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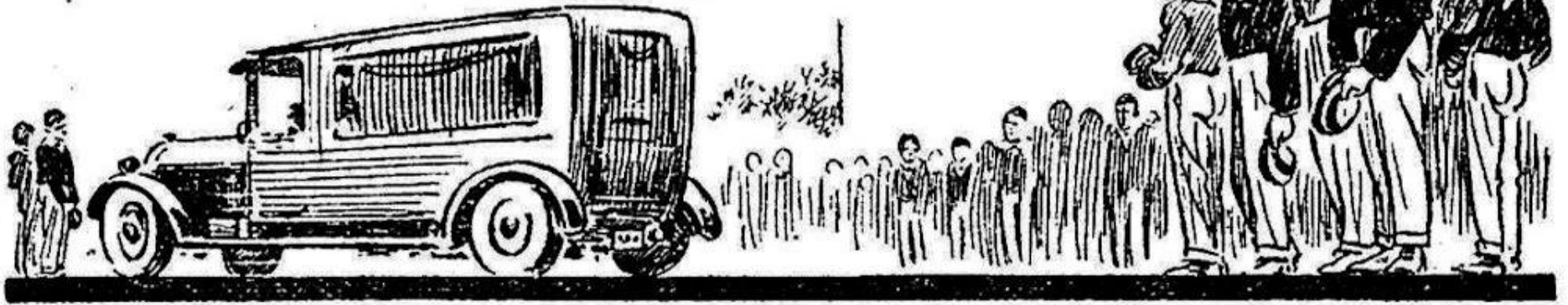


THE MIRACLE OF STUDY D

An exciting long complete yarn of mystery at St. Frank's, introducing Nelson Lee, Nipper, Handforth, and other popular characters.



In spite of Handforth's warning, Marriott began reading out another joke. "You rotter!" exclaimed Handy angrily. "Haven't you any respect for poor old Church?" His right flashed out, and Marriott, unable to dodge the blow, was sent reeling.

Amazing School Story of the Chums of St. Frank's!**THE MIRACLE OF STUDY D**

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

Still unconvinced that Church, of the St. Frank's Remove, is dead, Handforth continues his investigations. His persistence proves somewhat disconcerting to Nelson Lee at times, for the famous House-master-detective is hot on the trail of the two men who attempted to murder Church. How Handy eventually sees his stricken chum—and actually saves his life—is told in this magnificent yarn.—ED.

CHAPTER 1.

Handforth's Obsession!

MIDNIGHT boomed out over St. Frank's, and a chill wintry wind came moaning and hooting round the gables and buttresses of the old buildings.

In one of the Ancient House dormitories, Edward Oswald Handforth went to the window, and stood looking out across the West Square. There was a half-moon in the sky, appearing now and again from behind scudding clouds. The famous leader of Study D saw neither the West Square nor the moon. His thoughts were far away.

"Handy!" came a soft call.

Handforth turned, and found McClure sitting up in bed.

"Why don't you go to sleep, Mac?" asked Handforth gruffly.

"How can I go to sleep with you marching up and down the dormitory and barging into the foot of my bed every now and again?" asked McClure. "And how can I go to sleep with the thought of poor old Church on my mind? I've been tossing about for hours, but it's no good."

"You ought to have more sense," said Handforth. "It's impossible to sleep, anyhow. I'm trying to puzzle out the solution of this mystery. Why are they trying to make the school believe that Church is really dead—while he's alive all the time?"

McClure groaned.

"Oh, my hat!" he said dismally. "Why do you keep saying that, Handy? Why do you keep fooling yourself?"

"I'm not fooling myself."

"You are!" said McClure fiercely. "I tell you, Handy, that you're crazy! Church died during the evening, and Dr. Brett said so!"

"Dr. Brett didn't know what he was talking about!"

"Didn't know——" McClure broke off rather breathless. "How can I argue with a chap like you?" he went on. "Isn't it bad enough to know that old Church is dead, without you making things a lot worse by keeping up this pretence? Oh, Handy, you're making it awfully hard—for both of us!"

McClure looked over towards the vacant bed—Church's bed. Until two or three nights since, that bed had been occupied by Church, the third member of the inseparable trio of

the Remove. But lately Church had been in the sanatorium, gravely ill. And now—

"He'll never sleep in that again, poor old scout!" said McClure gently. "Do you know, Handy, I can hardly believe it. It's too—too awful! There he lies, in the sanny, with a sheet over him—and to-morrow they'll come with a motor-hearse, and—and—"

"You might as well spare yourself the trouble of being sorrowful," said Handforth coldly. "You can worry as much as you like—and you can be as puzzled as you like, too. Goodness knows I'm worried and puzzled! But I'm not grieving!"

"You—you callous rotter!" said McClure, goaded to it.

"I should be callous if Church were really dead," replied Handforth calmly. "But nothing will make me believe that he has pegged out. No, Mac! There's some funny business going on—and I mean to find it out, too! They're keeping us in the dark for some reason, and—"

"Who do you mean by 'they'?"

"Why, Mr. Lee and the Head, and Dr. Brett—yes, and Nipper, too!" said Handforth indignantly. "They're all in it! They know that Church is alive, and they won't tell me! For some reason they're fooling the whole school."

"Oh, Handy, they're not fooling anybody!" said McClure miserably. "We both saw poor old Church during the evening—and he died with his hand practically in yours. You know that as well as I do. It's so—so awfully tragic that it seems— Oh, I don't know! We've done nothing but talk about it ever since, until I'm weary and tired. And it's all so useless, too. Didn't Dr. Brett say that he was dead? You're surely not mad enough to believe that the doctor would make a statement like that if it were untrue?"

"They must have some reason for trying to keep it dark," said Handforth obstinately.

"But why—why?" continued McClure. "What earthly reason could they have? Oh, you obstinate mule! You stubborn idiot! Why can't you accept the facts, Handy?"

"I climbed up into the sanny, after Church had died—or after they said he had died," replied Handforth. "I saw him there in the moonlight! He was breathing then—and his heart was beating, too. I felt it beating! And that, mark you, was after they'd given out the report that he was dead!"

"You must have imagined it!" said McClure huskily.

"I tell you—"

"Nothing could have been easier!" went on Mac. "You wanted Church to be alive—you had a crazy idea in your head that he was not dead. So when you felt his heart, you imagined that it was beating. When you listened to his breathing, you thought that you could hear it. But you know what a vivid imagination you've got, Handy! There's no need for me to tell you that!"

Just for a moment Handforth seemed to waver.

"By George!" he said huskily. "I wonder— No!" he added with a return of his

confidence. "Blow you, Mac! You needn't try to weaken me like this. I felt old Church's heart beating, and that's good enough for me! They're up to something squiffy in the sanny, you mark my words! And, what's more, I've been waiting."

"Waiting?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean—waiting?"

"I've kept awake on purpose," said Handforth. "It's after midnight now, and I'm going out—to investigate!"

McClure started up, rather horrified.

"You're not going to—to the sanny?" he asked. "You're not going in—"

"I won't say that," said Handforth grimly. "But I'm going out to investigate, anyhow! I want to find what's going on! Do you think I can sleep with this mystery hanging over us? Do you think I can get a wink with my mind in this state of uncertainty? I feel stifled in here—I can't breathe properly! I'm going out—now!"

"Oh, but Handy!"

"You needn't argue!" said Handforth obstinately. "I'm going! And if you have any feelings for poor old Church, you'll come with me."

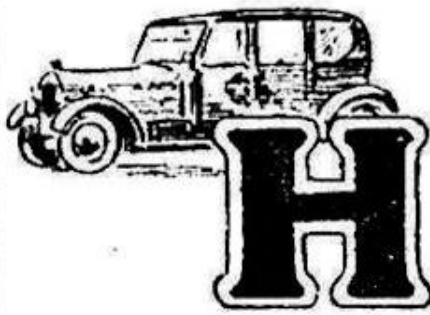
"I'll come!" said McClure, as he got out of bed.

But he was not bent upon accompanying Handforth because he had any feeling for Church. His feelings, at the present moment, were all for Handforth. For McClure believed that Edward Oswald was half-demented, and that it was essential for somebody to go with him to see that he didn't get into any trouble.

And so they silently dressed, and then crept out into the still, empty corridor.

CHAPTER 2.

In the Dead of Night!



HANDFORTH'S state of mind was an inextricable puzzle. Indeed, McClure found himself looking at his leader now and again in a curiously frightened manner. He was beginning to fear for Handforth's sanity. It almost seemed that the shock of Church's death had affected Edward Oswald's mind.

For the facts, after all, were comparatively simple.

Church had suddenly fallen ill—dramatically, unexpectedly. And then, after a rapid decline, he had apparently breathed his last. Handforth, indeed, had been sitting at Church's bedside during that fatal moment. So how could he be in any doubt as to Church's death?

McClure had been there, too—and that was why McClure was so amazed at Handforth's present attitude. In Mac's very presence, Dr. Brett had come into the sick-room and had pronounced life extinct, after examining

the unhappy schoolboy. So how could Handforth actually believe that there was any hope? What was his object now in going out after midnight—on what he was pleased to call an investigation? What was there to investigate?

It was certainly true that Nipper had been actively engaged with Nelson Lee shortly after Church's death. They had been to the laboratory together, and then they had visited the sick-room again. Strange lights had been seen there, and so forth. But surely this was no reason for Handforth's remarkable obsession? At least, McClure couldn't see any reason.

But there was a great difference between the mentality of Handforth and the mentality of McClure.

For while McClure was hard-headed and very matter-of-fact, Handforth was imaginative, volatile, impulsive. He was apt to get strange ideas into his head, and once there they were inclined to remain. Now, on this tragic night, he had formed the preposterous idea that Church was still alive!

In fact, McClure was so exasperated about it all that some of the misery was forgotten. For Handforth was so cool—so serenely self-possessed. Now and again he had been just a little uncertain, but he always came up smiling, as it were.

"It's no good you pulling such a long face, old son!" he murmured, as he and Mac crept out into the West Square, making their exit by the window of Study D. "There's nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about?" repeated McClure, staring.

"Nothing at all!" said Handforth confidently. "Good old Church is alive, and we're all being tricked. There's some mystery afoot here, and I believe old Zuma is connected with it. You remember old Zuma, don't you?"

"For goodness' sake don't bring in that fortune-teller!" said McClure gruffly. "It was Irene and those other Moor View girls who first persuaded old Church to go down to sit in front of Zuma's giddy crystal! And ever since then he's met with bad fortune, and now the poor chap's dead!"

"Rats!" said Handforth, almost light-heartedly. "If you want to know my opinion, Church is very much alive and kicking—probably chuckling over the whole business. You mark my words, my son, there's going to be some startling developments in this case. And that Zuma chap is at the bottom of everything. There's a real detective mystery here, and I'm going to investigate it!"

McClure was freshly astounded. Here was Handforth calmly talking about investigating a detective mystery, while in the sanatorium poor Church was lying there, lifeless! It seemed callous—heartless! McClure was beginning to feel quite scared.

The open air had evidently done Handforth quite a lot of good. His brow had cleared, and he was now as keen as mustard. He had finally rid himself of any fears. Church was alive, and there was nothing to

worry about. That was the way he looked at it. The next thing to do was to get on the track.

The rummiest part of the whole business was that Edward Oswald was absolutely right! As a general rule he was miles off the track, but this time he had hit the nail bang on the head. But how was it possible for McClure to have such serene confidence? That sort of thing was only possible in one fellow out of a thousand.

"Now, the first thing we've got to do is to discover why Mr. Lee and Dr. Brett want the school to think that Church is dead," said Handforth. "Once we've arrived at the solution of that mystery, all the rest will be easy!"

McClure sighed.

"I suppose you'll be convinced after the funeral, won't you?" he asked hopelessly. "Handy, old man, you're the most obstinate beggar under the sun! It's bad enough at an ordinary time, but now, with poor old Church gone, it seems pretty terrible. For example, what's the good of coming out here like this? You keep on talking about investigation, but what can you do? Why not come back to bed, and try to get some sleep?"

"I couldn't sleep now, even if I took half-a-dozen sleeping draughts," replied Handforth. "We're going round to the sanatorium, to have a look at it. We're going to—" He broke off, and caught his breath in. "By George!" he went on. "What's that?"

"Nothing—only a car," replied McClure, not without a little start of surprise.

They had just turned the angle of the Ancient House, and were in time to see one of the Head's closed motor-cars silently gliding towards Inner Court. It had just come round from the garage, and was purring along so smoothly that nobody indoors could have been aware of its presence. But Handforth and McClure, outside, not only heard the car, but saw it. And there was one rather significant fact. The big saloon was gliding along without showing any lights!

"There you are!" whispered Handforth. "What do you think of that? Don't you call that mysterious?"

"Well, it's a bit rummy, I suppose," admitted McClure, scratching his head. "But, after all, it's not the public highway, and the chauffeur isn't obliged to put the lights on until he gets out on to the road."

"It's not only that," said Handforth. "Why should this car be out here now—between midnight and one o'clock? You know jolly well that the Head goes to bed fairly early. He doesn't encourage visitors staying late."

"But it's different to-night," urged McClure. "With old Church there, in the sanny— Perhaps some of those specialists have come along—you know they were going to send for some specialists."

"All spoo!" said Handforth calmly. "There weren't any specialists coming, or anything else. I tell you, Mac, there's some-

thing behind all this that we don't know of! If we only get into Inner Court, and watch, we shall see something soon—something jolly interesting! By George! We're on the track properly, and we're not going to be dished!"

Just a little of Handforth's spirit entered McClure now, and he lost his sense of horror. Was there something in Handforth's strange obsession after all?



CHAPTER 3.

The Boy Who Lived!

R. MALCOLM STAFFORD, the headmaster of St. Frank's, paced up and down his study in agitation and amazement.

"But this is extraordinary, Mr. Lee," he was saying. "Upon my soul! It is one of the most startling occurrences that I have ever heard of in all my life! Indeed, if any man but yourself told me this, I doubt if I should believe it!"

"And yet it would be true, just the same," smiled Nelson Lee.

"Yes, yes, to be sure!" said the Head. "But, good gracious! The boy is really alive then? Dear me! You must forgive me if I seem sceptical, Mr. Lee. And I need hardly tell you that I am exceptionally relieved."

There was a third person in the Head's study—Dr. Brett, the school medico. Nelson Lee had intended telling the Head the surprising truth about Church much earlier than this, but Dr. Stafford had been over in Bannington, at a dinner appointment. He had never imagined, when setting out, that there was any possibility of Church having a sudden relapse and dying.

By telephone, Dr. Stafford had learned of Church's sudden death. He had been inexpressibly shocked, and yet it had been impossible for him to return to St. Frank's immediately. His evening had been spoilt, but there was nothing he could do by returning to the school at once. He knew that Nelson Lee was in full charge during his absence, and Lee, after all, was the one man to deal with a situation of that kind.

The Head's host, as it happened, had been the bishop of the diocese, and there had been many prominent guests. So, although Dr. Stafford had been anxious enough to make his excuses and leave, etiquette had forbidden any such thing.

And when he got back to the school at last, at a late hour, he had heard, to his relief and astonishment, that Church was alive after all.

Much had been happening during his absence.

"I must confess, Mr. Lee, that I am completely bewildered," he went on. "I received the most definite information that Church had died, and was naturally grieved.

How could this mistake have occurred? Surely, Dr. Brett—"

"I accept no blame, sir," said the doctor quietly. "If the circumstances were to happen all over again, I should not hesitate in signing a death certificate. Never in my career have I seen such an exact simulation of death."

"The boy, I understand, was really in a trance?" asked the Head.

"Yes," said Dr. Brett. "But it was no ordinary trance. It was one brought on by a particularly diabolical poison known to the Mexican-Indians as Issi-Kala."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the Head, staring at Nelson Lee. "This is more astounding than ever! How could the boy have got the poison into his system?"

"It was administered deliberately," replied Nelson Lee.

"You—you mean that an attempt was made to murder him?" gasped Dr. Stafford.

"Yes!" said Lee. "That is the blunt truth. A few days ago there was a queer old fortune-teller in the district—a man named Zuma. He and his assistant pitched their tent near the village, and they went in for crystal-gazing, and such like. Church, I understand, visited this man, and was told that his future was a complete blank. In other words, Zuma gave him to understand that he had no future at all. He prophesied the boy's death, as a matter of fact."

"But this is strange, is it not?" asked the Head.

"In view of the circumstances, no," replied Nelson Lee. "For I am quite convinced that this man, Zuma, is the author of the attempted murder. Zuma and his companion are brown men—Indians, I suspect. They are very possibly descendants of the ancient Aztecs, of Mexico. Church's uncle was a great explorer, you may remember, Dr. Stafford?"

"I believe I have heard that such was the case," nodded the Headmaster, thoroughly bewildered.

"About four years ago Mr. Geoffrey Church suddenly fell ill, and within two or three days he was dead—heart failure, so the specialists said. Nobody suspected poison. But there can be little doubt that the unfortunate Mr. Church was deliberately poisoned by these Indians. The poison, Issi-Kala, was administered into his blood—by means of poison darts, I assume—and the end soon came."

"But why should these men visit their further vengeance upon a mere schoolboy?" demanded the Head angrily.

"I don't know, but I fully intend to find out," replied Nelson Lee. "And I must tell you, Dr. Stafford, that Church is, to all intents and purposes, still dead. The school must continue to think so. In no circumstances must the real truth be revealed."

"But why not? Won't this be most awkward?"

"I don't think so," replied Nelson Lee. "I have made all arrangements to transfer

Church to Moat Hollow—the old house near the village. There he will be perfectly safe and well guarded. In the morning a motor-hearse will arrive, ostensibly from London, and then the school will be able to continue its normal course. Everybody will think that the funeral is to take place in London, and the matter will soon be forgotten. You know that schoolboys are very forgetful in that way.”

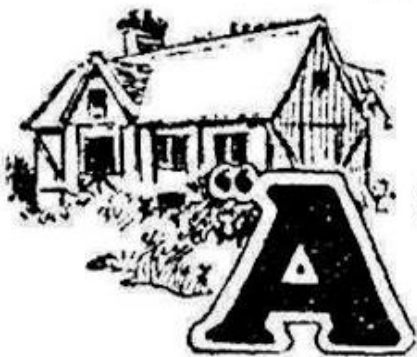
“But why all this mystery, Mr. Lee?” asked the Head, in distress.

“Because Church’s life will still be in very grave danger if we reveal the fact that he is not dead,” replied Nelson Lee grimly. “These men—these mysterious Indians—are, I believe, still in the district somewhere. As long as they believe that Church is dead, then they will remain idle, and perhaps attempt to escape from the neighbourhood. But if, on the other hand, they get to know that the boy is still alive—well, you can surely realise that they will only redouble their efforts to kill him? At the moment we need not concern ourselves regarding the motive for this horrible crime. We must safeguard the boy, and the only way of doing that is to keep up the pretence of his death.”

“I don’t like it,” said the Head, with a worried frown. “It’s—it’s so strange, Mr. Lee!”

“You must remember that the news of Church’s death was given out in all good faith,” Nelson Lee pointed out. “There was no attempt to deceive the school then. Well, as the boys think that Church is dead, there is no reason why we should contradict the report. I have come to the conclusion that the poor boy must be taken secretly away, and kept at Moat Hollow until the crisis is over. When these scoundrels are laid by the heels—then, of course the truth can come out.”

And the Head knew that Nelson Lee’s decision was a wise one.



CHAPTER 4.

A False Alarm!

“AND this poor boy?” said Dr. Stafford, after a short interval of silence. “You tell me that he is in a trance?”

“He was in a trance—but we have succeeded in bringing him out of it,” replied Nelson Lee. “Indeed, if we had not taken very active measures, he would have been dead by this time.”

“You mustn’t take any notice of the ‘we,’ sir,” pointed out the doctor. “Mr. Lee did this entirely on his own. I knew nothing about it until afterwards.”

“We must thank heaven that we have you with us, Mr. Lee,” said the Head fervently. “You are a great expert on poisons, are you not?”

“I have some knowledge of poisons,” admitted Nelson Lee.

“And this unfortunate youth?” asked the Head. “Is he in any danger now?”

“If he is not moved too far—that is to say, if he is not put to any great strain—there is every hope that he will completely recover,” said Nelson Lee. “That is why I am only taking him as far as Moat Hollow. It is but a mile or two, and a slow journey in a heated car will do him no harm. Once there he can be well cared for. That old house is particularly well-suited to the job, because it is surrounded by high walls, and can be easily guarded. Church will be quite safe there, and none will know of his presence. Our main concern, at the moment, is to get him out of the school. Complete quietness and rest will bring him back to normal health. In the meantime, while he is recovering, I shall do my utmost to hound down these scoundrels who had attempted to kill him.”

“Don’t you think it probable that they have already fled?” asked the Head.

“No, I believe they are still here,” said Lee. “They do not think that they are suspected, and so there is no reason for them to indulge in any precipitate flight. Indeed, such a thing might very easily draw special attention to them. They are astute rascals, and it is far more likely that they will deliberately linger in this district, and then wander on, keeping to their rôles of vagrant fortune-tellers.”

“And this poor boy?” cried the Head anxiously. “Where is he now?”

“I have taken the liberty of placing him in one of your own rooms, Dr. Stafford,” said Nelson Lee quietly. “I hope you do not mind.”

