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THE PERIL of the HAUNTED ROOM!

A thrilling long complete yarn of schoolboy mystery and adventure, featuring the famous chums of St. Frank's.

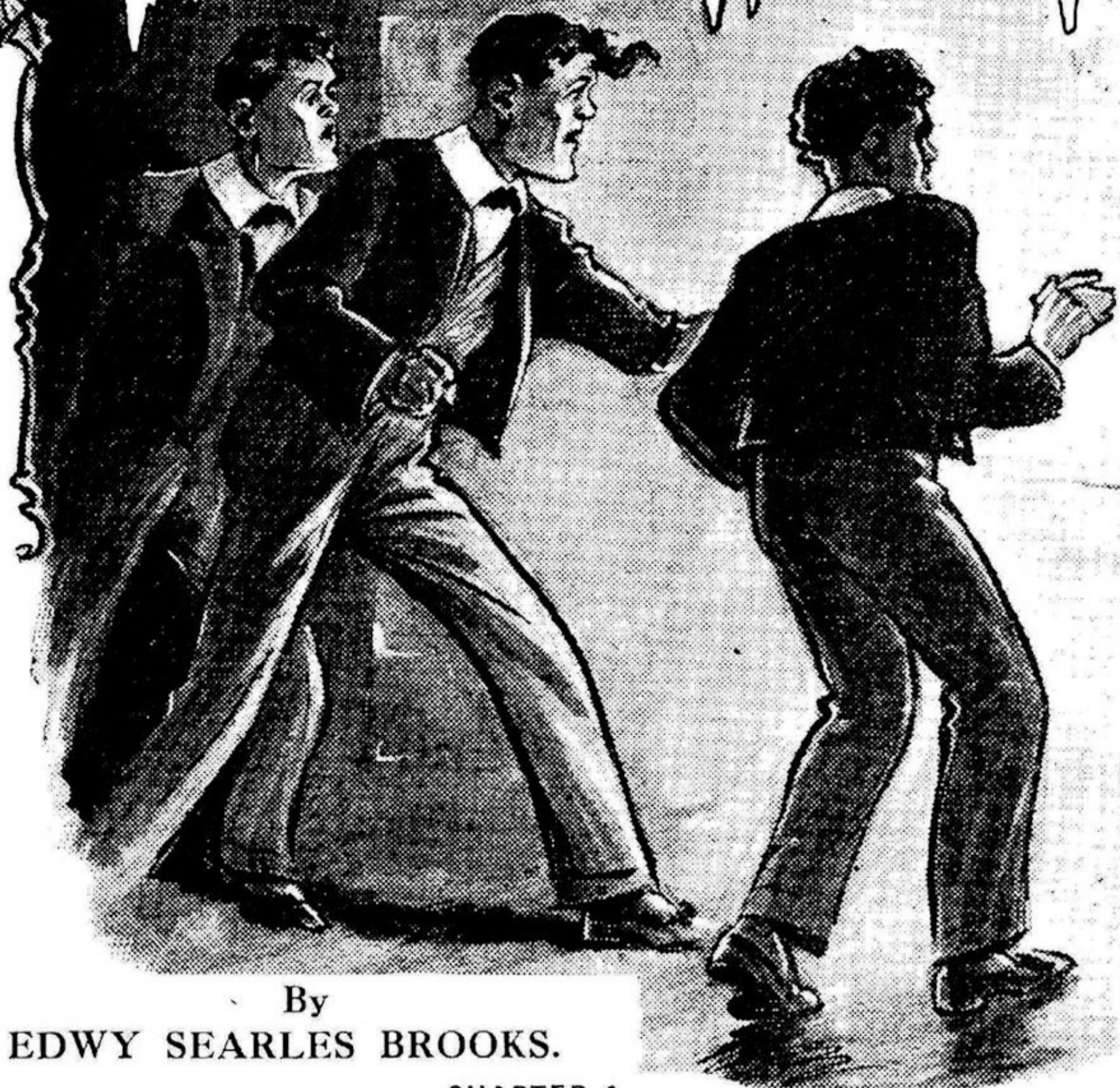
New Series No. 189.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

December 14th, 1929.

YOU'LL BE THRILLED BY THIS STUNNING YARN—

THE PERIL of the HAUNTED ROOM!



By
EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

CHAPTER 1.

The Party at Travis Dene!

"MY dance, I think," said Handforth briskly.

"You'd better think again, old man," smiled Church. "Irene has already promised this waltz to me."

Handforth went red with indignation and wrath as Church coolly encircled his arm round the dainty waist of Irene Manners, and took her off into the centre of the floor.

"That's the third time!" breathed Handforth thickly.

This was getting beyond endurance. The great Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove at St. Frank's, had been "dished" by either Church or McClure for the third time in succession. It was almost more than flesh and blood could stand.

—OF SCHOOLBOY ADVENTURE, FUN AND MYSTERY!

Five St. Frank's juniors missing; another found unconscious! Amazing things happen at Travis Dene, the ancestral home of Edward Oswald Handforth, this week. Mystery after mystery; sensation after sensation! Readers will revel in every chapter of this magnificent yarn.

These were gay times at Travis Dene, the ancestral home of the Handsforths. The Christmas festivities were in full swing, and the schoolboy and schoolgirl guests were having a really wonderful time. Sir Edward Handforth was the kind of host they liked. Not only was there an ample and luxurious supply of everything that was good in the eatable line, but the whole party was a-bubble and fizzing with gaiety and life.

This evening, for example, Sir Edward's super-radio-gramophone was providing dance music. It was almost equal to the music that any first-class orchestra could provide, the stately ball-room being flooded with melodious rhythm. There were twinkling lights, gay decorations, and the floor was occupied by happy, carefree couples. Nearly all of them were young, for most of Sir Edward and Lady Handforth's guests were schoolboys or schoolgirls. Removites and Fourth-Formers of St. Frank's were numerous, and there were any number of young ladies from the Moor View School.

There were other guests, of course—Mr. and Mrs. Stokes—the Housemaster of the West House and his wife. There



was Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous schoolmaster-detective; there was Miss Eileen Dare, the equally celebrated girl detective. There was Molly Dare, Eileen's niece—a pretty, jolly happy child of about twelve. She was the particular charge of Willy Handforth. Even at this minute, Willy was watching closely as Molly danced with one of the other St. Frank's fags.

Willy had had most of Molly's dances this evening, but he allowed some of his fellow fags to have a look in now and again. And whenever he did, he remained on the

watch. His expression was earnest and thoughtful—very different from his usual carefree, mischievous attitude.

For Willy never forgot for a single moment that there were some mysterious men—deadly enemies—who had traced Eileen Dare and her niece to this stately old home in mid-Suffolk. Only a day or two earlier they had attempted to kidnap Molly, and had been frustrated at the last moment.

Willy and Molly were close chums—which was all the more surprising, because Willy had frequently expressed a lofty contempt for girls of any kind. Now he was changed. It wasn't that he was "smitten"; he really liked Molly. She was a jolly sort of girl, and sensible, too. She appealed to Willy immensely. And now that she was in danger he had made up his mind that he would protect her. All his fag friends were on the watch, too. Willy had given his orders; Molly was to be guarded and protected.

Not that there was much danger at a time like this. The mysterious enemy was hardly likely to take any action in the midst of these Christmas festivities. However, it was just as well to be on the safe side, and Willy's vigil was constant. He knew that outside there were gamekeepers and other men constantly patrolling the grounds by Sir Edward's orders. It was Nelson Lee, however, who had put this idea into his host's head. Those grim enemies would need to be very clever to approach the mansion now.

So, really, there was very little need for Willy to be concerned. His elders had taken all the precautions that were necessary, it seemed.

Nelson Lee himself was easy in mind. He had, he felt, safeguarded Molly in every possible way. Even if the kidnappers succeeded in getting through the outer defences, they would find themselves up against a resolute barrier within Travis Dene itself. For here there were many schoolboys who knew of Molly's danger—and who were ready to protect her. Underlying all this gaiety and fun there was a certain tension in the atmosphere. The boys and girls were thoroughly enjoying themselves, and yet, at the same time, they were holding themselves ready for action. Nobody really expected anything to happen, but it was just as well to be on the safe side.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was furious.

As everybody knew, he had a particularly soft spot for Irene Manners. He had made up his mind that he would have every dance with her this evening. He made the mistake, however, of taking the thing for granted. It had never occurred to him that he might be forestalled.

Thus, when Church calmly claimed the first dance, and McClure the second, and so on, Handforth became hotter and hotter and angrier and angrier. He hadn't the faintest idea that his faithful chums were deliberately ragging him. Church and McClure, in fact, had thought it distinctly "thick" on Hand-

forth's part to assume that Irene would leave her programme free solely for his benefit.

He had been boasting all the afternoon—during tobogganing and skating—that he would have every dance with Irene during the evening. So directly after tea Church and McClure had pounced upon Irene, much to that blue-eyed young lady's surprise, and had taken her into the plot. Gleefully, she had given the first eight dances to Church and McClure, alternatively. By that time, she reckoned, Handforth would have learnt his lesson.

The waltz ended, and there was much laughter and chatter. Vivian Travers and Jimmy Potts paused as they were about to pass Handforth, and they regarded him with polite inquiry.

"Something on the mind, dear old fellow?" asked Travers. "I hate to say so, but you look positively dangerous."

"I am dangerous!" fumed Handforth.

"No doubt your minor has been upsetting you—"

"Bother my minor!" broke in Handforth fiercely. "It's Churchy who has made me wild, and Mac, too. By George! When I get those two chaps alone I'm going to slaughter them!"

"Well, well," murmured Travers. "Perhaps we'd better not inquire too deeply, Jimmy, dear old fellow. One of these little family squabbles, what?"

"Looks like it!" grinned Jimmy Potts.

They passed on, while Handforth pushed his way through a crowd of laughing boys and girls and made for the spot where Church and McClure were chatting with Irene, Doris, Mary and some of the other girls. But just before he could reach them a fox-trot started.

"Oh, good egg!" said McClure briskly. "I think this is my dance, Irene, isn't it?"

"I believe it is," smiled Irene.

"Here! Hi! What the—"

Handforth halted, speechless. McClure had just whirled Irene off into the centre of the floor, and once again Handforth was left stranded. It was noticeable that Church was nowhere to be seen. Church felt that this was a case where diplomacy was needed.

Handforth fumed and fretted, but it was no good. He could not very well barge in and drag Irene away from the Scottish junior. Handforth could only wait, growing more and more exasperated. He hadn't had one dance with Irene this evening!

It seemed an age to him before the fox-trot was over, but at last the music ceased, and then it was announced that there would be a brief interval for refreshments. The guests, laughing and chatting, went crowding towards the buffet.

Handforth's eyes gleamed as he noted that Church had reappeared, and that he and McClure were escorting Irene to a little table set in a nook. The girl herself was thoroughly enjoying the fun.

"Oh, hallo, Ted!" she said demurely, as Handforth came striding up. "Is anything

the matter this evening? You don't look quite well."

"I'm well enough," said Handforth thickly, "but there is something the matter. Do you know that I haven't had a dance with you yet?"

"There's plenty of time," smiled Irene.

"And these—these silly idiots——"

"Are you talking about us?" interrupted Church coldly. "If you're too slow——"

"J u s t a minute," interrupted Handforth in a suppressed voice. "I want a word with you two chaps—out in the hall. And now's the opportunity."

"Sorry, old man, but it can't be done," said McClure. "We've got to fetch some ice-cream for Irene."

"Will y o u come out into the hall, or shall I drag you out?" demanded Handforth. "G o o d n e s s knows I don't want to cause a n y trouble here in the ball-room, but if you won't c o m e quietly I'll jolly well drag you out."

"You'd better try it on!" said Church, with some spirit.

Irene looked rather distressed.

"P e r h a p s you'd better go," she murmured, with a quick glance at Church and McClure. "Don't bother about the ice-cream just now."

Church and McClure were rather uncertain after this, and while they were hesitating Handforth seized them by the arms and whirled them outside into the great hall, which was more or less deserted. However, Mr. and Mrs. Stokes were standing near the big fireplace, where the logs blazed and crackled. Handforth gave them one glance, and he propelled his chums onwards.

"Come on—we'll go to the library!"

"But look here, Handy——"

"We'll go to the library," repeated Handforth, his voice becoming ominous. "There's nobody there now, and I want a few private words with you fellows."

THE library, as Handforth had expected, proved to be empty.

He thrust his chums inside, closed the door, put his back against it, and then switched on the lights.

"N o w !" he said, in an outburst of righteous indignation.

"What do you think you're going to do?" asked Church, with a sniff. "This is a nice way to treat guests under your own roof, I must say!"

"Never mind my own roof!" retorted Handforth. "You've been pinching my dances——"

"Rats! They were Irene's dances—to give to whom she chose!" put in Mac. "Churchy and I got ahead of you——"

"You're a couple of traitors!" roared Handforth. "I've been trying all the giddy evening to have a dance with Irene, and one of you fellows barges in and cuts me out! I've had enough of it! I claimed all Irene's dances before the ball began!"

"And it's like your nerve!"

said Church indignantly. "You take too much for granted, Handy! Come on, Mac—let's get out of here!"

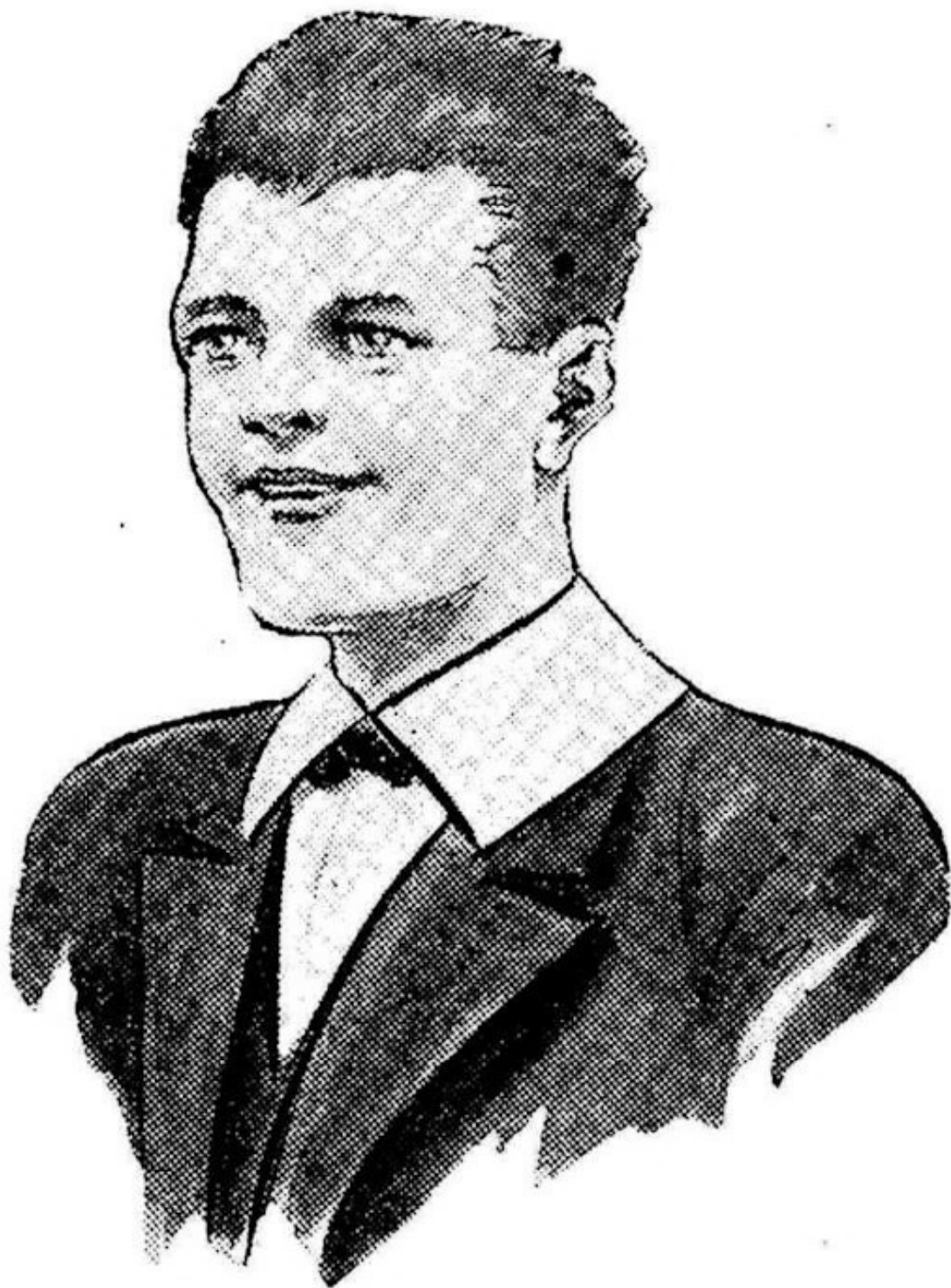
"Just what I was going to say!" said McClure.

They moved towards the door, but Handforth barred the way.

"Try to get past me!" he said grimly.

They tried—but, unfortunately, they failed to realise that their leader was in deadly earnest. His right came round and caught Church full on the chest. It wasn't

WHO'S WHO AT ST. FRANK'S.



JOHN BUSTERFIELD BOOTS.

A prominent member of the Fourth Form, and a power of strength in the Junior football team. Keen on all sports, and something of a publicity expert.

a heavy blow, and it wasn't a painful one, but the effects of it were rather startling.

Church staggered back with a grunt, tripped on a loose mat, and then completely lost his balance. He went sprawling over just as he reached the panelled wall, and he hit the wall with considerable force.

Crash!

Something seemed to go, and Church, dazed, sat on the floor to find a dark, mysterious opening next to him!

CHAPTER 2.

The Secret Passage!

"MY only sainted aunt!" ejaculated McClure, staring. "You've busted the wall, Churchy!"

"I didn't do it!" protested Church. "I only hit this panel with my elbow, and something seemed to give. Well, I'm jiggered! There's a beastly earthy smell coming out of here."

Handforth was staring, fascinated.

"A secret panel!" he murmured, his voice quivering with excitement. "By George! One of the old secret passages of Travis Dene!"

He had apparently forgotten his quarrel with his chums. He had eyes for nothing but that cavity in the panelling.

"I say!" ejaculated McClure. "You don't really mean it, do you? There aren't any secret passages in this old house, are there, Handy?"

"I've heard there are—but I've only found one or two uninteresting tunnels that lead nowhere," replied Handforth, moving forward. "Perhaps this might be something different. What price we explore it now? I've got an electric torch on me, and it won't take us long! I say, what a lark!"

They all stared eagerly into the cavity. It was obvious that Church had accidentally struck a secret catch of some kind—or perhaps he had forced the panel to move aside by the very unexpectedness of his blow. Anyhow, the panel had slid back, and there was very clearly a chamber, or a passage, beyond.

"Come on!" breathed Handforth. "I'll lead the way!"

They passed through, and they found themselves in quite a big space. There was room enough for Handforth to turn and examine the mechanism of the panel. He pulled at it, and it slid back into position with a soft click.

"Look at that!" he said admiringly. "It works as well now as when it was made—perhaps centuries and centuries ago!"

"Can you open it again?" asked Church anxiously.

"Easy," replied Handforth. "Look here."

He took hold of the metal knob, pulled, and the panel slid back in its groove. He closed it once again, and there was that same click.

"We can get out all right," said Edward Oswald, his voice tense with suppressed excitement. "Come on! Let's do some exploring. Jolly good job I brought this torch. Useful things to carry, my sons!"

Handforth flashed the light round, and there were ejaculations from all of them when they beheld a flight of dusty stairs leading downwards. This looked like being a genuine discovery—something well out of the common.

"Wait until I tell my pater about this find of mine," said Handforth exultantly. "He'll probably give me a fiver for myself! He's as keen as mustard on secret passages—"

"Wait a minute!" said Church. "What do you mean—this find of yours? I'm the chap who discovered the secret panel."

"Rats! I gave you that punch, didn't I?"

"Yes; but I found the secret spring—"

"You biffed into the wall, and you only touched the spring by accident," declared Handforth. "I gave you that punch, so I'm the chap who discovered the panel."

"Well, you needn't crow," put in McClure. "Perhaps this stairway won't lead anywhere."

Handforth led the way, and he noticed that the dust was thick on the stairs—so thick, indeed, that it almost seemed like a soft carpet. Evidently this hidden stairway had not been used for many, many years; perhaps not for centuries. The air was musty and unpleasant, but the juniors never gave it a thought.

"Where the dickens are we going?" asked Church in wonder. "The library is on the ground floor, so we must be going right down into the cellars."

"There aren't any cellars under this part of the house," said Handforth. "There must be an underground tunnel here leading to some other—Hullo! Where have we got to now?"

The stairs ended abruptly, and Handforth's torch revealed a narrow passage. The sides were of stone, and they were fairly reeking with dampness. Overhead, the roof of the tunnel was crudely arched, and the air in the place was evil-smelling.

"Hadn't we better go back?" asked Church dubiously.

"Go back! What for?" demanded Handforth.

"This is a pretty mouldy sort of place to be in," said Church. "Don't forget that we're in our evening togs, Handy. These walls are filthy—"

"We can't stop for trifles like that!" broke in Handforth impatiently. "We're making discoveries, and if we get our clobber a bit dirty it won't matter."

