

NELSON LEE

23



E. O. Handforth—budding playwright! A succession of laughs in this week's screamingly funny complete school yarn featuring the cheery Chums of St. Frank's.



***Handy Puts His Foot
In It—On and Off
the Stage!***

HANDY'S

CHAPTER 1.

Something Wrong with Handy!

BIGGLESWADE, of the Sixth Form at St. Frank's, grinned.

"Lost something?" he asked amiably.

Church and McClure, of the Remove, looked at Biggleswade suspiciously. They had just emerged from the Ancient House at St. Frank's, and Biggleswade was coming up the steps. The tall, untidy, loosely-jointed senior was completely barring the way, and as he was a prefect the two juniors couldn't very well barge past him.

"We can't find Handy," said Church briefly.

"I thought you'd lost something," nodded Biggleswade. "Well, I can help you. Handforth is behind the shrubbery somewhere."

"Behind the shrubbery?" repeated Mac. "Alone?"

"As far I know," replied Biggy cheerfully. "When I saw him last, he had his hands deep in his trousers pockets, his chin on his chest, and he looked about as moony as a sick rabbit. I think his breakfast must have disagreed with him."

"You're not kidding us, are you?" asked Church suspiciously. "Handy dodged off directly after breakfast, and we haven't seen him since."

The two chums didn't wait to question Biggleswade further, but hurried across the Triangle towards the shrubbery. Behind this belt of trees there was a fairly open space, with the monastery ruins just beyond. Cautiously venturing through the trees, Church and McClure suddenly came to a halt.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" murmured Church. "Biggy was right!"

"But what's the matter with the ass?" whispered McClure.

—When You Read This Week's Rollicking Complete St. Frank's Yarn.



PLAY!

*By EDWY
SEARLES BROOKS*

Edward Oswald Handforth, the famous leader of Study D, was just beyond the trees, pacing up and down. And, strangely enough, he was talking to himself. Handy had a number of peculiar habits, but talking to himself was not one of them. On his face there was an expression of concentrated ferocity which turned to a look of horror as he suddenly stopped and half recoiled.

"No, no, not that!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Do what thou wilt to me, foul knave, but touch not my steed!"

Church and McClure exchanged startled glances.

"My only sainted aunt!" murmured Church.

"It's happened!" said Mac, with conviction.

"What's happened?"

"The poor chap's gone off his rocker!" said the Scottish junior.

"Rats!" breathed Church, shaking his head. "It's only tremendously brainy people who go off their rockers—and Handy isn't brainy."

"Then he must have had some shock," declared Mac.

They looked at their leader more interestedly than ever. He had suddenly given vent to a fiendish cackle—a truly blood-curdling sound, totally unlike his normal boisterous self.

"Ah-ha!" he ejaculated, striking a dramatic attitude. "Face to face at last, scullion! No, that doesn't sound right," he added, in a more ordinary voice. "I've got it! Ah-ha! Face to face at last, thou dastard! Good egg! Face to face at last, thou das-

tard, is pretty good. What! Thou art telling me that Sir Jasper decamped with Ermyntrode last even? 'Sdeath! Then I am undone!"

"Well, he's about right there," murmured Church, nodding. "He's not only undone, but a part of him's missing! He's not all there!"

"Poor old Handy, it must have been something he ate for breakfast," said McClure, in real anxiety. "Hadn't we better persuade him to see the doctor? He's either delirious or in a fever."

They walked out of their cover and approached Handforth, who was apparently unaware of their proximity. He halted once more in his pacing, and pointed dramatically.

"Thou!" he hissed. "Thou art the blighter who blighted Ermyntrode's life! H'm! Seems to be something wrong there," he added, frowning. "Thou art the rapscallion who blighted the love of that fair damsel! A murrain upon thee, Sir Jasper!"

Church went one side of him, and McClure the other. They gently took his arms.

"Come on, Handy, old man," said Church gently.

"Eh? Here, what the dickens—Leggo!" roared Handforth. "Don't interrupt me now, you fatheads! Plague take ye—I mean, buzz off!" He shook himself free, glared at his chums, and waved an imperious hand. "Begone!" he said coldly.

"But look here——"
"Get thee out of my presence, knave!" said Handforth. "Eh? Oh, my hat! Why do you chaps want to come and bother me now? If you don't clear off, I'll slaughter the pair of you."

"But you're not well, Handy——"
"Rats! I've never been better."
"Bodily you're all right, perhaps, but your head doesn't seem right," urged Mac. "Don't get excited, old man."

"Humour him!" breathed Church. Handforth started

"What are you asses trying to do?" he asked suspiciously. "Do you think I'm off my rocker?"

"Ahem! You'll be all right soon, if you only calm down," said Church.

"I'm all right now," roared Handforth. "Scat! Vamoose! I want to be alone! I dodged you chaps after breakfast, and I should like to know what you mean by following me about?"

"If only you'll come with us to the sanny——"

"You can both go to Jericho—and you'll leave me here!" bawled Handforth excitedly. "I'm busy! I can't be bothered with trifles now!"

"But it'll soon be time for lessons——"

"I tell you I can't be bothered with trifles!" shouted Handforth. "Are you going, or shall I biff you?"

He looked so ferocious that Church and McClure backed away. Then he made a rush at them, his eyes blazing. They fled. And when they emerged into the Triangle, they found that he had not followed. Nipper

and Travers and Parkington and one or two others looked at the two flustered juniors with interest.

"A spot of trouble, dear old fellows?" asked Vivian Travers sympathetically.

"I say, you chaps, there's something wrong with Handy!" panted Church.

"Is that unusual?" asked Kirby Keeble Parkington politely.

"Don't be an ass, K. K.!" put in McClure. "There is something wrong with Handy! He's behind the shrubbery, jabbering to himself, striking attitudes, and generally acting like a lunatic!"

Travers shook his head.

"Nothing to be alarmed about," he said. "As far as I can see, Handy is quite himself."

"Why can't you be serious?" demanded Church, exasperated. "I tell you there's something wrong with Handy—else why should he drivel a lot of rot about Sir Jasper and Lady Ermyntrode and goodness knows what else!"

"Perhaps we'd better look into it," said Nipper.

The cheery Remove skipper led the way through the shrubbery. The other Removes followed, but they all halted in a bunch as they caught sight of Edward Oswald Handforth.

He was standing in the open, his arms outspread, his head flung back, his eyes blazing with defiance.

"Strike!" he panted. "Strike, thou base cur! Thinkest thou that I am afraid of thy paltry steel?"

"My only hat!" said Nipper, blinking. "Good!" said Handforth, relaxing. "Thinkest thou that I am afraid of thy paltry steel! I mustn't forget that bit! Now, lemme see——"

His words trailed away into a mumble, and he commenced pacing up and down, his chin lowered to his chest.

"Well?" whispered Church. "Didn't we tell you he's dotty?"

"It may be only a passing phase," said K. K. "He must have had a nightmare, and it's preying on his mind."

They were suddenly startled by a gloating peal of unnatural laughter from Handforth.

"Fools! Fools!" he shouted shrilly. "Come ye a yard nearer and ye will all be killed in thy tracks!"

"Great Scott!"

"Is he talking to us?"

"Wert mad enough to suppose that I, Sir Jasper, would leave my treasure unguarded?" continued Handforth mockingly. "Poor, pitiful fatheads! Nunno, that's wrong! Poor, pitiful chumps! That's not much better, either. Poor, pitiful half-wits! I am aware of thy machinations!"

K. K. nudged Nipper and Travers.

"We'd better take him by surprise—and hold him," he suggested. "He's liable to get violent, by the sound of it. Rather a pity we haven't got a strait-waistcoat handy."

"I suppose you mean a strait-jacket?" asked Nipper. "But I don't think he's as

mad as that," he added, with a grin. "In fact, I don't believe he's ill at all."

He strode forward and the others followed. They gathered round Handforth warily.

"Hallo! Where did you chaps spring from?" demanded Handforth, with annoyance. "My only hat! Can't I be left alone a bit?"

"Sorry, Sir Jasper," said Nipper soothingly.

"Eh?"

"Sorry to barge in like this, Sir Jasper, but you seem to have forgotten that it's nearly time for lessons," went on Nipper.

"What do you mean by calling me Sir Jasper, you fathead?"

"Aren't you Sir Jasper?" asked Nipper innocently.

"Of course he is—he was just saying so," declared K. K., giving the others a meaning glance. "Humour him!" he whispered, aside. "It's our only chance."

"I—I think you'd better come indoors, Sir Jasper," said Church hesitatingly. "The—the Lady Ermyntude is waiting to see you."

"That's right, Sir Jasper," said McClure eagerly.

Handforth regarded them all in amazement.

"Have you chaps gone off your rockers?" he asked blankly.

"Ahem! We rather thought the boot was on the other foot," murmured Travers.

"Boot? Foot? Who's talking about feet and boots?" asked Handforth, who always took things literally. "Why can't you idiots clear off? Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Busy at what?"

"Never you mind what—I'm busy!"

"I think you ought to tell us, Handy," said Nipper gravely. "If you don't, people will be saying that you're looney. You can't walk about muttering to yourself, and striking attitudes, without attracting notice."

Handforth started.

"Was I muttering, and striking attitudes?" he asked anxiously.

"You were more than muttering, my son—you were fairly shouting," said K. K.

"When an author is hard at work, he gets lost in his job," said Handforth, with a wave of the hand. "If you must know, you inquisitive bounders, I'm thinking out the plot of my new play."

"Your new which?" yelled Church, with a flood of understanding.

"You heard what I said. My new play."

"Handy's latest," grinned Parkington.

"You can chuckle all you like, you Red-hot fathead!" snapped Handforth. "I haven't actually started writing it yet—I'm thinking out the plot. Can't you leave me alone? I've thought of some ripping dialogue, and I'm trying to remember it—so that I shall know what to put down when I really start."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Handy!"

"Why write a play at all?" asked McClure, with a snort. "Who wants a play, anyhow?"

Edward Oswald Handforth breathed hard.

"I didn't think it would be any good trying to keep this to myself," he said, exasperated. "I suppose I'd better show you—just to keep you quiet! Look at this!"

He whipped a crumpled newspaper out of his pocket, and the Removites looked at it with interest.

CHAPTER 2.

Mr. Crowell is Not Helpful!

"WHAT'S this?" asked Church suspiciously.

"A newspaper, ass!" replied Handforth. "What did you think it was—a tablecloth? It's this morning's paper. Here you are—look at this paragraph."

He pointed triumphantly to a minor news item, half-way down a column. It was headed: "Shortage of Play Plots."

"Well, what about it?" asked Church, staring.

"Read it!" urged Handforth.

The Removites all tried to read it at once:

"Mr. Russell Warburton, the famous producer, now in control of the Emperor Theatre, made an interesting statement last night, when one of our representatives interviewed him regarding his future policy. Mr. Warburton declares that there is a lamentable shortage of worth-while play plots. He is of the opinion that the romantic drama is not dead; and if he can find a suitable play, he will present this type of entertainment at the Emperor Theatre at an early date. We understand that he is offering one hundred pounds for a suitable plot. Here is a chance, it seems, for budding playwrights—although we understand that Mr. Warburton does not require the full play. His offer is for the plot only. It is Mr. Warburton's contention that many people have brilliant ideas for plays, but do not possess the faculty for writing them."

"You see?" asked Handforth calmly. "I've made up my mind to get that hundred quid."

"Wha-a-at!"

"I've already thought out a plot——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy—he never wastes any time," chuckled Nipper. "Half an hour after seeing the newspaper, he's thought out his plot! He's beating Edgar Wallace at his own game!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cackle away!" roared Handforth. "But you'll laugh on the other side of your faces when I win that prize."

McClure took a deep breath.

"But there isn't any prize," he said impatiently. "It's only a—a general statement."

There's no competition, with rules, or anything like that."

"All the better."

"Besides, Mr. Warburton doesn't want a fully written play," went on Mac. "It says so here clearly enough. He only needs a plot."

"Well, I'm going to supply him with a plot and a fully written play, too," said Handforth, with satisfaction. "I'm not going to have any silly playwright messing about with my plot, and twisting it inside out!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Play writing is easy enough," went on Handforth. "Didn't Edgar Wallace write one the other day at the wheel of his car?"

"At the wheel of his car?" asked Church.

"Yes—while he was waiting for a traffic jam to move on in the Strand," said Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I dare say he had plenty of time," grinned Nipper. "I've been in one of those traffic jams myself! But, my dear old Handy, you're chasing a rainbow."

Handforth looked up at the sky.

"Idiot!" he said scornfully. "The sun isn't even out!"

"It's a dream, old man," said Nipper gently. "Mr. Warburton won't appreciate the kind of plot you're likely to produce."

"I shan't produce it—Mr. Warburton will do that."

"I'm not talking about the play," said Nipper patiently. "He only needs a plot, and there isn't a chance in ten million that you'll satisfy him. As for writing the whole play, it's the one certain way of ruining all your chances—even supposing that your plot had an earthly."

Handforth glared round defiantly.

"You're jealous—that's what's the matter with you!" he said, with scorn. "Why can't you think out your own plots? The offer's open to all, isn't it? But I'm giving you fair warning—your plots won't stand a chance after Mr. Warburton's read mine!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can laugh all you like—but I'm going ahead!" declared Handforth. "I'm not going to take any rest until my play is written. I've always fancied myself as a playwright. Don't you remember, I wrote one once about Trackett Grim, the detective?"

Vivian Travers shuddered.

"I was hoping," he murmured, "that nothing would ever crop up to remind us of that."

Clang-clang!

"Well, there goes the bell," said Nipper cheerfully. "No need for you fellows to worry," he went on, turning to Church and McClure. "Handy isn't any more dotty than usual. But I doubt if you'll get this bee out of his bonnet. You'd better let him write his play, and get it out of his system."

H ANDFORTH and his "latest" provided the Remove with a general laugh—and the Fourth and the Third got wind of it, too, and chuckled hugely.

When the Remove clattered into the Form-room for morning lessons, Handforth was conspicuous by his absence. Mr. Crowell, the Form-master, allowed his eagle eye to rove up and down the ranks.

"Does anybody know what is detaining Handforth?" he asked, looking from Church to McClure, and back from McClure to Church.

"We're not his keepers, sir," protested Church.

"Nevertheless, Church, you and McClure are, I believe, Handforth's constant companions," said Mr. Crowell. "Is Handforth unwell?"

"Well, I don't think he's quite himself, sir," replied Church truthfully.

"We will see about that," said Mr. Crowell. "It is not one of Handforth's failings to be late for lessons, so perhaps he will have an acceptable excuse. Oh, thank you, Biggleswade!" he added as the lean, loose-jointed prefect placed a book on his table. "I hope you told Mr. Stokes that I would return this by lunch-time?"

"Yes, of course, sir," said Biggy.

"Oh, by the way, Biggleswade—if it's not troubling you too much, I would like you to find Handforth and send him at once into the Form-room," said Mr. Crowell, as the prefect made to depart. "I understand that he is not—er—quite himself."

Biggleswade went off amiably enough. He did not care much for the task of hunting up delinquent juniors, but it wasn't his way to grumble. He took life philosophically. Moreover, he had seen something of Handforth that morning, and he had an idea that Edward Oswald was—er—not quite himself.

His hunt through the Ancient House was unavailing, but he ran Handforth to earth in the gymnasium. Strange noises coming through one of the open windows put him on the scent. Biggleswade strode to the gym, tried the door, and found it locked.

"Hi!" he shouted. "Who's in here?"

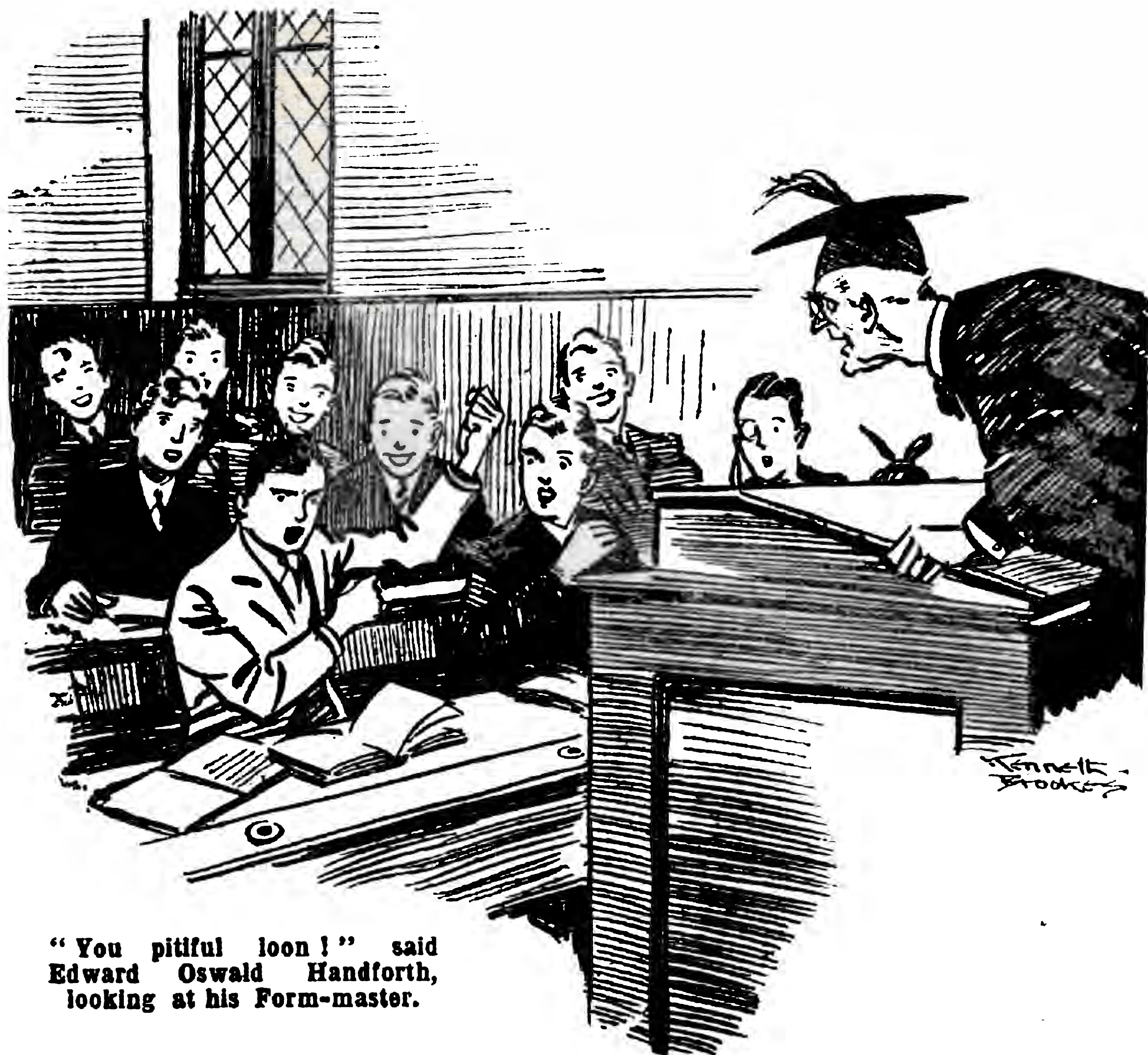
"I am!" came Handforth's voice. "Go away!"

"You cheeky sweep!" said Biggleswade. "What do you mean by telling a prefect to go away? Open this door!"

"Eh? Oh, sorry, Biggy—I didn't recognise your voice," said Handforth as he unlocked the door. "Don't come bothering now, there's a good chap. I'm busy."

Biggleswade's eyes opened wider. Handforth had walked back to the parallel bars, across which he had placed a board. Several sheets of paper were already full of Edward Oswald's scribbings.

"Very interesting," grinned Biggleswade. "Awfully sorry, Handforth, that you're so busy. But I have half an idea that Mr. Crowell wants you to be busy in the Form-room. Too bad to interrupt you—"



"You pitiful loon!" said Edward Oswald Handforth, looking at his Form-master.

"If it's too bad to interrupt me, what are you doing it for?" broke in Handforth complainingly. "Be a sportsman, Biggy! I'm writing my new play."

"Oh, that's the game, is it?" asked the prefect. "Well, your new play isn't as important as Latin and geography and maths. Put that rubbish away and come along with me."

"But I'm only half-way through the first act—"

"Mr. Crowell will supply the climax to that act—with a swishing, I should imagine," said Biggleswade, nodding. "A good, smashing curtain, old man."

He was standing no nonsense. He seized Handforth by the scruff of the neck, hauled him out, and ran him into the School House. By the time they reached the Remove Form-room, Handforth was breathless and indignant.

"Here you are, sir," said Biggleswade, grinning. "I think he must have forgotten about lessons. I found him in the gym, exercising on the parallel bars."

And Biggleswade went off, chuckling.

"Go to your place, Handforth," said Mr. Crowell coldly. "Your absentmindedness will cost you one hundred lines."

Handforth went to his place, reflecting that it was a hard, hard world.

