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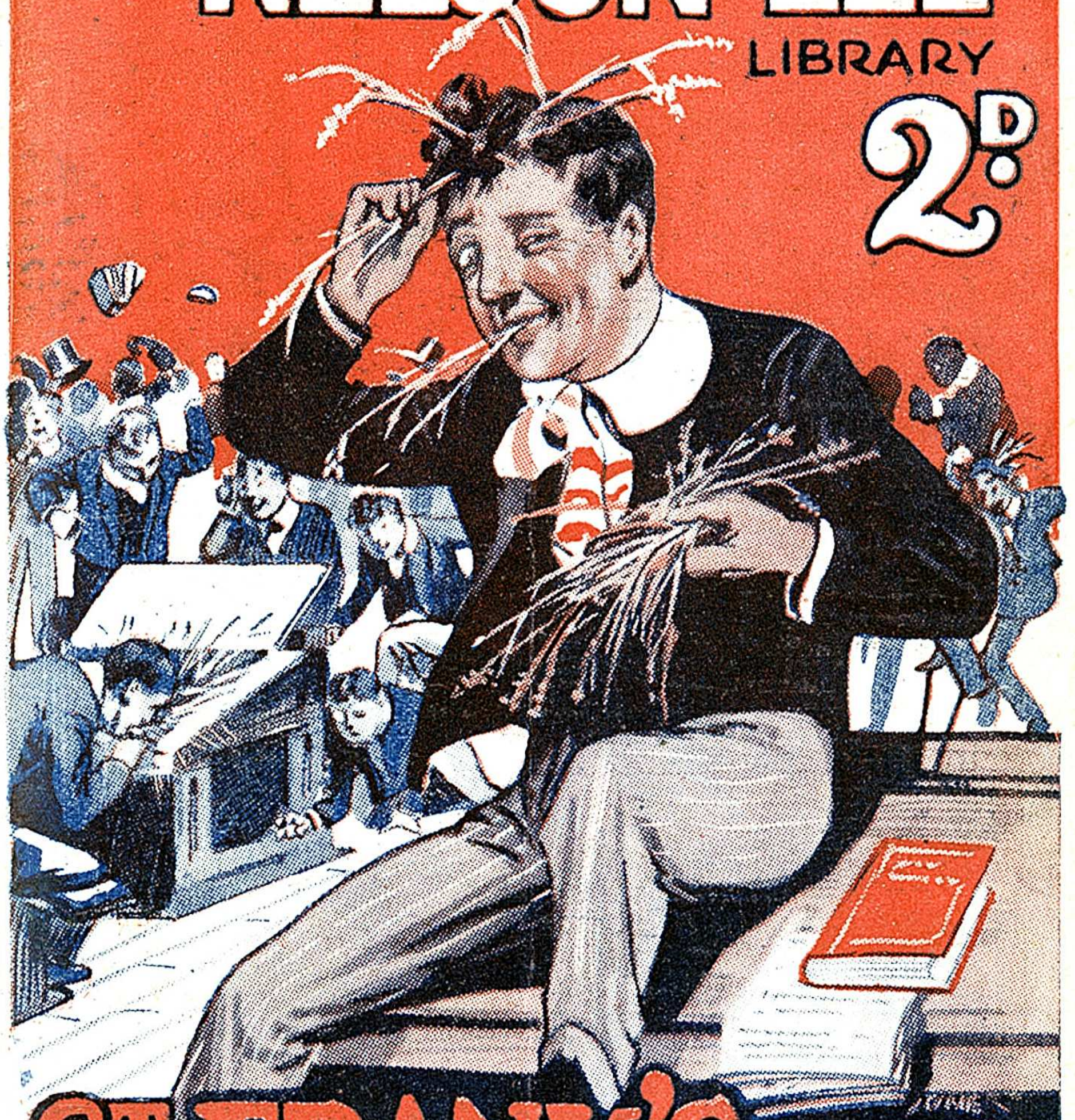
HANDFORTH OFF HIS ROCKER

—IN THIS WEEK'S STORY!

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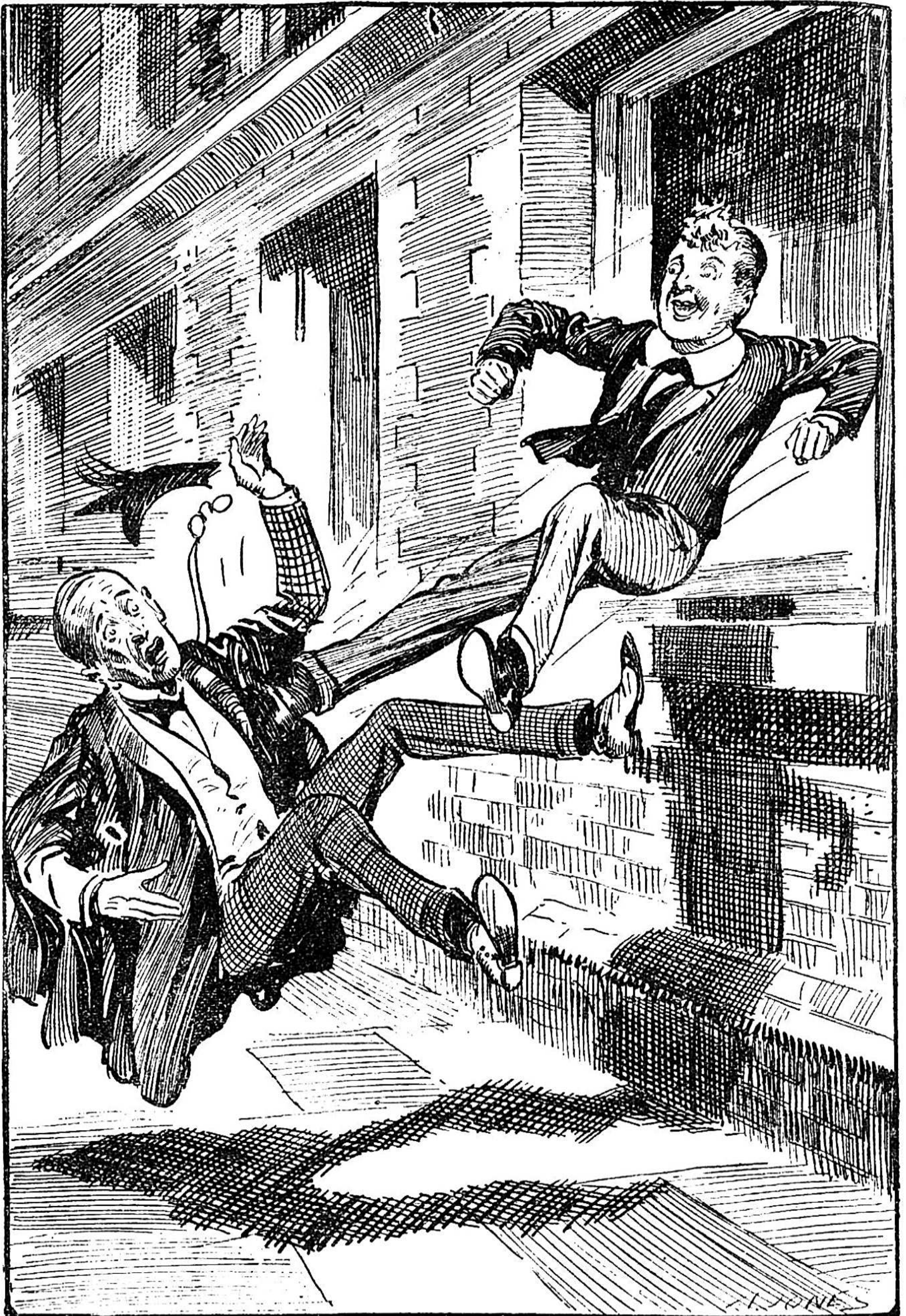
ST. FRANK'S GOES MAD!

A SCREAMINGLY FUNNY LONG COMPLETE STORY OF SCHOOL LIFE!

New Series No. 6.

CUT ON WEDNESDAY.

June 12th, 1926.



With a wild whoop, Handforth shot through the window. He caught Mr. Pycraft amidships, and the master landed with a fearful crash on his back. The fun at St. Frank's had started!

ST. FRANK'S GOES MAD!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

You have never read a funnier story than this long complete yarn of the Boys of St. Frank's.

CHAPTER 1.

STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH.

MR. HORACE PYCRAFT, the master of the Fourth Form at St. Frank's, turned an almost complete somersault, and landed with a fearful crash on his back. Not that Mr. Horace Pycraft was in the habit of performing these gymnastic feats. The present one was quite unintentional on his part.

He was indulging in a before-breakfast stroll in the West Square, and was feeling almost genial—a strange state of mind for Mr. Pycraft, for he was generally crusty and short-tempered.

He happened to be passing along the paved stone path alongside the Ancient House, and had just drawn opposite the window of Study D when a surprising thing happened. Mr. Pycraft didn't actually know what it was, because it happened so quickly.

Something solid shot through the window—something which hurtled through the air and struck Mr. Pycraft amidships with disastrous consequences. The something, to be exact, was the burly form of Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove. From sheer exuberance of spirit, apparently, Handforth had taken the window in one flying leap.

It was quite characteristic of him to neglect the ordinary precaution of ascertaining if the coast was clear. He simply gave vent to a wild whoop, and vaulted through the window towards the open air. It seemed

that the confines of Study D were altogether too limited for Handforth's frame of mind.

"Sorry, sir!" he said breathlessly.

He picked himself up—having fallen even more heavily than Mr. Pycraft—and proceeded to act in a remarkable fashion. He raced round the West Square aimlessly, giving frantic leaps into the air, and letting out strange cries. It never occurred to him that Mr. Pycraft might be unsatisfied with a mere "Sorry," and that discretion should have taken him elsewhere. No, he remained in full sight, apparently oblivious of the Form-master's existence.

"Look out, there—out of the way!" roared Handforth. "Whoa! You reckless idiot, you nearly swerved into me! Keep to your left!"

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Pycraft dazedly.

He was sitting up and watching Handforth in a bewildered, muddled sort of way. He was just beginning to realise what had happened, and he was marvelling at the fact that his bones were still intact. His first impulse was to leap to his feet and seize the offending junior by the scruff of the neck and yank him indoors for summary castigation. But Handforth's strange behaviour nearly took Mr. Pycraft's breath away.

Although he was telling people to get out of the way, and advising them to keep to the left, there wasn't another soul in sight! The master and the junior had the West Square to themselves, and Handforth was

seemingly addressing his shouts to the empty air.

Scarcely anybody was down yet—at least, not the rank and file of the seniors and juniors. A number of enthusiastic sportsmen, however, had been up since six o'clock, and the greater proportion of them were still on the playing-fields, busy at the nets. School was in full swing again after the short Whitsun vacation, and St. Frank's was settling down to the stern business of—sport. Lessons, of course, were a necessary evil.

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Pycraft huskily.

By this time he had picked himself up, and he was staring at Handforth strangely. Edward Oswald was acting even more peculiarly than before. One of the outdoor servants had carelessly left the lid of an ashbin about, and Handforth had grabbed this up. He was now using it in a novel fashion.

Crouching in a low attitude, he held the zinc lid in front of him, as a motorist holds the steering-wheel of his car. Handforth's attitude was tense, and he was living in a world of his own.

"All ready?" he sang out, glancing round. "Good! Shut the door, Mac! Don't mess about with that spare tyre, Church, you chump! Look out—we're off!"

Slowly Handforth trotted forward, increasing his speed and swerving round towards the West Arch. Mr. Pycraft watched in amazement.

"The boy's gone out of his mind!" he muttered, thoroughly startled. "That wild leap through the window—this delusion—Good gracious!"

Almost when Handforth had disappeared into the archway he came into view again, backing round as though he were reversing a motor-car. Then he swung off across the square at a gallop.

"Now then, you idiots—out of it!" he belated. "Do you want to get run over?" He suddenly stood still, his face glowing, his eyes gleaming. "By George! How absolutely ripping!" he gasped.

With another whoop, he tossed the ashbin-lid into the air, and it narrowly missed crashing through one of the West House study windows. It clattered against a wall with such a din that Handforth started round with a jerk.

"My hat!" he ejaculated, as though coming to his senses.

"What's the game, Handy?" shouted Reggie Pitt, the junior skipper of the West House, looking out of Study K. "Have you gone off your rocker, or what? Or do you always behave like this before breakfast?"

"Hurrah!" cheered Handforth triumphantly.

Mr. Pycraft came into action.

"Pitt, come here at once!" he shouted urgently. "Bring some other boys with you. This—this unfortunate youth is demented! I have never seen a more painful case of sheer lunacy!"

There was every justification for Mr.

Pycraft's alarming statement, particularly as Handforth was now performing a kind of war-dance of his own, chuckling to himself, and muttering in an excited undertone. And at this moment Church and McClure, his faithful chums, turned round the rear angle of the Ancient House.

"Here he is!" said Church gruffly.

"What's the matter with the ass?" demanded McClure. "If ever we lose sight of him for five minutes he either gets into trouble or does something silly. What a life!"

"Why on earth did he tear out of the House at such a speed?" asked Church, puzzled. "He was only down a few minutes before us, and yet he'd vanished by the time we got to the lobby. And look at him now!"

McClure was looking in astonishment. There had been an unfortunate error that morning, and the chums of Study D had been in an irritable humour as they dressed—particularly Handforth. The idea had been to get up at six o'clock with the other enthusiasts, in order to put in some cricket practice. But something had gone wrong with the works. Handforth had indulged in "just another couple of minutes," and he had remembered nothing more until the first rising-bell clanged out. And then he had had the nerve to blame Church and McClure. So they had dressed themselves, amid much bickering, and had come downstairs thoroughly bad-tempered.

So Handforth's present frame of mind was all the more extraordinary. His flushed face, his gleaming eyes, his whole bearing of joy—all indicated, in the plainest possible manner, that he was either bubbling with happiness or really and truly demented.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said McClure blankly.

"Look at him!" breathed Church.

Edward Oswald Handforth had abruptly ceased his antics and had pulled something out of his pocket—a little square leather thing, as far as his chums could see. He held it in front of him and gazed at it in a fascinated manner.

"Mine!" he said gloatingly. "Mine—mine! By George, this is going to make everybody sit up—eh? I shall have to be careful!" he added, stuffing the object into his pocket, and glancing round furtively. "Hallo! So there you are!"

"Be careful, boys—be careful!" panted Mr. Pycraft, as Church and McClure moved forward. "Stand back! This unfortunate boy is mad! Indeed, I have every reason to believe that he's dangerous!"

Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey had turned out by this time, and Buster Boots and Bob Christine, of the Fourth, had also appeared. They closed upon Handforth cautiously, Mr. Pycraft remaining discreetly in the background.

"Be very gentle with him, boys!" said the master. "He might have killed me, but I bear him no ill-will. It is only too plain that

he is out of his mind. Any further excitement might make him violent."

"That wouldn't be anything new, sir," said Christine, grinning.

"All the same, he's been acting jolly queerly this morning," declared Pitt. "I saw him with my own eyes, racing round the square with a dustbin-lid, dancing like a Dervish, and all sorts of things. Do you know anything about it, Church?"

"Of course not," said Church. "Ten minutes ago he was sane enough. He ran downstairs a few minutes before Mac and I—"

"What's all this argument?" interrupted Handforth coldly. "You might tell these chaps to buzz off, sir!" he added, turning to Mr. Pycraft. "I don't want any bother. I've had some news this morning—marvellous news—staggering news—ripping news!"

"What is it?" asked Church and McClure eagerly.

"I can't explain—it's a secret!" replied Handforth, looking serious. "I've made up my mind not to breathe a word." He was obviously labouring under intense inward excitement. "By George! Think of it! Hurrah! Mine—mine!"

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Pycraft, backing away.

Handforth had suddenly lost control of himself, and he gave another wild yell, and leapt upwards. Instinctively his chums and the other juniors grabbed him and held on tightly. They all knew that Handforth was capable of strange behaviour, but this was something quite exceptional.

"Leggo!" he panted, glaring. "I'm going to startle you chaps soon! Just watch me shoot through the Triangle at sixty miles an hour! Watch me make circles round the Fountain without even skidding! At last—at last! My dream is realised!"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Pitt, aghast.

"Hold him, boys—hold him, I tell you!" panted Mr. Pycraft. "Without any question, he's demented! Take him indoors and lock him in one of the rooms until I return. And, Boots, go straight to the nearest telephone, and get Dr. Brett to come up here. At once—at once!"

Mr. Horace Pycraft hurried off, extremely agitated and not a little scared. He had been knocked over once by Handforth, and he was apparently afraid that Handforth would go for him again—and the next time, perhaps, with serious consequences.

"Now, you ass, what the dickens is the matter with you?" demanded Church, as soon as the Form-master had disappeared through the West Arch. "You're no madder than usual—this is only one of your funny stunts! What's this staggering news you keep talking about?"

"Out with it!" said Reggie Pitt crisply.

There was a dreamy, far-away look in Handforth's eyes.

"Forty—fifty—sixty!" he breathed tensely. "By George, we're doing sixty! Hi, look out, there! Phew! That was a narrow shave if you like!"

The other juniors looked at Handforth, and then they looked at one another. It was all too clear that he had completely forgotten their existence. Was it possible that Mr. Pycraft's diagnosis was actually correct?



CHAPTER 2.

MR. PYCRAFT STARTS A RUMOUR.
R. MALCOLM STAFF-

D

FORD, the headmaster of St. Frank's, was glancing out at the June morning when Mr. Pycraft came

hurrying across the Inner Court from Big Arch. There was something so agitated in Mr. Pycraft's manner that the Head looked again.

"I trust nothing is wrong," he murmured, frowning.

He was rather afraid of Mr. Pycraft, for the latter gentleman, although only an under-master, had a disagreeable habit of running to his superiors with all sorts of petty complaints. Dr. Stafford had done his utmost to curb this trait in Mr. Pycraft, but with little success.

A minute later, the master of the Fourth fairly burst into the Head's study. Dr. Stafford was scarcely expecting such an unceremonious entry, and he frowned again. He had at least anticipated the courtesy of a preliminary knock.

"Really, Mr. Pycraft!" he said severely.

"I beg your pardon, sir—I really beg your pardon!" panted the Form-master. "But this—this is no time for the usual amenities. One of the boys has gone completely off his head—utterly out of his mind!"

"Nonsense, Mr. Pycraft," said the Head sharply.

Such an announcement from any other master might have alarmed him, but he knew Mr. Pycraft's little ways—and he knew, moreover, that Mr. Pycraft was apt to exaggerate in the most outrageous fashion.

"Upon my soul, Dr. Stafford, I am speaking the truth!" declared the Form-master earnestly. "Handforth, of the Remove, is demented! Not only did he jump upon me and knock me down, but he has been performing the most alarming antics in the West Square, with a dustbin-lid!"

"Good gracious!" said Dr. Stafford.

"At the present moment he is being held by several other boys, and I have instructed them to take him indoors," continued Mr. Pycraft. "I felt it my duty to report to you at once, sir. I have, by the way, sent for Dr. Brett. It is fortunate that I managed to keep my head in this crisis."

The Head was not the kind of man to be pitchforked into a mare's nest. He was distinctly suspicious. The name of "Handforth" was quite sufficient to bring doubts into his mind. Handforth of the Remove was a splendid boy in many ways—one of the most trustworthy scholars in the entire school—but he had his peculiarities. The Head sat down and smiled grimly.

"I fancy, Mr. Pycraft, that you are alarming yourself needlessly," he said. "There is probably a very rational explanation of Handforth's peculiar conduct. I suspect that he is training for some game—some sport. One sees nothing else this term! In spite of my endeavours, I am afraid the boys are as crazy on sports as ever. The matter worries me intensely."

"But Handforth, sir—"

"Take my advice, Mr. Pycraft, and leave Handforth to his young companions," interrupted the Head. "I will warrant that he will be quite normal during breakfast. Food has a remarkable effect in such cases. If the boy is still acting strangely, Mr. Stokes will no doubt notice it. Pray cool yourself, sir, and drop this subject."

The Head's very manner acted as a cold douche for Mr. Pycraft, and he felt very small. And this, in turn, had the effect of making him irritable. Good heavens! Had that wretched boy hoodwinked him, after all?

"Really, sir," he said feebly. "Really, I—"

"Quite so, Mr. Pycraft—quite so," put in the Head, nodding. "You may take my word for it that Handforth was merely indulging in some peculiar training. There is this big Marathon Race this week—a sports event which is at present attracting the attention of the whole school. I am wondering what I can do to quell this unhappy fever."

Mr. Pycraft leapt at this opportunity.

"You have indeed used an adequate term, sir," he exclaimed. "Unhappy is right! The boys, from the Sixth Form down to the Third, are in a veritable ferment. It is nothing but cricket, running races, swimming, sculling, cycling—"

"Yes, I know, Mr. Pycraft," broke in the Head, frowning. "There is no need for you to enumerate these things. You must remember that Fenton, our school captain, has set this term aside as a Sports Carnival. Next week we shall have the third great game in the series of schoolboy Test matches. I am not altogether opposed to these fixtures, since they are helping enormously to further the Empire spirit."

"A myth, sir—a myth."

"On the contrary, Mr. Pycraft, the Empire spirit is a very concrete actuality," said Dr. Stafford sharply. "I hope you do not preach that nonsense to your boys? If so, we shall have a very severe disagreement."

"I—I was only joking, sir," said Mr. Pycraft feebly.

Inwardly he writhed. This was just the sort of thing to put him into one of his most objectionable tempers.

"It is hardly a subject to joke upon, sir," exclaimed the Head coldly. "But we were discussing the sporting fever which has obsessed the school. The big Marathon Race this week the Test match next week. I have half a mind to prohibit this Marathon Race altogether. I shall consider the point. I must at least do something to check the

present tumult. I believe the boys are studying for the coming examinations, but I am disappointed."

Owing to the craze for sports, Dr. Stafford had announced the most difficult summer term exams. that St. Frank's had ever known. They were special exams., expressly designed for the purpose of restoring the school to a normal state of mind. All boys who failed to obtain a given percentage of marks would be prohibited from all sports for the rest of the year, or until they improved their status in class to the required standard.

It had come as a great shock to the school, but the school had responded nobly. Swotting for the exams. was an absolute necessity. There was no possible way of evading it. So the school was swotting. But Fenton was determined that the term's sport should not suffer, and so he had advised everybody to utilise every moment of spare time. It was now a common practice to rise at six a.m., and to get tea over within fifteen minutes, and then devote a full hour to studying. The scheme was working well, although it was a severe test of will-power and determination. Some of the weaklings had given up the fight, but all the prominent seniors and juniors were rigidly carrying out the programme.

