

# THE NELSON LEE

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# UNDER A CLOUD!

A dramatic incident from the magnificent long complete school yarn, featuring  
the Boys of St. Frank's, inside.

Now Series No. 106.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

May 12th, 1928.



In attempting to fling the pillow out of the window at the grinning Fourth Formers, Handforth used just a little too much energy. The result was alarming. Handforth overbalanced, and the next moment he had fallen head first through the window, and was dropping like a stone towards the hard paving of West Square. "Oh, my goodness!" gasped Christine frantically.

An Enthralling Story of School Life and Adventure!

# UNDER A CLOUD!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

In his usual generous-hearted way, Edward Oswald Handforth has made friends with Bert Hicks, little realising that worthy's scoundrelly intentions. Handy is made to realise it this week—when it is too late, for by then a whole heap of trouble has descended upon his shoulders!—Ed.

## CHAPTER 1.

### The Fall of the Mighty!

"GO away!" roared Handforth aggressively.

The leader of Study D at St. Frank's was standing at the window of his dormitory in the Ancient House. And outside, in the West Square, a group of Fourth Formers were grinning up at him. The sunshine of the May evening was slanting across the roof of the West House.

"His Royal Highness objects to our presence," said Bob Christine sadly. "In fact, judging by the tone of his voice, we must be an abomination in his eyesight!"

"I expect we are trespassing," said Yorke, nodding. "Handy must have bought the West Square, so that he can look out of his dormitory window and see an unbroken vista of solitude!"

"Good old Handy!" chuckled Talmadge. "Lord of the giddy earth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Edward Oswald Handforth, his face very red, leaned out of the window.

"Go away!" he repeated threateningly. "Clear off, you silly Fourth Form asses!"

Left to themselves, the Fourth Formers would probably have passed on. But, nowadays, it was quite the approved thing to rag old Handy, and they dallied.

The fellows were on their way indoors, from Little Side. They had strolled into the West Square, *en route* for the Triangle, and so on to their own Side. For these Fourth Formers belonged to the Modern House, which was on the east side of the school.

Seeing Handforth at his dormitory window, brushing his hair, they had ventured to hail him. Handforth, as a matter of fact, had just changed into flannels, and was putting the final touches to his toilette. He had not approved of the flippant manner in which Christine & Co. had greeted him.

"I understand that all the Remove fellows are looking ill," remarked Clapson solemnly.

"And I must say that I've noticed a certain neediness myself."

"How do you account for it?" asked Yorke, with equal solemnity.

"Oh, that's easy!" said Clapson. "Haven't you heard? Handforth has sent the whole Remove to Coventry, and the poor chaps are pining away. Life holds no further charm for them!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Fourth Formers roared with merriment. They pretended to take no notice of Handforth, who was still standing at the window above.

It was quite a joke about Handforth. Of late, he had been in a very peculiar mood. It had started a week or two earlier, when the Remove had sent him to Coventry. Handforth had been stubborn, awkward, and generally unmanageable. Thoroughly fed up, the Remove had decided to leave Edward Oswald to his own sweet ways. Even Church and McClure, Handy's own special chums, were no longer on speaking terms with him.

The trouble was entirely of Handforth's own making, but he could never see this. One little thing had led to another, and Handforth had become so antagonistic to his Form-fellows that, in his present mood, he detested the sight of them all. But, somehow, the Remove did not take him seriously; neither did the Fourth.

And, in consequence, Handforth was continually being chipped. The more chipping he received, the greater his bitterness became.

"Look at the cricket, too," said Christine, shaking his head. "How can the Junior Eleven hope to win any games without Handforth?"

"Impossible!" said Talmadge. "The Junior Eleven without old Handy is like a ship without a rudder!"

Handforth boiled. This was another of his grievances. In a pure spirit of perversity, he had refused to play cricket for the Junior Eleven—and the Junior Eleven, quite unperturbed, had gone on its way with serene indifference. It had been winning matches with greater success than ever before. Handforth, indeed, was hardly missed. This was a great shock to him—since he had believed, in his own mind, that Nipper, the Junior skipper, would beg of him to reconsider his decision.

"Are you beastly Fourth Formers going to clear off, or shall I come down and smash you?" roared Handforth fiercely.

Christine looked up.

"Oh, hallo!" he said, in surprise. "Are you still there, Handy, old man?"

"Don't call me 'old man,' you rotter!" yelled Handforth.

"All right, old man—I won't, old man!" said Christine. "Awfully sorry, old man!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other Fourth Formers roared with merriment, and Handforth, whirling round, seized the pillow from his bed.

"Look out!" sang out Talmadge, dodging.

Handforth flung the pillow with all his strength. At least, that was what he intended to do. But in his enthusiasm he leaned too far out of the window, and before he could check himself he had overbalanced. The pillow did not even leave his hand. He fell headlong, with a wild yell of alarm.

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Christine frantically.

It wasn't very far from that first-floor window to the ground. All the same, such a fall as this might easily be serious—for the West Square was paved, and Handforth had fallen head first.

Crash!

He landed in an untidy heap, but, by a singular chance of good fortune, the pillow struck the ground first, and it cushioned the impulsive junior's fall. There was a rush at once, and the Fourth Formers surrounded the victim.

"I say, Handy, I hope you're not hurt!" said Christine, with concern. "What an ass you were to—"

"Clear off!" muttered Handforth dazedly. "I—I'm all right!"

"My dear chap, you came an awful cropper!" said Talmadge. "Quick, you fellows! Lend a hand!"

But Edward Oswald Handforth struggled to his feet, dizzy, bruised and bewildered.

"I don't want any help!" he said shakily. "I'm not made of china! It doesn't hurt me to fall—"

"Crumbs!" broke in Christine. "You're bleeding, Handy! Who's got a clean handkerchief? My only hat! He's injured!"

The Fourth Formers were very serious now. Blood was pouring down Handforth's face, and dripping from the point of his chin. But he made light of the injury. He pulled out his own handkerchief, and dabbed his forehead.

"It's nothing—only a scratch!" he muttered, with a gulp. "You rotters! It's all your fault!"

Christine & Co. felt inclined to bottle up their sympathy. It was certainly a bit thick for Handforth to lay the blame at their door! But, after all, it was just like him to do this.

And then, at this interesting moment, Mr. Crowell arrived.



## CHAPTER 2.

### Another Shock for Handy!

"GOOD heavens!" said Mr. Crowell in alarm.

The master of the Remove had witnessed Handforth's

fall from one of the windows of the West House, where he had been talking to some prefects. Now he pushed through the Fourth Formers, and seized Handforth by the arm.

"Are you hurt, my boy?" he asked

anxiously. "Good Gracious! You are bleeding badly——"

"It's nothing, sir!" grunted Handforth. "I'm as right as rain!"

"It's a wonder he didn't break half the bones in his body, sir," said Talmadge. "He fell clean down——"

"Yes, yes—I saw the fall!" interrupted Mr. Crowell. "Are you quite sure, Handforth, that no bones are broken?"

"Well, I ought to know, sir," replied Handforth gruffly. "There's only this little cut over my eye——"

"Let me see it!" commanded the master of the Remove.

He examined the wound closely.

"H'm! A nasty cut, Handforth," he said at length. "Not so bad as I at first feared, but it undoubtedly needs immediate attention. You will go straight to the sanatorium, and ask Dr. Brett to dress the wound and apply a bandage."

"But—but I can't go about the place with a bandage round my head, sir!" protested Handforth.

"You will do as I tell you, Handforth!" said Mr. Crowell sharply. "I am well aware of your careless ways, and you are quite capable of attempting to conceal this injury. But I will have none of it. Go to the sanatorium at once."

"Yes, but look here, sir——"

"In fact, Handforth, I will take you there!" said Mr. Crowell finally.

And Handforth was marched off, much to his disgust. The Fourth Formers dispersed, discussing the affair. Talmadge tossed the pillow back into the dormitory, through the open window. The incident, to all intents and purposes, was over.

Mr. Crowell, however, was standing no nonsense from the leader of Study D. He knew well enough that Handforth had lately been acting like a spoiled child. He even went so far as to express this view to Handforth himself, and it cannot be said that Handforth was gratified.

At the sanatorium, Dora Manners appeared to be the only person available. She was the nurse, and she reported that Dr. Brett had gone to Bannington.

"Then I trust, Miss Manners, that you will be able to deal with this boy's injury," said Mr. Crowell. "He fell from a window into West Square, and, incredible as it may seem, his only injury appears to be this cut over the eye."

"That's all right, Mr. Crowell," said Dora briskly. "I'll dress it for him and make him comfortable. Come along, Ted!"

Mr. Crowell left Handforth in the gentle care of Nurse Manners. Dora, by reason of the fact that she was cousin to the fair Irene, of the Moor View School, was on very friendly terms with many Remove fellows. It was customary for her to address them by their Christian names.

Dora was a very charming young lady, and she was on the permanent staff at St. Frank's. She was, of course, older than

Irene, and she was, incidentally, the apple of Browne's eye. William Napoleon Browne of the Fifth sometimes gave people the extraordinary impression that Dora was his own especial property.

"Now, Ted, you mustn't be awkward," said Dora gently, as she led Handforth into the surgery. "Come along, now—bend over this wash-basin like a good chap."

Handforth grunted, and obeyed.

The cut was bathed, and then Dora applied antiseptic. By this time, much to her satisfaction, the bleeding had nearly stopped. Handforth, who felt that the whole proceeding was ridiculously unnecessary, was an unwilling patient.

"Look here, Dora, chuck it!" he said pleadingly. "You're not going to stick a rotten bandage round my head, are you?"

"No; I think a small piece of plaster will be sufficient," said Dora calmly. "And don't be so restless, Ted. I shall get very impatient with you if you keep on moving away from me like this. What's the matter with you lately?"

"Nothing!" said Handforth, under his breath.

"Nonsense!" smiled Dora. "I know all about your troubles in the Remove, and I think you're very silly, Ted. Nearly all the fellows are anxious to be friendly with you again, but you simply won't let them."

"I don't want to be friendly!" said Handforth stubbornly. "They're a lot of rotters——"

"They're not—and you know they're not!" said Dora firmly. "There will never be any improvement if you keep up that nasty spirit, Ted. Why, even Irene is bad friends with you. And you used to be such pals, too. It hurts me to see it, Ted. What's the matter?" she added anxiously.

Handforth was tongue-tied. He felt very embarrassed. He felt, too, that he couldn't possibly discuss his "break" with Irene in this fashion. Of course, Dora was Irene's cousin, but that didn't make any difference.

Perhaps he felt a few qualms of conscience. He well remembered how, nearly a fortnight ago, he had met Irene laughing and talking with a fellow who was a perfect stranger to him. Irene had seemed on terms of the greatest familiarity with this stranger, too.

The incident had happened on the very day that Handforth had disowned the Remove. Consequently he had been feeling very aggressive and antagonistic, and he remembered, with rather a feeling of guilt, that he had roughly and rudely asked Irene why she was so friendly with the stranger. Irene, being rather a sensitive girl, had resented his manner. Since then, they hadn't even spoken. This had only added to Handforth's wretchedness, for Irene had always been his own special girl chum. This quarrel with Irene, indeed, had done much to increase Handforth's bitterness against the Remove.

Dora, as she busied herself with the plaster, intuitively felt that the subject was too ticklish for her to handle. So she changed it.

"Sometimes," she said, rather wistfully, "I wish I were at school again, Ted. I am very happy here, at St. Frank's, but I'm so tied."

"How do you mean?" asked Handforth.

"Well, I would like to go to London tomorrow to my cousin Elsie's wedding," replied the girl. "Irene's going—she's got the whole day off from school. Lucky Renie! Elsie Winston's wedding will be a wonderful affair—"

"Elsie—what?" broke in Handforth, staring at Dora with wide-open eyes.

"Elsie Winston."

"But—but— Elsie Winston!" yelled Handforth excitedly. "And—and she's your cousin?"

"She's Irene's cousin, too," said Dora, in wonder. "You see, my father and Irene's father are brothers, and Mrs. Winston is their sister. That's simple enough, Ted, isn't it?"

But Handforth wasn't listening. He was standing there, and his face had gone pale, and his eyes were filled with utter consternation!



### CHAPTER 3.

#### What's in a Name?

DORA was completely mystified.

Her patient's abrupt change of manner was incomprehensible to

her. What earthly reason could he have for being so startled at the mere mention of her cousin Elsie's wedding?

"Winston!" panted Handforth, at last. "Oh, my only hat!"

"Ted, what *do* you mean?" asked Dora, looking at him with concern. "Whatever is the matter?"

Handforth suddenly came to himself with a start.

"Look here, Dora!" he said, clutching at her slender arm so fiercely that she winced. "A week or two ago I met a young chap down the lane—a chap I'd never seen here before."

"That must have been Jack," said Dora, gently pulling her arm away.

"Jack!"

"Cousin Jack," nodded Dora.

"Yes, I was told that his name was Jack Winston," said Handforth breathlessly. "Do you mean to tell me that he's Irene's cousin?"

"My cousin, too," said Dora smilingly. "But why are you so excited, Ted? As I've just been telling you, Irene's got special

permission to leave by the first train in the morning—"

"She's leaving?" said Handforth blankly.

"Not for good, you silly!" laughed Dora. "Only for the day. She's going by herself—by the early train—so that she can attend cousin Elsie's wedding in London."

"Oh, I see," said Handforth abstractedly.

"Jack told us all about it when he was down here a week or two ago," went on Dora. "In fact, that was one reason why he came down—so as to arrange for Irene's day off. I thought it was very decent of him."

"Oh, rather!" said Handforth thickly.

Dora gave it up. She could not understand Handforth's bewildered manner. Perhaps he would come to himself soon, and would explain. She held out the little patch of plaster that she had prepared.

"Now, Ted—hold steady!" she ordered firmly.

"By George!" said Handforth, his eyes gleaming. "I must go! I can't stay here—"

"But this plaster—"

"Blow the plaster!"

"Ted!" protested the girl.

"I—I mean—I'm awfully sorry, Dora!" panted Handforth, backing away. "I didn't mean to be rude! But—but I can't stop! I've just got to go!"

"But it will only take me a minute—"

Handforth simply didn't listen. He turned on his heel and fled from the surgery. He wrenched the door open, tore out, and within another minute he was racing across Inner Court towards the Triangle. It had been utterly impossible for Dora to stop him.

"Well I'm blessed!" murmured the girl, as she watched him running.

Without slackening his pace, Handforth pelted across the Triangle, rushed out through the main gateway, and turned up the lane. There was only one thought in his mind—to get to the Moor View School! To get to Irene. The one thing in the world at this moment was to face Irene and beg her forgiveness.

"Oh, my goodness!" panted Handforth, as he ran. "What a fool I was! What a dotty, crazy lunatic! No wonder Renie gave me the cold shoulder."

That information from Dora had come as a terrific shock to him. And the very simplicity of the explanation only added to Handforth's consternation.

Ever since he had quarrelled with Irene he had held bitter thoughts regarding that stranger. He had believed that Irene had thrown him over, and had made friends with somebody else. At the time she had told Handforth that the young fellow's name had been Jack Winston. But never for a moment had Handforth guessed that Jack was a cousin of hers.

As Handforth remembered that meeting he went hot all over. Now that he could see

the thing in the true light, he realised that he had been unforgivingly rude. Bluntly and roughly he had asked Irene what she had meant by "chucking him over" in favour of her new friend! He had roared at her, and had insistently demanded an explanation.

It all came back to him vividly. Irene had flushed up, and she had resented his manner. And no wonder! Handforth had jumped to a perfectly idiotic conclusion, and the girl had been hurt.

Ever since then, Handforth had been nursing his grievance; but now he saw the thing in its proper light. What right had he to object to Irene's friendliness to her own cousin? He had acted like a bear with a sore head—he had assumed things that he had had no right to assume.

"Oh, I must apologise!" he muttered, as he ran. "I've got to find Irene, and ask her forgiveness! Before I do anything else, I've got to apologise to her. I've got to explain—and to tell her how sorry I am!"

Nothing else in the whole world mattered. Before anything else, he must put things straight with Irene! And he was fearful. He had a terrible doubt in his mind. Would the girl ever forgive him?

If only he could speak to her alone for two or three minutes, he would blurt out his regrets; and there was nothing niggardly about Handforth when he knew that he was in the wrong. All he wanted to do, in such circumstances, was to utter profound expressions of his regret.

For nearly a fortnight he had avoided going anywhere near the Moor View School. He had dodged when any of the girls had come into sight. Like an idiot, he had believed himself to be the aggrieved party, and he had done everything in his power to show Irene that he didn't care a toss about her friendship. And yet, all the time, he was in the wrong!

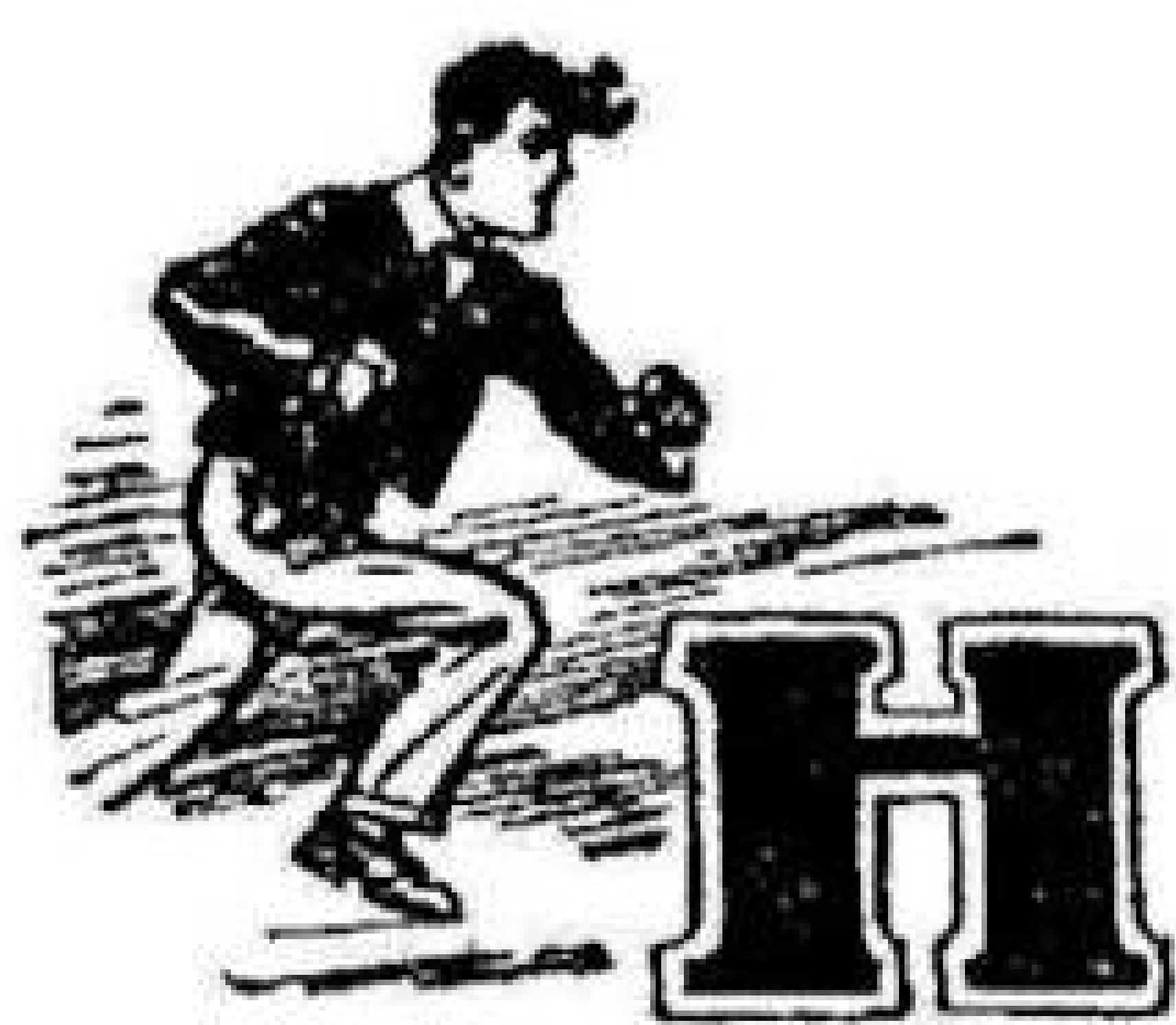
He raced on towards the Moor View School, his heart thumping heavily against his ribs.

If only Irene would listen to him, just for three minutes, all would be well. But would she listen?

That was the point! Would she listen?

## CHAPTER 4.

### Failure!



**H**ANDFORTH didn't stop running until he reached the main door of the Moor View School.

And now, having raced across the courtyard, he stood there, in the big porch, breathing heavily. He didn't even wait to compose himself before hammering hard upon the knocker.

To his disappointment, he had found the door closed, and he couldn't very well walk in. He had half expected that some of the girls would be in sight, and he had been hoping that they would tell him where he could find Irene.

But he had seen nobody in the courtyard. He could hear girlish voices and laughter, floating from some of the open windows, but none of the girls themselves were in sight.

The door opened.

"Oh, I say!" burst out Handforth. "I wonder if——"

He paused. Instead of Doris Berkeley, or Mary Summers, or Winnie Pitt, or one of the other girls he knew, he beheld a neat maidservant.

"Yes, sir?" she said inquiringly.

"Oh, rather!" said Handforth, confused. "I—I mean—— Look here, I want to speak to Irene—— That is to say, Miss Manners. She's in, isn't she?"

"I believe she's down at the courts, playing tennis, sir," said the maid. "But I'm not quite sure. She may have come in. I'll see, if you like."

"Thanks awfully!" said Handforth. "Tell her that it's Ted Handforth. Say that I particularly want to see her for two or three minutes."

"Very good, sir," said the maid.

She vanished, and Handforth waited. He was in a fever—in more senses than one. He was feverish with impatience, and he was simply streaming with perspiration. It was quite warm that evening, and his run from the school had been strenuous. He was just beginning to realise that he did not look at all presentable, and when he fumbled for his handkerchief he remembered that it was bloodstained, and that he had left it in the sanatorium.

"Oh, my hat!" he muttered wretchedly.

