Ripping New St. Frank's Series Begins To-day!

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"The LURE of the FOOTLIGHTS"

Crash! Forgetting his role, Handy clean knocked out the hero.
(*A laughable incident from this week's St. Frank's story.*)

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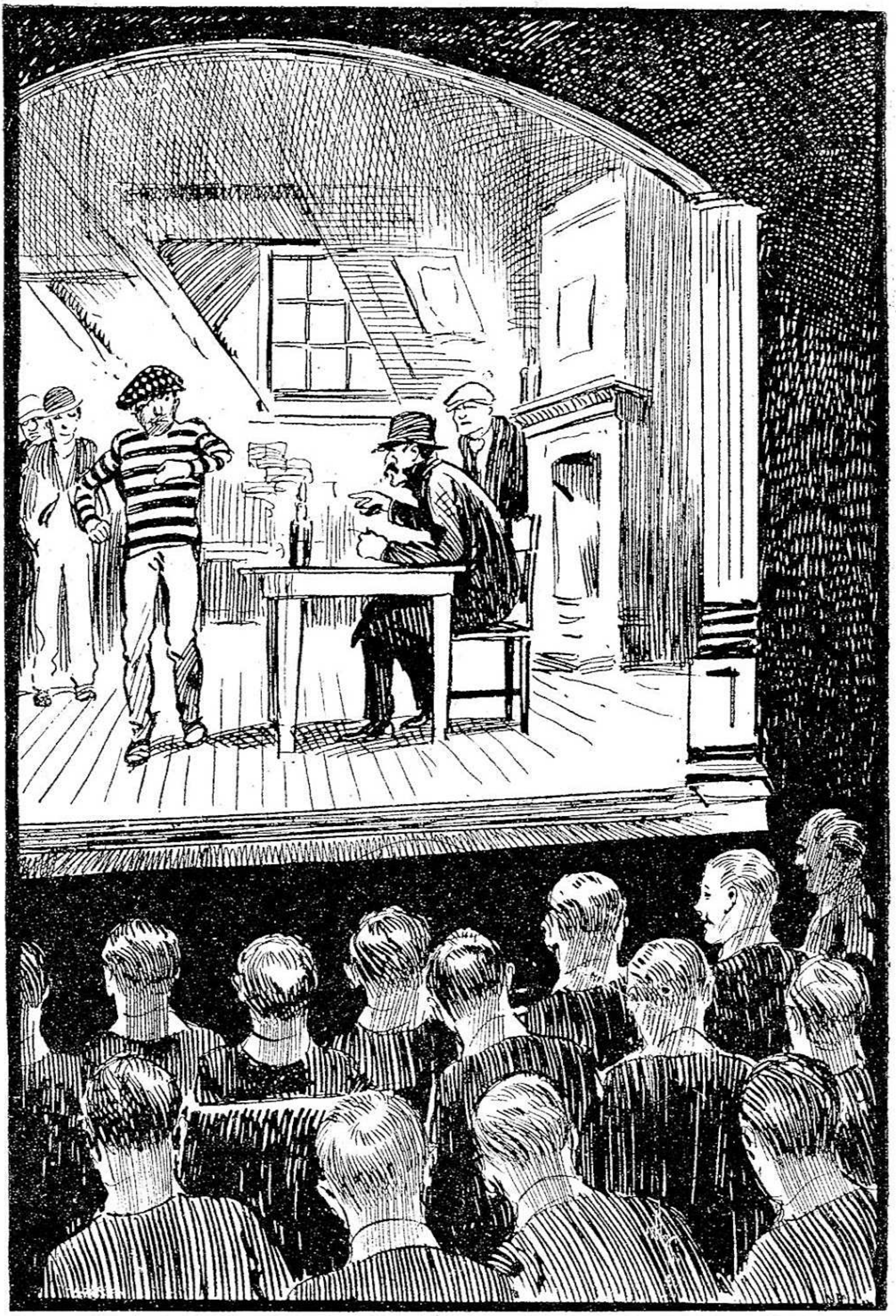
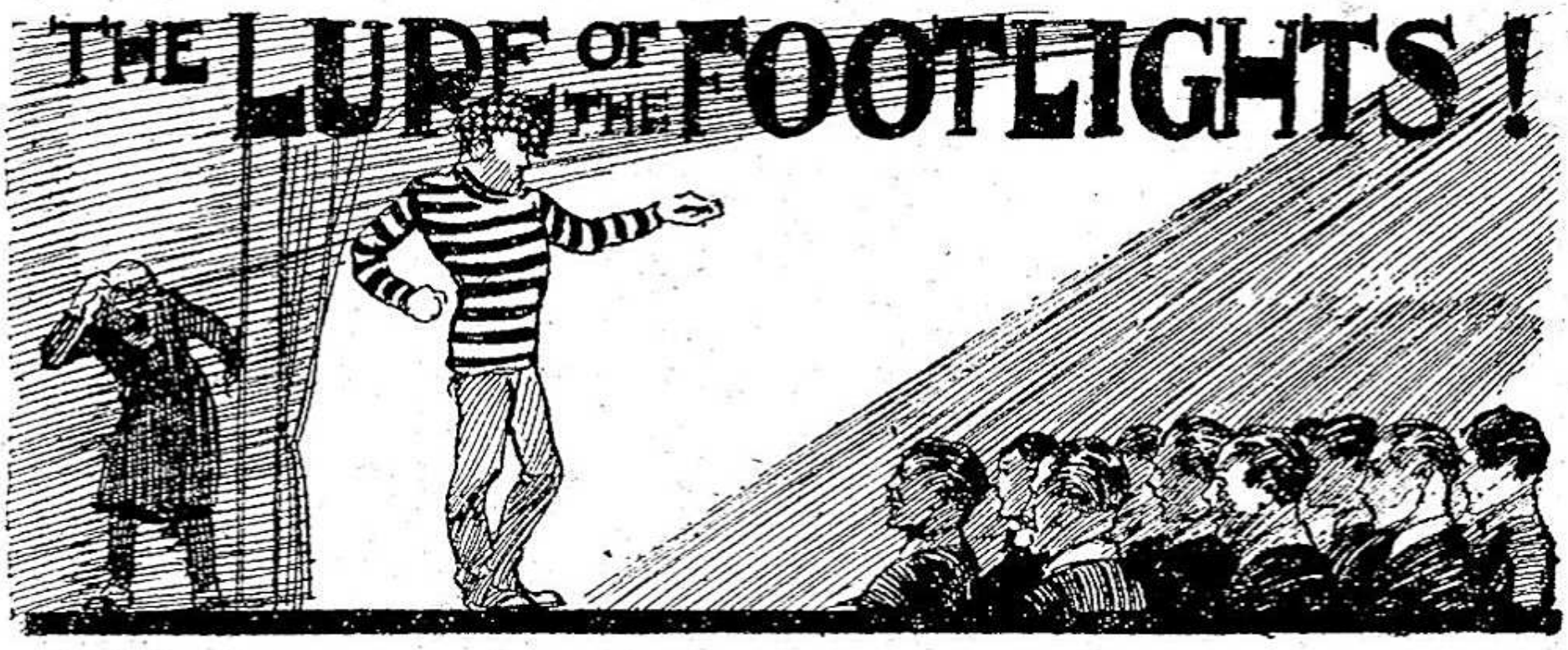


There was a perfect roar of delight when Handforth came on, dressed in tightly fitting trousers, a gaudily striped jersey, and a huge cap which hung over one ear.



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

Opening Yarn of a Stunning New Series.

CHAPTER I.

ORCHESTRA STALLS GOING CHEAP.

WILLY HANDFORTH, leader of the Third Form at St. Frank's, rested his elbows on the top bars of the gate, and made himself thoroughly comfortable.

"Not bad!" he commented critically. "A bit mouldy round the edges, but fairly passable, on the whole. What about another of those butter-balls, Chubby? Don't be greedy!"

"Why, you chump, I scoffed the last one five minutes ago!" said Chubby Heath, with a snort. "Just because you buy the things, you think I ought to give 'em all to you!"

Willy made no comment. He was always purchasing confectionery of various kinds, and giving it to his chums to hold. But when he wanted to know what had become of it, he met with nothing but indignant protests.

"And do they call this giddy thing a theatre?" asked Juicy Lemon. "I've heard it's not worth going to. Mr. Binks says it's an awful show. He wouldn't go, if they paid him."

The three leading lights of the St. Frank's Third Form were nearly at the end of the village. Before them stretched a meadow, and in the immediate vicinity stood a rather imposing-looking canvas erection. It was not a round tent, but a kind of oblong pavilion, with the narrow end facing the gateway. It was entirely faced by a wooden structure—an elaborate entrance, with a pay-box in the centre.

Over the top of this a great board announced to all and sundry that this was "Noggs' Imperial Theatre." Close at hand were two or three lorries, now snugly covered, and out of use until the next move was made. Discreetly hidden behind the tent peeped the end of a large motor-caravan.

"That's where the boss lives," said Chubby Heath, nodding towards the caravan. "Old Noggs travels about like a circus proprietor, you know. He lives in that giddy caravan all his life. My hat! It's a wonder he doesn't get fed-up with it."

Willy shook his head.

"It's no good getting fed-up with things when you've got to endure them," he said wisely. "We're fed up with old Suncliffe, but it's no good making a fuss. We just stick him. So I suppose old Noggs sticks to his caravan. It wouldn't be a bad idea to come to to-night's performance."

"Not likely," said Juicy. "I wouldn't spend my good money on this!"

"Your good money?" asked Willy.

"Yes."

"And what do you call your good money, you young ass?"

"Well, I've got tuppence——"

"Tuppence!" interrupted Willy. "Where did you get the other penny from?"

"It must be mine!" said Chubby, in alarm. "He only had a penny this morning, and I lost one in the Form-room——"

"Well, it's mine now!" said Juicy Lemon firmly. "I was hard at work when something rolled against my foot. Do you suppose I was going to disturb the lesson by asking whose it was? You shouldn't lose your giddy money if you don't want anybody to find it."

"Don't argue!" said Willy sternly. "It's not worth all this breath. A measly tuppence! And you're talking about this show! There's no admission under sixpence, you fathead!"

"Then who cares about it?" asked Juicy. "What's the play, anyhow? A horribly dull thing called 'The Champion of the Ring.' Somebody told me it was worse than taking a dose of poison."

"Well, I don't believe in running a thing down until I've tested it personally," retorted Willy. "We'll see if we can't—— Hallo! Here comes old Andy! You watch me, my lads! I'll soon wangle some seats for to-night."

"But we don't want to come," protested Chubby.

Willy regarded him coldly.

"Do you think I care whether you want to come or not?" he asked. "If I say you're coming—you're coming! I know what's good for you chaps! There's an end of it!"

"But look here——"

"See that?" said Willy, removing one of his elbows, and placing his clenched fist beneath Chubby's nose. "Take a close look, my son! Any more of your cheek, and you'll feel it!"

Chubby Heath shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, perhaps the show won't be so bad," he said resignedly. "But I thought about going to the pictures——"

"You're not supposed to think," said Willy. "I'm here to do that. Just you keep qu'et, and see what happens. Good-afternoon, Mr. Noggs! How's everything?"

Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs, the sole proprietor of the travelling theatre, paused, and regarded the trio of fags with a calculating eye. It was an old habit of his to appraise any sightseers who hung about the meadow—and he wasn't particularly enthusiastic now.

"In returning your greetings, I should like to know if you are here to book seats, or merely to annoy me?" he said, in a deep, booming voice. "We do not open the gates until five-thirty——"

"But can't we get our tickets now?" asked Willy. "We thought about booking three orchestra stalls, you know."

Mr. Noggs brightened up.

"They are yours for four shillings and sixpence," he replied promptly.

"I said we were thinking about it," Willy reminded him.

"That's as far as we'll get!" said Juicy Lemon, jingling his twopence.

"Away!" commanded Mr. Noggs, pointing dramatically up the lane. "Am I to be the butt of your childish humour? I suspected that you were deadheads the moment I set eyes upon you! For two hours this morning I was pained by the sight of the village youths gaping over this gate. Go hence! Let me hear no more of this——"

"Hold on, Mr. Noggs," grinned Willy. "We're not deadheads. We want to book seats for your show—but we're not quite sure about the prices. How do they go?"

"The orchestra stalls are one shilling and sixpence, the pit stalls are one shilling, and the pit is sixpence," replied Mr. Noggs, in his slow, precise way of speaking. "I perceive that you are young gentlemen of refinement. Let me remind you that the pit, though irreproachable for the price, is scarcely in keeping with your social station."

"That rules out the pit," said Willy, nodding.

"We have the pit stalls at one shilling—comfortable, select, and reasonable," continued Mr. Noggs, warming up to his work. "These seats are bookable in advance, and there is no extra fee. But even the pit stalls are not in keeping with such young gentlemen as yourselves."

"That's kyboshed the pit stalls," said Willy.

"I take it, then, that you are going to patronise the best seats in the house?" asked Mr. Noggs, with enthusiasm. "By a lucky chance, the front row has not yet been booked, and I can provide you with three choice seats in the very centre."

"They are ours," said Willy.

Mr. Andy Noggs whipped out a ticket book, and filled in three of them. This sort of work was scarcely his forte—for he was not only the owner of the theatre, but the leading man—the man upon whose shoulders the entire performance rested.

He was an actor of the old school—a tall, dignified figure, with flowing hair, heavy features, and a clean-shaven face. He affected an overcoat with a fur collar, and reminded Willy of the Silver King.

"Four shillings and——"

"Half a tick, Mr. Noggs," interrupted Willy. "Not so jolly quick with that four and sixpence!"

"By the shade of Shakespeare!" ejaculated Mr. Noggs. "Are you attempting to back out of your undertaking——"

"Not at all," put in Willy. "But what about half-price?"

"I will admit that children are booked at half-price——"

"Children!" yelled Willy & Co., in one voice.

"Children under the age of ten," continued Mr. Noggs. "I may not be a judge of age, but I venture to suggest that you will never see that tender year again. I must insist upon adult prices."

"It's all very well insisting, but what are you going to do when we've only got one-and-tenpence between us?" asked Willy, shaking his head. "You can't get away from facts, Mr. Noggs. Hand over your tuppence, Juicy. Out with that ninepence of yours, Chubby."

Willy held out the sum of one and tenpence—all in coppers.

"We're willing to take those stalls at a special cut rate," he said calmly. "Times are hard, and we've got to go easy. How

about it, Mr. Noggs? It's all good money. Juicy's tuppence is a bit sticky, but it's none the worse for that."

Mr. Noggs regarded the money longingly. It was a cunning scheme of Willy's to hold it out in such an inviting manner. Money was indeed scarce, and Mr. Noggs was tempted.

"The pit stalls are excellent value at one shilling——" he began.

"None of your pushing off with pit stalls," interrupted Willy. "We're not questioning the value of the seats, but we want to sit in the front row. Can't you do it, Mr. Noggs—as a special favour? Remember our social position. We couldn't very well disgrace the school by hobnobbing with the crowd. Besides, think of the tone it will give to the front row!"

"I am not so very sure that the tone will please me," responded Mr. Noggs grimly. "There are several definitions of the word. However, I will accept this money, and I will give you your stalls. But in return I trust you will keep this matter a little secret between ourselves. And perhaps a little judicious advertising would not come amiss? A word from you spread among your companions——"

"That's all right, Mr. Noggs—you can trust us to boost your show for all it's worth," said Willy Handforth readily. "And that's literal, mind you."

"I can only trust that your standards will not be too high," sighed Mr. Noggs. "We are here to-morrow night—and we shall be in Edgemore for the other two days of the week. So there is plenty of time for you boys to come in your multitudes."

Willy took the tickets, and pocketed them. Mr. Noggs saw them vanish regretfully. He couldn't quite understand why he let them go. After all, it was a piece of unexampled nerve to obtain three one-and-sixpenny seats for the total price of one-and-ten.

But one never knew quite why one succumbed to Willy.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRIALS OF MR. NOGGS.

FIVE minutes later, Mr. Noggs slowly entered his caravan, and removed his overcoat.

The interior of this home on wheels was surprisingly roomy and comfortable. It was no ordinary caravan—but a huge motor vehicle as large as a pantechnicon. It was thus a fair-sized room, with a curtained alcove at the end, concealing Mr. Noggs' bed. There were one or two comfortable chairs dotted about, a well-worn carpet adorned the floor, and in the corners were little bookshelves and cupboards. The whole place was untidy, and generally home-like.

"Ah me!" sighed Mr. Noggs, lowering himself into a chair. "Three stalls for one-and-tenpence. Times are bad, indeed! What has become of my independence? What has happened to my self-respect?"

"Busy, guv'nor?" asked a cheery voice at the door.

Mr. Noggs looked round as he filled his pipe.

"Come in, Steve," he said sadly. "Another humiliation! But what is one to do when one plays to empty benches? Does ever a theatrical manager refuse money? Is it not better to sell three seats for one-and-tenpence than to leave them empty?"

"Every time!" agreed the newcomer. "We'd sell the stalls at threepence each if it wouldn't spoil our prestige. What's happened now, guv'nor? No need to look so worried about it."

Stephen Ashwood was the juvenile lead of Mr. Nogg's company. He was a good man at figures, and he generally took the money in the paybox. He was over thirty, but looked younger, one of that vast army of commonplace actors who are accustomed to spending eight months of the year "out," and grabbing with eagerness at the smallest part. With Mr. Noggs he had at least a permanent billet. The work was hard and the pay uncertain. But it was better than nothing.

"You couldn't have done anything else, guv'nor," he said, when he had heard about the episode. "I'm hanged if I can understand why this show doesn't attract the crowds, though. It's a mystery to me; it's been a mystery for months. We ought to be full every night."

"We ought, Steve—we ought," said Mr. Noggs. "We give good plays, although I will admit our company is weak in places. But would these rustics appreciate real talent?"

"Just like casting pearls before swine," said Ashwood with a grunt. "What about your acting, guv'nor? You're one of the best character actors in the country, and your stuff goes for nothing. These crowds would rather see a twopenny-halfpenny clown."

"I am afraid you are cynical, laddie," said Mr. Noggs, shaking his head. "There is something wrong with us. We don't know what it is. We go from town to town, and we are doomed to play to empty benches. We advertise—we announce our coming with a blare of trumpets. But we do not attract the crowds. Yes, Steve, there is something wrong."

Mr. Noggs puffed at his pipe moodily. This was one of his private weaknesses—his pipe. In public he would appear with nothing less imposing than a cigar. But as cigars were scarce he was generally regarded as a non-smoker.

He was a sad man—his lined face, and his troubled eyes told of the worries that beset him. Ever since this tour had commenced, several months earlier, misfortune

had dogged him. It was as though Fate had determined to crush him.

On previous tours he had made money. He had done well, taking his theatre from town to town, and covering all expenses, with plenty to spare. In those prosperous times he had been able to pay a thoroughly capable company, and he had started this tour with the self-same crowd.

But from the very outset the audience had been weak. Not once had he paid expenses. Matters had gone from bad to worse, and one by one he had parted with his best talent. His "company" now consisted of himself and Ashwood and a few mediocre members of the profession who had been down and out—people who had no real acting ability, and who never ought to have chosen the boards as a career. There are thousands of this type.

Mr. Noggs had forgotten what it was like to play to a full house. He couldn't understand the consistent bad luck. It was not as though he had competition. His travelling theatre was a novelty, perhaps the only one of its type in the country. And he only went to places that had no theatres of their own.

On the whole, his theatre was well appointed, attractive, and the seats were remarkably reasonable. His playbills were of high quality and tone. His advance agent was a man of enterprise and initiative. And yet, in spite of all this effort, the luck would not turn.

"We must bear our troubles bravely, Steve,'' continued Mr. Noggs, removing his pipe. "Of what use to carp and grumble? A showman's life is ever one of ups and down. 'An habitual acquaintance with misery is the truest school of fortitude and philosophy'—Goldsmith. We must try to repair our mistakes, Steve, for we are obviously making some. 'The man who makes no mistakes does not usually make anything'—Phelps. A wise remark of his, Steve."

Ashwood smiled.

"Upon my word, guv'nor, I don't know how you keep all these quotations in your head," he said. "You generally manage to trot one out at the right moment—just when it applies."

"'Misfortune serves to make us wise'—Gay!'' murmured Mr. Noggs.

"I'm hanged if you're not at it again!"

"'Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows'—Shakespeare,'' said Mr. Noggs sadly. "Forgive me, Steve. I try not to quote these illustrious poets, but who am I to assume that my words are better than theirs? We are in troublous times. 'One woe doth tread upon another's heel, so fast they follow'—Shakespeare."

"Seen anything of Barton to-day?" asked the other.

Mr. Noggs winced.

"Speak not to me of Barton," he said grimly. "I am sinking into a peaceful state of meditation, Steve. Barton is no soothing balm for my woes. He may be my advance agent, but I owe him more money than I care to think of. A man to forget, Steve. But unfortunately, to forget him is impossible."

