

HANDFORTH AT ST. JIM'S!

By
**MARTIN
CLIFFORD**



He's thick-headed, he's pugnacious, he's obstinate—and he's true-blue! In short, he's the one and only **HANDFORTH** of St. Frank's, whose arrival at St. Jim's is celebrated by making him the 'victim' of a glorious jape, but who stays to win the cheers of the very fellows who rag him!

CHAPTER 1.

Monty Lowther's Great Idea!

FIGGINS and Kerr and Fatty Wynn grinned cheerily as they entered Study No. 10 in the Shell passage of the School House at St. Jim's.

The study was already well filled, for it contained Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, of the Shell, and Jack Blake & Co. of the Fourth.

"Come in!" said Tom Merry politely. "You're quite safe, Figgy. It's pax."

"Just a friendly meeting—Monty's idea!" explained Blake.

It was the day after the Whitsun holidays, and St. Jim's was all a-bustle with fellows constantly arriving and exchanging holiday yarns.

"Well, choke it up!" said Figgins, as he looked round. "Somebody told us that we were urgently wanted in this

study, Tom Merry. Well, here we are."

"We thought it was a feed!" said Fatty Wynn, eyeing the empty table with disgust.

Tom Merry chuckled.

"It's no good looking at me, Fatty," he said. "This is Lowther's idea. He's been mysterious for an hour past, and he suddenly decided to call a triple alliance of Study No. 6 and you fellows."

All eyes were turned upon Lowther.

"Yes, it's about time you got it off your chest, Lowther," said Jack Blake pointedly. "Now that these New House dummies are here—"

"These New House what?" said Figgins & Co., in one voice.

"Dummies!" repeated Blake. "Wasters, half-wits, simpletons—anything you like. I don't care! They all mean the same thing."

"You footling idiot!" roared Figgins. "You frabjous School House lunatics!" "Peace, children, peace!" urged Monty Lowther, in a pained voice. "This is a peaceful meeting. It's a pity, I'll admit, that we've got to have these New House maniacs with us, but the fact is they're needed. So we can almost describe them as necessary evils!"

Figgins breathed hard, and Kerr and Fatty Wynn were red with wrath. Yet the New House trio felt that it would be most unwise to start any violent activity. They were in the heart of the enemy's camp.

"I wathah think, Lowthah, that you are twyin' our patience a little too fah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, jamming his monocle into his eye, and inspecting Monty with sudden suspicion. "Bai Jove! I twust this is not your ideah of a pwactical joke?"

"Dry up, Gussy!" said Blake impatiently.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Dry up, ass, and let Lowther do the talking!"

"I wefuse to dwy up!"

"Then ring off!" said Blake.

"You fwiughtful ass!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "There is no difference between dwyin' up and wingin' off!"

"I know that!" said Blake. "So you can do both!"

"I uttahly wefuse——"

"Put a sock in Gussy's mouth, somebody!" said Monty Lowther cheerfully. "Either that, or gag him! I don't care which!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Oh, cut the cackle and get to the hosses!" said Tom Merry soothingly.

"Right!" said Monty. "Well, there's a new fellow coming into the Fourth to-day."

"Yes, we know it," said Tom Merry. "Some chap named Handforth, from St. Frank's. What about it?"

"Well, it seems to me that something ought to be done," said Lowther thoughtfully. "That's why I called this meeting."

Blake grunted.

"My only sainted aunt!" he said, glaring at Monty. "You've called us together like this because a new fellow is due to-day?"

"Exactly!"

"Then you're off your rocker!" said Blake. "Besides, it's like your nerve, you Shell ass! Handforth is coming into the Fourth with us!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy, nodding. "I was talkin' with Mr. Lathom half an hour ago, and he expwessly wequested me to look out for the new fellow. I wegard it as a mattah of dutay to meet Handforth at the station——"

"Then you'll be unlucky, Gussy," interrupted Blake. "This chap Handforth is coming down in his own car."

"Bai Jove!"

"Nerve, I call it!" went on Blake indignantly. "None of us have got cars of our own. Yet this burbling duffer of a St. Frank's fellow owns his own Austin Seven!"

"Well, you needn't be jealous," said Tom Merry.

"I'm not jealous!" roared Blake.

"You sound like it!" murmured Tom. "But I must admit I'm puzzled," he added, glancing at Lowther. "What's the idea, Monty? Why should we interest ourselves in this new Fourth Former? I should hope we're above taking an interest in the affairs of the mouldy Fourth!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"We're off, anyhow!" said Figgins, making for the door. "It's just like you School House idiots to drag us here for nothing. We're not interested in your piffing new boys! Handforth is coming into the Fourth Form, I know. But what do we care? He's going to be a School House chap, and that means that he'll be no good!"

Monty Lowther deftly pushed his way through the others, and placed his back to the door.

"Just a minute!" he said calmly. "You're not going yet, Figgy! I haven't explained my idea yet. Why

the merry dickens can't you have a little patience?"

"Patience!" howled Figgins. "We've been here for hours already!"

Monty Lowther remained perfectly cool.

"The trouble is, you don't know Handforth," he said. "The name means nothing to you. But to me it means a lot!"

"Oh, does it!" said Blake curiously. "Have you met the fellow?"

"Never!"

"Then how the thump——"

"Wait!" interrupted Monty. "I haven't actually met Handforth, but I've heard all about him. And, believe me, what I've heard is an earful!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Thinking of one of your practical jokes, eh?" he said. "Well, if you've a suggestion for ragging the new fellow, trot it out!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's our job to jape him—not yours!" said Blake pointedly.

"Who the dickens is Handforth, anyhow?" demanded Figgins. "I don't like his name to begin with. It's a rotten name!"

"Well, the poor chap can't help that," said Monty Lowther. "His full name is even worse—Edward Oswald Handforth."

"Poor beggar!" said Herries sympathetically.

"I happened to meet a St. Frank's chap during the hols," went on Monty. "We had a chat about things in general, and we rather wondered why the two schools didn't exchange matches and all that sort of thing. Still, that's neither here nor there."

"I'm glad you realise it!" said Blake impatiently.

"But with regard to Handforth, the opportunity is too good to be missed," said Lowther. "I understand, on the best possible authority, that his leg was made, above all others, to be pulled."

"Oh!" said Tom Merry.

The meeting began to take an interest.

"This chap, Handforth, is the world's greatest chump," continued Lowther calmly. "By what I understand, he's recently been in some trouble at St. Frank's, and he was practically sacked from the school."

"Bai Jove!"

"But there was a mistake," said Lowther. "Handforth wasn't guilty, and the truth came out, and he was pardoned. But his pater had already been here, and had arranged with the Head for Handforth to join the School House after the Whitsun holidays."

"Yes, we know all about that," said Blake, nodding.

"Well, Handforth got on the high horse," grinned Monty Lowther. "This St. Frank's chap I spoke to thought it was a huge joke. Handforth was the laughing stock of the whole school. He maintained that he had been unjustly kicked out, and he jolly well wasn't going back! He said that it would serve St. Frank's right to lose him. So, in a way, he's only coming here out of spite!"

"Bai Jove! What a wemarkable chap!"

"You're right, Gussy!" nodded Lowther. "But it just shows you the sort of fellow Handforth is. Perhaps 'spite' isn't quite the right word, though. The awful ass seems to think that it's a matter of duty for him to leave St. Frank's cold. It's a question of principle with him."

"Well, he must have some determination, anyhow," remarked Digby.

"Determination!" repeated Lowther. "Ye gods and little fishes! This fellow is as stubborn as a mule. He's big and brawny, with a rugged sort of face. He's got a punch like a steam-hammer, and his favourite pastime is to biff people over."

"A useful merchant, by the sound of him," chuckled Manners.

"He's a chap with fixed ideas, and nothing can shift them," continued Lowther. "As straight as a ramrod, and thundering good-hearted. In fact, there's nothing really wrong with him,

The St. Frank's juniors are pretty cut up about losing him. But he's made up his mind, and nothing will shift him. So he's coming here."

"Like Alexander of old, he's seeking fresh worlds to conquer!" grinned Tom Merry.

"He'd better not try to conquer the Fourth!" said Blake darkly.

"My dear ass, that's just the point!" exclaimed Lowther. "Handforth isn't an ordinary new fellow. He doesn't really want to leave St. Frank's—he's only done it because of his dotty ideas about principle. And as he's an arrogant beggar, he'll come here full of determination to put St. Jim's on the map!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Aren't we on the map already?" roared Blake.

"Of course we are; but Handforth doesn't think so!" grinned Lowther. "He's got a rummy sort of mind. He thinks he's doing St. Frank's a permanent injury by leaving."

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Cheese it, Monty!"

"It's a fact!" said Lowther earnestly. "You wait until he comes, and then you'll find out that I'm right! Handforth believes that St. Frank's will go all to pieces because he's left, and it logically follows that he believes that St. Jim's will go off its head with delirious joy to welcome him into the fold."

"The fellow must be dotty!" said Herries bluntly.

"No, he's not dotty," replied Lowther. "He's only a born idiot!"

"Weally, Lowthah, isn't that the same thing?"

"Never mind, Gussy," chuckled Lowther. "Handforth is coming here this evening. He's making the journey by road, and Mr. Lathom told me that he's expected some time after seven. That gives us heaps of time to prepare."

"Prepare what?" demanded Figgins.

"There's one point I ought to mention—although I've already hinted at

it," said Lowther. "Handforth is the most gullible merchant on earth."

"Gullible?"

"He'll believe anything," nodded Monty happily. "You can pull his leg until further orders, and he'll swallow any old yarn that you like to tell him. It's only a question of doing it in the right way."

"And what is the right way?" asked Blake.

"Why, to give him the limelight," said Monty promptly. "I understand that he'll rise to the bait every time if only his vanity is touched. He's not naturally conceited, but he's got an enormous idea of his own importance. At St. Frank's he was a big pot in the Middle School, and he'll expect to be a big pot here."

"He'll soon learn differently," said Blake, with a grin.

"But there's no reason why he should learn too soon," said Monty. "My wheeze is to spoof him. Spoof him as no other fellow in history has ever been spoofed. He's the ideal victim!"

"But where do we come in?" asked Figgins.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I shouldn't have invited you New House rotters into the game at all, only we might need Kerr," explained Lowther blandly. "We know that Kerr isn't ornamental, but he makes up for that by being useful."

"You footling idiot!" said Kerr wrathfully.

But he cooled down as Monty Lowther proceeded to explain the details of his scheme. And so the plotters plotted.

CHAPTER 2.

Hail the Conquering Hero!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH, late of St. Frank's, grunted with characteristic aggressiveness.

"I'll show 'em!" he said darkly.

"They'll be sorry for themselves now!" It must be recorded, with a certain

sadness, that Handforth was thinking of the Head and the other powers that were at St. Frank's. In his imagination, Handforth beheld the Head of St. Frank's wringing his hand with anguish on this fateful day. He pictured him consulting earnestly with his Housemasters on the tragedy of losing the leading light of the Remove.

And it is fairly safe to say that the Head had already forgotten Handforth's existence!

In this spirit, Handforth approached St. Jim's. His thoughts were still at St. Frank's—although, now and again, he was troubled by a twinge of doubt. What would it be like at St. Jim's? How would the fellows there greet him? How would the school in general compare with St. Frank's?

But the die was cast, and Handforth was—as Monty Lowther had stated—a fellow with an iron determination. Other people less polite called it a pig-headed obstinacy.

The new fellow for St. Jim's was seated at the wheel of his Austin Seven, and the little car was humming along the road between Wayland and Rylcombe. Handforth was a big junior—rugged and brawny. He was hatless, for it was warm on this summer's evening, and his hair was tousled. In the rear of the car were two or three suitcases, and some other odds and ends of luggage.

Handforth went everywhere in his Austin Seven. He had a special driving licence—"wangled" for him by a doting aunt. And Handforth was thrilled by the thought that he would cause a sensation at St. Jim's. He knew well enough that the usual run of junior schoolboys did not own their own motor-cars.

Houses were within sight, and Handforth guessed that he was approaching Rylcombe. He had been told that St. Jim's was only a little way beyond the village. Dusk was falling, and it was growing late in the evening. But Handforth didn't care. It was the first day after the holidays, and he was a new

fellow, and he wasn't likely to get into trouble.

He turned a bend of the road and entered the old High Street of Rylcombe. He stared, automatically easing his foot from the throttle.

"Hallo!" he muttered. "What's all this?"

As far as he could see, the village street was crowded with juniors. They were so thick that he would either have to stop or run into them. Handforth was a reckless driver, but not reckless enough to take the latter course. He applied his brakes.

And while he continued to stare he heard shouts. It was obvious to him that these fellows belonged to St. Jim's. He recognised their caps. But he was puzzled by the fact that many of them were carrying big flags, and waving them enthusiastically. The old High Street was gay with colour, in spite of the failing daylight.

"Hurrah!"

"It's Handforth!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Three cheers for the new fellow!"

"Hip—hip—hurrah!"

Cheers rang out with lusty enthusiasm. Bewildered, Handforth pulled his handbrake on, and the Austin came to a stop. Immediately the car was surrounded. Excited juniors were swarming up in crowds.

"Steady, you fellows!" said one of the juniors in a shocked voice—a pleasant-looking youngster with curly hair—to wit, Tom Merry. "Remember who he is!"

"Great Scott! I'd forgotten!" gasped Blake penitently.

The crowd hung back, and everybody stared at Handforth with awe. There could be no mistaking those expressions; one and all, these juniors were impressed.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth blankly.

He stood up in the car and rested his hands on the top of the windscreen.

"Hurrah!"

The cheers broke out again with redoubled vim.

"Welcome to Handforth!"

"Three cheers for the new fellow!"

"Hurrah!"

Flags were waved, and the enthusiasm increased.

"Silence!" went up a shout. "Silence for Handforth!"

Instantly the cheers died down, and the crowd waited, breathless with eagerness and excitement. Handforth was bewildered; he hadn't expected a reception like this! His imagination was vivid, but never in his wildest dreams had he pictured such a scene.

Tom Merry came forward, and he looked at Handforth with reverent respect.

"Is your name Handforth?" he asked hesitantly.

"Why, yes," said the new fellow. "It's jolly decent of you—"

"Edward Oswald Handforth?"

"Yes, that's my name," said the new arrival. "I used to be at St. Frank's, you know."

"Of course we know!" said Tom Merry. "Who doesn't know? Who hasn't heard of the great Handforth? Who hasn't whispered his name with awe and wonder? We welcome you to St. Jim's, Handforth! My name is Tom Merry, and I'm the junior skipper."

"Jolly pleased to meet you!" said Handforth, extending a huge paw.

Tom took it, but he wasn't prepared for the pressure that Handforth applied.

"Well, I'm glad that I'm known to you—by repute, anyhow!" said Handforth delightedly. "So you're Tom Merry, eh?"

"Yes. I'm in the Shell," replied Tom. "This chap is Jack Blake—the leader of the Fourth. You're going into the Fourth, aren't you?"

"So I understand," replied Handforth, as he looked at Blake. "Pleased to meet you, Blake! So you're the leader of the Fourth, eh?"

"Yes!" said Jack Blake sadly. "But I don't suppose I shall be leader for

long. Now that you've come, Handforth, I shall probably be a back number."

Handforth grinned with sheer delight.

"Well, of course, it's quite possible," he said genially. "As a matter of fact, I had already made up my mind to be the leader of the Fourth. But I'm jolly glad to hear that you're prepared to step down in my favour."

"What else can I do?" asked Blake humbly. "And you can rely upon us all to do our best to prove worthy of your presence, Handforth."

"Yaas, wathah!" beamed D'Arcy. "Blake, deah boy, kindly intwoduce me!"

"This is Gussy—our pet dummy!" said Blake obligingly.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Leave it until afterwards, Gussy," interrupted Tom Merry briskly. "We mustn't forget our duty to the new fellow. It isn't every term that we get a new chap with such a reputation as Handforth's. Remember, too, what a marvellous school he has come from!"

"St. Frank's!" said Blake dreamily. "Yes, you're right, Tom Merry! All honour to Handforth, and let us hope and pray that we shall please him!"

"Hear, hear!" went up a reverent chorus.

Handforth swelled visibly. His face was flushed, his eyes were gleaming. And if there were one or two explosive chuckles from the rear ranks—emitted from sheer lack of self-control—he did not hear them.

And the St. Jim's juniors were not only amazed, but they were overjoyed. This new fellow was swallowing everything, exactly as Monty Lowther had predicted! Never for an instant did he suspect that he was being japed!

It was too good to be true!

But as the wily Monty had foreseen, Handforth's mind was very receptive for such a piece of fooling. He believed that St. Frank's was mourning over his loss—and thus it stood to reason that St. Jim's was rejoicing over its gain. And once the initial stages of this

gigantic jape were successfully negotiated, the rest would be easy.

And the initial stages were already over!

In a word, Handforth had not only swallowed the bait, but he had gulped down the hook, the line, and the sinker, so to speak.

"Now then, you fellows!" shouted Tom Merry briskly. "Where are the ropes?"

"Hurrah!"

"The ropes—the ropes!"

With admirable precision numbers of fellows ran forward with ropes, and they proceeded to tie these to the front axle of the Austin Seven. Handforth regarded them in amazement.

"Hi!" he roared. "What's the idea?"

Tom Merry recoiled from that megaphone-like voice.

"We can't allow you to drive to St. Jim's," he said firmly. "We're going to pull you the rest of the way in triumph!"

"Great Scott!" said Handforth blankly.

"It's always done with famous men," said Monty Lowther gravely. "Please, Handforth, allow us to have this simple pleasure."

Handforth swelled visibly again, and one or two of his waistcoat buttons were in danger of bursting off.

"Oh, rather!" he said, waving a benevolent hand. "Go ahead! If it's going to please you fellows, I don't mind a bit!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Handforth!"

The cheers rang out again, and soon, amid much excitement and commotion, the teams got to work. They hauled on the ropes, and the Austin Seven was pulled through the village in triumph.

Flags were waved, and a number of other flags had been stuck into the rear of the car, where they billowed out majestically in the breeze.

And Edward Oswald Handforth sat at the wheel, glowing with delight.

In a vague sort of way, he had pictured his entry into the quad at St.

Jim's. The juniors would crowd round him, probably, and would ask him all sorts of questions. But this was too wonderful for words! The St. Jim's fellows were honouring him as he deserved! They were treating him as he had always felt that the St. Frank's fellows should have treated him!

Monty Lowther and his fellow-conspirators were only bottling up their merriment with the greatest difficulty. In fact, Monty's chief fear was that somebody would give the game away prematurely. And this jape had hardly started yet.

"Here we are!"

"Hurrah!"

The teams at the ropes swung round into the old gateway of St. Jim's, and the Austin followed, Handforth steering deftly. He hardly had time to look at the grey buildings, and to admire the picturesque, ivy-covered walls.

His attention was concentrated upon the crowds that lined the quad. And now more cheers were ringing out. On every side stood the juniors, waving their caps, jumping up and down with excited joy.

"Welcome to St. Jim's!"

"Hip—hip—hurrah!"

The cheering was thunderous. And Handforth expanded more and more, believing, in that celebrated innocence of his, that he was thoroughly deserving of this reception.

All his doubts were thrown aside. He was jolly glad now that he had come to St. Jim's!

CHAPTER 3.

Spooing the New Fellow!

THE impression that was being systematically drilled into Handforth's mind was that he was a fellow of immense importance. Of course, he had always known this—but it was refreshing and exhilarating to find that the St. Jim's juniors were prepared to give him his rightful due.

Like the prophet of old, who was of

no account in his own country, Handforth had always been bitterly disappointed at the utter lack of appreciation shown him by the St. Frank's fellows. In a sort of way he had been a celebrated character; but even he couldn't blind himself to the fact that St. Frank's, as a whole, had treated him as a joke.

How different it was at St. Jim's!

There were no derisive laughs—no rude interruptions—no disrespect. At last Handforth was enjoying that honour and respect which he felt his due. His lightest words were received with enthusiasm; these St. Jim's chaps hung on his every utterance.

"Hallo! What's all the excitement out here?" asked Bernard Glyn, as he emerged from the School House doorway. "My hat! Who's the funny-looking merchant in the exaggerated pram?"

Handforth's smile vanished, but before he could say anything, a chorus of shocked warnings went up. Blake dashed forward, his face full of dismay.

"Dry up, Glyn, you ass!" he hissed. "This chap is Handforth!"

Bernard Glyn started violently.

"Handforth?" he repeated, with awe.

"Yes, you footling idiot!"

"Oh, I say!" ejaculated Glyn penitently. "I'm awfully sorry! I didn't know! I—I suppose I ought to apologise?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy, jamming his monocle into his eye, and regarding Glyn with stern disapproval. "Weally, Glyn, I am surprised at you! Surely you could wecognise that this —"

"All right, Gussy!" interrupted Glyn hastily. "But the light's failing, and I couldn't see properly."

He ran down the steps and looked at Handforth humbly.

"I apologise!" he muttered. "I do hope that you forgive me, Handforth!"

"Oh, that's all right!" said the new junior, waving a lordly hand. "We're

all liable to make mistakes! Say no more about it."

"Oh, thank you!" gasped Glyn, with relief.

Handforth's sang-froid was restored. Little did he guess that this was merely another part of the general spoof! And the amazing thing to the majority of the juniors was that he swallowed it all!

"Now then—forward!" shouted Tom Merry briskly. "Stand back, most of you! Haven't you any respect? Forward—the committee!"

"By Jove—yes!" said Blake, with a start.

The majority of the fellows backed away, and only Study No. 6 and the Terrible Three remained. They surrounded Handforth as a kind of body-guard as he stepped out of the Austin Seven.

"We'd like you to allow us to show you to your study, Handforth," said Tom Merry respectfully. "Is it all right?"

"It's all right with me," replied Handforth serenely. "Go ahead!"

And they solemnly mounted the School House steps and tramped indoors. Up the stairs they went, and when they got into the Fourth Floor passage, Blake hurried forward in advance, and flung open the door of Study No. 6.

"Here we are!" he said, with deep respect.

"Walk into my parlour," said the spider to the fly," murmured Monty under his breath.

All unsuspecting, Handforth strode into the study, while the committee made way for him. Just inside, Handforth came to a halt and looked round dazedly.

"My only hat!" he ejaculated.

"Isn't it good enough?" asked Blake anxiously.

"I twust, deah boy, that the study meets with your appwoval?" said Arthur Augustus, with concern. "Bai Jove! How uttably wotten it would be if Handforth failed to appweciate —"

"It's—it's not that!" broke in Handforth, finding his voice. "By George! Is—is this my study?"

"It'll suit you, won't it?" asked Tom Merry, evading a direct reply to the question. "I'm in the Shell, I know, and this is a Fourth Form study, but we naturally take an interest—"

"Leave this to me," said Blake, as they all entered and the door was closed. "If there's anything wrong, Handforth, just say the word. We'll do our best to have it put right."

But Handforth was hardly able to speak. He was startled by the appearance of that wonderful study. Nothing at St. Frank's could compare with it!

In point of fact, Study N. 6 had undergone a transformation.

A soft carpet was on the floor, and near the hearthrug were two easy-chairs. A plush lounge reposed near the window, and a beautiful desk was set against the wall. The electric lights were shaded—delicately, artistically shaded. The whole study was suffused with a warm, eye-pleasing glow.

Handforth did not know that practically all this furniture had been borrowed, for this evening only, from some friendly seniors! And Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. thought it unnecessary to mention the fact.

"Why, it's—it's wonderful!" said Handforth, at last.

A chorus of relieved sighs went up.

"Bal Jove!" said D'Arcy, beaming. "That's taken a frightful load off my mind, deah boys!"

"Rather!" said Blake, his tone full of delight. "Handforth likes it! He's satisfied, you chaps! That's fine, isn't it?"

"But—but look here!" ejaculated Handforth, staring at the solemn-looking juniors. "I can't understand it, you know!"

"Can't understand what?" asked Tom Merry politely.

"Why, this study."

"What can't you understand?"

"I mean, it's so thundering good!" said Handforth, still looking round.

"At St. Frank's they haven't any studies like this. At least, not in the Remove."

"Well, of course, we mustn't let you get a wrong impression," said Tom Merry, smiling. "As a matter of fact, Handforth, this is the only study at St. Jim's with such wonderful furniture in it."

"The only Fourth Form study," amended Blake.

"That's what I meant," nodded Tom. "And, naturally, Handforth, we brought you to it."

Handforth's smile was becoming broader and broader.

"That was jolly decent of you!" he said contentedly.

"Well, what else could we do?" asked Tom Merry. "You've got to remember who you are, Handforth. All the rest of us pile three and four into a study, and it's just the same in the Shell. But you, being such a distinguished fellow, must have something better."

"We don't mind a bit," said Blake eagerly. "As long as you're satisfied, Handforth, we shall be pleased."

"Yaas, wathah," agreed Gussy, nodding. "It'll be a frightful pleasuah to us, deah boy, to weceive your assuah-wance that ewevythin' is all wight."

Handforth sat down in one of the easy-chairs, and he tried to analyse his feelings. He knew that he was overjoyed. He knew, also, that he was amazed; but he tried not to reveal this latter emotion. He felt that it was up to him to take these gifts as a matter of course.

"I like St. Jim's," he said firmly. "I don't mind admitting to you fellows that I was just a bit uncertain about it. But now that I've arrived, I'm jolly glad I made the change."

"I'll bet they're dreadfully cut up at St. Frank's," said Monty Lowther sadly.

"Oh, well, I suppose they're a bit downhearted!" agreed Handforth, with a nod. "Still, it was their own fault,

And now that I'm at St. Jim's, I mean to stick here!"

"It sounds too good to be true!" said Herries dreamily.

The jaspers felt that they could now say anything they liked. Handforth was well away on the flood-tide of make-believe. Having gone thus far without suspecting the truth, he was an easy victim. The juniors were now convinced that Monty Lowther had been right when he had said that Handforth's leg could be pulled until further orders.

Tap, tap!

"There's somebody at the door!" said Blake, looking annoyed. "How dare they come in here now and interrupt Handforth?"

The junior from St. Frank's rose to his feet, freshly surprised.

"Don't the chaps barge in, just as they like?" he inquired.

His companions looked shocked.

"They might barge into other studies. Handforth, but not into yours!" said Tom Merry, shaking his head. "I should hope they'd have more respect."

"They didn't have much respect for me at St. Frank's," said Handforth feelingly.

"Ah, but you're at St. Jim's now!" pointed out Blake.

Tap, tap!

"Bai Jove! I wondah if this is Mr. Lathom?" said Arthur Augustus, taking his cue from Monty Lowther. "I shouldn't be surprised. deah boys! Pewwaps that accounts for his persistence."

"Mr. Lathom!" repeated Handforth. "Who's he?"

"The master of the Fourth," murmured Blake. "Our Form-master, you know. Are you going to let him see you?"

Handforth stared.

"Let him see me?" he repeated.

"Because, if you don't want to, I'll just pop out and warn him," said Blake. "A word from me will be enough, of course. He'll go away, and come back when you want him."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus found it impossible to restrain that exclamation. Surely, Handforth would smell a rat now? But he didn't. He glowed with greater pleasure than ever. With a certain vague bewilderment, he was realising that his importance was even greater than he had even privately suspected. Form-masters themselves were ready to bow to him.

"Oh, well, we might as well be friendly!" he said, with a magisterial wave of his hand. "Let Mr. Lathom come in. I don't mind seeing him."

Blake made a curious sound in his throat, and Herries and Digby were compelled to turn aside. Monty Lowther remained perfectly solemn, but Tom Merry and Manners had great difficulty in keeping their faces straight.

Blake opened the door, and the figure of Mr. Lathom stood outside.

"Er—I understand that Handforth, the new boy, has arrived?" said Mr. Lathom's voice.

"Yes, sir," replied Blake.

"May I have a few words with him?" asked Mr. Lathom hesitantly. "Pray, do not disturb him if he is busy. I will come back later. Only I thought that the moment was perhaps opportune."

"That's all right, sir! Come in!" sang out Handforth boisterously. "I'll admit I'm a bit busy, but that doesn't matter. Come in, sir!"

Mr. Lathom entered, and Blake deftly closed the door. In the subdued, artistic glow of the study, Handforth saw a figure in cap and gown. He saw a smiling face, and he came to the conclusion that it was the Form-master right enough. He certainly did not suspect that "Mr. Lathom's" glasses were unnecessary, and that his hair was false. But, then, Handforth had never seen Mr. Lathom. And he was only seeing this newcomer in a subdued light.

"Ah, so you are Handforth?" said Mr. Lathom genially. "Splendid! I'm very pleased to meet you, Handforth!"

Indeed, I may say that I am proud to meet you!"

He slapped Handforth on the back, and then gripped his hand.

"Thanks, awfully, sir!" said Handforth delightedly. "You're my Form-master, aren't you?"

"Officially, yes," agreed Mr. Lathom, digging Handforth in the ribs. "But, unofficially, we can be a little more free and easy."

"By George!" said Handforth, with a gulp.

"Stand back, you other boys!" went on Mr. Lathom sternly. "How dare you crowd round Handforth in this way?"

"Sorry, sir!" gasped Blake.

"We forgot ourselves, sir," murmured Lowther.

"Then you must not forget yourselves again!" said Mr. Lathom, with dignity. "You will realise, Handforth, that it is necessary for me to be somewhat stern with the—ahem!—rank and file. You, naturally, come within a different category."

"Yes, sir," said Handforth helplessly. "Oh, rather!"

CHAPTER 4.

Keeping It Up!

THE amazing part of the whole affair was that Handforth was "sucked in."

At any moment during the course of the jape, the practical jokers had been prepared to indulge in their long-pent-up laugh. But as long as the thing would keep going they were ready to carry on.

And it now seemed that Handforth was as innocent and unsuspecting as ever. He had got past the stage of being surprised, and he was now taking everything as a matter of course. And this was the cream of the joke.

Greatly encouraged, "Mr. Lathom" slapped Handforth on the back again.

"There are exceptions to every rule, my boy," he said, with a chuckle. "And you, being such a celebrated character,

will naturally be an exception at St. Jim's."

"Thanks awfully, sir!"

"Dear me! My dear boy, why do you keep saying 'sir' to me?" asked Mr. Lathom mildly. "I want us to be friends. I want us to be familiar. These other boys are different. Naturally, they are different. I cannot demean myself by being familiar with every Tom, Dick, and Harry."

"Oh, rather not, sir!" said Handforth, regarding Blake & Co. as though they were so many microbes.

"I would mention that my Christian name is Philip," continued Mr. Lathom genially. "And among my very special friends I am always addressed as 'Phil.' You must remember that, Handforth."

He chuckled, and repeated the rib-digging process.

"Ulp!" gasped Handforth. "Yes, sir! I—I mean, of course, I'll remember it!"

"Splendid!" beamed Mr. Lathom. "Now, don't forget—to my special friends, I am Phil. And I already count you as one of my special friends, Handforth. I trust you will not be offended if I call you Handy?"

"Oh, sir!" said Monty Lowther in a reproachful voice.

"Eh? Ahem! Well, perhaps it would be somewhat too familiar," said Mr. Lathom hastily. "Well, Handforth, I must be going. I can see that I am wasting your valuable time. Don't forget to come along to my study whenever you wish. Drop in at any old time. Look upon it as your own!"

And Mr. Lathom, waving his hand, hustled to the door and went out. Handforth sank back, and sat at the edge of the table. A few beads of perspiration were showing on his heated brow.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he ejaculated blankly.

"Do you like our Form-master?" asked Blake anxiously.

Handforth recovered himself.

"Like him?" he repeated. "By

George! He's the most wonderful Form-master I've ever met!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "I'm vewy much afwaid that we shall soon be jealous of you, Handforth, deah boy! But, of course, Mr. Lathom can see the difference!"

Handforth was vastly impressed. Mr. Lathom's visit had left him feeling slightly weak. In his wildest dreams he had never imagined that a Form-master could be so genial and friendly as Mr. Lathom had been. But then Handforth pulled himself up. He was remembering his importance! Everybody at St. Jim's knew of it, and, what was more to the point, everybody at St. Jim's appreciated him.

And appreciation was what Edward Oswald Handforth had always pined for. At St. Frank's he hadn't received it. The fellows had shown him a singular lack of respect.

As for the japers, they were heroes, one and all. It was only by the exercise of the greatest possible self-restraint that they kept it up. Their one desire was to burst into a yell of prolonged laughter.

But that would spoil everything.

"We're awfully glad that you like Mr. Lathom!" said Tom Merry, as a new idea came into his head. "He's not my Form-master; but Blake, here, can tell you a few things about old Lathom."

"Rather!" said Blake. "He's pretty decent, on the whole, but he's never treated any of us as he treats you, Handforth. That's the best of being famous."

"Oh, well, of course!" said Handforth modestly.

"There's one thing that I think I'd better mention," said Tom Merry, becoming grave. "In fact, as junior skipper, it's my duty to mention it, Handforth."

"Go ahead!" said Handforth, who was now prepared for anything.

"Well, it's a warning," continued Tom. "Mr. Lathom was very nice to

you just now, and everything seemed to be going smoothly. But it won't be all jam."

Handforth, who had been feeling that there was a catch in it somewhere, looked at Tom Merry quickly. He had received a jar. But he hadn't the faintest suspicion of the real truth.

"It won't be all jam?" he repeated.

"Well, there's a bit of a snag," said Tom, while the other juniors looked at him wonderingly. "You see, we've got a kind of unwritten law at St. Jim's here. You can't possibly be fully recognised as a fully fledged Fourth Former until you have carried out certain tests."

"Tests?"

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "Weally, Tom Mewwy, I don't seem to wemembah—"

"That's enough, Gussy!" murmured Blake, stamping on D'Arcy's elegant toe.

"Yawwooooh!" howled Arthur Augustus wildly.

"You were saying, Tom Merry?" said Blake politely.

"Blake, you fwabjous dummay!" shouted D'Arcy. "You have wuined my shoe! You have cwushed my foot!"

"Never mind your foot, Gussy!" said Tom Merry. "I'm just explaining things to the new fellow. Well, Handforth, the fact is, every new chap at St. Jim's is supposed to tackle these tests. There are three of them, and they've all got to be polished off during the new fellow's first month."

Monty Lowther felt that this was going a little too far. He, as the prime practical joker, should have been told of this. But Tom Merry had only just thought of the scheme—although nobody would have suspected it, judging by the way he talked.

"I don't know what you mean—tests," said Handforth, staring.

"They're stiff!" said Tom solemnly. "They may even seem silly, when you

hear them first; but that's not my fault.

"Don't forget that these tests are an unwritten law!" said Blake stoutly.

"Yaas, wathah!"

They hadn't the faintest notion what Tom Merry was getting at, but they felt that it was their duty to back him up.