The passage was only just wide enough for them to progress in single file. Handforth led the way, and Church brought up the rear. And Church did not feel too comfortable. Behind him stretched the inky, impenetrable darkness, and although he

wasn't a nervous boy he could not help feeling an irresistible impulse to look over his shoulder.

There were no difficulties about this exploration, there was only the one tunnel; so it was impossible for Handforth to go wrong. There were no side passages, which might have led to confusion. And before long Handforth came to a halt, his progress barred.

"Hallo! This looks interesting," he said tensely. "A whacking great door, you chaps. Oak, by the look of it. My only hat! Look at all this massive mechanism!"

His chums could just see by pressing forward and craning their necks. The entire space of the passage ahead was filled with a solid-looking door. It was evidently the entrance to some secret underground chamber.

"Hold the torch, Mac," said Handforth eagerly.

McClure held it, and Handforth set about the task of conquering that great oaken door. The mechanism which controlled it was spread almost entirely over the whole door. There were great rusty rods running from top to bottom, and diagonally across. There was a big spring, too, and some rusty catches. Handforth tugged at the rods and exerted all his strength, but nothing happened.

"We've got to get in here!" he said, breathing hard. "By George! It might be a treasure chamber!"

"Oh, draw it mild!" protested Church.

"Why not?" continued Handforth. "Travis Dene is hundreds of years old, and in the old days there might have been kings and princes hiding there. I believe it's a fact that Cromwell spent a week in the house. In those old days men went about with cartloads of gold, fleeing from the Royalists. How do we know that there isn't a big hoard under Travis Dene?"

"I think we'd better go back and tell your pater," said Church. "We'll never get past this door, anyway."

"Won't we?" shouted Handforth. "By George! Something gave just then!"

He had been pulling on one of the rusty diagonal rods, and it suddenly creaked and groaned. Then there came a snap, and when Handforth pulled on the door it moved some inches, creaking protestingly.

"Done it!" he yelled excitedly. "Come on, you chaps!"

Church and McClure were nearly as excited as their leader by now. Handforth pulled the door back and passed through, expecting to find himself in a big underground chamber. He stared in bewilderment, disappointed.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he said. "It's still the tunnel!"

The light from the torch revealed a continuation of that dank, narrow passage. Handy pressed on, and Church and McClure followed.

"Whoa! Easy, you chaps!" said Handforth suddenly. "There are some more steps

here. Where the dickens can we be getting to?"

They were so intent upon their exploration that they did not notice that the air was sweeter now. It was still dank and ill-smelling, but it was much easier to breathe. They went down a flight of steps, steep and treacherous. There was only just room enough for them to squeeze through.

They soon came to the bottom of this fresh descent, and now they found a wider passage, which almost immediately opened right out into a big chamber. The light from Handforth's torch did not penetrate far. There were spaces beyond the light's power which were impenetrably black. Overhead there were quaint stone arches, like a crypt.

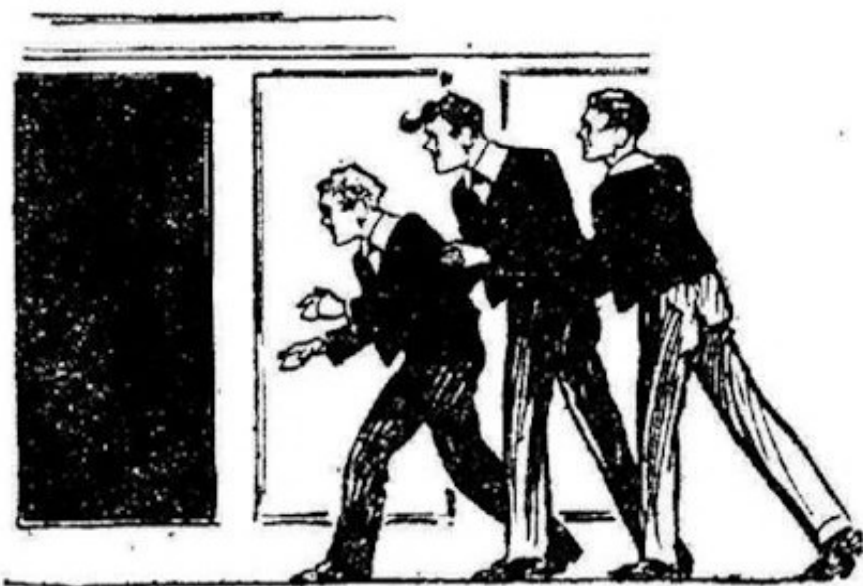
"Look!" muttered Church, in a shaky voice. "Oh, my hat! Look there—in the middle! What—what's that at the table?"

Handforth, who was jerking his torch round, now brought it to a halt so that the rays were steady upon the centre of the chamber. He caught his breath in with a sharp hiss.

"There's a table and chair there!" he muttered. "And—and there's something sitting at the table. A sort of figure——"

"Let's go back!" muttered Church. "Hang it, I'm not scared, but——"

He broke off as Handforth advanced. There was something fascinating—something horribly significant—about that figure which sat at the table in the centre of the big chamber. The whole space was filled with horrors. The air was foul again, and it was heavy with a beastly, earthy dankness.



And there, in the middle of this underground place of mystery, there was——

"A skeleton!" gasped Handforth, in a faint voice.

THEY all stared at the grim relic in horror and wonder. It was, indeed, the skeleton of a man. And there were even fragments of tattered clothes hanging about those age-old bones. The figure was in a sprawling position, the skull resting on the table between bony hands.

"Don't touch it!" muttered Church. "If you do, it'll probably fall to pieces!"

"I wonder if this is one of my ancestors?" whispered Handforth, in an awed voice. "By George, it makes a chap think, you

know! This—this thing must have been here for centuries!”

There was no doubt that he was right. But it was impossible for the juniors to hazard any explanation. Perhaps this grim guardian of the underground chamber had been imprisoned by his enemies—perhaps he had died of starvation, and had collapsed over the table; and through the centuries he had retained that position, which was suggestive of utter exhaustion. Or perhaps he had been stabbed in the back. Perhaps—

But what was the use?

“I think we had better go back, Handy,” said McClure, trying to speak steadily. “The others will be wondering what has happened to us. Besides, your pater ought to know about this.”

“Plenty of time,” replied Handforth, pulling himself together. “We’ve got to look for the treasure, my sons. I’ll bet this old chap was guarding the hoard. Perhaps he was a miser—”

“More likely he was a political prisoner of some kind,” interrupted Church. “Don’t be so certain of that treasure, Handy. People only find hidden treasure in adventure stories.”

They dragged themselves away from that gruesome figure, and a brief exploration of the full chamber revealed nothing. At least, nothing in the way of treasure, as Handforth had so confidently expected. But the juniors found another tunnel opening, which yawned mysteriously and eerily in front of them. This was a much wider passage, being fully six feet from wall to wall, and so high that a tall man could have walked in comfort.

“Come on!” muttered Handforth.

“Wait!” urged Mac. “Let’s be sensible about this, Handy.”

“What do you mean?”

“That torch of yours isn’t looking any too bright,” replied the Scottish junior. “The battery’s giving out, and we don’t want to be trapped down here in the dark, do we? I don’t believe we’ve got a match among the three of us.”

“There’s plenty of juice left,” said Handforth, looking at the torch.

“Wouldn’t it be a lot better to come back fully equipped?” asked Mac. “We could bring three or four torches and some of the other fellows—and Mr. Lee and your pater, and Mr. Stokes.”

“Not likely!” said Handforth. “We discovered this place, and we’re going to unmask all its secrets. I’ll bet there’s a hidden treasure down here somewhere.”

“Oh, my hat!” groaned Church. “He’s got hidden treasure on the brain!”

It was impossible for them to influence their leader. He had the torch, and wherever he went they had to go.

Handforth proceeded down the passage, and it seemed to go on for ever. They must have covered fully three hundred yards, and there was not a turn or a dip. Here and there a kind of recess was to be seen, and all these were explored, but they led nowhere.

“We must be right out under the grounds by now,” said Handforth wonderingly. “About half a mile from the house, I should imagine. Where the dickens can this tunnel lead out?”

“There’s a sort of turn ahead, isn’t there?” asked Church, straining his eyes.

Handforth held his torch steadily, but the light from it was weak and feeble. Even he was feeling a trifle uneasy now. The battery was rapidly losing its power, as McClure had hinted.

“I think we’d better be getting back,” said Handforth reluctantly. “Still, we’ll have a look at this corner farther on. It won’t take us a tick. Perhaps we shall come upon the exit.”

He hurried on, and then came the surprise.

So suddenly that the three juniors were completely taken off their guard—so abruptly that they had practically no chance of defending themselves—some figures pounced out from the darkness. The three juniors caught a glimpse of an evil face—a face with a scar running across it. Then the electric torch was jerked out of Handforth’s grip, and complete darkness fell.

Church received a blow on the side of the head which stunned him on the spot. McClure tried to give battle, but a lean, muscular arm was forced round his throat and he was borne to the floor. Handforth fought like a demon, but he too, was soon overpowered. In that black Stygian darkness the fight was short and sharp.

A match was struck, and a candle was lit. The three exhausted boys were quickly bound hand and foot, so that there was no possibility of them escaping. Two men stood over them—and one was the man with the scar. These were the enemies of Molly Dare—the rascals who had more than once attempted to kidnap her!

No words were spoken. Handforth & Co. were dragged down a narrow side passage, and they were dumped into a cold, dirty cell. There was an odour of stale tobacco in here, proving that this cell had been occupied before—apparently by the scarred man and his companion.

Disaster had overtaken the schoolboy explorers!

CHAPTER 3.

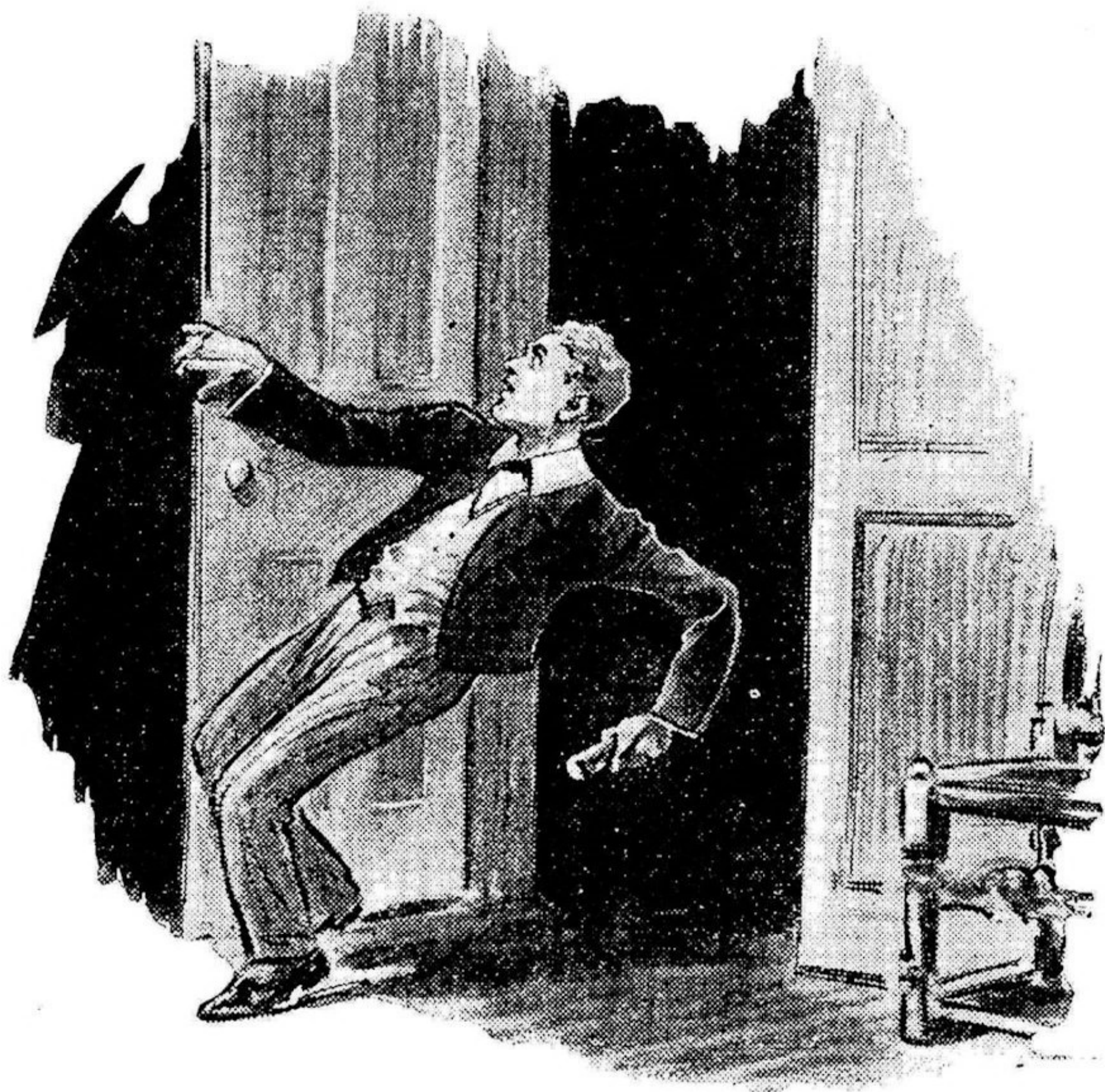
Missing!

IRENE MANNERS wore a worried frown on her pretty brow.

“I really can’t understand it, Mary,” she said. “It isn’t like Ted to go off in that way and not to come back. And what about Church and McClure? They’ve gone, too.”

“Well, you needn’t worry,” smiled Mary Summers. “There are plenty of other nice fellows to dance with.”

“It’s not that,” said Irene. “I’m afraid that Ted has been having a dreadful scrap with his chums.”



Cautiously Nipper peered into the room. As he did so he felt his knees sagging; every ounce of strength left him and he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

"And they've knocked one another about so much that they daren't re-appear in the ball-room, eh?" chuckled Doris Berkeley, as she joined the other girls. "That's about the size of it, Renie, old girl. You know what a fellow Ted is when he gets excited."

"That's just it," said Irene. "I do hope he hasn't hurt his chums much."

"It's more likely that they've hurt him," laughed Mary.

Nipper came along as the music recommenced.

"Ready, Mary?" he asked genially. "This is my fox-trot, isn't it?"

"Have you seen anything of Ted?" asked Irene, before Mary could answer. "I mean, do you know if he has been fighting?"

"Yes," replied Nipper promptly.

"There! What did I say?" murmured Doris.

"Of course. I don't know of any particular instance; but Handy's always fighting, so

I'm safe," grinned Nipper. "Why, what's the matter?"

"I don't think anything's the matter, but Ted went off with his chums an hour ago and they haven't come back," said Irene. "I wish you'd be serious, Nipper. Why should they be gone all this time?"

"Goodness only knows," replied Nipper. "It doesn't take Handy more than two or three minutes, as a rule, to scrap with anybody. I'll make some inquiries for you, if you like."

"Well, wait until this dance is over," said Irene.

INQUIRIES were made, but nobody had seen anything of Handforth & Co. Very little notice was taken at the time. For the chums of Study D to disappear for a period was nothing unusual. But when supper-time arrived, and they were still missing, the fellows and the girls

began to talk—and to make more insistent inquiries.

It was a very late supper. It was after eleven o'clock, and everybody was feeling delightfully tired and happy. The evening had been one of the most enjoyable of the whole Christmas holiday. Nothing had occurred to mar the enjoyment of the occasion.

Willy Handforth took little notice of his elder brother's disappearance at first, but he, too, was inclined to feel worried after supper.

"When was Ted seen last?" he asked, coming up to a group of schoolboys and schoolgirls in the great hall.

"He took Church and McClure out," said Irene. "He was very angry with them because they had been stealing his dances. At least, that's what he said. They came out here, I believe."

"Into the hall?" asked Willy.

"Yes."

"And haven't they been seen since?"

"Well, nobody can tell us anything," said Irene. "We've made all sorts of inquiries, but they've led to nothing. You see, it's so difficult. You boys have been about all the evening, and none of the servants took any particular notice of two or three of you. Why hasn't Ted come back?"

"But there's no evidence that he went anywhere," said Nipper. "Perhaps he's upstairs. Perhaps he knocked his chums about so much—and they knocked him about so much—that they daren't appear again."

"We've already thought of that," said Irene. "But is it very likely?"

"We've been up to Handy's bed-room, and he's not there," put in Travers. "In fact, we've searched everywhere."

"I wonder!" murmured Willy, looking deeply concerned.

"Eh? What are you wondering?" asked Nipper.

"It would be just like Ted to get himself into some serious trouble," said Willy grimly. "Don't forget those mysterious men who have been trying to kidnap Molly, and——"

"Cheese it, you young ass!" interrupted Reggie Pitt. "There's no evidence that Handforth went out of doors, and it's a certainty that those men couldn't have got into the house."

"Well, you never know," said Willy, shaking his head. "Ted's capable of anything—and Church and McClure are a couple of asses. They allow him to mess them about just as he pleases. I tell you, I'm worried."

THEY were all worried.

Sir Edward Handforth and Nelson Lee and all the other adult guests got to hear of the mysterious disappearance of the trio. They, too, thought little at first, but when midnight arrived and Handforth & Co. were still missing, there was every reason for them to feel concerned. By this time, the girls had gone to

bed, and the boys were thinking of following their example.

"I'm wondering if Edward and his two friends went to the library," said Sir Edward, as he stood with Mr. Stokes and Nelson Lee in the hall. "I went there some little time before supper, and I found the lights on."

"But nobody in the room?" asked Lee.

"Not a soul," replied the host. "Of course, there may be nothing in it. Yet I hardly think that any of the other boys would go into my library without permission. Edward, of course, is different; he fancies that he has a perfect right to wander wherever he pleases. A headstrong boy."

"I think we had better go to the library," said Nelson Lee.

They went, and Lee immediately noticed that one of the rugs was rucked up and badly disarranged.

"Do you know anything about this, Sir Edward?" he asked.

"I don't," replied Sir Edward, frowning. "Some of the boys have evidently been playing about in here. Infernal impudence!"

"There is a graze on the polished flooring just beyond this rug," continued Lee, searching keenly. "It is almost as though somebody had slid along. Of course, there is no certainty——"

He broke off as a tap sounded on the door.

"Come in!" called Sir Edward.

The butler appeared, accompanied by a rather scared-looking maidservant.

"This is Jane, sir—one of the scullery maids," said the butler. "She has something to tell you."

"Indeed!" said Sir Edward.

"Please, sir, I saw three boys going into the library here while the dancing was going on," said the girl. "One of them was Master Edward, sir, and the others were his two friends, Master McClure and Master Church."

"Oh!" said her master. "You saw them coming into the library?"

"Yes, sir."

"At what time?"

"I expect it must have been about half-past eight, sir—or perhaps a quarter-to-nine," replied the girl.

"Did you see them come out?"

"Oh, no, sir—I was only passing the end of the corridor, and I happened to look down," said the girl. "They seemed to be quarrelling a bit, and that's why I noticed them. I was carrying a tray of things for the dining-room, and I forgot all about the young gentlemen immediately afterwards. I shouldn't have remembered, only there was some talk that Master Edward wasn't to be found."

"Well, we at least know that your son came into this room, Sir Edward," said Nelson Lee, after the butler and the maid had gone. "Whether they came out again or not remains to be seen."

"But they must have come out again," protested Sir Edward. "They're not here, are they?"

"I am wondering if there is a secret passage of any sort leading from this apartment."

"A secret passage!" ejaculated Sir Edward, staring. "Good gracious! A secret passage from the library? Quite out of the question, Mr. Lee!"

"But there are some secret passages in this old house, are there not?"

"Not that I know of," growled Sir Edward impatiently. "There's been some talk of secret chambers and hidden passages, but in my belief that's all nonsense. Whenever a house happens to be two or three centuries old people think that it must be honeycombed with secret passages. As far as I know, the walls of this room are absolutely solid."

AN hour later Sir Edward was intensely worried—and so was Lady Handforth.

The gamekeepers outside had been questioned, but they all declared that not a living soul had left the house between the hours of eight p.m. and ten p.m. If it came to that, nobody had left the house at all—nobody who could not be accounted for.

In spite of this, however, Nelson Lee and Mr. Stokes and a number of the boys, including Nipper and Willy, searched throughout the grounds. There was no trace of the missing trio. Then the house itself was ransacked from top to bottom. But Handforth and Church and McClure had vanished—apparently into thin air.

As for Molly Dare, extra precautions were taken to-night—at Nelson Lee's suggestion. Two of the gamekeepers were stationed on the terrace immediately beneath Eileen Dare's window—for Molly slept in the same room. Mrs. Stokes was in that bed-room, too; she and Eileen took it in turns to sit in front of the fire and keep guard over the sleeping Molly. Outside in the corridor there were two of the Remove fellows. Nelson Lee was making absolutely certain that the enemy could not possibly get at the child.

In the meantime, the search for the missing juniors continued. And it came to nothing.

