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A K.O.
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Yarn inside

One of the many exciting incidents from this week's magnificent book-length school yarn featuring the famous Chums of St. Frank's.

New Series No. 74.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

June 20th, 1931.

Fun, Fights and Thrills in a 'Haunted' Farmhouse!

HANDY'S MIDNIGHT



CHAPTER 1.

S.O.S.

"JUNE!" said Handforth disgustedly. "My only sister! Look at it!"

"What's the good of looking at it?" asked Church, grinning. "It's bad enough, Handy, without your making it worse!"

"Fateful!" snorted Handforth.

The celebrated leader of Study D, in the Ancicat House at St. Frank's, was standing in front of the window, gazing out upon the dreary expanse of West Square. Prep in Study D had been over for some little time, and normally Handforth and Church and McClure would have gone out for cricket practice.

But there would be no cricket practice this evening.

CAPTURE!

By EDWY SEARLES
BROOKS.



Rain was pouring down in torrents, and the sky of the June evening was black and lowering. A high wind was blowing, too—so high, in fact, that it almost amounted to a gale. It whistled and shrieked round the old walls of St. Frank's, buffeting and blustering noisily.

"More like October than June!" went on Handforth, with a sniff. "And it's so jolly cold that I've half a mind to light a fire!"

"By jingo, that's not a bad' wheraz!" said McClure, the Scottish junior. "It'll make things nice and cheery for the evening, anyhow."

He did not actually mean it. Yet, in all truth, it was chilly enough for a fire. It

was one of those evenings, peculiar to the English summer, when the seasons seem to be reversed. All idea of going out had been abandoned long before prep. A number of St. Frank's fellows had planned to go into Bannington this evening, but the weather was so unfriendly that those plans were cancelled. It was essentially an evening for remaining indoors.

"What about the wireless?" asked Church, by way of changing the subject. "It's just about ten to nine, and we might as well listen to the news bulletin."

"Blow the news bulletin!" growled Handforth. "Who wants to listen to the news?"

**Starts with an
S.O.S.**

**Ends with a
K.O.**

"I dare say they'll tell us that Torquay has had ten hours of sunshine to-day—and that Weston-super-Mare has had one of the best days of the season," grinned McClure. "The temperature has probably been eighty in the shade at Newport, Mon."

"Do you think I care what the temperature has been at Newport, Mon?" roared Handforth. "I jolly well know that the temperature here is about fifty—and it wouldn't surprise me to learn that it's jolly near freezing point!"

However, he calmed down somewhat when Church turned on the wireless. Some excellent dance music was being broadcast, and perhaps this had the effect of cheering up Handforth. Then, a minute later, the time-signal sounded from Greenwich, and the weather forecast followed.

It was not particularly cheering. A depression, it appeared, was hovering somewhere off the west coast of Ireland, and although an extensive anti-cyclone was stationary over the greater part of the North Sea and the Continent, the Atlantic depression was steadily but surely pushing the anti-cyclone into oblivion. It seemed any odds that the depression would emerge the victor. And this meant, in so many words, that the weather over southern England would be wet and cold for the next two or three days.

"What about our cricket match against Bannington Grammar School on Saturday?" asked Handforth indignantly.

"My dear chap, it's no good glaring at me," said McClure. "I'm not the depression."

"Dry up, you two!" said Church. "Here's an S O S."

"Oh, turn the giddy thing off!" said Handforth, thoroughly fed up again by the weather forecast.

He turned aside to the window—for gazing at the pouring rain seemed to fascinate him. McClure winked at Church, and they both gave their attention to the radio. The announcer was speaking with his usual perfection of diction.

"Here is an S O S.," he said. "Will the relatives of Gilbert Church, address unknown, communicate at once with the nearest police-station, or the Helmsford Hospital, where he is lying seriously ill?"

Church jumped up with a blanched face. "Did—did you hear that?" he asked hoarsely.

"Shut up!" snapped McClure, running nearer to the instrument.

"I will repeat that," came the announcer's voice. "Will the relatives of Gilbert Church, address unknown, com-

municate at once with the nearest police-station or the Helmsford Hospital, where he is lying seriously ill? Here is the first general news bulletin—"

McClure cut off the wireless, and stared at Church curiously. Handforth had turned from the window and he had completely forgotten the weather.

"What's wrong, old man?" he asked earnestly. "You don't mean to say that that man is any relative of yours?"

"My uncle!" said Church breathlessly. "It must be! Didn't you hear what the announcer said? Gilbert Church—address unknown!"

"Have you got an Uncle Gilbert?" asked McClure quickly.

"Yes; and, what's more, we hardly ever know where he is!" exclaimed Church. "He's a queer sort of chap. I haven't seen him for a year or two. One of the best, though; always tips me a couple of quid. A kind of rover, you know. A bachelor, and he spends most of his time in travelling. I say, this is awful!"

"We've got to do something!" said Handforth briskly. "You know what these wireless S O S's are! When they broadcast an appeal like that, it generally means that the poor chap has met with a serious accident—that he's been run over, or something. We shall have to rush over to the Helmsford Hospital!"

Church was looking stunned. "Poor old Uncle Gilbert!" he said huskily. "I—I can't believe it, you know. I say, supposing I'm the only one of the family to have heard that S O S?"

"It's quite likely that you are," said Handforth. "And we can't take any chances. I'm going to dash over to Helmsford Hospital in my Morris Minor—and you're coming with me! We've got to find out about this!"

"But the weather—" began Church.

"Blow the weather!" retorted Handforth. "You don't think I care about a bit of rain, do you? It's nothing much—only a shower!"

The change in him was remarkable. Now that he knew that one of his chums was in trouble, he completely lost his grumpiness. His one thought was to help Church—and to help him in a practical way.

"It's no good going to the nearest police-station," he went on. "While we're messing about, making inquiries, we can be in Helmsford. It's only twenty miles away, and I can do it in my Minor in just over half an hour. Come on!"

They hurried to the door, Church pale and agitated. They had no sooner got out into the passage than Nipper, the Remove captain, came hurrying along,

with Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregollis-West. Travers was there, too, and Fullwood, and one or two other Removites.

"Did you chaps hear the wireless?" asked Nipper quickly.

"Yes. It's my Uncle Gilbert," said Church.

"Oh, I say! I'm awfully sorry!"

"Poor old Churchy!"

"Let's hope your uncle isn't too bad, dear old fellow," said Travers.

"We're going to old Wilkey now!" said Handforth. "Don't stop us, you chaps! Every second may be of importance!"

He fairly dragged Church away, for there were many fellows who wanted to sympathise. And soon the chums of Study D were ranged in front of the Housemaster's desk.

Mr. Abington Wilkes listened amusedly at first, but then he became grave. Mr. Wilkes was a man of action, too, and he possessed a heart of gold.

"I am grieved to hear this, Church, old man," he said concernedly. "Of course, you may go at once."

"Thanks awfully, sir."

"Get off as quickly as you can," went on Mr. Wilkes. "In the meantime, I will telephone to the Helmsford Hospital and tell them that you are on your way."

"You're a brick, sir!" said Church gratefully.

"We can go, too, can't we, sir?" asked Handforth. "I want to drive Churchy over in my Morris Minor—it'll be so much quicker. And Mar's one of us, and, well—"

"Of course—of course," said Mr. Wilkes, nodding. "You may all three go. I will place no restrictions upon your trip, but I will rely upon you to get back as soon as possible. I realise that this is a very exceptional case."

"Thanks awfully, sir!" chorused the juniors.

They hurried out, and they made a dash for the cloak-room, where they donned their overcoats and caps, assisted—or, rather, hindered—by dozens of helpers.

"When will you get back, you chaps?" asked Fullwood.

"Goodness only knows!" replied Handforth. "Church may have to get in touch with some of his other relatives—and I may have to fetch them. There's no telling. Expect us when you see us."

Somebody opened the big front door, and a flurry of rain and wind came shooting in. Putting their heads down, the trio dashed out. They soon reached the garage, where Handforth started up the engine of his faithful Morris Minor.

"Poor old Uncle Gil!" murmured Church, when they had got started. "I hope to goodness he isn't badly hurt!"

The others were silent. They did not like to remind Church that S O S messages are only broadcast when the situation is critical.

A number of sympathetic Removites had braved the elements and were standing in the open doorway of the Ancient House, waving. They saw the Morris turn into the lane, and vanish.

Very little was said during the ride to Helmsford.

Handforth had all his work cut out driving. The evening was so black that he was obliged to turn on the headlights soon after passing through Bannington. The wind was roaring with gale force, and the rain spattered on the windscreen and windows of the little car in hurricane furries.

Helmsford was reached at last, and by now darkness had completely descended. At the hospital they were met by the house surgeon, Dr. Williams.

"You have been quick," he commented. "Mr. Wilkes rang me up and told me that you were coming. Well done! Which one of you is Church?"

"I am," said Church eagerly. "Is—is my uncle—bad?"

The surgeon shook his head gravely.

"Very bad indeed, I am afraid," he replied. "He was run over by a car, here, in Helmsford, earlier in the evening. He has a broken leg, and very severe concussion—indeed, a fractured skull. I might as well tell you at once that he is in grave danger."

"Oh, I say!" muttered Church. "Poor old Uncle Gil! Can—can I see him at once, sir?"

"I will take you to him," replied Dr. Williams. "There is just a chance that he may regain consciousness, but I cannot give you any real hope."

They were led along a corridor, and Handforth rested a hand on Church's shoulder for a moment.

"Keep your pecker up, old man," he murmured.

"I will," promised Church unsteadily.

He braced himself, and a moment later they were ushered into a ward. The house-surgeon took them across to one of the beds, where a nurse was in attendance.

"This is a nephew of the patient, nurse," murmured the doctor.

She nodded, and Church, going forward, looked down compassionately upon the unfortunate man in the bed. Then his eyes opened wide, and a little gasp escaped him. He looked closer, incredulity and relief expressed on his face.

"This—this isn't my Uncle Gilbert!" he ejaculated. "I've never seen this man before in all my life!"

CHAPTER 2.

Handforth is Obstinate!

DR. WILLIAMS stepped forward quickly.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"You had better look closer—"

"There's no need to," interrupted Church. "My Uncle Gilbert is a totally different sort of man. He is a six-footer, broad and rather stoutish, and he's bald on the top of his head. This man is a foot shorter, ten years younger, and— and everything! I couldn't be mistaken in a thing like this, sir!"

"No, I suppose not," agreed the doctor, with a nod. "Well, young man, this will a relief to you. But it still leaves us in the same dilemma."

Church had another look at the patient, he shook his head again, and they all retired to a quiet corner of the ward.

"Jolly good, old chap!" murmured Handforth, patting Church on the shoulder. "We're awfully bucked to know that the poor fellow isn't your uncle!"

"Rather!" said McClure.

"Well, I'm not going to be silly about it," said Church. "I'm so relieved that I could shout for joy. I'm sorry about the man—but, after all, he's a perfect stranger."

"Quite right," agreed the doctor. "That is the best way to look at it, my boy. It is clearly a coincidence of names. Your uncle, I understand, is named Gilbert Church?"

"Yes."

"And this man's name is Gilbert Church."

"How do you know, sir?" asked Handforth quickly.

"Well, when he was brought into the hospital, unconscious, we naturally did all we could to identify him," replied Dr. Williams. "We found a postcard and a letter addressed to 'Gilbert Church, Esq.' at a small London hotel. We telephoned to that hotel, but they could give us no information. The man had been merely a casual one-night visitor. All his linen, too, bears the initials 'G. C.' There was a motor driving licence, too, made out to Gilbert Church, with a Camberwell address. The Camberwell police went there, and found the house to be an ordinary boarding-house. The man had stayed there for two or three weeks, and had then gone. That was eight or nine months ago.

It was impossible to find out anything about the man's relatives, or his permanent address. That is why the B.B.C. consented to issue the broadcast."

The doctor took Church by the hand.

"Well, young man, I will be saying good-bye—I am busy," he smiled. "I am indeed glad that this little affair has turned out all right so far as you are concerned."

"Thanks, sir," said Church. "I thought he must be my uncle because Uncle Gilbert is a bachelor without any permanent home, and he does a lot of travelling. But he wouldn't stay at a boarding-house in Camberwell, and he wouldn't take out a driving licence, either. He has always hated motor-cars. At least, he would never drive one. We'd better be going, you chaps. There's nothing we can do here."

Handforth grunted.

"It's sort of fazed out!" he grumbled.

"Of course, I'm jolly pleased to know that the man isn't your uncle, Churchy," he added hastily. "Still, it is a bit of a faze, isn't it? I'm wondering if we can't do something for the poor chap."

"I fancy that you can safely leave that to us," said Dr. Williams dryly.

At that moment there was a movement from the bed, and the nurse glanced round.

"I think he is rallying, doctor!" she murmured.

They moved across to the bed, and Handforth was the first one there. In his excitement, he almost elbowed the nurse aside, much to that young lady's suppressed indignation. Dr. Williams bent over the other side of the bed.

The injured man's eyes were open, and he was looking straight at the ceiling in a dreamy, delicious kind of way. Then he seemed to become suddenly aware that somebody was near him; his gaze transferred itself to Handforth's face, and his eyes became less staring.

"Blackman's Farm!" he muttered, in a faint whisper.

"Eh?" ejaculated Handforth, bending nearer.

"Blackman's Farm—go at once—all alone there!" breathed the patient.

"But—I don't understand," said Handforth. "What do you mean—'Blackman's Farm'?"

"Will need help—others not coming until late," faltered the injured man. "Go! You understand? Blackman's Farm!"

He sank back wearily, his eyes closing. The doctor placed a hand on the man's forehead, and made a brief examination.



Over the wireless came an S.O.S. that Gilbert Church was lying seriously ill in Helmford Hospital. "My uncle!" gasped Church.

"He has gone off again," he murmured. "It was only a touch of delirium. I don't think he was really conscious. H'm! A pity he could not tell us anything of importance."

"Wouldn't it be any good speaking to him, sir?" asked Handforth. "Supposing you shake him a bit?"

"We don't do that sort of thing here, young man," said the doctor, rather severely. "This poor fellow is in no condition to be shaken. The chances are that he will never recover consciousness. He is in a very bad way."

They left the ward, the doctor insisting upon the boys going at once. Handforth was frowning, and there was a puzzled light in his eyes.

"Blackman's Farm—go at once—others not coming until late!" he murmured. "I say, that sounds jolly mysterious, you know! Blackman's Farm!"

"Don't be an ass, Handy!" said Mac. "Didn't the doctor say that the man was delirious?"

"Yes, I know, but there is a Blackman's Farm!" said Handforth half-ex-

citedly. "I seem to have heard of it. Yet I can't quite remember—"

"Blackman's Farm is a ramshackle, deserted farmhouse, about ten miles from Helmford," interrupted the doctor. "The only way to reach it is by taking the by-road to Little Melleley—midway between here and Bunnington."

"By George, that's right, sir!" said Handforth, nodding. "Isn't there a faded old board on that signpost, with 'Blackman's Farm' on it?"

"I believe so."

"That's where I've seen it, then," nodded Handforth. "I say, I wonder—"

"There's no need for you to wonder anything," interrupted Dr. Williams gruffly. "The best thing you can do is to get straight back to school. I tell you I know this farmhouse. It has been empty for years. It is half a ruin, and all the country people in the district declare that it is haunted. It's miles from anywhere."

"But why should that man say something about the place like that?"

"I tell you he was delirious," said the doctor. "No doubt he saw that sign,

just as you have seen it, whilst passing along the road. There is no accounting for what people will say in delirium. Don't take any notice of those muttered words—they mean absolutely nothing. It's late already, and you boys must get straight back to your school."

"We will, sir," said Church, nodding.
"We won't delay a minute," added McClure firmly.

They thanked the doctor for his courtesy, and a minute later they were out in the wild, blustery night, running through the pelting rain to the little Morris Minor. They scrambled in, and were soon comfortable.

"Well, thank goodness it's turned out all right, Churchy," said McClure. "There's nothing very rummy about it, either. Church isn't a particularly uncommon name, and Gilbert is fairly ordinary, too."

"Buck up, Handy!" said Church. "What the dickens are you waiting for?"
"I'm thinking," said Handforth, who had made no attempt to start the engine.

"He's thinking!" said Church sarcastically. "It's after ten, and we shan't be able to get back to St. Frank's until nearly eleven, and he sits here thinking!"

"Oh, all right," growled Handforth, pressing the electric starter.

The little engine sprang into life, and a moment later the Minor was gliding out of the hospital grounds and on to the main road. The lights of a service station glowed just ahead.

"How about juice, Handy?" asked Mac.
"Got plenty in the tank?"

"Tons," replied Handforth. "I had four gallons put in yesterday, so she's over half full."

They purred on, and, leaving Helmford behind, were seen well on the road to Basington. The night, if anything, was more wild than ever. The wind seemed stronger, and the rain was lashing viciously against the little car's windscreen and windows.

"Just like winter!" said Church. "Who the dickens would believe that this was the month of June?"

"I expect it will soon blow itself out," said McClure. "To-morrow may be a gloriously sunny day with the temperature up in the eighties. That's the beauty of our climate. You never know what it's going to do next."

Handforth sat silent. Perhaps he was still thinking. At all events, his chums noticed a great difference in him. Usually he was so talkative. They both felt vaguely uneasy, for when Handforth was in a thoughtful mood like this, it generally meant trouble. Both Church and McClure knew that their leader had

been greatly impressed by the unknown man's delirious statement.

They had proof of this some ten minutes later. Handforth had been driving slowly—much more slowly than usual. And now, with a little muttered exclamation, he pulled the car over to the off-side of the road, and put on the brakes.

"There it is!" he said impressively.
"What do you mean?" asked Church, peering forward. "I can't see anything."

