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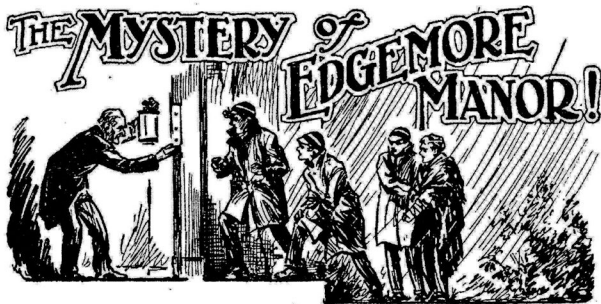


THE MYSTERY of EDGEMORE MANOR!

A thrilling incident from the splendid long story of school life and adventure, featuring the Boys of St. Frank's.



"Go!" thundered Lord Edgemore, pointing with a gaunt finger. "Go from these grounds wretched boys. Handforth and his three companions gazed up at the earl in amazement. Here they were, stranded on this wild night with one of their number injured, and the peer wouldn't give them shelter.

A Grand New Series!Start the First Gripping Yarn Now!

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

There is something dark and forbidding in the ancient Norman structure which has sheltered the Earls of Edgemore for generations. Certainly the behaviour of the present earl is mysterious, to say the least, and no one is more dumbfounded by it and intrigued than Handforth and Co. of St. Frank's.

CHAPTER I.

Homeward Bound!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH, of the St. Frank's Remove, crouched further over the steering-wheel, peering intently through the rain-drenched windscreen. The patch of light cast by the twin-headlamps was almost absorbed by the blackness of the night.

"How the dickens can a chap see through all this smother?" growled Handforth. "Whoa! That was a pretty stiff gust, wasn't it?"

"Nearly blew us over!" said Church. "Steady, Handy! You're not far from the bank on this side——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I'm practically in the middle of the road—and I don't want any driving lessons from you, my lad!"

"We shall get along all the quicker if you don't give Ted any advice," said a voice from the rear.

Handforth half turned his head.

"You dry up, Willy!" he said darkly. "We've had enough from you this evening! By George! I must have been dotty when I

agreed to bring you to the pictures with us! You caused enough trouble in the cinema——"

"Hi!" roared Church. "Do you want to have us all over?"

Handforth gave his attention to the driving again—which was very necessary. For the night was not only excessively dark, but it had turned out wild and tempestuous.

There were four juniors in the cosy little Austin Seven—Edward Oswald Handforth and Church and McClure of the Remove, and Willy Handforth of the Third.

The little car was tackling its task manfully. It was battling homewards in the teeth of the gale, and every now and again an extra heavy gust would almost force the steering out of Handforth's grip.

Rain was coming down in squalls—driving against the windscreen and side-curtains with devastating force. The road ahead, illuminated by the headlamps, was not only streaming with water, but at times there was a spray, almost a foot high, caused by the pelting rain.

This was a change after the recent frost—when the whole of the St. Frank's district

had been in the tight grip of winter. Following the thaw, March had come in like a lion. There had been a high wind earlier in the evening, but it was now a hurricane, and it seemed likely that the weather would get even worse.

Not that the four St. Frank's juniors were in any discomfort. The Austin Seven was very cosy, and although it wasn't a saloon, the side-curtains were effective. Now and again the hood overhead would be pressed downwards by the force of the gale, only to be ballooned out the next second.

Handforth & Co. and Willy had been to the pictures.

But they were late in returning to St. Frank's. They had received special permission to go, on condition that they got back by ten o'clock. It was nearly a quarter-past ten already, and they had only just left Bannington.

Church and McClure and Willy had wanted to come out of the cinema at the end of the big picture, but Handforth major had insisted upon waiting until the end of the programme. The reason for their lateness was therefore simple. In vain, Handforth's companions had argued with him; and it hadn't been much consolation for Edward Oswald to discover that the concluding comedy had been of such drivelling quality that one wondered how time and money could have been spent upon its futile production.

"We shall probably get into a row for being late," said Handforth, as he changed into second gear up a sharp rise. "It's all your fault, too, Mac."

"Mine?" said McClure, from the chummy seats at the rear.

"Yes, yours!"

"Why, you silly ass—"

"If you hadn't started getting out of your seat at the end of the big picture, we should have been home by now," said Handforth unreasonably. "You know how I hate people taking things for granted."

"Ted's right!" said Willy. "We all wanted to go out, and he naturally opposed us. That's just his obstinate nature. If we had begged him to remain for the last picture, he would have insisted upon going. The trouble with you two chaps is that you don't know how to manage him."

Church and McClure granted.

"Does anybody know?" asked Church bitterly.

"You cowards!" said Handforth, in a scathing voice. "You rotters!"

"Why are we cowards?"

"Because you know jolly well that I can't biff you!" replied Edward Oswald helplessly. "I'm driving—I've got to keep my attention on the road, and I can't leave go of the steering-wheel—so you're insulting me, and you think that you're safe! But you're not, my lads! Just wait until we get home—and then I'll wipe up the lot of you!"

Three chuckles were the only replies he got, and it was on the tip of his tongue to

make further scathing remarks when he suddenly uttered an ejaculation, and jammed on the brakes!



CHAPTER 2.

Handforth is Obstinate!

"HALLO! What's the matter?" asked Church, as he was violently jerked by the sudden stoppage.

"Do you think I'm going to drive through that?" demanded Handforth.

They had just arrived at the bottom of a slight dip, and the Austin Seven was at a standstill, her engine throbbing impatiently. Church bent forward, and peered through the rain-spattered windscreen.

"It's nothing to be scared about!" he said. "Only a watersplash. I expect the ditch has flooded, and the overflow is going across the road. I don't suppose it's more than eight or nine inches deep."

"Chance it, Ted!" said Willy, leaning forward in the rear seat. "Yes, it'll be safe enough! Crawl through slowly, and—"

"I'm driving this car!" interrupted his major coldly. "I'm the owner of it, too! And if you think I'm going to risk getting stuck in the middle of that giddy watersplash, you'd better think all over again."

"What are we going to do, then?" asked McClure. "Get out and carry the giddy car over?"

Handforth took no notice of this sarcasm. He peered anxiously at the miniature flood. As Church had said, it wasn't very much. Merely a stretch of storm-rippled water, about fifteen feet across, at the bottom of the dip. It looked deep, but the chances were that the Austin would get through without any trouble.

But Edward Oswald Handforth was in an obstinate mood. All his companions urged him to carry on—therefore he decided not to carry on.

"No, we can't do it!" he decided. "You chaps seem to think that this car is a whacking great Rolls-Royce. Well, it's not! It's only an Austin Seven, and we can't risk getting stuck in the middle of that flood. We're going back!"

"Good!" grinned Willy. "That'll mean a longer ride—and it's a glorious night for driving. As for being late—who cares? We might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb!"

"But there isn't any other way home!" said Church impatiently. "What's the good of being an ass, Handy? Why don't you make up your mind, and drive through it? If you like, I'll get out and find out how deep the water is."

"You'll stay where you are, Walter Church!" said Handforth tartly. "This is my car, and I'm the driver—and I don't want any advice from my passengers. I'm going to make a detour."

"A which?"

"We'll go home through Edgemore," went on Handforth firmly. "Yes, that's it! We shall only have to go back about half a mile, and then we can take that side lane. It might be a mile or two farther, and we shall get to the school twenty minutes later. But that's better than being stuck in the middle of a flood!"

"Go ahead, then!" said Church, in a weary voice.

The others knew how useless it was to make any commonsense objection. If Handforth had made up his mind to take a long detour through the hamlet of Edgemore, there was nothing more to be said. It was certainly his car and, while he was at the wheel, he would be boss.

"Perhaps you're right, Handy," said McClure diplomatically. "After all, it isn't very far round—and I expect you'll be able to dodge all the big flints."

"Flints?" repeated Handforth.

"Well, you know as well as I do that those little side lanes are smothered with beastly flint stones," said McClure. "But, as you say, it's your car—and they're your tyres. As for the mud, I expect we shall churn our way through somehow!"

Handforth hesitated for a moment, and his three companions almost thought that the trick had been done. But suddenly Edward Oswald uttered a mocking laugh.

"Trying to spoof me, eh?" he said, with a fierce glare at Mac. "By George! You nearly did it, too! Do you think I'm going to be scared by your talk about flints and mud? No jolly fear! We're going to make that detour, and I don't care if it's midnight before we get home!"

He put the gears into reverse, and after one or two movements backwards and forwards, the little car was speeding back along its own track, running much more freely now, for the roaring wind was behind it.

"You can never tell with those water splashes," said Handforth, in excuse of his conduct. "They may be only six or seven inches deep, or they may be two or three feet, and we should look fine, shouldn't we, dumped in the middle of a three-foot flood, unable to go backwards or forwards?"

After a short run, during which Church and McClure and Willy made no comment, a narrow turning was reached, leading sharply off to the left. Handforth drove the Austin Seven into this, and they were soon bumping along over an atrocious road. It was so narrow that the grass banks came down closely on either side, and Handforth was obliged to drive very cautiously.

The little car slewed and skidded continually, and now and again there was an ominous bump as a big stone was encountered.

Then, with startling abruptness, an extra hard bump was followed by a fierce hissing sound, which arose even above the buffeting of the gale. "The steering wheel tugged at

Handforth's fingers, and the car rattled ominously.

"That's done it!" said Willy complacently. "Puncture!"



CHAPTER 3.

The Joys of Motoring I

HANDFORTH brought the little car to a standstill, and he switched off the engine. There was dead silence, except for the howling of the wind through the trees which lined the by-lane. Silence, except for the drumming of the rain on the fabric hood of the little Austin.

"Back tyre!" said McClure gloomily. "I expect the cover is torn to shreds!"

"Poor old Handy!" said Church, with sympathy. "What a rotten job it will be for him changing the wheels!"

Edward Oswald Handforth started.

"For me?" he said thickly.

"It's your car—and you're the driver!" said Church, not without a certain amount of pleasure. "We shouldn't dream of interfering, Handy. You chose to come along this lane, although we warned you about the flints——"

"Dry up about the rotten flints!" roared Handforth furiously.

His chums and minor were not affected by his outburst of rage. For they knew that he was angry with himself. It had been a sheer act of folly to come along this muddy, flint-smothered lane—and now Handforth had his reward. It wasn't quite cricket to rub it in too much.

"A puncture!" went on Handforth, in despair. "Oh, my goodness!"

"The spare wheel's all right, isn't it?" asked McClure anxiously.

"Yes, as far as I know," replied Handforth, who seemed a little stunned. "Of all the rotten luck! A puncture—a burst tyre! And here we are, late already, and it's raining cats and dogs!"

"That's just the way of things, Ted," said Willy sagely. "On a clear moonlight night, with an hour to spare, we could ride over a mile of broken bottles and never get the ghost of a puncture. These things always happen when you haven't any time—and when it's pouring with rain. Haven't you been a motorist long enough to know that?"

Handforth grunted, for he was in no mood to appreciate Willy's pleasantries.

"Well, I shall need some help!" he said gruffly. "I can't change the rotten wheel by myself, I suppose? I shall need a light, and somebody will have to operate the jack, and we need the brace for the nuts. By George! I used the brace two or three days ago, when I took the spare wheel off

to clean it, and I don't believe I put it back under the seat!"

"You've got a spanner, haven't you?" asked Church.

"Yes, thank goodness," said Handforth, with relief. "But it's an awful job, getting one of these wheels off with a spanner. They're wire spokes, and you can't jolly well get the spanner in between the giddy things! Rats, blow and bust! Why didn't I put that brace back?"

It was some little time before he gathered enough courage to open the door and get out. Any possibility of obtaining help was remote. They were in the wilds of this rutty lane, and they were miles from anywhere.

The rain was coming down harder than ever before—beating fiercely against the hood and the side curtains, driven by the shrieking gale.

Handforth's chums knew very well that they would have to get wet through. There was no help for it. They couldn't let Handy jack the car up, and change the wheel, all by himself. So it was a question of all hands to the pumps.

Even so, the job was bad enough.

On a fine evening, on a dry road, and with all the necessary tools, the wheel could have been changed easily within ten minutes. But here, in this muddy lane, and without the brace—a most necessary tool for changing the wheel—it was a very different story!

Before long, all the four juniors were ploughing about in the mud—which came well over their ankles. The off-side back tyre was not only flat, but the tube was forced out from beneath the cover. Fortunately, the juniors had an electric torch with them, and this was a great help.

Within a very few minutes they were soaked through, and after that it didn't matter much. The wind was roaring like a thousand demons, and the rain hissed into their faces and down their necks.

But at last the task was accomplished.

The little car was jacked up, the offending wheel was removed, and the spare wheel put in its place.

"It's a bit slack, but we shall have to chance it!" bawled Handforth, against the roar of the wind.

"Can't we pump it up a bit?" yelled Willy.

"Somebody borrowed my giddy pump yesterday," replied Handforth, in a bellow.

The others did not press him—but they suspected that he himself had been the borrower. In all probability the pump was in the garage at St. Frank's. It was just like Handforth to leave it behind.

But although the wheel was changed, and the car was now ready for continuing the journey, the youthful motorists were by no means happy.

If one puncture, why not two? But it was no good meeting trouble half-way, so they all got back into the car and sogged

down upon the seats, each one leaving a pool of water where he sat.

Then Handforth started the engine, and they continued the journey—tense and anxious.



CHAPTER 4.

Disaster I

IT was half-past eleven when they started off again, as Willy had seen by glancing at his watch. But Willy said nothing. What was the use? For some time Handforth had been very silent, and the others knew that he was penitent. He was sorry now that he had been so obstinate. And Edward Oswald was always silent under such conditions.

The sturdy car jogged and jolted over the bad road, and every time there was a heavy jar, the juniors expected to hear the bursting of another tyre. But the minutes passed, and everything was all right.

"We shall be in Edgemore soon," growled Handforth, at length. "And after that we shall be on a good road all the way home."

"First time I knew it was a good road," said Church.

"Well, it's better than this."

"That's not saying much!" put in McClure. "This isn't a road at all—it's worse than a ploughed field! Here, Willy, you keep over your own side!"

"I can't help sliding along when the car swerves," said Willy defensively. "And what about your feet? Wouldn't it be a good idea for you to keep your feet to yourself instead of clumping them all over me?"

"I didn't know I had any feet!" said Mac, shivering. "They're so numb that I can't feel 'em—"

"Good egg!" shouted Handforth suddenly. "Here's Edgemore!"

They were all relieved.

The tiny hamlet of Edgemore was reached, and this meant that well over half of the journey had been accomplished. It was now under two miles to St. Frank's, and the juniors knew every inch of the road. True, it was only a lane, and it was a flint-strown lane, too, but they all hoped for the best.

There wasn't a light of any kind in the village as they purred through, and in next to no time they had left the last cottage behind. Edgemore was a very small place.

"The trouble is, what the dickens shall we say when we get in?" asked Church anxiously. "Somebody's bound to be waiting up for us—Feston of the Sixth, I expect."

"More likely the Housemaster!" said McClure.

"Yes, I expect Mr. Lee will be on the watch for us," said Handforth coolly. "But

I don't jolly well care! We've got a good excuse."

"Have we?" asked Willy. "First time I knew it!"

"Rats!" said his major. "Of course we've got a good excuse! We couldn't go along the main Bannington Road because of a serious water splash, so we made this detour, had a puncture, and—"

"Hold on, Ted!" interrupted Willy sternly. "You're not suggesting that we should tell fibs, are you?"

"Who's talking about telling fibs?"

"You are."

"Why, you young ass—"

"You distinctly told us to say that we were stopped by a serious water splash," said Willy. "And you know jolly well, Ted, that that water splash wasn't any bigger than a cup of tea!"

His major grunted as he bent guiltily over the wheel.

"Oh, go on—I don't care!" he said gruffly. "I suppose you're right—all of you. I was an ass to make this detour! We could have been through that water splash in two minutes if only I'd had enough sense! But I was a silly idiot, and there's nothing else to be said."

And his companions let it go at that. Whenever Handforth realised that he was in the wrong, he always made handsome admission. True, it was only on rare occasions that he did realise he was in the wrong. It was only when the case was exceptionally blatant that he so knuckled under.

"By George!" he said, after Edgemore had been left behind. "This wind is worse than ever! We were nearly pitched into the hedge just then—I could hardly hold the steering-wheel. Whoa! Hold the hood, somebody! It's being blown off!"

An exceptionally heavy gust swept down, and it did seem, for a moment, that the hood of the car was about to be torn to tatters. They were descending a winding hill. It wasn't very steep, but the turns were sharp. Then suddenly, at an exceptionally acute corner, Handforth gave a gasp and a yell.

"Look out!" he roared.

The headlights, swinging round with the car, had abruptly revealed a raging torrent sweeping across the lane like a cataract! Compared to that other water splash, this affair was like Niagara.

Instinctively Handforth knew that if the Austin went into that torrent it would immediately become trapped.

So Handforth wrenched at the steering-wheel, and the Austin swerved. There was a giddy lurch as the little car jumped over the grass bank.

Then, with a sickening motion, the Austin half overturned. McClure gave a wild bellow, and he was pitched clean through one of the side-curtains, to vanish into the darkness outside!



CHAPTER 5.

McClure's Injury.

"Ugh!" gurgled Handforth, in agony.

He leaned back in his seat, holding his chest. He had been pitched forward on to the steering-wheel at the moment of the abrupt stoppage, and he had been badly jarred. Church, beside him, was dazedly sorting himself out.

"What—what happened?" he gasped. "Great Scott! We're half overturned, Handy! Your side of the car is sticking up in the air!"

"Where's Mac?" shouted Willy, from the rear. "Hi, Ted! Quick! Old Mac was thrown out just now!"

"Thrown out!" gasped Handforth, forgetting his pain.

"Look!"

Handforth and Church stared round. In the reflected gleam from the headlamps they could see the gaping hole in the side-curtains. And McClure was conspicuous by his absence. The wind was shooting through the aperture with devastating force, bringing the rain stingingly with it.

"Help!" came a desperate moan. "Hi, you fellows—rescue!"

They managed to tumble out somehow—Handforth wrenching open his off-side door with difficulty. They all climbed through, and found themselves nearly toppled over by the fury of the gale, which came hooting round the bend with terrific force.

"Mac!" shouted Handforth anxiously.

"Here!" came a faint, far-away sound.

Willy was already passing round the back of the half overturned car, and then he let out a yell. Handforth and Church joined him.

"It's all right—I'm not hurt much!" panted McClure, with a gasp in his voice. "I suppose I must have been pitched clean out!"

