was downstairs in the main shop. One glance showed him that there were no customers about at the moment. Mr. Piper was keeping the unwelcome visitor at the back of the shop, and he was showing him some long sticks of crayon. And Mr. Stockdale very obviously wanted to get away. Willy's eyes gleamed as he hurried forward. So far, Mr. Stockdale had not seen him—and perhaps there would be no necessity for him to be seen at all. It would be all the better, for in that case the Housemaster would never know that a St. Frank's boy was there.

Crash!

Something suddenly butted into Mr. Stockdale very violently.

"Oh, awfully sorry!" said Willy, in a false voice.

He had banged into Mr. Stockdale, and at the same moment he caught his hand in the thin cord of the Housemaster's pince-nez. A violent tug, and the glasses fell to the floor with a clatter.

"Really!" exclaimed Mr. Stockdale angrily. "My glasses! Be careful, sir! You have torn my—"

He broke off with a sudden exclamation of anguish. For an ominous grinding, crushing sound came. Willy was taking no chances. One of his feet had gone over the pince-nez, and the glasses were smashed to atoms. In the circumstances, it had been the only thing to do. Never again would Mr. Stockdale wear those glasses! And, for this afternoon, at all events, he was half-blind.

"Oh, I am fearfully sorry, sir!" said Willy, backing away. "Kindly allow me to pay for the damage."

"That is all very well, sir," said Mr. Stockdale, with heat. "It was very careless of you—very careless indeed! I am absolutely lost without my glasses!"

"But surely you have a spare pair, sir?" asked Willy.

"I have not!" snapped the Housemaster.

"Good!" murmured Willy, under his breath.

"What?" said Mr. Stockdale. "What was that?"

Mr. Piper stood looking on, and listening, in confused wonder. But he was beginning to realise the trend of events now. He, too, knew how short-sighted Mr. Stockdale was.

Somehow, Willy escaped, and returned to the sale-room.

"It's all right!" he announced. "I've smashed his glasses to pieces, and when he

comes up here everything will be O.K. Carry on, you chaps. You're doing fine!"

"Good for you, Willy!"

And the sale went on. Two or three minutes later, Mr. Stockdale himself came up, escorted by the relieved dealer. And at the sight of that sale-room all Mr. Stockdale's annoyance vanished. He completely forgot about his smashed pince-nez.

He could see lots of misty figures, and he could hear strange voices. What was much more to the point, he could hear big prices being bid!

"Ten pounds!" he murmured, as though he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own ears. "Ten pounds for my painting of the school chapel! Did I hear somebody bid ten pounds, Mr. Piper?"

"The bidding has reached twelve pounds now, sir," murmured Mr. Piper.

"Good gracious me!"

And Mr. Stockdale stood there in a kind of daze. He had no suspicion whatever that all this was a fake—a good-natured, generous fake, put up specially for his benefit.

And at last, fully satisfied that this dream was an actuality, he was persuaded to go away. Mr. Piper led him downstairs, and invited him into his own private quarters. He was only too glad to leave the boys to carry on alone.

"Now, Mr. Stockdale, you must remain here quietly," said the dealer. "The sale is proceeding satisfactorily, and it will soon be over. At the earliest moment I will come and tell you the figure that has been realised."

Mr. Stockdale sat down, and passed a hand over his heated brow.

"It is amazing!" he said softly. "It is too wonderful for words! My paintings—my paintings that I had thought so worthless! Fate has been very kind to me, after all!"

And the Housemaster's joy was a sight for sore eyes!

CHAPTER 18.

Very Successful!



THE sale was over.

Immediately after Mr. Stockdale had been manoeuvred below by the art dealer, the bidding had continued very briskly, and the last of the paintings were disposed of. There was no reason to hang out the farce any longer. The sooner it was finished, the better.

And those final paintings went like wildfire.

All the conspirators succeeded in getting safely off the premises without Mr. Stockdale seeing them—or, what was more important, hearing them.

Complete success had attended their efforts.

They not only got their bicycles out, but they even succeeded in getting away from the town without meeting anybody in authority. Once clear of the Bannington

boundaries they were safe. And they all arrived at St. Frank's, in due course, feeling elated and happy. They had done a good and generous service. And it was only natural that they should feel content.

Mr. Stockdale's trouble was over.

And the Housemaster would never know the truth! That was the beauty of the whole affair. He would have the money for his sister's journey, and he would always believe that he had sold his paintings to the ordinary public. Later on, perhaps, he might get a bit of a shock if he attempted to hold another sale. But that wouldn't matter. Even if Mr. Stockdale did suspect at some future date, he would never be able to prove the thing.

"Well, everything passed off fine!" said Nipper, as he stood in the Triangle with some of the other juniors. "We worked the sale all right, and we've got home safely. No fear of being flogged or anything. It all went like a dream."

"Rather!" said Boots warmly. "I must say that you chaps have acted jolly decently."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "How did you expect us to act?"

"Well, I mean old Stocky is our Housemaster—not yours!" replied Boots. "We shall remember this. Thanks awfully, you fellows, for all that you've done. Without you rich Ancient House fellows the dodge couldn't have been worked."

"Dear old boy, please forget it!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West, smiling.

"Yes, rather!" said Church. "The thing's over, and Stocky is all serene. So let's go indoors and get some tea."

"A jolly sound suggestion, too," said Nipper.

And with cheery words they parted.

Archie, entering his study soon afterwards, found Phipps on duty with supplies of tea. Phipps was looking unconcerned and calm. But Archie went so far as to clap his man on the back.

"Dashed good, Phipps, old lad!" he said heartily. "Everything in the garden is lovely."

"Really, sir?"

"I mean to say, everything in the garden is absolutely grand!" proceeded Archie with enthusiasm. "In other words, and to boil it down to a nutshell, the good old sale was a ripping success."

"I am pleased to hear that, sir."

"As I told the dear old lads, it required a man of brain to think of a wheeze like that," continued Archie. "Tea, what? The cup that cheers! What-ho, Phipps! Kindly pour the young master out a face-full!"

"I am gratified to hear, sir, that the sale was such a success," said Phipps. "As the town of Bannington is at present out of bounds, I was rather afraid that there might have been a hitch."

"Absolutely not," said Archie. "No hitches whatever, old bean."

And he chatted genially about the sale, explaining all the details to the interested

Phipps. And at last the valet glided towards the door, bent upon taking his departure.

"One moment, Phipps!" said Archie, producing his wallet. "In fact, two moments. Kindly be good enough to accept this little token of the young master's esteem!"

He wafted a fiver towards Phipps.

"Thank you, sir," said the valet. "I really did not anticipate——"

"Absolutely enough!" interrupted Archie firmly. "Take it, laddie, and may it bring you joy! You dashed well deserve it!"

"Thank you, sir," said Phipps.

He glided out, and Archie sank back among the cushions of the lounge, thoroughly satisfied with a good afternoon's work.

And at that very moment, Mr. Arthur Stockdale was sitting in Mr. Piper's office, dazed and bewildered. He was bewildered with joy.

For Mr. Piper has just informed him that the sale had realised the extraordinary sum of one-hundred-and-fifty pounds, seventeen shillings and sixpence.

It was indeed a staggerer.

Mr. Stockdale vividly remembered that the dealer had once told him that his paintings were not worth ten pounds to him! The Housemaster was so stunned by it all that he could hardly grasp it at first. Even after seeing the sale—through a kind of blur—he had thought of sixty pounds, or seventy pounds, as the outside limit. But the actual sum was well over double!

"A very successful sale, Mr. Stockdale," said the dealer, rubbing his hands together. "Splendid! The accounts are all here, and——"

"Yes, yes!" muttered Mr. Stockdale. "Quite so, sir. Of course, I want you to deduct your commission——"

"I have already done so," said Mr. Piper promptly.

And when the Housemaster left the premises, half an hour later, his pockets were bulging with notes—fivers, pound-notes, ten-shilling notes, and silver. He was all over money. And his heart was thumping hard with a joy that he had never expected to realise.

Only that very morning he had heard that his sister could be sent away for that life-saving voyage for the sum of ninety-five pounds, inclusive. This, of course, was without any luxuries whatever. And as Mr. Stockdale went home, he went into further dreams.

For now he would be able to give his sister a real good time. With all that money she could go first-class, perhaps, and have every comfort. She could have little luxuries that would otherwise have been denied her.

Mr. Stockdale hardly remembered getting back to St. Frank's. He didn't even know how he had made the journey. All he did know was that his pockets were full of real money—genuine money. He had sacrificed his paintings, it was true—but not for a song. At five shillings each, it would have been a wicked shame to let them go. But now he felt that he had been justified in selling them. And he was feeling pleased with himself, too.



Politely the juniors asked the motorist if they could be of any assistance. Then, as Lord Pippinton saw the man's face, he started. This was the very man who had pushed him over the edge of the quarry—had tried to murder him—only an evening or two back!

He had always had half an idea that his paintings were very amateurish—that, as works of art, they were valueless.

Incidentally, Mr. Stockdale's opinion of his own work was very true!

But now he was thinking differently. If people would buy them for such sums, then there must be something in them!

He went towards the Modern House, and felt that he was treading on air. To-night he would be able to send the money off. No, perhaps, with luck, he would be able to get a day's leave of absence. The Head would surely grant it to him.

And on the morrow he would go up to London, and he would see his ailing sister. He would tell her the good news with his own lips. What a wonderful prospect!

Everything was now joyous for the hitherto harassed Housemaster.

He passed Boots and Christine on the way to his study, but did not even see them. But they saw him—and their joy was increased. Never before had they seen Mr. Stockdale so happy.

And then the Housemaster entered his own study. He closed the door, and, turning, found Alan Castleton sitting in a chair, waiting!

CHAPTER 19.

Shattered Hopes!



"GOOD-EVENING, sir," said Alan coolly.

Mr. Stockdale had experienced a sudden jar.

He wanted to be alone—

quite alone. And it incensed him to see this junior sitting in his study, as though he owned the place. And this was the very boy he had reported to Mr. Stokes for that offence, earlier in the afternoon.

"I think your name is Castleton?" asked Mr. Stockdale.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Castleton, what are you doing in my study like this?" asked the Housemaster. "You do not belong to this House, and I think you know well enough that you have no right to enter my room in this fashion."

