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HANDFORTH
THE DETECTIVE!

*A rousing story of school life, fun and adventure, featuring
the Boys of St. Frank's.*

New Series No. 93.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

February 25th, 1928.



Archie came out of the pawnshop and was on the point of turning into the High Street, when he uttered a gasp. For over on the other side of the road were Handforth & Co., together with Irene Manners and Marjorie Temple! Had they seen him coming out of the "pop" shop?

*The Rival Detectives!**Nelson Lee v. Handforth!*

HANDFORTH THE DETECTIVE!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

Edward Oswald Handforth has often fancied himself as a "special investigator," and, in attempting to track the mysterious thief who burgled the studies of the Ancient House at St. Frank's, he is in his element. Usually Handy in the role of a 'tec proves a "wash-out," but in this case he meets with great success.—Ed.

CHAPTER I.

Early Risers!

"BURRRRRH!"

Nipper, the popular captain of the Remove at St. Frank's, hopped nimbly out of bed, and commenced dressing at lightning speed. It was so cold that the dormitory windows were covered with frost.

Six-thirty had just chimed out from the big school clock, and St. Frank's was still and quiet. At this hour nobody was about. Even the domestics were only just beginning to stir.

"That's better!" murmured Nipper, after he had got some of his clothes on. "By Jove! This frost is keener than ever! We've had more than a week of it—and it looks like lasting for another month!"

Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West were sound asleep, and Nipper had no intention of waking them. Within five minutes he was ready, and he crept out, closing the door softly behind him.

A brief visit to the bathroom, where it is to be feared he skimped his morning wash, and Nipper hurried downstairs. He didn't

want to be late. And as he turned into the Remove corridor, he saw a figure at the other end.

"Morning guv'nor!" said Nipper cheerily.

"Good morning, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee, the famous Housemaster-detective. "You're here on the stroke of time."

"Rather, sir," said Nipper. "This is a very special case, and we want to do as much as we can before any of the other fellows come down. Have you formed any theory yet?"

For some reason, they both went into Study E, which was normally occupied by Archie Glenthorne and Alf Brent. Nelson Lee closed the door, and they both looked round the apartment curiously.

"But why here, sir?" asked Nipper.

"This study promises to be a more interesting field of search than any of the other studies," replied Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "Of course, Nipper, the trouble is, we have so little to go upon."

"Practically nothing," said Nipper, shaking his head. "There was that ice carnival last night, and everybody was away from the school. The Ancient House was

deserted except for Archie Glenthorne, and he was asleep."

"And then a mysterious figure appears," said Nelson Lee, with mock gravity. "A sinister apparition, Nipper! He steals from study to study, and takes various articles of value. Trivial value, perhaps, but—"

"Oh, I don't know about that, guv'nor," interrupted Nipper. "Archie lost fifteen quid in fivers, to say nothing of a gold pencil and several other things of the same sort. Valuable cameras were taken, too, and even watches. The thief, whoever he was, made a pretty good haul."

"And yet, for a professional burglar, the haul was insignificant," said Nelson Lee. "Really, Nipper, I do not think that we are on the track of a very clever crook. I am quite convinced, indeed, that the culprit is an amateur."

"I don't see how you can arrive at that conclusion, sir," objected Nipper. "The man was masked—Archie saw that in the fire-light, when he woke up."

"A mask, after all, is a very easy thing to make," said Nelson Lee. "Just a piece of black cloth, with two eyeholes made in it. And amateur burglars can wear masks, Nipper. In fact, it is the mask which convinces me that the culprit is an amateur."

"Well, it's very puzzling, sir, and you can't deny it," said Nipper. "Archie was pretty plucky over the business, and he struggled with the rotter, and then gave chase. It was just bad luck that Archie slipped over in the Triangle and half-stunned himself. Or perhaps he was knocked down by the intruder. He doesn't even know himself."

"And there the matter rests," nodded Lee. "In fact, Nipper, you have stated all the known facts."

"Just a minute, guv'nor," said Nipper. "What about Merrell and Marriott, of the East House?"

"I rather think that we can count them out for the moment," replied Lee, as he walked up and down the study, gazing intently at the floor. "Merrell and Marriott were in the Punishment Room—"

"In this House, sir."

"Yes, in this House," agreed Lee. "But that makes very little difference. They declare that they saw somebody scudding across the Triangle, with Glenthorne in chase. They even believe that this figure turned and struck Glenthorne down. But they cannot be sure of it. I am more inclined to believe that Glenthorne slipped and fell."

"What about the rest of that story told by Merrell and Marriott?" asked Nipper. "They say that they heard padding footsteps on the stairs outside the Punishment Room. And they say that the thief uttered strange chuckles."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Merrell and Marriott are both unreliable witnesses," he replied. "As I have already told you, Nipper, we can forget them for the time being. My first move will be to make

a thorough examination of this study. The struggle took place here, and, with luck, we might be able to pick up a few scraps of information."

Nipper looked round the study without much hope.

"Look here, guv'nor, I want to ask you something," he said suddenly. "Do you suspect anybody? You're pretty mysterious about it, and I've an idea that you've got something up your sleeve."

"Well, Nipper, as it happens, I have," admitted Nelson Lee gravely.

"I knew it!" said Nipper. "You admit that you've got something up your sleeve?"

"Yes!"

"What is it guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"My arm, young 'un!" chuckled Lee.

CHAPTER 2.

Nelson Lee Investigates!



NIPPER grunted with disgust.

"I might have expected that, you bouncer!" he said tartly. "Just like one of your mouldy tricks!"

"You will kindly remember, Nipper, that you are addressing your Housemaster!" said Lee sternly.

"Chuck it, guv'nor!" grinned Nipper. "We're not in school hours now—and I should hope that we can be ourselves. Fancy telling me that you've got your arm up your sleeve! That was just an evasion, sir! I know jolly well that you've got on the track of something, and you won't tell me."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised, Nipper," said Lee, with exasperating calmness.

Methodically Lee went about the room, shifting the furniture and looking closely at the floor. He made a careful examination of the desk, and he pursed his lips when he saw the marks that had been left upon the face of the polished drawers.

"Finger prints, sir?" asked Nipper keenly.

"Plenty of 'em, my boy," replied Lee. "But I'm very much afraid that finger prints will be useless in this case. We're not dealing with a criminal who is known to Scotland Yard. If you'll only think for a moment, Nipper, you'll realise that the culprit *must* be somebody who knows his way about the Ancient House very thoroughly."

"But couldn't anybody have sneaked in like that?" asked Nipper. "Couldn't a tramp have done it? What evidence is there that the fellow knew his way about?"

"The evidence of this study."

"But how, sir?"

"For one thing, the thief knew exactly where the bureau stood, in spite of the fact that he had no light," replied Nelson Lee. "Glenthorne's evidence is quite clear on that

point. He heard nothing whatever—he was not disturbed. The thief, therefore, must have entered by the door, and crossed to the bureau without colliding against any furniture, and, furthermore, he opened the drawer containing Glenthorne's money before doing anything else."

"Yes, it does look a bit suspicious, sir," said Nipper. "You don't suspect any of the fellows, do you? There aren't any thieves in the school! Besides, the intruder was a curious-looking character, with hunched shoulders, and——"

"All the evidence regarding the fellow's appearance is utterly untrustworthy," said Nelson Lee. "Glenthorne only saw him in the flickering firelight—and, later, in the moonlight of the Triangle. Merrell and Marriot—the only other witnesses—saw nothing but the faintest glimpse of the man as he ran across towards the shrubbery. So we cannot judge what his appearance was really like. And as for——"

Lee broke off and bent down.

"This might come in useful," he added slowly.

"What is it, sir?"

"A coat button—that's all."

"One of Archie's, I suppose——"

"No, this is not one of Glenthorne's," said Nelson Lee. "Glenthorne does not wear tweeds—in the evening, at all events. And this button is a mottled one, of a very distinctive colouring."

"Then it's a clue, sir."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," replied Lee dryly. "In the struggle it was probably torn from the intruder's jacket. Not that we must take anything for granted. The button may have been dropped by Brent, or by some ordinary visitor to the study. We shall have to make a few inquiries before we can be certain."

Nipper suddenly became alert.

"Just a minute, sir!" he said, in a low voice. "Did you hear something just then?"

"I rather fancy I did," murmured Lee. "Listen!"

They both became silent. And, from outside in the corridor, came a curious shuffling sound. Neither of them could give it a name. It was not a footstep, neither was it the sound of sweeping—which might have been expected at this hour. It was something totally grotesque.

Dead silence—then a stealthy, mysterious shuffle—then silence again.

"There's somebody out there, sir!" whispered Nipper.

"And the obvious course, young 'un, is to open the door and see who it is," replied Nelson Lee, as he stepped outside, with Nipper close behind him.

"Upon my word!" said Nelson Lee.

About ten yards down the passage crouched the figure of Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove. Handforth was on the floor—on all fours—and in one hand he held a huge magnifying glass.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Nipper. "It's only Handy! What the dickens——"

"By all appearances, Handforth is making an investigation, Nipper," said Lee solemnly. "It would be a pity to disturb him."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, sir," exclaimed Handforth, looking up. "I was half afraid that you'd be sarcastic, or something."

"Sarcastic, Handforth?" said Lee innocently. "What an idea!"

"Of course, it's a bit thick—you being down, too!" said Handforth, in a tone of disgust, as he looked at Nelson Lee. "I thought I should have the field to myself for a full hour! And now I find that you're down first—and Nipper, too!"

"Have no fear, Handforth," said Lee. "Nipper and I will not disturb your labours. You can go ahead to your heart's content."

"You mean it, sir?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"Assuredly."

"Thanks awfully, sir!"

"You silly ass!" grinned Nipper. "The gov'nor's only pulling your leg! You'll never find anything out in this passage if you search until doomsday!"



CHAPTER 2.

The Special Investigator!

RATHER to Nipper's surprise, Edward Oswald Handforth was not indignant. On the contrary, there was a look of triumph in his eyes as he brought his magnifying glass into play again.

"So I shan't find anything, even if I search until doomsday, eh?" he exclaimed. "What about this?"

"What about what?"

"This footprint!" said Handforth gleatingly. "Come and look at it! This is the footprint of the thief!"

"Remarkable!" murmured Lee mildly.

"I thought I would give you a bit of a knock, sir!" grinned Handforth. "Of course, I wouldn't presume to tread on your corns, sir. You're a famous detective, and I'm only a sort of an amateur. But I regard myself as the special investigator in this case."

"That's just as well, perhaps—because everybody else will regard you as a special ass!" said Nipper. "And where's this marvellous footprint? And how do you know that it's the footprint of the thief?"

"Because I've been putting two and two together!" replied Handforth calmly. "And two and two always make four!"

"You'll soon get a prize for arithmetic at that rate, old man," remarked Nipper approvingly.

"Look here!" urged Handforth. "Look at this footprint! See it? You, too, sir!"

Both Nelson Lee and Nipper bent down, and they gravely examined the footprint on the linoleum. It was rather blurry, but there could be no doubt that it was an actual footprint, and under Handforth's magnifying glass it was even more obvious.

"There are one or two miniature pools of water," said Nelson Lee. "Now, I wonder how they could have come there?"

"Easy as winking, sir," replied Handforth. "Ice!"

"Oh, I see! Ice!" said Lee. "You are implying that the thief brought a few fragments of ice into the House on the soles of his shoes?"

"Exactly, sir," said Handforth, nodding. "That's the same deduction as I've made."

"Why, you ass, if the thief had made this footprint, the water would have been gone by this morning," said Nipper, with a grin. "It's eight or nine hours since the robbery took place, and—"

"That doesn't make any difference," interrupted Handforth. "This footprint must be the thief's, because it's too large to have been made by any of the fellows. Look at it! A whacking great hoof! Size ten, by the look of it."

"It is certainly large, Handforth," admitted Nelson Lee.

"And here's the mark of the rubber heel, sir," added Handforth, pointing. "Under the magnifying glass you can see it very clearly. The rubber heel has left a clear impression on the lino. It's one of those whole rubber heels—not a revolving kind. And there's a crack across it, as clearly as anything. That makes the whole case simple."

"Splendid!" said Lee. "I am beginning to think that my own services are entirely unnecessary."

"Well, of course, I don't want to say anything, sir—but you've pretty well hit the nail on the head," remarked Handforth contentedly. "I made up my mind to investigate this case, and I've practically got it completed. We've only got to find a man with big feet, and with a cracked rubber heel, and we shall have the thief!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Nipper suddenly.

"Well, what's the cackle for?" asked Handforth coldly.

"Nothing, old man—nothing!" gasped Nipper, as he looked down at Handforth's feet. "You're quite ready to admit that the man who made this footprint has awfully big feet?"

"Terribly big feet!" said Handforth promptly.

Nipper looked at Handforth's extremities again; and as Edward Oswald was now sitting on the floor, the soles of his shoes were in full view.

"It'll be an awful shock to you, Handy, old man—but you made that footprint yourself!" grinned Nipper.

"What!" gasped Handforth.

"It's a fact!" said Nipper. "Have a look at your own shoes. The left one exactly

fits the description you have given. It's a whacking great shoe—size ten, I should imagine—and the rubber heel is cracked from side to side."

"Oh, my goodness!" gurgled Handforth, as he twisted his foot round and examined it. "I—I didn't think that—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Nipper laughed uproariously, and Handforth got to his feet, looking very sheepish. Nelson Lee, much to Edward Oswald's relief, had walked off a few paces, and was apparently oblivious to the laughter.

"That's right—cackle!" growled Handforth, with his face fiery red. "How the dickens was I to know that it was my own footprint?"

"As a special investigator, old man, you've made a pretty rotten start," said Nipper frankly.

"Handforth!" said Nelson Lee abruptly. "I want to ask you a question."

"All right, sir," said Handforth, in some surprise.

"Did you lose a key last night?" demanded Lee.

Handforth started.

"Why, yes, sir!" he stammered. "I—I believe I did!"

"Why, sir?" asked Nipper curiously.

"Never mind why," replied Lee. "Did you find that key again, Handforth?"

"Yes, sir—at least, Church found it," replied Handforth gruffly.

"When?"

"Later on in the evening, sir—after the carnival," said Handforth. "But I don't see—"

"It doesn't matter, my boy—I only wanted to know," said Nelson Lee slowly.

"But what key is it, sir?" asked Nipper.

"Perhaps we'd better not discuss the subject now, young 'un," replied Lee. "Later on, possibly, this key may have some significance. But, for the time being, we will dismiss it."

And Nelson Lee walked thoughtfully away, leaving both Nipper and Handforth very puzzled.



CHAPTER 4.

The Head's Announcement!

"H OW, in the name of all that's mysterious, did Mr. Lee know anything, about that key?" murmured

Handforth, rubbing his chin. "I didn't tell a soul—and old Church promised to keep it mum, too! He wouldn't say anything, after giving me his word. How the dickens did Mr. Lee know?"

Nipper was rather exasperated.

"If you'll tell me what key it was, I might be able to help you," he said. "It was like the gov'nor's nerve, to go off without explaining! I'm supposed to be helping him

in this investigation, and yet he keeps things to himself. He's always like that, blow him!"

"Quite right, too!" said Handforth firmly. "Detectives never ought to give any secrets away to their assistants!"

"You silly ass!"

"And I'm sorry, Nipper, but I can't tell you anything more about that key!" went on Handforth, taking his cue from Nelson Lee. "No, I feel that it is my duty to keep it dark."

Nipper fairly glared at him.

"You poor, pitiful, howling dummy!" he roared. "You lost a key last night, and Church found it again for you. And, in some rummy way, the gov'nor knew about it. What was the key? Don't be such a chump, Handy. Tell me—"

"If you think I'm going to tell you anything after calling me all those names, you've made a bloomer!" interrupted Handforth coldly. "It might be a different thing if you apologised—"

"All right, I apologise."

"Eh?"

"I said, I apologise."

"Oh!" said Handforth. "Well, of course, that's different. All the same, I'm not going to tell you about that key."

"Why, you silly cuckoo—"

"I told you that it 'might' make a difference if you apologised," explained Handforth blandly. "Well, upon full consideration, your apology doesn't permit me to tell you about that key. It's the duty of a special investigator to keep his secrets. That key must be significant in some way—and I'm going to follow up the clue!"

Whereat Handforth strode off, leaving Nipper more indignant than ever. However, he was looking considerably mollified half an hour later, after he had joined Nelson Lee again.

By this time the rising bell had sounded, and a good many juniors were beginning to appear. Further investigations were out of the question—for it was impossible to do anything with inquisitive juniors swarming round.

There was a good deal of excitement before breakfast. Everybody in the Ancient House—seniors and juniors—had gone carefully through their studies, and a very great many things were reported missing.

Even the inmates of the other Houses made a careful search, but it was clear that the burglar had confined his attentions to the Ancient House alone. In all probability, Archie's intervention had prevented the intruder from making a thorough job of his marauding visit.

Directly after prayers, and while the entire school was congregated in Big Hall, Dr. Malcolm Stafford made a speech.

The Head was looking rather grave, although he was in no way agitated.

"You all know about the petty thefts that occurred in the Ancient House last night," he said, after one or two preliminary

remarks. "It is very evident that the losses are more or less trivial, and it has been decided that there shall be no police investigation."

The school was disappointed. The juniors, in particular, had been looking forward to Inspector Jameson, of Bannington, appearing on the scene. It was a favourite sport among the juniors to bait the pompous Inspector Jameson. They had hoped that he would question them, and give them opportunities for plenty of fun.

"The matter is not serious enough for the police to be called in," continued the headmaster. "As far as I know at present, the stolen articles do not amount to very much in value. It seems that they are mostly silver pencils, cameras, boxing gloves and such like articles. Every boy who has suffered a loss must send in a report to his Form-master, and in due course he will be compensated."

"Well, that's something, anyhow," said De Valerio. "My watch has been pinched!"

"If the police came here, there would only be a great deal of unwelcome publicity," said Dr. Stafford. "It is even possible that some highly-exaggerated story would get into the London newspapers. We don't want to risk any such catastrophe as that."

The Head quite failed to make any mention of the fact that Nelson Lee was conducting a private investigation. After all, there was no reason why the school should be told.

"And now, before you dismiss, I have an unpleasant duty to perform," continued the Head, his voice becoming stern. "Two members of the Fourth Form are to be publicly flogged. They are guilty of a very despicable trick upon Mr. Crowell."

The Head gave the school a few details of the affair. Not that the school needed any details. Everybody knew how Merrell and Marriott had tied a bunch of fireworks behind Mr. Crowell's coat-tails, and how the unfortunate Mr. Crowell had been severely scorched—and, indeed, burnt—before he could get rid of the fearful things.