"I am worrying about you, guv'nor,'' said Ashwood, shaking his head. "Unless business bucks up you're going to lose the whole show; that fellow will take it over your head."

Mr. Noggs frowned.

"You don't like Roger Barton, laddie,'' he said slowly.

"I don't."

"And yet Barton is a man of business—a live wire," said Mr. Noggs. "If he cannot bring money to my paybox, who can? Never have I had my shows so well represented. Never have I had my advance work done so thoroughly."

"Well, it's a queer thing that we've done rotten business ever since he took on the job," said Steve Ashwood bluntly. "He started with us on this tour, guv'nor, and look where we stand. The man's a hoodoo.''

"Base word!" frowned Mr. Noggs. "Use no Americanisms, Steve. I detest them. Our good English is being mutilated far too much these days. Alas, it is the films we have to thank!''

"We have to thank the films for our empty houses, too, I'm afraid!" growled Ashwood. "I don't know why, though. We don't touch places where the picture theatres are strong. The whole thing's an infernal mystery. Barton's lent you money, hasn't he?"

"You must not speak in that tone of Barton," said Mr. Noggs severely. "I am grateful to him, Steve. But for his money I should have been sunk into the mire long since. It is he who has kept us going. 'Moneys are the sinews of war'—Thomas Fuller. Without them, Steve, we should perish."

"But you didn't need Barton's money before this tour.''

"Times are different; they are harder now," replied Mr. Noggs. "And even Barton has advanced his final sum. Unless business looks up he will seize my property, and I shall be ousted from the possession of everything I own. Do you wonder that I am turning grey, Steve? Twice during one month have I resorted to the dye bottle. A sad state of affairs!''

"We don't seem to be doing much here, either!" growled the other. "Of course, we've only given one show, but there weren't twenty people in the house. That's just about exhausted Bellton, though."

"The school, Steve—the school.''

"One-and-tenpence!'' said Ashwood bitterly.

Again Mr. Noggs winced.

"We must not judge too hastily," he sighed. "But for the close proximity of St. Frank's I would not have pitched in this spot. We must live in hopes, laddins. To-night may see a rally."

"Let's hope so!" growled Ashwood. "Well, we want three new vacuum lamps for the footlights, guv'nor—that's what I came to see you about. Shall we get them, or shall we remain short? The stores are all gone, you know, we got to the last of the extras weeks ago."

Mr. Noggs produced an old-fashioned leather purse, and peered into it wistfully.

"Light, Steve—very light," he murmured. "'He who steals my purse steals trash'—Shakespeare. No, our funds do not justify a fresh supply of lamps. Let me sleep, laddie—let me forget the trials of this life. For, after all—'Life is a jest, and all things show it; I thought so once, but now I know it'—Gay. Away, Steve, leave me. 'O sleep! O gentle sleep! Nature's soft nurse'—Shakespeare."

Mr. Noggs closed his eyes and lay back in his chair. His pipe drooped, and Steve Ashwood quietly left the caravan. He paused at the door for a moment and regarded that lined old face.

"What a rotten shame!" he muttered savagely. "One of the best old boys who ever breathed!"

CHAPTER III.

THE WHEELS OF CHANCE.

"BUCK up, Handy!" panted Dick Hamilton, glancing over his shoulder. "By jove, they're in sight! Put some beef into it, man!"

Edward Oswald Handforth grunted.

"If you think you can beat me, Nipper, you've made a bloomer!" he snorted. "It's like your nerve, telling me to buck up. Unless you're jolly careful those hounds'll have us!"

The two Ancient House juniors were evidently engaged on important business. They were running hard, skirting a spinney somewhere between Caistowe and Bellton. Both were airily attired in running shorts, and rubber-soled shoes. And in the dim distance behind a straggling crowd of tiny white figures could be seen.

The hounds were in full cry after the hares.

It was one of the Junior Inter-House paperchases: Nipper and Handforth represented the Ancient House, and the West House hounds were hot on the scent. Unless some extra speed was put on the hares were in danger of being overtaken

"Look after that scent of yours," warned Nipper, as they shot round the spinney and made for a friendly hedge. "Why, hang it, you're not leaving a trail at all! I warned you to be careful with that paper!"

"Those asses didn't give me enough!" said Handforth indignantly. "My bag's empty, and I can't leave any trail now. Somebody's going to get into a row——"

"You hopeless duffer, we both had the same amount when we started," growled Nipper. "I've got heaps to carry me through. We've got to lay the trail properly. We can't expect——"

He paused, as they found a gap in the hedge, and pushed through. Just beyond lay the Caistowe road. There was a high bank, and it was a long jump down into the lane.

Nipper laid his trail well, and was thinking of dodging straight across and confusing the hounds by making a round-about detour through a neighbouring wood. But Handforth wasn't so keen. He was worrying about his lack of paper.

As usual, he had been very reckless. In spite of repeated warnings he had thrown the trail out with lavish expenditure, not only penalising himself, but rendering the task of the hounds much easier. They were gaining all the time, and Nipper was quite anxious.

Handforth stared as he prepared to leap down into the road. A small motor-car was standing about twenty yards away, and a well-dressed man was pasting a long, narrow bill to a gatepost. He had evidently stopped the car on purpose to perform this simple operation.

But Handforth hardly saw the man; he hardly saw the car.

His attention was attracted by a large pile of similar bills in the rear of the two-seater, resting in the dickey, which was open. The bills positively beckoned to him.

"By George!" he gasped. "Paper!"

"You hopeless ass!" gasped Nipper. "You can't ask that man——"

"Who's talking about asking?" interrupted Handforth. "This isn't a time for politeness. You buzz on, I'll catch you up in half a jiffy. Unless we're careful those West House bounders will be on us."

"Take my advice, and come along," said Nipper. "You'll only get into trouble if you——"

But Handforth didn't wait. He was in no mood for half-measures. He sped up the lane, and at the same moment the man turned away from the gatepost, pastepot in one hand and brush in the other.

"Hallo!" he said. "What's this—one of your games?"

"I want some paper," said Handforth briskly. "My hat! Just the very thing! Sorry, but——"

"Confound your nerve!" shouted the

stranger. "Leave those bills alone! Drop them, I tell you. Of all the infernal cheek!"

Handforth grabbed a large sheaf of bills and crumpled them triumphantly. They were just the very things he needed. He could tear them into scraps as he ran, and he would soon be provided with the material for laying his trail.

But the motorist didn't see eye to eye with him. And after all, there was something to be said for him. This calm commandeering of his property by Handforth was a trifle beyond the limit.

As it happened, the gentleman in question was Mr. Roger Barton, the advance agent for Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs. He wasn't a particularly pleasant man to look at, at least, not at this present moment.

He was on the thin side, with a hard, crafty face. Yet it was an intelligent face—the face of a keen business man. He was smartly dressed, and this occupation of pasting bills seemed incongruous. But Mr. Barton believed in saving labour, and he generally went about with a number of current bills and a pastepot. At every opportunity he would slap one up.

It aroused his gore when he saw this schoolboy crimpling those expensive bills, and preparing to tear them. A calm protest on his part would have worked miracles—Handforth would have desisted in a moment. For one could do anything with the famous leader of Study D if one went about it in the right way.

But to shout at him was fatal.

"Drop those bills, you young thief!" roared Mr. Barton. "Do you hear me? Why, you——"

"Blow your beastly bills!" snorted Handforth. "This paper-chase is more important than your circus, isn't it?"

"Circus!" shouted Mr. Barton, freshly enraged.

"Well, fair, then——"

"I'm advertising Noggs' Imperial Theatre——"

"Oh, that show!" said Handforth tartly. "I've heard it's a dud! My only hat! 'The Champion of the Ring'! You'd better come to St. Frank's if you want to see some decent boxing."

"Are you going to drop those bills?" snarled Mr. Roger Barton.

"No, I'm not—— By George!" gurgled Handforth, as he caught sight of some streaks of white through the opposite hedge. "The Hounds! They're on me! Oh, corks! Get out of the way, you chump!"

But Mr. Barton dropped his paste-brush and grabbed Handforth in a vice-like grip.

"No, you don't!" he rapped out.

"Leggo!" howled Handforth. "The Hounds, I tell you!"

"You'll drop those bills, or——"

"They'll have me if you don't stop this silly rot!" panted Edward Oswald. "There's the honour of the Ancient House at stake! You—you hopeless ass! If you don't——"

He didn't waste any further words. He little realised that this encounter with Roger Barton was to be merely the first of many. He had no idea that this thin-faced man was to become the enemy of many St. Frank's fellows.

With one wrench, Handforth twisted round. He grabbed the swinging pastepot from Mr. Barton's other hand, and hurled it up.

Swish—squelch!

The pastepot descended in an inverted position, fairly on the top of Mr. Barton's head. He gave a gurgling, despairing cry—a cry which echoed curiously in the hollow pastepot. And a mass of sticky whiteness ran down over his shoulders, ruining his perfectly-cut clothing.

"That's what you get for messing about!" snorted Handforth tartly.

A yell from the Hounds spurred him to action. He made one leap at the opposite hedge, tore through a gap, and vanished. Mr. Barton was staggering about blindly. He may have been a most unpleasant character—he was certainly a man of violent tongue. But, on this occasion at least, he had done nothing to deserve such treatment. Handforth had taken his playbills, had refused to give them up, and had added injury to insult by smothering him in his own paste!

It was hardly surprising that Mr. Barton was in a towering fury.

The Hounds only made matters worse. They had caught a glimpse of one of the Hares, and Mr. Roger Barton became a mere cipher. Staggering about in the road, he was just something which stood in the way. The Hounds swept round him, over him, and on all sides of him. For a moment he thought that he had been caught in the midst of a stampeding herd of cattle.

With a yell of triumph, the Hounds swept on—and Mr. Roger Barton was left in the middle of the road. He was sitting there, forlorn and tattered. He looked as though he had just passed through a crushing machine.

His collar had vanished, his hair was a ghastly mass of paste and mud, and he was utterly awful from head to foot. Slowly, painfully, he staggered to his feet. Then he caught sight of some more of the Hounds. A few stragglers were coming up—and they stared at the apparition in blank astonishment.

CHAPTER IV.

A MATTER OF FIVE SHILLINGS.

MR. ROGER BARTON shook a feeble fist. "You—you young hooligans!" he gasped. "I'll have the law on you for this! Look what you've done——"

"Steady on!" panted Dick Goodwin. "We've done nothing——"

"Your wretched companions have!" snarled Mr. Barton. "I'll complain to your headmaster of this outrageous affair! And if any St. Frank's boy comes near Noggs' Theatre, he'll be turned away!"

"I tell you——"

"Not one of you will ever be admitted!" roared Mr. Barton. "And I'll make you pay for this damage, too! I'll make you suffer——"

"The man's mad!" snorted Owen major. "Come on—we can't waste our time on this lunatic! What's he growling for? We've done nothing to him!"

The stragglers pressed on, and once again Mr. Roger Barton was alone. Exactly how he cleaned himself he did not know. When he brought out his handkerchief and wiped his face, he only smeared the paste into a more glutinous mass. His feelings towards St. Frank's were bordering on the venomous.

If the Remove had deliberately attempted to antagonise the man, they couldn't have chosen a better method. But without any real intention of doing so, they had made an enemy of him. And Mr. Barton was not the kind of man to differentiate. He included the whole of St. Frank's in his denunciation.

In the meantime, the Hares were on the home stretch—Nipper well in advance, and an easy winner. But Handforth only just managed to scrape into the gateway of St. Frank's by a hair's-breadth—with Reggie Pitt and the other prominent Hounds close at his heels.

"Marvellous!" remarked Willy Handforth, as his major reeled in. "Wonders will never cease! Ted's managed to get home! But, of course, he was with Nipper, and that accounts for it."

Handforth paused, breathing hard.

"You silly young ass!" he ejaculated. "If it hadn't been for me, Nipper wouldn't have been anywhere! I don't want to boast, but——"

"The less you can say, the better, old man," interrupted Reggie Pitt, with a chuckle. "We Hounds never had a ghostly chance of collaring Nipper—but you're lucky to scrape in! I suppose it was you who upset that fellow in the Caistowe lane?"

"Which fellow?"

"Why, we found the poor beggar smothered in paste——"

"Oh, him!" said Handforth carelessly. "He deserved worse! Did you ever hear of anything so potty? I merely grabbed a handful of his beastly bills, and he started kicking up the dust! I had to tip his own pastepot over him before he'd let me go."

"By gum! You've killed our chances for going to the show, anyhow," said Dick Goodwin, as he attempted to regain some of his breath. "The man was Mr. Noggs' advertising agent. He told us that no St. Frank's chaps would be allowed in the place at any price."

Handforth sniffed.

Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs, the sole proprietor of the travelling theatre, paused and regarded the trio of fags with a calculating eye. It was an old habit of his to appraise any sightseers who hung about the meadow—and he wasn't particularly enthusiastic now.

"Who cares?" he said tartly. "According to all reports, the show's a dud, so what does it matter? Besides, if I want to go, I'll go! Huh! I'd like to see them keep me out of it!"

He stalked off, and went to the Ancient House, where he had a bath, and changed. When he came downstairs he was feeling fit and happy. The Ancient House had put it across the West House, and everything was well with the world. And Handforth was aware of a surprisingly robust appetite.

Arriving in Study D, he had no cause to feel depressed. A cheerful fire was blazing in the grate, a kettle was singing on the hob, and while Church cut bread and butter, McClure was opening a fat, healthy sized tin of sardines.

"Good egg!" said Handforth briskly. "Tea? Well, I must say you chaps have bucked up like Trojans."

"How did the Trojans buck up?" asked Church.

"Do you mean to stand there and say you've never seen a Trojan?" demanded Handforth. "You ought to see one getting up a hill! Solid tyres, too——"

"Tyres!" gasped Church. "Men don't wear tyres, you chump! The Trojans were those hefty people who lived in Troy——"

"I'm talking about motor-cars!" interrupted Handforth, glaring. "I've never

known such chaps for living in the past! But why the dickens are we arguing about nothing? Let's have a couple of those sardines, Mac."

They settled down to tea, and the conversation naturally dwelt upon the afternoon's paper-chase. Handforth described the encounter with Mr. Roger Barton with a wealth of graphic detail. Church and McClure were interested, but somewhat perturbed.

"I say, that's going to mess us up a bit, isn't it?" asked Church. "We thought about going to that show this evening. It starts at six, you know, and we can easily get back in time for locking-up. I think old Noggs has timed his performance so that we can all——"

"Rats to Noggs—and rats to his performance!" interrupted Handforth. "Do you think I'm going to waste good money on a show like that? Why, it's an absolute frost."

"How do you know?"

"Everybody says so," retorted Handforth finally.

"Everybody says that your Trackett Grim stories are an absolute frost," remarked Church.

"Look here, you insulting rotter——"

"Here, hold on!" gasped Church. "I'm paying you a compliment, you chump! Everybody says your Trackett Grim stories are a frost—but we know they're not, don't we? It may be the same with this travelling theatre. You can't judge by what people say, Handy. The only thing is to take a sample for yourself."

But Handforth's natural obstinacy was not conquered by such arguments.

"It's no good—we're not going!" he said firmly. "I've made up my mind, and there it is. We're not going!"

"I suppose you've made up our minds, too?" asked McClure sarcastically.

Handforth nodded.

"You need somebody to make 'em up for you," he said calmly. "I'm sorry for you chaps. I pity you. It must be rotten to go through life with a mind that needs somebody else to control it. I wouldn't pay a bob for that dud show! I wouldn't lend any money for it, either."

"Then it seems to be settled," said Church.

"It is settled," replied Handforth. "Pass the sardines!"

The door opened, and Willy looked in.

"Hallo!" he said cheerfully. "Tea? All right, Ted—don't worry! I'm not going to invite myself to sit down. You can get rid of me in ten seconds. Five bob!"

Handforth rose, spluttering.

"My only hat!" he gasped. "I gave you ten bob a couple of days ago—when you swindled me——"

"That time you kissed Irene, you mean?" asked Willy.

His major turned a beautiful pink. He was still being unmercifully chipped in consequence of that episode. He had kissed Irene Manners fairly and squarely—unaware of the fatal fact that Willy & Co. had been looking on. And it was still one of the standing jokes of the school.

"Clear out of here!" he said thickly.

Willy came inside and closed the door.

"That ten bob went like lightning," he said. "I needed a new coil for my wireless, and Chubby smashed his watch, and——"

"Here's your five bob—and you can scoot!" interrupted Handforth, in desperation. "I'm blessed if I know why I do it! I always say I won't—and I always do! I believe you're a young wizard, or something!"

Willy took the silver, and grinned.

"Thanks!" he said cheerfully. "Now, if you'd like me to stop to tea——"

"We wouldn't!" said Handforth & Co. in one voice.

"If you'd like me to stop to tea, I shall have to regretfully refuse," went on Willy calmly. "I'm a particular chap. I like taking my meals in peace. There's nothing worse than having a sardine down your back. I'm sorry for you chaps," he added, shaking his head at Church and McClure. "It's a wonder you look so well on it."

He opened the door, but Handforth stopped him.

"What do you want that five bob for?" he asked curiously.

"Theatre tickets," replied Willy.

"What?" yelled his major. "Do you mean to say you've rooked me of five bob so that you can go to that beastly fit-up?"

"I had to get the money somewhere, you ass!"

"But I've just told Church and McClure that I wouldn't lend anybody a cent to go to that show," roared Handforth.

"I can't help your troubles," replied Willy. "You shouldn't make these rash statements unless you can stick to 'em. Well, so-long!"

He went out, and found Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon waiting in the lobby.

"Got it?" they asked.

Willy sniffed.

"You might as well ask me if I've got two legs!" he replied tartly. "Do I ever go to Ted for anything without coming away with it? Now we can pay old Noggs that two-and-eightpence."

"But he's sold you the three seats for one-and-ten," Chubby protested. "You don't need to throw good money away——"

"You dry up!" growled Willy. "I don't want to get things on the cheap like that—and old Noggs needs the cash a lot more than I do. He proved himself to be a good sort by reducing his prices, but we'll do the square thing, and pay up."

Chubby and Juicy failed to understand their leader's point of view. They were as honest as the day, but this seemed to be sheer waste. They lacked Willy's uncannily keen sense of fitness.

In the meantime, Handforth & Co. were continuing their tea.

"Like your minor's nerve to get five bob for going to that rotten show," Church was saying. "You're right, Handy—it would be a sheer waste of money to visit the place."

"Just what I was thinking," nodded McClure, with a slight wink at his co-conspirator. "It's bound to be a ghastly show."

"Oh, certain!" said Church. "Cake, Handy?"

Edward Oswald frowned.

"Blow the cake!" he said. "Oh, so you think it would be a good idea to stay away from that show to-night, eh?"

"Best idea in the world."

"Then we're going!" retorted Handforth grimly. "I'll teach you chaps to take notice of silly gossip. I shouldn't be surprised if it's a jolly good performance! Let's have some of that cake, Church, you ass!"

Handforth had some of the cake, and harmony was complete in Study D.

CHAPTER V.

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE, TOO!

"WHAT-HO! The merry old cup that cheers, what?"

Archie Glenthorne, the knut of St. Frank's, roused himself from the lounge in Study E, and sat up. Phipps, his valet, had just glided in, carrying a tray. The tray contained a steaming teapot, a dish of hot muffins, and an assortment of fancy cakes.

"You've absolutely come in time to save my bally life, Phipps," said Archie, as he gazed fondly at the tray. "Tea, by gad! The stuff that warms the cockles of the good old gore circulator."

"Yes, sir," said Phipps.

He set the tray down on a little table, and Archie adjusted his monocle, and gazed at it quizzically.

"I mean to say, one cup, old lad? What's the dashed idea?"

Archie was thinking of what had happened to his study-chum, Alf Brent.

"Master Brent gave me to understand that he would be partaking of tea with Master Boots, in the Modern House, sir," replied Phipps. "Muffins, sir?"

"Absolutely," said Archie, helping himself. "I don't know how it is, Phipps, but your toasted muffins are always about fifty furlongs ahead of other chappies' toasted muffins. I mean to say, there's something so frightfully juicy about the bally things!"

"No doubt the secret lies in the liberal use of butter, sir," explained Phipps. "If you will ring——"

"Wait!" commanded Archie, as Phipps was gliding towards the door. "Odds haste and hurry! Not so fast, old thing! The young master desires to have his evening raiment laid out in readiness for the young master to dash into!"

"Evening raiment, sir?"

"The good old silk facings, Phipps—the boiled shirt, and what-not?" explained Archie, as he bit into a muffin. "To be exact, the correct gent's wear for evening."

"Just as you say, sir," said the valet. "I take it that you are going to a party? I am sorry you did not mention this earlier," he added reproachfully. "In that case, I should have found an opportunity to give your evening-dress the care and attention it demands."

"But, dash it all, isn't the bally thing wearable?"