And the strain was beginning to tell. Actually it was the killing pace which was affecting the boys. The persistent swotting was undermining their stamina. Dr. Stafford, unfortunately, held the view that it was the sports training which had produced the ill effects.

"Yes, Mr. Pycraft, I am disappointed," repeated the Head slowly. "I thought the extra work of the coming examinations would curb this sports madness, but I was wrong. Perhaps it will be necessary to take more definite steps—to forbid certain events altogether. We shall see."

The note of finality in the Head's voice indicated that the interview was over, and Mr. Pycraft departed feeling something like a deflated bicycle tyre. All the wind had been taken out of him by the Head's matter-of-fact coolness. And the Form-master was feeling vindictive.

He strode across the Inner Court, and fairly stamped his way into the Triangle. The breakfast-bell was just ringing, and one or two juniors, including Reggie Pitt, paused as they were about to enter the West House. They came across to Mr. Pycraft.

"I think Handforth's better now, sir," said Pitt. "We were scared at first, too, but Church and McClure took him indoors, and —"

"I am quite ready to believe that Handforth was deliberately attempting to fool me!" broke in Mr. Pycraft harshly. "And you need not make the ridiculous implication that I was scared, Pitt."

"Sorry, sir—"

"Undoubtedly this Marathon Race is responsible for a great deal of irrational conduct," went on Mr. Pycraft, a certain note

of relish coming into his voice. "The race, I believe, is due to be run on Saturday afternoon? H'm! I fear the school is booked for a big disappointment."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked the juniors breathlessly.

"Oh, nothing!" replied Mr. Pycraft. "Nothing! But I understood that the headmaster has virtually decided to prohibit this Marathon Race altogether."

"What!" gasped Pitt, staggered.

Mr. Pycraft smiled genially.

"I thought it would surprise you," he chuckled. "It only shows, my boy, that you cannot play fast and loose with a man like Dr. Stafford! Personally, I am very pleased to hear that this Marathon Race is to be abandoned. It will teach the school a lesson. There is altogether too much slackness."

He went off feeling his old self again. Anything of a disagreeable nature generally put Mr. Pycraft into a good humour. He left the juniors gazing at one another with real consternation.



CHAPTER 3.

THE CAT ESCAPES FROM THE BAG.

"THIS," said Reggie Pitt, "means dirty work!"

"Dirty work?"

"Work of the most sinister and murky description!" continued Pitt grimly. "My only hat! If that's true—about the Marathon Race being prohibited—there'll be something like a revolution in the land!"

"The chaps won't stand it!" said Jack Grey indignantly.

"Not likely!" agreed the Hon. Douglas Singleton, with warmth. "Why, this Marathon Race is one of the biggest events of the carnival—almost as important as the Test matches. Scores of chaps are training for it."

"There'll be riots if the Head forbids it," said Jack Grey. "We'd better get up a deputation, and tell him——"

"We'd better keep cool," interrupted Pitt evenly. "We've only got old Pieface's word that the race is to be scratched. Just one of his disagreeable taunts, I suppose. He's a beggar for starting rumours, you know. It may be true, but we should be dotty to take any action until the Head makes it official. Let's go in to breakfast," he added practically. "Nature not only calls, but yells."

In spite of Reggie's common-sense coolness, however, the other juniors talked a great deal during breakfast, and the whispers went round from table to table. In some uncanny manner the echoes of the rumour penetrated into the other Houses, and by the time breakfast was over the whole school was in a state of alarm. Everybody had heard the story.

The Marathon Race was to be cancelled!

It wasn't officially announced, but the majority of fellows—with the haste of youth—jumped to the conclusion that it would only

"BETWEEN OURSELVES"

This popular feature reappears on page 34 of this issue. Does Mr. Edwy Searles Brooks answer your letter this week?

be a matter of time before the dread notices were put up. And knots of fellows gathered in the Triangle, in the squares, in the lobbies and passages, in the common-rooms and studies—all discussing the same subject.

There was probably only one study which differed. In Study D, in the Ancient House, Edward Oswald Handforth had dismissed the rumour with a mere wave of his hand. And Church and McClure were really alarmed.

There certainly was something the matter with Handy!

He had entered for the Marathon Race himself, and in a normal state he would have raged up and down the school like a tornado, boiling and fuming with indignation at the very suggestion of the race being prohibited. And he had dismissed it with a mere gesture!

Church and McClure were ready to worry about it, but Handforth worried them even more, and they gave him their full attention. They were still completely mystified regarding his earlier behaviour. They had, however, discovered a solitary clue. On the study table they had found an empty envelope. So Handforth had received a letter that morning! And the contents of the letter, without any question, had been responsible for the startling effects.

It was quite a high-class envelope—one of those parchment affairs, with rough edges. It had been addressed by a lady, too—but certainly not by a schoolgirl. Church and McClure were obliged to dismiss the theory that this was a new love affair.

"Look here, Handy, it's a bit thick!" said Church gruffly.

"Balloons, I'll bet!" murmured Handforth, far away.

"Eh?"

"Bound to be," continued Handforth. "Lemme see, what's to-day? Tuesday! Two days to wait! Oh, corks! I'll never be able to do it!"

"It's no good," said McClure, with a snort. "He's still scatty!"

"There's something on his mind—that's

all!" growled Church. "Look here, Handy, wake up! Isn't it a bit steep, keeping us in the dark like this? We're your pals, aren't we?"

"What!" said Handforth, starting. "Talking to me?"

"We're your pals, aren't we?"

"Who said you weren't, you ass?"

"Well, what's the idea of keeping this thing dark?" demanded Church indignantly. "Why can't you tell us the news? Be a sport, you know!"

"What news?" asked Handforth, pretending to look surprised, and failing utterly.

"Didn't you get a letter this morning?"

"No! I—I mean, yes! That is——" Handforth paused, and glared. "What's it got to do with you?" he demanded. "Can't I have a letter without you chaps spying and prying?"

His chums turned crimson.

"Oh, all right, we'll clear out!" snapped McClure.

Handforth was contrite in a moment.

"Sorry! I didn't mean that!" he growled.

"You're not the sort of chaps to spy on anybody. But—but this thing—well, I want to keep it a secret. I want to give you chaps a whacking great surprise. Nothing to be wild with me about, you cuckoos! Only I'd rather keep it to myself, and then spring it on you suddenly."

"When?" asked McClure, staring.

"Thursday!"

"Do you expect us to wait until Thursday?" snorted Church. "Besides, you couldn't keep a secret until Thursday. You're bound to let it out either to-day or to-morrow. So why not now?"

Handforth laughed scornfully.

"Can't keep a secret, eh?" he said. "You wait, my sons! I'll show you whether I can keep a secret or not! I'm blessed if I'll tell you a word about that Aus—— About——about that letter!"

"So you admit you've had a letter?" exclaimed Church. "Something about balloons, too——"

"Balloons!" echoed Handforth, with a start. "How the dickens did you know? Blow you!" he added, pulling himself up with a jerk. "I'm not going to tell you a word about her!"

"HER!" yelled Church and McClure.

"She's not coming till Thursday," said Handforth dreamily. "She's the smartest, prettiest little thing—— I—I mean—— Look here, if you chaps don't dry up, I'll smash you!"

His chums were looking at one another in alarm. So their first theory had been right, after all. That letter was from a girl, and she was coming here on Thursday. And Handforth had admitted that she was smart and pretty!

"You—you hopeless chump!" burst out Church. "What about Irene Manners, of the Moor View School?"

"I was just thinking about her," said Hand-

forth softly. "I shall take Irene out in her the very first day——"

"In her?" repeated McClure, staring.

"My new car, you ass—— That is——" Handforth paused, and came to himself. "My hat! I've let it out now, you rotters! Just like your nerve to trap me into——"

"Your new car?" repeated McClure, shaking himself to see if he was awake. "Your new CAR? Are you standing there, and telling us that you're going to have a motor-car? Why, you must be even more dotty than old Pycraft thought!"

"It's true!" roared Handforth. "My Aunt Constance is making me a present of an Austin Seven, and it's coming on Thursday. By George! Think of it! A car of my own! What about Browne and his Morris-Oxford now?"

Handforth was so relieved to get the secret off his chest that he had no thought of being angry. He was looking at his amazed chums with gleaming eyes, and he was fairly throbbing with excitement.

"Well?" he asked eagerly.

"So that's why you were messing about in the West Square with a dustbin lid?" breathed Church. "That's why old Pycraft thought you'd gone scatty! You were just pretending——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled McClure violently.

"You—you cackling ass——"

"Somebody's spoofing you!" gasped McClure. "Oh, my goodness! Do you really think that you're going to get an Austin Seven? You dotty chump, it's a jape! And it's not even the First of April!"

"Of course!" agreed Church. "Some funny idiot is simply pulling your leg! Why, an Austin Seven costs nearly a hundred and fifty pounds!"

Handforth had turned pale.

"A jape!" he muttered hoarsely. "You—you mean—— Oh, rot! I don't believe it! Of course it's not a jape. My Aunt Constance is as rich as anything. She's a widow with pots and pots of money. Doesn't know what to do with it. A hundred quid or so is nothing to her."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

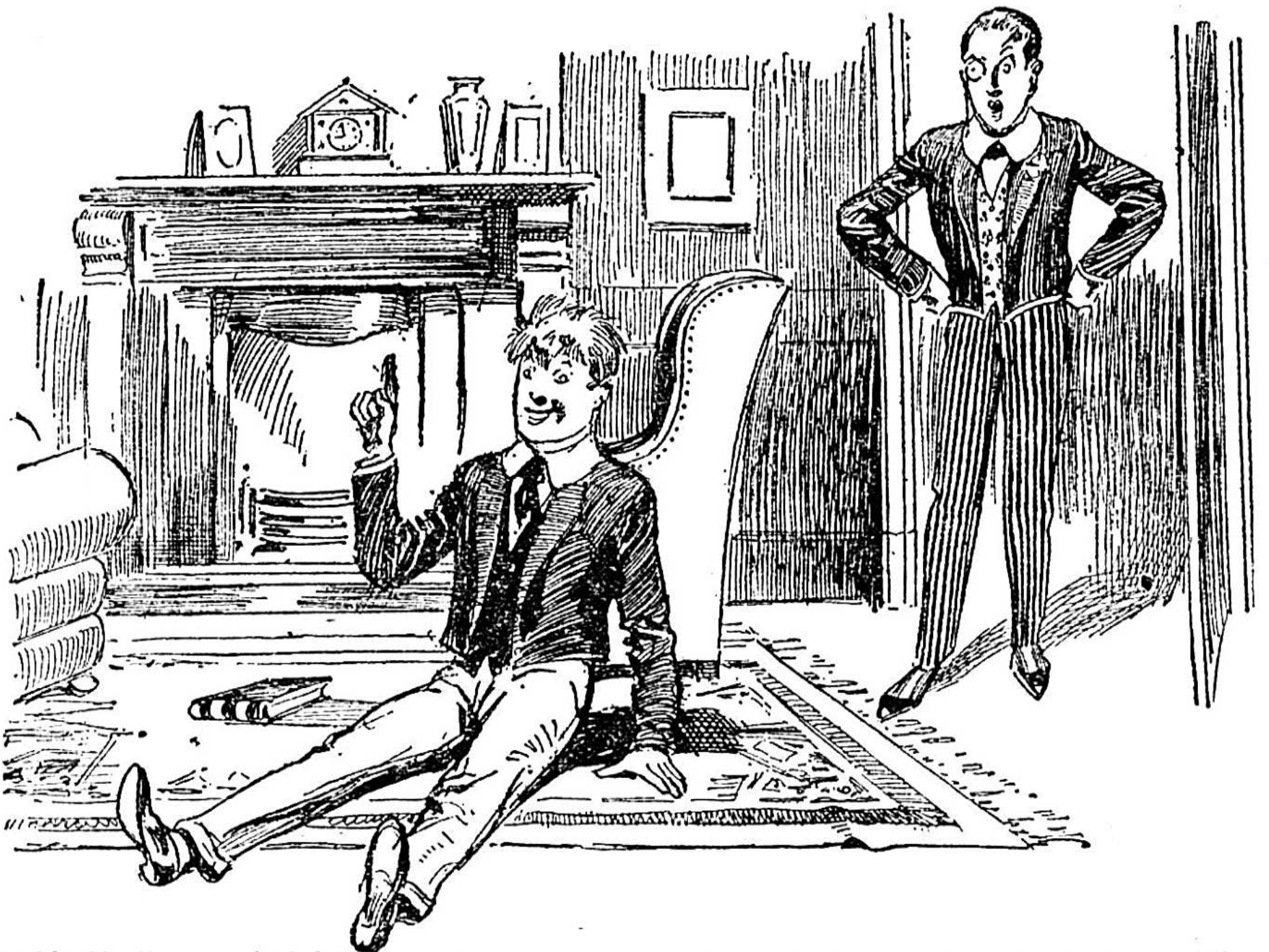
"Oh, Handy, chuck it!" pleaded Church, with tears in his eyes. "You'll be the death of us before you've done! Fancy you driving an Austin Seven! And fancy you imagining you're going to GET one!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" sobbed McClure heartlessly.

"Have a look at this letter, you—you maniacs!" hooted Handforth.

But Church and McClure were too weak to look at any letter. The cream of the joke was that Handforth actually believed this cock-and-bull rubbish! He was so excited about the mythical Austin Seven that he couldn't even realise that some joker was pulling his leg!

They reeled out of the study, and within five minutes the whole Junior section of the Ancient House was howling about Handforth and his Austin Seven.



Archie Glenthorne adjusted his monocle and stared blankly at his study mate. Alf Brent was sitting on the floor, dabbing at the empty air. "There's another!" he exclaimed wildly. "Look at 'em—all red and green and glistening! Little globules floating about!" Archie blinked down at him. "Good gad!" he gasped. "The laddie's seeing things—he's off his rocker!"



CHAPTER 4.

HANDFORTH GETS A LETTER.

STRANGELY enough, Handforth remained perfectly calm.

Everybody was expecting him to show a lot of temper, and to deliver a few biffs in order to relieve his mind. But for some extraordinary reason he still stuck to the yarn that an Austin Seven was really coming for him. In spite of all the scorn and laughter, his confidence in that letter was unshakable. He maintained that it was genuine.

"You can laugh, my sons," he said sourly, as he went into the School House for morning lessons. "Just wait until Thursday—and then you'll see. Do you think I don't know my Aunt Constance's writing?"

"Oh, Handy, it's too thick!" grinned Church. "Let's have a look at that letter. We'll soon show you that it's a fake!"

For a moment Handforth hesitated. And then he brought the letter out—another proof of his super confidence. He had recovered the envelope, and Church examined the postmark for the first time. He expected to find that the letter had been mailed in Bellton, or Bannington—but the postmark was distinctly "Bournemouth."

"Where does your aunt live?" asked Church curiously.

"Bournemouth."

"Oh!"

"Anything wrong with Bournemouth?" asked Handforth, glaring.

"No, of course not," said Church hastily. "Only I rather thought— Oh, I don't know!" he added. "This postmark is genuine enough, but that doesn't prove that you're going to get a motor-car, Handy. Can we have a look at the letter?"

Handforth was agreeable, and his chums examined the letter with keen interest. They were still very doubtful, for it seemed utterly impossible to them that there could be any truth in the story. They were standing in the School House lobby, and other fellows, going to their class-rooms, made all sorts of humorous remarks as they passed.

"Funny, aren't you?" said Handforth calmly. "But this time I'm going to dish the lot of you! It takes a clever chap to pull my leg!"

"Then there must be somebody clever on the job!" grinned De Valerie.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure were scanning the letter:

"My dear Edward,—No doubt you were surprised—and perhaps a little pained—to

receive no present from me on your recent birthday—April 17th. By this time you have probably given up all hope of getting any present at all. But I haven't forgotten you, my boy.

"During last term you pleased me enormously by devoting your spare time so assiduously to the theatre. As you know, the theatre is my own hobby, and it gratifies me to know that you have even written a play, and that you have acted in it personally—with great success. I feel that you deserve some very special reward for this conscientious effort.

"And I decided to buy you a little motor-car, so that you can get out into the country and enjoy the fresh air on half-holidays, and on fine evenings. I wanted you to have this car on your birthday, but there have been some unfortunate delays over the licence, but my son—your Cousin George—has at last obtained a special concession. I don't pretend to understand this, but I do know that the difficulties have been surmounted.

"So you will get your car—which I understand is termed an Austin Seven—this week. It has been promised for Thursday, so if you will be on the look-out on that day, the firm will send a representative down with the car. This gentleman will give you all the necessary instructions and tuition. I wish you much joy and success with this little gift, which is only a slight token of my appreciation for your glorious theatrical debut.

"With much love,

"Your affectionate

"AUNT CONSTANCE."

"Well?" asked Handforth ominously.

"I'm jiggered if this doesn't seem genuine," admitted Church, scratching his head. "What do you think, Mac?"

"It *seems* genuine," said McClure cautiously. "But you can't go by appearances in a thing like this. You've got to remember that the whole idea of the jape is to pull Handy's leg. What would be the good of a letter if he could spot it as a fake?"

"That's right," acknowledged Church, nodding.

"You—you poor, pitiful chumps!" said Handforth witheringly. "Aren't you convinced even now? My hat! Do you think I don't know my Aunt Constance? Do you think I don't know her handwriting? Why, she's always been a bit of a joke in our family, but I think she's a brick now!"

"Somebody's been fooling you——"

"Somebody hasn't!" roared Handforth, exasperated. "In any case, who could do it? And why? Willy? He wouldn't try to spoof me over a thing like this, and there's nobody else. Besides, how could he get the letter posted in Bournemouth?"

But Church and McClure were hard to convince. They had every reason, too. Edward Oswald Handforth's leg was pulled so often

that it seemed impossible that this surprising letter could be genuine. And he was such a splendid subject for a practical joke, too. His chums couldn't forget how he had gone to London for the Easter holidays, and had visited a solicitor's office in the expectation of receiving a fortune. That had been a jape, and Handforth had been fooled by a preliminary letter, too.

"It's easily possible to get things done," argued McClure. "Somebody might have a pal in Bournemouth, and he could have sent the letter on to be posted there. In fact, it's the only way to work a jape properly. We're in June now, and your birthday was in April. It's obviously a fake."

"But my aunt explains——"

"You mean about the licence?" put in Church. "That's a weak excuse, and doesn't fool me at all. Any car can be licensed at a few hours' notice."

"You—you idiot!" snorted Handforth. "She doesn't mean the car licence—she means MY licence! That's the cause of the delay."

"Well, let's get in," said Church. "We shall be late——"

"Your licence?" interrupted McClure, with a start. "Ha, ha, ha!"

He yelled, and Handforth stared.

"What's the matter now, you cackling hyena?" he demanded.

"Why, you can't get a licence!" grinned McClure. "At least, you can only get a licence to drive a motor-bike. A chap's got to be seventeen before he can have a car. That's dished you, my son!"

"Oh, has it?" retorted Handforth coolly. "There's been a long delay because of that driving licence. But my Cousin George is a big pot in the L.C.C., and he must have wangled something. I think they issue licences under certain conditions—when a chap is an exceptionally good driver. Anyhow, what do I care? The thing's been done, and I'm safe. As long as I've got the licence, there's nothing else to worry about."

His chums gazed at him in wonder. They knew him to be an optimist, but this was sheer lunacy. He was beating his own record.

"You speak as though you've got the giddy licence!" said Church, staring. "Can't you realise, you hopeless duffer, that it's all part of the spoof? You've only got that letter to go on."

"Then what do you call this?" said Handforth triumphantly.

He produced a little leather-covered card—the object he had gloated over in the West Square before breakfast—and held it under Church's nose. It was certainly a driving licence.

"Well I'm dashed!" ejaculated Church blankly.

He opened it, and, sure enough, it was an ordinary L.C.C. driving licence (Handforth's home being in London), and Handy's name was inscribed upon it in full. And it was the official authority to drive a motor-car—not a motor-cycle. Church and McClure

were fairly staggered. This was something in the nature of a trump card.

"Let's have it back!" said Handforth coolly. "And don't breathe a word, my lads! All the other chaps are kidding themselves that it's a jape, and I mean to give 'em a surprise on Thursday. Are you satisfied now?"

He took the licence, pocketed it, and walked off in high glee. Church and McClure gazed at one another in doubt.

"Oh, it's impossible," said Church at last. "We didn't look at that licence thoroughly—it's probably a fake, too. Some brainy chap has thought it all out and done the job in detail."

"That's about it," agreed McClure. "When you come to think of it, that's exactly what a clever japer would do. I'll bet a car arrives on Thursday—but it'll be a toy by parcel post."

"Probably C.O.D.!" grinned Church.

"My hat, yes!" said McClure, with a chuckle. "I'll bet that's the whole idea of the joke! Handy will get a parcel, he'll have to pay cash on delivery, and it'll be a tin toy!"

And Handforth's chums, hugely pleased that their solution of the mystery was the only possible one, wended their way happily to the Remove Form-room.



CHAPTER 5.

CANHAM OVERDOES IT.

COMING in rather late, they found that Mr. Crowell was already at his desk, and the Remove was settling down. As unobtrusively as possible, Church and McClure stole to their desks.

"Church — McClure!" snapped Mr. Crowell. "Take fifty lines each for being late!"

"Yes, sir," said Church and McClure meekly.

They didn't feel quite so happy, for it was always a crime to be absent when their names were called. The Remove marched into Big Hall for prayers, and the whole school was expecting—and fearing—that the Head would make an announcement regarding the Marathon Race.

But he didn't. There was no speech from the platform at all; the Remove went back to its Form-room much relieved. Perhaps there was nothing in Mr. Pycraft's rumour, after all. But one could never be certain.

Handforth came in for a good many chip-pings before the class settled down to lessons. For nobody believed in the authenticity of that letter. In vain he pointed out that his Aunt Constance was an eccentric lady who had a perfect mania for the theatre. Nobody ever knew what she was going to do next. She was always financing theatrical ventures, and being imposed upon by plausible promoters. It was just like her to make her nephew an expensive birthday present

because he had been taking an interest in the theatre.

But the juniors refused to believe any such story. It was one thing for William Napoleon Browne, of the Fifth, to own a motor-car—he was over seventeen, anyhow, and his father was immensely wealthy—but it was quite a different matter for a mere junior to be a car-owner. Why, the very suggestion of it was fantastic.

"Is it true about the Marathon Race, sir?" asked Dick Hamilton, before the Form started work.