It was because of this that Merrell and Marriott had been in the Punishment Room at the time of the robbery. And now they received their punishment—a flogging before the whole school. When it was all over, Merrell and Marriott had practically no interest in life, and the school dismissed, feeling that the last ten minutes had not been wasted.



CHAPTER 5.

Many Claims!

LF BRENT, of the Remove, put his head into Study E.

"Got your claim ready yet, Archie?" he asked. "The

Housemaster, I believe, is taking them now."

"Claim, dear old scream?" repeated Archie, dropping his monocle out of his eye. "Oh, I see what you mean! You mean the claim?"

"Marvellous!" said Brent. "What a brain you have, Archie!"

"Pray don't be so frightfully sarcastic, old lad," said Archie. "The fact is, I'm not going to bother about the dashed claim. I mean, why? Such a frightful fag!"

Alf stared, and then he became grim.

"I'm your study-mate, Archie, and I've got to look after you!" he said sternly. "So it's too much fag to make a claim, is it? Why, you howling ass, you've lost more than anybody!"

"Really?" said Archie. "Good gad! You don't absolutely say so?"

"What about your gold pencil?"

"Oh, rather!"

"The thief took it, didn't he?"

"I'm afraid he did, old boy," said Archie. "In point of fact, and looking at the dashed thing this way and that way, one might say that this jolly old thief had dashed taking ways!"

"That gold pencil of yours was hall-marked—eighteen carat," said Brent. "It must have cost about ten quid, by the look of it. In addition, you're missing three five-pound notes, aren't you?"

"Something like that," said Archie.

"Anything else?"

"Absolutely nothing," declared the genial ass of the Remove. "That is to say, nothing, except for a pair of cuff links that were in the same drawer as the fivers. Rummily enough, they don't seem to be there now."

"Were they valuable?" asked Brent suspiciously.

"Oh, I don't know—not particularly," replied Archie, who was fed up with the whole business. "I mean to say, they were only made of platinum——"

"Made of what?" yelled Alf.

"Odds a-gales and hurricanes!" gasped Archie, backing away. "Kindly refrain from oscillating, dear old lad!"

"Platinum cuff links!" said Alf, taking a deep breath. "And you weren't going to mention them! I shouldn't be surprised to hear that they were decorated with diamonds."

"Not diamonds, Alf, old bean—only pearls!" said Archie, beaming.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Brent. "You're hopeless! Come on—make out your claim! Three five-pound notes, a gold pencil-case, a pair of platinum links—with pearls—and——"

"That's all," said Archie. "Absolutely nothing else, old darling."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Look here——"

"Absolutely and positively," said Archie firmly. "In the words of the good old song——"

The door opened, and Edward Oswald Handforth looked in.

"Ready with your claims yet?" he asked. "We're going along to Mr. Lee now with ours."

"Just coming?" said Alf. "This brainless idiot wasn't going to claim anything—and he's lost about fifty quids' worth of goods!"

Brent finished writing on a piece of note-paper, and then he joined Handforth & Co. and a number of other juniors in the corridor. They all had pieces of paper in their hands, and they were all on their way to Nelson Lee's study.

Teddy Long, of Study B, joined the crowd, and Teddy was looking very important and very excited. He, too, had a piece of paper in his grubby fingers.

"What's that?" demanded Handforth, catching sight of it.

"A piece of crêpe, isn't it?" asked Travers politely. "Somebody dead, Long?"

"This isn't crêpe!" howled Long. "It's a piece of paper!"

"Sorry, dear old fellow!" murmured Vivian Travers. "At first sight it looked like a piece of crêpe. The result of your handling it, no doubt."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Just a minute!" said Handforth, wrenching the grubby piece of paper out of Long's hand. "I want to have a look at this! It can't be possible that this idiot is going to make a claim!"

"Of course I'm going to make a claim!" shouted Teddy Long excitedly. "The thief pinched all sorts of things out of my study!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "You never owned anything of value——"

"He took my gold fountain pen!" said Teddy Long defiantly.

"Your what?"

"My gold fountain pen, and my ten-guinea Kodak!" went on the sneak of the Remove.

"Yes, and my gold watch, too!"

"Ye gods and little fishes!" murmured Nipper. "Are you going to make a claim for a gold fountain pen, a ten-guinea Kodak, and a gold watch, Long?"

"Yes, I am," replied Teddy Long. "The Head told us to make our claims, and then we shall get compensation. I've valued my losses at about forty-two quid."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Where's Hubbard?" roared Handforth, looking up and down the corridor.

"Hubbard's the chap who shares Study B with this young sweep! Hi, Hubbard!"

"Somebody calling me?" asked Hubbard, appearing from the lobby.

"Yes!" shouted Handforth. "How many things were missing from your study?"

"None," replied Hubbard. "The thief didn't get as far as Study B—and it wouldn't have made much difference, even if he had. There was nothing worth pinching."

"Why, Teddy Long is claiming that he lost a Kodak, and——"

"Bump him, and tear up his claim!" said Hubbard contemptuously. "The tubby young rotter hasn't lost anything—except his sense of honesty!"



Teddy Long had proved himself a fraud, and the Removites weren't standing for that. They seized hold of him and, in spite of his struggles and yells and kicks, proceeded to bump him severely.

And Teddy Long, much to his disgust, was severely bumped on the spot (and a very painful spot, too) and his dreams of reaping a rich compensation were shattered.



CHAPTER 8.

Archie's Dilemma!

“YOU'RE wanted on the 'phone, Archie!” said Church, just before lessons.

“Who? Me?” said Archie Glenthorne, in astonishment.

“Yes, you.”

“Wanted on the 'phone?”

“Yes—by Marjorie,” said Church, with a grin.

“Oh, rather!” exclaimed Archie, brightening up. “What ho! Good old Marjorie, what? I mean to say, absolutely!”

He was thoroughly brought to himself by the mention of Marjorie Temple's name. Marjorie was one of the Moor View School girls, and she had always been Archie Glenthorne's particular chum. In less than a minute, Archie was in the Common-room, encased in the private call-box which was provided there. Every House at St. Frank's

had one of these semi-public telephone boxes installed for the use of the fellows.

“Here we are, dear old thing!” said Archie genially. “I mean to say, hallo!”

“Good morning, Archie,” came Marjorie's laughing tones over the wire.

“Oh, rather!” said Archie. “The same to you, old girl! Good morning, with four-wheeled brakes! I trust everything is all right, and so forth? I mean, it isn't usual for you to—”

“No, I know,” interrupted Marjorie. “It's just a reminder, Archie—that's all.”

“Good gad!” breathed Archie, trying to rack his brains. “A reminder? Oh, rather! But, the fact is, I can't quite—”

“I'm coming to tea this evening, Archie,” said Marjorie.

“Oh, are you? Topping!”

“But you invited me, Archie!” protested the girl.

“Odds blunders and horrors, did I?” said Archie, aghast. “Now I come to think of it, so I did! Absolutely! How pricelessly priceless! I observe that the sun is shining with ever greater brilliance, dear old soul! So you're trickling along to tea, what?”

“And I shall expect that fiver, Archie,” said Marjorie gently.

Archie nearly dropped the receiver.

“The—the-er-fiver?” he bleated. “I don't believe I quite caught—”

“Yes, you did, you boulder!” laughed

Marjorie. "Fiver was the word I used—and fiver was the word I meant. Don't tell me that you've forgotten all about it? You distinctly promised to contribute five pounds to the Bellton Church Renovations Fund, and I'm one of the collectors."

"Oh, rather! One of the collectors!" said Archie vaguely. "Absolutely! I see what you mean! You're one of the priceless people who go about collecting?"

"Yes, and I've got to hand in my collection box this evening," explained Marjorie. "And I am relying on that fiver of yours to make my total more than any of the other girls'. So you mustn't fail me, Archie!"

"Never!" said Archie Glenthorne stoutly. "A promise, I mean, is a promise. But—"

"That's awfully good of you, old man," said Marjorie gratefully. "We'll show them something, won't we? Well, cheerio—"

"But, I say!" gasped Archie. "About that business of showing them something—"

"Good-bye!" said Marjorie sweetly.

The line became dead, and Archie went limp.

"It's all very well to talk about showing them something, but I'm dashed if I shall be able to show Marjorie the fiver!" he murmured dismally. "Good gad! That is to say, odds predicaments and dilemmas!"

He staggered out of the telephone box, a picture of utter despair. Until that reminder from Marjorie, he had completely forgotten about the promised fiver. And, as Marjorie had said, it was important. She had to hand in her collection box that evening, and she was relying upon Archie's handsome contribution to make her total more than any of the other girls'.

And Archie, to tell the horrible truth, was broke.

He certainly had a few loose shillings in his pocket, and he had a vague idea that a ten shilling note was hidden away in one of the creases. But fivers were conspicuous by their absence. He had had three the previous night, but the mysterious thief had taken them. And it was quite impossible for Archie to get any money from his father until the morrow, at the earliest.

Of course, a very easy way out would be to tell Marjorie all about it, and ask her to wait. But this solution never occurred to Archie Glenthorne. He had very strict opinions about promises. He had told Marjorie that he would put five pounds into her collection box on this day, and it wasn't Marjorie's fault that a thief had come into the Ancient House, and had boned most of Archie's available cash.

Something, in fact, had to be done.

But what? He couldn't even go about borrowing, for he knew that everybody had spent all their available cash on the ice carnival. The Remove was in an unusual condition of leanness where cash was concerned. Even Vivian Travers, who usually rolled in money, had spent all his immediate supply.

"Phipps!" murmured Archie, as a thought struck him. "Good old Phipps will solve the problem."

He was relieved. Phipps, his valet, would undoubtedly be able to offer a suggestion. Archie glanced at his watch, and then he started violently.

"Absolutely!" he ejaculated breathlessly. "The good old gold ticker! Jewelled in every dashed hole, what? There shall be no appeal to Phipps, after all!"



CHAPTER 7.

The Plunge!

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE was beaming with contentment as he restored his watch to his pocket.

"Nothing easier!" he told himself. "I mean to say, when a chappie is absolutely up against it, his brain cells begin to throb like anything! And here we are, with the good old solution out and dried! A swift dash into Bannington, a dive into the good old pop-shop, and there you are! A fiver like a shot!"

Archie was glad that he had come to this decision.

He did not like to take his worries to anybody else—not even to Phipps. For one thing, Phipps was sometimes rather too outspoken regarding Archie's habit of carelessly leaving fivers in his study.

No, the simpler way would be to run into Bannington, and visit a pawnshop. Archie's noble susceptibilities jibbed slightly at the prospect. He didn't like going into pawnshops—but, at the same time, he recognised that pawnshops were necessary establishments. They were there to do business, so why shouldn't he help the cause?

Yet it must be confessed that Archie held that extraordinary view—so common among certain people—that it was degrading to be seen entering a pawnbroker's shop. It would upset him horribly if any of the other St. Frank's fellows got to know about his exploit. But, after all, there wasn't much danger. It wasn't a half-holiday to-day, so there was very little chance of any of the fellows being in the town.

Archie's independent spirit was clearly shown here. He had promised Marjorie that he would contribute a fiver to her fund that evening—so the fiver had to be obtained, by hook or by crook. He could easily have got it from his Housemaster, after explaining that he had lost fifteen pounds the previous evening. But that would have meant asking a favour, and Archie much preferred to get the money entirely on his own.

It was a curious point of view, for if any of the other juniors wanted to borrow off him, he was lavish in his response. If to had the money, he always lent it with a free

heart, and he thought none the less of the juniors for coming to him. Yet when it was his turn to borrow, he shrank from it.

Morning lessons were rather "ragtime" that day. Mr. Crowell was not taking the Remove as usual—for Mr. Crowell was recovering from his burns and scorchings, occasioned by the vindictive trick that Merrell and Marriott had played upon him—and the Remove was in charge of a prefect.

Also, the fellows were agog regarding the overnight robbery. All sorts of theories were floating about, and the juniors were wondering if their missing property would ever come back to them.

Archie was very pleased when lessons were over, and he lost no time in speeding to the bicycle shed, and getting out his jigger. When occasion demanded, the lackadaisical Archie could be as energetic as an electric hare.

He was off almost before any of the other fellows had come out of the School House, and he was quite certain that he had succeeded in getting away without being spotted. Not that it really mattered—for the juniors were frequently dashing off on their bicycles to the village during the interval between lessons and dinner.

It was a glorious day for cycling. The roads were still frozen hard, and there was a crisp freshness in the sunlit air. Overhead, the sky was blue, and it was a joy to be alive. Hard pedalling was necessary in order to keep warm, and Archie fairly hummed along the main Bannington road.

He arrived in the town flushed, warm and breathless. He had a vague idea that there was a pawnbroker's shop somewhere in the High Street. Indeed, he had sometimes expressed strong disapproval of this. He overlooked the fact that the pawnbroker had as much right there as any other trader.

"What ho!" he murmured, as his gaze roved up and down the wide thoroughfare.

He had spotted the mystic sign—the three golden globes—and, rather to his relief, he now found that the pawnbroker's shop was, to all intents and purposes, a very high-class jeweller's. He wouldn't lose any of his dignity by walking into an establishment of this kind.

So he propped his bicycle against the curb, looked ostentatiously into the window for some moments, as though selecting some article of value, and then he walked into the shop. A lean individual appeared from his lair almost at once, and he regarded Archie appraisingly.

"Absolutely!" said Archie, fumbling with his waistcoat. "I mean to say—The fact is, dear old soul, funds are a trifle low. What about popping the old ticker? Or, in other words, kindly advance me five of the best—"

"Pledge department round the corner!" said the lean individual.

"Eh?"

"You will find the pledge department round the corner!"

"Oh, rather!" ejaculated Archie. "You mean round the corner? Exactly! Not—not here?"

He wandered out in a daze, and then he discovered that there was a little alley at right-angles to the High Street. Glancing down this, Archie was horrified to see a big board projecting from a narrow doorway. And on the board, for all the world to see, were the words: "Pledge Department."

"Good gad!" ejaculated the swell of the Remove. "How frightfully frightful!"

But there was no help for it. He took a quick glance up and down, and he saw that the coast was clear. In about two seconds Archie was inside, only to be mystified. For he now found himself confronted by six or seven extremely narrow doors, all in a row.



CHAPTER 8.

A Startling Discovery!

DDS puzzles and mysteries!" breathed Archie helplessly.

He had never seen anything like it.

There was a narrow kind of passage, dimly lit, and there were these curious doors, all in a row. There weren't any handles on them, and when Archie pushed at the nearest door it swung inwards.

"I gather that the idea is for a chappie to take his choice," he murmured. "Well, let's have a shot."

He pushed open the door, and passed through. Now he found himself in a tiny cubicle, all to himself. On the other side was a wide counter, and the wall of the cubicle extended over a portion of this counter, so that it was impossible for him to see into the next tiny compartment.

Behind the big counter was a space, and then a vast array of shelves, filled with strange-looking bundles. Archie was further fascinated by an extraordinary penholder on the counter, almost in front of him. He blinked, for it seemed to him that the penholder contained three nibs, all joined together by some species of machinery.

"We live and learn," murmured Archie mildly. "But I must say that of all the frightful places that a chappie could trundle into, this is the dashed frightfullest! I mean, I feel like some prisoner, awaiting his turn in the dock!"

He came to the conclusion that his preconceived ideas of pawnshops was quite correct. There was urgent need for revision. Why couldn't pawnshops conduct their affairs like any other respectable business? Why couldn't they make it possible for customers to enter without advertising their purpose to all and sundry?

Just then Archie gave a sort of jump, and his eyeglass dropped out of his eye and clattered on to the counter.

"Good gad!" he breathed amazedly.

He was staring fascinatedly at something on the counter—something just beyond the edge of that partition near him. It was a pencil—a gold pencil, with a quaintly-designed seal at the end.

He bent over the counter and looked at the pencil more closely. And his first impression was right. It was his own! It was the gold pencil that had been taken from Study E the previous evening!

And here it was, in this pawnshop!

It was small wonder that Archie Glenhorne was startled. So the thieves had been pawning the loot. They hadn't lost much time about it apparently! Quite unconsciously, Archie reached forward to pick the pencil up—so that he could give it a closer examination. He wanted to be absolutely sure, and once he fingered the pencil he would know beyond all shadow of doubt, for his initials were engraved upon it.

"Now then, sir, what's the game?" asked a suspicious voice.

"Eh? Oh, here you are!" said Archie, with a gulp. "Absolutely! The fact is, I was just—One moment, laddie! Do you mind if I have a look at that pencil?"

The pawnbroker's assistant had taken the pencil, and he was about to place it on a ledge against the opposite wall—far out of reach. But he paused now, and looked at Archie inquiringly.

"What do you want it for?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing much, but if you'll let me examine it for a moment I shall be frightfully obliged."

The man handed it over, and he watched Archie curiously. Of course, the pencil was the elegant junior's. He had known it from the first. There, engraved upon it, were his initials. Yet Archie was shrewd enough to realise that he couldn't claim it. It had been pawned by somebody else, and, as far as the pawnbroker was aware, Archie had no claim to it whatever.

"Thanks, most awfully," said Archie, as he handed it back. "I suppose you couldn't tell me who popped it?"

"You are quite right," said the pawnbroker. "I couldn't."

"Eh? You mean to say that you won't—?"

"Look here, young gent, what's your game?" asked the man impatiently. "I can't waste my time in answering your silly questions. That pencil oughtn't to have been there, and you haven't any right to question me about it."

"Yes, but you see—"

"Do you want to redeem a pledge, or what?" asked the man.

"Well, the fact is, I'm a bit broke," explained Archie. "Now, this ticker of mine is a pretty juicy proposition. Absolutely made of gold, with cogs, and springs, and everything."

"Let's have a look at it," said the pawnbroker, holding out his hand.

Archie parted with his watch, vaguely aware that he didn't like this fellow at all. Somehow, the pawnbroker aroused in him a

feeling of animosity. But Archie was raw at this kind of thing. He didn't know that these gentlemen were compelled, by the very nature of their business, to be brusque and curt. It was second nature to them—especially on Saturday afternoons and Monday mornings.

"This is a good watch," said the pawnbroker, in a tone of surprise, and giving Archie an even more suspicious glance. "Now I come to look at you more closely, you're from the big school, aren't you?"

"Dash it, does that make any difference?"

"Well, I can lend you ten pounds on this watch, if you like," replied the pawnbroker, satisfied that this customer was *bona fide*.

