MORE ADVENTURES OF THE ST. FRANK'S CIRCUS!

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The Above Thrilling Incident occurs in This Week's Grand Story :—

SCHOOL AND CIRCUS!

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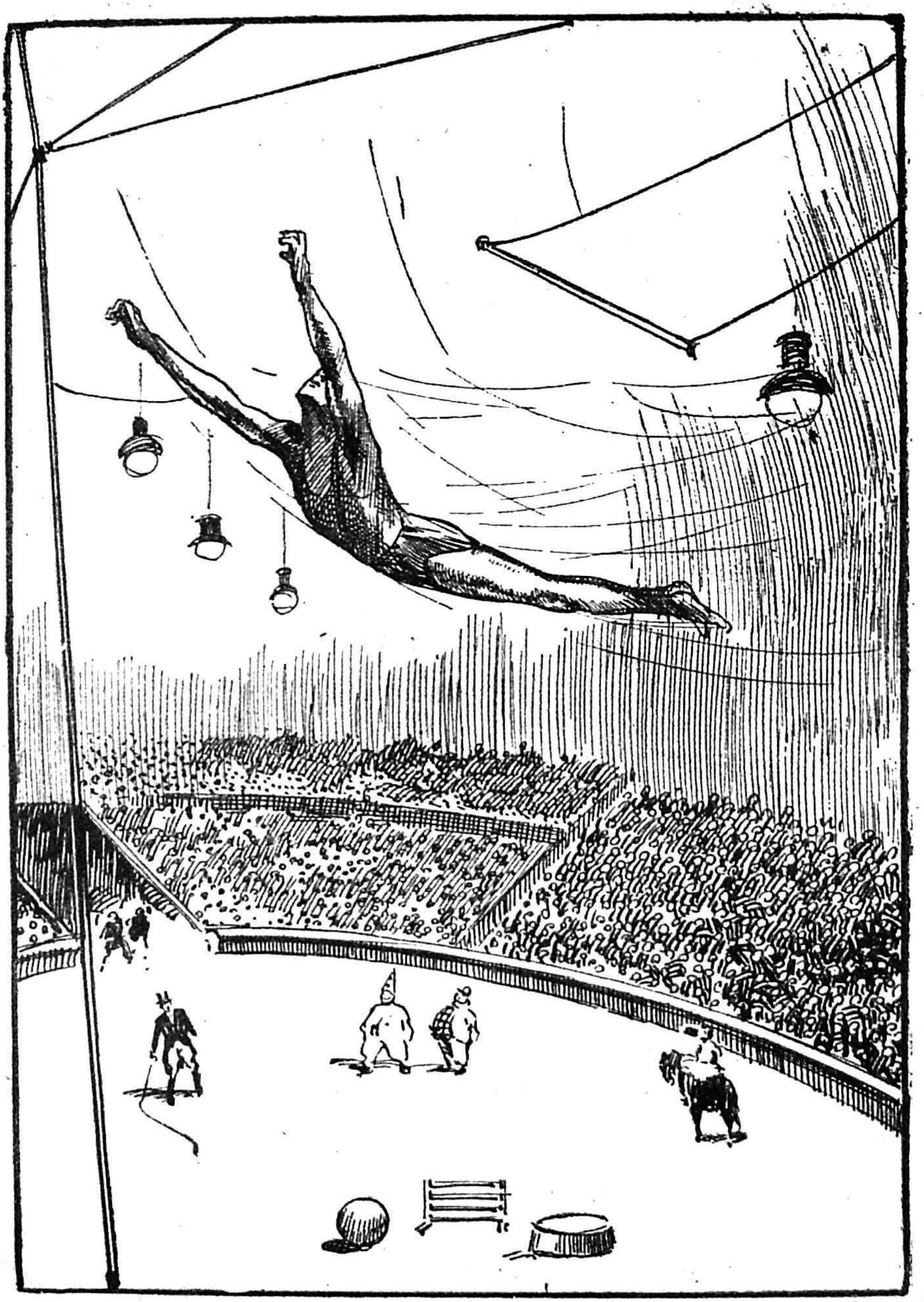


The trapeze swooped down again, and Johnny Onions suddenly hurled himself from the cross-bar, and went flying across the top of the tent like a pea from a catapult.

SCHOOL and CIRCUS!

BEING THE ADVENTURES OF THE BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S IN THE RING.

Ever since the famous St. Frank's Juniors took over the Onions' Circus from the mis-management of Mr. Snayle, the show had grown from a losing to a prosperous concern. The circus belongs to the Onions brothers, formerly of the River House School, but, owing to a clause in an agreement between Snayle and the boys' father, Snayle cannot be dismissed, though he is no longer managing the show—the artists refusing to perform under his directions. He wants to see the circus fail so that he can purchase it at a low figure. Consequently, he is up in arms against the Juniors, and tries by all kinds of shady tricks to get them out of the way, to ruin the show and bring disaster on the performers.

THE EDITOR.

The Narrative Related by Nipper and Set Down by E. Searles Brooks

CHAPTER I.

RISING EARLY IN THE MORNING!

"OUT you come, my lad—show a leg!" I shook Tommy Watson briskly by the shoulder, and he sat up in bed, blinking at me rather dazedly.. Then he transferred his attention to the dormitory windows.

Sunshine was entering slantingly, and with a weak and pale kind of radiance—eloquent proof of the early hour. Outside, the old Triangle of St. Frank's was peaceful and still, and not a soul stirred. The air was filled with the joyous singing of birds.

"Wassup?" mumbled Tommy Watson dazedly.

"I'm up—and you're not!" I replied, giving him another shake. "Come on—don't look so bleary. It's exactly half-past five, and—— There you are! Schoo! clock's just chiming the half-hour!"

"Oh, my hat, yes!" said Watson, with a yawn. "We're getting up at half-past five to-day, aren't we? I say, what a rotten idea! Two hours before rising-bell—and we've got to tumble out!"

"We've got just half an hour to get dressed and have a bite of early breakfast," I said crisply. "We've got to be in the Form-room by six o'clock, or we're locked out! So hustle!"

Tommy Watson reluctantly climbed out of bed, and by this time Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey were also awake. They were no trouble, and started dressing at once.

But Edward Oswald Handforth was not quite so easy. Church and McClure grumbled a bit when they were shaken, but they turned out. And they proceeded to shake their leader until he sat up, lashing out.

Biff!

"Yaroooh!" howled Church wildly. "You —you dangerous lunatic! What's the idea of swiping out——"

"Come on!" muttered Handforth thickly. "All the five hundred of you! Think I'm afraid of those knuckle-dusters, eh? What the—— Hallo! Well, I'm jiggered!"

Handforth opened his eyes and blinked.

"Dreaming?" inquired Reggie. "I gathered, by your actions, that you were just having a scrap with Jack Dempsey!"

"Who woke me up?" demanded Handforth aggressively.

"I did!" growled Church. "You've nearly crippled me!"

"You—you rotter! I'll biff you for that!" roared Handforth. "I was just in the middle of the loveliest dream I ever had. And you've got to butt in and spoil it! I was up in Mars, and I was fighting two or three hundred chaps who looked like spiders, and they had boxing gloves on all their feet! I was whacking the lot, too—swiping them to bits! And every one I touched exploded, just like toy balloons!"

"It's high time you were awakened, then!" said Reggie Pitt. "A fellow who has a dream like that ought to go to a specialist! What did you have for supper last night?"

"Mind your own business!" growled Handforth. "What's the time? I haven't heard the rising-bell!"

"The rising-bell won't go for nearly two hours," I pointed out. "It's just after half-past five, and we're due in the Form-room at six. Don't tell me you've forgotten!"

Handforth leapt out of bed with alacrity.

"Forgotten!" he echoed. "I should think not! Something must have gone wrong, because I meant to be up and get all the rest of you out! Before going to bed, I made up by mind to wake up at a quarter-past five!"

"And instead of waking up, you take a trip to Mars!" sniffed McClure. "A fat chance we should have if we had relied on you! Nipper was out first, and it's a good thing we've got a human alarm-clock in the dormitory."

By this time about fourteen of us were rapidly getting dressed.

The fellows didn't like turning out of their warm beds at such a chilly hour, but once they had started dressing they felt as fit as fiddles, and began to wonder why they hadn't always risen at this hour.

Handforth looked round wrathfully.

"Only four over the ten!" he exclaimed. "What about these other lazy rotters? I think we'd better yank 'em out——"

"Let 'em sleep if they want to," I advised. "As long as we're up, it's all right—they don't matter, anyhow. We can be certain that Christine and Boots and the other two Monks will be up, so there's nothing to worry about."

We went on with our dressing, many of the other juniors watching, but making no attempt to rise. They didn't quite see the fun of getting out two hours before it was absolutely necessary.

And yet on the previous day they had been highly indignant because fifteen Remove fellows and Handforth minor of the Third were allowed the privilege of missing afternoon lessons.

But the afternoon was only free on condition that two hours' work was put in at lessons before breakfast, Mr. Clifford, the sports master, having very decently consented to take the early class from six till eight.

These fourteen fellows formed the group who were connected with Professor Onions' Colossal Circus and Menagerie, which was now pitched at Bannington. Many of the fourteen performed in the show, and the others were engaged in publicity work connected with the circus.

Anyhow, Nelson Lee had agreed that all the fellows who attended early morning lessons would have their afternoons free. It was absolutely imperative for the sixteen to be up. With the others it was a matter of choice.

And although they had been so firm on the matter the previous day, they now displayed a singular reluctance, clinging to their sheets and blankets as drowning men will clutch at a floating spar.

"Not me!" said Armstrong, tucking himself down. "I'm staying here till the rising-bell! This early rising is dotty! Blow the afternoon! What's the good of spoiling our giddy beauty sleep?"

And most of the others agreed with him.

Now that it had come to the actual point, they much preferred to remain in bed—which was exactly what I had anticipated. It was merely a matter of determination, and the bulk of the fellows were not sufficiently strong-willed to turn out.

The dormitory door opened, and Willy Handforth appeared, fully dressed, his face shining with recent rubbing.

"Lazy bounders!" he said disdainfully. "Just what I thought! Only half-dressed! Even Archie's nearly ready!"

"Cheeky young sweep!" snapped his elder brother. "You clear out, or I'll chuck a boot at you!"

"I'm not afraid of that!" said Willy. "You couldn't hit a haystack!"

Whizz!

Willy grinned, and didn't move a hair. The boot flew about two yards wide of him, and he calmly picked it up and returned it with much better aim. In fact, it struck Handforth fairly in the middle of the chest.

"Ouch!" he gasped dazedly.

"It's all right—don't get excited!" said Willy. "I was just showing you how a boot really ought to be thrown. If I hurt you it was your own fault, and if I've done anything I'm sorry for I'm glad of it!"

And Willy vanished, amid widespread grins. Handforth picked up his boot and held it ready.

"I can't aim, eh?" he said thickly. "Just wait till he comes back——"

The door opened, and Handforth let fly with a swish—and Archie Glenthorne, who lounged elegantly in, sat down on the floor with a fearful thud as the boot struck him in the pit of the stomach.

"Help!" he murmured. "Assistance! Tally-ho and yoicks! It appears that the battle has commenced!"

We assisted Archie up, and he wasn't hurt quite so much as he would have us believe. It was rather good to see him up and dressed, but this was entirely due to the faithfulness of Phipps, his valet.

Five minutes later the dormitory was clear of everybody, except those who preferred to sleep, and it seemed that the experiment of rising at five-thirty would turn out an unqualified success.

CHAPTER II.

THE MARTYRS.

JOHN BUSTERFIELD BOOTS nodded cheerily.

"Here we are, all bright and smiling," he said. "Ten to six yet, and still time to have a bite. We can't face two hours of lessons without fortifying the inner man."

"Rather not!" agreed Handforth. "Fatty Little's gone off to prepare things, and we couldn't do better than follow. Come on!"

There were twenty of us all told—the sixteen who formed the circus contingent, and four brave souls who had had the pluck to leap out of bed at the first awakening. Two of these were Church and McClure, the other two being Tregellis-West and the Duke of Somerton.

I was glad to see Buster Boots, Percy Bray, Bob Christine and Yorke. These four had got up as a matter of course, having given their words. But not a single other Monk had turned out.

We all went to the Ancient House Common-room, and refreshed ourselves on hot tea and sandwiches. This brain wave was really an idea of Fatty Little's. He had positively refused to even consider early lessons unless he was strongly fortified.

And so he had collected a small sum from each junior, and had laid in a stock of food. Thus we had an ample supply of sandwiches, to say nothing of a dozen thermos flasks filled with hot tea. It was rather like a picnic.

And so, just on the stroke of six, we marched into the Form-room in orderly fashion, and found the apartment empty. We took our places, and sat at our desks just as though this were quite an ordinary occurrence.

"There goes six!" said Church. "And no sign of Mr. Clifford yet. I say, what a lark if he fails——"

"I'm sorry to deprive you of your lark, Church, but here I am!" said Mr. Clifford cheerily, as he marched in. "'Morning, boys! I must say you're looking bright and cheerful! Feel like work?"

"Rather, sir!" said the class.

"That's just as well, because I'm going to make you perspire between now and eight o'clock!" said Mr. Clifford calmly. "I want you to thoroughly understand that this early class is not a joke, but a reality. Mr. Lee's instructions, you know—must be firm. Lock the door, somebody!"

"No need to, sir," grinned Pitt. "Everybody else is sound asleep."

"Still, we'll have it locked, and be on the safe side," declared the sports master. "No laggards allowed! Anybody who turns up now will be driven away, and must work throughout the afternoon."

The door was locked, and Mr. Clifford turned over his books.

"I'm hanged if I know what lesson to start on," he said frankly. "This is out of my line a bit—still, we'll do our best. By the way, do I observe your jaws munching, Little, or is it an hallucination?"

"Mum-munching, sir?" said Fatty, with his mouth full.

"You're in this room to work—not to feed yourself!" said Mr. Clifford sternly. "Let me see what you've got there! The impudence of it! Eating sandwiches!" he added, as he examined Fatty's desk. "What's inside of 'em?"

"Ham, sir," said Fatty nervously.

Mr. Clifford regarded them doubtfully.

"H'm! I'm a bit dubious——"

"They're first-class, sir—we all had some before coming in," I grinned. "Had to be prepared, you know, sir."

Mr. Clifford looked at the class indignantly.

"Why, you greedy young gluttons!" he exclaimed. "Gorging yourselves on sandwiches, and you didn't have the decency to offer me one!" He took a bite. "Mm! Not so bad!"

Fatty looked on aghast as Mr. Clifford calmly confiscated half a dozen sandwiches and marched back to his desk. And the class settled down to work—at least, it made a big show of doing so.

Upon the whole, that early-morning class was a great success. After the first half-hour, the fellows settled down to steady work, and felt as fit as fiddles—and as hungry as hunters—by the time eight o'clock arrived. It was necessary to show Nelson Lee the result of our labours, and to get his seal of approval—or there would be no afternoon off. Perhaps this was one reason why a good deal of work was accomplished.

"There it goes—eight o'clock," said Mr. Clifford briskly, as the school clock chimed out. "Books shut, boys! Dismiss! Clear out. "Books shut, boys! Dismiss! Clear out as soon as you like! And now for a smoke," he added, under his breath. "I'm gasping!"

"Thanks awfully for taking us, sir," I

said. "I'm afraid you'll get fed up after a few days——"

"You'll get fed up long before I shall, I'll warrant," grinned Mr. Clifford, as he filled his pipe. "I'll see to the books and take 'em to Mr. Lee. You can all shoot off now as soon as you like."

We hurried out, feeling fresher than we had felt for months at such an early hour. The rest of the Remove was just trickling down, sleepy-eyed and yawning. Reggie Pitt regarded them gravely.

"And to think," he said—"to think that we look like that on an ordinary morning! It makes cold shudders go down my spine! In future I shall always get up at half-past five—even after the circus is finished!"

"You rotters!" said Armstrong warmly. "Sneaking down without even having the decency to wake us! Now you'll have the afternoon off and we shan't! You ought to be boiled!"

Handforth glared.

"Sneaking down!" he roared. "Why, you blithering idiot! We woke all of you, and you distinctly said that you preferred to remain in bed!"

"My hat!" gasped Armstrong. "I don't remember a thing!"

The rest of the Remove was rather glum. Now that the early class was over, and we had successfully passed through the ordeal, all the other fellows were envious, and regretted staying in bed.

"All right; we'll be up to-morrow," declared Owen major. "We're not going to have these chaps crowing over us! Just you wait—— Great Scott! What's the matter with Handforth?"

Edward Oswald was looking very queer. The muscles of his neck were strained, his face was red, and he appeared to be undergoing great physical strain.

"Anything wrong, old man?" asked Church anxiously.

Handforth suddenly grew normal and took a deep breath.

"No, fathead!" he said tartly. "I was just practising—— But come along to Study D. I'm not going to have all these asses in the know!"

"Some dread secret apparently," said Pitt, shaking his head. "It looks very much as though Handforth has got a secret malady. Did you notice the way his veins stood out just now? Any day he might pop off! We shall see Handforth standing somewhere, and then—phut!—it'll be all over."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth disdained to reply, and marched off to Study D, followed by Church and McClure, who were looking rather anxious. As soon as they had entered the little apartment, Handforth's chums turned on him.

"You're not ill, are you, old man?" asked McClure.

"Ill?" he roared. "Of course I'm not ill!"

"But you looked awfully bad, you know," put in Church. "That forced, strained look in your face, that tightening of the neck muscles——"

"Idiot!" snapped Handforth. "I'm a ventriloquist!"

Church seemed to sway a bit, and he clutched at the table for support.

"A—a which?" he asked faintly.

"A what?" said McClure, in a feeble voice.

Handforth misunderstood their symptoms.

"Of course, I knew you'd be bowled over," he said calmly. "But you can always trust me to spring these big surprises. Out in the lobby, I was just going to throw my voice, but I thought better of it. No need for the other chaps to be in the secret yet."

"It's just as well," said Church thoughtfully. "Ten to one they'd misunderstand, and only think you were dying."

Handforth looked at him suspiciously.

"The idea occurred to me during lessons this morning," he said. "I've always fancied myself as a ventriloquist. There's nothing in it, really. All you have to do is to throw your voice about."

"It's pretty risky," said McClure dubiously.

"Risky?"

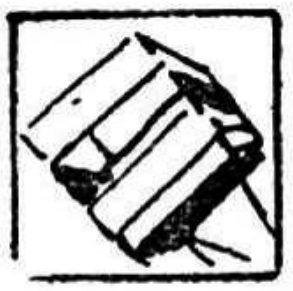
"You might hit somebody!"

"If you're going to be funny, I'll shove your head in the coal-box, and tip the cinders down your neck!" threatened Handforth. "I'm learning to be a ventriloquist, because I'm going to introduce it as a new turn at the circus. I shall be an uproar at the very first performance!"

"You will!" agreed Church and McClure unanimously.

CHAPTER III.

THE TROUBLES OF MR. SNAYLE.



MORNING lessons seemed easy and leisurely for the twenty Remove fellows who had already put in two hours before breakfast.

Instead of starting work for the day with "that tired feeling," they were right in their stride, and settled down to lessons briskly and energetically, and Mr. Crowell came to the conclusion that the early morning stunt was greatly to be commended. He had had a vague fear that everything would go wrong. And Mr. Crowell was a dry old stick, and simply hated anything that upset the smooth routine of work.

But he was certainly delighted with the energy of the twenty fellows who were trying this new system. The rest of the Remove felt that it had been swindled, and they worked sluggishly, with the dismal knowledge that a whole afternoon of labour lay before them.

And when lessons were over, the Remove

crowded out of the Form-room, some joyous, some the opposite.

"Free for the day!" said Handforth, stretching himself. "Fine! Free to do as we jolly well like! Free to move here and there, while these poor beggars have got to swot all the afternoon in class."

"Well, don't rub it in!" growled Armstrong. "Just like you to crow!"

"You could have had the same privilege if you'd shown an ounce of energy this morning," said Handforth. "But you lazy slackers deserve to be in all the afternoon."

"Oh, rats!"

Armstrong went off sulkily. But not a single member of the Remove had any cause for complaint. Nelson Lee had been very diplomatic, and all the boys had had their own choice. Having failed to get up two hours before the rising bell and put in an early spell of work, they were necessarily condemned to the usual afternoon's labour.

As for the rest, they enjoyed the hour before dinner hugely—on Little Side. I got the majority of them out for cricket practice, and I informed them that they would be required daily for this task. It was about the only free time we could have during the stay of the circus.

Left to themselves, most of the fellows would have rushed through dinner in about ten minutes. But it was an orderly meal, and had to take its leisurely course—which was just as well for more than one digestion.

But the very instant dinner was over, a rush was made for the bicycle shed, and a bevy of machines were wheeled out, much to the chagrin of the other fellows.

"Lucky beasts!" said Teddy Long enviously.

The whole twenty of us were starting off, for the extra four were quite keen to come along to the circus and watch. Besides, if there were any vacant seats, the juniors would be able to have a free show.