"I am very much afraid, Sir Edward, that your son has been seized by these mysterious men who have been menacing Miss Dare's niece," said Nelson Lee at length. "It is incredible that your son and those other two boys should have gone off on their own accord. I fear that they have been seized and imprisoned somewhere. You know this house better than I do, and if you can suggest—"

"I can suggest nothing, Mr. Lee," put in Sir Edward huskily. "Where can the boys be? Where can they have been taken to? I am more mystified than you. The whole thing is most disturbing—most worrying!"

CHAPTER 4.

The Mystery of the Night!

NIPPER and Travers and Reggie Pitt and some others were in the great hall, collected round the big fireplace. When Sir Edward and Nelson Lee and Mr. Stokes came in the boys turned eagerly.

"Any news, sir?" asked Travers.

"None," replied Nelson Lee. "I really think that you boys had better be getting to bed. It is after midnight—"

"Not likely, guv'nor!" broke in Nipper. "Handy and Church and McClure are our chums, you know, and we want to help. In fact, we'd like to remain on the alert all night, if you don't mind. It's an exceptional occasion—and it's the Remove's job."

"Do you think it likely that anything will happen during the night?" asked Sir Edward wonderingly.

"Well, it is just as well to be on the safe side," replied Lee. "We have done everything possible, Sir Edward; we have searched the grounds, we have searched the house, and still we are at a complete loss. All we can do now is to remain on the alert. To-morrow, if no news is heard of your son and his companions, we must inform the police."

"Wouldn't it be better to inform the police at once?" asked Sir Edward.

"You can, if you wish, ring up the police at Bury St. Edmunds and report the matter, but I doubt if they will take any action before to-morrow," replied Lee. "For the rest of the night we must rely solely upon ourselves."

"You think that the boys disappeared from the library, don't you?" asked Mr. Stokes.

"I do," replied Lee. "How they disappeared I cannot possibly imagine—unless, as I have hinted, there is a secret passage of some kind."

"But that's impossible," declared Sir Edward impatiently. "Haven't I already told you that there is no secret passage leading from the library? Surely, if such a thing existed, I should have known of it? I have lived in this house all my life—and my father and my grandfather—"

"That necessarily means nothing, Sir Edward," broke in Nelson Lee gently. "It is by no means uncommon for such secrets to be concealed in such an old house as this for centuries on end. I shall make it my duty to-morrow to make a very thorough examination of the library."

"Well, for the rest of the night let me keep guard there, sir," said Nipper eagerly.

"And I'll keep you company, dear old fellow," murmured Travers.

"Good man!" said Nipper, with a nod. "How's that, guv'nor? Travers and I will stay in the library—just to be on the safe side. We'll take it in turns to nap on the big lounge. And if anything happens we'll rouse the household."

Sir Edward was impatient.

"An absolute waste of energy," he declared. "There is no earthly reason why you boys should spend the night in the library. Utter nonsense! I don't agree to it for a moment. You had far better be in your beds."

"They shall go to bed, Sir Edward, if you insist," said Lee quietly. "They are your guests, and they must—"

"Not at all—not at all," broke in Sir Edward gruffly. "If you want these boys to remain in the library, let them remain. I wouldn't presume to interfere with your investigations, Mr. Lee. Your judgment is better than mine, I have no doubt."

SO Nipper and Travers took their places in the library. They themselves had had an idea that their time would be wasted; but it was just as well to take this precautionary measure.

There were other boys on duty that night, too.

Willy, for example, insisted upon keeping watch in the upper corridor, outside Molly's bed-room. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon and other stalwarts of the Third were also called upon to sacrifice some of their sleep in the good cause.

When Nipper and Travers went to the library they were accompanied by Nelson Lee and Sir Edward and Mr. Stokes. Lee went round the walls, tapping the panelling and listening intently. But, as far as he could discover, those walls were thick and solid. Sir Edward watched impatiently.

"You'll find nothing here, Mr. Lee," he said. "This house was built when builders knew what they were doing. These walls are from eighteen to twenty-four inches thick."

"To-morrow," said Lee, "I will take measurements—with your permission, Sir Edward."

"Measurements?"

"I am not satisfied that there is no possibility of a secret way out of this room," said Nelson Lee. "What is there, for example, immediately below this library?"

"Nothing—but the solid earth."

"No cellars?"

"All the cellars are under the other part of the house," replied Sir Edward. "Surely, Mr. Lee, you can allow me to know best in this matter? And once again I say that these boys will be wasting their time by remaining here—and they'll be losing their sleep, too."

"Don't worry about us, sir," said Nipper. "We'll take it in turns, and we'll get a good amount of sleep."

They were left alone at last, Sir Edward going up to his bed-room to comfort Lady Handforth—who, of course, was intensely worried over the whole extraordinary business. Mr. Stokes went to bed, too. Nelson Lee, on the other hand, had no idea of sleep. He donned his overcoat and ventured forth into the night.

"Well, this is a nice game," said Nipper, as he put some more logs on the library fire.

"What do you think of it, Travers?"

"If it was any other fellow but Handforth, I might think that something dramatic had happened," replied Vivian Travers. "But, by Sampson, there's never any telling with Handy! How do we know that he didn't steal off of his own accord? Naturally, Church and McClure went with him."

"The gamekeepers all swear that nobody left the house."

"That means nothing," replied Travers. "If Handy was on one of his stunts he'd deliberately fool those men on guard."

"That's true," admitted Nipper thoughtfully. "Well, perhaps something will turn up in the morning. Who's going to take first spell on the couch?"

"You are," replied Travers. "I'll stay on guard for an hour."

They had a bit of an argument, but at last Nipper gave in. He rolled himself on the big lounge, and was sound asleep in less than a minute. Travers remained on guard, and he faithfully awakened his companion at the expiration of the first hour.

Then he took his spell of sleep, and Nipper kept awake.

And so it went on through the night.

BY five o'clock both Nipper and Travers were beginning to feel that they had indeed wasted their time. Nothing had happened so far, and there was not one chance in a thousand that anything would happen now. Before so very long the domestics would be getting up and Travis Dene would awaken for a new day.

But it was still a good way off dawn, and the night was black and silent and mysterious. It was just that hour when everything is more than usually eerie. Nipper was on guard, and Travers was sleeping; and Nipper had half decided to allow his companion to sleep on. It seemed a pity to disturb him now.

"I might as well keep guard for the rest of the night," Nipper told himself. "Only another hour or two—"

He broke off and held his breath. A sound had come to his ears. He was sitting near the fire, and the sound had come from the other part of the room, which was in deep shadow.

There was one electric light burning—a table lamp, heavily shaded. The fire was flickering comfortably, and it had afforded the watchers a feeling of companionship during their vigil. There is always something friendly about the crackle and glow of a fire.

Scratch—scratch—scratch!

The sound came again, louder this time, but every bit as mysterious and as eerie. Travers, on the big lounge, stirred and then sat up. He blinked at Nipper, who immediately placed a finger to his lips.

"Hallo, hallo! Something doing, dear old fellow?" murmured Travers, alert on the instant.

"I don't know—but there's a rummy sound against that wall behind you," breathed Nipper.

"For the love of Samson!" ejaculated Travers, looking round.

Scratch—scratch—scratch!

It came again. It seemed to be in the room, and yet it wasn't in the room. There was a ghostly quality about that sound which affected both the listeners. They held themselves tense and ready for instant action. Somehow, they could not help feeling that something was about to happen.

"Rats!" murmured Travers.

"You think that scratching sound is caused by rats?"

"What else?" smiled Travers. "It's the still hour before the dawn, and I dare say that a couple of roystering rats are having a nibble at the floorboards somewhere. I understand that rats are rather partial to floorboards."

"You're wrong," whispered Nipper. "These sounds don't all come from the same direction. I heard the scratching over in the corner at first, and then it shifted along the wall—listen to that! By Jove! It's rummy!"

Thud-thud! There were one or two soft, almost imperceptible bumps, and they were immediately followed by a repetition of the scratching noise.

"Wait a minute!" breathed Nipper.

He crept towards the door, intending to switch on the other lights. Travers remained on the lounge, half amused, half serious. When Nipper reached the door he paused, his hand reaching up towards the switch.

A new sound had come to his ears, and this time it came from outside—from the corridor. It wasn't exactly a creak, but something very like it. It was repeated, and Nipper suddenly switched the main lights on in the library.

"That's better!" said Travers, with a sigh. "I don't mind admitting that cold shivers were running down my spine. It's wonderful how a little light restores a chap's courage."

"There's nothing here," said Nipper, in a low voice, as he looked round, "but I heard something outside just now."

"Nerves, dear old fellow," declared Travers. "For goodness sake don't let your imagination—"

"It wasn't imagination," interrupted Nipper. "I tell you I heard something along the corridor. You stay here, and I'll creep out and have a look round. If anything happens, yell!"

"Make no mistake—I'll yell!" promised Travers.

"And if I discover anything, I'll call to you," said Nipper, softly opening the door.

He crept out, and found the corridor black and cold.

Creak-creak!

The sound came to his ears again, and he slowly advanced, one hand on the switch of his electric torch. He reached the end of the wide corridor, where it bent round, and suddenly switched on his torch. The light slashed through the darkness—and revealed a carelessly-closed window at the corner. A breeze was springing up with the approach of dawn, and it was causing the window to move slightly.

"Idiot!" muttered Nipper, thoroughly fed up. "Travers was right—my imagination is getting the better of me."

He switched off his torch and went back towards the library. Then he half-hesitated in his stride. He knew that he had left the library door slightly ajar, but now he could see nothing. The lights in the library were out. Why had Travers switched them off? They were all out—even the little standard lamp on the table. What on earth had Travers been up to?

It occurred to Nipper that something might have happened during his absence. He approached with extreme caution—until he was right in the library doorway. He felt the door, and it gave slightly under his pressure—proving that it was still ajar.

"Travers!" he whispered. "What's the game? What are you—"

Then the words choked in his throat. An extraordinary sensation of bewilderment and confusion came over him. He felt his knees sagging. He felt every ounce of strength draining rapidly out of his muscles. His wits became more scattered—

With a soft thud, Nipper collapsed on to the corridor floor.



WHEN daylight came, Nipper was found at the end of the corridor by Nelson Lee—stretched at full length, completely unconscious. And in the library, nothing seemed to have been disturbed. The standard lamp was glowing on the desk—but there was absolutely no sign of Vivian Travers!

CHAPTER 5.

Another Disappearance!

NELSON LEE was apparently unmoved, and yet, under the surface, he was intensely disturbed.

Nipper unconscious—Travers missing! Here was a dramatic turn!

Lee himself had made no discoveries during the night; he had been prowling about in the grounds, up and down the lanes in the neighbourhood of the house, and he had patrolled the halls and corridors of Travis Dene, too. And this thing had happened in the library in spite of all these precautions.

All efforts to restore Nipper to consciousness were in vain. He was carried to bed, and a doctor was fetched. The medical man was mystified and alarmed. He could do nothing to bring Nipper to his senses.

"The boy's been drugged—heavily drugged, Mr. Lee," he declared. "I don't know what drug was employed, but he is in such a stupor that it may be hours before he comes round."

"He is in no danger?" asked Lee.

"As far as I can tell, the drug has not affected his heart," replied the doctor. "It is beating strongly, and I have every reason to hope that when he recovers consciousness he will be himself. But I must acknowledge that I am utterly mystified. I have never come across such a case as this."

Nelson Lee went away, satisfied that Nipper was not in any danger. But this thing which had happened to the junior was disturbing—indeed, alarming. It proved that the enemy was getting desperate.

And Travers? What had happened to Travers? He had completely vanished, whilst Nipper had only been gassed or drugged. And why should these mysterious men seize Travers in that way? Their only possible motive would be to silence him. Perhaps he had discovered something which might give them away, therefore it was necessary for them to kidnap him as they had kidnapped Handforth & Co.

Molly Dare was quite safe. There had been no disturbance upstairs during the night. One of Nelson Lee's first duties, of course, was to hurry up to Eileen Dare's rooms and make inquiries. He found that Molly was sleeping peacefully, and that nothing untoward had occurred.

WILLY was looking haggard and careworn this morning.

He was determined, more than ever, to stick closely to Molly; he sensed that her peril was now growing acute. These unknown enemies were getting ready to pounce. If this was not the case, they would not have seized Travers as they had done.

Willy, too, was worried about his elder brother. He generally affected to scorn Edward Oswald, but it was, after all, only an affectation. When Edward Oswald was in peril, Willy worried intensely.

Not unnaturally, the whole of Travis Dene was in an uproar this morning. Inspector Jerrold, of the local police, put in an appearance in answer to a telephone call, and he brought one or two constables to assist in the search for the missing juniors—and to stand guard.

The guests were anxious and excited. Breakfast was a scrappy meal. Neither

Sir Edward nor Lady Handforth appeared. But Molly Dare came down as usual with Eileen, and it was impossible to keep from her that there had been some dramatic happenings. And Molly, in consequence, was deeply affected. She knew that she was really the cause of all this.

"Oh, those boys must be found," she said, looking at Willy with wide, frightened eyes. "One of them is your brother, Willy, and it's all my fault——"

"Oh, draw it mild," protested Willy. "How can you be to blame for anything? You mustn't talk like that, Molly. I expect my major's all right, and before long we'll have the whole mystery cleared up."

There was a lot of wild talk going on between the schoolboys and the schoolgirls. Many of them were wondering whose turn it would be next. Handforth and Church and McClure had vanished, and now Travers had followed them. Nipper was upstairs, unconscious. Small wonder that these other schoolboy and schoolgirl guests were beginning to feel slightly apprehensive.

Nelson Lee was rather misled by the fact that Nipper had been found unconscious at the end of the corridor. This indicated that he had been attacked in the corridor, and not in the library. It seemed, then, that there was no menace in the library, as Lee had first supposed. Yet it could not be denied that Travers had vanished from the library.

The whole affair was puzzling and baffling.

AND while the guests of Travis Dene partook of their scrappy breakfast, four other people were feeding—but in a very different way.

They were Handforth, Church, McClure and Travers.

Handforth & Co., sleeping as well as they could on the hard stone floor, and with their ankles and wrists bound, had been disturbed in the early morning by the noisy opening of the door of their prison.

They were in a kind of cell—an old dungeon, perhaps, which had been used in the bygone centuries. The juniors had been dazzled by the light from an electric torch, and they had seen a figure thrust in upon them, and then the door had slammed, and the bolts had been shot home.

"Who is it?" asked Handforth huskily, as he sat up.

"Well, well!" came a well-known voice out of the darkness. "I was wondering, dear old fellows, if I should meet you——"

"Travers!" ejaculated the three prisoners, in one voice.

"Unhappily, yes," said Travers, with all his usual *sang froid*. "They've got me, too, you see. A nasty, uncomfortable business. I'm not in the least impressed by these new quarters."

"You ass!" said Handforth. "You can't see them!"

"If I saw them, I should probably be less impressed than ever."

"How did you get here?" went on Handforth eagerly. "What's happened? Why doesn't somebody come to rescue us?"

"I'm afraid the rescue squad is slightly at sea," replied Travers, as he bent double and gently eased himself to the floor. "Infernal nuisance, having these ropes round my wrists and ankles. However, I think I rather dished them about this roping business. A trick I learned off a conjurer chap. Without a great deal of exertion, I believe I shall be able to get my hands free."

"Good man!" said Handforth.

"I imagine that you were grabbed by the enemy in the library?" inquired Travers.

"No; we found a secret panel," explained Church. "Like asses, we explored it instead of telling the rest of you. And while we were down in this tunnel we were suddenly pounced upon by those beastly men. They shoved us in here, and we've been here ever since."

"Somehow," said Travers, "I don't think we shall be here for long. Nipper and I were in the library on the watch. He went out for half a minute, and then things began to happen. I saw your famous panel open, and a shadowy figure came out, holding a revolver. Before I could give the alarm or do anything the blighter pounced on me and fetched me a packet which made me lose all interest in the proceedings. I didn't remember much else until I found myself near this prison of yours. But Nipper must have noticed something, and the very fact that he didn't show himself indicates that he was on the alert. I dare say the rescue party will come along in due course."

Travers gave a final tug, and his hands were free. A moment later he had untied the ropes from his ankles, and he chuckled.

"That was easy," he said, in an amused voice. "If you fellows would care to have your ropes untied—"

"Come on!" said Handforth tensely.

THREE minutes later Handforth & Co. were free.

But for some little time they were unable to take any action because their limbs were so cramped, and even after that they found that the vault had such a strong door that there was no hope of them breaking it down.

"How many men are there on this job?" asked Travers.

"We don't know—two or three, at least," replied Handforth.

"Have they brought any food to you yet?"

"Not a bite!" said Church bitterly. "I believe they're going to starve us to death!"

"Don't you believe it," said Travers. "They'll come soon—probably with some grub. How about pouncing on them when they appear? You never know—we might be able to work the dodge."

They waited, expectant and hopeful. The situation was certainly better now. Travers' advent had made all the difference.

A full hour elapsed before there came any sign from the enemy. The silence of this underground vault was oppressive and rather terrifying. More than once the prisoners inwardly wondered if they were to be shut up here for good—to be left here to starve. They could not help thinking of the skeleton they had seen in the other vault. He, too, perhaps, had been left to starve in this subterranean prison.

"Listen!" ejaculated Travers suddenly. "Somebody coming, I think, dear old fellows."

"Let's get ready!" breathed Handforth. "Two of us on each side of the door. And when the man comes in we'll pounce on him."

They held themselves ready, standing expectantly in the darkness. Sure enough footsteps sounded—growing nearer and nearer. At last they halted outside the door, and the bolts were shot back. The door opened, and a gleam of light came flashing in from a torch.

"Better let them have their hands free while they eat this bread and cheese," growled a voice. "They're only kids, anyhow, and they can't—"

"Now!" roared Handforth excitedly.

With one accord the four juniors charged forward. Travers was vexed, because in his opinion this attack was premature. Far better to have waited until the men actually came into the dungeon. It was Handforth's impulsiveness which had spoilt the effect.

Indeed, this attempt at escape was ruined practically at the outset. For Handforth and Church succeeded in getting through the doorway, but before McClure and Travers could follow the door itself was slammed and one of the bolts was shot.

Thus the schoolboy party found itself divided. The four of them might conceivably have overpowered these two men, but as it was the men only had Handforth and Church to deal with—and they dealt with them drastically.

"Hi! Come on!" gasped Handforth, as he clenched his fists and dashed to the attack. "We'll soon smash these rotters—"

"Keep that door bolted!" snarled the man with the scarred face. "Hang it! How did these boys get free? Quick! They'll give us a lot of trouble if they start running!"

As he spoke, he lashed out with one of his feet, and his heavy boot caught Handforth on the shin. The unfortunate junior gave a gasp of pain, lost his balance, and toppled over. Simultaneously Church was sent crashing against the stone wall, half-stunned by the heavy blow that the other man had dealt him.

The next moment both the juniors were on the dank floor of the passage, a man on each of them. They were held down, and in spite of their struggles their ankles were roughly tied—this time with handkerchiefs.

After that the scarred man and his companion went into the cell, and they made

short work of Travers and McClure. Not that these two juniors did not put up a good fight. They did—although it was hopeless from the start.

Ten minutes later the four captives were once more roped up, and now they were tied with cruel tightness. There would be no second chance of them getting free.

"Young hounds!" snapped the scarred-faced man. "We'd better bring them into the other vault—where we can keep our eyes on them. They'll be safer there. We shan't need to keep them prisoners much longer, anyhow."

The juniors were roughly dragged out, and soon they found themselves in a much larger vault where an oil-stove was burning and where there were one or two oil-lamps, shedding a yellowish glow. The men were obviously using this vault for their temporary headquarters.

And now perhaps a few words of explanation here will not be out of place. The men had known nothing of the entrance into the library until Handforth had stumbled unwittingly down the tunnel. As a matter of fact, they had previously found that heavy oaken door, but from this side there was no mechanism—no means of opening it. The three juniors had very kindly opened it from the inner side, and had left it unfastened. Thus it had been easy for these men to get into the library and to trap Travers.

And now, it seemed, they were preparing for the climax!

CHAPTER 6.

The Door in the Ruins!

"**H**AS anybody seen Willy?" Ena Handforth asked that question in an anxious, troubled voice.

Breakfast was over at Travis Dene, and the young guests were drifting about aimlessly, hardly knowing what to do this morning. The whole party was upset; and everything was at sixes and sevens. Groups of boys and girls stood in the great hall, others were wandering about on the terrace.

"Willy?" said Tommy Watson, looking round. "He was with Molly last, I think. They were in the morning-room—"

"I know," interrupted Ena. "But then Molly went out with Miss Dare and Mrs. Stokes. They went upstairs, I think, and Willy remained in the morning-room."

"Well, it's just as well for that little kid to be kept upstairs," said Jimmy Potts. "You never know what might happen. And if she's in her bed-room, with Miss Dare and Mrs. Stokes to look after her, she'll be safe enough."

"Nobody seems to have seen Willy since then," said his sister. "My only hat! I hope to goodness that nothing has happened to him! It's bad enough for Ted to get himself into a mess, but it's not like Willy to go and do the same silly thing."

It wasn't long before everybody was inquiring for Willy, but nobody could find him. Nelson Lee was informed, and Lee soon organised a systematic hunt. And it was quickly established that Willy was not anywhere in the house. His strange disappearance had an uncomfortable effect upon the others.