"How can a chap settle down to geography and maths?" he complained bitterly. "When an author gets an inspiration he has to put it on paper at once, or the opportunity is lost for ever."

"Are you talking to me, Handforth, or to yourself?" demanded Mr. Crowell sharply.

"Eh? I—I don't know, sir."

"You had better know," said the Form-master. "Unless you settle to your work, that imposition will be increased by half. I am certainly not going to allow you to interrupt our morning's work any further."

Handforth settled down grudgingly, urgently nudged by Church and McClure.

"Cheese it, Handy!" breathed Church. "You can't expect Crowell to understand. He doesn't appreciate genius."

Handforth nodded.

"By George, you're right!" he agreed. "But I'm glad you do, Churchy."

"Ahem! Of course," whispered Church. "And don't forget there's a footer match this afternoon—you don't want to be detained for extra lesson, do you?"

"Footer match?" said Handforth. "Rats! I can't play this afternoon, I shall be too busy."

"Handforth!" shouted Mr. Crowell, rapping his desk. "How dare you talk after what I have just said! Fifty more lines!"

Handforth subsided, and tried hard to settle down to the lesson. But it was difficult. A genius, with inspirations flowing like water out of a tap, cannot switch his mind on to such paltry annoyances as maths.

All went well for some time—until, in fact, Mr. Crowell, happening to look up, was startled to see Handforth staring fixedly into nothingness, his expression one of unutterable contempt.

"Handforth!" rapped out the Form-master. "What is the matter with you?"

"Pitiful loon!" said Handforth. "Get thee from my sight!"

Mr. Crowell jumped.

"What—what did you say, Handforth?" he gasped. "What did you call me?"

"Thou art unclean in mine eyes," said Handforth. "I regard ye as all honest men regard the lowliest reptiles!"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Mr. Crowell, aghast.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A titter ran round the Form—the Form understanding precisely what was the matter.

"How—how dare you, Handforth!" panted Mr. Crowell, striding forward and grabbing for a pointer. "Never have I heard such unparalleled impertinence!"

"Not content with robbing me of my lands by the basest usury, thou now attemptest to filch me of my daughter," said Handforth coldly.

"Your—your daughter!" almost shrieked Mr. Crowell.

"The Lady Ermytrude is not for thy uncouth arms, thou knave!" jeered Handforth. "Thou art a rogue, a knave, a scullion. May a plague descend upon ye and make thy countenance even more hideous than Nature intended!"

Rap-rap!

Mr. Crowell's pointer came down hard upon Handforth's knuckles, and the leader of Study D jumped about a foot into the air.

"Hi! What the— Here, steady, sir!" he gasped. "You hurt me!"

"I intended to hurt you!" snapped Mr. Crowell. "How dare you, Handforth! How dare you call me a knave and a rogue!"

"Oh, my hat!" babbled Handforth. "Did—did I say that, sir? Awfully sorry, sir! I—I must have been a bit absent-minded! I was thinking of some new lines for my big play."

Mr. Crowell began to understand.

"Oh! So that explains it?" he said, simmering down. "Instead of getting on with your lesson, Handforth, you are thinking of some new lines for your big play? I am exceedingly sorry to interrupt your literary efforts, but there is a certain problem in mathematics which requires your immediate attention."

"Oh, but I say, sir—"

"You will say no more!" rapped out Mr. Crowell. "What you deserve, Handforth, is a caning. But I will be lenient with you—knowing, as I do, that you are not quite a normal boy. But I shall not give you another chance!"

Handforth, his knuckles still tingling, gave it up as a bad job and groaningly settled down to lessons.

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CHAPTER 3.

Handy Plays for the Fourth!

"**T**HREE o'clock sharp, Handy," said Nipper briskly.

Dinner was over, and the pair had met in the Ancient House lobby. But Handforth did not appear to hear; he walked straight on.

"Did you hear?" shouted Nipper. "Three o'clock, sharp!"

"Eh? What are you talking about?" demanded Handforth, turning.

"Thinking about your play again?" asked Nipper patiently. "I'm terribly sorry, Handy, to break in on your weighty thoughts, but there's a Form match on this afternoon—Remove versus Fourth. There's some rumour that you'll be needed in goal."

"Oh, footer!" said Handforth impatiently. "You'd better leave me out."

"Oh, no!" said the Remove captain. "Last night, when I suggested playing Fatty Little in goal, you jibbed, and your name went on the list. You're playing, Handy."

"I don't want to play now—I shall be too busy."

"You're playing—and if you don't turn out we'll drag you out," said Nipper. "Play or no play, you're not going to cut footer. Footer's more important than play writing."

Handforth was dismayed. He began to sympathise with people he had read of in stories—people who were torn between love and duty. He hated missing footer, but he badly wanted to get on with his play. In the end, realising that Nipper had been in earnest—and that he was in danger of losing his place—he turned out. Church and McClure, who were playing back, were relieved. They had expected trouble.

"This'll do you good, Handy," said Church enthusiastically. "On a clear, brisk afternoon like this the game will put new life into you."

"I wanted to get that first act finished," grumbled Handforth.

"Yes, rather," said McClure. "Good luck to you, old man! But think of the good this exercise will do you. Think of the fresh air! It'll clear all the cobwebs out of your brain."

"There aren't any cobwebs in my brain," said Handforth coldly.

"Of course there aren't, old man," said Mac. "But when this game's over, and you've had a good tea, you'll be as fresh as paint. You'll be able to rattle off that

first act, and the second act, too. Don't forget, we've got to give the Fourth a licking this afternoon."

Things might have been all right if the Fourth-Formers had gained the ascendancy at the beginning of the game, thus giving Handforth plenty of work. But, as it happened, the Remove pressed hard, and most of the play was in the Fourth's half of the field. Handforth, in the Remove goal, had nothing whatever to do. As a natural consequence, he leaned dejectedly against one of the goalposts, and his mind drifted back to Sir Jasper and the Lady Ermyntrode, to say nothing of Captain Bludd and Simeon Stranglehold, the usurer.

Nipper scored a first-class goal for the Remove, but at the recommencement of the game the Fourth-Formers managed to break away. Buster Boots passed cleverly to Bob Christine, and Bob slipped the leather out to Oldfield, on the wing.

"Go it, the Fourth!" went up a yell.

Oldfield streaked down the touchline, centred neatly, and Christine was there. The Remove spectators were horrified to see Handforth still leaning negligently against the goalpost, utterly unconscious of what was happening.

"Look out, Handy!" went up a roar. "Wake up, you fathead!"

Slam!

Bob Christine made no mistake. He sent in a pile-driver which ripped into the open goalmouth and nearly went through the netting at the back.

"Goal!"

Nipper ran up, exasperated.

"Handy," he gasped, "are you dotty? Didn't you see——"

"By George, I've got it!" interrupted Handforth excitedly. "The curtain for the second act! Simeon Stranglehold comes in, and he finds Sir Jasper—— Eh? Hallo! What's happening?"

"My only sainted aunt!" groaned Nipper. "Here you are, thinking of your rotten play, and allowing the Fourth to score! Don't you know that Christine's just shot a goal? Don't you know that you let it go right past you?"

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Handforth. "I—I'd forgotten the game!"

Crowds of Fourth-Formers behind the net yelled with appreciation. Exasperated and indignant, the Remove players went back to their places, urgently called by the referee's whistle.

Handforth pulled himself together. But not for long. The game drifted back into the Fourth's half of the field, and there was another period of inactivity for Edward Oswald. Then the Fourth-Formers had another spell. Christine, breaking through, streaked for goal. This time he walked the leather right into the net, grinning cheerfully as he spotted Handforth's expression of horror—Handy having come to himself a second too late.

"You—you dummy!" roared Church, rushing up. "You're playing for the Fourth—

not the Remove! That's the second goal you've scored for the other side!"

"But—but I didn't see what was happening!" explained Handforth sorrowfully. "I was just planning the big dramatic scene in the second act."

"Go ahead and plan all you like," snorted Nipper. "But plan it somewhere else! The Remove will be far better off with ten men!"

"I'll—I'll buck up after this," promised Handforth penitently.

"No, you won't! You're not having another chance!" said Nipper. "Church, you'd better drop back into goal."

Handforth protested, but in vain. Nipper, as his captain, made it quite clear that his services were not required.

Ordinarily he would have been tremendously upset, and he would have done everything in his power to make amends. But he was so full of his great play that he soon forgot the footer match. He buried himself in Study D, and lost himself in his literary labours.

Meanwhile, the Remove performed wonders on Little Side. By valiant efforts Nipper and his men made a brilliant recovery. Nipper himself scored two goals, Reggie Pitt added another, and the Fourth-Formers were fairly run off their feet. With only ten men, the Remove conquered. Church, in goal, proved to be a tower of strength, and although the Fourth broke through on several occasions, never once did they get the ball past him. So the situation was saved, and the Fourth-Formers' early jubilation was silenced.

Church and McClure, having changed, went along to Study D with grim expressions on their faces. They entered noisily, but staggered back in the doorway. Study D was a sight. Papers were littered all over the floor; the table was strewn with odd sheets, and Edward Oswald Handforth, in his shirt-sleeves, and with his hair looking like a mop, was writing feverishly.

"My hat!" said Church. "When did the cyclone happen?"

Handforth looked up and waved an impatient hand.

"Clear out!" he snapped. "You can't come in here! The door's locked!"

"Fathead! We're in!"

"Well, you oughtn't to be in—I locked that door!" said Handforth impatiently. "Don't disturb me now!"

"We're going to have tea in this study—and you and your beastly play can go to the dickens," roared Church.

Handforth, his train of thought completely shattered, came back to earth.

"So the game's over?" he asked. "How did we get on?"

"We won—but no thanks to you!" said McClure coldly.

"Do you mean to say that the Remove won—with Churchy in goal?" asked Handforth in astonishment.

Church affected not to hear the slight on his goalkeeping prowess.

"Come on, Mac! Let's clear up a bit."

He picked up a couple of newspaper sheets, and flung them into the fire. Handforth leapt up with a yell of alarm.

"You—you idiot!" he bellowed. "Look what you've done!"

"What have I done?" asked Church. "They were only some bits of a newspaper."

"I've scribbled notes all down the margins!" yelled Handforth. "They're gone now!"

"So much the better," said Church calmly. "The more notes we can destroy, the sooner we'll have tea. Look at all the litter on this table!"

"It's not litter!" roared Handforth. "It's my play!"

But for once Church and McClure were determined. They were fed up to the teeth with Handforth, and they let him know it. Ruthlessly they commenced to clear the

table; and when he became war-like, and started punching, they punched back. Aggressive as Handforth was, two against one was no equal fight.

"It's no good kicking, we're going to have this table cleared!" said Church, brushing a smear of blood away from his cut lip. "If you want to write your play, you can write it somewhere else."

"This is my study," panted Handforth. "Why can't you go and have tea in Hall?"

"It's our study, too—and your play can wait until after we've eaten," said McClure. "What are these old scraps of paper? Chuck 'em in the fire, Churchy."

Handforth pounced upon them.

"That's my first act!" he hooted. "Oh, my hat! I can't stand this any longer!"

He gathered up his papers, his notes, and his pen and ink, and fled.

"Now we can get tea ready," said Church gruffly.



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Handforth, in desperation, locked himself in one of the bath-rooms. Here, at least, he would be free from interruptions.

Now, bath-room's are not ordinary apartments; and Handforth's subsequent actions must be put down to a psychological cause. Handforth's conscious mind was full of his great play, whilst his subconscious mind told him that he was in the bath-room. Mechanically, he went to the bath, put in the plug, and turned on both the taps. Even the splashing of the water did not distract him; it was the natural sound in a bath-room, and, if anything, it soothed his disordered thoughts.

As there was no table, he pulled at a cupboard door, and tore the flimsy hinges apart.

"Good egg!" he murmured, with satisfaction.

He placed the door on the wash-basin, and it formed an excellent desk. Pulling his chair up, he spread his papers out, got his pen ready, and commenced writing.

The taps continued to flow steadily and relentlessly.

CHAPTER 4.

Professor Tucker in Trouble!

PROFESSOR SYLVESTER TUCKER, the Science Master at St. Frank's, was busy.

Although it was tea-time, tea meant nothing to him. He was locked in his private laboratory, conducting a delicate chemical experiment. For the time being, he had forgotten astronomy—which, after all, was only his hobby. This experiment was connected with his work, and upon the result of it much depended. He was due to deliver a profound lecture to the Sixth later on in the evening, and his chemical experiment was for the purpose of proving a certain theory.

A bunsen burner was glowing under a big retort, and the retort was bubbling and sizzling merrily. It contained a reddish-brown liquid, and now and again a bubble of gaseous vapour would explode, sending forth a noxious odour.

"Three minutes," murmured the professor, as he peered at his watch. "Splendid! In another three, the reaction will take place. I am convinced that my theory is correct. In precisely three minutes the contents of this retort will abruptly change from a reddish-brown to a brilliant blue."

He moved along the bench, and busied himself with another retort. When that reaction took place, his plan was quickly to add another chemical.

Thirty seconds had elapsed when there was a curious "plop." It was instantly followed by a terrific puff, almost like a minor explosion. The professor, spinning round, saw a cloud of brown steam roar up from the retort.

"Upon my soul!" he ejaculated, startled.

The vapour caught him by the throat, and set him coughing; but he charged forward valiantly, and gazed at the retort closely. It was bubbling as before.

"Extraordinary!" murmured the professor, frowning. "I have never known——"

He broke off. Something, it seemed, had struck him on the top of his head, which was not covered with as many hairs as he would have liked. He gazed round, but there was nothing to account for the phenomenon.

"Really, I think I must be ill!" he said with concern, as he felt moisture on his forehead. "Dear me! Good gracious! Cold perspiration!"

It was certainly an astonishing discovery. The laboratory was warm—in fact, suffocatingly hot—and it was peculiar that the professor's brow should be running with a cold wetness.

Before he could think of any reasonable explanation, another explosion came from the retort, and a cloud of stifling vapour arose, filling the room: the liquid within the retort was seething ominously.

"Something is wrong!" panted the professor, backing away. "Yet I can swear that I placed the correct proportions——"

Boom!

The seething retort was in real earnest this time. It did not merely puff—it exploded. It was fortunate that the professor had backed away, for thus he escaped the sprays of boiling liquid. The vapour became as thick as fog. Staggering towards the door, the professor managed to find it, and he turned the key. He fell out into the passage, and a brown fog followed him.

He was far more annoyed than alarmed. This experiment, upon which he had counted so much, was a dismal failure. The theory that he had sought to prove was obviously wrong, and the professor could not understand why it was wrong. The thing was absurd. How could it be wrong? According to all his calculations, it could be nothing but right.

The pure air of the corridor quickly revived him, and the fumes were lessening. From the laboratory came an ominous "drip-drip-drip" of water. Even as the professor ventured into the laboratory, the sound changed; the "drip-drip" became a splashing stream.

"Good heavens!" shouted the professor, adjusting his spectacles and staring at the stream. "Water! There is water pouring through the ceiling! This—this is disastrous!"

From at least five points, water was pouring down into his precious laboratory. With a sudden chirrup of exultation, the professor knew that his experiment had not been wrong. This water, dripping from the ceiling, had fallen into the retort, and had caused the chemical to explode.

However, this was not much satisfaction. Nothing could alter the fact that the laboratory was becoming seriously flooded. Water was dripping down upon his bench, his chemical bottles, and his cupboards. Frantic, the professor ran out into the corridor again.

"Help!" he shouted.

Fenton, of the Sixth, being in the vicinity, heard the cry, and he at once came along to investigate. Fenton, was a sturdy, well-balanced fellow, not given to hallucinations, but as he came within sight of the professor he jumped about eighteen inches into the air.

He did not recognise the professor at all, and no wonder. The chemical vapour in which Professor Tucker had been wallowing was brown in nature, but a great deal of it had condensed on the professor's face and in condensing it had become a vivid green. The learned man's countenance was streaked grotesquely, and his hair—which was long everywhere except on the top—hung down in weird, matted masses. The professor, in fact, was giving a very excellent impersonation of the Old Man of the Sea.

"What on earth is happening here?" demanded Fenton, recovering himself and striding forward. "Who's fooling about —?"

"Ah! Is that you, Fenton?" panted the scientist.

"Great Scott! Professor Tucker!" gasped Fenton.

"Upon my word, man, you are not blind, are you?" snapped the professor. "Cannot you recognise me?"

"I—er—well, hardly, sir," said Fenton hastily. "Have—have you had an accident?"

"I have had no accident, Fenton," said the professor, with asperity. "But there has evidently been an accident to the roof! It is leaking like a sieve! Look at my laboratory! Flooded! My experiment ruined! The rain is simply cascading——"

"But it's not raining outside, sir."

"Not raining?" barked the professor. "Ridiculous! Absurd! If it is not raining, Fenton, how do you account for all this water? I gave you credit for more sense!"

Fenton strode into the laboratory, looked at the scene of desolation, and gazed up at the ceiling. His lips compressed. Fenton had a very good idea of the school's geography, and it only took him about five seconds to arrive at a possible explanation.

"You'd better go upstairs, sir, and get yourself cleaned," he suggested. "I'll attend to this. Somebody has been flooding one of the bath-rooms—that's why the water is pouring in here."

"Good heavens! You—you mean that—I see—I see!" said the professor excitedly. "Of course! I had overlooked the fact that the roof is not immediately over this room. Go, Fenton—go at once!"

Fenton went.

CHAPTER 5.

Handforth is "All Wet"!

EDGAR FENTON grasped the handle of the bath-room door and turned it. Nothing happened.

"Hallo!" he shouted loudly.

"Who's in here?"

There was no reply.

"Open this door!" roared Fenton, thumping on the panels.

Still there was no reply. The school captain became anxious. Water was streaming under the door, and he could hear the taps running. Perhaps there had been a tragedy!

Church and McClure came hurrying up—to be joined, a second later, by Nipper, Parkington, Travers, and a few others. They had been attracted to the scene by Fenton's shouting.

"What's wrong?" went up an amazed shout.

"I don't know—but it looks ugly," said Fenton. "The professor's laboratory is flooded, and I find that this bath-room is locked and the water taps are turned full on. I can't get any reply."

The juniors exchanged startled glances. Fenton began hammering on the door again.

"We'd better smash it in!" he said tensely. "Stand back, you chaps. I'm going to——"

"Can't you idiots go away?" came a sudden voice from within the bath-room.

Fenton started. He was both relieved and surprised.

"That was Handforth's voice!" he said grimly. "Handforth, what are you doing in this bath-room?"

"I'm busy!" came Handforth's voice. "Clear off! I'm just on the last lap, and within two or three minutes I shall be finished!"

"In two or three minutes you'll flood the school!" roared Fenton. "What are you playing at, you young idiot?"

Handforth, within the bath-room, had been engrossed—until a few moments ago—in his play; so much so that he had known nothing of what was going on around him; had been oblivious of everything. He had been writing furiously ever since he had locked himself in. Free at last from interruptions, he had had an orgy of writing. His great play had progressed splendidly.

But now he was brought to a realisation of things. Fenton's bellowing voice bothered him—and then he suddenly realised that it was Fenton's voice. Fenton was the head prefect, and he could not be ignored.

Handforth looked impatiently round at the door. Then he blinked. His jaw sagged.

"My only Uncle Jehosaphat!" he gurgled in horror.

The bath was full—overflowing. Water was pouring over the side in a steady stream, adding to the flood on the floor; and the floor, as Handforth could see, was inches deep with water!

He sprang to his feet in amazement.



Handy the playwright had forgotten all about footer—and Christine calmly walked the ball into the net.

"Hi!" he howled. "Something's happened! The room's flooded!"

"Didn't you know it, you young dolt?" came Fenton's angry voice. "Open this door!"

Handforth splashed across the room in a rare state of alarm. He unlocked the door, flung it open—and the flood swept out into the corridor.

It was like the sudden opening of lock gates in a river. With a swirl and a swish, the water rushed out. Fenton, caught in the full deluge, found the water splashing up nearly to his knees. Church and McClure and the other juniors dashed back, but not until they had been soaked.

"Oh, my hat!" said Handforth blankly.

The flood, triumphantly continuing its course, raced down the corridor, to expend itself exultantly down the stairs. A good deal of it flowed direct from the landing and straight down to the lobby. Several Fifth-Formers, chatting there, were half-drowned in the cascade. Biggleswade, coming upstairs, was met by the flood, and it was too late for him to escape. He was swamped.

"You—you dangerous young lunatic!" snapped Fenton, seizing Handforth by the

shoulder and swinging him round. "What do you mean by flooding this bath-room and creating all this havoc? Do you think it's funny?"

"I—I—I——" stuttered Handforth.

"Stay here until I come out!" ordered Fenton, dashing into the bath-room.

He rapidly turned off the taps, pulled out the plug, and the water began to subside. Fenton glanced round, saw the cupboard door on the wash-basin, and the litter of papers. The juniors were crowding in, too, and grins were passing freely to and fro.

"What's all this?" demanded Fenton, pointing.