“Good gracious, no!”

“Phipps is with him,” continued Lee. “I thought it just as well to take Phipps into the secret. He is a man to be trusted, and I have so arranged matters that he has ostensibly secured a fortnight’s leave of absence. He will be in full charge at Moat Hollow—and there is no more capable man for such a task than Phipps. Young Glen-thorne will miss him, but I do not think that he will suspect the real truth.”

“No, no, of course not,” agreed the Head. “You did quite right to confide in Phipps, Mr. Lee. He is a very capable man—a trustworthy man, too. But the boy? Is he conscious?”

“No,” put in Dr. Brett. “I do not suppose he will be conscious for another day or two.”

“Dear me! That sounds very bad!”

“On the contrary, it is distinctly good,” put in Nelson Lee. “This poison will soon be eradicated from his system if he is carefully treated, and closely watched. And once consciousness returns, after a brief spell of dazedness, he will very speedily recover. I do not think there is any danger at all—providing that he is kept quiet and away from all disturbances.”

"Mr. Lee had instructed Phipps to bring round one of your cars, sir," put in Dr. Brett. "It should be at the door almost at any minute now. There is only one other person in the whole school who shares this secret with us—and that person is young Hamilton."

"I rather think that we can rely upon his discretion," smiled the Head. "Upon my word, Mr. Lee, I am very gratified to know that Church is alive. But I am bewildered by all this mystery and secrecy. I do hope that everything will turn out for the best."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"I dislike the secrecy, too," he said. "But there is no help for it, Dr. Stafford. Above all else, we must safeguard the boy's life, and, as I have already told you, it would be dangerous in the extreme to let the news escape that he is alive. These men are implacable—relentless and fiendish."

"Yes, yes, I quite agree that you have done the right thing," said the Head quickly. "But I do hope that these rascals will soon be rounded up, so that the real truth can be told. I want you to remember that the good name of St. Frank's is at stake. Parents are very peculiar—very easily frightened, sometimes. We do not want to let the newspapers get to know of this startling affair either. It might do the school a great deal of harm."

"There's the car!" said Dr. Brett suddenly.

And then, after that, there was a good deal of activity. The headmaster was perfectly content to leave all arrangements in the able hands of Nelson Lee. After all, Lee's plan was a very simple one. It would be a brief task to take Church down to Moat Hollow.

This was an old house near the village—one that had been used in the dim past as a lunatic asylum. Afterwards, it had been put to various purposes, even being utilised, at one period, as a school. It had been empty for many months now, but was dry and habitable. A high wall surrounded the entire property, and the whole place could be very easily guarded.

Dr. Stafford had a look at Church himself, just before the unconscious boy was carried out to the waiting car. Church was looking pale and drawn, but he was breathing evenly, and his heart had a sound, healthy beat. No longer was it erratic or feeble. The antidote that Nelson Lee had applied was doing its work splendidly. With no further poison being administered into Church's system, there were high hopes that he would completely recover.

With scarcely any noise, he was carried out and placed gently in the waiting car. Phipps was at the wheel—Phipps being a man of many qualifications. Then Nelson Lee and Dr. Brett got inside with Church, and the Head retired to his House. No fuss was being made—no commotion whatever.

But then, just as the car was about to glide off, a rather awkward situation arose.

For a second Nelson Lee had seen two figures lurking in some bushes on the other side of Inner Court. In a flash, Lee thought of those mysterious brown men. He leapt forward, pulling out his revolver as he did so. He rather wondered if that deadly blow-pipe would be brought into effect—if he would feel the sting of a dart entering his skin. And perhaps these men would use a different poison this time!

"Who is that?" demanded Lee sharply.

"Oh, crumbs!" came a voice. "We're spotted!"

"Shush, Mac!" said another voice. "You silly ass—"

Nelson Lee put his revolver back, and his jaw set rather grimly. He knew who these two were now.

"Handforth!" said Nelson Lee sternly. "McClure! What are you two boys doing out here?"

Handforth hardly took any notice. He was looking across at the car, and his mind was filled with fresh suspicions. As for Nelson Lee, he was glad that he had caught these two boys now. They had seen nothing, and, just because a car was standing there, they could suspect nothing. Although Handforth was Church's greatest chum, Nelson Lee particularly wished to keep the truth from him. For Handforth had a habit of broadcasting every secret that came his way. He didn't do it purposely, but he simply couldn't help it.

"Who's in that car, sir?" demanded Handforth aggressively.

"I see no reason why you should be so curious regarding Dr. Stafford's car, Handforth," said Lee, in a sharp voice. "I asked you a question. What are you doing out here—after midnight?"

"Handy has been worrying about Church, sir," said McClure. "He thinks—"

"Never you mind what I think!" exclaimed Handforth, pinching McClure's arm until he nearly yelled. "We—we were just walking about, sir—couldn't sleep properly. After that terrible business about poor old Church—we—we—"

"I think I understand, Handforth," said Nelson Lee gently. "In the circumstances, I shall not punish you for breaking bounds in this way. But you must go to bed at once."

Nelson Lee found it impossible to be cross with Handforth. He took this activity on Edward Oswald's part to be a clear indication of his devotion to Church.

And so the two juniors were compelled to go back to the Ancient House, and to get into bed. Nelson Lee made no mistake about it. He called a prefect, and ordered him to remain on guard outside Handforth's door—until both the boys were asleep.

As it happened, the prefect's duty was not a long one. For both Handforth and McClure were thoroughly tired out—although Handforth had not been willing to admit it. But within ten minutes of his getting into bed, he closed his eyes, and soon afterwards he was sound asleep.



CHAPTER 5.

A Tiny Doubt!



NOT until the rising bell rang the next morning did Handforth and McClure awake.

McClure was first out of bed, and he was aware of a dull sense of loss. He had given one glance across at Church's empty bed, and his heart had been heavy. He went over to Handforth, and shook him by the shoulder.

"Come on, old man—rising bell's gone," he said gently.

"Chuck it, Churchy!" mumbled Handforth, turning over. "Go over to Mac, if you want to worry anybody."

"Oh, Handy!" muttered McClure, biting his lip.

"You leave me alone, Walter Church!" said Handforth, sitting up. "I'm blowed if I'll—Eh? Oh, crumbs! I—I'd forgotten!"

"Poor old Churchy!" muttered McClure huskily.

Handforth was thoroughly awake now.

"Not so much of your 'poor old Churchy,' my lad," he said. "Church is all right—just as much alive as we are. They've spoofed you, but they haven't spoofed me!"

"Oh, my goodness!" said McClure, staring

Just as Handforth emerged he saw a figure come out of another dormitory. Hastily Handy crouched back, watching intently. "By jove!" he breathed. "It's Nipper!"

fascinatedly. "You're not still keeping up that belief, are you, Handy?"

"Yes, I am!" replied Handforth. "I meant to make some more investigations last night—only Mr. Lee scotched the scheme. He brought us back to bed, and I don't seem to remember much after that. I meant to get up again, but—"

"It's a good thing you slept," said McClure thankfully.

"Well, anyway, I'm jolly well glad that we went out last night," said Handforth. "We saw that car standing against the Head's doorway—and Mr. Lee was there, too. Didn't I tell you that there was something squiffy going on?"

"But you've had no proof of that!" protested McClure.

"It may not be proof enough for you—but it's proof enough for me," said Handforth firmly. "For some reason or other, they're trying to make us all think that Church is

dead. But I know jolly well that he's alive, and so I'm not worrying—I'm not grieving."

"Oh, Handy, you must!" said McClure, in deep distress. "All the fellows will think that you are callous. They know that Church was your best pal—"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Churchy and you were just about the same—we were all pals, weren't we? But you needn't worry. I shan't let any of the other chaps know that I've guessed the truth."

"The truth!" said McClure bitterly. "Oh, I wish it *was* the truth!"

He was quite shocked at Handforth's attitude, for he could see no reason whatever for it. Every bit of Handforth's so-called evidence was based on his own theories. At least, McClure thought so. True, Handforth had entered the sick-room, after Church had apparently died. He had seen Church then—and had felt his heart beating. But it was only natural that McClure should assume that Handforth had imagined the thing. He knew what a first-class imagination Handforth possessed.

The two chums went downstairs, and they found that most of the other juniors were looking at them in a rather curious way. There seemed to be an awkward feeling about. Tommy Watson, De Valerie, Fullwood and the rest—including Boots of the Fourth and Reggie Pitt of the West House—all knew that Handforth had been dreadfully cut up; and they were rather diffident about sympathising with him. They felt, perhaps, that he would not like to hear words of sympathy from their lips. It was better to leave him alone—to let him have McClure's society only for the time being. They avoided the pair out of respect for them.

And, truth to tell, Handforth and Mac were only too pleased. They didn't feel like talking—they didn't want to discuss the dreadful tragedy which had come over the Remove. That was the way McClure looked at it. Handforth's point of view was quite different. Being convinced that Church was alive, he naturally wanted to escape all discussion. He made up his mind to investigate on his own—to get to the bottom of the mystery.

"The hearse has just come, Handforth!" said Gulliver, of Study A, as Handforth and McClure crossed the Ancient House lobby.

"Shut up, you rotter," said Fullwood, giving Gulliver a glare.

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" asked Gulliver.

"The hearse?" repeated Handforth, with a start.

"Yes," said Fullwood uncomfortably. "I didn't think they'd fetch poor old Churchy away so quickly, though. It's a big motor one, and it drove through into Inner Court about five minutes ago. It's outside the sanny now."

McClure gave his leader a curious glance.

"I say, that's rather quick, isn't it, Handy?" he muttered. "They might have left him here a little longer—until to-

morrow, say. Why should they want to rush him off like this?"

But Handforth didn't hear. He was hurrying towards Big Arch. A tiny doubt was beginning to assail him. The hearse had come! What did it mean?

For a moment or two Handforth's mind was in a whirl. Were all his convictions wrong? The arrival of the hearse could only mean that it had come to fetch the coffin! Handforth wanted to find Nelson Lee—to search out Dr. Brett. He wanted to ask all sorts of questions. But then, before he could collect his thoughts together again, the motor-hearse returned—driving sedately across Inner Court, towards Big Arch.

Crowds of juniors were standing in the Triangle, silent and sombre.



CHAPTER 6.

The Return to Normal!

IT was an impressive scene.

The hearse was an unpretentious one, but splendidly equipped, neverthe-

less. The body of it was quite enclosed, so that no coffin was visible to the eye of the onlookers. But it came through Big Arch at a slow, sedate pace—ample, significant evidence of its true mission.

And as the hearse came through the Triangle, every fellow there uncovered his head, and remained still.

Nelson Lee, who happened to be watching from one of the windows, bit his lip with vexation. This smacked very much of unpleasant deception. For Lee knew only too well that the hearse was empty. It had only been sent there so that there should be no wondering comments later on. The school would believe that Church had gone, and Lee was hoping that St. Frank's would soon resume its normal life. It was better to have the thing over and done with as quickly as possible.

The hearse was going straight back to a big firm of undertakers in London, and there the matter would end. St. Frank's would think that Church was going to be buried in his own native town or village, and thus the secret would be kept. It was essential, of course, that some such move of this sort should be made—otherwise, there would be any amount of strange rumours floating about.

"It seems rather callous, especially when I see all these boys uncovering their heads," murmured Lee. "But it is for the best. It is for the boy's own sake. The school will be only too ready to forgive me when they hear the full truth, later."

There was another reason for this deception, too. Zuma, the mystic, and his companion would probably see this hearse, and they

would come to the only possible conclusion. Certainly they would believe that their victim was being taken away to be buried. And so they would be fooled—so they would leave the boy alone in future.

There were a good many fellows who thought that the early arrival of the hearse was verging upon the indecent. It seemed terrible, to come here the very morning after Church had died—to whisk him away—so that everybody should quickly forget.

Handforth and McClure, standing apart, were regarded by many eyes after the hearse had gone. Quite a number of fellows had expected that Handforth would make some sort of demonstration. But he didn't. He seemed rather stunned.

McClure was moist about the eyes as he looked at Handforth two or three minutes later.

"Well, old man, it's over!" he muttered huskily. "Poor old Church has gone—never to come back again!"

"It can't be!" said Handforth, in a low, fierce voice. "I don't believe it, Mac—I tell you I don't believe it!"

"But you must believe it now, Handy," said McClure. "After all this——"

"I don't care!" interrupted Handforth obstinately. "You can think I'm dotty if you like, but I believe that hearse was empty!"

"Empty!"

"Yes!" said Handforth, little realising how dead on the mark his assumption was. "Why should they put Church in that hearse when he's still alive?"

"But—but——"

"But he's dead, eh?" said Handforth. "That's all you know, my son!"

"Oh, Handy!"

"Yes, it sounds callous, doesn't it?" asked Handforth coolly. "I know what I'm talking about, old son. And when you come to think of it, what else could they do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they're fooling the school that Church is dead, aren't they?" said Edward Oswald. "And so they brought this hearse here, just to keep up the giddy deception. It's my belief that Church is still in the sanny. I'm going to make it my business to pop along there soon, too—just to have a look round. If they try to keep me out, I'll jolly well force my way in!"

It could not be denied that the school was very pleased that the tragic affair was over. As long as the shadow of death hung over St. Frank's, there had been a feeling of awkwardness everywhere. The juniors had spoken in low voices, and they had gone about almost on tip-toe. But now there was no need for that. With surprising speed, St. Frank's resumed its normal life.

By the time breakfast was over, the juniors were beginning to go about as usual, and except for one or two sympathetic comments regarding Church, the juniors went about their ordinary avocations.

Perhaps it seemed rather callous, but actually it wasn't. Out of all the boys at St. Frank's, only a comparative few had known Church at all intimately. The vast majority had scarcely been on speaking terms with him—as a friend. He was just one of them all—just a unit in the great establishment of St. Frank's—and it was not to be expected that these boys should keep up any false grief. They were shocked at the suddenness of the tragedy, but after the hearse had gone the air seemed to be cleared.

And so, when breakfast was over, numbers of Fourth-Formers went off to Little Side for footer practice. The fags larked about in the Triangle, and in the squares. Shouts were beginning to sound again, and yells of laughter were becoming more and more frequent. St. Frank's was soon forgetting! Schoolboy-like, the majority of the chaps were feeling intensely relieved that the shadow had been removed.

Exactly as Nelson Lee had foreseen, there were practically no comments. Just at first some of the fellows had wondered why Church had been rushed off so suddenly—but they naturally assumed that his people had ordered the swift removal.

McClure and Handforth were the only ones really affected, and they stood in rather a curious position. McClure was badly cut up—he was so miserable, indeed, that he could only go about with a long face and with his head sunk upon his chest.

But Handforth was in a different position altogether. He knew that Church was alive—and he was hugging that secret to himself. He wanted to know *why* Nelson Lee and Dr. Brett were keeping up this pretence.

Handforth had always been a keen boy on a mystery, and he saw no reason why he should let Nelson Lee know that he was aware of the truth. He would find this thing out for himself—he would ferret it out on his own! Yes, he would show them! They couldn't spoof him just as they pleased!

Handforth had an obstinate spirit, and he looked at the whole affair in a peculiar light. He thought that he had been slighted—he considered that he should have been taken into the secret from the very first. But as he hadn't been—well, he would go to work in his own way, and confound them all!



CHAPTER 7.

Handforth Keeps It Up!

McCLURE stood on the Ancient House steps, and he was glowering. "That's all they care!" he said bitterly. "On the very morning after poor old Churchy's end, too! What does it matter to them?"

He was looking at a group of Fourth-Formers standing on the other side of the

Triangle. They were not very distinguished juniors, it is true—Armstrong, of the East House, Griffith, Marriott, Steele, and one or two others. One of them had a comic paper, and was reading out some funny jokes apparently, for the others were yelling themselves hoarse with laughter.

"What does it matter?" asked Handforth indifferently.

"I can't understand you!" said McClure, turning on him with a fierce expression. "Is that all you think about Church, then?"

"Church is alive—so we don't need to mourn for him!"

"You'll make me go for you soon!" said McClure, his eyes blazing. "I'm beginning to think that you're absolutely mad, Handy! Didn't you see the hearse go? Oh, my hat! I can't go over it all again!"

"That's good!" said Handforth.

"But it makes no difference to these chaps, in any case," went on McClure, glaring at the Fourth-Formers once again. "They don't share this—this secret of yours, Handy! They believe that Church died yesterday—and that he's dead now. And yet there they are, cackling like a lot of hyenas!"

Handforth started, and frowned.

"That's right!" he said. "I hadn't looked at it in that way. They believe that poor old Church has pegged out, and yet they're behaving in this fashion! All right—I'll soon put a stop to it! We've got to keep it up while we're about it."

It suddenly occurred to him that some of the shrewd members of the Form might think it rather peculiar if he took no action. He was supposed to be grieving—and yet, actually, he felt perfectly serene at heart. True, he was puzzled—he was exasperated by his inability to probe the mystery. But with regard to Church, he had no doubts whatever now. He felt certain that the hearse had come here just for show, and that Church was probably in the sanatorium, rapidly recovering.

There was something rather extraordinary in this blind faith of Handforth's. For it was blind, more or less. He had seen Church after he had come out of his trance, but Handforth was no doctor. He could not have sworn that he had felt Church's heart beating, and that he had really heard him breathing. But he knew it, all the same. His conviction was beyond the ken of ordinary mortals.

He started moving across the Triangle towards the group of Fourth-Formers. Steele saw him coming, and he uttered a low word of warning.

"Better go easy, you chaps," he muttered. "Handforth's coming over!"

"Let him come!" said Marriott, who was reading out the jokes. "What do we care?"

"Well, he might get nasty!" said Armstrong dubiously. "I think he's rather hard hit about Church—"

"Oh, we don't want any sloppy sentiment!" said Marriott, with a sneer. "We're naturally sorry for the chap, but he's gone now.

And thank goodness, too! We can breathe again—we can laugh if we want to!"

And he read out another joke, laughing uproariously. The others joined in—not because the joke was good, but because they wanted to let themselves go a bit. They were tired of creeping about and whispering.

"Stop that!" said Handforth, as he strode up.

"Stop which?" demanded Marriott. "What's the matter with you, Handforth?"

"Never mind what's the matter with me," retorted Edward Oswald aggressively. "I won't have this shouting about in the Triangle. I won't have this laughing."

"Oh, won't you?" said Marriott. "We don't have to ask your permission to laugh."

Buster Boots of the Modern House came striding across.

"Yes, you'd better cut that out, you fellows!" he said hotly. "Haven't you any respect for the dead?"

"They took the body away this morning!" said Steele. "Are we expected to cry, or what?"

"At least, you can display a little sense of decency—even if it's only for Handforth's sake," said Buster. "Church was Handforth's special chum, and—"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Armstrong. "We can't keep up that pretence all the time. We didn't know Church very well—we hardly ever spoke to him, in fact. Why should we shed crocodile's tears?"

"Not likely!" said Merrell. "Let's have another of those jokes, Marriott, old man!"

Marriott grinned and started reading one out. But Handforth grasped his arm, tore the paper away, and crumpled it up.

"If any other fellow laughs I'll smash him!" he said grimly. "I'm going to make you respect poor old Church's memory. If you haven't any decency of your own, I'll knock some into you!"

"Why can't you mind your own confounded business?" roared Marriott. "That paper was mine!"

"So you were the fellow who was doing all the reading out?" asked Handforth.

"Yes, I was."

"All right—put your hands up!"

"Confound you, I won't!" roared Marriott, backing away. "If you have any respect for Church you'll stop brawling in the Triangle!"

Crash!

Marriott went over, having received a glorious right from Edward Oswald. It was just what Handforth wanted. For two or three days he had been inactive, owing to his worry over Church. But now he was just in the mood to relieve his feelings, and he sailed in with both fists.

Those Fourth-Formers scattered like chaff before a scythe. They ran off in all directions, and Buster Boots stood by, grim and approving.

"That's the way, Handy old man," he said. "They belong to my Form, I know, but they're a lot of callous, heartless rotters. You

don't know how sorry we are about Churchy. Only a day or two ago he was walking about as usual, and now——"

"That's all right!" interrupted Handforth gruffly. "I'd rather you didn't say anything, old man."

"Yes, I understand," said Boots, nodding.

But he didn't understand. Neither did any of the others. They thought that Handforth disliked hearing any reference to Church because it pained him. But the real reason was quite different. Handforth wanted to hear no sympathetic words—because he felt, within him, that Church deserved none. For Church was alive—and he was being kept hidden somewhere—for reasons unknown.

There was certainly something uncanny in Edward Oswald Handforth's intuition!



CHAPTER 8.

Getting Embarrassing!

R. CROWELL
coughed.

"Handforth!" he said, after a moment's hesitation. "McClure!"

The Remove had just settled down in the Form-room for morning lessons, and although the recent "death" of Church was still the uppermost subject of conversation, St. Frank's was feeling, generally, that life was now going on its normal, matter-of-fact way.

This was the first time that Mr. Crowell, the Form-master, had seen Handforth and McClure since the supposed tragedy. He was looking at them very concernedly—and with even a touch of tenderness in his eyes. Generally, Mr. Crowell was a stern, stiff sort of man. But he could have his soft moments, too.

"Sir!" said Handforth and McClure, standing up in reply to Mr. Crowell's summons.

