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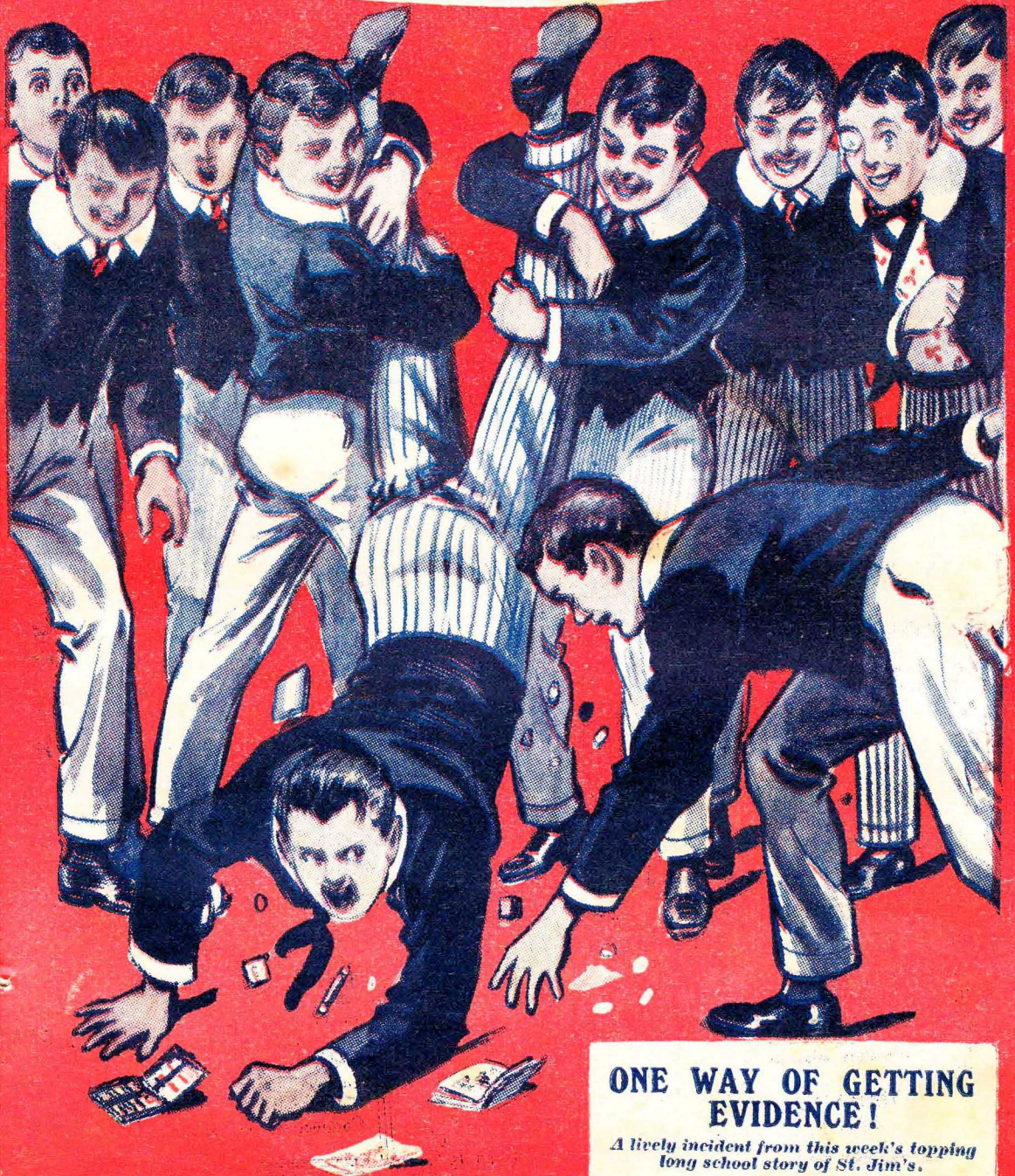
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EVERY
WEDNESDAY.



ONE WAY OF GETTING EVIDENCE!

A lively incident from this week's topping long school story of St. Jim's.

ROLLICKING LONG STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO., OF ST. JIM'S—

HANDFORTH'S THIRD TEST!

MARTIN CLIFFORD

CHAPTER 1.

Handy's Little Way!

SQUEAK, squeak!
Handforth, of the Fourth at St. Jim's, paused as he was striding down the Shell passage. The School House was comparatively quiet, for the June evening was brilliantly fine, and practically everybody was out of doors.

Squeak, squeak!

"Rummy!" murmured Handforth, frowning.

That peculiar sound puzzled him. He was just opposite Study No. 7, and that particular number on the door did not recommend the apartment to Handforth; he knew that Aubrey Racke resided therein. And Handforth had been long enough at St. Jim's to know that Racke was an outsider.

Squeak, squeak!

It came again, and the new fellow in the Fourth decided upon action. That squeak was undoubtedly coming from behind the closed door of Racke's study. It possessed a strangely pathetic note, and was almost animal-like in its plaintiveness. Yet Edward Oswald Handforth could hardly see how Racke, or any other junior, could make a thin, feeble noise of that sort.

Crash!

Handforth was usually forceful in his habits. He hammered on the door of Study No. 7, and then he turned the handle and strode in. It wasn't his way to stand on ceremony.

"Here, what the——"

Aubrey Racke stopped short. The cad of the Shell was bending over the study table, and he was so utterly taken aback that he could only stare. He had had no warning of Handforth's entry; and he imagined, too, that the Shell passage was deserted that evening.

"You rotter!" said Handforth thickly.

Racke crimsoned.

"Get out of here, confound you!" he snapped. "Who the deuce told you to barge in like this? Get out of my study, you Fourth Form waster!"

Handforth took a deep breath.

"What's that?" he said, in a thunderous voice, pointing to something on the table.

He ignored Racke's words; there was something of far more importance to attend to. Handforth's gaze was fixed upon a small, brown object on the table, and as he looked his eyes blazed.

Squeak, squeak!

There was no need for the Fourth-Former to wonder any longer. He could see how that plaintive sound was being produced. The brown object was a mouse, an ordinary house mouse, and a thin piece of string was tied to its tail. At the other end of the string was a heavy paper weight. And even as Handforth watched, the unfortunate little creature tugged madly, the string tautened, and the lacrated tail quivered.

"You torturing brute!" blazed Handforth.

"Can't you mind your own bizniz?" said Racke savagely.

"This infernal mouse was in the cupboard, and——"

"I don't care where it was!" roared the enraged Fourth-Former.

He went to the door, slammed it, and then he whipped

up a knife from the table. With a swift stroke he cut the string, and the mouse scuttled away with lightning speed. It streaked down the table leg and vanished in the region of the fireplace.

"You silly idiot!" roared Racke. "You've let it escape!"

Handforth said nothing; but his actions were significant. Deliberately he took off his jacket, and commenced to roll up his sleeves. His jaw was set, and his eyes were still blazing.

"Look here, you interferin' cad!" panted Racke. "What do you think you're goin' to do?"

"I don't think anything!" retorted Handforth. "I'm going to give you a good hiding!"

"Confound your nerve——"

"I'm going to smash you to a jelly!" said Handforth, with icy calmness. "You cowardly hound! It's just about your mark to capture a harmless mouse and to kill it by inches!"

Racke gulped.

"I wasn't killing it!" he panted. "I found the beastly thing in my cupboard, nibbling the cake, and I was teaching it a lesson. What's it got to do with you, anyhow? You haven't been at St. Jim's two minutes, and you seem to think that you own the place. How many more times am I to tell you to get out of this study?"

This was a weak attempt at bravado, and Racke knew it. By this time Handforth was ready for action, and he advanced relentlessly. He pushed the table aside as though it were a mere chair, and Racke backed away.

Words could not express Handforth's disgust at the petty nature of Racke's recent "amusement." It wasn't the thing in itself, but the light it cast upon Racke's character. Everybody knew that Racke was a cad, but it was a revelation to Handforth that any fellow could descend to such a miserable form of cruelty.

For that piece of torture had been so pointless, so unnecessary. Racke would have been justified in capturing the mouse, and killing it. But to place it on exhibition, in the middle of the table, just to watch its painful struggles to get free, was contemptible and beyond excuse.

"Put up your hands!" said Handforth briefly.

"Confound you, I won't!"

"Then take that!"

Swish!

Handforth delivered a powerful drive; but Racke managed to dodge, and the Fourth-Former's fist whizzed past his ear.

"You fool!" panted Racke. "Stop this! I'm not going to fight you! It's like your beastly nerve to come in here—— Yaroooooh!"

Handforth's right had caught him on the nose, and Racke went staggering backwards, howling. He tripped over the fender, and sprawled headlong in the fireplace. But he was on his feet again in a moment, and now he managed to clutch a cricket stump that had been standing near the grate.

"Stand back!" he said hoarsely. "You—you dangerous lunatic! If you come near me again, I'll——"

"Rats!" snorted Handforth contemptuously. "I'm not frightened by that rotten stump! You're too much of a cad to fight fairly, aren't you?"

With supreme indifference, Handforth barged in, and Racke got home one slashing blow with the cricket stump.

AND EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH OF THE FOURTH



Sleeping a night in a Housemaster's bed seems to be the outside edge in "dares." But it doesn't dismay Edward Oswald Handforth, the new boy in the Fourth at St. Jim's, for with his usual obstinacy and optimism he tackles the task. How does he get on?

It caught Handforth on the arm, and he drew his breath in sharply.

The next second he snatched the cricket stump away, and hurled it across the study. It clattered on to the top of the cupboard, and sent a pile of cups and saucers smashing to the floor.

"You confounded fool!" hooted Racke. "You're wrecking the place!"

"Wait until I've finished!" said Handforth fiercely.

Tramp, tramp, tramp!

They created a terrific dust as they swayed backwards and forwards across the study. Racke, driven to it, was fighting with all the skill that he knew of; but he was no match for the aggressive Fourth-Former.

Crash!

"Yow! Stop it!" howled Racke. "Yaroooooh!"

But Handforth was just beginning to enjoy himself. He continued the pressure, delivering blow after blow, and driving Racke round the study continuously. Already, the cad of the Shell had one black eye, and blood was oozing from the corner of his mouth.

Tramp, tramp, tramp!

The scrap was getting hotter, and outside in the corridor Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther came to a halt, and looked at one another. They were in flannels, and had just come in from Little Side.

"Trouble!" remarked Tom Merry significantly.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of Study No. 6, as he and his chums joined the Terrible Three.

"The wow appears to be comin' f'rom Wacke's studay."

"Somebody must be whacking Wacke!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthrah—"

"It's the very dickens of a shindy, by the sound of it," said Blake as he took a step towards Study No. 7. "Hadn't we better make some inquiries? The asses will get themselves into trouble."

"It wathah stwikes me that they are in twouble already," said D'Arcy.

Grunts and gasps and shufflings came distinctly to their ears, and they glanced anxiously up and down the passage. It would be in the nature of things if a prefect came along at this inopportune moment.

"We'd better butt in!" said Manners bluntly.

Blake was already doing so.

He flung open the door of Study No. 7, and he and the other juniors crowded in the doorway. It seemed that they were just in time to witness the finale.

"And now you can go to the dickens!" said Handforth contemptuously.

He was standing in the middle of the dust-smothered study, and Aubrey Racke was sprawling full length on the floor. Racke was not a pleasant sight. His jacket was split, his collar had gone, his left eye was closing, his nose was swollen, and altogether he was very much of a wreck.

Handforth, on the other hand, was hardly marked. He showed little sign of the fight, except for a deep flush, and his disordered hair and clothes.

"Go it!" said Blake invitingly. "Don't mind us!"

"Weally, Blake, I'm surprisid at you!" protested Arthur Augustus. "I twust you do not take pleasuah in witnessin' this wuff behaviah!"

"Bow-wow!"

Handforth turned before Gussy could speak again, and he nodded.

"It's all right, you chaps," he said casually. "There's nothing the matter."

"Nothing?" asked Tom Merry.

"Nothing at all!"

"Well, of course, opinions differ," said Monty Lowther. "If we asked Racke, I dare say he would tell us that very much was the matter."

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed D'Arcy. "Weally, Handforth, I fail to undahstand why you have been scwappin' with

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Wacke in this unseemly manna. I am weady to believe that Wacke deserved a feaful thwashin'—"

"He deserved to be slaughtered!" growled Handforth. "You don't want me to explain, do you? He was acting like a cad, and so I gave him a thundering good hiding!"

"We're not curious," nodded Blake. "I dare say you had excellent cause, Handy. In fact, I rather think we'd better steal away."

"You—you fools!" snarled Racke, staggering to his feet. "You're not goin' to let that cad go, are you? I was doin' nothin'—absolutely nothin'! He barged in here, and picked a quarrel with me for nothin' at all!"

"Liar!" roared Handforth.

"Here, steady!" said Tom Merry quietly. "Don't shout so much, Handy! Perhaps we'd better know just why you thought it necessary to pitch into Racke like this."

Handforth frowned.

"It was my affair—and his!" he replied gruffly. "Sorry, but I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"But weally, Handforth—"

"No!" said Handforth. "I don't see any reason why I should tell you chaps anything about that mouse!"

"Mouse?" said Blake. "Which mouse?"

Handforth started.

"I didn't say anything about a mouse!" he said hastily. "At least, I didn't mean to."

"Well, you said it, old man," grinned Herries.

"Then forget it!" said Handforth coldly. "Racke and I have had a fight, and there's an end of the affair. But if I catch him torturing a mouse again I'll make him fit for the sanny!"

"Torturing a mouse?" repeated Tom Merry grimly.

"Yes!" roared Handforth. "The rotter had tied a paper-weight to the poor little blighter's tail, and he was watching its struggles to get free! Of course, I just sailed in and smashed him!"

"Of course!" agreed the others.

Handforth suddenly recollected himself.

"Still, it's no good you chaps asking me why we had this fight!" he added hurriedly. "You'll get nothing out of me!"

"Yes, we've noticed it!" nodded Monty Lowther blandly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm sorry, but I don't feel justified in taking you into my confidence," said Handforth, as he moved towards the door. "I'm not usually secretive, but there are exceptions to every rule."

"Oh, of course!" agreed Tom Merry gravely. "Under the circs, old scout, we won't press you."

"We'll continue to remain in dark ignorance!" said Monty Lowther, nodding. "As for Racke, I think we'll leave him in sole possession of the field of battle. In other words, 'nuff said!"

And all the others agreed.

CHAPTER 2.

Handy's Chance!

IT was agreed that the little incident should be completely forgotten. Racke had had his punishment, and that settled it.

But if Blake & Co. and the Terrible Three forgot, Aubrey Racke didn't.

Handforth had allowed the occurrence to fade completely out of his mind, half an hour later. He usually had so many scraps that it was difficult for him to keep count of them.

And this evening he was worried, too.

He suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to post a letter. And now the school box had been cleared, and it was necessary for him to go to the post office in Rylcombe. It was a most important letter, too.

At least, Handforth considered it important. It was addressed to a young lady named Irene Manners, and she belonged to the girls' school near St. Frank's. She and Handforth had always been the best of chums.

On his way down to the village, in his Austin Seven, Handforth ruminated over his present position. He was having quite a good time at St. Jim's, and the fellows were generally decent. But every now and again a sort of "home sickness" came over him for St. Frank's.

This was particularly the case whenever he thought of the fair Irene. And long before he got to the village he was in a thoroughly unsettled frame of mind.

"Rats!" he muttered. "I'm at St. Jim's now, and I'm jolly well going to stick it! Anyhow, I'll stick it until I've finished those four dotty tests! After that I may clear out. It all depends!"

He was always dreaming of the day when he would go

back to his old school—for he refused to regard St. Jim's as anything but a temporary habitation.

And he was thinking, too, of the memorable first day, when the Shell and the Fourth had spoofed him up to the eyes. He had been solemnly assured that it would be necessary for him to complete four severe tests before he could be regarded as a fully fledged Fourth-Former. Jack Blake had even gone to the length of saying that Handforth could assume the captaincy of the Fourth if he succeeded in those tests.

And, extraordinarily enough, Handforth had already succeeded in the first two tests! His phenomenal luck had carried him through. Firstly, he had soundly thrashed a prefect, and had "got away with it"; secondly, he had scored a century in a First Eleven cricket match.

The next item on the programme was even more difficult—at least, it was more outrageous in its impracticability. He had to sleep a night in his Housemaster's bed! And rack his brains as he might, Edward Oswald Handforth had not yet been able to arrive at a solution to this mighty problem.

It wasn't such an easy matter to gain access to Mr. Railton's bed-room—let alone his bed! It was the kind of task that seemed utterly impossible of accomplishment.

But then, Tom Merry had only invented these "tests" on the spur of the moment, never dreaming that this remarkable new fellow would be crazy enough to attempt them. And yet he had already thrashed a prefect, and played for the First!

That sensational match was still the talk of the Junior School at St. Jim's. By the purest of luck, Handforth had found himself pitchforked into a senior's place, and he had played the game of his life. In the Fourth he was now thoroughly established. He was a great man. A fellow who could play cricket like that was worth having.

Handforth reached the post office, and he sighed as he took his letter out of his pocket, and walked into the building. It would be rather ripping if he could go back to St. Frank's!

But then he squared his jaw.

"Not likely!" he said grimly. "Not until I've finished those four tests, anyway!"

"I beg your pardon?" said the girl behind the grille.

"Eh? Oh, nothing!" said Handforth hastily. "I want a three-halfpenny stamp, please."

He was supplied, and as he was sticking the stamp on the envelope, the postmaster glanced at him over the tops of his glasses, and then reached into a handy slot.

"You're Master Handforth, of St. Jim's, aren't you?" he asked.

The new fellow looked up.

"Yes," he answered. "Why?"

"There's a registered letter for you here—but it won't be delivered until to-morrow, in the ordinary way," said the postmaster. "As you're here, you can take it, if you like."

"Good egg!" said Handforth eagerly. "Thanks awfully! A registered letter! I'll bet that's from my pater!"

He signed for it, and went out.

"Jolly decent of the old boy to let me have it now!" he murmured. "I need it, too! Feels like money!"

The letter was, indeed, from his father, as he could tell by the handwriting. And as he was practically stony, the arrival of this windfall was like corn in Egypt.

Before climbing back into his Austin, Handforth opened the letter and glanced inside. His eyes were gleaming as he inspected five one-pound currency notes. He only peeped at the letter, reserving the full reading of it until he got back.

"Good old pater!" he said heartily. "A giddy fiver! By George! That's what I call a tip!"

It was an extra-special one, it seemed—in recognition of Handforth's wonderful century for the First Eleven, the previous week. Sir Edward Handforth was a generous man, and he felt that his hopeful son was worthy of a concrete reward.

Feeling highly pleased with himself, and with life in general, Handforth tucked the letter into his pocket, and purred back towards St. Jim's. And a few minutes later he completely forgot that letter and its precious contents.

For he met Mr. Railton—and the meeting was fraught with import.