He was lying half in the ditch and half in the hedge. His clothing had caught on a number of spiky projections, and he could not free himself. But, miraculously enough, no bones were broken, and at first it seemed that McClure had not suffered any injury at all.

He was released by his companions and he stood up, breathing hard—still looking dazed.

"Well, that's done it!" he said, as he looked at the car. "We'll never get her going again to-night, Handy!"

"Blow the car!" said Handforth. "What about you, Mac? Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"It's nothing—only a bit of a twist in this arm," said McClure, as he held his left arm. "I think I must have ricked it, or something. But it doesn't hurt much."

"Come round to the lights and let's have a look," said Handforth briskly.

He gave no thought whatever to his precious Austin Seven. The others had seen

that the car had come to no real harm. It was lying at an acute angle, half on the bank and half in the ditch, and it was a moral certainty that they would never be able to get her on the road again that night.

"Here, steady!" said McClure protestingly. "There's no need to fuss over me, Handy! I tell you I'm not hurt——"

"Good Heavens!" panted Handforth, in horror. "Not hurt! Look at your hand!"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Church huskily.

McClure looked down at his left hand in wonder—and then he, too, gulped. Blood was pouring down his muddy palm, dripping through his fingers and splashing over his clothing. Until that second he had known nothing about it.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he said dazedly.

"You're bleeding like a pig!" ejaculated Handforth, without realising the uncomplimentary nature of his simile. "Here, let's have your overcoat off, man!"

"Steady, Ted, you ass!" said Willy. "Don't wrench him about like that! And you a Boy Scout, too! A fat lot you know about first aid!"

There was something compellingly calm about Willy's way. With the utmost coolness he shouldered his major aside, and in a twinkling he had McClure's overcoat off. In any emergency the captain of the Third could be relied upon to act decisively.

"You must have injured your arm horribly, Mac," said Church, in a frightened tone. "You've lost pints of blood!"

"That's right!" said Willy. "Go it! Cheer the poor chap up. Ah, here we are—just beneath the elbow, here. H'm! Pretty nasty, by the look of it."

In the glare from the off-side headlamp, they looked at McClure's injured arm. It was smothered with blood, and there was a long gash, extending for two or three inches, from just below the elbow towards the wrist.

"I can't understand it!" said Mac shakily. "I didn't feel anything—only a dull kind of ache. What are we going to do about it?"

"I'll soon show you!" said Willy Handforth briskly.

CHAPTER 6.

Handforth's Decision!



FOR once, Handforth was content to stay in the background. He believed that this injury of McClure's was serious, and it was perfectly obvious that Willy knew what he was about. And Handforth himself was filled with remorse—he was in an agony of self-condemnation.

"It's all my fault!" he muttered miserably. "If I hadn't been such an obstinate mule, this wouldn't have happened!"

"Cheer up, old man!" said McClure, with a wry smile. "It's not so bad as all that."

"You may bleed to death for all we know!" went on Handforth mournfully. "We're absolutely hopeless here—in this storm. There's not a house within a mile, and the Austin is crippled and we can't use her. It'll mean walking home, and—— By George, though! What about the Manor?"

"The Manor?" said Church.

"Edgemore Manor!" said Handforth, staring at the hedge a little lower down. "We're close against it! The drive entrance is only a hundred yards back. We passed it just before the accident."

"Never mind about the Manor!" put in Willy. "Get some water, Ted—and some rags, too, if possible."

"There aren't any rags!" said Handforth.

"Then let's have your handkerchief," retorted Willy crisply.

He attended to McClure's wound in a very businesslike way. That gash looked very terrible, but actually it wasn't very serious. Just a fairly deep cut in the fleshy part of the arm.

"You must have caught it on something as you were flung out of the car," said Willy, as he busied himself. "It's never possible to tell how these things happen—they're all over so jolly quickly. Or perhaps there was a flint in the grass where you fell. Not that it really matters—we'll soon have you comfy, old son."

"I'm jolly glad you are with us, Willy!" said Mac fervently. "Thanks awfully for all this!"

Edward Oswald Handforth was frantic.

"It's all very well to say that this injury of Mac's is not serious," he ejaculated, after he had paced up and down for a few moments. "But we can't tell! And it'll take us over an hour to get back to the school through this smother! Something ought to be done now—at once!"

"But we can't do anything, Handy!" said Mac.

"We can—and we shall!" said Handforth fiercely. "It's all my fault—and I'm going to see that something is done! Oh, what an idiot I was—what a first-class ass! Poor old Mac! After you've got over this, I want you to kick me!"

"I'll do anything to oblige you, old man," said McClure willingly.

"Eh?"

"Well, it was your suggestion——"

"I meant it, too!" insisted Handforth, with a glare. "I deserve to be kicked! Look here, Edgemore Manor is right close to us—and the house itself is only a few hundred yards down the drive. We can be there in two or three minutes, and we'll have you attended to properly, Mac."

Both Church and McClure looked at their leader in exasperation. This was another of his crazy ideas! McClure was feeling better now, and he was ready to face the long trudge to St. Frank's against the howling gale. The rain wasn't coming down so furiously now, although the wind, if anything, was higher.



With the rain pelting down in torrents, and with the wind roaring like a thousand demons, the four juniors were forced to get out of Handforth's little Austin car and change the wheel. In a few moments they were all soaked to the skin.

"It's a good idea!" said Willy smoothly.

Church and McClure looked at him in surprise.

"What's a good idea?" asked Church, staring.

"Why, what Ted has just been saying—about knocking up the people at Edgemore Manor," replied Willy. "I don't usually endorse Ted's ideas, but this time it's a winner."

"You silly young ass—"

"It's nearly midnight," pointed out Willy, "and I expect everybody at St. Frank's is getting pretty worried about us. Well, it'll take us over an hour to get home, and, although Mac is plucky enough, he oughtn't to be forced to walk all that way. If we can get into the Manor, it'll only take us five minutes to ring up the school and tell 'em what's happened."

"By jingo!" said Church. "That's true!"

"And I expect the people at the Manor will give old Mac a shakedown for the night," continued Willy. "With luck we might all be put up. As long as Mr. Lee is told, why worry?"

"By George, I hadn't thought of it like that!" said Handforth. "And we're bound to be successful, too. The Earl of Edgemore

lives there—and he wouldn't refuse help to a stranded motoring party. Come on! Are you chaps ready?"

"Yes," said McClure.

McClure was feeling slightly weak now. Shelter seemed to be near at hand, and so he allowed himself to "go."

Before leaving, Handforth switched out the Austin's headlamps. This could safely be done, as the little car was right off the road, being half on the bank and half in the ditch. It was not causing any obstruction.

And with Handforth flashing the electric torch in front of him, the four soaked and weary juniors trudged back along the lane until they came to the grey stone pillars which marked the gateway into the Edgemore Manor drive.



CHAPTER 7.

The House of Mystery!

"LOCKED!" said Handforth, with a grunt.

He had just rattled the great iron gates. They

were rusty and old—and in many places they

were broken. There was something sinister in their very appearance, with the great chains which secured them.

"Well, that's done it!" said McClure, in a husky, tired voice. "It's no good, you chaps! Let's be getting to St. Frank's. We're only wasting our time here."

As he spoke, he swayed slightly, and Church held him. McClure pulled himself up, then passed a hand over his face.

"It's all right—I was only a bit giddy for a tick!" he muttered dully.

The others looked at him with anxious eyes. Handforth flashed the torchlight into his face—and it could be seen that he was very pale. He hadn't lost very much blood, but he was numbed through and through, and his injured arm was aching atrociously. The shock of being thrown so violently out of the car had had its effect, too.

"We've got to do something!" said Handforth desperately. "Why the dickens do people lock their gates like this? What's the good of it, anyhow? Look at the wall here—crumbling away with age and decay! We can get through that gap in two ticks!"

He had turned his torchlight round, and, sure enough, there was a big gash in the ancient wall, where many of the topmost bricks had crumbled away. It would be very easy for the juniors to climb over and to get into the grounds by that means.

"Wait a minute!" said Church. "What's the good of doing this, Handy?"

"Every good! We've got to knock up the people in the Manor."

"But I expect they've been in bed for hours!" objected Church. "It's nearly midnight, you know, and—"

Handforth gave a start.

"By Jove, yes!" he said, frowning. "H'm, I was forgetting that." He paused for a moment, and then a look of determination came into his face. "Nevertheless, I think we're justified in knocking them up. Old Mac here is in a bad way, and he's got to have attention immediately. Come on—let's try it, anyhow!"

"I don't think it'll be much good!" said McClure wearily. "I seem to remember a sort of rumour about the Earl of Edgemore. I can't quite remember it—"

"Then don't try!" said Willy. "We've got to get you inside, old man. You're not fit for the long walk to the school. Even if we can only find shelter for you, it will be enough!"

They all climbed over the crumbling wall, and before long they were in the drive. There was now no need for Handforth's electric torch, for the rain had completely ceased, and the moon had come out from behind the scudding clouds.

There were yew-trees on either side of the drive, and they were whirling about wildly in the gale. It was an eerie scene. The drive was weed-grown—the whole picture was one of desolation and neglect.

A turn in the drive revealed the Manor itself.

It was no ordinary country house. In the moonlight it looked forbidding and grim. It was an ancient Norman building, with turrets and battlements. In every respect, indeed, it was like a mediæval castle. Not a light was showing anywhere, and the wilderness of the parkland was almost menacing.

"I—I don't like it!" muttered Church, as he involuntarily paused. "There's—there's something rummy about this place! It looks like a ruin!"

"But it can't be!" said Willy. "The Earl of Edgemore lives here."

"Are you sure?" asked McClure doubtfully. "We don't know much about this part of the world—even though it is only a mile or two from St. Frank's. We hardly ever come round this way. Edgemore is off the beaten track. It's buried—it's practically out of the world."

This was true enough. It was very seldom that any of the St. Frank's fellows came this way, and they knew very little about the Earl of Edgemore and his estate.

"I tell you the place is empty!" said Church. "Look at it! A fortress—a feudal castle! What's the good of going here? They won't have a telephone or anything! We shan't even be able to knock them up!"

"We can try, anyhow," said Willy, as he urged McClure on. "It's very unsafe to judge from the outside. In all probability, the earl has got electric light and every modern convenience within the building. And yet I seem to remember that he's a bit of a hermit—lives practically by himself, or something like that. Come on—we shall all catch pneumonia if we stand about in our soaking clothes."

They pressed on, for the die was cast now. They were so near to the building that they might just as well go right up to the main entrance and hammer upon the door. It wouldn't delay them much longer, and they would at least have the satisfaction of knowing that they had done their best.

And McClure's condition was in no way reassuring. In the moonlight his face looked deathly pale, and he was still unsteady as he walked. But even Willy was beginning to feel the effects of this weird, eerie scene. The nearer they drew to Edgemore Manor, the more forbidding it looked!



CHAPTER 8.

The Man Behind the Grille!

"RUMMY!" said Willy Handforth thoughtfully. "In fact, jolly rummy!"

They were all standing near the foot of the great flight of steps which led up towards the imposing main door. The wind was whistling round the juniors, chilling them to the marrow. The moon, sailing far from the

hurrying clouds, shone with full brilliance upon the ancient stones of the Manor.

And a gaunt, forbidding place it looked, too.

For years, evidently, it had been allowed to go to rack and ruin. The great steps were weed-grown, and many of them were cracked and out of place. Half the windows within view were boarded up; on every side the grass was rank and wild, and there were piles of accumulated rubbish against the walls of the building—dead leaves in sodden masses, where they had been blown during the autumn, and where they had been left to rot and decay.

"I should think it is rummy!" said Church, with a shiver. "We were idiots to come here! It's all rot, saying that the Earl of Edgmore lives in this place! It's only a ruin—a locked-up, uninhabited house! People haven't lived here for years, by the look of it."

"It's a shame, when you come to think of it!" said Willy thoughtfully. "What a fine old place it is, really! One of England's most perfect examples of Norman architecture—and marvellously preserved, too."

"Preserved, do you call it?" said Handforth. "What about those boarded windows and all these weeds, and—"

"They're nothing!" said Willy. "I'm talking about the walls—and the building itself. But why should we waste time like this? Come on—let's get in!"

They were all feeling weary now—but they had little hope of rest. For they could not believe that this house was inhabited. However, they might just as well try their luck.

Willy ran up the wet, moss-grown steps, and when he arrived at the great metal-studded door he soon found an enormous bell-handle. He pulled at it with all his strength, and even above the whining of the wind the juniors could hear a dull, far-away clanging.

"The bell works, anyhow," said Willy. "Lend a hand, Ted—let's give it a real hefty pull."

Clang—clang—clang!

Deep within the recesses of the Manor, the bell jangled and tolled, and there was a mysterious, ghostly sound about it. The juniors waited there, uneasy and jumpy. Then, as if to emphasise the weirdness of the whole adventure, another bell began to toll.

"What's that?" asked Church huskily.

"Don't get the wind up, you ass!" growled Handforth. "It's only a clock!"

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Church.

Edward Oswald was right. The clock, somewhere far above, was clanging out the solemn hour of midnight.

The juniors listened until the last stroke—then they looked at one another in the moonlight, and their faces were drawn.

"Twelve o'clock!" said McClure, with a kind of gulp. "Oh, I say! This—this is getting on my nerves! Why did we come here? What the dickens will Mr. Lee be

saying? They'll be sending search parties out soon—"

"Steady on, old man!" interrupted Handforth gently. "If only there's a telephone in this place we shall soon be able to put Mr. Lee at his case. And then we can stay here, too—until to-morrow."

"Listen!" broke in Church, clutching at Handforth's sleeve. "What's that?"

"Eh? I didn't hear—"

"Yes!" said Church. "Listen! Can't you hear something?"

"Footsteps!" said McClure.

There was a brief lull in the wind, and the juniors could hear a shuffling sound from beyond the great doors. A few moments later, with startling abruptness, a rattling of metal sounded, and a portion of the door slid back, revealing a small hole, about a foot square, on the same level as their heads. There was an iron grille covering this aperture. Behind it a yellow, flickering light could be seen.

"Hallo!" said Handforth, with relief and eagerness. "Thank goodness! There is somebody here, then!"

"Not a ghost, either!" grinned Willy. "You'd better do the talking, Ted—you're great at that sort of thing!"

Handforth was close up against the grille now, and he was staring in astonishment. Behind those bars he could see a quaint old man—a bent, wizened individual, with a sinister cast of countenance. He was holding a flickering, old-fashioned lantern. The junior could see that he was dressed in a big overcoat, and in his other hand he carried an enormous stick.

"What do you want?" the man demanded harshly. "Who are you? Who is it that comes knocking at the door at the hour of midnight?"

"No need to be so unpleasant about it!" said Handforth. "We're chaps from St. Frank's. Had a bit of a motor accident down the road, and one of us has got an injured arm. We want you to let us come in, and we'd like to telephone to the school."

"Yes, and the injured chap would like to stay here all night, too," added Willy. "If you can give him a shake-down—"

"Go!" interrupted the old man, with a sudden fury. "A trick—a trick! None of ye shall enter these walls! Go, and be thankful that ye've come to no harm! Go while ye're safe!"



CHAPTER 9.

No Admittance!

HANDFORTH stared at the old man behind the grille in amazement.

"But you don't understand!" he burst out. "Poor old Mac is injured, and he must have attention and

shelter! We're all soaked to the skin, and—"

"A fine tale!" sneered the old man. "A likely story, indeed! Do ye think you can come here with such trickery and deception?"

"But there's no trickery!" urged Willy. "What's the matter with you? Why do you suspect us of anything like that? We only want to ring up the school, and—"

"There's no telephone here!" snapped the old man harshly.

"Then let us in, so that we can get Mac into bed!" said Handforth fiercely. "Hang it, where's your humanity? You can't leave the chap out here, soaked and injured! And who are you, anyhow? You're not the Earl of Edgemore! Go and tell your master—"

"Very clever—very clever!" jeered the strange old man, with a mocking laugh. "But ye can't get in with such a transparent dodge, my fine boys! Go back to your employer—go and tell him to think of something more ingenious!"

"Our employer?" said Handforth blankly.

"Aye, ye know well enough who I mean!" said the man behind the grille. "Trickery—trickery! Always it's trickery!"

The juniors were not only startled, but they were dumbfounded.

What could this old man mean? What extraordinary idea had he got into his head? Why, in the name of all that was mysterious, did he assume that they were attempting to get into the Manor under a lying pretext? What possible object could anybody have in doing such a thing?

"Go!" added the old fellow. "Ye'll do no good by staying here!"

"Yes, but—"

"Schoolboys—a motor accident—and one of ye injured!" chuckled the old fellow, his face distorted. "Ho, ho! Very good! Very good indeed! But not good enough for old Jenkins!"

And, with a slam, he closed the grille, and the juniors found themselves looking at the bare face of the great door. A low chuckle came to their ears, followed by the sounds of shuffling footsteps; then the wind came hooting round the building with ever-increasing force, shutting out every other sound.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Handforth dazedly.

"Yes, it's pretty rummy, isn't it?" said Willy. "Jenkins? That's it—I remember now. Jenkins is the name of the Earl of Edgemore's old retainer. A sort of butler chap, who goes into the village sometimes."

"Oh, let's be going!" said McClure, with utter exhaustion. "They won't let us in, so what's the good of stopping? It's past midnight, and we ought to be back at St. Frank's. Why not walk it? Why waste time here?"

But Handforth was looking obstinate again.

"We're not going to be done like this!" he said furiously. "The inhuman rotter! Barring us out, as though we were lepers! I never heard of such a thing! On a night

like this—after a motor accident—and with one of us injured! Why, it's—it's outrageous!"

"But we can't do anything, Handy!" protested Church. "Mac's right! We ought to be getting along—"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth fiercely. "We've only seen Jenkins, the butler! What's the good of that? I want to have a word with the Earl of Edgemore himself—or with some other member of the family. By George! We're not going to be turned out into the night like this! Mac needs attention—he needs a bed. And we're jolly well going to see that he gets one!"

Handforth seized the great bell-pull again, and he tugged on it with all his strength. Away within the building came the sound of the dull clanging.

"Steady, Handy!" gasped Church, seizing hold of him.

"Go and eat coke!" roared Handforth.

"I tell you I'm going to wake somebody up—somebody belonging to the family! And if that old butler comes back to the hole in the door, I'll give him a piece of my mind!"

Edward Oswald was thoroughly indignant. Here they were, four harmless schoolboys—one of whom was injured—soaked to the skin and stranded on this wild night. What earthly reason could there be for barring them out?