"Being a new fellow, Handforth, you've got to do these tests," said the Shell captain, lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper. "Firstly, you've got to fight a prefect, and knock him clean out."

"Fight a prefect?" repeated Handforth, staring.

"That's what I said!" replied Tom, as serious as an owl.

"Well, of course, that'll be pretty easy!" said Handforth, after a moment's thought. "I don't mind fighting anybody! There was hardly a chap at St. Frank's that I couldn't lick with one hand!"

"By Jove, that's fine!" said Tom eagerly. "Then we can dismiss the first test with a light heart. The second is a bit more difficult. You'll have to score a century, batting for the First Eleven!"

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Blake, under his breath.

Herries and Digby nearly shrieked with laughter, but Blake stopped them in the nick of time. And Handforth, as serenely innocent as ever, merely grinned.

"Score a century for the First Eleven?" he said. "Oh, that's nothing!"

"Nun-nothing?" gasped Manners.

"Nothing at all!" said Handforth lightly. "I've played for the First Eleven at St. Frank's before now."

"And did you score a century?" asked Lowther, in an awed voice.

"Well, no," admitted Handforth reluctantly. "Not exactly! But if some silly ass hadn't caught the ball——"

"Ha, ha, ha! Ahem! Sorry!" said Blake hurriedly.

Tom Merry was racking his brain for

the other mythical test, and his face suddenly cleared.

"And finally, you'll have to raid Rylcombe Grammar School single-handed," said the Shell captain. "What's more, you'll have to bring back a signed declaration from Gordon Gay to the effect that the Grammarians aren't fit to clean our boots!"

"Gordon Gay is the Grammarian Junior leader," explained Blake kindly.

"Here, I say!" protested Handforth. "How can I raid a school single-handed? I've never seen the place, and I don't know——"

He broke off as he saw that the juniors were regarding him with amazement.

"Bai Jove!" burst out D'Arcy. "You're not weally tellin' us, deah boy, that you can't do it?"

"Nun-no!" gasped Handforth. "I—I was only thinking that——"

"You!" said Blake incredulously. "The great Handforth, the famous Handforth of St. Frank's! Why, you're trying to kid us! You can do anything, Handforth! There's nothing in the world that's beyond your powers!"

"Nothing!" said Tom Merry, wagging a finger at Handforth. "We know about you, old man, so you can't fool us!"

Handforth gulped and pulled himself together.

"Oh, rather!" he said breathlessly. "These tests don't scare me! They're nothing! At least, they're nothing to me!"

The japers were nearly convulsed. They felt annoyed with Tom Merry for not having warned them. He might have spoilt the whole joke by taking them unprepared. Not that they need have worried. Handforth was being carried completely away by his own importance.

"I thought I'd better tell you about these tests, you know," said Tom Merry. "They've all got to be done during your first month, and——"

"That's all right!" interrupted Handforth, with a lofty wave of his hand.

"Leave everything to me, Tom Jerry!"

"My name is Tom Merry!" said Tom humbly.

"Sorry!" grinned Handforth.

"What's the difference?"

"Not much," agreed Tom. "Well, you see, unless you do all these things during your first month at St. Jim's you'll never be officially recognised as a member of the Fourth."

"I think I had better point out," said Blake, "that if you're successful, Handforth, you'll naturally be the leader of the Form."

Handforth's eyes gleamed.

"Then I've got to be successful!" he said promptly. "Even before I came here I'd made up my mind to be the leader of the Form before the end of the first month!"

"Great Scott!"

"And now I think I'd better go and see the Head," remarked Handforth contentedly. "I must say, you chaps, that I'm pleased with St. Jim's. It's the most wonderful school I've ever been in!"

"Joyous, happy words!" murmured Lowther in a dreamy voice.

"Yaas, wathah!" beamed Gussy. "It makes us vewy wellevved to heah you cwackin' up St. Jim's, Handforth."

"Well, I believe in speaking as I find!" said Handforth. "I'm jolly pleased to know that you fellows are ready to knuckle under to my rule. I'm a born leader, as you've probably seen, and there must be something about my personality that compels respect and obedience."

"He knows it, you see?" said Tom Merry, glancing at the others.

"And now, about the Head," went on Handforth. "It's getting a bit late, isn't it? I'm supposed to report myself to your headmaster, and there might be a bit of trouble if I forget him. I know what headmasters are! So if you'll excuse me——"

He broke off, looking at the juniors in astonishment, for they were all grinning and chuckling.

"What's the joke?" demanded Handforth.

"My dear chap, you will have your fun, won't you?" grinned Tom Merry. "Fancy telling us that you're going to see the Head! It's the Head's place to come to see you!"

"Wha-a-at?" gasped Handforth.

"Of course it is!" said Blake boisterously. "Any other new boy, naturally, would go to the Head. But you, being such a great man, mustn't lower yourself like that, Handforth."

CHAPTER 5.

Too Good to be True!

"GREAT SCOTT!"

Handforth pulled himself together with difficulty.

Tom Merry & Co., and the rightful owners of Study No. 6, were half-expecting the new fellow to look at them suspiciously. But he didn't. A slow smile of gratification was spreading over his rugged features.

"I hadn't thought of it in that way!" he said at last. "The Head's got to come and see me, eh?"

"Rather!"

"You think I should be lowering myself if I went to him?"

"It would be most frightfully infwaddig, deah boy," said D'Arcy, shaking his head. "Not with the avewage wun of juniahs, you undahstand, but you're a special case."

"A very special case," said Monty, firmly.

Handforth nodded.

"Well, I suppose I'd better wait until the Head comes," he said, sinking into one of the chairs. "Perhaps somebody would be good enough to tell the Head that I'm ready to see him?"

"Oh crumbs!" gurgled Blake.

Handforth had swallowed this, too! And there he sat, like some Indian potentate, graciously consenting to see the Head! It was too good to be true!

But one glance at Handforth's complacent countenance satisfied the jaspers that he was still serenely unconscious of the true position.

"Run out and fetch the Head, Herries!" said Blake quickly.

"I'll go like the wind!" said Herries.

He blundered to the door and escaped. He was only too glad to get away, so that he could stagger to the end of the passage and give vent to his bottled-up laughter.

"I'll go, too!" said Manners, in a strained voice.

He staggered out, and when he reached the end of the passage he fairly shrieked with laughter. Herries was already there, holding his sides in pain, and tears were streaming down his cheeks.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dry up, you silly asses!" said Bernard Glyn, shaking them. "How's everything going?"

"Don't ask us!" sobbed Manners. "The new chap is spoofed up to the collar!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's drinking it all in like champagne!" moaned Herries.

"Yes, but what's happening in there?" demanded Levison.

There were a good many juniors collected at the corner, and they were all eager. Hovering in the doorway of a neighbouring study, a dignified figure could be seen—a figure surprisingly like Dr. Holmes, the reverend Head of St. Jim's. Only this particular Dr. Holmes was grinning in a most un-Head-like manner.

"What about me?" he inquired. "Where do I come in?"

"Now!" gurgled Herries. "We've come to fetch you! Handforth has consented to see you at once!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't give the game away, you chaps!" begged Manners, with tears of mirth in his eyes. "Oh crumbs! This is too rich for words! Monty said that we could pull this chap's leg—and he's a scream! Let's keep it up for all

it's worth—until to-morrow morning, if we can!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

In Study No. 6 Handforth was settling himself more comfortably in his chair. He now felt that he was firmly established. The juniors held him in awe; his own Form-master had treated him with deference; and now he was waiting to graciously interview the Head.

Tap!

"Here he is!" breathed Tom Merry. "Look out, you chaps!"

"Bai Jove! My tie isn't stwaight!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in anguish.

The door opened, and Dr. Holmes walked in. At least, he looked like Dr. Holmes—and when he spoke he spoke like Dr. Holmes, and surely this was good enough for Handforth? And in the subdued glow of the study the newcomer undoubtedly looked like the genuine article.

"Er—may I come in?" inquired the Head, with a nervous cough.

"Rather, sir!" said Handforth, without even rising. "The fellows said that you wanted to see me, so I told them to bring you along."

"It was very considerate of you, Handforth, I am sure!" said Dr. Holmes, as he advanced and hesitatingly took Handforth's hand. "I had been hoping that you would find time to see me. And, needless to say, I am gratified at your singular generosity."

"That's all right!" said Handforth kindly. "Of course, to-morrow would have been soon enough, really. Strictly speaking, I don't like to be bothered during my first evening—"

"Dear me!" said the Head in alarm. "In that case, Handforth, I will retire at once! I fear that I have been presumptuous—"

"Not at all, sir!" interrupted Handforth. "Don't go! Now that you're here you might as well get it over! What did you want to see me about?"

That Handforth could actually believe himself to be in the presence of his headmaster was incredible. The

other occupants of the study were well-nigh stunned. Was it a fact that this extraordinary new fellow was fooled? Could he, a sane human being, believe that the headmaster of St. Jim's would come to him like this?

But Tom Merry & Co. didn't know Handforth yet! However, they were rapidly learning!

"Really, Handforth, there is nothing that I particularly want to see you about," said the Head, in a flurried voice. "But it is only natural, perhaps, that I should be eager to make your acquaintance."

"Yes, of course, sir!"

"You are no ordinary new boy, Handforth, as, no doubt, you are well aware," continued the pseudo Head. "And at St. Jim's we are not particularly formal, as you may have discovered."

"I think it's a fine system, sir!" said Handforth enthusiastically.

"But you must realise that we have to be very careful," continued the Head. "Do not imagine that I allow all my boys to be familiar with me: such ruff-raff as these are beneath contempt!" he added, indicating Tom Merry and the others with a wave of his hand. "As you have seen for yourself, they are little better than microbes!"

"Bai Jove!"

"You—you burbling New House rotter——"

"Silence!" thundered the Head sternly.

Fortunately, he was in time to drown the chorus that had arisen and Handforth noticed nothing.

"I must be patient with them," said Dr. Holmes generously. "You and I, Handforth, can sympathise with them in their half-witted imbecility."

"Yes, of course, sir," said Handforth; while the School House juniors fumed.

"They are merely infants!" continued the Head sadly. "Youths in form and figure, but babies in brain! Doubtless you have already observed this curious fact?"

"Well, I had noticed it, sir!" agreed Handforth.

It was rather a wonder that Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. did not fall upon him then and there, and wreck the whole jape. It was as remarkable that Dr. Holmes was not seized and bumped, and shot head first out of the study.

They were prevented from doing this by the clanging of a distant bell.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy with a start. "Bed-time, deah boys!"

"Well, Im blessed!" said Blake.

"And I've just wemembahed that we've not had suppah!" went on Gussy. "How fighwfully wotten! Weally, Blake, I wegard you as an ass! You should have weminded us——"

"Dry up, Gussy!" growled Blake.

"Remember who's here!"

"Blake—D'Arcy!" rapped out the Head. "You will each write me five hundred lines as a punishment for these impertinent interruptions!"

"Why, you—you—— Yes, sir!" gasped Blake.

"Bai Jove! I uttahly wefuse——"

"Since it is bed-time, Handforth, I must leave you," said Dr. Holmes, turning to the new fellow again. "Well, don't forget to look me up."

"Look you up, sir?"

"And it is quite unnecessary for you to 'sir' me," continued the Head genially. "My name is Holmes. Call me Holmes, if you like."

"Oh, dear!" said Handforth feebly.

"I would mention that my full name is Dr. Richard Holmes," continued the Head. "Dicky for short. Well, my boy, this is a proud moment for me! Here you are, in my school! Handforth—the wonderful Handforth! It is something that I have dreamed about, but something that I hardly believed possible!"

He shook Handforth's hand warmly again, and beamed with delight.

"Well, well! Good-night, Handforth!" he added, while the new fellow was still speechless. "Don't forget what I have told you! Drop in whenever you like! My study is yours! My entire house is yours! Whenever you

would prefer to have dinner with me, or even breakfast, don't trouble to give me any warning. Just walk in!"

And Dr. Holmes waved his hand, strode to the door, and passed out.

"My only sainted aunt!" breathed Handforth dazedly.

Surely he had guessed? But not a bit of it! There was only one Handforth, and he had long since passed the point when he might have suspected. This jape had been worked up crescendo and in a very brainy way. If the Head had been sprung on Handforth during the initial stages he would never have swallowed him. As it was, Handforth's unique mind was bewildered, but innocent.

"By George!" he said at last. "That's the kind of Head!"

"I'm glad you like him!" said Tom Merry, in a curiously strangled voice.

"Like him!" laughed Handforth. "He's a top-notch! In fact, the whole of St. Jim's is first-rate! I always thought St. Frank's was pretty good, but it's a dusthole compared to this place!"

"Hear, hear!" said the juniors, in one voice.

"Absolutely a dusthole!" repeated Handforth. "At St. Jim's they know how to treat a fellow! They realise his worth at the first glance!"

"Ahem! Let's be going!" said Blake diplomatically. "You'll allow us to escort you upstairs to the dormitory won't you, Handforth, please?"

Fortunately, Handforth made no mention of supper. The japers had deliberately kept him here, in Study No. 6, so that he would have no opportunity of going into Hall. For there he would have met the genuine Mr. Lathom, and possibly the genuine Head. And Tom Merry & Co. were anxious to keep this practical joke up until the morrow. It seemed incredible that it could be kept up until then; but with Handforth, apparently, anything was possible.

The juniors tramped upstairs, with Handforth in their midst. They got

him into the Fourth Form dormitory as quickly and as adroitly as possible. They didn't want him to meet any prefects or masters until the morrow.

"Well, here we are!" said Blake, as they entered the dormitory. "Not much of a place, I'm afraid, without a special bed for you, Handforth!"

"Don't be silly, Blake!" said Tom Merry. "Of course, there's a special bed for Handforth!"

"You clear out, you Shell boulder!" frowned Blake.

"We just came in to see Handforth nice and comfortable," murmured Lowther.

A good many other Fourth Formers were crowding round now, eager to join in this colossal rag. But they all took care to keep the joke up. It was too good to spoil!

CHAPTER 6.

The Fun Begins!

"H'M! Not so dusty!"
Thus Edward Oswald Handforth.

He had inspected the Fourth Form dormitory, and although the juniors wanted to fall upon him and smite him, they manfully restrained these warlike urgings.

"I'm afraid it's pwetty wotten, weally," said Arthur Augustus apologetically.

"Well, at St. Frank's we had our own bed-rooms," said Handforth.

"You know—small dormitories; two or three fellows in each. But I suppose this is all right. That's my bed over there, eh?" he added, pointing.

"Yes, please, Handforth!" said Blake humbly.

Actually, he wanted to punch this new chap hard—and frequently. Handforth's condescending air was irritating.

It had been impossible to make many drastic alterations in the Fourth Form dormitory. By dint of a little bribery and corruption, however, in which cer-

tain maidservants were concerned, a special bed had been prepared for Handforth.

It was quite a good affair, fitted up with an ornamental canopy, to say nothing of silk curtains. It stood out from the other beds like a rose amongst weeds.

"We prepared this in your honour, Handforth," said Blake simply.

"Oh, I see!" said Handforth. "That was jolly decent of you!"

"Not at all!" put in Levison. "Nothing is too much trouble where you're concerned, Handforth. My name's Levison—Study No. 9. Hope you don't think it's cheeky of me to talk to you like this?"

"Not a bit!" said Handforth. "Go ahead!"

"Well we'll be going!" said Tom Merry with genuine reluctance. "Come on, Monty! You, too, Manners!"

"Yes," said Monty Lowther miserably. "We shall have to curb our impatience until to-morrow. But we can get up early and be the first to greet Handforth when he comes down!" he added, brightening up.

The Shell fellows departed, hoping against hope that the lunatics of Fourth Formers would not give the game away prematurely. Now that the jape had extended so far, it was imperative that it should continue until the morning.

Handforth undressed and got into bed, and every now and again one junior or another was brought forward and humbly presented. By this process Handforth's belief that he was a junior in a thousand was not only strengthened, but verified. One and all, these St. Jim's juniors were paying him homage.

To Handforth it was like a dream coming true.

"Well, the prefect will soon be here to see lights out," said Blake, as he jumped into his own bed. "If I were you, Handforth, I shouldn't say much to him. It doesn't do to be too familiar with the prefects."

"Prefects!" said Handforth scornfully. "My dear chap I shall ignore him!"

He was in bed now and he lounged back on his pillow with his hands behind his head. He was very comfortable and his mind was at rest. Never had he known such joy as this. At St. Jim's he was somebody. He felt that power was within his grasp. Already these juniors were eager to obey his every whim. Before long they would be his slaves.

"By George" murmured Handforth, as he closed his eyes, "there's no mistake about it! St. Frank's is a dust-hole compared to this place!"

His thoughts were interrupted by a fiendish yell.

"Look out!"

"Hi! It's falling! It's falling on Handforth——"

Crash!

Handforth, opening his eyes, was just in time to see the canopy descending upon him like an avalanche. There was a splintering crash, a muffled confusion of thuds, and Handforth practically vanished.

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Quick—quick!" yelled Blake. "To the rescue!"

He permitted himself a wide grin, and he congratulated himself upon the deft manner in which he had pulled the hidden string. Stentorian shouts were coming from beneath the folds of the canopy, and the thing was heaving like an angry sea.

"Hi! What the—— What's happened?" spluttered Handforth, as he struggled. "Lemme get out!"

Juniors ran up from all sides. They bumped into the bed violently, and it rocked and heaved.

Then suddenly the bed itself collapsed.

Crash!

Down it went, the head slithering against the wall and the foot sagging over. The main section took a sharp list to starboard, and Handforth was de-

posited on the floor with a fearful bump. The sheets and the blankets covered him like a shroud.

"Wh-what's happened?" came a muffled gasp from the disordered pile.

"Oh, quick!" shouted Blake, in anguish. "It's Handforth! Somebody will get the sack for this to-morrow when we find out the truth! Oh, what carelessness!"

"Awful!"

"Let's all help Handforth, you fellows!"

And the Fourth Formers proceeded to help Handforth. The wrecked bed was straightened out somewhat, and the sheets and blankets and the canopy were hauled away. Handforth sat up in the middle of it all, gasping. His face was red, and he was bewildered.

"How did it happen?" he panted.

"Goodness knows!" said Blake penitently. "Oh, Handforth, how can you forgive us!"

"Why, you didn't do this, did you?" demanded Handforth with a flash of suspicion.

"Nunno!" gasped Blake. "I—I mean—that is to say, I hope you'll forgive us for allowing this to happen, Handforth! It's terrible! You—you, the great Handforth! We ought to be kicked—every one of us!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We gave special instructions about that bed, too!" said Blake darkly. "By Jove, somebody's going to pay for this to-morrow! Come on, you fellows! Let's get this bed up again! Under the circs, we'd better dispense with the canopy!"

Which was just as well, for the prefect, coming to see lights out, would undoubtedly have asked some awkward questions about that canopy. By this little stratagem the dormitory was made to look normal again, and Handforth suspected nothing.

The juniors almost fell over themselves in their eagerness to set the bed to rights. Handforth wasn't allowed to touch anything. He was requested to stand aside, and then, with lightning

speed, the bed was erected—quite securely this time—and made.

"There you are!" said Blake breathlessly at last. "Hop in, Handforth! It's time for lights out! Please, for our sake, don't say anything to the prefect!"

"That's all right!" said Handforth gruffly. "I'm not a chap to make a fuss!"

He was greatly impressed by their breathless apologies. And when, a minute or two later, Darrell of the Sixth came along to turn out the lights, he noticed nothing suspicious.

"Well, thank goodness!" said Herries softly, after the door was closed behind the prefect.

"Yes, rather!" murmured Blake. "We're safe now! Good-night, Handforth!"

"Good-night!" said the new fellow.

"Good-night, Handforth!" echoed every voice in the dormitory.

"Eh?" gasped Handforth. "Oh, I see! Good-night, you chaps!"

Never had he received such attention; never had he had such adoration. Until they had all said "Good-night!" to him, they couldn't compose themselves for sleep.

And Edward Oswald Handforth snuggled down drowsily, picturing the triumphs that he would encounter on the morrow.

If all this could happen during his first hour or two, what would not the morrow bring forth? He could see himself condescending, with much graciousness, to have a few words with this junior or that junior. He would go round the school and inspect the buildings, and he was sure that he would have an escort of humble Fourth Formers and Shell fellows.

And in this deliciously happy frame of mind Handforth fell asleep. It seemed to him that no time at all had elapsed before he was awakened by a discordant clanging.

He sat up in bed, blinking around.

"By George!" he muttered sleepily.

The summer sunshine was streaming

through the dormitory windows, and fellows on all sides were sitting up and stretching themselves. Just for a moment Handforth did not know where he was. Then, in a flash, he remembered.

"My only hat," he said aloud, "I'm at St. Jim's!"

In a flood he remembered all the happenings of the previous night. His first momentary sensation of strangeness passed. Here, at St. Jim's, he was somebody!

"Hallo, Blake!" he said cheerily.

Jack Blake grunted and turned over in bed.

"Shurrup!" he mumbled. "Go and eat coke!"

"Eh?" gasped Handforth.

"Lemme alone!" murmured Blake sleepily. "What's that rotten noise?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, fearful lest Blake should give the game away in his half-wakeful condition, leapt out of bed.

"Weally, Blake, I'm surprised at you!" he said severely.

"Burrerrr!"

"I do not wegard that as an intelligible remark, Blake!" said Gussy. "You have appawently forgotten that Handforth is with us!"

"Eh?" said Blake with a start as he turned over. "Handforth? Oh, by Jove!"

"I am pleased to see that you've wemembahed yourself!" remarked Gussy frigidly. "I was afwaid, Blake, that you were goin' to be wude to the new fellow. However, there is still time for you to wepah the damage!"

Blake, sitting up, gazed somewhat sleepy-eyed at Handforth.

"Why, yes—the new fellow!" he said. "Morning, Handforth!"

"Time to get up, eh?" said Handforth.

"Nunno! Not at all!" said Blake hastily, as he leapt out of bed. "At least, not for you! All the rest of us must hurry, but you're different."

"Oh, well, of course——"

"Quite different!" put in Levison.

"Don't you trouble to get up, Handforth! You stay there, and take your ease!"

"But won't there be trouble?"

Ernest Levison laughed.

"There would be trouble if we presumed to do it," he replied. "But why should you worry? The masters you saw last night won't say a word to you—not even if you're two hours late!"

This was true enough, although Handforth didn't see the inner meaning of Levison's words.

"In that case, I think I'll have another ten minutes," said Handforth luxuriously.

He felt that it would be a wrong policy to get up with the rest. He was somebody special—a privileged person. It would never do to lower himself to the level of the rank and file!

And so, while the Fourth dressed, Handforth lolled in bed. It wasn't until almost the last fellow had gone that he condescended to "show a leg." And then he only did so because he was anxious to get down—to add further laurels to his victories.

But downstairs, crowding round the open doorway of the School House, the juniors were not merely chuckling, but they were yelling with laughter. They were waiting for the cream of the joke.

At last the moment was arriving when the truth would hit Handforth like a bombshell. And the Fourth and the Shell felt that life was indeed worth living!

CHAPTER 7.

The Climax!

"CAVE!"

"Here he comes!"

"Bai Jove!"

The crowd had increased. It was overflowing down the School House steps, and into the quad. Everybody wanted to be on the spot when Handforth came down.

And now he was coming.

He had appeared at the top of the stairs, and he was attired in the full

glory of white trousers and blazer. Strictly speaking, he should have been wearing Etons; but he was so imbued with his sense of security that he had decided to startle the natives by coming down in flannels. Besides, they were much more comfortable during the hot weather.

"Hurrah!"

"Here comes Handforth!"

The new fellow beamed genially. It was just the same! This morning, indeed, the juniors seemed to be more enthusiastic than ever. Here they were, cheering him to the echo, bowing to him, just because he had appeared at the top of the stairs!

He didn't know that Tom Merry and Blake had led those cheers—mainly to drown the many titters of laughter that had gone up. Also, a perfect gasp of anticipation had sounded. For, by a piece of luck that could only be described as phenomenal, Mr. Lathom himself had just walked out of the passage. He and Handforth were bound to meet down in the hall.

It wasn't merely lucky—it was providential.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Lathom mildly, as he blinked round. "What is all this commotion, boys?"

"Handforth's just coming down, sir," said Blake, with the utmost gravity.

"Handforth?" repeated Mr. Lathom. "I do not seem to remember the name—"

"The new fellow in the Fourth, sir."

"Ah, yes!" said Mr. Lathom, nodding. "Mr. Railton informed me before going away—"

"Hallo, there!" roared a cheery voice.

"Clap!"

Handforth had come downstairs, and, to the overwhelming joy of the crowd, he had clapped the sedate little Mr. Lathom on the back! The master of the Fourth was nearly startled out of his skin, and he jumped a foot into the air.

"Good gracious!" he gasped. "What—what on earth are—"

"Morning, Phil!" grinned Handforth genially.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crowd nearly expired with suppressed merriment, and Mr. Lathom wondered if he had suddenly gone out of his mind.

"How—how dare you!" he said angrily.

"Eh?" gasped Handforth, with a start. "Here, come off it! Cheese it, Phil!"

"You impertinent young rascal!" ejaculated Mr. Lathom, aghast. "I refuse to cheese it—That is to say—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth was surprised—and just a little bewildered. He had recognised Mr. Lathom on the instant. True, he had only seen him once before—and then in the subdued light of the study. But he couldn't possibly have been mistaken.

"You're Mr. Lathom, aren't you?" he demanded.

"That is my name, young man!" snapped the Form-master. "But I would remind you—"

"Then what's the giddy wheeze, Phil?" grinned Handforth.

"Phil!" breathed Mr. Lathom, dazed.

"We're going to be pals!" said Handforth, thumping Mr. Lathom on the back. "These other fellows of course, are different. We—"

"How dare you!" shrieked Mr. Lathom wildly. "You—you impertinent young rascal! Never in the whole of my life, have I been so grossly—"

"G'weat Scott! The Head!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been unable to restrain himself. And Handforth, looking round, saw the dignified figure of Dr. Holmes passing by the School House outside. And Handforth's eyes gleamed.

"I shall make it my duty to report you at once to Dr. Holmes!" Mr. Lathom was saying excitedly. "I think you must be mad. How can you have the impudence to—to slap me on the

back, and—and— Good gracious! Boy! Come here! Come here at once!"

But Handforth, to the delirium of the juniors, had walked off, without even waiting for Mr. Lathom to finish!

"Good heavens!" muttered the Form-master dizzily.

Handforth was striding down the steps of the School House; and now, indeed, the juniors were on the qui vive for the next bombshell. Over by the New House, Figgins & Co., and all their kind, were waiting and watching.

"Weally, Lowthah, I am beginnin' to wegwet my part in this howwid jape!" murmured Gussy, in distress.

"Ass!" said Monty Lowther briefly, but to the point.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Ring off, Gussy—it's zero hour!" murmured Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah! But at the same time, deah boy, isn't this wathah a dirtay twick on this new fellah?" asked Gussy dubiously. "It was quite all wight up to a certain point, but there's goin' to be a fwightful wow in a minute!"

"We're waiting for it," grinned Monty softly. "And don't be an ass, Gussy. Handforth is a new fellow, and that's why we can play this jape on him. The Head—and old Lathom, too—will soon realise that the chump has been fooled. So they'll go easy with him!"

"I twust you are wight, Lowthah," said D'Arcy with concern.

Most of the others were crowding out into the quad. Mr. Lathom had gone down the steps, in the wake of Handforth; but now he paused—chiefly because his legs refused to carry him any farther. He wasn't quite sure that his eyes were functioning. For the thing he saw—or thought he saw—was too startling for words.

Handforth, running lightly, had overtaken the Head near the chapel, and the "thud" as he clapped Dr. Holmes on the back was heard all over the quad. Every voice had been silenced—everybody was waiting, with bated breath, for what would happen.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the Head, with a violent start.

He spun round, his mortar-board cocked over one ear at a grotesque angle. He beheld the grinning Handforth, and his glasses dropped from his nose and dangled on their cord.

"Boy!" he thundered.

Even Handforth recoiled under the stern voice.

"Good-morning, Holmes!" he said, recovering himself instantly.

"Oh, hold me, somebody!" moaned Blake. "Take me away to die!"

"Shush!" warned Tom Merry. "Don't laugh, you idiots! This is too good to be missed!"

Dr. Holmes seemed to be experiencing some difficulty with his larynx. But at last he got it into working order again.

"What is your name?" he demanded, in a terrible voice.

"Come off it!" grinned Handforth. "You know jolly well that my name's Handforth——"

"Ah, yes!" broke in the Head. "Handforth! You should have come to me last night, boy! What do you mean by having the audacity to strike me?"

"Rats!" said Handforth, to the Head's stupefaction. "I was only thumping you on the back! You told me that we were going to be pals, didn't you? Cheese it, Dicky!"

"Dicky!" babbled the Head, in a hoarse whisper.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, crumbs!" wept Tom Merry. "This is too much! Ow! I'm in pain!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth was looking at the Head in a bewildered way; even he could now see that Dr. Holmes was purple with wrath.

"What's the matter, sir?" he asked.

"Didn't you invite me to call you by your Christian name? Didn't you say that I could come into your house whenever I liked, and that I could look upon it as my own?"

"Silence!" thundered Dr. Holmes angrily. "Handforth! Your father

told me something of your character, and I have been given to understand that you are an exceptionally head-strong boy. Are you deliberately insulting me?"

Handforth fell back a pace.

"Nunno, sir!" he gasped. "But—but you told me last night——"

"Rubbish! I did not see you last night!"

"But you did, sir!" shouted Handforth. "You came to my study, and you told me——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

This time it was a perfect roar, although the source of the laughter was mainly invisible. Most of the juniors had thought it politic to get beyond the range of the Head's eagle eye.

"Handforth, calm yourself!" said the Head sternly. "Are you seriously telling me that you believe that I came to your study last night?"

"But you did come, sir!"

"Nonsense!" said Dr. Holmes. "By what flight of imagination do you presume that I should come to our study?"

"But—but——"

"I can only assume, young man, that you have been made the butt of a practical joke!" said the Head. "There can be no other explanation of this extraordinary belief of yours."

"Sir!" panted Mr. Lathom, running up. "This boy—this young rascal has been incredibly impertinent——"

"Please calm yourself, Mr. Lathom!" interrupted the Head. "There is some mistake. Handforth is new to this school. He only arrived last evening. It is quite obvious that he is bewildered and dazed—and I can only conclude that he has been made the victim of a practical joke."

Handforth tried to speak, but he couldn't. His throat worked up and down, and his face went as red as a beetroot.

"In the circumstances, Handforth, your gross impertinence will be overlooked," went on the Head kindly. "At the same time, I cannot possibly imagine how you could have been so

foolish. I think it will be better, on the whole, if I do not make a pressing inquiry. But in future you must be more careful."

"I—I—I——" began Handforth, gulping.

"You will report to my study after breakfast, Handforth!" said Dr. Holmes. "By that time, I hope, you will be fully conversant with the true state of affairs. Come, Mr. Lathom!"

The two masters vanished into the Cloisters, and, as though by magic, the quad filled with juniors. The quad also filled with yells of laughter. On every hand juniors were doubled up; they were fairly shrieking with merriment.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Handforth!"

"The jape of the year, by Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Edward Oswald Handforth stood there, going red and pale in turns. If a bombshell had exploded on the other side of the quad he could not have been more staggered. In a flash—in a blinding blaze of realisation—the stunning truth had come upon him. It had seared into his brain.

He had been fooled!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, I wathah think the Head acted like a wippah, deah boys!"

"He did!" panted Blake. "But we knew the idiot wouldn't get into much trouble! Oh, my sides are cracking!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The New House juniors were now taking part in the general hilarity. One and all, the Shell and the Fourth, were wondering how Handforth would take this climax. The chances were that he would bolt—that he would scuttle away and hide his diminished head.

But they didn't know Handforth!

His powers of recovery were remarkable. And while the quad was ringing with laughter he clenched his fists, and he swung round upon his tormentors. He knew the truth now! He wasn't the big power that he had imagined himself to be! He was just

the victim of a jape! But Handforth's pride was in no way diminished.

"You rotters!" he thundered furiously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you spoofing bounders!" hooted Handforth. "Come on! I'll fight the lot of you! I'll take you one by one, and reduce you to pulp!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The laughter was greater than ever. Was there no end to this new fellow's idiocy? The entire Shell and the entire Fourth were surrounding him, and he was ready to fight the lot!

CHAPTER 8.

Looking for Trouble!

TOM MERRY stepped forward, smiling and cheery.

"Well, that's that!" he chuckled. "Just our little joke, Handforth!"

The new fellow glared.

"By George!" he breathed. "You're the Remove captain, aren't you?"

"No, I'm the Shell captain."

"What's the difference?" bellowed Handforth. "You're the chap who spoofed me last night!"

"One of them!" said Tom modestly.

"The chief honours go to my distinguished friend on my right—Monty Lowther."

Lowther bowed.

"This is so unexpected!" he murmured.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You rotters!" roared Handforth. "I'm going to smash you into a jelly!"

"Oh, please, Handforth!" said Blake in an awed voice.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Further shrieks went up, and Handforth knew, even more than he had known before, that his dream was only a dream. Here, just the same as at St. Frank's, he was regarded as a joke! His vision of power crumbled to dust.

"Don't look so wild, old man," chuckled Tom Merry. "We've heard about you——"

"Put up your hands!" hooted Handforth, rolling up his sleeves.

"And we've no reason to believe that you're not a sportsman," went on Tom. "Isn't it rather a usual thing to jape a new fellow, Handforth?"

Handforth's arms fell limply to his sides. Then, in a moment, his warlike looks vanished; a weak grin spread itself over his good-natured face.

"All right!" he said gruffly. "I've been properly dished—and I hope I'm sportsman enough to take it in the right spirit."

"Good man!" said Tom Merry heartily.

"Bai Jove!" said Gussy, pushing forward. "I must remark, Handforth, that you have taken it wemarkably decently."

Handforth grunted.

"All the same, you're a lot of spoofers!" he said darkly. "What's more, I'll get my own back!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth strode off towards the School House, and the juniors were well pleased with him. The last veil had been pulled from his eyes, and yet he was, on the whole, good-tempered about it.

"Hold on!" sang out Blake. "Where are you going to, Handforth?"

"To my study!" snorted Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It wasn't a laugh that went up, but a yell.

"Anything funny in that?" roared Handforth, coming to a halt, and turning.

"You bet there is!" grinned Blake sweetly. "You haven't got a study."

"What!"

"That study we took you into last night is ours!" explained Blake. "We borrowed the furniture for the occasion."

