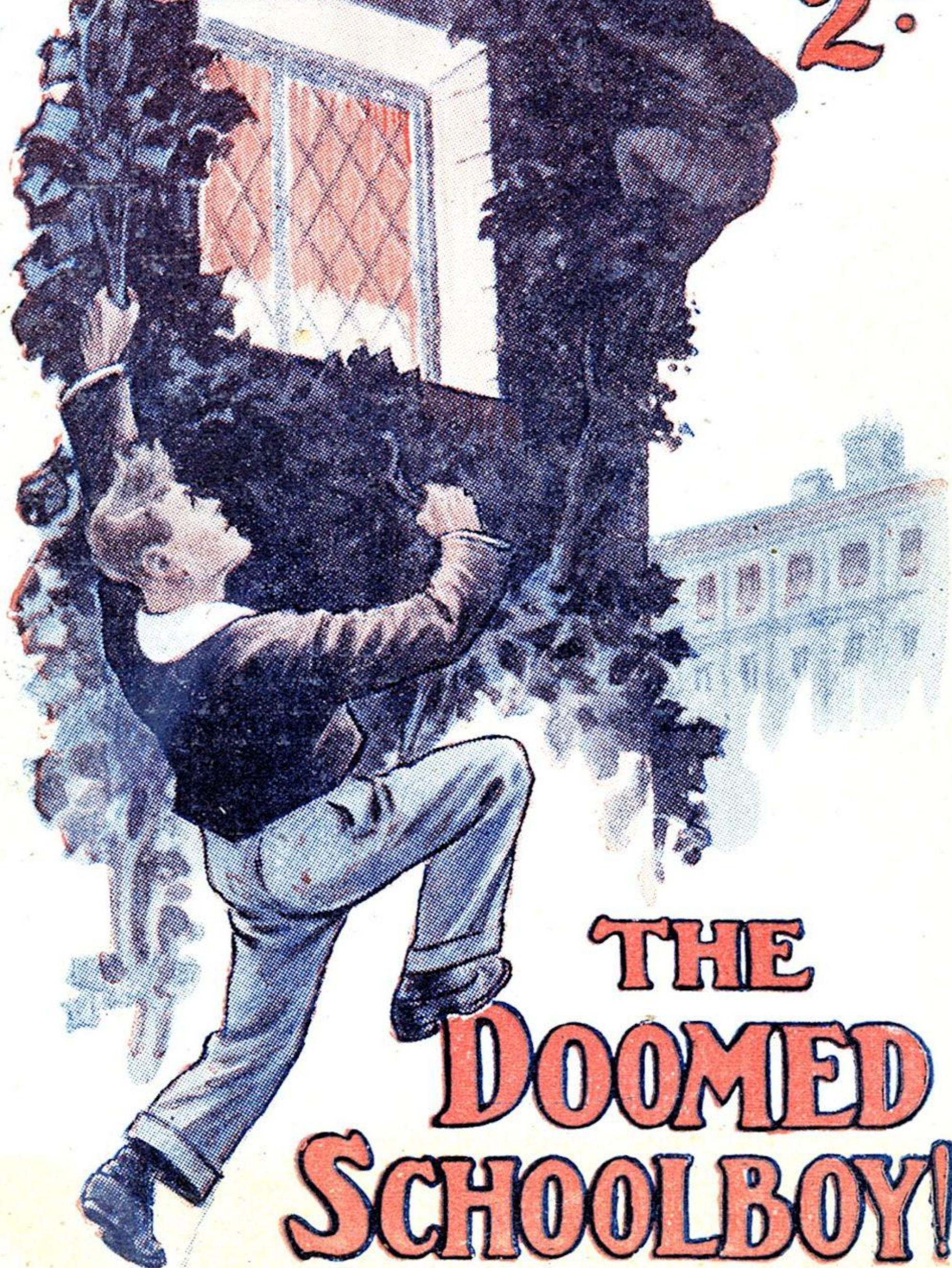


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THE
**DOOMED
SCHOOLBOY!**

A dramatic incident from the thrilling long complete yarn of schoolboy mystery and adventure contained inside.

New Series No. 77.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

October 22nd, 1927.



Nelson Lee held up the glass retort and looked at it intently. "What does it mean?" asked Nipper. "It means," replied Lee, his voice strangely grim, "that Church did not die from an unknown malady. He was poisoned—deliberately, fiendishly poisoned!"

Start This Series Now!Sensations at St. Frank's!

THE DOOMED SCHOOLBOY!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

The death of Walter Church! When St. Frank's learns the amazing news, it is staggered. Handforth, indeed, stoutly declares that he doesn't believe it. Even after he has seen the apparently lifeless body, after Dr. Brett has issued an official announcement, Handforth still maintains that Church is alive. This powerful yarn will grip you from start to finish.—ED.

CHAPTER I.

Handy Intervenes!

"STOP!"

Harry Gresham and Alec Duncan, and several other Removites of St. Frank's, glanced round as the command rang out sharply from the direction of the Ancient House steps. It was a cold, crisp morning, and the juniors were engaged in the healthy exercise of punting a football about. One or two of them were keeping their eyes open for prefects, for, strictly speaking, punting a football in the Triangle was against the rules.

"Carry on!" said De Valerie of Study G.

"It's only that ass, Handy!"

"Like his nerve to tell us to stop!" said Alec Duncan.

And they carried on. Gresham passed the leather to Clive Russell, and Russell was

about to take a pot-shot at goal—in other words, West Arch—when Edward Oswald Handforth came striding up.

"Didn't I tell you to stop?" he demanded aggressively.

"And who the dickens do you think you are?" demanded De Valerie. "Have they made you a prefect by any chance?"

"You callous rotters!" said Handforth in a cold, stern voice.

"What?"

"You heartless bounders!" went on Handforth accusingly.

"Look here——"

"What do you mean by making all this noise in the Triangle?" went on Edward Oswald. "Shouting and laughing and making all the din that you can! Those fags over there are just as bad, and I'll deal with them in a minute! It's positively disgraceful—all this commotion!"

The juniors stared at the famous leader of Study D in astonishment.

"There's no more noise than usual, you funny ass!" said Harry Gresham. "Why shouldn't we shout if we want to? What's the idea of wanting us to whisper and creep about on tip-toe?"

Handforth drew a deep breath.

"Have you forgotten about Church?" he asked sternly.

And then the other juniors understood. But they did not look at all penitent. On the contrary, they were inclined to be indignant and facetious.

"Cheese it, Handy, old man," said Cecil De Valerie. "We know that Church is a bit seedy, and that he was taken to the sanatorium last night, but that's no reason why we should creep about——"

"Poor old Church is ill!" interrupted Handforth curtly.

"We know that, but he's not going to die," said Fullwood. "Draw it mild, Handy! There's reason in all things——"

"Well, there's not going to be any noise while I've got two fists!" interrupted Handforth, grimly rolling up his coat sleeves. "Understand that! If there's any more din out here, I'll knock down the fellow who makes it! Poor old Churchy was taken ill last night, and now he's in the sanny. I've tried to see him, but they won't let me in."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We're not surprised to hear that, Handy," said Hubbard, with a cackle. "They might as well ask a bull to walk into a china shop! You're hardly the kind of fellow to be admitted into a sick-room!"

Handforth regarded the juniors more sternly than ever. He was inclined to take Walter Church's illness very seriously, but nobody else did. Even McClure, the third member of the inseparable Study D trio, rather thought that Handforth was going a bit too far. Church was ill certainly, but it wasn't likely to be anything serious. There was no sense in getting the wind up, and it was perfectly ridiculous to expect everybody to be quiet. The sanatorium was right on the other side of Inner Court, and any amount of shouting in the Triangle would hardly be heard at that distance.

Church's illness had come very suddenly, very mysteriously. He had been quite all right until the previous day, and then he had collapsed. An unaccountable numbness had taken possession of him, and there had been other strange symptoms. Yet, normally, Church was one of the healthiest fellows in the Remove. This strange malady had attacked him suddenly, and had laid him low.

"What's the trouble out here?" inquired Nipper, the popular Remove skipper, as he emerged from the Ancient House with Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "Anything wrong, Handy?"

"Yes," replied Handforth. "These fellows have been making a lot of noise."

"I haven't noticed it," said Nipper.

"Nor has anybody else," said Gresham. "We're all sorry about Church, but I think that Handforth expects a little too much. He wants us to creep about on tip-toe, and to whisper when we speak to one another."

"And we won't do it!" said Hubbard bluntly.

"Not likely!" said one or two of the others.

"You must be reasonable, Handy," said Nipper, with a smile. "Church won't be able to hear any shouts that take place in the Triangle, you know. He's an invalid, but that's no reason why we should go to extremes."

"I think you fellows ought to do something to show your concern," said Handforth. "Doesn't it seem a bit callous to go about as usual—to punt a footer about in the Triangle? Don't you think that we ought to do something special to show old Church that we're concerned about him?"

"Chuck it, Handy!" said Fullwood protestingly. "Don't make a mountain out of a molehill. Church will be well cared for in the sanny, and I expect he'll get plenty of dainties. We're all sorry for him, but——"

"If you're all sorry for him, then you'll follow my lead," interrupted Handforth. "You'll collect all the delicacies you can, and take them along to the sanny. That's my idea. Let's make a round of the studies and collect all the stuff we can. Let's show the poor old chap that we're thinking about him."

Nipper turned to the other juniors, and there was a rather soft light in his eyes.

"Well, there's no harm in that, you fellows," he said. "And if it'll please Handy, why shouldn't we do it? Let's collect a few special things from the study cupboards, then go along to Church and try to cheer him up. It's pretty rotten being in the sanny, you know."

"Good man!" said Handforth gratefully. "I thought I could rely upon you, Nipper!"

"Begad!" beamed Sir Montie. "And the rest of us, too, dear fellow!"

One or two winks were passed round, and in less than a minute the rest of the juniors were entering wholeheartedly into the scheme. But Handforth did not appreciate the fact that a great many of the juniors were entering the affair in a ragging spirit. They were sorry that Church was ill, but they did not take the same grave view as Edward Oswald Handforth.

CHAPTER 2.

Dubious Delicacies!



"POOR old Church!"

"Not so loud, you asses!"

"Shush! The patient might hear you!"

It is to be feared that many of the juniors

were entering the affair in a purely ragging spirit. They were now pouring out of the Ancient House in a long succession, laden with all manner of "delicacies." The idea had spread to the West House, too, where a good many other Removites were indulging in the same pastime. Handforth, of course, noticed nothing amiss.

His was about the easiest leg in the whole of St. Frank's to pull, and just at present, in his preoccupied state, it would have been perfectly easy to pull both his legs at once. He only knew that dozens of fellows were pouring out of the Ancient House and the West House laden with parcels. They were all taking special treats to the patient, and Handforth's heart warmed greatly. He was highly delighted with the Remove. The fellows were acting as he had hoped they would act. They were showing their concern for poor old Churchy.

It never occurred to the leader of Study D that the whole business was assuming the shape of a colossal jape. He was very concerned about his chum, and it was impossible for him to realise that the rest of the Remove did not take the same grave view as himself.

Church was ill, certainly. But then, there was nothing unusual in this. One junior or another was generally in the sanny, suffering from a cold, or a touch of influenza, or the mumps, or a sprained leg, or something of that sort. Church had unexpectedly gone dizzy the previous evening, and he had been carried off into the sanatorium. Well, there was nothing for the Remove to worry about, and the Remove simply refused to worry.

But Handforth, who was greatly attached to his two chums of Study D, took an altogether different view. When they were well and hearty, he was ready enough to punch their noses, and to generally make their lives hideous. Indeed, most of the other fellows could never understand why Church and McClure stuck to him. They did not know that he was sincerely and deeply attached to them. But when either of them was ill—well, then it was that Edward Oswald Handforth revealed his true feelings. In his bluff way he could never conceal his emotions.

"Might as well humour him!" grinned Fullwood as he came out with a bag of oranges. "I don't know whether Church will appreciate these oranges—they're a bit squiffy, I believe—but it's the best our study can produce!"

"We're all taking something," laughed De Valerie. "I've got a tin of sardines here, and I understand that Gresham and Duncan are taking a chunk of cake. Fatty Little is contributing a saucepanful of toffee."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A saucepanful?" grinned Fullwood. "Is there something wrong with it?"

"Obviously," said De Valerie dryly. "You wouldn't find Fatty Little giving away all that toffee unless it was squiffy."

This was sad, but true. Fatty Little, of the West House, was loud in his protestations of generosity. He, like the others, was entering into the spirit of the rag.

"Yes, by ginger, there's about three pounds of toffee here!" he said, as he exhibited the saucepan. "My special toffee, too—made with treacle and pure butter!"

"It looks a bit rummy!" said Reggie Pitt, as he gazed distastefully into the depths of the mass.

"I don't think Church will care much for it," said Jack Grey, shaking his head. "No good taking that to him, Fatty!"

"He'll love it!" declared Fatty Little. "It's perfectly good toffee, except for the fact that I mixed some garlic flavouring with it by mistake!"

"Oh, my hat!" said Reggie, with a shudder.

"Yes, I thought it was vanilla essence!" said Fatty indignantly. "I took the bottle down off the shelf, and I'd emptied all that beastly garlic flavouring in before I knew the truth."

"He drove us out of the study with the awful niff!" said Cornelius Trotwood, edging away from the saucepan. "There's still a horrible odour of garlic hovering about in the West House."

"Old Churchy ought to like that stuff!" said Alf Brent, with a grin. "I've heard that garlic is wonderful medicine. It's bound to do him good."

"It might be better if it was thoroughly cooked," said Nick Trotwood. "But we yanked the saucepan off the fire, and wouldn't let Fatty carry on. It's all runny and sticky—more like glue than toffee!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shush!" warned Reggie Pitt. "Here comes Handy! We don't want to let him hear us laughing!"

"Poor old Handy—he's as serious as a judge!" chuckled Alf Brent. "What an ass he is to take so much notice over Church's illness. The chap'll be out of the sanny inside a week, I expect."

Even when the procession began to form up in solemn file, Handforth did not suspect anything, although the juniors were pulling long faces, and whispering in exaggerated tones. At a word they commenced moving forward, walking slowly and sedately, each one holding his tribute. Handforth went at the head, highly pleased with all these fellows for being so thoroughly decent.

Nipper, who took no part in the rag, stood on the Ancient House steps with Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West. He was frowning.

"I don't quite like this, you fellows," he said gruffly. "I think we ought to warn Handforth that his leg is being pulled. It's too bad."

"We can't do anything," said Watson. "And, after all, doesn't Handy deserve it? It's too silly—making all this fuss over Church."

"I wonder?" said Nipper slowly.

"Begad!" said Sir Montic, looking at him rather curiously. "What do you mean, dear old boy?"

"Well, perhaps there's something in Handforth's concern," replied Nipper quietly. "I'm rather afraid that poor old Church is very seriously ill, and I don't like to see this japing spirit over an invalid. But perhaps it's better to let Handy find out for himself. I don't suppose he would believe me, even if I did give him a warning."

And the chums of Study C continued to watch the procession as it proceeded on its way towards the sanatorium.



CHAPTER 3.

Mr. Pycraft In Trouble!

LESS my soul!"

Mr. Horace Pycraft, the master of the Fourth Form, came to a halt within the confines of the

Inner Court, and adjusted his glasses. He beheld a long procession marching solemnly through Big Arch, and coming towards him. Mr. Pycraft could see at once that all these boys belonged to the Remove—and he had no real authority over them. But Mr. Pycraft was a most unpleasant gentleman, and nothing delighted him better than to interfere in matters which were not in his province.

He compressed his lips, and marched towards the procession with an unpleasant glint in his eyes.

"Handforth!" he snapped. "McClure! De Valerie! Fullwood!"

"Sir!" went up a chorus.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Mr. Pycraft. "I imagine, Handforth, that you are the—the ringleader in this extraordinary escapade?"

"What escapade?" asked Handforth.

"I suppose you know it is against the rules for you boys to come into Inner Court without a permit?" went on Mr. Pycraft. "I suppose you know that this part of the school property is out of bounds for juniors?"

"Not when we have definite business, sir," replied Handforth, who knew the rules very thoroughly. "Anybody is allowed to come across Inner Court if they have a legitimate object."

"Ahem! Quite so—quite so," said Mr. Pycraft, momentarily confused. "But I very much doubt, Handforth, if you have a legitimate object," he added sharply. "What are you doing here? Why are you leading all these boys—"

"I should have thought you could guess, sir," interrupted Handforth bitterly. "Church is ill—and we're going along to the sanny to see him!"

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Pycraft. "And have you received an official permit to visit Church?"

"No, sir, but—"

"In that case, Handforth, I am only performing my duty when I order you to leave these precincts at once," said the Fourth Form master unpleasantly. "It is perfectly disgraceful that all you boys should come here—noisy and undisciplined—in front of the headmaster's house. Go at once!"

Handforth compressed his lips.

"If it is all the same to you, sir, I think I'll stay!" he said stubbornly. "I haven't seen Church this morning, and I'm anxious about him. He may be worse."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Pycraft. "There is nothing much wrong with the boy. Do not be absurd, Handforth!"

"If you think it's absurd for a fellow to be a bit concerned over his chum, sir, then I'm sorry for you!" said Handforth, with a glare. "We're visiting old Churchy to find out how he is this morning, and to give him some dainties. I'm taking full responsibility, and if the Head likes to punish me, I'm perfectly prepared to stand the racket."

And, without another word, Handforth marched on. The rest of the Removites—who had no great fear of Mr. Pycraft—followed their leader's example. The Fourth Form master stood there, hot with rage at this defiance.

"Halt!" he shouted. "How dare you? Good gracious! How dare you defy me in this way? Halt at once!"

But the Removites were not going to be done out of their "fun" by Mr. Pycraft. In fact, his advent only made the thing more attractive. If they all received a sentence of fifty or a hundred lines each, they wouldn't mind. The rag was well worth it.

The sanatorium was really a wing of the headmaster's own house. It was quite separated from Dr. Stafford's private residence, although it was actually attached to the building. The sanatorium had a door of its own at the end of the wing, and Handforth made straight for it.

His idea was to march straight in, and to go upstairs to Church's bedside with all his followers. However, this little scheme was scotched, for the door proved to be closed, and it was secured inside. Handforth thumped upon it loudly.

"Go it, old man!" grinned De Valerie. "That's the way!"

"Bang harder!" said Doyle.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth had apparently forgotten that a patient desires quietness and peace. He brought his fist down upon the door panels with thumping force. He was indignant because the door was closed, and he was intent upon letting the sanatorium staff know that he was seeking admittance.

"Better go easy, old man," said McClure. "All this noise, you know—"

The door suddenly opened, and Dr. Brett stood there.

"What is all this?" he asked sharply. "Handforth! Are you responsible for this disgraceful hammering?"

"We want to come in, sir," said Handforth. "We want to see Church—"

"If you have any consideration whatever for Church, you will moderate your conduct!" interrupted the medical man curtly. "I am surprised at you, Handforth. You know well enough that Church is ill, and yet you come here, thumping upon the door in the most reckless fashion. There are other patients in the sanatorium, too, and all this noise is most disturbing."

Handforth stared at the doctor with sudden realisation.

"Oh, I say," he blurted out. "I'm awfully sorry, Dr. Brett! I—I'd forgotten for the moment! I—I hope old Church hasn't been upset by all this thumping? What a chump I am!"

The doctor was somewhat mollified by Handforth's obvious penitence.

"That's all right," he said gruffly. "You're a thoughtless sort of fellow, Handforth. If you go away now—"

"But we want to see Church, sir."

"I am sorry, but you cannot see him," replied the doctor. "And please let me hear no more of this noise."

He went inside again, and closed the door softly. The juniors heard the latch click to.

"Hi!" shouted Handforth. "Just a minute! What the dickens—"

"It's no good, old man," said McClure. "We can't go in—he won't allow it. And you mustn't question the doctor's decision."

Mr. Pycraft came bustling up.

"Just as I thought!" he said triumphantly. "The doctor has very rightly forbidden you to enter the sanatorium. You must go at once—all of you! If you do not immediately return to the Triangle, I shall make it my duty to report the whole occurrence to your Housemasters."

"But we want to see Church, sir!" said Handforth stubbornly. "These other chaps can do as they like, but I'm not leaving the sanny until I've seen Church."

Mr. Pycraft became excited.

"How dare you defy me!" he demanded shrilly. "Go at once! I shall not order you again. And all you other boys, too!"

De Valerie turned to the crowd.


"Perhaps we'd better obey!" he said, with a wide wink—unseen by Mr. Pycraft. "But we'll leave all our delicacies behind, and then Handforth can collect them up, and take them in to poor old Church."

"Good idea!" sang out the rest.

And, dumping down their "delicacies," the juniors decamped.

CHAPTER 4.

Too Much Noise!



HANDFORTH and McClure were the only two who remained behind. The rest, having dumped their goods down, retired for some little distance, and then halted, interested in the proceedings.

"Upon my word!" ejaculated Mr. Pycraft, as he stared at the conglomeration of pots and packages and tins on the ground. "What is all this? Handforth! Are you responsible for these boys bringing this ridiculous collection here?"

"It's not a ridiculous collection, sir," said Handforth. "The fellows were bringing tit-bits for the patient. All invalids like something special when they're in bed."

"Tit-bits!" shouted Mr. Pycraft, gazing at the various articles. "Are you insane enough to believe, Handforth, that any patient could consume this—this vile stuff? Sardines—dry bread—doughnuts! And this—this horrible-looking stuff in the saucepan! Are you telling me, Handforth, that Church will appreciate such 'tit-bits'? You must be insane, boy!"

Handforth looked at the contributions, and gave a start.

"Some of the chaps didn't have anything better to give, I suppose," he said, frowning.

"Oh, cheese it, Handy!" said McClure. "You know jolly well that most of them were treating the whole thing as a rag."

"A rag?" repeated Handforth, with a jump. "Great Scott! You don't mean to say those rotters had the callousness to— Oh, my goodness! I didn't think of it before!"

He stared across Inner Court, and his eyes were smouldering as he beheld the group of juniors still standing there, grinning widely.

"You rotters!" he shouted, shaking his fist. "Come back and collect all this stuff! I thought you were sincere—and you were only-doing it as a jape!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Several cackles went up from the jesters.

"You cannot throw dust into my eyes with this transparent ruse, Handforth," said Mr. Pycraft. "You are the ringleader of this disgraceful escapade, and I shall see that you—"

"Oh, chuck it, sir!" interrupted Handforth. "I thought the fellows were sincere—I thought they were really concerned about poor old Church. Look at this stuff!" he added, picking up Fatty Little's saucepan of toffee. "Who brought this? I never dreamed—"

He started violently as he caught a full whiff from the saucepan. The odour was an awful mixture of burnt butter, garlic, treacle, and scorched sugar—but mostly garlic. The mixture was half runny—an awful, unhealthy-looking mass.