"There's something uncanny about this place," said Gresham in a low voice as he stood with some of the other boys. "First Handforth and his chums—then Travers, and now Willy! They've all vanished! Where are they? What's happened to them? And who's going to be next?"

"That's what I'm thinking," said Jimmy Potts. "We fellows had better stick together, I think, or we might find ourselves pounced upon and spirited away."

"What about the girls?" asked somebody. "They'd better be careful, too."

It wasn't exactly a scare, although it was very akin to one. And after that the schoolboys and schoolgirls kept closely together in big groups. They all had an eerie feeling that they might be mysteriously captured by these unknown enemies if they separated.

And the disappearance of Willy remained a fresh sensation.

CURIOSLY enough, Willy wasn't missing at all.

At least, he hadn't been captured by these grim enemies of Molly's. Without any attempt at secrecy, Willy had walked out of doors and had made his way through the grounds.

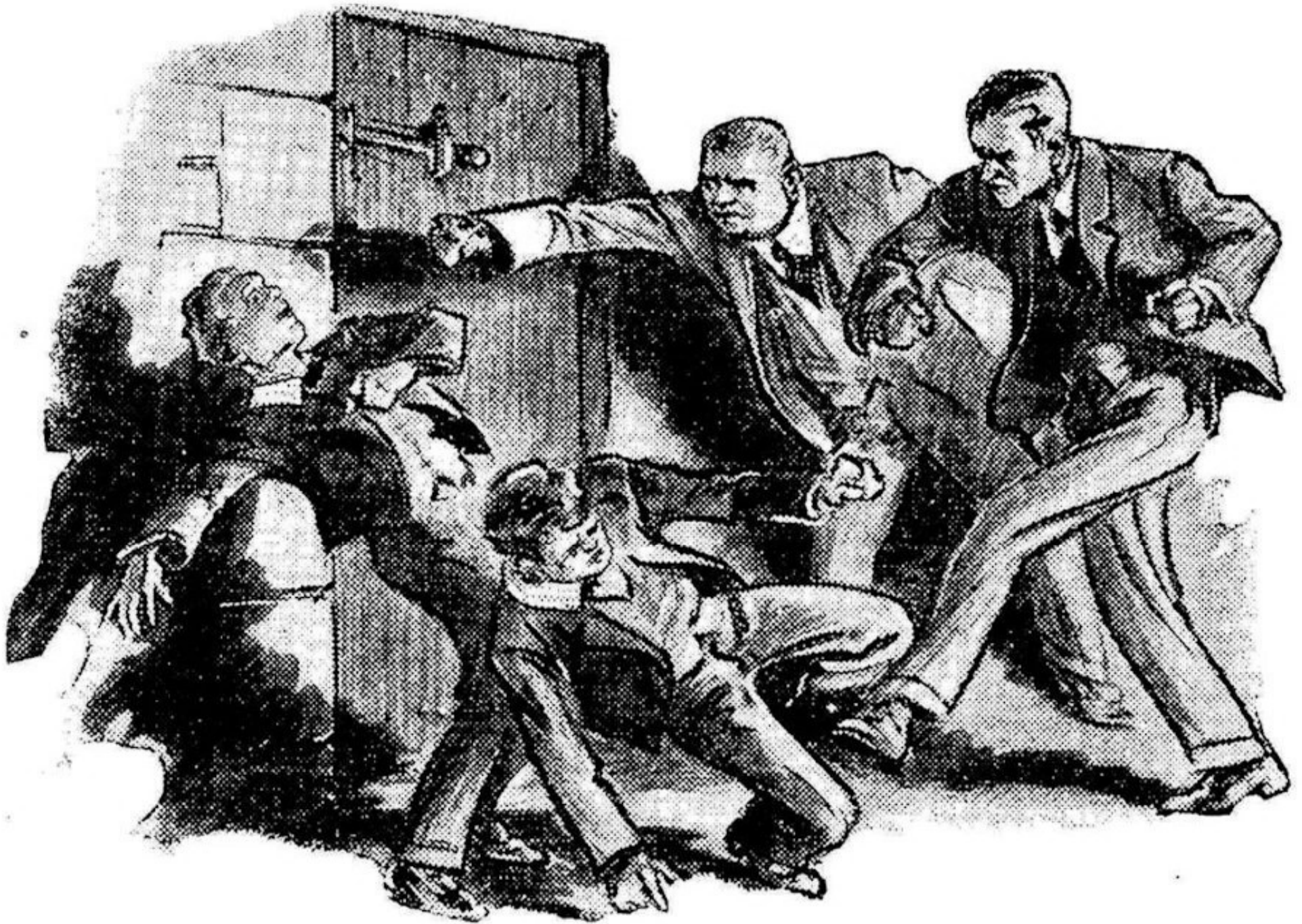
It was just by chance that nobody had happened to see him. It was quite natural, for the men on duty outside had not been told to take any particular notice of the schoolboy guests; and Willy had certainly chosen a route which did not lead him anywhere near the guards.

He was filled with anxiety about Edward Oswald, and he badly wanted to get on the track. He knew how his father and mother were worrying, and his keenest desire was to take some action which would bring them comfort.

It did not occur to him that he was only adding to their worries by going off entirely on his own like this. As a rule, Willy was thoughtful on such matters, but it must be explained that he had had no idea when he started out that he would be away for long. Unquestionably, he had not suspected that his absence would be noted and made the subject of a fresh sensation.

Earlier that morning he had propounded a theory to his father. He reminded Sir Edward of some old ruins not very far from the main mansion. They were the ruins of an old wing which had once been part of Travis Dene itself, but for two or three hundred years this section had been isolated, and it was now an ivy-grown, picturesque ruin.

Willy, of course, was a born explorer; during many a summer holiday he had spent fascinating hours looking through



The man with the scarred face lashed out at Handforth, and the junior toppled over. Simultaneously Church was sent crashing against the wall by the other man.

those ruins, and he had found more than one entrance to a vault or crypt. He had a vague idea that there was an underground tunnel which linked up the ruins with Travis Dene, but he had never been able to find it.

His theory was that the men must have discovered the old tunnel, and by this means, perhaps, they had got into the house. Unfortunately, Sir Edward had pooh-poohed the whole idea, and he had told Willy to "run along."

Willy had tried to speak to Nelson Lee, but the schoolmaster-detective had been too busy with the police to give any attention to him. So Willy, rather fed up, had decided to work on his own.

Now he was at the ruins, and he had succeeded in getting there unknown to a soul.

And he soon made an important discovery.

As he was perfectly ready to admit, he made this discovery by sheer chance. For no sooner had he entered the ruins than he fancied he heard stealthy footsteps. With the quickness of a fox, he withdrew behind a mass of creepers, and stood there motionless, his heart beating rapidly.

It was more than likely that the stealthy sounds were caused by one of the game-keepers, or perhaps by a policeman. Still, it was Willy's policy to be cautious. And so, in order to be on the safe side, he concealed himself.

He was well rewarded.

For, as he crouched there, peeping through a mass of leaves, he saw a stranger. The man's very appearance was suspicious. He was walking on tip-toe, and he was on the alert. He had come from the direction of a narrow lane which ran just on the other side of a neighbouring wall. Now he approached one of the ivy-clad buttressed walls of the ruins, and he suddenly vanished.

Willy blinked.

The man had simply gone through the screen of ivy, apparently into the solid wall itself. The thing was uncanny. Willy was on the point of moving out of his own concealment when he drew himself back. The man had reappeared, and now he went off in the direction from which he had originally come.

"Rummy!" muttered Willy. "What's the game?"

He was agog with inward excitement over this discovery of his. He could hardly believe in his good fortune. It seemed too good to be true. Within the first ten minutes of his investigation he had learned something of paramount importance.

He waited until the sounds of the man's footsteps died away; then he crept from his hiding-place and ran quickly across to the other wall. He parted the ivy and peered into the gloom.

"My only sainted aunt!" he ejaculated.

Instead of a solid wall, there was a big crevice. Some of the big stones were out of place, it seemed. Willy pressed upon them, and they moved heavily inwards.

Then he knew the truth.

This wall was not as solid as it looked. There was a door here—a door which seemed to be a part of the wall itself when closed. But it was ajar now—and this indicated, to Willy's shrewd mind, that the man had only gone away temporarily. Otherwise he would not have left that door in this condition.

"It's now or never," muttered Willy, making up his mind on the second.

He pushed on the stonework, and it went farther inwards. He crept through and found himself in a dark, dank tunnel. Willy hesitated here, wondering what he should do. If he went forward he might easily come face to face with some other members of the gang. And, single-handed and unarmed, how could he hope to put up any sort of a successful fight?

Far better to hide here and wait for that man to return. Then, perhaps, he would be able to follow the fellow, and he might be able to make some more important discoveries.

As before, Willy decided that caution would be all to his advantage. It was Edward Oswald's policy to rush headlong into danger; it was Willy's policy to think beforehand.

HE waited. Striking one match, he had quickly seen a deep crevice in the stonework of the tunnel, just behind the door. He had crept into this, chancing whether he would be discovered. In any case, it was the only possible place of concealment, and this was no time for hesitation.

As it happened, the man returned within two minutes. He came cautiously into the gloom from the daylight. He closed the door quietly behind him, and flashed on an electric torch.

Willy's heart nearly stopped beating. Would the man flash that light round? If so, he could not possibly fail to see the figure of the intruder.

But no. The man did not pause for a moment. He plunged on into the tunnel, and Willy breathed a sigh of relief. The fag could see that the man was now carrying a parcel. It was this, no doubt, which had caused him to return. Either he had forgotten to bring it in the first place, or else he had made his preliminary trip in order to see if the door was open. What did it matter, anyhow? The man was there, and Willy was able to follow him.

This was an adventure after Willy's own heart! He was enjoying every moment of it—more particularly as it seemed probable that he would get on the track of the missing juniors—one of them being his own brother. Willy did not doubt that those four boys were imprisoned somewhere in this strange catacomb.

Willy waited until the man had gone some twenty or thirty yards down the tunnel, and then he followed. Creeping along cautiously, he had no difficulty in keeping his quarry in sight. He was comparatively safe, too, for while the man was carrying that bright light, Willy was in total darkness. And if the man should suddenly turn and flash his light down the tunnel, Willy would probably have plenty of time to slip into one of the handy nooks and crevices which he had seen at frequent intervals.

But the man did not look round once. He walked on, with no thought in his mind of any possible shadower. The light suddenly vanished, and Willy broke into a run. The man had gone off down a side tunnel, and Willy was just in time to see him disappear for a second time round another bend.

With greater caution than ever, Willy followed—for now he could hear voices. This was going to be a tricky business. At all costs he must find out what was beyond that bend; he must see with his own eyes.

But there was danger now—acute danger. For if he should run into the arms of any of these men he would be lost. Not that Willy hesitated. He crept forward as resolutely as ever, with a full knowledge of the chances that he was taking. He arrived at the bend, and, peering round, his heart gave a jump.

There was a kind of wide space here, and almost immediately in front of him he could see a pile of fallen masonry and stonework. The roof of the tunnel had collapsed here—it had been in this condition, perhaps, for countless years. But there, in that pile of disordered stonework, Willy saw an excellent hiding-place.

He crept towards it, slipped between two of the big stones, and crouched down. He now found that he had a perfect spy-hole—through which he could look right into a big, domed vault, where two or three lights were burning, and where two men were standing, talking.

What was more to the point, Willy could see his celebrated major—and Church and McClure and Travers, too! There they were, all bound up like so many trussed chickens. They were in a row, against one of the farther walls.

"It's not worth the risk, bringing this grub for these infernal kids," one of the men was saying, in an impatient voice. "But now you have brought it they might as well have it."

"Well, we can't starve them," said the other man. "We don't need to untie them—we don't want another scrap in here like this morning! If we just loosen their ropes a bit, they'll be able—"

"We won't loosen their ropes at all!" interrupted the other harshly. "Cut that bread into slices, and the cheese, too. They'll manage to pick it up and eat it. If they don't they can go hungry!"

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED!

Eric Fender, Gwynfryn, Gwaenysgor, Prestatyn, North Wales, wants to hear from a boy on a training ship; also from a reader in Scotland.

Edward Woolfson, 13, Arnott Street, S. C. Road, Dublin, wants to hear from Scouts.

Leslie C. Edens, 10, Paradise Street, Oxford, would like to exchange ideas for clubs with readers living in South Africa, India, Canada, U.S.A., China and Germany. Also desires for correspondents interested in athletics, football and cricket—outside England, Australia and New Zealand.

Ralph Clarry, 14, Algonquin Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, wants new series N.L.L. 1-84 and 89, also 118-131; 10s. offered.

W. Harrison, 28, Scalegate Road, Currock, Carlisle, wants correspondents who are interested in birds' eggs; ages 14-16.

Jack L. Crickett, Park Street, Morrinsville, Auckland, New Zealand, wants to hear from readers in America; ages 13-15.

James Allan Adamson, 2, Providence Terrace, Lower Wortley, Leeds, Yorks., offers N.L.L. new series, 1½d. each, post free. Also wants to hear from E. B. Waterfield.

C. Ramscar 34, Leasowes Road, Leyton, London, E., wants an Australian correspondent who is interested in birds' eggs.

John Smith, 59, Norman Avenue, Lordship Lane, Wood Green, London, N.22, wants correspondents.

A. F. Thompson 16, Parkstone Street, Harpurhey, Manchester, offers N.L.L. old and new series.

Desmond McIlroy, 206, Donegall Avenue, Belfast, offers back numbers of the N.L.L.

James Smith, 33, Brooksby Walk, Homerton, London, E.9, wants members for his stamp club.

J. H. Budgen, 41, Totland Road, Brighton, wants N.L.L. new series Nos. 1-45.

Miss F. B. Wells, 40, Baggott Street, Blakenhall, Wolverhampton, Staffs., wants to hear from girl readers, ages 14-15.

Miss Mary Hardy, 2, Lawson Street, Wall-send, Northumberland, wants to hear from girl readers for her Hobbies Club; America, Japan and France especially.

Alfred W. Smith, 109, Jack Lane, Hunslet, Leeds, Yorks., wants correspondents.

M. D. Forero, Apartado 1605, Lima, Peru, South America, would be pleased to hear from readers in South America who would like to join the Imperial Correspondence Club of which he is the South American Secretary. F. W. Minde, at 100, Dalston Lane, London, E.8, the Secretary of the Club, will be pleased to hear from readers anywhere.

F. A. Clarke, 25, Elms Park Road, Leyton, London, E.10, wants to hear from readers who will help to form a club.

Francis H. Burrow, 4, Okeburn Road, Tooting, London, S.W.17, wants to hear from readers in his district interested in sport.

William Burt, 23, The Downs, Altrincham, Cheshire, would like to hear from stamp collectors in Gambia, the West Coast of Africa, etc.

Jack Hardy, 48, Blessbury Road, Burnt Oak, Edgware, Middlesex, wants correspondents in Lancashire and the North of England.

"I don't think we're any too safe in here," said the man who had brought the food. "They've got the police on the job, now."

"Hang the police!" said the other man. "They'll never find us. We're safe enough. And to-night we've got to act. We can't have any more of this fooling about. The whole thing is getting on my nerves. We never bargained for this trouble when we started the game."

"Looks to me as if we've bitten off more than we can chew."

"Have we?" snarled the man with the scarred face. "We'll see about that! To-night, my friend, we're going to win!"

CHAPTER 7.

Nelson Lee Investigates!

NELSON LEE stopped his car outside the village garage, in close proximity to the single petrol pump.

A man in overalls came out.

"Four gallons, please," said Lee.

It was not really a car-ride from Travis Dene to the village, but Lee had a reason for driving instead of walking. He wanted to make a few inquiries, and he was desirous of making them as unobtrusively as possible.

The village garage was a very humble affair. At one time, no doubt, it had been merely a repair-shop for cycles. It was a little wooden hut, with various enamelled signs plastered on the front of it, and there was this solitary petrol pump on the roadside. Over the hut there was the name, "G. A. Lambert." Evidently it was Mr. Lambert himself who was in attendance.

"Nice day, sir," remarked Mr. Lambert.

"Quite nice," agreed Lee. "You don't often get cars through Great Travis at this time of the year, do you?"

"Not so many as in the summer, of course, but you'd be surprised at the number of folk who stop for petrol," replied Mr. Lambert, conversationally. "Now and again I get some repairs, too."

"Didn't I see a big Buick here yesterday?"

"It wasn't a Buick, sir," said the man. "It was a Graham-Paige."

"I thought it was an American car, anyway," said Lee.

"Gent came in to have one of his tyres repaired," said Mr. Lambert. "A Firestone tyre, it was. Funny sort of puncture, too. The cover was gashed pretty badly, and I found some splinters of wood right inside."

"Certainly strange," agreed Nelson Lee. "Fortunately, we motorists don't often have our tyres punctured by splinters of wood."

"I reckon this gent must have taken his car off the road, sir," said the garage man. "Hit against an old stump, or something, and a jagged bit went through the wall of the cover. I asked him about it but he told me to mind my own business. Unpleasant feller, he was."

"I dare say you meet all sorts," commented Lee.

"Feller with a scar right across his face," continued Mr. Lambert. "Not one of our sort, as you might say. From London, I suppose. I thought he was stayin' up at the Dene at first."

"From your description, I hardly think he is the type of man whom Sir Edward would invite," said Lee dryly.

He paid for the petrol, bade Mr. Lambert good-day, and drove off.

He stopped at the village post office, which was also the grocer's; he stopped at the tobacconists, and at the little newspaper shop. And, in the same way, he made casual inquiries at each of these places.

THE information that Nelson Lee gained was quite satisfactory.

A stranger had been into the grocer's that very morning, and had bought one or two loaves and a couple of pounds of cheese. It was an unusual purchase, for strangers of that class did not make a habit of buying bread and cheese in such a fashion.

As Lee drove back he took note of the route. There was no possibility of finding any tracks on the main road. The snow was beaten down by constant traffic, until it was as hard as macadam. But just near Travis Dene there was a small side lane which skirted the high wall which surrounded the property. Lee did not pause here, but he noted the lane, and he drove on and put his car in Sir Edward's garage. Then he strolled back towards the lane.

He was impressed by the fact that a stranger had bought bread and cheese that morning.

"Four boys have vanished from Travis Dene," muttered Lee. "There is every reason to believe that they have been captured and imprisoned by these strange men.

I'll warrant that the bread and cheese was purchased for those prisoners."

He wandered round to the little side lane, and at first he could find nothing definite. There had been a number of carts along the lane, and these carts had made their rough, uneven marks on the frozen snow. But here and there, after a close examination, Lee detected the faint impression of motor-car tyres.

Farther along his attention was attracted by the mangled condition of a low hedge. There was no ditch on this side, or beyond. The hedge was so low that he could easily step over it, and beyond there was a wall, then a thick belt of trees, and beyond these trees the ruins of the older section of Travis Dene could just be seen.

"H'm!" mused Lee, as he stood there. "This is rather significant."

He stepped over the hedge, and it wasn't long before he found some more tyre tracks. He was familiar with the pattern of most motor-tyres, and he had no difficulty in identifying these as belonging to the Firestone brand. A car with Firestone tyres had plunged right over that hedge and had penetrated into the belt of woodland. No doubt the car had been concealed there—in readiness, perhaps, for a quick dash away. And Lee remembered how Molly had nearly been kidnapped some days earlier. That attempt had failed, and here, in the snow, was part of the story. The men had had their car ready, but owing to the intervention of the St. Frank's fellows they had been unable to complete their job.

No doubt, one of the tyres had been penetrated by a stump in the hedge. The car was not here now, but Lee did not doubt that it was at no great distance away.

He was puzzled, however, as to the whereabouts of the men. He had definitely established that they were not staying at any of the village inns, and they were certainly not lodging anywhere. There was no cottage close at hand where they could possibly be hiding—no haven of any kind.

Where, then, were their headquarters?

Lee was looking grim as he surveyed the old ruins. He had an idea that an investigation of those ruins would not be in vain.

He carefully examined the wall, and his trained eyes immediately detected the marks where people had been scaling the wall. An ordinary observer, perhaps, would have noticed nothing significant, but Lee knew what to look for, and how to look.

Over on the other side of the wall he advanced cautiously towards the ruins. There were no footprints here, for the ground was hard and frozen. The snow had been drifted into banks by the wind, and very little of it had fallen direct. There were plenty of



THE ST. FRANK'S QUESTIONNAIRE!

Here are twelve testers for you, chums—questions which refer to St. Frank's and its members. Give them the "once-over", jot down the answers to those which you know, and then compare them with the correct list which will be given, together with another set of questions, next week.

1. Who are the occupants of Study No. 16 in the East House?
2. Where is the St. Frank's chapel situated?
3. What is the School House used for?
4. Where do the Third-Formers board?
5. How many Sixth-Formers occupy each senior study?
6. In which Houses do the Removites board?
7. Who is the junior who is crazy on botany?
8. Who is the inventor of the Remove?
9. When is Archie Glenthorne's birthday?
10. Who are the operators at the St. Frank's Private Telephone Exchange?
11. Which school was it that Handforth went

to for a period after he had given himself the sack from St. Frank's?