"Oh, quite sir, but——"

"Then we'll say no more about it, Phipps," beamed Archie. "As a matter of fact, I didn't make up the jolly old mind until a few minutes ago. I mean to say, I was lounging on the cushions, thinking of this thing, and browsing on sundry subjects, when all of a sudden it absolutely hit me in the vitals!"

"Yes, sir."

"I mean, there I was, without any dashed thought of staggering forth this evening, and the next bally minute the old mind was made up," continued Archie, sipping his tea. "It's rummy how these things barge into a chappie's life, Phipps. I mean, it sort of makes you think."

"Quite so, sir, but I don't quite follow the exact nature of your engagement," said Phipps. "If you are going to a party——"

"Party? Good gad! Absolutely not, Phipps," said Archie. "We are merely reeling down to the local theatre, Phipps. In fact, now I come to think of it, you'd better take this fiver, and book a box. Or if all the boxes are snapped up, I'll make do with a stall."

Phipps was obviously perturbed.

"You mean Mr. Noggs' fit-up theatre?" he asked, aghast.

"Exactly! That is to say, absolutely!"

"But surely not evening-dress, sir?" asked Phipps, in horror. "You are not seriously thinking of donning dress-clothes to visit that—that questionable place of amusement?"

Archie regarded his valet coldly.

"Isn't this somewhat thick, Phipps?" he asked. "I mean to say, isn't it bordering on the turbid? Kindly remember, Phipps, that what the young master says is absolutely the final word. Dash it, it's pretty murky when a chappie's valet starts——"

"But really, sir, I insist!" interrupted Phipps, in real alarm. "You cannot go to that place in evening-dress! It is for yourself to decide whether you should visit a commonplace booth or not—but it is well within my own province when I protest against the wearing of evening-dress."

"I have told you, Phipps, that I intend patronising a box, or the stalls."

"In this case, sir, it makes no difference," said Phipps. "You must not dream of pursuing this—this ill-considered plan——"

"Good gad!" interrupted Archie, staring at Phipps in a strange way. "The poor old lad's going absolutely watery in the attic! Pull yourself together, Phipps. This sort of thing pains the young master beyond all words. Never before have you so forgotten the unwritten laws of your calling."

"But, really, sir——"

"You, a valet, absolutely standing there and advising a chappie to enter the stalls of a theatre in anything but evening-dress!" continued Archie, scandalised. "Why, good gad, it's a crime! If I wasn't a good-natured chappie, I'd whisk out the old wallet, pay you up, and turn you out into the cold blast!"

Phipps kept his patience nobly.

"But you are failing to appreciate the impossibility of the situation, sir," he said plaintively. "This theatre is not like Daly's or His Majesty's, or Drury Lane! It is a mere tent—the stalls are no better than benches! Really, Master Archie, you must be guided by me in this matter."

Archie had only heard one word.

"Benches, Phipps?" he repeated dully.

"Yes, sir."

"Good gad!"

"If not benches, then practically the same as benches," said Phipps, hastening to seize his advantage. "Evening-dress would be absolutely out of place. It would be tantamount to absurdity."

"Good gad!" repeated Archie, other words failing him.

"These stalls are of hard wood—they will probably be damp," continued Phipps. "There might be nails sticking out of them——"

"Stop!" pleaded Archie feebly. "In another ten minutes, dash it, I shall be cancelling the engagement altogether. And that's absolutely out of the ques., Phipps. You don't seem to realise that I've promised to escort a lady."

"Miss Temple, I take it, sir?"

Archie looked frigid.

"Dash it all, I don't see why you should immediately assume that the lady is dear old Marjorie—that is to say, Miss Temple," he said stiffly. "As a matter of fact, you've biffed the right nail on the head, Phipps. I've promised the dear girl, you know. I can't back out of it now."

"I should certainly advise you to cancel the engagement, sir, if it is at all possible," urged Phipps. "I have heard, on the best authority, that the show is poor in the extreme—in fact, hopeless."

Archie looked more and more concerned.

"And where did you hear this foul news, Phipps?" he asked.

"In the George Tavern, sir."

"Odds bottles and tankards! You don't mean to say you hob-nob with the lads of the village in that dashed hostelry?" asked Archie, scandalised. "I mean to say, you can do as you like in your own time, but——"

"It is one of my little habits, sir, to drop in for an occasional chat with the landlord," explained Phipps. "Last night it was the talk of the whole parlour that Mr. Noggs' show is unworthy of support. I was given to understand that the performers are even worse than the play."

Archie stirred his tea with a worried frown on his brow.

"Of course, this makes it dashed awkward," he said. "Under the circs., Phipps, I'll rule out the evening-dress scheme. I mean, you know best. But I absolutely can't disappoint the lady. That sort of thing isn't done, laddie! So, be the show good, or be it ghastly, the young master goes! That, I mean, is the good old last word."

Phipps shrugged his shoulders.

"Then I shall not attempt to influence you further, sir," he said. "I need hardly point out that there is a serious risk of rough contact with local youths. There is a possibility that you will be placed in an undignified position. One always takes a risk when one enters a mere booth. However, I will say no more, sir."

Phipps departed, and Archie was so worried that he forgot all about his tea. He sat there, staring glassily in front of him. After a while, Alf Brent walked in. Alf shared Study E with the fastidious Archie, and occasionally he took tea elsewhere—as he was rather glad of a change now and again. It was a relief, once in a while, to eat sardines out of a tin, or to toast a kipper over the fire, or to drink tea out of a condensed milk tin. Such atrocities as these were impossible in Archie's study. Brent happened to be the son of the Chairman of the Governors, but he also happened to be a normal boy.

"Hallo! What's the matter?" he asked, staring. "Tea cold! Muffins only half-eaten! Anything wrong, Archie? Anything disturbing the massive brain?"

Archie explained the dread situation.

"You hopeless duffer!" grinned Alf. "You mustn't take any notice of Phipps! He's a stickler for etiquette. He'd have had ten fits if he'd seen me ten minutes ago—frying a sausage on Buster's best shovel."

Archie winced.

"Laddie, don't!" he pleaded. "I mean to say, I'm feeling frightfully bad now, without you making it frightfully worse——"

"Besides, you needn't worry about that theatre," went on Brent. "I'll go along with Handforth & Co. They've decided to risk it. A few of the others are talking about trotting along, too."

Archie brightened up.

"In that case, old chestnut, there's not much to worry about," he beamed. "So we'll leave it at that, what?"

CHAPTER VI.

PATRONISING THE SHOW.

MR. ANDREW SYLVANUS NOGGS shook his head gloomily.

"I can't understand it, Barton—it's beyond my comprehension," he said, his voice deeper than ever with melancholy. "The theatre's a good one, the seats are excellent, and the whole show is novel. Why don't we get the crowds?"

Roger Barton shrugged his shoulders.

"It beats me, too," he admitted. "But still, we shall have to cheer up, Andy. The luck may change now that the weather's getting better. We're into March, you know, and that'll make a difference."

"I wish I could believe you, laddie," said Mr. Noggs sombrely. "'I have not that alacrity of spirit, nor cheer of mind, that I was wont to have'—Shakespeare. This tour has bereft me of hope. Roger, I'm a broken man. Or nearly broken. A little brisk business, and I might be mended."

"I'm afraid there's not much chance, guv'nor," said Barton. "I was full of optimism at the beginning of this tour, but I've been getting more despondent every day. It doesn't matter what we do, we can't hit it. Another week or two like this, and we shall be in Queer Street."

"'There is no vulture like despair'—Lord Lansdowne," said Mr. Noggs, as he stroked his bluey chin. "I, too, feel a grave misgiving in my bones. What is the matter, Roger? I am pleading with you to tell me."

"I can only say that it's just plain bad luck," said Barton. "We've tried everything, Andy. We've put on Shakespeare—we've gone to the other extreme, and given 'em rubbishy farce. We've tried the old melodramas, and we've tried the new thrillers. But it's empty benches every time."

"And now we're putting on an original play," said Mr. Noggs. "What's the difference, laddie? They don't come—they don't roll up!"

The present play—"The Champion of the Ring"—had been produced by Mr. Noggs a week earlier for the first time on any stage. It was a melodrama which had fallen into Mr. Nogg's hands by chance—the work of an amateur. But Barton had thought it a likely winner. And Mr. Noggs was desperate. He was ready to put on anything if there was a chance of success. He had tried all the old reliables—such as "East Lynne" and "The Silver King"—but business had gone from bad to worse.

The two men were standing within the theatre. It was close upon opening time, and the lights were being tested by the electrical engineer—who was also one of the lorry drivers and one of the leading actors.

Unquestionably, Noggs' Imperial Theatre was a remarkably fine place, considering the drawbacks of such an outfit. It was small, but by no means tawdry. Once inside, there was no suggestion of a booth.

The stage was an exact miniature of a real stage, with an imposing-looking proscenium, and artistic double curtains of plush. The footlights were of the regulation type, and the theatre was even provided with two powerful spotlights.

The auditorium was naturally on the ground floor only, but it had a business-like rake, so that one could see perfectly from every seat. The stalls were of the tip-up type, but naturally devoid of upholstery. They were, however, provided with loose plush cushions. The rest of the seating accommodation consisted of benches—the pit stalls being distinguishable from the pit by reason of red cloth stretched along these benches.

The whole place was, in fact, a small reproduction of a big theatre. And the country people ought to have patronised it in their hundreds. The novelty of the place alone should have guaranteed this. But, somehow, this tour had been one long succession of disasters.

"Those boys, too," went on Mr. Barton, with a sudden frown. "Don't let any of the young demons in, Andy! Take my advice, and bar the whole lot."

Mr. Noggs looked astonished.

"Bar the boys?" he repeated. "The boys of the big school?"

"Yes, confound them!"

"'What money is better bestowed than that of a schoolboy's tip?'—Thackeray," retorted Mr. Noggs. "We need their trifles, Roger. Indeed, did we not actually pitch upon this spot in order to entice the schoolboys into the show? What other population is there?"

"I have had a sample of them to-day," snapped Mr. Barton. "Didn't I tell you? Didn't you see my clothes? Bar the lot, I say! Refuse to admit them, guv'nor!"

Mr. Noggs shook his head.

"I have never refused money yet—and, by the ghost of Garrick, I won't start now!" he swore. "This is the time we need money, Roger—the time when we'll sell seats at half their value! This time, I'm firm."

"But I insist——"

"You insist!" boomed Mr. Noggs, with dignity. "Remember, this is not your property yet, Barton! I am the owner—I am the manager—I am the man who controls! Those boys shall be admitted. We

cannot afford to pick quarrels with the public—or any section of the public."

"All right—do as you like," said Barton gruffly. "But you'll regret it, Andy. You needn't be unpleasant, either. I've made no reference to that money you owe me—and didn't intend making any."

"Forgive me, laddie," said Mr. Noggs, patting the other on the back. "I am worried—I am distraught. The whole position is black."

Barton laughed.

"It's bound to get better," he said. "I'm not worrying, anyhow."

"'I never knew any man in my life who could not bear another's misfortunes perfectly like a Christian'—Pope," said Mr. Noggs pointedly. "I have all to lose, Roger—you have all to gain. We can only trust to our star of fortune, be it good or ill. 'Fate is a sea without a shore'—Swinburne."

He glanced at his watch, and found that the time was close upon half-past five. It was approaching the hour when the theatre doors would be opened to the public. Indeed, it was practically on time—for the show itself commenced at six.

Outside there were signs of activity.

The dynamo—fitted in one of the lorries—was humming musically, and two arc lamps in front of the entrance were already gleaming—although there was still plenty of daylight. A knot of village children were hanging about the gate of the meadow.

Fifteen minutes later, the situation was scarcely any different.

About fifteen people turned up—but as they only patronised the sixpenny seats, the takings were not considerable. It seemed that nobody else would come along, for the lane was empty, and there was an air of deadness.

"Worse and worse!" said Mr. Noggs, as he stood outside the theatre. "Only eight shillings, Steve! This is terrible, indeed!"

"We took nearly fifteen last night," said Ashwood, who was in the pay-box.

"At this rate, ladkins, we shall be starving at the end of the week," declared Mr. Noggs. "And I was hoping—— But what's this? Boys? Not one, Steve, but many! And my old heart was feeling wintry at the lack of public support! What a difference! 'Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer'—Shakespeare."

The difference in Mr. Andy Noggs was remarkable. The first St. Frank's fellows to arrive were Handforth & Co. They marched into the field, closely followed by Archie Glenthorne, Alf Brent, with Marjorie Temple between them. Reggie Pitt and his sister came, too—and finally Willy & Co., of the Third

It seemed to Mr. Noggs that a whole procession was piling into his theatre. But, as abruptly as it had commenced, the procession ceased. Depression descended upon him once more.

"Too soon, Steve!" he sighed. "We were joyous far too soon. 'Twas but a passing ray of sunshine."

Willy approached Mr. Noggs, and drew him aside.

"Here's the rest of the money for our tickets," he explained, as he put it in the old showman's hand. "Thanks, Mr. Noggs. We've done our best to bring a crowd along, but everybody's saying that the show's a dud."

"By the wraith of Wyndham!" thundered Mr. Noggs. "Who dares to question the quality of my fare? Have I not provided the public with rich entertainment for a score of years and more?"

"I don't know anything about that, but your show's got a rotten name," said Willy frankly. "There's nothing like telling you the truth, Mr. Noggs. You'd be surprised to hear what everybody's saying. I suppose you haven't got an enemy, doing you a bad turn?"

Mr. Noggs made no reply, but stood there, thoughtful and rather grim. And outside the gate, two seniors had paused on their way up from the village. They were William Napoleon Browne and Horace Stevens, of the Fifth.

CHAPTER VII.

NOT SO BAD—BUT NOT SO GOOD.

"YOU tarry, Brother Horace," said Browne, as his companion paused opposite the gate. "Surely you are not attracted by this low, vulgar entertainment?"

Stevens looked rather sheepish.

"Well, not exactly attracted," he replied. "But I always had a hankering after anything theatrical. I thought it might be a good idea to pop in—— But perhaps not," he added. "Let's go on——"

He paused, and looked rather wistfully at the somewhat garish exterior of Noggs' Imperial Theatre.

"Forgive me if I am wrong, Brother Horace, but I take it that you are bursting with anxiety to attend the performance?" said Browne. "Why, therefore, hesitate? I do not pretend to understand the workings of your massive mind, but nevertheless I am ever ready to try anything once. Let us brave the ordeal, and see what Mr. Noggs has to set before us."

An eager light leapt into Stevens' eyes.

"By Jove, you mean it?" he asked. "We'll go in?"

"Assuredly," beamed William Napoleon Browne. "Why not? Others have survived, and the chances are that we shall emerge alive."

"I say, don't rot!" protested Stevens. "After all, you can't expect to see a West

End show in a fit-up like this. I dare say the play will be rotten, but it'll be a bit of a change."

"I think we can safely assure ourselves that it will be a bit of a change," agreed Browne. "From a purely personal point of view, I must confess I am not on the verge of hysterical excitement regarding the prospect. However, if it pleases your playful mood to indulge in a couple of stalls, pray follow me to the pay-box."

"Hang it, I'm going to pay for this——"

"Pardon me, but on such matters as these, I insist!" interrupted Browne firmly. "You are my guest, Brother Horace, and the subject is closed. These are unsuspected traits. Little did I imagine that my boon companion would develop a taste for the twopenny gaff. Alas, I fear you are degenerating sadly."

"I'm hanged if I'm going now!" snorted Stevens. "You're just as bad as the others, Browne—and I thought you were more broadminded. It's not fair to call the place a twopenny gaff. I believe old Noggs is doing the right thing. He's taking the art of the theatre round to the rural districts—he's showing the public something they've almost forgotten. He ought to be supported in every possible way."

Browne regarded his chum curiously.

"What is this?" he asked. "I am suspecting that you are a dark horse, Brother Horace. You are apt to be so quiet and ordinary that one accepts you as a perfectly harmless Fifth Former. But I am beginning to suspect that my estimation of you is wrong. It has been truly said that still waters run deep."

"Are we going into this show or not?" demanded Stevens gruffly. "I've never talked about the theatre much—but it's my particular hobby, if you'd like to know."

"And yet you have never done anything dazzling in amateur theatricals?"

"That's because I'm not keen on amateur theatricals," replied Stevens. "I've seen a bit of it at St. Frank's, and these shows are generally messed up from the start, and utterly ruined. So I've kept in the background. I regard the theatre with more reverence than that."

"We are getting some startling information, indeed," remarked Browne. "Forgive me, Brother Horace, for treating this matter with levity. I can now see that you are in deadly earnest. Let us hesitate no longer."

They went up to the pay-box, and purchased two stalls. The money was now being taken by an elderly man—an actor who was only called upon to play small parts. Ashwood had gone round to the dressing-rooms to prepare for his entrance, which would be at the rise of the curtain.

When the two Fifth Formers entered the auditorium, they found the place miserably empty. It wasn't large, but it could have held at least six times more than the number who now occupied it. And one always feels depressed upon entering a quarter-filled theatre.

There was no music, and the St. Frank's fellows were talking together in low tones. From the rear, the people in the cheaper seats were whispering noisily. And the majority of them were youths from the village.

The play started—and the audience had only increased by four others—two patrons of the pit, and two St. Frank's Fourth Formers, who sat in solitary state in the pit stalls.

There was nothing particularly novel or startling in the play itself. It was, indeed, a somewhat lurid melodrama, crudely constructed, and crudely acted—with the solitary exception of one notable performance.

Mr. Andy Noggs was simply wonderful.

Ashwood played his part indifferently, and the rest of the cast were obviously professionals of small talent. It could be easily understood why they were not appearing in a bigger concern.

The heroine of the play was pretty and winsome, but her acting ability was almost nil. It was possible, however, that they all suffered by contrast with Mr. Noggs. He had a character part—he played a penniless musician, and some of the more pathetic scenes were wonderful. Indeed, Mr. Noggs put far more effort into the show than it deserved. He lifted the play out of the common rut, and almost made it notable.

It seemed a terrible pity that his acting should go for nothing. At the most poignant moments, giggles would come from the cheap seats—and more than once Stevens winced, and frowned with annoyance. He was capable of appreciating the finer qualities of the acting.

Browne, too, was enthusiastic about Mr. Noggs' acting. Handforth and Co. were equally impressed. But the rustic audience seemed to prefer the blatant fooling of the so-called comedian. He was utterly painful in his attempts to be humorous, but he received far more applause from the rustics than did Mr. Noggs.

"It's a confounded shame!" said Stevens hotly, during the interval. "What's the good of good acting in front of these people? Old Noggs is a marvel—and if only he had a decent company with him the whole show would go with a fizz. The worst of it is, the play's a mere mass of rubbish."

"I am only too sorry to agree with you, Brother Horace," said Browne. "Seldom have I listened to such unparalleled tripe. However, we are still hale and hearty, and we can only hope for the best."

Archie Glenthorne was not very talkative. He admitted that Mr. Noggs was a fine actor, but he seemed to be rather dreamy. And he did not come out of this condition until the second act was well on the way—

and he only livened up at the appearance of the heroine.

"I mean to say, bally pretty, what?" he murmured.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Marjorie, who was sitting next to him.

"Eh?" gasped Archie. "Oh! Sorry, dear old girl! The fact is—I—I——"

"Dry up, Archie, you ass!" hissed Handforth.

Archie subsided, confused. For the moment he had quite forgotten that Marjorie was next to him. He was by no means fickle, and he regarded Marjorie as the most ripping girl in the world. But, at the same time, he was always susceptible to feminine charm. And stage charms seemed to have a greater attraction for him than any other. He had more than once been fascinated by some fairy of the footlights.

Miss Daphne Walters was small, dainty, and vivacious. Little else could be said in her favour. She struggled bravely with her part, but made little of it. Not that Archie was at all critical. One smile from her was sufficient to put him in the best of humours—and she had actually smiled straight at him on one occasion.

The last scene of the show was painful in the extreme.

It represented a boxing ring, and was supposed to be at the National Sporting Club. Two famous lightweights were contesting the title—and everything depended upon the result. One of the contestants was the son of the old musician, and the other a crooked boxer whom the villain of the piece had bribed. The old musician's son had to win the match in order to obtain the purse—which would mean the saving of his father's life. An operation was necessary, and the winning of this boxing-match was the only way in which to get the money.

It was a hotch-potch of melodrama and comedy—a hash-up of ancient ideas and wheezes. And the boxing-match itself proved to be a dreadful fizzle. The two youths who played the parts of the boxers did not appear until the second act—for which the bulk of the audience was grateful. They were not actors, and they were certainly not boxers. In Mr. Noggs' circumstances, he was unable to engage the men who would have been suitable for the parts.

And the scene which was to have provided the big punch of the show fell absolutely flat. If this boxing-match had been worked up well there might have been some hope of saving the evening. But it fell so flat that the St. Frank's fellows were in real pain.