It was fine and warm, but with a somewhat cloudy sky and a stiff, gusty breeze. Having expected thunder, this change in the weather was welcome. And by the time we arrived on the circus meadow, in Bannington, we were all feeling in the best of spirits.

Johnny and Bertie Onions met us just within the gates, and gave us a warm welcome.

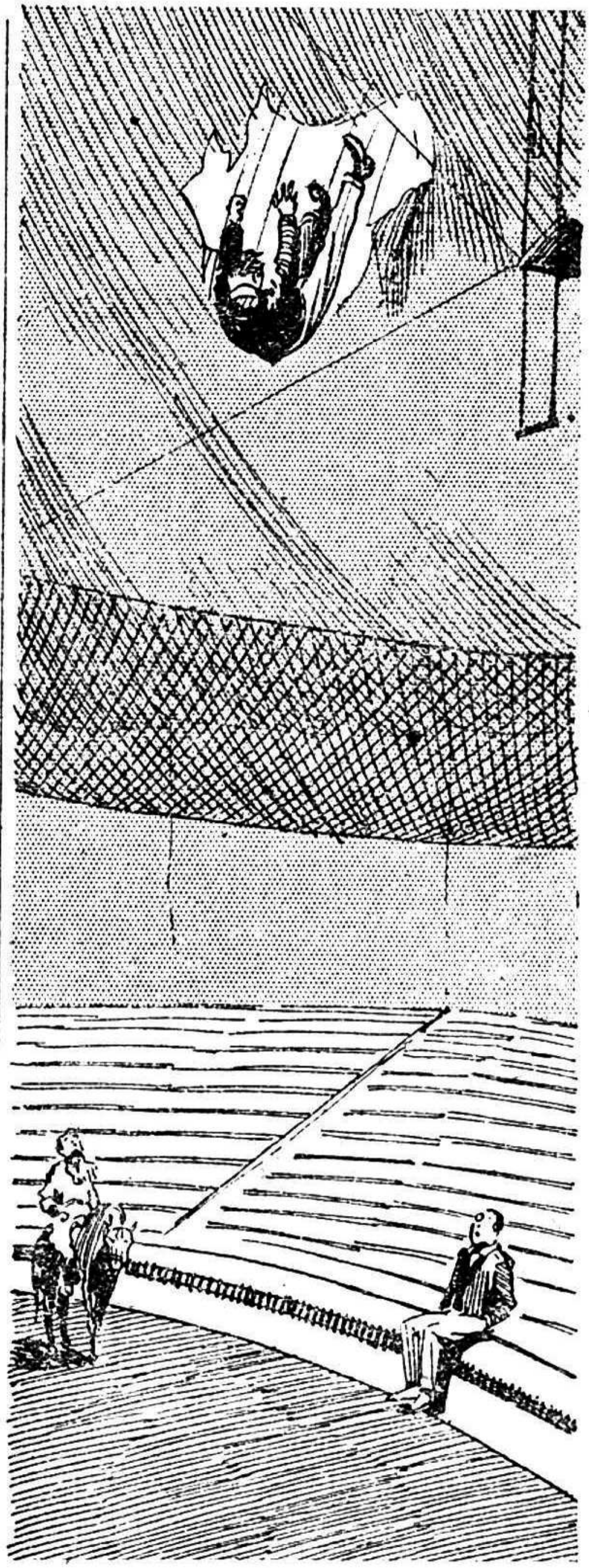
"Everything O.K.?" asked Johnny.

"We're here, aren't we?" I smiled. "Doesn't that speak for itself?"

"Well, yes; but I was a wee bit doubtful," replied Johnny. "You fellows gave me your promise, and I relied on it. But masters are such funny fish at times, and they're liable to change their minds without warning. Besides, you might have been kidnapped!"

I grinned.

"Last night was enough for us," I said. "We're not going to be caught twice like that, my son! By the way, we dashed off



Crash! Without the slightest warning, some object came hurtling through the roof of the tent. It burst through with a loud explosive noise.

in a bit of a hurry at the end of the show yesterday evening. Seen anything of Snayle?"

Johnny Onions frowned.

"Mr. Snayle's been as nice as you like," he said. "Can't make it out! Do you really think he plotted to keep you fellows away from the show?"

"Think!" snorted Handforth. "I know!"

We had no proof, but we were all just as certain as Handforth. Cycling to Bannington on the previous evening, we had fallen into a trap, the whole crowd of us being imprisoned in a barn, being rescued in the nick of time for the show through the shrewdness of Willy Handforth.

There was another reason, too—a deeper reason.

When this tour had commenced, Mr. Snayle had been put in full control by Professor Onions, the father of Johnny and Bertie. The professor had met with disaster in his financial speculations, and the shock had caused him to suffer a stroke, and he was now lying helpless in his own home.

Almost penniless, he had been obliged to send the circus on the road in an impoverished condition and with indifferent artists. This was why it had been such a ghastly fizzle.

It might not have fared so badly if Mr. Snayle had done his utmost, if he had been

Apparently, we had been treated in this way by a number of disreputable Bannington roughs. But these men had no grudge against us, and absolutely no motive for keeping us away from the circus. Mr. Snayle had both. And it was as plain as daylight that he had been behind the plot. His very fury and disappointment upon seeing us arrive had been eloquent enough.

Mr. Simon Snayle was the manager of the show, and he had engendered a bitter hatred against us all because we had turned the circus from a failure into a success. He regarded it as a slight to himself, and his one great desire was to rid the circus of our presence.

faithful to his trust. For Professor Onions had legally made over the ownership of the circus to his two young sons, and a clause in the document guaranteed Mr. Snayle the position of manager.

Taking advantage of the fact that he was virtually the owner, Mr. Snayle had deliberately let things go to pot, while cunningly pretending that he was doing his best.

And Johnny, who was the business man of the two brothers, had not been long in seeing through Mr. Snayle's game. The man was an arrant rascal. His scheme was to make the circus a dead failure, to involve it in hopeless debt and difficulty, so that it would finally collapse. Then Mr. Snayle

would calmly step in and buy it outright as a worthless proposition, for a tenth of its actual value.

Everything had been going very nicely towards this end when the St. Frank's Remove had stepped in, and had wrought miraculous changes. The publicity of the circus had been boosted, the boys themselves performed in the ring, and, instead of being a financial fiasco, the circus was now a little gold mine, fairly coining money at every performance.

So Mr. Snayle's scheme was knocked completely on the head, and somehow he didn't seem to like it. And he knew that he would be foiled just as long as these St. Frank's boys had any connection with the show. To get rid of them was his one great obsession.

But the deuce of it was they wouldn't be got rid of! And on the top of all these irritations, Mr. Snayle had heard from Professor Onions to say that he—the professor—heartily approved of the new order of things. And Mr. Snayle was instructed to do everything in his power to further the cause.

His only course was to acquiesce—or to pretend to do so. Naturally he chose the latter, and so he was everything that was smooth and pleasant—although, pleasantness being absolutely foreign to Mr. Snayle's nature, his change of manner was so obviously a sham that it carried no weight.

And the Remove carried on as though Mr. Snayle didn't exist.

CHAPTER IV.

BUSTER'S LATEST.

JOHN BUSTERFIELD BOOTS came up briskly.

"Those things arrived?" he asked, grasping Johnny's arm.

"Yes. They're in one of those tents," replied Johnny. "Couldn't have a better day for the scheme either. Are you going to get busy on it now?"

"What do you take me for?" retorted Buster. "I'm the publicity chief! My motto is, 'Do it now!' Never leave till to-morrow what you can do to-day. Ginger is the stuff we need in this life—ginger, with plenty of pep! When I start moving, you need to have a quick eye, or you won't even see me! That's J. B. B.!"

"Good old Buster!" grinned Pitt. "Somehow I've got an idea that your people must have been Americans! Never knew such a chap for hustle!"

Buster Boots looked at him disdainfully.

"Don't class me with Americans!" he sniffed. "I've got nothing against 'em on general grounds, but they're a lot of boasters. They're always telling the world what they're going to do—and never do it! We don't say a thing, but deliver the goods!"

"Hear, hear!" said Pitt enthusiastically.

"When I hustle, I hustle!" went on Buster. "When the Americans hustle, they only think they hustle! That's just the difference! Now, then, I want half a dozen of you fellows to lend a hand. No arguing! Come along, and get busy! There's only half an hour before the show!"

There was no doubt that J. B. B. was a great man when it came to advertising, and his remarks concerning the Americans although a bit exaggerated, were absolutely true in substance. And Buster was at least justified, for whenever he boasted he made good his boasts. He never promised a thing unless he could accomplish it. And he was a fellow with a whirlwind energy that carried him along like a human hurricane.

His latest publicity stunt was an enormous box kite—a vast thing, which was designed to carry two enormous streamers into the air—two great banners which would float four or five hundred feet above Bannington, visible for miles around. What Bannington wanted, according to Buster, was to be awakened. In his opinion, Bannington was sound asleep and snoring.

Somebody pointed out that the circus was well patronised, in any case, but Buster waved this aside. He declared that the public needed a constant and continual reminder that the circus was still on the spot. And this banner would do the trick.

Johnny, of course, had readily supplied the money out of the circus funds, and the thing had been done properly. The box kite had been constructed locally, and when it was brought out by Buster and his assistants, it seemed quite impossible that such a vast, cumbersome thing could ever get into the air.

"Why, it must weigh a ton!" said Handforth. "It'll never fly!"

"Won't it?" said Buster grimly. "I know something about kites. Kite flying used to be my hobby. All you fellows have got to do is to obey instructions, and within five minutes this affair will be floating like a feather in the breeze."

And John Busterfield Boots was right.

The kite didn't weigh a ton, or anything like it, but it was extremely cumbersome, and it required half a dozen fellows to shift it to the extreme corner of the meadow.

There was a cable and a winch, by which the kite could be controlled, once it was aloft. But Boots didn't use this winch to start with, preferring the strength of half a dozen sturdy juniors.

"It'll go up a bit jerky at first," he said—"especially in this gusty breeze. And we don't want to risk the cable breaking. As soon as she's steady, we'll transfer her to the winch. Now then! All ready?"

After one or two unsuccessful attempts, the gigantic kite was raised from the ground. A heavy, steady gust of wind came along, and by pulling at the right moment, with all hands on the rope, the kite rose from the grass, hovered a moment or two, and sailed steadily a few feet from the turf.

"Let her go!" yelled Buster. "Easy! Easy!"

Unfortunately, his order was mistaken. Practically all the juniors immediately released their hold on the rope, taking Buster literally.

"Hi!" he roared. "What the—— Look out!"

The kite gave a giddy, lurching swoop upon finding itself thus released, and for a moment was in danger of crashing to splinters on the ground. But it steadied itself, and rose in a lurching, meteoric ascent that fairly took the breath out of the spectators, and before Handforth knew it, he was swept off his feet, and carried twenty feet into the air. He clutched wildly.

"Drop, you ass! Drop!" howled Buster.

"You—you fathead!" gasped Handforth wildly. "Pull the giddy thing down!"

"If you drop, you'll break your neck!" shouted Church, in desperation. "Hang tight, old man, and we'll get you down!"

But the huge kite gave another swoop upwards, and we were all horrified to see Handforth carried another twenty feet into the air. To drop now would be disastrous, if not fatal!

Only for an instant was Buster nonplussed. In giving that order to let go, he had meant his assistants to allow the rope to slide freely, so that the kite could rise. By completely releasing their hold, they had given the kite free play. Nobody was to blame. It was a sheer misunderstanding.

"Quick!" shouted Boots, perfectly calm but filled with dread. "Grab the rope, and pull the kite down steadily. Don't jerk, or he'll lose his grip. And keep your heads! He'll be killed if we get into a panic."

But before the juniors could even grasp at the rope, another rushing gust of wind came along, and the kite was carried up in a series of giddy, swaying swoops. And Handforth clung desperately to the rope.

"He'll be killed! He'll be killed!" muttered Church, as white as a sheet.

"Why didn't he let go?" moaned McClure. "Oh, the idiot!"

This was rather unreasonable, for Handforth was really the only fellow who had really understood Buster's order. If he had let go during the first moment, all would have been well.

It had been sheer instinct that had caused him to clutch tight at the rope as he was lifted from his feet. Twenty feet from the ground, he realised the peril of his position, and hung on desperately. Forty feet from the ground, he clung to that rope for dear life.

But that added gust of wind which carried the great box-kite higher and higher in a series of swoops, had Handforth a full hundred feet up in the air before he could even realise what had happened.

"Good heavens!" I said hoarsely.

The kite was absolutely out of control. We made wild clutches at the rope, utterly desperate with anxiety and fright. But the kite had got such a power on it now that we could obtain no grip.

Shouts were sounding from all round the meadow.

Handforth's deadly position was realised by all, and all the spectators were aghast. Tessa, the little bareback rider, stood at the door of her caravan with a stricken face. It seemed inevitable that a tragedy was about to occur.

During those tense seconds, all eyes were strained upwards, watching that swaying, jerking figure, clutching so grimly to the rope.

Handforth himself was calm.

In any trifling matter he would have been nearly off his head with excitement. But he knew that death lurked beneath him—he knew that his grip was getting weaker. And he shut his eyes with the sheer horror of his position.

Edward Oswald felt that no power on earth could save him. And with the instinct of the doomed, he closed his fingers round that rope in a fierce, desperate grip. He was tossed about like a leaf in the wind.

And then, abruptly, dramatically, the climax came.

The kite stalled drunkenly, dipped down, and the rope slackened. That whirling figure of Handforth turned upside-down, with legs waving, but he still maintained his grip. Then the kite steadied itself instantaneously as another gust caught the fabric.

The rope gave a sickening jerk, and a shout of horror went up.

"He's falling—he's falling!" screamed Tessa, terrified.

That jerk had proved to be the last straw. The unfortunate junior's grip was torn away, and he fell like a stone. From a hundred feet up he came shooting to the ground, twisting, turning, a mere helpless fragment of humanity! And the kite, with a triumphant swoop, swept away with a whirring, shrieking roar of victory from the winch.

My heart seemed to stop beating, and I stood there, transfixed.

It was all over in a flash. But I gave a great gasp as I saw that Handforth shot straight downwards towards the billowing canvas dome of the big tent. He struck—and went clean through the canvas roof with such velocity that the sound of the rending canvas was like an explosion!

CHAPTER V.

HANDFORTH DROPS IN!

"AH!"

It was over—the tragedy had happened before our very eyes. And it was as though a spell had come to an end. With one accord, every human being within the meadow made a wild, frantic rush for the big tent.

"He's dead—he's dead!" panted Church, stricken with horror.

And this was the general opinion. Indeed, there was absolutely no way in which the ill-fated junior could have escaped destruction. The very force of that impact with the tent roof had been enough to kill him, apart from anything else. And he had shot clean through the roof as though it had been made of muslin.

It could scarcely have checked his fall in the slightest degree—he had dropped sheer for a hundred feet—and the impact with the hard turf of the ring would put the final touch to this ghastly tragedy.

A fall from a high trapeze might easily be fatal—and Handforth had swooped down from ten times that height! The consternation among the St. Frank's juniors was utterly pitiful.

The tent was not entirely empty.

It happened that Archie Glenthorne was serenely sitting at the edge of the ring, watching Jerry Dodd putting his pony through a few new tricks. Jerry, in fact, was rehearsing for the afternoon show, and he was anxious to include the new business in his performance.

"Bally good!" declared Archie languidly. "Dash it all, Jerry, that pony of yours is absolutely human! I mean to say, the way he cocks his head round and gives a chappie the glad eye! Priceless, if you know what I mean!"

"Yes, Bud's a little beaut!" declared Jerry affectionately. "If I lost this little pal o' mine—by Jings! What's all that excitement about outside?" he added, as the echo of a great shout came through the canvas walls. "Those fellows seem to be——"

Crash!

Without the slightest warning, some object came hurtling through the roof of the tent. It burst through with a loud explosive noise, and dropped fairly and squarely in the centre of a high net which had been spread by Johnny Onions for practising on the high trapeze.

"Good gad!" gasped Archie.

The net sagged down, straining and groaning in every knot, and stretched so acutely that it seemed almost miraculous that it didn't burst. One side of it tipped over, an object rolled out, and landed gently but firmly in the centre of the ring. The net whipped back like a piece of elastic.

"Great pip!" said Handforth dazedly.

He was sitting in the centre of the ring looking bewildered.

"Well, dash it!" said Archie, with indignation. "Hardly necessary to buzz in quite so boisterously, what? I mean to say, why not use the jolly old door, laddie? Buzzing through the roof strikes me as being distinctly on the ragged edge!"

Handforth still sat there in a daze.

"What on earth happened?" demanded Jerry Dodd in amazement. "You idiot! You might have killed yourself, jumping down like that——"

"Think I did it on purpose?" snorted Handforth. "Don't be a fathead! I've just fallen out of the sky! Dropped sheer for two thousand feet! In fact, I was above the clouds when I fell off that rope! I'll bet you couldn't do it without getting killed!"

He slowly rose to his feet, and was absolutely amazed to find that he was not only perfectly intact, but unbruised! He was hardly ruffled, and his clean collar was still uncrumpled. His only pain was a slight ache in both his hands.

"My only hat!" he said breathlessly. "It—it can't be true! Perhaps I'm dead—perhaps this is what it's like to die!"

He looked round, and saw Archie and Jerry still gazing at him, and he concluded that his first impression was right. By some miracle he had escaped. And then the crowd surged in.

I was among the foremost fellows to tear in at the big entrance. We all expected to find Handforth's battered and mangled remains lying in the ring—and, indeed, many fellows had hesitated to enter the tent at the last moment.

I suddenly came to a halt, my eyes goggling.

"Why—what—— You—you——"

"Anything wrong?" asked Handforth, as though nothing had happened. "Don't stare at me like that, ass! I'm not hurt——"

"Not hurt!" I gasped faintly.

"What do you take me for—a piece of glass?" snapped Handforth. "A little drop like that doesn't hurt me! As a matter of fact, I thought it would be just as well to see what Archie and Jerry were doing, so I dropped in!"

"But—but it's impossible!" I shouted. "You can't be alive——"

"Handy!" sobbed Church, rushing up to him.

He and McClure were so overjoyed to see their leader safe and sound that they stood there, shaking with emotion. Both were pale and haggard, but they recovered rapidly now that the anxiety was over.

The general amazement was overwhelming.

"Forgive me for being inquisitive, dear old souls, but I absolutely fail to grasp the scheme," observed Archie. "Kindly do a little explaining stuff. I'm dashed if I can——"

"Why, didn't you know, Archie?" said Pitt. "Handforth was carried up by

Buster's kite, and he was pretty nearly a hundred feet in the air when he was jerked off the rope. He fell like a stone."

"How absolutely priceless!" said Archie. "I mean, it was bally clever of him to choose such a ripping spot. But I must be allowed to remark that the tent is in no way improved. Somewhat mouldy for the customers if the old clouds begin to weep!"

"We'll soon have that rent repaired," declared Johnny. "I'll get some men on the job at once. But—but I can't swallow it, you know! Aren't you really hurt, old man?" he added, turning to Handforth.

"Hurt?" repeated Handy. "I'm as right as rain!"

"Haven't got a few ribs broken, or one or two collarbones shattered?" asked Pitt. "You don't feel that your spine is parted into different segments? Personally, I expected to find you littered all over the tent in about fourteen different instalments!"

"And what about my kite?" demanded Buster, his anxiety and concern giving place to indignation. "It's gone goodness knows where! The whole thing's messed up—just because you fatheads let go of the rope! A fat lot of good me getting these brilliant ideas!"

But he wasn't really serious. And for the next ten minutes we all excitedly discussed Handforth's miraculous escape. There was, of course, only one possible explanation.

His impact with the tent roof had spent all its force on the canvas, Handforth himself scarcely feeling the concussion. And his fall had been broken so effectively that the net just under the roof was enabled to bear the strain. It was extremely lucky that the net was very stout—and little short of incredible that Handforth should have fallen in that exact spot.

Before long we were all grinning. This was partly due to our relief, and partly because Handforth took it all in such a matter-of-fact way. He didn't seem to realise that he had escaped certain death by the barest fraction of an inch.

CHAPTER VI.

JOHNNY'S TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

BUT the afternoon's excitement was by no means over.

It was soon time for the show to begin, and everybody connected with the circus was delighted to see the crowds rolling up, and the big tent filling with an excellent audience. The seats were not packed to suffocation, but the "house" was good enough to please the heart of any showman.

And the performance went with its usual swing. Handforth performed as funnily as ever, first as the lion-tamer, and then in the rôle of comic strong man. It was all the funnier because he insisted on taking himself seriously. And Willy, dressed as the lion, was getting more and more proficient. Indeed, it was practically impossible to tell the fake. There was no attempt at deception in this act. It was left to the audience to form its own conclusions. And scarcely five per cent of the audience realised that the lion was an imitation one, and wouldn't have believed it if they had been told.

And while the show was on, Buster Boots and several others, assisted by some of the circus men, were making a more successful attempt to refly the kite. To Buster's great joy, the enormous kite had descended less than a mile away in the top of some trees, and had been rescued with hardly any damage.

