

THE NELSON LEE

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HANDFORTH'S GREAT ADVENTURE!

*A superb long complete yarn of school life and adventure, featuring
Edward Oswald Handforth and the Chums of St. Frank's!*



It must be admitted that Handforth's efforts to paint his Austin Seven were successful if inclined to be inartistic. It must be admitted, too, that he succeeded in getting quite a lot of the paint on himself. By the time he had finished, indeed, he was covered almost from head to foot !

*Handforth in Disguise!**Out to Prove his Innocence!*

HANDFORTH'S GREAT ADVENTURE!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

Edward Oswald Handforth means to prove to everybody that he was not an active party in the robbery at St. Frank's, and he knows that the only way to do that is to get on the track of Bert Hicks, the real thief, and force that rascal to confess. This Handy proceeds to do, with amusing, not to say interesting, results!—ED.

CHAPTER 1.

Too Awful for Words!

HANDFORTH sacked!

The bluff, good-hearted, blundering Edward Oswald Handforth taken away from the school by his father!

That was the sensation which spread sorrow and dismay throughout the Junior School at St. Frank's. For Handforth, in spite of his arrogant, pig-headed qualities—or perhaps because of them—had been one of the most popular fellows in the Remove.

And now he had gone—for good!

"I can't believe it, you know," said Fullwood, of Study I, as he stood chatting in the Ancient House lobby with De Valerie and Somerton. "The place won't seem the same without old Handy."

"It'll be a lot quieter, anyhow," said De Valerie, shaking his head.

"The giddy house has seemed like a cathedral for hours—ever since Handy was taken away!" growled Somerton. "Poor old scout! He must have done something pretty rotten to get the sack like that, but I'm sorry for him, all the same."

"It's tea-time now, and he's only been gone a few hours," remarked Fullwood, frowning out upon the May sunshine. "Yet it seems like days! And the whole thing is such a mystery, too!"

Handforth himself might have been surprised if he had seen the grave faces. He had had a break with the Remove recently, and for weeks he had hardly spoken a word to anybody. He had been on the high horse; he had believed himself to be the injured party, and, although the Remove had refused to take him seriously, the Remove had nevertheless ignored him.

But now that he had gone, it was different.

His faults were forgotten, and only his good points were remembered—and old Handy had very many good points. There was a genuine feeling of deep regret in the Remove, and in the Lower School generally. With one or two notable exceptions, the juniors were dismayed at the loss of the bluff leader of Study D.

A few other juniors were passing by, and they paused to join in the discussion.

"That's just it!" said Jimmy Potts, of Study H. "Why, in the name of all that's rummy, was Handforth sacked?"

"Everybody knows that, I should think!" said Gore-Pearce sneeringly.

"What do you mean?"

"What I say!" retorted Claude Gore-Pearce, with an unpleasant grin on his supercilious face. "Hang it, doesn't the whole school know that Handforth was sacked for being a thief?"

"Here, steady, confound you!" said Fullwood angrily.

"Well, isn't it a fact?" demanded Gore-Pearce.

"We don't know anything," said Fullwood. "Nobody has told us anything. We've only been guessing. Everybody knows, of course, that the Ancient House was burgled last night, and that a good many things were stolen. Everybody knows, too, that Handy was missing this morning, and that old Pagett ran across him in London and hauled him back."

"With some of the stolen property on him!" put in Gulliver jeeringly. "Don't you call that proof?"

"Well, I don't believe that old Handy is a thief!" said Jimmy Potts stoutly.

"Well spoken, dear old fellow!" observed Vivian Travers, lounging up in his cool way. "I am ready to admit that Handforth had a good few faults. If it comes to that, we all have faults. I'd bet a quid of anybody's money—my own, especially—that Gore-Pearce, here, has so many faults that his decent qualities, if any, are entirely smothered."

"Look here, confound you——" began Gore-Pearce.

"But Handy only had human faults," went on Travers easily. "The sort of faults that any chap could forgive. And, by Samson, you'll never make me believe that he's a thief!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I'm glad you think that, Travers," said Nipper, the Junior skipper, as he came indoors.

"Dear old fellow, we all think it," said Travers.

"Do we?" broke in Gulliver. "Well, I don't, for one! Bell doesn't, for another! And Gore-Pearce doesn't, for still another!"

"No fear!" echoed Gore-Pearce and Bell. Vivian Travers shrugged his shoulders.

"I said 'everybody,' I believe," he murmured. "You three, of course, don't count."

There were a few chuckles.

"You're all mad!" said Gore-Pearce sourly. "There was a robbery last night: Handforth bolted, and he was dragged back to day. And we all saw his pater take him off in his big car. He's been sacked in disgrace. Isn't that good enough. Everybody who isn't blind knows that Handforth was bunked from the school for being a thief."

A pale-faced, but excited, junior came shouldering his way through the crowd.

"Say that again, Gore-Pearce!" he said fiercely.

"Certainly!" said Gore-Pearce, with relish. "Handforth was bunked from the school because he's a thief!"

Crash!

Church, of Study D, did not stand upon ceremony. His fist crashed into Gore-Pearce's face, and the millionaire's son went over with a wild howl. McClure, also of Study D, came pushing up.

"Get up, you cad, and I'll knock you down again!" he said hotly. "Churchy has had his slosh, and now I'll have mine!"

They were pulled back and held while Gore-Pearce picked himself up and slunk away. He had never believed that the mild Church would go for him like that.

"It's no good, old man," said Nipper quietly. "You can't start a scrap here, in the lobby."

"Lemme go!" panted Church. "He called old Handy a thief!"

"I'm afraid lots of fellows are calling old Handy a thief," said Nipper unhappily.

"It seems to be the general impression in the Fourth and the Fifth—and, in fact, almost all over the school. And what else can the fellows believe? These fellows, I mean, who didn't know Handy intimately, as we did?"

Church groaned.

"I suppose you're right," he said miserably. "The Head hasn't made any public statement, and nobody knows any real facts, and all the evidence looks as black as thunder against poor old Handy. Why couldn't they let him have a few words with us before he was taken away?"

Nipper did not reply. He had just caught sight of a figure crossing the Triangle, and Nipper came to a sudden decision.



CHAPTER 2.

The Benefit of the Doubt!

NELSON LEE, the famous schoolmaster-detective, came to a halt as Nipper confronted him.

"Can I have a word with you, guv'nor?" asked Nipper earnestly.

"I rather think I can guess the subject of your proposed conversation, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, nodding. "Handforth, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'm afraid there's nothing much that I can tell you——"

"There's got to be, guv'nor!" broke in Nipper grimly. "Things can't go on like this. The Head hasn't made any statement; he hasn't issued any notices or anything, and, naturally, everybody is jumping to the one conclusion. They're saying that Handforth is a thief."

Nelson Lee looked rather grave.

"I feared as much," he said, frowning.

"It isn't true, guv'nor—is it?" asked Nipper.

"No!" replied Nelson Lee.

"Thank goodness!" murmured Nipper, with relief. "That's one point settled, anyhow! But don't you think the Head ought to issue a statement of some kind?"

"I shall certainly urge him to do so, in order to put an end to these unsavoury rumours," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "It is a very good suggestion of yours, young 'un. But, really, I have been so busy, and the Head himself has been so harassed, that there has been no time. I don't think Dr. Stafford quite realises how the school is discussing poor Handforth's disgrace."

Nipper looked at Lee closely.

"What did he do, sir—exactly?" he asked.

"And why was he sacked?"

"Handforth was not sacked, Nipper!"

"Not sacked, sir?"

"No," said Lee. "There was no public expulsion, as you know. Neither will there be any stigma against his name. He has merely been taken away from the school by his father—at the headmaster's request. It was considered to be good policy to take this course."

"Then the school ought to know, sir!" said Nipper indignantly. "Everybody is saying that Handy was sacked—and that he's a thief! By Jove! What's wrong with the Head? Why doesn't he—"

"Easy, young 'un, easy!" interrupted Lee, with a smile. "You must remember that Handforth has only been gone for a few hours. There has been much to do. The police have been here, and Dr. Stafford hardly knows whether he is on his head or his heels. Fortunately, the police have now gone. But whether they will capture the thieves who broke into the Ancient House last night is rather a doubtful question."

"You mean Bert Hicks, sir?" asked Nipper. "You've discovered that Hicks had two confederates, haven't you?"

"Yes, two men with a barrow," replied Lee. "They have been hanging about the neighbourhood for quite a time. I might as well tell you that the evidence against Handforth was very strong, but the Head gave him the benefit of the doubt."

"It was all his own fault," said Nipper, with a grunt. "Just because he was at loggerheads with the Remove, he made friends with that lout, Hicks. Hicks spoofed him up—he told him all sorts of lies—and got Handy's sympathy. I don't believe for a minute that Handforth suspected Hicks' real character."

"I agree with you," said Lee at once. "Handforth was undoubtedly duped. He allowed this boy, Hicks, to sleep in his very study night after night. He fed him, and called him his friend. It was sheer folly on Handforth's part."

"Well, didn't we tell him so, sir?" asked Nipper bitterly. "He brought Hicks to the school in the open daylight at first, and we threw the young hooligan out, but we thought that was the end of it."

"Unfortunately, it wasn't," said Lee. "Handforth kept up his friendship with this unscrupulous young rascal. He did so in secret—admitting Hicks into his study after lights out. We now know, of course, that Hicks was playing a deep game—probably egged on to do so by his elder confederates. They were planning a coup—a robbery—and the unfortunate Handforth, in his innocence, allowed himself to be the tool—the dupe!"

"If he wasn't actually guilty, sir, why was he forced to leave?"

"My dear Nipper!" protested Lee. "How could the boy remain? On his own confession, he was on the friendliest possible terms with one of the thieves. He admitted the thieves into the school, and he supplied them with information regarding valuables. He did this in all innocence, no doubt, but can we expect the headmaster to believe that?"

"Doesn't he believe it, sir?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Lee. "As the evidence is purely circumstantial, he has, as I have said, given Handforth the benefit of the doubt, and has not expelled him in disgrace. But there can be no denying that there is a shadow over Handforth. He might have saved himself from this disaster if he had been perfectly frank with regard to his movements this morning."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Handforth, as you know, went to London—by the very early train," replied Lee. "He point blank refused to give any explanation of his journey. He said that he took the wrong train at Bannington—he got into the London express by mistake. That, of course, is possible—for Handforth is capable of almost any blunder like that. But why did he go to Bannington? Why should he get up early on this morning, of all mornings, and act so strangely?"

"Wouldn't he say, sir?"

"He would give no explanation whatever," replied Lee gravely. "And that, of course, confirmed the Head's suspicions. But, after all, they were only suspicions, and nothing could be actually proved. Personally, I believe that Handforth's visit to Bannington was an innocent one. But he foolishly refused to explain. If only he had been frank, he might have saved himself from this disaster."

"It's all pretty rotten, sir," said Nipper miserably.

"Yes, the affair is distinctly ugly," replied Lee. "As you know, Nipper, some of the stolen property was found on Handforth by Mr. Pagett. That, again, was significant. Yet I was successful in influencing Dr. Stafford. I believe that the stolen property was 'planted' in Handforth's clothing during the night."

"I believe it, too, sir."

"But we can't prove it," pointed out Lee. "That's the point, young 'un. There is just a chance that Handforth *may* be guilty. Don't you see? His own story did nothing to clear up the mystery, but in the absence of direct evidence, he was dealt with leniently. If only some definite evidence could

be brought forward, to clear up these details, Handforth might have a chance of coming back. But until then he is under a cloud. Well, you can rely upon me to see the headmaster as soon as possible, with regard to that public statement."

And Nelson Lee moved off, leaving Nipper very thoughtful. A crowd of juniors soon came round, and they were all talking at once.

"Any news, dear old boy?" asked Sir Montie Tregellis-West eagerly.

"Yes—good news," replied Nipper.

"Handy wasn't sacked at all."

"What!"

"Not sacked!"

"No," said Nipper. "He was only taken away by his father."

"Isn't that the same thing?" asked Watson.

"Not exactly," replied Nipper. "There's no stigma against his name—and so he's free to go to any other big school. There's no proof that he was a thief, either. The worst that can be said of him is that he made a hopeless ass of himself—and, personally, I don't believe for a minute that old Handy ever had a dishonest intention in his head!"



CHAPTER 3.

A Gleam of Daylight!

THE news spread very rapidly.

Although most of the fellows were relieved to hear that Handforth had not been officially expelled, they couldn't see much difference in it. Handforth had gone—he had left the school with deep suspicions against him. Nothing had been actually proved, but then again, Handforth himself had not been able to prove his own innocence. So he had left under a cloud.

This meant, of course, that the headmaster was quite convinced that Handforth had acted dishonestly, and that it was better he should be taken away from the school as quickly as possible. There would be quite enough publicity over the robbery, what with the police hunt, and the possible capture of Bert Hicks and his associates. It was better that Handforth should be away, so that his name could not be dragged into it.

Most of the fellows went indoors to tea—for even the tragedy of Handforth had not affected their appetites so much that they were willing to go without tea. Church and McClure, however, remained out in the Triangle, mooching about in the warmth of the May evening. They, at least, wanted nothing to eat.

Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson looked at one another as they were in the lobby. They probably had the same thought

"Let's invite them into Study C, eh?" suggested Nipper.

"Begad! Precisely what I was going to say, old boy," beamed Sir Montie. "I'm afraid they're most frightfully cut up."

Nipper and his chums walked down the Ancient House steps, but before they could reach Church and McClure a group of figures, dressed in white, appeared in the gateway. They were Irene & Co. from the Moor View School. By the look of them, they had just been playing tennis, and they waved as they saw the juniors.

In fact, they came running up, their faces grave, their eyes full of concern and inquiry.

"Is this true about Ted?" asked Irene Manners breathlessly.

"He's gone!" said Church, in a dull voice.

"Gone for good?" cried the girls.

"Well, I'm afraid he's practically expelled," said Nipper. "Poor old Handy! It seems a shame, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't seem a shame—it *is* a shame!" said Irene, her lips trembling. "Oh, it's too bad! I'll never believe that Ted did anything wrong! He couldn't! Oh, he was stubborn and obstinate, but I know he was as straight as a die!"

"Thanks, Irene!" said Church huskily.

There was a rather awkward silence for a moment.

"But how did it happen?" asked Doris Berkeley, at length. "Why was Ted taken away? We've heard all sorts of silly rumours, and we haven't had a chance of getting down till now. Some wretch said that Ted had been stealing—"

"I'm frightfully afraid that there are plenty of wretches about, then," said Sir Montie, shaking his head.

The girls were very concerned. Irene, in particular, had been Handforth's very special chum, and she was looking pale with anxiety and worry.

Nipper explained the circumstances as he knew them, and the gravity of the girls became deeper as they listened.

"The trouble is, Handy was so obstinate about where he went this morning," concluded Nipper. "It may be right that he got into the wrong train at Bannington by accident—he went right to London, you know, and was dragged back by old Pagett. Handy says that he mistook the express for the local. But why did he go to Bannington, in the first place? Why did he get up at about six o'clock, before the robbery was discovered, and make a trip to Bannington?"

"Wouldn't he give any explanation at all?" asked Mary Summers.

"None," replied Nipper. "And, by refusing to say anything, he practically condemned himself. The Head believes that he was bolting."

"Do you believe it?" said Irene bluntly.

"No," replied Nipper. "I don't think he bolted—because he'd done nothing to bolt for. But it was that journey of his which put the lid on it, so to speak. It looked so black against him."

While they had been talking, Dora Manners had joined them. Dora was Irene's

cousin, and she was on the permanent staff of St. Frank's as a nurse. She had been listening with grave attention.

And now, suddenly, a new light sprang into her eyes. She drew Irene aside, while the other girls were still talking to the boys. Dora compelled Irene to walk quite a distance away.

"Whatever is the matter, Dora?"

"Nothing much—only an idea has just struck me," said Dora, in a low voice. "Do you remember when I came up to the school this morning, Renie? You told me that you had refused to see Ted last night."

"Yes, I know," said Irene wretchedly. "Oh, what a cat I was! I'm so sorry for it now—but what's the use?"

"You quarrelled nearly a fortnight ago," said Dora. "Ted saw you speaking to Cousin Jack, and he thought that Cousin Jack was just a stranger, and he got jealous."

"I know," murmured Irene. "I was silly about it, too. I ought to have told him. But I didn't—I got offended. But, then, Ted was awfully rude!"

"Never mind about that," said Dora quickly. "But I was speaking to Ted yesterday, and I told him that Jack Winston is your cousin, and he went rushing straight off to the Moor View School. I couldn't quite understand it at the time, but I do now."

"He came there, and asked for me—and I sent a message out to say that I was busy, or something," said Irene unhappily. "Then he came to my study window, and I went out and slammed the door. In the end, he was sent away by Miss Bond."

"Yes—yes, but here's the point!" said Dora eagerly. "I told Ted, yesterday, that you were going to London by the early train this morning, as you had had permission to attend Elsie's wedding. Don't you see?"

"No, I don't think I do, quite," confessed Irene, with a frown on her pretty brow.

"But think!" urged Dora. "Last night, after I'd told Ted that you were going to London, you got a telegram from Cousin Elsie, saying that the wedding was postponed, and you didn't go to London by the first train this morning at all!"

Irene's face suddenly flushed, and her eyes gleamed.

"You—you mean——" she panted.

"Of course!" said Dora breathlessly. "That was why Ted got up early this morning, and went to the station! You wouldn't see him last night, and so he tried to see you this morning!"

"And I didn't go to the station!" said Irene in a tragic voice.

"No; and so he went on to Bannington—and perhaps he *did* intentionally go on to London," said Dora. "Don't you see? He wanted to square things with you, and he must have been in a terrific muddle when you didn't show up."

"Oh, poor old Ted!" said Irene. "What a dreadful shame! But why didn't he explain? Why didn't he tell Dr. Stafford?"

"Oh, but how could he?" put in Dora.

"You know what Ted is—dreadfully shy! He wouldn't like to tell the Head that he had got up early and gone to the station so that he could meet a girl and settle up a quarrel. And if Ted couldn't tell the truth, he'd keep silent. He'd rather do that than tell a lie."

"Dora, you've hit it!" said Irene, catching at her cousin's arm. "Oh, I know you've guessed it! That was why Ted went down to the train this morning."

"But what can we do about it?" asked Dora.

"I don't know," replied Irene, her blue eyes filled with trouble and doubt. "Ted's gone now, so what's the good of saying anything to anybody?"

Dora pursed her pretty lips.

"As you say, Ted's gone now," she replied. "Even if you said anything, I don't suppose it would do any good!"

"It's all my fault!" said Irene wretchedly. "Oh, Dora! I feel dreadful about it!"

"But, Renie——"

"It's my fault, I tell you!" said the other girl fiercely. "If I had only seen Ted last night, instead of being such a little cat, everything would have been all right! He wouldn't have got up early this morning, and gone off like that, and then there couldn't have been any misunderstanding. Oh, it's my fault! And now he's gone—gone for good!"