"Sorry, sir, but the matter is rather important," said Alan, with a touch of insolence. "There's something you ought to know, so I've come along to acquaint you with the facts."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Stockdale angrily. "I wish to hear no facts from you, Castleton. It is a piece of sheer impertinence for you

to come here like this. Go at once! If you wish to make any complaint, make it to your own Housemaster, and he will——"

"Just a minute, sir—just a minute!" interrupted Alan. "I don't want to make a complaint. My business is connected with that sale of paintings this afternoon."

Mr. Stockdale started, and stared at the junior.

"What did you say?" he asked sharply.

"That sale of paintings this afternoon," drawled Alan. "Your paintings, Mr. Stockdale—at Piper's place, in Bannington. I dare say it realised quite a tidy sum, eh?"

Mr. Stockdale stared.

"Upon my soul!" he ejaculated. "Of all the insolence——"

"No insolence intended, sir," said Alan. "I happen to know something about this sale, and it is my plain duty to tell you about it."

"This is beyond all bearing!" said Mr. Stockdale furiously. "How dare you interest yourself in my business, Castleton! How dare you, sir! I shall report you to the Headmaster for gross——"

"Steady—steady, sir!" interjected Alan. "By the time you've heard what I've got to say, I don't think you'll report me to the Head. In fact, I rather think you'll want to keep mum about the whole business."

"Keep mum!" stuttered Mr. Stockdale. "Good heavens! What in the world——"

"You won't want the Head to know how you've been tricked, will you, sir?" went on Alan calmly. "And you won't want the school talking about that hoax, either."

"Hoax!" said Mr. Stockdale in a startled voice. "Castleton, what do you mean? Unless you can explain yourself thoroughly, I shall be very angry. Hoax? Which hoax?"

For an instant a suspicion came to him. Then he brushed it aside. How could he believe anything that this boy said? And why should he believe it?

He adjusted his pince-nez—a fresh pair which he had obtained from the optician's, after leaving Mr. Piper's. They did not suit him very well, for they were only a makeshift pair. But, at least, they enabled him to see fairly well. And they would do until he had some new ones made for his own eyesight.

"Now, Castleton!" he said grimly. "Be good enough to explain yourself."

"Nothing easier, sir," said Castleton. "You've been hoaxed, that's all. I don't like to see that sort of thing, so I thought I'd better come along and tell you."

"Go on!" said the Housemaster, in a strained voice.

"That sale of your pictures was a swindle, sir—a fake," said Alan. "It was all a put-up job by the fellows—Boots, Christine, Hamilton, Handforth, Pitt, and the others."

"What!" gasped Mr. Stockdale, in a strangled voice. "Castleton, do you realise what you are saying?"

"Quite, sir," replied Castleton. "I know what I'm saying—and I know it's the truth. You thought that sale was a perfectly bona-fide affair, didn't you? You thought the

bidders were members of the ordinary public? Well, they weren't. That's all!"

"Not—not members of the public!" ejaculated Mr. Stockdale. "Nonsense! You—you young scoundrel! How dare you suggest——"

"Better go easy, sir," said Alan truculently. "I don't like being called a young scoundrel!"

"Upon my word! How dare you speak to me——"

"You can go to these fellows, if you like, sir. They're holding a little tea—a celebration tea, I believe—over in the Ancient House," went on Alan. "There's Browne of the Fifth, too. Browne was the auctioneer. They wanted to raise some money for you, but they knew they couldn't lend it to you in the ordinary way, or give it to you. You would never have accepted it. So they got up this dodge, so that you would be fooled. I thought it was my duty to tell you."

There was something singularly despicable and caddish about this action of Alan's. It was purely a matter of revenge. He had vowed to get even with Mr. Stockdale—and this was Alan Castleton's way of doing it!

It was a detestable act—the act of a rascal. For Alan absolutely gained nothing. Nothing, that is, except his evil satisfaction. And Mr. Stockdale lost everything! He lost his money—he lost his hopes—he lost his faith. In one crash, everything went.

"Castleton, you can go!" he said, in a dull, low voice. "I will inquire into this matter. I am not sure whether to believe you or not—but you can go."

"You can take my word for it, sir, that it's all true," said Alan languidly. "Surely you didn't think you'd gain all that money from your paintings? If you'll think a minute, you'll realise that it was all a put up——"

"Go!" shouted Mr. Stockdale, his voice rising shrill with the anguish that filled him. "Go, sir!"

"No need to shout at me, sir!"

"You young scoundrel!" thundered the Housemaster. "You disreputable young rascal! Leave this study before I thrash you within an inch of your life!"

And there was such a world of meaning in Mr. Stockdale's tone, that Alan Castleton very hastily departed. He grinned as he went down the corridor. He had done his work—and he had done it thoroughly!



CHAPTER 20.

All for Nothing!

MR. STOCKDALE sat in his chair like a dazed man.

He needed no proof that he had been hoaxed.

Alan Castleton's word was enough for him. It mattered nothing whether Alan was a liar, or a cad—the thing was too utterly obvious.

Indeed, now that Mr. Stockdale knew the truth, he wondered why he had not jumped to it before. What a fool he had been to

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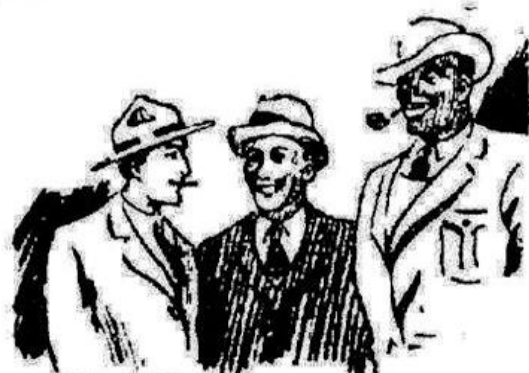
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think, for a moment, that his paintings could have sold for such high prices to real customers! These boys had done it out of their good-heartedness—to help him! How they had known of his trouble he could not guess—but somehow they must have found out.

And Mr. Stockdale's heart warmed towards these generous juniors who had rallied round so wonderfully. And his heart hardened against Alan Castleton for the latter's mean, contemptible act in giving the game away.

But, of course, there was only one thing to be done.

Mr. Stockdale rose to his feet, and when he walked across the room he dragged his limbs as though he had suddenly become an old man.

And over in Study C, in the Ancient House, that celebration tea that Alan had referred to was in full progress. Nipper & Co. were the hosts, and Handforth, Church, McClure, Fullwood, Reggie Pitt, and several others were the guests.

The study was crowded, and everybody was merry and joyous. Buster Boots and his men had promised to come over later—after they had held a little celebration on their own.

"Silence for the chair!" called Reggie

Pitt, as Nipper rose to his feet. "Speech, Nipper, old son—speech!"

"Rats!" grinned Nipper. "I'm just going to drink the health of Mr. Stockdale!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Stocky!"

Teacups were raised, and Mr. Stockdale's health was drunk with great heartiness.

"One of the best!" went on Nipper. "He's not our Housemaster, but he's a jolly good sort. And now that we've got him out of this little trouble, we shall see him going about with a smiling face again."

"Yes, rather!" said Handforth happily. "I hate to see people going about with long dials! It gives me the pip! Good luck to old Stocky!"

"Yes, by Jove!" said Pitt. "And good luck to his sister!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good health, too!" said Fullwood. "Let's hope that she comes back from that voyage hale and hearty!"

Tap, tap!

"Come in!" sang out everybody.

The door opened, and Mr. Arthur Stockdale entered. He had heard those final words outside the door—good health to his sister!

And his eyes were somewhat moist as he entered the room. His step faltered slightly. But he steeled himself, and cleared his throat.

A dead silence had fallen upon the merry throng. There was something in Mr. Stockdale's attitude that chilled them. He was haggard again—as haggard as before. And now his eyes were utterly miserable—and yet, withal, there was a gleam of warmth in them as he looked at the juniors. These were the good fellows who had helped him—who had attempted to get him out of his trouble by stealth!

"I am sorry to disturb you, boys," he said quietly, his voice breaking somewhat. "But there is one question that I must ask you."

"What is it, sir?" asked Nipper, fearful to hear the answer.

"Are you boys responsible for a hoax this afternoon?" asked Mr. Stockdale. "I am putting this question to you point blank—and I want a straightforward answer. There was a sale of my pictures at Mr. Piper's art shop this afternoon. Do you boys know anything of this affair?"

There was a dead, startled silence.

"I am waiting!" said Mr. Stockdale. "One word from you will be enough. Did you boys arrange that sale?"

"Mr. Piper arranged it, sir!" said Handforth blusteringly. "What should we know about it? Didn't Mr. Piper come to you and tell you——"

"That is an evasion, Handforth," said Mr. Stockdale quietly. "What I want to know is this. Did you go to Mr. Piper and request him to arrange this sale? What is more to the point, were you boys the buyers of my pictures?"

"Well, sir——"

"You see, sir, it's like this——"

"Please—please!" said Mr. Stockdale, in agony. "Yes, or no?"

"Yes, sir!" said the juniors unhappily.

"I thought so—indeed, I knew it," said Mr. Stockdale, his voice faltering. "Any words from me are unnecessary. At all events, only a very few are needed. Naturally, I cannot accept this money."

"Oh, but you must, sir!"

"Really, Mr. Stockdale——"

"In no circumstances can I accept it!" insisted Mr. Stockdale. "Here is the entire amount—the whole sum that Mr. Piper handed to me. I will leave you boys to distribute it among yourselves—each to take back his own particular sum. I thank you for your good intentions on my behalf, but you will realise that my position is quite definite. Thank you, boys—thank you!"

And Mr. Stockdale, half choking, passed out of the room, and closed the door softly behind him.

And that celebration tea was shattered. Not a word was spoken. The juniors sat staring at one another in a dazed, pained fashion. The money lay on the table—and they all realised that their efforts had been for nothing! In some uncanny fashion, Mr. Stockdale had learned the truth.

It was a heavy blow—a devastating shock!

CHAPTER 21.

More Trouble!



"Y goodness!" said Handforth, at last.

He spoke in a dull, dazed voice. It was a voice of tragedy, too.

"How did he get to know?" asked Nipper huskily. "Oh, I say, how rotten! After all our trouble, too! After all our efforts to keep it from him!"

"And we thought we were successful," said Pitt wretchedly. "What a giddy frost! What a fiasco!"

The door opened, and Archie Glenthorne came in, smiling and urbane.

"What-ho, laddies!" he said cheerily. "The good old spree, what? Celebrating the—— Good gad! Is anything the jolly old matter?"

"Matter enough, Archie!" said Nipper quietly. "Shut the door, there's a good fellow. Somebody has blown the gaff!"

