

LONG SCHOOL STORY THAT THRILLS—Inside!

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The BLACK HAND AT ST FRANK'S!



E. O. Handforth kidnapped! Read this week's stirring long complete school, mystery and adventure yarn, featuring the famous chums of St. Frank's.

New Series No. 89.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY,

October 3rd, 1931.

Mysterious Hooded Figures Cause Consternation at St. Frank's.

The BLACK HAND



CHAPTER 1.

Trouble on the Road!

"WELL, cheerio, sweethearts!" said Kirby Keeble Parkington affably. "Happy landing!"

"What do you mean—'happy landing'?" asked the departing guest. "I'm not flying anywhere!"

"That Morris Minor of yours, old darling, may not be able to fly, but with you at the wheel there's no telling where she's going to land," said K. K. blandly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crowd of Fourth-Formers at the

gates of Carlton College roared with merriment. But Edward Oswald Handforth, the owner of the Morris Minor in question, could not see the joke.

"Chuck it, you silly hyenas!" he said, grinning. "Well, we'll be off. Thanks for a ripping time."

"Yes, rather!" echoed Church and McClure.

"You've done us proud," went on Handforth genially. "And when you come over to St. Frank's, we'll return the compliment."

The famous chums of Study D had been visiting. They had dropped in upon their

Sensational Complete School Yarn of Intriguing Interest.

at ST. FRANK'S

By *EDWY SEARLES*
BROOKS

▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲
E. O. Handforth kidnapped by
dreaded secret society.
£50,000 ransom—or death.
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Carlton friends for tea, and the celebrated "Red-Hots" had made them very welcome. It was now about twenty minutes past eight, and the October evening was dark and blustery. Handforth, with his usual optimism, had been delaying the departure

until time was getting short. It was very necessary to get back to St. Frank's before nine-thirty—and it was a good hour's run, even in the nippy Minor.

"We'll do it before bed-time easily," said Handforth with confidence. "We've

got a permit from Old Wilkey to be out until half-past nine."

"That doesn't allow much time for repairing a puncture, or changing the wheel," remarked Harvey Deeks, shaking his head solemnly.

"Rats! My tyres are sound enough," said Handforth.

"Well, you might have a mechanical breakdown," said Clement Goffin carelessly. "What would you do then?"

"Repair it, of course!" replied Handforth promptly. "What are you chaps trying to do—kid me? Do you think I can't do roadside repairs?"

K. K. chuckled.

"We won't go into another argument, honey," he murmured. "You'll only blame us for being late! Well, so long! Don't forget that we're coming over to you pretty soon!"

"The sooner the better," said Handforth heartily, as they shook hands.

Church and McClure were already in the comfortable little saloon; and Handforth, taking his seat, revved up the engine, slipped in the gear, and the car glided away. The Carlton juniors gave their departing visitors a rousing send-off.

"Decent chaps," remarked Handforth, after a while.

"There's nothing wrong with K. K. & Co.," agreed McClure, the Scottish junior. "But there wasn't any reason for you to stay so late, Handy. We shall have a rush now."

"Rot! We'll do it before nine-thirty on our heads!"

"Well, if we're late, you'll be responsible," said Church comfortably. "Mac and I are in your hands."

"You couldn't be in better," retorted Handforth. "This little bus can do wonders."

Church and McClure privately thought that the little bus would need to. It was all very well for Handforth to be so confident; but he was cutting it rather fine.

However, the faithful little car bowled along valiantly, her twin head-lamps slicing the darkness so efficiently that Handforth was able to maintain a fine turn of speed.

They had covered about eight miles of the journey, and were bowling along a lonely stretch of road, with dense woodlands on either side, when the engine gave an ominous little splutter.

"That's funny," said Handforth, frowning. "She doesn't often do that."

There was another splutter, and then all the power seemed to vanish. Opening the throttle wider made no difference. The little car lost her momentum, and soon she

came to a complete standstill, the engine dead.

"Mechanical breakdown," said Church resignedly.

Handforth jumped.

"Rats!" he ejaculated. "It's — it's nothing! I—I believe we're out of juice!"

Those words—"mechanical breakdown"—had startled him. Earlier in the evening he had had a heated argument with K. K. & Co. on the subject. He had been boasting that he was capable of doing any ordinary roadside repairs. There weren't many defects which he could not quickly locate!

"Well, now's your chance, Handy," said McClure, not without sarcasm. "You told those Carlton chaps how clever you are, didn't you? Let's see some of that cleverness!"

"Fathead!" said Handforth, opening the door.

He unfastened the bonnet flap, lifted it, and looked into the petrol tank, using a little electric torch. He was relieved.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "I thought for the moment that we were out of petrol, but the tank's over half full."

"It must be the magneto, then," said Church.

"There aren't any magnetos on these cars, you chump!" retorted Handforth. "It's coil ignition. H'm! I wonder where the trouble can be?"

He switched on again, adjusted the controls, and operated the self-starter. It whirred energetically, but the engine refused to come to life.

"Perhaps the petrol tap isn't turned on?" suggested McClure.

"Well, that's pretty brilliant, I must say!" retorted Handforth, with a sniff. "How do you suppose we've travelled eight or nine miles? It's no good looking at the petrol tap, or the tank, either. We've heaps of juice, so the trouble can't be connected with the fuel. Must be something wrong with the ignition."

"Go ahead, then," said Mac. "It won't take long."

"Only a minute or two," added Church sweetly.

Handforth inwardly writhed.

"Come out of that seat," he growled. "I want to get at the tool-kit!"

Having decided that the trouble was connected with the ignition, Handforth proceeded to start operations on the distributor. He soon found that it wasn't half such an easy task as he had imagined.

"Buck up, old son!" said Church. "You've been nearly ten minutes already."

"Can't you dry up?" retorted Handforth as he bent over the engine. "Do you think I'm enjoying myself?"

"Well, I'm only wondering about the time," said Church mildly. "We shall never get home by half-past nine, you know. Old Wilkey's a decent sort, but —"

"Dry up!" growled Handforth. "Give me a pair of pliers!"

"Found the trouble?" asked Mac, as he handed over the pliers. "Good man! He's located it, Churchy! Well, I must say he's proved as good as his word. He told K. K. that it wouldn't take him more than five minutes——"

"I haven't located it!" roared Handforth, exasperated.

"Oh! I thought——"

"I don't care what you thought!" snorted Handforth. "I've unfastened this distributor, and now I'm jiggered if I know how it goes!"

"You'll soon find out," said McClure. "I remember your telling K. K. how simple it is to effect roadside repairs."

"Dry up about K. K.!" bellowed Handforth, getting desperate. "Perhaps I was a bit too optimistic."

Having bragged so much to Parkington & Co., Handforth couldn't even jump on Church and McClure for their sarcasm. Here was a golden opportunity to prove his words—and he knew very well, in his heart, that this trouble was beyond him. Very sensibly, he knuckled under after seven or eight minutes of useless tinkering.

"Go on—laugh!" he said bitterly.

"What are we to laugh about?" asked Church.

"We're stuck here—helpless!" replied Handforth. "We're probably miles from anywhere."

"I don't call that funny," said Church.

"It isn't funny, you ass, but I thought you'd laugh, all the same," growled Edward Oswald. "After what I said to those Carlton chumps——"

"We're not going to chip you, Handy, old man," said McClure, with a grin. "You always were an optimist. The best thing we can do is to find a garage—and a mechanic. No sense in sticking here all the evening."

It was a practical suggestion, and Handforth was grateful to his chums for their tact. As usual in such circumstances, he proceeded to chastise himself mercilessly.

"Well, I'm whacked!" he said. "A silly, simple fault in the ignition, and I can't locate it! What am I?" he demanded, turning upon his chums.

"That's all right, old man——"

"I'll tell you what I am!" roared Handforth fiercely. "I'm a boasting, bragging ass! I'm a conceited idiot!"

"Oh, well——"

"And I jolly well deserve to be left stranded!" declared Handforth. "It'll teach me a lesson, I hope! Next time I won't be so beastly confident! I ought to be kicked!"

"If kicking you would get the engine going again, we'd oblige," said Church. "But as it would only be a waste of time, we'd better get a move on."

"Yes, we'll shove the car to the nearest garage," said Handforth. "There may be one half a mile down the road."

"We came this way, didn't we?" asked Mac. "Well, as far as I can remember, there's no garage for two or three miles."

"You're pretty cheerful," grunted Handforth. "I expect it'll come on to rain next!"

Pushing the Morris Minor was not particularly hard work, for the country hereabouts was almost level. But even a gradual rise soon had them perspiring, and they were relieved when they reached the summit. There was a corresponding slope to go down, and they were able to ride. The little car, in neutral, gathered speed bravely, and a mile was quickly covered in this way. After that came more pushing, and at length lights were observed ahead. It was just over half a mile into the village, and the car had to be pushed all the way.

It was now getting on for nine-thirty, and, according to schedule, they should have been almost at St Frank's.

Fortunately, there was a little petrol station in the village, with a modest garage and workshop adjoining. A lean, wiry, elderly man in overalls soon appeared in answer to Handforth's hooting.

"Petrol, young gents?" he asked briefly.

"No—trouble," replied Handforth. "We've pushed this giddy car for three or four miles. You might have a look at her and see what's wrong."

"Bring her in," invited the garage man.

As soon as he lifted the bonnet he whistled.

"You can't get her going, you say?" he asked. "I don't wonder! The distributor's in bits!"

"I did that," growled Handforth.

"Oh, you did it?" asked the garage man. "Trying to find out what was inside?"

"The engine stopped, and the juice was all right, so I thought there was something wrong with the ignition," explained Handforth. "I got that thing in bits, and

then I couldn't put it together again. How long will it take you?"

The garage man tilted his cap back, selected a point behind his ear, and scratched it.

"Can't do it in under half an hour," he said, after careful calculation. "After that, I shall have to go over her to find out the real trouble."

The three juniors left him to it, and Handforth, much subdued, had very little to say.

"We shan't get away from here much before half-past ten, by the look of it," remarked Church glumly. "So it'll be eleven o'clock before we get home. My hat! Old Wilkey will be tearing his hair!"

"There's a telephone-box here," said Handforth suddenly. "By George! That's an idea! I'll ring up Old Wilkey, and tell him that we're delayed on the road. Very likely he'll excuse us."

He had no trouble in getting through to Mr. Alington Wilkes, the good-natured Housemaster of the Ancient House at St. Frank's. Mr. Wilkes listened to the tale of woe in silence.

"So you see, sir, it's not really our fault," concluded Handforth earnestly. "We don't know what's the trouble, and the mechanic's looking at the car now. We had to push her three or four miles——"

"You said that before, old chap," interrupted Mr. Wilkes, over the wires. "Only you've added a mile to it. Didn't you say two or three miles at first? Well, I can't very well be angry with you."

"Thanks awfully, sir!"

"It was sensible of you to ring me up and let me know," continued Old Wilkey. "Get here as soon as you can. In the circumstances, I shall not punish you for being late."

"By George! You're a brick, sir!"

"There will probably be a little surprise for you when you arrive," added Mr. Wilkes dryly. "In fact, you'll be quite glad that this little breakdown happened—for you will see somebody whom you would not have otherwise met until the morning."

"I don't understand, sir," said Handforth.

"Your father will be here."

"What!" gasped Handforth, in dismay. "Oh, crumbs!"

"You don't sound very pleased, young man," came Mr. Wilkes' reproachful voice. "Sir Edward Handforth telephoned me earlier in the evening, saying that he would be coming down—and that he would spend the night at St. Frank's."

"But what's he coming for, sir?" asked Handforth blankly.

"I think there is a political meeting of some sort at Bannington to-morrow," explained Old Wilkey. "And your father, reasonably enough, is using St. Frank's as his local headquarters. Considering that he has two sons at the school, and a daughter at Moor View, it is only to be expected——"

"Yes, rather, sir, of course," interrupted Handforth. "Well, we'll get home as quickly as we possibly can. And thanks awfully, sir, for being so decent."

When he left the telephone-box he found Church and McClure eager.

"Well?" they asked, in one voice.

"We're sunk!" said Handforth gloomily.

"Did he cut up rusty?"

"Old Wilkey? No, he was as right as rain," replied Handforth. "But I've just heard that my pater will be at the school to-night."

"You're not scared of your pater, are you?" asked Church, in surprise.

"Oh, you know what he is," grunted Handforth. "He's always said that I shouldn't have a car—and he'll use this as an excuse for forbidding me to use it, or something. Let's get back to that garage, and tell the man to hustle! Our only chance is to get back to St. Frank's before my pater arrives. Blow him! He's always springing surprises on a chap!"

Church and McClure grinned. Handforth himself was rather good at that sort of thing. He was a typical chip off the old block—only he didn't realise it, and he would have been indignant if anybody had told him so.

The garage man had completed his work on the distributor, and he was scratching the spot behind his ear again.

"There's nothing wrong with your ignition, young gent," he said. "I've tested everything, and there ain't a fault. Must be the carburettor."

"But there's plenty of juice," objected Handforth.

"Maybe; but it ain't getting to the engine," said the man. "I suppose your petrol tap's turned on?" He had a look himself, and exploded. "No wonder she wouldn't go!" he ejaculated, half-indignant and half-amused. "The tap ain't on!"

"What!" gasped Handforth.

The garage man turned the tap, and an ominous sound of gurgling liquid followed—to say nothing of an equally ominous splashing on the road.

"What the—— Here, there's something rum about this," said the man. He went round to the other side of the bonnet, opened it, and started. "Hi,

turn that tap off!" he yelled. "The petrol pipe ain't connected up with the carburettor at all! There's another pipe here! Seems to me there's been some funny monkey business."

It only took him about a minute to discover that there was an auxiliary pipe to the carburettor; he traced it to a small temporary tank fitted on the dash. The car's real tank had been completely disconnected.

"What's the idea, young gents?" asked the man complainingly. "You haven't had no engine trouble. Your carburettor was connected up to this tin—which don't hold no more than a pint and a quarter.

couldn't understand the joke at the time—but we understand it now!"

"The—the cunning of it!" gasped Handforth. "While K. K. was entertaining us in his giddy study, some of his pals were fitting this extra tank—and connecting up the pipe!"

"The joke's on you, Handy," said McClure with a rueful grin. "If only you had looked at your petrol tap, as we suggested at first, we should have located the trouble. You can't say that K. K. didn't make it easy."

Handforth was too disgusted to make any reply. The joke was certainly on him! He had boasted so much about



Valiantly Handforth & Co. set about pushing the broken-down Morris Minor up the hill.

No wonder you didn't do no more than eight miles before she petered out. What's this label?"

Handforth grabbed it, and a sickly expression came over his face, for on that label were the significant words:

"Glad you located the trouble, old man. Or has this been found by a garage mechanic? Love to all.—K. K."

CHAPTER 2.

The Frightened Stranger!

"DISHED!" groaned Handforth. "Dished by those Carlton rotters!"

"No wonder they yelled when K. K. said there was no telling where we should land!" said Church bitterly. "We

locating engine trouble that Kirby Keeble Parkington had put him to the test.

The proper pipe was soon connected, and the garage man, chuckling hugely, saw the juniors off. The faithful little Minor hummed along speedily, but eleven o'clock was striking as the juniors passed through Bannington.

"There's bound to be trouble with the pater," growled Handforth, worried. "He must have arrived ages ago—and he'll jump on me like the dickens!"

"Don't you believe it," said Church. "Your pater's a good scout. Still, on the whole, I think we'd better keep mum about what really happened—we don't want everybody chipping us."

They were doing a comfortable thirty between Bannington and Bellton when the sharp, staccato toot of a high-pitched

electric horn sounded in their rear. Handforth moved over, and a handsome limousine glided smoothly past, overtaking the Minor.

"By George!" gasped Edward Oswald. "I thought I recognised that horn! That's my pater's car!"

"Then we're too late," said McClure resignedly. "He'll be there long before us!"

"Not if we hurry!" growled Handforth. "Hold tight, my sons! I'm going to do some speeding!"

It was his innate optimism again. Until he actually tried it, he really believed that he could overtake his father's limousine. The sturdy little car did its best, but it was no match for the high-powered limousine, and by the time Handforth came within sight of St. Frank's the other car had vanished.

Handforth turned into the gateway so recklessly that Josh Cuttle, the head porter, preparing to close the gates, was compelled to make a wild leap for safety.

He let out a startled yelp as he did so, and Sir Edward Handforth, who had just alighted from the limousine at the Ancient House steps, turned his head quickly. A companion was getting out of that big car, too, and the headlights of Handforth's little car flashed fully upon him. He was a young man, well dressed, foreign-looking, and his eyes were wild, and his hair was untidy. A terrified cry, almost a screech, escaped him.

"They're here—they're here!" he shrieked. "They've got me!"

"Nonsense!" snapped Sir Edward sharply. "Here, pull yourself together, man!"

He seized the other, and held him. Handforth, leaping out of his car, ran up.

"Hallo, pater!" sang out Edward Oswald.

"There you are. Pasquali—they're only boys," said Sir Edward gruffly. "There's no need for you to behave like this."

"Boys," muttered the stranger, his lips trembling. "And I—I thought— Only boys!" he added huskily.

Church and McClure had come forward by now, and they stood looking on in wonderment.

"What's wrong, pater?" asked Handforth bluntly. "Did we scare this gentleman?"

His father was rather unreasonable.

"You're enough to scare anybody, swooping in like that!" he said severely. "What are you doing out of doors at this time of night, Edward? You ought to be in bed and asleep!"

"You passed us on the road about five minutes ago, pater," said Handforth, still staring at the stranger. "I tried to catch you, but— We've had a bit of a mishap, so we're late. We ought to have been back before half-past nine."

"Well, never mind—never mind," interrupted Sir Edward. "It doesn't matter. Come, Pasquali! Hold up, my dear fellow! Didn't I tell you that there was nothing to worry about? This boy is my son, and the other two are his friends. You really mustn't give way to your fears."

"I am sorry," muttered the other shakily. "You think I am a coward—yes? Ah, but you do not know! You do not realise! You think I am safe here, yes? Well, you will see."

Sir Edward, in his concern for his companion, had apparently forgotten Handforth & Co. Mr. Alington Wilkes had opened the door by now, and he was standing in the open doorway, looking politely interested.

"Sorry I'm late, Mr. Wilkes," said Sir Edward, as he shook hands. "This gentleman is a young friend of mine—Mr. Luigi Pasquali, of Milan. I want you to forgive me for bringing him to the school unbidden. But the circumstances are rather unusual——"

"Pray don't mention it," interrupted Old Wilkey, in his hospitable way. "If he is a friend of yours, Sir Edward, he is perfectly welcome at St. Frank's. We will do all we can to make you comfortable, sir," he added, turning courteously to Luigi Pasquali.

"This gentleman is Mr. Wilkes," said Sir Edward, completing the introduction.

"You are very good, Mr. Wilkes—you are very kind," said Pasquali, in a low voice. "The time! What is the time? Had we not better get indoors?"

He was looking furtively, fearfully, over his shoulder, and Mr. Wilkes was justifiably bewildered. Handforth & Co.'s arrival at the same moment had complicated matters, too.

"Rummy business!" murmured Handforth confidentially to his chums. "Who's this bird, anyway? And what was the idea of his shrieking out like that when we came up? What does he think we are—ghosts, or something?"

"The man looks half-crazy with fear," whispered Mac. "A friend of your pater's, Handy! Do you know him?"

"Never seen him before," murmured Handforth.

The leader of Study D was intrigued. It wasn't like his father, who was a man of placid, regular habits, to be mixed up

in anything mysterious. A political meeting was generally the nearest he got to anything exciting.

"Come in, boys—come in!" Mr. Wilkes was saying. "You had better go straight up to bed."

"Yes, sir," said Handforth & Co. disappointedly.

"I am glad your car is going again, Handforth—you can give me the details in the morning," said the Housemaster. "I shall be—er—busy for some time——"

"Let them stay," urged Luigi Pasquali suddenly, spinning round upon Mr. Wilkes, and clutching his arm with such violence that the Housemaster was nearly overbalanced.