The passengers could only see through the rain-swept windscreen, and everything was blurry and uncertain. But Handforth had the advantage of the cleared section of glass which was swept by the windscreen wiper.

"It's that signpost," said Edward Oswald. "There you are, my eyes—'Little Mellsey—2 Miles.' And there's that bit of board tacked on underneath. I knew jolly well I'd seen something about Blackman's Farm somewhere."

By leaning over Handforth's shoulders, the other two juniors were able to see through that cleared section of glass. The headlights of the little car were shining fully on the signpost. They could see the odd piece of board, but they could not read the words upon it, which were faded and weather-stained.

"Well, what about it?" asked Church.
"We knew this all the time. Let's be getting on."

"Yes, we might as well," agreed Handforth, in a curiously tense voice.

He engaged his gears, accelerated, and the next moment the car was gliding into that tiny by-lane. Church and McClure were startled.

"Here, I say!" shouted McClure. "What's the idea, you ass?"

"We're going to Blackman's Farm!" replied Handforth calmly.

"What!"

"It's the only thing to do," said Handforth. "We've got to investigate this rummy affair."

His chums grabbed him by the shoulders so violently that he was obliged to shove both feet down and bring the car to a standstill.

"You silly asses!" he gasped. "You might have had us in the ditch!"

"Better be in the ditch than go to this empty farmhouse!" said Church wrathfully. "You're mad, Handy! Don't you realise that it's past ten?"

"What does that matter? Old Wilkey told us that we could be out as long as we liked!"

"That's when he thought that the injured man was my uncle," said Church hotly. "Dash it, this is taking a mean advantage of old Wilkey! We ought to

got back to St. Frank's as quickly as possible."

"Of course we ought!" agreed McClure.

"Rats! It won't take us long to go round by Blackman's Farm," said Handforth obstinately. "I know all these by-roads, and after leaving the farm we can cut across to Middlott and then get home by way of Edgemore. I don't suppose it'll take us ten minutes longer, anyhow."

"Oh, you're crazy!" said Church. "On a rotten night like this anything might happen. There's been an awful lot of rain, and there'll be water splashes. Supposing we get stuck in one—miles from anywhere?"

"Supposing you dry up, and let me drive this car?" growled Handforth. "By George! It's my car, isn't it? I'm driving it, and you chaps can mind your own giddy business. Leggo my shoulders! We're going to Blackman's Farm!"

CHAPTER 3.

Blackman's Farm!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH had won.

Church and McClure knew him too well to argue any further; for any such wordy warfare would only make him all the more obstinate.

He had made up his mind to go to Blackman's Farm, and it was his car, and he was driving. So to Blackman's Farm they went. But this did not prevent Church and McClure from making some caustic comments.

"It's ten to one we'll get bogged in one of these side lanes," said Church. "After all this rain there'll be floods, too. Still, what do we care? If we have to walk ten miles home, it's only a trifle!"

"If you ask me, Handy's taking a beastly mean advantage of us," said McClure. "He's got us in his car, and we've jolly well got to go where he takes us! Do you call that sporty?"

Handforth stopped the car, and sat round in his driving seat.

"Look here, you funny fatheads!" he said darkly. "I don't want any more of these remarks!"

"We can't even talk between ourselves now!" said Church bitterly.

"You were only talking for my benefit," roared Handforth. "My only hat! I don't know what's the matter with you fellows! Where's your spirit of adventure? Here we've got a chance of investigating a tip-top mystery, and all you want to do is to get back to school!"

"Tip-top mystery be blowed!" snorted Church. "Didn't Dr. Williams distinctly

tell us that Blackman's Farm is a deserted, half-ruined house miles from anywhere?"

"And didn't he say that it's supposed to be haunted?" asked Mac. "Who wants to go to a haunted house on a night like this?"

"I do!" said Handforth promptly.

"You would!"

"I'm not afraid of ghosts, even if you chaps are!" went on Handforth tartly. "Besides, I don't believe in ghosts. But I can't get that poor chap's words out of my head. 'Blackman's Farm—go at once—all alone there—will need help.' Doesn't that give you a thrill?"

"The man was only delicious," said McClure. "The doctor said so."

"Doctors don't know much," retorted Handforth. "Besides, he was only trying to put us off. Think of the possibilities, my sons! We're told to go to this old farmhouse at once. Somebody is all alone there, and that somebody will need help! Yes, and there was another bit, too. He said that the 'others would not be coming until late.' Now, what did that mean?"

"Why ask us riddles?" growled Church.

"It's all very well to say that the fellow was delicious, but I don't believe it!" continued Handforth tensely. "In any case, why should he say things like that about Blackman's Farm—a real place? The doctor says that he must have seen that signpost. Perhaps so—but it doesn't wash. And where's the harm of making a bit of a detour, and having a look at Blackman's Farm on our way? Dash it, it won't make us much later, and old Wilkey is expecting us back when he sees us. So why not make sure, and have a look at the place?"

His chums were silent.

"There might be nothing in it, but on the other hand there might be something really exciting," continued Handforth. "Who knows? It seems dotty to me calmly to go back to St. Frank's, and forget the whole thing. We should never forgive ourselves if we learned, afterwards, that we had missed a real adventure. I want you chaps to back me up—not to oppose me all the time!"

Church and McClure were certainly impressed.

"All right, old man," said Church readily. "Perhaps you're right. It isn't a great deal out of our way, and we might as well make sure."

"Good man!" said Handforth, with relief. "I'm not saying the thing is a cert. But let's have a look round. Think of it! A ramshackle, deserted farmhouse, miles from anywhere! By George! The very thought sends a thrill down my

spine! For all we know, there might be a gang of coiners there—or smugglers!"

Church and McClure grinned to themselves. Whenever there was any little mystery, Handforth's mind always strayed in the direction of smugglers and coiners. He was always out for adventure.

And the very wildness of the night was in keeping with this mysterious mission. Even Handforth's chums caught some of the excitement themselves as the little car ploughed on its journey. The lane was narrow and extremely muddy, and speed was out of the question.

The tiny village of Little Mellsley was like a place of the dead as the Morris Minor drove through. Not a light was showing from any cottage; even the inn was dark, all its occupants in bed for the night.

After passing through the village, the way was more difficult. The lane ran on through some isolated hamlets with many twists and turns; but Blackman's Farm could only be reached by taking an even narrower lane which branched off just beyond the village. Here the going was really tricky.

Church and McClure said nothing, but they were momentarily expecting the car to become bogged. And then, in all truth, the plight of the three juniors would be a nasty one! For they were many miles from St. Frank's, and it would mean walking.

The incessant rain was having a striking effect upon the road surface. It was now soft and treacherous, the wheels of the little car sinking in deeply. Only by slow, careful driving did Handforth progress at all. There were many twists and turns, many dips and sharp rises. In some of these dips the water was running like a river, and it was touch and go whether the car got through or not.

"Strikes me we shall get lost," murmured Church. "How the dickens shall we know when we've got to Blackman's Farm, anyhow?"

"Well, we've got to go on; we can't turn back in this narrow lane," said Mac. "Let's hope for the best."

"It'll serve Handy jolly well right—Hallo! What the dickens was that?" asked Church, staring.

"Lightning, I think," said McClure, staring through the rain-splattered window.

The next second a rumbling crash, audible even above the purring of the engine and the splashing of the rain, sounded overhead.

"Go it!" said Handforth, with a grin. "Thunder and lightning; now! The very sort of night for an adventure, you chase!"

"Look out!" yelled Church. "There's a whacking great water-splash just in front!"

Handforth pulled the Minor up abruptly. The headlights revealed a formidable flood. The little car had descended a steep dip, and the lane rose sharply just ahead. At the bottom of the dip roared a flood stream fully twenty feet across. It looked deep, too.

"This isn't an overflow," said Handforth, with some concern. "There's always a watersplash here—you can tell that by the raised pathway at the side, for pedestrians. Shall we chace it?"

"If we do, we'll get stuck," said McClure resignedly. "Go ahead! Who cares? Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb!"

Handforth got out of the car and ran forward, where he could see more clearly. The watersplash was far too deep for the little Morris Minor to tackle. But Handforth saw something else, and he chertled with satisfaction. In a moment he was back in the car, and had slammed the door.

"We're all right," he said contentedly. "We can go along the footpath. That's the best of these little cars—they can squeeze through anywhere."

He backed for some distance, and then steered the car on to the footpath. It was not very wide, and just where the watersplash roared across the road there was a flimsy-looking wooden bridge at the side, with a white-painted rail.

"You silly ass!" shouted Church, in alarm. "You'll never get across here! We shall either get stuck, or this wooden staging will collapse."

"Rats!" laughed Handforth. "Just you watch!"

He opened the throttle, the car accelerated, and it fairly dashed across the roadside pedestrians' bridge. There wasn't an inch to spare against the white-painted railing, but a moment later, lurching and swaying, the little car was on the road once more, tearing up the steep hill.

"My only hat!" said McClure, taking a deep breath. "We did it!"

"You bet we did it!" grinned Handforth. "And why not? I'm driving this bus!"

After reaching the top of the hill, the lane was wider, and the surface was better. With an occasional flash of lightning, and a roll of thunder to accompany it, the three juniors continued their quest.

About half a mile farther on, Handforth suddenly applied his brakes. There was no longer any lane. For some time

it had been dwindling away, and grass was showing all over the surface. Now a hedge, whipping about uneasily in the gale, lay directly ahead. A ramshackle gate was visible, too.

"This must be the place," said Handforth eagerly.

He switched off all the lights, and the resultant darkness, for a moment or two, was intense. Then the lightning flashed, and in that brief second the three boys caught sight of a gaunt, half-ruined building away to the right, partially concealed by great elms and chestnuts.

Then the darkness snapped down again, and a rolling peal of thunder crashed overhead.

"Ugh! We don't want to go in that place," said Church, with a shiver. "Look here, Handy, don't be an ass! You know jolly well that that man was delirious. How could he have been here? And why?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out," replied Handforth, opening the door. "Come on, my sons! Let's make a dash for it!"

He was as obstinate as ever. Reluctantly Church and McClure scrambled out, and all three stood in the driving rain. The wind was blowing boisterously, and the hedges and trees were whipping about like live-creatures in torture. Leaves were blowing here and there, and now and

again a twig or a small branch would fall to the ground.

"This way!" said Handforth, his voice sounding thin in all that tumult.

He pushed open the dilapidated gate, and a moment later he and his chums were running up to the black, mysterious building which was now faintly visible.

The boys' eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom by this time; they could just distinguish the outline of the old farmhouse, and they could see the clumps of trees surrounding it. Not a light showed anywhere. The place was empty—ruined—deserted.



Handforth uttered a wild howl of alarm as he suddenly plunged through the floorboards.

CHAPTER 4.

The House of Mystery!

ANOTHER lightning flash, just when they were near the farmhouse, revealed the front door. It was tucked away at the back of a half-demolished rustic porch, and it was standing half-open. In that lightning flash, too, the boys had seen the windows. Most of them were great black gaps, with little scraps of broken glass just visible. Others were half-boarded up. A glimpse of the roof had shown that a great many tiles were missing, the slates showing gaudily.

"By George!" exclaimed Handforth suddenly. "I'd forgotten! I've got an electric torch in my pocket!"

He pulled it out and flashed it on. It was a good torch, and the battery was new. A dazzling beam of light shot out, and the juniors were very soon on the other side of that half-open door. Here, within a great brick-paved parlour, or lounge-hall, they were at least in the dry. Draughts whistled and shrieked round them as they stood in a close group.

"Well, we're in!" said Handforth triumphantly.

"Can't see any counterfeiters, though," remarked Church. "Or coiners, either."

"Fathead! Counterfeiters and coiners are the same!" said Handforth. "Are you trying to be funny? You wouldn't expect the rotters to come out to meet us, would you? They're probably in a cellar."

Church and McClure looked about them uneasily. The place was even worse than they had anticipated. Dr. Williams' description had been unimpeachable enough; but the actuality was rather terrifying.

Clearly, the old house had been deserted for years. And it was so lonely that the juniors felt isolated from all the world. Little Mellisley was over three miles away—and it might just as well have been three hundred. There was no other house or cottage any nearer, in any direction. Blackman's Farm stood bleakly alone.

A charming enough spot, no doubt, on a hot summer's afternoon—a quaint place to explore. But between ten and eleven o'clock at night, with the rain lashing and the wind howling—well, it was a very different proposition. Church and McClure, at least, were fed up within the first minute, and all they wanted to do was to get out and seek the comfort of the cosy Morris Minor.

"H'm! I've got to admit that it doesn't look very promising," said Handforth grudgingly. "But why the dickens should that man ask me to come to this old farmhouse if there wasn't something rummy going on here!"

"He didn't ask you," said McClure.

"He did! He looked straight at me, and—"

"He was delirious, you see! He would have spoken just the same if you hadn't been there."

"Well, anyway, he asked me," said Handforth obstinately. "And he told me that somebody was all alone here, and that that somebody would need help."

"Coiners don't need your help," said McClure tartly.

"I'm not so sure about that coiner theory," retorted Handforth. "In fact, I've abandoned it. There's something else going on in this place. Something mysterious. Listen!"

They listened. The old building was full of mysterious creaks and whisperings. When the wind lulled, as it occasionally did, a host of wail and eerie sounds came to the three boys.

A flight of old stairs led upwards from a corner of the big hall, and they could have sworn that the stairs were creaking, as though somebody was walking down. Over their heads were great oaken rafters. Plaster was missing in many places, and the laths were showing in ugly patches.

Zzzzzzz!

There was a sudden scuttling, scraping sound on the other side of the room. Church and McClure jumped, and even Handforth started round nervously.

"What—what was that?" asked Church, scared. "I say, let's get out of here!"

Handforth pulled himself together, strode across the room, and laughed.

"It's nothing!" he said. "Only a broken tree branch."

He pointed. The branch was lying on the hearthstone. There was a great open fireplace, and that branch had evidently sithered down the chimney. Perhaps it had lodged half-way, and the draught had caused it suddenly to fall.

The wind was howling again now, and once the old building shook as a peal of thunder roared overhead.

"I hope you're satisfied by this time, Handy, that we're just wasting our time," said Church. "I'm beginning to feel guilty about it, too."

"Guilty? How?"

"Well, old Wilkey let us go to Holmsford because we thought that my uncle was injured," replied Church. "As soon as we found that the man wasn't my uncle, we ought to have gone home. And here we are, messing about in this beastly haunted old farmhouse. We shan't be home till after midnight! It's a dirty trick on old Wilkey! Don't forget that we're keeping him up all this time!"

"Rats! He never goes to bed before midnight, anyhow," replied Handforth. "And as for this place being haunted, you're mad! Now that we're here, we'll explore!"

"But why?" demanded McClure, in exasperation. "What's the good of exploring? Can't you see that there's nobody here? Dr. Williams was right all the time. He told us to forget what that man said—"

"Well, it won't take us much longer!" growled Handforth. "We might as well go over the place before we leave. Come on!

Let's have a look round the ground floor first."

He moved to an open doorway, and his chums kept closely to him. Handforth had the light, and they did not want to be separated from him. They were not nervous, but there was something indescribably eerie about this ramshackle old building.

A tour of the ground floor proved barren. There was a kitchen, and a rambling old scullery, this latter being very dilapidated and open to the elements. There was another room which might have been a parlour, and a perfect labyrinth of larders and store-cupboards. They all proved to be damp and deserted. There was no sign of life of any description—not even a mouse or a rat. Blackman's Farm was a place of desolation.

"It's no good," said Church, shivering. "Hang it, Handy, let's go!"

"We might as well have a look upstairs before—Hullo! What the—Great Scott!" gasped Handforth. "What—what was that?"

His chums had seen nothing, but Handforth's tone startled them. They stared at him. He was gazing round in a half-frightened way.

"What was what?" asked Mac, with a gulp.

"Something touched me on the side of the face!" panted Handforth. "Something cold—like the fingers of a skeleton!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Cheese it, Handy!"

"And I heard a rummy sound, too, at the same moment!" went on Handforth, flashing his torchlight here and there. "Neither of you chaps touched me, I suppose?"

"Of course we didn't!" said Church.

They were very jumpy now. For Handforth, the stolid, matter-of-fact leader of Study D, to say that skeleton fingers had touched him was significant. He wasn't given to imagination.

"We'll get out of here—There! I saw something that time!" he shouted. "Something black and—Look! There it is!"

For a moment something fluttered across the torch beam, and the three boys caught a flashing glimpse of two beady eyes, reflected by the light. Then the thing had whisked away into one of the far corners of the room.

"My only sainted aunt!" said Handforth disgustedly. "A bat!"

"Oh!" breathed Church and McClure, with relief.

"A silly, fatheaded, idiotic bat!" continued Handforth. "Fancy being scared of a thing like that! What rot!"

"Still, that bat proves something," said McClure quickly.

"Eh! What does it prove?"

"That this old house is empty—that it has been deserted for years," replied McClure.

"Bats don't live in places that are inhabited."

"That's true," admitted Handforth reluctantly.

"So we might just as well go," added Church. "Dash it, Handy, you don't still

think that we shall find anything here, do you?"

Handforth made no reply. Although he wouldn't admit it, he was beginning to believe that he had come on a fool's errand.

However, he stubbornly insisted upon searching the whole place before leaving. So they returned to the front parlour or lounge hall, or whatever it was, and mounted the creaking stairs.

There was a minor disaster when Handforth, slipping rashly into one of the bedrooms, plunged through the rotted floorboards. He hauled himself back to safety, with one or two bruises and grazes for his pains.

"You'd better go easy, Handy!" advised Church. "This old place is in a rotten state. Look at the dust and the dirt on the floor. You can easily see that nobody's been here for years."

"Not even a footprint," said McClure, almost with satisfaction.

