THE AMATEUR ACTORS OF ST. FRANK'S— See Within !

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2D

STAGE-STRUCK ARCHIE!

Has The KNUT of The SCHOOL Lost His HEAD ?

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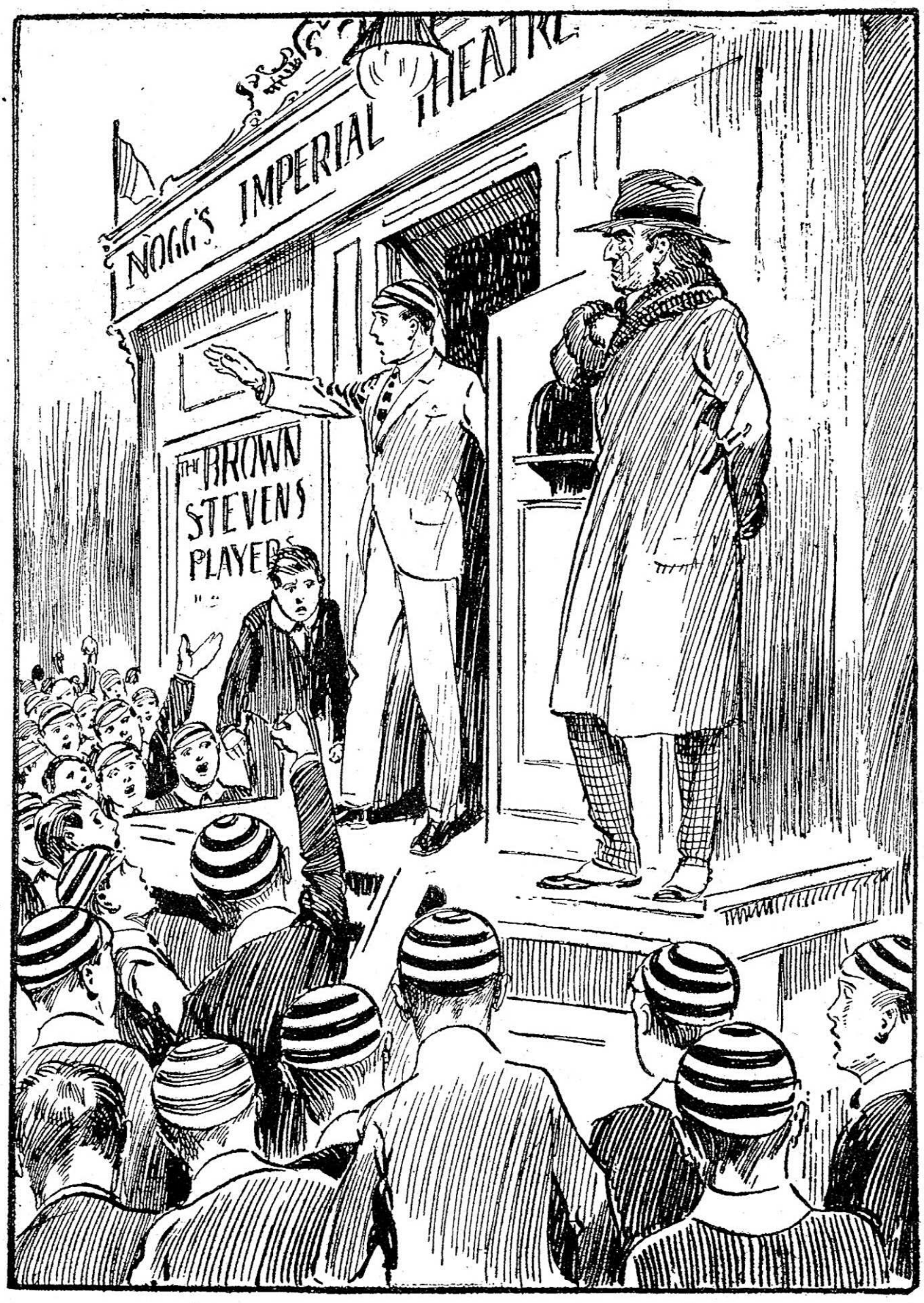
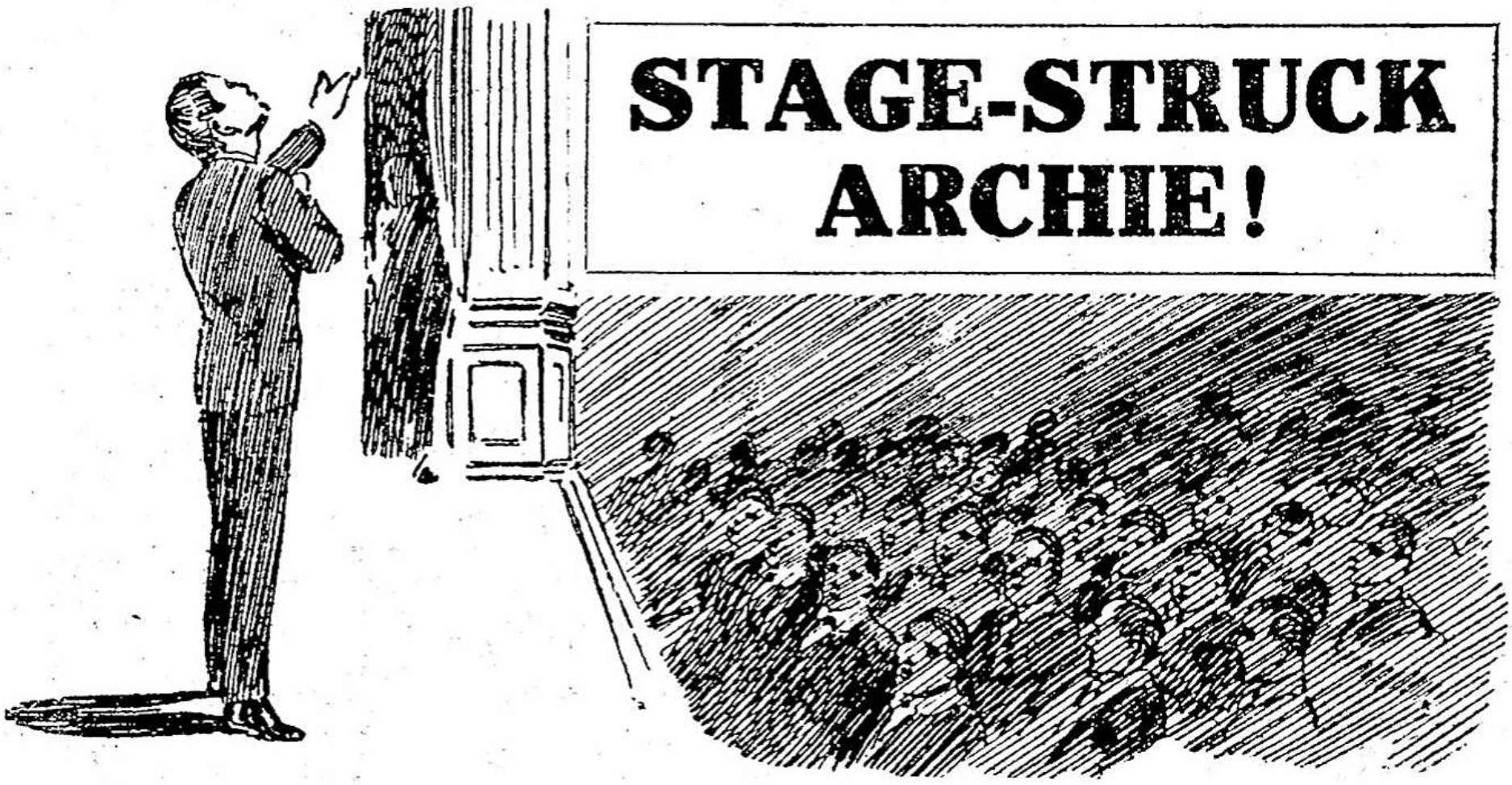


Browne emerged from the pay-box with some speed, and held up a warning hand. And there was something so compelling about his personality that the crowd was held in check.



STAGE-STRUCK ARCHIE!

Another Stunning Yarn of the Schoolboy Actors.

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER I.

TROUBLE IN BROWNE'S STUDY.

TEDDY LONG, the sneak of the Remove at St. Frank's, burst violently into the Junior Common-room of the Ancient House.

"Quick!" he gasped. "There's a fearful row in the Fifth!"

"Go away, you young ass!"

"But I tell you——"

"Clear off!"

Teddy Long came to a halt, and glared at the two groups of juniors who occupied the comfortable apartment. They were Handforth & Co., of Study D, and Nipper, Tregellis-West, and two or three West House fellows. Football seemed to be the chief subject under discussion, and when football was being discussed, Teddy Long's idle gossip was not tolerated.

It was nearly tea-time, and the juniors would soon be dispersing to their own studies, to partake of the favourite meal of the day. It was the favourite meal because the fellows enjoyed the free-and-easy liberty of their own dens.

"Look here, you chaps!" panted Teddy Long urgently. "This is something special, you know! Old Browne's having a terrific row with Stevens! They're going at it hammer-and-tongs!"

"Do you Ancient House fellows usually put up with this sort of thing?" asked Reggie Pitt, with a sigh. "Are we talking footer, or——"

"I'm not speaking to you West House bounders!" interrupted Long warmly. "There's an awful row going on in Browne's study——"

"I'll give you just one minute to clear out!" interrupted Handforth grimly. "My only hat! We've got to stand a few things, but we needn't stand this! See that, you little tittle-tattle?"

He held a huge fist in front of the startled Teddy.

"Cheese it, Handforth!" he protested. "Something ought to be done about this row! Browne and Stevens are fighting——"

"Time's up!" interrupted Handforth curtly. "You can either go decently, or on your neck! Now, my lad—scoot!"

"Look here, you chaps——"

Teddy made one last appeal, but he abandoned it. There was something very threatening about the leader of Study D, and Teddy Long took to his heels, and fled. He fled so speedily that he nearly crashed into De Valerie as the latter came down the passage.

"Steady, you young fathead!" said De Valerie. "Oh, so you're after him, Handy? That explains it! Heard the latest?"

"Have you brought some marvellous news?" asked Handforth sarcastically. "I just biffed Long out for gossiping!"

"You'd better not try and biff me out!" said De Valerie tartly. "I thought you might

like to know that Browne and Stevens are trying to murder one another as rapidly as they can."

"What?"

"Fact!" said De Valerie. "You never heard such a shindy! I was coming down the Fifth Form passage——"

"But—but this is Teddy Long's yarn!" interrupted Handforth, staring. "Have you heard this from him?"

"I haven't heard it from anybody. I've got my own sense to rely upon," replied De Valerie. "A chap can understand an ordinary row, but this seems to be a pretty serious business. I think we ought to go along and put a stop to it. It's so queer, too. Browne and Stevens are generally like long-lost brothers."

"All right—we'll go along," said Nipper briskly. "We can't have these Fifth-Formers scrapping with one another like this. It's up to the Remove to restore order. Come on! We'll make short work of it!"

About ten Removites crowded down the Fifth Form passage, and came to a halt outside the door of Browne's study. They looked at one another with growing surprise. There was certainly a row of gargantuan proportions taking place within that apartment.

William Napoleon Browne was the skipper of the Fifth—the most popular captain the Fifth had ever had. For, in spite of his free-and-easy ways, his sarcastic manner of speech, and his apparent laziness, he was actually the most go-ahead senior in the Ancient House.

Browne was a live wire. And he had an uncanny way of getting things done without exerting himself. As a general rule, he let the other fellows suffer all the exertion. But his was the brain behind the movement. And, as a skipper, his tact and his judgment were infallible.

"Better go in!" suggested Handforth.

Through the door came voices—loud, angry, impassioned voices. Browne and Stevens were shouting at one another in such unmistakable terms that the Removites became thoroughly alarmed.

Nipper didn't hesitate. He seized the handle of the door and turned it. But the door refused to budge. It was locked. Obviously the two seniors were determined to have no interruptions.

"Month after month you have ground me down!" Stevens was shouting, his voice vibrating with intense passion. "You hound! I have been fooled all this time! I've accepted you as a friend and a guide, but now I know you at your true worth!"

"You're wrong!" came Browne's frantic voice. "You don't know what you're saying! All this——"

"It's too late to make excuses now," interrupted Stevens fiercely. "The veil has been drawn from my eyes, and I see you as you really stand—a hideous thing! A ghastly monstrosity in human guise! I see you for the first time in my life—a repulsive creature, to be shunned as one would shun the plague! Get out of this room, or, by Heaven, I'll throw you out!"

"Great Scott!" muttered Nipper. "This is pretty steep, you know! I never knew that old Stevens had it in him."

"I don't believe that about Browne, either!" said Pitt. "He's not two-faced like that! Why, Browne's about the last fellow in the world I'd suspect of such a thing!"

"We'd better break the door down," said Handforth.

"Hush!" warned Tregellis-West. "Begad, this is frightful!"

They stood there, tense and anxious. It pained them to hear such an unholy row between Browne and Stevens.

"Somebody has been poisoning your mind," Browne was saying. "You can't keep this up, old man. It's that infernal Hutchinson! He's to blame for this misunderstanding——"

"Misunderstanding be hanged!" thundered Stevens. "No, you can't get over it like that! I've had the evidence—I've had the positive, concrete proof. It has been possible for you to delude me until now, but the limit has been reached. I see you as you are—and I am horrified!"

Stevens did not stop at this. He abused Browne in the most eloquent terms—amazing, flowing sentences which whipped out like a lash. And the scorn he put into them, the unutterable loathing, made the listening juniors feel uncomfortable.

Horace Stevens's very tone, the acute vibration in his voice, indicated the righteousness of his fury. Never before had the juniors heard such a vibrant, impassioned denunciation.

"We can't stand this any longer!" said Handforth at last. "It's too much! In another minute they'll be grabbing at one another's throats!"

"Let's come away!" suggested Nipper. "This isn't any ordinary dust-up, Handy. It would be absolutely indecent to butt in——"

"When I want your advice, Richard Hamilton, I'll ask for it!" interrupted Handforth, in his most dignified tones. "Do you think we want these two idiots arrested for manslaughter? They'll kill one another!"

"In that case, there'll be no need to arrest 'em!" said Reggie Pitt. "Dick's right, though—we can't interfere——"

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Opposition was the very thing to make Handforth act. He hammered upon the door of Browne's study with a crashing fist. The power of those blows echoed and re-echoed up and down the passage. And the quarrelling within the study came to an abrupt halt.

"What is this base interruption?" came Browne's voice, in plaintive tones. "Go! Whoever it is—go!"

"Open this door!" roared Handforth. "We're not going to have you fatheads murdering one another! Open this door!"

"Unfortunately, such a thing is impossible," replied Browne through the panels. "Brother Horace and myself are engaged upon a task of vivid interest. Be good enough to efface yourself."