"The others are coming!" murmured Dora, in alarm.

Irene composed herself, as Mary Summers and Marjorie Temple and the other girls came up, accompanied by Nipper & Co., and Church and McClure. Irene said nothing to them. She stood apart, her face pale, her eyes eloquent of agony.

She was torn with doubt and uncertainty. Would it do any good if she went to Dr. Stafford, and explained? Would it help poor old Ted? She didn't know—and she hesitated.

When she went back to the Moor View School, soon afterwards, she was unhappy and pale. The other girls, thinking that she was only worrying over the loss of her boy chum, said nothing.

But Irene was really worrying from two causes. Firstly, because Handforth had gone from St. Frank's for good, and secondly, because she felt that she, herself, was partially responsible for the disaster.

CHAPTER 4.

Home!



EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH looked up with a start as the big limousine came to a halt.

With a shock of surprise, he saw that he was outside the family residence, in the West

End of London. The evening sunshine was slanting across the house-tops, golden and mellow.

"We're home!" muttered Handforth dully. Until that moment he had been lost—utterly and completely buried in his own thoughts. His wretchedness had overwhelmed him—had partially stunned him. During the earlier part of that journey there had been room for only one thought in his fevered brain.

He had been kicked out of St. Frank's!

Guilty of nothing except misplaced generosity, he had fallen into the trap that had been laid for him, and had been made the scapegoat. He seemed to remember the incidents of the beginning of the day as a sort of dream. At times, it seemed like a nightmare.

"Come, Edward!" said a cold, hard voice. Handforth looked up with a start. He found his father already outside the car, and the door was open. But never before had Handforth heard that note in his father's voice.

"I'd—I'd forgotten that you were here, dad!" said Handforth, with a gulp. "By George! Of course! You've been here all the time, haven't you?"

"I am waiting!" said Sir Edward ominously.

"But, pater! You don't believe—"

"It is not my intention to enter into any discussion with you here, Edward!" said his father harshly. "Get out of this car, and come with me!"

There was something impelling in his voice, and Handforth felt weak and shaky again. He climbed out of the limousine, and found himself walking up the path towards the front door. He had not expected to see that front door again until the Whitsun holidays—which, incidentally, were drawing near. But here he was—home! But there was not that customary thrill, for he knew that he had no right to be there. He had been brought home in disgrace.

They went indoors, into the big hall, but did not pause there. Sir Edward marched his son straight into the morning-room, and closed the door.

"I want to see the mater!" said Handforth huskily. "She won't believe awful things against me—"

"Your mother is away—at Broadstairs!" interrupted Sir Edward curtly. "I am glad of it, too. It is better that she should be spared this shock for a few days. To-morrow, too, I may have recovered somewhat from the cruel blow that you have dealt me. In the meantime, Edward, you had better remain silent. I am in no mood to listen to you."

Handforth could hardly believe his ears. Normally, Sir Edward was bluff and boisterous. He was a big man—genial and good-natured. Like his elder son, he was blunt and impulsive, and, like his elder son, too, he was stubborn.

"But, pater!" urged Handforth. "Please listen! I can explain—"

"I am sick and tired of hearing explanations!" broke in his father wearily. "At St. Frank's I heard explanations enough! No, Edward, I have already told you that I am in no mood for listening to you. To-morrow, perhaps, I will discuss your future with you, but not now."

There was something so stern in his voice that Handforth sat down limply and made no reply. Sir Edward rang a bell, and a maid-servant appeared. She elevated her eyebrows as she saw the junior sitting there.

"Bring food!" said Sir Edward briefly. "Sandwiches—boiled eggs—anything!"

The maid departed, rather flurried. She had seen, at once, that there was something tense in this situation. The door closed, and Sir Edward paced up and down, his hands clasped behind him. Once or twice, Handforth tried to speak, but he was silenced.

Truth to tell, his father was stricken by this sudden blow. He did not believe, for one moment, that Edward Oswald had been purposely wicked. Yet he could not doubt that his son had been wilful and perverse; that he had been influenced by evil companions, and the mere possibility that he had been mixed up in a theft at the school caused Sir Edward intense agony.

He could not trust himself to discuss the matter with his son now. There would be plenty of time to-morrow—after he had calmed down—after he had reviewed everything in his mind. Sir Edward could not trust himself to remain calm now. He wanted to be alone—alone!



CHAPTER 5.

All His Own Fault!

FOOD was the last thing that Handforth wanted just then.

He felt that the first mouthful would choke him. Yet his father knew well enough that he needed a meal, since he had eaten nothing during the whole day. He had been absent from St. Frank's during the usual meal-times, and afterwards, when Mr. Pagett had brought him back to face the charge, there had been no time to think of meals.

"I don't want it, pater!" he muttered, after a tray had been brought in. "I couldn't eat a thing, I tell you!"

"Eat!" said Sir Edward, pointing. "Do as I tell you, Edward! Let me have no nonsense!"

Handforth, much against his will, took a mouthful of bread-and-butter, and broke an egg. Then, with a feeling of mild astonishment, he found that he had no sensations of choking. A minute later, he was eating ravenously.

At last he pushed his chair back, satisfied. He had consumed a hearty meal—as Sir Edward had believed that he would.

"Pater!" muttered Handforth, looking at



"I think it is far better that you should be left to yourself and that I should be left to myself," said Sir Edward Handforth. Without another word he turned on his heel, walked out of the room, and locked the door, leaving Edward Oswald Handforth staring miserably after him.

his father with anxious eyes. "Why leave it until to-morrow? I want to talk to you now! I want to tell you everything—right from the start! I hardly had a word with you at the school, and you mustn't believe—"

"I have already told you, Edward, what my intentions are," broke in his father relentlessly. "There is no hurry. Nothing depends upon our discussion. It will do to-morrow!"

"Oh, but——"

"Come with me!"

Handforth felt a firm hand on his shoulder, and he rose to his feet and accompanied his father out into the hall. Truth to tell, Handforth was feeling just a little bit scared. He had never known his father to be like this before. But then, Handforth did not even begin to realise the agony of mind that his father was suffering.

With a dim feeling of surprise, he found himself taken to his own bed-room—the one he always occupied when he was at home during the holidays. It was quite ready for him, with clean sheets on the bed, and with neatly-folded pyjamas on the coverlet. Obviously a telegram had been sent.

"Now, Edward, I am going to lock you in your room," said his father. "Perhaps you do not understand that I am worried and intensely troubled. But I ask you to make no noise. I ask you to remain here quietly until to-morrow."

"Oh, pater!" said Handforth huskily. "Of course you're worried—and I know it, too! But if you'll only let me tell you——"

"No!" said his father, his voice still stern. "I think it is far better that you should be to yourself—and that I should be to myself!"

Without another word, Sir Edward Handforth turned on his heel, walked out of the room, and the key clicked in the lock. The burly junior was left standing there, near the bed, staring at the closed door.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Handforth wretchedly.

He stood there for several minutes, deeply hurt by the pain that he had seen in his father's eyes. At last he moved over towards the window, and stood looking out upon the green lawn of the garden and the gay flower beds. He could see a corner of the paved yard, with a glimpse of the garage. The limousine was standing there, and the chauffeur was busy with a duster.

Everything seemed so unreal to the junior.

Here he was, at home, when he should have been in the Ancient House at St. Frank's, doing his prep. Here he was, locked in his bedroom—bidden to leave it. And his father had been so different from what he had expected, too.

Handforth had always known his father to be noisy and violent when he was angry. Upon arrival home, Handforth had expected to go through a fearful half-hour, with his

father shouting at him, shaking him, and generally giving him "beans."

Instead, Sir Edward had been deadly calm—sorrowful.

And now Handforth was left alone, with the knowledge that he would not be disturbed until the morrow. He looked dully at the bed, at the pyjamas, and he wondered how anybody could be so mad as to think that he would be able to sleep.

He sat down at the open window and remained there, staring unseeingly across the garden. His thoughts were still confused.

Almost without Handforth knowing it, the dusk crept down until the shadows were deepening in the corners of the room. And still he sat—still in thought. Gradually the chaos was leaving his mind. His father had been right; this solitude was what he needed. He was feeling calmer, but the bitterness within him was growing.

It was a bitterness directed against himself. He wasn't thinking so much of the events that had just taken place—but of the events which had led up to that catastrophic climax.

Darkness came, and the stars were twinkling in the skies. Handforth sat at the window, and his vision was now clear. He was looking at everything in its true focus. At last he rose to his feet—stiffly—and commenced pacing restlessly up and down in the shadowy bed-room.

"Oh, what a fool I've been!" he muttered tensely. "I can see it now—now that it's too late! It's my own fault! It's been all my own fault from the very start! Only why the dickens didn't I see it before? Now I'm sacked—or just as good as sacked—and I shall never go back to St. Frank's again! What are the chaps thinking about me? What are they saying? Oh, I must have been mad!"

His restless pacing continued. He traced everything back—right to its source. He remembered that first day, two or three weeks ago, when he had been so cantankerous. At the time he had told himself that everybody was against him, and that he was the injured party. But now he could see that his own folly had been responsible for the long train of misfortunes.

He remembered that fatal morning when he had squabbled with Church and McClure. He had got out of bed on the wrong side, had quarrelled with everybody, and had made an idiot of himself in class. He had received lines from Mr. Crowell, and had been kept in extra lesson during the afternoon—instead of playing in a cricket match.

Like a lunatic, he had defied Mr. Crowell, and had had the idiocy to appear on the cricket field!

"Yes, and I thought that old Crowell was a beast and a rotter for dragging me back to the class-room," muttered Handforth huskily. "Of course, he was right! What made me do it? Old Crowell was right all the time! Any master would have done the same!"

He remembered how he had gone about the school, uttering threats against Mr. Crowell. He remembered how he had found Willy's little monkey, Marmaduke, in Mr. Crowell's study. Marmaduke had half-wrecked the room, in his exuberance at being free, and he—Handforth—had been accused of the damage! At the time, Handforth had felt that he was an absolute martyr. But now—when he could see everything in its true focus—his opinion was different. He had been found in that study, and Marmaduke had not been seen. Naturally, Handforth himself had been blamed, and had been flogged. After what he had been saying about Mr. Crowell, how could he blame the Head for jumping to a conclusion that had seemed obvious?

And it was the same all along!

His had been the blame! He had quarrelled with Irene, thinking that Irene had "chucked him over." He went hot all over when he remembered how rude he had been to the girl. Since then he had discovered that he had had no justification for his conduct.

Yes, his folly had been patent from the very start—to everybody in the school except himself!



CHAPTER 6.

The Awakening!

"HY couldn't I have seen all this before?" muttered Handforth, as he sat down on the edge of the bed, and clasped his hands round one raised knee. "What was the matter with me? Why was I such a blind idiot? And Hicks? The treacherous, lying rat! By George! If ever I get my hands on him, I'll—I'll—"

He nearly choked. He had trusted Bert Hicks—had fed him, had given him shelter, and now, when it was too late, he knew that Hicks had been playing with him all the time.

And yet he might have known! For hadn't Nipper and Travers and the others warned him against that young hooligan? They certainly had! And he remembered how he had scorned their earnest efforts to help him. He had gone on blindly, relying upon his own judgment, only to find that he had despised his true friends in favour of a cunning trickster.

His perversity had led him on and on, and never once had he allowed that film to unroll from his eyes. But it was gone now, and Handforth could hardly credit that he had been so foolish. If he had only thought, he might have known that Bert Hicks was pumping him—getting information out of him. He might have known that the young rascal had had ulterior motives.

The school had been burgled, and he, Handforth, was responsible!

"It is my job to recover the stolen property!" he muttered fiercely. "I brought it all on, so it's up to me to square it! But how—how? What can I do? They think I'm just as bad as Hicks and his gang! They think I'm a thief! Even the pater looks at me in a way that makes my blood turn cold!"

And so it went on—his thoughts going round in circles.

The end was, of course, inevitable. Weary in mind and in body, Handforth fell back upon the bed, and although he told himself that sleep could never come to his troubled mind, sleep did. It was the sleep of exhaustion—mental exhaustion, as much as anything else. He lay upon the bed like a log—fully dressed, just as he was. He had dropped into a dose unknowingly, and now he was in a sound sleep, troubled only by occasional vague, elusive nightmares.

He awoke with a start.

He felt chilly; he was shivering.

"They don't give us enough blankets in this giddy school!" he mumbled, turning over and clutching at thin air.

Then he sat up. His fingers, instead of encountering the sheet and the blankets, had encountered nothing. He looked across the bed-room in a bewildered way. It was daylight—broad daylight! The early morning sunshine was peeping in at the window. Birds were singing, and he could hear the occasional rumble of traffic, too.

"My goodness!" ejaculated Handforth abruptly.

In a flash, remembrance had come back. He wasn't at St. Frank's—he was at home, in London! He was in his own bed-room, and he was fully dressed. He remembered now, how he had been lying on the bed overnight. No wonder he was feeling chilly!

But now that full consciousness had come, he was no longer sleepy. He could tell by the sun, that the hour was about five-thirty. He must have been sleeping for eight or nine hours.

He got off the bed, feeling cramped; he walked up and down for a while, and then sat down on the bed again. His brain was clearer—and, although he still knew that he, himself, was to blame for everything that had happened, he no longer looked at the situation in the same panic-stricken way as he had looked at it the previous evening.

Some of his old spirit was returning.

"By George!" he muttered, his eyes glittering. "I can't believe it! The pater brought me here, and looked me in! Poor old dad! What a rotten shock it must have been for him! What the dickens can I do? How can I show him that I was only a born idiot, and not a thief? Perhaps he'll listen to me this morning—later on, after breakfast. He's got to! Things can't remain as they are now!"

His thoughts were disturbed. Outside, the purring hum of a motor-engine was mingling with the twittering of the birds, and there was something about that hum which

struck a familiar chord in Handforth's mind. The unmistakable purr of an Austin Seven!

Of course, there was nothing in it—there were hundreds of Austin Sevens about, and probably one of the sturdy little cars was passing— But no! It wasn't passing. Handforth could distinctly tell that this particular Austin Seven was down in the yard—only just below the window. He got to his feet, went to the window, and looked out. Then his eyes opened wider.

There, in full sight, was his own sports Austin, with its glittering red body—he had had it repainted only just recently—and its other distinctive features! A young fellow was just climbing out of it, and, as Handforth watched, the engine was switched off.

At first Handforth was bewildered. How was it possible that his own little car was here, in London, at half-past five in the morning? Then, with a shock that was tantamount to a physical blow, he knew the truth.

That young fellow down there was his father's second chauffeur. In all probability, he had been sent down to St. Frank's overnight, with instructions to bring the little Austin home. Very sensibly the chauffeur had made a start in the small hours, and had thus had a clear run home, unimpeded by traffic or police traps.

Not that it mattered, anyhow. Here was the little car—and its presence was significant. For it meant that everything was over! His trunks, of course, would come along by train! Handforth himself had left St. Frank's, and now his belongings were following him!



CHAPTER 7.

The Great Idea!



ANDFORTH'S face was a study in consternation.

Until this minute, he had hardly realised the awful truth. He was home, it was true. But it seemed to him, in a vague way, that he would be going back to St. Frank's in due course. But now he knew the truth. He was never going back—he had been brought away by his father, and there would be no return!

"Oh, crumbs!" he muttered miserably.

He couldn't realise it—he refused to realise it in its full tragedy. He knew that it was all settled and fixed, but he wouldn't admit it. He thought of Church and McClure, and of Nipper and Travers and all the others. He thought of Irene—and a deep flush suffused his face and neck. His eyes became frantic with helplessness and anxiety.

Then, in the natural sequence, he thought of Bert Hicks—the young hooligan who had caused all this.

"I can't stay here like this!" panted Handforth, shaking himself and moving restlessly up and down the bed-room. "I've got to find Hicks! That's the only thing in life—to find Hicks, and smash him to a jelly! I've got to recover all that stolen property, and take Hicks to the Head and make him choke up the truth! By George! If only I could get away, and—"

Then he paused, a wave of despair creeping over him. How could he get away? He was in London now, in his own home, under his father's eye. In all probability, he would be packed off to Broadstairs, to his mother. Of what use was it to have futile plans of searching for Bert Hicks?

It would cost money to get down to the St. Frank's district, and even when he got there it wouldn't be any good. Everybody would see him; the Head would get to know, and he would be packed off to London again. Oh, what was the use?

Yet, with that determination which was peculiarly his, he thrust out his jaw, and told himself that nothing would satisfy him but a return to the St. Frank's district. That was the starting point! Bert Hicks had disappeared from there, and he couldn't be very far away, either!

Handforth greatly fancied himself as an amateur detective, and he was supremely confident. He believed that he would be able to get on the track of that unscrupulous young rascal. It is to be suspected that Handforth's desire to punch Bert Hicks into a jelly was far more predominant than his anxiety to serve the law.

Somewhere in the house a clock was chiming. Three-quarters! Just as he had thought—a quarter to six! He moved over towards the window mechanically, and stood there, looking out. The garden was delightfully fresh in the early morning, but, so far, there was no sound of movements within the house. None of the domestics were up. The young chauffeur had vanished, having probably gone off to a coffee shop, or somewhere, to get himself some breakfast. And there, in the yard, stood the Austin Seven. Suddenly Edward Oswald Handforth jumped.

He literally leapt into the air, and now his face was burning red. An idea had come to him—and it was such a stupendous idea that the blood rushed to his head. It was, incidentally, an idea that could have come to nobody on earth but Edward Oswald Handforth.

"I'll do it!" he gasped feverishly.

This was like him, too. No sooner did an idea enter his head, than he wanted to put it into execution. He always acted on impulse; and it must be admitted that unless he acted on impulse now, he would never be able to act at all.

"I'll run away!" he breathed excitedly. "By George! It's so simple, so obvious, that I must have been dotty not to think of it before!"

But it was the Austin that had put the idea into his head.

There it was—his own little car! Waiting for him—with not a soul about!

"Yes, that's it!" said Handforth, glowing all over with satisfaction. "That's it! The first thing I've got to do is to find Bert Hicks, and smash him up! The only way I can do it is to go down into Sussex. And here's my car—ready for me! I shall be down there before the pater knows anything about it!"

Another thought came into his head. Handforth was nothing if not optimistic.

"Yes, and after I've collared Hicks, and after I've dragged him to St. Frank's and made him tell the truth, I'll apologise to the whole Remove!"

There was something very naive about Handforth's plan. He did not consider any possible hitches. He had decided to set out upon this expedition, and he refused to think of anything else but success. It was so exactly like him to be eager and impatient to admit his faults, too. When he knew that he was in the wrong, he could never rest content until he had acknowledged it.

"Yes, I'll make a day of it!" he told himself, all his high spirits returning. "I'll buzz off in the Austin—and I'll be away within ten minutes! It won't take me long to locate that rat, Hicks, and after I've pulverised him I'll make him prove my innocence. Then I'll tell all the chaps in the Remove that I've been a blithering idiot, and that I ought to be kicked, and that I'm an obstinate donkey!"