"Sorry I can't make it more—"

"A tanner?" repeated Archie. "Oh, absolutely! To tell the honest truth, old bean, I was only going to ask for a fiver. But now you come to mention it, it might be a juicy scheme to have a trifle more."

Considering that the watch was worth about fifty pounds, the pawnbroker was not taking much risk. But Archie was perfectly satisfied. He watched, fascinatedly, while the ticket was made out—in fact, three tickets together, all with the same penholder. This was something weird and wonderful to the genial ass of the Remove.

Then, with ten pounds in his pocket, to say nothing of a pawnticket—which, for some reason, he felt heartily ashamed of—he sallied out. As he turned the corner into the High Street he uttered a gasp.

For over on the other side of the road were Handforth & Co., Irene Manners—yes, and Marjorie herself!



CHAPTER 9.

Archie the Sleuth!

DURING that tense moment, Archie Glenhorne was paralysed. He stood there, staring blankly.

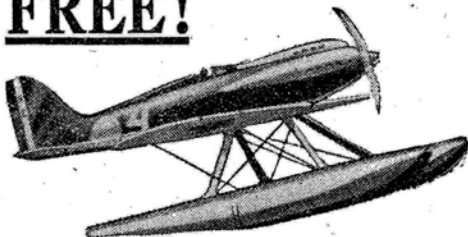
Truth to tell, he had been very preoccupied as he left the "Pledge Department." He had been thinking of that gold pencil of his, and he had been wondering what he should do about it. The pawnbroker wouldn't give him any information, and he couldn't very well see how he could make any discoveries on his own account.

But all these thoughts were driven out of his head now.

He saw that Nipper was among the crowd, too—Nipper and Reggie Pitt and Vivian Travers. To Archie's startled gaze it seemed that the whole of Bannington High Street was filled with St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls. And he had confidently expected that he would have the town to himself! Of course, they had just arrived on their bicycles—probably for the sake of the run in the crisp, wintry air.

(Continued on page 14.)

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For a fellow who was credited with having virtually no brain capacity, Archie Glen-thorne acted with remarkable promptitude. He spun round like lightning, and dodged into the alley again. If only he could keep out of sight for a bit, all would be well. But he remembered that the fellows and the girls had been walking in this direction. Very shortly they would come opposite the alley—and they would spot him.

"To earth, laddie—to earth!" he murmured.

The only possible haven of refuge was the "Pledge Department" again. He had a dim impression that somebody had just entered—having passed down the alley while he had been on the main pavement. Archie caught a glimpse of a leg vanishing through that doorway, but, at the time, he paid no attention to it.

He shot into the same cubicle that he had just vacated, and he leaned against the partition, breathing hard. He was aware of voices close by.

It now occurred to Archie that he would have to give some explanation of his presence here. Well, that was easy. The pawnbroker would understand when he told the simple truth. He would say that he didn't want to be seen by his schoolfellows, and the blighter behind the counter would probably appreciate the position.

So Archie went to the counter and looked over it. The pawnbroker was just a little further along, opposite the next cubicle. He gave Archie a glance and nodded.

"Just a minute, young gent," he said briefly.

He gave his attention to some articles on the counter, and Archie understood that he was dealing with another customer. The swell of the Ancient House found himself looking abstractedly at the things that had just been handed across.

And then, for the second time, Archie gave a jump.

"Well, I'm dashed!" he breathed. "That is to say, I'm not only dashed, but blowed! Absolutely!"

For he found himself gazing at a pair of platinum cuff-links that were, without question, his own property! He saw that the pawnbroker was handling a camera that had certainly been in De Valerie's study the previous evening. Yes, and a band had just come into sight, with an expensive fountain-pen in its fingers.

"This, too," said a voice.

It was a voice that Archie took a dislike to on the spot.

And he knew that on the other side of that partition stood the thief!

He quivered all over!

There, in that next cubicle, was the rascal who had entered the Ancient House during the ice carnival, and who had stolen the goods from the Junior studies! Here he was—and Archie felt his heart beating rapidly when he came to the conclusion that this was an excellent opportunity for him to catch the culprit red-handed!

He craned over the counter, trying to look into the next cubicle, but he found the pawnbroker staring at him with cold, fishy eyes.

"That's about enough of that, my lad!" said the man. "What's the game?"

"Oh, rather!" babbled Archie. "But the fact is, you see, those dashed things—"

Before he could get any further a roar sounded in his rear. He spun round round, and found Edward Oswald Handforth in the narrow doorway. Behind Handforth were Church and McClure, Ralph Leslie Fullwood, Nipper and several other juniors. They were all grinning their widest, and a shout of laughter went up.

"Oh, Archie!" roared a chorus.

"Good gad!" bleated Archie helplessly.

"We've caught you, my lad!" said Handforth accusingly. "Great Scott! What the dickens do you mean by being in this place? Come on—out of it!"

"Oh, I say, really!" protested Archie. "Odds horrors! You absolutely don't understand—"

"We understand that you're in this pop shop!" said Handforth. "By George! I shouldn't have thought it of you, Archie! It seems to me that we've arrived in the nick of time! If you want some money, we'll club together and advance it! We're not going to let you put your shirt up the spout!"

"You frightful ass!" shouted Archie. "I hadn't the slightest intention of parting with my shirt! Dash it, how could a chappie appear in public without a shirt?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Grab him!"

"Yes, rather—drag him out!"

And Archie, in spite of his protestations, was firmly seized and hauled backwards out of the cubicle. The pawnbroker, in the meantime, was making all sorts of protests. Not that the St. Frank's juniors took the slightest notice. They didn't care what the pawnbroker thought, or what the pawnbroker did. They had come here to drag Archie out of this place, and they did it.



CHAPTER 10.

Very Surprising!

ARCHIE GLEN-THORNE straightened his ruffled collar, and tried to assume an air of dignity.

"I'm frightfully wild!" he said hotly. "I regard you all as a crowd of poisonous blighters!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Archie—reduced to pawning his necktie!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie, clutching at his throat. "You don't mean to tell me

that my necktie— Absolutely not! It's still here. If you want to know the truth, dash you, I've popped my ticker!"

"Your gold watch, Archie?" asked Nipper sadly. "Things *have* come to a pass!"

They were standing on the main pavement now, and Archie was mortified to see that Marjorie Temple and the other girls were all near by; they were smiling as broadly as any of the juniors.

"How much did you get on it?" demanded Handforth.

"A tenner, dash you!"

"Oh, I say!" burst out Marjorie, suddenly losing her smile. "Is it true, Archie? Have you really pawned your watch for ten pounds?"

"Absolutely!"

"Then you must have done it because of— Oh, you fellows!" said Marjorie, turning to the others. "It's not fair to chip Archie like this! I didn't realise it before, but he must have pawned his watch for my sake!"

"Your sake?" asked Handforth blankly.

"Yes!" said the girl. "You were telling me about the robbery last night, and you said that Archie had lost fifteen pounds."

"That's right," said Nipper. "By Jove, you don't mean to say, Archie—"

"I mean to say nothing, you frightful ass!" said Archie coldly.

"I particularly asked him to contribute something to the Church Fund," explained Marjorie. "It was Archie's idea, of course, to make the sum five pounds—and he promised it some days ago. He said that he would give it to me this evening. And when he realised that he was broke, he came here—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, it's not fair to laugh at him!" protested Marjorie. "I think Archie is a sportsman!"

"And so do we all!" said Nipper, giving Archie a hearty clap on the back. "Good man! Rather than disappoint Marjorie, you popped your watch, eh? That was fine of you, Archie!"

Archie felt slightly mollified.

"I tried to dodge you," he explained. "In fact, I thought I had oozed away without any eagle eyes spotting me."

"And so you did!" grinned Nipper. "We saw nothing of you, old man, until we entered the pawnshop."

"Eh? Then how— I mean—"

"Your bike!" chuckled McClure. "You left your bike outside, Archie. Very careless of you!"

"Well, I'm dashed!" said Archie. "I'd forgotten all about my dashed bike, dash it! But, look here, talking about that robbery," he added, in a lower voice, "here's a chance for us to get frightfully busy. It was just

like you chappies to come barging in at the wrong moment."

"What do you mean—barging in at the wrong moment?" asked Nipper.

"The thief is in that pawnshop now!"

"What!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie.

"He's in the pawnshop now?" ejaculated Handforth, startled.

"I saw the blighter!" nodded Archie. "At least, I saw one of his hands."

"Only one of his hands?"

"Well, you see, those dashed pill-box things are partitioned off, so that one chappie can't see the next chappie," explained Archie. "Not a bad idea when you come to think of it."

"Never mind about that, Archie," said Nipper quickly. "The thief was in the next cubicle to you, you say?"

"Absolutely!"

"How on earth do you know it?" asked Handforth. "You say you only saw the chap's hand, so how do you know he was the thief?"

"Because he was pawning the things that were pinched!" explained Archie. "Why, dash it, I saw my own gold pencil, and my platinum links, and De Valerie's camera—"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" ejaculated Nipper tensely. "And we barged in just at that moment! I can see it now, you chaps! The thief has been pawning the stolen property, and he's in there now!"

"Come on!" bellowed Handforth.

They piled into the "Pledge Department" like an avalanche, leaving the surprised girls out in the main road. But, of course, the customer had now gone. During the delay he had completed his transaction, and he was no longer within grasp.

"What's all this?" shouted the pawnbroker angrily, as he stared at the packed cubicles. "Confound it! You can't do this sort of thing, you boys! Why can't you behave yourselves?"

"It's all right!" said Nipper. "Don't get excited. Who was the customer who was in here five minutes ago—the man who pawned some platinum links and a camera?"

The pawnbroker glared.

"I'm not here to tell my customers' business to you!" he retorted.

"Then you'll have to tell it to somebody else!" said Nipper. "Those things were stolen property!"

The pawnbroker changed colour slightly, and an anxious expression swept over his face.

"Stolen property!" he said, with a little stammer. "How do you know that?"

"Because some of the things belong to us!" yelled Handforth. "There was a robbery at St. Frank's last night, and lots of fountain-pens and silver pencils and things were taken away. The thief has been in here pawning them! We want to know who he is!"



CHAPTER 11.

A Queer Turn!

THE pawnbroker, obviously agitated, waved both his hands.

"Now then, young gentlemen—now then!" he said. "Don't make all this noise! I don't want a lot of attention attracted to the establishment. For all I know, this is just one of your practical jokes."

"It's not!" said Nipper earnestly. "I'm jolly sure that Glenthorne hasn't made any mistake—"

"Absolutely not!" said Archie. "I ought to know my own dashed gold pencil when I see it—especially as it's got my initials engraved on it."

"Oh, so that's why you wanted to see the pencil?" asked the pawnbroker.

"Absolutely," nodded Archie. "And those platinum cuff-links—"

"Just a minute!" said the man. "I think I'd better fetch the guv'nor. This thing's too big for me."

He hurried away, and in less than a minute he returned with an elderly, bent man of gentlemanly appearance.

"This is Mr. Salford," said the pawnbroker. "He's the boss. You boys had better tell him what you've just been telling me."

Mr. Salford listened with interest—and concern—as he heard the story of the robbery at St. Frank's.

"And these articles that you saw are the ones that were stolen?" he inquired, at length.

"H'm! I don't know what to do about it. They were pawned in the ordinary way of business, and I cannot possibly let you have the goods."

"Of course you can't," admitted Nipper. "We don't want them, in any case."

"Don't we?" said Handforth.

"I mean, we don't want them now," said Nipper. "But if you'll give us the name of the man who pawned the goods, Mr. Salford, we might be able to get on his track."

"I think you'd far better go to the police," said the pawnbroker anxiously.

"No, our headmaster doesn't want the police to be brought into it," said Nipper.

"He doesn't, eh?" said Mr. Salford, with relief. "That's good hearing, anyhow! As far as I'm concerned, I would much prefer the unhappy business to be settled privately. What was the man like who pawned the goods?" added Mr. Salford, turning to his assistant.

"A smallish sort of chap—with a bluey kind of chin," said the other. "He wasn't a local man at all—although he looked respectable enough. I brought you those platinum links, Mr. Salford, and asked you

if you thought it was all right to take them in."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Mr. Salford. "Well, boys, in the circumstances, I suppose I'd better waive a point, and let you know the name of the man who pawned these things."

And he gave it. The name was "Robert West," and the address was an obscure one in New Cross, London, S.E.

"Thanks," said Nipper, as he made a note. "I'm going to tell Mr. Lee about this—he's the Housemaster of my House, and you may have heard of him as a detective, too. He's got the affair in hand, and he'll probably make a few discreet inquiries on his own."

"I do hope that nothing will be made public, young gentlemen," said Mr. Salford earnestly. "It wouldn't do my business any good if the Bannington public knew that I had been taking in stolen property. But the Bannington people are inclined to be narrow-minded, and—"

"That's all right, you can rely on us," said Nipper. "Come on, you chaps. We've got to buzz back, and report this thing to the guv'nor."

Outside, they held a brief consultation, and Archie received many congratulations for his smart piece of detective work. Not that Archie claimed any credit.

Within five minutes, they were all pedalling back towards St. Frank's, and the girls kept pace with the boys easily. They parted outside the school gates, and there was still some little time to spare before the dinner bell would ring.

As it happened, Nelson Lee was coming out of the Ancient House just as the juniors got off their bicycles in the Triangle. They all ran up to him in a crowd.

"Steady!" said the Housemaster, with a smile. "What's all this?"

"We're on the track of the thief, sir!" said Handforth eagerly.

"Splendid!" smiled Lee dryly.

"It happens to be true, sir," said Nipper. "It was Archie who spotted the rotter—"

"Oh, come!" protested Archie. "Dash it, come! I mean to say—"

Nipper briefly explained the circumstances, and Nelson Lee's expression changed as he heard the details. Without any question, the juniors had got on the track.

"Yes, this is very interesting," said Lee, at last. "Of course, the name means nothing—and the address less than nothing. But I am very surprised that the man should have pawned these goods locally. I am very surprised indeed."

"Why, sir?"

"Because it indicates— Well, Nipper, it gives this case a very queer turn," said Nelson Lee slowly. "Yes, a very queer turn! I don't like it at all! It is far worse than I had believed."



Archie gave a gasp of amazement as he saw the pawnbroker handling a camera, and saw a hand holding an expensive fountain-pen appear from the other side of the partition. For Archie recognised those articles. They were some of the things that had been stolen from St. Frank's!

The juniors couldn't understand it. Nelson Lee was looking very startled and worried.

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

"I had believed that this robbery was something in the nature of a practical joke," replied Nelson Lee, as he and Nipper moved away from the others. "But this looks bad, young 'un."

"It proves that the thief is a real wrong 'un, if that's what you mean, sir."

"That is exactly what I do mean," replied the Housemaster-detective. "Can't you understand, Nipper, the significance of it? The thief has learned that no police inquiries are to be made—that there is to be no publicity whatever over this robbery. He therefore knew that it would be perfectly safe for him to pawn these goods in the local town."

Nipper stared.

"But that means that the thief must be somebody belonging to St. Frank's, sir!" he protested.

"Exactly!" said Lee grimly. "That's why, I am worried, Nipper!"



CHAPTER 12.

Thrashing It Out!

"SOMEBODY belonging to St. Frank's!" repeated Nipper, in a startled voice. "Well I'm jiggered!"

It's—it's awful, sir! But who could it have been?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Guess, giv' nor?" said Nipper, staring. "How the dickens can I guess, when there's nothing to go upon? Everybody was at the ice carnival with the exception of Archie Glenthorne and Merrell and Marriott!"

"With the exception of Archie Glenthorne, and Merrell and Marriott!" nodded Nelson Lee significantly.

"Eh? Oh, dash it, we know that Archie wouldn't do it, and those two East House fellows were locked in the Punishment Room!" said Nipper, staring. "I was one of the fellows who helped to put them in,

and— Great Scott! You don't mean to say that you suspect Merrell and Marriott, sir?" he added blankly.

"I very much regret to tell you, Nipper, that I do suspect them!" said Lee, with a hard note in his voice. "What's more, my suspicions are founded on very reliable evidence."

"My goodness!" breathed Nipper. "But—but I don't get hold of it, sir! They were locked in—even while the thefts were taking place."

"I imagine that was why the thefts *did* occur," said Lee cryptically.

"Because Merrell and Marriott were locked in?"

"Exactly."

"But how could they pinch the things while they were locked in the Punishment Room?" asked Nipper, in exasperation. "I say, guv'nor, you are tantalising, you know!"

"And yet, if you only used your wits, you would see the thing quite clearly," chuckled Nelson Lee. "Not that there is any reason for me to speak so lightheartedly. This looks like being a grave affair."

"I've got it, sir!" said Nipper, with a sudden jump. "The key! Handforth had the key of the Punishment Room last night, and I wondered what the dickens you were getting at when you asked him, before breakfast, if he had lost it. Now I'm beginning to get a glimmering of the truth."

"Ah, your brain is not quite so dormant, after all," said Lee dryly. "Yes, Nipper—Handforth had possession of the Punishment Room key, and that is a very significant fact. I understand that Merrell and Marriott were brought to the school by a crowd of you boys, and that you locked them in the Punishment Room, after releasing Glenthorne."

"But even now I can't quite see——"

"It was obvious to me that these thefts had been committed by an amateur," continued Nelson Lee. "Indeed, the whole affair was unconvincing. The masked intruder, and the fight in Glenthorne's study. It all smacked of a schoolboy jape. Real burglars do not wear masks, neither do pilfering tramps. And as soon as I heard from Handforth that he had lost the key of the Punishment Room, I easily put two and two together."

"That means that you were suspicious of Merrell and Marriott from the start, sir?"

"It does," agreed Lee. "I was dissatisfied with their statement at the very beginning; and I at once saw the explanation when I heard about that key. Try to imagine the position, Nipper. Merrell and Marriott had been thrust into that Punishment Room, and they knew that everybody was absent at the ice carnival. Then, unexpectedly, they found that the key had been left in the lock, and that the door was open."

"But the key was found out in the Triangle——"

"Let me finish!" said Lee. "One of these young rascals, I assume, conceived the idea

of impersonating a burglar. He therefore crept down into the deserted House, with the intention of 'lifting' as many valuable things as he could lay his hands on. Unexpectedly, he came upon Glenthorne in Study E, and that rather spoilt the game."

"So it was Merrell whom Archie grappled with?"

"Merrell or Marriott," said Nelson Lee. "I rather think Merrell is the ringleader of this unpleasant game. Anyhow, he fled, and after Glenthorne had slipped over in the Triangle Merrell dodged back into the Ancient House, ran upstairs, locked himself into the Punishment Room, and threw the key out of the window."