The popular Housemaster of the School House was carrying a light bag, and Handforth at once applied his brakes and pulled up. He raised his cap as he came to a standstill next to Mr. Railton.

"You'll have to hurry," said Mr. Railton. "It's nearly locking up."

"That's all right, sir," replied Handforth. "Can I give you a lift, sir?"

"Thanks all the same, but I think not," smiled the Housemaster.

"Only going to the village, sir?"

"If you really want to know, Handforth, I am going to

the station to catch the evening train," said Mr. Railton dryly. "Is there anything else you would like to know?"

Handforth was not conscious of anything out of the way in his queries. But it was nevertheless decidedly nervy of him to question his Housemaster at all. He went serenely on:

"Oh, to the station, sir?" he said, with a little start. "By George! Are you going to catch the evening train, sir?"

"I have already told you so."

"The London train, sir?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" said Handforth. "I see, sir. Then—then you won't be back—I mean— Sorry, sir!"

"I am glad you realise that your interest in my movements

St. Jim's. He was bubbling with excitement. Unfortunately, Mr. Railton omitted to mention a very important point—a crucial point. Very carelessly, he had made no mention of the fact that he only intended travelling as far as Wayland in the London train! And there were at least two trains back from Wayland!

The junior Common-room in the School House was startled, five minutes later, when Handforth burst in like a whirlwind. Quite a number of fellows were there, mainly talking about cricket.

"Hi, you chaps!" yelled Handforth breathlessly.

"Gweat Scott! Whatevah's happened, deah boy?"

"Cheese it, Handforth!"

"Listen!" shouted Handforth. "I'm going to sleep in old Railton's bed to-night."

"What!"

"I'm going to do that third test!" declared Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!" said Blake gruffly. "What's the idea of talking rot like this? You know jolly well that you can't sleep in Railton's bed!"

"That's all you know!" grinned Handforth, cooling



Aubrey Raake scrambled to his feet in a moment, and clutched up a cricket stump that had been standing near the grate. "Stand back!" he said hoarsely. "If you come near me again, Handforth, I'll—" "Rats!" snorted Handforth contemptuously, and he rushed forward. (See Chapter 1.)

is a trifle unseemly, young man!" said Mr. Railton smilingly. "But never mind. I don't think you mean to be inquisitive."

"Oh, no, sir! Rather not, sir!"

Mr. Railton nodded, and walked on.

In a sort of daze, Handforth raised his cap, and then sat back in the driving seat, staring straight ahead of him. His eyes were blazing. His inquiries had not been so disinterested, after all. And he had definitely learned that Mr. Railton was going to Rylcombe to catch the London train.

It was a vital piece of news.

Here, unexpectedly, dramatically, was a solution to his problem! For days he had been worrying about that third "test," and now, by this wondrous stroke of good fortune, his opportunity had come.

"My only hat!" breathed Handforth tensely. "Old Railton is going to London! He can't possibly get a train back to-night, because there isn't one! That means that he can't be back until to-morrow!"

The possibilities were enormous.

"By George!" said Handforth, suddenly clutching at the gear lever. "I'm going to tell the chaps about this! Old Railton's bed will be empty to-night—until I dive into it!"

He engaged his gears, and sped onwards towards

down. "I've made up my mind, and nothing is going to shift me!"

"Well, I'll admit it takes a good deal to shift you, once you're in bed!" agreed Blake.

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry, pushing forward. "For goodness' sake, be sensible, Handy! You know well enough that I was only spoofing you about those idiotic tests—"

"Spoofing me or not, I'm going through with them!" said Handforth firmly. "Haven't I already done the first two?"

"Yes, by sheer luck!"

"Rats!" said Handforth serenely. "Anyhow, there'll be no luck about this third one! I've just heard that Railton is going to be away for to-night, and if I don't grab this chance I shan't get another!"

"Well, there's a lot of truth in that," agreed Tom Merry. "Railton doesn't often go away. This is the first time I knew he was going this evening. Who told you?"

"He told me himself!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Yes!" said Handforth. "I had a word with him down the lane, as I was coming back from the village."

"And he told you where he was going?" asked Blake wonderingly.

"Said he was going to London," nodded Handforth, without realising that this was not the actual truth. "You see, I'm a bit of a detective, and as soon as I saw the valise in his hand I deduced that he was going away."

"Marvellous!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"I added two and two together!" said Handforth.

"And made forty-four!" nodded Monty.

"How the dickens can two and two make forty-four, fathead?"

"I couldn't do it, of course," said Lowther, shaking his head. "In my simple way I always get a sum total of four when I add two and two together. But you're different, Handy. You always get the correct figure, and then draw upon your imagination for the rest."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" snorted Handforth.

"He means, dear man, that the bulk of your conclusions are liable to be wrong," explained Cardew. "In other words, he's not at all convinced that Mr. Railton is actually going to London. Neither am I. For instance, why didn't he speak to me about it?"

"Ass!" frowned Handforth. "I met him on the way to the station, with a bag in his hand, and he distinctly told me that he was going to catch the train for London. So that's settled!"

"Weally, deah boy—"

"Settled!" repeated Handforth coolly. "To-night I shall sleep in Mr. Railton's bed, and during my third week at this school I shall succeed in the third test! By George! I'm going to show you chaps what I'm made of!"

CHAPTER 3.

On the Job!

TOM MERRY patted Handforth gently on the back. "Look here, old scout," he said, "let's have a heart-to-heart talk."

"Rats!"

"You know as well as I do that I was only rotting when I invented those fatheaded tests," continued Tom. "We shan't think any the less of you if you chuck them up."

"I'm not going to chuck them up!" frowned Handforth.

"But weally, deah boy—"

"And I don't need any advice from you, D'Arcy!" interrupted Handforth coldly. "I know what your game is—all of you! You want to dish me out of the leadership of the Fourth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blake promised me that if I succeeded in those four tests, he'd hand over the Fourth leadership to me," said Handforth grimly. "So I'm going straight ahead. And you silly rotters can't stop me! Understand? It's settled!"

"Why bother with him?" asked Clifton Dane impatiently. "He's such a pig-headed ass that he deserves to get into trouble!"

"Are you talking about me?" roared Handforth, glaring.

"Yes, I am!"

"Why, you babbling cuckoo—"

"Cheese it!" grinned Tom Merry. "Handy, old man, remember that we're your pals. Don't misunderstand us. We're not trying to dissuade you so that we shall get the laugh over you, but because we want to save you from being sacked."

"Sacked!"

"Bunked!" nodded Tom. "That's what'll happen to you if you're caught in Railton's bed."

"How can I be caught, you poor idiot?" asked Handforth pityingly.

"Oh, let's bump him and get it over!" said Blake. "Are you going to stand this sort of thing, Tom Merry? Are you going to let him call you a poor idiot without smashing him in the eye?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"If he was any other fellow, I'd probably get wild, but we all know our Handy!" he said good-humouredly.

"I'm not Handy!" said Edward Oswald.

"Ahem! We won't argue the point," murmured the Shell skipper. "Still, we'll do our best to make you see reason. It would be bad enough if you were just caught in Railton's bed-room; but to be found actually in his bed—"

"But I shan't be caught!" roared Handforth, in exasperation. "Don't I keep telling you that Railton's gone to London?"

"Look here!" interrupted Blake. "Supposing Railton actually has gone to London? That doesn't make you safe."

"Yes, it does!"

"Then you're an optimist!" snapped Blake. "The House dame will know that Railton has gone, and the chances are that she'll buzz into his bed-room in the early morning,

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with a bevy of maids, in order to turn the room out. You know what these matrons are."

Handforth gave a superior laugh.

"I thought of that!" he said coolly.

"Eh? You've thought of it?"

"Of course!" nodded Handforth. "I shall lock the door!"

"Bai Jove!"

It was obvious that Handforth was not to be turned from his purpose. And all the other juniors were compelled to admit that locking the door would be a simple solution to the problem. And, in a way, they admired this bluff, stubborn new fellow for his dogged determination. He was several kinds of an ass, but nobody could overlook his resolution.

"Well, if you won't be sensible, you won't!" said Tom Merry smilingly. "Go ahead, Handy—and we wish you luck! But don't say that we didn't warn you. It'll be a risky game."

"The riskier the better!" said Handforth.

"How the merry dickens shall we know whether he's really done this test or not?" asked Croke, with a hint of a sneer in his voice. "What proof shall we have that he's really spent the whole night in Railton's bed?"

"His word!" said Blake promptly.

"Oh!" said Croke. "I'd forgotten that!"

There were many chuckles, for Croke's voice had contained an even more obvious sneer.

"You rotter!" roared Handforth, flushing. "Do you think I should trick you? Do you think I should sneak out of Railton's bed-room, spend the night somewhere else, and then pretend that I'd won the test?"

"You never know!" put in Racke sourly.

"By George!" yelled Handforth, turning up his sleeves. "Lemme get at him! I've given him one thrashing to-day, and I'll jolly well—"

"Chuck it!" grinned Blake. "No fighting here, Handy!"

"Wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus. "Pway wemem-bah that a pwefect might dwop on you, Handay. At the same time, I must wemark that Wacke is an insinuat' wottah!"

Handforth breathed hard.

"Look here!" he said tensely. "I'm not going to have any doubts about this thing! Not likely! And I want you fellows to form a committee—Fourth and Shell combined."

"A committee?" repeated Tom Merry. "What for?"

"After lights-out you'll come along with me and see me right into Railton's bed-room," said Handforth. "Yes, right into his bed! Then you can go out, lock the door, and take the key with you!"

"My dear ass, there's no need—"

"Yes, there is!" broke in Handforth. "I insist!"

"Caesar hath spoken!" said Monty Lowther solemnly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I insist!" roared Handforth. "You'll take the key with you, and you won't come back until to-morrow morning, when the rising-bell rings. Then, when you walk in and lug me out of Railton's bed, perhaps you'll be convinced that I've done the thing properly."

"Yes, we shall be convinced—then!" said Croke, grinning.

"I utterly disagree with all this!" said Arthur Augustus coldly. "I regard you as a doubtin' wottah, Cwooke!"

"In that case, Gussy, you'd better regard half the Junior School in the same light," said Croke. "Dozens of chaps are of the same opinion as me!"

"I don't believe it!" frowned Blake. "Personally, I'm willing to accept Handforth's word—without any of this silly committee business."

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll believe you, Handy, old man!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"That's very decent of you; but I've got to be on the right side!" said Handforth deliberately. "I don't want to give anybody a chance to doubt my having done the third test. So, after lights-out, you'll come and lock me in Railton's bed-room, and take the key!"

And he refused to hear of any other arrangement. Upon due consideration, Tom Merry and Blake and the others saw the thing from Handforth's point of view. He wanted to safeguard himself, and there could be no doubt that his precaution was warranted.

After prep, Blake and one or two others made a few discreet inquiries. But, as far as they could ascertain, nobody knew anything about Mr. Railton's plans. He had gone out, and that was all.

"What's the idea of being so inquisitive, anyhow?" asked Darrell, of the Sixth, whom Blake questioned.

"Isn't he our Housemaster?" asked Blake innocently.

"A fat lot of interest you take in your Housemaster's movements!" said the prefect, with a suspicious look. "I suppose you've got some jape on, eh? Well, take my advice, kid, and drop it!"

It was the same with the others. They could only ascertain that Mr. Railton had "gone out." Very carelessly, the Housemaster had omitted to tell anybody of his private movements.

"It looks fishy to me!" said Blake, shaking his head. "I don't believe old Railton's gone to London at all! A Housemaster wouldn't go off like that without telling the prefects, or somebody."

Just before bed-time, Blake and Tom Merry seized Handforth on the stairs.

"You'd better chuck it up, Handy!" said Tom Merry earnestly.

"Ass!"

"We can't get to know anything about Railton," went on Tom. "We've asked lots of people, but they all seem to think that Railton will be back this evening."

"I don't care what they seem to think," replied Handforth serenely. "I met him on the way to the station, and he told me he was going to London."

"Are you sure he told you?"

"Of course I am!"

"Well, I wish I was as sure," said Blake dubiously.

They went upstairs to the dormitory, and Handforth laughed at all the doubts and fears. He was serene in his confidence. In due course, the prefect came to see "lights out"—which was only a formality

bed-room. They arrived, and found the door unlocked, and the room dark, the blind being down.

"Good egg!" murmured Handforth exultantly. "The key's here—in the lock, on the inside."

"I'll take it!" said Tom Merry.

Handforth reached out to turn the electric light on, but Manners held his hand.

"You reckless fathead!" hissed Manners.

"Eh? What the—"

"If anybody spots a light in this bed-room, there might be trouble!" said Tom Merry. "You're quite right, Manners. The masters, anyhow, will know that Railton has gone to London, and we can't be too careful."

"Oh, have your own way!" said Handforth.

He realised that there was no need for the light. There was still plenty of dusk, and he could see the bed easily, although the blind was drawn. He jumped on to the bed and grinned.

"Well, that's all!" he said cheerfully. "You asses can clear off now!"

"We're going!" murmured Blake. "It'll be quite bad enough if one of us gets the sack! Come on, you chaps! He's mad, but he's beyond all help!"

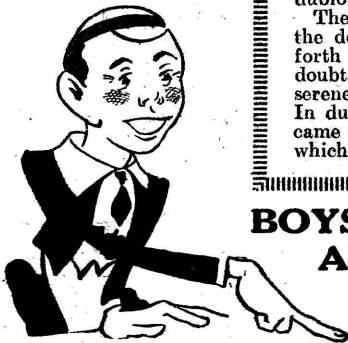
They crept out, and locked the door on the outside. There was no escape for Handforth now. He was committed to this rash undertaking. And the committee went back to their various beds, chuckling.

It was generally agreed that Handforth was a chump, but his exhibition of will power had undoubtedly made an impression.

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CHAPTER 4. A Ticklish Situation!

"NEVER knew such a chap!"

This was Jack Blake's considered opinion, delivered as he sprawled in bed, with his hands behind his head. The Fourth Form dormitory had settled down again, and all was quiet.

"He's worse than Grundy!" grinned Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies, I wergard that wemark as uncalled for," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Gwunday is a most fwithful ass!"

"And so is Handy!"

"But not in the same way," said Blake. "Gussy's right. Grundy is just a plain chump—a duffer at sports, and everything else. But Handforth always manages to 'get there' somehow. How the merry dickens he does it is a mystery. But he does!"

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Gussy. "I wathah like Handay."

"We all like him!" chuckled Levison. "He's so jolly innocent. There's something different about him."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Handay is a most remarkable chavactah. We all agree that he is a pwithless burblah, and we all know that he gets the most ewazy ideahs; but he's twue blue, all the same."

Clang!

In the momentary pause, as Gussy ceased speaking, a distant metallic clang came to the ears of the Fourth-Formers. The summer's evening was very quiet, and the red glow of the dying sunset was still visible in the dormitory. The windows stood wide open, admitting the cooling air, to say nothing of sundry gnats.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, sitting up in bed.

"What's the matter, ass?" asked Blake.

at this time of the year. The daylight of the long June evenings lingered until well past ten-thirty.

It was ten o'clock when a move was made.

As the school-clock chimed out the hour, Handforth sat up in bed, and looked round him. Most of the Fourth-Formers were already asleep, but Blake & Co. were wakeful. They had promised to form part of the committee.

"Ready?" asked Handforth.

"Not so loud, you ass!" warned Blake. "Yes, we're ready. But why not think again, Handy? It's too risky!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "We all know what a fwithful ass you are, deah boy, but we don't want to see you bunked."

Handforth got out of bed.

"Come on!" he said briskly.

"Weally, Handforth!" protested the swell of the Fourth. "I addressed my wemark to you—"

"I know you did, and you can go and eat coke!" replied Handforth.

"Bai Jove!" said Gussy. "It is uttably useless to argue with the obstinate duffah."

And it was.

Two minutes later, the five Fourth-Formers crept out of the dormitory, and they were just in time to meet the terrible Three in the passage. The Shell fellows were grinning.

"He's as stubborn as ever, then?" murmured Tom Merry.

"As pigheaded as ever, you mean!" growled Blake.

"It's not stubbornness, and it's not pigheadedness!" said Handforth, with a glare. "It's determination! You fat-heads thought you'd give me an impossible task, didn't you? Well, I'm going to show you that I'm game! Here's my chance to—"

"Yes, we know all about it!" interrupted Blake hastily.

"We don't want to stand jawing here. The sooner we get back to bed the better."

There was much common-sense in this remark. And silently the "committee" tiptoed towards Mr. Railton's

"I wefuse to be called an ass!" said Gussy. "Howevah, there is no time to waste. That was the pwivate gate."

"My only hat!"

The same thought leapt into all their minds, and there were many murmured ejaculations.

"Railton!" breathed Blake. "Yes, and didn't you hear the last train come in about ten minutes ago? We distinctly heard it rumble into the station—"

Crunch—crunch!

Blake stopped talking. Outside, somebody was crunching over the gravel. It was a steady footstep, and one that the Fourth-Formers instantly recognised.

Arthur Augustus leapt out of bed, and dashed to the window. One glance was enough for him. He caught a glimpse of Mr. Railton in the dusk, as the Housemaster walked towards the door of the House.

"Gweat Scott!" gasped the swell of the Fourth, as he spun round.

"Railton!" went up a dozen whispers.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Are you sure, Gussy?" said Blake, leaping out of bed.

"Yaas; I saw him!" panted Arthur Augustus.

"That's done it!" murmured Levison.

"Poor old Handy!" said Digby, with a whistle.

"The ass—the frabjous idiot!" said Blake wrathfully.

"The burbling duffer!"

"Yaas, wathah; but—"

"It's as clear as daylight!" said Blake hurriedly. "Handy made a bloomer, as usual! I've never known such a fellow for blundering!"

"But he said that Mr. Railton told him he was going to London—" began Clive.

"What does it matter what he said?" interrupted Blake. "I expect Mr. Railton told him that he was catching the London train—which, I suppose, was perfectly true."

"Bai Jove!"

"But Mr. Railton could only have gone to Wayland," continued Blake. "And now he's come back on the last train. He's here, you chaps! What the merry dickens are we going to do about Handy?"

"We can't do anything, can we?" said Herries bluntly.

"Weally, Hewwies, we can't leave the poor blightah in Waitton's bed!" protested D'Arcy. "If he is discovahed there, there'll be the most frightful wow!"

"He'll be sacked, for a certainty!" said Blake, as he hurried towards the door. "Come on, you chaps! No, not all of you! We don't want to make too much noise! But we've got to go and drag Handy out of that bed!"

"You'll have to be jolly quick, dear men," grinned Cardew. "The chances are that Railton will go straight up to his bedroom. And if you're all found there—"

"Come on, then!" said Blake feverishly.

They got out into the passage, about half a dozen of them. And then, as they were making a rush for Mr. Railton's bedroom, Blake suddenly checked.

"My goodness!" he muttered. "We haven't got the key!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Tom Merry kept it," went on Blake. "Just like those Shell fatheads to cause this delay!"