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Handforth replied by hammering harder than ever. And this time the key turned in the lock, and the door was flung open. The juniors in the rear pressed forward, and the whole crowd surged into the apartment. They expected to see signs of destruction, but the study was in excellent order, and Browne and Stevens were both spruce and tidy. Stevens was certainly hot and panting, but otherwise there was nothing wrong with him.

"What's the row about?" demanded Handforth imperially.

"The row?" said Browne, with polite attention. "Has there been a row?"

"You—you Fifth Form ass!" snorted Handforth. "Weren't you and Stevens slanging one another like mad a minute ago? At least, Stevens was slanging you! I've never heard such language!"

"Not bad, I hope?" asked Brown concernedly.

"No, but it was jolly eloquent," said Handforth.

"A tribute, Brother Horace—a distinct tribute," said Browne triumphantly. "This will prove to you that my own opinion is unbiased. These youths, knowing nothing of the facts, are visibly quivering at the knees at the very sound of your impassioned tones. Pat yourself upon the back, brother, for you have done nobly. Seldom have I witnessed such a masterpiece."

Handforth stared blankly.

"But—but I don't catch on!" he ejaculated.

"Do you mean to say, Browne, that it was all spook?" asked Nipper, in astonishment. "Weren't you really having a row?"

Browne sighed.

"It is a pity—it is a thing which saddens my heart—when I realise that it is impossible to indulge in a little rehearsal without attracting the attention of the entire school."

"Rehearsal!" yelled the crowd.

"Such, little lads, is the case."

"You mean that old Stevens was only acting?" said Reggie Pitt. "By jingo! Then I can only say that it was a masterpiece! The amount of reality he got into his tone was staggering."

"An observation with which I agree not only heartily but unreservedly," replied Browne. "Brother Horace, be good enough to bow. Praise from Brother Pitt is praise indeed, since he is one of the shining lights of the Junior Dramatic Society. We are already famous."

CHAPTER II.

BROWNE IS DETERMINED.

DICK HAMILTON turned to the other juniors.

"Under the circs., I think we'd better fade away," he suggested gracefully. "I don't think we stand in a particularly brilliant light. Sorry, Browne. All sorts of apologies, Stevens. We'll leave you in peace."

"That's all right," said Stevens, grinning. "Only just a little run through. Not a rehearsal, you know. I'd no idea we'd attract such attention. Hope we didn't alarm anybody."

"My dear chap, we had the wind up properly," said Pitt. "We were beginning to think that Browne was a wolf in sheep's clothing. We were prepared to carry him away on a stretcher!"

Browne shook his head sadly.

"Alas, that such base thoughts could be engendered in connection with myself!" he sighed. "Is not my character known, then? Am I not famed throughout the length and breadth of the universe as a man of honour and integrity? Am I not celebrated as the strong, silent leader?"

Stevens chuckled.

"You mustn't take any notice of old Browne, you know," he put in. "He was only indulging in some of his usual foolery when he talked about my acting. It was nothing to write home about, goodness knows!"

"I'm satisfied with my own opinion, thanks," said Nipper. "Stevens, old man, you're a genius! You mustn't waste your talent on a Fifth-Form play! That speech of yours was marvellous!"

"Uncanny!" said Reggie Pitt. "We never dreamed that it was all spoof. I've heard a few actors in my time, but I've never heard anything better than that."

"Ah, but you missed the best of all!" said Browne. "The speech was good—but the emotional gestures were astounding. The expressions—the whole appearance of Brother Horace was an education in itself. He was no longer himself, but the embodiment of the man he portrayed. Without exaggeration, a masterpiece of art."

"Chuck it!" said Stevens, flushing. "Don't be a hopeless ass, Browne, old man. There's no need to fool me like this. You know as well as I do that I made an idiot of myself."

"Modesty is a great virtue, but mock modesty is a crime!" said Browne severely. "Away with this attitude, Brother Horace! You are well aware that your performance was great. But are we to suffer this invasion permanently?" he added, gazing at the juniors. "I trust there is still a feeling of propriety left in the school?"

"All right—we'll clear off," said Nipper.

"Hold on!" interrupted Handforth. "When's the play going to be produced? It sounded a jolly good one to me. If you're not keen on the part, Stevens, I don't mind taking it on——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Little boys should be seen and not heard!" said Browne, frowning. "And inquisitiveness is one of the vices I most deplore. With much regret, Brother Handforth, I must decline to broadcast my information at the moment."

Handforth snorted.

"If you think I want to hear anything about your rotten play, you've made a mistake!" he roared. "When it comes to acting, I don't need any recommendations! What about the show at Noggs' Theatre two days ago?"

"Ah, what about it?" said Browne. "The less we dwell upon that, the better. I have no wish to pain you, but I can truthfully say that it was, without any fear of contradiction, the most ghastly exhibition ever placed upon any stage."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth's expression was comical. But as he seemed inclined to adopt warlike tactics, the other Removites dragged him forcibly away. And Browne and Stevens were left in peace again. Browne closed the door, and beamed.

"And now, tea," he suggested. "A meagre meal for such a celebrity as yourself, Brother Horace. You deserve a banquet. What better proof do you now need? These departed youths honestly thought that you were slanging me in sober earnest. At the risk of repeating myself, I must describe it as a wonderful tribute."

Horace Stevens grunted.

"I never know how to take you, old man," he said plaintively. "I never know when you're spoofing, and when you're serious. Honestly, was I passable?"

Browne clutched at the air.

"You still doubt?" he asked. "Brother Horace, I am grieved. Without any attempt to joke—without any intention of deception—I declare that your performance was wonderful. And all the more wonderful considering that you have not actually rehearsed the part. I venture to predict that Mr. Noggs will stand on his head with joy."

"I'm not sure that I'll show him the play yet," said Stevens. "And I am certainly not going to show him any of my beastly acting. Why, he'd laugh at it. He'd pity me."

Browne opened the cupboard and produced the tea-things. He said nothing for a few minutes, and before long the meal was well on the way.

"If there is one quality you possess, Brother Horace, that quality is modesty," he exclaimed, as he cut the bread-and-butter. "I have come to the settled conclusion that you cannot help it. Therefore, it is my task to over-ride your decisions, and force you into action. Remember, I am your business manager. Bear that constantly in your mind, and all will be well. You must allow me to conduct the business with Mr. Noggs."

"I won't see him, I tell you," grunted Stevens.

"We shall descend upon Mr. Noggs immediately after tea," proceeded Browne calmly. "We shall give him the play, and we shall make definite arrangements for its production."

"But I refuse——"

"And that, Brother Horace, is the decree," interrupted Browne. "Say no more. We have decided. Be good enough to pass the jam."

Stevens gave it up, and passed the jam. He could never hope to oppose his own will to William Napoleon Browne's. When the latter made up his mind, he allowed no obstacles to bar his progress. He had an extraordinary way of enforcing his will.

Until recently, Browne had had no idea that his bosom chum had any particular ability. He had always regarded Stevens as a genial, cheerful, good-natured friend. Stevens was one of the best—the kind of friend a fellow could rely upon. But he had always struck Browne as being more or less of a duffer.

But without any warning—and mainly owing to Noggs' Imperial Theatre—Stevens had revealed the fact that his great ambition was to go on the stage. His father had been an actor before his death—and a playwright, too. Stevens, to clinch matters, had further indicated that he was endowed with his father's talent. But with the son it was rather more than talent—it seemed to Browne that it might develop into genius.

And the captain of the Fifth had promptly made up his mind to "push" Stevens for all he was worth. And the shrewd Browne was not the kind of fellow to associate himself with a possible failure. He knew exactly what he was doing. For Browne was brainy.

The whole school had been talking about Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs and his travelling theatre. The latter had been pitched outside Bellton for over a week—although it had originally planned to make a stay of two evenings only.

Some of the juniors had seen the performance, and had been impressed by the futility of the big scene in the last act—an important boxing-match. So Handforth and Lawrence had taken these parts for one evening.

The show, of course, had been reduced to a mere farce, but the theatre had been packed. And that, after all, was a very important point—for Mr. Noggs had been doing atrocious business for weeks. The old showman had gone nearly off his head with joy at the sight of the full house.

He was quite a character—a Shakespearean actor of the old school. And this tour had been singularly unlucky. No matter which town or village he visited, he met with failure. Poor business, empty benches, in-

creasing debts. It had been one continuous story of failure.

After the appearance of Handforth and Lawrence, however, local interest in the show had increased. And Mr. Noggs had promptly seized his opportunity, with the agility of a true showman. The very next night he had produced a different show, and the St. Frank's fellows had patronised it famously. And there was still another new play on for to-day.

But Browne was not interested in these. Stevens had raked out a play which his father had written some time before his death. Browne had read it—and he was impressed. He had seen Stevens acting—and he was startled.

"We shall see you in the West End yet, Brother Horace," he observed, as he poured himself out a cup of tea. "And I further venture to predict that we shall see you acting in your own play. For I gather that it is your sole property?"

"Well, mine and the mater's," said Stevens. "The mater's really, I suppose, by law. But she's never shown any interest in it."

"Without wishing to criticise your mater, I must express the view that her short-sightedness is colossal," declared Browne. "Instead of having this play produced, she allows you to bring it to school and hide it at the bottom of a trunk! A deplorable affair, brother."

"I've got all the parts, too—everything ready for production," said Stevens. "But it's no good, Browne—I've given up hope of ever seeing it produced. After all, it's no good pining for the moon!"

CHAPTER III.

MR. NOGGS DOESN'T MIND.

"FIREWORKS," said Browne, "would not come amiss at this juncture. What you need, Brother Horace, is a large bundle of fireworks at your rear. In other words, you need a rude awakening. You are dead. You are in want of ginger. I grieve to see it."

"But, look here, old man, it's all very well to talk like this," protested Stevens. "The play's good, I believe. In fact, I think it's the best thing my pater ever did."

"A masterpiece."

"I wish you were a real judge, Browne," said Stevens. "That's just the trouble, you're not. Don't forget that lots of West End managers have seen the play, and have turned it down."

"A fact which enhances its merit enormously."

"My pater hawked it about for months," continued Stevens. "And these were men who knew plays—men who dealt exclusively in plays. Surely their opinion is of some account?"

Browne nodded.

"I will grant that their opinion is of some account," he acknowledged. "But the word 'some' can be applied in many ways. In this instance, I should say that its meaning is insignificant. I may be jaundiced in my view, but I have no bursting admiration for the judgment of the West End theatre managers. No, Brother Horace, I maintain that this play is a masterpiece. Your assertion that I am no judge has wounded me. I am metaphorically bleeding."

"Sorry, old man!" smiled Stevens. "I didn't mean to hurt you. But you're so jolly enthusiastic, you know. I've got an awful fear that you've allowed your enthusiasm to blind your judgment. That's all. Yet you're generally right," he added thoughtfully. "You don't make many bloomers."

"And you may be sure that I shall achieve another triumph in connection with this play," declared William Napoleon Browne. "If you are ready, we will venture forth into the sunlit evening, and seek the eloquent Mr. Noggs. Leave him entirely in my hands, Brother Horace. He will be as putty in the hands of a glazier."

Stevens was still dubious, but he made no further protest.

And twenty minutes later the two seniors turned in at the gateway of a meadow near the village, and behind the somewhat garish structure of Mr. Noggs' Imperial Theatre. It was far more impressive at night-time, when the electric lights were gleaming—for the show carried its own power plant, and was entirely self-contained.

The actual theatre was a big tent—not a tent of the circus type, but a kind of glorified marquee, with an imposing frontal section, with steps on either side leading up to the pay-box. Lorries, covered with tarpaulins, were dotted here and there, and a few men were lounging about in the evening sunshine. These were the workmen and drivers and electricians. After a certain hour in the evening they converted themselves into actors. Everybody who worked for Mr. Noggs appeared on the stage at one time or another.

The proprietor himself lived in a well-appointed caravan. He was old-fashioned. He had been a travelling showman all his life—although his ability as a character actor should have taken him into the West End of London years since. But opportunity is a great thing—and Mr. Noggs had never had it. He was a talented actor—but an appalling business man. Perhaps this accounted for his remaining in one rut.

"This way, Brother Horace!" said Browne briskly. "Perchance we shall disturb the great man in the midst of an evening nap. Let us hope that he is a good-humoured waker."

But Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs was not asleep. When the two seniors entered his caravan, in response to a booming invitation

to "Come in!" the old actor was reclining in a comfortable easy-chair, enjoying his pipe. He never smoked his pipe in public. Nothing but a cigar would satisfy his dignity.

"Ah, this is a welcome entry!" he said, rising. "Make yourselves at home, young sirs. The space is limited, but it is comfortable. I beg of you to stand on no ceremony."

"Good-evening, Mr. Noggs!" said Stevens. "This is Browne's idea, you know—not mine. He wants to ask you a favour——"

"You will pardon me for interrupting, but I cannot allow that statement to pass," put in Browne. "Brother Stevens has made a grave mistake, Mr. Noggs. I am asking no favour. On the contrary, I am proposing to do you an excellent service."

"Have you boys not done me enough service already?" asked Mr. Noggs. "But proceed. Let me hear more before I make comment. It is only the fool who passes an opinion before knowing his facts."

Mr. Noggs was a big man, clean-shaven, but with long flowing hair. He had the word "showman" written all over him. And his slow, deliberate method of speech was in full keeping with his appearance.

"Here," said Browne, "we have a budding Irving, an embryo Garrick. Without any fear of contradiction, Brother Noggs, I can safely introduce Brother Stevens as one of the world's coming emotional actors."

"You howling ass!" said the world's coming emotional actor.

"A somewhat caustic comment, but we will let it pass," said Browne smoothly. "I beg of you, Brother Noggs, to take no serious notice of him. I have always regarded Brother Horace as a man of no vices. But I have recently discovered one besetting sin. His modesty is not merely extensive, but bordering on the criminal."

Mr. Noggs regarded Stevens with interest.

"What have we here?" he asked. "Genius in disguise? Let us hope he is prepared to suffer many disappointments. 'Your man of genius pays dearly for his distinction'—Emerson."

"Look here, Mr. Noggs, this idiot doesn't know what he is talking about!" said Stevens. gruffly. "He always speaks in that exaggerated way. If he does any more of it, I shall walk out."

"Let us, above all, keep our tempers," said Mr. Noggs. "You look a promising youth. You have the figure. You may, indeed, have the presence. Remember, modesty is a wonderful asset on the stage. 'Avoid shame, but do not seek glory; nothing so expensive as glory'—Sydney Smith."

"He won't seek glory, Brother Noggs," declared Browne. "He is far more likely to seek retirement. Once going, his powers are amazing. But it is an exhausting business to get him on the move. But to business. I should like to borrow your theatre," he added calmly.

And Noggs elevated his bushy eyebrows.

"A strange request—but proceed!" he said.

"Not permanently, of course—merely for an hour or two," continued Browne. "Brother Horace's father is dead. That is to be regretted, since he was obviously a man of strange talent. He has left a play behind him, and it is my intention to produce it. I desire your co-operation and support. Needless to add, I will provide all the actors and actresses."