"Oh, crumbs!" said Handforth blankly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'll have to wait until Mr. Railton comes," pursued Blake. "He's our Housemaster, you know. He's not con-

ing along until this afternoon. He'll probably bung you in with Trimble and Mellish, or somebody like that! Poor old scout! What a shock!"

"I say, I hope Handforth is really put into our study!" said Baggy Trimble eagerly. "He's going to be one of my pals——"

"Clear off, Trimble!" frowned Blake. "How did you know that Handforth had any money?"

"I didn't know!" roared Baggy, in confusion.

"Well, scoot!" said Blake curtly.

Monty Lowther wore an innocent smile as he strolled up to Handforth.

"Oh, by the way," he said. "What about knocking out the prefect, Handforth? What about scoring a century in a First Eleven match? What about——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A yell went up, and Handforth started.

"By George!" he gasped. "Was that spoof, too?"

"Ye gods and little fishes!" murmured Monty, fanning himself. "He's even ready to believe that Tommy was serious."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sorry, old man, but everything was spoof!" explained Tom Merry, with a chuckle.

"Oh, was it!" shouted Handforth, his face red with wrath. "All right, you rotters! I'll show you!"

"What will you show us?"

"I jolly well will thrash a prefect and do those other things!" thundered Handforth, with an impetuosity that was all his own. "You've practically dared me to do them, and I'll——"

But his voice was drowned in the chorus of laughter that went up.

"Oh, this chap'll be the death of me!" sobbed Blake dizzily. "He means it, you fellows! He actually means it!"

"Yes, I do mean it!" shouted Handforth. "When I say a thing, I mean a thing—and I do a thing!"

It was the general hilarity that had goaded him to make this rash statement.

"And look here," went on the new fellow, as a sudden thought struck him, "who were those masters I saw last night?"

"Sorry, old man, but they were Kerr, of the New House," said Blake cheerfully.

"They were Kerr?" repeated Handforth. "You don't call that grammar, do you?"

"Mr. Lathom was Kerr, and the Head was Kerr!" smiled Jack Blake. "Don't you understand? He impersonated the two of them! Kerr is our pet impersonator."

Handforth took a deep breath.

"Where can I find him?" he demanded fiercely.

Monty Lowther, scenting more fun, looked round.

"Well, he doesn't seem to be here at the moment," he put in. "Most of the New House juniors have gone indoors. Do you really want to find Kerr?"

"Yes, I do!" said Handforth sulphurously. "You fellows aren't so much to blame as he is! It was he who spoofed me about those masters, and I'm going to smash him!"

"Go ahead!" said Blake cheerfully. "You'll find Kerr in Study No. 4, Fourth Form passage, in the New House. That ramshackle barn over there!" he added, pointing.

Half a dozen fellows eagerly gave Handforth full directions as to how he could reach Study No. 4. They were rather surprised at Handforth's new attitude. As yet, they did not know that it was quite usual for him to blow hot and cold with great rapidity.

And as Handforth rushed off to the New House, Tom Merry & Co., Blake & Co., and hosts of other School House fellows, collected on their own side of the quadrangle, waiting to see what they would see. They had little doubt as to what this would actually be.

Any fellow who barged, single-

handed, into the New House, was not asking for trouble, but yelling for it.

It said much for the spirit of this remarkable new fellow that he should thus go on the warpath. Tom Merry & Co. were quite pleased with their new recruit. There was promising stuff in Handforth, it seemed.

In the New House, Handforth rushed up the stairs, three at a time. He blundered in the Fourth Form passage like a human avalanche, and when he arrived at Study No. 4, he "knocked" on the door with his foot.

Crash!

The door flew open and Handforth burst in.

"Hi!" came a yell. "That door was locked——"

"Well, now it's unlocked!" roared Handforth. "Where's the chap who fooled me last night? Where's—— Oh, my only hat!"

He broke off blankly. Standing in front of the mirror was a most unpleasant looking master. At least, Handforth thought so for the moment. Then he saw that this "master" was just affixing a side-whisker to his face.

"You're the chap!" hooted Handforth, jumping to the truth.

Undoubtedly he was right. The fellow at the mirror was none other than Kerr, the canny member of the celebrated New House "Co."

But if Handforth was infuriated at the sight of Kerr, Figgins & Co. were infuriated at the sight of Handforth. They were greatly annoyed. They had locked the door, and they had believed themselves to be private. They had not been prepared for Handforth's violent methods.

In fact, they had hurried indoors, with the idea of perpetrating an additional jape upon the new School House fellow. Figgins and Fatty Wynn were to get friendly with Handforth by the use of honeyed words, and then they were going to introduce him to "Old Ratty," their Housemaster. And the results, they had planned, were to have been vastly entertaining.

And now it was all spoilt!

Handforth had charged in, and he had seen Kerr in the act of making-up. The lean Figgins went red with anger, and his hand strayed towards a cricket-stump.

"That's done it!" said Kerr, with regret, as he pulled his wig off. "The jape's off, Figgy!"

"Oh, so you were going to spoof me again, eh?" said Handforth thickly. "You're the chap! You're the rotter who fooled me last night!"

"Come on!" hooted Figgins wildly. "Buck up, New House!"

George Figgins didn't argue. He considered that it was a waste of time to bandy words with this cyclonic School House fellow. There was only one thing to be done.

"Here, what the——" began Handforth.

Crash! Thud! Biff!

"Yarooooo!" howled Handforth desperately.

The thing was done very adroitly, and the good work proceeded with machine-like precision.

With one accord, Figgins & Co. fell upon Handforth. They seized him, they bowled him over, and they whirled him out into the passage.

"Whoa!" shrieked Handforth. "You——you silly asses! Oh, my hat! Just you wait until I—— Yow!"

Bump!

Handforth was whirled to the top of the stairs, and then he was whisked down with incredible speed. The next moment he reached the doorway, and the manner in which he flew down the New House steps was remarkable.

He landed at the bottom, upside down, and his beautiful flannels were a picture. He was dusty, dishevelled, and dazed. And, on the other side of the quad, the School House fellows looked on in their wisdom.

"Well, he asked for it!" said Monty, Lowther sadly.

"Yaas, watah!" agreed D'Arcy. "I must remark that the deah boy appears to be a feahful ass!"

Figgins, on the top of the New House steps, dusted his hands.

"Now you can clear off!" he said breathlessly. "That's what we think of School House rotters!"

And Edward Oswald Handforth, sitting there in the quad, was under no misapprehension regarding Figgins & Co.'s opinion of School House rotters!

CHAPTER 9.

Handforth Sticks To It!

"HA, HA, HA!"

"That's right — laugh!" said Handforth, glaring.

"Thanks!" said Blake. "We will! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Idiots!"

"Not so much of your 'idiots,' my lad," frowned Blake. "Don't forget that you're a new kid, and new kids are sat on if they get cheeky."

Handforth breathed hard.

"You're off your perch now, old man," said Monty Lowther gently. "We no longer hang upon your words. In fact, your focus needs to be adjusted."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came up.

"I have been thinkin', deah boys," he announced, beaming upon all and sundry.

"What with?" asked Lowther politely.

"I uttably wefuse to be dwawn by your wotten insinuations, Lowthah!" said D'Arcy. "I have been thinkin' about Handforth."

"Nothing in that, Gussy," said Blake. "We've all been thinking about Handforth."

"We have had our fun with the new fellow, and I wathah think that it is up to us to show him that we are fwiendly," continued Gussy.

"Is that the net result of your profound thinking?" demanded Blake tartly. "Because, if so, you'd better go away and think again! Handforth already knows that we're friendly."

"Weally, Blake——"

"He's a sportsman, and he can take a joke," added Blake.

"All right! We'll forget all about it!" grunted Handforth. "All the same, I'm going to make you fellows sit up one of these days."

"Bai Jove, I twust there is no ill-feelin'?" said Gussy anxiously. "I think it would be a wippin' ideah if some of us showed Handforth wound the school! Aftah all, he is pwactically a stwanger within the gates."

There were many juniors willing enough to escort Handforth round. The Terrible Three offered themselves on the spot; Blake and Herries and Digby were equally obliging. Bernard Glyn and Clifton Dane came along. Levison and Clive seemed quite anxious to show their friendliness towards the new fellow.

But Handforth, like Rachel of old, mourned, and would not be comforted. He was shown all the sights; he was taken to the playing fields; he was shown the startling beauties of the River Rhyl. But all to no purpose.

When it was time for lessons he was still looking grim. The fact of the matter was, he hadn't yet got over the shock.

At St. Frank's he had had two special chums of his own—a long-suffering pair named Church and McClure. And, although the Remove in general hadn't allowed Handforth to have much rope, he had, at least, done very much as he had pleased with his own study-mates.

But at St. Jim's it was totally different.

Now that the joke was over, the juniors were quite polite to him, and they were friendly enough. But, as for taking any notice of what he said, he might as well have been a gramophone. They listened, they smiled, and they hinted that it was time he changed the record.

Arthur Augustus made a point of attaching himself to Handforth, and, although Gussy meant well, his efforts were not appreciated. The swell of St. Jim's little realised it, but he came

precious near to having his noble nose punched more than once during that morning. For Handforth was in an exasperated mood, and he was ready enough to hit out at the slightest provocation. Only Gussy's obvious desire to please saved him.

When lessons were over Handforth received an intimation that Mr. Railton wanted to see him. The Housemaster had arrived during the morning, so Handforth went off to Mr. Railton's study and had a brief interview.

When he came out there was a somewhat happier expression on his rugged face. He seemed more settled. In the passage he encountered Baggy Trimble.

"I want Study No. 9," he said, looking at Baggy ferociously.

"I'll show you the way, Handforth," said Trimble in an eager voice. "I'm always obliging, you know."

Handforth was nothing if not blunt.

"I don't like the look of you!" he said coldly. "I don't know your name, and I don't want to know it! What's more, I don't want to know you!"

"Oh, I say!" protested Baggy feebly. "I—I rather thought that we should be good friends——"

"Then you'd better rather think something else."

An unpleasant expression came over Baggy Trimble's face.

"You'd better be careful to keep on my right side," he said warningly. "I'm an important chap in the Fourth, you know. My people at Trimble Hall are jolly influential! They've got tons of money!"

Handforth was satisfied that his original summing-up of Baggy had been correct.

"I don't want to hear about your beastly people!" he said tartly. "And it doesn't matter to me whether they're rich or whether they're paupers! I don't judge people by how much money they've got! I'm not one of those snobs, thank goodness!"

"I—I was only trying to be pally, you know!" said Trimble insinuatingly. "In fact, if you can lend me five bob,

old man, I'd be awfully obliged! You see, I'm expecting a big remittance from Trimble Hall——"

"That's all right!" growled Handforth, diving a hand into his pocket.

Much to Trimble's amazement, he produced the five shillings, handed it over, and passed on. This fellow from St. Frank's was noted for his open-handed generosity. Handforth himself considered that it was well worth five shillings to be rid of Baggy Trimble.

When he arrived at Study No. 9 he hammered on the door, burst it open, and strode in. He found Ralph Reckness Cardew chatting with Levison and Clive.

"Ah, our genial friend from St. Frank's is paying a call!" murmured Cardew languidly. "Walk in, dear man! Pray don't trouble to knock!"

"I did knock!" said Handforth.

"Sorry!" said Cardew. "I thought you were trying to push the door in!"

"In any case, I don't see why I should knock on the door of my own study!" went on Handforth, his eyes gleaming.

"Your own study?" said the trio, in one voice.

"Yes!"

"Do you mean to say that old Railton has bunged you in with us?" asked Levison indignantly.

"Mr. Railton told me to come to Study No. 9, and this is Study No. 9!" said Handforth aggressively. "I don't know exactly who you fellows are, but I take it that I've got to share this study with you!"

"Seems like it!" said Clive sadly.

"Life is full of these little worries!" murmured Cardew.

"Life will be full of some big worries before long!" retorted Handforth. "Now, my lads, we'd better understand one another right at the start!"

"There's nothing like it!" agreed Levison, nodding.

"Good! I'm glad you agree!" said Handforth. "Well, I'm the leader of this study from now onwards! Do I make myself plain?"

"I imagine, dear man, that Nature did that!" replied Cardew smoothly.

"You silly ass!" roared Handforth, colouring. "By George, I can see that I shall have to start by biffing you about! As I said before, I'm the leader of this study——"

"Open the door, Clive, old fellow!" said Levison coolly.

"With pleasure!" said Clive.

"These little operations are distressin', but very necessary!" said Ralph Reckness Cardew, as he rolled up his sleeves. "I think we are all agreed, dear men?"

The chums of Study No. 9 advanced upon Handforth in a body.

"Here!" ejaculated the new fellow. "What the dickens do——"

He broke off with a wild yell. Heavy hands were laid upon him. He was seized, he was propelled out into the passage, and he was bumped.

"Hi!" he roared. "You howling lunatics——"

Slam!

The door of Study No. 9 closed, and Handforth picked himself up, breathing harder than ever. Cardew & Co. had said very little, but they had clearly given Handforth to understand that as a leader he wasn't wanted.

He took himself off, boiling.

Downstairs he ran into Blake & Co. "Wherefore this thushness?" inquired Blake. "Why the ruffled brow?"

"I'm fed-up!" said Handforth fiercely.

"Bai Jove! I twust——"

"I'm jolly sorry I came to this rotten school!" roared Handforth.

"This what school?" demanded Study No. 6, in one voice.

"I won't stay in it, either!" continued Handforth threateningly. "I'll jolly well go back to St. Frank's!"

"What about your boast?" asked Herries.

"My what?"

"Didn't you say that you were going to accomplish all those dotty things that Tom Merry trotted out last night?"

"Weally, Hewwies!" said D'Arcy.

"You know vewy well that Tom Mewwy was only wottin——"

"I don't care whether he was rotting or not!" broke in Handforth. "You fellows seem to think that I'm made of gingerbread! Well, I'm not! And when I say a thing, I mean it! I've made up my mind to undergo those tests—and I'll do every one of them!"

"Within the month?" chuckled Blake, hugely amused.

"Yes, blow you—within the month!" said Handforth aggressively. "And after that I'll go back to St. Frank's!"

"You'll deserve to go into a king's palace if you do all those things!" grinned Blake. "Don't be such an ass, Handforth! You know it was only a joke, and——"

"All right! Just you wait!" interrupted Handforth darkly.

He strode away and passed out into the quadrangle. He tramped out through the gates and turned down the lane.

"The burbling idiot!" said Blake, frowning. "He'll only get himself into trouble if he sticks to those dotty ideas!"

They couldn't understand Handforth's mentality. At his old school he was well known; and the fellows there knew that he took such things very seriously. He regarded those "tests" of Tom Merry's in very much the same light as a dare.

And so, blindly and grimly, he meant to go ahead. As for the details, Handforth didn't worry over them in the slightest degree. He never did. And, extraordinarily enough, in nine cases out of ten he blundered through.

CHAPTER 10.

Handforth's Luck!

"GREAT SCOTT!"

Handforth was staring down Rylcombe Lane, his brow as black as thunder.

Until a few moments ago he had been

sitting disconsolately on the top of a gate. His troubles weighed heavily upon him. To find suddenly that he was a mere nonentity, instead of being a leader, had hit him hard. His first hours at St. Jim's had been very joyous; and now he was suffering from the reaction.

Certain vague squeals had attracted his attention at first. Then, getting down from the gate, he had looked down the lane. There, about a hundred yards away, a tall St. Jim's senior was pulling the ear of a diminutive fag.

"Well, you little worm, what about it?" the senior was saying in a harsh voice. "Are you going to do as I tell you, or not?"

"Please, Knox, don't!" wailed the fag shrilly. "You're hurting me!"

"I'm trying to hurt you, you snivelling little brat!"

Handforth began to boil.

He didn't know who Knox was, and he certainly didn't care. But he guessed, quite correctly, that Knox was an objectionable character.

"In future, you'll remember that all my orders are to be obeyed!" came Knox's voice. "You've had the nerve to ignore my orders—and this is how I treat such kids!"

With one movement Gerald Knox swung the fag off his feet and grasped his lashing ankles.

"Now!" snarled Knox.

The unfortunate fag was helpless. Knox commenced to swing him round in this inverted position, with the fag's head almost scraping against the road.

"Oh!" sobbed the fag. "My head! Please, Knox! My head! You're hurting me!"

Knox laughed with enjoyment. This was evidently a new form of punishment that he had invented. He didn't know there was a witness quite close at hand.

"By George!" breathed Handforth furiously.

This was a case of sheer bullying, and Handforth hated bullying like poison.

Already the fag's head had touched the ground with some violence two or three times, and the youngster was in danger of being seriously hurt.

"Stop that, you cad!" roared Handforth, as he ran up.

Knox was so surprised that he dropped the fag like a hot brick. The frightened youngster was on his feet in a moment. He staggered, ran blindly into the hedge, and then got his bearings. But neither Knox nor Handforth noticed him now.

"Who the thunder do you think you're talking to?" snarled Knox.

"I'm talking to you!" said Handforth, whipping off his jacket. "Put up your hands, you bullying hound!"

"Why, confound you——"

"Put 'em up!" shouted Handforth.

Knox was not only startled, but he was furious. This chap was a junior—and evidently a new fellow, too. Knox hadn't seen him before.

"Do you now who I am?" he said, in a terrible voice.

"I don't care if you're the Grand Vizier of Siam!" yelled Handforth.

"Take that!"

Biff!

Knox took it. He couldn't do anything else. For Handforth, without any further argument, had sailed in. In any moment of emergency Handforth never wasted any time. He acted.

"Yareoooooh!" hooted Knox wildly.

Crash! Biff! Thud!

"You—you young demon!" shrieked Knox, backing away and trying to ward off Handforth's blows. "I'll get you sacked for this——"

But Handforth, serenely indifferent as to his fate, was continuing the good work. Incidentally, he was enjoying himself. He was revelling in this "mill."

He had been exasperated ever since breakfast-time, and now, at last, he was able to let off some of his steam. He went for Knox with enthusiastic vigour.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered that exclamation. He and Blake and Herries and Digby had just come within sight.

And Tom Merry & Co. were there, too. They all stared in amazement. Handforth, the new fellow, fighting with Knox!

"My only sainted aunt!" said Tom Merry faintly. "He's doing it!"

"Eh?" said Blake. "Doing what?"

"Why, those dotty tests!" gasped Tom. "Don't you remember? The first one was to thrash a prefect and knock him out. Handforth is on the job already!"

"Gweat Scott!"

The juniors watched in amazement. They were by no means averse to seeing Knox battered about. And they were seeing it now! Indeed, before a couple of minutes elapsed the Shell fellows and the Fourth Formers were filled with enthusiasm for Handforth's display.

"Well, by Jove!" ejaculated Blake. "The chap may be a prize ass; but when it comes to fighting, he's all there!"

"He's a holy terror!" agreed Tom Merry.

Tramp, tramp, tramp!

Handforth and Knox were going at it hammer and tongs. Knox of the Sixth had had no intention of fighting; but he had no option. With Handforth aggressively attacking, Knox had been compelled to put up his hands. And once he had started fighting he had to keep on.

And he was finding, to his dismay, that he was no match for this burly junior. His reach was longer, but his breath was shorter. And the power behind his punches was insignificant compared to Handforth's.

Crash!

For the second time in quick succession, Handforth landed a "beauty" on Knox's nose. The rascally prefect went staggering back, howling madly.

"Yes; and now you'll take another one!" yelled Handforth. "Those eyes of yours look a bit baggy. I'll improve their appearance!"

But! Slam!

With sledgehammer blows, Handforth continued his whirlwind attack. Knox,

who had put up some semblance of a fight at first, was now in disorder. He staggered back, giving way, his arms flying wildly, his defence smashed.

"Stop!" he snarled. "You—you young fool! Stop, I tell you! I'm a prefect, and——"

"Then you jolly well ought to be ashamed of yourself!" roared Handforth. "And if I see you treating a kid like that again, I'll pulverise you more than ever!"

Tramp, tramp, tramp!

It was soon over now. A few other juniors were in the offing, in addition to the Terrible Three and Study No. 6. They were all fascinated by this extraordinary sight. A Fourth Former fighting against Knox, the prefect. In open daylight. In Rylcombe Lane!

The end, as Blake put it, was beautiful.

Handforth's right hand came round, and it caught Knox on the point of the chin. There was a jarring thud, and the rascal of the Sixth almost turned a somersault as he crashed over.

He lay sprawling on the ground, just as he had fallen—out!

Handforth stood over him, breathing hard.

"Well, that's that!" he panted. "You haven't had half what you deserve, but it'll do!"

He turned on his heel, walked back along the lane, and picked up his coat. Then, feeling thoroughly pleased with the world in general, he strode off towards St. Jim's.

And Gerald Knox, crawling dizzily to his feet, made a wild plunge through the nearest hedge, so that he could get out of sight. It was necessary that he should get out of sight, too. He wasn't a pretty picture.

And the astonishing thing about the whole incident was that Handforth did not even know that he had fulfilled the first one of those preposterous "tests"!

He ran into Blake & Co. and the others almost before he knew it.

"Good old Handforth!" they shouted, in a triumphant chorus.

Handforth started, and looked round at the flushed faces.

"Cheese it!" he grunted. "I don't want any more of your spoof!"

"My dear chap, it isn't spoof!" said Tom Merry enthusiastically. "Good man! That scrap of yours was worth a guinea a box!"

"My hat!" ejaculated Handforth. "Were you fellows looking on?"

"We saw everything!" replied Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!" chipped in Gussy. "Weally, deah boy, you have done wondahs! Any fellow who can administah a feahful thwashin' to that wascal, Knox, is my fwiend."

"He was bullying a fag!" said Handforth, frowning. "Not ordinary bullying, either; but downright savage cruelty! Who is he, anyhow?"

"Knox of the Sixth!" said Tom Merry.

"He's a prefect!" put in Manners.

"Yes, so he told me," said Handforth coolly. "I don't care!"

"But you'll be slaughtered!" said Herries.

"Will I? Who's going to slaughter me?" retorted the new fellow. "Besides, do you think Knox is going to tell anybody that he was thrashed by a junior? I'm not boasting, because the fellow couldn't fight for toffee. But if I know anything about bullies, he'll keep mum."

"The chap's right!" said Tom Merry, nodding. "Knox will probably do all he can to make Handforth's life a misery, but he daren't report him—it would be too risky. Besides, he'd be the laughing-stock of the school in less than half an hour!"

Handforth was greatly bucked when he saw the enthusiastic faces round him. His exhibition of fighting strength had made a big difference. The St. Jim's juniors were ready to take him to their bosoms.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated suddenly. "Did—did you say that that fellow is a prefect?"

"Yes," grinned Tom Merry. "Just thought of something?"

"Why, I've fulfilled the first of those tests!" roared Handforth excitedly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You certainly have!" grinned Blake. Handforth was flushed with triumph.

"Didn't I tell you that I'd do 'em?" he exclaimed. "And that's only the first! Now I'm going straight ahead and I'm going to do the other two things!"

"Bal Jove!"

"And all within my first month!" said Handforth firmly. "I may leave St. Jim's after that, or I may not. But I'm blowed if I'll shift a foot until I've completed all the tests."

And, amazingly enough, Edward Oswald Handforth was in deadly earnest.

The juniors of St. Jim's were just beginning to understand this extraordinary new fellow.

CHAPTER 11.

Handforth Means It!

TOM MERRY chuckled.

"Come off it, Handforth!" he said smilingly.

"Come off what?"

"Well, my dear old scout, you can't be serious," said Tom. "You know as well as I do that you fulfilled the first of those giddy tests by accident."

"Yaas, wathah!" nodded D'Arcy. "When you thwashed Knox, deah boy, you didn't even know that he was a pwelect."

Handforth's face became stubborn.

"What difference does that make?" he asked.

"Nothing much!" grinned Blake. "Only that your ignorance made the thing possible."

"My what?"

"Your ignorance!"

"Look here, you silly ass——" began Handforth.

"No offence!" grinned Blake. "Can't you understand what I'm driving at? If you had known that Knox was a prefect, you wouldn't have gone for him."

Handforth laughed aloud.

"That's all you know!" he retorted.

"Knox was bullying that fag, and I didn't care whether he was a prefect or not!"

"But a fellow can get flogged for attacking a prefect," said Herries.

"What do I care?" demanded Handforth aggressively. "If I'm flogged, I'm flogged! It wouldn't be the first time that I've been a martyr! I shouldn't have left St. Frank's, only I was accused of something that I didn't do. It was all cleared up before I left, but I wasn't going to stay at a school that couldn't take my word!"

"Ahem!" murmured Tom Merry. "As it happens, I don't think there's much risk, Handforth. Knox isn't likely to make any report. It would be a bit too risky—for himself."

And, as it turned out, these surmises were correct.

A little later, after Handforth had washed himself, and had removed most of the marks of the recent battle, he encountered Knox at the top of the stairs in the School House.

Knox was not a pleasant sight.

He had done wonders in the way of concealing the scars, but nothing could hide the fact that his nose was too large for his face; the feverish application of raw steak had done little to reduce the greeny-bluish tinge round his eyes. And one ear was definitely puffy and swollen. Altogether, Knox of the Sixth looked a wreck.

"I've been looking for you," he said, in a low voice, as he glared at Handforth.

"Well, you've found me!" replied the new fellow.

They glared at one another. Handforth was quite at ease, and he was in no fear of this prefect. Indeed, there was a contemptuous light in his eyes.

"Come to my study!" said Knox firmly.

Handforth shrugged his shoulders, and accompanied the prefect to the Sixth Form passage. Knox led the way to his study, and Handforth followed.

"Now!" said Knox, as he closed the door.

"What's the idea?" asked Handforth guardedly. "You'd better not start any hanky-panky——"

"I've found out who you are!" interrupted Knox harshly. "You're a new kid in the Fourth, eh? And your name's Handforth?"

"What's the idea of these silly questions?"

"Look here, Handforth, I want a private word with you!" said Knox tensely. "Out in the lane you attacked me, and——"

"Gave you a good hiding," nodded Handforth. "Well?"

Knox went red.

"As you're a new kid, I'm inclined to overlook the offence!" he said, in a snarling voice. "But if ever you lay fingers on me again, I'll have you kicked out of the school!"

"Rats!"

"Are you saying 'Rats!' to me?" roared Knox.

"Yes, I am!"

"Why, you infernal young hound——"

"Better be careful!" interrupted Handforth darkly. "I've thrashed you once, Knox—and I can do it again! I may be a new kid, but I'm not frightened of your threats! There are one or two bullies at St. Frank's—so I know the ropes! That's how much I care for you!"

And he snapped his fingers contemptuously in the infuriated Knox's face.

"Get out of here!" snarled the prefect. "And if any master asks you if you've been fighting with me, say you haven't!"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth, staring. "Are you ordering me to tell lies?"

"You heard what I said!" snapped Knox. "Some of the juniors are talking about that affair, but there's just a chance that the masters won't hear of it. I don't want to get you into trouble——"

"You mean, you don't want to get yourself into trouble, eh?"

"So if you're questioned, say that you didn't fight me at all!" added Knox, breathing hard.

Handforth eyed him with scorn.

"I wonder why they made you a prefect?" he said, in astonishment. "But you needn't be afraid! I'm not a sneak! If I'm questioned I shall say that I've been fighting—but I won't say who with."

A look of relief came into Knox's eyes.

"That's enough, then!" he said.

"Now you can get out!"

"Thanks—I'm going!" replied Handforth. "The air in this study doesn't suit me! It reminds me of hogs!"

He strode to the door and opened it.

"Hi!" shouted Knox furiously.

"What did you say?"

"Go and eat coke!"

Handforth went out and slammed the door. He wasn't acting with any bravado; he was just himself. He was famed at St. Frank's for his recklessness and plain speaking.

In the Fourth Form passage he ran into Blake & Co. as they were about to enter Study No. 6.

"Somebody said you'd been to Knox's study," remarked Blake curiously.

"So I have," grunted Handforth.

"What did he do—swish you?"

"Don't be an ass!" said Handforth. "He's frightened out of his skin! He only took me there because he wants that fight hushed up. But he needn't have worried—I'm not in the habit of sneaking."

"Well, I'm glad it's settled," said Blake. "And I dare say the hiding will do Knox a lot of good. All the same, it was a bit of a nerve for a new chap to thrash one of our prefects."

"And now he's going to score a century in a First Eleven match," said Herries, with heavy sarcasm.

"Bai Jove! Weally, Handforth, I twust you will think bettah of your wash promise," said Arthur Augustus, with concern. "As a fellow of tact and judgment, pway allow me to offah you a word of advice——"

"Rot!"

"Weally, Handforth——"

"Go and fry your face!"

"I uttably wufese to fwy my face!" said Gussy indignantly. "Bai Jove! If this is the way you tweat a fellow who is offahwin' you some sound advice——"

"Oh, leave him alone, Gussy!" interrupted Blake. "He's only gassing! He's only letting off steam!"

"I am afwaid you are wight, Blake," said Gussy frigidly. "It is a fwightful blow to wealise that the new fellow is a bwaggart!"

Handforth breathed hard.

"A braggart, am I?" he said glaring.

"Well, that remains to be seen. Tom Merry told me that I had to undergo those three tests——"

"But he was only rotting, you burbling chump!" roared Blake.

"I don't care whether he was rotting or not!" snapped Handforth. "There's something else I remember, too. You're supposed to be the leader of the Fourth, aren't you, Blake?"

"No, I'm not supposed to be," replied Blake. "I am the leader!"

"Well, you told me that if I was successful in those tests, I'd naturally be the leader of the Form!" said Handforth, with gleaming eyes.

"Bai Jove!"

"Do you admit it?" demanded Handforth.

"Well, yes——"

"Then I'm going to step into your shoes before the end of the first month!" said Handforth triumphantly. "I've fulfilled the first condition, and now I'm going ahead to fulfil the others!"

"Why, you—you——"

Blake was almost at a loss for words, but he suddenly broke into a yell of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he howled. "You frabjous ass. How do you think you're going to score a century for the First Eleven? And how the merry dickens are you going to raid the Grammar School——"

"If you'll wait, you'll see!" said Handforth calmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The new fellow strode off, his jaw set and his eyes gleaming. And Blake & Co., weeping with mirth, went into Study No. 6.

"Oh dear!" said Blake weakly. "He'll be the death of us before he's done!"

For it was as obvious as daylight that Handforth meant every word that he had said. And the St. Jim's fellows decided that he was a perfect scream.

But still, nothing could alter the fact that he had fulfilled the first condition! As for the others— Well, St. Jim's was beginning to get a true glimpse of Edward Oswald Handforth's character—but, as yet, they didn't know of his proverbial luck.

CHAPTER 12.

Crocked!

IT was the following Saturday, and a fine summer's afternoon. The great Edward Oswald Handforth was considerably disgruntled.

There were two cricket matches on that afternoon. The St. Jim's First Eleven were playing Wensford at Wensford; while, more important still, the St. Jim's juniors were playing Rylcombe Grammar School on the latter's ground. Handforth had offered his services for both matches! First to Kildare, as captain of the St. Jim's First, then to Tom Merry, as the skipper of the Junior XI; and in each case, Handy's kind offer had been turned down, without thanks!

The old school seemed quiet and deserted, and the atmosphere was distasteful to the energetic Handforth. So he went round to the garage, got out his little Austin Seven, and drove off, just as he was, still wearing his white flannels and blazer. In a grumpy frame of mind, he set off at random, turning over the country roads, unmindful of the glories of the afternoon.

"Goin' anywhere in particular, old bean?"

Ralph Reckness Cardew of the Fourth met Handforth with languid interest. He had recognised the Austin as it came down the old High Street of

Rylcombe, and he had stepped out into the road, with hand upraised.

And now Handforth, like the ancient gentleman who feared the Greeks when they came with gifts in their hands, regarded Cardew with some suspicion.

"As a matter of fact, I'm not," he replied bluntly.

"Good!" drawled Cardew.

"What do you mean—'good'?"

"If you're goin' nowhere in particular, you might as well run me into Wayland," explained Cardew. "I shall be awfully obliged for the lift, old scout!"

Handforth's face cleared.

"All right," he said. "Jump in!"

Cardew jumped in.

"Fed-up—what?" yawned the dandy of the Fourth, when they were humming along.

"Yes, I am," replied Handforth gruffly. "Fed-up to the neck!"

"Thought so!" murmured Cardew. "Dear man, you look it!"

"Well, who wouldn't be?" said Handforth fiercely. "I was expecting a place in the eleven this afternoon, and—"

"Quite so!" interrupted Cardew. "But life is too short for all these details, old bean. Besides, I know them. Between you and me and the speedometer, I don't wonder that you're peeved. A fellow of your aboundin' energy is naturally fed-up when he gets left out in the cold. But why worry? I know quite a decent place in Wayland where they have a rippin' billiards-table."

Handforth stared.

"Do you mean a pub?" he demanded suspiciously.

"I'm afraid I do," said Cardew nodding.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth, reaching for the hand brake. "I'm jolly well going to stop this car, and you're going to get out, you rotter! I'm blessed if I'll give you a lift if you're only going to play billiards in a rotten pub!"

"Don't get excited, old thing," said Cardew gravely. "I was only puttin' it to you as a suggestion. If you don't like it, you can leave it. As a matter

of fact, I'm goin' into Wayland to have a painful, but necessary, interview with my dentist."

"Oh," said Handforth, accelerating again.

"Teeth," said Cardew, "are a mixed blessing. One cannot deny that they are useful for crackin' nuts, or for chewin' the kind of meat they whack out to us at St. Jim's; but it's a frightful bore when the dashed things have to be stopped, or the nerves tickled, or some-thin' equally ghastly."

Handforth was not listening. He wasn't interested in Cardew's idle chatter. Besides, he hadn't the faintest suspicion that Cardew had invented this visit to the dentist on the spur of the moment.

They arrived in Wayland, and Handforth drew up in the High Street. Cardew got out.

"Thanks most awfully, old bean!" he said languidly. "Whereaway now?"

"Don't know!" grunted Handforth. "Anywhere will do."

"You're easily pleased."

"Well, I don't know these roads much, anyhow," said Handforth. "One way is just as good as another. I'm out for a run—that's all."

"Then why not run along to Wensford and see how the seniors are gettin' on?" suggested Cardew.

"Blow the seniors!"

"Wensford isn't very far," said Cardew. "You go straight along until you're on the Abbotsford road, and Wensford's three miles farther on. A renowned beauty spot, I understand."

"I don't want to see any beauty spots," replied Handforth gruffly.

He nodded, engaged his gears and went off. Cardew, smiling to himself, went off to his own pursuit—which were probably questionable. On the other hand, they may have been entirely innocent. One never quite knew with Ralph Reckness Cardew.

Handforth drove out of the town, and although he told himself that he would go anywhere rather than Wensford, he took the Abbotsford road.