They explored the other rooms—Handforth going cautiously now—but it was the same story. Dust, dirt, dampness and mildew. Not even a scrap of furniture, not an up-turned box. The place was a wilderness of cobwebs, draughts and eerie noises.

"Well, you chaps had better start crawling," said Handforth gruffly as they descended the stairs.

"We're not crawling—we want to get home," said Church.

"I'm wrong—and I've got to admit it," went on Handforth with a grunt. "What a fool! All this journey for nothing, and—"

"Look!" gasped Church abruptly.

"What the—"

"The torch—quick!" shouted Church. "Over by that window!"

Handforth swung the torch round, and it played upon one of the lower windows, where the glass had long since gone. But they could see nothing there.

"What's the matter, Churchy!" asked Handforth, staring. "What did you see?"

"A face!"

"A which?"

"A—a human face!" panted Church shakily. "No, don't stare at me like that! I tell you I saw it! Just for a flash, in the gloom! It was pale and ghostly—"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth. "Pull yourself together, you ass! How the dickens could there be a face at the window? There's nobody here except ourselves! By George, though, we can soon prove it! If there was somebody there, we shall find footprints outside!"

He hurried down the few remaining stairs, casting the torchlight on the floor in front of him, in case there were any more pitfalls. Abruptly he came to a halt. He bent down and snatched something from the floor.

"What's that you've got?" asked McClure curiously.

Handforth looked at his chums with glowing eyes.

"We're not going away from this place!" he said fiercely. "I knew it! I knew it all the time! There is something squiffy going on! Look at this!"

And he held before his chums a cigarette stub. They stared at it blankly.

"But that's nothing, Handy!" protested Church.

"Nothing?" echoed Handforth. "Why, you silly ass, this is a clear proof that somebody has been in this old farmhouse recently—in fact, to-day!"

How could this be here if the place had been deserted for months? Why, even in a couple of days, a cigarette end would get spotted and stained and mouldy. Think how damp the floor is!"

"That's true," admitted McClure.

"Then somebody has been here," said Handforth triumphantly. "And if somebody has been here, it proves that that man in the hospital was right. There was a reason for his asking us to come here—and a good reason, too. We've got to find out what it was!"

"But we've searched the place, and there's nothing at all!" protested Church.

"Then we shall have to search again," replied Handforth. "We've missed something. First of all, though, we'll have a look outside for those footprints!"

"I don't think Churchy really saw anything," said McClure. "We're all on the jump, and it's easy enough to imagine things—"

CHAPTER 5.

The Cry in the Night!

A CLUE!
Edward Oswald Handforth, at least, was quivering with excitement, and Church and McClure were impressed.

"The very first clue we've found!" said Handforth tensely. "A fresh cigarette end!



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"I didn't imagine it!" interrupted Church. "I saw a face! Whether it was a human face or a ghost, I don't know. But I'll swear I saw a face!"

Handforth strode to the window, leaned out, and flashed his light upon the ground outside. He was disappointed. A paved path, with moss growing between the crevices, ran parallel with this wall of the farmhouse. The stones were washed by the driving rain, and they glistened wetly.

"Rats!" said Handforth. "We can't prove it, one way or the other. Footprints wouldn't show on this path—particularly in this awful rain. We can't go out and search. We should be at a disadvantage. The crooks would be able to drop on us, and we shouldn't stand an earthly."

"Crooks!" repeated McClure. "What crooks?"

"I don't know what crooks—but it's a cert. there are some," replied Handforth coolly. "Ordinary decent people don't prow round houses, looking in windows."

McClure gave it up. Handforth, it was obvious, firmly believed in that "face-at-the-window" story. Church believed in it, too. Church, in fact, was now wholeheartedly on Handforth's side.

"It's all very well for you to scoff, Mac, but somebody was looking in that window!" he insisted. "It's all so beastly mysterious. If there is somebody lurking about, I wish he'd come forward and show himself."

"Perhaps somebody is being kept here a prisoner!" suggested Handforth suddenly. "By George! That's an idea, you chaps! That fellow in the hospital was on his way to rescue her, and he met with an accident, and—"

"Here, hold on!" gasped McClure. "You're taking a lot for granted, aren't you? What do you mean by 'her'?"

"Why, the girl who's imprisoned!"

"How do you know anybody's imprisoned—and how do you know it's a girl?"

"It's just as likely to be a girl as a man, isn't it?" retorted Handforth. "Besides, look at this!"

He triumphantly held something else in front of his chums, and they saw that it was a tiny pearl bead.

"Clue No. 2!" said Handforth with satisfaction. "Didn't you see me pick it up just now? It's a bead from a girl's necklace! Men don't wear beads, do they?"

"But it might have been here for years."

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "It wasn't even dusty. The finding of that cigarette stub has made all the difference—it's given us a line to start the investigations on. I'm going to see if there are any more beads about here."

He went round flashing his torch, bending low—a regular sleuth. And, extraordinarily enough, within three minutes he had found ten other beads of a similar type to the first one.

"It's as clear as daylight!" he said breathlessly. "The girl was dragged in here and her necklace broke during the struggle."

It seemed that Handforth was not entirely relying upon his imagination. The finding of these pearls was, indeed, an important development. And there was something else, too.

"Wait a minute!" said Church with a curious note in his voice.

He was looking at one of the beads in the strong light of Handforth's electric torch, and his eyes were glowing.

"I say, you chaps," he went on, "this isn't an ordinary bead, you know! It's a real pearl!"

"What?"

"Look at it!" continued Church excitedly. "Anybody can tell the difference between an imitation pearl and a real one if he knows anything about them. My sister's got a real pearl necklace, and she's always showing it to people. It broke once, and there was an awful fuss because one of the pearls was missing. I remember at the time that my mater pointed out the difference—"

"Never mind your mater!" interrupted Handforth. "These are real pearls! Good enough! That proves that the kidnapped girl is somebody of importance—somebody wealthy, I expect. She's been kidnapped, brought here, and the crooks are holding her for ransom."

"Pipe down, Handy! Pipe down!" said McClure.

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"I heard that in an American talkie."

"Don't quote American talkies to me!" snapped Handforth. "Is this a time or place for foreign languages?"

"Pipe down means calm yourself," said McClure. "You're bit too speedy, old man. I don't think there's much doubt that a girl has been in this house—fairly recently, too; but there's not a chance in a thousand that she's here now, or that man with the cigarette either. We've searched everywhere, and we've found nothing—"

"That doesn't prove that nobody's here," interrupted Handforth. "What about secret chambers?"

"Eh?"

"What about hidden cellars and secret passages?" went on Handforth. "These old houses are full of things like that. Anyhow, I'm not giving up yet. Hold still and listen."

He raised his head and let forth a tremendous yell, and it was so unexpected that Church and McClure gasped. Handforth was always doing things like that, without giving any warning.

"You silly ass—" began Church.

"Shut up!" urged Handforth. "Listen!" They stood stock still, listening, but they could only hear the lashing of the rain and the buffeting of the wind.

"If we can't get any answer to our shouts, we'll do some more exploring," said Handforth, running up the stairs. "Come on! We'll start again in this upper corridor."

He gave the word, and in one mighty voice they let out a terrific yell. Then, as they held their breaths, they heard something.

It came mysteriously from above, as though from the very roof. It was a sort of wail—almost a shriek. It was quite distinctive from the sound of the wind.

Church and McClure went pale, and even Handforth felt shaky.

"Did—did you hear something?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes."

"Great Scott! It sounded rummy!"
"Let's get out of here!" said Church, in a panic. "That wasn't a human cry, Handy! I believe the place is haunted!"

At one word from Handforth, Church would have bolted, and McClure would have been right at his heels. They were plucky enough fellows ordinarily, but this old place had been getting on their nerves for the past half-hour. It had fairly got "under their skins" by now.

"Let's shout again!" said Handforth grimly. "You're not going to tell me that a ghost would answer our yell! Come on—together!"

They bawled lustily. This time they listened with greater intensity than ever, and now it seemed to them that the answering cry was a muffled, pitiful appeal for help.

And undoubtedly it came from somewhere above.

"There is somebody here!" roared Handforth, gazing at his chums with blazing eyes. "What did I tell you? All you chaps could do was to sneer at me and call me an ass, and—"

"We give you best, Handy!" interrupted Church. "You were right—for once!"

"What do you mean—for once?"
"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't let's argue now," put in McClure. "That voice came from the roof somewhere. But there aren't any rooms higher than these, are there?"

Handforth did not reply. He was flashing his torch to the ceiling. In their first tour of exploration they had only looked for doors. Naturally enough, Handforth had not thrown his light on any of the ceilings. But now that he had a direct clue, he soon discovered what he was looking for.

On the landing, almost at the head of the stairs, there was a square trap-door in the stained ceiling. It obviously led up to a space between the rafters—not an ordinary attic, but a mere storage hole. Perhaps there was a cistern up there, too—which would account for the trap-door.

"Hi!" yelled Handforth. "We're here to help you! Please answer."

But now there was no response, and this was not very encouraging.

Handforth looked round eagerly. He had suddenly remembered something.

"By George!" he said. "Wasn't there an old step-ladder about here somewhere? I remember seeing it, and I wondered what it could be for. Now we know!"

"It's in one of these rooms," said Church eagerly.

They soon fetched it—an old, rickety ladder, which just reached to the ceiling.

Handforth mounted quickly, and when he got to the top he found that the trap-door was a small, square one. It was fitted with a rusty bolt, which had been shot right home. If anybody was imprisoned up there, escape was impossible.

"Go easy, Handy!" called McClure from below. "We don't know what's in that attic!"

"We soon shall know!" retorted Handforth, wrenching at the bolt and pulling it back. "Good egg! That's got it!"

He heaved on the trap-door, and it lifted cleanly and toppled over, revealing a black gap. Grasping the edges firmly, Handforth swung himself into space and hauled himself up. A moment later he was kneeling within the narrow attic, with the roof close above his head. This part of the roof, he found, was perfectly sound. There were no tiles missing, and the attic was dry.

He flashed his torch round as he haulted there.

"Anybody here?" he asked huskily. "It's all right! We're your friends. We've come here to help— My hat!"

He had caught sight of something moving on the other side of the attic floor. It was quite small, and even in that first glance Handforth could tell that there was no grown-up girl here, as he had anticipated. What he saw was a dark-coloured travelling-rug, and it was moving slightly.

He hoisted himself farther in, close to his feet, and advanced cautiously. At the same moment the travelling-rug was half thrown aside, and Handforth found a small, tear-stained face looking at him. He saw two eyes—eyes that were eloquent of sheer, stark terror.

"Oh, my only rained aunt!" whispered Handforth, stricken.

For he could see that the figure crouching in that travelling-rug was a mere child—a little girl of about five or six!

CHAPTER 8.

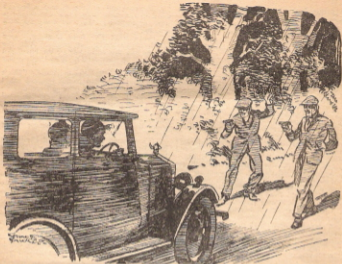
Handy in Difficulties!

HERE was an astounding discovery! Church and McClure, scrambling up the ladder, arrived in the attic almost immediately after Handforth had made his discovery. All three boys stared wonderingly at the terrified child. They had not known what to expect, but this revelation took their breath away.

It was all the more bewildering because Handforth had been half-expecting crooks. Crooks! And they had found a tiny, terrified child!

"I say, it's all right, you know!" said Handforth gently. "Cheese it! I—I mean, don't cry like this! We're not going to hurt you!"

The child, crouching back in the travelling-rug, could retreat no farther because of a big cushion. She pressed herself against it, staring in fascinated terror at the torchlight—and at the blackness beyond.



Two figures stepped in front of Handy's car, and in their hands were gleaming automatons. "Hands up!" commanded one of the men.

"Oh, what a fool!" muttered Handforth contrastily. "I'm only making things worse! Here, one of you chaps! Take this torch—and shine it on me."

He realized that he had increased the child's fear by flashing that light into her face. Church now took the torch, swung it round, and the beam played upon Handforth's rugged countenance. An extraordinary softness had come over his face, and his voice, too, was husky and gentle.

"My only hat!" breathed Mac. "A little girl!"

"Here—all by herself—in this awful house!" said Church in awe. "I say, how absolutely rotten! Poor little thing! I expect our yelling must have frightened the life out of her."

The child was terrified. She was sobbing convulsively, looking from one junior to the other in stark fear. The boys could picture her appalling plight—alone in this attic with only the lashing of the rain and the howling of the wind for company.

"Easy now—easy!" murmured Handforth. "It's all right, you know. We're your friends—we're your pals. We've come here to help you. Pull yourself together, for goodness sake! Come along now!"

The child seemed to realize that these intruders meant her no harm. Handforth's

tone, perhaps, reassured her. Church and McClure listened in startled admiration. That voice, usually so rough and boisterous, almost contained a caress.

"Don't you understand!" went on Handforth soothingly. "We're here to rescue you—to take you away to safety. Just take it calmly, and pull yourself together. Good egg! That's better! Don't be frightened!"

He laughed, and Church and McClure laughed, too. The child, still staring, now lost some of her fear.

"Come along!" continued Handforth, taking her trembling hand and patting it. "See! We're quite friendly. Tell us how you got here. Tell us who left you here—and why."

The child whispered something, but her voice was so thin, so tremulous, that her words escaped the boys.

"That's better!" smiled Handforth. "Here, I've just thought of something! I've got a packet of chocolate in my pocket! I'll let you're hungry, too! Have a go at it!"

He pulled out a sixpenny carton, hastily removed the silver foil, and the child hesitatingly took the chocolate. She nibbled at it almost greedily—a sure indication that she had been left here for many hours without food. Within a few moments she was eating

eagerly. And now her confidence had been more or less secured.

She spoke again, her voice stronger. Handforth & Co. gazed at her in astonishment.

"What was that she said?" asked Handforth.

"Sounded foreign to me!" murmured Church in wonder.

"Rot! Anybody can see that—I don't know, though!" said Handforth quickly. "You like the chocolate!" he added, pointing.

The little girl nodded.

"There you are!" said Handforth. "She understood that all right!"

"Only because you pointed to the chocolate," said McClure.

"Well, I'm jiggered! I don't think she's English at all! Do you understand English?" he added, addressing the child.

She looked at him blankly and shook her head. Then, as though her emotion had suddenly got the better of her, she burst into a flood of quick talk—excited, voluble, to end up in a flood of tears.

"Oh, crumbs!" said Handforth aghast.

"It's—it's a sort of reaction," whispered Church. "Let her cry—it'll do her good. But did you hear that lingo? I couldn't understand a word of it! She's foreign right enough!"

"Well, this beats the giddy band!" said Handforth, looking at his chums blankly.

"A deserted old farmhouse and a foreign child in the attic who can't understand a word of English! We shall wake up in a minute!"

"That's what I've been thinking," said McClure, scratching his head. "Who the dickens can this child be? Why should she be locked in this attic? Who brought her here?"

"Wait!" said Handforth tensely. "Don't forget what that chap in the hospital said! Lemme think. 'Go at once—all alone there—will need help—others not coming until late.' That's what he said! I'm beginning to get the hang of it now, you chaps! I should think she does need help! But what about those others who are coming later? Are they enemies or friends?"

"It's no good asking us," said Church in bewilderment. "How should we know? Perhaps the kiddie has got a bag or something? I mean, we might be able to find out her name or address."

"Anyhow, I'll try her with some French," said Handforth briskly. "That's a pretty good idea, eh? I'll bet she's French. She looks dark and Frenchy."

But whether Handforth's French was too atrocious—which it certainly was—or whether the child was of another nationality, she failed to respond. She was gaining confidence all the time, but there was no doubt that Handforth's attempts at French caused a slight setback. The child regarded him

THE WAY OF THE WIZARD!



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with widely opened eyes, some of her fear returning.

"Chuck it, Handy!" protested McClure as he saw what was happening. "You've scared her again!"

"That French of yours is enough to scare anybody," added Church.

"Fanny!" said Handforth, frowning. "She can't be French, anyhow. I've tried all sorts of questions in French, and she doesn't understand 'em at all."

"Yet it's still possible that she might be French," remarked Mac.

Handforth ignored the slur upon his linguistic abilities.

"Perhaps she's German?" he suggested. "Anyhow, we might as well try her with some German. I'm pretty good at that."

"Have a heart, old man!" pleaded Church. "You don't want to frighten the kiddie more than ever!"

But Handforth reeled off a sentence or two in a horrible guttural, throaty voice. It was supposed to be German, but even his chums, who knew something of the language—at least, the Remorse edition of it—failed to understand a word.

The child opened her eyes even wider, and she crouched back, shaking her head.

"That sounds more like bronchitis than German!" said Church tartly. "The poor little thing thinks you're coughing!"

Handforth gave it up. "Well, she's neither French nor German," he said, scratching his head. "By George! Here's a go! What the dickens are we to do now? She can't understand us, and we can't understand her."

It was certainly an awkward situation. Even the child was unable to explain the extraordinary circumstances of her imprisonment.

Who could have left her alone in Blackman's Farm?

Now that the juniors had had time to look at her more closely, they could see that her features were delicate, aristocratic. Her frock, in spite of its crumpled and torn condition, was of exquisite silk. And the boys remembered that pearl necklace, too. Not many children of the tender age of five are permitted to wear real pearls.

"It can't be an ordinary case of kidnapping," said McClure thoughtfully. "If it was, the rotters who pinched her would be here to look after her. Well, it's no good waiting about, Handy; there's only one thing for us to do."

"Oh! And what's that?" asked Handforth.

"Clear out of here, of course!"

"And what, then?"

"Isn't it obvious?" said Mac. "We've got the Minor, and it won't take us long to drive back to the main road. We can get to Bunnington and give the kiddie over into the care of the police."