Mr. Noggs was more surprised than ever.

"You shall have the theatre," he said, waving his hand generously. "For have I not a debt to pay? Do I not owe you boys a measure of gratitude? You have helped me in this benighted spot. 'Beggar that I am, I am poor even in thanks'—Shakespeare. I cannot find the words I would wish to utter."

"Then we can regard that as settled?" asked Browne. "Splendid! You will realise that this is quite a private affair. The public will not be admitted, at least, for the first performance. In the eloquent language of America, it will be a try-out."

"I should like to mention that it will be awkward if you encroach upon my own times," said Mr. Noggs. "Providing no such contretemps occurs, you are welcome to my theatre. But I warn you that this experiment may be a failure. Have I not had experience? 'Tis not in mortals to command success'—Addison."

Browne waved the possibility aside. He went into a long explanation of the play, and described Stevens' wonderful acting. But it was observed that Mr. Noggs revealed little enthusiasm.

He had heard of these amateurs before. He had come across youthful prodigies many times during the course of his career, and he had seldom found them worthy of the attention which their relatives or friends bestowed upon them. He had heard, also, of wonderful plays.

So he was scarcely to be blamed for doubting Browne's word. In his own mind he was convinced that the thing was a bubble. But after all, it was not his business.

He was willing to let the boys have his theatre for the production of their play, but he declined to help in the producing. He pleaded excess of work. He felt it safer to take no part in the proceedings.

"A rash decision, Brother Noggs," declared Browne. "A most unwise decision. Let me assure you that the thoughts in your mind at this moment are totally wrong. This play is no dud, and Brother Horace is no ordinary actor. As his manager, I am prepared to prove this. He is well trained, and at my command he will perform. Brother Horace, up!"

"Look here, you funny idiot——"

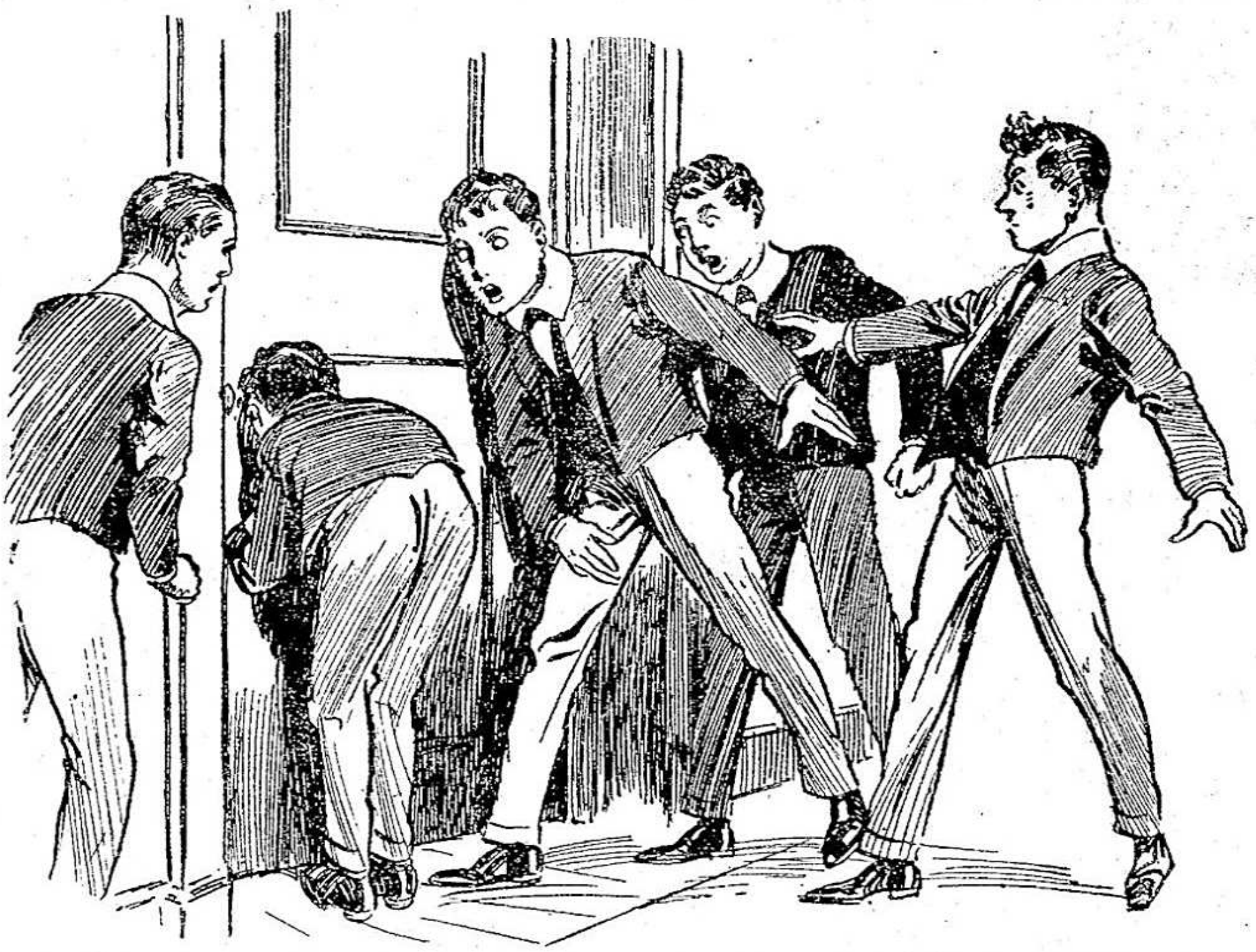
"Up!" commanded Browne sternly. "Take your position at the end of the chamber, and do your stuff."

I'm an actor. I've never been on the stage in my life!"

Browne was in no way upset.

"The stage does not realise what it has missed," he commented. "I perceive that I was somewhat tactless. Forgive me, Brother Horace, for the blunder. I merely want you to get upon your hind legs and act. Do the big speech that was so successful this afternoon."

"If the youth is reluctant, do not press him," said Mr. Noggs. "Another time.



"We'd better break the door down," said Handforth.
"Hush!" warned Tregellis-West. "Begad, this is frightful!"
They stood there, tense and anxious. It pained them to hear such an unholy row between Browne and Stevens.

CHAPTER IV.

STEVENS SPRINGS A SURPRISE.

HORACE STEVENS turned red.

"Confound it, Browne, what do you think I am?" he asked warmly. "A performing seal, or a trick dog, or something? I'm hanged if I'll make an ass of myself. I don't agree to the proposition, anyhow. It's all piffle to tell Mr. Noggs that Far better for him to show me when he is in the humour."

"If he is left to himself he will never be in the humour," declared Browne. "I must remind you, Brother Noggs, that he requires a constant prod. I am inclined to stand behind him with a pin."

Stevens took a lot of persuading, but at last he consented to deliver one or two speeches from his father's play. There was no necessity for him to refer to the script. He knew the play by heart, for he had always longed to act it on the stage.

And during the course of months he had secretly learned the words, the gestures, the whole business of the part. It had been his hobby to get alone in his bed-room and practice. But he had never believed that he would ever have a real chance.

He was a quiet fellow, and the rest of the Fifth had every reason to regard him as an easy-going senior of a very ordinary type. This was because he had never had the chance of shining in his own particular forte.

Mr. Noggs was a patient man, and he humoured Browne's whim. At least, he regarded it as a whim. He had every reason to be on good terms with the St. Frank's boys, since they had brought him such excellent business. So the least he could do was to show some kind of return.

But he made one alteration in the programme.

"Let us give the youth every chance," he suggested. "This is no place for such a demonstration as you indicate. The stage. Nothing but the stage will suffice. 'Let us, then, be up and doing, with a heart for any fate'—Longfellow."

Mr. Noggs led the way out of the caravan, and Stevens took the opportunity of pinching Browne's arm.

"You bounder!" he hissed. "You've let me in for something now. By Jove, I'll get even with you for this!"

Browne merely smiled.

"Base ingratitude, Brother Horace, but I freely forgive you," he said smoothly. "Wait until the performance is over. I venture to suggest that your tone will be somewhat changed. Alas, how sad it must be to have no knowledge of one's own talent! I, at least, am well aware of my own genius."

"You don't forget to tell everybody," grinned Stevens. "Hang it all, Browne. I can't very well be wild with you. I think you mean well. But it's a dirty trick to fool old Noggs like that."

"I am not fooling Noggs; but you are fooling yourself," replied Browne.

They went into the theatre, and the lights were switched on. Mr. Noggs was somewhat whimsical. He thought it would be an excellent plan to expose this upstart for what he was really worth. He didn't blame Stevens, for Stevens had clearly proved that he was an unwilling factor. But Mr. Noggs wanted to take a gentle rise out of Browne.

It was for this reason that he had suggested the stage.

Nothing could be more deadening to an amateur than a cold theatre, an empty auditorium, a bare, barren stage. Amid such surroundings as these this budding Irving would soon come a cropper. And the sooner the better. It hurt Mr. Noggs to encourage a hopeless case.

"Proceed," he said with dignity. "Climb upon the stage, young man, and let me hear your words. I will watch carefully. I will give you my studied opinion. But do not display anger if my judgment is harsh. I am no flatterer. 'Tis an old maxim in the schools that flattery is the food of fools'—Swift. So be warned."

Stevens climbed upon the stage and looked at Browne helplessly. This was much more than he had bargained for. Browne appeared to be quite callous. He merely waved his hand, and advised his chum to get on with it.

Mr. Noggs and Browne settled themselves in two of the fifth row stalls, and waited. Stevens stood up there on the stage, the footlights playing upon him, and adding to his discomfiture. He felt a hopeless idiot, as Mr. Noggs had anticipated. He felt unable to say a word. Never in his life had he dreamed that he would experience these sensations when facing the footlights.

Browne said nothing. He waited for Stevens to commence with the utmost confidence. There was indeed something rather quaint in the situation. For while Stevens, the would-be actor, was literally in a blue funk, William Napoleon Browne was as cool as ice, supremely confident in the outcome of this experiment.

Mr. Noggs coughed. He felt that some sort of hint was necessary. For Horace Stevens was standing up there like a lunatic, all hands and feet. In every possible way he revealed his inexperience. But Browne never turned a hair. He had no reason to turn a hair. He knew.

And at last Stevens commenced—haltingly, mumblingly.

He chose the big scene of his father's play. It wasn't the scene which required the greatest emotional acting, but it was the longest, the one where he stood upon the stage, making an impassioned speech of anger. It was a favourite of his. For he regarded this play in a loving fashion, and there were parts of it which he particularly loved.

Mr. Andy Noggs took a deep breath as he sat there in the empty stalls. This sort of thing was painful to him. It grieved him. He decided to take Browne aside afterwards and point out the cruelty of this thoughtless act.

But at this point Mr. Noggs began to pay more attention.

Stevens was not quite so halting. He was speaking more freely, with a greater confidence. And with every moment his self-consciousness grew less. Mr. Noggs and Browne had become a blur, the whole auditorium was a mere space. Stevens didn't quite know whether it was filled or empty.

And then it ceased to be even a space. It became nothing. Mr. Noggs and Browne vanished. The footlights disappeared. Stevens found himself living in the actual scene portrayed in his father's play. And it was here that he revealed his genius as a true actor. He forgot where he was, and threw himself into his part so thoroughly that for the time being he BECAME the individual he represented.

"By the shade of Sheridan!" breathed Mr. Noggs, opening his eyes. "Is this boy talented, after all?"

"Wait!" breathed Browne. "I urge you to wait!"

Stevens continued. By this time he had lost every atom of his awkwardness. He had acted this scene, privately, so many times that he was familiar with every word and every gesture. He threw himself into the play with all his soul.

The test was a severe one, a terrible one.

But this mere boy of eighteen overcame the drawbacks. Absolutely alone, without any audience to play upon, without any stage support, he delivered that speech with overwhelming success. His gestures were superb, his expressions remarkable. Even his voice, untrained as it was, contained such inflexions and cadences that Mr. Noggs sat there, amazed.

Now and again William Napoleon Browne stole a glance at the old actor. He was satisfied. Mr. Noggs, too, was unaware of his surroundings. He was caught in the magic of Horace Stevens' personality. He was enthralled to the core. And then at last Stevens finished.

He came back to earth; he knew that he was once again upon this cold stage. And his awkwardness returned. Flushed, breathless, he stood there for a moment. Then he leapt over the footlights, and joined the others.

"Sorry, Mr. Noggs," he apologised. "Hope I wasn't too long. It was Browne's fault."

Mr. Noggs was regarding him dazedly. He made no comment. To tell the truth, Mr. Noggs was speechless for the moment.

"Splendid, Brother Horace!" murmured Browne. "Even I sit here in a condition of amazement. Fortunately, I am not dumb. I can express my appreciation of your wondrous effort."

"Dumb?" grunted Stevens. "You wouldn't be dumb if you were gagged! I'll bet you'd find a way of speaking! I'm not surprised that Mr. Noggs is knocked over. I've simply made an ass of myself!"

Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs rose to his feet.

"Let me look at you!" he said, in a suppressed voice. "Let me study you closely. 'I would applaud thee to the very echo, that should applaud again.'—Shakespeare. Boy, I am a man of meagre words. Upon the stage I can speak. Off the stage I am as other mortals. What can I say to express my feelings, my sensations, my stupefaction?"

"I am sorry, Mr. Noggs——"

"Young fool!" boomed Mr. Noggs. "Let there be no more of this self-depreciation. Don't you know that you are a genius?"

"Splendid!" murmured Browne, beaming.

"Oh, chuck it!" said Stevens, flushing to the roots of his hair.

"You are a marvel!" shouted Mr. Noggs, his enthusiasm welling forth in a great burst. "Boy, you are a born actor! You are a prodigy! Never have I seen such expressions—such control! With experience, you will become a veritable master of your art!"

CHAPTER V.

BROWNE'S LITTLE WAY.

WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE stood there, a genial smile on his face, a calm light of confidence in his eyes. From the very first he had known that this would happen, and he was consequently cool.

"Excellent, in its way," he admitted. "But Brother Horace can do better. This is merely a slight example of his prowess, Brother Noggs. Without fear of contradiction, I will state that this play—with Brother Horace in the leading part—will create a sensation throughout the civilised theatrical world."

"A subtle expression," nodded Mr. Noggs. "Assuredly, we can let the uncivilised theatrical world look after itself. But this boy! This young genius! I cannot let this production go on without having a hand in it. Young man, you must let me help in this enterprise."

Browne nodded.

"That, of course, was my original intention," he explained. "But I did not press you, Brother Noggs. I thought it wiser to let you see for yourself."

"I owe you an apology," said Mr. Noggs graciously. "Not half an hour since, I was inclined to scorn you. I was impatient—irritated. But now I am beginning to realise that you are a young man of genius yourself. But your talents lie in another direction."

Browne smiled calmly.