"Into the Triangle?" said Nipper, with a whistle. "By Jove, and Church found it in the Triangle!"

"By a lucky chance, Church found it there, and gave it back to Handforth," continued Lee, nodding. "Nobody else knew anything about the loss of that key at the time, and Handforth naturally assumed that he had dropped it. Clearly, Merrell and Marriott could not be accused of the theft, since they were supposed to be locked up in the Punishment Room. Actually, of course, the Punishment Room door was accidentally left unlocked, and these two rascals were able to get out. I might as well tell you quite frankly, Nipper, that the button I found in Glenthorne's study belongs to Merrell, of the East House."

"Then—then it's not merely a theory?" asked Nipper, pursing his lips. "You've actually proved that the thief was Merrell!"

"Yes, I have proved it, although I have taken no action," said Lee. "I was waiting for the young rascals to replace the stolen goods. As I told you, I believed that it was merely a practical joke. But this latest news alters the complexion of the whole case."

"I should think it does!" said Nipper grimly. "By Jove, sir, no wonder you were startled just now! Those rascals have started pawing the stolen goods! It wasn't a jape at all. They stole the things with the deliberate intention of sticking to them!"

"It looks like it, Nipper," said Nelson Lee slowly. "But it isn't always safe to judge by appearances."



CHAPTER 13.

Handforth On The Scent!

ARMSTRONG, of the Fourth, bustled excitedly into the lobby of the East House.

"Heard the latest,

you chaps?" he sang out.

"About the Remove robbery?" asked Clapson.

"Yes," said Armstrong. "I haven't heard anything definitely, but there are rumours going about. The chaps are saying that some

of the stolen things have been popped in Bannington!"

"Popped!"

"Shoved up the spout!" grinned Armstrong. "In other words, pawned!"

"Well, the thief has been pretty quick about it, hasn't he?" asked Griffith. "And wasn't he a bit rash to pawn them in Bannington?"

"I don't believe it!" said Clapson bluntly. "You've just admitted that it's only a rumour, Armstrong. Where's the sense of going about spreading yarns of that sort?"

Armstrong frowned.

"Long, of the Remove, heard it first," he said coldly.

"Very reliable chap—Long!" scoffed Clapson.

"He edged up to Handforth and some of those other fellows, and you know what Handforth is for jabbering," said Armstrong. "Long overheard something about Glen-thorne's gold pencil. Handforth was saying that it had been pawned, but when Long asked a few questions he was bumped and booted off."

"Serve him right, too!" said Griffith.

None of these Fourth-Formers noticed the startled expressions on the faces of Merrell and Marriott, who happened to be passing through the lobby at the moment. But it was a fact that Merrell and Marriott went very pale. They exchanged glances that were expressive of dire alarm. Then they went out into the Triangle, and didn't stop until they were well on the other side of the fountain. They came to a halt in the quietness of West Arch, and they looked at one another like a pair of startled rabbits.

"Those things are being pawned!" gasped Marriott frantically.

"Be quiet, you idiot!" hissed Merrell, as a shadow fell across the archway.

But it was too late! Those few words of Marriott's had been uttered with such shrill fear that they had easily reached the ears of Edward Oswald Handforth as he walked by. And Handforth came to a sudden halt, and he bestowed the full power of his celebrated glare on the East House pair.

"Oh," said Handforth, "what have we here? By George, you two fellows are looking as pale as anything! Have you seen a ghost, or what?"

"We've seen you!" snapped Merrell. "And that's enough to make anybody go pale!"

"You cheeky rotter!" roared Handforth. "If you give me any of your rot—"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Merrell, trying to compose himself. "What are you implying, anyway?"

"There's something fishy about this!" said Handforth, with sudden excitement. "I've been thinking about you fellows, and I believe you know something about that robbery!"

"We—we don't!" panted Marriott wildly.

His manner was suspicious in itself, even to Handforth's intelligence.

"What should we know about it?" asked Merrell savagely. "You know as well as I

do, Handforth, that we were locked in the Punishment Room while the robbery was taking place—"

"But were you locked in the Punishment Room?" interrupted Handforth, with extraordinary shrewdness—for him. "There's something rummy about the key. I had the key, but I'm jiggered if I remember locking you in! And the key was found by Church, afterwards, in the Triangle! I don't believe I locked you rotters in at all. That's why I've been thinking so deeply. What do you know about this robbery?"

"Nun-nothing!" gasped Marriott. "We—we didn't mean to steal the things, really—"

"Shut up!" roared Merrell.

"That's enough!" thundered Handforth. "So you didn't mean to steal the things really, eh? That means that you took 'em, eh? I've solved the mystery! I've got the culprits! Hi, you fellows—quick!"

Before Merrell and Marriott could get away, Church and McClure and Fullwood and Travers and a number of other juniors came hurrying up.

"There they are!" said Handforth, pointing accusingly. "They're the thieves!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cheese it, Handy!"

"Tell us another joke!"

"Marriott has just confessed!" roared Handforth. "He didn't mean to, but—"

"It's a lie!" panted Merrell. "You flustered the ass so much that he didn't know what he was saying. Everybody knows that Marriott and I were locked in the Punishment Room while the robbery was taking place."

"That's right, Handy," said Fullwood. "Do be sensible!"

"But you don't understand!" howled Handforth. "I forgot to lock the door of the Punishment Room last night!"

"What?"

"And these two rotters were able to get out!" went on Edward Oswald. "That's the explanation of the whole mystery. Let's grab them and take them to Mr. Lee! That'll be the quickest way out of the whole business!"

And many hands seized the cowering Merrell and Marriott!



CHAPTER 14.

A Very Thin Story!

NELSON LEE and Nipper were standing by the Ancient House steps, talking earnestly, when the crowd of fellows came bustling up, with Merrell and Marriott in their midst.

"Here you are, sir!" sang out Handforth triumphantly. "We've got 'em!"

Nelson Lee frowned for a moment. In that second he knew that it would no longer be possible to keep the truth hidden concerning

Merrell and Marriott. Then his face cleared. Perhaps it was just as well for the school to know all about it. There would at least be an end to all the rumours that were going about.

"Oh, so you have solved the mystery, Handforth?" asked Nelson Lee smoothly. "Splendid! And these are the culprits? I congratulate you upon your smartness."

"I don't want to boast, sir, and I don't want to crow over you," said Handforth modestly, "but I hope you'll admit that I've beaten you this time?"

"You silly ass!" said Nipper indignantly. "Mr. Lee told me that Merrell and Marriott were the culprits ten minutes ago."

"What!"

"The gov'nor discovered it by a process of elucidation," went on Nipper. "I expect you arrived at the solution by accident."

"Of course he did!" snarled Merrell. "It was Marriott's silly tongue that gave us away."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Handy—robbed of his glory!" chuckled Vivian Travers. "Too bad, dear old fellow!"

Merrell was pushing his way forward, and his face was alight with alarm.

"Look here, sir, it's all wrong!" he panted, clutching at Nelson Lee's arm.

"Marriott and I didn't pawn anything! It's all a rumour! We only took the things for a joke."

"You admit taking them, then, Merrell?" asked Lee sternly.

"Yes, sir," said the Fourth-Former, in a wretched voice. "We—we didn't mean anything serious. But when we found that the door of the Punishment Room was unlocked, we thought it would be a good idea to get some of our own back on the Remove chaps. We were going to put everything back to-night, and then watch the faces of the Removites to-morrow morning when they found all their goods again."

"You must realise, Merrell, that we only have your word for this," said Nelson Lee gravely.

"But it's true, sir—we swear it!" panted Marriott.

"How were you going to put the things back after you'd pawned them?" demanded Handforth witheringly. "I suppose you mean that you were going to put the pawn-tickets back?"

"No, no!" shouted Merrell. "We haven't pawned anything, I tell you! It was only a joke—a bit of fun! We haven't been out of the school since yesterday—we're both gated. So how could we have pawned them?"

"You'd better make a clean breast of all this, Merrell," said Nelson Lee. "We know how you got out of the Punishment Room, and we know that you went from study to study taking every valuable article that you could lay your hands on. Did Marriott join you in this expedition?"

"No, sir!" gasped Marriott. "It was Merrell's idea, and I was upstairs all the time!"

"That's true, sir," admitted Merrell. "He was too funky to join in."

"And Glenthorne?" asked Lee. "You did not attack Glenthorne?"

"Only in the study, sir—and it wasn't much," replied Merrell. "I was more scared than he was. He bolted after me, and skidded over in the Triangle. I didn't touch him there, sir—it was just an accident."

"Well, I am prepared to take your word for that, Merrell," nodded Lee. "But about this stolen property? You have told me that you only took it as a practical joke. In that case, where is the stuff now?"

"We'll show you, sir," said Merrell eagerly. "That'll prove that there's been a mistake, won't it? Nothing's been pawned, sir—it couldn't have been! You'll find everything in the hiding-place, just as we left it late last night."

"Is this hiding-place near by?" asked Lee.

"I put it under the floor of the boathouse, sir," said Merrell. "You see, after I bunked, I dumped everything in the shrubbery. But I couldn't leave it there, so later on, when everybody had gone to bed, I sneaked out and put the things under a loose board in the boathouse. My plan was to go there again to-night, and to nip into the Ancient House and to put everything back—"

"Yes, you said that before, Merrell," interrupted Nelson Lee. "The main thing, at the moment, is to recover this property. We shall go to the boathouse at once."

"Thanks awfully, sir!" panted Merrell eagerly. "That's just what I want! It'll prove that I've been telling the truth—that there wasn't any idea of really stealing the things. On my word, sir, it was only a joke!" he added desperately.

Nelson Lee looked at him searchingly.

"I hope you are telling me the truth, Merrell," he said, after a moment. "But come! This affair is still in a very unsatisfactory state, and we must do our best to straighten it out."

They hurried towards the boathouse, over the playing fields. Needless to say, Handforth & Co., Fullwood, Reggie Pitt, and a host of other fellows followed at a respectful distance behind. They weren't going to be left out of this investigation, for it promised to be very interesting, considering what had already transpired!

CHAPTER 15.

A Shock for Merrell and Marriott!



HE boathouse was reached after a few minutes' brisk walk, and the bulk of the crowd hung back

while Nelson Lee opened one of the doors

and strode in. Nipper and Merrell and Marriott followed. The rest pressed nearer, so that they should miss nothing of what took place. They were in constant fear of being ordered away.

"Now, Merrell, show me this hiding-place," said Nelson Lee briefly.

"It's here, sir," said the Fourth-Former, running forward and bending down in one corner of the building. "Here we are, sir—this board. You see, it's a bit loose."

He tugged at it, and with a sudden jerk it came free, revealing a hollow cavity underneath. At the other end of the board-house the river ran beneath the flooring, but here there was only the frozen ground.

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Merrell, in a stricken voice. "It's—it's all gone!"

"Gone?" shrieked Marriott.

"Somebody has taken it all, sir!" panted Merrell, pale to the lips.

Nelson Lee was quite unperturbed.

"In the circumstances, Merrell, I expected nothing else," he said coldly. "The story you heard about some of the goods being pawned is no rumour. Now, my boy, you had better realise the gravity of this situation. You took those articles from the junior studies of the Ancient House, and some of them have already been disposed of."

"I am not a thief, sir!" sobbed Merrell, breaking down. "Oh, sir, you don't believe it? I don't know how the things have gone, or who's taken them! Somebody must have been watching last night—a tramp, perhaps. I swear that I didn't mean to—"

"You had better come with me, Merrell," interrupted Nelson Lee grimly. "No, Marriott, not you. I am quite satisfied that you had nothing whatever to do with this escapade."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" bleated Marriott, nearly reeling with relief.

"A fine sort of yarn!" Handforth was saying, in a tone of scorn. "He hasn't fooled you, has he, sir?"

"We will not discuss the matter, Handforth," replied Lee quietly.

"But—but it's all a spoof, sir!" ejaculated Handforth. "We all know what a liar Merrell is, and it's as clear as daylight that he's got a confederate somewhere."

"Hear, hear!"

"It's all a put-up job!"

"Merrell acts very convincingly, but it's a bit too thin!" said somebody else. "Of course he knows where the stuff has gone to, and I expect he was going to share in the profits, too!"

"Yah, thief!"

"Somebody ought to send for the police!" Nelson Lee turned to the juniors sternly.

"Let there be no more of this!" he said. "I am surprised at you, boys! Let there be no condemning of Merrell until the facts are all threshed out."

They looked rather sheepish—particularly Handforth.

"Sorry, sir!" said the leader of Study D. "I take back what I just said. Goodness knows I don't want to be unjust!"

Handforth was always ready to admit himself in the wrong—and he generally did so handsomely. But the others were only silent.

"I want you all to keep this matter to yourselves," went on Nelson Lee earnestly. "No good will come of a lot of talk. So don't spread any more rumours. If you are questioned, say that you have been forbidden to speak. Can I rely upon you to carry out my wishes?"

"Yes, sir!" chorused the crowd.

Nelson Lee said no more, but he walked off with Merrell by his side. Not that he had any real hope that the juniors would stick to the letter of their promise. They were junior schoolboys—and their tongues were necessarily energetic.

"Now, Merrell, I am inclined to believe this story of yours," said Lee, not unkindly.

"Oh, thank you, sir!" breathed Merrell.

"Honestly, it was only a joke, sir."

"Perhaps you had better realise, Merrell, that I have suspected you from the very first," went on the Housemaster-detective. "And, that being so, I made many discreet inquiries this morning. You will materially help your case if you are frank with me."

"I have been frank, sir!" protested Merrell.

"After prayers this morning you had a conversation over the telephone," continued Nelson Lee relentlessly. "With whom did you communicate, Merrell—and why?"

The Fast House junior turned deathly pale again.

"Nobody, sir!" he gasped. "I—I didn't—"

"Lying will do you a great deal of harm, Merrell!" interrupted Lee sharply. "Somebody telephoned to you this morning, and you were in conversation with him for some minutes. Come now! Out with it!"

Merrell crumpled up.

"You're suspecting me of having a confederate, aren't you, sir?" he said, with a wild look in his eyes. "But you're wrong! It was only Grell, of the River House School! He's one of the chaps there, sir—I've been a bit friendly with him of late. It was only Grell, sir!"

Nelson Lee pursed his lips, and the very vehemence of Merrell's statement had convinced him. Well, it wasn't so promising as he had hoped—but it was, at least, something!



CHAPTER 16.

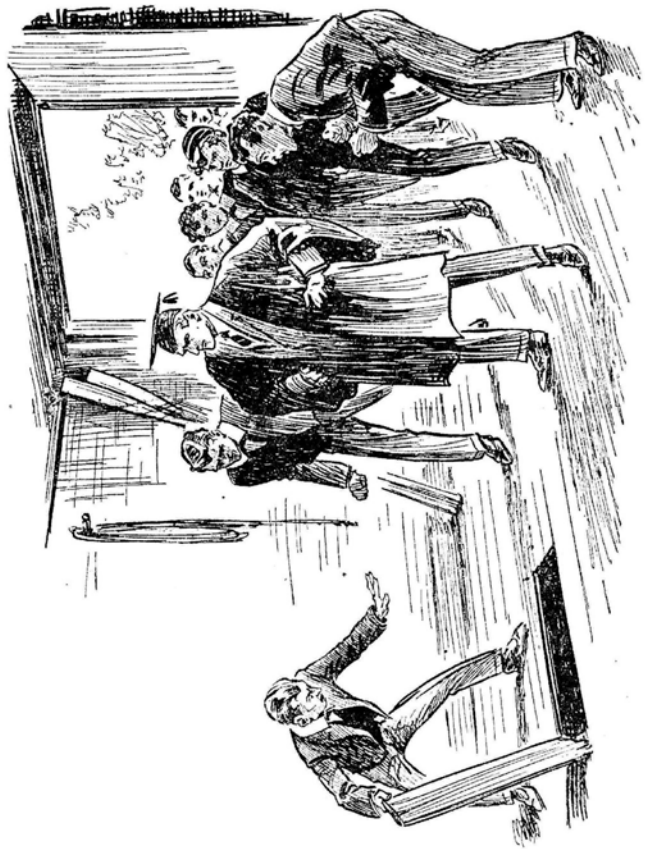
Step by Step!

CLANG-CLANG!

"There's the dinner bell, sir!" Merrell said huskily, as they neared the Triangle.

"Can—can I go now, please, sir?"

"I am afraid that you will have to wait for your dinner, young 'un!" replied Nelson Lee. "You will come with me to my study."



While Nelson Lee looked on grimly, Merrell tugged at the loose floor-board, and with a sudden jerk it came free, revealing a hollow cavity underneath. "Oh, my goodness!" cried Merrell, looking down. "It's all gone!" Harriot, standing nearby, gave a shriek of alarm. He and Merrell had hidden some stolen property in that cavity—and now it had disappeared!

in the Ancient House. I haven't finished with you yet."

Merrell made a queer kind of sound in his throat, and he shook in every limb. But there was no help for it. He had to accompany Nelson Lee to the latter's study.

"Now, Merrell, we have had enough of this evasion," said Lee sternly. "I am prepared to believe that you only took those articles as a practical joke—a very questionable practical joke, but we need not stress that point. I must strain every effort to recover the stolen property before it is too late."

"But I can't tell you anything, sir!" protested Merrell. "It's not fair to accuse me of—of being in league with somebody else! You think that I was lying about Grell, don't you?"

"No, Merrell, I believe that you told me the truth."

"But you don't believe that Grell pinched the things?" asked Merrell, with a startled look in his eyes.

"That remains to be seen," replied Nelson Lee. "Now, let us have a few more facts. Why did Grell ring you up, my boy?"

Merrell seemed to be tongue-tied. He was shaking visibly as he stood there in front of Nelson Lee's desk. Lee was rather inclined to be gentle with him—for his distress was obvious.

"We will look at it from another angle, Merrell," he said gently.

"When did you see Grell last? For the moment, we will forget this telephone conversation. When did you actually see him last?"

"About three days ago, sir—"

"Merrell!" snapped Lee sharply.

"I—I mean last night, sir!" babbled Merrell, breaking down.

"That's better! So you saw Grell last night? At what hour?"

"I—I didn't want to say anything about it, sir!" wailed the wretched junior. "Grell came round after lights-out, and he threw a stone at my dormitory window. That's why I didn't want to tell you—in case I got into trouble for breaking bounds after lights-out."

"You see how one thing leads to another, Merrell," said Lee sternly. "You can generally be sure that your sins will find you out. If you do anything wrong, and there is the slightest inquiry, you are always liable to be discovered. Remember that, Merrell. Tell me why this boy Grell came to you at such an hour last night?"