It gave him great pleasure to refer to himself in these disparaging terms. And now his mind was busy, too. It came upon him, in a flood of excitement, that he would have to make very careful plans.

His first impulse was to tie his sheets and blankets into a rope, swarm to the ground, and shoot off in the Austin. Fortunately, he did not do anything so impulsive.

He remembered that preparations would have to be made—and, once started on that line of thought, all sorts of snags arose. He sat down on the bed, his eyes glowing.

Never mind about snags! He would take them, one by one, and think of something to overcome them!

His determination, if not his grotesque scheme, was at least deserving of success!

CHAPTER 3.

Ready for the Great Adventure!



T

HERE was something effervescent in Edward Oswald Handforth's mood now.

The possibility of failure he swept aside as unworthy of a moment's attention. He was going off on a great adventure, and he would be

victorious. That was the one and only thing to think.

After all, it was only the natural reaction.

Last night, Handforth had been in the depths of despair—in the lowest abyss of misery. His sound sleep had done him good, and now, in the fresh sunlight of the early morning, his hopes were high. He had gone from one extreme to another—as was usual with him. Looking upon the dark side was a silly thing, anyhow. He was full of high spirits—full of determination and hope.

In fact, in a word, Handforth was himself again.

"Now, let's see!" he murmured, grinning with glee. "I've got to think things over—and I've got to think mighty quick, too! The only place to pick up the trail will be at St. Frank's. Not actually in the school, but round by Edgemore, or Caistowe, or Midshott, or somewhere like that. I've got to buzz all round in my Austin, searching for traces of that cad, Hicks!"

In his exuberance, he did not seem to realise that this "buzzing round" would be a pretty hopeless sort of job. And in his present state of optimism, he believed that he would be able to pick up Bert's trail in about ten minutes, once he had got fairly started.

"But it'll be no good going to Edgemore or Caistowe, to start with," he decided, frowning. "I shall have to go to Belton, and make a few inquiries. H'm! Everybody knows my Austin—there aren't many red ones in that district! And everybody knows me, too! How the dickens am I going to wangle it?"

It was indeed a knotty point. He could see himself getting to Belton all right. But what then? It would ruin everything if he was seen and recognised. For he had made up his mind that he would not speak to anybody belonging to St. Frank's until he had proved his innocence. Then he would be able to face everybody with a bold heart, and with a clear conscience. But what would happen if he got to Belton, and found himself surrounded by Removites? What would happen if Mr. Lee came upon him, or the Head?

Even Handforth's imagination was sufficient for this. He knew that he would be detained, that his father would be wired for, and that he would be hauled back to London again. And that wasn't a very lively prospect.

"There must be some way!" muttered Handforth tensely. "I consider myself pretty good at detective work, and— By George!"

He had got it! The very idea! Why not go down to the St. Frank's district in disguise?

Handforth had very weird and wonderful ideas on disguise. He had never had much practice, it is true, but he had always held the view that he could disguise himself in such a manner that his own mother would

not know him. And here, like a gift from the blue, was an opportunity of proving all his theories!

He was gripped by the stupendous nature of this great stunt. It held him in a trance for a few moments. He marvelled at his own genius—which had given birth to this super idea.

It would all be so simple, too. At this hour of the morning, he could creep into his father's dressing-room, and get all sorts of clothes from the wardrobe! Yes, and there was a big make-up box in a cupboard on the landing—that one he and Church and McClure and some of the other juniors had used for amateur theatricals during the winter. Idea after idea came, and Handforth could now see success looming before him. All the snags had been swept away, and nothing remained but for him to get busy.

And he got busy!

His first move was to tie the sheets together, and to lower them out of the window like a rope. He hadn't much fear of being disturbed. It wasn't quite six yet, and none of the domestics would be down until half-past, at the very earliest.

Having done this, he inspected a ledge which ran along the side of the house. He decided that it would be quite safe—although, actually, it wasn't safe at all. But he ventured along it, flattening himself against the wall. A slip would have meant a very nasty fall, and probably a serious injury, on the path below.

But he reached the next window in safety, and he knew that this was the window of a kind of lumber-room. It was partially open at the top, and in less than a minute Handforth had lifted the sash and was inside. He crept to the door and found, to his relief, that it was unlocked. He hadn't been able to get out of his own room, but he could get out of this one.

His next move was to visit his father's dressing-room—which could be reached without entering the actual bed-room. His ransacking of the wardrobe occupied about three minutes, and he emerged with a bundle of clothing, linen, ties, etc.

Returning to the box-room, he flung everything out of the window on to the path below. Then he went and fetched the make-up box, and one or two other odds and ends that had occurred to him. His heart was beating rapidly all the time, for he had a horror that he might be detected, and stopped. For he knew that if his father should come, and command him to halt, he would halt. In similar circumstances, he would defy any schoolmaster who happened to come along, and would bolt just the same. But it was not Edward Oswald's habit to ignore his father.

So it was imperative that he should be off while Sir Edward still slept. It would be all the good if he got away before any

of the servants were up, too. For he did not want any hue and cry. He wanted to be miles on the road before his absence was discovered.

And luck went with him.

Making the return journey along that ledge, he reached his own window, and in a couple of moments he had swarmed down the sheets and was on the ground. He collected his spoils, and bundled everything into the back of the Austin. His heart was now throbbing painfully. At any moment he expected the chauffeur to show up, and to ask him what he was doing.

But no. He got the gates open, and he pushed the Austin out. He dared not start the engine there, for fear of one of the maids looking out of her bed-room window as she was dressing and seeing him. At last he got the little car out, and he pushed it right round the corner until another house intervened. Then, leaping in, with perspiration standing in beads on his forehead, he pressed the electric starter and the engine hummed.

With a great gulp of triumph, he trod on the accelerator, and engaged the gears. He was off! He had succeeded in getting away, and nobody knew anything about it!

His great adventure had started!



CHAPTER 9.

Camouflage!

SUCCESS!

The rhythmic purr of the Austin engine seemed to drum the word into Handforth's

ears as he sat at the steering-wheel. He was well away by now. He had got out of the West End, and was now skimming through the suburbs in the early morning sunlight; more than one constable on point duty had gazed in stern disapproval at this burly schoolboy as he whizzed past.

But Handforth was too busy to think about constables and speed regulations. He was only too glad to get out of London before the rush of traffic started. Expert driver as he considered himself to be, he preferred not to test his skill during London's rush hours.

Soon after seven, such good progress had he made, he was well out into Surrey. And now he was just pulling up outside a garage, for he had no intention of running short of petrol. Usually, Handforth forgot all about petrol, but this morning his senses were unusually acute.

"I've done it!" he muttered triumphantly. "I'm well away! And they all think I'm still locked in my room! Good egg!"

He found that his tank only contained about half a gallon of "juice," so he had three gallons from the pump. The tank held

four, but it was now practically full—and there was ample spirit to last him the entire day, even if he drove almost continuously.

Fortunately, he had some money on him. Not much, but sufficient for his present needs. He had tendered a ten-shilling-note, and as he was waiting for his change, his gaze wandered into a big show window, near the petrol pumps.

The garage was making a feature of cellulose paint—a particular brand for home application. It was a cellulose finish that could be applied by brush, and, according to the garage, any enterprising car-owner could repaint his own car in the course of an hour, and make it look like a brand new one. Cellulose had, of course, the great advantage of drying almost rock-hard within an hour or two.

"By George!" said Handforth abruptly.

His last remaining snag had gone. During his ride through the suburbs he had been a bit worried about his little Austin. As regards himself, he no longer had any fear. He would adopt a disguise, and he was convinced that nobody would know him from Adam. But what about his little car? It was a distinctive red, and it was well known throughout the St. Frank's district. Of course, there were other red Austins, and he had convinced himself—nearly—that his disguise would be enough. People might think that the car looked like Handforth's, but when they saw a stranger at the wheel they would believe that they had been mistaken.

But now Handforth had another brain-wave.

A couple of tins of this patent cellulose, and he could change the appearance of his car within an hour! There wasn't much of it to cover, anyhow, and the job would be easy.

Within a couple of minutes he was talking easily to the garage man, and the garage man assured him, with perfect confidence, that he could speedily make his car look like a new one. So Handforth invested in two tins of bright blue cellulose and a large-sized brush. The cost of these things made a nasty hole in his remaining cash, but he didn't care. They were necessary.

And off he went again, freshly excited.

He felt that he had the whole day before him, and he reckoned that he would easily be able to get to his destination shortly after noon.

At about eight-thirty he pulled his car up near a little wood, where everything was quiet and peaceful. There was a gateway here, and the gate itself was closed, but not locked. It was only the work of a minute for Handforth to hop out, open the gate, and drive his car in. He closed the gate again, and then proceeded cautiously.

He was delighted with the result of his enterprise. For very soon, after a bumpy journey, the Austin was in a little clearing, and there were trees all round. He was

hidden from the road—hidden from everybody. He stopped the engine, climbed out, and walked round the little car.

"Easy!" he told himself.

Rather surprisingly, he had been thoughtful enough to provide himself with a couple of pork pies and a bottle of ginger-beer, which he had purchased from a coffee stall just as the latter was packing up. He now fell upon these luxuries with gusto, and felt all the better for his meal.

After that came the serious work.

It is to be feared that Handforth was a somewhat slapdash painter. But it cannot be denied that he entirely changed the appearance of the Austin Seven. It is also true that he covered every inch of the ordinary body work with brilliant blue. The mere fact that he accidentally daubed blue smears on the upholstery and over the wheels—which should have been left black—is hardly worthy of mentioning. It must be remembered that Handforth was in a great hurry, and accidents are liable to happen to the very best of car painters.

Anyhow, he was thoroughly satisfied with his work.

In passing, it might be as well to mention that Handforth successfully disguised himself before he even attempted the job. By the time he had finished that car he was blue almost from head to foot. He had blue on his trousers, blue on his jacket, blue on his shoes, and, indeed, blue on his hands and face. Even his hair was blue in parts.

He didn't worry at all—until he tried to wash himself in a neighbouring brook. And then he found that cellulose possesses a most peculiar property. It won't come off! By the application of the correct medium, of course, it can be removed like lightning. But water won't shift it—particularly plain water. Handforth had no soap or powder cleanser. However, it wasn't like him to worry over trifles.

The car was a satisfactory job—it was blue all over—and that was the main thing. It didn't matter a toss about his clothing, because he was going to change it, anyhow.

And change it he did. In that secluded spot, it was a perfectly safe proceeding to adopt. He climbed into one of his father's suits—a particularly choice one that Sir Edward used for the City. The trousers were striped, and the rest of the attire consisted of a morning coat and waistcoat. On Sir Edward they looked impressive and dignified. On his son they looked like nothing in the wide, wide world.

To begin with, Sir Edward was much bigger and taller. On Handforth, the clothing folded itself into rucks. The trousers collected in gathers round his ankles. The collar was several inches too large, and the soft felt hat—which, of course, was never intended to be worn with such a suit—gave Handforth the appearance of a youthful anarchist.

"Crumbs!" he muttered. "There seems to be something wrong!"

He looked down at his ankles, and he instinctively felt that something would have to be done. It was only a minute's work for him to turn the trousers up, and as he was perfectly satisfied with the result, what did it matter what anybody else thought?

As for the jacket, that would have to stand. He convinced himself that nobody would take much notice. At the worst, people would only think that he was a bit eccentric.

And now he proceeded with the most important feature of the disguise.

From his make-up box, he produced grease paint, false whiskers and moustache. He tried on several, and at last he decided upon a black beard, bushy false eyebrows, and a somewhat moth-eaten wig. By the time he had donned these atrocities, he looked more like an anarchist than ever—but he had now grown suddenly elderly.

He was handicapped by the fact that he had no mirror—he had forgotten this important point. But, when he had finished, he took a look at himself in the brook, and that one look was enough to make him shiver like a startled hind.

"Great Scott!" he breathed. "For half a tick I thought I was looking at somebody else!"

Extraordinarily enough, he was perfectly satisfied. But then, he was very excited—very full of his great scheme. Moreover, he was quite convinced that his skill in the art of make-up was second to none. So he was liable to look at the result of his work with a prejudiced eye.

And now, having completed his preparations, he prepared to depart.

Very fortunately for him, a shower of rain came on, so he was compelled to affix the Austin's hood and side-curtains. So, when he drove away, he was mercifully hidden from the public gaze—or, at least, partially hidden.

But for this shower, Handforth would probably have been pulled up by the first policeman! For our sturdy custodians of the law are liable to gaze with suspicion when grotesque freaks are to be found loose on the public highway!

CHAPTER 10.

Startling News!



DR. MALCOLM STAFFORD, the dignified old Head of St. Frank's, placed his fingertips together, and looked across his desk at the wretched youth who stood on the other side.

"I am sorry that Mr. Pagett has found it necessary to send you to me in this fashion, Parry," said the Head gravely. "But there can be no denying that your record is lamentable. It seems to me that

you seldom obtain more than fifteen marks out of a hundred for any subject that you undertake."

Parry, of the Fifth, squirmed. He belonged to the Modern House, and it was notorious in the Fifth that he was the most indolent fellow in the Form. Otherwise, he was quite a normal good natured fellow. He was the bane of Mr. Pagett's existence, and at last goaded by an excess of laziness on Parry's part, the Form-master had reported him to the Head.

"Term after term, your reports are very bad indeed," went on the Head sternly. "Really, Parry, there must be a change. Don't you like work?"

"Yes, sir!" muttered Parry.

This, of course, was an untruth—for Parry hated work like poison.

"Mr. Pagett has brought these papers to my notice," continued the Head, picking up some of Parry's worst atrocities. "Honestly, Parry, I've never seen anything like them."

Parry quite believed him.

"I cannot believe it possible," said the Head, "that you handed in these papers to your Form-master—"

Zurrrrrh!

"One moment!" said the Head impatiently, as the telephone buzzer sounded.

"Yes? I beg your pardon? Yes, this is the headmaster's house. Who did you say—"

Dr. Stafford speaking! Oh! I see—I see! Good morning, Sir Edward!

Parry was grateful for this respite; perhaps he could think of some excuse that might pass muster. Unfortunately, his brain was somewhat stupefied by the near proximity of the Head. Also, he couldn't help listening to what the Head was saying. Dr. Stafford himself seemed to have forgotten that the Fifth Former was present—and he could hardly be blamed for this.

"Good gracious!" he ejaculated with concern. "I am distressed to hear this, Sir Edward! You say that your son is missing? I see—I see! He got up in the early morning, escaped by means of knotted sheets, and drove off in his own Austin car! Extraordinary, Sir Edward! And yet, knowing the boy as I do, I am not entirely surprised."

Parry pricked up his ears.

Sir Edward! Obviously, the Head was talking to Handforth's pater! And Parry felt quite excited when he understood that Handforth had bolted again! Only this time, instead of bolting from the school, he had bolted from home!

"Yes, yes, it is quite possible," the Head was saying. "I agree with you, Sir Edward, that your son may have some idea of coming back to St. Frank's. That would be quite characteristic of him! Yes, I will see that everything possible is done. If there is any news of him, I will ring you up—I beg your pardon? Oh, I see! You may be coming down yourself?"

Parry stood there, listening—thrilled. At last the Head placed the receiver on its

hook; he sat back in his chair, and took out his handkerchief.

"Upon my soul!" he murmured. "What a truly extraordinary boy!"

Parry coughed.

"You were saying, sir—"

"Eh? Ah, yes!" said the Head, adjusting his glasses. "Parry, you may go!"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and, Parry, if you happen to see Mr. Lee, tell him that I should like him to come to me— No, no! You needn't bother!" said the Head hurriedly. "I can telephone to him. That will be quicker! Go, Parry!"

"Yes, sir!" gasped the Fifth Former.

The Head was so agitated that he failed to realise the significance of Parry's presence. He might have pledged the senior to silence if he had thought of it, but he had forgotten Parry, and everything connected with him.

And Parry, being a fellow who simply loved anything in the way of a sensation, shot across Inner Court, and burst into the Triangle like a tornado. It was well after nine o'clock, and before long the school would be going indoors for lessons. But, at the moment, the Triangle was thronged with seniors and juniors who were sunning themselves.

"Hallo!" said Reggie Pitt, of the West House, as he stood chatting with a group of Ancient House fellows. "What's the matter with Parry? Look at him flying through Big Arch!"

"Bother Parry!" grunted Church dolefully. "Why talk about Parry? What are we going to do about old Handy? That's what we've got to decide!"

But nobody took any notice of Church—except, perhaps, McClure. The others realised that Church and McClure were liable to hold prejudiced opinions regarding their old leader. Handforth had gone, and the Remove was steeling itself to bear the blow.

"I say, you fellows!" shouted Parry excitedly, as he barged into a group of Fifth Formers. "Have you heard the latest?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Chambers, staring.

"Handforth has bolted from home!" yelled Parry.

"What?"

"Fact!" said Parry, pleased to hear that sensational shout. "He's bolted from home in his Austin Seven, and there's the very dickens of a row about it!"



CHAPTER 11.

Just Like Old Handy!

"Well, well!" said Vivian Travers complacently. "Good for old Handy! Isn't it just like him? You can never keep a good man down!"



With a triumphant flourish Handforth whipped off his cap and beard. "Ted!" exclaimed Irene.

"But I don't believe it!" said Fullwood. "Parry must have got hold of the wrong end of the stick! You know what an ass he is! How can he know anything, anyhow?"

"Of course not," said De Valerie. "I suppose it's only a rumour."

Crowds of fellows were swarming round Parry.

"All right—all right!" said Parry breathlessly. "Don't all shout at once!"

"Who told you this about Handy?" demanded Nipper, pushing forward.

"I was in the Head's study when Sir Edward rang up!" grinned Parry, more pleased than ever. "I heard every word that the Head said! He promised Sir Edward that he'd do everything he could—because there's a decided chance that Handy may come down to St. Frank's in his Austin!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Handforth won't admit that he's beaten, you know," went on Parry. "He was taken away yesterday by his father, but he's evidently made up his mind to come back on his own!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I knew it!" gasped Church, red with excitement. "Didn't I tell you only this morning, Mac, that I shouldn't be surprised if Handy came back?"

"You did!" agreed McClure. "And I said exactly the same thing!"

"There's no need to get excited, dear old fellows," drawled Travers. "I admire Handy's spirit, but, by the look of things, he won't meet with much success. His pater seems to be an obstinate old boy!"

"Handy takes after his pater!" nodded Church, with gleaming eyes. "And I suppose you're right, Travers. After all, what can Handy do? It's a dotty idea, when you come to think of it."

"What's a dotty idea?" asked Jimmy Potts.

"Why, thinking that Handy will come here," said Church. "He may be an ass, but he's not such an ass as that! He'd know that he'd be spotted in a tick, and he'd know, too, that his pater would soon be on his track."