"Listen!" urged Herries.

For a second they paused; but no sounds came to their ears—there was no tread on the staircase. Mr. Railton had probably gone to his study, and that meant that the juniors would have a brief breathing space.

They dashed towards the Shell dormitory and burst in.

"Hallo! What the merry dickens—" began Kangaroo, in alarm. "Look out, you chaps! We're raided!"

"Rats!" panted Blake. "It's only us!"

"What's wrong?" demanded Tom Merry, wakeful on the instant.

"Everything!" retorted Blake. "Old Railton's come back!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"And Handy is in Railton's bed!"

There was much consternation in the Shell dormitory, and half the fellows were already out of bed.

"Where's the key?" asked Blake urgently. "Have you got it, Tom Merry?"

"Yes."

"Then don't waste time in jawing—come with us," said Blake. "We've got to get Handy out before old Railton comes up to bed. It'll mean the sack for him if he's found there!"

Tom Merry ran towards the door, having taken the key from under his pillow. The next moment a whole crowd was surging out into the passage and dashing along towards the Housemaster's bed-room.

Edward Oswald Handforth was several kinds of an ass, but the juniors felt that it was impossible to leave him there, in Mr. Railton's bed, to his fate. By hook or by crook he had to be yanked out and brought back to safety.

But the juniors were reckoning without their host!

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CHAPTER 5.

Nothing Doing!

ZZZZZRH!

Mr. Railton's bed-room vibrated rhythmically to the slow, regular snore of the sleeper in the bed.

Handforth, serene and unruffled, had gone to sleep, so confident had he been that he would not be disturbed.

The captain of the Shell unlocked the door and the juniors swarmed into the room. Somebody had pulled the blind up, and the dim light of the late dusk was flooding into the apartment. It was a subdued glow, but it was sufficient.

Blake and Tom Merry and D'Arcy, and one or two others, were leaning over the sleeper, amazed at the soundness of his slumber. The other part of the room was filled with other fellows. Even Racke and Scrope, and a few minor Shell fellows, had come along to join in the general "fun."

Tom Merry seized Handforth by the shoulder and shook him.

"Wake up, you ass—wake up!" he hissed urgently.

Handforth stirred, his snoring abruptly ceased, and he blinked.

"Hallo!" he mumbled. "Wassermarrer? Go 'way! Tain't rising-bell yet."

"Fathead!" said Tom Merry. "Wake up, Handy!"

Handforth suddenly came to himself.

"By George!" he ejaculated. "So it's you! Why, you fatheads, what's the idea? What do you mean by coming here and disturbing—"

"Railton's come back!" broke in Blake.

"Rats!" said Handforth calmly.

"I tell you—"

"Rats!" repeated Handforth. "Why, you poor idiots, you can't spoof me with a yarn like that!"

"It's not a yarn!" yelled Blake excitedly. "If you're caught here you'll be sacked!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Gussy. "Pway be sensible, Handay! If you come with us evewythin' will be all wight—"

"You mean that everything will be all wrong!" said Handforth gruffly. "If I come with you, then you'll have the laugh over me. You'll say that I've lost this test, and then I shan't get another chance. Thanks all the same, but I'm not so green!"

The juniors gasped.

"Don't you believe us?" said Tom Merry frantically. "Railton has come back."

"Tell it to the Marines!" said Handforth. "Railton told me that he was going to London, and I know jolly well that he wouldn't descend to telling me whoopers."

"You must have misunderstood him—"

"I didn't!"

"Oh, you hopeless ass!" yelled Blake. "Do you want to be rescued or not?"

"Not!" said Handforth coolly.

"Look here," said Tom Merry, grabbing Handforth by the shoulder again, "we're in earnest, old man. Honest Injun!" Handforth started at that.

"By George!" he said, staring. "You—you mean that you're not spoofing me?"

"Yes."

"And you actually saw Mr. Railton?"

"We didn't see him," admitted Tom. "These Fourth-Formers came and told us."

"Gussy saw him," said Herries. "We heard a crunch on the gravel, and when Gussy looked out of the window he spotted Mr. Railton—"

"Oh, well, of course, that explains it!" said Handforth, with a return of his coolness. "Gussy must have made a mistake!"

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "Are you suggestin', Handay, you wottah, that the man wasn't Mr. Waitton at all?"

"It couldn't have been Railton," said Handforth, with exasperating serenity. "He's gone to London."

"You burblin' idiot," shrieked Gussy, "I saw him!"

"You saw somebody, I dare say," agreed Handforth. "But it's nearly dark outside, and it would be easy enough to make a mistake. Clear off, you fellows! I'm not going to get out of this bed!"

"Weally, Handforth—"

"We shall have to use force!" said Tom Merry grimly. "It's no good messing about with an absolute chump like this! We've come here to help him, and all he can do is to tell us to go and eat coke! Lend a hand, you chaps. We'll drag him out by force!"

"Yes, rather!" said Blake in a determined voice.

"Here, hands off!" roared Handforth. "If any chap touches me I'll biff him! I tell you that Railton has gone to London. You're not going to make me lose that 'test'!"

He clenched his fists, and there was such an air of warlike defiance about him that the juniors hesitated.

And just at that moment a trifling incident took place on the other side of the bed-room.

All the juniors, except one, were crowded about the bed, staring at Handforth, their whole attention concentrated upon the obstinate new fellow.

Aubrey Racke was the only one who allowed his attention to wander.

As a matter of fact, Racke had only come along in a spirit of vindictiveness. He had a vague idea that he might be able to play the traitor, and so give Handforth away. Even if Handforth didn't get the sack, he would be in for a flogging. And Racke considered that this would be some sort of revenge for the thrashing that Handforth had given him earlier that day.

But now Racke had changed his mind.

Unexpectedly, dramatically, he had caught sight of something on Mr. Railton's dressing-table. If the blind had remained down, Racke would never have looked at the

that Handforth, after all, was hardly responsible for his actions.

From Handforth's point of view the thing was different.

He had made up his stubborn mind that the juniors had come here for the purpose of spoofing him. He had been spoofed so many times that his attitude was not without justification. And Handforth was now like the ancient gentleman who feared the Greeks when they came with gifts in their hands, and he viewed the juniors with suspicion.



Crunch—crunch! There was the sound of somebody crunching over the gravel in the quad. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy leapt out of bed and dashed to the window. He caught a glimpse of Mr. Railton in the dusk as the Housemaster walked towards the door of the House. "Gwast Scott!" gasped Gussy. "He's come back!" (See Chapter 4.)

dressing-table; but the blind was now up, and he could see fairly distinctly.

And there, underneath a little trinket, were some pound currency notes!

Money! Pound notes! Here in Mr. Railton's bed-room! And if Racke could only give Handforth away on the quiet there might be some interesting complications, particularly if those notes were missing!

On the spur of the moment, acting upon a swift impulse, Racke whipped the trinket aside, grabbed the currency notes, and stuffed them into his pocket—the pocket of his dressing-gown.

"By gad!" he breathed. "If only I can put the blame on Handforth, there'll be no question about his getting bunked!"

He joined the others round the bed, totally unconscious of the fact that a pair of eyes had been watching him during that vital moment.

A sort of tussle was now taking place round the bed.

"We're fed-up with this!" Blake was saying. "Grab him!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'll give you just two seconds, Handforth!" said Tom Merry curtly. "Are you going to get out of this, bed of your own accord, or shall we drag you out?"

"I'll punch the first fellow who comes within reach!" retorted Handforth defiantly.

"Oh, what's the use?" said Blake.

They were all inclined to leave him to his fate; yet this rather went against the grain. For it was generally agreed

"You can't kid me that Railton has come back!" he said flatly. "On your own showing, Gussy is the only one who has seen him—and we all know that Gussy isn't reliable!"

"Weally, Handay—"

"He probably saw some other master," continued Handforth. "And I'm jolly well not going to get out of this bed! I've made up my mind to stay in it until the morning, and wild horses won't drag me out!"

"You uttah ass!" said Gussy indignantly. "I saw Waitton as plainly as I can see you!"

"Yes, and he may be here at any second!" said Blake, in alarm. "Wild horses may not drag you out of that bed, Handy, but we're going to do it!"

"Are you?" roared Handforth. "Try it!"

The juniors tried it.

Exasperated beyond measure, they fell upon Handforth from both sides of the bed at once. Tom Merry seized him by the shoulders, Blake grabbed him by the hair, Herries and Manners seized his legs.

"Biff! Crash!"

"Yow!" howled Blake wildly. "Oh dear! Hold him, somebody!"

Handforth was lashing out desperately, but at last the very force of the attack subdued him. He was a born fighter, but the odds were too great. He was seized, held, and his struggles were useless.

"Got him!" panted Blake. "Now, all together!"

But even as they were in the act of yanking him off the bed a footstep sounded out in the passage.

"Cave!" gasped Digby.

But it was too late!

As the juniors stared round towards the door it burst open, and Mr. Victor Railton strode in. He paused on the threshold.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the Housemaster, in amazement.

There was a dead silence, except for the forced, heavy breathing of the startled juniors.

Click!

Mr. Railton switched the electric light on, and the room became flooded with radiance. The Housemaster's brow was as black as thunder, and his eyes were filled with mingled amazement and anger.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded in a terrible voice.

CHAPTER 6.

Off His Rocker!

FOR some moments there was utter, absolute silence in Mr. Railton's bed-room. All the intruders were holding their breath, and nobody had thought of answering the Housemaster's question. They just stood there staring at him, numbed by the dramatic suddenness of the catastrophe.

But if Tom Merry & Co. were startled, Handforth himself was stupefied.

He was staring at Mr. Railton in blank, bewildered amazement.

Seeing is said to be believing, and Handforth was seeing now!

Whatever his thoughts may have been a moment earlier, he now knew definitely that Mr. Railton had not gone to London. For here he was in the flesh standing in the doorway.

"My goodness!" said Handforth thickly.

His voice was like the explosion of a bombshell in that silence. He was convinced at last—and he was almost bereft of his wits by the position that he found himself in. How could he explain? What could he say? There he was sprawled on Mr. Railton's bed, his hair tousled, the very bed in a hopeless state of disorder.

As for Mr. Railton, he was as dumbfounded as any of the juniors.

He had come upstairs contentedly, pleasantly tired, after the hot day. Nearing his bed-room, he had become aware of the sound of voices, and after a moment of unbelief he had come to the conclusion that these voices were proceeding from his own bed-room.

It had been a startling discovery.

Never in the whole course of his experience had Mr. Railton known anything like it. Juniors in his bed-room! He had burst in, and his amazement had been all the greater. Not only were these juniors in his bed-room, but one of them was actually in his bed, with all the rest attempting to drag him out! In fact, they were converting his sedate sleeping-chamber into a bear garden!

Small wonder that Mr. Railton was momentarily overwhelmed.

But Handforth's voice broke the spell, and Mr. Railton took another stride into the room.

"What is the meaning of this?" he repeated thunderously. "Upon my word! What are you boys doing in my bed-room? How dare you take advantage of my absence in this outrageous fashion!"

"We—we—we—" began Blake helplessly.

"Well?" snapped Mr. Railton.

"I—I—I—I mean, we—we—we—"

"Come, Blake!" said Mr. Railton curtly. "If you cannot speak coherently, perhaps one of these other boys will be good enough to explain! Handforth, what are you doing in my bed?"

"He's dotty, sir!" babbled Blake desperately.

"Dotty?" repeated Mr. Railton. "Ahem! I cannot accept—"

"He's clean off his rocker, sir!" gasped Blake. "He insisted upon sleeping in your bed, and we've been trying to drag him out!"

"Yaas, watah, sir!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "That's the twuth, sir!"

"We knew you were coming, sir, and we tried to get him out before you arrived on the scene!" said Tom Merry rapidly. "But the poor ass wouldn't take any notice of us, and he resisted our efforts."

"He's as mad as a March hare, sir!" said Blake.

Handforth started. In fact, he started so violently that the bed-springs creaked. In that brief second Handforth performed a swift piece of mental jugglery. For him, it was a masterpiece.

And yet his need was desperate.

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Unless he thought quickly—unless he took some drastic action—it would mean the sack. And the dire nature of Handforth's extremity sharpened his wits to a phenomenal degree.

He knew now that he was trapped. Mr. Railton had returned and had discovered him. But never for a second did this remarkable new fellow think of giving up his plan. He was as pig-headed as ever!

If he got out of this bed now, confessing the truth about the whole incident, he would be lucky if he was not expelled from St. Jim's. Furthermore, he would lose this third "test." And Handforth had no intention of losing it. He was a super-optimist by nature, and even now he did not give up hope.

It was Blake who had given him the tip.

Blake had said that he was dotty, and there in that one word lay the solution to the problem. By hook or by crook he had to remain in that bed for to-night. The morrow could look after itself—for by then he would have succeeded in his fantastic task.

It was characteristic of Handforth to think in this way. Never would he admit defeat. And his wits were always at the sharpest when the odds were heavy.

Abruptly he pointed a quivering finger at Mr. Railton.

"Stand back!" he said in a hoarse voice. "Go! Leave my camp, and take your bandits with you!"

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Railton.

"Chuck it, Handy!" hissed Blake. "The game's up, and—"

"Silence, dog!" thundered Handforth. "As for you," he went on, glaring at Mr. Railton, "you cannot deceive me as to your identity! I know you, base miscreant! You are the traitor king of Arabia!"

"Great Scott!"

"Oh, my only hat!"

"The poor chap's gone crazy!"

Mr. Railton took a deep breath, trying hard to control his anger and amazement.

"Handforth," he said sharply, "enough of this nonsense—"

"But you cannot kidnap me!" went on Handforth fiercely.

"No, by George!"

"Kidnap you!" gasped the Housemaster.

"Yes!" roared Handforth. "I know your game! You've come here, with all your desert bandits, and you've surrounded my camp, and now you want to drag me out of my tent and take me off to your stronghold!"

"Boy!" shouted Mr. Railton.

"But as long as the Union Jack flies from my flagstaff I shall remain firm!" continued Handforth, his voice becoming wilder and wilder. "I defy you! Yes, and all your desert rabble!"

Tom Merry & Co. listened and watched in fresh amazement. In a flash they realised that Handforth was "trying it on." He was pretending to be dotty!

And he was doing it very well, too. His eyes were burning with a frenzied light, and it was not surprising that Mr. Railton was momentarily doubtful. But that frenzied light was occasioned by Handforth's knowledge of his desperate position. If this wheeze failed all would be lost.

"You foolish boy!" said Mr. Railton, taking another step towards the bed. "You cannot deceive me by this ridiculous exhibition—"

"Stand back!" hooted Handforth, grabbing at the air and levelling an imaginary weapon at the Housemaster. "Take another step and I will drop you in your tracks!"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Mr. Railton.

"I will make an example of you, so that all your followers will learn of my ruthlessness!" continued Handforth tensely. "Never will I—an Englishman—submit to being captured by desert Arabs! Back, dogs—back!"

The juniors, startled by Handforth's very vehemence, automatically backed away. They marvelled at his nerve. They even began to doubt his sanity seriously. Had he really gone off his rocker? It certainly seemed like it.

But Mr. Railton, after another searching look at Handforth, set his teeth.

"There has been enough of this folly!" he said angrily. "Handforth, get off that bed at once! I am amazed and shocked at your impudence—"

"Back—back!" panted Handforth.

He waved his arms violently, and, indeed, he looked really dangerous as Mr. Railton approached. The Housemaster paused, feeling that any further advance would be unwise. He did not wish to be struck by Handforth's lashing fists. And, without question, Handforth was quite excited enough to strike. Ordinarily he would as soon have thought of jumping over the moon as hitting a master; but just now he was feverishly excited, and he was carried away by his own deception.

"Touch me not!" he went on wildly. "I have only to

give the command, and I can sail away from your clutches on my magic carpet!"

"Gwreat Scott!"

"You see, sir," said Blake quickly, "he's only talking rot! He's been talking rot for hours! He insisted upon coming to your bed-room, and we tried to drag him out."

"We knew what a row there would be if he was found here, sir," said Tom Merry truthfully. "And it's no good trying to force him off that bed, either. He gets violent as soon as we go near him!"

Mr. Railton was uncertain. He was full of deep suspicion still; yet, at the same time, Handforth was acting very convincingly. And there was just a chance that he might have been affected by the hot sun that day. Perhaps he had been reading a highly imaginative book of Arab adventure; perhaps the story had temporarily affected him. In such a situation as this it was unwise to be too drastic.

Mr. Railton turned abruptly.

"All you boys must return to your dormitories!" he said sharply. "I will inquire fully into this to-morrow. But

there has been enough disturbance for to-night. Go to your dormitories at once."

"Yes, sir!" chorused the relieved juniors.

Handforth leapt to his feet and struck a dramatic attitude on the bed.

"Victory!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "The enemy retreats! Victory is mine!"

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Railton blankly.

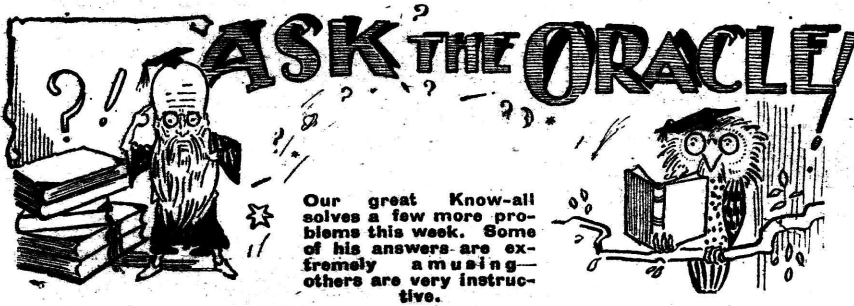
"You dare not touch me, and you know it!" went on Handforth triumphantly. "Take your bandits and be gone! And think well before you attack my camp again!"

Tom Merry & Co. and all the Fourth-Formers filed out of the room, and they hurried off to their dormitories, still marvelling at Handforth's audacity. What would be the outcome of this startling affair? Would he be able to carry it through?

For the moment, at any rate, he had succeeded in his desperate deception.

Mr. Railton followed the last of the juniors out of the bed-room, and he looked the door and pocketed the key.

(Continued on next page.)



Our great Know-all solves a few more problems this week. Some of his answers are extremely amusing—others are very instructive.

Q. What does Fid. Def. on our coins mean?

A. This question was sent in by a studious reader from Pontypool who wishes to be known merely by the classic pen-name of "Cul-de-sac." The abbreviation Fid. Def. appears on our various coins, as you may see by borrowing a half-crown—or a penny will do if your pal's trust in you does not extend to this amount. It means Defender of the Faith (an abbreviation of the Latin, fidei defensor). The monarch on whom this title was first conferred was Henry the Eighth, who wrote in his limited leisure a book entitled "Assertion of the Seven Sacraments" that much pleased the Pope Leo.