And when he saw on a sign-post,

"Wensford, 3 miles," he carried on. It was even necessary for him to take a secondary road to reach his destination, but he took it.

Truth to tell, Handforth's heart was in cricket. It was the one subject he thought of on a summer's afternoon. Motoring was all very well in its own way, but he considered that motoring was a mere waste of time. Cricket, on the other hand, was an irresistible lure.

Not that he cared a hang about the first eleven. Why should he? Kildare had treated him with scorn, when he had asked, with sublime cheek, for a place in it, and there didn't seem to be a chance in a thousand that he would ever be able to fulfil that second "test." The thought of this made Handforth gloomy. Yet, at the same time, there was a determined light in his eyes. By hook or by crook he would have his way! He might have to wait a week or two—

Handforth had just swung round a bend in the road, when his thoughts were interrupted by the sudden appearance of a stationary van ahead of him, blocking his path.

Zurrrrrrrh!

Handforth sounded his electric horn impatiently, but without avail. The van seemed to be standing alone, without anybody in attendance. And there wasn't room to pass, since the lane was narrow and the grass banks were rather high. Even the handy little Austin couldn't squeeze past.

"Careless idiot!" grunted Handforth wrathfully. What the dickens is the idea of leaving a bus standing in the middle of the giddy road?"

He hooted again, and looked up and down. The van, as could be seen by the inscriptions on the bodywork, belonged to a Wayland baker, and near by stood a little cottage.

"It's a pity the chap can't deliver his bread without blocking up the road!" said Handforth indignantly.

He climbed out of the car and moved forward. But at that moment he gave a start. Lying on the grass, quite near

to the van, was a bicycle. And the bicycle was wrecked.

"My only hat!" muttered Handforth.

He was startled. An explanation of this deserted van had suggested itself to him. There had been a mishap! The bicycle, as he could see, was badly battered. The front wheel was completely crushed, and the handlebars were twisted and distorted.

"Phew!" whistled Handforth. "Must have been a pretty smash!"

He looked at the van, but there was no sign of damage. He was walking round the vehicle when a hail came from the doorway of the neighbouring cottage. He turned, staring.

"I say, sir!" shouted a voice. "Just a minute!"

Handforth saw a smallish man in the doorway of the cottage—a man dressed in breeches and leggings. Obviously the baker's man.

"Hallo!" sang out Handforth. "What's the matter?"

"Do you mind coming in, sir?"

Handforth ran towards the cottage gate, and a moment later he was at the door.

"Had a bit of a mishap, sir," said the baker's man. "Nothing much, thank goodness! But there's a young gent in here as wants a message taken."

"That's all right," said Handforth. "I don't mind—"

He was interrupted by an exclamation from within the cottage.

"I say, is that you, Handforth?" came a familiar voice.

"Yes," said the new fellow.

"Good man! Come in here a minute!"

Handforth went in, and he was rather surprised to find Darrell of the Sixth sitting in a chair. The good lady of the cottage was hovering about him, looking anxious and worried.

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

"This is jolly luck!" exclaimed Darrell. "You couldn't have come at a better moment, young 'un! I was hoping that a stranger might be willing to take a message for me, but you're the very man for the job."

"What job?"

"I want you to hurry along to Wensford with a message to Kildare," said Darrell. "Tell him I've had a mishap—"

"Hold on!" said Handforth. "What's happened?"

"Never mind what's happened."

"But I want to know."

"Oh, confound it, nothing much," said Darrell, impatiently. "My front wheel caught in a rut just as I was passing the baker's van, and in trying to get out of the way I went over."

"One of the nearest things I ever see!" declared the van driver. "By a piece of luck the young gent rolled on to the grass, and I only went over his bike. But it gave me a turn, I can tell you! I thought I'd gone over the young gent, too!"

"Then you're not hurt?" said Handforth.

"Yes, I am," growled Darrell. "I must have caught my foot when I rolled in the grass, and I've sprained my ankle. Look at the size of it!"

"Hard lines!" said Handforth, as he looked at Darrell's swollen ankle.

"Can't use it, of course," went on the Sixth Former. "But never mind about me. This chap is going to take me back to Wayland in his van, and I can easily get to St. Jim's from there. I'm worrying about the eleven."

"Oh!" said Handforth.

"You see, I promised to be at Wensford on time," went on the prefect. "I had to make a call in Wayland, so I went round that way, and Kildare is expecting me. I was a bit late, and that's why I was hurrying. More haste less speed—eh?"

"So you want me to tell Kildare that you can't turn up?"

"Yes, that's all," said Darrell, nodding. "It's rotten hard lines on me, but it'll be a bit rotten for the team. Kildare hasn't taken any reserve with him, so he'll have to play with only ten men, or else use a Wensford substitute. Anyhow, it's necessary that Kildare should know the truth at once, because he's expecting me."

"Right you are!" said Handforth promptly. "I'll buzz along and tell him."

"Good man!" said Darrell, relieved. "Pedal hard, because it's nearly time for the start."

"Pedal, be blowed!" said Handforth. "I'm here in my car."

Darrell gave a grin.

"Sorry; I forgot," he said. "Nothing so common as a bike for you—eh? All right. Step on the gas, then!"

Handforth nodded, and went to the door. Then he paused and looked back.

"But can't I do anything else?" he inquired. "Wouldn't you like me to send a doctor, or something?"

"No; I shall be all right."

"I think the young gentleman had better call at Dr. Brent's," said the woman anxiously. "It's only just up the road, and—"

"Thanks all the same, but it doesn't matter at all," said Darrell hastily. "Hang it, it's only a sprain! I hate making a fuss over a trifle. I'm crooked for the game this afternoon, but I'm not bad enough to see a doctor. Cut off, Handforth!"

And Handforth cut.

By this time the van-driver had moved his vehicle, and as Handforth drove away he reflected on the curious nature of this little affair. He had only gone along the Wensford road by mere chance—by taking notice of Cardew's suggestion. And he was glad that he could be of some service to the stranded senior.

Handforth now had something to do—he had an objective. And anything was better than meandering over the countryside at random.

And as he "stepped on the gas," and grew nearer and nearer to Wensford, an idea came to him. It was a startling idea—a staggering, stupendous idea. In fact, it not only took his breath away, but he swerved so violently in his sudden excitement that he nearly drove into the ditch.

CHAPTER 13.

Pushed into the Game.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was thrilled.

His heart was thumping rapidly, his face was flushed, and his eyes were burning. The audacity of his latest idea had positively thrilled him in every fibre, and when he was jarred by one of his own ideas there was certainly something extraordinary about it.

"Darrell's crooked," he muttered, "and Kildare hasn't got any reserves! By George, why not? It's a chance! If I only do the thing in the right way, and carry Kildare off his feet, I might be able to work it!"

Handforth's brain was singing with excitement. He remembered his boast—his promise to fulfil those "tests." He had told Tom Merry & Co. that he would play for the First Eleven, and that he would score a century. Tom Merry himself had made that ridiculous stipulation, and Handforth, in his rashness, had undertaken to essay the seemingly impossible feat.

And now, like a bolt from the blue, Fate had played right into his hands!

He had been refused a place in the junior game, and he had come wandering over the countryside in his Austin. Now, by sheer chance, he had found Darrell crooked, and was on his way to Kildare, with a message to the effect that Kildare must elect a substitute from the "enemy."

In cricket, of course, it was quite a commonplace thing to play a substitute from the opposition for fielding, if a team happened to be a man short. It was always being done.

But why play a substitute belonging to Wensford when a St. Jim's man was actually on the spot?

That was Handforth's overpowering argument.

"I'm only a junior, of course, and under ordinary circumstances Kildare wouldn't even look at me," he muttered. "But, hang it, I'm better than a Wensford man! Any St. Jim's fellow, junior or

not, is a better substitute than one of the giddy enemy!"

Unquestionably the argument was sound. But would Eric Kildare see it?

Handforth was full of doubts and uncertainties as he drove headlong towards Wensford. All sorts of possibilities crowded into his mind. What if St. Jim's had won the toss, and were batting first? The chances were that Kildare would ring up St. Jim's, and tell another senior to hurry along, and the senior would arrive in plenty of time to take his knock. Wensford was only seven or eight miles from Rylcombe.

Even supposing St. Jim's had lost the toss, and were in the field, Kildare might do the same thing. A First Eleven substitute could be over within thirty or forty minutes, and Kildare might prefer to play a man short until

"Oh, blow!" muttered Handforth. "I'm not going to think of any such rot! Darrell's crooked, and I'm on hand, ready. I'm in flannels, and everything. I'll put it to Kildare, as man to man, and unless he's a born idiot he'll play me! If I don't grab this chance I'll never get another."

There was certainly a lot of truth in that last reflection. And there was no time for any further thoughts, for Handforth had just caught sight of some red brick buildings in the distance, and then he swung round the bend and found himself at the gates of Wensford College.

It was a comparatively new school, very modern and up to date, and this was the first time that the St. Jim's fellows had been invited to a match.

Several seniors were hanging about the gateway as Handforth came into sight, and his sudden appearance had an immediate effect. Handforth did not know that his proverbial luck was about to play him a singularly kindly trick.

He waved to the Wensford fellows, and drove straight into the Big Close.

"Hey, half a minute, Darrell!" sang out one of the seniors.

Handforth was already pulling up, and now he brought the Austin to a standstill and leapt out. The seniors fell upon him like a pack of hungry wolves.

"By Jove, you're just in the nick of time!" ejaculated one of the Wensford men. "Come on! We're just starting!"

"But look here——"

"No time to talk!" said the other. "Your skipper has lost the toss, and our men are taking first knock. You're needed in the field, Darrell."

"Darrell!" gasped Handforth.

"They were just going to start without you," interrupted the Wensford fellow. "Our skipper has agreed to let you come on after the game has started. But you might as well be there at the beginning now."

"But hold on!" ejaculated Handforth, startled. "I've only come——"

"Never mind about that!" broke in the other. "You're here, and that's good enough. We're going to rush you on to the field!"

"Rather!" said the others.

And Handforth was whirled away in the centre of the crowd of Wensford fellows.

His mind was in a tumult. He was just beginning to see that these seniors had mistaken him for Darrell. They thought that he was the regular member of the First Eleven, and not merely a messenger.

And, certainly, the Wensford men could not be blamed for their mistake.

They had been told that a fellow named Darrell was expected—one of the St. Jim's prefects, and a highly important member of the team. They had gone to the gates to keep a sharp look-out for Darrell. And when they had seen a burly St. Jim's fellow coming along in flannels, and driving an Austin Seven, they had jumped to an obvious conclusion.

Handforth was bigger than the ordinary run of juniors, and it was by no means the first time he had been

mistaken for a Fifth Former or a Sixth Former. Besides, the very fact that he was driving a car seemed to be definite proof that he was at least seventeen or eighteen.

And this mistake, of course, helped Handforth enormously.

If the Wensford seniors had recognised Handforth as a mere junior, arriving with a message from Darrell, they would have left him there in the Close. They would have taken his message and conveyed it to Kildare, and, in all probability, Handforth would never have had the chance of getting anywhere near to the St. Jim's skipper.

As it was, he rushed straight on to the cricket field, and his luck did not end here, either.

"Good egg!" said one of the Wensford fellows, as they came within sight of the pavilion. "They haven't started yet. But the umpires are ready, and Taylor is preparing to bowl. Just in time, Darrell!"

"He might as well go straight on the field—eh?" said one of the others. "No need to take him to the pavilion."

"No need at all," agreed the first Wensfordian. "All right, Darrell, skip on to the field. We'll tell Kildare that you're here."

Handforth gulped. Being as honest as the day, he could not possibly allow this deception to go through without protest. He couldn't allow himself to be bundled on the field in this way. In his opinion it wasn't playing the game. He would simply be taking a mean advantage of the circumstances.

"Hold on!" he panted. "I want to see Kildare!"

"But the game's just starting, and—"

"I can't help whether it's starting or not!" broke in Handforth. "I've got to see Kildare. I've got a message, and you've made a mistake!"

"You can leave your message until the tea interval!" said the Wensfordian spokesman, who was an aggressive sort of fellow. "Never known such a jabberer! Why waste time in talk?"

"Yes, but——"

"Hallo! There goes the first ball!" said one of the others. "Buck up, Darrell, for goodness' sake! There's been enough delay already!"

And Handforth was unceremoniously pushed through the spectators near the boundary line, and bundled on to the field. And the Wensford fellows hurried off to the pavilion, feeling that their duty had been done.

CHAPTER 15.

The Substitute!

KILDARE, as Handforth ought to have known, was not available to take any messages. He was in the field directing his forces.

The game was, indeed, on the very point of starting.

There had already been a delay of nearly a quarter of an hour, while the Wensford cricketers had good-naturedly waited for Darrell to arrive. The Wensford skipper had won the toss, and had elected to take first knock. So it was rather important that all the eleven St. Jim's men should be on the ground.

Kildare had been offered a substitute, but he had politely refused, being certain that Darrell would turn up at any moment. Kildare was very puzzled regarding Darrell's lateness, for Darrell had assured him, positively, that he would be there well before the start. And Darrell was certainly not the kind of fellow to let his side down. Quite the contrary.

When, therefore, Kildare saw a group of Wensford seniors hurrying along from the Close, with a white figure in their midst, his relief was great. Darrell had arrived—at the very last minute.

"About time, too!" remarked Baker.

"Oh, I expect he's got a good reason for being late!" said Kildare good-naturedly. "There's no reason why we shouldn't start straight away," he added, turning to one of the Wensford batsmen.

"No reason at all," said the latter politely. "I hope everything's all right now."

"Of course it is," smiled Kildare, as he gazed across at the supposed Darrell. "But what's the idiot doing down there? He knows perfectly well that I wanted him to open the bowling—By Jove! Just a minute, umpire!" added the skipper sharply. "Awfully sorry to cause a further delay, but something seems to be wrong."

"My hat!" ejaculated the Wensford batsman. "What's up now?"

But Kildare had drawn aside, and was talking to Baker.

"That fellow isn't Darrell," the St. Jim's skipper was saying.

"Not Darrell!" ejaculated Baker. "Oh, I say! I'm hanged if you're not right, though! He certainly isn't Darrell!"

"Who on earth is playing such a game?" said Kildare angrily. "I've never heard of such—"

He broke off, as a hail came from the pavilion.

"It's all right, you fellows! You can go ahead!" sang out a voice. "Darrell's just come, and we've bunged him on to the field!"

Kildare opened his eyes wider.

"Just a minute!" he said, turning to the nearest umpire. "I've got to speak to this fellow. You men think that he's Darrell, but he isn't!"

"Well, what does it matter?" asked the umpire. "He's a St. Jim's man, isn't he? Why all this fuss?"

"I am sorry you think I am making a fuss," replied Kildare quietly. "But I'm not in the habit of putting men in the field unless I know exactly who they are."

"Perhaps you're right," grinned the umpire.

Kildare hurried off across the turf, and he could now see that two or three other members of his eleven were signalling rather excitedly to him. They were quite close to the new arrival, and the latter was gesticulating and talking.

"Great Scott!" shouted Baker suddenly. "It's that kid, Handforth!"

"What!" gasped Kildare.

But a second later he knew that Baker had spoken the truth. The newcomer was Handforth, of the Fourth Form. And there he was, taking his place on the field, as large as life, as though he had a perfect right to be there. Kildare's face became clouded with anger.

He ran up at top speed.

"Handforth!" he shouted, as he approached. "What's the meaning of this?"

"There's no need to roar at me!" said Handforth. "You needn't get wild!"

"Needn't get wild!" repeated Kildare furiously. "What do you mean by masquerading as Darrell, and fooling these Wensford men—"

"I didn't fool them!" protested Handforth.

"Well, whether you fooled them or not, they're fooled!" said Kildare grimly. "They just sang out to me that Darrell had arrived, and I find you here!"

"Well, it's not my fault if they make silly mistakes!" said Handforth tartly. "I tried to explain to them, but they wouldn't listen. They bundled me on the field while I was still trying to explain. You don't think I'd deliberately play a trick like this, do you, Kildare?"

The St. Jim's skipper cooled down.

"Well, what's the explanation?" he asked grimly.

"I tried to get a word with you, but they wouldn't listen to me," pursued Handforth. "As soon as I drove up in my Austin they practically dragged me out of the car and pushed me along, and shoved me on to the field—"

"Yes, you said that before," broke in Kildare. "What are you doing here, anyhow? And do you know anything about Darrell?"

"Of course I do!" said Handforth. "That's why I came. And now that I'm here, why don't you let me play?" he went on eagerly. "I know I'm only a

junior, but surely I'm a better substitute than one of the Wensford men?"

"Substitute!" ejaculated Kildare. "What on earth——"

"And I'll promise to do my best!" said Handforth earnestly. "If you'll only let me play, Kildare, I'll go all out! I'll play the game of my giddy life! It may be a bit irregular, according to the St. Jim's practice, but there's an exception to every rule, isn't there? And you know jolly well that you haven't any reserves, and——"

"Hold on!" gasped Kildare. "What's all this nonsense about playing a substitute?"

"That's what we've been trying to find out!" said one of the other St. Jim's seniors. "But we can't get a word out of the young idiot! All he's thinking about is playing in the game himself! He must be mad!"

"But I've explained!" protested Handforth. "I've already told you that Darrell can't come."

"You've told us nothing of the sort!" said Kildare sharply. "What do you mean—Darrell can't come? Why can't he come?"

"Because he's crocked!"

"Crocked?"

"Of course he's crocked!" said Handforth. "Look here, Kildare, be a sport! I dare say one of these Wensford men will help you out; but it isn't to be supposed that the rival skipper will let you play one of his best men. I don't want to boast, but surely I'm better than a Wensford reserve? Anyhow, I do belong to St. Jim's, and——"

"Stop!" shouted Kildare desperately. "Eh?"

"Why isn't Darrell here?" went on Kildare, grasping Handforth's arm, and shaking him. "Why on earth can't you explain?"

"But I've been explaining all the time!"

"You exasperating young sweep!" said Kildare sulphurously. "You've only told me that Darrell is crocked, and that he can't play! What's happened to him? Out with it, confound you!"

Handforth took a deep breath.

"My hat!" he said. "Didn't I tell you? I was out in my Austin, and I came across Darrell in a little cottage two or three miles away. He nearly collided with a baker's van, and fell off his bike and strained his ankle. He was lucky not to go under the van with the bike!"

"Great Scott!" said Baker. "Is this true?"

"Of course it's true!" said Handforth indignantly. "Darrell asked me to bring a message to you, Kildare. He says he can't play, and——"

"Oh!" said Kildare slowly. "So that's it! What a wretched piece of luck! Poor old Darrell! Is he badly hurt?"

"Nothing much; only a beastly swollen ankle!" said Handforth. "He's properly cut up about it, and he's going back to Wayland in the baker's van."

"Thanks!" said Kildare. "I can understand now. Well, Handforth, you'd better cut off!"

"Cut off!" said Handforth blankly.

"That's what I said!"

"But—but what about the game?" asked the new junior. "Aren't you a man short?"

Kildare hesitated.

"I am!" he admitted at length. "Still, a good many fellows came along to watch the match——"

"Nobody you can play, though!" put in Baker pointedly.

The Wensford captain came over, good-humoured, but politely impatient.

"Isn't this game ever going to start, Kildare?" he inquired. "I don't want to be critical, but is this delay necessary?"

"I'm sorry!" said Kildare. "But there's been a bit of a mix-up. Darrell, one of my best bowlers, has had an accident, and he sent this junior along with a message. I'm a man short in earnest now."

"Hard lines!" said the rival captain. "But what's wrong with this fellow?"

"He's a junior."

"He looks hefty enough, anyhow!"

grinned the Wensford skipper. "Can't he play cricket?"

And Kildare thought rapidly.

It was true that he had no available substitute; it was equally true that Handforth was a useful sort of cricketer, as he had shewn at the nets, although there was no telling how he would shape in a First Eleven match. But it could not be denied that St. Jim's was a man short. And here was this remarkable fellow from St. Frank's. After all—

"Hang it!" said the Wensford skipper. "Why not let him play? Don't you think that it's about time we started?"

Kildare nodded.

"All right!" he said. "As old Darrell is crooked, we shall have to get along without him. Handforth, you can play!"

"Good egg!" said Handforth breathlessly.

He felt grateful towards the Wensford captain. Without doubt, his arrival at that critical moment had influenced Kildare's decision. The Wensfordians were impatient, and Kildare did not like to keep them waiting any longer. And it had struck Kildare, too, that it would seem peculiar for him to ask for a home substitute when a St. Jim's cricketer was actually on the ground. Junior or no junior, Handforth was given his place.

"You'd better stay out here just where you are, young 'un!" said Kildare briskly. "Now, then, let's get going!"

"That's the most sensible thing you've said yet!" remarked the Wensford captain genially.

And at last the game started.

The delays had seemed long, but actually the first ball was delivered only twenty-five minutes after the pre-arranged time. And as the weather was perfect, and the June evenings were long, there was nothing to worry about. Moreover, this was only a single innings match, so it was exceedingly probable that it would be played to a conclusion.

The wicket was dry and in tip-top condition. It was essentially a bats-

man's wicket, and during the first two or three overs the Wensford opening pair played themselves in. They started cautiously, but soon opened out and began to score freely.

Handforth, fielding near the boundary, was afire with eagerness and determination. Here was his chance—his great opportunity! In spite of all the seemingly insurmountable difficulties, he was playing in a First Eleven match!

The seniors had scorned him; even Tom Merry & Co. had scorned him. Well, now he would prove to the whole of St. Jim's that he was made of the right stuff! Failure in the game would mean complete ignominy.

So Handforth was keyed up to a pitch of perfection that was quite unusual, even to a fellow of his unbounded energy. He was on tiptoe all the while, a veritable human electric battery.

In very much the same way as a professional footballer will play far above his usual form in a crucial Cup-tie, Handforth was now excelling himself. Never before had so much depended upon his prowess. He was quite a good cricketer at any ordinary time, but to-day he was exceptionally good. The circumstances made him so. His opportunity had come, and he was not wasting it.

And during the first quarter of an hour's play Kildare received one or two surprises. For Handforth's work in the field was of outstanding merit. Whenever the leather came in his direction he was after it like a greyhound after a hare. Never once did he fumble; never once did he make a mistake.

And on three separate occasions he saved almost certain boundaries, returning the ball so smartly that only two were scored.

"By Jove, that kid's good!" remarked Baker approvingly.

"Yes; he's doing famously!" agreed Kildare.

The St. Jim's skipper was feeling more settled in mind. He felt that he was justified in playing this junior. No

doubt there would be a lot of criticism from the St. Jim's Upper School when the facts came out, but Kildare did not care. He was a strong captain, and he was not in the habit of being influenced by the opinion of the multitude.

At the same time, it was an undeniable fact that Kildare's position would be much stronger if Handforth played a consistently good game. And by the way things were going, Handforth was out to make St. Jim's history!

CHAPTER 15.

Something Like a Surprise!

"HERE we are!" said Dick Julian, of the St. Jim's Fourth.

The chums of Study No. 5 dismounted from their bicycles. Julian and Hammond and Kerruish were looking hot. Having nothing better to do, they had taken it into their heads to go for a ride on that fine afternoon, and, finding themselves in the neighbourhood of Wensford, they had decided to have a look at the First Eleven game.

They were naturally curious, because Wensford was not one of the ordinary schools that played against St. Jim's, and they wanted to see how things were going.

"Phew! Half an hour under the trees will do us good!" said Hammond, as he mopped his brow. "And, if we're lucky, some of these Wensford chaps might stand us a tea!"

"Stranger things have happened!" grinned Julian.

They left their bicycles in the Close and strolled leisurely towards the playing-fields. There was nobody to direct them, but they could easily find their way, for continuous shouts and applause came floating through the warm air.

The Wensford fellows were taking a very keen interest in the game. They regarded it as a very high honour that St. Jim's should come over to play them, and practically the whole school had turned out to watch.

But the three St. Jim's juniors had no difficulty in getting near to the boundary line at one of the corners of the field.

"Our men are in the field!" said Kerruish, as he sprawled on the grass. "What's the score?"

Dick Julian was examining the board.

"Forty-eight for one wicket!" he replied. "They can't have been going very long, and they seem to be giving our seniors a twisting. Hallo! Did you see that? By Jove, that was a swipe!"

"Boundary!" said Hammond briefly.

The batsmen were running, and the red leather was hissing across the turf, en route for the boundary. It seemed impossible that any of the St. Jim's fieldsmen could reach it.

But it was reached.

With terrific energy a St. Jim's fellow was running, and, with the ball only a foot from the boundary line he flung himself downwards, and clutched at the leather in the nick of time. A roar went up as it was seen that he held the elusive sphere. And with all his strength, without rising, he flung it wicketwards.

"Oh, jolly good!" said Kerruish enthusiastically.

"Smart work!" agreed Dick Julian. "Who is the chap? I don't seem to recognise him."

They all watched as the fieldsman rose to his feet and trotted back to his position.

"That's rummy!" said Julian, frowning. "I could swear that——"

He paused, and Hammond grinned.

"Better not!" he advised. "Bad language isn't allowed."

"Ass!" said the Jewish boy. "But, look here! That fellow isn't one of our seniors! He looks just like—— Oh, but it's impossible! He can't be!"

"My only sainted aunt!" gasped Kerruish. "It's Handforth!"

"What!"

"It is!" insisted Kerruish, in a startled voice. "It's Handforth—that new chap from St. Frank's! There aren't two fellows in the world with a

figure like his. What the merry dickens

"We shall wake up in a minute!" said Hammond dazedly. "Handforth playing for the First!"

"And what about that promise of his?" put in Julian wonderingly.

"What promise?"

"Didn't he say he'd score a century for the First Eleven, according to Tom Merry's potty stipulation?" asked Julian. "Everybody yelled at him and told him that he was off his rocker. And yet here he is—actually playing for the First!"

"We must be mistaken, after all," said Hammond, frowning. "It can't be Handforth! I say, let's run along and get a closer look."

They all went, and a minute later their doubts were set at rest. Without question, that particular fieldsman was Edward Oswald Handforth of the Fourth!

Kerruish turned to some of the Wensford spectators.

"I say," he burst out, "do you know why this fellow is playing?"

"That's easy!" replied one of the Wensfordians. "Darrell, or whatever his name is, met with an accident on the way, and this other chap is playing as a substitute. And, by the look of things, he's hot!"

"Hot!"

"Mustard!" said the Wensfordian. "Why the dickens your skipper didn't want to play him at first is a mystery. I wish to goodness he'd never turned up! He's saved I don't know how many boundaries!"

"Oh, my hat!" said Kerruish blankly.

They stood staring at the game, and a moment later they were rewarded by the finest piece of work that Handforth had yet done.

Clack!

It was a mighty hit. The leather soared up and up, and the batsmen were running.

It was the first chance that had occurred for some time, but it was a

very remote one. The ball was soaring across the field towards the boundary, and it seemed impossible that any of the St. Jim's fieldsmen could reach it in time. And, even so, the catch would be difficult.

And it was Handforth who was nearest—Handforth who was running.

It was touch and go. Everybody held their breath. At the last second the junior flung himself upwards and sideways, and his fingers clutched at the leather.

Slap!

The sound of the ball striking his palm was like a pistol-shot, and his fingers closed over it. He stumbled, falling sideways. But miraculously he recovered himself and spun round.

The next second he flung the ball high into the air.

"Oh, well caught!"

"Bravo!"

And another roar went up:

"How's that?"

It was out right enough, and Kildare flushed with pleasure and wonder. The Wensford skipper had been dismissed, and, ridiculously enough, Handforth had done the trick.

"Well caught, Handforth!" shouted Kildare enthusiastically.

Handforth's ears burned, and the palm of his hand felt like fire. But he didn't care. He knew he was doing well, and his heart was beating a song of triumph within him. He was justifying his place.

Dick Julian dragged his two chums away from the Wensford crowds.

"Look here! This is too good to keep!" he said excitedly. "We ought to tell some of the other fellows about it!"

"But there aren't any here!" said Kerruish.

"I know that, but there's a telephone in the place, isn't there?" said Julian quickly. "The game isn't half over yet, and plenty of chaps can get here on their bikes long before the tea interval. They'll be in time to see the fireworks when Handforth bats!"

"Rather!" said Hammond. "I can't believe it even now! Handforth playing for the First Eleven! And even Tom Merry wouldn't accept him!"

"People say that the age of miracles has passed; but they're all wrong!" declared Kerruish. "Come on! Let's go and find a telephone!"

They could hardly contain their excitement. They felt that they couldn't possibly keep this sensation to themselves.

But when they ultimately found a telephone and succeeded in getting through to St. Jim's, they found that all the juniors were absent. Most of them had gone over to Rylcombe Grammar School, and the others were all out of doors, reading under the trees, or on the river.

"What a frost!" said Kerruish.

"No, it isn't!" said Julian. "We'll ring up Rylcombe Grammar School. That's what we ought to have done at first."

As it happened, a rather extraordinary state of affairs existed at the Grammar School just then. In a word, the junior match was over.

Gordon Gay and his men had batted first, and they had started out famously, with their usual vigour. But after 25 runs had been knocked up without a wicket falling, an absolute collapse had taken place.

There is never any certainty with cricket. The Grammarian wicket was in fine condition, and there seemed no reason why Gordon Gay & Co. should not stay in the whole afternoon.

But in one over Frank Monk and Gordon Gay had lost their wickets, being dismissed by the redoubtable Fatty Wynn. And then, for no earthly reason at all, the rest of the Grammarians had walked out from the pavilion and had come back in a procession.

Nobody could understand it, least of all Gordon Gay. But it had happened. In less than half an hour the home team was out, the "tail" having crumpled up completely.

Tom Merry & Co. found themselves facing a certainty. It was only necessary to obtain 39 runs to win.

And Tom Merry and Blake between them knocked up the necessary total with great gusto. Knowing their safe position, they had hit for all they were worth, and had taken all sorts of chances that ordinarily they would never have risked.

"Well, that's whacked you, my lads!" grinned Tom Merry, after the winning run had been scored. "What shall we do now?"

"Is it worth while going on?" asked Gordon Gay dubiously. "There's not much fun in playing when nothing depends on it."

"Oh, we might as well carry on—just for the fun of the thing," said Blake. "Besides, you Grammarian asses need a lot of exercise!"

"Fathead!" said Frank Monk.

But at that moment Carker of the Grammar School Fourth came running up, full of importance.

"I say, you fellows!" he panted. "You're wanted on the 'phone!"

"Who's wanted?" said Gordon Gay.

"Tom Merry, or one of these other St. Jim's chaps!" said Carker. "It's somebody 'phoning from Wensford."

"Wensford?" said Blake in surprise. "What the merry dickens for? The seniors are over at Wensford, aren't they?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry. "All right, I'll go!"

Within five minutes he was back, his face flushed, and his expression rather bewildered.

"What's up?" asked Kangaroo curiously.

"Nothing!" replied Tom. "But I'm going to give some of you chaps a fit. Handforth is playing for the First at Wensford!"

"What?"

"Great Scott!"

"Oh, come off it, Tommy!"

"Tell us something we can believe!"

"It's a fact!" said Tom Merry breathlessly. "I've just heard it from Dick

Julian. He's over there with Kerruish and Hammond. And Handforth is playing for the First—and playing a great game, too!”

“Bal Jove!” ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. “What an extraordinary state of affairs! Weally, Tom Merry, I cannot help thinkin' that you are wottin'!”

“I thought Julian was rotting—until he told me, honest Injun, that it was true,” said the St. Jim's junior skipper.

“But why did he ring up?” asked Blake.

“He thought some of us fellows might like to go over on our bikes to see the fun,” replied Tom. The captain of the Shell turned to Gordon Gay. “I say, we've whacked you, so what about calling it a day? We'd like to run over to Wensford to see this marvel.”

“You're welcome!” grinned Gordon Gay. “We don't want to do any more leather hunting, thank you!”

“And the next time we play we'll have our revenge!” remarked Jack Wootton. “This win of yours this afternoon was only a fluke!”

“Bow-wow!” chuckled Blake.

“Weally, Blake, I am inclined to agree with Wootton,” said Gussy gracefully. “Ewevybody knows that the Gwammawians' standard of cwicket is below that of St. Jim's—”

“Oh, do they?” said Frank Monk darily.

“Yaas, wathah!” said D'Arcy. “At the same time, we are willin' to admit that you had fwightfully bad luck this afternoon, deah boys.”

“Well, we needn't hold an inquest over the giddy game, Gussy!” said Figgins. “Every team is liable to collapse—and the cause isn't always obvious. The less we say about this game the better.”

And the Grammarians were in hearty agreement with these sentiments.

Five minutes later the St. Jim's cricketers were on their bicycles and speeding off towards Wensford. A good many other juniors went, too.

Ordinarily no senior match would

attract them in this way. But Handforth of the Fourth was playing for St. Jim's, and the circumstance was so remarkable that Wensford drew the St. Jim's juniors like a magnet.

CHAPTER 16.

Playing for the First!

“WELL done, young 'un!” Kildare gave Handforth a hearty clap on the back, and it was all the reward that Handforth needed.

“I did my best,” he said, flushing.

The Wensford innings was over. The home side had knocked up the somewhat formidable score of 202. It was, of course, nothing unusual in senior cricket, but there was nothing certain about the game. St. Jim's would need to go warily in order to equal, and better, that total.

Handforth was singularly modest about his performance, and the seniors were surprised. They had understood that this junior from St. Frank's was a boaster and a braggart.

In actual experience they were finding that he was nothing of the sort.

For when Handforth did anything really praiseworthy he generally regarded it as a mere nothing, and he actually resented praise. His boasting and bragging was invariably confined to matters of no importance. Which only went to prove that at heart he was true gold.

He knew that he had played well in the field. He would have been a fool if he hadn't known it. He was pleased, but he was not swollen-headed. For, as he argued, he had only played as he had told everybody that he would play. So what was there to brag about? Handforth's philosophy was simple.

All the seniors had congratulated him, and he was fed-up. He didn't like the way in which they regarded him as a freak.

“They're dotty!” he told himself. “I wouldn't have asked for a place in

the team unless I could have played a decent game. They seem to think I'm a curio, or something! Fatheads!"

Thus dismissing the St. Jim's seniors, Handforth thrust his hands into his pockets and stared at a piece of exercise paper which was pinned to the wall of the dressing-room.

It was a list of the First Eleven, in numbered order. And he found that Darrell's name was fourth. His eyes gleamed.

"When shall I go in, Kildare?" he asked, turning.

"Last man," said Kildare briefly.

"Eh?"

"You heard me, kid!"

"I know I did!" said Handforth. "But what's the idea of putting me in last man? How the dickens can I hope to make any score?"

"I'm not relying upon you for any score," said Kildare gently. "You've done good work in the field, kid, and I'm satisfied. You'll take last knock."