"Eh? I—I beg your pardon, sir?" ejaculated Old Wilkey. "Really, I——"

"The boys! Let them stay!" panted the stranger. "The more the better! You don't understand, sir."

"I certainly do not," said Mr. Wilkes, with some asperity.

"Come, Pasquali, this won't do!" growled Sir Edward. "Man alive, you're safe enough here. We'd better humour him," he added in a whisper. "His nerves are in shreds."

"So I can see," murmured Old Wilkey. "Will you come straight through? There is a nice fire in my sitting-room. I am afraid the supper is rather spoilt, Sir Edward. I was expecting you much earlier——"

"Of course—of course," interrupted Sir Edward. "I meant to be here by nine-thirty, or ten. I will explain just why I was late."

They all went in—and Handforth & Co., having heard the whispered comments, and having had no fresh order to go upstairs, followed. Church and McClure would never have dared, but Edward Oswald felt that his father's presence gave him a certain amount of latitude. Old Wilkey did not even dismiss them after they had all entered the sitting-room, and Handforth had closed the door.

"The window!" said the young Italian, looking over at the drawn curtains with terror in his eyes. "Is the window closed?"

"I don't think it is—quite," replied Mr. Wilkes. "I am a great believer in fresh air——"

"For Heaven's sake, close it, sir!" panted the other. "Wait—wait!"

He leapt madly aside, and crouched low behind an easy-chair whilst Mr. Wilkes drew the curtains aside and tightly closed the window. The three juniors watched in amazement.

"I owe you a very complete apology, Mr. Wilkes, for subjecting you to this

unhappy—er—scene," said Sir Edward earnestly. "If I had thought that Pasquali would act in this way, I would not have brought him. I was vain enough to hope that I would be able to restore his nerve on the journey down; but he has been gradually getting worse and worse. I am really exceedingly sorry."

He spoke half-angrily, half-pityingly, and he practically ignored the shivering, cowering young man who had dropped limply into a chair.

"I am a coward, yes!" panted Pasquali, looking up, his eyes burning. "I know it! But have I not the excuse? I am a doomed man, Sir Edward! Soon I shall be dead!"

"Stuff and nonsense!" growled Sir Edward. "I am very sorry, Pasquali, but I am losing patience with you."

The Italian looked at him almost fiercely, and then he transferred his attention to the big, old-fashioned marble clock which stood on the mantelpiece. As he did so, the gong, low and mellow, sounded the half-hour.

Sir Edward glanced at the clock, too, as he heard the stroke.

"Cheer up, Pasquali," he said, with a mocking note in his voice. "You've still half an hour to live!"

Pasquali covered his face with his hands.

"You despise me, and perhaps I deserve it," he muttered brokenly.

Sir Edward went over to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, my boy," he said, instantly contrite. "That wasn't quite fair of me. I don't despise you—don't think that. But I certainly do believe that your fears are absolutely groundless. Do you think I would have brought you to this school if I believed otherwise! Do you think I would subject St. Frank's even to a remote possibility of danger—and tragedy?"

Mr. Wilkes coughed.

"May I—er—be permitted to know just what all this means?" he asked mildly. "I hate to be inquisitive——"

"Not at all, sir," said Sir Edward gruffly. "There is not a great deal of explanation needed. Lady Handforth went off to some friends in Scotland this afternoon, and as I found myself free I thought I would motor down to St. Frank's. I have promised to make a speech in Bannington to-morrow, and I thought the opportunity a good one for seeing my children. Before starting off I called in at my club, and our friend Pasquali happened to be in the smoking-room, alone. He looked so utterly haggard that I went across and spoke to him. He

told me such an extraordinary story that I was delayed for more than an hour, and in the end I decided to bring him along with me—for, to be perfectly frank, I was afraid to leave him. I thought he might do something desperate with himself."

"I shall never cease to be grateful, Sir Edward," muttered Pasquali, looking up.

"I have known Pasquali for some little time," continued Sir Edward, still addressing Old Wilkey. "I have not only met him at my club, but I have had certain business associations with him. And I happen to know that he is alone in London, as you might say. He has no parents—no kith or kin of any kind in this country. He is the London representative of a great Italian engineering firm, and it was his loneliness which prompted me to—er—take him under my wing, as you might say."

Church and McClure glanced at one another. It was the sort of thing that Handforth himself would have done; and Handy's pater was just the same!

"Pasquali has told me an amazing story—so amazing as to be preposterous," continued Sir Edward. "Frankly, I cannot credit one word of it, and in the morning, when he is still safe and sound, Pasquali himself will have to admit that he has been extremely foolish."

Luigi Pasquali shook his head.

"On the stroke of midnight I shall die," he said in a low voice. "You laugh at me, Sir Edward—you scoff—but I know! The Mafia never fails!"

CHAPTER 3.

At the Stroke of Midnight!

MR. ALINGTON WILKES gently polished his glasses.

"The Mafia?" he repeated politely. "The word somehow sounds familiar."

"By George, yes!" burst out Handforth excitedly. "The Mafia's an Italian secret society, sir! You know—the Black Hand!"

Pasquali shuddered.

"Yes, the Black Hand!" he whispered tensely, glancing again at the clock. "In just over twenty minutes the Black Hand will strike!"

"You mean the clock will strike," grunted Sir Edward. "There's no sense at all in this Black Hand nonsense. Don't take any notice of him, Wilkes. The poor fellow is half-hysterical."

"Come, come, young man," said Old Wilkey gently. "I'm sure that Sir Edward is right. There must be some

mistake. The Mafia is no longer in existence."

"So you think—so most people think," burst out Pasquali. "Am I not in a position to know the real truth? It was my father, Heaven rest his soul, who was so active in stamping out the accursed Black Hand society." His eyes shone proudly. "My father was one of Italy's greatest patriots. He did noble work, for which he was decorated by the Italian Government."

"That's quite true, Wilkes," said Sir Edward, nodding. "The boy's father was one of Italy's heroes; he was mainly instrumental in stamping out the dreaded Mafia."

"Two months ago my father was found dead in the wreckage of his car," said Luigi Pasquali in a low, dull voice. "They said it was an accident. But the newspapers could not tell the truth. My father was killed—murdered. It was an act of revenge by the accursed Black Hand!"

"Was there any proof of that?" asked Old Wilkey quietly.

"Proof? You think these people leave proofs?" asked Pasquali, with some show of spirit. "But I know! Have I not had the messages? Listen, sir! I will tell you! There is yet time!"

He glanced at the clock again, and drew nearer to the others. The three boys had not moved, and they were fascinated. They were hoping against hope that Mr. Wilkes would not send them to bed.

"It began some weeks ago," said Pasquali. "Until then, even I had not guessed that my father's death was anything but an accident. I came to London for my firm because I knew the English language so well. I talk English like the native, yes? I was engrossed in my business—happily at work from morning until night. Then, one day, came the first message. I found it in the lining of my hat—a crude, ill-scrawled message, with a roughly-drawn design of a black hand instead of a signature."

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Handforth, who was soaking in every word like a sponge.

"This message said little—the one word 'Beware,'" continued the young Italian. "I thought—yes—I thought it was a silly joke. But then, later, I had other messages. I found them under my plate in the restaurant—in my ordinary morning correspondence—even in my overcoat pockets. The Mafia lives again! Ah, you may think I am mad, but I know the truth! Some of those devils have re-started the dreaded society——"



Handforth & Co. saw a flash from the shrubbery. Pasquali, running across the Triangle, threw up his arms and collapsed to the ground.

"But, my dear fellow," interrupted Sir Edward, "I made inquiries of Scotland Yard—just to quieten your fears—and the Yard people assure me that there isn't the slightest truth in the suggestion that the Mafia is again active."

"I do not scorn your Scotland Yard," said Pasquali, shaking his head. "It is the greatest detective organisation in the world. But even Scotland Yard knows nothing, or next to nothing, of Italy. They are wrong, Sir Edward! The Mafia is active! It is reorganising, and it needs money. Even a secret society cannot be rebuilt without money."

"And demands were made of you, eh?" murmured Mr. Wilkes shrewdly. "We seem to be getting to something."

"They told me, in these messages, that I must find the sum of twenty thousand pounds—or die," said Pasquali brokenly. "I am in a good position, gentlemen, but such a sum is impossible. I could not pay it—and I would not pay it. Thus, I ignored these warnings. And the last message I received was final. This night, on the stroke of twelve, I am to die! No matter where I hide, no matter what steps I take to protect myself, I shall die!"

Mr. Wilkes and Sir Edward exchanged significant glances. It was fairly clear to them—and to Handforth & Co., too—that the unfortunate young Italian had been subjected to an intensive campaign of threatening letters. They had got on his nerves to such an extent that he had been reduced to this pitiable condition. There was no doubting his sincerity; he really believed that he would die at the stroke of midnight.



"I found the poor chap in despair," explained Sir Edward gruffly. "He came to the club, so he told me, to spend his last hours. You see, he has no home—only a hotel. He thought perhaps he would be safer at the club. I don't mind telling you, Mr. Wilkes, that there was quite a scene in that smoking-room; I felt most uncomfortable about it. And as I couldn't leave poor Pasquali there, and as my start for St. Frank's was long overdue, it occurred to me that it might be as well to bring him along."

"It was really a splendid idea," nodded Mr. Wilkes approvingly.

"I thought I could talk some sense into him on the journey down," went on Sir Edward. "But no; he is as certain as ever that he will die on the stroke of midnight. How in the name of miracles these imaginary Mafia people will get at him is beyond my comprehension! Come, come! This certainly does sound ridiculous, Pasquali! You know as well as I do that you can be in no danger here."

"Not the slightest," urged Mr. Wilkes. "These Black Hand rogues will not find their way to St. Frank's. You are absolutely safe here. I could not imagine a safer place in the whole of England."

"You are good!" murmured Luigi Pasquali. "I thank you, gentlemen. But.

whatever precautions you take, I shall die at the stroke of the hour. The Mafia never fails!"

He covered his face with his hands again, and Sir Edward shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Well, he'll know how wrong he is soon," he murmured. "It will soon be midnight."

Handforth was fairly quivering.

"Oughtn't we to do something, sir?" he burst out eagerly, appealing to Mr. Wilkes. "How about waking up the chaps—the Remove and the Fourth and all the rest? We could surround the school, and make a complete ring of protection, and——"

"Ahem! I don't think that will be necessary, Handforth," interrupted Old Wilkey. "Mr. Pasquali is in no danger."

"But the Black Hand is a horrible secret society, sir!" urged Handforth. "They—they get at people anywhere, you know! I've read about 'em!"

"Perhaps you had better go to bed, you three," said the Housemaster. "I find, after all, that there is no necessity for you to remain up."

"But—but it'll soon be midnight, sir——" began Handforth, dismayed.

"Exactly—and it is high time that you were in bed," cut in Mr. Wilkes. "Nothing will happen at midnight. I entirely agree with your father that this unfortunate young man has been made the victim of a cruel joke. You had better go."

"Yes, sir," said the three boys glumly. "Good-night, sir."

They went, but Handforth thrust out his jaw aggressively when they reached the passage.

"All rot, is it?" he muttered. "And he thinks we're going to bed, does he?"

"Look here, Handy——"

"We'll go outside—and we'll keep watch," said Handforth tensely. "Then, if we see any of those Black Hand rotters creeping about, we'll pounce on 'em!"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Church.

Handforth, of course, preferred to believe implicitly in Luigi Pasquali's melodramatic story. Sir Edward Handforth and Mr. Wilkes, more level-headed, preferred to adopt the common-sense view. As Sir Edward had said, he would not have brought the Italian to the school if he had had the slightest fear that there was any genuine danger.

Handforth & Co. cautiously made their way out of doors. Everything was quiet, except for the blustery wind, and the moon was shining fitfully as it occasionally appeared from behind the rapidly drifting clouds.

"Listen!" muttered Handforth tensely.

From somewhere along the road came the sound of a motor-car. It was vague, and even as the juniors were listening the sounds ceased. The car, for some reason, had stopped.

"Did you hear that?" breathed Handforth excitedly. "By George, the Mafia!"

"Rats!" said McClure. "It was only somebody's car. I'm not even sure——"

"What's—what's that over there?" whispered Church abruptly.

"Eh?"

Handforth, his voice throbbing, spun round. Church was staring across into the shadowy opening of East Arch.

"I—I thought I saw something move just now," muttered Church unsteadily. "A sort of shadow. My imagination, I suppose. This moonlight's a bit tricky. We'd better go in, you chaps."

In Mr. Wilkes' sitting-room the three men waited.

The tension was now getting strained. The solemn ticking of the marble clock sounded unusually loud, and once, when the fire crackled, Pasquali jumped nervously.

"Steady—steady!" murmured Sir Edward. "Only another five minutes, my boy. After midnight, I understand, you will be safe?"

"After midnight I shall be dead!" replied Pasquali tragically.

"Of all the—oh, well, have your own way!" grunted Sir Edward, with a helpless shrug. "You see, Wilkes, these Mafia people are infallible," he added, not without irony. "But if they do fail to keep an appointment, their victim, I understand, is perfectly safe."

"That is some consolation, at least," said Mr. Wilkes dryly.

Pasquali, his lips trembling, looked from one man to the other.

"You laugh at me, yes?" he said. "Alas! It is a thousand pities that I should bring such trouble upon this school. Oh, if only Moreno were here!"

"Moreno?" repeated Sir Edward politely.

"He, of all men, would know what to do—would know how to protect me," went on Pasquali. "Not that even he could save me from the vengeance of the Black Hand! But Moreno cannot reach England in time," he added, with a helpless shrug. "Perhaps it is as well."

He looked at the clock again, and the pallor of his face became more pronounced.

"Who is this man Moreno, you speak of?" asked Sir Edward, more for the sake of keeping the conversation going than anything else.

"You have not heard of Guiseppe Moreno?" asked Pasquali, in surprise. "He is the famous Italian secret service man—the greatest enemy the Mafia ever had, next to my father. Was he not with my father when the Mafia was destroyed?"

"Oh, I see," nodded Sir Edward.

"I told Moreno of my troubles—he wired that he was coming—but it is impossible for him to be in England until to-morrow," continued Pasquali. "Then it will be too late. Perhaps he will avenge me."

"Upon my word, Pasquali, you're making me angry with all this morbid nonsense!" growled Sir Edward impatiently, getting to his feet and striding up and down. "Look at the clock, man! Only another two minutes, and it will be midnight! Where's the danger? How do you suppose these—these Black Hand fellows can get at you?"

"That I do not know," replied Pasquali simply. "But they will get at me."

He seemed calmer now; the proximity of the dreaded hour, instead of increasing his fears, had quietened them. He was like a man resigned to his fate. His face was grey and haggard, his eyes dully hopeless.

The clock ticked off the seconds. . . .

Luigi Pasquali shrugged.

"The time is at hand," he said softly. "Gentlemen, I bid you farewell! You will tell Moreno, please, that I died like a man!"

He rose to his feet, his eyes now shining with an almost fanatical fire. The tension from which he was suffering was evidently tremendous, for, in spite of his bold front, his features twitched, and it was only by a supreme effort of will that he was standing so erect.

Sir Edward Handforth and Old Wilkey looked at him wonderingly—and not without pity and admiration. He was so sincere in his belief that he was to die that they could think of no words to say. Solemnly, the marble clock commenced to strike the hour.

One—two—three—

Pasquali was breathing hard, and the other two, in spite of themselves, half-expected something to happen. The clock continued relentlessly, striking the full twelve strokes. In the silence which followed, Pasquali's breathing sounded loudly. He had closed his eyes, and had squared his shoulders.

"Well?" came Sir Edward's voice, a trifle shaky, but triumphant. "What of your infernal Mafia, Pasquali? Midnight has struck, and you still live."

As Mr. Wilkes mopped his brow—for the tension had been a strain—Luigi Pasquali opened his eyes, and there was

an expression of wonder and bewilderment in them.

"I live—I live!" he burst out hoarsely.

He went off into a babble of voluble Italian, and just as suddenly checked himself. He looked from Sir Edward to Old Wilkey, and now his eyes were blazing with incredulous joy.

"Then—then I was mistaken?" he panted, swaying, and clutching at the table. "My fears were needless! A thousand apologies, gentlemen! I was so convinced—"

"That's all right, Pasquali," interrupted Sir Edward. "I hope you will be more sensible next time. I told you from the first—"

"Air—I must have air!" interrupted Pasquali, in a choking voice. "I live—I am free—the danger is over! Give me air!"

He ran to the window, thrust aside the curtains, and opened the window wide. He leapt out before the others could stop him and went running off in the moonlight, his hands raised above his head.

"Let him go—it'll do him good," murmured Mr. Wilkes. "Poor fellow, he needs cooling."

"A thoroughly upsetting affair," growled Sir Edward. "Upon my word, I am almost beginning to fear—"

He checked suddenly, and turned from the window to stare, open-eyed, at the marble clock on the mantelpiece. The hands showed the time to be two minutes after the hour—but midnight was even then booming out from the great clock over the School House!

And Luigi Pasquali, running into the Triangle, halted as though paralysed as he heard the mellow chimes. There came a sudden stab of fire from the thick bushes of the shrubbery, the sharp, whip-like crack of a pistol, and Pasquali, with a shriek, collapsed to the gravel!

— —

CHAPTER 4.

Mystery in the Night!

AT the stroke of midnight!

The dreaded Mafia had acted, just as Luigi Pasquali had feared! Fooled by Mr. Wilkes' clock, which was clearly two minutes fast, he had believed himself to be safe. A tragic mistake with terrible consequences. For on the stroke of the actual hour the Black Hand had revealed itself.

Handforth and Church and McClure, waiting uncertainly in the shadows, had seen Pasquali running into the Triangle, and they were more than a little puzzled,

for they knew perfectly well that it was not midnight. Then the chimes had sounded—and then had come the ominous crack of the pistol. Instinctively the three chums had drawn back behind the angle of the Ancient House wall. When they looked again they saw the inert figure of Pasquali lying on the ground.

"Look! He's shot!" gasped Handforth, in horror. "He was mad to come out here——"

"There's somebody coming!" exclaimed Church. "Look out! It may be——"

Then he checked, for the figures were those of Sir Edward and Old Wilkey.

"What's happened?" shouted Sir Edward, as he ran. "Where's Pasquali? The clock was wrong. He went out without realising——"

"He's shot, pater!" gasped Handforth, running up. "Look! We—we heard the

shot clearly, and then we saw the poor chap throw up his arms and collapse."

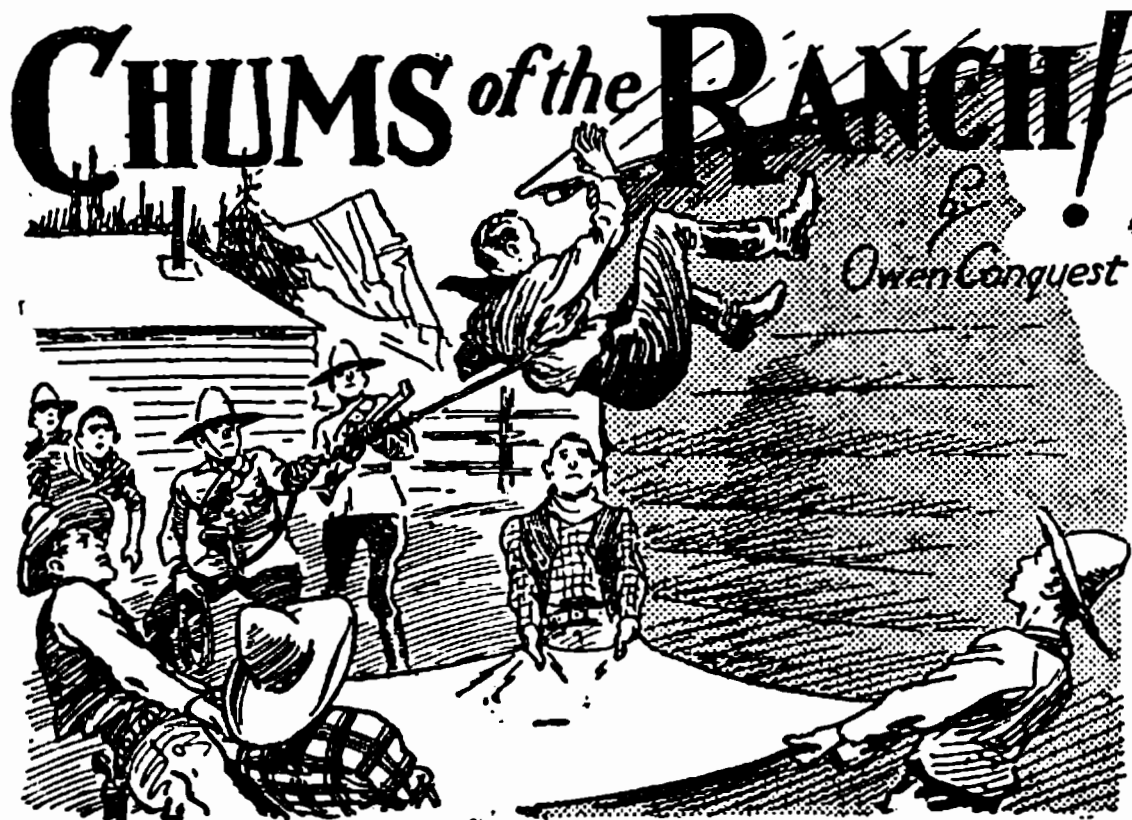
"Good heavens!" groaned Sir Edward. "No, boys, keep back! Poor Pasquali! They got him, then! This is ghastly!"

