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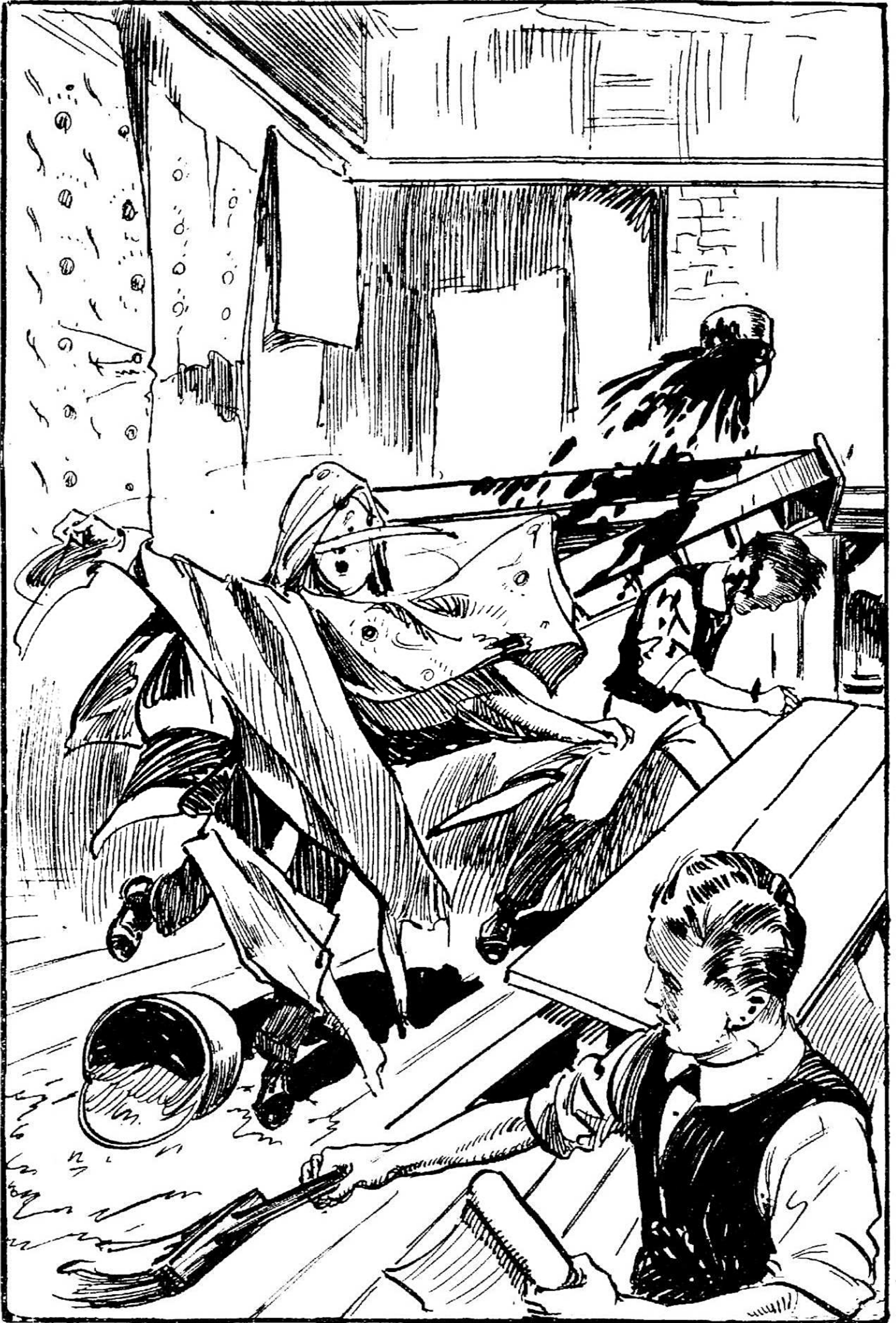


SPRING-CLEANING

AT

ST. FRANKS!

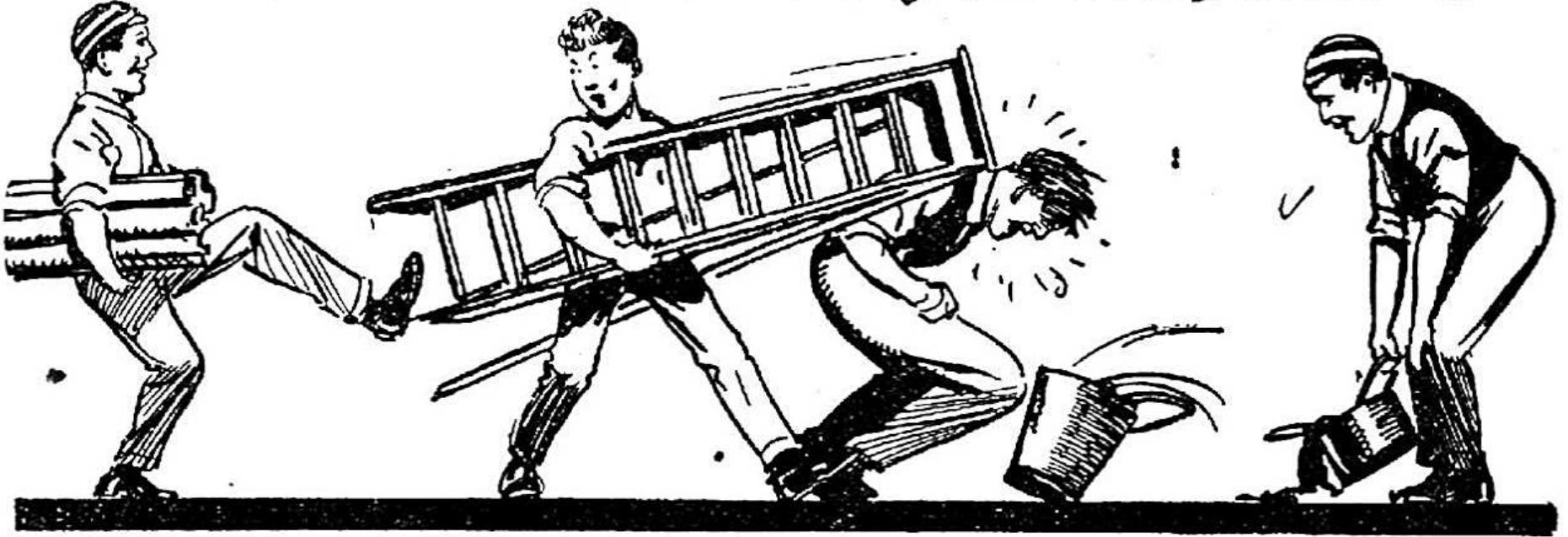
Handforth is funnier
than ever in this
week's lively long
complete school yarn.



Handforth gave a roar of alarm as—sending the ladder, a pot of paint, and a pail flying in all directions—he crashed to the floor, the strip of wallpaper clinging to him stickily. He was finding that paper-hanging wasn't quite so easy as it looked!

Handy Among the Paint and Paste!Complete in This Issue!

SPRING-CLEANING AT ST. FRANK'S!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

Handforth & Co. redecorate Study D. A side-splitting story of the famous Boys of St. Frank's.

CHAPTER 1.

AFTER THE FLOOD!

“EXTRAORDINARY!”

The old gentleman came to a halt opposite the Caistowe Town Hall, and gazed fixedly over the tops of his glasses at a party of boys which was making its way across the square.

“Extraordinary!” repeated the old gentleman, in amazement.

A police constable, strolling by, came to a halt. He followed the old gentleman's gaze, but could not see anything to warrant this behaviour. The policeman bent a suspicious eye on the old gentleman.

“Anything wrong, sir?” he asked tentatively.

The old gentleman pointed.

“Tell me,” he said, “where are those boys from?”

“St. Frank's College, I think, sir.”

“Then I am amazed—literally astounded!” declared the old gentleman. “I have always understood that St. Frank's College was one of England's greatest public schools—a seat of learning for the sons of noblemen and gentlemen.”

“Beg pardon, sir?” said the constable, staring.

“And now,” continued the old gentleman, in an aggrieved voice, “I see that this—this much vaunted St. Frank's is merely a ragged school! I have never been so surprised in my life! I am shocked—I am dumb-founded!”

The constable allowed a slow grin to spread over his ample features. Eyeing the group of St. Frank's juniors, he felt compelled to agree with the old gentleman. Seldom had he seen such a gang of young scarecrows. It is not too much to say that they were marring the view.

“It ain't so bad as you think, sir,” said the constable, with the air of one who knows. “Them boys don't always dress like that. It's the flood, sir. That's what's done it!”

“The flood?” repeated the old gentleman, with a start. “Ah, yes, to be sure! But even now I cannot understand—”

“I don't exactly know the right of it, sir, but I believe them boys was cut off from the school, or something,” said the policeman. “I did hear that they'd just come off a couple o' barges, but that don't seem quite reason-

able. Anyhow, you mustn't judge by appearance, sir. Everything's a bit rummy just now, after the flood. You can take it from me, sir, that the St. Frank's boys is usually as smart as they make 'em!"

The old gentleman removed his glasses and polished them.

"I am greatly relieved," he said contentedly. "It is disturbing to have one's preconceived ideas so utterly shattered. You have eased my mind enormously, officer—enormously."

He pressed half a crown into the policeman's hand, and toddled off.

"Barmy!" said the policeman.

Across the square, the party of St. Frank's fellows remained sublimely unconscious of the perturbation they had just caused in the heart of at least one Caistowe citizen. They continued on their way to the railway station equally unconscious of the fact that they were the direct cause of a piece of silver changing hands.

There were twenty of them—mostly Remove fellows, but with a sprinkling of Fourth and Third Formers. In a word, they comprised the late crews of the barges Araminta and Penelope. And when it came to a question of appearance, they were rather a discredit to the noble order of bargees. In fact, no self-respecting bargee would have appeared publicly in such a condition.

Most of the juniors were wearing Eton suits. But they were torn, tattered, stained, shrunken, creased and horrible caricatures of their former glory. The tailors who had made them, could they have gazed upon the juniors at this moment, would have taken months to recover.

The general effect was not improved by the fact that hardly anyone wore collars, and those who did wear collars looked far worse than those who didn't. For a collar, when it gets to a certain degree of grubbiness, is a liability instead of an asset. All in all, these St. Frank's fellows were the last word in disreputableness.

"Come on, Handy—don't lag behind!" said Church anxiously.

"Yes, Handy, let's keep moving!" urged Dick Hamilton. "Haven't you noticed how the people are staring at us?"

"Staring at us?" repeated Edward Oswald Handforth.

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"You know it's dangerous for you to go out in public!" said Reggie Pitt.

"Dangerous?" repeated Handforth, in amazement.

"Your fatal beauty, old man—your handsome, classic, Apollo-like——"

"You howling fathead!" roared Handforth, turning red.

"Oh, dry up!" said Dick impatiently.

"I'll dry up when I please!" retorted Handforth.

"Better leave him alone, Nipper," said Church. "It's fatal to get him started in a public street——"

"This funny idiot, Reginald Pitt, has insulted me!" said Handforth, coming to a halt in the middle of the pavement, and blocking all the traffic. "I don't want to be nasty, but I'm going to bash him in the eye!"

Archie Glenthorne placed himself in front of Handforth, and the glassy, haunted expression which had previously dwelt in his eyes now became a feverish look of appeal.

"Laddie, kindly desist!" he said huskily. "Remember our frightful condish! The populace sheers off at our approach—even the dogs run as they view us from the offing. I mean to say, the absolute thing to do just now is to slide with some speed into the grateful obscurity of the railway station."

Handforth stared.

"What's the matter with us?" he asked blankly.

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie. "Doesn't he know?"

"Know what?"

"Dear old soul, I may be foul and poisonous to gaze upon, but I venture to suggest that I'm absolutely natty compared to you," replied Archie earnestly and tensely. "Not two minutes ago a pair of worthy citizens gave us one look and shied—absolutely shied! I mean, absolutely like horses! It caused the good old spine to loop the loop!"

"Yes, I noticed 'em!" said Reggie Pitt, nodding sympathetically. "They were so scared that they showed the whites of their eyes! He's right, Handy—we're a public blot. The sooner we can get to the station, the better."

"Absolutely correct!" agreed Archie feverishly.

"Oh!" said Handforth, light dawning upon him. "You mean our clothes?"

"He's just seen it!" breathed McClure dazedly. "Until now, he didn't know that he looks like a scarecrow that the farmer has chucked aside as useless!"

"Are you calling me a scarecrow?" roared Handforth.

"We're all scarecrows!" said Nipper quickly. "Don't make a fuss, Handy, for goodness' sake!"

"Don't argue with him!" snapped McClure. "He wouldn't care if he came out dressed in the clothes of a tramp. He doesn't notice these things—in fact, he forgets where he is, half the time. He even forgets where he's going. He can't help it, poor chap. We've got to make excuses for him."

Happily, Handforth failed to hear these insulting remarks. His eye had been attracted by a neighbouring shop window, and he was staring into it in sheer fascination. He was rooted to the ground. Everything else was forgotten. He stood there, dazed.

"Well, come on," said Nipper briskly.

They all wanted to get to the railway station. Until they had actually set foot in the town, they had not realised their bedraggled appearance. But now they were so acutely conscious of it that it weighed upon them like a load. They all had a feeling of

shame, and they wanted to hide themselves in dark corners.

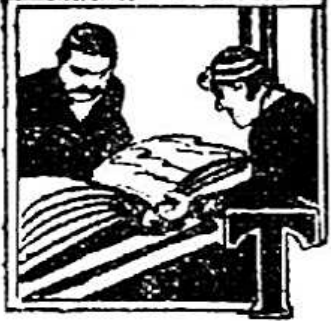
Glad to be on the move again, they pressed on—until Church and McClure suddenly called a halt.

"Where's Handy?" asked Church, staring round.

"Jiggered if I know," said Pitt. "We thought he was with you fellows."

"So he was," said Church anxiously. "Then we looked round, and he had vanished! Oh, the hopeless ass! What's he up to now?"

They needn't have worried. Handforth was only shopping!



CHAPTER 2.

HANDFORTH BUYS WALL-PAPER.

HERE was every excuse for the juniors.

The recent floods at St. Frank's had made everything topsy-turvy, and at one time it seemed that tragedy would stalk hand-in-hand with the disaster. But the boys of St. Frank's had triumphed over the great ordeal.

The floods had gone now, leaving wreckage and devastation. But Nature was apparently doing her utmost to make amends, for the April weather was like summer, and the evening was singularly warm and clear.

All along the Stowe Valley, the slow task of restoration was in progress. St. Frank's, of course, was deserted, the boys having been sent home until after the approaching Easter holidays. When the term recommenced, it was hoped, St. Frank's would be itself again.

But these twenty boys had been having a little adventure on their own. They had salvaged two barges from the floods, and had spent several days on the river. They had just delivered the barges in triumph to the owners.

In short, they had earned some valuable salvage money, and had handed it over to the Flood Distress Fund, with a wish that it should be utilised for relief in the Bellton district. On the whole, the boys had every reason to feel pleased with themselves.

But now, at last, they felt that they could leave this stricken district, and go home. In fact, there was nothing else for them to do. They had only vacated the barges this afternoon, and were now homeless.

Not until they got into the town did they appreciate their plight. They had been through all sorts of adventures on those barges. They had performed rough work, they had received several soakings in the river, and a hundred and one things had happened to convert them into scarecrows. They hadn't noticed it much on the barges. But here, in Caistowe, they were terribly self-conscious.

Somebody had suggested returning to St. Frank's but this was vetoed. The school was

in the hands of workmen, and everything would be upside down.

"We'd better get on the train, and go straight to London," Nipper had said. "The less delay, the better. We look pretty ragged, I know, but it'll be dark when we get to London, and we can go home in taxis. It'll be the quickest and the easiest."

And even Archie Glenthorne had agreed to this, much as he viewed the railway journey with apprehension. He consoled himself by remembering that they could exclude all strangers from their compartments, and could pull the blinds down.

Handforth, apparently, wasn't so particular. He was probably the most disreputable of the lot, and he was undoubtedly the least concerned. His logic was simple. What the dickens did it matter to anybody else how he looked? And if they stared at him, he would soon biff them one!

However, there were so many fellows in the party that Handforth was not allowed to have his own way. He was going to London with the rest of them, and they weren't standing any of his rot.

And now, unaccountably, he had escaped!

"He can't be far away," said Church, staring round "He was with us half a minute ago. It's a mystery——"

"Look!" said McClure.

He was gazing into a shop-window. They had walked back a few yards, while the other fellows waited for them. And McClure stared into the shop-window with an expression of alarm on his features.

"What d'you want me to look at?" asked Church blankly.

He could see nothing in the shop-window to excite the faintest quiver of excitement. It was about the most uninteresting shop-window Church had ever seen. The premises were occupied by a firm of builders and decorators, and this particular window was filled with unexciting looking fire-grates, wash-basins, brass taps, and so forth, with a variegated background of sinister-looking wallpaper.

"He's in there!" said McClure, in a hollow voice.

"But what the dickens for?" gasped Church. "We know he's off his rocker, but there's no earthly reason why—— Oh, my stars! You—you mean the wallpaper?"

"I mean the wallpaper!" said McClure drably.

They exchanged bleak looks. Only that afternoon Handforth had been babbling about wallpaper and whitewash. It was the revival of an old mania. Before the flood, he had decided to re-paper Study D, and to decorate it according to his own ideas. But the sudden emergency had squashed it all—which proved, according to Church and McClure, that the flood had been sent for something after all.

And now he was at it again!

An hour earlier he had bent before the blast of concentrated argument, and had reluctantly decided to leave the decorating until the new term. As the others had pointed out,

the school was in such a mess now that Handforth couldn't do anything, even if he went there. Why not give the authorities a chance first? If he didn't like the appearance of Study D after the decorators had done their worst with it, he could easily rip everything down and do it all over again.

It seemed a good bet, and Handforth had finally succumbed. The others knew that he would probably forget the whole scheme before the Easter holidays were over, and so it would be scotched for good.

So Church and McClure could hardly be blamed for looking at one another with such pallid expressions. As though actuated by a single spring, they leapt to the doorway of the shop, and charged in.

"I knew it!" gasped Church. "There he is!"

Down at the other end of the shop, Handforth was staring round at them.

"Clear off!" he said coldly. "I'm busy!"

"You ass!" roared Church. "You're keeping everybody waiting!"

Handforth was callously indifferent.

"Let 'em wait!" he said briefly.

"But what about the train?" demanded McClure. "Do you expect that to wait for your imperial highness?"

"Eh?" said Handforth, with a start. "What time does the train go?"

"We don't know till we get to the station."

"Then don't come here, bothering me with silly objections!" said Handforth magisterially. "We should probably have missed the train, in any case. And we can go by the next one, can't we? Eh? How much?"

He turned to the shopkeeper, who was obscured from Church and McClure's view by various articles of stock. This unseen gentleman apparently said something which affected Handforth like an electric shock. He jumped.

"What rot!" he snorted. "I'm not going to pay all that!"

An argument ensued, and Handforth's chums felt hopeful. It was quite on the cards that Handforth would dot the shopkeeper one on the nose, and refuse to complete the transaction. He was always liable to these differences of opinion.

"Oh, all right!" he said at last. "But it's jolly thick—that's all I can say!"

"I wish he meant that last bit!" murmured Church.

"Hi, you chaps!" roared Handforth. "Let me have two quid!"

"He's said something else!" snorted McClure indignantly. "By Jupiter, though, we've got him! He's short of cash, and he can't buy the stuff unless he pays up!"

"Buck up!" came Handforth's voice.

"Sorry, old man—can't be done," said Church. "You'd better let the man have his stuff back, and—"

"What do you mean—can't be done?" demanded Handforth, striding up.

"Well, you see—"

"Didn't you show me thirty bob this afternoon, Walter Church?"

"I—I—I—" began Church feebly.

"And didn't you say you had a quid, Arnold McClure?" roared Handforth.

"Well, yes, but—"

"Then don't mess about!" snapped the leader of Study D. "My hat! Are you going to keep me waiting about here all the evening?"



CHAPTER 3.

DIDDLEING HANDY.

IN vain Church and McClure pointed out that railway companies were hard, unbending institutions. In vain they argued that railway tickets had to be paid for, and they pointed out the discomforts of riding on buffers, or hiding in a corner of the guard's van.

They added that London taxi drivers were known, sometimes, to expect fares, and that they didn't always carry people about for nothing. Handforth brushed these objections aside as though they were trifles light as air.

"I want that money!" he said curtly. "Archie and Nipper and the others have got plenty of cash—and they can stake us until we get to London. So you can't bluff me with that rot!"

Church and McClure, crushed and defeated, caved in.

And three minutes later all three emerged from the shop, each staggering under the weight of a huge parcel. They felt aggrieved and hurt. It was bad enough for Handforth to practically burgle them, but to make them carry his load was adding insult to injury. But as it saved all argument, and avoided delay, they suffered like the martyrs they were.

"What's all this?" asked Reggie Pitt, as they reeled out.

"Don't ask us!" snapped Church.

"I think Handy's going to build a house!" moaned McClure.

"A house!"

"Yes," said Church. "We've got the materials for the foundations as a first instalment. I think it's concrete!"

"You howling ass!" roared Handforth. "It's only wallpaper. I never heard such a fuss over an ordinary little parcel!"

"But what, in the name of wonder, do you want with wallpaper?" asked Nipper. "You don't mean to say—Great Scott! You're not still keen on that decorating stunt, are you?"

Handforth looked dignified.

"I saw the paper in the window, and took a fancy to it," he said. "It's just the very stuff I had in mind—quiet, without being too drab."

"Is this the one?" asked Pitt, pointing.

He indicated a refined, subdued pattern. Handforth gave it a glance, and sniffed.

"That rotten thing!" he repeated. "I wouldn't use that to paste inside a dog-kennel! This is the one that hit me in the eye!"



SCARED OF THE DARK!

**GREAT NEW
SERIES
STARTS NEXT
WEDNESDAY!**



AFRAID TO PLUNGE IN!

Something new in new boys—yes, he's all that! He's the queerest new boy St. Frank's has ever known. It's not long before everyone calls him a funk.

THE FUNK OF ST. FRANK'S!

He's scared of everybody, even the fags of the Third can cheek him. He's got less pluck than any boy in the school. He's an utter coward.



TOO TIMID TO DEFEND HIMSELF!

He's the funk of St. Frank's—but things aren't always what they seem! Start this enthralling new series in next week's issue.



FRIGHTENED TO FIGHT!

He pointed to another part of the window, and Archie Glenthorne, who had crept up between two or three of the other fellows, careful to screen himself from the public gaze, reeled back and gave a weak cry.

"Good gad!" he gasped. "Not—not that!"

"No wonder it hit you in the eye, Handy!" said Reggie Pitt. "It's a wonder it didn't jump out and bite you!"