"I do not wish to distress you, my boys, by any unnecessary reference to your bereavement, but I feel that a word from me is rather called for," said Mr. Crowell quietly. "I know that Church was your own particular chum. You shared the same study with him, and you slept with him in the same dormitory at night. Therefore, it is only natural that you will feel his loss to a far greater extent than any of the other boys in this room."

"Yes, sir," muttered McClure huskily. "We can't believe it, even now. We can't credit that he's really gone, sir. It's too—too awful!"

Handforth said nothing—because he was such an honest fellow at heart that he felt that if he spoke he would be a terrible hypocrite. He could not voice words of sorrow when all the time he felt that there was no actual reason for mourning.

"And so, in the circumstances, I shall excuse you two boys if you would prefer not

to remain at lessons," said Mr. Crowell briefly. "That is all I wish to say."

"Thank you, sir," said Handforth eagerly.

"Come on, Mac!"

"Oh, but—but——" began McClure.

"We're excused," said Handforth. "Thanks awfully, sir."

He took McClure by the arm, and they both passed out of the Form-room. Nipper and Reggie Pitt and all the other Removites watched them go in some surprise. Handforth was acting in a very strange way. They had expected him to be so different. They had all anticipated that he would be grief-stricken—that he would show it on his frank, open face. Yet, somehow, he didn't seem to be grieving at all. He was only eager—and strangely excited.

"McClure seems to be the more cut-up of the two, sir," remarked Fullwood, as he noticed Mr. Crowell frowning.

"Yes, to be sure," said Mr. Crowell. "Very strange, too! But perhaps Handforth's grief is more deep-seated. Perhaps he is hiding it under a bluff exterior of assumed indifference. Handforth is a strange boy in many ways. A terrible affair, indeed! Well, we must not let it weigh upon our minds. Work must go on."

In the meantime, Handforth and McClure found themselves outside in the Triangle, rather at a loose end. McClure, indeed, was sorry that he had come out. He would have preferred to work, just to take his mind off his misery.

"Why did you drag me out like this, Handy?" he asked.

"Because this is just the chance we want!" replied Handforth briskly. "We shall be able to go to the sanny, and find out if Church is there."

"But—but——" McClure broke off, gulping. "Oh, Handy! Aren't you ever going to regain your senses?"

"You'll see, my son," said Handforth coolly. "You won't have to wait long, either. Once I get fairly on the track, I shall soon discover this secret about Church. I want to see him, too—I want to find out how he is. And if I can help him in any way, I'm his man!"

McClure listened, shocked. It seemed terribly brutal of Handforth to speak in this way. Church was dead—he had even been taken away from the school in a hearse—and yet here was Handforth still speaking as though he were actually alive! McClure hardly knew what to say.

He accompanied Handforth across Inner Court in a dazed sort of fashion. Handforth was making for the sanatorium, as he had said he would. But what on earth was the use?

As it happened, the two juniors met Nelson Lee before they reached the sanatorium door. Nelson Lee's eyes were full of sympathy as he halted before the pair.

"If I can offer you any condolences, Handforth——"

"Thanks all the same, sir, but I'd rather you didn't!" interrupted Handforth gruffly.

"All this sympathy is getting a bit embarrassing."

"Oh, it isn't, sir!" panted McClure. "I don't know what's the matter with Handy—he seems so cold, so indifferent about everything!"

"I cannot quite believe that," said Nelson Lee, looking at Handforth closely.

"I'm not indifferent, sir," said Edward Oswald. "But why should I worry myself about old Church? I'm not quite so green, sir!"

Nelson Lee started ever so slightly, and gave Handforth a sharp, searching glance.

"What on earth do you mean by that, Handforth?" he asked.

"Nothing, sir!" said Handforth, with a wave of his hand. "But you can't spoof me!"

"Good gracious! What are you saying, my boy?"

"Don't take any notice of him, sir!" said McClure frantically. "He's got a bee in his bonnet—he will persist in saying that poor old Church is still alive! He has no reason for it—it's just blind faith. He can't credit it—it's too much for him. And he won't mourn for Church, because he says there's no reason to!"

"Upon my soul!" said Nelson Lee.

He was startled by the revelation of Handforth's amazing faith. The boy was right! Without question, he was on the mark!

"You needn't worry, sir," said Handforth calmly. "I'm keeping the secret—I'm not letting any of the other fellows know. But you might tell me where Church is, and why you're pretending that he's dead?"

For once in his life, Nelson Lee was nearly at a loss for words. But he rapidly recovered himself.

"I think, Handforth, that you had better drop these foolish ideas," he said quietly. "You will only be misunderstood by the other boys if you carry on like this."

"Well, I'll ask you a question, sir—point blank," said Handforth, as a sudden idea occurred to him. "I know you won't tell me a lie—we always trust you, sir. Is Church dead?"

Nelson Lee did not hesitate this time—for any hesitation would have been fatal.

"No, Handforth, you cannot force me to make any statement like that," he said, shaking his head. "I can only tell you that Dr. Brett has already issued a certificate of death, and that poor Church's hearse left the school this morning. The funeral, I believe, is arranged for the day after to-morrow."

And Nelson Lee walked away, his eyes rather troubled.

"Unless we're very careful, that boy is going to ferret out the secret," he told himself. "Upon my word! I never believed that Handforth could be so astute! All the same, I'm delighted with him. Good lad—stout fellow! That's the kind of faith I like to see."

Meanwhile, Handforth was staring at McClure with triumphant eyes.

"Well, what about it now?" he asked, taking a deep breath. "Do you want any more proof?"

"Proof!" said McClure, choking. "You're madder than ever, Handy!"

"But he didn't deny it," said Handforth.

"Well, did you expect him to answer you as if he were a kid in the Third?" shouted McClure. "He told you that Dr. Brett had issued a death certificate, and that the funeral is arranged for the day after to-morrow. Isn't that good enough to convince you? I tell you that Church is dead!"

"And I tell you that he's alive!" retorted Handforth promptly. "Even if I had had any doubts before, I haven't any doubts now! By George! I wonder what Mr. Lee's game is? Never mind! We'll find it out!"

And McClure gave it up as a bad job!

CHAPTER 9.

Nelson Lee Investigates!



WE shall have to keep a close watch on Handforth, young 'un," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully.

It was afternoon now—a half-holiday, in fact—and Nelson Lee and Nipper were walking down Bellton Lane towards the village. Lee had half-suspected that Handforth was on the watch, ready to follow him, and so the Housemaster-detective had taken care to leave the school by a somewhat roundabout route. He was now quite convinced that Handforth was not trailing him.

"Oh, so you've noticed something rummy about Handy then, sir?" asked Nipper.

"I don't blame the boy, of course," said Nelson Lee. "But I believe he suspects the truth. At any rate, he seems to have a settled idea in his head that Church is alive."

"It's only his obstinacy, guv'nor."

"Yes, I believe it," said Nelson Lee. "Handforth is one of those sort of boys who clings tenaciously to an idea. He simply refuses to believe that Church is dead, and all the evidence in the world won't convince him. If you put black before him, and he wanted to think it was white, it would appear white. Handforth's mentality is weird and wonderful."

"He seems as cool and indifferent as you like," said Nipper. "I've noticed it several times to-day. He goes about stopping the chaps from larking and shouting, but I think he only does it for the sake of appearances. He can't really *know* that Church is alive, can he?"

"It is quite sufficient that he suspects," growled Nelson Lee. "And with Handforth a suspicion is a certainty. That's the unfortunate part of it. It is just one of his little characteristics, remember."

"Wouldn't it be better to tell him, sir?" said Nipper gently. "Poor chap! It must



Nipper came to a halt, and his heart gave a little jump. A strange-looking figure—draped in a kind of flowing robe—had suddenly appeared in the clearing. It made no sound and was more like an apparition than a living being!

be rotten for him to be in a state of continual suspense. And if he half suspects already—”

“No, Nipper, it wouldn't do,” interrupted Nelson Lee. “If he is incautious enough to speak about this belief of his, nobody will believe him. But if we tell him the actual truth, and then he repeats it, the fat will be in the fire. The school will soon know that Church is alive, and then we can take it for granted that the countryside will know it, too. Quite apart from all that, it is impossible to take Handforth into our confidence. We have burned our boats.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“I mean that there will be quite a sensation if the truth comes out now,” replied Nelson Lee. “A sensation which will echo not merely in this district, but even to the London newspapers. And we should have a very poor explanation, shouldn't we? But if we leave it until Church is comparatively recovered, and until these enemies of his are laid by the heels, then we shall have a concrete case. Publicity will not matter then in the least. No, we can't tell Handforth. It would be a blunder.”

“You'll simply let him keep this suspicion of his?”

“It is all that we can do,” replied Leo nodding. “As long as it remains a suspicion no harm can be done. And in a way, I am rather glad. It would have hurt me very deeply if Handforth had been badly grief-stricken. It would have been exceedingly painful for all of us who are in the secret. It is better for Handforth to be like this—for the situation now becomes somewhat humorous.”

“Well, we shall have to be jolly careful, that's all,” said Nipper. “Handforth's a hard beggar to shake off. He might even be following us now.”

“Well, if he is, I rather think we shall be able to give him the slip,” said Nelson Lee dryly. “However, there's not much fear of that. We are bound for the wood, Nipper. I want to have a look at that gully.”

“That place where Handforth and McClure saw Zuma and the other Indian performing some rites?” asked Nipper. “What do you expect to find there, gov'nor?”

“I really don't know,” replied Nelson Lee frankly. “I am merely curious to look at

the place. It may give us one or two clues. You never know."

"Have you heard anything about Zuma's movements, sir?"

"Nothing as yet, but I have instituted inquiries throughout the district," replied Nelson Lee. "You need not imagine that I am allowing any grass to grow under my feet, young 'un."

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to communicate with Scotland Yard, sir?"

"An excellent idea," nodded the detective. "I communicated with Scotland Yard last night."

"Oh!"

"I had quite a long conversation over the 'phone with our old friend, Detective-inspector Lennard," continued Lee, "and the Special Branch men are becoming intensely active. Two or three of them, you may be interested to know, are already in this district."

"This looks like business, gov'nor," said Nipper eagerly. "And what about Church? Have you seen him since this morning?"

"I saw him at midday, and his improvement is continuing," said Nelson Lee, with satisfaction. "Dr. Brett is quite delighted. He even hopes that the unfortunate boy will recover consciousness some time this evening. But I have to be very careful in my visits to Moat Hollow. We must not let any comments get about. We don't want the villagers to start talking. Well, here we are. Let us go straight into the wood."

They had arrived at the stile in the lane, and after a glance or two up and down, to see that they were not being observed, they plunged into the recesses of the wood.

CHAPTER 10.

Zuma the Mystic!



N

ELSON LEE hesitated after he and Nipper had penetrated a short distance into the wood.

"I am not sure that you ought to come, Nipper," he said doubtfully.

"Why not, sir?"

"Because there may be danger," replied Lee.

"I'm not afraid of danger!"

"I know that, but this is a special kind of danger," went on Lee. "According to all my inquiries these two Indians, or whatever they happen to be, have not left the district, and it is quite probable that they are still lurking about in Bellton Wood. There are many recesses here, gullies and caves and unknown cavities. I think it highly probable that these men have made the wood their headquarters."

"It seems quite likely, sir," agreed Nipper.

"And you must remember that they are relentless in their methods," continued Nelson Lee. "We know, for certain, that they used a blow-pipe on poor Church. A poisoned dart is a very deadly missile, Nipper, even more deadly than a revolver bullet, for it is absolutely silent."

"I'm game to risk it, gov'nor," said Nipper promptly. "By Jove! But doesn't it seem fantastic? To think that here, in the heart of a peaceful Sussex wood, we've got to be on the look-out for Indians with poisoned darts and blow-pipes! It doesn't seem possible, does it, sir?"

"Unfortunately, it happens to be a reality," said Nelson Lee, "and we must be prepared for almost anything. It behoves us, therefore, to move with excessive caution."

They penetrated further amid the trees, and at last they reached a spot where they could gaze right down into a rocky gully. According to the story that Handforth had told, the mysterious Indians had performed some curious rites down in that gully.

"Before we venture down, Nipper, we'll stay here for a bit and watch," murmured Nelson Lee. "There are some caves down there, I believe, and it would be just as well to make certain— Down, young 'un—down!"

He murmured the last words in a low voice. Instantly Nipper dropped. He remembered those poisoned darts. The next second the pair of them were flat on their stomachs, almost hidden in the rank undergrowth. And some distance away, at the bottom of that long, rocky gully, two figures had appeared. They had just emerged from one of the caves, and were looking about them cautiously.

They were Zuma the Mystic and his assistant!

The very men that Nelson Lee and Nipper had come to search for! There was something strange in this circumstance. For it was obvious that the two Indians had no knowledge that they were being watched. Only in the nick of time had Lee and Nipper dropped to the ground.

Nipper was about to make some remark when he noticed that Nelson Lee was placing a finger to his lips. And so they both remained silent, watching.

The men below were strange-looking specimens. They were brown-skinned—hardy-looking types, dressed in rough clothing. One of them seemed to be gathering sticks, while the other had gone to a little brook, in order to fetch some water. For perhaps five or six minutes they remained in view, and then they both retired again amongst the rocks, penetrating their secret retreat.

"Come, Nipper!" murmured Lee, at last. "We have seen enough."

"But aren't we going to take any action, gov'nor?"

"Not now."

"Why not go down there and arrest them?"

"Because I have no warrant," replied Lee quietly, "and in this country, Nipper, an arrest cannot be made without some such preliminary. Quite apart from that, I do happen to be a policeman."

"Yes, but this is a special case, gov'nor," urged Nipper. "I'm game to have a scrap with those chaps if you like. Wouldn't it be better to lay them by the heels, and get them locked up somewhere?"

"Yes—if we could capture them," replied Nelson Lee. "But you are unduly optimistic, my boy. Those men are tough and wiry, and they are very slippery customers, too. I do not flatter myself that we could capture them single-handed. We must always remember that they will resort to drastic means if they are cornered. I do not fancy a poisoned dart. And there is really no reason why we should be precipitate."

"You think they'll still remain here, then?"

"I am quite certain of it," replied Lee. "This afternoon, Chief-Inspector Lennard will come down; I shall have an interview with him, and at the earliest opportunity a complete search of the woods will be made by a strong force of police. It may interest you to know that the wood is being watched from several quarters already. I do not fancy that our birds will be allowed to fly."

"And will Church be safe at Moat Hollow, gov'nor?"

"As safe as we can possibly make him," said Lee. "At all events, he will be far safer there than he could possibly be at the school. For we can take precautions there that would be impossible in the sanatorium. There is too much publicity at the school—too many boys about, to see what is going on. At Moat Hollow we are quite to ourselves and we can take the necessary steps."

They emerged from the wood a minute or two later, and Lee frowned suddenly as he caught sight of Handforth and McClure standing just a little distance down the road, watching them.

"By jingo!" murmured Nipper. "So Handy's on the prowl, after all! He's seen us, gov'nor!"

"Yes, and we had better take the bull by the horns," said Nelson Lee, pursing his lips.

He walked swiftly down the road, and Handforth came along to meet him. It was Handforth who spoke first.

"Have you been looking for those mysterious men, sir?" he asked eagerly. "Zuma and that cross-eyed pal of his? Have you been—"

"There is no need for you to get these ideas into your head, Handforth," said Lee gruffly. "Nipper and I have been for a walk. Surely we are permitted to do that on a half-holiday?"

"Why don't you tell me what the game is, sir?" asked Handforth, in his direct way. "I might be able to help. I want to help. If there's anything I can do for poor old Church—"

"Handforth, this talk is quite absurd," interrupted Lee. "I want to tell you now that Bellton Wood is strictly out of bounds. And I mean this, Handforth—earnestly. In no circumstances must you enter the wood."

"Then I was right, sir?" said Handforth, his eyes gleaming. "And you're just saying this to keep me out of the secret! It's not fair! If Church is in danger, I ought to be told."

"Why do you assume that Church is alive?" demanded Lee. "How many more times must I tell you, Handforth, that this obsession of yours is sheer nonsense?"

"I don't care how many times you tell me, sir—it won't make any difference," replied Handforth obstinately. "And if you won't let me help—then I shall have to work on the case on my own!"

"Upon my soul! I shall get really angry with you soon, Handforth," said Nelson Lee sharply. "Your obstinacy is most exasperating."

"I'm sorry, sir; but I'm thinking of Church all the time," said Handforth. "If you'll only tell me—"

"I shall tell you nothing!" broke in Lee. "You need not expect to get any information from me, Handforth. I have asked you to keep out of this affair entirely, and I shall expect you to respect my wishes. Furthermore, I once again warn you against entering this wood. In fact, I want your word of honour—here and now—that you will make no attempt to penetrate it."

"That's not fair, sir," protested Handforth. "We've always been allowed to go into the wood—"

"But you are allowed to go in no longer!" said Nelson Lee, rather dangerously. "Remember, Handforth, that I am your Housemaster. I have attempted to be very gentle with you, in view of the exceptional circumstances, but you are forcing me to become stern. I am your Housemaster, and I must exact obedience from you. Now, sir! Give me your solemn word that you will not enter this wood until I remove the ban."

Handforth hesitated a moment, then he sighed.

"You know I can't defy you, sir," he growled. "You are my Housemaster, and I've got to obey. All right, sir—I give you my word."

"Thank you, Handforth," said Nelson Lee quietly. "That is very handsome of you, my boy—and I appreciate it, and I shall remember it. I know that I can take your word implicitly."

He and Nipper walked on, and when they had got out of earshot Nipper whistled slightly.

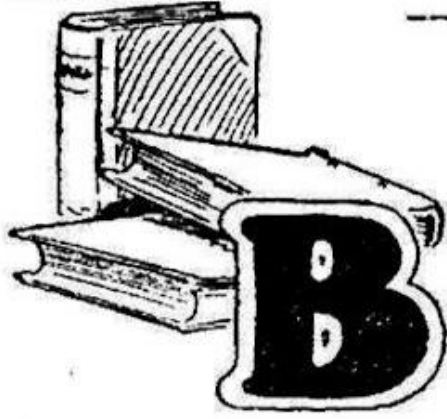
"This is getting pretty awkward, sir," he murmured.

"Yes, Nipper, you are right," muttered Lee. "I was afraid that Handforth would be troublesome. Thank heaven he gave me his word that he would not enter the wood. I tremble to think what might happen if he started making investigations on his own."

"We should have a real death, I am thinking."

"Well, we can be satisfied that Handy won't break his word," said Nipper. "His word is his bond, you know."

Nelson Lee did know it—and he was relieved.



CHAPTER 11.

Still Determined!

BY mid-evening the great bulk of St. Frank's was carrying on as usual. It would not be fair to say that the boys had forgotten the tragedy of Church's illness, and his sudden "death," but it could not be denied that the majority of the fellows were rather thoughtless. Moreover, they had their own affairs to think of—their own little worlds to live in.

But it was noticeable that there was generally a hush when Handforth hove in sight. Very few of the juniors spoke to him. They left him severely alone, and he and McClure went about almost as if they had been sent to Coventry. But the diffidence of the others was purely because of their sympathy for the pair. They didn't know what to say even when they did meet them, and Handforth was so different, too. He was not displaying half the grief that the Remove had expected.

"We can't judge by appearances," Fullwood remarked in the common-room that evening. "Handy is a queer sort of chap in some ways, and I expect he is keeping his feelings all to himself. He doesn't want us to see that he's grieving. So he pretends to be indifferent."

"Just like him!" said De Valerie. "The best thing we can do is to avoid him for a few days, until things get back into the ordinary rut. Time is a great healer, you know."

But if the juniors could have seen Handforth just then, they might have been surprised. For Edward Oswald was in Study D, frowning heavily at McClure. He had just come in, and he had caught McClure in the act of looking over some of Church's old books.

"Put those things away!" he said sternly.

"I won't!" replied McClure. "I've been thinking about old Church—trying to picture him here, sitting by the fireside. Isn't it awful to think that he'll never come back again?"

Handforth frowned.

"I can think of something more awful than that," he said gruffly. "Where is he? That's what I want to know! Where have they taken him to? And how is he getting on? I want to know if he has recovered consciousness, and if—"

McClure gave a kind of groan.

"When are you going to accept the truth, Handy?" he asked wearily.

"Mr. Lee won't give me any information, and even Nipper is as dumb as an oyster," continued Handforth, puckering his brow. "It's no good trying to get any information out of them. They are keeping me in the dark deliberately—because they're afraid that I might give the game away. I know what their object is! They can't spoof me!"

Handforth was feeling angry and resentful. Church was his chum, so why couldn't they tell him the truth? His determination to make private investigations was more firm than ever. Unfortunately, he could not find any line to go upon. He did not know where to start.

"There's some mystery that I can't fathom," he said, sitting on the edge of the table and scowling at the floor. "That's the trouble, Mac—I don't know where to begin. But I shall keep my eyes open to-night, never fear!"

"What do you mean?" asked McClure, looking at him in a rather startled way.

"After lights-out I'm going to do a bit of prowling," replied Handforth. "I believe it's the only way of getting at the truth. Rummy things are going on, and I mean to find out!"

"But you mustn't break bounds!" said Mac.

"You'll see about that, my lad!"

"But you gave Mr. Lee your word of honour!"