"Rot!" said Handforth.

"What did you say?"

"I said 'Rot'—and you heard me!" exclaimed Handforth firmly.

"You cheeky young sweep——"

"You know jolly well that I'm not cheeky!" said Handforth warmly. "But look at this list. Darrell's name is down for fourth man!"

"What about it?"

"Well, I'm Darrell's substitute, aren't I?"

A chuckle went round among the seniors.

"He's got you there, Kildare, old man!" murmured Baker.

"Yes, you're Darrell's substitute," admitted Kildare slowly. "But I'm the skipper, young 'un, and I'm in a position to alter my mind——"

"Oh, come off it!" said Handforth anxiously. "How the dickens can I score a century if I'm last man in?"

"A century!" repeated Kildare politely.

"Yes."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I believe the kid means it," said

Kildare in wonder. "My poor young ass! Do you honestly believe that you stand an earthly chance of making a century in this game?"

Handforth set his teeth.

"You can laugh all you like!" he said grimly. "You were ready to laugh at me when I went on the field, weren't you? I don't want to boast, but I didn't make a mess of it, did I? Well, why can't you give me a chance with the bat? You know jolly well that when the last man goes in the game is all over bar shouting."

"But you're merely a substitute——"

"Exactly!" said Handforth. "I'm Darrell's substitute. And Darrell was to be fourth man in. I'm only standing up for my rights when I ask to be sent in fourth."

"Let him have his way, Kildare!" chuckled Monteith. "He deserves it!"

"He deserves a thundering good kicking!" said Kildare good-naturedly. "All the same, I'll agree to let him go in fourth. I'll give the kid a chance. He's Darrell's substitute, so he shall take his knock in the right order."

"Thanks awfully, Kildare!" said Handforth, taking a deep breath.

"And you can count yourself very lucky, my lad!" added Kildare.

Handforth did. As a mere deputy—and a junior at that—he really couldn't expect anything else but a knock at the end. His shrewdness in taking advantage of that list tickled all the St. Jim's seniors, and they were chuckling hugely over it. In fact, they liked Handforth immensely. There was something very attractive about this bluff, blunt, plain-speaking junior.

Kildare and Monteith opened the St. Jim's innings, and there was bad luck right from the start.

Monteith's wicket fell before a run had been scored. He gave the ghost of a chance to third-slip, and third-slip took it. It was really a remarkable catch.

Baker came in next, and things settled down for a bit. Kildare and Baker began to score.



"You—you rotters!" bellowed Blake, as the Grammarian raiders bore away the St. Jim's chums' tuck-hamper and heaps of clothes. "Put those things down!" "We've got a pressing engagement," shouted back Frank Monk. "We'll see you another time!" Then, laughing harder than ever, the Grammarians vanished among the trees.

But just as they were nicely set, Baker called to Kildare to run for a risky single.

"No, no!" shouted Kildare.

But Baker was half-way down the pitch, and before he could get back his wicket was shattered.

"How's that?" grinned the 'keeper.

"Out!"

"Hard lines, old man!" said Kildare.

"But you shouldn't have chanced it!"

"I know that!" growled Baker. "I was dotty!"

The Wensfordians were feeling happy. They were dismissing these redoubtable St. Jim's fellows with comparative ease. In their enthusiasm they omitted to reflect upon the luck which had favoured them.

Two of the St. Jim's strong men out! But Monteith had been caught by the merest fluke, and Baker's dismissal was more accidental than anything else.

Being fourth man in, Handforth came out to partner Kildare. Barely had the substitute taken his stance at the wicket when, to cap the run of ill-fortune, and with a total score at only 28 a bird flew across Kildare's line of vision as he received a ball from the Wensford fast bowler. For a split second Kildare lost sight of the leather, and his middle stump flew clean out of the ground.

Kildare walked back to the pavilion amid a mild display of sympathetic applause.

"What on earth happened?" asked Baker in wonder, when Kildare reached the pavilion.

"A confounded bird!" growled Kildare. "All sparrows ought to be exterminated by law!"

"I didn't see any bird," said Baker.

But he didn't doubt Kildare's word. The St. Jim's skipper was a very safe batsman, and for him to be out with only ten runs to his credit was unusual.

"I'm afraid there's not much chance for us!" said Kildare gloomily.

"Not an earthly!" agreed Baker, as he watched another Sixth-Former stride out to the wicket and the Wens-

ford team change over. "Handforth's going to bat now. He'll get a duck, I'll bet!"

Handforth, as he took guard, was in exactly the same condition as he had been when he started the game. He was on tip-toe—he was keyed up to a high pitch of efficiency. His coolness, too, was remarkable.

Now that the great moment had come, his brain was as cold as ice; he displayed no sign of stage fright. But this, after all, was characteristic of him. It was in moments of great crisis that Handforth gave of his best. At other times he could be relied upon to make a hopeless mess of anything he undertook.

Kildare sat in the pavilion and watched. His heart almost came into his mouth as Handforth received his first ball.

"Help!" murmured Kildare.

For Handforth had swung his bat high, and he leapt forward to meet the leather. It seemed to be an incredible act of folly.

Clack!

"Come on!" yelled Handforth.

He scored two with that first ball, and Kildare sighed.

"He'll last about five minutes—if that!" he said sadly. "The young idiot doesn't even try to get himself set!"

But there was something that Eric Kildare did not know. Handforth was riding on the crest of one of his lucky waves. And in that position he simply couldn't do anything wrong!

CHAPTER 17.

Bravo, Handforth!

"BAI JOVE!"

Arthur Augustus D'Ar made that exclamation as he gazed with consternation at the Wensford score-board.

"Must be a mistake!" said Blake credulously. "Thirty-seven for the wickets! I don't believe it!"

The St. Jim's juniors had just arriv-

and they were crowding on to the playing-fields, eager and hot.

Long before they got within sight of the pitch they had learned that Wensford were all out for 202. They had heard rumours also that the star St. Jim's batsmen had been dismissed for negligible scores. And now the board corroborated those ominous tidings.

"Three wickets down!" said Tom Merry, with a whistle. "My hat! That's bad luck!"

"I say," burst out Bernard Glyn, "look who's batting!"

They all stared.

"Gwreat Scott!" gasped Gussy. "It's Handforth!"

"Impossible!" said Blake. "Handforth batting! That means that he was fourth man in!"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"Kildare must be off his rocker!"

All the new arrivals were greatly astonished. They had hoped to reach Wensford before the first innings was over, so that they could see Handforth in the field. And they had all been convinced that the new junior would be last man in. To see him actually batting at the opening of the St. Jim's innings was startling.

As it happened, Tom Merry & Co. and the others could not have arrived at a better time.

For Handforth was giving an extraordinary display.

Tom Merry & Co. watched, fascinated. An over had just commenced, and Handforth cheerfully sent the first ball well beyond the boundary. The second ball hit the roof of the pavilion, and the third did its best to brain third-slip.

Handforth's hitting was tremendous. The energy he put into his work was worth running a mile to see. Indeed, not only were the St. Jim's fellows staring, but the Wensfordians were beginning to get worried. This substitute—this junior, who had come in at the last moment—was beginning to give an uneasiness.

"It can't last!" said Kildare in amazement. "It's ridiculous!"

But, strangely enough, it did last—and it was solely owing to Handforth's grim determination. He was slogging amazingly, taking chances that caused Kildare and the other St. Jim's seniors to shudder as they watched.

It was a case of sheer dogged resolution. Handforth knew that this was his chance, and he wasn't sacrificing it. The Wensford bowlers could do nothing with him. He was like a fellow possessed.

And gradually the initial astonishment changed to enthusiasm. Even the Wensford fellows threw aside their anxiety and gave full vent to their excitement. They were enjoying this. Cricket, after all, was cricket—and, from a spectacular point of view, they had never seen anything to equal the performance of this rugged, reckless junior.

There was no science about it—no art. But to watch it was superb. To see Handforth leap out, to see his terrific on-driving, to see him take horrible chances—it was all wonderful.

And his wicket was charmed. Nothing could touch it. Bowler after bowler came on, but Handforth treated every ball in the same way. He knocked those unfortunate Wensford bowlers to every corner of the field. The risks he took were dreadful, but Kildare was becoming inured to them. He no longer shuddered. He just watched with an ever-growing wonderment, and with his heart beating much more rapidly than usual. Kildare, in fact, was beginning to hope.

"Never seen anything like it!" he said, turning to Baker. "This kid's a wizard!"

"It's luck—sheer luck!" said Baker. "Of course, he's working like a navvy, but it isn't decent that he should take such chances and get away with them. I'm sorry for these Wensford bowlers!"

Among the spectators the comments were just as enthusiastic. A perfect storm of applause went up when Hand-

forth reached his fifty. So far, he had had practically all the bowling, for he had cunningly contrived to score a single or a three with the last ball of each over. And his partner was glad enough. While this lucky "streak" lasted, it was just as well to give it its head!

But perhaps the seniors were just a little uncharitable in describing Handforth's performance as luck. "Pluck" would have been a better word to use.

For, without his iron will to back him up, without his bulldog courage, Handforth would never have been able to carry this thing through.

"There goes the hundred!" said Tom Merry, with satisfaction. "By Jove! And fifty-eight of 'em have been scored by Handy!"

"Bravo, Handforth!"

"Yaas, wather!" said Arthur Augustus enthusiastically. "I am inclined to think, deah boy, that we have been blind to Handy's pwowess! The chap is a wondah!"

"He'll get his place in the Junior Eleven all right!" said Tom Merry, nodding. "Not that he'll ever bat like this again."

And Tom Merry was probably right. The junior skipper could well understand that Handforth was playing far above his usual form. A big match of this sort generally has one of two effects upon a fellow in Handforth's position. Either he gets stage fright and comes a hopeless mucker, or he steels himself to his task and plays far above his usual standard. It is seldom that any middle course is taken.

"Seventy-five!" said Blake, after two or three more overs. "Oh, by Jove! I can't believe it even now, although I'm watching!"

Three other wickets had fallen, but Handforth's remained intact. It looked as though he was going to carry his bat right through.

And he was still playing the same game—still slogging recklessly at any

and every kind of ball. It didn't matter to him whether they were slow or fast, and googlies and yorkers and every kind of delivery met with the same cavalier treatment.

It seemed to the spectators that some of those balls were unplayable, and yet Handforth sloshed them away for twos or threes with impunity.

"I believe we're going to win!" said Blake breathlessly at last. "Hundred and seventy-six! We need under thirty to give us the game, and Handforth is good for the whole innings."

"Yaas, wathah!"

They had ceased to watch for the shattering of Handforth's wicket. The latter, of course, was charmed. There could be no other explanation.

Eighty-eight — ninety-two — ninety-four!

Handforth's score was creeping up. The excitement grew intense as he neared his century. Would he do it? Would he succeed?

"Of course, we can see what he's after," said Tom Merry.

"Dry up, you ass!" said Manners. "We can't talk now! Here comes— Oh, bravo! Well hit, Handy!"

Another four!

"Ninety-eight!" said Tom Merry, with a little gulp in his throat. "Oh, my hat! I'm all trembling!"

"Same heah, deah boy!" murmured Gussy.

"It's that promise of his!" said Tom. "The fellow's an absolute marvel! He told us that he would score a century in a First Eleven match, and I'm blessed if he's not doing it."

But nobody was listening to him, and a dead silence fell over the field as Handforth prepared to accept the next ball. Everybody knew that this would be the crucial one. Would he be robbed of his century at the last second?

Down came the leather, and out sprang Handforth.

Clack!

It was the biggest hit that he had

made yet, a terrific driving stroke which sent the ball soaring skywards like a shell from a cannon. Away it went, over the ground, far beyond the boundary.

"Hurrah!"

"Bravo, Handforth! Oh, well played!"

Handforth, at the wicket, took a deep breath. He glanced at the scoreboard, and his face was flushed as he saw "104" go up against his name. He had done it! He had scored his century! And all round cheer upon cheer went up.

With the very next ball Handforth's stumps were spreadeagled. He didn't know why, he couldn't explain how it had happened. But, with the accomplishment of his purpose, his nerve seemed to go. Every atom of his assurance deserted him, and he made an awful mess of that stroke.

But it didn't matter. He had done wonders—he had scored a century for the First Eleven, and it was a record that he could well be proud of.

CHAPTER 18.

The Conquering Hero!

"GOOD old Handy!"

"Hurrah!"

"Well played, old man!"

The juniors came crowding round Handforth as he approached the pavilion. They were excited and enthusiastic, and their expressions of admiration were genuine.

"Jolly good, Handy!" said Tom Merry, as he clapped the new fellow on the back. "You were marvellous!"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Handforth uncomfortably. "I made an awful hash of that last stroke!"

"What does it matter?" laughed Tom Merry. "You've made your century."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, beaming upon Handforth. "Weally, deah boy, your performance was wemarkable. Pway allow me to con-

gwatulate you. I wegard you as a wippah!"

"He's made history for the Fourth!" said Blake genially. "And if the First Eleven doesn't win this match now, the seniors ought to be boiled!"

"Oh, they'll win!" said Tom Merry confidently. "Handy has set them an example that they can't possibly ignore. The game's all over bar shouting."

"Well, we'll do the shouting!" grinned Lowther.

The seniors were almost as boisterous as the juniors as Handforth went amongst them. Kildare caught him by the shoulder, shook his hand, and regarded him with frank wonder.

"How on earth did you manage it?" he inquired. "You know, you're a bit of a surprise packet!"

"Am I?" asked Handforth. "Where does the surprise come in? I told you I was going to score a century, didn't I?"

"You'll do!" chuckled Kildare.

"I don't know how the dickens I came to miss that last ball," said Handforth, frowning. "I meant to carry my bat right through—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The seniors laughed uproariously.

"Anyhow, young 'un, I believe you've saved the game!" said Kildare. "We shall carry on and win now."

It was true enough. Encouraged by the example of this extraordinary junior, the seniors won the match fairly easily. And the Wensfordians considered that it was very much of a swindle. This mere junior had been brought in as a substitute, and it was owing to him that they had been robbed of their victory. Nevertheless, they were sportsmen, and they congratulated Handforth as heartily as any of the St. Jim's seniors.

Handforth went home in triumph, in his Austin Seven, escorted by a whole crowd of cyclists. There was nothing half-hearted in the way in which the juniors showed him their appreciation.

And Handforth, of course, enjoyed it all.

This was the sort of thing he liked! Yet one could have too much of a good thing, and before St. Jim's was reached Handforth was becoming somewhat embarrassed.

Personally, he did not regard his feat as anything remarkable. Hadn't he said all along that he would score a century for the First Eleven? Then what was all the fuss about?

"Anybody might think that I'd taken all you fellows by surprise!" said Handforth, turning to Blake, who was sitting beside the driver's seat.

"Well, you have taken us by surprise," replied Blake.

"Rats! Didn't I say——"

"Yes, I suppose you did," put in Blake hastily.

"Yaas, wathah!" observed Gussy, from one of the rear seats. "You pwo-mised us that you would score a century for the First, Handay, but we thought you were only boastin'. I wathah think we owe you an apology."

"Oh, don't bother about it!" said Handforth lightly.

Blake chuckled. He was feeling very pleased with this new recruit in the Fourth. Handforth was certainly doing famously. Gussy and Herries and Digby had managed to squash themselves into the limited space at the rear of the car. They could not have been comfortable, and yet they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

When Handforth steered through the old gateway into the quad a storm of cheering rang out. The news had got to St. Jim's in advance. Somebody had telephoned, and crowds of enthusiastic juniors were waiting.

Wally D'Arcy and a gang of fags were much in evidence, and a large number of New House fellows joined in the cheering.

But the climax came when Dr. Holmes himself came across to the Austin Seven, which had pulled up against the School House steps. The Head was beaming with good nature.

"Well done, Handforth!" he said, extending his hand.

The flustered Handforth gripped it, turning as red as a beetroot.

"It was nothing, sir!" he muttered uncomfortably.

"I admire your modesty, since I have been led to believe that you were not exactly a modest boy," said Dr. Holmes kindly. "You have done splendidly, Handforth. I congratulate you!"

"Thank you, sir!" murmured Handforth.

"Darrell, I am sure, will be more pleased than anybody else, since you have deputised for him so valiantly," continued Dr. Holmes. "I am only sorry that I was not at Wensford to watch the match. It must have been very thrilling."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Handforth's hitting was a sight for sore eyes, sir."

"It was glorious, sir!"

"I wish you fellows wouldn't make such a fuss," said Handforth, frowning. "There wasn't anything in it. Those Wensford chaps didn't know how to bowl."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth's modesty was quite sincere, and most of the juniors were surprised. They had always regarded him as a boaster.

But Handforth was rather difficult to understand. If he had scored a century in a fags' match he would probably have bragged for hours. But whenever he accomplished anything of genuine merit, he generally astonished everybody by disclaiming all credit.

"I am sure that your Form is proud of you!" smiled the Head, as he prepared to take his departure. "You are quite a newcomer, Handforth, and you have started extremely well. I hope that you will score many another century for St. Jim's, although for some time to come you must necessarily confine your energies to the Junior Eleven."

"Thank you, sir," repeated Handforth.

He was very relieved when the Head

went, and Tom Merry clapped him heartily on the back.

"Steady, deah boy!" protested Gussy. "I imagine that Handay's back must be quite sore by now!"

"Sorry!" grinned Tom. "The fact is, Handy, the Head was right. In future, you'll play for the Junior Eleven—and you can take it from me that you've won your place. You'll be one of the star turns in the next big match."

"Good man!" said Handforth eagerly.

"What about making him the star turn at a special feed this evening?" suggested Blake.

"Good egg!"

"The very wheeze!"

But Handforth, as usual, objected.

"Oh, rot!" he protested. "You can have a feed, if you like, and I'll be glad enough to come, but I'm jiggered if I'll let you hold it in my honour. What's the idea of making all this silly fuss?"

But Handforth's objections fell on deaf ears, and swift preparations were set afoot for the holding of a big celebration feed. Naturally, any excuse for a feed was welcome, and this could hardly be called an excuse, anyhow. A feed was absolutely necessary.

There was a quick whip round, all the wealthy juniors contributing handsomely, and there was a good deal of bustle round the tuckshop. Handforth wanted to stand his whack, but he wasn't allowed to. The juniors were very firm on this point. As the guest of honour, they couldn't think of him contributing towards the exes.

And so, an hour later, while the Senior School was still discussing Handforth's feat with mild astonishment, the juniors gave themselves up to revelry. The gathering was a large one—in fact, practically the whole of the Shell and the juniors were present, including Figgins and all his New House valiants.

It was a time for celebration, and everybody celebrated.

CHAPTER 19.

Still Determined!

"GENTLEMEN——"
"Hurrah!"
"I stand here to address you——"

"Bravo!"

"It gives me great pleasure——"

"Good old Handy!"

"Fatheads!" roared Handforth indignantly. "If there are any more of these interruptions, it won't give me any pleasure at all to address you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Personally, I consider that you're all dotty!" continued the new fellow candidly. "A feed's all right, but the way you keep harping on that century of mine makes me wild!"

"You'll have to forgive us, old man," chuckled Tom Merry. "The spoils to the victor, you know—and that's why you're the guest of honour at this feast. You've proved that you're a good cricketer."

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Not scientific, perhaps, but a good slogger," continued Tom. "And nobody can say that you aren't a hard worker. In fact, taking you all round Handy, you're a good acquisition to the Junior Eleven."

Handforth didn't look very pleased.

"Half a tick!" he said tartly. "Who's making this speech?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sorry, old scout!" grinned Tom. "Carry on!"

"Thanks! I will," said Handforth. "And, understand, I don't want to hear any more of this rot! Let's forget the silly match! Who are the seniors, anyhow?"

"Ah, who?" murmured Blake.

"They're always overrated," said Handforth disparagingly. "It was just the same at St. Frank's. The fatheads were dreadfully shocked at the idea of a junior playing in the First; but, as everybody at this feast knows, lots of juniors can show the seniors a clean pair of heels any day."

"Hear, hear!"

"Hurrah!"

"The seniors think too much of themselves!" roared Handforth. "It was only by a sheer accident that I got into that game to-day, backed up by my own determination. And what was the result?"

"We know it, old man," said Tom Merry genially.

"The result was a foregone conclusion," declared Handforth. "A junior cricketer can generally knock spots off the seniors. It's a good thing that these incidents happen now and again. They help to open the seniors' eyes to their true standing. They're not better than we are."

"Heah, heah!"

"In fact, they're not so good as we are!"

"Bravo!"

"We can wipe them up any day!" roared Handforth, waxing enthusiastic, and amid much laughter. "So don't talk any more piffle about my doing something miraculous! I'd ten times rather play for the Junior Eleven!"

This, after all, was true modesty on Handforth's part, and his audience appreciated it. Many a fellow in his position would have made great capital out of his feat. But Handforth bluntly told the truth when he gave it as his opinion that senior cricket was over-rated.

"It's jolly decent of you to give me this feed," continued Handy, "and I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful. But you'll do me a favour if you'll forget cricket for the rest of the evening, and talk about something else."

"That's easy!" chuckled Bernard Glyn. "Let's talk about your next ordeal, Handy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My next which?" asked Handforth.

"You've already wiped off two of those special tests, old scout," grinned Tom Merry, taking his cue from Glyn. "You haven't forgotten the other, have you?"

"Of course I haven't, ass!"

"When I invented those tests I was only rotting," went on Tom Merry. "Nobody ever thought that you would take them seriously, Handy."

"Unless he's a fathead, he won't take them seriously now," said Blake. "He wiped up Knox of the Sixth by a fluke—"

"What!" thundered Handforth.

"By a fluke!" repeated Blake calmly.

"You—you silly ass!"

"A fluke!" insisted Blake, quite unmoved. "I'm not saying that you thrashed him by a fluke, but the opportunity came along unexpectedly, without any preparation on your part."

"Oh, that's different!" admitted Handforth, simmering down.

"And practically the same thing can be said of to-day's match," argued Blake. "You were born lucky, Handy. Just think of it! By sheer chance you accidentally came upon Darrell, and Darrell, by the merest of flukes, had sprained his ankle. And so you got your chance to play, and succeeded in that second test."

"H'm! Perhaps you're right," said Handforth gruffly.

"My dear chap, of course I'm right," said Blake. "I'm not trying to belittle your performance, so don't misunderstand me. It doesn't matter much how you got into the game——"

"Are you going to start jawing cricket again?"

"Sorry!" said Blake hastily. "Well, and now we come to the next test."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry rose to his feet, and there was silence.

"Look here, Handy, I withdraw all I said about those tests," he said earnestly. "There's no need for you to go ahead with them. We're satisfied."

Edward Oswald Handforth shook his head.

"You may be satisfied, but I'm not," he said firmly. "I know jolly well that those tests were a spoof, but I've done two, and I'll do the other one."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But you know it's impossible——"

"I know nothing of the sort, Tom Merry!" frowned Handforth. "Not long ago you were saying it was impossible for me to score a century for the First. But I did it, didn't I?"

"But you were lucky, old man——"

"Well, perhaps I shall be lucky again," retorted Handforth calmly. "Lemme see. What is this fatheaded third test, anyhow? I've got to raid the Grammar School single-handed, haven't I?"

"Well, yes."

"Good enough, then," said Handy triumphantly. "I'm not going to rest content until I'm leader of the Fourth. And as I can't become leader of the Fourth until I've succeeded in all three tests, I'm going ahead!"

And Tom Merry gave it up.

This astonishing new fellow was filled with extraordinary determination, and the juniors were beginning to wonder if the other test was, after all, impossible. For nothing seemed impossible to the lucky Handforth!

CHAPTER 20.

Just Like Handy!

"SHRIMPS!" said Handforth firmly.
"Eh?"
"Which?"

"No picnic is a success without shrimps!" said Handforth, with an air of finality.

There were many chuckles. Blake & Co., of Study No. 6, the Terrible Three of the Shell, and a crowd of other juniors, were standing about in the old quadrangle at St. Jim's. The afternoon was blazingly hot. The sun shone down out of a cloudless sky; the very air seemed to quiver with heat. The droning hum of insects was continuous.

Even Figgins & Co., the doughty leaders of the New House juniors, were among the crowd. The pipe of peace had been smoked, and the hatchet was buried. For once, harmony was complete.

A big picnic had been arranged for that afternoon, a half-holiday.

There was no cricket match fixed for the day, and, as the temperature was somewhat up in the eighties, Tom Merry & Co. had decided that a lazy afternoon by the riverside was more in accord with the conditions. The weather was too hot for cricket; the idea of standing about in the pitiless glare of sunshine on Little Side was not one that appealed to the juniors. How much better to disport themselves in the river, and then while away the afternoon hours under the shade of the riverside trees! And, finally, to finish up, a picnic.

To the juniors, the programme seemed as perfect as anything could be.

And they were just ready to start. Everybody carried a parcel or a bag, and the majority of them had their swimming costumes and towels slung over their shoulders.

"Never mind about shrimps, Handy," said Levison, with a chuckle. "We've got plenty of sardines and hard-boiled eggs, and ham sandwiches and——"

"But you can't beat shrimps on a hot day!" interrupted Handforth obstinately.

"Cheese it, Handy!" said Jack Blake. "You can't get any shrimps nearer than Rylcombe——"

"Then I'm going to Rylcombe!"

"Weally, Handay, you cannot be sewious!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, jamming his eyeglass into his eye, and inspecting Handforth in astonishment. "You appeal to forget that we are ready to start!"

"All right—start!" said Handforth.

"And what about you, you fwrightful ass?"

"I can follow," replied Handforth. "Or, better still, I'll pop down to the village in my Austin Seven, and then I can join the rest of you later."

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Blake. "What an obstinate mule the chap is! Bother the shrimps! Does anybody here want any shrimps?"

"No!" observed the others, in one voice.

"There you are!" said Blake, turning to Handforth, as if it was the only thing in the world that mattered.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm not asking you to wait for me," went on Handforth. "You can all clear off! But I'm going to the village——"

"Oh, go, then!" interrupted Blake crossly. "I never knew such a stubborn idiot in all my life. Always wanting to do something different from everybody else! All for the sake of a few rotten shrimps, too!"

"Look here, Jack Blake!" roared Handforth, turning red. "If you're asking for a thick ear——"

"I'm not!" said Blake. "It's no good asking you for a thick ear, because you couldn't give it to me."

"Why, you silly lunatic——"

"Weally, deah boys, pway don't start scwappin' you for a thick ear, like this!" said Arthur Augustus with concern.

"Yes, chuck it, you fellows!" said Tom Merry. "If Handforth wants to get his shrimps, let him get them! You know where we're going to hold the picnic, don't you, Handy?"

"Down by the river, of course!"

"That's a bit vague," smiled Tom. "We're going to a particularly secluded spot, where we can bathe in comfort, and where we can disport ourselves merrily to our heart's content."

"Back to Nature," nodded Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Gussy. "It will be wippin' to get far frowm the mad-din' cwowd for once."

Handforth was given full directions as to how he should find the rendezvous. As he would be in his Austin Seven, he would have to make a fairly wide detour, after leaving the village. Even then, it would be necessary for him to leave his car at the beginning of a footpath somewhere near the river.

"That's all right!" he said at length. "I can understand. No need to go into all these details. I'm not dense."

"Well, don't blame us if you can't find

the place!" said Tom Merry. "Ready, you fellows?"

"We've been waiting for ages," said Figgins politely. "But, never mind—don't worry about us. We're very patient!"

"I don't think!" growled Blake.

They went off at last, exasperated by Handforth's obstinacy. And the fellow from St. Frank's, left alone, began to regret his stubborn decision. Now that he had got his way, he didn't really want it!

Within two minutes, he had got out his little Austin Seven.

"After all, shrimps aren't much of a catch!" he grumbled, as he drove down the lane. "Besides, they may not have any in the village. It's just like those asses to go off without me!"

And thus calmly placing the blame for his pigheadedness on to the other juniors, Handforth continued on his way.

He had got nearly into Rylcombe—in fact, he was just entering the quaint village High Street—when he beheld a number of youthful figures ahead. They were dressed in flannels, and they wore school caps. In fact, there was quite a crowd.

"My goodness!" muttered Handforth. "Grammarians!"

He had been long enough at St. Jim's to realise that Gordon Gay & Co., of Rylcombe Grammar School, were a force to be reckoned with. Yet his confidence was such that he felt no uneasiness as he now approached Tom Merry & Co.'s deadly rivals.

The Grammarians acted promptly.

They recognised the little Austin Seven at the first glance, and they also recognised the rugged-featured junior at the wheel. And Handforth was alone! Here was a golden opportunity to rag the new St. Jim's junior!

"Shall we let him pass, you chaps?" asked Gordon Gay.

The others grinned, and immediately formed a barrier across the narrow lane. Handforth was a reckless driver, but he was not reckless enough to

charge full tilt into this human barricade.

He hooted wildly for a moment, then took his foot off the accelerator, and applied the brakes. The little Austin came to a standstill a few feet from the Grammarians.

"What's the silly idea?" demanded Handforth wrathfully.

"We couldn't let you go by without passing the time of day," said Gordon Gay, in a genial voice. "Could we, you chaps?"

"Rather not," said the others.

"We felt that we had to become more closely acquainted," nodded the Grammarian leader.

"Hear, hear!"

"We've heard such a lot about you, Handforth, old man, that we wanted to get in closer touch with you, said Gordon Gay genially.

"Much closer touch!" nodded Frank Monk.

Handforth expanded visibly.

These Grammarians, apparently, were not such bad fellows, after all.

"That's all right," he said, as the Grammarians came crowding round the Austin Seven. "As a matter of fact, I was rather keen on getting to know you fellows better. One of these days I may pop along to the Grammar School."

"Pop as soon as you like," said Gordon Gay agreeably. "I'll guarantee that you'll get a warm reception!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We'll welcome you with open arms," said Gordon Gay. "In fact, any time that you feel like looking for trouble, just pop!"

Handforth frowned.

"I'll take all the trouble you chaps can give me," he replied tartly. "Here, I say! Keep your paws off my radiator. And don't maul those head lamps about!"

The Grammarians were pressing very close. There was a big crowd of them, including such stalwarts as the brothers Wootton, Tadpole, Carboy, Lane, and Mont Blong.

Handforth regarded them all with great interest. He was particularly attentive to Gordon Gay and Frank Monk.

And as he looked at them he remembered his third test.

In order to claim the leadership of the Fourth, he had to raid the Grammar School single-handed, and extract a written statement from Gordon Gay to the effect that the Grammarians were not fit to clean the boots of the Saints! And that, without doubt, was a tall order.

So Handforth was particularly interested in the Grammarians now. Here was a good chance to give them the "once over." And their very friendliness attracted him. He did not know, yet, that they were pulling his leg.

"What's it going to be?" asked Frank Monk thoughtfully. "Shall we empty his petrol tank and leave him stranded, or shall we only let the wind out of his tyres?"

"Why, you silly asses——" said Handforth wrathfully.

"That's not a bad idea!" grinned Gordon Gay. "We'll let the wind out of his tyres! It's too hot this afternoon to do anything strenuous, and as the air is so still a little wind will be welcome!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Besides, think of Handy's feelings as he is pumping up all the tyres again!" continued Gordon Gay, with a chuckle. "Poor chap! He'll have a pretty strenuous time, with four tyres to fill! But exercise is good for all of us!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth stood up in his seat, his face flushed with wrath.

"You rotters!" he shouted. "Leave my tyres alone!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You ought to be jolly thankful that we don't do something more drastic!" said Carboy. "We would do, only it's so hot this afternoon."

"Hi!" howled Handforth. "If you let the wind out of my tyres——"

"They'll be flat," said Gordon Gay nodding.

"You babbling idiot, I know they'll be flat!" howled Handforth. "By George! And I thought you were friendly!"

"So we are," said Gordon Gay. "We look upon you as a long-lost brother. But there's no reason why we shouldn't have a little fun at your expense, old man."

"Fun!" hooted Handforth. "Do you call it funny to flatten my tyres, so that I've got to pump them all up again?"

"Jolly funny!" said Gordon Gay. "Just listen to me laughing. Ha, ha, ha!"

And the other Grammarians echoed that hilarious outburst.

But Handforth could not see the point of the joke.

"Hi, stop!" he bellowed. "I've got to join the other chaps at a picnic!"

"What!" said Gordon Gay, pricking up his ears.

"I'm just going to the village to get some shrimps!" said Handforth desperately.

"Shrimps!" repeated Frank Monk. "What do you want shrimps for?"

"For the picnic, of course!" said Handforth, with incredible folly. "I've arranged to meet the other chaps down by the river."

"Oh, they're having a picnic, are they?" said Gordon Gay casually.

"Yes."

"How many of them?"

"Oh, a whole crowd—Tom Merry, and Blake, and Piggins, and the rest," said Handforth. "I should have been with them, only I thought I'd fancy some shrimps."

"Good man!" said Frank Monk. "I'm glad you wanted some shrimps."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And where is this delightful spot?" inquired Gordon Gay.

"Haven't I told you that it's down by

the river?" said Handforth impatiently. "It's a quiet place, just near a bend, behind the wood. There's a clump of willows——"

"Yes, I know the spot," nodded Gordon Gay. "Thanks, awfully, Handy, old man. You're a brick!"

"Eh! What the——"

"A picnic!" murmured Gordon Gay. "And those St. Jim's asses will be unprepared and unsuspecting."

Handforth was aghast.

"What!" he ejaculated. "You rotters! You're not going to raid the picnic, are you?"

"What an idea!" said Gordon Gay in a shocked voice.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Grammarians pressed round closer than ever.

"There's only one thing to do, of course," said Gordon Gay briskly. "We can't let this fathead go along in his Austin and give the warning. So the best thing we can do is to rope him to his steering wheel, and hide him up somewhere."

"Hear, hear!"

Handforth rolled up his sleeves

"If you touch me——" he began wildly.

But they did touch him. They more than touched him—they pushed him down into his seat, and tied his feet to the clutch and brake pedals. They roped his hands to the steering-wheel, and they even went to the length of wrapping a scarf round his mouth, so that he was unable to make a sound.

And after that the Austin Seven was pushed back along the lane, forced through a big gap in the hedge, and left concealed in a thicket.

Yelling with laughter, the Grammarians retreated. And Handforth fumed as he heard their voices dying away.

Too late, he realised his folly. He had given the game away, and he was left here, helpless, unable to carry any word of warning to the unsuspecting picnickers.

CHAPTER 21.

The Raiders!

SPLASH, splash!

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Cardew dived neatly off the grassy bank into the sparkling waters of the River Rhyl. They were the last two in, and they soon came to the surface, gasping and spluttering.

"Bai Jove! This is wippin', deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Gorgeous!" agreed Blake. "Race you to the bend, Gussy."