"I say, you know, I'm awfully sorry—really!" said Handforth earnestly. "I don't know how those taps got turned on. I didn't turn them on."

"Nonsense!" said Fenton. "You were in this room, and the door was locked. If you didn't turn the taps on, who did?"

"Well, I must have done it unconsciously," said Handforth. "I'm most dreadfully sorry, Fenton! Don't be ratty."

Fenton looked at the burly junior in a very straight way. Handforth's earnestness

was genuine. He was really deeply concerned—and honestly penitent.

"Well, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt," said Fenton gruffly. "You turned the taps on unconsciously—and forgot them, eh? But why did you forget them? What on earth could you have been doing to distract your mind so much? What's all this litter over by the wash-basin?"

"My play."

"Your what?" yelled Fenton.

"My play, of course," said Handforth defiantly. "I'm writing a play for Mr. Russell Warburton, the famous West End producer."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

K. K. and Travers and the others yelled with laughter; but Fenton did not think the situation particularly funny.

"You hopeless young duffer!" he said, exasperated. "So you're writing a play, are you? And, in the writing of it, you do your best to flood the House? Well, I'm sorry for you, Handforth! Knowing you to be an irresponsible young lunatic, I might find it in my heart to forgive you. But I very much doubt if the Housemaster will take the same view. You'll come with me at once."

"I can't come now, Fenton!" protested Handforth. "Be reasonable! I'm in the middle of writing the last scene——"

"There'll be another scene—in Mr. Wilkes' study—before you do any more writing," interrupted Fenton. "It won't be a pleasant scene, either—or a painless one. In fact, after it's over, you'll be in too much pain to do any more writing. Come on!"

Fenton seized the big Removite, but Handforth wrenched himself away.

"Wait a tick!" he gasped. "I'm not going to leave my play here! These fat-heads will grab it and put it in the fire, or something!"

"He must be a thought-reader," murmured Travers, grinning.

Handforth seized the sheets of his precious play and stuffed them in sundry pockets. Then he allowed himself to be led away.

His interview with Mr. Wilkes was rather painful. The Housemaster was a kindly man, but he could not overlook Handforth's offence. However, the burly Removite only received a mild caning. Mr. Wilkes realised that Handforth's actions had not been wilful, and the damage caused had not proved serious.

Handforth came out of the Housemaster's study with smarting palms, but even now his enthusiasm was undeterred. Whilst the Remove chuckled hugely over the whole affair, Handforth locked himself in a box-room, and, by the light of a candle, he finished his play. He had been on the last lap, anyhow, and he gave a chirrup of joy as he wrote the final words.

"Well, that's that!" he murmured, taking a deep breath. "And if that hundred quid isn't mine, I'll eat my footer boots!"

His optimism was to be admired; but, apparently, he was booked for a very indigestible meal.

CHAPTER 6.

Nipper's Brainwave!

CHURCH and McClure were busy at their prep. when Handforth triumphantly entered Study D.

"Well, here we are," he said briskly. "Clear all that rubbish off the table! I've got to get busy."

His chums gave him a startled look.

"You can have the end of the table, if you like," said Church. "Can't you see we're busy with our prep.?"

"Never mind your prep.," replied Handforth, as he planked his papers down on the end of the table. "I've got to get to work on my play."

"Isn't it finished?" asked Church anxiously.

"Yes."

"Then what do you mean?"

"I can't send it to Mr. Warburton in this state, can I?" said Handforth. "This is only a rough copy. I've got to put it into ship-shape. Type it, in fact."

"Type it?" yelled McClure. "But you can't use a typewriter!"

"Anybody can use a typewriter after a bit of practice," replied Handforth confidently. "I'm going to borrow that machine from the prefects' room——"

"Ass! They won't let you take it!"

"I'll get it somehow!" declared Handforth. "I shall want you chaps to help me. You'll have to read the play out, and I'll type it——"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Church, getting to his feet. "It's about time we had a thorough understanding, Handy. Mac and I are sick of your play."

"Why, you—you mutinous rotters——"

"Writing your play was bad enough, but when it comes to typing it out we're putting our foot down," went on Church. "We're not going to have this study turned upside down for the next two or three days. Don't be an ass, Handy! Why don't you take your play down to Miss Topper, in the village?"

Miss Topper?" asked Handforth, staring.

"Don't stand there looking like a dummy!" snorted Church. "You know Miss Topper does typewriting for all sorts of people—mostly by post. She advertises in the 'Bannington Gazette.' She'll type your play—and type it properly."

Handforth sniffed.

"What about paying for it? I'm nearly broke," he replied.

"Leave that to us," said Church.

He and McClure dashed off to the Common-room and put the position before the other Removites.

"For goodness' sake, be sports!" urged Church. "Help us! If Handy types that play in Stud. D we shan't get any peace for the rest of the week!"

"What do you want us to do?" asked Nipper.

"Well, how about getting up a round robin—& subscription?" asked Church. "A

bob or so each all round, and we can raise the money. Handy's broke, and that's why he's got this potty idea of typing the play himself. Come on—be sporting!"

The Removites cottoned on, and grinningly they contributed their shillings and half-crowns. Handforth's chums then dashed back to Study D. Edward Oswald was sitting at the table with his play in an untidy heap in front of him. Church grabbed it while the grabbing was good.

"Hi! What are you doing?" yelled Handforth.

"This is your play, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"All complete?"

"Yes."

"Good egg!" said Church. "Come on, Mac!"

They raced out, with Handforth after them. He had an idea they were going to throw his precious play into the dustbin. But he was reassured when they explained that they were on their way to Miss Topper, in the village. When he saw the colour of their money he was even more relieved. After all, he concluded, it would be better to have the play typed out properly.

MISS TOPPER, a businesslike young lady, promised to have the play fully typed and ready by the following evening, complete with the various parts—and including a carbon copy for Handforth's own use. She had been rather dubious at first after looking at the appallingly scrawled manuscript, but when Church dumped a handful of silver on her table she was willing enough.

Handforth's chums returned to St. Frank's feeling that they had scored a triumph. The Remove was relieved, too.

The next evening Miss Topper arrived, bright and smiling, with the typescript as promised. There were two copies—one to be sent away, and the other for Handforth to keep. In the Common-room Handforth showed his play to all and sundry with tremendous pride. It certainly looked imposing now; it bore a resemblance to a real play. Miss Topper had performed wonders. How she had sorted out the untidy sheets, and how she had made order out of chaos, was little short of marvellous.

"This is going off to Mr. Warburton to-night," Handforth was saying. "I shall register it, of course. The very title ought to appeal to him. 'The Curse of Strangers! A Romantic Drama of the Middle Ages.'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?" asked Handforth, frowning. "This isn't a comic opera!"

"It may not be an opera, but I'll bet it's comic," grinned Tommy Watson.

"Why, you silly ass, it's thrilling—gripping—breathless drama," said Handforth. "When this play is produced in the West End——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"At the Emperor Theatre," went on Handforth, glaring, "it'll be the rage of London."

"You'll be treading on Edgar Wallace's corns unless you're careful," said Travers, shaking his head.

"Fathead! How do you know he's got any corns?" demanded Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, poaching on his preserves," amended Travers.

"Don't be dotty," scoffed Handforth.

"This play of mine isn't like one of Edgar Wallace's."

"I'll bet it isn't!" said Parkington, with conviction.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There are crooks in it, but they're medieval crooks," continued Handforth enthusiastically. "And as soon as this is produced at the Emperor Theatre I'll have all the talkie kings after me."

"You're more likely to have the lunatic asylum keepers after you, old man," said Travers solemnly. "But they'll probably grab Mr. Warburton first for being dotty enough to produce your play!"

Handforth took no notice of the chipping. It was his personal opinion that the other Removites were jealous.

NIPPER made a rather interesting discovery the next day.

He had gone into Bannington with Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West, and they had paused to read a big bill concerning a forthcoming charity bazaar, to be held at the Victoria Hall. The Study C trio would not have troubled to read that bill, only they knew that Mr. and Mrs. Wilkes were interested in the bazaar and were working actively, in conjunction with the vicar and many other prominent local ladies and gentlemen, to further the good cause. The boys had heard one or two references to the bazaar, and it was generally understood that Mr. Wilkes' boys, at least, would turn up in force.

"I suppose we shall have to go," said Tommy Watson, without enthusiasm. "I'm not keen on bazaars myself."

"Look at this," said Nipper, with a curious note in his voice. "Rather a coincidence, isn't it?"

He pointed to a name on the bill, prominently displayed.

"Mr. Russell Warburton, begad!" said Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez. "Haven't I heard that name before, dear old boy?"

"Well, I should think so," grinned Nipper. "Mr. Russell Warburton is the big West End producer, the man who was overjoyed this morning to receive Handy's great play."

"My hat!" said Tommy Watson.

"He's interested in this charity bazaar, and he'll be down in Bannington for the opening," went on Nipper. "He's due to make one of the big speeches. By Jove!"

"Surely there's a possibility of some fun here?"

"Fun?" repeated Sir Montie. "How?"

"A charity bazaar—Mr Russell Warburton—Handy and his play," murmured Nipper. "Let me think this out, my sons!"

He thought it out to some purpose. In fact, he got a brainwave. Back at St. Frank's, Nipper lost no time in going straight to Mr. Alington Wilkes. The bazaar was to be held in less than a week, and there was not a minute to be lost.

"Come in, Nipper, old man," said Mr. Wilkes cordially. "Always glad when you boys call on me. Take a pew. Make yourself at home."

"Thanks awfully, sir," said Nipper, sitting down. "You've heard about Handforth's play, haven't you?"

"I believe I've heard a few rumours," admitted Old Wilkey cautiously.

"Handy got the idea of writing it after seeing a paragraph in the morning papers, sir," said Nipper, with a smile. "Mr. Warburton, the producer, is offering a hundred pounds for a good plot. But Handy wasn't satisfied with that. He wrote the whole play, and sent the script to Mr. Warburton last night."

"Poor Handforth!" sighed Old Wilkey.

"But I've thought of a wheeze, sir, where Handforth's play might come in useful, after all," said Nipper eagerly. "How about producing it at this big charity bazaar, at the Victoria Hall?"

Mr. Wilkes sat up, his eyes twinkling.

"Sounds good," he admitted. "It sounds distinctly good. You mean, produce it yourselves—you boys?"

"Yes, sir—with the help of some of the Moor View girls."

"Better still," said Mr. Wilkes. "By all means have some of the girls in it."

"Handy thinks it's a full-length play, but, of course, it isn't," went on Nipper. "I don't think it will run for more than three-quarters of an hour."

"An amateur play, performed by St. Frank's boys and Moor View girls, is quite attractive," said Mr. Wilkes approvingly. "Anything to bring money in, eh? An excellent wheeze, Nipper! I'll see to it. You'd better send Handforth to me——"

"Wait a minute, sir—that's only half my idea," interrupted Nipper. "I thought—Well, you're a sport, Mr. Wilkes. I thought it would be rather a good stunt to spoof Handy over this."

Mr. Wilkes twiddled with his straggly moustache.

"Spoof him?" he repeated. "What are you trying to do, young man? Make me a party to some of your larks?"

"Well, the fact is, sir, Handy will go off the deep end if we suggest producing his play just for a charity bazaar," said Nipper. "He'll kick up an awful fuss, and he'll probably refuse to let us do it. He's got a bee in his bonnet about that play, you see. He thinks Mr. Warburton will accept it, and

produce it at the Emperor Theatre. He's an awful optimist, you know, sir."

"To say nothing of being an awful chump," murmured Mr. Wilkes. "Well?"

"As you probably knew, sir, Mr. Warburton himself is interested in this bazaar, too," said Nipper. "He'll be at the opening."

"H'm! I begin to see daylight," said the Housemaster, chuckling.

"If we approach Mr. Warburton he won't take any notice of us," continued Nipper, "but if you put it to him he'd cotton on. Twig, sir? What we want you to do is to get in touch with Mr. Warburton, so that Mr. Warburton will write to Handy and tell him that his play will be utilised for a try-out performance at this charity bazaar."

"Hold on! Hold on!" said Mr. Wilkes. "Mr. Warburton can't commit himself to anything like that."

"He needn't commit himself at all, sir," urged Nipper. "He could just say the play is to be produced—and by St. Frank's boys and Moor View girls. Coming from Mr. Warburton, Handy will be as pleased as a dog with two tails. The bazaar will benefit, Handy's play will be produced—which ought to please him, seeing that it won't be produced in any other way—and everybody will get a good laugh. What about it, sir?"

Mr. Wilkes chuckled and then laughed outright.

"Well, there's nothing like striking while the iron's hot," he said dryly. "I'll write to Mr. Warburton this evening—while he's still got Handforth's precious play in front of him. After all, considering the commotion Handforth caused over the writing of that play, he deserves to be spoofed, doesn't he?"

CHAPTER 7.

Great News for Handy!

DURING the next day, Nipper quietly passed the word round amongst the Removites—and even amongst the Moor View girls, too.

Mum, of course, was the word. Handforth did not suspect a thing. And there were many private chuckles over the prospect. The charity bazaar, which the fellows had hitherto regarded as a frightful bore, became a subject of intense interest.

Next morning, Handforth nearly had a fit when he took a letter out of the rack. Church and McClure had led him there casually, instigated by Nipper. If Mr. Wilkes had written, as promised, and if Mr. Warburton had replied, as expected, Handy ought to have a letter to-day. The letter had arrived.

There it was—an important-looking business-sized envelope—and Edward Oswald's eyes bulged when he read "Emperor Theatre" in the top left-hand corner.

"From your pater?" asked Church innocently.

"No fear!" roared Handforth. "Great Scott! Hi! Come here everybody! It's come!"



"Wilt wed me on the morrow, fair maid?" asked Handforth. Mr. Pycraft blinked, snorted, then advanced threateningly.

"My only hat!" gasped Church. "What's come?"

"My cheque!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"My cheque for a hundred quid!" yelled Handforth excitedly.

"Don't be an ass, Handy," said Church, with haste. "You haven't even opened the letter yet!"

"But my play can't be in here—there's not room," said Handforth. "So it stands to reason that it has been accepted! And if it's been accepted, why shouldn't the cheque be here?"

It seemed logic, but Church and McClure, being "in the know," urged Handforth not to be too optimistic. He opened the letter—and drew out a single sheet of typewriting.

"Hallo! There's no cheque, after all!" he said breathlessly. "Still, that doesn't matter. The cheque will follow, I suppose."

By this time, Nipper and Travers and Parkington and Jimmy Potts and De Valerie and a crowd of others had come up. They collected round in an interested group.

"Something important?" asked Nipper with interest.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" breathed Handforth, looking up from the letter with

wild eyes. "I knew it! What did I tell you all along? My play is to be produced!"

"Good old Handy!" said Nipper heartily.

"Congratters, old man!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good luck, Handy!"

"Rather!"

The juniors swarmed round, voicing their congratulations. They did so enthusiastically, boisterously.

"Now, you chumps, what about it?" demanded Handforth, looking at Church and McClure. "I thought you said my play was coming back?"

"We must have been wrong," said Church. "Well, there's nobody more pleased than we are, Handy. Where is your play going to be produced—at the Emperor Theatre, as you expected?"

A cloud came over Handforth's rugged countenance.

"Well, no," he said slowly. "That's rather a snag."

"Not at the Emperor?" asked Nipper. "Some other West End theatre, perhaps?"

Handforth coughed.

"Well, the fact is, Mr. Warburton is interested in this big charity bazaar in

Bannington," he said reluctantly. "You've heard something about it, haven't you?"

"Charity bazaar?" asked Nipper, his brow puckering. "Why, yes, of course. Isn't it going to be held at the Victoria Hall?"

"That's it—and Mr. Warburton suggests that my play should be produced for the benefit of the charity bazaar," said Handforth. "He doesn't actually say so, but it's obviously a try-out performance. If it goes well at the bazaar, he'll accept it for production in London."

"Does he say that—or hint it?"

"Well, it speaks for itself," replied Handforth. "Why should he want to see the play if he didn't have an idea of accepting it?"

"That's true."

"He says he'll be keenly interested to watch the performance—particularly as the play has been submitted to him with a view to its production at the Emperor Theatre," continued Handforth, glancing at the letter. "That's plain enough, isn't it? He just wants to see how it'll go. The trouble is he insists upon the play being acted by you Remove chaps, with some of the Moor View girls."

A buzz of excitement went round—just as though this was the first the fellows had heard of it.

"By Jove, that's rather good!" said Nipper eagerly. "He wants us to act it?"

"Yes."

"Then we're with you, Handy!" said Nipper with enthusiasm. "By Jove, old man, we'll put it across for you! We haven't got much time, but we'll score a triumph. We'll make that play an absolute scream!"

"What do you mean—a scream?" asked Handforth coldly. "It's a serious drama!"

"Ahem! I mean, we'll make it a success," said Nipper hastily. "We'd better get in touch with the girls at once. We shall have to give the parts out. There's not much time to learn them. And there must be rehearsals, too."

"Who's going to produce this play—you or me?" asked Handforth, with some impatience. "I can see Mr. Warburton's idea all right—but it's a dotty idea. You chaps will mess the whole thing up!"

"Still, you can't refuse," said Nipper. "If you did that, Mr. Warburton wouldn't look at your play again. He's asked to see it—and you've got to show it to him. And I think you can trust us to do the best we can, Handy."

"We'll rally round, old man," said K. K. Parkington. "We'll put it across brilliantly."

Handforth forgot all about his breakfast; he rushed off to the Moor View School to tell Irene Manners all about it. The girls were only too eager, of course to help. They promised to be on hand that afternoon in the Ancient House Lecture Hall. Rehearsals were to commence immediately. Fortunately, it was a half-holiday.

"I'm afraid we're going to have a bit of trouble over this," said Nipper confidentially to a group of Removites. "Mr. Warburton

can't produce the play himself—which is lucky for him—and it's a cert that Handy will want to do all the directing."

"That'll mean chaos," said Harry Gresham, shaking his head.

"With Handy as producer, we shan't progress a yard," went on Nipper. "There's only three days, anyhow. The whole thing is being rushed through."

"The quicker, the better," said Travers, grinning. "We'll have some good sport out of it. Amateur theatricals are never any good when they're dragged out too long—they get wearisome. And what does it matter if everything goes wrong on the night? The more it goes wrong, the better! We can easily think of lines better than Handy's."

"That's true," admitted Nipper with a chuckle. "Still, unless there's some sort of order in the rehearsals we shan't get anywhere. Well, we'll see what happens."

Mr. Warburton, in his letter, had kindly promised to send down all the necessary costumes for the production of the play. They were, in fact, on the train already. Mr. Warburton had further said that he would be in Bannington himself, and he would superintend the preparation of some special scenery. As it was for charity, he was only too glad to do his bit.

IRENE MANNERS came over that afternoon with Doris Berkeley, Marjorie Temple, Mary Summers, and two or three other girls. A goodly proportion of Removites collected in the Lecture Hall, too. Handforth bustled about, very important.

"Well, girls, you all know what's in the wind, don't you?" he asked briskly. "We've got to get this play thoroughly produced between now and Saturday. It'll mean hard work. There are seven or eight important characters, and about as many minor characters. These last don't matter much—anybody can fill them."

"Who's going to play the hero, Ted?" asked Irene.

"I am," replied Handforth promptly. "I'm going to play Dick Handsome, and you're going to play Lady Ermyntrode Divine."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The fellows tried not to laugh, but they couldn't help it. The idea of Handforth taking the part of "Dick Handsome" was distinctly funny.

"We need a good actor for the part of Sir Jasper Strangeways, too," continued Handforth. "How about you, Nipper?"

"I'm game," said Nipper readily.

"All right—you'll be Sir Jasper Strangeways, Lady Ermyntrode's father."

"But how can he be Lady Ermyntrode's father if Lady Ermyntrode's surname is Divine?" asked Parkington.

"Eh? What does it matter?" asked Handforth. "Lady Ermyntrode is the heroine. I couldn't give her a name like Strangeways, could I?"

"But if it's her father's name——"

"Oh, don't quibble!" said Handforth impatiently. "Divine was a lot better name—so the heroine is called Lady Ermytrude Divine. Are we going to waste all the afternoon arguing?"

"Go ahead," said Parkington, grinning.

"I think you'd better play Colonel Bludd," went on Handforth. "It'll just suit you, K. K., with your mop of carrot hair."

"My what hair?" asked K. K., turning pink.

"Colonel Bludd is Dick Handsome's pal—a bit of a highwayman really," explained Handforth. "But he's a decent sort, and he turns up trumps in the last act."

"A highwayman—in the Middle Ages?" asked Nipper politely.

"Why not?" demanded Handforth. "Sir Jasper Strangeways is in the clutches of the villain—Simeon Stranglehold. You'd better play Simeon Stranglehold, Travers."

"Thanks most awfully, dear old fellow."

"Simeon Stranglehold is a usurer, a rotter of the worst sort," went on Handforth. "He's got a mortgage on Castle Strangeways, and he's trying to force Sir Jasper into letting him marry the Lady Ermytrude. See? Sir Jasper is just about to sign, when Colonel Bludd pops in and holds everybody up with his pistols. And Dick Handsome grabs the Lady Ermytrude—that's you, Irene—and kidnaps her."