"Not to go into Bellton Wood," agreed Handforth. "That's quite right—and I shall keep my word, too. But there are plenty of places besides Bellton Wood, my son! And I'm not ass enough to believe that old Churchy is hidden away in the wood somewhere. No, he's not there—they wouldn't leave him in a place like that in this wintry weather!"

"But Church is dead!" shouted McClure desperately. "Oh, Handy, when will you be convinced?"

"Never!" replied Handforth coolly. "I'm sorry to see you so upset, Mac, but you're a chump. Why can't you have the same faith as me? Church is alive, and—"

"If you break bounds to-night, I'll tell Mr. Lee!" said McClure hotly. "In fact, I'll go to him now—and I'll tell him what you're planning to do! You need locking up, you ass—you ought to be put in chains!"

Handforth reached over, and seized McClure by the arm.

"What kind of a chum are you?" he asked quietly. "You may think I'm mad, and perhaps I am a bit dotty—I don't know, even myself! But what sort of a pal do you call yourself—to threaten to tell Mr. Lee that I'm going to break bounds?"

McClure gulped.

"Sorry, old man," he muttered. "I didn't mean it. But—but I'm so worried about you. You frighten me."

Handforth laughed.

"You needn't worry at all," he replied. "And before long you'll be calling yourself every kind of duffer for not supporting me. Just you wait, Mac—just you wait! If I don't see old Church to-night, you can call me a Dutchman!"



CHAPTER 12.

After Lights-out!

NOW and again McClure found himself catching his breath in with a sudden wild hope. Was there something in Handforth's blind faith, after all? Edward Oswald was a very forcible kind of fellow, and at times he almost succeeded in convincing McClure that he was right.

But then Mac would remember Dr. Brett's pronouncement; he would remember the coming and going of the hearse; he would remember that Church's funeral was fixed for the day after the morrow—and McClure's hard-headed common sense would tell him that miracles could not happen in this prosaic age. He did not possess Edward Oswald Handforth's serene gift of blind faith.

Later on that night, after the prefects had come round to put the lights out, Handforth remained very wakeful. He said nothing to his chum, but simply reposed on his bed, waiting.

McClure was wakeful, too—hoping against hope that his leader would fall off to sleep. It nearly always happened that when Handy made up his mind to keep awake, with the object of going off on some night expedition, he fell asleep.

But he was a different Handforth now! All ordinary school matters were as nothing to him. Japes and games were forgotten. Football had no interest whatever. He was thinking only of Church—of getting in touch with his stricken chum. He wanted to find out where Church was—and to learn why he had been spirited away. For by now Handforth had cast aside the last doubt that had ever assailed him. Church was alive, and somewhere in the district. He would find him! Not a moment's rest would he have until he *had* found him!

"Handy!" came a soft call, after half an hour had elapsed.

"Hallo!" growled Handforth.

"Nothing!" said McClure, in a subdued voice.

"Thought I was asleep, eh?" went on Edward Oswald. "No fear, old son! I'm going to get dressed in a few minutes, and then I shall go out. I'd like you to come with me."

"Yes, I'll come," said McClure, in a hopeless kind of voice.

"You'll only come on one condition," said Handforth firmly. "You'll have to throw all these beastly doubts of yours aside, and

convince yourself that old Church is alive and kicking. You'll have to cut out this rot about him being dead."

"But I can't, Handy!" said McClure. "I've got to be guided by my common sense—"

"Never mind about your common sense!" interrupted Handforth. "All you need is faith."

"Faith!" echoed McClure bitterly. "What's the good of that? Two and two make four, and all the faith in the world won't make them add up into any other figure."

"We're not talking about sums," said Handforth coldly. "Anyhow, you're not coming with me."

"But—"

"I won't have you!" interrupted Handforth. "You've no faith, Mac, and I'm disappointed in you. Don't I keep telling you that Church is alive?"

"But he can't be!" said McClure. "I tell you it's impossible, Handy!"

Handforth said no more. At about a quarter past eleven he rose from his bed, and quietly dressed. He was creeping towards the door when he felt a hand on his arm, and he turned. McClure was looking at him anxiously.

"Don't go, Handy!" he pleaded. "You won't do any good."

"I'm going!" said Handforth briefly.

"Then I'll come with you—"

"Do you believe Church is alive?"

"No," said McClure fiercely. "I can't believe an impossible thing like that!"

"Then you're not coming!" growled Handforth. "I'm sorry, Mac, but it's a pity you can't take my word."

He then went out of the dormitory, leaving poor McClure very upset, and very unsettled.

It was rather curious that Handforth should choose that particular time to emerge from his dormitory. For, just as he opened the door, he caught a glint of light further along the passage. He withdrew quickly, and stood there, watching. A figure came out of another dormitory, and passed slowly down the corridor. Handforth caught a glimpse of the other's face as a moonbeam fell upon it.

"Nipper!" breathed Handforth to himself.

Instantly, he was on the alert. Once again he was convinced that he had made no mistake. Why should Nipper be prowling about after lights-out? What reason could Nipper have for breaking bounds? He was fully dressed—so he was obviously going out somewhere. Here was a chance to make a big discovery!

Handforth knew that Nipper was in the secret—he had felt it all along. Perhaps Nipper would lead him to the place where Church was being kept! It was a fine opportunity.

Unfortunately, Handforth was a fellow of extremes. He either took no precaution at all, or else he took such an excessive amount

of precaution that he spoilt everything. In his anxiety to keep Nipper ignorant of his own attentions, he gave the Remove skipper too great a start, and when Handforth himself got to the staircase, he could see no sign of his quarry. He went down quickly, and searched the lower passages. But Nipper had gone.

Handforth dodged into Study D, went to the window, and flung it open. Then he went out into the West Square, and for some little time he ran round the school buildings, hoping to catch some sight of Nipper. But his efforts were fruitless.

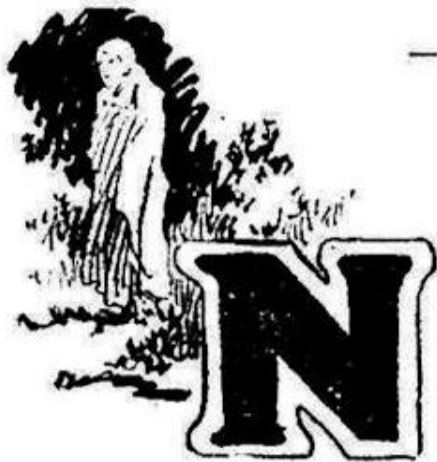
"Rats!" he muttered, at length. "I've lost him! By George! Perhaps he went to the sanny!"

No sooner had the thought come to him than he was hurrying into the Triangle, and towards the sanatorium. But when he arrived there he found every window in darkness. St. Frank's apparently was asleep. The night was cold, but fairly still. Stars were twinkling overhead, and the moon was showing, too.

For some little time Handforth stood watching the window of that room in the sanatorium—where Church had last been seen by him. But Handforth had no desire to climb to the window and look in. He knew that Church wasn't there now. It never even occurred to him that Church might be dead somewhere. He had forsaken that idea long since.

And so, uncertain, and at a loose end, Handforth wandered about the school buildings. He didn't know what to do—he didn't know where to begin.

But chance was playing right into his hands, if he had only known it!



CHAPTER 13.

At Moat Hollow!

NIPPER walked briskly down Bellton Lane towards the village. He had no sense of guilt, as might beset any ordinary junior who was breaking bounds after lights-out. As a matter of fact, he had arranged with Nelson Lee that he should go down to Moat Hollow that night, to make himself useful should he be required.

Dr. Brett and Phipps were on the spot practically all the time—although the doctor was obliged to attend at St. Frank's at certain hours during the day, so that there should be no curious comments.

Nipper had offered to come on duty from about midnight until 4 a.m. He didn't mind losing a little sleep for three or four nights—or even longer, if necessary. This was no ordinary occasion. As he was in the secret, it was just as well that he should do his share.

Nipper found himself wondering about Handforth as he walked down the dark lane.

He couldn't quite make Handforth out. Without question, Edward Oswald had got an idea into his head that Church was still alive.

"Rummy chap!" murmured Nipper, shaking his head. "He can't actually *know* that Church is still alive, particularly after all the precautions the gov'nor has taken to make the school believe that he's dead. Just a case of faith, I suppose. Good old Handy! Once he gets an idea into his head, dynamite won't shift it!"

All the same, Handforth's activity might prove awkward sooner or later. Nipper realised this, and he was half inclined to urge Nelson Lee to take Handforth into the secret. It might even be a good idea to tell Edward Oswald that Church was alive, and progressing well, and then pack him off home for a couple of weeks. McClure, too. That would be quite a safe move, for Church's two chums would be safely out of the way, and the school wouldn't think anything, either.

"We might even let the rumour get about that they've gone off to attend the funeral." Nipper told himself. "Not at all a bad wheeze. I shall have to put it to the gov'nor."

He was aware of a slight thrill as he walked past the dark mass of Bellton Wood. He was in no way afraid, but he remembered that those strange Indians—or Aztec descendants, or whatever they were—were in that wood. They seemed to be in no hurry to depart. They had done their foul work—or supposed that they had—and now they were resting on their oars. Ultimately, no doubt, they would wander off, and would then return to their own country. At least, that was what they were hoping to do. But Nelson Lee was planning otherwise.

Suddenly, Nipper came to a halt, and his heart gave a little jump. He was just passing a gap in the hedge, and it chanced that he could gain a clear view straight into the wood, where there was a little clearing. The moonlight was shining down into this open space, and at the very moment of Nipper's passing a figure appeared.

Only for a second did Nipper gain a glimpse of it. It was a strange-looking figure, draped in a kind of flowing robe. It was hatless, and the face appeared to be extraordinarily pale. It was more like an apparition—a spectre—than a living being. It made no sound, and vanished mysteriously into the blackness of the wood.

"My only hat!" murmured Nipper, undecided.

Should he rush into the wood, and give chase to this figure? Or should he hurry down to Moat Hollow at once, and tell Nelson Lee? He decided upon the latter course. For one thing, it would be a mad sort of project to enter the wood, for it was as black as night under the trees, where the moonbeams did not reach. Thus he would be at the mercy of any enemy that waited in ambush, and Nipper could not forget that these strange enemies of Church's were experts in the use of blowpipes and poisoned

darts. There was no sense in asking for trouble.

He was greatly puzzled, too.

Had he seen Zuma, or his companion? He wondered. Both those men were brown-skinned—and yet that apparition had looked excessively pale. Perhaps it had been merely a trick of the moonlight?

At last Nipper reached the end of the lane, and there, just at the junction of the road—near the bridge which crossed the River Stowe—the high wall of Moat Hollow rose sheer from the road.

The gates were locked and barred. To all intents and purposes, this old house was empty and deserted. All the windows were invisible from the roadway, not that that would have made any difference, for no lights were showing.

Nipper was about to climb the high wall when he paused. The actual wall was not so very high, but an addition had been made to it at the top—an addition of wood. At one spot this wood had rotted away, and there was a distinct hole now. Through this hole one could see the windows of the old house, and Nipper rather wondered that Nelson Lee should have allowed this gap to remain. Passers-by could look in if they wanted to.

In addition, it was an easy method of ingress. Nipper used it himself, and noticed, as he was worming his way through, that the rotten old boards had recently been broken. Perhaps the wind had done the damage. At any rate, it would have to be repaired.

Dropping lightly to the ground inside, Nipper ran across to the house, and tapped lightly upon the rear door. After a few moments it was opened by Nelson Lee himself.

"Ah, here you are, young 'un!" said the detective. "A little early, eh? Why, hallo! Is there anything wrong?" he added, as he caught sight of Nipper's excited face in the moonlight.

"Nothing exactly wrong, sir, but a rather queer thing has happened," replied Nipper, as the door was closed and they went into a small room.

The window was closely shuttered, and heavy curtains were hanging inside as an additional precaution. A lamp was burning on the table, and there was an aspect of cosiness about the place. No fire was burning, since the smoke would have been a tell-tale sign that the place was occupied. But an excellent oil-stove was giving a warm glow.

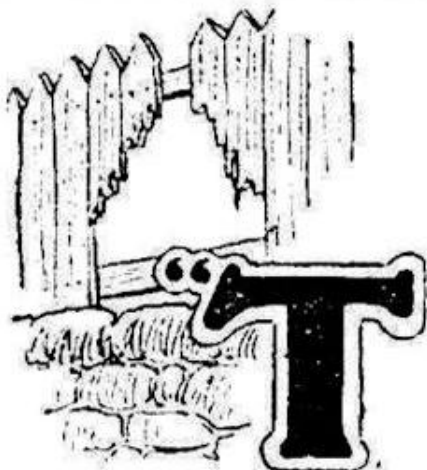
"I saw something in the wood, sir," went on Nipper. "A sort of strange figure, dressed in a cloak."

And he gave a full account of what he had seen. Nelson Lee pursed his lips, and rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he listened.

"Probably one of our cheerful friends," he said, nodding. "I shall be very pleased when they are placed under lock and key, Nipper. I don't think it will be long now. To-morrow, perhaps, at the latest. Events are going to move fast, I hope."

"How's Church, sir?"

"Getting along splendidly," replied Lee, with satisfaction. "Dr. Brett reports that he will be conscious at any minute now, and there is every indication that he will rapidly recover. That deadly poison is being driven out of his system, and the effects will not be lasting. We shall soon have Church on his feet, and back at St. Frank's, too!"



CHAPTER 14.

The Lost Patient!

HERE'S something else, too," said Nipper. "Did you know that there's a big hole at the top of the wall, sir?"

Nelson Lee looked at Nipper sharply.

"A hole?" he repeated. "Where?"

Nipper described the spot.

"That's very curious," said Lee. "There was no gap there when I arrived, an hour ago. I don't like this, young 'un—I don't like it a little bit! Is it possible that those brown devils have guessed the truth? I had better go out and have a look at once."

"I'll come, too, gov'nor."

"No, you won't," interrupted Lee. "If those brown men are in the vicinity, there is a distinct risk of poisoned darts flying about in the air, and there is no reason why we should both go into danger. Stay behind. I shall not be very long."

"Can I go and have a look at Church, sir?" asked Nipper.

"Yes, if you wish."

"Do be careful, gov'nor," said Nipper, rather anxiously. "By the way, who's with Church now?"

"I rather think he is alone," replied Lee. "Dr. Brett is snatching a few hours sleep, and Phipps is busy with certain culinary preparations. We must eat and live, you know."

"All right, sir," said Nipper. "But I hope you're wrong about those Indians jumping to the truth."

It was excellent news to hear that Church was well on the road to recovery. His decline had been swift, owing to the introduction of the deadly poison into his blood. But now that the crisis was over, and he had taken a definite turn, he would soon be convalescent, and normal health would be restored within a very short time. This strange Mexican poison, known as Issi-Kala, was deadly in its immediate effects, but once eradicated from the system, the victim became healthy again.

Nipper went out into the hall of the old house, and softly entered one of the other downstairs rooms. This was the sick room, for the time being. It had formerly been the headmaster's study when Moat Hollow had been a school.

Nipper tip-toed in, and he was greeted by a ruddy glow from the oil-stove. The room looked very cheery. Nipper was rather surprised to see that the window was wide

Handforth gave a wild yell as he broke through the gap in the hedge. Some distance ahead two figures could clearly be seen rushing towards Belton Wood. "Come on!" panted Handy to McClure, and he dashed forward in pursuit.



open. Perhaps Dr. Brett wanted the patient to have as much fresh air as possible. And then, with a sudden gulp, Nipper noticed something else. The bedclothes were flung back, and the bed itself was empty!

He looked round with startled eyes. He could see into every corner of the room by that perfect glow from the oil-stove. Nipper gave a gasp. Church wasn't in the room at all! And the open window—

"Guv'nor!" shouted Nipper, leaping for the door.

Phipps appeared from one of the other rooms.

"Hush, Master Nipper!" he warned. "Your voice—"

"Phipps!" shouted Nipper. "Where's Dr. Brett? Where's the guv'nor? Church isn't here!"

"What!" ejaculated Phipps, startled out of his customary impassiveness.

"What is wrong, Nipper?" demanded Nelson Lee, appearing from the end of the hall. "Why are you making all this noise?"

"Thank goodness you haven't gone out yet, sir!" panted Nipper. "Church isn't here!"

"Not here!"

"No, sir, I believe he's escaped!"

"But this is impossible!" said Nelson Lee, pushing past and hurrying into the sick-room. "The boy was unconscious. Good gracious! He has certainly gone!"

Dr. Brett came running in, sleepy-eyed and alarmed.

"Has anything happened?" he asked, staring round. "I was awakened by— Good heavens! Where's Church? Where's the boy?"

"We don't know!" said Nipper frantically. "I came in here to have a look at him—just to see how he was getting on—and I found the bed empty and the window open!"

"Two of the blankets are missing, too!" said Dr. Brett, after a quick glance at the bed. "This is terrible! Where can the boy be?"

He stared at Nelson Lee with sudden horror.

The famous detective was looking at the bed thoughtfully.

"Do you think those men have been here?" Dr. Brett asked. "Do you think they have kidnapped him?"

"No, I hardly think so," replied Nelson Lee. "Those enemies of Church's would have murdered him in his bed, I should think. They would have no reason to kidnap him, doctor. It is far more probable that Church recovered consciousness and wandered out of his own accord."

"But would that be possible?" asked the doctor, staring.

"I believe so," nodded Lee. "This poison has very peculiar properties. Once the

patient recovers consciousness, and providing he is in ordinary bodily health, he is in possession of all his faculties immediately, except for the fact that he is generally dazed and dull. I imagine that Church must have awakened, and after wandering round the room once or twice, he put some blankets round him and went out through the window. Perhaps he is still close to the house. We must go out—"

Nelson Lee paused and looked sharply at Nipper.

"That figure you saw in the wood, young 'un!" he snapped. "A white face, you say? Dressed in a robe? I wonder!"



Handforth gave a wild yell as he broke through the gap in the hedge. Some distance ahead two figures could clearly be seen rushing towards Bellton Wood. "Come on!" panted Handy to McClure, and he dashed forward in pursuit.

"You—you mean—"

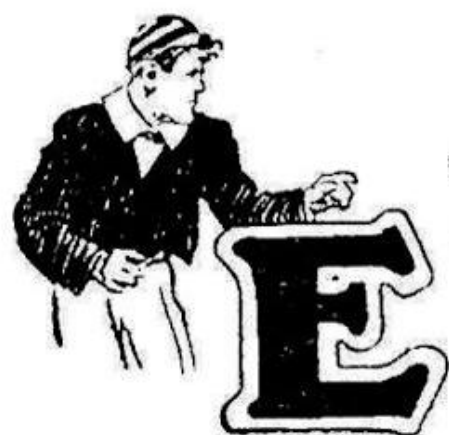
"I think it more than likely that you saw Church in the wood," interrupted Nelson Lee. "He was wandering about aimlessly—like some unfortunate being who has lost his memory."

"You're right, guv'nor," said Nipper, with a gulp. "I know you're right! Of course it was Church, and I mistook those blankets for long, flowing robes! And, I say," he added, "I'll bet Church made that hole in the woodwork, too!"

Complete consternation reigned, but Nelson Lee did not lose his head.

"We must go out at once—all of us!" he said tensely. "This situation is very grave. Church, apparently, is in that wood, and he is only attired in pyjamas and has nothing but the protection of a couple of blankets. Thank heaven he took the blankets! They, at least, will keep him warm. But I am thinking of those men in the wood. If he should change to go near them——"

"Let's get out, sir!" panted Nipper. "Let's go and find him before they make sure of their victim!"



CHAPTER 15.

The Apparition of Study D!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH felt very much like a lost sheep.

He had already wandered round the school buildings about three times, and he was

rapidly coming to the conclusion that this sort of thing was hardly good enough.

And yet, what the dickens could he do?

He knew that Nipper had gone out somewhere, and he was convinced that Nipper had gone to the place where Church was being secretly kept. But Handforth was without any clue. It was an exasperating situation for such an amateur sleuth as he. He didn't know which way to turn. He thought of all the likely spots, and he very sensibly came to the conclusion that it would be a waste of time to go wandering about the countryside at random.

"No, that won't do," muttered Handforth, as he came to a halt in the Triangle. "They may have taken him to some nursing home in Bannington, or to a cottage in Edgemore, or—or anywhere! How on earth can I tell? If I ask Mr. Lee he won't tell me—and Nipper himself is as close as an oyster! The bounders! But they needn't think that I'm going to give it up! I'll soon find a clue, and then, by George, I'll have them all on toast!"

Unfortunately, Handforth was well aware that his words sounded rather hollow. He was just as far from locating Church's whereabouts as ever. It might even be that his chum was still somewhere in the school. Perhaps in the Head's house! This, indeed, was quite an excellent idea, but Handforth couldn't very well go up to the Head's house and break in. He had been as near as possible, and he had noticed that all the windows were black.

"Oh, rats!" he muttered disconsolately. "I've wasted nearly an hour like this, and goodness knows what I'm going to do. How can I sleep with this trouble upon my mind? And what is there to look forward to, anyhow? It'll be just the same to-morrow and——"

He broke off as a thought struck him.

Why not go indoors again, and conceal himself in the upper corridor? He would wait there until Nipper returned, and then swoop out and confront him.

"That's it!" decided Handforth. "That's what I'll do! And I'll threaten to smash him to pieces unless he tells me where old Church is! If

Nipper has any decency in him at all, he'll let me into the secret!"