"I think the same," said Nipper. "And yet, I don't know, though," he added thoughtfully. "Handy's mind works differently to ours."

"It's unique!" nodded Travers.

"He may be coming down here with the deliberate idea of kicking up a row," continued Nipper. "He was half-stunned yesterday, and they took him away without much trouble. But he's had a good sleep since then, and you know how quickly he recovers. He's probably coming down here with the

wild idea of having it out with the Head, and getting himself reinstated!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"It would be just like him to refuse to acknowledge himself sacked," continued Nipper. "Or he may be coming down to get on the track of those crooks."

"My stars!" gasped McClure. "You've hit it, Nipper! That's it! You know how crazy he is about detective work! He thinks he's marvellous at the game—and I'll bet he's coming down here so that he can get on Hicks' trail, and nab him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old optimist!"

"Let's wish him luck!"

"Rather!"

This unexpected news about Handforth had brought about a complete change in the attitude of the Remove. The previous evening the whole Form had been subdued. In a sort of way, they had mourned the lost Form-fellow. Even this morning, the juniors had been going about with grave faces. They had been collecting together in knots, discussing the one all-absorbing topic. And there had been a noticeable shortage of laughter and noisiness. Everybody had been sympathising with Edward Oswald in his great trouble.

But now it was different.

Handforth, like the hopeless ass he was, had bolted from home in his own Austin, and his father had the idea that he was coming to St. Frank's. This put a different complexion on the affair altogether. The Remove found itself grinning, then shouting with laughter. Obviously Handforth needed no sympathy! If he could do a thing like this, on the very first morning after his removal, there was plenty of spirit in him!

It was clear enough that he was not taking his defeat lying down. So the Remove were only too glad of the opportunity to resume its normal light-hearted attitude. Everybody had pictured Handforth as a subdued, wretched sinner, mooning about at home, steeped in his own misery. And here he was, careering about the countryside in his Austin. It wasn't surprising that the Remove found itself capable of grinning.

Yet the more thoughtful fellows were very dubious. It occurred to them that this sort of behaviour would not do Handforth any real good. He would only be located, and then take back to London. In one way, this piece of news was sad—for Handforth was deliberately giving himself another ordeal.

"Oh, well, it's no good worrying, of course," said Nipper, as he stood talking to Church and McClure. "There's only one Handy in the world, and he's acted just as we might have expected him to act. The great question is, how will it end? What on earth can his game be?"

"Yes, I wonder when we shall hear anything more," said Church anxiously. "Oh, crumbs! There goes the bell! How the

dickens are we going to do any work this morning?"

"We shan't do any!" said McClure, taking a deep breath. "I feel like cutting lessons altogether!"

"Better not!" advised Nipper. "Old Crowell will have quite enough trouble, as it is. The whole Form is pretty excited, and everybody will be listening for the sound of Handy's Austin all the morning."

So, much as Church and McClure hated it, they went into the Form-room with the rest of the fellows. But when the interval had come and gone, and the morning was wearing on, and no sound of Handy's Austin had been heard, the excitement began to die down. Mr. Crowell, much to his relief, found that the Remove was beginning to take a little notice of him.

The impression was gathering strength that Edward Oswald Handforth had already been recaptured, and that St. Frank's would see him no more.



CHAPTER 12.

Handforth in Disguise!

"LISTEN!" said Jimmy Potts, coming to a sudden halt.

Vivian Travers dutifully listened. The

chums of Study H had just been to the station, to inquire after a very important hamper that Jimmy was expecting. Unfortunately, it hadn't turned up, and the pair were now leisurely walking back towards the school.

It was half-holiday that day, and the mid-day meal was already over. The Junior eleven had no matched fixed for this afternoon, although there was a practice game on, featuring the lesser lights.

"Well?" said Travers amiably.

"Don't you hear something?" asked Jimmy Potts. "Can't you hear the purr of an Austin along the Bannington road?"

Vivian Travers chuckled. They had left the station approach, and at this point they could look for a short distance down the Bannington road, but there was a bend a little further on, concealing the long stretch.

"What of it?" asked Travers amusedly. "Anything surprising in it?"

"Well, I was thinking of Handforth, you know," said Potts, rather lamely.

"My dear Sir James, forget it!"

"You silly ass! Don't call me 'Sir James'!"

"Well, Jimmy, then," said Travers obligingly. "You seem to forget that Austin Sevens are as thick as flies nowadays."

"You're right!" said Jimmy, as the car came into view. "This isn't Handy's. It's blue!"

"And I hardly think the gentleman at the wheel can be confused with our own Handy,"

chuckled Travers. "Of all the whiskered brigands I have ever seen, this gent appears to be the most bewhiskered."

They prepared to stroll on, without giving the Austin and its occupant another glance. But suddenly Vivian Travers looked more closely at the approaching car—and he certainly looked very straight at the figure at the wheel.

"For the love of Samson!" he murmured under his breath.

So far it was only a suspicion—dim at that. But it was rather a curious fact that the blue Austin was slowing down. It was drawing to the side of the road where Jimmy and Travers were standing.

Handforth, at the wheel, was filled with a great new idea.

Since coming through Bannington, he had been troubled with a few doubts. After passing Helmford, he had suddenly realised that the sun was shining, and that there was no longer any need for him to be stuffy and hot. So he had stopped the car, and had lowered the hood, and taken the side curtains down. His clothing and disguise were quite stuffy enough, without anything else.

In the open air, he had travelled along much more comfortably, but, passing through Bannington, he had noticed a remarkable number of stares in his direction. The policeman in the centre of the town, indeed, had stared so hard that Handforth had vaguely wondered if he had forgotten his licence-holder.

He had put on speed, and then he had seen that passers-by were looking at him; some were actually laughing. In the end, he had an uncomfortable suspicion that something had slipped in connection with his disguise.

Outside the town, however, he stopped, and had made certain adjustments. Everything had seemed all right. Then why had the people stared? Handforth was worried.

He was rather later than he had expected, too. But at last he was approaching Bellton—where he intended to make discreet inquiries concerning Bert Hicks. Incidentally, the local police had not yet found any trace of the elusive Hicks and his companions. True, the case was not considered to be an important one, and there was not a wide hue and cry. There were no detectives on the trail of the tramps—for they were little better than tramps.

Turning the bend near Bellton, Handforth instantly recognised the two figures in flannels. Vivian Travers and Jimmy Potts! And, on the spur of the moment, Handforth decided to give his disguise a thorough test. He would soon find out if there was really anything wrong with it. Perhaps he had been ultra-sensitive when passing through Bannington. Perhaps everybody had stared at him just because he was wearing black whiskers. After all, there weren't many men about with black whiskers. This was a point that he ought to have thought of before, but it was too late now.

Anyhow, he could easily bring his car to a halt near the two juniors, and make some inquiry as to direction. If his disguise was satisfactory—as he confidently believed—they would fail to recognise him. And if they failed, then everything would certainly be all right. He would be able to carry on with impunity, knowing full well that his disguise was impenetrable.

It must be admitted that Handforth's heart was beating rapidly as he pulled the car to a standstill. He quite failed to observe the startled expression on Jimmy Potts' face. He did not see the slight nudge that Travers gave to his companion, and the purring of his engine prevented him hearing Travers' low words:

"Jimmy, dear old fellow, this is more wonderful than I had ever hoped for!" he said softly. "Not a word! Leave this to me!"

"But—but—"

"Exactly!" murmured Travers. "All the same, leave it to me!"

Jimmy Potts pulled himself together, and took his cue from Travers. He assumed an air of polite interest, and hoped against hope that his face did not give him away, for inwardly he was not only amazed, but bewildered. At the first glance, he had recognised Handforth beneath that grotesque disguise, and it had seemed incredible to him that the leader of Study D could be riding about on the highway in this weird get-up.

"Anything we can do, sir?" inquired Travers politely, as he raised his cap.

Handforth jumped in his seat.

"I—er—can you, by any chance, tell me if this is the right road for Caistowe?" he said in a deep, rumbling voice, which he assured himself was well disguised. "And is this the village of Bellton?"

Vivian Travers' face was a perfect study of politeness.

"Yes, sir; this is Bellton," he replied. "And if you want to get to Caistowe, you take the first turning on the left. You can't mistake it. There's a sign-post at the corner."

Handforth wanted to reply, but he couldn't. He was filled with an overwhelming sense of triumph. Here were these two St. Frank's fellows, whom he knew so well—and who knew him so well—answering him as though he were a perfect stranger!

The test was a success! They didn't know him. They noticed nothing out of the ordinary!



CHAPTER 13.

The Sleuth!

IF Handforth was filled with gratification, Vivian Travers and Jimmy Potts were filled with incredulous

wonder.

Was it possible that Handforth really

believed that his own personality was hidden beneath this crude get-up? After a moment's reflection, Travers, at least, came to the conclusion that Handforth did believe it. Otherwise he would never have come boldly into Bellton like this. Handforth had bolted from home, and here he was, in his favourite rôle of sleuth!

Travers' brain, as usual, worked quickly. Something would have to be done about this! If Handforth was spotted by a master or a prefect, he would be challenged at once, and probably seized. Then he would be taken by force to the school, and kept there until his father had been informed. And Travers didn't want anything like that to happen. This thing was almost too good to be true, and it was certainly too good to be wasted.

It was now perfectly obvious that Edward Oswald Handforth was in no need of sympathy.

Travers reasoned it out shrewdly. Handforth's very presence here proved that his sentence had been a mistake. If he had been guilty, he would have remained at home, crushed and stricken. But, being a fellow of spirit, and being innocent, he had returned, and his very disguise indicated that his object was to investigate the mysterious affair which had led to his downfall.

No; old Handy needed no sympathy! But, without question, he needed help! For, as sure as the sun was shining, if he was left to his own devices, he would rapidly be in trouble.

Travers realised that it would be a fatal mistake to "recognise" the leader of Study D. Far better to pull his leg—and to help him by wile.

These thoughts had flashed through Vivian Travers' mind within a second or two, and in the meantime Handforth himself was glowing with success. Jimmy Potts, by this time, had assumed an air of complete innocence.

"A stranger in these parts no doubt, sir?" asked Travers casually.

"Yes," said Handforth, with a start. "That is, I mean, no! Not exactly. I know Bellton pretty well."

"We're from St. Frank's, sir," remarked Jimmy Potts, feeling that it was rather necessary for him to make some sort of remark.

"St. Frank's?" repeated Handforth, as though he had never heard of the place.

"The big school," explained Travers.

"Oh, rather!" said Handforth, nodding so vigorously that his eyebrows were in danger of falling off. "I've heard of the place."

Travers was eyeing him contemplatively.

"I'll bet you've heard of most places, sir," he said. "In fact, I'll bet you're a great man. I can see it by the very look of you."

Handforth glowed afresh.

"Well, hardly great," he said modestly. "The fact is—"

"You're a great painter, aren't you, sir?" asked Jimmy innocently. "I expect you have come down here in the cause of Art?"

Handforth coughed. He didn't quite like this. He had no wish to be mistaken for a

painter. Handforth, it is to be feared, had no great opinion of painters. His mind ran in more practical grooves.

"No," he said firmly. "I am not a painter."

"Then an author, sir?" ventured Travers.

"No, you ass!" frowned Handforth. "At least, I am an author at times. But I'm really a detective."

Travers stepped back a pace, and gazed at Handforth with undisguised awe. Jimmy Potts stepped back, too, and his jaw dropped slightly.

"A detective, sir?" they both said, in one voice.

"My name," said Handforth impressively, "is Saxon Drake!"

"For the love of Samson!" murmured Travers, in wonder.

"Great Scott!" breathed Jimmy Potts.

Edward Oswald Handforth hugged himself. Never had he dreamed of such a triumph as this!

"Yes," he went on, rather carried away by the intoxication of the moment. "I'm down here on an investigation. A secret investigation, mind you," he added darkly. "I've got to take rooms at the George Tavern, and make the place my headquarters."

This statement had slipped out quite unintentionally. Handforth had thought of it on the spur of the moment, and it seemed to him that it would further impress his gaping audience. Until then, he hadn't had the slightest intention of taking rooms at the George Tavern. In fact, he didn't want to go there at all. He didn't precisely know where he was going. He had arrived at Bellton, and that, for the moment, was sufficient.

"I knew you were somebody big, sir," said Travers, with deep respect. "Mr. Saxon Drake, eh? The great detective! I suppose you wouldn't like us to help you in your investigation?"

"Not likely!" said Handforth promptly. "Er—that is to say, certainly not! No, boy! I cannot be bothered with schoolchildren! Besides, it has always been my policy to work alone. I never have confederates!"

"I suppose you mean assistants, sir?" asked Jimmy mildly.

"Eh? Yes, of course I meant assistants," retorted Handforth. "I find that I can concentrate better if I am entirely by myself—"

"Excuse me a moment, sir!" interrupted Travers hurriedly. "Shan't be a minute, Jimmy!"

"Here!" gasped Jimmy Potts. "What the dickens—"

"Keep Mr. Drake there!" said Travers, as he hurried off. "I want to pop to the iron-monger's, to see if my camera is repaired. I can't afford to lose this chance of taking a snap of the great detective!"

Jimmy couldn't quite understand it, for he knew perfectly well that Travers had no camera. The truth was, Travers had just

seen a number of youthful cyclists dismounting from their machines, farther down the village street. And Travers felt that this opportunity was too good to be missed!



CHAPTER 14.

A Few Preparations!

NIPPER paused as he was about to enter the confectioners'. Tregellis-West and Watson were with him, and in the shop Archie Glenthorne was chatting with Reggie Pitt. And Vivian Travers was coming down the road at the double.

"What's the excitement?" asked Nipper wonderingly.

"Never mind now! Get inside!" urged Travers. "Church and McClure are just coming down the road, and I want them, too!"

Handforth's former chums had appeared in sight at the other end of the village street, and Vivian Travers waited impatiently while they cycled up. They both wore settled expressions of hopelessness, and they were preparing to pedal right past. But Travers pulled them up.

"Come inside—and look sharp about it!" he said urgently. "I've got news!"

This was sufficient for Church and McClure. Their thoughts had been with Handforth all day, and they had been particularly acute since the story had leaked out that Handforth had bolted from home. They were even now on a sort of haphazard scouting expedition.

"News?" panted Church, as he ran into the confectioners', with Mac at his heels. "Do you mean news about Handy?"

"Good gad!" remarked Archie Glenthorne, as he laid an ice-cream aside.

"Listen to me, all of you!" said Travers calmly. "Handy's here!"

"What!"

"Handy is here!"

"Here?" yelled Church excitedly.

"Here!" said Travers, nodding. "Just down the High Street, sitting in his Austin Seven."

"Well, I'm hanged!" ejaculated Nipper. "Of all the reckless idiots——"

"Just a minute, dear old fellows!" broke in Travers, as Church and McClure were preparing to dash out. "There's no hurry. I'd better explain that Handy is disguised."

"He's what?"

"At least, he thinks he's disguised," amended Travers coolly. "And even his Austin has changed its colour. I rather suspect that old Handy has been busy with a pot of paint."

"But—but how can he be disguised?" asked Church, in amazement.

"That's just the point," said Travers. "The poor old chump has got black whiskers

on, and he's wearing a hat that's about four sizes too big for him. He's the greatest freak on earth! And, unless we want him to meet with absolute disaster, we've got to rally round and help him."

"Absolutely!" said Archie stoutly. "The very stuff, laddie! You can rely upon me in this dashed crisis."

"Poor old Handy!" murmured Church softly. "It's almost pathetic, when you come to think of it——"

"Then don't think of it!" said Travers, grinning. "And don't waste any sympathy on Handy! He doesn't need any! A fellow with a nerve like his is unique. I wish I had half of it!"

"But if he's disguised, how could you recognise him?" asked Nipper. "And what did you say when you told him that you'd spotted him?"

"I didn't tell him!" grinned Travers. "He thinks, the poor innocent, that Jimmy and I were fooled. Jimmy, by the way, is still keeping him detained. I spotted you fellows out of the corner of my eye, and so I hurried along. And don't forget that Handy's new name is Saxon Drake, and he's a detective, here on an investigation."

"Odds rot and rubbish!" said Archie blankly. "I mean to say, old cheese, you don't absolutely mean it?"

"I do!" said Travers, with a chuckle. "I want you fellows to keep it up. See? Make Handy believe that he's still unspotted. Pull his leg for all you're worth. He told us that he's going to take rooms at the George Tavern, so I'm going to pop into the George now, and prepare the landlord for the shock. We've got Handy here now, and we're not going to let him escape!"

"By Jove, you're right!" said Nipper keenly. "Unless we do something drastic, he might be seen by a master. And then the fat would be in the fire!"

"Exactly!" said Travers, making for the door. "My plan is to get him into the George, and then, perhaps, we'll be able to find out what his game is. And we might be able to help him."

"Oh, I say, that's fine!" said Church breathlessly. "Come on, Mac! Let's go and find him!"

"But be cautious!" warned Travers. "Don't forget that he's Mr. Saxon Drake, the detective!"

Church and McClure and Nipper and the others went hurrying out, while Vivian Travers dodged across the road and went into the George Tavern. Within a minute he was talking to the landlord.

"In a very short time," said Travers, "a grotesque freak of humanity will come here applying for rooms. You will instantly recognise this grotesque freak as Handforth, of the Remove. He thinks he is disguised, but he isn't. We want to keep up the joke."

"Bless my soul!" said the landlord, in a dubious voice. "Master Handforth? The



Handforth flung a bundle of clothes to the ground below. He was aglow with intense excitement—for in a few minutes now he would be on the trail of the rascally Bert Hicks!

young gent as was taken away yesterday? All the village has been talking about him."

"All the more reason that you should admit him without question," said Travers. "It's important that you shouldn't recognise him. He'll say that his name is Saxon Drake, and I want you to keep the ball rolling."

The landlord of the George scratched his chin.

"I don't know as I ought, young gent," he said. "I might get into trouble with the people at the school. Mind you, I like Master Handforth—always did. A rare good-hearted young gent, although boisterous at times. And I don't believe he did any wrong, either."

"Then you're the very man to help us," said Travers smoothly. "You needn't worry about money. If there's any trouble, later on, about the room, I'll pay for it. Charge any old thing you like. This jape is worth quids!"



CHAPTER 15.

Keeping It Up!

HANDFORTH experienced a slight shock as he observed the group of juniors descending upon him.

For a moment he was almost panic-stricken, and he thought about wishing Jimmy Potts a hasty good-day, and speeding off. But he really hadn't time, for the other Removites were already on the scene.

And Church and McClure were among them! Handforth felt that this would indeed be a crucial moment! For, of all fellows on earth, Church and McClure were the most liable to see through his disguise. If they failed to penetrate it, then he would be safe indeed!

Jimmy Potts played his part well.

"Hallo, you chaps!" he said, glancing round as he heard the footsteps. "Let me introduce you to Mr. Saxon Drake, the famous detective! He's down here on an important case, and he's going to stop at the George Tavern."