"Wats!" said D'Arcy. "I'm in the watah to enjoy myself, not to wace."

There was a deep pool in the river at this point, and the water was clear and fresh. It was an ideal place for swimming. And all the other juniors were splashing about, floating on their backs, diving, and generally having a good time.

The river bank was grassy, and some little distance from the water's edge there were a number of leafy willow trees. The materials for the picnic had been dumped here, and dotted all about were the heaps of clothing that the juniors had discarded. The towels were lying there, too.

In the background was a stretch of woodland, and in no direction was a house or cottage to be seen.

This place was absolutely private—far from the madding crowd.

There wasn't even a footpath near by, just meadows and woodland, all basking in the hot afternoon sunshine.

"We can do with an hour of this," said Figgins contentedly, as he floated on his back. "By then we shall be nicely cool, and we can have a go at the grub!"

"Rats!" said Fatty Wynn indignantly. "What rot! I'm not going to stop in the water for an hour! In my opinion, we ought to have had the picnic first."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's bad to go into the water on a full tummy, Fatty," said Kerr, grinning.

"Don't you believe it!" retorted Fatty

Wynn. "There's nothing like laying a solid foundation."

"Well, it's a good thing you didn't eat before you came in," remarked Blake, as he swam past. "Otherwise you'd have sunk like a stone!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And while the juniors proceeded to enjoy themselves, certain lurking figures were creeping nearer and nearer, taking cover behind various clumps of trees that offered such excellent protection.

In a word, the Grammarian raiders were on the warpath.

They approached cautiously, for if the Saints caught any sight of them the whole raid might fail. The Grammarians were in strong force; but there were a large number of St. Jim's juniors. And a desperate fight, on a hot afternoon like this, was not to be even thought of.

Besides, if it came to a fight, the Grammarians might lose, and that wasn't to be thought of, either.

"My sons, it's going to be easy!" murmured Gordon Gay contentedly.

"It's a cert!" chorried Tadpole. "As soon as we get near enough, we'll make one rush, and it'll be all over in a couple of minutes."

"That's the idea!" breathed Frank Monk. "A surprise raid, and a swift retreat."

"But we mustn't leave anything to chance," warned the Grammarian leader. "By Jove! Look over there!" he added, with sudden excitement. "They're getting up a kind of race, or something, and they're starting off up the river!"

"My hat! So they are!"

"The time for us to act will come when they are at the farthest point away," went on Gordon Gay shrewdly. "That will give us all the more time."

"Well, they haven't spotted us yet," murmured Carboy. "We're as safe as houses!"

The Grammarian forces were stretched out for some little distance, all crouching behind the trees and bushes,

From the river nothing could be seen of them. There wasn't the slightest hint that enemies were so close at hand.

"Now, don't forget the plan," said Gordon Gay. "Tadpole, old man, pass the word along to the other chaps. When I give the shout, we'll all dash forward, and grab the grub and all the togs."

"Particularly the grub," nodded Carboy.

"Yes, but the togs are just as important," said Gordon Gay. "We might as well do the thing thoroughly, while we're about it. And don't forget their shoes!"

"Oh, dash it!" protested Frank Monk. "We don't want to be lumbered up with their beastly shoes!"

"Ass!" retorted Gordon Gay. "It's more important than anything else to pinch the shoes, as you'll realise if you only think for a moment."

Frank Monk looked puzzled, and then he grinned.

"Perhaps you're right!" he chuckled. "Look out!" warned Carboy. "Now's our chance."

Most of the St. Jim's Juniors were now a considerable distance away, having swum well up the river to the bend. A kind of impromptu race was in progress, and only a few fellows had been left behind in the wide pool, and even these were some little distance from the bank.

"Now then!" roared Gordon Gay, leaping to his feet. "Let it go, you chaps!"

"Hurrah!"

"On the ball!"

Forms sprang up as though from nowhere, and the next moment the Grammarian forces charged down upon the clearing, filling the air with their yells. They swept down to the river bank at top speed.

"Grammar School for ever!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with St. Jim's!"

In the river, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy abruptly assumed an upright position. He had been floating on his

back, with Cardew and one or two other languid fellows near by. They all splashed about, staring wildly at the river bank.

"Gwheat Scott!" gasped Gussy. "Gwammawians!"

"Raided, by gad!" said Cardew.

"Hi!" howled one of the other juniors. "Blake! Tom Merry! Quick! Rescue!"

"Dear men, what's the use?" murmured Cardew lazily. "We can't do a thing."

"Weally, Cardew——"

"If you think you can—go ahead!" said Ralph Reckness Cardew amusedly. "But what's the good of foolin' yourselves?"

Nobody took any notice of him. D'Arcy and the other juniors were swimming desperately towards the bank. Down the river the juniors had heard the yells from the pool, and, with Blake and Tom Merry and Figgins leading the way, they swam desperately to the rescue. Some of them were making for the bank at the nearest point, their one desire being to get ashore.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Grammarians were yelling with laughter. With a precision that spoke of good generalship, the raiders seized the various parcels of food and the heaps of clothes. Indeed, in less than a minute every scrap of material had been picked up from the ground—parcels, clothing, shoes, and towels. Nothing was left.

The Grammarians, heavily laden, were in retreat, yelling with triumph.

Gordon Gay paused for a moment to glance back.

"Thanks, you fellows!" he sang out. "It's a lovely afternoon for a picnic, isn't it?"

"You—you rotters!" bellowed Blake. "Put those things down!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Toodle-oo!" chortled Gordon Gay.

"Ta-ta, children!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We'll see you another time, when

"We're not in such a hurry!" shouted Frank Monk, grinning. "But just at the moment we've got a pressing engagement!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And, yelling harder than ever, the Grammarians vanished among the trees. The whole thing had been accomplished with incredible speed. There was not a sign of the raiders left. They had vanished, and only the echo of their laughter could now be heard.

Panting hard, the St. Jim's juniors reached the bank, climbed out, and raced off in pursuit.

But even as they were running they seemed to know that the day was lost.

"Yawoooooh!" howled Arthur Augustus suddenly. "Bai Jove! I've twodden on a thistle!"

"Blow the thistles!" roared Blake. "We're got to overtake those rotters! We've got to—Yow! Oh, crumbs!"

He hopped about on one foot, having caught his bare toe on a hidden root.

"I'm stung!" groaned Herries, a moment later. "I've never known so many nettles in all my life!"

"What about the thistles?" said Figgins wrathfully. "This place is simply overgrown with thistles and nettles!"

"And we haven't even got our shoes!" groaned Tom Merry, coming to a halt.

He knew that there was no chance of overtaking the raiders. In their bare feet, the victims could not proceed at any pace. There were nettles and thistles and hidden roots. Adequate pursuit was impossible.

"Dished and diddled!" said Blake miserably. "Oh, my-hat!"

"How the dickens did the rotters know anything about it?" demanded Levison wrathfully. "Who told them that we were going to hold a picnic here this afternoon?"

"Oh, what's the good?" asked Tom Merry, recovering his good humour. "A raid's a raid—and we've done the same to the Grammarians before to-day! What does it matter how they found

out? We've been done, you fellows, and we'd better take it with a good grace."

"Yaas, wathah! nodded Arthur Augustus. "It's a fwightful fwost, but it's no good cwysin' over spilt milk."

"But they've pinched our clothes!" roared Blake.

"Bai Jove! I'd forgotten that!" said Gussy blankly. "The fwightful wottahs! We cannot altogethah blame them for takin' the gwub, but it was a wotten twick to bone our clobbah!"

CHAPTER 22.

The Last Straw!

"HERE we are!"

Gordon Gay was rather breathless as he uttered the words. But he was grinning too. He and the other Grammarians had come to a halt behind the hedge in a quiet part of Rylcombe Lane. Frank Monk stood on his tip-toes, and looked over the hedge.

"It's all serene!" he said. "Handforth's Austin Seven is still there!"

"Of course it's still there!" grinned Tadpole. "We made a proper job of it. The poor fathead won't be able to get free until we release him!"

The Grammarians paused for a few moments to cool down. The afternoon was swelteringly hot, and the violent exercise had caused Gordon Gay & Co. to perspire freely. But the spoils were easily worth the trouble that had been taken.

"Come on!" said Gordon Gay at last. "Might as well get it over. No need to keep the poor chaps in a state of suspense. We'll let Handforth go to their rescue."

The others chuckled, and a moment later they pushed through some gaps in the hedge, and crossed the lane. They had now left the main booty behind, and were carrying only the raided clothes and towels.

On the other side of the opposite hedge, they gathered round the Austin.

hidden as it was in the thicket, and they grinned broadly.

"Poor old Handy!" murmured Frank Monk. "He looks a bit hot and bothered!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No reason why he should be," remarked Jack Wootton. "He's had a nice opportunity for peaceful meditation."

"Gurrrrrrh! Ummmmmmph!"

Those weird sounds came from the muffled Handforth, as he sat tied to the steering-wheel of his little car. He was still quite helpless. His eyes were glaring and the portion of his face that was visible was fiery red.

"Sorry, old man!" said Gordon Gay coolly, as he removed the scarf. "A bit warm for you, wasn't it?"

Handforth spluttered.

"You—you rotters!" he gulped. "I'm nearly suffocated!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm half-dead!" hooted Handforth violently.

"Yes, I've noticed it!" nodded Gordon Gay. "You sound like it, old scout!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wait till I can get at you!" bawled Handforth furiously. "You Grammar School wasters! You—you tricky fat-heads! I'll get my own back for this!"

"Poor old chap!" sighed Frank Monk, shaking his head. "What strange delusions he does get!"

"Must be off his rocker!" said Tadpole.

They cut the strings that bound Handforth to his car, and as soon as he was free he leapt out and made a dash for Gordon Gay.

"Put up your hands, you rotter!" he hooted.

"It's too hot, old man!" said the Grammarian leader calmly.

Handforth was seized, and held back. And, as he continued to be violent, he was bumped. At last he realised that the odds were overwhelming, and that he was only asking for trouble.

So, in a flash, his mood turned. This was characteristic of him. From being

wildly angry, he now became icily cold. He looked at the Grammarians with withering scorn.

"Go ahead!" he said bitterly. "Twenty to one is just about your mark!"

"Cheese it!" said Gordon Gay. "We shouldn't have bumped you, Handy, if you hadn't wanted to fight us. You know jolly well that these raids are perfectly legitimate. We've pinched all your grub, and now we're going to have a nice little picnic of our own!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, I know all about that!" said Handforth frigidly. "But you needn't jolly well think I'm going to take this lying down! Not likely! Before long I'm going to have my revenge! I'm going to make you chaps wish that you'd never seen me!"

"We wish that already!" said Frank Monk. "What have we done that we should suffer this pain?"

"Are you saying that the sight of me gives you pain?" roared Handforth.

"Perhaps it's not exactly a pain," replied Frank Monk. "It's more of a dazed kind of feeling. We can't really believe it, you know. I suppose that really is your face, Handforth?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you—you——"

"Don't bother!" grinned Gordon Gay. "Here you are, Handy! Here are all the togs that we pinched from the other chaps. We're shoving them into your panttechnicon. Be a sport, and deliver them as soon as possible, won't you? I dare say Tom Merry and the others are feeling a bit chilly!"

Without ceremony, the clothes and the boots and shoes and the towels were bundled into the Austin Seven, and then the Grammarians prepared to take their departure.

But before actually going, they were thoughtful enough to push the little car back into the road.

"There you are!" said Gordon Gay. "Don't say that we're not sportsmen!"

"We've released you, Handy, and we've given you all the togs back!"

"And let this be a lesson to you!" said Frank Monk warningly. "Never, in any circumstances, go to the village for shrimps!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Grammarians, chuckling loudly, vanished among the trees on the other side of the lane. Handforth watched them go, and his feelings were too deep for words.

But, incensed as he was against the Grammarians, he had to admit that they had played the game. Raiding the picnic was a perfectly legitimate piece of work and they had only borrowed Tom Merry & Co.'s clothing so that the pursuit should be rendered out of the question.

And now, being beyond the possibility of capture, they had handed the togs back again.

Gordon Gay & Co. retired from the field as honourable victors.

In the meantime, the victims of the raid had recovered from their first outburst of indignation and anger. Now they were disconsolate. The sunshine of the afternoon had gone, and for them the outlook was dreary.

"This is what comes of joining forces with these School House burlbers!" said Figgins bitterly. "We might have known what would happen!"

"Weally, Figgins, I wegard that we-mark as uncalled for!" said Arthur Augustus, with some heat. "You surely cannot blame us for what those wotten Gwammawians have done?"

"I'm not blaming you!" replied George Figgins. "I'm pitying you!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Yes, rather!" said Redfern. "If the New House had been in charge of this picnic, there wouldn't have been any Grammarian raid! We should have taken the proper precautions!"

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "Nobody in charge of the picnic. Figgy just as much the leader as I was. Why talk rot?"

Figgins gave a weak grin.

"Well, we've got to blame somebody, haven't we?" he said frankly. "But you're right, Tommy, old scout. Nobody's to blame, really—except those beastly Grammarians!"

"Heah, heah!" said D.Arcy.

"Well, the only thing we can do is to look the facts in the face," said Tom Merry practically. "We're stranded here, without any togs. The picnic's gone for ever!"

"I told you we ought to have eaten the grub first!" said Fatty Wynn mournfully. "If you'd taken my advice, and laid a solid foundation——"

"Don't make things worse, Fatty old man!" interrupted Tom Merry. "The grub's gone—and by this time, I expect, it is absolutely beyond recovery."

"What about our clobber?" asked Blake wrathfully. "How are we going to get back to the school like this?"

"Well, thank goodness we've got our swimming costumes on!" said Merry. "I expect Gordon Gay will send the clothes back some time this evening—with his compliments. The best thing we can do is to dodge back to St. Jim's as quickly as we can, and sneak in without being spotted."

"Yes—if we're lucky," said Figgins dubiously.

"Well, we stand a better chance now than later on," said Tom. "In the heat of the afternoon it's quite likely that all the masters will be taking naps, and the prefects will be out of doors. But if we wait until tea-time, we shall never get in without being seen."

And so the discomfited picnickers commenced their cautious walk back across the fields to St. Jim's. They knew nothing of the events that had been happening in Rylcombe Lane; they had no idea that Handforth was already in possession of their clothes, and that it was in his power to bring them to the rendezvous.

It was a glum, silent procession that picked its way gingerly through the

nettles and thistles towards the school. Long before Tom Merry & Co. reached the playing fields, their bare feet were covered with tiny blisters from the nettles, and scarcely a leg had escaped a fair number of scratches.

"Thank goodness!" said Blake, gasping with relief as the grey pile of St. Jim's came within sight. "We'll soon be indoors now. And won't we give those beastly Grammarians a hot time the next time we meet them!"

"Yaas, wathah!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove! I twust we shall be able to get indoors without bein' spotted!"

"It strikes me we're spotted already!" said Monty Lowther, as he gazed down ruefully at his shins and ankles. "I'm trying to think of the revenge we're going to have on Gordon Gay & Co."

They became more cautious as they grew nearer.

"It's all clear, as far as I can see!" said Tom Merry. "Come on, you chaps! Better make a dash for it now!"

"Yes, rather!"

Tired, sore, and weary, the juniors prepared to make a final burst, so that they could get into their own quarters with as little waste of time as possible. They were just on the outskirts of Little Side, and there was only the quad to be crossed.

As far as they could see, everything was quiet. St. Jim's was dozing in the heat of the afternoon, and the only sound that came across on the quivering air was the whirring of a lawnmower—probably from the Head's garden.

"Stop!"

Every one of those juniors jumped at the unexpected command. They halted in their tracks and stared round.

"Cave!" whispered Blake. "The Head!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Gweat Scott!"

Before any of them could move, Dr. Holmes himself came striding up, his brow black. Indeed, none of those

lightly-clad figures dared move, since the Head had commanded them to stop.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Dr. Holmes, as he surveyed them all with one comprehensive glance. "Upon my soul! Where have you boys come from?"

"The—the river, sir!" said Tom Merry.

"And what of your clothing?"

"We—we haven't got any, sir!" chorused the juniors.

It was impossible for them to be more explicit. They could not explain that their "clobber" had been commandeered by the Grammarians.

For, if they did so, Dr. Holmes would undoubtedly communicate with the headmaster of the Grammar School, and then Gordon Gay & Co. would find themselves in trouble. It was essential that no word of the truth should come out.

"Upon my word!" said the Head sternly. "I am amazed that you boys should go down to the river to bathe in this unseemly condition."

Tom Merry & Co. were silent.

"You are perfectly well aware that it is strictly against the school rules!" continued Dr. Holmes angrily. "How dare you appear in public like this—dressed only in your swimming costumes?"

"There's nobody about, sir!" said Blake defensively.

"Nobody about!" thundered the Head. "What of that? You do not need telling, I presume, that this is practically public ground. And yet you come across the playing fields in this—this state of undress!"

"It's very hot this afternoon, sir," said Figgins.

"That is no excuse!" retorted the Head. "Every boy will go indoors at once, and clothe himself in a rational manner. Furthermore, every boy here will report to his Housemaster, and say that I have ordered him to write five hundred lines!"

"Yes, sir!" said the unfortunates in mournful voices.

"And since it is obviously difficult for you to conduct yourselves properly in public, you will all be confined to gates for the period of one week!" said Dr. Holmes curtly. "Go! And never let me see you like this again!"

The juniors went—feeling that Fate had played them the shabbiest trick of all.

It had been bad enough to suffer defeat at the hands of the Grammarians; it had been bad enough to lose the grub; but this final disaster was the last straw.

"Five hundred lines each!" groaned Blake dismally.

"Gated for a week!" said Levison, pulling a long face. "Oh, my hat! We've got a nice little score to settle against Gordon Gay and his crowd!"

And they passed into the quad, their footsteps flagging, their spirits drooped. Seldom had they suffered such an afternoon of ill-fortune!

CHAPTER 23.

Up to Handy!

"**B**AI Jove!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered that exclamation as he and the other School House juniors were about to enter their own quarters. The purring hum of a motor-car was sounding in the afternoon air, and a moment later an Austin Seven came gliding through the gateway.

"It's Handy!" said Blake, staring.

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus. "I am wondewin', deah boys, if Handay knows anythin' about the Gwammawians—"

"Look!" broke in Tom Merry, pointing. "Look at all that stuff in the back of Handy's car! Our togs!"

"What?" yelled the others.

Without waiting further, they ran across the quad, and surrounded the little Austin Seven as it came to a standstill. Figgins & Co., who had been about to enter the New House, were also

on the spot. For every junior had come to the same conclusion.

Handforth himself was rather astonished; he had not expected to find the picnickers here. As a matter of fact, he had just come back from a long detour. He had driven to Rylcombe, and then round some of the side lanes, in an endeavour to find the rendezvous.

But Handforth was not so familiar with the ground as the other St. Jim's juniors, and he was compelled to admit, too, that he had not been paying very close attention when Tom Merry had given him directions. So after wasting a good deal of time, the Fourth Former had been obliged to give the search up as a bad job and return to St. Jim's to seek directions.

It was a piece of pure chance that he encountered the picnic party in the quad.

"You silly asses!" said Handforth, as he got out of the little car. "What the dickens are you doing here?"

"That's just what I was going to ask you!" said Tom Merry. "I thought you were going to join us—"

"Blow that!" interrupted Blake. "Here's our clobber!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"How did you get it?" demanded Figgins. "What's been happening, you School House chump?"

"Don't all speak at once!" retorted Handforth glaring. "If you had waited by the river, I should have brought your clothes back to you. But I couldn't find the beastly place! I went all round—"

"We're not interested in that!" broke in Tom Merry. "We want to know what happened!"

"Can't you see what happened?" said Handforth tartly. "I was grabbed by those rotten Grammarians!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Grabbed and tied to my steering-wheel!" roared Handforth indignantly. "They left me there, gagged and bound, with the car hidden in the trees! Then they went off to raid the picnic!"

"Gweat Scott!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"No wonder you didn't turn up, Handy!"

"How the dickens could I turn up when I was bound and gagged?" said Handforth. "I'm going to smash those Grammarians to pulp——"

"Hold on!" interrupted Tom Merry, a grim note creeping into his voice. "There's something here that needs explaining, Handy! We couldn't understand how the Grammarians got to know that we were holding a picnic by the river. Did you tell them?"

Handforth started.

"Eh?" he said. "Well, no! I—I mean—— I didn't exactly——"

"What?" yelled Figgins. "Then it's all your fault!"

"Grab him!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The excited juniors surged round Handforth, and many hands reached out for him. But Tom Merry managed to restore order.

"Let's have the thing straight!" he exclaimed. "Now, look here, Handy, let's know exactly what happened. You say that you were grabbed by the Grammarians as you were going down to the village?"

"Yes," replied Handforth. "I told them that I couldn't stop, but they wouldn't take any notice!"

"Go hon!"

"And then they jumped on me, tied me up, and left me!" said Handforth fiercely. "After I'd been nearly suffocated, they came back, and set me free, and bundled all this stuff in my car!"

"Yes, we can see that!" put in Blake. "But did you tell Gordon Gay anything about the picnic?"

"Of course I didn't!" said Handforth indignantly. "At least, I didn't mean to!"

"You didn't mean to!" howled Figgins.

"Well, it slipped out!" said Handforth.

"What!"

"I happened to mention that I was going to the village for some shrimps,"

said the new fellow gruffly. "And then, I suppose, I said something about the picnic. Not that it makes any difference——"

"It makes all the difference, you careless ass!" said Tom Merry wrathfully. "We don't need to ask any more, you chaps! It's as plain as a pikestaff that this lunatic gave the whole game away. He told those Grammarians that we were holding a picnic, and I dare say he mentioned the exact spot, too! That's why they grabbed him and bound him up!"

Handforth, knowing this to be the truth, bottled up his wrath. In fact, he admitted his guilt then and there.

"I suppose it was my fault, really!" he said frankly. "I was an ass! I'm awfully sorry, you chaps—I didn't mean to give anything away, but those Grammarians rotters flustered me——"

"That's enough!" snorted Blake. "My hat! If you hadn't dashed well insisted on barging off to the village, we should have been having the picnic by now. Gordon Gay and his crowd wouldn't have known anything about it! Oh, you—you—— What are we going to do with him?"

"Slaughter him on the spot!" said Figgins promptly.

"Bump him!" yelled Fatty Wynn wrathfully.

"Yes, rather!"

Handforth was seized by the excited crowd and he was whirled into the air, and then dropped with a thud on the hard, unsympathetic quad.

"Yaroooooh!" he howled wildly. "You—you big fatheads—— Yow! Yooooop!"

"Again!" said Figgins.

Bump!

"Ow-yow!" bellowed Handforth. "You babbling lunatics! Lemme go! I'll smash the whole crowd of you! Oh, dear! Yow!"

He was bumped two or three more times, and then the juniors, feeling somewhat better, sorted out their respective Houses. It was exasperating, indeed, to learn that the whole

catastrophe had happened because of Handforth's lack of caution.

When Tom Merry & Co. came out into the quad again, ten minutes later, they were rather at a loose end. The afternoon was only half spent, and they were wondering how they could use the time. To go out of gates was impossible, since any such move was prohibited.

They found Handforth in the quad, leaning against the wall of the gym, in the shade. The great Edward Oswald was looking very thoughtful.

The bumping, apparently, had done him a lot of good.

For one thing, he knew that the juniors had been justified in handling him so roughly. But for his folly, the Grammarians would never have made their raid. Thus, Handforth felt, in his inner heart, that it was up to him to make amends. And while the fellows had been dressing, Handforth had been thinking.

"I hope you're feeling pretty proud of yourself!" said Figgins, as he approached the gym with Kerr and Fatty Wynn and a few other New House fellows. "You've spoilt the afternoon, and——"

"Cheese it!" broke in Handforth. "You've given me a bumping, haven't you? I thought the matter was settled!"

"So it is!" said Tom Merry, as he came up with his chums. "Go easy, Figgy! Handy's had his gruel, and, besides, I don't think he really meant to give us away. It was only his silly carelessness."

"People ought to pay for their carelessness!" said Figgins.

"Hear, hear!"

"Well, I have paid, haven't I?" demanded Handforth, as he ruefully rubbed himself. "And I'll do some paying myself, too! You fellows needn't worry! I'll get my own back on those cheeky Grammarians!"

"Oh!" said Blake. "And how do you propose to work this miracle?"

"I'm going to lead a raid on the Grammar School——"

"In that case, you'll have to wait for

a week!" said Figgins bitterly. "We're all gated!"

"What?"

"Didn't you know?" said Blake. "We ran up against the Head, and he gave us five hundred lines each, and gated us for a week!"

"Oh, my hat!" said Handforth, staring round. "Is this true?"

"Of course it's true, you ass!"

"By George! What rough luck!" said Handforth, with real concern. "No wonder you fellows bumped me like that!"

"Yes; and we're liable to bump you again!" said Figgins darkly.

Handforth's eyes were gleaming.

"So I'm the only one who isn't gated, eh?" he said gloatingly.

"That's right—crow about it!" said Bernard Glyn. "By Jove! Are we going to stand this, you chaps? He's crowing over us because he isn't gated! I think we ought to give him another bumping!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Wait a minute!" said Handforth hastily, as he backed away. "I've admitted that I was an ass, and I'm going to make amends! You're gated, but I'm not! So I'm going over to the Grammar School, and I'm going to wipe out this stain!"

The juniors stared at him blankly.

"You're going over to the Grammar School?" repeated Blake.

"Yes."

"All by yourself?"

"Yes," repeated Handforth. "I'm the only fellow who can go, and so I'll play a lone hand. My idea is to go over to the Grammar School now—this very minute—and to turn the tables on Gordon Gay & Co.!"

"Poor chap!" said Monty Lowther, touching his head. "It must be the sun!"

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed D'Arcy. "Weally, Handay, you are not sewiously suggestin' that you should waid the Gwammah School single-handed, are you?"

"That's exactly the idea, Gussy—

single-handed!" agreed Handforth.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Blake. "He's thinking about that test!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Handy, old man, take my advice and forget it!" said Tom Merry gently. "You're not a bad sort, on the whole—although you're not to be trusted off the leash—but we shouldn't like you to come to an untimely end. If you go to the Grammar School all on your little ownsome, you'll never come out alive!"

"Daniel in the lions' den!" said Monty Lowther, nodding.

"Exactly!" said Handforth promptly. "Daniel went into the lions' den, and he wasn't hurt! And I'm going to the Grammar School, and I'm going to put the kybosh on those fatheaded Grammarians!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is my fourth week at St. Jim's, and if I don't succeed in that final test, I shall never become leader of the Fourth!" said Handforth grimly. "So I'm going ahead! Here is my opportunity, and I'm going to grab it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He means it, too!" said Cardew wonderingly. "Dear me, he actually means it!"

"Then the sooner we can knock these crazy ideas out of his head, the better!" said Tom Merry firmly. "Have you forgotten the conditions of that test, Handy?"

"No, I haven't!"

"Weally, Handay——"

"I know exactly what I've got to do!" said Handforth.

"I wathah think you have ovah-looked some of the points, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "Othahwise, you would nevah suggest this widiculous pproject."

"Tell us what you have to do, Handy!" said Tom Merry.

"That's easy," replied Handforth. "First of all, I've got to go to the Grammar School alone."

"Correct!"

"As it happens, it's the only way," continued Handforth. All you fellows are gated, and so it's my job to exact a

terrible vengeance for this afternoon's raid. And as it was mainly my fault, I shall go on this errand with a firm determination to win. You see, I've got to put things right. I feel pretty bad about the way I let you down, too!"

The juniors looked at him in wonder. They rather admired his spirit; they liked the frank way in which he took the blame, and for that very reason they were reluctant to let him go. They felt that he would be sacrificing himself for nothing.

"Just think for a moment, old scout," said Tom Merry quietly. "You won't carry out the conditions if you creep secretly into the Grammar School. If you want to win this test you will have to go in boldly——"

"I know that!" broke in Handforth. "And that's what I shall do. I shall walk straight in, and raid the Grammarians single-handed."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're mad!" said Blake impatiently. "You know jolly well that you can't do anything like that! Besides, what about the document?"

"The which?"

"Oh, don't pretend that you don't know!" said Blake. "Before you win this third test, you've got to get a signed paper from Gordon Gay——"

"Oh, yes!" said Handforth, nodding. "That's what I've been planning out!"

"Oh, you've been planning it out?" asked Figgins.

"Rather!" said Handforth. "Before I come away from the Grammar School I shall get a signed paper from Gordon Gay, admitting that the Grammarians aren't fit to clean our boots!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And how do you propose to get anything of the sort from Gordon Gay?" asked Tom Merry. "How do you think you'll be able to get into the Grammar School and out again with that signed statement?"

"That is my secret!" replied Handforth firmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're spoofing, old man!" said

Levison. "You can't do it—you can't even attempt to do it!"

Handforth squared his shoulders.

"Can't I?" he said fiercely. "Well, I'm going now!"

"Hold him!" said Blake. "We can't let the lunatic do a thing like this! It's no better than sending a lamb to the slaughter!"

"Keep your hands off me!" said Handforth fiercely. "I've made up my mind to raid the Grammarians, and I'm going!"

"But, you burbling duffer, the thing's a sheer impossibility!" shouted Bernard Glyn. "If a couple of dozen of us went we couldn't do it!"

"A couple of dozen of us aren't going!" retorted Handforth. "I'm going alone!"

"Oh, let him go!" said Figgins impatiently. "It'll teach him a lesson! It'll knock some of the conceit out of him!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "Weally, Handay, I think you ought to take our advice. We know what twicky boundahs the Gwammawians are!"

"Well, they say fools rush in where angels fear to tread," growled Tom Merry. "Not that there's the faintest hope of him getting an admission from the Grammarians that St. Jim's is top dog!"

Handforth was quite cool as he prepared to go.

"Well, I shall see you fellows soon after tea," he said serenely. "I'm sorry you're gated, but you'll have a little consolation when I get back."

"You're an optimist, old man," said Monty Lowther. "You won't be back at St. Jim's for at least a fortnight."

"A fortnight!"

"Yes," said Monty. "I expect you'll spend a couple of weeks in Wayland Hospital!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ass!" said Handforth witheringly.

He shouldered his way through the crowd, and most of the juniors were willing to let him go. But Tom Merry and Jack Blake ran after him and caught him by the shoulders.

"Look here, Handy, chuck it!" said Tom Merry earnestly.

"Rats!"

"We can't let you do it!" said Blake. "It's—it's cruelty to animals!"

"Lemme go!" shouted Handforth, shaking himself free. "I tell you I've made up my mind to complete the third test—and when I come back I shall be leader of the Fourth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, what's the use?" asked Blake hopelessly.

"No use at all," replied Tom Merry. "Let him go—and I hope he learns his lesson thoroughly!"

But in spite of his exasperations, the captain of the Shell had many misgivings as he watched Handforth stride boldly through the gateway.

CHAPTER 24.

The Lone Raider!

HANDFORTH'S determination was something to marvel at.

It wasn't like the determination of any other fellow. He was unique. He did not pause to consider the odds. He just made up his mind to do a certain thing, and he went straight ahead and did it. More often than not, he came a frightful cropper in the process. But the more knocks he got, the greater became his stubbornness.

But it had to be admitted that luck was generally on his side.

He had set out now on a mission that seemed foredoomed to failure. Under no possible circumstances could Tom Merry & Co. see the faintest glimmering of hope. If anything in this world was certain, then it was certain that Edward Oswald Handforth would come back from Rylcombe Grammar School a wreck.

Needless to say, that opinion was not shared by Handforth.

He went on his way, his confidence growing with every step he took. He had already made up his mind exactly what he was going to do. And failure.

in his opinion, was impossible. Not that this was anything to go upon; for Handforth always regarded failure as impossible.

When he arrived at the Grammar School he was as cool as ice. Perhaps he did not realise the perilous nature of his undertaking. There was, indeed, something pathetic in his supreme confidence.

And it never occurred to him that his lone raid was really a piece of colossal nerve. Like everything else, Handforth took it as a matter of course. He had let Tom Merry & Co. down, and now it was up to him to make amends.

And instead of being dismayed at the prospect, instead of entering upon this task in the belief that it was a forlorn hope, he went ahead with the grim determination to succeed.

Once through the gateway he paused and looked at the buildings of the Grammar School in an uncertain way. Nobody was within sight. Like St. Jim's, the Grammar School was dozing in the sweltering heat of the June afternoon.

"Hallo! What do you think you're doing here?"

Handforth spun round at the sound of the voice, and he found a tall, good-looking senior approaching him. He was a stranger to Handforth—a pleasant-looking fellow, dressed in flannels. He was Delamere, the captain of the school.

"I'm from St. Jim's!" said Handforth briefly.

"Yes, so I notice," said Delamere, glancing at Handforth's cap. "Are you alone?"

"Well, I seem to be, don't I?"

"Rather a risky thing for you to walk in here like this," said Delamere, with a smile. "But you must be a new kid at St. Jim's. I don't think I've seen you before."

"I haven't been there long," replied Handforth. "Look here, can you tell me where Gordon Gay is? Have those rotters come back yet?"

Delamere laughed.

"It strikes me, young 'un, that you're

looking for trouble," he said good-naturedly. "Still, if you want to find it, why should I stand in your way? The majority of the Fourth Form kids are in the Common-room, I believe. They're having a sort of feed."

"Our grub!" said Handforth fiercely.

"Oh!" said Delamere. "Ahem! Perhaps I'd better not make too many inquiries. Anyhow, I heard an unholy row coming from the Common-room, and I had to go there to tone it down. You'll find quite a merry crowd waiting to welcome you!"

"How do I get to the Common-room?" asked Handforth grimly.

Delamere told him, and with a nod of thanks Handforth walked straight indoors.

The Grammarian senior skipper shook his head and went on his own way.

"Well, it's not my business," he told himself. "I think I'd better have a bad memory and forget all about it."

Handforth found the Common-room without difficulty, and he barged straight in and took in the whole scene with one comprehensive glance.

Gordon Gay & Co. were there in force. The feed, apparently, had just ended, for the Grammarian juniors were standing about in groups, chuckling and chatting. It was cool in the Common-room—much cooler than out of doors. This explained, perhaps, why the juniors had gathered here.

At Handforth's entrance all eyes were turned upon him.

For a moment there was a sort of stunned silence. An incident of this sort was well-nigh unprecedented. A solitary St. Jim's fellow, walking straight into the midst of the Grammarians—in their own Common-room!

Then Gordon Gay broke the silence.

"Look out! St. Jim's cad!"

"Grab him!"

The Common-room immediately became filled with voices, and there was a general move towards Handforth.

"Chuck it!" said Handforth calmly.

"There's nobody else with me!"

"What?"