He and Mr. Wilkes ran to the prostrate figure. Luigi Pasquali was lying face upwards in the moonlight, one leg doubled under him, one arm outflung on the gravel.

"Look!" muttered Old Wilkey, in a choking voice.

But Sir Edward had seen. Right in the centre of the unfortunate Italian's forehead was a horrid wound; a trickle of blood showed on the side of his face. A cloud obscured the moon, and the dread sight was half veiled by the gloom.

"Dead!" said Sir Edward hoarsely. "Killed instantly, Wilkes—shot through



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the brain! Great Heaven! What are we to do?"

Handforth & Co., who had been creeping up, suddenly checked. Lights were appearing in various windows, and voices were dimly sounding from all the Houses of St. Frank's. But what really checked the three startled Removites was the sound of crackling twigs from the shrubbery. Handforth spun round.

"They're there, pater—in the shrubbery!" he shouted excitedly. "If we're quick we'll nab them!"

He ran at top speed, and Church and McClure, after a second's hesitation, followed.

"Handy!" gasped Church. "Don't go there! Those devils will kill you——"

But it was useless. Handforth was not thinking of any personal danger; he was hot on the track. His father and Old Wilkey, after their first shock of surprise, also ran towards the shrubbery and plunged into the bushes in the wake of the boys.

"Edward — Edward!" shouted the baronet frantically. "Are you mad? Where are you, Edward? Those men will shoot you as ruthlessly as they shot Pasquali!"

But by this time Handforth and Church and McClure had plunged through the shrubbery and were in the open space near the monastery ruins. The two men found them there, and Sir Edward was intensely relieved.

"It's all right, pater! I'm not hurt!" panted Handforth. "We heard someone in the shrubbery——"

"They've gone now," interrupted his father, almost harshly.

"I thought I caught a glimpse of them, pater," said Handforth. "I'll swear I saw one man—perhaps two. They seemed to be hooded. If we make a search——"

"You boys will go back to the House—at once!" commanded Mr. Wilkes, his customary mildness gone. "No, do not argue! Go!"

There was no questioning that order. Mr. Wilkes, for once, was as hard as iron. Handforth & Co., their hearts thudding painfully, ran back into the Triangle. Sir Edward and Old Wilkey followed, for they realised the futility of searching the shrubbery in this Stygian darkness.

Then came another surprise.

As the boys emerged from the shrubbery, Handforth half checked and pointed. Black, mysterious figures were vanishing round the further angle of the Modern House, and even in the gloom the boys could see that those figures were dragging something between them.

"There they are!" yelled Handforth. "They must have doubled back, or—— Great Scott!"

"Stay where you are, boys!" ordered Mr. Wilkes, running up.

"But look, sir!" gurgled Handforth. "They've—they've taken the body!"

Now they understood what those mysterious figures had been dragging. Luigi Pasquali was no longer lying face upwards on the gravel! But, on the spot where his body had lain, a little square of white showed clearly against the black background. Handforth ran up.

"It's a message!" he said breathlessly

"Go indoors, boys!" commanded Mr. Wilkes. "Let me have that paper, Handforth!"

He took it, and both he and Sir Edward saw the ominous black hand, crudely designed, on the paper. Above it were the words: "Let those who interfere beware, for it will be their turn next!"

Sir Edward was breathing hard.

"This—this is like a nightmare!" he muttered. "They've killed poor Pasquali, and they've taken his body! The infernal ghouls! What can we do, Wilkes?"

"Very little, I'm afraid," replied Mr. Wilkes, who was as cool as ice. "But the sooner we get the police here, the better!"

THE whole school, of course, was aroused. Everybody had been awakened by the sound of the pistol-shot. Like magic, window after window became illuminated, and boys crowded at the windows, talking excitedly.

Inevitably, masters from all the Houses came. Mr. Nelson Lee himself—the Head—arrived on the scene. The famous schoolmaster-detective was looking grave as Sir Edward and Mr. Wilkes gave him the details.

"I blame myself entirely, Mr. Lee, for not coming to you at once," said Sir Edward. "I mean no disparagement of you, Wilkes, but Mr. Lee should have been told. We never dreamed that there was any truth in the poor fellow's story. We thought he was raving—we thought the whole thing was an absurd joke."

"I must confess," said Mr. Wilkes, "that I did not credit Pasquali's story. And when he was murdered, at the stroke of midnight, I was inexpressibly shocked."

"You are sure that he was murdered?" asked Nelson Lee, looking keenly from one to the other.

"You mean—could it have been suicide?" asked Sir Edward. "Quite impossible!"

"Of course it was impossible, sir!" burst out Handforth. "Churchy and Mac

and I saw it all! We heard the shot, and we saw the chap collapse—we saw those Black Hand rotters dragging the body away, too!”

“He was shot clean through the brain,” said Sir Edward tragically. “And I called Pasquali a fool! It was I who was the fool!” he added fiercely. “I should never have allowed him out of my sight!”

“I really had no idea that my clock was fast,” said Mr. Wilkes. “That was the real reason for the tragedy. For the poor young man, believing himself to be safe, actually ran out to his doom!”

“It is quite useless, gentlemen, for you to blame yourselves in this way,” said Nelson Lee steadily. “Pasquali is dead, and his murderers have very cunningly removed his body—and for an obvious reason.”

“I confess it is not obvious to me,” said Sir Edward helplessly.

“A dead body, Sir Edward, means evidence,” replied Lee grimly. “Even if the murderers are traced and arrested, there can be no actual charge of murder unless the body can be produced.”

“Yes, I see—I see,” muttered Handforth’s pater. “The clever hounds! Yes, that’s what they are—hounds! They must have been watching the club—they followed my car to the school—they waited until the stroke of the hour!”

“The Mafia carries out its threats to the letter,” said Nelson Lee quietly.

They were standing in the brilliantly-lit Ancient House lobby, and there were other boys listening now, in addition to Handforth & Co. Nipper, Travers, Tregellis-West, Fullwood and numerous

Removites were crowding on the stairs, and there were seniors, too.

“But the Mafia is no longer in existence!” protested Sir Edward, staring. “That is why I was so convinced that Pasquali was worrying himself needlessly.”

“You are wrong,” said Lee evenly. “The Mafia has recently been revived—exactly as Pasquali told you.”

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Sir Edward. “But—but Scotland Yard told me——”

“Scotland Yard does not give its secrets away to people who care to make inquiries—not even to such influential people as yourself, Sir Edward,” said Lee. “But I happen to know for an absolute fact that a newly-formed Black Hand gang has recently committed at least two murders



There was a terrific explosion down the lane, the force of which staggered the St. Frank's juniors. Once again the dreaded Mafia had struck!

in Southern Italy, and there is not the slightest doubt that the Mafia is still in existence in the United States. There seems to be little doubt that this unhappy young man is the Mafia's latest victim.”

“And he came to me for protection—for help!” groaned Sir Edward. “I brought him to St. Frank's with every confidence,

never dreaming that I should involve the school in such a tragedy!"

"You need not fear, Sir Edward, that you will be in any way blamed for your action," said Nelson Lee gently. "From first to last you did everything possible for young Pasquali. It is unfortunate

Police had been set to work searching the surrounding countryside—not that Lee had the slightest hope that Pasquali's body would be found. In addition to the pocket-book and tobacco-pouch, one or two water-soaked letters were discovered.

"We'll drag the river to-morrow," said

Inspector Jameson, after he had reported his finds to Nelson Lee. "It's as clear as daylight that the criminals took the body and dumped it into the river."

"From which it may never be recovered," said Lee quietly.

The inspector looked at him sharply, and Sir Edward and Mr. Wilkes, who were also present, were interested.

"I don't think so, Mr. Lee—I don't think so," said Jameson. "If the body's in the river, we'll get it. And, as I've said, it is certainly there."

"There are some very deep pools in the Stowe, Inspector Jameson," replied Nelson Lee smoothly. "And we can be quite sure that the criminals would not have dumped their victim into the river unless they had very efficiently weighted him. The pocket-book and the letters were found near that bend of the river which is known as the Pool. Even if you drag for six months, I doubt if you will meet with any success. The water is not only deep, but there is thick mud at the bottom."

"Well, we'll do everything humanly possible," said Inspector Jameson gruffly. "We've got to recover that body! Without it—"

He shrugged, and bustled out to give further orders to his men.

"Since the police are handling the case so efficiently, gentlemen, perhaps we had better go to bed," said Nelson Lee dryly. "I really fail to see what we can do by remaining up. You, particularly, Sir Edward, need some sleep."

"I can't sleep!" growled Sir Edward. "I keep thinking of that poor young fellow!"

He thrust a hand into his pocket for his pipe, and suddenly he started. Some-



that the school should be involved, but we must make the best of it. You have nothing with which to reproach yourself."

NELSON LEE acted drastically. He sent everybody back to bed; he would not listen to Handforth's excited story. There was very little fear of any further danger, but Nelson Lee was responsible for all the boys, and he took no chances. Back they went to their dormitories.

The police arrived from Bannington, with the fussy Inspector Jameson in charge. And the inspector, having heard the story, became even more self-important than usual. A murder case! Here was a chance of distinguishing himself—a chance of promotion!

The next discovery, made at about 1 a.m., was the finding of Luigi Pasquali's pocket-book and tobacco-pouch floating on the waters of the River Stowe.

thing crackled in his fingers; he withdrew his hand, and there was a crumpled paper in his grip.

"What's this?" he asked huskily.

Almost fearfully he unfolded the paper, and he drew his breath in with a hiss. For on the bottom of that crumpled sheet was a crudely executed black hand! Written above it, in roughly printed characters, were the words: "Englishman! You have proclaimed yourself our enemy, and you shall pay—next!"

Nelson Lee nodded as he read the ominous words.

"I expected this," he said shortly.

"But good gracious!" ejaculated Mr. Wilkes, in alarm. "This is terrible! They are even threatening Sir Edward!"

"A logical consequence of Sir Edward's actions," said Nelson Lee, nodding. "It was he who brought Pasquali here—he who attempted to help Pasquali. Therefore he has incurred the enmity of the dreaded Mafia."

Sir Edward, who possessed the same bulldog courage as his son, grew angry instead of alarmed.

"Why, the infernal rogues!" he shouted wrathfully. "So they'll threaten me, will they? Huh! Do they think I'm scared of them?"

But, all the same, he had turned slightly pale. He knew what had happened to Luigi Pasquali—and this message said that he was to be next!

"Don't upset yourself, Sir Edward——" began Lee.

"Who's upset?" barked Sir Edward, glaring. "Do you think I'm frightened of this threat?"

"Not at all," murmured the schoolmaster-detective. "But you mustn't even get excited about it."

"I'm not excited, either!" grunted the baronet, breathing hard.

"I want you to go quietly to bed—and to rest assured that you will come to no harm," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "Leave this matter in my hands, Sir Edward. I give you my guarantee that everything will be all right in the end."

Mr. Wilkes was looking relieved.

"Yes, by Jove, the case is in Mr. Lee's hands now!" he said, turning to Sir Edward. "That makes us more comfortable."

"How, in the name of all that's miraculous, did this message get into my pocket?" asked Sir Edward suddenly. "Gad! These Black Hand people are like magicians!"

It was, indeed, a staggerer, and there seemed to be no solution to the mystery.

CHAPTER 5.

The Secret Service Man!

HANDFORTH was the fellow of the hour next morning.

But he wasn't half so noisy and boisterous as he might have been; for he had learned of the threatening message discovered by his father, and this, together with the tragic death of Pasquali, cast a black shadow over his enthusiasm.

"It's a rotten business altogether," he grunted, as the crowds of fellows pressed round him. "We saw the poor chap there, and we might have saved him! But how were we to know? That shot came unexpectedly——"

"Don't you start blaming yourself now, Handy," interrupted Nipper. "Your pater's been doing that quite enough. The Black Hand gang is responsible for Pasquali's death, and nobody else."

The affair, of course, was a tremendous sensation.

Not only at St. Frank's, but Bellton and Bannington and the whole surrounding district were agog. By breakfast-time the rumours had gone round, and people were arriving—morbid sightseers who came by car and on bicycles and on foot. They stood out in the road, staring into the school grounds.

The police were as active as ever this morning—in fact, more active. Dragging operations had been commenced very early. Inspector Jameson was reluctant to speak of the discoveries he had made; but it was freely rumoured that the police had found all sorts of footprints on the bank of the river, near the spot where the ill-fated Pasquali was assumed to have been sunk.

"We can't tell—yet—exactly how many men were engaged in this cold-blooded murder, but there must have been at least four," said the inspector, as he discussed the case with Nelson Lee that morning. "Probably six. Anyhow, quite a gang."

"I wonder what they would have done if Mr. Wilkes' clock had been right?" asked Lee musingly.

"It is my own theory that the murderers were attempting to get to Mr. Wilkes' study when Pasquali came running out," said the inspector. "So, of course, they shot him in the open. Otherwise they would have smashed Mr. Wilkes' window, and would have murdered him as he stood there."

"That is quite probable," agreed Nelson Lee.

"These Mafia thugs are daring enough for anything," said the inspector. "To tell you the honest truth, Mr. Lee, I'm not at all happy to be on the case. But duty is duty. It wouldn't surprise me in the least

if I got the next message—threatening me with death! And you're not safe yourself."

Lee nodded gravely.

"We are all in the same boat, Jameson," he replied. "We are all liable to incur the Mafia's wrath. Yet I somehow feel that you and I are perfectly safe."

"I'm glad to hear that!"

"But I'm not so sure about Sir Edward," continued Nelson Lee. "We must never forget that these Mafia people are after money. They wanted money from Pasquali, but he courageously refused to pay them. He could not, of course, have met their full demand—but he could have paid something. He did not."

"And so he died," nodded the inspector. "And Sir Edward? You think they'll make demands of him?"

"Sir Edward is a rich man—and he has already been threatened," said Lee. "I am very much afraid that there will be developments before long—ugly developments."

"Well, Sir Edward has nothing to fear," grunted the inspector. "He is protected by the police now."

Nelson Lee made no comment; he had his own private opinion as to the protection the local police could afford.

It wasn't quite breakfast-time when a luxurious saloon car purred quietly through the gateway. Nipper and Handforth and crowds of other fellows were immediately attracted. There was a solitary figure at the wheel of that car—a lean, middle-aged, keen-featured man.

"By George!" said Handforth eagerly. "I'll bet he's a Scotland Yard detective! One of the heads!"

They crowded round the car as it came to a halt, and they soon found out their mistake—for other boys, too, believed that this man was from Scotland Yard.

"Sir Edward Handforth—he is here, yes?" asked the stranger abruptly.

Clearly he was no Yard man. He spoke with a very pronounced foreign accent.

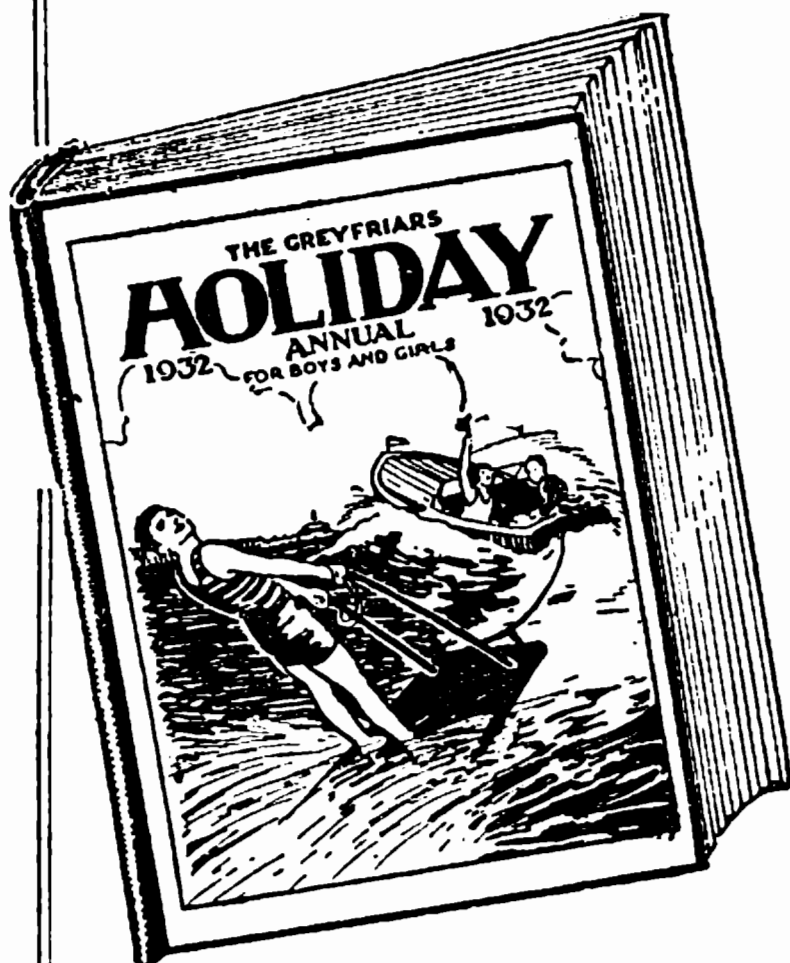
"Yes, sir—my pater's here!" said Handforth quickly. "My name's Handforth, you know. Sir Edward is my father."

"You will take me to him," said the stranger briefly.

It was not a request—it was a command. This man was evidently accustomed to being obeyed.

Fortunately, Sir Edward himself appeared at that moment. Both he and Mr. Wilkes had seen the arrival of the handsome saloon, and they now came out

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to greet the stranger. The boys hovered round at a respectful distance.

"It is Signor Handforth?" asked the newcomer, looking sharply from one to the other.

"I am Sir Edward Handforth," said the baronet. "I am not mistaken, sir, I think, in addressing you as Signor Guiseppe Moreno?"

"But yes, signor," said the other, shaking hands in a quick, decisive way. "I wish to thank you, Sir Edward, for your efforts to save my dear young friend, Pasquali. Alas! It could not be. When the Mafia marks its victim there is no escape!"

They went indoors, much to the disappointment of the boys; and Mr. Wilkes, who was introduced on the way, ushered the visitor into the breakfast-room. Mrs. Wilkes and Vera tactfully made their excuses and departed.

"I arrive in the—how you say?—small hours," explained the Italian. "And then I hear of my poor Luigi. I come too late, yes? Without waiting, I drive straight here, gentlemen. You will tell me how it happened."

Again that note of command, clearly indicating that Signor Moreno was accustomed to being instantly obeyed. He listened intently as Sir Edward gave him the details; and when he had heard all he gave an expressive little shrug.