12. What was the "Silent Two"?

ANSWERS TO LAST WEEK'S QUESTIONS:

1. The first St. Frank's story was published on July 28th, 1917, and it was called "Nipper at St. Frank's."
2. Hubert Churchman, George Holland, and Ernest Lawrence.
3. The bell-buoy in the mouth of Caistowe Bay, which marks a treacherous shoal.
4. Mr. Marshall.
5. Spratt.
6. Eight—four each way.
7. Cornelius Trotwood.
8. Yes; from 6 till 10.30.
9. Ten.
10. Brown and Gold.
11. Professor Cyrus Zingrave.
12. In the centre of the Triangle.

places where a man could walk without treading in any of the snow, and the crooks, no doubt, had taken great care to avoid leaving any footprints. Lee approached the ivy-covered wall of the ruin, and almost at once his attention was arrested by a tiny patch of white on the ground, half-concealed by the ivy. He bent down and picked up—a handkerchief.

"Very interesting," he murmured.

An examination of the handkerchief revealed the initials "W.H." in the corner. Furthermore, the handkerchief bore the St. Frank's laundry mark, which was well known to Lee.

"So Handforth minor has been here," mused the schoolmaster-detective. "And he was careless enough to drop a handkerchief. Yet Willy is not careless. This looks promising."

With great care he examined that ancient wall, parting the ivy, and it was only a matter of three or four minutes before Nelson Lee discovered something of exceptional interest. Some of these big old stones did not seem to fit as closely as the others. There was no dirt or moss in the crevices. Lee examined the wall with even greater care and it was not long before he had satisfied himself that a portion of this wall, apparently so solid, was really a secret door.

Pushing on it and heaving against it made no difference, however. The door was immovably closed.

"Well done, Willy," murmured Nelson Lee approvingly. "That was a cute dodge of his to drop his handkerchief. I haven't the slightest doubt he did it deliberately—knowing that he was entering this tunnel. I'll wager everything I've got that this door leads into a passage that joins up somewhere with the main building."

It was more than probable, Lee concluded, that Willy knew of this tunnel—Willy having lived at Travis Dene all his life, on and off. Or perhaps he had followed the mysterious men. In any case, he had left that clue behind, a clue which had enabled Lee to discover this door and to get a "line" on the lie of the land.

Nelson Lee did not hesitate for long. He felt convinced that he had hit upon the hiding-place of the crooks. But it would never do to smash this door down, thus creating a lot of noise—and warning the enemy that their lair had been found.

Far better to proceed with infinite caution.

LEE walked across the gardens of Travis Dene, and on the terrace he encountered one of the constables who had been placed on guard. He immediately commandeered this man. For, although the investigation was nominally in charge of the police, the inspector recognised that Nelson Lee was the master-mind.

"I've got a job for you," said Lee, as he and the constable walked back towards the ruins. "I'm afraid you'll have a cold vigil, but you must be prepared for that."

"Anything you say, sir," said the police man.

They reached the spot, and Nelson Lee indicated the hidden door behind the ivy. Then he took the constable to a neighbouring clump of laurels, and parted them.

"I want you to conceal yourself in these bushes," he said. "You are to watch that section of the ivy-covered wall I have just indicated. I believe there is a secret door there, and it is possible that somebody will enter or emerge. Keep your eyes well open."

Flames and great billowing masses of smoke were being carried into the vault where lay the bound and helpless figures of Handforth and his chums and their captors. "The place is on fire!" exclaimed one of the men. "We're trapped!"



and report to me as soon as anything of an unusual nature happens."

"Yes, sir," said the surprised constable.

"I will come out to you within a couple of hours, in any case, and you will then be relieved," continued Lee. "Don't move until you hear from me—don't show yourself under any consideration."

Unfortunately the constable failed to obey these orders to the letter. For after half an hour had elapsed he parted the laurel bushes and took a closer survey of the scene. He did not quite believe in Lee's theory. He could not credit that there was actually a door in that great, solid wall of the ruin. And as it happened the door had opened at that very minute. It was just a piece of bad luck.

One of the men was on the point of emerging, but before doing so he peered cautiously through the sheltering ivy leaves. And the first thing he saw was the face and helmet of the half-concealed constable, amid the laurels.

It was a great pity that the policeman should have disregarded his orders—for by that one act of rashness he had given himself away. He, for his part, knew nothing of those eyes which had just watched him.

The man behind the ivy closed the door in silence, and then he went hurrying back along the dank tunnel.

CHAPTER 8.

Willy Gets Busy!

"POLICE!"

The man with the scarred face started up as his companion came dashing into the vault, frightened and agitated.

"What do you mean?" he demanded harshly.

"It's true, Keeley!" panted the newcomer. "The police are outside—watching the ruins! They must know of this secret door!"

"You're mad!" said the man with the scarred face. "Pull yourself together, Ronson. These country policemen are harmless. And if you saw one of them he was probably pottering about by chance—"

"But he wasn't!" broke in the other. "He was hiding behind some bushes, and he was watching the wall. It was only by chance that I took a peep out beforehand. He didn't see me—he didn't know anything about it. But I'll swear he was watching that door."

The man named Keeley swore.

"Then it's Lee!" he muttered fiercely. "Lee's at the bottom of this! No need to

be afraid of the country police—but Lee's different. He's put them up to it. We've got to act, Ronson—and we've got to make it snappy, too!"

"Aren't you going to wait until to-night, as you said?"

"I don't know what to do now," replied Keeley. "If the police are on to us we might be trapped in here. Curse this detective fellow—and all these schoolboys! They've messed everything up for us!"

"I told you it was foolish to come here —"

"You can keep your sneers to yourself!" snapped Keeley. "We're not going to be foiled like this. We'll get that kid—and we'll get her now!"

HANDFORTH & CO. and Travers, listening to this, felt considerably bucked. There were indications that their ordeal would soon be over. The two men had not paid the slightest attention to them; they were far too concerned with their own affairs. They had intended to lie low until night came, and then to make a bold bid for success. Now,



es and great billowing masses of smoke were being carried the vault where lay the bound and helpless figures of forth and his chums and their captors. "The place is on e!" exclaimed one of the men. "We're trapped!"



it seemed, they would be compelled to take action almost at once.

For, with their exit watched, and with capture certain if they tried to escape that way, they had but one alternative. That was to make a dash through the house itself.

But this plan would be fraught with danger for them. It seemed just as likely that they would get captured that way. They were bottled up. Their only hope was that the secret panel had not yet been discovered. This gave them the advantage. For if they made a sudden attack they would do so by surprise.

They discussed these matters as they stood there, and they were unable to come to any definite decision.

"I tell you, Ronson, we'd better wait," said the man with the scarred face, at length. "How do we know the police have found the exit door in the ruins?"

"I saw the constable waiting—"

"That proves nothing," said Keeley. "He may have been stationed there by chance. I'm not satisfied that they've discovered that door—and I don't believe they have. In fact, if they had they would have started smashing it down. No, we'll wait for a bit."

Willy, listening amidst the pile of masonry, felt his heart beating rapidly. He was still there—still on the watch. So far he had been unable to formulate any scheme that promised to be successful. Single-handed, he could not do much against these men. And, very wisely, he had remained inactive.

But now the situation was different.

He knew that his handkerchief trick had succeeded. Nelson Lee, probably, had found that handkerchief, and had then discovered the stone door. He had placed a policeman on guard. Willy's brain worked rapidly.

If only he could force these men to act at once—to disclose the secret way into the house—he would probably force them into the hands of Nelson Lee and the police.

For, if it came to a sudden panic, the men would undoubtedly run towards the house exit. They would never deliberately take the other route, which, as they knew, would land them into the hands of the watching police.

And it was here that Willy's ingenuity found full play.

Close to him there was a big pile of old straw and hay. It was quite dry, and he knew that

it must have been brought in here by these men. Perhaps they had used it as a couch. They must sleep sometimes, and straw, after all, makes a comfortable bed.

Willy quickly formulated a plan.

With extreme caution, he backed out until he stood in the wide passage outside the vault. He could feel a distinct draught blowing, and he knew that if this straw was ignited it would waft up the tunnel—away from the door in the ruin.

This was what Willy wanted.

His work now was ticklish. With excessive care he crawled back, seized a huge armful of straw, and edged his way backwards into the tunnel again. His idea was to place this straw in the tunnel so that when it blazed up it would block that way of escape. The men would naturally be alarmed at the sudden flare, and they would assume perhaps that the police had broken through the door and were on them. Willy figured

that they would instantly make a dash for the other exit—thus showing him where it was, and throwing themselves perhaps into Nelson Lee's hands.

At any rate, it was worth a trial.

It was not Willy's way to hesitate or to waste time. He made one more journey, and seized another great mass of straw. His one fear was that the rustle of it would be heard by the men in the vault; but they were so engrossed with their own conversation, so anxious about the whole situation, that their vigilance was relaxed.

WILLY made another discovery which gave him much satisfaction.

Quite by chance he found some heaps of old sacking and clothing near one of the walls. In all probability this stuff had been in the vault for ages. It was damp and rotten—and would just serve the purpose for which it was needed. Willy feared that the straw would blaze up too fiercely, and that it would soon consume itself. But if he placed a lot of this old clothing on the top of the straw heap there would be large masses of smoke, and the flames would be deadened. The fire would last longer.

It was only the work of a moment or two for Willy to grab this old stuff and to distribute it over the surface of his great straw bonfire. Then, taking a deep breath, he struck a match.

Quickly and with a steady hand he ignited the straw against both walls and in the middle. Simultaneously the bonfire blazed up, the flames running along rapidly until the straw was alight from wall to wall, forming an impassable barrier.

"Good egg!" muttered Willy under his breath.

He dodged back and concealed himself in a crevice that he had previously noted. He had figured on exactly what would happen. The men would rush out, and they would flee towards the other exit—the exit which led into Travis Dene itself. Willy, having allowed the men to pass him, would follow.

A great cloud of dense, acrid smoke arose from the bonfire. The flames were licking lazily now, held in check by the damp clothing and sacking on the top, and the current of air carried the smoke in blinding masses into the vault itself.

"Hallo! Something seems to be burning," said the man Ronson, sniffing the air. "What on earth— Good heavens!"

He stared in stupefied amazement at the vault exit. The smoke was pouring in in

thick clouds, and through it a lurid yellow glow could be seen.

"The place is on fire!" he gasped.

"It can't be on fire!" shouted the man with the scarred face. "It's a trap, Ronson! The police must have got in—they're trying to smoke us out!"

With one accord they rushed for the exit and went plunging through the smoke. Out in the tunnel they paused. They could see the flickering glare of the fire on their left—in the direction of the guarded exit. There was no going that way. The fire formed an impassable barrier.

"Quick!" said Keeley harshly. "There's only one chance for us now, Ronson. Curse them, they've forced our hand! We'll make for that door which leads into the library. Got your gun handy?"

"Yes!" panted Ronson.

"Then use it if necessary!" snapped the other. "We'll hold up the whole crowd—boys and all! Only we've got to get out of that house. We're not going to be collared now!"

They went rushing off, exactly as Willy had anticipated, and he prepared to follow. But just then he heard something else—something which brought him to an abrupt standstill, and which made him abandon his original idea.

"We're trapped!" came a startled, half-choking voice. "Oh, my only hat! The police couldn't have known that we were in here! We shall be suffocated—and perhaps burnt to death!"

"Steady, you chaps!" came Handforth's voice. "No sense in getting the wind up. I expect we shall be rescued before——"

"Look!" shouted one of the prisoners. "The flames are licking into the vault itself—they're spreading! And this straw is all round us. We're bound up and we can't escape! We're going to be trapped!"

Willy's heart nearly stood still.

Now that it was too late—or almost too late—he realised that he had inadvertently placed his elder brother and the other juniors in a position of dire peril. He had only intended that bonfire to blaze up; but in carrying the straw out of the vault he had left a trail of it behind, and the flames, licking along this straw, had penetrated into the vault itself.

And now Willy remembered that he had only taken a very small portion of the straw. The whole lot of it was catching fire, and his brother and his chums were being suffocated—with the prospect of being roasted.

This was a time for instant action.

And Willy, instead of following the men, made a quick dash through the choking smoke and flames. They were leaping up through the vault entrance now, and Willy's dive through the flames was an act of sheer heroism. He was scorched and dazed, but he got through into the vault in safety. Then he plunged forward through the smother and came upon the bound juniors.

(Continued on page 26.)

The POPULAR
Every Tuesday 2d



Edward Oswald Handforth undertakes to answer, in his own unique fashion, any question "N.L." readers care to submit to him. But, although of a certainly the results will be amusing and entertaining, the Editor takes no responsibility for their veracity. Write to Handforth, c/o the NELSON LEE LIBRARY, to-day.

H. SMITH (Kings Lynn) states this is the first time he's written to me, and he hopes it won't be the last. What do I think about it—well, perhaps I'd better say nothing! I certainly will not give you Irene's home address. And look here, just you keep your nose out of it. Irene's my chum, and I don't want you treading on my corns, as the saying goes. Sorry I can't answer your riddle: If it takes a man an hour to walk four miles, how long will it take a blind blackbeetle to walk through a barrel of tar? I found a blackbeetle, but it wasn't blind; hence my inability to answer your question.

"JOAN" (Runcorn). Thanks for your letter—which had no stamp on it. Grrrrh! Glad to hear you love me with all your heart, but I didn't tell this to Irene as you suggested. I can't bear the thought of two girls fighting—

???? (???) writes me an extraordinary epistle, on which is stamped a fingerprint. This reader wants me to prove my ability as a detective by telling him or her what he or she is. A chimney-sweep, I should think!

"RASTUS" (Melbourne) asks me to tell him the difference between a pillar-box and an elephant. Well, I'm jiggered! I should never trust you with a letter of mine to post, "Rastus."

"ERIC" (Norbury) wants to know umpteen things about Irene. Go and eat coke!

E. P. E. MAY (Seven Kings) would like me to give him a few tips on how to find coiners' den. Easy! You just pick up the clues, disguise yourself as a farthing or a ha'penny, and then go and capture them.

G. MUMFORD (London). Here's the answers to your three questions: (1) Where is the disease elephantiasis mainly found—in an elephant, I should say. (2) What is it caused by—I don't know. (3) What exactly is it—a disease, I think.

"BUNSEN" (Tunbridge Wells). The date of my birthday is the 18th of April. Judging from the aromas that sometimes exude from Willy's study, I should say that he IS interested in chemistry!

JOYCE BARTON (Streatham). You want to know how many pips there are in a pomegranate, do you? Send me one of these vegetables, and I'll soon find out for you. This is how I shall do the counting. I shall get Churchy or Mac to stand against the wall, and then I shall proceed to throw every pip at him one by one, counting them as I do so. I cannot tell you what my face is like. It's beyond description. (Hear, hear, Ed.)

"INTERESTED" (Stafford) asks where do flies go in the winter-time? Chase one and see. The difference between a cabbage and a canary is this; you peck at one and the other pecks at you if you're fool enough to get near it.

F. P. FISHER (Tooting). Interested to hear that you're a member of the Tooting Secret Society. Please convey my sympathies to the society. If I catch you going out to lunch with Irene next week I—I'll make mincemeat of you and then stuff you down your throat.

"SPARKS" (Bexhill) asks me one question: Could I punch him on the nose? He bets me I couldn't. That's very rash on your part, old man. I've a good mind to get out my Austin Seven right now and pay you a visit. But no; I rather like your handwriting, and so I'll let you off this time.

"ARTIST" (Camberwell). This reader is keen on drawing, and wants to know if I'm the same. I am. I'm very good at drawing, and I've supplied the Editor with some small sketches which I expect he'll publish. (There's something wrong with your expectations, Handy—Ed.)

The Peril of The Haunted Room!

(Continued from page 24.)

"All right, you chaps!" he panted. "I'll soon have you out of this!"

"Willy!" yelled Handforth excitedly.

"It's all my fault, Ted!" went on Willy. "I lit that bonfire—but I never realised that the flames would spread into the vault. Hold tight and I'll have you free in two ticks!"

But, even while he was speaking, he was horrified. The flames were leaping towards them with a ferocity which was appalling, and the fumes and smoke in the vault were so dense that already his head was swimming, and he doubted if he would keep his senses for more than another minute.

Would he be able to save his brother and these other boys? Or would he collapse, and perish with them in this blinding inferno?

CHAPTER 9.

Getting Exciting!

NELSON LEE was by no means idle. Having left the policeman on guard in the ruins, he had immediately gone indoors and sought an interview with Sir Edward Handforth. Lee felt convinced that there was a subterranean tunnel leading from the ruins to Travis Dene

itself—and he was equally certain that the tunnel had its exit in the library. In that room somewhere there was a secret panel. Lee no longer believed that Nipper had been attacked in the corridor. He had dismissed that original theory of his. He had gone back to the assumption that the library was the seat of the secret.

"You're quite wrong, Mr. Lee," declared Sir Edward. "Hang it, I've lived in this house all my life—and my father lived in it before me—and his father before him. There has never been any suggestion that a secret passage leads from this library——"

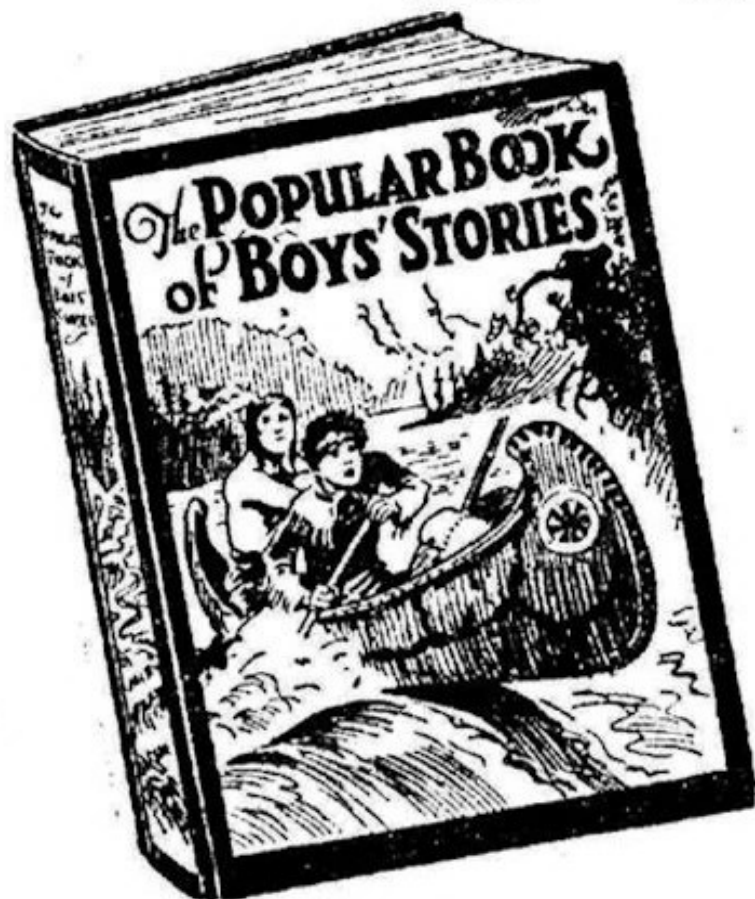
"That is neither here nor there, Sir Edward," interrupted Lee. "We know that a boy vanished from this room during the night—and we know, too, that your elder son and his companions were last seen in this apartment. I am convinced that they accidentally found this secret tunnel and penetrated it—only to fall in the hands of the enemy."

Sir Edward shrugged his shoulders.

"If you are so certain, Mr. Lee, perhaps you will locate this secret panel," he said. "But surely I ought to know best. I am the owner of this house."

"But you have never taken the trouble to take measurements, Sir Edward," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "I have been measuring for some little time, and I find that there is a space behind the west wall which cannot be accounted for."

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"Indeed!" said Sir Edward in astonishment.

"Do you know of any such tunnel as I suggest?" asked Lee. "Do you know of any underground chamber which might lead out, possibly, into the old ruins?"

Sir Edward shook his head.

"I've heard my sons speaking of such a tunnel and such a chamber," he replied, "but I have never given much attention to their talk. I put it down as mere schoolboy romancing. So many old houses are supposed to have secret passages—and so many have none at all—that one is apt to regard these things with amusement."

"So you have never seriously attempted to locate this tunnel," nodded Lee. "Well, Sir Edward, I am going to make a serious attempt now. The information in my hands already is significant, and I have no doubt that—"

He broke off, alert.

"What is it?" asked Sir Edward, in surprise.

"Listen!" muttered Lee tensely. "Don't you hear something? Thuds—foot-steps!"

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Sir Edward, staring blankly at the west wall of the library.

They were in that apartment alone. Until a minute ago Sir Edward had been impatient and slightly annoyed. Now he was thoroughly startled, and at that moment one of the old oak panels in the wall burst open. At least, so it seemed to Sir Edward. Actually, it slid back with a jarring thud. The man with the scarred face came plunging out, and behind him was a second man.

"Great Heavens!" ejaculated Sir Edward.

Keeley took in the situation at a glance.

"Hands up!" he rapped out harshly. "Don't shout—don't move! If either of you utters a sound he'll drop—dead! I'm in earnest, gentlemen!"

"You—you infernal scoundrel—" began Sir Edward.