"Pah!" said Handforth in disgust, as he flung the saucepan from him. "I'll punch

He broke off as Mr. Pycraft uttered a fiendish yell. Very carelessly, Handforth hadn't taken any care in flinging that saucepan away from him—and it alighted on the middle of Mr. Pycraft's chest! But that was not all. The sudden jar had the effect of jolting the toffee out of the saucepan, and it

flopped into Mr. Pycraft's face in one spreading mess.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Removites, at the distance, yelled with appreciation. They had never hoped for any entertainment like this. They were safe, too—for Handforth would catch any punishment that was going.

"Help! Help!" screamed Mr. Pycraft, running round in circles. "Good heavens! This—this ghastly stuff! I'm choking—I'm poisoned!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not so much noise, sir!" said Handforth. "Don't forget that Church is just upstairs in the sanny, and that he's——"

"Bah!" snarled Mr. Pycraft. "You shall hear more of this, Handforth! You shall certainly hear more of this!"

He fled; painfully aware that the juniors were shouting with laughter at him. The worst of it was that he realised he had only himself to blame. He had deliberately interfered, and he had received his reward. But Mr. Pycraft savagely told himself that Handforth would receive an even more drastic reward—later.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The laughter still went on. Handforth shook both his fists at the yelling juniors.

"Can't you be quiet?" he bawled. "You unfeeling rotters! You spoofing bounders! And I thought you were sincere, too!"

The juniors came crowding up, grinning and cackling.

"Poor old Handy!" sang out Doyle. "Isn't it easy to pull your leg?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And then, before Handforth could take any action—he was, as a matter of fact, about to sail in with both fists—the door of the sanatorium opened, and Mr. Nelson Lee stood there. There was an immediate hush. The popular Housemaster of the Ancient House was a very different proposition to Mr. Pycraft.

"Boys, I am greatly surprised at you," he said sternly. "Have you no more thought for Church than to come here, making all this noise? Don't you think you should have a little more consideration?"

The juniors were somewhat abashed.

"But Church isn't really ill, is he, sir?" asked De Valeric.

"Church is very ill!" replied Nelson Lee quietly. "If I did not think that this scene was merely the result of thoughtlessness, I would punish you all very severely. Go away at once!"

"But can't we see Church, sir?" asked Fullwood.

"No, you cannot," replied Lee. "Go back to your own Houses—and make as little noise as possible."

The juniors went—very subdued. They could gather, from Nelson Lee's tone, that Church was more seriously ill than they had thought. The only two juniors who remained were Handforth and McClure. They were filled with alarm at Nelson Lee's words.

Handforth turned to the Housemaster-detective, and clutched at his sleeve.

"Can't I see old Church, sir?" he pleaded. "Just Mac and me, sir! We're Church's pals, you know! We're his chums! You'll let us see him, won't you, sir?"

Nelson Lee hesitated.

"It was you, Handforth, who made the most noise," he pointed out coldly.

"I—I didn't mean to, sir!" said Handforth. "Those chaps made me wild! They came here, bringing all this rubbish with them—treating the whole thing as a rag! I didn't know it at first—I didn't even suspect it!"

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"Very well, Handforth," he said quietly. "I will accept your explanation. Yes, you two may come inside for a few minutes—as you are Church's special friends. But only for a few minutes, remember. And you must be very, very quiet!"

CHAPTER 5.

The Invalid of the Remove!



MINUTE later Handforth and McClure were ushered into the sick-room. Church had a special little ward all to himself—one of the

private rooms in the sanny. The two juniors approached the bedside, their faces grave and troubled. But it was impossible for them to believe that Church was really ill. Two days ago he had been hale and hearty, without the slightest trace of any illness. Now he was in the sanatorium, confined to his bed. Surely this indisposition of his could only be a trifling matter?

But one glance at their chum brought startled pain into the eyes of Handforth and McClure.

"Church, old man!" muttered Handforth huskily.

There was a terrible change in Church. He had looked rather ill the previous day, when Handforth had been dosing him up with all sorts of patent medicines; but this morning the difference in him was startling in the extreme. In some extraordinary way, he looked terribly emaciated. His eyes, when he opened them and smiled at Handforth, seemed larger than usual—and unhealthy bright. There was a doomed look about him. His cheeks were drawn and shrunken, and, although they were deathly pale, there was a tiny spot of colour in the centre of each.

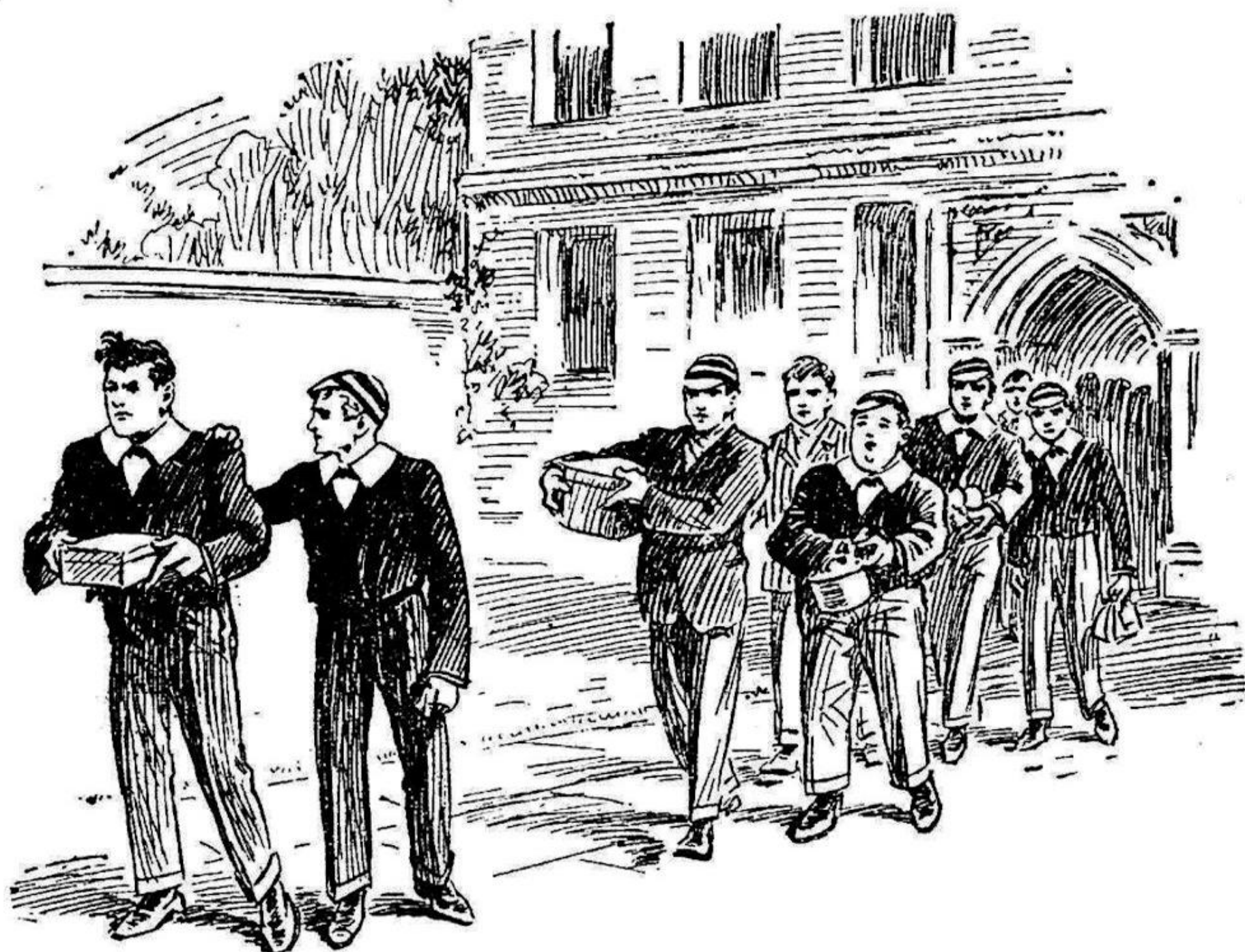
"Hallo, Handy!" he said in a whisper. "Rough luck, isn't it?"

"Oh, Churchy!" said Handforth. "You look awful!"

"Steady, old man!" murmured McClure.

"I—I mean, you'll soon be better!" said Handforth hastily. "I don't suppose there's much wrong with you, Church, old son. You've always been a healthy merchant——"

"It's decent of you to come, Handy," said



Solemnly the juniors filed behind Handforth and McClure. The leader of Study D little suspected that they were treating the whole thing as a rag—that the “dainties” they proposed to give to the bedridden Church consisted of sardines, stale bread, garlic-flavoured toffee, and such like!

Church in a dull, listless voice. “I can’t see you very well, though. Who’s that with you? Is it Mac?”

McClure came a little closer.

“Yes,” he said, with a gulp. “Can’t you recognise me, Church, old scout?”

The light was quite strong, and it was startling to realise that Church could not even recognise his own chum. The very suddenness of this illness made it all the more appalling. It was, indeed, the very worst feature. Church had been as right as rain only two days ago, and now he was suffering from some dread malady which had laid him low. It was all very mysterious.

“Do you feel any pain, old son?” asked McClure.

“No, no pain,” replied Church, in a tone of utter languor. “I’m just—just dull and numbed. I can’t feel my legs, you know, and even my arms feel rummy. I don’t know what’s the matter with me. The doctor won’t say, and I don’t believe he knows.”

“Why don’t they get specialists from London?” asked Handforth. “If Dr. Brett doesn’t know what’s wrong with you, the cleverest physicians in the land ought to be brought here—”

“Oh, chuck it, Handy!” said Mac. “I don’t suppose it’s so serious as all that.” He gave Handy a nudge. “Shush, you ass!” he hissed. “You’ll only make him feel worse!”

Nelson Lee stepped forward.

“Now, boys, you’ll have to come away,” he said gently.

“But—but we’ve only just arrived, sir!” protested Handforth. “Can’t we stay—”

“I am sorry, but you must not stay any longer,” insisted Nelson Lee. “I think Church is rather sleepy, and he wants to rest.”

There was something in Nelson Lee’s tone which made it impossible for the two juniors to defy him. Church himself seemed quite indifferent. He smiled again as his chums bade him good-bye, but he made no comment. Softly the two juniors withdrew from the room, and went with Nelson Lee into an adjoining apartment, which appeared to be a kind of surgery.

“Oh, doesn’t he look bad, sir?” asked Handforth tensely. “And all in a couple of days, too! What’s the matter with him, sir?”

“We don’t know, Handforth,” replied Nelson Lee.

“You don’t know, sir?” said the two juniors.

“Dr. Brett is not only puzzled, but greatly worried,” replied Nelson Lee. “He can only tell us that Church has been stricken with some strange disease, which he cannot possibly diagnose.”

“But you’re a bit of a doctor yourself, sir!”

urged Handforth. "Don't you know what's wrong with him?"

"Unless the thing was utterly fantastic, I should hazard a guess that Church is suffering from some strange poisoning," replied Nelson Lee. "But that seems too ridiculous. Now and again he appears to go into a trance. He will lie there for half an hour on end with his eyes wide open, and yet he will take no notice when he is spoken to. But afterwards he will know what has passed round him. That is the extraordinary part of it."

"A trance!" said Handforth, staring. "Oh, my goodness! Then—then his brain must be affected?"

"Undoubtedly the root of all the trouble is in the brain," agreed Nelson Lee. "We can only hope that these symptoms will soon pass, and that Church will return to his normal health. Otherwise, I am seriously afraid that—that—"

"You don't mean that he'll peg out, sir?" broke in Handforth frantically.

"Well, my boy, Church is wasting away," said Nelson Lee gravely. "There is no sense in hiding this from you. His emaciation during the last twenty-four hours is absolutely appalling. The development of this—this malady is swift and dreadful."

"What about his people, sir?" asked McClure. "Aren't they coming down?"

"Church's parents are abroad at the moment," replied Nelson Lee. "They are, indeed, several thousand miles away, and cannot possibly reach England until two or three weeks have elapsed. By that time, I hope, Church will have recovered his ordinary health."

"And what about his sister—Ethel?" asked Handforth. "She's only at the Moor View School. Why doesn't she come to nurse him or something?"

"It is far better for the boy that he should not have his relatives round him," replied Nelson Lee. "Every care is being taken of him here. In any case, Ethel has been unfortunate enough to contract the mumps from one of the other girls at the Moor View School, and she is necessarily quarantined."

"So she's ill, too!" said Handforth. "Oh, my hat! It's—it's a kind of curse!"

"Don't be absurd, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee sharply. "The girl's illness is perfectly simple—an ordinary case of mumps. There is absolutely no connection between her indisposition and her brother's, so don't get these fantastic ideas into your head."

"Sorry, sir!" muttered Handforth. "Only it seems so queer."

Handforth turned aside, and stared absently out of the window. He was thinking of Church in the other room, lying there with that hopeless expression in his eyes. The poor boy was so obviously "booked." What could it mean? Handforth's heart was as heavy as lead. Was he going to lose his chum? It seemed too terrible—too tragic!



CHAPTER 6.

The Revelation!

UMA!" said Handforth fiercely.

"Eh?" gasped McClure.

"Old Zuma the Mystic!" said Handforth, a startled expression in his eyes. "By George, we'd forgotten old Zuma for the minute! Where's Mr. Lee? We'll tell him—"

"No, don't!" interrupted McClure. "We shall only make ourselves look ridiculous."

Nelson Lee had gone out of the room for a moment, and the two juniors were alone. Handforth was staring at Mac with wide-open eyes.

"I'll bet old Zuma is responsible for this!" he said fiercely. "He's the chap who's laid poor old Churchy low!"

"Don't be silly!" insisted McClure gruffly. "Zuma only foretold what was going to happen, the same as these seers always do. I'm beginning to believe in that old chap now. There's something uncanny about him."

They were referring to a quaint old fortune-teller who had had his tent near Bellton village for some days past. Church, in a spirit of fun, had visited the old mystic, and Zuma had told him that the crystal was blank. He could see nothing in it—no trace of Church's future. What could that mean, except one thing? And now, sure enough, here was Church in the sanatorium, and there was every sign that he was sinking rapidly.

Handforth and McClure knew something more about Zuma the Mystic, too. For they had seen this old fellow in the recesses of Bellton Wood with an assistant of his. The two men had been indulging in some sort of sacred rites, but they had disappeared before Handforth and Mac could get near them. They were altogether mysterious.

There was something rather terrible in the way in which Zuma's prophecy was being fulfilled. For here was Church apparently next to death's door. Handforth shivered as the thought crossed his mind.

"It can't be!" he said fiercely. "Old Church isn't going to die! It's too—too frightful!"

"Steady, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee quietly, as he returned to the room. "It will be a tragedy indeed if Church dies, but we must remember the fate of his uncle. There is a significant parallel between the boy's case and—"

"You—you mean Uncle Geoffrey?" asked McClure. "Church was telling us something about his Uncle Geoff!"

"Yes, about four years ago Mr. Geoffrey Church was stricken with some terrible malady, and within three or four days he had gone!"

"You—you mean that he died?"

"Yes, Handforth," said Lee quietly. "He was in his ordinary state of health, and then

abruptly this disease came upon him. We will call it a disease for want of a better description. The cleverest specialists were procured, but they could not diagnose the case, with the result that nothing could be done for the unfortunate gentleman. He rapidly grew worse, and then died. It was feared that he had contracted some strange malady in Mexico."

"Mexico, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Church was a great explorer," explained Nelson Lee. "His last contribution to the world's knowledge was the discovery of a wonderful Aztec tomb in one of the wildest sections of Mexico. Perhaps the unhappy gentleman contracted the disease while he was in that Aztec tomb, but it did not have any effect until months afterwards, when he had retired to his country home in England."

"It may have been a curse, sir," said Handforth impressively. "There was much the same sort of talk about those Egyptian tombs —"

"Don't get such ridiculous ideas into your head, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee sharply. "I did not know that you were superstitious."

"I'm not, sir!" denied Handforth.

"Then keep your imagination within bounds, my boy," said Lee. "There is just a possibility that Church's uncle contracted some disease while in Mexico. There are some diseases, as you may know, which lie dormant for years, and then suddenly, abruptly, they develop and show themselves. Perhaps even Church himself received the germ from his uncle, and it has now only manifested itself."

"That's possible, of course, sir," said Handforth slowly. "But it's jolly rummy! It's—it's awful! What can we do?"

"Nothing—except wait," replied Nelson Lee. "You may be quite sure, boys, that Church is receiving the very best attention. Even now I am making arrangements for two or three specialists to come down. My advice to you is to go about your everyday work in just the ordinary fashion. Of course, I cannot prevent you worrying about your chum, but do not let this matter prey upon your minds. I think you had better be going now, in any case, for it is nearly time for breakfast."

And, although they badly wanted to stay, they were not allowed to do so. Two or three minutes later they found themselves out of doors, walking slowly across Inner Court back towards their own House. Both of them were looking subdued and sombre.

"Poor old Church," said McClure softly. "Doesn't he look terrible?"

"I'm not thinking about Church just now!" said Handforth fiercely. "Zuma! What about Zuma?"

"Oh, why can't you forget—"

"But you don't seem to realise!" interrupted Handforth, coming to a halt, and facing McClure. "Church's uncle died from some awful disease after coming back from Mexico—after discovering an Aztec tomb!

It's the first we've heard about it, and it throws a light on the mystery."

"Does it?" said McClure. "I can't see it."

"Why, old Zuma himself—and his beastly assistant—may be Mexicans!" said Handforth tensely. "They're brown men, aren't they? Or, perhaps, they're Aztecs—descendants from the old Indian rulers! They might have cursed Uncle Geoffrey for disturbing that tomb, and now they're visiting their horrid vengeance on old Church himself!"

"Chuck it!" said McClure sharply. "Don't be an ass, Handy! Don't get those silly ideas into your head! You know what Mr. Lee just told you!"

"Oh, all right!" said Handforth, taking a deep breath. "Perhaps I am getting a bit wild in my ideas. But doesn't it seem rummy, all the same? Doesn't it make you think dotty things like this?"

They went into the Ancient House in a thoughtful mood. Was there something in Handforth's startling theory? Or had Church merely fallen a victim to some perfectly natural disease?



CHAPTER 7.

Handy Means Business!

AFTER breakfast, during the brief interval before morning lessons commenced, the Triangle was thronged with juniors. It was a fine, crisp, sunny morning, and everybody wanted to take advantage of the excellent weather.

Handforth came out because he felt that it was impossible for him to remain indoors. He felt stuffy in there—in the study. He was restless, too. He could do nothing but walk about, moodily thinking of Church.

On the Ancient House steps he came to a halt, and frowned heavily. Lots of juniors were larking about, and making a considerable amount of noise.

"Thoughtless rotters!" said Handforth darkly.

McClure pulled at his sleeve.

"Don't make a fuss, old man," he said earnestly. "I don't suppose old Church can hear them at this distance. Besides, you can't expect these chaps to go about on tip-toe, and to whisper. Do be reasonable, Handy."

Edward Oswald turned upon him.

"Are you as bad as the others?" he demanded fiercely. "Don't you care anything about Church?"

"That's not fair!" said McClure, very quietly. "You know better than that, Handy."

Handforth gave a kind of a groan.

"Sorry, Mac!" he muttered. "I'm all— all upset, you know. Of course, you care— just as much as I do, I expect. Poor old Churchy! What's going to happen to him?"

Why don't those specialists come? This suspense is terrible!—Is he really bad, or——"

"It's no good talking like that, Handy," interrupted McClure gently. "It won't do any good. Mr. Lee gave us some fine advice, and we ought to take it. Let's go about our ordinary duties in the same way as usual."

"But that's impossible," said Handforth. "You know it's impossible!"

"Well, perhaps it is," admitted Mac. "But, at the same time, we can keep calm, and it's no good railing at these chaps because they're making so much noise. They don't realise that Church is gravely ill. They only think he's just seedy."

A number of Modern House juniors came across, looking solemn and subdued. Handforth watched them rather suspiciously at first, but he soon changed his opinion. These fellows, led by John Busterfield Boots, Bob Christine, and one or two other decent Fourth Formers, were looking very sombre.

"Awfully sorry to hear about old Church," said Boots, as he came to a halt. "Near death's door, isn't he?"

Handforth winced.

"I hope not!" he replied.

"We hear that you've been to the sanny, trying to pull him through!" said Bob Christine solemnly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other Fourth Formers cackled suddenly, and then remembered themselves. Once again they pulled long faces.

"We thought we'd come along with a few suggestions," went on Buster Boots calmly. "There's a haystack in one of the paddocks, Handy, and we thought it might be a good idea for all of us to go along and bring the hay into the Triangle."

"What on earth for?" asked Handforth.

"Well, it'll deaden the sound of our footsteps," replied Boots. "If we spread the hay all over the place, it'll make things nice and quiet. Then I thought we might be able to wear felt slippers."

"You'd better stop this, you chaps!" said McClure angrily.

"Why, we're only offering some ideas," said Bob Christine, in surprise. "Clapson has a particularly brilliant suggestion. His scheme is to take Handforth away, and to gag him. St. Frank's'll then be extraordinarily quiet!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We thought about getting up a band," suggested Yorke. "Two or three of our chaps are pretty good with a comb and a piece of paper. And then, of course, we have a cornet in the Modern House, to say nothing of a saxophone and a banjo. The scheme is to go outside the sanny, and provide special music under Church's window. Something to liven up his spirits, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth regarded the Fourth-Formers with a black brow.

"You cads!" he said, his voice quivering. "I never thought you were such a crowd of feelingless rotters!"

And, without another word, he sailed in with both fists.

Crash! Thud! Biff!

Handforth's right went driving hard into Boots' face. His left caught Bob Christine on the chin, and sent him reeling over backwards. The Fourth-Formers scattered wildly. Seldom had Handforth been in such a forcible mood. He went through that throng of juniors like a scythe through a hayfield.

"Hi, look out!"

"Make way, you chaps—he's gone dotty!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Those fellows who had not tasted Handy's fists were yelling with laughter.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Bob Christine. "He's—he's dangerous!"

"The fathead ought to be locked up!"

"Grab him, somebody—and hold him down!"

But Handforth would not allow himself to be grabbed. He went for those cackling juniors with a grim, relentless ferocity. It was for his chum's sake! It was for Church's sake—poor old Church, who now lay in bed, gravely ill. There was a set, agonised expression on Handforth's face.

"You contemptible cads!" he panted, as he came to a halt and glared round him. "You callous rotters! Don't you understand that poor old Church is seriously ill? He's my chum, and I'm going to stand up for him! I'm not going to let you jeer like this, and treat his illness as though it were a mere sprained ankle!"

Nipper came through the crowds, and he was looking concerned.

"Go easy, Handy," he said. "It's a silly business to knock the chaps about in the Triangle like this. You'll only get yourself into trouble."

"What do I care?" asked Handforth passionately. "They've been ragging poor old Church! They've been suggesting that hay should be put down in the Triangle, and that we should go about in felt slippers! They don't mean it—they're only trying to be funny!"

Nipper turned to the crowd, and his face was grim.

"Is this true?" he demanded.

"Of course it's true!" said Talmadge. "Do you think we're going to act the giddy ox, the same as Handforth?"