Handforth gulped. He had forgotten that remark of his about the George, and he rather regretted it now. But there wasn't time for him to amend that statement.

"Good-afternoon, sir!" said all the juniors in one voice.

They doffed their caps, and regarded Handforth with respect and awe. But they only did this with the greatest effort—with the greatest restraint. For their one desire, at that moment, was to yell with laughter. They quite believed Vivian Travers' statement that Handforth needed no sympathy!

Never, in all their lives, had they seen anything so funny.



Handforth flung a bundle of clothes to the ground below. He was aglow with intense excitement—for in a few minutes now he would be on the trail of the rascally Bert Hicks!

Even Church and McClure were staggered—and they had reason to know of Handforth's escapades. That he should regard this disguise as an effective one was almost incredible. Nipper, at all events, wasn't really surprised. He had long since come to the conclusion that Edward Oswald could make himself believe anything!

"Very pleased to have you down here, sir," said Nipper gravely. "It isn't often that Bellton is so honoured."

"No fear!" said Church eagerly. "I hope you've come down in connection with Handforth, sir?"

"Handforth?" repeated Edward Oswald, in a puzzled tone.

"He's our chum, sir," said Church, with an effort. "He was practically sacked yesterday, and some rotten tramps burgled the school. Poor old Handy had been suspected of helping those crooks!"

"It's a rotten lie!" roared Handforth indignantly. "I—I mean— Oh, my hat!"

He pulled himself together hurriedly. "No, I can't tell you why I'm down here!" he added, in an impressive voice. "My mission in Bellton is a secret one. Now, boys, I must go. I cannot remain idle any longer. I must get to work!"

He was relieved to find that the juniors had noticed nothing. They were still regarding him with deep respect, and his heart was thumping with intense satisfaction. Even Church and McClure were spoofed! He had always believed that he would make good with disguises—and now he knew it!

"I suppose you're going along to the George Tavern, sir?" asked Nipper.

Handforth started.

"Well, no," he said hastily. "I've got to get on with that investigation—"

"But surely you're going to the George Tavern first, sir?" asked Nipper. "Of course you are! We'll go with you, too! We'll escort you there!"

"Hear, hear!"

"A priceless scheme, laddies," said Archie Glenthorne stoutly. "A dashed bodyguard for the great detective, what? Absolutely!"

"Oh, rather!"

"Two of us will ride ahead, as an advance guard," said Church. "The rest of you can place yourselves on either side of the car. Come along!"

There was no getting out of it. Handforth found himself committed to go to the George Tavern. When they got there, the landlord was waiting outside, and Nipper was rather alarmed to see that a number of other 'St. Frank's' fellows had come up, and were standing round in a crowd. A few of the villagers were there, also. But Vivian Travers had been busy—he had warned everybody.

Handforth, flushed and hot, brought his Austin to a standstill outside the inn, and then he majestically emerged from the little car. It spoke well for the restraint of the onlookers that they did not burst into one long shout of laughter. Handforth had been funny enough in the Austin, but he was ten times as funny out of it. His suit, five sizes too large for him, hung upon his body in folds, and he looked like an exaggerated edition of Charlie Chaplin.

"Welcome to Bellton, sir!" said the landlord heartily.

"Eh?" gasped Handforth. "But—but you don't know me!"

The landlord wagged a finger at him.

"Who doesn't know the great Mr. Saxon Drake?" he asked, with impressive solemnity. "It's no good, sir! I've already heard about you. Come straight in, sir! Your rooms are ready."

"Oh, my only hat!" muttered Handforth.

He entered the inn, and the spectators stood round in a semi-circle, watching with reverent interest. This, at least, is what Handforth believed. Actually, they were anxious to see Handforth vanish into the



Tavern. They didn't want him to be recaptured by the Head.

In the doorway, Handforth turned, and he waved an imperious hand.

"You boys mustn't follow me!" he said sternly. "I have work to do—as I have already told you! So you can jolly well clear off—I—I mean, be good enough to go!"

He then turned on his heel, and vanished into the cool, shadowy depths of the stone-paved hall of the old-fashioned inn.



CHAPTER 16.

Surprising the Natives!

HOLD me up, somebody!" murmured Tommy Watson, in an exhausted voice. "Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a very subdued laugh—and it was instantly silenced. All those St. Frank's fellows wanted to yell at the top of their voices, but if they had done so, everything would have been spoilt. Nipper and Vivian Travers and Church and McClure were urgently telling their companions to hold themselves in.

"For goodness' sake, don't let him know!" said Travers. "We've got him into the Tavern, and, for the time being, he'll be safe. Now we've got to decide what we've got to do with him!"

"It won't be easy!" said Nipper, shaking his head. "You know what a wilful bounder Handy is!"

"He'll probably sneak out by the back door!" said Church, in sudden alarm.

"It won't matter if he does, dear old fellow," murmured Travers coolly. "The Austin is being taken round into the yard, and I'm going to see that it's locked up!"

In the meantime, Handforth had been ushered into a private sitting-room. The landlord was all attention and politeness.

"If there's anything that you'll be requiring, sir I'll take your orders," he said respectfully.

"No!" replied Handforth. "I don't want any orders! I—I mean, I don't want anything! I've got to think! I've got to get out my plan of campaign! So the sooner you go, the better I shall like it!"

"Yes, sir," said the landlord gravely.

He went out, shutting the door, and Edward Oswald Handforth emitted a long

breath of relief. He was alone! For a spell he could be himself—he could relax his constant vigilance.

"Oh, crumbs!" he muttered, as he sat down abruptly in a chair. "What a game! But, by George, I fooled them all!" He added triumphantly. "They don't suspect a thing!"

His gaze fell upon a bale of clothing, and one or two other odds and ends which had been solemnly carried into the sitting-room by the landlord. It was only natural that the great man's luggage should have been brought in with him.

In his present state of mental stress, Handforth did not realise the incongruity of it. As he saw that clothing, and the theatrical make-up box, his eyes glittered. A new idea came into his head.

"Why not?" he asked himself. "It's all very well being Saxon Drake, but those chaps are too jolly excited and inquisitive!"

He went to the window, and looked out. A number of juniors were in sight, standing about talking in groups.

"Thought so!" grunted Handforth. "As soon as I show myself, I shall be mobbed. I can't even go out! And that means that I shan't be able to make any investigations this afternoon! Oh, well, there's only one thing for it!"

He strode to the door, turned the key in the lock, and then got to work.

Outside, a new development had cropped up. For several of the Moor View girls had arrived on the scene, and they were rather startled when they heard the news. Doris Berkeley and Mary Summers, and one or two others, smiled happily, enjoying the joke. But Irene Manners looked anxious.

"Oh, why did Ted come here?" she murmured, as she drew Doris aside. "It's a mad thing to do!"

"All the same, you ought to be glad," said Doris.

"I am glad," replied Irene quietly. "Perhaps I shall get a chance of having a few words with Ted. I do so want to! But this state of affairs can't last for long, Doris, you know! As soon as any of the masters get to know that Ted is here, he'll be dragged out and taken up to the school. And then his father will be sent for!"

"Lots of things can happen before then," said Doris philosophically. "I'm jolly glad to see that Ted is here. It shows that his spirit is sound enough, anyhow! If he had a guilty conscience, he wouldn't have dared to come!"

"That's what I'm thinking, too," said Irene happily. "I was just wondering if I could slip into the Tavern——"

"Odds vision, and nightmares!" came a startled interruption from Archie Glen-thorne.

The girls glanced round, and then they, too, caught their breath in. Everybody else was staring—dumbly.

A figure had just appeared in the doorway of the George Tavern. It was a figure

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in plus-fours—with a sports coat to match, and with an enormous cap. Beneath the cap, a glimpse of red hair could be seen, and on the gentleman's chin there was an exaggerated goatee beard.

It is a well-known fact that plus-fours are cut with singular generosity, but these plus-fours drooped right down to the gentleman's ankles. Altogether, the figure was a degree more grotesque than the fabulous Mr. Saxon Drake; and it is no exaggeration to state that more than one spectator felt faint with the shock.

They were gazing upon Handforth—in a new disguise!

"Oh, my only aunt!" breathed Church hoarsely.

"Steady, old man!" panted McClure. "For goodness' sake, don't give yourself away."

Handforth, thoroughly pleased with himself, strode out and looked up and down the High Street. He turned to Nipper and Travers.

"Say, have you young guys seen a gazook around here named Saxon Drake?"

Nipper, with an effort, raised his cap.

"I thought Mr. Drake was indoors, sir," he said. "Are you another guest in the inn?"

"Sure thing!" said Handforth, with an exaggerated American accent—an alleged American accent. "I guess my name is Silas P. Hooper, and I'm a guy from Chicago! Say, folks, what's all the durned excitement?"



CHAPTER 17.

Irene Means Business!

ONLY by the greatest exercise of self-restraint did the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls hold their faces straight. Handforth as "Mr. Saxon Drake" had been comic enough. But Handforth as "Mr. Silas P. Hooper," of Chicago, was literally a scream. Those fellows and girls were heroes and heroines.

As for Handforth, his satisfaction knew no bounds.

It had been well-nigh impossible for him to emerge from the Tavern in his former disguise, for the juniors would have at once surrounded him. But now, in his new character, he was a stranger to them, and so he would be able to go his way—and start on his real work. For Handforth was beginning to worry, inwardly, about Bert Hicks. He had come down here to capture that young rascal, and his determination was as strong as ever. Not that Handforth had any settled plan in mind.

The majority of the juniors were only too anxious to continue this priceless jape, but before any of them could collect round Handforth, Irene stepped forward. She,

like the others, was astounded that Handforth could believe that he would pass muster.

"Do you know Mr. Drake?" asked Irene. Handforth looked at her with glowing eyes. At last! This was the moment he had longed for—when he could see Irene, and explain to her! And then he remembered. It was just the irony of fate that he was prevented even from recognising her openly.

"Eh?" he gasped at last. "Know him? Well, say, baby, you can bet your sweet life I know him!"

He was rather pleased with that reply—it struck the right note.

"Oh, Mr. Hooper, I wish you would take me indoors, and introduce me," said Irene earnestly. "I'd love to meet Mr. Drake!"

Nipper and Vivian Travers guessed that Irene was doing this with a purpose, but most of the other fellows thought that she was just ragging him. And they admired her for it. She was doing famously. There was something excruciatingly funny in the idea of Handforth taking Irene indoors to introduce her to the non-existent Mr. Drake.

"Say, you've said a mouthful!" exclaimed Handforth boisterously. "I guess Silas P. Hooper ain't the guy to refuse a request from a lady! Come right in! I'll sure let you meet my friend, Mr. Drake!"

The fellows pondered. What was the game now? But Handforth had got another idea! Fate had placed this chance in his hands! Irene was asking to be shown indoors—and who was he to refuse her? She, of all persons in the world, would know his great secret. Here was his opportunity to have a private word with her.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Hooper!" said Irene breathlessly.

She took his arm, and she literally pushed him through the doorway. She didn't care what any of the others thought. There was one thing that she *had* to discover, by hook or by crook!

Handforth led the way into the sitting-room, and the door had no sooner closed than he whipped off his cap and wig, and gave a tug at his goatee.

"Ted!" ejaculated Irene, startled by his sudden action.

"Rather!" said Handforth eagerly. "I've given you a surprise, eh? You didn't think it was me, Renie, did you?"

"I—I—"

"But it is!" went on Handforth, gazing at her with sudden gravity. "I can't hope to explain now. But I'm down here in disguise—because I want to prove my innocence! And I want a couple of minutes alone with you, Renie, so that I can tell you how rotten I feel—"

"Oh, Ted, don't!" broke in the girl, clutching his arm. "I was a little cat the night before last, when you came up to the Moor View School to see me. I want you to forgive me, if you can."

Handforth took a deep, deep breath.

"Oh, I say," he said. "Don't talk like that, Renie! I'm the one who's got to apologise! I was horribly rude to you the other week, when I saw you with your cousin, Jack Winston. I—I thought—"

"Never mind, Ted!" said Irene, smiling.

"But I was a cad!" protested Handforth. "I was a rotter! I ought to have known! I don't wonder that you refused to speak to me, and that you cut me dead! But I want to apologise, Renie. I want you to let things be as they were."

"But they are, you silly!" laughed Irene. "Everything is just the same. We were both to blame. I shouldn't have been so resentful. Still, it's all over now, and I think it will be a lot better if we don't talk about it."

Handforth could have danced with joy. The ordeal he had been looking forward to with such trepidation was no ordeal at all.

Irene, for her part, was glad enough to be friendly again. But she had come into the George Tavern with one object, and one

object alone. Looking at Handforth earnestly, she still held his arm.

"Ted, I want to ask you something," she said tensely. "Why did you go to Bannington yesterday morning?"

"It's awfully decent of you, Renie, to forgive me—"

"Why did you go to Bannington yesterday morning?" repeated the girl.

"Why did I— Eh? Go to Bannington?" said Handforth, coming to earth. "Oh, I see! Why—and that reminds me!" he added, in surprise. "I thought you were in London, Renie! Didn't you go to your cousin's wedding?"

"Oh, Ted, why don't you answer me?" said Irene steadily. "I've asked you why you went to Bannington yesterday morning?"

"To see you, of course!" replied Handforth, without hesitation. "I got up early, and went down to the station so that I should be there when you arrived. I wanted to get



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you alone in the train, so that I could apologise to you for being such a rotter!"

"I knew it!" breathed Irene happily.



CHAPTER 18.

Sound Advice !

HANDFORTH looked at the girl in wonder. "Knew what?" he asked.

"I knew that you weren't running away from the school yesterday!" said Irene, with quiet confidence. "Oh, Ted, but why didn't you explain this to your headmaster? Why did you let him believe that you were running away with some of the stolen property?"

Handforth gulped. "Do—do you know anything about that, then?" he asked blankly.

"I know everything."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"We all know," said Irene. "And we know, too, that you're innocent, Ted. But if you had only explained to the Head—"

"I couldn't!" broke in Handforth awkwardly. "Oh, I say, Renie! How could I tell the Head that I went to the station to see you alone? How could I tell him that I wanted to apologise to you? I—I didn't want to drag your name into it!"

"It was awfully decent of you, Ted, but it wouldn't have mattered, really," said Irene, looking at him with frank friendliness out of her blue eyes. "And you did yourself an awful lot of harm, you know. Your refusal to explain why you went to London was—was— Well, it seemed like evidence against you."

"But I went to London by accident!" protested Handforth. "I got into the wrong train. I was so worried about you—"

"Yes, I know," said the girl. "I can believe that, too. But don't you see, Ted, that it makes all the difference. If your headmaster only knew that you caught that train at Bellton yesterday morning with a perfectly innocent reason, he'll re-consider the whole case. You weren't running away, as he thought."

"Well, that's all over now," said Handforth gruffly. "Personally, I don't think it matters. The main thing is to get hold of that awful cad, Hicks. By George! I'm going to find him, too!"

Irene made no reply for a moment. She was thinking quickly. She knew, too, that it was necessary for her to be diplomatic.

She wanted to help Handforth all she could, but she knew that it would be impossible for him to take any step towards finding Bert Hicks if he continued his present policy. And she could hardly tell him that his disguise was too funny for words. She did not want to hurt his feelings.

"I'm going to get on the track!" said Handforth determinedly. "In this disguise, I shall be able to—"

"Ted, please!" urged Irene. "Please don't go out of doors in that disguise again!"

"Why not?" he asked, staring.

"Oh, what's the use," asked the girl hurriedly. "If the police can't find these rascals, how can you do it?"

"Blow the police!" said Handforth. "Oh, I say! Sorry! But you see, I've made up my mind—"

"I expect Hicks and his companions are in London by now," went on Irene, shaking her head. "Don't you see how hopeless it is, Ted? They've been missing for nearly two days. They escaped in the small hours of yesterday morning, and they haven't been seen since. Have you any idea where they might have gone to?" she added, with a keen glance at him.

"How should I know?" asked Handforth, scratching his head. "That's the trouble!"

"Didn't Hicks ever tell you where he was going, or anything like that?"

Handforth frowned, thinking deeply.

"That rotter spoofed me!" he said darkly.

"He made me think that he was an orphan, and that he had nowhere to go. If I only had some clue—"

He broke off, and his eyes opened wider. A red flush suffused his cheeks.

"By George!" he breathed tensely.

"What is it, Ted?"

"I've just thought of something!" said Handforth. "There may be nothing in it, but there's just a chance. Look here, Renie!" he added, his excitement growing. "That young brute, Hicks, once told me that he was going to join a fair."

"A fair!"

"Yes; one of those travelling fairs," said Handforth. "Afterwards he said he'd got a job at Caistowe, but I think that was a lie. He said he knew the man who kept a fair, and that when it came into this district he would get a job. It may have been all lies—"

"I'm not so sure of that!" said Irene shrewdly. "Oh, Ted, I wonder if you've hit it? Don't you see? There has been no trace of the men at all. And it would be so easy for them to hide with a travelling fair. There are caravans, and all those sort of things, you know."

Handforth jumped.

"You may be right!" he said huskily. "That's why the men haven't been found. They're lying low!"

"It's a chance, anyhow," declared Irene, her eyes gleaming with hope. "Surely, if these rascals had been tramping along the roads, they would have been seen, and stopped by the police. Very soon after the robbery was discovered the police knew all about it, and they sent warnings into every town and village. But no sign of the men has been seen!"

"But I may be all wrong about the fair," said Handforth, as doubts assailed him.

"But, listen," urged Irene. "I was in Bannington yesterday, and I saw a bill—about a fair at Midshott!"

"Midshott!" gasped Handforth, his eyes widening. "Bert Hicks mentioned Midshott, too! He said that the fair would be coming to Midshott!"

"Oh!" cried Irene excitedly.

"Where's my Austin?" said Handforth, swinging round. "I'm going straight there—"

"Wait a minute, Ted," panted the girl. "Oh, don't you see? This may be the real clue! Those wretches must have started off at two or three o'clock in the morning, and they could easily have got to Midshott before breakfast time. And so, long before the police were told anything about it, they had joined that fair, and the police wouldn't even suspect them! The police would be looking for tramps on the road—not for men working in a fair ground!"

For once, Handforth saw things in their true light.

"Renie, old girl, this is your doing!" he said breathlessly. "If I collar Hicks to-day, it will only be through you!"

"But we haven't collared him, Ted—and we may be on the wrong trail," said Irene quietly. "So you mustn't take anything for granted."

But Handforth did. He looked upon it as a certainty. And, instead of taking the credit to himself, he gave it to Irene. She was the cause of this sudden ray of hope.



CHAPTER 19.

Action!

HANDFORTH wanted to dash straight out, but Irene held him back. "No, Ted!" she said. "You can't go out like that!"

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth. "I—I'd forgotten! I'd better put my false beard on again, and my wig—"

"No, don't!" insisted the girl. "Please, Ted, drop all these disguises, and go after Hicks as yourself."