"Hands up, I say!" snarled Keeley. "You'd better not let me tell you—"

He broke off as Nelson Lee made a sudden movement. He pulled the trigger of his revolver, and there was a sharp, deafening explosion. The bullet hissed past Nelson Lee's ear. The next second the revolver itself followed. The man had flung it with all his strength; it caught Lee on the side of the head, and he went reeling over.

Ronson followed his leader's example, and he quickly picked up a table-lamp which was near by and flung it at Sir Edward. Although he dodged Sir Edward did not entirely escape the missile, and he stumbled. The next moment the two men had made a

dash for the door, and they had succeeded in getting through.

Lee, half recovering, saw that smoke was drifting out through the opened panel. The very air was pungent with it. And Lee was alarmed.

"After them, Sir Edward!" he shouted. "They can't get far—the police are outside, and the gamekeepers, too. But you'd better follow. I'm going down into this tunnel."

Sir Edward, with a quick recovery, went dashing out into the corridor, shouting at the top of his voice. Nelson Lee jerked an electric torch from his pocket, and plunged through the secret opening.

He had a "hunch" that he was needed down in that underground tunnel. Perhaps it was the smoke that had aroused his fears. He knew that those missing juniors were prisoners in the tunnel—or, at least, he had every reason to believe that this was the case.

And there was Willy, too; Willy had disappeared. Some instinct seemed to tell Lee that those boys were in danger.



It was fortunate that Willy Handforth was a boy of courage and resource, otherwise those unfortunate prisoners would undoubtedly have perished. Nelson Lee would have arrived too late.

Down in that vault, where the flames were spreading and converting the whole place into an inferno, Willy was fighting with desperation and dogged pluck.

It was natural that Willy should think of his brother before the others. His first move was towards Edward Oswald, and he frantically pulled out his clasp-knife. He could hardly see what he was doing, for the smoke was now so thick in the vault that it was like an impenetrable fog. It gripped his throat, it well-nigh blinded him, and it made his senses reel.

"Hold steady, Ted!" he panted. "If we keep our heads, we'll be all-right."

With a steady hand he slashed through Handforth's bonds, and the next moment Handforth was free. But he was so cramped that he could hardly move. He rolled over—just in the nick of time. The flames were licking round through the straw towards him, and even as he rolled away from them they burst alight.

Willy was trying to locate the others. He knew that they were lying right in front of him, but the smoke was so dense that they had already completely vanished.

"Kick the straw away, Ted!" he croaked. Handforth was already doing so. Ignoring his cramped limbs, and the agony of "pins

and needles" which well-nigh robbed him of movement, he clumsily kicked the burning straw away. He did so just as the flames were beginning to surround Travers and Church. A delay of two seconds, here, would have been disastrous. As it was, Handforth's action came just in time.

Slash-slash-slash!

Willy was busy with his knife, and although it seemed to him that hours elapsed before he cut through all those ropes, actually only a bare thirty seconds passed.

And then, as though from far, far away, came a voice—an anxious, horrified voice.

"Boys—boys! Where are you?"

"All right, sir!" shouted Handforth, his voice cracking in his excitement. "We're in here—we're safe so far!"

"Thank Heaven!" came Lee's answer.

But the famous detective was freshly staggered. He was outside in the passage. The bonfire was burning furiously out there, and the flames were spreading right across the doorway of the vault. To him it seemed that the vault itself was a raging mass of flames. How could those boys be living in that furnace?

But Nelson Lee did not hesitate.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and plunged blindly through the vault opening. He collided violently with Willy and Church, and nearly sent them flying. It was impossible to see anything. The smoke was almost solid in here. Only by a tremendous effort of will was Willy keeping his senses.

"It's no good—I'm done!" muttered Church, feebly. "I can't breathe—I can't see——"

He had been inactive, and this, perhaps, was the reason for his collapsing. His limbs were cramped, too, and with his lungs choked and well-nigh bursting, he was unable to continue the battle.

Lee managed to seize him as he fell, and in a moment the detective was plunging out again—into the corridor, where there was less danger.

In the meantime, Handforth had grabbed hold of McClure, and they both went staggering drunkenly out into the tunnel. Travers followed, and Willy was the last.

"Are we all here?" asked Lee hoarsely.

"I think so, sir!" gurgled Willy. "Oh, my hat! I didn't mean to put those chaps into any danger when I lit that fire! I only wanted to scare the crooks out of their bolt-hole!"

"You succeeded, Willy—and, mercifully, there has been no tragedy," said Lee. "But come! We must be out of this as quickly as possible! Within another three or four minutes there will be no air left, and we shall all succumb."

THEY never remembered how they progressed along that smoke-choked tunnel.

Lee led the way, and they found the grim chamber where the skeleton kept guard; they passed on into the other tunnel,

through that open doorway, and so on up the dusty stairs to the secret panel in the library.

It was a nightmare experience. And when they came tumbling out into the library, Church and McClure and Travers all fell prone on the carpet, gasping for breath. Handforth was not quite so "done," and Willy—who, really, should have been the first to collapse—was still in possession of his wits. He went staggering blindly across to the library door.

"Come back, Willy!" commanded Lee. "You had better stay here——"

"But Molly, sir!" panted Willy. "Is she safe, sir?"

At that moment Nipper came running down the corridor from the great hall. Willy forgot to be surprised to see him, for Nipper was supposed to be upstairs, in bed. However, Nipper had recovered, and although he was still slightly groggy, he was determined to be in at the finish. He had heard the commotion, and he had dashed into some clothes and had come down.

"Guv'nor!" he shouted, as he caught sight of Nelson Lee. "What's happened here? Great Scott! You all look scorched and blackened!"

"We're safe, Nipper, and that's all that matters," replied Lee.

"They've got Molly—they've bolted with her, sir!" went on Nipper. "Sir Edward was shouting——"

"They've got her!" yelled Willy, horrified. "Oh, where? Which way did they go? Quick! We've got to save her! They've got Molly, sir!"

Nelson Lee made no reply. He ran out, with Nipper at his heels. In the great hall they found Sir Edward Handforth and the local inspector. Both of them were looking flustered and excited.

"Tell me!" rapped out Lee.

"Those two scoundrels held us up!" panted the inspector. "By a piece of ill-luck, Miss Dare was coming through the hall with the child at the moment. They brutally knocked her down and seized the little girl. They ran off with her——"

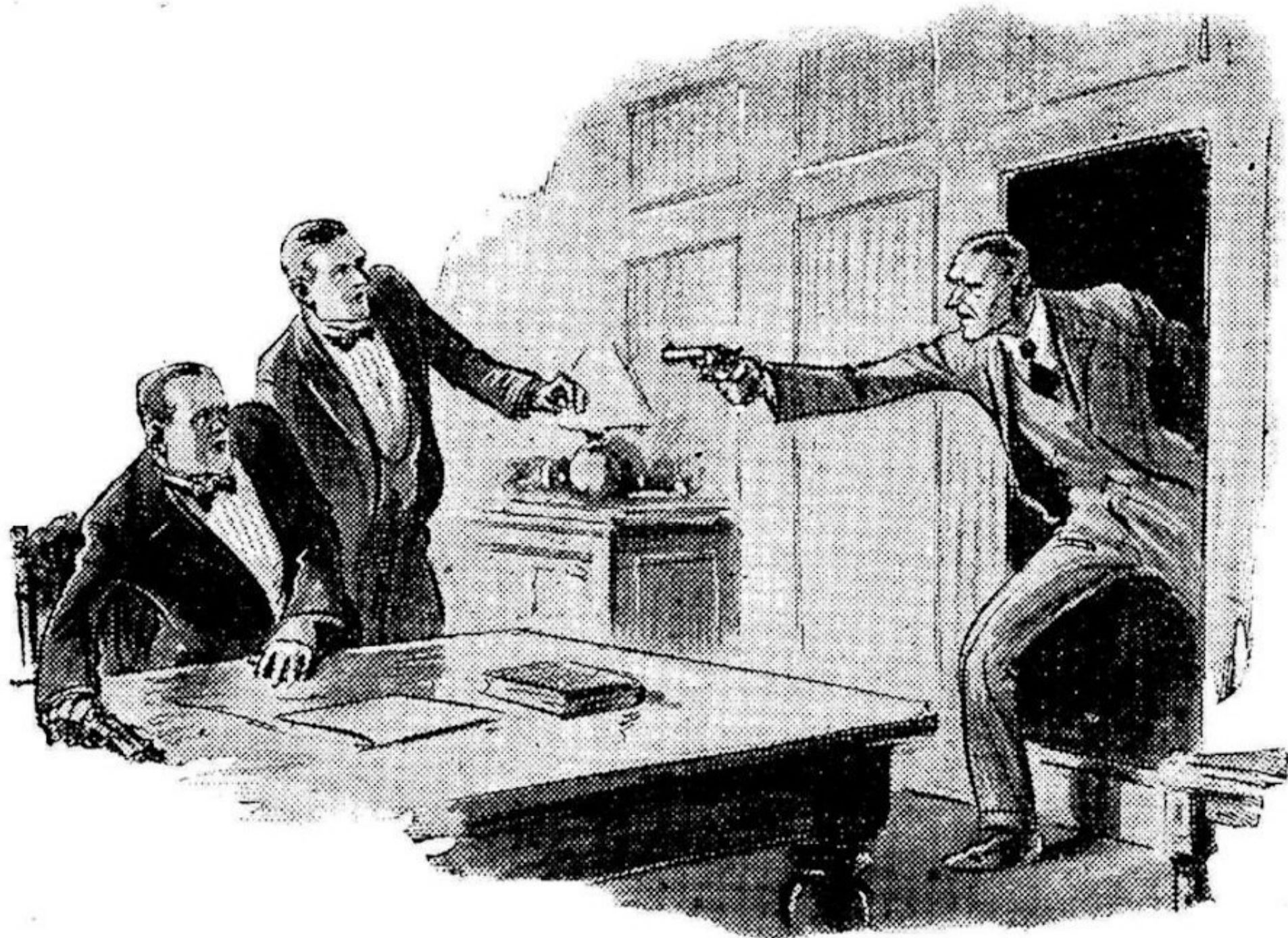
"Why didn't you stop them?" demanded Lee angrily.

"I was unable to do anything," replied the inspector, who had blood streaming from his face. "They threw a chair at me, and I was momentarily knocked out; I have only just recovered——"

Lee did not wait to hear any more. He ran out through the open door, into the sunshine. The worst had happened! These crooks, in spite of all the precautions, had managed to capture Molly Dare!

NELSON LEE'S car was all in readiness. He had left it just outside the garage, and there was nothing to do but switch on and press the self-starter.

He leapt into the car, with Nipper beside him, and a second later the car was shooting off. As it moved forward, a scorched,



The oak panel slid back and into the library jumped the man with the scarred face. "Hands up!" he rapped, to the astonished Sir Edward Handforth and Nelson Lee.

blackened little figure made a wild leap. He landed aboard safely, and neither Lee nor Nipper took any notice. Willy Handforth, smoke-begrimed and dishevelled, was determined to be in at the finish. His brain was clearing now, and he was acutely worried about the safety of his girl chum.

Zurrrrrh-zurrrrrh!

Nelson Lee sounded the electric hooter, and a crowd of St. Frank's boys and Moor View girls scattered from the drive as the big car came tearing down upon them. They were all looking excited and flushed.

"The side lane, sir!" shouted somebody. "Those men got into a car and went off down the lane!"

"They started two minutes ago, sir!"

"Hurrah!"

"Mr. Lee will overtake them!"

"Go it, sir!"

They were more excited than ever, and Lee was glad of this information. As he drove, he quickly remembered the geography of the district. He remembered, too, how the side lane made a fairly wide detour, owing to the intervention of meadows. If those men obtained a good start, they would probably completely escape. They were in possession of a very powerful car, capable of high speeds. And now that they had gained this victory, they would go all to consolidate it.

Then and there Nelson Lee made up his mind.

"Hold tight!" he shouted.

He turned the car off the drive and went plunging headlong across the Travis Dene lawns. The schoolboys and schoolgirls, watching, gasped with consternation. For a second they believed that Nelson Lee had lost control of the car. But, no; Lee was doing this deliberately.

The car took the lawns in its stride, plunged on over some flower-beds, charged through a light trellis gate as though it had never existed, and emerged with a throbbing roar into the snow-covered parkland.

Lee accelerated now, and the powerful car raced across the undulating, snow-covered turf. He was taking a direct route—cutting off a big corner. If he could reach the junction of the main road before the fugitives he might be able to cut them off.

It was a big chance.

As he drove Lee caught a glimpse of something flashing past the hedge-tops over on his left. It was almost a neck-and-neck race. The crooks were in that other car, but they were on the lane, and there were several twists in that lane yet.

"We've got to do it!" muttered Lee harshly.

He trod on the accelerator harder than ever—until the car was plunging along like

a thing of life. With amazing skill and judgment he brought this mad drive to an end. At the last second he lifted his foot, applied the brakes, and the car went charging through the hedge diagonally. Nipper and Willy hung on for their lives—and they needed to hang on, too. The car bucked like a broncho, and the next second it was in the lane, just at the point where it joined the main road. Lee brought it to a stop, broadside—entirely blocking the lane exit. It was narrow, and there was a bank on one side and a ditch on the other. It was impossible for the fugitives' car to pass.

It was coming up now at full speed—and it was not until the final bend in the lane was taken that Keeley, who was driving, realised the trap. A gasp of horror came into his throat, and his foot went down instinctively on the brake pedal. To charge this obstruction meant instant death.

But even as it was there was insufficient time for him to pull up on this snow-covered, treacherous road. The big Graham-Paige skidded, slithered sideways, and then charged into the ditch. By a merciful Providence it did not overturn, but sagged to one side and then buried itself almost completely in the drifted snow.

"Molly!" shouted Willy.

He found her in the snow, unharmed—where she had been flung. Willy was grateful for that snow. If it had not been there the child might easily have been gravely injured. As it was, she had not even suffered a bruise.

It was the same with Keeley and Ronson. They, too, had been flung out, but they were at a disadvantage. For before they could rise Nelson Lee and Nipper were upon them.

"A last bid, my friends, but you have failed," said Lee grimly.

He was filled with satisfaction. That short cut of his had saved the situation. But the man with the scarred face and his companion were not yet done. They were fighting madly. Keeley was being successfully held down by Lee, but Ronson, with only Nipper to fight, was getting the best of it.

"I'll soon settle with this kid!" he shouted hoarsely. "Hold your man, Keeley! We'll pinch their car, and we'll get away even yet!"

But just then, unfortunately for them, a great shout came, and a crowd of St. Frank's fellows dashed up, having run across the park.

And after that, of course, the end was swift.

The juniors, excited and energetic, hurled themselves into the battle. Keeley and Ronson were dragged off, flung down, and veritably smothered. They disappeared beneath the mass of boys, and in next to no time they were completely overpowered.

CHAPTER 10.

Eileen Dare Explains!

"PHEW! That was pretty warm work, guv'nor!" said Nipper, wiping his perspiring brow.

"It was touch and go, young 'un," agreed Nelson Lee. "Thank Heaven we were in time—and Molly is safe. She will be in no further danger, for these men are now in the hands of the police, and they will receive very stiff sentences for their villainy."

The inspector and the other policemen had already come up, and Keeley and

COMING NEXT WEEK! ~~~~~



Ronson were handcuffed, and were being marched away to the local lock-up. Their spectacular game was over.

There was plenty of excitement. The two cars were left in the lane—they could be moved later. Everybody went streaming back towards Travis Dene, and Willy was perfectly content to be by Molly's side. She, herself, was bewildered; she had been thoroughly frightened upon being carried off, but her quick rescue had restored her to the normal. And the fact that those "horrid men" had been arrested made all the difference. Molly knew that she need fear them no longer. At Travis Dene Molly was taken by Eileen Dare, and hurried upstairs.

Sir Edward, bustling about, relieved Nelson Lee by assuring him that the fire had been completely extinguished down in those old vaults. Men had been sent there with patent fire extinguishers, and they had succeeded in putting out the blaze. And, of course, there was general rejoicing at the reappearance of Handforth and the other missing boys.

It really seemed that all danger was over, and that the mystery was cleared up.

A FULL hour elapsed before there was anything like order at Travis Dene. However, by then the servants had got over their excitement, and

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

the guests were able to think clearly. A great peace had settled over Travis Dene now.

Handforth and Willy and the other juniors had changed, after bathing, and one or two of them were wearing bandages and plaster, where they had been scorched. Their heads were still aching from the effects of the deadly smoke fumes, but otherwise they were all right.

And it was at Eileen Dare's suggestion that all the guests were collected in the great hall.

"I want you all to know the truth," said Eileen quietly, when the moment came for her to speak. "It had been my hope, at first, to keep this matter a secret—for,

strictly speaking, I am only acting on behalf of a client. But the circumstances are so extraordinary that an explanation is very necessary."

The guests felt that this was certainly the case.

"When I came here at Sir Edward's invitation I had not the slightest notion that I should bring all this trouble on my host," continued Eileen regretfully. "I am intensely sorry——"

"I shall be far happier, Miss Dare, if you skip all this," growled Sir Edward. "We quite understand that you had no intention of bringing this peril upon Travis Dene. Nobody blames you. Indeed, we are all full of sympathy, and we are glad that the affair has ended so satisfactorily."

"Is Molly safe now, Miss Dare?" put in Willy.

Eileen smiled.

"Molly is in no further danger," she replied. "I did not bring her down, because it is better that she should hear nothing of the explanation that I am now about to give you. She is upstairs with Mrs. Stokes. After I have told you what I feel compelled to tell you, I hope that the party will continue as before."

"I don't think a little excitement of this sort will upset my guests to any great extent," said Sir Edward dryly.

And then Miss Eileen Dare exploded her bombshell.

"I must tell you, in the first place, that Molly is not my niece," she said quietly. "Her real name is Molly Stapleton."

"Not your niece, Miss Eileen?" asked Nipper, in surprise.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Willy. "Oh, well, she's really none the worse for that. Molly's a jolly nice girl, anyway."

"But the story concerning her is so strange that I almost hesitate to tell it," continued Eileen. "Her father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Stapleton, went to India when Molly was about five years old. Mr. Stapleton was an important bank official in Bombay, and they were a very happy couple. They took great joy in their little daughter. And then, tragically, both Mr. and Mrs. Stapleton were attacked by malaria."

"Oh, how awful!" murmured Irene.

"Molly was immediately sent to Mr. Stapleton's brother, who was also in Bombay," continued Eileen. "He was a trader of some kind—he had only come out to India because his brother was there, and because he had always been a sponger and a hanger-on. But Mr. and Mrs. Stapleton, in their extremity, thought only of their daughter. They were dreadfully afraid that Molly, too, would catch the malaria."

"But she didn't, did she?" asked Willy.

"Molly escaped—but, sadly enough, Mr. and Mrs. Stapleton died," said Eileen, in a low voice. "It was a terrible tragedy. They were dead in a week, and Molly was left fatherless and motherless—and in the hands of that worthless scamp of an uncle."

There was a sympathetic silence.

"For years Mr. Stapleton had practically supported his brother," continued Eileen. "He was a drunken rascal, and it was only Mr. Stapleton's influence which had kept him from going completely to the bad. After the death of Molly's father, as you can imagine, this man had no controlling influence to guide him. He did go to the bad."

"And Molly was in his care?" asked Willy, horrified.

"He was her sole relative, and naturally he had the law on his side," replied Eileen. "He was Molly's legal guardian. She lived in his house, and I fear he treated her badly. Mercifully, she was too young to understand much; she certainly never knew that her uncle was guilty of a great swindle which was the talk and scandal of Bombay."

"Do you mean that her uncle was sent to prison?" asked somebody.

"No; he was not sent to prison," replied the girl detective. "This swindle involved the ruin of a very powerful Indian merchant. But before Molly's uncle could escape, before the police could get on his trail, he was punished—and he was punished in a dreadful way. He was found murdered!"

"Oh!"

"And Molly was left without a soul in the world!" muttered Willy compassionately.

"The child never knew anything about the murder," said Eileen. "She believed—and she believes still—that her uncle went to another part of India on business. Fortunately, some friends of Mr. and Mrs. Stapleton, who had come to Bombay for a holiday, were there at that particular time, and they immediately took Molly into their own care. As they were returning to England very shortly they brought the child with them. They felt it would be better for her to come right out of that tragic atmosphere. Indeed, they adopted Molly."

"Did this Indian merchant—the one who was swindled—murder her uncle?" asked Nipper.

"There was never any suspicion against him," replied Eileen Dare. "This Indian merchant was an honourable man, and although he had every reason to desire revenge against the scamp, he was not the kind of man to commit murder. No; that crime was committed by fanatics—people who had suffered through the merchant's ruin."

"But who were these men who tried to kidnap Molly?" asked Handforth, in surprise. "These rotters who have been up to all this monkey-business here?"

"I am afraid that Molly's adoptive father and mother were rather incautious on their way home to England," replied Eileen. "The tragedy was, of course, the talk of the saloon on the homeward bound boat. The story went the rounds continuously. Everybody was talking about the scandal, and the unfortunate position of the child. And these men, Keeley and Ronson, were passengers on that boat."

"I have every reason to believe that they

are confidence men—international criminals. They saw a chance of making some money here, and they acted upon the idea. I have no doubt that it was their intention to kidnap Molly, and to pretend that they were agents of the Indian merchant who had been so cruelly wronged.