"It's a pity you can't respect Handforth's grief," replied Nipper quietly. "I'm sorry I interfered. Perhaps you'd better get on with it, Handy!"

And Nipper turned away, angry.



CHAPTER 8.

The Realisation.

NIPPER had said very little, but those few words of his had been significant.

Handforth turned on his heel, and he took McClure

by the arm.

"Come on, let's get away from here," he said huskily. "These fellows make me sick! They can't seem to understand that you and I are worrying about old Churchy. I don't suppose we can really blame them—they're a hard-hearted, thoughtless crowd."

They walked off towards the Ancient House steps. Bob Christine turned in the direction that Nipper had gone and ran after him. He caught Nipper by the arm and pulled him round.

"Just a minute, old man!" said Bob. "Were you serious just now?"

"Yes, I was," replied Nipper.

Buster Boots had come up, followed by a crowd of other juniors.

"But you don't mean to say that Church is really—well, he's not gravely ill, is he?" asked Bob, wide-eyed.

"In case you don't know it, I'd better tell you that Church is not only gravely ill, but dangerously ill," replied Nipper. "I thought everybody in the school knew it by this time."

"Dangerously ill!" echoed Buster Boots, with a start. "You—you mean that—that—Oh, rot! It can't be true!"

"Of course it can't!" said Talmadge. "When a fellow is dangerously ill it means that he's liable to peg out!"

Nipper nodded.

"That's true," he said. "Poor Church is in a very critical condition!"

"But you can't be right—you *can't!*" insisted Bob Christine. "Why, we thought that Handforth was exaggerating everything—that he was making a big fuss over nothing. We took it for granted that he was indulging in some of his ordinary rot."

"Well, you're wrong for once," said Nipper. "The situation is grave in the extreme."

"Oh, dash it, I can't believe it!" said Boots. "Only yesterday Church was walking about, and the day before he was absolutely as sprightly as usual. A fellow can't be struck down as speedily as that. It's—it's not natural!"

"That's just the peculiarity of the case," replied Nipper. "I've had a word with the gov'nor this morning—and with Dr. Brett, too. I've never seen them looking so concerned before. The doctor is absolutely haggard with worry. He can't make it out; he can't understand it. With all his medical knowledge, he's unable to do anything to stay the rapid progress of Church's illness. The whole affair is a mystery. But you can take it from me that old Church is in a bad way. I've seen him this morning, and he gave me a shock. Poor chap! It's too awful!"

Nipper turned away, biting his lip, the picture of Church before his eyes.

"Dear old chappie, we didn't know," said Archie Glenthorne sorrowfully. "Good gad! And here have I been lolling about, as it were, watching the good old scene with cheery enjoyment. Odds tragedies and disasters! How frightfully frightful! If there is anything we can do, old top, kindly say the word!"

"Yes, what can we do, Nipper?" asked Buster Boots.

"Nothing," replied Nipper. "That's the best thing to do—nothing. Keep as quiet as you can, and if Handy seems peculiar—well, humour him. Poor chap, he's terribly cut up about Church! I never thought he had so much feeling in him."

The juniors turned, and looked towards the Ancient House steps. Handforth was still there, leaning against the stonework, listless and miserable. Every now and again he would turn and look towards Big Arch—to the sanatorium beyond. He was in a state of constant suspense.

Bob Christine suddenly took a deep breath and walked over towards Handforth. As he came up, Edward Oswald gave him a straight, hostile glance.

"Can't you leave me alone?" demanded the leader of Study D. "If you start any more of your cold-blooded ragging—"

"Wait a minute, Handy," interrupted Bob quietly. "I'm sorry for what happened just now. I didn't realise that Church was so ill. I want to apologise for being such a beast."

Handforth's face cleared on the instant. "That's all right, old man," he said promptly. "As long as you understand, well— We'll say no more about it."

Just then Buster Boots came up.

"Handy, I want you to let me apologise," he said, totally unconscious of the fact that Christine had just used almost the same words. "We didn't know that Church was so seriously ill, and if we hurt your feelings just now we're awfully sorry. I hope you'll forgive us."

Handforth gave a kind of gulp.

"That's all right!" he muttered. "As long as you understand, there's nothing more to be said. Poor old Church! I've seen him this morning, you know—and he looks awful. I don't know how the dickens I shall do any work this morning. I shan't be able to sit in my seat—I shan't be able to concentrate at all. It would be a different thing if Church had small-pox, or scarlet fever, or something. We could understand it then—and we could be patient. But nobody seems to understand what's the matter with him. It's some awful malady that can't be diagnosed. That's the terrible part of it! What's wrong with him? What is it that has struck him down like his?"

He turned aside, and none of the other juniors bothered him any more. In fact, they toned down from that very moment—out of sympathy. A great deal of their sympathy was for Handforth as much as it was for Church. Two or three others came up, and mumbled a few words expressing their sorrow, and Handforth found it more difficult to accept this kind of thing than the ragging. He was heartily pleased when the bell clanged out for first lesson, for he was freed from the attentions of the others.

Perhaps it was a relief to him to be in the Form-room, too. He couldn't wander about

there—he couldn't pace restlessly to and fro. Perhaps Mr. Crowell realised his state of mind, for never once did the Remove Form-master call Handforth to attention, or question him regarding his slackness.

As a matter of fact, Handforth sat at his desk, staring straight before him—doing no work whatever. Work? The very thought of it was outrageous. How could he work here, while Church, his chum, was languishing in the sanny—perhaps hovering between life and death?



CHAPTER 9.

Handy Forestalled!

"GRAPES!" said Handforth thoughtfully.

"Eh?"

McClure looked at his leader in surprise. Morning lessons were over, and the pair were standing rather forlornly in Study D. Somehow, that famous apartment seemed altogether different with Church absent. Church had never been a forceful member of the celebrated "Co.," but now that he had gone the room seemed dismal.

"Grapes," repeated Handforth. "They generally give grapes to invalids, don't they? Let's go down to the village and buy the finest grapes that we can get hold of."

McClure nodded approvingly.

"By jingo, that's a good idea!" he said. "Yes, let's go. And perhaps we can get some peaches, too."

"Peaches won't be any good," said Handforth, shaking his head. "They wouldn't let him eat tinned fruit."

"You ass, I mean fresh peaches," said Mac. "They're a great delicacy."

"But you can't buy peaches at this time of the year, you chump!" growled Handforth. "You ought to know that they only come in at the end of the summer."

"But you can buy foreign peaches at all times of the year," said McClure. "Nectarines, and grape-fruit, and all sorts of things. They all come from abroad, you know—but you can generally obtain them. The trouble is, I don't suppose the village fruiterer will have any. They're too expensive to stock."

"Oh, I don't know!" said Handforth. "He generally has a pretty good supply of luxuries. Bellton isn't like an ordinary village—what with St. Frank's and the River House School and the Moor View School all close at hand. Plenty of our chaps are full of cash, and so the village shops can stock a lot of expensive stuff. Anyhow, let's go down and see."

McClure was very glad that Handforth had thought of this idea, because it would give him something to do. Going to the village was a lot better than hanging about the Triangle, or making an abortive attempt to get into the sanny. They had seen Nelson

Lee, and had learned that Church's condition remained unchanged.

The patient was neither worse nor better. He seemed to be in a kind of stupor most of the time. When aroused he would be himself, but was very listless and indifferent as to his ultimate fate. This was curious in itself—for Church was a vigorous youngster as a rule, and one would have supposed that he would cling tenaciously to life. It was extraordinary that he should be so dull and uninterested.

And yet actually this did not seem to be the case, when it was fully analysed. For Church occasionally informed the doctor that he knew everything that was going on round him—although, somehow, he couldn't properly express himself. Both Dr. Brett and Nelson Lee were waiting—waiting until some specialists arrived from London. Not that these gentlemen would be able to do much.

The Head, naturally, was very concerned—very worried, indeed. He went to see Church himself, but could make nothing of the case. He had never had anything like it in the school before.

Meanwhile, Handforth and McClure were on their way to Bellton. They were in Handy's little Austin Seven. At first, Handforth hadn't wanted to use his car. He seemed to think that it was wrong to do so. But McClure pointed out that they would need plenty of space, so that they could carry back their purchases, and at last Handy had agreed.

He was a very different fellow to-day.

Only yesterday he had been his ordinary bluff, blustering self. He had been as noisy as ever—as aggressive and as boisterous as usual. But to-day he was totally different. He was subdued. When he spoke, his voice was much lower, and pitched in a soft kind of husky key. Even in his movements he was more gentle. And yet there was no reason for this, because he was so far from Church that he could easily be his normal self. But the very knowledge that Church was ill—dangerously ill—had completely changed Handforth's character. Only when he was aroused did he cast aside this cloak of gentleness.

"Well, we've got nearly three quid between us," he said with satisfaction, as they drew near to the fruiterer's shop in the village. "We ought to be able to buy plenty of grapes and peaches and things with all this cash; and when we go to the sanny we're bound to be admitted."

"I'm not sure about that, but we can hope," said McClure.

"Of course we shall be admitted," said Handforth. "Haven't we got to give this stuff to old Church?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Mac.

But in his own mind he rather thought that they would be compelled to leave the fruit with the doctor. It was most probable that they would be refused admittance to the sick chamber. If Church was really as

bad as Nelson Lee had intimated, it was very unlikely that visitors would be allowed.

Handforth drew the Austin Seven to a halt outside the fruiterer's, and then he and McClure marched in. They were just in time to see William Napoleon Browne inspecting a large basket of grapes and other choice fruits.

"Here, hold on, Browne!" said Handforth quickly. "Have you bagged the last bunch of grapes?"

"I fancy not, Brother Handforth," replied Browne, turning. "There are, I believe, sundry other bunches available, although none so choice as this. You must surely realise that the best is for me."

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "I want that basket!"

"Sorry, young gent," said the shopkeeper. "But Mr. Browne has just paid me for it."

"Then I'll pay Browne!" said Handforth firmly. "Don't be an ass, Browne! I want those grapes for old Church——"

"It grieves me, Brother Handy, but I must decline," said Browne. "It so happens that I, too, have been thinking of the unhappy Brother Church. These simple trifles are just a little tribute from the Fifth. So you will surely realise how impossible it is for me to give them up."

Handforth stared.

"You've come here to buy those fruits for old Church?" he asked in surprise.

"Alas, that you should catch me in the act!" sighed Browne. "But it happens to be the truth."

"Good man!" said Handforth warmly. "Thanks, Browne! You're a brick! It's just like you to think of a chap when he's down with illness."

And then Archie Glenthorne came bustling in.

"What-ho!" he observed cheerily. "Kindly trot out the choicest and most luscious fruits—— Good gad! The old establishment is already filled!" he added, noticing the other fellows. "I mean to say——"

"Why, have you come here to buy some fruit for old Church, too?" asked Handforth.

"Odds embarrassments and stabs!" said Archie in distress. "As a matter of absolute fact, laddie, precisely. But I was rather hoping to be the first chappie on the spot."

"Good old Archie!" said Handforth promptly. "It seems that we've all come here on the same game. Well, never mind, there's plenty for all of us!"

CHAPTER 10.

No Admittance!



HANDFORTH was rather touched by the fact that Archie Glenthorne and William Napoleon Browne had thought of the same idea as himself. They had come especially

to the village to purchase choice fruits for the invalid. It was very decent of them—it revealed a fine spirit.

For, after all, they were not Church's chums at all. Handforth felt that it was his privilege, and his alone, to provide Church with delicacies. But it was impossible for him to protest. These fellows were willing to spend their money, and Handforth could do nothing.

As a matter of fact, there were other fellows at St. Frank's who were thinking of the stricken Church, too.

Fatty Little, for example, was locked in Study L, in the West House, busy with mysterious cooking arrangements. A delicate, appetising smell was emerging from the study, and many a junior paused outside the locked door to sniff the air hungrily. But there was no admittance.

At last, about ten minutes before the dinner-bell was due to ring, Fatty emerged from the study, and he was carrying a pie-dish set upon a tray. It was surrounded by frilly coloured paper, and looked very dainty. The contents of the pie-dish, too, gave forth a most delicious odour. One or two juniors, passing down the corridor, paused uncertainly and sniffed at the air. They were hungry, ready for dinner, and that smell brought them to a standstill.

"By jingo!" said Singleton. "What is it? Any chance of a share, Fatty?"

Doyle, Scott, and Goodwin and two or three others collected round, their eyes hungry and eager.

"By gum!" said Dick Goodwin. "It smells champion, Fatty."

"Well, it ought to smell champion, too," said Fatty Little, nodding. "But a smell is all you'll get, my lads. I've cooked this delicacy especially for old Church!"

"Oh!"

"He's an invalid now, and he can only eat the best of everything," went on Fatty. "This is one of my special cheese custards. Four eggs, my sons, a pint of milk, and some of the finest cheese."

The dish certainly looked exceedingly appetising. The surface was a beautiful, delicate brown, and little wisps of steam were coming up, appetising steam that made the juniors reel.

"Then it's too bad!" said Singleton. "You shouldn't bring the thing out in front of us like this, Fatty—just before dinner, too!"

"It's a swindle!" said Doyle indignantly.

But Fatty Little merely grinned, and went on his way. Out in the Triangle he was just in time to encounter Handforth and McClure, Browne, Archie Glenthorne, Reggie Pitt, and Buster Boots. They had all just come in from the village, and they were all well loaded. Baskets of fruit, boxes of chocolate, and all manner of other luxuries were in their hands. They were making a bee-line for the sanatorium. This was a very different procession to the one that had gone in that direction before breakfast. It had been a

rag then, but now it was a genuine pilgrimage to poor Church's bedside.

Handforth looked at Fatty Little suspiciously as he joined them.

"We don't want any more of your rotten toffee, Fatty!" he said gruffly. "You'd better take that horrible concoction away!"

"By pancakes!" said Fatty hotly. "You silly ass, this is one of my special cheese custards. It's the very thing for an invalid. Old Church will have just one taste, and then he'll gobble down the whole dishful. He won't be able to resist it!"

"Splendid, Brother Little!" said Browne. "All contributions are welcome. We must let Brother Church know that we are thinking of him, and that we wish him a speedy recovery."

They all continued their way through Big Arch, across Inner Court, and at last they arrived at the sanny. Handforth opened the door, and was about to cross the lobby towards the staircase when Nelson Lee appeared. Nelson Lee was coming down stairs, and his expression was one of great gravity.

"How's Church, sir?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"I am very sorry to report, boys, that Church is a little worse," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Worse!" panted Handforth. "You—you don't mean——"

"Steady, young man—steady!" interrupted Lee. "There is no need for you to get excited. As far as we know at present there is no actual danger. But it would be idle to tell you that Church shows any sign of improvement."

"We've brought him a few delicacies, sir," said Reggie Pitt. "Grapes, pineapples, peaches, and things."

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Just a few odd trifles, so to speak."

"I've cooked him one of my special cheese custards, sir," said Fatty Little proudly.

Nelson Lee looked at them all, and he slowly shook his head.

"I am afraid you can't take all this stuff up to Church now," he said. "You will have to leave it here in the hall."

"Oh, I say!" protested Handforth. "Why can't we take it up, sir?"

"Because Church must not be disturbed," replied Nelson Lee. "Dr. Brett is most strict on that point. Nobody is to see him—nobody whatever."

"Not even me, sir?" asked Handforth.

"Not even you, my boy."

"But I'm Church's special pal, sir!" urged Handforth. "Mac and I——"

"I am very sorry, Handforth, but there can be no exceptions," interrupted Lee. "You cannot see Church now, and you must leave these delicacies on the table here. I need hardly say that I am very delighted to see this expression of your kindly thought for the stricken boy. Church, too, will greatly appreciate your generous action when he is a little better."

"By George!" breathed Handforth. "Then—then you think he'll get better, sir?"

"We all hope so, Handforth," replied Nelson Lee, with a worried little frown. "We all hope so."

There was nothing more to be done. The fellows were obliged to unload themselves, and to emerge once again into the open air. Church was not to be disturbed in any circumstances. As Handforth and McClure went back towards the Ancient House, apart from the others, Handforth's brow was puckered.

"Mr. Lee said that he only *hoped* that old Church would recover!" he muttered. "He isn't sure, even. Mac, old man, it's more serious than we know of. Oh, why can't they tell us the truth?"

"Because they don't know it themselves," replied McClure. "That's the explanation, Handy. There's something awful about this illness of Church's, and nobody knows what it is!"

And Arnold McClure had hit the nail on the head!

CHAPTER 11.

Handforth Won't Be Denied!



DURING afternoon lessons Handforth was so restless that Mr. Crowell excused him from work altogether. When all the other juniors came out they found Edward Oswald mooching about in the Triangle, his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets, his brow black and troubled.

"Any further news, Handy?" asked McClure, running up, full of anxiety.

"No—nothing," said Handforth.

"You haven't seen him?" asked Nipper.

"No, they wouldn't let me," replied Handforth bitterly. "I've been to the sanny two or three times, but they won't let me go inside. They say that Church mustn't be disturbed."

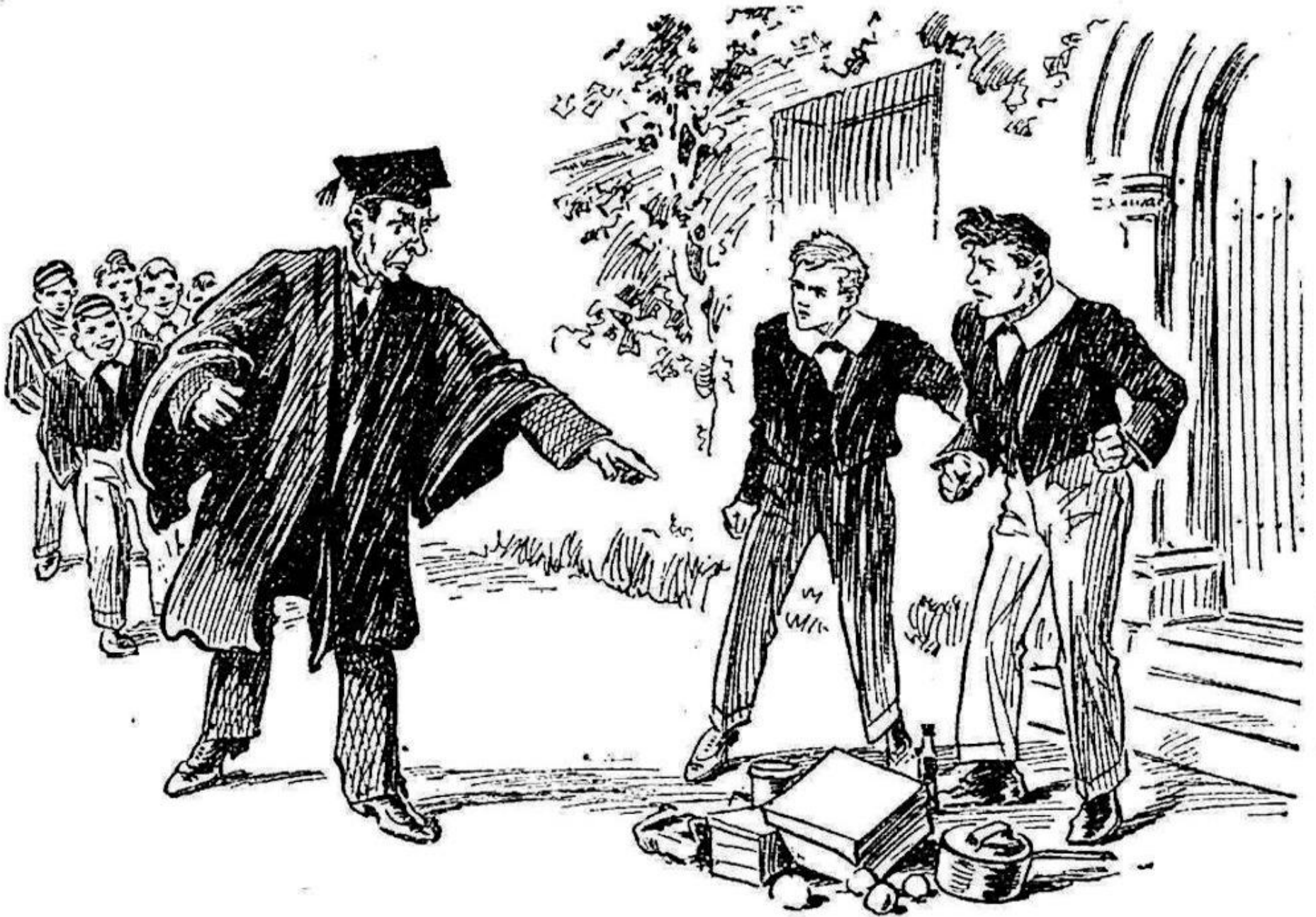
He looked round at the gathered crowd with glowering eyes.

"There's something rummy about it," he went on, his voice fierce and angry. "There's something—mysterious. I am Church's chum, aren't I? If anybody can cheer him up, it's me! And yet I'm not allowed to go near the place!"

"Well, Mr. Lee ought to know best," said McClure resignedly.

"He thinks he knows best—but he's wrong!" growled Handforth. "It isn't as if Church is suffering from some contagious disease, or anything like that. There's no reason why he should be debarred from seeing his own friends!"

"If the gov'nor won't let you see him, Handy, you can bet there's a jolly good reason," said Nipper quietly. "The gov'nor wouldn't deliberately keep you away unless there was a very special cause. He knows that you're Church's best chum, and he



"Handforth, what is this ridiculous collection of things for?" demanded Mr. Pycraft, staring at the conglomeration of pots and packages and tins on the ground. "They're a few dainties for Church, who's in the sanatorium!" Handforth answered indignantly.

would admit you like a shot if there was any prospect of your doing any good."

Handforth nodded.

"That's why I'm so worried," he said miserably. "Even I can't see poor old Church! He must be in an awful state! Just one look at him this morning, you know—only for two or three minutes—and then we were hustled out. We haven't seen him since, and they won't give us any news. They won't tell us whether he's better or worse or anything! This suspense is awful!"

Nipper and the other juniors walked away, feeling that Handforth would prefer to be alone. Alone, that is, except for McClure's company. And McClure didn't know what to say or do, either. His own feelings were very akin to Handforth's, but he was more capable of fighting them.

"Well, Handy, it's no good mooning about out here," he said at length. "This sort of thing won't do, you know. Better go in and see about tea."

Handforth turned on him.

"Tea?" he repeated. "If I tried to drink any tea it would choke me!"

"It's no good going on like that," growled Mac. "We've got to eat and drink, Handy—we've got to keep on living. We're both cut up about Church, but let's keep level-headed for goodness' sake."

At last McClure succeeded in persuading his leader to go indoors. It was cold outside—and the dusk was falling. They wandered towards Study D, and went inside.

At just about that moment, Nipper was in Nelson Lee's study, talking earnestly to the Housemaster-detective.

"But why won't you let Handy see him, gov'nor?" he was asking. "You don't know how he's cut up."

"I do know, Nipper—and I sympathise with Handforth greatly," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "But it is quite impossible."

"But why impossible, sir?"