He tried to straighten his ruffled hair. He was aware of a severe ache in his left shoulder, and it was certainly a fact that his head was throbbing abominably. After that fall of his, he ought to have taken an hour's rest. Instead of that, he had been far more violent than usual and now, in consequence, he was paying the penalty.

There was something very naive about this big, blustering Removite. For all his stubbornness and his perversity, he was a very likeable fellow. There was nothing really wrong with old Handforth, and now that he had seen the daylight with regard to Irene, he was beginning to wonder if he had been in the wrong all the time. It was a thought that shook him.

Now that he came to think things over clearly—logically—he could see quite plainly that he had been very tantalising on that fatal day. He had been very cantankerous, too. What a fool he had been to talk to Irene as he had done! Perhaps all the rest of the fellows were right when they told him that he was perverse, and——

The maid came back.

"Well?" asked Handforth eagerly

"I'm sorry, sir, but Miss Irene is very busy, and she can't see you," said the girl briefly.

"Busy?" repeated Handforth, looking blank. "How do you mean—busy? Is she doing her prep.?"

"She didn't say, sir."

"She's in?" asked Handforth. "I mean, you saw her? You went to her study, or somewhere?"

"Miss Irene is in her study, sir," replied the maid. "She instructed me to tell you that she could not see you."

"Oh, my hat!" said Handforth dazedly.

He hadn't expected anything so cutting as this. His girl chum was in her study, and she refused to come out to have a few words with him! Even now Handforth did not realise how grievously he had offended Irene, and how hurt she was.

"Yes, but look here!" he burst out.

"That's all rot! Go back and tell her——"

"I'm sorry, sir, but Miss Irene told me to bring back no further message," said the maidservant, with obvious distress. "If I were you, sir, I shouldn't try any more," she added confidentially. "Miss Irene didn't seem any too pleased when I told her that you were here."

Handforth stood there like a fellow in a dream, and before he could say anything else the door closed. He found himself looking at the knocker, and, somehow, it seemed to him that the thing was leering at him. The knocker was one of those caricatures of a human face, and Handforth hated it intensely.

He moved away, uncertain and miserable. He didn't know what to do now. He had thought that it would be so easy, too. It was only necessary to get Irene alone for a few minutes, and to apologise to her, and to explain——

He started. Distinctly he had heard Irene's voice!

Doris Berkeley's voice too—and Mary's! He looked round, his eyes gleaming. Near the corner of the building a window was wide open, and the voices were floating out into the evening air. With a fresh start, Handforth realised that this was the window of Irene's own study!

"By George!" he breathed, taking a sudden resolve.

He strode along the gravel path, and then, with one leap, he landed in the flower-bed and reached the window-sill.

"Oh!" exclaimed several girlish voices.

Handforth found himself looking into the study. "Irene was near the door, and she was idly swinging a tennis racket in her hand. Doris and Mary were consuming ice-creams out of paper cones, but they paused now to look at the figure at the window."

"Renie!" panted Handforth. "Sorry to butt in like this, but I want a few words——"

"Oh!" said Irene, her voice full of indignation.

Without a single word, she turned, opened the door, and vanished.

"Renie!" shouted Handforth desperately. "Give a fellow a chance, you know! I want to explain!"

Slam!

The door closed, and Handforth found himself staring helplessly at the other two girls. They were wondering what he was going to say next, and they were destined to wonder, too. For, at that moment, a foot-step crunched on the gravel path, and a new voice made itself heard.

"What are you doing here?" it said sharply.

"Crumbs!" breathed Doris. "The Bond bird!"



## CHAPTER 5.

### The Great Idea!

MARY SUMMERS cast a swift look of warning at Handforth.

"Cave, Ted!" she hissed. "Bunk for your life! Quick, Doris, let's clear out. It might be better for Ted if he's caught!"

The girl scrambled out of the room, and Handforth hardly had time to appreciate the thoughtfulness of their action. He turned, and found a severe-looking lady standing on the gravel path, regarding him through her glasses.

"Your name is Handforth, is it not?" demanded Miss Bond, the headmistress.

"Yes!" gasped Handforth. "I—I came to—to——"

"Never mind why you came!" interrupted Miss Bond. "What are you doing here? How dare you! This is perfectly scandalous!"

"But—but I wanted to have a few words with Irene!" panted Handforth, leaping out of the flower-bed. "I—I mean, Miss Manners!"

"Leave these premises at once!" said the lady darkly. "I am surprised at you, Handforth! I thought the boys of St. Frank's were young gentlemen! How dare you come here, prying through the windows of the girls' studies?"

Handforth was staggered.

"But—but I didn't mean——" he began helplessly. "I went to the door, but the maidservant told me that Miss Manners couldn't see me! And—and I heard her voice, and some of the other girls laughing, so I came along to the window. There was no harm in it, Miss Bond!"

Miss Bond relaxed her stern expression.

"Nevertheless, you should not have done it!" she said coldly. "And you certainly ought to have known better than to trample on my flowers!"

"Oh, I say! I—I'm awfully sorry about that!"



Handforth was determined to see Irene. He strode along the gravel path and then, with one leap, he landed in the flower-bed and reached the window-sill. "Oh!" exclaimed several girlish voices as he looked in.

"You will kindly go!" said Miss Bond, who still looked very scandalised. "I have never objected to you boys being on friendly terms with my girls. I like it—I approve of it. I think there is nothing better than healthy friendship between boys and girls. But you are taking an outrageous advantage of my leniency when you act in this way!"

"The fact is, Miss Bond, I've had a bit of a row with Irene!" said Handforth miserably. "I've been a rotter—and I wanted to apologise. That's all! She wouldn't see me, and—and——"

"Well, let us hope that you patch up this quarrel sooner or later," said Miss Bond, not unkindly. "However, Handforth, you must not stay here now. In the circumstances, I shall not report you to your House-master, as I had intended. But please go."

It was final, and Handforth could do nothing but depart. There was something almost comical in the way he attempted to raise his hat—for he was not wearing a hat. Confused and wretched, he wandered out into the road, and walked slowly back to St. Frank's. His left shoulder was beginning

to hurt him more than ever now, although he hardly felt the pain. There was a much greater pain within him.

"Oh, my goodness!" he muttered. "What a frost! She wouldn't even see me—wouldn't even speak to me, when I had her face to face! I'd no idea she was so upset! What a cad I must be!"

He turned aside at a gateway and stood there, leaning over the gate, staring unseeingly across the meadows. His wretchedness was written all over his rugged face. If only he could get to Irene, and talk to her alone for two or three minutes! Once he had apologised he would feel better. Once he had got those words of regret off his chest, his burden would be lightened. At present, he felt as though he were choking.

"What the dickens shall I do?" he muttered unhappily.

His world would, indeed, be sunnier, if, at least, he made friends with Irene again. Perhaps it would be the ending of all this nonsense. Perhaps the girl would influence him, and make him come back to his senses.

But how could he speak to her? He

couldn't very well wander about the lanes in the hope that he might encounter her. It was ten chances to one that she would be with several of the other girls—and it was sheerly impossible for him to unburden himself in public.

Then, like a flash of sunlight out of the greyness, an idea came to him. Dimly, vaguely, he recalled Dora's words. He hadn't paid much attention to them at the time, but now they were beginning to come back to him.

"What was that that Dora was saying?" he muttered feverishly. "Something about to-morrow! Something about Irene going off by an early train! Oh, my hat! I can't quite remember—Yes I can! By George!"

He stood there, his face flushing and his eyes gleaming with a new hope. He remembered quite clearly now. Irene had obtained permission to go to London on the morrow to attend her cousin Elsie's wedding! Yes, and she was going off by the first train from Belton—alone! And the first train was an early one—leaving soon after seven.

"That's it!" said Handforth breathlessly. "Why, it's easy! It's as simple as A.B.C.! What the dickens have I been worrying myself about?"

He could have laughed aloud in his relief.

"Why, it was all planned especially for me!" he told himself exultantly. "I've only got to get up jolly early to-morrow morning, and then I can nip down to the station and be there on the platform when Irene arrives!"

She couldn't very well avoid him there! He could travel with her as far as Bannington, and explain things on the way! The train took ten minutes, at least, and Handforth felt that he would say everything within three minutes! Why, this was the best piece of luck that he had had for years!

It was so simple. And after he had explained everything to her, he could take the next train back and nobody would be the wiser, for he would be at St. Frank's again well before breakfast. It seemed to Handforth that the world had become sunnier. The sky was more blue, and the birds were twittering with gaiety.

Handforth glanced round as he heard the faint hum of bicycle wheels. A telegraph messenger passed him, but he hardly saw. He little realised the significance of that messenger!

He continued his way to St. Frank's with a springy step, and a confident smile had appeared on his features. The solution to his problem was so delightfully straightforward that Handforth hugged himself. And as he walked along, he invented all manner of self-abasing phrases that he would use in the course of his elaborate apology.

He found himself in the Triangle, and Fenton of the Sixth stopped him.

"What's this I hear about you falling out of a window, Handforth?" asked the captain of the school.

"Eh? Me? You must be dreaming!" said Handforth. "I haven't fallen out of any window!"

"Then what's that nasty cut over your eye?" demanded Fenton. "Man alive! It needs dressing——"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Handforth, with a start. "That's right! I *did* fall out of a window, now I come to think of it! Well I'm jiggered!"

He walked on, once again in the world of realities.



## CHAPTER 6.

### Something Handforth Didn't Know!

At the Moor View School, Irene Manners was sitting gloomily on the edge of the table in her

study. Her pretty face was overcast.

"I was perfectly horrid to Ted!" she said slowly. "I know we've had a row and all that, but I feel rather awful about it now."

Doris Berkeley smiled.

"Cheer up, old girl!" she said. "It'll do Ted good! And you're bound to meet him again——"

"But I can't see him this evening—it's nearly time for locking up!" said Irene. "And I'm going to London to-morrow—early. That means that I can't possibly see him until the day after to-morrow."

"Well, don't let it worry you, Renie," said Mary Summers. "And if you didn't want to snub him, why——"

"Oh, I don't know!" broke in Irene. "But as soon as I saw him, I felt angry. I remembered how rude he had been, and I thought that he ought to have a lesson."

"Well, you were quite right," said Doris judiciously. "He deserves a lesson—and if I were you I shouldn't worry in the tiniest degree. You've got to enjoy yourself to-morrow, remember!"

A tap sounded on the door, and a maid-servant appeared.

"Here's a telegram for you, Miss Irene," she said.

"A wire!" cried Irene. "For me? Oh, it must be from cousin Elsie!"

She tore it open, and suddenly her face became filled with dismay.

"What is it, Renie?" asked Doris, with concern.

"Oh, isn't this just too bad?" said Irene, looking vexed. "It's from Aunt Caroline, and she says that Elsie badly sprained her ankle at tennis to-day, and the wedding is postponed for a fortnight!"

"Oh, tough luck!" said Mary sympathetically.

"What a shame!" said Irene. "Poor old cousin Elsie!"

It was rather like Irene to put it that way. She said nothing about her own disappointment.

"Well, you'll get the day off later on—in a fortnight," said Doris practically. "And there's one consolation, Renie."

"What's that?"

"Why, you'll probably be able to see Ted to-morrow," said Doris, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, bother Ted!" said Irene, frowning. "At least, bother him just at this minute! I suppose I'd better go to Miss Bond and show her this wire."

And Handforth, in the meantime, knowing nothing of this postponement, contentedly matured his plans.

That evening, many fellows in the Remove noticed that Handforth was different. He wasn't wearing that sullen expression which had been so usual with him of late. But nobody took much notice of him. Indeed, they hadn't the chance, for Handforth kept mainly in Study D, alone.

Once he passed Church and McClure in the passage, but they did not even look at him. In these strange days, Church and McClure were more distant to their former leader than any of the other fellows. They were rather fed-up with Handy, and they had decided to wait until he had had the commonsense to "come off the high horse."

Handforth remembered an important thing later on in the evening. He felt that he could trust himself to awaken at six o'clock the next morning—but the occasion was such a critical one that he could not leave it to chance. He would need to borrow an alarm clock; and as he had decided to have nothing to do with the Remove or the Fourth, he went long to the Fifth Form passage.

Luckily, he obtained an excellent alarm clock from the ever genial Browne, who lent it to him with all the good will in the world. Handforth did not know, of course, that the clock belonged to Stevens, who shared the same study of Browne.

On the way down the passage, Handforth tested the alarm. The buzzer was a loud one, and it gave Handforth a start as it commenced its ear-shattering din.

"Here, stop that noise, you confounded young idiot!" said an irritable voice.

Handforth turned, and found Biggleswade of the Sixth near him.

"It's all right—nothing to make a song about," said Handforth.

"It's not all right!" snapped Biggleswade. "Stop it, I tell you!"

Handforth pulled the lever, and the din ceased. He looked at Biggleswade rather curiously. For, as a rule, this particular prefect was excessively good-natured and genial, and Handforth had never known him to suffer from nerves before.

"What's up with you, Biggy?" he asked wonderingly.

"Jawache!" grunted Biggleswade.

"Oh!" said Handforth. "That's tough! Why don't you have the tooth out?"

"It's neuralgia, or something!" said the Sixth Former, with a wild light in his eyes. "I'm nearly dotty with it! About six teeth aching at once!"

"Try mustard," advised Handforth. "Fill your face with mustard, and——"

But Biggleswade was walking on; he was

tired of hearing of these household remedies. Just then the bedtime bell began to clang, and Handforth moved off. He went up to his dormitory in a peaceful state of mind.

He had this little bed-room to himself. Normally, Church and McClure shared it with him—but since the "break," his chums had gone elsewhere. Nowadays, Handforth was left severely alone.

And Edward Oswald was very glad of it, for he cherished a secret. He had every reason to be thankful to Church and McClure for leaving him to himself like this.

For when all lights had been extinguished, Handforth did not go to sleep. He remained awake, waiting. At last ten-fifteen chimed, and by this time the school was quiet and still. Handforth slipped out of bed, and quickly put some things on. Then he crept downstairs—and noiselessly made his way to Study D in the darkness.

He crept in, and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Safe as houses!" he murmured. "Good egg!"

This procedure on Handforth's part was becoming a nightly practice. Truth to tell, he was expecting a visitor. He went to the window, and looked out into the West Square. There was a crescent moon in the sky, and the stars were gleaming. There was a faint glow out in the square, but not a soul was in sight.

"Well, it's not quite half-past ten yet," murmured Handforth. "I expect he'll be on time."

He was thinking of Bert Hicks, the vagrant youth he had brought to the school nearly a week earlier. He had claimed Bert as his new chum—and, although the Remove knew nothing about it, the friendship was still "on." All the fellows believed that Handforth had completely forgotten the ragged Bert. Little did they know the truth!



## CHAPTER 7.

### What Biggleswade Saw!

**A**VID Biggleswade was in torment.

It was nearly half-past ten, and Biggleswade, instead of

being in bed, was raging up and down the Triangle like a Dervish.

He marched round the fountain about six times, and then he started off, his jaw set, his fists clenched, for the gymnasium. He went round the gymnasium, skirted the back of the East Square, and came out in the Triangle again beyond the Modern House.

Then, desperate and wild-eyed, he made a circle round the chapel, and came to a halt at last under the elms in the far corner of the West Square.

"What have I done to deserve this?" murmured the tortured prefect.

He was in the throes of a particularly violent paroxysm of pain. His neuralgia, or

whatever pain he was suffering from, was excruciating. Finding sleep impossible, he had marched up and down the corridors for a time, and now he had come outside. But the cool night air seemed to be making matters worse instead of better.

The school clock chimed the half-hour, and Biggleswade gazed across the square. As he did so, he thought he saw a dim figure moving in the shadow of West Arch. There was something rather stealthy about that movement.

"Fancy, I suppose!" Biggleswade told himself.

But he continued to watch and, strangely enough, his toothache seemed better. This was the natural consequence of his mind being concentrated on something else.

The movements came again, and Biggleswade was quite sure. Somebody was moving towards the wall of the Ancient House. For a moment or two it came out into the faint moonlight, and Biggleswade, in much astonishment, saw that the figure was that of a ragged youth. He was an unsavoury-looking specimen, and he obviously had no right here in these private grounds.

Biggleswade was about to move forward, in order to intercept the marauder, when something else happened.

"Hist!" came a low voice from one of the lower Ancient House windows.

With a little run, the figure reached the window, and Biggleswade strained his eyes and ears.

"That you, Bert?" came a voice that was unmistakably Handforth's.

"Yes, mate—here I am!" said the common voice of the intruder.

"All right—hop in!" murmured Handforth.

Biggleswade stared. The window closed, and all was darkness in the study.

"Well I'm hanged!" said the prefect in amazement.

But now that the surprising little incident was over, his toothache came back to him with redoubled force. He forgot Handforth, he forgot the stranger, he forgot everything in his agony.

Like a tormented animal he staggered indoors again, and went up to his own bedroom. He felt that aspirin tablets were positively indicated. But he had already swallowed six that evening, and although they had given him some measure of relief, he was dubious of taking too many. He knew that aspirin tablets were harmless taken in moderation, but he felt that he was overdoing it. But it couldn't be helped. He had to have relief, or he would go mad.

And so Handforth and his strange visitor were left undisturbed.

It was a curious little scene in Study D. The curtains were drawn closely over the window, and a candle was burning on the table, carefully shielded by a little wooden structure which Handforth himself had made. And seated at the table was Bert Hicks, Handy's new chum.

Bert, to be perfectly honest, was an unsavoury-looking specimen. His eyes were

close-set and shifty. His features were foxy, and he was, without question, of a criminal type. But Handforth, who was notoriously unobservant, had not noticed any of these defects in Bert's physiognomy.

Bert was eating greedily, and Handforth was watching.

"You're a gent, sir—that's what you are!" said Bert between mouthfuls.

"Rats!" said Handforth bluntly.

There was a further silence while Bert continued to satisfy his inner man. He had been coming here for several nights now—and Handforth had always provided him with this supper in secret. Furthermore, Bert had been sleeping in the study, using one of Handforth's pillows and some of Handforth's blankets. And at five o'clock every morning, Bert would creep out before anybody was awake.

It had been all right so far, but there was no telling. Even Handforth was beginning to have his doubts. He had a feeling that, sooner or later, somebody would spot this game. As it happened, that feeling of Handforth's was prophetic.

Not that Handforth regretted his friendship with Bert Hicks. He believed in him. He had found Bert wandering along the road, during the previous week, and Bert had poured a plaintive "hard luck" story into Handforth's receptive ear—and Handforth had swallowed every word of it. It was a well-known fact that his leg could be pulled until further orders. And this particular young rascal of the highway had found Handforth an easy victim.

For Bert was, to be blunt, an unmitigated young rascal. He was a thief and a liar. Furthermore, he had two confederates in this game, and it is needless to add that Handforth had no suspicion of this.

Jed Monks and Bill Weenen had their little camp in Bellton Wood, and they were only awaiting the zero hour. Night after night, Bert Hicks had been paving the way.

Little did Handforth guess that Bert had, during these nightly whispered talks, been pumping him continuously! Little did Handforth realise that he had given away all sorts of valuable information, mainly concerning the geography of the school, the movements of the masters, and similar vital points.

All unconsciously, the leader of Study D had answered Bert's seemingly innocent questions. All unconsciously, Handforth had become the dupe of this young hooligan.

His faith in Bert was absolute. He had left his watch and money in the study the first night that Bert had slept there. Nothing had been touched! This, in Handforth's opinion, was good enough! Bert was trustworthy—he was honest. It must be said in Handforth's favour that Bert had been very, very careful during these nightly visits. Never once had he touched anything of value. How was Handforth to believe that it was all part of a scheme? How was he to know that the zero hour was very close at hand?



## CHAPTER 8.

## A Near Thing!

**I**T had been in a spirit of perversity that Handforth had made friends with the rascally Bert Hicks.

On that eventful day he had been feeling particularly fed up with the Remove, and with life in general. Thus, when he had accidentally encountered Bert, he had been in a receptive mood, and Handforth had taken Bert to the school, and he had proclaimed him to all and sundry as his new friend.

And all this in a spirit of defiance.

Later, Handforth had stuck steadfastly to this new chum of his. He honestly believed that Bert was homeless and hungry. So Handforth, very enthusiastically, had provided him with a bed and with food.

But during the last night or so, Handforth's enthusiasm had waned somewhat. He did not actually realise this, but, somehow, he was beginning to chafe. How long would it last?

He himself had said nothing to Bert—he had not breathed a word. He had been waiting for the youth to broach the subject. How long would it be before Bert found work? Before he earned some money, so that he could keep himself like any other decent citizen?

Strangely enough, just as these thoughts were in Handforth's mind, Bert finished his supper. He sat back in his chair.

"Well, young gent, I've bin lucky to-day," he said easily. "I got a job!"

"By George!" said Handforth, the relief sounding in his voice. "That's topping!"

"I reckon you'll be glad to see the back o' me, eh?" said Bert.

"No, rather not!" said Handforth hastily. "I said that I would stand by you, Bert, and——"

"Yes, young gent—and stood by me you 'ave," said Bert, his voice full of false emotion. "You've been a brick, sir! Without you, I might 'ave starved! I shall never forget your kindness, young gent—never!"

"Oh, don't make a song about it, for goodness' sake!" growled Handforth.

"I tramped over into Caistowe," said Bert contentedly. "Lummy, mate, you don't know 'ow sore my feet are! You don't know what it's like, tramping from place to place, hour after hour, lookin' for a job!"

"I can imagine it!" said Handforth sympathetically.

"Well, at last, I see a cove on the beach," said Bert Hicks. "You know, sir—one o' them refreshment stalls! The season's just beginnin' at Caistowe, although it ain't really started yet. Anyhow, I got a job for the whole summer."

"Congrats, old man!"

"Thanks, sir!" grinned Bert. "A good job, too, as jobs go. I start the day arter

to-morrer, so I don't s'pose I shall be troublin' you arter to-morrer night."

"Rats! You haven't been any trouble!"

"Yes, I 'ave, sir, and you knows it!" said Bert seriously. "Well, I got a job with this refreshment stall, keepin' charge of the lemonades and ice-creams, see?"

"My hat, that's not a bad sort of job!" said Handforth, smiling.