And that last scene was not even lifted up by the appearance of Mr. Noggs. He was supposed to be at death's door, awaiting the news that the operation could be performed. Naturally the villain was frustrated, and the match was won by the old musician's son. The curtain fell almost immediately after the referee's decision—with everybody on the stage cheering the victor.

"Oh, my hat!" said Handforth feebly.

"Pretty awful, but old Noggs was topping," said Church, as they left their seats. "Why the dickens couldn't he have come in that last scene and livened it up? He's the only actor in the cast!"

"I'm going round to speak to him!" said Handforth firmly. "Of all the dud shows I've ever seen. By George! That match! Why, those fatheads didn't know the first rudiments of boxing! Old Noggs ought to be told."

"Do you think he doesn't know it, you fathead?" grinned McClure. "It's no good telling him a thing like that——"

"Well, I'm going to give him my opinion, anyhow," retorted Handforth.

And nothing would shift him from his purpose.

CHAPTER VIII.

HANDFORTH'S BRILLIANT IDEA.

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE came to a halt.

"One moment, old chestnut!" he said, grasping Handforth's arm. "The lads are saying that you intend to haunt the good old stage door in search of Mr. Noggs. We'll go round together, what?"

"Don't worry, Archie—we're all going," put in Nipper. "We can't leave Mr. Noggs to Handy's mercy. He's as obstinate as ever, and won't be convinced—so we'll make a party of it."

Handforth glared.

"Who told you to butt in?" he demanded. "And when did you come, anyhow? You weren't in the show when the curtain went up——"

"Tommy Watson and I dropped in during the second act," explained Nipper. "My hat! That boxing-match was too ghastly for words!"

"That's just what I've been saying," growled Handforth. "Old Noggs ought to be told about it——"

"Oh, come on—let's get it over," interrupted Church impatiently. "It won't do any good—he won't welcome our interference. But it's no good trying to argue with Handy."

They all trooped round to the rear of the theatre, and Archie was so absent-minded that he failed to observe that Alf Brent had gone off with Reggie Pitt—the pair of them escorting Marjorie and Winnie back to the Moor View School.

The stage door was merely a kind of tent flap at the rear, with Mr. Noggs' caravan in close proximity.

Mr. Noggs always travelled with the show—and always lived in his caravan. The other members of his company secured lodgings at the various stops.

"Hallo! What's all this?" asked Ashwood, as he emerged. "Haven't you fellows gone home yet? You'll be late for roll-call, or something, and then we shall get the blame. How did you like the show?"

"Awful!" said Handforth promptly.

They weren't so successful as this. If the public wants rubbish, he'll give 'em rubbish."

"I suppose it's a bit difficult," said Nipper.

"Difficult!" echoed Ashwood. "By Jove, you ought to be with us for a few weeks—then you'd know how difficult it is to please the public! But the guv'nor's a good actor. The rest of us are no good, but he's an artist."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie Glenthorne. "And Miss Daphne Walters, by gad! I mean to say, a somewhat priceless young thing as it were!"

The two Ancient House juniors were evidently engaged on important business. They were running hard—skirting a spinney somewhere between Caistowe and Bellton. Both were airily attired in running shorts and rubber-soled shoes. And in the dim distance behind, a straggling crowd of tiny white figures could be seen.

Ashwood grinned.

"There's nothing like hearing the truth," he said, as he lit a cigarette. "I'm inclined to agree with you—particularly that boxing-match. The guv'nor wants to buck it up a bit, but those young asses won't learn. If the play didn't fall so flat at the end it might just save itself from puerility."

"I'm surprised Mr. Noggs puts on such a hopeless thing," said Church.

"What's the good of putting on anything else?" growled Ashwood. "He's tried Shakespeare, and goodness knows what else.

Ashwood raised his eyebrows.

"She's not a bad looker, but I'm afraid her acting——"

"Odds insults and slurs!" interrupted Archie indignantly. "Miss Walters is absolutely top-hole! If it's possible, old vegetable, I'd rather like an introduction. That is—— I mean to say——"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Tommy Watson. "Archie's smitten!"

"An introduction, eh?" chuckled Ashwood. "Nothing easier! Daphne!" he added, putting his head through the doorway. "Just

a minute! One of these schoolboys wants to meet you."

Archie turned very red, but there was no way of escape. A moment later, Miss Daphne Walters appeared. Archie gazed at her in a fascinated kind of way. He could see that she was the same—but somehow, in some indefinable way, she was different. Much older. Much less sylph-like. Ashwood bowed.

"My wife!" he said blandly.

"Eh?" gurgled Archie. "I mean—— Good gad! Frightfully pleased to meet you, and all that sort of bally thing! Odds, shocks and starts! I thought—— But not really? Not absolutely Mrs.—Mrs.——"

"Mrs. Ashwood," she smiled. "I've been Mrs. Ashwood for five years."

"I mean, that's dashed good," said Archie feebly. "It's always so frightfully uncertain about you stage people, you know! I thought you were years younger—— I mean, you don't look older now, but—— That is, of course, you do. I should say you absolutely don't!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Archie was horribly confused—and completely dumbfounded. He had never dreamed for a moment that the girl on the stage would prove to be the wife of one of the actors. Such a thought hadn't occurred to his simple mind. How he escaped, he hardly knew—but he managed to slip away upon the arrival of Mr. Noggs.

"Is there something wrong here?" inquired the old showman, gazing at the juniors. "What is this gathering?"

"I'm afraid they've come to run the show down, guv'nor," replied Ashwood.

"Not the show—but that boxing-match," said Handforth promptly. "Your acting was marvellous, Mr. Noggs. We thought you were first-class."

"Rather!"

"You did wonders, sir."

Mr. Noggs looked less severe.

"Thank you for this praise," he said, with dignity. "I will admit the actual play is unworthy of our histrionic efforts. I would prefer to act in something that would enable me to give full scope to my meagre abilities. But, alas, I have turned to this trash in desperation. Business is poor—we know not what to present."

"If you only bucked up that boxing-match, the show wouldn't be so bad," declared Handforth. "Look here, Mr. Noggs, I've got an idea. It's the most marvellous idea you ever heard of. I don't mind telling you it's a brain-wave."

"'On their own merits, modest men are dumb'—Colman," said Mr. Noggs. "I am sorry my play has not pleased you, young gentlemen. It is difficult indeed to please one and all. But I must carry on, and try and try again. 'There is no mistake so great as the mistake of not going on'—Blake. 'We learn wisdom from failure much more than from success'—Smiles."

"The guv'nor's full of these quotations," explained Ashwood, smiling. "He's always borrowing the sayings of great men."

"They are more weighty than my own empty utterances, ladkins," said Mr. Noggs. "But let us listen to this wise youth on my left. He has an idea to suggest. Out with it, my boy. We are waiting."

"It's about those two boxers," said Handforth. "I'm willing to take the part on to-morrow night—just to show you how it ought to be done——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!"

"And Lawrence will take the other part!" roared Handforth. "It needs two real boxers to make that scene go! Lawrence and I could make it fizz like champagne! Leave it to us, and——"

"Nay, this is but a jest," interrupted Mr. Noggs, frowning. "'A jest unseen, inscrutable, invisible as a nose on a man's face, or a weathercock on a steeple!'—Shakespeare. You're attempting to gibe at me——"

"I'm doing nothing of the sort!" broke in Handforth warmly. "I appeal to you chaps," he went on, turning to the other juniors. "Couldn't Lawrence and I do that boxing bit in the last act ten times better than those duds?"

Nipper chuckled.

"Well, yes," he admitted. "You're a good boxer, Handy, and Lawrence is a champion. You could certainly do the boxing business with credit. But I wouldn't guarantee the acting."

"The acting isn't so important," put in Church. "It's the thrill that's needed. Imagine that boxing match properly worked up. Why, it would make the crowd tremendously enthusiastic, and send it away satisfied."

"Just my argument!" said Handforth quickly. "And don't you be so jolly sure about the acting, Nipper, you chump. Lawrence and I could do it fine. We'd show 'em something!"

Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs shook his head.

"I am not denying that the suggestion has points of merit," he said slowly. "But it wouldn't do, my young gentlemen. Oh, no, it wouldn't do. My theatre may be ill-patronised, but I have no desire to see it converted into a laughing-stock. Away with these suggestions. I will have none of them!"

Handforth glared.

"But it's for your own good!" he said warmly.

"I do not doubt your good intent——"

"And we don't want any money for it, either," continued Handforth. "I've always longed to be an actor. This is my chance. And with that boxing match at the end——"

"Don't take any notice of him, Mr. Noggs," put in Tommy Watson. "He means

well, but he'd only ruin the whole show. He can't act for toffee. He'd forget all his lines, and you'd get nothing but cackles from the audience.''

"Why, you—you dotty lunatic!" snorted Handforth. "Are you telling Mr. Noggs that I can't act?''

"It sounded very much like it," grinned McClure.

Handforth removed his overcoat.

"We're going to settle this now!" he said grimly. "Up with your hands, you rotter! If you think I'm going to take insults from you, Thomas Watson——"

"Chuck it!" interrupted Nipper. "It's for Mr. Noggs to decide, Handy. You and Lawrence couldn't act much worse than the two fellows we saw, with all respects to you, Mr. Noggs, and you could certainly work up the boxing match in a realistic way.''

"Then it's settled," said Handforth. "Good! You'd better give us our parts, Mr. Noggs. It won't take us more than an hour to learn 'em. I'll tell Lawrence, and——''

"Wait!" interrupted Mr. Noggs, holding up his hand. "'Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast'—Shakespeare. 'It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden, too like the lightning'—Shakespeare. I cannot agree to this.''

"You can't agree to it?" replied Handforth blankly.

"I thank you for the suggestion; I thank you for the kindliness of your thought," replied the old showman, "but I must decline the offer with firmness and dignity. Nay, it cannot be."

CHAPTER IX.

MR. NOGGS AGREES.

HANDFORTH was by no means discouraged. When an idea came into his head he did not readily relinquish it. And the mere fact that Mr. Noggs had declined the offer made little or no difference to Handforth's determination.

"But you don't understand what you're missing!" he urged. "We'd make that play into a different thing. We'd work it up until you wouldn't recognise it."

"Mr. Noggs knows that all right!" chuckled McClure.

Mr. Noggs looked rather perturbed. As a matter of fact, Handforth's volcanic personality upset him. He was a man of slow, dignified actions, a man who thought well before taking any step. He was deliberate in everything, and he would never be pitchforked into an enterprise which had not received full deliberation.

Handforth scared him. He was so noisy, so insistent. But Andy Noggs' personality was the stronger of the two, and he refused to be trapped.

"Of the kindness behind this thought I need not speak," he said slowly. "I appreciate that you mean well. But do not attempt to press me. My plight is sore, and I am ready to chance almost anything. 'Tempt not a desperate man'—Shakespeare."

"You're not really desperate, Mr. Noggs," said Nipper.

"I wish I could deny that assertion," replied the old actor. "But I will tell you candidly that I cannot. I have met with nothing but misfortune throughout this tour. Business has been getting worse. Just when I anticipated a good harvest, the takings have been less than ever. If things go on at this rate you will not look in vain when you search the nearest workhouse.''

"We didn't know things were as bad as that, Mr. Noggs," said Nipper uncomfortably. "We'll get a crowd of the chaps to come down to-morrow evening——''

"To-morrow the show moves to Edgemoor, laddie."

"Then alter your arrangements," said Nipper. "I'll get a crowd down——"

"Never!" interrupted Mr. Noggs. "I do not desire charity. Let them come to see my show of their own free will, or not at all. I may be near the brink, but let me pitch over decently. I am driven to the point of accepting inferior prices for my best seats. But never shall I consent to the proposal you make.''

"Who's been paying you inferior prices?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Three of your boys—younger than yourselves—persuaded me to sell them three stalls for the meagre sum of one shilling and tenpence,'' continued Mr. Noggs. "I was weak. I was unwilling to refuse the money. And the boy who conquered me was a boy of wondrous persistency."

"Your minor, Handy," grinned Nipper. "That description fits him down to the ground. Three stalls for one-and-ten. Just like his nerve!"

"Just wait until I lay my hands——"

"Wait!'' interrupted Mr. Noggs. "This boy has since paid me in full—an action which will live with me for many a day to come. A truly remarkable youth. A kindly young man, indeed. His understanding is greater than his small body betokens."

"We're not talking about my minor,'' said Handforth impatiently. "What about that suggestion of mine, Mr. Noggs? You'd better snap the opportunity while you can. I may change my mind before to-morrow."

But again Mr. Noggs shook his head.

"I am sorry——" he began.

"Just a minute, Mr. Noggs," said Nipper crisply. "Can I have a word with you over here?"

He pulled the old fellow aside, and Mr. Noggs wondered what was in the wind.

"Take my advice, and accept that offer of Handforth's," said Nipper. "He may be a duffer, but he's one of the best fighters in the Junior School. He knows a lot about boxing, too. As for Lawrence, he's the son of an ex-amateur champion, and I'm sure he'd be game."

"But I cannot take the risk——"

"There's no risk about it," insisted Nipper. "It may not be as dignified as you'd wish, but it would fill your theatre. You wouldn't be able to hold half the crowd!"

"By the image of Irving!" breathed Mr. Noggs. "A full house! Shall I ever witness such a phenomenon again? Speak not of these miracles, young man. My ears are not attuned to their reception."

"It's not a miracle," smiled Nipper. "Handforth means well, and he's just the fellow to go into the whole enterprise with tremendous enthusiasm. He and Lawrence would make that boxing match a corker. And even if it is liable to cause a few grins, why worry? Think of the money you'll take at the pay-box."

"Will these untutored rustics appreciate the difference——"

"Untutored rustics be hanged!" interrupted Nipper. "There won't be room for a soul except us St. Frank's fellows, and possibly a few of the Moor View girls. If it gets about that Handforth is to appear on your stage to-morrow evening you'll be besieged for tickets in the morning. And look at the advert. As a business man, Mr. Noggs, you oughtn't to hesitate a moment."

"As a business man, I am a mere cipher," sighed Mr. Noggs. "I am an actor, young gentleman. I am an artist. Nevertheless, I cannot fail to appreciate the reasoning behind your statements. I am tempted to accept this offer. It may, as you hint, be a good advertisement."

"It's bound to be a good one," said Nipper. "Even if it's for only one night, Mr. Noggs, I'd press you to agree. Let Handforth have a shot. You'll fill your house to suffocation."

That picture was too much for Mr. Noggs' power of resistance.

"A full house!" he repeated. "Great Cæsar! Is such a thing possible? I do not like to accept—— And yet, why not? Who am I to scorn a well meant offer? 'Pride is at the bottom of all great mistakes'—Ruskin. Yes, I will be persuaded. I will succumb. Let us make your young friend acquainted with the news."

Handforth heard it with joy, and the other fellows were rather startled. They had never dreamed that Mr. Noggs would take the suggestion seriously.

"Of course I knew you'd have to accept," said Handforth crisply. "Well, what about the parts? I shall play the hero——"

"I presume you mean the juvenile lead?" asked Ashwood, who had been listening to the debate. "That's my part, young 'un. You'd better take the character of Smasher Bill."

"But Smasher Bill's the rotter!" snorted Handforth.

"You'll fit the part to a T," said Nipper. "You'll have to be Smasher Bill, Handy, and Lawrence will take the part of Harry Wallis."

"But Harry Wallis is the fellow who delivers the knock-out and wins the five thousand purse for the operation!" objected Handforth. "That's my part, you cuckoo! I'm going to play the winner. You don't suppose I'm going to receive a knock-out, and lie flat on the stage when the curtain goes down?"

"Mr. Noggs had better give us the parts, and you and Lawrence can settle it between you," said Nipper, with business-like precision. "We can't waste any time, either; we shall be late as it is. Can we have the the parts, Mr. Noggs?"

"Within a minute, ladkins," replied the old showman promptly. "They are small speaking parts, a mere sentence or two in an earlier scene, and another few words prior to the boxing."

"We can get the hang of the thing in an hour," said Handforth. "But I'm going to play Harry Wallis, so don't forget. It's my idea, and I've got the right to choose."

Nobody attempted to argue the point, and ten minutes later all the juniors were hurrying up to St. Frank's.

It wasn't long before the news spread, and it seemed that Nipper's prophecy would turn out to be near the mark. Half the Remove decided on the spot to book seats by the whole row. They wouldn't miss seeing Handforth on the stage for anything.

Whatever the result of the experiment, one thing was a foregone conclusion. Noggs' Imperial Theatre would be packed to capacity on the following evening.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW HORACE STEVENS.

WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE glanced up from the study table, and allowed a light of astonishment to enter his placid looking eyes.

"I am intrigued, Brother Horace," he observed mildly. "If I am not too inquisitive, what is the exact mean-

ing of this semaphore practice? I was ever a seeker after the light."

Stevens took no notice. He and Browne were supposed to be busy at their prep. Browne had entered into his own work with his usual dash and go. He generally concluded his prep in about half the time occupied by Stevens, and with much more successful results, too.

This evening Stevens had been even more careless than usual. He had been restless from the start, chewing his penholder, and occasionally rising from his chair and pacing up and down. Now he was over by the window, striking a dramatic pose. He was so engrossed that Browne's words were lost upon the air.

"I would remind you, Brother Horace, that——"

"Eh?" said Stevens, with a start. "Oh, sorry! Were you speaking, Browne, old man?"

"This is becoming grave, in all sooth!" said Browne sorrowfully. "Alack, I have long suspected a weakness of intellect, but I scarcely imagined such a lapse as this. Brother Horace, you are wandering. You are allowing your wits—such as they are—to dribble away."

"Sorry," said Stevens, sitting down.

He looked rather uncomfortable, and offered no explanation of his recent action. He made a pretence of work, but it was such an obvious pretence that Browne discreetly coughed.

"There is something on your mind, brother," he said. "Forgive me if I am pressing, but this is a matter which needs prompt attention. Choke it up, and get it off your chest. Do not hesitate, Brother Horace, for hesitation is fatal. Allow me to share your woes."

"Cheese it, Browne!" said Stevens uncomfortably. "It's nothing. At least, nothing much. I was thinking about that show we saw this evening."

Browne sighed.

"Strange how our minds should work in opposite directions," he observed. "You are thinking of that crudity, and I am trying to forget it. Do not breathe any mention of——"

"I know the show was rotten, but I'd love a chance to take the part of that young fellow," said Stevens enviously.

"There is a rumour abroad that Handforth and Lawrence are to appear on the boards to-morrow evening——"

"I don't mean one of the boxers—but the other young fellow," said Stevens. "You know, the part that's played by the man we saw after the show. Those juniors were talking to him as we passed. It's not much of a part, but I'll bet I could do something with it."

"I take it that you are hinting that you are ambitious of becoming an actor?" asked Browne, with fatherly interest. "This is a matter of gravity, Brother Horace. Unsuspected depths are being probed. Never did I realise the actual profundity of your composition. You may go up one, Brother Horace. I am proud of you!"

"Can't you stop rotting?" demanded Stevens warmly. "This isn't a joking matter, Browne. I'm serious. It's always been my ambition to become an actor."

Browne smiled.

"Have a good heart," he said calmly. "I will make you an actor."

"Look here——"

"Enough!" interrupted Browne. "It is one of my pastimes in life to further the ambitions of enterprising youths such as yourself. In my hands, brother, you will be playing in the West End before you reach the ripe age of twenty. From this minute onwards I am your manager."

"Confound your rot——"

"I am your publicity agent and your general adviser," continued Browne calmly. "At the moment I am lacking in an attractive hobby, and the furtherance of your ambition will come in as an excellent stopgap. Leave everything to me, and your name will be made. I may add that there is no suggestion of rot in these learned remarks. I am in earnest."

Stevens condescended to smile.

"This is all very well, old man, but what on earth can you do?" he asked. "I'm not having anything to do with school theatricals. Don't think I'm superior, or anything like that, but they always strike me as being so jolly tame. I want a chance on the real boards—and there's no hope of that until I get through the 'Varsity. And then, I suppose, my uncle will put me into business, or something equally putrid."

"Ah, these uncles!" said Browne, shaking his head. "In many instances they are even worse than these paters. One never knows how to take them. But why should you assume all that you have assumed? I will make you an actor immediately. Before a month has elapsed, you will be playing with professionals in a legitimate theatre."

"That's absolutely impossible——"

"Nothing," said Browne, "is impossible. Many times have I impressed that fact upon you, Brother Horace—and still you falter. In this life, there is one factor which dominates all others. Determination is the keynote of success. Determination is the stuff which carries you on, over every obstacle. Determination is the only necessary factor for achievement. Without boasting, Brother Horace, I think I may describe myself as the embodiment of determination. When I start a thing, that thing goes."

"My pater was an actor, you know," said Stevens thoughtfully.

Browne winced.

"Wasted words!" he murmured sadly. "My most impressive eloquence cast upon the empty air! But continue, Brother Horace. I forgive you freely. I appreciate that you are scarcely yourself this evening."