Mr. Wilkes, meanwhile, had sent for Nelson Lee, and Lee had been present during the latter part of Sir Edward's recital.

"This is Signor Guiseppe Moreno," said Mr. Wilkes at the first opportunity. "Signor Moreno, I would like you to meet our headmaster, Mr. Lee."

"I am honoured," said Lee gravely. "I have heard of you, Signor Moreno."

"I am famous in my own country, yes, but I did not know that my fame had reached England," said the Italian, with a quick, flashing smile. "But, yes, in the Secret Service of my country I am, perhaps, a—how do you say?—a big man. Yet I am not big enough. The Mafia thrives again—or will unless we stamp it out before it can gain power. It is money these murderous dogs require."

"You think they will demand money from me?" asked Sir Edward, in some alarm.

"I would like to reassure you otherwise, but I must warn you that there is danger," said the Italian Secret Service man. "It was you who helped Pasquali, therefore the Black Hand has marked you down as an enemy."

"I'm not afraid of the ruffians!" grunted Sir Edward aggressively.

"Ah, my friend, that is not the attitude," said Moreno with regret. "Many men have died because they have not been afraid! It is well to be afraid—of the Mafia! I am afraid—oh, yes! If the Mafia gets to know that I am in England looking into this case, my life will not be worth a straw. They will get me—and, as I say, I am afraid. But yet I will do my duty."

He spoke quietly, with dignity, and his words impressed his listeners deeply.

"I am here because I desire to avenge my young friend, Luigi," went on Moreno. "Perhaps the enemy will not discover that I come." He shrugged. "That we must risk. I learn, too, of your danger, Signor Handforth, and if it is in my power, I desire to protect you."

Breakfast was brought in at that moment, so the conversation drifted temporarily into commonplace channels.

"If these rogues expect me to pay them any money they'll be disappointed," said Sir Edward, as he sat at the table and shook out his serviette. "I've never heard of such confounded impudence—"

He broke off, staring. A small square of paper had fluttered to the floor, disturbed by Sir Edward's activities with the serviette. There seemed little doubt that the paper had been lying beneath the serviette.

"Ah! What is that?" shouted Moreno, leaping up. "Let me see!"

"Upon my soul! Another message!" gasped Mr. Wilkes in amazement. "But this is incredible! How could that message have been placed beneath your serviette, Sir Edward?"

They looked at the paper, and there was the crudely-designed black hand. And this time the message was grim, definite, incisive: "Sir Edward Handforth, attend! From Pasquali we demanded £20,000, and he failed—and died. From you we demand £50,000. Get this money ready to-day. Later you will have further instructions. Failure will mean—death!"

"Good heavens!" muttered Sir Edward, his voice shaking. And at last his aggressive, stubborn spirit was shaken.

"This is uncanny!" said Old Wilkey. "None of my servants could have been bribed to put that paper there. What can it mean? How could this thing have happened?"

"How did that message get into my coat pocket last night?" retorted Sir Edward gruffly. "Black Magic, I call it."

Guiseppe Moreno nodded.

(Continued on page 24.)

Three Pages Of Chuckles—A Sure Cure For The Blues.



HANDFORTH'S Weekly

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Editor E. O. Handforth
Chief Sub-Editor E. O. Handforth
Literary Editor E. O. Handforth
Art Editor E. O. Handforth
Rest of Staff E. O. Handforth

October 3rd, 1931.

SUB-EDITOR'S CHIN-WAG.

POETS' CORNER.

Ode to a Cow.

By
CLARENCE FELLOWE.

OWING to the fact that the Editor has a large impot to do for Crowell, it's the sub-editor's duty to write a column this week. If you want to know who is the sub-editor, look at the list of staff on this page. You'll find it by going to the top of this column and taking the first turning on the right.

About this impot, by the way. I think it's rather unjust of old Crow'sfect to jump on me. He makes out that I smashed up a lot of ink-bottles and things in the Form-room cupboard.

I need hardly say that it's an utter fib. I didn't smash a single thing; didn't even touch one of them. All I did was to put Mrs. Poulter's cat in the cupboard. It was the cat who smashed the blessed bottles, and I get landed with an impot. Jevver hear of such injustice?

As a matter of fact, I've been in pretty hot water all round lately. I got a gating last week for organising a game of bicycle-polo in the Triangle. Considering that only five fellows were injured—none of them really seriously—and four more got off with mere flesh wounds, I reckon this was fierce.

Have you ever played bicycle-polo? It's some game, believe me. We played seven a side—my team against Nipper's. Piles of jackets and Burberrys served as goals.

You play it something like ordinary polo, only you use hockey-sticks and a hockey ball—at least, we did. You whizz about on the bikes after the ball, and I need not say that there are dozens of collisions.

Nipper's team beat my lot by seven goals to four; but it was an awful swindle, because Travers jolly well hoofed the ball in three times with his feet—he thought he was playing footer—and the ref. had the cheek to allow them as goals. And the game wasn't finished, either. Fenton, Morrow, Biggy, and a dozen other prefects came up with their ashplants half way through the second half, and there was much weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

See you again next week. E. O. HANDFORTH
(Sub-Editor).

P.S.—If any fellow would like to buy a heap of scrapiron—the remains of fourteen good bikes—I can let him have it at a bargain price.

Oh, large brown cow!

Say, why were you born?
Explain to me how

You grew that large horn;
What makes you wolf grass
Like an animal? Say,
How on earth do you pass
Your spare time away?

Oh, giant beast!

You walk in the mud
Enjoying a feast
Of chewing the cud;
You lean on a fence
And you slumber. My hat!
I can't see no sense
In actions like that.

Oh, milky brute!

Explain to me, do,
What makes you pollute
The silence with "Moo!"?
Explain all those "moo's,"
Oh, fatheaded cow!
Say, what is the use
Of making that row?

Answer by the Cow. (E. O. H.)

Oh, silly ass!

I'll do you the favour
To say I eat grass
'Cos I'm fond of the flavour;
I drop off to sleep
'Cos of East House disgraces
(I'm frightened to peep
At their hideous faces.)

As for my "moo!"

I say it for fun;
All animals do—
You ask anyone;
A kitten—you know it—
Occasionally "mews,"
And even a poet
Has his little "muse."

WEEKLY SCIENCE TALK

By Professor Napoleon Browne. This week: **PARKING.**

IF you have a car, dear brother (or sister), this talk will be of special interest to you. If you haven't a car, and can't borrow one for the occasion, read this column if only because it contains many pearls of wisdom written by a master.

The science of parking in an older form existed many centuries ago; but it is with the increase of petrol-driven vehicles that it has taken a new and strenuous turn.

In the old days, anybody of a curious turn of mind could begin parking. The most famous parker of history was a person named Nosey, who often put his nose into places not altogether healthy for it. And thereby hangs a tale. Brethren owning long bokos, who would like to copy the famous Nosey Parker, are advised to be careful how they go about it. Bokos are sometimes tapped—hard!

The modern form of parking, however, is altogether different. It is simply the science of leaving a car.

Now, anybody not acquainted with this science would laugh and sneer at it. "How absurd," they would say. "Surely it is easy enough to leave a car. All one has to do is to get out and walk away."

Exactly, and before one has gone two yards, an older form of parker in a nasty blue uniform will appear and say:

"'Oy! Y'can't leave that car 'ero. You know that as well as I do. 'Op orf."

If you are not an expert parker, you will stay and argue with this person. The end, however, will be exactly the same. You will 'op orf.

Wherever you go, this same thing will happen. After about two hours of it, you may begin to realise that there is a little more in the science of parking than you thought at first.

The only thing to do to leave a car anywhere in our big towns is to camouflage it as a lamp-post or a horse-trough. If you get some paint, and disguise your car as a man selling matches, or as a

barrow, you may leave it in the road.

But a word of advice: how you disguise your fellow who got disguised his car as a barrow.

And when he had hopped it!

Next Week:

GREAT SH

Trackett Grim

Grimmett

POPPE

By E. O.

Coming

Take an aeroplane
nearest newsagent
copy in

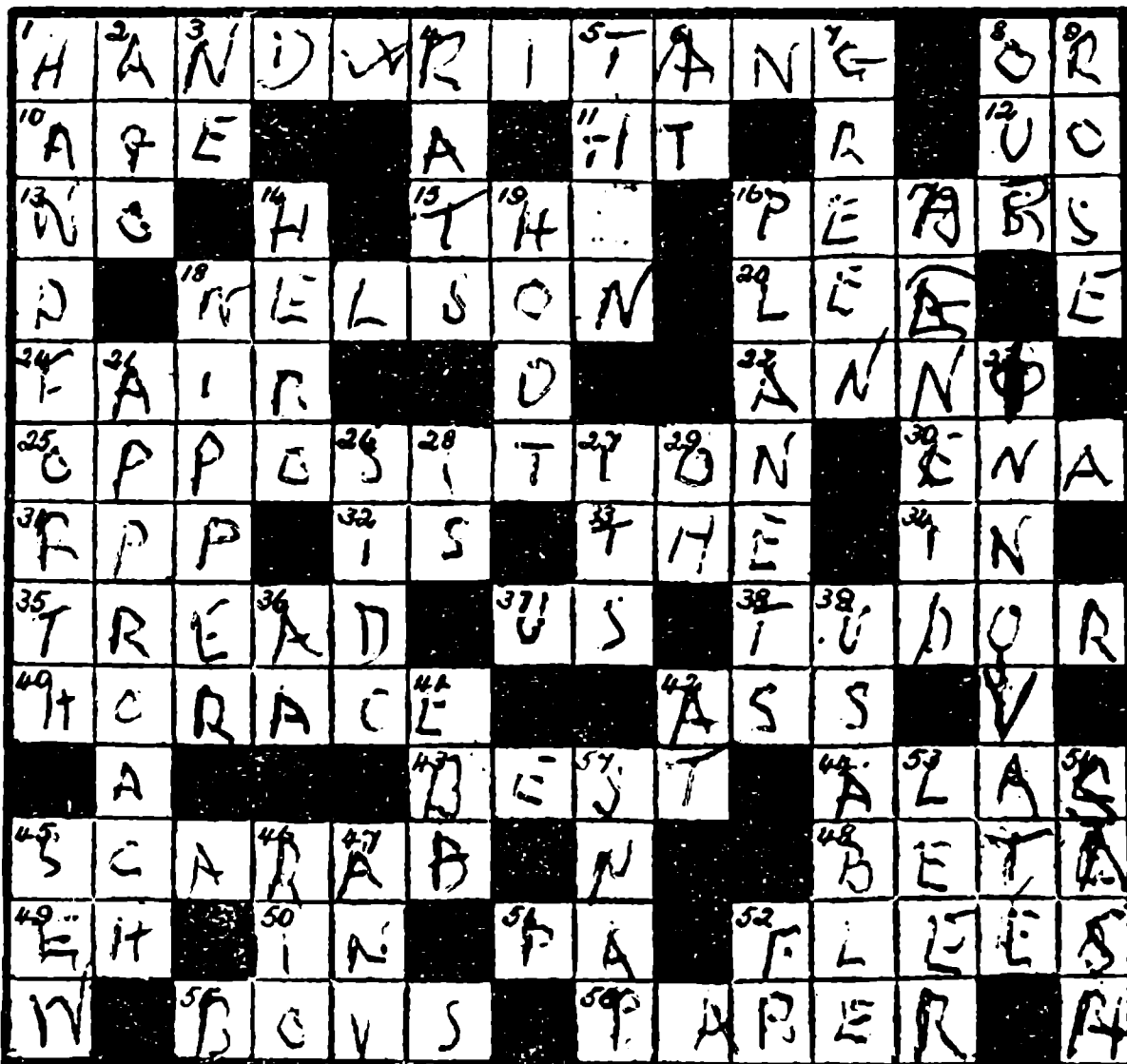
NIPPER'S PUZZLE CORNER.

TWO PUZZLES IN ONE.

I'M looking for brainy fellows and girls this week. I've made you out a little crossword puzzle. The clues are rather catchy, so you'll have to use large chunks of your grey matter.

When you have solved the puzzle there is another little problem for you. Hidden in the words of the puzzle is a sentence which will make you applaud loudly and cry, "Hear, hear!" Can you find it?

The solutions will be published next week—if Handy doesn't forget and leave them out.



CLUES.

Across.

1. Even if you do this wrong, you do "write."
8. Alternatively:
10. When you are twenty-one, you will be of this.
11. High tension (abbrev.)
12. You! Oh!
13. Nothing doing.
15. "The" definite article:
16. These should be eaten in twos:
18. Famous hero who won a great "Victory."
20. This side of a ship shows which way the wind's blowing.
22. To construe this Latin word will take you "years."
24. Either sportsmanlike or light-headed.
25. When Churchy or Mac suggest anything, this is what they meet with.
30. Handforth in feminine gender.
31. Reply Post Paid (abbrev.).
32. Third person of verb "to be."
33. Same as 15.
34. Into or within.
35. When you put your foot down you do this.
37. We ourselves:
38. Henry VIII belonged to this family.
40. Favourite author of the Sixth—I don't think.
42. A cross between a mule and Browne of the Fifth.
43. Superlative of "good."
44. Exclamation of dismay:
45. Well-known Egyptian beetle:
48. This letter will be Greek to most of you.
49. Should be: "I beg your pardon."
50. Same as 34.
51. Father (abbrev.).
52. Meaning "flies"—but has nothing to do with insects.
55. "— will be boys."
56. You can see it in between these lines.

1. An
2. Time
3. North
4. A
5. At the
6. Prom
7. Most
8. Below
9. "A"
14. This
17. We
18. You
19. An
21. To
23. To
26. This
27. It is
28. Same
29. You
36. Shot
39. Cap
41. Try
42. The
45. You
46. I
47. H
52. Fire
53. Top
54. Girl
57. Do

stand a chance of
d.
urning. Be careful
I once knew a
ne chalk and dis-
ome of hop-sotch.
me back, the car
TALKING.

ART STORY.

r's Latest and
Adventure

OFF!

NDFORTH.

xt Week.

he round to the
t and order your
advance.

Down.
itor and a "hard-
since.
east.
amous monosyllable
very fellow.
at time.
un—third person:
new boys are this
ging to us.
—by any other name
smell as "sweet."
eo and Juliet.)
describes the man of
oss.
go round and round
n.
ate this book, but we
t every day.
humble servant.
l doesn't care this for
dy.
aw near.
gin something new.
also revolved so fast
it got mixed up.

as 32 across.
make this remark
you are told to bend
for Automobile As-
tion.
ble of being used:
tide does this after
flow.
place where.
get the "stitch" when
to this.
re rolling down to
l, baa, black sheep:
you — wool?"
plug. (Abbrev.).
make a face—as a
esperian king did:
and windows wear it:
and cameras do this.

Vivian Travers gives an account of—

EXPLORING STRANGE LANDS

I HAVE always wanted to be an explorer. It's so interesting, I think, to travel into new and dangerous regions, where you never know what may be waiting around the corner. And I have started practising this pastime at St. Frank's.

Last week I organised a party to explore the difficult and dangerous region known as the Third-Form Passage. I determined to conquer this wild territory, or die in the attempt.

I limited my party to six explorers, and a dozen "natives" to bear our goods. The natives, of course, were fags—who had some acquaintance with the strange inland region we were to explore.

We did not take much in the form of food with us. A few pounds of chocolates and a tin of biscuits formed our main supply. We took a number of water-bottles; but the natives assured us that fresh water was obtainable in a remote region called "the bath-room," which was never visited by the wild and savage tribes of this country.

One memorable Monday morning, we put on our kit, including climbing-irons, puttees, etc., lined up our natives in the Remove Common-room and loaded them with our baggage. A great crowd of Removites had come to see us off, and we shook hands all round—not without certain lumps in our throats at the idea that we might never return alive. The fellows gave us three cheers as our procession started off up the narrow staircase which led to the mysterious country.

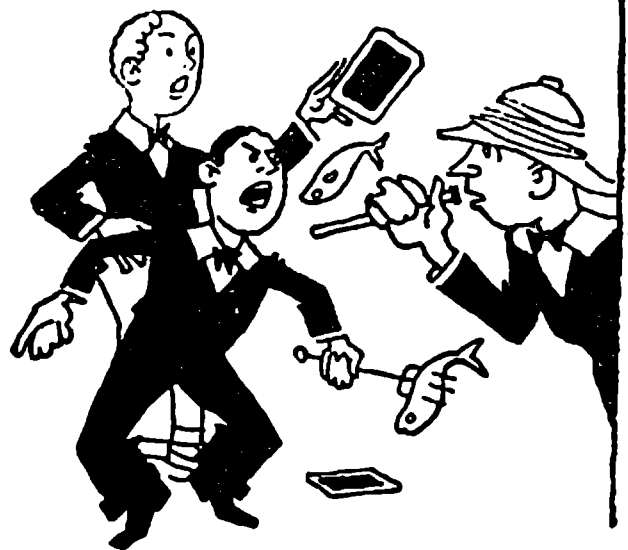
Halfway up the stairs we halted to take our first meal of biscuits and chocolate. Our procession completely blocked the staircase as we squatted down, native fashion, and consumed our rations. The natives were nearly all black, though, of course, this was due mainly to ink.

A little past noon I gave the word to start, and we resumed our difficult and hazardous climb. We were glad we had brought our pea-shooters, for we soon encountered hostile tribes, led by three warriors named Willi, Chubbi, and Juici, who blocked our way and peppered us with missiles from a curious kind of catapult.

A fierce battle ensued, but we succeeded in beating back the enemy, although some of us were slightly wounded.

Our destination was a place known as the "Fag's Common-room," and we reached this spot eventually. Jimmy Potts and Somerton, with three of the natives, pushed on to the "bath-room" to get our water-bottles refilled. The rest of us studied this strange place we had found.

This spot was entirely enclosed by walls of brick, rising sheer from the ground in



an imposing manner. At one end of this valley, half-a-dozen or so savages were gathered about a fire, and they were cooking fish by means of toasting-forks and slates. They made a hostile demonstration as we approached, and one of them called out words which sounded like: "Slingemout! Yahremovecads!"

One of our natives interpreted these words to us, and said they meant that the savages desired to sling us out.

By this time Potts and Somerton had returned, and we determined to make our way back to civilisation as quickly as possible. A sharp fight with the savages resulted in minor injuries, but we broke through eventually, and arrived at the stairs safe and sound.

A large crowd was waiting to greet us in the Remove passage, and some of the fellows had tears of joy in their eyes to see us come back alive.

LECTURES AT ST. FRANK'S

By TOMMY WATSON.

THE following are the lectures which will be delivered at St. Frank's this week. I collected this information on scraps of paper, and I rather mixed up the papers in my pocket. But if the speakers and their subjects happen to be jumbled up, I expect you can sort out their right order.

MONDAY. Class-room, 6.30 p.m. **MR. CROWELL** will lecture on "How To Learn Ju-Jitsu," and will give demonstrations with members of the audience.

TUESDAY. Common-room, 8 o'clock. **E. O. HANDFORTH** will deliver his famous lecture on "Mysticism, and the African Hoodoo." All welcome.

West House: **TIMOTHY TUCKER** will address a meeting on the topic of "New Tricks in Boxing."

THURSDAY. Mr. Alington Wilkes will address Ancient House juniors in the Remove Form-room at 6.30. Subject: "How To Dodge Work."

FRIDAY. Common-room, 8 p.m. **ENOCH SNIPE** will give a speech upon "Strange Manners and Customs of the Ancient Greeks."

Gymnasium, 8 p.m. **YUNG CHING** will address a meeting on "The Beauties of Virgil."

THE BLACK HAND AT ST. FRANK'S

(Continued from page 20.)

"And believe me, my friends, these people of the Mafia are capable, almost, of Black Magic," he said impressively. "You, Signor Handforth, are a business man. But these other gentlemen are schoolmasters; they lead sheltered lives, and they know little or nothing of the criminal organisations of the world."

"You are not including Mr. Lee, are you?" asked Sir Edward, staring.

The Italian shrugged.

"Gentlemen, I am a man of vast experience in these matters," he said, and there was no conceit in his voice—only conviction. "You, Signor Handforth, are in grave danger!"