Considering that the kite had been regarded as a total loss, the discovery was extremely welcome. And even while the show was in full swing, the kite was brought back, and launched with complete success.

At just about this same time, Johnny Onions was preparing for the final act of the show. It was his task to provide the final thrill which would send the audience away satisfied.

He had recently invented an entirely new act, which he called the Dive of Death. He used the high trapeze for this particular trick, with no nets. Having obtained a long, steady swing on the trapeze, Johnny lowered himself until he was hanging head downwards, thus swinging in a manner which looked terribly precarious, but which was perfectly safe to a trained acrobat.

And at the end of his backward swing the idea was to suddenly release his hold and dive head downwards, straight into a funnel-like opening of canvas. He slid down this like a rocket, to land safe and sound in the very centre of the ring.

From the spectators' point of view, it was very thrilling, and was liable to cause many hearts to beat wildly. But, as a matter of fact, the trick was perfectly safe, provided Johnny released his hold on the trapeze at the crucial moment. And he was not likely to make a mistake there.

The long canvas funnel was entirely his own invention. It tapered down, and curved, thus making his fall easy and even comfortable. And there was the thrilling moment when he shot out like a rabbit from a hole, a foot above the ring, to drop on a prepared mat.

When all was said and done, the trick was a novel edition of shooting the chute, and it had proved to be enormously popular on the three occasions that he had performed it. It was a sensational success, and was placed in the programme as a permanent attraction.

Everything was ready for the trick now, and the orchestra had silenced its customary noise to give effect to the great moment. Johnny had climbed to the high trapeze,

and was now swinging backwards and forwards, getting up the necessary velocity.

Six or seven more swings, and the speed would be sufficient. It was largely a matter of judgment, and Johnny's was of the best. It was not until the last moment that he hung head downwards. At present he was swinging to and fro in a sitting position.

He just reached the end of his forward swing for the third time, and was thinking about assuming his inverted position. And at this second he made a rather terrible discovery.

The strain on the trapeze at the extreme end of its thrust was considerable, and Johnny felt the support, overhead, give a decided jar, and at the same second he heard a faint but ominous crack.

Instantly, his glance leapt upwards.

The trapeze was fixed to one of the great canvas roof supports, and it seemed strong enough to hold a couple of elephants. But that crack told Johnny that something was wrong.

And it was a serious matter for something to be wrong with the support of a trapeze that is whirling its human freight backwards and forwards fifty feet above the ground! A mishap at such a time as this, and the performer would go hurtling down like a stone.

Instantly, Handforth's remarkable escape leapt into Johnny's mind. Was it possible that there were to be two mishaps in one afternoon? Handforth had escaped by sheer luck—blind chance. But there was not the slightest hope of that for Johnny. For there were no nets under him—nothing but the ring, surrounded by the hundreds of staring, tense faces.

Again he reached the end of his swing, and this time the crack was so startlingly pronounced that the trapeze shuddered, and several of the attendants below looked up with scared, anxious expressions.

Johnny was compelled to make an instantaneous decision.

Long experience of trapeze work told him that he was swinging between life and death. There was something wrong up there in the roof—something radically wrong. The support might possibly stand the strain of another forward swing, but something would collapse if the performer put so much as an ounce of added effort into his work.

Johnny's dilemma was a terrible one.

At any second he expected the trapeze to break away, and send him hurtling to the ground. To remain on it for one unnecessary moment might be fatal. And yet to drop into that prepared canvas shoot was an impossibility!

He had not yet sufficient swing—and dared not increase the momentum. And to attempt to dive was madness, for such an attempt was absolutely doomed to failure.

There was nobody about at the moment, and the unshaven rascal edged his way towards the ancient van, and entered.

He must act at once—on the second!

All these thoughts passed through his mind in a swift flash, and again he reached the fatal point.

Crack!

The trapeze seemed to leap, and Johnny's heart was in his mouth. The next time it would break! He knew it! He knew it as surely as the sun was shining down upon the outside of the tent.

He could do nothing at the end of his backward swing, for the shoot was out of reach; he dared not lessen the swing of the trapeze, for the very effort of doing so would bring about the fatal result.

There was one chance—one faint possibility of safety.

And that was to leap at the crucial moment—to leap before the trapeze support could give way, and precipitate him into eternity! And when there is only one chance, that chance is inevitably taken.

The trapeze swooped down again, and Onions suddenly hurled himself from the cross-bar, and went flying across the top of the tent like a pea from a catapult.

"Oh!"

The audience uttered one long-drawn-out gasp of terror.

Just when it seemed certain that Johnny would go crashing to the ground, his fingers closed round some stay-ropes which were hanging loose. His grip tightened, his headlong descent was checked, and he slid down to the ring in a kind of long, swooping glide, landed on his feet, and calmly bowed!

CHAPTER VII.

THE INQUIRY.

NOBODY knew more than Johnny Onions what a terrible effort it cost him to appear so cool and collected at that fateful moment. The audience burst into tumultuous applause, and the band, taking its cue, crashed out into the National Anthem, announcing the show to be at an end.

It had been touch and go, but Johnny was safe. And the audience thought that it was all part of the programme! They believed that they had witnessed the much-advertised dive of death.

But all those who were connected with the circus knew different.

Tessa, who had been standing just in the entrance, was looking pale and shaken, and she stared at Johnny as he came out as though he were a ghost. As for Johnny himself, he still felt dazed, and both his hands were burning with acute agony.

He was instantly surrounded by an excited crowd.

"You must be mad!" shouted Handforth. "What the dickens did you take that idiotic leap for? Why didn't you go down the shoot, as usual?"

Johnny gave a kind of gulp.

"Couldn't!" he said, breathing hard. "There was something wrong."

"You might have killed yourself!" exclaimed Tessa angrily. "Oh, Johnny, why did you take such a terrible risk? I—I thought you were going to be smashed to pieces! That's two frights I've had this afternoon!"

Some of the attendants had come hurrying in by now—those men who had been waiting at the bottom of the canvas shoot to receive Johnny, and steady the flimsy structure. I arrived, too. For, as ringmaster, I had been absolutely startled at Johnny's remarkable change of programme. But, having heard those cracks from above, I suspected something of the truth.

"Are you all right, Master Johnny?" asked one of the men anxiously.

"Yes, thanks, Sam," said Johnny. "It was a near thing, though. My hands burn a bit, through sliding down that rope, but that's nothing. I'm lucky to be alive!"

"It was a pretty marvellous leap, old man," I said, as I patted him on the back. "And it was ten to one whether you'd reach those ropes or not. What went wrong?"

"That trapeze," said Johnny quietly. "Another swing, and it would have smashed away at the upper support. It gave two or three cracks, and I knew that it would never stand the added strain of a wider swing. I simply had to leap, or——"

"You—you mean to say that the support started giving way?" demanded Handforth.

"Yes!"

"Then you're a jolly plucky chap for taking that jump!" declared Pitt. "You saved the show, too! As for your judgment, the very fact that you're safe is eloquent enough. Thank goodness, you acted quickly."

"It was either that or coming down in an even greater hurry than I did," replied Johnny, with a smile. "As soon as the tent's empty, I'm going aloft to see what's wrong with that support."

Handforth scratched his head.

"It beats me!" he said. "Why, those wooden joists up there are as big as tree-trunks! How on earth could one of them crack without being tampered with—— By George!"

He looked rather startled, and was about to speak when he noticed that Tessa was near by. But the girl only remained a few minutes longer, and then hastened off to her caravan, to get changed.

"I'll bet I've got it!" said Handforth grimly, as soon as Tessa had gone. "This is some of Snayle's work!"

"Snayle!" I repeated, staring.

"Of course! The murderous rotter!" snorted Handforth. "You know he's got a grude against us! I'll bet he weakened that beam on purpose—a deliberate attempt to send Johnny to his death!"

"My hat!" said Church. "There's something in that."

"There's nothing in it at all!" exclaimed Johnny Onions sharply. "Don't get such dotty ideas! If anybody weakened that support, it was Handforth himself!"

"What!"

"Me?" roared Handforth, aghast.

"Yes!"

"Why, you—you—— You accuse me of ——"

"My dear ass, I don't accuse you of anything," interrupted Johnny. "I simply said that you weakened the support. Naturally, you didn't do it on purpose. It was just one of those things that nobody could foresee——"

"Yes, but look here!" snorted Handforth. "I'm not going to have you saying that I weakened that joist! I haven't even been up on the roof!"

"You didn't fall through it, did you?" asked Johnny quietly.

"Eh? Fall through it?" repeated Edward Oswald. "You mean——. Oh! But—but it's impossible——"

"By Jove! I believe Johnny's right," I said swiftly. "You know, you came through that canvas roof with terrific velocity, old man, and the shock was enough to smash a dozen beams!"

"Oh, that's rot!" argued Handforth. "I wasn't even hurt!"

"Which is nothing to go by at all," I pointed out. "A motor-car can smash at sixty miles an hour through a gate, and hardly have a scratch on it, and not even a dent! Yet the gate will be shattered to smithereens. Your fall was something of the same kind. The shock to the tent was considerable, but you felt nothing. Just one

of those queer tricks of gravity, or something."

"Well, let's go up and have a look!" said Johnny practically. "The tent's empty by this time, and we'll soon settle the question. And the sooner that weakness is remedied the better. Sliding down the shoot is much easier than skinning my giddy hands on those ropes!" he added, with a rueful glance at his burning palms.

Most of the fellows hurried off to get their bicycles, in order to get to St. Frank's in time for tea. For it was necessary to return to the school in order to see about prep., and other matters. It wasn't necessary to start back for the circus until close upon seven.

Johnny and I went up to the top of the tent to make investigations, and Handforth and Boots and Reggie Pitt waited below. They had promised to wait for me so that we could cycle back together.

"There you are—just what I thought!" said Johnny, when we were clinging to the woodwork, immediately under the canvas roof. "Have a look at this! Just near the spot where Handforth came through."

The high trapeze was securely fixed at this point, and as Johnny put some weight on one of the ropes a distinct crack appeared in that particular piece of woodwork. It was quite new and freshly made.

"Goodness knows how it happened, and it's no good trying to fathom it," said Johnny.

"Well, was it my fault?" shouted Handforth, from the ring.

"No."

"There you are!" said Handforth triumphantly.

"It wasn't you fault, but there's not the slightest doubt that your fall through the roof started this crack," went on Johnny. "It's an absolute mystery to me how it could have happened, but there you are. The sudden strain, I expect."

"You were right about that leap of yours," I said grimly. "Another swing, and this split would have developed into a direct fracture."

"And I should have developed into about a hundred fractures!" agreed Johnny. "Well, let's go down—— Hallo! Rain! Oh, glory! Looks healthy for the evening show, doesn't it?"

A sudden pattering had sounded immediately above us, on the stretched canvas, a pattering which rapidly developed into a steady, drumming roar. And above the noise of the rain we distinctly heard a distant boom of thunder.

I looked at Johnny, and made a grimace.

"Empty benches to-night, old son," I said. "Still, can't be helped. It's never any good getting in a temper with the weather."

"That's what my dad always said," agreed Johnny. "Some circus proprietors start swearing when it rains, but swearing doesn't improve matters. I had an idea there was thunder about. We've felt it ever since yesterday."

We descended to the ring, and Johnny gave some instructions to the carpenters to go aloft, and make the damage good. Then we strolled to the exit flaps, where the other fellows were standing.

"Pretty cheerful, eh?" said Reggie, as we looked out upon the hissing downpour. "We've got to cycle through this! Anybody got any diving-suits, or swimming costumes?"

"Rats!" said Johnny. "You can't go back to St. Frank's in this. Wait until it's over, and have tea with Bertie and me while you're waiting."

"Sometimes," said Pitt, "you're almost human!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. SNAYLE'S OPPORTUNITY.

JOHNNY'S invitation was very opportune, and deserved better appreciation than Reggie's facetious remark. But Johnny took it in good part, and grinned.

"We've got a particularly decent spread to-night," he went on. "I'll just give the word to Dippy to make ready for the guests. Whoo! Coming down cats and dogs now!"

The rain was, indeed, hissing down in one continuous sheet, and this was an excellent sign. It indicated that the torrent would be of short duration. But to cycle through it was quite an unnecessary ordeal.

Johnny vanished, and before long we observed him waving to us from the steps of his caravan. So we made a dash for it, and bundled inside, where everything was cosy and comfortable.

"There's a good deal to be said for this caravan life," remarked Handforth, as he sat down on a locker. "I wouldn't mind living in one of these giddy things, you know. We had some fine sport during that caravan tour of ours a few terms back."

There was certainly something attractive about this well-appointed caravan. But it was not made to accommodate six juniors, and they had a bit of difficulty in disposing themselves.

However, after a little arranging, they were all sitting round the table, and Dippy was busy piling the festive board with large supplies of attractive-looking eatables.

Dippy, the dwarf, was a kind of handy man, but his main duties when the circus was pitched consisted of seeing after meals for Mr. Suayle, and for Johnny and Bertie. He was a cook of no mean quality, and he could make a cup of tea like a connoisseur.

"Good for you!" said Johnny. "That's the style! How did you manage to conjure up all this selection?"

"Dippy always ready to please you, boss," replied the dwarf, as he prepared to bustle out. "Dippy go now and bring tea. Very pleased young boss safe. Dippy much scared this afternoon."

He went off, and Johnny looked serious.

"He's one of the best, that poor beggar," he said. "And Snayle treats him like a piece of dirt! I'm going to try to make an alteration, if I can. Go ahead, you chaps! Pile in!"

We needed no further invitation, but proceeded to pile in with gusto. And in the meantime Dippy scuttled off to the "kitchen"—a caravan which he used for this especial purpose—and prepared to make the tea, so that it would be served hot and fragrant.

He hardly noticed Mr. Simon Snayle gazing out of the window of his caravan. Mr. Snayle had been watching for some time. He had seen that four St. Frank's fellows had entered Johnny's little wheeled home, and he knew, by Dippy's activities, that tea was being served.

And Mr. Snayle was very thoughtful. The rain had stopped now, the sudden thundershower being over. The sky was clearing, and patches of blue were beginning to make themselves apparent overhead. The sun came out, and the golden light glistened on the wet grass.

But Mr. Snayle saw nothing of this. There was an inscrutable expression on his face, although his eyes were wholly evil.

Throughout the day he had made himself pleasant to Johnny and Bertie, and even to the St. Frank's fellows—a supreme ordeal for a man who hated the boys as much as Mr. Snayle did. His one desire was to rid the circus of these confounded upstarts, these precocious schoolboys. But, cudgel his wits as he would, Mr. Snayle had been able to find no solution to the problem. Force was out of the question, and plotting had failed.

But now, in a moment, he saw a way.

The germ of the idea had occurred to him as soon as he saw the four of us dash across to the Onions Brothers' caravan. Mr. Snayle was no fool, and he instantly gathered that we were stopping to tea, on account of the rain.

And here was his great chance!

Ten minutes' deep thought was sufficient. He now had the plan cut and dried—formulated in every detail. And at last a slow, malicious smile twisted the corner of his mouth.

"By thunder!" he muttered. "They'll never wriggle out of this corner!"

He stepped across his caravan, unlocked a small cabinet, and extracted a paper packet. He slipped it into his pocket, passed out, and walked briskly to Dippy's kitchen. The dwarf was just in the act of filling the kettle.

"Dippy soon come, boss," he said, cringing, as though expecting to be struck. "Dippy making tea for young gents——"

"All right, fool, don't upset that kettle!" interrupted Mr. Snayle sourly. "See here, Dippy, there's something you've got to do—and you'd best remember that it's my private business. And if you breathe as much as a word to a living soul, I'll crack every bone in your blamed carcase!"

The dwarf almost trembled as Mr. Snayle towered over him.

"Dippy always do what boss say," he muttered. "Dippy not speak of boss' business. Take tea now to Master Johnny."

"Not so much hurry, you crooked lump of garbage!" said Mr. Snayle, taking the packet out of his pocket. "See this? Well, there's some powder in here, and as soon as you've made that tea, you've got to empty this powder into the teapot. Then stir it up."

Dippy looked scared and thoroughly alarmed.

"Boss not poison boys?" he asked fearfully. "Dippy frightened! Not want to do this, boss! Dippy much afraid——"

"You fluffy-brained fool!" interrupted Mr. Snayle harshly. "You snivelling cuss! What the blazes do you mean by suspecting me of using poison? Take that, you durned skunk!"

"Crash!"

He delivered a stunning, vicious blow on the side of Dippy's head that sent the dwarf reeling across the caravan. The unfortunate creature cowered there with his head down.

"This stuff's harmless—understand?" said Mr. Snayle curtly. "Here it is— take it! And do as I have ordered! Put it in the tea as soon as you've got that kettle boiling—and see that the boys drink. All of 'em! And you needn't be frightened—this powder is only a touch of dope to make the young vermin sleep for a while. And remember what I said about speaking. If a word of this leaks out, I'll choke the life out of you!"

Without another word, Mr. Snayle turned on his heel, and walked out. He left Dippy shivering violently, and breathing hard. The dwarf was absolutely in Mr. Snayle's power, and there was eloquent evidence of this when Dippy obediently emptied the powder into the teapot soon afterwards. He had just poured the water over the leaves, and the powder instantly dissolved and became invisible.

From past experience, Dippy knew that he had to obey. More than once he had been thrashed with a dog whip until he lay bruised and bleeding. And he had wits enough to realise that Mr. Snayle was not attempting to do the boys any

murderous hurt. This was merely part of some scheme to get rid of them.

But Dippy was nervous and shaky as he carried the teapot into the cheery caravan, where the juniors were busy at their meal, and highly delighted at the warm sunshine which was now streaming through the windows.

"Good old tea!" said Reggie Pitt heartily. "Here we come—all hot and steaming! Who's going to do the honours?"

"Leave that to me," said Johnny.

He picked up the teapot, and filled the six cups.

CHAPTER IX.

RINGING THE CHANGES.

DIPPY stood looking on with such an expression of fear on his face that we could not fail to observe it. Handforth frowned rather darkly.

"Has that beast of a Snayle been at you again?" he demanded.

Dippy started.

"Young boss mistaken," he stammered. "Dip—Dippy all right. Not seen Mr. Snayle for hours. Dippy very happy because young bosses enjoying tea. Go now, and get cakes."

"That's the idea," said Pitt, as he took up his cup, and sipped at it. "Ah! This is the stuff! Chuck over one of those scones Handy, I can see that Buster's eyeing them covetously."

"I'll have to give Dippy a touching up," said Johnny, frowning. "He's famous for his tea, and this isn't up to the mark. Kind of squiffy taste about it. Notice it?"

"I expect he's trying a new brand," I said, taking a gulp. "It does taste a bit queer, but perhaps the milk's to blame. Milk's queer stuff during thundery weather, you know."

And the subject of the tea was dismissed, and we continued our meal merrily, with absolutely no suspicion of the truth. Dippy stood looking on with that same scared expression, but we did not connect his attitude with our own meal.

In the meantime, a rather disreputable looking individual was lurking about among the transport waggons. He was a ragged, unshaven customer of a most nondescript appearance. Curiously enough, he seemed to be taking a rather lively interest in our own caravan and in Dippy's kitchen.

It was no uncommon thing for a tramp to hover about the circus either in search of a casual job, or a good feed. So this fellow was practically ignored by the few men who were about. It was just the slack time, anyhow, when the hands were at their evening meal

Dippy soon left us, and it seemed to me that he was looking just a little relieved. Possibly he had been expecting us to expire on the spot, after drinking the tea; but as there seemed to be no alarming symptoms, he took himself back to his own quarters.

But soon after he had gone Handforth gave a prodigious yawn.

"Funny thing!" he mumbled. "I've come all over drowsy—can't keep my giddy eyes open. Better have another cup of tea, I think."

Reggie Pitt yawned, too.

"That's the worst of this sultry weather," he said, leaning back. "It's a bit stuffy in this caravan, too."

With a start, I realised that I was unaccountably sleepy, and the sensation of utter lassitude crept over me at such an alarming pace that I found myself nodding off even as I attempted to reply. I vaguely noticed that we had all emptied our tea-cups, and then I remembered that queer taste.

"I say, nothing wrong with that tea, was there?" I asked, forcing myself to speak articulately. "I wonder if somebody's been——"

Handforth flopped on to the table, and lay there breathing heavily. Bertie Onions was already lolling back with his mouth open. Reggie Pitt tried to nudge him aside, but didn't seem to have the strength.

And after that everything was a kind of blur, and I just remember sagging down in my chair, and then I must have gone sound asleep.

It was about three minutes after that that Mr. Snayle appeared out of his caravan. He had just set down a pair of binoculars—through which he had been staring in at the open window of our own van. There was an expression of flushed triumph on the man's face.

"Dippy!" he called out sharply, as he descended the steps.

"Boss call Dippy?" asked the dwarf, running up. "Dippy do as boss say——"

"Shut your mouth, you cursed fool!" hissed Mr. Snayle. "Go and fetch a tray, and then follow me. Move, or I'll lift you on the toe of my boot!"