"Is what true, Hamilton?" asked Mr. Crowell.

"Mr. Pycraft hinted that it might be cancelled—"

"You must not take any notice of these rumours, Hamilton," interrupted Mr. Crowell coldly. "I can scarcely credit that Mr. Pycraft was so indiscreet as to start such a tale. So far as I know, the headmaster has made no decision regarding the race. In any case, this is no time for such a discussion."

"Mr. Pycraft was pretty certain, sir—"

"I am not interested in Mr. Pycraft's opinion, Pitt," said the Form-master coldly. "Let us confine ourselves to the lesson."

The Remove smiled inwardly. Mr. Crowell had a very poor opinion of Mr. Pycraft. Indeed, the masters of the Remove and Fourth were deadly enemies. The lesson started—history—and the Remove tried to concentrate upon it. But it seemed a shame to stew in the Form-room, learning about Charles II and his battles with Cromwell, when the June morning was so fine and sunny outside. Cricket was much more important.

"We shall deal, this morning, with that particular portion of Charles' reign after his escape to France," said Mr. Crowell, turning over the leaves of his history book. "How many years did Charles II reign?"

The Form was stumped at such short notice.

"Handforth!" snapped Mr. Crowell. "I don't believe you are attending to me at all! How many years did Charles II reign?"

"Eh?" gasped Handforth, emerging from a brown study. "Sorry, sir! Seven, sir!"

"Seven!" thundered Mr. Crowell, aghast. "Good heavens! Is this sheer ignorance, or a deliberate attempt—"

"I—I didn't quite catch the question, sir," said Handforth desperately.

"I am glad that you admit the fact," said Mr. Crowell tartly. "If you will attend to your work, Handforth, you may learn more. Now, let us concentrate upon this subject. It is one of the most interesting periods of English history, although not one of the most creditable."

Handforth was rather relieved. He had half-expected an impot; but now that the danger was over he gave his full attention to history, and thrust all thoughts of the Austin Seven out of his mind. That "seven" was inclined to butt in where it wasn't

wanted. Gradually his thoughts drifted again, and he suffered a severe relapse.

Mr. Crowell's eyes were not likened unto gimlets for nothing. It wasn't long before he detected that dreamy expression in Edward Oswald's gaze. The leader of Study D was obviously far away.

"We all know that Clarendon did a great deal, in those unfortunate days, to enforce a creditable national policy," said Mr. Crowell. "But Charles was inclined to be dissolute, and he was rather weak— Handforth, of whom are we talking?" barked Mr. Crowell suddenly.

Handforth gave a jump.

"Austin, sir," he said promptly.

"Austin!" repeated Mr. Crowell. "What on earth—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Remove yelled, but Mr. Crowell didn't see the joke.

"Silence!" he shouted. "How dare you laugh in this ridiculous fashion just because Handforth fails to attend? Handforth, you will write me one hundred lines! No, sir— not a word!"

"Oh, corks!" groaned Handforth.

It was obvious to the Remove that he was still obsessed by the idea that he would soon be the proud owner of an Austin 7-h.p. car. The poor chump couldn't see that it was a joke!

"I cannot help noticing that you are gradually becoming worse as the term progresses," said Mr. Crowell, bringing the whole Remove into his condemnation. "While advocating plenty of healthy exercise, I consider that the present enthusiasm for sports amounts to a mania. You must curb it, boys. You must— Canham, is there something the matter with you?"

He broke off, and fixed his gaze upon Bob Canham, a most inoffensive junior. He shared Study Q in the West House with Clarence Fellowe and Timothy Tucker. He was quiet and reserved, and even inclined to be shy, and he had a weakness for scientific reading. Everybody knew that he had been swotting intensely for the coming exams., to the neglect of his sports practice. Although a good footballer and cricketer, he was taking no interest in sports for this term.

"Canham, I am speaking to you!" said Mr. Crowell.

Canham was certainly looking rather queer. He was sitting in his place, staring straight ahead of him with a vacant, muddled expression on his face. His cheeks were a bit pasty, too, and his eyes sunken. Apparently he heard nothing of Mr. Crowell's voice.

Clarence Fellowe, who sat next to him, gave him a dig.

"Wake up, you chump, or you'll give him the hump!" he whispered.

"It is entirely unnecessary for you to interfere, Fellowe," said Mr. Crowell, striding across the room. "Canham, are you ill? What is the matter with you?"

Canham turned his head and looked at Mr. Crowell vacuously.

"Fifty-nine is obviously a ridiculous answer," he said.

"What!"

"But sixty-three's even worse," said Canham.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Mr. Crowell, seizing Canham, and shaking him. "Wake up, sir! Are you all going mad? This fever seems to be spreading throughout the entire Form! I shall begin to think I am in a lunatic asylum!"

Canham stared at Mr. Crowell blankly, muttering figures. His mind was evidently full of something entirely different to history—mathematics of some kind. And although Mr. Crowell shook him again, he still remained in a semi-bemused state.

"There is something wrong with the boy," said the Form-master concernedly.

"Well, he lives with those two freaks, Fellowe and Tucker, sir," explained Pitt. "We've been expecting this for a long time—"

"There is no occasion for you to make fun of the unfortunate lad," interrupted Mr. Crowell severely. "Canham! Go outside into the fresh air, and take an hour's rest. You have been working very hard recently. I happen to know that you have been cramming heavily. I fear you have overdone it. The fresh air might have a beneficial effect."

Canham looked at Mr. Crowell with that same vacant stare.

"Fresh air, sir?" he repeated.

"Yes. Go outside and sit down beneath the trees."

Canham got up without a word and walked mechanically out of the room. Dimly the sense of Mr. Crowell's order had come to him, but it was clear to everybody that his mind was very confused.

And the Remove sat up and took notice. Nobody suspected that Canham was spoofing—he wasn't the kind of junior to do that. But what could be nicer than an hour under the trees, in the cool air? It might be quite a good idea to go off one's rocker!



CHAPTER 6.

THE GLIMMERING OF A BIG IDEA.

NOBODY in the Remove had any definite intention of copying Bob Canham's example. But it was an undeniable fact that Canham had escaped the history lesson with remarkable ease. And more than one fellow felt, in the back of his mind, a dim glimmering of something big.

At the moment there was quite a lot of sympathy for Canham. The poor chap was clearly dazed by over-swotting. He had been going at it so intensively that he was in some danger of a collapse. Mr. Crowell himself was thoughtful and concerned as he went back to his desk.

"I shall report Canham's strange condition to the Housemaster as soon as possible," he

muttered. "I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

"It might be dangerous, sir," remarked Dick Hamilton.

"Eh? Dangerous?"

"There have been cases where fellows have gone clean out of their minds, sir," replied Dick. "One can have too much of a good thing, you know. These exams. are unusually stiff, and—"

"We need not discuss the exams. now, Hamilton," interrupted Mr. Crowell sharply. "Canham is a studious boy, and there are not many others in this room who are liable to a collapse from overwork! It is far more likely that over-training at sports will do more harm."

"Oh!" said the Remove indignantly.

"The trouble is arising from the fact that you are all trying to do too much," said the Form-master. "The headmaster could see that the mania for games was growing stronger, so he took prompt measures to check it by ordering these examinations."

"Well, we're not slacking, sir," said Watson.

"On the contrary, you are studying for the exams. with praiseworthy application," said Mr. Crowell. "But here is the point. You cannot bear the idea of abandoning any of your sports fixtures, so you are utilising every moment of the day for either studying or training."

"That's the whole idea, sir," nodded Hamilton.

"It is a totally wrong idea," declared the Form-master. "Something must be sacrificed—either the sports or the studying. And as you are compelled to study, some of these sports should be dropped. That is the crux of the trouble. Far better to abandon a few of your games than undermine your health."

The Remove, of course, looked at it in quite a different light. The sports and games could do nothing but make them healthy. It was the studying that should be abandoned—not altogether, but partially. And many minds were busily wondering how the Head could be forced to lighten the exams.

"I don't see the force of that argument at all, sir," said Dick Hamilton boldly. "What about Canham?"

"He is a case in point—"

"No fear, sir," broke in Dick promptly. "Canham has dropped his sports practice altogether—he's keen on getting full marks in the exam. And what's the result? You've had to send him outside because he's all dazed and wonky."

"Dazed and what, Hamilton?"

"Well, he's a bit muddled—through over-study."

Mr. Crowell compressed his lips—a habit of his when defeated.

"Let us get on with the lesson," he said shortly.

"We all think the Head ought to make the exams. a bit lighter, sir—or, at least, give us a bit more time," continued Dick. "If he doesn't. there'll be other cases like Can-

ham's. And they might all come at once. We should look pretty blue if half the school went dotty, shouldn't we, sir?"

"Hear, hear!" said the Remove approvingly.

"Hamilton, sit down, and try not to be so ridiculous!" frowned Mr. Crowell. "There is not the slightest danger of half the school going—er—dotty. Ahem! I wish you would not make use of these silly expressions!"

He dismissed the matter peremptorily, and lessons went on. And as soon as school was over a large proportion of the juniors rushed upstairs and changed into running attire. They had forgotten all about the "danger" of over-training. The Marathon Race was one of the biggest events of the Sports Carnival, and there were scores of entrants—all equally determined to win the honours.

Dick Hamilton, as junior captain, sounded a timely note of warning. He strongly advised the fellows to be careful. It would be quite possible, after all, to overdo it. A fellow had to have a certain amount of rest, whether he felt he wanted it or not. Nature would not be denied.

"You'll train a lot better if you completely relax for an hour now and again," said Dick. "Simply do nothing. Get a book and read. Loll in the grass, flat on your back. Do an hour's punting on the river. Sleep under a hedge. Anything, in fact, to give yourselves a complete rest. You'll probably think you're wasting time, but that's a fallacy."

"And when are we going to do these delightful things?" asked Fullwood. "It's all very well to talk about lolling on your back in the grass, but our time's all booked up."

"That's just the trouble," growled De Valerie. "We've either got to be swotting, or putting in time at the nets, or training for the Marathon Race, or eating, or sleeping. A fat lot of time we've got for punting on the giddy river and reading story books!"

Dick Hamilton grinned.

"I'll admit our programme is pretty full, but when there doesn't seem to be time for relaxation you've got to make time," he replied. "An hour in the afternoon is the best of all, but there's not much hope of the Head allowing anything so satisfactory as that."

"Isn't there?" said Handforth thoughtfully. "By George, I wonder!"

"You wonder what?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"Just what I thought!" said Dick, smiling. "How's your Austin Seven, old man? Still got an idea that it'll arrive on Thursday?"

"Rats!" said Handforth stiffly.

He walked off amid a series of chuckles. Church and McClure went with him, but they made no reference to Aunt Constance and her remarkable gift. They had finally decided that the subject had better be ignored. By Thursday, perhaps, Handforth's optimism would be shattered.

There was very little time for talk, in any case. Tea, these days, was a rushed meal. It had to be over by five o'clock at the

latest. And then there was an hour's hard ~~swotting~~ until six. Every fellow with an ounce of determination in him was keeping to the schedule.

A few, of course, had fallen out, but even these were making a pretence of working. And during that hour St. Frank's was always peaceful and quiet. Not even the professed slackers dared to show themselves blatantly in the Triangle or the squares. They kept to their studies, hoping to impress the others with their industry.

But as soon as the school clock chimed the hour of six St. Frank's awoke. That is to say, St. Frank's emerged from its studying, and swept out of doors to the playing-fields, to the river, and to the lanes.

The most important matters this week were cricket practice and running. The third Test match of the Young England v. Young Australia series was to be played on the following week, and Fenton, the school captain, was very anxious. Australia had won the second match, and unless St. Frank's practised hard and religiously, Australia would win the third.

On this particular evening, six o'clock had no sooner struck than there was a rush for the dormitories. And any amount of fellows came down, bent upon a five-mile practice run. Among these was no less a person than Archie Glenthorne.

The genial ass of the Remove was surprising everybody by his energy this term. He had even won one or two events in the Athletic Sports, after everybody had laughed at him. And now he was training for the Marathon with assiduous determination.

He met Phipps, his valet, at the bottom of the stairs. Unofficially, Phipps was also Archie's trainer, and most of the elegant junior's success was due to Phipps' patience and advice.

"What-ho!" beamed Archie, as he paused. "Just off for the good old evening trot, laddie," he observed. "Five miles of the real stuff, what? Or more, Phipps? Say the good old word, and the young master will do his ten!"

"I think five miles will be sufficient for this evening, sir," replied Phipps, feeling Archie's muscles, and generally knocking him about. "You're getting harder, Master Archie. Splendid!"

"I mean, is this mauling about so absolutely necessary?" asked Archie. "Where's Brent? I thought the good old tulip was coming along?"

"I think Master Brent has decided to remain indoors, sir," said Phipps. "I advised him to. A tendon is somewhat strained, and requires rest."

Archie was rather disappointed, but he agreed with Phipps that it would be far better for Alf Brent to rest himself. A strained tendon is no joke when one is training for a long-distance race.

Archie returned, after his run, flushed, radiant, and tired. He intended taking Dick Hamilton's advice. An hour's complete rest

on the lounge in Study E was the order. Archie was a firm believer in napping. He wasn't afraid of hard work, and he simply gloated in hard training—but he liked his relaxation.

Having been rubbed down by Phipps, and having changed, he descended to Study E, and lounged in. Alf Brent was there. And Alf Brent was acting in a most remarkable fashion.



CHAPTER 7.

A SHOCK FOR ARCHIE.

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE paused in the doorway, and adjusted his famous monocle.

"Good gad!" he ejaculated, staring blankly at Alf.

Alf Brent was not sitting at the table, or on the lounge, or in one of the easy-chairs. He was sitting on the floor, midway between the window and the door, staring at nothing. And every now and again he would make a grab at the air. And there was a wild sort of look in his eye. Even as Archie watched, he uttered a triumphant shout.

"Got you!" he exclaimed. "That's the twenty-seventh!"

"Good gad!" repeated Archie.

He hastily closed the door, and hurried forward to his chum. He took hold of Brent's shoulder, and Alf glanced up quickly.

"Don't stand there!" he panted. "You're right in the middle of 'em!"

Archie looked round dazedly.

"Eh?" he gasped. "I mean, what? Middle of which? Alf, old lad, what's the dashed idea? I mean to say—"

"There you are—there's another!" interrupted Alf tensely. "Look—look! Can't you see it? There!"

He pointed straight in front of him, and the drawn expression of his face caused Archie Glenthorne to stare at him with acute alarm. He was pointing to the very centre of the door.

"Can't you see it?" he repeated breathlessly.

"The door?" said Archie. "Laddie, this —"

"No, no!" panted Brent. "Not the door! Here—right in front of my hand! Can't you see it? This thing—this queer-looking globule."

"Globule!"

"All red and green and glistening!" said Alf Brent. "Look, it's changing to blue now! Now it's yellow—now it's vermilion! Watch, Archie! I'll grab it! I've caught twenty-seven already!"

"Odds visions and mirages!" breathed Archie softly.

He gazed at the empty air, wondering if there really was something there. Either his eyesight was defective, or Alf was seeing things. At all events, there was nothing whatever between Alf and the door.



“What is the meaning of this?” thundered Mr. Crowell, as he stared round the Remove form-room. Nobody took the slightest notice of him; Handy continued his antics on the top of the desk, Archie Glenthorne carried on his game of marbles, other fellows were dancing and the whole form-room was in an extraordinary state. “Upon my soul!” gasped Mr. Crowell. “What is the meaning of this? The place looks like a—a lunatic asylum!”

“Alf, old chunk of fruit, there’s nothing there!” said Archie concernedly. “I mean to say, absolutely nothing but space. You know the stuff. Space. That frightfully queer material which you see up in the sky. I mean to say, globules! What, dash it, are globules?”

“Round things!” said Alf Brent, reaching forward, and making a grab. “Oblong things! Hallo, there’s another one—over here!” he added, swerving aside, and grasping at Archie’s leg. “No, I’m wrong. It’s you.”

“Gadzooks and oddslife!” said Archie, in horror. “The poor old article absolutely mistakes me for a globule! Alf, laddie! I mean to say—Alf! Dash it all, pull yourself together! Wrap yourself up, and tighten the good old strings! Dash it, you’re unstuck!”

He forced Brent to his feet. Alf was trembling, and he seemed far more dazed and vacant than Bob Canham had been during the morning. Canham, by the way, was now quite himself again.

Alf Brent hung heavily on Archie’s arms, and it was only by an effort that Archie succeeded in getting him into a chair. He sagged down, and passed a hand wearily over his eyes. The enforced activity had brought him momentarily to his senses again.

“Alf, old lad!” whispered Archie anxiously.

“Hallo! That you, Archie?” muttered Alf. “I can’t understand it. I—I feel— There’s

something rummy— My eyes, you know. And my head. I can’t seem to think— Look there!” he added, starting up. “Look at that queer shape over by the fireplace!”

Archie looked with a violent start.

“Shape!” he repeated, gulping.

“That—that triangular thing!” whispered Alf, pointing. “My hat! Look at the colours! Isn’t it glorious? But it’s fading now—it’s all going hazy! Hanged if I can understand—”

He passed a hand in front of his eyes again, and shook himself violently. Then he sagged even more, and sat there, opening his eyes and closing them. His hands kept groping in front of him.

Archie Glenthorne watched with growing alarm. With a sudden shock, he remembered Canham’s behaviour in the Form-room. But Canham had been positively sane, compared to this. And there could be only one possible explanation. Poor old Alf was dotty! His mind had become unbalanced, owing to too much swotting! It was a staggering thought.

Perhaps Brent’s condition might become worse. He would possibly develop violence in the next phase! What should a fellow do in such circumstances? Tell somebody else—get help—fetch a doctor! Archie stood there, rather horrified.

And another thought had occurred to him—a most uncomfortable one. When he came

to think of it, he had been swotting practically as hard as Alf. And if Alf's brain snapped—

"Good gad!" muttered Archie, staring glassily in front of him. "I mean to say, Alf's one of these brainy merchants, and I've never been absolutely celebrated for the supply of grey matter. If Alf goes off his good old rocker, what about me? Why, dash it, perhaps I'm scatty already!"

The recollection that his own brain was not particularly robust gave Archie a bigger shock than ever. But Brent compelled his attention again, by starting to his feet and dashing across the study. Instinctively, Archie grabbed a heavy ruler.

"What-ho!" he gasped. "A fight for life, what? Alf, old chicken! Kindly remember —"

"They're everywhere now!" shouted Alf, his voice peculiarly strained. "Everywhere, Archie! Do you mean to say you can't see these round things floating about? Can't you see the colours?"

Archie stared hard, and the powers of auto-suggestion were so pronounced that he could actually see a lot of floating things, something like coloured soap-bubbles. His imagination was getting the better of him—for, of course, the atmosphere of the study was perfectly clear.

"Odds straightjackets!" he said huskily. "You're absolutely right, Alf. But, of course, there's nothing there. Absolutely not! We're both off our dashed rockers! We're dotty!"

With a glassy look in his eye, he reeled to the door, and went out. He had almost forgotten Alf's condition in the sudden realisation that he was nearly as bad himself. It stood to reason that he was just as bad. He had been cramming for the exams, as strenuously as Alf, and he had no illusions regarding his brain capacity. He was probably worse than Alf!

Actually, Archie was no fool. When he liked to use his wits, they were as keen as anybody's. But so many fellows regarded him as a rank duffer that he took it for granted that he was one.

And now he had become unhinged!

Out in the corridor he met Handforth & Co.—just in from cricket practice. The chums of Study D paused, and looked at Archie in surprise. He was feeling his way dazedly, groping along the passage with his hands in front of him. There was obviously something wrong.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Handforth bluntly.

Archie stared at him, and started.

"Good gad!" he muttered. "I'm getting worse! Dear old Alf can only see globules, but there's a frightful gargoyle gazing at me! Take it away, dash you! Remove the frightful thing!"

"He means your face, Handy," grinned Church.

"My face!" roared Handforth,

"Absolutely not!" said Archie, staring at Edward Oswald's face in a fascinated manner. "I mean to say, that's not a face! It couldn't be! No human being would wear a frightful thing like that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Church and McClure.

"Funny, isn't it?" snorted Handforth. "Archie, you idiot! If you pass any more remarks about my face, I'll slaughter you! Are you dotty, or what? Have you become a lunatic?"

Archie took a deep breath.

"A lunatic!" he repeated. "That's it! Absolutely! Kindly send for Phipps! The young master desires to be quietly put away. The good old mind has become unput. In other words, laddies, I'm balmy!"

Handforth sniffed.

"Tell us something new!" he said tartly. "We've known that for years!"

"Hang it all, there is something wrong with him, though," said Church, with concern.

"He's not as scatty as this usually, Handy. I—I wonder— Great Scott!" he shouted.

"Has Archie been overworking, too? The whole school's going mad!"



CHAPTER 8.

UNACCOUNTABLE.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH started.

"By George!" he said, a keen light entering his eyes. "The whole school, eh? Of course, that's all rot, but—" He paused, frowning. "I wonder if— Rats! Archie's not mad!"

There was an idea at the back of Handforth's mind—an idea which wouldn't materialise. He kept getting glimpses of it, but it refused to form itself. His brain was not given to working rapidly.

"But he's acting jolly queerly, all the same," growled McClure. "Archie, old man, have you been overdoing it? Swotting, and all that? Take my tip, and have a little sleep—"

"The jolly old dreamless, what?" murmured Archie. "Absolutely useless, old peony! The good old mind is cracked, and forty of the best wouldn't do any good at all. It simply remains for the asylum to yawn open, and admit me!"

"You silly chump—"

"It's no good, my dear chappies, I know the worst," interrupted Archie. "You're going to humour me, what? Don't trouble. When a fellow knows he's off his dashed rocker, that sort of stuff doesn't wash. I mean to say, I've heard that some of these lunatic asylums are quite frightfully decent. Chappies live in them for years."

"Hallo, what's the trouble?" asked Dick Hamilton, coming along with Tregellis-West and Watson. "Anything the matter with Archie? He's looking a bit groggy."

"It's nothing—he's gone mad, that's all," said Church, with a wink.

"Absolutely," agreed Archie, nodding.

"Well, there's nothing like knowing one's shortcomings," chuckled Dick. "But don't be an ass, Archie! There's nothing wrong with you, really."

"Pray don't attempt to deceive me, old dear!" said Archie firmly. "I shall trickle away to the Head, and request him to inform the pater. Dash it, the pater has frequently observed that the old brain was weak, and liable to crack at any moment. It hasn't merely cracked—it's splintered. And poor old Alf is off his rocker, too."