Handforth's taste in wallpaper was deplorable. It was a ghastly thing. A vivid red background, with green, snake-like things squirming all over it. Even in the subdued light of the shop window it was enough to make Archie shudder.

The celebrated leader of Study D gave a snort and walked on, followed by his two chums, who staggered under the weight of the numerous rolls of wallpaper and tins of enamel and paint. Behind them came the rest of the juniors, all grinning hugely.

Suddenly Church gave an exclamation of annoyance. The bundles of wallpaper had slipped in his arms, and, in making an attempt to replace them more securely, he dropped some of the tins of paint, one of which burst open, the contents spilling over the pavement.

Handforth turned round and glared at the unhappy Church.

"You careless idiot!" he said witheringly.

"This stuff's for redecorating our study—not the pavement! Can't you carry a few tins of paint now without spilling it!"

Church gazed at his chum indignantly.

"It's your own fault, you fathead! Why can't you buy things in moderation? This lot's heavy!"

"Hadn't somebody better order a dray?" suggested Pitt, glancing at Church and McClure. "These poor chaps are nearly finished. Can't you see their legs sagging?"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "It's not heavy!"

"Not a bit!" agreed Nipper. "Church and McClure are the only chaps who say it's heavy. But have you bought this paper for Study D, or the whole school? Or do you mean to redecorate Bellton?"

"You silly chump!" retorted Handforth. "I wasn't sure how much I wanted, so I bought all he'd got. There are a few pots of enamel, too, and stove-black, and stuff."

His chums, feeling that this delay was only tending to condemn them to life-long deformity, thudded the parcel down to the pavement, and took a breather. They gazed at the other fellows helplessly, and with silent anguish in their eyes.

"Why," asked De Valerie complainingly, "must nineteen fellows wait here while one lunatic acts the giddy ox? I thought we

had all this out before? I thought this rot was shelved?"

"It's never safe to think with Handy!" said Dick, shaking his head.

Handforth looked at them with disdain.

"You needn't worry—I'm not going to make any changes in the arrangement," he said. "But I spotted that paper, and I thought I might as well secure it."

"I'll bet Caistowe's glad to get rid of it!" said Watson. "Why didn't you take the sample out of the window, and make this street safe?"

"I don't want any funny remarks!" retorted Handforth. "You fellows haven't got any taste! A chap needs an artistic eye to choose a good wallpaper. My plan is to leave that parcel in the cloak-room at Bellton as we go through. Then it'll be all ready for me when we get back, after Easter."

Everybody brightened up. Apparently the situation wasn't so serious as they had first thought. Handforth was resigned to the delay, but Church and McClure inwardly groaned as they realised that the new term was destined to start with this horror. They felt that they would pass through the holidays with a sort of dread shadow hovering over their lives.

Somehow they got to the station, where a piece of good news awaited them. The service was still disorganised, but a London train would be leaving within twenty minutes.

Church and McClure were slightly relieved at this juncture. A piece of glad tidings was imparted to them by Reggie Pitt, in a whisper.

"Shush! Not a word!" murmured Pitt. "Don't tell Handy—but the first stop's going to be Helmford!"

"But—but——"

"Just heard!" whispered Pitt. "So we'll dump that giddy parcel out at Helmford and leave it there. It's a dirty trick on Helmford, but the town might be able to recover from it. Let's hope for the best."

Handforth, unconscious of this impending blow, was quite cheery. If he knew that the train was not due to stop at Bellton, he would probably refuse to travel. And that would have meant more trouble. So half a dozen of the juniors kept him busily engaged in conversation, so that he should not hear the truth.

It was a great relief when the train arrived; but it was a greater relief when the train steamed out. They were en route for London now, and they could afford to sit back and take things comfortably. The evening had drawn on, and the dusk was deepening.

"We'll just be able to catch a glimpse of Bellton, as we go through the station," said Church, after a while. "There's enough light left for us to see the High Street as we whizz through."

"Whizz through?" repeated Handforth.

"Yes."

"What do you mean—whizz through?"

"We're not stopping at Bellton," said Church, with relish.

"Not stopping!" yelled Handforth.

"No," grinned McClure. "This is a fast train—first stop, Helmford! Look out, we're getting to Bellton now. We shall have to be quick if we want to get a glimpse——"

"You—you rotters!" shouted Handforth. "Do you mean to say you knew this, and you didn't tell me? What about my parcel?"

"We didn't want to worry you, old man," said Reggie Pitt considerably. "We knew how upset you would be, so we kept it to ourselves. We thought you'd get the pip if you heard that this train wasn't stopping at Bellton."

And just then the brakes ground on, and the train stopped—at Bellton.



CHAPTER 4.

AN UNEXPECTED SETBACK.

HANDFORTH sniffed.

"Thought you'd spoof me, eh?" he exclaimed.

"There's a dotty joke! You might have known

that you couldn't keep it up!"

Reggie Pitt shook his head.

"No, Handy, we meant it in all good faith," he said. "The railway company has done the dirty on us. This train isn't due to stop here at all. It's a tragic error."

Handforth opened the door and leapt out upon the platform.

"Shut that door!" came the voice of old Wiggins, the Bellton porter. "'Ere, you mustn't get out, young shaver!"

"I am out!" retorted Handforth. "And don't call me 'young shaver'!"

"Lor' bless my eyes! I didn't see it was you, Master 'Andforth!" said Wiggins. "I didn't recognise you in them old clothes."

"Never mind about my old clothes," said Handforth. "There's a big parcel in the luggage van, and I want it taken to the booking office——"

"Can't be done, sir," ejaculated Wiggins, with alarm. "Train might go any minnit. She ain't supposed to stop."

"Oh!" said Edward Oswald. "So those rotters tried to dish me— By George! And the joke turned back on 'em! Jolly good! I shall be able to chip them all the way up to London."

"We ain't supposed to stop, Master 'Andforth," insisted Wiggins. "You'd best get in agin——"

"If we're not supposed to stop, why are we stopping?" asked Handforth.

"The signal's agin us."

"Then if the signal's agin us—I mean, against us—we're all right!" said the leader of Study D firmly. "We'll go along and get that parcel, and dump it in the booking office. Come on!"



In attempting to make the bundle of wallpaper more secure in his arms, Church dropped some of the tins of paint, one of which burst open, the contents spilling over the pavement. "You careless idiot!" Handforth exclaimed witheringly. "This stuff's for redecorating our study—not for the pavement!"

They went, and Church looked alarmed.

"The fathead will get left behind!" he protested.

"Are you going to worry yourself about that?" asked Pitt. "Personally, I couldn't think of anything happier. Imagine it! Handforth left behind! Let me enjoy a moment of dreamy contentment!"

They expected the train to get into motion at any moment, but five solid minutes elapsed, and then Handforth got back, puffed, but satisfied. He had committed his fell work, after all. Some of the fellows felt like writing to the railway company about it.

"Lazy beggars!" said Handforth, as he got in. "You might have come and lent me a hand."

"But we thought you might get left behind," said Nipper.

"Although, of course," added Pitt, "we knew it was too good to be true. Things like that only happen in dreams."

"Fathead!" said Handforth coldly.

The engine was blowing off steam at a great rate, and the guards of the train, having called a meeting, went forward and drew the engine-driver into the conference. But it didn't seem to do any good. The signal was still against them.

"This is rot!" said Handforth impatiently, as he leaned out of the window. "I've always said this was a dud railway company. Dis-

gusting—stopping at a station that we ought to have roared through."

"You seemed pretty pleased about it ten minutes ago," said Church.

"There's no reason for it to stop all this time," argued Handforth. "I thought perhaps they were only waiting until I got my parcel out."

"He thinks he's the chairman of the company!" sniffed McClure.

Handforth had got out on the platform again, and one or two of the other fellows followed him. This delay was getting beyond a joke. And they thought they might as well use the time by walking along the platform and getting a glimpse of the village. They hadn't seen Bellton properly since the floods had gone down.

But just then the booking-clerk came hurrying out, and his face was alight with anxiety. The service had only been in operation again since that morning, and the clerk had spent a very anxious day. Lots of things had gone wrong.

"Half a tick!" said Nipper. "What's this delay for?"

"Trouble up the line," replied the clerk. "Looks as if we're going to be stuck here for another hour—and even then you'll only get on as far as Bannington."

"What!"

"Another hour!"

"And then only get as far as Bannington!"

There were several shouts of dismay. The train was pretty full, but only the St. Frank's fellows had left the carriages. This piece of news came upon them as a shock. Obviously, the clerk was talking nonsense.

"What do you mean—only as far as Bannington?" asked Nipper.

"What I say."

"But that's all rot!" put in Watson. "This is a London train."

"It may be a London train, but if you'll tell me how it's going to jump a gap of track twenty yards long, I shall be obliged!" replied the clerk with some asperity. "I've just had the news through on the telegraph. The embankment just beyond Bannington has subsided, and all traffic is stopped. There's a fearful mess-up over it. Can't run a train either way!"

"We love being cheered up!" said Pitt gently.

"But I say, look here!" shouted De Valerie. "Do you really mean that we can't get to London to-night?"

"By what I can see, you'll be lucky if you get to Bannington," replied the man. "And this isn't the only train that's held up, either. The whole line's disorganised."

And ten minutes later this alarming news was verified. The guards came along the train, and gave all the passengers the melancholy information that there would be a wait of three hours. Possibly four, said the guards. Or, if there was a bit more trouble, maybe five. And Bannington, in any case, was as far as the train could go. Big gangs of navvies had been sent to the affected spot, and they would work all night with flares. But, said the guards, there wasn't much chance of getting to London until late the next morning.

"Just our luck!" growled Nipper. "The first train we get in gets stranded! And all because of the floods, too. We try to escape them, but we can't!"

"Well, it's a rotten line!" declared Handforth. "Fancy building an embankment that subsides! If it comes to that, why couldn't they chance it? I don't believe in this rotting!"

"All these railway companies are silly like that," said Pitt sarcastically. "They hate turning their lines into switchbacks. Just think of the fun, diving down into that subsidence at sixty miles an hour! Railways haven't got any pluck!"

"Well, it's no good standing here and staring at one another," said Nipper practically. "The news is official, and we're diddled. Can't get to London—can't get beyond Bannington. We'd better stay here."

"We shall have to stay here," growled Watson.

"No, I mean at St. Frank's."

"St. Frank's?" said Handforth, starting.

"Yes."

"St. Frank's!"

"It's a big school, just up the road," explained Nipper politely.

"You sarcastic ass!" growled Handforth. "I was just thinking, you know. I mean, if this train had to get stranded, it couldn't have petered out at a better place."

"Absolutely a jolly old stroke of providence," declared Archie Glenthorne firmly. "I mean to say, here we are, the whole jolly menagerie, and London remains in the distance, beyond the old grasp. A foul and murky trick, but I'm personally dashed happy."

Archie was, in fact, beaming.

"You'd better sing!" said Watson sourly.

"I absolutely feel like it," confessed Archie. "I mean, we can leg it to the school, have a good old bracer of India-and-Ceylon juice, and then obtain a large and well-assorted supply of the old dreamless. Up on the dashed morrow, and there we are! I mean, new clobber, and so forth, and what not! The old sun shines again!"

Nipper nodded.

"It's a nuisance, being delayed like this, but Archie's right. We can't do better than go up to the school. There's no way of getting to London, and we simply can't go to Bannington in these togs. No respectable hotel would admit us!"

"Yes, but we're known!" said Jack Grey.

"Well, anyhow, we shouldn't like to face the populace, as Archie would put it," replied Nipper. "Let's go to the school, and see how we stand. We're certain of shelter there, anyhow."

"Are we?" asked Buster Boots. "The school is deserted—without any fellows or masters or anybody. I say, what a rotten frost! It's quite likely we shan't get any supper even!"

"Great pancakes!" gasped Fatty Little. "No supper?"

"Oh, don't growl!" said Nipper. "We can't tell anything until we get there. We're not risking anything, in any case. The train's going to stop here three hours, so we can come back to it if we find everything locked up. We're on safe ground."

This was true enough, and a minute later the fellows were streaming out of the station, and striding off towards St. Frank's. They were more lucky than the other passengers in that hapless train.



CHAPTER 5.

BACK AT THE OLD SCHOOL! BELLTON was a pitiful sight.

The dusk helped to conceal most of the destruction that had been caused by the flood, but the village was like a place of the dead. Not a single inhabitant had returned, for everything was smothered in mud, and littered with debris.

Bellton had been very hard hit, and the juniors felt that the salvage money they had earned would be needed. The unfortunate villagers had been washed out of their houses

and homes, and many of the cottages were cracked and sagging, with gaping holes in their walls. The High Street was silent and absolutely deserted.

Many of the shops had smashed windows, where drifting wreckage had battered into them. All this had been under water.

The juniors were subdued as they passed through.

"I say, what a beastly, clammy look the place has got!" remarked Church. "It's a bit lower here than at St. Frank's—and they had it worse. I hope to goodness we find somebody at St. Frank's, you know."

"I'll bet there won't be a soul there," said Bob Christine. "It stands to reason there won't. The school's been given over to the workmen, and they don't keep on all night. What a shame, that train stranding like that!"

They continued their way onwards, glad, in a way, to be on familiar ground again, and to note that the recent floods had caused less damage than they had feared. Within a few weeks, no doubt, Bellton would be looking itself again. But just now the village had the effect of depressing the party.

St. Frank's was reached at last, and the gloom of night had descended. It was warm and calm, and the stars were beginning to twinkle out in the cloudless sky.

The juniors found the big gateway wide open, and they walked through into the Triangle, and came to a halt. There was nothing here to give them any feeling of cheer.

The place was utterly black and still.

"Thought so!" grunted Christine. "Not a soul here!"

"Better look out, you fellows," warned Nipper. "Bound to be hand-carts and things knocking about. These builders' men always leave their stuff lying round. We seem to be unlucky."

"It's all rot!" growled Handforth. "There's nobody here at all. There isn't a light showing anywhere, and all the doors seem to be closed, too. What on earth shall we do now?"

They advanced into the Triangle, and felt more depressed than ever. Usually, St. Frank's was aglow with lights at this hour of the evening. Even during the holidays, when the school was away, St. Frank's was a live, active place. For the domestic staffs remained in residence, of course, and many of the masters stayed behind, too.

But now there was no sign of life.

Of course, it was only to be expected. All the lower floors of the school had been inundated, and were now in a sad condition of dampness and wreckage. The floods had extended to every quarter of St. Frank's, and the workmen had not been in possession for long. They were making the place habitable again. And everybody, of course, was keeping away until the restoration was completed.

"Better get back to the train," suggested De Valerie. "We don't want to stay here, in this darkness. We can't get in, anyhow—all the doors are locked and bolted, I expect."

"I'm going to have a look," said Handforth firmly.

He strode further up the Triangle, well in advance of the others. Then he suddenly paused, and let out a hail.

"Come on!" he shouted. "There's a light in the Head's house!"

"What!"

"Somebody there, anyhow," sang out Handforth. "Let's go and see who they are."

"By Jove, he's right," said Nipper, "Absolutely!"

From here they could see through Big Arch, and across Inner Court. The Head's residence stood on the other side, and not one light was gleaming, but two or three. And they were in the downstairs room, too—rooms that had recently been filled with water. Evidently, the Head's house had been made habitable. Those lights, gleaming out of the deep dusk, were comforting. They had a big effect on the stranded school-boys. They cheered up wonderfully. The old school wasn't so dead as they had supposed.

"Come on, you fellows!"

"Rather!"

They went through Big Arch at the double, eager to find out the truth. Beyond, they ran across Inner Court, and brought up in a group round the big porch.

"Well, I'm blessed!" murmured Nipper.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, but look there!" said Dick, pointing. "Those lights are from the Head's study. Rummy, isn't it?"

"Why should it be rummy?"

"Well, if only the domestics are here, they wouldn't be in Dr. Stafford's private study," replied Nipper. "We shall have to look into this."

Handforth was already hammering at the door. The others crowded round, waiting eagerly. They were suddenly aware that they were feeling very tired and hungry. They had no wish to go back to that train.

The door opened, and a figure stood outlined.

"Good gad!"

A cry of joy broke from Archie Glenthorne. he pushed through the crowd, and fairly flung himself forward. The next moment he was on the neck of the man who was standing in the doorway.

"Phipps, old nugget!" he murmured gladly. "What-ho! Away with care and sorrow, for happiness is here!"



CHAPTER 6.

A SHAKE-DOWN FOR THE NIGHT.

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE'S delight was touching.

"Good old Phipps!" he exclaimed, disentangling himself, and standing back.

"I don't mind admitting, laddie, that the

young master is most frightfully glad to see you. In fact, I've never been so frightfully glad to see anybody. I'm touched, laddie, positively touched!"

"We knew that long ago, Archie," said Pitt gently.

"Eh? Good gad! Did you hear that, Phipps?" said Archie. "The dear old soul is passing comments on the young master's mentality. Touched, what? Well, dash it, I must admit I feel slightly frothy in the rafters, at the moment!"

Phipps, Archie's faithful valet, was much too dignified to reveal the satisfaction that filled him. He was far too well trained to greet his young master by boisterously slapping him on the back, as he felt inclined to do. All his satisfaction was concentrated into his gladsome smile. And Phipps was relaxing very considerably even to smile.

"Master Archie!" he exclaimed. "This is unexpected! I thought you were in London, sir!"

"We're on our way there now, Phipps, old boy," beamed Archie. "Absolutely on our way, don't you know! Only the train seems to be a non-runner. She left the post all right, but jibbed, dash it, at the first hurdle. Absolutely jibbed!"

"I don't quite understand, sir," said Phipps.

Nipper, going forward, briefly explained.

"So, you see, we're in a bit of a mess," he concluded. "We never anticipated anything like this when we left Caistowe. It's no good going back to the train because we should only get to Bannington. So we came to St. Frank's, hoping we should find some signs of life."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "And we found it, what? I mean, I regard Phipps as the brightest sign of life that ever beamed across the good old vision!"

Phipps was rather worried.

"I'm sure I don't know what to suggest, young gentlemen," he said. "The school is quite deserted. All the domestic staffs are gone, and the Houses are shut up."

"What about this house?"

"I was referring to the boarding-houses for the boys, sir," replied Phipps. "The headmaster is in residence here again already, and the staff is once again on duty—"

"The Head's here?" repeated Nipper, in astonishment.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"You seem surprised, sir."

"I'm puzzled, that's all," said Nipper. "I understood that Dr. Stafford was seriously ill."

"Yes, we all heard it," said Church.

"I am glad to report, young gentlemen, that Dr. Stafford has made a most remarkable recovery," said Phipps. "While not being actually himself again, the improvement in his condition is so marked that he has been allowed to return to the school. Needless to say, a small army of workmen

were busily engaged here right up to this morning."

"I should think so!" agreed Nipper. "Well, it's jolly good news. You'd better not disturb the Head now, Phipps—he's probably asleep—"

"On the contrary, sir, Dr. Stafford is reading in his study."

"What!"

"Good gad!" said Archie, horrified. "Isn't that most frightfully unwise, Phipps, old bird? Isn't that most ill-advised, old sparrow? I mean to say, one might just as well read in a dashed cistern. After all the frightful wetness that's been trickling about, and flowing hither and thither, the good old walls must be positively oozing."

"Yes, it is a bit risky," said Nipper.

"The contractors have guaranteed perfect safety, Master Hamilton," said Phipps evenly. "They have dried the rooms, I understand, by scientific methods, and everything is again quite normal. You must remember that fully sixty men were at work here."

"What I want to know" said Handforth, "is how much longer we're going to stand in this porch?"

"Two jolly old brains with the same jolly old thought!" said Archie. "I've been waiting for the invitation, Phipps. Beastly bad form to walk in without being asked, but there seems to be nothing else for it."

Phipps stood back.

"Come in, young gentlemen—come in," he invited. "I really did not know what to do. I'm afraid we've insufficient accommodation here, and—"

Phipps broke off, the words fading on his lips, as though something had gone wrong with his dull emitter valves. He seemed to have gone right off the wave length.

He was staring at Archie—staring with wide, horrified eyes. The pain in his expression was touching.

"Master Archie!" he managed to breathe.

"What-ho!" said Archie brightly. "Eh! Odds ghosts and spectres! The dear old lad has turned as pale as a chunk of cheddar! Absolutely wilting about the gills, dash it!"

Phipps pulled himself together with an effort.

"Your appearance, sir!" he said hoarsely.

"My appearance?" repeated Archie. "Oh, I see what you mean! You mean my appearance? The good old personal effect, as it were?"

"I—I did not see you clearly in the porch, sir—"

"And it's rather foul that you should see me clearly now," said Archie. "I was hoping to spare you this moment of anguish, Phipps. I was trusting that you would be saved from this horror. But, I mean, there you are! Gaze upon me, Phipps! Can you wonder that the old spine is twisted? Can you marvel at the tissues being wasted away? I tell you quite frankly, Phipps, the young

master has been through fire and water. With an accent, dash it, on the water!"

Handforth pushed himself forward.

"What's all this rot about Archie's appearance?" he asked tartly. "I can't see anything the matter with him! Anybody might think he was unfit to look at, by the way you talk, Phipps."

Phipps certainly did think so, but a bell rang at that moment, and he was unable to make any reply. The juniors waited in the wide hall, looking about them in wonder. Not much time had been wasted in getting the Head's house shipshape again.

Phipps returned.

"Dr. Stafford desires you to go into his study at once," he announced.



CHAPTER 7.

SPRING CLEANING AT ST. FRANK'S!

DR. MALCOLM STAFFORD was somewhat thinner, somewhat paler, and seemed a little shrunken. Otherwise he was himself.

He smiled upon the boys with a kindly, benevolent expression.

"I thought you were all in London by this time," he said, as they stood before him, nearly filling the room. "And so many of you, too! Really, I hardly know what to do. Phipps has told me that your train has broken down, and you must, of course, remain the night here."

"Thanks, awfully, sir!"

"The trouble is, I hardly know where to put you," said the Head.

"Don't worry about that, sir," said Nipper quickly. "If you'll give us the key of the Ancient House, we'll let ourselves in, and have a shake-down there for the night."

"But, my boy, everything is upside down!"

"After sleeping in a barge hold, sir, we're not particular."

"Absolutely not!"

"We'll be all right, sir."

Dr. Stafford was looking rather dubious.

"I am not so sure," he replied. "We shall see. Perhaps there may be a better solution to this problem. I understand that you have been on the river for several days?"

"Did Mr. Lee tell you, sir?"

Yes," replied the Head. "But, as a matter of fact, the manager of the Caistowe Water Haulage Co. rang me up this afternoon, too. Yes, they have restored a few of our local telephones. Things are rapidly improving. This spell of fine weather is a heaven-sent gift."

"Rather, sir," agreed Nipper.

"And I have been informed that you boys have very generously waived your claim to the salvage money so that it can be handed over to the Bellton Distress Fund. A generous and noble action. I am proud of you all."

"Oh, I say, sir!" protested Handforth.