Dippy scuttled off, and Mr. Snayle walked leisurely towards Johnny Onions' caravan, and marched in. He stood just within the little apartment, and gave a soft chuckle. He gazed upon a scene of peaceful slumber. All six juniors, including myself, were lolling about in various attitudes of repose.

Dippy appeared with the tray, and Mr. Snayle made way for him.

"Look pretty, don't they?" he said, with a sneer. "Don't stare like that, you half-witted lout! Get busy and clear this table! Take everything off—the whole lot of truck! And look slippy about it!"

"Dippy scared!" muttered the dwarf hoarsely. "Young bosses all dying——"

Mr. Snayle uttered such a growl of rage that Dippy ducked away, and commenced piling up the tray at express speed. And Mr. Snayle gave a jeering laugh.

"These boys ain't hurt in the least," he said softly. "They're just asleep—see? In a couple of hours' time they'll be as sprightly as you are, except for a headache. There ain't no reason for you to look scared. And remember what I told you about keeping your mouth shut."

Within five minutes, the table was completely cleared.

All traces of the meal were removed, and now Mr. Snayle worked quickly. He proceeded to take a number of curious things from his pockets—which Dippy had observed to be bulging.

First of all, a whisky bottle, half empty, and then half-a-dozen small glasses. These were placed about the table in odd positions, and Mr. Snayle poured whisky in several. He added an artistic touch by knocking one of the glasses over on its side.

Then he took out a pack of much used playing cards, and with these he littered the table, dealing out various cards for the supposed players. Some of the cards he dropped carelessly on the floor.

And finally he took out money—piles of coppers and a small proportion of silver. Against every junior he laid a little heap of money, and then he stood back, and grinned.

"Good!" he murmured. "Anybody coming into this van could only draw one conclusion. I've got these young tykes waxed now! They'll be like this for an hour, at least, and when they begin to recover they'll be like a drunken crowd. Couldn't be better!"

He was just about to leave the caravan when he paused, an evil glitter entering his eyes. Dippy had just come in, and was gazing at the scene with a kind of listless resignation.

"Pretty, ain't they?" said Mr. Snayle. "But there's just one point that needs considering. The young beggars don't smell of spirit! Anybody cute enough could tell that they were doped, and not drunk. We'll soon put that right, Dippy."

"What boss mean to do?" asked Dippy huskily.

"Grab this first kid, and force his mouth open!" ordered Mr. Snayle. "That's right! Wider, you fool—wider! Good!"

Dippy had seized Handforth's head, and jerked it back. And now the unfortunate junior's mouth was held wide open. And Mr. Snayle proceeded to pour a considerable lot of whisky down the unconscious Removite's throat. It was all the better, perhaps, that some of the whisky spilled over, and soaked Handforth's shirt front and tie.

All the rest were treated in exactly the same way, and the caravan fairly reeked with spirits. Mr. Snayle placed the nearly empty bottle on the table again, and turned to Dippy.

"Looks realistic, don't it?" he jeered. "Within a couple of hours, Dippy, these infernal brats will be cleared out for good. And remember to keep your mouth closed! If you don't I'll take the skin off your filthy carcase! And take these!"

Mr. Snayle handed over a packet of cigarettes.

"What Dippy do?" asked the dwarf. "Dippy don't smoke."

"Well, you're going to smoke now!" snapped Mr. Snayle. "Light six of these in succession, and smoke 'em about a quarter down, and then leave them burning on the table—one against each kid. I'll be back in five minutes."

And Mr. Snayle, feeling that he had attended to all details with complete care, left the caravan, and locked it behind him.

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERIOUS TRAMP.

DIPPY stood looking at the helpless juniors for some moments after Mr. Snayle had gone.

He was relieved to see that they were all breathing evenly and naturally, and it was fairly obvious that no real harm had overtaken the party. In fact, Dippy was beginning to grasp the nature of the ingenious plot. Simple enough — amazingly simple — but likely to be successful, nevertheless.

To judge by appearances, there had been a disgustingly drunken orgy in this caravan —an orgy of card playing, drinking, and gambling. Ninety-nine arrivals out of a hundred would declare that we had been guilty of base conduct, and had drunk ourselves into a condition of insensibility. There was, in fact, no other construction to place upon this scene.

And Dippy was not such a fool as he was believed to be.

He could even guess where Mr. Snayle had now gone, and the dwarf clenched his horny hands, and muttered beneath his breath. He could do nothing! If he so much as performed the slightest action to ruin this plot, his punishment would be terrible

For years Mr. Snayle had enslaved this unfortunate creature until he was no longer like a human being, but like a cowering animal. He had suffered many brutal beatings at Snayle's hands, and his whole life consisted of serving the manager well, in order to escape further brutality.

Dippy proceeded to light the cigarettes, as he had been ordered, and the caravan soon became filled with choking fumes. Indeed, Dippy nearly made himself sick—

for he was not accustomed to tobacco. But he had had his orders, and it never occurred to him to disobey them. And he couldn't get out till Mr. Snayle returned, for the door was locked.

The other people belonging to the circus went about in complete ignorance of these happenings. No commotion had been made, and there was nothing to suggest that the calm, peaceful evening was being used by Mr. Snayle in this nefarious manner.

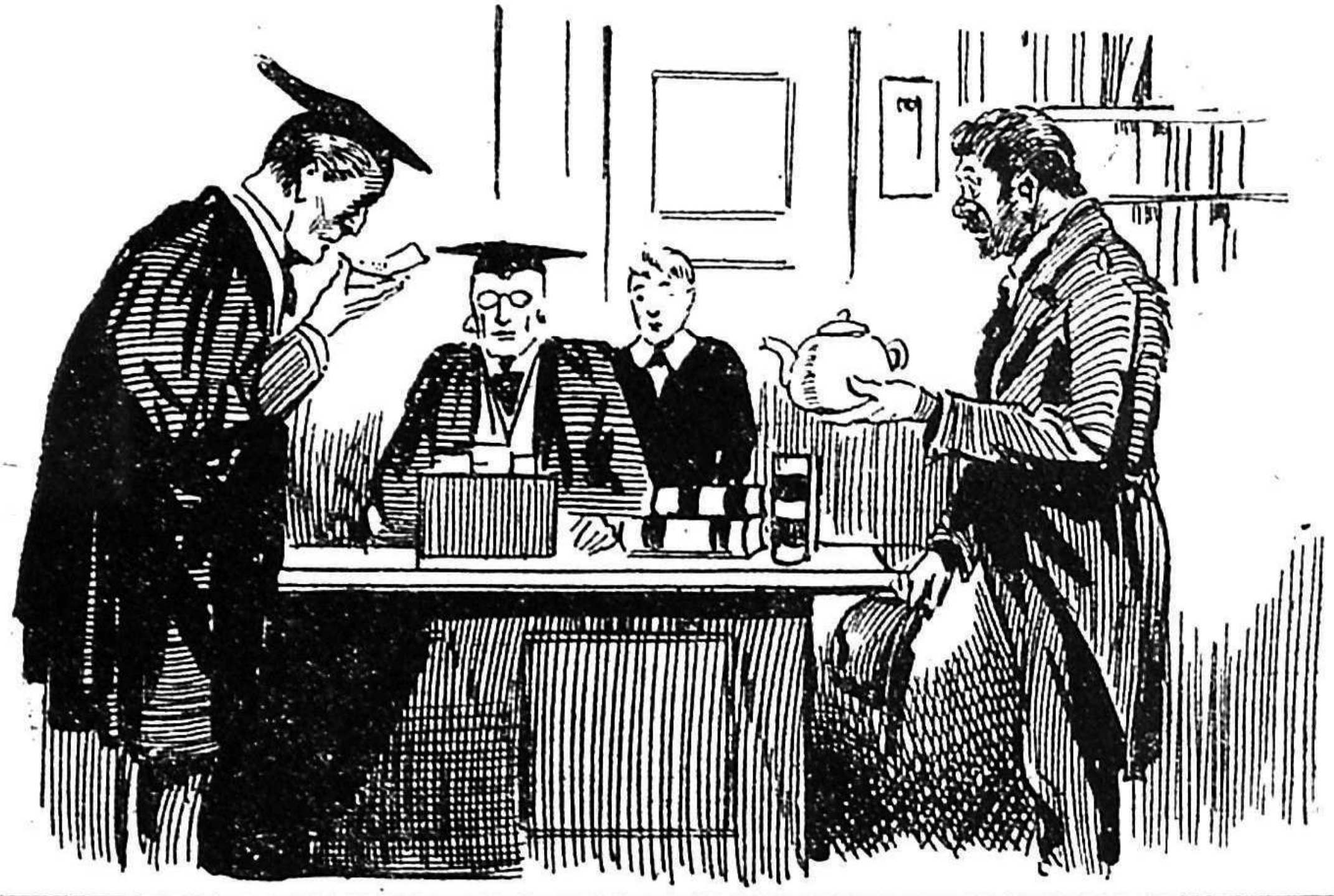
All signs of the thunderstorm had now gone, and the sky was clear, with the slanting sun shedding a golden light over the dripping countryside. In the big tent several men were busily repairing the

Mr. Snayle himself lost no time.

He left the circus, hurried down the road, and after about a hundred yards he came to a number of little shops. One of these was a small sub-Post Office, and a sign outside announced that there was a public telephone. Mr. Snayle entered the Post Office, —which was also a confectioner's shop—and passed into the little telephone box, closing the sound-proof door securely behind him. With two coppers ready, he lifted the receiver.

"Bannington 7-0," he said shortly.

This was the number of Dr. Stafford's private telephone at St. Frank's and in



"'Old 'ard, sir," interrupted the tramp aggressively. "What about this 'ere? An' what about this 'ere, too?" And the fellow produced a teapot from his ragged clothing, and thumped it on the desk.

damage to the trapeze support, others were feeding the animals, and the normal routine life of the circus went on in perfect harmony.

Even if questioned, the men would not have been able to say what Mr. Snayle had been doing, or what Dippy had been doing, or what had happened in or about the Onions brothers' caravan. The circus men had their own work to attend to, and they paid little or no heed to Mr. Snayle or the boys.

And yet this thing was being prepared and engineered right in the very midst of the circus! Without question, Mr. Snayle's plot was a cunning one—and likely to prove successful by reason of its very simplicity.

less than twenty seconds the connection was made

"That Dr. Stafford?" asked Mr. Snayle, as he heard a voice.

"Speaking," came the Head's voice.

"Good! Well, see here, Dr. Stafford, I'm the manager of Professor Onions' Circus," said Mr. Snayle. "Maybe you've heard of the show? Snayle's my name—Mr. Simon Snayle."

"Certainly I have heard of the show," replied Dr. Stafford. "I understand, from Mr. Lee, that some of my boys are assisting your performance, Mr. Snayle. I have been assured that everything is in perfect order, and so I have given my full permission"

"I am sorry to disturb your peace of mind, sir, but things ain't what they seem," replied Mr. Snayle. "And I've just rung you up because I believe you've got hold of the thing wrong. Maybe you think that these boys are helping the show?"

"I was certainly under that impression."

"Then you're wrong, sir—dead wrong," said Mr. Snayle. "These schoolboys are the biggest nuisance we ever had. They don't know a thing about the business, and they're up to all the evil tricks you could imagine. But I'm not saying anything over the telephone. I'd like you to come along and see with your own eyes what sort of things go on behind your back."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the Head.

There was a short pause, for the Head was startled by the insinuation that Mr. Snayle had uttered.

"I would like you to be more precise, sir," came Dr. Stafford's voice. "Are you suggesting that my boys misconduct themselves in your circus—that they behave in a manner that is liable to bring discredit on the school?"

"Discredit?" repeated Mr. Snayle with a laugh. "That word's hardly strong enough, Dr. Stafford. I've put up with their behaviour for as long as I can stand, hoping they'd get better. But they're worse, sir—and getting worse every day. And I feel that it's my duty to let you know, although I hate the idea of getting the youngsters into trouble."

"But what have my boys done?" demanded the Head anxiously.

"It's not exactly what they've done—it's what they're liable to do," said Mr. Snayle. "So far, I've managed to keep their habits a secret, but if they stay in the circus much longer the men will get to know, and then the whole town will be talking. The only way is for you to come right over and catch the young scamps red-handed."

There was a short pause, and Mr. Snayle waited, grinning. He felt that he had said just enough. He had made no definite statement, but his hints were significant.

"Very well, Mr. Snayle, I will come at once," said Dr. Stafford at length. "Expect me in about twenty minutes. I trust you will meet me at the—er—entrance, as I shall be somewhat at sea in my unfamiliar surroundings."

"I'll be looking out for you, sir," promised Mr. Snayle. "Right! Good-bye!"

Mr. Snayle hung up, and went out of the post-office in the sweetest temper that had possessed him for many days.

But his mood might have been a little less easy if he had known what was going on in the circus meadow at that very moment. The queer old tramp—the disreputable stranger who was taking such an interest in Dippy's Kitchen—had at last taken action.

There was nobody about at the moment, and the unshaven rascal edged his way towards the ancient van and entered. The "kitchen" was empty, of course, for Dippy was still locked in the other caravan with the boys.

The tramp looked round quickly, and a gleam came into his eyes as he saw a small paper packet lying on a shelf, where it had been carelessly tossed. The man picked it up, gazed inside, and saw a small quantity of white powder still at the bottom.

He carefully folded the packet up and placed it in his pocket. Then, just as he was about to depart, he noticed a teapot on the table. It was warm, and still contained a quantity of tea-leaves.

With a chuckle, the mysterious tramp tucked the teapot into his ragged clothing and stepped out of the caravan. He wandered away unnoticed.

CHAPTER XI.

DR. STAFFORD INVESTIGATES.

MR. SIMON SNAYLE strode into the circus meadow with a brisk step, and made his way across the turf to the Onions brothers' caravan. He unlocked it, passed inside, and paused, coughing.

"Well, you've done your work pretty good!" he said, looking through the blue haze of smoke. "Good man, Dippy; I'll reward you for this! Serve me well, and I'll make your life a real pleasure!"

"Dippy done what boss ordered," said the dwarf sullenly. "But Dippy not like it. Dippy not understand——"

"An' you ain't supposed to understand!" snapped the other. "All you've got to do is to keep your ugly mouth shut! If you don't, you'll get strangled. You can clear out now, and remember my warning!"

Dippy went, only too glad to get out into the open air. And he was not long in discovering that the teapot and the small paper packet were missing. But Dippy naturally assumed that Mr. Snayle had removed these articles—it was the one natural conclusion he would come to. So he made no report to his master.

Thus Mr. Snayle knew nothing whatever about it—which was just as well for his peace of mind. For if he had learned that those two articles of evidence had mysteriously vanished, he might have been greatly worried.

Mr. Snayle satisfied himself that everything was in perfect order, and that the boys showed no signs of recovering; and then he emerged from the caravan, and locked it up.

He strolled carelessly to the gateway of the meadow and stood there, leaning against one of the posts and staring down the road. Dr. Stafford would be arriving at any minute now, for it was almost certain that he would come by car.

Sure enough, six minutes had hardly elapsed before a big closed car came gliding along the road. It halted just opposite the gateway, and Dr. Malcolm Stafford emerged. He gazed at Mr. Snayle inquiringly. The manager was looking very pleasant and good-humoured.

"Dr. Stafford, sir?" he said briskly.

"Er—yes," replied the Head. "Mr. Snayle, I believe?"

"That's me, sir," said the manager. "Glad you've come over so promptly. You couldn't have arrived at a better time—before these young scamps can recover, and deny their actions."

The Head adjusted his glasses.

"Before they can recover?" he repeated. "What do you mean, Mr. Snayle? I confess that I am totally bewildered by your veiled accusations. It may help matters if I tell you at once that I have been warned against you. I will be frank, Mr. Snayle. I have been told that you are not a man to be trusted. It is just as well that we should start with a thorough understanding."

Mr. Snayle scowled, and the Head's cold tones irritated him.

"Oh! So you've been listening to those cursed young hounds, have you?" he snarled.

"Good gracious! Are you referring to my boys?"

"Yes, I am!"

"In that case, Mr. Snayle, I shall seriously consider returning at once, without pursuing this investigation a yard further!" returned the Head hotly. "How dare you, sir! Control your language! Under no circumstances will I have the boys of St. Frank's College referred to in such violent terms!"

Mr. Snayle swallowed hard.

"Maybe I was hasty," he said thickly. "But you've been told a heap of lies, sir. They've talked against me, eh? That's nothing new. The manager of a circus doesn't expect bouquets. But I'm not asking you to believe anything that I may have to say. I've got evidence—and you can prove the thing with your own eyes."

"Prove what thing?" asked Dr. Stafford, as they moved slowly across the turf. "I wish you would be precise, Mr. Snayle. These innuendoes and vague suggestions do not help us in the least. According to all the information I have received, a party of my boys have been helping your show with really extraordinary ability and enterprise. And I further understand that they have behaved themselves with the utmost praiseworthiness. Indeed, from all sides I have heard nothing but commendation."

"Likely enough," said Mr. Snayle—"likely enough! But you can't believe all you hear. I'm saying nothing about the advertising work or the performance in the ring. The boys ain't been so bad at it. But things have come to a pass, an' I don't want my men corrupted by the evil example of these young reprobates."

The Head paused in his tracks.

"Evil example!" he repeated, staring. "Young reprobates! Those are strong terms, Mr. Snayle. For your own sake, I hope you will be able to justify them; but for the sake of my boys, I trust that you are entirely wrong. And again let me remind you that you are still vague."

"It's a case of breaking it gently, sir," said Mr. Snayle. "You believe that these boys have been behaving decently, eh? What'll you say when I tell you that they use this circus work merely as an excuse for indulging in disgraceful and disgusting orgies?"

"Orgies?"

"Drinking—smoking—gambling!" snapped Mr. Snayle.

"Good heavens! You—you tell me that my boys have been gambling?" gasped the Head absolutely startled. "Nonsense, sir! You are mistaken. I refuse to believe any such preposterous story!"

"I tell you it's true!" said Snayle angrily. "And, what's more, I'm sick of it! I'm not going to have these young tykes hanging round my show any longer. Drinking and setting my men a bad example——"

"Stop!" commanded Dr. Stafford. "I will not hear another word, sir! I do not believe your extraordinary story——"

"You don't believe it, eh?" shouted Mr. Snayle, losing his temper. "Well, let me tell you this. I found four of your boys with the two Onion brothers—the kids who have been trying to run this show. And the whole six are so dead drunk that they don't know a thing. I've locked 'em in their own caravan, until you could come along and see them with your own eyes!"

The Head was greatly agitated.

"Show me this—this caravan," he said curtly.

Mr. Snayle walked briskly forward, unlocked the caravan door and flung it open. Dippy, from a distance, was watching, and he now knew exactly the full nature of Mr. Snayle's plot.

"There are you, sir—walk in!" said the manager, with a sneering note in his voice. "Walk in. I have no doubt the sight will be a most pleasing one to your eye."

The Head gave Mr. Snayle one look of utter dislike, and then with a firm tread, he mounted the short steps and entered the caravan. He took one step forward, and then stood stock still.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HEAD'S DECREE.

DR. STAFFORD'S heart nearly stopped beating.

Instinctively, he disliked Mr. Snayle, and mistrusted him. And he hardly hardly knew what to expect as he entered the caravan. But now, as he gazed at the scene before his eyes, he completely forgot Mr. Snayle, and everything else. He was utterly and absolutely startled.

His nostrils was assailed by the reek of stale tobacco fumes and strong liquor. The air was heavy with the combined smell, and the evidence of his nostrils was corroborated by the evidence of his eyes.

There, lolling about in drunken, abandoned attitudes, were six boys—Johnny and Bertie Onions, of the circus, and Handforth and Pitt and Boots and myself—all of the Remove at St. Frank's.

The whisky bottle, the glasses, the burnt-out cigarettes, the cards. In one flash Dr. Stafford could read the truth. He must have been blind could he not have seen the one obvious conclusion.

These boys had played cards, had smoked, and had indulged in spirits. And they had consumed whisky until they were incapable! The shock was so great that Dr. Stafford was momentarily stunned.

"Great heaven!" he muttered huskily. "So this—this is what comes of my leniency! I never dreamed; I never—— Oh, this is too dreadful! I cannot believe it!"

But the words were mechanical. He did believe it. It was impossible to do anything else. The evidence was complete, and there could be no possible excuse—no atom of explanation.

And after the first flood of alarm and distress, Dr. Stafford became possessed of a cold fury. And its very coldness was more terrifying than the most heated rage. His face went pale and drawn.

"Boys!" he exclaimed sharply.

"Oh, it's no good trying to wake 'em yet!" said Mr. Snayle from the rear. "They're dead drunk——"

"Hold your tongue, sir!" commanded the Head, turning on him. "Why did you not prevent this—this tragedy?"

"Well, you're satisfied, I suppose?" jeered the other.

"Why did you not prevent it?" repeated the Head tensely. "Knowing this dreadful orgy to be taking place, why did you allow it to go on until it reached this—this appalling stage? I hold you responsible for this ghastly incident, Mr. Snayle!"

"You can do as you like about that—I don't care a hang!" snapped the manager. "But how the thunder do you suppose I can be looking after these kids morning, noon, and night? Think it's the first time?"