"He wanted to borrow some money, sir."

"His need was desperate, was it not?" asked Lee. "The circumstances hint that such is the case."

"He didn't say so, sir, but I believe he wanted it badly."

"How much?"

"He wanted to borrow ten pounds, sir," protested Merrell. "Of course, he was dotty!

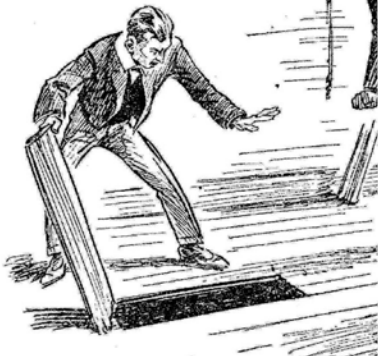
I couldn't even lend him ten shillings!"

"Did you tell Grell of this practical joke of yours?"

"Yes, sir," muttered Merrell. "But it wasn't Grell, sir!" he burst out desperately. "Grell may be a rotter in some ways, but he's not a thief, sir!"

"Yet we have established the fact that Grell came to you after lights-out, in desperate need of money," said Lee relentlessly. "It is a significant fact, Merrell. You did not tell him of this practical joke so that he should know where there were valuables to be obtained?"

"Of course not, sir!" gulped Merrell. "I never thought of it like that! In fact, I told him about the jape before he even asked for the money. I thought it was a jolly good joke, and I wanted him to join in the laugh!"



While Nelson Lee looked on grimly, Merrell tugged at the board underneath. "Oh, my goodness!" panted Merrell, looking back. He and Merrell had hidden some stolen goods.

"Well, we will leave that for the moment," said Lee. "Why did Grell ring you up this morning?"

"Only to ask me about the affair, sir," replied Merrell. "He wanted to know if there were any further developments."

"And did you tell him?"

"There wasn't anything to tell, sir."

"Yes, there was," replied Lee. "The head-

master had announced, in Big Hall, that there were to be no inquiries, that the police were not to be informed, and that the boys were to send in their various claims. Did you give Grell any hint of this?"

"Yes, sir!" muttered Merrell, realising, even as he spoke, how he was tightening the net round the River House boy.



with a sudden jerk it came free, revealing a hollow cavity me!" Marriott, standing nearby, gave a shriek of alarm. avity—and now it had disappeared!

"I think that is all, Merrell," said Lee, at length. "You may go. When I want you again I will send for you."

Merrell took a deep breath.

"It wasn't Grell, sir!" he panted. "It looks black against him, but it wasn't Grell! He's not a bad chap, and I know he wouldn't steal those things—"

"You may go, Merrell."

Merrell went—utterly wretched. Indeed, he was scared out of his wits. And Nelson Lee sat back in his chair, and he thoughtfully pursed his lips.

"Grell!" he murmured musingly. "I wonder? And yet, according to the pawnbroker, those goods were pledged by a man. Who can this mysterious individual be? We are progressing, but we haven't yet caught sight of the thief."



CHAPTER 17.

Handforth's Startling Decision!

"W H Y not?" said Handforth dreamily.

"And echo answers

'Why?' said Church. 'Or it might possibly echo 'No.' You can't always tell with these echoes—they're tricky customers!'

The chums of Study D were out in the Triangle, and it was nearly time for afternoon lessons.

"Yes, why not?" repeated Handforth, suddenly coming to earth. "Look here, my sons, I've got an idea! We'll get out the Austin Seven, and we'll buzz into Bannington. We'll spend the afternoon in an investigation, and by the time we've done we'll recover all those stolen goods!"

Church grinned, and McClure chuckled.

"Fine!" said Church. "But haven't you forgotten something, old man?"

"I never forget things!" replied Handforth. "A proper detective can't afford to forget things!"

"Then you can't be a proper detective," said Church promptly. "What about lessons?"

"Lessons?"

"Those nasty, tiresome things that we do in the class-room," explained Church laboriously.

"You silly ass! I know what lessons are, don't I?" snapped Handforth.

"I thought perhaps you didn't, that's all," said Church.

"Well, I do—and lessons can go to the dickens!" said Handforth calmly.

"When it comes to a question of investigating a mystery, we can't allow lessons to interfere. Don't bother me with such trivial matters!"

Church and McClure exchanged startled glances.

"Mad!" said Mac, tapping his forehead. "Clean off his rocker!"

"He'll come to himself when the bell rings," said Church. "Handy, you ass, you can't really be serious. You're not suggesting that we should cut afternoon school, are you?"

"This investigation must be made!" retorted Handforth.

"But—but you'll be playing truant if you run off like that!" said Church, suddenly realising that Handforth was in earnest. "You hopeless chump! You can't miss lessons—"

"You mean 'we, my son!'" interrupted Edward Oswald. "We're all going!"

"Look here—"

"A detective must have his assistants with him when he's on a case!" went on Handforth curtly. "I'll admit that my assistants are pretty mouldy specimens, but I shall have to make do with you. One of these days I may knock you into shape."

"That'll be a change," said McClure tartly. "You generally knock us out of shape."

"Well, come on—no arguments!" said Edward Oswald. "We'll get the Austin out now, and we shall be away before anybody can miss us. My idea is to go to Bannington, and hang about that pawnshop. The thief is bound to go in again, and we'll catch him red-handed."

Church and McClure were frantic in their alarm. They could picture Handforth's activities during the afternoon. He would probably collar every customer who went into the pawnbroker's shop—with dire consequences. Handforth, as a detective, was a weird and wonderful individual.

"By George!" he ejaculated abruptly.

He was staring across the Triangle, and Church and McClure turned. David Merrell, of the East House, was just slipping out—and there was something furtive about Merrell's movements. It was clear that he wanted to get out without being seen, but this wasn't very surprising, considering that Merrell was officially confined to gates.

"Great Scott!" said Handforth. "Look at that! Merrell's sneaking out—and you can bet your boots that he's got something tricky on hand!"

Even Church and McClure were ready to admit this. There was something exceedingly significant in Merrell's exit.

"Come on!" breathed Handforth, arriving at a new decision. "We won't bother about the Austin now. We'll shadow this rotter, and see where he goes to."

"Isn't that rather like spying on him?" asked Mac dubiously.

"No!" replied Handforth. "Detectives are always shadowing people. If we were rotters, we should be spying. But as we're detectives, we're only shadowing."

"That seems like a distinction without a difference," murmured Church. "But I sup-

pose you know best, Handy. And we'll do anything for a quiet life."

In fact, Church and McClure realised that it would be a wise course to give Handforth his head. He was set on this new idea now, and he would probably abandon the other alarming scheme.

"We'll do this properly!" murmured the leader of Study D. "No good going in a clump—he's bound to spot us the very instant he glances round. I'll go first, and you fellows must trail behind. You keep me in sight, Mac, while Church can bring up the rear, and keep you in sight. And if I suddenly yell, you come up to the rescue."

"Do you expect to be attacked by brigands!" asked Church.

"I don't know what to expect," retorted Handforth. "A detective never does! But it's a detective's duty to be prepared for any eventuality!"

Two or three minutes later the heroes of Study D were on the track of Merrell. Church and McClure were quite convinced that Merrell would be aware of these activities within the first hundred yards. But for once Church and McClure were wrong.

Handforth was so keen on this case that he was phenomenally cautious. And Merrell, as he went down the lane, hadn't the slightest notion that his movements were under observation!



CHAPTER 18.

Developments!

HE trail was not a very long one.

Rather to Handforth's surprise, Merrell only got as far as the stile which led into Bolton Wood, when he came to a halt. He leaned against the stile, waiting with every sign of impatience.

Handforth was crouching behind the hedge, so Merrell saw no sign of him as he himself looked anxiously up and down the road.

"What's the idea, Handy?" whispered McClure, as he crawled up.

"Why have you left your post?" demanded Handforth sternly.

"Cheese it!" said Mac. "You came to a halt, so I thought I'd better draw up close. Old Churchy is coming, too. Where's Merrell? Oh, I can spot him—down by the stile!"

"He's waiting for somebody," said Handforth.

"Marvellous!" murmured Mac. "How can you make these wonderful deductions so quickly?"

A moment later Church arrived, and at the same time a second figure appeared near the stile. And this second figure and Merrell talked rapidly together for two or three minutes.

"The sinister confederate!" breathed Church.

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Handforth was looking disappointed.

"Can't make it out!" he muttered. "That other chap is a boy!"

"Did you expect him to be a girl?"

"You idiot!" said Handy. "I'd already made up my mind that Merrell was going to meet a man—in fact, the chap who has been pawning the goods."

"That's the worst of detective work," said McClure. "You're always coming up against snags. Things never turn out as you expect them to. By the way, who is the chap? Ever seen him before?"

"We're too far off to recognise him—but he's wearing a River House cap," said Handforth, after a cautious survey.

A few moments later the amateur detective was called upon to make a sudden decision. For Merrell and his companion parted, and Merrell came hurrying back along the road at the double—evidently intent upon getting back to St. Frank's well in time for lessons.

"Well, that's that!" breathed Church, with relief. "We might as well be going, Handy. The bell will sound soon—"

"Bother the bell!" said Handforth. "Come on—on the trail again! We've got to shadow this other chap!"

"What!"

"Look here—"

"We know Merrell is going back to the school, so we needn't bother about him," said Handforth, with real commonsense. "But it's this other chap who wants looking after! We don't know who he is—or why Merrell met him. But we can jolly well be certain that he's got something to do with this mystery. So we're going to follow him!"

There was no way out, and Church and McClure were compelled to go. At least, they felt that it was necessary for them to accompany their leader. Goodness alone knew what he would get up to if he were left by himself!

Not that the investigation was very exciting. Their quarry went through the wood, and then there was another meeting. But this time Handforth had every reason to be excited.

For Grell, of the River House School, met a skinny, well-dressed individual in a little bye-lane, and stood talking to him for some time.

"We're properly on the track now!" said Handforth exultantly, as Church and McClure closed in. "Don't bob about, you idiot—and don't talk loudly! That River House chap is talking to a man!"

"How can he be so wicked?" whispered Church.

"A small, under-sized beggar," went on Handforth. "And what did that pawnbroker chap say? I'll bet my best Sunday boots that that chap is the thief! When the River House fellow parts from him, we'll follow."

"Follow the River House fellow?"

"No—the man!" said Handforth grimly.

Church and McClure began to vaguely realise that their leader was actually behaving

in a sensible manner. Indeed, Church and McClure were becoming excited. For they could see that they really were on the track. How on earth Handforth had done it, they couldn't imagine—but, as Church confided to McClure, accidents were always liable to happen.

So, when Grell and the unknown man parted, Handforth & Co. followed the man. And Grell hurried off to the River House School with fleet feet. When he arrived there he found that afternoon lessons had already commenced—but he didn't mind much. What he did mind was the presence of Nelson Lee and Nipper, who were waiting for him in the courtyard. Nipper had been excused from afternoon lessons by Lee's special request.

"I think your name is Grell, my boy?" asked Lee, as he confronted the junior. "I want to tell you at once that I have some very grave questions to ask you. My name is Mr. Lee, and I come from St. Frank's."

Grell fell back a pace, and his face changed colour.

"I—I don't know what you mean, sir!" he stammered. "Why—why do you want to see me?"

"I think you know perfectly well why I want to see you, Grell," said Nelson Lee. "I may as well inform you that Dr. Hogge, your headmaster, knows nothing of this visit as yet. Whether he ever does know will depend on the answers that you give me."

To the stupefaction of Grell, Nelson Lee took one arm, and Nipper took the other. The wretched River House junior was led out into the road, and there was no escape for him.

By all appearances, the mystery of the pawned property was being probed to its depths!

CHAPTER 19.

The End of the Trail!



USTACE GRELL was not a pleasant-looking boy. In fact, he was distinctly unpleasant.

He was a big, hulking youth of about sixteen, and his eyes were shifty, his face was mottled, and he possessed a receding chin.

"Now, Grell, I want the truth from you," said Nelson Lee sternly. "To avoid any possible lying on your part, I will tell you at once that I know all about your visit to St. Frank's last night."

"I—I—I—"

"I know that you spoke in secret to Merrell, of the Fourth Form," continued Nelson Lee. "I know that Merrell told you of certain articles that had been stolen—for a practical joke—from the Ancient House, and placed under the flooring of the boat-

house. It is just as well that you should know these facts, Grell."

Grell tried to speak, but his jaw seemed paralysed.

"Now that you understand the position, I demand perfect frankness from you," said Nelson Lee, in that cool, deadly way of his. "Some of the goods have been pawned in Bannington this morning—and it seems that you are the only outsider who knows—"

"I—I didn't steal them, sir!" blurted out Grell, recovering his speech in a flood of talk. "It's not fair, sir! I'm not a thief! I didn't steal the things! I knew they were there, because Merrell told me, but I didn't—"

"Now, now, Grell—don't get excited!" interrupted Lee. "If you didn't steal the goods, who did?"

"I don't know, sir!"

"Another lie of that kind, Grell, and I shall take you straight before your own headmaster!" said Lee sharply. "Now! Out with it! You owe money to somebody, don't you? You came to Merrell, asking for a

loan? You couldn't get the money, but you knew about those valuables. So you told this man about them—"

"I—I didn't mean to do anything wrong, sir!" sobbed Grell. "He's a chap named Mason—a sort of bookie in Bannington. I owe him ten pounds, sir. Money that I lost on two or three races."

"That's better!" said Nelson Lee. "You owe money to a man named Mason. Well? You told Mason that these valuables were to be found under a loose board in the boat-house at St. Frank's?"

"Yes, sir!" said Grell miserably. "He was threatening me—he threatened to go to the Head and get me expelled—and, in desperation, I told him about those goods. But I didn't mean him to steal them!" he added hoarsely. "I suppose I was a fool to tell him, but—"

"I think I have heard enough, Grell," said Nelson Lee. "You have supplied me with the information I came for. Where is this

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man Mason to be found? What is his address?"

"He lives in a lodging-house in Bannington, sir—No. 36, North Street," said Grell. "But you'll have to be quick, sir—he's going to leave Bannington this afternoon by the 3-10 train. He's off to London."

"By jingo!" said Nipper, looking at his watch. "Then we shall have to hurry!"

"Why is this man bolting, Grell?" demanded Lee sharply.

"I warned him about the inquiries——"

"What!" snapped Lee, pulling Grell round and facing him. "Out with it! When did you see Mason last? And how did you know that any inquiries were being made?"

"I—I had a 'phone message from Merrell, sir, and Merrell met me at the stile and told me that I was in a tight corner!" babbled the wretched boy. "And I saw Mason afterwards, and——"

"That's enough!" snapped Lee. "Confound it! I cannot altogether blame Merrell—for he wanted to save you, Grell—but I am very annoyed to hear that this man Mason has been warned."

"I was in a blue funk, sir," wailed Grell. "When Merrell told me that some of the goods had been pawned, I thought that I should be sent to prison, or something like that! So I told Mason that he mustn't pawn any more—that he's got to return everything. And—and the rotter laughed at me, and said that if I breathed a word, he'd get me sacked! I tried to argue with him, but it wasn't any good! What are you going to do, sir?"

"At the moment, nothing," replied Nelson Lee. "You had better return to your school, Grell. Later, however, I shall be compelled to have a consultation with your headmaster."

"Then—then I shall be sacked, sir!" groaned Grell miserably.

"You deserve to be expelled," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "But it'll all depend upon the full circumstances, and, in any case, the decision will rest with Dr. Hogge, and not with me."

After which, Nelson Lee and Nipper, without any further delay, hurried off to Bannington.



CHAPTER 20.

Getting Hot!

"RUMBS!" panted Church. "This is a pretty warm pace, isn't it?"

"Can't help it!"

said Handforth. "We've got to keep the rotter in sight!"

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to overtake him, and bowl him over?" suggested McClure. "We can be pretty well certain that he's the rotter who pawned those things, and if we only find the pawntickets on him,

we shall have the evidence! Why not get it over and done with?"

This was a very sensible suggestion, but Handforth would not hear of it.

"No!" he replied. "We've got to trail the boulder to his lair!"

"Yes, but look here——"

"He's probably a member of a gang!" continued Edward Oswald, who never failed to draw upon his imagination. "By George, that's it! There's a whole gang of crooks, and this chap is just one of them! Think of the glory for us when they're all rounded up!"

"He'll probably lead us straight to a coiners' den!" said Church sarcastically.

"Or a smugglers' cave!" snorted Mac.

But Handforth took no notice. He had made up his mind—and there was no shifting him.

But the chums of Study D were certainly having a strenuous time of it. Much to their surprise, the Unknown had put on double speed immediately after parting with the River House fellow. The man was running as though he were in dread of something, and even Handforth was forced to arrive at the conclusion that Grell had given the man a warning.

This, of course, was the truth.

Mason knew that inquiries were being made, and that Bannington was a very unhealthy place for him. So he had decided to clear. But Mason badly wanted to visit his lodgings before shaking the dust of Bannington from his feet.

It was obvious that the man had no fear of being shadowed. He did not look back once—or he might have easily spotted the three juniors. He was running hard, in spasmodic rushes. Every now and again he would break into the double, and cover several hundred yards at express speed. Then, temporarily exhausted, he would drop back to a walk.

So the three young sleuths in his rear had all their work cut out. For while Mason was running openly in the road, Handforth & Co. were in the meadows, on the other side of the hedge. It was fortunate for them that the ground was frozen solid, or they might never have kept up the pace.

When, at length, Bannington itself was reached, they had to come out into the open and risk the consequences. But Mason was too intent upon his mission to bother to look behind. Passing through the centre of the town, he made his way to North Street, a very questionable thoroughfare near the gasworks.

"Run to earth!" panted Handforth triumphantly.

The quarry had gone into a dingy-looking house, and the juniors were glad of the rest. They stood some little distance away, recovering their breath and wondering what the next move should be.

"Well, we've done something, haven't we?" asked Handforth, in a satisfied voice.

"Why, when Mr. Lee hears about this, he won't give us any lines for missing lessons. We've tracked the thief to his den!"

"I expect he's consulting with all the other members of the gang now," said Church mildly. "Or perhaps he's spotted us, and by this time he may have bunked out by the back way. Perhaps he's only gone into this place just to give us the slip!"

Handforth looked startled.

"By George!" he ejaculated. "I hadn't thought of that! One of you fellows had better go round—"

"Look out!" warned Mac. "Here he is again!"