"They need the money more than we do, sir," said Nipper. "I know we look like tramps, but that will soon be remedied if we can only get into the Ancient House, and ransack our trunks and wardrobes."

"Ah, yes, to be sure," said the Head. "That is a very important point, is it not?"

"If I may say so, laddie, a dashed important point," declared Archie firmly. "Good gad! I should say sir! Absolutely! Bargeeing, dash it, has somewhat affected the old vocabulary."

"We'd much prefer to dig in the Ancient House for to-night, sir," said Nipper. "Then we shan't cause any trouble. We can get into different suits to-morrow, and be off without bothering you."

"Well, perhaps you will be all right," said the Head slowly. "They have re-established the heating apparatus, and the whole school is again supplied with electric light. But the beds, I fear, are untouched—"

"That doesn't matter, sir!"

"We don't mind a bit, sir!"

And five minutes later the juniors crowded into the Head's dining-room, at his invitation, and were left alone there to enjoy a hearty supper—Phipps doing all the honours. They were now feeling that life was well worth living, and that everything was rosy.

Later, they went to the Ancient House, and found plenty of comfort in the dormitories. Everything was in great disorder, after the adventures of the flood, but no dampness had penetrated to the upper rooms. What did it matter about sheets? There were good beds, and plenty of blankets. So the juniors slept like tops till the morning.

Handforth was the first awake. Apparently, there was something on his mind, for it was not usual for him to be active and alert at the early hour of seven o'clock. But this morning he jumped out of bed, brisk and refreshed, and he gave a glance of approval at the window. The April sun was shining in gloriously.

"Come on, my lads!" he said briskly.

"Shake a leg!"

He ruthlessly pulled Church and McClure out. They were occupying their old room, and it was good to know that the ground was visible outside their window—instead of a wide expanse of water.

"Here!" protested Church. "What's the matter?"

"Rouse up, and get out!"

"What's the time?" yawned McClure.

"Never mind about the time," said Handforth. "We've got to go to the station!"

"The station?"

"Yes, ass!"

"But—but it's early morning yet!" said Church indignantly. "That chap said there wouldn't be any train until mid-day! What's the good of going to the station now, Handy?"

"Every good."

"But we don't want to go without all the other fellows—and they won't take any orders from you," said McClure. "They're very unreasonable like that. They're always forgetting that you're the Czar!"

"Rats!" frowned Handforth. "Arguing won't make things any better, so buck up and obey orders."

His chums breathed hard.

"You—you exasperating ass!" said McClure gruffly. "We've decided to stick together, haven't we? Why should we three go off to London alone?"

"Go off to London?" repeated Handforth, in surprise.

"Didn't you say——"

"You hopeless chumps!" roared Handforth. "We're going to fetch my parcel!"



CHAPTER 8.

AT IT AGAIN!

HERE were moments when Church and McClure became the prey to sinister, homicidal fevers. Occasionally a wave of indignation would sweep over them with such violence that it left them with panting breath, and hands that clutched desperately in the air.

This was one of those times.

"Grab him!" said Church thickly. "It's no good arguing—he's got to be slaughtered!"

Handforth started back.

"Talking about me?" he asked fiercely.

"Yes, we are!" thundered Church. "Do you think we are going to be hauled out of bed to go down to that beastly station, and fetch your rotten parcel, and carry the atrocity back to the school? My only hat! What do you think we are—Christian slaves, or something?"

"That's it!" fumed McClure. "And he thinks he's Nero!"

For a moment the air was electric with exchanged glares. It was rather a wonder that no blue sparks were visible, sizzling to and fro.

"Nero?" retorted Handforth. "You silly idiots! Nero didn't keep Christian slaves—he was the chap who sat on the beach, and told the waves to go back."

"You ignorant ass!" snapped Church. "That was Canute!"

"Oh, was it?" said Handforth, turning red. "You know a lot, don't you?"

"I know about ten times more than you!" replied Church curtly. "And I don't profess to know much, either."

"Why, you—you——"

"Oh, leave it alone!" interrupted McClure. "Canute is a better name for Handy than Nero! That ordering the tide back business suits him down to the ground! I often wonder why he didn't tell the floods to stop! It

would have been such a simple way of settling the thing!"

As sleep was now quite out of the question, Church and McClure both dressed. But they formed a grim compact—merely by the exchange of glances—to have nothing to do with the parcel of wallpaper. Handy had bought it, and Handy could deal with it. As far as Church and McClure were concerned, they had seen the last of it.

By the time they were all dressed, Handforth was feeling better. His chums, too, were singularly affected by the soothing influence of clean shirts, fresh socks, and glossy collars. They had got out their best suits, and once again were feeling themselves. No longer were they bargees. Again they had become scholars of St. Frank's.

"Shall we go for a stroll?" suggested Church casually. "By jingo, it's good to be respectable again! Let's have a walk round the school until the other fellows are ready."

"Brekker at the Head's, eh?" said McClure. "Good egg! The Head's a bit of a sportsman, you know, on the quiet. That supper last night was topping; and brekker's bound to be just as good."

"He's doing us proud!" said Church, nodding.

"Never mind about the Head, or brekker," said Handforth. "Let's move!"

"Out for that stroll?"

"Yes—to the station," said Handforth.

"Rot!" snapped Church. "Mac and I have decided to wash our hands of your beastly parcel, Handy. If you want it brought up to the school, you can fetch it yourself. My hat! Do you think we're going to ruin our Sunday togs by hauling that ton-weight about?"

Handforth started, and looked thoughtful.

"H'm! I'd forgotten about our clothes," he said, gazing down at his own immaculate front view. "That's awkward!"

"Why don't you tip some of these workmen to go and fetch it?" suggested McClure, as he looked out of the window.

"Workmen?"

"Men," said McClure, "who work."

"You silly ass——"

"At least, men who are supposed to work," amended McClure. "I don't know much about building or decorating, but it strikes my inexperienced eye that these fellows aren't dashing about as energetically as they could. Just my fancy, I suppose."

Church and Handforth joined their chum at the window. They found themselves looking down upon West Square, with the long wing of the West House opposite. The picture was somewhat melancholy, although the morning sunshine did much to dispel this gloom. Half dried mud lay everywhere, and bits of wood and other wreckage were scattered about all over the place. There were builders' materials in heaps, too. And two or three dozen workmen were standing about in groups, talking. They had their hands in their pockets, and there was some excuse for McClure's doubts.

"They haven't started yet," announced Handforth.

"Go hon!"

"Just finished breakfast, I expect," continued Handforth. "By George! My chance to tip a couple of them to fetch this parcel. Come on, you fellows! I shan't be satisfied until that wallpaper is safely stowed away in the school, so that it'll be ready for use when we come back for the new term."

"It's like a family curse!" moaned Church. "We keep trying to get rid of it, but it hovers over us like—like—"

"A sword of thingummy," nodded McClure sympathetically.

"A sword of which?" stared Handforth.

"I've forgotten the chap's name. Isosceles, I think."

"You fathead!" said Church. "Isosceles was the chap who invented the triangle!"

"Oh, was he?" growled Handforth. "It's a pity they couldn't get an Englishman to do it! I don't believe in these foreign architects coming here and messing things up. I always thought the Triangle was a dotty—"

"The Triangle?" gasped Church. "You chump, I wasn't talking about the Triangle—not our Triangle. I meant any old triangle—or, rather, the isosceles triangle."

"Mad!" said Handforth curtly.

"Damocles!" said McClure brightly. "That's it—Damocles."

"What the dickens—"

"I've just thought of the name," nodded McClure. "Damocles was the chap who went to a banquet in Syracuse, or somewhere. And he had a fit when he saw that a sword was hanging over his head, suspended by a single hair."

"Where did you say it was?" asked Handforth coldly.

"Syracuse!"

"I'm not surprised, then," retorted Handforth curtly. "Those American chaps are capable of anything!"

"Oh, listen to him!" said McClure, in amazement. "He thinks Syracuse was in America! You silly chump, we're talking about Greek history. At least, I think it was Greek. This chap, Damocles, saw that sword suspended over his head by a single hair—"

"I've heard enough of this babbling!" interrupted Handforth impatiently. "In the first place, no single hair could hold a sword, and you jolly well know it!"



Archie poked his head through the window and felt something soft and sticky fall down his neck. He looked up and another blob splashed loudly on his monocle. Handy was painting . . . !

"Well, that's the story—"

"It's not a story—it's a whopper!" interrupted Handforth. "Let's get down to those workmen, and see about my parcel."

McClure groaned.

"It's no good!" he said. "I've battled like a hero to take his mind off that horrible thing, but I might just as well try to heave the Ancient House off its foundations!"



CHAPTER 9.

SOMETHING WRONG
SOMEWHERE!

RICHIBALD WINSTON
DEREK GLENTHORNE
surveyed himself complacently.

"Somewhat juicy, Phipps, what?" he suggested.

"I rather think you are exceptionally smart this morning, sir," agreed Phipps.

"Absolutely on the mark, laddie," agreed Archie. "Once again, the Pride of the Glen-thornes feels himself, Phipps. Once again he can pour himself out upon the world and stare it in the face without a dashed quiver."

Archie was certainly glorious.

Phipps had come over especially to help him—Phipps knowing full well that Archie would be utterly lost without help. Secretly, Phipps harboured a dread fear that his young master would choose a necktie that clashed with the rest of his outfit. Archie needed watching in these matters. He had a wonderful taste for fine silks, and fine clothes. But he was liable to sideslip badly when it came to a question of colour. On many occasions, Phipps had brought Archie up with a jerk after an ugly skid.

This morning he was perfect—from the top of his glossy blond hair to the tips of his glistening shoes.

"We feel, Phipps," said Archie, "that all is right with the universe. And now for the good old nosebag, what? Brekker, and all that sort of rot! Kindly grab the halter, Phipps, and lead the young master to the manger! He would e'en champ."

"Breakfast will be served at eight o'clock, sir," said Phipps.

"What-ho!" murmured Archie, looking at his watch. "Everything all correct, I mean? Nothing slipshod nowadays, what? Well, I must say I approve. It's frightfully exciting, dashing hither and thither in barges, and going about like tramps, but it's liable to be disturbing. I don't mind admitting, Phipps, that I feel bright this morning. At least fifteen years have been removed from the good old shoulders."

They went out, Archie feeling that he would just have sufficient time to get over to the Head's house. It was a quarter to eight, and Archie could do the walk comfortably in that time. Any other fellow could have done it in forty seconds with his feet hobbled, but Archie disliked being hurried.

"What-ho!" he beamed, as he came across Handforth & Co. in the corridor. "Good gad! I hardly recognised you, my dear old chappies! Once more the perfect young gents, what? Life is getting sweeter and sweeter."

"Can't stop, Archie. I'm busy," said Handforth, pushing past, and knocking Archie into the wall. "I've got to see about my parcel!"

"You poisonous ruffian!" shouted Archie indignantly. "Phipps! Help, and so forth! The good old starboard shoulder is utterly ruined!"

"Just a little dust, sir," said Phipps soothingly.

Handforth strode on, unconscious of the turmoil he had created in Archie's breast. He reached the lobby, and ran into Dick Hamilton & Co. The Study C trio had evidently just come in, for they were looking flushed and healthy after a brisk walk.

"Where away, Handy?" asked Nipper.

"Station!" said Handforth briefly.

"I'll save you the trouble," said Nipper. "We've just come from the station."

"Good man!" said Handforth, looking round. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?"

"Where's my parcel?"

"Your parcel?"

"My wallpaper and stuff," said Handforth, looking round again.

Nipper felt in all his pockets.

"I don't seem to have it!" he said, in surprise. "Awfully careless of me, Handy. I must have lost it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Incidentally," went on Nipper, "let me inform you, Handy, that your parcel can lie in the Bellton booking-office and decompose, for all we care. My hat! I knew you were an optimist, but I didn't think you were absolutely off your nut! Did you expect us to fetch your beastly parcel?"

"You've been to the station, haven't you?" roared Handforth.

"Yes, but—"

"Then it's a dirty trick," said Edward Oswald. "I shall remember this! It's not a big thing, but it's one of those memories that stick!"

"Rats!" grinned Nipper. "Blow the parcel—leave it where it is until we come back after the vac. There's a piece of cheering news, though. No train until seven o'clock this evening."

"What!"

"It's a fact, Handy boy," said Tregellis-West mournfully. "A perfectly frightful outlook, but I suppose we shall have to face it. It'll mean telegrams and other beastly inconveniences. And we shan't get into London until late to-night."

"No train until seven o'clock?" repeated Handforth. "What rot!"

"That's what we thought," agreed Watson.

"Just one of those unexpected swipes that Fate is always catching you," said Nipper. "We've heard all about it. The whole main line embankment a mile beyond Bannington has caved in. Effects of the floods, of course. They've got huge gangs of navvies at work, but there won't be any traffic until this evening. We shan't get a train out of Bellton until seven o'clock at the earliest."

Handforth gave the Study C trio a pitying look.

"You asses!" he said. "Why should we mess about here all day because there's no train from Bellton? It won't take us more than an hour to walk to Bannington! We can get a train there."

"We might!" agreed Nipper thoughtfully.

"Then's what's wrong?"

"Well, the only thing is, the train would bring us back to Bellton," said Nipper. "They're only running a few locals from Bannington to Caistowe and back. Still, that's only a trifling point."

"You see," said Watson patiently, "we're dished. The line is blocked *beyond* Bannington, so there's no London traffic at all."

"I don't care," retorted Handforth. "I'm

not going to be kept here against my will. I'll go by road in my Austin Seven."

"It's a good idea, but I thought you'd had enough of the floods?" said Nipper. "Down in the dips between Bannington and Helmford, I hear, the roads are under water. And those that aren't under water are under mud. But please yourself, of course, Handy."

"I think I'll go—and chance it," said Handforth stubbornly.

"There's another hitch," went on Nipper. "Your Austin isn't here."

"Isn't here!"

"No, they took it away."

"Took it away!" howled Handforth. "My Austin! Who? When? Where's it gone to? The rotters—"

"Don't get excited," grinned Nipper. "One of the big Caistowe garages has taken charge of your Austin and the Head's car, and all the other motors. They're putting them in perfect trim again. The school pays the expenses, of course. But it had to be done. Motor-cars don't run very sweetly after being under water for a week or so."

"Then—then we're dished?" asked Handforth blankly.

"Doomed to stay at St. Frank's all day," nodded Nipper.

"By George!" said Edward Oswald with a violent start. "So we've got the whole day in front of us, have we? Then—then we can —"

He broke off, breathing hard, his expression dreamy. And just then the workmen started streaming out through the lobby, all of them talking in gruff, heated tones. Nipper glanced out into the Triangle. Other workmen were there, too, and the air was filled with an angry murmur.

"Something seems to be wrong," said Nipper.



CHAPTER 10.

HANDFORTH'S CHANCE.

"WHAT'S the matter with the fatheads?" said Handforth, staring out.

"Looks like a bit of trouble," said Nipper curiously. "Not our business, of course, but we might as well ask."

He buttonholed one of the painters as he came out.

"Trouble somewhere?" he asked.

"You've 'it it, young gent," said the man.

"Serious?"

"Oh, I don't s'pose it'll be much," replied the painter. "We're just goin' to 'old a meetin', an' I dessay it'll be all right. Trouble with the manager—that's what it is. The boss is all right, but the chap down 'ere, who's lookin' after us, is only fit to call hisself a blinkin' slave driver. That's wot 'e is—a slave driver!"

"Oh, you'll smooth it out, I expect," said Nipper.

"You bet we shall," replied the painter.

"I ain't so much affected, you know. It's them plasterers wot 'as got the 'ump. The rest of us is in sympathy, like. After this meetin', we'll all be at work agin. I don't s'pose it'll take more than ten minutes. Allus havin' these little upsets, somehow. I don't 'old with all these 'ere squabbles!"

He went out, and Nipper made a grimace at the others.

"Looks pretty bad," he said. "But it's not for us to criticise without knowing the facts. How about going along to breakfast?" he added. "Two minutes to eight."

"Breakfast?" said Reggie Pitt, coming downstairs. "Oh, what silvery music is this? Where is there another word with the same joyous lilt?"

"Are you just up?" asked Nipper severely.

"Not guilty," said Reggie. "I'm just down."

"Then you ought to be ashamed—"

"I am!" interrupted Pitt penitently. "I grovel before you, O censorer! But the voice of the blast awakened me early, and I took another doze. Said blast being our good friend, Handy's wondrous baritone!"

Handforth, strangely enough, took no notice.

"Let him be!" murmured Pitt. "He dreams! One of his somnambulistic specialities! Here we have a perfect example of a human being—at least, I assume it's a human being—standing perfectly upright with his eyes open, quite unconscious. In another minute he'll be snoring."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth was aroused by that chorus of laughter.

"What's the joke?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nothing—nothing!" said Pitt. "Ah, the silvery chimes of eight! Can't you hear the voice of breakfast whispering to us? Forward, brave warriors! Let us hunt the ferocious bacon in its native haunts."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I'm thinking of an idea. I want to tell you chaps something bright. I don't want to brag, but it's absolutely brilliant. It's the one idea—Hi! Come back, you fatheads! I'm talking to you!"

But the voice of breakfast, if quiet, was much more compelling than the voice of Handforth. His audience, as Adams might have put it, had given him the air. They had walked out on him. In other words, they had handed him the raspberry. The American boy could be very expressive at times.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth indignantly.

But, on second thoughts, he came to the conclusion that breakfast was a sound proposition. It would give the day a good start. And Handforth had an inkling that the day would be a strenuous one. Church and McClure felt this, too, although they knew nothing official. But Handforth's expression was significant, and his chums partook of breakfast in a state of unrest and unease.

Their fears were justified.

After breakfast—and after the Head had condoled with them over their enforced stay at the school—the juniors went out into the bright sunshine. There was nothing to do. Many of them were wondering how they would kill the time. It was useless to think of going to London by road. They simply had to wait for the train.

"Now," said Handforth, "we'll start."

"Start what?" asked Church, with a sickening dread within him.

"Decorations," said Handforth firmly.

"Oh, crumbs!" moaned McClure.

He and Church fell limply into one another's arms, and a number of other fellows gathered round, wondering what the trouble was.

"Gluttony is a serious thing," said Pitt. "These after-effects——"

"It's Handy!" gasped Church. "He's going to start some decorations!"

"Good!" said Pitt briskly. "Make a ring, you chaps! I'll be Handy's second——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't mean facial decorations," snapped Church. "This isn't a time to be funny, you West House comedian!"

"My fame is spreading!" said Pitt contentedly.

"Handy means to put wallpaper on Study D," howled Church.

"He's far more liable to put it on himself, so why worry?" asked Nipper. "There ought to be some good entertainment over this."

"Yes, for you chaps," groaned Mac. "But what about us?"

Handforth glared round.

"When you've finished being idiotic, perhaps I can speak?" he asked.

"He's jealous," said Pitt. "He wants to be idiotic in his own turn."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We're doomed to stay here all day," continued Handforth relentlessly. "There's no train until seven o'clock this evening, and it's only just nine o'clock now. That means we've got eleven clear hours for work."

"Naughty boy!" said Pitt severely. "Where's your arithmetic?"

"Well, twelve hours, then!" roared Handforth. "Can't a chap make a slip now? We've got all day, and I want you fellows to help me with Study D. Twenty of us! It'll be easy!"

Nipper grinned.

"That was a good one!" he said. "Know any more?"

"Eh? Know any more what?"

"Aren't you telling jokes?" asked Nipper.

"No, I'm not!" howled Handforth. "I'm asking you chaps to help me to decorate Study D. I'm not going to trust my den to these workmen! Some of us can be doing the papering while the others are painting. Be sportsmen, you know! Rally round, and help!"

"Ha, na, na!"

"He's full of fun this morning," said Pitt.

"You—you——"

"Cheese it, Handy," said Nipper. "This idea of yours is dotty, and we're not going

to encourage you by discussing it. It's off!"

"Oh, have a heart!" pleaded Church.

"Think of us!" said McClure, in a hollow voice.

"It'll be hard lines on you fellows—but duty is duty," said Nipper firmly. "It can't be done!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And most of the fellows strolled off, cackling. Of course, they didn't take Handforth seriously. They were dressed in their best, and they meant to have an easy day. Quite apart from which, they hadn't the faintest intention of encouraging Handforth's craziness.

They reached the Triangle, and found the workmen standing about in groups, and ill-tempered.

"Not settled yet, then?" asked Nipper.

"No, it ain't!" retorted one of the plasterers. "And not likely to be! We're on strike—that's what we are!"



CHAPTER 11.

NO BLACKLEGS!

"DDS shocks and spasms!" said Archie Glenthorne. "On strike?"

"Yus, that's what we are—on strike," said the

plasterer with warmth.

"Good gad! Absolutely! You mean on strike?"

"That's wot I do mean!" agreed the man, as though he hadn't made his meaning clear earlier. "We ain't puttin' up with no nonsense! Not likely. We don't do no work until that bloke, Miller, clears off."

"Oh, I see!" said Archie. "This—this—er—bloke—fails to please, what? I mean to say, one of your mates, what?"

"He ain't one of our mates—'e's the manager."

"I mean— What?" said Archie, adjusting his monocle. "You don't absolutely mean to say the manager?"

"Yus, I do!"

"Then it seems to me, laddie, that you need ticking off," replied Archie frigidly. "Absolutely ticking off! It's frightfully bad form, dash it, to refer to a manager as a 'bloke'! That sort of thing isn't done!"

"Ain't it?" said the plasterer. "Well, I'm doin' it!"

This seemed to clinch the argument, and the other juniors tactfully manoeuvred Archie into the background. The workmen had their own troubles, no doubt, and it wasn't for the juniors to take sides, or express opinions.

"I expect it'll soon be settled," said Nipper cheerily.

"It'll be settled when that bloke, Miller, clears out—and not before!" said the plasterer. "A interferin' old 'og, that's wot 'e is! We 'aven't 'ad no trouble with 'im up at the workshops, in London. But down 'ere 'e seems to think 'e's Mr. 'Igh-an'-mighty! Lord Crush-'em, or something! It's likely we'll

stand 'is lip! Wants to mess about with us plasterers, like as if we didn't 'ave no fore-man!"

"Then it's a real strike?" asked Pitt.

"We don't do no work to-day!" said one of the other men, feeling that it was up to him to join in the conversation. "I ain't a plasterer, but us chaps are out in sympathy. If Mr. Miller don't give in, we packs up an' goes back to London. That's wot 'appens!"

"And the school, dash it, gets absolutely left in the good old cart?" asked Archie, returning to the attack. "Pretty hard lines on us, I mean! What, as it were, have we done?"

"Don't be an ass, Archie," said De Valerie. "If they've got a grievance, they've a right to air it. Good luck to 'em!"

"Hear, hear!" said Boots.

"Three cheers for the strike!" said two or three others.

The workmen felt warmed towards these wholehearted juniors.