It was a good moment to make this suggestion, for Handforth was ready to agree to anything that Irene proposed. Yet, for a moment, he looked blank with dismay.

"But I came down all prepared!" he protested. "I thought it would be better to disguise myself—"

"It's different now, Ted!" said the girl quickly. "You've got something definite to go on now. It doesn't matter if Hicks does recognise you. All the better. He'll never be able to get away, once you spot him."

"By George, that's true!" admitted Handforth, his eye gleaming. "All right! I'm fed up with these beastly clothes, anyhow!

It's tremendously hot to-day, and I've been nearly stifled."

"Splendid!" said Irene happily. "All right, then! I'll go outside, and I'll tell the others. You change as quickly as you can, Ted, and then come out."

"Tell the others?" said Handforth, staring.

"Yes," replied Irene. "They've got to go with you—on their bicycles! You've got to let them help you."

"Oh, but look here—"

"I want you to, Ted!" said Irene.

"Then they can come!" replied Handforth promptly. "The whole giddy school can come! If you want 'em to, that's good enough for me!"

She went out, laughing, and it is only true to state that she was inwardly excited. For she, too, believed that something would come of this escapade, after all.

Outside, the other girls came crowding round her, and Church and McClure and Nipper and Travers pressed closely, too.

"Listen, all of you!" said Irene, before they could question her. "Ted is coming out in two or three minutes—as himself! I've advised him to drop these disguises."

"Well, well!" murmured Travers. "Just as we were beginning to enjoy the fun, too!" Irene looked at him with a little frown.

"Oh, it isn't right of you to talk like that!" she said. "It may be funny for you, but it's not for Ted!"

"I stand corrected," said Travers humbly. "And you are quite right, Miss Irene. I apologise. For Handforth, I admit the situation is by no means happy. But has he any plan of action?"

"Yes," said Irene. "He's just remembered that Bert Hicks may be with a fair at Midshott, and he's going straight over there now, to make sure. Wouldn't it be a good idea if some of you fellows went, too—on your bicycles? There might be trouble, you know."

"We'll go!" said Church eagerly. "We'll go in the Austin!"

"Rather!" agreed McClure.

"And the rest of us will be getting ahead now—on our bikes!" said Nipper practically.

"Hear, hear!"

"Are you sure this isn't a mare's nest, Irene?" went on Nipper, looking closely at the girl. "You know what Handy is—"

"Yes, of course," said Irene. "But, somehow, I believe there may be something in this business."

Before she could explain anything further, the door of the George Tavern was flung open, and Handforth appeared. Once again he was dressed in his own clothing. They were somewhat bespattered with blue cellulose, but this was only a trifle. He was happy enough to be back in his own personality.

"Good old Handy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What have you done with Mr. Saxon Drake, and Mr. Silas P. Hooper?"



"Walk up, gents—walk up!" sang out a coarse voice, as the juniors ran into the meadow. "Three shies a penny! Three shies——" The voice broke off abruptly. And Handforth gave vent to a great bellow. The youth in charge of the coconut booth was Bert Hicks!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you didn't know me, anyhow!" roared Handforth triumphantly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We knew you all the time, you ass!" shouted Watson. "We were only pulling your leg!"

"What!" gasped Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Never mind about that now!" said Nipper crisply. "There's some idea of going to Midshott, isn't there? Well, Handy, the sooner we start, the better!"

Handforth abruptly changed his manner, as a thought came to him.

"Look here, you fellows!" he shouted.

"Do you think I deserved to be pushed out of the school? Do you think I'm guilty?"

"No fear, old man!"

"Absolutely not, laddie!"

"We're with you, Handy!"

"Yes, Ted!" cried Doris. "You can count on us!"

Handforth flushed with pleasure.

"By George! You're bricks—all of you!" he said huskily. "And there's one thing I want to say—now! I meant to say it to the whole Form, but I can easily repeat it, later on. I want to apologise to you all—I want to tell you that I was a fool and a blockhead and a stubborn idiot!"

"Cheese it, Handy!" protested Church.

"I won't cheese it!" thundered Handforth.

"All this trouble is my own fault, and now I'm going to do my best to repair the damage! And if you fellows will let things

go on in the old way, I shall be as happy as a sandboy!"

"Well spoken, dear old fellow!" said Travers. "And I'll bet you're glad to get it off your chest!"

This was true enough. Handforth was feeling much happier now—now that he had admitted his folly. Nipper and Reggie Pitt and all the others did not look upon the affair so seriously, and they were smiling. But it was just like Handforth to be so candid in his self-condemnation.

"That's all right, old man!" said Nipper, clapping him on the back. "We've forgotten all about it. Everything is 'as you were' from this minute onwards. And if you want us to help you this afternoon, we're your men!"

"I say, you're real sportsmen!" said Handforth huskily.

Five minutes later they were off—on the road to Midshott!

CHAPTER 20.

Irene's Bold Step!



SLIM girlish figure walked across the quiet Triangle at St. Frank's, and entered the Ancient House.

Hardly anybody was about, for it was a long way from tea-time, and the fellows were

either on the playing-fields, or reading books under the trees, or out on the river. The news of Handforth's return had not yet reached the old school.

Irene knew her way about the Ancient House fairly well, and she had no difficulty in locating the Housemaster's study. Her heart was beating rather rapidly as she tapped firmly upon the panels.

"Come in!" came a call.

Irene entered, and Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous schoolmaster-detective, at once rose from his desk.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Miss Irene," he said pleasantly.

"Please forgive me for disturbing you, Mr. Lee," said the girl, as she closed the door. "But I want to speak to you about Ted Handforth."

Nelson Lee looked grave.

"I'm rather sorry," he said, as he indicated a chair to her. "Won't you sit down? I know that Handforth was one of your friends, but I am afraid there is nothing that I can do. Handforth is gone. He left the school yesterday—"

"Oh, Mr. Lee, won't you tell me what you really think?" asked the girl, as she bent forward in her chair. "You don't believe that Ted Handforth is really guilty of deliberate dishonesty, do you?"

"I don't," replied Lee frankly. "But there can be no question that he was extraordinarily foolish. As far as I can see, the headmaster took the only possible course."

"Of course he was foolish," said Irene. "We all know that, Mr. Lee! But I think the case went rather against him because he refused to explain why he caught that early train yesterday morning. Without any explanation from him, it looked as though he bolted, didn't it?"

"Well, it had that appearance, I fear."

"I can explain just why he went, Mr. Lee."

And, before Nelson Lee could make any comment, Irene told her story. She explained how Handforth had come to her the previous night, and how she had refused to see him. It was rather an ordeal for the girl, but she did not shrink from it. She was doing this for the sake of her boy chum. She explained how Handforth had been told she would be going to London by that early train, and how he had got up especially so that he could have a few quiet words with her in the local from Bellton to Bannington, hoping that she would patch up the quarrel.

"And he was so worried when I didn't turn up that he was all in a muddle," went on Irene. "Don't you see, Mr. Lee? Then, before he knew where he was, he found himself in the London train, instead of coming back to Bellton."

Nelson Lee was very thoughtful.

"This evidence is certainly important," he said. "It is a great pity that we did not

know of this yesterday, Miss Irene. Handforth was foolish not to explain."

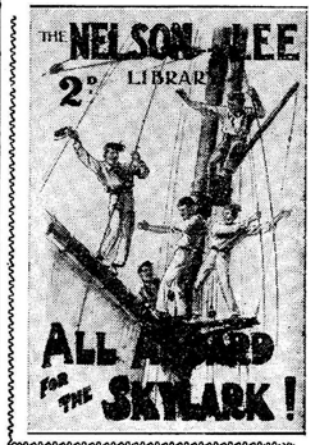
"He was thinking of me, I think," said the girl quietly.

"This is certainly a valuable piece of information," said Lee, getting to his feet. "For another point occurs to me. In London, Handforth met Mr. Pagett, and tried to escape from him. Mr. Pagett thought this was a very peculiar action on Handforth's part—since one would naturally assume that Handforth's chief desire would be to get back to the school."

"I don't think I quite understand," said Irene.

"And yet it is very simple," went on Lee.

NEXT WEDNESDAY!



"If Handforth thought you were going to London, and that you had missed the train, he would naturally assume that you would be coming on by the next train."

"Oh!"

"And it is fairly easy to assume that he was anxious to remain at Victoria, so that he could meet the next train in—in order to get that little private talk with you," said Nelson Lee keenly. "Don't you see?"

"Yes, yes! Of course!"

"Then that is another point settled," smiled Lee. "Handforth's unaccountable actions are becoming childishly clear. I think you had better come with me to the headmaster, Miss Irene, if you don't mind."

"I'll come, certainly," said the girl quickly. "I'll do anything I can, if it is to help Ted Handforth."

Dr. Stafford was considerably agitated when he heard the story. Irene told it again, just as she had told it to Nelson Lee. The Head drummed his desk with his finger-tips, and fiddled with his pipe-alternately.

"Upon my soul!" he remarked. "What do you make of it, Mr. Lee? I am glad, of course, that this young lady has come forward, but it is a thousand pities that she did not do so yesterday morning, while we were holding the inquiry."

"But I didn't know!" said Irene.

"I quite realise that," nodded the Head,

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glancing at her. "And it was foolish, of course, of Handforth not to tell us the truth regarding his visit to London. As I see it now, he merely went to the station in order to meet you, Miss Manners. Perhaps I can understand his silence, but, at the same time, the situation was so serious that he should have spoken."

"And I have already told you, Dr. Stafford, that the trains were running differently at Bannington yesterday," said Nelson Lee. "I made inquiries, and found that the London express went out from the platform that usually accommodates the local."

"Yes, yes," nodded the Head, frowning. "I think you told me that platelayers were

at work? Well, naturally, we can quite understand Handforth's mistake. Dear me! I wonder if we have done the boy an injustice?"

"Oh, I'm sure you have, sir!" put in Irene earnestly.

"And yet, I don't know!" said the Head, pursing his lips. "We mustn't forget, young lady, that Handforth confessed to admitting the young thief into the school."

"But he did it innocently, sir!" protested Irene. "He didn't know that Hicks was a thief! He only did it out of the goodness of his heart! It was silly of him—it was terribly foolish—but it wasn't wicked!"

"H'm! I am inclined to believe that," said Dr. Stafford, in some distress. "And this new evidence certainly clears up a point that was most obscure. But for the accident of this young lady not going to London, as she had planned, Handforth would have been at school when the robbery was discovered. And thus much of the suspicion against him would have been avoided. A very unhappy situation."

Before any further comment could be made, there came a frantic tapping on the door, and a moment later Mr. Crowell, the master of the Remove, burst breathlessly in!



CHAPTER 21.

Monkey Business!

R. STAFFORD looked at the hot and flushed Form-master in astonishment.

"What is it, Mr. Crowell?" he asked mildly. "What has happened?"

"An extraordinary thing, sir!" panted Mr. Crowell. "An incredible thing!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"My study, sir!" said Mr. Crowell frantically. "Papers destroyed—ink everywhere—and utter confusion! And it cannot be a coincidence! In no circumstances, sir, can it be a coincidence! It fills me with the utmost distress when I realise that that unfortunate boy was flogged for an offence which he did not commit!"

Dr. Stafford and Nelson Lee exchanged glances. Irene remained seated, and tried to look indifferent.

"Even now, Mr. Crowell, I must confess that I do not follow you," said the Head gently. "Why are you so excited? I gather that some of the boys have been mischievously employed in your study—"

"No, no!" interrupted Mr. Crowell, bending over the desk. "Not the boys, sir! But a monkey!"

"Good gracious!"

"Yes, sir—Handforth minor's monkey!" said Mr. Crowell agitatedly. "Good heavens! Cannot you understand what means, sir? Don't you remember? Surely

you recall how I brought Handforth major into your presence, and accused him of damaging my study?"

"Dear me! That is so!" said the Head, in astonishment.

Irene was listening now—without making any attempt to conceal her eagerness.

"Handforth minor came to us, and urged us to believe that his monkey had committed the damage on that occasion," continued Mr. Crowell. "We thought that it was a concocted story. We believed that the boy was merely trying to save his brother from a flogging. And yet that story must have been true!"

"You mean that the monkey has repeated his escapade?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Exactly!" said Mr. Crowell quickly. "I went into my study, ten minutes ago, and there I beheld this wretched little monkey, sitting in the middle of my desk, emptying the inkpots over my belongings. To say that I was startled would be futile. I was utterly agast."

"No doubt you were," agreed the Head.

"For not only was I angry at the destruction that this monkey had done, but I was instantly remorseful regarding Handforth," continued Mr. Crowell. "It became perfectly obvious to me that Handforth had been flogged unjustly. I am very upset, sir."

"You are sure there is no trickery about this?" asked the Head, frowning.

"Trickery? No, no!" said Mr. Crowell. "I have ascertained that Handforth minor is away. He has been very depressed since yesterday, and this afternoon he went off for a long walk alone. Some of the other Third Form boys, playing about, accidentally allowed the monkey to get loose. Handforth minor knew nothing about it. He knows nothing now. He has not yet returned."

"This is very startling," said the Head, worried. "Monkeys, as we all know, have a habit of repeating their tricks. And this creature, no doubt, went instinctively to your study after finding itself at liberty."

"That is precisely how I figured it out, sir," agreed Mr. Crowell. "The wretched animal acted as all monkeys will. It went to my study again, and tore my papers up, emptied my inkpots, and ruined the books. But that damage can be repaired; I am not so concerned over it. But I am deeply distressed over the realisation that I brought an unjust accusation against Handforth major, some days ago. The boy was flogged—publicly. I trust, sir, that you will make an announcement to the whole school, exonerating the unfortunate boy, even though he has left."

"I shall certainly do so," said the Head promptly. "The school must know that that flogging was administered owing to an unfortunate error."

"So it seems that Handforth is not such a young rascal as appeared to be the case," said Nelson Lee quietly.

The Head frowned.

"I am very concerned about the boy," he said frankly. "Honestly, Mr. Lee, doubts are creeping into my mind. Within the course of half an hour, Handforth has been proved innocent on two counts! It is very significant. His offence, at the very worst, seems to be reduced to the one fact that he admitted the youth, Hicks, into the school."

"And he did that innocently, sir!" said Irene impulsively.

The Head started, and glanced at her.

"For the moment, young lady, I had forgotten your presence," he said. "Yes, you are quite right. Now that these other facts have come to light, I am prepared to believe that Handforth did nothing dishonourable. If only the thieves could be apprehended—"

The telephone buzzer sounded, and the Head lifted the receiver somewhat irritably.

"Yes?" he said. "Oh, is that you, Sir Edward?"

Irene's heart jumped. Handforth's father!

"No, Sir Edward, there has been no sign of the boy here at St. Frank's," said the Head, in answer to a query. "All the same, some fresh and interesting facts have come to light, and I should very much like you to catch an early train—Oh, I see! You are at St. James' College."

Irene was filled with wonder. She had, of course, heard of St. Jim's. What in the world could Sir Edward Handforth be doing at St. Jim's?

"That is splendid!" said the Head. "Yes, Sir Edward. Please come over at once. As you say, it is highly probable that your son has come down to this district. Quite apart from that, I have excellent news for you."

The Head was rather flushed when he hung up the receiver, a minute later.

"It seems that Sir Edward Handforth is at St. James' College—and that is not a very considerable distance away," he said. "Sir Edward is coming over at once, and I shall be delighted to give him this satisfactory information. I only hope that some news will be heard of his son in the meantime."

Soon afterwards, Irene—who had not told the Head that she had already seen Handforth—went back, feeling thrilled. The air was being cleared. By a stroke of pure luck, the headmaster and Mr. Crowell now knew that Handforth was not guilty of that monkey episode. They knew, also, exactly why he had gone to London.

What was happening now? How would this eventful afternoon end?



CHAPTER 22.

Success!

"IDSHOTT!" muttered Handforth exultantly.

The Austin Seven fairly hummed into the quiet village. It

was just the drowsy period of the afternoon,

and not a soul was about in the quiet street. In the car with Handforth were Church, McClure and Nipper. The other investigators had been left behind, for Handforth had been too impatient to accommodate his pace to theirs.

"Well, we're here, anyhow," said Church eagerly. "Now, where the dickens is the fair ground? Are you sure you haven't made a mistake, Handy?"

"Of course I haven't made a mistake," replied Handforth. "Irene distinctly said that she saw a bill—Hullo, here's somebody!"

He slowed the car up as a small village girl, of about ten, came out of a cottage.

"Hey, miss!" sang out Handforth.

The child looked at him wonderingly.

"Do you know where the fair ground is?" asked Handforth.

The girl nodded blandly.

"Down there!" she replied, pointing to a side lane a few yards further on.

"Thanks!" said Handforth.

They started off again, turned down the lane, and gathered speed. Eagerly they looked for the fair ground. Within a couple of minutes they were leaving the village behind. Then Nipper gave a hail.

"Hold on, Handy!" he sang out. "This must be it!"

The car stopped, and they all stared into an empty meadow. But the grass was well trodden, and in places it was worn deeply, and there were still some stakes left in the ground. The picture told its own story.

"They've gone!" said Handforth blankly.

"Looks like it!" agreed Nipper, with a frown. "That little girl told us where the fair ground was, but she forgot to mention that the fair had packed up!"

"But what the dickens are we going to do now?" demanded Handforth, the resourceful sleuth.

"Do?" repeated Nipper practically. "We're going to find out where the fair has moved on to, of course."

"By George!" said Handforth, with a start. "That's just what I was going to suggest!"

"They can't have gone far," said Church. "These little fairs never do. We'd better go back to the main street and inquire, hadn't we?"

The car was turned, and, at length, it reached the main street again. They were just in time to encounter the cyclists—Fullwood, Travers, Potts, Pitt, and the rest. They were all hot and perspiring.

"Well?" they shouted in chorus.

"The fair's moved on!" said Handforth. "We're looking for somebody. Good egg! Here's somebody."

This somebody was a stout village policeman. He came up majestically, eyeing the party with some suspicion.

"Do you know anything about the fair?" asked Nipper, jumping out of the car and facing the policeman.

"It ain't 'ere now," said the burly limb of the law.

"I know that—but do you know where it has gone to?"

"Yes; it's over at Stoke Tapsley."

"Stoke Tapsley, eh?" said Nipper. "That's a village somewhere off to the right, isn't it?"

"Four an' a half miles away," said the constable. "Not as I advise you boys to take the trouble to find it," he added. "It wasn't much of a fair, at the best."

"Oh, we like our fun!" said Travers easily.

The cyclists went pushing on, eager, if possible, to arrive at Stoke Tapsley as soon as the Austin. But before long the sturdy little car came shooting past them.

"Sorry!" yelled Handforth. "Can't stop!"

"All right—carry on!" shouted Reggie Pitt. "We'll soon be there!"

The lane was narrow, and full of twists and turns. Thus, the Austin, although it got ahead, did not remain very far ahead. While Handforth had to slow down at every bend and corner, the cyclists shot round with impunity.