"I won't pay, if that's what you mean," said Sir Edward fiercely.

The Italian looked at him in surprise—even in pain—and then he uttered an exclamation in his own tongue. He moved nearer to Sir Edward, and placed a firm hand on his arm.

"Listen, Signor Handforth," he said quietly. "You know what happened to Pasquali? He would not pay, yes? But he did pay—with his life!"

Sir Edward changed colour.

"You think that these people will threaten my life?" he asked hoarsely.

"You will pay—or you will die," replied Guiseppe Moreno, shaking his head. "Alas! I wish I could give you hope. I will do all in my power to protect you; and I will hasten back to London with this information, and I will place it before the Secret Service authorities of the Italian Embassy. But we must have time, my friend." He shrugged again. "If the Mafia decides to act, you must obey. Later, perhaps, we will gain a victory, and your money will be recovered."

"But—but—"

"I will ask you a blunt question, Signor Handforth," went on the Italian relentlessly. "Can you find this sum?"

"I don't know," replied Sir Edward, frowning. "It is a large amount!"

"I am in agreement with Signor Moreno," put in Nelson Lee quietly. "It will be better all round, Sir Edward, if you can secure that money—to-day."

"You advise me to pay?" asked Sir Edward, aghast.

"At what figure do you value your life?" demanded Moreno curtly.

"Eh? Oh, you mean— But such a sum will cripple me!" said Sir Edward in despair. "I am a rich man, but fifty thousand pounds is a fortune. I can convert securities into cash—"

"Do so," said Moreno, in that commanding way of his. "Better to be crippled, Signor Handforth, than to be murdered, yes?"

"I will go to London at once," said the baronet dully.

"No, no—that would be folly," said the Secret Service man. "Better for you to remain here, my friend. Do not move from here. But get the money—for it is certain that the Mafia will act again before the day is out. Send a messenger to London with your instructions, and have that money ready. That, Signor Handforth, is my advice."

He bowed, and moved towards the door.

"But surely you will stay to breakfast, Signor Moreno?" asked Old Wilkey quickly.

"I? Pouf! A thousand thanks, but I must return to London—to my Embassy," said Moreno. "I have no time for food."

"Wait!" said Sir Edward. "Since you are going to London, perhaps you will be good enough to take certain letters of instruction—"

"I would be glad to serve you, Signor Handforth; but it is not certain that I shall reach London," interrupted Guiseppe Moreno quietly. "So it would be risky for me to take your letters. The Mafia is active; perhaps I have been—watched. My life"—again that shrug of his—"it is not worth the purchase of a minute, as you English say."

He opened the door, and was gone—a straight, upright figure, his face set in an expression of quiet courage.

"A brave man," murmured Sir Edward, unconsciously squaring his own shoulders. "I pray that he comes to no harm!"

Little did he realise what was to happen within the next ten minutes!

CHAPTER 6.

The Bomb Outrage!

"HERE he is!"

"Who?"

"That Italian Secret Service man."

Handforth was eager. He had heard about Guiseppe Moreno, and he and a crowd of others had hurried over their breakfast, and they were in the Triangle when the Italian came walking briskly out to his car.

Moreno waved his hands impatiently, and he spoke volubly in Italian as the boys surrounded him. But suddenly he paused, and he looked straight at Handforth.

"Ah, yes," he said, nodding. "You are the son, is it not so? Your father, he is Signor Handforth?"

"That's right, sir," said Handforth eagerly. "What's happened? Any fresh news? Is my pater really in danger?"

Moreno looked grave.

"If your father is sensible—as I think he will be—there is nothing to fear," he said quietly, placing a kindly hand on Handforth's shoulder.

"You—you mean that my father will have to pay?" asked Handforth.

"He has incurred the enmity of the Mafia—and he must pay," said Moreno.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Great Scott!"

"They're after your pater, Handy!"

"My pater won't pay!" roared Handforth wrathfully. "What rot! What do you mean, sir? I know my pater better than that! He's not going to be frightened by these——"

"Your father will be well advised to be frightened," interrupted Moreno with sudden fierceness. "My poor friend Pasquali was not frightened, no! But the Mafia acts secretly—hideously. We do not see them, we do not hear them. But the agents of that terrible secret society are with us. They are here, they are there, they are everywhere. If they are not obeyed, they strike—and, when they strike, they kill!"

He walked on without another word, entered his car and started the engine.

"Hi!" yelled Handforth, running up. "What about you, sir? Aren't you in danger, too?"

The Italian flashed his white teeth.

"They demand no money of me—since I am not rich," he replied. "The Mafia will not give me any chance, as they gave Pasquali a chance—as they are giving your father a chance. There are no messages for me, my young friend. If the Mafia strikes, it will be swift—sudden—and I shall have no chance of escape."

"Aren't you scared, sir?" asked one of the other juniors, awed.

"I am scared, yes," replied Guiseppe Moreno frankly. "I know enough of the Mafia to be scared, my young friend! But what am I to do? Shut myself up? No, I fight—and I shall continue to fight."

He engaged his gears, gave another of those expressive shrugs, and the car glided away.

The boys went to the gate, and watched it purring smoothly down the lane towards Bellton.

"A brave man, that!" said Tommy Watson admiringly.

"Personally, I don't think much of him," said Nipper.

"Eh?"

"Too jolly theatrical," went on Nipper critically. "If you ask me, he was trying to make himself look pretty big and important. Oh, I'm not running him down, but I'd sooner rely on the guv'nor any day! He'd never admit that he's afraid of the Mafia!"

"Well, to do this man justice, you must admit that he knows a lot more about the

Mafia than Mr. Lee does," said Handforth. "He was working on the case with Pasquali's father in Italy."

"Yes, I'm willing to admit that," agreed Nipper, nodding. "I expect Moreno is clever enough in his own way; he's a sound Secret Service man. But if anybody's going to protect your pater, Handy, it's my guv'nor, and don't you forget it!"

"By George, yes!" said Handforth with a start. "I'd better dash in and find out——"

He broke off as an insistent, urgent hooting of an electric horn sounded. It came from round the bend—and Guiseppe Moreno's car had just disappeared round that bend.

All the boys stopped talking, and they listened. Distinctly they heard the shrieking of brakes, and they wondered. What had caused Moreno to stop his car with such violence?

"Let's—let's dash down and see what's up!" suggested Reggie Pitt eagerly.

Instinctively, they felt that something of a dramatic nature had caused the Italian Secret Service man to apply his brakes so fiercely. They began running—and at that moment something happened.

Those who were looking down the road saw a great, vivid flame leap upwards from beyond the hedge, at the curve. In the same second a terrible explosion sounded.

Boom—crash!

It was bewildering—stunning—stupefying. It was no ordinary report, but an explosion like that of a shell from a naval gun. The trees of Bellton Wood, near the road, swayed as in a gale. Branches and dying leaves were flung through the air, and over the spot hung a great cloud of dense smoke. Debris was falling in all directions.

The boys themselves, before they could utter a sound, were flung back by the terrific force of the concussion. Two or three of them fell. And when they did shout, they could hardly hear one another, for their eardrums were numbed. From somewhere close at hand they heard the thin sound of shattering glass. A number of the school windows, in fact, had been broken by the terrific shock of the explosion—and in Bellton, as it afterwards turned out, many windows were shattered, and the chimneys of two cottages had collapsed. Fortunately, nobody was hurt.

"The Mafia!" were the first words which Handforth uttered.

"The devils—they must have got Moreno!" shouted Nipper.

Other boys, including prefects, came dashing out of the school.

"What was that?" yelled Morrow, of the Sixth.

Before anybody could answer, Sir Edward Handforth and Mr. Wilkes came running out at the double. Yet Nelson Lee, who did not seem to be hurrying so much, was in the road first.

"Do any of you boys know what happened?" he asked sharply. "Where was that explosion?"

But he need not have asked; the dense cloud of smoke was still hovering over the lane, half-way to the villago, alongside Bell-ton Wood.

"I—I think they've got that Italian, sir," said Nipper. "He started off, and we heard him give a hoot on the horn, and then he shoved his brakes on until they screeched. Then, almost at once, came the explosion."

"This—this is too horrible for words," muttered Sir Edward, his face haggard.

They went running down the lane, and there were crowds of boys following. Nelson Lee knew how futile it would be to order them back, for they were far too excited. Lee was the first to arrive on the scene.

Police were coming now, too—for Inspector Jameson and some of his men had been near the river, and they had dashed across the meadows by a short cut. They arrived in the lane almost at the same moment as Nelson Lee, Sir Edward Handforth, Mr. Wilkes, and Mr. Stokes—of the West House.

"Good heavens!" was Inspector Jameson's first exclamation.

The scene before them was horrifying in its grim significance. The smoke had cleared, and in the centre of the road was a great, jagged, gaping hole. Stones and earth were strewn in all directions.

It was the kind of hole which might have been made by a giant aeroplane bomb. It was ten or twelve feet deep, and from rim to rim the crater measured not less than thirty feet. The road at this point, in fact, had vanished.

And there was something of far greater significance.

On the edge of the gaping hole, perched precariously, was the twisted, jagged remains of a motor-car radiator, and strewn all over the road and the surrounding meadows were scraps of metal and woodwork and cloth. In the bottom of the hole itself was a little mass of blazing debris.

Except for that battered scrap of radiator, which had somehow retained its shape, the rest of the car had just been blown into fragments.

And Guiseppe Moreno?

The men and boys, as they gathered round the spot, could not refrain from shuddering. For the fate of Guiseppe Moreno was all too obvious! Like the car, he had gone—he had vanished into thin air, leaving not a trace.

The Mafia had claimed another victim!

CHAPTER 7.

A Shock for Handforth!

"HORRIBLE—horrible!" muttered Sir Edward brokenly.

"We must be thankful that no other lives were involved in this tragedy," said Nelson Lee, his voice quiet

and steady. "Mercifully, the road was empty, except for that one car."

Inspector Jameson looked at him sharply. "You mean that somebody was killed?" he asked abruptly.

"He must have been killed," said Mr. Wilkes. "He was in that car—he was driving away from the school."

"But where—I mean, surely there would be some remnant—"

"That is by no means certain, inspector," interrupted Nelson Lee. "If the unfortunate man caught the full force of that bomb, his death would be instantaneous—and—Well, we need not discuss it now," he added quietly. "It is not a pleasant subject—especially within the hearing of these boys."

Sir Edward Handforth gave a gulp.

"And I am to be next," he muttered. "I cannot believe it, Lee! Moreno told us that these Black Hand scoundrels are ruthless, but I never dreamed—Oh, it is too horrible!"

Inspector Jameson was looking more important than ever—and very startled, too. A second murder within twelve hours!

"There can be no doubt that the bomb was flung from the wood," he said. "One of the criminals were probably standing behind the hedge, and as the car came along he flung—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Sir Edward in his blunt way.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I said 'nonsense,' and I meant nonsense!" growled Sir Edward. "Are you telling me that a man stood by the side of the road and flung a bomb at Signor Moreno's car? What do you suppose happened to that man? In such an explosion as this he would have been instantly killed!"

The inspector, who had turned rather red, bit his lip.

"H'm! Perhaps you are right, Sir Edward," he admitted grudgingly.

"It is far more likely that the Black Hand men were prepared for Signor Moreno's passing," said Old Wilkey mildly. "Very possibly they placed something in the centre of the road, so that Moreno was compelled to stop his car, and at the crucial moment they detonated it from some distance away. What do you think, Mr. Lee?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Somehow, I think you are both slightly wrong," he replied smoothly. "But it really does not matter now. The harm is done—and we must confine our attentions to a matter of greater importance."

He glanced shrewdly at Sir Edward, and Sir Edward started.

"Yes, yes—they'll be after me next," he said almost defiantly. "Well, confound them, I'm not showing the white feather!"

Inspector Jameson was glad enough to escape; he instructed his men, and before long Bellton Wood was being scoured from end to end. The whole countryside, in fact, was to be searched that morning. The inspector was a busy man. He was half



One of the hooded figures threw something which struck Handforth on the side of the head. He slumped helplessly to the floor.

afraid that a superior officer would come down and take the case out of his hands.

"Jameson is doomed to disappointment, I'm afraid," said Nelson Lee dryly. "I doubt if he will make any discoveries in the wood. These foreign criminals are exceedingly clever. In broad daylight they claim their second victim—and they do not leave a trace."

"It's enough to make a chap feel scared," muttered Church, who was standing near by with Handforth and McClure. "I'm frightfully worried about your pater, Handy!"

"This is what comes of doing a good turn!" groaned Handforth, thrusting his hands despondently into his pockets. "Think of it! My pater goes to his club, he meets that chap Pasquali, and in next to no time he finds himself involved in all this mystery! And now the Mafia is demanding money—or his life!"

Abstractedly he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket—which he felt, somehow, should not have been there. The next moment he jumped a foot into the air and gave vent to a wild yell. His father turned upon him irritably.

"Upon my word, Edward, what is the matter with you?" he snapped. "I fail to see any reason why you should make such absurd——"

"But, pater, look!" gurgled Handforth. "A—a Black Hand message!"

"What!"

"I—I just found it in my pocket!"

"Good gracious!"

"In my pocket!" repeated Handforth dazedly. "How could it have got there? These Black Hand rotters are cleverer than conjurers!"

"Let me see it, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee sharply.

"Oh, my only sainted aunt!" ejaculated Handforth in dismay. "Fifty thousand quid! It's—it's impossible!"

Nelson Lee took the paper. On it was written this message:

"Let your father obey the instructions he has been given. Let him have the sum of £50,000 ready by evening. Failure will lead him to a worse fate than that which has overtaken Guiseppe Moreno!"

"But—but this is unbelievable!" said Sir Edward in amazement. "That message must have been placed in my son's pocket since this second tragedy!"

"Do you remember, Handforth, if any strangers hustled you while you were standing about here?" asked Nelson Lee keenly.

"I—I don't know, sir," replied Handforth. "There were some of the chaps round about

me, and I believe there were one or two people from the village, and there might have been some strangers, too. But there was such a crowd, and everybody was so excited that——"

"Exactly," nodded Nelson Lee. "You don't remember! It would have been very simple, Handforth, for somebody to slip that message into your pocket—and obviously it could not have got there in any other way."

Handforth was not listening.

"Pater!" he panted, clutching at his father's arm. "What are you going to do? You haven't got fifty thousand quid, have you?"

"If necessary I can get it," replied Sir Edward dully.

"Oh, pater, you must get it!" urged Handforth. "Think—think of mother! And Ena and Willy and Edith and—and me! You can't let these people kill you, pater! We'd better all be broke!"

Sir Edward patted his son on the shoulder; he was thinking of his family, too. He was thinking of the crippling blow which this vast sum would deal him.

"I am in your hands, Mr. Lee," he said quietly. "I will do exactly as you advise."

He was an ill-looking man as he went back to St. Frank's, and he went straight to Nelson Lee's study with the famous school-master-detective.

"Well, Mr. Lee?" he asked, when they were in private. "You did not answer me a short while ago. What do you advise?"

"You must get the money, Sir Edward," replied Lee quietly.

"If you say so, I will. But it seems cowardly," said Sir Edward. "I hate knuckling under——"

"You have seen what has happened to Luigi Pasquali and to Guiseppe Moreno," went on Lee. "The Mafia need money—and they will go to extreme-lengths, it seems, unless they get it. Take no notice of the police, Sir Edward; I want you to be guided by me. Get this money from London as quickly as you can. We don't know how the criminals will instruct you to pay it over, but we can be quite sure that their method will be a cunning one. When the command comes, you must obey."

"And pay over the money?"

"Yes," replied Lee. "In that way, we shall stand a chance of capturing the criminals."

Sir Edward looked at him sharply.

"Then—then you are not suggesting that we should knuckle under completely?" he asked, a trace of hope in his voice.

"I am merely suggesting that it will be wise, from every point of view, for you to comply with the Mafia's demands," replied Nelson Lee. "Later, perhaps, I shall not only get your money back, but I shall capture the criminals, too."

"I think you are right, Mr. Lee," said Sir Edward, some of his old spirit coming back. "As long as I know that you are going to

fight, I shall be happy. Splendid! Get the money, eh? Pretend to fall in with all the orders, by George! Wonderful!"

Forthwith, he sat down at Lee's desk and wrote feverishly. He sent a messenger to London without delay—and that messenger would set the wheels revolving which would result in the sum of fifty thousands pounds, in cash, being delivered to Sir Edward later in the day.

SELDOM had St. Frank's known such excitement.

When the time came for morning lessons, the fellows were in no mood for work. And the Form-masters, realising the situation, were easy. Mr. Crowell, of the Remove, was particularly thoughtful towards Handforth.

The leader of Study D was like a cat on hot bricks. He came into the Form-room with the other Removites, but he found it very difficult to sit still. He was talking all the time, and his flushed face and his excited eyes spoke eloquently of his emotion.

"I am very sorry, Handforth, to know of your—er—trouble," said Mr. Crowell kindly.

"It's not my trouble, sir—it's the pater's," replied Handforth. "I'm horribly worried, you know. I feel, all the time, that some of those Black Hand brutes might come along and murder him!"

"I don't think there is much danger of that," said the Form-master, shaking his head. "If the—er—Black Hand rogues can force money out of your father, they will not harm him. But I can quite understand your perturbation, and, in the circumstances, Handforth, I shall excuse you from lessons this morning."

"I say, sir, that's awfully decent of you!" said Handforth, leaping to his feet. "Thanks awfully, sir!"

And he was off like a shot. Yet that kindly action on the part of Mr. Crowell was destined to lead to another very startling development. On the whole, it would have been far better if Handforth had remained in the Form-room that morning!

CHAPTER 8.

The Hooded Men!

HANDFORTH could not find his father; he learned that Sir Edward had gone out—ignoring the Mafia. It was characteristic of him.

So Edward Oswald mooched about, his brain in a whirl. He could not quite decide what he should do. He turned towards the river, but quickly retraced his steps. The police were still dragging the river, and he had no desire to watch these morbid operations. He was trying to puzzle out, too, how that message had got into his pocket. It was all very mysterious.

And then he suddenly found Tubbs, the Ancient House page-boy, facing him.

"Beg pardon, Master Handforth, sir, but you're wanted," said Tubbs.

"Rats!" growled Handforth. "Who wants me? I'm busy now—I'm thinking!"

"On the 'phone, sir," said Tubbs.

"Oh, on the 'phone?"

"Your father, Master Handforth, sir," explained Tubbs.

"Why the dickens didn't you say so at first?" yelled Handforth. "Which 'phone? Where?"

He dashed indoors, and within a minute he was at the telephone.

"Hallo, pater!" he panted. "I say, I've been trying to find you! Where are you?"

"Don't be so excited, Edward," came the gruff voice of his father. "I am in Bellton—and I have discovered that two strange-looking men are trailing me."

"Great Scott!"

If Handforth had been less excited, he might have noted a queer huskiness in his father's voice.

"I want you to do something, Edward," came the voice over the wires.

"Rather, pater!" exclaimed Handforth eagerly. "Anything you say."

"I came down to the village to send an urgent telegram—one that needed my personal attention," went on the voice. "I saw these two men—both strangers—get out of a smart motor-launch, which was moored to the river-bank near the bridge. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, of course!" said Handy. "Well, pater?"

"They are outside the post-office now."

"Oh, my only hat!" gasped Edward Oswald. "You—you mean that they're going to murder you?"

He was full of wild fears; he could imagine the scene. His father in the telephone box at the post office; the two strangers outside, waiting for him. Handforth had visions of gangster pictures he had seen—people being put "on the spot."

"Now, Edward, do not get wild ideas into your head," came the voice in an admonishing tone. "I don't think for a moment that I am in any danger. My life is not threatened—yet."

"But you never know, pater——"

"I know that I can look after myself," retorted Sir Edward's voice with impatience. "Don't be absurd, Edward. I want you to run to the village as quickly as you can—at least, as far as the bridge. You will find the motor-launch just where I said."

"By George! You think it belongs to the Mafia crooks, eh?"

"I think it is very possible," came the voice. "I will delay in the village—I will lead these men on a false trail. Meanwhile, you must go to the launch, get aboard if you possibly can, and search it."