CHAPTER 10.

The Earl of Edgemore.

"LOOK!" exclaimed Willy, pointing.

His major, who was about to ring the bell again, paused in the act. He stared up. The other juniors were gazing, too—and they felt their hearts jumping and beating with greater rapidity.

"My goodness!" muttered McClure, in a strained voice.

There was every reason for the juniors to be uneasy. A figure had appeared on a balcony, some distance up the great stone wall. No light had shown—and nobody had seen a window open. But there, on the balcony, stood that figure.

A gaunt, tall, strange figure, attired in a tattered dressing-gown. His face was lined and wrinkled—indeed, so extraordinarily lined and wrinkled that he looked grotesque in the pallid moonlight.

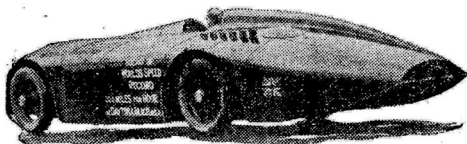
"It's the earl!" whispered Willy.

He knew that his guess was a correct one. There was something in the old man's bearing—something about his proud, defiant attitude—which spoke of his breeding. In every line of him he was the aristocrat.

"Are you Lord Edgemore, sir?" shouted Handforth, running nearer to the balcony.

"I am the Earl of Edgemore," replied the

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old man, staring down at the four juniors. "So! Boys—raw schoolboys! So this is what it has come to!"

"We don't know what you mean, sir," protested Handforth. "And we don't know what your man meant, either. We're harmless enough. We're only seeking shelter—"

"You are seeking to find an entrance into my home—my home!" interrupted Lord Edgemore, his voice quivering with some great emotion. "Jenkins was wise; he was clever. He saw through your game, and he kept the door barred. It is a poor trick!"

"But it's not a trick, sir!" shouted Willy earnestly. "We're only fellows from St. Frank's, and one of us owns a little motor-car. We were driving home from the pictures in Bannington, and we had an accident. One of us is hurt, and—"

"Do you think you can deceive me with such nonsense?" broke in the Earl of Edgemore contemptuously. "Boys from the big school—out after midnight! A paltry dodge! Boys driving their own motor-car—nonsense! You thought to delude me with this tale of woe! You sought to get in—to set my precautions at naught! But you have failed, my fine young gentlemen! And now you can go back to your employer and report your failure!"

"Employer!" echoed Handforth. "That's what your man said! But we don't know what you mean. We haven't any employer! And there's no trickery about it—"

"Go!" thundered Lord Edgemore, pointing with a gaunt finger. "Go from these grounds! Wretched boys, you are trespassing even now! You are standing on my property. My property! Do you hear me? All this is mine—mine!"

He swept his hand outwards, indicating the wild wilderness of the park.

"Mine!" he repeated, working himself up into a great fury. "I have sworn that no intruders shall gain admittance! I warn you, foolish youths! Go while you are safe! For, if you hesitate, if you delay, I will not be answerable for what might happen!"

There was such fire in his tone, such quivering intensity in his voice, that the juniors involuntarily backed away. They were startled afresh. They were almost frightened by the old earl's passionate outburst. And it was all double Dutch to them, too. For the life of them, they could not understand what he meant.

"We want shelter, sir—that's all!" said Handforth desperately. "One of us has met with an accident. Why won't you believe me? Why won't you let us in—"

"Enough!" thundered the earl. "My patience is at an end! I will give you three minutes—and only three minutes! If you are still here at the end of that time you will have yourselves to blame for what follows!"

He stood there, an imposing figure—a mysterious figure. Yet, at the same time, there was something curiously dignified about him. His back was as straight as a ramrod, and the moonlight shone upon his proud, wrinkled countenance.

"We'd better be going, you chaps," murmured Church uneasily. "I don't like the look of this! I believe the old boy is mad—clean off his rocker!"

"They're both mad!" said Handforth fiercely. "Both the earl and his giddy servant! What do they mean? How can there be any trickery in us getting in—just to seek shelter? It's raining again now, and—"

"We'd better go, Ted," said Willy quietly. "If the old chap doesn't want to admit us, we're helpless. It's no good standing here and raving. There's something about the whole affair that we can't understand. But perhaps we shall understand it some day."

His major was not so level-headed.

"I don't care about that!" he said. "Mac here must have treatment, and I'm going to find out why the old boy won't let us in! I'm determined to investigate—"

"Oh, help!" groaned Church. "That's done it! Handy's talking about investigating—in the middle of the night, and in a rainstorm! For goodness' sake let's get off to St. Frank's! Anything is better than this!"

Suddenly the Earl of Edgemore's voice sounded.

"So!" he thundered. "You have ignored my warning! Very well, I will show you that I am in earnest!"

He gave another shout—a curiously high-pitched one this time. Then suddenly, and to the utter consternation of the juniors, two enormous mastiffs leaped clean over the balcony and came hurtling to the ground, their eyes gleaming greenishly in the moonlight!



CHAPTER II.

Danger!

"Look out!" yelled Church wildly.

"Oh, my hat!"

"They're coming for us!"

"Run! Run!" shouted McClure.

With one accord, the juniors turned and fled across the grass-grown wilderness, the wind-driven rain beating on to their faces. Handforth was the only fellow who hesitated. He always hated to give in; and even now, in spite of this dramatic turn, he wanted to stay and face the danger.

"Handy! Handy!" shouted McClure hoarsely. "Come on! They'll kill you!"

Even Handforth turned then, for there was an untold horror in McClure's voice. Handforth remembered his chum's weakened condition, too, and so the next moment Handforth had joined Church, and they were both helping their companion along.

"The brute! The old brute!" panted Handforth hotly. "Fancy setting the dogs on us! Look at 'em! They're coming for us now!"

It was only too true.

The great mastiffs, prancing ferociously,

were not merely level with the running boys, but in advance. They were baying throatily, and had bared their teeth viciously. Yet, to the relief of the juniors, the dogs did not actually attack them.

The whole affair was staggering.

The juniors had been surprised enough at being refused admittance into the Manor, but this new development was both amazing and bewildering. In that moment, they could only conclude that the old earl was mad. No sane man would have set those savage mastiffs on them in this way. For they had done nothing. They were merely stranded travellers, sorely in need of shelter.

And this was the kind of reception they had received at the hands of Lord Edgemore! "Look!" screamed Church, with sudden terror.

For some reason, the great mastiffs had left Handforth & Co., and now, as Edward Oswald turned, he saw something that chilled his blood. Willy, running some distance away, was suddenly felled by both the mastiffs. At the same instant, the great dogs reared up and dashed upon the Third-Former. Willy went over like a ninepin, rolling in the thick grass and weeds. And there he struggled, the great dogs mauling him, tearing at him, snarling and baying.

"Oh, Willy!" choked Handforth. "They've got him, you chaps! They've got Willy!"

"The fiend—the horrible fiend!" panted Church. "Quick! What can we do?"

"We've got to rescue him!" shouted Handforth. "Oh, where is there a stick? We've got to beat these dogs down! Look! They'll tear Willy to shreds!"

The moon had come out again as two clouds parted, and the pale radiance was flooding down on this wild scene.

The mastiffs were rolling over and over, and Willy was underneath, apparently putting up a fight for his life. The air was filled with the baying and snarling of the dogs.

It was impossible to find any weapons, and so Handforth & Co. ran up just as they were—prepared to fight those enormous dogs with their bare hands. Even McClure had forgotten his weakness in the extremity of this moment. They ran up, hardly knowing what the next minute would bring. But they all proved their courage by their very readiness to go to the rescue of the stricken Third Former.

And then came another surprise.

"Willy!" shouted Handforth, as he came tearing up. "Willy, old son! We're coming—we'll kill these brutes!"

"Rats!" gasped Willy. "Don't be an ass, Ted!"

"What!" gurgled Handforth.

"Don't be such asses!" said Willy, struggling to his feet with difficulty, and instantly being bowled over again by one of the mastiffs. "These things are only puppies!"

"Pup-puppies!" stammered Handforth blankly.

"Puppies!" howled Church. "That's all!" grinned Willy. "I've just been having a game with 'em!"

"Game!" hooted Handforth, hardly knowing whether to be relieved or indignant. "Why, you—you spoofing idiot! We thought you were being half killed!"

"I can't help it if you make these silly mistakes!" said Willy coolly. "It didn't take me two ticks to spot that these dogs were friendly. They made enough noise, of course—but I know a bit more about animals than you fellows, and I spotted that they were only out for a bit of fun. I expect the earl only set them on us to give us a scare."

It was some moments before Handforth & Co. were convinced. But when the two mastiffs started prancing round then, showing every sign of friendliness, they were satisfied.

But this did not explain the extraordinary nature of the situation.

In fact, it only made it more fantastical. What could it all mean? Why was the strange old earl so madly anxious to keep everybody out of the Manor?

CHAPTER 12.

The Trudge Through the Night!



W HETHER the two mastiffs would have made friends with Handforth & Co. if Willy had been absent, was

a question of some doubt. But Willy had a "way" with him where animals were concerned. Even Willy himself could not explain it. But it was an undoubted fact that animals of all kinds were attracted towards him. They obeyed him—they took to him instinctively.

And now these two great dogs, after their frolic, were looking at Willy with eager eyes, and their great tails were wagging. They had accepted Handforth & Co. as a matter of course, since they were obviously Willy's friends.

"You see?" said Willy, as he fondled one of the mastiffs. "There's nothing wrong with these beauties! They looked pretty terrifying in the moonlight as they romped after us, but—"

"Well, I call it a bit thick!" interrupted his major indignantly. "Of all the mad, crazy, idiotic stunts, this beats everything! We think we've got a couple of horribly savage hounds after us, and they're only playful puppies!"

"Shameful!" said Willy, nodding. "We shall have to tell the earl about it—and ask him why he doesn't keep savage dogs. You seem disappointed, Ted."

"Don't be a young ass!" frowned Handforth. "I'm jiggered if I can understand what it means! In fact, the whole affair,

from start to finish, is a sort of Chinese puzzle."

"Listen!" said Church. "What was that just then?"

"A whistle!" said Willy.

Sounding distinctly above the roaring of the wind, the whistle came again, and the two mastiffs, after a reluctant look at Willy, obeyed the summons. They went trotting off into the gloom, soon to vanish.

The moon had gone behind the clouds again, and the wild scenery of Edgemore Park was hidden.

"Let's get home!" said McClure wearily. "Oh, Handy, let's get home!"

"Poor old son!" said Handforth, his voice full of sympathy. "It's been a rotten time for you, Mac! We thought we were going to find shelter for you, but this beastly old earl is as heartless as a stone. He'll hear more about this, the old rotter!"

They commenced the trudge homewards along the dark, muddy lane, battling against the violent headwind.

"I'm worried about my Austin," said Handforth, after they had proceeded some distance. "I don't like to leave her there, you know. Perhaps it would be as well if I went back, and—"

"And desert old Mac?" asked Church sternly. "Oh, Handy! Do you put your Austin before poor old Mac?"

"Nun-no, of course not!" said Handforth hastily. "I—I'd forgotten— I mean, blow the Austin!"

And the subject was not raised again. Church and McClure both wanted to remind Handforth that all these misadventures had occurred because of his pig-headed obstinacy. If he had had sense enough to drive through that original watersplash, they would have been in bed and asleep by this time. But what was the use of rubbing it in? Handforth knew all this—and he had, indeed, expressed his regret.

So the conversation was confined to occasional expressions of opinion concerning the Earl of Edgemore and his remarkable habits. Sustained conversation was difficult, in any case, since the wind was blowing so hard that the juniors were compelled to shout. So, for the most part, they trudged on, with their heads bent to the hurricane, in silence.

McClure did not utter a word of complaint, although his arm was aching badly. Yet actually this walk was good for them all. It restored their numbed circulations, and long before they got to St. Frank's they were warmed up, and as they were healthy youngsters there was not much chance that they would suffer any serious consequences.

"Here we are—at last!" said Handforth thankfully.

"Oh, good egg!" said Church. "I've never been so glad to get to the school before! The gates are locked, of course. We'd better climb over the wall."

"I expect the gates will be open," said Willy. "Mr. Lee knows that we are out,

and— Yes! Come on, my lads! Now to face the music!"

"I expect it'll be a pretty painful tune!" said Church.

They turned into the Triangle, and they could see one or two lights gleaming in the Ancient House. All the other Houses were dark, for the hour was now well past one a.m. As the four juniors approached, they saw that the door of the Ancient House was wide open. One or two figures were there, and some of these figures were carrying lanterns.

"Well, I'm hanged!" shouted a voice suddenly. "They're here, sir!"

"They've just turned up!"

One or two figures came running out of the Ancient House lobby, and Handforth & Co. recognised Nipper, the captain of the Remove, Tommy Watson, Vivian Travers, and Browne of the Fifth.

"My hat!" said Handforth blankly. "A giddy search party! They were just going out to find our dead bodies! Thought we'd had an accident, I suppose! Oh, crumbs!"

"You bouncers!" said Nipper, bustling up. "Where the dickens have you been all this time? What do you mean by keeping out until such an hour? We've been nearly off our heads with worry!"

"It is no exaggeration to say, brothers, that we have been living through centuries of agony," asserted William Napoleon Browne. "Let the joybells ring, for the lost are found, and all is well!"



CHAPTER 13.

On the Carpet!

MR. NELSON LEE, the famous Housemaster of the Ancient House, made no immediate comment as Handforth & Co. and Willy came into the brilliant light of the lobby. And in that first glance Neleon Lee saw much. McClure's pale, haggard face told him a good deal, and there was no severity in Nelson Lee's expression.

"Shut the door, Fenton, please," said the schoolmaster-detective.

Edgar Fenton, the captain of St. Frank's, shut the door, and then he and the other members of the search party stood round, looking at Handforth & Co. and Willy with curiosity and doubt.

"There is no need for me to tell you, boys, that the hour is close upon one-thirty," said Nelson Lee quietly. "You went to the pictures in Bunnington, and you were to be home before ten. What does it mean?"

"It's my fault, sir," said Handforth eagerly. "All my fault! If anybody's going to be punished, sir, I want you to know that I'm to blame."

"I have not mentioned anything about punishment, Handforth," said Nelson Lee dryly. "If you can give a good explanation



Handforth wrenched the wheel round and the car, jumping up the grass bank, half overturned. McClure gave a wild bellow as he found himself pitched through the side curtain, to land with a sickening thud in the roadside ditch!

of your lateness, it is possible that you will be excused. I imagine that you have met with an accident? At least, you have returned on foot, and not in your car."

"That's just the trouble, sir," said Handforth anxiously. "We were coming home all right—just a bit late, I'm afraid—but we should easily have got here by about twenty past ten. It was raining cats and dogs, and the wind was howling like the dickens. About a mile out of Bannington, we came upon a watersplash—"

"And you got stuck in the middle of it, eh?" asked Nipper.

"No!" growled Handforth. "I was a silly ass not to chance it, as these other chaps advised me. I thought we *might* get stuck, so I turned the car round and decided to come home by Edgemore."

"A very unwise decision, Handforth," said Nelson Lee. "You ought to have known that the Edgemore lane was in a very treacherous condition."

"I know, sir," said Handforth miserably. "But I suppose I was obstinate. Anyhow, we had a puncture, and it took me about an hour to change the wheel. It was awful, ploughing about in that mud! We hadn't got a brace to undo the wheel nuts, and we had to use a mouldy old spanner."

"But you eventually got going again?" asked Lee.

"Yes, sir—but then, just after we had gone through Edgemore, we came upon another watersplash," said Handforth. "This one was an awful thing—a giddy torrent. I swerved, and the car jumped on the bank and half-overturned, pitching poor old Mac out. He's hurt his arm, sir."

"It's nothing much!" put in McClure.

"Only a bit of a graze—"
"It's a bad cut, sir!" insisted Handforth. "We bound it up as best we could, and we into Edgemore Manor. My idea was to get thought it was so serious that we tried to get first aid for Mac, and to leave him there for the night. I wanted to telephone to the school, too, to let you know that everything was all right."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Since you have been so frank, Handforth, and since you have admitted your fault so handsomely, there is very little that I can say," he observed. "No doubt you acted for the best—at least, what you thought to be the best. And, in the circumstances, I shall not punish you. McClure, let me have a look at your arm."

McClure bared his arm, and the House-master examined it. A relieved look came into his face when he saw that it was nothing very serious.

"You must have it bound up properly before you go to bed, McClure."

"Just a minute, sir!" said Handforth eagerly. "Thanks awfully for letting us off like this! You're a brick, sir! But we've got something else to tell you—something about Edgemore Manor!"

"Isn't that the home of Lord Edgemore, sir?" asked Nipper. "He's a queer old fellow, isn't he? Lives by himself, or something?"

"I believe so," said Lee, nodding. "Well, Handforth? What happened at the Manor?"

They all listened in growing astonishment as Handforth told the story—with many corrections and interjections from Willy. In fact, by the time they had done, several of the listeners were looking sceptical.

"Draw it mild, Handforth!" said Tommy Watson. "You must have been dreaming! Lord Edgemore wouldn't bar you out like that—for no reason! And as for those mastiffs—"

"But it's true!" said Handforth, glaring. "If you're calling me a fibber, Watson, I'll—"

"Now, now, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee sternly. "You mustn't talk like that. There is every reason for these boys to be doubtful. Your story is not only strange, but difficult to credit."

"Don't you believe it, sir?" asked Handforth blankly.

"I do believe it," replied Lee. "There is no reason why I should do otherwise. Obviously, the Earl of Edgemore is an eccentric gentleman, and he may have his own reasons for acting in such a peculiar manner."

"What are you going to do about it, sir?"

"Do?" said Lee. "Nothing. You had better get to bed at once—all of you. McClure, you will come to my study, and I will put some ointment and bandages on your arm—"

"Nothing, sir!" broke in Handforth, in amazement. "You mean to say that you're going to do nothing?"

"It is no business of mine, Handforth—ours, either," said Nelson Lee quietly. "You have admitted that you were trespassing on the earl's property, and he was perfectly at liberty to refuse you admittance to the Manor if he liked. As for the dogs, they were harmless, as you have shown. I see no reason why we should take any action whatsoever."

"But—but—"

"And now you must get to bed!" said the Housemaster. "You four juniors need not rise when the bell goes in the morning. I shall give orders for you to be called at a later hour, and you will not attend lessons until after the mid-morning interval. Come, McClure!"

"Thanks awfully, sir!" chorused the tired juniors.