"Good gracious! You mean they have been like this before?"

"More than once!" retorted Mr. Snayle contemptuously. "I got sick of it at last, and communicated with you. That's all! But don't blame me, or you'll regret it! I didn't know a darn thing until I happened to come along and find the young idiots incapable!"

The Head turned away, his lips pursed, his eyes gleaming. And at the same moment two of the juniors showed signs of movement. They were Handforth and myself.

In a vague, dim kind of way I could hear voices, and I was aware of an unpleasant taste in my mouth. It was as though I were just awakening from a deep, unhealthy slumber.

Handforth, at the same moment, flopped back in his seat and passed a lazy hand over his eyes. Then he sneezed, coughed a bit, and allowed his eyelids to lift.

"Wasser marrer?" he asked thickly. "Who's making noise? S'funny! I can't seem to see straight——"

"Handforth!" thundered the Head.

The familiar voice, and the commanding tone, caused Handforth to open his eyes wider, and recognition came. He staggered to his feet, swayed dizzily, and sank down again.

"Sir!" he muttered dazedly. "I—I——"

"Boy, you are intoxicated!" exclaimed the Head harshly.

Handforth started.

"Intox—intox——" The words baffled him. "Dunno what you mean, sir!" he mumbled feebly. "I feel queer—beas'ly headache!"

He went on mumbling to himself, and by this time I was beginning to see things in the caravan, and could understand better. Full consciousness was returning. And I, too, had a splitting headache.

Reggie Pitt and the others were now beginning to stir. We had all drunk about the same quantity of tea, and were naturally recovering at about the same time.

"Leave 'em alone for a bit—they'll soon work it off," suggested Mr. Snayle. "Or I'll tell you what. A dousing with cold water will bring 'em round in two minutes!"

The Head turned sharply.

"These boys must not be publicly humiliated," he said. "I understand that nobody else in the circus knows of this horrible affair?"

"Nobody—you're safe there!"

"Then I'll wait until the boys recover," said the Head. "Kindly bring some cold water, Mr. Snayle. A drink may do them good. I intend taking these four boys back with me to the school."

Mr. Snayle's eyes gleamed.

"Best thing you can do, sir," he declared heartily. "They're no use round this place. Will you let them come back for the evening show——"

"They will not be allowed within two miles of this town while your circus remains on its present pitch!" broke in the Head

grimly. "I have seen enough, sir! I apologise to you for my former doubts. Unquestionably you were fully justified in your attitude, and your strong terms."

Mr. Snayle laughed to himself as he went off for a supply of cold water. His plan had succeeded! The St. Frank's boys would be kept away from the circus for good! At last he had got rid of them!

He came back with a big jug of cold water, and found the Head standing in front of Handforth, who was now so far recovered that he had grasped a little of the truth.

"Can't make it out, sir," Handforth was saying. "We—we were having tea, you know——"

"Tea!" shouted the Head angrily.

"S'right, sir! I can't understand all these glasses," muttered Handforth, swaying as he stood. "Cards, too!" he added, with a gasp. "But—but we haven't had any cards! There's—there's something rummy about it, sir!" he said frantically, turning his face to Dr. Stafford.

"Pah!" muttered the Head disgustedly. "If I wanted any further evidence—and Heaven knows I have seen sufficient—your breath is the final proof. You absolutely reek of whisky, sir! You young scoundrel!"

"Whisky!" I exclaimed, staggering to my feet. "That's right, sir! I can taste it in my mouth! Something's happened, sir—something queer's been going on here! We didn't drink the whisky——"

"Enough!" broke in the Head. "I wish to hear no more. By denying the charge you are only aggravating the offence. Lying will not serve you. Drink some of this water, and attempt to recover yourselves."

The Head was absolutely quivering with inward rage. That whiff of Handforth's breath had been overwhelmingly conclusive. Dr. Stafford wanted to see no more. And as we continued to protest that something was wrong, his anger only increased. The evidence was irrefutable.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SHOCK FOR THE SCHOOL.

WITHIN the space of thirty-five minutes, many changes had come about.

Reggie Pitt and Handforth and Boots and I found ourselves locked in the Junior punishment-room in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. We had been conveyed from Bannington in the Head's car, and not a word had been spoken during that miserable trip—for Dr. Stafford had commanded silence.

At the circus, Johnny and Bertie Onions were frantic. Having got over their bewilderment, they forgot their headaches, and were only filled with a great and ever-growing consternation.

It would be impossible to give the evening show!

The weather had cleared, and a record crowd was certain. But Johnny had learned from Mr. Snayle that the Head had forbidden his boys to come near the circus again. And the position seemed hopeless.

Johnny guessed at once that Mr. Snayle was at the bottom of this grim conspiracy. But he could prove nothing, for there was not an atom of evidence. And Mr. Snayle maintained the attitude that he was absolutely ignorant. Thus, although the schoolboy circus owners were convinced of the truth, they were helpless. They could not bring an accusation against Mr. Snayle without the evidence to support it.

At St. Frank's the four of us had been smuggled into the punishment-room without anybody knowing. For we had been ordered indoors through the Head's private entrance, and he had personally conducted us to our present prison. And we were now in full possession of our usual wits.

"It'll mean the sack, of course!" said Pitt ruefully. "There'll be no easier punishment for such a crime! Glory, how my head aches!"

"It was that tea!" I said grimly. "The tea was doped! Don't you remember that queer taste? Nothing dangerous, of course—just a sleeping-draught of some kind—a harmless drug. But it enabled Snayle to do the trick. The cunning ruffian!"

Handforth glared round frantically.

"But—but we're not going to stand still and do nothing, I suppose?" he shouted. "You idiots! We've got to deny——"

"What's the good of denying?" interrupted Boots miserably. "Do you think the Head's going to believe us? Didn't he see us all lying round that table, as drunk as lords?"

"We weren't drunk!" snorted Handforth.

"I know that, you ass, but we looked it," growled Boots. "And we reeked of whisky, too—we reek a bit now! We could talk to the Head for a month, and he wouldn't believe us! Snayle's got us beaten this time, and there's an end of it."

"I'm afraid you're right, old man," I said despondently. "It's not a bit of good raising false hopes. I'm trying to figure out how Snayle did the thing. I can just remember dropping off to sleep in the middle of the tea things, but that's all."

"Dippy must have known," said Pitt. "Don't you remember how scared he was looking, and how we couldn't understand it? But it'll be no good mentioning him as a witness, because he's dead afraid of Snayle. No, my sons, our goose is cooked!"

"They must have come and cleared the tea things away, and substituted the whisky and the cards," I declared. "It's pretty clear that Snayle shoved some of it down our throats, too. That would be easy enough, because we were unconscious. But if we told

the Head this he'd simply laugh at us. It sounds too fantastic."

And the others realised that I was right. It was an awful thought, and we grew more and more unhappy.

In the meantime, the word had been sent round St. Frank's that the whole school was to collect in Big Hall without further delay. There was a bit of a sensation about this, because calling the school together unexpectedly generally meant something of unusual importance.

But the real truth was not even hinted at, for nobody had seen us arrive, and it was assumed by the rest of the amateur circus performers that we had decided to stay in Bannington.

These particular fellows were anxious, for it was nearly six already, and they didn't want to be detained. Yet it was impossible to leave just yet. An order to attend in Big Hall was as rigid as a king's command.

By a quarter to six the entire school was collected together, and then—to the astonishment of all—the door at the back of the raised platform opened, and four figures were ushered through—Buster Boots, Reggie Pitt, Edward Oswald Handforth, and myself. We were all looking a bit groggy, our hair was ruffled, and we were dishevelled and untidy.

A murmur went up at once.

"Oh, so that's it!" muttered Church. "Those chaps have been getting into a scrape! Hope it won't interfere with the circus! I wonder what the idiots have been up to?"

"Goodness knows!" said Jerry Dodd anxiously. "We left 'em in the big tent, you know——"

An order came for silence, and Dr. Stafford stepped to the front of the platform. His face was grave and set, and the school felt that he had an announcement of unusual gravity to make.

"I have very little to say," he exclaimed in his deep voice. "These four boys on the platform have committed a grave offence against the school regulations, and will be severely birched at a later hour this evening——"

"What have they done, sir?"

"It is not my intention to go into any details concerning the misconduct of these misguided juniors," went on the Head. "Were it not for the fact that I believe them to have been led away, expulsion could be their only punishment. But I have decided to be merciful, and to flog them, and confine them to gates, with the forfeiture of all half-holidays, for the period of one month."

"Oh!" muttered the school.

The punishment was severe enough, in all conscience!

"Furthermore, I have to announce that the circus in Bannington is strictly and absolutely out of bounds," continued the Head grimly. "This rule applies to every boy in the school. From this minute, the circus is banned. Any boy disobeying my order, after this warning will be summarily expelled."

This time there was a sensation.

"But—but we've got to go to to-night's show, sir!" shouted three or four juniors. "We can't let the circus down——"

"Silence!" commanded the Head sternly. "I have given my orders, and I will not repeat them. Neither is it my intention to go into any details regarding the offence which these four boys have committed. But I am satisfied as to their guilt, and they will return at once to the punishment-room, to be flogged at a later hour. You may dismiss!"

"Half a minute, sir!" shouted Handforth, striding forward, his face hot and red. "It's not fair! We ought to have a hearing!"

"Yes, yes!" shouted a dozen voices.

"Let them have a hearing!"

"What have they done?"

The Head turned, his face grave.

"I am amazed, Handforth, that you should have the audacity to question my decision," he said, forcing himself to speak quietly. "I have dealt with you with astonishing leniency——"

"But we're the victims of a plot, sir!" said Handforth excitedly.

"How dare you?" thundered the Head. "Wait! Do you wish me to tell the school of your disgusting conduct? Shall I lay bare this story of shame and degradation? I had decided to spare you——"

"We want the school to know, sir!" shouted Handforth.

"Yes, sir," agreed the other three of us.

"Very well," said the Head quietly. "Lest I should be accused of unfairness, I will relate everything I saw, and I will then permit you boys to explain your conduct—if you can!"

Dr. Stafford turned to the crowded and excited school, and quietly went into every detail of what he had seen in the caravan. And the school listened in staggered surprise as detail after detail was unfolded. And the dishevelled appearance of the four culprits was now explained.

The Head kept his word, and we were allowed to give our denial of the charge, and to explain what had occurred. But the school listened with growing doubts. All we could say was that we had been having tea, and that we fell asleep, and that we awoke to find ourselves soaked in whisky. Without question, the story sounded a mere invention—faked up at the last moment, as an excuse for our conduct.

"It was a plot!" declared Handforth passionately. "We were drugged, and it was Mr. Snayle who——"

"We have heard enough," interrupted the Head. "And I will listen to no accusations that are wildly made for the purpose of screening yourselves. I think the school will understand that I have been extremely

merciful in sentencing you to a flogging, instead of expelling you from St. Frank's."

And the school agreed. There were a good many fellows who refused to believe that we were guilty, but the majority were dead against us. There seemed little or no hope of escape from the fate which awaited us!

CHAPTER XIV.

A HORSE OF ANOTHER COLOUR.

"DISGUSTING young rascals!" said Chambers disdainfully.

"Deserve to be sacked!" agreed Phillips. "I reckon they ought to consider themselves lucky that the Head is only going to swish them! They deserve to be kicked out of the school!"

And these two Fifth-Formers were not the only pair who came to that conclusion. The majority of the Senior School were absolutely convinced that the story was true—and not one of them could be blamed. For if the Head was satisfied, surely they ought to be!

In the Remove and Third the state of opinion was mixed. Most of the juniors were too bewildered by the story to form any instantaneous conclusion. But they were gradually coming round to the view that there could have been no mistake.

"This is the end of Nipper, of course!" declared Armstrong. "He won't have the nerve to stick to the captaincy after this business. Drunk, by jingo! Discovered drunk, after playing cards!"

"The cads ought to be kicked out!" said Fullwood.

"Don't you talk!" exclaimed Church fiercely. "Of course, you've never played cards and drunk whisky, have you? You rotten hypocrite! If you had had your deserts, you'd have been sacked terms ago!"

Fullwood turned red, and sneered.

"Go and eat coke!" he snapped sourly.

But he lounged off, deciding that the subject was not one that could be improved by pursuing. And Church turned to a crowd of other juniors, and fiercely declared that there had been some awful mistake.

"It stands to reason!" he went on excitedly. "We all know Handy and Nipper and Pitt, don't we? Are they the kind of fellows to get drunk? And is Boots the kind?"

"They're about the last fellows in the whole school to act like that!" said Tommy Watson. "There must be some mistake—there must! The thing's too awful to be true!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Dash it all, I entered life with a somewhat limited supply of thinking apparatus, but, I mean, even

"I'll teach the reptile to defy me!" he breathed hoarsely. "Burn my skin! I'll—I'll——"

He broke off, for at that moment he caught sight of a curious object in the very centre of his little table.

the grey matter that I possess refuses to swallow this yarn! Absolutely! It seems to me that this is one of those occasions when we've all got to rally round."

"But what can we do?" asked Church miserably.

"Oh, come!" protested Archie. "I mean to say, don't jump on me for any ideas! When it comes to thinking these things out, the old bean sort of buzzes a bit, and then switches off! But what we ought to do is to dash about and gather a few facts together for the poor old lads. I mean, grab some evidence, what?"

"It's not so easy as it sounds, old man," said Somerton. "I'm just as certain as you that Snayle is the culprit. But we can't prove it, and as far as I can see, we never shall."

"But what about the show to-night?" demanded Willy Handforth hotly.

"We can't give it—we're banned!" growled Jerry Dodd.

"You—you weakling!" snorted Willy. "Instead of standing here and moaning, you ought to be dashing into Bannington, and finding out what Snayle was doing at tea-time——"

"But if we go near the circus, we shall be sacked, you young ass!"

"Oh, well, if you're afraid to take any risks for the sake of your chums, you ain't worth wasting breath on!" snorted Willy contemptuously. "I'm going—and they can sack me if they like! Think I care? If I don't come back with enough proof to exonerate my major and those other chaps, I'll eat my waistcoat-buttons!"

And Willy stalked off, fairly disgusted with the whole Remove.

He emerged into the Triangle, and was about to make a dash for bicycle shed, when he observed a disreputable-looking tramp hesitating near the gateway. The man was ragged, down-at-heel, and his slouch-hat half-concealed his unshaven features.

"I've seen that merchant before!" muttered Willy, frowning. "Yes, by jingo! He was lurking round the circus this afternoon —— Whew! I wonder if he knows something——"

He broke off, and hurried across the Triangle.

"Are you looking for somebody?" he asked bluntly.

"Why, yes, young gent," said the tramp. "I thought, mebbe, as I could see the Headmaster. Y'see, I've got something to tell him——"

"About those four chaps who were supposed to be drunk?" asked Willy excitedly.

The tramp nodded.

"Six on 'em, there was," he said. "Leastways, six altogether, but only four belong to this 'ere school. I see them being took away. What's happened to 'em, young gent?"

Willy quickly told him.

"Then they ain't been sent away?" asked the tramp. "And they ain't been flogged? I reckon I just come in time, me lad! If you'll be good enough to take me to the 'ead master, there'll soon be a change."

Willy gave a whoop, and led the old tramp towards the Head's house. But just as they were entering, Nelson Lee appeared, and gazed at Willy and his nondescript companion with frank curiosity. Willy was rather pleased at the meeting.

"It's all right, sir—I'm just taking this man to see the Head," he explained briskly. "He knows something about that affair at Bannington—he can prove that those six chaps are the victims of a plot! He knows all about it, sir!"

"Oh, indeed?" said Nelson Lee, with a look of relief. "Your arrival is most opportune," he added, turning to the man. "You had better come in at once."

The Head was considerably astonished when the ragged stranger was ushered into his study. And he looked hopeful for a moment or two when he learned that this man had brought some important news.

"Let me hear your story," said the Head briefly.

"Well, it's this 'ere way, sir," said the fellow. "I was a lurkin' about the circus, looking out for anything I might see—mebbe a job. Well, I see a dwarf chap—him as they call Dippy—puttin' some powder into a teapot. Then I see the dwarf and Mr. Snayle goin' in an' out o' that caravan where the boys was. It strikes me them two was up to somethin' fishy."

The Head pursed his lips.

"Have you anybody who can corroborate this evidence?" he asked.

"Ain't my word enough, sir?" asked the tramp.

"Hardly," said Dr. Stafford grimly.

The one obvious explanation occurred to him. The circus men were undoubtedly anxious for the boys to return—and so were the Onions brothers. This story sounded a palpable lie. And the Head could hardly be blamed for suspecting that it had been concocted on purpose to save the juniors. He could hardly take this tramp's unsupported word.

"I am sorry," said the Head coldly. "But I cannot accept this extraordinary story of a white powder in the tea. No, my man, you must go away——"

"'Old 'ard, sir," interrupted the tramp aggressively. "What about this 'ere? An' what about this 'ere, too?"

And the fellow produced a teapot from his ragged clothing, and thumped it on the desk. And beside it he placed a folded white packet!

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE CIRCUS AGAIN.

NELSON LEE picked up the teapot at once, opened the lid, and gazed at the sodden tea leaves. He sniffed at them keenly.

"Drugged they are, sir—as full of dope as a Chink!" said the tramp. "An' 'ave a look at this 'ere powder, too! I don't know nothin' about the stuff, but it made them boys groggy in less'n five minutes!"

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated the Head blankly. "Where—where did you find these things?"

"In an old caravan that the dwarf uses as a kitchen," replied the tramp. "Y'see, I 'appened to be lookin' on, an' I became a bit interested. I 'ad an idea what was in the wind, an' so I thought I might as well 'elp a bit. I wouldn't like to see them young gents cop out for a thing what they didn't do!"

"This—this is utterly startling!" said the Head. "But it seems incredible to me that there really could have been a plot. And yet—and yet Heaven forbid that I should commit a terrible miscarriage of justice! Please tell me what you make of this powder, Mr. Lee."

Lee was already sniffing at it. He placed a tiny portion on his tongue, and a grim expression came into his face. Willy stood by, forgotten. He watched Nelson Lee's face with acute anxiety.

"Yes, this is undoubtedly a powerful drug ——" began Lee.

"Good!" burst out Willy excitedly.

"I thought as 'ow it was, sir," said the tramp, nodding. "Like as not, a poison, eh?"

"On the contrary, it is comparatively harmless," replied the schoolmaster detective. "This powder would instantly dissolve in tea, and become invisible—but would undoubtedly give the beverage a peculiar tang."

"Those chaps said the tea tasted squiffy, sir," put in Willy quickly.

"Dear me! Who told you to come in here?" demanded the Head irritably. "Go at once, Handforth minor!"

"Oh, sir!" protested Willy. "I found this tramp! I—I mean, this gentleman who came all the way from Bannington to help," he added hastily, as he observed the tramp looking at him aggressively. "I want to stay, to hear the rest!"

"Then hold your tongue, sir!" said the Head grimly.

For a few moments, he considered deeply, and then rose to his feet. In the face of this new evidence, it was impossible to punish the culprits without a further investigation. He remembered his instinctive dislike of Mr. Snayle, and he was becoming more and more convinced that the man had, indeed, indulged in a petty plot with the mis-shapen dwarf.

"Mr. Lee, I am going to Bannington at once," said the Head. "I will take this man with me, and make an inquiry on the spot."

And within five minutes the Head was off, accompanied by the ragged stranger. Willy hung about, filled with anxioty. He said nothing to the others, thereby showing his good sense. He was afraid that the tramp's evidence might not pan out so successfully as he hoped.

Arriving at the circus, the Head found everything still comparatively quiet, although it was growing near the time when the public would begin to roll up. Mr. Snayle was standing outside his caravan, talking with Dippy, and he looked up with slight alarm as he saw the Head's swift approach.

Johnny and Bertie Onions came up, too, although they said nothing. They were utterly miserable, and had been preparing great placards, announcing that there would be no show, to be placed at the gateway. They had a vague hope that the Head's arrival might bring about an alteration at the last moment.

"Back again?" asked Mr. Snayle casually.

He concealed his uneasiness, assuring himself that no possible hitch could have occurred. And he regarded the tramp with frank curiosity. He couldn't understand who the man was, or what connection he could have with the affair.

"It is not my intention to accuse you of base villainy unheard, Mr. Snayle," exclaimed the Head grimly. "But I have every reason to suspect that you have deliberately hoodwinked me."

Mr. Snayle's heart gave a lurch, but he kept his face.

"What the blazes do you mean?" he growled.

"I mean, sir, that I have here a witness who can prove that there was some very questionable behaviour on the part of this dwarf," retorted the Head, indicating Dippy "I have every reason to believe that a white powder was placed in the tea which those six boys consumed."

Mr. Snayle turned a kind of sickly green.

"It's a lie!" he snarled, to hide his confusion. "Do you believe this tramp? Get off these premises, you filthy hound, or I'll break every bone in your body!"

The tramp stood his ground, although he recoiled a bit.

"One moment, sir—one moment!" snapped the Head. "Your attitude is highly suspicious!"