"Odds tragedies and disasters!" gasped Archie. "I mean to say, blown the gaff? But you don't mean——"

"Yes, I do!" said Nipper. "Mr. Stockdale knows all about it, and he has returned the money."

"But how could he have known?" asked Handforth. "He's only just found it out—that's certain. Old Piper couldn't have told him—because here's the money!"

"Piper didn't tell him," said Nipper. "Mr. Stockdale must have heard of it since he got back to St. Frank's."

Crash!

Buster Boots came rushing in, excited and alarmed.

"Have you heard?" he asked breathlessly. "Yes, I can see you have!"

"Old Stocky has told you, then?" asked Handforth.

"Yes—I met him out in the Triangle just now, and didn't wait to go back into my own House," said Buster. "Oh, my goodness! He's returned all the money, then?"

"Yes, every penny of it!" said Nipper. "Pretty awful, isn't it? We can't understand how the dickens he got to know. It's a mystery!"

"I'm not so sure about that!" said Boots, his eyes gleaming.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, I believe that cad, Castleton, gave the game away," said Boots.

"What?"

"Castleton!"

"Yes!" said Boots grimly. "I passed him in the Modern House not five minutes ago, and he was coming away from the passage where Mr. Stockdale's study is situated. And the rotter had a gloating, evil expression on his face!"

Handforth leapt to his feet.

"That's good enough for me!" he roared. "Castleton blew the gaff, of course! It's just the kind of despicable thing he would

do. He knew of Mr. Stockdale's trouble, too. Come on, you chaps—we'll find Castleton, and reduce him to mincemeat!"

"Hold on!" growled Boots. "I believe there's some trouble coming. I saw Castleton talking to Pycraft, too. He went out, and met Pycraft in the Triangle, and they both went off towards the Head's house."

"What!"

"The—the awful sneak!"

And then came another interruption. The door opened, and, curiously enough, Mr. Pycraft himself strode in. And he was accompanied by no less a person than Dr. Malcolm Stafford!

"Ah, here they are, sir—here they are!" said the ill-tempered master of the Fourth. "As you see, they are holding quite a party."

"Yes, I can see that, Mr. Pycraft," said the Head. "There is really no reason why the boys should not hold a party if they wish. That is not the matter in question."

"No, sir, no!" said Mr. Pycraft. "Of course not!"

The Head entered the study.

"I am sorry to disturb you, boys," he said. "But I want to ask if you have been to Bannington this afternoon?"

The juniors exchanged startled glances. More of Alan Castleton's work! He had given the game away to Mr. Stockdale, and he had sneaked to the Head about their being in the prohibited area! There seemed to be no end to Alan's caddishness.

"Well?" asked Mr. Pycraft. "Why don't you answer?"

"I was in Bannington, sir," said Nipper quietly.

"And I, sir."

"And I!"

They all answered—as there was nothing else to be done.

"This is very serious," said the Head, looking grave. "You boys heard my warning this morning? You know the punishment for disobeying the strict orders? Bannington is out of bounds."

"Yes, sir," chorused the juniors.

"And flogging is the punishment for disobeying," continued the Head.

"Yes, sir."

"Every one of you boys will report to my study in half an hour," said Dr. Stafford curtly. "I believe there are one or two others who accompanied you, and I shall search for them. That is sufficient. Report to my study in half an hour."

He went out without another word, and, from one of the shadows of the Triangle, Alan Castleton watched the Head emerge from the Ancient House. He grinned vindictively. Not only was he revenged upon Mr. Stockdale, but he was making his enemies over in the Remove sit up, too. Alan was quite enjoying himself! For Alan Castleton's ideas of enjoyment were weird and wonderful!

In Study C the interrupted revellers were looking at one another with dazed dismay. A flogging! And their plan for Mr. Stock-

dale's "fund" was shattered! Just when everything had seemed to be right—everything was wrong!

And they all knew quite well that Alan Castleton was responsible for everything!



CHAPTER 22.

Another Surprise!

WITH heavy, dragging footsteps Mr. Stockdale went back to his study in the Modern House.

The bottom was knocked out of all his dreams. He felt faint and dizzy. The reaction was terrible. All that day he had been in a kind of dream—living in a Paradise. His paintings were sold—the money was here! His sister's life was now secure, and everything was rosy and splendid!

And now—this shock! This devastating blow, which shattered everything at one fell sweep.

It seemed to Mr. Stockdale that there was a mass of lead within him as he opened the door of his study and walked in. He was feeling rather faint, too. He wanted to rest—to sit down quietly—to repose his aching head and his throbbing brain.

"Ah, good-evening, sir—good-evening!" said a voice.

Mr. Stockdale looked up sharply, and beheld a perfect stranger.

"Really, sir—" he began, at a loss.

"Have I the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Arthur Stockdale?" asked the other.

"Yes, that is my name."

"My name is Oscar Hammerton, representing Oscar Hammerton & Co., Ltd., of Oxford Street, London," continued the stranger. "I understand, Mr. Stockdale, that you have some paintings for sale?"

Mr. Stockdale started.

"Is this another hoax?" he asked fiercely.

"Really!" protested Mr. Hammerton. "A hoax? Mr. Piper, of Bannington, has been holding a sale of your art, I understand—"

"There was no sale!" interrupted Mr. Stockdale heavily. "It has fallen through. It was nothing—nothing."

"And your paintings are still available?" asked Mr. Hammerton eagerly.

"Yes, they are still available," said Mr. Stockdale, in a bitter voice.

"This is splendid!" said the visitor. "I came here in the hope of securing all your future work, Mr. Stockdale. But it is a great gratification to know that I can now obtain the paintings I had feared were sold."

Mr. Stockdale sat down heavily. Dimly he was realising that the name of Oscar Hammerton was not new to him. He was groping. Still dazed, he looked at the other across the table, and then the significance of the name came to him. Why, of course, Mr. Hammerton was one of the biggest art dealers in the West End.

"If it is indeed true that all your paintings in Mr. Piper's shop are for sale, then I shall be most delighted to purchase them," said Mr. Hammerton. "Would an offer of two hundred pounds in cash be of any use to you, Mr. Stockdale?"

"Two hundred pounds!" echoed the Housemaster, in a thick voice.

"I shall be most happy to pay you in cash at once, if you are agreeable," continued the dealer. "I shall, of course, leave it to Mr. Piper to send the paintings on to my London show-rooms. Or you can send them on yourself, if you please. This is all a matter of arrangement."

Mr. Stockdale listened in a fresh daze.

After all the hoaxing—after all the spoofing—he could hardly believe that this was genuine. But what else could it be? Here was this famous man—the great Mr. Oscar Hammerton, of Oxford Street—offering him two hundred pounds for his paintings!

There could be no fake about this!

Otherwise the man would never have suggested sending the paintings to London—for, if there was any trickery about it, that would have given the game away at once.

"Regarded as pure art, I'm afraid that your paintings are not quite—er—perfect," proceeded Mr. Hammerton. "But they just happen to be the particular type that I have been looking for. I am sure that I shall be able to dispose of them very readily. You need not imagine, Mr. Stockdale, that I am influenced by any philanthropic——"

"Tell me, sir—tell me!" interrupted Mr. Stockdale huskily. "Is this a genuine offer? I may as well tell you that I have been recently hoaxed by some of my schoolboys. It was a very generous action on their part—a kindly, good-natured trick. But it was a trick, nevertheless. I do not wish to fall into another trap."

"My dear Mr. Stockdale!" protested Mr. Hammerton. "My dear sir! Surely you do not expect a man of my reputation——"

"No, no!" muttered Mr. Stockdale. "Please forgive me!"

And then, in a fresh dream, Mr. Stockdale found himself possessed of two hundred pounds in five-pound notes. He signed a receipt, and gave an undertaking to personally see that all the paintings were sent on by train to Mr. Hammerton's London show-rooms. It was genuine! There could be no doubt about this! Just when everything had seemed at its blackest—some light had burst through!



CHAPTER 23.

The Confession!

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE, walking rather painfully, entered his study in the Remove passage, and found Phipps hovering about with the fire-irons. Archie went across

to the lounge, and lowered himself very very gingerly.

"Good gad, Phipps!" he murmured in a feeble voice. "Kindly rally round and give the young master every kind of brand of assistance."

"Is anything wrong, sir?" asked Phipps.

"Anything wrong?" retorted Archie.

"Good gad! Is anything right? The whole blessed works have gone phut, Phipps! And I may as well inform you that the young master has just received a somewhat foul swishing."

"Indeed, sir!"

"Absolutely indeed," said Archie painfully.

"The good old rear section is dashed tender, Phipps. But that matters nothing, as the good old novelists say. The most frightful thing of all these other frightful things is that poor old Mr. Stockdale knows the truth, and he has returned us his money. Everything is knocked sideways, Phipps."

"I hardly think so, sir," said Phipps with a discreet cough.

Archie looked up, regarding Phipps curiously.

"You don't know, Phipps," he said. "You don't know the sad truth."

"I rather think I do, sir," said Phipps.

"I have a little confession to make to you."

"Odds life," said Archie. "A confession?"

"Yes, sir," nodded Phipps. "I happened to see Mr. Stockdale coming into this House, and I observed him go to Master Hamilton's study. And, naturally, when I saw Mr. Stockdale's expression I guessed the truth."

Archie nodded.

"Of course you would," he said. "Nothing misses the good old eagle eye of Phipps, what?"

"And I seized the opportunity, sir, to don a quite simple disguise," went on Phipps smoothly. "A small moustache, horn-rimmed spectacles, and a changed voice. These trifles were quite sufficient, sir, with the addition of false eyebrows."

Archie sat staring.

"Kindly explain, old lad!" he said feebly.

"The young master is wallowing."

"I took the liberty of going across to Mr. Stockdale study, sir," said Phipps. "My little impersonation was rendered all the easier because Mr. Stockdale is at present wearing some pince-nez which are not quite suitable for his eyesight. Therefore, there was no fear that he would recognise me."

"But why?" asked Archie. "Why did you do this, old thing?"

"Well, sir, I impersonated Mr. Oscar Hammerton, the famous art-dealer of London," continued Phipps imperturbably. "As you may know, sir, he is a friend of your family—quite a personal friend of Colonel Glenthorne's."

"Good gad!"

"Furthermore, sir, I took the added liberty of using your money," continued Phipps. "I have purchased all of Mr. Stockdale's paint-

ings for the sum of two hundred pounds—all the money you had."

"What!" shouted Archie, leaping to his feet.

