

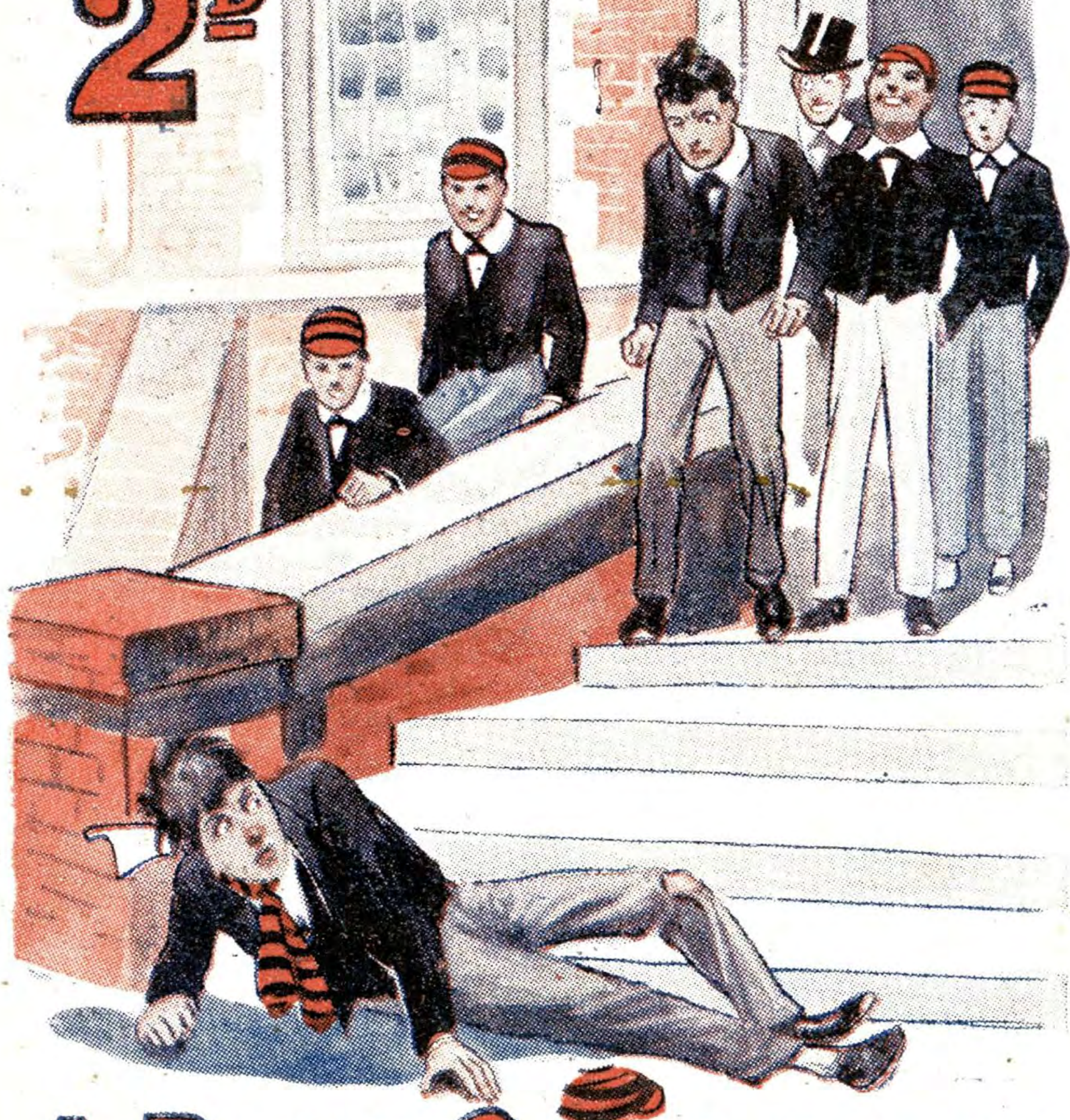
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A RANK OUTSIDER!

An enthralling long complete school-life yarn, featuring the famous chums of St. Frank's.

New Series No. 74.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

October 1st, 1927.



The moment Castleton struck his lighter inside the gas-filled room there was a terrific explosion. Lord Pipinton, catching the full force of it was sent hurtling through the window as though he had suddenly been flung from a catapult, while Castleton lost his grip on the ivy and went tumbling groundwards.

Castleton's Caddishness!Shunned by the School!

A RANK OUTSIDER!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

When Alan Castleton finds himself "cut" by all the Juniors at St. Frank's, he vows to get his revenge. His opportunity occurs when Nipper, Handforth and one or two others plan a jape on the East House. He deliberately schemes to get them expelled from the school and—but read for yourselves what happens by getting started on this stunning school story now—ED

CHAPTER 1.

Handy on the Scent!

TIMOTHY ARMSTRONG, of the East House Fourth Form at St. Frank's, nodded in a friendly way as he passed Handforth & Co. of the Remove. And Handforth suddenly came to a halt and sniffed the air.

"What is it?" he asked in a disgusted voice.

"Which?" inquired McClure.

"Didn't you smell a peculiar niff just now—as Armstrong and Griffith passed us?" demanded Handforth, staring suspiciously after the two Fourth-Formers. "By George! One of those idiots is using scent!"

Church and McClure sniffed the air, and nodded gravely.

"You're right!" said Church. "I can smell it distinctly!"

"Horrible!" said Mac with a shiver.

Edward Oswald Handforth set his jaw, and then he hurried off on the track of Armstrong and Griffith. The two East House fellows had just joined Freeman and Dallas and Steele, three other East House Fourth-Formers. They were standing in a group, chatting and enjoying the mildness of the evening. There had been a lot of cold weather lately, and it was a change to be able to stroll about in the Triangle minus overcoats.

"Just a minute, Armstrong!" said Handforth aggressively.

The Fourth-Formers glanced round.

"Hallo! What's biting you?" asked Armstrong.

"Nothing's biting me—but I'm nearly choked!" said Handforth, with a glare.

"Who's the chap here with perfume?"

"With what?" chorused the Fourth-Formers.

"One of you cuckoos is using scent!" roared Handforth indignantly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson joined the little throng, and Reggie Pitt of the West House came along, too.

"Perfume!" said Reggie in a shocked voice. "Can it be possible?"

He glanced at the East House fellows, and noticed that Timothy Armstrong was flushing rather deeply.

"There's the culprit!" said Pitt, pointing. "Come on, Armstrong—confess!"

"Rats!" shouted Armstrong blusteringly.

"I haven't used any scent, you funny idiots! What do you think I am—a girl?"

Handforth frowned.

"You needn't start insulting the girls!" he said severely. "By George! If you were a girl, Armstrong, I'd be jolly sorry for the gentle sex! But that's not the point. You're using scent!"

"Lavender!" said Tommy Watson, sniffing.

"Absolutely not!" put in Archie Glen-thorne languidly. "It's lily-of-the-valley, dear old cheddars!"

"Rats!" said Nipper. "Parma violet. I'd know it in a moment."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Armstrong was redder than ever.

"You fatheads!" he roared. "I haven't used any scent at all! It's only my new hair cream!"

"What!"

"I can use hair cream if I like, can't I?" demanded Armstrong aggressively. "You Remove chaps can go and eat coke!"

He was rather self-conscious about that hair cream of his. It was of a highly perfumed nature, and although the odour soon wore off, it lasted very strongly for the first five or ten minutes, and Armstrong had just applied a dose of the concoction. Armstrong was a bit of a dandy in his own way, and he rather fancied himself.

"I don't care whether it's hair cream or whether it's ordinary scent," said Handforth. "But what I jolly well do know is that you smell like a flower-shop! Take him away, you Fourth Form chaps! Sprinkle him with disinfectants or something!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's all right for girls to use scent," went on Handforth. "They like that sort of thing. But when a chap starts dosing himself with lily-of-the-valley and making the whole Triangle reek it's time to say something!"

Armstrong walked away with his nose in the air, but he felt aware that he did not look very dignified. He was followed by a shout of laughter. Even his own Form fellows were

joining in the fun. At St. Frank's any junior who used perfume was regarded askance. It was not merely an indignity to the sterner sex, but it was positively against all good form.

"I expect they're all the same," said Handforth, looking at the East House fellows with scorn. "I believe they sprinkle their handkerchiefs with lavender water! If we go into their studies we'll find flowers all over the place!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, chuck it, Handy!" said Freeman, glaring. "What do you take us for?"

"I wouldn't like to say," replied Handforth promptly. "But the next time I smell any perfume on any of you chaps, I'll take you by the scruff of the neck and dip you in the fountain—just to wash the niff away!"

"Rats!" said the Fourth-Formers, walking off.

And everybody was grinning and cackling—everybody, that is, except Nipper, the popular skipper of the Remove. Nipper was wearing a very thoughtful expression, although at the same time there was a twinkle deep down in his eyes.



CHAPTER 2.

The Cut Direct!

RIDICULE is the only way to cure these chaps who use scent," said Handforth, as he walked towards the Ancient House with Church and McClure. "Hold 'em up to ridicule and they're squashed."

"No need to make such a fuss about it, Handy," said Church. "After all, Armstrong wasn't using real scent. Hair cream isn't so bad——"

"I don't care whether it was hair cream or whether it was face powder!" interrupted Handforth grimly. "Scent is scent, and it doesn't matter how you shove it on. The chap absolutely reeked. When he passed me I felt sick and dizzy for half a tick!"

"Well, let's go indoors and see about some tea," said McClure diplomatically. "Nearly everybody has gone in——"

He paused, and at the same time Handforth and Church stiffened slightly. They were nearly at the steps of the Ancient House, and Alan Castleton was just coming down, having emerged from the lobby. Castleton was a comparatively new fellow in the West House Remove.

"Seen Pippy about anywhere?" he asked, glancing at Handforth & Co.

The chums of Study D did not reply. Instead they moved aside with very exaggerated actions, and continued speaking to one another as though Alan Castleton had never addressed them. They walked into the Ancient House without giving him a glance.

Alan bit his lip and walked on. His eyes began to glitter in that evil manner of his. Since coming to St. Frank's he had done everything possible to alienate his Form fellows. He was recognised as a cad and a despicable hound. Even Gordon Wallace & Co., of Study A, were not quite so detestable as this new boy.

Nipper and Tregellis-West were strolling up at the moment, and Nipper was still looking very thoughtful. Castleton paused and looked at the pair.

"Have you seen Lord Pippinton?" he asked.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West pointed across to the school clock.

"As I was sayin', dear old boy, I believe there is somethin' wrong with the works!" he said, brushing past Castleton without a glance at him. "The clock is two minutes slow, and that's frightfully unusual."

"How do you know it's two minutes slow, Montie?" asked Nipper.

"Accordin' to my watch, dear old fellow, the minute hand ought to point to——"

Montie's voice trailed away, and Alan Castleton stood there biting his lip more fiercely than ever. Twice in swift succession he had been given the cut direct. And it wasn't an unusual happening either. All that day he had been cut—cut by practically everybody.

Alan's face was glowering and sullen.

"All right," he muttered savagely. "They can cut me all they like, but my time will come! I'll make them sorry for themselves!"

His vindictive nature was aroused. And he was all the more angry, perhaps, because he must have known in his heart that he deserved the condemnation and disgust of his fellow juniors.

They did not forget his action in the affair of Mr. Stockdale, the Housemaster of the Modern House. They had got up a little hoax especially for Mr. Stockdale's benefit—so that he could raise some money on his amateur oil paintings. And Alan had cruelly given the game away to Mr. Stockdale, thus ruining everything that the generous-hearted fellows had done. Fortunately the matter was now over, and Mr. Stockdale was freed from his recent worries. But this made no difference to Alan Castleton's action. And the juniors remembered. They held Alan in contempt.

They held him in even greater contempt because, when he had first come to St. Frank's, they had expected to find a genuine sportsman. They had seen his photograph in an illustrated weekly, with the information that he was a famous footballer, a wonderful boxer, and an all-round sportsman. But there was one thing the St. Frank's fellows didn't know. That photograph was not of Alan at all! It was a picture of Arthur Castleton—Alan's twin brother! Nobody at St. Frank's knew that there were twins. And how could they guess? For Castleton him-

self had never breathed a word. That was a little secret of his own family.

Alan went into the West House, and came upon Wallace & Co in the lobby.

"Just lookin' for you!" said Gordon Wallace.

"Where the dickens have you been?" asked Gulliver.

"Eh?" said Alan, with a start. "Oh, somewhere about! The rotters! The beasts!"

The cads of Study A looked at their new friend in surprise.

"What's up?" asked Wallace.

"Everything's up!" snarled Alan. "They're cutting me everywhere—morning, noon, and night! If I speak to them they refuse to answer. They get away from me as though I were carrying smallpox, or something!"

Wallace grinned.

"Well, when you come to examine it, what else can you expect?" he asked, mockingly.

"You haven't done much to endear yourself to the rest, have you? And you know what a lot of goody-goodies they are! Take my advice, and ignore them. You'll get hardened in time."

But Alan shook his head.

"I'll not ignore them!" he replied fiercely. "I'll get even with them soon! I'll make 'em sit up!"

"Who are you referring to in particular?" asked Bell curiously.

"That cad, Hamilton!" replied Alan. "And Handforth—and Pitt—and Glenthorne—and Fullwood—and——"

"That's enough," interrupted Wallace. "We know them all! They're all in the same class—too dashed good to live! Chuck it, Castleton! You'll never make them any different—and if you try to get even, as you say, you'll only have the thing recoil on your own head! I've tried it, and I know!"

But Alan Castleton made no reply. Only his gleaming eyes told of his evil vindictiveness.



CHAPTER 3.

Hatching A Plot!

WALLACE & Co. shrugged their shoulders, and went off to their own study for tea. They were not inclined to associate with Alan Castleton while he was in such a bitter temper. And Alan himself wandered off, his hands thrust deeply into his pockets, his brow lowering and sullen.

A little later Handforth & Co. happened to go across to Mrs. Hake's tuckshop, in the corner of the Triangle. They were after supplies for tea. And in the shop they encountered Nipper and Watson, in deep conversation with Tregellis-West. Nobody else happened to be present.

"What's the secret?" asked Handforth curiously.

Nipper looked up.

"Oh, just a wheeze!" he said coolly. "I'll tell you about it later on, Handy. Something up against the East House chaps."

"The East House chaps——" began Handforth.

"Shush!" murmured Watson. "Not so loud, you ass! We're going to keep this a secret."

"I'll tell you what!" murmured Nipper. "Come along into the gym., and we'll talk about it now—just the preliminary details. If we don't, Handy will only haunt us everywhere we go."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "But if it's something against the East House chaps I want to be in it! We haven't japed Armstrong and his lot yet, have we? It's high time we got busy!"

The six Remove fellows went into the gym., and noted with satisfaction that it was empty. It was an ideal place for hatching a plot.

Of late, there had been a big revival of the old House rivalry. There had been japes between the West House and the Ancient House. But, so far, the Removites hadn't made many raids upon the Fourth Formers. At St. Frank's, the Remove was divided into the Ancient House and the West House. The Fourth boarded in the Modern House and the East House.

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

"Nothing much—so don't get excited," said Nipper. "It was that hair-cream of Armstrong's that put the idea into my head."

"Oh, was it?" said Handforth with a start. "Don't forget that I sniffed that hair-cream first!"

Nipper chuckled.

"I'll give you full credit for that, Handy," he replied dryly. "You've got a wonderful nose for scent!"

"Rather!" said Church, nodding. "Handy's always kidding himself that he's a great detective, and he got on the scent all right this evening, didn't he?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Har, har, har!" mocked Handforth sarcastically. "Very funny, isn't it?"

"We won't pursue the subject, Handy," said Nipper gently. "Now about this jape. Why not follow up that hair-cream business? My idea is for us to raid the East House to-night—after lights-out. No good doing it before, because we should be spotted. We'll go into all the junior studies, and decorate them with flowers and ribbons and things."

Handforth's eyes gleamed.

"By George!" he grinned. "That's not a bad wheeze!"

"It'll cost a bit of money, but it'll be worth it," went on Nipper. "We can buy the flowers this evening—in the village. That's why it's necessary to make the plans now, well in advance. We shall want some scent, too!"

"Scent?" said Church and McClure staring.

"Six bottles—one each!" replied Nipper. "We'll get all sorts from the chemist—lily-of-the-valley, palma-violet, wallflower, and any old thing you like."

"But why scent?" asked Handforth, staring.

"Because, after we've decorated the studies," explained Nipper, "we'll creep up into the Fourth dormitories, and sprinkle that perfume over Armstrong & Co.'s clothing."

"Dear old boy, it's great!" said Tregellis West. "It is, really!"

Handforth gazed at Nipper admiringly.

"Great!" he echoed. "It's marvellous! Saturate their clothes, you mean?"

"Exactly," said Nipper. "And not only the clothes they are wearing at the time—but everything! We'll open the wardrobes, the drawers—and shove perfume over their best suits and spare shirts, and collars and ties! And wherever they go to-morrow, they'll simply reek! The Fourth Form room will be like a scent factory!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Old Pycraft will be on their trail all day!" went on Nipper, with a chuckle. "Wherever they go, they'll leave a reeking trail. And do you think we shall laugh at them to-morrow?"

"Laugh!" said Watson. "We'll kill ourselves!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And they roared at the very thought of it. It was certainly a good idea for an innocent jape. The essence of a good rag was to make it thoroughly laughable—being, at the same time, harmless and good natured. And this scheme of Nipper's fulfilled every necessary ingredient.

"It'll be a great triumph for the Ancient House," went on Nipper, with a chuckle. "Just the six of us, you know. We won't tell anybody else about it—until to-morrow. So be jolly careful, Handy. Don't talk about it after we've gone out of here. We'll meet again after tea, and pop down to the village for the supplies."

"Trust me," said Handforth. "Only six of us, eh? That's ripping! And to-morrow, when Armstrong & Co. are going about the place, scenting the whole atmosphere, we'll let the cat out of the bag!"

"That's the idea!" said Nipper. "It's only a simple scheme, but it ought to work wonderfully."

And the six plotters went out of the gymnasium, chuckling. Little did they imagine that that harmless plan was destined to develop into a very complicated drama! And the reason for this was not so difficult to find, after all.

For as soon as the schemers had vanished out of the gym., there was a movement from behind a pile of stacked-up deck-chairs.

And Alan Castleton emerged, his eyes gleaming vindictively!



CHAPTER 4.

The Eavesdropper!

ALAN had not deliberately hidden himself behind those deck-chairs with the object of spying upon the chums of Study C and Study D.

No, it had been more or less accidental.

That much, at least, can be said for Alan. He had wandered into the gymnasium idly, still sullen and morose. He had not wanted to go indoors for tea. He was trying to think of some scheme, whereby he could get even with the other juniors for their treatment of him. It did not occur to Alan that he deserved all this, and that he could expect no other treatment as long as he acted like a cad.

Just as he had got to the door, intending to wander round the Triangle again, he had spotted the six Removites coming towards the gym. They had cut him once, and he did not want them to cut him again. And so he had backed hastily, and had hidden behind the deck-chairs—believing, at the time, that the fellows would soon go out again.

And Alan had heard everything!

He had heard—and not one of the schemers knew that their plot was in the possession of an outsider. True, the plot was innocent enough. Nothing could have been more innocent than this little scheme to smother Armstrong & Co.'s clothing with scent, and to decorate their studies with flowers and ribbons.

But Alan Castleton looked at it in a different way.

There was something very cunning in his mind—something evil. And his brain was working rapidly now.

"Just the six of them!" he muttered. "They are going to break bounds after lights-out and get into the East House! Oh-ho! The plan is to decorate the studies, is it? And then sprinkle scent on Armstrong & Co.'s clothes!"

Already an idea came to him, as despicable as any of his other ideas.

"Yes, it'll be easy—dead easy!" he muttered. "It's only a matter of arrangement—and waiting my opportunity. And I won't say a word to anybody. I'll keep this entirely to myself. It's just possible that they'll all be sacked—the whole six!"

Twenty minutes later his plans were clear. And Alan was looking cool and collected again.

All his sullenness had gone. He was no longer morose, no longer ill-tempered. He had found a solution, and the simplicity of it was startling.

He went into the Ancient House and made his way to Study A. It was too late for him to have tea in Hall, and he didn't fancy going to his own study in the West House. Perhaps

he would be in time to snatch a cup from Wallace & Co.

"Still in time?" he asked cheerily, as he walked into Study A.

Wallace & Co. looked up from the tea-table.

"Yes, there's some tea in the pot, if you want it," said Wallace, looking at Alan curiously. "And there are still some sardines left—and plenty of cake."

"No bread-and-butter, though," said Bell.

"That's all right!" grinned Gulliver. "I expect Castleton will make a decent tea off the sardines and the cake. They go well together!"

Alan chuckled as he sat down at the table.

"You can keep the sardines," he replied coolly, "but I'll have the cake, if you don't mind."

Wallace was still looking at him in a straight way.

"Have you backed a winner this afternoon?" he asked. "Just got the news that you've come into a fortune?"

"What do you mean?" asked Alan.

"Well, there's a big difference in you, isn't there?" asked Wallace. "When we left you in the West House lobby you were like a bear with a sore head. You snapped us up, and your face was as black as thunder. Now you're happy."

Alan Castleton nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I've thought of something. I've thought of a way to get even with Nipper and Handforth and their beastly pals!"

Study A looked at him with more interest than ever.

"Oh, you've thought of a way, have you?" said Wallace. "This is jolly interestin'! Trot it out, Castleton!"

"If it's all the same to you, I'll keep it to myself," replied Alan, as he sipped his tea. "You'll probably be interested to-morrow. Something dramatic will happen. But I'll let it come as a surprise. Anyhow, look out!"

Bell gave him a frowning glance.

"Dash it, Castleton, we're none too particular in this study, but there's something about you that makes me shiver!" he said. "You're so dashed cool and calculatin'! I wouldn't like to have you up against me!"

"That's all right," said Castleton. "We're friends, aren't we? I shan't be up against you as long as you remain one of my pals."