Stoke Tapsley was reached within twenty minutes, and it wasn't necessary to enter the village. It was a decent sized place, and lay in a hollow. As the schoolboy sleuths hummed down the hill, they beheld a few grubby tents in a meadow on the outskirts of the village. Flags were flying, too, and there were some swings.

"This is it!" said Handforth excitedly.

"Now for the great moment!" said Nipper. "You mustn't be too disappointed, Handy, if this theory of yours is all wrong."

"It's not wrong!" vowed Handforth. "Those thieves are there—on that fair ground!"

It was useless to argue with him. He had made up his mind. The chances, of course, were ten to one against success. But it could not be denied that there was that tenth chance. Bert Hicks and his rascally companions had not been seen since they had robbed St. Frank's. Every road had been watched, but without success. It was feasible enough to suppose that the rascals were lying low in an innocent country fair.

Nipper had thought of something which he had not mentioned to his companions. It was known that Hicks and his associates had had a loaded coster's barrow with them, and nobody had troubled to wonder what that barrow contained. Nipper, however, had wondered a good deal.

There was a high hedge surrounding the fair ground, and so it was impossible for the juniors to see much as Handforth brought the car to a standstill. He leapt out and ran towards the open gateway which led into the grounds. Nipper and Church and McClure were close at his heels; and, in the distance, the other juniors were humming into sight on their bicycles.

The fair ground was very badly patronised. It wasn't the hour for business yet. A number of children were hanging about, looking at the coco-nut shies, and gazing wistfully at

the swings, or at the tin-pot hand-operated roundabout.

"Walk up, gents—walk up!" sang out a coarse voice, as the juniors ran into the meadow. "Three shies a penny! Three shies—"

The youth in charge of the coco-nut shy forth gave vent to a great bellow.

The youth in charge of the coco-nut shy was Bert Hicks!



CHAPTER 23.

The Capture!

H

ANDFORTH wasn't surprised in the least. But Bert Hicks was. He was more than surprised, he was

dumbfounded.

"There he is!" yelled Church excitedly.

"That's the chap!"

"Didn't I tell you so!" roared Handforth. "Here, you cad! You treacherous rat! Come here!"

Hicks, as ragged as usual, and dirtier than usual, recovered the use of his limbs. Probably he had no conscience, but something told him that Edward Oswald Handforth was not friendly.

He turned on his heels and bolted. It was rather unfortunate that he should bolt down the coco-nut shy. He did this just as a solitary customer—a burly farm labourer—was taking a pot-shot at one of the coco-nuts.

Crack!

Bert Hicks ran into the line of fire, and the wooden ball struck him on the side of the head. He staggered as he ran, stumbled, and fell. He wasn't hurt much, but the shock of that unexpected bull's-eye had bowled him over.

"Now, then!" panted Handforth, rushing up.

"Ere, young gent!" gasped Hicks, staggering to his feet. "I—I didn't mean no 'arm! It wasn't me! It was them others—"

"You toad!" broke in Handforth, his eyes blazing. "After all I did for you! You betrayed me—you let your rotten pals into the school, and you burgled the place! You planted some of the stolen stuff in my clothes—"

"I didn't!" lied Bert frantically. "I don't know nothink about it!"

"Put up your hands!" thundered Handforth. "Look sharp about it! I give you three seconds!"

Hicks tried to escape, instead of putting up his hands. The next second, Handforth swung him round, and sailed in; and when Edward Oswald Handforth sailed in, things generally happened!

The leader of Study D took no notice of the general excitement. The children were shouting, and men were running about. The

other St. Frank's fellows had appeared on the scene, and the air was filled with shouts. But Handforth didn't hear anything. He was going ahead with his settled task of pummelling Bert Hicks into a jelly.

And even if he didn't quite accomplish this task, he undoubtedly changed Bert's appearance to such an extent that it would certainly be one moon before it resumed its normal aspect.

Other interesting things were happening in the meantime.

Nipper, looking keenly round, had noticed two men hurriedly skulking away—doing their utmost, in fact, to dodge out of sight behind one of the tents. Nipper hadn't the slightest doubt that these men were Jed Monks and Bill Weenen, Hicks' associates in crime.

"Come on, you fellows!" said Nipper tensely. "There's work for us while Handy's on this job! Sharp's the word!"

"Here, steady!" gasped Reggie Pitt. "We're still puffed—"

"Can't help it!" said Nipper. "It's an urgent case!"

They went tearing round the tent, and as they appeared, the two men broke into a run, it soon became a panic-stricken flight.

"Tally-ho!" sang out Archie Glenuthorne. "Yoicks, and so forth!"

"After 'em!"

All doubts had gone. These two men were the pair who had helped Bert Hicks to burgle the school! And they were no match for the fleet schoolboys. Long before the end of the meadow was reached, the rascals were overtaken.

"What's the idea?" snarled Jed Monks, turning at bay. "You young 'ounds—"

He didn't get any further. Both he and Bill Weenen were bowled over like ninepins. They struggled frantically, but it was useless. The juniors simply swarmed over them, and held them down.

"Search them!" panted Church.

"Why trouble?" Nipper grimly. "Look at this! It fell out of this crook's pocket when he went over!"

A fresh yell went up.

"Somebody's gold pencil!"

"Mine, I believe!" said Vivian Travers, taking it. "Yes, by Samson, it is!"

Here was proof, indeed! Ruthlessly the pockets of the prisoners were turned inside out, and all sorts of valuables came to light. In addition, each man had over twenty pounds in currency notes on him. Bert Hicks, doubtless, had his share of the loot, too.

"This is good enough!" said Nipper. "Come on, you chaps! Lug them back!"

Still struggling and kicking, the frantic pair of rogues were forced back to the tents. By this time, Handforth had just finished his allotted task. Bert Hicks was down and out—suffering from the effects of a clean knock-out.

And now an elderly man was running up and down, shouting excitedly.

"What's all this?" he demanded furiously. "What's all this? What are you boys doing?"

"Who are you, anyhow?" asked Handforth bluntly.

"I'm the boss of this show!" replied the old man. "What do you boys mean by coming here and ruining business, and—"

"Steady!" said Nipper. "These three men are thieves. They broke into our school the night before last, and they're wanted by the police."

"Thieves!" ejaculated the fair proprietor, with a change of manner. "S'elp me, Jim, if I didn't think they was rum 'uns!" he added, turning to another man. "Ere, you'd better go an' fetch the police! We're respectable people, we are! We don't want no thieves among us! Givin' the fair a bad name!"

"How long have they been here?" asked Travers.

"Only since yesterday," said the old man, cooling down. "Brought a barrer with them—all the stuff for a coco-nut shy. Just what we 'adn't got, so I gave 'em permission to set up their shy, an' join in the business."

Nipper's eyes glinted.

"I rather wondered what that barrow contained!" he said, glancing at Travers. "You see, they were all ready for the coup."

"Yes, and after burgling the school they simply joined this fair as decent showmen, and nobody suspected a thing," said Travers, nodding. "Well, well! What a dirty trick on these honest people!"

He had not exaggerated. The fair people were, indeed, infuriated when they heard the facts. They had taken the trio in, believing them to be bona fide itinerant showmen. But they knew better now!

There was more excitement when the village policeman came. Particulars were taken, and the juniors helped the startled constable to take all three prisoners to the lock-up.

"They'll be in Bannington Gaol by to-night!" said Nipper contentedly.

"Handy, old man!" breathed Church, grasping Handforth's arm. "Everything's all right now! You're coming back to St. Frank's with us—and the Head's simply got to reinstate you!"

CHAPTER 24.

Handy Springs a Bombshell!



DR. STAFFORD extended his hand with cordial pleasure.

"I am glad, Handforth—very glad!" he

said quietly.

Handforth took the proffered hand rather awkwardly.

"That's all right, sir!" he muttered.

"It is a pity that you did not tell us the reason for your journey to London when we were holding the inquiry," continued the Head. "But we know the truth now, Handforth, and so the air is cleared. I shall call the school together, and you will come on the platform with me. I want to publicly reinstate you."

Handforth was silent. Outside, crowds were waiting—eager to hear the result of this interview. Nipper and Travers and one or two of the other juniors had told the headmaster everything that had passed, and all the points were cleared up. Now Handforth had been left alone with Dr. Stafford.

"I may as well inform you, Handforth, that I have already had a telephone message from the police," continued the Head. "The youth, Hicks, has confessed everything."

"By George!" said Handforth eagerly. "Then that's why you've—you've pardoned me, sir?"

"Yes," said the Head. "I am satisfied that you acted in all innocence. You were foolish, no doubt, but we will not stress that point. Hicks has confessed that you took no part in the robbery, and that you never suspected that one was contemplated. To that extent, at all events, the wretched youth has made amends. But perhaps we are crediting him with a kindly thought which is undeserved. I have no doubt that the truth was forced from him by the police."

There came the purr of a car from outside, in Inner Court, and a tumult of shouting could be heard, too. Handforth glanced out of the window, and then started.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "The pater's car!"

A minute later, Sir Edward came blundering into the study. His face was red, and his eyes were gleaming—with that same gleam which was so characteristic of his son.

"Edward!" he ejaculated breathlessly.

"Hallo, dad!" shouted Handforth, in an uncertain voice. "Sorry I bunked this morning, but—but—"

"Nonsense!" shouted his father. "You were justified! By gad, my boy, I'm proud of you! You knew that you were innocent, and so you came down here to prove it, eh? Splendid! That's the spirit!"

He turned to the Head, his face glowing.

"I'm proud of my son, sir!" he went on boisterously. "Thank Heaven this unpleasant business is over! Mr. Lee has just told me everything, and—"

"If it hadn't been for Irene Manners, dad, I might not have been cleared!" said Handforth happily. "It was she who came forward and explained things."

"Good girl—good girl!" said Sir Edward, nodding. "I always liked Irene! Well, the less we can say about it, the better. It's over now, and settled. Let's forget it."

"That is my view, too, Sir Edward," remarked the Head.

"There'll be no need for you to go to St. Jim's now, Edward," went on Handy's father, rubbing his hands together. "Splendid!"

"St. Jim's?" repeated Handforth, staring. "Precisely!" smiled Sir Edward. "I have just come from St. Jim's. I went there to arrange matters. Indeed, it is all fixed up. I had a long talk with Dr. Holmes, and I have arranged for you to go into the School House at St. Jim's after the Whitsun holidays."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth blankly.

"But, naturally, that is now cancelled," went on his father contentedly. "You will stay on here, Edward."

A curious light came into Edward Oswald's eyes. One of his famous impulses swept over him.

"No, dad!" he said tensely. "I'll go to St. Jim's—just as you've arranged!"

"What!" shouted his father.

"Really, Handforth—" began the Head.

"Yes, sir!" said Handforth sternly, turning an accusing eye upon the amazed Dr. Stafford. "I don't want to stay here any longer!"

"Upon my soul!"

"I came back to-day to prove my innocence!" continued Handforth. "And it's been proved—and I am cleared! But that doesn't alter the fact that I was unjustly accused!"

"Yes, but my dear boy—"

"Accused—and punished!" said Handforth, working himself up. "If it hadn't been for Irene's efforts—and my own determination—the truth would never have come out!"

"But it was entirely your own fault, Edward!" said his father. "You know that you were very perverse and stubborn."

"Yes, I know that, dad—but it's a pity that I couldn't have been trusted!" said Handforth bitterly. "If my character isn't known at St. Frank's by this time, it ought to be!"

"Upon my word!" ejaculated the scandalised Head.

"And if a thing happens like this once, it might happen again!" argued Handforth. "I was practically chucked out of the school—and so I'll stay chucked! My name is cleared, and that's all that matters. I'll go to St. Jim's!"

Sir Edward suddenly leaned forward; Le thumped the table with his fist.

"All right!" he said, in the same impulsive way as his son. "You will go to St. Jim's!"

Handforth opened his mouth, and his jaw dropped. He was staggered. He had only been bluffing—and he knew it. He had been waiting to hear Dr. Stafford urging him to remain, and then he was going to have the pleasure of generously consenting. He hadn't considered his father at all.

"Eh!" he gasped, at length.

"Yes, Edward, you shall go to St. Jim's!" said Sir Edward, with a quick, meaning

glance at the Head. "You will come back to London with me now, and after the Whitsun holidays you will join the School House at St. Jim's as a pupil. It is your own wish, and it shall be granted."

Handforth went out of the study rather dazed. But his jaw was set as he went out. He knew that he was committed to it now, and he actually made himself believe that he wanted it all along. He forgot that he had been bluffing. At St. Frank's he had been unjustly accused, and he had come precious near to disgrace; and, as he had pointed out, such a thing as that might happen again! So he would go to St. Jim's—and it would serve Dr. Stafford right!

In the Head's study, Sir Edward was chuckling.

"Let him have his own way!" he said, mopping his heated brow. "It'll do him good! Let him go to St. Jim's!"

Outside, Handforth strode off, and soon found himself surrounded by cheering fellows.

"Well, we're all square now!" he said happily, as he looked round at the enthusiastic faces. "Thanks, you chaps! I'm jolly glad to know that everything is over!"

"Good old Handy!"

"And we shall be together again into Study D!" said Church, with a contented sigh.

"That's just where you make a mistake, my son!" said Handforth. "I'm going back to London to-day with the pater. They kicked me out of St. Frank's, and they wanted me to come back. But I'm not coming! After the holiday, I'm going to St. Jim's!"

"After the holiday, I'm going to St. Jim's!" said Handforth triumphantly.

"Oh, my hat!"

"St. Jim's!"

"If you don't want to believe it, you needn't!" said Handforth, as the amazed shouts went up. "But it's a fact! I shall be sorry to leave all you fellows, but it's a question of principle!"

"You hopeless ass!" urged Nipper. "Don't you realise you've won?"

"That may be!" said Handforth stubbornly. "But I've already told you that it's a matter of principle. St. Frank's deserves to lose me—and I'm going! After this I shall be at St. Jim's!"

In the end the Remove was compelled to believe him. There was quite a sensation about it, and Church and McClure were frantic. Not that this made any difference to Edward Oswald Handforth's determination.

His name was cleared. All the recent trouble was entirely over, and Handforth had decided to leave St. Frank's for good.

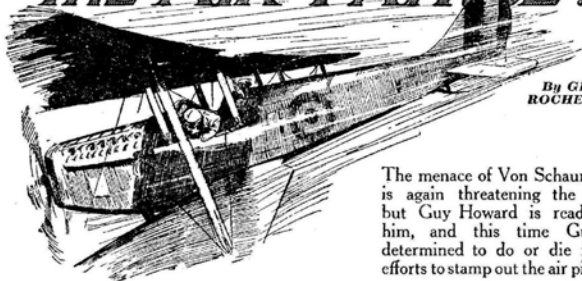
That, however, remained to be seen!

THE END.

(Edward Oswald Handforth is going to St. Jim's, but you'll have a chance of reading about him in next week's special Whitsuntide story entitled: "ALL ABOARD FOR THE 'SKYLARK'!" Order your copy now!)

Another Long Instalment of Our Enthralling Air Serial!

THE AIR PATROL!



By GEO. E.
ROCHESTER

The menace of Von Schaumberg is again threatening the skies, but Guy Howard is ready for him, and this time Guy is determined to do or die in his efforts to stamp out the air pirates!

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 bulhion 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 Vortetzen, 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 Airway's new super-airship, Z.X.I. Meanwhile Von Schaumberg has had built a huge airship, and, with the idea of revenge, he appears over England. He blows up Aerodrome D, and sends a spy named Kurz to get information concerning the launching trials of Z.X.I. Kurz gets talking to a country yokel and learns that Guy is commander of the giant airship.

(Now read on.)

Z.X.I.

A CORDON of soldiers from Larkhill Camp was keeping the crowd from approaching within a quarter of a mile of the long shed which housed the great airship, Z.X.I.

Kurz, and the youth who seemed cast for the rôle of guide, philosopher and friend to that individual, elbowed their way into the best positions they could find.

The huge iron doors of the airship shed were open. In front of them were uniformed officials, bustling mechanics, press photographers, and a handful of favoured guests.

A slim, boyish figure clad in the blue of an Atlantic Airways pilot was standing apart, engaged in earnest conversation with Air Marshal Sir Hylton Browne, of the Air Ministry, and Major Lockyer, who was in command of the airship station.

"That's Howard!" said Kurz's companion excitedly, pointing to the boy. "Soldiers say that he Howard, yonder!"

Kurz nodded, and stared with interest at Guy. So that was the fellow who had smashed Von Schaumberg's first squadron. He was only a kid!

A motor tractor chugged fussily in front of the open doors of the shed, and the mechanics and officials surged backwards. Kurz's hands clenched, and he held his breath.

Z.X.I. was coming out!

Slowly a blunt, grey nose came into view; then, foot by foot, a gigantic hull. Kurz gasped. Before the powerful tractor had drawn the airship clear of the shed, he realised that she was a mightier vessel than Von Schaumberg's.

One thousand feet in length, if an inch, and a full two hundred feet in diameter.

Four 950 h.p. hydrogen-kerosene engines were slung in their cars on the port side of the long, beautifully-fashioned gondola, with its cabins, dining-rooms, and lounges, and four similar engines were slung on the starboard side.

She was moving on greased clamps, attached to wide-gauge steel rails embedded by sleepers in the turf. This obviated the necessity for a haulage crew.

A thunderous cheer from the crowd rolled far across the old-age Plain. For she was British, that mighty leviathan of the air—British designed and British built. Above the glittering white registration numbers on her great envelope was painted a replica of the Union Jack.

Her huge bulk dwarfed the watchers into insignificance, and Kurz knew that he was looking at the largest airship in the world.

He stared, fascinated—appalled. His lips moved almost inaudibly.

"What will happen," he whispered, "when we meet her in the air?"

Then he grinned, and a peculiar look crept into his eyes. An orderly had dashed up to where Guy was standing with a group of officials. The orderly seemed to be speaking rapidly, jerkily. Guy shoved the man aside, and sprinted towards the telephone hut.

And Kurz told himself that he could make a shrewd guess as to why the great airship's new commander was obviously wanted so urgently on the 'phone!

Londonwards :

GUY was wanted on the 'phone, and urgently, as Kurz had guessed. Reaching the telephone hut, he snatched up the receiver.

"Hallo!" he said crisply. "Yes, Howard speaking!"

"This is Sir Seton Milvain's secretary!" came a shaking voice over the wire. "You are ordered to report here, at headquarters, without a moment's delay!"

"But what has happened?" demanded Guy.

"The worst!" came the shaking voice. "Shortly after dawn this morning D aerodrome was blown out of the water by seven seaplanes dropping high explosive bombs!"

"What?" ejaculated Guy.

"We have received wireless confirmation from various ships and from our own machines! You will leave Stonehenge at once! If Z.X.I. is out, Major Lockyer is requested to see to the immediate housing of her!"

"Very good!" replied Guy grimly.

He put down the receiver, and dashed from the hut.