"Yes, sir," proceeded Phipps. "And I really think that Mr. Stockdale is happy at last. He has no idea that this is a second hoax—because I used the name of a real art-dealer, and I have instructed Mr. Stockdale to send the paintings on to Mr. Hammerton's London address."

"Odds staggers and shocks!"

"I need hardly remind you, sir, that it will be necessary for you to put things right with Mr. Hammerton," continued Phipps. "I should suggest a discreet letter, and no doubt Mr. Hammerton will take it all in good part. Since he is such a big friend of your father's there can be little harm done. And I have no doubt that Colonel Glenthorne will consider that the two hundred pounds have been well spent. It was in a very good cause, sir."

Archie groped with the staggering immensity of this revelation.

"But, dash it!" he gasped. "Do you absolutely mean to say, Phipps, that everything is all right?"

"I rather think so, sir."

"You mean to say that Mr. Stockdale has been paid—that he thinks his paintings have been actually sold?" asked Archie happily. "Phipps, old stilton! Phipps, old dutch! You're not only a living marvel—you're absolutely too brainy to live in this world!"

Phipps remained as imperturbable as ever.

"It was nothing, sir," he protested. "Just a little act of mine on the spur of the moment. I sincerely trust that you will overlook the liberty, sir."

"Liberty!" said Archie. "Why, you dear old chump, it's the greatest thing you ever did!"

"I think it would be advisable for us to keep this little secret to ourselves," went on Phipps. "The less it is talked about the better."

"Oh, rather!" agreed Archie as he seized Phipps' hand and wrung it warmly. "Just our secret, what? Put it there, Phipps—put it there! Dash it, you're the world's greatest wizard!"

concerned about Mr. Stockdale than Alan Castleton.

"Yes, we've got to get up a deputation," said Nipper. "We'll see old Stocky and urge him to accept the money. If we put it nicely he might agree. We'll tell him that his sister's life is in danger, and that it is a duty to humanity for him to accept, even if he doesn't like it."

"That's the line to go upon," agreed Buster Boots. "Come on, don't let's waste any time—let's go at once."

"How many of us?" asked Bray.

"Well, I suggest four," said Boots. "Nipper, Handy, Pitt and myself. How's that?"

"Fine!" said Handforth. "Come on! Let's get it over!"

The four juniors went into the Modern House with determined expressions on their faces, but it must be confessed that they did not possess very much hope. But there was just a chance—a chance in a thousand—that Mr. Stockdale would see their point of view. They had all the money with them, and they wanted him to accept it. For the sake of his sister they wanted him to take the cash.

They reached Mr. Stockdale's study and tapped upon the door.

"Come in!" came a cheery, happy voice.

They glanced at one another curiously, for it was Mr. Stockdale's voice, and it was not the tone they had expected. They went in and found the Housemaster bright and cheerful.

"Well, boys," he said, smiling upon them kindly. "I am glad you have come! I hope you did not take my words too harshly. But I was very upset at the time. I appreciate your good efforts—your wonderful thoughtfulness. You hoaxed me, no doubt, but the motive behind it all was very, very generous and noble."

"Oh, cheese it, sir!" said Nipper gruffly. "We've come here, hoping that you might accept the money as a loan from us—just for the time being, as it were."

Mr. Stockdale smiled.

"Fortunately, my boys, it is not necessary," he said. "Since I saw you last I have had some very good fortune. A famous art dealer from London has been to see me, and he has bought all my paintings for a very good price, even more than—ahem!—the sale realised."

"You've—you've sold your paintings, sir?" gasped Handforth.

"Every one of them," smiled Mr. Stockdale, nodding.

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Then—then you don't need our money at all, sir?"

"No, boys; but thank you all the same."

They staggered out, dazed. There was something very mysterious about this. It was altogether too staggering to be true. They joined the other juniors in the Triangle, and they were plied with eager questions.

"There's something rummy happened," said Handforth. "Old Stocky has sold all his paintings to an art dealer or somebody!"

CHAPTER 24.

Two Mysteries!



WHEN I come across Alan Castleton——"

"Never mind Castleton now, Handy!" interrupted Pitt. "We can

leave Castleton for another time. Let's decide about this deputation."

The juniors were standing out in the Triangle under the dark sky. All of them were sore, for they had all recently tasted the Headmaster's cane. They had received their swishing in silence, and now they were far more

"What!"

"He didn't go into any details, but he's as happy as a lark," said Buster Boots. "He must have sold the paintings, too, or he wouldn't be like that. After our hoax, you can bet he was pretty careful about this second affair. Well, good luck to him!"

"But how—how?" murmured Nipper, frowning. "I don't believe it. There's something very funny about all this!"

And as they stood there, discussing the matter, Archie Glenthorne came out of the Ancient House, looking very chirpy. He strolled off towards the West House unaware that Nipper had been looking at him.

Nipper compressed his lips. Why was Archie so happy? Obviously he could know nothing of Mr. Stockdale's change of fortune, and he had recently had a swishing, and yet he was humming to himself with sheer contentment! It was very significant.

"By Jove!" murmured Nipper to himself. "I wonder!"

He was thinking of Phipps, and he was thinking of the art dealer who had recently seen Mr. Stockdale. In fact, Nipper guessed the truth. But he didn't say anything to the

others. Perhaps it would be just as well to let that little matter remain a mystery.

"Well, let's get indoors, you chaps," said Nipper, turning to Tregellis-West and Watson.

"Yes, we'll come, too," said Reggie Pitt. "I'm blessed if I can understand what it all means, but it seems to be pretty good. If old Stocky is satisfied, I'm jolly certain that I am!"

And as he went towards the West House with Jack Grey, he caught sight of a figure near the gates.

It was a gaunt figure, with bowed shoulders. And, with a start, Reggie Pitt recognised the old stranger who had been with the car—that man whom Lord Pippinton had accused of attempting to kill him!

And here he was again!

Here, lurking about the school! Who was he? Was it possible that there was any truth in what old Pippy had been saying? And when Pitt looked at the gateway again the figure had gone—passed on into the night!

What was the meaning of this strange mystery?

THE END.

NEXT WEDNESDAY!

"A RANK OUTSIDER!"

Once more Alan Castleton, the new boy who arrived at St. Frank's with such a wonderful reputation for sportsmanship, is shown up in his true colours. There's nothing good that can be said about him!

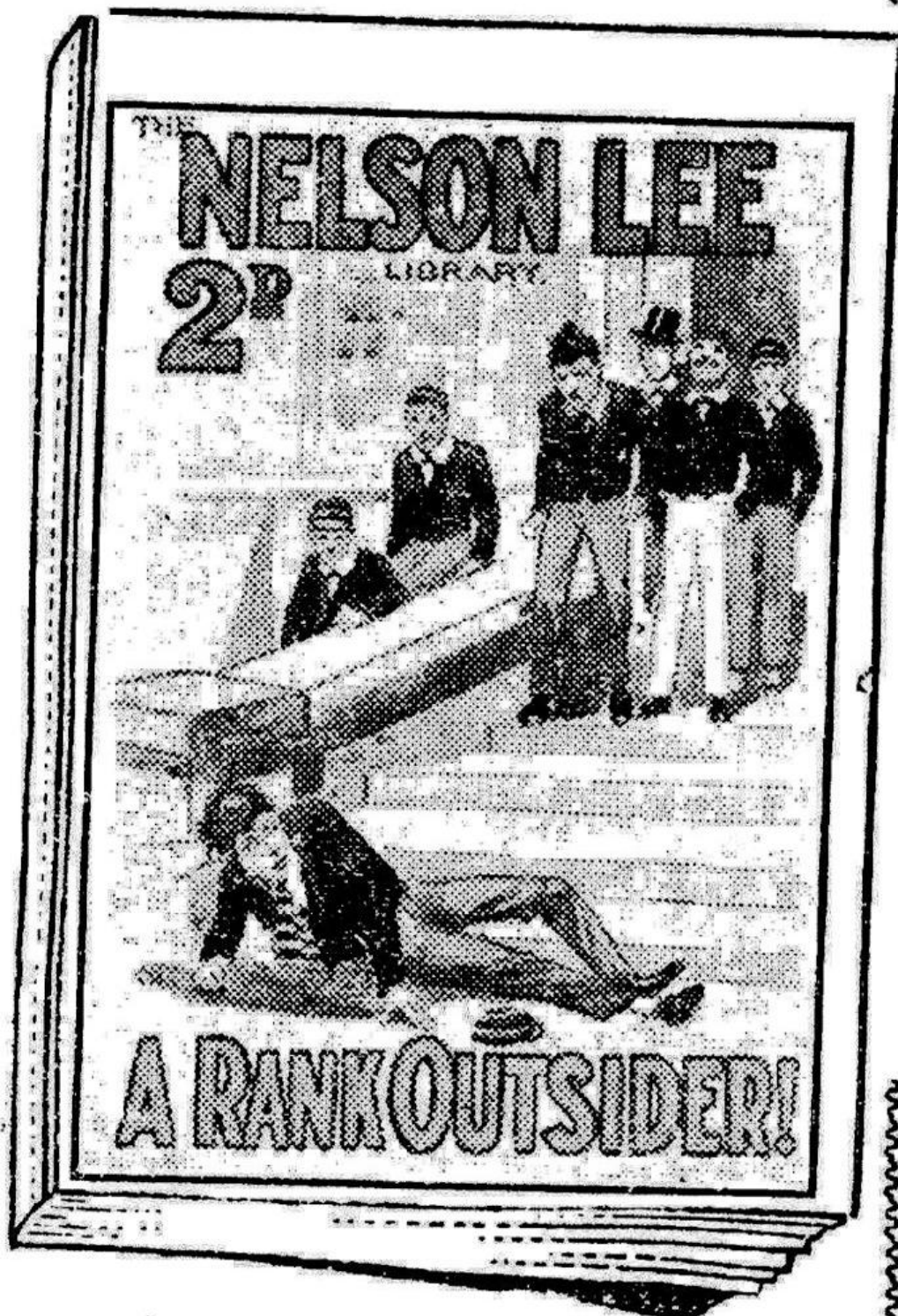
But a rotter can make a whole heap of mischief amongst decent fellows, and this Castleton proceeds to do.