At least, it was something. Handforth went through West Arch, and took a couple of strides across the Square towards the window of Study D. Then he came to a halt. He was staring hard at the window.

The study was fully illuminated!

And yet he could have sworn that he had switched off the light before leaving. He hadn't closed the window, but he had certainly put the light out. Who was there now?

"Mac, for a cert!" muttered Handforth, frowning. "The silly ass! There's no sense in leaving that light on like that—without the blind being drawn, either!"

And then another thought struck him. Perhaps a master had come down! Perhaps Nelson Lee himself was in the study—waiting for Handforth to return! Edward Oswald received a bit of a jolt, and he became very cautious. Instead of going directly to the window, he crept forward in a straight line, on the other side of the Square.

His object was to draw level with the lighted window, so that he could see inside from a distance. By walking forward, he would be able to take in a view of the entire room, and thus he would be able to see who the person in the room actually was.

Suddenly he came to a halt. Yes, there was somebody in there! He could see a figure standing close against the table, near the door. The figure had his back towards the watching junior, and Handforth frowned. He couldn't quite make out who this mysterious individual was. Somebody with a blanket round him, apparently, and—

"Good heavens!" gasped Handforth faintly.

For the figure had turned and, instantly, he recognised the pale, bewildered-looking features of Church!

Church!

There—in Study D! Just for a moment, Handforth thought that his brain was about to burst. All along he had been sure that Church was alive, and now, with a shock that was like the bursting of a bombshell, Handforth's chilm had come into his vision. There he was, in his own old study, and—

The light suddenly snapped out, and Handforth jumped.

"Church!" he gasped hoarsely.

Was he mad, or had he really seen that apparition? It wasn't a very great distance to the window—only across the Square—and, although Handforth ran like mad, it seemed to him that he took ages to cover the distance. At last he reached the window, and he scrambled over the sill and paused just inside. The study was pitchy dark, and not a sound came from that blackness.

"Church!" said Handforth hoarsely.

But there came no reply from the gloom.

"Church, old man!" repeated Handforth. "Are you there? I saw you just now! I—"

He had groped his way forward and had reached the electric-light switch. He pressed it down, and stared round with wide, startled eyes.

The study was empty, save for himself!

CHAPTER 18.

Too Much For McClure!



EMPTY!

Bewilderedly Handforth stared round. He flung open the door, and looked out into the dark corridor.

He listened. But he could hear nothing, except the heavy thumping of his own heart.

"Church!" he said desperately.

But that strange Presence had completely gone, and had left no sign. Handforth felt rooted to the spot. He didn't know what to do. It was impossible to search the whole building now—single-handed. And, besides, a dreadful sort of fear was beginning to assail him. Had he seen a real living person, or had he seen a ghost? No, no! Not a ghost! For that implied that Church was really dead!

"He was here!" said Handforth fiercely. "I don't know where he's got to, but old Church himself was here in this room a minute ago! But where can he be?"

He hurried down the passage into the lobby, and then tore upstairs. It was rather an unwise thing to do, for there was every likelihood that Church was still downstairs in the junior corridor, and it would be easily possible for him to get outside again without Handforth knowing anything about his exit. And, to tell the truth, this actually happened.

By the time Handforth got down he was no wiser, and a complete search of all the junior studies offered no explanation. That figure had gone—completely.

A sudden thought came into Handforth's throbbing brain, and he immediately rushed upstairs, burst into the dormitory, and found McClure sitting up in bed, miserable and anxious. Mac, in fact, had heard his leader going up and down the corridor a minute or two earlier, and had wondered what was in the wind.

"Oh, thank goodness you've come back, Handy!" he said with relief.

"Mac!" said Handforth, rushing to the bed, and seizing McClure by the shoulders. "I've seen him!"

"What?" gasped McClure.

"I've seen him!"

"You—you've seen whom?" asked McClure, rather fearful of hearing the answer.

"I've seen old Church!" said Handforth breathlessly. "Not ten minutes ago—in Study D! I was out in the Square, and I noticed that the electric light was on. And old Church was in there—close against the door!"

McClure uttered a cry.

"Handy!" he panted. "You're off your head!"

"Yes, I saw him!" said Handforth. "Good old Churchy! There he was, dressed in a blanket or something, but I couldn't tell properly because he switched the light off."

"Did you only see him at a distance?"

"That's all, worse luck," said Handforth.

ANSWERS

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"When I got into the study he wasn't there."

"Oh!"

"He'd gone somewhere — absolutely vanished," said Handforth. "I went out into the passage and looked all over the shop, but he'd slipped away. Goodness knows where he's got to."

McClure groaned. It all sounded so fantastic! Handforth had been compelled to admit that he'd only seen Church at a distance, and when he had entered the study the apparition had gone. It was only too clear to McClure's mind what had actually happened. Handforth had imagined it!

And McClure was startled—frightened.

He did not believe that Handforth had seen a ghost—for McClure was a very sensible youngster, and he did not believe in superstitions of any kind. But he knew that Handforth had a very vivid imagination. Handy had wanted to see Church in Study D, and he had seen him. That was the long and the short of it. It indicated that Handforth was getting into a very serious condition, owing to all his worries.

"He seemed to be in a bit of a daze," said Handforth slowly. "I can't quite make it out—unless he was just wandering about, and came back to Study D in an absent-minded sort of way."

"Oh, Handy, I wish you'd go to bed!" said McClure wearily. "This sort of thing won't do you any good, old man. It'll only turn your brain in the end."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you didn't see Church!" said McClure. "How could you have seen him—when he's dead?"

Handforth breathed hard.

"By George!" he ejaculated. "Are you keeping that up even now—after I tell you that I've seen him?"

"But—but—"

"But nothing!" growled Handforth. "I don't know whether to be happy or wild. I'm jolly happy because I've seen Church, thereby proving that all my suspicions are justified. But I'm wild because he escaped so quickly, and because I haven't any clue. There's no possibility— Wait a minute, though."

He broke off, and he spoke breathlessly.

"A clue!" he went on. "I'm not so sure about that, though. Church was in the study, wasn't he? I haven't looked round the place yet—I was too busy searching for him. But it's quite possible that he left a clue there. Come on—we'll go down and see!"

"No, don't go again—"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "I'll give you two minutes, Mac. I'll wait until you've got your bags on, and then we'll both go down together."

McClure made no objection. He wanted to go with Handforth now—fearing for him. It was bad for Edward Oswald to go wandering about alone. He only got these mad ideas into his head and, sooner or later, he would suffer a collapse. That was the way McClure

looked at it. So he rapidly got into his trousers, and then pulled his slippers on.

"I'm ready!" he said shakily. "Come on!"

Downstairs they went—Handforth full of hope and eagerness, and McClure full of dull misery. He was convinced, inwardly, that Handforth had seen no figure at all. Handy's vivid imagination had been playing him false. On the face of it, the story was outrageous. He had only seen the supposed Church at a distance, right from the other side of West Square.

And yet it was rather peculiar that the electric light should have snapped out. Mac had to admit that he was puzzled over that. How could Handforth have imagined a thing of that sort? One can easily mistake a shadow, or a moonbeam for a figure in the night. But Handforth had distinctly said that the electric was full on, and that it had suddenly been switched off. That was certainly a curious circumstance.

"Of course, I went to work the wrong way," said Handforth gruffly. "I ought to have stayed downstairs, and then got back into the Square. I should have seen him coming out, then. Instead of that I ran upstairs, and wasted a lot of time. Goodness knows where the poor chap has got to by now. But we'll find him, Mac—never fear! We'll find him!"

"Oh, if we only could," said McClure, in a fervent whisper.

CHAPTER 17.

The Clue!



THEY arrived at Study D, and found the light still switched on, just as Handforth had left it five minutes earlier. McClure was

about to enter, when his leader grasped him by the shoulder.

"Wait!" snapped Handforth.

"Oh, you ass!" gasped Mac. "You startled me! What's the matter?"

"Be careful where you walk, my son," said Handforth briskly. "There might be some footprints!"

"If there are any, they'll be yours!" thought McClure bitterly.

They stood looking into the study from the doorway, and Handforth's eyes were eager. He took in every detail. The table seemed to be undisturbed, and there were no indications whatever that any unauthorised person had been in the room. But then, just as Handforth was beginning to lose some of his excitement, he gave a little shout.

"Look!" he panted, running forward. "What's this?"

For a moment or two McClure did not know what his chum had found. Then, going closer, he saw that Handforth was staring down at some little fragments of earth

near the hearthrug. They were curious lumps, as though they had fallen from somebody's heel.

"There you are!" said Handforth triumphantly, as he turned a flushed face towards McClure. "What did I tell you? *Somebody* has been in this room, anyhow! Here's the proof of it, Mac! Perhaps you'll still tell me that I imagined the whole thing?"

"But you've been outside, haven't you?" asked McClure, as sceptical as ever.

"Of course I have."

"Then you must have brought this earth in yourself," growled Mac. "It stands to reason, old man. I don't want to discourage you, or anything like that, but be sensible, for goodness' sake!"

"You—you disbelieving rotter!" shouted Handforth, thoroughly exasperated. "I've told you ten times that I saw Church in this room, and even when I show you the proof you won't believe me! I'm fed up with you, Mac—yes, disgusted, too!"

"Handy!" said McClure in anguish. "I don't want to be beastly, but—"

"I've been outside, but I only went round the school building," interrupted Handforth grimly.

"And you know as well

as I do that there's nothing but gravel and grass all round here. But look at this!"

He held up a piece of earth from the floor. It wasn't exactly earth, but clay—and it was quite damp.

"Examine it!" said Handforth fiercely. "You know that clay, don't you?"

McClure started.

"Why, yes!" he said, in surprise. "There's only one sort of clay about here—it comes from that meadow, next to Bellton Wood. It's that queer kind of red clay—and we always avoid that meadow in wet weather because we get our boots messed up."

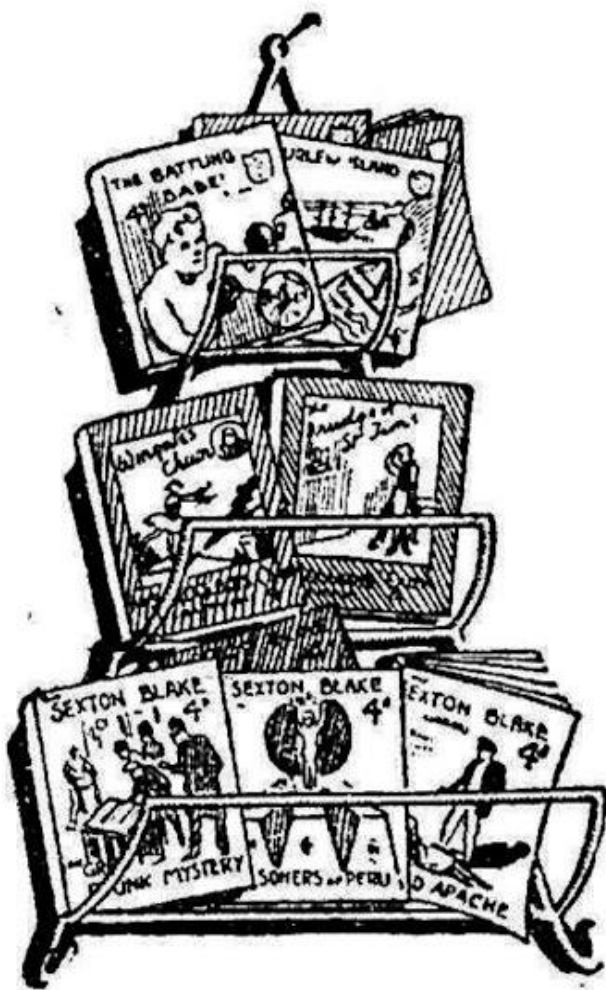
"That's right!" nodded Handforth. "Well, here's some of the clay here—in this room. How do you account for it? I haven't been outside the school premises, and you can have a look at my boots if you like. They're as clean as a whistle!"

McClure stared in wonder—and with a sudden excitement within him.

Here was proof that Handforth had really seen somebody in the study—and McClure's doubts began to fade away. There could be no question about it any longer.

"Handy, old man, I'm awfully sorry!" he said, with real regret. "I

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EVERYWHERE!

didn't believe you at first—and I ought to apologise, I suppose. But this proves it, as sure as a gun! Somebody was in here. But perhaps it was a tramp, or——”

“You ass!” said Handforth witheringly. “Do you think I could mistake a tramp for poor old Churchy? I tell you I saw his face—pale, and with a bewildered look on it. The electric light was full on, and he was standing under it. What do you take me for—a bat? I'm not blind! It was Church, and I'm going to find him, too!”

A wave of wild excitement now came over McClure. There was such conviction in Handforth's tone that he was even beginning to break down the barriers of Mac's stubborn disbelief.

“Oh, if Churchy is really alive!” he said breathlessly. “But—but it seems too wonderful to be really true!”

Handforth laughed—excitedly and happily. “Mac, old man, listen to me!” he said, staring hard at his companion. “Church is alive; get that right into your head—nail it there, and put a padlock on it so that it won't escape! I've known from the very first that Church is alive, and to-night I've seen him!”

“Oh!” murmured McClure breathlessly. “It wasn't my imagination—it wasn't my fancy!” continued Handforth, his voice so vibrant with certainty that McClure felt himself quivering in every limb. “And there's another point, old man! Church was here—and that proves that he has taken a turn for the better. He's not only conscious, but he's able to walk about, in the open air! In a few days' time, by George, he'll be well at this rate!”

“Then—then I've been wrong all the time?” asked McClure.

“Of course you have, old scout!” grinned Handforth. “But you believe it now, don't you?”

“Yes!” said Mac huskily. “I believe it now, Handy!”

He couldn't do anything else. The expression in Handforth's eyes was such that McClure cast aside every one of his doubts, and he shared that same faith as his leader. For now he had seen some evidence. And he was all agog with excitement to help Handforth in the search for the missing Church.

“What are we going to do?” he asked, looking at Handforth with gleaming eyes.

“We're going to that meadow—near the wood!” replied Handforth. “I gave my word of honour that I wouldn't go into the wood itself—and I'll keep to it. But we can go to that meadow, and have a look for footprints, can't we? And we might be able to follow the trail. By George! Imagine it! How great it will be if only we can find Church to-night, and have a word with him! After that I shall have another word with Mr. Lee!” he added darkly. “In fact, several words! And they won't be pleasant ones, either! It's like his giddy nerve to keep us in the dark all this time—and to think that we shouldn't know! If Church was really

dead I should feel it in my bones, and I should be mourning for him. As it is, I'm only anxious to find out where he is, and to know what all this mystery is about.”

“Good old Handy!” said McClure softly. “I say, what a pal you are!”

“Rats!” growled Handforth, flushing. “Let's get outside—let's hurry off on this investigation!”



CHAPTER 18.

The Men in the Wood!

THEY paused when they reached the Triangle. “I think we'd better go down the lane,” said Handforth, in a low voice. “It's better than walking across the meadows—particularly at night. There might be all sorts of potholes and things, and besides, it's damp. If we go down the lane, we shall be able to cut into that particular field by a direct route.”

“All right!” said McClure. “You know best.”

So they climbed over the school wall, dropped to the lane, and set off. The moon was shining again now, and there were only a few clouds in the heavens. The two juniors didn't know what the time was, and they didn't care. They only knew that they were searching for their missing chum, and both had an idea that they were going to meet with some success to-night. McClure, by this time, was whole-heartedly convinced that he had been doing Handforth a wrong. For Handy had been right all along the line!

“Of course, we mustn't be too sure,” Handforth was saying, as they walked along. “Even if we do find some footprints, there's no guarantee that we shall be able to follow the trail—By George,” he added suddenly, “you're only half dressed, Mac!”

“That doesn't matter,” said McClure. “I'd forgotten all about it,” went on Handforth, looking at his chum. “You've only got your bags on, and a pair of slippers! You're not even wearing a proper coat!”

“What do I care?” said McClure. “As long as we keep moving, I shan't come to any harm. Besides, I'm excited. I can't waste time in going back for an overcoat or a cap. Let's carry on.”

“All right, then! But walk briskly.” Handforth was delighted to see the change in his companion. Hitherto McClure had been very sceptical—very exasperating, too. Handforth was pleased, too, because there was now a definite line to work upon. It was slim enough, in all conscience, but it was something. It was better than being at a loose end.

Church had been in Study D; he had left some clay behind him, and that particular clay was only found in a certain meadow close to Bellton Wood. To go straight to that meadow was much better than wandering

about aimlessly, in the faint chance of catching sight of their lost chum.

"Rather a pity we haven't got an electric torch with us," said Handforth, after a while. "We could just do with one——"

"What was that?" interrupted McClure suddenly.

"Eh? What was which?"

"I thought I heard voices. Yes," said Mac excitedly. "Didn't you hear a shout just then? A kind of muffled——"

"Shush!" said Handforth, coming to a halt.

They waited for a few moments, tense and eager.

But, although they both knew that they had heard some peculiar sound, they could not tell exactly what it had been. They only knew that it had come from some spot just ahead, near the wood.

With one accord, they broke into a run and went down the lane. Handforth caught sight of a gap in the hedge, and, swerving, made for it.

"Come on!" he panted.

They broke through, and then Handforth gave a wild yell.

About eighty yards ahead, two figures could clearly be seen, and they were struggling along, carrying a heavy burden. It looked very much like a sack, and they paused in their occupation as they heard Handforth's shout. The next moment, with one accord, they flung down their burden and fled, rushing off at a tangent, and making for the recesses of the wood.

"Come on!" yelled Handforth. "After them!"

"Yes, but——"

"Don't ask any questions!" shouted Edward Oswald. "Let's catch these others first, and make inquiries afterwards!"

It crossed McClure's mind that the dark figures belonged to a couple of poachers or tramps. But there was no time to carry on any further conversation. Handforth was rushing in the wake of the strangers at full speed, and McClure kept up to him.

Indeed, so fast did they run that they overtook the escaping figures just as they reached the dense shadows of the wood. In the pitchy blackness, the pair turned and prepared to fight. It was impossible to see who they were—or even to guess at their character. But their very actions proved that they had been up to no good.

"Don't let them get away, Mac!" panted Handforth, as he grabbed at one of the strangers. "It doesn't matter who they are—hold them! Take that, you rotter!"

Crash!

Handforth's fist crashed home with full force. A gurgling cry went up, and the voice was so strange that Handforth gave a start.

"By George!" he panted. "I believe these chaps are Zuma and his companion! That wasn't an English voice, I'll bet! Come out into the moonlight, you bounders, so that we can see you!"

They struggled on, fighting fiercely. But, unfortunately, these two strangers would not

fight as Handforth and McClure would have liked. Instead of standing up to the battle with clenched fists, they dodged, wriggled, ducked, and adopted every tricky ruse imaginable. Handforth found it impossible to use his famous right again.

A cry of agony came from McClure, and Handforth swung round, alarmed. Mac was on the ground, writhing. He didn't exactly know what had laid him low, but he dimly knew that foul play had been resorted to. Something had struck him on one of his ankles, and then he had gone down, receiving another vicious blow as he fell.

"Are you hurt?" shouted Handforth, rushing over to the fallen McClure.

"It's not much! I'll soon be better!" gasped Mac. "Don't let them escape, Handy! The beasts—the cowardly hounds!"

Handforth turned, but he only heard a thud of feet, and then he just caught a glimpse of the two dim figures bursting into the wood. For a moment he ran forward, intent upon pursuit. But he checked himself, biting his lip. He remembered that he had given Nelson Lee his word of honour that he would not go into the wood.

"Rats!" he said fiercely. "This is what comes of giving a promise! I can't follow the chaps now! I'm helpless! Oh, well, I don't suppose I could have done much, anyhow. It's as black as pitch under those trees."

He turned back, and found McClure sitting up.

"Don't bother about me, Handy!" said Mac. "Hurry back and see what it was those men were carrying."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Handforth, staring.

"Nothing. Only—only I thought——"

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth. "You mean they might have got hold of old Church somehow? You think that——"

He didn't wait to say any more. He rushed off, his brain throbbing with a fresh excitement.



CHAPTER 19.

The Face Over the Hedge!

HANDFORTH came to a halt, surprised and bewildered.

He knew that he had reached the spot where those two strangers had dropped their burden. But now there was nothing on the ground. The moonlight, shining down upon the grass, revealed nothing. There was no bundle of any kind, no indication that it had even been dropped there.

"By George!" muttered Handforth tensely. "Then we were right! It wasn't just an ordinary bundle—a sack of turnips, or anything! I'll bet a penny to a pound that they had grabbed old Churchy, and



A face appeared on the other side of the hedge and, as Handforth saw it, he gave a great yell of joy and wonderment. "Church!" he shouted excitedly.

were trying to pack him off somewhere! There's never any end to this mystery!"

He knew that a sack of turnips could not walk off of its own accord. And yet this bundle had gone! While he and McClure had been fighting the two mysterious figures, the dropped burden had taken itself off somewhere! There could be no mistaking the spot, for this part of the meadow was open.

Handforth went walking round in circles, looking intently. Perhaps there was a hollow of some sort, half hidden in the moonlight. It would be a terrible shame if, after this adventure, they were compelled to go back to bed without having made any discoveries.