Briefly he informed Major Lockyer as to what had happened and, leaving that astounded officer to digest the news, he ran towards the hangar where the station aeroplanes were housed.

"The fastest bus you've got!" he rapped to the head mechanic.

Within three minutes a fast little Grebe scout was out of its hangar, and Guy was clambering into the cockpit. His hand closed on the throttle and, switching on, he ran the engine up to full revolutions.

Then his gloved hand whipped up, the waiting mechanics whisked away the chocks from in front of the tyred wheels of the undercarriage, and the powerful little bus shot forward.

Up came her tail and, as Guy pulled on the control stick, she took the air in a steep climb, swinging Londonwards before she flattened out at eight hundred feet.

Guy gave her full throttle all the way, and it seemed but minutes before the large hangars, offices, and buildings of the London Air Port appeared in the distance.

Guy did not bother about the niceties of landing once he received his landing signal from the ground. He took the Grebe earthwards with engine full on, and only closed down when he was fifty feet from the hangar roofs.

He landed at a rate which brought shocked comment from the ground staff, much shaking of heads, and certain dark prophecies concerning "flying fools" and early funerals.

A burst of the throttle brought the Grebe surging on to the tarmac which fronted the hangars. Guy kicked on the rudder-bar, using the tail-skid as a break. The Grebe whirled round with a lurch, which almost buckled the wildly-dipping lower port plane on the macadam. Then, before the machine had lost way, he leapt from the cockpit.

A uniformed official bustled forward, the landing register open in his hands. He was frowning, for he did not approve of such landings as he had just witnessed.

He cleared his throat with the pomposity which was his by nature of his office.

"Young man," he began severely, "I shall require particulars! Before I take them, however, let me give you a word of advice. Pilots who land like you landed just now are—"

"Are in a hurry!" snapped Guy. "And that's what I am. I want the very fastest car you've got, and I want it now!"

"But—"

"I'm Howard! And I'm wanted at headquarters!"

Oh, magic name! Howard of the Rangers! It cleared all obstacles, all red-tape regulations, like chaff before the wind. Within five minutes Guy was at the wheel of a powerful car roaring along the London Road.

In less than half an hour he swung into Kingsway, just off the Strand, and came to a grinding halt in front of the imposing entrance of Atlantic Airways headquarters.

The commissionaire at the door recognised him and touched his cap.

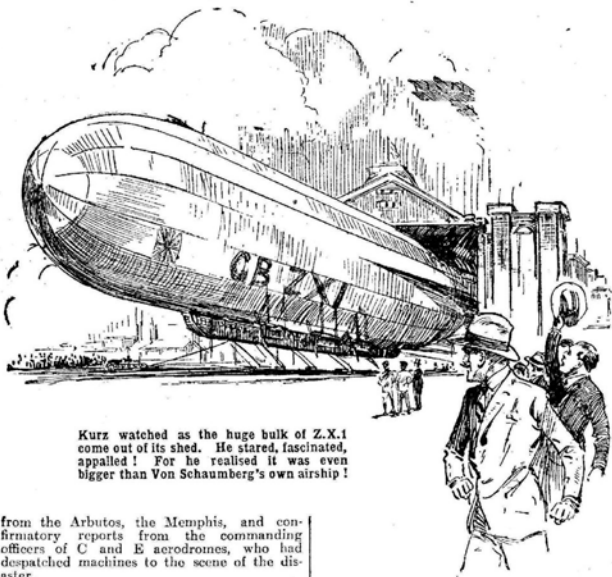
"You are to go up at once, sir!" he said. "Sir Seton Milvain is waiting!"

The Decision!

IN Sir Seton's room, Guy found a directors' meeting in progress. Sir Seton was very pale, but composed. But those other august gentlemen were sore stricken by the tragic news of that morning. They showed it in their hushed speech, in their every gesture.

They waited, conversing in low tones, whilst Guy read the wireless reports placed in front of him by Sir Seton—reports received

"Then where is he operating from?"
 "That is what I am wondering!" replied Guy. He picked up the report received from the skipper of the *Arbutos*, and read an extract aloud. "My chief engineer, who knows something of aero engines and aircraft, tells me that in view of the weight of bombs obviously carried by the small machines of the attackers, their petrol capacity must of necessity be very small. Maybe this fact will be of assistance to you—"



Kurz watched as the huge bulk of Z.X.1 come out of its shed. He stared, fascinated, appalled! For he realised it was even bigger than Von Schaumberg's own airship!

from the *Arbutos*, the *Memphis*, and confirmatory reports from the commanding officers of C and E aerodromes, who had despatched machines to the scene of the disaster.

"And now, Howard," asked Sir Seton quietly, when Guy had concluded his perusal, "who do you think is responsible for this dastardly outrage?"

"Von Schaumberg, sir—undoubtedly!" replied Guy.

"Yes," Sir Seton nodded. "It can be no one else! Neither robbery nor looting was the motive! It was sheer savage destruction—terrible revenge!"

"But how," almost wailed a plump gentleman, "how has he done it? We thought his base had been wiped out!"

"So it has, sir," replied Guy.

Guy laid down the report. "Gentlemen," he said, "if we attach any weight to the opinion expressed by that engineer—and I think we must—then it is obvious that Von Schaumberg's base must either lie very close to the air-route in mid-Atlantic, or must be some transitory one!"

"Yes. Continue, Howard!" said Sir Seton.

"It is impossible that Von Schaumberg can have a stationary base close to the air-route—a base which must, of necessity, lie close to the main shipping routes!" went on Guy. "There is no rock or land in mid-Atlantic which would serve as such a base!"

"Yes, that is true!" murmured one of the directors.

"Therefore," continued Guy, "we are bound to adopt the theory that these bombing machines which attacked D aerodrome were dispatched from some transitory base. This base might be either a fast aircraft carrier, such as the Eagle, a super-submarine with aircraft accommodation and launching gear, or an airship!"

"But—but where would Von Schaumberg get such a such a thing?" gasped the plump gentleman.

"Any one of the three types I have indicated could have been built for him, sir!" replied Guy.

"Yes, I entirely agree with you, Howard!" remarked Sir Seton. "And presuming your theory is correct, which type of transitory base do you think Von Schaumberg is using?"

"An airship, sir, without a doubt!" replied Guy promptly. "Both the Memphis and Arbutos report that the attacking machines disappeared whilst climbing to a terrific altitude. If they had been returning to some floating base, such a procedure would have been unnecessary!"

"Yet they might have climbed to hide the course they intended to take!" came an objection.

"That would have been unnecessary!" replied Guy. "They could easily have flown out of sight at a low altitude, then circled to their base wherever it was lying!"

"I am in entire agreement with you, Howard!" replied Sir Seton. "The point is, what is the best course we can pursue to wipe out this menace once and for all, and bring these miscreants to justice?"

"If," quavered the plump director nervously, "there is a piratical airship at large, had we not better keep Z.X.I. in her shed for the time being, and release Howard in order that he might endeavour to get on the track of these villains?"

Sir Seton leapt to his feet, and crashed his fist on to the table.

"No, sir!" he cried. "I refuse to be intimidated by this murderous scoundrel, Von Schaumberg. Z.X.I. will take her trials in the ordinary way, even if I have to mount gun platforms on her!"

Guy caught his breath sharply.

"Sir," he said eagerly, "why not re-condition Z.X.I., mount guns on her, and fit aircraft carrying gear? She can stay in the air practically as long as we like to keep her up, and her ceiling is forty-five thousand feet. Fit her so that she can launch an attack or withstand an attack, and I'll find Von Schaumberg! And this time," he added grimly, "there'll be no mistake!"

Sir Seton hesitated.

"You mean, send her on a protracted cruise with the object of finding Von Schaumberg's floating base?" he said slowly.

"Yes, sir!" replied Guy earnestly. "Aero-planes would be useless! They would be forced continually to land for re-fuelling

unless they were large machines. And, if large machines are used, I do not think they will be able to attain the necessary altitude."

"And yet," said Sir Seton dubiously, "although there is no shadow of doubt in my mind that Von Schaumberg is using an airship, we have no concrete proof that he is."

"I am convinced that he is, sir," replied Guy firmly. "And it must be a big airship to carry at least seven machines. Z.X.I. is the only aircraft which could meet such an airship on anything like equal terms!"

Sir Seton sat in silence for a few moments. Then he turned to his fellow directors, and said gravely:

"Gentlemen, we have seen to what terrible lengths this Von Schaumberg will go. There can be not the slightest doubt that it was he who launched the devilish attack on D aerodrome this morning. No matter what the cost be to us, we must make certain that no such attack will ever be made again. The blowing up of D aerodrome will paralyse our air line. Neither passengers nor commercial firms will utilise our machines until we can give an absolute guarantee of safe passage. I say, with Howard, let us fit the Z.X.I. with guns, and gear for carrying fighting scouts, and despatch her in search of this monster, Von Schaumberg. Gentlemen, are we agreed?"

And, with whole-hearted and fervent unanimity came the response:

"Yes; we agree!"

Von Schaumberg's Spy!

KURZ sat alone in the small sitting-room of his modest lodgings in Amesbury village. His shoulders were deep in a ramshackle basket-work arm-chair, and his feet were on the mantelpiece. He puffed slowly, appreciatively, at his pipe, and in his eyes was a gleam of something akin to amusement.

For there was a streak of grim humour in Kurz's make-up, and he was conning over in his mind the news he had obtained for his chief, Von Schaumberg.

Ten days Kurz had spent on the plain, ambling amiably here and there, with his sketching-block very much in view. Ten days in which he had amassed certain information concerning Z.X.I.—information which he was looking forward to retailing to Von Schaumberg. He was intrigued as to how that individual would receive it.

He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece, swung his feet to the hearthrug and, knocking out his pipe on the brass fender, rose to his feet. Crossing to the window he stared out at the patch of garden, almost hidden in the dusk of the late evening.

"I'd better be going!" he murmured, and, retracing his steps to the table, he picked up the small brass tea-bell with which boarders at the cottage were accommodated.

Its metallic jingle brought the landlady to the room. She regarded Kurz with unwonted benevolence, for he had proved an ideal lodger. So nice-mannered and affable, and so prompt in stumping up what he owed. Oh, yes, Kurz could be extremely affable when it suited him.

"I'm going now, ma'am!" he said gently. "I have been very comfortable here!"

"Thank you, sir," replied the gratified landlady. "I shall always be pleased to put you up when you are around these parts!"

Kurz smiled, shaking his head.

"I do not think I shall ever be around these parts again," he murmured. "But I have had a most interesting and edifying visit. Most interesting, indeed! You do not know how Stonehenge has fascinated me. I am so looking forward to telling my friends all about it. Good-bye, ma'am!"

And still smiling gently, Kurz took his departure. It was two hours later when he arrived on the edge of the plain, and routed out the farmer who had lent him a barn in which to house his small plane.

So light was that bus that Kurz wheeled it out himself. The farmer, at his request, had got in a stock of petrol, and Kurz spent half an hour in filling his tank and giving the machine a rapid overhaul. Then, pressing another flyer into the honest farmer's hand, he clambered to the cockpit.

The silence of the summer's night was broken by the shattering roar of the powerful engine. Kurz taxied away from the farm buildings, swung into what little breeze there was, then gave the bus full throttle.

She shot forward like a greyhound from the slips. Up came her tail and, as Kurz pulled on his controls stick, she took the air in a steep upward climb. She had taken off in sixty feet.

Up, up into the night sky went Kurz, climbing in a wide spiral. Continually he kept peering over the edge of the cockpit, keeping the lights of Amesbury village directly below him.

Fifteen thousand feet—twenty thousand—twenty-five thousand. He was climbing more slowly now in the rarefied atmosphere. The watch on his dashboard pointed to eleven forty-five p.m. Von Schaumburg's airship was due to pick him up at midnight.

He peered up at the night sky above him, but there was, as yet, no signs of her. At thirty thousand feet he flattened, and had momentary recourse to the oxygen tube which he carried inside his flying-coat.

Then, as he circled, crouched over his controls—for it was bitterly cold at that tremendous altitude—he saw a huge cigar-shaped shadow driving towards him from the west.

"That's her!" he muttered.

He knew that sharp eyes in the forward control cabin of the airship would be on the look-out for him, and thrice his electric torch glowed in the darkness. Putting the torch back into its rack when he had received an answering signal from the airship, he shoved forward his control stick and dived.

He passed right under the gigantic bulk of the airship, which was thundering eastwards. Wheeling, he followed her, climbing foot by foot and swinging wide to avoid the slip-stream of the powerful Stahlfeder engines.

Gingerly, craning far out of his cockpit, he commenced to edge inwards towards a broad suffused glow which illuminated the hitching apparatus on the starboard side of the hull.

He knew the speed of the airship was ninety m.p.h. for taking machines aboard, and he

(Continued on page 43.)

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Summer is Coming!—?

PARDON me referring to this fact. It should be obvious, but unluckily summer is not, as a rule, half as obvious as it might be. But cricket club secs. are getting up on their hind legs, and that in itself is a bright sign of the glad season. Bikes which have lain in cold storage during the winter emerge, and have their bright parts polished up after months of retirement. Conspicuous amongst the events of the summer ahead will be the brilliant adventure serial which is shortly to start in the N.L.L. Keep a look-out for this rousing yarn—really the grandest and most galvanic yet. Then Mr. Brooks, in his popular feature "Between Ourselves," has broken silence again, and will have some interesting things to say in the near future. This bit of news will satisfy the numerous chums who have written in to ask if this feature had gone for "keeps."

A Cheery Venture.

C. A. Westrope, 26, Victoria Road, Surbiton, Surrey, is running an amateur magazine called "Youth," and he pays me the following compliment. This is a one-copy affair, and goes from Glasgow to Cornwall. It has thirty-six readers. "I only wondered," says C. A. W., "whether you would be so kind as to write a short little chat for it. Mind you, I don't want you to put yourself out in any way, and I don't mind what you write about so long as you write something." Which is putting it nicely. C. A. Westrope wants to hear from readers who are interested in his mag.

Cheerio, St. Patrick!

It's true enough you can argue about anything. Here's a reader who asks whether the Patron Saint of Ireland was an Irishman or a Scot. The correspondent had a fierce argument on the point. The facts are like this. The Saint, who disliked snakes so much that he turned them all out of Erin, might have been thought to be an Irishman, but he was not. He was born at Kilpatrick, near Dumbarton, and his father was a Roman gentleman named Calphurnius, while his

mother was British, her designation being Conchessa. St. Patrick saw a good deal of life. He was a prisoner at Antrim for a spell, having been caught in an Irish raid. Then he became a monk at Tours. He went back to Ireland, and settled in the north, where he had been a captive, and there he met the king of Ireland, one Laoghaire. And he was much respected for many things, including his down on the snakes. And that's that!

MY LETTER-BAG.

Best thanks to Robert Rainbow, Hoxton. The characters are imaginary, and St. Frank's does not exist. W. May, Richmond, Victoria, says people who say St. Frank's is not good are mad. Hear, hear! Ken Gray, Melbourne, sends a topping letter, and plumps for the El Dorado series. He drops into poetry about a recent record:

"Hinkle, Hinkle, little star,
Sixteen days, and here you are!"

Thanks, too, to Les. Stabb, 4, Langwells Parade, Northcote, Melbourne; Maurice Garrett, for his fine letter from East Geelong; Deyeron C. Dunn, Coogee; Alfred Wheatley, Leichardt, with news of Bert Hinkler; H. MacMahon, West Broken Hill; Miss Norah Sheard, Cleckheaton; Henry Rose, Melbourne, who wants an Australian series; A. J. Anderson, Catford; he is keen on journalism and story-writing, and doing well; Frank Ferris, Auckland, is a keen admirer, and writes of Hinkler also; he is extra keen on a barring out; Miss Betty Bridger, Swansea, wants Irene & Co. to look less flappery! F. C. Powell, Barnet, sends a corking letter; he and his chum intend to stick to the old paper. Cheers!

LEAGUE MEMBERS—PLEASE NOTE!

All League members should please note that correspondence appertaining to the St. Frank's League must now be sent to:

St. Frank's League,
5, Tallis House,
Tallis Street,
London, E.C.4.

"THE AIR PATROL!"

(Continued from page 41.)

fiddled with his throttle till his speedometer needle was flickering at just over the ninety mark.

His fingers closed on a switch, pressed, and the steel arms on his upper plane locked into a rigid arc. Ahead of him, starkly silhouetted in the diffused glow from the open trap door in the hull, he saw a thick black rod of tapering steel, with a pear-drop shaped hinged ring fitted at the end.

Slowly, foot by foot, inch by inch, he edged towards it. It was right above his thundering propeller now, creeping slowly towards his upper plane. His foot pressed so gently on the rudder-bar that it was almost a caress.

Then came a faint, almost imperceptible jolt. Kurz's fingers closed on the throttle and he shut down to three-quarters, ready to yank open again should he have failed to connect.

But he kept pace with the airship, thundering onwards through the night, and cautiously he closed the throttle to quarter open.

His machine swung and dipped sickeningly and, with a sigh of relief, he switched off his engine, for he knew then that he had connected successfully with the parent craft.

A dynamo in the airship hull whirled into life. Steadily the small aeroplane was pulled up into the hull at the end of the stout hitching-rod. The trap door snapped shut, and the diffused glow was switched off as though by magic.

News for Von Schaumberg!

"SO you have returned, Kurz?" There was an eager note in Von Schaumberg's harsh voice. He paused in the restless pacing of his cabin and turned to confront Kurz, who had entered after a discreet knock.

"Yes, sir!" replied the spy.

"And you have news for me, Kurz?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let us have it!" rapped Von Schaumberg. "Get on, man. You've seen Z.X.I.?"

"Yes, and she's a bigger craft than this," replied Kurz.

"Is she, indeed?" smiled Von Schaumberg, and turned to Vorzetzen, seated at a table. "That is interesting, Vorzetzen, but size will not avail her!"

"She is due to take her trial flight to-morrow!" went on Kurz.

"Good!" Von Schaumberg grinned, and rubbed his hands. "To-morrow, hey? Well, we'll be ready for her!"

"And she takes the air carrying a full

complement of guns and fighting scouts!" continued Kurz blandly.

"What?" roared Von Schaumberg. "But why should she be armed like this?"

"I don't know!" retorted the other. "But I can guess! Work commenced on her immediately following the receipt of the news in England that D aerodrome had been blown up. They're taking care that Z.X.I. isn't blown up. At least, that seems the only feasible conclusion!"

"Unless," cut in Vorzetzen roughly, "they have discovered how we launched the attack on D aerodrome, and are coming in search of us!"

"Let them!" Von Schaumberg snarled. "It'll make no difference. I'll swear she'll never return from her trial trip to-morrow! What idiot have they put in command of her?" he added.

Kurz backed away, carefully putting the breadth of the cabin table between himself and his chief.

"Guy Howard!" he replied blandly.

(Another grand instalment next Wednesday, boys!)



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