"But—but—— Hadn't I better tell the police, or——"

"Tell nobody," came the command. "Surely you are capable of attending to such a simple task?"

"Oh, rather, pater!" said Handforth hastily. "But I thought—— Yes, of course," he added enthusiastically. "Why should I tell the police, or Mr. Lee, or anybody? I'm a pretty keen amateur detective, aren't I?"

"That is the spirit," came his father's husky voice. "Go ahead, then! Find out all you can, and then come along to me in the village. You will find me in one of the shops—probably in the chemist's. There is a small lending library there, I believe, and I can linger without attracting too much notice."

The telephone became dead, and Handforth hung up the receiver. His face was flushed, and he was breathing hard.

He was very pleased with his father. Usually, Sir Edward did not display a great deal of confidence in his son's detective abilities. It was rather surprising, in fact, that Sir Edward had not insisted upon his son telling Nelson Lee or Inspector Jameson. Handforth did not give the matter any further thought. The thing to do was to get into action.

"Anything special, Master Handforth?"

Handforth was hurrying out, and Tubbs put the question anxiously as he hovered about in the passage.

"It's all right—urgent message from my pater," said Handforth briskly. "Can't stop now, Tubby, old man—I've got to rush!"

Tubbs looked astonished.

"'Ere, sir, but I don't understand——"

He broke off, for Handforth had gone. Tubbs was justifiably astonished; for he had caught sight of Sir Edward Handforth over by the playing-fields, not three minutes earlier. How, therefore, could Handforth have had an urgent message, by telephone, from his father?

Handforth ran off, and when he reached the gates he half-checked, thinking of his Morris Minor. But he decided, on the whole, that he had better go on foot. He would attract less notice.

The road between the school and the village, of course, was stopped, so he took to the meadows and skirted the sight-seeing crowds which had come along to look at the damage caused by the explosion.

He reached the bridge, and looked eagerly over the parapet. There, sure enough, about a hundred yards up-stream, and moored to a sapling near the bank, was a smart motor-launch. As far as Handforth could see, nobody was aboard.

"By George!" he breathed tensely.

He ran along the quiet lane which skirted the river. It was a simple task for him to dodge through a gap in the low hedge whilst nobody was looking.

Creeping down to the river bank, Handforth stepped aboard the launch and looked round with excited eyes. It was a smart craft, and evidently a speedy one. There was a cabin amidships, and the door was closed. It was rather significant that the

little windows should be heavily curtained, so that it was impossible to see within.

Handforth looked up and down, his heart thudding. Nobody was taking any notice of him—scarcely a soul was within sight. There was a little bend of the stream here, and willows screened the boat from the lane and road. It was only possible to see the launch from the bridge—and the bridge was empty.

Handforth tried the cabin door, and his heart thudded more heavily than ever as the door immediately opened under his touch.

"My hat!" he breathed.

He slipped into the cabin, closed the door, and moved forward. Then he stood stock-still. For standing immediately in front of him in that confined space were two extraordinary-looking men!

It was impossible to form even a random guess at their true appearance, for they were dressed in great black cloaks, and over their heads they wore heavy hoods, which descended into folds upon their shoulders. There were tiny eye-slits—but nothing else.

"Here, I say—" began Handforth blankly.

Then the two hooded men leapt. Valiant fighter as Edward Oswald Handforth was, he had no chance now. He had been taken completely by surprise, and the odds were all against him. For the hooded men were not relying solely upon their fists. Something heavy whizzed through the air, and it

struck Handforth a nasty blow on the side of the head. He staggered, crashed over, and the next moment his enemies were upon him. He went down, and a heavy scarf was tied cruelly round his face. Ropes were twisted round his ankles, biting deeply into his skin and flesh.

It was all over within a couple of minutes. Handforth was hopelessly trapped; he was a prisoner.

"Young fool!" hissed a voice in broken English. "You think you can play tricks with the Black Hand?"

Handforth heard the words dully, for his head was aching and throbbing, and this was intensified when the launch's engine suddenly purred into life. The little craft was on the move. It glided down the river. At the wheel sat a smartly dressed man with a white-topped yachting cap set rakishly on the side of his head.

In the cabin Handforth found his brain clearing. He knew that he was in the hands of the dreaded Mafia. He was very puzzled. It almost seemed as if these men had been expecting him—

And then the truth struck him like a blow. He remembered that voice over the telephone. Surely it had been too husky for his father's voice. By George! It hadn't been his father at all. He had been tricked; decoyed here deliberately—and, like an idiot, he had fallen into the trap!



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

SOMETHING ABOUT NOTHING.

Young Jimmy had been pestering his father with numerous questions, and father was rapidly becoming exasperated.

"Daddy, what do you do in the office all day?" asked Jimmy.

"Nothing, child, nothing!" barked father irritably.

Jimmy pondered over the answer for a moment.

"Then how do you know when you're finished?" he ventured brightly.

(B. Crane, West Lodge, Hothfield, Ashford, has been awarded a handsome watch.)

HIS COUNTING WAS O.K.

"Caddie, sir?"

"Yes, but I want a boy who can count

because I'm playing in the first round of the championship to-day. Can you add up?"

"Yessir."

"What are five and seven and four?"

"Twelve, sir."

"Excellent. You're engaged."

(G. Playford, 4, Elizabeth Place, Rye, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

WHAT WAS THE GOOD?

Pat O'Shea was very upset because he had lost his dog.

"Why don't you advertise?" asked his friend.

"But the dog can't read!" replied O'Shea hopelessly.

(A. Hodge, Kersal Hall, Manchester, has been awarded a penknife.)

ALL OUT.

Caller: "Can I see the manager, please?"

Office-boy: "He's out, sir."

Caller: "Can I see the under-manager, then?"

Office-boy: "He's out."

Caller: "Very well. I'll just wait by the fire."

Office-boy: "That's out, too."

(N. Challis, 34, Devonport Road, Shepherd's Bush, W.12, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

PROOF.

"Are these sheets quite clean?" asked the tourist as he surveyed the bed.

"Clean!" cried the landlady indignantly.

CHAPTER 9.

Missing!

"SEEN Handy?"

Walter Church asked the question in an anxious voice. Morning lessons were over, and Handforth's chums had been searching high and low for their leader. But there was no sign of him. They had asked his father, but Sir Edward, a very worried and harassed man, had roughly told them that he knew nothing of Handy's whereabouts.

"He'll turn up," said Nipper. "He couldn't have gone far—and you know what he is."

"We do!" said McClure worriedly. "He's probably messing about somewhere, trying to pick up clues! He'll only get himself into trouble. Before you can say 'Jack Robinson' he'll incur the enmity of the Black Hand!"

"It's awful," said Church. "I can't help thinking of those two poor Italians—both murdered. One actually at St. Frank's and the other down the lane. Whose turn will it be next?"

"The guv'nor is on this case—and he'll make things move," said Nipper confidently. "It's my private opinion that my guv'nor knows a lot more than he'll say! In fact, I believe he's got something up his sleeve."

"Why doesn't somebody do something?" asked Jimmy Potts. "We shall have Scot-

land Yard men down here before long—swarms of 'em. I've heard that there are lots of reporters buzzing about already."

"Blow the Scotland Yard men—and blow the reporters!" said Church gruffly. "Where's Handy?"

Tubbs, the page-boy, who had just come out of the Ancient House, paused.

"There's something rummy about Master Handforth, young gents," he said uncomfortably.

"What do you mean?" asked Church and McClure in one voice.

"Well, an hour or two ago, soon after lessons started, Master Handforth was wanted on the telephone," explained Tubbs. "I thought it was Sir Hedward at the other end of the line, an' I believe Master 'Andforth thought so, too. Anyway, he went off to the village in a rush. An' blowed if I didn't see Sir Hedward over near the playing-fields—so it couldn't 'ave bin him on the 'phone, after all."

Nipper grabbed Tubbs by the arm; and Church and McClure looked startled.

"Why the dickens didn't you say something about this before?" demanded Nipper. "You say there was a 'phone call for Handy? And he rushed off? Haven't you seen him since?"

"No, Master Nipper!" gasped Tubbs. "You see, I never thought there was anything wrong—"

"Of course they are. I've just washed them. Feel them—they're still damp."

(*L. V. Hooper, High Street, Moreton-in-Marsh, has been awarded a penknife.*)

AN OPPORTUNE VISITOR.

Householder (to safe-breaker who has been caught in the act): "Ah, just the man I want. Open this tin of fruit for me, please."

(*W. Kitchener, Claremont Cottages, Biggleswade, has been awarded a pocket wallet.*)

HANDED DOWN.

Small boy (to mother): "Did you say that the pink vase was handed down from one generation to another, mummy?"

Mother: "Yes, my child."

Small boy: "Well, this generation has dropped it."

(*F. Blincoe, 10, Coventry Avenue, Worcester, has been awarded a penknife.*)

BELOW THE SURFACE.

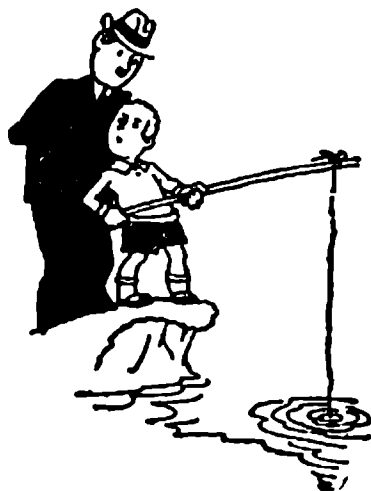
Father: "Whatever are you doing, Willie? Trying to fish?"

Willie: "No, dad, I'm teaching Bobby to swim."

Father: "But where is Bobby?"

Willie: "At the end of the string, dad."

(*B. Small, Harlow Wood Hospital, near Mansfield, has been awarded a penknife.*)



IGNORANCE IS BLISS.

Bill (at museum): "I wonder what 'B.C.240' on that mummy stands for, Joe?"

Joe: "Don't you know? That's the number of the car that knocked her down."

(*J. Buckley, 110, Mottram Road, Stalybridge, has been awarded a penknife.*)

HIS CHIEF CONCERN.

Drowning man: "Save me! Save me! I'm going down for the second time."

Tired fisherman: "Well, have a look at my hooks while you're down there, and see if the bait's still on."

(*W. Jones, Conygre Farm, Alveston, near Bristol, has been awarded a pocket wallet.*)

QUITE DIFFERENT.

Mistress (pointing to gong on hall table): "Why didn't you sound the dinner gong, Mary?"

Mary: "Please, ma'am, this morning you said it was the breakfast gong."

(*T. Davies, 6, Heath Road, Garston, Liverpool, has been awarded a penknife.*)

A SPOT OF BOTHER.

Judge: "Describe what passed between you and the plaintiff during your quarrel?"

Prisoner: "The plates were regular dinner size, your Honour, and the teapot had a broken spout."

(*F. Wootton, 15, Walter Street, Manchester, has been awarded a pocket wallet.*)

They did not wait to hear any more. There was a hue and cry immediately. When Nelson Lee was informed of the facts, he looked grave. Sir Edward, who was with him, was frantic.

"This is terrible!" he said hoarsely. "It is the Mafia! They have got one of my sons! Perhaps they're harming him! Perhaps——"

"Don't you believe it, pater!" said Willy Handforth, who had heard the news, and who had joined his father. "Ted's one of those chaps who always come up smiling. He'll wriggle out of it somehow!"

"William, you must go indoors—and stay indoors," said Sir Edward earnestly. "No, for Heaven's sake, don't argue, my boy! I am terribly, terribly worried about you—and about Edward. These devils may try to harm you next."

"All right, pater," said Willy quietly.

He could see that his father was in no fit condition for an argument. Far better to humour him.

The police were informed; search parties of Removites and Fourth-Formers and seniors went out. But when they returned they all had the same report. They had not found Handforth, and they had not heard of anybody who had seen him.

"You must not take this too badly, Sir Edward," said Nelson Lee quietly. "There can be no doubt that your son has been captured by the enemy; but you must not assume that he is in any danger of his life. It is all to the advantage of the rogues to keep him safe."

Corroboration of this came unexpectedly, and almost at once. Mr. Wilkes, looking slightly agitated, came hurrying up.

"Sir Edward, there is a man telephoning—and he wants to speak to you urgently," said the Housemaster. "I may be mistaken, but I believe he is speaking with a slight foreign accent."

"It is about my son!" exclaimed Sir Edward, rushing off.

Lee and Mr. Wilkes followed him to the Housemaster's study. Sir Edward, at the 'phone, was finding it difficult to control himself.

"Who is it?" he asked sharply.

"You are Sir Edward Handforth, yes?" came the voice, evidently disguised.

"Yes, yes!"

"If you will go to the fifth green of the school golf links, you will find something of interest attached to the flag," said the voice. "Remember—the fifth green."

The telephone became dead, and Sir Edward opened his eyes wider.

"Hallo, hallo!" he shouted. "What on earth—The man's gone!"

"What did he say?" asked Nelson Lee.

Sir Edward told him.

"Do you think it is a trap—to catch the father as well as the son?" asked Old Wilkey.

"Hardly," replied Nelson Lee. "For the enemy must know that Sir Edward would not go alone. However, we will take precautions.

I believe that it is merely a cunning method of getting another message delivered—one that will baffle any attempt to locate or identify the messenger."

Lee only delayed for a moment or two—whilst he made inquiries of the telephone exchange. The call, he found, had come from one of the public boxes in the Caistowe post-office. It was impossible to get any information regarding the man who had used the telephone.

"They are clever—infernally clever!" snapped Sir Edward. "They do not give us a loophole."

When he went off to the St. Frank's Golf Links, he was not only accompanied by Nelson Lee and Mr. Wilkes, but by Inspector Jameson and two police-constables as well. In all the circumstances, it was better to be well prepared.

The St. Frank's Golf Links was an excellent one. It was a nine-hole course, and the fifth hole was the farthest from the clubhouse. The green practically bordered the deserted moorland, and it was in a dip. It was a sheltered spot, and any man could easily have gone there, at any time during the morning, without much fear of having been observed.

"Let me go alone—first," said Nelson Lee, as they were approaching the green.

"Certainly not, Mr. Lee," said Inspector Jameson. "I will accompany you."

They went, and they were soon satisfied that there was no trap here—no hidden explosive. But pinned to the flag was a small sealed envelope, and it was addressed, in printed characters, to Sir Edward Handforth, Bart.

"A cunning plan," said Nelson Lee. "This message no doubt contains your final instructions, Sir Edward."

"Let me open it!" said the baronet tersely.

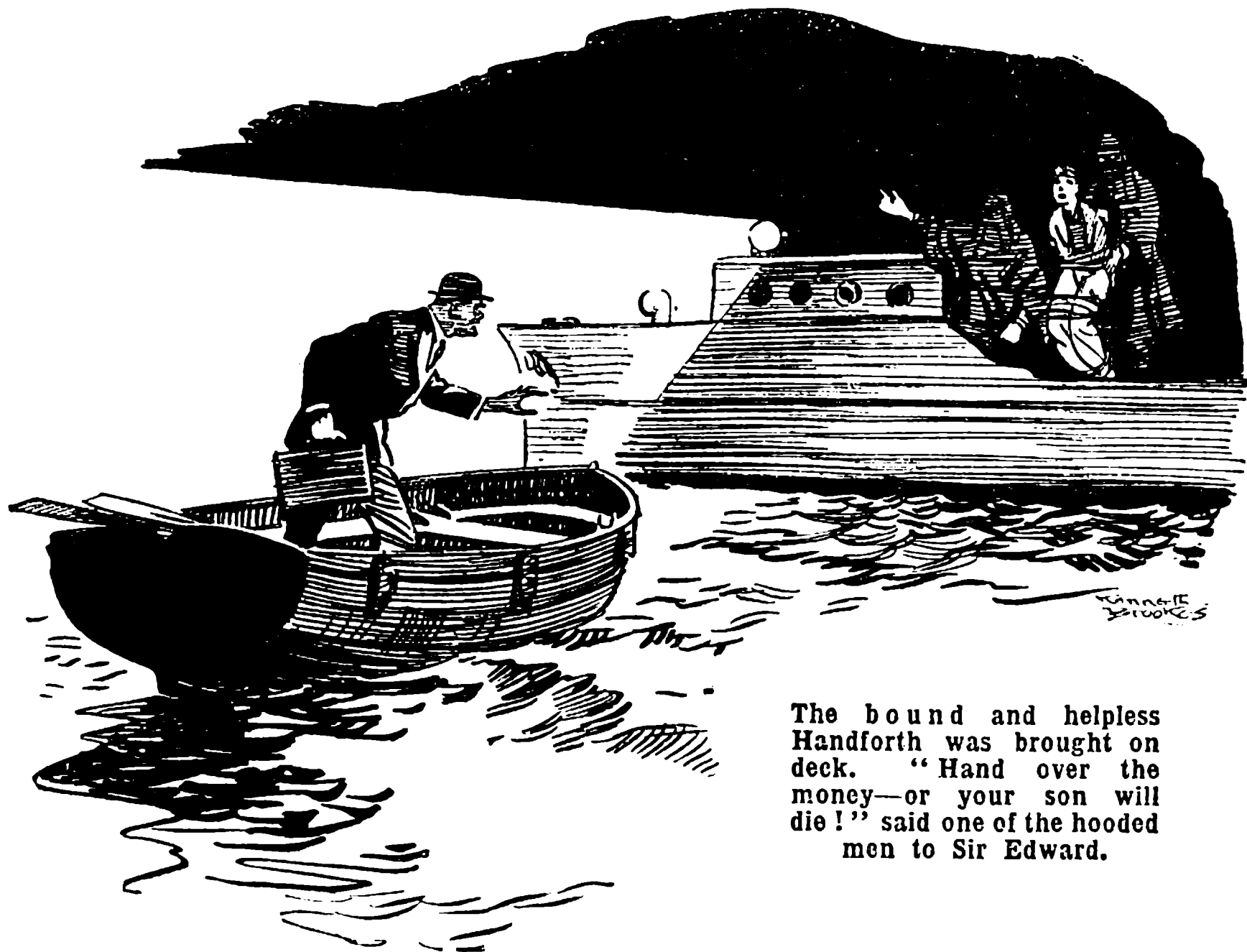
He did so, and Lee's prediction proved to be right. For the message was much longer than any of the others. It ran as follows:

"Sir Edward Handforth, your son is in our hands, but safe. You were to have been our next victim, but the unexpected arrival of Guiseppe Moreno impelled us to alter our plans. And now your son has given us, by falling into our trap, a powerful lever. Take heed of the instructions below.

"At precisely one hour after sunset, you are to take a small rowing-boat, and proceed to sea until you reach a spot roughly one mile beyond the Shingle Head Light-house. You will take with you the fifty thousand pounds. You must be alone. If any other boat accompanies you, or if any other boat appears whilst you are at the appointed spot, we shall not show ourselves. But your son will die."

Then followed, underneath, the customary drawing of the black hand.

"This is appalling!" ejaculated Sir Edward, looking up. "I am no seaman. I



The bound and helpless Handforth was brought on deck. "Hand over the money—or your son will die!" said one of the hooded men to Sir Edward.

won't go! And yet, my son— What can we do, Mr. Lee? What do you suggest, inspector?"

He appealed to them almost helplessly.

"I think we'd better have a number of motor-boats ready," said Inspector Jameson eagerly. "What do you say, Mr. Lee? We can wait about in the darkness, and then, when the moment arrives, we'll swoop down—"

"And either the criminals will not appear at all, or they will have time to escape," said Nelson Lee briefly.

"Eh?"

"We can be quite sure that their own craft will be faster than anything we can obtain," went on Nelson Lee. "Furthermore, they will be watching closely. They will be on the alert. This is a very ingenious method of obtaining the money safely, and I don't very well see how we can take any safeguards without endangering your boy's life, Sir Edward. Not that I really believe him to be in any peril."

"We must not leave anything to chance!" said Sir Edward quickly.