And then, just at that moment, Handforth found himself comparatively near to the hedge. The lane was on the other side. He paused uncertainly.

"Now, what the dickens can I do?" he asked, with a frown. "It's no good—"

He broke off, staring. Something had moved on the other side of the hedge, and something was coming into view, too. It was a face, rather eerie and ghostly. The moonlight was shining full upon it, and Handforth gave a great shout of joy and wonderment.

"Church!" he shouted excitedly.

He was only ten or twelve yards off, and

there was Church, standing on the other side of the hedge, looking over! Looking at him! In that flash, Handforth could see Church's eyes—strange, dull, and rather listless. He was looking straight at Handy, too, and yet he made no sound. He uttered no answer.

"Church!" shouted Handforth again.

He ran forward, blindly and wildly. It was more like a charge. He was going straight for that hedge, having some idea of bursting straight through it. It didn't matter to him that there might be thorns in it and jagged pieces of stick. He wanted to get to Church, and to hold him. At last there was a chance of proving his convictions.

But Handforth was too precipitate.

He had got to within six feet of the hedge when he tripped. His foot caught in an unseen root, and he went over like a poleaxed bull. The very force of his run added to the violence of his fall. He went over with a dreadful thud, and rolled head over heels into the ditch near the hedge.

Bewildered, half stunned, and smothered in mud, Handforth floundered there for a few moments. He was utterly dazed, and he was aware of a dull ache in his left shoulder,

where he had struck the ground. He had come a frightful cropper.

It was a full minute before Handy had recovered his wits. He pulled himself out of the ditch, and went round in a drunken sort of circle for a moment or two.

He was trying to remember what had happened. His brain was whirling, and his whole head seemed to be twice its normal size. And then, abruptly, he remembered.

"Church!" he muttered. "Yes, I saw old Church! He was looking over the hedge at me! He was——"

He stared at the hedge wildly, but there was no sign of any face now.

"Why didn't he answer me when I called?" panted Handforth. "Oh, my hat! If I wasn't so certain that he was alive, I'd say I saw a ghost! That pale face—those rummy eyes! Why didn't he answer me?"

He looked about him, to right and to left, and then remembered the gap in the hedge through which he had chased those two mysterious figures only a few minutes before. He went blundering through it, and found himself in the lane. Up and down he ran, calling huskily. But only the echo of his own voice came back to him. Church was not here now; or, if he was within earshot, he did not answer. Handforth frowned disappointedly.

He had been so near to a big discovery, too! First of all, those mysterious men, then the dropping of the bundle, and, finally, that face over the hedge. And, out of all this, Handforth had discovered absolutely nothing. It was a grievous blow to all his hopes. What could he do now?

He came to a halt at last, holding his throbbing head. Then he gave a violent start. Something was moving on the other side of the hedge—something that was pushing against the dead leaves in a stealthy sort of way.

"By George!" muttered Handforth, his senses on the alert again.

A face appeared over the top of the hedge, and Handforth ran forward.

"Are you there, Handy?" asked the face. Handforth came to a sudden halt, and groaned.

"Oh, is that you, Mac?" he asked. "I—I thought——"

There was no mystery about this second apparition. It was only McClure, hobbling along, searching for his leader.

CHAPTER 20.

No Clue!



stand straight!"

McCLURE stared at his leader wonderingly:

"What's happened, Handy?" he asked.

"You seem to be dazed. You can't

He put out a hand, and steadied his companion.

"Thanks!" muttered Handforth. "I—I'm still a bit dizzy, you know! By George! I came an awful cropper just now."

"You look it!" said McClure, staring at Handforth in wonder. "Why, you're all over mud, and there's a terrible graze on your arm here. It's bleeding, too."

"I don't care about that," said Handforth. "I've just seen Church again."

"What!"

The moon had come out now, and McClure looked at Handforth with a sudden scared expression in his eyes.

"You—you've just seen Church again?" he repeated.

NEXT WEDNESDAY!



"Yes."

"When? And how?"

"I was over in the meadow, and I caught sight of something against the hedge," replied Handforth dully. "When I looked up, I found old Church staring at me over the hedge. I shouted to him, but he didn't reply. Oh, Mac, it was just like a ghost this time—a pale face, with the moon shining full upon it! And he didn't answer!" he added bitterly. "It was Church—and he didn't answer!"

McClure felt a creepy sensation down his spine.

"Are—are you sure?" he asked un-

certainly. "Perhaps—perhaps— Oh, Handy! Perhaps we're wrong all the time! It may have been a real ghost!"

"How can it have been a ghost, when Church is alive all the time?"

"But—but—"

"Look here, Mac!" interrupted Handforth grimly. "No more of your doubts! No more of your disbelief! It was Church I saw—Church in the flesh, and not his ghost!"

"I believe you, old man," said McClure unsteadily. "But it does seem a bit queer, doesn't it? If he had really been there, why didn't he answer you? And why was it that you didn't catch him? If he was so close to you—"

"It was my own idiotic fault!" said Hand-

"HANDFORTH'S TRIUMPH!"

In spite of Nelson Lee's precautions, Zuma the Mystic eludes the police.

He is on the point of making another attempt on Walter Church's life when Handforth providentially puts in an appearance. At sight of Zuma, Handy becomes a veritable human cyclone, and his famous right gets busy!

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forth fiercely. "I ran forward too suddenly—too blindly. My foot caught on a root, or something, and I fell headlong. Ye gods and little fishes! I've never had such a terrific fall before! It's a wonder I didn't break my neck! I went clean into the ditch, after rolling over and over about half a dozen times! I'm bruised in every giddy limb!"

"And what about those men?" asked McClure. "Who were they? We couldn't see them in the darkness, but they were a tricky, cowardly couple, anyhow! One of them hacked my shin with a knife, or something!"

"A knife!"

"Yes; there's a bad cut on the shin, and I've bound my handkerchief round it," said McClure. "I think it'll be all right until we get back to the school."

"Look here, I've just got an idea!" said Handforth suddenly. "I know the exact spot where I saw Church looking over the hedge. Let's go along to it now, and see if there are any marks on the bank."

They lost no time. Hurrying along, Handforth searched the hedge closely, and at last came to a halt. He had made no mistake about the spot. Just near there was a sapling drooping over the hedge, and it was a curiously shaped one. It made an excellent landmark.

"This is the place," said Handforth, as he went closer. "Church was looking over the hedge just here—within two yards of the sapling. What a pity we haven't got an electric torch with us!"

But the moon was kindly. It shone full out upon the bank which, at this point, was fairly high. And there, clearly defined in the soft clay-like soil, were a number of footprints. There were many patches of grass and weeds up there, but some parts of the ground were exposed. And these footprints could not be mistaken. They had been made quite recently.

"There you are!" said Handforth. "What did I tell you? A ghost doesn't leave any footprints behind, does it? Church was standing here, Mac—within two or three yards of me! Just think of it!" he added, clenching his fists. "And now we're dished again! There's not a clue of any kind!"

"There are these footprints."

"But what's the good of them?" asked Handforth. "They don't lead us anywhere! Church must have come down into the lane after he saw me. And this road is all tarred, and it's as hard as a rock. We can't follow any tracks here. We're done again—we're no further than we were. Did you ever know anything so beastly in all your life?"

McClure said nothing. He was convinced that Handforth had really seen a figure over the hedge. The footprints told their own story. Mac was beginning to believe, too, that Handforth himself was responsible for this failure. He had been too eager—too precipitate. He had frightened Church away by his very actions. For, if Church was wandering about in a semi-dazed condition, he would naturally have been frightened to see that burly form charging blindly at the hedge.

"Oh, well, we can't do anything now," said Handforth despondently. "Oh, corks! My shoulder! I believe it's dislocated, or something!"

"We're both crocks," said McClure. "I think perhaps we'd better get back to the school, old man, and continue these investigations to-morrow."

Handforth was beginning to think the same. All the enthusiasm had been taken out of him. Truth to tell, he was badly hurt. His shoulder was seriously bruised, and his head had received a bad knock, too.

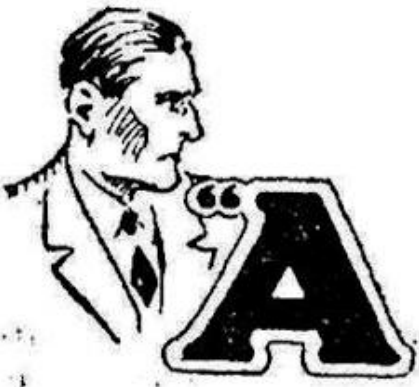
It was throbbing painfully, and he was acutely aware of the fact that his entire left side was soaking. He had fallen right into the mud of that ditch, and he was in a state of great pain and discomfort.

"Yes, we'll get back to the school," he said. "We've had enough for to-night—and yet we've done nothing! That's the worst of it! After all our trouble, we've got to crawl back to our beds, and we haven't got any further!"

"Yes, we have!" said McClure. "I'm glad I came out to-night, Handy—tremendously glad! When I went to bed I thought that you were crazy, and I was certain that Church was dead. But now I know differently. Now I know that old Church is alive, and we're bound to hear something to-morrow."

"We must!" said Handforth, with a sudden fierceness. "But how can we go back? Church is wandering about somewhere—wandering about helpless, an easy prey to those two scoundrels if they find him again!"

The two chums paused uncertainly, not knowing whether to go back to the school or whether to continue their ramblings.



CHAPTER 21.

Safe Again!

ANYTHING to report?"

Nelson Lee asked the question quickly and anxiously. He and Nipper had just encountered Dr. Brett

at the corner of one of the meadows near Bellton Wood, and some little distance from the lane.

"Nothing!" replied the doctor, hoarse with worry. "I haven't seen a sign of the boy! Where can he be, Mr. Lee? This is a terrible business! Do you think those men have got hold of him again?"

"We can know nothing for certain," replied Nelson Lee. "We can only go on searching until we find him. He *must* be found to-night!"

All three had been out for over an hour. They had gone through the outskirts of the wood, they had searched the fields and meadows, and they had failed. They only knew that Church had got out of the window at Moat Hollow, and was now wandering about somewhere, attired only in his pyjamas, a pair of old slippers, and two blankets. Nelson Lee was thankful that Church had taken those blankets. They were thick, warm ones, and if he kept them on him he was not in much danger of taking a chill. But it was a serious affair, nevertheless.

"Phipps is down by the river, I believe," went on Dr. Brett. "I met him not long ago, and he is very worried, too."

"Well, we must separate again, doctor," said Nelson Lee briskly. "You go over towards those ploughed fields yonder, and Nipper and I will take——"

"Hold on, sir!" interrupted Nipper suddenly. "What's that over there?"

He pointed with a quivering finger.

A figure was moving in the distance, right on the other side of the field. It was moving quite slowly and openly—making no attempt to conceal itself. There was something curious about it, too, for there seemed to be no legs—but just a long kind of cloak affair.

"It's him!" gasped Nipper. "Oh, I believe——"

He broke into a run while he was speaking, and Nelson Lee and Dr. Brett were just as quick. They all raced across that grass as hard as their legs would carry them, and as they approached they all uttered exclamations of relief. For in the moonlight, at close quarters, they could see that this figure, indeed, belonged to the unfortunate Church.

He half turned as they came up—as though frightened. But they were upon him before he could make any attempt to flee.

"Church, my boy!" ejaculated Lee, as he caught the swaying youngster by the shoulders.

"Who are you?" muttered Church dazedly. "Where am I? I—I don't seem to remember——"

"Never mind, my boy," murmured Lee. "Quick, Brett! You, too, Nipper. Take him—yes, carry him!"

In a moment, Church was in the doctor's arms.

"Thank heavens!" murmured Brett. "I don't think he's come to much harm. He is quite warm, and he doesn't seem to be exhausted. Feet are wet, I'm afraid—and this outer blanket is very damp, too. But we'll soon have him in bed again, and well wrapped up."

"Do you think he'll have a relapse, or catch a fever, or anything?" asked Nipper.

"I fancy not—for he has evidently been on the go all the time," said Dr. Brett. "However, we can know nothing for certain now. Let us be thankful that he is safe again."

"Hush!" murmured Lee, holding up a hand. "I thought I heard——"

He broke off, and they all stood perfectly still.

Voices came to them—faint and low on the night air. They seemed to come from the direction of the lane, and Nelson Lee pursed his lips. It was impossible to be certain at that distance, but he thought he recognised the tones of Handforth. He turned quickly to the others.

"Be off!" he whispered. "Yes, both of you—and go as quickly as you can. I'll join you later."

"But you may need help, sir!" muttered Nipper. "If those men——"

"There aren't any men here, Nipper!" in-

interrupted Lee. "Don't stop to argue—hurry!"

And Nipper knew better than to argue. He and Dr. Brett went off, the doctor refusing Nipper's offer of aid. Nipper took out a small revolver from his pocket—one that Nelson Lee had given him at the commencement of this search.

In the meantime, Nelson Lee dropped into the lane, after running across the meadow, and he hurried up to the two figures who were wandering slowly and aimlessly towards the school.

"Handforth!" said Nelson Lee quietly. "McClure!"

The two juniors looked round, startled.

"By George!" panted Handforth. "We—we didn't hear you coming, sir!"

"What are you boys doing out here, at this time of night?" demanded Nelson Lee sternly. "Why are you breaking bounds in this fashion? I have already spoken to you, Handforth, and you gave me your word that you would not—"

"That I wouldn't go into Bellton Wood, sir," interrupted Handforth. "Well, I've kept my word—I haven't been there."

"But what are you doing out here?"

"Well, I'll tell you, sir," said Handforth grimly. "I've known all along that Church is alive—"

"How can you be so absurd, Handforth?" broke in the detective sharply.

"Oh, you needn't use that tone, sir," said Handforth, with an aggressive note in his voice. "I've seen Church to-night!"

"What!"

"Yes, so I have!" said Handforth. "I went out of doors, to see if I could get on the track of anything. I happened to go into West Square, and there was Church, in Study D."

And Handforth proceeded to tell Nelson Lee the full details of the last hour's happenings.

Lee listened with great interest, and with a sense of relief. It was quite clear to him, now, that Church had wandered to the school in a semi-dazed state. Somehow, he had been drawn there by reason of the old associations. Probably he would know nothing about it when he fully recovered consciousness. His visit to the school had been more or less mechanical.

There was something else that Nelson Lee concluded, too. Handforth's story of the encounter with the two strangers was significant. It became as clear as daylight that those men were Zuma and his ally. So they had seized Church! And they had been in the act of carrying him into the wood when Handforth and McClure had interrupted them. In other words, Handforth had undoubtedly saved Church's life that night!

Those men had probably had some devilish plan in mind—or they would have dealt with Church swiftly. In their cool cunning they had overstepped the mark—they had delayed.

And Handforth and McClure had spoilt their plan!

But even now there was nothing to prove, definitely, that Church was really alive. Handforth had seen him twice—but he had not spoken to him, he had not been really near to him. Nelson Lee decided that it would be his best plan to say as little as possible. He would admit nothing—and allow these two juniors to think what they pleased.



CHAPTER 22.

A Golden Opportunity!

"WELL, that's the yarn," said Handforth, in conclusion. "After that scrap with those two men we feel a bit rocky, but we're game to carry on, if you like. If you want us to help you to search for Church—"

"I think not, Handforth," interrupted Nelson Lee gently. "You had better go back to bed—both of you."

"But you'll admit that Church is alive, won't you, sir?"

"Unfortunately, Handforth, I shall admit nothing," replied Nelson Lee. "I know that your imagination is a very vivid one, and you cannot be really sure what you actually saw in your study. You say that the figure belonged to Church?"

"I know it did, sir."

"And yet, Handforth, that unfortunate boy's funeral is fixed for the day after to-morrow."

"Oh, I say, sir!" protested Handforth. "Why do you keep it up like this? Why can't you treat Mac and I different from all the other chaps? What's the secret about? Why can't you let us into it?"

"There, there, Handforth—you must not question me," said Nelson Lee. "I will admit this, and I shall expect you to respect my confidence. There are some very mysterious things going on in this district just now. There is danger, and I do not like you boys being out in this way. Naturally, I shall not punish you for to-night's adventures, although you have broken bounds in the most barefaced fashion. I shall be satisfied if you give me your word—"

"No more promises, sir!" interrupted Handforth gruffly. "If I hadn't given you my word about not entering the wood, I should have followed those beastly men!"

"Well, Handforth, I want you to go back to bed," said Nelson Lee. "You, too, McClure. And say nothing about this affair to any of your schoolfellow's to-morrow."

"You can trust us for that, sir," said Handforth. "But it's a pity you can't tell us where Church is. We want to see him. We want to know how he's getting on."

Just for a moment Nelson Lee hesitated. Should he tell these two boys? He felt very tender towards them. After all, they had saved Church's life, and they deserved to be taken into his confidence.

But then Nelson Lee remembered Handforth's habit of "letting things out."

As matters now stood, Handforth knew nothing for certain. In his own mind he was convinced that Church was alive, and he was right. But if he told the other St. Frank's fellows about this episode they would not believe him. They would merely think that he was raving. For he had no concrete proof.

But if, on the other hand, Nelson Lee took him to Moat Hollow, and allowed him to see Church—well, then the case would be altogether different. For Handforth would be able to blurt out that he knew where Church was, and that he had seen him. The St. Frank's fellows would listen, and they would heed.

No, it would be safer—for another twenty-four hours, at least—to keep Handforth still in a state of mystification. By that time, perhaps, those brown rascals would be laid by the heels. Scotland Yard detectives were coming on the morrow, and a big force of local police were to make a great drive through the local woods. So Nelson Lee forsook that momentary idea of telling these two boys the full truth. But it hurt him a little. They deserved it—they ought to be told, if only as a reward for their faithfulness. But it wouldn't hurt them to be mystified for a little longer.

"Go back to the school, boys, and get into bed," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Please don't ask me any questions, because I cannot answer them."

"You mean to keep us in the dark, then, sir?"

"I have told you, Handforth, that I do not want you to ask any questions," repeated Nelson Lee. "I will now say good-night to you."

"Good night, sir!" said McClure.

Nelson Lee turned aside and walked down the lane. After a while, he went through one of those gaps in the hedge and struck off across the meadow. Handforth turned quickly to McClure, and his eyes were gleaming.

"You go back to bed, old man," he muttered. "And as you go up the lane, talk—pretend that you are talking to me!"

"But what the dickens——"

"I'm going to follow him!" said Handforth grimly. "This is a golden opportunity, my son! If only I can shadow Mr. Lee with success, I shall find out where Church is!"

"Oh, but look here——"

"Don't argue—buzz off!" said Handforth tensely. "Don't you understand that we mustn't waste a second? Walk up the lane, and keep talking all the time. Try to imitate my tones, if you can. By George, it'll be a feather in our cap if we can fool Mr. Lee!"

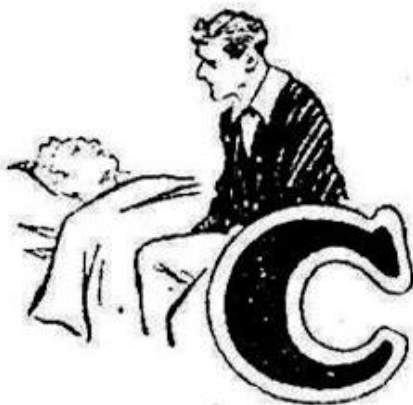
McClure badly wanted to accompany Handforth on this mission, but he could see that his own part was very essential, and it was almost second nature for him to obey his leader's commands.

He hurried off, and commenced talking at once. He went up the lane, and carried on a very creditable conversation, altering the timbre of his voice now and again in an effort to imitate Handforth's lower tones.

Handforth, in the meantime, had crawled through the hedge, and was scouting his way along it, keeping his eye on Nelson Lee's distant figure. It was very black against the hedge, and even if the detective looked back, he would not see any sign of his shadower. In a way, this enterprise of Handforth's was astute in the extreme. Never before had the famous leader of Study D been so shrewd. In his anxiety to find his lost chum, he was revealing quite a genuine flare for detective work.

And the most astonishing part of the whole business was that Nelson Lee was deceived!

It was true that he was preoccupied. He was worrying about Church, and he wanted to get back to Moat Hollow, to find out if the boy had come to any harm. So when he paused now and again, and heard voices from the distant lane, he was satisfied. He took it for granted that Handforth and McClure were on their way back to the school, as he had ordered. He listened until the voices died completely away in the distance. Little did he imagine that Handforth was only a hundred yards behind him, creeping along like a shadow!



CHAPTER 23.

Out of the Unknown!

CHURCH turned over in bed, looked at Nipper curiously for a moment, and then he smiled.

"That's all right, old fellow," murmured Nipper softly. "You're safe now."

Nipper was sitting beside the patient's bed, and Dr. Brett was hovering near. They had just got Church between the sheets, and the room was looking very cosy and comfortable. The doctor was anxious, although now he was no longer worried. There was no sign of fever in Church, and his cheeks had taken on a healthy tinge. The dazed look was beginning to fade from his eyes. Indeed, there was a light of recognition in them as he looked at Nipper.

"Why, it's you, Nipper!" he said feebly.

"Splendid!" said the doctor, with delight.

"Good old Church!" said Nipper, bending forward. "You know me, eh? That's fine! You'll soon be all right now, old man!"

"Yes, of course, you're Nipper!" said Church, with a puzzled expression on his face.