"That's a good whooze," agreed Church. "Then we shall be free of the whole business."

Handforth regarded them pityingly.

"If you can't suggest anything better than that, kindly dry up!" he said scornfully.

"What do you mean?" asked McClure.

"Don't you think it's a good idea?"

"I don't think anything about it," retorted Handforth. "It's a rotten idea!"

"But it's our duty to inform the police——"

"We can inform the police—but I'm dashed if I'm going to take this child to the police-station!" said Handforth gruffly. "We're going straight to St. Frank's, and this kiddie is going to be handed over to Mrs. Wilkes."

"Oh!" said Church and McClure.

They were astonished at the sound common sense of their leader's suggestion. It was, indeed, an excellent idea. Mrs. Wilkes would give the child every care; and old Wilkey, in the meantime, could telephone to the police and give all particulars. The scheme had the added advantage—from the point of view of Church and McClure—that an immediate departure would be made from this lonely, mysterious old ruin.

But the adventure was far from over!

CHAPTER 7.

An Unexpected Development.

THE little girl was eating the chocolate again, and Handforth regarded her cautiously.

"Well, are you ready?" he asked, in a casual voice. "We might as well be going."

The child looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"It's no good talking to her like that, Handy," murmured Church. "You've got to make signs."

"By George, yes!" said Handforth. "H'm! This is going to be awkward. If I attempt to get hold of her, she might misunderstand, and start crying again. We don't want to frighten her."

An idea suddenly occurred to him. He removed his overcoat, and held it out to the child.

"Put this on!" he said loudly—apparently under the impression that she would be able to understand the better if he shouted. "Sarvy! I—I mean, do you understand the whooze? Overcoat—oo!"

The child nodded brightly as Handforth held the garment invitingly open. She scrambled to her feet, and the boys saw that she was a little girl of delicate build. That she now regarded the boys as her friends was patent enough, for she half-turned so that Handforth could wrap the overcoat round her the more easily.

"Don't be scared," said Handforth, as he reached forward. "Nobody's going to hurt you."

He took the girl into his arms, and he held her tightly. Something in his grip, perhaps, reassured her more than ever. How was it possible to be scared of old Handy's kindly, rugged face? She nestled close to him, and

gave a little contented sigh. She was very tired—very sleepy; and she was now suffering from the reaction of her many hours of terror.

"You go first, Churchy," said Handforth. "You'll have to help me to get her down."

"Right-ho!" agreed Church.

With tender care the child was lowered through the trapdoor, Handforth handing her down to Church, who stood on the ladder. A minute or two later the three juniors were on the landing, and Handforth was once again carrying the child in his arms.

"That's right, Churchy—you flash the torch," he said. "Lead the way, and show me the stairs. I don't want to stumble. Did you bring that rug, Mac? And the cushion? Good egg! We shall need them in the car. Besides, when we come to examine them properly, they may give us a clue."

They descended the stairs, and the usually clumsy Handforth was extraordinarily sure-footed and gentle.

They all moved towards the half-broken front door. The wind was howling as fiercely as ever. An occasional gust would shake the old house alarmingly, and the boys could hear the straining of the old timbers. They were glad enough to get out, for at any moment a portion of that ramshackle old place might collapse.

The rain drove fiercely into their faces as they plodded down the muddy "path" towards the lane. The woods reached almost to their ankles, and here and there they splashed through deep pools of water. The storm raged about them as they reached the lane.

"Buck up, for goodness' sake!" shouted Handforth above the wind. "What are you doing with that torch, Churchy? We left the car here, didn't we?"

"That's what I thought!" replied Church, flashing the light round. "Funny! It couldn't have moved by itself, and I'll swear—Hallo! What's this?"

He was directing the light towards the ground, and they could all see the muddy tracks left by the little Morris Minor.

There were two or three sets of tracks here, too, indicating that the little car had been shifted backwards or forwards. The boys were filled with consternation. They had driven up, and they had got straight out of the car; Handforth had not reversed, or shifted about in any way. Yet here were these tell-tale tracks! And the car itself was no longer here!

"Somebody's pinched your car, Handy!" said McClure hoarsely.

"My Minor!" muttered Handforth, aghast. "I—I don't believe it! We must have made a mistake, you chaps! The car must be here somewhere!"

They ran about frantically, Church flashing the torch in all directions. They no longer had any doubts. They knew this was the spot where the Morris Minor had been left.

"It's gone!" panted Handforth, halting at length. "Oh, my only sainted aunt! My

Minor—pinched! But who could have done it? There hasn't been a soul here except us—"

"Hasn't there?" interrupted Church suddenly. "What about that face I saw at the window!"

"Face!" gasped Handforth. "But you only imagined that—"

"I didn't!" said Church breathlessly. "Somebody's been here—somebody's pinched your car, Handy! He must have come up to the farmhouse, and had a look through the windows to make sure that the coast was clear!"

They went about frantically, searching in all directions. Handforth clung tightly to the little girl, and she uttered no protest. She seemed to understand that something had gone wrong; but she still had faith in these new friends of hers.

"It's no good, Handy," said McClure. "What's the good of looking for the car? It's been pinched!"

"And—and we're stranded!" said Handforth huskily.

Mystery upon mystery! And this fresh development was an ugly one. The boys, burdened with that little child, could not get away from this lonely, mysterious farmhouse. In this pitchy darkness and lashing rain it would be folly to attempt to walk to Little Mellisley. The only shelter for them was near at hand—in the ramshackle house they had just left.

But for what reason had Handforth's car been stolen? And by whom?

"We're only getting soaked out here, Handy," said Church, after a while. "We'd better get back."

"Yes," said Handforth dully. "I suppose it's the only thing to do. I'm thinking of this kiddie. She can't stand this wind and rain, and—"

"I say!" ejaculated McClure tensely. "Wait a minute!"

He dashed recklessly into a clump of thick bushes which were being whipped about by the strong wind. The others stared at him in amazement. But before they could frame any questions a yell of excited triumph came from Mac.

"It's here, you chaps! It's here!"

"The Minor?" bawled Church.

"Yee—right in these bushes!"

Handforth was a hero. He wanted to shout, but he remembered the child in his arms. On no account must she be frightened any more. He had again surprised his chums by his self-control and cool-headedness. All of which went to prove that Handforth was a useful enough fellow in a real emergency.

"Let's have a look!" he said briskly.

They found the car, undamaged by all appearances, in the heart of the tangled bushes.

"This is even more rummy than the discovery that she had gone!" said Handforth, his eyes gleaming with relief. "My only

(Continued on page 24.)

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LINE UP HERE FOR A GOOD LAUGH, LADS!



HANDFORTH'S Weekly

No. 9. Vol. 1.

EDITORIAL STAFF.

June 20th, 1931.

**BETWEEN
OURSELVES**

Editor-in-Chief
E. O. Handforth
Editor
E. O. Handforth
Chief Sub-Editor
E. O. Handforth
Literary Editor
E. O. Handforth
Art Editor
E. O. Handforth
Rest of Staff
E. O. Handforth

**OUR POETRY
COMPETITION**

Edward Oswald Handforth, popular author of the Trickett Grim stories, chats with the readers of "Handforth's Weekly."

I THINK this feature is a jolly good idea of mine, you chaps. It's original, too. "Between Ourselves" is a good title. I thought it out all by myself. It was one of my brainwaves. I believe, now I come to think of it, that a certain person—naming no names—has used the idea himself; but that is only what I expect. In this feature I shall reply to St. Frank's fellows who would like to write to me. I haven't had any letters so far; but I will answer those I have had.

BUSTER B. (Modern House) wants to know whether I look a bigger fool than I am, or whether I am a bigger fool than I look. If Buster B. will have the goodness to call upon me in Study D, at any time he's over this way, I'll answer him.

I have also received a note from Mr. Crowell (Ancient House) who asks me why I did not hand in my imposition at tea-time yesterday, and informs me that it is now doubled. I don't quite see what I can answer to a letter like that.

COLONEL THUNDERGORE (Grove House, Bannington) wants to know if I can tell him the name of the St. Frank's scholar who, while driving a Morris Minor through Bannington High Street, had the misfortune to bump into the colonel's car.

This is another question that I cannot answer—or, more correctly, shall not answer. I can, however, assure the colonel that the guilty party is very sorry, and I am willing to pay the cost of the damage, providing it's not over one-and-sixpence (1s. 6d.).

E. O. HANDFORTH.

BELOW will be found a poem entitled "Bannington Moor," by Tommy Watson. The last words of each line—the words which rhyme—have been omitted, and dots have been put in to show the number of letters in the missing words. The idea is to complete the poem, without looking at the solution overleaf.

The WINNER of this competition will have the honour of standing Handforth ginger-pop and tarts in the tuckshop.

BANNINGTON MOOR

When the sun shines bright on Bannington Moor,
And the wind blows in from the sea;
When the delicate hare-bell bends
The grasp of a travelling
When dew-drops cling to the hawthorn
As they fell on the cool of
To this glad spot I make my
And revel in high
But when the clouds are lowering
The summit of every
When the winds blow cold on Bannington
And the sea is grey and
When all is still, but the wailing
And the marsh lies lost in the
I must prefer a jolly good
And a jolly nice cosy

Commence this fine story to-day.
OUR SMASHING NEW SERIAL.

"THE CLUTCHING HAND"

By

SHEDD GORE.

CHAPTER ONE.

At the Midnight Hour.

There was a sudden bang!

(To be continued.)

IMAGINARY INTERVIEWS

No. 1.—Julius Caesar.



"Oh interesting! Interesting! I was called to see Mr. J. Caesar this morning, and I found him full of ideas and big ideas, in the office of the Forum."

"Come right in, come!" said he cordially.

"Thank you, Mr. Caesar," I said. "How are you feeling now?"

"Bad!" he said, shaking his Roman head. "Very bad, indeed, you know. Takes me something crazy these days. And what do you think? When I asked my doctor what to do to cure me, he prescribed rest, food! And me with thirty-seven daggers in me."

"You had?" I inquired.

"Yes, had! They're all had—just! had. Look at me. See what a rest the curious Caesar made. Look! In this place my Caesar staggered through this my well-beloved Britain though I'll tell you what it is, and Caesar. "Whispering said what he had and to see Gilson and all the rest of 'em, but old Brutus never did that dark one for the sake of Britain."

"Didn't he?" I gasped.

"No, he didn't," stropped Caesar. "He used no money—that's why he cracked his head! of stand like a post in the world. I bet him five to one on anything that Mark Antony would offer me the crown, and he took me on. And this, mark you, after I'd specially begged old Mark to offer me the said crown."

"No wonder you feel sore," Mr. Caesar."

"You said it," he nodded seriously. "Well, what is a dagger among no money? It's the principle of the thing that worries me. And Mark Antony—another ungrateful knave."

"What?" I cried. "Why, no, Mark Antony asked all Rome to average your death."

"Yes, I know all about that. But what happened? After he had hounded Brutus and Cassius so far that they nearly ran away sideways, he went joining of other Miss Cloopras instead of getting my daggers all at once, taking as gratified in the world."

"I stood up."

"Yes, there it is," I said proudly. "I have seen on a mission from scientists all over the world. In every school we are drilled on cases of the Galina Wars to contrast."

"Oh, yes!" said Caesar, smiling and laughing. "A good deal of a good story."

"Absolutely. Well, I've come to you with a present from England's schoolboys. See you, this with our kind regards."

"So saying, I produced a dagger, and made him a present of it along with the other thirty-seven."

FASHIONS FOR MEN

WHAT-HEO! What-HEO! What-HEO!

I mean to say, I don't mean to be able to start—what!

Just now to my really, but I don't know where to begin.

The fact is, a change has got to be made in writing men's fashions, because, come to think of it, there's nothing so important as fashion, if you get me.

So when I talked and as I look on this good old subject of fashions for men, you know that I know what I'm talking about. I mean, if you know that I know that you know that I know that you know that I know what I'm talking about—well, it's a damned sight, isn't it, you think? Or do you?

But probably not, anyway. Not that that matters, of course; but, dash it all, there is so severe in this Wuzzey that I've got to cut off my preliminary remarks. (Continued at foot of col. 31.)

CECIL DE VALERIE tells us about a



I DON'T suppose Handforth will get this story. It is, unfortunately, all about E. O. H. and look young in rather badly. Perhaps he will have sufficient sponsorship to get this in—(You check up! I've put this in, now, just to show you that I don't care what you write about me. By George! I know something I could write about you, and I'll jolly well do it in a few short days. So there! See—E. O. H.)

This happened at a circus in Bannington, some while ago. Several Romanesque went down to see the circus—which boasted wild animals, a computer, a frogger and a ventriloquist. And it was this latter gentleman, who caused all the trouble.

The ventriloquist happened to be standing near the lion's cage, just as Handy, myself, and one or two other fellows, came along. Handforth marched up to the lion's cage, stared at the King of the Beasts for about five minutes, and then said:

"What a most-odd old lion! He doesn't look savage enough to fight a pound of butter."

"Well, I've got a better line than yours, and shows it," retorted the lion spontaneously. "If that was my face, I'd rub it out and do it again."

Handforth burst on out as a bristling chimney, while we nearly jumped clear of the ground. Nipper, however, happened to glance at the grinning face of the ventriloquist next chair, and gave us the tip. We chuckled.

Next so, Handy. He glared at the lion.

"What do you mean?" he bawled.

"Are you talking to me, Winkler?"

"Sleep lad, this," roared the lion. "That's the best of having a brain. You can guess those things at once."

"You—you—you—!" stammered the great Handforth. "I've a good mind to come in that cage and snap you up—now or as lion."

"I'm sorry to inform you, Handforth, that you couldn't snap up a glass of barley water."

"By George! That's done it!" asserted Handforth. "I'm going in."

He grabbed wildly at the door of the lion's cage. We absolutely gaped at him.

"You utter idiot!" yelled Nipper. "What are you going in that cage for?"

"You heard what the lion said to me!" roared Handy, turning round. "I'm going to punch his nose."



"You blithering maggot!" Do you think the lion was talking to you, now? Alas, you ever heard a lion talk?"

"Oh?" gasped E. O. H., passing.

"Oh, he's stammered. 'I-I never thought of that, I suppose, some I think of it, a lion couldn't talk, really. And yet—"

"It was a ventriloquist, me! He's just walked over."

"What?"

We explained. After about an hour, Handforth grasped the fact that the ventriloquist chap had been a snatched a painful revenge. As it was, after looking for the ventriloquist the rest of the afternoon, he returned forever to the school.

But some are still a nose rubbed with Wuzzey. I advise you to my setting about lions or ventriloquists.

"I have it in for old Crowell. He gave me a nasty slip in close this morning. Right in the eye. I speak indignantly. It was this—"

SCENE: History Lesson. (Enter Mr. Crowell with deep frown.)

Mr. Crowell: "Pitt, kindly tell me the family name of the Earl of Chesham, the name by which he is known before the granting of his own's patent."

Mr. (stammer): "Darn, sir! I don't think I ever met the gentleman, sir."

I was in trouble again during the geography lesson. Just because I didn't know the capital of Nicaragua. Why, dash it all, I don't even know Nicaragua itself, let alone the capital of the place.

The only thing I've ever heard of in connection with Nicaragua was about:

I remain your good old friend,
Zerogram
It's never for a rift in a jacket—"

But Mr. Crowell was not content with this. I expect to inform readers of this paper that he forced me to assume a posture favourable to his pupils, and proceeded to administer corporal chastisement with the aid of an ash-tray.

Here's another geography story, before the station closes down for the night.

A master was talking to a boy about the rivers of America, and he mentioned the Mississippi and the Missouri.

"Yes, Sign! and Miss Durr," said the boy. "You must be some relations of Old Man River."

Not bad, that. Oh, I'm a funny fellow!

But, joking apart, I still don't believe there's such a place as Nicaragua.

READY WIT

FROM

REGGIE PITT



SCREAMINGLY FUNNY RIDDLE—"Why is Mr. Suddiff like a pot-pye? Because he takes his herbs at the 'Moose'." (How does he being think of it?)

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SOLUTION.

(The missing words from the pages on page 21.)

Bakers, Bee. Sprag. Night. Way. Dought. Oak. Hill. Meer. Chiff. Reck. Gloom. Reck. Room.

HANDY'S MIDNIGHT CAPTURE!

(Continued from page 23.)

hat! What the dickens can it mean? How did the car get here?"

"Well, somebody put her here, that's certain," replied Church. "It's a bit up hill from where we left her, so she couldn't have got here on her own."

"Look!" said Mac, pointing through the little window panel at the rear. "The ignition switch is on, Handy—although the engine isn't running. That's how I spotted her."

"What!"

"The little red light," explained Mac. "It always glows, you know, when the ignition is switched on, whether the engine is running or not. In fact, when the engine gets up a certain speed, the signal goes out."

"I didn't leave her switched on!" said Handforth excitedly. "By George, Mac, that was pretty smart of you! We should never have found her here until daylight."

"There was nothing smart about it," said McClure. "I spotted the tiny red light, that's all. It was jolly careless of the people who moved her."

"People!" ejaculated Handforth. "Yes, I suppose there must have been more than one. Well, it's another mystery, but we can't bother about it now. Open that giddy door!"

They pushed their way deeper into the thicket, and Church opened the driving-door. Handforth, leaning over, deposited his burden on the rear seat.

"Buck up and get in, you chaps!" he said briskly. "Can't leave the kiddie alone. The sooner we're away from this queer spot the better."

"But who could have done this—and why?" asked McClure.

"Never mind those questions now," replied Handforth. "We've got to get away."

The positions were reversed. It was generally Handforth who asked all sorts of unnecessary questions; but now he only had one object in mind—and that was to get clear away. He was thinking only of the little girl.

At a touch of the starter, the engine sprang into life, and a moment later Handforth had backed the car out of its place of concealment.