"It sounds all right to me, sir!" grinned Bert. "Eighteen bob a week, and my food. So I shall be all right after this—leastways, right through the summer. And I thank you kindly, young gent, for all that you've done for me."

Outside, the school clock was striking eleven.

"Well, I'm jolly glad to hear this, Bert," said Handforth. "You'd better be tucking yourself up in the big chair now, and I'll put the blankets over you. I knew you'd be all right as you only persevered."

Handforth was genuinely delighted. Never for an instant did he guess that Bert's story of a job was a pure fabrication, from beginning to end. In extenuation of Handforth's folly, it is only fair to remark that Bert Hicks was an extraordinarily clever young actor. He might easily have fooled far brainier people than the unsuspecting Handforth.

"Well, good-night, Bert, old man," said Handforth, at length. "You'll be comfy, won't you?"

"I never bin so comfy in all my born days," replied Bert. "I ain't likely to forget these nights I've spent here, Master Handforth. I thought mebbe as you'd think I was a wrong 'un—just tryin' to lay my 'ands on something valuable."

"Don't talk rot!" said Handforth. "You're my friend—and I trust my friends!"

"That's what makes me feel so—so good inside, sir," murmured Bert. "What with that Form-master o' yours 'avin' a lot of money in his study to-night, an' one thing and another. Perhaps you wouldn't like me to stay——"

"Don't be an idiot!" interrupted Handforth, almost roughly. "Haven't I said that I trust you?"

"Then that money is really there, hey?" said Bert, shaking his head. "Somehow, it don't seem safe to me. You remember, young gent—you was tellin' me a day or two ago."

"Yes, about Mr. Crowell and the sports funds," nodded Handforth. "He always keeps the money in his desk, but there's nothing in that. Who do you think would pinch money from St. Frank's?"

Bert yawned.

"Yes, I suppose it's safe," he said. "Any-ow, I'd rather cut my right 'and off, young gent, than go back on you. I'm a pore sort of cove, I know, but I've always bin honest. Mebbe that's why I've 'ad such 'ard luck."

"Don't you believe it!" said Handforth promptly. "You'd have had a lot harder

luck, Bert, if you had been dishonest. Well, I mustn't stop any longer. Good-night, old son."

"Good-night, and thank you kindly, young sir," said Bert, snuggling down.

Handforth went out, after blowing out the candle, with a strangely uplifted feeling within him. Here was this poor vagrant in the school by his—Handforth's—ingenuity. And, although he was poor and ragged, he was as honest as the day.

If Handforth had only known the truth, he would have had the shock of his life!

Even as it was, he had a bit of a shock on the stairs. For just as he was reaching the landing, he was startled to run headlong into Biggleswade, and Biggleswade was just coming down to make a few inquiries in Study D.

"Oh, there you are!" said the prefect, with deep suspicion. "What's the game, Handforth? What are you doing out of your bed?"

Handforth gulped. He was taken completely by surprise. He looked at Biggleswade blankly in the gloom. Biggleswade's toothache was a trifle better now, and he was so relieved that he felt that he had to exercise his prefectorial authority.

"I—I—I've just been downstairs!" said Handforth lamely.

"Well, I know that," replied Biggleswade. "But who was that rough-looking merchant you were admitting to your study a little while ago?"

Handforth nearly fell over backwards.

"Into—into my study!" he gasped.

"Yes, you silly young ass!" said Biggleswade, with as much harshness as his nature would permit. "Come on! I'm waiting to hear what you've got to say!"

"But—but how did you know——"

"That's an easy one!" said Biggleswade. "I was out in the West Square, raging up and down with this toothache of mine, and I saw a regular young rough getting into your study window. You were calling him 'Bert,' too."

Handforth felt trapped. Biggleswade was a prefect, and if he made any report on this subject, Handforth would get into very hot water. He hadn't done anything wrong—at least, so he believed—but, at the same time, the powers that were would probably view the whole affair with a jaundiced eye!



## CHAPTER 9.

### The Night Hawks!

LOOK here, Biggy, for goodness' sake, don't give me away!" said Handforth breathlessly.

"That all depends," said Biggleswade.

"You know as well as I do that you've no right to bring visitors into your study after lights out. It's a serious offence."

Handforth gulped again. From Biggleswade's words, it was pretty obvious that the prefect believed that the visitor had gone. In a flash Handforth saw an easy way out.

"There's nothing in it, Biggy!" he urged. "The poor chap was nearly starving. I met him on the road, some days ago. He's ragged and dirty, but he's as right as rain. I had him in to give him a bit of supper."

"Oh!" said Biggleswade, whose good-nature was a by-word. "So that was the game? You let him into the school so that you could give him some supper? Of all the crazy ideas! Why on earth didn't you give him five bob, and let him buy his supper for himself?"

Handforth could not explain that Bert was sleeping in the study, and he was rather baffled.

"Well, I don't know," he said desperately. "I thought it was more friendly—more chummy, you know—to let the chap feed in my study. He's been here for two or three nights, and there's no harm done. Be a sport, Biggy! Don't give me away, you know!"

Whether Biggleswade would have given Handforth away was doubtful; in any case, at that moment Biggleswade's agony returned with full force. Without warning, his jaw commenced throbbing with terrific violence. He clapped a hand to his face, and groaned.

"As bad as that?" said Handforth, staring.

The unfortunate Biggleswade bent double, and speech for him was impossible. The spasm lasted for a full minute, and even then he only obtained slight relief.

"All right—cut off to bed!" he gasped hoarsely. "Oh, good heavens! What on earth shall I do? This is awful!"

"Did you try that mustard——"

"Cut off!" barked Biggleswade.

He staggered drunkenly away, and vanished into the Sixth Form passage. Handforth breathed a sigh of relief—although he was full of sympathy for the unhappy prefect. But he was satisfied, at least, that Biggleswade would make no further inquiries. If he did—well, the fat would be in the fire. But Handforth had a clear conscience, and he went to bed and dreamily mused over his forthcoming meeting with Irene in the early morning.

And so he went to sleep. And Biggleswade, in his own room, suffered further tortures. He forgot Handforth, the ragged stranger, and everything else. All he wanted was oblivion.

At last he obtained it. It might have been the effect of the aspirins, or it might have been from sheer exhaustion. But, at all events, Biggleswade managed to fall asleep—sprawling over his bed, fully dressed as he was.

Midnight chimed, and downstairs, in Study D, Bert Hicks was pacing fretfully up and down.

"Twelve o'clock!" he muttered. "Lumme! This ain't 'arf gettin' on my nerves! Another 'arf-hour to wait! I've never knowed time go so slowly before!"

What could it mean? Hitherto, the rascally Bert had slept soundly until the early morning, taking full advantage of Handforth's generosity. But to-night he was wakeful—alert—jumpy. Evidently there was something very special planned for to-night.

"There can't be no 'itch!" muttered Bert feverishly. "Everything's planned—everything's ready. Old Jed's goin' to 'ave the barrer out in the lane, an' after we've done the job we can get straight off an' be twenty mile away by the mornin'! Nothin' can't go wrong!"

He kept telling himself this, and as the time ticked away he became more and more nervous. At last the quarter-hour chimed out, and it seemed to Bert that ages had elapsed.

He waited in a positive fever for the next chimes, and now he was at the window, staring into the dark shadows of West Arch. Every little sound scared him. There was a faint breeze blowing, and now and again came the cries of night birds. But St. Frank's was all dark and asleep.

"That blamed clock must 'a' stopped!" breathed Bert at last. "An' why don't Jed an' Bill come? Where are they? Crikey! I 'ope nothin' 'as 'appened to 'em! They may 'ave run foul of the village copper——"

The half-hour chimed out, and Bert's jagged nerves were shaken. He crept out of the window, looking cautiously about him. And then he caught sight of two figures, moving stealthily out of the shadow of West Arch. His narrow chest heaved with relief.

The figures came nearer, and Bert got into the study again. He was followed in by the pair, and the curtain was carefully drawn after the window had been closed.

"Well?" came a husky whisper.

"It's all right," breathed Bert. "Everything's quiet. The kid's gone to bed long ago."

"Did you get to know about the money?"

"Yes, it's here," said Bert, a gloating note coming into his voice.

"Blige me!" said the other man. "An' that kid don't suspect nothink?"

"Not a thing!" said Bert. "'E's as green as watercress!"

Bert was feeling much better now. The presence of these men steadied him. Everything was all right.

"Can we show a light?" came a whisper.

"No reason why you shouldn't," replied Bert. "Them curtains are safe enough. Still, it's just as well to be careful."

The electric-torch glowed, and Jed Monks carefully laid a small crowbar on the study table.

"We don't want to waste no time," he said softly. "We're all primed up, an' we each

know where to go. You've got to stay about 'ere, Bert, an' keep watch. Bill an' me will do the job."

In the reflected light of that torch, those three faces were indeed evil. Jed Monks was an elderly man, wizened and crafty. Bill looked a regular tramp, with two or three days' growth of beard on his chin. He was younger, but he was every bit as villainous as old Jed.

"Well, come on," said Jed softly. "We ain't got any too much time, Bill. Let's get at it! An' you keep your ears open, young Bert! This is about the softest job we've ever struck, an' if anythin' goes wrong it'll be a miracle!"

Very cautiously, Jed opened the study door. They all passed out, and dispersed like shadows into the night!

## CHAPTER 10.

### The Treachery of Bert Hicks!



ING-DONG! Ding-dong!

One-thirty chimed out sedately, and once again the three

evil figures were collected together in Study D.

"Well, Bill, what did I tell you?" old Jed was saying in a gloating voice. "It's the softest job we ever done! All plain sailin', without a minute's danger!"

"What 'ave you got 'old of?" whispered Bert eagerly.

"The 'ole blessed lot!" replied Jed Monks. "Watches, fountain pens, gold pencils, cameras, an' a 'ole collection of silver cups! Yes, an' that fifty quid out of the fool master's desk, too."

"Blige me!" said Bill, in awe.

In a word, the raid had been a great success.

For a solid hour the thieves had been ransacking study after study. Undisturbed, they had continued their work with ever-growing confidence.

Even Nelson Lee himself, who was sleeping on the very premises, had known nothing. For these rascals had taken care to remain on the ground level. They had not risked the upper passages. And Nelson Lee, for all his astuteness, was only human. He was not to know that these burglars had been admitted into the House by one of the juniors. He could not guess that the same junior, sadly deluded, had given the burglars all the information they had needed.

"Well, look 'ere, 'let's 'ave some o' them things," said Bert tensely. "A couple of the watches, an' a tie-pin or two, or some-think like that. Yes, an' some o' them quid notes, too."

"Don't be a young fool!" said Bill. "We're goin' to share arterwards——"

"I ain't talkin' about sharin'!" said Bert. "Lumme! I shall want more than two or three quid, I can tell you! If it wasn't for me, this job wouldn't 'ave bin done——"

"Don't start quarrellin', you young ijit!" warned Jed. "'Ere you are—'ere's some o' the things. It's for the kid upstairs, Bill," he added. "Just a sort of precaution."

By the dim light of the electric torch, Jed handed over a number of articles of lesser value, and he grudgingly added three currency notes of a pound denomination, and two ten-shilling notes.

"That'll be enough!" he said briefly.

"It ain't worth it!" remarked Bill. "All that there money——"

"You shut your 'ead!" interrupted Jed. "There's nigh on eighty quid 'ere, all told, an' these valuables besides. We've made a good 'aul, an' it's a brainy idea of young Bert's to shove some o' these things into the kid's clothes."

"But what's it for?" asked Bill.

"Didn't we arrango it all?" said Jed savagely. "There'll be a big row in the mornin'—an' the cops will be called in, like as not. Well, when they find some o' this money an' some of the valuables in the kid's clothin', it'll put the cops off the scent. They'll think the robbery was done by somebody inside. Don't you see?"

"Of course!" said Bert cunningly. "That's why I thought of the idea! Why, there probably won't be no chase at all. We shall be as safe as 'ouses! They'll think some of these kids stole the things, an' the p'lice might not be called in at all. Even if that young fool of a 'Andforth tells about me, it won't make much difference. Arter them things 'ave been found on 'im, 'e'll be in qucer street!"

And Bert, the traitor, chuckled gleefully.

A moment later he tiptoed out of the study and made his way upstairs. In the meantime, Jed and Bill vanished into the night—to the appointed meeting place, some little distance up the lane.

They felt that there was no danger in Bert creeping upstairs to the dormitories in the Ancient House. Even if he were caught, it wouldn't matter so much. For he would immediately claim Handforth as a friend, and Handforth, of course, would explain his presence. Thus there would be no search, and Bert would be allowed to go.

But this was looking upon the very worst aspect. There wasn't one chance in a thousand that Bert would be discovered.

He knew exactly where Handforth's dormitory was situated, having made interested inquiries. And very soon Bert was in the little bed-room, cautiously fumbling in Handforth's suit. Handforth himself was fast asleep, and snoring peacefully. Even if he awakened, it wouldn't matter much—especially after Bert had "planted" the money and the articles. For he could easily tell Handforth that he had decided to leave the school now, instead of at five o'clock, and that he had just come upstairs to whisper good-bye.

But none of these things happened. Handforth did not awaken, and Bert, at length, crept out again.

Two o'clock was just striking when he joined his companions, some little distance down the lane. Behind them, St. Frank's loomed up in the faint moonlight, dark and still. There had been no alarm, and the three curiously-assorted rascals were aglow with the flush of triumph.

"Didn't I tell you, all along, that it would be a good game?" said old Jed Monks gloatingly. "I told you, young Bert, didn't I?"

"Not 'arf you didn't!" said Bert. "An' all because o' that fool kid! Lumme! I didn't know as there was so much barminess in this 'ere world!"

Here was an indication of Bert Hicks' character! Basely, foully, he had betrayed the fellow who had befriended him—and he felt not the slightest atom of remorse. He only jeered at his victim!

And the thieves went on through the night, covering mile after mile, and leaving St. Frank's further and further behind.

## CHAPTER 11.

### The Early Bird!



URRRRRRRH!

Edward Oswald Handforth awoke with a violent start.

He had been dreaming that he was in his Austin Seven, and Irene Manners was in the seat next to him. The little car, for some extraordinary reason, had developed wings, and it was skimming over St. Frank's like a bird. Handforth was frantically apologising to Irene, and she wouldn't listen. Then the engine had abruptly torn itself to pieces, and was making a deafening din. The Austin was falling—

At this point, Handforth awoke, to find the alarm clock buzzing away for all it was worth underneath his pillow.

"Oh, my hat!" he muttered with relief.

He had learned this tip from his minor, Willy—this dodge of putting the clock under the pillow—but it seemed to him that everybody in the House must hear.

Actually, the noise of the alarm was so deadened that not a sound could have been heard outside the dormitory. As Handforth's head had been actually on the pillow, he had naturally awakened on the instant.

Handforth, as he got up and dressed, was, in a way, an instrument of fate. All unknowingly, he was about to tread a path of disaster; and Bert Hicks and his evil companions were to benefit very materially through Handforth's misfortunes. Delay they wanted—and delay they were going to get!



**Cautiously Bert Hicks placed the stolen articles in Handforth's clothes, and as Handy was asleep he was not aware of these activities. Next morning, however, he was to receive the greatest shock of his life!**

Soon after half-past six, Handforth was out in the open air—eager and inwardly excited. He was thinking only of Irene, and the possibility of her forgiving him. Well, this morning he would be able to see her alone, and he would soon know his fate.

He had gone to Study D to get his cap, and he had seen nothing there to arouse any suspicions within him. As usual, the blankets were carefully folded and placed in the cupboard. Bert Hicks had gone. There was no reason for Handforth to be suspicious.

He was walking down the lane now, in the early morning sunshine. The whole countryside was aglow with awakening life. The sky was blue, and there was a promise of heat later on in the day. Early insects were already out, buzzing vigorously in the sunshine and darting about in front of Handforth as he walked along.

He had plenty of time. The first train for London didn't leave until shortly after seven, and Handforth chuckled to himself as he pictured the scene that would soon take place. Or, at any rate, he fondly told himself that it would take place.

Irene would come into the station and walk on the platform. Then she would find Handforth there—and there would be no escaping him! At this point in his thoughts, Handforth received a bit of a jolt. Supposing some of the other girls came down, just to see Irene off?

He hadn't thought of this possibility before. Yet, now that he came to consider it, it was very likely. Perhaps Doris and Marjorie, at least, would come down with Irene. And what would Handforth do in that event?

"Crumbs!" he murmured, frowning. "That'll be jolly awkward! I can't do anything in front of the other girls—I don't want to look a howling ass! Besides, my quarrel with Irene is private."

He soon came to a decision.

It would be comparatively easy, after all. He would get his ticket for Bannington, and then he would wait some little distance down the platform—hiding behind the bookstall, or in a corner of the waiting-room. Anywhere, in fact, so long as he was out of sight. Then, if some of the other girls came with Irene, it wouldn't matter.

He would watch the train in, he would see Irene get into a compartment—she was bound to select an empty one—and then, just as the guard waved his flag, he would dash forward and leap in. He grinned as he thought this all out. The other girls would naturally be surprised, but there wouldn't be time for Irene to change her compartment. Thus he would have her alone with him for the brief journey to Bannington, and he would surely be able to explain matters *en route*, and arrive at Bannington a forgiven sinner.

It was only a local train that came through Bellton. People had to change at Bannington Junction to get into the London express. No, Handforth told himself, there wasn't a chance in a thousand that Irene would get into a compartment that was already occupied. So his scheme was certain to work.

He arrived at the station, and found that the booking-office was just open. He got his ticket, and wandered on to the empty platform. It was very seldom, indeed, that there were any passengers for this early train. Actually, the train only stopped to disgorge

a mail bag, and to take on several churns of milk.

Seven o'clock struck, and Handforth took up his position some little way down the platform behind the lamp-room. He was quite hidden here, and this spot had another advantage. By keeping an eye round an angle of the little building, he could watch the station approach, while remaining hidden himself. Thus he would be able to see Irene before she actually got into the booking-office.

And so he waited. He was serenely easy in mind as yet. But after the distance signal had changed its position, he began to get a little worried. Then the platform signal was lowered, and he heard several ting-a-lings from the signal-box.

The train was due in now—and Irene hadn't turned up!

Handforth kept his eye on the station approach with growing anxiety.

He couldn't have made a mistake. This was the first train, just as Dora had said; and Irene had got the whole day off. She was going to London by this train, and—

A rumble in the distance made Handforth start round with dismay. A glance up the straight stretch of line showed him a gleam of white steam and smoke. The train was within sight!

"Oh, my only topper!" muttered Handforth. "Why the dickens doesn't she come?"

He threw caution to the winds now.

He ran round the lamp-room, rushed down the platform, and sped out through the booking-office. Still there was no sign of Irene. Which, really, was not to be wondered at since Irene, at that moment, was still asleep in bed!

Handforth ran across the station approach, and stared down the road. His heart nearly stopped beating. The only soul in sight was the postman, coming leisurely along, obviously with the object of collecting the mail.

Then the train came in. Handforth turned and stared at it dazedly.

"She hasn't come!" he panted. "Oh, what the dickens shall I do now?"

He continued to stare down the road with anxious eyes. Perhaps Irene was late—perhaps she would come flying along on her bicycle, at the last moment.

Handforth had always been an optimistic youth.

steam out. Handforth was torn with doubt and uncertainty.

What should he do?

What was the good of using his ticket now? Of what earthly use was it to go to Bannington—

"Oh, my goodness!" he gasped abruptly.

A thought had come to him—a possible solution to this mystery. There was just a bare chance that Irene had gone to Bannington on her bicycle—so that she could catch the London express there, direct. It was a lovely morning, and Irene loved cycling. Besides, there was a wait at Bannington, and perhaps the girl would have more time by cycling to the junction. Possibly, too, some of the other girls had agreed to go with her for the ride. It was just what they would do!

Everybody detested these slow local trains, and they always avoided taking them, if possible. Handforth himself had often caught the London train at Bannington instead of troubling to come to Bellton.

"That's it!" he muttered excitedly. "What an ass I am! I might have thought of that at the first!"

The engine gave a whistle, and Handforth spun round, gasping. At top speed, he raced across the station approach and flew through the booking-office. The train was just starting.

"Stand back, there!" came a shout from the guard.

But Handforth took no notice. He leapt at the train, grasped the handle of a door and tore it open. The next moment he was in the compartment, breathing heavily with triumph and relief.

"Done it!" he panted. "But, by George, I nearly lost it!"

As the train gathered speed, he tried to tell himself that everything was all right. He had hit upon the solution of the mystery. Yet, really, Handforth was in a rare way. He was tormented. Everything had gone wrong!

He was exasperated, too, because he had planned it all out so perfectly. He had seen every move in that little game of his. It had become so real in his mind's eye that he was bewildered now that it had not really happened. Irene hadn't come!

He tried to think of Dora's words again. He was quite positive that he had made no mistake. Dora had definitely said that Irene was going to London by the first train this morning. Well, this was the first train—and Irene hadn't caught it. There was only one possible hope—that she had cycled to Bannington.

The local rattled into the junction almost before Handforth knew it. He jumped out, and looked eagerly up and down the long double platform. It was a central platform, with a track on either side—Bannington was quite a big station, in its way.

There was hardly anybody about. A solitary porter, and a whiskery gentleman who was conjuring with baskets of chickens. Otherwise, the platform was empty.

## CHAPTER 12.

### Rough on Handforth!

ANG - clatter - bang-clatter!

The noise of the milk churns brought Handforth to his

senses. They were being put on the train, and in less than twenty seconds the guard would give his signal and the train would



"She's not here!" muttered Handforth miserably.

Then, as he glanced at the station clock, he brightened up. The London express wasn't due for another twelve minutes, and so it was quite likely that Irene would come in yet.

Handforth paced up and down, his thoughts busy. He kept his gaze glued upon the main entrance, across the tracks. Irene would have to come in that way, and then she would cross the overhead bridge so that she could reach this central platform.

Every now and again, Handforth received a spasm of hope. Some girl would appear in sight, and, at first glimpse, Handforth would mistake her for Irene. Passengers were coming fairly thickly now—in twos and threes—and more than one individual gazed wonderingly at this agitated schoolboy who kept pacing up and down, his face aglow with anxiety.