"My pater was an actor," repeated Stevens, hardly hearing Browne's interruption. "Famous, too. He played in the West End for years—but never seemed to get to the absolute top. I expect that was because he had money. They didn't regard him as a sincere actor."

"Your pater, I take it, is dead?" asked Browne. "I fancy you have referred to this subject before—although it is news to me that you ever held these secret ambitions——"

"He died when I was a mere nipper—a kid of about four," replied Stevens. "Of course, I don't remember him—but I know he was a marvellous actor. Playwright, too. A marvellous playwright."

Browne smiled kindly.

"We are apt to overrate——"

"That be hanged for a yarn!" interrupted Stevens warmly. "I've got one of my pater's plays upstairs now—the one he called his masterpiece. It was the last thing he did, really—he died only a few weeks after he'd completed it. And I tell you it's too wonderful for words."

"And was it never produced?"

"Never," replied Stevens. "Of course, it went round to the managers—and they rejected it one after another."

"This is gratifying news, indeed!" said Browne eagerly. "A certain sign of excellence, Brother Horace! If the West End managers refused your pater's play, we may safely assume that it is a superb effort. For we are well aware that the West End managers produce nothing but rubbish."

"That's a bit too caustic, old man," smiled Stevens.

"There are, I admit, one or two notable exceptions—but we are speaking generally," said Browne. "Alas, the modern theatre has fallen into the hands of gentlemen with commercial minds and crude ideals. It is time for a renaissance. Let us be among the first to foster this revival."

"No, that play was never produced," went on Stevens. "My pater was frightfully unlucky. Two of his other plays were put on in the West End, but they were both failures—mainly because they were messed up in the production. It was these failures, I expect, which made the managers fight shy of his last play. As a matter of fact, I've got all the parts upstairs—everything ready for production purposes."

"You have never told me of this before," said Browne reproachfully.

"There wasn't any need to, old man. I didn't think you'd be interested—and, besides, what chance is there of anything being done. That play was written fifteen years ago——"

"Age is a mere nothing," interrupted Browne. "What of Gay's 'Beggar's Opera'? That was written many, many generations ago, Brother Horace, and it was one of the greatest successes that London has ever known. What of 'The Farmer's Wife'? That was written many years since, and did not the managers repeatedly scorn it? And now it is still running! Think, Brother Horace! Still running in the West End after more than two years of success!"

"But this play of my pater's isn't a comedy, you know," said Stevens. "It's mostly serious—with one or two emotional situations. There's one in particular. It's simply—— But I'd like you to read it, Browne."

"I should be delighted," said Browne. "Is there, by any chance, a part that would suit yourself? Is there a part that would suit me?"

"There's a part I'd love to play," said Stevens dreamily. "By Jove! If I only had the chance——"

"You shall have it," interrupted Browne briskly. "How would you like to give this play a try-out—at once? How would you like to see it produced this very week?"

"Look here, old man, don't be an ass——"

"We will borrow Mr. Noggs' theatre, and produce the play forthwith," said Browne firmly. "Enough! Do not attempt to turn me from my purpose. The play's the thing, Brother Horace! Let me have it, and the rest will be simple. Remember, I am now your manager."

"But, confound it, you can't——"

"It is not my habit to argue," interrupted Browne serenely. "My mind is made up—and therefore your mind is made up. We are going ahead, and nothing will deter us."

CHAPTER XI.

HANDFORTH MEANS BUSINESS.

"MY hat!" said Church blankly.

He sat up in bed, and stared. The rising-bell had not ceased its unwelcome din, but Edward Oswald Handforth was in the centre of the dormitory floor, fully dressed, indulging in extraordinary acrobatics.

He was apparently fighting the thin air—lunging, driving, and feinting. Propped on the mantelpiece was a grubby-looking document. Occasionally Handforth would go over towards it, and give it a glance.

"You may think you're clever, Smasher Bill, but you're not going to win this fight!" he said thickly. "You cur! Take that!"

Swish!

Handforth nearly bowled himself over by the force of his undelivered blow.

"I'll defeat your evil designs!" he panted. "I'll—— Oh, rot! There's nothing in the giddy part! Hardly anything to say!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Church.

Handforth turned.

"Who told you to interfere?" he demanded, dropping his hands. "Go to sleep

again, you ass! I'm busy. And I don't want any interference, either."

"Are you rehearsing for to-night's show?" grinned Church, as he tumbled out of bed. "You'd better go easy, Handy—you're learning the wrong part! You've got to play Smasher Bill."

"Rats! I'm playing Harry Wallis, the young miracle boxer," replied Edward Oswald. "Lawrence says he doesn't care which he plays, so——"

"But the part isn't half so good," argued Church. "Harry Wallis is merely a boxer—he's hardly got anything to say. Why, you've just been complaining about it."

fashion. Why, he won't know where he is! You've got to stick to the part, Handy, or chuck it up."

"You'd better play Smasher Bill," urged Church. "There's a lot more opportunity for good acting in that part. What about that bit where's he's plotting with the villain? That secret conclave in the scene before the last? Harry Wallis does nothing."

"But Smasher Bill gets knocked out in the last scene—and that's ridiculous," insisted Handforth. "I'm blessed if I'm going to lie down when the curtain falls, and look a silly ass!"

"Oh, well, please yourself," said Church.

Swish—squelch!
The paste-pot descended in an inverted position fairly on the top of Mr. Barton's head.

"That's nothing," said Handforth indifferently. "I shan't take much notice of the part. I'll put in a lot more, and improve it as I go along."

Church goggled.

"You'll take no notice of the part?" he gasped. "You'll add to it as you go along? Why, you ass, you'll ruin it!"

"I don't want any interference——"

"You'll spoil the whole show if you go on like that," put in McClure, who had been thoroughly aroused by the argument. "You can't mess Mr. Noggs' play about in that

"The show will be worth seeing, anyhow—it'll be a scream. You haven't much time for rehearsals, Handy—no half-holiday today, you know, and you've got to appear to-night."

Handforth sniffed.

"I'll have the part letter perfect before breakfast," he said. "It's not a part at all, really—there's nothing to learn."

When the chums of Study D got down they found visitors from the Modern House awaiting them. John Busterfield Boots and

Bob Christine had come over with Ernest Lawrence.

The latter was a good-natured junior, and he had readily consented to fall in with Handforth's proposal. He didn't count himself as an actor, but he was game. As it happened, he was the champion boxer of the Junior School, and what he didn't know about the science of the sport was not worth learning.

The Ancient House fellows were prepared to wager a term's pocket-money that Dick Hamilton could beat Lawrence any day, and it was quite on the cards that a deciding contest would be arranged, sooner or later.

"Good!" said Boots briskly. "Just the man we want! Now, Handy, look here! Who's going to play Smasher Bill? You or Lawrence?"

"I'm not quite sure yet," replied Handforth.

"Then you've got to be sure—we can't have any messing about," retorted Boots. "My dear ass, you seem to forget that there's hardly any time. You don't want to get on the stage and make a fool of yourself, do you?"

"He'll probably do that, in any case," said Bob Christine, with a chuckle. "Old Noggs' place will be packed out to-night. Heaps of the chaps are talking about going—and they'll all expect to see Handy come a hopeless cropper. That's all they'll go for."

Handforth frowned.

"Then they'll be disappointed!" he said sourly. "I'm going to put so much dramatic acting into this part that the whole audience will be spellbound. Old Noggs himself won't recognise his own play!"

"I believe it!" said Boots, nodding.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It'll be too funny for words," went on Boots. "But we don't want to start any rows, do we? A bit more of this, and there'll be a house rag on the go! Who's going to play Smasher Bill, and who's going to play Harry Wallis? That's the question to be decided."

"Leave me out of it," said Lawrence. "I don't care which part I play—but I want to know something soon, so that I can get a move on."

Handforth was still indecisive, and nothing was actually fixed by the time lessons started. Not that it really mattered. The big scene was the boxing match, and that needed little or no rehearsal. Besides, the audience would consist almost wholly of St. Frank's fellows, and they wouldn't mind in the least if Handforth and Lawrence forgot every word of their parts. It would only add to the entertainment.

During morning lessons, Edward Oswald was absent-minded and preoccupied. He gave very little attention to his work, and this was partly accounted for by the fact that he had the typewritten script of the play in his desk—and he kept making surreptitious references to it.

Mr. Crowell was fortunately in a good humour, or he might have pulled Handforth up on several occasions. He was busy at the blackboard, for example, speaking to the Remove Form while he indulged in lengthy expositions of mathematics. Handforth seized the opportunity to practise a few drives.

It had been impressed upon him that the fight was to be a mimic one, and he was anxious to make his lunges appear forceful while they were actually powerless. And this needed a lot of careful practice. He didn't want to knock Lawrence out in real earnest.

"Steady, you ass!" hissed Nick Trotwood, as one of Handforth's fists whizzed perilously near his ear. "Mind what you're doing!"

"It's all right—only a feint!" said Handforth.

"Old Crowell will do a faint if you let him see you!" growled Nick. "Can't you leave it until after lessons, you hopeless duffer?"

Swish! Crash!

Handforth attempted another movement, but unfortunately he caught Teddy Long a fearful blow on the chin. It was really Teddy's fault, for he was craning over his own desk, in order to catch a glimpse of Nick Trotwood's exercise paper. He was, in fact, indulging in his usual habit of barefaced cribbing.

He fell back, howling wildly.

"My hat!" gasped Handforth. "What the——"

"Silence!" commanded Mr. Crowell, swinging round from the blackboard. "Who is it making that abominable noise? Long, how dare you? Be silent at once! What on earth is the matter with you?"

"Please, sir, Handforth punched me!" babbled Teddy Long.

"Handforth! Did you punch Long?"

"No, I jolly well didn't!" roared Handforth.

"There is no need for you to bark at me, Handforth!" said Mr. Crowell, frowning. "Neither is it necessary for you to use that disrespectful tone! I won't have these disturbances——"

"Long got in my way—and it serves him right, too, sir," growled Handforth. "He shouldn't put his face where it oughtn't to be!"

"You had better sit down and get on with your work," said Mr. Crowell coldly. "I strongly suspect, Handforth, that you have not been paying attention. What was the problem we have just examined?"

"The problem, sir?" asked Handforth helplessly.

"I can see that you know nothing whatever about the subject," retorted Mr. Crowell. "Another exhibition of this inattention, Handforth, and I shall detain

you. I don't know why I am so lenient with you."

Work went on, and Handforth thought it wiser to attempt no more boxing practice. But he was thoroughly startled when Mr. Crowell suddenly called upon him fifteen minutes later.

"Handforth, read aloud from the point I have just left," said the Form-master.

"Eh?" gasped Handforth. "You cur!"

"Good heavens!" gasped Mr. Crowell.

"You scheming cur!" repeated Handforth fiercely. "Remember, Smasher Bill, your villainy has found you out—— Eh? Oh, my hat! Sorry, sir! I—I didn't quite know——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled the Form.

"How dare you use such terms when addressing me, Handforth?" demanded Mr. Crowell, horrified. "I shall take you to the Headmaster——"

"I—I forgot myself, sir," panted Handforth. "It's—it's my part, you know."

"Your part?"

"I'm learning my lines——"

"Oh!" interrupted Mr. Crowell, light dawning upon him. "Amateur theatricals, I presume. No, Handforth. Not another word! This usage of work-time for your private pleasures is intolerable. You will write me three hundred lines. The next time I shall sentence you to extra lessons for the whole evening."

"Oh, corks!" said Handforth blankly. "Sorry, sir! I—I'll pay attention now!"

And for the rest of the morning he gave no more time to his precious part. The threat of being detained for the whole evening gave him a remarkable zest for hard work.

CHAPTER XII.

REHEARSALS.

"WHAT about a rehearsal?" asked Nipper briskly.

"No need for one," replied Handforth. "You can trust us to know our parts thoroughly by this evening. There's no sense in messing about with a lot of silly rehearsals."

Lessons were over, and the juniors were in the Triangle. It was a glorious March morning, with a strong hint of spring in the air. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, and the temperature was equable.

"You'll make a first-class actor, Handy—about as much as my boot!" said Nipper grimly. "It doesn't matter how small your part is, you've got to rehearse it. If you don't you and Lawrence will be hopelessly at sea. I suppose you're playing Smasher Bill?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Or are you playing Harry Wallis?"

"I've a good mind to play Harry Wallis," said Handforth thoughtfully.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Church. "You can't play both parts, you duffer! You can't fight yourself, can you? How much longer are you going to be deciding?"

"Here comes the Modern House contingent—they'll soon settle it," said Nipper.

The Modern House had decided to back Ernest Lawrence up staunchly. They considered him the champion of the school, and they were keen on seeing him give an exhibition of real science in the last act of Mr. Noggs' play. Everybody with money to spare had decided to book seats in advance.

"How are things going?" asked Boots, with business-like crispness. "Letter perfect yet, Handy? Lawrence is."

"He's playing the part of Harry Wallis, the gushing young hero," said Christine. "I'm glad it's settled. Handy will make a fine bruiser. He's just the right type to take the part of Smasher Bill."

"Why, you insulting rotter——" began Handforth.

"With make-up, of course," added Christine hastily. "Besides, it's a part that needs a lot of acting. It takes a jolly clever actor to be villainous on the stage. I doubt if Lawrence could do it. He's only a boxer. But you're an actor as well as a boxer, Handy."

Handforth thawed considerably.

"Well, of course, there's something in that," he admitted. "When it comes to real acting, Smasher Bill is the best part. But can't we alter the play? I don't see why the Smasher should be knocked out in the last round."

"But that's the most important bit of all, you ass," grinned Nipper. "If the Smasher isn't knocked out, there's no decisive finish to the fight—and the whole play goes phut."

"And look at that bit where Smasher Bill talks to the villain during one of the rest spells," said Buster Boots. "What a fine chance for dramatic acting! He urges the villain to put some dope into Harry's sponge. There's nothing of that sort in Harry Wallis's part. You've got all the fat, Handy—so you can't grumble at receiving the knock-out in the end."

Handforth was even more mollified.

"But it's a rotten exit," he objected. "That's the only part I don't like. I'm not conceited, or anything, but how the dickens am I going to make my bow when the audience applauds?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"So that's what you're worrying about?" grinned Nipper. "My dear chap, nothing simpler! You won't be really knocked out—it's only a play! As soon as the curtain comes down, you'll jump up and make your bow. There's nothing for you to concern yourself about."

"By George, I hadn't thought of that!" said Handforth, his eyes sparkling. "I shan't be really 'out,' shall I? Good!

Then I'll play the part of Smasher Bill! Now we'll see about that rehearsal, if you're so keen on it."

"Have you read up your part?"

"Rather!"

"Let's go into the gym. and get busy," said Nipper briskly. "Remember, there's no time to waste. Things have got to be done rapidly to-day. And it's all in a good cause. Old Noggs is going to have a full house to-night, if he's never had one before!"

The gymnasium was fairly crowded five minutes later. Nipper constituted himself the producer, and took charge of the script of the play. Handforth and Lawrence had their own respective parts.

"There's no need for this business," said Handforth impatiently. "We know our parts already."

"What's your cue for your first entrance?" asked Nipper.

"Eh? I don't quite—— Half a minute!" said Handforth. "Yes, by George! You cur! You scheming cur! Remember, Smasher Bill, your villainy——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They're my lines, you ass!" grinned Lawrence. "You've been learning the wrong part! I knew you'd get mixed up, Handy. The best thing we can do is to start all over again."

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

Nipper insisted upon Lawrence's suggestion—and a fresh start was made. And the gymnasium was a busy place until the dinner-gong sounded. In the meantime, there was another busy place, not very far off.

Noggs' Imperial Theatre was literally besieged. The juniors in particular were determined to see Handforth's effort that evening, and it was widely known that the travelling theatre would not hold anything like the number who arranged to attend.

So there was an early rush to book seats.

Mr. Andy Noggs and Steve Ashwood were kept hard at it. Every stall was sold within half an hour, and all the pit stalls went like hot cakes. Mr. Noggs could have sold the entire pit at one-and-sixpence a time had he chosen; but he didn't take advantage of the chance. He was a man who believed in sticking to his prices religiously. The pit was sixpence—and it wasn't bookable, as a rule. But, under the exceptional circumstances, he waived this particular rule.

Every inch of room in the modest auditorium was sold out before lunch-time, and even Mr. Noggs was surprised. He had never imagined that the St. Frank's fellows would rally round with such enthusiasm. It was a complete eye-opener.

"The best thing you can do, guv'nor, is to stop here for the week," suggested Ashwood, after the rush was over. "And we were going on to Edgemore, too, to-day! Those boys will probably keep on the parts for another two or three days if you want them to."

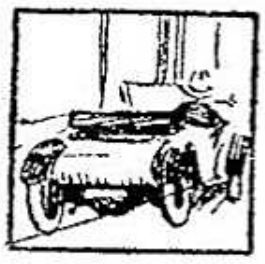
"It needs consideration, laddie," said Mr. Noggs slowly. "We don't want to fill our benches at the expense of dignity. It will all depend upon to-night's show. We must be prudent. It is a chance we can't afford to miss, but I am a man of care. 'Chance always fights for the prudent'—Eurypides. Luck is turning, Steve."

"Think of the crowds we've turned away," went on Ashwood. "Why, we'll hold the same number to-morrow, and an equal number the next day. And even then the school won't be exhausted! Why, these kids will come two or three times if they've got a personal interest in the show."

"Nevertheless, ladkins, I am keeping my mind open," declared Mr. Noggs. "We have taken good money to-day. Our coffers are full. But at what expense? We cannot tell until to-night. I make no decision until this experiment is over."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF ROGER BARTON.



A SMALL car drove into the meadow, and came to a standstill. Roger Barton stepped out, and advanced towards the theatre. Mr. Noggs saluted, and walked forward to meet the newcomer.

There was something totally different in his manner. The old showman was more active—more alive. There was a sparkle in his eye, and his very gait was springy. In spite of his doubts regarding the evening, he was in a bubbling mood.

"Welcome, Barton!" he shouted boisterously. "I didn't expect you to-day! But one is ever pleased at happy surprises."

Barton looked at the theatrical proprietor in astonishment. He knew nothing of the recent events, for he had been away in Caistowe, and beyond. He had, in fact, gone to Edgemore, expecting to find the show there, in the course of being erected.

"What on earth's the meaning of this, guv'nor?" he asked. "I've been to Edgemore. Why haven't you pulled up stakes yet? You'll never be able to get the show up before opening time!"

"We're not going to Edgemore yet awhile, laddie," said Mr. Noggs pleasantly.

"But, hang it, what about the bills?" suggested Barton. "There's the date on them, and everything. "You can't play fast and loose with the public like that. I'd no idea——"

"'Men are the sport of circumstances'—Byron," said Mr. Noggs. "And what of the dates, Roger? Can we not paste a

notice of postponement on these wretched bills? Do not bother me with such trifles!"

"Trifles!" shouted Barton. "Confound it, Andy, I wish you were as good a business man as you are an actor! You want looking after like a child! What folly has possessed you to stay here?"

Mr. Noggs frowned.

"'He who hath not a dram of folly in his mixture, hath pounds of much worse matter in his composition'—Lamb," he replied sternly. "It may be folly, Roger, but it is profitable. We are in a position to place the 'House Full' boards out to-night!"

"The 'House Full' boards!" ejaculated Barton, staring.

"Ay, knave!" boomed Mr. Noggs. "We are booked up to the hilt!"

"Impossible!" said the other "There aren't enough people in this dead hole to half fill the seats."

"A strange admission from a manager!" said Mr. Noggs, with a sharp look at Barton. "You planned this tour, Roger, and you confess such a thing as that! How now?"

"But Bellton has been exhausted by this time," said Barton quickly. "Of course I planned the tour—but I didn't expect you to stay here over your time. And what's this about the house being booked up?"

Mr. Noggs explained the circumstances, and Barton listened with growing surprise. Gradually, he changed his attitude, and by the time Mr. Noggs had done he was beaming.

"By Jove, Noggs, I take back what I said about your folly," he said enthusiastically. "That was a brilliant move! Two of those boys are playing to-night, eh? And half the school is coming to see them? It's a stroke of genius, man!"

"But not mine," confessed Mr. Noggs. "It came from one of the boys himself. We are full up for the first time this tour! It is undoubtedly an occasion for celebration. Let us adjourn to the tavern and make merry. Never have I felt so fit as I feel to-day. 'Cheerfulness, sir, is the principal ingredient in the composition of health'—Murphy."

"You've certainly changed, guv'nor," agreed Barton. "I haven't seen you in this mood for months. Good! We'll have a drink on the strength of the triumph. And we'll look upon this as a good omen for the rest of the tour."

"It means the change of the luck, old spifkins," said Mr. Noggs genially. "With hard work, we can surmount the obstacles. 'What merit to be dropped on fortune's hill—the honour is to mount it'—Knowles."

The old showman's spirit was infectious. His bubbling good humour was good to see. The change in him was so extraordinary that even Ashwood was startled. And he knew most of his employer's moods, too.