"Because Handforth's presence in the sick-room would be worse than useless," said Lee, clenching his fists. "Do you know, Nipper, that the unfortunate boy is now practically in a state of coma? That original numbness which assailed him has crept over his entire body, and he can scarcely move a hand or an arm. He does not seem to know when anybody goes near him. He just lies in bed, motionless, a living ghost. The progress of this dread malady is so startlingly swift that I am left helpless. If Handforth went into that sick-room now it would be a grave mistake. He could do nothing for his chum, and his own anguish would only be increased. But, remember, I am telling you this in confidence. You must not repeat it to any of the other boys."

"Very well, sir," said Nipper. "Poor old Church! What can be the matter with him? Haven't you any idea, sir?"

"I think you had better leave me now, Nipper," said Nelson Lee quietly. "There are one or two things here that I must attend to, and then I am going back to the sana-

torium. As soon as there is anything further to report I shall tell you. Perhaps I shall post a bulletin in the lobby."

And Nipper could get no further information out of Lee. What he had said was significant—but perhaps there was more significance in what Nelson Lee had left unsaid. Without question the great detective had some theory of his own, and he did not want to share it, even with Nipper.

After tea, when darkness had fully descended over the old school, there was a noticeable absence of any rowdyism. The seriousness of Church's illness had at last become general knowledge, and there was a sort of subdued feeling in the atmosphere—a foreboding.

Handforth was as inconsolable as ever. Twice he went to Nelson Lee's study, only to find it empty. Twice he made his way to the sanatorium, to be turned away. There was no admittance.

"I can't stand this any longer!" he said fiercely, after the evening had fairly advanced. "Mac, there's something funny going on in the sanny! They won't let anybody see poor old Church—they won't give any information at all! By George, I'm not going to be kept from my chum like this!"

"He's my chum, too," said McClure.

"Yes, I know, but—but it's different, somehow," said Handforth. "Anyhow, I'm going to see him—whether they want me to or not!"

They were standing outside, some distance from the sanatorium, watching the window of the sick-room. And Handforth began to move forward.

"What are you going to do?" asked McClure, rather alarmed.

"There's ivy on that wall!" said Handforth pointing. "They won't let me go into the sanny by the ordinary way—so I'll climb the ivy! I'll get in old Church's window!"

"But you mustn't!" said McClure, grasping at Handforth's sleeve. "Don't do anything like that, Handy! They'll only throw you out! Besides, it doesn't seem right—to force your way in—"

"I don't care!" interrupted Handforth obstinately. "They shan't keep me from Church! You stay out here—just where you are. There's no need for two of us to be collared. You stay here and wait until I come back! But I must know what's happening to poor old Churchy!"

He shook off McClure's detaining hand, and strode purposely forward. He was desperate, and he was going to be denied no longer!



CHAPTER 12.

The Mysterious Figure!

HANDFORTH clung to the ivy on the sanatorium wall, his eyes staring, his whole frame tense.

"Who's that?" he asked, in a low, startled voice.

Some distance above him, moving in the ivy with the agility of a gorilla, was a figure. Handforth could just see it in the dim gloom of the evening—a moving figure, clutching at the ivy, and swinging from root to root with amazing dexterity.

Handforth was amazed. He was climbing the ivy so that he could get to Church's window—because there was no other method of entry for him. And it seemed that he was not the only one who was attempting this desperate game! That figure couldn't belong to McClure, because Mac had been left behind, some distance away. Besides, Mac wouldn't do a thing like this, in any case. Then who was it?

Handforth climbed higher, and he only saved himself from falling sheer by clutching desperately at one of the thick roots and swinging round. By the time he had fully regained his balance, and was able to look up once more, that mysterious figure had gone. There was no sign of it whatever. Yet he could swear that the stranger had not dropped to the ground.

"Am I going dotty, or what?" muttered Handforth breathlessly. "Who was it? He didn't go into the window—he was moving away from it. Perhaps he went round the corner, and then dropped to the ground out of sight."

Handforth's mind was full of doubt—full of dread. He didn't exactly know why, but the sight of that dim shape, clinging to the ivy, had filled him with terrible misgiving.

But perhaps his imagination had been playing tricks with him. Perhaps he had seen no figure at all! It was very gloomy, and—But no! He couldn't have made a mistake like that. He had seen *something*.

At any other time, perhaps, Handforth would have abandoned his project in favour of investigating the little mystery. But at present he was so anxious to discover Church's condition that he almost forgot that mysterious figure during the next two or three moments. For he found himself clutching at the window-sill of the sick-chamber, and he pulled himself cautiously up.

The sill was a wide one, and it was easily possible for Handforth to sit upon it, and to peer through the panes of the window. The blind was not fully down, and he could see within. There were shaded lights glowing, and the bed was in full sight.

Dr. Brett was sitting on a chair, close to the bedside, and he was watching Church with an anxious, eager light in his eyes.

"Splendid!" Handforth heard him say. "That's better, Church, my boy! That's better! Feeling brighter, eh?"

"Why, yes, sir," came Church's voice. "I—I seem to have wakened up, somehow. And yet I know everything that's been going on. I can't understand it—I can't get the hang of—"

"Never mind—never mind!" interrupted Dr. Brett. "Don't worry your head, my boy. We shall soon have you better now. There is a distinct turn in your condition. During these last two or three minutes you have

revived amazingly. I cannot tell you how delighted I am."

Handforth, hearing these words, gave a great gulp. It was impossible for him to go away now. Poor old Church was better! In that case, why shouldn't he go in and have a word with him?

Without a qualm, Handforth gripped one of the lattice windows and pulled it open. With a creak it gave way, and the next moment Handforth was within the room. Dr. Brett looked round with a startled expression on his face.

"Handforth!" he said, starting up. "What on earth——"

"Forgive me, doctor!" begged Handforth. "But they wouldn't let me in downstairs, and I had to see old Church! You won't give me away, will you?"

There was such a world of earnestness in Handforth's tone that Dr. Brett thawed at once. The angry light died out of his eyes, and he even allowed a twinkle to enter them.

"You always were a resourceful youngster, weren't you?" he said dryly. "Well, now that you're here, I suppose I'd better let you remain a few minutes. But how did you get up to that window?"

"The ivy, sir," said Handforth, going towards the bed. "Church, old son! By George! I've been trying to see you all day!"

He sat on the edge of the bed, and looked at Church with anxiety and concern. There was, indeed, a terrible difference in the poor boy's appearance. But yet, if Handforth had only known it, Church was looking vastly better now than he had looked five minutes earlier. Dr. Brett was staggered by the improvement that had suddenly taken place.

"Hallo, Handy, old son," said the invalid, with a faint smile. "Funny business, isn't it? I don't know what's wrong with me, and I don't think the doctor does, either! I believe I'm causing an awful lot of trouble."

"Blow the trouble!" said Handforth, only too delighted to hear his chum speaking so brightly. "What the dickens does that matter? We're all worried about you——"

"You mustn't worry," said Church softly. "I shall soon be well now. I'm feeling ever so much better. I can't understand it. But I want to get out of bed—I want to jump about."

"Turn cartwheels, eh?" said Handforth, grinning with relief. "That's the style, old scout!"

Church started.

"Yes, cartwheels," he said, in a strange, strained voice. "That's what I did immediately I found that other splinter in my arm, didn't I?"

"Eh?" said Handforth, staring.

"Don't you remember?" went on Church. "I went out into the Triangle for a breath of fresh air—after I had been feeling so queer. I found a splinter in my arm, and immediately after that I was feeling as lively as a cricket. And I found a splinter in my arm

only two or three minutes ago, and now I've got that same lively feeling. Isn't it rummy?"

Handforth turned, and glanced at Dr. Brett.

"Take no notice!" murmured the doctor. "I think he has been dreaming. Pretend to agree with him."

"Oh, rather!" said Handforth, turning back to Church and nodding. "That's all right, old man! Forget all about it—you'll soon be better."

"Yes, I believe I shall," said Church peacefully. "And yet, I wonder! Sometimes I feel—I feel— It's all so strange. I don't know how long I've been here, or anything. It seems like weeks—months! And yet, really, it's only a day or two, isn't it?"

"Never mind," said Handforth softly. "You'll soon be out of the sanny now, Church, old chap. I can sit here for a bit, can't I, Dr. Brett?"

The doctor was on his feet, making for the door.

"Yes," he replied. "Sit there, and watch him, Handforth. I want to speak to Mr. Lee. If there is any sudden change, come to the door, and call me at once. Do you understand?"

And Dr. Brett went out, leaving Handforth alone with his chum.

CHAPTER 13.

The Shock!



"POOR old chap!" murmured Handforth tenderly.

Church was lying back on his pillow, his eyes closed, his breathing even and regular. He had apparently dropped off into a peaceful sleep. And Handforth sat there, by the bedside, with one of Church's hands in his. Not for the world would Handforth have spoken loudly now.

He gave very little heed to Church's reference to that splinter. It meant nothing to him. He took it for granted that Dr. Brett's whispered comment had been near the mark. Perhaps Church had been dreaming.

Yet, really, there was something singularly significant in that dramatic change in Church's condition. Almost since midday he had been like a log, unwilling or unable to speak. Then, all at once, he had been quite bright.

And he had referred to a splinter!

There came a sudden little noise at the window, and Handforth turned his head sharply. He instantly thought of that mysterious figure that he had seen in the ivy. Outlined in the window was a face—pale and ghostly in the gloom of the night. For a fraction of a second Handforth felt his heart beating like mad. Then a wave of relief swept over him.

For he recognised the features of McClure.

The next moment Mac was entering the room; he caught his foot against the window-sill and made a little noise.

"Can't you come in quietly, you careless ass?" asked Handforth fiercely. "He's asleep! Do you want to wake him up? Why did you come at all? Why couldn't you stay out there?"

McClure approached the bedside.

"Because I'm just as anxious about poor old Church as you are!" he replied. "Do you think I don't care a straw about him, or what? Oh, my goodness! Doesn't he look rocky?"

"You shouldn't have come in?" growled Handforth. "They might let me stay, but they won't allow both of us to stay. You've spoilt everything, Mac."

"Never mind about that," said McClure. "I tell you I couldn't keep out there any longer. I was all alone—and it seemed ages since you went up that ivy. I had to come, Handy—I had to know the truth."

"Did you see anything of a figure out there?" asked Handforth. "Did you see anybody lurking about?"

"No, of course not," said McClure. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," said Handforth. "It doesn't matter."

They were silent for a moment or two, as they watched the still, pitiful figure on the bed.

"Did you find him all alone—like this?" asked McClure, at length.

"No; Dr. Brett was with him."

"And he allowed you to stay?"

"Yes," replied Handforth. "Why not? Church was awake then—talking to me as cheerily as you like. The doctor went out to have a word with Mr. Lee, I believe. Anyhow, he left me here, and poor old Church has gone off to sleep. He's better, Mac—miles better! The doctor said so."

"Oh, good egg!" said McClure, with relief.

They were only speaking in whispers, and their ears were strained, too. They were expecting Dr. Brett to return at any moment. Everything was very still. Not the slightest movement or sound came from the figure on the bed. In fact, McClure began to look at it in a rather scared sort of way. He could not help noticing that all the colour had died out of Church's cheeks. A minute or two earlier there had been a little spot of pink in each cheek, but these spots had now gone. There was something almost wax-like in his appearance.

"I say!" muttered Mac suddenly. "Is he all right?"

"What do you mean—all right?" repeated Handforth. "He's ill. Goodness knows what the trouble is—"

"No, I mean—is he only asleep?" asked McClure, frightened.

His tone caused Handforth to give a little gulp.

"Don't be an ass!" he said roughly. "Of course he's only asleep!"

"But are you *sure*?" asked McClure, his voice unsteady. "He—he looks so—so still! And he's gone so pale, Handy! Look how squiffy his skin has gone—"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" interrupted Handforth. "Three or four minutes ago he was talking to me."

"Yes, but this is a mysterious case," said McClure. "And patients often have a kind of rally just before the last. You know that as well as I do. Handy—Handy! I tell you —"

"It must be the light!" interrupted Handforth, bending closer and looking at Church intently. "He's different—yes! But I can't understand— Oh, my goodness!"

While speaking, he had tried to release his hand from Church's gentle grip. And then he made a staggering discovery. Church's fingers were stiff—they gripped him in a kind of mechanical grasp. In that second, every ounce of Handforth's reserve left him. He shook that cold grip away, and flung himself on his knees by the bedside, seizing Church by the shoulders and shaking him.

"Church!" he panted hoarsely. "Church, old man!"

But there was no reply from the still figure.

"He's not breathing!" said McClure, shrill with fear. "Handy—I tell you he's not breathing! Feel his heart! Quick! Feel —"

"Be quiet!" panted Handforth huskily. "He *must* be breathing, Mac! Oh, it's too awful to believe— No, there's not a sign—not a single sign! His heart's stopped!"

"Stopped!" shouted McClure, staring with wide, terrified eyes.

Just for a moment they gazed at one another, and then they looked at that pale, wax-like figure again.

"He's dead!" shouted Handforth madly. "Dr. Brett—Dr. Brett! Come here—come here! He's dead!"



CHAPTER 14.

An Amazing Situation!

DEAD!"

Walter Church heard those words as clearly as if he was in his normal state of health.

He wondered, curiously, what it all meant. It seemed to him that a great time had elapsed, that he had awakened from some sort of sleep. Yet when he tried to open his eyes he found it impossible to do so. He could hear everything that was going on in the room; he had heard every scrap of that conversation between Handforth and McClure and he knew that they were now breathing hard and standing over him in dire distress.

For, to tell the truth, Church was no more dead than his chums were!

And yet, when he tried to move an arm, there was no result. When he tried to open

his eyes, he found it impossible to do so. He could not move an inch—every one of his muscles was rigid. He had lost all sense of feeling, all sense of touch. He could hear, too, and, if his eyes had been open, he could have seen. But yet he could only have seen in one straight line, for it would have been impossible for him to shift the angle of his eyes.

In a queer, detached kind of way, Church wondered if this was, indeed, death. They had said his heart wasn't beating! He wasn't even breathing! Was he dead?

In that same abstract way, he found himself wondering. Death, as he knew, was the greatest mystery of all. None could say what happened after the heart had ceased to beat, and the lungs had ceased to function. Was this death? Was he able to lie here, on the bed, and to hear everything that went on round him?

But Church was a level-headed, sensible fellow, and something told him that he was very much alive. And then, in a sort of flash of intuition, he knew the truth.

He was in a trance!

Yes, that was it—a trance! He had heard of such things. He had even heard that people were sometimes buried—taken for dead! Yet he didn't feel frightened—he only knew that everything was extraordinary. He badly wanted to see—to make some sign to Handforth and McClure—just to tell them that he was all right. But he couldn't. Indeed, it was no use trying. He was just like a log—like some inanimate object.

He had often wondered what it was like to be in a trance—and had pictured to himself that it would be a dreadful, appalling ordeal. Anybody in a trance, knowing that he was really alive, would surely be in the last stages of terror? That was the way Church had always looked at it.

But now that the actuality had come—startlingly enough—he felt no terror whatever. He was only wildly curious. It was just a strange experience. He had no fear at all. It seemed to him that he was thousands of miles away from everybody else—from his usual surroundings—and yet he could hear the voices near him so clearly!

"Why doesn't the doctor come?" Handforth was saying. "Why doesn't he come? Run and fetch him, Mac!"

"It can't be true, Handy—oh, it can't be true!" replied McClure, his voice quivering with horror. "Poor old Church! Only five minutes ago—"

There came the sound of a door opening abruptly, and footsteps crossed the room.

"Boys!" came Dr. Brett's voice. "What is it? Tell me! What is it?"

"He's dead, sir!" said Handforth. "A minute ago we noticed that he looked different, and—"

"Good heavens!" said Dr. Brett. "I cannot believe it! He was better—so much better! Stand aside, Handforth, stand

aside! Confound you, boy, do you hear me?"

Church had an idea that Dr. Brett had gripped one of his hands, but he couldn't be sure. He could feel nothing—but he could hear the doctor's breath very close to him.

"Yes!" came the doctor's voice, at length. "Heaven have mercy on the boy, he is dead!"

Again Church had that curious, wondering sensation. The doctor himself had pronounced him dead! Was it true, then?

And then came another voice—easily recognisable as belonging to Mr. Nelson Lee.

"Good gracious! What are you boys doing here?" Nelson Lee was saying. "How did you gain admittance—"

"Never mind that, sir!" said Handforth, in an agonised tone. "Poor old Church is dead!"

"What!" shouted Nelson Lee.

"It is true, Mr. Lee, true!" said Dr. Brett, in a broken sort of voice. "Dead—before any of the specialists can arrive! I was never more shocked in all my life! I came to you and told you how much brighter Church was. I thought the crisis was over—that he had taken a turn for the better, but now—"

"Let me see!" said Nelson Lee quietly.

Another long pause, and then Lee's voice came once more.

"There is no heartbeat—no breathing!" he said tensely. "Good gracious, Brett, this is terrible! Somebody must report this tragedy to the headmaster at once. He will be overwhelmed with grief."

"And only ten minutes ago he was alive!" came Handforth's wailing voice. "Tell us it's not true, sir! Tell us—"

"Boys, you must not remain here!" said Nelson Lee. "You must go at once!"

"Yes, sir; but—"

"At once, Handforth!" repeated Nelson Lee. "You, too, McClure. Go downstairs quietly, and let yourselves out by the main door. And see that there is no noise in the school. What a tragedy! What an appalling tragedy! Poor, poor Church!"

"He died with his hand in mine, sir!" faltered Handforth. "Dr. Brett went out of the room, and old Church was talking to me. I thought—I thought— And then, when we looked, he had gone pale and all wax-like. We never dreamed—"

"Yes, yes, Handforth!" interrupted Nelson Lee gently. "You can tell us this afterwards. But you must go now—you must!"

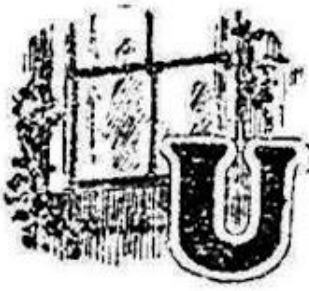
And Church could hear all this—every word of it! He even heard Handforth and McClure sobbing openly—unashamedly. They were sobbing for him—because he had died! Little did they guess, as they passed dazedly out of the sanatorium, that their stricken chum was not dead, but in a death-like trance!



Carelessly Handforth flung
the pan of garlic-flavoured
toffee away from him.
Next moment Mr. Pycraft
uttered a fiendish yell as it
landed on his chest, and
the revolting contents spilt
all over his face!

CHAPTER 15.

The Hushed School!



UNDER the stars, Handforth and McClure came to a halt, their senses stunned, their brains dull with misery.

"Dead!" muttered Handforth, clutching at McClure's arm. "Oh, Mac, old man, tell me it isn't true! Poor old Church, you know—one of the best under the sun! And only a day or two ago I punched his nose! Oh, what a cad I was—what a rotten bully!"

"Don't go on like that, Handy!" sobbed McClure. "How were we to know—"

A figure came up out of the gloom—a group of figures, in fact. They belonged to Nipper, Archie Glenthorpe, Reggie Pitt, and a few other prominent Remove fellows. They had missed Handforth and McClure, and were coming along to hear if there was any news.

"Handy!" said Nipper, as he ran forward in the darkness. "Great Scott! Are you blubbing?"

Handforth lifted up a tear-stained face.

"Yes!" he said defiantly. "And I am not ashamed of it, either!"

"But—but what's happened?" asked half a dozen voices.

Handforth seemed to choke.

"Can't you guess?" he muttered tensely. "He's dead, you chaps! Poor old Churchy! He's dead!"

"What!"

"Good gad!"

"You're wrong, Handy—you must be wrong!"

Handforth groaned.

"Does it look as if I'm wrong?" he asked hopelessly. "Ask Mac! He knows! But I can't believe it—I can't—" He broke off, catching his breath in. "I won't believe it!" he muttered fiercely. "No, by George! I won't believe it!"

But none of the others heard him, for they were talking to McClure in eager, subdued voices. They were getting the details from him, and poor Mac was telling them in a pitifully incoherent manner. His own grief was every bit as poignant as Handforth's.

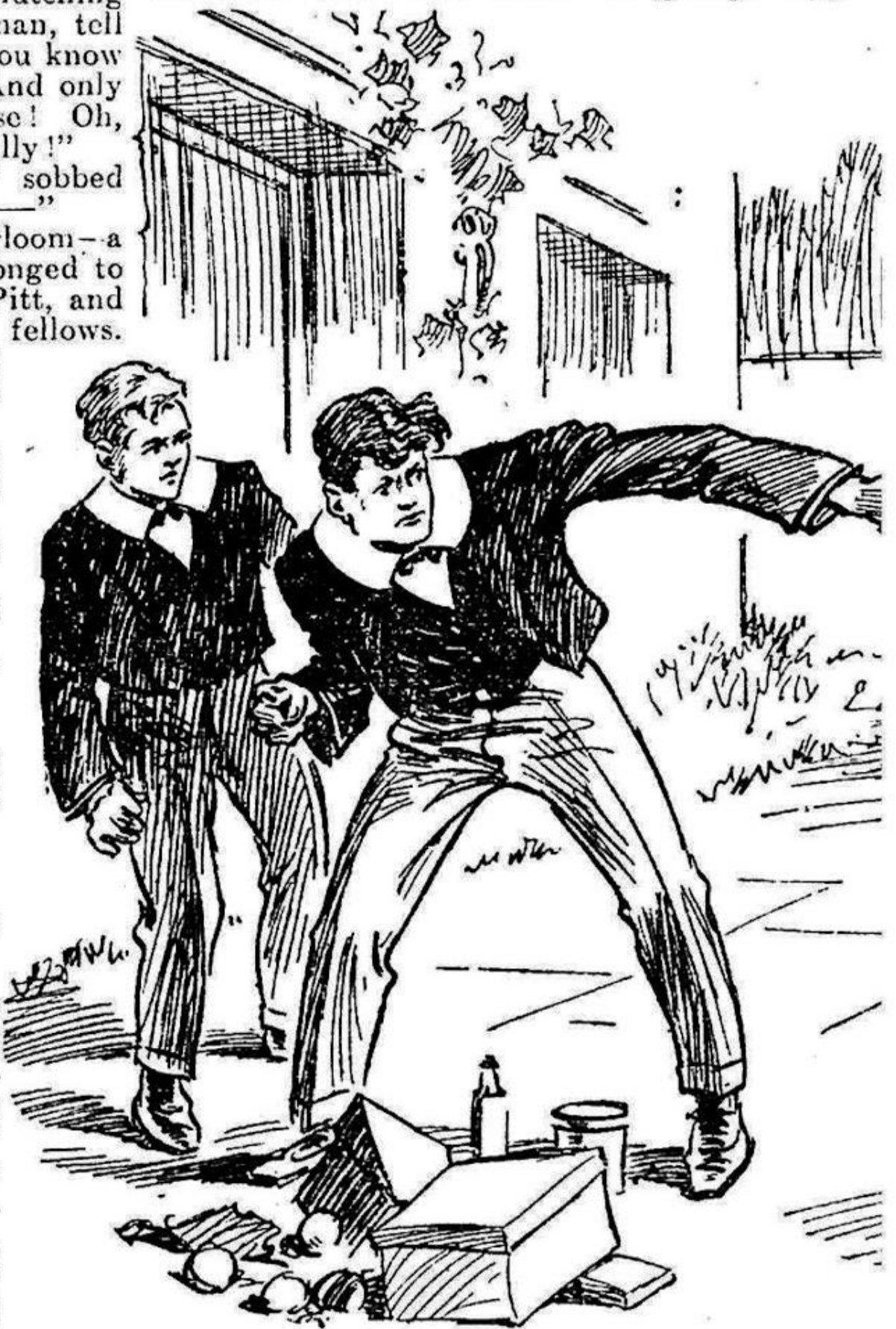
There is an old saying that bad news travels fast, and certainly St. Frank's became aware of this present tragedy by some kind of miracle. It spread through the Houses in a tense, horrified whisper. Study after study heard it, and within two or three minutes the whole school was talking of nothing else.