"We need not dwell upon my own peculiar talents," he said. "Do they not speak for themselves? Let us come to a decision regarding Brother Horace. I will inform you that I am his business manager—his guiding brain. He has no time to bother with the sordid details of business. It is for me to attend to such matters."

Stevens was flushed and inwardly excited.

"But—but you don't mean it, Mr. Noggs?" he asked blankly.

"Every word, ladkins—every word!" said Mr. Noggs. "Unfortunately, my powers of eloquence are limited. 'I am no orator, as Brutus is, but as you know me all, a plain blunt man.'—Shakespeare. My boy, your performance was nothing short of marvellous. I wish I could put my appreciation into words. 'It is but poor eloquence which only shows that the orator can talk.'—Reynolds."

"You honestly think I stand a chance?" asked Stevens eagerly. "This means a lot to me, Mr. Noggs. I don't want you to raise my hopes for nothing. I haven't taken any notice of Browne——"

"A deadly insult, but I can do nothing," murmured Browne.

"You should have heeded your friend's words," said Mr. Noggs. "He merely spoke the truth when he described you as an actor of rare ability. Let him continue to guide you. You cannot do better than place your faith in his judgment."

"Then it wasn't merely spoof?" asked Stevens.

He couldn't believe that he had really created an impression. The fact was, he had been so carried away by his emotion that he had no real estimate of his own abilities. He couldn't remember what had actually happened on the stage.

And he had to thank Browne for everything.

Left to himself, Stevens would have done nothing. Browne was the force behind this schoolboy actor. Stevens had no initiative of his own, and Browne was quick to understand this. Without any guiding hand, Stevens would never get anywhere.

So there was something more than bombast in Browne's decision to appoint himself business manager. It was necessary, too, for him to order Stevens about relentlessly. Without this treatment, Stevens would jib.

Indeed, Browne regarded his protege as a kind of performing dog, and he claimed a great deal of the credit—just as though he had taught Stevens his tricks.

"We shall hold the first rehearsal to-morrow," said Browne firmly. "Be prepared, Brother Noggs, for an invasion in mid-afternoon. You can rely upon us not to interfere with your own arrangements."

"But to-morrow we move to Edgemore," said Mr. Noggs. "We cannot delay it further. Barton, my manager, is impatient."

"Then let it be Edgemore," said Browne. "Who are we to let such trifles hinder us? Edgemore is merely a mile or two away, and we shall have no difficulty in locating your palatial Temple of Thespis."

Mr. Noggs was quite agreeable—and he urged Browne to let him supervise the production. This, however, Browne refused. He would welcome Mr. Noggs' advice, but he insisted upon producing the play himself.

And there was something about Browne which brooked of no argument. Mr. Noggs was only too gratified to hear that he might be allowed the chance of presenting Stevens, at a later date, before the public.

And having come to these arrangements, the two Fifth-Formers left. Stevens was in a kind of maze—he couldn't quite realise that his father's play was on the verge of being produced at last. True, it would only be an amateur production—but even this took on a glorified glamour in Stevens' mind.

"You're a bit of a wonder, Browne," he said, as they walked up the lane. "Hanged if I know how you do it, old man! Once you start on a thing, you're like a volcano. Even now I'm all in a maze."

"Remain in it, Brother Horace—for in that condition you will be less troublesome," said Browne calmly. "You are merely required to act—not to produce. Leave everything to me."

"But you promised old Noggs that you'd provide the company," protested Stevens. "Where on earth can you get one?"

"There is talent everywhere," replied Browne. "'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.'—Shakespeare. Tut-tut! I am unconsciously taking a leaf out of Brother Noggs' book. It merely proves how apt we are to mimic one another. A fault to be corrected."

"That's not an answer to my question," said Stevens. "Where are you going to get your company?"

"Why go far afield?" asked Browne. "Why tap distant springs when a veritable river flows at our feet? It has been said on the highest authority that the Remove bristles with histrionic talent."

"Those juniors!" said Stevens, aghast.

"Why not?"

"But they can't act in this play!" snorted Stevens. "Don't be an ass, Browne! It's not a kid's play—it's a serious——"

"Given the correct amount of tuition, I venture to suggest that these youthful spirits will perform wonders," interrupted Browne. "And you must always remember that they will merely be in support of you. Anything, Brother Horace, to get the thing staged. Later, we can engage a professional company, and float the play in a dignified way."

Stevens began to appreciate the nature of the situation. Browne's main object, apparently, was to provide a vehicle for Horace Stevens' ability. It didn't matter much about the other members of the company, so long as the play was presented. Stevens, at least, would be able to show his own talent.

And a few minutes later Browne proved himself to be a fellow of resource and speed.

"Then what about the ladies?" asked Stevens. "We want the play to be fairly presentable, old man. We can't have those

kids acting the part of women. There's a limit, you know."

"Cast all such fears from your mind, brother," said Browne. "Do I not perceive several sprightly young things tripping towards us at this very moment? Watch closely, and you will see me work the oracle."

Stevens stared. A group of girls were coming down the lane on their bicycles—six of the young ladies from the Moor View School. They were Irene Manners & Co., Ena Handforth, Winnie Pitt, and Mary Summers. The latter was not actually a Moor View girl yet. She was the niece of Mr. Beverley Stokes, the Housemaster of the West House. And she had been staying with her aunt and uncle for some weeks. Indeed, she had taken an active interest in the recent rebellion.

"Halt, ladies!" called Browne, planting his lanky figure in the centre of the road, and holding out his hands. "Apply the brakes, and dismount. There is news. I might even say there is glad news."

The girls jumped off, and Browne and Stevens doffed their hats.

"I'll bet it's nothing," said Doris Berkeley pointedly. "Just when we're in such a hurry, too! You know what a gasbag old Browne is."

"He'd better look sharp, anyhow," said Irene.

Browne appeared pained.

"What have I done to deserve this evil reputation?" he asked plaintively. "But enough! Who am I that I should hope to hear logic from feminine lips? What manner of optimist should I be to expect reason?"

"What a nerve!" said Mary Summers indignantly.

"I would remind you, Sister Mary, that I rely upon my nerve to carry me through life," said Browne smoothly. "Never has it failed me—never has it landed me in the ox-tail. At the present moment, I am producing a play. I require three promising young actresses."

"A play!" exclaimed the girls, in one voice.

"The first rehearsal will be to-morrow night, in Noggs' Imperial Theatre at Edgemore," continued Browne. "When I say to-morrow night, I mean to-morrow afternoon—not later than four o'clock. No, three o'clock. I must remember that ladies are never punctual. Let the hour be three o'clock."

"You're spoofing us!" said Doris warmly.

"I shall require you, Sister Doris, to take the part of the vivacious young debutante," proceeded Browne. "Without casting any reflection upon your sweet looks, Sister Irene, I rather fancy you for the middle-aged matron."

"Cheek!" cried Irene hotly.

"And you, Sister Ena, will doubtless make an excellent villainess. To be more exact, a vamp. It is, by the way, a part which requires the utmost skill."

"You're mad!" said Ena Handforth. "You needn't put me down on your list, you chump! I wouldn't appear in your silly old play for a pension."

Browne waved his hand.

"And remember—three o'clock," he said calmly. "I wish I had parts for all of you—but the cast is not a big one. I have no doubt I shall have my hands full in dealing with three. In the drawing-room scene it may be necessary to engage a few more ladies to walk on—but that can be left until after the first rehearsal. Adieu! Be late at your peril!"

He raised his hat, and strode on. Stevens, flustered, followed. And the Moor View girls gazed after them in a somewhat speechless condition.

CHAPTER VI.

CHOOSING THE CAST.

"THEY'LL never come, Browne—so you needn't fool yourself," said Stevens, as they continued their way to the school. "You can't expect them to, either. Not one of them agreed."

Browne smiled.

"It was entirely unnecessary for us to waste time," he replied. "Have no fear, Brother Horace. The young ladies will turn up, en bloc, at to-morrow afternoon's rehearsal."

"Don't you believe it."

"Nothing is more certain," said Browne blandly. "It would have been a fatal mistake to enter into details. We have aroused their curiosity. And tell me of a more certain way to intrigue the feminine mind! I can assure you, brother, that we shall have difficulty in controlling the crowd."

Browne seemed so certain, that Stevens began to think so, too. And there was undoubtedly something in the Fifth Form captain's method. There was every chance that the girls would turn up.

Arriving at the school, Browne swept through the Remove like a vacuum cleaner. Practically all the juniors were at tea, but he went from study to study, gathering the members of his cast as he went along.

He seemed to know just the right types to choose. It was a difficult and delicate job, for there were only a comparatively few fellows who were known to be talented as amateur actors.

Dick Hamilton was one of the first to be caught in the net. In Study C, Browne roped him in, and considered for a moment over Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

"No, I hardly think so," he said at last. "I regret, Brother Montie, that you are unsuitable."

"But I haven't said I'll accept any part yet," put in Nipper. "I want to know what this play is. You can't rush us into a pig in a poke, my son!"

"I am merely collecting the cast at the moment," replied Browne. "You will understand that these selections are more or less tentative. The final choice will be made after the first rehearsal. So be at Noggs' Theatre to-morrow afternoon at three."

"But even now you haven't told us——"

"Time is precious, Brother Nipper—my time especially," interrupted Browne. "With regard to you, Brother Montie, I am afraid you look too intelligent. You are not exactly suitable for the character. It will have to be Brother Glenthorne. I rather fancy he possesses just that type of inanity which will fit the part I have in mind."

"But Archie's intelligent enough, in spite of his looks," put in Nipper. "You'd better go to the West House, and collar Lord Pippinton."

"With all due respects, I hesitate to take your advice, Brother Hamilton," said Browne, shaking his head. "Brother Pippy, I fear, would take from now until nineteen-thirty-six to thoroughly master his part. And we cannot wait until then."

Browne passed out, without waiting for Nipper to ask too many questions. Then he went along to Study E, and routed out Archie Glenthorne.

"But I mean to say, good gad!" ejaculated Archie, after Browne had shot him the news. "Absolutely not! The old tissues wilt at the very thought, laddie! Kindly go elsewhere."

"Much as I hate to disappoint you, the selection has already been made," said Browne. "Therefore, Brother Archie, you will be at Noggs' Theatre to-morrow at three p.m. Enough!"

"Odds speed and lightning!" said Archie breathlessly. "But look here, dash it! I mean to say, dash it, look here! What about Phipps? I've got to consult the dear old vegetable before I can consent to this foul proposition. I may have some appointments."

"They can wait."

"But, gadzooks, they come before yours."

"Nothing comes before mine!" interrupted Browne firmly. "When I say you must be on the spot at three p.m., Brother Archie, you must be on the spot at three p.m. There is no other way of looking at it."

Archie suddenly started.

"Odds gad!" he burst out. "The old memory has just slipped into gear, dash it! Laddie, it's impossible! I've got an appointment to-morrow afternoon that absolutely can't be missed. So kindly produce your dashed indiarubber, and erase my name! Absolutely! And that, I mean, is absolutely that!"

"May I inquire the nature of this interesting appointment?" asked the captain of the Fifth. "Your tailor, perhaps? He can wait. Leave it to me, Brother Archie. I will interview the gentleman——"

"It is not my tailor, dash you!"

"Then your hatter?" said William Napoleon. "A serf of even less importance. A mere note will be sufficient——"

"And not my hatter, either!" interrupted Archie coldly. "The appointment, dear old volcano, is with a lady. So I trust you will appreciate the utter impossibility——"

"May I know the name of this damsel?"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Marjorie Temple. I mean, isn't this a somewhat poisonous inquisition, old lad? I mean, I don't see why I should exhaust the old vocal department to please you."

Browne patted Archie on the back.

"Remember," he said briskly, "three o'clock to-morrow afternoon. Noggs' Theatre, at Edgemore."

"But, you frightful fright, I absolutely decline——"

"Marjorie will be there," said Browne kindly.

He walked out, and strode with long steps to the West House. Here he secured Reggie Pitt and Nicodemus Trotwood. He explained no more to them than to the others. But his knowledge of human nature was great. He hadn't the slightest fear that there would be any absentees on the morrow's afternoon.

"We have done well, Brother Horace," he said when he entered his own study. "Everything is in train for the preliminary production. We have our cast cut and dried with the exception of one part—the comedian. I hesitate to select this important rôle."

"Important?" repeated Stevens. "There's no comedian's part in the play, you ass!"

"Alas! And you are supposed to know it by heart!" sighed Browne. "What of the noisy gentleman who appears in the second act?"

"The fellow who blusters in for five minutes, and makes a bit of fun with Algy?"

"That is the gentleman," agreed Browne. "I may mention that Brother Glenthorne has consented, somewhat reluctantly, to take on the part of Algy. He does not actually know this, but all will be well."

"But that's no comedian's part," said Stevens. "Anybody will do for him. And I'm not sure about Archie, either. Do you think he's got enough acting ability?"

"He requires none," replied Browne calmly. "It is for that reason that I have selected him. Algy, in the play, is a silly ass, and it will merely be necessary for Brother Glenthorne to be his natural self. With regard to the blustering gentleman, you are wrong in assuming that it is not a comedian's part. It may be a small part, but it is important. A poor actor would ruin the smooth running of the play at that juncture."

The door burst open, and Handforth strode in.

"What's this about a play?" he demanded grimly.

Browne looked up and elevated his eyebrows.

"Come in, Brother Handforth," he invited. "Pray don't stand out in the cold passage in this polite fashion. You are welcome within."

"You ass, I'm in already!" said Handforth, staring.

"Wasted!" sighed Browne. "One of my most subtle efforts! A play, Brother Handforth? The rumour is not entirely devoid of truth. It so happens that we are producing a play in Noggs' Imperial Theatre, the first rehearsal to take place to-morrow afternoon."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth indignantly. "Then what about my part?"

"You could not have appeared at a more opportune moment," beamed the Fifth-Former. "Brother Horace, here we have the very type for the blustering gentleman in the second act. Brother Handforth, I am delighted to offer you the part——"

"Blustering gentleman?" repeated Handforth. "I want the juvenile lead!"

"I regret to say that Brother Horace has already snapped that up for himself," said Browne. "With truth, I must acknowledge that he is the most suitable person. Your own part is a small one, and you will appear for, perhaps, ten minutes on the stage. Quite long enough, Brother Edward. You may count yourself lucky that——"

"You can jolly well keep your old part!" said Handforth indignantly. "I want the juvenile lead or nothing! Understand? You can't mess me about like that, you ass! Stevens won't mind."

"Stevens will mind," said Stevens. "In fact, Stevens does mind."

"Let us not argue," murmured Browne. "On second thoughts, perhaps we were rash to offer this part to Brother Handforth. I have no doubt that Brother Boots will be much more successful in the rôle. Be good enough to close the door as you leave, Brother Ted. The draught is unpleasant."

Handforth simply stared. He had had the chance of a small part, but he had thrown it away. And now he was left flat.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST REHEARSAL.