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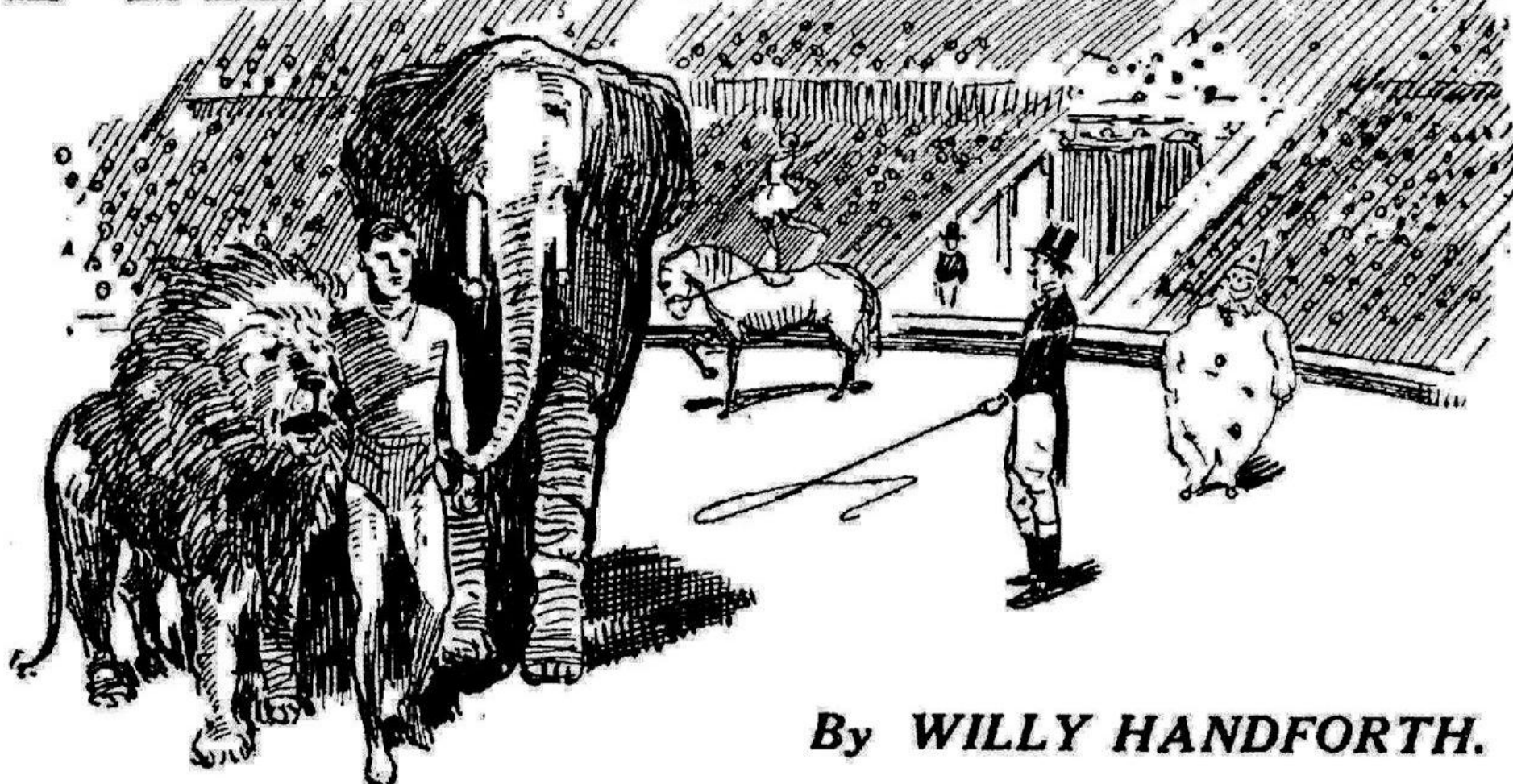
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[Out into the Cold World!]

OUT of my way, you cub!" And with these cruel words, Jasper Jelks took Tom by the shoulder, and sent him hurtling into a corner of the squalid, poverty-stricken room. But Tom was on his feet again in a moment, for our hero was a boy of pluck and spirit.

"You brute!" he cried defiantly.

Jasper Jelks swung round like a tiger.

"I'll give you the 'idin' of your life for that!" he shouted. "'Ow dare you speak to your father in that way?"

But Tom's eyes were flashing, and he was standing back, his shoulders squared, his whole face glowing with defiance. Our hero is a boy of about fourteen, with clear blue eyes, curly hair, and a fine figure. Only the previous day he had left school, having won every honour and prize that was going. And now he was home—now it was up to him to look out for work.

"You're not my father!" he replied boldly. "You're only my stepfather, and you've always been a brute to me!"

For a moment, Jasper Jelks could say nothing. He was taken completely by surprise, and he could only stand there, and goggle at Tom. At last the breaking point had come—at last the great moment had arrived when Tom was defying him.

"I'll larn ye!" Jasper Jelks bellowed, unstrapping his belt, and whirling it through the air. "Come 'ere, you young cub! What 'ave you been doin' to-day? Why ain't you got a job?"

"I've tried to get a job—but it's not so easy!" cried Tom, still standing his ground. "I only

left school yesterday, and you can't expect——"

"You're a lazy young scamp—that's what you are!" broke in Jasper Jelks harshly. "You take after your mother in your lazy ways——"

"Don't dare to say a word against my mother!" cried Tom fiercely. "She's been dead for over seven years, and I hardly remember her. But I know she was a kind, wonderful woman! And you're a brute—you're a blackguard!"

"By thunder!" snarled Jasper Jelks, leaping forward.

Slash! Slash! Slash!

Down came the belt with cruel force—but Tom wasn't there. He knew what to expect from his cruel stepfather, and he had dodged like lightning. Now he was at the door, and his eyes were flashing more than ever.

"I'm going away!" he cried defiantly. "You're not going to bully me any more—you're not going to thrash me again! I'm going out to earn my own living—and to make my fortune!"

And with these brave words Tom slammed the door, and strode out into the cold, cruel night.

It was raining, and he had no overcoat, but he did not falter. The die was cast. He was running away from home—and he did not care. Home! The very word was a mockery to Tom Hamilton! He had never known a home—and now he was setting out into the cold world, filled with eagerness at the thought of earning his own living—and the idea of hoeing his own row.

"Free—free!" he breathed happily. "At last I've had the pluck to tear myself away from my cruel stepfather! Never again will he thrash me—never again will he leave me without food: My schooldays are over—and now I must work."

Well, I'll strike out for myself, and I'll go far, far away!"

And he strode on—ever on.

Through the wet streets of the city he went, with the lamplight gleaming on the pavements, with the rain beating pitilessly down. On—always on. And Tom tramped on, his determination as strong as ever.

The rain was coming down in sheets.

Before long, Tom was wet through, but he did not care. And at last he had reached the outskirts of the town, and he was making his way into the open country. He did not care where he went. All he wanted to do was to get as far as possible from his stepfather.

Little did he know where Fate was leading him!

Our Hero Tames a Bull!

ON—always on! And the rain came down in blinding sheets.

All was darkness round Tom Hamilton now. He was trudging on, along the muddy roads, and his footsteps were weary. He had travelled many miles, and at last he was feeling happy. Away from his cruel stepfather—away from all the squalid surroundings of his boyhood. It was good to be out in the country, out in the open air, under the sky. What did it matter if it rained? Tom would not have cared if it had snowed.

And at last he crawled under a haystack, burrowing out a little nest for himself. And there he slept.

He awoke in a new world, for it was dawn—full daylight. The sun was shining gloriously, and all Nature was smiling.

How different from the old life!

Our hero was on the road—setting forth to make his fortune!

And his heart was light within him.

But, my hat, wasn't he hungry! I should jolly well say he was! But Tom's heart was stout, and his hunger did not worry him. Sooner or later, he knew, he would get a meal. He would earn a meal. Never would he accept charity. And never would he steal!

And when he thought of Jasper Jelks, and that squalid little house that had always been his home, he wondered why he hadn't run away before. What an ass he had been! This was better than living under his stepfather's poverty-stricken roof! This was better than being beaten and kicked and cuffed.

Our hero arose and stretched himself, and then he set off upon the road once more. The sun was shining down upon him, and all the world seemed happy.

The birds were singing everywhere, and Tom felt, right down within him, that everything was soon to be all right.

And just then he heard a tremendous bellow, and a great bull came tearing down the lane towards him. The bull was a whacking great animal, and it was snorting furiously, and its head was down in a great charge.

But Tom stood his ground, and was not afraid.

"Now then, old chap—now then!" he said persuasively. "What's all the excitement about? Cool off!"

And the bull, coming to a full stop, looked at Tom in a bleary sort of way. Our hero then walked up to the bull, and stroked his face—that is to say, the front part of his head.

A moment later, a fat and perspiring farmer came puffing up, and he stared in dumb amazement.

"Good-morn'ng, sir!" said Tom brightly.

"Well I'm blowed!" said the farmer. "How did you do it, young 'un?"

"Do what?" asked our hero.

"How did you tame this 'ere bull?" said the farmer. "'E's the worst one I've got."

"I didn't tame him," laughed Tom. "I've got a way with animals—that's all. I can always get on with animals, you know. I've got some white mice in my pocket even now, if it comes to that!"

The farmer looked on in amazement, and he gave the bull into the charge of two or three farm hands who had come panting up in the rear. Then he looked at Tom with a new interest.

"You're a stranger hereabouts, ain't you?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Tom. "I'm looking for a job—I'm on the tramp, and I mean to make my fortune. I haven't a home, or anything."

"Poor lad!" said the farmer kindly. "You look hungry, too. Come along o' me, an' I'll give you a good breakfast."

"But I haven't earned it!" protested Tom.

"Yes, you have!" said the farmer. "You've done me a good service, my lad, an' I want to reward you."

So our hero went to the farmhouse, and there he enjoyed a hearty breakfast, and when he went away he took a package of food with him, for the farmer's wife was a kindly soul.

Tom was feeling happier than ever now, because he had been able to feed his pet white mice. He had carried them in his pocket all the time, and they had come to no harm through the rain and the night.

Now he was on the road again, a hearty feed within him, and another feed slung over his shoulder.

And the sun shone gloriously.

Before long, Tom came to a little town, and as he was going down the High Street, he paused. A procession was coming down towards him—a procession that made him stand still, and look. For right in front were two big elephants, and then came a couple of kangaroos, followed by a lion in a cage, and a tiger in another cage. There were a couple of monkeys, too, and a zebra and a giraffe.

Tom stood there, wild with joy. His love of animals was terrific, and he had always wanted to see some of these fine creatures. But he had always been kept in that poverty-stricken neighbourhood by his stepfather, and he had never been to a zoo. So now that he saw this circus parade his heart was thumping wildly against his ribs. It was a sight that he had always longed to see.