Q. What is sanskrit?

A. An ancient language of India that is deemed as sacred.

Q. What is a D.C.M.?

A. This is an Army term and normally stands for the Distinguished Conduct Medal. It also has another meaning, District Court Martial, which is not so popular among the troops.

Q. How big is the world?

A. Before answering this question sent in by Fred Parkins of London, we must agree to admit that the world is round and not flat, as a few inhabitants of Haybrick-cum-Muggleberry still prefer to believe. So if you started digging straight down from the North Pole and kept on at it long enough, you would dig a distance of 7,899 miles before breaking through the ice at the South Pole. Long before that, though, you would have blisters and frost-

bite; and anyway, you would be up the pole to do it. Dig through the earth from side to side of the Equator and you would only have 7,925

miles to go. The distance right round the world is roughly 24,850 miles, though it would seem about ten millions if you tried to run and swim it

Why do divers have heavy boots? The oracle will tell you.



Q. Where is the Levant?

A. This, Alf. Saunders, is the name for the eastern part of the Mediterranean with all its islands and neighbouring countries. Palestine is down that way.

Q. What is an armadillo?

A. Chase a wood-louse, capture it, and look at it through a microscope and you will have a jolly good idea of what an armadillo looks like. It—the armadillo—is a burrowing animal of South America with bony armour on its body, and has the habit, also common in the domestic wood-louse, of rolling itself into a ball when alarmed.

Q. What does a broom at the masthead of a boat mean?

A. This is the sailors' sign that a boat is for sale.

Q. Who was Mulligatawny?

A. This query was kindly sent in by Percy Watteau, of Carbone-by-the-Canal, N.B., after he had heard the well-known song. Percy, it appears, has been having a little argument with his friend, who says he was the general who relieved Mafeking

during the Indian Mutiny, whereas Percy himself claims that he was the policeman who arrested Crippen. Both err somewhat. Mulligatawny is a soup highly seasoned with East Indies spices, or supposed to be. Unless you have a corrugated iron throat it is best to order mock turtle.

Q. Why does a diver need lead on his boots?

A. I fancy I see all your hands go up and hear you raise a mighty shout: "To make him sink." But this is hardly correct for a diver would sink even without lead on his boots—but he would not sink in the right way. Either he would roll upside down or sideways, and be struggling all the time to right himself. The lead, therefore, ensures that he shall sink feet first.

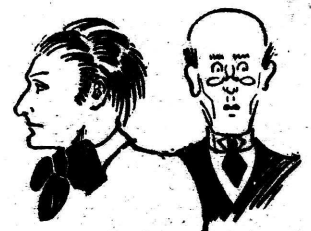
Q. What is an artesian well?

A. A perpendicular boring into strata, producing constant supply of aqua pura rising spontaneously to the surface. In other words, a well dug straight down into the ground that causes water to come bubbling up and keep on a-bubbling.

Q. What is the use of our hair?

A. As my waggish correspondent, "C.O.D." answers this himself by saying that it helps to keep our hats on, I suspect an elephantine attempt at humour. But let us go to the roots of the subject. Fish have scales, birds have feathers; and we humans have hair as a sort of thatch over our think-tanks. Nature has given it to us as a protection against the sun and the cold. There is little danger, however, of us getting sunstroke in England, anyway, and we have got in the habit of wearing hats to ward off the cold. No doubt it would be better for us all if we let our hair perform its proper function of protecting us, for many of us have come to the pass that if we leave off our hats on a chilly day we are liable to catch cold.

(Tell your chums if they want to know as much as you, to be sure and read this brilliant series!)



Some of us have lots of hair—others have very little. The oracle has something to say about this matter.

A sailor's sign that his boat is for sale—not sail, have

Then he went off to see that the juniors had really gone back to bed.

Handforth, falling back against Mr. Railton's pillow, took a deep, deep breath.

"By George!" he breathed. "It worked! I've done the trick!"

But perhaps he was just a little too previous!

CHAPTER 7.

A Dastardly Plot!

"JUST a minute, Racke!"

Aubrey Racke started. He had fallen behind the other Shell fellows, and he suddenly felt a hand on his arm. He looked round, and found Scrope beside him. There was no particular hurry, for Mr. Railton had taken himself off to the Fourth Form dormitory.

"What do you want?" demanded Racke shakily.

"Fifty—fifty!" replied Scrope promptly.

Racke came to a halt, and he stared white-faced at Luke Scrope.

"I—I don't know what you mean!" he blustered.

"Yes, you do!" said Scrope. "I want halves! You pinched some money from Railton's bed-room—"

"Be quiet, you fool!" hissed Racke frantically.

They were standing aside in the darkness of the passage, and Racke was shivering.

It came as a shock to him to learn that somebody had witnessed his despicable action. His only relief was the knowledge that Scrope was the fellow. And Scrope was a bird of Racke's own feather.

"You mad idiot!" snapped Racke, after he had recovered himself. "I didn't steal that money! What the deuce do you mean by accusing me of such a thing?"

"Didn't steal it!" ejaculated Scrope. "What did you do, then? I saw you put it in your pocket!"

"Don't be a fool!" retorted Racke. "It's only a wheeze—so that I can get my revenge on that cad Handforth!"

"Oh!"

"Don't you believe me?"

"No, I don't!" said Scrope bluntly. "You took that money for yourself—"

"Confound you!" snarled Racke. "I don't even know how much there is! My idea is to plant these notes in Handforth's box, or somewhere. Then, when the money is missing, there'll be a search. Railton knows that Handforth has been in his bed-room, and it'll mean the sack for the rotter if he's convicted of being a thief!"

"So that's the game, is it?" said Scrope dubiously.

"Yes, that's the game!" replied Racke. "But for goodness' sake don't keep talking here! Railton will be along at any minute. Let's get into the dormitory! We'll talk about it again to-morrow."

"Yes, but—"

"I tell you that Handforth will be sacked!" muttered Racke gloatingly. "I'm going to see that he gets the blame for stealing these notes! I don't want them myself—I've got plenty of money."

On the spur of the moment Racke took the notes out of his dressing-gown pocket. He and Scrope could just see them. They were folded in halves neatly. Racke counted them one by one.

"Five!" he murmured. "Satisfied, you rotter? There are five here—and no more! And I'm not going to keep any of them for myself. I'm not a thief!"

Scrope was satisfied; he couldn't be anything else.

"Yes, I can see there are five!" he growled. "But it looked jolly fishy, Racke. I thought you meant to keep them for yourself."

"Yes, and you were ready to go shares!" said Racke sourly. "But even if you're a burglar, I'm not!"

He went off without another word and joined the knot of Shell fellows as they went into their dormitory. Scrope followed.

It was only the work of a moment for Racke to stuff the Housemaster's money into his own trousers pocket. Nobody saw him in the gloom, and then he climbed into bed.

He was full of vindictive triumph. Handforth had succeeded in his wheeze, but on the morrow he would have to pay the reckoning!

In the meantime, Mr. Railton had finished with the Fourth, and now he came along to see that the Shell fellows were in their beds. After he had made his inspection, he went out into the passage again, and hesitated. Rather to his relief a figure hove in sight, and it proved to be Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth.

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Railton?" asked Mr. Lathom mildly. "I thought I heard strange noises—"

"You did, Mr. Lathom!" interrupted the Housemaster. "I am in a difficulty. Handforth, of your Form, is in my bed!"

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"Good gracious!" ejaculated Mr. Lathom blankly.

"I thought I should surprise you."

"I—I am very startled!" said the little Form master. "Surely, Mr. Railton, you cannot be serious? Handforth is in your bed? But why? Is the boy ill?"

"He is acting as though he had taken leave of his senses!" replied Mr. Railton, frowning. "But I doubt it. I have a suspicion at the back of my mind that he is malingering."

"I can hardly credit that!" said Mr. Lathom. "Handforth is a peculiar boy in some ways. But he is strictly honourable. I have some trouble with him in the classroom, but lying is not one of his habits. And for what earthly reason would he get into your bed, if he was not actually demented?"

"That is why I am hesitating," replied Mr. Railton slowly. "It cannot be an ordinary practical joke. The other boys were very anxious to get him out. Even as I entered the room, they were trying to carry him bodily away. But he was violent—desperate!"

"The boy needs a doctor!" said Mr. Lathom, in alarm.

"I am of the same opinion!" agreed Mr. Railton. "I think we had better go to him now, and if he still shows the same violent symptoms we shall have to bring some prefects, and forcibly subdue him. I am very worried, Mr. Lathom."

And, without any further discussion, they hurried to the Housemaster's bed-room, and cautiously entered.

CHAPTER 8.

Rather Worse!

HANDFORTH was prepared.

At first, he had imagined that Mr. Railton had left him alone for the night; but second thoughts had convinced him that he was not to succeed so easily.

He realised that the Housemaster had only gone to see that the juniors were safely back in the dormitories. And when he heard voices out in the passage—the voices of Mr. Railton and Mr. Lathom—he knew that he was in for more trouble.

As the key turned softly in the lock, he whipped a blanket round him, and squatted in the middle of the bed, after the fashion of an old-time tailor.

Click!

The light was switched on, and Handforth beheld the two masters just inside the doorway. Mr. Railton was looking at him closely—searchingly. Timid little Mr. Lathom was obviously ready to make a dash for safety.

"Beware, palefaces!" said Handforth impressively.

"Dear me!" murmured Mr. Lathom.

"Enter this camp at your own peril!" said Handforth, flourishing a pillow. "I—Big Chief Cooking-Pot—hear plenty handy!"

Mr. Railton advanced towards the bed.

"Very smart, Handforth, but not quite good enough," he said sternly. "You must not imagine that I am deceived by this theatrical nonsense. Come, my boy! Why are you making this pretence of insanity?"

Handforth's heart seemed to miss a beat.

But he wasn't the kind of fellow to knuckle under. He knew that he was in grave peril of being bowled out. Mr. Railton, as he had feared, was deeply suspicious; and any slip on his part would now cost him dearly.

For not only would he be bundled out of the Housemaster's bed, packed back to his own dormitory, and severely punished, but he would fail in that vital third test. And then the Fourth would have the laugh over him. Moreover, he would never get another opportunity.

So he had every urge to act his best.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he ejaculated, leaping off the bed, and assuming an air of blank astonishment. "That's a rummy thing! I thought you were a couple of palefaces! And I thought I was an Indian! I must be going dotty!"

"If you will control yourself, Handforth—"

"Rats!" said Handforth.

"What?"

"Any more cheek from you, Church, my lad, and I'll dot you in the eye!" said Handforth indignantly. "It's about time the pair of you turned up, too! What have you been doing?"

Mr. Railton looked at him more closely than ever. He was still certain in his own mind that Handforth was "putting it on." Yet the situation was difficult. He couldn't take anything for granted. It would be cruel to the boy if he really was wandering in his mind.

"Come, come, come!" said the Housemaster. "This pretence has gone too far, Handforth! In your anxiety to—er—deceive us, you are not hesitating to be disrespectful. Yet I don't think you mean to be deliberately disrespectful—"

"Cheese it!" interrupted Handforth, alarmed by Mr. Railton's continued scepticism. "What are you jabbering

about, you ass? Who the dickens do you think you are, anyhow?"

"I am Mr. Railton, your Housemaster——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Handforth!"

"Come off it!" grinned Handforth, giving Mr. Railton a playful dig in the ribs, which made the Housemaster stagger. "You hopeless chump! You're Church!"

"I must insist——"

"And you're McClure!" went on Handforth, turning on Mr. Lathom, and giving him a playful dig in the ribs which caused him to sit down violently on the floor.

"Good heavens!" panted Mr. Lathom, scrambling to his feet, and backing away. "The—boy is dangerous!"

"He is certainly daring!" agreed Mr. Railton grimly.

Handforth gave a snort. At the first sign of a slip he would be lost.

"I'm blessed if I know what's the matter with you two!" he said tartly. "I sent you down to Bellton half an hour ago, and even now you haven't brought the bananas back with you!"

"Bellton?" said Mr. Railton curiously.

"The boy is certainly wandering in his mind!" muttered Mr. Lathom. "Why does he call us by such strange names?"

"Church and McClure I believe, are two of his former friends of St. Frank's," said Mr. Railton, in an aside. "And I am well aware that Bellton is the village near St. Frank's."

"What are you chaps whispering about?" asked Handforth sharply.

He decided to carry on with this deception until further orders. It was rather a brainwave. It was very difficult to keep up the fiction that he was an Indian chief, or an Arab sheikh. But to regard the two masters as his late chums of St. Frank's was as easy as vinking. This sort of thing was second nature to him—and the scheme had the added advantage that he could be himself while still making it quite plain that he was off his rocker.

"Did you hear me?" he shouted. "You know jolly well that I won't allow you to mutter behind my back!"

"Now, Handforth——"

"Don't call me Handforth!"

"Really, I——"

"What's the idea?" demanded Edward Oswald. "You know jolly well that you've always called me Handy! And now, all of a sudden, you start calling me Handforth. Are you chaps asking for a couple of black eyes?"

"You had better get back into bed," said Mr. Railton patiently. "You are mistaken, my boy, in thinking that I am your friend, Church. And this gentleman is Mr. Lathom——"

"Exactly—exactly!" said Mr. Lathom, nodding. "I can assure you, Handforth, that I am not anybody else! Please try to pull yourself together!"

The wild light in Handforth's eye had convinced Mr. Lathom, at least, that he was more than slightly "touched." But, really, that wild light was occasioned by the junior's anxiety to carry this spoof through to success. His one aim was to get rid of these masters, and to sleep in Mr. Railton's bed for the night. He cared nothing for the reckoning on the morrow.

"What's the idea?" he demanded aggressively. "You howling fatheads! You silly dummies! Are you trying to fool me, or what? Do you think I don't know who you are?"

"Handforth, I must insist——"

"Go and eat coke!" roared Handforth.

"Good gracious!" panted Mr. Lathom. "The boy is clearly demented! Otherwise, he would never dare to make use of such—such outrageous terms."

Handforth's eyes gleamed more wildly than ever. He recognised the first sign of success.

"That's right—keep it up!" he said wrathfully. "Of all the giddy nerve! Coming into the dormitory like this——"

"This is not a dormitory, Handforth!" interrupted Mr. Railton. "It is my bed-room!"

"Well, it's mine, too, isn't it?" shouted Handforth. "Great Scott! Haven't we three shared this bed-room for terms?"

"But you are not at St. Frank's now, my boy——"

"Don't call me 'my boy,' you babbling ass!" hooted Handforth. "I don't know what's the matter with you, Walter Church! What do you mean, I'm not at St. Frank's?"

"Really, we can do nothing with him!" breathed Mr. Lathom. "I urge you, sir, to come away, and to——"

"Not at St. Frank's, eh?" broke in Handforth tartly. "By George, I believe you're right! I must be in Bedlam!"

"Upon my word! You must not say such things——"

"Or Colney Hatch!" bellowed Handforth, dancing up and down, and brandishing his fists. "That's it! You chaps must have gone potty, and you're in Colney Hatch! Anyhow, you're acting like it!"

Flurriedly, Mr. Lathom drew the Housemaster aside. "There is no shadow of doubt, Mr. Railton!" he murmured. "The unfortunate boy is suffering from delusions."

"I am still not quite sure——"

"But there can be no other explanation!" whispered the agitated Form master. "It is well known that these unhappy people invariably account themselves sane whilst assuming that everybody else is demented. Handforth is showing all the recognised symptoms. Poor boy—poor boy!"

Mr. Railton pursed his lips. He needed a good deal of convincing. He was very anxious to bow! Handforth out, and to administer a very severe punishment for this outrageous escapade. But it was difficult.

"Handforth!" he snapped, turning suddenly upon the junior. "Let me tell you at once that this deception is useless. Do you hear me, boy? I am not deceived. Another word of this nonsense, and I will take you to the Head for a flogging!"

Handforth's jaw dropped. He was within an ace of discovery, for he nearly gave himself away. Mr. Railton's abrupt change was so sudden that Handforth nearly gave up hope.

But he was a fellow who never admitted defeat.

This, indeed, was one of his strongest characteristics. In the very face of failure he always maintained a bold front. And this trait in his character saved him now.


With a bellow of assumed rage he squared up to the astounded masters. His fist shot out, and Mr. Railton jumped back only just in time.

"Come on!" he roared. "You cheeky fathead! You come here, pretending to be somebody else, and then you accuse me of trying to spoof you! By George! I'm just about fed up! Come on!"

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Railton, pulling himself together. "If you dare to strike me, Handforth——"

(Continued on next page.)

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"Dare!" yelled Handforth. "Anybody might think it's the first time I ever slobbered you! I'm fed up! Get out of this dormitory!"

Mr. Lathom was already getting out.

"Come, Mr. Railton!" he said hurriedly. "Our only course is to fetch a doctor without delay. Surely you cannot still imagine that Handforth is malingering?"

"No; we will leave," replied Mr. Railton. "I can see that nothing further can be done here."

He turned abruptly, and both masters went out of the bed-room. And Handforth sank down rather limply upon the edge of the bed. It had been a trying ten minutes, but he felt that he had won.

CHAPTER 9.

Handforth's Triumph!

BUT even now the schemer came within an ace of failure.

As he heard the key turn in the lock, he was actually on the point of giving vent to a low chuckle of triumph. But the narrowness of his escape had sharpened his wits to an acute degree.

Normally, Handforth was a bit of an ass.

But in this moment he proved himself to be pretty smart. Perhaps it was because he heard no footsteps down the passage. At any rate, a sudden suspicion leapt into his mind.

Like a cat he crept across the bed-room and placed his ear to the door. Something told him—instinct, perhaps—that the two masters had not gone away, but were listening.

And this was the truth!

Mr. Railton, as a last resort, had decided to adopt this pretence. He would apparently go, and then swiftly and unexpectedly burst into the bed-room again. He hoped that he would be able to catch the suspect red-handed.

"Ssssh!" he breathed warningly to the startled Mr. Lathom.

"Really, sir—"

"I believe the boy is shamming!" murmured Mr. Railton. "But we shall know now!"

On the other side of the door Handforth crouched, as silent as a statue. It was a ticklish game.

Silence!

Then, faintly, he heard the sound of breathing. And in that flash he knew that he was far from safe. The two masters were still out there—listening!

"All right!" he told himself. "I'll give them something for their money!"

He crept back noiselessly to the bed. Then he chuckled. But it wasn't the kind of chuckle that Mr. Railton was expecting. It was a low, throaty sort of sound, and most unnatural.

"Well, they're gone!" said Handforth loudly. "Thank goodness for that! They thought they could stay here as long as they liked! You can come out now!"

Mr. Railton and Mr. Lathom glanced at one another in wonder.

"Come on, my son!" continued Handforth. "Church and McClure have gone. Of course, they had a perfect right here—it's their dormitory as well as mine—but I've cleared 'em off. How much longer are you going to stick under that bed? Don't I keep telling you it's safe?"

The two masters heard the sound of the bed creaking. Then Handforth laughed. They heard something that seemed to be caused by a hand clapping on somebody's back.