Poor old Church was dead!

The first shock was a great one. In the Fourth and the Fifth and the Sixth, Church had never been really prominent. He was just one of the crowd, but to hear that he had died suddenly hit everybody very hard.

It had all come so suddenly—so unexpectedly. Even as late as this very evening, quite a number of fellows had scoffingly declared that Handforth was worrying over nothing, and that Church would soon pull round. Now came the news that he was dead!

It wasn't exactly morbid curiosity, but anxiety to hear further news, that brought the fellows crowding into Inner Court. They came in twos and three—in groups—and



they advanced silently towards the sanatorium, gathering into little crowds, whispering together with hushed, awed voices.

Hardly anybody thought of the cold wind which came cutting across from the playing-fields. Tragedy was in the air. Somewhere in the sanatorium, Church was lying, dead.

Handforth and McClure stood apart, too grief-stricken to talk; nobody came and disturbed their solitude. Somehow, all the other fellows seemed to understand that Church's chums wanted to be alone. One or two fellows wanted to go to the sanny and make inquiries, but Nipper stopped them. What was the use? The news was obviously official. Everybody was talking

about it. This could not merely be a rumour. Besides, Nipper had seen Handforth and Mac, and one sight of their faces had been enough.

Lights were appearing and disappearing in the sanatorium, and occasionally somebody would enter. The headmaster had long since left his own house, and had gone to the school hospital. He was in there now, and shadows could be seen against the blind of one of the upper windows. Somebody was pacing up and down, and the watching school could easily picture that scene within.

The other St. Frank's Housemasters



Carelessly Handforth flung the pan of garlic-flavoured toffee away from him. Next moment Mr. Pycraft uttered a fiendish yell as it landed on his chest, and the revolting contents spilt all over his face!

collected there, too—to say nothing of Form-masters. The very air was charged with subdued excitement—and tragedy. Prefects were liberally sprinkled in that crowd of watchers, but nobody thought of ordering the juniors out of Inner Court. They were, strictly speaking, out of bounds, but this was a very exceptional occasion. Everybody wanted to hear something official—something definite.

And at last they had the opportunity.

For Dr. Brett appeared—pale, haggard and wan. He had only come out for a breath of fresh air, it seemed, for he stood at the door of the sanatorium, looking up at the stars. Apparently he did not know

that scores of juniors and seniors were waiting out there. But he knew it a second later, for quite a number of them came padding up, on tip-toe.

“Dr. Brett!” went up the low shout. “Is it true?”

“Good heavens!” said the doctor, frowning. “What are all you boys doing here? Haven’t you any sense of decency? Can’t you go quietly back to your Houses——”

“But is it true, doctor?” asked somebody. “Is Church really dead?”

“Church died about half an hour ago,” replied Dr. Brett quietly. “Do not ask me for any particulars, because I cannot supply them. But he is dead, and I expect all you boys to——”

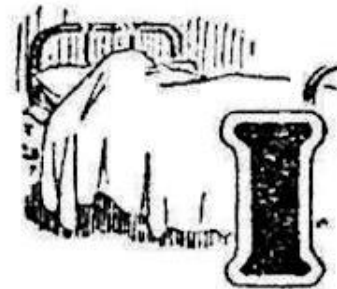
But nobody heard the rest of Dr. Brett’s sentence.

“Dead!” went up the whisper. “Then it’s really true!”

There was no longer any possibility of doubt. Dr. Brett himself had made the announcement—and it was official!

CHAPTER 18.

Handforth’s Conviction!



IN twos and threes, and with silent tread, the fellows began to trickle away.

What was the use of stopping? They had heard the truth now—from the doctor’s own lips—and so they returned to their Houses, to discuss the tragic affair. The tragedy of Walter Church was the only subject of conversation at St. Frank’s that evening.

Out in Inner Court stood Edward Oswald Handforth and Arnold McClure.

They had remained behind, because they were too dazed by the shock to make any move. It had practically stunned them. McClure, perhaps, was better able to conceal his feelings, and once or twice he urged Handforth to come indoors. But old Handy seemed to be deaf.

He just couldn’t believe it. For many terms he and Church and McClure had been inseparable chums. Study D, in fact, had been more or less of a joke in the Lower School. Wherever he went, Church and McClure went. There was a bond between them which none of the other juniors ever suspected.

They were only schoolboys, it is true—and schoolboy friendships are proverbially erratic. But not in every case. Sometimes, one or two schoolboys will attach themselves to one another, and this friendship is enduring. It was so with Handforth & Co. Handforth was always ready to punch his chums if they ever disagreed with him, and to “lord” it over them until life sometimes became intolerable. But they always clung to him—because they knew his sterling qualities. At heart, Handy was one of the best chaps breathing.

And now one member of that trio had gone!

So the school thought—so the school had every reason to think. For Dr. Brett himself had pronounced that Church was dead! What other evidence was necessary?

"Come on, Handy!" muttered McClure, in a shaky voice. "It's no good standing out here. We can't do anything. Let's go indoors."

"Indoors?" repeated Handforth, staring at Mac in a strange way. "I couldn't breathe indoors—I should choke!"

"But we can't stay out here all night!" protested McClure. "Don't think I'm callous, Handy—I'm more cut up than I can possibly express—but we've got to be sensible. Old Churchy has gone——"

"He hasn't!" interrupted Handforth fiercely.

"Handy!" protested Mac, shocked. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I don't believe that he's dead!" replied Handforth, clutching at McClure's arm so fiercely that Mac winced. "I tell you, there's a mistake somewhere! I won't believe that he's dead!"

McClure was aghast.

"But we saw him!" he whispered. "Handy, old man, are you going off your rocker? We saw him on the bed—and you felt his heart."

"I don't care about that—I don't believe that he's dead!" said Handforth, with a steadiness in his voice that surprised his chum. "There's some horrible mistake about it—some ghastly blunder. He couldn't be dead, Mac! Why, only a couple of days ago he was alive—playing footer—cycling with us, as usual! I tell you, he *can't* be dead!"

McClure had nothing to say. He had had thoughts of this sort himself, but he knew that they were idle. At least, he thought so. What reason had Handforth for thinking such wild things? McClure knew that when people die unexpectedly it is always a dreadful shock, and it is difficult for others to believe it at first. But where was the sense of fooling oneself?

"What's more, I'm going to climb that ivy again!" said Handforth calmly. "I'm going to have another look at Church!"

His anguish had completely gone. He was cool and self-possessed. A settled conviction had come upon him that Church was alive. He didn't know why—he didn't want to know why. It was quite sufficient for him to know that his conviction was strong.

More than once during the past quarter of an hour he had called himself a fool—a madman. He had felt that his brain was cracking, or something. Again and again he had fought against this conviction, thrusting it aside, and assuring himself that he was crazed. But, always, the conviction had returned. And now a great calmness had come over Handforth. He only wanted to see Church again—just to make sure.

McClure, of course, could understand nothing of his leader's feelings. He stood look-

ing at Handforth in a frightened, shocked way.

"Handy!" he begged. "You mustn't do that! Perhaps the doctor is there still—perhaps Mr. Lee is there! And if they catch you——"

"I don't care!" interrupted Handforth. "I'm going!"

"If you go, then I'll come, too!" said McClure fiercely.

"All right—just as you like."

"But it's mad!" protested Mac desperately. "Handy, can't you see that it's absolutely mad?"

"I can only see that I've got to go," replied Handforth steadily. "I *know* that old Church is alive, and I want to make sure of it."

Without another word, he turned on his heel, and strode off towards the wall of the sanatorium. With sure fingers, and steady feet, he commenced climbing. After a moment or two, his heart palpitating wildly, McClure followed. He couldn't let Handforth go off on an insane escapade like this. At least, he must accompany him, and share the consequences.

The distance to the upper window was not far—for that window was on a comparatively low level—and, at length, Handforth gripped the sill, and pulled himself up. The blind was drawn, but the window was still slightly open. Without the slightest compunction, Handforth tugged at it, and then dropped over the window-ledge into the room. He thrust the blind aside, to find himself gazing upon a rather strange scene.

Nelson Lee was there, together with Nipper. Lee was over by the electric light, closely examining something that he held between a little pair of nippers. But Handforth hardly gave the pair a glance. He looked towards the bed.

And his heart jumped.

For Church was invisible. Only a long sheet covered the entire bed, from head to foot. And underneath that sheet was a still, silent shape. In that flash, Handforth's heart became as lead. Then it was true! His conviction had been wrong!

CHAPTER 17.

The Third Splinter!



ANDFORTH!"

Nelson Lee spoke sharply, and his voice was exceedingly angry. Yet, at the same time, there was rather a soft note in it—for a glance at Handforth's face had driven all Nelson Lee's anger away.

"I had to come up, sir," said Handforth quietly. "I knew it was no good coming in through the ordinary doorway—because nobody would have let me come upstairs. So I came by the window. I wanted to see Church again."

McClure appeared at the window now, and he dropped softly into the room. He was looking pale and shaky.

"I tried to stop him, sir!" he muttered breathlessly. "But he would come!"

Nelson Lee came across, and took Handforth by the shoulder.

"You shouldn't have done it, my boy," he said quietly. "I shall not punish you for this action, naturally, but you must go. Both of you must go."

"But—but Church, sir?" muttered Handforth, staring at the sheeted figure on the bed. "I believe he's alive!"

"What?" said Lee sharply.

"Oh, I can't credit that he's dead, sir!" went on Handforth tensely. "It only seems a minute or two ago that he was talking to me. All about a trifle, too—just an everyday thing that anybody might speak about."

"What was it that Church referred to?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Oh, nothing, sir—I've forgotten," replied Handforth. "What does it matter?? Oh, yes, I know—a splinter. He said that he had found a splinter in his wrist, or something—and that he was feeling a lot better."

"That's what Dr. Brett said, sir!" put in Nipper eagerly.

"Exactly!" said Lee. "And you heard Church say this, Handforth? He told you that he had found a splinter in his wrist, and that he was feeling a great deal better?"

"Yes, sir," replied Handforth. "It seems that he had had a splinter in his wrist a day or two ago. But Dr. Brett told me that he must have been dreaming, and I never thought anything more about it. Why, what—" He broke off, and stared at the little nippers in Nelson Lee's grip. "What have you got there, sir?" he went on. "What is it?"

"Never mind, Handforth," said Lee sharply. "You must go."

"But—but I want to tell you about something, sir!" panted Handforth. "There's something mysterious about this whole business—something dreadful!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, sir, you may remember that I came up the ivy before," said Handforth. "Well, while I was climbing I saw a figure clutching at the ivy."

"A figure?" repeated Lee, his voice suddenly drawn.

"Yes, sir, and it seemed to me that it had been crouching near this window," continued Handforth. "But when I got a bit closer the figure had gone—and I thought perhaps I had been imagining it."

"Perhaps you had!" said Nelson Lee quickly. "At any rate, do not allow this matter to disturb you, Handforth. The figure was amongst the ivy, and then it vanished, eh? You saw nothing further of it?"

"No, sir," said Handforth. "I climbed into the room after that, and found Dr. Brett with poor old Church—and Church was saying that he felt a lot better."

"H'm!" nodded Lee. "A very sad affair, Handforth—very sad indeed."

"And there's something else, sir!" went on Handforth. "I tell you, the whole business, from start to finish, is—is uncanny. I believe that old Zuma the Mystic knew something about Church's illness. Didn't he prophesy it? And then Mac and I saw Zuma in Bellton Wood, performing some sort of religious rite."

"Indeed?" said Nelson Lee, with an interest that seemed somewhat out of place. "You saw this man Zuma, this charlatan of a fortune-teller, in Bellton Wood? What was he doing?"

"Well, he and his pal—a sort of assistant chap—were capering round a kind of furnace," replied Handforth. "Mac saw him, too. But when we got down to the spot they had gone."

"A very strange affair," said Nelson Lee, nodding. "But you must not let it prey upon your mind, Handforth. Poor Church is beyond hope now. Whatever the cause of his death, whatever the circumstances, we can do nothing. Dr. Brett has pronounced that life is extinct."

Handforth looked at the bed with rather wild eyes.

"But it's not true, sir!" he muttered. "He's not dead! Let me look at him again!"

"No, Handforth!" said Lee curtly. "Are you mad, my boy?"

"But—but—"

"I sympathise with you in your grief, and I wish I could do something to help you," continued Nelson Lee. "But you must both go now. You must both return to your House. Come along, we will all go together."

And there was no getting out of it. McClure, indeed, was only too glad to leave that tragic chamber. No doubt lingered in his mind now. There was poor Church under that sheet—dead! There was nothing else to think. Indeed, how could anybody in that apartment guess that Walter Church had heard every single word that had passed?

The situation was dramatic—indeed, tragic.

But Church was helpless—as helpless as a genuine corpse. What if he did not come out of this trance? What if the day of the funeral arrived, and— But the prospect was too terrible for contemplation.

Nelson Lee and Nipper and the two stricken chums of Study D found themselves in the Ancient House at last. Nipper remained behind for a moment or two after Lee had gone.

"Now, you chaps, be sensible!" he said as he saw Handforth and McClure into Study D. "I won't say anything more, because I can understand your feelings. Poor old Church—one of the best!"

Nipper then went out, leaving the two bereaved juniors alone. But as Nipper closed the door a keen, excited expression

came into his eyes. He sped down the corridor and made his way to Nelson Lee's study. He found the Housemaster-detective on the point of leaving.

"You're going to the laboratory, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Yes, young 'un," replied Lee. "You can come, too; but we must let nobody else know of our movements."

What was in the wind?

CHAPTER 18.

The Test!



WHAT do you really think, guv'nor?" asked Nipper breathlessly.

"I hardly know what to think, but I am convinced

that there has been some devilish work," replied Nelson Lee, his voice cold and harsh. "Poor Church didn't die of any ordinary illness. His malady was not a natural one. The evidence of these splinters, so called, is altogether too significant."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Why ask, Nipper?" replied Lee. "Church found a splinter in his wrist, and he immediately felt normal again—lively, active, and cheerful. The same thing happened once before."

"But afterwards he was a lot worse, sir," said Nipper.

"Precisely!" agreed Lee. "That is the most significant part of it all. Afterwards he was worse. Indeed, within ten minutes of discovering this final splinter Church was dead! And Handforth's evidence of a figure in the ivy is significant in the extreme; it confirms my suspicions!"

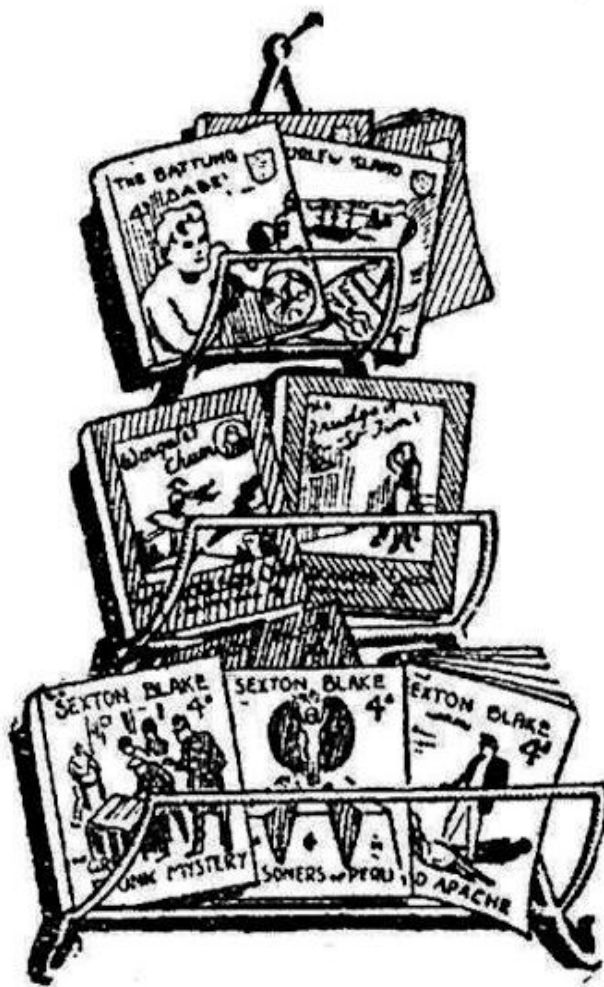
"Then—then you think that these splinters—"

"Don't worry me just now, Nipper," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I must apply some tests—I must satisfy myself. Before I make any further statement I want evidence.

Theories, after all, are of practically no value."

Nipper took the tip and said no more. He was glad enough to be permitted to remain. He, like most of the other fellows in the Remove, was grievously upset at the tragic death of Church. But Nipper had cause to be excited, too,

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for it seemed that Nelson Lee was on the track of some dramatic evidence. Perhaps Church had not died naturally, after all! There was something sinister in this matter of the mysterious splinters.

Nelson Lee had heard about it from Dr. Brett—the worthy doctor commenting upon it quite casually, believing that Church had been dreaming. But Lee had become very alert upon hearing of that splinter, and he had at once instituted a search in the sick-room.

The task had not been very difficult.

Church had been in bed all the time, and if he had found a splinter in his wrist, he would have plucked it out and dropped it quite close to the bed. Sure enough, Lee had discovered a tiny fragment of wood on the floor, just against the skirting. The wood was curiously dark, and it was pointed like a needle at one end. No ordinary splinter, Lee had seen at the first glance.

And then Handforth's story had come on the top of this, only corroborating it.

For about fifteen minutes Nelson Lee was very active with test-tubes, curious drugs, and intricate appliances which Nipper scarcely knew the meaning of. But he did know that Nelson Lee was one of the greatest living experts on poisons. For many years Lee had made a study of any and every poison, and he was, as a matter of fact, a first-class authority upon little-known drugs and deadly poisons.

"Yes, Nipper, the reaction is absolute!" murmured Lee at last. "Look here!"

That little splinter was fixed between a minute pair of nippers, and it was now wedged into a glass retort. There was some chemical in that retort, too, and from the point of the needle came tiny wisps of smokiness, mingling with the chemical. Lee took a small test-tube and placed it in the fluid. Then he added a few drops of a different chemical. Instantly the fluid changed its colour, and became slightly orange in hue.

"What does it mean, sir?" asked Nipper, watching fascinatedly.

"It can mean only one possible thing, young 'un," replied Nelson Lee, his voice strangely grim. "It proves my original theory. Church did not die from an unknown malady or from any disease. He was poisoned—deliberately, fiendishly poisoned!"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Nipper.

"This poison has the effect of stimulating the victim when it is first administered," continued Nelson Lee. "That is why Church appeared so much better during the first two or three minutes. But the reaction was swift and deadly. I imagine that this last dose must have been the final one of several applications, and his heart, his whole system, weakened by the previous doses of poison, was unable to stand the strain. The poor boy died."

"Then—then he was murdered?" asked Nipper, aghast.

"Undoubtedly," replied Lee. "And, by Heaven, I shall not rest until I have brought Zuma by the heels!"

"Zuma!" ejaculated Nipper. "Then—then—"

"Isn't it obvious?" broke in Lee, with a sign of impatience. "Zuma foretold that Church would die. A very easy prophecy, considering that Zuma himself intended to murder the poor boy!"

"And—and do you know what this poison is, sir?"

"Haven't I just applied the tests?" asked Lee. "It is extracted from some rare plant, found only in certain districts of Mexico and Central America. It is known among the Indians as Issi-Kala, and is generally used in the fashion that we have now experienced. Tiny darts are dipped in the concoction, the points becoming coated with the narcotic, and these darts are blown through special blow-pipes."

"Then, if this is true, sir, it's possible that Church's uncle was murdered, too?" asked Nipper, with wide eyes.

"Without question, Mr. Geoffrey Church was murdered!" agreed Nelson Lee. "And now these mysterious enemies have vented their vengeance upon the boy. It is a terrible business, Nipper. This Issi-Kala is one of the deadliest poisons known to science, and yet it is almost true to say that it is practically unknown. Not one doctor in a thousand would recognise its activity in the human system. Death always appears to be natural, caused by heart failure. If I had not found this splinter, I could not have definitely proved my theory. But now I know! Now I can safely—"

Nelson Lee broke off, and a strange, excited light came into his eyes. Nipper had scarcely ever seen such a light in Lee's eyes before. The famous detective was standing stock still, staring fascinatedly at the retort on the bench. And then he drew a deep, deep breath.

CHAPTER 19.

A Chance in a Thousand.



"WHAT is it, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly.

But Nelson Lee did not reply. He had lost that rigidity of his, and was

now pacing up and down the laboratory, frowning heavily. He was thinking, concentrating. Suddenly he turned to Nipper and pointed.

"Run to my study, Nipper, and fetch a big blue volume that you will find in the lower shelf of the bookcase," he said sharply. "It is a volume of my own manufacture, as you probably know."

"Rather, sir!" said Nipper. "Your collection of information on little-known poisons."

"That's the one," said Lee. "Fetch it."

Nipper was off like a shot, more excited

than he cared to admit. He ran like the wind, and just as he turned an angle of the corridor, he came face to face with Handforth and McClure. At sight of them he pulled up short, for never had he seen two such unhappy faces.

"What is it, Nipper?" asked Handforth, clutching at the Remove skipper's sleeve. "What's happened? What are you looking so flushed about?"

"Nothing!" stammered Nipper. "I—I mean— It's all right—I'm just going somewhere for the gov'nor!"

"Any fresh news about Church?" asked Handforth. "Has the doctor—"

But Nipper tore himself away, knowing that he could give Handforth no satisfaction. It was impossible for him to tell of Nelson Lee's dramatic discovery. If Handforth knew it, the whole school would share the secret in less than a couple of minutes.

Handforth turned to McClure after Nipper had gone, and his eyes were glittering.

"There's something going on!" he said, between his teeth. "Mac, old man, there's something rummy about all this. Why was Nipper so excited? What's happening?"

"Don't go on like this, old man!" urged Mac. "What does anything matter now—now that Church is dead? They can't bring him back to life!"

Handforth set his lips.

"Is he dead?" he asked. "I'm not sure, Mac!"