"But what's this scheme you've got against Handforth and those other fellows?" asked Wallace pointedly. "If you didn't mean to tell us, why did you say anythin' at all? Don't be so confoundedly mean, Castleton! Out with it!"

"Frightfully sorry," drawled Alan, "but I rather fancy keeping it to myself. You'll know in the morning. Don't be impatient."

Wallace & Co. were rather incensed, and for a moment they thought about throwing him forcibly out of the study. But they changed their minds when Alan produced a pack of cards, and suggested a little game

of solo whist. They had wanted a fourth, anyhow, and they forgot the other matter. So they settled down to a quiet game, and indulged in a cigarette or two.

But they were still very curious about Alan Castleton's plan. "Getting even" with the enemies of the Remove. They had little doubt that that plan was a mean and spiteful one.

Many times in the past Study A had attempted to get the better of Nipper and Handforth, but they had very seldom succeeded—they had never succeeded, in point of fact. They wondered if this new fellow would meet with better results!



CHAPTER 5.

After Lights-Out!

YOU fellows ready?"

Nipper, speaking cautiously, put his head into Handforth & Co.'s dormitory. The chums of Study

D were almost dressed. It was well after lights-out, and the Ancient House juniors were sound asleep, save for these six.

"Yes, we're ready," replied Handforth softly. "Where's all the stuff?"

"Down in Study C," replied Nipper. "It's in the cupboard, safely stowed away. If there isn't any hitch, we ought to be back within half an hour, and then we can sleep peacefully—knowing what a laugh we shall have to-morrow."

"We'd better have a good wash before we come back from the East House," grinned Tommy Watson. "We shall probably reek of scent ourselves, unless we're jolly careful. It's easy enough to sprinkle the stuff over our own clothing, and the joke would be rather spoilt if we niffed of the perfume as much as the East House chaps!"

"We've got to be careful, that's all," replied Nipper. "Well, come on. And don't forget—no talking as we go downstairs. We don't want any prefects butting in and putting a stopper on the game."

They crept downstairs like shadows, and succeeded in getting into the Remove passage without any interruptions. They entered Study C, and Nipper switched on a small electric torch.

"We'd better distribute this stuff now," he said, as he went across to the cupboard. "We'll each take a bottle of scent, and each a handful of flowers and ribbons and things. Then, when we get into the East House, we'll separate, and work in the different studies."

It was a good plan, since they would be well separated in the rival studies. There would be no chance of conversation if they were working alone. And, besides, the task would be accomplished all the quicker.

They grinned as they each took a small bottle of perfume. There were all kinds, and

they were careful to keep the stoppers well in and to avoid actual contact with any of the scent. And they each took a big bunch of flowers, too, and all kinds of highly decorative and highly coloured ribbons.

Chuckling, they went to the window, and Nipper prepared to unfasten the catch.

"Hallo!" he said in a puzzled voice.

"What's wrong?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Nothing's wrong," said Nipper. "But this window is unfastened."

"That's not very startling, is it?" asked Church.

"No, but it's queer," replied Nipper, frowning. "I'll swear I fastened this window before we went upstairs to bed. Perhaps I forgot it, though—I know I meant to fasten it. Queer."

He was thoughtful for a moment or two. Why was this window unfastened now? Had he forgotten it, or had somebody been in there? It would have been quite possible for an unauthorised person to enter the study after Nipper had left—and to put the catch back. But why? There seemed to be no object in such a thing. Nothing in the study had been touched—that was certain. Nothing had been interfered with, so Nipper dismissed the matter, and concluded that he had overlooked the window-fastening, after all.

Stealing out, they found themselves in the West Square, and from here they went through West Arch, and then across the Triangle to East House.

The school was very quiet. A low wind was moaning round the buildings, but not a light was showing anywhere—save from one or two upper windows in the masters' quarters. But there was very little fear of an interruption. As long as they made no noise, and went about their work swiftly and stealthily, there was no reason why they should not get back into their own House with complete success.

And what a laugh they would have on Armstrong & Co. on the morrow.

It was well worth the risk of breaking bounds after lights-out. It was a perfectly innocent jape, and the East House fellows would look very small and sheepish in the morning—when they were compelled to go amongst their fellows, reeking of scent. What was more, they wouldn't be able to get rid of it. Whatever clothes they donned, all of them would be saturated with the cheap, high-smelling perfume. Nipper & Co. even intended to put some of the scent into their rivals' boots and on to their caps, and all over their overcoats. And perfume of that kind has a habit of clinging and remaining pungent for quite a long time. Really, it would be days before Armstrong & Co. got rid of that odour. It would certainly be a glorious jape.

There was no difficulty in getting into the East House. For Nipper, following his usual course, had made three or four preparations in advance. He had walked into the East House just before bed-time, and had deliberately tampered with the window at the end of the junior passage. This window looked out upon the East Square, and was tucked



The mysterious man chuckled evilly when, after moving the gas-fire and turning the gas full on, he climbed through the window and closed it tightly behind him. And Lord Pippinton, fast asleep, was blissfully unaware of the impending tragedy!

away in a corner. Nipper had not left the catch unfastened, but he had so loosened it that the slightest tug would pull the window open.

"Here we are!" he murmured, as they came to a halt outside the window. "Now, you chaps. As soon as we get in, we'll attend to the studies first. You know exactly what to do, and there's no need for us to talk once we're inside. We really oughtn't to be talking here."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Handforth. "Who's to see us! Who's to hear us? Everybody's asleep, and the night's as black as the dickens. This wind, too, is jolly handy. It drowns all the other sounds. Buck up with the window, Nipper. Let's get in and start the good work!"

"Begad, yes!"

"Poor old Armstrong & Co.!" grinned McClure. "Oh, what a shock in the morning!"

"And won't we chip them!" grinned Church. "Won't we make their lives a misery to-morrow? I'll bet there'll be some fun in the Fourth Form-room during lessons to-morrow morning. I can see all the Modern House chaps avoiding Armstrong & Co. like the plague! The whole class-room will whiff of scent for weeks! And all different scents, too! What a lark!"

And, chuckling afresh, the plotters slipped through the window, and then distributed

themselves towards the various studies. They knew the inside of the East House like a book—and within a couple of minutes they had all vanished. There wasn't a single sign that any intruders were about.

Every invader was armed with a little electric torch, and once inside the studies they switched these on and set about the preparations.



CHAPTER 6.

The Mysterious Watcher!

IN the shadow of the West Square lurked a figure.

A mysterious figure—pressed against an angle of the wall, still and mysteriously silent. The figure had been there for some little time. The movements of Nipper & Co. had been watched and noted. And now all was still and quiet again.

The gaunt stranger!

Yes, this man, who lurked in the shadow of the West Square, was the very same individual who had once attempted to take Lord Pippinton's life. He was a curious-looking fellow—a tall, wiry old man, with bent shoulders, and with hair that came over his collar. His face was lined and gaunt, and his eyes were curiously wild and baleful.

Was he intent upon some injury to Lord Pippinton now?

It certainly seemed like it—since he was watching a certain window of the West House—watching it closely. And that window was the window of Lord Pippinton's bed-room! Alan Castleton occupied that little dormitory, too. Perhaps that was why the stranger was waiting.

But why should this stranger take such an interest in the schoolboy peer?

There seemed to be no reason for it. Lord Pippinton was one of the most harmless specimens of humanity on the face of the earth. He was every kind of a simpleton, and it seemed impossible that anything could be gained by his early demise. He was the only son and heir of the Duke of Walsham, and, even if he died, there were no other relatives. The old duke's fortune would go to charity. So who could this stranger be? And what was his object in haunting old Pippy in this way? There was a mystery here—a mystery which seemed as intangible as it was sinister.

Only the previous week the stranger had persuaded old Pippy to go for a walk with him—and then he had flung his young companion over the edge of the moor quarry. When Lord Pippinton came back, and explained the circumstances to Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey, he had been disbelieved. And small wonder! For nobody had seen Pippy come into the House, and he had not told Pitt and Grey about it until he had completely changed. Naturally, they had assumed that the simple junior had been dreaming. Old Pippy was in the habit of going off into these trance-like conditions.

But there could be no question that the danger was very real indeed.

For here was this mysterious old man again—lurking in the West Square—watching Lord Pippinton's bed-room window.

Perhaps he had had intentions of climbing up to that window—and the advent of Nipper & Co. had made him pause. He was waiting now. Waiting for what? Obviously for the East House raiders to return, and until the school was quiet again.

And then, cautiously, the window of old Pippy's bed-room opened.

The gaunt stranger darted forward slightly, and stared up, watching intently. A figure was at the window. And this figure acted definitely. It climbed over the sill, and then clung to the ivy, which was thick on this particular wall.

The old man shook his head as he watched. This was not Lord Pippinton, as he could tell quite easily in the dim moonlight which flooded the West House wall. This was the other junior who occupied the same bed-room.

Alan Castleton!

Yes, Castleton was climbing down the ivy. It was an easy climb for any energetic fellow, and Alan's nerve was good. Even if he had slipped he would not have come to much harm, for the distance from the bed-room window to the ground was comparatively slight.

Alan was feeling very contented.

From the end window of the passage he had watched. He had seen the six Ancient House fellows leave five minutes earlier, and he had waited until now before taking action on his own account. Now it was time for him to get busy.

Once on the ground he slipped through West Arch and crossed the Triangle. He had no idea of that watcher in the corner of the wall. He knew nothing of the mysterious stranger.

There were many queer things going on this night!

For after Castleton had gone, the gaunt man became active, too. Only for a few minutes did he hesitate. Then he crept forward, and arrived at the spot immediately below the window of Old Pippy's bed-room. If Castleton could climb down the ivy, then he could climb up the ivy. And this he proceeded to do.

For a man of his age he was extraordinarily agile. Up the ivy he went, and at last he reached the window-sill. Here he paused for a moment, to glance down and listen. But there was no sound—only the moan of the wind as it came through West Arch, and round the angles of the old buildings.

The man's actions were now peculiar, and, moreover, deadly in their awful intent.

Like a shadow he slipped into the bed-room, and one glance told him that Lord Pippinton was sound asleep. He crept to the door, turned the key in the lock, and then went close to the fireplace.

There was a gas-fire fitted in the grate. Not every junior bed-room had this luxury, but Lord Pippinton was inclined to be delicate, and on very cold nights he was allowed a little warmth prior to going to sleep.

"Ah, ah!" murmured the gaunt man. "As I thought—as I suspected!"

He bent down and closed the register of the stove. Then, with a wrench, he pulled the gas-fire out into the hearth, so that the vent was quite clear of the chimney. Then he turned the gas full on, and chuckled as he heard it hissing out.

Again he crept to the window, and then he climbed on to the sill, and closed the window tightly behind him. A minute later he had vanished into the night.



CHAPTER 7.

On The Job!

"GORGEOUS!" murmured Handforth ecstatically.

He viewed his handiwork with great pride. Handforth was in Study

16, usually occupied by Freeman, Dallas, and Steele. And the study was looking very unusual. It was, in fact, a sight.

The overmantel was decorated with little knots of highly-coloured ribbon. At either end of the mantelpiece stood a football boot, and in the football boots were sprays of flowers. Round the walls there were pictures—photographs, for the most part, of Freeman, Dallas, and Steele in various sporting rig. And every photograph was now decorated with little bunches of violets, or sprigs of evergreen, or festoons of ribbons.

The window, too, was very different from usual. Little fluffy lace curtains had been hastily put up, and these curtains, too, were decorated with more ribbons.

And the table was a picture in itself.

Flowers were sticking out of ink-pots, and two little saucepans had been placed at either end of the table, filled with more flowers. Handforth had been hard put to find a substitute for vases, but he had done very well on the whole, and Study No. 16 was looking highly decorative. Freeman & Co. would probably fail to appreciate these efforts to improve the study's appearance.

The door softly opened, and Nipper looked in.

"Finished?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Yes," said Handforth. "How does it look?"

"First class!" said Nipper, as he glanced round with the aid of Handy's electric torch. "By jingo, you've done it well, old man! Come and have a look at Armstrong's study!"

They went along to Study No. 12, and Handforth nearly burst into a roar of laughter. If anything, Armstrong's study was even more highly decorated than No. 16. And the flowers were beginning to send off their perfume already. No doubt the flowers were very nice, but schoolboys do not appreciate flowers. They appreciate them less than ever when they know that their Form fellows would howl with laughter at them.

The rest of the conspirators came along, and they all joined forces in the silent corridor.

"Well, that's that!" said Nipper genially. "We haven't been long on this part of the job, but the most difficult work is to come. We've got to go jolly carefully now, my lads. We mustn't let anything ruin the jape."

"Rather not!" said Handforth. "But where does the risk come in?"

"Why, if we wake anybody when we're shoving the scent on the clothing the game'll be up," replied Nipper. "Fortunately, these East House chaps sleep pretty heavily, I believe. We mustn't forget to be absolutely silent. Come on, let's get busy."

And they all crept upstairs.

The task was not quite so ticklish as they had feared. For when they distributed and entered the various junior bed-rooms, they found the Fourth-Formers sleeping so soundly that there was very little danger. And their task, after all, was a simple one.

The scent-bottles were all ready. They

were fitted with sprinkler tops, and it was only necessary to locate the junior's clothing and then proceed to sprinkle them.

It was rather more difficult getting into the wardrobes and opening the chests of drawers. But they hadn't really started on this latter task yet. The first job was to get the ordinary everyday clothing saturated.

Never for a moment did these innocent raiders imagine what was to come of this jape. For it certainly was innocent. There was no harm in it whatever. It was just a good-natured joke on the East House fellows. A joke which had been instigated by Nipper, by reason of Armstrong's highly-smelling hair-cream.

How was it possible for such a little game as this to lead to anything serious? How could it? Even Nipper, with all his shrewdness, did not imagine there was any peril whatever.

But then, of course, he did not know that Alan Castleton, the vindictive, was on the trail. He did not know that Alan was bent upon a particularly sinister revenge.

Coming out of one of the bed-rooms, Nipper came face to face with Tommy Watson. They paused for a moment to exchange notes.

"Finished in there?" asked Watson.

"Yes, nearly," replied Nipper. "But the fact is, I was going to have a word with you chaps, if I could locate you. I don't think we'd better interfere with the chests of drawers and the wardrobes, after all."

"Why not?"

"Because it might spoil everything," replied Nipper. "I tried to open a drawer just now, and it creaked horribly."

"Well, it doesn't matter much, does it?" asked Watson. "Even if they wake up, it won't hurt. They'll be too late to stop the thing—and we can be off in less than two ticks. The laugh will still be on Armstrong & Co."

"Yes, I know," agreed Nipper, grinning. "But it'll be a lot better if they wake up in the morning and they make the discoveries then. And we shall do quite enough scent-spilling, anyhow. Phew! The whole passage reeks of the stuff even now!"

"So it does!" replied Watson. "I say, I just remembered! Did you hear something about two minutes ago?"

"Hear something?"

"Yes; downstairs."

"No, I didn't—and I hope you didn't, either," said Nipper. "Because, if there's something going on downstairs, that smells of a master or a prefect. It must have been your imagination, Tommy. There's nobody about."

"I'm not so sure," said Tommy Watson uneasily. "I could swear I heard a door close downstairs two or three minutes ago. And we shall look fine if we're caught here, shan't we?"

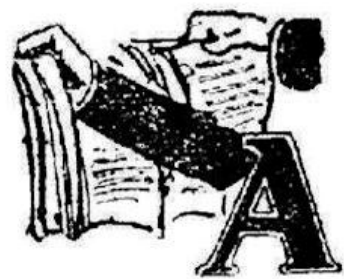
"Well, I dare say it'll mean lines, and perhaps a gating," said Nipper. "But old Mr. Goole isn't such a bad Housemaster. He

won't be too severe. Anyhow, he'll know that it's only an innocent school jape."

Innocent! It certainly did seem so, but then, Nipper didn't know the actual facts! He didn't know that other forces were at work on this eventful night!

CHAPTER 8.

Another One on the Job!



ALAN CASTLETON chuckled to himself.

"Now for it!" he murmured with a quiver of gloating triumph in his voice. "Now for it! But I mustn't make any noise! That confounded door banged just now, blow it! Slipped out of my giddy hand! I hope nobody heard!"

So Tommy Watson's ears had told him aright!

For Alan Castleton, in entering this particular study, had allowed the door to slip through his fingers, and it had banged slightly. But he did not worry. He did not fear any interruption.

For Castleton was not standing in one of the junior studies at all. He was, in fact, in the study which was usually occupied by Mr. Horace Pycraft, the ill-tempered master of the Fourth Form.

Mr. Pycraft lived in the East House, and all the occupants of the Ancient House and the West House and the Modern House were very glad of this. For they could well do without Mr. Pycraft.

He was the most unpopular master at St. Frank's. As a scholar, no doubt, Mr. Pycraft was a very clever man. In his capacity as master of the Fourth Form he was everything that could be desired, but in his treatment of his boys he was a tyrant—a petty bully—and nothing pleased him better than to pick on his pupils, and to toady to the rich and influential fellows. In many respects, Mr. Horace Pycraft was several kinds of a snob.

Just recently, too, he had aroused the ire of Nipper and Handforth and many of the other juniors. During the previous week Bannington had been placed out of bounds, owing to a case of smallpox. But several members of the Remove had gone into Bannington during the period of the ban, and Alan Castleton had whispered a word to Mr. Pycraft on the subject, and, naturally, the master of the Fourth had informed the Head.

A swishing had resulted, and the Removites were in no way inclined to love Mr. Pycraft in consequence. Alan remembered all this—and it formed a part of his little plot.

"Everybody knows that Nipper and Handforth and the others are dead against old Pycraft," he murmured to himself. "So when this affair is discovered, it'll look just like an act of revenge. Oh, yes! I'm doing the job thoroughly! I don't believe in miss-

ing out any important details. If those chaps don't get the sack, it won't be my fault!"

He seemed to take great pleasure in pondering over the despicable nature of his work. He looked round the study, wondering how to begin.

It was a comparatively small room, and very neat and tidy. Mr. Pycraft was a terror for having things in apple-pie order, and before he went to bed every night he made sure that all his books were in the right places, that his inkpot was closed, and that everything was "just so."

Alan Castleton looked round the study and grinned more than ever.

"Looks very nice!" he murmured. "But I don't think it'll look quite so nice by the time I've finished with it. I shall have to hustle, too—I haven't much longer than five minutes. But I think I can do a lot of damage in five minutes!"

He did!

His first task was to take down the most valuable books from Mr. Pycraft's shelves, and these he proceeded ruthlessly to tear up. He wrenched off the covers, he tore the leaves apart, and he wrecked them utterly.

Then he took the inkpot, and hurled the contents over the walls. There were great ink-splashes on the pictures and on the wall-paper. He shovelled out the ashes from the fireplace, and smothered them all over Mr. Pycraft's papers on the desk.

Not content with this, he took out his pocket-knife, and slashed at the furniture, making great marks on the highly-polished surface, and cutting through the leather cushions of the chairs. This was sheer destruction—not an ordinary jape at all.

Alan Castleton was wrecking Mr. Pycraft's study completely.

Within that brief space of five minutes, he created absolute havoc. The place was in a terrible condition by the time he went to the door, hot, breathless, and triumphant.

"Well, that's that!" he muttered. "By gad! They'll have a job to explain this away! Caught red-handed in a rival House, and old Pycraft's study wrecked! The thing will be as clear as daylight! They'll never be able to get out of it!"

But Alan was not finished yet!

Cautiously leaving Mr. Pycraft's study, he tip-toed his way to the end of the passage, and stood there listening. No sounds came to his ears. The raiders were still upstairs, still engaged upon the scent-sprinkling business, and Alan went along the passage, until he came to that end window—which had purposely been left open, in case of a sudden alarm. The raiders wanted to have their exit clear.

And now Alan proceeded to close the window, to fasten the catches, and to jam them tightly. Within a minute, the window was immovable. No amount of pushing and forcing could open it. He had cut off the raiders' exit!

This done, he went further along, turned into another corridor, and made his final

exit from the House by a study window. It wouldn't matter about leaving this catch unfastened, for, naturally, Nipper and his companions would know nothing of this means of exit. They would be trapped within the House!

And now for the warning!

Alan's way of giving the warning was peculiar.

Having reached a very dark corner of the East Square, he bent down, and picked up numbers of the stones from the gravel. Then he chuckled, and took aim.

Whizz!

Crash!

One of the lower windows of the East House went into splinters, making a terrific commotion in the night.

Crash—crash!

Two other windows splintered to atoms, and Alan paused in his ill-natured work. Lights had been switched on in two or three of the upper rooms. Voices were making themselves heard.

Alan Castleton grinned to himself.

His task was over.



CHAPTER 9.

An Amazing Development!

"Rummy!" murmured Nipper in a curious voice.

Those crashing windows had not sounded yet. The raiders were busy at their work, unsuspecting of what was going on below even at this moment. They were all satisfied that they had plenty of time, and that there was no reason for any alarm.

Nipper had just emerged from one of the Fourth Form dormitories. He paused in the corridor and gingerly sniffed at his fingers. They smelled strongly of wallflower—the particular perfume which his bottle contained.

"Rummy!" said Nipper again. "Funny kind of scent, anyhow! Cheap stuff, I suppose."

But he was still very puzzled.

Although he had done his utmost to keep any of the scent off his fingers, certain tiny sprays of it had touched him. But it wasn't this fact which caused him so much puzzlement. His fingers were burning—burning painfully. This perfume seemed to have an extraordinary strength, almost like a powerful acid.

Nipper sniffed at the bottle again and shook his head. It was certainly wallflower perfume. And just then Sir Montie Tregellis-West came along the corridor.

"Oh, here you are, old boy!" he whispered as he caught sight of Nipper. "Anythin' the matter?"

"No," said Nipper. "Not exactly."

"Begad! You mean the scent?" asked Sir Montie. "Have you noticed it, too?"

"Yes; it seems to burn my fingers."

"Dear old boy, that's exactly what I found," said Sir Montie in a strange voice. "But I've never known scent to do that before—I haven't, really. It's most peculiar—most frightful, as a matter of fact. Do you know that the skin of my thumb is absolutely peeling off?"