"Fortunately, the sea will be quite calm, and there are no treacherous currents along the coast in placid weather," continued Nelson Lee. "My advice to you, Sir Edward, is to take that boat out—to meet these rogues, and to secure the release of your son. The enemy has the upper hand, and it would be folly to defy them."

CHAPTER 10.

The Mafia's Triumph!

THE sea lay calm and smooth, and Sir Edward Handforth, as he rowed out alone across Caistowe Bay, was scarcely visible in the evening gloom.

It was one hour after sunset.

So far as St. Frank's was concerned, the whole dramatic affair was rather a frost. Nothing had happened during the afternoon, and the boys, who had been expecting all manner of things, were disappointed. The police, apparently, had failed to make any sensational discoveries; they had been dragging the river, and they had been searching the woods. But all to no purpose.

During the afternoon, Sir Edward Handforth had had consultations with the police and with Nelson Lee. They had thrashed out the whole matter, and, in the end, they had come to the conclusion that it would be better to obey the instructions, as Nelson Lee had advised from the first. For the dreaded Mafia, it seemed, held all the trump cards.

If any trap was laid, the Black Hand agents would not appear at all—and, as an act of reprisal for the attempted treachery, it was possible that they would murder their prisoner. It had been a clever move on their part to capture Sir Edward's son.

As the baronet rowed out to keep the appointment his feelings were mixed. He was not thinking of the money now; he did

not care particularly if he was financially crippled. He was thinking of his son.

He appreciated more than ever the wisdom of Nelson Lee's advice. Out here, on the open sea, it was possible to see for a great distance. Sir Edward had the impression that he was being watched by hidden eyes. The enemy, no doubt, had prepared; perhaps there were men with powerful night-glasses, watching. They would know if he came alone.

It was an eerie, mysterious adventure. On all sides lay the dark sea, and over on the headland the Shingle light shone at regular intervals as its boom revolved. The beam did not fall upon the surface of the sea hereabouts; it stretched farther out; and this, if anything, intensified the local gloom.

Sir Edward was no oarsman, but he managed somehow. Sitting there, alone in the boat, he rowed steadily, and the shore receded farther and farther away. He was out beyond the headland now, getting nearer and nearer to the appointed spot. He could just see the twinkling lights on Caistowe pier, and out in the Channel the riding lights of distant steamers were to be dimly observed.

'There was no wind now. The blustery breeze of the day had died down. And Sir Edward, who had been looking forward with some trepidation to this rowing-boat expedition, found that there was nothing to worry about. He was handling his little craft efficiently enough.

As near as he could judge, he was a clear mile beyond the Shingle Head Lighthouse by now. He eased up, resting on his oars. He looked in all directions over the dark sea. But he was alone. No other boat was in sight.

He plied his oars again; perhaps he was not quite far enough out. It was an excellent opportunity for thinking, and Sir Edward's thoughts were busy. Grudgingly, he admired the daring criminals. This appointment, a mile out to sea, was the safest method—

Suddenly, Sir Edward checked his movements. A throbbing sounded in his ears, and as he rested on his oars he recognised the vague but powerful beating of a motor. His heart was thumping faster as he looked eagerly across the gloomy waters.

It was some little time before he detected the low, black shape which was approaching from seaward. A powerful motor-launch, without lights. It came on steadily, and the engine was throttled down as it drew nearer and nearer. But these daring criminals were cautious. They did not approach direct.

Whilst they were still several hundred yards away from Sir Edward's boat, they changed their course and slowly circled round. At last, satisfied that their instructions had been obeyed to the letter, they came nearer. No doubt they were keeping a sharp watch on the shore and on the sea. But there was no other vessel near at hand—no motor-boat containing police.

The launch glided up. Suddenly a powerful light blazed out—a miniature searchlight.

It swung round, hovered over the rowing-boat for a moment or two, and then became steady. Sir Edward blinked in that dazzling glare. Then, just as suddenly, it was switched off.

The launch drifted in nearer, the engine purring lazily.

"We are satisfied, Sir Edward, that you are alone!" came a voice.

The launch was now alongside, and Sir Edward could see queerly hooded figures on the little deck. There was not the slightest possibility of recognising them, for they wore long cloaks, and the hoods were an effective form of disguise.

COMING NEXT WEDNESDAY!



"Well, I'm here!" said Sir Edward brokenly. "Where is my son?"

"Your son is safe," said one of the hooded figures. "You are here alone, Sir Edward. Do you assure us that you have set no trap? There are no boats waiting to dash up—"

"There are no boats at all—except this one," interrupted Sir Edward, his voice rising into shrill impatience and anxiety. "Good heavens! What more do you want? Where is my son, I say? Why do you torture me like this? Where is he?"

"We warn you, Sir Edward, that we are in deadly earnest," said the spokesman. "If you are armed, and if you attempt—"

"I am not armed! You fools! Do you think I would take such risks? I want my son! I tell you—"

"Easy, my friend!" interrupted the hooded figure. "You must not blame us for taking these precautions. You have the money?"

"Yes."

"The full amount?"

"Every penny."

"You will throw the package on to this deck," came the command.

"And my son?"

"Your son will be restored to you after we have satisfied ourselves that you have kept faith," was the reply. "Hand over the money—or he will die!"

Sir Edward breathed hard. It was a one-

safe!" ejaculated his father. "Well—what next?"

"You see that your son is unharmed," said the hooded man. "Throw us the package containing the money."

Sir Edward took up the attache-case which was resting on the seat beside him. He carefully tossed it across, and it fell with a thud upon the deck of the launch.

There was a delay. He could hear the catches being clicked back. The searchlight had been switched off, and one of the men was examining the spoils with the aid of an electric torch. He was soon satisfied, for the attache-case contained bundle after bundle of notes.

Voices sounded, and the language they spoke was Italian. Then came a command.

"Pull your boat in a little nearer!"

Sir Edward obeyed. The side of the rowing-boat grated against the launch. Handforth was lifted and suddenly pushed. He tumbled headlong into the rowing-boat, nearly upsetting it.

"The Mafia wins!" came the mocking, gloating voice of the hooded men. "We have your money, Sir Edward, and you have your son. You have nothing further to fear. Those who obey the Black Hand are never again in danger. Farewell!"

Sir Edward's eyes glowed with excitement.

"Yes, you've won!" he shouted. "But——"

"Oh, pater, it's all my fault!" came Handforth's wretched voice. "I'm to blame for this! If I hadn't been such a chump——"

"Be quiet, Edward!" ordered his father tensely. "You don't understand!"

He was staring fascinatedly at the launch. Clearly, he was expecting something to happen. And he was not wrong—for that something happened even while he was looking.

Four lithe, black figures rose up from the very sea itself. They gripped the launch's rail; they hauled themselves aboard; and without uttering a sound they hurled themselves upon the hooded figures!

CHAPTER 11.

The Last of the Black Hand!

THE surprise was complete.

The hooded men, believing themselves to be triumphant, had relaxed their vigilance. They believed that Sir Edward had walked—or, rather, rowed—blindly into the trap.

But they were wrong!

They had reckoned without the ingenuity of Nelson Lee. For Lee himself was one of those lithe, black figures which came up from the sea. The other figures belonged to Nipper, Mr. Alington Wilkes, and Tom Burton!

Nelson Lee had not hesitated to bring Nipper and the other Removite into this affair. There might be danger—but Nipper and Burton were such powerful swimmers that their services were urgently needed.

"Handforth's Good Deed!"

By E. S. BROOKS.

E. O. Handforth tied to the back of a water-cart; drenched to the skin.

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sided arrangement. He had to surrender the money blindly—and even then he would not be sure that his son was to be restored to him.

"This is an infernal trick!" he panted. "I am here, and I have brought the money. How can I be certain that you will keep your part of the bargain?"

The man did not reply for the moment; but the baronet heard some shuffling sounds, and then the searchlight was switched on again.

Sir Edward was startled to see the bound figure of Edward Oswald Handforth on the deck.

"Pater!" came Handy's voice. "I say, I'm horribly sorry about this——"

"Thank Heaven, Edward, that you are

And Old Wilkey, of course, was quite a champion in his own way. He didn't look one, but he was very much of a surprise packet.

The crooks were taken completely un-awares. It had never occurred to them that danger would come from the sea. Even when they had flooded the rowing-boat with their searchlight, they had not seen the heads of the swimmers. For Nelson Lee had been expecting some such move, and he and his companions had concealed themselves on the dark side of the boat, beyond the range of the searchlight. And it had been easy for the four to swim silently round, and to grip the sides of the launch, ready to leap aboard at the word of command.

Another boat would have caused the crooks to veer off—but, by swimming out with Sir Edward, Nelson Lee had fooled the enemy.

Nelson Lee was the first aboard, and he lashed out powerfully, without asking any questions.

Crash!

His fist thudded against one of those hooded heads, and the man, bewildered and frightened, let out a yell.

"We are trapped!" he shouted hoarsely.

The next moment the fight was on with a vengeance.

Nelson Lee and Nipper flung themselves at one of the hooded men, and they rolled over and over on the confined deck. Mr. Wilkes and Tom Burton gave their full attention to the second man. Apparently, there were no others aboard. The important mission had been entrusted to these two members of the Mafia.

"Swill my scuppers!" gurgled the bo'sun, as he struggled. "We've got 'em, mess-mates!"

"Keep them down!" shouted Lee. "Don't let them get at their firearms!"

Thus—thud—thud!

Mr. Wilkes was enthusiastically hammering the head of his own particular victim. Tom Burton was doing his bit, too.

Meanwhile, the other fight was developing rather more dramatically. The man whom Nelson Lee and Nipper were struggling with was like a maniac. He fought with the strength of a wild beast, and his two attackers were finding it a difficult task to hold him.

In the boat, alongside, Sir Edward was watching fascinatedly.

"Pater!" gasped Handforth. "What's—what's happening? It's Mr. Lee, isn't it? You're trapping the crooks, after all!"

"Don't interrupt!" said his father. "By Heaven! I think I'd better join in!"

"Here, I say! Unfasten my ropes, pater!" urged Handforth. "Be a sport——"

"I can't bother with you now!" roared his father. "What do you mean, anyhow, by getting yourself into this mess? Just what I might have expected from you, Edward!"

"But these ropes——"

"Bother the ropes!" said his father curtly. Handforth groaned. Not five minutes ago, Sir Edward had been filled with deep concern for his son; but now, seeing that same son safe and sound, he wasn't half so tender.

And Handforth was suddenly filled with misery. Here was one of the most glorious scraps that he had ever witnessed, and he wasn't even able to take part in it!

His father, however, was in a better fix. He managed to get the rowing-boat close to the launch, and with one leap he was aboard. The rowing-boat drifted away, and Edward Oswald gave a yelp of fresh dismay.

"Now!" roared Sir Edward aggressively.

Indignation and fury welled up within him. All day long he had been in a state of mental agony; he felt that it was only fair that he should take part in this scrap. And Sir Edward, when it came to the point, was essentially a man of action.

He sailed in enthusiastically.

Not that his efforts were really required. By this time Nelson Lee and Nipper had managed to get their man more or less subdued; and Old Wilkey and the bo'sun were sitting squarely on the chest of their own prisoner. Mr. Wilkes was fixing a rope around the fellow's feet, whilst Burton kept those same feet from lashing about.

Crash!

Sir Edward was not to be completely done. He delivered a terrific blow blindly, and Nelson Lee rolled over sideways, stars blazing in his eyes.

"Take that!" bellowed Sir Edward. "You infernal rogues——"

"If you don't mind, Sir Edward, I'd rather you didn't do that again," said Nelson Lee mildly. "Upon my word! That punch of yours is like the kick of a mule!"

"Good gracious!" gasped Sir Edward. "Was—was it you I hit, Mr. Lee?"

"It was," growled the great detective. "If you want to hit anybody, hit this fellow."

"He's all right, guv'nor!" said Nipper breathlessly. "We've got him down now. Here, Sir Edward, if you want to do something useful, sit on this chap's legs."

It was a wet business. Nelson Lee and his helpers were all in bathing costumes—and they had taken the precaution to grease themselves in order to keep out the cold. So, altogether, Sir Edward was in a messy condition by the time he had finished helping. But he didn't mind.

"We've got them all right now, Mr. Lee!" said Old Wilkey with satisfaction. "Where's that searchlight they were using?"

The prisoners were breathing hard after their terrific struggle. Their feet were bound by now, and it was short work for the victors to whip off those great hoods and to secure the men's arms to their sides.

"Now we'll have a look at the beauties," said Nelson Lee with a chuckle in his voice. "I rather think you're going to get a surprise, Sir Edward."

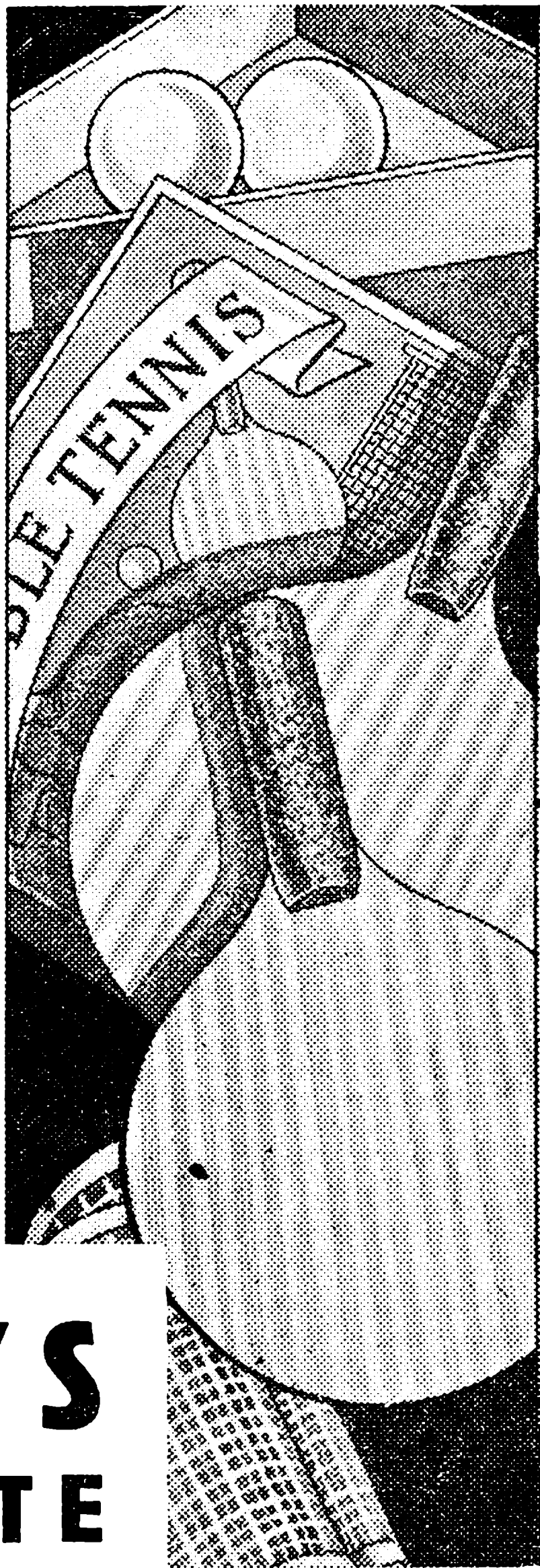
(Continued on page 38.)

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THE BLACK HAND AT ST. FRANK'S

(Continued from page 36.)

The searchlight blazed out, and Nipper, who was operating it, found that it worked on a swivel. He swung it round until the dazzling beam played fully upon the two captives.

Sir Edward looked, he blinked, and then he uttered a great shout.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated. "But—but——"

"Introductions, I think, are superfluous," said Lee smoothly.

"Luigi Pasquali!" gasped Sir Edward, staring dazedly at the younger of the two men.

"Perhaps we were a little too clever, Sir Edward," said Pasquali bitterly.

Sir Edward did not reply; he turned his attention to the other man.

"Guiseppe Moreno, the Secret Service agent!" he exclaimed, swallowing hard. "But—but this is absurd! It is, in fact, impossible! These two men are dead!"

"Not quite," chuckled Nelson Lee.

"But Pasquali was murdered!" went on Sir Edward. "Great Heaven! Didn't we see him stretched out in the Triangle? He was shot through the head! And—and——"

"And Moreno was blown to atoms, eh?" asked Nelson Lee dryly. "It was a very clever plan, Sir Edward, and I think the police were fooled just as completely as you were. Man alive, you don't suppose that I would have willingly let you surrender the enormous sum of fifty thousand pounds? I was convinced, from the first, that this whole affair would end satisfactorily."

Mr. Wilkes, seeing Sir Edward's stupefaction, laughed softly.

"These clever rascals made one very bad blunder, Sir Edward," he said dryly. "They were exceedingly rash when they allowed you to come to St. Frank's."

"But—but I don't quite understand!" said Sir Edward.

"No?" murmured Old Wilkey. "I don't think there's much doubt that Pasquali is the brain of this little gang. And what he did not know, when he came to St. Frank's, was that St. Frank's sheltered the world's greatest detective!"

"By gad, sir, you're right!" said Sir Edward with a start. "I never told Pasquali about Mr. Nelson Lee—and even when he heard the name 'Lee,' I don't suppose he thought anything of it. 'Lee' is not an entirely uncommon name in England. They thought they were dealing with just an ordinary schoolmaster! By George!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Well, we can continue this discussion ashore—when we are more comfortable," he said briskly. "I would remind you, Sir Edward, that four of us are attired only in bathing costumes. And this October night is not particularly warm."

"Upon my soul, I don't know what to say, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed Sir Edward. "This

is an absolute triumph for you, sir! You have done magnificently!"

"Nonsense," said Nelson Lee. "The case was both simple and easy. The only moment I had any anxiety at all was when I learned that your son had been trapped."

"Yes, I want to have a word with the young rascal about that!" said Sir Edward gruffly. "What on earth does he mean by getting himself trapped? Edward, I should like to know—— Hallo! Good gracious! Where's that rowing-boat?"

They had forgotten all about the rowing-boat in the excitement, and when they looked round it was nowhere to be seen. It had drifted off into the darkness, carrying the bound and helpless Edward Oswald with it.

Not that there was any cause for anxiety.

The boat was soon located; it had been caught in one of the drifting currents, and it was edging its way towards the shore. The launch, as soon as it was under way, swung round and went in chase. Handforth was hauled aboard, his ropes were untied, and he heard all the news. The rowing-boat was towed behind.

When Sir Edward saw his son's condition, he relented. Edward Oswald's wrists and ankles were much swollen; the ropes had been bound tightly, and he was in considerable pain. But he didn't care much; he was free now, and his father was safe.

"It wasn't my fault, pater—really!" he urged, after he had explained. "That—that rotter imitated your voice marvellously. One of the Mafia men, I mean. I never suspected anything until I got on this launch and went into the cabin. And then it was too late."

"I can only assume that they decided to grab you as an afterthought," said Sir Edward. "They thought that it would make their success absolutely certain. It was Pasquali, of course, who fooled you—Pasquali can speak perfect English, and he has known me for some weeks, and could easily imitate my voice."

Handforth stared blankly.

"Pasquali!" he ejaculated. "But—but Pasquali's dead, pater!"

"About as dead as we are!" retorted his father. "Oh, you don't know, do you? You haven't seen the prisoners! Well, you're going to get a surprise, young 'un!"

Handforth was certainly surprised. He had been a prisoner all this time, and he had not even guessed!

THE captives were handed over to the Caistowe police — where Inspector Jameson was waiting. The worthy Bannington inspector was considerably startled.

Later, at St. Frank's, after the four valiant swimmers had had a rub down and a change of clothes, there was a meeting in Nelson Lee's study.

"It is fairly clear that Pasquali and Moreno are clever confidence men," said Nelson Lee. "Pasquali succeeded in

'working' his admission into your exclusive club, Sir Edward. He chose you as his victim."

"The impudent rogue!" grunted Sir Edward.

"He made a point of cultivating your acquaintance and making himself very friendly," continued Lee. "Then, at the crucial moment, he trotted out his sensational story of the Mafia. I need hardly tell you that the Mafia itself has taken no part in this affair. It was a bluff from beginning to end. When Pasquali found that you were going to St. Frank's, he made his plans. I dare say you saw him some days ago—and you probably told him that you were going to St. Frank's?"