"The longer you strike, the longer holiday we shall have!" went on De Valerie, grinning. "Couldn't you carry it over Easter, and then hang it out a week or two, so that the school isn't ready until after Whitsun?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cheese it!" muttered Nipper. "They'll see we're kidding them!"

"Who's kidding 'em?" demanded De Valerie. "I'm in earnest! Don't we all want an extension of the Easter vac.? I've always said it was too short."

"Laddies, one moment!" interrupted Archie. "I rather fancy that the good old S.O.S. is being shoved on the air. Church and McClure, the dear old eggs, are absolutely making signals of distress. They're broadcasting the appeal right on our wavelength!"

The others glanced round. Handforth, in the shade of Big Arch, was about to perpetrate grim violence upon his long-suffering chums. He was in the act of tearing his jacket off already. The others hurried up, and surrounded him.

"Chuck it, Handy!" said Nipper. "No fighting!"

"Mind your own business!" roared Handforth.

"Bad example to the workmen," said Pitt, shaking his head. "They're all on strike, and——"

"On strike!" interrupted Handforth, forgetting his warlike intentions.

"Yes, the whole crowd."

"I say, is this a fact?" asked Handforth excitedly. "All these—these plasterers and paperhangers and chaps are on strike?"

"That's the sad truth," said Pitt. "But it doesn't affect us. We're not supposed to be here, really——"

"Doesn't affect us?" yelled Handforth. "Why, you fathead, it's our chance!"

"What do you mean—our chance?"

"On strike!" breathed Handforth. "By George, that's *done* it!"

"Done what?"

"Why, we've simply got to carry on, that's all!" declared Handforth firmly. "The school's got to be finished, hasn't it? There's all this spring cleaning held up, so it's our plain duty to take off our jackets, and carry on the good work. And we'll start with Study D!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I thought there was a catch in it!" grinned Pitt. "He thinks he can trick us by a thin wheeze like that! What does he care about the school? He's only thinking of Study D!"

Handforth drew himself up, dignified.

"I'm thinking of the whole place!" he said stiffly. "After we've finished Study D, we'll get busy on the other rooms. And it's up to you fellows to support me all along the line."

Reggie Pitt looked at Handforth in amazement.

"Are you inciting us to become strike-breakers?" he asked sternly.

"Eh?"

"Are you suggesting that we should be blacklegs?" demanded Pitt. "Handy—Handy! This is terrible!"

"What?" gasped Handforth feebly.

"It's—it's horrible!" continued Pitt, in a pained voice. "He wants us to be black-legs."

"But—but——"

"Our sympathy is with the workmen!" declared Nipper. "Handy, we're all ashamed of you!"

"Great pip!" breathed Handforth.

"We're surprised at you, suggesting such a—a treacherous act!" continued Nipper sternly. "We meant to keep out of this quarrel. We meant to steer clear of this strike. But since you've forced our hand, we've got to profess our whole-hearted sympathy with the strikers!"

"Hear, hear!" said Church and McClure, in one voice.

"Down with the blacklegs!" added Pitt. "In fact, let's make a resolve now. Any blacklegs who touch a single tool shall be frog-marched, and then dumped into the fountain pool!"

"Carried!" said a dozen voices.

Handforth goggled at them.

"So you see what it means, Handy," went on Pitt solemnly. "If you do a stroke of work in Study D, it'll mean trouble. We're not supposed to be here—in fact, we're interlopers. We're here on sufferance, and if we lift a finger in support of this monster—this bloke Miller—we're betraying the men."

"Hear, hear!"

Handforth had been rapidly recovering, and now he glared round with all his usual aggressiveness.

"Fatheads!" he said scornfully. "You can't pull my leg like this! Not likely! I'm going to start work on Study D at once. Come on, Churchy! Come on, Mac! We'll do this job on our own, and these other idiots can go and eat coke!"



CHAPTER 12.

HANDY, THE BLACKLEG!

HURCH and McClure gazed mutely at the others.

"It's no good you making eyes like a couple of sheep!" said Handforth tartly. "You're coming with me! You're coming——" He broke off, and stared at a man who was approaching. "By George, just a minute!"

The man was big and hearty, with a face which was probably quite genial under normal circumstances. But just now it was lined with worry and care. He was dressed in blue serge, with a bowler hat on the back of his head.

"Are you Mr. Miller?" asked Handforth.

The monster came to a halt.

"Yes," he replied. "Sorry, young 'un, can't stop——"

"But I want to ask you something," said Handforth.

"I'm just off to see the headmaster," broke in the man. "I think this trouble looks like becoming serious. Infernal nuisance! All over nothing—absolutely nothing!"

The juniors remained discreetly impartial.

"They're all right in the main," continued Mr. Miller exasperatedly. "The best body of fellows you could wish for, but there are one or two confounded mischief-makers among them. If the men wouldn't listen to them, it would be all right. But what can a man do?" he added appealingly.

"I've tried my best! And this contract——" He broke off and turned to Nipper. "Happen to know if the telephone is through to London?" he asked anxiously. "I want to get in touch with the firm."

"The 'phone's re-connected locally, but I'm not sure about trunks," replied Nipper. "You'd better go and see the Head. I hope he won't be too worried over this—he's only just convalescent, you know."

"Well, I'm doing the best I can," said Mr. Miller. "Thanks, boys. Don't mix in unless you can help it——"

"Take that to heart, Handy," said Reggie.

"Half a minute!" said Handforth, grasping the manager's sleeve. "Any objection if I do some decorations in my study?"

"You can play about to your heart's content," replied Mr. Miller.

He pushed on, and Handforth looked rather blank.

"I've changed my opinion about Mr. Miller," said Pitt firmly. "He's a man of marvellous perception. He read your character like a book, Handy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was only too plain that Mr. Miller regarded Handforth as a harmless unit in the scheme of things. He could do what he liked with Study D. He could wreak his worst upon that innocent apartment. Mr. Miller had weightier things upon his mind.

"Well, anyhow, I've got permission!" said Handforth, after he had recovered from his

indignation. "That settles it! We've got all day before us, and we'll make Study D into a different place. By the time I've finished with it, you won't know it!"

"We believe you!" agreed Nipper.

"What's more, I don't want any help!" roared Handforth.

"Thank goodness!" breathed his chums.

"I don't want any help except Mac's and Church's!" continued Handforth. "They belong to the study as much as I do, so they've got to lend a hand. Come on, my lads!"

"But—but we're all dressed in our best!" protested Church.

Handforth brushed the objection aside.

"That's nothing!" he said. "We can pop upstairs, and get into our old togs. They're ruined, anyhow, and a little paste won't hurt them."

This was sound reasoning—so sound that Church and McClure were crushed. They hadn't given Handforth credit for thinking of anything. Those old suits were destined for the rubbish-heap, anyhow, so a little added grime would make no difference. It seemed that all hope was lost. Church made a last despairing effort.

"What about the wallpaper?" he asked. "It's down at the station, isn't it?"

"By Jupiter, yes!" said McClure. "Well, of course, that's settled it! Can't do the study without any wallpaper——"

"These men are on strike, and if I tip a couple of 'em to fetch that parcel, I shan't be taking them from their work," interrupted Handforth, his words having the effect of a knell of doom. "For half-a-crown, these chaps will fetch that parcel in no time. Come on!"

The chums of Study D went off, and the other fellows gazed after them with grinning faces. The anguish of Church and McClure produced nothing but this callous amusement.

"Better let him have his fling, I suppose," said Nipper. "It'll save a lot of trouble. Besides, if it amuses him, why should we interfere?"

"I may be wrong, old companion, but I've a vague feeling that Church and McClure won't be amused in the slightest degree!" remarked Archie. "In fact, they look like a couple of chappies being led to the dashed scaffold!"

"Hard lines on them, but they'll get over it," said Nipper. "There's something to be said for Handy, too. We've got the whole day on our hands, and it's liable to get irksome."

This was true. Nobody quite knew how to employ themselves. The Head had kindly invited them to regard his house as their own, but they did not like to take advantage of this offer. The Head was far from well, and their noisy presence would hardly conduce to the peace that the doctor had probably been ordered.

Somebody suggested cricket practice, but this was a wash-out. The playing-fields would need a lot of attention before any

games could be played on them. In the end, the fellows strolled about, idly enjoying the bright sunshine. They took care to avoid the workmen.

In the meantime, Handforth & Co., having completed a little business transaction with two worthy carpenters, had advanced towards Study D. Church and McClure, now that the thing was inevitable, recovered their spirits. They were beginning to dimly see the possibilities. Perhaps there would be some redeeming features in this ordeal, after all. The very thought of Handforth in charge of a paste-pot was intriguing.

"What about changing?" asked Church, as they went down the Junior passage.

"Changing?" said Handforth.

"Of course, if you really prefer to spoil another suit of clothes, it's none of our business," said Church. "But Mac and I are going upstairs to change these togs."

"Yes, of course," said Handforth. "But that'll do after we've had a look at the job. That's the correct term, isn't it? These paperhangers always have a look at the job before they start on it."

"Rather," said Mac. "That's one of the sacred rituals!"

They pictured Study D as they had seen it during their previous visit—when they had left the barges for a brief spell to visit the school. Their old den had been a pitiful travesty of its real self. The furniture had been ruined, the walls streaming with dampness, and the paper peeling off. And the floor had been covered with a coating of mud and rubbish. Church and McClure were hoping that this spectacle would remove some of Handforth's ardour. One look at the room would probably take the stuffing out of him.



CHAPTER 13.

A STICKY BUSINESS.

"By George!" said Handforth.

They had entered Study D, and Church and McClure received a surprise. Their vision of

Handforth's stuffing being knocked out faded away. Study D was in such a condition that his enthusiasm was increased.

All the rubbish and mud and litter had been cleared away. The workmen had evidently been busy in the Junior passage. The floor was not only cleared, but it was clean. The walls had been stripped of their wet and useless paper, and not an atom of furniture remained. It was in an ideal condition for the reception of paperhangers.

"This is a bit of luck!" said Handforth, his eyes gleaming. "I thought we should have a lot of cleaning up to do first."

"Oh, you *had* thought of that, then?" growled Church, with a tone that indicated that he had been swindled.

"Of course, I'd thought of it," said Handforth. "I was going to set you chaps to

work on clearing everything up, while I measured off the wallpaper."

"Oh, were you?" said Mac. "Then we've escaped something!"

"This is simply ripping!" went on Handforth, becoming more and more enthusiastic. "Now, I think we'd better do a few preliminaries before we go upstairs and change."

"Preliminaries?" said Church. "But we don't want to start work in our best bags—"

"Preliminaries with pencil and paper," said Handforth. "Here's my notebook. Who's got a pencil? Lend me a pencil, Mac."

McClure handed over his silver one.

"Why, you burglar, this is mine!" said Handforth.

"Rats! You gave it to me!" retorted Mac.

"Did I? I don't remember it, but I expect you're right," replied Handforth, who often had these lapses. "A jolly good pencil like this, too! I must have been an ass! Well, let's get to work!"

He gave the room an appraising glance.

"All this has got to be altered," he declared. "Look at it! Skirtings and window-frame painted a dull brown—"

"Get away," said Church. "It's grained oak."

"I don't care what it is—I don't like it," said Handforth. "Never did like it. I believe in bright colours—cheery, light-hearted effects. Tones. That's the word—tones. When I come into this study, I want to feel cheery and happy. There's nothing gives you the pip worse than a dull room. What kind of paper did we have? A drab, rotten brown."

"That was to match the mahogany," said Church. "All the studies were like it—and you can bet they'll be like it again."

"Not this one," replied Handforth. "I'm going to make this study so bright that people will start singing as soon as they get into it. First of all, we'll have orange skirtings."

"That sounds fruity," said McClure.

"Orange skirtings, and we'll have the mantelpiece done in pea-green," continued Handforth, opening his notebook. "I'll dot these down, so that we can have a guide. Skirtings orange. Mantelpiece pea-green. Then we'll paint the window-frame a nice vermilion, and the window itself might look well in royal blue."

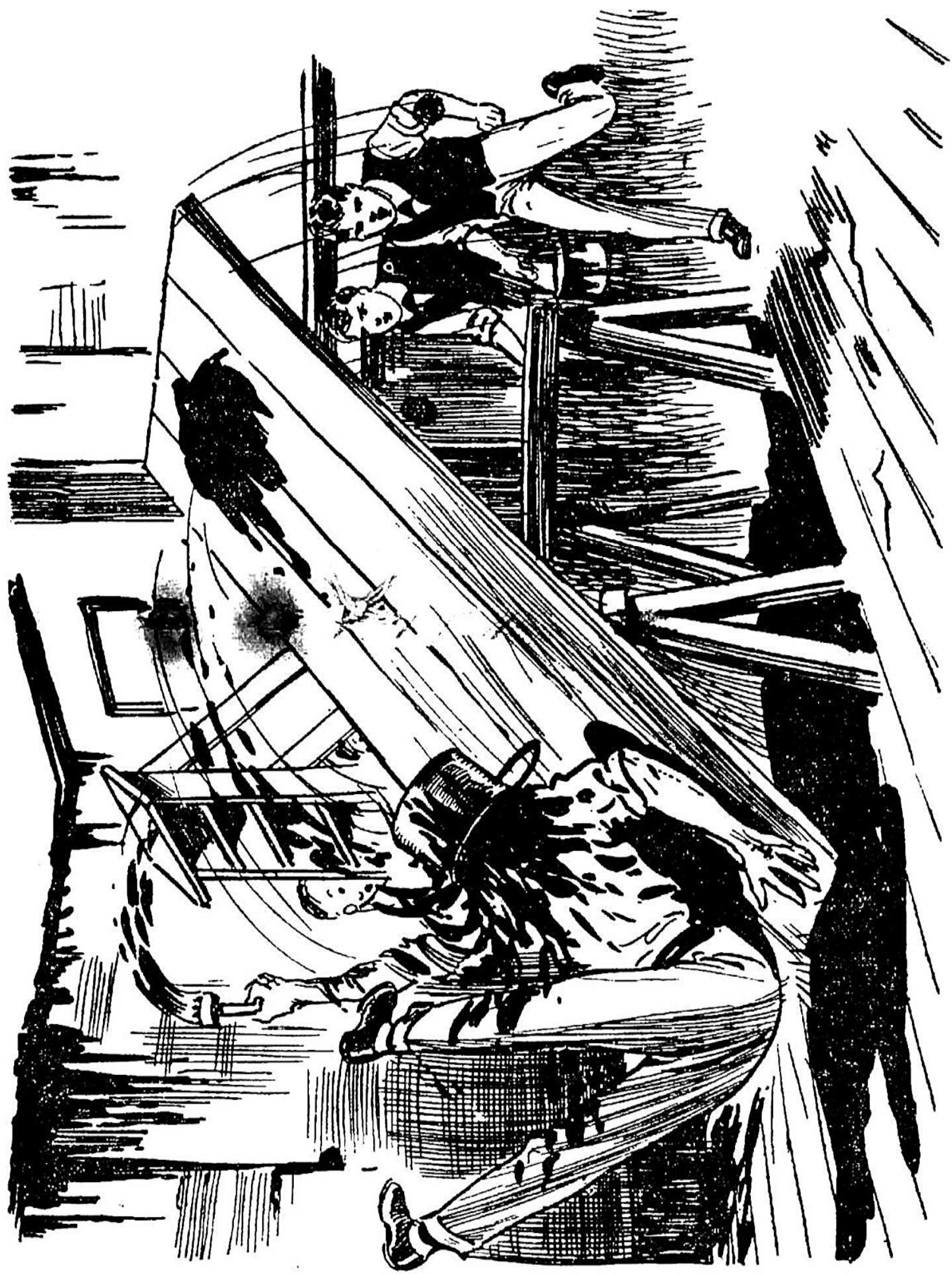
"It might," said Church, "but I don't think it will."

Handforth wrote rapidly.

"Window frame vermilion," he said. "Window, royal blue. That's all the paintwork, isn't it?"

"Isn't it enough?" said Church. "You silly ass, you'll make the room look like a futurist painting! It'll knock you over backwards as soon as you come through the doorway."

"By George! The doorway!" said Handforth. "We'd forgotten that. We'll have



Handforth took a stride forward, slipped on a big blob of paste, and then crashed over on his back. He made a frantic clutch at the end of the table, but only succeeded in pulling the whole thing over on top of himself— including a large pot of paint!

the door-frame in art-mauve, and the door itself, pillar-box red.

Church shuddered.

"Go easy!" he protested. "You don't mean it!"

"Door-frame, art-mauve—door, pillar-box red!" mumbled Handforth, as he wrote. "Well, that's the lot."

"I suppose you know that no room can look artistic unless all the paintwork is of the same colour?" asked McClure. "Why don't you pick on one, and stick to it? Art-mauve, for example."

"Colours," said Handforth firmly. "I want colours, and I'm going to have colours."

"My stars! You'll have 'em!" said Church grinning. "But we shan't get that to-day, so we needn't worry. For one thing, you'll have to buy the paints—"

"Shan't get it to-day?" interrupted Handforth, staring. "It won't take us long to slap the wallpaper on and we shall be ready for the painting this afternoon. I've got all the paints, too—they're in that parcel."

"You've got 'em?" ejaculated Church.

"Of course I have," said Handforth triumphantly. "How do you think I reeled them out so quickly, otherwise? I had all this planned out in my mind—and now we can simply get to work."

They went upstairs to change, Church and McClure feeling rather dizzy. They had an uncomfortable feeling that Handforth was in deadly earnest. And they, it must be remembered, shared that study with him. They could picture themselves shrinking from it throughout the forthcoming term—wearing smoked glasses at prep. Church, indeed, had a mournful feeling that he would be colour-blind at the end of the first week.

Once in their old togs, they felt better fitted for the task. They found a friendly foreman wandering about in the passage, and he cheerfully lent them some steps, and a real paperhanger's board, on trestles. What was more, he lent them a paste-brush, and a huge pailful of paste. The foreman, in fact, thought the whole thing was a good joke, and announced his intention of standing by and looking on.

Happily, Handforth & Co. were not condemned to this ordeal, for the foreman was suddenly called away to take the chair at an important meeting of strikers' delegates in Big Hall. And this absorbing topic kept him so occupied that he forgot the juniors altogether.

"Well, thank goodness he's gone," said Handforth. "Lock the door, Mac. We don't want these mer messing about, and hindering us."

The parcel had arrived and was on the floor. Handforth ripped it open, and took out pots of paint, and many rolls of paper. With a flourish he spread one of the rolls out on the table. Church and McClure shied slightly as they saw the pattern on the paper, and backed away.

"By jingo, it is startling!" said Church, awed.



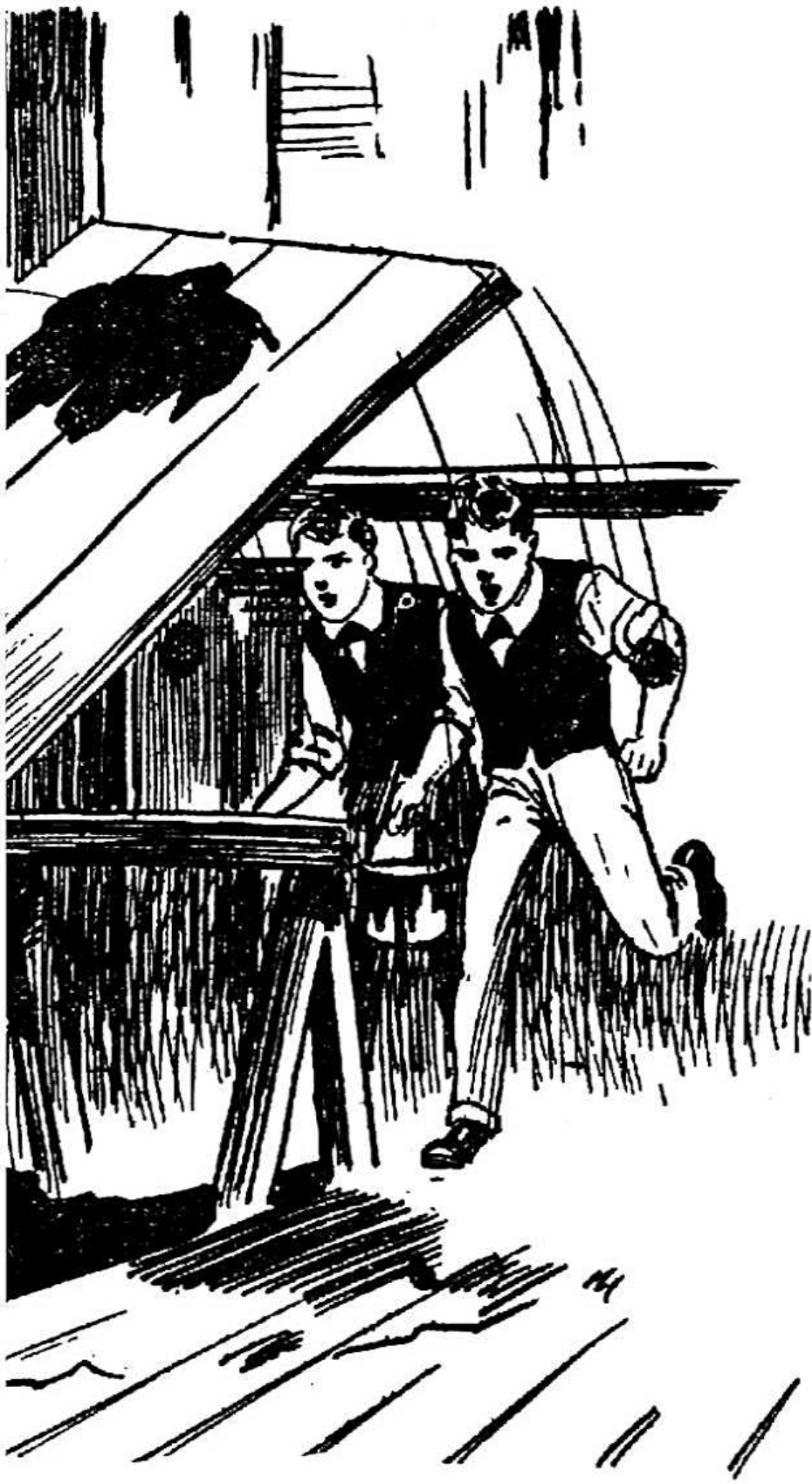
Handforth took a stride forward, slipped on a frantic clutch at the end of the table, but on including

Handforth said nothing. The sunlight was pouring through the window, and the wallpaper seemed to stand out like a beacon. The red background was startling—a vivid, aggressive red, which hurt the eye. And the green snakes which squirmed all over its surface were of a horrible green. It was one of those wallpapers which should have been suppressed by act of Parliament. The manufacturers should have been made liable to a term of penal servitude.

In the shop, Handforth had only seen it in a subdued light, and it had seemed quite toney. But it was his choice, and it wasn't his way to admit a mistake. He grasped the paste-brush firmly.

"It'll look fine when it's up," he declared. "You can't judge it by just one strip. Come on—we'll soon finish the job."