And Nelson Lee refused to hear any further comments. He was satisfied with the explanation that had been given, but he was determined that the boys should get to bed without any further loss of time.



CHAPTER 14.

A Hopeless Case I

"RUMMY?" said Handforth. "I should think it was rummy!"

He had just finished undressing, and Church was already in bed. Nipper and Travers were in the little dormitory, listening to a repetition of the queer story. McClure hadn't come back from Nelson Lee's study yet.

The seniors had gone back to their own bed-rooms, and Willy was now in the Third Form dormitory, telling an awed audience all about it. There had been all sorts of wild rumours concerning the missing juniors, and quite a number of fellows felt that they had been swindled. They had been expecting to hear a story of some ghastly accident, and to see the chums of Study D coming back to the school in an ambulance.

"Well, well!" said Vivian Travers, yawning. "We've got to admit, dear old fellow, that you have entertained us nobly. But isn't your yarn a bit flat?"

"What do you mean—flat?" asked Handforth.

"Well, oughtn't there to be some climax?" asked Travers mildly. "Of course, I'm not casting any doubts upon the yarn. I believe every word of it. But what's the explanation?"

"How the dickens should I know?" growled Handforth. "I put it to Mr. Lee pretty plainly, didn't I? And yet he tells us that there aren't going to be any inquiries! He's not going to make an investigation! It's not our business, so we can keep our noses out of it! Huh! Did you ever hear such a thing?"

Nipper chuckled.

"Well, the gov'nor's right, Handy," he said gently.

"Of course, you *would* agree with him!" said Edward Oswald, with a grunt.

"Rats!" said Nipper. "What do you suppose we can do? We can't go to Edgemore Manor and browbeat this rummy old earl. He's his own master—he can keep people out of his house if he likes. There are lots of eccentric people about, and if they do their funny tricks on their own property, nobody can complain."

"And I suppose we've got to puzzle over it for the rest of our lives?" demanded Handforth. "Well, that may satisfy you—but it won't satisfy me! I don't mind telling you that I'm disgusted! I'm disappointed in Mr. Lee—"

"Shush, you ass!" hissed Church. "He's coming!"

The door opened and Nelson Lee appeared, bringing McClure with him.

"Nipper—Travers!" said the Housemaster sharply. "What are you doing here? There

is no reason for you to be out of your beds. Be off at once!"

"Right-o, sir!" said Nipper. "Good-night, sir!"

They went off, and after Nelson Lee had seen McClure into bed he, too, took his departure, switching off the light.

"Feel better, old man?" asked Handforth at once.

"Heaps," said Mac. "I say, Mr. Lee is a brick, you know! He's even promised me that I shan't have to go into the sunny—or wear my arm in a sling. He says that I shall be fairly all right within a day or two."

"Jolly good!" said Handforth thankfully. "I've been worrying about you, Mac. But now that I'm relieved, I can give my attention to this problem."

"Eh?" said McClure sleepily. "What problem?"

"The mystery of Edgemore Manor!" said Handforth, in an impressive tone. "Mr. Lee thinks that we're going to drop the whole affair—and the other fellows are ready to drop it, too. But not me!"

"Oh, cheese it, Handy!" yawned Church. "By Jingo! Isn't it lovely to be in bed?" he added, stretching himself luxuriously between the sheets. "Ho-hum! Am I tired? I feel that I could sleep for years!"

Handforth wasn't taking any notice.

"What chance is there for an amateur detective at St. Frank's?" he asked bitterly. "I've got hold of a real mysterious case, and Mr. Lee won't even look at it! And he's forbidden me to take any further action! By George! It won't take me long to show him that I'm made of different stuff! I'm going to conduct this investigation on my own!"

"Two or three hours extra in bed to-morrow!" murmured Church dreamily. "Good egg! A special breakfast, all to ourselves, too! Good-old Mr. Lee!"

"Eh?" said Handforth. "What are you muttering about, you ass?"

"And no lessons until after the interval," said Church happily. "Jolly good, eh, Mac?"

Silence from McClure.

"Asleep, eh?" yawned Church. "I don't blame you, old man! Well, goo'-night, Handy! Happy dreams!"

"Look here, you silly chump, what about this investigation?" demanded Handforth, who didn't seem to be at all sleepy. "My idea is for us to go over to the Manor to-morrow—By George, yes!" he added eagerly. "It's a half-holiday to-morrow! I'd forgotten that for the minute! We can go over—Are you listening, Churchy?"

"Mm!" mumbled Church.

"We'll go over to-morrow, and we'll prow around the Manor," said Handforth. "That's it! And we won't tell anybody. Remember you chaps, this has got to be a secret—just between ourselves!"

Dead silence from Church and McClure.

"Well?" asked Handforth. "What do you think of it?"

The sound of heavy breathing came to his ears, and he sat up in bed indignantly.

"Hi, Churchy!" he sang out. "Mac! Did you hear what I just said?"

But Church and McClure were sound asleep, and it is doubtful if the explosion of cannon-crackers would have awakened them.

Edward Oswald Handforth, full of righteous wrath, turned over in bed and gave himself up to the task of thinking out the case from beginning to end. In about fifteen seconds he was sound asleep, and snoring peacefully.



CHAPTER 15.

Slightly Exaggerated!

SOME chaps have all the luck!" said Hubbard enviously.

He and one or two other Ancient House

Removites were standing about in the lobby. It was nearly time for morning lessons, and ever since the school had come down from the dormitories everybody had been talking about the mysterious misadventures of Handforth & Co.

The trouble was nobody knew exactly what happened. Rumours had been floating about continuously—particularly when the chums of Study D failed to turn up at breakfast-time. Nipper had been questioned, but he had merely said that there was nothing to make a fuss about. Handforth & Co. had been delayed by a puncture, and had been late. The fellows did not get much satisfaction out of Nipper.

There was a good deal of mystery about the whole business. One or two of the fellows had spoken about the affair at Edgemore Manor, and it was generally known that Handforth & Co. had passed through a strange experience there. But no details were available.

"Heard the latest, you chaps?" asked Teddy Long eagerly, as he came running into the lobby.

"Rats!" said Hubbard, who shared Study B with Long, and who knew him. "We don't want any more of your silly rumours—"

"But this is true!" insisted the busybody of the Remove. "I've just heard it straight from Travers—and Travers was one of the fellows who stayed up last night. He was here, in this very lobby, when Handforth & Co. came in."

"Well, here he is, now!" said De Valerie. "I say, Travers, have you been telling anything to Long, or is he lying, as usual?"

Vivian Travers obligingly came to a halt. "For once, dear old fellows, he is telling the truth," he replied. "I don't quite know how he manages to do this, but we are

dealing with facts. Yes, I have earned Long's eternal friendship by giving him a full account of the sinister adventure that happened to Handforth & Co."

"Sinister adventure?" repeated Fullwood, coming up with Russell.

"For the love of Samson, you don't mean to say that you haven't heard?" asked Travers mildly. "An extraordinary affair, my dear fellows! An uncanny business! It's rather a wonder that they got back alive!"

"I didn't think it was so bad as that!" said Fullwood, with concern. "They're not down yet, but I thought they were only sleeping a bit late this morning because they didn't get to bed until the small hours."

"The Earl of Edgemore tried to murder them!" said Teddy Long excitedly. "That's right, Travers, isn't it?"

Vivian Travers looked mysterious, and lowered his voice.

"Just as they were going past Edgemore Park, they ran into the ditch!" he said impressively. "Why? Because there was a raging torrent across the road—and how do we know that it wasn't a trap, expressly designed to catch these unwary motorists?"

"Oh, I say, cheese it!" said Russell.

"Luckily, nobody was hurt much in the accident," went on Travers. "And then they were lured into the grounds of the moated Manor. They were captured by the earl's myrmidons, and flung into the keep. Nobody knows anything for certain, but it is believed that the old Earl of Edgemore is a sort of hermit. He's a lonely man—and as soon as he knew that Handforth was going by he plotted to entrap him."

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Hubbard, staring.

"The earl knew that if he could get Handforth within those grim walls, his solitude would be at an end," went on Travers glibly. "It was a cunning plan—a dastardly plot. But Handforth & Co. managed to escape, although bloodhounds were put on their track, and they had a terrible fight with these savage dogs."

"And what's going to be done about it?" asked Hubbard. "Aren't they going to arrest the earl, or something?"

"Why should they arrest him?" asked Travers mildly. "Why, there was some idea of getting up a vote of thanks for him. Think of the peace that would have come to St. Frank's if Handforth had been incarcerated inside those grim walls for ever. You don't seem to realise that the Earl of Edgemore was bent upon doing a public service!"

"If you fellows take any notice of Travers, you'll be dotty!" said Nipper, from the background. "What's the idea, Travers, you chump? What are you spinning this yarn for?"

Vivian Travers glanced round.

"They wanted to hear a thrilling story, and I'm always an obliging chap," he said calmly.

"Do you mean to say that you haven't been telling us the truth?" shouted De Valeric.

"The truth?" repeated Travers. "Great Samson! I didn't know that you wanted to hear the truth! I thought you were anxious for a thrilling story of what didn't happen!"

And Travers strolled off, chuckling.

"Silly ass!" said Hubbard, turning red. "And you're worse, Long! You came to us with this idiotic story as though it were true!"

"Well, that's what Travers told me!" protested Teddy Long indignantly. "How was I to know that he was pulling my leg?"

"You'd better forget all about it," said Nipper. "Don't make a mountain out of a molehill. Handforth & Co. were stranded because of a mishap on the Austin Seven, and they had to walk home. That's the yarn in a nutshell. So why put a lot of frills on to it?"

And mainly owing to Travers' pleasantries the many rumours were discredited. Most of the fellows had come to the conclusion that all these various stories were false, and they ceased to take any interest in the matter.

In the meantime, Handforth & Co. and Willy were sleeping on—and when lessons started for the day the interest in Handforth & Co. had completely waned.



CHAPTER 11

As Determined as Ever!

HANDFORTH strolled to the window and looked out upon the blustery morning.

"Well, thank goodness the rain's stopped!" he said. "The weather's pretty decent to-day—and it ought to be, too, after last night's sample of frightfulness!"

"We'd better be getting along," said Church, rising from the table. "I suppose we shall have to go and report to Mr. Lee, eh?"

"That's about the size of it," said McClure.

The chums of Study D were in the dining-hall of the Ancient House—alone. They had just finished their belated breakfast, and, somehow, they had not enjoyed themselves very much. They didn't exactly like this special consideration, and the dining-hall had seemed very echoey and gloomy. Willy, much to his major's indignation, had been up for nearly two hours, and had cut breakfast altogether so that he could attend ordinary lessons with the rest of his Form.

"I'm going to have a word with young Willy after school," said Handforth dully. "It was like his nerve to get up and to leave us sleeping! He ought to have come into our dormitory and given us a jab."

"He did!" said Church. "In fact, he gave you about ten jabs, Handy—and you

threatened to skin him alive unless he cleared out."

"Did I?" said Handforth, in astonishment. "Rats! You must be dreaming, Churchy!"

The door opened, and Nelson Lee came in. "Finished?" he asked cheerily. "Then you'd better be getting along to your classroom. How's the arm, McClure?"

"Fine, sir, thanks!" said Mac. "Hardly any pain at all. It's only a scratch."

"Rather more than that, McClure," said Nelson Lee. "Rest the arm as much as you can, and report to Dr. Brett this evening for fresh treatment."

"All right, sir," said Mac, with a wry grimace.

"I suppose these chaps are going in to lessons, sir?" asked Handforth, waving a hand towards his chums.

"They are, Handforth," replied Lee. "And is there any reason for you to suppose that you will not be with them?"

"I'm going to fetch my Austin Seven, sir," replied Handforth promptly.

"On the contrary, Handforth, you are going to get on with your morning's work," replied the Housemaster. "Come along! Third lesson has already started."

"Oh, I say, sir!" protested Edward Oswald. "I can't leave my Austin in the ditch—"

"The Headmaster's chauffeur has gone to the scene of the mishap, Handforth, together with a mechanic," said Lee. "I have given orders that your car shall be brought here without delay. By the time lessons are over, you will find your bus in the garage."

"It was jolly decent of you to take so much trouble, sir—but I would rather have gone myself."

"I dare say you would, Handforth," said Nelson Lee dryly. "But have you no consideration for Mr. Crowell? I am afraid the poor gentleman is quite upset enough as it is. Hurry along and join your class."

So Handforth & Co. were obliged to obey—much as Handforth himself disliked it. In his opinion, lessons were of no importance whatever. His Austin Seven, on the other hand, was a matter of paramount concern.

In consequence of his fears and worries over the car—apparently Handy had little confidence in the Head's chauffeur's ability to bring it back safe and sound—Handforth's labours that morning were negligible. But although Mr. Crowell was exasperated at this disturbance of the usual routine, he went easy with the three late-comers. He knew they had had a tiring experience the previous night, and so he had mercy on them.

But after lessons Handforth was freshly disgusted. He was eager to tell his story to admiring crowds of listeners. But when he tried to start, the fellows moved away, smiling. They had heard that yarn before!

In fact, Handforth couldn't get anybody to listen to him. When he mentioned the Earl of Edgemore's name he was laughed at. The juniors were quite convinced by this time

that ninety-nine per cent. of the story was pure invention.

"The rotters!" said Handforth indignantly. "They don't believe all that about Edgemore Manor! What do you think De Valerie said to me two minutes ago?"

"I wouldn't risk a guess," said Church guardedly.

"Why, he said that we were only late last night because of my rotten driving!" snorted Handforth. "Said that we dreamed all the rest!"

"Well, what does it matter?" asked McClure. "There's not much in the story, after all. Now that I come to look at it sanely—in broad daylight—it seems quite ordinary. After all, we weren't in any serious plight, and any householder has a right to keep people out of his premises if he wants to. Everything seemed different last night, what with the storm and the darkness."

"Rot!" said Handforth, frowning. "The whole thing was a mystery—a deep, sinister mystery! There's something fishy about the Earl of Edgemore—and I mean to investigate the case, and root out the truth!"

"But what can you do?" asked Church impatiently.

"You'll see what I can do—when I get on the track!" replied Handforth, in a grim voice. "The first thing is to go to the garage and see if my Austin is there. If it isn't, there'll be trouble!"

But it was there—little the worse for its adventure. Indeed, the Head's chauffeur had given the faithful little car a wash down, and it was looking quite smart.

Handforth was immensely relieved, and he was feeling tremendously bucked—until he discovered that a valuable fur rug was missing!



CHAPTER 17.

A Good Excuse!

"HERE'S the fur rug?" demanded Handforth, after turning up the seats and looking in the rear of the car. "There you are! I knew something would happen! Didn't I tell you so? Somebody has pinched my fur rug!"

"Don't be so jolly ready with your accusations," said Church. "I expect the Head's chauffeur has taken it indoors—to dry it, or something. You've only got to make a few inquiries—"

"Great Scott!" said McClure, looking blank.

"What's the matter?" asked Handforth.

"Why, that fur rug of yours!" said Mac. "I believe I left it behind."

"Left it behind?"

"Yes, in the grounds of Edgemore Manor."

"The grounds of Edgemore Manor!"



As the four belated, soaked juniors approached the Ancient House, a number of figures came rushing out, including Nipper, who was carrying a lantern. "You bouncers!" said Nipper, bustling up. "Where the dickens have you been all this time? We've been worrying our heads about you!"

"Now I come to think of it," said Mac, with concern, "I believe I dropped it!"

"Dropped it!"

"What do you think you are—a parrot?" put in Church tartly. "Have you gone silly, Handy, or what? Mac says that he dropped your fur rug in the grounds of Edgemore Manor. That's simple enough, isn't it?"

"But—but that rug was a special one," said Handforth thickly. "Of all the careless fat-headed— My aunt gave me that rug for a Christmas box!" he went on. "It was worth quids! You know what a rummy old girl she is."

"Yes. She gave you the Austin, didn't she?" asked Church. "I wouldn't mind having a rummy aunt like her!"

"I'm jolly sorry about the rug," said McClure penitently. "Don't you remember, Handy? You wrapped it round me just before we went towards the Manor to find shelter."

"That's right! So I did!"

"And when those dogs came at us," went on McClure, "I just recollect dropping the rug off my shoulders as I bolted. I nearly tripped over it, and I threw the thing aside. Later on I forgot all about it."

"That is what comes of trusting to one's chums!" said Handforth bitterly. "Rank carelessness! I've never heard of such an idiotic excuse—"

"Steady!" said Church. "You seem to forget that Mac was in great pain and nearly exhausted."

Handforth started.

"By George, yes!" he said, changing his tone. "Sorry, Mac! In the circus, I'll forgive you. But we've got to get that rug back," he added, a gleam coming into his eyes. "It's a half-holiday this afternoon, so we'll buzz along to the Manor and make a search."

He seemed quite pleased suddenly.

"Yes, rather!" he went on, before his chums could make any comment. "We'll go there this afternoon. And while we're there we'll prowling round a bit and start on the investigation. I shan't rest until I've probed the mystery to the bottom. I'm going to find out why the Earl of Edgemore barred us out last night."

"But hang it, Handy, it's not our business!" protested Church.

"It's my business, though!" asserted Handforth coldly. "That rummy old chap set his dogs on us, and, although the dogs were tame enough, he meant to scare us. Why? What did he want to frighten us away for? There's something queer going on in the

Manor! It wouldn't surprise me in the least to find that the Earl of Edgemore has been murdered, and that there's an impostor in his place!"

"Here, I say—"

"Perhaps the whole house is in the hands of criminals!" went on Handforth, allowing his imagination full play. "Yes, by George, that's a theory, you know. Perhaps Edgemore Manor is the headquarters of a gang."



As the four belated, soaked juniors approached the Ancient House a lantern. "You bounders!" said Nipper, bustling up. "W

"I expect they've converted the cellars into a coiners' den," said McClure wearily.

But Handforth wasn't listening. Now that he knew where his precious fur rug had been left, he was very happy. For he was provided with an excellent excuse for going back to Edgemore Manor at once. If there were any attempts to turn him out of the grounds, he could easily explain why he was there, and his reason would be a legitimate one.

A little later on—just before the dinner-

bell was due to ring—Nipper approached Handforth & Co. The skipper of the Remove was looking rather thoughtful.

"About this yarn of yours, Handy," he said. "I was just wondering——"

"What yarn?" interrupted Handforth frigidly.

"I don't mean the one about the torture chamber!" grinned Nipper.

"Torture chamber?"