"Suspicious, is it?" sneered Mr. Snayle savagely. "Why, this man's story is a string of lies! He can't prove anything!"

"It isn't lies—it's true!" shouted Johnny Onions hotly.

Mr. Snayle laughed scornfully

"Of course, you'd say that!" he jeered. "But you'd best keep quiet young man! It wouldn't do you any good if your father heard——"

"We are wasting time!" interrupted the Head impatiently. "Have you any objection to my questioning this—this man?" he added, looking at Dippy.

"You can question him until you're blue in the face!" replied Mr Snayle coarsely. "He doesn't know a thing. He served the tea in the ordinary way, and this foolery about a white powder won't get you nowhere!"

Dippy came forward, looking fearful. And Mr. Snayle stood by with that same sneering twist on his mouth. He knew that Dippy dared not say a word. The dwarf would deny all knowledge of the powder—and all knowledge of the incidents that had happened afterwards.

But Mr. Snayle got a bit of a shock when the Head produced the teapot—which the ragged stranger had been carrying.

"Is this the pot which you served the tea in for those six boys" asked the Head. "I am relying upon you to answer me truthfully."

"Yes, that pot," nodded the dwarf. "Dippy know it."

"And did you empty the contents of a white packet into this pot?"

The dwarf edged away from Mr. Snayle.

"Dippy not understand it do boys any harm," he muttered. "Dippy put powder in tea for joke."

"Ah!" breathed the Head. "Then—then my suspicions were justified! Thank Heaven

we have learned the truth! Then those boys are innocent, after all!"

"It's a pity you couldn't believe us at first!" said Johnny Onions bitterly.

"I am sorry, my boy—deeply sorry!" replied Dr. Stafford quietly.

Mr. Snayle was nearly choking. At Dippy's words he had opened his mouth, but no sounds came. His whole expression of sneering complacency left him. Dippy had betrayed him! This creature who had been in his power for years, had disobeyed his commands!

"All Dippy's fault," said the dwarf quickly. "Put powder in tea for fun. Then Dippy clear tea things away, and put whisky on table, and make it look that boys drunk. He, he! Good joke! Dippy think himself clever!"

And the dwarf gave a kind of cackle. Mr. Snayle's rage gave place to intense relief. Dippy had exposed the plot, but he had not exposed his master! He had taken the blame on to his own shoulders! And Mr. Snayle made the best of a bad job, keeping his face with difficulty.

"Why, you blamed tyke!" he roared, turning on Dippy fiercely. "So you did it, eh? All right—clear off! I'll deal with you later! The fellow is half-witted," he added, turning to the Head. "He don't rightly know what he is doing half the time. But I'll tan his infernal hide for this!"

Dippy reached his own caravan, and found that the mysterious tramp had got there first. For a few moments, the ragged stranger talked to Dippy earnestly. Then he turned and made his way through a hedge

Dippy looked after him, and there was a happy expression in his eyes.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LIFTING OF THE SHADOW.

JOHNNY ONIONS grabbed Bertie's arm feverishly.

"It's all right, old son!" he panted. "We shall be able to hold the show after all. Our innocence is proved and I don't believe Dippy did it, either—although he admits it."

"Everything's all right now," said Bertie gloomily.

Mr. Snayle was talking savagely.

"Maybe the dwarf played a dirty trick, but I ain't having those boys round this circus again," he exclaimed. "You'd best understand that, sir! I've had enough of them kids——"

"Under the circumstances, Mr. Snayle, I feel compelled to regard you as a responsible man," interrupted the Head coldly. "These two young gentlemen are, I understand, the owners of this—this enterprise?"

"Well, yes, they are," admitted Mr. Snayle grudgingly.

"Do you desire my junior boys to continue their temporary services?" asked Dr. Stafford, turning to Johnny.

"Rather, sir!" said Johnny eagerly. "We can't get on without 'em, sir! They're due here in half an hour, or just over——"

"In that case, I will lose no time in getting back," smiled the Head, whose relief was enormous. "I am thankful that this unfortunate affair has turned out so satisfactorily. I came within an ace of committing a terrible miscarriage of justice."

Mr. Snayle turned away with a snarl, and walked off. All his efforts had been in vain—his whole plot had crumpled about his ears at the last moment! His face was not pleasant as he walked to his own caravan.

"You—you'll let the chaps come, sir?" asked Johnny eagerly.

"Most certainly," said the Head. "I should indeed be a tyrant if I kept them prisoners after learning of their entire innocence. I should advise you, my boy, to get rid of that dwarf."

"Yes, sir," said Johnny promptly.

He refrained from explaining that Dippy was probably a victim himself—for he wanted to occasion no delay. Every minute was of importance now.

The Head went off, got back into his car, and sat in the rear with an expression of complete contentment on his face. In the town he stopped at the Post Office, and entered a telephone box.

And three minutes later he was telling Nelson Lee the news, and giving instructions for the circus to be placed within bounds once more, and for the four prisoners to be instantly released.

In the meantime, Mr. Simon Snayle reached his caravan and entered it, nearly mad with rage. He had not trusted himself to speak during the last few minutes.

"That cur!" he snarled, with a string of foul oaths. "I'll whip him until he's a mass of pulp!"

And this was no mere figure of speech, but a threat that he intended carrying out to the letter. Dippy had betrayed him! The dwarf had revealed the truth, in spite of all his warnings that he was to keep his mouth shut! There was murder in Simon Snayle's heart at this minute!

He was so insane with rage that his breath came and went in great gulps. The veins stood out on his forehead, and his mouth was drawn back in a snarl of fiendish fury.

From a top shelf in his caravan he reached down a heavy, brutal dog whip. He lashed it through the air once or twice with vicious pleasure. The task he was about to perform was one that would please his bully's heart. He was glad of an excuse to thrash the dwarf until he lay upon the ground, a bleeding, unconscious mass.

"I'll teach the reptile to defy me!" he breathed hoarsely. "Burn my skin! I'll—I'll——"

He broke off, for at that moment he caught sight of a curious object in the very centre of his little table. It was a sharply pointed iron pin, about six inches long, the spike of which was dug into the woodwork. And impaled upon the pin was a half sheet of stout notepaper. He would have seen it earlier had he been less insane with rage.

"What in blazes——"

Mr. Snayle paused again, and bent over the table. There were only a few words on the paper—neatly written words in a clear, bold handwriting. And Mr. Snayle turned pale as he read them:

"Harm one hair of Dippy's head, and within fifteen minutes the police will learn of your part in the conspiracy against the six boys.

"ONE WHO SAW."

Mr. Snayle recoiled, startled and frightened.

He snatched at the paper, and his mind was in a whirl. It struck him that Dippy might have written this—but that was impossible, because Dippy couldn't write. It was somebody else—somebody who had proof of his own part in the plot! But who—who?

The man sat down on the locker, perspiring with cold fear. The very mystery of this affair unnerved him. And all his murderous intentions regarding Dippy faded away.

For if the police were, indeed, informed, it would go badly with Simon Snayle! His plot constituted what was more or less a criminal offence. And there was somebody who knew it, and could prove it!

For an instant, Mr. Snayle cast the thought aside, and seized his dog whip again. The thought of being cheated out of his revenge made him reckless. After all that dramatic note, placed so startlingly on his table, was nothing but a bluff! It couldn't be anything else!

But then, a second later, Mr. Snayle realised that it was just as likely to be a genuine threat. He couldn't afford to take the risk. And with a curse he flung his whip into a far corner of the van.

And Dippy, the dwarf, was safe.

At St. Frank's some rare excitement was afoot. Nelson Lee had released us, briefly explaining that the plot had been unmasked, and that we were free to attend the circus, as usual.

The school knew it, too, and quite a crowd came out to watch us go. The Head soon turned up, and lost no time in making a public announcement to the school, explaining the whole misunderstanding, and regretting that he should have so misjudged four of his juniors.

So everything was put right, and the shadow was lifted. And the circus that night, as though in compensation, went with a greater swing than ever, and there was a record crowd in the big tent.

But there was not a sign of Mr. Simon Snayle.

This questionable gentleman kept himself locked up in his own caravan. He was brooding—brooding over his real and imaginary wrongs, and trying to think of some fresh scheme whereby he could gain his ends.

Certainly, we had not finished with him yet!

THE END.

MY AMERICAN NOTE-BOOK

By the Author of our St Frank's Stories.

No. 23. NEW YORK POST OFFICES.

CONSIDERING the undoubted business efficiency of our American cousins, it is rather surprising to find that the New York public is rather badly provided for in regard to post-offices.

I have nothing to say against the postal service in general, for the dispatch and delivery of letters in America is most prompt and thorough. But if one wants to post a parcel, for example, or register a letter—entailing a personal visit to a post-office—the inconvenience is considerable.

I haven't the faintest idea how many post-offices we have in London, but I am sure there must be hundreds. Indeed, no matter what part of the metropolis one may be in, one is certain to find a local post-office within a few minutes' walk.

New York boasts of a population of nine millions, and it seems to me that there are amazingly few post-offices. One is compelled to travel quite a long journey by electric train or street car in order to register a letter. It is all very well for people who live near a post-office, but for the others it is exasperating.

One is exasperated in other ways, too. On more than one occasion I have waited in a queue at the 125th Street Post-Office in New York for more than twenty minutes—just to post a parcel.

For things are not done expeditiously over in America—much as they boast of their speed and hustle. The post-office I have mentioned is one that serves an enormous district—a busy, thickly populated area—and yet the staff is much smaller than in many of our insignificant sub-post-offices.

Similar to the banks, the New York post-offices are literally barricaded, and in order to get served one must go to a little pigeon-hole, resembling a ticket-office at a railway-station. There are several of these holes, but generally only one or two are open. And the queues of people have to simply wait their turn. It doesn't sound very hustling, does it?

The chief New York post-office, far down town, and standing almost next to the great Pennsylvania Station, is a grand, imposing building. The Americans are rather keen upon display, and it seems to me that they prefer to build these vast post-offices at enormous cost, and have a few—instead of a great number of modest post-offices such as ours. But, after all, the public wants service, and not display.

That same feeling of insecurity which I have mentioned regarding the banks is evidently felt in the post-offices, too. It is no unusual sight to see an official lounging about with a huge revolver sticking ostentatiously out of his hip-pocket.

I might mention that ordinary postage stamps can be readily purchased from almost any drug store in New York, and these drug stores abound in myriads, one being placed at practically every street corner. The streets are also provided with large, green-painted bins, in which one can deposit parcels. In a way, therefore, the public is better served than our own.

But a personal visit to a real post-office is frequently essential, and this is where we score.

While in New York I talked with several Americans who knew London, and they were full of praise for the remarkable efficiency of London's postal service—and one or two of them even acknowledge that America was behind us. And such an admission from an American is indeed a novelty!

There are no pillar-boxes in New York, as we know them. Instead, small iron boxes are clamped to the lamp-posts; but I think I have mentioned this before, in one of my other little articles. Anyhow, these receptacles, although insignificant compared to our own imposing pillar-boxes, abound.

NEXT WEEK—MR. BROOKS

Will describe his impressions of

NEW YORK'S BOWERY AND CHINATOWN

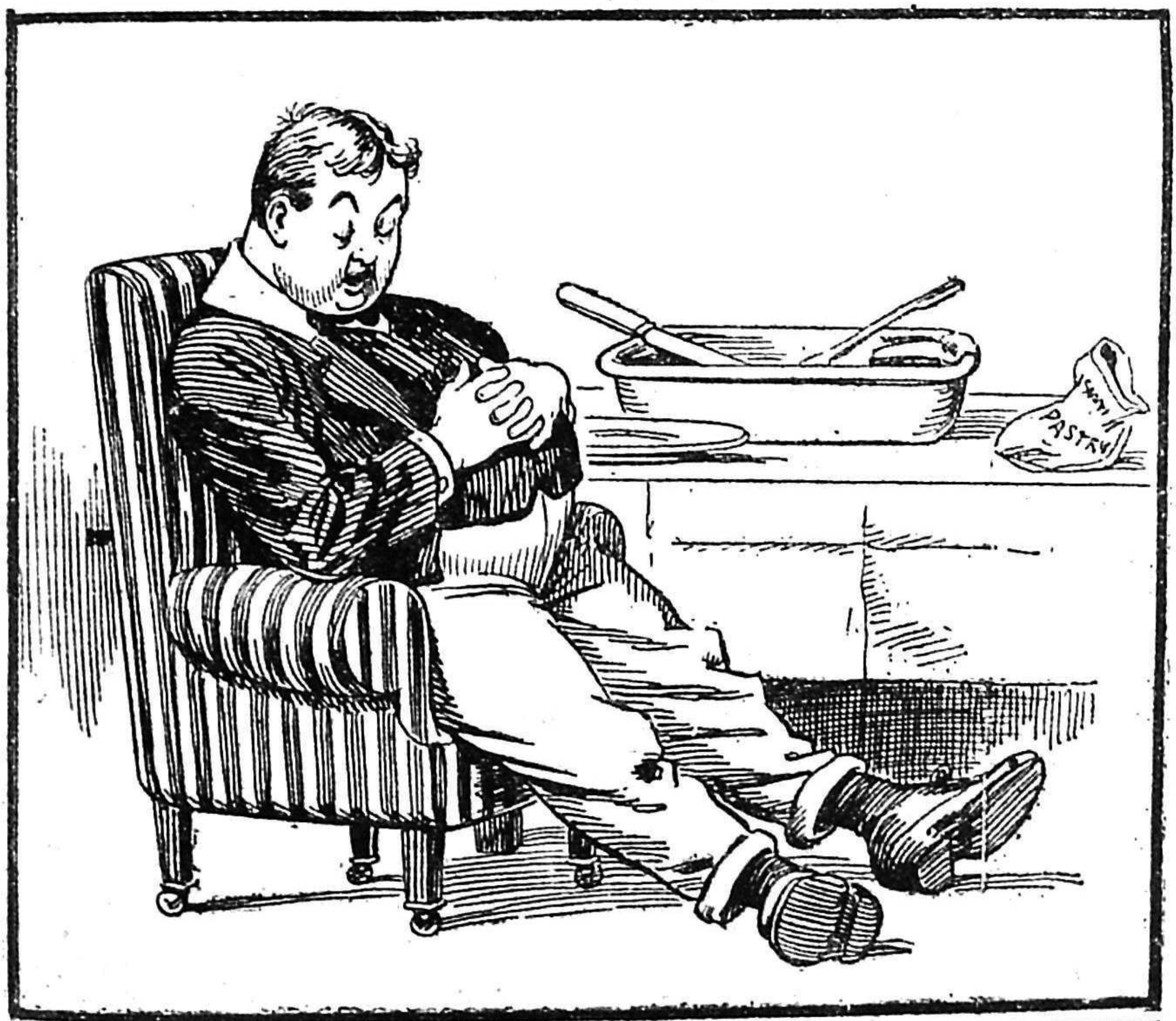
FINAL INSTALMENT OF COMPETITION SERIAL!

No. 25. Vol. I. Edited by Nipper. May 17, 1924.

St. Frank's Magazine

FAMILIAR PHRASES FROM FICTION

As Seen By Our Artist

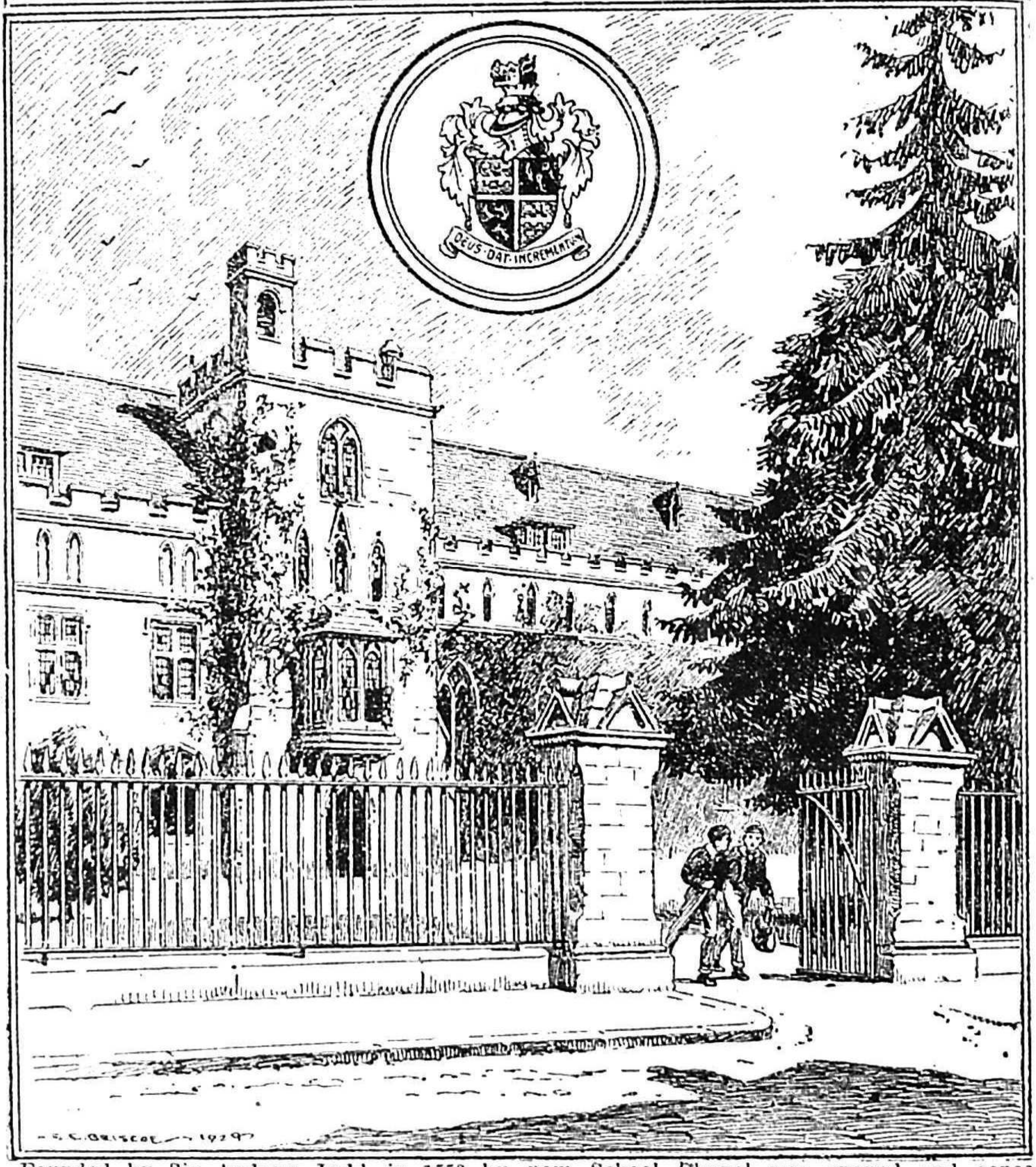


"HE CERTAINLY HAD IT IN HIM!"

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

SPECIAL SERIES OF ART SKETCHES BY MR. E. E. BRISCOE.

No. 27. TONBRIDGE SCHOOL.



Founded by Sir Andrew Judd in 1553 by Letters Patent of King Edward VI., Tonbridge School was one of several famous grammar schools started in England about this time. Its founder was Lord Mayor of London in 1550, and was well known for his wise beneficence. Since the main portion of the endowment exists in property in London, the school has grown considerably in importance in the last century. It has been rebuilt so often that little remains of the original structure. New extensions were begun in 1887 and completed in 1894. These included the Science Buildings, and in 1902 a new School Chapel was opened and consecrated by the late Archbishop of Canterbury.

The school contains about 480 boys, divided into three Sides—the Classical, Modern, and Scientific Sides. Of the latter, there is a well-equipped Engineering Class, and the Medical branch has received recognition by the General Medical Council as a teaching institution.

There are splendid facilities for games and sports, this department being organised in a system of gradation to suit the physique of the various boys.

Editorial Office,
Study C,
St. Frank's.

My Dear Chums,

Uncle Edward, whose "Replies in Brief" has attracted considerable attention, wishes me to announce that he will be pleased to include in his "Replies" any questions under the sun from readers outside the school, which means that every reader of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY is invited to bombard Handy with innumerable questions.

DO NOT TAKE HIM SERIOUSLY.

It does not matter how ridiculous they are, how personal, or how difficult, for even though Handy may feel like dotting you one on the nose, you are quite safe. The worst that he can do is to be—well, very plain-spoken. For instance, you must not mind if he occasionally tells you to go and eat coke, that he has deposited your communication in the W.P.B., or that he cannot be bothered to read such drivel, etc., etc.

A WORD OF WARNING.

And above all, I must strongly urge you not to take any notice of useful hints he may offer you, or disaster may speedily follow. Perhaps you may remember the advice he gave to a fellow suffering from warts. The poor chap tried Handy's cure of rubbing them vigorously with half a brick, and as this did not seem to work, he used a file. Needless to say, the operation proved to be not only ineffectual, but exceedingly painful. Handy is far from being infallible, though he thinks he is, and provided you take his words of wisdom with the proverbial pinch of salt, you will be far more amused than enlightened. Letters to Uncle Edward should be addressed to Uncle Edward, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

THE TRACKETT GRIM CHALLENGE.