"What!" muttered Nipper in a startled voice.

"Fact!" said Montie. "Look here!"

Nipper switched his light on, and examined Sir Montie's thumb. The damage was very slight, but there could be no doubt that the outer skin of the thumb was peeling away.

"Of course, it's nothin' to write home about," smiled Sir Montie. "I don't suppose I shall notice it to-morrow. But at the same time, have you ever known perfume to do this to your hands before?"

"Never!" said Nipper. "By Jove! There's something extraordinary about this!"

He sniffed at the scent again, and mentally decided that he would visit the chemist on the morrow and make a few inquiries. It was certainly not ordinary perfume, although it had been purchased as such.

Could those bottles have been tampered with by anybody else? Nipper shook his head. It seemed so ridiculous. Who would tamper with them? And, if it came to that, who knew anything about them?

Nipper could not guess that Alan Castleton had overheard the whole plan, and that Alan had shrewdly guessed that the materials for the raid would be stowed away in Study C. And Alan, of course, had visited Study C just before bed-time, and had slipped the catch back.

And then, long before Nipper & Co. had started on their raid, Alan himself had paid a visit to Study C in the Remove passage. He had paid quite a lot of attention to those six bottles of scent!

"I expect it's very bad quality stuff, that's all," said Nipper, as he switched off his light. "They've no right to sell such stuff. We'll carry on, and—"

Crash!

"Begad!" gasped Montie. "What—what was that, old boy?"

"A smashed window," said Nipper with a frown. "That's what it was, Montie. Some fathead has been careless. Handy, I expect."

"But it came from downstairs."

"Yes, I know, but perhaps Handforth went down—"

Crash! Crash!

"There it goes again!" said Sir Montie with a jump. "Begad! Somebody's smashin' up the happy home!"

Nipper looked grave. He knew now that this was no accident. Even Handforth, for all his clumsiness, would not smash three windows in succession. There was something very significant about the whole affair, especially as it had come on top of this discovery about the scent.

Handforth came rushing down the corridor, and with him were Church, McClure and Tommy Watson. All of them had emerged from various dormitories upon hearing these ominous crashes.

"What's happening?" gasped Handforth in alarm.

"Goodness knows!" said Nipper. "But we'd better get out of here now while we're safe! The whole House will be aroused in less than a minute!"

"Just what I was thinking," said Church. "Come on!"

"Rather!" said Watson breathlessly. "If we're copped here by old Goole or by Pycraft, we shall be in the soup properly."

"Breaking bounds after lights-out is a pretty hefty offence," said Nipper. "Come on! We've done a good bit, anyhow. I can't possibly understand what it means, but this is no time to make inquiries or to stand here discussing the matter. We've got to scoot, and scoot quickly!"

They hurried downstairs, hoping against hope that they would be able to get out before any alarm was raised. It would only take them a minute to reach that window and to slip through. And then:

"Stop!" came a shouting voice. "Boys—boys! Stop at once!"

It was the voice—the hard, metallic voice—of Mr. Horace Pycraft! And Mr. Pycraft himself had just come out of another corridor, attired in his dressing-gown, and holding a lighted candle.

"Don't take any notice!" whispered Nipper. "Quick—straight for that window—all of you!"

"Stop!" roared Mr. Pycraft from the rear.

But they didn't stop—they went straight for that window. And when they reached it they knew, for the first time, that there were some forces at work against them. For the window was immovable and they could not get out! Nipper wrenched at it in vain. He pulled and he tugged, but it was all useless.

They were trapped! Mr. Pycraft was on them!



CHAPTER 10.

Caught in the Act!

HANDFORTH uttered a gasp.

"Why don't you open the window?" he asked fiercely. "What's the

matter, you fathead?"

"I can't open it, Handy—it's fastened in some way," said Nipper. "It's been tampered with since we came in!"

"What!"

"Somebody has been here and secured the window so that we can't open it," went on Nipper. "The only thing we can do is to get out by another means. One of the other windows —"

He broke off as the corridor became flooded with electric light. And there, just a little further along, stood Mr. Horace Pycraft. At his rear was Mr. Goole, the Housemaster. Any further attempt to escape was impossible. They were caught red-handed!

"As I suspected!" said Mr. Pycraft, as he came striding up. "Boys from the Ancient House! Remove boys, Mr. Goole! You see?"

"Yes, I see, Mr. Pycraft," said the Housemaster. "Upon my soul!"

He advanced towards the culprits. At the first glance he could see who they were. And his expression became rather less severe. He knew those boys well. He knew that they had done much the previous week to help Mr. Stockdale. And, moreover, he knew them to be thorough young sportsmen. He was not inclined to take a very serious view of this affair. But his duty had to be done.

"Well, young men, what have you to say for yourselves?" he asked.

"I'm afraid we're collared, sir," said Nipper ruefully. "Only a jape on Armstrong and his crowd, sir. We've been decorating their studies, and sprinkling scent over their clothes."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Goole. "And was it necessary to break windows in the process of this—ahem!—pastime?"

"We didn't break any windows, sir," said Handforth. "Somebody else must have done that. We were all upstairs at the time, and didn't know anything about it until we heard the crashes."

"Preposterous!" broke in Mr. Pycraft. "Nonsense, boy! Who else could break the windows but you?"

"If you please, Mr. Pycraft!" said the Housemaster quietly.

"I beg your pardon, sir—I beg your pardon!" muttered Mr. Pycraft.

Mr. Barnaby Goole turned to the juniors again.

"We will leave the matter of the smashed windows for a moment," he said. "If you are not guilty of that act, you need not fear that you will be punished for it. But what was the real object of your visit? You came here, you say, to decorate the studies, and to sprinkle some of my boys' clothing with perfume?"

"That's all, sir," said Nipper, with a grin. "You see, Armstrong was using some highly-scented hair cream this evening, so we thought we'd give the Fourth-Formers a little scent to be going on with. Only a jape, sir."

Mr. Goole's eyes twinkled, although he tried to look stern.

"Nevertheless, boys, you have done wrong," he said. "You know that it is against all rules to leave your House after lights-out. I can do nothing but report you to your own Housemaster for this offence—and I trust that he will not deem it necessary to call in the assistance of the Head!"

"Really, sir, I think the Head should be informed at once!" said Mr. Pycraft.

"This matter is entirely for Mr. Lee to deal with," said Mr. Goole quietly. "These boys belong to the Ancient House, and Mr. Lee is the Housemaster there. I shall report them to Mr. Lee in the morning. For the present, boys, you may go."

"Thanks awfully, sir!"

"Would it not be as well to examine these studies?" asked Mr. Pycraft. "They say they have been decorating them. But is it not far more probable that they have been doing some wilful damage? You know what the boys are, Mr. Goole! They have really no idea of judgment."

"If they have done any wilful damage, Mr. Pycraft, they will be punished for it," replied Mr. Goole shortly. "They will—One moment, Handforth!" he added curiously. "What is the matter with your sleeve?"

"My sleeve, sir?" asked Handforth, glancing down.

"There appears to be a stain——"

"Oh, that!" said Handforth, with a grin. "I only spilt some of this scent on my arm——Hallo! What the dickens——Well, I'm jiggered! Look at this, you chaps! There are some whacking great holes in my sleeve, here!"

He held out his arm, in sheer amazement. There, plainly noticeable to all the interested lookers-on, were several big holes in the cloth. They were not jagged at the edges—clearly proving that they were not tears. The material apparently had been burnt through. And burnt through by some corrosive kind of acid.

"The scent!" said Nipper, a great light dawning upon him. "Don't you remember, Montie?"

"Begad, yes!" said Tregellis-West. "But scent doesn't do this sort of thing, old boy!"

Mr. Goole's expression had become very stern—and Mr. Pycraft was looking frankly incredulous.

"Please take no notice of these innocents, sir," he said. "I have no doubt that the boys are only trying to throw dust into our eyes. Perfume, eh? They have been sprinkling perfume about? I am more inclined to believe that they have been doing deliberate damage. No ordinary perfume would burn holes like that. It is some sort of acid—some abominable concoction of their own!"

"Boys, come upstairs at once!" said Mr. Goole quietly. "You will lead me into the bed-rooms you penetrated, and you will point out to me the clothing that you sprinkled with this—this liquid!"

"Yes, sir."

In a kind of daze, the six juniors followed Mr. Goole upstairs to the dormitory corridor, and went from bed-room to bed-room. And they received further shocks every moment. For every atom of clothing that had been sprinkled with this "perfume" was ruined.

Utterly and absolutely ruined!

There were holes appearing everywhere. Trousers were spoilt, jackets were rendered

useless; shirts, socks, and everything else were completely destroyed.

And all by this scent!

Nipper & Co. were not only staggered, but they were startled in the extreme. What could it mean? They knew nothing of this strange quality in the perfume. They had acted all innocently—but who would believe them?



CHAPTER 11.

Black Evidence!

M

R. GOOLE was now looking not only grave, but intensely troubled.

"Boys," he said, "this is very serious, very serious indeed. How could you have done such a thing as this? What could have led you to such dreadful lengths?"

"But we don't know anything about it, sir!" protested Handforth. "We thought it was ordinary scent——"

"Really, Handforth, it won't help you in any way to say that sort of thing!" interrupted Mr. Goole, pained. "You cannot tell me that you sprinkled this stuff on the clothing, believing it to be ordinary scent! No, no, that won't do!"

"A likely story!" said Mr. Pycraft with a sneer. "We caught them red-handed, Mr. Goole. We caught them with these bottles of acid in their hands—acid, thinly disguised as perfume! The trick is quite clear, and it is only natural that they will attempt to deny the abominable thing."

"But it's not true!" roared Handforth excitedly. "We thought it was ordinary scent!"

"Handforth, be quiet!" said Mr. Goole. "All of you be quiet! This matter will be inquired into thoroughly, and if you are guiltless there is nothing to fear. But let there be no further talk now. Come downstairs at once."

Of course, Armstrong, and Griffith, Dallas, and all the others were wide awake now, and they were highly indignant, furiously angry. All their clothing had been ruined, utterly destroyed by this sprinkled acid! In the sleeves, in every other part of the garments, there were holes. Not very big holes, but serious enough to make it impossible to wear the clothing. It was as though hundreds of moths had been at the suits at the same time.

There was quite an uproar upstairs when Nipper & Co. were led away by Mr. Goole and Mr. Pycraft. This affair was not quite so simple and innocent as it had at first appeared. Not only had these boys done wilful damage in the dormitories, not only had they smashed windows, but another discovery was soon made—the worst discovery of all.

"Better keep quiet, you chaps!" murmured Nipper, as they found themselves in the lower corridor. "Of course, we didn't know anything about the scent, but it looks very black

against us; as black as night. We shall have an awful job to get out of this!"

"But—but I don't understand it!" said Tommy Watson. "Didn't you buy that scent from the chemist?"

"Yes, but I'm beginning to suspect that it's been tampered with," said Nipper in a whisper. "Don't you remember that the catch of Study C window was unfastened? Somebody had been in there!"

"My only hat!"

"Somebody had been in there, and it's pretty certain that he must have tampered with the bottles of scent. But who?"

"That's just it!" said Handforth. "Who the dickens could have done it?"

"Goodness knows!" said Church. "But, by Jupiter, I'll bet he's the same chap who closed that window downstairs, so that we couldn't make any exit!"

"Of course," said Nipper. "It's as clear as daylight, but who'll believe it? Don't forget that we've been caught here, red-handed. Obviously, we're the culprits. You can't expect anything else. Mr. Goole is one of the most reasonable men under the sun, but we can't blame him for accusing us."

"And those smashed windows, too!" said Handforth. "They must have been done by the same chap. There's been somebody working against us all the time! But who? Nobody knew of this jape, except us six!"

Nipper frowned.

"That's just what I was thinking," he said. "We're the only ones who know anything about it, Handy. You haven't spoken to anybody, have you?"

"Not a soul!"

"Oh, well, I suppose we shall get at the truth sooner or later," said Nipper. "But we're likely to get into a whole pile of trouble first. This is one of our off-nights, by the look of it. The whole scheme's gone wrong from start to finish. And there's somebody at the bottom of it—some beastly plotter!"

But, as Nipper had said, how could they expect Mr. Goole to believe them? They had been caught in the act—caught red-handed, with those bottles of thinly disguised corrosive acid on them. Naturally, the raiders themselves had not suspected the truth of those bottles of scent—for they smelt like scent. The schemer, whoever he was, had only emptied about half of the scent out, substituting strong acid in its place. Thus, the perfume still smelt exactly the same, but it had become an agent of destruction.

And these boys had been found at their work—they had been caught while actually doing it! Of what use was it for them to deny the charge?

"Come to my study, boys!" said Mr. Goole, as they reached the corridor. "I must leave you here while I go over to the headmaster and awaken him. This is altogether too serious for me to deal with—or for Mr. Lee to deal with, either. This is essentially a subject for Dr. Stafford's attention."

"My study is nearer, sir," said Mr. Pycraft, as he flung open the door of his own

room. "I will take care of these young rascals while you are absent. I will——"

He broke off, uttering a gulping kind of gasp. He had just switched on the electric light—and then he jumped nearly a foot into the air. One glance at his study had given him the shock of his life.

"What—what—— Look, sir!" he shouted hoarsely. "Look at this, sir!"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Mr. Barnaby Goole, staggered.

"Oh, my goodness!"

"What—what's happened?"

Mr. Pycraft spun round.

"You young scoundrels!" he shouted furiously. "You dangerous young blackguards! How dare you wreck my study like this? How dare you come here, and——"

"But we didn't do this!" shouted Nipper, amazed.

"Didn't do it!" roared Mr. Pycraft. "Then who did? Tell me that, sir! Who did? How dare you deny it? Did we not catch you here, red-handed? Who else has been in this House but you? Have you not confessed that you have been decorating the studies? Decorating, indeed!"

"Oh, my goodness!" murmured Nipper.

"We're properly trapped!" muttered Watson.

"Did you hear that, sir?" shouted Mr. Pycraft. "They are admitting it!"

"I wasn't!" gasped Watson. "I—I didn't mean——"

"Enough!" said Mr. Goole, his voice cold and stern. "You will remain here while I fetch the headmaster! This matter is becoming more and more grave."

He went out and hurried away, and the six juniors, closely watched by Mr. Horace Pycraft, remained there—wretched and dazed. They would be accused of wrecking this study. And yet they knew nothing of it!

But of what use would it be to deny the charge?

They had been found at work in the East House—they had admitted that they had been giving their attention to the studies. And it was known that these particular fellows had a grudge against Mr. Pycraft. The thing was obvious from start to finish. And in the absence of any real culprit, it would be sheerly impossible to establish their innocence.

And there were other astounding events happening this night, too!

Even at that moment, Reggie Pitt, in the West House, was getting dressed. Jack Grey was putting his things on, too. They had both been awakened by the crashing of glass. They had heard those windows breaking in the East House. Reggie was a fairly light sleeper, and the window had been wide open.

After the first two or three crashes, he had got up and had gone to the window. And then he had decided that it was time for him to make a few investigations. Obviously, all was not right in the East House.

"There's something queer going on," he said to Jack Grey. "Why not go out and have a look? Burglars perhaps?"



Handlorth viewed his handiwork with great pride. Everything in the study had been decorated with ribbon, and there were flowers in profusion. Just then the door opened and Nipper looked in. "By jingo, you've done it well, old man!" he complimented.

"But burglars don't make all that noise!" objected Jack, yawning.

"No, I don't suppose they do," admitted Reggie. "Still, I'm curious. Let's go along the passage to the end window, anyhow. We can see across the Triangle from there."

It was the hand of Fate, apparently, that caused these two juniors to leave their bed-room just then. They got out into the corridor and went along towards the end window. But as they were passing Lord Pippinton's bed-room, Reggie came to a sudden halt.

"By Jove!" he muttered. "Can you smell something?"

"Gas!" said Grey in a startled voice.

"Gas by the ton!" replied Reggie. "And it's coming from old Pippy's bed-room, too! By Jove, there's a gas-fire in his room, isn't there? The careless ass! I expect he's left it turned on—and not lighted!"

There was acute alarm in his voice. The smell of gas was tremendously pungent. This part of the corridor was completely filled with it. It came out in wafts—in sickening waves. And when Reggie tried the door of Lord Pippinton's bed-room, it refused to budge.

"Locked—locked on the inside!" he said huskily. "Pippy—Pippy!"

He banged on the door in his agitation.

"He doesn't answer!" said Jack Grey, hoarse with alarm. "Pippy! Pippy!"

They both raised their voices, careless as to whether they were heard by any of the others. Bang—bang! They thudded upon the door, but there came no sound from

within. There was no answer! What could it mean? What else, indeed, but that Lord Pippinton was incapable of answering? His room was probably filled with that poisonous gas!

"It's no good!" gasped Pitt at length. "We can't get in! Quick—let's run along to Mr. Stokes' bed-room and tell him!"

And, like the wind, they sped off!

CHAPTER 12.

A Serious Business!



R. MALCOLM STAFFORD, the Head of St. Frank's, came into Mr. Pycraft's study and looked round

He said nothing for a moment or two. His face was grave, and his eyes were troubled. He had got up from his bed, and had hastily dressed himself. For Mr. Goole had assured him that it was absolutely essential that he should be on the spot himself. This matter was too serious for anybody else to deal with.

"You see, sir?" asked Mr. Pycraft at last, unable to contain himself any longer. "You see what has happened? Not content with sprinkling this wretched acid over the clothing of my boys, these reprobates have been here and have wrecked my study! If this is what they call a rag. I am sorry for their sense of

proportion. To my mind, it is an unwarrantable outrage—a blackguardly——”

“Mr. Pycraft, you will please control yourself!” interrupted the Head sternly. “I can quite imagine that you are annoyed—angered. But that is no reason for you to use such extreme words.”

“But—but the destruction, sir——”

“These boys shall be made to pay for what they have done,” replied the headmaster grimly. “Their punishment, you may be sure, will be very severe indeed.” He turned to the six juniors. “Boys, what have you to say about all this?”

“We deny it, sir,” replied Nipper quietly.

“You deny it?”

“Yes, sir!” chorused the six.

“But is this wise?” asked the Head, pained. “Do you think it will do you any good to make such a denial? Mr. Goole has informed me that he came upon you in the very act of using bottles of acid.”

“We didn’t know it was acid, sir,” replied Nipper. “Somebody must have changed the stuff.”

“Hamilton!”

“Oh, I know it sounds pretty thin, sir!” replied Nipper gruffly. “I don’t expect you to believe us, either. But it happens to be the simple truth. We only came here to play an innocent jape—to put perfume over Armstrong’s clothing, and to decorate the studies with ribbons and flowers. We didn’t wreck this furniture, and we didn’t——”

“Stop, Hamilton!” interrupted the Head grimly. “I am amazed—I am astounded that you should make such statements. Hitherto, your character has been absolutely untainted. If you did not wreck this study, who did?”

“We don’t know, sir.”

“Of course you don’t,” agreed the Head. “How should you know? You are the only intruders who have been in this House, and after your confessions it is idle for you to pretend. Perhaps you yourself, Hamilton, knew nothing of this. Perhaps some of your companions wrecked the study unknown to you. We will not go into that now. You are all equally guilty, since you have all been caught together. My duty, of course, is obvious. I must punish you all for this outrageous act of destruction.”

“Oh, my hat!”

“We didn’t do it, sir—we swear we didn’t!”

“Somebody’s been plotting against us!”

“Yes, rather!”

“I would very much like to believe you boys, but I find it impossible to do so,” said the Head. “You cannot deny that you were found with those bottles of corrosive acid actually upon you. That is deadly evidence in itself. You will go back to your House now, and your punishment will follow in the morning.”

“You’re—you’re not going to sack us, sir?” asked Church huskily. “You’re not going to expel us?”

“You undoubtedly deserve expulsion,” replied the headmaster. “But I shall seriously consider your punishment. I shall consult with Mr. Goole and with Mr. Nelson Lee. They are the two Housemasters concerned. You will know your punishment in the morning. For the present, get to your bed-rooms.”

Handforth gave a kind of gulp.

“But—but you don’t believe this, really, sir?” he asked hoarsely. “We wouldn’t do a thing like this. We’re not such cads and rotters as to do actual destruction. You can’t believe it, sir—you can’t!”

“I have already told you, Handforth, to get to your bed-room,” said the Head coldly.

“Yes, but——”

“That is enough!”

“It’s not fair!” burst out Handforth excitedly. “We only came here to do an innocent jape, and now we’re accused of this rotten——”

“Mr. Goole, will you kindly escort these boys over to the Ancient House?” interrupted Dr. Stafford. “Mr. Pycraft, please rest assured that every atom of this damage will be made good. The boys will pay full compensation for every act of destruction.”

“And so they should, sir!” said Mr. Pycraft hotly. “So they should! Never in my life have I known such a disgraceful incident. A harmless joke I can forgive. Sometimes the boys have placed everything in a study in disorder. That is not bad. But this is real, wicked destruction. I hope that you will expel them from the school. They deserve it. They deserve it thoroughly.”

And the six wretched culprits were led away by the unhappy Mr. Goole. For the Housemaster of the East House was very, very concerned. He did not relish this task. Yet the boys were obviously guilty, and so he did his duty.

And outside a figure lurked. And that figure was chuckling with evil glee.

Alan Castleton had been watching from outside Mr. Pycraft’s window. He had heard a good deal, too, and he knew that he had had his revenge.

“Well, they’re done now!” he said to himself, as he moved off cautiously towards the West House. “They’re finished, blow them! Unless they’re jolly lucky, they’ll be expelled. Sacked! Kicked out of the school on their giddy necks. That’s what I meant, too. I’ll teach them to ignore me, to give me the cut direct. And I’m safe. Absolutely safe. They can’t do a thing to me, because there’s no evidence. They’re cooked—positively cooked!”

And Alan Castleton, with another chuckle, vanished into the gloom, on his way back to the West House.

CHAPTER 13.

Hard Lines on Old Pippy!



LORD PIPPINTON sat up in bed, his head reeling, and with a sensation of choking in his lungs. In fact, he was only half-conscious.