"Some of the fellows are saying that you were captured by the earl and taken into a dungeon," chuckled Nipper. "In fact, there

to have a bee in his bonnet? He seemed to believe that you were attempting to get into the Manor by means of a trick?"

"Yes, that's right," agreed Church. "It was very rummy. He told us to go back to our employer. He sneered at the transparency of the ruse."

"What ruse?" put in Handforth.

"Well, of course, there wasn't any ruse at all," said Church. "But I'm only telling Nipper what the earl said. He thought we were trying to get in by a ruse. Why? Why the dickens was the old boy so agitated?"

"I've got a faint suspicion of an idea," said Nipper slowly. "No, I shan't tell you what it is, Handy—yet. But you're going over to the Manor again this afternoon, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Handforth challengingly.

"All right, old man. I'll come along with you, if you don't mind," said Nipper. "I think Fullwood and Reggie Pitt and a few others are rather keen, too. We'll make a party of it."



res came rushing out, including Nipper, who was carrying
ve you been all this time? We've been worrying our heads

are so many yarns going about that the whole school is cackling."

"Let it cackle!" snapped Handforth.

"Exactly—let it!" agreed Nipper. "And we'll confine ourselves to the simple truth. We don't want any of these embellishments, old man."

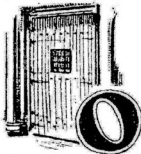
"These which-ments?"

"It doesn't matter," said Nipper gently. "There's one part of your story which interests me. You say that the earl seemed

"It's turned out fine this afternoon," said Nipper, "but we can't play any footer, because Little Side is too water-logged."

"Is that the only reason you're coming to Edgemore?" demanded Handforth indignantly. "Haven't you any real interest in the investigation?"

"Heaps, old man," said Nipper. "But you must admit that football comes first every time. Well, as we can't play football, we might as well play detective."



CHAPTER 18.

More Mystery!

N the whole, Handforth was pleased.

He thought it was a frightful check on the part of these fellows to butt into the investigation; but, on the other hand, it was a direct proof that his own deductions were right. Nipper, at all events, would never suggest a trip to the Manor unless he thought it would be profitable, and Nipper was certainly not an inquisitive fellow. He wanted to go because he knew that something strange was going on there.

So Handforth regarded this as a personal triumph, and he raised no objection when, after dinner, a small group of cyclists prepared to accompany the Austin Seven.

The party was a select one, consisting of Nipper, Tregellis-West, Watson, Fullwood, Reggie Pitt, Archie Glen-thorne, Jimmy Potts, Vivian Travers, and Willy Handforth. The latter was as keen as any of the Removites, and he ignored his major's suggestion that he should go and eat coke.

"You can play, if you like—but I'm going to work!" said Handforth coldly. "There's a mystery here, and I'm not going to rest until I've unravelled—"

"Yes, yes, old man, we know," said Church hastily. "Let's get going!" "Absolutely!" said Archie Glenthorpe, jamming his monocle into his eye and surveying the Austin with a dubious air. "By the way, old cheese, I trust there is truth in the rumour that I am to travel in the good old exaggerated pram?"

"In the what?" asked Handforth, glaring.

"Well, I mean to say—"

"You can come if you like, Archie," growled Handforth. "But don't you call my Austin names! I expect you're too lazy to ride your bike—"

"Absolutely not!" said Archie firmly. "But a chappie's bags are liable to get frightfully muddy when trundling the old velocipede."

They were soon off, and in due course they arrived at the spot where the torrent had been flooding across the lane.

It was now a mere trickle, and the road surface was practically washed away. But it was safe enough, and the Austin Seven and the bicycles negotiated the rough piece of road without any trouble. A few moments later they all came to a halt by the gateway of Edgemore Manor.

"There are great padlocks and chains on these gates," said Handforth, as he got out of the little car. "We shall have to get over the wall, you chaps, same as we did last night. And we'll have a search for that fur rug to begin with."

"Yes, that will make a good excuse for being in the park," said Nipper. "Strictly speaking, we shall be trespassing, but we can't possibly do any damage," he added, with a glance up the weed-grown drive. "By Jove! What a wilderness!"

"It must have been pretty weird last night," remarked Reggie Pitt thoughtfully. "I wonder why the earl lives in this way? He can't really be so hard up that he can't afford to keep the place in order, can he?"

"I'm afraid that's the explanation, old man," said Nipper. "I was having a talk with the gov'nor this morning, and he believes that the old earl is little better than a pauper. He's absolutely broke, and that may be the explanation of last night's mystery."

"How do you make that out?" asked Handforth, staring.

"Well, when people are hard up it's not uncommon for creditors to try all sorts of ruses to get into a debtor's house," replied Nipper. "Perhaps the Earl of Edgemore thought that

you were paid to work that dodge last night, so that somebody could sneak in afterwards and serve a writ. These people get up to all sorts of tricks."

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth, with a sceptical air. "I mean—Lord Edgemore! A peer—a big landowner!"

"Rummy things happen nowadays," said Nipper. "Peers aren't always rolling in money, Handy. Lots of them are next door to ruin. Well, anyhow, let's get inside and have a look round."

The juniors quickly climbed over the decayed and crumbling wall. They all realised, of course, that they were trespassing, but the spirit of adventure was strong within them, and, schoolboy-like, they paid no attention to the fact.

There was no sign of the fur rug, although the juniors searched the drive thoroughly. They went over the ground that Handy & Co. had covered the previous night, but the rug was not there.

"I expect that old servant must have taken it," said Handforth, at length. "He probably spotted it this morning, and took it indoors. We'll go and make inquiries. That'll give us a chance to find out the lie of the land, too."

The others were agreeable. In a big bunch, they went up to the main door, and they pulled that enormous bell. They could hear the tolling of it far away in the recesses of the fortress-like building.

In full daylight Edgemore Manor was even more picturesque than it had been by moonlight. Its Norman architecture was grand—impressive and stately. Many of the walls were ivy-grown, and, although the actual stonework was in a wonderful state of preservation, everything else seemed to be in a pitiable state of neglect. It was only too clear that the Manor had been slowly going to rack and ruin for years.

There was a sudden shuffling of footsteps behind the great door, and then the grille was revealed. Behind it appeared a face—the face of Jenkins, Lord Edgemore's old retainer.



CHAPTER 19.

A New Arrival!

"AN'T you open the door?" asked Handforth bluntly.

"So you are here again!" said the old

man, his eyes cold and antagonistic. "What do you want? Why do ye keep coming like this? More trickery, eh? Another try to fool us?"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "We lost a fur rug last night, and we want to know if you picked it up—"

"I saw nought of any rug!" interrupted the old man harshly. "A likely story! Get ye gone—all of ye!"

"Yes, but look here—"

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"His lordship is in a rare state of anger!" shouted old Jenkins. "And ye might as well know that ye stand no chance. Never will ye get in! It's a rare pity that them as employ ye couldn't think of something fresh this time!"

"But we're not employed!" put in Nipper quickly. "You don't seem to understand. We're only schoolboys from St. Frank's, and there isn't the slightest intention of treachery."

"Get ye gone!" repeated the old man angrily. "I want no more lies—no, more tricks!"

He slammed the little door, and there came the sound of bolts shooting home.

"Good gad!" breathed Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say, a rather poisonous sort of old blighter, what? Not too polite, if you know what I mean!"

"Well, well!" said Travers. "There certainly is something funny about all this."

"Didn't I tell you so?" demanded Handforth triumphantly. "What about it now, Nipper?"

"I don't know what to think, exactly," replied Nipper slowly. "But this old man isn't a wrong'un, Handy. He looked worried and embarrassed—worn out with overwork and sleepless nights. But if ever I saw an honest old face, I saw one a minute ago."

"That's my impression, too," said Fullwood, with a nod. "Yet why was he so angry? We've done nothing to him—or to his master, either."

"They evidently think that we're the dupes of somebody else," replied Nipper. "But whom?"

As if in answer to this puzzling question, a sudden commotion sounded far down the drive. There was much hammering and rattling, and then came a final clang of falling iron.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth, staring. "Somebody's breaking down the gates!"

"Sounds like it!" said Church. "My hat! Perhaps we're going to see something exciting this afternoon, after all!"

"Quick—let's stand aside!" said Nipper hurriedly. "There's a whacking great car just coming down the drive. We don't want to stand here like a lot of intruders. Let's get well clear, so that we shall be out of the way."

"A ripe and juicy scheme, laddie!" said Archie approvingly. "I should hate to be a dashed nuisance to anybody!"

Nipper's suggestion was a good one, and a moment later all the juniors left the moss-grown steps and drew aside into the thick bushes and evergreens, which grew in profusion near the old house.

Just as they did so an enormous Rolls-Royce limousine appeared, gliding noiselessly round the drive. It came to a standstill near the great steps, and the juniors watched in wonder.

There were two liveried men in front, and one of these leaped down as soon as the car

stopped and opened a rear door. Out stepped a big, blustering, over-dressed individual, of any age between forty and fifty.

There was something aggressively unpleasant about this man. His clean-shaven face was red and bloated, and the general effect of coarseness was only heightened by the enormous cigar which stuck out at right angles from his mouth.

"That'll do—that'll do!" he said, in a pompous, overbearing voice. "Now then, Taylor—we've got to be firm about this. Understand? I am here on business, and when I say I'm here on business I mean it!"

"I don't know who it is," murmured Handforth, "but I'd like to punch that rotter in the eye!"

"Yes, he makes you feel like that, doesn't he?" said Nipper, with a chuckle. "But this is getting interesting, my sons!"

Three men had followed the blustering individual out of the Rolls-Royce. All of them were well dressed, but they were all unpleasant specimens of humanity.

"Ring the bell!" commanded the big man. "Yes—that's it! Pull the thing, you fool! Do you think I want to be kept standing here all day?"

He jammed his cigar back into his mouth, and flung open his fur coat. An enormous gold watch-chain was revealed, with a scintillating gem depending from it.

"Coarse, blatant old rotter!" said Travers, wincing. "Great Samson! He may be wealthy, with his Rolls-Royce, but he's a common bounder!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie Glenthorne, shuddering.

Again the face of old Jenkins appeared at the grille in the big doorway, and the newcomer moved up the steps, with his myrmidons behind him. He waved an imperious hand.

"Tell your master that Mr. William Gore-Pearce is here!" he said pompously. "Open these doors, and—"

"One moment—one moment!" came a voice from the battlements above. "Those doors will not be opened at your command: They are my doors—for this is my home—my castle!"

The Earl of Edgemoor stood there, high on the battlements, an imposing, dignified figure!



CHAPTER 20.

Daylight!

MR. WILLIAM GORE-PEARCE went down several of the steps, and stared upwards. His bloated face was red and distorted with fury.

"There's been enough of this nonsense, Lord Edgemoor!" he shouted thickly. "I am tired of it—do you understand? I'm infernally tired of it! If you don't open these

doors and admit us, we'll smash them down!"

For some moments Lord Edgemore remained silent, and then he leaned forward over the battlements. In full daylight it could be seen that he was a fine, upright man, with lined features. His face was strong, but it was kindly, too.

"The laws of Great Britain have many drawbacks, but they do not permit of acts of brigandage!" he replied steadily. "You shall not force your way into my home, Mr. Gore-Pearce!"

"Your home!" raved the big man. "It is mine—mine! I've bought every stick and stone of this estate. I've bought you up, lock, stock and barrel! By what infernal impudence do you imply that it is still yours?"

"It is mine because it has been the home of the Edgemores for countless generations!" replied the old peer simply. "That is why it is mine, sir! No outsider shall call this building his home."

"These aren't the feudal days!" roared Mr. Gore-Pearce. "You old fool, do you think you're a feudal lord?"

"I am a feudal lord, if it pleases you to think me such," replied the Earl of Edgemore, with dignity. "Never will you gain admittance—"

"The whole thing is outrageous!" raved Mr. William Gore-Pearce. "Don't you realise, Lord Edgemore, that I have brought a bailiff's officer with me? Here he is! The law demands that you shall open these doors, and—"

"Bailiff's officer or no bailiff's officer, I stand firm!" broke in Lord Edgemore. "My ancestors lived in this castle for centuries. I live in it now, and no man is going to eject me!"

"Talk to him, Snell!" fumed Mr. Gore-Pearce, turning to another of his companions. "Who does he think he is? A pauper—a pauper dictating to a millionaire!"

"And yet I would prefer to be the pauper!" said Lord Edgemore scathingly.



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"My lord—my lord!" pleaded one of the other men—a wizened, rascally-looking specimen. "Why will you not accept this situation? I have repeatedly told you that the end has come. Mr. Gore-Pearce has purchased all the title-deeds to this property. He has held the mortgages for years, and now it is perfectly lawful for him to foreclose."

"And to have me evicted, eh?" shouted the earl. "No, no, Snell! You are a traitor—a treacherous hound! For years I trusted you as my lawyer. For years you served me. But now you are serving this new master. Well, serve him! Never will you weaken me!"

A deadlock seemed to be reached. Mr. William Gore-Pearce consulted with his companions, and the earl stood looking on with that same quiet dignity.

The St. Frank's fellows were flushed and excited.

"Don't you see?" asked Nipper, in a low voice. "It's as plain as daylight now!"

"But—but I can't quite get the hang of it!" panted Handforth. "So this—this bloated rotter is a millionaire! I've a good mind to smash—"

"Steady!" interrupted Church, pulling Handforth back.

"The old boy is broke?" said Nipper. "Snell is his lawyer, and he's sold the property over his head. I expect it has been involved for years. Heavy mortgages—and all that sort of thing. And now Mr. Gore-Pearce has decided to foreclose and pitch the earl out."

"This explains why they wouldn't let you in last night, Handy!" continued Nipper. "They thought it was just a trick of Gore-Pearce's. They thought you were agents for the bailiffs' men, or something."

"By George!" said Handforth, with a start. "I expect you're right! These—these rotters are trying to break in, so they can serve a summons, or something."

"It's a lot worse than that, by the look of it!" said Reggie Pitt, shaking his head.

"It's even worse than a writ. They've come to evict him—to pitch him out, and to take possession of the Manor. And they seem to have right on their side, too."

"Right?" said Handforth fiercely. "Do you call it right to bully and—"

"Right, according to law, I mean," said Reggie. "Personally, all my sympathies are with the earl. The Edgemores have always lived here, and he clings to the old walls. He won't admit that he's down and out. He won't admit defeat. You can't help feeling sympathetic towards a man like that. You can't help admiring him, either."

"But it can't last!" said Nipper, looking worried. "If these people have got the law on their side, the law will take its course!"

The whole mystery was explained now. The Earl of Edgemore, poverty-stricken, was to be evicted from his ancestral home. But he refused to acknowledge defeat. He was defiant—he was determined, like his ancestors

of old, to barricade himself in against all invaders!

The situation was not only strange, but it was filled with drama, and those St. Frank's fellows, standing there out of sight, did not trouble to go into the rights and wrongs of the dispute. Instinctively, they sided with the weaker—they were eager to help this unfortunate earl, who was literally threatened with being turned out into the gutter!



CHAPTER 21.

Handforth Declares War!

IT would not have been so bad if Mr. William Gore-Pearce had acted in a less bullying way.

He was obviously far from being a gentleman. He had arrived in a Rolls-Royce, and he had proclaimed himself a millionaire. Well, there was every reason to believe that he actually was a millionaire. But a gentleman—never. His coarse arrogance was written on every line of his puffy face. His vulgarity exuded from him almost visibly.

"Listen to me, Lord Edgemore!" he shouted, nearly beside himself with helpless rage. "Do you want me to return with a force of police? Do you want me to drive you out like a rat leaving a sinking ship?"

Lord Edgemore smiled calmly.

"I care nothing for your threats, Mr. Gore-Pearce!" he replied. "I defy you. Do you understand? You tell me that you have bought this property, and it matters not to me what insidious bargains you have made with my lawyer. I remain here—in my home. Police or no police, bailiffs or no bailiffs, I stay! And none shall gain admittance!"

"You're mad!" raved the millionaire, shaking both his fists up at the battlements. "You're crazy—and you shall pay dearly for this! Every stone of this property is mine! I have bought it—I have paid for it! You may defy me now, Lord Edgemore, but the law will take its course! I shall have you thrown out!"

Handforth gave a snort.

"Come on!" he shouted. "Let's put the thing straight to Lord Edgemore. I don't want him to think that we're mixed up with these rotters!"

Before any of the other fellows could stop him, Handforth ran out, and he raced along the weed-grown terrace.

"Lord Edgemore!" he bellowed. "Just a minute, sir! We St. Frank's chaps are on your side! You thought that we were employed by Mr. Gore-Pearce, didn't you? But we're not!"

"Who are these confounded boys?" shouted the millionaire furiously. "Turn them out! What are they doing here?"

Handforth's violent interruption could not have come at a more opportune time. For

it served to show Lord Edgemore exactly how the land lay.

"If you want any help, sir, call on us!" offered Handforth eagerly. "We'll lend you a hand, sir!"

"Steady, old man!" said Nipper, running up. "You can't make promises like that—"

"Yes, I can!" roared Handforth. "We've heard enough, Lord Edgemore! We admire you tremendously, and we'll help you all we can."

The Earl of Edgemore looked down. A slow smile came over his lined, haggard face, and, somehow, that face of his was converted in a moment. It was now kindly and lovable.

"I believe you, my boys—I believe you!" he said huskily. "Thank you for your kindly words. I am an old man, but I am not so helpless as these scoundrels imagine. No! Edgemore Manor is mine, and I will continue to hold it."

"Hurrah!" yelled Handforth.

Lord Edgemore turned and vanished. At the same time, Mr. William Gore-Pearce strode towards his Rolls-Royce, his men following him like sheep.

"Bah!" snarled the millionaire. "We can do nothing here! The whole thing is a farce—an idiotic farce!"

He turned and pointed passionately at the juniors.

"Get off these grounds!" he bellowed. "They are mine—mine! Get off them, confound your impudence!"

Handforth was about to make some reply, but Nipper caught hold of his arm.

"Don't. Handy!" urged Nipper. "We shall only put ourselves in the wrong. Let's go. We know the position now, and we can't do any good by remaining."

Handforth realised that this advice was good. The juniors all stood there in a grim group, watching the big Rolls-Royce turn and depart. Mr. William Gore-Pearce was talking excitedly—shouting abuse at his assistants.

"What about your fur rug, Ted?" asked Willy, as they all moved towards the road.

"Blow my fur rug!" growled Handforth. "What does it matter now? All our suspicions about the old earl were wrong. By George, he's holding a kind of barring-out on his own!"