Just this one success had wrought a complete change in the old actor. Week after week, he had met with nothing but misfortune and disaster. There was no indication that the turn of the tide had come. It would probably prove to be a mere flash in the pan. But Mr. Noggs was an actor—and actors are proverbially swayed by the turn of the events of the moment.

Barton had apparently forgotten his antipathy towards the school. At least, he thought it better to make no mention of it. He proved himself to be as wholeheartedly enthusiastic as Mr. Noggs—until he entered his motor-car again, and went off. And then a change came over him.

His good humour vanished, and an expression of black rage came over his crafty face. He cursed viciously as he jammed in his gears.

"The old fool!" he snarled to himself. "As merry as a kid—and pepped up to do even better acting than usual. The very thing I didn't want! These infernal boys are going to ruin all my plans!"

He cursed again.

"There's one good thing—it can't last long!" he muttered savagely. "I'll take good care to shift old Noggs away from that school before the week's out! House Full, indeed! That sort of thing won't suit me!"

He seemed worried in addition to being angry. For some reason best known to himself, his delight at hearing the news had been assumed. In strict reality, he appeared to be alarmed at the very thought of Mr. Noggs booking every seat in his theatre.

There was obviously something wrong with Mr. Roger Barton.

In the meantime, the St. Frank's juniors were greatly interested in the rehearsals of Handforth and Lawrence. As soon as afternoon lessons were over, another rehearsal was held in the gym, followed by a trip down to Noggs' Imperial Theatre. The two amateur actors were accompanied by a crowd of interested supporters.

Mr. Noggs met them at the gateway of the meadow.

"What now?" he asked genially. "Welcome! I take it that you have come to run through your parts? Good! I have been waiting. We will see what manner of actors we have."

"We're word perfect, Mr. Noggs," said Handforth crisply. "It isn't really necessary to come down here, but the other chaps insisted."

"It is just as well," said Mr. Noggs drily. "I have had actors in my company who have been word perfect for days, and have then dried up upon the lifting of the curtain. We cannot be too careful."

Only a few were admitted into the theatre, and the rehearsal was a brief affair—since the two juniors had very little to say. Their big scene came in connection with the boxing match—and this was all action.

With the exception of one or two mistakes, Handforth got through well—at least, the spectators considered that he had done well. He delivered his dramatic passages with eloquent emphasis. In fact, as Church confided to McClure, he was a perfect scream.

Mr. Noggs was rather scared.

"Good!" he commented, at length. "Distinctly good! But somewhat too emphatic. Toned down, you will be passable, young man. But always remember that this is a serious play—and not a burlesque."

"How about Lawrence?" asked Nipper.

"He is better—much better," said Mr. Noggs, nodding. "It is the natural tone that we desire—the normal manner of speech. You, laddie, are inclined to overact," he went on, turning to Handforth. "Be wary of that. An ill-spoken sentence will create laughter from the cheaper sections of the house—and that will ruin the effect. 'There still remains, to mortify a wit, the many-headed monster of the pit'—Pope."

"Monster?" repeated Handforth, staring. "What monster?"

"A quotation, my boy—merely a quotation," said Mr. Noggs. "Let me remind you of another vital point. I will allow you to conduct this boxing match as you think fit. You are experts—I am but a novice. But you, as Smasher Bill, must receive the knock-out in the end."

"That's all fixed up, Mr. Noggs," said Handforth impatiently. "I don't like being knocked out, but I suppose it's in the part."

"Make a mistake over that feature, and the play will be ruined," said Mr. Noggs earnestly. "At the right moment, this other young gentleman will deliver the smashing drive. A clever feint, of course. But as he delivers it, he will murmur the word 'Down.' That will be your cue to receive the count."

"That's all in the stage directions," said Handforth, nodding. "You can be easy in mind about everything. Your show will go with a swing to-night, even if it's never gone with a swing before."

Handforth spoke rather coldly. He didn't quite like Mr. Noggs' recent criticisms. He hadn't said much, but Handforth was sensitive. And he had been expecting Mr. Noggs to praise him up to the skies. Church and McClure made things no better shortly afterwards.

"Old Andy Noggs was quite right about your acting," said Church. "It's jolly good, Handy, but you're inclined to overdo it. Didn't you notice how the chaps were grinning?"

"You'd better tone it down," suggested McClure.

It was excellent advice—but it was wasted. Handforth had his own ideas about acting, and he had no patience with actors who merely spoke their lines in a natural way. His idea was to bring his words out dramatically, forcefully, and with ringing emphasis.

"Another word from you, my lads, and you'll get it in the neck!" he said darkly. "Old Noggs doesn't know what he's talking about! You wait until to-night! I don't like to boast, but I'll bring down the house!"

"You'll probably bring down something," agreed McClure.

"The curtain, probably," grinned Church.

But nobody else attempted to point out Handforth's shortcomings. It was the last thing they desired. From their point of view, the whole show would be spoilt if he acted properly. There was something excruciatingly funny about the blundering Edward Oswald when he was on the stage. And the cream of the joke was that he never realised how comic he was. The more dramatic the part, the funnier he made it.

So, according to all appearances, the St. Frank's juniors were in for a special treat this evening.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HIT OF THE EVENING.

NOGGS' Imperial Theatre was packed. Indeed, it was jammed. Without exaggeration, it was literally bulging with humanity—for the canvas sides were conveniently stretchable. Although every seat had been booked in advance, fully a score of other patrons succeeded in getting in.

There wasn't a single member of the ordinary public in the building. A few had turned up, but had failed to gain admittance. Outside the pay-box was a large board with the words "House Full" painted upon it.

The packed auditorium made an immense difference to the "feel" of the theatre. Those who had witnessed the previous evening's show were struck by the change. Everything had seemed dead then. Now it was full of life. The very air quivered with animation.

Browne and Stevens, of course, were well to the fore. They were the only Fifth Formers present, with the exception of Chambers & Co., of the West House. Chambers was a fellow who liked to be in everything that was going, and he had dragged Phillips and Bryant with him.

"I imagine, Brother Horace, that we are to see a very different performance this evening," murmured Browne just before the curtain went up. "You cannot fail to have detected the vim and verve which permeates the atmosphere."

"Yes, it's different to last night," said Stevens.

"And this feeling, I have no doubt, will reflect itself in the acting of the players," continued Browne. "Make no mistake, brother, we are now about to witness a breezy show—a show which throbs with vitality and life."

"The curtain's going up!" muttered Stevens.

It was obvious that he had his heart and soul in this sort of life. Browne was somewhat bored—although mildly interested in the possible developments of the last act. But Stevens was just as keen to see the play as he had been on the previous occasion—in spite of its crudities and many shortcomings.

Browne's prophecy proved correct.

Even during the first five minutes, a remarkable change was apparent. The play, instead of dragging wearily—instead of revealing its weaknesses with painful frequency—went with a swing and a verve.

This was mainly accounted for by the full house. There is nothing more deadening to an actor than to appear in front of row upon row of empty seats. But, on the other hand, when he sees the ranks of packed humanity, he is imbued with the will to do his best.

To-night this determination was enhanced by the novelty of the situation. Mr. Noggs and his company had not seen a full house for months. They couldn't help acting beyond their normal powers. Even the poorest member of the cast became almost good.

And Mr. Noggs himself achieved a triumph.

The juniors had thought him good before, but now they hailed him with roaring cheers. He deserved it, too. As a character actor he was superb. And to-night he surpassed himself. At times one could have heard a pin drop, in spite of the jammed house.

At one motion from Mr. Noggs—one inflection of his voice—and the whole house arose and cheered. There was something magnetic about this enthusiasm. But only while Mr. Noggs was on the stage. The other members of his company were mediocre. They excelled themselves, but there was a limit to their talent.

But when the interval came—there were only two acts—the schoolboy audience was thoroughly satisfied with the fare that had been set before them. They were astonished beyond measure. On all sides, they had heard that Mr. Noggs' theatre was a wretched place—that his play was hopeless, and his company vile.

And now they were finding out the truth!

The show was good, the theatre was ripping. Certainly, the players were generally poor, but there were not many adverse critics among this youthful audience.

"Why, we've been swindled by somebody," said Boots, of the Fourth. "Everybody's been saying that the show was dire. It's jolly good! And old Noggs is a marvel!"

"What's he doing here?" demanded Christine. "He ought to be in the West End. I've seen lots worse in London—and

Handforth was apparently fighting the thin air—lunging, driving and feinting.

I've never seen anybody better than Noggs. He's an artist to his finger-tips."

"Rather!"

"And the best part of the show is to come yet," grinned Church. "Wait until Handy gets on the stage!"

The juniors grinned at the very thought of it—and waited impatiently for the great moment to arrive. There were three scenes in the second act, and Handforth was due to make his appearance in the first. The scene was a kind of den in the underworld, where the villain of the piece had gone to engage Smasher Bill. And, having engaged him, he plotted with him.

Everybody in the house knew Handforth's cue; and everybody was waiting to give him a yell of applause when he came on. The cue was a sudden rapping on the door, following a remark by the villain.

Everything went all right up to a point. The words were spoken, but no rapping followed, and the audience waited expectantly. There was an awkward pause, and the man who played the villain repeated his words helplessly.

"Buck up, Handy!" yelled a crowd of Fourth-Formers.

"Come on, Smasher Bill!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There were no raps, but Handforth suddenly burst through the flimsy doorway at the back of the stage. In fact, he came through so suddenly that he nearly knocked the scenery down.

A howl went up—a perfect roar of delight. Handforth was dressed in tightly-fitting trousers, a gaudily-striped jersey, and a huge cap which hung over one ear. He was made up, too—his chin being blued, and his face being generally coarsened.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!"

The whole house clapped with enthusiasm, and Handforth came to the front of the stage and bowed. The other actors waited awkwardly. The audience still clapped, and Handforth still bowed—and the audience kept it up. This was developing into a first-class rag.

But at last Handforth suspected something of the truth.

"Dry up, you fatheads!" he roared. "How do you think I can get on with my lines if you keep clapping? You're holding up the giddy play!"

came over Smasher Bill's face. He opened his mouth, but said nothing. He looked positively scared.

"I've got a job for you," repeated the villain.

"Eh?" said Handforth desperately. "I—I mean—— You cur! You scheming cur! Remember, Smasher Bill, your villainy—— Oh, corks! I've got it wrong! Half a minute, you chaps—I'm speaking Lawrence's lines! Hi, where's the prompter?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The audience not only yelled, but it cheered vigorously. This was far better than they had anticipated. There was the utmost

"Ha, ha, ha!"

These words, from Smasher Bill, were so incongruous that the audience laughed uproariously. But at length there was a silence. For everybody wanted to see how Handforth would shape.

"This is the man," said one of the other actors. "The very fellow for the job. I told you he would be here soon."

"Ah, Smasher Bill!" said the villain, holding his hand out to the newcomer. "Glad to meet you, Bill. I've got a job for you."

Handforth stood back, and struck an attitude—a dramatic pose which caused the audience to gasp with suppressed merriment. And then, suddenly, a strange expression

confusion on the stage—for Handforth failed to hear the prompter amid the din. In the end, he was obliged to go to the side of the stage in order to catch the words.

Having heard the first two or three, he was rescued from his predicament. But he didn't wait for the laughter to cease. He struck the same attitude, and the audience held its breath.

"A job for me, guv'nor?" roared Handforth. "What's it going to be? I want fifty quid for—for——"

"Not yet—not yet!" hissed the villain. "You don't say that until later on!"

Handforth was prompted again, and gradually the action of the play was carried on. But by the time that particular scene came

to an end the entire audience was on the point of exhaustion. And the best part of the show was to come.

"How much did we pay for these seats?" gurgled Boots. "Eighteen-pence? We've swindled old Noggs! It's worth quids! I never knew Handy was such a comedian!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE GREAT SCENE.

ERNEST LAWRENCE made no pretence at being an actor, but he could certainly act. His performance was creditable in every way—particularly when it was remembered that there had been very little time for serious rehearsals. Handforth, on the other hand, claimed that he was a born actor, and yet he couldn't act for toffee. At least, this was the general opinion.

It was agreed, however, that he was a comedian of rare ability. When it came to a matter of humour, he was a corker. And most of the fun was occasioned by the fact that Handforth knew nothing about it.

He took himself so seriously, and he entered into the play with such tremendous gusto, that he was unaware of the audience. He lived in his part—and converted it from a commonplace one into a masterpiece of burlesque acting.

"I say, this is too bad!" grinned Stevens. "Handforth's ruining the whole show, you know!"

"Ruining it?" repeated Browne. "I venture to suggest, Brother Horace, that he's making it."

"But his part's a serious one—not a burlesque," protested Stevens. "He ought to be told. It's not playing the game to caricature the part like this."

Browne chuckled.

"I fear that you are still sadly lacking in vision," he murmured. "In your childlike innocence, you fail to observe that Brother Handforth is acting according to his own lights. He doesn't even know that his performance is a burlesque. Let him carry on. I am tickled."

"But it is too bad on old Noggs," said Stevens, who felt keenly hurt by the levity which had entered into the evening's entertainment. "All this is supposed to be serious, you know. And the house is yelling."

"A sure sign of success," declared Browne. "Even if the crowd yells at the wrong moment, what matters? The great thing is to send the audience away satisfied. I venture to predict there will be few malcontents when we are turned out into the cold night."

"Hush! Curtain's going up!"

During the next ten minutes the audience was subdued—so quiet, indeed, that it seemed scarcely possible that these same boys had created the previous din. The scene was supposed to be the old musician's garret, where he lay in bed, next to death's door. In this scene Mr. Noggs produced his best form—and his acting was moving in the extreme.

The old showman was grateful for the change in the audience. He had feared that the boys would continue their boisterous behaviour. But they didn't—it was impossible to do so when Mr. Noggs was on the stage. Their silence was a tribute to his great ability.

But at last the scene was over—to be followed by a storm of applause. And immediately after it came the big scene of the play, the boxing-ring—the match which was to mean the saving of the old musician's life.

The audience changed on the instant. Handforth was already in the ring—dressed in close-fitting fighting rig, and swaggering about in accordance with Smasher Bill's character. Only Handforth swaggered with such exaggerated movements that the touch of burlesque was complete. His over-acting was purely unconscious.

The fight commenced, and the audience settled itself down to ten minutes of sheer joy. Most of the juniors knew what Handforth was—and they were confidently expecting a display of fireworks.

The two originals had known nothing about boxing, but they had at least carried the fight off with a certain amount of order. The whole affair had been deadening in its painful pretence.

The efforts of Handforth and Lawrence, however, were vivid and realistic. The fight became a thing of spirit. In fact, it was so realistic that Ernest Lawrence thought it necessary to issue a caution or two.

"Keep your hair on, Handy!" he murmured, as they clinched, and hammered away at each other. "This is only acting, you know—no need to use that right of yours so forcefully!"

"Sorry!" gasped Handforth. "I'd almost forgotten."

"Forgotten!" repeated Lawrence, aghast. "Look here, you'd better not get too excited, my son, or you'll be giving me a frightful kosh——"

"Break away, there!"

"Now, then, ref.—you can't allow that!"

Amid advice from the audience, the referee separated the boxers, and the fight continued. This round was supposed to end with Handforth going down under a crashing blow from the young hero. At this point it was usual to get a round of applause. And then the gong would sound, saving Smasher Bill by a mere second or two.

Lawrence delivered the blow in accordance with the stage directions. It was a beauty—but judged so perfectly that while looking dangerous, its effect was hardly felt. Un-

fortunately, Handforth took no notice, but carried on.

"You ass!" hissed Lawrence. "Why didn't you go down?"

"Eh?"

"It's time, you chump!" said Lawrence. "You've got to take the count here. The gong goes just in time to save you!"

"By George, I'd forgotten!" breathed Handforth. "Come on—let's try it over again. But none of your big sloshes, remember!"

He made no attempt to speak quietly, and the audience heard practically every word. The illusion of a real match was, of course, utterly destroyed. And the postponement of the gong only added to the general merriment. It was a rather humorous boxing match, where the rounds could be lengthened according to the whim of the combatants!

Lawrence did it all over again, and Handforth rose to the occasion with dramatic effect. He reeled back realistically; it was rather unfortunate that he reeled before Lawrence had actually touched him. He struck the ropes, sank to his knees, and clutched at the air.

"I'm beat!" he gasped. "I'm whacked! Water! Gimme water!"

These words weren't actually in the part, but Handforth felt that they were necessary. He rolled over, groaning horribly. The timekeeper sounded the gong with haste, and the prolonged round was over.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Keep it up, Handy; you're killing us!"

"Our sides will ache for a week, old man!"

But the cream of the joke was to follow. The next round was supposed to be the last. In this great scene Smasher Bill received the knock-out, and Harry Wallis was proclaimed the winner.

Whether Lawrence delivered one or two unintentional blows is doubtful, but Handforth fairly let himself go. He became so excited that he seemed to forget that the affair was mere play, and that the fight was a fake. He entered into it with all his heart and soul.

"Steady!" gasped Lawrence, as he received a fearful thud in the chest. "Look out, you chump! What the——"

Crash!

He took a beautiful uppercut, his guard being down. In a fight like this he was careless. He nearly went over backwards, and Handforth followed up his advantage and pressed the attack.

This sort of thing was hopeless, so Lawrence took the only course and fought back. He thought it might awaken Handforth to a sense of realities, since talking was useless.

Crash! Thud! Slosh!

They went at it hammer and tongs, and the audience rose in their seats and cheered. They could see in a moment that a change had come over the fight. It was no mere pretence now. The combatants were going at one another as though they really meant it.

"Hurrah!"

"Go it, Lawrence! Modern House for ever!"

"Rats! Knock him out, Handy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Noggs, in the wings, was frantic. The fight should have ended nearly a minute ago, but it was still going on grimly. The timekeeper was afraid to sound the gong, for there wasn't supposed to be any further rounds.

"Handy, you idiot!" gasped Lawrence desperately. "Calm yourself, you blithering idiot! You've got to take the knock-out here. You're messing up the whole giddy show!"

"Knock-out!" panted Handforth. "Try and give it!"

Crash!

He swung his right round, and Lawrence staggered.

"I'll show you Modern House fatheads something!" said Handforth indignantly. "So they think you're the champion, eh? We'll soon see!"

Lawrence nearly gave it up. Again and again he delivered the imitation knock-out. But Handforth persistently refused to take the count. Mr. Noggs became more frantic than ever. The audience wept. Many juniors were on the point of expiring from sheer merriment.

And still Handforth persisted.

This round had lasted about four minutes already, and Lawrence scarcely knew what to do. In sheer desperation he put his hands down, and made a grab at his opponent.

"Now then, you madman!" he panted. "Are you going to calm down, or——"

But Handforth was unable to stop himself. Crash! His left came round, and Lawrence received it fairly between the eyes, a terrific smite which made him see stars. He reeled, fell against the ropes, and collapsed.

But he didn't rise, either!

The unfortunate referee was in a terrible quandary. Here was the hero knocked out, and if there was to be any pretence of reality at all he had to count him out. The whole course of the play was ruined.

"One, two, three——" counted the referee.

"By the shade of Shakespeare!" groaned Mr. Noggs, clapping a hand to his brow. "This is the end! I'm ruined! I was a fool to take on these boys. Curtain, Steve—curtain. Great Cæsar, drop it!"

And the curtain fell with Handforth standing in the middle of the ring, very much alive, and with the young hero very

much the opposite. As for the rest of the play it was abandoned.

And the audience didn't mind in the slightest.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. NOGGS ISN'T SURE.

NOBODY waited to see what would happen. It was taken as a foregone conclusion that the show was over. In fact, it couldn't go on after what had happened. Handforth had utterly shattered the true course of the plot, and there was nothing for it but to keep the curtain down for good.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The audience crowded out to the accompaniment of fresh laughter. Even Browne and Stevens were grinning widely. Browne had been far more entertained than Stevens, for the latter felt sorry for Mr. Noggs. The performance had been successful from a financial point of view, but Stevens had an instinctive feeling that Mr. Noggs would not be satisfied. He was too much of an artist to think merely of money. He had the reputation of his theatre to consider.

"It's just what we might have expected, anyhow," said Stevens. "Handforth means well, but he's such an excitable young bounder. I honestly believe he forgot that he was on the stage. He thought the fight was real. Poor old Noggs is probably having ten fits behind the scenes."

"And yet he should be congratulating himself," said Browne. "For has he not discovered a new comedian? I venture to predict that Brother Noggs would make a fortune if he introduced this volcanic joke of the Remove to the London audiences. London doesn't know what it's missing."

"Well, anyhow, I don't think Noggs will be particularly pleased," said Stevens. "If I was in his position I'd be tearing my hair."

"I scarcely think that Mr. Noggs will indulge in that rash enterprise," said Browne. "You must remember that he has much more hair to tear, Brother Horace, and with him it would be a serious step."