In a dazed, dull sort of fashion he seemed to remember having heard some bangings. Some thumps on the door. And now, although he was too far gone to realise what had happened or exactly where he was, he knew that something was definitely wrong. He had not awakened from an ordinary sleep. His mind was dulled, and his brain was sluggish. It was sluggish at ordinary times, but now it was on the point of ceasing to function.

As a matter of fact, Reggie Pitt had saved Lord Pippinton's life by banging so heavily upon the door.

For in another few moments it would have been too late to arouse him. That room was filled with gas—from ceiling to floor, it was choked with the awful, noxious fumes.

"Something," mumbled old Pippy, "is wrong! Something is positively out of the good old order. I mean——"

He broke off, unable to follow the train of thought that had started. Something else had occurred to him. Something had come into his mind—a great and tremendous conviction.

Air!

He must have air—and plenty of it. This was the instinct of self-preservation. Lord Pippinton didn't know why he wanted air, but he certainly knew that he wanted it. With a feeble motion he threw the bedclothes back and groped his way out of the bed, then he crashed to the floor. He picked himself up, clinging to the furniture, and then made off towards the window.

There is some instinct in all of us at such times of peril as this. The window! Old Pippy knew that he had to get to the window. His very life depended upon it.

And yet the window seemed to be miles and miles away. He could see it dancing in the distance, jigging and jogging up and down in the most fantastic manner. He could see the patch of moonlight on the wall and roof of the Ancient House, on the other side of the Square. But he couldn't get anywhere near it. The more he groped the further away it seemed to be.

Most of this was imagination, for the unfortunate junior was getting nearer to the window every minute, feeling his way along the wall, and clutching at the articles of furniture until he at last reached the window itself. He hadn't the strength to raise his arms to the catch. He couldn't have located the catch, in any case.

With a last despairing effort, he fell

heavily against the window, and it burst open. It was a lattice window, and therefore Lord Pippinton's weight had the desired effect. It had been securely closed, but not latched or fastened.

And there he hung, taking in great gulps of life-giving air.

His brain was very much dulled, however. He was so giddy that he could not see things straight even now. The whole of the Square was rocking up and down. But that fresh air was giving him life again—it was reviving him with every moment that passed.

And from behind came the wafts of gas. Only a very little of the gas-laden air had escaped so far.

And then—was it imagination, or did he really see it?—a figure came climbing up the ivy. No, two figures. Pippy stared in dull indifference. Yes, it was one figure, after all. Somebody climbing up from the ground. Not that it mattered to Old Pippy if a dozen climbed up. All the better, perhaps. They would take him out of this place—take him to where there was pure air.

And Alan Castleton, climbing up the ivy on his way back to bed, had no idea of the real truth. He had left the bed-room in a quite normal condition. That gaunt stranger had gone up, and had turned on the gas after Alan's departure. So, unscrupulous as Castleton was, he knew nothing of this incident.

He was rather annoyed to see Lord Pippinton at the window.

He had wanted to get back into his bed without old Pippy's knowing that he had been out. It was very upsetting. Ten to one the ass would start talking on the morrow, and then what would happen? Somebody might put two and two together! If it was discovered—and broadcast throughout the school—that Castleton had been out of his bed-room during the night, and at this particular juncture, it might be very awkward. So Alan was angry.

"Get inside, you ass!" he muttered, as his head drew level with the window-sill. "Can't you see I want to come in? And don't make any noise, either!"

He clung there, waiting for Lord Pippinton to move aside. But Lord Pippinton didn't do anything of the sort. He was too dazed to move. He just stood there, looking at Alan with dull eyes.

"Can't you move?" demanded Alan angrily.

Still there was no reply from Lord Pippinton. He continued to lean out of the window, with his hands on the sill. Alan stared at him in sheer exasperation. Had the fellow gone off into one of his trances here, at the very window? It was just like him, of course!

"You infernal fool!" muttered Alan. "Move! I want to come in! I can't climb on to that sill while you're leaning over it!"

For a moment, a spasm of intelligence came into Lord Pippinton's brain.

"Eh?" he muttered. "Don't go in! You can't—it's—it's awful!"

"Don't be such a fool!" snapped Alan, as he fumbled with one hand in his pocket, while he clutched at the ivy with the other. "What's wrong with you, Pippy? Are you in a fit, or what?"

Alan was beginning to feel slightly alarmed now. He could see that Pippy was not himself. Something was very wrong. He produced an automatic lighter, so that he could strike it quickly, and gaze upon Pippy's face. It seemed to him that it was very pale—very haggard. But he couldn't very well cling to this ivy for the rest of the night. Something would have to be done.

Lord Pippinton saw the lighter, and then uttered a hoarse cry.

"No!" he said warningly, his voice husky. "Don't! Don't light——"

Scratch!

Alan struck the lighter, and wriggled further up the ivy, holding the bare flame in the window.

And then, in a flash, came the explosion!



CHAPTER 14.

A Narrow Escape!

SHATTERING, devastating explosion!

It was so utterly unexpected that Alan Castleton thought that the world was coming to an end. He had had no suspicion of gas. Just below the window ledge there he had not smelt any trace of the poisonous fumes. He had only been wondering what could be the matter with Lord Pippinton, and he had held his lighter right in the full flood of the escaping gas. A deadly mixture—a highly-explosive mixture of air and gas.

Boom!

Precisely what happened in that second was startling in the extreme.

A livid sheet of flame curled round the bed-room, and then came the explosion itself.

Owing, probably, to the open window, the report was not so tremendous. It was a kind of enormous puff—a terrific dull sound, and Lord Pippinton, who was standing right in the full blast of the explosion, was caught fairly amidships, and sent hurtling out in the open air. He soared up, as though he had been suddenly flung from a catapult, and then, with arms and legs waving wildly, he crashed headlong into some bushes in the centre of the Square—where there was a decorated little enclosure.

In a way, he had been amazingly lucky. Nothing had struck him. Only the force of the explosion had pushed him clean out—had lifted him up as though he had been a feather, and sent him careering through the air.

As for Alan Castleton, he escaped the

force of the explosion altogether, for he had been below the level of the window-sill. But he saw Lord Pippinton flung out—he saw the sheet of flame, and after that he was too busy with his own affairs to notice anything. He lost his grip on the ivy for a moment, slithered down, and then clutched wildly.

He failed to get a grip, and went to the ground sheer. He landed with a thud, his ears drumming terribly, and feeling half-dazed.

He sat on the ground, shaking, and from many of the other windows of the school came shouts of alarm.

Figures came running through West Arch. For just at that moment, Mr. Goole, accompanied by the six East House raiders, were on their way across the Triangle to the Ancient House. Mr. Pycraft followed behind, for he was eager to have his nose in this business until the bitter end, and at the sound of the explosion they all ran helter-skelter into the West Square.

In the West House itself, Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey had just brought Mr. Beverley Stokes to Lord Pippinton's bed-room as the explosion occurred. Fortunately, they had not been actually outside the door.

They arrived in time to see the door burst outwards into the corridor, as though a sudden hurricane had struck it, and then came that great puffing explosion, and afterwards—silence!

"An explosion!" said Reggie Pitt, with a gasp. "We're too late, sir! Poor old Pippy must be dead!"

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Barry Stokes. "Come!"

He rushed into the wrecked bed-room, and switched on the light. Curiously enough, the bulb had not been smashed by the force of the concussion, and the light flooded the room.

Complete disorder reigned. One or two pieces of sheet were smouldering, and the linen on the dressing-table was burning, too. But, although the disorder was indescribable, the actual damage was comparatively slight.

"He's not here!" said Mr. Stokes, looking round. "Poor boy! He must have been flung out of the window! Castleton, too! Perhaps they are both killed! Quick! Help me to put these fires out! It will only take us a moment!"

In the meantime, Alan Castleton had picked himself up, and was surrounded by Nipper & Co., Handforth, and Mr. Goole and Mr. Pycraft. They were all asking questions at once.

Alan pointed. He wanted time to think. He pointed to the bushes in the centre of the square.

"There!" he muttered. "Lord Pippinton. He fell—he fell there?"

They rushed to old Pippy, and pulled him gently out of the bushes. He wasn't dead, as they expected. On the contrary, he seemed very much alive, and was hardly even singed.

"Absolutely!" he muttered, as he groped about. "The gas! I mean, it absolutely——"

"Do not talk, my boy!" interrupted Mr. Goole. "Dear, dear! This is a terrible occurrence! It is a wonder both boys were not absolutely killed on the spot!"

Alan was thinking swiftly. He realised that he would have to tell some story. He was wearing his ordinary clothes, and that would seem peculiar—for he would hardly sleep in his coat and trousers. But his quick brain soon solved the difficulty.

"I don't know how it happened!" he said, as the juniors and the masters gathered round him again. "I woke up suddenly—I don't know why——"

"You must have heard us knocking!" said Reggie Pitt, who had come up by this time.

"Yes, I suppose so," replied Alan, taking his cue. "But I was too dazed, too bewildered. Somehow, I got my clothes on. I don't know why I put them on—just mechanically, I suppose."

"But how did the explosion occur?" asked Mr. Stokes.

Alan was ready for this. He half-suspected that he had turned the gas on himself. In getting out of bed, he remembered kicking his foot against something on the fender. Perhaps he had turned the tap on by accident! Actually, nothing of the sort had occurred—but Alan's conscience was guilty.

"Pippinton did that!" he replied. "When he found the room full of gas he went to the window, and then he must have struck a match, or a lighter, or something. Anyhow, I warned him, but it was too late. I don't know what happened after that. We were both chucked through the window, I think. Lucky we're not dead."

The story sounded plausible enough, and was swallowed without a suspicion. And as for old Pippy, he didn't know anything. He had been too dazed, too far gone. When he had completely recovered, he remembered nothing of what had happened.

And nobody in the whole school suspected that somebody had made a grim attempt to murder old Pippy as he slept!

The affair was regarded as a pure accident—a mishap, from start to finish. And Alan Castleton was greatly relieved, for nobody knew of his night escapade. He had slipped out of the situation very neatly. And his handiwork remained unimpaired!

And but for the fact that the Ancient House juniors were breaking bounds after lights-out, nothing in the world could have saved Lord Pippinton from being murdered in his sleep.

The school, of course, was completely awakened.

That great explosion had aroused all. And for some little time there was a great amount of excitement. Fellows came out of their dormitories, and the domestic staff hastily dressed, and came downstairs, thinking that the whole school was on fire, and that they had to flee for their lives.

It was almost an hour before the alarm had died down. Even then, the fellows sat in their bedrooms, excitedly discussing the situation. Not many knew exactly what had happened. It was only known that an explosion had occurred, and there was much talk regarding Lord Pippinton. He had had an amazingly narrow escape.

And yet, after all, gas explosions are very peculiar phenomena. Sometimes they will kill ruthlessly; at other times, a gas explosion will send its victims hurtling through windows, and through doorways, and scarcely injure them at all.

After everything was quiet again, Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson sat up in their beds, talking in low voices.

"Let's forget old Pippy for the time being," Nipper was saying. "He's unhurt, and Castleton escaped, too. Let's talk about our own affairs."

"Why talk about them?" asked Watson gloomily. "Talking won't make them any better. We're booked for the sack to-morrow."

"Dear old boys, I don't believe it," said Sir Montie quietly. "There can't be such injustice as that—absolutely there can't!"

The door opened softly, and Handforth & Co. crept in.

"Thought we'd have a word with you fellows, before going to sleep," murmured Handforth. "This is the first chance we've had since we were brought over here. What do you think of it all, eh?"

"I don't know what to think," replied Nipper. "At least, I do know—but I don't like to say it. I don't want to bring accusations against a fellow until I have evidence to support it."

"Which fellow?" chorused the others.

"Never mind now," growled Nipper. "You all know as much as I do—so why don't you get your wits to work?"

"You don't mean Castleton, do you?" asked McClure.

"Yes, I do," said Nipper.

"What!"

"I mean Castleton," went on Nipper. "I'll bet he's responsible for this affair! Of course, we shall never bring it home to him—and we're booked for a pretty hefty punishment in the morning. The thing is as black as thunder against us. We were caught with the goods on us, so to speak. So what's the good of making any denials. It only seems we are making matters worse by lying!"

CHAPTER 15.

Under A Shadow!



IN a way, Lord Pippinton owed his life to the little jape of Nipper & Co.'s.

Perhaps Alan Castleton owed his life to the same cause. For would that gaunt old stranger have stopped at killing two? It was doubtful. He might have had no scruples in killing Castleton in his deadly design.



"Boys, stop at once!" came Mr. Horace Pycraft's rasping voice. The juniors paid no heed, but rushed straight for the window. Nipper tugged at it frantically, then gasped when he found it would not move. The juniors were trapped!

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I'm going to keep on denying it to the bitter end. We didn't wreck Pycraft's study, and we didn't know anything about that corrosive acid in those bottles of scent. By George, I'm not going to be accused of a thing that I didn't do!"

"You're accused already, old man," Church reminded him.

"Well, I'm not going to be punished for it—not without a struggle, anyhow," declared Handforth grimly. "If Castleton is responsible, we'll prove it!"

"But how?" asked Nipper. "That's the point, Handy. We can't possibly bring an accusation against Castleton unless we have the evidence to go with it. That wouldn't be fair. We may be all wrong—it's only a suspicion, at the best. There's no proof against Castleton."

"There's the proof that he's up against us," said Watson.

"Which isn't any proof at all," replied Nipper. "We can be fairly satisfied about it ourselves, but that's no good to the Head. And it would be rank injustice on our part to say that Castleton is the culprit when we don't know it. We all feel it, but we don't know it."

"Yes, you're right, old man," said McClure, nodding. "We haven't a shred of evidence, have we? But it's clear enough. Castleton must have known something of our plans, and I expect he put that corrosive acid in the bottles of scent. Naturally, we didn't examine them, and we used the stuff."

"Castleton must have wrecked Pycraft's study, too—while we were upstairs," continued Nipper. "And it was he who smashed the windows, I expect. And what about that explosion, too? In the light of all this other business, that explosion becomes significant."

"How?" asked Handforth.

"Why, I suppose Castleton must have turned the gas on by accident, or something," replied the remove skipper. "Perhaps he was having a cigarette after he got back, and that caused the explosion. We shall never know the real truth, anyhow. We can only guess at things."

"But how does that alter our position?" asked Watson gloomily. "We're either booked for the sack, or a public flogging. I tell you, life is beginning to look pretty awful to me. And we didn't do this thing! That's the worst of it! That's the thing that makes us writhe!"

Handforth granted.

"I'm not going to believe it!" he said firmly. "I don't believe for a minute that the Head will be so beastly unjust as to punish us for a thing that we didn't do. The evidence is only circumstantial, after all—"

"That's just where you make a mistake, Handy," put in Nipper, shaking his head.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Mr. Goole and Mr. Pycraft found us with those bottles of scent on us—and we were using that corrosive acid at the time," replied Nipper. "That's not circum-



"Boys, stop at once!" came Mr. Horace Pycraft for the window. Nipper tugged at it frantically.

stantial evidence, Handy—it's concrete, positive evidence."

"But we didn't put the acid in the bottles!" protested Handy.

"I know that—we all know it," agreed Nipper. "But who can we get to believe it? No, you chaps, the only thing we can do is to prepare ourselves for the worst. We're in the soup properly, and we've got to face the music."

It seemed that Nipper was right. They were completely in the trap—caught in Alan Castleton's net! To escape from those meshes was sheerly impossible. The rascal of the West House had made no mistake in his act of revenge!



CHAPTER 16.

The Accusation!

RAYERS were over.

The whole school was agog with excitement. The events of the night had been discussed ever since the rising bells had gone. And the school had found another cause for talk, too



The juniors paid no heed, but rushed straight he found it would not move. The juniors

—something that they hadn't even known in the hours of the night.

Six prominent fellows of the Ancient House were under a shadow!

Nipper—Handforth—and all their chums!

Armstrong & Co., of the East House, did not let anybody miss the story. They were full of it. They came out into the Triangle, and they penetrated into the West House and the Ancient House and the Modern House, and told the Remove fellows the story. Pitt, of course, and Fullwood and Archie Glenthorne, and many others, simply wouldn't believe it. It sounded too fantastic to be true. They knew Nipper & Co. and Handforth & Co. better than that! It wasn't like those six fellows to do such deliberate destruction.

House rivalry was all very well, and a jape was a jape, but this affair had been nothing less than sheer wanton destruction.

But now, after a lot of talk—after waves of excitement had passed through the junior quarters—the whole school was in Big Hall. Dr. Malcolm Stafford had come upon the platform accompanied by Mr. Barnaby Goolle and Mr. Nelson Lee, and others.

"This morning," said the Head gravely, "I have a very painful duty to perform. I have to punish six boys for a grave breach

of discipline during the night. Not only did they break bounds, but they acted in a manner which is unworthy——"

"It's not fair, sir!" shouted Handforth excitedly. "We didn't do it!"

"Silence!" shouted the prefects.

"I won't be silent!" roared Handforth. "I'm sorry to interrupt you, sir, but it's not fair to accuse us like this. We didn't wreck Mr. Pycraft's study, and nobody can prove it! There weren't any witnesses, and if you'll make some inquiries you'll probably find that somebody else is guilty. Why pick on us—just because we were in the East House on a perfectly innocent jape?"

Dr. Stafford looked at Handforth steadily.

"When I have your permission to proceed, Handforth, I will do so," he said dangerously.

"I—I'm sorry, sir!" muttered Handforth. "Awfully sorry, sir! I didn't mean to interrupt like that!"

An outburst on the Head's part would have only made Handforth worse. But Dr. Stafford's quiet tone had completely cooled him.

"It is only right that you should all know precisely what happened in the East House last night," continued the Head. "No doubt the story has got about, but it is liable to be exaggerated. I want to tell you the simple truth."

And so the Head continued, telling the school what he really believed to be the simple truth. The school listened in shocked amazement.

"It's more than I can understand, that's all!" said Fullwood, as he turned to Clive Russell. "It's not like Nipper to do a thing like that! It's not like Handy, either! They must have been off their rockers!"

"I can't believe they did it!" said the Canadian junior.

"No; it wants some swallowing," agreed Ralph Leslie. "But what else can we think? It seems that they were caught red-handed! You heard what the Head said, didn't you?"

"Yes!" said Clive, looking troubled.

"And the Head wouldn't talk like this unless he was positive," continued Fullwood. "Well, it beats me. The asses were crazy, that's all. Hallo! They've been told to stand forward. My goodness! I hope they're not going to be sacked!"

The six accused juniors had been ordered on to the platform. They walked up, red in the face, and tight-lipped. It was a novel experience for them to be hauled before the whole school, and to face the condemnation of their fellows!

Somebody started a hiss somewhere. Others took it up, and before long there were some hoots, and booing, too.

"Silence!" shouted the prefects.

"Look at the saints!" jeered a voice.

"Look at the chaps who've always been held up as good examples——"

"Silence!"

The murmurs died away, and Nipper & Co. were feeling rather dazed. There were always people ready to believe the worst. Even now, before they had really been punished, a

certain proportion of the school was eager to hiss them, and to condemn them.

The headmaster looked them over with a grave eye.

"Now, boys, I am going to give you a chance to confess," he said quietly. "What is the object of keeping up this denial? You know well enough that Mr. Goole caught you. You know that no other boy was in the East House unlawfully during the night. Why do you not confess to this indiscretion, and—"

"We can't confess, sir, because we didn't do it," interrupted Handforth gruffly.

"Do you still deny this charge?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Dear me!" said the Head, his brow becoming stern. "I had hardly expected this. I was hoping that reflection would have brought more sense to you all. And so you maintain that you are innocent? Even after being caught red-handed, you have the audacity to stand here and tell me that you did not commit this offence?"

"We committed the offence of breaking bounds, sir," said Nipper. "We also committed the offence of raiding the East House. But we only went there to sprinkle scent, and to put flowers and ribbons into the junior studies."

"Ridiculous!" muttered Mr. Pycraft, from the other side of the platform.

"I wish I could believe this, boys," said the headmaster. "Until now, I have always held a very high opinion of you. But how can I believe this denial of yours? Since you did not put that corrosive acid into the scent bottles—those bottles which you, yourselves, were using—who did? If you did not wreck Mr. Pycraft's study, who is truly responsible? What have you to say?"

"Nothing, sir," replied Nipper quietly.

"We don't know who is responsible."

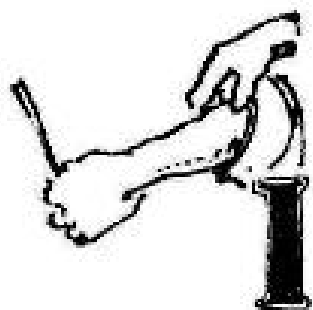
"But we suspect!" breathed Tommy Watson to himself.

Dr. Stafford shook his head.

"This won't do," he said gravely. "You deny the charge, and yet you cannot give any explanation. It is quite obvious to me that it is a waste of time to talk to you. I shall proceed with your punishment at once!"

CHAPTER 17.

The Punishment!



I was hopeless.

As Nipper had suspected from the first, Dr. Stafford was not likely to leave this matter in abeyance. The culprits had been discovered in the act, and any kind of investigation was

unnecessary. That was the way Dr. Stafford looked at it. He had the evidence of Mr. Goole and the evidence of Mr. Pycraft. He could not question the word of two of his masters.

"I shall make this punishment very drastic," said the headmaster. "At first, indeed, I had an idea of expelling the ring-leaders. But I will not go to that extreme measure."

This was a relief, at all events.

Alan Castleton felt a pang of disappointment as he heard the Head's words. He had been waiting eagerly. He had been expecting the Head to announce the expulsion of all the six culprits. And yet he wasn't going to sack one of them! Alan felt bitter with him. And then he brightened up—at the Head's next words.

"You will all be publicly flogged—now!" he went on. "As an added punishment, every half-holiday will be cancelled between now and the rest of the present term."

"But—but that means we shan't be able to play in the football matches, sir!" gasped Handforth.

"I am afraid it does."