"Molly's guardians received one or two warning letters, and they were very frightened. They came to me, and I took up the case. It was at my suggestion that I went to St. Frank's, taking Molly with me as my own niece. I thought that she would be safe there—and, later, after the attempt at kidnapping, I believed we should be secure at Travis Dene."

"In the meantime, I have been getting into touch with the Indian authorities, in the hope of establishing beyond all doubt that these two men are in no way connected with the Indian merchant."

"And has that information come to hand?" asked Sir Edward.

"It has, Sir Edward," replied Eileen. "It has been positively proved that Keeley and Ronson were acting entirely on their own. Their scheme was to seize Molly and to hold her a prisoner, and then to demand a big sum of money for her safe return. Failure to provide the money would have involved Molly sharing the fate of her uncle. That, in short, was the general idea."

"A very pretty plot," commented Nelson Lee, nodding. "These men took advantage of the story that they heard on the liner. Their plan was to work upon the fears of those kindly people who had adopted the child. They felt that it would be easy enough to fool them into believing that they were acting on behalf of the Indian merchant."

Eileen nodded, while Sir Edward Handforth breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, thank Heaven the whole thing is over now!" he said. "Perhaps we shall be able to enjoy the rest of the Christmas holidays in peace."

THERE was no "perhaps" about it.

Now that the shadow had been lifted, the Christmas party at Travis Dene was more jolly and happy than ever.

Molly herself was a lighthearted child, and she was not affected by the narrowness of her recent escape. And her foster parents arrived at Travis Dene the next day. They proved to be kindly, lovable people. Willy Handforth was thoroughly happy. It didn't matter to him whether his girl chum's name was Molly Dare or Molly Stapleton. She was a ripper, anyhow!

And so the Christmas party at Travis Dene finished up the holiday in peace and harmony—and, as Willy himself remarked, everything was now all serene!

THE END.

(Another grand series of yarns featuring the chums of St. Frank's is starting next week. Look out for the opening yarn, which is entitled: "The Worst Boy in the School!")

Gossip ABOUT St FRANK'S



Things Heard and Seen By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

IT'S evident that "A.E.O.," of Wellington, New Zealand, is a new reader, for he (or she) asks me to state something which has appeared in these columns quite a number of times. What is the date of the first number of the Old Paper? Here it is—June 12th, 1915. Some other new readers might be glad of this information, too, and that's why I'm repeating it here. And while we're at it, we might as well have the title, too. It was called "The Mystery of Limehouse Reach."

* * *

HERE'S a South African reader, living in Wynberg, who must forgive me if I've got his name wrong. It might be "A. Esdale," or it might be "G. Eldader," or it might be any one of a hundred names. In fact, it's such an awful signature that I've given it up in despair, and if this Wynberg reader hadn't raised a point of interest he wouldn't even have a mention. I hope he'll recognise this reply, and sign his name in a legible fashion when he writes to me next time. Anyhow, here's the point. He asks if boys of any nationality can apply for membership of the League? Of course they can! People of all nationalities can join the St. Frank's League. And age or sex doesn't matter in the least.

* * *

THERE'S not much doubt that Simon Kenmore is a much better chap than he used to be. In fact, I should say that the doubtful honour of being the cad of the Sixth is now held by Guy Sinclair. Anyhow, Sinclair, who used to be one of Kenmore's biggest pals, has now

"cut" Kenmore completely, which speaks very well for Kenmore. G. Treasem, of Altrincham, who has asked me who is the cad of the Sixth Form, will recognise this as a reply to his letter.

MARGERY WYTON, of Alderminster, is rather keen on reading about Archie Glenthorne. The fact is, Archie isn't very keen on being featured. He has spoken to me quite strongly about it more than once. He complains that such stories give him too much limelight, and he's a modest sort of fellow.

Still, for all that, I suppose I oughtn't to take too much notice of him. And if he does anything particularly funny in the near future, I'll make a point of recording it.

* * *

REG. T. STAPLES wants to know how many masters there are at St. Frank's, who wears the longest pair of trousers in the Lower School, what coloured tie De Valerie wears on a Sunday afternoon, and how many pockets the Removites have. I can't

help thinking that Reggie's trying to pull my leg with these questions. So all I can do is to advise him to guess the answers.

* * *

THIS week's photograph shows us R. Jas. Smith, of Wellington, New Zealand. He wants me to tell him what subjects are taught in the Remove. If I thought this was of sufficient interest, I'd make full inquiries and give a detailed list of all the work that the Removites are supposed to do, but the majority of readers, I imagine, are not at all interested in this direction.

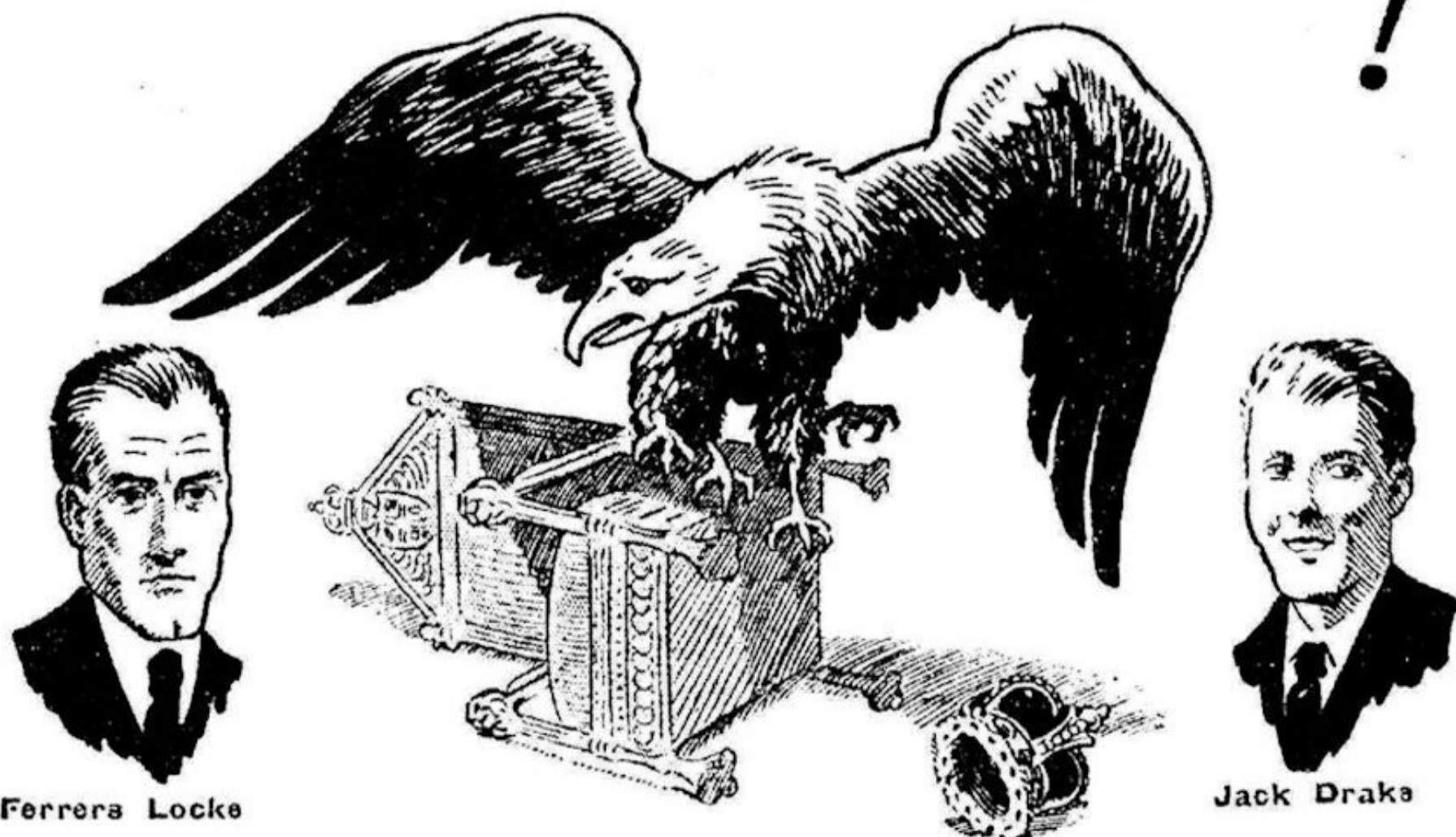
OUR READERS' PORTRAIT GALLERY



R. J. Smith

ARE YOU READING THIS EXCITING DETECTIVE SERIAL, CHUMS?

The FOUR-LEGGED EAGLE!



Locke On The Trail!

DISAPPOINTED though he was, Jack realised that nothing more could be done. Of Ferrers Locke there was no trace; he had completely disappeared—whether to his death or not Jack could not bear to think.

The river police motor-boat was now heading for headquarters. Suddenly the sergeant muttered an exclamation, and then pointed into the darkness. The pilot steered towards the spot indicated, and they came alongside the splash deck and the gunwale of a motor-boat. It was badly water-logged, and even then was fast sinking. Indeed, before the river police could make any investigations it had sunk completely.

Jack had immediately recognised it as the boat used by Prince Carlos, but he said nothing. He was more concerned in wondering what had happened to Ferrers Locke.

"Throw out a buoy, Jim, and mark the spot," said the sergeant to one of his men. "We'll come back later."

The position was marked with a temporary buoy. On the morrow a barge would be moored there, flying a green flag, and on her sides would be the word "Wreck," painted in huge letters. And another mystery would be added to the long list of river puzzles.

The river police returned to headquarters, and Jack had a talk with the superintendent. He was careful not to say anything about King Ferdinand and Prince Carlos and the plot in which they were involved.

"What'll you do, now, son?" asked the superintendent.

"Go back to Baker Street," said Jack. "I don't know what's happened to Mr. Locke, but if he's still alive and kicking—and I refuse to think anything else at the moment—that's where I shall find him."

* * *

Prince Carlos and his conspirators are congratulating themselves. Ferrers Locke is dead—or so they think. Yet, had they only known it, the famous detective is very much alive and kicking!

As it happened, Locke was very much alive and kicking. If Prince Carlos could think quickly and act quickly—so quickly that he could use a sinking boat with which to recapture his royal prisoner—Locke could be just as astute and artful. When Major Patens struck with the clubbed revolver, he hit Locke, but not on the head. The blow struck the detective's shoulder.

It was obvious that Prince Carlos would succeed in recapturing the king. There was nothing to stop them, for both Locke and Drake were badly handicapped.

So Ferrers Locke feigned defeat. He pretended he was stunned and allowed himself to sink out of sight, but beneath the water he swam, as near as he could, towards the shore. He was blessed with a good sense of

direction, and when he broke water again and poked his head above the surface, he saw the dim, black shape of the motor-boat, very low in the water, creeping past the hulk of the barge that had so cruelly deceived the fugitives.

Locke followed, swimming almost noiselessly. He noticed that the motor-boat was badly water-logged, and wondered if Prince Carlos would succeed in getting ashore. He could not help admiring the skill with which the sinking craft was handled. The boat was hardly making any speed and the tide was sweeping her seawards, but somehow Carlos got her past the moored barge and brought her alongside the deserted wharf.

Locke trod water, a few yards away, and saw the senseless form of King Ferdinand carried ashore. Perilla was the last to leap out on to the wharf, and he thrust the motor-boat out into the river with his foot; the craft drifted away with the strong tide. The water was gaining on her and, as she slipped away into the night, was barely six inches from her gunwale.

Locke swam round her stern and reached the wharf. He found a rope langing over the stone edge and managed to haul himself up to safety. He was cold, but there was work to be done. He squeezed the water from his clothes as best he could, then hastened away.

By the gate that gave access to the dark roadway he saw his foes, and crouched back behind a pile of cases, while Patens, evidently the strong man of the gang, forced the lock of the gate and opened it. They went out, carefully closing the gate behind them.

Locke followed cautiously out into the road. He knew exactly what he was doing. Before he could rescue King Ferdinand of Abronia he had to learn a lot about the men he was up against. He had had one good try, but circumstances had been against him. The next time he came to grips with Prince Carlos and his aristocratic gang, he meant to be armed with a better knowledge of this unique case.

The thing that troubled Locke most of all was what had happened to Jack; but he knew, firstly, that Jack was tough, and secondly, that Jack had been all right before Patens had started flinging his clubbed

revolver about. In any case, he could not help Jack now, any more than Jack could help him. The thing to do was to carry on. And that Locke proceeded to do.

With Prince Carlos as guide, the party set off, without the slightest hesitation, through the dreary, dark, deserted streets of the dingy riverside. They pursued a tortuous course, diving down dark alleys, through dense black archways, out into dreary, gloomy streets again, until they halted outside a house. There was nothing significant about that house; it was in a row of about twenty other houses exactly the same. Locke crossed over and slunk along in the shadows on the opposite side of the street. King Ferdinand was carried up the steps. Prince Carlos opened the door with a key, and they all went in. The door closed very quietly, and the dingy street was deserted again.

Locke took especial notice of that house. It was Number Seven. Then he turned and slunk back the way he had come, out of that street, went round the corner, and stopped by the blank wall that skirted the gardens at the rear of that dingy row of houses. No doubt at one time, many years ago, those gardens had grown flowers, but all that Locke could make out in the darkness, when he had climbed the blank wall, was rubbish—empty tins, broken bottles, and scraps of forgotten washing hanging on clothes lines.

He had to get to the back of the seventh house in the row, which meant that altogether he had seven walls to climb. Some were easier than others, but he managed it. All the houses were in total darkness, except Number Seven, and there a light in an upper room sent a beam of light out into the night. But not for long. Someone pulled the blind down with a rattle, and the cheery gleam was blotted out.

If possible, Locke wanted to find out what Prince Carlos and the others were doing, and what they meant to do next. The detective surveyed the house and located the stack pipes, but none of them lead anywhere near the window of the room where a chink of light still showed around the edges of the blind. So he approached the back door, carefully, cautiously.

The door was bolted, top and bottom, as well as locked, and therefore was next to im-

HOW THE STORY STARTED.

FERRERS LOCKE, the world-famous London detective, and his boy assistant, **JACK DRAKE**, are travelling on the Underground when they witness the murder of a foreigner. Following investigations, they discover that the deed was committed by the Grand Seigner, or Count, of Perilla, working on the instructions of **PRINCE CARLOS OF ABRONIA**. Carlos' ambition is to become king of Abronia, and already he has kidnapped the reigning monarch, King Ferdinand, and brought him over to England. The murdered man was an emissary of Queen Zita of Abronia, who has followed to rescue her husband; hence the man's removal. The queen asks Locke to help her restore King Ferdinand to his country. The detective's investigations lead him to Thames Ditton, where he interviews a Mr. Isaac Mossman, who is in the pay of Prince Carlos. Both Locke and Jack are captured and are placed in a motor-boat, where they find King Ferdinand, also a prisoner. Carlos and his followers come aboard and the boat heads for London. The three prisoners escape by jumping into the river, but Ferdinand is recaptured. Locke is stunned and disappears under the water, while Jack, drifting about, is picked up by a river police boat. They search for Locke, but can find no trace of him.

(Now read on.)

possible to open quickly. The ground-floor windows were protected by stout iron bars, too narrow to admit a man's body. Close by was a drain pipe that came out of the wall just over the first-floor windows. It did not go right up to the window of the room where Carlos was, but it served Locke's purpose. He swarmed up it nimbly and gained the sill of the first-floor window. With the blade of his pocket-knife he slipped the catch of the window, raised the lower sash and entered the room.

The place was meanly and shabbily furnished. Ferrers Locke decided that this was an emergency hiding-place for Carlos and his followers. Owing to the murder on the escalator at Charing Cross, the interference of Ferrers Locke, the sudden arrival of Locke and Drake at Mossman's up-river house, they had bolted here. But with the attention of Locke attracted to them and their activities, it was a moot point what they would do next.

Of course, Carlos might think that both Ferrers Locke and Jack Drake were drowned, but even then he could not be sure that the Scotland Yard officials might not pry around, both at Thames Ditton and on the lower reaches of the Thames. Carlos played for safety.

So did Locke. He took off his boots and crept across the room to the door. He could hear nothing. Very slowly he opened the door. Fortunately, it did not creak, and Locke only opened it wide enough to allow him to sidle round it out into the pitch-black passage. Then he climbed the stairs up to the next floor.

There were two doors on the next landing, one giving access to the front room on that floor, and the other to the back room, where the detective knew that Carlos and his followers were assembled. Locke went to the door of the back room, knelt down and placed his ear to the keyhole. The key was in the lock, on the inside, so he could see nothing, but he could hear.

At first the voices sounded all jumbled together, then Locke, becoming more accustomed to the various noises, began to pick out each individual voice: the bullying commands of Carlos, the sharp utterances of Major Patens, the snarl of Perilla, and the toadying whine of the Duke of Silene.

Locke frowned with annoyance. He could hear them speaking, but could not understand what they said. They were talking in the native dialect of Abronia.

Locke listened, however. There was nothing else for him to do, and one thing struck him. The name of the queen was being continually mentioned. Time and time again he heard that name—Zita. He heard the voice of King Ferdinand. It sounded weak and weary, which was only natural seeing what he had been through, but it was still defiant. Yet Locke had an idea that the more the name of Queen Zita was mentioned the defiance began to fade out of King Ferdinand's voice.

And in a flash Locke understood—or guessed at the truth. He knew that Prince Carlos was trying to force the king, not only to abdicate in his favour, but to sign a will leaving the Abronian fortune to him; and Ferdinand had refused to sign.

But suppose Prince Carlos kidnapped the queen? Suppose Ferdinand saw Queen Zita in the power of Carlos? Wouldn't that make him sign, as Carlos wanted him to do?

Locke reckoned he wasn't far out in his surmise, but even then, what was the best thing to do? Could he rescue the king single-handed? He decided against that. It was impossible. These men were too desperate. There was so much at stake that they would stop at nothing. The most important thing of all was to safeguard the queen, then return to rescue the king.

And even while Locke conned these things in his busy brain, Carlos rapped out a guttural command. Patens answered, and then heavy feet thudded on the floor. Locke only had time enough to move aside and crouch in a corner when the door was flung open. A shaft of light illuminated the landing, but Locke was in the shadow. Patens came out and closed the door. He turned to go downstairs, then something else occurred to him. He turned back again to return to the room he had left, and so he espied the dim figure of Locke.

He stared a moment, then—Locke sprang. There was no time to argue. Locke's fist crashed full in the man's face with terrible force. The major reeled backwards, and fell headlong down the stairs behind him with a crash. Locke bolted into the front bed-room, which, luckily for him, was empty.

And that house was silent no longer. Helter-skelter, Prince Carlos came rushing out, followed by his satellites; they thudded downstairs to pick up the half-stunned major. By now Locke was out on the window-sill. He grabbed a stack pipe and slid down on to the front door step. The next moment he was sprinting away up the street, intent on escaping.

In a way he was annoyed. He had had to hit the major before the major hit him, but it was not that which worried him. The trouble was that Carlos now knew he was still alive and on their trail. Not that it could be helped. The next move was clear before him. He had to get to the queen and warn her.

Locke, although he did not realise it in the stress of the moment, looked a complete wreck. His clothes were sodden, and he wore no boots. It was not surprising, therefore, that when he hailed a taxi the driver took one look at him and drove on, yelling out that it was late and he was going home.

When the next taxi came along Locke didn't stop to argue. He leapt on to the running-board and showed his card.

"Baker Street!" he hissed. "And don't worry about speed limits."

The streets were deserted, so that excessive speed was not essentially dangerous.

At Baker Street the taxi-driver discovered that he had not lost on the deal, for Locke tipped him lavishly. The detective went bounding up to his flat, burst in and came on Jack, pacing to and fro in the study. But whatever agonies of mind Jack had been through he didn't talk about them then. He saw from the look on Locke's face that there was work to do, and he was glad that he had already changed his clothes.

"Glad to see you, guv'nor," he said sincerely. "What's the next move?"

"Change first," said Locke breathlessly, "then to the hotel—to the queen. I'll talk while I change."

Against Time!

BY the time Locke was dressed in dry clothes he knew all that had happened to Jack, which was not such a lot, and Jack knew all that had happened to Locke, which was quite a lot. And then they sallied forth, and went post-haste to the hotel where Queen Zita was staying.

They burst in through the revolving doors. The night staff sprang to stop them, wondering what this whirlwind invasion meant. Locke went up to the booking clerk. That official was half asleep until Locke showed his card.

"Quickly!" snapped Locke. "The hotel detective! I want him!"

The hotel detective was soon on the spot, and Locke buttonholed him.

"Queen Zita is staying here?"

(Continued on next page.)

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The FOUR-LEGGED EAGLE

(Continued from page 37.)

"No, sir. You see——"

"Don't argue!" said Locke. "There's my card. You know who I am? Very well, don't waste time. I want to speak with her at once."

"At this time of night? She may have retired."

"Fetch her maid, then. Only be quick!"

There was something about Locke that obtained both respect and obedience. The detective took them up to the suite of rooms occupied by Queen Zita and her attendants. At the door of the ante-room they tapped and waited. The trim maid answered their summons and gazed at them in astonishment.

"Sorry to trouble you——" began the hotel detective.