"It sounds awfully thrilling," said Irene, trying hard to prevent herself laughing.

"Thrilling? It's one big thrill from beginning to end!" declared Handforth. "In the last act, Detective-inspector Gripp, of Scotland Yard, unmasks himself—until then he's been disguised as a footman."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Anything funny in that?" asked Handforth, glaring round.

"My dear ass, you can't have a Scotland Yard man in a play about the Middle Ages," said Parkington kindly. "There wasn't a Scotland Yard in the Middle Ages—or any detective-inspectors, either!"

Handforth waved an airy hand.

"Author's license," he said calmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Detective-inspector Gripp is assisted by Jonathan Wild, the thief-taker," continued Handforth. "I thought about bringing Dick Turpin in, but he would have clashed with Colonel Bludd."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The idea of Jonathan Wild appearing in a medieval play—many centuries before his time—was distinctly funny. However, this play would probably be a scream from start to finish—although Handforth did not know it!

CHAPTER 8.

Mr. Pycraft Backs a "Wrong 'Un"!

THAT was the cream of the whole situation; Handforth regarded his play as a romantic drama—one which would keep the audience glued to their seats with suspense and tension. The other

fellows intended to burlesque it, as it deserved—and put over in that way it would probably be extremely funny. But, of course, not a word of their intentions did the fellows breathe to the distinguished author.

And the distinguished author, very excited, proceeded with the first rehearsal. Having allotted the parts, he immediately started on the job.

"Now, we'll take the first scene," he said briskly. "Sir Jasper Strangeways is in his library, all alone. He is pacing up and down feverishly. Who's Sir Jasper Strangeways?"

"I think I am," said Nipper.

"Well, go ahead—pace up and down feverishly."

"Wait a minute—let's have a look at the script," said Nipper. "Don't I say anything?"

"All you do is to mutter to yourself—and look terribly anxious," said Handforth.

"Then you hear the sound of horses' hoofs outside. As you turn to the door, the Lady Ermytrude trips in——"

"That's not fair," interrupted Travers. "You can't expect Irene to fall headlong into the library at her first appearance."

"What do you mean—fall headlong?"

"Didn't you say she 'trips' in?" asked Travers. "What does she trip on—the threshold?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly fathead!" roared Handforth. "She trips in—she glides in, if you like. Don't take any notice of these asses, Renie. Just go over there, and pretend to trip into the library, will you? As soon as you enter, the big french windows open, and Dick Handsome—that's me—dashes in."

They tried it, but it was a hopeless failure. Handforth dashed in at the wrong moment, the Lady Ermytrude nearly tripped in reality, and Sir Jasper became so feverish that all the other members of the cast were helpless with laughter.

When Handforth tried it again, he gave conflicting orders, and within ten minutes the confusion was so great that nobody knew who anybody else was, and the scene, by some strange process, had changed to an opium den in the East End. Handforth had turned over a few pages of the script without noticing it.

One thing had now become certain. Handforth was useless as a producer.

"We need somebody who isn't in the cast to produce this play," said Nipper firmly.

"An outsider—a chap who can have full authority. I suggest Browne, of the Fifth."

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "We're not going to have any silly Fifth-Formers in this!"

"Browne is cool-headed and brainy," continued Nipper. "He has produced amateur plays before, and he knows his job. He's a sport, and he'll help us if we only put it to him."

"Yes, rather!" chorused the others.

"Hands up for inviting Browne to become the producer," said Nipper briskly.

Every member of the cast raised his or her hand without hesitation. Handforth looked disgusted. He could see that he would have to agree. If he didn't the cast would go on strike, the play would never be produced, and Mr. Warburton wouldn't see the masterpiece. So the members of the cast had their way.

William Napoleon Browne, the lean, lanky, genial captain of the Fifth, was invited to attend. He listened to the proposition with a grave face.

"A scaly enough outlook, Brother Nipper, but I will grapple with this problem to the best of my ability," he said at length. "You desire me, then, to take full command? I am to have undisputed authority?"

"That's it," said Nipper.

"You could not, of course, have come to a better man," said Browne. "I think I can state, without exaggeration, that my qualifications as a play producer are unimpeachable. Brothers and sisters, let us hobnob."

Browne was one hundred per cent efficient—when he really gave his mind to a thing. He entered into the spirit of this enterprise, and before an hour had elapsed astonishing results were being obtained. The rehearsal went on smoothly. Browne conquered all difficulties. His coolness, his geniality, surmounted every obstacle. Even Handforth, at the end of that hour, began to see that

the fellows and girls had been right. A strong hand was needed here—the hand of an outsider, who was not personally interested in the play.

Browne, naturally, had had a confidential little chat with Nipper, and he quite understood that the play was to be produced "straight" until the actual night—so that Handforth would not get suspicious. When the public performance came, however, the cast would give their own individual interpretations of their parts.

Before tea-time, the session was over. Each boy or girl had been given his or her part, and Browne gave instructions that there was to be another rehearsal to-morrow evening. In the meantime, the youthful actors and actresses were to learn their parts until they were word perfect.

"Do not hesitate to come to me, brothers or sisters, if you meet with any snags," said Browne, as he was dismissing them. "You will always find me at my permanent address. Telegrams, 'Efficiency, St. Frank's.' Make a note of it."

Not that Browne allowed the matter to drop until the next day. That evening he went about from study to study, ascertaining how the various members of the cast were getting on. He gave a suggestion here, and lent a hand there.

The next day Removites were discovered mooning about the Triangle muttering



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Handforth's idiotic lines. But, as all the other fellows knew what was in the wind, there were no serious misunderstandings.

There could be no question, however, that Mr. Horace Pycraft, the weedy, inquisitive master of the Fourth, received something of a shock that afternoon.

Nosing about, as was his custom, he happened to spot Handforth strolling into the shrubbery with Irene Manners. It was really none of Mr. Pycraft's business; for all he knew, they might have been going to explore the monastery ruins. Anyhow, Mr. Pycraft felt that it was his duty to hang about a bit. Presently he ventured into the shrubbery and peered cautiously into the open space beyond. What he saw gave him a shock.

Irene Manners was seated on a log, and Handforth, on his knees, was debasing himself before her.

"Good heavens!" breathed Mr. Pycraft, scandalised.

He crept nearer.

"I beseech thee, fair damsel, to gaze favourably upon my wooing," Handforth was saying, with passionate earnestness. "Wilt thou not seal the bargain with a kiss?"

"Nay, nay, bold sir," faltered Irene. "Thou art surely forgetting thyself!"

"Not likely—— I—I mean, thy bewitching charm: have entranced me," said Handforth stoutly. "Thy wondrous eyes are like pools of crystal liquid! Fair maid, give me hope! Say that thou wilt wed me on the morrow!"

"But this is so sudden, brave knight!" said Irene demurely.

Mr. Pycraft positively gulped.

"Upon my word!" he panted. "This is absurd! A mere schoolboy proposing marriage to a schoolgirl! I certainly regard it as my duty to intervene!"

He strode forward, bristling. Handforth leapt to his feet and Irene stood up hastily. Both looked somewhat flustered.

"Handforth! What is the meaning of this?" demanded Mr. Pycraft acidly.

"The meaning of what, sir?"

"You know very well what I am talking about," said Mr. Pycraft. "Have you taken leave of your wits, Handforth? How dare you propose marriage to this—this young girl!"

"Oh, my only aunt!" gurgled Irene, under her breath.

"But you don't understand, sir!" ejaculated Handforth. "I wasn't proposing marriage——"

"I distinctly heard you!"

"But I didn't really mean it, sir——"

"That makes your conduct all the worse!" snapped Mr. Pycraft. "I distinctly heard you ask this girl to kiss you! I am shocked, Handforth!"

"One moment, Brother Handforth," said a smooth voice. "Perhaps I can be of some assistance in this trifling dilemma?"

William Napoleon Browne appeared from the bushes just ahead. Mr. Pycraft started, and looked at him rather guiltily.

"What—what are you doing here, Browne?" he demanded.

"Much as it pains me to butt in, Mr. Pycraft, I fear you are labouring under a slight delusion," said Browne. "What you have witnessed was merely a scene from Brother Handforth's big play."

"Play?" asked Mr. Pycraft uncomprehendingly.

"I would point out that Brother Handy and Sister Irene are members of my cast," said Browne. "They are merely rehearsing, and much as I dislike mentioning the fact, I would point out you are holding up the entire scene."

"Rehearsing!" ejaculated Mr. Pycraft, suddenly looking foolish. "Oh, I see! A play! Good gracious me, Handforth! Why didn't you say so before?"

"You didn't give me a chance, sir."

Mr. Pycraft, utterly squashed, retired in confusion.

CHAPTER 9.

Handy the Optimist!

BY Saturday William Napoleon Browne was looking haggard, worn and weary. He had accepted his duties with a light heart; but two or three days of intensive rehearsals had left their mark.

"I'll bet you're glad it's Saturday," said Stevens sympathetically, as he and Browne came downstairs. "No more rehearsals after to-night."

"I will confess, Brother Horace, that the prospect of a peaceful morrow appeals to me."

"These rehearsals are the very dickens," agreed Stevens, "and those Remove youngsters must have been giving you a regular twisting."

"Make no mistake, Brother Horace," said Browne firmly. "The Remove youngsters have displayed singular patience and aptitude. I could rehearse them for months without showing, or feeling, any ill effects. It is the play itself which has worn me down."

"The play?"

"No man—not even Samson himself—could stand the strain of listening to those lines hour after hour, day after day, without wilting," said Browne. "Believe me or not, I dream about them. I catch myself sitting up in bed in the middle of the night mouthing them. They are indelibly impressed upon my brain—and, Brother, Horace, I fear for my sanity."

"Well, it's about time," said Stevens. "I've been fearing for it for some months."

"A wisecrack, as the Americans would say, Brother Horace, which is singularly lacking in wisdom," said Browne severely. "Get thee hence, scullion—— That is to

say, permit me to take my leave of you and seek out the heroes of the Remove."

The members of the cast had a pleasant surprise that morning. Mr. Wilkes, in the interests of charity, excused them from lessons. They afterwards learned that it was Browne who had put this idea into Mr. Wilkes' head—just as he put it into Miss Bond's. The headmistress of the Moor View School readily permitted Irene Manners and Doris Berkeley to stay away from lessons.

In the Ancient House Lecture Hall, whilst the rest of the school was at work, the company held a final rehearsal—a full dress rehearsal this time. So assiduously had Browne laboured that the play went through without a single serious hitch.

The youthful actors and actresses entered into the spirit of the "Romantic Drama" with gusto. Openly, glaringly, they burlesqued their parts—Handforth burlesquing his without knowing he was doing so. And the absence of any audience led Handforth to believe that his play was a roaring success.

Browne was wise in his generation; he had deliberately "wangled" this rehearsal whilst everybody else was at work. An audience, he knew, would have howled with laughter, and Handforth would have known the dread truth before the appointed hour. As it was, he suspected nothing. He was being spoofed right up to the final minute. The truth would not burst upon him until his play was in full swing—with the public present. If Browne was troubled by any qualms that this was unkind to Handforth, he thrust those qualms aside. Any fellow who could write a play like that thoroughly deserved everything that was coming to him.

"Brothers and sisters, allow me to congratulate you," said Browne, after the curtain. "Without the slightest exaggeration I can say that you have done wonders."

"Speak for yourself, Browne," said Nipper. "You're the producer, and most of the credit goes to you. I rather think we shall be all right to-night, don't you? The play ought to go through with huge success."

"If the good people of Bannington are wise, they will roll up in their thousands," said Browne, "for it will be many a long day before they have another opportunity of such a laugh. I only trust that the roof of the Victoria Hall will stand the strain."

"Laugh?" repeated Handforth.

"Did I say laugh?" murmured Browne. "I should have said 'treat,' of course. Be of good cheer, Brother Handy. Mr. Russell Warburton will be in the front to-night, and if he is still conscious when your play is over, I predict that— But, no. I cannot predict with any accuracy what Mr. Warburton's reactions will be."

"What do you mean—if he's still conscious?" asked Handforth, puzzled.

The Fifth-Former coughed discreetly.

"Surely, Brother Handy, you must realise that Brother Warburton is liable to be stunned?" said Browne smoothly. "However, let us dismiss the matter. Our dress rehearsal has been a success, and all is now plain sailing. Let us, therefore, seek to refresh ourselves so that we shall be strengthened for the coming ordeal."



"Open the door!" bellowed Fenton. Handf

THE bazaar itself opened in the early afternoon, and it was a great success from the very beginning.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilkes were much in evidence, Mrs. Wilkes having a stand of her own. Many other prominent people were there, including the Mayor and Mayoress of Bannington. As a bazaar, it was the most brilliant Bannington had seen for many a day. And there was the added attraction of a play in the evening—a play written by a St. Frank's boy and played by St. Frank's boys and Moor View girls. It was certainly a very big attraction. Tickets for the evening performance were selling well.

A big, breezy-looking man, middle-aged and clean-shaven, was very much in evidence. It was he who had been organising the various stalls, and his good work had been of tremendous benefit to the bazaar.

"I think it's going to be a huge success, Mr. Warburton," said Mr. Wilkes, when he happened to meet this breezy gentleman. "Thanks to you, the profits should be quite considerable."

"I am afraid my own part has been comparatively small," said Mr. Russell Warburton, shaking his head.

"By the look of things, this schoolboy play is going to be the hit of the occasion."

"Yes, I think it will be well patronised," smiled Mr. Wilkes.

"It's the play you wrote me about, of course," went on the producer. "Does the boy still cherish an idea that I shall consider his play for London production?"

"Handforth is optimist enough for anything," chuckled the Housemaster. "Wait until you see him!"

"Isn't it rather unfair to raise his hopes like this, only to crash them to the ground later?" asked Mr. Warburton. "I mean, I cannot possibly consider the play seriously——"

"Wait until you've seen it," said Mr. Wilkes dryly. "I don't think any other boy but Handforth could fool himself into thinking that the play has an earthly chance. The lesson will do him good. It might stop him from writing any further such effusions. He needs something drastic, I can assure you."

"As bad as that, is it?"

"As a serious play, I imagine that it must be terrible," said Old Wilkey. "But as a comic interlude—well, I haven't the slightest doubt that the audience will be entertained!"

Handforth himself made a point of getting to the bazaar early. He turned up before any of the others, and he soon located Mr. Russell Warburton.

"Hallo, sir!" he said breathlessly, as he planted himself in front of the big man.

"Hallo yourself, young 'un," smiled Mr. Warburton. "Do I know you?"

"Well, you ought to, sir. You wrote to me a few days ago," said Handforth. "I'm the author, you know."

"Oh, you're the author, are you?" asked Mr. Warburton, startled. "I see. Your name is Handforth, then?"

"That's it, sir," said the Removite. "You'll be here for the play, won't you? You'll see it through?"

"Oh, yes; I intend to witness the entire performance."

"Good egg! Then it's a cert!" said Handforth confidently. "How soon do you think it'll be, sir, before you produce the play in London?"

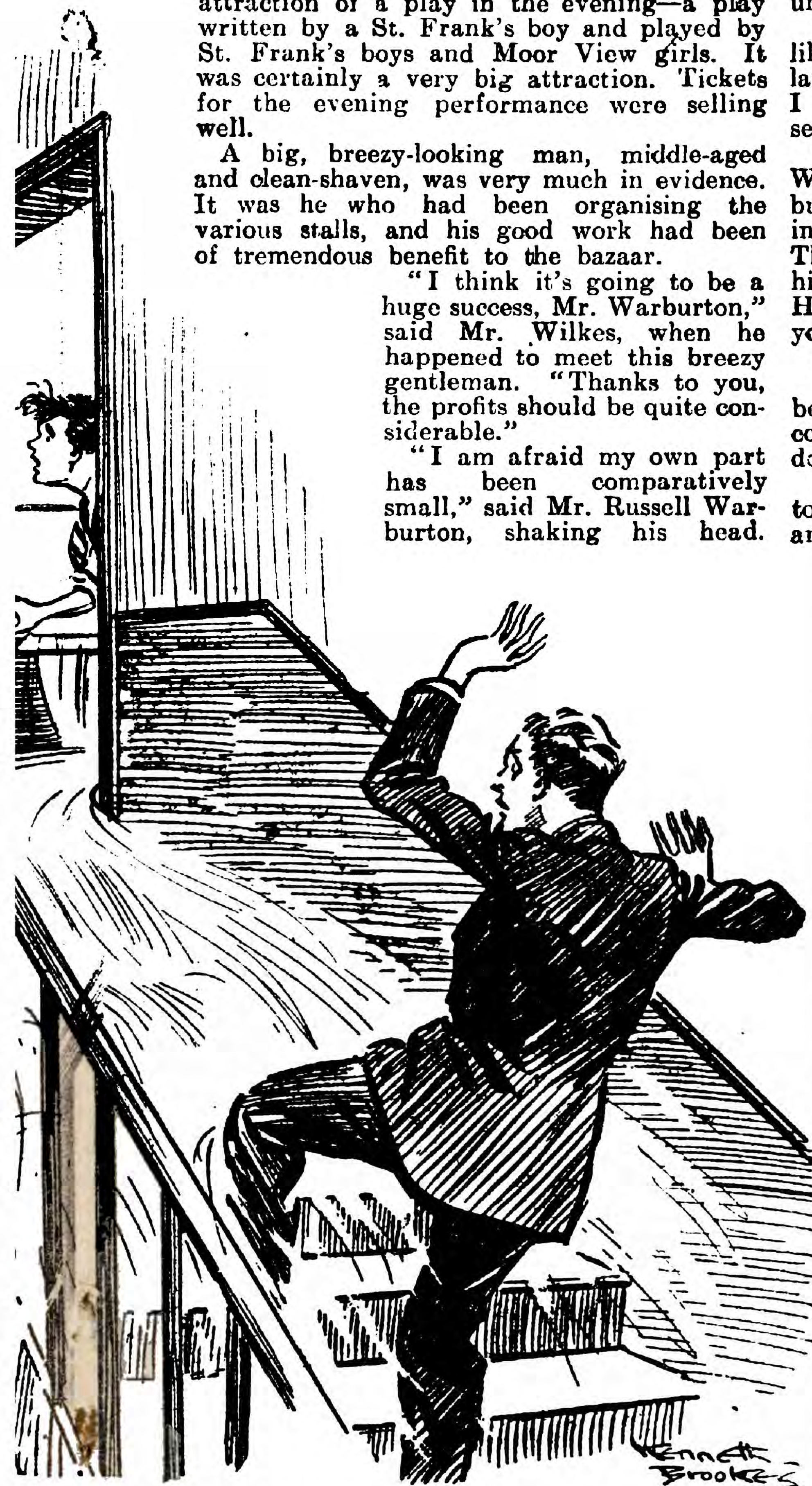
Mr. Warburton coughed.

"Well, before we go into that, perhaps I had better see the play for myself and judge," he said cautiously.

"Well, look here, sir, don't take too much notice of the chaps," said Handforth urgently. "They're not bad, of course—but you can't expect them to act like real actors."

"I'll make full allowances," promised Mr. Warburton gravely.

"I'm playing the hero, of course—Dick Handsome," went on Handforth, "and a girl friend of mine, Miss Irene Manners, is playing Lady Ermytrude. You won't find much wrong with either of us, I hope. As for the rest——"



Kenneth Brooke

Handforth opened it—and a flood of water came cascading out.

"The play is the thing, young man," interrupted Mr. Warburton firmly. "But I must remind you that I did not offer the sum of a hundred pounds for a play—but only for a plot. If I find your plot attractive, I shall not hesitate to buy it. And I think we'd better leave the matter there until the performance is over. You can come and see me again then."

"Thanks awfully, sir," said Handforth breathlessly.

He went off, bubbling with triumph. When the other members of the company arrived, they found him agog with confidence.

"It's all right, you chaps," he said, trying to speak casually. "My play has been accepted."

"What!" gasped Church.

"I've seen Mr. Warburton, and everything's settled."

"You—you mean that Mr. Warburton has promised to accept your play, and produce it in the West End?" gurgled Nipper.

"That's what it amounts to."

"You mean you're hoping that he will?"

"My dear ass, haven't I told you that it's a cert?" said Handforth. "Mr. Warburton is going to see the play—all the way through. Naturally, when he's seen it he'll buy it. He's told me to go to him afterwards, and we'll discuss matters again then."

"Oh, my only hat!" murmured Nipper, drawing some of the others aside. "Weren't we right? Nothing will convince this ass except seeing with his own eyes and hearing with his own ears. When his giddy play gets fairly on the go, he'll come to earth with a most awful jolt."

"The bigger the jolt, the better," said Church, with conviction. "We've had enough of him and his giddy play writing! Let's hope this shock will cure him."

"Cure him?" murmured Vivian Travers. "Upon my Samson! Do you think anything will ever cure him?"

CHAPTER 10.