He manoeuvred her back for some yards, changed into first gear, and was now fairly and squarely in the lane. He had switched the headlights full on, and the brilliant light they gave was a relief after the long period of gloom.

The rain was splashing noisily against the windscreen.

Then, at that moment, just as Handforth was about to start off, two figures abruptly stepped into the glare of the headlights—and in their hands they carried levelled automatics!

CHAPTER 8.

Touch and Go!

"HANDS up!" commanded one of the men, moving nearer.

He approached the driving-door, the window of which was open, and he levelled his automatic at Handforth's head.

"Take your hands from the steering-wheel!" he said harshly. "Quickly now! Raise them above your head!"

Handforth obeyed—not because he was frightened, but because his brain was more or less paralysed by the unexpectedness of this hold-up. Church and McClure were equally staggered, and the little child, tightly held by Church in the rear seat, crept close to him, whimpering pitifully.

"Boys—only boys?" said the man on the other side of the car. "Did I not tell you so? Pah! We need not have gone to so much trouble!"

Slowly, Handforth's brain was beginning to work again. He could easily tell that these two men were foreigners. Their English was good, but it was accompanied by more than a trace of accent.

"Get out of this car and stand in front with your hands above your head!" ordered the man at Handforth's door. "You understand?"

"All right—all right!" growled Handforth sullenly. "Keep your hair on! Give us a chance!"

He was capable of thinking quickly enough now; and he knew just what had happened and why it had happened. These men, whoever they were, had played cunningly.

Arriving at the farmhouse—and their visit was obviously connected with the child, who was also foreign—they had been startled to find the Morris Minor standing, deserted, in the lane.

This told them at once that some intruders were in the farmhouse. As a precautionary measure, they had pushed the Morris Minor into the bushes, concealing it—thus cutting off the retreat of the intruders. Approaching the building, they had spied, and they had discovered something of what was happening within. And then, perhaps, before they could make any attack, Handforth & Co. had emerged with the child.

So the men had waited—cleverly. An attack upon the boys in the darkness would have been a mistake—for in that smother of rain and wind, one or more might easily have escaped with the child.

The car being hidden, the men had waited for the boys to go back into the building. There they could be easily trapped—easily dealt with. Far better than a rough-and-tumble attack in the open.

But their plans had miscarried.

In their haste they had left that red ignition light glowing, and one of the boys had spotted the tell-tale gleam. It made all the difference.

For now the boys were in the car, and the child was with them—they were in a position to make a clean breakaway. It was impossible for the men to wait now; they were forced into the open, and, furthermore, they were forced to take drastic action.

All this passed through Handforth's mind in a mere second or two. And never once did he lose sight of the fact that an automatic pistol was pointing at his head.

"It's no good, you chaps—we're beaten!" he said reluctantly. "No sense in taking any silly risks. These fellows are in earnest."

"We'd better get out, then," muttered McClure.

"Yes," said Handforth sullenly.

His right foot was on the throttle-control, his left foot was depressing the clutch-pedal; and he knew that the gears were engaged.

"Hurry!" commanded the man at the door.

Handforth acted rashly—but bravely. He wasn't the sort of fellow to give in so tamely. Simultaneously, he pushed his right foot down and relaxed his left.

The engine ruced and the clutch jerked in. The Minor leapt forward. The man at the window had no time to pull the trigger of his automatic, let alone take aim.

He fell back, cursing in some foreign language. The other man, who had been slightly in front of the car, was obliged to leap for his life. In a flash, the Morris was lurching down the lane, screaming along in low gear.

"Hold the kiddie down low!" yelled Handforth. "They might fire, you chaps! Bend down!"

"Oh, crums!" gasped McClure.

Handforth deftly changed into second, and the little car gathered speed. In the rear, the two men were aiming; wicked flashes appeared from their automatics. Bullets sang. But in that confusion the men were only able to take hurried aim. They fired at the car's tyres—at its body; they missed; and within a few flashing seconds the range was too great.

"Done it!" yelled Handforth triumphantly. "We've beaten 'em, you chaps!"

"Good old Handy!" panted Church. "That was a hot minute, if you like! I thought it was all up with us!"

"Rats! We had the advantage all the time!" retorted Handforth. "I wasn't scared of those pistols! All I'm sorry about is that we had to bolt—for the kiddie's sake. I'd have preferred a good old scrap with the rotters!"

He eased up somewhat now, since there seemed to be no sense in taking unnecessary risks. The lane was narrow and treacherous, and the little car was slithering and swerving giddily. It would be hard luck if Handforth, in his haste, skidded into the hedge—thus giving the enemy time to run up and give battle.

"I couldn't have done it if the engine hadn't been running, and if I hadn't been in

low gear!" said Handforth exultantly. "Even a second's delay would have given those rotters time to fire at us. But we gave such a jerk forward that we caught 'em on the lop."

"You're a caution, Handy!" panted Mac admiringly.

"I knew there were crooks in this affair," went on Handforth. "Didn't I tell you so from the first? And the sooner we can get this little girl safely to St. Frank's the better."

"I say!" ejaculated Church abruptly, in a voice which was charged with alarm.

"What's up?"

"They're—they're following!" gasped Church.

"What?"

"In a car!"

"What the dickens— Oh, my hat!" panted Handforth, as he glanced round. "I never thought of that! All right—we shall have to go all out!"

That glance at the rear had convinced him. The glaring headlights of another car could be seen. The two men, finding themselves baffled, had evidently dashed for their own car, and were now sternly chasing the fugitives.

What was more to the point, it was practically certain that their car was far more powerful than Handforth's modest Minor.

The situation was not so good!

"Here, I say, go easy!" protested McClure, as the little car gave a giddy lurch. "Mind what you're doing, Handy! You'll have us all over!"

Handforth set his teeth.

"Well, it's tough and go!" he said grimly. "If that car overtakes us, we shan't stand an earthly! Those fellows are desperate, I should say. You leave this to me, my sons! I won't pitch you into the ditch!"

He was on his mettle. Everything depended upon this ride. And Handforth drove as he had seldom driven before. The little Minor charged desperately down that narrow, muddy lane.

Handforth knew that his only chance was now. Along this narrow track he had the advantage, for the bigger car would be more difficult to handle. But once on the main road, with its smooth tarred surface, the pursuer would quickly overtake.

It was a severe test. Handforth did not even consider his own safety—he was a reckless fellow at all times—but he was thinking of that little girl. If any harm came to her—

Skidding and slithering, the Morris tore down a steep little hill, charged through a shallow water-plash, and reared up the opposite slope.

"They're gaining!" exclaimed Church, looking through the rear window. "They're gaining all the time, Handy! My only sainted aunt! They're not more than a hundred yards behind now!"

"I've just thought of something," said Handforth tensely. "By George! We might be able to dish them yet!"

"It's impossible, old man! They're coming like the wind!"

But Handforth's eyes were gleaming. He said nothing to his chums regarding his plan. It was a desperate plan, and better kept to himself. He had just remembered that other watersplash, at the foot of the next hill—the one he had stopped to examine on the way to Blackman's Farm.

It was deep—so deep that the little Morris Minor could never get through successfully; and by now, in all probability, the torrent would be even bigger. But Handforth remembered that footbridge at the side. He had taken his little car over that once—and he could take her over again!

Edward Oswald Handforth gripped himself hard as the little car went charging down the steep descent. His headlights showed him the watersplash ahead—a muddy, swollen torrent. He only eased the throttle a trifle.

"Look out!" he yelled. "Hold tight, you chaps!"

"Handy!" gasped McClure. "You're not going to—"

He caught his breath in, aghast. And Church, looking back, saw that the pursuing car was gaining rapidly.

Then came the crucial moment.

The Minor, swerving off the road, charged at the footbridge. There wasn't a foot to spare on either side. Miraculously enough, it seemed, the car kept right side up; the next moment, with a terrific jolt, she was over that bridge and on the road again, screaming up the opposite hill on second gear.

"Done it!" shouted Handforth exultantly.

He put it down to luck—but, actually, it had been his superb driving, which had brought them through safely. McClure, with his heart thudding rapidly, could hardly realize that he was still alive. He had expected a dreadful crash.

Church, looking out of the rear window, let out a shout of excitement.

"They've stuck!" he yelled. "Look, Mac! They tried to charge through that watersplash, and it was too deep! They've stuck in the middle!"

"Good egg!" came Handforth's triumphant chuckle. "That's just what I expected. We've dished 'em, my sons!"

CHAPTER 9.

Back at St. Frank's!

OLD Wilkey was worried.

"I can't understand it, my dear," he said to his wife, for the tenth time.

"Why don't the boys return? Here it is, after midnight, and as wild a night as I can ever remember in June, and they are still away!"

"I think they must have had a mishap with the car," said Mrs. Wilkes.

"Well, that's all the more reason to worry, then," replied her husband. "The young idiots! We ought to have been in bed an hour ago."

He paced up and down, smoking furiously.

"It's not only those three boys who are out of bed, but a great many others, too," he went on complainingly. "Half the Remove is still awake. I went up there a little while ago, and the young beggars pretended to be asleep—but they didn't fool me. Handforth and his two chums won't fool me, either!" he added grimly. "I shall be very interested to hear what kind of story they will tell out when they do arrive!"

"Perhaps the people made a mistake at the hospital, dear?" said Mrs. Wilkes gently.

"Oh, but that's inconceivable!" replied her husband. "Church was only at the hospital for a few minutes; he was informed that the injured man was not his uncle, as he had feared. Then why aren't those boys back? They ought to have been here hours ago."

There was every reason for the House-master to be concerned. Soon after ten-thirty, having heard nothing from Church, Mr. Wilkes had rung up the Helmford Hospital. What he had heard had surprised him. And now it was well after midnight—and the three boys were still away.

"If they had run short of petrol, or anything trivial like that, they would at least have telephoned," said Mr. Wilkes, stroking his untidy moustache. "I'm not an alarmist, but I really do think that something serious must have happened. Handforth is a reckless fellow—"

"Listen, dear!" said Mrs. Wilkes suddenly.

"Can't I hear a car now?"

Her husband moved nearer to the window.

"By Jove! You're right!" he exclaimed.

"I'd better go to the front door."

He dashed out without a moment's delay, and he was soon flinging open the main door of the Ancients House. As he did so, he realized that the boys would probably take the little car straight round to the garage—

But no; it was at the bottom of the steps, and Handforth himself was just climbing out.

"Oh!" said Mr. Wilkes, his voice grim.

"So you have condescended to return?"

Handforth turned abruptly, and his face was flushed.

"Oh, hallo, sir!" he said. "I'm awfully glad you're still up, sir!"

"You may not be so glad after I have done with you," retorted Mr. Wilkes.

"Where are the others?"

"Inside the car, sir—just getting out."

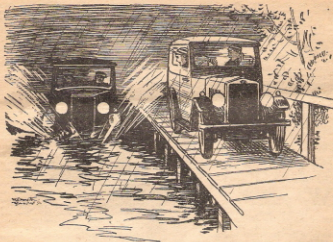
"They are quite all right?"

"Yes, rather, sir."

"I suppose you know what the time is?"

"Haven't the faintest idea, sir," replied Handforth briskly. "Not that it matters."

"Not at all—a mere trifle," said Mr. Wilkes with a touch of irony. "It does not concern you in the least, I suppose, to know



With only inches to spare, Handforth recklessly drove his car over the footbridge, while the pursuing vehicle became stranded in the water-splash.

that I have been kept out of my bed for at least two hours, and that—"

He was amazed to find that Handforth was paying no attention to him. The burly Removite had turned back towards the car, and he was taking hold of what looked like a big parcel, which the other boys were carefully handing to him.

The rain had almost stopped now, but the wind was still high, and it was blowing vigorously into the open doorway. Mr. Wilkes stood waiting.

Handforth came up the steps, carefully carrying his burden; Church and McClure, having scrambled out of the Minor, were at his heels. They all entered the brilliantly lighted lobby, and Handforth held his arm carefully, so that it acted as a shade.

"What is the meaning of all this?" asked Mr. Wilkes impatiently. "I think I am a long-suffering man, but—"

"Easy, sir—easy!" whispered Handforth.

"What on earth—"

"She's asleep, sir," interrupted Handforth. "If you talk loudly like that, you'll wake her up!"

Mr. Wilkes almost gaped.

"I'll—I'll wake her up!" he repeated.

"Her? What in the name of mystery— Good gracious me! Well, upon my soul!"

For the first time, he had caught sight of a little face peeping out of the "parcel"

which Handforth was carrying. Mr. Alington Wilkes stared at the child in amazement. As Handforth had said, she was asleep.

"It's all right, sir," whispered Handforth. "I can explain everything. May we take her in? I was thinking, perhaps, that Mrs. Wilkes—"

"Yes, yes, of course," said the House-master hastily. "Bring her straight in, boys. Fortunately, Mrs. Wilkes is still up."

He had not the faintest idea of what all this meant, but he was a man of action. He led the way to his private quarters, and Mrs. Wilkes was surprised and concerned when she saw the sleeping child.

"Oh, the poor little mite!" she murmured. "She's not hurt, I suppose!" she went on quickly, looking at the boys. "Oh! You didn't run over her!"

"Of course not, ma'am," said Handforth. "She's all right—only tired and frightened and sleepy. Well, thank goodness we're here all right, you chaps. Our responsibility is over."

"I am not so sure of that," said Mr. Wilkes. "Perhaps you boys will be good enough to explain what this extraordinary affair means? Who is this child?"

"We don't know, sir."

"Where does she come from?"

"We don't know that, either, sir."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Wilkes sharply.

"You must know."

"But we don't, sir," urged Handforth. "All we can say for certain is that we found her at Blackman's Farm."

"Good gracious!"

"And there might be some crooks after her before the night is out," went on Handforth earnestly. "She has to be guarded very carefully, sir. In fact, there ought to be a watch kept. Those men are desperate, and they may follow us—"

"Hold on—hold on!" interrupted the Housemaster. "Blackman's Farm? Crooks? What sensational rignarole is this!"

Handforth was complete master of himself; he was cool and contented. Now that he had got back to St. Frank's, he felt that everything was all serene. He faced the Housemaster without a quaver.

"Believe it or not, as that chap Ripley says, we've had a pretty hectic time, sir," he said coolly. "And I don't think the danger's over yet, either."

"Will you be good enough to explain—fully?" asked Mr. Wilkes sternly.

Handforth explained.

"WELL!" ejaculated Mr. Wilkes, at length.

It was a mild enough comment—and quite characteristic of the man. Actually, Mr. Wilkes was almost out of breath. He would not have believed everything that Handforth had told him, had not Church and McClure corroborated the story.

In the meantime, Mrs. Wilkes had taken the little child off to bed, and it was a great comfort to Handforth & Co. to know that the mité was now snug and secure for the night.

"An extraordinary adventure," said Mr. Wilkes, when he had recovered some of his breath. "Of course, boys, I quite accept your explanation. I cannot punish you for being late—as I intended. You have shown great courage and resource. I congratulate you."

"It was all Handy's doing, sir," remarked Church uncomfortably. "Mac and I didn't want to go to Blackman's Farm at all."

"I fancy Handforth has an instinct—or shall we call it a nose—for adventure," said Mr. Wilkes dryly. "He smells these things out unerringly."

"Not always, sir," murmured McClure.

"We cannot, of course, pretend to know who this child is, or why she was imprisoned in the old farmhouse," continued the Housemaster. "In any case, we need not worry ourselves over those details. As for the two men who threatened you with revolvers, we are equally in the dark regarding their identity or mission. That it was an evil, crooked mission, seems obvious. You had better get to bed at once—and you should sleep well, for you have earned your rest."

"What are you going to do, sir?" asked Handforth anxiously.

"I shall go to bed, too."



Jokes from readers wanted for this feature! If you know a good rib-tickler, send it along now. A handsome watch will be awarded each week to the sender of the best joke; pocket wallets, penknives and bumper books are also offered as prizes. Address your jokes to "Smilers," Nelson Lee Library, 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4.

THE INTREPID EXPLORER.

"You're got a good haul of fish there," said the old gentleman to the small boy.

"Where did you get them?"

"Well, sir," said the boy, "if you go down that path marked 'Private,' cross the field where it says 'Beware of the Bull,' and climb over the gate by the notice 'Trespassers will be prosecuted,' you'll see a pond marked 'No fishing allowed.' That's the place."

(R. C. Kraus, 4, Beaumont Avenue, Richmond, has been awarded a handsome watch.)

REWARDED.

Professor: "I understand you have now been twenty five years in my service, Henry?"

Faithful domestic (expectantly): "Yes, sir."

Professor: "Well, as a reward for your faithful service, I have decided to name after you my newest species of beetle."

(L. A. Rook, 09, Beach Road, Littlehampton, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

WHAT HE NEEDED.

He put down the rock cake he couldn't eat and glanced at the notice on the wall of the tearshop: "Home-made Cakes. Clubs supplied."

"Waitress," he said, a knowing smile dawning on his face, "you forgot to bring me a club."

(A. Robinson, 18, Spital Terrace, Gainsborough, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

BLOCKHEAD!

Office-boy: "I'm sorry I can't work to-day, sir. I've got a splinter in my hand."

Boss: "The result of scratching your head so much, I suppose."

(W. H. Waller, 125, Ipswich Avenue, Attleborough, Nuneaton, has been awarded a penknife.)

PRACTICAL ARITHMETIC.

Teacher: "Now, Tommy, do this subtraction mentally. Six boys went down to the river to bathe, but two of them had been told not to go into the water. Now can you tell me how many bathed?"

Tommy: "Yes, sir—six."

(P. Fisher, 120B, Croftdown Road, Highgate, N.W. 5, has been awarded a penknife.)