"Jolly good!" chuckled Handforth. "Now we can have that feed!"

Mr. Lathom plucked at his companion's sleeve.

"This is getting most distressing," he murmured. "Upon my soul, Mr. Railton, I cannot understand why you are so sceptical. The boy is patently out of his mind. He even thinks that he has a friend in the bed-room with him."

"Perhaps he has!" said Mr. Railton grimly.

"Eh? Good gracious! You surely do not think—"

"I hardly know what to think," broke in the Housemaster. "But I certainly do know that these junior boys are resourceful to a degree, and that there is practically no limit to their daring."

He swiftly turned the key in the lock, swung the door open, and walked in. But this time Handforth was ready. He had been expecting such an entry.

"Quick!" he gasped. "Get back under—Too late! It doesn't matter now, Willy. They've spotted you!"

On the spur of the moment, he invented Willy. Incidentally, Willy Handforth was his younger brother.

"What are you doing, Handforth?" demanded Mr. Railton sharply.

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"It's like your cheek to come back!" retorted Handforth, with a glare. "But the damage is done now, so it doesn't matter, but if you sneak, I'll tan you until you're black and blue!"

"Sneak!" repeated Mr. Lathom. "But, really—"

"Oh, dry up!" grunted Handforth. "You know jolly well that it's against the rules for us to have anybody else in our dormitory. But my minor and I are going to finish this feed. Aren't we, Willy?"

He looked at the thin air and grinned.

"Don't stand there goggling!" he continued, addressing the emptiness. "And put your tie straight, you careless young ass!"

There was something rather embarrassing in this business—something uncanny. It made the masters positively uncomfortable to see Handforth speaking to the blank atmosphere, as though he could actually see a living personality.



"Cave!" gasped Digby. But it was too late. As the juniors stared and paused on the threshold. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed in amazement.

Mr. Railton was torn. Handforth's antics were extremely well done, but he was speaking so rationally—so naturally—that it was hard to believe that he was suffering from delusions. Yet it was extremely difficult to bowl him out.

"Handforth, I have no desire to be unkind," said Mr. Railton quietly. "If you are really—er—unwell, I will have that you receive the proper medical attention. But if you are shamming—"

"Who's unwell?" interrupted Handforth, staring.

He was ever ready to spot a trap, and it occurred to him that this was one. He had nearly given himself away.

"And what's the idea of talking in that dotty tone?" he added tartly. "Who do you think you are—the Head?" He turned and looked at the air beside him. "Did you hear that, Willy?" he said. "Churchy's gone loopy!"

"Do you really imagine that you can see somebody?" put in Mr. Lathom, in awe.

"See somebody?" repeated Handforth.

"Yes. You keep talking to this imaginary Willy—"

"What do you mean—'imaginary'? Can't you see him there?"

"Really, you ought to know, Handforth, that there is nobody in this room, except Mr. Railton, yourself, and—"

"But Willy's here!" ejaculated Handforth in amazement. "Look at him! Grinning like a silly Cheshire cat!"

Mr. Lathom peered at the indicated spot, and the expression of bewilderment on his face was really rather comical.

"I can see nothing!" he said mildly.

"Then there's something wrong with your eyesight!" snorted Handforth. "Willy's standing here—a yard away



round towards the door it burst open and Mr. Railton strode in. He said, "What are you boys doing in my bed-room?" (See Chapter 5.)

from me! Only the silly young fathead has been struck dumb or something! I can't get a word out of him!"

Mr. Railton now began to look anxious. Handforth's acting had almost convinced him.

"Come, Mr. Lathom!" he said. "We must go. Handforth, I am extremely sorry that you are so unwell—"

"I'm not unwell!" roared Handforth.

"Er—no! Of course not!" said the Housemaster hastily.

"But I should advise you to get straight into bed—"

"I'll get into bed when I like, and not before!"

"But, really—"

"Oh, go and fry your face!" said Handforth witheringly.

Vaguely, he wondered what would happen to him if he was really bowled out. What would Mr. Railton do to him for addressing him so rudely? But then Handforth realised, with comfort, that if only his spoof was believed he would be exonerated from any suspicion of impertinence. He would always be able to explain that he had addressed the two masters as Church and McClure, and not as themselves.

"It is better that we should go!" said Mr. Lathom, as

they both went to the door. "I really fail to see how we can do anything to help the poor boy."

They passed out, and the door was closed and locked. This time they strode up the passage, their footsteps sounding plainly. And Handforth grinned with complete triumph and rolled on the bed.

"Done 'em!" he muttered exultantly. "Phew! What a game!"

Now that it was all over, he appreciated the strain. It had been very strenuous. At any moment during that half-hour he had been in peril of ignominious defeat.

But now he was secure, and the reaction was exhausting. He closed his eyes in sheer relief.

And in the meantime Mr. Railton had paused uncertainly at the end of the passage. Mr. Lathom was looking very agitated and worried, and he chafed at this delay.

"We must not waste time, Mr. Railton," he urged. "The only thing is to send for the doctor at once."

"I am by no means sure that a doctor is necessary," said Mr. Railton, with a grim note in his voice. "Very possibly a cane would be far more effective."

"My dear sir!"

"I do not wish to imply that you are easily deceived, Mr. Lathom, but I know that you are inclined to be soft-hearted," said the Housemaster dryly. "I am afraid I am not quite so tender. I am still suspicious."

"But the boy was acting so strangely—"

"Strangely—or cleverly?" said Mr. Railton. "You must remember that shaming of this kind is comparatively easy. And it is very difficult to detect—indeed, impossible to detect, if the culprit is sharp enough."

"I cannot believe that Handforth has been shamming," said Mr. Lathom firmly. "In class he is, I regret to say, inclined to be dull. He is an active boy—violent in his ways. In his studies, however, he is regrettably lax. I cannot believe that his wits are capable of this trickery."

And this was the thought that had occurred to Mr. Railton, too.

"Well, we will give him one more surprise," he said, after a short pause. "He heard us depart, and it may be that he will have relaxed his vigilance. If I can only bowl him out in one trifling detail, he will be lost."

Creeping quietly, they went back to the bed-room, Mr. Lathom quite annoyed with the Housemaster for this prolonged scepticism. But before Mr. Railton could put the key in the door lock he paused.

Zzzzzzzrrh! Zzzzzzzh!

"What is that extraordinary noise?" murmured Mr. Lathom mildly.

"The boy is snoring!" replied Mr. Railton. "He is asleep already!"

And this, startlingly enough, was true!

Handforth, with that remarkable serenity of his, had calmly pulled the bedclothes over him, and had gone to sleep! Not one fellow in a thousand could have done a thing like that—but Handforth did! He felt that he was safe. He believed that he would now be undisturbed until the morrow. Therefore, what object was there in keeping awake?

Fortunately, his very confidence served him well.

"Perhaps it would be better to leave him undisturbed," suggested Mr. Lathom softly. "He is asleep now, and a night's rest will probably restore his mental equilibrium."

"Perhaps so," said Mr. Railton slowly. "Upon my word! I wonder! Has the boy been trying to fool me, or is he actually unhinged! In the latter case, Mr. Lathom, do you think it probable that he would go to sleep so soundly?"

"Mental cases are very difficult to understand, sir," replied the Form master cautiously. "But I do certainly think that it is consistent with the facts that he should fall into a heavy slumber. It might be unwise to arouse him."

Mr. Railton considered.

It did not take him long to come to a decision. There was just a chance—a slim chance—that Handforth really was unbalanced. Therefore, sleep would undoubtedly do him good.

On the other hand, if it was all a bluff, it would be time enough to deal with the boy in the morning. To awaken him now might only cause a recurrence of the violent shouting. And Mr. Railton was reluctant to create a further noisy scene.

Zzzzzzzrrh!

The snoring continued, regularly and rhythmically.

"Yes; we will leave him undisturbed," said the Housemaster, at length. "Sleep can do him a lot more good than any doctor. But I shall make it my business to prosecute some very close inquiries in the morning."

And, together, the two masters crept away from the bed-room door. Mr. Lathom went off to his own apartment, and Mr. Railton found a spare bed-room.

So Edward Oswald Handforth slumbered on serenely, as he had originally intended, in his Housemaster's bed!

CHAPTER 10.

Working the Oracle!

DING-dong! Ding-dong! Six-thirty was chiming from the school clock when Mr. Railton put a key into his bed-room door, and turned it. The Housemaster was in his dressing-gown and slippers, and there was an expression of anxiety and concern on his face. At the same time, a light of doubt lurked in his eyes.

He entered his bed-room and pulled up the blind. The early-morning sun was streaming into the room, and for a moment Mr. Railton paused, staring at the bed.

"H'm!" he murmured thoughtfully. "I wonder!"

Handforth was sound asleep, as his steady breathing told, but there could be no denying that his attitude was extraordinary. Mr. Railton, accustomed as he was to boys, had never encountered anything like this before.

Handforth was doubled up like a knife. His face was buried in the pillow, and his snoring was therefore smothered. But he was sound asleep.

Mr. Railton knew that any boy, with sufficient daring, could easily pretend to be mentally unbalanced; but the Housemaster was ready to admit that no boy could continue this sort of thing in his sleep. Yet how could any sane fellow sleep in this unnatural attitude?

Fortunately, Mr. Railton was not closely acquainted with Handforth's habits.

Church and McClure, of St. Frank's—Handforth's former faithful chums—would have been in no way surprised at his present posture. They wouldn't have been surprised, indeed, if they had awakened any morning to find Handforth sleeping literally on his head. They were used to him.

Mr. Railton crossed to the bed, and touched Handforth on the shoulder. There was no result.

"Come, my boy!" said Mr. Railton. "Wake up!"

He tapped harder, and Handforth suddenly awoke. He sprawled at full length on the bed and rolled over, his mouth wide open, his hair falling untidily over his forehead.

"Gerraway!" he muttered incoherently.

"Wake up, Handforth!" said Mr. Railton sharply.

"Clear off!" muttered Handforth. "You silly ass! T'ain't rising-bell yet!"

"Handforth!" snapped Mr. Railton.

Perhaps Handforth's awakening senses detected the note of authority in the voice. He suddenly opened his eyes and then sat up in bed, bolt upright. He stared sleepily at the Housemaster.

"Hallo! Why, what the— By George!" he panted.

"Is—is that you, sir?"

"Yes, Handforth," said Mr. Railton, relieved at the junior's rational tone. "Wake up, my boy! I am not going to harm you!"

Handforth stared round the room, taking no heed of the words.

"But—where am I, sir?" he ejaculated in amazement. "This—this isn't the dormitory! I—I don't remember— Oh, my hat!"

In a flood, recollection returned.

His first thought, in that dramatic moment, was startling. He was almost on the point of leaping suddenly backwards and pretending to be a monkey. Anything, in fact, to keep up the deception that he was off his rocker.

But in another moment he came to the conclusion that any further deception was unnecessary. In a flash, he realised that he had succeeded!

He had spent the night in Mr. Railton's bed—he had completed that third test! Impossible as it had seemed, he had won!

"I've done it!" he muttered. "By George! I'll jolly well crow over those fatheaded—"

He pulled himself up with a jerk, for at that second his gaze had encountered Mr. Railton's. He had come within an ace of spoiling everything, and he knew it.

There was only one policy to pursue now.

"Where am I, sir?" he asked, putting on a bewildered expression. "What is this room, sir?"

"It is my bed-room, Handforth."

"Your bed-room, sir!" gasped Handforth, in well-feigned stupefaction. "But—but I've no right in your bed-room, sir!"

"Never mind that, my boy!" said Mr. Railton quietly. "How are you feeling?"

"Feeling, sir?"

"Yes, Handforth."

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"I'm feeling all right!" said the new fellow promptly. "Why shouldn't I feel all right, sir? There's nothing the matter with me!"

"Are you sure?"

"Blessed if I can understand you, sir!" said Handforth, staring. "What am I doing in this bed-room? Who put me here?"

"Don't you remember what happened last night, Handforth?" asked Mr. Railton steadily.

"Last night, sir?"

"Yes."

"Now, lemme see!" said Handforth, scratching his tousled head. "Last night! That's funny! What did happen last night, sir?"

"Surely, Handforth, you remember what happened last night?" said Mr. Railton, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "Come, come! Pull yourself together! You are not properly awake yet!"

"Yes, I am, sir!" said Handforth. "I'm fully awake! And I know that I'm in your bed-room. It's—it's so staggering, sir! And I'm actually in your own bed, too! How did I get here, sir?"

"I think you entered this bed of your own accord, Handforth."

"Oh, I say, sir! What rot! I—I mean——" Handforth paused, gasping. "Sorry, sir! But, dash it, how could I have got into your bed of my own accord? Draw it mild, sir!"

His tone was so full of incredulity that Mr. Railton was nearly convinced.

"Perhaps we had better not discuss the matter, Handforth," he said. "Since you remember nothing of what happened last night, I will not press you."

"But I want to know, sir!" urged Handforth, with rare cunning. "Do you mean to tell me that I got into your bed without knowing it?"

"That is for you to say, Handforth."

"Eh? I—I mean— Yes, of course, sir!" said Handforth hastily. "I seem to be all right now, too! I feel as fit as a fiddle!"

He passed a hand over his brow, thinking to gain time. He was at a loss. He did not know what to say, and he was mortally afraid that Mr. Railton would ask him some direct questions.

"You had better dress yourself, Handforth," said Mr. Railton, much to his relief. "Go straight along to your own dormitory, and get into your clothes. There is no need for you to go to sleep again."

"Oh, rather not, sir!" agreed Handforth promptly. "I'm feeling fine!"

"I'm glad that you are so much better this morning," said the Housemaster. "Your actions last night, Handforth, were most strange."

"Why, what did I do, sir?"

"Never mind," said Mr. Railton. "I will see you again later, if necessary, and it may be advisable to take you to a doctor."

"But I don't need a doctor, sir!" protested Handforth, in alarm. "There's nothing the matter with me!"

"Nevertheless, I cannot possibly allow a repetition of what took place last night," said Mr. Railton firmly. "And although you seem normal enough now I want to be satisfied on that point."

Handforth lost no time in getting out of the bed-room and scudding to the Fourth Form dormitory. Naturally, he found everybody asleep, and at first he had an idea of awakening the whole dormitory. But then he changed his mind.

"No!" he decided. "I'll get dressed, and go out in the early morning sunshine. Then, when the chaps come down, they'll find me strolling about in the quad, as large as life! By George! Now I shall be able to crow over 'em!"

He dressed in high glee, with never a thought to the probable consequences of his daring escapade. He took it for granted that Mr. Railton was satisfied. As for seeing a doctor, he wasn't particularly scared.

"I'm safe enough!" he told himself, as he made his way downstairs. "If a doctor examines me, he'll jolly well know that I'm sane enough, and he can't prove anything. I've done the trick, and I don't care if it snows!"

It seemed ages to him before the juniors began to trickle down. He had recollected that fiver in his pocket, and he was glad of the money. He had been practically stony, but now he felt like a millionaire. And in his present contented mood, he decided to treat all and sundry.

Blake & Co. were the first down, and they were immediately followed by the Terrible Three of the Shell. They all came hurrying across the quad to the spot where Handforth was lounging against one of the old elms.

"You bouncer!" said Blake, as he ran up. "How long have you been down?"

"Ages!" replied Handforth lightly.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, examining Handforth with interest through his eyeglass. "I twust you have wecovahed your weason, deah boy?"

"Fathead!"

"Weally, Handay—"

"But what's happened?" demanded Blake, staring.

"Nothing much," replied Handforth coolly. "Mr. Railton woke me up, and I got dressed, and came down."

"But didn't he make any inquiries?"

"Heaps!"

"And does he know that you were spoofing last night?"

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "I pretended to know nothing about it. He thinks my mind is a blank. But why worry about that? I've done the trick, my lads! I've completed that third test!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "You're a caution, Handy!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He's a coughdrop!" agreed Blake. "And as for his luck— Well, my hat! I've never known any chap to have such luck! It's uncanny!"

"Well, let's come to the tuckshop and celebrate!" said Handforth genially. "My treat, you know!"

"Good man!" chorused the juniors.

And before long the tuckshop was crowded with laughing juniors. Gradually the story got about. It was the talk of the Shell and the Fourth, and even the New House fellows yelled with laughter when they heard all the details.

The Fifth and Sixth heard rumours, too, and so the story went round the whole school. Long before breakfast, St. Jim's, from the fags to the Sixth, was roaring over the joke.

It was regarded as a masterpiece of daring. Handforth, the new fellow in the Fourth, had slept the night in Mr. Railton's bed! And, what was more to the point, he had got away with it!

CHAPTER 11.

The Plot Develops.

"HERE we are!" said Racke viciously.

While the bulk of the juniors were celebrating in the tuckshop, Racke and Scrope were standing in one of the School House box-rooms. Racke had just discovered a trunk with "E. O. H." painted on the top of it. To his great satisfaction, the trunk was unlocked.

"The thing can't fail!" said the cad of the Shell, with an unpleasant grin. "It's quite likely that Railton has missed those notes already, so the sooner we can get down the better. There'll be a search, and the money will be found in Handforth's trunk. Direct evidence, what?"

"Rather!" said Scrope, yawning.

He wasn't particularly interested. He had only come along, in fact, to make certain that Aubrey Racke put every one of those pound notes into Handforth's trunk. Scrope had a suspicion that Racke wanted to keep some of the money for himself.

Taking the notes out of his pocket, Racke counted them again.

"Five!" he said gloatingly. "It's a cert, by gad! Handforth is bound to be suspected, and—"

"Yes, we know all about it!" interrupted Scrope. "Why not get it over?"

Five minutes later the two precious rascals were downstairs, mingling with the crowds. Racke was very relieved to get that money out of his possession, and he now took a genuine delight in laughing at the tale of Handforth's exploit. Racke could afford to laugh, for he knew what the outcome was to be.

After breakfast the school chuckled more than ever.

There were no longer any doubts about the story. It had spread from the lowest Form to the highest, and everybody knew the details.

Mr. Railton was no fool, neither was he deaf. And he was well aware of the chuckles that were going round. It was obvious to him that the school was laughing over some particularly rich joke. He happened to encounter Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, in the School House lobby.

"Just a minute, Kildare!" said the Housemaster.

Kildare paused, smiling.

"Certainly, sir!" he said. "Anything I can do?"

Mr. Railton glanced out into the quad, where groups of juniors were cackling noisily. Handforth was the centre of the biggest group, and he was laughing more than anybody else. Apparently he had completely recovered his reason. Indeed, Mr. Railton did not think it necessary to take him to a doctor.

"Without wishing to be too inquisitive, Kildare, may I ask what all the laughter is about?" asked Mr. Railton dryly.

Kildare hesitated.

"Oh, it's nothing much, sir!" he replied evasively. "Only something that one of the juniors has been up to."

"Indeed! Something I mustn't hear, eh?"

Mr. Railton put the question with twinkling eyes, and Kildare felt reassured. At the same time he was in a difficulty.