He whirled the brush round, and the unfortunate Church received about half a pint in his face before he could dodge. Handforth sloshed the brush on the paper, and started work in earnest.



l then crashed over on his back. He made
g the whole thing over on top of himself—
int!

“Glub-glub-glub!” said Church incoherently.

“Go easy with that brush, you fathead!” gasped McClure.

“Eh?” said Handforth, glancing round. “What’s happened to Church? Splashed a bit? Well, he shouldn’t get in the way! Come on! It won’t take us two ticks to get this piece fixed up!”

And he went on merrily pasting.



CHAPTER 14.

HANDFORTH STICKS TO IT.

EWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was full of enthusiasm. Now that he was thoroughly on the job, he felt that it was practically

finished. Only a few strips of paper to put up, and the walls would be done. As for the painting—well, any ass with a few brushes could slap it on in no time

He glanced round.

“We’ll start over that corner, next to the door,” he announced. “Then we’ll work round to the window, and take this other wall last. Mac, shove the steps over by the door.”

McClure didn’t move. He was looking on, with an expression of intense admiration in his eyes. He even looked at Handforth as though he couldn’t believe that he was awake.

“Buck up!” said Handforth crisply.

“Well, by Jupiter!” said McClure, at last.

“What’s the matter, fathead?”

“Handy I didn’t know you had so much sense—honestly, I didn’t!” said Mac, his admiration finding an outlet in words. “This is simply a stroke of genius!”

“What is?” said Handforth, staring.

“Pure genius!” declared Mac breathlessly.

“If you’ll tell me—”

“Why, that idea of yours!” said McClure, pointing to the table. “We all think that paper is a bit too gaudy, don’t we?”

“Do we?” said Handforth aggressively.

“Of course we do, and your idea of shoving the paste on the face of it, so that we shall only see the back, is topping,” said McClure. “Only a born artist would have thought of a stunt like that.”

Handforth stared at the pasted strip of paper in dismay.

“Great Scott!” he gasped. “I’ve pasted it on the wrong side!”

“No, you haven’t!”

“I’ve pasted it on the face, haven’t I?”

“Well, that’s the right side!” said McClure firmly. “You don’t mean to say you’re going to ruin everything by—”

“Take it away!” ordered Handforth. “It’s all your fault for jabbering, Church,” he added, glaring at his other unfortunate chum.

“My fault?” gasped Church.

“Yes!”

“For talking?”

“Yes, blow you!”

“But I haven’t said a word!” snorted Church.

“Then you should have said a word!” roared Handforth unreasonably. “Couldn’t you see I was pasting this on the wrong side? You just stand there, eating that stuff, and you don’t care twopence!”

“It’s a lovely flavour!” said Church bitterly. “It tastes like sour porridge mixed with vinegar and ink.”

Handforth tore the strip of wallpaper from the table and tossed it aside. McClure tried to dodge, and thoroughly wrapped himself inside it. He staggered across the room, slipped, and fought desperately.

“Lend a hand, Church!” he yelled. “By jingo, let’s do the same as these workmen are doing!” he added, as he freed himself. “Let’s go on strike!”

“I’m game!” said Church promptly.

Handforth took no notice. Human nature is a peculiar thing. If Handforth had ordered his chums to remain, they would probably have pushed his head into the paste pail and decamped. But, just because he

said nothing, they stuck to him—in more senses than one. They had a dread feeling that tragedy would happen if they left him alone.

"Wait a minute before you start pasting that bit!" said Church. "Where are the scissors?"

"What scissors?"

"Aren't you going to cut the edge off?" asked Church.

"What edge?"

"Oh, my hat!" said Church hopelessly. "He doesn't know that wallpaper has to be prepared! You silly ass, Handy, if you don't cut the edge off it'll show, and then the whole effect of the room will be spoilt."

"Nothing could spoil it!" said McClure.

Handforth brushed aside the objection.

"We can't mess about with edges," he said curtly. "The main thing is to get the paper on the walls. Come on, lend a hand with this piece! We shall never get anything done unless we make haste."

He took a stride forward, and his foot landed on a spot where a blob of paste had fallen. The next second Handforth turned a complete somersault. His foot shot from under him, he crashed over on his back, clutched at the edge of the table, and pulled the whole thing over on top of himself, including a large pot of paint!

"That's more than I could do!" said Church admiringly.

A roaring confusion of noise came from beneath the table. One of the trestles shot out at the rear, and the loose top went heaving over. Handforth sat up, dazed and bewildered.

"Who did that?" he panted.

"I suppose you'll blame us?" asked McClure. "It's your own fault for splashing paste all over the floor. The giddy place will be like a skating rink before long!"

Handforth got to his feet and looked down at the wreckage. He felt that he was not making a very great success of this enterprise. And his temper was not improved when the window darkened, and two faces looked in.

"Nearly finished?" asked Reggie Pitt cheerily.

"Finished!" howled Handforth. "We haven't started!"

"This is bad! There must have been a hitch," said Pitt. "Perhaps it's because you haven't had an audience, Handy? Jack and I are quite willing to stay here, looking on."

"Go away!" hooted Handforth.

"We can give you some advice, too——"

"By George!"

Handforth whipped the paste-brush out of the pail and swung round. But the two West House juniors had gone. They had gone so quickly that they appeared to have evaporated.

"Where are they?" snorted Handforth, leaning out of the window.

"Oh, don't trouble," said Church. "Let's get on! Did you expect them to wait for you? They're all dressed up——"

"I'll give 'em dressed up if they come back!" said Handforth aggressively. "Lend a hand with this table, my lads, and let's get some work done! It's nearly dinner-time already!"

The pasting table was set up again, and the work proceeded. At least, the operations proceeded. Whether they actually constituted work was open to doubt, if one judged by results.

Handforth made no mistake with the next strip of paper. Certainly he tore it off carefully, and took no notice when Church pointed out that it was about a yard too long. He spread it over the table, and seized the paste brush. His chums dodged neatly across the room.

Slap! Slap!

The paste went on liberally, and the long strip was ready. Handforth glanced round and frowned.

"Didn't I tell one of you to put the steps near the door?" he said. "Buck up! I'm just coming across with this first piece. It's only a question of getting a start. Once we're fairly on the go we shall soon be done."

Church put the step-ladder in position, and Handforth seized the long strip of paper gingerly and proceeded to pull it free.

"Go easy!" warned Church. "The correct way is to double it and stick one side to the other—paste to paste. Then you won't get mixed up. After you get on the steps it'll just drop down into position."

"We can't bother with that," said Handforth curtly. "When I do a job I do it in my own way."

And, continuing to do it in his own way, he held the pasted paper high above his head, with the paste side towards him. The limp top section drooped over, and several drops of paste fell down his neck. Then the piece of paper wrapped itself round his head.

He stumbled blindly forward, tripping on the lower part. With a wild, fiendish howl he fell headlong, inextricably mixed up with the remnants of wallpaper. His chums watched admiringly.

"That's Handy's way!" said Church, with a nod.



CHAPTER 15.

STILL ON THE JOB!

EGGIE PITT'S face appeared at the window again.

"Hallo!" he said. "I see you're getting on,

famously Handy."

"He's just showing us his own patent way of wallpapering," explained McClure. "I thought it was all rot at first, but I must say there's something in it."

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Pitt looked at the heaving mass on the floor, and elevated his eyebrows.

"That's funny," he said. "We chaps out here have been labouring under a delusion. We thought Handy was going to paper the walls. I didn't know it was his idea to paper himself!"

"It may be," said Church. "To tell you the truth, we don't exactly know what his idea is yet. He's the paperhanger, you know. We're only the labourers. It's not our business to ask questions."

Handforth's face suddenly appeared, bursting through a chunk of paper, after the style of a clown going through a hoop. Blobs of paste were running down his face, and his hair was too awful to look at.

"Here we are again!" said Pitt genially.

Handforth tried to speak, but failed. It was entirely his own fault. He wanted to call Pitt about twenty things at once, and they naturally became jammed. Handforth's vical cords were large, but there was a limit.

"Now I understand why you bought so much paper," went on Pitt. "Something after the style of making a film play, eh? You get twenty thousand feet, and whittle it down to about three thousand. It's a jolly good idea to allow for wastage. Only a big brain could have thought of that."

"Go away!" croaked Handforth.

He leapt to his feet, and tore at the masses of paper which were sticking all over the front of him. But he only succeeded in getting his hands clogged with the stuff. He was within easy reach of the paste brush, however, and the West House juniors once more performed their famous vanishing trick.

"Why aren't there any shutters to this window?" asked Handforth thickly. "If those funny idiots come back again I'll—I'll—"

"You won't be able to do anything, old man," said Church. "They're too quick." He looked round. "Well, we're getting on a bit," he continued. "We've half papered the floor, anyhow!"

Handforth turned on him.

"If you're going to start any of those funny remarks, I'll push your head into the paste pail and hold it there!" he threatened. "It's all rot! Wallpapering is the easiest game in the world! We've just been unlucky, that's all."

"You don't feel like chucking it up, then?" suggested McClure.

As a matter of fact, Handforth did. He felt like stalking out of the room, and having nothing more to do with it. But that iron will of his, that leather-like determination, conquered. He drew a deep breath, and glared.

"No, we're going on!" he said hoarsely.

"It's risky——"

"I tell you we're going on!"

And Handforth grabbed at the roll of paper, and whirled another length of it on to the table. Again the pastebrush came into operation, but this time Handforth doubled the strip in two, face to face, as Church had

originally advised. Church was far too tactful a youth to make any comment. But he winked confidentially at McClure.

Handforth was astonished at his success now. He found that he could carry the paper quite easily, and after he had mounted to the top of the steps, the lower half fell down smoothly.

"By George!" he said exultantly. "Now we're moving!"

His words were, unfortunately, only too true. He was moving far too rapidly for his liking. The steps were a little too far away, and Handforth was carelessly leaning over, as though they were bolted to the floor. The top sagged over, Handforth gave a roar of alarm, and crashed head first to the floor, amid the ruins of another strip of wallpaper.

"My hat!" said Church blankly.

He and McClure instinctively rushed up to their leader to aid him. But he apparently needed no aid. He was already on his feet, turning round in circles, tearing the paper from him, and uttering wild and uncouth cries. His chums backed away.

"Great Scott!" gasped Church. "He's gone dotty!"

"Isn't it enough to make anybody go dotty?" bawled Handforth, his face suddenly appearing. "Who—who put those steps there?"

"Mac did!" said Church. "I—I mean, I did!"

Handforth simply went for him like a whirlwind; Church made one clean dive through the window, and landed in West Square. He turned, and his face was expressive of alarm.

"Look out!" he panted. "There's a crowd of chaps here! Don't let yourself be seen like that, Handy. They'll die of laughter!"

Handforth paused on the very sill.

"You're lucky!" he said fiercely. "Come back again!"

"Not likely!"

"You ass, I won't hurt you!" said Handforth, realising that he was beaten. "You and Mac be pasting the next strip of paper while I clear some of this litter off me!"

Church re-entered, and the work continued. It afforded Handforth no satisfaction to note that his chums handled the wallpaper with much better success than he had done. He was exasperated. He was fuming so excessively that he made a sound like a kettle boiling.

"All right—give it to me!" he rapped out.

"Don't bother, Handy—we'll put it up," said Church.

"No, you won't! I'm the paperhanger!" retorted Handforth. "I'm not going to have you fatheads saying that you had to do the job because I made a mess of it! I know your games!"

This time he made certain that the step-ladder was firm, and in a solid position.

He let the sticky mass of paper fall down, and then he slapped it on the wall.

"Easy!" said Church. "It's not quite straight——"

"I'm doing this!" snarled Handforth.

He didn't usually snarl, but he had a hor-

rible feeling that this wallpaper was getting the better of him. It changed him from a rational Removite into a kind of human wolf. He drew his hands away, and pulled about eighteen inches of paper with him. But the strip was sticking on, that was one thing.

"Good!" he panted. "Now we've started!"

He smoothed it down, unable to get out all the rucks and folds. But it was on. And when he stepped back to the other side of the room, and surveyed it, the rucks weren't very noticeable. He decided to ignore them. The red and green atrocity filled the room with a sinister brooding.

"It's all on the skew," said Church.

"That doesn't matter," growled Handforth, who knew it.

"Yes, but it'll look rotten when you put the next piece on," said McClure. "Besides, there's something else. You'll have to take that down again, Handy."

"Take it down?" repeated Handforth, as though Mac had asked him to demolish the school. "What the dickens for?"

"Nothing else for it," said Mac. "It's upside down!"



CHAPTER 16.

GIVING IT BEST!

HANDFORTH gave a groan. It was a big shock to him to learn that the first successful strip was upside down. It was securely pasted to the wall, too. But he cheered up when a ready solution occurred to him.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "We can put all the rest on upside down."

"Oh, rats!" said Church. "You don't want to spoil the whole effect for the sake of scraping one strip. This paper's bad enough the right way up. There's no need to make things worse."

But Handforth was firm. He wasn't going to be defeated by a silly trifle of that sort. Besides, now he came to look at the paper closely, he felt that it was more attractive, wrong side up. Those green snake things didn't look quite so aggressive. He picked up another roll, and prepared to go ahead with the job. In his heart, he knew that that strip of paper looked ghastly, for it was about six inches out of the perpendicular. But he wouldn't have admitted it for a pension. He had started this task now, and he could do nothing else but finish it. He wasn't to be defeated by a few rolls of wallpaper! Hadn't he always maintained that wallpapering was child's play?

Besides, he remembered the other juniors.

He remembered how they had laughed at him, how they had predicted these very disasters, and how they had told him that the whole affair was crazy. Why, if he forsook it now, they would heap ridicule upon his head, and burst their sides with laughter. Handforth was in just that position where retreat was out of the question. He had to go on.

"What-no!"

A languid voice sounded from the window, and Archie Glenthorne stood there. He did not realise his stark peril. Handforth's hand was even then on the paste brush.

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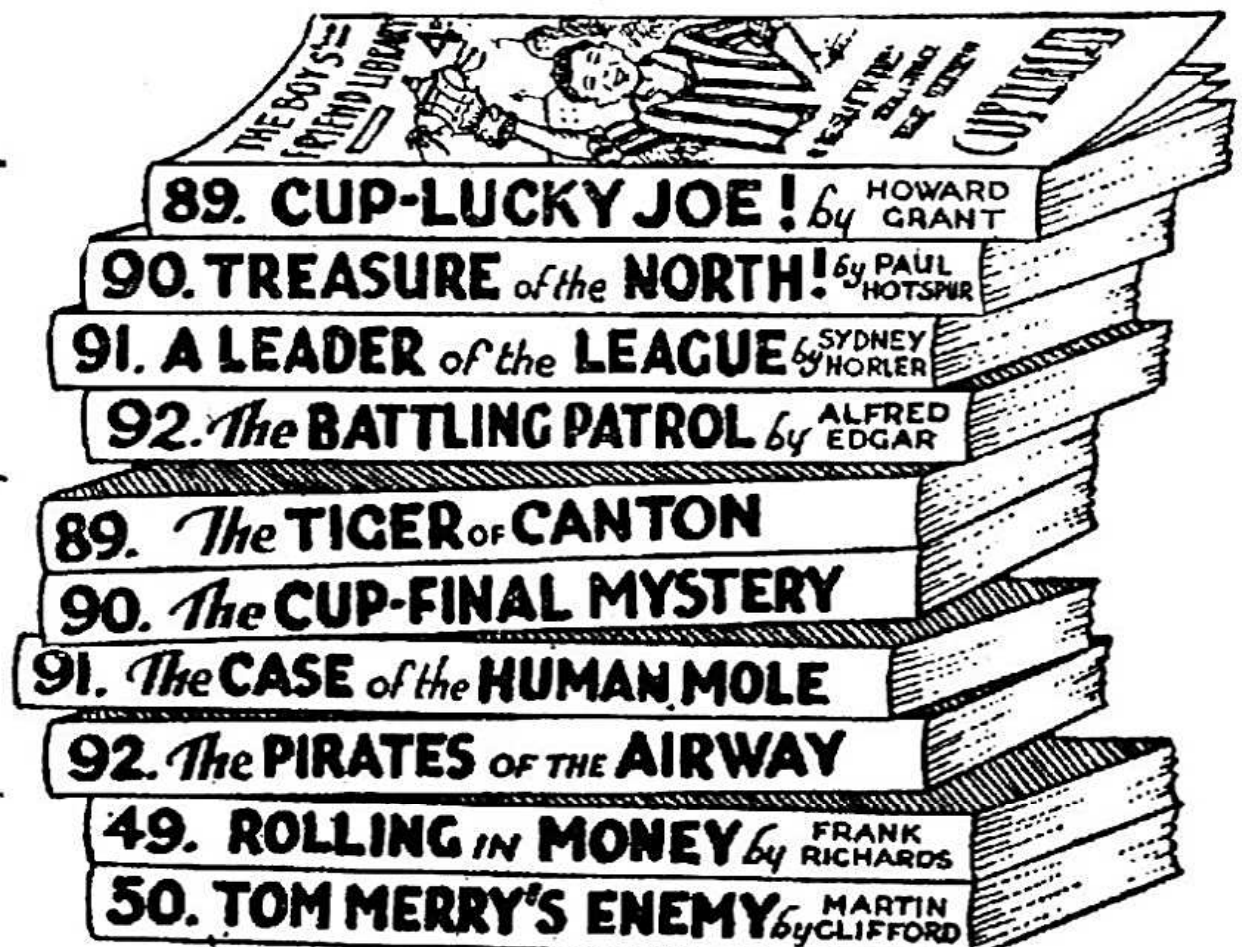
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"Good gad!" said Archie, gazing at the littered floor through his celebrate eyeglass. "Dirty work at the jolly old cross-roads, what? I mean to say, some sort of accident, I gather?"

"Go away!" said Handforth thickly.

"Eh?"

"Go away!"

"Oh!" said Archie. "I see what you mean. You want me to go away? You desire me to trickle forth into the offing? Absolutely right—ho! A nod, old strawberry, is as good as a wink."

Archie had leaned further into the room as he was talking, but just as he was turning round to go he leapt as though somebody had stuck a darning needle into him. His eyes just caught sight of that completed strip.

"Good gad!" he bleated.

"What's the matter now?" demanded Handforth, startled

Archie gave another look at the thing, with frozen fascination.

"Not absolutely!" he said hoarsely. "You don't mean to tell me— No! There are some horrors, dash it, which are too absolutely frightful to be true! The old eyes must be playing me false!"

Handforth raised the paste brush significantly.

"I'll give you ten seconds to clear off!" he said grimly.

"But, my dear old article," protested Archie. "I mean, that—that section of view on the port quarter! Don't tell me the whole dashed room is going to be submitted to the same foul treatment?"

"I'm not telling you anything—except to clear!" roared Handforth.

"Old chappie, I'm going!" said Archie unsteadily. "The old tissues need a tonic after this poisonous blow. Phipps shall be found, and he shall concoct the good old mixture as before. Absolutely! Tea, milk, and two jolly old knobs of the sweetest! I'll get the dear old lad to have the prescription made up while I wait!"

Archie reeled off, and Handforth took another deep breath.

"No wonder we can't get on!" he said bitterly. "How can we expect to do any work when these fatheads keep interrupting? The next chap who comes near that window gets this paste-brush in his face."

Church and McClure refrained from making any comment. They were living in dread of receiving the paste brush in their own faces. And they were careful to pick their words before uttering them. An incautious remark in this apartment just now would be tantamount to suicide.

"Well?" snapped Handforth. "Are we working or not?"

Church smartly flung the next strip of paper over the table. McClure moved the steps with noisy ostentation. And Handforth did some more dirty work with the paste-brush.

"Come on!" he said curtly. "We've got to put some speed on."

He took a step forward and put his foot on the edge of the paste-pail. The next second

the pail tipped over, and Handforth slithered along on the sticky mess. He sat down with a crash which shook the whole study.

"That wasn't our fault!" said Church hastily.

"Did I say it was?" hooted Handforth.

"Well, we wanted to be on the safe side," said Church, rescuing the pail, and salving half the glutinous contents. "You've got to be careful on this sort of work. In fact, you're too refined for it, Handy. That's the trouble. This is only work for labourers. I'm surprised that you lowered yourself by taking it on."

But this was a feeble strategem, and failed dismally.

"I told those other chaps I was going to paper my room, and I'll paper it!" said Handforth stubbornly. "I'll— Hi! What the— Great Scott! I'm stuck to the floor!"

He sat there dismayed. He had thudded down with tremendous force, and at that particular spot there was a patch of half-dried paste. And that paste was not only tacky, but glue-like.

"Lend me a hand, you helpless idiots!" panted Handforth.

They heaved him up, to the accompaniment of an ominous ripping sound.

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Handforth. "What was that?"

"Sounded like something tearing," said Church.

"I know that!" shouted Handforth. "Great pip! My bags are all torn! I'm fed up with this!" he added fiercely.

"I don't wonder at it!"

The sound of that voice was like a magical restorative to the desperate Edward Oswald. He was almost on the point of giving in. An excuse for abandoning the whole project was preparing itself in his mind to be put into words. He spun round and beheld his minor at the window.

"Fed up, are you?" went on Willy. "Well, Ted, I told you what would happen. You're not the kind of chap to be left alone with a paste-brush. At the same time, it's a good idea, and I've borrowed it."

"You'll borrow this next!" stormed Handforth, raising the paste-brush.

"Steady!" said Willy in alarm. "You're not going to be violent just because I compliment you, are you? This idea is good—"

"Clear off!" interrupted Handforth wrathfully.

"All right—if you're going to be nasty," said Willy. "I never stay where I'm not wanted. But I'd like to remind you that it's nearly dinner-time."

"Dinner-time!" said Handforth, amazed. "What rot!"

"It's five to one, anyhow," said Willy.

"But—but we've only been working for about half an hour!"

"Time flies when you're busy," said Willy sagely. "And by what I can see, you've been putting in a tremendous morning's work. I like the effect of the patchwork floor! Better

than linoleum, in a way, only it might not wear so well."

He vanished, and Handforth looked almost fiendish.

"The next chap who comes to that window will get this paste-brush!" he panted. "I said it last time, and I mean it! I'm sick and tired of all these interrup—"

He broke off as a shadow fell across the window. The paste-brush went hurtling through the air, and thudded with a squeaking, sickening plop into the centre of Dr. Malcolm Stafford's waistcoat!



CHAPTER 17.

HANDY, THE PAINTER!

OR about a thousand years there was silence.

At all events, it seemed to the horrified Handforth that several epochs elapsed before that dreadful, brooding silence was broken. He was fixed to the floor as though bolts had been screwed into his feet through the planks.

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated the Head.

His words shattered that silence like the explosion of a bomb. Handforth felt one desire within him—a desire to bolt. Every fibre within him demanded that he should run, and keep on running, and then run some more. He had hurled a paste-brush at the Head! Such minor crimes as burglary and murder faded into insignificance beside this.