"Yes, it is something like that!" nodded Nipper, with a smile.

"I hate to see a bullying rotter like old Gore-Pearce, or whatever his blessed name is!" went on Handforth aggressively.

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "I rather think that we're all agreed."

And they were.

On their way home to St. Frank's they discussed the situation from all its standpoints, and they made no attempt to keep the affair secret.

In fact, they were determined to spread the news far and wide—to enlist the aid of all the Removites—yes, and the Fourth-Formers, too, Handforth, at least, had a big idea of helping Lord Edgemore in a more

practical way. The others weren't so sure about it.

For one thing there could be no doubt that, on the surface, the earl was in the wrong. If Mr. Gore-Pearce had bought the Manor, he was legally entitled to enter it. But what had annoyed the juniors—what had made them side with the earl and made them determine to help him—was the bullying attitude of Mr. Gore-Pearce. They felt that they thoroughly detested the man. Millionaire or no millionaire, he had no right to act in the way he had acted, whatever the provocation. And so they wanted to see him beaten by the earl, and they were willing to help administer that beating, if it were possible.

Another thing to be considered was the fact that the Head might not like it if they interfered. But Handforth had not considered these questions at all.

As soon as the little party got into the Triangle, after putting the Austin and the bicycles away, they beheld a stranger. And, in some vague, illusive fashion, this stranger struck a familiar chord in their minds.



CHAPTER 22.

Claude Gore-Pearce I

"HELLO, Nipper—we've been looking for you!" said John B. Boots, of the Fourth. "Have you seen it?"

"Seen what?" asked Nipper.

"It!" said Boots. "I don't know it's name yet, but—"

"Oh, you mean this fellow, here?" asked Nipper, with a nod.

"Yes!" said Boots aggressively. "Thank goodness he's booked for the Remove and not the Fourth!"

Handforth and the other juniors gave all their attention to the stranger. He was already surrounded by a number of fellows. Most of these fellows were nonentities, such as Gulliver and Bell, Teddy Long and Hubbard, Merrell and Marriott, and they were all gazing at the newcomer with admiration and awe.

But Nipper and Handforth, at the first glance, experienced a pain. Archie Glen-thorne positively wilted. Sir Montie Tregellis-West turned pale.

For they beheld a scrupulously attired young bouncer of about fifteen. He was of normal height, but his figure was clumsy. His face was commonplace, but it was distinctive in one respect—it wore a constant, supercilious sneer. He looked what he was—an out-and-out snob.

"Here, I don't believe it!" said Handforth, aghast.

He went straight up to the stranger and looked him in the face.

"Is it true that you're a new fellow—"



"I am not in the habit of answering impertinent questions!" drawled the new boy, in answer to Handforth. Handy gasped. Then, slowly and significantly, he began to roll up his sleeve, while the onlooking juniors closed round interestedly.

and that you're in the Remove?" he demanded.

"And who may you be?" asked the stranger, with a beautiful drawl. "Upon my word! Really! I'm not in the habit of answering impertinent questions!"

Handforth gasped, and the other juniors closed round. Edward Oswald raised his fist, slowly pushing up his sleeve at the same time.

"See that?" he roared, planting his fist under the newcomer's nose.

"Really! How dare you!" gasped the boy, startled out of his superciliousness. "I hope you won't dare—"

"You'll answer my question, or I'll lay you flat with one drive!" said Handforth fiercely. "I make it a rule to be gentle with new chaps—but when I'm called impertinent I'm liable to get careless!"

"I suppose I must humour you!" said the other contemptuously. "Yes, I am in the Form that is called by the ridiculous name of the Remove."

"The what name?" went up a general chorus.

"But it is not my intention to board here," went on the other, with an insufferable air. "Oh, no! I am a day boy, and I merely came this afternoon to look round—"

"A day boy!" yelled Handforth. "Why, there aren't any day boys at St. Frank's!"

"There is one now!" said the new arrival. "My people have taken a big furnished house on the other side of the village, but that, I must tell you, is merely temporary. We shall soon be in residence at Edgemore Manor—"

"What!" roared Handforth, in amazement.

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie. "I mean to say, light in the darkness, what? So this—this foul chappie is absolutely the son of that bloated blighter we saw at Edgemore?"

"Is your name Gore-Pearce?" asked Nipper, facing the stranger.

"Yes!" he replied contemptuously. "My name is Claude Gore-Pearce. I am the son of the great millionaire, Mr. William Gore-Pearce."

"Oh, my hat!"

"And he's—he's booked for St. Frank's!"

"As a day boy, too!"

"What have we done to deserve this?" asked Vivian Travers, in agony. "What sins have we committed that we should be thus accursed?"

Handforth was looking absolutely dazed.

"Claude!" he repeated, in a weak voice. "Oh, crickey! Oh, crumbs! Hold me up, somebody!"

Claude Gore-Pearce was evidently too obtuse to realise that ninety per cent of his companions were antagonistic. Or perhaps he was so eaten up with his own importance that he did not even see it.

"Yes, my father is the great millionaire!" he said, rolling the words off his tongue in a way that made Archie writhe afresh. "Before very long all our family will be in residence at Edgemore Manor. My father has bought the place, lock, stock and barrel! It's ours now—or will be, as soon as we've turned that pottering old fool of an earl into the road! He's kicking up trouble, but he'll soon be pitched out!"

"And what's going to happen to Edgemore Manor?" asked Nipper steadily.

"Everything!" replied Claude Gore-Pearce. "The whole place is going to be redecorated and renovated. All my father's servants will come down, and my mother and my brothers, too. There'll be dozens of servants—and I might as well tell you that my pater keeps five Rolls-Royce cars! That's the kind of man he is!"

The juniors felt disgusted.

This new fellow—this day boy—was the most insufferable snob that had ever set his foot inside the picturesque old Triangle.

A day boy, too! A new innovation at St. Frank's!

The snobs of the Remove took to this newcomer at once—but the decent fellows disliked him on the instant.



CHAPTER 23.

Travers Tries It On!

VIVIAN TRAVERS was looking very thoughtful after the crowd had drifted away from Claude Gore-Pearce.

"Well, what about tea?" suggested Jimmy Potts.

Travers looked at his study-mate with a whimsical smile.

"Ah, yes—tea!" he said. "An excellent idea, Jimmy! But let us not forget that we have a stranger within the gates, and that a certain amount of courtesy is due to him."

Jimmy stared.

"Are you talking about Gore-Pearce?" he demanded.

"Who else?"

"You're kidding, of course," said Jimmy.

"We must not forget," mused Travers, "that Gore-Pearce is the son of a millionaire. One would naturally assume, therefore, that he is rolling in money. Let us see if he is willing to expend a proportion of this ill-gotten wealth in a noble cause."

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked Jimmy Potts bluntly.

"Come with me, and I think I can guarantee an entertaining quarter of an hour," replied Travers, with a chuckle.

Claude Gore-Pearce had just detached himself from a group of admirers—this group consisting of such fellows as Gulliver and Bell and Teddy Long. He was preparing to leave.

"Ah!" murmured Travers. "An opportune moment."

He overtook Claude Gore-Pearce rapidly, and linked his arm through that of the day boy. Gore-Pearce came to a halt, greatly surprised, while Handforth and Fullwood, and one or two other fellows who were standing over by the Ancient House, stared in wonder.

NEXT WEDNESDAY!



"Look at Travers!" said Handforth indignantly. "Making pals with that snob, Gore-Pearce!"

"Disgusting!" said Church, with a glare.

"You can never tell with Travers," remarked Fullwood. "In all probability, he's only pulling the beggar's leg."

The beggar in question was looking at Travers with cold disdain.

"What is the idea?" he demanded. "I don't know you!"

"That, of course, is your misfortune, and it can be easily remedied," said Travers smoothly. "My name is Travers—Vivian

Travers. I adorn the Remove. Allow me to introduce my friend, Jimmy Potts."

Gore-Pearce looked at Jimmy, but seemed in no way pleased.

"I should have said, Sir James Potts, Bart.," added Travers.

"Oh!" said Gore-Pearce, with a sudden change in his manner. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Potts. So you're really a baronet, eh?"

He extended a flabby hand, and Jimmy took it reluctantly, promising himself a warm two minutes with Travers later on.

"You're just going, I suppose?" asked Jimmy pointedly.

"Well, yes," said Gore-Pearce. "As I

"The Schoolboy Householders!"

Edward Oswald Handforth again comes up trumps with a brilliant idea, and after the other Removites have got over the shock, they rally round him enthusiastically.

Handy is as amusing as ever, but unfortunately Church, his study mate, is often unable to appreciate Handy's peculiar sense of humour. No doubt Church is deserving of sympathy, for it is no joke to be shoved on the top of a pile of furniture, packed insecurely—very!—in Handy's Austin Seven, and then whizzed along at umpteen miles an hour.

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said before, I only came to-day in order to have a look round. Being a day boy, I shall never find it necessary to remain at the school after lessons. I am not altogether pleased with the general run of the fellows," he added pompously. "But perhaps they do not yet realise who I am!"

Jimmy felt rather sickened, but Travers was smiling with all his usual amiability.

"That's because you don't know them, dear old fellow," he said confidentially. "Popularity in a big school like this depends mainly upon one thing."

"One thing?" repeated Gore-Pearce.

"Exactly!"

"And what is that one thing?"

"Grub!"

"Grub?" repeated the new boy, staring.

"Grub!" said Travers. "In other words, tuck! Invite these fellows to a feed, and they will be yours. I have tried it, and I know. It is a guaranteed, gilt-edged device. Of course, it will cost you a bit of money, but—"

Gore-Pearce smiled more superciliously then; he gave a deprecating wave of the hand.

"Poof! I have plenty of money. My father is enormously rich—he's a great millionaire! He owns a fleet of Rolls-Royce cars. He employs an army of servants. So money is nothing to me, and if you think that this idea of yours—"

"I know!" said Travers, in a firm voice. "Wait! Jimmy, dear old fellow, keep our friend entertained for a minute or two. I'll dash into the tuck shop, and see how many fellows are there. There is nothing like striking while the iron is hot."

Travers was off, and Jimmy Potts boiled inwardly. He hadn't the faintest idea what Travers was driving at, but he certainly knew that he was left alone, in the middle of the Triangle, with this insufferable new fellow. And Jimmy didn't like it.

"Do you think this is a good plan?" asked Gore-Pearce, after a short pause.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Jimmy. "The fellows are always ready to eat at somebody else's expense, of course. And a fellow who stands treat is generally popular."

Jimmy hardly knew what to say. He did not want to spoil Travers' plan—whatever it was—and so he said as little as possible, and hoped that Travers would soon return.

As a matter of fact, Travers came almost at once. He had dashed into the tuck shop, had whispered urgent words to numerous juniors, and two of these latter, grinning hugely, had hurried away.

"Ah, here we are!" said Vivian Travers, as he returned to Gore-Pearce. "There are eight or nine chaps in the tuck shop now—mostly belonging to the Remove. An excellent opportunity, dear old fellow."

"But I was just going—"

"I can guarantee that you will be well repaid if you delay your departure," said Travers. "Come with me, Gore-Pearce. My suggestion is perfectly simple. Once within the tuck shop, I will casually order some pastries and other luxuries, and I shall invite the crowd to join in."

"Yes, but you said—"

"After those delicacies have been demolished, it will then be your turn," explained Travers coolly. "You, like the dashing fellow that you are, will turn to the lads and suggest that you will stand treat. It is a never-failing scheme. You cannot do better than repeat my own words, syllable by syllable. That is the main reason why I am standing, treat first—just to show you the ropes."

Gore-Pearce found it difficult to resist. Travers had linked arms with him again, and was urging him towards the tuck shop; there was something very compelling about Travers' personality, too. A moment later, they entered the shop, and Travers raised a cheery hand. Reggie Pitt, Jack Grey, Fullwood, and a number of others acknowledged his salute.

"Just showing the new chap the ropes," explained Travers genially. "Mrs. Hake, meet Mr. Claude Gore-Pearce. You may have heard of his father—the great millionaire. Needless to say, he is rolling in money. If you gaze at him closely you will see it oozing out of his pores."

Mrs. Hake, buxom and smiling, knew Travers better than to take much notice of his "blarney." But she certainly had heard of Mr. William Gore-Pearce, and she regarded the son with interest.

"Walk up, gentlemen!" invited Travers, looking round, and giving Gore-Pearce a nudge at the same time. "This is my treat. Order anything you like on me. The more the merrier! Come along—everybody! Mrs. Hake serve them with anything they order, and tell me the amount of the bill. I'll settle up."

"Very good, Mr. Travers," said Mrs. Hake.

Reggie Pitt and the others came crowding round the counter to give their various orders. And Claude Gore-Pearce was rather astonished at their moderation. Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey, for example, ordered a doughnut each. Fullwood was satisfied with a small bun. The others, although they made a great fuss and thanked Travers effusively, selected only the plainest fare.

"You're a sport, Travers!" said Fullwood enthusiastically.

"By Jove, rather!" agreed Reggie Pitt.

"No wonder he's so popular!" They seemed quite excited about it all. At last, when they had all been served, Travers turned casually across the counter, and glanced at Mrs. Hake.

"How much?" he asked, producing his wallet. "It's my treat, and I'm paying for everybody, remember. What's the figure, dear lady?"

"One and tenpence altogether, Mr. Travers," said Mrs. Hake.

"For the love of Samson!" said Travers, with a start. "As much as that? Well, well! I mustn't grumble, must I?"

He paid the money, and smiled genially at Claude Gore-Pearce. The latter was glowing with inward excitement. He was new to a big public school like St. Frank's, and it filled him with astonishment to learn that a fellow could be so popular merely because he treated his Form-mates to a few doughnuts and buns. And Travers had seemed quite startled at the absurdly small total of one and tenpence! Gore-Pearce was exceedingly amused—not to say impressed. He could see himself becoming the most popular

fellow in the Junior School. He would not stop at one and tenpence! He would go much further—and he would do it often. He was a millionaire's son, and he would show these fellows what he was made of!

"Your turn, dear old fellow!" whispered Travers, nudging him.

"Now?" said Gore-Pearce.

"On the spot!" said Travers. "And don't forget to invite everybody. Be lavish—be big. Do the same as I did!"

Gore-Pearce could have laughed aloud. He tried to remember the words that Travers had used, and he turned to the groups of juniors.

"I'm a new fellow, I know," he said, "but you can all order what you please at my expense."

"By Jove!" ejaculated Pitt eagerly. "Do you mean that, Gore-Pearce?"

"Of course I do," said Gore-Pearce importantly. "Order anything you like. All of you—and the more the merrier!"

"That's the style!" urged Travers.

"Come along!" shouted Gore-Pearce, working himself up. "I'm standing treat, remember, and I'll pay for anything that you order. And the more of you who take advantage of my invitation, the better! Mrs. Hake," he added, turning, "serve everybody with anything they like, and I'll pay the bill."

"I hope you mean that, young gentleman!" said Mrs. Hake, rather anxiously.

"Of course I mean it!" said Gore-Pearce, with a pompous glare. "I am the son of a millionaire!"

"Good man!"

"Good old Gore-Pearce!"

The fellows crowded round the counter, and, curiously enough, about a dozen others came piling in at that moment, shouting with excitement and joy.

"Come on—Gore-Pearce's treat!"

"Hurrah!"

"Gore-Pearce is paying for everything!"

"Splendid man!"

"Gangway there—gangway!"

More and more came in, as the news spread like wildfire. And Claude Gore-Pearce, hemmed in against the counter, regarded the invasion with a feeling that was akin to stupefaction!



CHAPTER 24.

Gore-Pearce's Treat!

"HURRAH!"

"Let's get near the counter, you chaps!"

"Come on!"

"Gore - Pearce is standing treat to everybody!"

More and more came in, and Claude Gore-Pearce felt dizzy and dazed. It seemed to him that all these juniors must have been waiting just round the corner, ready to come

swarming in at a signal. If the truth must be told, he wasn't far wrong in this assumption!

"Come along, Mrs. Hake—hurry up!" sang out Reggie Pitt. "Let me have half a dozen of your threepenny jam tarts!"

"And I'll have a dozen of your sixpenny custards!" shouted Fatty Little eagerly.

"Cream horns for me!" said Fullwood, smacking his lips. "Half a dozen will do to start with!"

"Gimme a pound of chocolate biscuits!" roared somebody else.

And so the orders were given—lavish, magnificent orders. Fortunately, Mrs. Hake had an assistant behind the counter—as she generally had at this hour—and they were kept working like niggers as they supplied the orders to the excited crowd. Mrs. Hake was quite comfortable about it all. She had received Gore-Pearce's assurance that he would settle up at the end, and, after all, he was the son of a millionaire.

"What—what does this mean?" snapped Gore-Pearce, coming to himself with a violent start. "Is this a trick, Mavers, or whatever you're infernal name is?"

"My name is Travers—and it's not infernal."

"Well Travers, then!" snarled Gore-Pearce. "I thought you told me—"

"Dear old fellow, why jump down my throat?" asked Vivian Travers mildly.

"You heard me invite the fellows to a treat, didn't you? Strangely enough, they all seem to be very hungry now. But you cannot repudiate this invitation. Remember your own words, Gore-Pearce. You invited everybody—and the more the merrier. I am gratified to see that so many have accepted."

"But I'm not gratified!" roared Gore-Pearce furiously.

"No?" smiled Travers. "But, remember, you are out for popularity—"

"It's a trick!" shouted the new boy, in a rage. "You've just been playing a trick on me! I thought there was something funny about it all the time, and now I know!"

"We live and learn!" murmured Travers contentedly.

"Well, I'm not going to pay!"

"Come, come!" said Travers. "The good lady won't like that, dear old fellow. You distinctly promised her—"

"I don't care what I promised!" raged the millionaire's son. "I thought the bill would only come to about two bob!"

"You cannot, of course, hold Mrs. Hake responsible for your thoughts," said Travers easily. "We are all liable to labour under misapprehensions at times. Your only course, dear old fellow, is to grin and bear it."

But Claude Gore-Pearce did not grin, and he had made up his mind that he would not bear it. He knew now that Vivian Travers had been playing a joke on him—one of Travers' typical practical jokes. But Gore-Pearce, being a raw recruit, had guessed nothing until it was too late.

There were between twenty and thirty juniors in the tuck shop, all making hay while the sun shone. Fatty Little was doing wonders, and he hadn't enjoyed himself so much for terms. Unhappily, Gore-Pearce found it impossible to either get away or make himself heard. He was hemmed in, and everybody was shouting at once; nobody took the slightest notice of his protestations.