CHURCH and McClure were doing their prep. when Edward Oswald Handforth strode violently into Study D. His face was black, and he was looking grim. His chums immediately detected the danger signals.

"Likely!" said Handforth, slamming the door. "By George, of all the beastly nerve! If Browne thinks I'm going to stick it, he's off-side!"

"Don't interrupt, old man," said Church plaintively. "I'm wrestling with this rotten algebra. Why do they give us this stuff? It must have been invented by somebody in a padded cell! His idea was to drive everybody else into the same condition!"

"Never mind your silly algebra," said Handforth darkly. "Old Browne's producing a play, and he hasn't given me the leading part!"

"Awful!" said Church.

"Ghastly!" panted McClure, horrified.

Handforth failed to detect the gentle sarcasm.

"I should think it is awful!" he roared. "What's more, I'm going to show these Fifth Form idiots that they can't mess me about! A big play, too, mark you! It's going to be produced in Noggs' Theatre. I hear that Irene's going to be in it, and two of the other girls."

"And you're left out?" asked McClure. "I expect Browne wants to be certain of success."

"By George, I've got an idea," said Handforth slowly. "I've got a brain-wave! It's a rummy thing I didn't think of it before. What about that play of mine? I'll produce that, and ruin Browne's! That'll make him sit up!"

"That play of yours?" said Church questioningly.

"Yes."

"Which play?"

"The one I'm going to write!" retorted Handforth.

"You spoke as if it was written!" snorted Church. "My dear ass, you can't write a play in five minutes! Or five hours! Or five days! Plays need brains! They're jolly tricky things to handle. You've got to know all about entrances and exits and prompt sides, and things. They're awfully hard to wangle."

But Handforth wasn't listening.

"This is heaps better than getting a part in Browne's mouldy old show!" he declared. "I'll write that play of mine, and have it ready by the end of the week. I've got two or three, really—one about the Wild West, and another about a coiners' gang."

"And another about smugglers, I suppose?" asked McClure.

Handforth made no reply. He was fascinated by this new idea of his. And, instead of doing his prep., he paced up and down the study, thinking out a plot, and nearly driving his chums to distraction.

As a direct consequence of this, he had a most painful interview with Mr. Crowell in the morning. It wasn't a private interview, either. The Form-master rated him severely in front of the entire Remove, and it was only by luck that Handforth wasn't detained for the whole afternoon.

There wasn't a great deal of talk about Browne's latest stunt. Only the interested

fellows were keen. Most of the others came to the conclusion that it was merely some more of William Napoleon's usual gas.

Consequently, when three o'clock arrived only the prospective members of the cast and a handful of others turned up at Noggs' Theatre, in Edgemore. Handforth & Co., of course, were there. For Handforth wanted to find out what this play actually was. Having gained that information, he would be able to mould his own play on the same lines.

Exactly as Browne had predicted, the Moor View girls turned up. They declared that they had no intention of taking any parts, but had merely come along to volunteer this information. But Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs soon made them think differently.

He spoke to the entire cast outside the theatre—which was again pitched in a meadow, but this time in the very centre of the village. Strangely enough, there had been the same lack of interest as usual, and the Edgemore people were saying that the show wasn't worthy of their support.

"You are young, but that is no offence," declared Mr. Noggs, as he looked at the group. "I doubt if you will be successful in your respective parts, but you will at least do your best. And none of us can do more than that."

"It'll probably be all right, sir," said Nipper. "Not so very long ago there was a production of 'The Admirable Crichton' in London, and every member of the cast was the son or daughter of a famous stage celebrity. All jolly young, too—in adult parts. It was a terrific success."

"A point, Brother Nipper—a distinct point," said Browne. "I will confess that we are not the sons and daughters of stage celebrities, but if we are successful we shall deserve even greater merit."

"'The play's the thing'—Shakespeare," said Mr. Noggs. "It matters not how young the players—at least, at such a performance as this. It is for you to do your best—to give this play every chance. I will offer what help I can. But bear in mind the fact that I am merely an onlooker. Go your own ways, and take no notice of an interested old man."

Mr. Noggs managed to make them realise that the production was no mere joke—no light affair. Until now, most of them had assumed that it was just one of Browne's little jokes.

"We must all understand one another, brothers and sisters," declared Browne. "There will be no attempt to run through any of the parts to-day. But Brother Stevens will read the play to you, and impress upon you the meaning of your own particular parts. You will then take these parts, and study them. This production is to be conducted on the right lines."

"We're all game, Browne," said Reggie Pitt.

"It'll be a wonderful thing," put in Irene Manners. "I had no idea the play was a real one. I'm longing to see my own part."

"Same here," said Doris.

"Well, the fact is, it's a pretty decent play," said Stevens modestly. "My pater wrote it, you know. It was one of the last things he did before he died. And ever since then the script has been knocking about, and I've always wondered if it would ever be used. Of course, this production is an amateur affair, but I'm bubbling with enthusiasm over it."

"Continue, Brother Horace," said Browne. "It was my intention to make this little speech—but since you are in the mood, I will not venture to take it out of your hands."

Stevens, to tell the truth, was so joyous that he seemed quite another being. Until this moment, he hadn't quite realised that the play was to become an actuality.

It was the realisation of his dream. The dream he had never expected to come true. His dead father's play was to be put on the stage! Even if the actors and actresses were only schoolboys and schoolgirls, it was something. It was a step in the right direction—a step towards bigger things.

"I don't want to say much," he went on quietly. "But I'd just like you to know that this isn't a mere piece of fun. The play is a serious one. In my opinion, it's one of the greatest plays that was ever written—but, of course, I'm not in a position to judge. I'm naturally prejudiced in favour of it."

"Take no notice of these words," said Browne. "I have read the play, and it is, without question, a masterpiece. Hence my eagerness to produce it. I would remind you that this is merely a preliminary step. This play is destined for the West End of London."

Stevens shook his head.

"I'd like to think the same, of course, but that's rather too stupendous a thought," he said. "If we can only give a creditable performance, I shall be satisfied. What I mean is, please don't treat it lightly. Go into your parts in earnest, and we'll see if we can't beat the usual amateur efforts."

The others were impressed by his earnest tone. They could all see that this was a great occasion for him. It was the realisation of his ideal, and he was all the more grave because the play had been written by his dead father.

They all promised to do their utmost—to take their parts seriously, and to regard the whole thing with reverence.

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And Stevens read the play aloud.

Unconsciously, he acted parts of it as he went along. He instilled the lines with lift, and gradually worked up his audience into a state of suspense and enthralled interest.

It was a full ninety minutes before he had finished, and the cast was moved deeply. Even Handforth had nothing to say. He appreciated the fact that this was no occasion for an indignant expression of his disappointment.

The others were honoured. They felt it a keen pleasure to take even a small part in the proposed production. And even the most unsophisticated could recognise the merit of the play. This was no commonplace work, but a masterly effort, from a master brain.

Mr. Noggs wandered away after he had heard the play through. He was a man who could judge—and he felt that he would rather not give his opinion. For he knew that this play was a fortune maker. If it was only put on in the right place, and acted by the right company, it would create the sensation of the decade. And the old showman was intensely impressed.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROGER BARTON'S CUNNING.

INWARDLY, Mr. Noggs was excited.

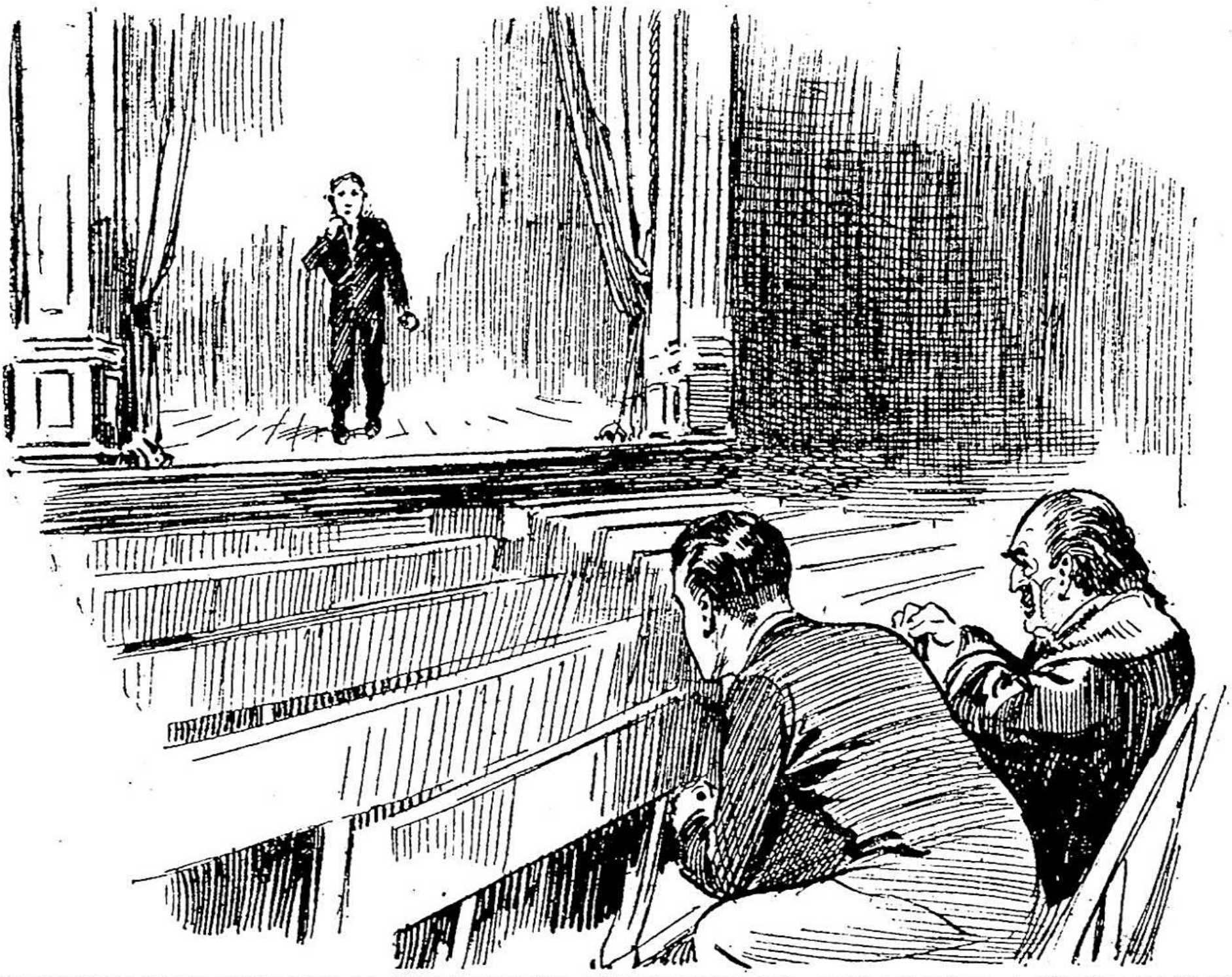
He didn't actually know it, but he was moved to the core. He was not exactly the producer, but his advice would be respectfully considered if he offered it. And the play would be produced on his stage!

He could see the possibilities in it—he could visualise this emotional drama on the stage of a big theatre, enacted by people with famous names. What a sensation it would cause!

"You're looking thoughtful, guv'nor," said a voice.

"Eh? Yes, Steve—yes," exclaimed Mr. Noggs, with a start. "I am very thoughtful. To tell you the truth, my brain is in a whirl. I have just heard the most wonderful play of my career. And what a part for me, Steve! By the phantom of Phelps! What a part for me!"

"But I thought the boys——"



For Horace Stevens was standing up there like a lunatic, all hands and feet. In every possible way he revealed his inexperience.

"Yes, Steve—the boys are doing it themselves," continued Mr. Noggs. "The part I mentioned is to be played by the youth named Browne. And, upon my soul, I honestly believe he will make something of it. A remarkable boy, indeed! A wonderful personality."

"And is that play really good, guv'nor?" asked Stephen Ashwood, Mr. Nogg's juvenile lead. "Is it the real thing?"

"Good!" repeated the old showman. "Great Cæsar! Such lines! Boy, the play is a miracle! If only I could get hold of a big theatre, and produce it in the way it deserves—— But there I go again, Steve. Dreaming as usual! Such a triumph is not for me. Such opportunities do not come my way. I am cursed, Steve."

Mr. Noggs spoke with sadness, and Ashwood shook his head.

"You never know, guv'nor," he said quietly.

"'Tis too late!" replied Mr. Noggs sombrely. "'There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune'—Shakespeare. That tide has never flowed for me, Steve. It cannot come now. I must be content to watch others. For myself, I am growing old. 'A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man'—Shakespeare. 'I am declined into the vale of years'—Shakespeare. What a man, Steve! What a man was the bard of Stratford. Without his aid, my conversation would be flat and drab."

"I'm afraid you're in a pessimistic mood, Andy," said a voice from the rear. "What's the idea? Business still bad?"

They turned, and found a thinnish man with them—a man with a keen, clear-cut face. He was Roger Barton, the advance manager of the show. Indeed, he was the business brains of the whole concern—since Mr. Noggs himself was an actor first and last.

"You find me in a solemn mood, Roger," said Mr. Noggs. "I was speaking of the play which these schoolboys are to produce in my theatre."

"Those confounded St. Frank's imps?" demanded Barton. "Who gave them permission to use the theatre? Look here, Andy, I'm not agreeable to this! I don't give my sanction——"

"Enough!" boomed Mr. Noggs angrily. "And who are you, knave, that you should give your sanction? My theatre is my own, and I require no sanction from others."

Barton flushed.

"Unless business looks up, it won't be your theatre for long!" he retorted. "You can't expect to get any more money out of me, Noggs! I've done more than my share already—and unless you can repay the money by the end of next week I shall have to take steps——"

"Control yourself, man!" commanded Mr. Noggs. "Is this my friend? Is this my Roger? 'Most friendship is feigned, most loving mere folly'—Shakespeare. Am I to believe those words, man? Is your friendship feigned? I find not many mistakes in Shakespeare's wisdom."

Barton laughed harshly.

"You're too fond of these infernal quotations," he said. "You'd do a lot better to get down to facts——"

"Infernal quotations!" boomed Mr. Noggs. "Base words! Speak them not in my presence, Roger! It seems that you and I will differ, unless you adopt a more gentle tone. Remember, my theatre is still my own. I owe you money, and unless that money is paid, you will seize my worldly goods. So be it! But do not claim it until it is yours."

"There's no need to speak like that——"

"And these boys have my permission to produce their play," continued Mr. Noggs with dignity. "And what a play, Barton! 'Tis a pity you did not hear it."

"I am not in the least interested," said Barton indifferently. "Thank heaven, I haven't got an artistic temperament! Left to yourself, Andy, you would put on nothing but highbrow stuff, and go bankrupt."

Andy Noggs laughed bitterly.

"Am I then so prosperous?" he asked. "Have these accursed melodramas lined my pockets with gold? During this tour, Roger, we have given the public rubbish—at your suggestion. And where do we stand?"