"Not sure?" said McClure aghast.

"Come on outside," said Handforth. "I can't breathe in here—I can't rest. I want the open air; I want to move about in the darkness, so that nobody else can see me. Oh, Mac, I can feel it in my bones that there's something strange taking place!"

Together they went outside. McClure was more distressed than he could possibly say. It was idle to argue with Handforth in his present mood. But Mac was positively appalled. What was the good of going on like this? Church was dead, and that was such a stunning fact that nothing else seemed to matter. And yet Handforth was hoping, even now. Poor McClure's agonies of grief were added to by his leader's extraordinary attitude.

In the meantime Nipper, having obtained that blue volume, had taken it to Nelson Lee, and now the Housemaster-detective was turning over page after page, until he came to a certain entry. He studied it closely for several minutes.

"Yes, I thought I was right!" he said. "Here, Nipper, is a report on the peculiar properties of this poison, Issi-Kala. As a matter of fact, it was given to me by old Dorrie."

"Lord Dorrimore, sir?"

"Yes. Dorrie made these discoveries when he was exploring in Central America, some years ago," replied Nelson Lee. "He interrogated many Indians about this particular poison, and this information is perfectly

authentic. In nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand Issi-Kala produces death—a swift death—after an apparent period of wasting away. But in some cases Issi-Kala has been known to produce a false death."

"What do you mean, sir?" gasped Nipper. "How can there be a false death?"

"A trance," said Lee, his eyes gleaming. "And don't forget, Nipper, that Church was in a kind of trance practically all day, until the administration of that final dose of poison. Then he died."

"You—you mean—"

"He died," repeated Nelson Lee. "The doctor has pronounced that death is certain. But—and here is the dramatic possibility—there is just a faint hope that he is only in a death-like trance!"

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Nipper. "But—but what can we do? How can we revive him, sir?"

"There is a method of reviving him," replied Lee crisply. "But it must be applied at once—within the hour. Otherwise, actual death will follow in from eight to ten hours. That has always proved to be the case. The only possible chance of deciding this grave point is to inject certain drugs into the victim's blood. If there is any actual life left in him there will be a quick reaction."

"Have you got these drugs, sir?" asked Nipper breathlessly. "Can we make the test?"

"Yes," replied Lee, running over to a special cabinet. "Thank Heaven that I am in the habit of making intricate experiments with poisons, and other deadly drugs. As you know, Nipper, it is one of my hobbies. But we must be quick—we must be very quick!"

Less than seven minutes later the pair were hurrying out into the night. Nelson Lee was armed with a hypodermic syringe, and one or two tiny phials of pungent drugs. Fortunately they met nobody on their way to the sanatorium, and when they got inside they went up to the death chamber and locked themselves in.

Outside Handforth and McClure were staring upwards, staring at the fatal window. A light had appeared in it. As he saw it, Handforth gripped his fists, and his eyes were alight with wild excitement. Who was in the death chamber? What did these mysterious movements mean?



CHAPTER 20.

The Great Secret!

WALTER CHURCH lay motionless.

The sick-room was absolutely dark, and no sound came to Church's ears except the low moaning of the wind outside. It seemed to him that his hearing was extra-



Jokingly the juniors made their suggestions for helping Church to get better quickly, but they were not appreciated by the grim-faced Handforth. "You cads!" he said, his voice quivering.

ordinarily acute. But he had no knowledge of the passage of time, and his mind was largely filled with a wondering doubt. Was he really dead?

To move was out of the question. He could not so much as lift an eyelid. All his muscles were set. Yet he experienced no discomfort, nor did he feel any pain. He only knew that he was helpless here, and that all life seemed to have left his body. He had a curious sensation of floating in mid-air, but yet he knew that he must be resting on the bed. And Dr. Brett had said that he was dead. If this was true, then death was a very curious phenomenon. And what of later on?

Church found himself wondering, not in any frightened condition, but in a curious, detached sort of disinterestedness. Would he always be like this? Would he be buried, and then—

Voices made themselves heard.

The door had opened and two people, at least, had entered the room. They were whispering together, and Church could hear their words quite distinctly. He recognised Mr. Nelson Lee, and he recognised Nipper, too.

"How long will it be before there's any sign, gov'nor?" Nipper was asking.

"Not long, young 'un—five or six minutes, at the most," replied Nelson Lee. "The reaction is generally very quick. Indeed, if

there is no result at the end of ten minutes, we can take it positively for granted that the unfortunate boy is actually dead."

Actually dead!

Church rather wondered at that remark of Lee's. Then perhaps he wasn't really dead, after all? Perhaps this was only a curious phase of his illness?

He did not know that the sheet had been drawn back, and that one of his arms had been exposed. His sense of feeling had entirely gone.

Nipper's face was pale and troubled as he looked down upon the waxen features.

"It's no good, gov'nor!" he said, in a choking kind of voice. "There's no life here. He's dead!"

"And yet we cannot be sure," said Nelson Lee. "I have seen people in a trance before, and the simulation of death is sometimes startling in the extreme. We can tell nothing until I have applied these tests."

Church became mildly interested. So they were going to do something with him? He rather wondered what was going to happen; and then, strangely, it seemed to him that his hearing was growing less acute. The voices were now far away, and fading.

Indeed, they soon became so dim that he could no longer distinguish any words. Everything seemed to be floating and swaying to and fro. He had a sensation of falling,

slowly and gently, and then after that complete oblivion came.

The watchers by the bedside were silent now.

Four minutes had elapsed, and not a single alteration had occurred in Church's appearance. Nelson Lee had thrust the needle of the hypodermic syringe into one of Church's veins, and now there was nothing to be done except wait.

"Oh, I knew it was no good, sir!" breathed Nipper at length.

"Hush!" murmured Lee. "Five minutes!" he added, glancing at the watch which lay in his hand. "Five minutes and fifteen seconds. There is still time, Nipper. If only——"

"Look, sir!" gasped Nipper suddenly.

They both stared at that pale face with fascinated wonder. Yes, there had been a movement, a faint, almost imperceptible movement. And now Church's eyelids fluttered just a trifle. A deep, sighing breath came from his lungs as all his muscles were suddenly relaxed. The rigidity had left him.

"He's alive, sir!" shouted Nipper hoarsely.

"Quiet, my boy—quiet!" urged Lee, his own voice quivering with triumph. "Thank Heaven! We have been in time!"

Just for a flash a light of intelligence came into Church's eyes. He looked at the pair dazedly.

"Church, old man!" said Nipper joyously.

Church uttered a low kind of moan, and then with another long sigh he closed his eyes and breathed evenly.

"He's alive, sir!" repeated Nipper. "Oh, I've got to rush off and tell old Handy! He'll be dotty with happiness over this——"

"Come back, Nipper!" snapped Nelson Lee. "You must not tell a soul!"

"Not tell a soul?" repeated Nipper, staring.

"Church has been brought out of his trance solely owing to the prompt administering of this antidote," said Nelson Lee. "But he is still in a very dangerous condition. The poison is thoroughly into his system, and it will take several days for him to recover full consciousness. A period of coma has now set in, and if he is well cared for there is every chance that he will completely recover. But absolute rest and absolute quietness are essential. Even Handforth must not know that his chum has been pulled back from the edge of the void."

"But poor old Handy is frantic, sir," said Nipper, pained.

"I am very sorry for Handforth, but he is the last fellow in the world to be told," replied Lee quietly. "The whole school must imagine that Church is really dead. You must remember that this was no ordinary illness, but a deliberate attempt to murder Church."

"Oh, my goodness!" said Nipper, with a start.

"These enemies of his are probably lurking about still, and if they discover that

Church is not actually dead they will act again," continued Lee. "And you may be sure that they will make no mistake on the second attempt! So, in order to save this poor boy's life, we must let the school continue to think that he is dead!"

"But—but he can't stay here, sir!" cried Nipper breathlessly.

"No, we shall have to make some secret arrangements," said Nelson Lee. "Church is in a very critical condition, and he cannot be moved far. Perhaps we could get him down to Moat Hollow—that old, lonely house near the village. There, behind those high walls, he would be safe. We shall see. But nobody must know that he has been removed, or that

NEXT WEDNESDAY!



he is alive. The funeral arrangements will go on exactly the same. These enemies of his are implacable, and they must be given no opportunity to complete their devilish work."

Nipper drew a deep breath, and stood looking at that still figure on the bed. He realised that Nelson Lee's words were true—that there was every necessity for extreme caution.

Now that Church was really alive, he must be safeguarded.

But the possibilities were enormous, and Nipper felt that the immediate future would be filled with excitement. And then there was poor old Handy! What a shame! Handy

would have to remain in ignorance of this joyous truth! It was hard lines—bitterly hard lines. But, after all, Church's safety came first.



CHAPTER 21.

The Third Climb!

NIPPER could hardly contain himself. Only ten minutes earlier he had been absolutely convinced that Walter Church was dead. Yet now he was lying on the bed here, breathing evenly. True, his breathing

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was very faint—very, very weak. But the deadly work of the Issi-Kala poison had been checked, and now, given quietness and complete rest, there was every chance that the unfortunate boy would pull round.

“Will he recover consciousness, sir?” asked Nipper, at length.

“Yes, before very long,” replied Nelson Lee. “But, according to all my data, he will be in a very confused state for some time. During the actual trance, his faculties are quite alert, I believe, but we shall not know that until later, when we are able to question him. But he is now fully unconscious, and when he does recover it will be a gradual

process. It may be several days before he can remember any of us, but after that his progress will be rapid. This deadly poison is soon eradicated from the system.”

“It's a pity we can't tell Handy, sir,” said Nipper unhappily. “You don't know how cut up he is. The poor chap can't rest. He's simply going about like a ghost. I always knew that he thought a lot of Church, but —”

“As I said before, Nipper, I am very sorry for Handforth,” interrupted Lee. “But he must not be told. I have a high regard for Handforth's moral character, but I have absolutely no faith in his discretion. Handforth is an exceedingly open boy, and it is impossible for him to keep anything to himself. You know that, Nipper.”

“Yes, sir,” admitted Nipper. “That's true enough.”

“And if he knew this secret, do you think he could keep it?” went on Lee, shaking his head. “No, Nipper. He would let it out to everybody. Even if he said nothing, his actions, his appearance, would give him away. He would unconsciously tell his school-fellows that Church is really alive, and that there is some mysterious work going on. Zuma would undoubtedly get to hear, and what then? Instead of these fiendish enemies being satisfied that their work is done, they would start all over again. Perhaps they would attempt to murder others in their devilish determination to exterminate Church. No, we must keep this to ourselves. Don't you realise the importance of it, Nipper?”

“Yes, sir, I do now,” replied Nipper, nodding. “What shall we do? Are you going to leave him here?”

“For the time being, yes,” replied Nelson Lee. “You had better go back to your own House and mingle with the other boys. Don't let them have any reason to start any comments. I will go to the headmaster and report this startling occurrence. After that we shall have to make arrangements for Church's secret removal.”

And so they prepared to leave the sick-room.

Just at that very moment, Handforth and McClure were outside, standing in the very centre of Inner Court. Handforth was looking up at that lighted window—the window of the death chamber! He had been standing like this for some little time, and McClure, too, was filled with wonder and doubt.

“What can it mean, old man?” he murmured, after a long silence.

“I don't know, but I mean to find out!” said Handforth fiercely. “There's some funny business going on, Mac. And Church is alive. I know it! I can feel it in my very marrows!”

“Handy, old man, you're crazy!” said McClure, for the fiftieth time. “You're making a lot of fuss over nothing. Isn't it usual for people to go into the death chamber? Perhaps they are getting him ready for the funeral. Oh, let's come away—let's come away, Handy!”

"No," said Handforth, "I'm going to climb the ivy again."

"You're going to——" McClure paused, and stared at his leader in horror. "Handy, you mustn't do it," he went on frantically. "You can't go up into that room now! It's—it's sacred! It'll be a terrible thing if you break into that room again, now that poor old Church is dead!"

"He's NOT dead!" said Handforth, with such fury that McClure fell back.

"But—but——"

"Oh, you can laugh at me—you can look at me as if I were mad!" went on Handforth. "But I'm not! By George, I've had a few convictions in my time, but this one is a positive obsession! I can't tell you why I know that old Church is alive, but I *do* know it! It sounds dotty, doesn't it?"

"It can't be true, Handy," babbled McClure. "You heard what the doctor said? The thing's on your mind, and you're letting yourself get unhinged. If you go on like this, you'll probably go off your head completely. Why don't you come away, and mix with the other chaps? Anything to get out of this morbid atmosphere. Please, Handy—for old Churchy's sake!"

But never had Edward Oswald Handforth been so obstinate.

"For old Churchy's sake, I'm going to climb that ivy again!" he replied. "I *must* see him again—I must! I'm not satisfied, Mac, and nothing will make me satisfied until I've seen old Church again."

He strode off, leaving McClure uncertain and unsettled. Mac was no coward, but wild horses would not have caused him to climb that ivy again. He could only wait out there—wait in the darkness for Handforth to return. He knew what the return would be—Handforth would come down, heart-broken and convinced at last. It was the only possible thing that could happen. For hadn't McClure seen his stricken chum? Hadn't he heard Dr. Brett's words? Hadn't he seen the body, covered with a sheet?

And while McClure was pacing up and down, wringing his hands, Handforth was climbing up the ivy, his nerves taut, his muscles supple. At last he reached that window-sill again, and he drew himself gently up. He was just in time to see the light vanishing out of the sick room, and he faintly heard the closing of a door.

Those intruders, whoever they were, had gone!

The room was empty—save for that still figure on the bed!

Just for the moment, then, Handforth hesitated. Should he go in? Perhaps Mac had been right, after all! Now that he was on the point of performing the act, he seemed to realise that he was doing something terrible. But then he shook himself, and forced the window open. With his heart thumping heavily against his ribs, he padded across the room and approached the bed.

Just at that moment the moon came peeping out from behind the scudding clouds. A beam fell right in through the window, and Handforth gave a low, choking cry!



CHAPTER 22.

A Fright For McClure!

THE pale, drawn face of Walter Church was uncovered!

This was the circumstance which caused Handforth to cry out aloud. For what could it mean? Why was Church uncovered now, when only an hour since he had been left there, entirely enveloped in that sheet?

Handforth went closer, feeling that he was doing something really dreadful. But he couldn't hold himself back. He had to know! Life would be sheerly impossible for him unless he discovered the truth now—once and for all.

"Church, old man!" he muttered, as he fell upon his knees beside the bed.

No sound came from Church—no movement. And yet, as Handforth knelt there, looking at his stricken chum, it seemed to him that there was now a spot of colour in that pale face. The waxen expression had gone, too. The features were not so rigidly set. Or was it only Handforth's imagination?

He listened.

Yes, there was just a faint sound of breathing—a tiny, almost imperceptible sound. But even now Handforth wasn't absolutely convinced. Perhaps he was deceiving himself. Perhaps—He held one of his hands close to Church's mouth, but could feel no breath.

Gingerly, tenderly; he touched the chest of that still figure, and a moment later he could have shouted with excitement and joy. For he felt the beating of Church's heart! Yes, he felt it—faintly, ever so faintly, but the heart was beating!

And now he was certain of the breathing, too!

"He's alive—alive!" said Handforth joyously. "Oh, thank Heaven! I knew it—I knew it all the time! They can't fool me! They can fool all the other chaps if they like—but not me! Old Church is alive all the time!"

He rose to his feet, paced up and down once or twice—just to still his fevered brain. Then he went back to the bed and bent over it.

"Church!" he whispered softly. "Church, old man!"

But there was no sign, and Handforth believed that the helpless boy was either asleep, or unconscious from some other cause. But he was certainly alive. The fact was established. There could be no doubt about it whatever.

And outside, McClure was waiting—

"By George!" muttered Handforth. "I shall have to tell old Mac! What does anything matter now? I don't want to stop here any longer—I can leave it to Mr. Lee, and to Dr. Brett! Poor old Church is alive—and that's good enough for the moment!"

He went to the window again, and almost fell out in his eagerness. He went down that ivy with such speed and recklessness that it was rather a wonder that he did not break his neck. But at last he reached the ground, and he ran forward just as McClure came out of the shadows to meet him.

"Oh, thank goodness you've come back!" panted McClure. "It seems ages since you went. Nipper came out of the sanny a minute or two ago, but I didn't let him see me. He went off to the Ancient House, and——"

"Mac!" interrupted Handforth, grabbing his chum. "He's alive—he's alive!"

"What!" panted McClure, staring at Handforth with frightened eyes.

"He's alive, old son!" laughed Handforth, with an almost hysterical note in his voice. "I don't know what's happened, and I don't care. But I felt his heart beating—and I could hear him breathing, too! I believe he's very ill, and it may be weeks before he's himself again. But what does that matter? He's alive—and I've proved that I was right!"

McClure stared at his chum in utter terror.

"Handy, Handy!" he babbled. "You're fooling yourself, old man! He can't be alive—you know that as well as I do! Why can't you accept the truth? What's the idea of making such a hopeless idiot of yourself? It won't do any good——"

"It's a pity you didn't come up with me," said Handforth. "Then, perhaps, you would have known. I'm satisfied, anyway. Don't worry, Mac—I'm not going to hang about here any longer. We'll go indoors now, and we'll tell the other fellows——"

"No, don't!" urged McClure. "You'll only make them think that you have gone dotty. Did he speak to you while you were there?"

"Of course not—he's unconscious!"

"Did you see him move at all?"

"No," said Handforth dreamily. "But I heard him breathing—and I'm satisfied."

McClure was scared out of his wits. He could picture Handforth bending over the dead body of his chum, fooling himself that life still existed in that pitiful figure. For did not McClure know how vivid Handforth's imagination could be? When he chose, Handforth could make himself believe almost anything. He wanted Church to be alive—and he had convinced himself that he actually *was* alive. That was all it amounted to. Of course, poor old Church had gone. There was no question about it whatever.

But McClure's objections were worse than useless. Handforth knew the truth, and he was indulgent with his chum. He let him run on, and said nothing for a time. They

walked slowly across Inner Court, and finally found themselves in the Triangle. The bed-bell was just clanging, and McClure was thoroughly glad of it. This evening had been one long round of tension and suspense. It would be good to get into bed.

"Don't you see how impossible it is, Handy?" he ended. "Why, if Church was alive, the whole school would have known by this time. Mr. Lee would have told us all—he would have sent word like a shot! Can't you realise a simple thing like that?"

Handforth started.

"That's the rummy part of it," he said, frowning. "Why have they kept it secret? Why haven't they told us that Church is really alive? What's the idea of fooling the school like this?"

"Oh, Handy, you're still obstinate!" sobbed McClure.

"That's a pretty startling thought of yours, old man," went on Handforth. "Yes, by George, why haven't they told the school? If Church is alive, why can't they let us know? But perhaps there's a bulletin indoors already—we've been out here for quite a time, remember. Let's go in and see."

"Yes," said Mac. "Let's go in!"

But when they got inside they found no bulletin, and all the other juniors were going about with long faces, and they were talking in whispered voices. The whole school was hushed. There was no indication that Church was actually alive. At last Handforth went outside again, and stood on the Ancient House steps. A sudden wave of uncertainty had come over him. His confidence of a few minutes ago had gone.

"Come indoors, Handy!" said McClure, pulling at his arm.

"No!" said Handforth huskily. "I don't want to come in yet, I want to think—I want to think!"



CHAPTER 23.

Handy Seems Convinced.

It was only too clear to the unhappy McClure that Handforth had been deceiving himself. For here he was, filled once again with uncertainty and misgiving.

Before going indoors, Handforth had been certain that Church was alive—now he was filled with doubt again.

"It's no good going on like this, old son," said McClure, in great distress. "Isn't it all obvious to you? If old Church was alive—and it seems like sacrilege to be talking in this way—everybody would have known about it by this time. It was wrong of you to go up into that room as you did—to have another look at the poor chap. It seems to have turned your brain."

"I wonder?" muttered Handforth hoarsely. "And yet I could swear that he was breathing. I even felt his heart——"

He broke off, and caught his breath in as he saw Nelson Lee striding towards the Ancient House from Big Arch. Handforth suddenly made up his mind. Nelson Lee would know! Yes, and Dr. Brett was with him, too, and they were both talking together in low, crisp tones. Dr. Brett, indeed, seemed to be thoroughly excited. Handforth's heart jumped. This was confirmation of his own convictions! They had come to tell everybody that Church was alive!

He ran forward, and Nelson Lee and the doctor came to a sudden halt.

"You ought to be up in your dormitory, Handforth," said Nelson Lee quietly. "The bell went some little time ago."

"Oh, never mind the bell, sir!" said Handforth. "You've brought some news, haven't you? Good news?"

"Upon my soul!" muttered Dr. Brett, staring.

Nelson Lee compressed his lips.

"What good news could you expect, Handforth?" he asked very quietly. "I am very much afraid, my boy, that you are distraught. I do not blame you, and I shall not be hard with you. But you must go to bed now. You have had a very trying evening, and I realise that any words of sympathy from me may sound hollow."

Nelson Lee was genuinely upset. Handforth looked so wild, so haggard, and it grieved Lee that he was unable to tell this faithful boy the real truth. But Handforth's very attitude now proved the wisdom of keeping the secret.

"But Church, sir!" said the leader of Study D. "What about Church? Something's been happening, I know—I can feel it in my bones! Tell me that Church isn't dead, sir! I'm sure that he isn't! And something's happened, hasn't it? He's alive, sir! I know he's alive!"

Nelson Lee looked at him queerly; then his face became set. He concluded that Handforth was only saying this because he could not believe the dread "truth." He was not the only fellow at St. Frank's, either, who found it difficult to believe the report that had gone forth.

"It is useless for you to talk in this way, Handforth," said Nelson Lee quietly. "You were in the unfortunate boy's room when Dr. Brett pronounced that life had passed. Why do you ask these questions? Why do you—"

"But he's alive, sir!" said Handforth obstinately. "He's alive—isn't he?"

"Come, come!" broke in Dr. Brett. "You're distracted, Handforth—that's what's the matter with you. You know well enough that Church is dead. Didn't you hear me say so?"

McClure came up, and his face was pale.

"I wish you'd take Handforth indoors, sir," he pleaded. "He's been going on like this for a long time. He will persist that Church is alive, and he's almost scared me out of my wits. I think the poor chap's going half

out of his mind. We were both very fond of Church, sir, and it's such a terrible shock—"

"Yes, my boy, yes," interrupted Nelson Lee gently. "I quite understand. Handforth, you must come to your dormitory. If you go on like this, you will make yourself thoroughly ill—and that won't be of any use to yourself, or to anybody else. I thought you would be brave—and I am sure that you will be."

It hurt Nelson Lee to speak like this, when he knew that a few words from him would bring such joy to Edward Oswald's heart. But Lee felt that he was doing his duty. Church was still in very grave danger, and every precaution had to be taken.

"Can't you give me any hope, sir?" asked Handforth huskily.

"No hope whatever!" broke in the doctor. "You heard what I said before, Handforth, and you must accept the statement. It will be sheer foolishness if you spread a ridiculous story that Church is still alive. How can you bring yourself to believe such fantastic things?"