"I've come here alone!" said Handforth.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" ejaculated Carboy.

"Of all the nerve!" grinned Gordon Gay. "My poor benighted fathead! Do you mean to tell us that you have had the nerve to come here entirely on your own?"

"It didn't require much nerve!" replied Handforth coolly. "You've just finished eating that raided grub—eh? Well, I'm here to have revenge!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Grammarians howled with laughter.

"Come on, you fellows!" sang out Jack Wootton. "We can't allow this, can we?"

"Rather not!"

"Let's jump on him and make him realise that he can't walk into this Common-room as though he owns it!" went on Wootton. "I rather think that we ought to do something special. How about tarring and feathering him?"

Handforth stood his ground.

"That's right!" he said witheringly. "You can do exactly as you like with me, and I shan't be able to put up much of a fight. I'm alone, I tell you."

"Yes, draw it mild!" said Gordon Gay. "There's no need to jump on the fellow. He deserves to be treated leniently for his cheek. We can't very well slaughter him."

The Grammarians were amazed. But they were inclined to have mercy on Handforth. The very fact that he had walked in so boldly stood in his favour. He hadn't an earthly chance against them, so why should they take the trouble of attacking him?

Gordon Gay was the first to see the possibilities, and he closed one eye at his chums. Handforth saw nothing of it. But Gordon Gay considered that this was too good an opportunity to be missed.

"What are you going to do with us, Handforth, old man?" asked Gordon Gay gravely.

"I've come here for revenge!" replied Handforth.

"What!"

"Revenge!" repeated Handforth, striding forward. "You rotters raided our picnic, and now I mean to make you pay!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"But, please, Handforth, it was only a jape!" said Gordon Gay in a trembling voice. "I don't think you quite understand. Sometimes the St. Jim's fellows raid us, you know. And at other times we raid them. It's give and take. Won't you please forgive us?"

"No, I won't!" roared Handforth.

"He won't forgive us!" said Gordon Gay mournfully.

Heroically the other Grammarians held their laughter in check. They could see that Gordon Gay was spoofing this St. Jim's fellow; and, astoundingly enough, Handforth took it all seriously. He, apparently, had no idea that his leg was being pulled.

"Oh, but, Handforth," pleaded Gordon Gay, "do you really mean it when you say that you won't forgive us?"

"Forgive you!" repeated Handforth scornfully. "Even if I could forgive the raiding of the picnic, I couldn't forgive you chaps for the way you handled me this afternoon!"

"It was only part of the game!" said Frank Monk defensively.

"That's no excuse!" said Handforth. "It isn't a case of forgiveness at all! I'm here to wipe out the stain!"

"Who's got a duster?" asked Tadpole, looking round.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't need a duster!" roared Handforth sternly. "I'm going to wipe out the stain with these!"

And he displayed his two clenched fists.

"Impossible, old man!" said Gordon Gay, inspecting them. "You can't wipe out any stains with those things! You're more liable to make some fresh stains!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Grammarians were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Here was an unexpected treat! Handforth, the new fellow at St. Jim's, calmly barging into their midst, asking for trouble! To fall upon him and ignominiously pitch him out was a crude way of dealing with him. Far better let him run on, and have some fun at his expense.

Handforth himself was feeling triumphant. He had succeeded in getting right into the Grammar School—into the midst of the enemy. And he was overjoyed to find that they were awed at his presence. But he wasn't surprised, for he had expected this.

"How are you going to deal with us, old scout?" asked Gordon Gay interestedly. "You've raided us, and now you're fairly on the warpath. Naturally, we're a bit interested. What's the programme?"

"Don't make it too hard!" urged Carboy.

Handforth stalked forward, examining the Grammarians critically. Finally he came to a halt in front of Gordon Gay, and he jabbed the Australian junior in the chest.

"You're the leader of this mob, aren't you?" he demanded.

"Which mob?"

"Are you the leader, or are you not?" said Handforth darkly. "Don't quibble!"

"I—I'm sorry!" faltered Gordon Gay in a trembling tone. "Please forgive me, Handy!"

"Will you answer my question, blow you!"

"Yes, if you please!" whispered Gordon Gay. "But if I confess that I'm the leader, what are you going to do to me?"

"You'll find out!" retorted Handforth.

"Well, I am the leader!" said Gordon Gay, hanging his head.

"Good!" said Handforth. "I knew it all the time, but I wanted to get the words from your own lips! And now I'm going to give you a good hiding!"

"Oh, Handforth!" gasped Gordon Gay, staggering back.

"I'm going to thrash you within an inch of your life!" thundered Handforth.

"Help—help!" moaned the Grammarian leader, looking round wildly. "Keep him off! I—I'm afraid!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other Grammarians shrieked with laughter. They couldn't keep it up any longer. And Handforth, as that outburst fell upon his ears, turned round and looked at the yelling crowds.

"You rotters!" he hooted. "You've been spoofing me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're not afraid of me at all!"

"Not a bit!" grinned Gordon Gay, recovering his usual composure. "Sorry, old man, but we couldn't resist it."

"You—you—"

"Better go easy!" warned Frank Monk. "We've been having some fun with you, old man, but if you start calling us names we might get violent. For example, it's quite on the cards that we shall give you a bumping and chuck you out on your neck."

"Why not put him in a packing-case and send him back to St. Jim's, carriage forward?" suggested Tadpole.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wait a minute!" laughed Gordon Gay. "Have you forgotten that he's going to give me a good hiding?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's right—cackle away!" said Handforth scornfully. "I'm just one against the lot of you. I've come here alone, trusting to your good sportsmanship to give me a fair deal. And if you lay your paws on me you'll be a lot of outsiders!"

Gordon Gay became serious.

"There's something in that, old man," he agreed. "And we'll give you a fair deal. We won't let you go back to St. Jim's saying that the Grammarians are bad sportsmen."

"Good!" said Handforth promptly. "That's exactly what I wanted to hear

you say! Now Gordon Gay, I challenge you!"

"Eh?"

"I challenge you to a fight here and now!" said Handforth, his eyes gleaming. "With or without gloves—I don't care which! But if I win, it's to be regarded as a St. Jim's victory. If you win, I'll go back and admit that I've been thrashed—that St. Jim's has been thrashed, and you can record it——"

"Hold on!" interrupted Gordon Gay. "Let's get this straight. You say you challenge me to a fight?"

"Yes, I do!" replied Handforth. "I'm a chap who believes in the generals of an army fighting the battles. Why should the rank and file be used as cannon fodder?"

"Why, indeed?" murmured Frank Monk.

"The quarrel is between the leaders—the generals!" said Handforth sternly. "They are the ones who ought to fight! And whichever general wins gains the victory for his entire army!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"And that's my challenge!" said Handforth triumphantly. "I'm here as the representative of the Fourth and the Shell at St. Jim's!"

"But you're not one of their generals!" said Gordon Gay.

"Yes, I am!" roared Handforth. "After to-day I shall be the leader of the Fourth—I shall step into Blake's shoes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'll laugh on the other side of your face before I've finished!" said Handforth. "Now, Gordon Gay, are you going to accept this challenge or not? If I win, it's to be set down as a St. Jim's victory, and not merely as a personal success, and it applies the same both ways. I'm waiting for your answer!"

The Grammarians were silent. They were all looking at Gordon Gay. Handforth had sprung his bombshell, for, without question, his methods were unique.

CHAPTER 25.

Gordon Gay's Promise!

GORDON GAY did not hesitate for long.

He knew that he was in a trap, and there was no getting out of it. If he refused to accept this challenge all the St. Jim's fellows would laugh at him—would chip him unmercifully. Handforth had come to the Grammar School single-handed, and had offered to fight the Grammarian leader. There was no possibility of evading the scrap.

Not that Gordon Gay had the faintest suspicion that he might lose. His prowess with the gloves was well known, while Handforth, on the other hand, was a fellow who looked a slogger first and foremost, with no idea of science.

"Done!" said Gordon Gay suddenly.

"I accept!"

"Good man!" ejaculated Handforth, grasping Gordon Gay's hand and shaking it. "That's the stuff! All right, then! We'll have our mill, and the winner is to claim a complete victory for his school. That's understood, isn't it?"

"Quite understood!" replied Gordon Gay.

"Well, we're not grumbling!" grinned Frank Monk. "You've only got to knock this ass sideways, Gay, and we shall be able to record two victories against St. Jim's in one afternoon!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wait until he knocks me sideways!" snorted Handforth.

"I suppose the other fellows know that you have come here?" asked Carboy in wonder.

"Of course they know," replied Handforth. "As a matter of fact, they're all gated, or some of them might have come with me."

"Gated!"

"Yes—gated!" repeated Handforth. "And all through you!"

"Here, cheese it!" protested Frank Monk. "What do you mean?"

"You pinched their clobber, and they didn't know you'd shoved it into my

Austin," replied Handforth. "They ran into the Head on their way back to St. Jim's, and he gave 'em five hundred lines each, and gated 'em for a week!"

"Oh, hard lines!" said Gordon Gay, with real concern. "We didn't mean to tip them into the soup like that!"

"Well, whether you meant it or not, they're in!" said Handforth. "I'm about the only chap who isn't gated. That's why I'm here alone."

"Oh, my hat!"

"So that explains it?"

"Yes," said Handforth, "that explains it. As they're all gated, I'm here as their representative."

"Well, we'll soon settle it!" said Gordon Gay, with a chuckle. "Bring out the gloves, somebody! You'd rather have gloves, wouldn't you, Handy?"

"I don't care," replied Handforth. "Suit yourself."

"Well, it's better," argued Gordon Gay. "We don't want to actually fight, do we? We're friends at heart, and a boxing-match will meet the needs of the occasion."

"But it's got to go on until there's a knock-out!" said Handforth firmly.

"I'm agreeable," said the Grammarian leader. "The fight will last about two rounds."

"Probably one," nodded Handforth. "It won't take me long to put you to sleep!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The lone raider's confidence was highly amusing to the Grammarians.

"And there's something else," went on Handforth. "There's something that's got to be settled before we strike the first blow."

The gloves had been brought, and eager juniors were helping the combatants to fit them on. Gordon Gay was grinning, and the other Grammarians were highly entertained. Only Handforth regarded the whole thing as serious.

"Something else?" said Gordon Gay inquiringly.

"Yes."

"Trot it out, then."

"If I win this fight I want you to sign a document," said Handforth. "In fact, you've got to promise me that you will sign it. If you don't promise there'll be no match."

"Document?" said Frank Monk. "What's the ass talking about?"

"Explain, O Oracle!" said Gordon Gay, looking at the visitor.

"It's just this," said Handforth, leaning forward. "If I win this fight, you've got to give me a signed paper, stating, in plain terms, that the Grammar School Fourth isn't fit to clean the boots of the St. Jim's fellows."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you babbling lunatic!" said Frank Monk wrathfully. "Do you think that you'll get a signed document of that sort?"

"Of all the nerve!" said Harry Wootton.

"Cheek!"

"The chap deserves to be bumped!"

"Hold on!" grinned Gordon Gay. "This needs thinking over. As there's not one chance in a thousand that Handforth will whack me, why shouldn't I sign the document? I mean why shouldn't I promise to sign it?"

"Great Scott! You don't mean it?" gasped Frank Monk.

"Yes, I do."

"But—but supposing you lose?"

"Do you think that I shall lose?"

"Of course I don't!"

"Then there's no risk," said Gordon Gay coolly. "In fact, I've got to promise."

He could see this in a flash. For if he refused to make the promise, there would be no fight. And Handforth would go back to St. Jim's, spreading the story that Gordon Gay had refused to fight him because he had feared that he might lose! In spite of Handforth's blundering ways, there was a good deal of cleverness in his mode of attack.

"Do you agree?" asked the St. Jim's fellow eagerly.

"Yes," replied Gordon Gay.

"Oh, my only Aunt Sempronia!"

"You'd better go easy, Gay!"

"Cheese it, you funky asses!" said Gordon Gay tartly. "I'm going to knock this St. Jim's fathead into a cocked hat!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You will knock him into what you call ze middle of ze next week!" grinned Mont Blong.

"Let's have no misunderstanding about this," said Gordon Gay, speaking deliberately. "Now, then, Handforth, we'll have it straight. We're going to fight, and the scrap must go on until there's a knock-out."

"That's right."

"If you win, I've got to write, in your presence, a statement to the effect that we're not fit to clean the boots of the St. Jim's fellows."

"Yes, and you've got to sign it!" nodded Handforth.

"I agree to all that," said Gordon Gay calmly. "I promise you that if you win I'll write that statement, and sign it."

"Good man!" grinned Handforth. "Then let's go ahead."

"Just a minute!" said Gordon Gay gently. "This ought to cut both ways, my son."

"Eh?"

"Isn't that fair?" asked Gordon Gay. "If you get knocked out, my son, I shall expect you to write and sign an exactly similar document. You'll have to state, in plain writing, that the St. Jim's fellows aren't fit to clean our boots!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, that's only fair!" said Handforth promptly. "I agree!"

"Then there's nothing more to be said!" remarked Gordon Gay. "Let's get it over!"

The Grammarians grinned with huge delight. They hadn't the faintest fear that their leader would fail. And then the joke would be supreme. For Handforth would write that statement, and they would all have it to chip the Saints with.

As for Handforth, he entered into this scrap with terrific gusto. Here was his chance to be the recognised leader

of the St. Jim's Fourth! He remembered Jack Blake's original promise, and he was determined to keep Blake to it.

For Handforth, in his fierce determination, was set upon winning. If only he could knock Gordon Gay out, then he would complete that third test! He would carry that signed statement back to St. Jim's, and his triumph would be absolute.

A referee—Carboy—was quickly appointed, and a ring was formed.

CHAPTER 26.

The Fight!

"TIME!"

Frank Monk, who was time-keeper, brought his hand down with a swing, as a signal. And a shout went up from the crowd in the Common-room. Within the hastily-formed ring Gordon Gay and Handforth sought warily for an opening.

"Go it, Gay, old man!"

"Knock him out in the first round!"

Gordon Gay undoubtedly had this idea in mind. For suddenly, like a panther, he leapt to the attack, sweeping through Handforth's guard, and delivering a terrific drive on the point of the jaw. Handforth staggered back, and was driven round the ring by the force of Gordon Gay's assault.

"Hurrah!"

"That's the way, Gay!"

"You've got him now!"

Handforth's recovery was swift. The blow had shaken him up a little, but he was as tough as leather, and he immediately pulled himself up and faced Gordon Gay squarely.

Slam! Biff! Slam!

They were fighting for all they were worth, and Gordon Gay was now making the discovery that Handforth was a formidable opponent. He had tightened up his guard now, and the Grammarian leader found it difficult to get through it again.

Furthermore, Handforth was now attacking.

With tremendous energy and force he drove Gordon Gay back. His science was not particularly noticeable, but his attack was irresistible.

Crash!

Handforth's right drove past Gordon Gay's guard as though it had never existed. And it seemed to the Grammarian leader that a battering-ram had struck him. He reeled back, lost his balance, and crashed to the floor.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Buck up, Gay!" gasped Frank Monk wildly.

"One—two—three——" counted the referee, in anguish.

There were anxious shouts from the ring of Grammarians.

"Get up, Gay! Get up!"

"All right, I'm not done!" panted Gordon Gay as he rose to his feet, much to the referee's relief. "I didn't see that one coming——"

"Or this one, either!" roared Handforth, leaping in again.

But Gordon Gay side-stepped neatly, and Handforth blundered on. The next moment they were at it again, and by this time Gordon Gay was grim and anxious. He knew, from the force of Handforth's blows, that the next one might well be decisive.

"Time!"

The boxers separated, and went to their "corners." Handforth was flushed and hot, but he was far from looking "done." And the bulk of the Grammarians were plainly showing their anxiety. Without doubt, Gordon Gay had nearly come a cropper during that first round. And it was a shock to his followers. They were beginning to realise now that victory for them was not absolutely positive.

Ordinarily, perhaps, Handforth might not have been able to beat the junior leader of the Grammar School. But this afternoon he was like a fellow possessed. So much depended upon his success; so much would result if he

gained the day! His eyes were quicker, his senses tuned to the occasion.

And, what was more to the point, he was determined that nothing should prevent him from winning.

"Time!"

There was a difference in Gordon Gay's attitude now. He was more wary; he was not so anxious to rush in and finish the scrap on the spot.

He was feeling more respect for his adversary.

And it became clear to the excited onlookers that Gordon Gay was now boxing cleverly, sparring with consummate skill, and waiting for Handforth to tire himself out by his tornado-like rushes.

But Handforth was a difficult fellow to tire out.

Moreover, much to the Grammarians' dismay, he was not at all inclined to fall in with Gordon Gay's scheme. He was pressing the pace all the time, forcing his opponent to fight.

And that second round was undoubtedly Handforth's.

"Time!"

The third round commenced with the Grammarians watching silently—anxiously. They knew how much depended upon the result of this fight. Their care-free interest had gone now. They were filled with doubts—they were in a state of continual suspense.

But the third round was Gordon Gay's. Towards the end of it he nearly delivered a knock-out, and Handforth was jarred badly. But for the calling of time he might easily have gone down for the count.

"Keep it up, Gay!"

"You've got him now, old man!"

"Finish him off in the next round!"

Gordon Gay was encouraged by these and similar shouts. After their leader's success in the last round the Grammarians were much more confident. But they were soon to discover that this confidence was misplaced.

"Time!"

Handforth started off with whirlwind speed. He rushed in to the attack,

swept Gordon Gay's guard aside, and got in a body punch which had dire effect.

Gordon Gay fell back a pace, and Handforth followed up his advantage. Crash!

His left, swinging round, struck the Grammarian leader's face. Then, before he could recover, Handforth's right swung in from nowhere. It caught Gordon Gay under the chin, and down he went.

"Well, that's that!" panted Handforth triumphantly.

"One—two—three——" counted the referee. "Four—five——"

"Get up, Gay!" shouted Frank Monk, in a fever of anxiety.

"Six—seven—eight——"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Jack Wootton. "Quick, Gay, old man——"

"Nine—out!" said the referee.

"Out!" went up a general roar.

Gordon Gay lifted his head, and he looked dazedly at the crowd. Handforth stood quite still, his eyes gleaming, his breath coming and going in gasps.

"You're whacked!" gasped Carboy. "Oh, my hat!"

Handforth went down on his knees and helped Gordon Gay to his feet.

"Sorry, old man!" he said, with concern. "I didn't mean to give you such a terrific swipe. But I was excited!"

"Cheese it!" murmured Gordon Gay. "It was all in the scrap. Well, you've done it, Handy. You've whacked me!"

"Yes, I know," said Handforth. "But what of it? I came here to whack you."

The Grammarians were filled with consternation. Never for a moment had they believed that their leader would be vanquished. Even Handforth was ready to admit that there was a good deal of luck in the knock-out. But the fact remained. Gordon Gay was beaten!

The Grammarians could hardly believe it.

In the blind confidence that he would win, Gordon Gay had recklessly promised to write that little document!

Within three or four minutes the Grammarian leader had recovered, and he grinned ruefully at his victor.

"The fat's in the fire now, you fellows!" he said, with a grimace. "I gave Handforth my promise, and I have got to keep it."

"You bet you have!" nodded Handforth.

"But you can't!" shouted Frank Monk. "Great Scott! You can't do it, Gay! You can't write that statement saying that we're not fit to clean the boots of the St. Jim's chaps."

"Of course you can't!" yelled the others.

"Oh, you ass!" said Carboy. "Why did you let him knock you out?"

Gordon Gay looked round wonderingly.

"You're excited, that's what's the matter with you!" he said severely. "I gave my promise, didn't I?"

"Yes, but——"

"But nothing!" said Gordon Gay. "A promise is a promise. I'm surprised at you fellows for even suggesting that I should try to get out of it."

"You're right, of course," admitted Frank Monk. "But it's so—so— Oh, crumbs!"

Words failed him.

"Awful or not, the thing must be done," said Gordon Gay. "I gave my word, and that's settled it. Who's got a sheet of paper?"

"Here you are!" said Handforth promptly.

Evidently he had come prepared. He seized his jacket and took out a plain sheet of exercise paper. And Gordon Gay produced his fountain-pen, and he went to a table.

"Now let's get this exact," he said. "I gave you my word that I would write a certain statement, didn't I?"

"You did," nodded Handforth.

"Very well, you've beaten me in a fair bout, and there's nothing more to be said," exclaimed Gordon Gay. "Tell me if this will suit you, Handforth."

He wrote rapidly, and a dead silence fell in the Common-room. At last

Gordon Gay put his pen down and handed the fatal sheet to the eager Handforth.

"There you are!" said Gordon Gay. "Mind the ink; it's still wet."

Handforth took the document and read it over.

"By George!" he muttered.

"Read it out," said Gordon Gay. "Let all the other fellows hear, so that they can know that I haven't broken my word."

"Yes, rather!" said Handforth. "Here you are, my fine Grammarian beauties! Listen to this:

"We, the Fourth Form of Rylcombe Grammar School, hereby freely admit, without prejudice, that we are not fit to clean the boots of the Shell and the Fourth of St. Jim's.

"Signed, on behalf of the Fourth Form,

"GORDON GAY, Captain."

"Satisfied?" asked Gordon Gay.

"Rather!" nodded Handforth. "You couldn't write anything else, if it comes to that. You promised to write this statement and to sign it. And I'm jolly glad to find, Gordon Gay, that you've been decent enough to keep your word. Yes, this will suit me down to the ground."

A roar went up from all the others.

"You're mad, Gay!"

"You can't let that St. Jim's waster get away with that paper!"

"Not likely!" yelled Jack Wootton.

"Grab it back, somebody!"

"Yes, and let's tear it up!"

There was a rush, but Gordon Gay stood in front of Handforth, and his eyes were blazing.

"Stop!" he shouted angrily. "A promise is a promise, and you can't get away from it. Keep calm, for goodness' sake!"

His followers stopped short, and Handforth, folding the paper containing those all-important words, placed it in his pocket.

Victory was his—complete and absolute victory!

CHAPTER 27.

Not According to Programme!

HARDLY had Handforth got the folded paper into his pocket before Carboy let out a yell of fresh excitement.

"By Jingo," he shouted, "I've got it!"

"Eh?" said Frank Monk. "What have you got?"

"I can understand now," said Carboy. "I thought Gay was mad for a minute, but now I can see the wheeze. There's nothing to worry about at all."

"Oh, isn't there?" said Lane. "How the merry dickens do you make that out?"

"It's easy!" grinned Carboy.

"Then explain, ass!" roared Harry Wootton.

"Yes, explain!" went up a chorus.

"Of course, it's rotten that Gordon Gay should have been knocked out by this silly St. Jim's fathead!" said Carboy. "But we'll let that pass."

"Thanks!" murmured Gordon Gay.

"Still, there's no need to worry about the signed document," said Carboy.

"You must be dotty!" snapped Frank Monk.

"I'm not dotty, but you are!" retorted Carboy. "Gay distinctly promised that he would write that statement and sign it. Isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"Well, he's kept his promise," grinned Carboy. "But I don't remember him saying anything about Handforth keeping the document."

"Eh? What?"

"There wasn't any promise given that Handforth would be allowed to get away with it!" chuckled Carboy. "Don't you see, you fatheads? Gay has kept his word; he's written the thing and signed it."

"My hat!" shouted Frank Monk. "Of course! We've only got to grab Handforth and tear the paper up, and everything will be all right!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a laugh of sheer relief from

all the Grammarians. Gordon Gay himself, curiously enough, was looking rather startled.

"Hold on!" he said. "I didn't mean—"

"Look out!" roared Jack Wootton suddenly. "Hold him, you chaps! He's bunking!"

"Great Scott!"

Perhaps it had been unwise of Carboy to speak so boldly as he had done. At all events, Handforth was streaking for the door, which happened, at the moment, to be unguarded.

He was filled with sudden alarm. He, too, had been vaguely surprised at Gordon Gay's apparent willingness. But now he understood. The Grammarian leader had kept his promise; but, as Carboy had said, no undertaking had been given that Handforth should be escorted safely off the premises. The Grammarians would be well within their rights if they seized the intruder, took the paper from him and tore it up. Gay would still have kept his promise!

But Handforth was too quick for them.

"Rats!" he roared, at the top of his voice. "Try and catch me! I've got that paper, and I'm going to stick to it!"

He tore the door open and dashed out.

"Stop him!" howled Carboy.

"My only aunt! He's escaping!" shouted Frank Monk. "After him!"

But Handforth was already down the passage, and a moment later he tore outside into the sunshine of the quad, and streaked across towards the gates. A number of Grammarians were pouring out after him, but luck was still against them. For Dr. Monk himself appeared from the direction of the playing fields, and the juniors came to a halt, uncertain and dismayed.

In the meantime Handforth had reached the lane, and he was running off at full speed.

"He's gone!" panted Frank Monk despairingly.

"And your pater's watching us, so

that we can't chase him," said Gordon Gay. "Well, never mind!"

"Never mind?" echoed Carboy, staring. "But—but Handforth has got that paper in his pocket!"

"I know it," said Gordon Gay. "But what's the good of crying over spilt milk?"

"It's all very well for you to take it like that, but I can guarantee that you'll have a warm time with the rest of the fellows," said Frank Monk wrathfully. "We never ought to have let Handforth get away! By Jove, he's done us! We're dished and diddled!"

"It's a sad world!" sighed Gordon Gay, shaking his head.

Handforth, who had not seen the figure of Dr. Monk, was at a loss to understand the absence of pursuit. But by the time he had got into the village High Street he had slackened his pace, and there was a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

He had won!

Even he, with all his confidence, could hardly believe it. It seemed too good to be true. Yet there could be no mistake about it. He had given Gordon Gay the knock-out, and he had that paper in his pocket! Single-handed he had got the better of the entire Grammarian force!

When he arrived back at St. Jim's he was perspiring freely, and his face was red. As he turned through the gateway a number of shouts went up. The chums of Study No. 6 were lounging on the School House steps, and Figgins & Co. were on the watch, too, near the New House. Numbers of other fellows came running across the quad with them. In a moment Handforth was surrounded.

"Bal Jove," ejaculated D'Arcy, inspecting the new fellow through his eyeglass, "he appears to be still whole, deah boys!"

"He hasn't been to the Grammar School!" said Figgins bluntly.

"Haven't I?" retorted Handforth. "You silly asses! I've not only been

to the Grammar School, but I've succeeded!"

"Come off it!" grinned Manners, as he walked up with Tom Merry and Monty Lowther. "You can't spoof us like that, Handy!"

"I'm not trying to spoof you!" roared Handforth.

"But you must be, old man!" said Tom Merry gently. "The Grammarians would never have allowed you to come back to St. Jim's in this condition."

"Wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus. "We expected you to be painted wed and gween, or covahed with feathahs, or somethin' equally howwible!"

"Then I'm sorry to disappoint you!" said Handforth tartly. "It would take more than those Grammarian fatheads to paint me red and green! If you want to know the truth, I had a fight with Gordon Gay, and I whacked him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a laugh of sheer incredulity that went up.

"Don't you believe me?" hooted Handforth.

"Sorry, old man—we don't!" said Blake.

"But it's true!"

"Look here, Handy, is this honest Injun?" asked Tom Merry sharply.

"Yes—honest Injun."

"Bai Jove!"

"You—you really whacked Gordon Gay?" gasped Blake.

"Of course I did!"

"My only sainted aunt!" said Blake, clapping a hand to his head. "Water, somebody!"

"Weally, Handay, I congwatulate you!" said Arthur Augustus enthusiastically. "Bwavo, deah boy!"

"Rats!" said Figgins. "He's trying to pull our legs."

"But he said 'honah bwight,' Figgay."

"That's true!" admitted Figgins, with a stare. "Well, I can't understand it—that's all I can say."

"Thank goodness for that!" retorted

Handforth tartly. "But I haven't told you half of it yet!"

"Silence for the chair!" sang out Tom Merry. "Now then, Handy, let's have the whole yarn."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Trot it out, Handy, old scout!"

"Let's have the full story!"

Handforth swelled visibly as the shouts went up and the juniors pressed closer round him. He was a fellow of importance at last! They weren't fooling him now!

And so, with much gusto, he proceeded to tell the story.

He explained how he had walked boldly into the Grammarian Common-room, and how he had challenged Gordon Gay to a fight.

"What a nerve!" said Blake wonderingly.

"You can't do much without nerve," replied Handforth. "I challenged the boulder to a fight on novel terms. If I won, it was to be counted as a victory for St. Jim's. Well, I did win, and I've wiped out this afternoon's affair. I've raided the Grammar School single-handed, and I've won that third test."

"Here, steady!" said Tom Merry, smiling. "You're a bit too hasty, old man!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Blake, I'll trouble you to hand over the reins of leadership to me. In future I'm leader of the Fourth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You drivelling dummy!" said Blake wrathfully. "What the dickens are you talking about? You may have whacked Gordon Gay, but you haven't won that test! What about the document?"

"I've got it!"

"What!" went up a general roar.

"I've got it!" repeated Handforth triumphantly.

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Blake crossly. "You haven't got it!"

"Of course he hasn't!" said Figgins. "You're not trying to tell us, Handy, are you, that Gordon Gay wrote that fatheaded statement and signed it?"

"He couldn't do anything else!"

replied Handforth. "Gordon Gay is a fellow of honour, and he had to write it."

"Bai Jove! Whatevah do you mean?"

"It's easy, Gussy," replied Handforth coolly. "Before I fought Gordon Gay I told him that the winner would expect to receive a signed document, on the lines that you know about."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "Did you promise to sign a paper like that, in case you lost?"

"Yes."

"You hopeless ass!" groaned Tom. "Thank goodness you won the scrap!"

"I knew I should win it!" said Handforth. "And as I did win it, Gordon Gay wrote that paper and signed it; then he handed it over to me."

"What did he say on it?" asked half a dozen voices.

"That he and the rest of the Fourth aren't fit to clean our boots!" grinned Handforth.

"Rats!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "Wats!"

"That's too tall, Handy!" grinned Manners. "We don't believe it—simply because we can't! Gordon Gay would never have written a thing like that!"

"Never!" agreed Tom Merry. "Or if he did write it, he wouldn't let it be brought to us!"

Handforth laughed outright.

"That's just the point!" he grinned. "Gordon Gay wrote it because he never believed that I should get away with it. But I bolted before they could get that paper back. I was out of that Common-room like a streak. And here I am—and here's the paper!"

He thrust his hand into his jacket pocket and produced the folded sheet of paper. There were many shouts from the crowd of juniors.

"Let's see it!" said Tom Merry eagerly. "By Jove, I'm beginning to believe that Handy is right, you chaps! And while we've got this paper we can—"

"Wait a minute!" said Blake

sceptically. "Let's see the precious statement before we start crowing!"

Handforth chuckled.

"You still don't believe it, eh?" he said serenely. "All right, my lad. Look at this!"

And, with a great flourish, he unfolded the paper and held it under Blake's startled gaze.

Blake looked at it, his eyes widened a little, and then he glanced at Handforth.

"Well?" he said tartly. "What's the idea?"

"Can't you read?"

"Are you trying to be funny?" roared Blake. "How can I read when there's nothing to read?"

Handforth looked at the paper, and then he jumped about a foot into the air. For his startled, bewildered gaze beheld a blank sheet!

CHAPTER 28.

The Explanation!

"GREAT pip!"

Handforth gulped out the exclamation in a tone of choking stupefaction.

"Very funny!" said Blake sarcastically. "Very clever! Is this your idea of a joke?"

Handforth nearly collapsed. He turned the paper over and over. But it was blank on both sides. It was absolutely devoid of any writing.

"I—I can't understand it!" he gasped frantically. "It's blank! There's no writing on this piece of paper!"

"Marvellous!" said Kerr.

"They've swindled me!" said Handforth wildly. "They must have changed the paper— But that's impossible!" he added, in a startled voice. "The ink was wet when Gordon Gay handed it to me, and I let it dry! And then I put the thing in my pocket!"

"Oh, chuck it!" said Tom Merry. "They fooled you somehow, Handy. We knew, all along, that they would never

write a statement like that, and hand it over to you. The age of miracles has passed."

Handforth continued to stare at the blank sheet.

"It beats me!" he muttered, as if he could hardly believe the evidence of his own eyes. "I—I'm knocked sideways."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors had no sympathy for him. It was just like the chump to think that he had got away from the Grammar School with "the goods." Gordon Gay had been knocked out in the fight, but he hadn't taken leave of his senses.

"I'm sorry, Handy, but I can't hand over the reins of leadership to you just yet!" said Blake blandly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's a fraud!" shouted Handforth, with sudden violence. "There's something funny about this paper!"

"Rot! The paper's all right!" said Blake. "They never meant you to get away with the real one, and they must have changed it!"

"But they didn't change it!" insisted Handforth.

"Weally, Handay, you are fwrightfully obstinate!" said Arthur Augustus. "If they didn't change the papah, it would have the w'tin' upon it. But the fact that this papah is blank p'oves that they must have substituted it."

"They were just having a game with you, old man," said Tom Merry gently.

Handforth's brow was wrinkled, and his eyes were burning.

"I can't understand it!" he said. "Gordon Gay gave me the paper, and I read it, while the ink was still wet. And then, as soon as it had dried, I put it in my pocket. I tell you, they couldn't have changed it! It was impossible! I had it in my hands the whole time!"

"They must have taken it out of your pocket, then!"

"That's just as impossible!" replied Handforth. "Because, as soon as I put it into my pocket, I bolted. This is the very paper that Gordon Gay gave me.

Great Scott, I ought to know! It's my own paper!"

"What do you mean—your own paper?"

"I had this blank sheet in my pocket, and I gave it to Gordon Gay," replied Handforth excitedly. "Can't you see? It's a sheet out of one of our exercise books!"

Tom Merry took it, and turned it over in his fingers.

"Looks like it," he admitted. "But, then, most exercise books are the same."

"I know it's the sheet, because there's a bit torn off the corner," went on Handforth furiously. "I don't know how they tricked me, but they did it! Oh, the rotters!"

"But they didn't break their promise!" said Blake.

"No—and that's what makes them safe!" growled Handforth in exasperation. "Gordon Gay only promised me that he would write and sign the paper. Well, he did that—in front of my eyes. I've been tricked right enough."

"I'm glad you admit it, old man!" said Figgins.

"What else can I do?" roared Handforth. "But, by George, I'm going to have my revenge! I'm going back to the Grammar School, and I'll get another written statement——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've escaped once, and you'd better not go there again!" said Tom Merry, shaking his head. "That luck won't hold twice, Handy!"

There was a commotion at the edge of the crowd, and before Handforth could answer, Langton of the Sixth appeared. There was an immediate silence, for Langton was a prefect.

"Oh, there you are, Merry!" he said. "Somebody is asking for you on the telephone. Gay, of the Grammar School, I believe. You'll have to tell him not to ring up like this!"