"Then—then I shan't be able to play goalie!" ejaculated Handforth, startled. "How do you think St. Frank's is going to win if I'm not in goal?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

In spite of the gravity of the situation, a shout of laughter went up from the school. It was characteristic of Handforth to be thinking about his position of goalkeeper at a moment like this. The prospect of a flogging did not worry him in the least. But being denied football filled him with dismay.

"But for the fact that you boys hold such reputations, I would certainly expel you," continued the Head. "Your offence is very grave—very serious, indeed. I am amazed that you should have descended to such a mean, despicable trick. It is not in keeping with your characters. There is scarcely a black mark against any of your names. And yet you have done this! I am very sorry—very sorry in more ways than one. For it has destroyed a great deal of my faith in you."

"I know it looks jolly black against us, sir," said Handforth, "but we didn't do it. And we'll go on denying it until we're black in the face, if you like. We didn't wreck Mr. Pycraft's study, and we didn't know anything about that acid—"

"There is no need to go all over it again, Handforth," interrupted the Head grimly. "And if you persist in these absurd denials, I can do nothing but add to your punishment. You had far better remain silent."

He turned on his heel, and consulted with Nelson Lee and Mr. Goole. Church and McClure tugged at Handforth's sleeves.

"What's the matter?" demanded their leader.

"Keep quiet, you ass!" muttered Church.

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in alarm. "You'll be sacked, or something, if you keep on jawing!"

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" asked Handforth aggressively. "Why shouldn't we deny the charge?"

"Because it's a waste of breath," replied Church. "Nobody will ever believe us, Handy."

"Yes, it's a lot better to remain silent," said Nipper. "I don't blame the Head, either. The evidence is absolutely complete. Let's think ourselves lucky that we're not sacked. We'll take our gruel without grumbling. And later on, perhaps, we'll be able to re-establish ourselves."

Nelson Lee came over towards them—the first time he had seen them since the story of the supposed offence had got about.

"This is a bad business, Nipper!" said Lee quietly.

"Very bad, guy'nor," replied Nipper. "I've just told Handy that it's no good denying the charge—but I don't mind denying it to you. We didn't do it."

"Do you all give me your solemn words on this?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Yes, sir!"

"H'm! I am rather inclined to believe you, boys," said Lee, much to their joy. "However, don't count on anything. I don't suppose I shall be able to persuade the Head."

Nelson Lee relied solely upon Nipper's word. Never in his life had Nipper told a deliberate lie to Lee. Whenever a serious question arose, Nipper could be relied upon. Lee knew that perfectly well. And there was something in Nipper's eyes just now which told him that none of these accusations were thoroughly justified. These boys had not done the things that were attributed to them.

Lee quickly went across the platform, and engaged Dr. Stafford in conversation. For some little time, the Head hesitated, and he and Nelson Lee engaged in earnest talk. The six culprits believed, for a time, that the whole affair was to be postponed. Nelson Lee was trying to make delay—so that there could be an inquiry. But his efforts were in vain.

"Really, Mr. Lee, I fail to see the reason

for any postponement," said Dr. Stafford, at last. "If we were dealing with circumstantial evidence, I should not hesitate to grant your request. But we have Mr. Goole's word that these six boys were found in his House—and they were found at their rascally work. They must pay the price now. I am very sorry—I am deeply grieved—but my duty is plain."

And he meant it, too. The six culprits knew that he meant it shortly afterwards, for they were flogged in front of the whole school—flogged severely.

They took their medicine without a sound.

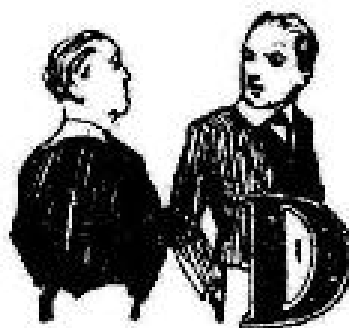
The indignity of it all was ten times more painful than the actual punishment. A flogging, when all was said and done, was nothing to be afraid of. A little physical pain for a time, and then it was over. But the scorn of the whole school was a different thing. It was this scorn which burned and scared and went right into the vitals of the culprits.

There had been no cheering—no support from the school. Everybody had watched in grim silence. And what could that mean—except that the school thoroughly approved of the Head's treatment?

Most of the fellows believed that Nipper & Co. had been carried away by excitement—that they had entered upon this escapade in a wild hour of indiscretion. The decent fellows were silent because they were shocked. The rest were silent because it was too risky to be anything else. And they weren't going to cheer the culprits.

In the ranks of the Remove, Alan Castleton gloated. He was safe now—absolutely safe!

But was he?



CHAPTER 18.

Too Steep For Bell!

DISMISSAL came, and everybody trooped out of Big Hall, talking excitedly. It was very seldom that six juniors were flogged at the same time, and the school had plenty to talk about.

Alan Castleton, walking out into the Triangle, found himself face to face with Wallace and Gulliver and Bell. They had followed him out, and had headed him off.

"Just a minute, Castleton," said Wallace. "We want a word with you!"

"That's good!" said Alan. "I wanted to see you fellows, too! No reason why we shouldn't have a little chat, eh?"

They drew aside, out of earshot of any of the others.

"Do you know anything about this business, Castleton?" asked Wallace.

"Know anything about it!" echoed Alan. "I know all about it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I worked it."

"You—worked it?" repeated Wallace, in a voice of great admiration. "By gad! Do

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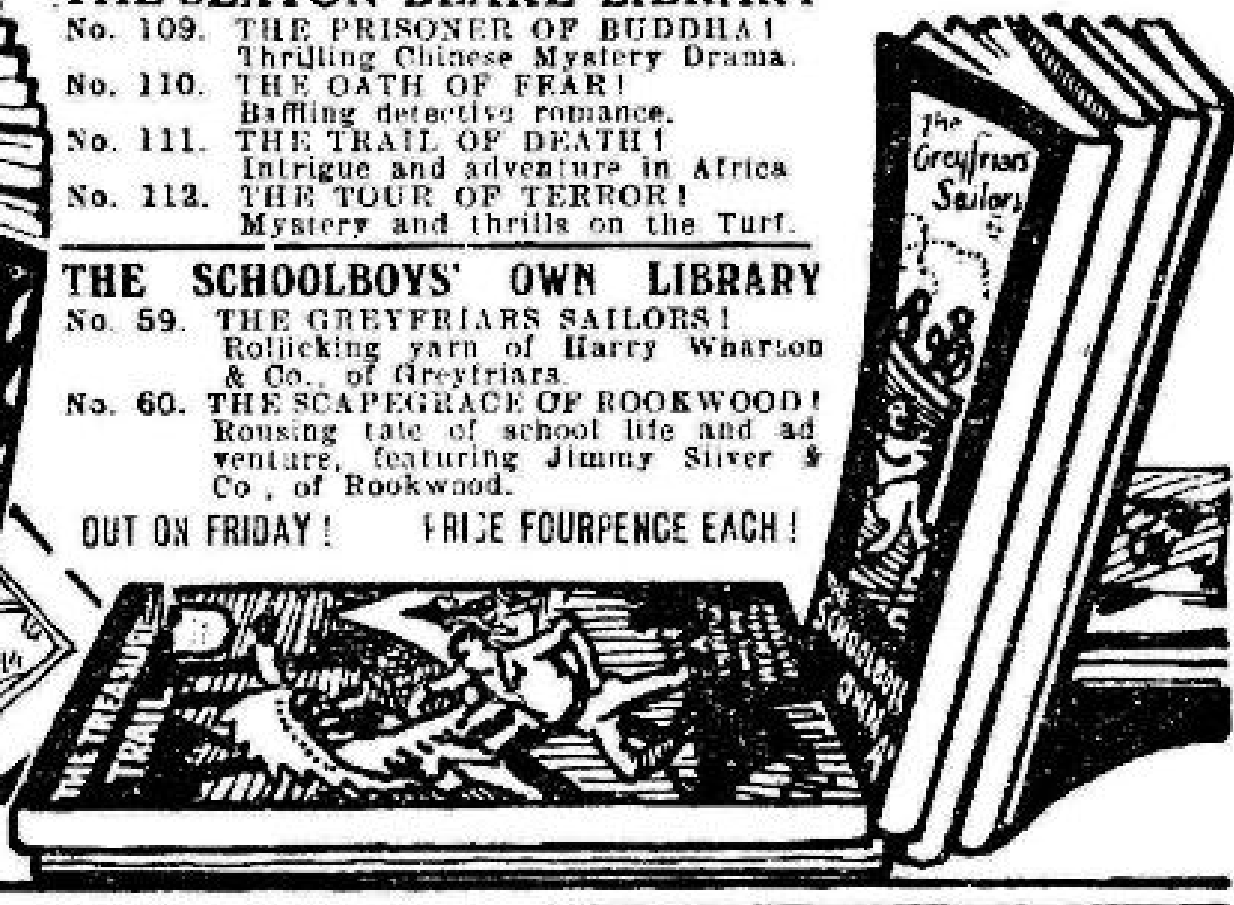
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you mean to say that you—— Phew! I knew you were a deep chap, Castleton, but this beats me!"

"But how did you work it?" asked Bell.

"As easily as winking!" grinned Alan. "And now those cads have had a flogging. All their half-holidays for the rest of the term are docked. Didn't I tell you that I would get even? I was hoping they'd be sacked, but I'm very satisfied, on the whole."

"How did you do it, old man?" asked Wallace, chuckling. "I must say you're a brainy one!"

"It was as easy as winking," replied Alan. "I happened to hear them talking about their plans—you know, the plans for sprinkling Armstrong & Co.'s clothing with scent. So I got busy."

"You got busy?"

"Yes," proceeded Alan coolly. "Last night, just before going to bed, I slipped the catch of Study C, in the Ancient House. And as soon as everybody was in bed, I ran down and got into Hamilton's study, and went to the cupboard. But it wasn't bare! Oh, no! There were six little scent bottles, if you please, filled with scent!"

"Not with corrosive acid?" asked Gulliver.

"Of course not," said Alan. "I took the corrosive acid. Borrowed it from the lab. Nobody will miss it, of course."

"And do you mean to say you changed all that scent——"

"Not all of it," replied Alan. "Only about half of it. But that was quite enough. The mixture was strong enough to do the good work—and the scent was strong enough to prevent the chaps from suspecting. If they noticed a chemical niff about the scent, they only thought it was the spirit in it, or something like that. Anyhow, the dodge worked, so why should I worry?"

"And Pycraft's study?"

"That was a piece of my work," grinned Alan. "In fact, a work of art, eh? Gad, you ought to have seen it by the time I had finished! Torn books—slashed chairs—and general wreckage. I made a thorough job of it while I was about it. And, of course, these six chaps were——"

"You rotter!" said Bell, hotly.

"Eh?"

"Hang it, I'm not any too particular," said Bell, "but this is too steep for me! It's a bit too thick!"

"Chuck it, Bell, you ass," said Wallace, frowning. "I'll admit the thing's a bit steep, but I'm with Castleton all the time."

"Same here!" agreed Gulliver.

"Then I'm not!" said Bell angrily. "I don't think much of Nipper, and I hate and detest Handforth. They're all a lot of snobs and cads and goody-goodies! But when it comes to deliberately trappin' 'em

like that, and wreckin' Pycraft's study, and all that acid business—— Well, it's too rotten! I don't want anything to do with you, Castleton. By gad, you're nothin' but a rotten crook! You're a beastly unscrupulous rotter!"

Alan Castleton clenched his teeth.

"You'd better go carefully!" he said fiercely.

"Confound you!" shouted Bell. "Why should I go carefully? You can't fight! We know that well enough! And I'm not afraid of you—you rotter!"

"Chuck it, Bell!" said Wallace, glancing round.

"I won't chuck it!" roared Bell. "It's too thick! It's too jolly rotten!"

"Don't shout!" urged Gulliver. "You'll have some of the other chaps hearin' you!" Bell was reckless.

"I don't care if they do hear me!" he retorted hotly. "I don't want anythin' to do with Castleton! He's admitted that he wrecked Pycraft's study, and he's admitted that he changed that scent for acid. He's a beastly trickster!"

George Bell was very excited. It was rather unusual for him. For Bell was several kinds of a rotter, and he had always supported Wallace in the latter's unscrupulous little schemes. But even Bell drew the line at Alan's cool and callous way. And he took no trouble to lower his voice as he uttered those words.

It so happened that Buster Boots and Bob Christine, of the Modern House, were within earshot. They heard the words, and drew closer. And both of them were looking almost as excited as Bell.

"What's that you were saying, Bell?" asked Boots, grasping Bell by the arm.

"Oh, nothing!" said Bell, regretting his excitement.

"Yes, you were saying something!" said Bob Christine. "You'd better repeat it, too! You said that Castleton wrecked Pycraft's study."

"So he did!" shouted Bell, as he saw Alan glaring at him. "He's just told us so! He took some acid from the lab, too, and substituted it for that scent! He's just told us all about it, the rotter! I don't want anything more to do with him!"

Alan Castleton, utterly taken aback, turned away.

"It's all lies!" he said, with a coolness that he did not feel. "The fellow's mad! I never said anything of the sort! He's gone loony, or something!"

And Castleton walked hurriedly away.

But it was too late. Bell had let the cat out of the bag, and before long a crowd was round him, eagerly asking questions. It seemed that the truth was to come out, after all!



CHAPTER 19.

Looking For Castleton!

OOO-OO!"

Edward Oswald Handforth started as he heard the booing. He had just come out of the Ancient House with Church and McClure. He clenched his fists, and looked across the Triangle, particularly towards the East House. There, a crowd of the rank and file was indulging in this barracking.

"I'll smash them!" said Handforth aggressively.

"Don't!" said Church. "What's the use? We're in disgrace, old man, and there's an end of it. It won't do us any good if you go about knocking spots off the chaps. It won't help us if you distribute black eyes and thick ears!"

"But it'll help me!" said Handforth pointedly. "It'll help to relieve my feelings! By George! It's a bit thick when the chaps start booing us like this!"

It was, indeed, a novel experience for the heroes of Study D. And Nipper and his chums had come in for the same kind of treatment, too. They were standing near West Arch, talking to Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey. Handforth & Co. joined them.

"Of course, we don't believe a word of it!" Reggie Pitt was saying. "Fullwood and De Valerie and Archie and all the other decent chaps are on your side, my sons. There's been trickery. Somebody has worked against you."

"Hi, Nipper!" roared Buster Boots, from the other side of the Triangle.

Nipper turned, and saw Boots waving wildly to him. A crowd had gathered there for some reason. And Nipper saw that Alan Castleton was walking out towards the gates—walking hurriedly, as though he had received a sudden call. As a matter of fact, Alan had a feeling within him that the Triangle of St. Frank's was a very unhealthy spot for him just at this particular moment.

"Something on over there," said Nipper, nodding towards Boots. "I suppose we'd better go over. Thank goodness they're not all against us. We've still got some friends."

"Of course you have!" grinned Reggie Pitt. "There aren't many chaps who believe the worst of you, my sons. Keep your peckers up. We'll get at the truth, sooner or later."

"A bit sooner than later!" said Bob Christine, as he ran up. "We've found the chap who did it!"

"What?"

"Fact!" said Bob. "Bell, of the Ancient House——"

"Bell!" said Handforth, staring. "Do you mean to say that Bell——"

"No, of course not," interrupted Bob. "Bell is the chap who can tell us the truth."

"Can Bell tell the truth?" asked Reggie Pitt, in surprise.

"Not as a rule, but I rather think he's in a truthful mood just now," went on Bob, grinning. "He's had a row with Castleton, and with Wallace and Gulliver, I believe. Anyhow, he says that Castleton is the chap who did the dirty work."

The six culprits exchanged glances.

"Didn't we say so?" murmured Tommy Watson.

"Let's hear what Bell has to say," said Nipper briskly. "Of course, this evidence isn't any good, not from the point of view of the Head. We can't sneak on Castleton. But it'll probably do us a lot of good in the school."

"Rather!" said Pitt. "The fellows will know the truth, and they'll sympathise with you instead of booing and hooting."

They went across, and found Bell the centre of attraction. It was a novelty for Bell, and he was feeling rather pleased with himself.

"Castleton's too steep for me!" he was saying. "And when he came along and admitted that he had put acid into those scent-bottles, and boasted that he had wrecked Pycraft's study, I was a bit fed-up. I couldn't help shouting at the chap. He's too much of a worm for me."

And Bell readily went into details. A great crowd had collected by now, and there was such obvious truth in Bell's statement that popular opinion veered round in favour of Nipper & Co. and Handforth & Co. In the eyes of the junior school, they were exonerated.

There was a further cause for this feeling.

Alan Castleton had suddenly disappeared! He had gone out, and hadn't said where he was going, or when he would be back. Parties went all over the school, looking for him, and didn't learn until afterwards that he had gone towards the village.

And then there were crowds waiting—waiting at the gates, ready to give Alan a reception when he came back.

"We'll smash him, and then we'll make him go and confess to the Head," said Reggie Pitt grimly. "I want you fellows to leave this in my hands. Castleton belongs to the West House, and I'm the skipper there. I'll deal with him, the worm!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Let Pitt take him on when he comes back!"

"Rather!"

There was a complete reversal of opinion, and a hot wave passed through the junior school. It extended to the Fourth, even—for the Fourth was closely concerned in this affair. It was Castleton who had wrecked Mr. Pycraft's study, who had maliciously got those six fellows flogged. He had admitted it. Under great pressure, Wallace and Gulliver had corroborated Bell's words. There wasn't any doubt on the subject. Alan



Alan Castleton proceeded to wreck Mr. Pycraft's study completely. In five minutes he had created absolute havoc. "By gad!" he muttered triumphantly. "They'll have a job to explain this away!" This was part of his scheme for getting his revenge upon Nipper and Co.!

had admitted it from his own lips, and he would have to pay the consequences!

But where was he?

The juniors knew that he had gone towards the village, but they dared not go out after him, because morning lessons were due to start in a little while.

Seldom, indeed, had the school been so incensed. Everybody was against Castleton, and he had gone—he had cleared out. Alan had done this because he had a feeling within him—a rooted conviction—that he had made St. Frank's rather too hot to hold him!

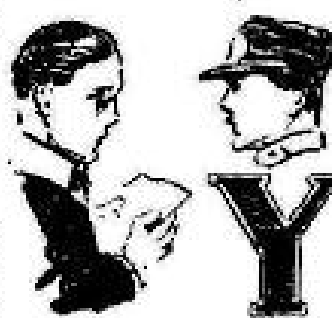
He had never expected this sudden change. He had gloated over his victory to Wallace & Co., believing that they would be entirely on his side. Bell's sudden change of tone had taken Alan by surprise. And now the cat was out of the bag! The lower school was enraged against him, and he was in mortal fear.

Coming back towards the school, just before lessons, Alan had approached behind a covering hedge, and he had seen the crowds—he had heard the shouts of anger. He knew that those shouts concerned him! And he was afraid to return—afraid to show himself!

For once he had gone too far, and his craven heart was filled with dread.

CHAPTER 20.

The Telegram.



YES, Alan Castleton was afraid.

If he showed himself before lessons he would be seized, he would be ragged unmercifully. And that was the right word to use—unmercifully. The fellows were in such a mood that they would treat him with brutal violence. Not only would he be made to run the gauntlet, but there were other awful experiences to go through. And Alan was afraid to face them—he had reached the end of his tether.

He knew what to expect if he only set foot on St. Frank's ground again. He was scared out of his wits—he was dumbfounded by this unexpected development.

And so he rambled on across the meadows, careless of the consequences. He would wait until the last bell went. Then he would sneak into the Remove Form-room. Yes, that would be it. He would go in after all the others were in their places—after Mr. Crowell had taken his seat at the desk.

Of course, it would mean lines—two or three hundred lines, perhaps. But what did that matter? The juniors wouldn't be able to touch him under Mr. Crowell's eyes. They could glare, and they could threaten him. But he would be quite safe.

Finding himself near the village, another thought came to this young rascal.

And it was such a staggering thought that he halted in his tracks, and stared straight before him, his eyes gleaming and burning.

"Why not?" he muttered feverishly. "And yet—I don't know, though! He might agree—he's jolly soft in most things!"

He stood there for two or three minutes, so thunderstruck was he by the enormity of the scheme that had entered his brain. He wanted to get it clear—he wanted to think it over thoroughly. By this time he had completely forgotten lessons.

It had occurred to him for an instant that it might be a good idea to run away. But then the thought of his father made him dismiss this idea. He couldn't run away! He would rather face St. Frank's than face his father! And Alan Castleton wasn't made of the stuff that would lead him to seek adventures on a ship, or anywhere else. He was too fond of his comforts. Besides, running away was only a fool's game. He could think of a better way than that.

He had no fear of his rascality coming to the ears of the Head. There was no proof against him. They wouldn't be able to get up any evidence to show that he had wrecked Mr. Pycraft's study. And he would never admit it to the Headmaster if he was pressed.

No, he was afraid of the juniors.

He knew that they would make his life unbearable once he went back to the school. He would be kicked and cuffed all over the place. Everybody would turn against him. His life would be a sheer torture.

And then this fresh scheme had come into his cunning mind.

It was a stupendous scheme, and, at the same time, it was a despicable scheme.

But it depended upon another.

In his extremity his mind went out towards his twin brother—Arthur! Arthur could help him in this extremity of his. Arthur Castleton was at St. Jim's.

"Where is St. Jim's?" muttered Alan, as he stood there in the lane. "It can't be far off. It's in the same county, anyhow—it's in Sussex. Yes, St. Jim's. Arthur's there, and if I send him a telegram he could meet me this afternoon. Gad, it's a half-holiday, too! Why not? Perhaps I can persuade him! And who would know? It's a stunning wheeze—the greatest idea of a century!"

He suddenly shrugged his shoulders, and made up his mind. Then he hurried into the village, and went to the post office.

He drafted out a telegram to Arthur Castleton, at St. Jim's School, near Rylcombe. It was quite a long telegram, and it cost Alan four or five shillings. But he didn't care. The money was well spent.

He went out of the post office, and his heart was beating more evenly now.