It was true enough. The man had reappeared—out of the front door. Now he was carrying a suit-case, and it needed no detective to deduce that he was going on a journey. Without a glance in either direction, he turned down the street and hurried off. He almost ran.

"Making for the station!" murmured McClure, as they followed.

"That means we shall have to act!" said Handforth fiercely. "Get ready, you fellows! We shall have to bowl the chap over, and search him! I'll bet that suit-case contains the remainder of the stolen goods! And we shall find the pawntickets in his pockets!"

"It's a pity you didn't try that game before!" said Church tartly. "We could have bowled him over on the open road, without anybody knowing anything about it. But now we shall have to do it with a crowd looking on."

"All the better!" said Handforth. "Besides, the chap has got the stolen property on him now—so we shall catch him red-handed with the goods!"

Their assumption turned out to be true. For, in due course, the quarry turned into the big station yard. But he never reached the booking office. For, at a word from Handforth, the three juniors sped forward at full speed. They got ahead of the man with the suit-case. They pulled him round, they bowled him over, and they fell upon him like hungry wolves!



CHAPTER 21.

Drastic Measures!

NELSON LEE chuckled. "It's all right, Nipper—let them carry on!" he said dryly. "I rather think we had better keep out of this. Handforth and his chums are doing very well."

"Of all the nerve!" said Nipper, staring. "The bounders must have dodged lessons. Just like Handy—when he's mad on detective work!"

"Let him alone!" said Nelson Lee. "For once, Handforth has got the right man."

Nelson Lee and Nipper were standing in the doorway of the waiting-room at Bannington Station. They had arrived about ten minutes earlier, and after a careful scrutiny of the waiting-rooms and the platforms, they were satisfied that Mr. Mason had not yet turned up. They had been keeping a close watch for him when the fun had started.

Outside, in the big courtyard, Mr. Mason was practically buried beneath Handforth & Co.

"But why not interfere, sir?" asked Nipper curiously. "We came here to get the fellow —"

"But Handforth and his assistants have forestalled us," interrupted Lee dryly. "This man deserves to be prosecuted, and he deserves a spell of imprisonment—but it would mean a great deal of trouble, Nipper. Visits to the local police court—evidence by the boys—unwelcome publicity generally. I rather think that Handforth will give Mr. Mason something for his money."

Nipper realised that Nelson Lee was right. The main thing was to recover the stolen goods, and it had been made clear, by this time, that Merrell was not actually dishonest. He had acted foolishly—nothing else.

Out in the yard, Mason was now attempting to fight. He was as wriggly as an eel, and the three chums of Study D were having a hard job to hold him down.

"Sit on his head, Mac!" roared Handforth. "Now then, you rotter! We've collared you—we've got you red-handed!"

"You—you young cubs!" snarled Mason frantically. "What do you call this game? Lemme go! I'll have the police on you—"

"Rats!" snapped Handforth. "You daren't call the police, and you know it!"

"I say, look here!" gasped Church, as he sat on the prisoner's feet. "Look at this, Handy!"

Church had just succeeded in opening the suit-case, and there, piled within and mixed with an assortment of nondescript clothing, were many familiar articles—a camera, several fountain-pens, a silver inkstand, one or two watches, and such-like odds and ends.

"It's all here, of course," said Handforth. "At least, all of it except for the things he's popped. But we'll soon get the tickets. Come on—upside down with him!"

The unhappy Mr. Mason was seized by his feet and ruthlessly turned upside down. He struggled and kicked, but it was useless. The three juniors were strong, and Mr. Mason, although wiry, was no bigger than they.

A crowd gathered round wonderingly. They beheld a man upside down, with all sorts of things falling out of his pockets. He was practically turned inside out. His overcoat was wrenched off him, his jacket was torn from his back, and all his pockets were rifled.

"Here we are!" panted Handforth triumphantly, as he found two or three pawntickets. "Now, you rotter, call the police!"

A crowd gathered round wonderingly. They beheld a man upside down, with all sorts of things falling out of his pockets. Handforth and his two chums were doing the job thoroughly!



"It'll be a jolly good thing if you do, because we'll give you in charge!"

"Let me go, young gents—let me go!" panted Mason, frightened at last. "I didn't mean no harm! It was that young gent at the school as told me I could take the things!"

"Rats!" said Handforth coldly. "You'd better dress yourself again—and get ready for a fight. I'm going to smash the stuffing out of you in a minute, after we've checked off these things!"

"No need to tick 'em off, Handy," said Church. "There are several pawntickets here, and we know, roughly, what's missing. There can't be anything else. The chap wouldn't leave anything behind, and it's as clear as daylight that he was making a bolt!"

"All right, then—let's have our mill," said Handforth happily. "We're not going to give you to the police, Mason. Prison is too good for you. So I'm going to send you to hospital!"

He peeled off his jacket, but in that second Mason seized his chance. With a sudden twist he wrenched himself away from Church and McClure, and ran. He ran like the wind, leaving his suit-case behind him—even leaving his overcoat behind. Like a hare, he lodged across the goods yard, and before Handforth & Co. could get anywhere near him he had made a wild leap into an open truck of a goods

train that was passing slowly through the station.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Handforth blankly.

It had been a desperate bid for liberty, and it looked like succeeding. The man was in the truck now, and he had quickly dodged underneath a heavy tarpaulin. It was about the only empty truck in the whole train, and it was towards the rear end.

"Lemme go!" gasped Handforth, as Church and McClure held him back.

"You ass!" panted Church. "What are you going to do?"

"Collar that rotter, of course!" roared Handforth indignantly. "He's escaping—before I've flattened his features!"

But Church and McClure would not let go, for the goods train was now gathering speed; and Handforth was filled with exasperation when he realised that he could not now get his man.

"Never mind, Handforth," said Nelson Lee, coming up from the rear. "It may interest you to know that I have been watching for some little time."

"Well I'm blowed, sir!" said Handforth blankly. "I—I didn't know! But look, sir—he's escaped! And I wanted to smash him!"

Just then Nipper came hurrying up.

"The brute diddled us, after all!" he panted. "We've got four pawntickets, but

there must be another one! Archie's platinum cuff-links aren't accounted for."

"What!" shouted Handforth fiercely. "By George! Do you mean to say that we've failed on the last lap? Quick, you chaps! We've got to go after that rascal, and we've got to get him!"



CHAPTER 22.

Handforth Finds a Way!

NELSON LEE shook his head.

"It doesn't very much matter, boys," he said, "I expect

I shall be able to make a satisfactory arrangement with the pawnbroker. The tickets, after all, are not of very great importance. And it is just as well, perhaps, that the rascal has got away. We don't want too much publicity."

But Handforth, at least, did not hear Nelson Lee's words. He had raced off into the station yard, and Church and McClure had gone with him. They knew what an impulsive fellow their leader was, and there seemed a very grin, determined light in his eye now.

"What's the game, Handy?" panted Church.

"We're going to get that thief and recover that other pawnticket!" said Handforth firmly.

"You ass!" said McClure. "How the dickens can we? He's on that goods train."

"When I start a case, I finish it!" said Handforth stubbornly. "And I'm not going to take a minute's rest until I've bagged that last pawnticket! Here we are! By George, this is what I call a piece of luck!"

Handforth's mind had been working very rapidly. He had noted earlier than an Austin Seven was standing outside the station. In many ways it was almost exactly the same as Handy's own little Austin, and it belonged to the proprietor of the big garage in the High Street. Handforth had often seen it, and, as it was similar to his own, he had taken particular notice of it.

"Hop in!" he said swiftly.

"But—but this isn't yours!" protested Church.

"I know that, fathead!" snapped Handforth. "Hop in!"

"But—but what's the good?" asked Church desperately. "You can't overtake that train, you fathead! And you might get into serious trouble for pinching this car!"

Handforth waved a hand as he leapt into the driving-seat.

"This car belongs to the garage down the road," he said. "I'm one of the best customers there, and I'll risk it!"

McClure suddenly uttered an exclamation of relief.

"Too late!" he grinned. "Here's the garage man now!"

Handforth looked round, and he was prompt.

"I say, do you mind?" he bawled. "I want to borrow your Austin for a bit. I shan't be long!"

The garage proprietor, who had just come out of the booking-office, looked uncertain.

"Well, don't be too long!" he said dubiously. As a matter of fact, the suddenness of Handforth's demand had momentarily taken the wind out of his sails, so to speak. In any case, he knew the junior quite well, for Handy was a good customer. "But if you do any damage to her, I shall hold you responsible."

"That's all right!" sang out Handforth.

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"I'll accept the liability! Thanks! Good man!"

He didn't wait for any argument. Indeed, he was off like a flash, changing up into top gear before the station yard had been left behind. Within a few moments the little Austin roared into the main road, and set off towards Helmford. Church and McClure were flabbergasted. Handforth, by his very "rushing" tactics, had obtained official permission to use the car. It was a sheer piece of nerve, but it had worked.

"Well, my hat!" panted Church. "If you don't take the cake, Handy!"

"But I don't see what the game is, even now!" protested McClure. "What can you

do? Besides, Mr. Lee was saying that everything is all right—"

"Blow Mr. Lee!" said Handforth disrespectfully. "I shan't call this case a success unless I recover that other pawn-ticket and give that thief a jolly good licking! He managed to hop on to that goods train, but I'm not going to be diddled by a trifle like that!"

"Here, steady!" said Church, as they went careering round a bend.

"This is no time for ordinary caution!" replied Handforth, as he bent over the steering-wheel. "It's a jolly good thing I know the local geography! Do you notice how we're gradually climbing all the time?"

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Well, the railway makes a detour of five or six miles after leaving Bannington, and the road goes straight ahead. With any luck, we shall get ahead of that goods train!"

"Great Scott!" gasped Church, staring.

"See the wheeze?" grinned Handforth, in triumph. "About six miles further on this road crosses the railway, right at the top of the long grade. I've thought it all out, my sons! Trust me to think quickly in an emergency!"

Church and McClure were, indeed, staggered.

"But—but—" began Mac helplessly.

"Goods trains don't travel very fast, as a

rule," went on Handforth complacently, as he trod on the accelerator. "By George, this little old bus goes well—almost as good as mine! What was I saying? Oh, yes! Goods trains don't travel at more than twenty-five or thirty miles an hour generally. Well, we're doing thirty-five, and we've got less ground to cover. We shall get to that bridge ahead of the train easily."

Church and McClure could quite believe this—judging by the rate at which they were humming over the ground. There was no mistake about it, Edward Oswald Handforth had made a very astute move. It was a clever piece of strategy—quite unlike Handforth's usual fantastic moves.

"But what can we do—even if we get to the bridge before the train?" asked Church, staring. "What the dickens have you got in that crazy head of yours, Handy?"

Handforth was looking supremely contented.

"You'll see what we can do—when we get there!" he replied. "I thought it all out in a jiffy! You can trust me—"

"Yes, we heard that before," said Mac hastily.

"That goods train won't stop 'until it gets to Midshott—and perhaps not then!" said Handforth shrewdly. "That beastly thief will think that he's safe, and he won't attempt to jump out while the train's going. So we shall have him on toast!"

"But how?"

"Easily enough!" said Handforth. "He'll be in that truck when the train passes under the bridge, and as the goods train is a long one, it will be laboriously climbing up the last stretch of the grade. That means to say it'll be going slowly! And this is a low bridge!" finished Handy significantly.

Handforth's chums were freshly startled.

"But—but you don't mean to drop on to the train?" gasped Church, in dismay.

Handforth laughed aloud.

"That's exactly what I *do* mean!" he said complacently.



CHAPTER 23.

Getting Exciting!

HANDFORTH'S two chums exchanged glances, and in those tense seconds they came to an under-

standing. Never would they permit Handforth to carry out his rash plan!

It was absolutely characteristic of him to decide upon this stunt. He didn't think of the risk; he didn't consider the dangers. Just for the sake of recovering that final pawn-ticket, and having a fight with the thief, he was prepared to jump from the railway arch on to the moving goods train!

Church and McClure were thankful that they had accompanied him. For, at a pinch, they could, united, generally "best" him.

And they were grimly determined, now, to put a stop to their leader's folly. But they said nothing. The time for action would come after the bridge had been reached.

So, for the next mile or two, the pair were silent.

At last the bridge was reached. Handforth brought the Austin to a standstill and leapt out. He ran half-way across the bridge and stood there, leaning over the parapet looking down the line. Far away, in the distance, a puff of smoke could be seen.

"There you are!" he said triumphantly, as he pointed. "We're in heaps of time! Look at that signal! It's down! And the train's coming along now."

"Oh, rather!" said Church, in a strange voice.

Both he and McClure were amazed that Handforth could contemplate such a leap. True, the bridge was very low, and the jump itself would not be so great. But, even if the train were only travelling at fifteen or twenty miles an hour, the risk would be enormous. The slightest miscalculation of distance might mean grave injury. And the game wasn't worth the candle.

Then McClure suddenly got an idea.

"My hat!" he ejaculated, staring. "Look there!"

"Look where?" asked Handforth, turning. Mac was pointing at some heaps of stones just on the other side of the bridge. Road repairs were in progress at this spot, although, at the time, there were no workmen engaged on the task. The materials were there, in readiness for the operations.

"What are you getting so excited about?" asked Handforth, puzzled.

"Look on that heap of stones!" said McClure. "Can't you see that red flag?"

"What about it?"

"Well, why not grab that red flag and wave it from the bridge here?" explained Mac brilliantly. "Ten to one the engine driver will spot it, and he'll pull the train up. Then, instead of you jumping into that truck, Handy, we can all dodge down the embankment, and—"

"My stars!" said Church. "That's a jolly good idea, Mac!"

Even Handforth had to admit that the idea had its good points.

"Perhaps you're right!" he said grudgingly.

"As a matter of fact, I should have spotted that red flag in another second or two. Go and grab it—quick!"

McClure was off like the wind, and he soon returned with the flag. By this time, the goods train was well in sight, clanking laboriously up the long grade.

Fortunately, Handforth & Co. had the spot completely to themselves. A fast touring car had passed along the road a minute earlier, but the occupants had scented nothing exciting. Now the road, in both directions, was completely deserted.

"Good!" said Handforth. "We don't want any silly interruptions!"

"Why don't you wave that flag?" demanded McClure. "The train's nearly half

a mile off, I know, but we might as well be on the safe side."

"Wouldn't it be better to go down on the line?" asked Church quickly. "The driver would be more certain—"

"No—better stay up here!" interrupted Handforth. "He's bound to see us up here!"

He leaned far over the parapet and commenced waving the flag about violently. The goods train continued its clanking progress. For a few tense seconds no change was noticeable. Then, suddenly, Church flung out an arm.

"Look!" he panted. "The driver's leaning out of his cab! He's seen the flag!"

"Good egg!" said Handforth exultantly.

But there was far more significance in the fact that the goods train was slowing down perceptibly. The brakes were being applied, and the trucks were clanking and clattering against one another rebelliously. On came the train, and now both the engine driver and the fireman were staring up at the juniors.

"Stop! Stop!" yelled Handforth, as the engine passed beneath the bridge.

Church and McClure caught a glimpse of the engine crew's faces. Both the men were looking surprised—and small wonder. In the circumstances they could hardly ignore that red flag. But both the men were probably puzzled as to why they should be pulled up—when the signals told them that the line was clear.

However, Handforth's object had been achieved, and the train was slowing down. But, as yet, it had not completely come to a standstill.

"Look!" breathed Handforth, staring down. "That's the truck—that one with the tarpaulin on it! By George! I'm going to jump down, you chaps!"

"No!" gasped Church. "It's too dangerous—"

"Dangerous be blowed!" roared Handforth. "Why, the train's practically stopped now!"

The bridge, after all, was a very low one, and it was the work of a moment for Handforth to climb over the brick parapet and to rest his feet upon a little ledge. Then, with a quick intake of breath, he jumped.

"Oh, my goodness!" muttered Church, leaning over the bridge.

Nothing could have happened better for Handforth's purpose. Owing to the waving of that flag the goods train had now come to a stop, and Handforth had been able to leap right down into the vital truck. He landed upon the stretched tarpaulin, and slithered down into a corner of the empty wagon. As he rose to his feet he gave a roar of triumph.

"Now, then, come out of it!" he shouted.

There was a movement over in the far corner, and the next moment Mason, looking dirty and dishevelled, emerged from his cover. The man, truth to tell, was thoroughly startled. He stared at Handforth with goggling eyes.

"Thought you'd given us the slip, eh?" roared Handforth. "Not this time, you rotter! I want that other pawnticket!"

"You young fool!" snarled the man, noticing in a flash that Handforth was alone. "If you come near me I'll smash you!"

He pushed the tarpaulin aside, and Handforth suddenly came to a halt. The pair stood facing one another, hesitating. Handforth was reckless, but he was not rash enough to deliberately court a broken skull. For Mason was brandishing a great iron bar—which he had obviously found in the truck.

"Come any nearer, and I'll finish you!" snarled the man.

"You—you murderous brute!" panted Handforth. "Put that thing down—and fight fair!"

But Mason advanced towards him, and things began to look rather bad for Edward Oswald. For Mason was not only desperate, but dangerous. And just then Church acted. He leapt down from the bridge above.

It was a splendidly timed leap—for he landed full upon Mason's shoulders—just as the man was about to strike with that murderous iron bar. They both went down in a heap, and McClure, at the same moment, arrived.

"Good man!" shouted Handforth exultantly. "Hold him down! That's the stuff! Now we've got him!"

Flat on his back, and practically winded, Mason was helpless.

"It's all right, kids—I give in!" he gasped. "You've got me beat!"

Within a minute, the missing pawnticket had come to light. It was found in one of Mason's waistcoat pockets—where it had got stuck in the lining. Handforth held it up triumphantly.

"I told you I'd got it!" he grinned. "When I start a case—I finish it!"

He stared down at the cowering wretch, and suddenly his desire for a fight faded away. There would be no satisfaction in scrapping with this outwitted rascal.

"Oh, let him go!" said Handforth gruffly. "We've got that pawnticket, and the case is finished. He's scared enough, anyway!"

"Cave!" muttered Church, as he glanced over the side of the truck. "Here comes the guard and the engine-driver! What the dickens shall we do, Handy?"

"Bunk—before they ask for any explanations!" replied Handforth promptly. "We don't want to be delayed here by those chaps!"

With one accord, the three juniors leapt out of the truck, and they streaked up the frosty embankment. Shouts came from down the line—from the guard, and from the other members of the train crew. But the juniors took no notice. They had an idea that they would be detained—and that they would get into trouble for stopping the train.