As a prefect, it was impossible for him to approve of Handforth's recent escapade; but Kildare was a sportsman, and he saw no reason to make inquiries. He had heard nothing officially, but he had made up his mind to wink his eye at the whole affair. But it was very awkward to be questioned by Mr. Railton—for Mr. Railton was the victim.

"Well, the fact is, sir, it was a sort of joke," said Kildare vaguely.

"I realise your difficulty, Kildare," said the Housemaster, nodding.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"You are naturally reluctant to discuss this matter with me," continued Mr. Railton, chuckling. "The joke, of course, concerns Handforth of the Fourth Form?"

"Oh, I say, sir—"

"This is strictly between ourselves," said Mr. Railton calmly. "So Handforth was not out of his mind last night? It was all a joke, eh? He slept in my bed deliberately—yes, and he succeeded in neatly deceiving me, too."

(Continued on next page.)

PIECOMBE THE PRICELESS!



Pained!

You ought to meet Ulysses Piecombe, the cranky manager of the Blue Crusaders. He used to be a school-



Perplexed!

master and he's always up to some queer game. The Crusaders are a jolly lot of lads. There's Fatty Fowkes, the genial, sixteen-stone goalie. Between the posts, in a scrap, or sitting down to a good feed, you can't beat him. His great pals, Ben Gillingham, the fierce-faced, bow-legged back, and "Tich" Harborough, the midget schoolboy winger, are real good sorts, too. Why not meet them this week in the corking close-season yarn of footer and thrilling adventure—

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A light of relief came into Kildare's eyes. He could tell by Mr. Railton's tone that everything was all right.

"The young rascal deserves a flogging, of course," said the Housemaster. "Happily, however, I possess a sense of humour. So I rather think, Kildare, that I shall wink my eye at the entire escapade."

"That's jolly decent of you, sir!"

"Nonsense!" laughed Mr. Railton. "I can appreciate a practical joke as much as anybody—even when it is directed against myself. Upon my word! What a nerve that boy must possess!"

"Never knew anything like it, sir!" agreed Kildare. "You see, sir, he's a new fellow, and when he first came here he was spoofed by all the Form. And they gave him a series of 'tests' to undergo. Sleeping in your bed, I believe, was one of them."

"Then I admire the boy's determination!" chuckled Mr. Railton. "Yes, Kildare, we'll let this drop. Officially, I know nothing whatever about it."

"I see, sir," smiled Kildare.

The Housemaster passed on, and Kildare's high opinion of him was strengthened.

Mr. Railton went up to his bed-room, and he looked round with twinkling eyes.

"The impudent young rascal!" he murmured. "I've had a few tricks played on me, but this is surely the most daring—"

He broke off abruptly, and the twinkle died out of his eyes. With three rapid strides, he reached his dressing-table, and he stared down at the white linen. Then he moved one or two of the trinkets, and there was a frown on his brow.

"Good gracious!" he muttered.

He opened the drawers, and examined them. But after a moment or two he shook his head.

"No, this is useless!" he murmured. "The money was here—on the dressing-table. I placed it under one of these trinkets."

Another search—equally futile.

"This is serious!" said Mr. Railton, under his breath. "The money is gone! Yet it was certainly here last night, before that boy came into my bed-room."

Mr. Railton was genuinely worried.

He knew that he had placed those currency notes on his dressing-table during the previous evening. Now they were gone! It was impossible for him to "wink his eye" at the affair. Indeed, it was very necessary for him to prosecute some swift inquiries.

He hurried downstairs again, and as he was descending towards the hall he beheld Handforth standing in the doorway. Baggy Trimble was hanging round.

"Oh, really, Handforth," Trimble was saying, "I'm only asking you to lend me ten bob!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I've heard your tales before, my lad!"

"I'm expecting a big remittance from Trimble Hall—"

"Go and eat coke!"

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"Yah! You mean rotter!" yelled Trimble, dodging into the Hall. "You've been spending money like water at the tuckshop, and yet you can't lend me a measly ten bob!"

"By George!" roared Handforth. "I'll—I'll—"

"You had a fiver this morning, and you jolly well know it!" went on Baggy indignantly. "It didn't come by post, either, because I looked through all the letters—I-I mean—"

Trimble broke off, and fled, with Handforth tearing after him.

And Mr. Railton continued his descent of the stairs, his face now grimly set.

Here was circumstantial evidence indeed! Unpleasant, unsavoury evidence! Handforth, the boy who had slept in his bed-room, had been spending money like water in the tuckshop! He had been in possession of five pounds, and yet that money had not come by post!

There was every reason for Mr. Railton's deep concern.

CHAPTER 12.

A Startling Disclosure!

MR. RAILTON did not hesitate for long.

His first move was to hurry outside, and to make his way to the little tuckshop in the corner of the quad. He was much relieved to find that it was void of juniors. Mrs. Taggles, behind the counter, was smiling and happy. She had had an excellent morning.

"Good-morning, sir!" she said, beaming upon the Housemaster.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Taggles," replied Mr. Railton. "I—er—am a little worried over certain money that may have passed into your hands this morning."

He hardly knew how to put it; for he did not want to alarm the good lady. Yet, at the same time, these inquiries of his were urgent. Mrs. Taggles had paused in the act of polishing a glass, and she was looking at her visitor in some alarm.

"I hope there's nothing wrong, sir?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't know—yet," replied Mr. Railton. "Tell me, Mrs. Taggles. Have you taken any paper money this morning?"

"Why, yes, sir."

"How much?"

"A matter of two pounds, and quite a lot of silver."

"This paper money," said Mr. Railton, leaning over the counter. "Are they pound currency notes, or ten-shilling ones?"

"Here they are, sir—you can see them," replied Mrs. Taggles, opening her till in great trepidation. "I'm sure I hope there's nothing the matter, sir!"

Mr. Railton took the notes eagerly, but Dame Taggles could tell nothing by his expression as he examined them.

"From whom did you receive these notes?" he asked.

"From Master Handforth, sir."

"You are sure?"

"Oh, yes, sir! None of the other young gentlemen had any notes," said Mrs. Taggles. "I hope they're all right, sir?"

Mr. Railton smiled.

"Quite all right," he replied, as he handed them back. "Say nothing about this, Mrs. Taggles. It is quite a personal matter, and there is no need for any talk."

"Very good, sir," said Mrs. Taggles wonderingly.

Mr. Railton walked out of the tuckshop without another word, and his eyes fell upon Handforth, who was just coming out at the School House doorway. Taking a quick decision, Mr. Railton hurried forward, beckoning to the new fellow.

"Oh, I say, sir!" protested Handforth as he doffed his cap. "I don't need to be taken before the doctor—"

"Never mind about that, Handforth," said Mr. Railton. "Come with me to my study."

"Ye-e-e-es, sir!"

Handforth was looking very dubious as he followed the Housemaster indoors. Most of the laughter in the quad had ceased, as all eyes followed the pair as they went in. It was generally believed that Edward Oswald Handforth was now to be called upon to pay the reckoning.

As soon as the Housemaster's study was reached, Mr. Railton closed the door, and then he faced the junior. He went straight to the point.

"Handforth," he said, "I understand that you received some money this morning?"

"Money, sir?" said Handforth, in surprise. "But—but I thought you were going to ask me about sleeping in your—"

"Never mind about that," interrupted Mr. Railton. "Did you receive some money this morning?"

"No, sir."

"But you have some money?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you get it from?"

"My pater, sir," replied Handforth, in astonishment. "Where else should I get money? I happened to go to the post office last night, and they gave me a registered letter. Said I might as well take it, instead of waiting till it was delivered this morning."

"Oh!" said Mr. Railton slowly.

There was something overwhelmingly convincing in Handforth's prompt answers. And the Housemaster was greatly relieved, since he had been reluctant to believe that this particular junior could be guilty of any discreditable act.

"So you received this money from your father, Handforth?" said Mr. Railton. "Is it usual for him to send you five pounds at a time?"

remains, nevertheless, that five pounds, in notes, has disappeared from my dressing-table."

"Oh, my hat!" said Handforth blankly.

"The matter is so serious that I must do everything in my power to clear it up," continued the Housemaster. "You did not take that money, Handforth, but somebody did!"

Handforth was aghast.

"It's awful, sir!" he burst out. "Who could have done a rotten thing like that? I went straight into your bed-room with the other chaps, and I never thought of looking at the dressing-table!"

"Ahem! Quite so!" murmured Mr. Railton.

Handforth did not seem to realise that he was giving



"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave an exclamation of amazement as he picked up something from under the seat and examined it. "This envelope is full of cawwenny notes!" "What!" Jack Blake grabbed the envelope from his chum's hand. "My only hat!" he gasped. "Five quid!"
(See Chapter 13.)

"No, sir—worse luck!" said Handforth frankly. "It was an extra-special tip—as a sort of recognition of my hitting up a century for the First Eleven last week. Here's my pater's letter, sir."

He took it out of his pocket and handed it over openly.

But Mr. Railton only gave it a glance.

"I do not wish to read your private family letters, Handforth," he said quietly. "I can take your word."

"Thank you, sir!"

"In case you think it peculiar that I should question you in this way, perhaps I had better add a few words of explanation," continued the Housemaster gravely. "I am exceedingly glad, Handforth, that you have so satisfactorily cleared up a point that was worrying me."

But—but I don't understand, sir."

"You will in a moment," said Mr. Railton. "Now, Handforth, I want you to think carefully. While you were in my bed-room last night, did you see any currency notes on my dressing-table?"

"No, sir," said Handforth promptly.

"You are certain?"

"Positive, sir," said Handforth, in amazement. "Currency notes? On your dressing-table, sir? I didn't go near the dressing-table. And if there had been a hundred currency notes there I shouldn't have touched them! Great Scott! You don't think that I—"

"No, no!" said Mr. Railton hastily. "I have already told you, Handforth, that I can accept your word. But the fact

the game away. Already he had practically told Mr. Railton that he had entered that bed-room in full possession of his wits. But the Housemaster, like the sportsman he was, remained deaf to these thoughtless revelations.

"There were many boys in my bed-room last night, Handforth," he said thoughtfully. "Boys belonging to the Shell and to the Fourth. One of them must have seen the notes and taken them."

"Oh, but it's—it's frightful, sir!" protested Handforth. "And it's my fault for—"

"Nonsense!" said the Housemaster. "I might as well tell you that I am very anxious about these particular notes, because they are counterfeit."

"What!" gasped the junior.

"They are very clever forgeries," continued Mr. Railton. "As a matter of fact, they were sent to me by my friend Mr. Ferrers Locke."

"The detective, sir?"

"Yes," nodded Mr. Railton. "He sent them as a curio. They are very excellent forgeries—almost undetectable from the genuine article—therefore they are dangerous in the hands of somebody who does not know their real nature."

Handforth was dumbfounded. The fact that the notes were forgeries cleared up a little point that had been causing him some surprise. He had wondered that the Housemaster should so carelessly leave five pounds about on his dressing-table. But as they were valueless, the matter was explained.

Not that there was any reason why Mr. Railton should not leave heaps of real money in his bed-room.

"I am glad to hear that you, at least, know nothing of this mystery," said Mr. Railton, as he opened the door. "You may go now, Handforth; but I want you to promise me that you will say nothing whatever about this incident."

"Why certainly, sir."

"You will not have to keep silent for long, however," continued Mr. Railton grimly. "I intend to make a public announcement after prayers. But until then, Handforth, keep it to yourself."

Handforth went away, puzzled and worried.

At the end of the passage he ran into the chums of Study No. 6 and a few other juniors.

"Did you get it hot, old man?" asked Blake sympathetically.

"Oh?"

"Did he lay it on thick?"

"Ass!" said Handforth. "He didn't lay it on at all!"

"Bai Jove! Haven't you been licked, deah boy?" asked Arthur Augustus, in surprise.

"Of course I haven't been licked!" retorted Handforth. "Why the dickens should I? As a matter of fact, I can't explain anything," he added, with a lordly wave of his hand. "It's a private affair between Mr. Railton and myself!"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"Bai Jove!"

"And it's no good you fellows questioning me, because I shan't tell you anything!" added Handforth firmly. "You'll know about it directly after prayers, anyhow. Mr. Railton's going to make a statement."

"What about?" asked Herries, staring.

"Why, about those counter—" Handforth pulled himself up with a jerk. "Rats!" he added hastily. "You're not going to trick me like that, you bounders!"

He walked on, realising, perhaps, that he would unwittingly break his promise if he did any more talking.

And he was greatly relieved when the bell rang for prayers.

Afterwards, just as the school expected to be dismissed, Dr. Holmes stepped forward to the edge of the platform.

"Just one moment!" said the Head gravely. "Mr. Railton has something to say, and as it is a matter of considerable gravity I must insist upon complete silence and attention."

The school wondered what was coming.

"My remarks apply particularly to the Fourth Form and the Shell," said Mr. Railton quietly. "It is known to you all, of course, that a certain junior boy slept in my bedroom last night."

A subdued chuckle ran round Big Hall.

"I do not intend, however, to take any action over the matter," said Mr. Railton. "Handforth was, apparently, temporarily—ahem!—unhinged."

There was another general chuckle.

"I'm glad he said 'apparently,'" murmured Monty Lowther.

"However, there is another point that must be cleared up," said Mr. Railton. "Last night, before Handforth entered my bed-room, there were five currency notes, of one pound denomination, on my dressing-table. But when I entered my room this morning they had gone!"

This time it was not a chuckle, but a buzz of excitement. Like a bombshell Mr. Railton had sprung his sensational piece of news.

"Bai Jove!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

"And Handy was flush this morning, too!" said Mellish excitedly.

"Silence!"

"I would like to add at once that Handforth himself is completely above suspicion," said Mr. Railton, much to the school's surprise. "I have already questioned him, and his answers were satisfactory."

"But he had lots of money this morning, sir!" said somebody.

"Handforth received that money by registered post last night!" said Mr. Railton sharply. "Let there be no unpleasant insinuations regarding Handforth! I am quite satisfied that he is absolutely innocent. There were a good many junior boys in my bed-room last night, and they are all under suspicion. Any one of them might be guilty. My object in addressing you publicly in this way is to give the culprit a chance of confessing. I call upon him to stand forward."

Aubrey Racke, looking very sick, remained as still as a statue. Scrope had turned deathly pale, and he cast a sidelong glance at his fellow-conspirator. But Racke gave no sign.

The rest of the fellows were gazing at one another wonderingly.

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"I am prepared to believe that the money was taken as an ill-natured practical joke," said Mr. Railton. "Therefore, if the culprit can give a satisfactory explanation, his punishment will be comparatively light. But you must realise that it is essential that the matter should be cleared up. Come! I call upon the culprit to stand forward."

But nobody moved.

"There is one further point that I must make clear," said Mr. Railton grimly. "The five currency notes that I have referred to are counterfeit."

"Great Scott!"

"Duds, by Jove!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Racke looked more sickly than ever; but he remained still.

"I must, therefore, warn the boy who took those notes that any attempt to use them will be attended with grave risk of trouble with the police," said Mr. Railton in a hard voice. "Therefore, once again I urge him to confess."

Still there was no sign, and Mr. Railton shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said curtly. "I can draw only one conclusion from this silence. I only hope that the boy, whoever he is, will now think carefully. And let him remember that I am prepared to receive him at any time in my study."

The school was dismissed by the Head, after a warning to the effect that the matter was not yet ended.

Naturally, there was a big sensation.

"Who the merry dickens could have done it?" asked Blake, frowning, as he and a number of other Fourth-Formers crowded out into the passage. "None of our chaps, I'll bet!"

"Rather not!" said Herries.

"We ought to look into this on our own account!" said Tom Merry loudly. "The rotter will probably try to keep the whole thing secret now that he knows the notes are duds. And then we shall all be under suspicion permanently."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "If you will leave this mattah in my hands, deah boys—"

"Rats!"

"Are you addressin' me, Blake?"

"Yes, ass!"

"I wufuse to be chawactewised as an ass!" said D'Arcy warmlly.

"Then go and eat coke!" growled Blake. "Blow! Everything seemed all right until Railton made that announcement! Well, thank goodness Handy is cleared! But who the merry dickens could have done it?"

Everybody was asking questions. And in the meantime Racke and Scrope had retired to Study No. 7, and they were both looking pale.

"Now you've done it!" said Scrope savagely. "Why the dickens didn't you own up?"

"Don't be a fool!" retorted Racke. "Do you think I want to get bunked from the school?"

"Well, you'll have to do something!" said Scrope. "It's no good leaving those dud notes in Handforth's box."

Racke bit his lip.

"How was I to know that they were duds?" he snapped. "And how did Handforth satisfy Railton that he wasn't guilty?"

"Oh, what's the good of asking silly questions?" said Scrope impatiently. "Something's got to be done—quickly. Handforth isn't even suspected, and so there'll be no search. Nobody will look into his box, and your marvellous plot has fizzled out!"

Racke grunted.

"Why shouldn't we accuse Handforth point-blank?" he suggested. "Why shouldn't we dare him to open his box before witnesses?"

"Because it would only recoil on ourselves!" said Scrope promptly. "If we challenged Handforth to open his box, and then the notes were found inside, Blake and those other cads would accuse us of having planted the money. You know what-rotters they are!"

Even Racke had to admit that this possibility was worth considering.

"Yes, and the sooner you get rid of those notes, the better!" said Scrope.

But Aubrey Racke wasn't listening. There was something else that was worrying him; something that Scrope did not know about.

CHAPTER 13.

A Slight Mistake!

"WELL, it beats me!" said Jack Blake.

He and his chums of Study No. 6 were strolling in the quad. It was nearly time for lessons, and everybody was discussing the same subject.

Who had stolen the counterfeit notes?

"We've thought of everybody," said Digby. "As far as I can see, the Fourth is cleared."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "We didn't take the money, did we? And the only othah Fourth-Formahs in Mr. Wailton's bed-woom last night were Levison and Cardew and—"

"I've thought of Cardew," said Blake slowly.

"Bai Jove! You don't weally think—"
 "No; Cardew wouldn't do a thing like that," replied Blake. "But what about the Shell fellows? Tom Merry & Co. are out of it, of course. But who else was there? What about Racke and Scrope? Did they go to Railton's bedroom?"

"I didn't see them!" said Herries, shaking his head. "But they might have been there, of course. Don't forget it was nearly dark, and there was a lot of excitement."

"That's the trouble," nodded Blake. "We don't know who was there."

"Bai Jove!"
 Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered the ejaculation in a tone of surprise. He was bending down, and now he held something in his hand. The chums of Study No. 6 had seated themselves under one of the shady elms, and almost in the first moment Arthur Augustus had noticed something, half under the seat.

"What's that you've got?" asked Blake curiously.
 "I haven't the faintest ideah," replied Gussy. "But it appears to be a lettah."

"Rats! People don't leave letters lying about on the ground!"