"Do you mean Brent?" asked Handforth.

"He's in the study," nodded Archie. "The poor blighter keeps seeing globules, you know."

"Seeing what?"

"Round things and oblong things," explained Archie vaguely. "All sorts of dashed ripping colours, as it were. A large and varied assortment of rainbows, and all that sort of thing. And I'm dashed if I don't see the same! It's no good, laddies—we're past all hope!"

He reeled off, and the juniors grinned.

"Nothing to worry about with him!" said Dick Hamilton. "He's got a vivid imagination, and he's only kidding himself. Remember how he thought he was ill once, and nearly on the point of dying? He'll soon get over this spasm. But I'm not so sure about Brent."

"I expect Brent's been fooling him," said Tommy Watson.

"Let's go and see," said Handforth, striding towards Study E.

They piled in, and found Alf Brent sitting on the hearthrug, making frantic grabs at the air. Apparently he was no better. Indeed, there was every indication that he was decidedly worse, for he was no longer content with mere globules.

"Look at them!" he said. "Look at all these coloured lights. Can't you see them flashing about? Just like fireflies."

"Chuck it, Brent!" grinned Dick Hamilton. "You can fool Archie, but you can't spoof us with this rot."

Alf turned a vacant face towards the visitors.

"I can't see you properly," he said. "Why don't you stand still? And what's the matter? You've all gone red and green and purple! Look at these lights here—hundreds of them! Just like searchlights, playing about everywhere! My hat! They're getting brighter—"

He broke off, and blinked. Then he slowly got to his feet, and shook himself. He gave the other juniors a rather sheepish look.

"Sorry!" he murmured. "It's all rot, of course. But I could swear I saw— There you are!" he panted, relapsing into his previous condition. "Look!"

"Hang it all, Brent, this is too thick!" growled Handforth, annoyed. "There's no need to act the giddy ox with us!"

"Hold on," said Hamilton, with a strange

change in his voice. "I don't think Brent is quite himself. He's not doing this on purpose. Brent, old man, aren't you feeling quite yourself?"

"I tell you he's spoofing—"

Handforth stopped as Alf Brent swayed, and fell in a heap to the floor. There were several exclamations, but Brent sat up, and started talking about coloured lights again. It was becoming increasingly evident that he was not deliberately putting all this on.

"One of you chaps hurry off and fetch the Housemaster," muttered Dick. "I don't think he's dotty, but he's certainly seeing things that aren't here! Rummy, too! Overwork, perhaps."

"You really mean—" began Watson.

"Yes. Hurry off, you ass!"

Watson, now quite scared, dashed out. It wasn't necessary for him to go far, for at the end of the passage he encountered the Housemaster in conversation with Archie Glenthorne. Mr. Lee was looking rather grim, although his eyes could not conceal a certain twinkle.

"Come, come, Glenthorne, this is mere nonsense!" he was saying. "There is nothing the matter with you, my boy."

"Absolutely, sir," insisted Archie, in a feeble voice. "I mean to say, the old tissues are wilting more and more. It's a frightful thing for a chappie to know, but I am positively off the old balance. Kindly 'phone the nearest asylum, and get them to shove off with the rescue squad. It's time Archie was biffed into the padded cell!"

The Housemaster shook his head.

"I shall not send to the asylum, Glenthorne, and I shall not take any notice of your vivid imagination," he replied. "You are as sane as I am, but if you are feeling slightly unwell, perhaps you had better go straight to bed—"

"He's all right, sir," interrupted Tommy Watson hurriedly. "He's only taken an example from Brent. It's Brent who's mad!"

"Good gracious! Another?"

"Yes, sir," said Watson. "I wish you'd come and have a look at him. I think Archie must have imitated him, you know—perhaps unconsciously. Poor old Brent's in the study, seeing coloured lights!"

"Good gad!" said Archie. "I thought it was globules!"

Mr. Lee frowned.

"There is obviously something amiss here," he said suspiciously. "I am certainly not going to believe that any boy has taken leave of his senses. I'll have a look at Brent at once, Watson."

"I think it's overwork, sir—too much sweating!" panted Watson.

The Housemaster nodded, and went into Study E. At the very first glance, Mr. Lee could see that Alf Brent was not himself. Alf was sitting in the chair, staring straight in front of him, and making an occasional grab.

"Let me examine this boy," said the Housemaster quietly.

He did so—closely. He shook Brent, asked him sharp questions, and forced him to put out his tongue. He examined his eyes, and questioned him closely regarding his delusions. For, without question, Brent was seeing all sorts of things that had no existence. In the end, Mr. Nelson Lee was frankly puzzled.

And Brent could give no account of himself, either. Once or twice he tried to concentrate, and to answer lucidly. But he always drifted back into the other state. He could see colours—hundreds of colours.

"H'm! I am sure I don't know what's the matter with him—but he had better go straight to bed," said the Housemaster gruffly. "Some of you boys escort Brent upstairs, and see him into his room!"

"Yes, sir."

"And waste no time over it!"

"But—but aren't you going to send for Dr. Brett, sir?" asked Dick.

"Of course not," replied the Housemaster. "Brent is quite healthy in the ordinary way. A night's sleep will rid him of these peculiar delusions. I shall question him in the morning; I have no doubt that we shall be able to arrive at some satisfactory explanation."

"You don't think his brain has cracked through too much swotting, sir?" asked Tommy Watson anxiously.

"Good gracious, no!" said Mr. Lee. "Take him upstairs, and put him to bed. That's the only treatment he requires."

Dick Hamilton and the others escorted Brent up to his dormitory forthwith, and when Archie Glenthorne entered the room twenty minutes later he found his chum sound asleep. Archie had decided that bed was the best place for him, too. Phipps had been talking to him.

"Then you absolutely think, laddie, that the young master has nothing to fear?" Archie murmured. "I mean to say, the old brain—what there is of it—is still robust?"

Phipps was as unemotional as ever.

"I shall call you at six a.m., sir," he said smoothly.

"But about the brain department—"

"It is essential, sir, that you should put in some hard practice in the morning," continued Phipps. "I am quite hopeful regarding your success in the Marathon, sir."

"But, good gad!" protested Archie. "About this scattiness—"

"Good-night, sir," said Phipps.

"I mean to say—"

Phipps glided silently out and closed the door. And Archie Glenthorne rolled into bed and ruminated. Phipps, the blighter, had absolutely ignored the young master's references to lunacy! It would be necessary to tick him off in the morning. Dash it, a chappie couldn't allow his bally valet to ride roughshod—

But at this point Archie dozed off, and slept.



CHAPTER 9.

THE CONSPIRATORS.

"By George!" said Handforth abruptly.

He and his chums were in Study D, and for some time Edward Oswald had

been silent. It was so unusual that Church and McClure were beginning to feel lonely. There was something missing from the study. Such peace as this was trying to the nerves.

"By George!" repeated Handforth breathlessly.

"Thought of something?" asked McClure. "I believe you've been stewing over an idea for the last half-hour, but nothing seemed to come—"

"Why not?" asked Handforth, getting to his feet and pacing up and down. "Why not, my sons?"

"Why not what?"

"Well, why shouldn't we all go mad?"

"Eh?"

"The whole giddy school!" said Handforth, halting and staring at his chums. "That's it—the whole school! Why not?"

Church grunted.

"I thought you were going to bring out some marvellous idea about your Austin Seven!" he said tartly. "My hat! Have you lost your enthusiasm already? I expect you've come to the conclusion that some funny ass has been pulling your leg?"

Handforth smiled in a superior sort of way.

"The Austin Seven is a cert.," he replied calmly. "I'm not excited about it because I know it's coming. So I've dismissed it for the moment. There's something more important to be dealt with."

"Oh!"

"I'm surprised at you fellows for doubting my aunt's letter," continued Handforth accusingly. "Do you think I don't know a jape when I see it? That Austin car is mine. Think of it," he went on dreamily. "Seven cylinders, you know! That's the sort of car—"

"You fathead, it's only got four cylinders," interrupted McClure.

"Rats! Why do they call it a Seven?"

"Oh, my goodness!" grinned Church. "He thinks he's going to own an Austin Seven, and he doesn't even know what the 'Seven' means! You josser, it's seven horse-power."

"A marvellous car, too," added McClure, nodding. "In fact, it's a bit too marvellous to be true, as far as you're concerned, Handy. You'll have to wait until you're in the Sixth."

Handforth waved his hand.

"Never mind about the Austin now," he said curtly. "That's not coming until Thursday, and there's something more urgent in the air. Hamilton is supposed to be the junior skipper, but he never thinks of any ideas, so I've got to lead the Remove instead. We ought to have another election," he added indignantly. "I'm the right chap to be the Form skipper!"

"Hear, hear!" said Church and McClure, to save all argument.

"I've got hold of a ripping idea," continued Handforth. "I've had it for hours, only it wouldn't come properly."

"Something like butter?" asked Church.

"Butter?"

"Well, butter comes suddenly——"

"You fathead!" snorted Handforth. "Do you think my brain's like a churn? This idea has been roving about inside my head all day."

"It would do," agreed McClure. "Plenty of room there!"

"Eh? If you're trying to be funny, Arnold McClure, I'll chuck you out of the window," said Handforth grimly. "This stunt of mine is not merely an idea—it's a brain-wave. Why shouldn't the whole school go dotty?"

His chums stared.

"First it was Canham, then Brent, and then Archie Glenthorne," continued Edward Oswald. "And old Crowell knows that we've all been swotting. If the school goes off its rocker, the masters will be prepared. They are half-expecting something of the kind, anyhow. Look at the way Mr. Lee sent Brent off to bed. If we don't seize this opportunity now, we shall never get another one like it."

Church and McClure realised that Handforth was quite serious, and they regarded him with fresh interest.

"Do you mean to say that the whole school can go mad?" asked Church. "But that's all rot! You can't expect the fellows to go dotty to order. Besides, this swotting isn't half so bad——"

"You chump, can't we pretend to go mad?"

"Oh, pretend!"

"Of course, it won't be necessary in certain cases," said Handforth curtly. "You fellows needn't change your tactics at all. You've been mad ever since you were born, and it's always been a puzzle to me why you're here instead of in a lunatic asylum."

"Cheese it, Handy," protested McClure. "It might be a good idea for the school to go dotty. But why? That's the question. If there's any object to be gained——"

"What about this Marathon Race?" interrupted Handforth. "Everybody knows that the Head's half-inclined to prohibit it. It's quite likely that he'll put up the notices to-morrow, just when we're all in the middle of training. Why not forestall him by going dotty?"

"But that's only a rumour——"

"All the same, we can't take any chances," insisted Edward Oswald. "The Head's in a rummy mood this term. He's got a bee in his bonnet about sports. If a lot of chaps go silly to-morrow, he'll realise that they need fresh air. In fact, we'll all demand the Marathon so that the school can be restored to normal health. And we'll agitate for more liberty, too. If the Head thinks our brains are cracking, he'll probably knuckle under."

Church and McClure were very dubious.

"We couldn't work a thing like that ourselves," objected Church. "It would have to be done thoroughly—by scores of chaps. In the Fifth and the Fourth and the Third, too."

"That's the whole idea," agreed Handforth eagerly. "A lot of fellows in every Form will go off their chumps at the same time. Too much swotting! See the idea? The chaps who remain sane will say that all this cramming is proving too much for our brains."

"It's a rattling fine idea, but I don't see how it can be worked," said Church, shaking his head. "It's no good starting a jape of that sort in a haphazard way, you know. It's got to be thoroughly organised."

"Why not put it to Browne?" suggested McClure.

He only said this casually, never believing that Handforth would admit any outsider into his scheme. But Handforth always acted just the opposite to one's predictions. He nodded at once.

"Good idea!" he said promptly. "We'll get Browne and Boots and Willy, and have a confab. The skippers of the Fifth, the Remove, Fourth, and Third."

"But you're not the skipper of the Remove," said Church.

"Yes, I am, only I haven't been elected yet," replied Handforth coolly. "Still, we'd better have Hamilton in, I suppose. He'd only get wild if he was left out. And while we're at it we'll invite Chambers and Reggie Pitt and Bob Christine and Fullwood and a few others. Have a regular meeting, in fact, with representatives of all Houses. It's no good expecting the school to go dotty unless everybody is prepared."

Handforth's chums were very doubtful, but they agreed to hurry round and pass the word that a meeting was called. There wasn't a great deal of time, either, for the evening was getting on. Church and McClure were fully expecting that Handy's idea would be scotched. They never had much faith in these ideas of his, and this one seemed particularly wild and woolly.

But William Napoleon Browne, of the Fifth, promptly stamped it with the seal of his approval, and the others grinned and said it was rather topping. The prospect of St. Frank's going suddenly mad was rich. And what a priceless rag, too! Who wouldn't join in?

The meeting was even larger than Handforth had expected, and the conspirators foregathered in the gymnasium—a recognised place for such plottings.

"There can be no doubt, brothers, that this scheme has great possibilities," said Browne. "We cannot pretend to understand how Brother Handforth has evolved such an idea, but we must not delve too deeply into these mysteries. I have noted that Brother Handforth has recently developed in a surprising manner. It can, indeed, be said that he is becoming almost human."

"You silly ass——" began Handforth.

"The suggestion that St. Frank's should

go mad is passed unanimously by all concerned," continued Browne. "But there are ways and means to be considered. There are plots to be plotted. There are conspiracies to be conspired. Let us put our heads together and plan the campaign."

"Good man!" grinned Willy Handforth. "I've already thought of a few stunts to work on old Suncliffe. My hat! To-morrow's going to be a red-letter day! Bravo, Ted!"

Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt and the others were equally keen, and the rest of the period before bed-time was fully occupied by the schemers.



CHAPTER 10.

THE FIRST SIGNS.

FENTON, of the Sixth, stared.

It was breakfast-time in the Ancient House—in all the Houses of St. Frank's, for that matter—and Fenton sat at the head of the Remove table. The prefects took it in turns to keep order among the juniors. Mr. Lee, the Housemaster, had a table of his own at the end of the picturesque old dining-hall, where the other resident masters were also situated.

It was a good arrangement, for the juniors preferred to have a prefect with them, rather than a master. Most of the prefects were easy-going, and conversation, so long as it was subdued, was winked at.

This morning the Remove had just settled itself down for breakfast, and Edgar Fenton stared. Not without reason. Ralph Leslie Fullwood was looking vacantly in front of him and smothering his porridge with Worcester sauce. Then he proceeded to add pepper and mustard.

"What's the idea, Fullwood?" asked Fenton gruffly.

Fullwood commenced his porridge with exaggerated gusto, and took no notice of Fenton's question. It had been previously arranged that Ralph Leslie should be the first to start the ball rolling. And his form of mania appeared to be peculiar. He was deaf and dumb.

"Fullwood!" said Fenton sharply. "Russell, give that idiot a shake, and ask him what the game is. What's the idea of eating porridge with vinegar and sauce—Fullwood, stop making that infernal noise!"

Some of the other juniors were grinning, and a few were getting prepared for their own performances. Fullwood was eating in a most ungentlemanly fashion, making strange and uncouth sounds.

"I—I think he's a bit queer this morning, Fenton," said Dick Hamilton, with concern. "I noticed it in the Triangle first——"

"Rubbish!" said Fenton curtly. "You can't fool me!"

"Where's the hay?" asked De Valerie angrily. "Why hasn't somebody brought the hay in? There's nothing to eat here."

He looked round with bulging eyes, his whole attitude strange.

"You can't eat hay, you ass!" hissed Church.

"I always eat hay!" roared De Valerie violently. "I always eat hay—and chaff. I'm a horse, aren't I?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Another one gone scatty!"

"Another one trying to be funny, you mean!" snapped Fenton. "Any more of that piffle, De Valerie, and I'll turn you out! In two minutes you'll have Mr. Lee over here, and then there'll be some trouble. Take my advice, young 'uns, and drop this nonsense at once."

"I want my hay!" insisted De Valerie. "If I don't get it jolly soon I shall start eating this straw!"

He made a grab at Somerton's hair, and clutched a handful of it.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's not straw, you chump!" panted Watson. "You're trying to scalp Somerton! My hat! I'm blessed if Somerton isn't rocky, too! Look at the ass! He doesn't seem to mind a bit!"

The youthful Duke of Somerton was sitting there with a senile expression on his face, and the more De Valerie tugged at his hair, the more pleased he looked. It is scarcely necessary to add that this performance had been well rehearsed beforehand. Fenton started up in his place with a grim frown.

"You're mad, are you?" he asked. "We'll see about that! I've always known that a few of you were a bit weak in the head, but you can't kid me with this silly rot! Fullwood, stop making a disgusting exhibit of yourself! Put that horrible-looking porridge down!"

"He's doing it all the time!" grinned Russell.

Fullwood looked up with a pleased smile, and made a grab at the vinegar bottle. He peured a liberal dose into his coffee. But, although Fenton shook him and shouted at him, he remained dumb.

"You—you hopeless young ass! Who did that?" demanded Fenton, whirling round. "Handforth, are you throwing things at me?"

This question was totally unnecessary, for Edward Oswald Handforth was deliberately breaking a round of bread into pieces and throwing them at the school captain. In any sane condition Handforth would not have taken such a liberty, for Fenton was not only the head boy of the Ancient House, but he was also one of the best of fellows. No junior in his senses would think of insulting him.

Biff!

A piece of bread struck Fenton on the nose just as he was about to speak.

"Bullseye!" shouted De Valerie, leaping up excitedly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you——" Fenton paused, breathing

hard. "Handforth, stop that idiotic behaviour at once!"

"Idiotic behaviour!" repeated Handforth in surprise. "Everybody does it! It's one of the recognised things to throw bits of bread to the bear! Look, you chaps—this bear can speak, too!"

"Are you calling me a bear?" shouted Fenton.

"Of course you're a bear—anybody can see it!" said Handforth cheerfully. "Why don't you do some tricks? What do you think we came to the Zoo for?"

"Zoo?" said Fenton faintly.

"Of course," nodded Handforth, looking round. "This is the Zoo, isn't it? Look, there are the monkeys!" he added, pointing triumphantly to Church and McClure. "Don't they look funny?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here, I say!" protested Church, who couldn't see the joke.

"And there's the kangaroo!" said Handforth, pointing to Jerry Dodd. "If we wait a bit he'll probably do his tricks."

Jerry Dodd started, and jumped nimbly upon his chair.

"I didn't know it before!" he shouted. "I'm an Australian, aren't I? Handforth's right—I'm a kangaroo! Just watch me!"

With one leap he bounded over the back of his chair, and proceeded to hop up and down the floor. He gave a realistic imitation of a kangaroo, and the Remove looked on with keen appreciation. Only the "insane" fellows took no notice. They were too busy with their own peculiar forms of madness.

And they went at it for all they were worth—Fullwood mixing his food in the most startling fashion, De Valerie insisting upon his hay, and the Duke of Somerton apparently pleased with all the hair-pulling that De Valerie liked. Handforth was throwing bread continuously, and the confusion was becoming worse.

"We're in the middle of everything!" said Handforth. "Look at the giraffe over there! And the elephants, too! I never thought the Zoo was so jolly interesting."

Fenton looked round helplessly.

"Great Scott!" he muttered. "I'm hanged if I know—"

By this time Mr. Lee had risen from his own table and was coming down the dining-hall. Fenton breathed a sigh of relief. The advent of the Housemaster would probably restore these idiots to sanity in less than a second. Mr. Lee came up.

"Thank goodness, sir!" muttered Fenton.

But he was startled to find the "lunatics" continuing their antics in just the same way. Handforth, indeed, threw a piece of bread at Mr. Lee during the first second and pointed a derisive finger.

"Look!" he chuckled. "Here's the lion now!"

"I want my hay!" said De Valerie feebly.

Mr. Lee stood looking for a moment, and

his lips were compressed in rather a grim fashion. He had given Fenton plenty of opportunity to quell the disturbance, but Fenton was apparently helpless.

"I can't do anything with them, sir," said the head prefect.

"So it seems, Fenton," replied the Housemaster, nodding. "This mania apparently began last night—with Brent and Glenthorne. H'm! It seems to be spreading."

"They're only ragging, sir," muttered Fenton.

"I'm not so sure," said Mr. Lee grimly. "In any case, fresh air is the best treatment they can have. Food, of course, is the worst possible thing. All these boys who are acting strangely must be taken outside."

"But we've hardly started breakfast, sir!" roared Handforth, in sudden alarm. "I—I mean— Look!" he added hastily. "The kangaroo's getting trickier than ever!"

Fenton grinned.

"Come on, you cheerful lunatics!" he said briskly. "Outside—the whole crowd of you! Food will only make you worse. I say, Wilson! Bring a couple of those other seniors and help me to shuffle these poor idiots out into the open!"

And two minutes later the poor idiots were shuffled out. They had a vague sort of feeling that Handforth's great stunt wasn't panning out very well. After all, it was no joke to miss one's breakfast!



CHAPTER 11.

ST. FRANK'S GOES DOTTY!

THE Ancient House was not the only one that had its quota of lunatics.