"I say, sir—"

"But not before I have telephoned to the police," continued old Wilkey. "I shall do that at once, and inform them of all the details."

"Couldn't you do it now, sir—while we're here?" asked Handforth eagerly. "I mean, we'd like to hear the result. Perhaps the police will know who the little girl is, and—"

"No, Handforth, you must get to bed," said Mr. Wilkes, shaking his head. "It is very, very late already. There is nothing more that you can do to-night. Good gracious, old chap, don't you think you've done enough? Surely you can leave this to me now!"

"Of course, sir," admitted Handforth. "But I'm uneasy."

"About the child?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why should you be? She is safely with Mrs. Wilkes."

"I know that, sir," said Handforth. "But I can't help thinking of those two men in that car. I don't suppose it would take them long to get the car out of the water-splash, and they might have followed."

"No, no, there is practically no chance of that," said Mr. Wilkes, laughing. "You saw no sign of the car whatever after passing through Little Mellsey. You came all the way along the main road, through Bannington and Bellton, and you were safe."

And, by the way, I think you did quite right in bringing the child straight home to me. It was far better than stopping at the police-station in Bannington."

"Thanks, sir!" said Handforth, flushing. "I thought you'd agree with that. But about those men. Don't you think we ought to keep watch? I mean, form a sort of body-guard—"

"You get to bed, young man!" broke in old Wilkey, chucking. "Mrs. Wilkes and I can look after that little girl until the morning—or until the police come to fetch her away. As far as you are concerned, the adventure is over."

"Yes, I suppose it is, sir," said Handforth reluctantly.

"Good-night, sir!" chorused Church and McClure.

They seized their leader, and they practically forced him out of the study. Mr. Wilkes, they reckoned, was quite right. The adventure was over. But was just like Handforth to attempt to prolong it.

When they got up into the Remove passage they were not particularly surprised to hear one or two doors opening. Faces appeared. Whispers sounded. When they went into their dormitory they were followed by such a crowd of pyjama-clad figures that the room was soon packed.

"Here, I say, what's the giddy idea?" asked Handforth, looking round. "This is our dormy, you know!"

NOT WANTED.

Visitor: "Is your father at home?"

Son: "What is your name, please?"

Visitor: "Just tell him it's his old friend, Bill."

Son: "Then father isn't in; I heard him tell mother that if any bills came he wasn't at home."

(*M. Litvins, 19, Tudor Crescent, Cuckham, Portsmouth, has been awarded a book.*)

HIS FACE WASN'T HIS FORTUNE.

Little boy (at booking office): "How much is it to Hammersmith, please?"

Clerk (angrily): "I've told you three times already that it's twopenny."

Little boy: "I know that; but my little brother likes to see you come to the hole. It reminds him of the zoo."

(*J. Walker, 3, Holtshurst, Woodlesford, Nr. Leeds, has been awarded a penknife.*)

WHAT HE WAS WORTH.

The college man was just about to make a start in business.

"I suppose," he drawled, "you'll pay me what I'm worth."

"More than you're worth," said the manager of the business. "We'll give you a shilling a day."

(*J. Devlin, Amphalange, Stewartstown, Ireland, has been awarded a book.*)



SCUPPERED.

First lad (after bathing): "Hi, where's the towel?"

Second lad: "You'll have to wait till Ginger's finished—he's wearing it for his bathing-suit."

(*G. Witt, Home Farm, Breamore, Salisbury, has been awarded a pocket scuttlet.*)

SAFETY FIRST.

Jones: "I went to that tailor you recommended."

Robinson: "Good. And you told him I sent you?"

Jones: "I did."

Robinson: "And what did he say?"

Jones: "He asked me to pay in advance."
(*N. Tucker, 24, The Park, Peabok, Nr. Warrington, has been awarded a penknife.*)

COPPED.

Visitor (up from the country, to tramp): "Excuse me, but I thought London was paved with gold?"

Tramp (eying policeman in near vicinity): "I dunno about gold—but it's certainly paved with coppers!"

(*A. McIntosh, Salisbury Cottage, Blair Forbes Drive, Bridge of Allan, has been awarded a book.*)

The visitors included Nipper, Tregellis-West, Watson, Travers, Potts, Fullwood, and Graham. They were all excited and curious.

"Out with it, Handy!" said Nipper briskly. "What the dickens do you mean by coming in at nearly one o'clock in the morning?"

"We're anxious to hear about your uncle, Churchy," said Travers. "How is he, dear old fellow?"

"Yes, what happened to him, Churchy?" went up a chorus.

Church flushed with pleasure. It was good to know that all these Removites had kept awake on purpose to know about Uncle Gilbert.

"I feel a bit of a fraud," he said uncomfortably. "You see, the man in the hospital wasn't my Uncle Gilbert at all."

"What?"

"His name was Gilbert Church—but it was just a coincidence," went on Church. "We should have been back hours ago if Handy hadn't taken us off on an adventure."

"You leave this to me!" said Handforth gruffly. "If anybody's going to do the talking, I am! Understand? It was my idea to go to Blackman's Farm, wasn't it?"

And he gave the startled and interested Removites a long and graphic account of the recent adventures.

They were rather inclined to discredit the story at first—for Handforth was renowned for his powers of exaggeration. But when Church and McClure thoroughly backed him up, they—like Mr. Wilkes—were convinced.

"You lucky barges!" said Nipper, with a sigh. "You generally manage to get all the fun!"

"Fun!" repeated Church. "It wasn't much fun in that lonely old house, with the wind howling round, and with all sorts of mysterious noises going on! I tell you, I'm jolly glad to be back here!"

"Let's get some sleep," said McClure, yawning. "We can keep on jawing all night. You chaps will oblige us by clearing out."

"Rats!" said Handforth promptly. "I've got something else to say before they clear out."

CHAPTER 19.

The Vigil.

MR. WILKES tip-toed into the little dressing-room which adjoined his bed-room. Mrs. Wilkes had fixed up a small bed here, and the unknown child was sleeping peacefully.

"She's thoroughly exhausted," murmured Mrs. Wilkes, as she joined her husband. "She hasn't even awakened—not when I undressed her and put her to bed. Poor little thing!"

They tip-toed back to the bed-room.

"I think she'll be all right until the morning," said Mr. Wilkes. "Did you discover anything, dear? I mean, any name on her clothing, or anything like that?"

"Nothing—nothing at all," replied Mrs. Wilkes, looking puzzled. "I can't under-

stand it. Her clothes are lovely—very expensive. That seems to indicate that she must be the child of rich people."

"I can quite believe that," said old Wilkey. "She's foreign, too, if we are to believe the boys—and I have no reason to doubt them. A most puzzling affair altogether."

"Did you telephone the police?"

"Yes; I had quite a long talk with Inspector Jameson," replied Mr. Wilkes. "As I expected, the police want us to keep the little girl here until the morning. It would be most unfair—and quite unnecessary—to move her at this hour. Jameson tells me that he will make widespread inquiries, and by the morning, perhaps, he will be in possession of some information."

"Are they sending some men to Blackman's Farm?"

"I suppose they'll go up in the morning—but if I know anything of these country police, they won't bother until daylight," replied the Housemaster. "Oh, by the way, I also telephoned to the Helmsford Hospital, but they could give me no information. The injured man is still unconscious, but they think he is getting a little stronger. He may have passed the crisis."

"Still, we know practically nothing," said Mrs. Wilkes. "I do hope the police find out who she is quickly. I am thinking of the poor mother. How distracted she must be!"

"WELL, what about it, you chaps?"

Handforth asked the question eagerly, and his eyes were burning as he looked round the crowded dormitory.

"Do you think it's necessary?" asked Tommy Watson.

"To keep watch? Of course I do!" replied Handforth. "If I didn't, fathend, why should I suggest it?"

"It's not a bad idea, you fellows—and we ought to back Handy up," said Nipper. "We can easily take it in turns—half a dozen of us at a time, say. We can post sentries at various windows, in different parts of the House. Then, if any intruders try to get in, we shall spot them and mess up their game."

"Good man!" said Handforth heartily. "I thought you'd agree with me, Nipper. Even old Wilkey laughed when I suggested that there might still be danger—and he's gone to bed. That means that the House is unguarded. Of course, old Wilkey is a useful chap in a scrap, but that doesn't say much. Nobody's any good when he's asleep."

"Well, I'm going to bed," said Travers, yawning. "If you fellows like to lose your beauty sleep, it's your own concern. For the love of Samson! What possible chance is there of those men coming to St. Frank's? You're all dotty! That kiddie is safe enough now."

"There's no harm in being on the safe side, is there?" demanded Handforth coldly.

"Do you think I was fooling about those armed men?"

"Not at all—but you're fooling yourself if you think they'll come here," replied Travers. "You gave them the slip, didn't you? How on earth do they know where you brought the little girl? You weren't kind enough to tell them your plans, were you?"

"Perhaps you've forgotten, Travers, that these chaps were wearing their school caps!" said Nipper pointedly.

"Yes, by George!" agreed Handforth. "I was just going to say that. These men must have known that we were schoolboys—and they can easily find out which school we belong to."

"I surrender," said Travers humbly. "I'd forgotten that clue. You're right. We ought to keep watch until daylight—so I'll be the first volunteer."

It was, after all, only a precautionary measure. There was no harm in being on the safe side. Handforth, at least, had every reason to know that those mysterious men were desperate. They would not easily allow themselves to be frustrated by three mere schoolboys.

Yet it was not to be expected that the other fellows would share Handforth's suspicions. The whole affair, to them, was just a story—and a fantastic story at that. If it had not been for the presence of the child in the school, the Remove would have thought that Handforth & Co. were victims of their own imagination.

It said much for Handforth's popularity that there was no lack of volunteers for sentry duty. Over a dozen juniors consented to lose an hour or so of their night's sleep, in order to keep watch, although not one of them really believed that there would be any disturbance.

"We'll do it—but you're a masterpiece for mures' nests, Handy," said Harry Gresham with a grin.

"All right—we shall see," retorted Handforth. "And we shan't have to wait long, either."

Church nodded.

"He's right, you chaps," he said earnestly.

"What!" said Travers, staring. "You're agreeing with him?"

"Yes," said Church.

"And so am I," added McClure stoutly.

"Well, well! Wonders will never cease," murmured Travers, looking round at the others. "This is indeed a night of nights! Kindly observe! Church and McClure are actually agreeing with Handy!"

Everybody grinned.

"Cheese it, you chaps!" said Church. "This is no time for being funny! If Handy has got a hunch that something else is going to happen to-night, I'm with him! It's his night! He's had hunch after hunch—and they've all turned out right!"

"We saw those men, too," added Man. "It'll be a long time before I forget them!

Respectably dressed fellows, but foreign-looking—and sinister."

"That's the word I've been trying to think of—sinister," said Handforth, nodding. "By George, you're right, Man! These chaps think we're half-dotty—but we'll show 'em before the night is out!"

"Well, come on, let's get to our posts," said Nipper briskly. "We've got to set guards at half a dozen different windows, so that every approach to the Ancient House is watched. And we must arrange a system of signals, too."

Within ten minutes the "watch" was complete.

Unknown to Mr. Alington Wilkes, who had gone to bed, the Ancient House was far from asleep. There were silent, unseen watchers on duty at various windows. Every approach was under observation.

There were eight fellows on the job, to be exact—in pairs. It was safer this way, since there was no chance of any one sentry falling asleep at his job.

It was not so dark outside now; the sky was clearing. Ragged clouds were scurrying across the heavens, but a few stars were beginning to peep through the rifts. The wind had dropped, and the rain had almost ceased.

Nipper and Tregellis-West were the two sentries on duty in the front of the House, overlooking the Triangle. And a rather significant thing took place five minutes after they had commenced their task.

As soon as the pair had grown thoroughly accustomed to the darkness, they could see the outlines of familiar objects in the Triangle fairly clearly. No human being would be able to approach the Ancient House from this direction without being seen by these two guards.

It was just the same elsewhere. The West Square was under constant observation, and so were the other approaches to the House.

"Look there, old boy!" murmured Tregellis-West, pointing.

Nipper needed no showing. In the distance, towards Belton, a whitish reflection in the sky told of an approaching motor-car. They could follow its course easily as it came up the lane. It grew nearer, and as it was passing St. Frank's the speed grew less.

"Coming here, by the look of it," whispered Nipper.

But so; the car passed straight on. It was evidently a powerful one, for the boys did not even hear the faintest murmur of its engine. Then, not three minutes later, the car came back, now travelling fast. It shot down the lane in the direction of Belton at a high speed.

It was certainly significant.

"Something funny about this," said Nipper, frowning. "We don't want to jump to any wrong conclusions, Montie, and yet we mustn't forget that Handforth's Minor was chased by a big car."

"And this one hasn't had a chance to call anywhere, what!" murmured Sir Montie shrewdly.

"Exactly," said Nipper. "There's only one house beyond the school—and that's Moor View. Well, that car didn't call there—it was back too quickly. Either some innocent motorist has found himself on the wrong road, or that car came by here purposely to have a look at the lie of the land. I'm beginning to think— By Jove! Did you spot that?"

"No!" said Montie. "What is it, old boy?"

"Those headlights have gone out—and the car isn't half-way to Bellon," replied Nipper tensely. "Why should that motorist switch off the lights? I believe the car has stopped."

"Begad! It looks like it! But I can't see—"

"It's stopped, Montie—after passing the school and re-passing it," went on Nipper. "Those men, according to Handy, are foreigners. They don't know anything about this district—or very little, anyhow. I think you'd better buzz round and tell the other chaps what we've seen—and warn them to be specially on their guard."

"All serene," murmured Montie.

"Car? We didn't see anything—or hear anything, either!" said Handforth when he was told. "By George! It looks jolly suspicious, though! You say it stopped down the lane?"

"We don't know—we only saw the lights go out," replied Montie.

"That means they've left the car there, and they're coming back on foot," said Handforth tensely. "They'll be here within five minutes, you chaps!"

"I've just thought of something," said Fullwood, who was keeping guard with Handforth. "These men won't know what part of the school the child is in—and they might try to break into the West House or the East House."

"By George, yes!" said Handforth in alarm. "And there aren't any guards in those Houses!"

"Well, what does it matter?" asked Sir Montie mildly. "The little girl is in this House—and as long as the blighters don't get into this House, she's safe."

"If I'm! That's true," admitted Handforth, cooling down. "Perhaps it doesn't matter so much."

He went closer to the window and peered out. It was half-open, so that he could lean over the sill. From here he could see the window of Mr. and Mrs. Wilker's bed-room—and the window of the dressing-room, too.

"I wish they would come," he murmured. "We'd give 'em a surprise! We'd collar 'em, too—and then, perhaps, we should know what it was all about!"

Sir Montie went back to his own post, and he found Nipper staring out tensely across the Triangle.

"Not a sound, Montie," murmured Nipper. "And keep well back!"

"Begad! You don't mean that there's somebody—"

"I'm not sure," interrupted Nipper. "But I thought I saw something shadowy moving against the high wall a minute ago. It's easy enough for the imagination to play tricks— No! Look there! Can you see him?"

A moment later the two Removites were quivering with eager excitement. For not one figure, but two, appeared in the gloom of the Triangle below. They were slowly and silently advancing towards the Ancient House!

CHAPTER 11.

The Midnight Marauders!

THE two figures did not hesitate for long. They had seemed uncertain as they moved about the Triangle; but as soon as they came within sight of West Arch they acted decisively. They moved swiftly through the arch, vanishing from view.

"You stay here, Montie—and watch closely!" murmured Nipper. "I'll buzz round and warn the others. It's my turn this time."

He hurried away before Montie could either agree or protest. Nipper was puzzled. Why had those men acted with such precision as soon as they had reached West Arch? And then Nipper suddenly remembered. There was a little light glowing behind the blind of Mrs. Wilker's dressing-room!

It was the only light in any of the school buildings. If these marauders were the men who had been at Blackman's Farm—and who were looking for that little child—they would naturally be attracted by the one lighted window in the school.

Quick as Nipper was, Handforth had acted first.

Peeping out of the dormitory window, he had immediately spotted the shadowy figures as they emerged on the inner side of West Arch. They crept round the Ancient House building, hugging the wall.

"They're here, Fully!" breathed Handforth into Fullwood's ears. "You give the alarm as soon as I act!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Fullwood.

"Shush!" hissed Handforth. "For goodness' sake, you are, keep quiet!"

It was only the rushing of the wind which prevented them from being heard. The men, creeping along below, did not even look up. Thus, when Handforth acted, his move came as a complete surprise.

He waited, judging his time bravely. Then, with a sudden whoop of pent-up excitement, he launched himself into space.

The drop was not very great; but a fellow of Handforth's weight, descending upon one's shoulders, is no joke. Handforth landed fairly and squarely, and the man collapsed like a poleaxed bull.



"Carrajo!" he snarled savagely.

With one movement he hauled Handforth to his feet, and at the same moment he jabbed a dagger into the small of the junior's back. Handforth felt a sharp prick, and in a flash he knew what was happening.

"Move one inch, you young fool, and you die!" hissed the man. "I have a knife at your back!"

Handforth, for all his recklessness, did not move a muscle.

The other man, bruised and battered, had now scrambled to his feet.

"Kill him, Morro!" he panted.

"Kill him!"

But Morro, in a burst of rapid-fire foreign language, evidently objected to this. Meanwhile, heads were appear-

The rope snaked out; the dagger was flicked from the man's hand, wherewith Handforth dashed in with a smashing left that sent his assailant toppling backwards.



They went over together—man and school-boy. Somehow, Handforth found himself uppermost, and he commenced punching away with all his strength.

"Back up, Remove!" he yelled. "Come on, you chap! I've got 'em!"

If he had had any doubts regarding the identity of these two men, the doubts were soon dispelled. For the second man, flinging himself to his companion's aid, whipped something from his pocket which gleamed wickedly in the starlight.

ing at many windows, and a general alarm was already imminent.