A Roaring Success!

HANDFORTH, with his eye glued to a hole in the curtain, was fairly quivering with excitement.

"Come and have a look through here, Churchy!" he whispered. "The place is packed! There's not an empty seat! They're sold out!"

"Old Wilkey said that the play would be a success," grinned Church. "Lots of our chaps have come, and the Moor View girls, too. If the hall had been as large again it would have been full."

"Well, it's my play that's making this charity bazaar a big success," said Handforth happily. "It was a jolly brainy idea of Mr Warburton's to produce it here—as a try-out. When it's put on in London——"

"Ahem! Hadn't we better be getting ready?" asked Church hastily

It was nearly time for the curtain to go up, and the first scene was set. It was quite good—the representation of an old feudal castle. It wasn't as Handforth had imagined, or as he had directed in the script; but that didn't matter.

At last the fateful moment arrived.

The curtain went up, and Sir Jasper Strangeways was discovered pacing up and down the stage, talking. A hush fell over the audience—a hush so tense that Handforth, standing at the back, ready for his cue, could almost hear the beating of his own heart.

Somebody at the back commenced making sounds that resembled the beating of horses' hoofs. Simultaneously the door opened, and the Lady Ermyntrude entered. Irene certainly looked very charming in her long, flowing gown and her conical hat, with its trailing lace.

"Father, father!" she cried. "Who is the horseman without?"

"Nay, child, why ask such questions of me?" cried Sir Jasper, with agitation. "Get thee to thy chamber, wench."

"Ah, father, you cannot deceive me!" said the Lady Ermyntrude. "I know that Simeon Stranglehold is coming. Thou art afraid of him, methinks!"

"The cur! The scullion!" raved Sir Jasper, clenching his fists. "Simeon Stranglehold is coming here to deprive me of my domains!"

It was Handforth's cue and, bursting through the French windows, he strode on to the stage. Handy had always been very much of a blunderer, and just now he was very excited. Therefore it was not surprising when he stuck his foot through the French window and tried to drag it on to the stage after him.

The audience tittered, and Handforth turned red and felt very hot and bothered under his grease-paint. With a desperate wrench he released his leg, leaving the piece of scenery to the tender mercies of a stage hand, who hastily put it in position again. Then he strode down stage, struck an attitude, and held his riding-whip aloft. He was dressed picturesquely, with top-boots, a flowing mass of long ringlets, and a superb doublet.

"'Tis not Simeon Stranglehold, fair Ermyntrude, but I thy lover!" he shouted. "I am come betimes, methinks!"

The audience tittered afresh. Handforth's acting was intended to be "straight"; but, as a matter of fact, it was pure burlesque. The audience began to appreciate it.

"Dick Handsome!" cried Irene, running across and clutching at Handforth. "Thou hast ridden hard, my lover! Thou art tired!"

"I? Tired?" laughed Handforth. "Thinkest thou that a ride of fifty miles on my bonny mare tires me? Nay, nay, good damsel! I am come to save Sir Jasper from the clutches of the villain."

This time the laughter was long and loud, and the action of the play was held up for

a bit. Handforth, startled, nearly forgot his lines. This scene was deadly serious—and it annoyed him to hear the audience making such an uproar. Matters became worse a moment later, when another door burst open and Travers charged in—Travers being Simeon Stranglehold, the usurer.

"Foiled, thou upstart!" he croaked, waving some papers in Handforth's face. "Here is the mortgage on Castle Strangeways—and I am in possession with my men."

"'Tis too late, good Dick," sighed Sir Jasper. "I am undone!"

"Odds death! 'Twill take me but a moment to fling this scurvy knave through yon window!" roared Handforth.

"Touch me, and my lackeys will come in and give you a thundering good hiding!" snarled Simeon Stranglehold. "I am the master of Castle Strangeways now. Thou, thou upstart, will quit! And if thou art wise, thou wilt quit while the quitting is good!"

The audience fairly rocked with laughter.

"Call thy lackeys!" shouted Handforth. "You silly ass, if you think—I—I mean——"

He broke off abruptly, stalked to the front of the stage, and held up his hand.

"Half a tick!" he protested, addressing the audience.

"You're not supposed to laugh here, you know! This is all serious stuff!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The laughter became a continuous roar, and anything further that Handforth said was completely drowned. Nipper was whispering urgent stage asides, and for a moment or two it seemed that the whole scene would be ruined. However, Nipper and Travers managed to keep the play going. Many of Handforth's lines were missed out altogether, but as nobody noticed it, it didn't matter much.

When Handforth made his exit he ran into Church and McClure, in the wings.

"You fathead!" hissed Church. "What the dickens did you want to talk to the

audience for? That wasn't in the play, was it?"

"But the audience is yelling with laughter all the time!" protested Handforth.

"What else do you expect them to do?" asked Mac. "The play's funny enough, isn't it?"

"Funny! It's dramatic!"

"That's just your delusion, old man," said Church gently. "We all knew that the audience would yell with laughter at this play—and it's going great guns. Don't go and ruin everything now."

"You—you knew it?" gasped Handforth.

"Of course we knew it—and the sooner you can accept the situation, the better," said Church. "This show's going to be a big success—if you keep it as comic as it is now. But if you try to make it really serious, it'll be a dismal failure."

Handforth was appalled, but there was no time for him to do much protesting. He was due to go on the stage again practically at once—for he had a good deal of the "fat"—and his appearance was greeted by another outburst of hearty laughter and applause. It was the applause, in fact, which saved the situation.

Boiling with indignation, Handforth carried on—and Irene and Nipper and Travers and the others worked hard and

valiantly. They put the show over with a gusto and a vim which was breathless.

Never once was the action allowed to flag. the whole play was rushed along at full speed, and everybody was burlesquing his or her part to the fullest possible extent. Handforth wasn't, of course—at least, not consciously—but that made his own acting all the funnier.

Even between acts there was no time for him to protest, for he was rushed off by Church and McClure, who helped him to change. And by the time he was ready, he had to go on the stage again. It was one long, pelting rush from start to finish.

And the eyes of the audience, as the climax came, grew weaker and weaker from excessive laughter. When Detective-inspector

Next Week's Bumper Programme of Stories.

"A FIGHT FOR A THRONE!"

By John Brearley.

"Prince Budrudin shall sit on his rightful throne!" Thus the Night Hawk—thereby setting himself and his allies a fight against overwhelming odds—odds that are conquered in a series of whirlwind thrusts and audacious action that will make you tingle with excitement.

"Archie The Spendthrift!"

By E. S. Brooks.

Bags and bags of money for Archie Glen-thorne! For hasn't he won a prize of £1,000? He has—and Archie proceeds to have a rip-roaring fling. Feeds for his chums; suits, ties, shirts by the dozen, expensive furniture. The bills mount up—and then comes the shock. Poor old Archie! You'll revel in this lively St. Frank's yarns, lads; not a dull line in it; one of E. S. Brooks' best.

"The Valley of Hot Springs!"

By Ladbroke Black.

Eric and his uncle have arrived at the mysterious valley—and the most exciting, most perilous adventures are about to begin.

Order Your Copy In Advance.

Gripp, of Scotland Yard, put in an appearance, a yell went up which might have been heard at the other end of the High Street.

When the final curtain came down, with Dick Handsome triumphantly holding the Lady Ermyntude in his arms, the applause was deafening. People were on their feet, clapping and shouting. Even Handforth began to feel bucked.

"Author! Author!"

"Come on, Handy!"

The shouts were continuous, and at last Handforth was compelled to stand forward. The applause was tremendous. Handforth tried to make a speech, but he was drowned. Then the curtain came down definitely, and Mr. Russell Warburton stepped upon the stage.

Handforth rushed up to him.

"Well, sir?" he asked breathlessly "You liked it, didn't you?"

"I haven't laughed so much for years," confessed the producer.

"Yes, there's something wrong about that," said Handforth anxiously. "You weren't supposed to laugh, you know——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Whether I was supposed to or not, I laughed until the tears were in my eyes," said Mr. Warburton. "For a charity bazaar, young man, your play has been an immense success."

"And you'll produce it in the West End?" asked Handforth confidently.

"Well, I hardly think so," said Mr. Warburton, shaking his head. "There is a wide difference, you know, between a charity bazaar and a West End theatre. Surely, young man, you're not still cherishing your fantastic hopes, are you?"

"But what about the plot?" asked Handforth feebly. "Don't—don't I get the hundred quid?"

Mr. Warburton felt in his pockets, and produced a cheque. The company gathered round, eager and excited.

"Here is your cheque for one hundred pounds, young 'un," said Mr. Warburton smoothly. "I cannot accept your play, but I will give you this cheque just the same—if you will promise to hand it straight to the charity funds."

"But if you're buying my play——"

"No, I'm not buying your play," said the producer. "I thought I'd made that clear. Well, do you accept the cheque or not?"

"Yes, rather, sir," said Handforth. "I'm only too willing to contribute a hundred quid to the charity."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

So Handforth got his cheque, after all—and he almost spoofed himself into thinking that he had really won the hundred-pound prize. Actually, of course, Mr. Warburton had contributed a hundred pounds towards the charity funds, but he had done so rather neatly.

And Edward Oswald Handforth, with mingled feelings, boasted far and wide, that Mr. Russell Warburton, the famous producer, had paid him a hundred pounds for his precious play. That play had seen the light once—but it was never likely to see the light again. But as the charity had benefited, and as everybody had had a good laugh, everything was all serene.

THE END.

(Another rollicking yarn featuring the cheery Chums of St. Frank's next week, lads: "Archie the Spendthrift!" One long laugh from beginning to end.)

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED

Francis Barradell, 73, King's Meadow Road, Meadows, Nottingham, wants correspondents.

R. H. Moss, 49, Lichfield Road, Rushall, near Walsall, Staffs, would like to hear from readers.

George Jenkins, 52, Aisthorpe Road, Woodseats, Sheffield, wishes to correspond with someone (age 15) who is interested in motor-cars.

R. J. Tipping, 7, Eden Terrace, Londonderry, Ulster, Ireland, wants to exchange stamps with readers in British Colonies, Dominions, and Europe.

Miss Betty Burden, No. 1 Cottage, University Farm, Gravel Hill, Cambridge, wishes to hear from girl readers.

Alexander G. Andrews, 25, Oakland Terrace, Terenure, Dublin, wishes to correspond with readers, particularly in Canada, Australia, South America, and Europe.

W. S. Poval, 28, Wavertree Road, Streatham Hill, London, S.W.2, wants members for the World-Wide Film Friendship Club.

Miss Caroline Wolff, Yorktown Heights, New York, U.S.A., would like a girl pen-friend.

Miss Marjorie Ainos, Box 171, Arcola, Saskatchewan, Canada, wants girl correspondents; ages 13-16.

D. Grogan, 38, Dresden Road, Highgate, London, N.19 (age 15), wants correspondents.

G. F. West, 60, Seventh Avenue, St. Peter's, Adelaide, South Australia, wants correspondents anywhere, especially in Europe, Asia, and South America; collects stamps.

Alan F. Rogers, 27, Heath Street, East, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, wants members for the Universal Correspondence Club.

Miss Bernice Soper, Box 414, Arcola, Saskatchewan, Canada, would like girl readers (ages 13-16) to write her.

Eric Phillips, 250, Pitsmoor Road, Sheffield, wants correspondents in U.S.A., Germany, France; ages 12-15.

Harry A. Forsyth, 42, Arthur Street, Silvertown, London, E.16, wants a Spanish correspondent; age 16-17.

E. P. Pereira, 23, Broadway, Madras, India, wishes to exchange Indian stamps for good British Colonial, Australian, and African stamps.

Miss Mary Godfrey, 17, Selkirk Street, Cheltenham Spa, would like to hear from girl readers.

K. Gunn, 90, Riddons Road, Grove Park, London, S.E.12, wants overseas correspondents, New Zealand especially.



Jokes from readers wanted for this feature! If you know a good rib-tickler send it along now—and win a prize! A handsome watch will be awarded each week to the sender of the best joke; bumper Annuals, pocket wallets, and penknives are also offered as prizes. Address your jokes to "Smilers," Nelson Lee Library, 5 Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4.

OBEYING ORDERS.

Doctor: "Why are you taking your medicine in the bath?"

Pat: "Well, begorra, you told me to take it in water."

(A Hazell, 65, Noyna Road, Tooting, S.W.17, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

FRAE ABERDEEN.

"Jock, will ye dine with me to-morrow night?"

"Aye, Sandy, I will."

"Guld! Eight o'clock at your house!"

(J. Goodway, 22, Jersey Road, Wolverton, Bucks, has been awarded an Annual.)

SUITED HIM.

Sergeant: "Now then, I want volunteers for railway work."

Private: "Right, sergeant; put me down as a sleeper."

(S. Warrior, 78, Crescent Road, Middlesbrough, has been awarded a penknife.)

WOE.

Binks: "Hallo, old man, you look worried. Anything the matter?"

Jinks: "I should say so. I've lost my glasses, and I can't look for them until I find them!"

(M. Kennele, 24, Woodland Grove, Blackpool has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

FALSE ALARM.

The motorist was lost. He saw an old man approaching.

"Hi!" he shouted. "Do you know the way to Widdlecombe?"

"No, danged if I do," said the old man, shaking his head. The motorist drove on slowly, and then heard loud shouts from behind him. The old man had been joined by another and they were waving him back. The motorist reversed.

"Well?" he asked hopefully.

"This is my mate, George," said the old man. "E don't know the way either."

(J. R. Stanforth, 41, Front Row, Highgate, King's Lynn, has been awarded an Annual.)

NOT REASONABLE.

Diner (angrily): "Look here, waiter; there are two flies fighting in my soup!"

Waiter: "Well, sir, what do you expect for threepence—a bull-fight?"

(M. L. Oldham, Applegate Street, Leicester, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

EXPERIENCED.

Doctor: "Have you tried gargling with salt and water?"

Sailor: "I should think so! I've been shipwrecked six times."

(H. Kelsey, 84, Queen Street, Thornaby-on-Tees, Yorks. has been awarded a penknife.)

CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER CASES.

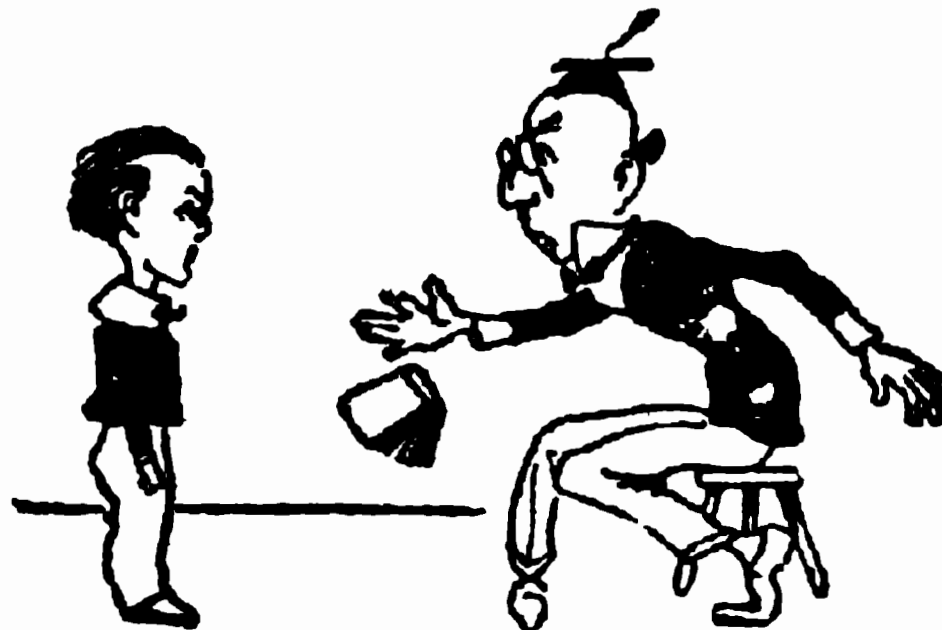
Small boy: "Quick, constable, a man has been fighting my father for nearly an hour."

Constable: "Why didn't you call me sooner?"

Small boy: "Father was getting the best of it until a few minutes ago."

(A. Overen, 39, Mossbills Lane, Wavertree, Liverpool, has been awarded a penknife.)

This'll Make You Laugh!



MORE IMPORTANT.

Master: "I shall not punish you this time, for there seems to be no evidence that you were seen in the orchard."

Scholar: "Thank you, sir. May I keep the apples?"

(J. Daniel Abrahams, 4, Cardigan Road, Kilburn, N.W.6, has been awarded a handsome watch.)

ALBERT AGREED.

Grandma (reprovingly): "Albert, I wouldn't slide down the banisters."

Albert: "No, grandma, perhaps you are rather too old for that."

(C. Hutchison, 105, Melbourne Road, Island Bay, Wellington, New Zealand, has been awarded an Annual.)

A WEIGHTY AFFAIR.

Schoolmaster: "Now, you clearly understand why I'm going to cane you, don't you?"

Pupil: "Yes, sir. It's because you're a heavyweight and I'm only a featherweight."

(H. Page, 167, Victoria Park Road, London, E. 9, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

CORRECT.

Teacher: "Now, Tommy, how many sevens are there in seventy-seven?"

Tommy (looking at blackboard on which is written the number): "Two, sir."

(W. Faulkner, 35, Winnipeg Bldgs., Preston Road, Poplar, E.14, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

No Frills About The Night Hawk—Only Thrills!

By

JOHN

BREARLEY

TERROR of the SKIES



CHAPTER 1.

Aboard the "Firefly"!

NELSON LEE, the famous detective, a cigar glowing peacefully between his lips, leaned over the taffrail of the Firefly yacht and stared pensively into the warm Mediterranean night.

Everywhere a profound peace reigned, so quiet that the regular murmur of the oil-engines and the babble of the wake beneath him seemed to intensify the hush rather than break it. A few brilliant southern stars gleamed in the blue-black velvet of the sky, and a faintly illuminated stain on the sea marked the vessel's track. All else was dark and still.

A swift, unobtrusive

craft, the Firefly cruised gently through the night, stealing deeper into the lonely stretches of sea between the coasts of Turkey and Egypt—a long day's voyage yet from her secret hiding-place on the desolate Palestine shore far ahead.

Save for small, regulation sidelights of red and green, and a queer bright blue gleam at her slender masthead, she sailed in darkness, every porthole and cabin window aboard shrouded by heavy plush curtains. The crowded shipping lanes out of Alexandria and the Suez Canal were miles to the rear, and inspection or interference now was unlikely. But the yacht's skipper was taking no chances.

A patrolling Turkish or British destroyer might take it into

**SCOUNDRELLY RAM TAGORE
CAUSES TROUBLE GALORE!**

their heads to ask questions—one could not tell in this turbulent, out-of-the-way sea. And the attentions of inquiring warships just at present were the last things the occupants of the Firefly required.

For the yacht's errand—Nelson Lee made no attempt to delude himself in the matter—was frankly, outrageously illegal. Wherefore, caution was the order of the day.

To all intents, she was merely a pleasure yacht, taking a famous criminologist and his assistant for a much-needed holiday cruise. Her crew of hefty sailormen was perhaps somewhat larger than usual, but that was the owner's affair. To official eyes, the boat was just a wealthy man's toy, trim, dainty, harmless. Actually, she was a heavily-armed, floating arsenal.

Down in her hold, hidden and innocently labelled, were long, shallow boxes, the contents of which alone would have ensured years in gaol for every man aboard. There were sleek new Winchesters, smuggled in at Cadiz, heavy Colts, grenades, two dismantled Lewis guns. Sturdy, squat boxes held ammunition for each weapon.

And, behind the curtains of the main cabin, amidships, crouched, laughed, and gambled seventeen of the toughest, classiest, free-for-all scrappers Nelson Lee had ever known collected into one band. Thurston Kyle's Kittens—a squad of real adventurers, men who would risk their souls for a fight and a thrill in these drab modern days.

And all this—these smuggled guns and hard-fighting men—for one wild purpose: to win back the throne of one of the tiniest but fiercest States in India for a dark, slim boy of fourteen! Nelson Lee's lips twitched as thought of what certain people in far-off Britain would say if they knew the real nature of his "holiday cruise."

To invade the kingdom of Bhuristan, overthrow the ruling rajah, and instal his small schoolboy nephew, Prince Budrudin Ananda, in his stead! It was like a page from some stirring, picturesque tale of the Middle Ages.

The detective drew deeper at his cigar at thought of the lad—"Buddy," as everyone called him. The young prince, probably at this moment boxing with Nipper or Snub Hawkins in the hold, or beating them hollow at chess in his cabin, had won his way into every heart aboard, that of Nelson Lee especially.

The plucky kid was worth fighting for, he reflected. Years of wandering and misfortune, treachery of friends, murderous attempts on his life by his uncle's assassins—even by his own cousin, that clever fiend, Prince Ram Tagore—had had their effect on the boy, but failed to damp his spirit or break his nerve.