"The public wants rubbish—needs rubbish!" retorted Barton. "I am doing my best to push the show. A man can't do more than that."

"Nay, I will grant that you have worked," said Mr. Noggs. "It is fate. 'Let Hercules himself do what he may, the cat will mew, and the dog will have his day'—Shakespeare."

"Confound your quotations," snapped Barton.

He turned on his heel, and walked off—leaving the business he had come upon until he was in a better mood. And very soon afterwards it was time for the doors of the theatre to be thrown open to the public. The St. Frank's boys and the Moor View girls had gone home—filled with the determination to learn their parts, and do honour to the play.

And the theatre meadow took on a deserted aspect.

It was a fine evening—sunny, warm, and fresh with spring. Perhaps this had something to do with the poor attendance. At all events, Mr. Noggs and his company took the stage to a nearly empty house. There wasn't a pound in the building.

And it was only natural that the actors should slur their parts. There was nothing to be enthusiastic about.

"Empty benches again!" said Mr. Noggs, as he stood in the wings. "The luck never changes, Barton! We are indeed cursed by fate."

"Perhaps you'll realise that those boys are only using you as a tool," growled Barton. "They've got you to lend them your theatre—and where are they? Where's their money? Not in your pay-box, Noggs!"

"They were generous at Bellton," said Mr. Noggs gruffly.

"You're still near enough for them to come over for their own purpose," sneered Roger Barton. "I tell you, they're not worth troubling about."

"'Tis better that you should say nothing, than give utterance to ungracious words," said the old showman. "I am disappointed in you, Roger. As the hour of my crash approaches, you grow more and more arrogant. I had thought better of you."

Barton laughed, and said no more. And when Mr. Noggs took his cue and went on the stage again, the advance manager walked out of the theatre, and looked round in the evening sunlight. His little car was waiting in the road, and he glanced at his watch as he walked towards it.

"Just about time," he muttered. "I thought it was earlier."

Getting into the car, he drove off, and didn't stop until he was approaching the main Bannington road. Here he turned up a tiny side lane, and came to a halt near a ramshackle gate. The car had hardly pulled up before a man appeared from a little spinney.

"I'm glad you're here, Lister," said Roger Barton. "What about your report?"

The other man smiled. He was stout and bluff—a genial, infectious kind of individual. But there was something about his eyes which denoted craftiness. His face, too, indicated a close and constant acquaintanceship with spirituous liquor.

"Couldn't be better," declared this bibulous individual, in a husky, ingratiating voice. "If everything's all right your end, you needn't worry about mine. Caistowe's done. I've worked every inn and hotel in the place. I've been glad of the extra day or two."

"Good!" said Mr. Barton, nodding. "If Caistowe's been properly worked, Jake, the old man ought to be at the end of his tether within a fortnight. We've been doing well. But don't forget that you've got to keep mum——"

"No need to repeat that stuff," interrupted Jacob Lister, with a grin. "I'm wise, Barton. I haven't knocked about the theatrical world for twenty years for nothing. You're giving me good money, and I'm satisfied. Sounds funny, doesn't it?"

"Infernally funny!" agreed Mr. Barton. "We don't meet many satisfied people these days!"

"I'll keep this job on as long as you like," went on the other. "The worst of it is, it'll soon finish. Where do I go next?"

"You've got the plan of the tour—you know the next pitch," said Mr. Barton. "Some one-horse village beyond Caistowe, I believe. You'd better not move on for a bit, though. Give Caistowe another dose to-morrow, and then clear out. I'd better be going now," he added, glancing up and down. "It would ruin everything if we were seen together."

There was something significant in this secret meeting—but also something startlingly obvious. The reason for Andy Noggs' failure was as clear as daylight. Roger Barton, the man he trusted, was letting him down.

It was such a simple plan, too—cunning and sure. While Mr. Barton went in advance of the show, and ostensibly boosted it up, his secret accomplice made a stay in every town and village, and gave Mr. Noggs a bad name. Lister, in fact, was in the habit of making a round of the public houses. Here he would get friendly with the natives, and advise them to ignore the coming show. With the seeds thus sown, each town or village was rapidly circulating the bad reports.

And by the time Mr. Noggs and his theatre arrived, any prospective business had been practically killed. Jacob Lister was the very man for such work as this—for he had the full qualifications of a confidence trickster. While being unscrupulous, he was not only affable in manner, but possessed the knack of plausibility and conviction. He could make people believe just what he told them—and he seemed so genuinely honest that few doubted him.

And thus Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs was being duped by his own manager. This man had lent him money—and had so effected the legal transactions that in due course—failing the repayment of certain sums—the entire property would lawfully pass into his own hands.

An honest manager would have set Mr. Noggs on the road to fortune. But a dishonest manager was leading him into bankruptcy and ruin. Ever since this tour had started, the old showman had met with failure. And even now he had no deep suspicion regarding Barton's true activity. Just recently he had detected a change in Barton's manner, and a subconscious idea was beginning to take shape in his mind. But he had no open doubt. He gave all his energies and all his thoughts to the production of his plays.

A week or two more, and the bad business would have its inevitable result. Mr. Noggs would be unable to clear those payments, and Roger Barton would step in, and claim the entire property. It was a swindle from start to finish—but a swindle which came within the law. Barton had taken good care to keep on the safe side.

Would he succeed in his contemptible enterprise?

CHAPTER IX.

MR. PYCRAFT'S CAPTURE.

MARJORIE TEMPLE, of the Moor View School, shook her head.

"It's not good enough, Archie," she said firmly. "It won't do at all."

"Not really?" asked Archie Glenthorne, with concern. "I mean, what's the absolute fault? I thought the good old lines were coming out somewhat snappily."

"That's just it—they're coming out too snappily," said the girl. "You've got to remember, Archie, that you're supposed to be proposing to me in this scene."

"Good gad!"

"You needn't make those ridiculous expressions!" frowned Marjorie. "It's only a play. You mustn't speak your lines so formally—and in such stilted tones. When a fellow's proposing to a girl, he's got to be more gentle. Try and be natural, Archie—put some real emotion into it. I'm sure Browne will jump on you if you don't."

Archie looked alarmed.

"Absolutely!" he said, in distress. "Odds volcanoes and fireworks! Browne is an absolute blighter, if you know what I mean. A dashed chunk of electricity. Ever since this morning, he's been whizzing hither and thither, bunging about a thousand volts into every chappie he comes across. I mean to say, the old lad positively exudes sparks!"

"And quite right, too," said Marjorie. "The producer of a play has got to be active—and hard-hearted, too—or he'd never get anything done properly. I wouldn't take on Browne's job for worlds!"

"The dear old egg seems to like it!"

"That's just Browne's way," nodded Marjorie. "He always enjoys himself when he's going all out. He can't bear to keep still. He's a wonderful sort of fellow, you know—so we've got to look out for ourselves. Let's get this scene right, Archie."

"Oh, rather!" said Archie feebly.

They were quite alone in the seclusion of the Junior Sports' Pavilion on Little Side. It was the following evening, and all the amateur actors and actresses had been pegging away at their parts since the previous night. There had been no slackers. They had entered into the play with full and overwhelming enthusiasm.

They couldn't do anything else. William Napoleon Browne wouldn't let them. There was something to be said for Archie's description of the schoolboy producer. All day long Browne had literally been an electric wire. He was out to get things done—and they were being done. This was Browne all over. He was a talker, he was a braggart (in his own innocuous way), but, above all, he was a man of action.

And in various parts of the school, the youthful artists were getting down to hard work. At this early stage, of course, nothing cohesive could be attempted. It was just a series of confused scraps. It would be like this for some little time—and an outsider would have gone off his head with the tangle of it all. Producing a play is a task that demands infinite patience and an angelic temper.

"Now, you've got your lines right, haven't you?" asked Marjorie, in a businesslike way. "We're just taking this one little scene now, Archie. Don't try to do too much. We shall only make a mess of it if we run before we can walk."

"A somewhat choice expression, old girl," agreed Archie.

Marjorie was thoroughly enjoying herself. Like almost every other girl, she had the natural instincts of an actress. And she was fairly revelling in this unexpected treat. Her own part was a small one, but she was bent upon making the most of it.

The three really important feminine rôles in the play were being taken by Irene, Doris and Ena. But there was one particular scene where Marjorie could reveal some ability as a soubrette. Browne had given her the part after a final selection, and she was particularly pleased with it because most of her "business" was in connection with Archie. Browne had evidently had an eye to this when he made the choice.

"Now, don't forget, Archie, you're supposed to be desperately in love," continued Marjorie. "All through the first act you've hardly said a word to me—but in this scene you pluck up your courage and propose."

"Absolutely!" said Archie, embarrassed.

"You've learnt your lines, haven't you?"

"Oh, rather! Didn't you hear me just now?"

"I did!" said Marjorie, grimly. "It won't do like that, Archie. You've got to be ever so much more affectionate."

"Good gad! I—I mean——"

"You've got to kneel at my feet, according to the stage directions, and then propose," continued Marjorie calmly. "I'm only fooling with you, of course, but I'm supposed to be a saucy young minx, so I accept you in loving terms."

"Odds heart throbs!" murmured Archie.

"All right, then—let's go ahead," continued the girl. "I'll sit just where I am, and you've got to stand over there, and then throw yourself at my feet. Keep hold of your part, you silly! You're bound to forget your lines, and you'll need it to refer to."

Archie was enjoying himself, too—but the whole situation was so dashed embarrassing. The worst of it was, he had a particularly affectionate regard for Marjorie, and this sort of situation—although only play-acting—was somewhat perilous.

"Now then!" prompted Marjorie.

"Oh, rather!" stammered Archie, gazing glassily at his part. "What ho! So this is where we start the good old scene, what?" He glanced at his lines, and gazed at Marjorie lovingly. "Phyllis, old girl, can't you give me a little hope? I'm going about in a daze—I can't sleep or eat! I mean to say, the whole thing's foul——"

"That last bit isn't in the play!" interrupted Marjorie.

"Eh? Absolutely not," said Archie. "But it's so dashed difficult to stick to the good old lines. A chappie is inclined to run off——"

"Well, you mustn't run off," put in Marjorie. "For goodness' sake, Archie, pull yourself together and drop all your conciousness. You'll never play the part unless you act naturally."

Thus chided, Archie made a noble effort, and managed to throw off his embarrassment. He became almost too fervent.

It was a pure chance that Mr. Horace Pycraft, master of the Fourth Form, happened to be taking a stroll on the playing fields. It was a fine evening, and Mr. Pycraft was thinking deeply of a geographical text book he was writing.

He approached the Junior Pavilion in a state of abstraction, but suddenly paused. Before actually revealing his presence to those within, he halted. Voices came to his ears.

"You must, Phyllis—dear old girl, I can't bear to live without you!" came a voice which was unmistakably the property of Archie Glenthorne. "Dash it, I love you so much that——"

"Oh, how can you!" came a girl's voice. "How can you!"

"It's no good—I've got to allow the old flow to burst forth!" went on Archie passionately. "Phyllis, darling, if you don't marry me I shall absolutely perish! I mean it, dearest!"

"Mr. Pycraft heard a happy feminine sigh.

"My darling!" came Marjorie's voice, soft and trembling.

Mr. Pycraft stood stock still, horrified.

"Good heavens!" he muttered. "What is this? What scandalous——"

"My own, own darling!" came the girl's voice again. "I knew you loved me, but I was afraid to let you see that I loved you, too!"

Mr. Pycraft didn't waste another moment. He strode round the angle of the pavilion, and stared. His face took on an expression of amazed stupefaction as he saw Archie Glenthorne kneeling at a girl's feet, with his arms clasping her with fervent affection.

"GLENTHORNE!" roared Mr. Pycraft, like the blast from an electric horn.

Archie gave one gulp, and reeled to his feet.

"What?" he bleated. "Good gad! Old Pieface! I—I should say—— What-ho! Sorry, dear old chunk of vegetation!"

"Glenthorne!" stormed Mr. Pycraft. "What does this mean? As for you, my young lady, the best thing you can do is to go back to your school at once! You impudent young hussy!"

Marjorie flamed up with indignation—and then suddenly threw her head back, and broke into a peal of uncontrollable laughter. She had suddenly grasped the comic nature of the situation. Mr. Pycraft thought it had been real!

"Disgraceful!" shouted the Form-master. "Glenthorne, you will come with me! This matter shall be reported to your Housemaster without a moment's delay. I have never heard of such an outrageous——"

"Good gad!" gasped Archie. "You—you don't think——"

"SILENCE, sir!" thundered Mr. Pycraft.

"But, dash it, I mean to say——"

"Not another word, Glenthorne!" interrupted the master. "I heard enough—I saw enough! No excuse from you can possibly militate against the outrageous nature of your behaviour. You, a mere boy! It is scandalous—appalling!"

"Oh, Archie!" sobbed Marjorie. "Of all the funny things——"

"You had better go, my girl!" shouted Mr. Pycraft. "Make no mistake—this matter shall be reported to your headmistress also! Glenthorne, come with me!"

"I'll come, too, Archie!" chuckled Marjorie, her eyes dancing with merriment.

"But, odds errors and bloomers!" gurgled Archie. "You're wrong, old horse! There's absolutely nothing——"

"Enough!" panted the Form-master "I can well understand your confusion, Glenthorne—but I must confess that I am startled by the appalling self-possession of this young lady! Heaven only knows what the modern girl is coming to!"

CHAPTER X.

THE LURE OF THE STAGE.

MR. HORACE PYCRAFT was a most unpleasant individual when he liked. And he generally liked. The Fourth Form had more than once passed an unanimous vote that Mr. Pycraft, like the gentleman in the "Mikado" song, would never be missed.

Upon the whole, the Fourth Form just managed to get along without any open ruptures. But Mr. Pycraft was a severe thorn in the Form's side. He had a disagreeable knack of interfering in matters that did not concern him. And it was a pastime which he thoroughly enjoyed.

He really thought he had made a sensational capture here. A mere Removite

making passionate love to a Moor View girl. The thing was not only startling, but utterly scandalous. Mr. Pycraft never thought of asking for an explanation. The affair didn't seem to need one.

Archie was too startled to find any words, and he was marched into the Ancient House almost before he could recover his wits. Marjorie loyally kept him company, and she was bubbling over with enjoyment. She hadn't hoped for such a rich situation as this.

By a lucky chance, Nelson Lee was just coming through the lobby as they entered—and there were a number of juniors standing about, too. Mr. Pycraft's eyes gleamed. There was nothing he liked better than "roasting" a fellow in public.

"Mr. Lee," he shouted, "I wish to report this boy!"

Everybody turned, and listened with interest. There was something in Mr. Pycraft's tone which indicated an exceptional crime. And Marjorie Temple's laughing eyes were intriguing, too. There was something rather rich behind all this.

"Indeed?" said Nelson Lee smoothly. "I am sorry, Glenthorne, if you have been getting in trouble. I should like to hear the nature of your complaint, Mr. Pycraft."