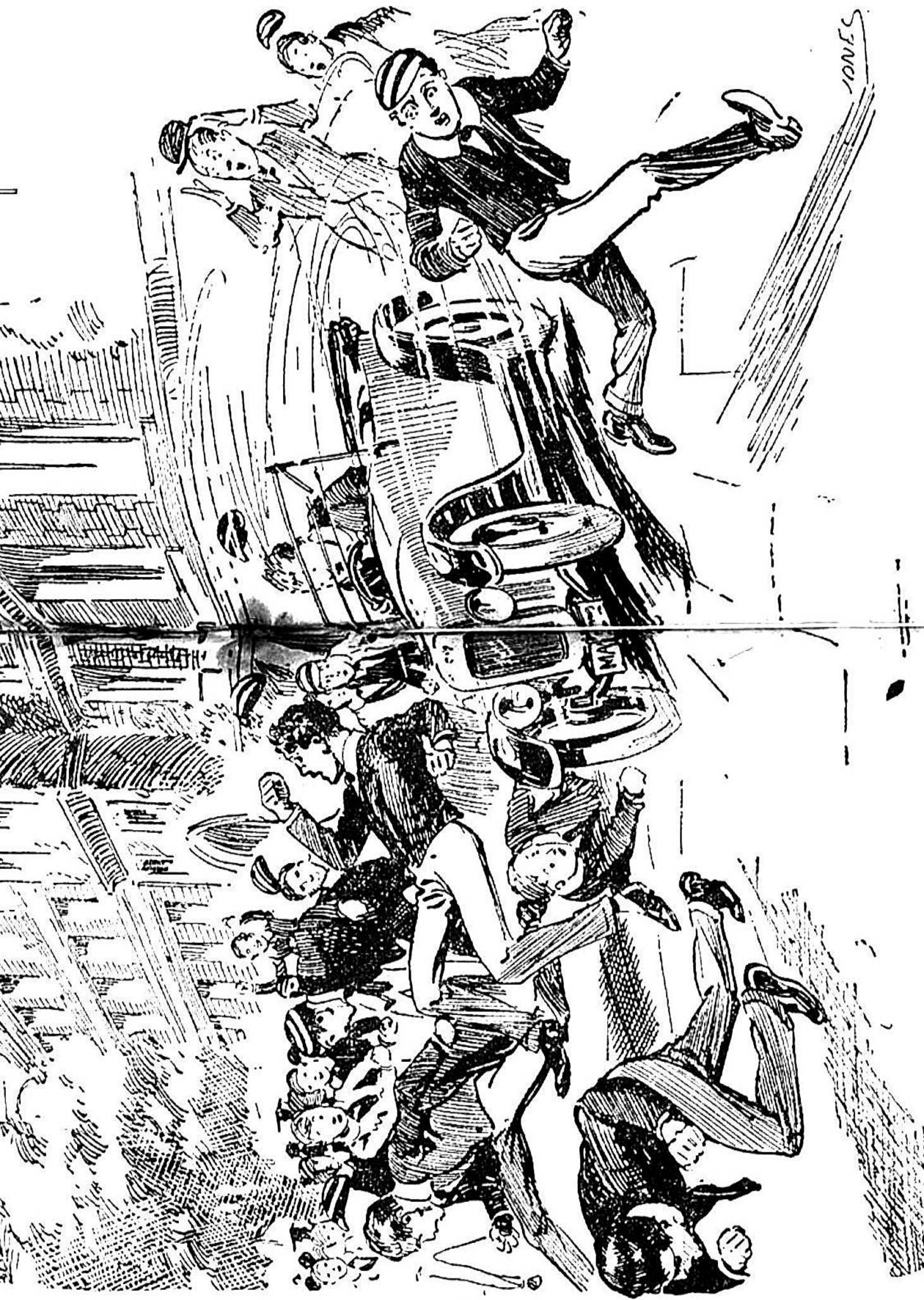
In all the other Houses similar scenes were being enacted—although the majority of them were rather milder. Edward Oswald Handforth, as the instigator of the plot, felt that it was up to him to do something particularly outrageous. The rest contented themselves with mere indications of lightheadedness.

The Fifth was affected, too—and the Third, almost to a man, had cheerfully gone off its rocker. By the time breakfast was over the harassed masters and prefects were fully convinced that a colossal rag was in progress.

But it was really impossible to single out any particular boy or any group of boys. There were so many culprits. Besides, after the genuine case of Brent, it was very difficult to detect any fake.

Alf Brent, by the way, was much better this morning, and he had no recollection of the coloured globules and searchlights he had seen the previous evening. He was sane again, although rather groggy. Archie Glenthorne was maintaining, quite stoutly, that he could feel the symptoms coming on.

The affected juniors in the Remove consoled themselves by feeding in the school shop, and making Handforth pay the bill. After all, it was his idea, so it was up to him



to provide a feed. Fortunately, the other Forms managed to finish breakfast in the orthodox way.

The wave of madness was felt in every House, and although the masters were convinced of a general rag, they hardly knew what to do. At different intervals, the school would indulge in these little affairs, and the masters generally thought it best to wink at them. But this was something different. For it was quite possible that some of the fellows were genuinely affected. They had all been swotting very hard, and they had been taxing their brains to the utmost. The whole school was in a state of high tension. The "lunatics" readily assumed the manners of demented people.

It was decided to ignore this phase for the time being. Mr. Crowell, the master of the Remove, however, found it rather difficult to carry on. For when he arrived in the Form-room for morning lessons, his class was looking rather peculiar. To pretend that everything was normal was more than Mr. Crowell could manage.

He paused in the doorway, grim and stern—and rather inwardly alarmed. It occurred to him, subconsciously, that there was some slight compensation in the thought that to-day was a half-holiday. There was only the morning to get through.

"Boys!" thundered Mr. Crowell. "What is the meaning of this? How—how dare you continue this preposterous behaviour? Do not imagine for one moment that you can hoodwink me with this ridiculous pretence!"

He stared round furiously.

The Remove was in an extraordinary state. Handforth, for example, was sitting on the top of his desk, making all sorts of strange motions with his hand. He kept grabbing at his fists, and shouting triumphantly as he caught them. His hair was adorned with wisps of straw, and he looked properly mad.

De Valerie was sitting at his desk with the lid wide open, and the desk was filled with hay, as though it had been converted into a manger. De Valerie's clothes were strange, too. His collar was on backwards, his waistcoat was upside down, and his hair was brushed straight upwards, as though he had just received a terrible fright. He sat there, chewing hay with vacuous enjoyment.

Archie Glenthorne was even more startling in his behaviour. He was a fellow who hated anything dirty. His mania for cleanliness was a byword in the Remove, and he was never comfortable unless spotless from head to foot.

But at the present moment he was groveling on the floor, playing marbles with chunks of coal. He was being assisted in this pastime by Tommy Watson. The pair of them were black from head to foot.

Mr. Crowell gasped. Without doubt, Glenthorne was out of his mind! There could be no question in HIS case.

"Hallo, sir!" said the sane fellows—about two-thirds of the Remove.



With Handforth at the wheel, the car lurched forward. The machine was shooting round the Triangle, with fellows dodging it as they had ever driven a

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell.

"Yes, things are getting a bit thick, sir," nodded Dick Hamilton. "These poor chaps are getting worse and worse every minute. The complaint's catching, too. We shall all go balmy soon, I expect."

"Hamilton, I am amazed!" panted Mr. Crowell. "You, the captain of this Form, standing here and witnessing this—this utter nonsense! Surely you know that these boys are pretending?"

Dick Hamilton looked grave.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, sir," he said earnestly. "Don't forget what you were saying yesterday—about overdoing it. And once one fellow goes, the rest are liable to follow quickly. What can I do, anyhow, sir? You've got to humour lunatics."

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Crowell breathlessly.

Reggie Pitt took his inkpot out of its well and held it up as though it were a glass. He stood there, looking round with an expression of genial imbecility on his face.

"Ladies and gentlemen, a toast!" he called



ear there!" somebody yelled, and an instant later the
r skelter out of the way. It was the first time that Handy
t looked like it!

loudly. "We, of this great institution, wish
to toast our great managing director, Mr.
James Crowell! Raise your glasses——"

"Pitt!" shouted Mr. Crowell hotly.

Reggie cheered, and drank the contents of
the inkpot with a gulp.

"Good heavens!" gasped the Form-master
frantically. Mr. Crowell was unaware of the
fact that Reggie Pitt's inkpot had contained
nothing more harmful than water. "You—
you foolish boy! This—this is going alto-
gether too far! I insist upon order. Do you
hear me?" he thundered. "I insist upon
order!"

Never had Mr. Crowell felt so helpless. The
majority of the class hastened to settle down—
acting quite normally. But the rest continued
their queer antics as though he had never
spoken.

"Upon my soul!" muttered the Form-
master, striding to the corner, and grasping
his cane. "I intend to punish you all with
the utmost severity. Perhaps this cane will
make you understand not to be——"

"Hold on, sir!" interrupted Dick Hamilton.

"It's not fair to cane these poor chaps, is it?
You've got no actual proof that they're pre-
tending, and they might be entitled to our
pity. There's nothing more heartrending
than seeing an ordinarily decent chap going
off his chump."

Mr. Crowell paused, and forced himself to
be calm.

"There is something in what you say,
Hamilton," he admitted. "I certainly have
no proof, but—— Well, I can't believe that
—— It seems impossible! These things have
happened so suddenly!"

"A stitch in time save nine!" remarked
Pitt cheerfully.

"You—you young rascal——"

"Travel north, or south, or east, or west,"
babbled Pitt, "a man's own house is still the
best."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull
boy!" said Pitt firmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By jingo, he's right there, though!" said
Church.

"Neither a borrower nor a lender be!" con-
tinued Pitt. "Fair play is a jewel, and if
you want a thing done well, do it yourself.
It's dogged that does it, and faint heart never
won a fair lady!"

Mr. Crowell fairly danced with exasperation.

"Stop!" he shouted thickly. "Stop!"

"Look on the bright side of everything!"
advised Pitt, with a leer of purely idiotic
lunacy. "A willing heart lightens work.
Patience and perseverance accomplish
wonders."

"I insist——"

"He that plays with fire may be burnt!"
warned Pitt grimly.

"By Heaven, you are right there!"
stormed Mr. Crowell. "And let me tell you
that you are playing with fire now! You
impertinent young rascal, I am tired of this
pretence!"

At this moment Mr. Crowell's attention was
distracted, for Handforth was seizing Church
and McClure and banging their heads to-
gether. He insisted upon believing that they
had suddenly changed into a couple of coco-
nuts.

And Fatty Little's behaviour was even more
staggering. Dick Goodwin was offering him
buns, and Fatty was scornfully rejecting them.
Nobody knew exactly how much effort this
cost Fatty, but he was doing his part nobly.
One might have supposed that buns were
worse than prussic acid.

"Take them away!" he insisted. "I don't
like food! I'm not going to eat another
thing! All I want to do is to sleep—to get
away somewhere in peace. Those buns hurt
me to look at them!"

"Just one bite!" said Dick Goodwin.

"No!" roared Fatty. "I don't want 'em!"

Mr. Crowell felt rather dizzy. He also felt
terribly helpless. Whichever way he looked, a
certain number of juniors were acting irration-

ally. And it was a fact that others were gradually revealing traits of lunacy. Things were getting worse and worse.



CHAPTER 12.

THE THIRD GETS IT, TOO!

MEANWHILE, other classrooms in the School House were equally in disorder. The whole object of this stupendous rag was to bring matters to a head swiftly. A mere lunatic here and there would have done no good at all, for they would have been promptly restored to sanity. But with the whole school developing a strange mania, the masters were in a position of helplessness.

The Fifth, under Browne's leadership, contented themselves with showing a few signs of irrational behaviour. But Mr. Pagett was almost worried off his head, even so.

It was the unfortunate master of the Third who came in for the most trying ordeal of all. For the Third, as was only natural, became far more violent in their lunacy than the other Forms. The high spirits of extreme youth would not be denied, and Mr. Suncliffe—the Form-master—was destined to remember that morning with recollections of horror.

For once, the Third had got into its room before Mr. Suncliffe had arrived. And when he turned up, in a bit of a hurry, he found Willy Handforth waiting outside the door. Willy, by previous arrangement, was the only sane fellow left.

"Hold on, sir!" said Willy quickly. "Just a minute!"

Mr. Suncliffe frowned.

"Stand aside, Handforth minor!" he ordered. "What is all this noise? If you think you can detain me while your companions settle down——"

"Hush, sir!" warned Willy. "Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

"About everybody going dotty——"

"Enough!" snapped Mr. Suncliffe. "I was nearly driven out of my mind at the breakfast-table—not merely by my own boys, but by the others. And I hear that this absurdity is just as apparent in every other House. I will soon quell any irregularity in this Form!"

"Take my advice, sir, and go easy," urged Willy. "I'm about the only sane chap left. Heath and Lemon and all the other chaps have caught it badly. And it's no good talking to 'em, either."

"There are other methods, Handforth minor," said Mr. Suncliffe ominously.

He pushed past, and strode into the Form-room. He had been prepared for a scene of wildness, but the appearance of the Third nearly took him off his feet.

Half the members of the Third were rolling on the floor, engaged in a free fight. The

others were hanging about, acting in the way they supposed that lunatics acted. Even though the free-fighters were only engaged in a game, the dust in the apartment was thick.

"Boys!" thundered Mr. Suncliffe, aghast.

Chubby Heath looked up excitedly.

"Here he is!" he shouted. "Here's the new chap!"

"Good egg!"

"Let's put him through it!"

About fourteen fags surrounded Mr. Suncliffe before he could prepare himself. They formed a ring, and danced round him, yelling at the top of their voices.

"How—how dare you?" gasped the Form-master. "Stop this at once! Do you hear me, you young idiots?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Juicy Lemon. "Listen to him! He thinks he can order us about! And he's only a new kid!"

"We'd better buck up, too," warned Chubby Heath. "Old Sunny might be along in two ticks, and you know what a temper he's got!"

"Good! Let's rag the new chap!"

"Hear, hear!"

"On him!" yelled Heath. "Over with the cheeky beggar!"

Mr. Suncliffe found himself menaced by the entire Third—which insisted upon regarding him as a new boy. In vain he attempted to escape. He was seized, and dragged this way and that.

"I warned you, sir!" roared Willy. "They're all dotty! They think you're a new kid! The only way is to humour them and do what they tell you. If you don't, you'll have an awful time."

Mr. Suncliffe was too busy to make any reply—being at the moment beneath about fifteen fags, who had piled upon him in one heap. A moment later he saw daylight again, and sat up dizzily.

Mr. Suncliffe leapt to his feet, white with anger. Not for one moment did he believe that these boys were genuinely insane. Some of them, perhaps, were so excited that they had developed a sort of temporary madness, but it was nothing worse. And Mr. Suncliffe was determined to restore order.

"You—you wretched young monkeys!" he panted. "This idiocy has gone far enough! Handforth minor, fetch my cane!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Third.

"A new kid—threatening to cane us!"

The fags yelled, and Mr. Suncliffe gulped. Even the threat of the cane had no effect. The boys, who usually obeyed him without question, were simply treating him as one of themselves; this was the form of madness which the Third had contracted.

Before Mr. Suncliffe knew what was happening, a game of leapfrog was in progress, and juniors were sailing over him in bewildering succession. It was more than he could stand. He never knew exactly how he escaped from the Form-room, but he managed it at last, and staggered out blindly.

He was a complete wreck.

Smothered with dust from head to foot, his collar torn off, his clothing full of rents, he looked a forlorn figure. He managed to reel off to the East House—where he lived—for a change of clothes. He had long since ceased to care what happened to the Third.

And the Third congratulated itself heartily.

"My hat, it worked!" grinned Chubby Heath, from the window. "He's gone! He's bunked clean into the East House!"

"Hurrah!"

"Yes, but what's going to happen now?" asked Hobbs dubiously.

"Why worry?" chuckled Owen minor.

"We've proved to him that we're scatty, and we've done our bit. How about going out and playing some cricket? Let's get up a scratch game!"

"Hear, hear!"

The spirit of dare-devilry had taken possession of the fags, and they were ready for any sort of mischief. Willy Handforth kept his head, however, and he proceeded to lock the door.

"None of that, you fatheads!" he said curtly. "We've started this thing now, and we've got to keep it up. Old Sunny won't be long in giving himself a bath, and changing, and how shall we look if we play cricket? Lunatics don't do that!"

"But can't we play a freak game?" suggested Chubby. "Can't we use spades or shovels instead of cricket-bats, and cabbages for balls? Anybody would think we were dotty if they saw us doing that. And think of the fun!"

But Willy shook his head.

"Nothing doing!" he replied. "We'll stay in this Form-room until old Sunny comes back, and there won't be quite so much violence, either. All you chaps get into your places, and go mad quietly. There's been enough of this noise. It's geography lesson, so we'll mix up history and arithmetic with it. Before we've done, old Sunny himself will be scatty!"

The Third didn't like it, but Willy was firm. And when Willy made up his mind to anything, the Third had to comply—or there was trouble. Willy Handforth was not only a good leader, but he was a strict one.

Mr. Suncliffe, having changed, hurried back to the School House, expecting to find the Form-room in a complete state of wreckage. On his way, he saw many indications that the Third was not the only affected class. There were signs, indeed, that the madness was spreading rapidly throughout the school.

He was half inclined to go straight to the headmaster, and report the occurrence. He had, in fact, decided to do this before changing. But he had cooled down since then, and he was vaguely wondering if there was really something in the air. Uneasy doubts assailed him. Were the juniors actually off their heads?

It seemed impossible that they could de-

liberately and wilfully act as they had done. No rag had ever assumed these startling proportions. Perhaps it was a kind of temporary insanity. At all events, Mr. Suncliffe was very cautious as he approached the class-room. He would give just one peep and then go to the Head.

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Suncliffe.

Expecting to find something which his imagination could not conjure, he was quite startled to see the Third Form comparatively quiet. The fags were all in their places, and except for a little grubbiness, they looked fairly sane.

"Oh!" said Mr. Suncliffe, striding into the room. "So you have recovered your wits, eh? So much the better! I shall make it my business to report your conduct to the headmaster after school."

But Mr. Suncliffe changed his mind very soon afterwards—when he could get nothing intelligible from any of the boys. It was a history lesson, but the fags gave geographical and arithmetical answers. In fact, any and every subject came ready to their lips—except geography. Long before the usual time for dismissal, Mr. Suncliffe was an exhausted man.



CHAPTER 13.

THE HEAD'S QUANDARY.

BY eleven-thirty most of the school had been dismissed from lessons.

There was a limit to human endurance, and master after master had given up in despair, and had allowed his Form to escape. For as the morning progressed, the madness increased. It spread from fellow to fellow—until hardly anybody was "sane."

There was another aspect of the affair.

Some of the juniors entered into the spirit of the plot so thoroughly that they developed a form of genuine mania. Instead of pretending, they were acting silly without realising it. And one or two of them were closely questioned by the masters, and the masters were alarmed.

The scene in the Triangle was an extraordinary one.

With the school let loose, the madness continued in various forms in almost every corner. Handforth was growing worse and worse, and he was now running round the Triangle on all fours, making curious hissing sounds.

"Hallo, what does he think he is now?" grinned Bob Christine.

"Don't you know?" said Buster Boots. "He's an Austin Seven!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth pulled himself up, very red.

"You—you funny Modern House idiots!" he roared. "Isn't it about time you dropped that Austin Seven? I'm a wild boar."

"You can't fool us, you ass——"

"I tell you I'm a wild boar!" snorted Handforth.

"He's quite right," said Buster Boots, nodding. "He's certainly wild—and he's always been a bore. Therefore he's a wild bore."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You think that's funny, don't you?" sneered Handforth. "I'll jolly soon show you Fourth Form fatheads how I treat you—"

"Chuck it, you chump!" said Pitt, hurrying up. "We're all supposed to be mad, don't forget. There are masters about, and we've got to keep it up. Dodge round the Triangle like an Austin Seven, Handy."

Handforth breathed hard.

"I'm keeping my temper manfully!" he said, with forced calm. "I'm keeping it because I shall throw you into contusion to-morrow."

"Why to-morrow?" asked Christine. "Why not now?"

"Because my car's going to be delivered to-morrow."

"Poor old Handy!" sighed Bob. "Isn't it pathetic, the way he clings to these delusions? If the Austin Seven comes to-morrow, I'll deliberately sit in the middle of the fountain pool!"

"You needn't worry," grinned Buster Boots. "To-morrow never comes. Handy's

to-morrow won't, anyhow. Go on, Handy, old man, let's have your celebrated imitation of a wild boar."

Any visitor, happening to arrive in the Triangle at the moment, would have been startled. For he would have mistaken St. Frank's for a home of hopeless imbeciles. The Triangle was simply crowded with idiots.

And in the meantime the masters were holding a rapid consultation. Mr. Lee and Mr. Barnaby Goole—of the Ancient House and East House respectively—were away. But the others decided to go to Dr. Stafford in a body. Something drastic had to be done.

"It is almost certain that the headmaster knows of these outrageous doings," said Mr. Pagett, of the Fifth. "At the same time, it is just as well that he should know the details. I am convinced that several of my boys are genuinely unhinged."

"You disagree that they are merely pretending?" asked Mr. Stokes.

"At first I thought they were pretending," replied Mr. Pagett. "And I still think that many of the younger boys are indulging in a—a rag. But at least a third of my own scholars are genuinely deranged. Not seriously, of course—but temporarily."

Mr. Stockdale, the Housemaster of the Modern House, looked rather dubious.

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"Really, Mr. Pagett, I can't quite agree with you," he said slowly. "I had made up my mind that the whole affair was pre-arranged—"

"I don't believe it," interrupted Mr. Pagett. "At least, I will agree that there was a certain amount of pre-arrangement, but an acute form of madness has actually seized the school. It will probably die down rapidly, and vanish as unexpectedly as it developed. But, in my opinion, there is one chief cause of the trouble."

The other masters looked at him with interest.

"Over-strain," said Mr. Pagett firmly. "Foolishly, they have maintained their sports programme without dropping a single event. In order to do this, the boys have been losing their sleep, and swotting when they should have indulged in relaxation."

"There is something in what you say, Mr. Pagett, but it is the training which caused this result," declared Mr. Crowell. "The boys are at high tension all the while—very excitable and temperamental. The slightest excuse is sufficient for them to indulge in these excesses. I cannot agree that over-work is responsible."

"Sorry, Mr. Crowell, but I'm siding with Mr. Pagett," put in Mr. Stokes. "It's the mental strain that has brought on this mania. A little more freedom, and there'll be no danger of a recurrence. The boys haven't given themselves any time to recover. They have been overtaxing their brains, and then overtaxing their muscles and sinews. In my opinion, they need some extra time for rest, and I shall put that phase of the matter to the Head very strongly."

"Well, let's go and see him," suggested Mr. Pagett.

By the time they arrived in Dr. Malcolm Stafford's presence, they were unanimous on two subjects. They really believed that some of the boys were genuinely affected, and they felt that the pressure of school work should be slightly relaxed. After all, the masters had to bear the brunt of these trials, and they wanted no recurrence.

The Head listened grimly to the reports.

"I am sorry, gentlemen, but I have already made up my mind that these boys have deliberately perpetrated a piece of foolery," he said coldly. "I have no sympathy with them whatever, and I shall show the school what I think of its so-called insanity. The Marathon race shall be prohibited."

Mr. Stokes looked alarmed.

"I trust you will reconsider that decision, sir," he said earnestly. "The Marathon race is just what the school needs. A very large percentage of boys are competing, and a long, tiring run will do them a world of good."

"Upon my word, Mr. Stokes, do you actually believe in this nonsense?" asked the Head, in surprise. "Have you been deceived?"

Mr. Stokes laughed.

"I don't think so, sir," he replied. "I am convinced that ninety per cent of the 'lunacy' cases are put on. The rest are genuine."

"Good heavens! That's an alarming statement!"

"I don't intend it to be," said Mr. Stokes. "When the ninety per cent cease their fooling, the ten per cent will recover. That's only natural. They are simply carried away by the conduct of their fellows. The trouble is, we cannot determine which are genuine and which are assumed. Some of the young beggars are extraordinarily clever at the game."