A circus parade!

That was what it was, and Tom's heart leapt more wildly than ever. A circus! All his life, he had longed to live in a circus! Perhaps he would be able to get a job in this circus—and then his cup of happiness would be filled!

And then, as Tom was thinking this, a motor cycle came whizzing along. It was one of those noisy things—one of those motor bikes that sound like a couple of machine guns in action. It shot by, and at the same moment the two elephants reared up, and ran amok!

It was a tense, dramatic moment!

Our Hero Gets Into the Circus!

NOW, although Tom had a wonderful way with him when it came to animals, he hadn't had much experience of elephants. In fact, he hadn't had any. He had quelled the bull without much difficulty, because he had dealt with bulls before. But these elephants were a different matter, and for a moment our hero hesitated.

Meanwhile the elephants were charging down the street, and the air was filled with shouts and

screams. It seemed that scores of people were to be trampled to death.

Then suddenly Tom had an idea, and quick as a flash, he pulled his white mice out of his pocket.

He ran forward, and as the elephants came charging down upon him, he heard the crowds crying aloud with horror. Everybody thought that this brave boy was to be trampled to death before their very eyes. But our Tom knew what he was doing! When those frantic creatures were nearly upon him, he stooped quickly, and placed the white mice on the ground. Then he stepped aside, and pointed.

"Now then, Mick, show what you can do!" cried Tom. "And you help, Mack."

It was a tense, dramatic moment!

Mick and Mack, the white mice, seemed to understand what their young master meant. For they ran forward, right before those enraged elephants. And those giants of the forest fell back, trembling like aspen leaves. Everybody knows that elephants are frightened of mice—and here was an example of it!

The elephants were nearly scared out of their skins. They faltered, trembled, and stood still—rooted to the ground with fright. And the next moment Tom, seeing that he was victorious, ran forward, and he stroked the trunk of the nearest elephant.

"All right, old boy—all right!" he said softly. "Nothing to be scared of! Trust me!"

In a flash, he had picked up Mick and Mack, and they were now in his pocket. The elephants were instantly relieved, and their trembling ceased. And they seemed to know that Tom was their friend.

Cheers were ringing out from all sides, and as Tom swung round, wondering what the excitement was about, he found, to his amazement, that the people were cheering him! An Indian chap had now come up—a sort of Hindu. He was scowling ferociously, and he took charge of the two elephants with brutal cries. Tom took an instant dislike to this man.

Before he could speak, a fat man in a gorgeously red suit came riding up on a charger. He had a tremendous great moustache with pointed ends, and he was wearing a topper.

"You'll report to me later, Chunga!" he shouted, looking angrily at the Hindu. "It was your carelessness that caused those elephants to run wild!"

"But, sahib, the motor cycle—" began the Hindu.

"Nonsense!" shouted the fat man. "You should have kept the elephants in hand!"

"You are the master, sahib—and I obey!" muttered Chunga.

And Tom was the only one who saw the evil glint in Chunga's eyes as the Hindu slunk off, taking charge of the two elephants. The big man dismounted from his charger, and patted Tom on the back. At the same time, he looked Tom up and down. He noted his rags and tatters, and the travel-worn condition of his boots.

"Well done, lad—well done!" said the big man with the moustache. "It was you who saved a disaster."

"It was Mick and Mack, sir—my white mice," replied Tom simply.

"This kid ought to be useful to us, boss," said the clown of the circus, coming up. "Did you notice how he made friends with the elephants?"

The big man looked at Tom, and he could see the sparkle in Tom's eyes.

"I am Signor Boggannini," he said proudly.

"I am the boss of this great circus!"

And Tom looked at him in awe.

"Do you want a job?" continued Signor Boggannini.

"Why, yes, sir!" panted Tom. "I—I was wondering— But do you mean it?" he gasped.

"Do you mean that I can get a job in the circus?"

"Report to my caravan later on to-day, and I will see you," said Signor Boggannini, waving a fat hand. "Enough! Let the parade proceed! And, boy, I shall remember your good work!"

And so the parade proceeded, while Tom stood there in a dazed condition. He had seen Signor Boggannini himself—the owner and proprietor of the Greatest Circus on Earth! And Signor Boggannini had promised him a job! Life seemed too wonderful for words, and Tom hardly knew whether he was on his heels or his head.

Our Hero Amongst Friends!

AFTER the procession had passed, with all its glamour and wonder, Tom stood on the pavement, still in a dream. It seemed too good to be true. Signor Boggannini had promised him a job in the circus! And it was the one job in all the world that Tom had longed for!

He didn't care what work he would have to do. He didn't want any wages, either. He would be perfectly content to work for the food he ate, and he would be willing to sleep in one of the circus wagons. Anything to be with the circus!

At last Tom came out of his dream, and he knew, then, that it was a reality. He made his way through the town, and at last he came to the field where the circus was pitched. The very sight of it made him stand still.

His heart beat a rapid tattoo against his ribs.

There stood the circus, with the great main tent in the centre. Flags were flying over it, and all round there were other tents and caravans, and horses were grazing all over the place. And near the gate which led into the field a number of boys were watching.

Tom went up to the gate, and pushed it open. The boys told him that he couldn't get in—or that if he did get in he would be quickly kicked out. But Tom only smiled, and walked on. He had been invited—and he felt sorry for these other boys.

He found himself in the meadow, and he looked round uncertainly. One of the caravans seemed bigger than all the others, and then his eyes gleamed excitedly as he saw the name "Signor Boggannini" painted over the door of that special caravan.

And Tom's heart beat a rapid tattoo against his ribs.

Just then a man approached him—a tall, thin man, with a smiling, wrinkled face. He took a liking to him at once. There was something friendly about this man.

"Hallo, kid!" he said, coming up. "So you've come, then?"

"But—but I don't know you!" said Tom, staring.

"Yes, you do—I'm Smiler, the clown," said the man. "I was in the parade. You've come to see the boss, haven't you?"

"Yes," replied Tom. "I'm after that job!"

"Good luck to you!" said Smiler. "You'll find that old Sam Boggs is one of the best. A bit hasty-tempered, but—"

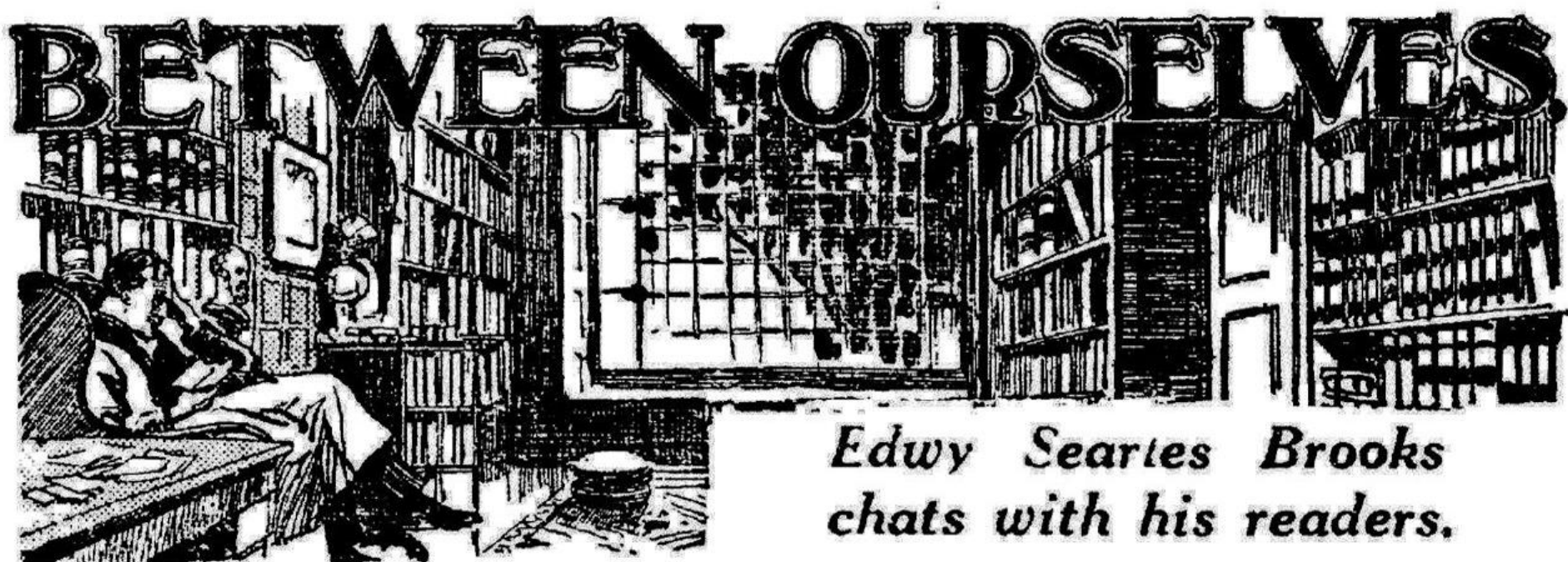
"Sam Boggs?" repeated Tom. "But who— Oh, you mean Signor Boggannini?"

"Signor Boggannini to the public, but Sam Boggs to the rest of us," grinned Smiler. "If you go in that caravan, you'll find him. He's probably having dinner at the moment with Mrs. Boggs and Daisy. You'll like Mrs. Boggs—a motherly sort of woman. And Daisy is a peach."

Tom wanted to say something, but he couldn't speak. All this was too wonderful!

And as he walked forward, animals from all

(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: 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. Letters of very special merit will be distinguished by a star (*) against the sender's name. My photo exchange offer is still open; my autographed photo for yours—but yours first, please.—E.S.B.

W. N. Martin (Darlaston), Gladys Lake** (South Norwood), Ed. A. Harrison (Bolton), Robert Johnson, Jr. (Leicester), F. M. Ambler (Dulwich), Tom Treadwell (E.C.2), Harold G. Scott (Walthamstow), H. E. Buckland (Dulwich), Wm. Thos. Daley* (Etna Creek, Aus.), Ronald Johnson (Aberdeen), E. Ash (Liverpool), "Scout" ** (Birmingham), Harry Mullen (Dublin), Thos. Jones (Wolverhampton), "Harry Gresham" ** (Hollinwood), Terence Sullivan* (Tufnell Park), Bill Knight (Dover), A. Hall (Folkestone), F. H. Green (Stratford), Albert W. Tull** (Portsmouth).