As for Mason, he disappeared while the disappearing was good. Leaping on to the track, he ran like a hare, and Handforth & Co. did not see him again. They had ceased to take an interest in the fellow's movements.

Once on the bridge, Handforth leaned over and waved a cheery hand to the train men.

"Hi!" called an elderly guard. "What have you boys been doing? What's the game?"

"It's all right—you can go ahead now!" sang out Handforth coolly. "There was a crook on your train, and we wanted to get hold of him, that's all! Thanks awfully for stopping!"

He waved his hand, then withdrew, grinning to his chums. Shouts came from the line as Handforth ran across to the Austin.

"Come on!" he panted. "Those men will be up here in half a tick! Let's be going!"

"But I say, you know," protested Church, "oughtn't we to stop? After pulling the train up like that—"

"Well, perhaps so!" admitted Handforth thoughtfully. "There's no reason why we should run away, is there? All right, my sons, let's explain!"

And when the railway men came up, indignantly demanding to know what it was all about, Handforth explained.

It is to be feared that the guard received the story with a good deal of scepticism, and he darkly hinted that the headmaster of St. Frank's would hear all about it, with possible trouble for Handforth & Co. But the chums of Study D did not seem to mind. They went on their way at last, smiling happily.

"Well, that's that!" said Handforth, as the Austin hummed on its way back towards Bannington. "As I told you before, my sons, when I start on a case—"

"You finish it!" said Church, chuckling.



CHAPTER 24.

All Clear!

HANDFORTH returned to Bannington without mishap. The garage proprietor was somewhat incensed with Handforth, but after he had examined the Austin, he recovered his good spirits. No damage had been done, and as Handforth was a good customer at the garage he made no charge.

Out in the High Street, much to Handforth's delight, he and his chums ran into Nelson Lee and Nipper. A visit had already been made to the pawnbrokers, it seemed, and matters were generally being cleared up.

Excitedly Handforth explained all that had happened, and Nelson Lee listened with an impassive face.

"You were very rash, Handforth," said Lee, at last. "There was really no need for you to go to all that trouble in order to recover the pawnticket."

"When I start a case, sir, I finish it!" said Handforth doggedly. "And, anyhow, you can't deny that I'm the chap who solved the mystery!"

"A remarkable piece of work, Handforth," agreed Nelson Lee, nodding.

Edward Oswald claimed all the credit. According to his way of thinking, he had conducted the case with brilliance from start to finish. Even when Nipper pointed out that Nelson Lee had done nine-tenths of the real detective work, Handforth couldn't see it.

"If it comes that, what about Archie?" went on Nipper. "Archie was the real sleuth!"

"You ass!" said Handforth. "What's Archie done?"

"My dear chap, if it hadn't been for Archie, the thief might never have been captured at all," said Nipper. "He would have done all his pawnbroking, and he'd have got clear away before we knew anything about it. But Archie was keen enough to spot some of the stolen goods in that pawnbroker's shop, and everything else has resulted from it. If you ask me, Archie is the sleuth in this case!"

"I think we will settle it, Nipper, by saying that the honours are divided," put in Nelson Lee diplomatically. "Considering all the circumstances, we will not make any inquiries regarding lessons," he added, turning to Handforth & Co.

"Thanks awfully, sir," said Church gratefully.

"We must get back to the school as quickly as we can," went on Nelson Lee. "And, remember, boys, there is no need for the full truth to come out. I am perfectly satisfied that Merrell had no intention of dishonesty, and we can therefore withhold most of these unpleasant facts."

"What shall we say, sir?" asked Nipper.

"Merely that Merrell played a practical joke, and hid the missing things away," replied Nelson Lee. "Some of the boys know, of course, that the goods were taken from the boat-house, but that doesn't matter much.

The very fact that we have recovered them so promptly will put a stop to any unsavoury rumours."

"And what about that River House chap, sir?"

"Grell?" said Lee thoughtfully. "I am very much afraid that Grell will be expelled. Dr. Hogge is a severe man—and rightly, too. But we need not concern ourselves about the wretched Grell. He thoroughly deserves to leave the school, for it is only too clear that he has been acting in a rascally manner, and it was despicably dishonest of him to tell Mason about Merrell's practical joke. Yes, the young rascal is well deserving of expulsion."

Later in the afternoon, St. Frank's was talking about the whole affair in a puzzled way. Nobody knew exactly what had happened. The goods had been returned—that was obvious. All the Ancient House fellows had got their property back.

It was known, too, that Merrell had had a painful interview with the headmaster, but he wasn't sacked, as everybody expected, and Merrell himself refused to make any statement on the subject, although he was pressed to do so by scores of fellows.

In the end, the school came to the conclusion that the East House junior had merely played a foolish joke, and it wasn't long before the subject was dropped.

At least, it was dropped by everybody except Edward Oswald Handforth. Archie Glenthorne had forgotten all about it within an hour. He claimed no credit whatever—he was too relieved to get his three fivers back, to redeem his precious ticker, and contribute the fiver to Marjorie Temple's collection-box.

But Handforth talked long on the subject, until Church and McClure were heartily sick of it. It was destined to be some weeks before Edward Oswald forgot his wonderful detective work in the case of the missing Ancient House valuables!

THE END.

ANOTHER GRAND NEW MYSTERY SERIES STARTING NEXT WEEK

Where there's a mystery, of course, there you'll find Handforth, and so he's well to the fore again in Edwy Searles Brooks' latest masterpiece entitled:



Also look out for the opening chapters of Geo. E. Rochester's Grand New Serial entitled: "THE AIR PATROL!" Turn to page 41 for full particulars.



Fighting for Pancakes!

This interesting article tells you all about the many quaint and traditional happenings which take place on Shrove Tuesday—better known as "Pancake Day."

Fighting For Pancakes.

A HUGE round of pancake, about four times as large as the normal sort; two dozen boys, prepared to sell their lives dearly, ranged up with clutching fingers; a prize of twenty shillings and glorious fame for the boy who grabs the largest piece as the sticky mass of flour and milk and eggs comes hurtling through the air. There you have all the makings of a fine, rousing scrimmage!

Each year the ancient scramble takes place at Westminster School, when Shrove Tuesday comes round. In the old days the entire school lined up for a great and glorious free fight over that single pancake. But now the proceedings have been toned down, and only chosen representatives from each Form do combat for the piece of pancake which shall bring to the holder of the largest fragment a whole "quid."

The school cook, or sometimes the school butler dressed as a cook, starts the scrimmage by hurling the pancake over a bar in the roof of the Great Hall, the idea being that it shall fall at the boys' feet. His aim isn't always true. The pancake may descend greasily on the boys' heads! However it falls, the two dozen champions hurl themselves at it and fight for a handful.

Treasured Relics.

In about a fifth of a second it is torn apart, and the boy to emerge from the scrum with the largest share claims the honours and the prize. The scales have sometimes to be brought into play, to decide which really is the largest piece, though usually a chunk of sufficient dimensions is secured by one of the boys to proclaim him at once as the victor.

Needless to say, the pieces are long cherished by those who secure them, as souvenirs of the old school days. No one knows how many fragments of the Westminster School pancakes are now on show in glass-fronted air-tight cases. There is at least one such case containing the mummified remains of a whole pancake, which was

secured by a Westminster boy some thirty-six years ago!

Other customs are still followed in various parts of the country to celebrate pancake day. Bells are rung at Olney, in Bucks, on that day, as they have been since 1445, and there is a great race to the church between competitors who strive to get there first with a ready-to-eat pancake.

Very Wet Football!

A less gentle custom prevails in Derbyshire, at Ashbourne, where a sort of wild and woolly ball game is indulged in by all and sundry with "wind" enough to take part. Usually the kick-off is timed for about two o'clock, and it is sometimes well into evening before the opposite goal is reached. The great point about this pancake-day game is the fact that the goals are water-wheels three or four miles apart!

In Northumberland, two adjoining parishes for as long as local records go back have sent all their able-bodied folk into the football field. All corners are welcomed—and there is room for them, for a full quarter-mile separates the goalposts, which are gaily decked out with festoons of evergreens.

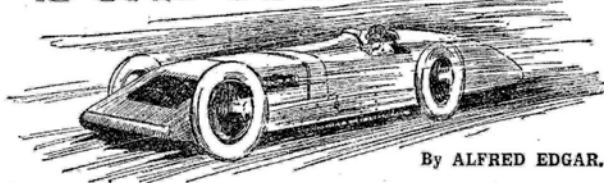
At Scarborough—where the sea air, we suppose, is responsible for all the energy put into this age-old Shrovetide custom!—pancake day is marked by wildly strenuous skipping down on the sea front. All the townsfolk who can nip briskly enough, turn out with skipping-ropes and jump as though their lives depended on it, which all helps to get up an appetite for the waiting pancakes!

After all this, you may ask: "Why pancakes on Shrove Tuesday?" Well, that happens to be the day on which penitents once considered it to be the usual custom to apply to their priests to be "shriven" (hence the word "shrove")—that is, forgiven, before entering on the forty days of fasting which commences on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, and ends at Easter.

The making—and eating—of pancakes on that day arose from the fact that here was the easiest way of using up all left-over dripping and lard before the Lenten fast!

HOLD YOUR BREATH, BOYS ! 241 m.p.h. !—That's the speed at which Mark Lynch travels in his Giant Ince Eight, and that's the speed which Dick Barry has got to beat if he's going to bag the world's record !

SONS OF SPEED!



By ALFRED EDGAR.

HOW THE STORY STARTED—

DICK BARRY takes the wheel of a Kent racing car when his brother—

BIG BILL BARRY, is injured, and succeeds in winning a great race at Brooklands, snatching victory from his brother's rival—

MARK LYNCH, star speedman for Ince Eight cars. Lynch's firm have built a monster racing machine, which they call the Giant Ince, and with which they hope to break world's records for speed. In opposition—

"PROFESSOR" KENT has designed a car
(Now read on.)

known as the Kent Flyer, and Dick is to drive this in an attempt on the records at Seacombe Sands. Immediately after the Brooklands race, Dick and Bill get a message that there has been an accident at the Kent works; the professor has been hurt, and the Flyer—wrecked! The two brothers, together with some mechanics, immediately rush back to the Kent works. There, in the testing shed, they find the professor, with bandages round his head, looking pale and shaken; while the Flyer is a battered wreck!

"All Hands to the Pump !"

THE professor turned slowly as Dick and Bill rushed in.

"You've got here, then," he said coolly. "Who won?"

"Dick," answered Bill. "What's happened? Who did that?"—and he pointed to the battered Kent Flyer. "Are you hurt?"

"A little shaken," the professor answered in his quiet way. "So you won—splendid, Dick! Shake hands on it."

When Dick took his extended hand he was conscious that the professor's fingers shook more than just a little. It was obvious that he had had a terrific shock, although he tried not to show it. Dick imagined that he was more upset about the car than about his own injuries.

"What's happened?" Bill asked again. "What a mess! Is the car much damaged?"

"Steering's wrecked—front axle bent—radiator shattered, but that's all the more important damage," the professor told him. "A five-ton lorry hit it, as a matter of fact!"

They stared at him, and he went on:

"While you've been at Brooklands, I've had the machine out on the moor almost

every afternoon. Not to try her speed, but to find out the effect of some alterations I've been making to the springing. This afternoon an empty five-ton lorry deliberately drove into me while the car was stationary. That's all, except that the lorry immediately backed out and drove away!"

Dick gasped, while Bill and the mechanics who had come with him from Brooklands looked at one another. Nobody needed any telling about who had paid the driver of the lorry to lie in wait for the machine—it was Mark Lynch, of course. It was what would seem to be a last desperate effort to cripple the car.

"I got rather cut about the head, but nothing worse," the professor said. "You needn't worry about me, Billy—it's the car. They're going to have the course ready for us on Monday morning, and I know Lynch will have the Giant Ince up there."

"We had duplicate castings of everything for this machine," said Bill. "It'll be only a matter of hard work to repair the damage. Hurst came back with me, and three other boys. If some of the machine hands will volunteer to work over the week-end, we might—"

"Everybody in the whole works has agreed to stop to help, if necessary," said the professor slowly.

There was silence for a little while, then Bill and Hurst and the others made a closer inspection of the damage.

"Our big trouble will be the radiator," said Bill at last, as he straightened up. "Still, we may be able to manage that. Professor, we'll scout round and get some grub, then we'll all start work. You other fellows are with me, aren't you? We can get her ready for Dick, but there'll be no sleep for any of us between now and dawn on Monday, if we're to do the job."

"We've worked on her all night before this—we can do it again," said little Joey Hurst, and the other mechanics echoed his words.

Bill refused to let Dick give a hand when he offered, and Bill told him why during the meal that followed.

"You've got to be fit as a fiddle on Monday," he said. "I don't know how much you've been through to-day, nor how you felt before the race this morning. But if you don't know it, I'll tell you now that you're looking just about washed out, young 'un! I want you to pack off home as soon as we've finished grub."

Dick nodded. He had to admit that he wasn't feeling too fresh. Bill went on:

"I'm going to tell the gateman and the watchmen that if you show yourself round the works here to-morrow, they're not to let you in. Go out for a good long tramp across the heath, get in a good night's sleep, then come round here about seven o'clock on the Monday morning. We ought to be about ready to move off by then."

Dick realised the wisdom of his brother's advice. Monday would bring the crucial test, the final matching of the Flyer against the Giant Ince. In the British Grand Prix, the Kent machines had proved themselves better cars than the Ince Eights. If only the Flyer would show her paces on the Monday, then their triumph over Lynch would be absolute and complete.

Dick wondered if the professor had done anything about finding the driver of the five-ton lorry which had done so much damage. He guessed that he hadn't. After all, it wouldn't have mended matters, and the professor was the sort of man who believed that wrongdoers eventually reap their own reward.

So Dick obeyed Bill's suggestions. And once again the brilliant white of powerful electrics shone out through the windows of the shed in which the Kent Flyer stood, while men worked against time.

When Dick turned up at the Kent works on the stroke of seven o'clock on a cloudless Monday morning, he found the Flyer mounted on a big lorry, and behind the lorry was a long string of vehicles which were packed with men from the works, all waiting to move off.

The professor had closed the works for that day, and everyone who could travel wanted to get to Seacombe. Fifteen minutes later the line of machines started off for the Kent Flyer's greatest test!

The Rival Cars!

A BLUE, smooth sea shimmered in the morning sun. The flag-staked Seacombe sands showed golden, and on the landward side of the miles-long course stood line upon line of parked cars. Thousands upon thousands of spectators were massed behind the ropes which had been stretched out to keep them a full quarter of a mile from the course that the hurtling machines would take.

It was mid-morning when Dick and Bill arrived with the Flyer. An official directed them to the far end of the course, where a great stretch of sand had been roped off, and in which the car could be made ready. A mighty crowd stood around the ropes, and already the Giant Ince was on the scene.

Bill wouldn't let Dick help to get the Flyer off the lorry, and he had to stand idle while the work was done. An official came up to him and shook hands.

"Thought you'd like to know that the arrangements we've made are just the same as last time," he said. "There'll be a motorcyclist waiting at the other end of the course to give you your time after the first run, so that you'll know how you stand for the second effort. It'll be the average speed of the two runs that counts for the record, of course."

Dick nodded.

"I expect the professor will want me to make a test run first," he said. "Has the Giant been over the distance yet?"

"Yes. Lynch did a test run each way—touched about two hundred miles an hour and went well," the man answered. "But there's not a puff of wind this morning, so you won't be hampered like you were last time."

The boy grinned a little, then glanced across to where the Giant Ince stood. Apparently there was nothing more that could be done to the car, for a group of mechanics stood idly around it, while Mark Lynch himself was chatting to one or two officials.

Dick had already heard that Lynch had suffered very little hurt in his crash at Brooklands, and the only sign of it was a strip of flesh-coloured plaster down one side of his forehead. Dick moved across the sand to get a closer look at the rival machine.

The Giant Ince was painted a glowing blue, and there was smashing strength in every line of her enormous shape. She was so huge that she seemed to dwarf the mechanics standing around the car. Her exhaust pipes were moulded and riveted to the body, mighty bulges against the streamlining.

The car was a giant indeed, and the red Kent Flyer looked slim and small beside its rival. But the Flyer accomplished her speed with the terse, planned strength of a greyhound, while the Giant Ince gained it by sheer weight and enormous power.

The one car was a clever engineering job. The other was strength piled on strength. This morning would show which was the better machine.

Dick paused some distance off the Giant Ince; he noticed that Lynch was looking across at him. The man's dark eyes glittered a little, and his expression was dour as he eyed the boy's slim form. Perhaps he was incredulous that Dick could have withstood his cunning and have defeated him time after time, because he frowned a little, then turned away.

Dick moved back to his own car. Half an hour passed in preparation, then Bill beckoned him over.

"All ready for you, young 'un," he said. "If you get in, we'll start her up and get her warmed for a trial run."

Dick nodded and climbed into the cockpit. He set the controls; mechanics clustered round, then ran the car forward in a push start. The engine fired with a thunderous roar, and Dick ran the car round and back to the planks on which she had been standing. He remained in the narrow cockpit for a minute or so, easing the cold engine to steady speed, then he climbed out again and left the engine running.

"Might as well get ready," he said quietly, and Bill nodded.

Dick began to feel a little shaky now that the moment was at hand. He pulled on his white overalls, after which Bill helped to draw tightly-gripping elastic sleeves over his hands so that they clamped down the cuffs of his overalls.

Other elastic bands went about Dick's ankles, then two broad canvas straps were buckled over his shoulders and around his body. After that, he donned goggles which gripped tightly over his eyes and well under the peak of his crash helmet, the strap of which was secured firmly beneath his chin.

When he was ready, Dick stood looking forward along the course. As before, he had a straight run of nearly three miles before he reached the first timing strip; beyond the end of the measured mile there was another three miles in which to pull up. The course showed wide and clear and straight, and to the left of it he could just make out the long, black blur of the thousands of thrilled spectators.

"All ready, I think," he said to Bill, and grinned a little as the professor came over.

"You'll do a trial run each way, Dick," the professor said. "Then Lynch will go for the record. After that, you will make an attempt yourself. The Ince people have agreed that each car shall make as many

runs as we like, until one or other admits defeat. Are you agreeable to that?"

"It's a sort of—of speed duel, is that it?" asked Dick, and the grey-haired man nodded. "All right, I don't mind." He hesitated a moment, then added: "There's nothing to wait for; I might as well get on the job."

Dick turned to the machine and slipped into the cockpit. He lay almost flat in it, with the big steering-wheel close against him, and the grid-guarded windshield sloping steeply just beyond the wheel.