"They are indeed!" agreed Mr. Crowell fervently.

"I honestly assure you, Dr. Stafford, that it is almost impossible to make any distinction," urged Mr. Suncliffe. "My own boys, I believe—being quite young—have merely been fooling. But even among these youngsters I have detected some genuine derangement."

The Head frowned.

"This, of course, makes a big difference," he admitted. "I had no idea, gentlemen, that the matter was so serious. And you really think that the Marathon race should be allowed to stand?"

The masters were firm on the point.

"H'm!" said the Head thoughtfully. "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps the exercise and the fresh air would have a beneficial effect. Upon my soul, we are having a lot of trouble this term! No matter what we do, the boys insist upon their sports."

"They are boys, sir, after all," smiled Mr. Stokes.

"Yes, that's a hard fact," admitted Dr. Stafford. "And they are obstinate, too, confound them! No matter how much I try to curb their animal spirits, they defeat me. I introduced these examinations in order to check the sports mania, but the school is as mad on games and sports as ever."

"We can't very well blame them," said Mr. Pagett gruffly. "If the boys prepare for the exams., and carry out their sports programme in addition, we must really praise them for their determination and pluck. But I think they should have a little more time."

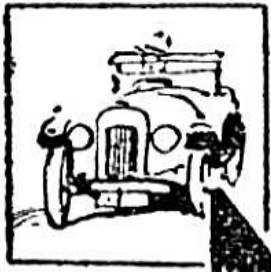
"How do you mean, Mr. Pagett?"

"I suggest that we ignore this morning's outburst completely," said the master of the Fifth. "I will only mean an enormous upheaval if we attempt to punish the culprits, for they run into scores. Ignore it, and make some announcement which the school will welcome."

"An excellent suggestion in my opinion, sir," declared Mr. Stokes. "If you adopt Mr. Pagett's plan, there will be no more madness in St. Frank's."

The headmaster stroked his chin.

"I'll think it over," he said slowly. "I'll think it over."



CHAPTER 14.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

MR. BEVERLEY STOKES looked at Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey frowningly—although his eyes were inclined to twinkle. He had just crossed Inner Court, and had paused in the cool shade of Big Arch.

"Very clever, Pitt," he said grimly. "Very clever—but it doesn't deceive me. Some of the boys may be unhappily afflicted, but not you!"

Reggie Pitt, who was looking utterly imbecile, smiled sheepishly, and resumed his normal aspect.

"Sorry, sir," he said apologetically. "You're quite right—I'm sane enough. But it's an honest fact that some of the other fellows are pretty wonky. This swotting, you know——"

"It's all very well to blame the work entirely, Pitt, but it won't do," said Mr. Stokes sternly. "You know as well as I do that you've all been overdoing it. If you weren't quite so obstinate, you'd sacrifice a few of your sports events—as the headmaster originally intended."

"Oh, cheese it, sir," protested Pitt.

The housemaster smiled.

"The idea strikes you as being impossible, eh?" he chuckled. "Well, perhaps I can understand. Look here, Reggie, I want you to do me a favour."

"Anything you like, sir," said Pitt eagerly.

"You, too, Jack," went on Mr. Stokes, grasping Grey's arm. "Mind you, this is confidential, so don't give it out officially. We've been having a talk with the Head, and the Marathon race for Saturday is safe."

"Oh, fine, sir!" said Reggie, with enthusiasm.

"And there's just a chance that the Head may make another concession, too," continued Mr. Stokes. "The notices won't be posted until this afternoon, but if you two fellows go round among the others and drop a hint here and there, it might do some good. The sooner we can restore the school to sanity, the better."

"We've got you, sir," nodded Jack Grey.

"Leave it to us," said Pitt.

"If only the pretenders can be sorted out, we can easily deal with the few genuine cases," said Mr. Stokes. "They aren't likely to be severe. A short rest will put them right. I shall get a few of the other boys to go round in the same way, and I hope to see the school fairly normal during the next half hour."

There was something magical in the way in which St. Frank's recovered.

A mere hint, as Mr. Stokes had suspected, was quite enough. The rumours soon got round that the Marathon was safe, and that the Head had decided to wink his eye at the recent insanity. Truth to tell, most of the "cases" were only too glad to resume their

normal sanity. A few of them were, indeed, becoming slightly deranged through overdoing it.

Well within the half hour, the Triangle was looking more like a school ground, and less like an asylum yard. Nothing official was known yet, but the fellows contented themselves with the thought that there could easily be another outbreak if the rumours proved untrue.

It was only just after the usual dismissal time, even now, and the rest of the day was a period of glorious freedom—being half-holiday. There were all sorts of things to be done during the afternoon. The weather was hot, and there was no prospect of rain.

A cricket match was on the schedule—a House fixture between Lee's and Stoke's. There were runs in the country to be indulged in—practice runs in preparation for the big Marathon. It would be too ridiculous to carry the insanity into the school's spare time.

"Well, I think we can reckon that the idea has been a huge success." Handforth was saying, as he stood near the fountain with a number of other juniors. "All we've got to do now is to wait until the Head does the right thing."

"We're not certain about it yet, though," said Bob Christine.

"If he doesn't do the right thing, we'll go dotty again!" declared Handforth. "We're not going to be dished! When the whole school makes up its mind about a certain thing——"

"Hallo, what's this?" interrupted Church, staring towards the gateway. "My hat! Why, it—it looks like——"

He paused, staring harder than ever.

The other juniors glanced round, and Handforth sniffed. A small motor-car had just driven in—a smart, neat-looking little turn-out. It came purring across the Triangle sweetly and smoothly.

"That thing!" said Handforth disdainfully. "Do you call that a motor-car?"

McClure chuckled.

"It's an Austin Seven, you ass!" he grinned.

Handforth jumped.

"What!" he gasped. "Why, by George, so it is! Doesn't it look simply ripping, you chaps. That's the kind of motor-car to have—neat and nippy! Not like those lumbering great buses you see on the road."

"I expect it's yours, old man," said Bob Christine blandly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's come a day before its time!" yelled Boots.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

This time Handforth fairly leapt.

"Of course it's mine!" he gasped. "Great pip! It didn't strike me at first——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, Handy, you're killing!" sobbed Fullwood. "Do you mean to say you really think



"Take them away!" moaned Fatty Little, as Goodwin offered him the buns. "I don't like food—I'm not going to eat another thing! Take them away—I don't want 'em!" Fatty's behaviour was staggering—no one had ever seen him refuse food before. Was he mad—like the rest?

— Ha, ha, ha!" he howled. "He thinks it's his Austin Seven! Poor old Handy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crowd grew larger, and it simply went into hysterics. It was just like Edward Oswald Handforth to assume that the first Austin Seven would be his. There were any amount of these handy little cars on the road, and it was the most likely thing in the world that a visitor should arrive in one. The crowd pressed round, anxious to see the fun.

But Handforth's confidence was supreme. The Austin Seven—a brand new one, by the way—had come to a halt, and a dapper young man was just emerging from it. He was rather surprised to see the rush of juniors. The engine of the car was still running—but so silently that it could scarcely be heard.

"I—I say!" gasped Handforth, grabbing the dapper young man by the arm. "Are you looking for somebody? Are you just delivering this car?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," said the stranger. "My name's Gibson—representing Messrs. Howell, Rogers, &—"

"I don't care who you represent," panted Handforth. "Who's that car for?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crowd, augmented still further, fairly shrieked. Poor old Handy still thought that the car was his! And it wasn't even Thursday! This latter fact made the joke all the

more creamy. How any sane person could have such delusions was staggering. Handforth was obviously as mad as a hatter still.

"Who's the car for, Mr. Gibson?" grinned Reggie Pitt. "For goodness' sake, be quick and put this chap out of his misery! He thinks it's for him, and he won't be convinced until you shatter his dream."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Gibson, a most collected young man, as a rule, felt flustered. The juniors were not only circling round him, but the Austin Seven had nearly vanished. And Mr. Gibson was thinking of the exquisite varnish.

"Steady—steady!" he said severely. "Give a man room to breathe! Haven't you youngsters seen a motor-car before?"

"Quick!" gasped Handforth. "Who's it for?"

Mr. Gibson was exasperatingly deliberate. He took a delivery note from his pocket, together with some other papers, and glanced at it. Then he looked up, frowning.

"This car is supplied to the order of Mrs. Manning—" he began.

"Poor old Handy!" sighed Fullwood.

"Mrs. Manning!" shrieked Handforth.

"That's my Aunt Constance!"

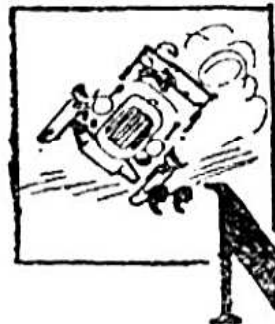
"What!"

"I have been instructed to deliver it to a Mr. Handforth," continued the stranger, looking round in surprise. A Mr. Edward

O. Handforth—a boy, by the look of it, in the Lower School—”

“It’s mine!” roared Handforth triumphantly.

The crowd ceased its hilarious laughter abruptly. Fellows gazed at one another in dazed bewilderment, and there was a dead silence.



CHAPTER 15.

HANDFORTH'S AUSTIN SEVEN.

MINE!” repeated Handforth gloatingly.

“Oh, are you Mr. Handforth — or Master Handforth?” asked Mr.

Gibson, looking at him. “Good! I can deliver the car to you straight away, then. I was to have brought it down to-morrow, but I had business in Bannington to-day, so I came along—”

“Wait a minute!” exclaimed Fullwood, grasping Mr. Gibson by the arm. “Look here, is this on the square? We’ve been yelling at Handforth because of this Austin Seven. We thought it was just a spoof. Have you brought this car here for Handforth—honour bright?”

“Of course I have,” said Mr. Gibson, staring. “My instructions are to deliver it at St. Frank’s—to this young fellow here. I suppose he is Master Handforth?”

“Of course he is!” said Reggie Pitt. “Oh, my hat! And we thought— I say, you chaps, we owe Handy a handsome apology. For once he’s right! Handy, old man, accept my earnest—”

“Shut up!” said Handforth happily. “I don’t blame you.” He suddenly became suspicious. “I suppose you’re apologising so that I shall give you free rides?” he added tartly. “Huh! Well, that game won’t pay!”

Church shook himself.

“Then it’s true, Mac!” he breathed. “Handy was right all the time! And we— we— Oh, my goodness! This Austin Seven is for him—a present from his Aunt Constance. I say, what a ripping birthday present!”

The crowd had changed its tone completely. Edward Oswald Handforth had suddenly become of great importance. Hitherto he had been a joke, and the car with him. But now he was the genuine, absolute owner of a motor-car. It was simply staggering.

“But—but what about the licence?” asked Pitt.

“I’ve got that fixed up already—”

“Impossible,” interrupted Fullwood. “A chap isn’t allowed to hold a motor-car driving licence until he’s seventeen.”

“I think Mrs. Manning overcame that

little difficulty,” explained Mr. Gibson, smiling. “I don’t know how she managed it, though. Influence, I suppose. Such things can be done in exceptional cases—if the boy’s an excellent driver.”

“But—but Handforth doesn’t know a sparking-plug from a tyre valve!” grinned Dick Hamilton. “He’ll take five minutes in finding the steering-wheel!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“I was half prepared for that!” said the expert, nodding. “I’ve had instructions to stay here for two or three days, if necessary, to give complete tuition in driving. If there’s anything you’d like to know at once, I’ll get busy—”

“Tuition?” interrupted Handforth scornfully. “Rats! Just show me the controls, and you can buzz off. Any fathead can handle a motor-car nowadays. I don’t want any instructions. I’ll go for a ride straight away. Anybody coming with me?”

“I think you’d better go alone first, old man,” said Fullwood gently. “Even Church and McClure have sidled off. I expect they’re rather keen on living, you know.”

Handforth snorted.

“Come on, Mr. Gibson—let’s have a shot,” he said briskly. “Oh, by the way. Bob Christine, there’s something I’m waiting to see you do.”

“Oh!” said Bob. “What’s that?”

“I want to see you sit in the fountain pool, my lad.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Rats!” grinned Christine. “I said I’d sit in the fountain pool if your car was delivered on Thursday. It’s a jolly lucky thing for me it came to-day. Sorry, old man, but you can’t blame us for being sceptical.”

Handforth didn’t hear. He was examining the Austin Seven. It was certainly a neat, spanking little turn-out. Everything in connection with the car was diminutive, but it was surprisingly complete. It was a high-grade car in miniature—a delight to look upon.

“Stand back, you chaps—stand back!” ordered Handforth importantly. “Hi, Armstrong, you chump, take your filthy paws off that mudguard!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“And don’t lean against the radiator, young Willy!” went on Handforth, frowning. “This car’s mine—”

“Lucky beast!” said Willy. “It’s just like Aunt Constance to give you a car and to forget me. By the time my birthday comes round in September she’ll have another craze, and I shall be left out in the cold.”

“I can’t help your troubles,” said Handforth crisply. “Take your arm off that bonnet, you young ass! Do you think I want the varnish ruined?”

By this time the crowd had greatly increased, and it respectfully receded. The little Austin Seven was left in the centre of the circle, gleaming delightfully in the sunlight. Most of the eyes that feasted themselves upon it were envious.

ANSWERS

Every Saturday, Price 2d.

NEXT WEDNESDAY!

"Handforth to the Rescue!"

It's the Third Schoolboy Test Match—and two of the best men in the England team are missing!

They're marooned!

Each is stuck on a rocky little island out to sea.

And Handforth goes to look for them—in his car! Handy is in a reckless mood—he doesn't stop for anything!

Read all about it in next week's lively long complete yarn of the Boys of St. Frank's—it's one of the best we've had!

Don't miss

"The Case of the Haunted Hotel!"

Mysterious noises, the tinkling of invisible bells, gusts of ghostly laughter! It was driving the guests out of the place, but Nelson Lee and Nipper solved the mystery!



Handy makes the feathers fly in next Wednesday's rollicking yarn—look out for this cover!

ORDER IN ADVANCE!

Even Handforth had hardly dared to hope in his innermost heart that Aunt Constance's promise would be fulfilled. But now it was an absolute fact, and he was filled with joy. Of course, it was a pure fluke. His aunt was an eccentric lady, and she had a habit of getting a craze. She would go for years without remembering any of her nephews, and would then suddenly overwhelm them with fabulous presents. She had even gone to the length of obtaining a special driving licence for Edward Oswald—a sure proof of her eccentricity.

But what did Handforth care? He was now the proud owner of an Austin Seven—a clear gift from the blue skies! It was so amazing that he almost felt that he would wake up at any moment.

Mr. Gibson was a very energetic young man. Crisply and concisely he explained the controls, and there was such a businesslike air about him that Handforth had no difficulty in picking up the information. The positions of the brake and the clutch and the

accelerator were impressed upon him, and the little mysteries of the gear lever were explained.

"Let's have a shot!" he said eagerly.

"You'd better let me drive first," suggested Mr. Gibson gently.

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "This is my car, and I'm going to drive it. Now, lemme see. This is the first speed, isn't it?"

"Well, the car's insured, anyway," muttered Mr. Gibson resignedly.

Handforth sat himself in the driving-seat, and fingered the hand controls for a few moments. Then he tested the foot pedals. The engine was still running, but he wasn't aware of this fact. That astonishing little unit was so quiet that nobody knew the engine was ticking over.

"Careful!" warned Mr. Gibson, as Handforth fingered the gear lever. "She's running, you know. Out with your clutch—now put her into first. Easy, young 'un—"

"Stand clear, there!" yelled somebody.

The warning was only just in time. Hand-

forth, in his usual ramheaded fashion, put in the clutch with a fearful jerk. The Austin lurched forward, and Mr. Gibson winced. He was accustomed to this sort of thing, but it always pained him. He was anxious, too. He had never intended his pupil to go off like this on a solo run. Edward Oswald had taken him off his guard.

"Hi! Steady, Handy!" yelled McClure.

"You'll kill yourself, old man!" gasped Church.

Handforth, at the wheel of the Austin, was simply shooting round the Triangle in a wide arc, and the fellows were dodging madly out of the way.

"Great Scott!" muttered Mr. Gibson, in alarm.

Handforth was making straight for the main gates. Mr. Gibson had expected him merely to take a turn or two round the Triangle. Handforth and the Austin Seven vanished into the lane, scraping one of the granite posts by a hair's-breadth. The crowd expected to hear a crash, but it didn't come. Only a powerful musical purr, as the leader of Study D depressed the accelerator.

There was a rush for the gates, and the crowd surged out. They were just in time to see a haze of dust up the lane. Handforth had already vanished!

"Confound the young ass, I'd no idea he meant to do this!" said Mr. Gibson, worried. "I haven't given him instructions. It's no good running up the road, boys," he added. "He'll probably blunder on for miles."

The crowd waited in the lane, hardly knowing what to do. Church and McClure wasted two or three valuable minutes, and then decided to get their bikes out. They were on the point of doing so when there was a loud yell.

"Here he comes!"

"Great Scott!" gasped Church. "So he is! And he's still safe!"

The groups of juniors staggered. The Austin Seven was gliding silkily down the lane, and everybody stared in dazed wonderment. Handforth was sitting nonchalantly at the wheel, and Irene Manners, of the Moor View School, was by his side. They both waved as they passed.

"Just going to the village!" called Handforth coolly. "Back in ten minutes, you chaps. I say, doesn't she look absolutely stunning?"

Mr. Gibson took a deep breath.

"Did he mean the car or the girl?"

"He was right in both cases," grinned Reggie Pitt. "By Jove, Handy's a caution!"



CHAPTER 16.

THE GREAT MARATHON RACE.

IN spite of the excitement created by Edward Oswald Handforth's new acquisition, the Marathon Race was the chief topic of interest during the rest of that week.

Certainly the Lower School was astounded by the fact that Handforth was still alive. He had returned from the village in perfect safety, and he had gained an uncanny mastery over the Austin Seven—a clear enough proof of that little wonder's simplicity of control. Handforth seemed to have no difficulty whatever in making her obey his every whim. And he hadn't had any tuition! Even Mr. Gibson was staggered—although he proudly pointed out that nobody ever had any trouble with an Austin Seven.

Great joy was occasioned throughout the school that day by a notice posted up by the headmaster. The Marathon Race was to be run off on Saturday, as arranged, and there would be no attempt to bar it. And there was another announcement—a sheer piece of delight. In future, afternoon school would finish an hour earlier, so that the whole school could get out into the fresh air on fine days, and rest on wet days.

It was a concession that nobody had expected—but there was one drawback, in the eyes of the sporting enthusiasts. It was to be distinctly understood that no exercises or training should take place during that hour. It was to be simply and purely for rest. On all ordinary days the school was ordered to relax completely between three-thirty and four-thirty. Cricket and other sports were prohibited.

"That's a bit steep, you know," said Reggie Pitt dubiously.

"But we can't grumble," said Dick Hamilton. "We've won the day. The Head means to have no more madness in the school! With this hour of freedom in the afternoon we can ease up the pressure a bit. And it'll certainly do us an enormous amount of good."

"Rather," said Fullwood, nodding. "On the quiet, we can use that hour for swotting, and then have tea in peace, leaving the whole evening free for cricket. And the Marathon's safe, too. Good egg!"

By the Saturday, the interest in the Marathon had reached fever heat. It was to be a go-as-you-please race, with an enormous number of entrants. The distance was not strictly in accordance with the older rules, for the course was only a circular fifteen miles. But it was likely to prove a grim test of endurance.

Only a small percentage of the competitors would finish. That was a certainty, in spite of the large number of entrants. Fortunately, the weather was cool and cloudy, with a breeze blowing in from the coast. A really hot June day would have made the race a gruelling ordeal.

The start was a lively affair. It seemed as though the entire school was taking part. The playing-fields were simply crowded with white figures, but there were plenty there to cheer the fellows as they started. The first mile was across country—straight over the meadows. By the end of that mile the dense

pack would have sorted itself out, and could take to the highway.

Handforth, of course, was confident of victory. But he had been spending too much of his time with the new car, and instead of training during the latter part of the week he had slacked. His optimism was supreme, and he was certain that he would be the first home.

His surprise, therefore, was great when his minor surged coolly and resolutely past him in the third mile. By this time Edward Oswald was puffed and tired. Now that it was too late he realised that he ought to have put in more time at training.

The runners were strung out in one huge procession along the Bannington Road, the course being through the outskirts of the town, and then round by the country lanes through Edgemore and on to the moorland, and so by a roundabout course to St. Frank's again.

Just near Bannington, Handforth halted suddenly. Church and McClure were loyally with him, reserving their bursts of speed until the last five miles. But now they pulled up short.

"By George," said Handforth breathlessly, "I've got an idea."

Church glared.

"Is this a place to think of ideas?" he asked tartly.

"You chaps buzz on—never mind me," said Handforth. "Look! Here's one of the local motor-buses coming! It's going straight through Bellton to Caistowe, and it'll take me back in ten minutes—"

He broke off without finishing his explanation, and leapt on the motor-bus as it passed. There was a service of these buses between Bannington and Caistowe during the summer-time, although they only went hourly.

Handforth had apparently abandoned the race, for an altogether better scheme had taken possession of him. After all, why should he bother? He had wisely come to the conclusion that he stood no chance. And riding in his Austin Seven was much better than trotting along this fifteen-mile course and getting footsore and weary.

His plan was to bring out his little car and follow up the runners, and then be in at the finish. He would encourage the leaders, and spur them on to victory. In fact, he'd use the Austin Seven to pace the leading chaps!

And, sure enough, Handforth carried out his plan. He reached St. Frank's, rushed round to the garages, and whipped out the little Austin. Within a minute he was scooting down the lane. He seemed to take all sorts of reckless chances, but he bore a charmed life. And after a stern chase, he picked up the stragglers, and wended his way through them with uncanny skill.

"I'm jiggered if that fathead isn't butting in with his giddy Austin!" gasped Church, as Handforth swept by. "Hi, Handy!

Haven't you got more sense than to mess up the race—"

But Handforth had passed on. As he proceeded he yelled encouragement to the panting runners. He was now going sedately, so that there was no possibility of running anybody down. According to strict orders, they were keeping well to the left of the road.

"Come on, you chaps!" roared Handforth. "Follow me!"

"Great Scott!" said Fullwood. "He's pacing us!"

And, certainly, the Austin Seven was a wonderful encouragement. It seemed much easier to run with that little car purring along just ahead. Gradually, Handforth grew to the leaders in the race, and, to his astonishment Archie Glenthorne was among the first twelve—and the tape was only two miles ahead!