Just as I had anticipated, the appearance of a detective story by Archie in the Mag. last week has had a startling effect upon Handy. The famous author of our Trackett Grim stories has written to inquire my reason for printing such a rotten 'tec. yarn by a mere novice, while he (Handy), who is an expert in detective stories, was utterly ignored. But the really interesting part of Handy's letter is near the end, where he makes rather a novel challenge to Archie. I should have said that Handy had enclosed with his letter the first part of a new Trackett Grim story. This story I have been able to put in this week's number of the Mag. Now Handy challenges Archie to write the conclusion to this yarn, and the following week Handy will himself send in his version of how it should end. The reader will thus be able to judge for himself Handy's claim to superiority over Archie as a detective writer.

ARCHIE NUMBER NEXT WEEK!

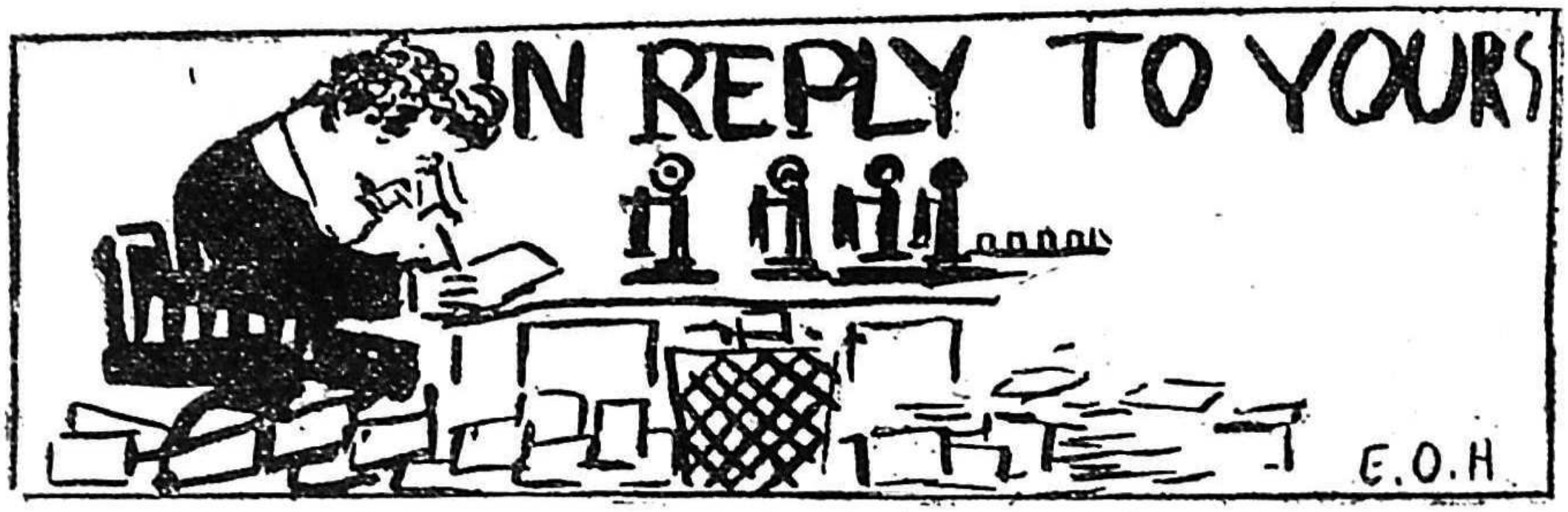
Next week Archie is going to relieve me of the task of editing the Mag. Don't get alarmed; it will only be for that one week. I am not at liberty to disclose the special attractions in store for you, as Archie wants to give you a surprise, which I can promise you will be a very pleasant one.

THOSE TWENTY-FOUR NAMES!

Our Competition Serial comes to an end with this week's instalment, and introduces the numbers of the last six members for you to identify. It is now up to you, my chums, to get busy and try to win the GUINEA I am offering in this unique competition. Full particulars as to what you have to do, and the date of last day for sending in, are given on Page 12.

Your sincere chum,
NIPPER.

St Frank's Magazine



Correspondence Answered by Uncle Edward

REGGIE PITT.—No, I have never heard the riddle before, and I think it is so rotten that I wouldn't give it any prominence. "If a motor-car skids from the top of a hill to the bottom, whose children are they?" Fathead! There's no sense in a question like that! And the answer is just as senseless. "The motor-car skids!" Of course it does, otherwise it couldn't get from the top of the hill to the bottom. If you can see the joke, I can't.

T. ARMSTRONG.—Your grumble about the rising bell ringing at seven-thirty is disgraceful. As a matter of fact, seven-thirty is an absurdly late hour for any healthy person to get up. I'm out of bed regularly at half-past five, so that I can have the afternoon free for the circus. And I've never felt fitter in my life.

WALTER CHURCH.—I am very sorry, but I cannot disclose my identity. I shall continue to be known as UNCLE EDWARD, and nothing more. Didn't I tell you this in the study only a few days ago? You're an ass to waste your time writing to me when I'm always with you.

COMPETITION FIEND.—Now that the competition is going full swing, you're still unsatisfied. There's no pleasing some fellows! Of course, the "Comrades of the Crimson Cross" is a rotten serial, and nobody can possibly tell who the characters are supposed to be. If I had written the yarn, I should have given all sorts of leading clues. But the Editor took the job on himself, and a better man was shoved aside.

R. CHRISTINE.—Your criticism of the Trackett Grim story in the Easter number is nothing else but sheer drivel. You complain that you have never seen gas rising from a cheese, and that the incident in the story could never have happened. Perhaps you have never heard of such a thing as author's licence! I have informed Handforth of your complaint, and the next time he catches you alone I'll punch your nose!

REGGIE PITT.—I've just seen your rotten joke. It's too late to alter my answer above, so I'm giving you this additional space. "The motor-car's kids." Of course, I can see it all right now. But why didn't you separate the words properly in the first place? It's a pity you didn't know better grammar. In any case, the riddle is a dud one.

WILLY.—Of course, I can tell you why pillar-boxes are painted red, and I'm surprised at your ignorance. Pillar-boxes are painted red so that they will match all the mail vans, and also to protect them from any bulls that may happen to be passing, because bulls dislike red.

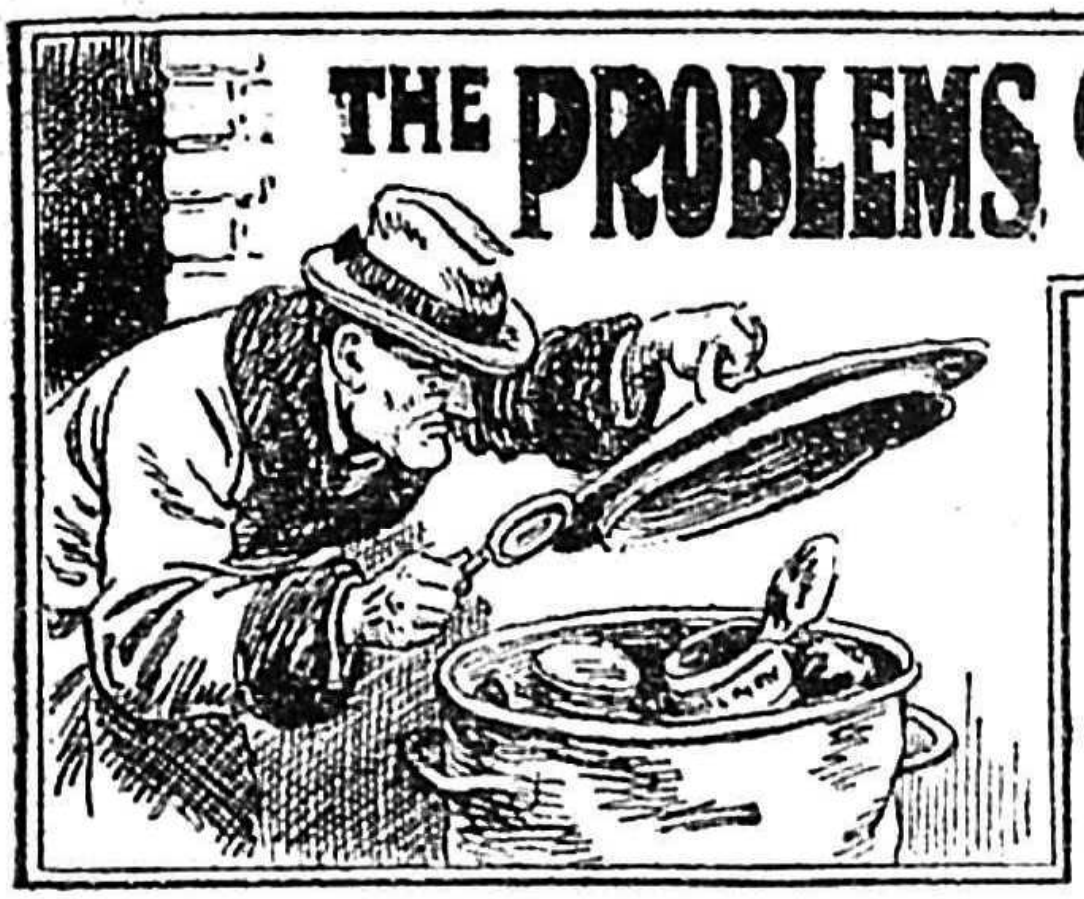
ENTHUSIAST.—No, it is not difficult to learn typewriting. Any ass who knows the alphabet can find the proper keys, and all you have to do is to press them down, and the words appear. I should think a really good typewriter would cost three or four pounds.

CINEMA FAN.—I agree with you that Felix the Cat is very funny. I don't think it's a real cat, although we can't be sure of this. They do the most extraordinary things on the films. I've even seen a man change a suit of clothes in one flash, and become a tramp instead of a dandy. These film actors must be very smart at quick-changing.

J. G.—Can I tell you the origin of the saying, "That Kruschen feeling"? Yes, certainly. There was once a man named Kruschen who felt so full of life that he constantly jumped over tables and even motor-buses. And since then the saying has become quite popular.

UNCLE EDWARD.

THE PROBLEMS OF TRACKETT GRIM



CUNNING CARL—THE COWBOY CROOK!

Being the Thrilling Adventures of Trackett Grim, the Famous Detective.

— BY —

ED. O. HANDFORTH.

THE MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE TRAIL.

SIX-SHOOTER SAM, the foreman of the Double Cross Ranch, strode out of the bank into the main street of Snake Fire Gulch, Arizona. He was carrying a big leather wallet containing the sum of £5,000.

This money was the wages for all the ranch hands, and Six-Shooter Sam always carried it home over the prairie at the same hour every week. He stood on the pavement for a minute, hitching up his leather chapps; and then, with a gay laugh, he leapt lightly into the saddle of his faithful broncho.

Six-Shooter Sam was a member of the old school, and preferred his broncho to the motor-bus. A man of the prairie is contemptuous of all motors, and believes only in horseflesh.

The next moment the brave foreman lay in the dust, dead.

"Gee!" said Sam, as he tore down the High Street, amid a cloud of dust. "I'll have to hustle some, or I'll be late for tea! I guess the chaps will be impatient for their tin, too!"

The foreman failed to notice an evil face peering from behind a shack near the outskirts of the town. It was a wooden structure, and the eyes were set beneath bushy brows. This grim individual was none other than Cunning Carl, the Cowboy Crook—the dastardly miscreant who had terrified the whole countryside for years past.

Hardly had Six-Shooter Sam vanished round the bend in the lane when Cunning Carl leapt into the saddle of his horse and gave chase. He overtook his victim in the midst of a dense wood, where the glaring heat of the sun beat down pitilessly.

"Hold!" cried Cunning Carl triumphantly.

Six-Shooter Sam reined in his broncho, and stared back over the boundless prairie, his view unobstructed by even a bush. In a trice, he grabbed for his gun, but he was too late!

Crack!

Cunning Carl's revolver spat fire and lead, and the next moment the brave foreman lay in the dust, dead. Cunning Carl rushed up, snatched the wallet, and vanished across the boundless prairie!

ENTER TRACKETT GRIM.

Tracket Grim, the notorious detective, glanced up sharply as a double knock sounded on the front door of his rooms in Baker's Inn Road. Splinter sprang to the door, and brought back a cablegram.

"Ah!" said Trackett Grim shrewdly. 'A wire!"

He flung down the comic paper he had been perusing, removed

his feet from the mantelpiece, and tore open the telegram. It contained an urgent appeal.

"Trackett Grim, London. Come at once. Foreman murdered and robbed. Police helpless. Any fee you like.

"CYRUS P. SQUIRT.
"Snake Fire Gulch, Arizona."

Trackett Grim leapt to his feet, quivering with eagerness.

"Pack!" he commanded. "We are off to Arizona! There is no part of the world that can get on without me! I am the one man in all the universe who is always called for! Pack, Splinter—and look slippy!"

Splinter was already dashing into the bedroom, where he hastily flung some odd shirts and clothes into two suitcases. In a trice he had finished, and exactly ten minutes later Trackett Grim and Splinter were off to Arizona.

They were just in time to catch the morning boat to America, and were soon speeding across the Atlantic. When Trackett Grim was called in, he never allowed the grass to grow under his feet!

THE WRECK OF THE ARIZONA, LIMITED!

The great American express train was swaying and roaring along the iron way across the plains of the Middle West. Trackett Grim and Splinter were seated in a first-class compartment, and were glad because they were near the end of their journey. Arizona was the next station but one.

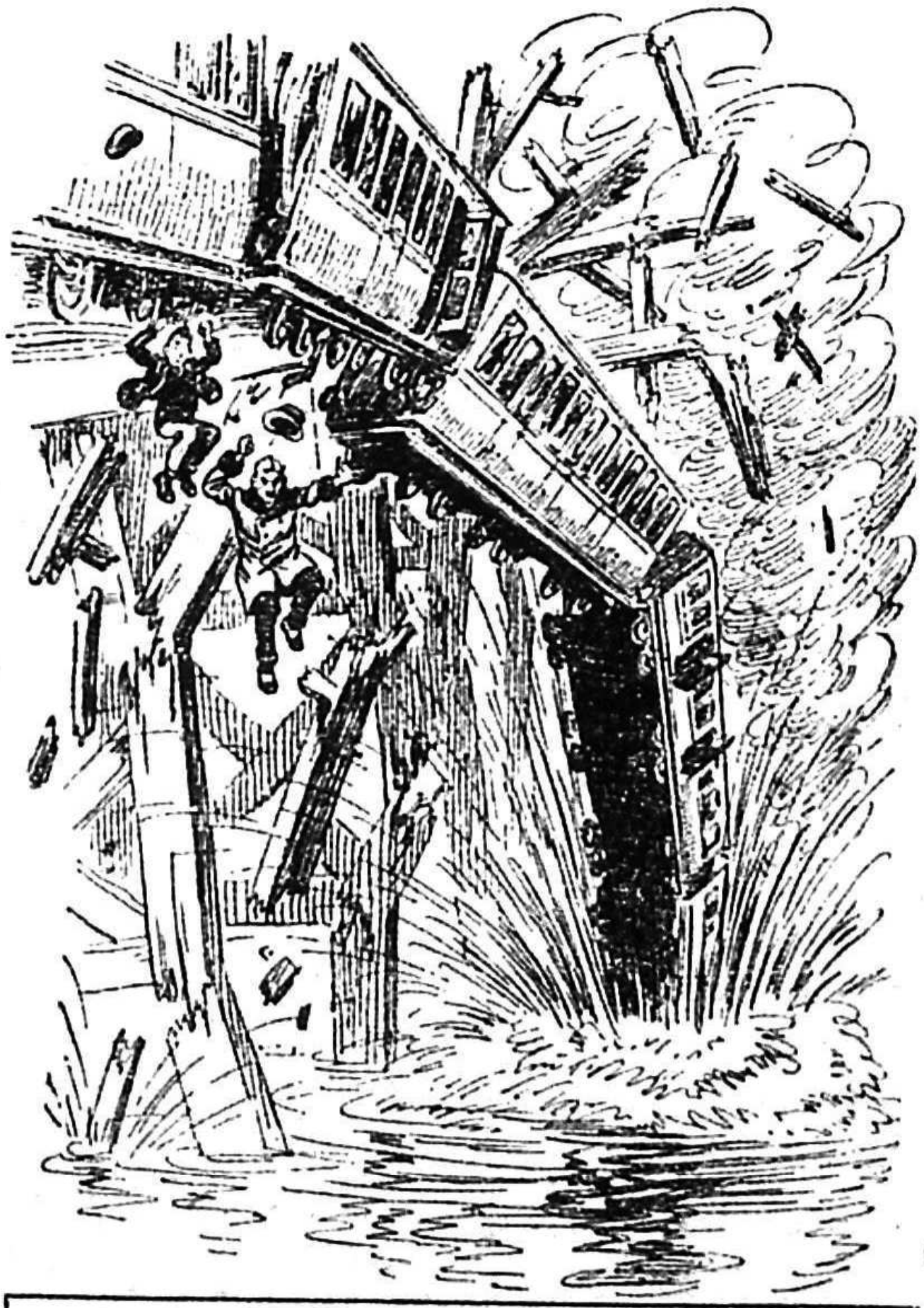
In America they don't call a fast train an express, but a "limited." This is probably because its speed is limited to a certain average. Anyhow, the train was too slow for Trackett Grim, who was absolutely bursting with eagerness to get on the track of Cunning Carl.

Suddenly, Splinter looked out of the window and saw that the train was just passing over a great trestle bridge, with a rushing stream thousands of feet below. On the other side of the gulch lay the boundless prairie.

"We are nearly there, sir!" cried Splinter.

He was right, for at that second the trestle bridge busted up into a thousand fragments, and the train leapt down to destruction, falling like a stone. But at the last second, Trackett Grim flung open the door, and he and Splinter made a leap for life!

Down—down towards the surging rapids!



At that second the trestle-bridge busted up, and the train leapt down to destruction.

THE CLUE OF THE REVERSED HORSE-SHOE!

The train was no more—a mere mass of wreckage and debris. Every soul was killed. And on the top of the gulch, Cunning Carl leered with victory, for he had done this deliberately, so that his arch-enemy would never reach the scene of the crime.

But Cunning Carl had made a bloomer. Trackett Grim and Splinter were alive—swimming down the rapids until they reached a quiet spot. Here they hauled themselves out of the river, and hurried on to the boundless prairie. It was bare, as far as the eye could see.

But Trackett Grim pointed away to the south.

"That is the way to Snake Fire Gulch!" he said. "A brisk walk, Splinter, and we will be there."

But before they had progressed far, Trackett Grim suddenly came to a halt. On a soft patch of the road, he caught sight of some footprints—the footprints of a horse.

And it could be seen that the left front horseshoe had been fixed on back to front.

"A clue!" cried Trackett Grim. "We are on the trail!"

They pressed along the highway, up hill and down hill, until they arrived at Snake Fire Gulch. They had no difficulty in finding the Double Cross Ranch, and they were warmly greeted by Mr. Cyrus P. Squirt, the owner. He wrung their hands, and there were tears in his eyes.

"I guess I want you to avenge Six-Shooter Sam!" he exclaimed, in his strong American accent. "And I guess you've got to recover that five thousand quid, too, Mr. Grim! Gee whiz! I've heard that you're a ripping detective, and here's a chance for you to show what you can jolly well do! Sure thing—I guess so! Yep, siree!"

"Show me the body!" said Trackett Grim briefly.

They left the ranch, and walked down the shady lane to the spot where the body of Six-Shooter Sam still lay on the boundless prairie. By the order of the police, the unfortunate foreman had not been touched. And as Trackett Grim and Splinter came up, Detective-Inspector Gink, of the Arizona Police, removed his bowler hat and mopped his brow. There were two policemen on duty, too, and they respectfully touched their helmets to the notorious British detective, whom they knew by sight.

"Glad you've come, Mr. Grim!" said the inspector gruffly. "This case beats us. Say, if you can get on the track of Cunning Carl, you're sure some snappy guy, I guess! That rotter has got away with the cash, and we're absolutely whacked!"

TRACKETT GRIM PICKS UP THE TRAIL.

It was not long before Trackett Grim had made his examination, and then he rose to his feet with a grim look in his eyes.

"This man was shot in two places by a revolver!" he said curtly. "His murderer stole the wallet, but left this behind!"

And Trackett Grim triumphantly pointed to two great finger-prints on the dead man's clean white linen collar—which the local police had not noticed.

It was the first clue!

This stirring detective story will be concluded next week, when Trackett Grim will prove his wonderful ability by the clever manner in which he defeats Cunning Carl. Look out for it—it's a treat in store.

E. O. H., Author.

"Stone-Walling."

THIS week, my chums, I intend to plunge right away into the art and mystery of cricket, and to give you a few hints which I have myself found valuable on the playing-fields, on the subject of batting.

Perhaps you will be surprised to see the title I have given this article. As a rule, the "stone-waller" is a man for whom most of us entertain a great contempt. Yet a little reflection will show you that a "stone-waller," or a purely defensive batsman, can be just as useful, and even more so than a man who has a meteroic career at the wicket, knocks up a few runs, and then comes back to the pavilion clean bowled.