He lifted his arm in a signal to the mechanics, slipped into gear, revved up the engine, and a moment after the car shot away for its trial run.

Dick took it steadily, and the machine ran perfectly at three miles a minute down the course. He turned and came back, still at the same easy speed, until he was once more on the planks where Bill waited.

"One—eight—nought and a little bit, they say!" Bill yelled to him. "All right, keep the engine running. I'd stop in the car if I were you. Lynch is going now!"

220 m.p.h.!

DICK throttled down the Flyer's engine. Through the slamming of the car's exhaust he could hear the shattering roar of the Giant Ince. Lynch's head looked diminutive as it stuck up a little above the high side of the monster's cockpit.

Flags waved wildly down the course. A hundred yards to the front, and at one side of the machine, an official by a field telephone waited for the word that all was clear. Suddenly he dropped his instrument, then slashed down a red flag that he held.

There was a moment or so in which the mighty engine of the Giant Ince lifted to a thunderous roar, died away, then rose again as the machine leaped forward. From the spinning rear wheels there lifted a gigantic fount of sand. The air was filled with the stammering bellow of the wide-mouthed exhausts, and an instant after the car was a blue, sliding speck in the heart of a rising cloud of sand.

At terrific speed it streaked for the measured mile, looking as though it was at the foot of a plume of sand, which gradually spread and completely hid the machine. Its warlike roar died to a droning note, and then was lost to a muttering sound as the machine reached the far end of the course and swung round.

Eagerly Dick peered ahead. He saw the man with the red flag at the telephone again, and suddenly he lifted his hand three times, indicating Lynch's speed with his fingers:

"Two—one—seven!"

Two hundred and seventeen miles an hour—and even while the man signalled the Giant Ince was coming back.

Dick picked it out as a black speck on the sand which travelled towards him at terrific speed, growing bigger and bigger until it shot over the last timing strip and began to slow. In split seconds, it seemed, the car was sweeping round outside them, dropping to a crawl as Lynch cleverly brought it back to the spot from which it had started.

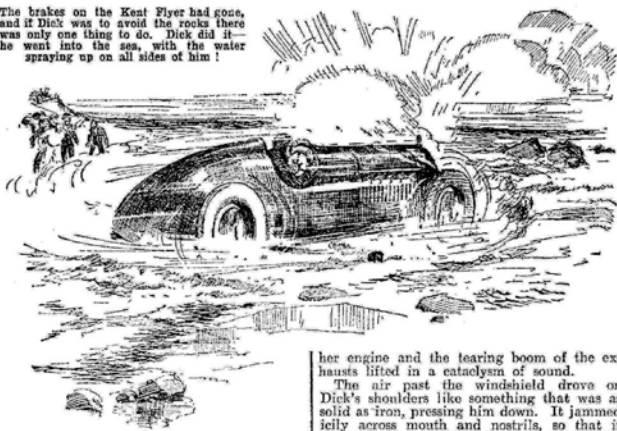
Mechanics began to run towards it. The official by the telephone yelled at a man who was near him, and the man chalked rapidly on a blackboard near by. He lifted the board so that they could see the figures he had written:

"217 and 223.

Avg.: 220 m.p.h."

Lynch had lifted the record from 205 miles an hour to 220 m.p.h.!

The brakes on the Kent Flyer had gone, and if Dick was to avoid the rocks there was only one thing to do. Dick did it—he went into the sea, with the water spraying up on all sides of him!



Dick glanced at Bill, and the big fellow leaned over the side of the Flyer's cockpit.

"That'll take some licking. Good luck, young 'un!"

"The Flyer will do it!" Dick told him. "Wish you—" He broke off. He was going to say that he wished Bill was at the wheel instead of himself, but that might look as though he was funkling it. What he really meant was that he wished Bill was going to have the honour of licking Lynch, only Bill couldn't do it with his damaged rib.

Bill patted Dick's shoulder, then went off and joined the professor.

Dick saw that Lynch had got out of his car and was looking across to him. The boy

felt the sun warm on his face, and now, as he looked for the red flag, he was conscious that his mouth had gone hot and dry. But he knew that his nervousness would pass when he got started.

He revved up the engine, then saw the red flag lifting. He slipped into gear and waited, with engine roaring steadily. He raised his arm for the mechanics to shove him off the planks. The flag dropped, his arm came down, —and the Flyer shot away!

Licking Lynch!

THE old, terrifying gale began to whine about Dick's ears, increasing with the speed of the car, but because of the professor's alterations to the springing, she didn't buck much on the sand. She seemed to slide forward, while the roar of

her engine and the tearing boom of the exhausts lifted in a cataclysm of sound.

The air past the windshield drove on Dick's shoulders like something that was as solid as iron, pressing him down. It jammed icily across mouth and nostrils, so that it was almost impossible for him to breathe as he huddled there and peered forward.

He had his foot hard down on the accelerator, and the black and white post which marked the beginning of the measured mile swooped up and swished past him. Dick riveted his gaze far ahead. The ranks of spectators whipped by, flags merged to a blur, the last post went behind, and a mile ahead a checkered flag waved for him to slow down, as he had covered the course.

Dick slowed, saw the motor-cyclist who would come and tell him what speed he had done, then was past the man and pulling out in a wide sweep over the sand, following the marks that Lynch's Giant had left. The cyclist came roaring up.

"Two-three-three!" he yelled.

Two hundred and thirty-three miles an hour. Dick grinned, settled anew in his seat, and pulled his car straight for the return run. He started on it without any pause, and almost before the spectators realised it he was on his way back.

Again the gale and the storm of sound, again the breath-taking rush of solid air, then he saw the roped-off space whipping towards him and he slowed, pulling round, and finally came to a stop, with the mechanics running to push the car on to its planks. Dick sat looking to where the official was writing on the blackboard:

"233 and 237.
Avg. 235 m.p.h."

Fifteen miles an hour faster than the Giant Ince!

"Well done, young 'un! He can't beat that!" Dick heard Bill's voice in his ears, then looked across to where Lynch was staring at the board. The man glanced over to him, then ran forward and spoke quickly to an official. The man answered him; they talked for a moment or two, and then Lynch got into the Giant. He sat in the cockpit, waving his hands and gesticulating to the men around. Someone came running across to Bill.

"Lynch is going to start his run half a mile further back!" he shouted. "It'll give him greater impetus when he gets into the mile. You can leave your car here with the mechanics, but shift the lorries!"

"Bill, we might as well shift the Flyer back, too!" Dick yelled.

"Wait until Lynch has gone!" Bill returned, and as he spoke the Giant Ince started forward, turned on the sands, and went speeding backwards, with spectators running hastily to a safe distance.

Dick watched and waited. He saw the Ince mechanics clearing off while the Giant speedily ran to where a rocky fringe marked the end of the sands behind. Lynch kept the car running slowly backwards and forwards until the course was quite clear—he had to keep it on the move to prevent the wheels sinking in the sand. That was why, when one of the record-breakers came to rest, the cars were always run on to planks.

Finally the red flag dropped. The Giant Ince pulled straight, then came forward with a terrific, desperate roar. It was going past Dick in what seemed but the fraction of a second. He glimpsed the top of Lynch's helmet as the machine passed in an inferno of noise. Sand sprayed out from the wheels, slashing over the Flyer, and then the car was gone, hurtling madly.

"Better get the Flyer back now!" Bill yelled to Dick; already their lorry was running rearward, bearing spare planks.

Dick followed it in the Kent record-breaker, shunted backwards and forwards until the planks were laid, then got on to

them just as he saw the Giant returning.

And now the rival car wasn't so steady. It was jolting and leaping on the sand under its tremendous speed. It approached in a series of awe-inspiring jumps, seeming to skid with each one until Lynch slowed it and got it under control.

He brought it up and around behind the Kent group, stopping it not a dozen yards from the Flyer. He raised himself in the cockpit, and Dick could see that the man's face was strained from his run, white and drawn.

"Now beat that!" Lynch's hoarse, snarling voice came to Dick's ears, and the boy's face set grimly as he waited to learn what speed the rival machine had done. From the now distant telephone a motor-cyclist came speeding. He ran straight between the two cars and stopped as he yelled:

"Giant's average—two hundred an' forty-one!"

"And that's his limit! He can't go faster than that!" Bill leaned over to shout in Dick's ears. "Beat that and we win!"

Dick said nothing. The professor had designed the car to do two hundred and fifty miles an hour. Now he would find out if she were capable of it. He asked Bill for a scarf, then tied it over his nose and mouth, Bill tucking the ends down behind the tightly-fitting neck of Dick's overalls.

Down the course the red flag was waving. Again Dick's arm came up, dropped, the mechanics pushed, and with a challenging bellow the Flyer went away once more!

Lynch's Last Run!

FROM the moment that the rear wheels thudded half a dozen planks high into the air, Dick put his foot right down, slamming the throttle wide. He'd got an extra half a mile of run before he entered the mile, and he meant to make the most of it.

The roar of the engine rose to a piercing scream, a mad song of power. Once it lifted to a terrific note as the rear wheels left the ground and spun uselessly ere they found a grip. Then the car settled down and streaked on.

She sat the sand like a leech, making full use of every ounce of power. All the mighty strength of her red shape was packed down to the wheels, while Dick huddled in his seat with the gale howling fiendishly about his crash-helmet.

He was conscious of nothing but the far end of the track as he held the car to its course. All he knew was that the machine was travelling faster than it had ever gone before. She went through the mile like a blazing meteor, and when he reached the end he didn't stop for the motor-cyclist to come up and tell him his time.

He didn't want to know it. The Flyer was doing all she could do, and if the Giant beat

this effort it would be because she was a better car.

It seemed to Dick that the Flyer took longer—much longer—to slow this time, and the car ran almost to the rocks at the other end before he could bring her round. He left the cyclist standing as he swung past him, straightened, and then put his foot down again.

Every nerve and every muscle in Dick's body willed more and more speed from the striving machine. To him, the flags which bordered the course were like a hedge; he saw the spectators as a sweeping dark line. Then he was into the mile again, with the car at the absolute limit of hurtling speed.

Dick just glimpsed a black and white flag, madly waved to tell him that he was through the distance, then the distant group by the rocks heaved at him with terrifying swiftness. The car wasn't slowing as it should have done, and he used the brakes.

For a moment they responded, then suddenly seemed to come loose, and Dick realised that they had been burnt out. The rocks were shooting towards him, and he knew that if he hit them it would mean death. His right was bordered by sand-dunes that would turn him over if he steered that way.

He was powerless to stop the car now. It was out of hand—brakeless, and still doing more than two miles a minute. The waiting mechanics realised it, and he saw them begin to run. He glanced to his left—the sea!

Dick steered towards it, the car answering slowly. He knew that he mustn't hit the water full on; so he tried to strike it sideways. Almost before he expected it a giant fount of water was streaking up all around him, while the machine slowed like magic. He pulled out on to the dry land again, not fifty yards from the first of the rocks, but now under control.

He heaved on the steering-wheel, the car skidding wildly, went straight, and then brought up near its planks and came slowly to a stop.

Bill and the others dashed towards him, and Dick saw that his brother's face was white.

"Brakes gone!" Dick called to him.

He heard Bill shouting something, but could not catch what it was, and he looked for the man who would tell him what speed the Flyer had attained on its last run.

Dick guessed that the sea must have

(Continued on page 43.)

THE AIR PATROL!



By GEO. E. ROCHESTER.

A STORY OF THE WORLD OF TO-MORROW!

Guarding the giant air-liners which fly between Britain and America with their cargoes of mail and bullion go the swift-

flying members of the Atlantic Rangers—alert and watchful.

Pirates—modern in every sense of the word—lie in wait along the air-route, watching like birds of prey for their chance to attack and plunder.

Guy Howard, youngest and most intrepid of the Atlantic Rangers, sets himself the task of wiping out this menace of the skies. In spite of the terrible odds, he pits himself, single-handed, against these Pirates of the Air!

Such is the main idea of the magnificent new serial which is starting in the Old Paper next week—a serial which will thrill you through and through!

Look out for the opening chapters next week, chums!



Our Weekly Pow-Wow

By
The Editor.

A Story of the World of To-morrow.

EVERY day sees some new development in aviation taking place around us; distant outposts of the Empire that once were almost isolated from the mother country are now linked together in the aerial routes opened up by our plucky airmen. It is to be doubted whether there has ever been any quicker advance in science and invention than that shown in the conquering of the air. Anything would seem possible "up aloft" these days. Just a look at the giant air liners, with their powerful engines, their iron-nerved pilots, and their up-to-date wireless apparatus tells us that, figuratively speaking, it is in the air that the world of to-morrow will live. Thus a story dealing with this world of to-morrow, and written by a man who during the Great War was a competent pilot himself, will of a certainty interest my many thousands of readers. I went to great pains to secure this yarn from Mr. George Rochester—whose story in our companion paper, the "Magnet," has created a furore—and I honestly think that it will prove to be the most popular story, apart from the St. Frank's School tales, of course, that the "Nelson Lee" has ever included in its pages.

Playing a Lone Hand!

We will step into the world of to-morrow, you and I; we will picture without effort huge floating aerodromes linking up the vast seaboard of Britain and America. To and from these 'dromes huge passenger and bullion-carrying liners of the air make their passage. Up aloft hums a tiny single-seater "scout," with a keen-eyed "policeman" acting as escort to his valuable charge flying below. It's the job of this policeman, or, to give him his name of to-morrow, "Ranger," to suppress piracy. Not too far-fetched that, is it? We've had piracy in the world ever since it began—piracy in many shapes and guises, but still piracy. Therefore, it is not demanding too much of our imagination to picture a resolute band of air pirates, with a secret stronghold somewhere in the vast

Atlantic, whose amiable job of work is to plunder the valuable cargoes that daily cross their "beat." But there's that Ranger of whom we spoke a moment ago; we mustn't lose sight of him. Playing a lone hand he has set himself the dangerous task of discovering the whereabouts of these modern pirates' secret lair and of breaking up the organisation that is a perpetual threat and menace to civilisation. That's his job, boys—a job fraught with much peril and hardship; a job that is essentially a Britisher's. You'll accompany him through space, in a manner of speaking, for George Rochester gives that artistic and realistic touch to his narrative which there is no resisting. You will live in his world of to-morrow; you will glory in it, mark me well. Just another word; this wonderful story, entitled "The Air Patrol!" starts in next week's bumper issue of the "Nelson Lee." Do me the favour of passing on this information to your chums; they'll be grateful for the tip, and so shall I. 'Nuff said!

In Want of Friends.

A Midland chum sends me word that he is in a "very awkward position." That is how he phrases it, but candidly I consider he is exaggerating the difficulty. This merely amounts to the fact that his family has moved to another quarter of the town, with the result that he knows nobody. It takes time to make friends naturally. If one could pick them off the first bush most like they would not be worth having. I am sure as the weeks slip by new chums will be made. No use running after them. Patience is the only thing.

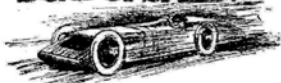
A Note of Warning.

Members of the St. Frank's League are warned against having any dealings with any persons calling themselves "high officials" or "representatives" of the League.

The St. Frank's League is run entirely from this office by correspondence, and the Chief Officer can take no responsibility for the bona fides of any person who may approach members personally with the object of organising camps, excursions, etc., under the auspices of the League.

THE EDITOR
(Chief Officer.)

SONS OF SPEED!



(Continued from page 41.)

damaged the car. If he'd failed, he might not be able to run again. His thoughts broke off as the motor-cyclist came up.

"Average—" The man paused.

"What is it?" Dick gasped.

"Average—two hundred an' fifty-three!"

Two hundred and fifty-three miles an hour! At the side of the Giant Ince, Mark Lynch stood like a man astounded. He glanced across at Dick, then suddenly turned to his mechanics, and they started going over the machine.

"He's going to try and beat it!" Bill gasped. "If he does, you won't be able to run again, Dick. Get out an' look at the car!"

Dick got out. All the casing round the radiator was dented and split, while from each brake-drum there came little wreaths of reeking smoke, where the brakes had burnt under the car's speed when he used them to try and stop.

"We couldn't get her repaired in time to—" began Bill, then broke off as the Giant started to roar once again.

Lynch had finished his inspection of the machine and was ready to run.

"Heavens, he's got a nerve!" Dick gasped, and he stood staring.

The Giant had looked dangerous when it came down the course last time, and Lynch must have known it, but he was going to try again.

On a sudden impulse Dick moved towards the machine. Lynch might be a rotter and a rogue, but he was no coward. He looked towards the boy as he came over, stumbling a little, because he felt a bit shaky from his ordeal.

"Best of luck!" Dick called to him, as he came up.

"I don't want any wishes from you!" Lynch snarled at him. "Stand away!"

The red flag was waving down the course, and with the words he ripped off the planks.

After what seemed only a few seconds, Lynch had started on the return run.

The car was lurching from side to side in twenty-foot sweeps. Twice daylight showed under the leaping wheels. It passed the last post, leaping again, and Dick gasped as he saw the car skid madly.

Round she went, round in a wild half-circle, Lynch half out of the cockpit as he strained on the wheel. Round, still further, on two wheels now, with sand spraying up in all directions, tilting up—up—over!

It went on, somersaulting viciously. There came the awful, shattering sound of the crash as the Giant Ince whirled again and again, then alighted for a quarter of a mile on its side, wheels buckled and tyres stripped from the dented rims.

Lynch had covered the mile each way, but his speed was just under an average of 241 miles an hour.

And when they took him out of the wreckage he was dead.

The story of the Kent Flyer's tremendous achievement and Dick's daring driving went flashing round the world. It was the one thing needed to put Kent cars on the road to complete prosperity.

Though Mark Lynch was a rogue, none could deny his courage as a speedman, and they laid him to rest in ground that overlooked the place where he had died.

When the funeral cortege had gone Dick and Bill stood barcheaded at the graveside. Gently they laid the wreath that they carried at the foot of the grave.

They turned away and stood looking out across the sands which had brought them fortune and just, if awful, punishment for the man against whom they'd fought.

Then, each glancing back to the resting-place of their rival, they moved slowly away.

THE END.

(You all like stories dealing with thrilling adventures in the air, don't you? Of course you do! Then you must read the opening chapters of our grand new serial which starts in next Wednesday's issue. This story is entitled "The Air Patrol!" and is written by Geo. E. Rochester, the brilliant and popular author of many successful boys' yarns. Don't forget, chums! Look out for the first superb instalment next week.)

Stop Stammering! Cure yourself as I did.
 Seculara PRIN. — FRANK B. HUGHES, 7,
 Southampton Row, London, W.C.1.

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