"Good old Archie!" boomed Handforth. "You'll win, old son! I'm jiggered if you haven't got more stamina than all the rest put together!"

He drove right ahead, and then accommodated his pace to the leaders—shouting encouragement continuously. And when the final burst came, Handforth increased his pace.

And Archie Glenthorne surged out of the rank and file, and drew ahead. But Reggie Pitt and Dick Hamilton and Bob Christine gave him a hard battle. They all fought gamely for the honours.

But Archie won.

Amazingly enough, Archie won! He was only a bare yard ahead of Dick Hamilton, with Pitt and Clapson—who had come up unexpectedly—tying for third place. It was one more proof that Archie Glenthorne was an exceedingly dark horse.

By the time that night fell, the Head was feeling distinctly pleased. The whole school was settling down, and all signs of "madness" had passed. Thus ended the biggest rag that St. Frank's had ever known!

("Handforth to the Rescue!" is the title of next Wednesday's long, complete yarn of St. Frank's. It tells of the Third Schoolboy Test Match, and of Handy's reckless ride to save the game for England. Don't miss this rollicking story!)

THE END.

.....

NEXT WEDNESDAY

HANDFORTH TO THE RESCUE!





BETWEEN OURSELVES

Mr Edwy Searles Brooks
chats to his readers



NOTE.—If any reader writes to me I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed to EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Flectway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Every letter will be acknowledged in these columns, and if of very special merit will be starred.

E. S. B.

“What! Has this thing appeared again?”—SHAKESPEARE.

* * *

It's a bit thick, hurling Shakespeare at your heads in the very first line, but I think that quotation is rather appropriate. This little confidential chat of mine hasn't worried you since January 16th, and to tell you the truth I'm absolutely afraid to dig out the huge pile of letters which calls for acknowledgement. Well, “calls” is scarcely an adequate term. For a month or two they fairly yelled at me, indignantly demanding to be dragged out of the drawer and dealt with. But more recently they have only been moaning slightly, having practically given up the struggle. Still, they're not dead—and while there's life there's hope.

* * *

When this feature was first introduced, I promised everybody that their letters would be acknowledged, without any SINGLE exception. Of course, heaps of you have been saying that that was all spooft, and that I'm a sort of swindler, only worthy of being cast into the deepest dungeon 'neath the castle moat. But if that happened to me, how the dickens do you think you'd get your summer series? I've written these St. Frank's yarns in all sorts of rummy places, at one time or another, but I rather draw the line at dungeons. Besides, you'll get those acknowledgements yet. Fact! I can see a few of you smiling in a sceptical kind of way, but this is honest Injun. I'll deal with quite a few letters this week, and then gradually work off the remainder.

* * *

Anybody who writes to me now can expect to see a reply in about six weeks. Some of the impatient readers expect to see their names in these columns within seven days of writing, and, of course, that's all tommyrot! It simply can't be done. Why, do you know that I get letters from Australia and New Zealand, and their writers cheerfully express themselves willing to wait SIX MONTHS for their answers! Quite a lot of home readers have been waiting six

months, too, owing to the non-appearance of this feature during the past four months—but I wouldn't like to say they've been willing to wait!

* * *

We've had all sorts of changes since I last gossiped with you, the chief one being the increased size, with bigger type. But you needn't think the Editor is going to stop here. There are all sorts of things—good things—coming along, among them being that Sectional Map of St. Frank's and District. You know, the one I promised for the autumn. Of course, YOU thought I meant last autumn, didn't you? Naturally, I meant next autumn, and if Christmas comes along and the map hasn't appeared, I shall still mean next autumn. (My hat! Hasn't this E. S. B. chap got a colossal nerve!) I thought I'd better make some reference to the map in this chat, or you'd think I'd forgotten all about it. Whatever you do, don't slang the Editor. He doesn't deserve it, because the fault's all mine. Until I supply the intricate particulars for that map, he can't possibly prepare it. But I've been so tremendously busy with these Test Match stories, and now I'm so hard at work on the summer yarns to follow, that I'm blessed if I can squeeze out the time. Still, I'll manage it soon, so don't worry. And I know that you'll forgive me. By the way, when I say “soon,” I mean—well, soon! You know, some time between now and when Handy goes up into the Fifth.

* * *

By the way, about this bigger type. I seem to remember that lots of you wrote to me and complained of eye-strain. Some of you said that you had to read the Old Paper on the quiet, because your parents objected to the small print. I'd like to have your views on the change. And if some of you know some old readers who gave up the paper because of the small type—well, just give them the tip, will you? They probably don't know anything about these ripping changes of the Editor's. And while you're about it, why not go in for a regular

boosting day? Just put one day apart—say next Saturday—and whoever you speak to (it doesn't matter if it's your Form-master, or your office-chief, or the milkman, or the sweep, or the greengrocer), just shove in a good old word about the N. L. L. How about it? Supposing we fix on next Saturday for certain? Make it a wholesale boosting day for the Old Paper. Is that settled? Good!

* * *

Now for some of those acknowledgements. E. V. Hall (Newcastle, N.S.W.); Weary Willy (Sydney); Rex Bruggy (Horsham, Victoria); George Roach (Windsor, Victoria); Coral Island (Kilkenny, South Australia); J. Wattes (Grafton, N.S.W.); Ida Brand (Frinton-on-Sea); The Two J.'s (Glasgow); F. L. S. (Rathmines); Eric Roy Derrington* (Weston-super-Mare); Loyal - But - Discontented-Reader (Hornsey); A. J. Southway (South Farnboro'); Eric Gamble (Wisbech); A. W. Ward (Bexhill); W. E. Wetton (Heckington); H. Cobb (Hanwell); Ronald Hodgson (Brixton); Ena Jenkins (Detroit, U.S.A.); Harry Hibbert (Manchester); R. Firkins (Tewkesbury); A Girl Supporter (Blackburn); W. E. Kieser (Penrith); Kenneth Waterhouse (Blackburn); Glesca A. Keely (Sydney).

* * *

Right you are, E. V. Hall, I plead guilty to the charge. Talking about Clarence Fellowe, you say he's had a long rest, and that he ought to pop up with some of his best poetic talk. I'll see that he soon does some popping. But that impulsive beggar, Handforth, persists in pushing himself to the front, and a lot of these other chaps, like Fellowe and Bertie Onions and Jarrow and T. T. get neglected. I do the best I can with Handy, but I can give you my word he's a tough customer. Sometimes I sit down with the firm intention of pushing Edward Oswald right into the background, and Willy still farther, but before I know where I am I'm hanged if the pair of them aren't right on the page in front of me. You wouldn't believe what a wrestle I have every week.

* * *

So you want a summer series dealing with discovery, Eric Roy Derrington? H'm! I'm not so sure about that, but I can faithfully promise you that old Dorrie and Umlosi will be to the fore, and that the party will go to a quarter of the globe that they've NEVER been to before.

I should like to quote one of the other letters, and I hope you won't think I'm seeking a little cheap advertisement. The general tone of the letter is such that it might be very helpful to some of you whose parents fail to understand the characteristics of Our Paper. I am not printing the writer's name and address, but he will undoubtedly recognise his words, and I should very much like him to give me permission to use the

letter again without omitting his identity and whereabouts. It would be very helpful, too, if all readers who have no objection to such publicity would mention the fact in a postscript. Here's the letter I refer to:

"Dear Mr. Brooks,—

"I feel I must write to you about your excellent yarns in The St. Frank's Library (Nelson Lee). I have read them ever since they first came out, and it was the book that I had been looking for for years. You will appreciate how I have deliberated the contents when I tell you I am a married man with four children, ALL boys. I hope my lads will read your stories when they become eligible. My eldest is six and a half years, and youngest nine months. I am thirty-one years old. It will seem rather funny to you, that, being so old as this, I should take an interest in Dick Hamilton & Co., but, you see, the tales are so really true to life, and one can never tell how they are going to end. And such CLEAN reading and healthy enjoyment in them! Often I read passages from the tales to my wife dealing with Archie Glen-thorne's quaint language, and she laughs with me.

"You will see I have enclosed one of my billheads to show you I am a business man. I REALLY THINK THAT YOUR BOOK OUGHT TO BE IN EVERY HOME WHERE THERE ARE BOYS; THE INFLUENCE THROUGH THE TALES IS SO EXCELLENT. This is the first time I have written you, and my fervent hope is that you will make St. Frank's immortal, and that you will let me read the stories when I have grown a beard.

"Yours Most Faithfully."

I should like to make a weekly feature of publishing at least one letter, such as the above—although sometimes the tone of it may be severely critical, and not full of such undeserved praise as the above. I need hardly repeat that this letter is quite genuine, and I earnestly hope that it may have some good effect when submitted to doubting parents.

* * *

Well, although I wanted to say a lot more, I'm at the end of my space, so I shall have to leave another batch of acknowledgements until next week. Oh, by the way—don't forget what I suggested about next Saturday!

E. S. B.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE.

Owing to lack of space, it has been impossible to publish the application form this week. It will appear again in next Wednesday's issue.

“THEY’RE OFF!”

An interesting chat
about the Derby.

THE blue riband of the racing world in every way—from the point of view of owner, trainer, and jockey, is the Derby, the greatest of the English classic races and the greatest horse race in the world. So famous and so great a tradition has the Derby become that the name is a household word, and when we want to speak of any sporting event that arouses particularly keen excitement we call it a “Derby.” Thus we have “local Derbys” when neighbouring football teams meet, the Irish Derby, aerial Derbys, and so on, and even the Americans have borrowed the word.

Singularly enough, although the race is named after the famous sporting lord who instituted it 144 years ago, and although there is a Lord Derby’s representative in the race every year, it was 138 years until the race was won again by a Lord Derby. It was a very near thing in 1923 when Mr. Ben Irish’s Papyrus just defeated Lord Derby’s Pharos. For a great part of the race it was a thrilling tussle between Mr. Irish’s horse and Pharos, but in the end, largely owing to Donoghue’s superb jockeyship, Papyrus raced home in front of Lord Derby’s horse.

In the Derby, more perhaps than in any other race, jockeyship tells. The Epsom course is a difficult one, and none but the most practised jockeys can hope to do it with anything like ease.

The course is a mile and a half long, so that the distance alone demands a well-trained horse. Starting in a kind of hollow, the horses have an uphill gallop for half a mile, then along the level, followed by a steep descent to Tattenham Corner—that famous landmark and test of both horse and jockey. There is a sharp swing round here, still downhill, and then they are in the straight again, and for half a mile we have the final fight to the stands and the winning-post. This last half-mile has seen some thrilling struggles; oft-times the result has been in doubt almost to the last second. The whole race makes a great demand on the resources of the jockey, and is a terrific strain for him. That is why there is almost as much trouble taken in the selection of the jockey as in the training of the horse, and why there is so much consternation when the jockeys of the favourite horses are changed or in doubt just before the race.

An example of the triumph of jockeyship was the Derby a few years ago, when Craigan-Eran would probably have won had not Donoghue, with wonderful skill, beaten him on Humorist.

Only one jockey—Robinson—has won more Derbys than Donoghue. R. Arnall, Clift, Buckle, Fred Archer, and Steve Donoghue have each won five, and S. Arnall, W. Scott,

and John Watts four each, but “Steve” is the only one to have won three in succession.

A notable case of jockeyship winning the day was the 1907 Derby, when Johnny Reiff, the American, on Orby, won a very trying race—it was known as the Helter Skelter Derby—by his coolness.

One of the best-known jockeys that have ever lived, Tod Sloan, came over from America with a big reputation about thirty years ago, but although he rode in several Derbys, he never won. In 1898 he boasted that had not his mount, Holocaust, fallen at a critical part of the race and broken a fetlock, he would certainly have won.

The 1898 Derby, by the way, was won by Flying Fox, with Morny Cannon up, a horse that was sold two years later by the Duke of Westminster for 37,500 guineas.

A very different kind of jockey from Tod Sloan was Fordham, who rode Sir Bevys to victory for Mr. Leopold de Rothschild, in 1879. Mr. de Rothschild, who was an excellent judge of a jockey, asked Fordham to ride, but the jockey refused, saying that he wasn’t nearly good enough to ride a Derby winner, and suggesting the names of other jockeys. It was a long time before the owner could overcome Fordham’s modesty and persuade him to ride.

Perhaps the most notable of Derby jockeys for the last fifty years was Fred Archer. He was really an ideal jockey for the great race, for his nerves were like iron, he was amazingly resourceful, and no one ever had better finishing powers.

One of his victorious Derbys—in 1880—was won in a rather peculiar way. Robert the Devil, with Rossiter up, was making the running, and looked a likely winner, but when it was near the judge’s box it looked round, so gave Archer, on Bend Or, the chance to dash in front and win by a head.

Another desperate finish of Archer’s, in the early ’eighties, was when he won on Lord Hastings’ Melton, beating Paradox by a head. His easiest victory was with Ormonde, the following year.

There is a celebrated instance of an apprentice riding the winning horse in the Derby. It was in 1900, and King Edward’s horse, Diamond Jubilee, should have been ridden by the stable jockey, Mornington Cannon, but the horse took a dislike to Cannon, and refused to allow him to have anything to do with him, on one occasion even attacking him. So Herbert Jones, then an apprentice, was given the mount, and won the race, with Morny Cannon himself second on the Duke of Portland’s Simon Dale. Jones again won for King Edward on Minoru, in 1909, and has hopes of adding to his Royal victories by winning for King George before he retires.

SLASHER'S DERBY!

Nelson Lee and Nipper in an exciting topical story.



A thrilling complete yarn of the world's greatest horse race.

CHAPTER 1.

THE FAVOURITE CROCKED.

MRS. JONES, the buxom housekeeper who ruled the house in Gray's Inn Road, greeted Nipper with a stare that made his cheerful whistle droop and fade away.

"And this is a nice time to come down to breakfast, Master Nipper," she said, and her lips closed like a mouse-trap.

"It's the nicest time of the day," Nipper agreed, with a doubtful grin. "It's just the time when a chap's appetite is at its best—and a nice smile from a nice old lady'd make it better still!"

But Mrs. Jones was proof against even that bare-faced flattery. "The impudence I 'as to put up with is more than flesh and—" She stopped suddenly, as the jangle of the front-door bell echoed through the house. "That's another of 'em—always in a 'urry, and the way I 'as to drag me poor bones about is enough to wear me to a shadder, so it is."

"And this is where you get busy, my lad," Nipper muttered, as the housekeeper left the room. He knew these early morning callers—they always wanted to rush a chap off somewhere, they never seemed to think he wanted feeding.

"Gen'leman in the name of Allison to see Mr. Lee," Mrs. Jones said a moment later. "Suppose you'll do as 'e's away, so I've put 'im in the insulting room, I have, but it 'asn't been dusted yet—what with 'avin' to keep breakfast lying about 'arf the morning

But Nipper didn't wait to hear any more; he edged past her and hurried along to the consulting-room. As he opened the door, the visitor—a burly, sunburned chap—frowned as he saw it was not Nelson Lee himself who had entered.

"Mr. Lee's away, sir," Nipper exclaimed. "I'm expecting him home to-night—"

"Tut, tut, I ought to have telephoned."

the man snapped. "It looks as if I've given myself a useless journey."

"Well, Mr. Allison, I'm Mr. Lee's assistant, and I might be able to help you," Nipper answered. "If you care to tell me your trouble—"

"Um—it can't do any harm," Mr. Allison interrupted. "Perhaps you've heard of Bill Allison, of Lamdown Lodge, youngster?"

Nipper grinned.

"With the Derby only one day off and Allison's stable sheltering the hottest favourite for years, I've heard of you all right," he said.

"And it's about that same favourite I've rushed up here to see Mr. Nelson Lee," Allison answered. "If anything happens to Slasher, I'm a ruined man—and I'm beginning to wonder if he'll ever see the post."

"What d'you mean, sir?" Nipper asked, startled. "The nag only came over from Ireland yesterday—you don't mean to say anything's happened to him already?"

"It hasn't—yet," Allison snapped. "But that is no thanks to some beggars I'd like to lay hands on. Slasher only came over yesterday, as you say, but already the lad in charge of him is in hospital, and an attempt has been made to dope the animal!"

"Gosh! that's quick work!" Nipper gasped. "You mean some fellows want to spoil his chance—to stop him from running?"

"I'll tell you what's happened, lad," Mr. Allison said. "The Irish boy, O'Neill, wouldn't sleep in the house—he was that anxious to stay near the horse. He bedded down in a loft facing Slasher's box, and late last night he was roused by a noise in the yard. Jumping out of bed, he saw two men trying to get into the favourite's box. He fought 'em like a tiger, but before anyone could rush to his help they were off, and O'Neill was left stretched out with a broken head."

"And you think they'll come back to finish their rotten work?" Nipper asked.

"I'm certain of it," Mr. Allison answered.

"And I've a feeling that they'll be too clever for me—that's why I wanted the help of Nelson Lee, until to-morrow's race is over."

"He'll be home early this evening," Nipper explained. "But why not let me leave a note for him, then I'll come down with you and scout round until the gov'nor turns up."

The big trainer rubbed his chin, and smiled doubtfully. "But what do you know about horses, my lad?" he asked.

"Not enough to ride a Derby winner," Nipper grinned. "But I know a whole lot about crooks, and it's crooks that are making you uncomfortable, Mr. Allison. Besides, I'm not meaning to go into your stable. If you can trust the lads who have charge of Slasher, then any danger to him must come from outside—and that's where I'll be watching."

Mr. Allison hesitated, glanced at his watch, and nodded.

"Then come along," he said. "I've spent too much time away from the stable as it is. Slasher's due to have his final canter this afternoon—so hurry up, youngster."

There was no need to tell Nipper that. He was already scribbling out a note to the gov'nor, and, in another moment, he dashed upstairs and crammed a few things into a bag; then, warning Mrs. Jones not to expect him home "for a year or so," he ran out to the car in which Mr. Allison was impatiently waiting.

An hour later, Nipper left the car whilst it was still two miles from Lamdown Lodge, and began to tramp across the downs as if out on a days' tramp.

Working round in a big half-circle, he gradually neared the Lamdown stables, and found a convenient hiding-place in a thick clump of bushes, about two hundred yards away from Allison's house. He was now directly opposite the stable gates, and away on his right was the level trial stretch on which Allison usually exercised his nags.

There was not a soul in sight round the training quarters, so Nipper turned his attention to the place where Slasher would presently be on view. From Mr. Allison's description, he was able to pick out the posts that marked the measured mile, and he began to study every rise and fall of ground through the strong glasses he carried.

"If anyone tries to get at Slasher in the open, there's not much chance for him to hide about here," he muttered. "Let's see—the course the nags will take sweeps round this hillock I'm on, turns sharp round by that little wood, then away they come for home. Um—don't see that much harm can happen, though a couple of chaps could easily hide in the wood."

But, though he watched every tree and shrub in the place for nearly an hour, there was not the least sign of life; in fact, Nipper began to wonder if he had all this part of the world to himself. The only moving thing he saw during the next two hours was a big motor-driven furniture-van slowly passing along the distant high-road, and vanishing behind the wood he had so closely studied. Beyond that very ordinary sight there was nothing of interest, and he was nearly asleep

on the velvety turf when the gates of Lamdown opened.

Focussing his glasses, Nipper watched five thoroughbreds come in single file through the gateway, ridden by lads in riding-breeches and sweaters. Behind them rode big Bill Allison and a wizened little man whom Nipper guessed was Jerry Reekes, the forty year-old head "lad."

From Mr. Allison's description, Nipper had no difficulty in picking out all-black Slasher—the Derby favourite, and about the hottest order Ireland had ever sent over. He strode over the turf as daintily as if treading on eggs, and now and again he flung his handsome head up as though wanting to set off and show what he could do.

"Gosh! but he's a beauty!" Nipper murmured. "He's a coat like black satin—there's not a white hair on him. If he goes as good as he looks he has the Derby in his pocket. Hallo, they're off!"

Nipper knew that he was not witnessing a secret trial, or anything so exciting. It was simply a final "breather" for Slasher, before the great race next day. But the instant Allison had the five horses in line the Derby favourite fairly danced to be away; and, when the trainer finally signalled the lads the off, Slasher shot ahead before they had covered the first furlong.

Then Nipper witnessed a most amazing sight. Slasher suddenly seemed to go mad—he raced along at a speed that left the other four trailing far behind, and he shot straight into the thickly timbered wood before any of the onlookers really understood what was happening!

Both horse and jockey were swallowed from sight in an instant. Allison let out a great roar of fury, dug spurs into his hack and dashed for the spot where Slasher had vanished. It took the trainer about thirty seconds to reach the place, but before he could dive in amongst the trees the Derby favourite reappeared, looking none the worse for his strange fit of madness.