"Will he come?" he muttered. "Will he meet me at Abbotsford? If he does, I think I shall be able to wangle him. And he can't very well refuse, because there's no time for him to put it off. He'll have to start for Abbotsford almost as soon as he gets the telegram. And I know Arthur—as soft as putty. He'll come all right!"

He went back towards St. Frank's, that gleam still in his eye. For a moment he wondered if he should wait—if he should play truant for the morning. It might be just as well. What did he care, anyhow? It was better than going back and facing—

"I don't know, though!" he murmured.

NEXT WEDNESDAY! ~~~~~



"They can't touch me while I'm in class. And as soon as lessons are over I shall have to start for Abbotsford myself. I shall be safe enough—and I'd better go back, anyhow, just to see how the land lies. Perhaps it isn't so bad as I imagine."

This was quite a big thought.

If the feeling against him was not so serious as he now believed, he might be able to send Arthur another telegram. And that would stop him coming. Yes, it was essential that he should go back to St. Frank's, and discover how things were going. And so he went.

He received a bit of a shock when he got

into the Triangle, and glanced at the school clock.

Morning lessons had been going on for half an hour! What was Mr. Crowell likely to do? Probably he would be caned.

Well, it wouldn't hurt him much, although he didn't quite relish it. But he would invent a good excuse. Alan was very clever at inventing excuses!

He walked towards the School House, entered, and made his way towards the Remove Form-room. Just for a moment he hesitated outside the door. Then, with another shrug of his shoulders, he placed his hand on the door-knob and turned it. He strode in, cool and supercilious.

And Mr. Crowell, turning from his desk,

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Nipper, Handforth, and the other juniors sense the change, and they are much mystified. Against their wills, almost, they find themselves beginning to like Castleton.

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regarded the late arrival with angry eyes. If there was one thing that Mr. Crowell detested, it was lateness.

Mr. Crowell adjusted his glasses, and drew a deep breath.

as usual. He was aware that all the other Remove fellows were looking at him with glaring eyes. From every desk came these baleful looks. Alan needed no telling that he had been wise in waiting until now.

"Castleton!" rapped out Mr. Crowell.

"Sir?"

"Come here, Castleton!"

Alan turned and went to Mr. Crowell's desk. He found the Form-master looking at him in a very angry manner.

"Since you have decided to grace us with your presence after all, Castleton, perhaps you will be good enough to explain the meaning of this lateness?" went on Mr. Crowell acidly. "I have no desire to interfere with your liberties, but I would remind you that there are certain hours when you are supposed to devote yourself to studies. Why are you late?"

"I went for a walk, sir."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Crowell. "So you went for a walk, Castleton?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Well, since you can go for a walk so easily, Castleton, perhaps you will write me five hundred lines!" said Mr. Crowell. "And let me remind you that you must go for no further walks until those lines are written and delivered. I shall require them at tea-time at the latest. Go to your place!"

Castleton went, cool and insolent. What did he care about the five hundred lines? If his plans went well, he wouldn't be anywhere near St. Frank's at tea-time. So he had nothing to worry about. He didn't care how many lines Mr. Crowell gave him.

He sat down in his place, and the morning lessons proceeded. Not that Alan was feeling particularly comfortable. He could see those glares from all sides. He knew that he was being gazed upon by every one of his Form fellows, and those gazes were the opposite of friendly.

Handforth, who was comparatively near, leaned across his desk and threw a pellet of paper at Castleton.

"You wait!" hissed Handforth as Alan glanced round. "You think you're jolly clever, don't you? But wait until after lessons! We're going to make you confess to the Head! We'll drag you there by the skin of your—"

"Handforth!" said Mr. Crowell sharply.

"Eh? Oh, sorry, sir!" said Edward Oswald.

"You were talking, Handforth!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then don't do it again, Handforth!" said the Form-master. "I won't have these disturbances!"

And lessons went on again for five or ten minutes. Then a prefect came in and engaged Mr. Crowell in conversation for a moment or two. Fullwood seized the opportunity to have a word with Alan.

"You'd better look out for yourself, Castleton!" he said grimly. "We'll have the truth



CHAPTER 21.

A Grim Prospect!

HALT!"

Alan Castleton pulled himself up as Mr. Crowell barked out the word. Alan had been

walking to his place as though everything was

out of you at break—we'll make you confess! And after lessons we're going to take you to the Head—just as Handforth said! And I hope it means the sack!"

"Go to the deuce!" said Alan bluntly.

"You rotter!"

"Wait until after lessons!"

"By jingo, we'll take it out of you then!"

"We'll make you sore for a month!"

Mr. Crowell turned, astonished by these muttered threats.

"Silence!" he shouted. "How dare you?"

Alan, at his desk, mentally decided that he was in a tricky position. It wasn't merely one set of the juniors that were against him, but the whole Form. They had made up their minds to force the truth out of him, and then he was to be taken to the Head so that he should confess. It would mean a flogging at the very least, and probably the sack. He would have to go very carefully or he would find himself beyond his depth.

There was "break" to consider, too. But Alan got over this difficulty fairly easily. He put up his hand, and Mr. Crowell frowned.

"Well, Castleton, what do you want?" he asked curtly.

"Are you going to stay in the class-room during 'break,' sir?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," replied Mr. Crowell. "I have work to do during the interval. Why?"

"Well, as I was late, sir, I rather thought I'd make up a little lost time by staying in during 'break,'" replied Castleton coolly. "That is, sir, if you don't mind."

Mr. Crowell softened somewhat, having no idea of Alan's motive.

"Certainly, Castleton," he said. "You have my full permission to stay in. I am glad to see you appreciate the point. If you devote yourself closely to work, I may even reduce the number of your lines."

"Thank you, sir!" said Castleton, with a triumphant glance at the Form.

Again he had escaped them! But by doing this, as Alan knew well enough, it was only goading them further and further. They would be more and more determined than ever. It was a grim prospect that awaited him. And even if he escaped during "break" he could not remain in the class-room after lessons were over for the morning. They would have him then!

Mr. Crowell stayed in the class-room during the interval, and Alan was safe. He worked hard, too, much to the Form-master's satisfaction. He reduced the imposition by a hundred lines. Not that Alan cared a toss about this. Still, he was safe.

There was a certain restlessness in the Form during the latter half of the morning's work. Mr. Crowell noted it, and he shrewdly suspected the truth. But he made no inquiries. He knew that the Form was incensed against Castleton, and he himself had no great liking for the new boy. So he remained discreetly unconscious of the brewing storm. At the same time he was rather pleased with Castleton, for Castleton had

acted in a manner which he had not expected.

Three minutes before the time for dismissal, Castleton again raised his hand.

"Do you mind, sir, if I leave now?" he asked steadily. "My tooth has suddenly started aching very badly, and I've got some special stuff in my study. There's only two minutes to go, sir, and I've finished my work. I hope you don't mind, sir?"

Mr. Crowell glanced at the clock.

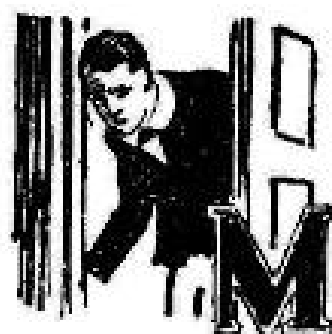
"As your tooth is aching, Castleton, I will excuse you," he said. "You may go."

"Thank you, sir!" said Alan coolly.

He walked towards the door, and he could not refrain from turning a gloating face towards the Form. Once again he was about to escape them by a piece of trickery.

Handforth rose to his feet, shouting wildly. This was more than he could stand.

"Stop him before he escapes!" he yelled. "Don't let him get out! Come on, you chaps! Grab him!"



CHAPTER 22.

Afraid to Face the Music!

MR. CROWELL spun round amazed.

"Handforth!" he thundered.

"Don't let Castleton get out!" roared Handforth. "Quick, you chaps—you fellows near the door! Bar the way!"

"Rather!"

"He won't escape!"

There was a rush, and a number of fellows placed themselves between Castleton and the door. Alan came to a halt, his heart thumping wildly. He was too late after all. His trick had failed, and he was dreadfully afraid. There was something exceedingly grim in the attitude of his Form fellows.

"That's the idea!" said Handforth. "Grab him! It's only another of his dodges, the rotter! He means to get out and escape us again!"

Mr. Crowell, who had nearly been choking, found his voice again.

"Boys!" he exclaimed thickly. "Boys! Get to your places at once!"

"Yes, sir, but——"

"Silence, Handforth!"

"But you don't seem to understand——"

"Another word from you, Handforth, and I will cane you!" shouted Mr. Crowell.

"I think they must have gone mad, sir," said Castleton. "I've done nothing to them. I expect they're jealous because I'm going out first. It's only my tooth——"

"Castleton, you had better go," said Mr. Crowell coldly. "If you other boys have any quarrel with Castleton, you can leave it until lessons are over."

"But it's time for dismissal now, sir," said Fullwood, pointing to the clock.

"It is time for dismissal when I give the word!" retorted Mr. Crowell coldly.

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Upon my soul!" said the Form-master. "What is the matter with you this morning, boys? You have been restless ever since we commenced lessons! And now, apparently, you are going quite off your heads! It is outrageous, and I will not stand any more of it! Every boy who is not in his place within ten seconds will be detained for the whole afternoon!"

This threat had its dire effect. There was a scramble, and the juniors got back into their desks. And Alan was left with a clear way to the door.

He did not wait to argue, and he did not give another triumphant glance at the Form. He reached the door, tore it open, and went out so hurriedly that Mr. Crowell stared after him in some surprise.

"He's gone now!" said Handforth fiercely. "He's escaped!"

"And he didn't have the toothache at all!" said McClure. "That was only an excuse! By Jupiter! That chap's deep—as deep as they make 'em!"

"Silence!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "If there is any more talking in this Form-room, I shall not only detain you for a further half-hour, but you will be sentenced to extra lessons for the afternoon. I will not be flouted in this fashion!"

Outside, Alan Castleton was hurrying out of the School House. His heart was still thumping wildly.

He knew that he had only escaped by the skin of his teeth. And in another minute the Removites would come flooding out, and they would search for him on the instant. There was no time to be lost.

At full speed he ran into the West House, rushed up to his bed-room, grabbed one or two things, and then turned into his study. Less than a minute later, he made a beeline for the gates.

"Thank goodness!" he muttered. "I've done it!"

Even as he ran down the lane, he heard the shouts of the fellows as they came pouring out of the School House. He dodged through the hedge, and continued his way along the other side. If any of the juniors came to the gates, and looked down the lane, they would not see him. He felt hunted. He was mortally afraid to face the music.

And it was necessary for him to hurry, too. He glanced at his watch more than once as he ran over the uneven ground in the meadow. And, at last, when he neared the village, he turned back to the road, feeling that he was now safe.

Half-way through Bellton, he heard the distant whistle of a railway engine. He ran for all he was worth, and arrived breathlessly in the station just as a train was pulling up against the platform.

He hastily obtained a ticket for Bannington. Then, running on to the platform, he got into the train just as it was about to pull out. He sank back on to the cushions, and gave a great sigh of relief.

"Done it!" he muttered. "Phew! I thought it would be a near thing!"

At Bannington, he decided, he could get another ticket, and go across country to Abbotsford Junction.

He glanced at his ticket idly, his thoughts back at St. Frank's. He had left everything in a turmoil there. He had made the school too hot to hold him.

Suddenly he gave a laugh—a mirthless kind of laugh.

He had noticed the date on the ticket. And it reminded him of something.

"By gad!" he muttered. "My birthday! So it is!—Arthur's birthday, too! Well, all the better, perhaps—he won't suspect anything. He'll think I just want to meet him because it's our birthday. That's fine! I hadn't thought of it before, or I should have put 'Many Happy Returns' on that telegram. Not that it really matters."

Yes, it was Alan Castleton's birthday! So much had happened since the early morning that he had overlooked it for the moment. And what a birthday it was proving to be! He was running away from the school—not in the ordinary way, but in a peculiar fashion of his own. He was running away because he had made the place a hornets' nest.

The Remove, to a man, was against him. And he had little doubt that the Fourth would join the other juniors in their animosity. By this time the story of his trickery had got all over the school. It was he who had wrecked Mr. Pycraft's study—he who had done everything else! He drew a deep breath, and told himself that he had done the right thing in getting away from the wrath of the juniors. He had any amount of insolence and assurance, but the prospect of going back to St. Frank's appalled him.

He was right in these fears.

For, at St. Frank's, the whole school was being searched for him. Every nook and cranny was being turned inside out. And it was proved, beyond question, that he had slipped away. Well, there would be a hot reception for him when he showed up again! A grim, dramatic reception!

But Alan had no intention of showing up again!



CHAPTER 23.

Alan's Startling Idea!

ALLO, Alan, old son! Many happy returns of the day!"

Arthur Castleton uttered that greeting as he stepped out of the train at Abbotsford Junction—the train that had brought him from Rylcombe. And Alan, taking his twin-brother's hand, grinned cheerfully.

"Same to you, old fellow!" he said. "Many happy returns of the day!"

"I had a letter from father this morning," went on Arthur. "He sent me two fivers."

"Same here," said Alan nodding. "Well, let's go into the waiting-room—away from the

crowds. Everybody is staring at us already. And I hate being stared at."

Arthur frowned slightly. His twin-brother had always been very sensitive about people looking at them. But what did it matter? Arthur, being a sunny, good-natured junior, didn't mind in the least. In fact, he was inclined to enjoy the novelty. But Alan was very different.

They were amazingly alike, these twins.

In repose, it was impossible to tell the difference between them. Even their own father could not do so. It was when they spoke that one could tell the difference. Alan's tone was generally supercilious and superior, whilst Arthur spoke quietly and gently. In character, too, Arthur was the opposite of his brother. He was decent right through—a sportsman to his finger-tips.

Perhaps their upbringing had something to do with their vastly different characters now. At Walsing Grammar School Arthur Castleton had gone in for sports, and he had associated with decent fellows from early childhood. But Alan had never had the benefit of Arthur's guidance. It was their father's whim that they should be separated—that each should fight his own way in the world. Alan had always mixed with evil companions, and now the difference in them was startling. But it was a difference in character, not in figure and face.

"Hope it wasn't very awkward for you to come?" asked Alan, as they found themselves alone in the waiting-room.

"Well, it was a bit," admitted Arthur frankly. "But that's nothing, Alan. Always glad to see you, and it'll be fine to exchange notes. I'm getting on fine at St. Jim's. They're a ripping lot of fellows there—Tom Merry and Jack Blake, and good old D'Arcy, and the rest of them. How do you like St. Frank's?"

"Topping!" replied Alan promptly. "A fine school, Arthur, old son. A gorgeous place, and all the fellows are rippers, too. I'm having a simply wonderful time at St. Frank's!"

He lied glibly—so glibly, in fact, that Arthur had no suspicion that his twin was deliberately fooling him.

"The truth of the matter is, Arthur, I've got a little idea," went on Alan casually. "An idea for a good joke. That's why I sent you that telegram, and asked you to meet me here."

"You brought me here just for the sake of a joke?" asked Arthur, in surprise.

"Exactly," said Alan. "It's necessary that you should be here. In fact, it's a very important point. Without you, the thing can't be done at all."

"Well, what is it?" smiled Arthur.

Alan got up, and paced up and down the waiting-room once or twice. His heart was throbbing madly, but he strove to appear calm. He did not want Arthur to guess the true purport of his scheme. Everything would be ruined if his twin gained an inkling of the real truth. He must keep up the pre-

tence that it was a joke—that his suggestion was a mere piece of fun.

"What's the wheeze, Alan?" asked Arthur again.

"Well, look here, it may startle you a bit at first, but you'll soon get used to it," said Alan, as he came to a halt in front of his brother. "It's just this. Why shouldn't we change places?"

It was out! He watched Arthur's face eagerly. Arthur looked bewildered for a moment, and then he frowned at his twin.

"Change places?" he repeated incomprehendingly.

"Exactly."

"But I don't catch on," said Arthur. "What do you mean, change places?"

"Just for fun, of course," said Alan, with a laugh. "It's our birthday to-day, and just the occasion for a joke of this sort. Only twins like us can work it. And think what a gorgeous——"

"But, my dear old chap, I don't understand at all!" complained Arthur. "How can we change places?"

"It's simple enough," replied Alan. "Instead of you going back to St. Jim's, you'll go to St. Frank's, and I shall go to St. Jim's. Just think what a lark it would be!"

Arthur rose to his feet.

"You're dotty!" he said briefly.

"I'm not! Think what fun——"

"There wouldn't be any fun!" growled Arthur. "We couldn't work it, you chump! If I go to St. Frank's in your shoes I shan't know a soul. And if you go to St. Jim's in my shoes you'll be in just the same predicament. We should both be bowled out in no time."

"Don't you believe it!" grinned Alan, inwardly perturbed at his twin's attitude. "Don't you believe it, Arthur, old man. We're so much alike that nobody would ever guess the truth. Take my own case, for example. I go to St. Jim's, and everybody will immediately assume that I am you."

"And you won't know a soul."

"Of course I shan't," agreed Alan. "That's just the rich part of the whole scheme. But it won't take me long to get the hang of things. You've brought those photographs with you, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Arthur thoughtfully. "So that's why you asked me in the telegram to bring photographs of the Shell and the Fourth? You wanted me to point out the pictures of all the prominent chaps?"

"Exactly," said Alan. "I've brought photographs of the Remove and the Fourth at St. Franks'. I can do the same to you. Don't you see, we shall be well primed, and it'll be the joke of the season. Nobody at St. Jim's or St. Frank's need know anything about it. It'll be a glorious piece of fun. What do you say?"

But Arthur shook his head.

"I say no!" he replied definitely.

And he sounded as though he meant it!

CHAPTER 24.

The Victim!



LAN was desperate.

He felt that his whole scheme was crumbling about his ears. He had relied upon Arthur's good

nature and generosity to assist him out of this dreadful hole he was in. He was so worried, so dreadfully anxious, that he did not give any time to consider the despicability of his latest suggestion. Afraid to go back to St. Frank's himself—afraid to face the hornets' nest that awaited him—he was proposing to send his unsuspecting brother there. It was an appalling act of treachery.

"Don't be a spoil-sport, Arthur!" he urged. "Dash it, you've always been so keen on a good joke! You'll like the chaps at St. Frank's—they're a fine, sporting set. And I can prime you up with information about all the prominent fellows—Hamilton, Handforth, Reggie Pitt, Fullwood, Buster Boots, and the others. An hour's talk, and an exchange of notes, will put everything right for us."

"But I can't see any reason for it," insisted Arthur, in his steady way. "It's such an objectless joke. There's nothing to be gained."

"There'll be the novelty of it!" insisted Alan. "Look here, let's do it just for three days. How's that?"

"Three days?" repeated Arthur.

"Yes," said his twin brother. "To-day's Wednesday, isn't it? Well, let's carry it on until next Saturday. That's the next half-holiday. We'll both pop off on Saturday, meet here, and then go off to our real schools."

Arthur began to thaw a little. After all, there would certainly be a big element of novelty in the affair. It would be rather rich to go to St. Frank's and be mistaken for Alan—to have everybody talking to him as though they had known him for weeks. It did not occur to him just then that Alan might have some ulterior motive. But it *did* occur to him that Alan would probably do many things to injure his name at St. Jim's. For Arthur had already suffered severely owing to Alan's reputation. At St. Jim's there had been many misunderstandings, for the fellows there had confused Alan's wretched doings with Arthur's. However, that was all over now, or so Arthur believed.

"Well?" asked Alan, as he watched his brother's face. "Are you game?"

The word rather hurt Arthur.

"Of course I'm game!" he replied. "I should hope I'm game for anything, Alan. Only this thing— Well, it took me by surprise, you know. It wants a lot of thinking over."

"Rats!" grinned Alan, seeing the signs of weakening. "Just think what a lark it'll be. You've brought your photographs, and I've brought mine. We'll each point out the most important chaps. There can't be any confusion then. Be a pal, Arthur. It's our birthday to-day, and it'll be the most gorgeous jape that ever happened!"

Arthur looked at him steadily.

"Are you getting on all right at St. Frank's?" he asked.

"My dear old son, I'm doing splendidly there!" replied Alan glibly. "I've chucked all my old rotten habits. They didn't pay me. Everything's all right at St. Frank's."

He was desperate. He realised, of course, that Arthur would get the shock of his life once he arrived at St. Frank's. But that didn't matter now. The one thing was to get him to agree. And once they had parted Alan would go to St. Jim's, and he told himself that he would stay there. He would write to Arthur and make some excuse, anything to keep them apart.

"Just until Saturday!" he said with a grin.

"Be a pal, Arthur."

"Oh, all right," said Arthur at last.

Victory!

Alan had won, and he could scarcely conceal a gloating note from his voice. His twin brother had agreed to go back to St. Frank's. And thereafter for the next hour the pair talked earnestly. They studied the photographs. They exchanged every possible piece of information.

And then at last Arthur's train came in. It was the train which would take him to Bellton—

They shook hands, grinning cheerfully, for by this time Arthur was just beginning to appreciate the possibilities of the scheme. Never for an instant did he suspect that he was being duped.

"Well, good luck, old man!" said Alan. "We'll meet again on Saturday—on this same platform. By gad, what a scheme! The biggest joke we ever thought of!"

And so Arthur Castleton started towards St. Frank's. And as the train vanished round a bend, Alan grinned to himself.

"I've worked it!" he muttered. "Heigh-ho for St. Jim's! I shall have a clear field there—no chance of Arthur having got himself into any mess. What a life!"

And in the other train Arthur was off to St. Frank's, rather thrilled inwardly. He tried to memorise the names—Handforth, Fullwood, Hamilton, otherwise known as Nipper. Yes, he had them off pretty pat.