At last the customers were served, and Mrs. Hake's stock was looking sickly. Scarcely anything was left. All the most expensive luxuries had long since gone, and Mrs. Hake herself was busy with pencil and paper. She had had a rare time keeping account of everything.

"What's the damage, Mrs. Hake?" sang out Travers, when he saw her look up.

"Eight pounds, fifteen shillings and sixpence," said Mrs. Hake breathlessly.

"There you are, Gore-Pearce," smiled Travers. "A mere trifle! Eight pounds, fifteen shillings and sixpence. This is where you do the great working-out act."

Claude Gore-Pearce tore himself away, his face red with fury and alarm.

"I won't!" he shouted savagely. "I won't pay a penny! I've been tricked, and you-all know it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The tuck shop rang with riotous laughter—much of it, it is to be feared, of a pastry-muffled character.

The millionaire's son quivered from head to foot.

"I won't pay!" he bellowed. "You thought it was clever to fool me, didn't you? Well, you can all go and hang yourselves! I don't hold myself responsible!"

Mrs. Hake, full of anxiety, leaned over the counter.

"Come, young gentleman, that won't do!" she said sharply. "You promised to settle up—"

"I didn't expect to pay an outrageous sum like eight pounds!" bellowed Gore-Pearce.

Much of the laughter was beginning to die down. The juniors were looking at Gore-Pearce with disgust. This was an excellent test—and Gore-Pearce had come out badly! Vivian Travers had had a trick played on him when he had arrived at St. Frank's—very much of the same character—and he, being the fellow he was, had smiled amiably, and had paid up with great cheerfulness. But Claude Gore-Pearce was not of the same breed.

Being a new fellow, he should have accepted the situation. Indeed, being the son of a millionaire, a harmless practical joke of this kind should have meant nothing to him. As he glared at Travers, he could see the scorn and contempt in the latter's eyes.

"I rather thought you would act like this, Gore-Pearce!" said Travers scathingly. "Well, well! The world's made up of all sorts, isn't it?"

It might as well be mentioned that Vivian Travers had guaranteed Mrs. Hake full payment, in the event of Gore-Pearce's failure to settle up. So the good lady's anxiety was

not particularly acute. She knew, at least, that she could place absolute faith in Travers' word.

"You'd better settle up, my lad!" said Reggie Pitt, as he looked at Gore-Pearce. "Come on! Smile, and pay up!"

"I won't!" roared Gore-Pearce. "I don't hold myself responsible—"

"But, hang it, you gave Mrs. Hake your promise!" said Fullwood contemptuously.

"One moment, dear old fellows," said Travers. "Surely this is a perfect approaching? And he, no doubt, will settle the point."

Everybody looked out, rather wondering why Vivian Travers had given such a broad wink behind Gore-Pearce's back. But they soon understood. The tall, lanky figure approaching the tuck shop belonged to William Napoleon Browne of the Fifth, and Browne, of course, was no more a prefect than Travers was.

"This is a gratifying spectacle," said Browne, in his benevolent way, as he entered. "I take it that some fortunate fool has come into a fortune? Let me not disturb this happy, if gluttonous, scene, brothers."

"Just a minute, Browne!" said Travers, with another wink. "You're one of the most important prefects in the school, aren't you?"

"Brother Travers, it is not my habit to assume a dignity which—"

"And therefore you'll be able to tell Gore-Pearce a few home truths!" went on Travers hastily. "Being a prefect, Browne, you are in a position of authority. Your word goes. This fellow, Gore-Pearce, is a new boy, and he refuses to pay Mrs. Hake her bill after inviting everybody to feed at his expense!"

"It was a trick!" shrieked Gore-Pearce.

But Travers took no notice of him. He explained the situation to Browne, and Browne, who was ever ready for a practical joke, assumed an air of gravity that would have made an owl look silly.

"Is it possible that I have heard aright, brothers?" asked Browne, in a shocked voice. "Brother Gore-Pearce, I would warn you that this matter is grave, indeed. I venture to predict that unless you rapidly change your mind you will soon be ankle-deep in the ox-tail."

"I'm not going to pay a penny!" panted Gore-Pearce.

"Did you promise Mrs. Hake to settle up?"

"Yes, but—"

"And did you invite the entire populace to indulge their every whim?"

"Yes, I did!" roared Gore-Pearce. "But I didn't know—"

"Enough!" said Browne sternly. "Wretched youth! Unprincipled strippling! This sum, I understand, is eight pounds, fifteen shillings and sixpence. Pay up at once, brother! Pay up—or take the consequences!"

"I'll take the consequences!" hooted Gore-Pearce.

"I would remind you that prison looms hideously before those who indulge in the sinister crime of fraud," said Browne, in a terrible voice. "Will you pay this bill, wretched youth, or am I to go to the headmaster? Am I to lay these sordid facts before

his wilting ears? Am I to report that we have, in our midst, a rascal who can be described by no other term than that of a welsler? Shame, brother!"

The crowd was ready to yell with laughter, but, heroically, it remained grave. And Claude Gore-Pearce, with visions of a terrible interview with his father, fumbled for his wallet. He had only just got to St. Frank's—he was a raw new boy. Something in Browne's tone seemed to tell him that he would be expelled on his very first day! Of course, he believed that Browne was a prefect, and a person of authority. So, raging like a volcano, and giving a life-like exhibition of the said volcano bursting into eruption, he paid up.

After he had paid up, Browne walked out, and the crowd yelled itself hoarse.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And he thought old Browne was a prefect!" sobbed Reggie Pitt, holding his sides. Gore-Pearce started violently.

"Wasn't Browne a prefect?" he yelled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've been done brown, my lad!" said Reggie, grinning.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you're not going to eat any more of this food!" shouted Gore-Pearce, with sudden fury. "It's mine! I paid for it!"

"All right—you can have it!" shouted Handforth, who had come in towards the last. "You say these tarts are yours, Gore-Pearce? Good! Take 'em!"

Whizz! Slosh! Whizz! Slosh!

The tarts flew with unerring aim, and they broke all over Gore-Pearce's face. He staggered back, and Handforth's action was the cue for a general rag.

Whizz! Splosh! Whizz! Blob!

Custard tarts, cream horns, jam puffs, and all manner of other delicacies hit Claude Gore-Pearce in a battering fusillade. In less than one minute he was plastered from head to foot, and the juniors shrieked with enjoyment.

Gore-Pearce had asked for it—and he had certainly got it!

He staggered out of the tuck shop, a grotesque figure, and staggered blindly towards the gates.

"Well, so much for Gore-Pearce!" chuckled Travers. "We put him to the test, and he jibbed at the first hurdle. Well, well! It's just as well to know what these new fellows are made of!"

Claude Gore-Pearce's entry into St. Frank's had not been auspicious. And, considering that he was the son of the millionaire who was trying to turn the Earl of Edgemore out of his home, there was every prospect that the immediate future would be entertaining!

THE END.

(Jolly fine series, isn't it, boys! What-ho! Then you'll all want to read next Wednesday's yarn, which is entitled "THE SCHOOLBOY HOUSEHOLDERS!" And now, if you haven't done so already, turn to page 35 and read the opening of our wonderful new serial!)

Opening Chapters of a Magnificent New Adventure Serial!

THE AIR PATROL!



By **GEO. E. ROCHESTER.**

Young Guy Howard, of the Atlantic Rangers, finds himself up against the stiffest task of his career when he sets out to round up the mystery Pirates of the Air! But he's full of pluck and resource; and his subsequent amazing adventures will thrill all "N.L.L." readers.

CHAPTER 1.

The Atlantic Ranger!

"DIRTY weather, Howard, and more to come!"

"Yes. Pity you weather experts can't arrange a fine spell!" grinned Guy Howard.

The meteorological officer laughed and hurried on in the direction of the living quarters, his oilskins glistening in the wet.

Guy cocked an expert eye at the low-lying, leaden clouds, which were weeping a thick drizzle, then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he buttoned up the collar of his flying coat and turned towards the hangars, where his super-engined, single-seater machine was already being wheeled out on to the macadam.

Guy was the youngest member of the Atlantic Rangers, whose duty it was to patrol between the huge floating aerodromes which linked up the Atlantic seaboard of Britain and America.

These aerodromes, colossal structures of steel, buoyed up by enormous tanks, were nearly half a mile in diameter. There were six of them: A, B, C, D, E, F, being their respective station identifications. At nights their lighthouses, rising two hundred feet above sea level, served as a guide to the large air liners and mail-carrying machines.

Each aerodrome had its staff of expert mechanics, its salvage machines, repair depôts and petrol dumps. On each aerodrome there were, also, fully equipped wireless and meteorological stations, comfortable living quarters for the personnel, and an hotel for the benefit of air travellers who were stormbound.

Guy was attached to D aerodrome, which was under the command of Colonel Malcolm. He was almost due to take-off on a four-hours' patrol as far as C aerodrome, but, as he walked towards the hangars, a hoarse shout caused him to come to an abrupt halt.

"Mr. Howard! Mr. Howard!"

Turning, Guy saw a mechanic running towards him from the direction of the living quarters and offices.

"Sir," panted the man, as he came up, "Colonel Malcolm wants you, right now. At once, sir!"

Something in the man's voice caused Guy to look at him sharply and snap:

"What's wrong? What's the trouble?"

"I dunno," replied the other, through labouring breaths. "But it's something mighty serious, sir. I was passing the colonel's hut when Sparks, the wireless operator, passed me at the double. His face was as white as a sheet. He dashed into the colonel's hut, and the next moment the colonel himself came to the door and shouted at me to fetch you——"

He broke off, for Guy was already

running towards Colonel Malcolm's office. Reaching the door, he knocked and entered.

Colonel Malcolm was pacing the floor, but at sight of Guy he stopped short and said harshly:

"Get off at once! Struben is down in the sea with five hundred thousand pounds worth of bullion on board. He has been attacked. His wireless message was unfinished. This is the third raid on your beat, Howard, and I hope for your own sake that it has not been successful."

"Did Struben give any position, sir?"

"None. He is somewhere between here and C aerodrome!"

Guy saluted smartly, then turned and dashed for the hangars. The propeller of his machine had been left ticking over by the sergeant-mechanic, who had been tuning up the engine.

"All right, sergeant?" Guy snapped.

"Yessir! Everything O.K."

Guy nodded and, clambering up, dropped into the snug cockpit. His hand closed on the throttle. The engine roared with renewed life. Then his left hand shot up and, in answer to the signal, the waiting mechanics whipped the chocks away from the tyred wheels of the undercarriage.

The aeroplane shot forward and, skimming across the macadam, took the air in a long upward glide.

"What's the matter with Mister Howard?" inquired the sergeant-mechanic wonderingly. "Seemed as how he couldn't get off quick enough!"

"Neither he could!" cut in the mechanic, who had brought the colonel's message to Guy. "Struben's down in the sea with the bullion machine! Sparks has just told me. It's a hold-up. The third on Mr. Howard's beat. This will mean a blinkin' court-martial for him, you see!"

CHAPTER 2.

Struben!

MEANWHILE Guy was eating up space at the rate of one hundred and fifty miles an hour. He was flying due east, but the visibility was very bad. At eight hundred feet, misty, wraith-like clouds swirled and eddied about the machine, and he was forced to drop to five hundred feet.

With anxious eyes Guy swept the grey waste of waters below him. More than once he circled widely in an effort to sight the bullion machine, but an hour had passed before he saw the huge bulk of it

away to starboard, squatting on the waves like some monster beetle.

Shoving forward his control, Guy dived towards the big four-engined bullion machine. His own single-seater was fitted with an adaptable undercarriage, which permitted of his landing on either land or water. At twenty feet he circled over the bullion machine and, shutting off his engine, he glided to the water and ran in towards it.

Struben, pilot of the bullion machine, leant over the side of his cockpit.

"So you've got hyar?" he shouted. "Gosh, I figgered you were never comin'!"

Struben, a lean, gaunt American, was one of the leading pilots in the employ of Atlantic Airways.

"Yes, I'm here!" replied Guy shortly. "What's your damage?"

Struben laughed mirthlessly.

"Guess I've on'y lost five hundred thousand pounds of bullion, Mister Ranger!" he drawled. "That's all, 'less you like to add that Heyward, my second pilot, and Richards, my gunner, have both cashed in their checks!"

"You mean they are dead?" snapped Guy.

"Sure! That's jest what I do mean," replied Struben, then added, with a sudden flash of heat: "What are you shootin' off all them fool questions for? Get right after the scum that pulled this hyar hold-up, and cut th' cackle, Mister Ranger."

Guy flushed.

"I'm taking no orders from you, Struben," he replied coldly. "I'm coming aboard you."

He splashed a sea-anchor overboard and, leaping on to one of the huge floats of the bullion machine, took the precaution of looping a rope from his machine round one of the shock-absorber casings. He then clambered up and dropped into the roomy cockpit beside Struben.

Muller, Struben's mechanic, was sitting on the floor of the cockpit nursing an arm, the sleeve of which was wet with blood. There was no sign of either Heyward or Richards, and, at a sharp question from Guy, Struben drawled:

"They're in th' rear cockpit. I put 'em there myself when th' shootin' was over. They're both dead."

"Right!" snapped Guy. "Let me have the whole yarn, Struben."

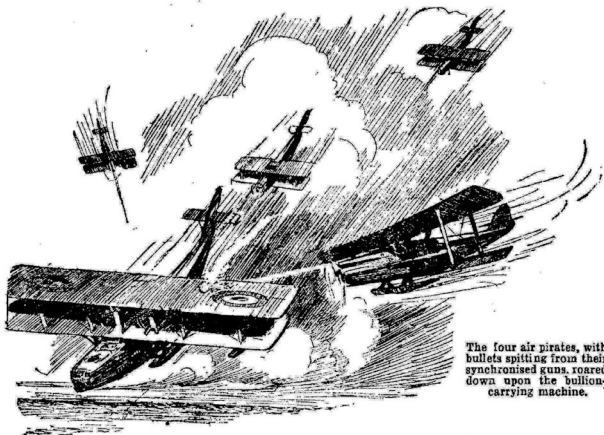
"Reckon there ain't nothin' to tell," replied Struben. "I was cruisin' along, 'bout four thousand feet up, when four double-seater seaplanes come roarin' right down on me, shootin' bullets fast as they could jerk 'em outa their synchronised

guns. I figger Richards got his right away. He fired one burst then flopped over his gun. I'm not a fool, Mister Ranger, and I've yet to meet th' guy that can call me a coward, but I saw that the fellers were in real, honest-to-goodness earnest. I shut off my engines and came right down to the sea. It wasn't any good tryin' to run, 'cos I was out-engined with this great lumberin' bus. Reckon the sea-planes were good for one hundred and eighty on th' level; and me, I can't do more'n one hundred and twenty with cargo and crew aboard. 'Nother thing, I can't climb. My ceiling is twelve

dandy shootin'. Waal, them fellers then gives me two minutes to hand that bullion over real quiet and peaceable, else they figgered that they'd come and get it over my dead body!"

Struben paused, wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

"There're some guys, Mister Ranger," he went on, "who have real death and glory notions, but I'm not one. I know jolly waal when I'm at the wrong end of a gun, and I guess my mitts sure crept skywards without any arguing at all. Two masked guys came aboard and shipped the bullion to their own machines. Then they



The four air pirates, with bullets spitting from their synchronised guns, roared down upon the bullion-carrying machine.

thousand feet with this ol' bullion machine, mister, so I figgered I'd best get down 'fore I was shot down. Get me?"

"Yes. Get on!" replied Guy grimly.

"Waal, then, Heyward was workin' his wireless like as though he hadn't another minute to live, and, gosh, he hadn't, neither. A bullet got him clean through the head and another one plugged into th' wireless. I guess I jest naturally figgered we were done, then. I gets th' bus landed on th' sea, and them four machines landed same time as I did and manoeuvred so's their guns had me covered. Muller, hyar, pulled his automatic, but they smashed his arm with some real

took off, leaving me sittin' around down hyar wonderin' where you Rangers were?"

"All right. I don't want to hear about what you were thinking," retorted Guy. "How long ago did this happen?"

"Upwards of an hour and a half, I reckon. I've been splicing a couple of flying wires what were shot away, else I'd have been hittin' th' trail for D aerodrome 'fore this. I'm ready to take off now, anyway, so don't mind me, mister; you get off after those pirates right now."

"I'm seeing you home," replied Guy curtly.

Struben laughed harshly.

"I don't want seeing home," he drawled,

his cold eyes on Guy. "Get this, mister; there's going to be some trouble over this affair. Three times there's been a hold-up on your patrol and I've figgered as th' mug twice. Waal, I'm tellin' Atlantic Airways that if this route isn't patrolled in a more efficient manner, I quits! Yes-sir, quits for good. And I'm not the only pilot who hates this stretch 'tween C and D aerodromes. You've got to capture those air pirates, else—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Guy, turning towards the rear cockpit. He knew it was perfectly hopeless to attempt to take up the search for the raiding machines at the moment.

They would be miles away by this time, and would almost certainly be flying by compass through the cloud-banks. Added to that, Guy could see that Struben's machine was badly riddled, and it was essential that some sort of escort accompanied it to D aerodrome. The American might easily be forced to make another landing on the sea with engine—or some other—trouble. In the event of such a landing, Struben might find it impossible to take off again. Guy could, of course, wireless for a salvage machine, but the visibility was becoming so bad that the salvage machine might never find Struben.

In the rear cockpit Guy found the bodies of Heyward and Richards. The latter had been shot through the chest. Heyward had been shot through the forehead. There was a little bluish mark where the bullet had entered. Guy dropped to his knees and raised the man's head. For a long moment he examined the wound, closely and with earnest intentness, then gently lowered the head to the floor again. Rising to his feet, he stood plunged in thought, then, turning abruptly on his heel, made his way back to the forward cockpit.

"Waal, satisfied?" grunted Struben.

Guy nodded.

"You say Heyward was working the wireless when he was shot?" he asked.

"Yes. That's correct!"

"He was sitting side by side with you, then?"

"Sure!" snapped Struben. "Any more fool questions? Don't you know that th' wireless officer always sits by th' side of th' pilot on th' bullion machines?"

"Jolly near go for you getting that bullet!" remarked Guy quietly.

"Cut it out!" snarled Struben angrily. "It didn't get me and that's all there is to it. Let's get home, if you're not aimin' to hustle around after those crooks."

An angry light leapt for a moment into Guy's eyes, but he answered steadily enough:

"All right, if you're sure your machine is fixed O.K. Sure you can make D aerodrome with her?"