"Great jumping corks!" he babbled croakingly.

Another thousand years seemed to elapse. Handforth had had a battle with himself. To run was cowardly, and he was ever a fellow to face the music and to take his gruel. Besides, he had remembered that the door was locked and one of his chums had the key.

"Handforth!" thundered the Head.

He was standing outside the window, looking in.

"Sir?" said Handforth in a thin, small voice.

"Did you throw this brush at me, Handforth?" demanded the Head, in a tone that filled the room and sent the words echoing and re-echoing through Handforth's dazed brain.

"No, sir."

"Boy!" exclaimed the Head sternly.

"I—I didn't, sir!" said Handforth, running to the window, his face full of consternation. "I—I say! I'm awfully sorry, sir! Frightfully sorry! I—I mean I'm awfully, frightfully sorry!"

His concern was so great that the Head relaxed.

"No, I cannot think that you deliberately threw the brush at me, Handforth," he said. "But you evidently threw it at somebody."

"I—I thought— I mean, the chaps have been bothering me, sir. And—and— You see, I—I— What I mean is—"

Handforth's voice trailed off as he realised the futility of words. It wouldn't do him any good to confess that he had hurled the paste-brush at one of the other fellows. His only course was to remain silent, and to await the devastating crash of the chopper when it fell.

"Under the circumstances, Handforth, I will make no further inquiries," said the Head sternly. "I am remembering that you are nominally my guest to-day. So I shall inflict no punishment."

"Oh, thanks awfully, sir!" said Handforth with breathless relief.

"But I should like to know what you are doing here?" continued the Head with ominous relentlessness. "What is this litter? What is the meaning of this extraordinary confusion? Good gracious, Handforth, do you realise that your appearance is positively revolting?"

"Is—is it, sir?"

"I have never seen anybody so appallingly bedaubed with grime and paste and paper in all my life!" continued the Head. "I have, at least, the right to know what you are doing. I do not include Church and McClure, as I feel certain they have been drawn into this folly against their will."

Handforth gave a kind of gulp.

"We're papering the room, sir," he explained.

"You surprise me, Handforth," said the Head, wiping his waistcoat with an ample handkerchief. "Yes, you surprise me. At a venture, I should rather say that you have been papering yourself!"

Behind Handforth's back, Church and McClure shook hands.

"I—we— Well, sir, we've had a bit of trouble," confessed Handforth. "Things didn't go right, you know."

"I can well believe it," said the Head drily. "It has been truly said that we are learning something every day, Handforth. This is the first time I knew, for example, that it is left to the boys of this school to decorate their own studies."

"I—I thought—"

"I can quite understand what you thought, Handforth," interrupted the Head. "And you will please understand that I quite forbid this."

"Forbid it, sir?"

"I do, Handforth—absolutely forbid it," replied the Head. "I cannot imagine any other boy in this school, but you, considering such a fantastic idea. Go and get yourself cleaned at once, and let there be no more of this nonsense. You must do no more of this paperhanging."

Handforth seemed to shrink.

"But—but I've bought all the paper, sir," he protested.

The Head gazed at the strip on the wall.

"If this is a sample of it, Handforth, I shall have all the rest destroyed," he said sternly. "Now, remember my words. Get yourself cleaned at once. The dinner-gong will sound at almost any minute."



Handy took two steps into Study D, and then swayed backwards into the arms of Church. "Help!" he gasped wildly. His study had been papered and painted according to his own colour scheme—orange skirtings, pea-green mantelpiece, and vermilion window frames—but, somehow, he didn't quite like the result!

The Head nodded, and vanished from the window. Handforth, turning, just caught Church and McClure in the act of shaking hands for the second time. They guiltily leapt apart.

"What's that for?" asked Handforth darkly.

"Congratulations!" stammered Church. "Your—your escape, old man."

"The Head's a sportsman!" declared McClure hastily. "A topper! A real brick! You biff him in the radiator with a paste-brush, and he doesn't even slaughter you. You've had a marvellous escape!"

Handforth said nothing. A thought had just occurred to him—a thought which filled him with a soothing, restful peace. It trickled all over him, and oozed throughout his whole being like a healing balm.

The Head's ban was his loophole of escape! For some little time he had been feeling that this paperhanging scheme was doomed to come an awful cropper, but he hadn't dared to give it up for fear of being ridiculed. Now he could see his line of escape. Naturally, he couldn't possibly defy an order from the headmaster. He managed to give voice to a really convincing sigh of disappointment. At least, it might have been convincing to a pair of outsiders—but not to Church and McClure. They knew him far too well.

"What a beastly frost!" said Handforth disgustedly. "Just when I was getting on

so fine, too! Now the Head's spoilt everything."

"Too bad!" murmured Church.

"Hard lines, old man," said McClure.

They naturally kept up the pretence. It was so much easier.

"Well, the Head's banned the whole thing, so I suppose we might as well chuck it up, and get changed," went on Handforth carelessly. "Anyhow, the other fellows can't chip me for not finishing the room."

"They wouldn't be so unjust," said Church happily.

They went upstairs and changed, and Handforth's chums were filled with a great and glorious contentment. At least, they could look forward to a quiet afternoon.

But even they, with all their bitter experience to warn them, did not know the full extent of Handforth's wonderful mind.

Dinner over, they talked lightly about strolling over to Bellton, to see if any of the inhabitants were back. They prattled on about examining Little Side, and they mooted the idea of going along to the Moor View School, to see how it was looking.

And in the midst of all this, Handforth dropped his bomb.

"The Head didn't say anything about painting," he remarked thoughtfully.

Church and McClure jumped a foot in the air.

"Painting?" gasped Church.



CHAPTER 18.

WILLY'S LITTLE SURPRISE!

THEY regarded their leader in dire alarm. Their complacency was shattered.

"Painting?" repeated McClure dazedly.

"The Head only forbade us to do the wall-papering," argued Handforth. "After all, painting is the main thing. That'll give more colour to the room than anything else. And we shall be safe on that."

"Safe?" said Church, as though he couldn't believe his ears.

"Well, you know what I mean—no paper to mess about with."

"You wouldn't be safe with a giddy box of water-colours!" roared Church, the pent-up indignation welling out in one outburst. "You wouldn't be safe with a penn'orth of crayons!"

McClure took up the point enthusiastically.

"He's not safe with anything!" he said desperately. "In my opinion, it's an absolute mistake to let him go about without a nurse!"

"Nurse!" jeered Church. "You mean a keeper!"

Handforth came to a dead halt, and stared at them.

"Are you talking about me?" he demanded.

He knew very well that they were, but if they had offered a prize at St. Frank's for the fellow who could ask the greatest number of unnecessary questions, Handforth would have run off with the award.

"Yes, we are talking about you!" said Church ferociously. "What's more, we're fed up with you! Sick of you and your rot! We've had more than we can stand, and if you want any painting, you can jolly well do it yourself!"

Handforth ripped off his jacket.

"Hold this!" he said, handing it to McClure.

"What for?" asked Mac.

"Hold it while I slaughter Church!" panted Handforth.

McClure dropped the coat contemptuously.

"I am not going to hold your giddy coat while you do a thing like that," he replied.

"I agree with Church. If I could find better words than he's used I'd say 'em! We're fed up with your piffle, and we're not standing any more of it. Painting, eh? Great Scott! It was bad enough with the paste! We don't want to take any chances with paint!"

A few other fellows came up.

"Trouble?" asked Nipper gently.

"It's just going to start!" replied Handforth, rolling up his shirt sleeves.

"Better go easy!" said Reggie Pitt. "The Head might dodge up again—and he's not likely to let you off twice in succession. What's the trouble about, anyhow? Perhaps we can smooth it out? We're wonderful peacemakers!"

"Handy wants to start painting!" said Church briefly.

Reggie Pitt sighed.

"Of course there are some things that can't be tackled," he said. "If Handy wants to start painting, after his experience with the wall-papering, he's not an optimist, but a lunatic. We'll stand by while you jump on him, and knock some sense into his head."

Handforth was staring across the Triangle. There were many workmen lounging about, but they were all in little groups. The strike was still on.

But Handforth was looking at a single figure—a small figure. It had appeared for a moment in West Square, and Handforth had just glimpsed it. That one glance had been enough. His minor had appeared in view, and had vanished again, wearing a long white coat, and he was carrying a paint-pot.

"My goodness!" said Handforth tensely.

"It's all right, you chaps," said Pitt. "You're safe now. He's gone off into another of his dreams."

Handforth whirled round.

"Does anybody know what my minor's doing?" he asked sharply.

Nobody did. Nobody was interested in Willy.

"I'll go and see!" breathed Handforth.

He rushed off, leaving Church and McClure to voice their lamentations to the sympathetic ears of the other Removites. In the meantime Handforth tore through the rear doorway of the Ancient House, and dashed to the Third Form quarters.

"Hi, Willy!" he yelled.

The door of Willy's little study opened, and closed again. Willy stood before his major. The air was filled with a smell of new paint.

"What are you up to?" asked Handforth darkly.

"I'm glad you've popped along," said Willy, with a nod. "Saved me the trouble of going to fetch you, Ted. I've borrowed your idea, you know—although I've improved on it. You see, these rooms of ours aren't really studies, and I heard from official sources that they're not going to be re-distempred, or anything."

"Distempred?" repeated Handforth. "Distemper's a disease!"

"I expect it would be to you!" agreed Willy, nodding. "Besides, you're always liable to catch it, anyhow. All dogs do."

Handforth frowned.

"I don't want any of your check!" he snapped.

"Sometimes," said Willy, "we get what we don't want. As I was saying, the school authorities, for some mysterious reason, don't think it necessary to put wallpaper on these rooms. But I do. So Chubby and Juicy and I have been papering."

"You mean you pinched my wallpaper?"

"I wouldn't use that wallpaper if you gave it to me," retorted Willy. "No, I got round

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one of the foremen. Had a little chat with him, and made myself pleasant, and—"

"Made yourself pleasant?" said Edward Oswald. "Impossible!"

"Well, anyway, I got some wallpaper," said Willy pointedly. "I got some paint, too. Come and have a look."

"You young ass!" growled Handforth. "Do you think I'm going to believe that you can paper your study? Why, even I couldn't—I—I mean, the Head stopped me!" he said hastily. "You silly Third Formers couldn't do any wallpaping, so I don't believe you."

"You needn't," said Willy. "Have a look at this."

He opened the door, and Handforth gazed upon a scene of industry. It was a very small room, and had originally been a box-room, and Handforth remembered it as a drab little apartment, with dull, distempered walls.

The walls were now covered with a cheerful wallpaper. Perhaps the strips weren't quite true, and possibly there were rucks here and there. But, with all their faults, they were a thousand per cent. better than Handforth's effort. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were

squatting on the floor, putting paint on the skirting—a quiet brown.

"Well I'm jiggered!" breathed Handforth. "You—you spoofing young ass! You've had those men in here to help you."

"Not likely!" protested Willy. "Honest Injun!"

Handforth turned away, and went off feeling rather dizzy. He was also feeling determined. This, indeed, was the last straw. If his minor could do this sort of thing, and do it efficiently, he wasn't going to be beaten. The contractors could get on with the wallpaping, but the Headmaster had not said a word against painting. Handforth returned to his chums grimly resolved.



CHAPTER 19.

ARCHIE CATCHES IT!

"H, all right!" said Church weakly.

And McClure nodded in silent submission. For ten solid minutes Handforth

had been talking to them, and at last, out of

sheer desperation, they had given in. He hadn't threatened, and he had dropped all his warlike aggressiveness. He had cunningly resorted to pleading.

And his faithful chums, unable to withstand this line of attack, had given way. They went upstairs to change into their old things again, a drooping, despairing pair.

"We'll do it, Handy," said Church in a melancholy voice. "We'll help you. But, mark my words, there'll be disaster."

"Rats!" said Handforth cheerfully. "The wallpapering was a messy job, but painting is different. Easiest thing in the world."

They went downstairs again, and Handforth produced his variegated colours. He selected the vermilion, as this was a nice, bright colour which caught his eye. He opened the tin, and regarded the paint with satisfaction.

"By George!" he said. "It looks good. We'll start on the door."

"With that?" asked Church.

"Yes!"

"But the door's going to be red."

"Well, isn't this red?"

"Look in your note-book," said Church. "'Door—pillar-box red.' That vermilion paint is for the window-frame. Where's your memory? Not that it matters where you splash the beastly stuff."

Handforth consulted his note-book, and looked surprised.

"You're right!" he said. "This vermilion is for the window frame."

He put the note-book on the mantelpiece, and frowned at the paint tin.

"Willy was using one of those whacking great paint pots," he said, with a jealous pang. "You buzz off, Mac, and see if you can borrow one. An empty one—and clean. Buck up. The afternoon's getting on."

McClure went off, and Handforth placed the steps near the window.

"We'll start at the top, of course," he said. "By George, I like the look of this paint. Such a bright, cheery colour."

"It's not bad," admitted Church. "I like bright colours, too—but not too many of them. Why not do the sensible thing, Handy, and paint the whole room in that vermilion? Better than making it look like a squiffy rainbow!"

"Rot!" said Handforth, dipping his brush in the paint, and walking to the window. "Look how easy this is."

He daubed the paint on the woodwork of the window frame, and his brush made several wide streaks down the wall. Church grinned. It was fortunate the walls hadn't been papered.

"Easy!" said Handforth, lifting his brush up with a flourish.

"Look out!" howled Church wildly.

He ought to have been on his guard. About four huge splashes of paint came off the brush, and fell on his face. They ran down in thick, sticky streams.

"You—you careless ass!" growled Church, wiping his face with his sleeve and producing hideous effects. "What do you want Mac

and me here for, anyhow? We shall only get smothered——"

"I've decided to let you paint," said Handforth generously. "At first, I thought about doing it all myself, but I don't see any reason why you fellows should stand about, idle. So you can take a couple of those other brushes, and open another tin. You can get on with the skirting."

Church consulted his note-book.

"Orange," he said. "Right-ho!"

It was quite obvious that Handforth was taking a lesson from his minor, although Handforth himself was quite unaware of this. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon had been painting the skirting, and Handforth unconsciously set Church and McClure on a similar task. He would have been far wiser if he had chosen this part of the room himself. One was safe in painting the skirting, for one was on the floor already. But, naturally, Handforth preferred to stand on the top of the steps. He had an extraordinary propensity for doing just the wrong thing.

"Oh, here you are," he said, as McClure came in. "Good man! That's the sort of thing."

McClure had secured a big paint-pot—one of those straight-sided, wide pots with a loose handle. He put it on the trestle-table.

"Cost me a bob in tips," he remarked casually.

"That's all right—all for the good of the cause," said Handforth. "Now, here we are—that's better! So much easier to get at."

He tipped the vermilion paint out of the tin, and it filled the pot a third of the way up. He dipped his brush in, and moved enthusiastically across to the steps again—leaving the can on the opposite end of the table.

"Now we'll start in real earnest," he declared.

He mounted the step-ladder, and gave his brush a preliminary shake as he did so. A cry of anguish arose from outside the window, followed by shouts for help.

"You ass!" gasped Church. "You've done it again!"

"It's only Archie," said Handforth indifferently.

He didn't even take the trouble to look out. But Archie Glenthorne, the immaculate dandy, was in despair. He had been strolling past, utterly oblivious of Handforth and all his works. Then, suddenly, two huge blobs of something red and poisonous had come shooting through the window, and had splashed down the very centre of his coat.

"Odds disasters and tragedies!" he exclaimed feebly. "Good gad! I mean to say, a couple of good gads! Handy again, dash him! Paint! Foul, loathsome paint!"

A great fury welled up in Archie's bosom. "I say!" he protested, pushing his head through the window. "I mean, I say! I say, you dangerous atrocity! Do you know that you've absolutely wrecked and ruined my——"

Archie stopped dead. A blob of something

soft and sticky had fallen on the back of his neck. He looked up with dazed consternation, suspecting that Handforth was carelessly holding his paint brush. He was quite right. Another blob fell at that critical second, and splashed loudly upon Archie's monocle.

The unfortunate youth waited for no more. He reeled away, quivering in every limb, and dimly aware that he ought to be thankful. But for his monocle, that last blob would have gone into his eye. He ran swaying into Nipper and Pitt and a few others in West Arch.

"Hallo!" said Nipper. "Have you started painting, Archie?"

Archie shook from head to foot.

"It's that—that human volcano in Study D," he explained tremulously. "Good gad! This is more than the old sinews and muscles can stand! Where's Phipps? Kindly allow me to dash off for Phipps! The young master needs assistance!"

Handforth continued his task, quite unmoved.

"Did you see that blob go in Archie's eye?" he said cheerfully. "That'll teach those fatheads not to poke their heads where they're not wanted."

"A bit rough on him, though," said Church.

"It'll do him good," replied Handforth. "There you are. What do you think of that? By George! This colour is topping! By the time the room's done—Hi! Where's my paint?" He glanced round. "Who's the ass who left my paint on the table?"

"He's standing on the steps," replied McClure tartly.

Handforth frowned, and started descending. With all his usual clumsiness, he caught his heel and pitched forward.

"Hi!" he howled. "Look out! What the

He landed with a crash on the end of the table. That didn't seem a particularly alarming circumstance in itself—but it wasn't a real table. It was only a loose top, supported on a couple of trestles.

And here's the sinister point.

The paint-pot was on the other end. As Handforth landed on one end of the table, the other heaved up and shot the paint-pot through the air in a high, graceful curve. Handforth crashed to the floor, and the paint-pot, with deadly accuracy, landed over his head in an inverted position, and streams of paint fell over Handforth like a flood.

"I knew something was going to happen!" said Church despondently.

curious, gurgling noises were coming from it.

"Quick!" gasped McClure. "He's drowning!"

They rushed to their leader's help, just as Nipper and Pitt and the others looked in at the window.

"Oh, my hat!" said Church, scared. "It's jammed on!"

"Come on—heave!" roared McClure.

The paint-pot was fixed firmly over Handforth's head, and it took his chums an appreciable number of seconds to force it off. Then they started back, staring in amazement.

"Handy!" breathed Mac. "Handy, old man!"

Handforth said nothing. He was breathing hard, but his face had vanished. His entire superstructure, so to speak, was smothered in vermilion paint. It poured down from his hair, it dripped on to his shoulders, and his rugged features were just a messy blob.

"I say, we'd better lend a hand!" said Nipper sharply. "This looks serious! How did it happen, Mac?"

"He fell off the ladder," said McClure. "Hadn't we better get some water or something? He's stunned! Perhaps he's badly hurt—"

He was interrupted by a glubbing groan from Handforth. The sound came out through a sticky film of paint.

"Where—where am I?" gurgled the unfortunate junior. "Who—who hit me on the head with a coke-hammer? Or did the roof fall in? Oh, corks! I'm all dizzy! I can't see a thing! There's an awful red film—"

"It's all right, Handy," said Nipper soothingly. "Chuck us one of those rags, Church. Goodness, what a mess! He'll have to have a bath after this—and he'll have to soak his head in turpentine for a week!"

Nipper wiped off as much of the paint as he could from Handforth's face, and Edward Oswald staggered dizzily to his feet, held by his chums. The rest kept their distance—not because they were ungenerous, but it will be remembered that they were all wearing their best clothes. Church and McClure were in their old togs.

"Come on, Handy," said Church gently. "We'll take you upstairs."

"But—but—"

"We'd all better have a bath together!" said McClure. "In fact, we'll put you in, Handy, and bathe you first!"

This remark made Handforth recover slightly.

"What do you think I am—a baby?" he asked indignantly.

"No, you ass! But you're in such an awful state—"

"Oh, my head!" groaned Handforth. "That—that rotten can gave me an awful kosh, you know—I'm all dazed and dizzy!"

"Better chuck up this painting," advised Nipper.

"I—I suppose I'd better," admitted Handforth, all the determination knocked out of him. "Rummy thing, but it's more tricky



CHAPTER 20.

DECORATED—AND DONE FOR!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH didn't move. He had sagged back, and he sat there amid the litter—a grotesque figure. The

heavy paint-pot was still on his head, and

than I thought it would be! But what a shame—all my scheme of decoration spoilt!"

"Never mind!" said Church.

"But I do mind," said Handforth despondently. "I'd got it all mapped out, too—all the different colours! I shan't enjoy Easter now—I shan't have a minute's rest until I can finish the job. By George, I'll get this mess off, and carry on with it!" he added fiercely.

But, after he had got upstairs, he realised that his optimism was misplaced. He was so dizzy that he couldn't walk straight, and, even after a bath, he still felt groggy. And that bath had taken two hours, too. Most of the paint had been removed, although Handforth's hair was still looking somewhat sticky.

"It's only just four o'clock," said Church, when they had got into their dormitory; "you'd better have an hour's nap, Handy. Or, better still, sleep until it's time to go for the train," he added with rare wisdom. "We'll wake you up just after six—"

"Rats!" said Handforth as he stretched himself on the bed. "I'll be up in half an hour—so that I can get down to tea at five o'clock. I'm not going to be molly-coddled!"

"But—oh—"

"Oh, you needn't think I'm going on with that giddy painting," said Handforth, who was just beginning to feel lazily comfortable. "I'll leave it until after the vac."

His chums stole out happy once more. And when they returned, half an hour later, they were looking rather different. A new gleam had come into their eyes, and they noted with satisfaction that Handforth was getting dressed. He was looking himself again. The effects of the blow were wearing off.

"Feeling better, old man?" asked Church tenderly.

Handforth frowned.

"There's nothing the matter with me," he replied. "You needn't use that sloppy tone! I don't like being fussed over!"

Fifteen minutes later they went downstairs, and Handforth made for the open doorway. The sun was still shining, and he wanted to get out into the open air. Somehow, he couldn't get rid of a nasty smell of paint. It hovered round him like a halo, and fresh air seemed to be indicated.

"Just a minute," said Church. "Let's go into the study and get your notebook, Handy. You left it on the mantelpiece."

"Blow the study!" said Handforth. "I've had enough of it!"

But, in spite of his protests, they led him there. They allowed him to open the door and to walk in. He took two steps into the room, and then swayed backwards into Church's arms.

"Help!" he gasped wildly.

Study D glared at him. It absolutely came out and hit him. He stared round him in horrified amazement.

"Who—who did this?" he shouted hoarsely.

His consternation was supreme. The study

had been papered and painted! But the general effect was so unutterably awful that even Handforth felt sickened. He blinked. The whole atrocious thing hurt his eyes. His dizziness returned, and he clutched at Church's shoulder.

"This is a joke!" he shouted furiously. "Who did it?"

Nipper and the others came briskly along the passage.

"Thought we'd give you a surprise, Handy," said Nipper, with a cheerful grin. "We found that you had two or three sorts of wallpaper, so we chose the most striking—note the sun-flower effect! Very cheery, I think!"

"Stunning, isn't it?" asked Reggie Pitt.

"Stunning!" breathed Handforth. "I should think it is stunning! I feel as if I'd been hit with a mallet! You—you rotters!"