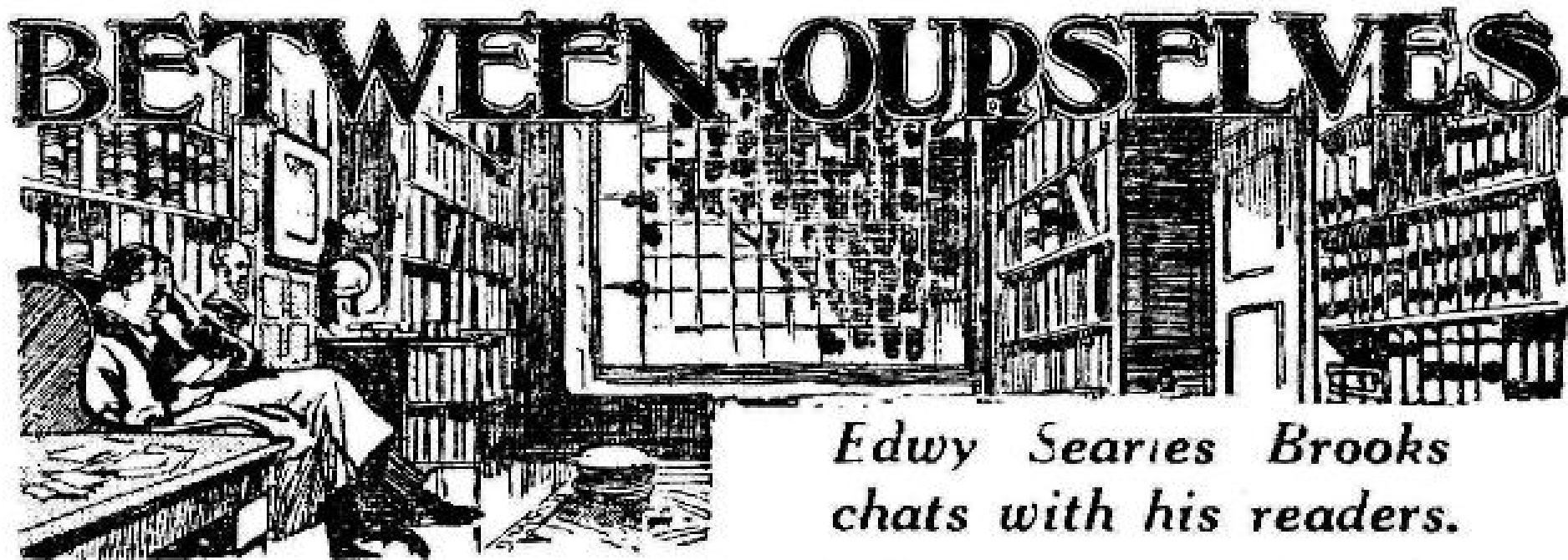
And he lay back in his seat, smiling.

Little did he guess at the real truth.

Little did he dream of the reception that awaited him at St. Frank's!

THE END.

("Staggering the School!" is the title of next week's magnificent long complete yarn. Make sure of securing your copy of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY by ordering in advance!)



*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.

Norman Carter (Darlington), Betty Sharpe* (Pinner), "Edward Oswald the Second" (East Ham), Wm. B. Tate (Southampton), Jack Proctor (South Shields), Fred Grove (London, S.W.1.), Ernest G. Hughes (Manchester), Kathleen Doughty (Nuneaton), Elsie L. Charley (Taunton), P. J. McMahon (Limerick), Arthur Ronald Grimes* (Newcastle-on-Tyne), "Eric" (Ilkeston), H. Fdk. Mullett (Combe-St. Nicholas), Alfred Osborn (Camberwell), Terence Sullivan* (Tufnell Park), Edmund Francis Armitage** (Tuakau, N.Z.), W. H. Knox (Durban), Val Clifton (Cape Town), Jacob Whitby* (Beaconsfield, S.A.), Susie Winsion (Durban), John Harvey (Awarua Plains, N.Z.), Frank Hargreaves (Caversham, Aus.).

The Chief Officer has passed on your letter to me, H. Fdk. Mullett. And you seem to have "spilled the beans" pretty thoroughly, too. I shall probably have the C.O. after me with a horsewhip, or something! Just listen to what you said in that letter to him: "I sent Mr. Brooks an autographed photo of myself in exchange for one of his weeks ago, but he hasn't sent his yet. Buck him up for me, please." There it is, in all its bald horror. You've given me away! You've told the C.O. that I've kept you waiting weeks for a photo. Well, thank goodness, you'll have had it long before this reply appears in the Old Paper. But now that I'm on the subject I'd like to mention—for the benefit of readers in general—that I can't always send off my photo by return of post, after I've got yours. There may be a delay of a week. But I don't keep many waiting as long as that. In fact, the sooner I can reply, the better I like it. But I just want to say that if you don't hear immediately, don't worry. Please remember that I'm a busy chap—and please also remember that while you send me one letter, I've got to reply to hundreds.

I never get bored with your letters, Terence Sullivan. I think you are the most consistent of all my readers. I love getting your weekly letters, but I quite realise that this may be a tiresome task for you. And although I don't want you to cut them down to one a month, I shan't be in the least upset if you do this. It's entirely up to you, old man—but always remember that I am delighted to receive your letters as frequently as you like to send them.

"In Trackless Space" appeared as a serial in the Old Paper some years ago, Edmund Francis

Armitage. It was later published in "The Boys' Friend Library"—No. 501 (old series, I think). I'm doubtful if it is obtainable now. I would like to tell you how much I appreciate your very long letter, containing, as it does, such interesting matter concerning New Zealand. I was quite enchanted. And then, again, towards the end of your letter, I was astounded. This is the bit that caused me such astonishment: "You should come to Tuakau, and see the St. Frank's League headquarters here, with its ninety-nine members, who are all readers of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY." I need hardly tell you how delighted I feel, and I wonder how many of our home clubs can boast of such a membership? I shall be tremendously interested to get further letters from you, old man.

That's a very happy expression of yours, Frank Hargreaves—"The way you write 'Between Ourselves' makes us feel as though we are all friends talking to one another round the NELSON LEE round table." Well, if it gives you as much pleasure to read these lines as it gives me to write them, then I'm sure we're all contented. For I regard this chat of mine as a regular weekly treat. And that's a topping thought of yours, old son. "Round the NELSON LEE round table." My hat! It's a pretty big table, isn't it? But in spite of its size, we can all see one another (especially now the Photo Exchange is going great guns), and we are all aware of the atmosphere of cheeriness and goodwill, aren't we?

Tom Rex (Sydney), J. Pearce* (India), S. G. Thornton* (Longreach, Queensland), W. W. Hedden (Sydney), "A Loyal Supporter" (Folkestone), Richard Graham Lilley* (Derby), R. C. Shepherd (Exeter), S. Browne (Buckhurst Hill), D. Staynes (West Brompton), Philip H. Bloom (Maida Vale), "Graduate"* (Liverpool), "Buck Jones" (Southend-on-Sea), "Helen" (Newcastle-on-Tyne), Stanley W. Bournes (Sydney), G. W. Giles (Birmingham), L. S. B. Talbot* (Melbourne), Claude Sanderecock (Aberdare), G. Keoh* (Banbury, Aus.), Jack Dart (Melbourne), Bert Lister (St. Camberwell, Aus.).

Yes, S. G. Thornton, I should very much like to have those articles you talk about—concerning central Western Queensland and the sheep and cattle stations. In fact, I am seriously thinking about writing an Australian series—yes, and pretty soon, too! Even if I don't get your reply in time, I can stow the information away—

perhaps for a second Australian series, in the future.

Thanks for that clipping, "Graduate," from the "Yorkshire Evening Post." It is quite likely that some readers will write to me, and say that I have gone right off the rails in my Congo series, in suggesting that there are cannibals in Central Africa nowadays. So I'll quote a bit of that cutting from the "Yorkshire Evening Post," for the benefit of everybody. Here it is: "Professor Seubring, F.R.G.S., who has been exploring the eastern half of the African Continent on foot since 1923, has had many exciting experiences. He relates, according to the 'African World,' that when he arrived among the cannibalistic Niam-Niam tribe in the Upper Congo he found preparations being made for the execution of a man who was thought to have been responsible for a girl's death by witchcraft. The professor saw the victim killed and cut into fragments. Knowing enough of the tribal habits of the Niam-Niam to guess the ingredients of the main dish, he declined an invitation to supper." Thanks, again, "Graduate," for your thoughtfulness in cutting that item out, and sending it on to me.

"BLOT" (Sheffield). I've put that in capitals at the beginning of a paragraph so that it'll be sure to catch your eye, Master "Blot." You're probably heaping curses on my head for not sending you my photo in exchange for yours. But you forgot to give me your address. So how the dickens can I send you the photo? You don't expect me to address it to "Blot, Sheffield," do you? No; you're not silly to ride a scooter at 12—if the scooter's a strong one. Nelson Lee was a detective before he became a schoolmaster. No. 1 of Our Paper (New Series) was entitled: "Sports Mad at St. Frank's."

RONALD S. DERHAM (Woolwich). Unlike the last chap, you sent me your address, Ronald, and I wrote you to it, and sent my photograph there. But the letter and photo have come back to me, with the words "Gone Away" marked on the envelope. If you'll send me your new address, I'll re-forward the letter and photograph at once.

Harry Baker (Droylesden), Fdk. M. Steel (Glasgow), Geo. Groome (Brisbane), H. McMahon (West Broken Hill, N.S.W.), Roy D'arcy (Derby), Peter M. Johnstone (Tasmania), Leonard M. Roberts (Moonta, Sth. Aus.), Stanley Green (Sutton, Cambs.), Thos. G. Mercer (Liverpool), Chas. Scott* (Margate), "An Old Reader"*** (Limerick), Renee Despard (Gunnislake), Kenneth Rawson (Burnley), Fdk. E. W. Brown (Headington), J. Barrington-Hazel (Leyton), Edward Paine* (Montreal), Leslie Strachan* (Forest Hill), Mrs. M. H. Hills* (Huddersfield), "Loyalist" (St. Helens, Lancs.).

Thanks for your cheery letter, "Old Reader." Limerick. Seeing that you are a married man of 35, with a family, I feel inclined to quote a portion of your letter—so that other readers, who believe themselves to be too old at 16 or 17, shall have the benefit of your opinion: "My one pastime since I am able to read is reading. Now, I have read all classes of books and fiction, but my supreme favourite is, was, and always will be, the good old 'Nelson Lee Library.' Long may it live and flourish." Thanks, "Old Reader," for your loyalty and for your enthusiasm. Good old Ireland!

Sorry, Fdk. E. W. Brown, but there's one point in your letter that I don't quite agree with. You say that one of your brothers cannot still read the Old Paper, as he is in Canada. That's quite wrong, of course. Our Paper can be obtained anywhere in Canada, providing it is ordered from

a newsagent. In fact, it can be obtained anywhere in the world by subscription.

I am going to repeat a few lines of your letter, Edward Paine—for the benefit of readers whose parents are opposed to Our Paper. This is what you say: "Last week I got my 'Nelson Lee Library,' entitled 'St. Frank's in the Congo,' and I showed it to my father. He said it was all trash, and why didn't I save my money and buy a good book. I said nothing, and went out. When I came in, he was reading it. And now he always glances through it, and never objects to my buying it. In fact, he encourages me to get it." That's the stuff to give 'em, old man!

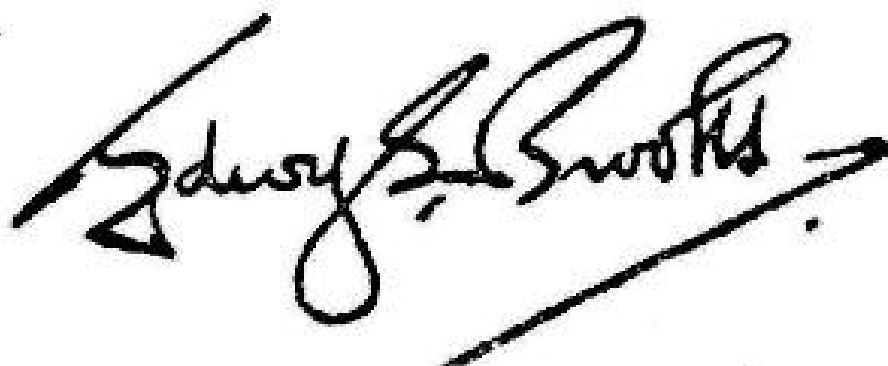
You are not the only reader, "Loyalist," who has asked me to write lots of stories about the St. Frank's fellows at school. Well, perhaps they have been away a good bit this year—what with the Northestrian stories, and the Flood, and the Fresh Air Camp, and then the Congo. Well, "Loyalist," you needn't worry. For the last four or five weeks the boys have been at St. Frank's, and they will keep at St. Frank's for many, many weeks. But you won't raise any objections if I take them off to Australia in the near future, will you? And even if I do take them, they won't neglect their lessons. For, you see, my scheme is to— Well, I won't say any more just now. All in good time, old man!

Yes, please send me your photograph, Mrs. Hills. I can assure you that it won't give me a shock. On the contrary, I shall be delighted to add it to my album. You tell me that you are an old lady of 76, and that you have read Our Paper since No. 21, Old Series. I am glad that my stories "buck you up" so much, and I hope that you will continue taking the medicine in weekly doses.

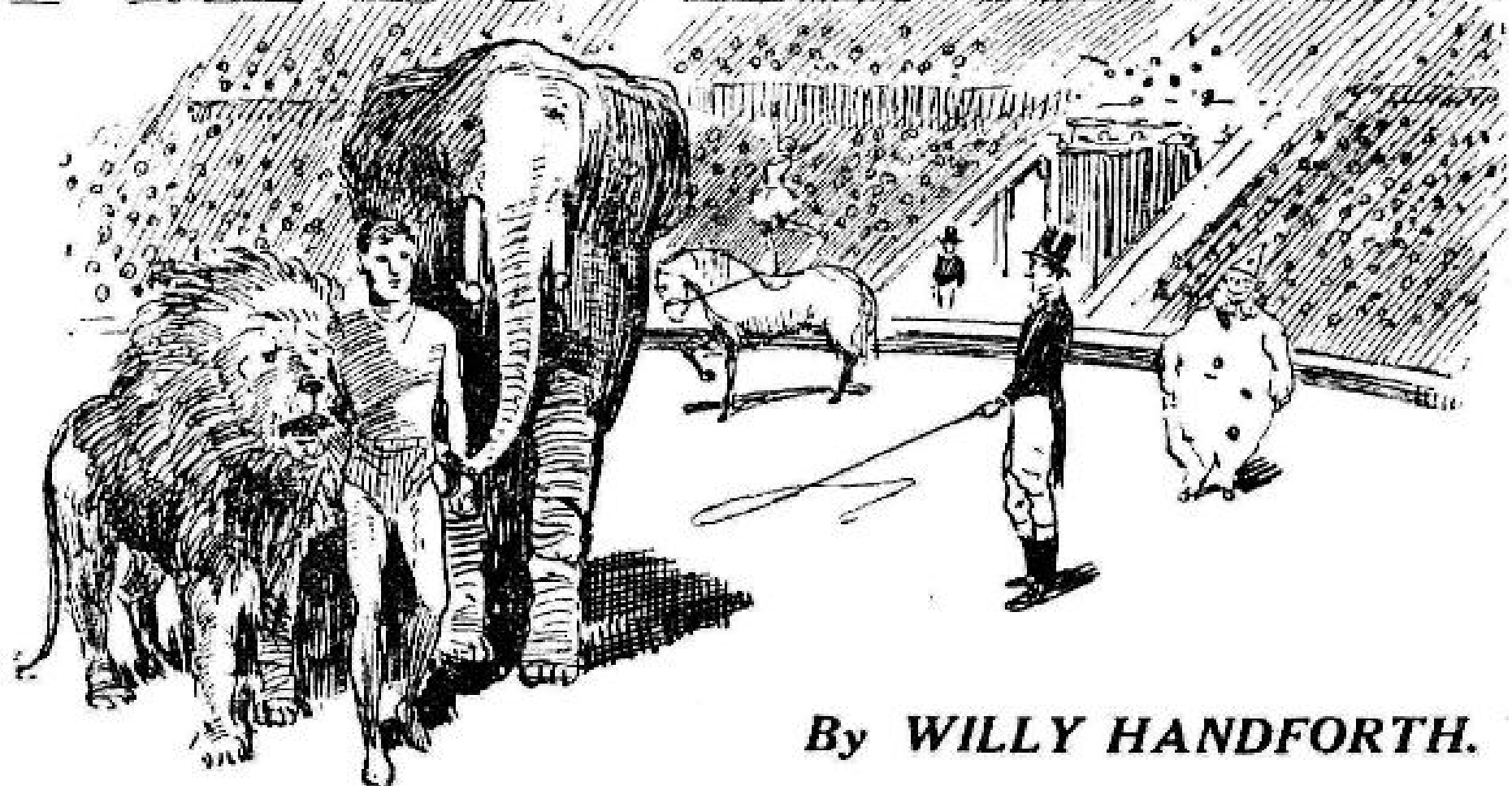
Peter Murphy* (Liverpool), Mrs. Gracie P. Wilson (Loughborough), Ronald E. Mabbett (Fairford), Lawrence Barrett* (Lincoln), W. G. Marsh (Islington), Sydney Smith** (Seartho), Cecil J. Wheeler* (Gibraltar), Terence Sullivan*** (Tufnell Park), "Aussie-En-Route"*** (London, W.C.2), E. Baldock (Purley), "A Staunch Supporter" (Forest Gate), Charles V. Brereton* (Congleton), Miss Al. Flower (Leek), "Pro Bono 'Idio'" (Blackpool), John Harold Richmond (Manchester), W. Guy Bignell** (Eastbourne), "Frances" (Maidenhead), Ian Hamilton (Sydney), "An Old Reader" (Mitcham), Leslie Bentley (Halifax).

Stout work, Sydney Smith! You certainly are a conqueror. You tell me that your father has always been prejudiced against the Old Paper, but at last you have succeeded in converting him. Yes, I should be very pleased to get a letter from your father, Sydney, old man. So get busy on the persuading stuff!

The Old Paper seems to be quite a family affair in your household. "Frances." Good egg! You tell me that your father, and all your four elder brothers, read my yarns. Don't forget to give them a dig from me, and tell them that they haven't written to me yet.



PRIDE O' THE CIRCUS!



By **WILLY HANDFORTH.**

This thrilling story of circus life has been written by Willy Handforth. It is exactly as he wrote it, save that small errors in punctuation and spelling have been corrected by the Editor.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE FIRST CHAPTERS:

Our hero, Tom Hamilton, has run away from his cruel stepfather, Jasper Jelks, and after a long tramp along the country roads, he has fallen in with Boggannini's Gigantic Circus. Tom has found a friend in Smiler, the clown, and our hero is going to see Signor Boggannini—better known as Sam Boggs in the circus—in the hope of getting a job. But on his way

to Signor Boggannini's caravan, Tom is stopped by Chunga, the elephant trainer, and Silas Snoops, the lion tamer. These two are villains, and Silas Snoops suddenly opens the door of the lion's cage, and thrusts our hero into the den. The lion is a savage brute, and the situation is desperate!

NOW READ ON.

Our Hero in the Lion's Den!

CLANG!
The door of the lion's cage closed with a loud crash, and there stood Tom, inside—facing that raging monster of the forests. And Silas Snoops stood by, shouting with mocking laughter.

"Now get out, you young cub!" he snarled.

With those words he turned on his heel, and strode away. Chunga, the Hindu elephant trainer, was rooted to the spot with fear. He expected to see our hero torn to pieces before his very eyes.

But no!

Never for an instant did Tom feel any danger. He had no fear of this roaring lion. He stood there, as cool as an icicle, and he walked forward—right towards the lion.

It must not be supposed that our hero is a prig. There's nothing like that about him. But when it comes to animals, Tom is always at his ease.

He has no fear of the wild things, for he knows that they are his friends.

"All right, Leonard—no need to make all that noise!" he said coolly. "What's the matter with you? Why don't you shake hands, and be friends?"

Leonard the Lion ceased his roaring, and looked at Tom wonderingly. And Tom went right up to him, and stroked him on the nose.

It was a wonderful sight.

There stood our hero, fearlessly stroking this monster lion on the nose, as though he had known him since a cub. Glancing back, Silas Snoops halted in his tracks. Perhaps he expected to see his victim torn and mangled on the floor of the cage.

But, instead of him seeing this, he saw Tom on the friendliest possible terms with Leonard. It was uncanny, the way Tom subdued the lion. Or, to be more exact, he didn't subdue the lion at all. The lion knew that Tom was his friend.

And so he ceased his snarlings and growlings, and he began to purr like a great cat.

Silas Snoops came out of his stupor, and his face became black with rage.

"Curses!" he muttered savagely. "Foiled!"

It was just at this moment that Signor Boggannini came running round the end of one of the tents, accompanied by Smiler, the clown. It was Smiler, in fact, who had fetched the boss.

For Smiler, having seen Silas Snoops' foul work, had feared the worst. Both men halted in their tracks as they saw the amazing scene before them.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Smiler, staring wonderingly.

He had good cause to be amazed. For there was Tom our hero, snuggling up to the great lion, and Leonard was trying to lick Tom's hand.

And Signor Boggannini, the great, blustering boss of the show, drew in a deep breath.

"Smiler, this is wonderful!" he said, in a low voice. "Wonderful! The Boy Lion Tamer! Can't you see it on the posters? The kid's a marvel!"

"He's more than that, boss," said Smiler. "Look at the way he saved the stampede in the town!"

Signor Boggannini nodded.

"Yes, Smiler, the boy's a marvel," he repeated. "One of these days he'll be starring in the Ring! And that day isn't so very far off, either!"

"If you've got any sense, boss, you'll star him right away—this very week!" said the clown.

"He's no ordinary kid, this! He can do anything he likes with animals. They love him—and he's safe. Look at that lion! The worst brute we ever had in the show, and Snoops can't do anything with him. Yet here's this boy, playing with the lion, just as though it were a cat!"

"Send the boy to my caravan!" said the big boss.

And he walked off.

As for Silas Snoops, he approached the cage again, and his expression was one of dumbfounded chagrin. Smiler came close to the cage, too, and he was grinning with delight.

"Well, Snoops!" he said, giving the trainer a mocking look. "You thought you'd frighten the boy, eh? Why, by sawdust, he's got more courage than you have!"