"The child!" breathed the man with the knife, placing his mouth close to Handforth's ear. "In which building—in which room—is the child?"

"Find out!" retorted Handforth defiantly.

"Speak, or I plunge this knife to your heart!" said the man harshly. "Wait! Wait, all of you!" he continued, looking up at the windows. "Make one attempt to approach, and this boy dies! The point of

my knife is even now sticking in his back!" Exclamations of consternation arose, to be immediately followed by a tense hush.

The man with the knife spoke rapidly to his companion, and a second later an electric torch flashed out, the light gleaming upon the dagger, held so menacingly at Handforth's back.

"You see!" said the man. "This boy dies if anyone makes a move!"

Then suddenly, something long and shaly hissed through the air. A sort of snap sounded, a clang, and the man who had held the knife cursed fiercely. The knife itself had been jerked completely out of his grip. Handforth whipped round.

"By George!" he shouted, lunging out with all his strength.

Crash!
His fist went home with battering-ram effect into the man's face. Handforth did not inquire as to what had happened. He didn't care. He just let fly, and he took the keenest enjoyment in letting fly.

Above, at one of the windows, Jerry Dodd, the Australian junior, took a deep breath.

"Couldn't do the lasso set properly, you chaps," he said. "But, at least, I knocked that knife out of the brute's hand!"

"Great Scott!" gasped Church. "So—so it was you, Jerry!"

"Well, something had to be done," said Jerry Dodd. "I reckon we'd best shin down the ivy now, eh? It seems to me we're needed."

"Hurrah! Come on, you chaps!"
"Remove to the rescue!"

Handforth, at least, needed no help. In a fierce encounter he was well capable of looking after himself.

Crash! Thud! Crash!
His blows were devastatingly rapid, one following another in such quick succession that the man reeled back, bewildered, dazed, and helpless. A final blow on the point of the chin finished him completely; he sagged at the knees, rolled over, and lay still, groaning.

The other man was running.
Handforth had half-expected a weapon to be used against him—a knife or a revolver. But he hadn't cared. His blood was up, and he had fought furiously, knowing that the other Removites were dashing to the rescue.

The second man, realising that he could never face the whole crowd, bolted. He went tearing through the blackness of West Arch. Two shadowy figures sprang out, gripped, and the fleeing man was pulled up short.

It was Nipper who had flung himself at the fellow's legs, and Tregellis-West who had clutched at his body. Together, they sent the man rolling in the mud, and they soon had him down.

Other Removites, attracted by the noise, rushed up.

"It's all right—we've got him!" panted Nipper, in a satisfied voice. "Anybody got any rope? We don't want to take any

chances with these beggars. They're too fond of knives!"

"Good egg!" shouted Handforth. "We've got the two of them, then? Well, wasn't I right? Didn't I tell you they'd come!"

"Handy, old man, this certainly is your night out!" agreed Nipper.

"Hear, hear!"
"Good old Handy!"

And then Mr. Wilkes, grotesquely attired in dressing-gown, tweed hat, and unlaced golf-shoes, appeared on the scene. He found the two prisoners surrounded by Removites, their hands bound behind their backs, their ankles tied with scarves.

COMING NEXT WEDNESDAY!



"Glad you've come, sir!" said Handforth briskly. "These are those two rotters we told you about!"

"Good gracious me!" said Mr. Wilkes, blinking.

"The two foreigners who tried their fancy tricks on us at Blackman's Farm, sir," went on Handforth. "Didn't I tell you that they might attempt to break into the school to-night?"

"You did," agreed the Housemaster. "But how—I mean, why—That is to say—"

"It was Handy's idea, sir," explained Nipper. "He thought it would be as well for us to keep watch—so we did. And this is the result."

Mr. Wilkes, informed thus concisely and briefly, clapped Handforth on the shoulder. "Well done, old chap!" he said heartily. "Splendid work!"

CHAPTER 12. Handy The Hère!

THE whole school, of course, had been more or less aroused by the commotion. Masters and prefects were turning out every minute; but Mr. Wilkes soon sent messages round, and the occupants of all the other Houses were firmly and

"St. Frank's Under Canvas!"

By E. S. BROOKS.

The open-air school!

Lessons in marquees; tents for dormitories; grub cooked over the camp-fire.

Nipper & Co. vote school-life under these conditions great fun. Watching E. O. Handforth cook breakfast is worth quids.

A great success—but there's one fly in the ointment: Ames Whitie. Ames wants to upset the whole apple-cart, and he isn't particular about how he does it.

Result: Ames and St. Frank's boys clash, and the boys prove a tough handful.

Look out for the opening story in this novel new series of school yarns, coming next Wednesday.

"The Phantom Foe!"

By JOHN BREARLEY.

More sensations from the Phantom Foe. More thrills from the Night Hawk.

"Handforth's Weekly!"

"OUR ROUND TABLE TALK."

ORDER IN ADVANCE!

politely instructed to get back to bed.

"Rather a pity Mr. Lee isn't at the school just now," said old Wilkey. "He would have liked this adventure. Still, we shall have him here next week, I understand. H'm! I suppose I shall have to question these very unpleasant men myself."

He was not very successful.

The men, sullen and vindictive, would give no account of themselves. They maintained a sullen silence.

"Perhaps it's just as well," commented Mr. Wilkes. "We'll leave all this to the police. Upon my word! What a night!"

Fenton, of the Sixth, had been dispatched down Bellon Lane with a number of other seniors. They had returned with the car. It was a powerful one, and it had been left,

with all lights extinguished, on the grassy border of the road, several hundred yards away from St. Frank's.

"How about searching those men, sir?" suggested Fenton.

"I really don't see why we should," replied old Wilkey. "I have telephoned to the police, and they are sending at once. The chaps can wait until the morning—but not these dangerous men. The sooner they are in the cells, the better."

There was no fear of the prisoners escaping. They had been carried into the Junior Common-room, and Nipper and Handforth and half the other Removites were on guard. Mr. Wilkes had realised the impossibility of getting the boys to sleep—or even in bed—until the prisoners had been removed from the school. So it was just as well to let the boys take a hand in the game, particularly as they were responsible for the capture.

Within twenty minutes, Inspector Jameson, of the Bannington Police, arrived with several men—to say nothing of a big closed car. The pompous little inspector was quite excited when Mr. Wilkes met him at the Ancient House doorway.

"These men—they are securely held!" he asked quickly.

"Why, yes," replied Mr. Wilkes. "We've got them very nicely tied up."

"We have reason to believe that they are Spanish," said the inspector. "Furthermore, we believe that they are closely concerned in the kidnapping of General Galzoni's little daughter. She is here, too, I understand!"

"She is quite safe with my wife," nodded the Housemaster.

"Splendid!" said Jameson, bustling in. "I really must compliment you, Mr. Wilkes, upon all this!"

"Don't compliment me—compliment the boys," said Mr. Wilkes dryly. "I've done nothing whatever—worse luck! I haven't had the chance. Such adventures as this don't come my way, I'm afraid."

The arrests were quite formal. The prisoners still refused to speak, but Inspector Jameson laughed in a pleased way as he looked them over.

"As I thought," he nodded. "Valdez and Morro—two Spanish penthouses whom Scotland Yard has been keeping under observation for some time."

"Spanish criminals?"

"Oh, no!" said the inspector. "At least, not criminals of the ordinary type. They are Secret Service agents—officers of Colonel Sancho's Intelligence Department."

"I must confess," said Mr. Wilkes, "that my own intelligence department is out of order. I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about, Inspector Jameson."

"You will have presently," replied the inspector. "Sergeant Williams, you can take these men away now. I'll wait here until General Galzoni arrives."

The sergeant saluted, and the two prisoners, securely handcuffed, were marched smartly away.

"Do I understand that we are to have another visitor?" asked Mr. Wilkes mildly. "I need hardly remind you of the hour, Inspector—"

"It's an unusual night, sir—and we can't blame the general for being anxious about his little child," said Jameson. "Since we had your information, soon after midnight, we got in touch with Scotland Yard. General Galzoni immediately started from London by car. I was going to telephone you when he stopped at the Harrington Police Station to pick me up. But this other affair happened in the meantime."

There was great excitement amongst the boys.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth. "Spanish, eh? That'summy, you know! I tried that little girl with French and German, and she couldn't understand a word!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It never occurred to me to trot out some of my Spanish," continued Handforth. "If I had done, a lot of the mystery would have been cleared up."

"Don't you believe it, dear old fellow," said Travers, shaking his head. "The mystery would have been deposed. She wouldn't have understood a word."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rats! I can speak Spanish—a bit," said Handforth. "At least, I know that 'Adios' means 'Good-morning,' and that a girl should be called 'Signorita.'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My poor old Handy!" said Nipper gently. "'Adios' means 'Good-bye'—and 'Signorita' is Italian."

Handforth started.

"Well, there's not much difference," he said defensively. "I must have got a bit mixed. 'Senorita' is the word, isn't it?"

"That's a bit better," agreed Nipper. "Well, I suppose we ought to be getting to bed now."

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "We're not going to bed until we know the truth of this giddy affair."

TEN minutes after the police car had gone a powerful limousine rolled up. A tall, agitated man emerged, and he wasted no time on formalities as he mounted the Ancient House steps to meet Inspector Jameson and Mr. Wilkes.

"My daughter—my child!" he said tensely. "She is—safe, gentlemen!"

"Quite safe, sir," said the inspector. "Mr. Wilkes, here, has taken charge of the child."

"My gratitude is yours, señor!" said the other anxiously. "But you will forgive me, I am sure, if I desire to see my little girl immediately. Everything else can wait. Please let me see her! Now—at once! I cannot wait! With my own eyes, I desire to see that she is unharmed."

Mr. Wilkes was not the kind of man to stand on ceremony. He took the agitated father straight upstairs. Mrs. Wilkes was already fully dressed—in preparation for this

visit. She softly led the way to the little bed on which the child was sleeping. General Galzoni dropped to his knees, trembling.

"My little Inez!" he murmured. "Heaven be praised!"

One glance at the child was sufficient to convince him that she was unharmed. She was sleeping peacefully.

"Much as I wish to speak with her—to question her—I will wait until the morning," said General Galzoni huskily. "And now, sir, I think it is you I have to thank—"

"No, no!" interrupted Mr. Wilkes. "Mrs. Wilkes and myself have merely cared for the little child since she has been in the school. Some of our boys rescued her and brought her here. Those same boys also captured the two men, Valdez and Morro. They have had quite a busy time."

"May I see these boys?" asked the general eagerly. "Not only do I wish to thank them, but some little explanation is desirable."

So Mr. Wilkes led him down, and introduced him to Handforth, Church, McClure—and to Nipper and Travers and the others. But it was mainly Handforth & Co. who held the centre of the stage.

THE boys did not pretend fully to understand. It seemed that General Galzoni was a very distinguished Spanish statesman. He held a high position at the Spanish Embassy, in London. He had many enemies. The Spanish Revolution was still an incident of but yesterday.

Inez, as usual, had been taken out by her nurse into Regent's Park the previous day. The trouble had started then, for an unknown man, driving up in a closed car, had seized the little girl, had slipped her into the car, and had driven off before the nurse could attract any attention. From that moment all trace of car and kidnapped child had been lost.

Frantic, General Galzoni had informed Scotland Yard—warning them, at the same time, to keep the whole matter a close secret. For serious consequences might have resulted in Spain, had it become known by his enemies that their emissaries had scored a triumph. The general was convinced that his child had been kidnapped so that his hand could be forced in political matters.

Even the general himself was not in full possession of the truth—but later, of course, it came out. Then, it transpired that the man, Gilbert Church, was an English crook whom the Spanish plotters had hired. It had been this man's task to seize the child, and to drive her into the south of England to a certain rendezvous—Blackman's Farm. He was to wait there with the little girl until his employers came to pay him and take the child away.

Gilbert Church had done his work thoroughly—up to a certain point. He had captured the child and had left her in the attic, quite secure. Then he had foolishly

driven into Helmsted; had been run over—and thus the whole apple-cart was upset.

Colonel Sancho's men—Colonel Sancho being the general's political enemy—had planned to reach Blackman's Farm after dark. The storm had upset their plans, and they had been late.

Meanwhile, the injured man, in his delirium, had put Handforth on the track.

Handforth, of course, was the hero of the hour. For once, he had scored a real triumph.

"The old boy wanted to whack out a hundred quid, as a reward," he said, the next day, when all the school was talking about the exciting affair. "Naturally, I refused."

There were plenty of fellows who sighed when they thought of what could be done with a hundred pounds; but the school, as a whole, admired Handforth for refusing.

However, General Galzoni had his way to an extent; for some days later a beautifully engraved gold watch arrived for Handforth—with a request that it should be accepted as a gift from a grateful father. And that watch is one of Edward Oswald Handforth's most treasured possessions.

THE END.

(Breccy new series of open-air school games starting next week. Opening story entitled: "St. Frank's Under Covers?")
Order your copy now—and tell your pals.

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A WELL MATCHED pair, a close heat, a slight advantage gained—*he's home!*

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KL 55

Our ROUND TABLE TALK

*A breezy chat on topics in general, conducted by the Editor
and Edwy Searles Brooks.*

The following letters from readers have been received by Edwy Searles Brooks: Molly Bradford* (Eastbourne), "An Old Reader" (Leeds), Robert E. Brimley (Rams-gate), Walter Webb (Birmingham), Horace G. Pryke* (Chatham), Evelyn S. Higgins (E.2), Arthur E. Angus (Sheffield), David T. Richards (Whitechurch), B. Smith (S.E.17), Ralph Clarry (Toronto), Edward James Lawrence (S.E.15), F. Lewis (N.W.1), Al. E. Charles (Pietermaritzburg), John W. Richardson (Oxford), John R. Fearn (Blackpool), D. William Howe (Codnor, Notts.), John G. Statham (Birmingham), Irene Mary Randall** (Sandwich), Jimmy Fletcher (Leeds), Henry Cathcart (Glasgow), Pamela Peters (S.W.9), Reginald T. Staples (S.E.17), E. H. Hayes (Worthing), Peter Mortis (London, Ont.), Alfred C. Hodgkinson (Polesworth), B. Mitchell (Wakefield), Percy Dann (Eastleigh), Alfred Seward (Reading), Leslie Farrow (Boston), Rosemary Thornley (Preston), Norman R. B. (Manchester), Sam Polevoy (E.2).

Yours is the kind of remark one likes to see in a reader's letter, Molly Bradford: "I am proud to say that my mother and father and my sister read the famous book." You will, of course, recognise the sentence, as it has been quoted from your letter. Other readers will know that the "famous book" is none other than the Old Paper. It is very gratifying to know, Molly, that when you are lonely you turn to the St. Frank's yarns, and even more gratifying to hear that your loneliness then vanishes.

Augustus Hart is as much alive as ever, David T. Richards. He is in Study T, of the West House, with Justin B. Farman and Owen major. But, like many other lesser lights of the Remove, he seldom, if ever, gets mentioned in the stories. It's his own fault for being so unenterprising!

You are wrong about Gore-Pearce, Irene Mary Randall. The name is not "Gore," but Gore.

Ernest S. Holman is wondering if Lord Dorrmore, in search of a new thrill, is training for the Schneider Trophy Race this year. As a matter of fact, Dorrie has recently acquired a wonderful high-speed plane, especially designed for him by The Manners Aircraft Manufacturing Co., Ltd. It is quite possible that he is thinking of competing for this tremendous high-speed race—and equally possible that a story on this subject will appear in the Old Paper at the appropriate time.

Here is a reader—G. Dodd, of Birmingham—who raises an interesting point. He says: "I am a pretty regular reader of the NELSON LEE; in fact, I get it most times every week when I can get it." Now this clearly indicates that G. Dodd sometimes goes without the Old Paper, although he actually wants it. His remedy is a very easy one—and that is to give his newsagent a standing order, instead of trusting to luck. Too many readers are prone to wait until Wednesday and then go to the newsagent on the off-chance.

Stanley Johnson wants to know what make of motor-cycle Vivian Travers owns. Well, Travers' bike is a B.S.A.. It is quite true that Willy Handforth's monkey, Marmaduke, has not appeared in the stories until recently, but Marmaduke is scarcely a "character" who can be featured regularly.

Here is a quotation from Arthur J. Miles' letter: "I think I am childish to write this letter. I am twenty years old, or shall be this week. What do you think of it? Would you, if you were my age, write to a person you only know by name, yet accept as a friend, or aren't you so silly?" It is not a question of silliness at all. The Old Paper is written for readers of all ages and both sexes. So there can be no question of childishness in a reader of twenty becoming a correspondent. His letters will always be welcomed, in common with those of all others whose interest induces them to write.

The Invisible Night Hawk Attacks an Invisible Airship!

The PHANTOM FOE!

A thrilling mystery and adventure serial

By

JOHN BREARLEY

Opening chapters re-told in brief on page 41.



Kittens in Action!

THE Phantom Foe's yellow gas had done its deadly work; had prepared the way for the main attack.

Through a gate in the hedge, and down the road, came swift, furtive men, their little figures mere shadows in the gloom. They wasted no time, but, forcing the locked rear-door of the armoured car, two of them clambered in and began handing out heavy boxes to the three who waited outside.

As soon as a man received his burden, he hastened back through the open gate, to a long car parked beneath the hedge inside the field; dumped the bullion-box there and ran back for another. Like all the Phantom's coups, this was planned to a hair, timed to a minute. The men,

tough and keen, hideous in their skin-tight yellow masks, followed instructions without speaking.

And so fast did they work and so engrossed were they in their criminal task that, when a second car flashed round a bend, driven by an almost noiseless Daimler motor perfectly tuned, they were caught flat-footed!