The juniors were crowding out of the field, and setting off for St. Frank's. Many of them were determined to come again on the following night, if Handforth arranged to appear again. As Boots pointed out, he was bound to be totally different in the second performance, and might even be funnier. Bob Christine pointed out that such a thing was impossible.

And while the audience was streaming home Mr. Noggs seemed very close to the point of tearing his hair, as Stevens had predicted. More than once he clasped his long locks in his hands. But he drew the line at actually tearing them.

"Misfortune!" he groaned. "Disaster! Ruin! All these are mine. Why did I ever agree to this insanity? Great is my sorrow this night. 'When sorrows come, they come not in single spies, but in battalions'—Shakespeare.

"It's all right, guv'nor—you needn't get the wind up," said Ashwood grinning. "We've sent the audience away pleased, so what does it matter? That's the main thing, isn't it? Those boys are as pleased as Punch. They've had their money's worth, anyhow."

"That's not the point, Steve," said Mr. Noggs. "I've taken their money, but what of my prestige? Has this misadventure done my theatre any good! Assuredly not. To-night's show was a joke. A jest. A mockery. Where was my judgment? Why did I allow this thing? 'O Judgment, thou art fled to brutish beast, and men have lost their reason'—Shakespeare. I am lost, Steve. My reputation is grounded in the dust!"

"You're exaggerating, guv'nor," said Ashwood, with concern. "Your reputation hasn't suffered. After all, these boys will only treat it as a joke——"

"There you have it!" interrupted Mr. Noggs, with a hollow laugh. "There you have it, Steve. A joke. What of my good name now? It has gone. 'He that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him, but makes me poor indeed'—Shakespeare. Oh, Othello, what true words, indeed!"

"Steady on, Mr. Noggs," said Nipper, stepping forward. "Handforth didn't mean to ruin the show, you know, and you needn't be afraid that the other fellows will make a laughing-stock of you."

They were standing at the rear of the tent, midway between the "stage-door" and Mr. Noggs' caravan. Reggie Pitt and Tommy Watson and a few other juniors came up, too.

"It is well to comfort me, for I need comfort," said Mr. Noggs sadly. "But how can you expect to perform the impossible? 'Comfort's in Heaven, and we are on the earth'—Shakespeare."

"You're taking it too seriously," smiled Nipper. "Anyhow, Mr. Noggs, you've had one full house, and we'll see what we can do to advertise your show in the right way. You don't mind if we take an interest in your theatre, do you? We want to see it booming, as it deserves."

"But the expense!" muttered Mr. Noggs. "I am not talking of money, sordid, gross money. I am talking of the expense in other ways. My standing, my reputation——"

"It hasn't suffered in the tiniest degree, Mr. Noggs," interrupted Nipper. "This show was a joke, I'll admit, but we were only laughing at Handforth. Didn't the audience sit tight when you were on the stage? Your good name is better than ever it was, sir. And we want you to let us help to set your show on the road to success."

Mr. Noggs lost some of his gloom.

"A noble cause, laddie," he admitted. "It pleases my ear. It warms my heart. But I am dubious. 'Can anyone remember when the times were not hard, and money not scarce'—Emerson. I shall continue to struggle on, for I am at heart an optimist."

"Then we'll help you, Mr. Noggs," said Reggie Pitt. "'Don't let us make imaginary evils, when you know we have so many real ones to encounter'—Goldsmith."

Mr. Noggs started.

"One of my favourite quotations," he said solemnly. "Apt—very apt. I will take heart, and look to the future with hope. You have already given me an earnest hint of your powers. Perchance your youthful influence will be for the good. I thank you."

"He's a good old boy," said Nipper, after they had bade him good-night. "And the next time we help, we've got to make it more serious. No more of Handforth's rot. We shall have to get up a wheeze to boost the show."

"Yes, and there's something rummy about it," said Pitt thoughtfully. "Why does everybody think it's rotten? There's something wrong with the advertising, or there's somebody giving old Noggs a bad name. It needs looking into."

"Well, the Remove's going to get busy," said Nipper. "And when the Remove starts on a thing it carries it through to the end."

A little later Handforth & Co. returned to St. Frank's—Handforth still more or less dazed by the recent happenings. He was preoccupied, too; his eyes gleamed, and his step was crisp.

"I have suspected it all along," he said confidentially. "I'm going to become a great actor. That's going to be my walk in life, my sons."

"But I thought you were planning to go into the detective business?" asked Church. "It's not my affair, of course——"

"Detectives are cheap compared to actors," said Handforth contemptuously. "I've come to the conclusion that any ass can be a detective. I'm going to make for the stage. That's my ambition!"

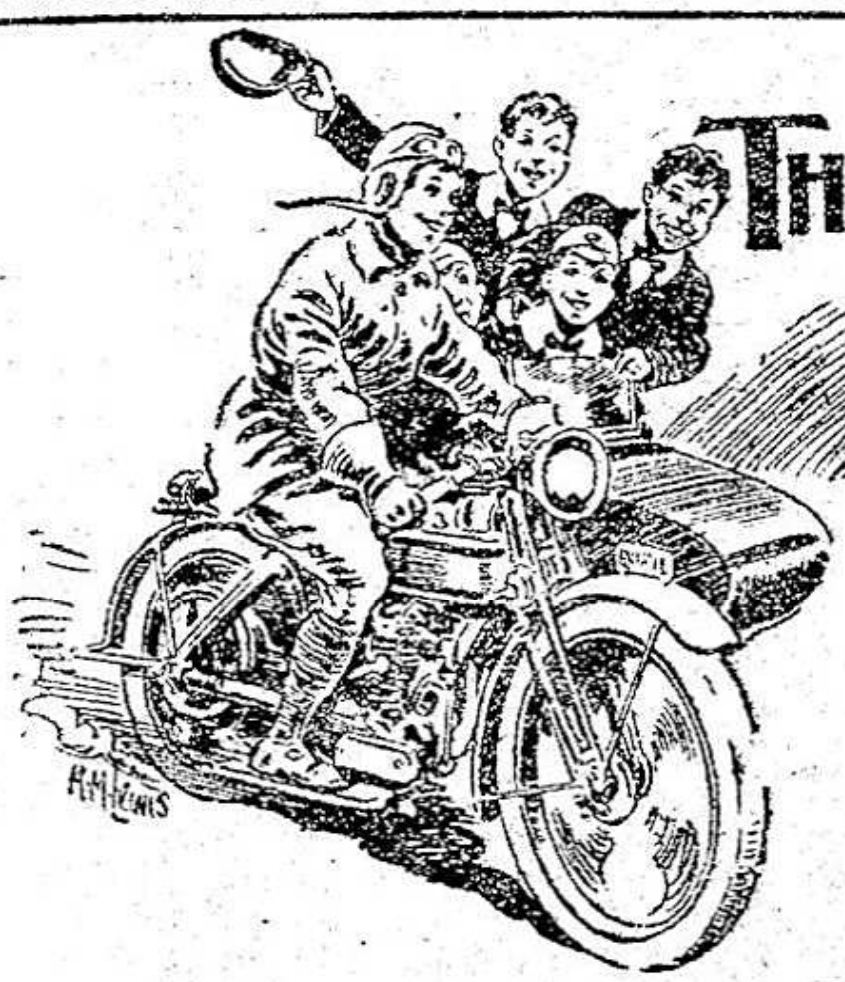
It was obvious that Handforth had been fired by the lure of the footlights, and Church and McClure knew better than to argue with him. If they had pointed out how hopeless the ambition was they might have visited the sanatorium for a day or two.

Handforth didn't seem to realise that his peculiar talent was on the comedy side. He had no chance whatever of becoming a great actor, but he didn't need to become a comedian. He was one already.

And in the near future he and the other St. Frank's juniors were to get more closely acquainted with the stage.

THE END.

Grand New Serial Just Started.



THE CALCROFT CASE.

Another Clever Story of Sexton Blake, Tinker and the Boys of Calcroft School.

By

SIDNEY DREW

FOR NEW READERS.

Tinker, the brilliant young assistant of Sexton Blake the world-famous detective, pays a surprise visit to Calcroft, his old school. During a motor-cycle spin with a school chum, Tinker witnesses a motor-car tragedy, in which the driver is killed by revolver shots by some unknown assailants. Subsequently, it is found that the murdered man was a bookmaker, named Aggsby, and probably the victim of a racecourse gang. Tinker returns to London with the startling suggestion that Aggsby was murdered in mistake for somebody else.

(Now read on.)

"BY gum, you're a queer one, Tinker," he said. "He didn't actually ask me to ask you, but he's still a bit rattled. You've puzzled him, as you puzzle most people who don't know you, and some who do. It's still sticking in his crop why you said they'd shot the wrong man."

"Then it had better stick," said Tinker. "I told him it was just an idea that came into my head at the time. It's one of the silly things I can't explain. When I discovered that the man was evidently a bookmaker on the run, and remembered the race-meeting at Floringdon, and what a race-gang will do when they have a grudge against a chap, I dropped the notion."

Dedgard was slow and stolid, but he was not without his share of shrewdness.

"But you didn't drop the notion," he went on. "It was still on the top of your head. Of course, you didn't mention it in your statement. It was only when you admitted searching the body that you let it out. How did you know the inspector had made up his mind? He hadn't told you."

"I just gave him credit for having a bit of commonsense," said Tinker. "He'd seen the body, and seen what I'd seen. A race-card for the day's meeting at Floringdon, race-slips with names of horses that ran the day before, mud-splashed trousers, and brand-new boots—why, a kid of ten years of age could nearly have guessed what it was all about!"

"When you saw what was in Aggsby's pockets you changed your mind," said Dedgard. "Never mind the inspector or his bothers, for he's only one of the things that are sent into this world to worry decent people like ourselves. I'm asking for my own sake. You really ought to be a bit flattered, for I'm putting this to you quite seriously. Were you talking through your hat when you said they'd got the wrong man, or weren't you?"

"You may think I have a few loose tiles on top, but that crazy idea that Aggsby was the wrong man keeps cropping up."

Sexton Blake, wearing a long white overall and with rubber gloves on his hands, came out of the laboratory and nodded to Dedgard.

"Tinker's broken out in a fresh place, Blake," said the detective from Scotland Yard. "He's trying to tell me that the Calcroft murder was a foozle, that they fired at and killed the wrong merchant."

"Don't believe him, guv'nor," said Tinker. "He's jumping on the truth with both feet. I did say so to the inspector at Calcroft when he was wanting me to tell him I'd searched Aggsby's pockets. I thought I'd like to give him a startler, and I did."

"Anyhow, you can't deny that you just told me that you've still got the same funny idea in your head."

"You didn't tell me, either, Tinker," said Sexton Blake. "If you've got an idea like that, my boy, you must have a reason for it."

"I'm not sure, guv'nor," said Tinker. "When I turned my flash-lamp on him he looked such a poor, insignificant chap it seemed impossible that anybody could want to murder him. I know, of course, that a man may look cheap and harmless and yet be a great rogue. And I did get that queer idea. Even after I'd searched him and found out his business, the thought still clung to me and I haven't got rid of it yet."

"Sort of second sight," said Dedgard, with a deep laugh. "You have broken out in a fresh place, Tinker."

"You're job is to collar the murderer, and then we shall know all about it," said Tinker. "When you're ready I'll run you down home on our 'bus and see what's happened to your wireless. Don't talk any more about the Calcroft murder, for I'm sick of it."

Tinker did not return till after eleven o'clock, and found that Mrs. Bardell had left his supper on the table. He had had supper at Dedgard's after putting the wireless to rights, and was thinking of turning in when he heard Sexton Blake's key in the lock.

"What made you get that notion about it being the wrong man, young 'un?" asked the private detective abruptly.

"Oh, my stars! I seem to have gone and done it properly," sighed Tinker. "First the inspector, then Dedgard, and now you. I just thought it."

"That's not very convincing."

"I know it isn't, guv'nor. On the face of it nobody would want to chase and kill a cheapjack little bookie like Aggsby unless they had a big grudge against him, and the only people likely to bear a grudge would be racing toughs. He had a fairly clean sheet, too, according to the evidence. Well, I can't help my thoughts. It seems a bit preposterous, for if Aggsby was shot in mistake, it means that somebody was waiting in ambush to shoot another man who was coming that way at about the same time."

"Rather a tall order, isn't it?" asked Sexton Blake.

"It is a tall order. Here's a copy of the plan the police had in court, and you know the place pretty well, guv'nor."

The private detective and his assistant bent over the plan together.

"We're guessing that Aggsby felt shy of the main-road and cut off it. We know he went to Aperling, for he bought the boots and hat there. Floringdon, where the races were, would be back on the table where the matchbox is," tracing the supposed route of the stolen car on the cloth with a wax vesta. "He'd have to turn south, get to Aperling, through Wisthorpe and Bolling, and then across Calcroft Green. That brings us on to the paper again. The road comes round by the pond into the Calcroft Road. Here's the school avenue on the right, and the Barren Tor Road nearly opposite on the left. There's a bit of rough stuff on the Tor side, with bushes and things, and room for a car to pull in. That's where the shooting came from."

"Did you see the flashes?"

"No, guv'nor, but I must have seen them if they'd fired from the other side, unless they'd fired through a thick hedge," answered Tinker. "Those are the Calcroft Woods, and the hedge is tall and dense. I couldn't go and look before the man Bindley sent arrived, but I had a quiet peep while I was waiting for Bindley. I'd heard no one run, and I'd heard no car. Certainly the car hadn't been there or I should have seen the tracks. There's a lot of thick grass and the rain was dripping from the trees, and I didn't go in to look for footprints. I didn't want to go back to the school with muddy boots or mess things up for the police. That car, if they had one, was a good way off, and the murderer or murderess shifted quietly, for it was jolly still and you can bet I was listening."

"No other car came along?"

"Not while I was there."

"Then if there's anything in your theory—I mean in that idea that came to you—the man they were waiting to murder did not turn up," said Sexton Blake.

"If there's anything in my idea, guv'nor, it means more," said Tinker, "but is there anything in it? I got it and I still have it. There's no ten mile limit or anything, and the ordinary driver who knew where he was going wouldn't have trickled along as Aggsby did. I'm sure he'd lost his way and had slowed down either to look for a signpost or to ask somebody where he was. A man must fancy himself a real crack at shooting if he fancies he can lie up in a hedge on a dark night and shoot the particular motorist he's after who's travelling twenty-five or thirty miles an hour."

"A pretty sound argument, young 'un."

"And that's why I think that Aggsby would be alive now and never have been fired at if he hadn't looked like pulling up."

Sexton Blake flicked a few specks of cigarette ash from the sleeve of his dress-shirt.

"According to your idea or notion or inspiration—or rather to follow it up, we have a pretty kettle of fish, Tinker," he said. "We have an assignation as well as an assassination. It seems highly melodramatic. The man was coming there to be shot, though naturally he had not been informed of that part of the plan. The unfortunate Aggsby arrives at the appointed place at the appointed time, slows down, and is immediately fired at."

"Sounds absolutely rotten, doesn't it?" said Tinker. "Why don't you call me a born imbecile and bonehead, and sit down and have a good laugh."

"I prefer facts to notions and ideas, but

I'm not laughing, for you may be right, my boy," said Sexton Blake. "You have talked some very sound sense. We'll take the police view that Aggsby was followed up by a gang in another car. We'll presume they saw the stolen car in Aperling. He was in the shop buying the boots. We know their methods. They wouldn't have waited in a ditch in the dark with every chance of missing him or killing the wrong man. They'd simply have forced him to pull up at some lonely part of the road by pulling their car across his, shot him dead and cleared off."

"Fact," agreed Tinker. "I'm jolly glad my notion isn't such pure rot. But who were those murderers after when they got Aggsby?"

"I wonder. At the pace he was going do you think they could have seen Aggsby's face?"

"It's hard to say, guv'nor. He wasn't wearing goggles, and there was an electric lamp over the speedometer, but whether it was off or on I don't know. If the lamp was on I think they could have seen him."

"Well, young 'un," said Sexton Blake, smiling. "I glanced at that charming newspaper you brought back with you, 'The Curlwall Advertiser' and something. There was a motorist on the Aperling-Calcroft road on the evening of the murder who failed to reach Calcroft if he ever intended to reach it. We both noticed that in his photographs he resembles the dead man."

Tinker gave a jump.

"My stars, guv'nor, that's a rouser," he cried. "The man who smashed up his car and was taken to Wisthorpe Hospital. The guy who lost his memory, climbed out of the window and bolted. What about it?"

Sexton Blake tapped the barometer, and then sat down in his favourite chair and stretched himself.

"I'll have a smoke and a think," he said. "The case has its interesting points. There is one thing that may spoil it. Dedgard's voice over the 'phone in the morning informing us triumphantly that he has arrested the murderers."

"And then he'll wake up, guv'nor," said Tinker. "Anyhow, while we're waiting for that I'm going to know more about that lost memory guy."

"I want a couple of bob out of it," said Bindley, flourishing his collecting book and pencil; "so shift off its neck a bit and let's get at its face."

CHAPTER VIII.

SEXTON BLAKE'S NEW POST.

"REALLY, Bindley," sighed Wilberforce Stott, blinking sorrowfully at two threepenny pieces and half a dozen coppers that lay in the palm of hi hand, "it is not that

I grudge the money, but that I am so frightfully impecunious. Though I do not do gymnastics, I am sure that Mr. Corby is quite a worthy person, but his departure is so inopportune. If he could only delay it for a week——"

Mr. Corby, who taught gymnastics to the boys of Calcroft, had suddenly been left enough money to bring him in a snug little income, and had decided to retire and give place to a younger man. Corby was very popular, and Bindley was collecting to buy him a little present from the juniors of Mr. Pycroft's house. He had just tapped Wilberforce Stott, hence the lamentations of Wilberforce.

"Don't take it to heart, old top," said good-natured Bindley. "I can't cut you out, for if your name wasn't on the list, some of 'em would think you mean. I've been broke myself and know what it feels like. I'll put you down as paid and stick in the bob for you, and when you handle some cash you can pay me back. Gee-hoo-piter! That's the little bounder I want. Stop him! Collar him, somebody!"

Without waiting to receive Stott's grateful thanks, Bindley dashed away. He had sighted Beilby, and to get a subscription out of Beilby was almost as difficult as to knock dust out of a jelly fish. Beilby knew all about the subscription, and that Bindley was collecting the money, so Bindley was the last person he wanted to meet until the list had been closed and the present purchased.

Beilby might have got clear away if he had swerved in time, but as he dashed down Mr. Pycroft's steps he collided with someone who was coming up. The impact was so great that they were both bowled over, and Beilby felt himself lying on the cold ground with the person he had knocked down sitting on his neck and pressing his stub nose hard against the gravel.

"What, you again, old bean?" cried Bindley, with a whoop of delight. "Delighted and all that. How do you find things?"

"Pretty bumpy," grinned Tinker. "I've found this, the thing I'm sitting on. Have you lost it?"

"I was chasing it," said Bindley, flourishing his collecting book and pencil. "I want a couple of bob out of it, so shift off its neck a bit and lets get at its face. Perhaps you'd better pick it up, old man, but hold it tight, for it's jolly slippery and slithery."

Tinker raised Beilby to his feet and held him firmly.

"Half a crown from you, my lad, for Corby's present," said Bindley. "Fork out and smile."

"Lemme go, you pirate," squealed Beilby, struggling. "It's blackmail. If you want to buy rotten presents to give to louts, pay for 'em yourself."

"You ought to give five bob," said Bindley, "but I'll let you off with half-a-crown. Pay up and smile."

"Shan't, shan't, shan't!" cried Beilby. "It's a dirty ramp, ramping and robbery. I haven't got half-a-crown. And lots of the kids are only giving bobs. Not that I've even got a bob," he added hastily. "You're a pack of thieves and cadgers, but you don't swindle me."

"Hi, Manners," shouted Bindley. "Here's old Tinker back, but we can't ask him to do it. Beilby won't weigh out for Corby."

Beilby kicked like a frantic mule and uttered piercing shrieks as Manners and Bindley turned him upside down and shook him. They shook a shower of coppers and small silver out of him, three watches, five penknives, a jack-knife, seven fountain pens, a silver watch chain, a flash lamp, several ends of wax candles, a folding camera, three silver pencil-cases, a magnifying glass, a catapult, four apples, a bag of sweets, a dummy revolver, one hard-boiled egg, a safety razor, two pocket combs and a cigarette holder.

"Thieves, thieves! Lemme go, lemme go!" squealed the victim. "Oh, me money, me money! Don't touch me money or I'll kill you. Thieves, thieves!"

"Beilby, two shillings, paid," said Bindley. "If I take more he'll have a pig-fit and die. Gosh! Look at the curiosity shop, and I'll bet there's as much again that hasn't fallen out. Gather 'em up, kid, before you miss something."

"I never saw such a collection in my life," said Tinker, as they turned away. "Where does he get 'em?"

"Oo-er!" said Manners. "What's that?"