"It's not a question of courage, sir," said Tom, grinning. "Old Leonard knows that I'm his pal, so we're friendly together. Why be frightened of a friend. Thanks, Mr. Snoops, for shutting me in the cage like this. I'm enjoying myself immensely."

And Silas Snoops cursed under his breath!

Our Hero Gets a Job!

"COME out of that!" roared Silas Snoops savagely.

The villain had changed his tone now.

He saw that Tom was in no danger within that cage. And so, in order to hide his confusion, Silas Snoops pretended to be angry.

"Come out of it!" he bellowed. "I've taught you your lesson, and let that be enough!"

He flung the cage door open, and Tom gave old Leonard a final pat on the head, then walked out.

Clang!

The door of the cage closed again, and Leonard made a sudden spring, and tried to grab at Silas Snoops with his paw. It was plain to see that the lion hated his tamer. Silas Snoops brought his whip round, and slashed it viciously through the air.

"You brute!" cried Tom. "No wonder old Leonard hates you! There's no need to be cruel to these wild animals! They'll be friendly enough if you treat them right!"

"Mind your own business!" snarled Silas Snoops, swinging his whip round again.

Slash!

This time he brought the whip round intending the cruel thong to cut across Tom's shoulders. But Smiler, the clown, leapt in front of Tom, and took the blow himself.

"You cad!" he shouted. "Would you strike a defenceless boy?"

And Silas Snoops cowered under the clown's scathing glance. As for Tom, he took hold of Smiler's arm, and gripped it.

"Thanks!" he said simply. "All the same, sir, you shouldn't have done that. I'm not afraid of Mr. Snoops. All bullies are cowards!"

Silas Snoops writhed inwardly as he heard these scathing words—and from that minute he was Tom's bitter enemy. From that second he was Tom's implacable foe!

And Smiler took Tom by the arm, and led him towards Signor Boggannini's caravan. A moment later Tom was inside, shuffling his feet, and handling his ragged cap in a self-conscious way.

The inside of the caravan was very neat and cosy. A little fire was burning at the end, in a closed grate, and the air was full of the smell of cooking. There was a small table in the middle of the room, and the big boss sat there. Near him was Mrs. Boggs, a buxom, homely woman, with a kindly face. And near her stood Daisy, a girl of about thirteen or fourteen.

Tom gave all his attention to old Sam Boggs and his wife. He hardly gave Daisy a glance. In a sort of way, Daisy was a pretty girl—as girls go—but Tom had more sense than to give any girl a second glance.

"Well, boy!" said Mr. Boggs, looking at Tom closely. "So you want a job, do you?"

"Yes, if there's one to be filled, sir," replied Tom boldly.

"It all depends," went on Mr. Boggs. "You seem to be a pretty strong lad, and I might be able to give you a job of some kind. What can you do?"

"Anything, sir!" replied Tom eagerly. "I don't care what it is!"

"You look pretty ragged," went on the big boss, eyeing Tom closely. "Where do you come from? Who's your father? How is it that you're wandering about like this?"

And Tom then told his simple story. He explained to his enthralled listeners how he had run away from his cruel stepfather, and how he had set out to earn his own living.

"Well, Tom, my lad, I like you!" said old Boggs, at last. "I like your spirit, too! You'll start with me as a stable lad. How will that suit you?"

"Fine, sir!" said Tom, hardly able to believe his good luck.

"You'll have your food, and you'll be able to sleep in one of the vans, or in a tent, or somewhere—and I'll give you five bob a week for pocket money," said Mr. Boggs. "But let me tell you that circus life is hard. You'll have to work."

"I'm not afraid of work, sir," replied Tom, his head erect, his eyes flashing.

"Good lad!" said Mr. Boggs. "And look here—there's something else I want to tell you. Later on, perhaps, you might be able to enter the ring itself as a performer!"

"Oh!" gasped Tom, hardly able to believe his ears.

"But I make it a rule in my show that no performer can get an engagement unless he is willing to put ten pounds down, as a deposit—a sort of premium, if you understand what I mean," went on the big boss. "So as soon as you can find that ten pounds, young 'un, you might be able to enter the ring as a real performer."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom quietly. "I shall start saving at once!"

"That's the style," said Mr. Boggs, with a grin. "Good lad! Now go out, and get to work. Smiler will show you round to the stables, and he'll tell you what to do. From now onwards you're with Boggannini's Gigantic Circus, and there are endless opportunities for promotion. Work well, and you'll find that I'm not a bad sort of boss."

Tom went out of the caravan, feeling dazed with happiness. His food, and his sleeping accommodation—and five shillings weekly, too! It seemed too wonderful to be true!

"I'll scrape and scrape!" he muttered to himself, as he stood out there, in the sunlight. "I shan't need to spend any money at all, and I'll put that five shillings a week by—and before the end of a year I shall have the ten pounds."

It was a glorious vision, and Tom went off towards the stables, feeling as though he were treading on air. Little did he know that Silas Snoops was watching him all the time—little did Tom guess that the rascally lion tamer had a look of villainous hatred in his eyes!

Our Hero Seizes His Chance!

WALK up—walk up! This way to the shilling seats!"

It was our hero who was shouting out these words.

Evening had come, and the great tent was filling up with people. Electric lights were blazing everywhere, and the glamour of the circus was in the air. Unhidden, Tom was standing by one of the payboxes, encouraging the public to enter. For Tom, by this time, was heart and soul in the circus, and he wanted to do everything to help his new boss.

And so he was standing there, shouting out encouraging words, and he didn't feel a little bit tired. Yet he had been on his feet ever since he had first arrived in the circus. He had been grooming horses—or helping to—and he had been fetching water, and carry bundles of hay, and generally making himself useful. In fact, he had been so busy that he hadn't even thought of where he would sleep that night, or where he would get his meals.

"This way for the greatest show on earth!" shouted our hero.

And the crowds rolled in.

So it went on at every entrance. The great tent was slowly filling up. The electric lights blazed everywhere, and there was a general feeling of jollity and good humour. Even now, Tom could hardly believe his good luck. He felt that he would soon wake up.

But, no! This was a real circus, and he was engaged as a stable lad—with a chance, in the future, of even performing in the ring itself!

At last the tent was so packed that nobody else could be admitted. And Smiler, the clown, patted Tom on the shoulder. Smiler was wearing his clown's attire now, and he looked very funny with his white face, red lips, and red-tipped nose.

"What about your sleeping quarters to-night, kid?" he inquired. "Fixed anything up?"

"Not yet," replied Tom. "Anywhere will do for me."

"Rot!" said Smiler. "You can share my caravan with me, if you like."

"I say, do you mean it?" cried Tom, delighted.

"Put it there!" said the clown, chuckling.

They shook hands, and in that simple way the compact was settled. In future, Tom would share Smiler's caravan.

Then came the beginning of the show.

Tom, having nothing to do until the performance was over, took his place near the ring

entrance, crouching low in a corner, where he was well out of the way. But he could see everything.

"My only hat!" he muttered. "Those people in the best seats think they're somebody—but I'm in a better position than they are! My seat's free—and I belong to the show itself."

That was the thought that kept throbbing through Tom's brain. He was a part of the show! Not a mere spectator—not a casual visitor. But he was a part of it, and would travel with it!

And his heart kept throbbing.

Tom's love for animals was tremendous, and as the horses came out, and trotted round the ring, he was lost in happiness. He loved animals—and he knew that animals loved him.

And then came one of the star turns of the show.

Bert the Bronco was led into the ring, and Signor Boggannini made an announcement to the great crowds. In the meantime, Bert the Bronco was being held by three or four strong ostlers. Tom was looking on eagerly.

"Ladies and gents," shouted the boss. "Here we have Bert the Bronco—the wild, untamed steed from the Western Plains! Only one horseman in my entire circus can ride him! You will now see him give a display of his skill!"

The horseman leapt into the saddle, and Bert the Bronco went leaping and swooping all round the ring. He was a terror. In vain he tried to unseat his rider. And at last, after completing three circuits of the ring, Bert was brought to a halt, and seized by many hands.

"Now, ladies and gents," shouted Signor Boggannini, holding up a hand. "Now for my great offer! I am willing to pay ten pounds to anybody present who can come into this ring and ride Bert the Bronco once round the ring without being thrown! This offer is open to all! And the money will be paid in spot cash!"

There was a murmur round the audience, and several bold youths at once came forward. And the audience went into shrieks of laughter as these unhappy fellows were thrown, one after the other. Bert the Bronco would have none of them.

And as for Tom, what of him?

What of our hero?

There he crouched, his face glowing, his eyes gleaming. An idea! The big boss had said that the offer was open to all! Ten pounds! Here was Tom's chance of getting that ten pounds—the money that he had expected to get after a year's hard work! And now there was a chance that he might obtain it in one big swoop! If only he could pay that ten pounds to Signor Boggannini, he would be eligible to take his place in the ring as a performer!

It was Tom's chance, and he decided to seize it!

As the last of the youths was thrown from Bert the Bronco's back, amid great roars of laughter, Tom sprang forward. He looked very small in that great ring, with the electric lights glaring down upon him. He felt small, too, but his spirit was big.

"Can I have a go, sir?" he shouted eagerly.

Signor Boggannini spun round, and his eyes opened wide.

"You!" he said. "Why, yes, I suppose so! But you must be mad, boy, if you think that you can ride Bert the Bronco!"

"Let my try, sir!" cried Tom boldly.

And the audience roared afresh with laughter. What nonsense! What absolute rot! It was like the cheek of this youngster to imagine that he could ride the untamed steed of the Western Plains!

But our hero was no ordinary boy!

Our Hero Wins!

"**H**A, ha, ha!" Roars of laughter went up as Tom approached Bert the Bronco. The audience felt that it was now going to have the greatest piece of fun of the whole evening. Those hulking youths had not been able to ride Bert once round the ring—or even half way round the ring. They had all been unseated during the first two or three steps. And here was this boy—a ragged sort of urchin, by the look of him—daring to attempt the ride!

Smiler, the clown, came running up, and he thumped Tom on the back.

"Good luck, kid!" he shouted. "Do your best!"

And Smiler turned about half a dozen somersaults, and then leapt upon Bert the Bronco's back, only to be flung off with terrific force. He landed with a bump in the sawdust, and the audience roared afresh.

"The kid will come a worse cropper than that!" shouted somebody.

Silas Snoops, waiting near the lion's cage, scowled.

"I hope he kills himself!" he hissed, under his breath.

Chunga, the elephant trainer, muttered a malediction in Hindustani.

"Go!" cried the boss, cracking his whip suddenly.

"Hurrah!"

"Stick it, kid!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He'll be off in a couple of seconds!"

And so, amid jeers and cheers of encouragement, Tom started his ride on Bert the Bronco. But, almost within the first second, the audience had hushed. Something was different here!

Tom was riding the bronco without the slightest trouble!

It was sensational—amazing—stupendous!

Bert the Bronco seemed to know that he had a friend on his back now. Not once did he try to unseat Tom. Instead, he capered joyously, and went galloping round the ring in sheer ecstasy.

And Tom's heart was beating a fierce tattoo against his ribs.

He had won—he had won—he had won!

Three times he went round the ring—just to make sure. Then he leapt to the ground, amid thunders of applause from the crowds. And Bert the Bronco came nosing up to Tom, and he whinnied with delight and joy.

"Boss, it's uncanny," said Smiler, glancing at Sam Boggs. "That kid's a miracle!"

"By thunder, so he is!" said Signor Boggannini. "I never saw anything like it!"

With the sound of the cheering strong in his ears, Tom led Bert the Bronco out of the ring. There were some in the audience who thought that it was all a trick—all a part of the show. They had even seen Signor Boggannini hand Tom ten pounds in notes, but they still thought it was part of the show.

Outside, in the entrance tent, Tom was looking at the money in a dazed way. The ten pounds was his! He had it in his hands!

Just then, Signor Boggannini came out with Smiler. They both stood looking at Tom. And in the background Silas Snoops was standing and glaring. He hated to see his young enemy winning the favour of the big boss.

"Well done, lad—well done!" cried Sam Boggs, thumping Tom on the shoulder.

"I—I hope it was all right, sir?" panted our hero. "I—I mean, I'm on the staff, and—"

"You're a stranger, and you've never seen Bert the Bronco in your life before," interrupted Signor Boggannini. "That's enough! The money is yours!"

"But I'm going to give it back to you, sir!" cried Tom. "Here it is—take it! It is my premium! And now, sir, I can take my place in the ring as a performer, if I'm good enough!"

Old Sam Boggs rocked with laughter.

"Keep the money, kid—keep the money!" he shouted boisterously. "That talk about a premium was only my little joke! Put that ten pounds in the bank, and let it stay there! You'll go into the ring as a performer, in any case! After a little training, you'll be the biggest draw of the whole show!"

As Tom listened to these words in a dazed kind of way, Silas Snoops gritted his teeth with rage. Tom would be the biggest draw of the circus! And up to now Silas Snoops had been the star! As clearly as daylight, he could see that his star was on the wane! And this boy was the cause of it! The lion-tamer's heart was aflame with hatred and jealousy at that moment.

Then, before anything more could be said, a great shout came from the ring! A tumult of sounds arose from the audience! Shrieks, shouts, and alarmed cries!

"What is it?" shouted the big boss, running forward.

Tom went rushing into the ring, too, and what he saw caused him to start back with a choking cry of horror.

For a kind of stampede had started in the audience. Men and women, boys and girls were fighting to get out, shrieking and shouting.

And what was the cause of all this?

Well may the question be asked! For there, just against the side of the ring, stood the tiger's cage—that cage which contained one of India's most magnificent tigers. The bars of the cage were broken and twisted, and the tiger was out in the ring, snarling and free!

"Oh, my Heavens!" cried Signor Boggannini, in horror.

Tom ran forward, his eyes aglow with a fresh excitement. And just at that moment the tiger gave one bound, and went leaping right into the audience!

(It looks pretty rocky for the audience, doesn't it? But wait until next week! Just wait until our hero gets to work on that giddy tiger!—WILLY.)

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HOW TO JOIN THE LEAGUE

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 81.

SECTION

A

READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.

I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare that I have introduced "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with the Membership Number assigned to me, and Membership Badge.

SECTION

B

MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.

I, Member No..... (give Membership No.), hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me..... (state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.

SECTION

C

NEW READER'S DECLARATION.

I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer)to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY."

(FULL NAME).....

(ADDRESS).....

INSTRUCTIONS.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. The second form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together, and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. **Member Applying for Bronze Medal:** It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms, bearing the same number, are needed. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of

the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided that each pair of forms bears the same date and number.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medals can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members, they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

These Application Forms can be posted for 3d., providing the envelope is not sealed and no letter is enclosed.

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If you want help or information on any subject, you will find the Chief Officer ever ready to assist you.



THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT

All LETTERS in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., London, E.C.4. Enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope.

A Cricket League.

LESLIE BENTLEY, 41, Wainhouse Road, King Cross, Halifax, Yorks., puts forward a notion which deserves to be set going by next season—namely, the establishment of an S. F. L. Cricket League.

A Gym Club.

Richard Ferrell, 19, Edith Street, Gateshead-on-Tyne, Co. Durham, asks about a gym club. He can start right away by calling a meeting of his chums. It is best to have things in order and to elect a chairman for the meeting. Then put the question of forming such a club, and go into the matter of funds. It does not matter a bean about making a small beginning. If it is a "go," the supplying of equipment will not offer much difficulty.

Ancient Egypt.

Leonard Naden, Castle Mill Farm, Castle Mill, Tipton, Staffs., is interested in the history of Egypt. He should get "Egypt," in the Story of Nations Series, from a bookseller. He should also look up the record of Ferdinand de Lesseps and the Suez Canal in the encyclopædia. This will give him much concerning modern Egypt.

In Shorthand.

Best thanks to Norman Wood (Ardwick), who sends me a cheery message in Pitman's shorthand. I congratulate him on the clearness of his style, and I appreciated the compliment to the "N. L. L."

Order in Advance.

This is the advice I tender to a reader in Dandenong (Australia), who got to the newsagent's shop and found, like Mother Hubbard, that the cupboard was bare. The only way is to register a regular order. Then the newsagent knows where he is, and the "N. L. L." reader gets his paper.

Joining the League.

A Berks reader wants to know how to become a member of the S. F. L. This is simple enough. My correspondent should read through the instructions given in the NELSON LEE LIBRARY, and then set about finding a new reader. Then write the fresh reader's name and address on the form provided, send it in, and the Certificate of Membership and the League Badge will be forwarded.

Studying the Films.

Harry McMahon, 50, Long Street, West Broken Hill, N.S.W., Australia, is very keen about the films. He makes a special request to an American reader to tell him about Los Angeles and how films are acted.

A Billiards Champion.

Bernard Rosen, Neardale, Middleton Road, nr. Crumpsall, Manchester, whose age is 12, is eager to have a billiards championship of the League, and he challenges members, ages 10–14. If they will write to him he will arrange preliminaries and final heats. This Manchester chum is a keen

player, but I am inclined to think there are but few like him in this respect.

Just Think of It!

A New South Wales reader asks me if it is not time to leave out the League Form, as he thinks all the members must have come in. This won't do at all. New members roll up every week. The S. F. L. is not a closed corporation. It will never be complete. All big movements keep the door wide open. The shut door never stood for progress yet. Far better take it right off its hinges and chop it up for firing.

The Twentieth Century.

D. A. R. (Melbourne) asks if this is the Nineteenth or the Twentieth Century. It is decidedly the Twentieth. The Nineteenth Century came to an end on December 31st, 1900.

This Calculating Business.

A Bradford chum asks me the following question: "If a person draws a thousand pounds interest from his bank at $7\frac{1}{2}$ p.c. for one year, how much capital has he invested at the bank?" This works out at £13,333 6s. 8d. My correspondent says he asked an Income Tax official, a chemist, and a clerk, and they had all different answers. Anyway, it is a nice little income.

In the Dumps.

D. C. M. (Sydney) asks what he is to do about being highly strung? He is nervous and always worrying about the future. He has different moods, too. One moment he is looking forward to the morrow with eagerness; in the same breath, so to speak, a fit of depression comes to him, he takes no interest in his work, and he feels fed up. I think my nervy friend is a bit run down; he should see a doctor, and above all, he should get plenty of fresh air. Nothing like that for getting rid of the cobwebs and the blues.

Those Seven Wonders.

A Margate reader asks for the names of the Seven Wonders of the World. They are the Hanging Gardens of Babylon; the Pyramids of Egypt; the Temple of Diana at Ephesus; the Statue of Zeus by Phidias at Athens; the Colossos of Rhodes; the Mausoleum erected by Artemisia at Halicarnassus; the Pharos or lighthouse at Alexandria.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

E. C. Kelsey, 68, Ferrars Road, Tinsley, Sheffield, wishes to hear from readers.

John H. Palmer, 33, Mary Street, Auburn, N.S.W., Australia, wishes to hear from readers.

E. Brindley, 29, Royds Street, Con-M, Manchester, asks H. McMahon, West Broken Hill, Australia, to reply to his letter.

E. J. Davies, 45, Turberville Street, Maesteg, Glamorgan, wishes to correspond with readers interested in literature, stamps, and sports.

(Continued on next page.)

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED

(Continued from previous page.)

Leslie Parker, 5, Heath Cotts., Stroud, **Petersfield, Hants.**, wishes to hear from an O.O.; also from readers generally.

Frank E. Palmer, 23, Park Lane, **Swindon, Wilts.**, wishes to correspond with readers interested in amateur theatricals and nature study.

H. Jones, 13, Ashbury Road, Battersea, **London, S.W.11**, wishes to hear from O.O.'s in Battersea, Clapham, and Batham, also from members who have formed clubs.

Roland Beacham, 10, Heyworth Crescent, Toronto, 13, **Canada**, wishes to correspond with readers in the Bedford and Redditch districts. He also wants to buy the "Mont Hellow" series.

L. Holman, 23, Palm Road, Romford, **London, E.**, wishes to correspond with readers in his district.

G. W. Cooke, 2, Herbert Street, Sydney, **nr. Crowe**, wishes to correspond with readers anywhere, especially in South Africa, Egypt, China, India, and South America; he also wants to hear from readers who have sets of the "N. L. L." (old series) for sale.

R. W. Edwards, 100, Main Road, Sydney, **nr. Crowe**, wishes to hear from readers anywhere, especially in the United States, India, Japan, Australia, Egypt, France, and South Africa; he also wants to get "N. L. L." 1-150; also to sell his stamp and cigarette card collections.

W. Stevens, 36, West Street, Leytonstone, **London, E.11**, wishes to correspond with readers. All letters answered.

Victor Naegel, 15, Hugh Street, Victoria,

London, S.W.1, wishes to hear from readers in his district.

J. Henderson, 145, Crown Street, **Liverpool**, wishes to hear from an O.O., also from readers interested in photography.

Leonard Naden, Castle Mill Farm, Castle Mill, **Tipton, Staffs.**, wishes to hear from readers overseas, especially stamp collectors.

T. Cushing, 1, Stafford Street, Earham Road, **Norwich**, wishes to hear from readers in his city.

Norman Wood, 32, Cannel Street, Ardwick, **Manchester**, would like to hear from readers in the Colonies, also from those interested in Pitman's shorthand, scouting, and ventriloquism.

E. Nunn, 27, College Street, Homerton, **London, E.9**, wishes to hear from readers anywhere, but especially those living in the Homerton district.

Thomas Gush, 614, Ossington Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, **Canada**, wishes to hear from stamp collectors and from readers anywhere. He has back numbers of the "N. L. L."

Alan Connell, 668, Military Road, Mosman, Sydney, N.S.W., **Australia**, wishes to correspond with readers in Canada, England, South Africa, and France.

J. J. Harvey, Awarua Plains, Southland, **New Zealand**, wishes to hear from readers in New Zealand, and anywhere in the British Empire. All letters answered.

Leslie Bentley, 41, Wainhouse Road, King Cross, **Halifax, Yorks.**, would like to become a reader of an amateur magazine. He also wishes to correspond with readers in Australia, America, and New Zealand.

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