"Them's my sentiments," too, H. E. Buckland. I want us all to feel that we are friends of the same circle. You say: "You are the only writer I know who chats with his readers. I think it is a splendid idea. It causes a band of friendship to spring up between author and reader; and what could be better?" And echo answers "What?" Well, not exactly, because, strictly speaking, if echo answers anything at all, it would answer "better." And as I don't think anything could be better, echo can go and eat coke, or chew coal, or something!

What you tell me, "Scout," gives me, as they say in the classics, food for thought. As a matter of fact, I quite agree with you. This is what you tell me: "A week ago a friend of mine asked if I could lend him a good book. When I suggested some of my old 'Nelson Lees' he turned up his nose with the polite remark of 'Detective rubbish.' Yesterday the same thing happened with another friend, except that he remarked 'Detective trash.' The peculiar part about it is that I don't blame them in the least. I should have done the same thing myself, unless I had been in the know. When I told these friends that the 'Nelson Lee' contained decent school stories, they were quite surprised, and one at least will be a regular reader." I expect lots of fellows are in just the same position as you, "Scout." Well, the remedy is quite simple. Give them a copy of the Old Paper and make them read it. After that, they can't possibly have any wrong ideas about the type of yarn that Our Paper contains. As for changing the title, it is a taller order than you imagine—and, in any case, that is a matter for the Editor. You've got to remember that I'm only the chap who writes the stories.

The best boxer in the Remove, Harry Mullen, is undoubtedly Nipper. Handforth is probably a better fighter, and by that I mean that he can

slog until further orders. But old Handy is too impulsive and too reckless to trouble much about scientific boxing. In a fight between Nipper and Handforth, it is quite likely that Nipper would be knocked out, although I do not think this is at all probable. At the same time, Nipper is undoubtedly the best boxer of the two. Ernest Lawrence, of course, is in the Fourth, and his prowess as a boxer is well known.

"A Complainer" (Douglas, I.O.M.); W. Brittain (Pimlico), Jas. A. Frost* (Kentish Town), Jas. W. Cook (Poplar), Percy Young* (Liverpool), J. A. Hartley (Haslingden), "T. C." (Kilkenny), Bernard Lyn Abbott (Streatham Common), Mrs. V. Adnum (Montreal), Stanley C. Conway (Battersea), John Foster (Huddersfield), J. Gallimore (Ealing), E. W. A. A. M. Bryar (Bradford), Henry Munday (Mill Hill), Alfred Williams (Harpenden), M. A. Rajabally (Rangoon), Solomon Arkin (Cape Town), George Bradley (Thornton Heath), Agnes Roddick (Bournemouth), "R. P."* (Dover), Henry Norman (South Shields), Winifred Johnson (South Shields).

I should be a lucky fellow, James W. Cook, if every reader had as much trust in me as you have. I rather like this sentence in your letter: "Really, I don't care whether you answer this letter or not, so long as you acknowledge its arrival—because I know that you have read it, and that's all I care." I'm afraid that a good many other readers believe that I throw their letters, unread, into the waste-paper basket. But, in justice to myself, I must say that your faith in me is not misplaced. I read every letter that comes into my hands—and I answer every letter that is of sufficient general interest, always providing that I have the space. Sometimes, I fear, I have to let many letters go into my files with only a bare acknowledgment. But not before I've read every word of them—personally! You ask me if it is impossible to re-start the Magazine? Well, it's not exactly impossible, old man. But don't you think these serials, written by the St. Frank's fellows, in turn, are every bit as good as the Mag? In a way, they're better—since you are enabled to get quite a respectable dose of the serial every week. No, old man, that sketch at the top of the page is not actually my study. All the same, I've got quite a nice study—with a real carpet on the floor—yes, and with a genuine easy chair (in which I fall asleep, sometimes, when I oughtn't to!)

Isn't there a bit of contradiction in your letter, "T. C."? After making a few disparaging remarks about the Congo stories, you say this: "Do you know that between Archie and Browne the 'Nelson Lee Library' has gone to the dogs? It is time that Browne was taken out of the paper altogether—and Archie with him." And then, on the next page, you cheerfully tell me that you consider the "Nelson Lee Library" to be "one of the best books on the market." I'm sorry I can't have Browne and Archie sent away from St. Frank's just to please you—because those two happen to be two of my most popular characters. So I'm afraid the Old Paper will continue to "go to the dogs."

I'm glad you liked the Archie serial, J. Gallimore, and I hope you enjoyed Handforth's effort just as much. You suggest that Lord Dorrimore should write one of these serials? It all depends, of course. The majority of readers might not care for the scheme. We shall have to wait and see.

Yes, M. A. Rajabally, there is one Indian boy at St. Frank's. He is Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn, and he shares Study N, in the West House, with the Hon. Douglas Singleton. He hasn't been much to the fore lately, but I shall have to see what can be done about old Hussi Kahn.

Thanks for your suggestion, "R.P." but I doubt if such a series would be of general interest. You suggest that next summer we should have a channel-swimming series, featuring Tom Burton as the schoolboy channel swimmer. Of course, you live in Dover, and that makes all the difference. Perhaps the general run of readers wouldn't "cotton on."

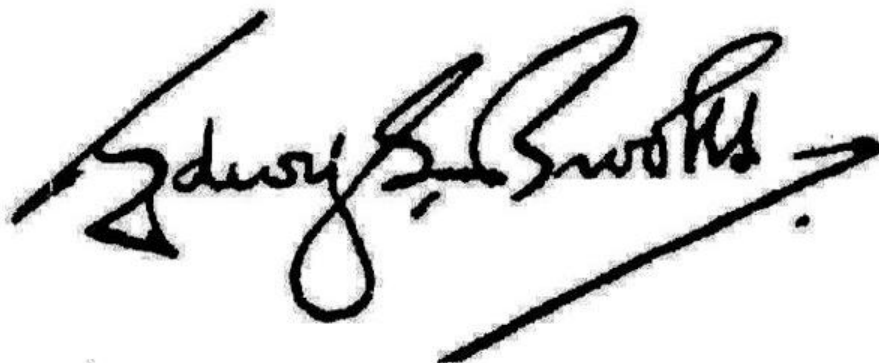
Vivian Golby (Harlington), Frank W. Hill (Wallasey), Loden & Leden (London, W. C.), Alec Bird (Chelmsford), J. W. Busby (Bow), James Staunton-Lambert (W.2.), Edmund R. Browne* (Durban), Sidney W. Le Roux* (Kingwilliams-town, Cape Province), H. Cyd Schyft (Johannesburg), "Sincere Reader" (Chatham), Edward Jones (Burcot), James Conway** (Clonmel), D. Vernon

Evans* (Chicago), J. Burford (London, N. 1.), L. Marsh (Hull), Gladys Marjorie Bowen* (Old Hill, Staffs), Margaret Ada Belcher (Wednesbury), Charles Price (Leeds), Leslie John Barnett (Plymouth), "Aussie-En-Route"* (Grasmere), Andrew A. McCarlie (Moulton).

While I know that I have such enthusiastic readers as you, Messrs. Loden & Leden, I am happy. You tell me that you are joining a new club, and that you intend taking seventeen back numbers of the Old Paper with you—and that you are sure of getting at least a dozen new readers. I hope that you did get the dozen, and I also hope that I shall soon be getting letters from them.

You have certainly hit upon the reason for old Handy's popularity, James Conway. You refer to him as "a personality endowed with virtues and faults like all of us." That's just it. And I'm inclined to think that it is Handforth's faults, rather than his virtues, that make him so well liked. We are all full of faults, although we don't like confessing to them. I am sorry that Terence O'Grady has been so much in the background, but if you will be patient enough you will see him figuring prominently, one of these days, in a series.

Thanks for your candid opinion of Our Paper, Gladys Marjorie Bowen: "It is the best-worded, exciting, adventurous, and the nicest paper for young and old, in England." I particularly like that bit "for young and old." I want people to realise that although my yarns are about schoolboys, they are available for everybody.



"PRIDE O' THE CIRCUS!"

(Continued from page 39.)

sides came towards him. It was absolutely marvellous. Horses came trotting up, whinnying with joy. Dogs came round him, barking happily. And in a cage, near by, a big lion was rubbing against the bars, purring at the very sight of Tom.

Smiler the clown stood there, wondering. He had believed that this boy was something different—but never had he imagined that our hero was so wonderful with animals.

Then Tom noticed that Chunga, the elephant trainer, was talking to a tall, sinister-looking man. And this tall sinister-looking man, who had fierce, penetrating eyes, was staring at Tom intently. There was something evil in that stare, and Tom believed that Chunga, the elephant trainer, had been plotting against him. He disliked both of them.

"Hi, boy!" shouted the man with the sinister eyes.

"What do you want?" asked Tom, walking up, his head erect, his eyes clear and bold.

"So you're the kid that the boss is going to engage, are you?" said the sinister man. "Well, my name is Silas Snoops, and I am the lion-tamer."

"Your lion doesn't look very tame!" said Tom fearlessly.

For the lion was lashing his tail now, and snarling furiously at the trainer. Silas Snoops uttered a long, mocking laugh.

"This lion is the wildest creature that ever came out of the forest!" he cried. "Even my skill cannot tame him yet!"

"I think I could manage him," replied Tom quietly.

Silas Snoops gave a roar of rage.

"Oh, you do, do you?" he shouted. "Then, by Heaven, we shall see!"

And with one swing he pulled open the door of the lion's cage, and he grasped Tom, and flung him into the cage.

Clang!

The door closed behind our hero, and there he was, alone in that cage with the wildest thing that had ever come out of the forest! And Silas Snoops stood by, shouting with villainous laughter!

(Well, you chaps, that's the end of the first instalment. I shouldn't be surprised if the Editor has messed about with my manuscript here and there, and he probably thinks he knows how to spell better than I do—but he's promised me that the story will appear almost exactly as I've written it. Anyhow, we author chaps have to put up with that sort of thing from editors. Next week you'll find our hero in all sorts of exciting incidents in Boggannini's Gigantic Circus. —WILLY.)



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.

A Complaint!

A PECKHAM friend says that some correspondents omit the formality of replying to letters. Our correspondence page is doing such excellent work that I much regret there should be any display of discourtesy. And it is uncivil not to answer letters, take it as you may.

A Bit of Bad Luck!

A Seedley chum says he was fishing, and his badge took a dive into the water as he was bending over the bank. I am sending my North Country friend a fresh badge. The old one has gone for good. Most likely a bright young trout ate it, thinking thus to become a member of the S. F. L.!