With a start, Handforth suddenly noticed that the train was in the station—standing against the platform! In his agitation and abstraction, he hadn't noticed it come in. People were climbing into the compartments.

If Handforth had been more composed in mind, he might have noticed that the train was rather short for the London express. True, it was standing on the London side, and Handforth naturally came to the conclusion that this was the fast train for Victoria.

Term after term he had caught the train on the same side of the platform. How was Handforth to know that platelayers were at work outside the station, repairing points? How was he to know that the organisation of the station was temporarily put out of joint, and that all the trains were running from different platforms?

The train he now saw, for example, was really the local—bound for Caistowe. It was, indeed, the train that Handforth had intended to catch back, since it stopped at Bellton. But as it was standing on that particular platform, and as Handforth was in such an agitated frame of mind, he mistook it for the London express. He was never very observant at the best of times, and just now he could easily be excused for his blunder.

Besides, he was frantic. Irene had not appeared—neither had any of the other Moor View girls. This proved that his theory was wrong. For some unknown reason, the girl hadn't come by this train at all! Perhaps she had decided to catch the next train to London—one that left Bellton at about half-past nine.

An idea suddenly came Handforth in his desperation.

He was standing near a telephone box, right in the middle of the platform. He dashed into it, and jerked the receiver from its hook.

"Number, please?"

"Eh?" said Handforth. "Number? I don't know!"

"Number please!" said the exchange girl, with some asperity.

"I—I've forgotten it!" said Handforth, craning his neck to look down the platform through the glass box. "I want the Moor View School, Bellton. Please give me the number, miss!"

At last it was through, and Handforth was now perspiring freely, owing to the confined atmosphere in the box.

"Two pennies, please!" came the voice of the exchange girl.

"Two pennies?" ejaculated Handforth. "I—I'd forgotten—Half a jiffy!"

He searched in his trousers pockets, and pulled out some silver. But he hadn't a copper on him!

"I haven't got any pennies!" he said huskily. "I've only got some sixpences and shillings and—"

"I can't connect you until you put two pennies in the box!" said the inexorable servant of the Government.

"Oh, please!" urged Handforth. "It's important, and—"

"I'm sorry, but I must have two pennies before I can connect you."

Handforth slammed the receiver down, exasperated and desperate. He plunged out of the telephone box, and he now found that the train had gone. A wave of sheer misery came over him.

"What's the use?" he muttered dismally. "The train's gone—and Irene didn't come! What's the good of ringing up, anyhow?"

And he sat down heavily on one of the station seats, and stared with glassy eyes at the middle distance.



## CHAPTER 13.

### Handforth's Little Mistake!

WITH a sudden start, Handforth realised that there was a train standing against the local platform. He rose heavily to his feet and moved towards it.

"Might as well go back!" he muttered drearily.

He got into the train, sat down in the corner of an empty compartment, and relapsed into his semi-oblivion.

At the best of times Handforth was liable to blunder in a matter of trains. But this morning it would have been rather remarkable if he had *not* blundered. And fate, assisted by some defective points, was all against him.

For, actually, he was now sitting in the London express!

But how was he to know it? It had come in on the local platform, and Handforth was too far abstracted to notice that the carriages were more imposing than the local train would boast of. But even in his present condition, he wouldn't have made these two consecutive mistakes if the trains had come in on their normal tracks.

Another feature against him was the fact that the London express was very late—having been held up outside the junction because of the repair work.

The train started after only a very brief halt, and Handforth didn't even notice it at first. In a subconscious way, perhaps, he knew that he was moving, but he did not give it a thought.

Certainly he had taken no notice whatever of the shouting porters. Their voices had come to him as though from afar, and he had heeded none of the words. It seemed that everything was conspiring to entrap him.

After a while he felt more at peace. He had had rather a bad time, but what did it really matter? He began to tell himself that he had been an ass. It would have been quite different if he had missed Irene and had thus been prevented from asking her forgiveness, as he had planned.

He suddenly sat up, and his eyes brightened.

"She missed the train—that's all!" he told himself. "Well, why the dickens should I go dotty with worry? She'll catch the nine-thirty, as sure as a gun! I can miss breakfast—yes, and lessons, too, if necessary! Anyhow, I'm jolly well going to be on the platform again at half-past nine! And she's certain to go by that train!"

This thought was a great comfort to him, and he partially lifted himself out of his abstraction. He glanced out of the window, and it vaguely struck him that something was different.

"By George!" he said, after a pause. "They're using better trains than they used to!"

Indeed, the train was gliding along with that easy smoothness which characterises the modern British express. There was none of the jolting and shaking of the humble local. Moreover, the train was going at quite an extraordinary speed. Handforth had never known the old local to do it before.

The steady rhythm was broken for a moment as the train passed over a number of points. With a little start, Handforth half rose to his feet. There was a station just ahead—he could see it! What on earth — The train was going to run clean through Bellton without stopping!

With staring eyes, Handforth leaned out of the window. What was wrong with Bellton station? It was all different—it was more huddled and — Then Handforth caught a glimpse of a name on the platform as the train roared through. "Midshott." He read the word in a kind of whirl of consternation and amazement.

"Midshott!" he gasped, sitting down in a limp heap.

And Midshott was on the way to Helmford — on the main line to London! This sudden revelation robbed Handforth of all his wits for the moment. He could only sit there, staring blankly in front of him.

"Well I'm blowed!" he muttered, aghast. "I'm in the London express!"

He realised it now. It had taken him some little time, but when the knowledge did finally soak in he was freshly dismayed. He got to his feet, leaned out of the window and stared down the train.

Now that his attention was drawn to it, he could see that all the carriages were big ones; it was a long train, too. It was the London express, obviously enough. He stared out across the landscape and recognised it. But even now he couldn't possibly understand how he had made such a blunder. He tried to remember what he had done on Bannington platform, and he was ready to swear that he had got into the local.

But what did it matter? Here he was, and he would have to stay in the train until it stopped at the next station.

"Great Scott!" yelled Handforth, leaping wildly.

The next station! With a stupefying shock he remembered that this was a fast train—a non-stop! It wouldn't pull up until it got to Victoria!

"Oh, that's done it!" groaned Handforth huskily.

His fresh plans were ruined. He couldn't be on Bellton platform to see the nine-thirty go out, after all! He was condemned to remain in this express until it got to London.

Just for a moment he thought about pulling the communication cord; and Handforth was quite rash enough to take an action of this sort. But commonsense prevailed, and he refrained.

"What'll be the good?" he asked himself. "Even if they stop the train, I shouldn't be able to get back. I'm over ten miles from Bannington by now, and I can't walk it! No, I shall have to stick it until I get to London now."

Resigned to his fate, he thought the whole thing out. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad, after all. His eyes even began to sparkle. By George! It might be all to the good! He would have some breakfast at Victoria, and he would hang about until the next train came in! Yes, that was it! And he couldn't possibly fail to meet Irene as she came out of the train! Why, this was better than the other plan!

And wouldn't Irene be surprised when he walked up to her and raised his cap! It would be easy enough for him to draw her aside, to make his apologies, and to catch the next train back.

It occurred to him that he would get into trouble at St. Frank's, but he dismissed this thought as unworthy. He would have to go before the Housemaster, and he would possibly receive a six-hander for cutting morning lessons. Still, he had got into the London train quite by accident, and in the circumstances he might be excused. Anyhow, he wasn't going to worry himself about it.

He settled himself in his corner, far more contented in mind.

This was Elsie Winston's wedding day—a mere delusion on Handforth's part—and, without question, Irene was coming to London. And unless she caught that second

train she couldn't possibly be in time. So she was *certain* to be on it.

Handforth pulled out his handkerchief in order to mop his brow. He glanced down at his pocket. Something else had come out with the handkerchief, and he stared.

Then he stared harder.

A gold watch chain! He tugged at it, and gazed in blank astonishment at the gold watch which was attached to the end of the chain. His breath came in a gulp.

It was Mr. Crowell's watch!



## CHAPTER 14.

### Amazing!

So if Handforth hadn't received enough shocks this morning, here was another one for him!

Ever since he had got up, he had received blow after blow. First the wait on the Bell-ton platform, then the non-appearance of Irene, the trouble in the telephone box, and, finally, getting into the wrong train. Handforth was only just beginning to get back into a normal condition.

Now, at a stroke, he was plunged back into his bewilderment.

"Well I'm jiggered!" he said, staring at Mr. Crowell's watch.

He could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes. It certainly *was* Mr. Crowell's watch. He had seen it many a time. It was a valuable watch, with a special kind of dial. One couldn't possibly mistake a watch like that.

"Old Crowell's watch!" breathed Handforth, turning it over and over in his hand in a gingerly way, as though it might bite him. "How in the name of all that's mysterious did it get into my pocket?"

There was every reason for Handforth's stupefaction. It seemed to him that the thing was crazy. He hadn't put the watch there himself—he was ready to swear to that. How, then, could it have got there? Mr. Crowell wouldn't have slipped his own watch into the pocket of one of his juniors! Besides, how could he have done it? Oh, it was silly—it was mad!

"I can't understand it!" said Handforth aloud, appealing to the luggage rack on the other side of the compartment. "Crowell's watch—in my pocket! Well I'm hanged!"

He never knew why he suddenly plunged a hand into his other pocket, but when he did so he felt something long and hard. It was unfamiliar. He pulled it out, and now his eyes fairly goggled.

"This isn't my fountain pen!" he gasped breathlessly.

As a matter of fact, he didn't possess a fountain pen. He had had many in his day, but they were generally smashed after a very brief existence. Either he leaned over a wall, or somebody punched him on the waistcoat

pocket, or he dropped the pen and then trod on it. All sorts of accidents were liable to happen to a fountain pen.

But this one wasn't of the usual vulcanite sort. It was gold—the whole of it, barrel and cap and everything! It was, in fact, Archie Glenthorne's fountain pen!

"Oh, this is dotty!" said Handforth, rising to his feet and pacing up and down the compartment as the train sped on its way. "Old Crowell's watch, and Archie's fountain pen! In my pocket! Who's been having a game? Who's been playing the giddy ox?"

And if Mr. Crowell's watch, and Archie's fountain pen, why not other things? As the thought came to him, Handforth plunged both his hands into his other pockets. The result was bewildering.

Not only did he find a pearl tie-pin, which he recognised as Vivian Travers' property, but he turned out an exquisite little gold seal, with the initials of Sir Montie Tregellis-West on it. Incidentally, he found five currency notes, to the value of four pounds, in one of his top waistcoat pockets.

And all his own money was in his trousers pocket, where he usually kept it. Four pounds—which wasn't his! He placed the notes on the seat, together with the watch and the fountain pen, the tie-pin, the seal, and one or two other similar valuable odds and ends.

Handforth viewed the collection like a fellow in a dream.

"What does it mean?" he asked blankly. "Why, these things are worth quids and quids! And this money, too! In my pockets! Either I'm going mad, or there must have been a lunatic at work last night!"

One thing, of course, was obvious. These things had been "planted" in his clothes while he slept. They couldn't possibly have got there in any other way. He knew, for certain, that he had had none of them in his possession when he had gone to bed, and he hadn't dreamed of looking through his clothes when he had got up. He had been very hurried, and he had been thinking about Irene, too.

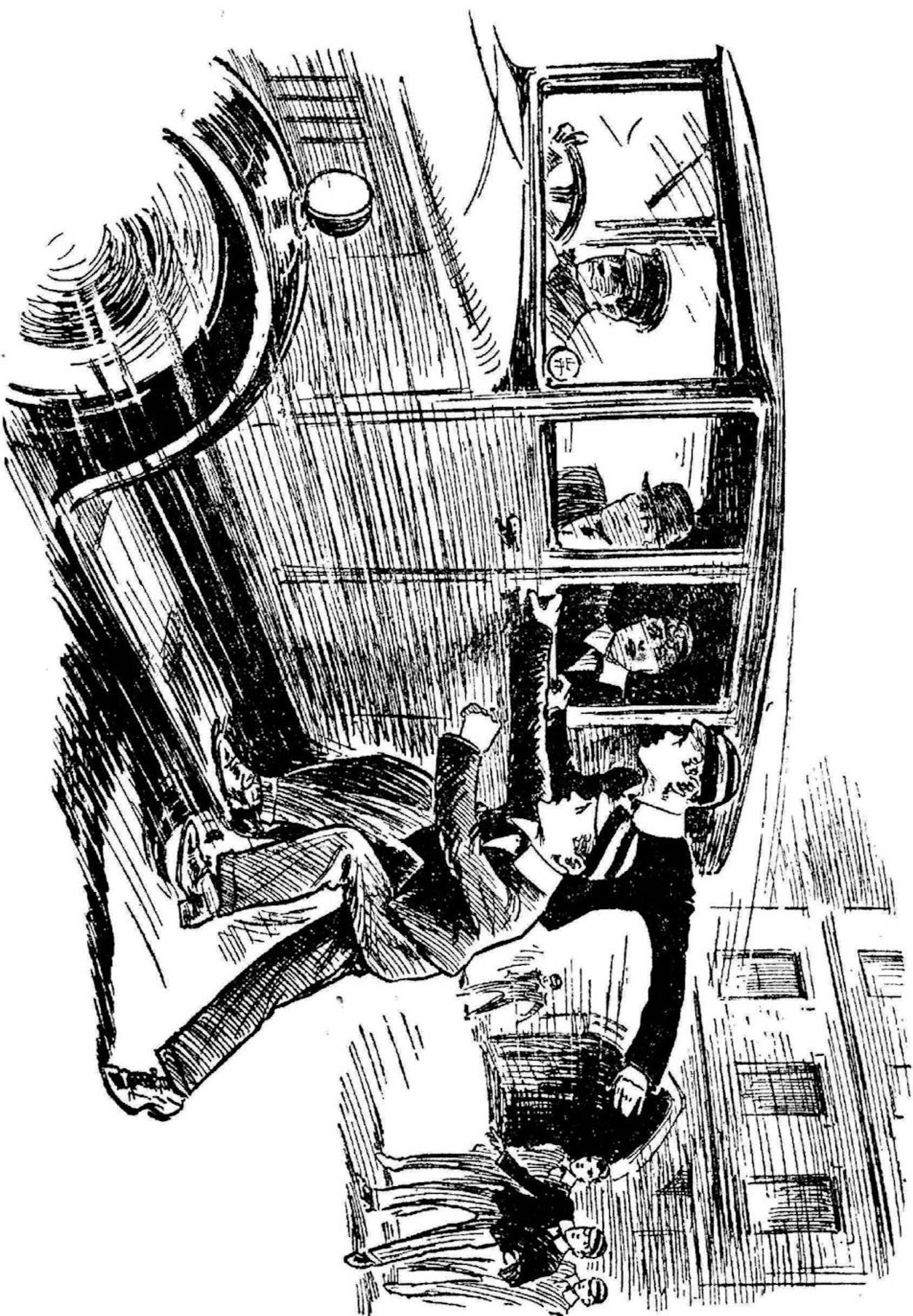
But how could these things have got into his clothing?

"Some idiotic practical joke!" muttered Handforth wrathfully. "That's what it is! I suppose the fellows thought it was jolly clever!"

Somehow, the significance of this discovery did not strike him, even now. These valuable articles were missing—and Handforth had mysteriously disappeared from St. Frank's! He hadn't intended to disappear, but nothing could alter the facts that he had left the school without telling a soul, and that nobody could know where he had gone.

And the practical joke theory did not seem to hold water. Upon due consideration, Handforth was inclined to dismiss it.

"No, it couldn't have been a joke!" he told himself, frowning. "Old Crowell's watch is enough! Besides, where's the joke in piling other people's property into a fellow's pockets? And none of the Remove chaps,



Frantic, wild-eyed, Church and McClure ran up to the gliding car and climbed recklessly upon the footboard. "Handy!" shouted Church, in desperation. "What does it mean?" "The pater's taking me away!" muttered Handforth brokenly. "I'm leaving—for good!"

would have been crazy enough to borrow Crowell's watch!"

The mystery was baffling, and, at last, he was compelled to give it up.

He collected all the things together, and put them into one pocket, including the notes. When he got back to St. Frank's he would make a few discreet inquiries; if nothing came of them, he would go straight to the Housemaster and make a report. There was nothing else that he could possibly do. He was certainly not going to keep possession of these things for a minute longer than he could help.

He sat in his seat, frowning and biting his lip. He was exasperated over the whole business. It worried him because he couldn't think of any solution. Yet it did not strike him that he was in any danger. Being as honest as the day, Handforth never dreamed that he might get into grave trouble.

He was so exercised in mind about it all that he had momentarily forgotten Irene. He had overlooked the fact that he was in the London-bound train, and that he would not be able to get out until the express reached Victoria. The significance of these facts went right over his head.

At last, utterly weary of thinking, worn out by his mental exercises, he lay back against the cushions and grunted.

"What's the use?" he muttered. "I expect I shall know what it means when I get back to St. Frank's. And I'm jolly well not going to worry myself any longer! Blow the things!"

He sat there, trying to think of other matters. But, somehow, that particular pocket seemed to bulge enormously. He could feel those valuables there all the time. They were a source of acute anxiety to him. Try as he would, he could not compose himself.

And in the meantime St. Frank's was awakening to an eventful day!



## CHAPTER 15.

### A Startling Discovery!

**T**AP-tap! Mr. Crowell, the master of the Fourth, had just finished dressing, and he looked round from his dressing-table as he heard the rather urgent tap upon his door.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Please, sir!" came an alarmed feminine voice.

Mr. Crowell strode across the room and opened the bed-room door. Outside, he beheld a scared-looking domestic.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Crowell wonderingly.

"Please, sir, will you come down to your study, sir?" said the girl breathlessly. "There's something wrong!"

"What do you mean—something wrong?" asked Mr. Crowell, his voice becoming sharp. "What has happened?"

Mr. Crowell was a very particular man, and he always kept his study spotlessly tidy. An alarming idea occurred to him that a large quantity of soot had fallen down the chimney, or perhaps a water pipe had burst



Frantic, wild-eyed, Church and McClure ran footboard. "Handy!" shouted Church. "My father's taking me away!" muttered

somewhere and had flooded some of his precious papers.

"It's—it's your desk, sir!" said the girl frantically. "It's all broken!"

"Broken!" gasped Mr. Crowell. "My desk!"

"Yes, sir—the front's cracked and split!" said the maidservant. "And it's open, too, and there are things strewn over the floor—"

"But—but this is amazing!" ejaculated

Mr. Crowell, his voice almost shrill with anxiety. "I must come down at once!"

"Yes, sir, please, sir!" replied the girl. "I went in, as usual, to dust, and to—"

"Yes, yes, of course!" said the Form-master. "And you made this discovery? Good gracious! What on earth can it mean?"

Crowell was the trustee, and all sorts of fellows were relying upon this money to buy new cricket pads and bats and other sporting articles. The money had only been drawn from the bank the previous afternoon, and Mr. Crowell always kept it in his desk. It was a yearly practice with him.

Bert Hicks and his associates had chosen an excellent night for their nefarious work!

All unknowingly, Handforth had given them that vital piece of information, and they had taken full advantage of it!

Quivering with agitation, Mr. Crowell ran into his study, and he uttered a sharp ejaculation as he saw the wreckage to his desk. It had been roughly smashed open, probably with a poker. This was no professional work. At the very first sight, Mr. Crowell could see that an amateur thief had been here.

"Good heavens!" he panted, as he tore the desk open and searched.

The maidservant stood by the door, uncertain what to do. She was pale and frightened.

"Please, sir, I thought it was best to come and tell you—" she began.

"Gone!" shouted Mr. Crowell abruptly. "The Sports Fund money—gone! Yes, and my watch! I left it here last night. My personal money, too! This is terrible, Milly—terrible!"

"Yes, sir!" said the girl, trembling.

Mr. Crowell looked round the study, but it seemed to him that nothing else had been touched. His precious books were safe, at all events. The thief had only taken money and valuables. But it was a very serious loss, and Mr. Crowell was filled with concern.

"Tell me, Milly," he said, turning to the girl, "did you touch anything?"

"No, sir—nothing!" said Milly. "As soon as I came in I saw that the desk was broken. I just stared at it, and I thought that something must be wrong, so I came straight up to you, sir."

"Very well, my girl—you can go," said Mr. Crowell. "There is no reason why you should remain. Don't bother about the dusting now. Everything had better be left exactly as it is."

"Yes, sir," said Milly, with relief. "Thank you, sir!"

She hurried away, and Mr. Crowell, after a moment, strode out of the room, locking the door behind him. He made off with rapid strides to the Housemaster's study. This matter had to be reported to Mr. Nelson Lee at once. It was of very deep gravity.

Mr. Crowell turned a corner, and only just avoided a violent collision with Chambers of the Fifth, who came running along like a cyclone.



ing car and climbed recklessly upon the  
l. "What does it mean?" "The  
ily. "I'm leaving—for good!"

He fairly flew down the corridor, and the girl kept pace with him. Hardly any of the boys were out yet, for it was comparatively early. Mr. Crowell was generally among the first down.

There was every reason for his acute anxiety. His desk broken open—and he knew that he had placed over fifty pounds, in cash, in that desk the previous day! It was the money for a special Sports Fund, and the money was to be distributed to-day. Mr.

"Really, Chambers!" protested Mr. Crowell irritably. "I am surprised at you. What do you mean by dashing about—"

"Sorry, sir!" gasped Chambers, who was red with excitement. "I'm looking for Mr. Lee. He's not in his study. and—"

"Not in his study!" echoed Mr. Crowell.

"No, sir!" shouted Chambers, in a flood of words. "And my study's been robbed, sir!"

"What?"

"Yes, sir—robbed!" roared Chambers. "My desk has been broken open—"

"Great heavens!" ejaculated Mr. Crowell aghast.

The Form-master's attitude had the effect of calming Chambers down.

"It's pretty serious, sir, but you needn't look so alarmed," said the Fifth Former. "I've lost a few things—"

"But you don't understand, Chambers!" broke in Mr. Crowell huskily. "My study has been broken into, too!"

"Great Scott!"

"This—is staggering!" said Mr. Crowell, agitatedly adjusting his glasses and letting them fall off his nose again. "Do you mean to tell me, Chambers, that your study has been ransacked?"