"I might have done," admitted Sir Edward gruffly. "I'll confess that the

fellow rather attracted me. Confound him, I became quite friendly."

"These confidence men are very clever at their own game," said Nelson Lee. "You have nothing to reproach yourself with, Sir Edward. Well, as I was saying, Pasquali made his plans. He arranged it so that he could accompany you to St. Frank's. It was easy enough for him to hire the motor-boat and to have it ready on the Stowe. Moreno was there, waiting, ready to do his own part. That was rather a clever dodge—to bring the confederate in as an Italian Secret Service agent."

"But—but even now I can't quite understand," said Sir Edward, rather helplessly.

(Continued on page 44.)

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By DAVID GOODWIN

Brought to Bay.

RALPH, how come you here?" cried Dick anxiously, as his young brother cantered up. "What the plague brings you across the moor by night? I'm right glad to see you, but——"

"Ay, but how did he find us, seeing that we have ridden zigzag over four miles?" growled Turpin, who did not seem too well pleased.

"I guessed you would ride for Braham Moor," said Ralph, "when I heard you had left by the west side of the park, so I rode here by the shortest way, and, now the moon has risen, I soon spied you."

"'Tis well the King's Riders have not your wit, or we should adorn the gibbet," said Turpin. "And, now you have found us, young cock o' the woods, what is your pleasure?"

"Dick, is Fernhall lost?" cried Ralph.

"Ay, and my pardon besides. I am Galloping Dick once more, Ralph, with three hundred guineas the price of my head. Perchance they will raise it to four! As for Fernhall, let it go hang! Black Satan and a pair of pistols are enough for me, since I am

driven to it," said Dick, looking with kindly eyes at his brother, yet a little sadly.

"Pink me if it isn't the better fun than partridge shooting," cried Ralph. "Dick, I'll ride with you, and perchance they'll put a hundred guineas on my head, too!"

"Nay, lad, you shall not," said Dick. "My enemies have outlawed me, but I'll never see you pulled down to my level. I kept you out of it before, and I will again. There is no need. Through carelessness I failed to make good my claim to Fernhall, and Hector Forrester jockeyed me out of it. 'Tis not so with Huntercombe, which is still your estate! I made that sure at once, after Vane's death, and it was proved by a flaw in the will Vane induced our father to make that Huntercombe was never rightly Vane's. Hector will never be able to turn you out of Huntercombe."

"I care nothing for Huntercombe while you are riding the highways!" said Ralph gloomily.

"Nay, boy. 'Tis your part of the family heritage and you must guard it. There is no outlawry hanging over you."

Opening Chapters Re-told in Brief on Page 42

"Come, let us water our horses at the brook," said Turpin, "while you and your brother are juggling with estates. We must ride on, for the dawn must find us over the county border."

"Let your beast drink lightly, Ralph," said Dick, as they all three dismounted by the brook, "for you have to ride back to Huntercombe to-night. If any danger threatens you there you'll spend the term at St. Austell's School again, with Dr. Tre-lawney. That will be the safest haven for you!"

"I shall be glad enough, since you will not let me accompany you," cried Ralph. "Egad, what sport we had then between Vane and the boys, eh, Dick? Rare fun it was!"

"'Od's death! What's that?" exclaimed Turpin.

A deep, sonorous baying came wafting on the night wind, as of some strange beast out a-hunting. Turpin ran up the steep side of the brook, and leaped on to a boulder, gazing out over the wild moor.

"To the horses, and ride for your lives!" he cried. "They have put the hounds on our track. See, yonder come the brutes!"

Racing towards the three comrades, their heads up and in full cry, came six gigantic dogs, baying wolfishly as they sighted their quarry.

The three fugitives made a dash for the horses, but they were too late. Ralph's big roan, suddenly panic-stricken at the sight of the oncoming brutes, flung up his head and galloped away like the wind, and the two highwaymen's horses, caught by the bad example, stampeded after him. The fugitives were left helpless.

"Here come the Riders on the trail of the hounds!" cried Turpin, pointing to a troop of horsemen in the distance, galloping furiously towards them. "Plague on it, our last chance is gone!"

"There will be little left of us when they arrive, unless we strike shrewdly," said Dick, with a fierce laugh. "I care not for all the Riders in England, but to be dogs'-meat—'tis outside the bargain. Here, Ralph, shoulder to shoulder, out with the steel, and fail not. He who misses his stroke shall have his throat torn out!"

Even as he spoke, the great brutes, with gaping jaws, sprang upon them. Dick's pistol flashed, and lodged its contents full in the chest of one, while Ralph prepared to meet the other with his sword.

Crack! went Turpin's pistol. Another hound rolled over with a howl and a gasp, right in the track of his fellows. But the others leaped over his body, and sprang at the three defenders like thunderbolts.

Again the pistol cracked, but the ball failed to stop the rush, and the great hounds were upon their quarry, mad for blood!

"Give 'em the steel!" cried Dick. "Stand close to me, Ralph, and I'll cover you."

A Fight for Life!

DAWN was breaking over the cold moorland, and the onslaught of the hounds was horrible to see. No human foes could have been so perilous. The three comrades were ready for them with the steel, but the hounds were four to three, and the boys knew that if a single stroke missed its mark the attacking dog would bear down the defender.

Turpin had flung his empty pistol aside, and stood with drawn rapier in his right hand and a dagger in his left. As the hound which attacked him leaped clear from the ground at his throat, the outlaw received him neatly on the point of his sword, which passed under the dog's chin and met it full in the breast. By the weight of its own spring the hound spitted itself right up to the sword-hilt, causing the powerful highwayman to stagger backwards ere the brute collapsed and fell. In a moment, Turpin, cool as ever, put his foot on the body, plucked his blade from it, and was ready for the next.

The largest of the hounds sprang at Dick, and he delivered a thrust full at its gaping jaws. It was a less safe stroke than Turpin's, being apt to glance and miss, but Dick had never stood up to dogs before, and had to learn by experience. By good luck, the thrust went home, the point drove out

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through the back of the brute's neck, and the sword-hilt clashed on its yellow fangs.

At the same moment the third hound flew at Ralph, and the plucky youngster, who had drawn his small court rapier, stood to it like a man. He received the hound's neck on his point, but, though sturdy, he was not strong enough to stand against the weight of the brute's rush, and it knocked him flat on his back.

With a ferocious growl, the hound turned on him, and in another moment Ralph would have met his death. Dick, seeing what had happened, sprang forward with a cry. His own sword was so deeply fixed in the animal he had killed that he could not withdraw it on the moment, and, desperate with fear for Ralph, he left it, and threw himself on the great dog with his bare hands.

"Roll away, Ralph! Get clear!" he cried, gripping the loose folds of the brute's throat. In another instant Dick, Ralph, and the dog were rolling over together, the hound gnashing its teeth madly and writhing desperately in an effort to get at its captor. It would very soon have succeeded, so agile was it, had not Turpin darted forward, plunged his dagger into its side, and turned again to face the fourth dog once more.

The hound which had so nearly finished Ralph's career dropped with a howl, and Dick, leaping up, sprang to his sword and with a couple of strong tugs, dragged it from the lifeless body of the dog.

Ralph was also on his feet in a moment, but his ferocious assailant had only been wounded by Turpin's dagger, and, springing up, it hurled itself upon Ralph. The fourth hound, as yet unhurt and with twice the cunning and agility of the others, was leaping from Turpin to Dick and back, keeping them both busy, as it sought to find a grip.

"'Od's burn it! Finish the brute quickly!" cried Turpin impatiently, making a savage lunge at the dog, which avoided him with equal skill and nearly dashed under Dick's guard. "Have you never a pistol, Dick? Mine is empty. We are horseless, and the Riders are nearly upon us! Ralph, spit that wounded pup of yours, for Heaven's sake!"

The troop of Riders, which were far distant when the dogs attacked, had galloped their hardest, and now were barely three hundred yards away. A sudden check pulled them up—the three foremost blundered heavily into a wide strip of bog, which lay between them and the fugitives. Turpin and the boys, on their way thither, had found a narrow path, over which they had led their horses, but the Riders charged at it in

ignorance, and in a few moments the leaders' horses were bogged up to the hocks.

Their riders floundered back to the edge, cursing, while the others galloped along the side, seeking a way over. There was none that they, in their haste, could find.

"A thousand furies!" cried the leader of the Riders. "There is no way! Leave the horses and cross on foot. The knaves are unmounted. We have them neatly, even if they beat the dogs!"

"The plague strike this capering brute!" said Turpin; for the fourth hound still attacked so savagely and shrewdly that they could neither kill it nor turn their backs on it. "Ah, well done! Down he goes at last. And young Ralph's, too!"

As the hound dashed at Turpin, a swift thrust from Dick transfixed it, and Ralph, who had just disposed of the brute that had been attacking him, laid the last of the dogs low. It was more than any of the three defenders had hoped for when the contest began; but still they were a little better off, for a dozen Riders were crossing the bog, and there was no way of escape.

"Dogs'-meat or the gallows!" said Turpin, with a little laugh. "That's the choice they've given us. But it shall be neither, by the black rood! We shall fight it out till the life leaves us—they shall never take us alive! A curse on these horses—'twas that blundering brute of Ralph's that led them astray."

He clapped his hands to his mouth, and gave a long, quivering whistle. Dick did the same. It was the call Black Satan always answered. But the three horses were still circling wildly over the moor, out of earshot. The dismounted Riders came up fast.

"Have you a pistol, Dick?" cried Turpin. "Here, take this. I have two. Load swiftly from the horn at your belt; we may still have time to put in a shot or two. I'll wager the fools have left their own pistols in their holsters." He gave a last despairing call to the distant horses, and then turned to meet the foe. "Stand each to your man and sell your lives dear—here they come!"

"Surrender!" roared the foremost of the Riders, as they gained the solid ground and came running towards the fugitives, leaving one of their number in charge of the horses on the other side of the bog, which they had crossed by springing from one tussock to another. "Surrender, you knaves and caitiffs, or we slay you where you stand!"

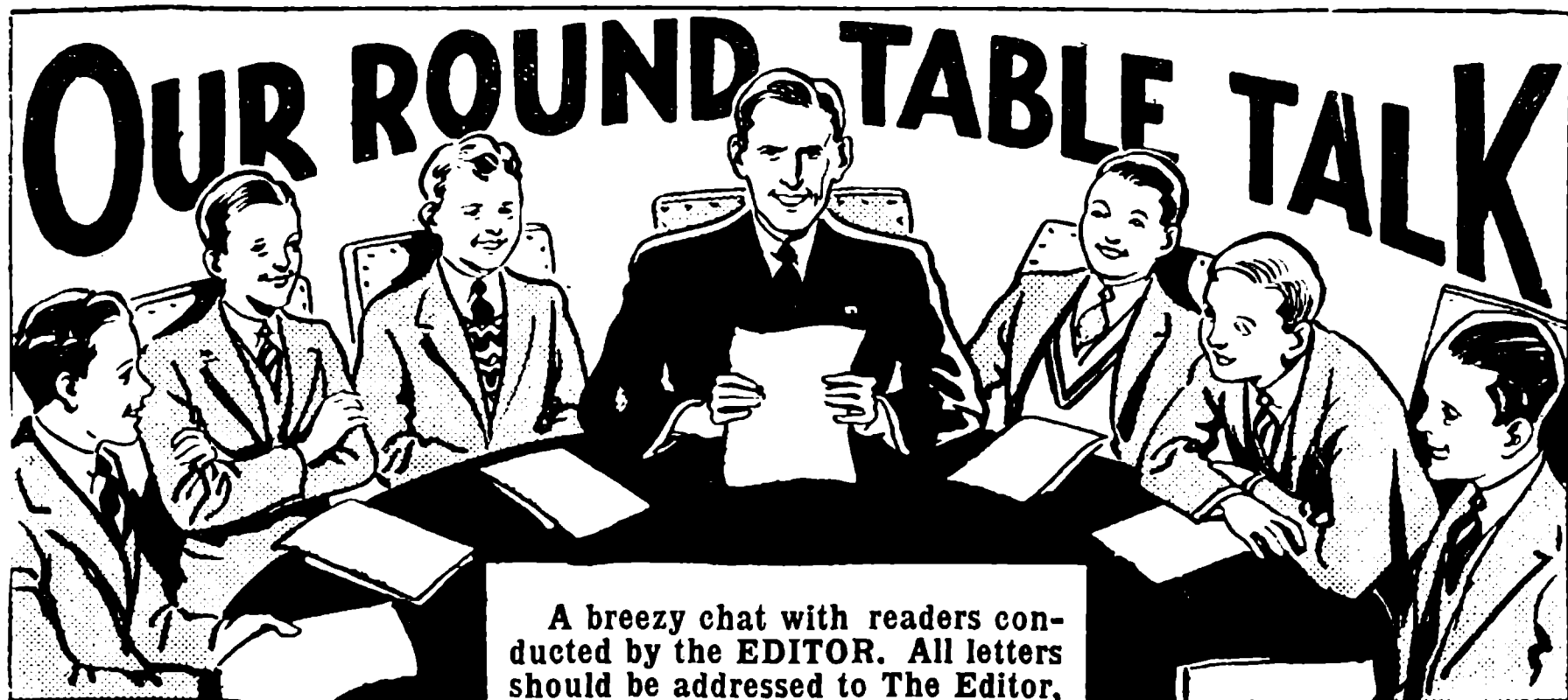
(Dick's fight for life with the King's Riders is vividly described in next week's rousing instalment.)

OPENING CHAPTERS IN BRIEF

DICK FORRESTER, formerly a young highwayman, has been deprived of his estate and fortune by the trickery of HECTOR FORRESTER. This is only the beginning of Dick's troubles, for he falls foul of CAPTAIN SWEENEY, the notorious leader of a band of footpads, and in assisting his former comrade of the road, RICHARD TURPIN, the famous outlaw, to elude capture by the King's Riders, he has himself broken the law and is wanted by the King's men. Dick is forced to become an outlaw, and he and Turpin ride off together. They are crossing a moor when Dick's young brother, RALPH, overtakes them.

(Now read on.)

Gather Round for this Week's Cheery Chat with the Editor.



A breezy chat with readers conducted by the **EDITOR**. All letters should be addressed to **The Editor**,

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YOU ask who are the cleverest boys in the Remove and Third Forms at St. Frank's. K. R. Humphreys (Hucknall), and this is rather a difficult question to answer. The best scholar in the Remove, perhaps, is Guy Pepys, but in other ways he is useless. Undoubtedly the cleverest all-rounder is Nipper—because he's clever in all sorts of ways, without being perfect in anything. Exactly the same applies to Willy Handforth, of the Third. Lots of readers seem to think that Nipper is always being described as perfect, but they are wrong. Nobody in this world is perfect, which is a jolly good thing for all the rest of us! A really perfect human being would be too awful for words. Nelson Lee himself isn't perfect by any means. You ask if he is a heavy smoker, and in this one respect alone he is far from perfect. He smokes more than is good for him, and is frequently telling himself that he'll have to cut it down or lose his fitness. But he goes on smoking just the same, particularly when he has a knotty problem to unravel. He regards tobacco, rightly or wrongly, as an aid to thought. Edward Oswald Handforth, by the way, has been in the St. Frank's stories since they first appeared in the Old Paper.

Vivian Travers has not changed his character in the slightest degree, Douglas Vardy (Southampton), and the fellows are never surprised if they come across him indulging in a surreptitious cigarette. He is just as likely to give a beggar a half-crown as to put the same half-crown on the three-thirty race. But in spite of his little weaknesses, Travers is really one of the best.

Here is a list of the most prominent Fifth-Formers. Ancient House—William Napoleon Towne (Captain), Horace Stevens, Bertram Loye, Walter Hitchin. West House—Cuth-

bert Chambers, Arthur Phillips, Walter Bryant, George Hodder. Modern House—Howard Rowe, Reginald Swinton, Stephen Parry, Stanley Hulbert. East House—Harold Grayson, Frederick Shaw, Percival Drake, William Simms. This finishes the list of boys who have been mentioned in the St. Frank's stories, and next week a list of masters will be given. It will be popular, also, I think, to give some thumbnail descriptions of the more prominent boys, to supplement the information already supplied. This feature will start next week.

The series you mention, Jack Kennedy (Coventry), describing the adventures of the St. Frank's boys in Africa and the South Seas, are out of print. The titles you require are as follows: Old Series. 4—"The Case of the Interned Detective." 7—"A Mis-carriage of Justice." 150—"The Remove in Revolt." 167—"The Moor House Mystery." 333—"The Interrupted Match." 392—"The House of a Thousand Eyes." 430—"The Slaves of Dorrimore Island."

I like to regard all my readers as a league of friends at this Round Table of ours. Cyril R. F. Amery (Beckom, New South Wales), and when you write to me I am always willing to help you in any way I possibly can, or answer your queries. Anything directly concerning the St. Frank's stories I will pass on to Mr. Brooks, and he will let me have his comments for inclusion in this Chat.

Mr. Kenneth Brookes, who illustrates the St. Frank's stories, James Anderson (Balarat, Victoria), is no relation whatever to Mr. Edwy Searles Brooks, as the "e" in his name indicates. Edgar Fenton's uncle—that uncle who is younger than Fenton himself—left St. Frank's at the end of the series in which he played such a prominent part.

THE BLACK HAND AT ST. FRANK'S

(Continued from page 39.)

"How did they work it, Mr. Lee? I mean, we saw Pasquali shot——"

"When Pasquali got into Mr. Wilkes' study, he saw that the clock was two minutes fast, and he took advantage of the fact," said Nelson Lee. "All Pasquali did was to run outside, and when the school clock chimed, Moreno fired a pistol. Pasquali collapsed, and it was the work of a moment for him to fake the bullet wound on his forehead. In the moonlight it looked quite realistic; but you will remember that the clever rascal took care to vanish before that wound could be closely examined. In fact, any examination of that 'body' would have been fatal to the plan. So the crooks made it appear that Pasquali had been dropped to the bottom of the Stowe."

"And Moreno?" asked Sir Edward. "That explosion——"

"The two men were very thorough there," said Nelson Lee. "That saloon car was an expensive one—but they sacrificed it for the sake of realism. A sprat to catch a mackerel. All Moreno did was to drive down the lane, and he quickly saw that he was alone, and in no danger of being observed. It was a particularly useful spot for the purpose, with the wood on one side. He jumped out of the car and ran into the wood."

"You mean he had a bomb in that car?"

"Undoubtedly," replied Lee. "Moreno simply turned the catch, or switch, and ran for it. The explosion happened when he was at a safe distance, and the car was blown to smithereens. Moreno simply ran through the wood, reached the river, and he was soon safe aboard the launch."

"I became suspicious after the peculiar disappearance of Pasquali," continued Lee. "I was not at all certain that the man was really dead. Then, again, I came to the conclusion that these two men were the only ones who could possibly have 'planted' those supposed Mafia messages. It looked very much like magic—but it was quite simple. The message in your pocket, Sir Edward—the message under your serviette—the message in your son's pocket. I remembered that either Pasquali or Moreno had been close to you just prior to the finding of those messages. Easy enough for them to slip the papers into your pockets as the opportunity offered."

"What chumps we were!" growled Handforth. "My only hat! And I thought we were really up against the Mafia!"

"Those two men are very clever," said Nelson Lee, his voice becoming hard. "Their object was to scare you out of a fortune, Sir Edward—and they might easily have succeeded. They had another man helping them, and I have learned from Inspector Jameson that he has given himself up. Apparently he had been double-crossed by Moreno and Pasquali. Well, they'll pay dearly for their villainy—for I haven't the slightest doubt that they'll go to prison with long sentences."

And so the affair ended quite satisfactorily—and that was the last St. Frank's heard of the Black Hand!

THE END.

(Edward Oswald Handforth is at his funniest and best in next week's hilarious long complete school yarn of the Chums of St. Frank's. Entitled: "Handforth's Good Deed!" Ask your newsagent to order your copy of the Old Paper in advance.)

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