"I didn't learn pilotin' on kite balloons!" snarled Struben. "Let's get! There's goin' to be a row about this, Mister Ranger. These routes aren't patrolled right, and—"

"You've said that already!" snapped Guy. "Switch on your engines and give your jaws a rest."

With that he dropped over the side on to the floats. Five minutes later both machines were in the air, heading for D aerodrome. But there was a grim look in Guy's eyes as he peered ahead through the murky drizzle!

CHAPTER 3.

Suspicious!

COLONEL MALCOLM bent forward in his chair, and surveyed Guy coldly across the table.

"We have heard Mr. Struben's evidence," he said sternly, "also his complaint as to the inefficient manner in which the route between C and D aerodromes is being patrolled. Although you are probably not to blame for your failure to be on or near the spots where these hold-ups have occurred, yet you have failed entirely to find the slightest clue as to the identity of these air bandits, or as to the whereabouts of their base."

He cleared his throat and went on:

"To-day has seen the third hold-up on your patrol and, unless you can bring in the men responsible for this dastardly raid, then we shall have no other option than to replace you with some more efficient Ranger. This is your last chance, Howard. Failure to find, and bring in, the persons responsible for this raid will be met with dismissal from our service. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," replied Guy quietly.

Colonel Malcolm turned to Captain Langley, his second-in-command. They conversed together for a few moments, then the colonel addressed Guy.

"Do you wish to question Mr. Struben further?" he asked.

Guy glanced at the lean American lounging near the table.

"No, sir," he replied.

"Very good. You may withdraw."

Guy and Struben saluted, and, turning, quitted the room.

Outside the wind had risen almost to a gale and was whipping rain from out of the night. It was three hours since Guy and Struben had landed on the aerodrome, and darkness had now descended on the Atlantic. The dash-dot-dot of the automatically-controlled lighthouse lantern was the only illumination, save for the dimly-seen lighted windows of the living quarters.

As Guy paused to turn up his coat-collar, Struben laid a hand on his arm and drawled:

"I'm mighty sorry, Howard, that it's come to this. Reckon I was feelin' real sore about it all and I kinda lost my temper. Mebbe you'll have some luck and light on a clue——"

"That's all right," grunted Guy. "I'm not kicked out of the service yet, and I don't intend to be, either."

"That's th' talk!" said Struben heartily. "Comin' across to th' mess?"

"No; I'm going to my room."

With that they parted, Struben towards the mess, Guy towards his quarters. But, before he had traversed half the distance, Guy halted. A sudden shaft of light had come as Struben opened the door of the mess, and was, in a moment, blotted out again as he banged the door shut behind him.

Waiting a few minutes, oblivious to the pelting rain, Guy walked quietly towards the uncurtained window of the pilots' ante-room which adjoined the mess. Keeping in the black shadow he peered in. The room was full of pilots, and officials who were off duty. Some were reading, others lounging in armchairs. Guy gave an exclamation of satisfaction as he saw that Struben had drawn a chair up to a card-table at which sat four other men.

"Danvers and his pals," Guy murmured. "Poker fends. That will keep Struben engaged for a few hours!"

He watched while Struben was dealt a hand, then turned on his heel and walked quickly in the direction of Colonel Malcolm's office. Knocking at the door, he was bidden to enter.

Colonel Malcolm, writing at the table, raised his eyebrows as Guy appeared. Captain Langley paused in the act of lighting a cigarette, and looked at Guy in surprise.

"May I speak to you, sir?" inquired Guy, with a snap salute.

"Yes. What have you to say?" replied the colonel brusquely.

"I would like a fortnight's leave, sir!"

Colonel Malcolm stared at him.

"You mean that you wish to have a roving commission for a fortnight during which time you will endeavour to get on the track of the air pirates?" he said sharply.

"Yes, sir."

"Why could you not have asked for this before? Surely it occurred to you?"

"Yes, sir, it did. I wished to say nothing in front of Mr. Struben."

Colonel Malcolm laid down his pen.

"Why?"

He rapped out the word, his cold eyes on Guy.

"Because I suspect Mr. Struben of complicity in the raids, sir," replied Guy steadily.

There was a moment of tense silence. When Colonel Malcolm spoke his voice was curiously quiet, albeit his eyes never left Guy's face.

"That is a grave accusation, Howard! On what do you base your suspicions?"

"On the fact that Heyward was shot by a revolver bullet fired within a foot of his head," replied Guy. "According to Mr. Struben, Heyward was shot by a bullet from one of the attacking machines. Mr. Struben has lied. Heyward was shot by someone in the cockpit!"

(Continued overleaf.)

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"Because the skin around the wound is faintly marked by the powder from the revolver which fired the shot. Powder markings will not show when the bullet is fired from more than a foot away!"

Colonel Malcolm and Captain Langley exchanged glances.

"This is most extraordinary," said the former. "Mr. Struben may be able to explain!"

"No, sir," cut in Guy sharply. "He would have some plausible explanation, and, if questioned, he would be on his guard."

"But, even admitting you are right, I fail to see how Struben can be incriminated on such flimsy evidence!"

"Richards, the gunner, had also been killed by revolver fire, sir," replied Guy. "Muller, the mechanic, was wounded in the arm, also by revolver fire, and at such close quarters that the bullet tore right through the arm. The doctor who examined the wounds will corroborate my statements. Apart from this, the machine was badly riddled with machine-gun fire, yet not one of those machine-gun bullets was responsible for any of the wounds, as Struben would have us believe!"

"Then what," asked Captain Langley quietly, "is your theory?"

"My theory is this, sir," replied Guy. "Mr. Struben has twice been attacked when piloting the bullion machine—a machine whose flights are always kept secret. Consequently there has been a leakage of information. Assuming that leakage was Struben, and that he is an ally of the air bandits, what is to prevent him landing somewhere on the sea and transferring the bullion to the pirate machines?"

"Impossible! Heyward, Richards and Muller would never allow him to do so!" snapped the colonel.

"I agree, in the case of the former two," retorted Guy. "And they were shot. Dead men tell no tales!"

Captain Langley whistled softly.

"Muller always flies with Struben," went on Guy. "He agrees with Struben's account of the raid. Consequently if Struben is a wrong 'un, so is Muller. Assuming that, then I think Richards was shot by Muller, and fired his own revolver at Muller before he died. One shot has been fired by Richards' revolver! Why did he fire the revolver? He had his machine-guns. Obviously he did not fire it to repel the raiders!"

"Continue!" said the colonel grimly.

"Heyward was shot by Struben as he sat by the latter's side. As I say, the skin is marked with powder. Before, or after, the bullion had been transferred, the bullion machine was fired at to give credence to Struben's story of the attack. It would be fired at carefully, so as not to hit Struben."

"And that," said the colonel slowly, "is your theory as to this raid?"

"Yes, sir."

Colonel Malcolm sat a few moments in silence, his brow puckered and drawn, his face grave. Then, turning to Captain Langley, he asked quietly:

"Have we enough evidence to justify our placing Struben under arrest?"

CHAPTER 4.

Muller Talks!

CAPTAIN LANGLEY looked at Guy curiously before answering.

"I think, sir," he said, "that we had better question Howard as to his proposed course of action. He has asked for a fortnight's leave."

The colonel nodded and turned to Guy.

"Assuming your suspicions are correct," he said, "do you wish to place Struben under arrest pending investigations?"

"No, sir; I think it would be extremely difficult to prove anything definite against Struben. My idea is to allow him to be at large, unaware that he is in any way suspected. I will trail him, for, if my theory is correct, there must be some tangible connecting link between him and the raiders. When I discover that link, then I will trace the raiders to their base."

"I think that is wise," replied the colonel. "Your suspicions may not be correct, and it would be extremely unfortunate and embarrassing were we to place an innocent American under arrest on such a charge. We must avoid, if possible, international complications. Also, if your suspicions are correct, by arresting Struben we might easily cause the raiders to become alarmed and disband. The bullion and specie which they have stolen would then, in all probability, be lost to us completely. I——"

He broke off abruptly as Guy, holding up a warning hand, stepped quickly, but softly, to the door and wrenched it open.

A gust of cold air and driving rain swirled into the room. Guy stood a moment on the threshold, peering out into

the night. Then, closing the door, he retraced his steps.

"I thought I heard someone outside, sir," he began apologetically. "It must

Crash!

The glass of the window flew into a thousand fragments, a bullet whined past Guy's head, burying itself in the plaster of the wall.

With a bitten-off ejaculation, Colonel Malcolm launched himself to his feet. Captain Langley was already at the door, and, swinging it open, dashed out into the night with Guy at his heels.

They doubled round the building, but nothing was to be seen in the inky darkness.

"Got clean away, whoever it was!" said Captain Langley grimly. "There's not an earthly chance of seeing anyone in this confounded darkness. Hallo! Where are you off to?"

"The men's quarters!" replied Guy, and glided away into the night.

Reaching the long, low building where the mechanics had their living quarters, Guy pushed open the entrance door, and, sauntering along a stone corridor, paused outside a door beneath which filtered a beam of light. He knocked, then opening the door, stepped into the room.

Muller, lying on a camp bed, his arm in a sling, looked up from an American magazine which he was reading. He was clad in shirt, trousers, and unbuttoned tunic. A pair of dilapidated leather slippers were on his feet.

"Well?" he growled.

"How's the arm?" asked Guy. "I thought I'd drop in and see how you were!"

"Arm's all right!" grunted Muller, then relapsed into silence.

Guy nodded and seated himself on the bed.

"That's fine!" he said. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Nothing!" replied Muller surlily.

"Sure?"

Guy's voice was genial.

"Course, I'm sure!" snarled Muller.

"You wouldn't like me to fetch Struben, eh?"

Muller raised himself on the elbow of his uninjured arm.

"What d'you mean by that?" he snarled.

"What do I want to see Struben for?"

"Just to tell him what you heard when you were listening at the door of the colonel's office," replied Guy easily. "Just to tell him that we're wise to him; and to tell him that you plugged at me and

missed. That was a foolish thing to do, that shot of yours, Muller!"

"Are—you—crazy?" demanded Muller hoarsely, an ugly look in his eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"You've never been out of this room tonight?" asked Guy.

"No, I haven't! What's it got to do with you, anyway——"

The words died on Muller's lips. Guy had bent down, and from beneath the bed had dragged a wet, and hurriedly-folded oilskin. In one pocket was stuffed a pair of rubber overshoes, and from the other Guy drew a squat automatic.

"I saw it when I came in," explained Guy, a hint of laughter in his voice. "The bottoms of your trousers were wet, Muller. Pity you lost your head and fired. That was what brought me here!"

Every vestige of colour had drained from Muller's face, leaving it grey and ashen.

"What are you goin' to do?" he asked huskily.

"Take you to Colonel Malcolm," replied Guy sternly. "The game's up, Muller, and you'll hang for the murder of Richards!"

His hearer never dreamt that in this latter remark Guy had drawn a bow at

(Continued overleaf.)

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venture. If he had he would probably not have crumpled up as he did.

"I didn't!" he screamed. "I didn't! It was Struben! I'll talk, I tell you! I'll explain. It wasn't me—it wasn't me! It was Struben——"

"Be quiet!" snapped Guy. "Get up and come with me!"

He rose to his feet and, waiting till Muller had also risen, he jabbed his gun in the small of the man's back.

"Now walk!" he snapped.

Muller obeyed without any sign of resistance. He shuffled from the room and along the corridor to the entrance door. Passing through it, captor and captive bent their heads to the gale.

A form loomed up out of the blackness.

"Is that you, Howard?" came the voice of Captain Langley.

"Yes, sir; I am bringing Muller along!"

"Very good!"

The trio reached Colonel Malcolm's office, and Captain Langley held the door open while Muller was ushered across the threshold.

Colonel Malcolm, sitting at the table, turned cold, grim eyes on Muller.

"Is this the man who fired that shot?" he asked sternly.

"Yes, sir," replied Guy.

The colonel turned to Muller.

"What have you to say?" he asked harshly.

"I'll explain!" whined Muller. "I lost my nerve. There's more in this than me. By glory, there is! He says"—he pointed a quivering finger at Guy—"that I shot Richards. I didn't—it was Struben—it was, I tell you!" His voice rose to a shout. "Struben did it! They've got a place, a rock off the coast of Greenland. They've——"

"Who?" cut in Colonel Malcolm. "Who do you mean by they?"

"The pirates! I tell you Struben's in with them! It was him what got me to stand in—honest to goodness, it was! I heard you talking and—and I lost my nerve and fired. We were never attacked to-day. We handed over the bullion to the four pirate machines—gave it to 'em—leastways, Struben did. They're partners of his and——"

"That will do!" cut in Colonel Malcolm. He turned to Guy.

"Bring Struben here!" he commanded.

"Under arrest, sir?" inquired the ranger.

Colonel Malcolm hesitated a moment.

"Yes, under arrest," he said crisply.

"We have evidence to justify such a procedure."

As he heard the words, a strangled cry

came from Muller. A look of utter fear came to his face.

"Don't let Struben know I've squealed on him!" he cried. "Don't bring him here. If Struben knows he'll kill me. Don't bring him here, I tell you!"

Colonel Malcolm looked at the cowering man contemptuously.

"That's your own funeral!" he said harshly, then added dryly: "But I don't think he'll harm you here. Howard! Fetch Struben!"

"No, no!" shrieked Muller hoarsely, and flung himself towards Colonel Malcolm. It was obvious that he was terrified of Struben. "Don't tell him I squealed," he implored. "Don't——"

The colonel pushed him aside disdainfully, then looked at Guy significantly.

"Very good, sir!" said the ranger.

Guy saluted smartly, and, leaving the room, crossed to the mess. He paused at the door of the pilots' ante-room just long enough to loosen the flap of his gun holster. He realised that Struben, when confronted with his guilt, would probably prove dangerous, and Guy was prepared for any emergency. Then, opening the door, he sauntered into the room.

Struben was sitting at a card table with Danvers and Mortimer of the technical staff, and two French air liner pilots, Montessor and Sauvage. He looked up as Guy approached, and his thin lips twisted into a grin.

"How do, Howard!" he drawled. "Goin' to sit in and take a hand? Reckon cards is better'n crook huntin' a night like this!"

There was flinny veiled mockery in the words. Danvers kept his eyes on his cards, but Mortimer, Montessor, and Sauvage stared at the boy coldly. Guy sensed their hostility, and guessed that Struben had been voicing his sentiments as to the manner in which the air route was being patrolled.

"I prefer crook hunting to cards!" he said grimly. "And that's why I'm here, Struben!"

A hush fell on the room. Struben sat rigid, staring at the boy. Then he laughed.

"Meanin'?" he drawled.

"Meaning that I want you for murder!" was the stern reply.

(Now, lads, what's your opinion of this new serial? Spiffing! The "goods"! Ah, I thought you'd like it. Next week's corking instalment is more exciting than ever, so look out for it. And do your Editor a favour by telling all your pals about this yarn of the world of to-morrow.)



Our Weekly Pow-Wow!

By
The Editor.

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Opinions, Please!

WELL, chums, what do you think of it? The new serial, I mean. You've all read the first instalment, and by now you should have formed your opinion of it. And I would like you to write to me and tell me that opinion. I want you to tell me, candidly, whether you like it or dislike it, why you don't like it, why you do like it, and so forth. I always like to know what my readers think of a story, because it helps me to select new yarns when they are needed in the future.

In next week's instalment Guy Howard proves his pluck and resource to the full. Things move with a real hum, and written as the instalment is in Geo. E. Rochester's most entertaining style, you will feel that you are accompanying Guy in his fight against Struben and his rascally employer.

Have you told your pals about this new serial of the air? You haven't! Great Scott! Surely you wouldn't let them miss a treat like this. Tell them right away, chums, and you'll be doing both them and me a good turn!

On the Stage.

This is where a South African reader yearns to be. He has had a bent towards the stage for years, but his people are dead against the theatre. One is not going to quarrel with anybody for feeling that, since the theatrical profession is simply thick with dis-appointments for all except geniuses, and even they feel a draught in nine cases out of ten.

Of course, the ideal is magnificent. One pictures the popular favourite passing out of his dressing-room and wending his way through the wings, what time every scene-shifter bows low, and the manager stands with bared head. Then the plaudits of the enthusiastic audience! Think of it! Why, there have been cases where the famous actor has been pelted—just snowed under—with banknotes, to say nothing of the bouquets which he has to kick his way through to get to the footlights to make a speech. But,

alas to relate, this does not always happen. Often, through no fault of his own, a play fails, and he finds himself out of a job.

As my chum in the south has a host of other interests, and is evidently a rattling clever fellow in other ways, I advise him to wash out the theatre as a calling.

Summer Joys!

We have all met people in this country who have had the face to grumble at our weather. Why, only last summer, I remember distinctly hearing it said that the season was a failure because there was no sun and we had rain every day.

But a cheery letter from Double Bay in Australia serves to show that a real summer may be too hot stuff to be comfy. Locusts, mosquitoes and flying ants make life unbearable. We all know what it is to be bitten by an ant in this country, but in Australia the flying ant is a terror, while the locust makes a noise like a machine gun. To round up, the mosquitoes bite till you are one unbroken tract of itch. So, after all, there is something in the English summer!

Music.

A Birmingham chum asks me a jolly curious question about music. He wants to know if it is good for the nerves. I dare say it is in some instances, but it is not everybody who would be better for a bout of harmony. Some individuals hate music. They might face it all right, but "facing the music" is a different thing altogether to listening to a piano player, or a fiddler scraping out an air. We know, of course, that music has charms to soothe the savage breast, and that's the reason (according to some folks) that you find a "brass band" round a dog's collar. But, seriously speaking, good music generally is a help. My correspondent wishes to know which is the best kind—the work of Mozart, Schubmann, and Beethoven, to take three of the great masters, or jazz? Well, some like one thing, some another. I am not very partial to jazz myself. It seems a lot of work to precious little effect. It may be

(Continued overleaf.)

OUR WEEKLY POW-WOW!

(Continued from previous page.)

all right for the nimble dancer, but you would not think such music could possibly calm anyone's ragged nerves. It all just depends upon how the music—whether classical or jazz—is played and upon what instrument it is played. But good music should be a fine old cheer up—when it is good.

Ditto.

From Australia comes the fine, crusted old yarn of the householder who was puzzled by getting a bill which ran:

1 Ton of Coal.

1 Ton Ditto.

He offered to stump up for the coal, but said he would be bothered if he would pay for a ditto, seeing that he had never had it. Good, but is it true?

A Note of Warning.

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