For the last fortnight, during which the Firefly had been gliding towards the Eastern Mediterranean, Buddy's high laughter and floods of quaint English had been good to hear. He was happy at last, among tried friends and on his way back to Bhuristan and victory.

Never for a moment did he doubt the result of this wild and reckless raid—a hand-

ful of men against a determined, independent country, protected by huge mountains. As he had chirped solemnly to Lee that morning:

"With you, Mr. Lee, Snub, Nipper, the Kittens, and, last of all, our great Thurston Kyle—I wonder where he is, by the way?—we cannot fail. We shall take my fat uncle—pig!—and mop floors with him, yes! As Mr. Scrapper 'Uggins says, we shall strike him pink and tan his blinkin' hide, eh?"

Nelson Lee had smiled and pulled his ear. He, too, incidentally, was wondering very much where Thurston Kyle was; his strange, masterful ally had literally disappeared into thin air. Never for a minute during the cruise had the detective set eyes on him. The Hawk's great wings had hurled him through the skies at a speed far in advance of the Firefly's ploughing through the Mediterranean waves.

The Night Hawk had gone on alone; advance guard, forager, scout. Where he was not even his sturdy, loyal assistant, Snub Hawkins, knew. Only through all the hours of night was the bright blue light kept burning at the masthead so that, when necessary, the lone flyer, knowing the yacht's course, could pick her up in the midst of the dark seas.

Nelson Lee's eyes lifted thoughtfully to the light. It was time the Night Hawk appeared; action was drawing nearer with every beat of the engines.

By this hour to-morrow the coast of Palestine would be reached. On the desolate marshes of El Tahkel, men and arms were to go ashore secretly in charge of Nelson Lee, to lie close in cover while the Firefly faded discreetly away.

That was to be the first stage in the long journey to Bhuristan. What happened afterwards depended on the Night Hawk—on his shoulders rested success or failure.

Between Palestine and Bhuristan, one safely-unobtrusive route existed—a straight, high flight across the hilly, desert wildernesses of Arabia and Persia, and over the mountains of Afghanistan. It was a monumental undertaking, requiring perfect advance plans. They had been made.

If the Night Hawk filled his end of the contract, all would be well—the surprise raid could go on with every hope of success. Thurston Kyle had promised—vowed—to meet the Kittens in El Tahkel marshland with 'planes sufficient for the flight, preferably one of the latest, mighty troop-carriers such as modern armies use. It was a promise typical of the masterful man, and Nelson Lee knew that his friend would leave nothing unturned to carry it out, although, for the life of him, he did not know how it was to be done.

However, his faith in the Night Hawk, tried and proven in many an adventure, was strong. But, as he leaned against the rail, alone with his cigar and his thoughts, he wished he had some definite news. For, if by chance the Night Hawk did fail, the position would be serious. Lee, the boys, the hefty Kittens, would be stranded on a strange land in possession of

illegal firearms. What trouble would follow then could only be guessed. But it would be big.

Then, out of the soft darkness at Nelson Lee's back, spoke a voice, grim and low:

"Put 'em up, Nelson Lee! I've got you at last!"

A cold hand touched the back of his neck.

WITH a harsh gasp of surprise, the detective wheeled swiftly, ducking, his hand dropping to his hip. Nothing could he see; only the ship's wake and the distant stars. The loneliness was absolute.

A tense moment passed with no further sound. Almost he had made up his mind he had been dreaming, when, from the sky directly overhead, came a quiet, mischievous chuckle. In a flash the explanation came to him, and he relaxed, looking up with an eager smile.

Less than a yard above him, faintly visible and apparently hanging in mid-air, was a white, handsome face, surrounded by the vague outlines of a leather helmet and goggles. The voice hailed him again, this time in a familiar tone.

"Ha, caught you that time, old friend!"

There came the rustle of huge wings closing together, the sound of feet landing lightly on the deck. Next moment, Lee was grasping the firm, outstretched hand of his ally, dropped from the skies in mid-ocean.

"Kyle! By gad, but you startled me!" He laughed in relief. "How are you? Where have you been?"

"Tired. Everywhere!" smiled back the Night Hawk, answering the keen questions in turn. "And you? Is everything all right?"

"Splendid! What progress have you made yourself?"

Thurston Kyle's laugh came softly, with a note of weariness behind it. He laid a hand on the detective's arm.

"Lee, can you get me to your cabin unobserved? Or any room would do where I can have a meal and afterwards a short sleep. Also"—he smiled, stroking his chin—"a razor. I know the crew aboard are trustworthy, but I do not care to be seen in my wings. I have much to tell you!"

"I occupy a cabin just forward of the bridge," replied Lee at once. "No one will see you in this light, but I'll go ahead and turn away any of the crew who may be about. This way!"

The journey was accomplished safely. In a few more minutes, the allies were facing each other over a table, while an overjoyed Snub and Nipper were scuttling towards the steward's pantry for food. They sat around in shining-eyed silence while Thurston Kyle ate, and at last, pouring himself a second glass of wine, the Night Hawk sat back and smiled.

"Good! I needed that after over twelve hours in the air!"

"Any news, sir?" breathed Snub excitedly.

"Plenty, boy. Listen, and I will tell you all my adventures since leaving England."

No further bidding was needed. Snub subsided. Lighting one of Lee's cigarettes, his master blew a spiral of smoke and sighed reminiscently. Then he began a story of stupendous deeds that amazed even his audience, well though they knew him.

"I ceased to follow you when the yacht turned past Ushant, Lee, and headed overland, sleeping in lonely barns, towers, anywhere, at night, flying high by day. It was a long flight, although comfortable once I was far enough south; but the details would only bore you. Suffice it that I reached Egypt after the longest series of flights I have ever made."

His listeners settled closer, alert and intent.

"The first task, as you know, was to find if any 'plane or 'planes were available for our army, and for that the neighbourhood of Cairo suited me admirably. It was close, for one thing, to Palestine, and also there is a big military flying-camp just outside. But, most important of all, the man who could help me most lives there!"

"You had a friend—in Cairo?" asked Lee, in faint surprise.

The Night Hawk looked at him amusedly.

"I am not quite the lonely hermit you sometimes think, Lee," he smiled banteringly. "From time to time I have wandered in many strange places on earth, sometimes with Snub, sometimes alone. And I have many queer acquaintances. Most of them I trust; but you, old fellow, are the only one who knows me as the Night Hawk. That, however, is by the way!"

Nelson Lee nodded. There were times, he knew, when his allies left their old mansion at Hampstead and disappeared, sometimes for weeks on end. He had never had the curiosity to ask where they went or what they did. The hint was sufficient.

"As I was saying, this man could help me most; but the difficulty, as you can imagine, was to get in touch with him. Obviously, I could not visit him like this; and thus came about my first adventure." He laughed. "And, Lee, at the moment there is in Egypt a much-bewildered Arab, who is still wondering, probably, what happened to him five nights ago."

"I had found a half-ruined temple in the desert, a dozen miles from Cairo. I hid my wings there, and made camp. At nightfall, by good luck, this Arab, a wandering tribesman, wandered near me. I had to—er—put him to sleep before I could induce him to part with his burnous, but eventually I did so, leaving him there with a sum of money that, I trust, consoled him for the loss when he awoke. Then I walked to Cairo!"

The audience of three grinned in silent appreciation. Kyle's action was characteristic; humorous lights danced in his eyes.

"I found my acquaintance in the native bazaar. He is an old Egyptian named Khaliffa, once a spy for the British Government there. He is crippled now, and never leaves his hovel, yet what that man does not

know concerning Cairo, Port Said, and other places in the East more secret, is not knowledge. I don't know how he does it, but daily most of the under-world gossip spreads to him in some uncanny fashion from hundreds of miles. And he is—useful!"

"I've heard of such natives," agreed Lee. "Carry on!"

"I trust Khaliffa enough to come straight to the point. He gave me information on all I asked; some good, some disappointing. The most disappointing of all was that I could not possibly purchase a 'plane suitable to our purpose and take it secretly to El Tahkel."

"Oh!" There came a murmur of dismay. The Night Hawk lifted his hand.

"Wait. I have not finished. As I told you back in England, Lee, if I could not buy a 'plane, I was determined to loot one! Well"—his dark eyes flashed—"I am about to do so. After a few hours' sleep here, I shall leave this boat at dawn—to get that machine!"

An amazed pause followed.

"Gosh! But how, Mr. Kyle?" gasped Nipper at length.

"That I shall decide when the time comes, my boy. But what Khaliffa told me was this: on Thursday evening—that is, to-morrow—an Egyptian Government 'plane, designed to hold twenty-four troopers, will leave Port Said for Cairo on a trial night flight. She will be flown by Lieutenant Fahdel, of the Egyptian Army, a famous pilot out here, and he will be alone. Our luck holds good."

He looked at them significantly, smiling in answer to the slow, contented chuckles that burst from his companions.

"In that case, we *shall* have a 'plane!" murmured Nelson Lee; and the boys laughed again.

"Yes. I shall not hurt Fahdel, but I intend to get his machine," said the Night Hawk quietly. "Thus, when you land your men to-morrow night, Lee, be ready for instant flight. I shall not fail you, rest assured!"

A great weight lifted from Nelson Lee's heart. He still had no idea how his friend was to accomplish such a daring feat, but, aloft, under those powerful, fast-flying wings, the Night Hawk was a person to whom ordinary rules did not apply. Nelson Lee had witnessed breathless deeds performed by his ally, far more difficult and dangerous than the one ahead—the capture of a 'plane in mid-air. He nodded again.

For all that, however, his quiet, clever face glowed. More than ever was he proud to be the ally of such a man.

"And the rest of your news?" he asked.

Something grim and harsh came into the Night Hawk's manner.

"Ram Tagore and the Dagger of Blood are far ahead of you already!" he answered. "They are well on their way home to Bhuristan!"

CHAPTER 2.

An Amazing Errand!

NELSON LEE sprang to his feet. "Good heavens, Kyle—you're uncanny!" he gasped. "How on earth did you discover that?"

A dark smile answered him.

"No matter—it's true!" snapped Kyle. "I am out to beat this Tagore, Lee; to put forth all my resources. He is clever, but, with modesty, so am I. And before long Ram Tagore is going to learn what it means to run up against Thurston Kyle!"

His voice held no boastfulness—only the stern, calm assurance of a man who knows his power.

"Tagore, two Indians, and a white man—obviously that snake, Jonathan Silk—came to Constantinople by the trans-European railway, went on to Bagdhad the same way, and then by 'plane into the wilderness. That is the information I received from my acquaintances. It was good, fast travelling. He is a clever man, Lee!"

"Clever?" The detective's jaw hardened fiercely, and a bitter look clouded his grey eyes.

Ram Tagore—the "Dagger of Blood." To Nelson Lee the words revived memories of that humiliating afternoon in Thurston Kyle's laboratory a fortnight back when, securely trapped though he had been, Budrudin's cousin had walked from under the noses of himself, Nipper and Snub, taking with him not only the little prince, but that beautiful, sinister ruby, the hereditary state jewel of Bhuristan!

His method of escape had been diabolically clever—mass hypnotism as practised by the fakirs of India. Only by the pluck and wit of Scrapper Huggins had Budrudin been rescued from a foul death. The Dagger had vanished into mystery along with the escaping Tagore.

Because of that episode Nelson Lee, dubious at first, had thrown himself into this present enterprise heart and soul. His one hope was to get at grips with the arrogant man who had tricked him.

"Yes—he is clever!" he repeated at last. "I hoped we should cut him off before he reached Bhuristan!"

Thurston Kyle shook his head, sensing his friend's soreness.

"It matters not a jot," he cried strongly. "Let him take the ruby to Bhuristan; it saves us worry and trouble. Nothing will be said about what has occurred. Tagore may even think we have given up the fight now he has the jewel and imagines he has drowned Budrudin. As for his father, the rajah—having tricked his subjects all these years with the false stone, he will make no fuss when the real one is restored. It simply means he will wear it in his turban of state as though nothing had happened. And"—the superb figure leaned forward, eyes half-closed and dangerous—"it will be there—

ready for us—when we break in and punish the rajah!"

He snapped his fingers contemptuously.

"But it is not the rajah we must fear; he is old, fat, impotent, according to Khaliffa's information. It is Tagore, who has hopes of the stolen throne one day, we must beat!"

"And we shall!" snapped Nelson Lee. His momentary anger had gone quickly, leaving him calm and collected as always. For some moments he stared ahead, deep in thought, weighing up his ally's news. When he looked up again, his face was purposeful and serene.

"Right! The Kittens are fighting fit, and I know you'll get us that 'plane, Kyle. The fact that Tagore has beaten us to Bhuristan will make Huggins' men keener still. Me, too. Anything else?"

"Yes. Snub, go and fetch Budrudin."

THE delight of his Highness Prince Budrudin Ananda when a grinning Snub hauled him into the cabin was shrill and boisterous. The moment the door was closed behind him, and he saw the handsome face of Thurston Kyle looking at him with a grave, kindly smile, the young Indian gave a whoop of joy, darted forward excitedly, then stopped and bent to the ground in a low and ceremonious salaam. Straightening up, he stepped forward soberly and put his lips to the Night Hawk's hand.

"My heart is singing like a bird, sahib!" he said in the flowery language of his country. But his sincerity was plain.

"Well, Budrudin, I am pleased to see you so happy!" smiled Thurston Kyle, patting the boy's shoulder. "Now, sit down here; I wish to talk to you."

Obediently Buddy drew up to the table, his small brown face alert. The Night Hawk placed his finger-tips together reflectively.

"When we were in England, my boy, you told me that you and your late father still had loyal friends in Bhuristan who would, the moment you reappeared, spring to arms and fight for your cause. Is that so?"

"Indeed, yes, sahib!" cried Buddy instantly, his eyes radiant. "When my father was overthrown in the rebellion his stout followers had to fly to the wilder hills and mountains. They are banded together there under old Lala Bagheera—Lala the Panther—and have been outlawed by my uncle!"

He jumped to his feet, arms outflung.

"They are my friends, sahib; they will fight for me, too. Many, many times my father spoke to me of them—saying that if we could but set foot in Bhuristan once more with guns and rifles the Panther's men would flock to our banner, and we should sweep down on to the plain like an avalanche from the mountains!"

The boy's ringing voice ceased for lack of breath, leaving his friends keen and interested. A gleam of satisfaction crossed Thurston Kyle's face.

"Good—Lala Bagheera! I shall remember that. Now, Budrudin, I intend to go ahead to the mountains of Bhuristan and wait for you there. But can you describe the Panther to me? And where shall I find him? Do you know?"

"Do I know, sahib?" was the gleeful answer. "Yes, and yes. Always my father talked of Lala, as I said, and I, too, remember him, though I am small kid when we bunk from Bhuristan, yes? Lala, he was leader of my father's soldiers then; a huge man—so." He waved his hands expressively. "Go thou, sahib, into the mountains of Kanjunga—the mightiest of Bhuristan's peaks. And hidden in places where only you can reach from Afghanistan you will find Lala and his men!"

"And I shall know him—how?" asked Kyle quietly.

"By his mighty voice and mighty beard, sahib. But most of all by the ancient tulwar stroke that robbed him of his left ear and scarred his cheek from temple to chin!"

"Ah!" Thurston Kyle fell back in his chair, his voice pleasantly contented. "That is plain enough. And Kanjunga? Where in Bhuristan does that mountain lie?"

With a quick gesture Buddy took a pencil from his pocket and produced a grubby scrap of paper. The others bent over him as he drew a rough map quickly.

"See, here is Bhuristan—like this, sahib." He drew a sketchy circle on the paper. "Over here, on the eastern side, is Jhadore, the capital, a city with high walls, wherein is my uncle's palace.

"The inside of the country is flat, surrounded by mountains—like a saucer, you see. Here, and here, above Jhadore, are the two passes of which I have spoken before. But on the Afghanistan side—the side facing us when we land—there are no passes, only a great wall of mountains. And Kanjunga is here, in the midst of that wall!"

"There are, I think, places where the mountains sink low or divide, and through these an aeroplane might fly if it had a clever pilot. Otherwise, for men and baggage, it is impossible. To get into Bhuristan we should have to go right round and fight in through the passes. Unless—" He stopped, bright eyes cloudy with thought.

"Well? Unless what, my boy?"

"Unless Lala the Panther could help. Who knows?"

Slowly the Night Hawk reached out for the little map and tucked it inside his flying costume. The little smile deepened on his lips.

"That we must find out—if hard flying can achieve it!" he said quietly. "Now, Budrudin, one thing more. You shall take pen and paper and write to this Lala the Panther. And you shall tell him that you, his rightful ruler, are on your way back to the country, and that he must gather his men and watch for you. Do you see?"

"Yes, sahib," Budrudin nodded eagerly. "Yet could you not speak to Lala? He

fought for the British in the war—he speaks English a little!”

“All in good time, my boy. Meanwhile, write that letter, please!”

Snub brought out some paper and Nipper a fountain-pen. But the little rajah, smiling, ran to his cabin for a long-pointed brush and proceeded to write in his own weird characters that looked as though an inky spider had crawled across the paper. When he had finished, however, he read the translation to Thurston Kyle, who nodded deeply and placed the letter with the map. Then he turned to Nelson Lee and the boys.

“And now, my friends, will you leave me, please? I shall leave here at dawn, and between now and then I must make up some lost sleep. I have a hard day before me to-morrow.”

Nelson Lee stood up.

“I’ll call you myself at dawn,” he said, “and see that no one is about. Good-night, Kyle!”

“Good-night!” The Night Hawk rose, too, dominating the room by his presence. “Everything is settled now in my mind—a voice tells me success is before us. Good-night!”

Four hours later, as the first chill wind of daybreak ruffled the calm sea, the Night Hawk skimmed away from the slender yacht and disappeared into the skies.

CHAPTER 3.

Boarded in Mid-Air!

SWIFTLY, his shining wings devouring the air in great, easy strokes, Thurston

Kyle, the Night Hawk, shot away, spiralling upwards into the clearing skies, rising above the still-dark sea, and into the upper regions where the brilliant dawn was breaking.

Soon the sun had broken through in majesty, dispelling the clouds, flooding the Mediterranean with liquid gold, in the midst of which the Firefly moved like some tiny toy. Stretching into his full stride, he swung away to the south, exulting in his speed and freedom. The yacht sank from view behind him, other ships appeared—tramps, feluccas, a stately battleship. But the Night Hawk passed over them all, unseen and silent.



From the 'plane which he had captured, single-handed, the Night Hawk hurled the pilot into the air.

His face showed no signs of fatigue now, for short though his rest had been, it had proved sufficient to a man whose strength of brain and body was amazing. There was a keenness in his eyes and a faint curve to his firm lips that promised well for the success of his venture.

Throughout the long day he flew, stopping occasionally to eat the raisins and tabloid food of his own invention that he always carried on long flights. Far away, a mere dim smudge on the horizon, he made out the flat coast of southern Palestine, and, altering his course a little, flashed through the hot afternoon until the presence of more

ships below him warned him he was nearing his destination—the low region around the great Nile delta, where it joins the sea.

Away to his left, from the height he was flying, he could see Port Said, and the entrance to the Suez Canal, thronged with ships of all sizes and flags. For him it was the first halt in his journey, the place from which, in an hour's time, Lieutenant Fahdel, of the Egyptian Army, was due to start in his huge troop-carrier, if the old spy's information was correct.

Leisurely the Night Hawk glided above the wide-flung port, looking beautiful in the evening sunlight. He marked down the flying-ground behind the town, and, through his glasses, surveyed Fahdel's probable course—out to sea above the town of Damietta, and then across the coastal desert wastes to Cairo. His cold eyes gleamed with a fierce satisfaction. Tilting into the wind, he swung away out to sea again.

A glance at his watch told him what time he had to spare; on outspread wings he hovered aloft, motionless, resting after the long flight since dawn. Gradually the sun sank in a ball of fire behind the far Arabian hills, and the brief southern twilight came down. He flexed his splendid muscles, tested the controls of his wings; then, as a bird darts from its eyrie, he swirled smoothly into flight.

For, with the last gleam of the after-glow, a mighty airplaine came gliding over Port Said from the flying-field beyond, her engines snarling harshly as, in slow, majestic flight, the pilot circled round the port to attain his flying altitude.

It was the troop-carrier at last, starting her night-trial.

In solemn spirals, Lieutenant Fahdel lifted his enormous charge higher, watched by eager eyes below until the soft dusk closed about it, hiding it from view. And then, all unknown to the Egyptian pilot, down from the heights above dropped a lithe, winged figure, flitting above and below the 'plane in phantom silence.

Close to the cabin windows, keeping pace easily with the heavy craft, the Night Hawk flew, peering inside with eyes that took in every detail. She was truly a splendid craft—solid, steady and powerful; the latest type used by modern armies. The 'plane was fitted with special skids for landing on the desert.

In the ample cabin space were folding-seats for the men, a rifle-rack, a long row of parachutes in case of emergency. The Night Hawk laughed in silent approval. The great transport would do very well to carry his hardy Kittens into the wilds of Bhuristan!