"Absolutely, sir," said Chambers. "The desk has been smashed, and my camera has gone. Yes, and my automatic lighter, and a silver calendar, and—"

"Come with me, Chambers—come with me!" said Mr. Crowell sharply. "This is a most extraordinary affair! Your desk smashed open and robbed—and my desk smashed open and robbed. I do not know whether I am on my head or my heels."

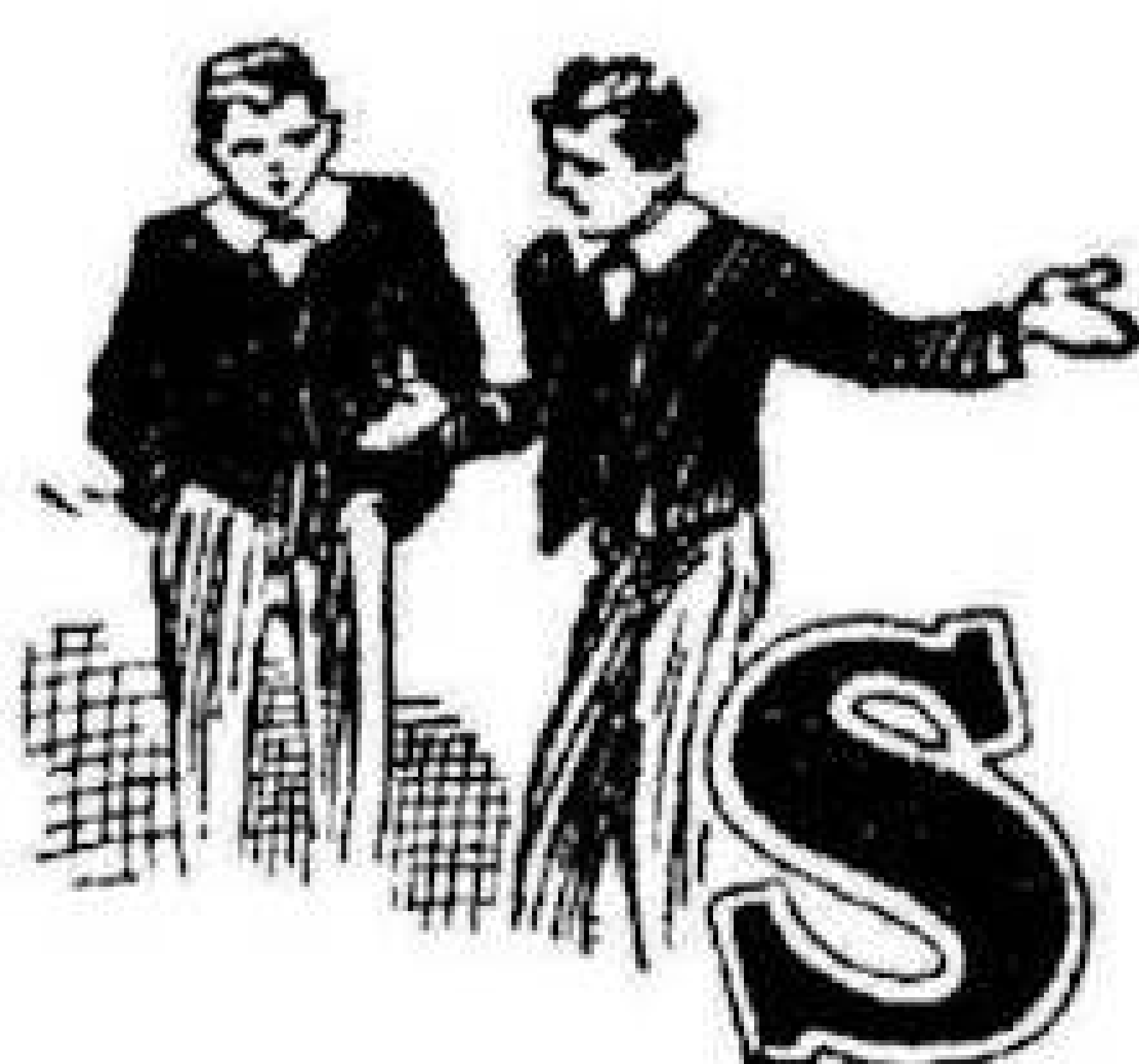
They hurried away, and Cecil de Valerie of the Remove, who had been passing the end of the passage, pursed his lips and whistled.

"My hat!" he said softly. "This is a bit of a game!"

He had heard those words, and in less than a minute he was hurrying along to the lobby, telling his startling news to other members of the Remove.

Not that it was necessary for him to do so. For Love of the Fifth was shouting at the top of his voice that some miscreant had been into his study and pinched a silver cup.

In about five minutes the Ancient House was in an absolute turmoil!



## CHAPTER 16.

### More Sensations!

ELDOM had there been such excitement at St. Frank's.

Only the Ancient House was affected, but the fellows of all the other Houses caught the fever and came crowding round, making inquiries and adding to the confusion. The news had spread like lightning, and discovery followed discovery.

Practically every study, junior and senior, had been ransacked! The majority of the juniors had not suffered greatly—only fellows like Archie Glenthorne and Sir Monte Tregellis-West and Vivian Travers, who possessed a good many valuable odds and ends.

The seniors had suffered most, on the whole. Biggleswade of the Sixth was one of the victims. He was rather late in coming down, for he had not slept any too well. But he was thankful that his toothache had abated. Except for a dull throbbing, he was feeling himself again. And, becoming aware of a curious shouting, he came out to investigate. On the landing, he met Fenton of the Sixth, who briefly told him of the burglary.

"You'd better go down, Biggleswade, and have a look in your study!" said Fenton. "The thing is serious. Mr. Crowell alone has lost over fifty pounds in cash—Sports Fund money—and most of the fellows are reporting all sorts of losses."

"But I say, dash it, this is a bit thick!" said Biggleswade helplessly.

He went downstairs, and it wasn't long before he learned that he had lost two or three articles. He came out and joined a number of other seniors in the passage. From afar, he could hear the ever-growing tumult.

"Rummiest thing that ever happened!" somebody was saying. "The burglars seem to have made a thorough job of it. They've been everywhere—and they must have taken half the night!"

"But how could they have got in?" asked one of the other seniors.

"They could have got in easily enough," said Biggleswade, with a grunt. "This isn't a bank! Practically any of the windows can be forced."

"Yes, but that's not the point," said Conroy major. "The puzzle is, how did the thieves know their way about the school? How did they do everything so quietly and secretly? How did they know where to lay their hands on the most valuable things?"

"Perhaps they got in touch with one of the servants, or something," suggested one of the other seniors. "You never know! Somebody in the school might have let them in!"

Hitchen of the Fifth came hurrying up.

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"I say, have you heard the latest?" he shouted. "Handforth's disappeared!"

"What?"

"Fact!" said Hitchen. "Nobody can find Handforth! He hasn't been seen this morning, and——"

"Bother Handforth!" said Conroy major. "He's an erratic sort of kid, anyhow—and I hear he's been on bad terms with the Remove of late. He probably took himself off in a huff, or something. Why come and bother us with rot like that when we're talking about this robbery?"

Hitchen felt rather subdued, and said no more. None of the seniors noticed that Biggleswade had turned a distinct shade paler.

It was the conjunction of those two statements that had caused him to sway as he stood. Somebody in the school must have helped the burglars! And Handforth had disappeared! Those were the two statements which had rocked Biggleswade to his heels.

For, in a flood of recollection, he brought back the events of the previous night.

It seemed almost like a dream to him, for he had been in a state of great agony at the time. He walked off, alone, so that he could think. What did it mean? What could it mean? The whole thing was ugly—horribly ugly.

Somebody in the school must have admitted the burglars—and Handforth was missing! These two facts throbbed through Biggleswade's mind. He was a simple sort of fellow, in his own way, and he wasn't given to much concentrated thought. He felt bewildered and dazed.

Was it possible that there was any connection between what he had seen, and this sensational discovery? He tried to think composedly. He had seen Handforth of the Remove admitting a ragged youth into Study D! It was little wonder that Biggleswade was shaking all over with agitation.

He had witnessed that incident—and he had made no report! He had not taken any action, either. Handforth, one of the fellows belonging to the school, had admitted a ragamuffin! And Handforth had confessed that the fellow was a tramp from the roads! But had Handforth been speaking the truth? That was the vital question!

It didn't take long for Biggleswade to come to a decision.

This thing was altogether too big for him to hold. He had to tell somebody—and that somebody was obviously the Housemaster. With a growing conviction that he held a clue to the mystery, he rushed off to Nelson Lee's study. But when he arrived there he found that the door was locked. He ran down the passage again.

"Anybody know where Mr. Lee is?" he asked, as he encountered a group of Removites.

"Yes!" said Nipper. "He's gone to the Head."

"Anything fresh, Biggy?" sang out Fullwood.

But Biggleswade didn't answer. He had no time to bother with these juniors. Several times, as he made his way out, he heard Handforth's name mentioned. So the juniors were talking about Handforth, too. But, as yet, nobody had connected Edward Oswald's remarkable disappearance with the robbery.

Biggleswade arrived at the Head's house breathless. Phipps, Dr. Stafford's butler, opened the door to him.

"I want to see the Head!" panted Biggleswade. "No, you needn't trouble to announce me, or anything. It's important!"

"I think it would be advisable, sir, if you permitted me to——"

But Biggleswade did not listen to Phipps. He ran across the hall, and fairly burst into the headmaster's study. He found Dr. Stafford there, with Mr. Nelson Lee and Mr. Crowell. They all looked round as the prefect entered.

"Really, Biggleswade, this is outrageous!" said the Head sharply. "What do you mean by bursting in here——"

"I'm sorry, sir!" gasped Biggleswade. "But—but I had to come and tell you! They're saying that Handforth's missing, sir!"

"What of it?" demanded the Head, with a sudden look of alarm. "Why are you so agitated, Biggleswade?"

"Last night, sir, I saw Handforth admitting a ragged boy into the school!" burst out Biggleswade excitedly. "And—and it seems to me that——"

"This is grave news indeed!" said the Head, glancing at Nelson Lee. "Biggleswade, compose yourself! You tell me that a ragged boy was admitted into the school last night? At what time? Good gracious me! And you say that Handforth was implicated in this?"

"Yes, sir!" replied Biggleswade unsteadily. "And now Handforth is missing!"



## CHAPTER 17.

### Circumstantial Evidence!

**I**T is no exaggeration to state that if a bomb-shell had exploded outside, in Inner Court, Dr. Malcolm Stafford could not have looked more startled.

Mr. Crowell's emotion was mainly one of incredulity, whilst Nelson Lee showed no trace of emotion at all. He was perfectly calm.

"You have made a very serious statement, Biggleswade," he said. "I hope you have mentioned your suspicions to nobody else? It would be grossly unfair to Handforth to have unsavoury rumours——"

"No, sir—I haven't told anybody!" said

Biggleswade, interrupting. "I—I thought I'd better come straight to the Head."

"And quite right, too," said the headmaster. "Your imputation regarding Handforth is dreadful! I must ask you to justify your statement."

Biggleswade, who was feeling thoroughly unnerved, tried to pull himself together. Until a moment or two ago, the headmaster and his colleagues had had nothing to go upon. Even Nelson Lee had supposed that the Ancient House had been broken into by a chance sneak-thief. The Housemaster-detective had been about to take his departure, in order to make a thorough investigation.

But the arrival of Biggleswade made all the difference.

"Of course I can justify it, sir," said the prefect, looking at the Head. "Last night, at about half-past ten, I saw Handforth secretly admit a stranger through the window of Study D. He was a ragged sort of fellow, more or less like a tramp."

"Good gracious!" said the Head, glancing at his companions.

"How is it you witnessed this incident, Biggleswade?" asked Nelson Lee. "At half-past ten you ought to have been in your bedroom. Where were you?"

"Out in the West Square, sir."

"Was there a light in Handforth's window when you saw this incident?"

"No, sir, but the moonlight was fairly bright."

"Why were you out there, Biggleswade?" put in the Head sharply. "Had you any suspicions regarding Handforth?"

"Great Scott, no, sir," said the prefect. "The fact is, I had a terrible faceache. Neuralgia or something. I've still got it a bit. Anyhow, I couldn't sleep. It was absolute torture, so I got up and went outside into the air."

And Biggleswade explained the full circumstances.

"The explanation of your presence in the West Square at half-past ten, Biggleswade, is

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satisfactory," said the Head. "If you were in such agony, I do not blame you for trying to get relief. But why on earth did you not report this extraordinarily suspicious incident?"

"It didn't seem suspicious at the time, sir," replied Biggleswade defensively. "How was I to suppose that the school was going to be burgled?"

"Nevertheless, Handforth's conduct was so grossly irregular——"

"I know, sir," muttered Biggleswade. "The fact is, I didn't quite know what I was doing. I was in such awful pain. I met Handforth on the landing, and he told me that the fellow was perfectly harmless—a sort of beggar. He'd only had him in to give him some supper. A sort of act of charity. I knew that Handforth oughtn't to have done it, but it didn't seem so very wrong to me."

"H'm!" frowned the Head. "You assumed, of course, that the ragged stranger had gone?"

"But he had gone, sir," said Biggleswade, in surprise.

"You don't know that, Biggleswade," put in Nelson Lee. "As Dr. Stafford has just said, it was only an assumption on your part. I happen to know Handforth very well, and he would think nothing of allowing a perfect stranger to have the run of the building. And of late, too, the boy has been at loggerheads with the rest of his Form. He has been in a perverse, cantankerous mood. I am not suggesting for a moment that he has knowingly done anything dishonest, but he is a boy who can be easily duped."

"It seems to me, Biggleswade, that you can be duped, too!" said the headmaster sternly.

"Ordinarily, sir, I shouldn't have let the thing go like that," said Biggleswade wretchedly. "But while Handforth was talking to me I got another spasm. I simply couldn't see—I was blind with agony. I rushed to my bed-room, threw myself down, and—and I was nearly crazy."

"Your indisposition is undoubtedly an excuse," said the Head. "At the same time, Biggleswade, I fear that you are easy-going by nature. You are liable to wink at irregularities."

This was true enough, and Biggleswade remained silent.

"As for Handforth being connected with this robbery, the suggestion is incredible," continued the Head. "But as nobody has seen him this morning, and as we have definitely learned that he admitted a rough-looking stranger into the Ancient House last night, we must pursue our inquiries with relentless energy. The matter is far too significant to be a mere coincidence. Perhaps it would be as well to have the Remove captain here, and to question him regarding Handforth's recent attitude."

So, five minutes later, Nipper himself was in the Head's study, filled with wonder.

"You will understand, Hamilton, that this inquiry is, so far, quite private," said the

Head gravely. "It is being said that Handforth has disappeared. Do you know of any reason why he should run away from school?"

"No reason at all, sir," replied Nipper. "I don't think he has run away, anyhow. He's probably gone off on one of his long walks, or something. He's been a bit moody lately. There's been some trouble in the Form, sir—nothing that I can explain. Handforth has imagined most of it. We've all been ready to be friendly, but he preferred to remain awkward."

"How was he awkward?"

"Oh, in lots of ways, sir," said Nipper. "He wouldn't speak to any of us, and he rebuffed us when we made friendly overtures. But we didn't really mind, sir. It was only his way. There's really no need to worry——"

"Do you know, Hamilton, if Handforth has ever had anything to do with any strangers?" asked the Head. "Particularly unsavoury strangers?"

Nipper looked surprised.

"Why, yes, sir, now you come to mention it," he replied. "A few days ago he brought a ragged sort of young fellow into the school."

"Dear me!" said the Head, glancing sharply at Nelson Lee. "Did you hear that, Mr. Lee?"

"What happened on this occasion, Nipper?" asked Lee.

"Oh, nothing much, sir," replied Nipper, who didn't like this cross-examination. "I'd almost forgotten all about it. One evening Handforth brought a ragged youth into the school, and gave him tea in Study D. He said that the fellow was his new chum. He talked all sorts of rot. Said he was going to make this young hooligan his friend. But it was only because he was in one of his silly moods."

"And what did you do?" asked the Head.

"Why, a crowd of us hustled the scamp off the premises, sir," replied Nipper. "We warned him not to come back again—and, as far as I know, he's never been here since."

"You acted very sensibly, my boy," said the Head, nodding. "But why do you refer to this stranger as a hooligan? Merely because of his appearance, or do you know anything detrimental to his character?"

"Well, as it happened, sir, some of the girls from the Moor View School had met that rascal the very same afternoon," explained Nipper. "He had tried to rob them, but the girls were too much for him. At least, Miss Irene was. She's been taking lessons in ju-jitsu from Travers, sir, and she simply threw this young hooligan over her shoulders. She did that twice, and then he bolted."

The Head raised his eyebrows.

"Upon my word!" he said mildly. "I wonder what our young ladies will be doing next? However, I must certainly express admiration for this girl's pluck and prowess. But you see the dreadful significance of this?" he went on, looking at Lee.

"In a way, I agree," said Nelson Lee. "But we must not be too hasty with our theories."

"My dear Lee, how can you say that?" asked the Head impatiently. "Hamilton has just told us that Handforth was on friendly terms with this—this young hooligan days ago! And last night he admitted this youth into the school. There can be no question that it *was* the same youth."

"Here, I say, sir!" protested Nipper impulsively. "You're not suggesting that Handforth had anything to do with that robbery?"

"Handforth admitted this young tramp into the school late last night—after lights out," replied the Head grimly. "And this morning the Ancient House has been ransacked, and Handforth himself is missing."

"But—but there must be some mistake, sir!" broke out Nipper. "It's quite likely that that young tramp burgled the school, but if Handforth has helped him, he did so in all innocence."

"If Handforth acted in innocence, why is he missing?" put in Mr. Crowell. "I hate to think badly of the boy, but, in my opinion, all the circumstances are exceedingly black against him."

The Head rose to his feet.

"There must be some other explanation," he said, shaking his head. "At all events, we must assume that Handforth is innocent until an inquiry has been held. And the very first thing is to discover the present whereabouts of this boy, and to bring him back. Guilty or innocent, he can, at least, provide us with the key to this alarming riddle."

And Nipper was dismissed. He went away, feeling bewildered and worried. What on earth had that old ass of a Handy been doing?

## CHAPTER 18.

### The Crowning Misfortune!



EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH, knowing nothing of the great sensation at St. Frank's, stepped

out of the express at Victoria. Except for the baffling presence of those valuables in his pocket, he was feeling fairly comfortable. Irene was bound to come by the next train, and in the interval he would be able to get himself some breakfast at the refreshment-room.

At the barrier, Handforth explained that he had got into the London train by mistake, but as he was prepared to pay his fare there was no unpleasantness. It was after he had got beyond the barrier that he suffered his crowning disaster.

For, suddenly, a hand was placed upon his shoulder—a heavy hand—and a familiar voice sounded in his ear.

"Handforth!" said the voice, in a tone of astonishment.

Handforth swung round—and found himself looking at Mr. Pagett, the master of the Fifth Form at St. Frank's!

"My goodness!" gasped Handforth blankly. "I—I mean—Hullo, sir! I—I—I mean, you—you—"

Words failed him, and every atom of colour had fled from his cheeks. Indeed, he looked so startled—so guilty—so taken aback, that Mr. Pagett eyed him with sudden suspicion.

The Fifth Form-master was pompous and overbearing, and he had an immense idea of his own importance. Otherwise, he was by no means a bad sort. He had only accosted Handforth, now, in a spirit of friendliness, not unmingled with surprise. He had naturally assumed that Handforth had full permission to be in London. Mr. Pagett himself had been away from the school for a few days, but was now on his way back. He intended catching the mid-morning train to St. Frank's.

"Come, Handforth!" he said sharply. "Why are you looking so confused? I take it that you have a pass?"

"No, sir!" panted Handforth. "That is to say—A pass, sir? You—you see—"

"Are you telling me, Handforth, that you have come to London without your House-master's permission?" broke in Mr. Pagett incredulously. "What are you doing here?"

Handforth was flummoxed. He was tongue-tied, as he stood there, and looked pale and red in turns. And his confusion was absolute.

His brain was filled with conflicting thoughts. How could he explain anything to Mr. Pagett? How could he tell the Fifth Form-master that he had gone to the station to have a private talk with Irene? It would be too humiliating to bring the girl's name into this explanation!

"Well, Handforth?" said Mr. Pagett grimly.

"It's—it's nothing, sir!" blurted out Handforth, at last. "I—I'm here by mistake!"

"By mistake?"

"Yes, sir!"

"What do you mean, Handforth, by that extraordinary statement?"

"Exactly what I say, sir," said Handforth, his brain clearing. "I was up particularly early this morning, and I went to Bannington by the first train."

"But you are in London, boy—not in Bannington!"

"I know, sir," said Handforth. "But, somehow, I made a mistake at Bannington. I meant to go back to Bellton by the local, but in some rummy sort of way I got into the express by mistake. And, as you know, sir, London is the first stop."

Mr. Pagett was deeply suspicious.

"I find it very difficult, Handforth, to accept this explanation," he said dubiously. "How on earth could you have mistaken the London express for the Bellton local?"

"But I did, sir."

"I find it hard to believe you, Handforth," said Mr. Pagett bluntly. "The local train goes out from quite a different platform—"



"Good heavens!" panted Mr. Crowell as, frantically, he searched his wrecked desk. For the Sports Fund money had gone, together with his gold watch and some other money!

and in another direction. Quite apart from that, why are you looking so confused and startled?"

Handforth was silent.

This misfortune had left him weak and flabby. He had confidently told himself that he would meet with no trouble until he got back to the school. Then, of course, he would have to give explanations, and would probably receive a six-hander and a big impot. But to meet Mr. Pagett like this, by sheer accident, was too thick for words. And Mr. Pagett's tendency to disbelieve him only made matters worse.

"Well, Handforth, there is none too much time," said the Fifth Form-master, at length. "Perhaps, after all, I can accept your explanation. You do not belong to my Form, but I have heard that you are a boy of extraordinary mentality. Your capacity for blundering, indeed, is a by-word."

"Oh, I say, sir!"

"I cannot conceive that any other boy would get into the London express in mistake for the local," proceeded Mr. Pagett tartly. "But you, perhaps, would do so. And now, of course, your one desire is to get back."

"Eh?" gasped Handforth, with a start. "No fear, sir! Not until after— Oh, my hat!"