Ferrers Locke swept him on one side and faced the maid. He studied her intently. She was a native of Abronia, dark skinned like a gipsy, but intelligent.

"I want to speak to her Majesty," he said. "Will you please take my card to her. It is important."

The maid took the card and stood there looking at it, bewildered.

"But, m'sieur," she faltered, "I have ze orders not to disturb——"

"The general, then," said Locke. "General Morina!"

"The general has retired, sir."

"Has the queen retired?"

"No, sir."

Locke frowned, and then glanced at his watch. It was one o'clock.

"Listen," he said, in impressive tones, "this is a matter of life and death. You understand? Does the queen usually remain up so late?"

"So late?" queried the maid. "No, m'sieur, nevair so late. She seems—what I say?—not like herself."

Locke frowned, then he lurched past the girl and stepped into the room, which was empty. He turned to the maid.

"Where is the queen?"

"In her boudoir, sir."

The direction in which the maid pointed was guide enough. Locke threw all ceremony to the winds. There was nothing to be gained and everything to lose by waiting on ceremony. He strode across the ante-room and flung open the door. Then he paused on the threshold, and bowed.

The queen was there. She sat at her writing-table, very prim and sedate. She frowned to see Locke there, then smiled.

"Mr. Locke, is it not?" she said, quite calmly.

Locke bowed again.

"You will pardon the intrusion, madam," he added, "but time is against us, and the matter is urgent."

The queen rose to her feet. She looked very regal in her evening dress. Jewels blazed at her neck, and the rings that

adorned her fingers sparkled brilliantly. She frowned slightly, as if worried, but Locke was studying her eyes.

"Nothing—I hope—nothing is wrong?" she said.

"Everything is wrong, madam," said Locke. "They have taken his Majesty to a house in the East End."

She sank down again on her chair.

"Can nothing be done?" she sighed regretfully.

"It is a matter of time, madam," said Locke, eyeing her shrewdly.

"And all the time," she retorted, "he is suffering. Where are your police, m'sieur?"

Locke's eyebrows went up slightly.

"Police, madam? You expressly intimated that you did not desire the police to be brought into this."

"Did I?" she queried. "Ah, yes, I remember now. I am afraid I am distraught this evening."

"As a matter of fact," put in Locke, "it is early morning."

"I suppose so," she agreed, hardly noticing that Locke, considering he was addressing a queen, was acting very curtly and uncourteously. "But you said the matter was urgent."

"It is. Your safety hangs upon it, madam."

She tapped on the writing-desk with her fingers impatiently.

"My safety hardly matters, m'sieur," she argued.

"You don't seem to realise," said Locke, "that if they captured you——"

"They would not dare so much," she said, and she rose to her feet again with a little laugh. "M'sieur, you see for yourself that they have not dared so much yet."

"Supposing they made an attempt——" began Locke.

"You are here to protect me, m'sieur."

"You trust me, madam?"

"Implicitly. What will you do? Remain outside this suite all night?"

She waved her hand airily as she spoke. Locke was watching her hands, and he smiled bitterly.

"I think," he said, "the hotel detective can do that part of the business."

"As you like," she said, rather doubtfully. "But you, m'sieur, what will you do?"

Locke came closer to her. Suddenly he seized her wrist.

"I think," he said harshly, "I'll put the handcuffs on you! Did you think you'd fool me twice?"

She paled. She trembled, sinking down on the chair.

"Peste!" she hissed. "You——"

"Last time," snapped Locke, "you wore no ring at all. That gave you away. This time you took that ring from the queen to fool me." He pointed to the ring she wore, emblazoned with the four-legged eagle. "But," he went on, "it doesn't fit you, so you wore your wedding ring over it to keep it in place. The queen, madam, does not do that."



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The FOUR-LEGGED EAGLE

(Continued from page 38.)

The maid came bursting in. She stared at Locke, and the detective saw that she was white to the lips. Then she stared at the queen, and recognising that she was an impostor, sprang forward. But Locke seized her and dragged her back.

"What do you know about this?" he demanded.

"Nozzing, m'sieur. I die for ze queen. But her——"

The savage glare she bestowed upon the impostor was answer enough.

"Leave her alone—for now," said Locke. "Where's the general? Quickly! They have kidnapped the queen. Where's Morina?"

"In his room, m'sieur."

"Where?"

"Zis way, m'sieur."

Locke turned to the hotel detective, who all this time had been an amazed if silent witness of the proceedings, and jerked his head towards the impostor.

"Watch her! If she gets away you answer for it to me."

"Trust me, sir."

"Good! This way, Jack."

The maid led the way, through one door, along a passage, until they came to the door of Morina's room. There the maid stood back, and Locke seized the handle. The door was not locked, and the detective opened it and burst into the room. Next moment he came staggering out again, his nose and mouth covered with one arm.

"Gas!" he cried warningly.

Even as he uttered the word the stifling, choking gas fumes came belching out into the passage. The maid screamed and fled, while Jack went down on his knees, stuffing his handkerchief against his face. And Ferrers Locke, his nose and mouth covered with a handkerchief, sprang through the doorway into that room—the room which was filled with deadly gas!

Cunning Against Cunning!

HOLDING his breath, Locke dashed into the gas-filled room which contained General Morina and groped about in the darkness. He crashed against the foot of the bed, went off at a tangent and hit the dressing-table. Then he found the windows and flung them open. Fresh, sweet air came billowing into the room. Locke gasped as he released the stale air pent up in his lungs and breathed in that life-giving air.

Jack Drake came groping his way into the room. He fumbled around the wall by the door-post, found the electric switch, and the room was flooded with welcome light. Then Jack darted over to the fireplace, where a gas-fire was fitted. Locke nodded approval as Jack turned off the tap.

They glanced about them, and saw the senseless figure of the general on the bed. Locke went over to him and gave him a quick examination. The maid came creeping into the room as if half afraid of what she would see and hear. She was followed by the detective, who strode in looking very fierce and important. Apparently he had been attracted to the scene in spite of the fact that Locke had ordered him to keep guard over the false Queen Zita.

"It's murder, I reckon!" he said.

"Not until the man's dead," said Locke, "and he isn't dead. Get water, quickly—and milk—pints of it!"

The hotel detective looked puzzled, but there was something about Locke that made people realise it was better to obey first and argue afterwards. Suddenly Locke gave a start; he looked at the hotel detective sharply, and then left Morina and went dashing out into the passage and along to the queen's apartment. He burst in, bounded across the room, and just succeeded in grabbing the false queen by the arm as she sought to escape.

"Just in time, I think," he said, with sarcasm. Then he called sharply: "Jack!"

Jack Drake came quickly.

"Here I am, guv'nor!"

"Then keep an eye on this impostor. We nearly forgot her."

"But didn't you tell that hotel 'tec to watch her?"

"I did!" Locke snapped angrily. "I shall have something to say to him about this later."

He then went back to Morina's room, which was now completely clear of any fumes. He bathed the general's wrists and brow with water. Fortunately Morina had not been in that poisonous atmosphere long enough for the fumes seriously to affect him, and being strong, he came round fairly quickly.

He stirred, opened his eyes, and then sat up, alarmed.

"Some-zing happen!" he cried.

"You're right!" said Locke. "The room was full of gas. If we had not turned up you would have been choked."

Morina stared at him.

"M'sieur," he said, "zat must have been Prince Carlos or one of his men."

Locke nodded assent.

"Drink this milk," he said.

Morina did so, and then he struggled to his feet, cautiously sliding off the bed as if not quite sure whether he would be able to stand up or not. He must have felt groggy, and he certainly looked it.

"But ze queen——" he began.

Locke went towards the door, motioning to him to follow.

"Come!" he said curtly.

(This stunning serial gets more and more exciting each week. Next Wednesday's instalment is full of thrilling incidents, and you mustn't miss reading it on any account, chums.)



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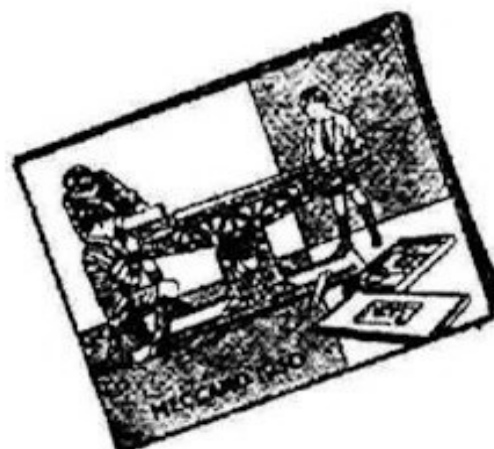
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For East and West!

SOME time ago I mentioned in this corner that M. Koli Mohamed, a very enthusiastic League-ite living in Singapore, was forming a correspondence club in his district, and that he proposed to amalgamate it with a similar club which is run by James Herbert Sullivan, of Stretford, Lancashire, providing he could get the latter's permission.

This weeks comes a letter from my Singapore chum telling me that everything is going swimmingly. He has formed his club, and negotiations for the amalgamation of the two clubs have been satisfactorily concluded.

Three cheers!

The Singapore-Manchester Correspondence Club or the Anglo-Malayan International Correspondence Club have been suggested as two names for this new organisation, and I am inclined to agree with my chum that the latter is the better of the two names.

Readers who wish to join this club—which looks like becoming a really big and successful affair—should apply either to M. Koji Mohamed, the Treasury, Singapore, Straits Settlements, or to James Herbert Sullivan, Cemetery House, Lime Road, Stretford, Lancashire. There is no age limit.

Here's a Bright Idea!

LEN SAYERS, of Victoria, Australia, writes to tell me that during the two years he has been a member of the

St. Frank's League he has introduced no less than fifteen new members to the NELSON LEE LIBRARY. That is the stuff to give 'em, Len! Carry on with the good work.

Through the "Correspondents Wanted" column my Australian chum has succeeded in obtaining five pen friends, and the six of them have formed themselves into a small club and correspond with one another.

Other readers might do well to follow suit.

Worthy of Encouragement!

HERE'S a reader—Alec Froggatt, of Stockport—who says he wants to join the St. Frank's League, and then asks me to announce that he wants to form a club. Not so fast, Alec! You've got to do one before you can do the other, you know. In other words, before you can form a club you will have to join the League.

The aim of this reader's proposed club, incidentally, is a really excellent one. Alec's idea is to get

members who will be willing to give their spare copies of the Old Paper to the orphans in various Homes.

As I have said, such a worthy enterprise deserves encouragement. My advice to you, Alec, is to join the League as soon as possible, and then I shall be only too delighted to give you all the assistance I can.

THE CHIEF OFFICER.

THIS WEEK'S WINNING LETTER

DEAR CHIEF OFFICER,—I have been reading the NELSON LEE LIBRARY for nearly a year now, and have belonged to the St. Frank's League since July.

I became known to the Old Paper by finding an old copy. I read it and, becoming interested, have never missed a single issue since.

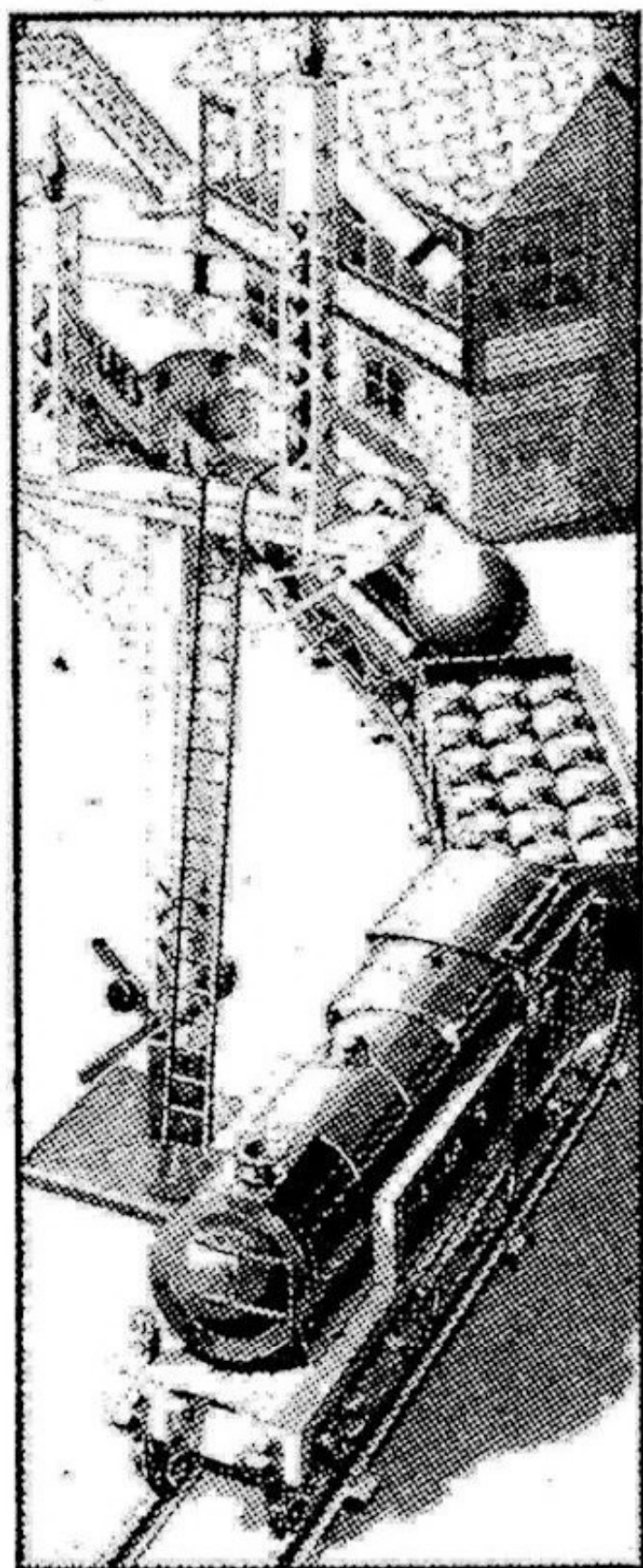
In my opinion the St. Frank's League is an excellent organisation, for it links up the countries that we know nothing about, and clubs may be formed in all the corners of the world by the help of the League. It brings together people who live thousands of miles apart and who would otherwise never have known of each other's existence.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) FREDERICK W. STEVENS,
S. F. L. No. 9,634.

(For this interesting letter Frederick W. Stevens, of Watford, has been awarded a useful penknife.)

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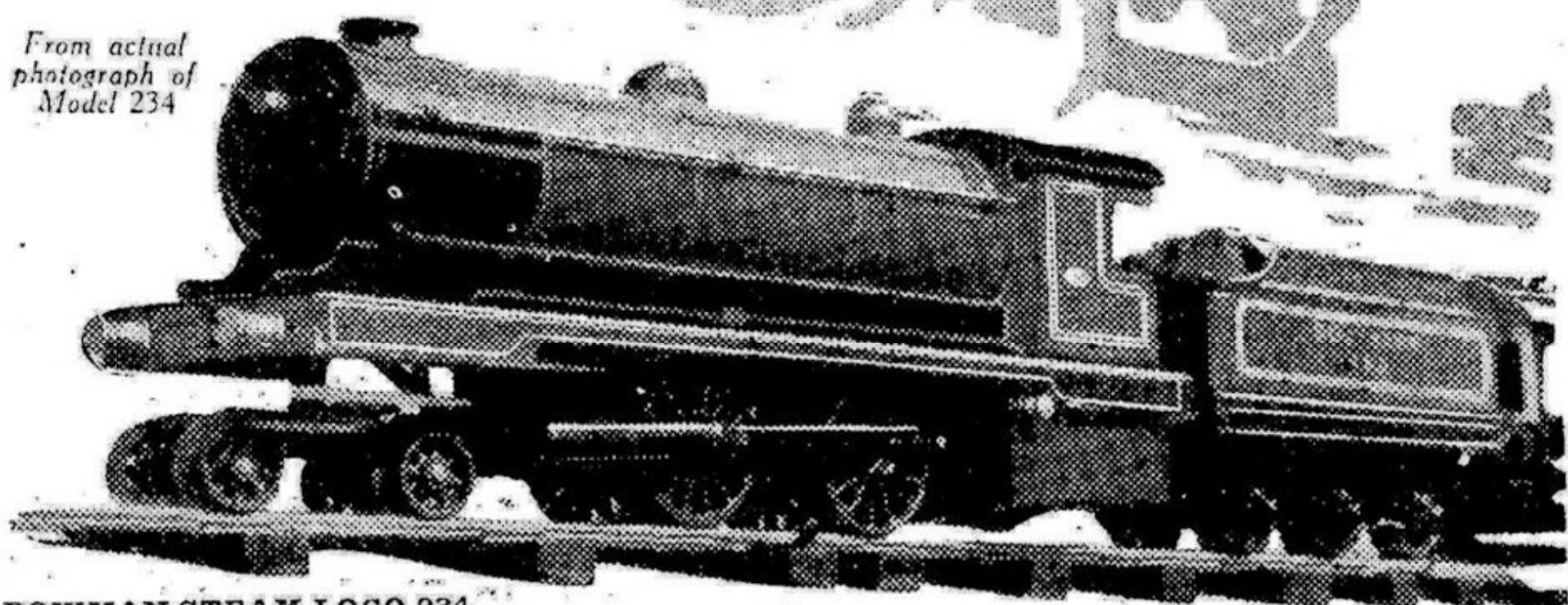
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BOWMAN TANK LOCO 300

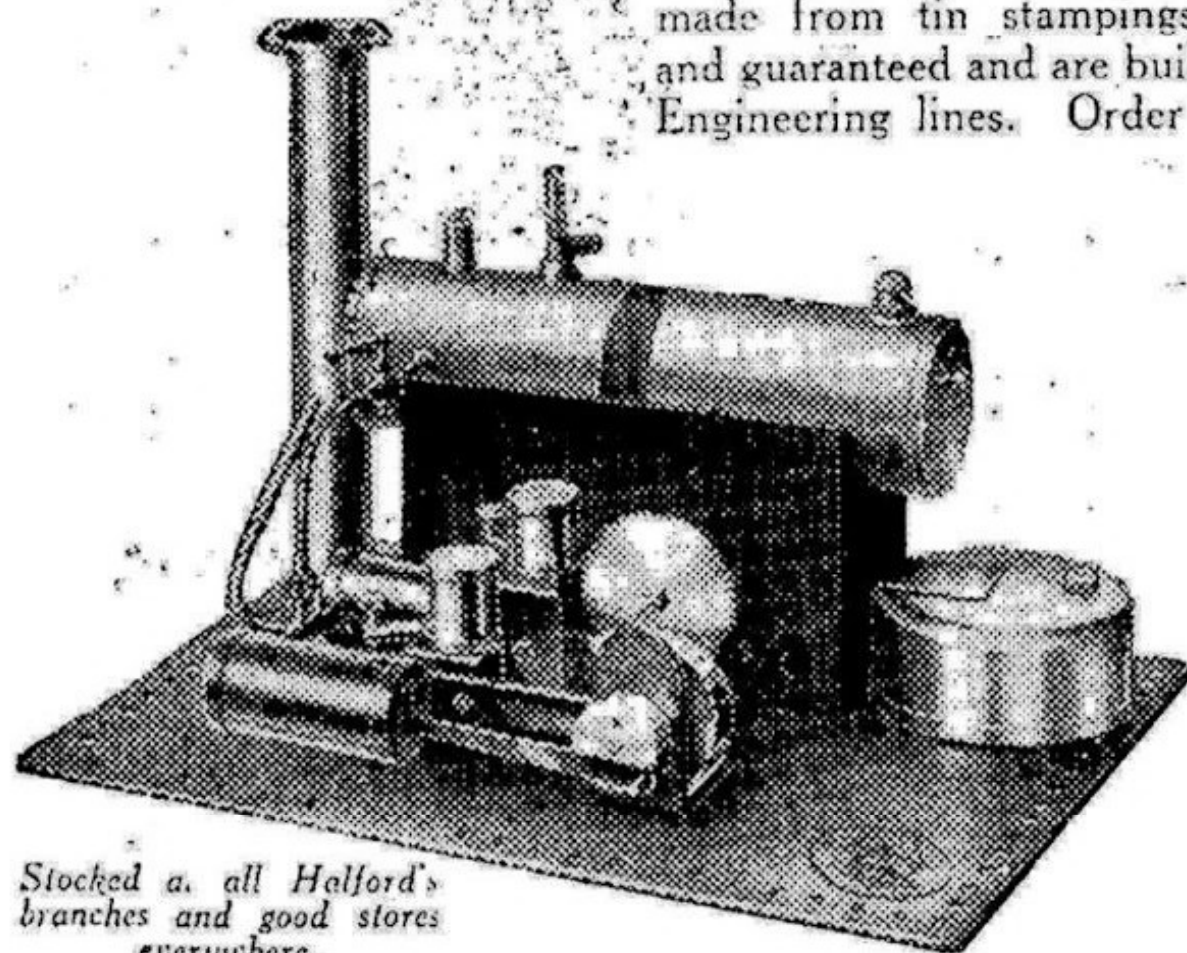
Similar to Model 265 but smaller. It will draw heavy loads 1 mile non-stop. Weight, 1½ lb. Length, 8½ in. "O" Gauge. Price **18/6** (Postage 9d.).

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