Whirling away from the cabin, he gathered his slashing wings for an effort, turned again—and struck. The automatic catch of the main door flew into splinters before the red stream of lead from his right-hand gun, and, in a second, he had fastened to the fuselage like a leech, steel fingers

thrust through the aperture, sliding the door back on its runners.

In the roar of the engine, the crackle of revolver fire was completely drowned; the attack was as silent as it was swift. The first intimation the pilot received that something was wrong came when a cold inrush of air rioted through the cabin and up into his cockpit. He swung round, brows drawn down in a frown, and saw a sight that froze him stiff with horror.

"By the prophet——"

He stopped. Stepping easily and calmly through the cabin door came the strangest figure he had ever set eyes on, even in dreams—a great, tall man, in leather faced by shimmering silk, his head hidden by a helmet through the goggles of which two dark eyes glittered strangely. The tapering wings, folded together down the figure's back, increased Fahdel's fear and amazement. The wide, strong shoulders and the squat gun that covered him completed his dismay.

A devil—a winged ghoul—had come aboard in mid-air!

For a moment he drove ahead mechanically. Then, his brain almost swimming, he bent to the controls with some vague idea of turning the 'plane into a spin. There came the swish of the sliding door, a few footsteps, and a grim voice in his rear.

"No tricks—or I shoot!"

Lieutenant Fahdel steadied the 'plane forthwith.

"You speak English, of course? Or French?"

"Y-yes, English—a leedle. French—bet-taire!" stammered the pilot.

"Then we'll talk in French, my friend. Listen carefully." The gun touched the aviator's neck with a cold kiss. "I have no wish to harm you!" the cold, level voice went on. "Nor shall I, if you obey. You have a stabiliser for your controls?"

"Y-yes, monsieur!"

"Then set it. Slacken speed a little. Now let the 'plane run!"

The Egyptian did so, his sallow face strained and horrified. Over the dark, lonely desert the great trooper zoomed steadily along.

"Good! Now sit there—and don't look round!"

To Fahdel's tortured ears came sounds as of straps and buckles falling limp. The Night Hawk, in fluent French, spoke again.

"Listen to your orders, please, lieutenant. Come out of your seat, turn and go down into the cabin. Take one of the parachutes there; buckle it on. After that, my friend—jump!"

A pause followed, during which Thurston Kyle looked over the airplane's dashboard.

"I see we are flying at five thousand feet—an easy jump, lieutenant. Remember, I shall cover you until you leave this 'plane. But if you obey orders, you have my promise of a clean get-away. No treachery on my part will baulk you. Understand?"

Again the pilot nodded his head, not trusting himself to speak as he rose from his

seat. Turning, he stood face to face with the giant towering above him; felt the pressure of the gun sink into his belt. He sidled past the helmeted figure, half-dazed with fearful wonder, and went down into the cabin. The moment he did so, his captor slid into the vacant place, and settled to the controls.

Down in the main cabin, his heart racing furiously, Fahdel made a brave effort to recover his nerve. The Night Hawk's back was turned towards him—he made a slow, half-hearted movement towards the rifle-rack.

"Don't!" The warning came with the force of a bullet, and, jerking round, Fahdel bit his lip deeply. He had forgotten the big mirror in front of the pilot's seat that enabled one to watch what was happening in the cabin. Framed in the clear surface, he saw the dread pirate regarding him with a cool stare of disdain, gun raised and ready. The Egyptian shrugged helplessly, and unhooked a parachute.

He had no further opportunity for resistance. Once more the stabiliser was temporarily set; the silent figure moved towards him, calmly assisting him to adjust the straps. At last the chute was in position, and, while Fahdel tottered across the cabin, the Night Hawk opened the sliding door. He bowed mockingly.

"Good-bye, friend; a pleasant drop and a soft fall. There are sands below and an easy night's walk to Cairo. Go!"

Shooting a wild glance at the goggled face before him and a wilder one still at the dark night sailing past the open door, the Egyptian tensed himself as though for a last effort. But even as the thought flashed through his mind, a hand like chilled steel took him by the back of the neck, lifted him off the floor, and, with a quick, easy swing, threw him out of the door and into the soft blackness of space.

The yell that rose to his lips was torn away by the wind. But for all that, his initial jump was perfect—the Night Hawk had seen to that. He yanked at the parachute's rip-cord, gulping with relief when his rapid downward plunge was heavily checked. And, from then on, he went sailing down in a smooth easy drop to the desert.

Up above him in the troop-carrier, the Night Hawk, after a last glance out, slammed the door shut briskly and leapt again to the pilot's seat. Quickly his firm hands took up the fixed controls, his foot settled on the rudder-bar. In a sonorous bellow, the huge 'plane tilted and swung round, the powerful motors roaring up and up to their fullest speed as Thurston Kyle climbed ever higher.

A laugh of exultant triumph broke from him when at last the machine straightened out. He had fulfilled his promise to Nelson Lee and his friends; captured a splendid 'plane in full flight. Steering by the compass before him, he swerved away to the west, crashing through the Mediterranean night—towards Palestine and El Tahkel.

The first victory had been scored.

CHAPTER 4.

The Landing at El Tahkel!

"STEADY, men!"

Up to his knees in slowly-lapping waves, his eyes striving to pierce the intense gloom, Nelson Lee called out softly as the splash of oars sounded in front of him. Behind him, on the beach, the second boat-load of Kittens stood in an interested bunch. The first party were already out in the darkness, acting as pickets on the edge of the desert marshes beyond. The third and last were just coming ashore.

"Right, sir!"

Scraper Huggins' low growl answered the detective. A moment later the boat's keel scraped on the shore and the men tumbled out, each with rifle, bandolier, and Colt. Minutes of bustle and fast work followed. Gear, machine-guns, stores, and fat drums of oil were brought ashore—all with the speed and silence of well-drilled, enthusiastic men. After a fortnight's idleness there was work to be done at last, and the Kittens revelled in it.

Leaving them under the cheery leadership of the gigantic Scraper, Nelson Lee went farther up the beach to where Snub and Nipper were busy over a heap of dead brush and old canvas, while an excited Buddy, with a tin of petrol between his knees, watched them eagerly. The detective smiled quietly as the three leapt to their feet. Everything—well planned beforehand—was going well!

"Getting on, boys? Good! Got that blue torch, too, Nipper?"

"You bet, guv'nor!"

"Right. No noise, youngsters, remember. This is a lonely spot, but there may be desert natives around, for all we——"

"Mr Lee." The Scraper stole up like a shadow, rubbing his big hands briskly. "All ashore, sir. Everythin' O.K."

"Very good!"

Sinking to the ground, the detective pulled out a pocket flash-lamp and flicked it several times out to sea. The answer—a pin-point of light—flashed back at once from far out; and presently their straining ears made out the faint thud of the Firefly's engines. The yacht was stealing away from that desolate land as secretly as she had come before the dawn should catch her. Soon only the sigh of the wind could be heard.

The landing at El Tahkel was complete. The Kittens were left to themselves now, with the deserts—and Bhuristan—before them. A vast loneliness filled the world.

Nelson Lee glanced at the illuminated dial of his watch.

"Scraper!"

"Yessir?"

"If Mr. Kyle has been successful, he should be here with the 'plane very soon—an hour at the most," said Lee evenly. "I shall signal him to land on this beach, which is fairly smooth."

"Yessir!"

"Take your men into the strip of marsh, together with all the gear. Get in touch

with the pickets and make camp in the midst of them. I shall flash a blue torch when we hear the 'plane, and Snub will light this bonfire—but we must run no risks of the men being hit by the 'plane. Also be prepared for swift action when Mr. Kyle —"

Crack! Cra-a-ck! Crack!

With a fierce word the Scrapper spun round, gun leaping to his hand. Nelson Lee and the boys were not a second behind, peering tensely towards the hidden marshes. From the wild depths, a dozen jets of fire spouted, the wail of a slug shrilled in their ears as it passed overhead. No sooner had the volley ceased than there came a high, piercing yell, followed by the thump of rushing feet—the fall of bodies. A harsh, commanding voice rang through the night.

The Kittens were attacked.

Quick as a flash the Scrapper wheeled to the men still around the boats, snapping orders. A silver whistle in Nelson Lee's lips shrilled a rallying call to the pickets. After an anxious second, made hideous by the shouts of the mysterious raiders, back came the Kitten's guard, running hard for the boats in a solid bunch, lamming out with rifle-butts and coshes as they came. Their retreat was almost perfect—many had fought in the Great War, and experience and discipline carried them through.

Then the main body, under the Scrapper and Nelson Lee, charged to meet them, and, in a heavy-hitting, ruthless squad, they stemmed the attackers' rush. Snub, grabbing the petrol-tin from Buddy, swamped the spirit over the signal pile and lit it; a glare sprang up, staining the beach. And the Kittens roared in cheery delight, for they could see their foes now to hit them.

Who they were, Nelson Lee had no idea yet. In the flickering glow he saw a small body of wild-looking men, dark and thin of face, clad in long, flowing cloaks and armed with antique jezails, flintlocks, and knives. Like most natives, they had let drive their guns in a first reckless volley and not paused to reload. They came charging down the beach in a straggling rush, blades and gun-butts raised.

The Kittens met them gaily.

"Don't fire 'less you have to, men!" roared Nelson Lee, and, dodging the raiders' bearded leader, slammed the barrel of his Colt across the man's temple.

There on the beach of El Tahkel, the blackness lit by the bright glare of the fire, a wild, hectic fight followed, swaying backwards and forwards along the sands, as first the Kittens gave and then swept back, driving the ambushers before them.

It was an ugly fight; shrieks, grunts, and cheers making a lurid accompaniment. The men in the long robes were fast and desperate battlers, but they were up against men who lived for fighting, and used steel, gun-barrel, fist, and boot with bewildering skill.

Now that the enemy had emptied their guns, the fight had become an ordinary knifing "rough-house" as far as the Kittens were concerned—the sort of "up-and-

downer" they thrived on. A dagger in a lean, brown fist would flash up, a strong hand would streak to meet it, catch it in mid-air. Then would come the sweeping thud of gun or cosh, and another untidy heap would hit the sand.

Some of the Kittens went down, to writhe and roll for a moment at death-grips with a foe, only to jump up alone in a short while and hurl themselves back into the scrum—for another "victim."

"Come on, me lucky lads!" the Scrapper's voice whooped hoarsely as he sailed in, shouting his war-cry. "Meet 'Uncle Dunlop.' This way for the 'orspital!"

And with Uncle Dunlop—a length of stuffed rubber-tyre—whirling, he cut and hacked his way into the heart of the natives, his mates ploughing in after him.

Once a shrieking attacker, bursting through the ranks, hurled himself at sturdy Snub and Nipper. Alf Jenkins, taciturn and grim, swerved back to cut him off from the boys, but before he could do so they had settled the matter for themselves. Snub took off from the ground in a flashing tackle, ducking a knife-thrust to sweep the charging man's legs from under him. And as they fell to the beach together, Nipper stepped in quickly, gun-butt whistling.

"An' that's that!" gasped the freckled youth, staggering up from under his limp aggressor. "Good shootin', Nipper!"

"Now, Kittens—a last rush, and we've got 'em!" cried Nelson Lee, fighting beside the Scrapper at the head of the defence.

Once more the panting men raised a cheer; once more they swept forward. This time they would not be denied.

Into the yelling raiders they slammed, pukkha fighting fiends, who hit and hit again. For a moment the result trembled in the balance; then, as quickly as it had flared up, the battle was over.

Unable to stand that frenzied charge, leaderless, dismayed, the men from the desert broke and ran for it. One second the fight was still raging fiercely, the next the long cloaks were flying up the beach, to vanish into the darkness whence they had come. Nelson Lee allowed his triumphant men to pursue for a few yards, after which he blew his whistle again. At once the Kittens stopped in their tracks and fell back obediently. In a cautious retreat, they threaded their way back through the crumpled attackers, to gather round the still bright signal fire.

"Wow!" In one and twos they dropped to the sand, chuckling breathlessly to each other.

When Nelson Lee came up, the Scrapper grinned at him and sighed beatifically.

"Luv'ly, sir, wasn't it?" he announced.

The Kittens' hearty chorus of agreement was good to hear.

But Nelson Lee, bleeding from a cut on the cheek, checked them sternly.

"No more noise, boys! Let's see what we're up against first. Scrapper, find out the casualties. Nipper, Snub—drag that leader there over to me!"

With savage cries the tribesmen charged. Nelson Lee and Kyle's Kittens awaited the attack eagerly.



Pulling back the man's white hood, he studied the dark bearded face intently. A suspicion had been hammering in his brain throughout the fight, but it died swiftly. The man was a vicious-looking ruffian, with the swarthy Semitic features of the typical desert nomad. Nelson Lee let the man fall back, and strode over to examine others of the fallen.

"All right, lads," he answered at length, in answer to inquiring looks. "Just some tribesmen—probably from the Arabian wilderness out yonder. We must have blundered into their camping ground for the night, and they came down for loot. I thought, when that first volley came, it was a little surprise welcome from—our friends!"

Budrudin wrinkled his nose at the crumpled chieftain.

"Bah! He is no man of Bhuristan, sahib—just an Arab robber!"

Scraper Huggins loomed up with his report.

"No one badly hurt, sir; only some nasty cuts and wallops."

Nelson Lee laughed with relief. Right well had the Kittens lived up to their reputation. They were well able to look after themselves, even against the knives of Arab desert rats.

"Splendid! See that the injuries are attended to, Scraper, and——"

He broke off abruptly, ears and eyes straining to the skies. Thrusting back the Scraper, he raised his voice to its highest pitch.

"Back up the beach, everyone!" he shouted. "Shoot to kill now if you are attacked. It's the airplane!"

Snub, calm as ever, splashed more petrol on the bonfire. Nipper's blue torch blazed.

CHAPTER 5.

Into the Wilderness!

WHARR-RR-RR! Whar-rr!

The silence of the El Tahkel shore was shattered, a million vibrations of scund droned across the desert, causing the still lurking tribesmen there to look fearfully at each other and huddle together. Could it be that these white devils who had smitten them so sorely were about to destroy them with roaring dragons? They fled deeper into the wide solitudes on the instant.

Lying flat behind some bushes, away from the beach, Nelson Lee stared upwards, his heart heating joyously. Steadily the bellow

of the descending 'plane increased, apparently headed straight for the signal glow. All at once the throbbing ceased as the snarling engines were cut off, and, with swishing wings and screaming struts, a great black shape shot into view, swooping down from the skies.

It was a thrilling moment in a thrilling night. Crying an involuntary welcome, Nelson Lee leapt from his shelter and went pounding down the beach. Low and fast above the shore swept the huge 'plane, a colossal bulk in the gloom. It slid straight across the signal fire and into the darkness farther on, the desert skids slicing the sand.

So, in a perfect landing despite the tricky light, the Night Hawk brought his prize to the rendezvous at El Tahkel. Nelson Lee was beside the 'plane to wring his hand the moment he opened the cockpit door and stepped out.

"Well done, Kyle! Oh, well done!"

Strong hands met in a tight grip. The Night Hawk laughed his thanks.

"You see I have kept my promise, Lee. But"—sharply—"what on earth has happened to you? You are wounded!"

"Only a scratch!" soothed the detective, and rapidly gave the story of the late fight.

Thurston Kyle breathed hard.

"Would that I had been a few minutes earlier!" he muttered. "Never mind, however, so long as there is nothing serious behind the raid. There will be fighting in plenty for me before we are done. Are the Kittens ready?"

"Ready and waiting. We must go at once, though; those natives may gather others and rush us again for all we know. Also there has been noise enough to attract everyone for miles already."

"Ah! Well, I will leave you to it at once, Lee. I do not wish to be seen. You, I know, will get the men and stores aboard without delay. I must go on ahead!"

Active as a boy, he climbed back into the troop-carrier for his splendid wings, and, with Lee's assistance, buckled them on. Once again the allies exchanged a firm grip.

"Au-revoir, Lee! We are a good step nearer victory now. I'm for Bhuristan as fast as I can fly, to get in touch with Lala the Panther and to scout around. But"—he clapped Nelson Lee on the shoulder—"I shall be watching out for you above the Afghan hills long before you arrive!"

"Kyle, you—you are almost superhuman!" cried Nelson Lee admiringly.

The Night Hawk took a long, deep breath.

"From you, old fellow, that is a great compliment. I shall endeavour to justify it!"

And he was gone before the detective could speak again—into the dark unknown.

Nelson Lee turned and ran back along the beach.

After that, matters went with a rush on the shore of El Tahkel. Throwing out a

line of sentries, with orders to shoot anything that moved and inquire afterwards, Nelson Lee mustered the other men and put them to loading gear and stores at the double. Only two were so badly hurt as to be incapable—an Irish ex-dockhand and little Sam Smith, the London hawker. The others piled in, grinning like schoolboys on a holiday, but deft and orderly for all that.

"Help! Some 'plane!"

"Like a blinkin' parlour!" chuckled the Scrapper, testing one of the folding seats luxuriously. "Hallow me to hoffer you a chair, Mr. Jenkins!"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"Shut up, you noisy beggars!"

A second squad trotted up, carrying the machine-guns parts between them. Packages were stowed in the tail, the fuel used in Thurston Kyle's flight from Egypt replenished from the drums. From the arrival of the 'plane to the final calling-in of the sentries barely twenty minutes had elapsed, so swiftly had the work been handled.

When all was ready, watch-hands pointed exactly to twelve midnight. Snub Hawkins touched Nelson Lee's arm.

"I'll take her up if I may, sir. Let Nipper see to your cheek."

The detective nodded, and the cheery Snub slipped gaily to the controls.

"Contact!"

Once more the desert hush was split by a thunderous roar as the propellers revolved. The monster 'plane gave a lumbering forward lurch. With beautiful ease Thurston Kyle's young assistant picked her off the beach, gliding aloft in a smooth, bellowing rush, spiralled out to sea, swung back at last and settled down.

The Kittens were off once more into the desert, following their lone-flying leader, the Night Hawk.

— — —

CHAPTER 6.

Ram Tagore's Fresh Stroke!

CALMLY, as though a flight into the back o' beyond was an everyday affair, the men settled down like the hardy crew they were. Rough but expert hands tended the deeper knife-stabs that some of the men had sustained on arms and shoulders, while Nipper put a plaster strip over his master's cheek.

The first light of dawn saw the huge trooper whirring over a vast dun plain in the heart of the Arabian Desert, and throughout the brazen day that followed the flight continued, Nipper and Nelson Lee taking turns to relieve Snub at the helm. Below, in the vast loneliness of the wilds, wandering tribesmen, caravan parties or solitary sheep-herders lifted keen eyes to the sky as a faint, sonorous hum drifted down to their ears. But all they saw was a

tiny speck of light far up in the intense blue, and their eyes were filled with wonder.

By mid-afternoon the sands of Arabia had given place to the Salt Desert of Persia, and two hours later the first craggy slopes of fierce Afghanistan leapt to meet the invaders. Among the air-pockets above the valleys and chasms Nelson Lee took the pilot's seat, nursing the roaring trooper through the bumps and perils with delicate skill.

In monotonous flight the afternoon wore on. The sun, slowly turning to a globe of molten fire, sank until its level rays gilded the great airplane's wings with ruby light. A ration of hot coffee and food was served, and suddenly, in the midst of the meal, little Buddy jumped up to the cockpit, hand eagerly outstretched.

"Mr. Lee—Mr. Lee! Look, the mountains of Bhuristan at last!"

With eyes that glistened suspiciously the youngster bent, staring his fill at the country—his own land—which he had not seen for so many years. Looking ahead, Nelson Lee saw, swimming in the glorious clouds of sunset, a long, towering wall of mountains, snow-capped, jagged, impregnable. Bhuristan at last! The second stage in the great journey was in sight.

Rising stiffly from their seats, the Kittens crowded to the windows for a look at the hidden, secret country they were to conquer—somehow. The Afghan uplands below them merged into a narrow plain running to the foot of that high, distant barrier.

And it was at that moment that someone caught sight of the strange 'plane, racing out of nowhere to meet them!

From the background of mountains it came—a thing of beauty in the sunset, but, in that wild region, a sinister spectacle. Plainly much smaller than the trooper, it was also much faster; the space between the two grew smaller with every passing minute.

Among the Kittens a silence fell, the men looking at each other with questioning eyes. And Nelson Lee, holding steadily on his course, watched the newcomer intently. Friend or foe? To the detective's mind, there could be but one answer, for the stranger had flown from the mountains of Bhuristan, out of a hostile country. He jerked an order to the alert Scrapper:

"Stand by!" Then, as the Kittens sprang coolly to the rifles, the answer to his suspicions came sharply. The aeroplane streaking towards him through the evening was a foe.

In a racing side-flip the stranger flicked off the course, rushing past the trooper at bewildering speed. The close-watching Kittens had an instant vision of a stream of red flashing from the enemy's after-cockpit, and on the steel sides of their craft sounded the vicious tattoo of heavy machine-gun bullets. Nelson Lee swerved away in a flash, snapping a second command over his shoulder:

"Every man lie down! Take cover!"