How to Write a Letter!

K. P. of Burslem asks how to write a letter. There is but little occasion for him to make the inquiry, for he has a sense of humour, and he writes simply and naturally. Funny thing how some people seem to fancy that a few conventional phrases such as "hoping you are well, as this leaves me at present," or "yours in haste" are necessary for a letter. Most likely there is no haste at all, no train to catch, and dinner is far from ready. The really interesting letter is that from a fellow who has something to say and who writes it just as he would talk.

A Club in Queensland!

Geo. S. Thornton, Aubin House, Quail Street, Longreach, Queensland, Australia, sends an interesting letter about his club, which has thirty-eight members, 15-19 years old. He wants to hear from readers who are interested in snapshots, books, etc. They have football, cricket, tennis and hockey players in the club. My correspondent states that he answers every letter he receives.

The Air Force!

"A Constant Reader," Leeds, asks about the Royal Air Force. I would have told him at once, but he omitted his address. He must make application in London, Royal Air Force, 4, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.2. His age is right.

Addressing Letters.

Jem Smith (Manchester) says he thinks the address on an envelope should begin with the town or city to which it is going, next the street and number, and the name last. He thinks this might help the postman, and I am inclined to agree with him.

Napoleon!

Did Napoleon ever come to this country? A Leicester chum puts this query. I never heard of such a visit. The emperor meant to come by the Boulogne route, but he thought better of it. Of course, in the early days the Corsican might have been over here, long before he watched the sack of the Tuileries as an unknown artillery officer. His nephew knew England well.

The Big and the Little!

Which is the biggest bird's egg in this country, ditto the smallest? A reader in the Midlands asks this query. The wild swan comes first, the wren second.

A Cycling Record!

A Highbury correspondent queries the statement in the "N. L. L." as to the world's record for the pushbike, and quotes "Cycling" to the effect that the highest recorded bicycle speed is over 80 m.p.h., reached by Jean Brunier during his motor-paced record ride of 75 miles 280 yards, at Monthery, France, November 1st, 1925. But that is just what the "N. L. L." said, and I do not see what my chum is grousing at.

The Plaza Club!

A Hull member asks about the word "Plaza." Would it be a good name for a club? I should say it is just the thing. Plaza is Spanish for Place or Square, and is O.K. for a title. Good luck to the Plaza Club, Hull.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

John A. Ewen, Fountain Cottages, High Street, Banchoy, Kincardineshire, N.B., wishes to get in touch with a French reader, or with one who can write French. He also wants to hear from an Organising Officer.

Chas. T. Browne, 74, Victoria Road, Lower Edmonton, London, N.9, wishes to secure in good condition old series "N. L. L." Nos. 1-352, 439-455, 413, 424, 429, 430, 432, 434, 437, also 1-55 New Series. State price.

Kenneth Macdonald, 63, Hindpool Road, Barrow-in-Furness, wishes to hear from readers who are interested in his amateur magazine.

E. Mountfort, c/o Circulation Branch, G.P.O. Maritzburg, Natal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with a reader in a large American city.

Wm. Cormack, 4, Becket House, Tabard Street, Boro', London, S.E.1, wants to hear from readers in his district, as he is forming a club.

J. Potter, 85, Drove Road, Biggleswade, Beds., wishes to hear from the nearest O.O. He has "St. Frank's on the Congo" to sell.

S. Waite, 87, Leconfield Road, Highbury, London, N. 5., wishes to hear from an O.O. in his district; he wants to join a club.

William Kitchen, 33, South Avenue, Buxton, Derbyshire, wishes to correspond with readers.

D. Douglas-Willan, Rosemallow, Houghton, Hunts., wishes to buy No. 67 (new series) "N. L. L."—the last story in the African series.

Wilkinson Rigg, 19, Edith Street, Nelson, wishes to correspond with readers who are interested in shorthand and stamps.

G. Hodgson, 70, Scalby Road, Scarborough, would like to hear from readers in and out of Scarborough with a view to forming a club. He also asks M. Howe, of Luton, to write and return last lot of photos.

G. Rudge, 26, High Street, Stonehouse, Plymouth, would like to hear from readers, or show any who live in his district his library.

J. Miles, The Lodge, Moulsecombe Schools, Moulsecombe, Brighton, wishes to correspond with scouts and fellows in the merchant service.

Jack Greaves, 3, Row 103, Great Yarmouth, has 100 "N. L. L." for sale.

D. Blackburn, 103, Warwick Street, Heaton, Newcastle-on-Tyne, wants to hear from readers anywhere.

N. Cochrane, 44, Walbrook, Terrace, St. Peter's, Newcastle-on-Tyne, wishes to hear from readers, particularly those overseas.

C. Rendell, 7, Three Colt Street, Limehouse, London, E.14, wishes to hear from readers interested in camping.

Alan H. Green, Loggerheads, Market Drayton, Shropshire, wishes to hear from readers abroad.

T. Young, Eurimie Street, Coomamble, N.S.W., Australia, wishes to correspond with readers, ages 16-19, about any interesting subject, especially the movies and sports.

Stanley Chidley, 32, Lowther Road, Preston Park, Brighton, wishes to hear from members in his district.

J. A. Burke, 328, N. C. Road, Phibsboro', Dublin, wishes to hear from stamp collectors, scouts, and readers generally.

William G. White, 79, Alexandra Street, Nuneaton, Warwickshire, wishes to hear from

readers in his district with the object of forming a sports club.

J. H. Thomas, 23, Ashcombe Street, Fulham, London, S.W.6, wishes to hear from readers interested in photography.

Fred Clark, 5, Coventry Road, Wavertree, Liverpool, wants to get in touch with members of the S. F. L. in the Allerton, Mossley Hill, Woolton, and Wavertree districts, also Leeds, Scarborough, etc., who are interested in cartoon drawing and stamp collecting.

Robert W. Connor, P.O. Box 1881, Cape Town, South Africa, wishes to hear from cigarette card collectors.

Walter S. Croston, 35, Ash Street, Seedley, Manchester, wishes to correspond with readers interested in nature study and fishing.

N. Wood, 32, Carmen Street, Ardwick, Manchester, wishes to correspond with readers interested in Pitman's shorthand, and stamp collecting.

Len Brown, 22, Prittlewell Street, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, wishes to correspond with readers who are interested in butterflies and pictures of them; he wants to form a field club.

Samuel Louis Ellison, 88, Donore Terrace, South Circular Road, Dolphin's Barn, Dublin, wishes to hear from readers who will help form a club.

Kenneth Pemberton, 8, Moorland Road, Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffs., wishes to obtain back numbers of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY.

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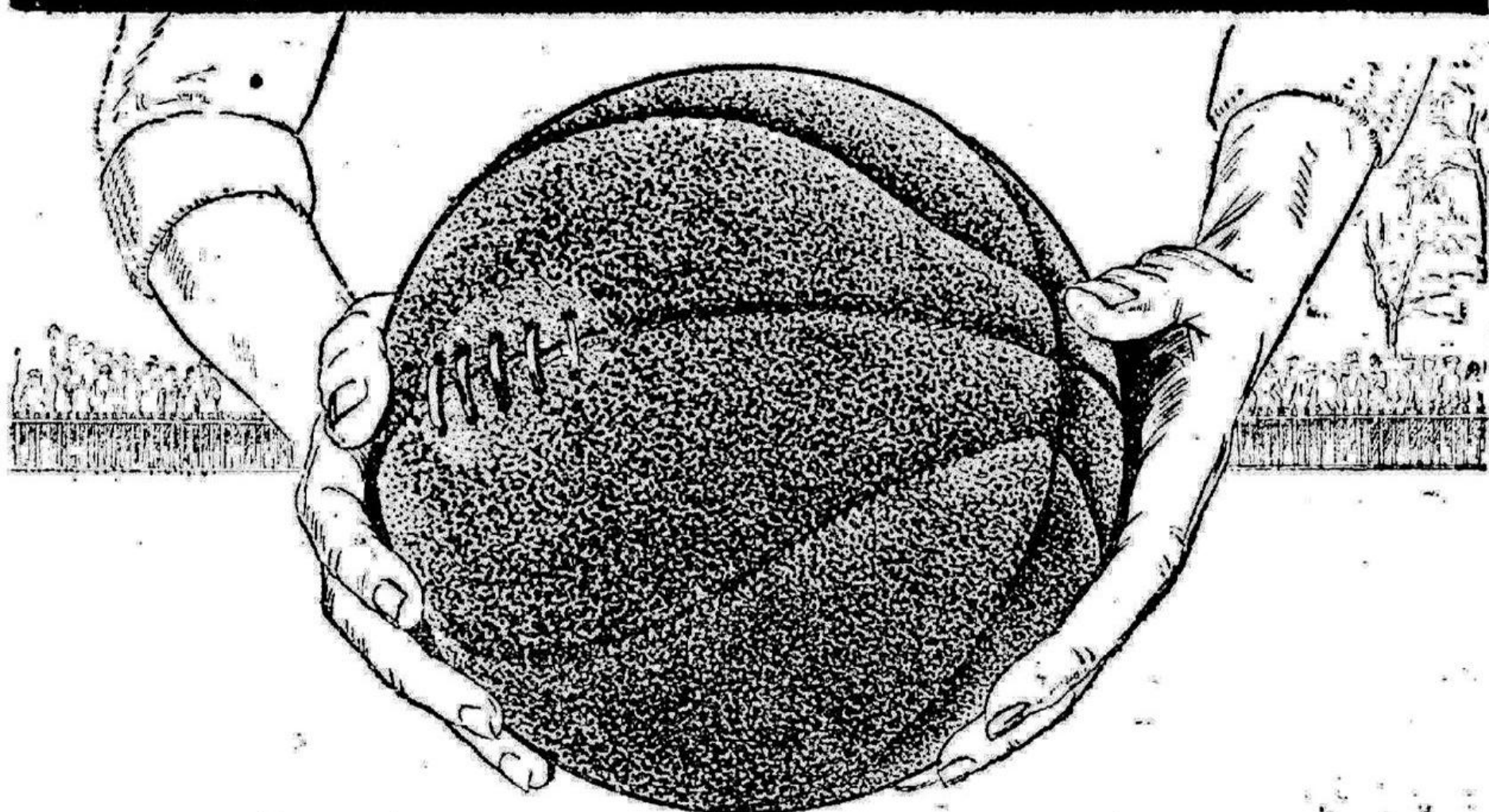
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