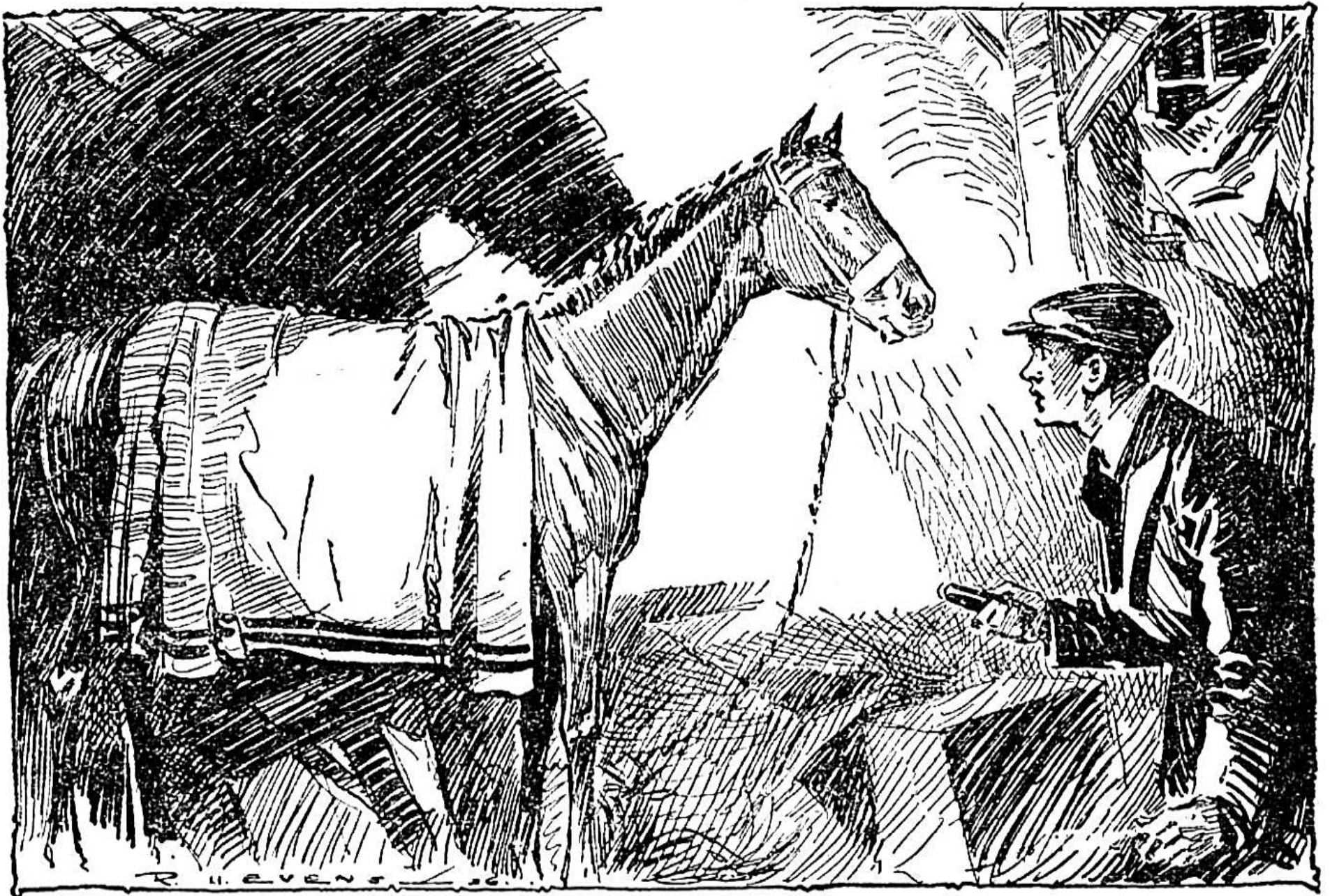
"Crikey! the old man's not half putting that apprentice through it," Nipper muttered. "Hallo—he's tumbling the chap off the nag and ordering Jerry Reekes up instead. He means to finish the course, though—here they come—but, oh, my hat! what's got the brute now?"

Nipper might well ask, though there was no one to answer him. Slasher, who had been so full of life a minute earlier, now loped along with hanging head, and looked less like a Derby candidate than a ten-year-old cab horse!

For a time, Allison hung on the brute's tail, flicking it with his hunting-crop, doing all he could to stir some life into it; but, when he was within ten yards of Nipper's hiding-place, he gave up in despair and curtly ordered Reekes to pull up.

"That fool Bryant's damaged the brute, somehow," he said, his face white with fury. "It's good-bye to the Derby, Reekes, and heaven only knows what Sir Gregory O'Brian will say when he sees his horse to-morrow."

"Never seen the likes of it before," Reekes



The big black horse looked round and whinnied as the light from Nipper's torch fell on him. In that tumble-down, dilapidated shed the stolen Derby favourite looked very much out of place.

grunted, dropping to the ground and beginning to examine the nag. "Tisn't as if Bryant didn't know how to handle a 'orse—he's ridden too many winners to let a playful three-year-old break away like this 'un did."

"We'll talk to Bryant later," Allison snapped. He ran his hand down Slasher's legs, looked the horse over from head to tail, and finally turned to Reekes with a puzzled frown. "It's queer—but there isn't a mark on the beast."

"Maybe he's knocked his head a clout on some tree-trunk," Reekes suggested.

"It's a case for the vet., anyway," Allison said impatiently. "Bring him in, Reekes, and we'll see what Bryant has to say about it."

Nipper was surprised that neither of the men showed any wish to examine the place that Slasher had barged into with such disastrous results. Then he guessed that all their thoughts were centred in the hope of someone getting the favourite fit again for to-morrow's race—they simply hadn't time to think of anything beyond that one tremendous problem.

"And that's enough to keep them busy, young 'un," a voice whispered, as if in echo to his own thoughts.

Nipper jumped—then turned a startled face to the speaker. "Cæsar's ghost!" he gasped. "How did you get here, gov'nor—and how on earth did you nose me out so easily?"

"Came by car—and saw a boot sticking out of this bush," Nelson Lee said tersely. "No, don't call Allison. We'll let him know I'm

here—after we've examined that interesting bit of forest."

CHAPTER 2.

THE STOLEN FAVOURITE!

AS soon as the Lodge gates had closed behind the trainer and his lads, Nelson Lee and Nipper made a bee-line for the little wood. They had no difficulty in picking up Slasher's trail, for the clear dents from his shoes made tracking easy.

"The horse was supposed to be out of control, but you'll notice that he entered the wood just where the trees are thinnest," Nelson Lee said dryly. "Look, young 'un, we're in a fairly narrow path, but Slasher has paced down its exact middle—without breaking a twig off a single tree."

"It looks as if jockey Bryant had him pretty well in hand," Nipper said.

"I never had the slightest doubt of that," Nelson Lee answered calmly. "See how carefully Slasher's been turned into this thicket—and, yet—here's where he brought the horse round, and made for the open again."

"No, he didn't, gov'nor," Nipper cried, scouting ahead. "Here's the hoof-prints still going on!"

But Nelson Lee had already spotted the double trail and was down on his knees beside them. For over a minute he studied the prints in silence, then looked up with a cold smile.

"There have been two horses here, not one,"

he said quietly. "They've been brought together on this spot—and the one that Bryant rode into the wood is not the one he took out again!"

"Gosh, gov'nor, you mean he swopped horses while he was hidden from our sight?" Nipper gasped. "But we saw Slasher dive into the wood, and we saw Slasher come out again—we must believe what our own eyes tell us, gov'nor."

"That's exactly what I am doing," Nelson Lee snapped. "Slasher's hoof-prints stand out as clear as if stamped in hot metal—you can see it has blurred the print every time that hoof has been put down."

Nipper could, indeed, see that, and in wondering silence he followed the gov'nor along Slasher's trail for another twenty paces—until the little wood came to an abrupt end beside a sunk cart-track!

But there was neither horse nor man in sight, and a quick search of the entire wood showed that they had the place to themselves. Then Nipper remembered something—and could have kicked himself for not thinking of it earlier.

"My hat, gov'nor—the furniture van!" he gasped.

"What d'you mean, Nipper?" Nelson Lee asked quickly.

"Why, I saw a motor-driven furniture-van coming along the high-road over an hour ago," Nipper confessed miserably. "It vanished behind this patch of trees, but I didn't take much notice—I thought it was going on. But if it hid here, then the Slasher's been carried away in it—and I've been as blind as a bat!"

"You couldn't foresee this amazing theft, Nipper, and a furniture van is a common enough sight," Nelson Lee said quietly. "But you are probably right—Slasher's miles away by now, and Allison is housing a useless screw that looks like the favourite's twin brother."

"But it seems almost impossible, gov'nor," Nipper protested. "Surely Allison and Reekes know their own nags—"

"You forget that Slasher has only been with Allison since yesterday," Nelson Lee said. "Horses almost exactly alike are not uncommon, and the only fellow who really knew the nag is in hospital. But we're wasting time, young 'un, and we've got to get on the track of that van quickly."

Jumping down into the cart-track, they followed the marks of heavy wheels with ease until the high-road was reached. The white, chalky mud from the track showed which way the van had turned; but that soon gave out, and the pursuers were left guessing.

"The village of Chelley lies a mile along this road," Nelson Lee said, as they strode swiftly on. "We'll go that far and try our luck; but, if the van has not gone through there, then we must return to Allison and question that lad of his."

"Why not try Bryant now, gov'nor?" Nipper asked. "He could lead us straight to the fellow who's played this trick, if only he could be made to speak."

"No, we'll leave Bryant alone if we possibly can," Nelson Lee answered. "The

moment the rumour gets out that Slasher has been stolen the fellows responsible will kill or cripple the animal. We've not only to find Slasher—we've got to get him back to Allison uninjured, if there's any way of doing so."

They entered Chelley soon afterwards, but for nearly an hour their cautious inquiries brought no result. Then Nipper got chatting to a garage boy and learned that he had filled the tank of a furniture van with petrol several hours before.

"Fellers must ha' been potty," the lad grinned. "Heard 'em say they must be at Hoggett's Farm by six o'clock—then I'm hanged if they didn't take the road for London when I'd filled 'em up wi' juice."

"Well, why shouldn't they take the road to London—I guess they knew what they were doing?" Nipper said, in a challenging way.

"But they didn't, mister clever," the lad grinned. "I told 'em Hoggett's was down by Haslemere. I knowed that 'cos I come from those parts myself."

"And I suppose they told you to mind your own business?" Nipper laughed.

"They did that," the village youngster agreed. "But I 'ad th' last laugh—for I saw 'em trailin' back 'ardly an hour since, an' a fine time they'd wasted 'fore they found out their mistake."

Nipper agreed, and dashed back to the village post-office, where Nelson Lee was busy 'phoning to Allison.

"Where's Haslemere, gov'nor?" Nipper asked—and told his news before Nelson Lee could reply.

"Um—you've done well, Nipper, for that van is almost certainly the one we want," he said. "Haslemere is on the borders of Sussex—a lonely country district, and a fifty-mile ride from here." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment, then: "Best thing we can do is to get a car over from Woking and drive straight away for Hoggett's farm."

They fed at the village inn, arrived at Haslemere towards dusk, and were told that Hoggett's farm lay two miles further on. Paying off the taxi a quarter of a mile from the place, they were finishing the journey on foot, and beginning to wonder if they had passed the farm in the darkness, when a big closed car drew up less than fifty yards ahead.

"Hang back—that must be the farm," Nelson Lee whispered. "Give the fellow time to get inside, young 'un."

They watched a thick-set, elderly man descend from the car and hurry up the rough path that led to a cluster of whitewashed buildings. Then they heard a murmur of voices, the door closed on the fellow, and Nelson Lee forced a way through the hedge that bordered the road.

There was one window in the place, but this was shut and curtained and gave no hint of what was going on within. Whispering to Nipper to follow him, Nelson Lee crept round the buildings and listened carefully until he was sure they had this side to themselves; then, pushing the blade of his penknife between the framework of a kitchen window, he

forced back the crazy catch, and gently raised the lower panes.

"I'm going in alone, young 'un, for two of us will only double the risk of detection," he whispered. "Give me a leg up—and while I'm inside, you scout round these outhouses for traces of the van." He threw a leg over the ledge, then bent again to the youngster. "And if you find anything, Nipper, no tricks—you'll just wait quietly about until I come out again."

"Right-ho, guv'nor," Nipper grinned.

He waited until Nelson Lee had gently closed the window, then turned to his own task. He carried a torch, for he had expected to spend the night prowling round Allison's stables, it will be remembered. Armed with this, he made for a big barn that stood thirty yards back from the house, and cautiously tried the door.

It gave to his touch, but the first glance showed that it held nothing beyond farm implements and a huge tub half-filled with black dye.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "Slasher and his twin are as black as my hat—Slasher's real black, but I wonder if this tub has helped to colour the twin?"

The stuff had splashed on the walls, and little rivers of it had dried on the ground. But Nipper realised that all the guessing in the world would do him no good, so he gave the barn up as a bad job and looked round for the next likely place to examine.

He soon made out the dark lines of a smaller shed, lying at the far end of a sloping field. Hurrying to this, he found that a rusty key had been left in the lock and, in a moment, he had the door open.

"Gosh, that village kid was dead right!" he gasped. "Here's old Slasher himself—tucked away in a shed that isn't fit to house a Margate moke!"

The big black horse looked round at the sound of Nipper's voice and whinnied as if asking why he had been put in such a place. He seemed to be comfortable enough, but his quarters were very different to the wonderful stables from which he had been stolen. Nipper stood for a moment admiring the black beauty—then, happening to turn his head, he saw a lantern bobbing up and down, and rapidly drawing nearer!

"Cæsar's ghost!" he whispered. "Here's somebody coming straight for the shed. Don't know if he's seen me, but this is where I fade out."

There was only one thing to do, and Nipper quietly sidled out of the door and round the corner of the shed. From that dark spot he watched a sour-looking chap slouch up to the door, fling it open and shine his lantern into every corner.

"Lummy! I thought I heard somebody in the yard, an' when Slasher whinnied I was sure there was trouble about," he muttered. "Looks quiet enough here, though—but if ole Take knew as I'd left the door unlocked, 'e'd skin me for it. Anyhow, I'll soon see if

The voice was drowned by the click of the

..... MYSTERY !

"What's that!" gasped Nipper, In a corner near the ceiling sounded the ghostly tinkle of invisible bells. The sound faded and died away, to be succeeded by a hoarse laugh that ended in a devilish snigger.

"You heard that?" exclaimed the white-faced proprietor of the hotel. "That sort of thing is going on all over the building!"

Read how Nelson Lee and Nipper solved

"THE CASE OF THE HAUNTED HOTEL!"

.....NEXT WEDNESDAY!.....

lock; then, with a satisfied grunt, the fellow slouched back to the house.

At a distance of ten yards Nipper crept behind the chap. The mumbled words he had overheard warned Nipper that the fellow meant to make quite sure no unwelcome visitor was about—and, sure enough, he began to examine the back windows one by one.

The third one was that by which Nelson Lee had entered the house, and Nipper's heart jumped when the chap tried it and found that it opened to his touch.

"So me ears wasn't playin' tricks, after all," the fellow muttered. "I'd take me davy I locked these winders—there's somebody about—an' I gotter find 'im!"

CHAPTER 3.

NIPPER DISOBEYS ORDERS.

THOUGH Nipper had only heard a word here and there, the fellow's actions left the youngster in no doubt that Nelson Lee was in grave danger. Quietly closing the window, the chap took a thing from his hip-pocket that looked like a drum-stick—only, instead of the bulb being made of rubber, it was weighted with lead!

It was no time for paying strict obedience to the guv'nor's orders, and the moment the fellow crept through the yard door, Nipper had the window open again and scrambled into the dark room. He guessed that the chap's first job would be to lock the window he had found open, and Nipper risked a lightning flick of his torch—spotted a big padded couch, and was under it in a second!

He had hardly tucked his feet out of sight when the lantern threw a light into the room

and the chap strode in without making a sound. He was now minus his boots—he moved like a shadow, and, after catching the window, he put out the light he carried.

Nipper never knew when he left the room, so silently did he go. But the chance had to be taken, and the youngster at last crawled from his hiding-place—half expecting a blow from the fellow's weapon, but never pausing, once he found he had the place to himself.

Groping his way down a long, narrow lobby, Nipper heard the murmur of voices somewhere ahead, but muffled as though a wall separated him from the speakers. He had no idea where the fellow he was stalking had got to, but he shrewdly guessed that the guv'nor would not be far away from those who lived here, so he took a chance and crept towards the unknown speakers.

The narrow lobby presently took a sharp turn, and now the sound of raised voices grew louder and clearer. Fearing to blunder into the other searchers, he hesitated—and thanked his luck a second later.

Less than ten feet ahead, a thin line of light suddenly appeared. A door had opened—a quarter-inch only, but enough to show Nipper that it had been opened by the fellow he was pursuing, and to show him that same fellow crouching down and listening.

And now Nipper heard the guv'nor's voice—cold and cutting as sharpened steel. He was speaking to the rogues who had stolen Slasher—and he was not wasting time in mere politeness.

"I've had enough of your lies," Nelson Lee was saying. "I know you—Josh Crell and Wee Wills—and you're two of the dirtiest racecourse crooks in England. I want Slasher, the Derby favourite—and I want no more whining lies!"

The door opened another inch, and Nipper saw that the fellow crouching in its shadow had the loaded stick ready poised!

"I'm finkin' you've gone loopy, Mr. Lee," someone said huskily. "What for d'you think we'd want t' pinch any blinkin' 'orse—'specially one as we're expectin' to win us a packet, to-morrer?"

"Where is Slasher—for the last time!" Nelson Lee snapped. "You've been paid by Harley Tuke to do this dirty job, and it's Tuke and Slasher I'm after—not you, my lads. Come, be sens—"

Then several things happened at tornado speed. The crouching man flung open the door, and sprang to his feet with weapon raised arm-high! Nipper yelled and made a wild spring for the fellow's back—and an uproar broke out in the room!

The youngster's leap landed him clean on the fellow's shoulders, and he clung like a limpet! The man staggered, recovered, and aimed a murderous blow at Nelson Lee's head; but Nipper's hand made a lightning grab for the lead-tipped club as it swept downward—and though the club missed its mark the tremendous drive behind it brought both Nipper and his man crashing to the ground.

A quick glance showed that the guv'nor was fully occupied, and no help could be

expected from that quarter. Nelson Lee was armed, but it was never his way to shoot unless all other means had failed. At present he was fighting with his fists—and they were usually more than enough for even the hardest of rogues.

But Nipper was having no picnic—he was rolling about the floor, wrestling with every ounce of his strength for the stick and being kicked and stamped on by those three fighting above him. His man had one arm free and drove a big fist at Nipper's head; but Nipper saw the blow coming, ducked slightly, and heard the fellow's knuckles smash on a table-leg! The chap grunted and tried to break away, but Nipper clung like a monkey and for a time they strained and twisted about in silence!

Bewildered though he was with all the rumpus, Nipper heard a mighty thud land on some fellow's jaw, and the next moment a hurtling body crashed the table over and lay beside it, moaning dismally. The chap struggling with him on the floor redoubled his efforts, succeeded in getting on top of the youngster, and was lifting his club for a knock-out when he was grabbed by the collar and pitched half across the room.

Then Nipper was jolted to his feet, and a gun thrust into his hands.

"Shoot—if that fellow moves!" Nelson Lee cried. "I'll attend to this other beauty!"

All the fight had gone out of Nipper's assailant at the sight of the pointed gun, and without being asked he flung his hands on high as a sign of submission. Nipper grinned—and the grin widened as he heard three crisp blows, the thud of a falling body—and the voice of his guv'nor, as calm and unruffled as if he was admiring an exhibition bout!

"Now, my lads, the game's about played out, and I still want to know where Slasher is hidden?" Nelson Lee demanded.

"He's in a shed about half a field away," Nipper said quickly.

"Thanks, young 'un, for that and the knock-out you saved me from," Nelson Lee said quietly. "I don't think these fellows will give us any more trouble, so hand me the gun and see if you can find rope enough to make them nice and comfortable with."

There was a telephone in the place, and Nelson Lee was in touch with Trainer Allison ten minutes after the scrap ended.

"That you, Allison—good!" he said. "Yes, this is Nelson Lee speaking—yes, Nipper's here, and you can thank him that Slasher will run for you, to-morrow." He listened to Allison's reply with twinkling eyes. "No, I wouldn't dare to handle anything so delicate as a Derby favourite, so send your own lads down—we're at Hoggett's farm, beyond Haslemere." He listened again to the trainer, and his face hardened. "The fellows we've caught are simply the tools for Harley Tuke—the owner of Dundas, and a desperate gambler who is on the verge of ruin. Keep the news quiet, Allison, for we want no more attempts to crock Slasher—we'll attend to Tuke after the race is over."

At a quarter to three the following afternoon, Nelson Lee and Nipper were looking on a vastly different scene to that of Hoggett's dismal farm. Two hundred thousand people lined the Epsom course, and filled the air with a hum as if all the world's bees had collected in one spot.

From the high stand on which they stood, they watched the eighteen Derby candidates file out from the paddock, and Nipper's excitement increased when he spotted the all-black.

"There's Slasher, gov'nor—third out, and number ten on the card!" he yelled.

"Not so loud, young 'un," Nelson Lee warned. "Mr. Harley Tuke, the owner of Dundas, is just behind you, and he still thinks the screw he planted on Allison is being mistaken for the favourite. He looks upon Dundas as a certainty now—but, win or lose, there's two C.I.D. men standing and waiting behind him."

But Nipper wasn't interested in Tuke and his coming troubles. The youngster was all eyes for the course, as he watched Slasher lope past the stands and stream away to the starting-post.

His glasses were never off them as they twisted and turned and refused to face the tapes. The silk jackets of the jockeys flashed in the sunshine—it seemed as if they would never get off. A false start—another false start—then came the sound of the bell that told the waiting thousands that the greatest race in the world was now in full swing!

"Slasher's red jacket's lying fifth, gov'nor!" Nipper yelled. "Dundas leads—he's coming away miles in front of the others!"

"The race isn't over yet," Nelson Lee cried, for once almost as wound up as his lively assistant.

They were racing along the rise now.

Dundas was increasing his lead—Slasher had drawn up to third position. A rank outsider named Dragon was lying in between, and it was early seen that the verdict would be amongst these three.

Slasher was going superbly—but so was Dundas and the despised Dragon. Rounding the corner Dragon ran wide, and Slasher shot into second place.

Down the hill the pace was tremendous, and the roar of excited thousands sounded like the crash of angry waves beating on a rocky shore. They reached the bottom of the hill, and Dragon had fallen back—the race lay between Dundas and Slasher, with the odds on the crook's horse.

"Now—Slasher!" Nipper screamed, as if his life depended on the black hearing him. "He's coming, gov'nor—look! He's on Dundas' tail—he'll win, he'll win!"

Flash! They were past the post and the race had ended. But it was impossible to tell the winner from the stands. Till the numbers went up, every eye was fixed on the board.

"Number ten—and good old Slasher has it!" Nipper yelled—though his voice was unheard in the roaring cheers that were greeting the favourite's victory!

But the excitement had dropped from Nelson Lee—he was once again the cold, stern being whose job was to see that crime was punished. He turned to Harley Tuke and saw that the fellow was almost fainting with the shock of disappointment. Then his glance went past the defeated rogue—he nodded to two grim-faced fellows who stood behind the ruined gamester, and heavy hands fell on the fellow's shoulders!

THE END.

(Look out for another thrilling detective yarn next Wednesday: "THE CASE OF THE HAUNTED HOTEL!")

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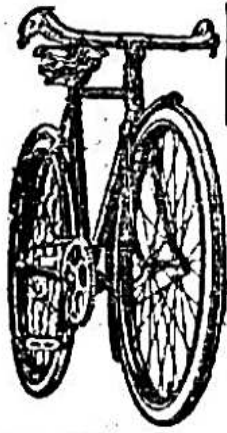
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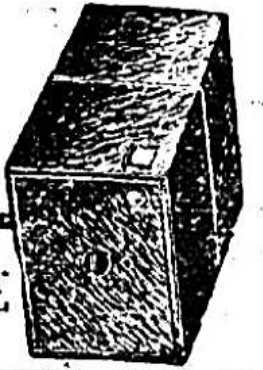
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