He broke off with a gulp. And Mr. Pagett eyed him with renewed suspicion.

"Indeed!" he said coldly. "If you have come to London by accident, Handforth, surely you are anxious to return?"

Handforth said nothing.

"Come with me!" ordered Mr. Pagett sternly. "I will get you a ticket, and then we will take our seats in the train."

They went off towards the main booking-hall, and Handforth felt desperate and reckless. He had made up his mind to wait at Victoria until the second train from Bellton came in—so that he could greet Irene and have that little heart-to-heart chat with her. And now Mr. Pagett was ruining everything!

## CHAPTER 19.

### A Staggering Development!



HANDFORTH'S next act was one of sheer folly.

It would have been folly in any circumstances, but, taken in conjunction with the

events that had been happening at St. Frank's, it was nothing more nor less than lunacy. For while Mr. Pagett was buying Handforth's ticket, Handforth bolted.

He wasn't going to be kept here, glued to the Fifth Form-master, against his will! He wasn't going to be dragged back to St. Frank's. Not likely! He'd go back in his own time—after the second train had come in! He'd go back after he'd seen Irene! And if he got into a bit more trouble over it, well, he might just as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb!

Mr. Pagett became aware of Handforth's absence only a few seconds after the leader of Study D had vanished.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the Form-master, staring round. "Hey! You!" he added, running up to a porter and grasping his arm.

"What's up, gov'nor?" asked the man, staring.

"Have you seen a schoolboy, wearing a blue and red cap?" panted Mr. Pagett. "He was here a moment ago——"

"Just went out into the yard, runnin' like a hare!" said the porter, pointing.

Mr. Pagett was off, and the porter grinned.

"Well, I 'opes the kid wins!" he murmured complacently.

Mr. Pagett, out in the station yard, looked about him frantically. There were taxi-cabs near at hand, buses in endless numbers—Ah! What was that glimpse of blue and red?

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Pagett aloud.

Seldom had he run so fast as he ran now. Edward Oswald Handforth was just disappearing into a taxi, farther along! Mr. Pagett was positively foaming with anger. He was amazed, too, that this junior school-boy should have so defied him.

"Where to, young gent?" the driver was saying.

"Anywhere!" replied Handforth frantically. "But get out of this station! I'll tell you later on——"

"Stop!" thundered Mr. Pagett, arriving in the nick of time.

He flung open the door of the taxi-cab, much to the driver's astonishment, and Handforth gazed at him with dull consternation.

"Come out here, boy!" ordered Mr. Pagett thickly.

He was boiling with rage. One or two loiterers stood by, watching interestedly. And Handforth, unable to ignore that imperious command, climbed out of the cab.

"Come with me!" said Mr. Pagett, in a voice that meant business.

He seized Handforth by the arm, and marched him back into the station. Handforth found some difficulty in walking. His legs seemed to be made of jelly. For once in his life, he was subdued. His dash for liberty had failed, and he was miserable and

trembling. There was something about Mr. Pagett's manner which overawed him.

"Now, sir!" said Mr. Pagett, in a low voice, as he came to a halt inside the station. "What do you mean by it?"

Handforth was silent.

"What do you mean by telling me that tissue of lies?" went on Mr. Pagett harshly.

"They weren't lies, sir!" replied Handforth, goaded into speech.

"Not lies?" said Mr. Pagett scornfully. "How dare you! If you came to London by the accident of getting into the wrong train, Handforth, then it is only logical to assume that your one desire would be to get back home."

**NEXT WEDNESDAY!**



"I—I—— I didn't want to stay long, sir——"

"That will be enough!" said Mr. Pagett curtly. "Although I am not your Form-master, Handforth, I know something of your perverse nature. And I also know that you have recently been in trouble with your Form-fellows. I believe that you are running away from school!"

"I'm not sir!" denied Handforth indignantly.

"We will not discuss this matter again!" said Mr. Pagett. "You have at least proved, by your actions, that there is something else behind this! You cannot convince

me that it is merely a matter of taking the wrong train! No, Handforth."

The Fifth Form-master was unusually incensed. He was convinced that he had chanced upon a truant, and he felt that it was his duty to escort Handforth back to St. Frank's. He glanced at the clock as he made his way towards the platform gate, and he noticed that he still had fifteen minutes to spare. Well, never mind; he would abandon his idea of going to the bookstall, and he would take Handforth straight into the train and sit with him there—gripping his arm until the train started.

But at that moment Mr. Pagett's gaze

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## ~~~~~ ORDER IN ADVANCE! ~~~~~

rested upon a long line of telephone boxes. An idea came into his head. Still holding Handforth, he marched to the attendant.

"I want you to connect me quickly to a Bannington number," he said. "If you can get through within five minutes, all well and good."

"What's the number, sir?" asked the operator.

He took the number, and he took Mr. Pagett's money—the latter to be refunded in case of non-success. Handforth listened to all this in a dull kind of way.

"What are you ringing up the school for, sir?" he asked sullenly.

"Silence!" commanded Mr. Pagett.

Three minutes ticked away, and then the attendant glanced up.

"Here we are, sir," he said. "Here's your Bannington number. Box No. 5, please."

For a moment, Handforth's heart leapt with hope. While Mr. Pagett was telephoning, he might be able to slip off again. Handforth was reckless enough for anything. But Mr. Pagett was taking no further chances. He opened the door of Box No. 5, and bundled Handforth into it. Then he followed, and closed the door. It was a bit of a squash, for Mr. Pagett was a large man, but he managed it.

"Now, Handforth, be silent!" he said, as he unhooked the receiver. "I want no further nonsense from you, sir!"

He placed the receiver to his ear.

"Hallo!" he called. "Hallo! What? Oh, is that you, Mr. Lee? Splendid! This is Mr. Pagett. I am speaking from Victoria station."

"What's the trouble, Mr. Pagett?" came Nelson Lee's voice over the wire.

"Only a trivial matter," replied Mr. Pagett. "But as I had ten minutes to spare, I thought I would ring up. Have you, by any chance, missed Handforth of the Remove this morning?"

"Why, yes," came the quick reply.

"The boy had no pass?"

"None whatever," replied Nelson Lee. "Tell me, Mr. Pagett—have you seen Handforth?"

"I have not only seen him, but I have got him here!" replied Mr. Pagett grimly. "I thought as much, Mr. Lee! The boy has told me some story of getting into a wrong train, but I am inclined to doubt it. Anyhow, I thought I would relieve your minds of any anxiety. I am bringing him home."

"This is excellent news, Mr. Pagett," came Mr. Lee's voice. "I will meet you at Bell-ton station with a car."

"That's very kind of you," said Mr. Pagett, gratified.

"I am afraid you misunderstand me, Mr. Pagett," said Nelson Lee. "I shall meet you by car because it is necessary to lose no moment of time. Perhaps I had better explain that the Ancient House has been broken into and robbed during the night, and——"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Mr. Pagett, startled.

"There is reason to believe that Handforth's presence will be enlightening," continued Nelson Lee. "It is highly probable that he will be able to assist us in the inquiry. I had better say no more than that over the telephone, Mr. Pagett."

"But, my dear sir, surely you are not implying——"

"Certainly not!" came Lee's voice. "But the boy's presence is very essential. He is wilful and headstrong—particularly so just now, Mr. Pagett. So I urge you to keep strict watch on him."

"You may be sure that I shall do that!" said Mr. Pagett tensely.

He hung up the receiver, and Handforth, who had made neither head nor tail of Mr. Pagett's brief remarks, was very puzzled by the Form-master's tone and by his obvious agitation!



## CHAPTER 20.

### More Circumstantial Evidence!

**N**OT a word was spoken, either by Mr. Pagett or by Handforth, as they took their seats in the train. They remained silent until the whistle blew, and the train began to steam out of the station.

Mr. Pagett was looking very grave. Nelson Lee's scanty information concerning the robbery had startled him. And after what had happened he flatly refused to believe that Handforth had accidentally got into the wrong train that morning.

Handforth knew something about that robbery! Exactly how he was connected with it, Mr. Pagett could not fathom. But it was as clear as daylight that he had been running away. Otherwise, why had he tried to bolt into that taxi? Why was he now looking so haggard and dazed?

Truth to tell, Handforth was unutterably miserable. Everything had gone wrong. Now, with bitterness in his heart, he realised that he would pass Irene's train—probably at about sixty miles an hour! And he had intended to be at Victoria to meet her! But to explain any of this project to Mr. Pagett was palpably out of the question. He would have to wait until Irene came back to school before he could clear up that wretched misunderstanding.

Little did Handforth realise that this trivial affair with Irene was the least of all his troubles! At the moment, it seemed overwhelming, but he would soon be enlightened!

Glancing up, the far-away look left his eyes. He found Mr. Pagett watching him closely—curiously. There was, indeed, something very strange about Mr. Pagett's inspection of him.

"What's the matter, sir?" asked Handforth huskily. "Why make all this fuss? I tell you I got into the wrong train by accident, but if nobody believes me I'm willing to take a swishing."

"Be silent, Handforth!" said Mr. Pagett. "There will be an inquiry as soon as we get to St. Frank's, and the less you say until then the better."

Handforth was mystified. An inquiry? What about? Of all the rot! Making such a silly fuss over a trifling incident like this!

He thrust his hands almost savagely into his pockets, and there came a muffled sound of tinkling glass.

"My goodness!" muttered Handforth, with a start.

Without thinking, he pulled a gold watch out of his pocket, and stared at the shattered glass. In his exasperation, he had pushed his clenched knuckles through the watch face. And he didn't realise, until it was too late, that Mr. Pagett was watching him.

"I am afraid you are very careless, Handforth," said the Form-master impatiently. "Why on earth do you keep your watch in your jacket pocket like that?"

"It's not mine, sir," said Handforth. "I—I mean— Well, you see—"

"Let me see that watch!" shouted Mr. Pagett, with sudden excitement.

"Eh?" gasped Edward Oswald. "Why, what the—"

Mr. Pagett snatched it, and stared at it dazedly.

"This is Mr. Crowell's watch!" he said, staring at Handforth like a man in a dream.

"I know it is, sir!" grunted Handforth. "I can't understand how the dickens it got into my pocket, either."

"You cannot understand—" Mr. Pagett broke off, breathing heavily. "What else have you got in that pocket, boy?" he added, his voice hard and grating.

Handforth was confused and flustered. He had turned deathly pale, too.

"Other things?" he gasped. "But I don't understand, sir! You don't think—"

"Let me see them!" thundered Mr. Pagett, rising and standing over him.

There was something rather terrifying in the master's attitude, and Handforth was more confused than ever. He produced a fountain pen, and the tie-pin, and the other things. Mr. Pagett gazed at them with absolute horror.

"These articles are not your property, Handforth!" he said at length. "How did you obtain possession of them?"

"I tell you I don't know, sir!" said Handforth desperately. "I—I found them in my pocket!"

"You found them—in your pocket?"

"Yes, sir."

"How dare you tell me such a lie?"

"It's not a lie, sir!" flashed Handforth hotly. "I tell you, I don't know how they got there! I found the watch by chance, as I was coming up in the train. And then I found the other things—all in different pockets! But I don't know how they got there, any more than the man in the moon!"

Mr. Pagett felt stunned; and there was every reason for his stupefaction. Nelson Lee had told him, over the telephone, that there had been a robbery at St. Frank's during the night. Handforth had left the school without permission, and he was urgently wanted—because it was felt that he could throw some light on the robbery! And here was Handforth, in this railway compartment, producing many articles of value that were obviously not his! They were articles belonging to people in the Ancient House! They were, in truth, some

of the things that had been stolen! What was the inference?

To Mr. William Pagett's staggered mind, this evidence was absolutely final.

From the very first moment of his meeting with this boy, he—Handforth—had been acting strangely. He had shown an almost frantic fear of being taken back to St. Frank's—as was evidenced by his dash into the taxi.

Mr. Pagett sat back, looking at the valuables with staring eyes. He remembered, with a fresh shock, that he had encountered Handforth by the merest stroke of chance. The boy had believed himself to be safe—he had bolted to London, and his story of getting into the wrong train was a pure fabrication. Mr. Pagett had felt this from the very first—and now he was convinced.

"Why are you looking at me like that, sir?" asked Handforth hoarsely, as he found Mr. Pagett's gaze upon him. "Great Scott! You don't think I really know anything about these things, sir?"

"Handforth, you will be silent!" said Mr. Pagett harshly. "No, not a word! Not a single syllable! Whatever you may have to say can be said when we get back to St. Frank's!"

And the unfortunate Handforth, freshly mystified, wondered whether he was awake, or whether this was some particularly obnoxious nightmare!



## CHAPTER 21.

### The Inquiry!

**D**R. MALCOLM STAFFORD rose to his feet as Nelson Lee, Mr. Pagett and Handforth entered his study. The Head had watched the car as it had driven across Inner Court, and now he was grave and stern.

"Here is the boy, sir," said Mr. Pagett briefly.

"Thank you, Mr. Pagett," said the Head, nodding. "I understand that you met Handforth quite by accident? A very fortunate meeting!"

Dr. Stafford sat down at his desk, and Nelson Lee and Mr. Pagett seated themselves, too. Handforth remained standing. He was startled by all this gravity. Why were they making such a fuss?

For Edward Oswald was still utterly ignorant of the true state of affairs. He believed that he was being hauled on the carpet like this merely because he had been found at Victoria; and it was such a small offence that he wondered what could possess these masters to treat it with so much seriousness.

"Now, Handforth, I am sure you realise the terrible nature of your position," said the headmaster quietly. "By what I can

only describe as a providential mischance, you met Mr. Pagett at Victoria, and thus your hopes of escape were frustrated."

Handforth listened in amazement.

"Escape, sir?" he blurted out. "But I wasn't trying to escape! I got into the wrong train at Bannington——"

"One moment, sir, if you will forgive the interruption," said Mr. Pagett, rising to his feet. "Before this boy is questioned—and in order that he may see how hopeless his position is—I think it would be advisable for me to make an important disclosure."

In his own way, Mr. Pagett was an artist. On the way up from the station, he had said nothing whatever to Nelson Lee regarding the stolen articles that he had found on the prisoner. Mr. Pagett wanted to get the very most out of that moment, and so he had waited until he was in the Head's presence.

"Will you be good enough to explain, Mr. Pagett?" said the Head rather testily.

"I am labouring under the disadvantage of knowing only the barest facts," said Mr. Pagett. "I was informed by Mr. Lee, over the telephone, that the school had been burgled during the night, and that a good deal of property had been stolen. I was further informed that Handforth might possibly be able to throw some light upon the mystery."

"That is quite correct," said the Head impatiently. "But, really, Mr. Pagett——"

"I urge you, sir, to let me finish," said Mr. Pagett steadily. "You already know how I encountered this boy at Victoria. It is important that I should tell you that he tried to escape from me while I was buying his ticket. He ran away and attempted to board a taxi-cab. I think you will agree that was a very significant action on his part."

"But look here, sir——" began Handforth desperately.

"Silence!" commanded Dr. Stafford. "Yes, Mr. Pagett, that action on Handforth's part was certainly significant."

"You will realise how terribly significant it was after I further explain that I discovered these things on Handforth's person after we had got into the train," continued Mr. Pagett relentlessly.

From his pockets he produced Mr. Crowell's watch, the currency notes, the tie-pin, and the other things. Nelson Lee rose to his feet, his face grave and troubled. The Head stared dumbly for a moment, and his own countenance was haggard.

"This is appalling!" he said at length. "I had hoped so much that the boy would be able to offer some satisfactory explanation. But this evidence is——"

"You don't think I stole those things?" panted Handforth, in utter horror.

He stood there, his whole face alight, his eyes blazing. He had listened, with palpitating heart, to Mr. Pagett's words. For the first time, he had heard that the school

had been robbed. And now, at last, he was beginning to understand what it all meant.

"Handforth, I am distressed more than I can say," said the Head quietly. "You wretched boy! There is only one possible course for you to take—and that is to make a confession——"

"But you can't think it, sir—you *can't*!" shouted Handforth, frantic with panic. "And you, sir!" he went on, turning wildly to Nelson Lee. "You—you don't think I'm a thief, sir? You don't believe I stole these things?"

Nelson Lee took Handforth by the shoulder.

"I can only say, my boy, that the evidence is exceedingly black," he replied. "If you will explain why you went to London by that early train——"

"I've explained until I'm hoarse, sir!" said Handforth. "I only went to Bannington, and then I got into the London express in mistake for the local. Mr. Pagett won't believe me——"

"Surely, sir, you cannot possibly credit this preposterous story?" said Mr. Pagett, turning excitedly to the Head. "How could the boy get into the London express in mistake for the local train? And why, indeed, should we bother with such nonsense? Is it not absolutely obvious that he was running away from school with his loot? I am the last man in the world to jump to conclusions, but in this case it is not a question of jumping. The conclusion is forced upon us by its own very obviousness."

"Oh, I'm all in a muddle!" said Handforth hopelessly. "I tell you I got into the express by accident. I did, sir! I did! And when I was in the train, I found those things in my pockets! I didn't know they were there until then! I hadn't the faintest idea——"

"Handforth, be silent!" interrupted the Head ominously. "I had had it in my mind to be sympathetic with you—to give you every consideration. But you are making me bitter and coldhearted. This preposterous profession of innocence is doing you far more harm than good."

"Oh, but, sir——"

"Wait!" said Dr. Stafford. "It will be idle for you to deny your knowledge of the robbery that took place last night. Biggleswade has told me how he saw you admitting a young scoundrel named Hicks into the school after lights-out. It has been ascertained that this youth, Hicks, brought confederates, and the Ancient House was ransacked. Some of the stolen property was found on your person. Can you not see how futile it is for you to profess your innocence?"

But Handforth hardly heard the Head's last words. He was dizzy and faint. The whole room seemed to rock as he heard that Bert Hicks had played him false.

The unfortunate junior felt that he was suffocating—that he was being hemmed in and smothered by the relentless accumulation of evidence!



## CHAPTER 22.

### A Shock for Handforth!

FOR a few moments there was a tense, dramatic silence in the Head's study. The three men were grave and uncomfortable. Handforth was standing there, as pale as a sheet, his whole figure seemingly shrunken.

Nelson Lee glanced at the Head, and gave a silent sign. Then he gently took Handforth's arm.

"You see, my boy, that the position is hopeless," he said quietly. "Surely it will be better for you to make a clean breast of your folly?"

Handforth looked at him bleakly.

"Bert Hicks!" he muttered. "Bert—the chap I thought was straight! My new chum! And he—he did this!"

"Why did you admit this youth, Hicks, into the school?" asked Nelson Lee.

"I thought he was honest, sir!" said Handforth dazedly. "I—I can't believe that he isn't honest! I was doing him a good turn, and—and—— Oh! You don't think that I took part in this robbery, sir?" he added, with a gulp.

"What else are we to think, Handforth, after some of the property has been found on you?"

"Bert Hicks must have done it!" shouted Handforth, with a sudden flash of light searing into his brain. "He *knew* my dormitory! He must have come up and put those things into my clothes! By George! That's why I didn't know anything about them—until I found them in my pockets by accident!"

"This is beyond all reason!" said the Head angrily. "Much as I would like to believe this boy's story, I find it difficult——"

"The hound!" broke out Handforth passionately. "The sneaking, treacherous rat! And I trusted him! I took him in as my chum, and I fed him, and—and—— Oh, I can't believe that any fellow could be so low-down!"

There was such a world of sincerity in Handforth's tone—such a quiver of fury—that Nelson Lee glanced significantly at the Head. Mr. Pagett only snorted. He believed—and who could blame him?—that this was a mere piece of mummery on Handforth's part.

"Handforth, we have no desire to be unjust," said Nelson Lee evenly. "We only want to discover the truth. To begin with, tell us the full extent of your association with this youth, Hicks."

"There's hardly anything to tell, sir!" panted Handforth. "Oh, I feel like a rat in a trap! And it's not right, sir—it's not true! I met Hicks last week, when I was out for a ride in my Austin. He told me he was starving and homeless. He hadn't got any

work, and so I brought him to the school and gave him a feed in my study."

"This, at all events, corroborates our earlier information," said the Head. "Are you telling us, Handforth, that you continued your friendship with this young hooligan?"

"I thought he was straight, sir."

"How could you think that?" said the Head sharply. "Did not the other boys tell you that this Hicks had made a base and villainous attempt to rob two of the Moor View girls on that very same afternoon?"

Handforth jumped.

"He tried to rob two of the Moor View girls, sir?" he repeated in a shout.

"Yes, and he would have been successful, had not one of these young ladies been an expert in ju-jitsu."

"Irene!" breathed Handforth. "Then—then she— Oh, my hat! The chaps tried to tell me, but I wouldn't listen! They said that Bert Hicks was a thief and a hooligan, and I didn't believe it! I thought they were only snobbish!"

His own folly was coming home to him with the force of hammer blows.

"Well, Handforth," said Nelson Lee gently, "I think the headmaster will be willing to take your word for this. You believed that Hicks was honest—"

"I do not think I am prepared to take his word, Mr. Lee," broke in the Head. "The facts are altogether too significant."

"Honestly, sir, I thought he was straight!" said Handforth, with a gulp. "And every night since then I've let him sleep in my study."

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated the Head, in amazement.

"There was no harm in it, sir," urged Handforth. "At least, I didn't think there was. I gave him supper every night, and let him sleep in my big chair. He cleared off every morning at about five o'clock, and nobody knew anything about it."

"This is merely a waste of time!" said the Head testily. "We already know that Handforth has been associating with this criminal, Hicks, and his confederates. Why go over the same ground? Last night these rascals executed their coup. They robbed the Ancient House, and disappeared. This boy disappeared, too, and he was found by Mr. Pagett in London with some of the stolen property on him. Really, Mr. Lee, the boy cannot maintain this absurd story of innocence!"

"One moment, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee, as Handforth was about to speak. "You have told us that you got into the London train by accident. For the moment, we will assume that you have been telling us the truth. Then why did you go to Bannington? What reason did you have for catching that early train to Bannington?"

Handforth opened his mouth to speak, gulped, and then closed his mouth again.

"If you will tell us why you went to Bannington—if you can give a satisfactory

answer to that question—it may make all the difference," continued Nelson Lee. "Come, my boy—we are waiting."