"Weally, Blake—"
 "And even if they do, we oughn't to open them," added Blake. "Of course, some chaps are careless enough for anything!"

Arthur Augustus was examining his find.
 "It is quite a blank envelope, deah boys," he said. "The flap is unstuck, and yet there appears to be somethin'—Gweat Scott! Weally, this is most extwaordinawy!"

"Cheese it, Gussy!" said Digby. "Don't make a song over nothing—"

"Nothin'!" shouted the swell of the Fourth. "This envelope is full of cawwency notes!"

"What!"
 D'Arcy's chums leapt to their feet, and Blake grabbed the envelope from his noble chum's hand.

"Weally, Blake, there is no need to snatch—"
 "My only hat!" gasped Blake, as he examined the find. "Five quid! These must be those dud notes! The thief, instead of owning up, has got rid of the notes by leaving them lying about in the quad!"

"Bai Jove! The fellow must be dottay!"
 "Nothing of the sort!" said Blake shrewdly. "He knows that the notes are no good, and he daren't attempt to change them. So he's got rid of them by this means."

It was as clear as daylight. And over on the other side of the quad, carelessly lounging against the school wall, Racke and Scrope were pretending to be looking the other way.

"Thank goodness!" murmured Scrope. "Those Study No. 6 idiots have found the envelope!"

"Oh, well, they'll do as well as anybody else, I suppose," growled Racke.

In a way he was not very pleased. He had been half hoping that some unscrupulous junior—Baggy Trimble, for example—would pick up the envelope and pocket the contents. In that event Racke would have challenged him, and then the unfortunate junior would probably have been accused of the theft.

But it didn't matter much. Racke felt that he was safe now. He had got rid of the worthless notes, and there was nothing whatever to connect him with the theft. He had been unable to have his revenge on Handforth; but, at least, he had made himself secure.

Kildare happened to be passing across the quad at that moment, and he paused as Blake & Co. came running up to him.

"Just a minute, Kildare!" said Blake. "Here are those dud notes."

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Kildare, as he took the envelope and glanced inside. "Where did you get them, Blake?"

"Gussy found them under the seat over there," said Blake, nodding towards the elms. "The thief must have got the wind up when he heard that the notes were duds, and dropped them in a spot where he knew they'd be found."

Kildare nodded thoughtfully.
 "Looks like it!" he agreed. "All right, young 'un. I'll take these to Mr. Railton straightaway."

Kildare went indoors; and Blake & Co. lost no time in spreading the news that the stolen notes had been discovered. Handforth was considerably annoyed.

"Hang it!" he said. "Just when I was starting my investigation!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Sorry, old man!" grinned Blake. "But you ought to have told me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "I was just going to track down the thief!" said Handforth. "In fact, if you had left me alone for half an hour, you fatheads, I should have had my hands on him!"

"Good old Handy!" chuckled Tom Merry. "The world's worst detective!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "You silly idiots!" said Handforth, glaring. "Why, at St. Frank's I've done all sorts of detective work—"

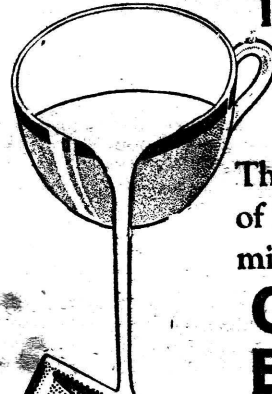
He was interrupted by a roar from the juniors. They were tired of hearing of his exploits at St. Frank's—for he was always trotting out these yarns.

"Cheer up, Handy!" grinned Blake. "You've completed that third test in fine style, and now this other matter of the stolen notes is practically cleared up. So there's nothing to worry about."

"I'm not worrying," said Handforth lightly. "And I won't forget that promise of yours, Blake."

(Continued on next page.)

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"Which promise?"

"As soon as I've completed the fourth test I become leader of the Fourth!" said Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's right, laugh away!" said the new fellow. "But before another week is out I shall be in Blake's shoes!"

"Impossible!" said Monty Lowther, looking from Handforth's feet to Blake's. "You'll never be able to get into them, old scout!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You know what I mean!" roared Handforth, turning red.

"Well, I'm not going to say much, but you've got the hardest task of all before you," grinned Tom Merry. "You haven't forgotten what that fourth test is, have you, Handy?"

"No, I haven't!"

"It's quite simple!" chuckled Tom. "You've only got to go to the Rylcombe Grammar School and raid the place single-handed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And after you've raided the Grammar School you've only got to get a signed document from Gordon Gay, admitting that the Grammarians aren't fit to clean our boots!" said Blake blandly. "Quite easy, of course!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth faced the yelling juniors with perfect composure.

"Cackle away!" he said. "You laughed just as much when I said that I was going to sleep in Railton's bed, didn't you? Well, my sons, the laugh will be on the other side soon!"

"Gwreat Scott!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "You're not weally goin' to twy to waid the Gwammah School, are you, Handay?"

"No, I'm not going to try," replied Handforth promptly. "I'm going to do it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But, in spite of their laughter, the juniors were compelled to admire Handforth's indomitable spirit. Never would he admit defeat. He was keenly determined to go straight ahead, and to complete even that fourth test, which was undoubtedly the most outrageous of them all.

And while they were all chuckling in the quad, Kildare had gone to Mr. Railton's study. The Housemaster was much relieved when he took the notes from Kildare's hand.

"This is splendid, Kildare!" said Mr. Railton. "So they were found in the quad? H'm! I don't wonder that the culprit got rid of them so quickly!"

"It's satisfactory so far as it goes, sir," said Kildare. "But we don't know who the culprit—"

"Bless my soul!" broke in Mr. Railton suddenly. He spoke in a voice of blank astonishment, and the St. Jim's skipper looked at him curiously.

"Anything the matter, sir?" he asked.

"I'm not sure, Kildare; but, at all events, there is a little discrepancy here," said Mr. Railton, as he continued to stare at the numbers on the notes. "These are genuine."

"Genuine, sir!" ejaculated Kildare.

"Yes."

"But I thought—"

"The boy who took the counterfeit money has evidently made a mistake," said Mr. Railton dryly. "He has got them mixed up with his own cash. These notes are quite genuine; and thus it stands to reason that the thief is still in possession of the forgeries."

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Kildare. "May I look at one, sir?"

Mr. Railton handed it over, and Kildare scrutinised it. "It seems genuine enough to me, sir," he said dubiously. "Are you sure that there's been a mistake? Plenty of dud notes nowadays are practically the same as the real ones."

"There is no mistake, Kildare," said Mr. Railton. "That note you hold is an authentic Treasury issue. There can be no error, because I have the numbers of those counterfeits. And these are quite different."

This was an unexpected complication, indeed! And yet the explanation was simple enough. Aubrey Racke, in his ignorance, had "planted" his own money in Handforth's trunk!

As it happened, he had had five pounds of his own money in his pocket, folded in exactly the same way as the counterfeits. The previous night he had stuffed the stolen money into his pocket, and in the morning he had not known which was which. They had both seemed exactly the same; and Racke, who then knew nothing about the counterfeits, had taken very little care. He had merely put five pounds into Handforth's trunk, never dreaming that the numbers of the notes would be taken. Very few people, after all, take the numbers of currency notes.

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Upon hearing the truth, Racke had rushed to the box-room and had regained possession of the five notes.

But upon comparing them with the five in his pocket he had been unable to detect any difference! Real and counterfeit—they had looked exactly the same. Indeed, Ferrers Locke had only sent them to Mr. Railton because they were exceptionally clever and well worth keeping as curios.

All the ten notes had been slightly used, and thus Racke had found it impossible to tell "tother from which."

But after a good deal of mental juggling he had remembered that his own notes were curled up at the edges, through being in his pocket. So he had taken the others and had placed them in the envelope. His doubts were set at rest, and he had been fairly comfortable.

The rest of the school thought that the affair was over; but the cream of the joke was yet to come!

CHAPTER 14.

Caught In His Own Trap!

"HALLO! What's this?" Handforth stopped in front of the notice board in the School House. There was a fresh sheet of paper pinned there, and the crowd of juniors came swarming round, attracted by Handforth's tone.

"Anything important, Handy?" asked Levison. "By George!" said Handforth. "I should think it is important!"

"Let's have a look!"

"Gangway, there, you fatheads!"

"Weally, deah boys—"

Arthur Augustus was hustled out of the way, and Handforth was elbowed off, too. The juniors crowded noisily round, reading the notice eagerly.

And in less than a minute there was a veritable sensation. For that announcement, in Mr. Railton's own handwriting, was startling enough. It ran as follows:

"IMPORTANT NOTICE!

"Certain currency notes, five in number, have come into my possession, after having been found lying in the quad-rangle. It is obvious that these notes have been confused with the forgeries that were taken from my bed-room last night.

"The thief has made a little mistake, and he has returned genuine currency notes, keeping the counterfeit ones in error. If he cares to claim them before twelve o'clock, noon, he is welcome to them. But only on condition that he brings the counterfeits in exchange.

"If, however, nobody comes forward by that hour, I shall immediately send the notes to the Wayland Hospital, deeming that the thief is willing to make this substantial gift to a local charity, and that by so doing he may clear his conscience.

"(Signed) VICTOR RAILTON, Housemaster."

There was a roar when the significance of the notice was realised.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Dished and diddled!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's all the cackling about?" demanded Handforth, staring. "I can't see anything funny in it!"

"Good old Handy!" chuckled Blake. "I thought your brain worked rapidly?"

"So it does!" said Handforth promptly.

"Then it must be a bit clogged this morning!" grinned Blake. "Can't you see the braininess of Mr. Railton's dodge?"

"No, I'm blown if I can!"

"But it's simple!" said Blake. "The thief is caught in a cleft stick. He daren't claim the real notes because it would be asking for the sack, and he daren't use the dud notes, either, because he knows they're duds! He's made a blunder, and now he's five pounds out of pocket!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, deah boys, this is fighwfully wich!" chuckled Arthur Augustus. "I wegard Mr. Wailton as a weal humowist!"

"By George!" grinned Handforth. "I can see it now!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A little distance away, Racke and Scrope were standing, and they listened to the shouts in a dazed kind of way. At least, Racke was looking dazed. Scrope appeared to be amused.

"By gad!" he muttered into Racke's ear. "Can you hear all that? You've made a bloomer!"

"It must be a trick!" panted Racke. "They were the dud notes I put into that envelope—"

"Rot!" said Scrope. "Railton wouldn't tell fibs like that!"

Besides, it's as plain as the nose on your face—and that's plain enough, goodness knows!"

"You silly fool——"
 "You were a bit uncertain all the while," went on Scrope maliciously. "You had an idea that you'd got the dud notes mixed up with your own. And then, after a terrific lot of trouble, you were clever enough to give up your own money!"

"Can't you be quiet, hang you?" snarled Racke. "I'm broke now!"

"Well, it's your own fault," said Scrope. "And, in any case, you've got five quid——"

"I've got nothing!" panted Racke. "I can't use those forgeries!"

"No, I suppose not."
 "It's all Railton's fault, for having those silly counterfeits on his dressing-table!" went on Racke savagely. "How the thunder was I to know——"

"Shush!" warned Scrope.
 But the Terrible Three and Blake & Co. were bearing down upon the precious pair. Racke, in his dismay, had been talking rather incautiously, and a few of his words had floated across the hall.

Moreover, he was looking positively green. Consternation and guilt were written all over him.

"Just a minute, Racke!" said Tom Merry grimly.
 "Mind your own infernal bizney!" shouted Racke.

"Pway let me deal with this wottah, Tom Mewwy," said D'Arcy. "Now, Wacke, you've got to confess that you were the wascal who took the notes——"

"Go and eat coke, hang you!" snarled Racke.

"Weally, Wacke——"

"Oh, shut up!"

"I wefuse to shut up!" said Arthur Augustus hotly. "Bai Jove! I have a good mind to administah a feahful thwashin' to——"

"Cheese it, Gussy!" said Tom Merry, as he seized Racke by the shoulder. "Now then, Racke, out with it! You took those dud notes, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't!" hissed Racke.

"Why argue with him?" asked Blake. "Tip him upside down and empty his pockets!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And in spite of Aubrey Racke's protestations he was seized by many hands and literally turned upside down.

Various articles clattered upon the floor.

A cigarette-case, an automatic lighter, some odd-silver, a pocket knife——

"Here we are!" shouted Blake, as he grabbed a number of folded currency notes. "By Jove! Five of 'em! These are the duds, sure enough! The money that Mr. Railton's got is really Racke's!"

"It's a lie!" howled Racke. "This money is mine——"

"It's counterfeit, you mean!" said Tom Merry. "The notes are no good to you, Racke—you can't change them, so they might just as well go back to Railton."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Good old Racke!" said Monty Lowther approvingly.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"I never knew he was a fellow of such generous spirit!" went on Lowther. "Imagine it! Racke contributing a fiver to the Wayland Hospital! Good man!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bump!
 "Yaroooooh!" howled Racke wildly.

Blake & Co. were busy—and so, for that matter, was Aubrey Racke. He was bumped hard, and he was bumped often. Then he was allowed to crawl away, sore and savage.

It was only the work of a few minutes for Tom Merry to creep along to Mr. Railton's study and to slip the five notes under the door. When the Housemaster reached the door, upon hearing the rustle of paper there was not a soul in sight.

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Railton in amazement.

A swift examination of the notes relieved him. They were the forgeries.

And immediately after morning lessons, when the fellows came trooping out of the class-rooms, they found another notice on the board. It occasioned further laughter.

"As no claimant has come forward," ran the notice, "there has been no alternative but to send the genuine money to the Wayland Hospital, as originally proposed. The fact that the counterfeit notes were recovered made no difference. The culprit failed to come forward to claim his own money, therefore it was forfeited."

And Mr. Railton, chatting with the Head, urged that no further action should be taken.

"I very much doubt if the culprit can be discovered, sir," he said. "In my opinion, it will be far more satisfactory to drop the whole thing."

"But the boy should be punished!" said Dr. Holmes sternly.

"I rather fancy he has received a very drastic punishment, sir," said Mr. Railton.

"H'm! Perhaps you are right," admitted the Head. "He has lost five pounds of his own money. It was an excellent idea of yours, Mr. Railton, to send it to the Wayland Hospital. Certainly the boy has been fittingly penalised."

And so the thing was settled.

Privately, Mr. Railton had more than a vague suspicion that Racke was the guilty party. But there was no proof, and it was practically impossible to obtain any proof.

And while Aubrey Racke was the laughing-stock of the Shell and the Fourth, Handforth was given a great ovation. He had completed that third "test," and nobody could deny that his success had been due entirely to his own dogged determination.

But there was still another of those "tests" to be tackled—and the last one of the four was unquestionably the knottiest problem of all!

Would this astonishing new fellow have nerve enough to go through with it?

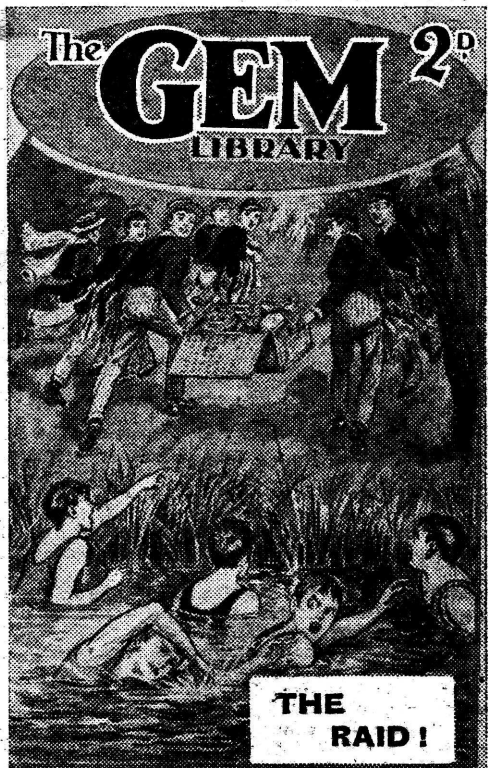
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HANDFORTH THE STICKER!

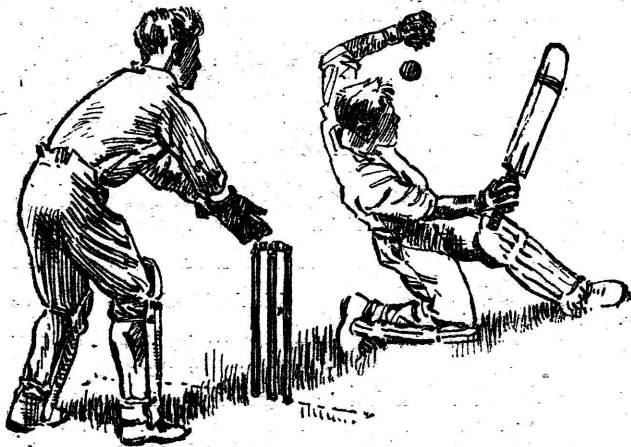
Raiding a rival school singlehanded and obtaining a written confession from the junior captain that St. Jim's is far superior to the Grammar School, is the colossal task that Handforth has to tackle next. The odds would appear to be a million to one against him, but that makes no difference to Edward Oswald Handforth; he's said he'll do it and . . . but you'll read about it yourselves in next week's issue of

The "GEM" Library.

Don't on any account miss this treat—order in advance.



A STRAIGHT BAT! Good fortune or ill-fortune sees Dick Dare always cheery and optimistic, and despite the fact that he's made a couple of bitter enemies in his new job at the County Cricket Ground, he's convinced in his heart that cricket in every sense of the word will see him through!



The LUCK of the GAME!

by
RICHARD RANDOLPH

A GRAND NEW CRICKET STORY, DEALING WITH THE ADVENTURES OF A BOY WHO LOVES THE GREAT SUMMER GAME, AND IS A MASTER AT IT, TOO.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE.

Driven to rebellion by the tyranny of an overbearing manager, young Dick Dare, a clerk in the Manchester Fire and Life Insurance Society, and a born cricketer, is sacked from his job. He decides to apply at the Markshire County Cricket Club ground for a place on the staff, and after an interview with Mr. Ainsley, whose life he had saved a few days before, is told to return on the following day. Outside the pavilion, Dick is met by Herbert Blair, his unscrupulous enemy, who, egged on by Leonard Urwine, the crack amateur of the Markshire eleven, forces a fight on the youngster he hates. Dick agrees to meet Blair in a paddock a hundred yards from the ground, with Urwine and Balkwill, another Markshire player, acting as timekeeper and referee respectively. Meanwhile, Mr. Ainsley has been a witness of the proceedings from a pavilion window, and he hurries to the paddock, arriving just in time to see Blair lying on the ground—knocked out. When he comes to, Blair contemplates to lay the blame on the fellow who has ticked him, and Dick, seeing that Mr. Ainsley believes the worst, walks out of the paddock without a word. "Stiff-necked young rascal!" mutters the old cricketer. "That's finished it!"

(Now read on.)

Balkwill Intervenes.