It was the hard-boiled egg, hurled by the enraged Beilby. It skimmed over Pye's head and flattened itself against one of the pillars of the porch. Suddenly realising that a hard-boiled egg, and a very small one at that, could not be purchased for less than twopence in the tuck shop, Beilby almost wept with rage as he gathered up his belongings.

"Where does he get 'em?" said Bindley, answering Tinker's question. "He's always selling and buying and swapping. Mean little dog! He makes pounds and pounds every term. You may not believe it, kid, but if you wanted twenty quid and the security was good and you'd pay the greedy interest he wanted, Beilby would find you the cash. But why this gleeful return? What has fetched you along?"

"Still that old murder, eh? I notice they haven't arrested anybody yet," said Manners.

"Well, it is the murder, but don't shout about it," said Tinker, who knew he could trust the juniors. "The guv'nor has got a bit interested."

"Whoa! Hold easy, Baines minor," shouted Bindley. "Ease up!"

Bindley, in search of more cash, sprinted down the class-room corridor after the hurrying figure of Baines, who seemed to have gone deaf.

Few boys were more popular at Calcroft than Bindley, but since he had started collecting money everybody seemed eager to get away from him.

"What's happened to the gymnastic instructor, then?" inquired Tinker. "Corby, isn't it? Has he been sacked?"

"No, but he's getting a bit past it," said Manners. "Too old for the job, you know. They'd have pensioned him off at the end of the term or found him something easier. He's dropped into some cash and is retiring. With that and his pension he'll be O.K."

"Got anybody in his place?"

"I haven't heard of anybody," said Manners, "and I don't think they'll bother to fill the berth till next term. There are three or four chaps in the Sixth nearly as good at gym stuff as ever Corby was, and most likely they'll take turns to show us the stunts till they get a fresh instructor. As a matter of fact, they needn't go to the Sixth for talent. Fane or Bindley could do it as well as the best of 'em."

Tinker did not stay very long. He had left the car at the foot of the bridge. The dinner-bell was ringing, the only bell the hungry Calcroftians liked the sound of. Tinker turned out of the private road, crossed Calcroft Green, and stopped about a hundred yards below another bridge. On the bridge stood a little group of spectators, watching two constables in a boat. One policeman was at the oars and his companion was throwing a drag into the water, letting it sink to the bottom and then hauling it up again.

Sexton Blake was one of the spectators. He turned away when he saw Tinker, and went to meet him.

"I see they're still fishing, guv'nor," said Tinker. "They haven't had a bite yet, I suppose? Well, they're plucked 'uns."

"They'd given up, but some urchin came along with a tale that he'd seen a body in the water, and that started them again," said Sexton Blake. "I've made a few quiet inquiries. The search seems to have been very thorough."

"Queer," said Tinker. "If he'd been properly dressed he might have got away unnoticed, but a bare-footed chap wearing a suit of pyjamas ought to have caused a bit of a sensation. No memory, no money, and no boots or socks! What about the car?"

"We'll go and have a look at it, young 'un."

As they drove into Wisthorpe, Blake pointed to the roofs and chimneys of a building standing well back from the road in its own grounds.

"That's the cottage hospital," he said. "The Calder runs past the bottom of the garden, and it's fairly deep. It has been well dragged; but if he has been in the Calder all this time, I'm afraid we've come for nothing at all. I saw the house surgeon and the nurse, but I couldn't get at the man's clothes, for the police had taken them away. To see the car, we shall have to go to Aperling. You'd better look at the car."

"You didn't tell them at the hospital who you were?"

"There was no need to. Two or three other people were making inquiries, and they didn't even ask my name."

"As I've often said, it's amazing how many folks do get lost, mostly on purpose," said Tinker; "but it's a bit of a tough proposition for a bare-headed, bare-footed man in pyjamas to get lost, unless he made a hole in the water and is still sticking in the mud at the bottom. This looks a likely place for lunch. You order it, guv'nor, and I'll have a dekko at the smashed bus."

The motor-car stood on a lorry in the yard of the police-station with a rope across to keep people from going too near. No permission was necessary to view it, for the gate of the yard stood wide open. A constable in his shirtsleeves was in charge. The car was of a popular make, and thousands exactly like it were on the roads. The bonnet was crushed in and the front axle badly bent.

"What did he hit up against?" Tinker asked.

"A bag of feathers," replied the constable, weary of answering questions. "You haven't lost a car, have you?"

"If I had a car like that thing I'd lose it quick," said Tinker. "Funny you can't trace it. What about the licence and number?"

"Good-day, sir," said the constable, ignoring Tinker. "Don't often see you over this way, sir. I wish I was back at your end, sir, and that they'd never shifted me. There is a bit of life about Calcroft Town; but this place is absolutely dead."

From which Tinker gathered that the constable had been stationed at Calcroft, and that the person he addressed resided there. He was on horseback, and he had a pretty taste in horseflesh. He was a tall man with a slight stoop, dark hair that was turning grey, bright black eyes, and brilliantly white teeth that flashed when he spoke.

"Aperling isn't too cheerful," he said. "Is that the mysterious car?"

"Yes, Mr. Roath."

"And the driver is still missing?"

"In the Calder, sir," said the constable. "A queer river the Calder. If we don't find him, what's left of him will wash up on Sheldey Shallows next flood. We're still dragging, but we ain't hopeful, sir."

"Curious that you haven't been able to

trace the car or the identity of the man," said Roath.

"It's curious we haven't been able to trace the car, sir, more curious than the man," said the police-constable. "That may sound a bit funny, but it's true. It's a Barshire number-plate, but not the car. The real car with that number belongs to a lady, and she'd driven it down to Devonshire, so the number-plate was a fake. The licence was a fake, too, and if he'd been stopped for any reason by any kid who had only been in the force a week he'd have been spotted. Thank you, sir."

The constable accepted a cigar, and as Mr. Roath slipped the massive gold cigar-case back into his pocket Tinker left the yard. Everything else the constable could have told he knew already.

"So that's the chilled beef magnate," he thought. "Roath of Calcroft, and Roath of the Fifth is either his nephew or his son, I forget which—the chap who stuck Wilberforce Stott's head in the pail. He looks more British than young Roath."

"Good-morning!" said a familiar voice.

It was the inspector of police from Calcroft, a gentleman Tinker had not been very anxious to meet.

"Good-morning, inspector," he answered cheerfully. "A nice day? How's the Calcroft crime going?"

"It seems to have stopped going," said the inspector. "What's brought you down here? Are you interested in this other affair?"

"Oh, so-so!" said Tinker. "We're always interested in anything that's puzzling. How would you like to meet my guv'nor?"

"Is Mr. Sexton Blake here, too? I'd be delighted to meet him," said the inspector.

"Come along, then," said Tinker. "Don't mention his name too loudly, though," he added, "for the guv'nor doesn't like being stared at."

They crossed over to the hotel, and Tinker introduced the inspector to the famous private detective. When the waiter announced that lunch was ready the inspector refused Blake's invitation to share it with them, pleading an appointment.

"I suppose I did the right thing, guv'nor," said Tinker. "If I'd seen him coming along I'd have dodged him, but I didn't get the chance."

"Quite the right thing, young 'un; the only thing you could do," said Sexton Blake. "If we intend to follow this up he would soon have got to learn that you were about, and become suspicious. Who was the man on the bay horse?"

"Then you noticed him?"

"I noticed the horse first, and then I looked at the man. He rode into the yard of the police-station when you were there."

"I found out who he was, and that's about all," said Tinker. "He's a Mr. Roath, who has bought a big house and estate at Calcroft. He has a nephew or son at the school, in Pycroft's House, and the kids don't like him. He's a Fifth Form guy, and what they call a lodger. They told me Roath was in the frozen meat trade, and enormously rich. One of the Argentine crowd, I guess."

"Uruguay," said Sexton Blake. "Roath, Danarico and Guedella, if it's the same Roath. They're big people, and own enormous stocks of cattle, or did. I fancy the big meat combine bought them out last year for a huge figure. Try another cutlet, young 'un."

Tinker was silent for a minute or two.

"I didn't hear what you and the inspector were chinning about," he said, after the pause; "but if it was shop, has he got any idea of connecting the shooting at Calcroft with this business of the missing motorist?"

"I don't think he has, Tinker," answered Sexton Blake, "and I didn't prompt him. We're going on with this."

"I thought you would, guv'nor, and that's really why I fetched the inspector along, for we've got to be on the spot. We don't want to be advertised, and the best thing was to muzzle the inspector. You remember Corby, of Calcroft?"

"The gymnastic instructor," said Sexton Blake, nodding. "Oh, yes, I remember Corby!"

"He's retiring," said Tinker, "and they're not likely to appoint another instructor till next term."

"Quite a useful notion, young 'un," said Sexton Blake. "We'll attend to that."

"No explanations required, guv'nor?"

"Not one," replied the private detective with a laugh; "but the idea is quite good. Let us get along and settle it. Perhaps I had better go and settle it while you have another look round. A little brain-polishing from the learned Mr. Pycroft might do you good," he added with another laugh. "There's the time-table hanging on the wall behind you. When's the next train to Calcroft Town?"

"Three-fifteen, guv'nor."

"I'll leave you the car, then, and take a taxi to the school," said Sexton Blake. "I don't expect you to do much good, but chance your luck."

Pretty Rose Halcart was pouring out tea for her father, for Dr. Halcart was the headmaster of Calcroft School, when the butler announced a visitor.

"He didn't give me his name, sir," said the butler, extending a silver tray on which lay an envelope, "but this note, sir."

Dr. Halcart put on his gold-rimmed glasses, opened the envelope, and read the note. Rose saw him give a start of surprise.

"Show the gentleman into the library," he said to the butler. "Perhaps you had better show him in here, Roberts. Lay an extra cup."

"Who is it?" asked Rose. "What an odd thing to send in a note instead of a visiting-card."

The Head of Calcroft laid his finger on his lips.

"Someone who is applying for Corby's position," he said. "You will probably remember him, but don't mention his name in the butler's hearing. Roberts is almost a newcomer, and will not know him by sight, but he would recognise the name."

Three minutes later Sexton Blake was seated at the tea-table, chatting with the Head.

"Of course, Mr. Blake, you may have Corby's position if you wish it," said Dr. Halcart. "Your note does not explain very much, but it rather alarmed me. Corby left yesterday, and his rooms are quite at your disposal."

Rose, who had the good sense to know that the two gentlemen wished to talk in private, left them as soon as possible.

Presently Mr. Pycroft was summoned by telephone, and that learned but slightly absent-minded person came at his usual quick pace, wearing his mortar-board with the back to the front. Shortly after that a messenger rounded up Holgate, the captain of the school and Bargrave the vice-captain.

After the meeting in the headmaster's house, Holgate and Bargrave walked back to the class-room together.

"A puzzling sort of stunt this," said Bargrave. "Mr. Blake isn't working with the police, either; he told us so plainly."

"And that's the only thing he did tell us plainly," said the captain. "I wonder what he told the Head, for I notice he looked a bit worried. But this beastly thing can't have anything to do with us—with the school, I mean; that's impossible!"

"Absolutely impossible," Bargrave agreed. "Mr. Blake wants to be on the spot, so he must suspect somebody in the district. It's a fine idea, but I wonder how he found out that Corby had packed up?"

"Got you!" yelled a voice. "Stand and deliver! Nothing under five bob from seniors, and no giddy credit, and no change given."

Bindley, of Pycroft's, darted out of the cloisters armed with his collecting-book and pencil, for the present to Corby.

"How much have you got, you young brigand?" asked the captain.

"Oh, a dollar or two, and I shall have ten bob more when I've done with you," said Bindley.

Holgate and his chum paid.

"That's that!" said Bindley, with a grin. "I've worn out about seven pairs of boots chasing kids, and got myself hated like poison over this job. Reckoning five bob a pair for mending boots, this little stunt is going to cost me thirty-five shillings. And the names I've been called! Dear us! The sort of thing you get for being kind. Wow! More loot!"

Though he had stated that the list was closed, Bindley sighted young Crone, of Pycroft's, who had dodged him even longer than Beilby had managed to dodge him. Crone bolted like a rabbit with Bindley after him, and Bindley lost him at the foot of the bridge. Crone had evidently taken to the woods, which were so thick that only a blood-hound could have tracked him down. The only person in sight was the Fifth Former, Martin Roath.

"Seen young Crone, Roath?" asked Bindley, who was always ready to forgive and forget.

Roath stopped.

"I haven't," he said, "and I wouldn't know him by name if I had. I say, can't you make less row in your study? From the time prep's over till the dormitory bell rings, you're howling and roaring like a cage of wild beasts."

"Well, I suppose there is a bit of cause for grousing," said Bindley, grinning, "for we're not always as quiet as mice; but I don't see how you're going to mend it, unless you shift your quarters. You might lodge a complaint with Pycroft, or try corking up your ears. I'm afraid you're going to be jolly unlucky, Roath. One of our kids—Manners—is inclined to be a bit musical, and he's talking about teaching himself to play the trombone. Try corks, old son, or build yourself a padded-room."

Roath made no answer, but walked into the quadrangle with bent head. Mr. Pycroft was talking to a man who wore a well-fitting, grey dust-coat and velour hat. The two shook hands and parted. Bindley, who was sitting on the parapet of the bridge hoping that Crone would emerge from his hiding-place, uttered an astonished whistle and jumped down.

"Why, it's Mr. Sex——" he began.

Sexton Blake laughed.

"You're wrong, Bindley," he said, "completely mistaken. I'm Basil Strong, the new gymnastic instructor."

"Right-o!" said Bindley. "Jolly easy to make a mistake, isn't it, sir? My name's not Bindley, either, sir. I'm Napoleon Bonaparte."

"Of course," said Sexton Blake, with a twinkle in his eyes. "How foolish of me. I forget when we last met, whether it was at the battle of Waterloo or when you were crossing the Alps. That fellow, the Duke of Wellington, was rather nasty to you, wasn't he?"

Then they both laughed, and after giving the junior a friendly pat on the back, the private detective strode off.

(To be continued.)

CAREERS FOR BOYS

— By A. C. HORTH —

THE BRICKLAYING TRADE.

AN ANCIENT TRADE.

The work of the bricklayer includes all kinds of brick construction, and in its highest branches is highly skilled. It is a very old occupation; for bricks have been used for building since the earliest days of civilisation. Bricks have been made to a standard size for a very considerable period, and the methods employed in placing them in a definite order for the construction of walls date back to mediæval days. Buildings built of brick have stood the test of time, and are still by far the most popular form of construction.

A TRADE TERM AND ITS MEANING.

The arrangement of bricks so that the vertical joints in one row or course do not come exactly over or under a vertical joint in the next row or course, is known as bond, of which several kinds are in general use; the ordinary dwelling-house is usually built with English or Flemish bond. The bricklayer must not only know the various systems of bonds, but also their comparative values with regard to stability, economy, appearance, and purpose of the building. The skill of the bricklayer is required not only to lay the bricks to a true surface or a dead level, but to work out difficult corners without alteration of the system of bond.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ARCHES

The construction of arches, either in buildings to bridge the openings for windows and doors, or for drains, tunnels, and all kinds of ornamental brickwork, forms an important branch of the work of the bricklayer which cannot be carried on without a considerable amount of training. A certain amount of assistance is provided by wood and metal supports, but considerable accuracy of hand and eye is essential. It is not only necessary to know the various methods of placing the bricks to form an arch, but the bricklayer must have a sound knowledge of the stresses and strains that the brickwork has to bear. This calls for at least an elementary knowledge of the principles of statics and other branches of science.

NOT SO SIMPLE AS IT MAY APPEAR.

It will be seen that the work of the bricklayer is not merely that of placing rows of bricks one on the top of another, but it is work requiring a considerable amount of knowledge, of great hand skill, and a certain amount of artistic appreciation. The work is fairly hard, and requires a fair amount of strength, but it is well paid, especially in its higher branches. The work being mainly carried on out of doors, is healthy, and it is by no means monotonous.

PERIOD OF TRAINING.

The period of training or apprenticeship lasts from five to six years, and although the beginner would be expected to do heavier work than in many other skilled trades, it is not beyond the strength of the average healthy boy. As a rule, there is little specialised work in bricklaying, so that a boy, employed as a learner or apprentice, would be brought into contact with practically all the difficulties of his trade during his period of training.

ADVANTAGES OF CITY BOYS.

The boy living near a large city who decided on bricklaying as a career would generally be in a better position in obtaining a thorough knowledge of his trade than one living in the country, on account of the many facilities that are offered for attending classes in technical institutes. In these institutions it is possible to obtain instruction in the practical as well as in the theoretical side of brickwork. Certificates are generally issued to students who complete successfully a course of instruction extending over two or three years. The City and Guilds of London Institute hold an examination in Brickwork, divided into Grades 1 and 2, followed by a final examination, consisting of two parts, one dealing with the theoretical side and the other mainly with the practical side of the work.

OPPORTUNITIES NOW FAVOURABLE.

Recent statistics state that the number of bricklayers working in 1924 had dropped by 25,000 compared with 1914, and, in view of the efforts that are being made all over the country for increasing the number of houses, it will be a very long time before the trade of the bricklayer is overcrowded. The number of apprentices is far below the normal, and as the opportunities are now favourable, the strong and healthy boy who wishes to belong to a highly skilled trade,

with every prospect of continuous employment for very many years to come, should consider very seriously the trade of a bricklayer.

FUTURE PROSPECTS.

The tools required by the bricklayer consist mainly of the trowel, plumb-line, and level, and are comparatively inexpensive. The possibilities of advancement are bright, for not only can an efficient bricklayer aspire to become a foreman, but there are many openings as clerk of works. Many prosperous builders of the present day commenced as bricklayers, and, with the facilities that now abound for obtaining a complete knowledge of the trade, there is every reason to advise boys to enter this branch of the building trades.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

List of Organising Officers (continued)

1549. Joseph Kearney, 2, Griffiths Row, Catherine Street, Limerick; 1557. May Doris Clark (Miss), 21, Haven Lane, Ealing, W.5; 1573. Hilary O'Brien, 16, Newenham Street, Limerick; 1586. B. Coward, 271, Wandsworth Road, London, S.W.8; 1597 Maurice H. Easy, Elmdon, Saffron Walden; 1607. George Fred Strickett, 31, St. Helena Road, Rotherhithe, S.E.16; 1649. William Walter Brooks, 60, Whitehouse Street, Bedminster, Bristol; 1731, Sidney S. Botton, St. Veronica, Church Road, Hadleigh, Essex; 1783. Julian W. Fisher, 90, Gillespie Road, Highbury, N.5; 1831. William Fairclough, 3, Syddall Street, St. Helens, Lancs; 1881. Walter Dennis Buckingham, 10, Vicarage Road, West Green Road, Tottenham, N.15; 1889. David Chalmers, 7, Holmlands, Monkseaton, Northumberland; 1918. H. Lane, 76, Mabley Street, Homerton, E.9; 1922. Pat Worsley Malaghan, 27, St. Paul's Road, London, S.E.17; 1929. Sydney Charles O'Connor, 6, Duke Street, Aldgate, E.1; 1932. Frederick Prowse, 35, Leslie Road, E. Finchley, N.2; 1939. William James Smith, 42, Blackshaw Road, Tooting, London, S.W.17; 1952. Uriel Raymond Williams, "Kenilworth," Middle Road, Cwmbwrla, Swansea; 1970. Joseph Hayden, 31, Venue Street, Poplar, E.14; 2017. H. M. Sayer, Hartley Barn Farm, Clutton, near Bristol; 2045. John Harold Richmond, 2, The Willows, Chorltonville, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Manchester; 2065. Lovell Cole, 106, Kennington Park Road, London, S.E.11; 2076. Leslie Henshall, 38, Linacre Road, Litherland, Liverpool; 2190. Ernest Ash, 12, Sharp Street, Kirkdale, Liverpool; 2200. Reginald Gill, 3, Cottans Buildings, Mermaid Yard, Exeter; 2208. John Edward Kirkbright, 151, Rosebery Street, Moss Side, Manchester; 2210. Myles Lawlor, Main Street, Mountrath, Ireland; 2225. Charles Harding, 37, Prebendal Avenue, Southcourt, Aylesbury; 2269. Leslie Cavalier, 41, Keston Road, Tottenham, N.15; 2341. John Vincent, 107, Clanmore Street, Southfields, S.W.18; 2346. Olive Bass, 1, Promenade Terrace, Mumbles, Swansea; 2356. Albert Fittan, 19, New Lane, Winton, Manchester; 2368. Leonard Smith, 49, Meadow Lane, Nottingham; 2436. Michael Keys, 22, Tyrconnell Road, Inchicore, Dublin; 2456. Bernard Samuels, 1845, Ft. Troy Street, Chicago, Ill., U.S.A.; 2853. Edwin Earl, 43, Mill Street, Milton Regis, Kent; 2855. Geoffrey George Harris, 159, Whipps Cross Road, Leytonstone, E.11.

COLONIAL ORGANISING OFFICERS

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