I want you to remember that in these articles I am addressing the lad who does not know a great deal about cricket, but who is ambitious to get on and to see his club top of the particular league which it happens to belong to. Some lads, I am aware, regard cricket more in the light of a pastime to be indulged in when there is nothing else doing, and play for purely personal glory when they pick up a bat or handle a ball. Such fellows will derive no benefit at all from these articles, and it is only a waste of their time to read them.

Such, too, I have no doubt, will scoff at the idea that there is any art in holding a straight bat before the wicket to block the efforts of the bowler at the other end. But you, who love cricket, and are anxious to better yourself, will see at once that there is sound sense behind the following remarks.

(*Continued on page 9, column 2*)

St Frank's Magazine

E. Sopp's Fables

By Edgar Sopp of the Fifth

No. 24. The Fable of the Fellow Who Was Too Candid.

NOW, it chanced that a certain mild-mannered youth wandered one day through the realms of the Ancient House, Intensely Worried by divers irritations which had been thrust upon him in the course of the day. And it might as well be explained forthwith that this mild-mannered youth went by the name of Edgar Sopp—to wit, the writer of these lines. And, behold, I was not only irritated, but Thundering Wild. It chanced that I had been attempting to make speed upon

CERTAIN LITERARY LABOURS.

And it also happened that certain Misguided Individuals in the adjoining studies were determined to make the air noisome with every conceivable kind of Shindy. One, forsooth, even went to the length of practising upon a cornet, whilst another appeared to be hanging pictures on every available inch of his wall, thereby creating a Nerve-shattering Din, which enraged me mightily. And on the other side of the passage an Unknown Miscreant was trying over the latest fox-trots

ON A JEW'S HARP.

And work was impossible. So, boiling with passion, I thereupon hied myself out into the spacious Triangle, and lifted my voice unto the skies, and proceeded to gnash my teeth with such ferocity that sundry sparrows flew hither and thither in much Confusion. And, lo, this behaviour on my part was Most Remarkable, since I am by nature of a peaceful, retiring Disposition. Perchance my unwonted ferocity attracted the attention of a passer-by. For, ere long, I was accosted by a crony of my own Form, who generally answered to the name of Parry. And Parry paused, and spake, saying unto me that I looked

ABSOLUTELY DANGEROUS.

And I turned upon this youth, and spake unto him with much Disgust. And he, being a patient youth—despite the fact that he lived in a certain Rabbit-Hutch graced by the name of College House—gave me his ear at once. Indeed, I may truthfully say that he gave me both ears, and drank in my words eagerly. Although, forsooth, it is somewhat Irish to say that a fellow can drink with his ears. And the gist of my lament was all centred upon One Subject. Roundly and ferociously, I called down curses upon the head of the architect who had designed the school, and even

DRAGGED IN HIS ANCESTORS.

And Parry listened in mild astonishment, making some inane remark that I was not myself—although how I could be another person he omitted to mention. I bitterly complained that the Ancient House walls were atrociously thin, that the Ancient House was inhabited by ruffians of the Worst Type. I went on to describe the whole Ancient House building as an Abomination unto civilised society, and further declared that the whole place needed Pulling Down and rebuilding with

SOUND-PROOF WALLS.

And when at last I desisted, it was through sheer want of breath—or, perchance, because my Unwonted Fury had spent Itself. And I paused, whilst Parry proceeded, with entirely Unnecessary Relish, to agree with every one of my remarks. He declared that my opinion of the Ancient House was shared by Himself, and stated that when I described the inhabitants as Ruffians, I was paying them a compliment. In fact, he became

WARMED TO HIS WORK.

And my anger, which had Died Down, commenced to Bubble Up with thrice increased power and Force. I believe that my eyes Flashed, but it is possible that my glasses concealed this Danger Signal

from my candid companion. Furthermore, he probably regarded me as Easy Game—being, as I have already mentioned, a youth of Mild Manners. And, lo, Parry continued serenely on his course of

VIOLENT ABUSE.

And he went a great deal further than my own remarks, for he proceeded to describe the Ancient House as a Dump, and went on to say that it contained Rubbish of All Descriptions. He expressed Amazement that the Mouldy Heap had not been obliterated centuries since. It is possible that he felt himself secure, since he was but agreeing with my own stated opinions. But I found it impossible to contain the Ire which seethed up within me like froth in a ginger-beer bottle that has

JUST BEEN UNCORKED.

And I clenched my fists, forgot my dignity as a senior, and delivered a Biff upon Parry's Smelling Apparatus that caused him to break off in the very centre of his Choicest Observation. The manner in which this Candid Blighter bit the Dust caused a surge of warmth to well up within me. And, having started on the Good Work, I thereupon made hay while the sun shone. In other words, I smote the beggar hip and thigh. And every time he attempted to rise, I delivered

ANOTHER SLOSH.

And whilst I was engaged upon this warlike occupation, I pointed out to Parry in choice, but well-chosen words, that it was my privilege to disparage the Ancient House to my heart's content—but for him to make his Coarse Remarks regarding the Beautiful Old Pile was an Infernal Liberty. Somehow, I believe that Parry took my remarks to heart. He certainly took my blows on his Nose—and elsewhere. And, behold, a crowd commenced to collect—a crowd of unwelcome and

VULGAR ONLOOKERS.

And I retired, trembling somewhat after my exertions, but thoroughly contented that honour had been satisfied. For, yea, verily, even a Fifth-Former of the most Harmless Appearance (such as myself) is apt to break out into Fistic Exercise when he hears his own House being reviled by an Impudent Rival. For it has been written that a Chap can run his own House down with impunity, but Sees Red when that same House is Run Down by another.

MORAL: CANDOUR IS ADMIRABLE, BUT SOMETIMES IT CAN BE DANGEROUS.

POW-WOW—*continued from page 7.*

A defensive batsman has a great deal to recommend him to the captain who is anxious for his side to win. If he cannot be relied upon to make a good many runs for himself, he can, at least, be relied upon to hold up his end so that the fellow at the other end of the pitch can make them, and as such has a value to the side that is lacking in many other players. And you must all remember that before you can hope to knock up centuries you must learn to keep up your end, and by careful steady plodding snatch a run here and there.

That is for a start, of course. I am not advocating that you should aim at becoming a purely defensive batsman and nothing else. Later on, I am hoping that you will develop into a run-getter, and a man who will be of great assistance to your side in piling 'em up.

Defence is merely the art of playing steadily and resisting temptation. Tempting balls which bowl straight along the pitch and absolutely ask to be clouted are all too frequently the ones that flatten your middle stump. Caution is the one big thing necessary in cricket, and it is a thing, I reluctantly and regretfully admit, that most young players I have seen seem to ignore. The great thing, before hitting out, is to get the measure of the bowlers at the other end, to watch the ball, and in no circumstances make a rash cut or hit until you feel perfectly convinced that you have got the other fellow's measure; to know, too, where his ball will break and then hit the bat.

That can only come by stone-walling and patience. Later, the youth who starts his cricket career bearing this in mind, will become a safe scoring batsman on whom his club may rely.

One of the first things, in my opinion, that should be studied by the ambitious batsman, is not the position in which he holds the bat, but his stand, or the position in which he finds himself most comfortable at the wicket. And this is largely a matter of paying attention to the feet.

Stand comfortably. Carry the weight as evenly on both feet as far as possible, but slightly more on the right than on the left, though not too much, as this is liable to handicap you in drawing back when it comes to back play. In the first place, learn to hold a straight bat to everything that comes along, and do not make the mistake of trying to dodge a ball that seems to be breaking for your leg. It is easier to take this sort of advice than to put it into action in your games, I know, but a little perseverance and a little courage will teach you in time.

This is all I am able to say on the subject of defensive play this week. Next week, however, I hope to give you a few more helpful tips, and perhaps to get on to another subject.

PAINFUL PARODIES

PERPETRATED
By
Clarence Fellowe

FELIX KEPT ON WALKING

(With apologies to the composer of the popular song)

There's a cat you've heard about,
Seen as well, I have no doubt.
He's a comic chap
Known on every map.
But there's fellows at St. Frank's
Just as funny, too.
And if these verses you will read
I'll tell you of a few.

Tucker keeps on talking, keeps on talking still,
With his glasses on him
You will come upon him.
He thinks he's a Socialist,
But he's a funny pill.
Stuffs himself with tommy-rot,
Spouts it out at us red-hot,
Doesn't know he's off his dot,
And keeps on talking still.

Adams keeps on chewing, keeps on chewing still,
With his piece of Wrigley
See his jaws go wiggley.
Always at it day and night,
Asleep he's munching still.
Once he went out for a ride,
Got a puncture—never sighed,
Stuck a blob of gum outside,
And kept on chewing still.

Chambers keeps on swanking, keeps on swanking still,
When he starts his talking,
What he needs is corking.
His head is filled up to the brim
With absolutely nil.
Thinks he looks like Owen Nares,
Doesn't know the public stares,
Because he's got some sprouting hairs,
And keeps on swanking still.

Teddy keeps on sneaking, keeps on sneaking still,
Always causing trouble
Through his hearing double,
When he's on his keyhole game
Or crouching 'neath the sill.
If you tied his tongue with string,
Put his mouth into a sling,
It wouldn't alter him a thing—
He'd keep on sneaking still.

Willy keeps on cheeking, keeps on cheeking still,
He's a little terror,
And I'm not in error.
Chief of all the Third Form fags,
With nerve enough to kill.
When you grab him fast and firm,
He just gives a double squirm,
Slips away like any worm,
And keeps on cheeking still.

Handy keeps on biffing, keeps on biffing still,
When he gets excited
Trouble is invited.
If you enter Study D
You'd better make your will.
In your eye you get a slosh,
Then he gives your nose a cosh,
Pulps you up like lemon-squash,
And keeps on biffing still.

Archie keeps on slacking, keeps on slacking still,
Work to him is painful,
Looks on it disdainful.
He leads poor old Phipps a dance,
Then sleeps unto his fill.
Once he went to bed so meek,
Said his joints were all a-creak,
Didn't wake up for a week,
But keeps on slacking still.

FULL INSTRUCTIONS TO COMPETITORS ON NEXT PACE

THE COMRADES OF THE CRIMSON CROSS!

Final Instalment of Fascinating Serial Competition

By THE EDITOR

CHAPTER IV.

THE END OF THE SECRET LEAGUE.

KENMORE, of the Sixth, stepped into the trap beautifully.

As he walked out of the gymnasium into the gloom of the Triangle, he tripped headlong over a stout piece of cord which was stretched out a foot from the ground.

And as he sprawled at full length, six nimble figures swooped upon him, lifted him bodily, and carried him away to the shrubbery. It was all done so rapidly that Mr. Stockdale, emerging from the College House, saw nothing of the commotion, and heard only a scuffle and a gasp—sounds which had no special significance for the Housemaster since they were quite common.

"Got him!" said Comrade 19, with a savage note in his voice. "By gad, I've got one or two scores to pay off with this beast!"

"I dare say you have," murmured Comrade 20, as he methodically placed a knee upon the prisoner's chest. "But, strictly speaking, you ought to have been one of the victims, and not in the League at all!"

"Oh, don't be a fool!" growled Comrade 19.

The six Comrades of the Crimson Cross made short work of their prisoner. Having gagged him, Kenmore was hoisted into an upright position, a rope was passed under his arms and drawn tight. Then he was lifted from the ground until he swung clear, the rope having been passed over a tree branch some distance above.

"We are not doing this to hurt you, Kenmore," said Comrade 20, "but to humiliate you. It'll sting you more to be humiliated than swished. Five minutes from now a number of Sixth-formers will come along and cut you loose. But I don't think you'll care for the experience. There's just one other little thing. Got the card, Comrade 21?"

"Yes, here it is," said Comrade 21.

He produced from beneath his black cloak a white piece of cardboard, with a string attached. It was tied to Kenmore's chest, and it bore these words:

"I am sticking here for a bit, by order of the Comrades of the Crimson Cross. This is my first punishment for being a beastly bully."

"Now he looks pretty!" chuckled Comrade 20, who was a fairly big junior. "It's a good thing I am in charge of this party. The Chief doesn't realise that I'm one of the most capable fellows in the Remove. This'll prove what I'm worth."

"Oh, dry up!" said Comrade 21. "You're not bad in a scrap, but you're too unreliable. When it comes to something serious, you're too easily swayed by popular sentiment."

"Well, I'm not a chap to chuck my money about like you are," retorted Comrade 20 tartly. "The way you spend your cash is sickening. I wish I had a quarter as much as you squander in a week!"

"If you had my money, you couldn't control it," said Comrade 21. "The trouble with you, old chap, is that you are lacking in imagination. The Chief doesn't trust you with a difficult job because you haven't got the faintest organising powers. And you always go with the crowd."

"Dry up, you squabbling asses!" said Comrade 22 briskly. "There's no need for us to stand talking here. I'm not sure that we've done enough for the prisoner. We want to seize this opportunity to make more capital out of our coup. There's nothing like pushing a thing on when it's going. The value of publicity is always underestimated by the crowd. With an opportunity like this, we ought to make the whole school ring with our success. Nothing in the world succeeds unless you push it!"

"Well, let's be going," said Comrade 21. "It's about time for the general meeting, and the Chief will be getting impatient. We've got to go and make our report."

"I think Kenmore will make a report,

too—when that gag's removed," chuckled Comrade 23. "He's bound to explode, anyway. All right, Comrades. Let's be getting a move on. Rather a pity, though, we didn't make the rotter fight."

"Six against one doesn't seem quite fair," objected Comrade 21. "Of course, you might have taken him on single-handed——"

"I should think he could!" said Comrade 22, with feeling. "I'm considered to be a tough beggar at fighting, but I wouldn't challenge Comrade 23! The best boxer in St. Frank's——"

"Rats!" broke in Comrade 20. "You giddy Monks think——"

"Let it pass!" interrupted Comrade 23. "Personally, I think I could take on Kenmore, and lick him to a standstill. But we don't want to argue."

"Sense at last!" said Comrade 24. "Ready?"

At length they moved off, and, having got clear of the shrubbery, Comrade 24 removed his cowl, and ran lightly over to one of the windows of the Ancient House. It was that of the prefects' room, and as the evening was mild, it stood open. Comrade 24 put his head in.

"Quick!" he gasped. "Kenmore's out here in the shrubbery, tied up, with a placard on him! Something's happened!"

Without another word he dashed off, and was satisfied when, from a secluded corner, he saw a number of seniors stream out and make for the shrubbery. Comrade 24 rejoined his companions.

"All serene!" he announced. "Now we can go and report."

They made their way to the Council Chamber, but, unfortunately, omitted to observe that Mr. Crowell watched them suspiciously—and followed. Before entering the Chamber, they put their cowls on again. And when they got inside, they found the other eighteen Comrades already present.

"Oh, so here they are, at last!" said Comrade 2. "And about time! I'll bet they've messed the thing up!"

"As it happens, we haven't," said Comrade 24.

Comrades 15 and 16 recognised the voice of Comrade 24 at once, and immediately went over and patted him on the back with the familiarity of close friendship.

"Everything all right?" asked Comrade 15.

"Yes, fine!" said Comrade 24. "Of course, that ass—er—Comrade 20 takes all the credit. But if the Chief hadn't planned out our course of action, the result might not have been so good."

"Silence!" roared Comrade 2. "I want to speak——"

"I rather think, Comrade 2, that it is my duty to address the meeting," said Comrade 1 mildly. "Now, Comrades, I——"

"Good gracious! What does this mean?" interrupted a voice.

Mr. Crowell stood in the doorway, which Comrade 24 had neglected to close properly, perhaps because his memory was not quite so good as it had been at one time.

Mr. Crowell stood looking at the cowled figures with absolute amazement. He had suspected that something out of the ordinary was happening, and now he was convinced of it.

"Upon my soul!" he gasped. "Who—who are you?"

"We are the Comrades of the Crimson Cross, sir," said Comrade 2 boldly. "We're a secret society——"

"Fathead!" hissed Comrade 9. "If you keep quiet, he won't know. Oh, ye gods and little jelly fishes! It's too late now!"

"Remove these absurd cowls at once!" remarked Mr. Crowell angrily. "I have never seen such a preposterous piece of nonsense in all my life! Ah, I thought so!"

He stood looking at the uncowled figures grimly.

"Leave this place, and let there be no more of this foolery!" said Mr. Crowell sternly. "I absolutely forbid you boys to act in this way!"

And the Comrades of the Crimson Cross passed out, rather subdued. The secret league was dead—not that it mattered. It was only invented for the purpose of this Competition Story, and now it's up to all you readers to get your brains on the go, and find out who everybody is.

THE END.

WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO.

You have now read the concluding instalment of our great Competition Serial. When you feel that you have identified the six numbered characters which appear in this instalment, write their names in the spaces numbered correspondingly on the coupon which you will find on page iii. of cover. Then fill in your name and address where indicated on the same coupon; cut out this coupon, and pin it to the three preceding coupons, published with the other instalments, and address to:—"Characters' Names," c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

Write clearly and in ink.

The closing date is Wednesday, May 21st.

The competitor who sends in the correct, or most nearly correct, twenty-four names of the St. Frank's characters will be awarded the prize of ONE GUINEA. In the event of two or more competitors sending in correct solutions, the Editor reserves the right to divide the prize accordingly.

The Editor's decision is final.

CHARACTER NAMES COMPETITION.

In the spaces provided below write against the numbers the names of the St. Frank's characters represented by corresponding numbers in this week's instalment of "THE COMRADES OF THE CRIMSON CROSS." Particulars of this competition are given on page 12 of the ST. FRANK'S MAGAZINE.

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21. .....

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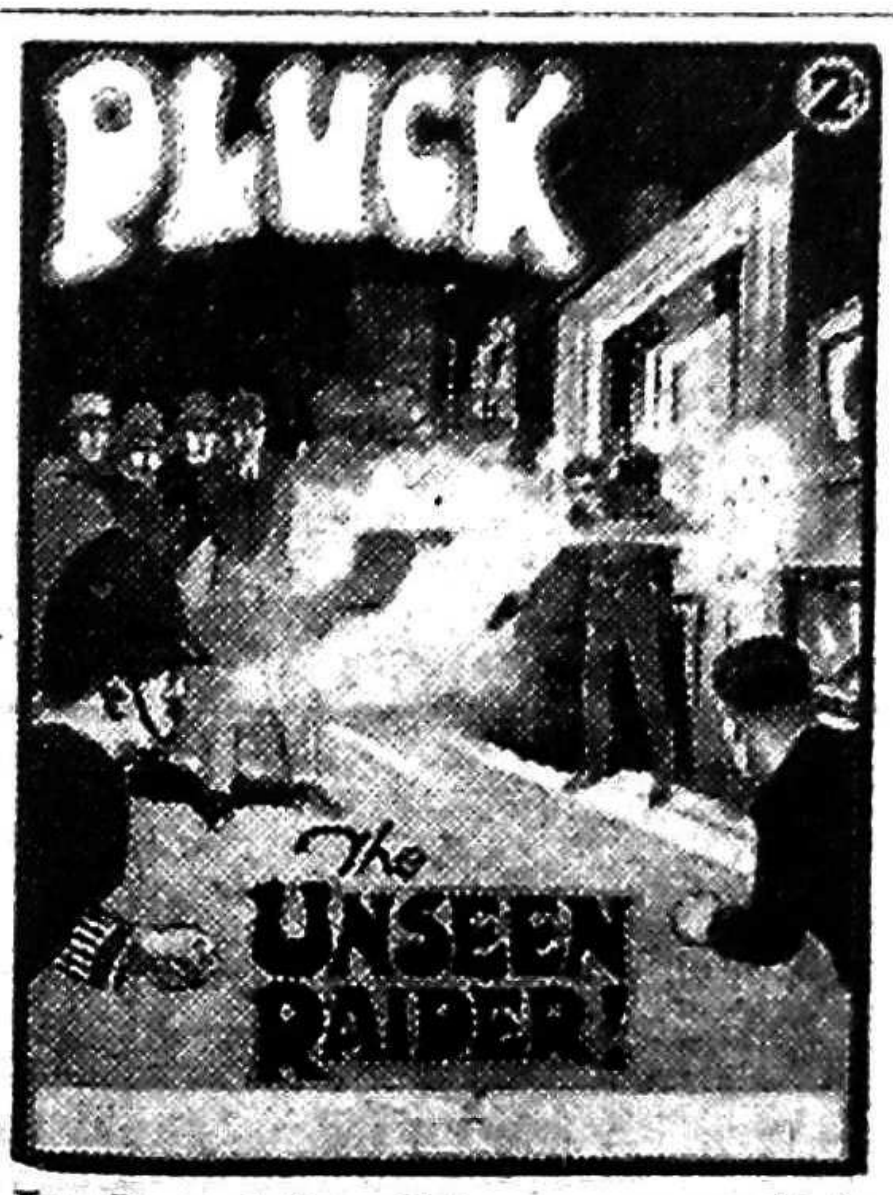

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