"Thanks, Langton," said Tom Merry. "I'll buzz along to the prefects'-room."

"It's like Gay's nerve to ring you up at all!" grumbled Langton. "What

does he think we are—fags for you juniors?"

There were many chuckles as Tom Merry made off, and Langton went his way. Arriving in the prefects'-room, Tom Merry seized the telephone and placed the receiver to his ear.

"Hallo!" he said. "That you, Gay?"

"Oh, hallo, Tom Merry, my lad!" came Gordon Gay's cheery voice. "How goes it?"

"What's the joke?" demanded Tom.

"I rather thought you would have found it out by this time!" chuckled Gordon Gay. "Hasn't dear old Handy produced that marvellous document yet?"

"Yes, he has!"

"I hope you liked the writing on it!" said Gordon Gay sweetly.

"You silly Grammarian ass!" roared Tom. "There isn't any writing on it!"

"No?" came Gordon Gay's bland voice. "Well, I never!"

Tom Merry heard some faint yells of laughter floating along the wire—proving that a number of other Grammarians were collected round the Grammar School instrument.

"Look here, Gay!" said Tom Merry daskly. "You fooled Handforth pretty thoroughly!"

"Did I?" said Gordon Gay. "I ought to be spanked, then!"

"You tricky bounder!" said Tom wrathfully. "I don't blame you, of course, but I'd just like to know how you did it."

"How I did what?"

"Handforth swears that the paper was never changed," said Tom Merry. "How the dickens did you manage to substitute that blank sheet?"

"My dear chap, what the dickens are you talking about?" asked Gordon Gay, in wonder. "The paper wasn't changed. Handforth saw me write it, and I handed it over to him. Hasn't he told you that?"

"Yes."

"Then what are you grumbling about?"

"The paper was blank, you fathead!"

shouted Tom. "It wasn't the paper that you originally gave him——"

"Yes, it was!" came Gordon Gay's chuckling voice.

"You can't kid me!"

"My dear fellow, honest Injun!" said Gordon Gay, shouting with laughter. "The paper that Handforth's produced before you is the absolute one—guaranteed in every hole!"

"What!" gasped Tom. "But there's not a line of writing——"

He was aware of more chuckles, and then the wire became dead. Obviously, Gordon Gay had rung off, and Tom Merry did likewise. He went out of the prefects'-room, puzzled and thoughtful.

When he got back to the others, however, his eyes were gleaming.

"Well?" went up a general shout.

"They fooled Handforth all right," said Tom. "I've just been speaking to Gordon Gay, and I think I know how they worked the stunt. No wonder Gordon Gay wrote the document so readily! No wonder Handforth wasn't chased!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Handforth.

"Why, they must have used some special ink!"

"Special ink!" gasped Handforth, as a great flood of light came to him.

"There's no other explanation," said Tom. "Gordon Gay just told me that the paper was never changed. And you say that there was writing on it when you put it into your pocket?"

"Yes, black writing, as plain as your hat!"

"Then it's perfectly obvious that Gay must have had some tricky kind of ink in his fountain-pen," said Tom Merry. "That's why he was so willing to write any old thing you wanted."

"Do you mean invisible ink?" gasped Handforth.

"Yes, a kind of invisible ink."

"But—but that sort of ink is like water."

"The ordinary kind—yes," said Tom Merry. "But this ink of Gordon Gay's must be the reverse of the usual sort."

"The reverse?"

"There's nothing new about it," said Tom Merry impatiently. "It looks just ordinary black ink, and it dries in the usual way. But about five minutes after anything has been written it, it all fades away to nothing."

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "How fidgetfully remarkable!"

Handforth examined his paper again, turning it over and over helplessly.

"There's nothing on here," he muttered, not even a scratch. You'd have thought that the pen would have left some marks."

"Not if Gordon Gay wrote it on a hard surface, as he was certain to have done, knowing the kind of ink he was using," replied Tom shrewdly. "A fountain-pen nib is usually smooth-running, and it wouldn't leave any scratches. So as soon as ever the ink faded away nothing was left."

Handforth took a deep breath.

"So that's how they diddled me, is it?" he said wrathfully. "The rotters! The bounders! By George, I'll get my own back for this!"

"We couldn't understand why Gordon Gay was so obliging," remarked Blake. "But now we know. Those Grammarian fatheads are cackling like the dickens, I expect!"

"Of course they're cackling!" said Figgins, with a sniff. "That's twice they've bested us in one day!"

"And all through Handforth!" said Blake, glaring.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hadh't we better bump him?" suggested Redfern.

"You silly asses!" howled Handforth, backing away. "How was I to know? I gave Gordon Gay a good thrashing, didn't I?"

"Yes, we've got to hand it to you for that, old man," said Tom Merry, nodding. "On the whole, you didn't do so badly. It would have been miraculous if you had really got that written statement. "We didn't expect it, and so we're not disappointed. Leave him

alone, you chaps! He did the best he could; and he did pretty well."

But Edward Oswald Handforth was by no means satisfied.

He felt that he had been basely tricked. And it was galling to think of the Grammarians howling with laughter at the rich joke that they had brought off at his expense.

CHAPTER 29.

Handforth's Luck!

"I'M going back!"

Handforth made that statement in a calm, deliberate voice. Unfortunately, nobody took any notice of him. The juniors had broken up into groups, and they were animatedly discussing the situation.

"I'm going back!" repeated Handforth.

Still nobody took any notice of him. He set his teeth, squared his shoulders, and walked off towards the gates. At this, Blake & Co., and one or two others, looked in his direction, and then ran after him.

"Hold on Handy!" said Blake, catching his shoulder. "What's the idea?"

"Didn't you hear me?" demanded Handforth.

"Yes; but we took no notice," replied Blake. "What you said wasn't worth noticing."

"You silly fathead!" roared Handforth. "Lemme go! I'm going back to the Grammar School!"

"That's your delusion, old man! You're staying here!"

"Blow you!" gasped the new fellow. "Do you think I'm going to stand this treatment from those blessed Grammarians? They fooled me, and I mean to make them pay! So I'm going back, and I shall get another signed statement out of Gordon Gay. And this time I'll make sure that it's written with proper ink."

"Hold him!" said Tom Merry. "Don't let him go!"

Handforth struggled in vain.

"Wait until I'm free!" he panted. "You chaps are gated, and I'm not! Once I get away, I'll jolly well show you——"

"This afternoon," said Blake steadily, "you allowed the Grammarians to raid us. Later on this afternoon you went to the Grammar School, and you allowed those fatheads to score over us for a second time. Do you think we're going to let you make things worse? Do you think that we're going to allow the Grammarians to score a hat-trick?"

"I'm going to put this thing straight!" bawled Handforth. "They've fooled me, and I mean to get my own back!"

"It's hopeless, old man—absolutely hopeless!" said Tom Merry. "We know that you mean well, but can't you realise that if you go back to the Grammar School you'll walk into a hornets'-nest? They won't treat you gently this time, my lad! They've had their joke, and if you go there again they'll pulverise you!"

Perhaps Handforth realised the hopelessness of the situation. He ceased his struggles, and he gave a kind of groan.

"All right!" he muttered. "Lemme go, and I'll promise not to bolt!"

He was released, and most of the fellows were feeling rather sorry for him. He had meant well, but he had been victimised by the Grammarians. It would be sheer folly for him to return.

"I saw the thing written, too!" he said miserably. "And look at it now! Nothing but a blank sheet of paper! Oh, my goodness! What a frost!"

"Wait a minute!" said Bernard Glyn, as he pushed forward. "Let's have a look at that paper, Handforth!"

It was handed over to him.

"That must be pretty marvellous ink!" said Glyn at length. "There's not a sign of anything on here. And yet it's exactly the same sheet of paper."

"Gordon Gay admitted it!" nodded Tom Merry.

"I was just wondering, that's all," said Bernard Glyn.

"Bai Jove! What were you wonderin', deah boy?"

"I don't suppose there's anything in it, Gussy," said Glyn. "But ordinary invisible ink is blank from the start, you know."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And it can usually be brought to vision by the application of heat," continued the schoolboy inventor. "But, as I said, that's the usual invisible ink."

"By George!" gasped Handforth, his eyes burning. "Do you think there's any chance that this ink might act in the same way?"

"I don't think it will; but there'd be no harm in trying," replied Bernard Glyn. "You see, this ink was black at first, and then it simply evaporated. The other kind of invisible ink is only invisible because it's transparent. And when you hold it before heat it scorches and comes out."

"Yes, but this might be the same!" urged Handforth.

"It might; but we mustn't hope," replied Glyn. "I expect it's evaporated completely away."

"Hold it in the sun," suggested Blake.

"That's not any good," said Glyn. "We want some real heat!"

"Come along to the Common-room, then," said Tom Merry briskly. "We can make a fire with some old newspapers. It won't take us more than a couple of minutes."

And there was an immediate rush for the School House Common-room. A wave of excitement had gripped the juniors. Old newspapers were brought, and they were set ablaze in the fireplace. Even Figgins & Co. had come across, and there was no thought of any House rivalry.

Bernard Glyn, in the fireplace, held the paper near the flames, and he kept it there until his fingers were nearly scorched. The paper began to crackle and curl.

"That ought to do it!" he said at last.

He rose to his feet and turned the

paper over. But it was still utterly blank.

"Thought so," grunted Bernard Glyn. "It's no good!"

"Try again!" said Handforth eagerly. "Perhaps you didn't hold it near enough."

"If I had held it any nearer, it would have burnt," said Glyn. "No, Handy, it's useless. I didn't think it would be any good, anyhow."

"By Jove, though!" said Tom Merry. "If only we could bring that writing up, what a victory it would be for us!"

"For me, you mean," said Handforth.

"Well, for you, then," smiled Tom. "Gordon Gay gave you that paper, believing that we should never be able to read it. But if we could only bring it to life again——"

"What's the good of talking like that?" broke in Blake impatiently. "The heat test is the only one that we can apply, and that has failed. Rats and blow! We can't do anything more."

"I'm fed-up!" said Handforth disgustedly.

He took the paper from Bernard Glyn's hands, and stared at it as though it had done him an injury. Then, with an exclamation, he tossed it on to the table that stood near by.

"Really, my dear fellows, I must ask you to leave me undisturbed," said Skimpole of the Shell, who was working at the table. "I cannot understand the meaning of all this commotion."

Skimpole, indeed, had blinked in mild disapproval at the crowd; but he had continued his task. He was cleaning something, apparently—and he was working vigorously with some old rags.

"Oh, blow you!" said Handforth, as he pursed his lips. "I was counting on that heat test. And it's fizzled out. We're done now!"

"Well, it's no good looking glum about it," said Tom Merry. "I dare say we shall get our own back on the Grammarians one of these days. Until then we shall have to be patient."

"Yes, we shall have to be patient for a week, at least!" grumbled Figgins. "This is what comes of joining forces with you silly School House wasters!"

"Why, you New House fathead——"

"You School House dummy——"

"Oh, don't let's start squabbling among ourselves!" said Blake hastily. "And it's all very well to let Handforth off, just because he whacked Gordon Gay. I rather think we ought to give him another bumping."

"Hear, hear!"

And a number of juniors moved purposefully forward.

Handforth backed away, hot and indignant.

"You silly asses!" he shouted. "It's not my fault——"

"Really, Handforth!" shouted Skimpole. "I must ask you to be careful——"

Crash—swoosh!

Backing away, Handforth thudded into the table violently, and a bottle that Skimpole had been using fell over and emptied its contents in a flood.

"My dear Handforth, that was very careless of you!" protested Skimpole angrily. "You have spilt all my methylated spirit! And I would remind you that methylated spirit is not excessively cheap to buy."

"Blow your methylated spirit!" retorted Handforth. "Why the dickens can't you do these things in your study?"

"I regret that you should adopt this domineering tone," said Skimpole, blinking. "But, unfortunately Gore raised the most unreasonable objections to my remaining in the study. I am afraid that Gore is a rough fellow."

"Bother Gore!" said Handforth. "And bother you and your beastly methylated spirits! These silly idiots are coming for me——"

"They are!" said Harry Noble grimly. "And they're going to bump you, too!"

"Look here. Lemme alone!" gasped Handforth. "You know jolly well that those Grammarians played a trick on

me— Eh? Why, what the— Hi! Look at this!"

Handforth's voice was raised in sudden excitement. He had forgotten the menacing juniors, and he leaned over the table and stared down at the useless sheet of paper that he had flung there.

"The writing!" he bellowed. "It's appearing!"

"What!" shouted Tom Merry, rushing forward.

"Look!" yelled Handforth.

An instantaneous change came over the crowd. Everybody tried to get near the table at once. The unfortunate Skimpole was bowled over, pushed to the edge of the throng, and literally trodden on as though he had been a mat.

Those nearest the table stared in amazement.

"Great Scott!" gasped Blake. "He's right! There's the writing—just as though it had been written a minute ago!"

"Steady!" said Tom Merry. "Don't push so much, you fatheads! The paper is all wet!"

"That's nothing!" said Handforth. "That's methylated spirit poured over it, and Skimpole ought to be boiled for bringing the stuff into the room."

"My dear fathead!" said Tom Merry, "can't you understand? We ought to get up a vote of thanks to Skimpole!"

"What the dickens for?"

"It's his methylated spirit that has done the trick!" said Tom Merry. "It's caused a sort of chemical action, and that invisible ink has become visible again. It's the spirit that's done it!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth blankly. "It's—it's like magic!"

He held the spirit-soaked sheet of paper in his hand. There, as clearly as it had originally appeared, Gordon Gay's handwriting was clearly visible. There was that fateful signed statement!

It was another example of Handforth's luck. By the merest accident, the "invisible" writing had been brought to life.

CHAPTER 30.

The Tables Turned!

HANDFORTH was flushed with triumph.

"Now, what about it?" he shouted tensely. "Perhaps you silly idiots will believe me after this!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "But, weally, Handy, we believed you all the time. We were only wld because you had been twicked!"

But a good many of the juniors had had doubts regarding the document. Here was Handforth's vindication.

At the top of his voice, Blake read out the words, and the Common-room echoed with yells of laughter.

"Well, that's clear enough!" grinned Tom Merry. "Gordon Gay, on behalf of the Fourth Form, admits that he and his followers aren't fit to clean our boots!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And he's signed it, too!" said Tom. "Handy, old man, congrattars!"

"Eh!"

"You've completed the third test!" chuckled Tom Merry. "The age of miracles hasn't gone, after all. You've raided the Grammar School single-handed, and you've brought back that confession from Gordon Gay. The man's a wonder, you fellows!"

"Bai Jove!" beamed Gussy. "I have always maintained that Handay was a bwainy chap!"

Handforth seemed to grow larger as he stood there, surrounded by the excited juniors, listening to their shouts of praise.

"I told you I'd complete all those dotty tests, didn't I?" he said serenely. "You thought you'd have me on toast—but now I have got my own back. And I'll trouble you, Jack Blake, to remember your promise! From this minute I'm leader of the Fourth!"

Blake was flabbergasted.

"But—but I was only rotting!" he protested feebly.

"I don't care whether you were rotting or not!" roared Handforth. "If it comes to that, Tom Merry was rotting."

But I'm leader of the Fourth now, and if you're a sportsman, you'll admit it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're dished, Blake; and you can't get out of it!" chuckled Figgins.

"I suppose not," said Blake ruefully. "Oh, my only sainted aunt. What's going to happen to the Form with Handy at the head of it?"

"Speak for yourself!" said Figgins coldly. "He may be leader of the School House Fourth; but if he tries any rot with the New House fellows, we'll soon put him in his place!"

"Wait a minute, though!" said Blake eagerly. "He hasn't won yet!"

"Haven't I?" snorted Handforth. "What do you mean?"

"Why, this writing will probably fade away when the methylated spirit evaporates!" said Blake quickly.

"Oh, crumbs!"

"All the same, I'll admit that you have, in strict fact, done the trick," said Blake grudgingly. "But if this writing fades again, it might make a difference."

"Well, we shall soon know," said Tom Merry, as he waved the sheet of paper to and fro. "This methylated spirit is drying off quickly, and it will be gone completely in a minute or two. Not that we need worry. We've read Gordon Gay's statement, and we know it's genuine."

"Still, it'll be heaps better if it remains permanent," said Kangaroo.

There was further excitement when the last of the spirit dried off. The chemical effect was maintained! There stood the writing, black and apparently permanent. In some magical way—capable of an easy explanation by any chemist, no doubt—the spirit had brought the writing up, and there it stood.

"This is rich!" chuckled Tom Merry. "Good old Handy! We owe him a hearty vote of thanks! Who's got a frame?"

"A frame?" repeated Blake.

"Yes," said Tom. "We're going to

frame this piece of paper and hang it up here in the Common-room!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And the next time Gordon Gay comes, we'll show it to him!" grinned the Shell captain. "My hat! He'll turn absolutely green when he sees it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's more likely to have a fit!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "He only wrote that statement because he thought that it would never reach our eyesight. But now we've got it up against him! There it stands in bold writing—the admission by the Grammarians that they aren't fit to clean our boots!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By Jove!" said Figgins. "This is rich, you chaps! After all, Handy is a pretty useful sort of fellow!"

"Hear, hear!"

Yelling with laughter, the juniors soon produced a frame, and the document was placed in it, and then it was hung in a bold place on the Common-room wall. Crowds of juniors gathered round it, inspecting the precious legend.

In the middle of it Baggy Trimble appeared in the doorway, his little eyes gleaming with excitement.

"I say, you fellows——"

"Clear out, Trimble!" said Blake shortly.

"But those Grammarian chaps are here!" shouted Trimble.

"What's that?" said Tom Merry, turning. "The Grammarians?"

"Yes," said Trimble. "Gordon Gay and a lot of the other chaps! They're in the quad, as bold as brass!"

It was difficult to believe, and most of the juniors went running out. But it was perfectly true. Gordon Gay & Co. had come along to chip their victims. They knew that they would be perfectly safe in the old quad at St. Jim's—for Tom Merry & Co. would never dare to "go for them" in such a public spot. And the thing was all the safer because, when the Grammarians retired, the Saints would not be able to

follow them. For Tom Merry & Co. were gated!

"Pax, my sons!" said Gordon Gay, as the crowd appeared in the School House doorway.

"Granted, in the circumstances," said Tom Merry. "What do you wasters want?"

"We just want to ask you one question," grinned the leader of the Grammarians. "How do you like 'em done?"

"Brown!" said Carboy solemnly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you funny fatheads!" roared Blake.

"We're sorry about that piece of paper!" said Gordon Gay, with mock solemnity. "Did Handforth tell you that there was anything written on it?"

"Yes, he did!" said Tom Merry, who had one hand behind his back. "He said that you had written a statement!"

"Ah, me!" sighed Gordon Gay. "How sad! And now the paper's all blank!"

"That's just your little mistake, old man!" said Tom Merry sweetly. "Have a look at this!"

He suddenly withdrew his hand from behind his back and displayed, to the startled gaze of the Grammarians, the framed paper. For a few tense seconds Gordon Gay & Co. stared at it in blank dismay.

"But—but I used a special kind of invisible ink!" gasped Gordon Gay at length.

"And we used a special kind of reproducer to make it visible again," said Tom kindly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dished and done, my lads!" yelled Blake. "We've got this paper now, and we know the truth! You Grammar School wasters aren't fit to clean our boots!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Never before had the Saints seen the Grammarians collapse so utterly. All their confidence deserted them; their smiles vanished; they seemed to shrivel up and grow small as they stood there

staring dazedly at the framed document.

Strange to relate, it was Gordon Gay himself who seemed the least taken aback by the way the tables had been turned.

"All right, you can crow!" he snorted, with a glare at the chortling Saints. "But you can take it from me that you won't be able to see that ink in half an hour's time! Mark my words!"

There was an incredulous yell from Tom Merry & Co.

"Rats!"

"Go home!"

"Tell us an easier one!" grinned Handforth.

Even his own followers did not seem to derive much comfort from Gordon Gay's belief, and they crawled away, too utterly amazed and dumbfounded to answer the jeers and cat-calls that followed them.

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"Of course, that ass Gay was talking out of his hat!" said Handforth confidently, as he strutted about in the quad. "I've done the giddy test, and now I'm leader of the School House Fourth! Deny it if you can!" he added, turning triumphantly to Blake.

"I don't deny it!" said Blake gruffly. "Even if the writing does the disappearing trick again, there's no getting away from the fact that you've pulled it off. Here's my fist! You're a wonder! We all laughed at you, and yet you've done the trick!"

Handforth was delighted as he shook hands.

"That's what I call a sportsman!" he said heartily. "And you needn't worry about your position as leader, either. You're welcome to it!"

"Eh?" gasped Blake. "Say it again!"

"You're welcome to it!" repeated Handforth, grinning.

All the other juniors looked at him in astonishment. After his three weeks of strenuous battling, and after winning all those three tests, he now placed no value on the reward! But, after all, it was just like him.

"Do—do you mean that I'm still leader?" asked Blake. "Have you released me from my promise?"

"Yes, my son!" replied Handforth. "I've been at St. Jim's for four weeks, and I've completed my three tests! In fact, I've proved that I'm not a chap to be messed about!"

"Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah!"

"And now that I've won the leadership of the School House Fourth, I'm going!" said Handforth.

"Going?" yelled the crowd.

"Going!" repeated Handforth firmly.

"I'm going back to my old school—St.

THE

Frank's! Back to the good old Remove! Back to my old chums, Church and McClure!"

"I believe he means it, too!" chuckled Tom Merry.

"Of course I mean it!" said Edward Oswald Handforth. "I've had my month here, and I'm satisfied! St. Jim's is a jolly good school, but it can't be named in the same breath as St. Frank's!"

"You silly, fatheaded ass!" roared a dozen voices.

"Well, we won't argue!" said Handforth serenely. "I'm going to write to my pater, and I'm going to ask him to take me away. My place at St. Frank's is waiting for me, so I'm going back!"

There were many chuckles throughout the Fourth and the Shell at Handforth's surprise decision. He had completed his "rubber"—a sort of double rubber, if it came to that—and now he had made up his mind to go.

He almost changed his mind half an hour later, however, when it was seen that Gordon Gay had not been talking "out of his hat."

Once again all trace of writing on the sheet of exercise paper had vanished, and this time, in spite of the juniors' desperate efforts, it was soon evident that the famous confession had gone for ever.

But its disappearance, galling as it was to Tom Merry & Co., could not lessen the burly Fourth Former's triumph. It had been proof enough that the last "test" had been successfully carried out.

The cheeriest fellow within the four walls of St. Jim's that evening was Edward Oswald Handforth as he pictured to himself his triumphant return as a conquering hero to St. Frank's.

THE

EDITOR'S NOTE:—

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH is a great character—there's no doubt of that. Did you know that he appears every week in the GEM, the great Wednesday school-story paper? In addition, of course, the GEM each week contains an absolutely unbeatable story of famous TOM MERRY & Co., of St. Jim's. You will find the GEM a paper after your own heart—order it from your newsagent to-day. Price 2d. weekly.

THE HEROIC BULLY!

A Short Complete Story of Rookwood School, Starring
Popular JIMMY SILVER & Co.

"O W! Yow! Leggo, Beaumont, you beast!"

"I'll let go, I don't think!" raved Beaumont, the Sixth Form prefect, taking a tighter hold on young Wegg of the Third, and bringing down leather belt for all he was worth. "You Lash, lash, lash!"

"Oh, Beaumont, do leave off!" pleaded little Wegg. "I really did not put the jam in your slippers. I——"

Beaumont's face was crimson with passion.

"Don't lie to me, you little beast!" he stormed, lashing Wegg with the leather felt for all he was worth. "You know you put the jam in my shoes!"

"I didn't, Beaumont!" whined Wegg. "I swear I didn't!"

"Then who did? Come on, out with it!"

"I can't tell——"

Lash, lash!

Down came the belt on Wegg's small back. Beaumont was in a fearful rage, and could hardly have been conscious of what he was doing.

"Ow! Groogh! Yow!"

Wegg yelled at the top of his voice. The pain he was bearing was excruciating, and he could not help the tears of agony running down his face.

"I'll lash the life out of you unless you tell me the name of the culprit!" thundered Beaumont.

"I can't tell you!" screamed Wegg. "You can cut me into little pieces first, you bully!"

"You little worm! Take that, and that, and that!"

Beaumont was beside himself with rage. Wegg screamed loud enough to wake the dead. His yells could be heard right up the passage. Jimmy

Silver & Co. heard them, and came tearing along for all they were worth.

The door of Beaumont's study was thrown open, and Jimmy Silver rushed in at the head of his chums.

"Pile in, you chaps!" he exclaimed.

Lovell and Raby and Newcome piled in, and in less than a minute Beaumont was lying on the floor, held down by eight strong hands.

"I'll pay you out for this, you little villains!" raved Beaumont.

"No, you won't, Beaumont, old scout," said Jimmy Silver calmly. "You'll just lie down there until we're ready to let you go! Sit on his head, Lovell, if he tries to get up!"

"What-ho!" chortled Lovell.

Jimmy Silver helped Wegg to his feet.

"What's all the trouble about, Wegg?" he asked.

"That beast accused me of putting jam in his slippers," explained Wegg.

"Did you?"

"No," muttered little Wegg. "I didn't!"

"Honest Injun?"

"Honest Injun!"

Jimmy Silver patted the youngster on the shoulder.

"All right, Wegg," he said. "I take your word for it. Now, cut along, there's a good chap. And, in future, give Beaumont a wide berth."

Wegg cut along immediately. He was very eager indeed to get as far away from Beaumont's study as possible at that moment.

With the weight of Lovell, Raby, and Newcome on his chest, Beaumont had calmed down by now.

"Get up, you chaps!" ordered Jimmy Silver.

Lovell and his chums rose to their feet.

"Now, look here, Beaumont," said Jimmy Silver, wagging a warning finger at the Sixth Form prefect. "It isn't the first time we've had to put the stopper on your bullying ways. If——"

Beaumont made a step forward.

"You cheeky fag!" he stormed. "For two pins, I'd——"

"Shouldn't advise you to," said Jimmy Silver warningly. "Don't forget we're four to one!"

Beaumont evidently thought that discretion was the better part of valour, for he drew back and dropped his fists.

"If we have to interfere again in order to stop your bullying," said Jimmy Silver, "I can promise you that you'll get the biggest hiding of your life!"

The Classical captain strode towards the door.

"Come on, you fellows," he said. "I want to go down to Coombe to get my footer-boots mended. Don't forget, Beaumont. I've warned you, mind!"

Beaumont gave the Fistical Four a vicious glare as they left his study. Dearly he would have liked to have tackled the Fistical Four one at a time, but he knew that he couldn't manage them all at once. Jimmy Silver & Co. therefore got off scot-free.

The Fistical Four returned to their study, and as soon as Jimmy Silver had gathered up his footer-boots, they set out for Coombe to interview Mr. Nixey, the bootmender.

It was a beautiful day, and Jimmy Silver & Co. thoroughly enjoyed the walk to the village. They settled their business with Mr. Nixey, and started on their return journey to Rookwood.

They had not gone far before Lovell pulled his chums up sharply, and pointed towards a house across a meadow.

"Look!" he cried. "There's a house on fire!"

"By Jove, so there is!" exclaimed

Jimmy Silver excitedly. "Let's go and investigate!"

The chums sprinted across the meadow for all they were worth.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver. "There's somebody leaning out of the upstairs window! Perhaps the poor beggar can't get down!"

"Look!" cried Newcome. "It's Beaumont!"

"So it is!"

It was true! Beaumont, the bullying prefect of the Sixth Form, was leaning helplessly out of the window of the burning house. Flames and smoke were belching forth in great quantities, and every now and again the prefect's figure was lost to view.

The Fistical Four rushed up to the house, and took the situation in at a glance.

"Can't you come down by the stairs Beaumont?" yelled Lovell.

"I can't—I can't!" wailed Beaumont. "It's awful—terrible!"

"You'd better jump out!" shouted Jimmy Silver. "We'll catch you, and break your fall!"

"I—I—I——" stammered the prefect.

"Come on!" yelled Jimmy Silver. "There's no time to be lost!"

Without a moment's more hesitation Beaumont leaped from the burning building. Luckily, he fell into the outstretched arms of the Fistical Four, and escaped injury from his fall.

"How did it all happen, Beaumont?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"I was——"

The prefect broke off abruptly as the howl of a dog fell upon his ears.

"Sounds as though there's a dog in there," remarked Newcome.

Yelp! Yelp!

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Beaumont. "It's my dog Rover! He's in there tied to a door-handle!"

"How——"

"I must save him!" cried Beaumont frenziedly. "I must save him, the poor little beggar! He's my best friend! I'm going——"

"You can't, Beaumont!" said Jimmy Silver, clutching the prefect by the shoulder. "I'll go!"

"No, no!" shouted Beaumont. "I'm going!"

The prefect dragged himself free, and rushed madly into the burning building. The Fistical Four waited anxiously outside. They could not understand why Beaumont, who simply delighted in causing bodily pain to a human being, should run such a great risk to save the life of his dog.

The juniors gazed at the burning building, and saw the fire increase in intensity. Although the prefect had only been gone a minute, it seemed an eternity to the waiting juniors.

Jimmy Silver gazed spellbound at the doorway, and watched the smoke belching forth in great clouds.

"I wonder whether he's all right?" murmured Jimmy Silver. "Maybe the poor chap's—"

Jimmy Silver could not finish his remark. It seemed terrible to think that the prefect might be lying unconscious in that burning building, beside his pet.

Would Beaumont never return?
Was—

"Hurrah!"

It was a faint cheer that fell from the lips of the Fistical Four as the figure of Beaumont, clutching his dog in his arms, came rushing wildly out of the clouds of overpowering smoke.

The prefect lumbered forward, and fell at the feet of the juniors. He had saved his pet from a burning death, but at what expense?

"Is he breathing?" murmured Lovell.

Jimmy Silver put his ear to the prefect's heart, and listened intently.

"Yes, he's breathing all right, but very faintly," he said thankfully. "Buzz off, and fetch a doctor, Lovell, there's a good chap! You, Raby, had better take the dog to the vet's in Coombe, and see whether its life can be saved!"

Lovell and Raby tore off at great speed.

In less than five minutes the fire brigade was on the scene, doing its utmost to get the flames under. The doctor arrived and examined the unconscious prefect.

"Get him to bed at once," he commanded, and the Fistical Four bore his unconscious form to the school, where in less than half an hour he was lying peacefully in a bed in the sanatorium.

Beaumont had a very bad time of it. He recovered in time; but, owing to the fact that he was badly burned, he was very weak for some time.

His first thoughts were for his dog, Rover, and when he learned that the dog had not died, his satisfaction knew no bounds.

From that day to this Rookwood does not know what caused the fire. Several fellows strongly suspected that Beaumont had gone to the empty house for a quiet smoke, and, having fallen asleep, let his lighted cigarette fall on some inflammable stuff.

Be that as it may, no one mentioned his suspicions to the Head, because everyone's sympathies were at the time with the prefect for his heroic act.

Beaumont was a bully of the first quality, but he had one redeeming quality—a love for dumb animals!



BRITAIN'S CHALLENGE!

TO-DAY Britain is making a strong bid to recapture her former speed supremacy of the seas. She already possesses the world's most powerful battleship in H.M.S. Nelson. At a Clydebank shipyard thousands of men are building the Britannia, which is designed to be the largest and fastest liner afloat. And during September, Mr. T. O. M. Sopwith will attempt to win the America's Cup with his new all-British racing yacht Endeavour.

Fourteen Failures.

Fourteen times has this country tried to win the America's Cup, and fourteen times she has failed. Sir Thomas Lipton spent a fortune on building five Shamrocks to compete in this contest—and then failed.

But perhaps the fifteenth time will be successful. Certainly Endeavour will make a noble challenge, for she is the very last word in yacht construction. Built entirely of steel—except for the deck, rudder and panelling in the crew's quarters, that is—she promises to be the fastest yacht ever turned out by a British shipyard. And we all hope she is, too, for it is high time the America's Cup had a change of scenery!

The Endeavour is a giant indeed; yet she is but a pygmy compared with the Britannia, the hull of which is fast nearing completion, in readiness for launching during September. Her Majesty the Queen has consented to perform this ceremony, and when the giant vessel glides down the huge slipway, it will be a memorable moment in the history of British shipping.

Our Challenge.

This wonder-ship has been built with the object of regaining for Britain the Blue Riband of the Atlantic. In other words, it is hoped she will succeed in

crossing the Atlantic in a faster time than any other ship. For years that splendid old veteran, the Mauretania, held the record, but her colours were lowered by the German liners, Bremen and Europa, and the Italian Rex.

Designed to attain a speed of 32 knots, Britannia should win back the record. And how all of us would like to be on our challenger when she makes her maiden voyage across the Atlantic! Already many people have booked passages; they are determined not to miss this big thrill, and will be on the spot to cheer if she proves herself the champion of the Transatlantic service.

Ship Like a Town.

Britannia will be more than a huge, floating, luxury hotel. She'll be like a small town which is taking a trip across the Atlantic.

Measuring over 1,000 feet in length, she will accommodate 3,000 passengers and carry a crew of 1,000. There will be shops, a swimming-bath, and a ball-room. The latter will also act as a theatre and a cinema, having a stage, and being wired for talking pictures.

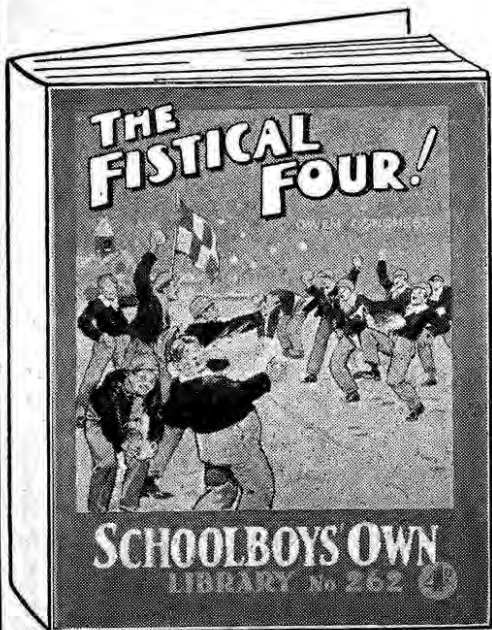
The building of this 73,000 tons liner gave an impetus to British trade which can hardly be credited. It has been estimated that something like 150 industries will play their part in her construction.

Thirty thousand tons of steel were required for Britannia, two million rivets, 100,000 pieces of china and cutlery, ten miles of carpets, including stair treads, and then there are all the hundreds of other different articles which go to fit up a liner.

Here's luck to Britannia and Endeavour! May they prove that this country still rules the waves!

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