"But where am I? What's happened? Have I been ill, or something?"

"Yes, Churchy, you've been ill," replied Nipper. "But you'll soon be better. Dr. Brett is here, and he'll—"

"Oh, hallo, doctor!" said Church, looking round and smiling faintly at Brett. "I'm in the sanny, I suppose? But it doesn't seem like the sanny!" he added. "What's the matter with me? I can't seem to remember. I've had the most awful dreams!"

"You mustn't talk too much," said the doctor warningly.

"I think it must have been a nightmare," said Church, passing a hand over his brow. "I seemed to be gripped in a sort of paralysis. I couldn't move a hand or foot, and yet I could hear everything. Oh, I don't know—it's rummy!"

He lay back and closed his eyes.

"Don't talk to him," murmured Dr. Brett. "He'll probably sleep."

And Church, lying there, went off into a dreamy sort of doze. He only knew that he was very comfortable, and that everything seemed to be peaceful. Then he dropped off into a pleasant, healthy sleep.

"He's gone off!" murmured Dr. Brett, after two or three minutes. "I thought he would, somehow. Poor boy! It's a wonder to me that he is as well as he is."

"He's getting better," said Nipper happily. "It's wonderful, doctor. He knew us—he recognised us. By to-morrow he ought to be well on the road to recovery."

"He's well on the road already," said Dr. Brett. "You'll notice that he didn't remember anything about to-night's happenings? I expect his mind will remain a complete blank."

He turned as the door softly opened and Nelson Lee came in. The Housemaster-detective was looking anxious.

"How is he?" was his first question.

"Better," said the doctor.

"Better!" echoed Lee. "I am delighted to hear this, although it seems rather too good to be true."

"Well, it's a peculiar thing, but I believe this jaunt into the open air has done him a world of good," said the doctor. "The exercise, the cool air, and everything else combined, has been very beneficial. It was just what he needed, for it has awakened him out of his semi-coma. In fact, he recognised us before he went to sleep."

"He won't suffer a serious relapse because of this adventure?"

"I hardly think so," said the doctor. "He has greatly benefited by his wanderings in the night. I have had a case something similar to this before. One would naturally think that the exposure would do a great deal of harm, but exactly the opposite is the case. Of course, without the blankets he would have been in a very bad state, but he had sense enough to keep himself warm."

"A period of quiet rest now, then a brief spell of convalescence, and he will soon be

himself again," said Nelson Lee, with satisfaction. "But we must be more cautious than ever before. Church has had a very narrow escape to-night."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Nipper.

"I mean that those Indians got hold of him, and he would undoubtedly have been dead by this time but for the intervention of Handforth," replied Lee grimly.

And Nelson Lee told Nipper and the doctor exactly what he had heard.

"It's a mercy those two boys were breaking bounds!" said Dr. Brett. "Splendid fellows! Hang it, Lee, they deserve to be told!"

"They do," agreed Nelson Lee. "Later I shall explain all the facts to them, and I feel sure that they will forgive me. But don't you see how important it is that we should be cautious? Don't you see the significance of this?"

"I don't quite follow," said the doctor.

"And yet it is very simple," replied Lee. "These enemies now know—absolutely, for certain—that Church is still alive!"

"By jingo, yes!" said Nipper, with a start.

"They know that their first attempt has failed," went on Nelson Lee, "so they will naturally do everything in their power to complete their deadly work. They were only prevented to-night by a mere fluke—and by the quickness of Handforth. We do not even know that this place is safe. We can only hope so."

And while they were talking in that room, with Church lying asleep on the bed, a solitary figure was hovering about beyond the outer wall of Moat Hollow. That figure belonged, not to one of Church's enemies, but to his best friend—Edward Oswald Handforth!

"Well, I've tracked him down now," Handforth was saying to himself. "This is where Mr. Lee dodged into. I didn't see him get over the fence, or go in through the gate, but he's in here all right. And that means to say that Church is here, too! What an ass I was not to think of it before!"

For a few moments he toyed with the thought of climbing over the fence and forcing a way into the old house, but a twinge from his shoulder warned him. He doubted if he could do any climbing, anyhow.

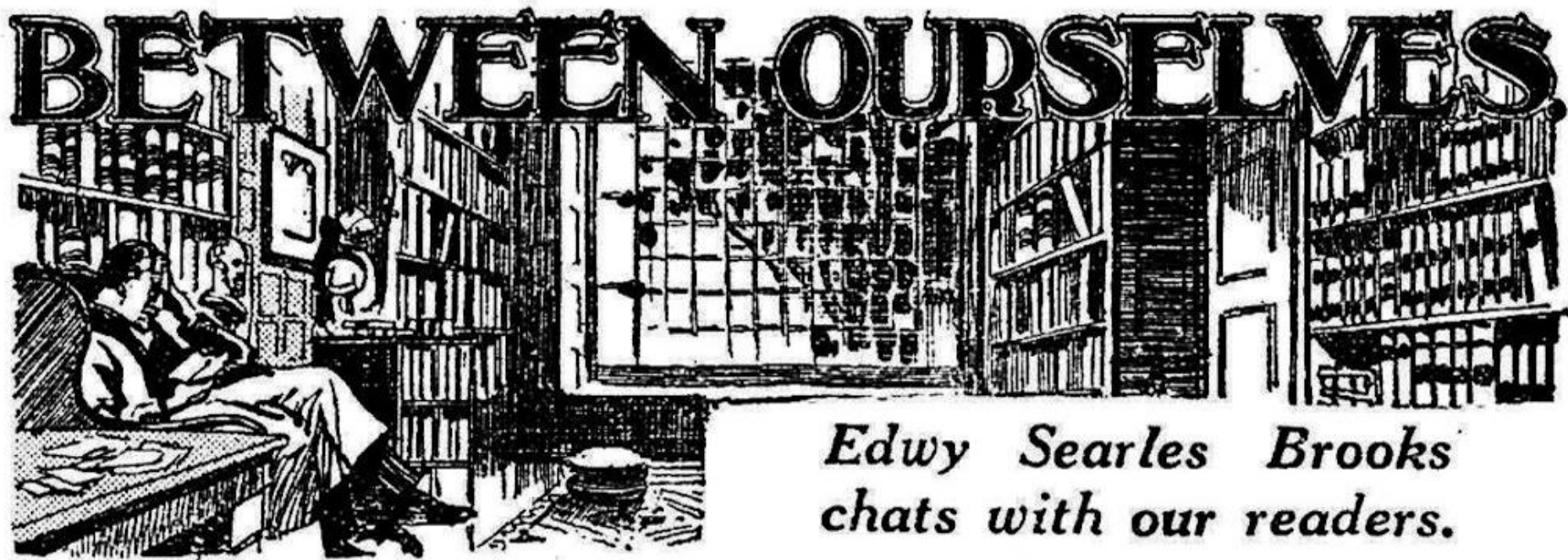
"No, by George, I won't do anything more to-night!" he decided. "I know where old Church is, and that's enough for now."

At last Handforth had found out the hiding-place. The rest could wait. But as he went back towards St. Frank's, dragging his weary feet, he told himself that he would pursue his efforts until he had fitted every section of the puzzle into its proper place.

And when Edward Oswald Handforth made up that stubborn mind of his he allowed nothing to turn him from his purpose!

THE END.

(Next week's grand yarn—and the concluding story of this series—is entitled "Handforth's Triumph!" Don't miss it!)



*Edwy Searles Brooks
chats with our readers.*

NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed: EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, LONDON, E.C.A. Every letter will have my personal attention. Letters of very special merit will be distinguished by a star (*) against the sender's name. My photo exchange offer is still open: my autographed photo for yours—but yours first, please.—E.S.B.

Charles Cruickshank (Aberdeen), "E. C. F."* (Deal), Kenneth Pemberton (Burslem), A. Woods (Eastbourne), Roland C. Beacham (Toronto), R. Bygrave (London, W.2), H. Woollacott (Canterbury), Leslie Alcock* (Greenwich), Eleanor A. Radford* (Stratford), Arthur Bailey (Burnley), Berenice Ellen Simper (Appila, S. Aus.), Raymond J. Ball (Lewes), Harry McMahon (West Broken Hill, N.S.W.), B. F. Rutches (Melbourne), Alma Tack (Sydney), S. Story (Leeds), G. S. Hunnible* (Mistley), L. Cavalier (Tottenham), Eric Warner (Finsbury Park), Jack Whyte (Muswell Hill).

You certainly should feel proud of yourself, "E. C. F." And thanks to the Rev. Mr. Beresford, too, for his unconsciously good services. I think I shall have to print a bit of your letter: "In last week's 'Between Ourselves' you answered a letter to the Rev. Mr. Beresford, and I might mention that the letter has found three new readers. When I showed them that answer, they said that there must be something in the yarns, to appeal to a minister. Then I gave an extra order last week for three copies, and I presented the copies to them, with their promise that if they liked the tale they would become regular readers, and help me to get a St. Frank's League branch about here. As they have all been down and given their orders in, I feel very proud of myself. Do you blame me?" No, I don't blame you in the least—indeed, I thank you for your great enthusiasm. When a reader buys three extra copies on purpose to gain three extra supporters, he is undoubtedly proving his staunchness.

I really must repeat a couple of lines from your letter, A. Woods—for the benefit of those readers who think themselves too old at 16 or 17. "I am 21 this year, but I shall continue to read the 'Nelson Lee Library' because I think it is a man's paper as well as a boy's. That's just my idea, only I rather claim that the 'Nelson Lee Library' is a paper for everybody.

The title of No. 524 of the Old Paper, Roland C. Beacham, is "The 'Tiger' Patrol." Another barring-out series, eh? Somehow, I don't think you'll have to wait long for them. What if I tell you that I've already written a barring-out series? As a matter of fact, they will appear—Whoa! I shall be getting into trouble with the good old Editor if I don't look out! Archie Glen-thorne's birthday, by the way, is on November 11th.

Here are the titles you want, H. Woollacott: 511—"The Siege of Moat Hollow"; 512—"Freed From Bondage"; 513—"Fooling the School"; 514—"Archie's Easter Picnic"; 515—"The Return of Nelson Lee and Nipper"; 516—"Fenton's Cricket Sensation"; 517—"The St. Frank's Test Match"; 518—"Playing For The First"; 521—"Buried Alive."

You tell me that the girls in your office used to jeer at you, Eleanor A. Radford, for reading the Old Paper, and that now they eagerly await for you to pass it on to them. But there seems to be a fly in the ointment, doesn't there? They won't buy a copy for themselves. Well, that's easy, isn't it? Test their enthusiasm by a very simple little device. Refuse to lend them your copy one week (say you've lent it—and *do* lend it—to a non-reader instead), and see what they do. If they buy their own copies, they'll prove themselves to be staunch supporters. If not—well, then they're a lot of spoofers.

St. Frank's is not founded on any particular school, Raymond J. Ball. So I cannot tell you how far Bellton is from Lewes.

Never, Harry McMahon, never! You begin your letter by telling me that I shall be calling you a nuisance for writing me so often. My dear old chap, I don't care if you write to me twice a week—I shall always welcome your letters, and read them with enjoyment. I dare say my ignorance is colossal, but I can't tell you why the U.S.A.

is alluded to by Americans as "Uncle Sam." I dare say some of the readers will write to me, and "put me wise." Then I'll pass on the information to you.

The number of the "Nelson Lee Library" that contained the concluding story of the "Cyclone Smith" Series in it, B. F. Rutes, was called "Fighting For St. Frank's" (No. 463, Old Series, dated April 19th, 1924). Thanks for the souvenir stamp of Canberra. These stamps are fine, aren't they?

I'm glad that you take such a view of my yarns, Alma Tack. "The great advantage you have over other authors is that your stories can be read by people of all ages." That's what you say, and you don't know how pleased I feel. I am always striving to make my simple yarns appeal to everybody, of any size, sex, or age. I am glad, too, that you think that my stories bring you nearer to England.

The numbers that you want, L. Cavalier, are as follows: "The Schoolboy Crusoes"—366; "The Schoolboy Conspirators"—548; "The Schoolboy Stowaways"—159; "The School Museum Mystery"—448.

Here, I say, Eric Warner, are you trying to pull my leg? Just listen to what you say: "I honestly think that the paper is *not* worth twopence now. To make the 'Nelson Lee Library' the old paper it was, cut out the Moor View girls, the St. Frank's League, and all the editorial chats and author's views. We don't want to know anything about the Editor or the Author of the 'Nelson Lee Library.' What we want is the stories. Now, Mr. Brooks, I want to know what you are going to do about this matter? Hoping to hear from you in the Author's Chat." !!!!!???? Now, Eric, how can you expect to hear from me in this Chat if it's abolished? I ought not to have wasted all these lines, really, but I expect they will prove amusing, so that's my excuse.

Edward Conway (Blackpool), Robert Postill* (Worcester), William Ginn (Highgate), James Rishton* (Oldham), Thomas F. Peters* (Birmingham), A. Horton, Jr. (Manchester), "Fed Up" (London, E.C.), H. S. Robinson* (Oasby), Sidney W. Le Rouse (King William's Town, S.A.), William W. Wade (Brisbane), Edward Paine (Montreal), G. Mayell (Kingston-on-Thames), Frank Fletcher* (Manchester), Frank E. Jones (Kidderminster), Edward Houghton (Romiley), "An Ardent Peruser of the 'N.L.L.'"* (Seven Kings), H. Barber (Brighton), "Tennis"* (Birmingham), J. O. D'Arcy (Bournemouth), Charles Francis de Stafford Ongley* (Maritzburg).

If you will send me your name and address, "Fed Up," I will grant your request—providing that you will let me print your name and address with the letter. You say you would like to see your letter in print, but

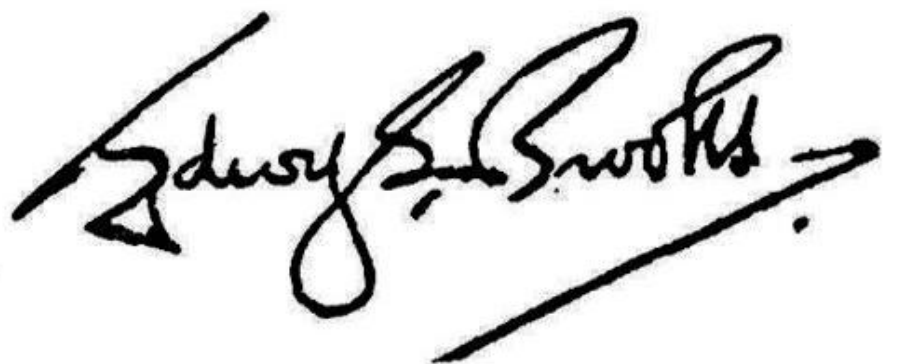
that I wouldn't dare to publish such a facer. Still, although you tell me that you can't afford to waste ink and paper on a fool like me, I am quite prepared to fill a paragraph of this page with your letter if you will let me print your name and address with it. Come on, old man—let me see if you have the courage of your convictions.

I'm afraid I did read your letter in two minutes, William W. Wade. And it took you three hours to type, eh? And now I'm going to disappoint you, too—because all those questions that you want answering must really be addressed to the Editor, and not to me. As you say yourself, such is life!

You needn't worry any longer, Edward Paine. You say: "I wonder who will really read this? Mr. Brooks, a secretary, the Editor, or perhaps the office-boy?" No, I'm the chap who reads all letters that are addressed to me, Edward. How many more times must I repeat this? One of these days, perhaps, I shall be believed.

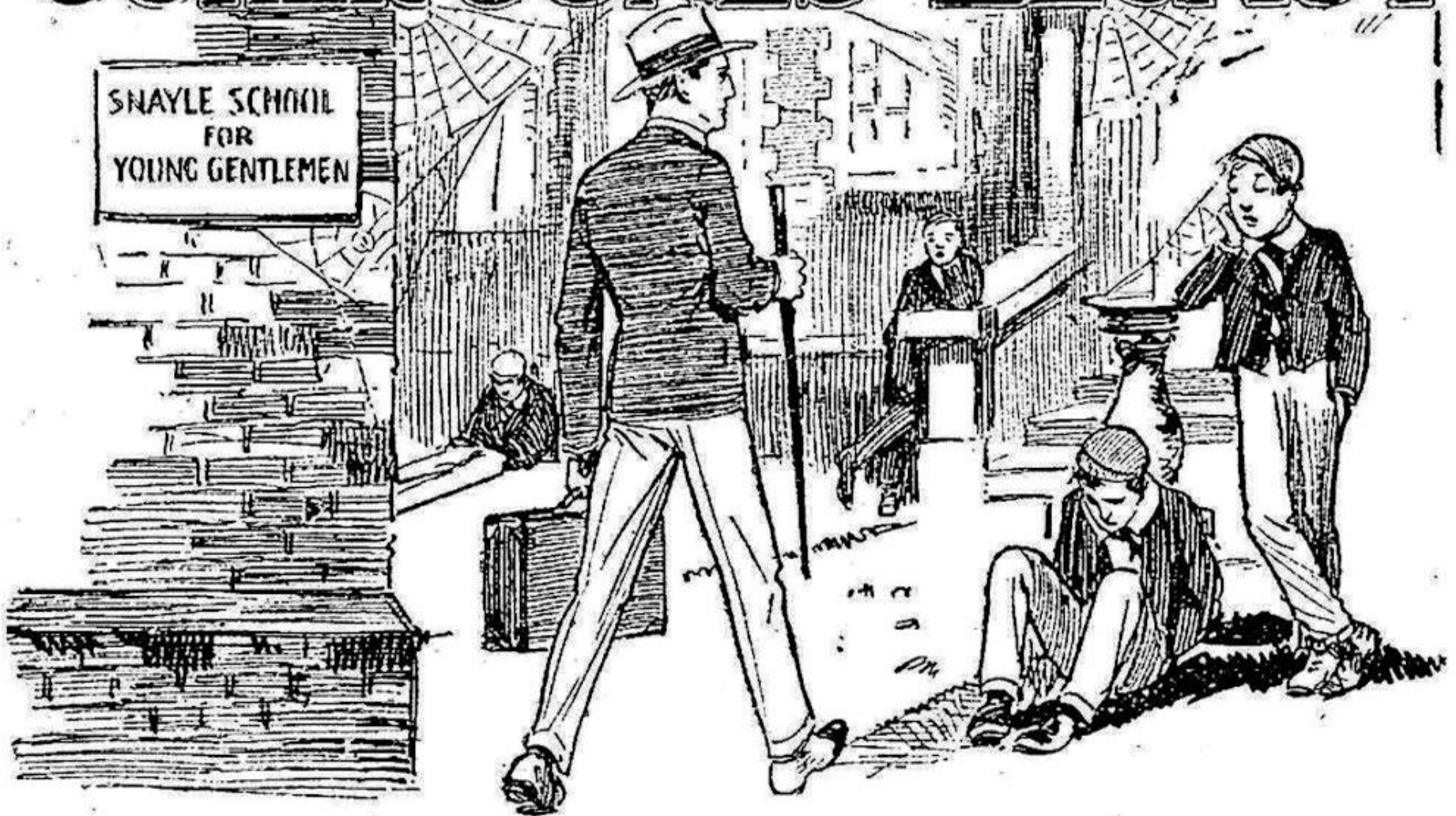
Here is a quotation from your letter, "Tennis," which I hope will prove to be of use to those readers whose parents object to Our Paper. You put it pretty bluntly, but any fathers or mothers who read these words will realise that they are merely frank: "If pig-headed parents who object to their children reading your excellent stories would only realise the immense help they give to acquire a good knowledge of the English language, I am sure that their objections would speedily vanish." Yes, and later on, when their objections *have* vanished, they'll see plainly enough that they *were* pig-headed, won't they?

Edward C. R. Sumner (Leyton), Arthur Fluck (Weston-S.-Mare), Jack Gillick (Belfast), Max Etting* (Johannesburg), "V.R.J.M." (Devonport), "Satisfied"* (Leeds), Jack Gillick* (Belfast), "The Seven"—Dennis Carr, Frank Marlowe, Barry Hamilton, George Suncliffe, Terrence Ashford, Robert Erdling, Harry Markham (London, W.1), Jean Hill* (Christchurch, Hants), Bernard Wm. Messem* (Forest Gate), "R.A.S.H." (Green Lanes, N.8), R. S. Gallagher (Portsmouth), "Dick"* (E. Orange, N.J., U.S.A.), P. W. Jeffery (Leeds), Miss I. M. Coyle* (South Hackney), Percy Young*** (Liverpool), Josephine Davis* (Gospel Oak), R. E. Langley (Wokingham), "A.L.F."** (Deptford Park, S.E.8), James Fletcher* (Leeds).



William Napoleon Browne's Masterpiece Starts To-day!

JOKER JONES' LEGACY!



By WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE

Snayle School is aptly named, for it's about as slow as they make 'em. The scholars hang about the premises, bored stiff, and looking like so many human cobwebs; the Headmaster sleeps—with his mouth open—the greater part of the day. And upon this cheery scholastic establishment, like a whirlwind, descends Joker Jones!

We Meet the Redoubtable Jones!

IT is no exaggeration to state that Robert Wellington Jones was a genius. Perhaps we had better add that his genius, at this present early state of life, had mainly manifested itself in his prowess at practical joking.