"Yes, you must drop this nonsense at once," said Nelson Lee. "Come along—I'll take you straight to your dormitory now."

Handforth gulped.

"All right, sir—I'll go!" he said brokenly. "Poor old Church! Then—then it's true! I thought he was—he was— Oh, I don't know what I thought! But I couldn't get rid of the idea that he may be still alive. It was a kind of—of mania, I suppose. Perhaps a night's sleep will do me good."

"Undoubtedly it will," agreed Nelson Lee. "In the morning, no doubt these unfortunate thoughts will be thrust out of your mind for good. You must not dwell upon them, Handforth, for you will only cause yourself greater misery."

"Yes, sir—I expect you're right!" said Handforth sadly. "Then it's true—poor old Church has gone! Oh, and I tried to tell myself that a mistake had been made. But what's the use? Poor old Churchy! Will they have the funeral down here, sir?"

Nelson Lee hesitated for a moment.

"I don't know, Handforth—but I rather think not," he replied. "In all probability a motor-hearse will come either to-morrow or the next day, and that is all the school will know about it. It will be better so. The sooner this unfortunate affair is over, the better. St. Frank's must resume its normal course. Life still goes on, remember. The routine of this great school cannot be changed because of a single tragedy. Always remember, Handforth, that death is constantly in the midst of us, somewhere. We must be brave at such times."

They all went indoors then, Handforth bowed and broken. McClure was aware of a sense of relief. At last Edward Oswald was convinced.

And Nelson Lee and Dr. Brett, as they went away from Handforth's dormitory,

were aware of a sense of relief, too. They had thought, for a moment or two, that Handforth was going to be troublesome. But no, he had resigned himself, and they were greatly pleased. Within a day or two, perhaps, the acute agony would go, and Handforth would resume his normal life.

Thus the great secret would be kept, and Church could recover in solitude and quietness. And in the meantime, Nelson Lee could hound down those unscrupulous brown men who had attempted to do him to death!

CHAPTER 24.

Handforth's Vow!



HANDFORTH leapt from his bed, and went across to the dormitory door. He stood there for a moment or two, listening to the footsteps of Nelson Lee and Dr. Brett receding down the corridor. Then he turned his face towards McClure.

"By George!" he said furiously. "I fooled 'em, Mac!"

McClure, who was commencing to undress in a listless sort of way, stared at Handforth in fresh amazement. McClure had just been looking at Church's bed, and he had been sadly thinking that their chum would never again occupy it. He was brought to his senses with a sudden jar by Handforth's furious tone.

"What do you mean, Handy?" he ejaculated.

"I fooled 'em!" repeated Handforth. "Yes, I even fooled Mr. Lee! He thinks that I'm convinced! He thinks that I believe their yarns about Church being dead."

McClure sprang to his feet.

"But don't you?" he gasped. "Oh, look here, Handy——"

"I tell you there's some monkey business going on!" said Handforth fiercely. "But they couldn't fool me with it! I am as convinced as ever that Church is alive, and nothing on earth will drive that conviction out of my head!"

McClure sank back on to the bed again, feeling limp.

"Oh, my goodness!" he said feebly.

He thought that Handforth was going insane. And yet, to tell the truth, Handforth's wits were unusually acute. As a general rule, he could be relied upon to arrive at the wrong conclusions. But perhaps the urgency of this particular case had sharpened his wits. At all events, he was shrewder now than he had ever been in all his life.

"Can't you see it all?" he went on fiercely, as he came across to McClure's bed. "They gave it out that Church was dead, and then what happened? We go back to the sanny, and we see lights in the death-chamber! And when I climb up the ivy, I

find that Church is uncovered, and that he's breathing!"

"It was your imagination!" burst out McClure.

"It wasn't!" insisted Handforth. "I tell you he was breathing! Well, after that, we find Nelson Lee and Dr. Brett coming along, talking together as secretly as you like—and old Brett was thoroughly excited. Why should he be excited if Church was dead? Answer me that, Mac!"

"I—I don't know!"

"Of course you don't know!" replied Handforth triumphantly. "Old Brett would only be excited if Church was alive—and he is alive! Didn't you notice the way the doctor kept looking at Mr. Lee? He was positively scared for a minute or two; then, when I pretended to be resigned, he looked as relieved as the dickens. And don't you remember how they urged me to keep quiet? They warned me not to spread a yarn that Church was alive? Why should they do that? Because they want to keep it a secret! I tell you there's some monkey business going on! Church is alive all the time, and yet they want to keep it from the school!"

McClure felt very weak.

"I don't believe it, Handy," he said. "It's only your dotty imagination at work again."

"All right—you can say what you please," said Handforth, as he paced up and down. "We'll keep it to ourselves, though—yes, by George, we'll keep the secret, too! There's no reason why we should go blurt-ing it about all over the school."

"That's a good thing, anyhow," said McClure, with sudden relief.

"And I'll investigate," said Handforth, his eyes gleaming. "That's why I'm going to keep mum about it all. I'm beginning to suspect that Mr. Lee is acting like this because of old Zuma."

"Old Zuma?"

"Yes," said Handforth. "Church wasn't ill until old Zuma appeared on the scene, and I've just remembered that figure I saw in the ivy. Perhaps it was Zuma himself! And perhaps that's why Mr. Lee is so jolly mysterious. You needn't look at me like that, Mac—you needn't think I'm loony. I just know that Church is alive, and I'm going to find out why they're all conspiring to keep the truth from us."

"But—but——"

"You can get undressed, and get into bed," went on Handforth coolly. "Even Nipper is in this secret, the deep bounder! He was with Mr. Lee in the sanny, don't forget! And yet he doesn't come to me, and tell me that Church is alive. Old Church is our chum—we're the very people who ought to be told the truth! I can tell you, I'm wild with them—I'm furious! They're all heartless and callous. But I'll have my own back!" he went on fiercely. "I'll carry out

some investigations on the quiet, and I'll prove that Church is alive. I'll ask them all what their game is."

Never had Handforth been so grim—and never had he been so closely on the track.

But Arnold McClure was as thoroughly unconvinced as ever. It seemed to him that Handforth was going the right way to work to drive himself insane. Poor old Church was dead, and that was the end of it all. So why should he—Handforth—get these fantastic ideas into his head? What good would they do? And as for investigating, McClure shivered at the very thought of it. Surely Handforth wasn't thinking of going to the sanatorium again? It was a horrible thought—a dreadful, terrible thought.

But McClure knew better than to argue. If he started protesting now, it would only make Handforth more determined than ever. So he fell silent, and climbed into bed, worried and miserable. For, on the top of his agony over the loss of Church, he was now beset with worry concerning Handforth. It was rough luck on McClure.

But Handforth did not even notice this. His own agony of mind had passed. The

settled knowledge had come upon him that Walter Church was alive, and so he went to bed calmly and grimly.

And thus that dramatic day ended. The whole school believed that Church had died, but four people amongst all those hundreds knew for certain that Church was alive. Those four people were Nelson Lee, Nipper, Dr. Brett, and the headmaster.

Edward Oswald Handforth knew that Church was alive, too! He had no absolute evidence of the fact—for he could not rely upon his visit to the sanatorium. He simply knew that Church was alive, and that was all that mattered.

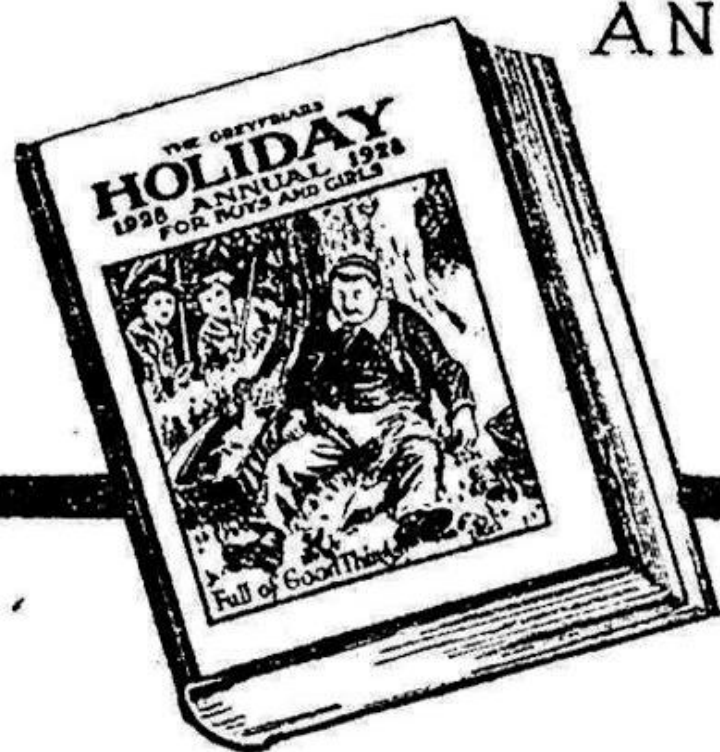
The events of the immediate future looked like being even more dramatic than those which had just passed!

THE END.

(Future events at St. Frank's ARE more dramatic, as you will see for yourself when you read next week's stunning yarn entitled "The Miracle of Study D!" Run along to the nearest newsagent now and order your copy in advance. And don't forget to tell all your pals about this grand series, either. They'll all thank you afterwards!)

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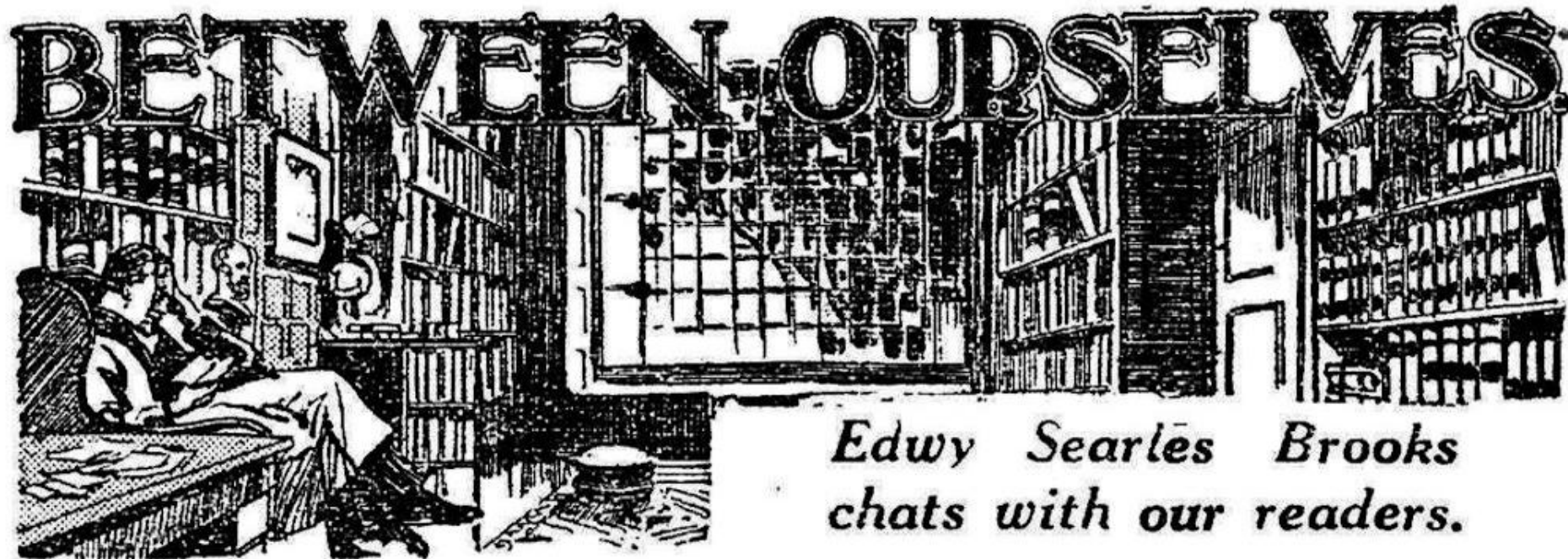
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* * *

You're the sort I like, Tom Smyth. You say: "I enjoy your stories every week, far-fetched or otherwise, and I hope you will continue to write them in the same way as you are doing at present." I wish all the readers were like you! But perhaps it's just as well for me that they're not, eh? For whenever I begin to feel very pleased with myself a letter comes along which gives me a little jolt.

* * *

Here we are again, "R.P."! My word! You don't know how many readers have been writing about you, during these past few weeks! I wonder if your ears have been burning? And—let me whisper it—I don't think you're very popular, old son! There aren't many who agree with you that the Moor View girls should be cut out of the stories. And I feel that I must comment upon this last letter of yours. This is what you say:

"Here, what is this I see at the end of your Chat? Oh! So you are jolly well sure that 'R.P.' and 'Sarcastic' are in a minority because you know the mass of your readers are sportsmen. Now, that is absolute soft soap. But it won't wash me, allow me to inform you. You are an artful old codger. By saying that you know the mass of your readers are sportsmen, they will naturally vote for you. A great many who would

vote against the girls will think to themselves, 'Well, Mr. Brooks says we are sportsmen, so we will vote for the girls, and blow "R.P." and "Sarcastic." You can't get over me with those tricks, you know. That's an unfair piece to put in, I think, Mr. Brooks. You are up to all the tricks of the trade.'

Now, "R.P.," I really must pull you up on this little matter. I thought I made it quite plain in the Chat to which you refer that I used the word "sportsmen" in quite a different sense from the one you infer. And I repeat that statement. My readers are sportsmen with regard to girls. They want Irene & Co. to remain in the yarns, because they are sporting enough to realise that my girl readers enjoy a reference, now and again, to Irene & Co. I will conclude this paragraph with another little quotation from your letter, "R.P."—"No more time to waste on you." They are your words, old man—not mine.

* * *

Yes, you are quite right, D. Cramp. As you say: "Then with 'Sarcastic.' He says you do not answer letters. But if you didn't answer them there would be no 'Between Ourselves.' The fact that you do answer letters proves that you read them." Exactly! If these replies of mine were all spoof, you wouldn't be getting this, would you? And there wouldn't have been any excitement about our pal, "Sarcastic."

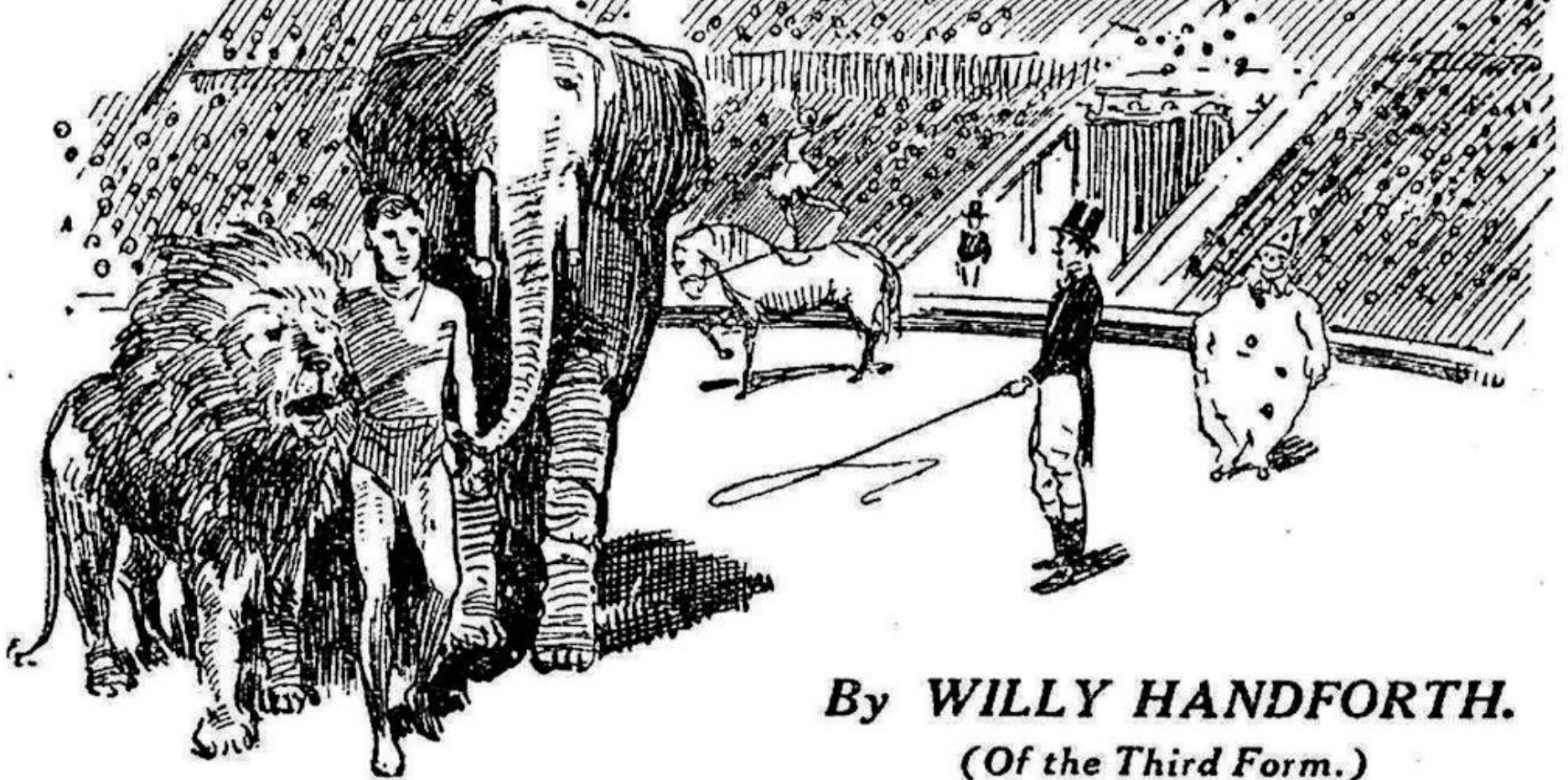
* * *

Here's a letter that I simply must quote. I think it will be of general interest to most readers—since it deals with a countryman of ours who is far away from civilisation. The letter is from Arthur Palmer, and it was posted in Gibraltar.

Yes, old man, I certainly should like to have some details of the life and work on board a cable ship. I'm a perfect glutton for information, you know—particularly when it is first-hand knowledge, such as yours. Here is the portion of your letter that I am going to quote. I am sure that you won't mind:

(Continued on page 41)

PRIDE O' THE CIRCUS!



By **WILLY HANDFORTH.**
(Of the Third Form.)

This thrilling story of circus life has been written by Willy Handforth. It is exactly as he wrote it, save that small errors in punctuation and spelling have been corrected by the Editor.

WHAT'S HAPPENED IN PREVIOUS CHAPTERS:

Tom Hamilton, the hero of this story, is the Star of Boggannini's Gigantic Circus, much to the jealousy of Silas Snoops, the lion-tamer, who has made several unsuccessful attempts on the lad's life. Snoops' latest piece of villainy is to fake up the imitation cannon from which Tom is to be shot. He has done it in such a way that Tom, instead

of landing safely on a trapeze on the other side of the circus tent, will hurtle out of the tent altogether, to fall hundreds of yards away. Unless a miracle happens it is certain death! That night, before a packed tent, Tom steps into the cannon. Everything is in readiness, and Signor Boggannini prepares to give the word to fire!

NOW READ WHAT HAPPENS.

Our Hero Saves the Situation!

FIRE!" roared Signor Boggannini. At that fatal word of command, the great cannon was discharged, and Silas Snoops, lurking in the shadows, gave vent to a low cry of triumph. At last his young enemy was to be polished off! That fatal word of command meant that Tom was to be hurtled through the air to certain death!

Cries of horror arose as Tom left the muzzle of the cannon, and went shooting upwards—upwards and upwards! As for our Tom himself, he hardly knew what had happened. But, even as he left the cannon, he realised that something was wrong. He was going too fast—he had come out of the cannon with such velocity that he was shooting upwards, and would never be able to catch hold of the trapeze that was waiting ready for him.

"My heavens!" cried Signor Boggannini. In horror, and on every hand his shout was echoed and re-echoed.

For Tom, like a meteor, shot straight upwards to the roof of the big tent, and then went clean through it—hurled through the canvas by the sheer force of his flight! It seemed that he was doomed to certain death!

But it wasn't likely that Fate was to take sides with such a rotter as Silas Snoops. Our hero had been born under a lucky star, and the thing that happened next was only in keeping with everything else that had happened to Tom. Tom proved, too, that he was a fellow of cleverness and resource.

Up he went—up and up into the night sky.

Then he started coming down, and he felt that it would be all up with him.

With a gasp of relief, he saw that he was falling straight down upon one of the smaller tents of the circus; in that same flash, Tom knew that he was to be saved. The roof of this tent would protect him, and would allow him to reach the ground in safety. He would slide down the bulging canvas, and then—

But something else happened—something unexpected.

For Tom dropped with such force that he went clean through this canvas, too! Right through—right down into the tent. And, amazing as it may seem, Tom alighted fairly and squarely on the back of Oscar, the Ostrich!

In a flash our hero recovered his usual composure.

He had made friends with Oscar the Ostrich days before, and he had been putting Oscar through some tricks. The great bird was rather frightened now, but he soon recovered when he heard Tom's voice.

"Good man—good old Oscar!" said Tom tensely. "Quick, old chap! We can save the situation if only you'll obey orders!"

Oscar the Ostrich was ready!

He swung round at the word of command, and went charging out of the tent. With tremendous strides he crossed the grass, and made straight for the main entrance of the huge circus tent.

Inside, there was a tumult. People were on their feet, shouting with horror. Signor Boggannini was running about the ring, trying to calm the people. For everybody believed that a tragedy had occurred. Everybody wanted to know what had happened to Tom, the intrepid young circus performer. And Silas Snoops was still in the shadows, chuckling evilly.

Then, in the middle of all this excitement, a shout came from the entrance, and Oscar the Ostrich came running in with his great strides. Further shouts went up now, but this time they were shouts of wonder and amaze.

"My heavens!" cried the big boss aghast.

For there was Tom, riding on Oscar's back, one leg in the air, and balancing himself securely on the other. It was an amazing performance; the audience rose to its feet like one man, and cheered.

"The boy's a living marvel!" gasped Smiler, the clown.

Everybody in that great tent believed that this was part of the show—that Tom had gone through the tent deliberately, and that the whole thing had been planned. Tom had saved the situation.

Meanwhile Silas Snoops ground his teeth with rage and mortification. Once again he had failed in his dastardly work!

Our Hero Proves His Worth!

"**H**OW did you do it, boy?" demanded Signor Boggannini, clapping Tom on the back. "Boy, how did you do it?"

"It was nothing, sir," said Tom modestly. "I just happened to fall through one of the other tents, and I alighted on Oscar's back."

"All the same, you have been marvellous," said the big boss. "And, sooner or later, I'll get to the bottom of this dastardly business! Somebody has been monkeying with the cannon—somebody has been trying to send you to your doom, Tom! And when I find out who he is—"

Signor Boggannini broke off, and his expression was terrible. Tom said nothing. But in his heart, he knew that Silas Snoops was the guilty party. Even now, as he stood at the side of the ring while another turn was on, he could see the scowl on the lion-tamer's face, and Tom knew, instinctively, that Silas Snoops was the guilty party.