And they waited. For Handforth had set his teeth, and he was determined not to drag Irene's name into this affair. How could he explain that he had gone to the station so that he could waylay the girl—so that he could apologise to her, and beg her forgiveness? How could he explain those personal things to these grim schoolmasters? And what would be the good of explaining? One glance at their faces was sufficient to tell Handforth that they would never believe such a story.

So he remained silent—and that was a dreadful thing for him to do!



## CHAPTER 23.

### The Decision!

**H**ANDFORTH'S silence was, in all truth, significant. For his failure to give any account of his early-morning trip was tantamount to an admission of guilt. It seemed to be proved beyond dispute that he had gone to London deliberately, knowing that the stolen property was on him.

Then, before any more questions could be asked, the hum of a motor-car sounded out in Inner Court. The Head rose to his feet and went to the window.

"I am glad," he said quietly. "Sir Edward has arrived."

Handforth jumped.

"My pater!" he panted. "Oh, please don't tell him—"

"I telegraphed for your father in the early forenoon," said the Head sternly. "I rather think it will be better if the boy is removed until I have interviewed Sir Edward," he added, turning to the others. "Mr. Pagett, will you be good enough to take Handforth away? You can wait with him, please, in the morning-room."

"Very good, sir," said Mr. Pagett gruffly.

He didn't like this task. He wanted to be present during the interview with Sir Edward Handforth. But he could hardly go against the Head's wishes.

"No, sir!" said Handforth frantically. "Please let me stay! I want to see the pater! I want to hear—"

"Take him away, Mr. Pagett!" said the Head curtly.

Struggling and protesting, Handforth was forced through an inner doorway, and he found himself in the Head's morning-room. The May sunshine was streaming through the window, but it seemed to Handforth that the sky was dull grey.

He did not know how long he waited. He sank into a chair, and he seemed to be in a kind of stupor. Then, at last, came a

summons from the Head's study. He found himself walking unsteadily through the communicating doorway.

"Pater!" he said huskily, as he found his father's gaze upon him.

Sir Edward was a big, bluff man—a big edition of Edward Oswald. But just at present he was looking haggard and worn. There was nothing but grimness in his eyes.

"Edward, I have heard everything!" he said, his voice hard and relentless. "I am your father, and I command you to tell your headmaster the whole truth. You must explain what part you took in this miserable robbery, and you must further explain——"

"I took no part in it at all, pater!" interrupted Handforth desperately. "Oh, won't you believe me? You—my father! Won't you believe that it's all a dreadful misunderstanding?"

"How can I believe it, Edward, when the evidence against you is so overwhelming?" asked his father, controlling himself with difficulty.

"I didn't do it!" shouted Handforth, his eyes blazing, his whole figure a quiver. "I can't help it whether you believe me or not," he went on, whirling round on the Head and Nelson Lee. "I only admitted Bert Hicks into the school because I thought he was straight—because I thought he was down on his luck! I don't know anything about the robbery! I tell you I don't know anything—*anything*!"

His vehemence was frantic, and Nelson Lee suddenly pursed his lips.

"Although I'm not suggesting that this boy is entirely innocent, I do state, with perfect conviction, that he has merely been a dupe," he said earnestly. "He was led away by this youth, Hicks—and probably by his companions."

"I didn't know Hicks had any companions, sir!"

"Then Hicks, alone, deceived you," said Nelson Lee. "Surely you can see that, Dr. Stafford?" he went on. "This boy is, in a way, the scapegoat. He has been led away by evil companions, and he admitted them into the school for nefarious purposes. I am even ready to believe that the money and the valuables were deliberately 'planted' in his clothing while he slept."

"I wish I could believe that!" said Sir Edward fervently.

"I think you can, sir," said the Head. "I, too, am inclined to believe that Mr. Lee is correct. Indeed, I shall give your son the benefit of the doubt. He has been more foolish than wicked."

"His folly is incredible!" said Sir Edward hoarsely.

"But nothing can alter the fact that your son deliberately admitted Hicks into the school," continued Dr. Stafford. "On the boy's own confession, he ran off this morning to catch the early train. We can only assume that he was running away, in the absence of any other explanation. It is my

personal opinion that he was completely under the influence of these criminals. Probably he arranged to meet them in London."

"I didn't, sir!" muttered Handforth wretchedly.

"We know that he was on bad terms with his school fellows," proceeded the Head, with the utmost gravity. "We know that he was in a perverse, awkward humour, and, as I see it, he conceived the idea of running away from school—of joining forces with this youth, Hicks, and his associates."

"Appalling—appalling!" said Sir Edward dully.

"By what mental processes your son came to this decision, I do not know," said Dr. Stafford. "But need we enter into that? He has been led away by evil companions, and it will be utterly impossible for him to remain in this school. As I think his actions have been directed by folly, rather than by wickedness, I shall not publicly expel him. But I earnestly ask you, Sir Edward, to take the boy away at once."

"I shall certainly do so," said Sir Edward Handforth, placing a hand upon his son's shoulder. "Edward, there is nothing more to be said. You will come with me."

This accumulation of agony was too much for the unfortunate junior, and all his aggressiveness and strength oozed away. He stood there, tongue-tied—too dazed even to make a further protest.

"It is, indeed, highly necessary that the boy should be removed," continued Dr. Stafford sternly. "There must be no scandal. The criminals will be hunted down and, if possible, all the stolen property will be recovered. And it is far better that this boy should be away, and completely out of everything. His presence here, in the circumstances, would be an embarrassment to all concerned. He has confessed to his association with Hicks, the hooligan, and that, in itself, is sufficient to justify my decision."

The sentence had been passed; and Handforth felt that nothing could hurt him now. He was impervious to further blows. He was battered and stunned into semi-oblivion!



## CHAPTER 24.

### The Scapegoat!

R. MALCOLM STAFFORD had acted with justice.

The evidence was circumstantial in the main, and the Head was ignoring this—he was giving Handforth the benefit of the doubt. But he had admitted his association with Bert Hicks, and that was enough to sentence him. He was not expelled, but he was being taken away from St. Frank's by his father.

If Handforth had been in any position to think clearly, he must have been impressed by the stunning way in which Fate had weaved this net around him. Traced to rockbottom, the slight mishap of Elsie Winston spraining her ankle was responsible for the whole train of misfortunes! For if Irene Manners had gone to London early that morning, as she had originally planned, Handforth would have been back in the school at the time of the discovery.

And thus he would have had no unaccountable journey to London to harrass him. He would have been in hot water, certainly, but the chances were that he would not have been compelled to leave the school.

But as he went outside with his father, he could not think at all. His brain was just one dull ache. He saw nothing—he heard nothing. He was stunned. Later he would recover, and then he would think with crystal clarity. But now his brain was overpowered by the extent of this calamity.

His father was like a figure of granite as he took his place in the big limousine. Sir Edward could not doubt that his son had been guilty of incredible folly. As a matter of fact, Sir Edward held the view that his son had been carried away by the fascination of his evil companions; that in the early morning he had been stricken by remorse and had fled, in a panic, from the school. Sir Edward could think of no other reason for his son's frantic journey to London.

The chauffeur had received his orders, and the car glided slowly, almost silently, across Inner Court and through Big Arch.

In the Triangle, crowds of fellows were hanging about. Church and McClure were there, and Nipper, and Travers, and Archie Glenthorne and all the others.

Nobody knew exactly what had been happening, but all of them had heard rumours. It was known that Handforth had been brought back, and that he had been closeted with the headmaster for ages.

In some uncanny fashion, too, the story had got about that Handforth had been found with some of the stolen property on him. In all probability, one of the Head's domestics had been listening at the study door, and had imparted her startling news—in strict confidence, of course—to some of the other domestics. And thus the rumour had been spread.

"Look!" panted Church suddenly.

The limousine had glided through Big Arch, and everybody in the Triangle was staring. There, in the back of the car, sat Sir Edward, stern and rock-like. By his side was Handforth, huddled and dazed. That picture was enough. Everybody who saw it knew the truth.

Handforth was being taken away!

And this fact, alone, was eloquent of his guilt. He had taken part in that robbery—he had bolted with the crooks, and had, by some mischance, been captured.

Now he was going off with his father—going away from St. Frank's for good!

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Nipper wretchedly. "Poor old Handy! I—I can't believe it!"

"It's too frightfully frightful for words!" said Archie sadly. "Good gad! What an absolute calamity!"

Church and McClure, in that moment, forgot their quarrel with their leader. They forgot everything—except that he was going. Frantic, wild-eyed, they ran up to the gliding car and climbed recklessly upon the footboard.

"Handy!" shouted Church, in desperation. "What does it mean?"

"Handy, old man!" choked McClure. "You're not going, are you?"

Handforth looked up. They were on his side of the car, and the window was open. He found himself looking into their agonised faces.

"Church—Mac!" he muttered brokenly. "I—I can't understand it! I'm all muddled! They've been saying things against me—horrible things! The pater's taking me away! I'm leaving, you chaps!"

"No, no!" panted Church. "It's not true, Handy, old man!"

Sir Edward leaned forward.

"My boys—my boys!" he said in agony. "This is doing no good—either to you or my son. Will you please jump from the car?"

The limousine had stopped, at a motion from Sir Edward, and Church and McClure, embarrassed and pale, stepped off to the ground.

The car started moving again. There had been something very stricken in Sir Edward's tone, and it had been enough.

The limousine turned through the gateway—and vanished.

As it did so a tumult broke out in the Triangle. Everybody started talking at once; everybody was full of excited comments. Handforth had gone—Handforth had left St. Frank's! It was the sensation of the term.

But there were two juniors who were silent. They were standing apart from the others, and they were dumb in their misery. Church and McClure, Handforth's own chums, could not credit this calamity. To them it almost seemed that the end of the world had come.

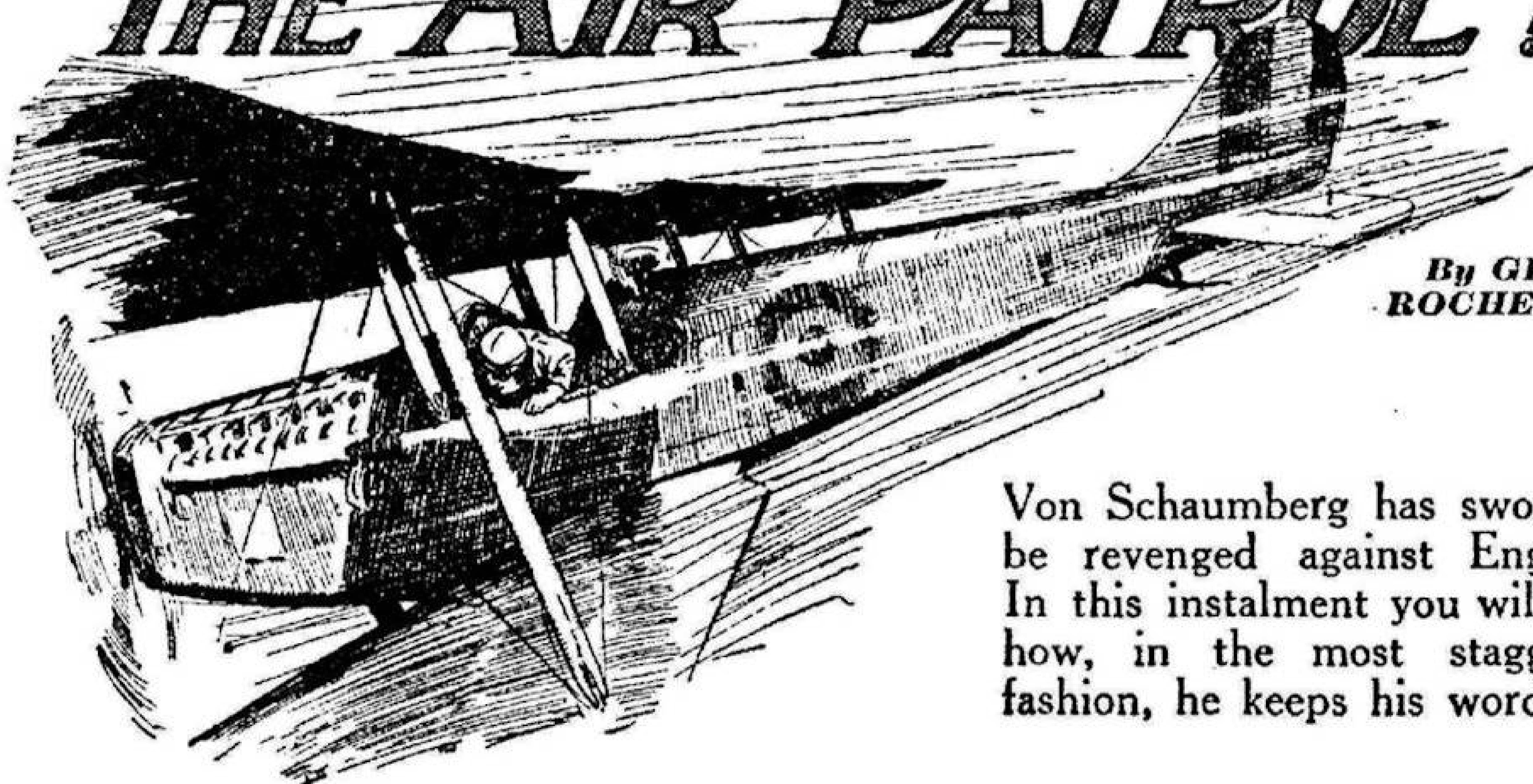
Yet they need not have been so hopelessly miserable. Even now, after their long friendship, they did not know their redoubtable leader! For, although Edward Oswald Handforth had looked down and out as he sat huddled in that limousine, he wasn't really anything of the sort!

The End.

*(Handforth isn't the sort of chap to be downhearted for long, and next week he sets out to prove his innocence. In "HANDFORTH'S GREAT ADVENTURE!" you will read how he does it. Look out for this fine yarn next Wednesday.)*

The Most Thrilling Instalment of This Serial Yet!

# THE AIR PATROL!



By GEO. E.  
ROCHESTER

Von Schaumberg has sworn to be revenged against England. In this instalment you will read how, in the most staggering fashion, he keeps his word.

## WHAT'S ALREADY HAPPENED:

GUY HOWARD, youngest and most intrepid "scout" in the Atlantic Rangers—whose duty it is to guard the air routes between Britain and America—is attached to Aerodrome D, one of the six huge floating aerodromes placed across the Atlantic Ocean. Just recently the big bullion and passenger-carrying air liners have been attacked by air pirates, whose leader is VON SCHAUMBERG. The headquarters of the pirates is unknown. Guy has sworn to exterminate them, and Von Schaumberg, on his part, has vowed vengeance against Guy for killing one of his confederates. Guy obtains a roving commission, and, discovering the pirates' headquarters, succeeds in capturing Von

Schaumberg, but he is released by Vorzetzen, the pirate leader's chief lieutenant. Von Schaumberg tells his companion that soon he will "strike in a manner which will startle the world!" They both disappear then—Von Schaumberg being under the impression that Guy has been killed in a fight—and nothing more is heard of them. In recognition of his services, Guy is promoted to commander of Atlantic Airways' new super-airship, Z.X. 1. Meanwhile Von Schaumberg has had built a huge airship, and, with the idea of revenge, he appears over England one night. To Vorzetzen he says: "Bring Kurz here!"

(Now read on.)

## Von Schaumberg's Threat!

VORZETZEN quitted the cabin and stepped into the well-furnished lounge with its wide, heavily-curtained windows.

A dozen men were lounging in wicker arm-chairs, some reading, others talking. Seven of them wore tight-fitting, high-necked, grey uniforms with silver wings on the left breast of their tunics.

"Kurz!" said Vorzetzen, addressing one of the seven. "The Chief wants you!"

Kurz, lithe of build and swarthy of feature, nodded. Rising to his feet, he followed Vorzetzen into Von Schaumberg's cabin.

"You are ready, Kurz?" demanded Von Schaumberg harshly.

"Yes, sir!"

"Good! In little more than an hour we will be over the village of Amesbury on

Salisbury Plain. We will hover whilst you take off. You have seen to your machine?"

"Yes, sir. My tanks are full, and all is ready for the take-off!"

"Good! Now listen, Kurz! You'll carry no gun on your machine. If anyone questions you, you are a private owner, and your papers will prove it. You have your papers?"

"Yes!"

"Now I will repeat my instructions to you," went on Von Schaumberg. "You will endeavour to obtain full information as to the time and place of the trial of Atlantic Airways' new super-airship, Z.X. 1. I will give you ten days in which to obtain that information. At midnight, ten days from now, we will hover over Amesbury at thirty thousand feet. You will pick us up right over the village and will come aboard. Is that plain?"

"Quite plain!"

"How you will obtain the information I require, I leave entirely to you. You must act as you think fit. Use your own discretion. It will be necessary to walk very warily. But if you are captured——"

Von Schaumberg paused. He thrust forward his great, bearded face, and his hands curled suggestively.

"If you are captured, Kurz," he repeated, and his voice was a purr, "you will not talk. You will know nothing. You will brazen it out to the end. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand!"

"I'm glad you understand, Kurz! For, should you talk, some day I will get you and you will die—horribly!"

"I will not talk!" responded Kurz sullenly.

Von Schaumberg nodded.

"Very good!" he said curtly. "You can go now. Tell the steward to prepare you a meal. Be ready to take off in an hour!"

Kurz saluted and withdrew. Von Schaumberg crossed to the curtained window of his cabin. Drawing the curtain aside, he peered out into the night. Far to the south, thirty-five thousand feet below, twinkled a myriad pin-pricks of light surmounted by a faint glow.

"See yonder, Vorzetzen!" he said harshly.

His lieutenant joined him at the window, peering through the thick triplex glass.

"London!" he said, and glanced sharply at his chief.

Von Schaumberg noted that glance, and he laughed shortly.

"Yes, mighty London, Vorzetzen!" he replied. "But do not alarm yourself. Our course does not take us there to-night!"

He dropped the curtain back into place, and swung on Vorzetzen with clenched fists and blazing eyes.

"This England has done her worst to me!" he snarled. "She will see what I shall do to her! I strike my first blow with the dawn. And London—London's turn will come, I swear it on my oath!"

### Over Salisbury Plain!

**H**E walked from the window and seated himself at the small table. There was a few moments of silence, broken only by the muffled drone of the powerful *Stahlfeder* engines of the great airship.

"Ah, it is easy—so very easy, is it not, Vorzetzen?" Von Schaumberg's voice was quiet, almost musing. "With the dawn we will put to the test the bombs Karl Max has made for me. They say that Karl is mad! Mad indeed he may be, but no finer chemist lives!"

Vorzetzen shrugged his shoulders.

"Give me the gun—the cartridge!" he said. "I am no lover of thermite and high explosive! It is dangerous cargo for an airship such as this!"

"Bah!" retorted Von Schaumberg contemptuously. "You have no vision, Vorzetzen! You are a fighter only. But I have vision, and what do I see?"

His hands clenched on the table in front of him, and malignant passion blazed in his eyes.

"I see the great floating aerodromes of Atlantic Airways riven from their foundations!" he shouted. "I see their hotels, their hangars, in flames! And I see them sink below the sea twisted and mangled wreckage! The work of years wiped out! Ay, grim indeed will be my vengeance!"

He broke off, panting with the fury of his outburst. Vorzetzen watched him in silence, strangely conscious in that moment of the evil of the man.

"And then,"—Von Schaumberg was speaking again—"when my vengeance is complete, and Atlantic Airways have been blown out of existence, we will loot and pillage where we will. None can stop us, Vorzetzen, for our altitude is our safeguard!"

"You think so?" Vorzetzen spoke sharply. "Yet suppose some fighting aircraft came upon us at forty-two thousand feet—our ceiling?"

"Well, what if they did?" snarled Von Schaumberg.

Then in a flash his mood changed. He leaned forward across the table, and there was something approaching infinite good-humour in his voice as he said:

"I am prepared for such a contingency, though I think it will never arise! But should we be attacked, then Karl Max—poor, mad Karl Max—will save us!"

"He will? How?"

"In the year nineteen twenty-six, aeroplanes were able to shield their battleships in smoke fog!" replied Von Schaumberg. "By utilising the same principles, and introducing chemicals of his own, Karl Max can spread around this airship a cubic mile of poison gas! We carry cylinders of that compressed gas in our hull!"

A bell trilled loudly in the cabin, and Von Schaumberg lifted the receiver of the short-length telephone which stood on the table in front of him.

"Yes?" he said harshly.

"Zuchtlos speaking from control cabin, sir!" came the guttural voice of the airship pilot. "We are passing over Salisbury Plain at a height of thirty-five thousand, one hundred and fifty feet!"

"Good! Cut out your engines! Can you pick up Amesbury?"

"Yes, sir. We are approaching it."

"Prepare to hover, then. Kurz is about to take-off!"

"Very good, sir!"

Von Schaumberg replaced the receiver, then rose to his feet. He gestured to Vorzetzen to accompany him, and together they quitted the cabin.

**Launched Into The Night !**

**A**S they entered the brilliantly-lighted lounge, the muffled drone of the powerful Stahlfeder engines died away, and the silence was unbroken save for the faint whir of the oxygen generating plant.

In the centre of the lounge, running upwards to the gigantic hull above, was a small electric lift and lift-shaft. With a curt nod of greeting to the men seated in the lounge, Von Schaumberg stepped into the lift, followed by Vorzetzen.

He pressed a button, and they were whirled up into the hull of the airship. Here, in the centre of the hull, between the eight huge gas-bags fitted forward and the eight fitted aft, was a series of platforms.

On the lower platform stood eight small black fighting scouts, their wings folded back. Mechanics were wheeling one of the machines on to a trapdoor fitted on the port side of the platform. Watching them was the black-leather clad figure of Kurz.

"Everything all right, Kurz?" demanded Von Schaumberg, ranging himself alongside the leather-clad man.

"Yes, sir."

"Right! Now, remember, we'll be here to pick you up ten days from now!"

Kurz nodded, and moved forward to the small scout. Vorzetzen laid a hand on his arm, growling:

"One moment, Kurz! You've got your oxygen cylinder?"

"Yes. It is here!" And Kurz indicated a small black metal tube slung inside his flying coat.