URWINE turned away his face to hide a grin of triumph. It seemed that his scheme to put Dick Dare in Mr. Ainsley's black books had worked.

But there was a queer look in those hazel eyes of Gregory Balkwill.

No one had ever quite fathomed Balkwill. He had not a chum among his brother pros. On the other hand, he had no actual enemy among them. His ways were not their ways. Off the field he associated with people for whom they had little use. He was so fine an all-round cricketer that he had been considered—and would doubtless be considered again—for England. Yet he had said that he would rather be a bookie than a cricketer pro.

Now something unusual had stirred in him. But he said nothing.

"Can I offer you my arm, sir?" asked Urwine.

"I have no need of it, thanks, Leonard," returned Mr. Ainsley.

But he hardly looked fit to get back to the county ground alone. He would have been better in bed that day, anyway; and now anger and shock had helped pain and weakness to cripple him, and he moved like an old and worn-out man.

Balkwill lounged after him, without a word to either Urwine or Blair. His going thus did not surprise them, however; it was very much Balkwill's way.

He found Mr. Ainsley leaning against the paddock fence, outside the gate, his face ghastly.

"Perhaps you'll let me help you, sir?" he said.

"Thank you, Balkwill!"

Balkwill gave his arm. Not another word passed between them.

It was seldom that he spoke to one another beyond the merest

commonplaces in these days. But the pro. remembered just then how Mr. Ainsley had found him, ten years earlier, a long, lean lad of sixteen, the cricket prodigy of a village in a county that had no county club, and had taken him away to qualify for Markshire. Balkwill had done all that his funder could have hoped as a player, but he had grown up into the type of man for which Mr. Ainsley had no liking.

Back in his own room at the pavilion, the man who had made Markshire cricket thought long and hard, and it is possible that his thoughts were tinged with the disappointment he had met with in Balkwill's case.

"A firebrand!" he murmured. "Bad for the team. And Leonard is not the man to keep him in order. It's a pity—a great pity—but—"

The upshot of it all was that when Robins came with the car he had to go to the bank to cash a cheque, and thereafter to Kingsland Street, with a thick envelope addressed to Dick.

Dick was not in at the moment. When he came in it was with Andy, and they were rather past their usual time. For Dick had felt that he must tell someone, and he had marched Andy off to hear the whole story while they paced up and down the towpath along the Markle.

Andy had been the first to spot the letter placed against the clock on the mantelpiece.

Dick opened it. There was a sheet of notepaper, headed by the county ground address, and inside it were twenty five-pound notes.

"My stars and garters!" exclaimed Andy.

"I can't take it—and I won't take it!" cried Dick.

"Oh, rot! I know jolly well if anyone offered me all that oof—"

"You dry up! I'm not going to be paid for a thing like that—not in money, anyway. It will go back to him."

"It's from Mr. Ainsley, then? You might see what he says, at least!"

"Here you are. You can read it with me."

They read the brief letter together.

"The County Cricket Ground,
"Manchester,
"April 30th.

"Dear Dare,—I fear that what happened to-day will preclude any possibility of your being given the engagement on the ground staff for which you applied. Quarrelling among the members of that staff is one of the things which arouse my strongest objection.

"You rendered me a great service on Saturday. I wish you well, and I know that your present position is one in which the possession of a little capital may mean much. Will you be good enough to take what I now send in the spirit in which it is offered? By so doing you will please

"Yours sincerely,

"JOHN AINSLEY."

"You ought to take it," said Andy. "It's only sense. Who are you that you should be too proud to accept a reward for doing a rich man like Ainsley a good turn? You don't say so; but it seems to me that very likely you saved his life."

"I can't and won't take it!" answered Dick, throwing himself into a chair, and sitting with his elbows on the table, and both hands trying to grip his short, wavy hair. "He didn't give me a fair show, Andy!"

"He's trying to give it to you now, anyway," Andy answered, sensibly enough.

All the common sense was on his side. He argued till the tea and chops got cold; but he could not move Dick. And the strange thing was that he felt foolishly proud of Dick's obstinate pride, though he was annoyed with his chum for it.

After tea Dick got a registered envelope, wrote a brief letter which he let Andy see, put letter and notes inside the envelope, and, with Andy by his side, went to the nearest post office and handed it over the counter. Andy could almost have cried when they came out, Dick carrying in his wallet nothing but one tiny bit of flimsy paper instead of twenty bigger bits each representing five pounds!

Mr. Ainsley got the letter at Marchester Hall next morning.

His wrath had died down; but his opinion had not changed, and the letter did not change it.

"There's good stuff in the lad," he said to himself. "But he's far too stiff-necked, and he's a firebrand."

And that might have been the end of all intercourse between John Ainsley and Dick Dare had it not been for the intervention of Gregory Balkwill.

It was five years since Balkwill had last been at the Hall. He had always managed to excuse himself somehow from attending the reunion of players—a gala day to the others—which took place there late in every September. But now he came of his own accord.

"Oh, yes; I'll see him!" said Mr. Ainsley.

He shifted from his bed to his dressing-room, and it was there the pro saw him.

"I wouldn't have troubled you on my own account, sir," Balkwill said. "But I've been thinking things over, and it seems to me that you ought to have the truth. I know you would be sorry afterwards if you found that you'd condemned anyone unfairly."

"I should, Balkwill. What is it you wish to explain?"

"About young Dare, sir. That row wasn't his fault in the very least. I've heard more about Saturday now, and I can see how he might very well have thought—though I'm not saying he'd have been right—that Blair stretched him out on purpose. But that's not the point. Blair threatened him with a thrashing if he didn't apologise for what he'd said. I heard the threat. I was in the dressing-room, and they were just outside. I didn't know then what I know now—from Edmead, who is to be relied upon—that Dare actually said nothing. The words Blair objected to were spoken by Mr.—by another man. You couldn't expect the boy to beg pardon or take a hiding, could you? And if you'd heard Blair hectoring him you wouldn't have wondered at his wanting to give Blair something for himself. That's all about it, I think."

"It puts a very different complexion on the matter, Balkwill, and I am greatly obliged to you for coming forward to set things right. Dare was to have been given a trial at the nets this morning, in anticipation of his joining the ground staff. I will go along to the ground. Perhaps you won't mind looking in at Dare's diggings—51, Kingsland Street—and bringing him along. The fact that you have spoken up for him will weigh with the boy—I think."

Balkwill stiffened at once.

"Sorry sir, but I couldn't think of doing that!" he said. "What's more I must ask you not to let anyone know that

I took a hand in this game. I want that to be a dead secret, and I think I've a right to ask that it shall be so."

"I can't refuse you that, Balkwill, though I don't understand. I am obliged to you, as I said."

"Oh, as far as that goes, there's no reason why you should be, Mr. Ainsley."

And with that Balkwill went, leaving Mr. Ainsley badly puzzled. But he had almost given up trying to comprehend Balkwill.

Unfit as he was, he dressed himself—or, rather, was dressed—and went down to the car. Robins drove him to Kingsland Road.

He found Dick at home, and overcame the boy's feeling of injustice by a few generous words.

"I have heard what convinces me that you were in no way at fault in that quarrel with Blair," he said. "I owe you an apology. I should not have condemned you unheard. Will you come with me to the ground and be put through your paces?"

Not a word did he say about the generous reward which a less broad-minded man might have held scorned. And Dick thought it best that he should not refer to it.

There was a big lump in his throat as he answered:

"Of course I'll come, sir!"

Robins, ready to help his employer into the car, whispered in Dick's ear:

"Good-luck!"

Dick liked that. But his feeling was that it was less luck he needed than a chance to show what was in him. His confidence in his own ability was strong, though he was not by any means swanky!

And now he had that chance. He would not waste it!

On the ground he saw Balkwill, who gave him a curt nod, his face quite expressionless, and Edmead, who greeted him cordially, having taken a strong liking to him. Edmead introduced him in the dressing-room to Nevern, the veteran stumper, Toplady, the fast bowler, and Rooper, who had done big things for the side in the batting line last season, after doing very little in the season before, his first.

Then George Giddings bustled in, his grizzled hair all on end as usual, his rosy face shining.

"Come along, Dare!" he said, without bothering about any formality of introduction. "The boss is ready to see what you can do. Pete Nevern, you come along, too, and Walter Toplady."

Toplady was a bowler and Dick had seen him in action. He was good—really fast—but not great. Something he lacked, that the fast bowler who is to achieve greatness needs. But he took a good many wickets, if they did cost rather heavily, and was very useful to the side.

In the net Dick played Toplady easily and stylishly, but was all at sea with Nevern for a few balls. He saw John Ainsley and Giddings smiling, and Edmead and a few more of the pros who had gathered round, frankly grinning.

And then he discovered why it was Nevern's slowish stuff puzzled him so much. Peter Nevern, unknown to fame as a bowler, never employed as a bowler in county games, had lately developed the googly.

When Dick realised that he changed his tactics. He played back, and waited for the break.

"He's found me out, sir!" said Peter.

"No doubt of that. Rayner, will you go into the net? Let's see what you can do with the ball, Dare!"

Dick bowled his best, though he still had some difficulty with the fast one. It hurt his shoulder to bowl it, and he only employed it now and then. But the impression he created was possibly better than if he had been bowling consistently fast.

For the shrewd observers saw that the fast medium stuff which made up the bulk of his bowling, the occasional slow which he slipped in, and the rare fast ball were all sent down without variation in run or any very noticeable change of action.

"Well, Giddings?" said Mr. Ainsley.

"I say he's all right, sir!"

"Peter?"

"He has my vote, sir!"

"Rayner?"

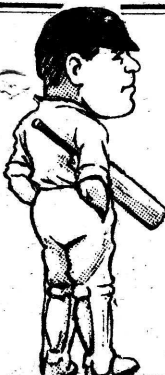
Rayner was still young enough to colour with pleasure that the boss should ask his opinion. Like most of the staff, he fairly worshipped the boss.

"He's a rattling good bat, sir; but I'd say he's even a better bowler. I feel rather proud that my bails are still on."

That was generous, and Dick felt it so. "You're on the staff, Dare," said Mr. Ainsley. "If there's anything you want to know that Rayner or Edmead can't tell you apply to Giddings. He's your company-commander, so to speak. We're all hopeful of you, my boy."

"Thank you, sir!" said Dick heartily.

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The guard's whistle sounded, and Dick made a rush for the train. But a foot was thrust between his legs, and he tumbled forward. As he fell he saw the grinning face of Herbert Blair at a window! (See page 27.)

Mr. Ainsley moved slowly and wearily towards the pavilion. The little crowd at the nets watched him go, and Dick could see that there was not a man in it who did not feel genuine concern for him they called "the boss."

Toplady brought down a big hand on Dick's back. "We all owe you a good turn, Dare," he said. "You've done us one. From what I make out you saved the boss's life, or something like it; and, apart from the fact that he's the best man alive, where the county club would be without him I don't know."

"Hear, hear!" came from the others. Dick felt as though he were walking on air. He had the chance to make his dearest dreams come true.

He did not anticipate instant or complete success. He knew that he had his spurs to win in class cricket. But his path seemed to stretch straight before him.

Little did Dick Dare guess what pitfalls beset that path, what opposition he would have to overcome, what enmity to face!

Stranded!

FROM the outset, Dick Dare's life as a cricketer was hardly a path of roses.

There were dull days, when the county team was away, and he and Edmead and the other youngsters had little to do but practise with one another. There were days not so dull, full enough of interest, indeed, but yet unsatisfying, when the county team was playing on the Manchester ground.

For the young pro the days of waiting for his first chance are anxious ones. He thinks that the anxiety will be at an end when once he gets that chance; but, having got it, he comes to realise that being on the fringe of the eleven, uncertain whether in any particular match he will have a place, is just as wearing.

Dick shared the time of waiting with two other colts—Edmead, and a slow bowler, Matthews. The three could sympathise with one another better for the fact that their claims hardly conflicted, for Edmead would only be wanted if Nevern were unfit to play, and Matthews was no bat, so that only the absence of Armley, the regular slow bowler of the team would bring him in. Dick might hope to fill any other vacancy that arose.

Mr. Ainsley was but seldom on the ground in the first few weeks of the season. He was very unwell, and did not

even attend the meetings of the selection committee. This gave Urwine the chance he wanted of keeping Dick out of the team. The two other members of the committee deferred to his judgment.

"Oh, Dare has promise!" Urwine told them lightly. "But he's not ripe for big matches yet. That would matter less but for the fact that he imagines he has nothing to learn."

This was a lie. Dick was as keen to learn as any youngster could be. But Urwine's jealousy grew with every day. He knew that his rich cousin thought less well of him than he had done a few years earlier; he had begun to doubt whether, after all, he was so very safe to be heir to the bulk of Mr. Ainsley's wealth. And that John Ainsley had taken a real liking to Dick he could not doubt.

He heard of Dick's being asked up to the Hall for a talk with "the boss" on more than one occasion. Mr. Ainsley had found that the boy had great interest in the history of the game, and it did him good to have someone to talk to about that. Then Blair added fuel to the flame of jealousy by telling Urwine that his principals, Messrs. Deedes & Deedes, had received from Mr. Ainsley a letter which gave them the impression that he contemplated making a new will.

Urwine's anxiety did not affect his play. He made lots of runs in the early matches. Rooper was in brilliant form, and Balkwill hardly ever failed. Toplady and Armley did all that was asked of them as bowlers; and little, grey-haired Nevern kept wicket as well as in his best days.

Thus, of the first half-dozen matches played, Markshire won four outright, and led on the first innings in another, the only check being at Sheffield, where Yorkshire, leading by 24 runs on the first innings, made no effort to bring about a finish, but, by careful batting, ensured themselves against defeat.

The seventh match on the card was that with Warwickshire at Edgbaston. The side chosen was much the same as in the matches played.

Turning up in good time at the County Ground on the Saturday morning, Dick found Edmead there before him, and in high excitement.

"The boss has phoned that you're to catch the ten-eleven for Birmingham, Dick!" he said. "Walter's crooked, it seems. Good thing you're fit to sling 'em down your hardest for a dozen overs now, if you're wanted to!"

George Giddings patted Dick on the back, and wished him the best of luck. Edmead went with him to the station. "Take a taxi," Edmead said. "You won't have any time to spare when you get to New Street. Wish I was coming with you!"

The 10.11 stopped at Wickhamdene and Yarnley on its way. Between Yarnley and Birmingham there was only one stop.

At Wickhamdene Dick saw Herbert Blair board the train. He had not run against Blair since the day when he had knocked him out, and was not keen on meeting him again. But Blair got into a compartment in the next coach.

A few minutes brought them to Yarnley, familiar ground to Dick. Here he stuck his head out of the window, looking out for anyone he knew. There was more of a crowd than usual on the platform, but he could not discern a familiar figure in it.

Then someone called his name. "Dare! I say, Dare! Wire for you!" A buff envelope was waved above the heads of the crowd. Dick did not stop to think that anyone with a wire for him, having sighted him, would naturally bring it to his compartment. He jumped out.

He had some difficulty in making his way through the crowd, which was gathered for a local train due in a few minutes. The voice that had hailed him did not make itself heard again. He pushed towards the spot from which the buff envelope had been waved.

Then the guard's whistle sounded, and he turned to make a rush for the train. But as he turned, a foot was thrust between his legs, and he tumbled forward.

"Ere, where d'you think you're comin' to?" snarled the fellow against whom he had fallen.

"Sorry! Accident! Must catch train!" gasped Dick. "Some hope!" returned the other.

The train was already on the move. Dick made his way by the use of his elbows. But he could not get to it in time, and as it quickened speed he sighted the face of Herbert Blair at a window, with a sneering smile upon it.

Dick swung round, and saw a porter he knew well. "What's the next for Birmingham, Jones?" he asked. "At twelve-thirty-five. Why, it's you, Mr. Dare! How'd you come to miss this?"

Dick could find no answer but a groan. For a minute or two he saw his case as hopeless, his chance lost, and John Ainsley's displeasure hanging over him.

He was very sure that Urwine would not keep his place open, even though he might win the toss, and thus be in a position to do so.

For doubtless Blair was on his way to Birmingham. He had not been down to play; but he had appeared for the county before with some success, and he was a pal of Urwine. As he thought of that, Dick could not help suspicion rising in his mind.

But he put it from him. He must not waste a moment now if he was to get to the Edgbaston Ground before noon.

It was close on fifty miles away. No train served. A car was the only chance.

The one garage at Yarnley was over a mile from the station; and he knew the slow horse-bus which plied between station and town. He could walk nearly as fast as that travelled.

Then he remembered that the friendly porter lived some distance from the station, and was a cyclist.

"Got your bike here, Smith?" he asked him. "Yes. Want a lend of it, Mr. Dare? You're welcome. But it's a longish way to Brum on a bike!"

"I'm not going to Brum on it. Mind if I leave it at Jagger's?"

"Not a bit, sir! I see now—car—eh? What's the hurry?"

"If I can get to Edgbaston before twelve, I play for Markshire. If I can't, I lose my chance!"

"Well, you've got to travel—I'll say that. But good luck to you! Come along an' I'll get you my machine."

(Will Dick arrive at the ground in time, or will Blair play in his place? These questions are answered in thrilling fashion in next week's instalment. Don't miss it, boys.)

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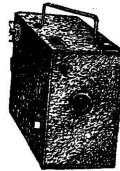
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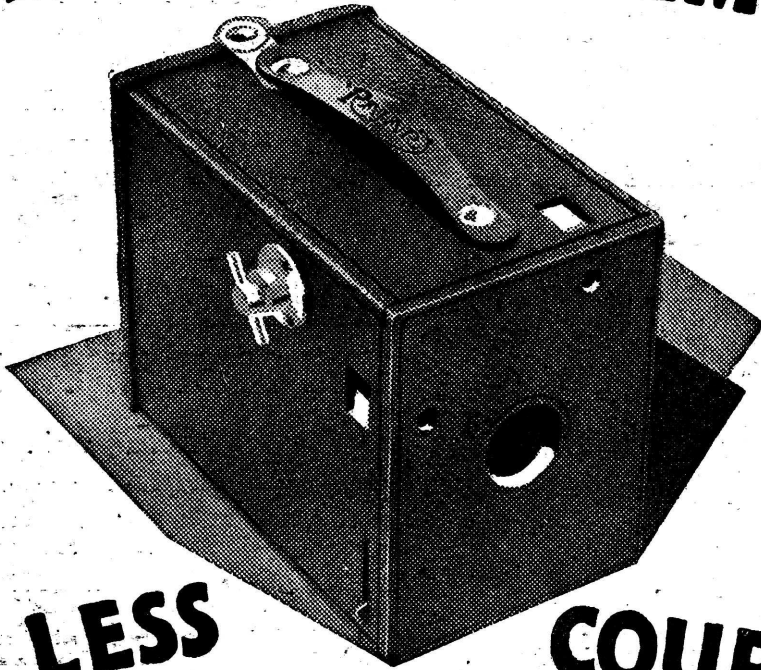
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