"What?"

"You—you beastly japers!" roared Handforth indignantly. "Just because I wanted to make my study look nice, there's no reason for you to ruin the whole place like this! I don't call it funny at all! It's a filthy sort of trick!"

"My only hat!" said Nipper softly. "He doesn't recognise it!"

"Look at the place closely, Handy," said Reggie Pitt. "Nipper, take out Handy's notebook and read the fatal evidence!"

Nipper took out the notebook.

"Skirtings—orange," he said. "Look at the skirting. Handy. Mantelpiece—pea green. Kindly observe the mantelpiece. Window frame—vermilion—"

"Great guns!" gurgled Handforth. "You—you mean—"

"We mean that this is your own colour scheme!" replied Nipper gently. "It's your own paper—and your own choice of colours. We thought we'd do it, just to let you see the result. We've arranged with the workmen to put it right later. Well, how do you like it?"

Handforth took a deep, deep breath.

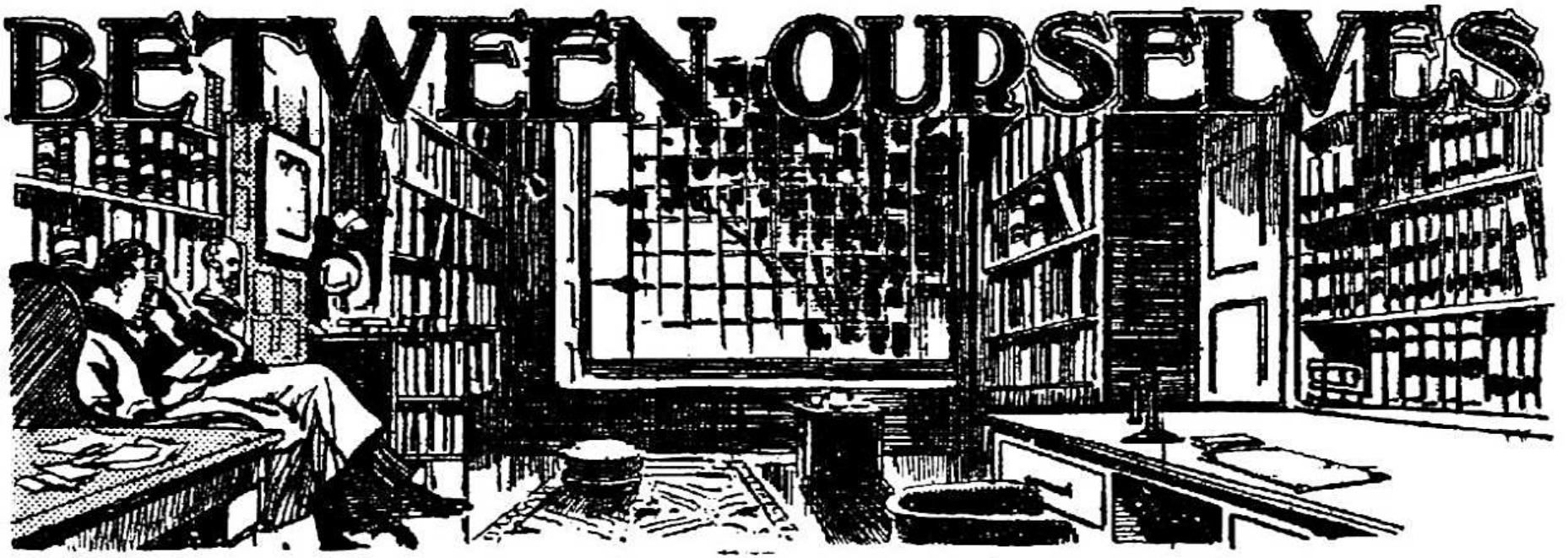
"Lead me away," he muttered feverishly. "By George! No more interior decorations for me! I'll let the school authorities do out the study just as they think fit!"

"Good!" grinned Reggie Pitt. "Well, Handy, they say that seeing is believing, don't they? Come along and have tea. The strike's over, by the way, and we hear there'll be a train soon after seven o'clock. So we'll soon be merrily bowling home for Easter!"

And Edward Oswald Handforth went—convinced.

THE END.

(Look out next week for the opening story of a grand new series, entitled "THE FUNK OF ST. FRANK'S!" Fun, mystery, adventure—they're all in this ripping yarn. You will also be introduced to a new character, Harry Gresham. A fine chap is Harry; a fine cricketer, too, but—he's a funk! Make sure of obtaining your next week's NELSON LEE LIBRARY by ordering NOW!)



Edwy Searles Brooks chats with 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 Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, LONDON, E.C.4. Every letter will have my personal attention, and all will be acknowledged in these columns. Letters of very special merit will be distinguished by a star, thus, against the sender's name. Communications which indicate writer's age are naturally easier for me to answer.—E.S.B.*

G. R. Morgan (Liverpool), Ivor Cross (Birmingham), Hilda Schofield (Manchester), D. Douglas-Willan (Houghton), George Hodgson (Scarborough), Reginald Quarrell (Yeovil), Robert E. Parlo (Southport), Charles Francis de Stafford Ongley (Maritzburg), William Lester (Walsall), W. L. Holcroft (East London, S.A.), F. T. H. (Norwich), Terence Sullivan (Dublin), W. G. Drew (Halton), R. W. Murfet (Soham), Barrie Arthur (Bodmin), Willie B. (St. Helens), "Podge and Midge" (Huddersfield), Laurence S. Elliott (East Ham), Harry Tomlinson (Birmingham), Ernest R. Hoath (Worthing), John A. Franklin (Manchester), Ernest W. Sands (Halifax), Ella M. Marlow (Ealing), "Regular Reader" (Newcastle-on-Tyne), W. Jacques (Leeds), Arthur F. Brueton (Pall Mall), R. P. Ostler (Stoke, Ipswich), George Burgess (Selsey), Maud Atkins (Coventry), Smith Thompson (Bradford).

Last week I was grouching because your letters contained nothing for me to comment upon. This week I shall have all my work cut out to squeeze my comments into two pages. Retribution!

That suggestion of yours, Charles Ongley, was a curious coincidence. Here are your words: "I suggest that all readers should send you a photograph of themselves. How's that for a wheeze?" You wrote that in South Africa long before you saw anything about my original offer, in the Feb 26th issue, to satisfy the many demands for my dial (or phizog, as one correspondent cheerily termed it) by offering to send a photo of it in exchange for that of any reader. Must have been a case of thought transference. We must be kindred spirits. But I notice

that you didn't send me your photograph, you bounder! Any old snap'll do. I don't care if you're upside down. And this, of course, applies to all other readers, he-male and she-male, infants and octogenarians. By the way, Charley, you didn't enclose that story in your letter, as you promised. How the dickens can I give you my opinion of it if I can't read it?

I'd like Terence Sullivan to send me his address, as he has asked me some questions which I would like to answer, but which are not of general interest.

I'm surprised at you, Maud Atkins! What do you mean by finishing up your letter like this: "I should love a photograph of you, but do you include girls in your offer?" Of course I do! I thought I had made that clear from the very first. Anybody who sends me a photograph of himself or herself will get an autographed one of me, and thereby have all their illusions shattered.

F. A. Jiggins (Braintree), Colin Elwis (Sheffield), Arthur R. Thomas (Mumbles), Ronald E. Mabbett (Fairford), Tom Treadwell (E.C.2.), L. S. Elliott (East Ham), Gladys Howard (Beckenham), Eric James Rigby (Manchester), Norman Knight (Wolverhampton), Bryan Slater (Christchurch, Hants), Frank E. Ball (Birmingham), Reginald V. Purslow (Kilburn), "Alf Uggins" (S.E.1.), Jack and James Freeman (Earls Court), "BM/JLXL" (W.C.1.), G. Desmond Richardson (Burton-on-Trent), John Willes (Folkestone), Arnold Wilson Jones (Manchester), Smale Fox Jr. (Leeds), E. G. Carpenter (Ealing), James H. Bulmer, Norman Atkinson, F. Turnbull, and B. Heron (Durham), J. C. Stockton (Verdun,

Que., Canada), Jack Shaw Brown, Thomas Anderson, and John C. Wilson (Glasgow), J. S. Dee (Manchester), W. S. Sutton (Liverpool), H. Teasdale (Liverpool), "Knees" (Fairford), Robert Murrell (New Malden), Edward A. Humberstone (Highbury), Julius N. Harris and E. C. Palmer (Merthyr Tydvil), Cecil Jones, A. Ford, R. James, K. Cook, and J. Gambling (Battersea), Stanley Cubin (Ilkley), William J. Aldous (Norwich), "Nipper" (Benwell), "A Nelson Lee Supporter" (Liverpool), Anna J. Dahl (Sunderland).

* * *

Now to deal with the one subject which seems to have aroused most interest this week—that letter from J. Marlow & Co., which I printed in full in the March 12th issue. I don't think I can do better than give some extracts from some of the letters acknowledged above. Why should I think of something to write when my readers have done it for me? For example, this is what Tom Treadwell says: "I have a few words to say about those five readers who called your stories silliness and fairy tales. Haven't they any imagination? Can't they imagine things? I can. And when I am reading your stories I feel as if I am on the actual scene. They're not impossible, but simply want a bit of imagination." Thanks, Tom.

* * *

And this is what Eric James Rigby says: "Your stories are certainly more or less fantastic and impossible, but do we not think too much of the sordid and everyday affairs of life? Variety is the spice of life, and I can honestly say that every Wednesday you supply your readers with the type of variety that invigorates and cheers one as they read. These remarks are endorsed by the Midnight Revels Dance Band (five), of which I am proud to be the leader, and I hope they may counterbalance those of Messrs. M., T., P., H., and B." Very fair of you, Eric.

* * *

Your support, G. Desmond Richardson, is most flattering, and I am going to quote a part of your letter, as you invite: "They (J. Marlow & Co.) threaten to stop reading the 'N.L.L.' All right, let them, and I will try my best to get five more readers who will become staunch supporters of your good self and the stories you write." I don't think you need imagine that Messrs. Marlow & Co. will stop buying the Old Paper, as I have an idea that they were just pulling my leg. Still, go ahead! The more readers we can get, the better—whether we lose "M. & Co." or not. Supposing we take it for granted that "M. & Co." have deserted the fold? All right! Let everybody get five new readers. We shall soon be on the right side then.

Just as I was flattering myself that Messrs. Marlow & Co. were utterly squashed, my eyes fall upon this letter, from E. G. Carpenter, of Ealing: "I must say that I strongly agree with your correspondents, J. Marlow, C. H. Tibby, etc., and that your stories ARE too far-fetched. Would any headmaster in his right senses leave a school without masters, as you make out in your story, 'The Deluge at St. Frank's'? I cannot believe that your readers can sit down and read such rot." Well, you seem to have read it, E. G. Carpenter, although I cannot know whether you were sitting down or not. And if you had read the story thoroughly (as I fear you didn't), and if you had as much imagination as Tom Treadwell, you would realise that when the Head left the school he knew nothing about the coming deluge. He left St. Frank's under the impression that he would be back within an hour. You would have been justified in your censure if I had made the Head deliberately desert the school in its hour of peril.

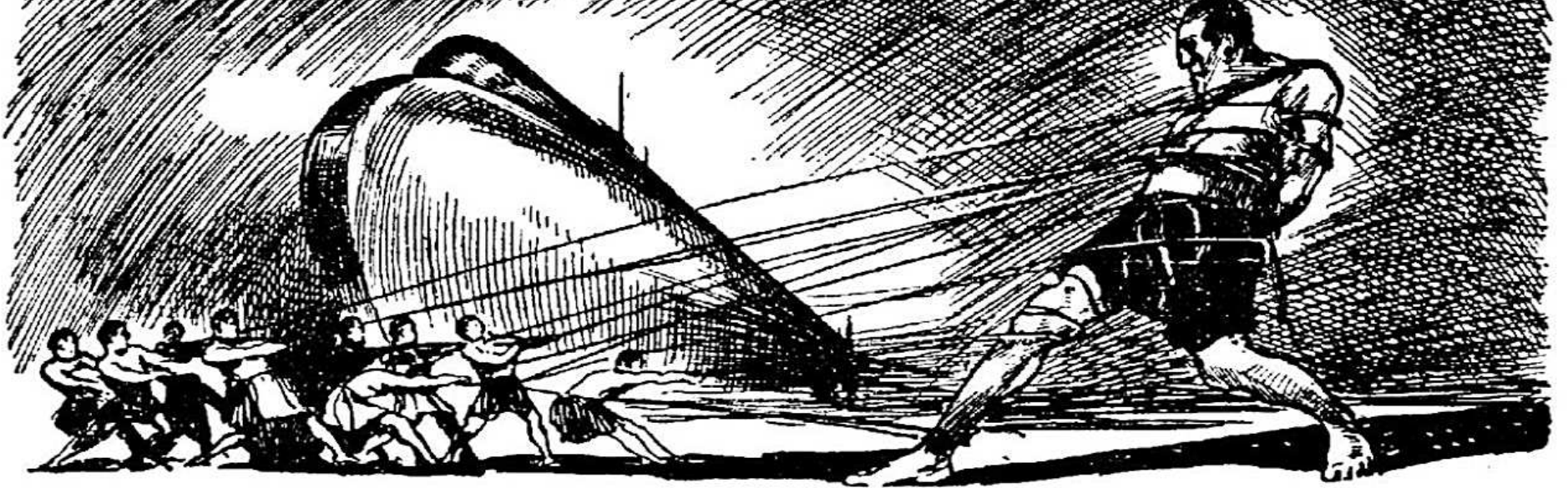
* * *

Here's another letter, from the "Anti-Five," who sign themselves "James H. Bulmer, Norman Atkinson, F. Turnbull, and B. Heron." It looks more like the "Anti-Four" to me, but perhaps the fifth one had a sprained wrist. But, four or five, this is what they write: "In our opinion, the series they criticise so much are the best you have ever written. Would you also please politely point out to these misjudged youths that they omitted to include the Schoolboy Magician series, the South Pole series, and the William K. Smith series? They might as well call Jules Verne's out-of-the-way stories, and the "Lost World" (by Conan Doyle) kiddish, too. All we can conclude is that they have a funny idea of *healthy tales*. 'Ridiculous and fantastic,' they say. We say, 'No—emphatically, no!' They are neither. Quite the reverse. For they have insight and imagination, and we can honestly say that no other boys' paper prints such stories—stories that are different. We all unite in saying that we wish you luck, and hope that you will continue to write the same type of story. They are neither impossible nor fantastic, for nothing is impossible in this wonderful old world of ours. If you were to discontinue writing the type of stories they complain against, we think you would lose a jolly sight more readers than five."



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By LIONEL DAY



INTRODUCTION.

Jim Maitland lives in a small shop in Stagmore. A mysterious man named Stanislaus Cripps owes money to the shop, and Jim determines to collect it. He climbs over the wall of Widgery Dene—Cripps' estate—and drops into the grounds. There he finds an amazing machine which is something between a submarine and an airship. Mr. Cripps is on board and Jim asks him for the money. The man refuses to pay, and before Jim realises it he finds the machine in the air! It travels half over the world, then dives into the ocean. It reaches the bottom, and then, instead of resting on the bed continues going downwards! It is then floating on the surface of an underground river, and Mr. Cripps explains that there must be a sort of leak in the ocean bed and they are being sucked down to the centre of the earth. They

stop the machine and come on deck. But as they appear they are captured by several amazing giants who fall on them from the shore. Jim escapes and later saves the life of a little man called Masra. In return Masra and his daughter Tinta let him live with them. Jim finds himself among a colony of dwarf men who are called the Kru people. They live in a vast cavern and are at enmity with the Giants—a race that is dying out. Jim determines to find the submarine and rescue Mr. Cripps, who is still a prisoner. Masra and Tinta decide to accompany him. To do this Masra has to desert from the Kru people. After many adventures they manage to rescue the inventor. Suddenly all four are attacked by the Kru, who capture Tinta and take her away to be killed!

(Now read on.)

Preparing for the Rescue!

JIM sank down on the floor of the tractor, and, burying his face in his hands, sobbed as if his heart were broken. Tinta had been captured by the Kru and would be made to pay the penalty for her defiance of the ban—and it was all on his account! She had broken the laws of her people for his sake, and now she was going to her death. He had tried to rescue her and failed.

"Oh, Tinta!" he groaned. "Oh, Tinta!"

Suddenly upon his trance of misery there broke Stanislaus Cripps' booming voice.

"Boy, you're balmy! Why do you think Tinta's going to be killed? Of course she isn't. Quite apart from the fact that she's a very charming young lady who appreciated the value of science so much that she risked her life to prevent the irreparable loss that would have been caused by my untimely decease, I like her personally. I have no intention of allowing her to be killed—any more than I propose to be killed myself, if it can be decently avoided!"

He turned to Masra who, pale and haggard, was looking anxiously in the direction in which Tinta had been forced away by the vengeful Kru.

"Come, Masra," said Cripps, "we'll go and rescue your daughter!"

Without another word he walked calmly back to the tractor, and, bending over the side, began to rummage among that glittering heap of stores.

"Here you are, put that on. And you too, boy."

With the tip of his finger he tossed two of the diving dresses towards Masra and Jim.

"In the old days of chivalry they used to wear armour, but it was heavy, inefficient stuff," Cripps said. "As long as Sir Launcelot could sit his horse, he could kill any number of half-naked peasants. They had as much chance as a fleet of rowing boats would have against an ironclad. But once his horse had been ham-stringed or brought down he couldn't get up, and the jolly old peasants had their own back. Now this metal of mine is so light that you won't know you're wearing the suit, and it'll stop any weapon they've got down in this part of the world. Get a move on both of you, and dress."

He set the example by slipping into the diving suit, which was constructed, as far as the shoulder and arms, of one piece. The head piece was separate, and was adjusted by an ingenious device of intermittent screws.

Having dressed himself, Cripps assisted Jim and Masra to complete their strange toilet. Jim, looking through the lenses that formed the eye-holes, could not help a feeling of amusement at the sight they presented, in spite of his anxiety regarding Tinta's fate.

They were all three transformed into the figures of mediæval knights, clad from head to foot in what looked like silver armour.

By a clever contrivance of valves, Jim found that they could communicate with one another, and microphone adjustment about the ears enabled them to hear more or less clearly. Stanislaus Cripps' voice came to him, its boom somewhat muffled.

"Those oxygen cartridges of mine were a bit too effective," he exclaimed. "We don't want to use them except in an emergency. But I've got some dope stuff here which is guaranteed to put anyone to sleep who gets a whiff of it!"

He handed to each of them two long cylinders, which looked like exaggerated electric torches. On one end was a nozzle like that to be seen on a fire extinguisher.

"All you've got to do is to touch that button, and the chemical mixture is projected into the air," he exclaimed. "But don't take any action until you get the order from me."

He took one glance round. Gra was visible in the dim distance, racing round the lake like an irritable entomologist, trying to catch the elusive anchor of the Flying Submarine.

"That'll keep him good and quiet," said Cripps. "If he does catch it, so much the better. He can't do it any harm. And if he doesn't, we shan't be any the worse off. Let's beat it, boy!"

The Sacrificing Stone!

WITHOUT another word, he clambered up the sloping rock and plunged into the tunnel Jim followed him, Masra bringing up the rear.

In a few minutes they had gained that rocky chamber where Jim had heard the Ban promulgated on the day when they had set out in search of the Flying Submarine. Here Stanislaus Cripps paused and looked about him with interest.

It was clear that his inquiring mind urged him to inspect the paintings that decorated the walls, but he checked his insatiable curiosity and beckoned to Jim.

"Ask Masra where they're likely to have taken the girl," he exclaimed.

"To the Hall of the People, Krim," Masra exclaimed, in reply to Jim's question. "We must hasten, or we may be too late!"

He led the way at a run out of the rocky chamber into the long network of corridors beyond. Three glittering figures, they raced down that interminable passage, the lights from the lamps above their heads glistening on their shining armour, their metal clad feet making a jangling sound on the hard surface of the floor.

At last they reached that curtained doorway through which Jim had passed on the day when he was made blood brother to Masra. On the threshold the Kru paused, and pointed at the curtain. Stanislaus Cripps joined him, and, bending down, listened intently.

From within came a weird chant that rose and fell with an effect that was blood curdling.

"What is the penalty for those who break the Ban? What shall we do to her who disobeys the law? O Kru, look at her! She went out to the Falta—ye just at the Coming of the Great Light! She would have been a victim to their god, she would have renewed their courage. O Kru, say what is the penalty!"

There was an ominous pause, and then from the other side of the curtain came the swelling chorus, raised now to a maddening shriek.

"Death. Death. Death!"

"Our cue, I think!" Stanislaus Cripps exclaimed.

With a movement of his metal clad arm, he swept the curtain aside and stalked into the great vaulted chamber beyond.

Standing just behind him, Jim saw tiers and tiers of seats, rising one above the other, filled with the Kru who were standing with their arms raised above their heads. He glimpsed their savage implacable faces—their eyes glowed with a terrible frenzied ecstasy. And then his gaze shifted to the scene in that central space—that same space where his blood had been mingled with that of Masra's.

A little stifled cry rose to his lips. There on a stone, bound hand and foot, lay Tinta, her eyes staring upwards at the roof. About her were twelve men armed with javelins. These glittering weapons were raised above their heads. In another moment and their points would be buried in the girl's body!

With a spring Stanislaus Cripps cleared the narrow gangway that communicated with the entrance, and rushed headlong into the centre of that little group. Jim and Masra following him, they lined up about the stone on which Tinta lay, forming a barrier between the girl and her would-be executioners.

So utterly unexpected was their appearance that the twelve men armed with the javelins stepped back while the rest of the audience stood spellbound at these astonishing apparitions. Jim heard Stanislaus Cripps' voice.

"Tell them, boy, that unless they're looking for trouble, they've got to cut out all this business. The execution is off!"

For a moment Jim was flabbergasted. Then, realising the necessity for action, grasping the fact that the effect of the surprise might pass—that Tinta might be killed under their very eyes in spite of all their efforts—he began to speak.

"O Kru listen to me. No blood is to be shed. It is the order of the mighty magician who stands here at my side."

He pointed his arm at Stanislaus Cripps.

"He has destroyed the Falta god; he has brought the Falta into subjection. No more will you have to fear them. And it is she who lies there—she whom you would kill—who has made these wonderful doings possible for him. Would you kill her who has destroyed the power of the Falta?"

For a moment there was a breathless stillness as he stopped speaking. Then from every part of that vast arena there came a wild demoniac shout.

"Death. Death. Death!"

Jim saw the little circle of javelin men hesitate, and then make a movement as if to close round the stone on which their victim lay. He raised his hand in a vain attempt to stay them.

"Listen, O Kru! It is forbidden for you to touch this girl. Woe to those who raise their hands against her!"

One of the javelin men—whom Jim recognised as an old friend—lowered his arm and addressed him.