But now, even as the audience was settling down to a further enjoyment of the circus, a new danger arose. Overhead rolled a sudden peal of thunder. It sounded like a succession of explosions, and it was accompanied by vivid flashes of forked lightning.

"A storm!" shouted the big boss. "A storm!"

Again the thunder rolled, and Tom, glancing at the crowded seats, could tell that the people were becoming uneasy. They were forgetting all about the show, and they were looking anxiously at the great tent, where the roof was swaying ominously. The wind was blowing with tremendous force, and the whole tent moved under the force of the gale.

"Let me go into the ring with Smiler, sir!" cried Tom, clutching at Signor Boggannini's coat. "We want to make the people laugh—to forget the storm. If we don't, there'll be a panic, and a stampede!"

"You're right, boy!" said the big boss. "Do anything you can, but keep the audience calm!"

While the thunder rolled again, and while the lightning sizzled down, Tom dashed into the ring. Smiler went with him, and very soon they had the audience in fits of laughter. The storm was forgotten—at least, it was forgotten for the minute.

But even the efforts of Tom, praiseworthy as they were, could not do very much. For this storm was a terrific one. The thunder boomed with such ferocity that it was impossible to hear oneself speak. Then came the rain—pelting, pouring, blinding rain. It hit down upon the great tent, beating the canvas inwards, and creating a tremendous racket.

And now Silas Snoops was not to be seen.

To tell the truth, the arch-villain had just thought of a new idea. Failed in his attempt to take Tom's life, Silas Snoops was now reckless. There was a madness in his eyes as he wandered about outside, in the storm. He was like a man possessed. He didn't care what he did, he wanted revenge on Tom—he wanted revenge on everybody. For Silas Snoops had gone crazy. That was the terrible truth!

Suddenly, Silas Snoops thought of a diabolical idea. The storm was at its height, and everybody was in a fever of uncertainty and terror. Now was the time to act! Now was the time to bring ruin upon Signor Boggannini, and his entire circus!

"Yes, and that will put me even with Tom Hamilton!" snarled Silas Snoops. "I can't have my revenge on the boy by any other means. I've got to ruin the whole circus, and a good thing, too! Before Tom Hamilton came, I was the star, and now I'm nothing! I will show Sam Boggs whether he can treat me like this or not!"

Creeping up through the darkness and the rain, he arrived at the great traction engine which supplied the circus with its electric light. There it was, humming away, with the driver sitting in the little seat before the levers. In front was the dynamo, and the engine was working perfectly, in spite of the storm.

Cautiously Silas Snoops crept up at the rear, ready to do his foul work. He seized a chunk of coal, and raised it aloft. The next moment he brought it down with a crash upon the head of the driver. The unfortunate man fell over sideways, and thudded to the muddy ground. Then Silas Snoops leapt to the levers, and a low chuckle of evil satisfaction escaped his thin lips.

"Now!" he cried triumphantly.

With one movement, he flung the lever over, and the engine stopped. At the same moment every light in the circus went out—as though they had been snuffed candles.

But Silas Snoops hadn't finished yet. After satisfying himself that the driver of the traction engine was unconscious, he went running off towards the animal cages.

For Snoops meant to set all the wild beasts at liberty—so that there would be a terrible panic—so that Signor Boggannini would lose all his

valuable beasts and his circus be ruined—so that Tom would share in the general disaster!

It was an evil scheme, and Silas Snoops had all the odds in his favour!

But wait—our hero isn't very far off!

Our Hero Foils the Villain!

AS all the lights went out in the circus, Tom caught his breath in sharply.

In a flash, he guessed what had happened.

"The lights!" shouted Signor Boggannini, in alarm. "The lights! It must be the storm! The engine has been struck by lightning, and we are all left in the darkness! Order—order!"

But Tom, who had seen that evil glint in the eyes of Silas Snoops a few minutes previously, knew the truth. This was no trick of the storm, but a trick of Silas Snoops! The villain had cut off all the lights, and unless something was done instantly, dozens of lives would be lost in the panic which, even now, was beginning to develop.

But does our Tom lose his nerve? No! We know well enough that Tom is a fellow of resource and cleverness. Quickly he rushed into the ring, and his clear voice rang out like a clarion.

"It's all right, everybody!" he shouted. "Keep your seats, please! The lights will soon come on again! In the meantime, you are about to witness the great Luminous Dance!"

"My heavens!" gasped the big boss. "What's the boy doing now?"

Yes, what is our Tom doing? It can be told in a few words. Realising that Silas Snoops committed this dastardly deed, Tom knows that there is only one way to avert a panic, and that is to interest the audience. And so, in a trice, Tom dashes out of the ring in the darkness, while the thunder rolls and the lightning blazes. He speeds into another tent, and grabs a tin of luminous paint. In less time than it takes to tell, Tom smears the stuff all over himself, and then he goes dashing back into the ring again.

"The Dance of Light!" he cried triumphantly.

The audience cheered and cheered. There was Tom, capering about in the ring, a wonderful figure in that luminous paint. He turned somersaults and cartwheels, and generally behaved like a chunk of indiarubber.

"It's all in the show!" shouted somebody in the audience. "Well I'm jiggered! And we thought that the lights had failed!"

Shouts of laughter went up, and Tom was cheered again and again.

For everybody believed that this was merely part of the show. Once again, Tom had saved the situation. But even he did not know the extent of Silas Snoops' villainy. For even then, the lion-tamer was releasing the wild beasts. First of all he allowed all his lions to go out of their cages. Then he went to the tigers, and let them loose, too. Then he had a word with Chunga, the elephant trainer, and Chunga made his elephants stampede.

And so it went on—cage after cage was visited, every wild beast was allowed to go free, and all of them were herded towards the ring!

"We'll do it thoroughly!" snarled Silas Snoops wildly. "What do we care now? I shall get the sack, anyhow, and so will you, Chunga! We might as well go the whole hog!"

"I am with you, Sahib!" said Chunga. "The big boss shall pay, too! More than once he has kicked me, and now I shall get my revenge!"

With these words, Chunga drew a cruel-looking knife from the folds of his robes. He vanished into the darkness, and things looked pretty rocky for Signor Boggannini.

In the ring, the scene was a strange one.

There was Tom, still capering about—still keeping the audience entertained. All the people were in their seats, and all believed that this was a part of the show. But then, just at that dramatic moment, a great roar arose on the air. Two enormous lions came bounding into the ring, and they could be dimly seen by the luminous glow that came from Tom's capering form.

And in the meantime, the tent rocked and swayed as the full force of the storm swept down. Then the elephants came charging in, trumpeting shrilly. The tigers followed, driven by Silas Snoops, and after that came a whacking great rhinoceros.

Silas Snoops closed the gates with a snarl of triumph. Not only were all the wild animals let loose into the ring, but the gates were closed, so that they could not get out again! And there were those thousands of people, looking on—suspecting nothing.

What was going to happen now?

Signor Boggannini was nearly fainting with apprehension and fear. He knew that unless a miracle happened hundreds of lives would be lost, while he himself would be completely ruined.

"Smiler, it's all over!" he muttered hoarsely, as he clutched at the faithful clown. "Tom has done wonders—he has kept the audience calm, but he can't go on like this for ever! All the wild animals are loose, and I believe that Silas Snoops is responsible! But what are we to do?"

Smiler uttered a hollow groan.

"I don't know, boss, I don't know!" he muttered. "We're helpless!"

But if they were helpless, our hero wasn't!

Our Tom's Triumph!

IN the twinkling of an eye, Tom knew what had happened.

"Silas Snoops!" he muttered tensely.

"This is more of that villain's work!"

His quick brain was working overtime. What was to be done now? How could he save the situation?

And then he laughed confidently. He knew what to do. Running up to Smiler, he caught the clown by the shoulder, and swung him round.

"Quick, Smiler!" he panted. "Dash out, and get all the lights going again!"

"But the wild animals—" began Smiler.

"Leave them to me!" interrupted Tom, in a ringing voice. "You slip out under the tent, Smiler, and get the lights going. Turn them all on in exactly one minute from now! There can't be much of a panic in that time—if there is, it will soon die down when the audience see what has happened."

Smiler was off in a flash. He did not dispute Tom's command. Tom was only a boy, but there was something about him which made everybody obey his orders.

Those next few seconds were tense and dramatic.

Tom's luminous figure could be seen, flitting about here and there. Now and again, a glimpse of one of the wild animals could be seen, too. The lions were roaring, and the other beasts were making the night hideous. Overhead, the tent was booming and echoing with the tumult of the great storm.

Rapidly, the panic was increasing. Children were shouting in terror, and women were screaming. Even men were jumping up in their seats, and losing their heads.

If this ruse of Tom's failed, then nothing could save the circus from complete and absolute disaster. This was the last chance, and Tom was taking a shot at it.

"My show—my show!" muttered the big boss hoarsely. "It's all up with me! The crowd will be out of hand in another ten seconds, and then I shall be ruined."

A tremendous shouting arose now, and a section of the audience came charging down towards the ring. It was the beginning of the great panic—the signal that would mean the wrecking of the entire circus, and the losing of hundreds of lives.

And then, in that tense second, the lights all came blazing on. The panic-stricken audience halted and stared. Gasps of amazement and admiration went up.

For the sight that was revealed was an amazing one.

There was Tom, the hero of the circus, in the very centre of the ring. He was standing on a kind of great pyramid, high in the air. And that pyramid was made entirely of wild beasts! It was the most staggering sight that Signor Boggannini himself had ever seen. The elephants were in the centre, and then came the lions and tigers, standing on their hind legs, and their fore paws placed on the bodies of the other animals. They formed a complete pyramid, and every one of those wild creatures was docile.

And it was Tom who had caused all this! Tom's amazing power over the wild beasts had done this!

The audience thought that it was all part of the show! They cheered and cheered, and the last vestige of panic left. What was there to worry about? If this boy could stand there in the middle of all these animals, why should they worry themselves?

Never before had Signor Boggannini known such enthusiasm. With a feeling of intense relief he stepped out into the ring, in order to make a speech. But at that very moment, a lithe form appeared. It was Chunga, and in his hand, poised ready to throw, was a wicked-looking knife.

"Look out, boss!" cried Smiler, in horror.

The knife left Chunga's hand, and it sped towards Signor Boggannini's heart. But in the twinkling of an eye, Tom leapt from the top of that pyramid, and as the dagger flew through the air, his hand flashed out and he caught it

by the haft! Tom then turned a treble somersault, and alighted in the sawdust; not one member of the audience saw what had happened.

As for Tom, he ran swiftly across the ring, and Chunga fled. But just then another surprise came, for several uniformed figures appeared in the entrance, and it could be seen that they were grappling with Silas Snoops. Chunga ran right into them, and he, too, was captured.

"Arrested!" snarled Silas Snoops. "What does this mean?"

"It means, Silas Snoops, that your career of villainy is over!" said the police-inspector coldly. "And yours, too, Chunga! You'll both come with me—and this will mean twenty years penal servitude!"

The two discomfited rascals were hauled away, and our hero never saw them again.

And so our story is over.

From that day onwards Tom was known as Pride o' the Circus, and he was Signor Boggannini's greatest star. Wherever he went he was acclaimed, and Signor Boggannini never regretted taking on this boy—this youngster who had proved himself to be such a hero.

We could continue telling of Tom's adventures for many, many more chapters, but here we must close. Perhaps, some day in the future, we shall be able to record more of Tom's adventures. Let us hope so!

THE END.

BROTHERS! YOUR EARS!

It will doubtless cause much gratification to learn that I have been persuaded to write the next great serial story. And this masterpiece of modern fiction will positively commence publication in next week's issue! Without wishing to belittle the efforts of my predecessors, I am compelled, however, to state that this forthcoming serial will naturally be in a class to itself. I urge you to be patient—to live through the next week with fortitude and stoicism. It is a long time to wait, I am aware—but the reward will be not merely adequate, but generous.

WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE.

BETWEEN OURSELVES.

(Continued from page 37.)

"There is impressed on my mind one little incident of where my stored-up 'Nelson Lees' came as a godsend to a certain individual somewhere down the West Coast of Africa. We had just finished laying a new shore end, when the Englishman in charge of the native staff came up to me and remarked:

"You're the first white men I have seen for eighteen months, and I am extremely thankful for the English papers and magazines that you have given me; but, perhaps you'll laugh at me, and I am nearly thirty, but—does anyone aboard happen to have the 'Nelson Lee'?"

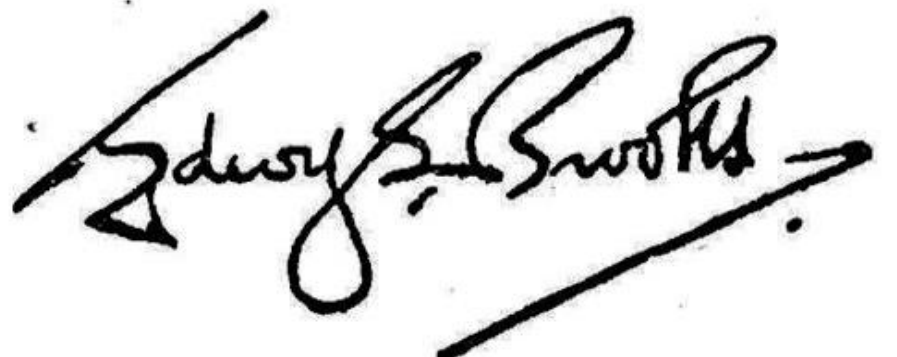
"I looked at him in wonderment. Of all things remarkable! Here, miles from civilisation, was a man shut away from all friends, and asking me if I had got any of the Old Papers! I told him how amazed I was, and of how lucky he was. So I immediately jumped into the launch, returned to the ship, and found my little heard. And I promptly

delivered them to the smiling Britisher. Before we left he again thanked me, and said: 'And to think that I nearly missed them through being afraid to ask!'

"On the way back to port, as I sat under the cool shade of our awnings, my thoughts went back to that lonely outpost of our Empire, where an Englishman sat under the tall palms and read of the boys of St. Frank's as they enjoyed themselves way back in the Old Country.

"So you can see that it becomes a great thing to me to be able to say this of the Old Paper. I can furnish another five or six occasions of similar happenings in China, India and South America."

Thanks Arthur Palmer, for your entertaining letter. You won't forget to write again and again, will you?"





All **LETTERS** in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, do **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.

Two Successful Clubs!

B. C. Coward, 271, Wandsworth Road, London S.W. 8, tells me his club is doing splendidly. Its speciality is cycling, also stamp-collecting.

Another S.F.L. Club which is swinging ahead is the one run by Desmond Richardson, 22, Astil Street, Stapenhill, Burton-on-Trent. He sends word that he has secured a club-room, and here, during the winter, the members will have darts, table-tennis, draughts, cards and boxing.

Bristol Booming!

Here is a capital letter from James D. Brooks, 6, Park Terrace, School Road, Knowle, Bristol, who belongs to a club which is doing right well. "In the near future," says this correspondent, "I think you will be overwhelmed with applications for membership from this district." Glad to hear it. The more the merrier. This Bristol chum next says he "goes to the dogs" every day as he is junior clerk at the Bristol Greyhound Club!

He will have his little joke.

A Fretwork Club.

A very enterprising fretwork club is being run by Eric Barber, 281, Lincoln Road, Peterborough—the place where the bricks come from. Keen fretworkers should write in. Enthusiasts are wanted.

"The Upper Form."

Congratulations go to the Editor and Staff of this bright and up-to-date magazine, of which the fellows at Alma Road Boys' School, Bournemouth, can well be proud.

Sad But True.

A Leagueite writes from Auburn, Australia, about the extreme ignorance of English people concerning what Australia is like. You know the kind of thing. There is the expectation of seeing kangaroos footing it nimbly about the shore as the ship hoves in sight. "They come out here," says my chum, "expecting to be ridden to lodgings on horseback, with other ideas equally fantastic." What they do find is that Australia is the same as England, with electric trams, skyscrapers, etc. Well, it makes a pleasant surprise, after all.

A Leagueite of Lincs.

Tom Kirk, Mount Pleasant, Wainfleet, Lincolnshire, tells me he is laid up with heart trouble, and he would like to hear from readers who could suggest a few things that he could do in his spare time. He has several N.L.L. new series he could exchange for papers, books, etc. We all wish Tom a speedy recovery.

A Letter From Accrington.

L. A. Wrigley, 81, Plantation Road, Accrington, tells me that work prevents him carrying on as O.O. His place will be taken by Henry Stothert, 9, Steiner Street, Accrington. The retiring Organising Officer says he is no youngster, but he takes the keenest interest in the work of the League, and in the spirit of co-operation which is developing. He regrets the necessity that compels him to cease active participation, for his heart was in the League. But I am sure he will continue to support the S.F.L. as time permits.

The Way To Do It.

Ronald Harold Riggs, 140, Green Road, Bournemouth, tells me he has found the League a splendid organisation which has helped him wonderfully. This correspondent made a big success of a magazine he ran. It was printed on paper obtained from the local newspaper, and good results were obtained with a "Rolls" cyclostyle. Two hundred copies were sold per month, and the debt incurred for the printing apparatus was soon wiped out. After that the profits went to the local hospital.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

G. Boswell, 10, Claude Road, C-C-Hardy, Manchester, wishes to hear from readers.

E. G. Buckingham, 2, Arlington Road, Ashford, Middx., wants to hear from members who will help to form an International Correspondence Club.

Ernest Adambery, 23, Flat Bastion Road, Gibraltar, wishes to correspond once a month with stamp collectors only in Dublin, Brussels, Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, Geneva, and Prague; also with readers in Italy, Malta, Palestine, Japan, and Toronto. He also

requires Nos. 20-43 N.L.L., new series, and would give in exchange Nos. 550-568 old series.

Arthur Rivlin, Ardwyn, Radys, Glamorgan, South Wales, wishes to correspond and exchange stamps with readers in any part of the world; stamp collectors only. He has a large and valuable collection, and is eager to get in touch with other keen philatelists.

R. Wheeler, 25, Whitecross Road, Weston-super-Mare, wishes to hear from members and an Organising Officer.

F. E. Pyman, 10, St. Mark's Street, Peterborough, wishes to exchange stamps with readers abroad.

Albert Ridley, 8, Ash Street, Edge Hill,

Liverpool, wishes to correspond with readers. Alfred Henry Scott, 69, Dewsbury Road, Dollis Hill, London, N.W. 10, wants Nos. 1 & 11 N.L.L. new series. He also asks readers living near to him to call and see his Meccano sets, including Hornby Train, which are for sale.

W. Bryant, "Dunolly," McKern Street, Campsie, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers in his district.

Alan Bertram Bersnaha, "Kurraba," 14, Crimea Street, Caulfield, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers in England and France, especially those interested in collecting old copies of the N.L.L.

JOIN THE ROYAL NAVY AND SEE THE WORLD.

Boys are wanted for the Seaman Class (from which selections are made for the Wireless Telegraphy and Signalling Branches), Age 15½ to 16½ years.

MEN also are required for SEAMEN (SPECIAL SERVICE) ... Age 18 to 25. STOKERS ... Age 18 to 25.

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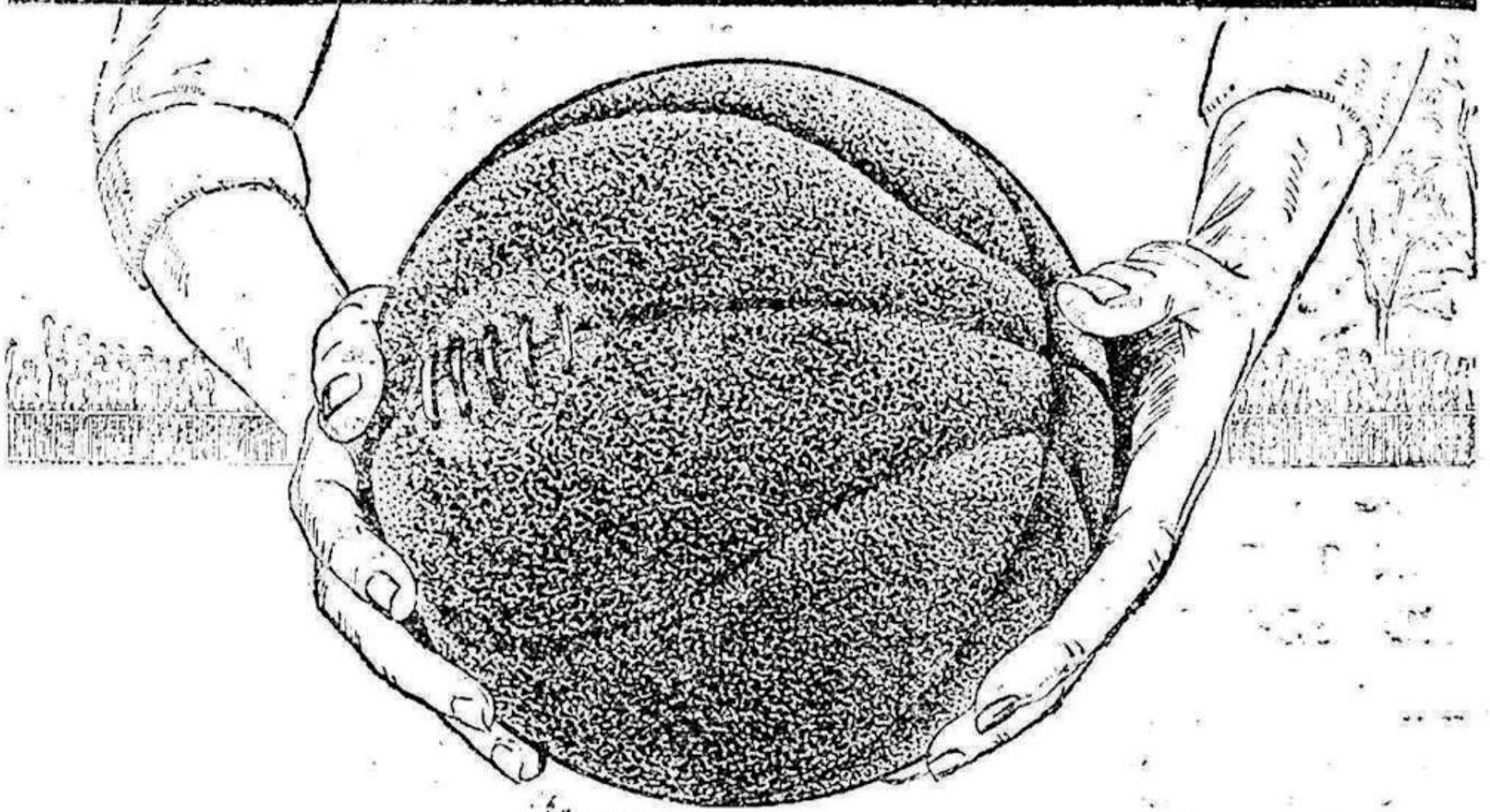
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