"A startling nature, sir—very startling!" exclaimed the Form-master, with enjoyment. "You may find it very difficult to believe, but I found this unfortunate boy making violent love to this—this young lady! It is quite in keeping with her effrontery that she should be here at the moment."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors, having heard so much, yelled.

They all knew that Archie was rather sweet on Marjorie. But to hear that he had been making violent love to her was distinctly rich—and distinctly worth a laugh.

"How—how dare you?" raved Mr. Pycraft, swinging on the crowd. "This is no matter for hilarity! Mr. Lee, this boy was kneeling before the girl, and clasping her! Actually clasping her! I need scarcely tell you that I was inexpressibly shocked!"

"Good gad!" breathed Archie. "The dear old chappie has got the thing absolutely wrong——"

"Don't dare to deny it, you graceless young scamp!" shouted Mr. Pycraft. "I came upon the pair accidentally, sir, and I distinctly heard this boy ask the girl to marry him!"

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

"And she, the young hussy, said that she loved him, and——"

"Really, Mr. Pycraft, there must be some mistake," interrupted Nelson Lee, in astonishment. "I have no wish to doubt the sincerity of your complaint, but I can hardly credit——"

"I can assure you, sir, my ears and my eyes were not deceived," panted the Form-master, confused by the general hilarity.

"Glenthorne, what have you to say?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Absolutely nothing, sir," burst out Archie. "That is, of course, absolutely a frightful lot! Marjorie and I were in the Pavilion when Mr. Pycraft hove in sight without a dashed word of warning. I mean, there we were, absolutely alone, and this—this dome of silence stole round the corner——"

"How dare you refer to me in such terms?" shouted Mr. Pycraft. "You see, sir, the boy actually admits——"

"Absolutely not!" interrupted Archie warmly. "Absolutely not, with oxidised fittings! Marjorie and I were just rehearsing, dash it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rehearsing?" repeated Nelson Lee smoothly.

"Rehearsing?" bleated Mr. Pycraft, a flood of light dawning upon him like a horrible vision. "You—you mean—— Good heavens! Surely——"

"Old Browne's play, sir," explained Archie, with dignity. "Marjorie and I are in it, you know. We were just running through the good old parts—rehearsing the love scene in the second act. Good gad! The bally affair was frightfully difficult, too!"

"Mr. Pycraft made a mistake, and he wouldn't let us explain," laughed Marjorie. "There was nothing in it, Mr. Lee—we were only——"

"I quite understand," interrupted Nelson Lee, smiling. "I have heard about this play, and it seems evident that you two are progressing famously—or Mr. Pycraft would not have made such an unfortunate mistake. You see, Mr. Pycraft, there is really nothing——"

"I had no idea!" panted Mr. Pycraft, covered with confusion. "Really, I—I feel most distressed. I must apologise to you, my boy—and to you, too, young lady. I—I really thought——"

The Fourth Form master fled, further words deserting him. The roars of laughter from the listening crowd threw him into a state of the utmost disorder. And he needed no further telling that he had made an awful ass of himself.

Nelson Lee smiled, and went his way, and Archie promptly invited Marjorie to tea in Study E—quite forgetting that he had issued this invitation earlier. Tea was to be the culmination of the programme, and Phipps was already bustling about, making preparations.

The other fellows dispersed, too, chuckling hugely over Mr. Pycraft's blunder.

"He had the decency to apologise, anyhow," grinned Church, as he and McClure went along to Study D. "That was a bit of a miracle for Pycraft."

"Well, he couldn't do anything else," said McClure. "After making such accusations, he was compelled to blurt out some sort of apology. Old Handy ought to have been there—he'd have had something to say."

"He hasn't been himself to-day," said Church thoughtfully. "I believe he's started on that play of his! The poor old ass doesn't seem to realise that it takes an experienced man to write a play! It's no good pointing these things out—— Hallo, what's this?"

They had arrived at Study D, but the door refused to open.

"Locked!" said McClure. Hi, open this door, you ass!"

No response came from within. It was tea-time, and Church and McClure were a bit late. They had been putting in some football practice, and were the owners of keen appetites. Some little time earlier they had stocked the study cupboard with the wherewithal for a substantial meal. For they all happened to be in funds at the moment.

"What about this door?" roared Church. "Handy, it's tea-time, you chump! Open the door, blow you!"

There came the sound of a shifting chair.

"Clear off!" roared Handforth's voice. "I'm busy!"

"But what about our tea?" howled Church.

"Go and have tea in Hall!"

"It's too late now!" shouted Church indignantly. "Besides, we've got a cupboard full of rolls and buns and sardines——"

"I can't help your troubles!" shouted Handforth. "I'm too busy for tea! I'm in the middle of my new play! Buzz off, or you'll ruin the flow! You're not coming in here for hours!"

Church and McClure looked at one another with grim purpose.

CHAPTER XI.

HANDY'S LATEST.

CHURCH'S eyes suddenly gleamed.

"Your new play?" he called, with his mouth close to the keyhole. "By jingo, Handy, have you got really started on it, then?"

"It's half-finished!" retorted Handforth. "And I'm not going to be interrupted by you idiots. By George, who cares about Stevens and his giddy old play? Who cares a fig for old Browne? This play of mine is going to knock spots off everything!"

"Good for you, old man!" said Church heartily. "I say, we'd love to hear some of your play! I'll bet it's a corker!"

There was a momentary silence within. McClure was looking startled, but Church gave him a significant glance.

"Sorry, but it's the only way!"

"What a cost!" breathed McClure dismally.

The door opened suddenly, and Handforth stood there. He was looking flushed and elated. He had known from the start that his chums would be joyfully interested in his play—but he had never expected them to ask for it.

"Good!" said Mr. Barton, nodding. "If Caistowe's been properly worked, Jake, the old man ought to be at the end of his tether within a fortnight. We've been doing well. But don't forget that you've got to keep mum . . ."

"Come in!" he said briskly. "I suppose I might as well read you some of it. You'd better get ready for a surprise, too. I'm going to make your hair stand on end."

"We're prepared for that," said McClure resignedly.

"First of all, we'll have some tea," remarked Church, bustling over to the cupboard. "Where's the kettle? Who the dickens has pinched the kettle? It ought to have been boiling by this time——"

"Never mind about tea!" roared Handforth, glaring.

"But it's past the time——"

"Blow the time!"

"Besides, we shall need something to brace us up!" urged Church. "A cup of tea will come in handy after a page or two of your play! We must have something——"

"I hadn't thought of that!" said Handforth, nodding. "You'll need reviving, my sons! This play of mine is a hair-raiser! None of your wishy-washy, sentimental tosh! It's a gripper—a thriller! The scene's laid on the high seas. It's all about a pirate king! A fearful robber, who plunders every ship he comes across."

"That ought to be simple to produce," said Church, nodding.

"The production isn't my business!" retorted Handforth. "I'm the author! I'm not supposed to worry over those details! The first act happens off the coast of Cornwall. There's a fearful storm, and the ship sinks——"

"In full view of the audience?" asked McClure, with interest.

"No, you fathead!" snorted Handforth. "The scene is blacked out, and the chaps talk about it in the next act—on the Spanish Main. Wait a minute—I'll read you some of it. The chief character is Captain Sculland Crossbones, and he's got a girl in his power—she's been rescued from a Spanish galleon, and she can't speak a word of English."

"Her part's in Spanish, then?" asked McClure.

"Yes! Eh?" said Handforth, with a start. "By George, I shall have to cut out that bit where she says she can't speak English. It might be rather awkward for Irene. We don't want her to go to the trouble of learning Spanish."

"We don't want the audience to have the same trouble, either," grinned Church. "But, I say! Irene can't play a Spanish girl. She's fair—and Spanish girls are dark, with dazzling eyes."

Handforth waved his hand.

"This Spanish girl's going to be fair!" he retorted firmly. "Now, listen! The first scene is on the deck of the pirate ship, the Plunderer. Captain Crossbones is talking to his mate, Simon Swashbuckler. All round, the cut-throat crew is grouped. You've got to picture that, because that's how it'll appear on the stage."

"Go ahead," said Church.

"Captain Crossbones waves his hand, and points to the Cornish coastline," said Handforth. "Now, this is where the play begins, so pay attention. Captain Crossbones: 'Yo-ho! Avast, ye lubbers! I want volunteers for the raid on Sir Jasper Bigacre's estate. Any lubber who doesn't volunteer will be chucked overboard to the sharks!'"

"So they had sharks in Cornwall in pirate days?" asked McClure, with interest.

"Author's licence," said Handforth calmly. "Don't interrupt, you ass! And leave that cake alone, Mac! How do you expect me to read my play when you're munching cake in front of my face?"

"I only took one bite," said McClure gruffly.

"We'll have tea when I've finished!" said Handforth grimly. "Now, sit down over there, and attend to me. The Mate speaks next, and he stalks across the stage and gives a roar. This is how it goes on:

SIMON SWASHBUCKLER: Now for the raid, boys! There's smugglers on this coast, and it's Yo-ho for a bottle of rum! By the spinnaker boom! Any rotter who doesn't come on this jape will walk the plank!

CAPTAIN CROSSBONES: So look alive, my hearties!

THE MATE: Don't forget the Spanish girl, captain.

THE CAPTAIN: What Spanish girl?

THE MATE: The one those Cornish chaps rescued from the Spanish galleon. She's a giddy corker! If we can only get her aboard the lugger, we'll wangle a ransom of two hundred quid!

"That's the end of the first scene," continued Handforth. "The curtain comes down, and the next scene shows the interior of Sir Jasper's mansion. Sir Jasper and Lady Bigacres are sitting at dinner with the Spanish girl, Signorita Juanita. The window suddenly bursts in, and Captain Crossbones appears, all dressed in dazzling silk."

"Not bad," said Church, nodding. "That ought to make a thrill. Was the captain wearing dazzling silk at the end of the first scene?"

"Of course not, you ass!"

"But he's on the stage when the curtain drops—and he comes on again as soon as the curtain rises," argued Church. "How long do you reckon they'll take to change the scene?"

"Oh, it'll only be a drop curtain—about a minute."

"Who's going to play Captain Crossbones?"

"I am, of course."

"Then you'll have to get a bit of a hustle on when you change your giddy clothes," grinned Church. "It's not a picture, you know! If you've only got a minute between the two scenes, I don't see how you're going to change into dazzling silk, my son!"

Handforth looked rather startled.

"My hat!" he said blankly. "I hadn't thought of that, you know."

"But they're the things that trip you up when you're writing a play," said McClure sagely. "If you're writing a Trackett Grim story, you can do as you like. But when you're writing a play you've got to visualise it. Everything's got to happen, remember—so it's no good shoving in stuff like that."

"You've got that Spanish girl wrong, too," sad Church. "She ought to be senorita. Signorita is Italian."

Handforth glared.

"If you're going to stand there and criticise, I won't read another word!" he roared. "Not another syllable! Now, listen! Captain Crossbones stalks into the room, and grabs Irene—I mean, the Spanish girl:

CAPTAIN CROSSBONES: This wench is mine! Any rotter who tries to rescue her will have to settle with me!

SIR JASPER BIGACRES: 'Sdeath! Unhand the maiden, you pirate dog! Fail to do so, and, by my halidom, I'll run you through! Wife, fetch my rapier!

LADY BIGACRES: Ay, that will I!

(She rushes out of the room, and all the pirates come flooding through the window. Sir Jasper is collared, and bound to one of the chairs. The girl is carried out. Then LADY BIGACRES comes back.)

THE CAPTAIN: Too late, mistress! The girl has gone, and your husband is helpless.

SIR JASPER: You lie!

(He suddenly tears his bonds asunder, and flings the heavy arm-chair across the room. It falls upon one of the pirates, and kills him on the spot. SIR JASPER grabs his rapier, and the terrific fight starts.)

"Hold on!" interrupted Church feebly. "What about that poor chap who gets killed? That might be all right in a story, but it can't happen on the stage, you chump!"

"Why can't it?" demanded Handforth.

"I suppose you'll get a new actor every night?" asked Church sarcastically. "Besides, it couldn't be done. Nobody could throw a chair across the room in exactly the same spot at every performance. And haven't you got a bit too much drama in it, old man? The play hasn't been going more than three minutes, and it's bunged full of thunder——"

"Three minutes!" echoed Handforth witheringly. "You fathead, we've nearly got to the end of the first act! There's only another two like it in the whole show."

McClure took a deep breath.

"Then perhaps it won't be so bad, after all," he murmured faintly.

CHAPTER XII.

BROWNE SETTLES IT.

HANDFORTH was thoroughly warmed up by now, and he didn't even notice that his chums were preparing tea as though he wasn't in the room. The kettle was nearly boiling, and Church was putting the tea in the pot. McClure busied himself with a loaf of bread and some butter.

"This fight goes on for about five minutes," continued Handforth. "Sir Jasper gets the worst of it, and loses his rapier. Captain Crossbones puts his pistol into Sir Jasper's chest and fires. Sir Jasper falls to the stage, dead. Now that's the end of the second scene. The next one is on the high seas, and there's a tremendous storm raging. The deck is heaving up and down in an awful way."

"Don't forget the deck would be the stage," said Church.

"That's all right—they can do these things," replied Handforth carelessly. "A boat has just come up, and two men get out of it. They are dragged on to the deck, dripping. Now it goes on:

THE CAPTAIN: What's all this? Who the dickens are these chaps? Stand up, you lubbers, and let's have a look at you!

(The two men suddenly spring upon the CAPTAIN, and hold him. They are agents of the Camorra, and they've come to rescue the girl from the pirates. One of them shoves a stiletto into the CAPTAIN'S side, but he's wearing chain-mail, and it snaps off.)

THE CAPTAIN: You rotter! So that's what you do after we rescue you from the deep! Take these lubbers below, and shove them in irons!

THE MATE: Why not make them walk the plank?

THE CAPTAIN: By the mainmast! So I will! Rig out the plank, you scum! We'll soon send these bounders to the sharks!

(The two members of the Camorra are made to walk the plank, and this gives a fine thrill. End of the scene. The next scene is a jungle in the West Indies, and Signorita Juanita is lost in the forest. It's pouring with rain, and she's soaked. A terrific snake attacks her, but she is saved in the nick of time by LIEUTENANT CHALMERS, of the Royal Navy, who dashes on, and shoots the thing with his revolver.)

LIEUTENANT CHALMERS: Saved! Another minute, and that snake would have stung you! Who are you? I have never seen such a pretty girl in all my life!

JUANITA: I am the daughter of a Spanish grandee. Save me! Take me away from this awful place! The pirates are on my trail, and if they catch me I shall die! Oh, save me!

"That's as far as I've got," said Handforth, with satisfaction. "In the next act, of course, we come to the real action. Lieutenant Chalmers takes the girl to the destroyer he commands——"

"Destroyer?" repeated Church.

"Destroyers are always commanded by lieutenants, you ass!"