To fire back was useless; the troop-transport was not a fighter, having closed sides and no loopholes. Again the enemy 'plane howled past, firing rapidly, striving to get above and behind the colossal invader. As it did so Nelson Lee saw two brown savage faces peering over her fuselage, and instantly Budrudin's high voice shrilled in his ear:

"Lal Dhulatta and Gokhale!" Snub followed immediately with an explanation.

"Buddy's right, Mr. Lee. They're the two scouts who dropped him from the 'plane in England! My hat!"

Nelson Lee's lips tightened. Ram Tagore's servants, eh? Somehow, then, that clever devil had got wind of the Kittens' invasion—this was his method of destroying them ere ever they reached Bhuristan. The detective's face went pale with determination.

But Lal Dhulatta, too, was a resolute pilot—and a clever one. Again and again he swooped on his huge prey as a harrier attacks a wild goose, darting, twisting, twirling. Gokhale, his machine-gunner, pounded the monster's sides incessantly.

A side-window in the transport crashed inwards in a shower of glass; the Kittens, lying flat beneath the seats, growled in impotent rage. One of them, Colts spouting, sprang to the shattered window—only to be sternly ordered back by Snub. To fire back was useless for the moment—a foolish, unnecessary risk.

At the controls, however, Nelson Lee, a first-class pilot at all times, was doing amazing things with the heavy craft, constantly out-thinking, out-flying and side-slipping the nippier rushes of Lal Dhulatta. Had Ram Tagore been aboard the hostile 'plane, the detective might have taken a chance of ramming the lighter craft; his great steel wings would have crushed it to pulp with possibly little risk. But saner counsels held good; the two opponents circled and dodged in strident, yarring circles.

Over and over in Lee's mind a phrase was churning, the last words of his ally, the Night Hawk.

"I shall be watching for you!" If, by reckless trickery, he could keep this venomous attacker at bay there might be hope for the Kittens yet—for the Night Hawk kept his promises.

Which is exactly what Thurston Kyle was doing at that moment! His glittering wings beating to their fullest power, lips drawn back in a bitter, contemptuous smile, the Night Hawk was hissing to the rescue.

From a peak of hoary Kanjunga he had watched the approach of the trooper so keenly that he had missed the first rush of the Bhuristanian attacker until it was almost too late. Now, eating up space in dazzling swoops, he whistled into action—a deadly air-fighter.

In the heavier, slower transport Nelson Lee had almost shot his bolt. Lacking in speed, with a bulkier craft to handle, he could no longer dodge Lal Dhulatta's aerial acrobatics successfully. Another stream of lead zipped through the broken window; a bullet ricocheted into the cockpit, missing the detective by a hair's breadth and smashing the mirror in front of him. Before his eyes the long bonnet of the engine outside became plastered with ominous grey streaks; the big trooper plunged like a wounded leviathan, falling away in a horrible stagger. He eased her up cleverly, shot a glance at his vicious opponent—and almost rose from his seat in an explosion of delight.

The Night Hawk was attacking!

The sight was uncanny—for of Thurston Kyle nothing could be seen. Only from above Dhulatta's 'plane came suddenly—devastatingly—a scarlet stream of flame. The thudding of the machine-gun bullets ceased as Gokhale rose in his straps, mouth wide open in a silent scream of agony, to fall forward next instant with one leather-clad arm stiffly outstretched.

Lal Dhulatta, vaguely realising his peril, looked up—tried to twist his craft into a "falling leaf." The effort was as futile as it was desperate. Before his bulging eyes a terrible winged apparition appeared from the sky, as though through a curtain, vanishing again on the instant. But two heavy slugs, fired at point-blank range, tore their way into the Indian's brain.

In a heap he collapsed over his joy-stick: the tail-plane rose dizzily. Relentless as Fate, the Night Hawk swooped after the dropping craft, fire spurting from both guns: a little flame flickered from the Bhuristanian, fluttered for a second, then, in a ghastly venomous whoosh, flooded the fuselage, streaming out behind in a brilliant rustling column. Like a roaring torch falling from the clouds, Ram Tagore's defender toppled to earth.

A great fountain of fire, leaping up from the dark plain below, told of its grim fate.

Within the struggling troop-carrier, the Kittens, Snub, Nipper and Budrudin sprang up with a rolling, united cheer. Nelson Lee alone was silent, wrestling tight-lipped with his crippled charge. One danger had passed, but another had sprung up—beyond remedy even from the Night Hawk. With one engine out of action, the heavily loaded transport was failing.

Gallantly the engine recovered—stammered feebly—recovered again; then died in mid-

air. Coughing and shaking, the 'plane swept down and down into the shadows in its last steep glide.

Followed nerve-wracking seconds. The Kittens clung to their seats, their lives in the hands of the impassive man at the helm. And sturdily he carried out his trust.

It was Nelson Lee's turn now to make a landing by leaping fire-light. The sun had vanished behind the mountains, leaving the strip of Afghan plain in densest shadow. But Ram Tagore's airplane still burned fiercely.

By the light of that flaming beacon the detective slid over the ground, flattening out. The trooper touched—bumped aloft and settled, rushing ahead on skids that banged cruelly on the rough land. There came a vigorous jolt as the speed slackened and a hillock smashed the left runner to splinters. With a grinding, tottering crash, the Egyptian monster, desperately won, desperately flown, swung round—and stopped.

Lal Dhulatta's sacrifice had not been in vain. The Kittens had reached Bhuristan, it was true, but a solid wall of granite, whose tops towered to the skies, lay between them and their goal.

And the 'plane that could have lifted them over those mighty peaks lay on the Afghan desert outside, its massive left wing a total wreck.

UNDER cover of the night Nelson Lee leaned wearily against an outcrop of rock, his tanned face marked by the strain of the long flight. Forty yards away the camp-fires of the Kittens glowed sombrely in the lee of the wrecked airplane, a shapeless, pathetic hulk. The detective knocked out the ashes of his pipe.

"That's twice Tagore has beaten me, Kyle. I've a long score to settle with him when we meet!"

Thurston Kyle spoke out of the darkness with quiet warmth, far different from his usual cold tones.

"Nonsense; you did magnificently—the finest air-exploit I have ever witnessed, Lee!" His deep laugh was like a comforting draught of wine. "Tagore is clever!" he mused. "We must not under-rate him for a minute. But we are not beaten. The Kittens are here—a night's sleep will work wonders. And—I have found Lala the Panther and given him his rajah's letter. It was enough!"

He laughed again, softly.

"Lee, the fight for Budrudin's throne is still on!"

THE END.

Next Week's Super-Thriller Night Hawk Yarn is Entitled :

"A FIGHT FOR A THRONE!"

Tell all your pals about this amazing series.



(Introduction on page 42.)

The VALLEY of HOT SPRINGS!

Harrowed By Arrows!

THE procession moved forward through the steaming mist, which seemed to grow thicker and thicker as the towering walls of the cliffs grew closer and closer. For nearly half an hour nobody spoke. Eric, though he was thrilled by the excitement of the adventure, began to experience a feeling of creepiness. The boy could see nothing except the vague outline of his uncle's figure, and every time his foot struck a stone, mocking echoes came from every side. There was something nightmarish about it all, and that feeling increased when suddenly the professor spoke, his booming voice being repeated from side to side of the towering cliffs.

"There's one point that puzzles me. If

that man belonged to the Valley of Hot Springs, what was he doing at Krikkertak? And why should he attempt to kill us?"

Eric, having no answer to that question, remained silent.

"Amongst certain races, especially to West Africa, the telepathic method of communication has been extraordinarily developed," went on the professor. "It has been proved again and again that it can outstrip the ordinary telegraph. It would almost seem that our arrival was expected, and that this man was sent, if not to prevent, at least to delay our expedition."

"Do you mean to say you really think they could have known we were coming?" Eric exclaimed.

"Eric the Red distinctly speaks of an Angekok, or wizard.

**Eric Denning & Co. arrive at the
mysterious valley—and everywhere
is gold!**

They are the ancient priests of the Esquimaux. If this caste still survives in the Valley of Hot Springs, which is likely, they may have developed certain psychic powers of which we know nothing. Understand me, I'm putting this forward simply as a theory. I am not yet prepared to advance it as a fact. The sooner we get to the Valley of Hot Springs, the sooner we shall know for certain."

Having delivered himself thus in his best lecture-room voice, the professor pushed forward at a quicker pace. He seemed absolutely tireless, and, young and strong as he was, Eric was hard put to it to keep at his heels. Behind him in the rear he could hear Danny puffing and panting. The heat of the vapour through which they pressed made the journey all the more difficult. It was like taking violent exercise in a Turkish bath, and the youngster longed to divest himself of the furs he was wearing.

Hour after hour went by, and still they never halted. Suddenly Eric felt his arm brush the side of the cliff. The path by the side of the stream had narrowed now to hardly more than a foot. He was about to suggest to his uncle that they had better take to the other bank, where there would be more room, when the professor halted.

"Listen!" he exclaimed.

From somewhere ahead of them in that impenetrable murk came a dull roar.

"We are nearly at the end. That must be the waterfall Eric the Red speaks of. Forward, gentlemen. We shall camp to-night at the foot of the path that leads to the valley."

But it took nearly two hours to reach the waterfall, and Eric was almost dropping when at last that distant murmur turned to a roar of falling water. Suddenly a gap appeared in the mist by which they were surrounded. The boy halted spellbound. The sight which had opened up before his eyes was terrifying in its majesty.

Immediately ahead of them he could see a great towering glacier, so hemmed in by the enclosing cliffs that its base was not more than a few feet in width. And down this there tumbled a foaming, smoking cataract of hot water. Its course was marked

on the ice by a grey stain as far as the eye could see. Save here, where the living rock had been laid bare, all was ice.

The professor sprang forward, and, regardless of the cataract, peered upwards.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Eric the Red was singularly accurate. There are the steps, gentlemen, which we must climb—the steps which he describes in his narrative as being no higher than a man's waist."

"But you ain't going to climb 'em now, are you, guv'nor?" Danny wanted to know indignantly. "Ain't it time for a bit of grub?"

Very reluctantly the professor agreed to their pitching camp. After all, they had accomplished, as he explained, in some ten hours a march that had taken Eric the Red two days.

"You pitch that tent and get a move on, Jackson!" Danny exclaimed. "And no tricks, mind you. I'm watching you."

Eric found himself grudgingly admiring their prisoner. Though he was obviously tired, he set about his task quite cheerfully—even whistling to himself. Meanwhile Danny lighted a fire and boiled a kettle. Though they were all desperately hungry, the professor cut down their rations ruthlessly.

"We may want this food before we reach the valley. Learn to curb your carnal appetites, gentlemen."

Danny made a grimace at Eric, and set about paying particular attention to the ration that was served out to Jackson. But if their prisoner went short, Danny saw to it that the professor didn't. When he thought nobody was looking, he slipped his bar of chocolate, which concluded the meal, on to the grass by the professor's side, a look of satisfaction lighting up his old battered face as he saw his master pick it up with an air of abstraction and begin to eat it. Eric, who had seen this by-play, drew him aside. Danny scoffed at the boy's remonstrance.

"Working and sweating is nothing, Mr. Eric. It's the thinking that counts. We've got to keep the guv'nor's brain going. Don't you fret about me. If I'm hungry I'll take some of Jackson's."

When they crowded into the tent, it only seemed to Eric that he closed his eyes for

HOW THE STORY BEGAN.

ERIC DENNING, cheery, adventure-loving youngster, lives with his uncle,

PROFESSOR DENNING. The professor absent-minded and interested in nothing save his studies, is expecting a visit from John Peters, an Arctic explorer who has discovered a narwhal's horn, on which is written in Runic writing the key to tremendous treasures, in Greenland. The horn arrives, but not Peters. For Peters is dead—murdered by one of a gang of scoundrels, the leader of which is

BOSS MAUNSELL. Maunsell attempts to capture the narwhal's horn, but is frustrated, largely owing to the activities of

DANNY, the professor's man-of-all-work and an ex-pugilist. The professor deciphers the writing on the horn, and he and Eric and Danny travel to Greenland, and start out for the Valley of Hot Springs. They capture Maunsell, who has been trailing them. He gives his name as Jackson, and he has just killed in self-defence a man who has already attacked the professor's party, and whom the professor declares must be an inhabitant of the valley.

(Now read on.)

a few moments before he felt the professor shaking him.

"Time to be moving!" he exclaimed.

If their previous trek had been trying, the one that followed was even more so. Eric the Red had spoken about the "steps no higher than a man's waist which with labour he could climb." The labour was there all right, Eric thought, after an hour of strenuous exercise.

Not only had they to cumb from one step to another, but they had all the time to fight against the enormous pressure of the falling water, which covered them like a cloud. Half blinded, in a kind of fantastic twilight, they pushed upwards. When they at last halted, huddled together in a kind of cave, over the mouth of which a cataract swept, even Danny's cheerfulness seemed to have left him.

"Didn't that bloke say he took four days over this job, Mr. Eric? What's the gov'nor want to start trying to break records for? Seems to think he's on the track at Stamford Bridge."

The professor, indeed, refused to give them any rest. As soon as that hasty meal had been eaten, they continued their climb. It seemed to Eric that they must be climbing the highest mountain in the world, and the boy was too exhausted even to feel a thrill of satisfaction when at last they came panting out on what looked like a vast plateau fringed on either side by ice, which, once clear of the steam that came from the water, stretched for miles on either side.

And here a worse trial of their endurance awaited them. The vapour from the stream came down in a continuous shower of snow, which melted almost before it reached the ground. The hot air, coming up from the stream and meeting the bitter cold of the regions above, set up such a violent evaporation that snow was formed and came driving into their faces, half-blinding them. And the extraordinary part of it was that they themselves all the time were perfectly warm.

Eric recalled little of that weird journey across the plateau. Every step he took he had to dash the melting snow from his face.

On the second night they camped on the plateau. The rations were getting lower and lower. It was clear that unless they reached their destination the following day they would be without food. Danny's face was even more grim when they swallowed their scanty breakfast of ship's biscuits and tea the following morning, and then once more took up the trail. Eric had been staggering forward in a kind of dream when he heard his uncle cry out.

"The tunnel—the tunnel!"

There only a few yards ahead of them, half hidden by the falling snow, was a great opening in the cliff through which the hot, steaming river tumbled. Catching the professor's excitement, Eric turned to Danny.

"The tunnel that leads to the valley!" cried the youngster excitedly. "We must be nearly there!"

As he spoke he saw Jackson step back quickly thrust his hand into Danny's pocket, draw out the Browning automatic there, and then fire three shots in rapid succession. The next moment, with a leap, he was on the professor, and had pulled him to the ground.

"Get down!" he shouted.

As Eric stood there dazed by these sudden happenings, a number of arrows rained down on the party, and one of the flying missiles pierced the loose sleeve of his fur coat!

The Wonder World!

ERIC gave a startled gasp, and quickly dropped behind a boulder. As he did so he felt something thrust into his hand. It was the barrel of a gun.

"Here you are, Mr. Eric," whispered Danny. "Give them some buckshot. You can't miss 'em. They're as thick as flies, all lumped together in this here tube station the governor's brought us to!"

Dashing the snow from his eyes, Eric was able to see for the first time that the entrance to the tunnel was filled with a dozen or more stalwart men with bows and arrows in their hands. Jackson, holding the professor down with his left arm, was busily engaged in emptying his automatic into the ruck. Slipping in a couple of cartridges, the boy took hasty aim. His two shots were answered by two more from his immediate right, where Danny was busy. For a moment the tall figures stood their ground; then, with blood-curdling screams, they turned and vanished.

Carrying his gun at the trail, Danny ran forward and dropped down by the professor's side.

"All right, gov'nor?" he inquired.

"Of course I am, Danny!" the professor retorted. "Will you have the goodness to tell this man Jackson, who has been taking such liberties, to allow me to get up?"

With a laugh, Jackson scrambled to his feet.

"Sorry, professor, but after all, I needed you to show me the way into the Valley of Hot Springs. It would have been foolish from my point of view to let you be killed."

Gripping the barrel of the revolver, he held the butt out towards Danny.

"Your gun, I think," he said. "I took it from your pocket."

A little sheepishly Danny took the revolver, and slipped it back into his pocket.

"Clever, ain't you?" he snapped. Danny had no use for the man who was supposed to be their prisoner.

But Jackson, apparently, was not listening to him. He had picked up one of the arrows, and was examining it with interest.

"Platinum, professor!" he exclaimed. "That's what these heads are made of!"

But the professor was unmoved by the discovery of this enormously valuable metal which had been hurled at them. He was eyeing the entrance to the tunnel.

"Very unfortunate, gentlemen. I desired before all things to enter the valley peace-

ably. Now it seems that we shall have to make a warlike demonstration."

"Have we to go through that tunnel, guv'nor?" Danny inquired.

"Of course we have. Is your memory so bad that you cannot recall what I read to you? The valley can only be entered by the long tunnel through which the stream finds its way out."

"Well, as we've only got to take this here tube to where we've got to get to, there ain't no need for you to show us the way any longer, professor. Jackson can go first, and I'm following next to keep an eye on him. Mr. Eric comes after me, and you can bring up the rear."

"Are you presuming to give me orders, Danny?" the professor shouted wrathfully.

"Not on your life, guv'nor; but that's how it's going to be—even if I have to keep running back and putting you in the rear."

Without waiting for the professor to make any further protest, he followed Jackson to the mouth of the tunnel. Another moment, and they were plunged into impenetrable darkness.

The stream cut a deep channel in the rock, and on the left was a rough pathway along which they groped, guiding themselves by the wall of the tunnel. For the best part of half an hour they saw nothing save the faint phosphorescence that came from the stream below, and heard nothing except the roar of the water. Then, abruptly, ahead of them there appeared a small circle of light, which grew wider and wider.

As if framed in a picture, curious objects began to appear—piles of grey stone, patches of vivid green, with here and there moving figures that looked as if they were being viewed through the wrong end of a telescope.

Jackson broke into a run, and presently they were racing towards what Danny insisted on calling the next station.

They stood together in a little group at the end of the tunnel, the professor now in the front, staring at a scene which almost took their breath away. It was like a great cup, the walls of which were frozen ice and snow, stretching upwards to a height of nearly three hundred feet. Enclosed by these walls of glistening white, was a circular space, quite thirty miles in diameter, which was a lush green. It was like a great meadow set in the heart of the Greenland mountains.

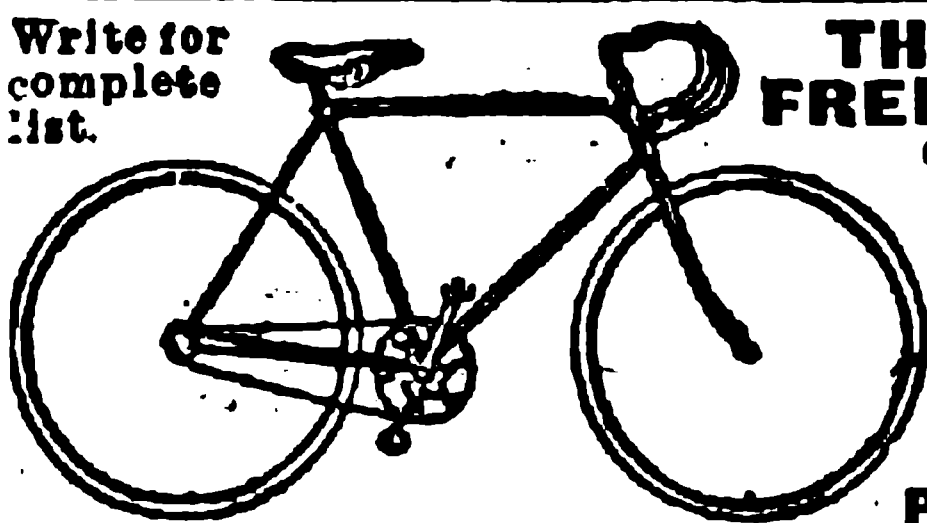
That was the first general impression they all got, and then bit by bit there began to dawn upon him then the details of this strange world into which they had stumbled.

In the very centre was a huge geyser, whose tumbling waters, catching the rays of the sun, were turned into all the colours of the rainbow; and from this central geyser there radiated what looked like a whole system of other geysers. Eric counted over eighty before he got tired of the calculations, and there must have been six or seven times as many besides. The tumbling of their waters filled the air with a curious hissing sound.

Surrounding the central geyser were a number of grey stone buildings in the shape of pyramids, and beyond there were other less magnificent houses. Farther still, on the outskirts, were low, humble-looking dwellings. From the mouth of the tunnel the ground sloped gently upwards, and where it reached the level plain there was the biggest building of all, its summit almost reaching to the top of the surrounding glaciers. What made it remarkable was that each of the steps of which it was formed, was faced with gold. And at the very summit was a huge golden platform on which stood a number of figures. Were they friends—or enemies?

(At the Valley of Hot Springs at last! Will Eric & Co. be received as friends—or as foes? Don't miss reading next week's enthralling instalment, chums.)

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