"Where you come from, O Shining One, we know not; what brings you here we cannot say; but the penalty on those who broke the Ban must be paid."

"It is forbidden!" Jim retorted, in a quavering voice.

"By whom is it forbidden, O Shining One?"

Jim collected his scattered senses. He remembered the strange tale that Tinta had told him. The situation was so desperate that a little flight of imagination was permissible, he felt.

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"By Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken," he replied boldly.

A hushed awe fell upon the vast crowd. Not a sound was heard in that vaulted building except the stifled breathing of the men. And then, in the midst of that stressed stillness, there seemed to come from the ground beneath their feet a voice that rose vibrant and thrilling.

"Be not deceived, O Kru. The penalty must be paid according to the law. I have spoken!"

Jim could see Masra shrink back against the stone on which Tinta lay, his whole gesture expressing indescribable terror. Stanislaus Cripps, with an inquisitive twist of his head, was looking about the ground as if in search of that spot from whence the voice came.

Jim realised that there was not a moment to be lost. That mysterious being in whose existence he had only half believed, had by some means or other declared his verdict!

In another moment the Kru, under the spur of that voice which for them was the law, and goaded by the thought that they had been deceived, would sweep them aside and proceed to their terrible rite!

The Mystery Gas!

"MR. CRIPPS," Jim shouted desperately; "it's no use. We can't hold them back any longer."

"Boy, who was that speaking just now?" Stanislaus Cripps inquired calmly. "A very interesting phenomenon."

Jim felt it was no time for the investigation of this mystery.

"Mr. Cripps, you must do something," he gasped.

With a yell that awoke the echoes in that vaulted chamber, the twelve javelin men rushed at their victim. Jim did the only thing he could think of. He flung himself face downwards on the top of Tinta, shouting to Masra to do the same.

He felt half a dozen spears strike his armour. He spread himself over Tinta—a living shield! And from every side of that vast arena the blood-curdling chorus of "Death—Death—Death!" was being re-echoed.

Then amidst that confusion, Jim suddenly heard a faint hissing sound. Instantly, it seemed, the pandemonium in their immediate neighbourhood ceased. There were a series of thuds, the noise of weapons dropping on the rocky floor.

The boy looked up to see Stanislaus Cripps standing calmly at the head of the stone on which Tinta lay, with that torchlike apparatus in his hand. From the nozzle was being projected a milk-like gas that spread and spread, and turned to a greenish hue as it mingled with the air.

Swinging his arm backwards and forwards, Cripps directed the jet towards the javelin men. As that mysterious gas touched them, they dropped to the floor like stones. Even as Jim watched, the last of them sank helplessly to the ground.

"I invented that originally, boy, to deal with the writ servers, solicitors' clerks, brokers' men, and the other ridiculous minions of an antiquated law who interfered with my scientific experiments at Widgery Dene! As you will note, it is remarkably effective."

He touched one of those recumbent figures with his metal-covered toe.

"It has a baby's soothing syrup beaten to a frazzle, boy" he exclaimed in a tone of satisfaction. "Extremely interesting."

It was curious how Jim's strained nerves responded to the effect of that philosophical detachment. Quite suddenly he felt no sense of fear. Stanislaus Cripps might have been standing on a crowded railway platform, waiting patiently for a train, instead of being in a cave six miles below the surface of the earth, and surrounded by a maddened horde whose laws and customs he had outraged.

"We'd better release the young lady, boy. She doesn't look to me as if she can be very comfortable."

From a metal belt that he wore about his waist, he took a long dagger-like knife and coolly cut the bonds that bound Tinta. The next moment the girl had scrambled from the stone.

At the sight of their victim apparently about to escape, the Kru—who had been paralysed by the mysterious fate that had overtaken the executioners—gave a maddened yell of rage and surged forward from their seats into that open central space. Jim put one arm protectingly about Tinta. He could feel the girl's body trembling.

"Tinta, it's me—Krim! Don't be frightened. No harm shall come to you."

They were bold words, and they seemed a direct travesty of what must inevitably happen. The Kru were now closing upon them in a solid mass.

"Keep your head, boy!" Stanislaus Cripps boomed. "Put the girl in the centre, then you and Masra stand on either side of her. As these unfortunate people are so excitable we must put some of them to rest for a little. Press the button of your cylinder when I give the order."

Shouting to Masra, Jim lifted Tinta on to the stone and took his place by her side. Following his example Masra stood with his back to him. Stanislaus Cripps' sturdy armoured figure completed the little barricade about the girl.

"Now!" Stanislaus Cripps shouted.

The perimeter of the circle was only a few feet away from him. The three men pressed the buttons of their shining cylinders. Instantly there streamed from the nozzles a flow of that milky gas, which mingled with the air and spread in an ever-growing greenish cloud. Moving the cylinders in a wide sweep, they completed a circle of the gas between themselves and the on-rushing horde of Kru.

To Jim it seemed as if a miracle had happened. As the Kru came in contact with that encircling cloud, they dropped to the ground senseless. Upon those pressing madly behind them, a like fate fell, until a solid wall of motionless humanity lay there.

For some moments those behind scarcely realised what was taking place, but as that wall grew ever higher—as man after man added his body to the pile—what was happening must have dawned upon them.

Abruptly that human wave seemed to hang back. There was a moment's pause, and, then, with a shriek of terror those that yet remained conscious in the Cave of the People turned and fled panic-stricken towards the door, struggling and fighting to escape with the same frantic indifference for the safety of one another as an audience trying to get out of a burning theatre.

A minute more and that vast vaulted chamber of the Cave of the People was empty, save for

Tinta, and the three shining figures that stood guard by her side, and the piled masses of the unconscious Kru!

The Kru Attack!

"A TRIUMPH of mind over matter, boy. Unfortunately we must postpone our further investigations of the Inner Cavern until the gas has dispersed."

Stanislaus Cripps seated himself on the stone with matter-of-fact coolness. He turned to Tinta and patted her hand paternally.

"Well, little girl, how are you feeling? Rather an unpleasant shock for you. Nice people, yours, I should imagine, when one gets to know them, but a trifle bloodthirsty when excited!"

Tinta, who was staring at the amazing scene about her with dazed, bewildered eyes, turned with a little questioning gasp to Jim.

"What is it that the great Hairy One says, Krim?"

Jim translated, leaving out, however, any mention of the Kru for fear of hurting Tinta's feelings. For answer the girl stepped from the stone, and dropping gracefully on her knees, bowed her dark head before Stanislaus Cripps.

"Tell him, O Krim, that as he has given me my life, so will I give him back his gift whenever he shall demand it. He is great. He is wonderful!"

"Very pretty of her, boy," Stanislaus Cripps boomed when Jim had explained the purport of her words. "But I don't want her life. Make that quite clear to her, will you? What I want is information."

He seemed suddenly to remember something, for, dropping on his knees, he began to examine the rocky floor. Presently he looked up at Jim.

"The human senses are such unreliable instruments, boy, that they are often susceptible of hallucinations. Now I could have sworn that I heard someone speaking from underneath this floor somewhere. Did you hear it, boy?"

Jim nodded.

"And Masra heard it too?" Stanislaus Cripps questioned.

Again Masra showed symptoms of that shrinking terror that he had displayed before.

"It was Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken, O Hairy One. You have set his word at naught—you have defied him—and, wonderful as you are, I fear for you. Who can stand up against Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken?"

"Eh, what's that?" Stanislaus Cripps exclaimed evidently understanding a word here and there of that statement. "What's this about Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken? What's he talking about, boy?"

Jim explained what Tinta had told him—how the Kru were ruled by some mysterious being whom no one had ever seen and who lived in the Cave of the Fire—a three days' journey away—and made his will known as occasion required. Stanislaus Cripps devoured the story, his eyes glowing with excitement.

"And they know the way there, these Kru?" he inquired.

Masra explained that he knew the beginning of the road; he had been part of the way—though he had never been selected by Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken to attend actually in the Cave of Fire itself.

"Then you must take us there," Stanislaus Cripps declared excitedly. "We will set off at once. The gas is dispersed, and there is nothing to keep us here a moment longer."

Both Tinta and Masra shrank away, appalled by this suggestion. It was not, Jim realised, a question of physical fear—he had had evidences of their courage which rendered such an explanation absurd—but some superstitious dread which had been born with them, and which not even

Stanislaus Cripps could override. He would be going to his death, they said.

Stanislaus Cripps clutched irritably at the place where his beard should have been when this was explained to him.

"Superstitious nonsense!" he growled. "Do they imagine that I, Stanislaus Cripps, am a child to be frightened by a bogey? I am curious—naturally curious. There must be some reasonable explanation. The story as you heard it, boy, has bunkum written all over it."

As the echoes of his voice died away and stillness settled down upon that vaulted chamber, they were startled by a sound that seemed to come from their very feet.

"I would see these men who have attempted to pervert my orders—who have dared to put words into my mouth—who have said the thing that is not. They are to be brought to me!"

Stanislaus Cripps was down on his hands and knees nosing about like a dog.

"Boy, they can't know anything about amplifiers and microphones in this world. It is absurd. And yet one could almost swear that that was somebody's voice reproduced by wireless on a loud speaker!"

Tinta, her face covered in her hands, had almost collapsed. Masra was cowering on the stone, his teeth chattering.

"Better to die here than to face Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken!" Tinta sobbed.

Jim drew Stanislaus Cripps aside. Neither Tinta nor her father would consent to lead him to the Cave of the Fires. It would be better, he suggested, to abandon the scheme. After all, they still had their hands pretty full, seeing that the Kru were openly hostile.

"We must go all the same, boy!" persisted Cripps obstinately. "I've got to understand the meaning of this. But perhaps it would be best to pacify these unfortunate people first."

He grinned as he gazed at the piled-up masses of humanity.

"Having a good sleep, aren't they? They won't wake up for a while yet. I might conveniently occupy the time in studying some of their mural records. You might take me to that place you told me of, boy—the Cave of Records!"

Picking their way with difficulty over that wall of sleeping figures, they gained the gallery beyond. Here Jim had to entrust the task of leading them to Tinta, for though he had spent four months in the Inner Cavern, he had never yet been able to master the intricacies of that net-work of galleries.

Of the Kru no trace was to be seen as, twisting and turning, now to the left and now to the right, they continued on their way. Jim, who was following at Tinta's heels, saw the girl suddenly halt and her figure grow rigid.

At the same moment there was a rush of feet, and from a dark gallery on their immediate left, a small detachment of the Kru rushed out, armed with their liquid fire apparatus. Jim had just time to seize Tinta round the waist and hurl her roughly back, when six jets of flame were directed towards them.

"Back, Mr Cripps!" he shouted. "Back!"

He was about to rush in headlong retreat, when he was arrested by the peculiar behaviour of Stanislaus Cripps. Instead of moving he just stood there, watching those jets of liquid flame like someone might halt in the street to watch a fire-brigade damping down the flames of a burning house with their hoses.

"Nothing to get excited about, boy!" he boomed. "Among the other virtues of my metal, it happens to be a non-conductor. It is impervious to heat!"

The Cone of Fire!

STANISLAUS CRIPPS advanced coolly on the Kru detachment. Instantly his shining figure became the target of those concentrated jets of flame. The range of the liquid fire apparatus was not more than twenty feet—a fact which explained why the Kru had not long since decimated the Falta—and with unhurried stride Stanislaus Cripps covered that distance. The jets of flame made a peculiar drumming sound on his armour.

Jim could see the grim set faces of the Kru—the hate in their eyes—as they kept their liquid flames directed on this man who had outraged their laws and customs. Clearly they imagined that he would suddenly drop dead at their feet.

Even when he was less than two feet away from them, and it must have been clear to the Kru that their usually deadly weapon was for some reason ineffective, they still held their ground.

Stanislaus Cripps walked straight up to one of them, and, as the man stood there gaping with astonishment, coolly took the apparatus out of his hand. Almost instinctively he seemed to guess how it worked, for the next second he had checked the flow of liquid flame. Then he gave the apparatus back to the man, patting him on the back.

"Talk to them, boy," he shouted. "Tell them that I consider them very brave men, and that I want to be friends."

Jim, having seen that Tinta was safely out of range and protected by her father, hurried to Stanislaus Cripps' side.

"O Kru," he exclaimed, "we know that you are brave men, and we desire to be your friends. Let us end this quarrel. You have seen that you cannot hurt us, and we have no wish to injure you."

The man whose apparatus Stanislaus Cripps had examined, flung out both his hands in a gesture of despair.

"It cannot be, You Who Speak Our Tongue. He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken has said it, and we must obey. You have defied our laws and the punishment is death!"

Even as he spoke there came a rush of feet from another gallery on their right. Before they could move, some forty Kru had flung themselves on them, and by sheer force of numbers had borne them to the ground.

Jim caught a glimpse of Stanislaus Cripps lying prone on the floor, while twenty Kru jabbed at him with javelins and axes. It reminded him of someone trying to open a tin of sardines without a proper instrument. He himself was being treated in the same way.

For ten minutes they were battered and stabbed and hacked. Sometimes they were turned over as if their assailants were looking for some joint in their armour, but so perfectly were the diving dresses constructed that, save for an occasional tingling, Jim never felt one of those blows.

He could see the sweat pouring down the Kru's faces; he could hear the breath labouring in their lungs with the exertions they were making. Then, as if exhausted, they paused, standing back to judge of the effects of their violence. Jim grinned to himself as he saw Stanislaus Cripps calmly rise to his feet as if nothing had happened.

"Tell them, boy, that they cannot injure us—that if they may not be friends without the consent of Him-Whose-Name-Cannot-Be-Spoken, let us be taken to this fellow, wherever he is, and come to some arrangement. Obviously we can't go on like this."

The Kru were staring open-mouthed at Stanislaus Cripps, and taking advantage of their consternation. Jim also rose to his feet, and translated Cripps' message.

"If we cannot be friends, O Kru, because that would be to disobey Him-Whose-Name-Cannot-Be-Spoken, take us to him. You cannot injure us, as you have seen. Even as in the Cave of the People we stretched hundreds of you helpless on the ground, so we could do the same here, if we wished. Let there be a truce between us, O Kru, until we have been before Him-Whose-Name-Cannot-Be-Spoken. Agree to that, and no harm shall come to any of you!"

The Kru bunched together, whispering to one another, evidently at a loss to know what to do. Clearly they had been so accustomed to have their lives regulated for them that now, faced with the necessity of having to act on their own initiative, they were utterly bewildered. For several minutes they engaged in this debate, and then, one of them acting as spokesman, turned to Jim.

"The three Shining Ones can go! It is the will of Him-Whose-Name-Cannot-Be-Spoken."

He inclined his head reverently as he uttered those words. How did he know? Jim wondered. Save for the heap of unconscious Kru in the Cave of the People, they had been alone when that mysterious voice had spoken.

"But the girl Tinta cannot go. She has been dedicated to death. He-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken has said it."

"Are they saying that Tinta is to be given up?" Stanislaus Cripps broke in. "Tell them they're talking nonsense. Rub it into them, boy, that I'm a magician that's got Him-Whose-Name-Cannot-Be-Spoken beaten to a frazzle, and that unless they want to be put to sleep they had better think twice about that clause relating to Tinta."

"Kru," exclaimed Jim, "what you ask is impossible. That Shining One is the mightiest of all wise men. Even Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken is nothing to him. He can ride in the air and move under the water. He cannot be hurt. Even as he dealt with the Kru in the Cave of the People, so will he deal with you here if you try to lay a finger on Tinta. He has said that Tinta goes with us to the Cave of the Fires!"

Again the men fell to whispering among themselves. Catching a word here and there, Jim realised that the Kru were only too glad of a chance of shelving their responsibility. To send Tinta to Him-Whose-Name-Cannot-Be-Spoken was to carry out the instructions they had received in the spirit, if not in the letter. Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken would deal with her. After all, it was his law—his Ban—promulgated through their mouths, which she had broken.

"It shall be as the Shining One has said," their spokesman exclaimed at last. "Tinta shall go with you, and Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken shall judge her."

Jim was conscious of a feeling of immense relief. Tinta was safe for a time at any rate.

"We know not the way, O Kru," he exclaimed.

"Come with us and we will set your feet upon the path. It is a long journey. Three times will the food be gathered and renewed before you reach the Cave of the Fires!"

Jim translated for the benefit of Stanislaus Cripps, who nodded his head.

"Tell them we shall want food, boy. If that infernal entrance tunnel wasn't so small, we could have made the journey in comfort on the tractor."

"We will give you food," the spokesman answered when he had been informed of Stanislaus Cripps' demands. "Come with us."

As they closed about them, Jim noticed that they avoided all contact with Tinta, shrinking from her as if they feared to touch her. He saw, too, that the girl had noticed it, for her pretty face flushed and her lips trembled.

Marching down a series of galleries, they paused at last in the Cave of the Mushrooms, where a party of the Kru busied themselves in gathering supplies for the journey. These, with several metal flacons containing milk, constituted their rations.

They were then led down an incline which ended at what looked like a wall of rock. One of the Kru touched this rock, and a great slab of stone swung round on a pivot, showing an opening beyond.

"This is the path that leads to the Cave of the Fires!" he exclaimed. "We may go no further."

They stepped through the opening, Jim following in the rear to guard Tinta. As he did so he heard the great slab of stone close, and a feeling of terror seized upon him.

Supposing they could never open that door-way again? Supposing they were never to come back from this strange journey? He kept these thoughts to himself, however. If he were nervous and anxious Stanislaus Cripps on the other hand was quite unmoved.

"Interesting, boy! This is an experience. Let's get on. I want to get to the bottom of this."

They were on a long tunnel illuminated by a faint reddish light, the origin of which they were some time in discovering. Then they saw that the right side of the tunnel—which sloped steeply in a spiral—had, here and there high up in the roof, little openings from which this light came. Stanislaus Cripps paused to inspect these windows, only to discover that they were too high up for him to reach.

"Curious, boy, very curious! This is not a natural shaft. It has been dug by man. With the tools available it must have been the work of hundreds of years!"

After descending for nearly six hours they halted, exhausted, and Tinta prepared the food. Having eaten it, they lay down and slept.

The next day and the next day they continued their journey deeper and deeper into the heart of the earth. At the end of the third day there was a marked increase in the temperature, which excited Stanislaus Cripps' curiosity.

"For a moment, boy, I am at a loss to explain it, but doubtless we shall discover the cause soon."

They had been marching about three hours on the fourth day when, turning a bend of the spiral path, they saw before them a great cave. As if acting under some common impulse, they all halted.

From the floor of the cave intermittently leapt little vivid red jets of flame. Even as they stared at this phenomenon, from somewhere in the distance came a rumbling murmur that grew louder and louder. Jim felt Tinta grip his arm—saw her put her other hand before her eyes. A very panic of terror seized him.

Coming across the floor of the cave, like a pillar of dust raised by the wind on the desert, was a whirling cone of fire!

(A whirling cone of fire! Sounds thrilling, doesn't it? Read all about it in next week's exciting instalment of this magnificent adventure serial!)

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THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT.

All **LETTERS** in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o **THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY**, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., London, E.C.4. Enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope.

"It is the Goods."

THAT'S what a Dublin chum says of the Silver Medal. He also says the arrival of the Silver Medal is another milestone in the progress of the League. He is doing all he can to show those who have not joined the S.F.L. just what they are missing.

More Compliments!

A Margate reader says the Silver Medal is the finest thing of its kind he has ever seen. If every reader of the "N.L.L." saw the Silver Medal there would be no rest till one of these medals was won. Now's the time.

"For goodness' sake mention the size of the splendid Certificate!" writes a New Zealand friend. "It is a splendid emblem, fit to adorn any wall."

A Good Club.

C. J. Rawlings, 23, Market Place, Wokingham, Berks, tells me he has a club of nine members. It has been running for two years. He is keen to get S.F.L. members to join. They are well equipped, and although the club-room is a store place at the back of the shop, it is only used by the club members. There is the use of a typewriter, and the club is winning its way.

Shall He Act?

"Jimmy" of Wokingham says he is keen on acting; he is a member of a go-ahead pierrot troupe, has been quite a success, and is good at patter. That's all excellent, but my pal would be wise to stick to a regular job and let acting be a side-line. It might take him years to get into the swim.

The Motto of the Lot.

"Erdington" tells me that the motto of the League should be put at the top of Chat, also the heraldic shield. This need not take up much space.

A Question of Taste.

M. A. T. writes from Great Yarmouth for advice as to where to spend a really lazy holiday—"preferably somewhere near Cambridge." There is plenty of good country in East Anglia, and this correspondent should find no difficulty in discovering some old farm or village by the sea where there is nothing to racket the nerves.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

George Burgess, Park Farm, Selsey, **Sussex**, has back numbers—old and new series—he is willing to sell.

Mary Gardner, 96, Station Road, **Ashington**, wants members for the Imperial Hobby and Corresponding Club.

Wm. N. Denby, 213, Berkeley Street, Sandyford, **Glasgow, G.3**, wants members for the Mermaid Club. Interested in stamps.

D. Harvey, c/o P.O. Box, Port Elizabeth, **South Africa**, wishes to correspond with readers anywhere. Sport and anything interesting.

W. Webb, 67, Monmouth Road, East Ham, **London, E.6**, wishes to hear from members in his district.

Tom Waiker, 5, Park Street, **Itams-o'-th'-Height, Salford, Manchester**, wishes to correspond with readers anywhere.

V. G. B. Hill, 4, Creswick Walk, Hendon, **London, N.W.11**, wishes to correspond with readers overseas.

Frank Slann, The Poplars, Holmer Road, **Hereford**, would like to hear from readers at home or abroad.

N. E. Brown, St. Alban's, Icen Road, Radipole, **Weymouth**, wishes to correspond with readers in China interested in stamps.

Victor Ivess, 8, Waitange Street, Gisborne, **New Zealand**, wishes to correspond with readers in Canada, Australia, and England, interested in stamp collecting and photography.

S. G. Thornton, c/o P.O. Longreach, Queensland, **Australia**, wishes to correspond with members.

Alfred Williamson, North Side Mackay, Queensland, **Australia**, wishes to hear from readers in Wales and France.

Art Lalonde, Jun., 183, Harry Street, Winnipeg, **Canada**, wishes to hear from readers interested in radio.

Christopher Fitzpatrick, 44, Upper Dorset Street, **Dublin**, wishes to correspond with readers in Australia.

Albert Edward Porter, 33, Compton Street, **Derby**, wishes to hear from readers in his district for the purpose of forming a cricket club.

Cyril V. Ellery, 8, Bullar Street, Southampton, **Hampshire**, wishes to correspond with readers.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE.

The Application Form for membership of the St. Frank's League appeared in last week's issue; it will be published again next Wednesday. All holders of **BRONZE MEDALS** who have qualified for **SILVER MEDALS**, and wish to exchange their medals for the higher award, should send their medals, together with a stamped addressed envelope, to the Chief Officer, the St. Frank's League, c/o "The Nelson Lee Library," Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

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