"Well, listen. When you take off, and get clear of the airship, throttle down. Glide down, without using your engine, till you get below seventeen thousand! If you go down quickly, the rapid change in atmospheric density will render you unconscious! Understand?"

"Yes, I'll remember!" replied Kurz.

"Then good-bye—and good luck!"

Vorzetzen held out his hand. Kurz took it in a brief clasp, then turned and clambered into the cockpit of the fighting scout.

To a piece of curved steel, socketed into the centre of the top plane, the mechanics had attached a rod of tempered steel, half an inch in diameter, and curved at the bottom. This rod was operated by a powerful dynamo.

For a few moments, Kurz fumbled with the controls in his cockpit. Then he turned to the waiting mechanics.

"I'm ready!" he said.

The head mechanic pressed a switch. The trapdoor on which the scout stood slowly slid back. There came a whir as the dynamo raced into life, and slowly the scout, with its still folded wings, was lowered out into the night at the end of the tempered steel rod.

There came a sharp click as Kurz pressed the wing control, and the planes snapped

back, locking into place. Then the silence was broken by the shattering roar of his engine.

Thirty-five thousand feet above Salisbury Plain hung that tiny aeroplane, dwarfed into insignificance by the bulk of the mighty airship envelope above it.

Kurz's eyes were on the dashboard in front of him. Even in that rarefied atmosphere his engine was giving him sixteen hundred revs. per minute. His gloved hand moved forward to a switch in the centre of the dashboard. His fingers hovered over it a moment. Then he snapped it down. The curved steel rod in his top plane, to which the lowering rod was attached, whipped open in the centre.

The scout dropped away into the night. Then her racing propeller bit the air. Kurz kept the control stick forward. With nose down, the scout tore earthwards. Then the roar of her engine died away as Kurz throttled down, and she dropped into a steep, corkscrew dive.

The trapdoor in the shadowy hull above him slid shut. The powerful Stahlfeder engines purred into life. Their note rose to a high, pulsating, thunderous rhythm, and, with gathering speed, the great airship drove westward towards the Atlantic.

And that was on the night of July 7th.

—

**Being an Extract from the Log of Captain Roberts, Master of the s.s. Arbutos, bound from New York to Liverpool with General Cargo.**

**A**T one bell in the morning watch, July 8th, I was on the bridge with Mr. Macfadden, my first officer. The morning was fine and clear. D aerodrome of the Atlantic Airways lay six miles away on our port bow. We were steaming at twelve knots.

"Without any warning whatsoever seven small black aeroplanes came tearing downwards. They roared over our mastheads, so low that I could distinctly see the heads and shoulders of the respective pilots. They were wearing black flying kit.

"Thinking it was some naval squadron, I turned away to speak to the man at the wheel, taking little notice of the machines. Then came a terrific explosion. I wheeled, in astonishment, and with my glasses I saw that the hotel on D aerodrome was in flames. The machines were then right over the aerodrome.

"Three more explosions came in rapid succession, and I saw the hangars and living quarters go up into the air in flaming debris. I rang down to the engine-room for full speed ahead, and we stood in towards the aerodrome.

"Over it were wheeling the seven black machines. I saw dark objects—bombs—drop from their undercarriages, and, with the terrific explosion which ensued, I saw a huge

column of water spout high into the air in the centre of the aerodrome.

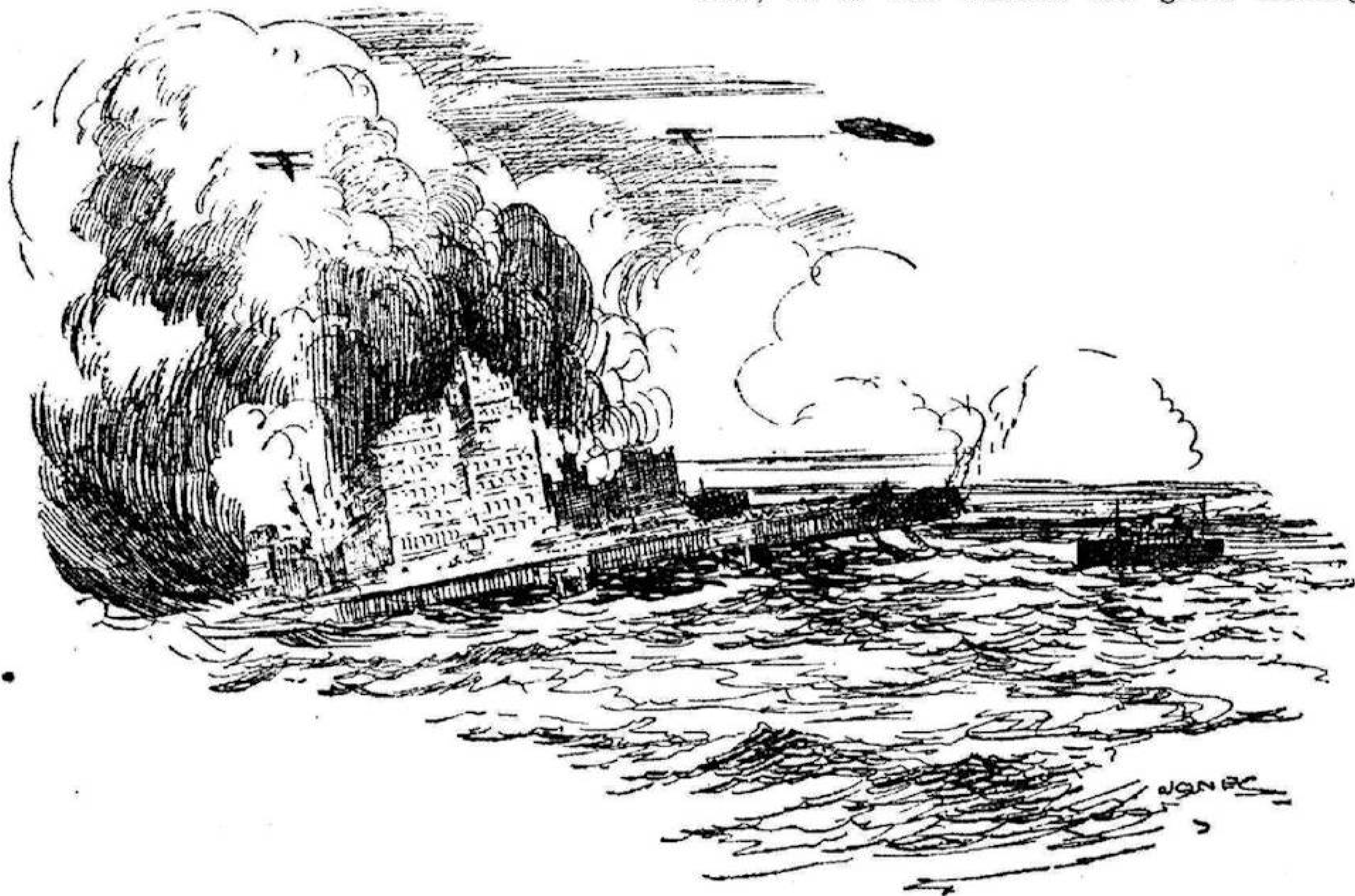
"I have learned since that this was caused by the main buoying tank exploding. Again and again came the thunderous explosions as the machines dropped their bombs. The aerial lighthouse had collapsed in a tangled wreckage of twisted girders. I could clearly make out the personnel of the aerodrome, and passengers who had alighted there, running frantically towards the edge of the aerodrome thinking, no doubt, to find some safety in the calm sea.

"By this time we were within three miles

"I was now within a mile of the aerodrome, and was approaching survivors of the attack. They were clinging to pieces of floating wreckage. The attacking machines had risen to a height of five thousand feet, and were circling. They made no effort to molest me.

"By this time the aerodrome had listed to port at an angle of approximately fifteen degrees. My boat derricks were already slung outboards, and every available man, including all that could be spared with safety from the engine-room, were standing to.

"We got the boats away and picked up sixty survivors. It was risky work for the mer, as it was evident the great floating



With a long rumbling roar, and enveloped in thick clouds of swirling steam, D aerodrome, its surface strewn with charred and burning wreckage, crumbled masonry and twisted girders, tilted to an angle and began to sink beneath the waters.

of the aerodrome, coming up under full steam. No building of any description remained standing, and, mingling with the flames, were enormous clouds of steam, caused by the intruding water through the buoying tanks, seven of which were taking in water and spewing it high into the air.

"The aerodrome itself had taken on a decided list, and I saw that it was adrift. The attacking machines dropped a further four bombs, the repercussion of which I distinctly felt as I stood on my bridge.

"I saw a big, four-engined passenger aeroplane coming up from eastwards, flying at about four thousand feet. I have learned since that this was the Anglo-French passenger and mail service machine, from Paris. The pilot was evidently at a loss as to the best course to adopt. He circled widely, then made off towards the east.

aerodrome of wood and steel would go under at any moment, and there was a decided danger of the boats being sucked under.

"The black aeroplanes which had caused this terrible death and destruction were still wheeling at five thousand feet. Other shipping was coming up, attracted by the reverberating explosions which had been heard many miles away.

"I got my boats inboards, and circled the sinking aerodrome in search of further survivors. But nothing was to be seen on the water except burning and smouldering wreckage. Satisfied that I could do no more, I stood away from the doomed aerodrome and hove to within a cable length of the Red Funnel liner, Memphis.

"Then, with a long, rumbling roar, and enveloped in thick clouds of swirling steam, D aerodrome tilted to an angle of sixty

degrees and slid beneath the waters. Before she went under I had a never-to-be-forgotten view of her half-mile diameter surface strewn with charred and burning wreckage, crumbled masonry, tangled and twisted girders.

"So great an eruption of the water did she cause as she went under that the Arbutos was swept like a cork for two full cable lengths, her port deck rail awash.

"And when I looked again for the black pirate machines which had wrought this havoc they were but specks in the sky, climbing, climbing, till they vanished from sight in the blue sky of a glorious July morning.

"It was murder most foul——"

### Kurz !

**I**T was that same morning that Kurz tramped into the little village of Amesbury. He had left his machine, and a five-pound note, with an unsuspecting farmer on the edge of the plain. The little scout was safe from prying eyes behind the solid doors of a big barn.

Kurz was an artist with enough money and leisure to enable him to roam at will in search of new subjects for his sketching-block. At least, that was the story he had told the farmer. Its reception by that worthy had left nothing to be desired, so Kurz had decided to stick to it.

He was going to sketch Stonehenge—that ancient temple of the Druids. It would take him a few days to complete his sketches. Where would he be able to get nice, quiet lodgings, clean and respectable? He stressed those words, "clean and respectable," for he was a wily fellow, was Kurz.

The farmer despatched him to Amesbury, to the address of an elderly lady who "did for" tourists. So behold Kurz, clad in the rough tweed suit which he had worn beneath his flying-coat, knocking at the door of an ivy-covered cottage which stood some little distance back from the straggling main street.

He got fixed up with lodgings, and insisted upon paying a deposit. Then, having created as favourable an impression as he could, he set out for Stonehenge, remarking that he would not be back till the dusk of evening.

But, as he left the village and took the road which led across the rolling plain towards Stonehenge, he found he was not alone on his pilgrimage. Labourers, farm-workers, small boys, and here and there a great shambling country lout, were all making in the same direction.

Intrigued, Kurz ranged himself alongside one of the latter—a shock-headed youth with a big red face and eyes which had the same vacant stare as has a cow's.

"Nice morning!" ventured Von Schaumburg's spy pleasantly.

"Ay!"

"Lots of people about, what?"

"Ay!"

Kurz frowned. He wanted more than that monosyllable. He measured his companion with a sidelong glance, and decided to take the plunge.

"Well, where the dickens are you all heading for?" he demanded.

"Us be headin' for airship shed," replied the youth.

In a moment Kurz became the interested innocent.

"Oh, is there an airship shed about here?" he said pleasantly. "How delightful! I was walking along to see the old temple of Stonehenge!" Then, with disarming interest: "Is anything special happening at the airship shed?"

"Ay! They're bringin' airship oot this mornin'!"

Kurz started. Surely Atlantic Airways' super-airship Z.X.I. was not going on a trial flight that morning. Von Schaumburg wanted to be on hand when that trial took place. But Kurz displayed no undue curiosity as he walked along with the yokel. His interest was but casual. Yet, before the enormous airship shed of Z.X.I. hove in sight, he had pumped the youth dry.

He discovered that the airship was being taken out of the shed to test the hauling gear; he discovered, too, that the new commander was taking over that day.

"Who has been placed in command?" he asked idly, for he felt little interest in that point, really. It mattered nothing who commanded Z.X.I.

"Bloke of th' name of Howard!" replied the youth.

"WHAT?"

Kurz almost shouted the word. He came to a dead halt in the middle of the road. His companion had also halted, staring at him with a dawning interest in his vacant eyes. In an instant Kurz had himself in hand again.

"Who—who did you say?" he demanded.

"Bloke called Howard!"

"Not that gallant young fellow of whom we have read lately in the papers! The one who broke up that gang of air pirates!"

Indeed, Kurz had himself well in hand now, but there was the faintest of quivers in his voice.

"Ay, him!" grinned the youth. "What a lad, eh? He's here now—comed down from Lunnon this mornin'!"

Kurz was silent. He had never met Howard, had never seen him. But he knew all about him. He knew how Von Schaumburg had hated that ranger—and Von Schaumburg had sworn he was dead.

But Howard was alive, and in command of Z.X.I.

Kurz had come to Stonehenge seeking information for Von Schaumburg. Well, he'd got hold of a priceless tit-bit right at the outset, and he wondered dubiously how it would suit Von Schaumburg's stomach!

*(More exciting chapters of this grand serial next week, boys.)*



# Our Weekly Pow-Wow!

By  
The Editor.

*Your Editor welcomes letters from all his readers; send him one now. Address it to: The Editor, "Nelson Lee Library," Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London E.C.4.*

## Hints About A Cycling Club.

**W**ITH Whitsun only a fortnight or so ahead, it is most suitable to get all arrangements made for cycling spins. A chum at Leyland, Lanes., writes to ask for some hints about the matter, but candidly I do not think he stands in any particular need of assistance. The best cycling club is one which comprises a bunch of trusty chums, all more or less of the same mind. Undoubtedly the really enjoyable run is not a speed affair at all, but a fairly leisurely exploration trip. My Leyland reader points out that there is no claim that all members shall be toy sawyers, or possess the latest type of bike. You can have no end of a good holiday on some hefty old machine which has been well cleaned and oiled. I hope this cheery Lancashire crush of wheelmen will get some rare good Saturday runs, and so fit themselves for a few days on the road later on when the fine weather has set in with its proper severity and the days are long. A Kodak is a good companion on such a trip, and it is well worth while to borrow a leaf from the book of the Scout and keep a brief record of what places have been seen, with something about Nature and the country generally, just to look at afterwards. In a company run the pace is bound to be more or less governed by the slowest member. That is so even if everybody is out to cover ground. But the main object is to get an interesting run, and it is here that the bike is such an excellent ally. You need not be pedalling all the time. Something en route attracts your attention, say a forest belt, or a chalk quarry, or an ancient ruin, and a halt for investigation is essential.

## A Life On The Ocean Wave!

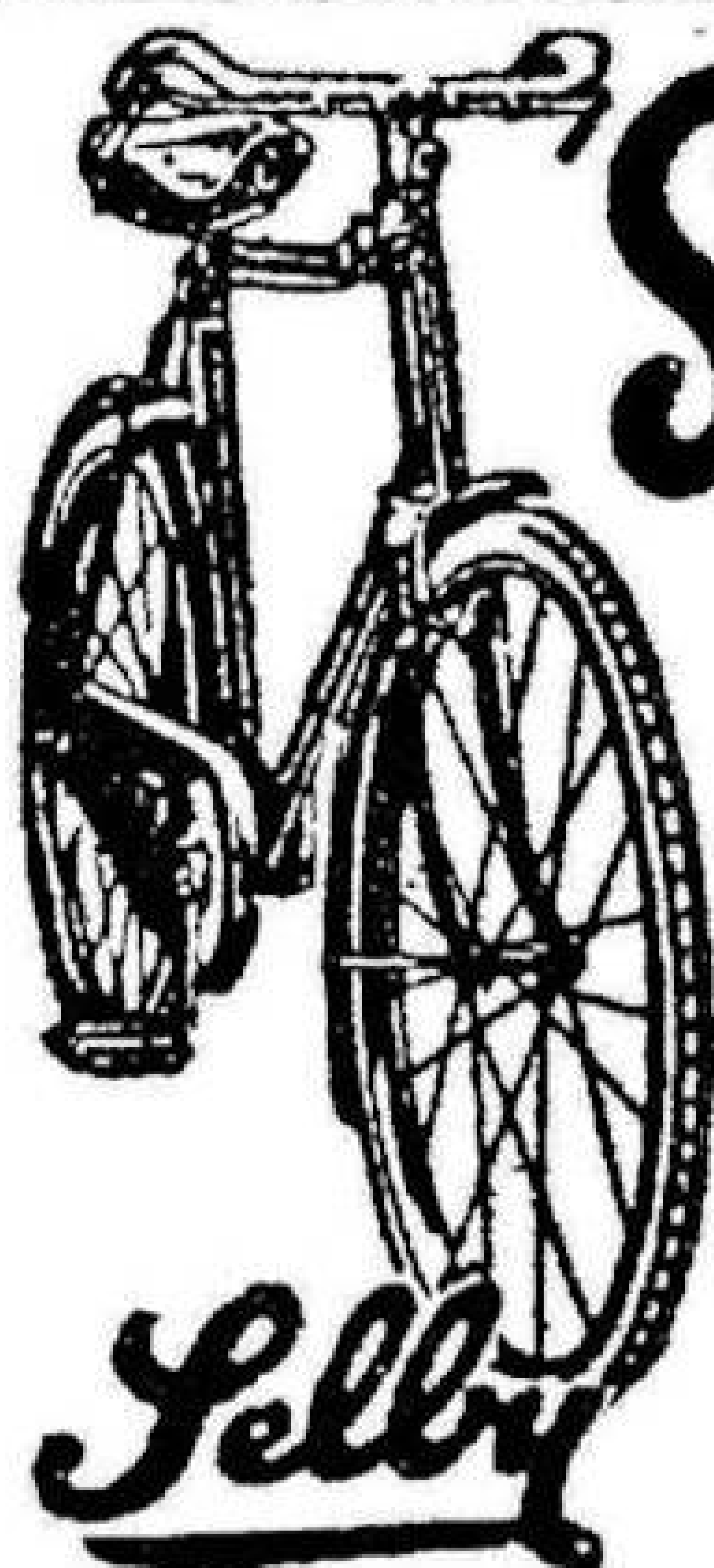
Here's a jolly compliment to the N.L.L. and a request in a letter from Carmarthen. The writer wants to go to sea, and would do anything useful, including cleaning boots and washing dishes, if he could only secure a job on board a liner. He shows such out-and-out willingness that he ought to be able

to find a berth with some shipping company. He is pretty well sure, however, to fail the first few applications he makes, for steamship lines are not waiting for workers of this or any other kind. Still, the likely fellow may get his chance, thanks to his own assiduity and by showing the good stuff there is in him. In this case the writer has been pretty well engaged on land, and I recommend him to secure a letter or two from people who have employed him and who are in a position to know his value. One may take it as a dead sure thing that there is a job for the all in, capable chap who means work, and who jumps to it. My chum must make some inquiries in his own district, and then, if he can, get an interview with the manager of a shipping firm at Cardiff, or another of the Western ports.

## Letters To Hand.

Best thanks go to Claude Rolinson, Adelaide, for his interesting letter; Rupert Dobbies, Black Rock, wants Handy to have a shindy with Church; he also wants to hear about Australian football; "Kurraba" reckons that no one is too old to read the

*(Continued overleaf.)*



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## OUR WEEKLY POW-WOW!

(Continued from previous page.)

"Nelson Lee," and asks when the sectional map is coming. This is being prepared now. Victor George Newman, Victoria, says it must be hard to write a topping yarn every week. Yes, it is, all that. He should see our Edwy with a wet towel wrapped round his noble head, engaged in thinking out a taking new wheeze. M. K., Dublin, asks me about the make of a bike he should get. He wants the jigger for practical purposes of his work in the town, and also for country spins. I recommend the ordinary make, not a racing machine, as he wants it for all purposes, and there is no special speed call. I have a topping letter from Alfred T. Wheatley. He says I am to excuse his bad writing and spelling, but I fancy he must have run in this remark without thinking what he was doing. His writing is O.K., and his spelling ditto, ditto. He wants people to understand that there are a lot of incorrect impressions knocking round concerning life in Australia. I fancy most of us know that Australia is not exactly a wild land—not, at any rate, near the big towns. I received a book the other day containing vivid pictures of the new dining-cars on the great railway which goes across Australia. That kind of thing gives one an idea of the great country, with its huge towns, and the splendid theatres and hotels, and world-famous newspapers.

### Jolly Near Perfect.

Harold W. Steff (Kettering) sends me a rollicking letter which shows him to be a stalwart supporter of the "Nelson Lee Library." He says he happened to be asked the other day by some fellow with an inquiring mind, whether he thought the "N.L.L." could be styled a perfect paper. His reply was "Yes, as near perfect as any paper could be." Thanks for that. The query comes as to what is perfection. I don't suppose you would ever get anything in this world from a paper to a pepper-pot, concerning which everybody was agreed. Take the pepper-pot. One chap would say it was all right. The next might hate pepper. This perfection business is a blind lead. You can only get something that is trying to get on the perfect mark. That's as near as can be achieved.

### CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

L. M. Proctor, 10, Atkinson Street, Harle Syke, nr. Burnley, Lanes, wishes to correspond with readers interested in sports, football and cricket, sports photos and cigarette cards.

Kenneth Macdonald, 63, Hindpool Road, Barrow-in-Furness, wishes to hear from readers interested in his Empire Hobby and Correspondence Club and Magazine.

Jack Sallery, 34, Sheridan Road, Manor Park, London, E.12, wishes to correspond with readers of the N.L.L. who have copies of the old series for sale; also with stamp collectors.

Jack Hardy, 12 bk, George Street, Bury, Lanes., wishes to correspond with readers interested in the films.



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