Robert Wellington Jones was tall and slim—yes, and handsome. Why should we withhold this fact? It might be as well to explain that his actual name was Robert Jones. But he felt—and rightly—that he deserved an additional name, so that he should be distinguished from countless other Robert Joneses who might be knocking about. So he had inserted the name of "Wellington," and who shall say that it was not an improvement?

At school, Jones had been a redoubtable character. His reputation as a practical joker, in fact, had been second to none. Masters had feared him—and his fellow scholars had treated him with awe and venerable respect.

At Oxford, Robert Wellington Jones had taken his reputation with him, and it is needless to add that he brought his art to such a high pitch

of perfection that no undergrad had really ever felt safe. The whole University had breathed such a sigh of relief when Jones had departed, that semiographs in all parts of the world had recorded it.

Having briefly introduced this remarkable young man, let us now get more closely acquainted with him. We find him, then, lounging in the private office of Mr. Pinch, of Messrs. Pinch, Dolittle & Rob, solicitors.

"And now, Mr. Jones, there is this matter of Snayle School," Mr. Pinch was saying. "I strongly urge you to dispose of this property at once. It was really a hobby of your aunt's, and she annually lost money on the school."

"One moment," said Jones, waving a hand. "I am interested. You tell me that this school is a losing proposition. Why?"

"It is only a small place—accommodating, perhaps, twenty or thirty pupils," replied the solicitor. "It is situated in Essex—at a small village known as Snayle-in-the-Hollow."

"It sounds a slow place," observed Jones. "And it is slow," agreed Mr. Pinch. "I have already given you details of your aunt's full legacy, and you know the extent of your ample

income, Mr. Jones. But this school is really a liability, and I suggest that you dispose of it—"

"It has always been my principle to turn liabilities into assets," interrupted Jones calmly. "Why cannot this school—this lethargic academy of learning—be turned into an asset? What, in fact, is wrong with the place?"

"I must confess that I do not know a great deal about it," said Mr. Pinch. "The headmaster is named Dr. Webb, and I believe he is a man of old-fashioned habits and customs."

"And his staff?"

"Consists of merely one assistant master," said Mr. Pinch. "Good gracious! And that reminds me, Mr. Jones! Dr. Webb's assistant has left the establishment, and I have been requested to obtain a new man, and to send him down. But it is very difficult to get any master to accept the position. The school, you see, is a very small one, and the remuneration, I am afraid, even smaller. I must write and tell Dr. Webb that there may be some delay—"

"Without wishing to upset any of your plans, my dear sir, allow me to make a suggestion," interrupted Jones complacently. "This school, I take it, is my own property—lock, stock, to say nothing of the barrel?"

"Yes, Mr. Jones, it is entirely your freehold property."

"And it is a school which has been allowed to go somewhat mouldy," mused Robert Wellington Jones. "It is, in fact, not only mildewed, but creaky at the joints. An interesting inheritance, Mr. Pinch! And a new assistant master is required. Do I detect a gleam in your eyes? Is it possible that you have probed the scheme which has just entered my mind?"

"I must admit that I cannot quite see—"

"No matter!" said Jones, waving his hand. "For the moment, I had forgotten. You are a solicitor, of course, and therefore we cannot expect too much. But you will write to Dr. Webb this very day, sir, and you will inform him that a new master is arriving on the morrow."

"But, really, I cannot possibly guarantee—"

"The new master is here—waiting," interrupted Jones. "In a word, I shall be the new master."

Mr. Pinch jumped out of his chair.

"You!" he ejaculated. "Really, Mr. Jones, is this another of your practical jokes? I have heard something of your reputation—"

"You may regard it as a practical joke if you wish," said Jones. "But I have a fancy to go to this school, and to give it a thorough examination. It is my property, and I desire to give it the once over before deciding to sell. It is quite likely that I may be able to buck the place up, and to put it on the map of Essex. We shall see—we shall see. Wellington Jones has never yet been defeated, and I fancy he never will be. For the purpose of this experiment, I shall merely be Mr. Jones—so you will write to Dr. Webb and inform him that a new master, of that name, will be dropping in some time to-morrow."

Snayle-in-the-Hollow!

IT will have been gathered that there was no necessity for Robert Wellington Jones to masquerade at Snayle School as an under-master.

But it will also have been gathered that Robert Wellington Jones was a fellow who could not resist a practical joke. As this school was his entire property, he had a mind to visit the place incognito, so to speak. As the boss of the works, he would have been at a disadvantage, but as a mere assistant master he would find the place as

it actually was. There would be no special preparations for him.

Jones had only been down from Oxford a few months, and he had been knocking about London, idling his time away mainly, and he looked forward to this trip with eagerness. He was independent now—for his aunt had left him a considerable fortune. Snayle School was merely a bit of makeweight, and, as it was a liability, Jones saw no reason why it should not be converted into a profitable piece of property.

So, as we will all agree, a first-hand examination was essential. Thus we find Robert Wellington Jones stepping out of an alleged train, somewhere in the wilds of Essex.

Jones had bidden good-bye to the main line some ten miles back, and for the last hour he had been tearing through the countryside, over a single track, at a speed of fully twenty-three miles an hour. It was probably a record for the line, and the engine was now moaning and wheezing, and doing its best to recover from the exertion.

Slumberstead was the nearest point on the railway to Snayle-in-the-Hollow, and Jones had been informed that his curious inheritance lay about two miles from the little town.

Outside the station, he found himself in a wide courtyard, in which stood an ancient vehicle which had probably been, in its youth, a taxicab. Jones regarded the vista with interest.

"Perhaps, in the goodness of your heart, you will direct me to Snayle-in-the-Hollow?" he suggested, addressing the slightly moth-eaten individual who sat in the driving seat of the cab. "I hate to disturb your afternoon siesta, but life is full of these trials."

"Snayle-in-the-Hollow, sir?" repeated the driver, coming to himself with a start. "Straight through the town, up the hill, and the first on the right. You can't go wrong. Mebbe you'd like to take the cab, sir?" he added hopefully.

"I think not," said Jones, inspecting the relic. "In fact, I am sure not. It so happens that I am in a hurry!"

He walked off with long strides, and during his course through the town he saw no less than four people, and the majority of the shops were actually open for business.

Then a winding country lane was reached, and Jones strode down it with ever-increasing foreboding. He turned a corner at the top of a long slope, and there he paused. Below him lay Snayle-in-the-Hollow. He could detect a church tower, at least four inns and one cottage, but otherwise the place seemed to be primeval woodland.

"A scaly prospect," murmured Jones sadly. "Is it any wonder that Snayle School is comatose? It is our stern duty to sojourn amongst these vegetables, and to instill them with life."

He walked on down the hill, and as he was nearing the sleepy little village he almost overran a gateway, which was half hidden amidst a tangle of overgrown laurels. But out of the corner of his eye he beheld a small board, and the small board, upon closer inspection, gave the following inscription to the world:

"SNAYLE SCHOOL FOR YOUNG GENTLEMEN."

Jones tried to shake off the feeling of depression which was enveloping him, and he squared his shoulders and braced himself. It must be understood that Robert Wellington Jones was a fellow who braved the heaviest odds with a stout heart. With a firm stride, he passed through the gateway.

Rounding the laurels, he merged into a kind of weed-grown drive, and the school now stood before him. It was, without question, a mouldy-looking proposition. The house was aged, with

gaunt gables and ivy-grown wings, and over the whole place hung an atmosphere of deadness.

Jones advanced, pausing on his way to inspect an object which adorned a stone sundial in the centre of the drive. The object appeared to be a human being—a boy of about fourteen, who lounged against the sundial, quite motionless, and who stared about him vacantly.

"Very interesting," murmured Jones.

"Eh?" said the boy, with a start. "Talking to me?"

"A thousand pardons!" apologised Jones. "I really thought you were one of the statues. I now perceive my mistake. If you would get into my good graces, kindly shake the barnacles from your feet, and lead me to the headmaster's domain. It may interest you to know that I am Mr. Jones, the new master."

The boy came to attention as if an electric switch had been touched.

"The new master, sir!" He gasped. "This way, sir!"

"The magic of my personality is unfailing," murmured Jones complacently. "I am glad that I came to this benighted spot, for I can see that there is a man's work ahead of me."

We Meet the Head!

FIRST impressions are said, by sundry wise-
acres, to be lasting. Certainly the first impressions of Robert Wellington Jones were undoubtedly deeply engraved. He had already come to the conclusion that Snayle School was the nearest thing he had seen to a cemetery, and he had no reason to alter this view.

The boy who was escorting him, after that one electrical start, had resumed his former moss-grown appearance. He led the way across to a big porch, dragging his feet painfully across the weed-choked gravel.

"Your name, I assume, is Tortoise?" suggested Jones.

"No," said the boy. "Turtle."

"Ah, I was not far wrong," said Jones. "Well, Master Turtle, there is really no reason why I should not begin my operations upon you. What you need is ginger."

And Jones seized Master Turtle by the scruff of the neck, and ran him across the remaining section of the drive with such speed that the gravel flew in all directions.

"Here, I say——" began the victim, in a bleating voice.

"You may say what you wish, my young friend, but nothing can alter my decision," observed Jones smoothly. "It is one of my invariable rules to finish anything that I begin, and since I have decreed that you shall exercise your rust-encrusted muscles, I have no alternative but to take this drastic step."

And Jones lifted the startled boy off his feet, and dumped him into an enormous flower pot which adorned the interior of the porch. It was one of those great ornamental flower pots which usually contain a bush of some kind—but which was now quite empty. The boy, in a doubled-up position, descended right to the bottom of it, and there he remained, firmly wedged.

"There!" said Jones, dusting his hands. "If you can extricate yourself, unaided, within five minutes, I shall have no hesitation in awarding you the first prize for athletics."

Sundry animal-like cries came from the unfortunate victim, but Jones took no notice. He seized the door handle, turned it, and marched into the building. Everything was gloomy within, and Jones found himself in a dark hall. When he looked at the windows he saw that they were grimy, and they had dark curtains over them, increasing the all-pervading gloom.

So far as Jones had seen, this school was quite a pleasant place—as regards the actual building and the situation. It stood amidst the most beautiful scenery of North Essex, and the house was picturesque and quaint. But a blight had apparently descended upon Snayle School. Everything was neglected. Even this hall, in which Jones now found himself, could have been made delightfully bright and cheery. But, no, it was a place of darkness and depression.

As sole proprietor of the whole works, Robert Wellington Jones felt a pain within him. He himself was a fellow of energy—a fellow who loved daylight and bright colours. He liked the fresh air—the sunshine. In that moment, he resolved that vast and overwhelming changes should soon take place at Snayle School. But, first of all, he had this business of interviewing the headmaster. He also wanted to find out the exact conditions here.

Vaguely, he detected a word written across one of the doors on the other side of the hall. Going closer, he bent forward and then found that the word was "Headmaster," painted on the door in faded lettering.

"Ah, we are lucky," murmured Jones. "Well, let us now proceed with the dirty work."

He seized the door handle, and strode into the apartment. Then, just inside, he came to a halt. Even the imperturbable Jones found himself momentarily nonplussed. He had expected to find a dull, dingy room—including a dull, dingy headmaster. But the actuality was rather more surprising than Jones had imagined.

For the apartment that he now found himself in was not merely dull and dingy—it was positively awful. Every wall was lined with bookshelves, and every shelf was covered with dingy, drab-looking volumes. The furniture was antiquated, and the window was practically covered by dark, heavy curtains.

In the centre of the room stood a desk, and it was piled high with books and papers. It is no exaggeration to state that the majority of these papers were yellow with age, and the accumulated dust was thick upon everything.

And there, seated in a chair behind the desk, was undoubtedly the most moth-eaten specimen of humanity that Jones had ever set eyes on.

He was a man of about fifty-five, thin and wizened, and the larger portion of his face was covered in a kind of fungus, which Jones correctly assumed to be whiskers. And when we add that this strange being was sound asleep, with his mouth wide open, we can begin to understand Jones' feelings. Uncouth noises were proceeding from the open mouth, and as each snore caused the air to quiver, the sleeper's bushy eyebrows rose up and down.

In extenuation of Jones' next act, kindly let us remember that he was a born practical joker. His very presence in this place was a practical joke. He was the sole owner, and yet he had come here as an assistant master. And when Jones found a man in this position, the impulse to awaken him by a novel method was irresistible.

Jones, in fact, seized the inkpot, bent forward over the desk, and emptied the black contents into the sleeper's mouth!

"I have always held," murmured Jones, "that gargling is a healthy, if noisy, recreation!"

We are Introduced to the School!

LET us say at once that we have never experienced the unique sensation of gargling with blue-black ink. Therefore, we cannot correctly describe the feelings of the unfortunate headmaster of Snayle School. We can only say that he gave about fourteen

convulsive jerks, sprayed a blue-back mist over his desk, and then sat up with a jerk.

"Good afternoon, sir!" said Jones genially.

"Eh? What the— Glub—glub—"

Although we are willing to state that our descriptive powers are second to none, we must frankly confess that it is sheerly impossible to set down, in writing, the equivalent of the headmaster's mouthings. Let us merely say that he ruined a perfectly good handkerchief, and there-after recovered.

"And who are you, young man?" he demanded, at last. "How dare you enter this room without announcing your arrival? What is your name?"

"Jones—a plain, simple enough name," replied Robert Wellington Jones. "And yet where is there a better name? It is possible that Browne has a rounder sound, and is, indeed, a superior name—"

"Jones—Jones!" interrupted the head. "Yes, of course, I remember! You are my new assistant master?"

"You have guessed my secret," replied Jones, nodding. "And you, I take it, are Dr. Webb?"

"Exactly!" replied the head. "Dr. Webb—Dr. Cobb Webb."

"A fitting name, too," said Jones firmly. "Never, in the whole course of my varied career, have I met a gentleman with such an appropriate name. I am delighted to meet you, Dr. Cobweb—that is to say, Dr. Webb. I trust that you will immediately give me the details of my coming duties. I am eager to get to work—I am champing at the bit with impatience."

Dr. Webb rose to his feet.

"Come with me!" he said, in a tired voice. "The boys are in the school-room at the moment—in charge of the head monitor. I am glad that you have come, Mr. Jones. You are badly needed."

"A truth," said Jones, "which has long since come home to me."

They went out into the dingy hall again, and the headmaster led the way to a big door at the end of it. A second later Jones found himself in the schoolroom, and he winced perceptibly as he looked round.

It was a big room—with plenty of windows. But nearly all these windows were covered with heavy curtains, and only a small percentage of daylight came in. The walls were dirty and drab, and an air of utter mouldiness pervaded the apartment.

There were between twenty-five and thirty boys seated at the long, uncomfortable-looking desks. Most of them looked up, but there was no interest in their eyes. Like everything else connected with Snayle School, the pupils were suffering from incipient stagnation.

"The boys are to be dismissed at four-thirty," said Dr. Webb wearily. "The lesson is Geography, Mr. Jones. Kindly take charge. The clock, I must point out, is out of order, but doubtless you possess a watch."

The headmaster then dragged himself out of the room, and closed the door. Robert Wellington Jones compressed his lips. The head, it seemed, had been only too glad to set him to work at once—without asking any questions regarding his qualifications. He had been accepted as the new master, and Dr. Webb had no suspicion that he was really the proprietor.

No wonder Snayle School was not a paying proposition! No wonder this establishment had gained a reputation for dullness.

Jones looked at the class, and a slow smile overspread his features. The boys had descended once again into their dreary lethargy. They were sprawling at their desks, tired and worn. The brooding atmosphere of the room was disturbed by an occasional snore.

Robert Wellington Jones braced himself.

"I rather think," he murmured, "that the fuse has run its course. Let us now witness the explosion of the bomb!"

(Have patience until next week, brothers! You will then see the result of Robert Wellington Jones' treatment. Does he awaken Snayle School? We shall see!—W. N. B.).

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By MORTON PIKE

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HOW TO JOIN THE LEAGUE

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 83.

SECTION A	READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.
	I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare that I have introduced "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with the Membership Number assigned to me, and Membership Badge.
SECTION B	MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.
	I, Member No..... (give Membership No.), hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me..... (state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.
SECTION C	NEW READER'S DECLARATION.
	I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY."
(FULL NAME).....	
(ADDRESS).....	

INSTRUCTIONS.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. *The second form* is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together, and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. **Member Applying for Bronze Medal:** It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms, bearing the same number, are needed. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of

the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided that each pair of forms bears the same date and number.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medals can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

— — —
These Application Forms can be posted for $\frac{1}{2}$ d., providing the envelope is not sealed and no letter is enclosed.

A FEW OF THE ADVANTAGES OF JOINING THE LEAGUE.

You can write to fellow members living at home or in the most distant outposts of the Empire.

You are offered free advice on choosing a trade or calling, and on emigration to the colonies and dependencies.

If you want to form a sports or social club, you can do so amongst local members of the League.

You are offered *free hints on holidays, whether walking, biking or camping.

You can qualify for the various awards by promoting the growth of the League.

If you want help or information on any subject, you will find the Chief Officer ever ready to assist you.



THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT

All **LETTERS** in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., London, E.C.4. Enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope.

Two Suggestions!

A Stockport reader points out that it is high time we had a section chart of St. Frank's—not only of the school, but of the whole district, showing Bellton, Bannington, and Edgemore.

Another loyal supporter at Gibraltar says it would be no end of a bright idea if Handforth & Co. went for a tour round the Mediterranean, dropping in at all the important places.

You can take it as read that Mr. Brooks and I give close attention to all these suggestions.

A Good Wheeze, This!

The St. Frank's League club at Charters Towers in sunny Queensland is going along swimmingly. The members sport a uniform of the most effective sort. It comprises khaki pants, white shirt, hat with blue-and-gold band, knife, belt and snake-bite cure. They are ready for anything.

A Puzzler From The Peninsula.

A Gibraltar reader asks if London is still the banking centre of the world. I think it is correct enough to say it is—and likely to remain so. Few subjects are more interesting than this key one of banking and credit. If confidence is felt in a country there is never much wrong.

Populations.

A reader down south asks about the populations of the big cities. London—Greater London—figures out at seven and a half millions; Paris three; New York six; Berlin four; Chicago two and three-quarters; Tokio two and a quarter; Moscow two; Birkenhead 145,592; Birmingham 919,438.

A Monkseaton Club.

O.O. No. 1889 sends me an excellent letter about how he spent his holidays. He went to Vienna and did a lot of tramping round, seeing the sights of that famous city. He was there a week, and then he went on to Leipzig, Salzburg, Munich and Hamburg. Next year he is going to camp out in the Lake District. His club is going strong, but the accommodation is not sufficient for a big membership. They have billiards, table-tennis, draughts, and the sports committee organise some decent runs on the "jigger."

Mozart

A Manchester chum asks about the last work of the celebrated composer, Mozart.

This is always supposed to be "The Magic Flute," but the very last work on which Mozart was engaged was, I think, the famous Requiem. There is a poetic and rather sad story of this in his biography.

"O. K."

An Australian reader wants to know the meaning of these letters. They stand for "all correct," and are an Americanism. An official of the U.S. signed a document with his name, and added the letters O.K. He was ever afterwards known as Blank O.K. He had a very happy idea, anyway. Nothing else meets the case so well.

A Cowboy Correspondent.

C. V. Brereton, 50, High Street, Congleton, Cheshire, wants to get in touch with a cowboy, and I see no reason why he should not, as I am putting in his request to readers out West. The N.L.L. goes everywhere, and that is why it is second to none for correspondence.

A Question of Character.

An Isle of Wight student of character has sent me a very neat little summing-up of the various celebrities at St. Frank's. He says Handforth major is a stubborn block-head, glaringly absent-minded, and a fellow who refuses to admit his own faults. And that's that. But the astounding—and pleasing—thing is that a fellow who seems most unreasonable one day bobs up the next as amiable as you like.

Rust And The Bike.

G. R. (Plymouth) asks how he is to keep his bike from getting rusty. An oily rag will do it. The machine must be well rubbed over after one of those spins in the rain, such as we have all known this late, brilliant (?) summer. Vaseline is a good thing to use.

(Continued on next page.)

HOW TO GET YOUR SILVER MEDAL.

All holders of BRONZE MEDALS who have qualified for SILVER MEDALS (see instructions on Application Form on opposite page) and wish to exchange their medals for the higher award should send their bronze medals, accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope, to the Chief Officer, the St. Frank's League, c/o the NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. The SILVER MEDALS will then be sent to them.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

(Continued from previous page.)

Norman Green, 6, Milner Place, Hunslet, Leeds, wishes to hear from readers who have back numbers N.L.L. (old series) for sale.

J. Quint, 11, Globe Road, Uxbridge, Middlesex, wishes to hear from readers in Australia and New Zealand, especially those who are interested in music.

Harry McMahon, 50, Long Street, West Broken Hill, N.S.W., Australia, wishes to hear from readers anywhere in the U.S.A., especially New York. All letters promptly answered.

E. W. Dicks, 9, George Street, Grahams-town, South Africa, wishes to hear from

readers keen on track riding and cycle racing.

Eric P. Tobin, 42, Bacon Street, Bethnal Green, London. E.1, asks Norman S. Stein to write to him.

J. J. Lawrence, 419A, Fox Street, Fairview, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with readers anywhere; ages about 19.

A. L. Moxon, 59, Manor Drive, Headingley, Leeds, would like to hear from anyone who has back numbers of the N.L.L. before 336. Please state numbers.

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