The car was on them before they could move. Hss-as; it jerked to a standstill; five cat-like men leapt into the road, firing as they landed.

They were four of Thurston Kyle's Kittens, under dear Alf Jenkins, who had followed the armoured car from London by their chief's orders. And they, like the others, wasted no time.

Phut; phu-ut; phut! Softly their silencer-guns spoke to the bandits; but the lead they slung was hard and red-hot. At the first volley, one of the Phantom's men inside the car clutched tigerishly at his breast and toppled on to the head of an outside man, pinning him half-unconscious to the ground. His companion died without a sound across the bullion-boxes. As for the others, they dropped in their tracks, one with his gun half-drawn, the other helpless with a box in his arms.

"Cease fire!" Feet pattered around the derelict gold-car. "Got 'em all; no, look out there, Nobby—that bloke's moving. Sock him one, quick!"

The half-stunned man, feebly pushing his dead confederate aside, was trying to pull a gun. Trying was as far as he got, for to the sound of a sharp thud, he finally collapsed. Alf Jenkins, as grim and as tough a fighter as ever lived, examined the others and grunted.

"You blokes shoot too straight!" he grunted callously. "Ne'mind, we've got one of them for the chief. Lively now; sling him into our car and hook it. Th' coppers can pick up the gold later—and these guys, too!"

Back to their Daimler glided the Kittens, bearing the unconscious prisoner in their midst. A self-starter whirred, the motor purred into life. All told, the venomous counter-attack had not lasted two minutes, but the Kittens were not anxious to stay for praise and publicity. They were off home, as quietly as possible.

But, as the car swung round and headed back for London, Jenkins leaned out with a flare-gun in his hand. A bright green light gushed into the air. And, at the signal that everything was all right, the inscrutable Night Hawk up above swung into action himself.

A Duel in Mid-Air!

ALL this time he had been waiting, under slow-quivering wings. But he had not been idle.

At the first flicker of the Yellow Gas, even before it touched the road, he had clapped a pair of goggles to his eyes; goggles copied from the curious purple anti-actinic glasses taken from one of the Phantom's gangsters the night of the Belhampton Bank raid. And, sliding them over his eyes, he had been rewarded by a sight that filled him with fierce triumph.

The Phantom Foe was in the trap!

Previous to donning the goggles, the heavens had been dark and blank. But now, high above him and poised directly above the armoured car, hung a great air-

ship; steel-hulled and slender, like a long cigar; surrounded by an aura of faint violet light. The Phantom's airship; and no longer invisible.

Heedless of what was going on beneath him, the Night Hawk swayed in his controls, staring upwards with intent, gleaming eyes. By way of a test, he took off the goggles and instantly the airship vanished as though it had never been. The moment he slid the glasses back again, however, there the graceful menace hovered, motionless beneath whirling helicopters.

The sight was uncanny; ghastly almost. But it proved his theories to the hilt. Bathed outside and in by ultra-violet apparatus, the Phantom's ship could sail serenely through the sky by day and night, completely invisible to the naked human eye. Only when anti-actinic glasses were donned that reflected the ultra-violet rays, could she be seen, as the sun's eclipse is seen through a smoked lens. All the scientist in Thurston Kyle granted unwilling admiration to the clever rogue who had discovered this modern secret of invisibility—a secret that mankind had sought for ages. But his resolve to give battle never weakened.

Slipping the goggles off once more, he was just in time to witness the whirlwind arrival of his Kittens, watching their storming rush and brief decisive attack with iron satisfaction. Then at last came Jenkins' signal. With a swift jerk at his helmet and a silent swing of his wings, the Night Hawk streaked aloft—straight for the faintly gleaming airship right above him.

Like a shell from a gun, he flashed through the air, a strange, fantastic and terrible figure. This was his second attack on the ship, and there would be no blundering in the dark this time. The curving windows showed plain in the steel hull, glistening, unprotected targets for his initial onslaught. Once they were shattered, his grenades would pour through, filling the interior with death and destruction. And after them, streams of lead from automaties that rarely missed.

This was to be the finish of the Phantom Foe. Wrapped no longer in invisibility, his airship became an easy prey to the unseen hunter without. The Night Hawk flung himself level on racing wings, swerved, flattened out. The giant seemed to have taken alarm from the fruitless raid below and was swaying uneasily, as though uncertain which way to flee. The Night Hawk, a bare hundred feet away now, attacked savagely.

And received the shock of his tempestuous career.

Phew! Something whined past his head; something else struck his wings, ficking a mortal lick into space, knocking him daintily off his course. Sounds like furious snags filled the air around him; a pain like a sudden knife-stab raked his leg from thigh to knee. In a second, surprised though he was, he had dipped and swerved, zig-zagging away like a swallow pursued by a hawk. And the shrill bullets followed.

But the marksmen who could have hit that dodging, twisting snage was not here; and besides, in his four-wheeled suit, he, too, could not be seen. Or so the Night Hawk thought. Yet, within a few moments, he knew he was mistaken. Whenever he went that deadly stream of lead trailed him, slipping so close that only blinding speed and luck saved him. Disappointment and rage converted him into a raging fury, consumed by ice-cold flames of anger.

The Phantom could see him! Looking up the goggles for the first time, his naked eyes stared him broader spaces of red light, jutting out from a new invisible hill, and even as he made the discovery, one of the way searchlights caught him. The Phantom could see him! All his carefully laid trap had collapsed.

Twisting out of the searchlight's grip, he saw the ship's course, too, and shot towards him at incredible speed. A machine-gun cut loose and tracer-bullets streaked through the space he had occupied a split-second before. Throwing back his head in a harsh challenging laugh, the Night Hawk hurtled above the charging monster, dived again and let down with his first grenade.

He had discarded the ultra-ultra goggles now, the better to see and avoid the searchlights. But their invisible craft was a large enough target. Oo-oo-oh! Straight into the ship's roof the missile crashed, breaching a hole in the plates.

Another and a third; their crashing explosions rang through the sky and four of the pencil-like rays snapped out for good. Face white and set, blind to all danger, he dived closer, unhooking a vacuum clip of bullets from one of his automatics, praying furiously that each found a bullet.

There in the sky, the wind dual was fought with terrific intensity. Like lightning, the Phantom's men struck back with a stream of bullets, fired at the will-o'-the-wisp Hawk. They missed his chosen body by a mile or two, but again his shuddering wings suffered. An unseen hand seemed to strike the four murderously as a gaping hole yawned in his right pinion; sending him lurching and staggering from his path, striving to regain control.

And then the Phantom played his trump-card; the Wick-troon, blinding, choking searchbeams that had beaten off the Night Hawk's attack before.

Thurston Kyle had been expecting it every minute, but he had hoped to get at the weakness of the airship and cripple the invention so that the crew would have been useless. But now, unable to break through the barrage of searchlights and warning lead—

Flared from blazing cylinders through tubes in the hull, the stifling fumes gushed out, hiding the entire airship instantly and flinging back the desperate attacker, Coughing under the new grip of the stuff in his lungs, blinded by tears that stung his eyes, the Night Hawk veered away in baffled despair. He was beaten again; and although the better resolution lashed him to a last hurricane effort, he knew that he was beaten. Closing his burning eyes, he flung the last of his grenades in a final attempt at damage, but an explosion came; it had missed, and was falling through space to the ground. The Phantom's vessel had made good its escape, slipping swiftly away under cover.

Till the fringes of the searchbeams was above him, and clear air flamed his face.

HOW THE STORY BEGAN.

THE NIGHT HAWK, known to the world as Thurston Kyle, invented, designed and ran the Phantom Flyer, a machine created, who has commenced a reign of terror, killing, kidnapping, burning. Always in ambush with a cloud of poison gas, which strikes his victims when they are sleeping, forcing into any one he desires, especially from an airplane, avenge. The Night Hawk thought that, up to his first clash with the Phantom, it was the inventor's better strategy to be built up and not a bullet train. Besides, he had to fly to Kyle, and he wanted to meet them to bring the Phantom to rest. He called a plan to the Captain of the Army of the West, and proposed to meet them in a battle of the air. The man who, the Phantom is "in the hands." Obviously there is a battle of the air, and the Phantom is a mechanical air containing a combination of bullet and gas. — because of the fact that this is part of Kyle's own secret plan. And the Night Hawk is having a hard time to strike!

(Now read on.)

the Night Hawk creak like a plowman. He had to go warily, too, for his damaged wings were playing tricks; and the duel had been fought at a pace that had taken him miles from the scene of the hold-up. His pent-up feelings found relief at last in a gasp that shook his muscular body.

With that the madman dart had possessed him vanished so quickly as it had arisen, leaving him dead and poised as ever. Beaten! Outgunned! He faced the facts squarely, and paid the clever Phantom tribute in a grim, automatic smile. Yet it had been a drawn battle after all, for at least the mysterious criminal had been cheated of his goal, his gangsters had suffered and his airship damaged once more by the Night Hawk's grenades.

"I was over-confident; and I paid for it," admitted Kyle to himself; and looked back at the slowly descending cloud above him. "Yes, you are clever, my friend; I admire you immensely. But, nevertheless, I shall get you—some day!"

And, muttering that resolve heave, he dived and captured his prey about till the effects of the smoke-cloud had passed. Then slowly and cautiously, nursing his wings with un-served skill, he glided away.

A Startling Announcement!

CAPTAIN FRANK ARTHURS, of the C.I.D., beside himself with wild anger, smashed his hard-fighting fist down on Sir Hugh Fletcher's desk. He did so with a force that startled the Chief Commissioner and Chief Detective-inspector Leonard considerably; and also brought a quizzical frown to the face of Thurston Kyle, who had been vaguely summoned to another council of war at the Yard.

"I don't care a tinker's darn what anyone says!" roared the Canadian, all trace of his usually pleasant drawl gone. "I don't even care that, by some strange luck we don't deserve, the gold-shipment is safe and was found last night. Not that loss of the Phantom's gold-darned wares got shot up by some guys we can't find or even trace. All I know, Sir Hugh, is that I was made a fool of in that train. Yeah, and Mr. Kyle's friend, too. The Phantom knew all about those buses that would have blown him up when he opened 'em. He knew all about everything, as you can read by the spy's last morning note. There's a damned traitor in the camp somewhere."

A breathless silence fell when the long, furrowed hand finished and the trembling

finger cut down. Sir Hugh and Leonard glanced at each other doubtfully, and Thurston Kyle, with a soothing smile, passed his cigar-case to Arthur in an attempt to calm him down.

"Try one of these, captain. After all, it was no fault of yours that the train-race proved ineffective!"

Arthur took a cigar and savagely bit off the end.

"No fault of mine? I'll say not. But I'm not a kid to stand this raw deal, Mr. Kyle. I reckon my record book here shows that when I want a man, I get him. But, my thunder! Sam, when a plan's discussed right here in Scotland Yard of all places, and it's betrayed next moment by a sneak-in, dirty, rotten spy, then all I've got to say is—"

And Captain Arthur said it.

Sir Hugh frowned and Thurston Kyle laughed outright at the well-chosen words. Pulling himself together, the Mount Canadian went on:

"Sorry, gents; I guess I'm a bit on edge. But listen, Sir Hugh, what else can it be but a spy? The Phantom actually went into the ballroom-coach on the train, after he'd doped Higgins an' me. But did he touch those buses? Not on your life. All he left was a note that I'd stall down the truck one o' these days. We never stood a chance; even the lighted gas-masks we wore, made taken from the Phantom's own van and kept guarded, had been tampered with and the gas went through—like that!" He snapped his fingers. "And then, after he'd joshed with us, the Phantom beat it 'cross-country and held up the uninsured car. What's it matter if someone else stopped the robbery—someone double-crossing him, perhaps? The fact remains he knew all that went on in here, when we four and Pelton of the Treasury mapped out the plan."

Suddenly his face hardened and he stood up, prominent jaw out-thrust.

"An' while we're about it—where is Pelton? Why isn't he here?"

His abrupt question had the effect of making Sir Hugh and Inspector Leonard glance at each other again, while Thurston Kyle sat up, quiet and watchful. At last the Commissioner put his fingers-together and stared at Arthur earnestly.

"Captain, is it your considered opinion that a leader know of our plans and informed the Phantom too?"

Arthur laughed heartily.

"It sure is. And I want to know where Pelton—"

"Lucian Pelton has disappeared!" said Sir Hugh Fletcher quietly.

huffed!

"**L**UCIUS PELTON—disappeared?" Sir Hugh Fletcher's troubled statement was so startling as a sudden blow. Captain Arthurs, faintly echoing the words, sat down again with astonished abruptness, while even Thurston Kyle was betrayed into a sharp exclamation of surprise.

"Good heavens!"

The Chief Commissioner nodded and picked up a report.

"Yes, disappeared. Another item in this mystery," he rasped. "Pelton, as you all know, occupies a high position in the Treasury—very high. He is a bachelor, with a suite of rooms in the Albany. He went home last night at the usual time, and was certainly indoors at 10.30, apparently preparing for bed. That much we found out from his valet, who 'phoned us early this morning that his master had vanished!

"Leonard here investigated the rooms immediately, but found no signs of violence; in fact, the reverse. Everything was in perfect order, except that some clothes, hair-brushes, etc., and a suitcase were missing. But Pelton's valet says he did not pack these; nor did the hall-porter see Pelton go out after 10.30. Yet he has gone, and apparently gone for some time!"

"No Government business, I suppose?" asked Thurston Kyle; to be answered by a decided negative. At which Arthurs looked round with a steady gaze in his eye.

"And last night our poked-up secrets were betrayed to the Phantom Fox. And Pelton was the only one besides ourselves who knew those secrets. Huh?"

"Meaning Pelton betrayed them and he's dead?" joked Leonard blandly.

"Meaning just that, sir?" was the equally bland reply. Arthurs turned grimly to Thurston Kyle. "Remember what I told about Pelton at your house, Mr. Kyle? I said then he seemed a queer guy. I say now that that now, that he's well in with the Phantom or else he is the Phantom!"

"Nonsense. Pelton has a sound, long record in the Treasury!"

"It isn't such nonsense, for all that, Sir Hugh," snapped the Canadian obstinately. "Our secret plans were shipped by someone, weren't they? Well, there was only five of us in the deal; and I reckon I'm right when I say we have proved ourselves straight. That leaves Pelton; the official in charge of the gold shipments. And Pelton's gone; no, he's dead, judging from that suit-case. Now then, I leave it to you if it's nonsense?"

He looked round again, saying something conviction on the faces of his brother officials. Sir Hugh laughed loud.

"There will be the devil of an uproar over this!" he frowned. "But I must confess it looks black. What do you suggest?"

"Suggest?" echoed Arthurs. "Why, throw out the net, of course, and pull Pelton in— pronto. Say, I'd like to get him myself. If Pelton's the Phantom, or even if he's just one of the gang, he's pretty well known and we ought to rope him in easy. Gee, I've got some mighty noteworthy remarks to make to Mr. Pelton when I do find him!"

Sir Hugh made some rapid notes on Leonard's report.

"Very well—see to it at once. This case is becoming terrible. As you know, the armored car we sent out last night after the train was found with its crew gassed, four of the Phantom's gangsters shot—and the gold intact. Once more we have failed to identify any of the dead men; nor can we trace who shot them. Furthermore, fantastic though it seems, there was a distinct air-bottle brought last night in the neighborhood of the hold-up; machinery and explosives were plainly heard. The night was dark, it's true. Yet nothing was more of the aerial combats."

(Continued on next page.)

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The Phantom Foe!

(Continued from previous page.)

"It is—"
Baffled, he spread out his hands helplessly and regarded Thurston Kyle gloomily.

But the scientist, who was enjoying himself hugely, merely looked bland.

"Perhaps the Phantom has other enemies besides the police!" he said smoothly. "Possibly a rival gang of—er—'hi-jackers,' as the Americans call them, I believe."

"Well, why did the hi-jackers leave the gold behind, once they'd settled the Phantom's men?" demanded Sir Hugh irritably.

Arthur, who had been listening impatiently, cut in before Kyle could reply.

"Disturbed, maybe; had to beat it before they could unload!" he jerked. "Sure, I think Mr. Kyle's right; there's another outfit laying for the Phantom besides us. I wish 'em back, too; although, gee, I guess they'll have to be roped in as well, eh?"

Thurston Kyle tapped the ash from his cigar and changed the subject.

"And you say you have not identified the men who were found, Sir Hugh? They are, apparently, strangers to the police; like the men who were found after the Bellanpton business." He shook his head doubtfully. "That, to my mind, is one of the strangest features in this case. Because, as we know, the Phantom had recruited his gang chiefly from our prisons. Yet, although some of the gang have fallen into your hands—dead, unfortunately—you have no record of them.

The Phantom has either formed a tremendously large gang, then, or else he has discovered some means of disguising them so uncanny as the rest of his methods."

The emphatic remark made Sir Hugh shake his head heavily.

"Your last theory is impossible, Mr. Kyle!" he regretted. "We have taken the prints of the captured men and also photographed their faces from every angle. Measured 'em as well. Sometimes the measurements tally; sometimes there's a slight resemblance to our records in the photos. But the finger-prints never check up. And"—he thumped the desk—"you can't disguise prints, Mr. Kyle. That's impossible."

Slowly Thurston Kyle nodded reluctant agreement, and, while the other watched him curiously, drew a card of finger-prints from his pocket. He passed them to Sir Hugh.

"I'd like you to send these down to the Records Department at once, if you will," he said quietly. "No"—as sharp exclamations rang out—"I will not tell you yet how they fell into my hands; it is just a slender clue I prefer to follow myself. You are all busy men; and you must trust me. Send them down, please, Sir Hugh; and telephone the result to me as soon as you can."

And with that he bade them a courteous "good-morning," and went, leaving three dubious men looking at each other in silence, more befogged by the mystery of the Phantom Foe than ever!

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