"But there weren't any destroyers in the time of pirates, Handy," said McClure. "You can't put that in! And you haven't explained how Juanita escaped from the pirates, or what she was doing in a jungle."

"And how are you going to get the rain?" demanded Church. "I suppose you're going to flood the stage every night?"

"I've seen rain on the stage!" argued Handforth. "They can fake all those dodges—— Hallo! Don't scoff all the sardines, you rotters! And when did you make that tea——"

"Pardon the intrusion, but nobody appears to invite me to enter, so I must discreetly announce my presence," said William Napoleon Browne, from the doorway. "I crave a chair."

"You can't have any of our chairs!" growled Handforth.

Browne sank down into one with a worn-out air.

"Just in time!" he murmured. "Much as I regret to state the fact, I am reluctantly compelled to speak the truth. I was on the verge of collapse, Brother Handforth. I have heard much. Too much."

"Have you been listening to my plays?" asked Handforth sharply. "By George, that's lucky!"

me to recover my usual robust health. One needs a certain amount of time to recuperate. Am I to understand that this is the commencement of a play?"

"It's my new triumph," said Handforth, nodding. "When that play's produced it'll create a sensation——"

"Alas, that so much effort should be wasted," said Browne pensively. "This is certainly an occasion for strong action—an occasion for firmness. I must not flinch from this unpleasant task."

He mournfully tore the script into shreds, and dropped them into the blazing fire. Then he gave a breath of thankfulness, and beamed.

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"It depends upon the point of view," murmured Browne. "Personally, I do not count myself very fortunate. Kindly allow me, brother. I missed the early scenes. Might I give them a casual glimpse."

Browne pick d up the manuscript without waiting for Handforth's approval. He turned the pages sadly. Now and again, as he read the masterpiece, he winced. Church and McClure watched him with keen enjoyment.

"Well?" demanded Handforth, as Browne paused.

"One moment, Brother Edward!" said the Fifth-Former. "One moment! Kindly allow

"'Twas best!" he murmured. "Do not trouble to thank me——"

Handforth uttered a curious sound at the back of his throat. He had only just appreciated the fact that his precious play had been cast to the flames. Church and McClure gave one another a glance of thankfulness, and went on with their tea.

"My play!" hooted Handforth, at last. "You've put it in the fire!"

"Exactly," nodded Browne.

"You've burnt it!" howled Handforth wildly.

"The best thing that could happen to it, I assure you."

"You—you Fifth-Form idiot!" roared Handforth. "You've destroyed my play! And I haven't got a copy of it!"

"A grateful thought, indeed!" murmured Browne, strolling towards the door. "I regret, Brother Handforth, that I should have found it necessary to take such a drastic step—but in cases of this sort one must be cruel in order to be merciful."

Handforth fairly danced.

"My play!" he gasped. "Oh, by George! I shall have to write it all over again! And I shall never be able to repeat those wonderful passages. They've gone for ever! They're lost to the world!"

"The world will doubtless survive," said Browne genially. "Forgive me for taking such high-handed action, brother, but your play was ghastly. There is, indeed, no adequate word to fully describe it. One day, perhaps, you will realise what a service I've done you. Be guided by one who knows, and confine yourself to such harmless tripe as Trackett Grim. Remember, I am speaking for your own good."

Browne nodded, and calmly passed out of the study. Church and McClure very wisely gave their full attention to the tea-table. Inwardly, they regarded William Napoleon Browne as a benefactor to mankind—but they kept this opinion to themselves.

The Fifth-Former's action had been high-handed in the extreme—for, strictly speaking, he had had no right to tear Handforth's property up in that way. But his conscience would not allow him to leave the study without destroying that deadly effusion.

"My play!" breathed Handforth hoarsely. "I've a good mind to prosecute him! Did you ever see anything like it? He tore it up, and chucked it into the fire! Right in front of my eyes!"

"Tea, Handy?" asked Church sympathetically.

"Tea!" thundered Handforth. "Isn't there something more important to think about? The rotter! I'll get even! He can't choke me off like that! It's only jealousy—nothing else!"

For a moment or two, he strode up and down the study, and he soon seemed to get over the shock. For his eyes began to gleam, and he uttered a chuckle.

"Well, it doesn't matter so much," he said. "Perhaps that play wasn't my real masterpiece, after all. I've got a better idea! This time I'm going to make it a modern play—and not about the sea at all."

"You're going to write another one?" asked Church faintly.

"Yes, rather! A real corker!" declared Handforth. "I'll lay the scene in London—in Limehouse! We'll get Chinese into it, and an opium den——"

But Church and McClure were too dazed to hear the details.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GENERAL INVITATION.

ULYSSES SPENCER ADAMS was passing the notice-board in the Ancient House lobby a few days later when he came to a halt.

"Gee! That bird's sure some little booster!" he grinned. "The folks might think there was something great about that punk play of his."

De Valerie, who was passing, gave an inquiring look.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Say, what do you know about this?" asked the American boy, indicating the board. "Looks like Browne is asking for trouble. He's inviting the fellows to get busy around that first performance this evening. He's sure a regular feller."

Cecil De Valerie had a look at the notice. It was midday, and a half-holiday. The March morning had been windy and rainy, but the prospects for football were not spoilt. The St. Frank's Junior Eleven was playing an important home fixture—but, in spite of this, a considerable amount of interest was displayed in the forthcoming production of Stevens' play.

It was generally known that the first performance was to be given that evening—or, rather late that afternoon, for it had to be over before Mr. Noggs' usual opening time.

The fellows would be able to finish the football match comfortably, and still get over to Caistowe, where Noggs' Imperial Theatre was now situated. Nipper had purposely fixed the start of this match at an earlier hour than usual.

De Valerie, like most of the other Remove fellows, had been taking an interest in the scrappy rehearsals. For these had been in progress during the last few days—in the junior studies, in the playing fields, and all sorts of odd corners. Once or twice Browne had rallied his company together and had held a full rehearsal. And now, at last, a complete performance was to be given on the actual stage.

Browne had been working like a horse. Indeed, only he knew the amount of work that had been entailed—with the possible exception of Stevens. Stevens, as the owner of the play—and therefore acting as the author—had been in close contact with the production from the start. Not once had Browne made a move without the consent of Stevens.

And now, after days of confusion, the play was beginning to look ship-shape. Even to-day's performance would only be like a full dress rehearsal. But the live wire of the Fifth was satisfied with the progress, and was determined to attempt a full performance.

"An invitation, eh?" said De Valerie, as

he regarded the notice. "We shall have to run along and see this, Adams."

"Maybe," said Adams, nodding.

"You don't seem very enthusiastic."

"Aw, gee, this stuff doesn't give me any kick," said the American boy. "You can't pull that kind of dope on me. Browne passed me up, too."

"He did what?"

"I offered myself as a snappy actor, and that guy gave me the air!" snorted Adams. "For the love of Mike! You won't catch me around that outfit this afternoon. No, sir!"

"Rats!" said De Valerie. "It'll be a good show, if all we can hear is true. I expect you're a bit peeved because Browne 'gave you the air,' as you call it. Your accent was probably a bit too strong for him."

Ulysses stared.

"I guess you call that a wise crack?" he asked tartly. "My accent? I'm handing it to you right now that my language is pure English. Say, you guys ought to hear yourselves talk! It beats me how you get by with that stuff."

"Do you think you talk better, then?" demanded De Valerie.

"Uh-huh!"

"That's the worst of you Americans!" snorted Cecil. "You think that everything you do is right! By Jove, you've got a nerve! You'll be saying that your plays are better than ours next!"

Adams nodded.

"You said a mouthful!" he agreed. "Say, over in the States we do things properly. Oh, boy! If you want to see a real nifty show, just hit Broadway! Gee, ain't you dumb?"

"I'm not half so dumb as you'll be if you keep on that tone!" said De Valerie warmly. "I'll knock half your teeth out—and then you won't be able to speak for a week! You've got too much cheek——"

"Say, can you beat that?" grinned Adams. "I was only kidding you. I don't have to use this New York talk, De Valerie. When it comes down to brass tacks, I can speak the same as you fellows. I guess I'll go along to this play, too. Maybe it'll be worth seeing."

They looked at the notice again. It was in William Napoleon Browne's bold handwriting, and ran as follows:

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT.

This afternoon, at 4.30, the Browne-Stevens Players will present, for the first time on any stage, the brilliant play, "The Third Chance," by Vincent Stevens. The management beg to announce that this private production will be presented at Noggs' Imperial Theatre, Caistowe, and will not be available for the general public. All scholars of St. Frank's College and the Moor View School, however, are cordially invited to attend. It will be advisable to arrive early, as no seats can be booked, and the accommodation is limited.

WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE
(General Manager).

This notice created a lot of interest, for Adams and De Valerie were not the only two who commented upon it. A large proportion of the Remove decided to be at Noggs' Imperial Theatre early—for the Remove was more interested than any other Form. But many members of the Fifth were keen, too—and it was certain that the Moor View girls would roll up in large numbers.

Mr. Noggs had been quite agreeable to the performance being given at 4.30. In Caistowe, the usual show did not commence until half-past seven, so the schoolboy producers would have plenty of time to get their play over before the doors were opened to the public in the ordinary way.

Things had been going badly with the old showman—for Jacob Lister had done his work well in Caistowe. The travelling theatre had done atrocious business on the first two nights, and there was no indication that matters would improve. The Caistowe people had practically ignored the theatre—only a handful occupying the cheaper seats at each performance.

Browne had no desire for empty benches at the production of Stevens' play—for empty benches would have a deadening effect upon the actors.

It was not pure kindliness, therefore, that prompted Browne to invite the fellows to roll up in their scores. He wanted them there for his own ends. As long as they were all connected with St. Frank's or the Moor View School, the performance would still be a purely private one. Under no circumstances were any members of the general public to be admitted.

In the early afternoon, Browne and Stevens and Irene & Co. took full possession of the theatre, and many preparations were made. Nipper, Pitt, and the other Removites in the cast, did not turn up until later—for they were playing in the football match. It was a rather heavy day for them, but this only added to the zest of the undertaking.

At about four o'clock the audience began to turn up. Several members of the Fifth, headed by Cuthbert Chambers, dropped casually in, and condescended to approach the main entrance.

"Might as well see what it's all about, I suppose," said Chambers indifferently. "It's up to us to support old Browne, in a way. Hallo, Browne!" he added, nodding to the occupant of the pay-box.

"We are indeed honoured," said Browne gracefully. "I need hardly hesitate regarding the tickets. You will assuredly require stalls?"

"We shouldn't think of sitting anywhere else, you ass!" said Chambers, staring. "I'll take three, please."

Browne busied himself with the tickets.

"Buck up, Chambers!" said Bob Christine, from behind. "Don't keep us waiting all day!"

"Leave some seats for us!" said Singleton.

"Get a move on!"

Chambers frowned at the crowd of juniors which had mysteriously gathered in the rear. They were coming up rapidly now —mostly on their bicycles. Even the football match had been deserted so that good seats could be obtained. But the juniors had satisfied themselves that St. Frank's was certain of a win before deserting Little Side.

"Four-and-sixpence, please," said Browne genially.

"Eh? Four-and-six?" repeated Chambers. "But I thought this was a private show! I thought it was free!"

"One is always apt to make mistakes," beamed Browne.

"But you invited us!" shouted Chambers indignantly.

"I invited everybody," explained Browne. "Naturally, I made no mention of prices. If you assume that the admission is to be free, I can be held in no way responsible. Upon the payment of four shillings and sixpence, Brother Chambers, these tickets will be yours."

"I won't pay a cent!" roared Chambers. "You can keep your bally tickets!"

It was a shock for all the others, too. Having been invited, they naturally concluded that admission would be free. Browne had been artful. He was getting the crowd there, and making certain of it. Out of such large numbers, he was fairly satisfied that he would fill the theatre. If he had mentioned, in the notice, that the usual charges would be made, the rush might not have been so enthusiastic.

"It's a swindle!" said Bob Christine warmly. "I'm not going to pay my last bob to go in!"

"There are seats at sixpence, brother," said Browne, from the pay-box.

"Keep 'em!" retorted Christine.

And before many minutes had elapsed the crowd had increased treble-fold, and the indignation was assuming alarming shape.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE NOD.

FULL prices — or no admittance.

That was the order, and the exerincreasing crowd didn't like it at all. They had come here in the expectation of seeing a free show, and this surprise demand for money bowled them over. Many, indeed, did not possess the wherewithal to ensure them admittance.

"Let's rush the doors!" suggested Hubbard warmly. "We're not going to be swindled like this!"

"Not likely!" shouted Armstrong. "Come on!"

"Hurrah! Altogether!"

Browne emerged from the pay-box with some speed, and held up a warning hand. And there was something so compelling about his personality that the crowd was held in check.

"One moment," said Browne. "I am surprised at this exhibition of miserly selfishness. I am shocked. I am pained. I am wounded. I thought better of my brothers than this."

"You can't fool us with that sort of talk, Browne," shouted one of the juniors. "You invited us to this amateur show, and we want to see it! None of your grabbing! It's like your nerve to try this on!"

Browne shook his head.

"If I had mentioned admittance charges, you might not have turned up," he explained blandly. "But let me assure you that you are adopting a strange course. You may count yourselves lucky that we did not decide to charge double prices. Are we to abandon the show? For there will be no performance if these doors are rushed and the theatre invaded. That, brothers, is a certainty."

"You rotter!" roared Armstrong. "The whole thing's a rush!"

"It pains me to mention this subject, but I fear there is no other course," said Browne resignedly. "I need not mention the plight of our kindly host, Brother Noggs. You are all aware of the fact that his ship has been drifting nearer and nearer to the rocks. Already it is touching the outermost crags. Will you deny this brave old fellow a helping hand?"

"Oh!" said Christine. "You mean——"

"I mean that the entire proceeds will be handed over to Brother Noggs in the shape of an honorarium," replied Browne sternly. "Every penny shall go into his coffers as a recompense for his valuable services in the production of this piece. Every labourer is worthy of his hire. Are we to deny Brother Noggs his rightful modicum of reward? Be brave, brothers. Be generous. Dip into your pockets, and produce the necessary. Remember, it is all in a good cause."

This, of course, put a different complexion on the matter, and the majority of the fellows paid up with a good heart. And there was soon a steady rush for the better seats.

Willy & Co. turned up, bright and cheerful. But they received a bit of a shock when they heard that cash was necessary. As it happened, they were in one of their impecunious periods. And Handforth major was not at hand to act the part of

banker. Something had got to be done promptly. Willy only had fivepence, and Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were broke. And they had expected to get in free!

"Three stalls, please," said Willy cheerfully.

"Ah, Brother William, it gladdens my old heart to see your smiling face," beamed Browne. "I take it that this request is thoroughly bona fide?"

"You can take it as you like," replied Willy. "I want three stalls. I'm not going to leave this box until I get three stalls. So the sooner you trot out three stalls, the better."

Browne eyed the fags dubiously.

"Forgive me if I am unduly suspicious, Brother William, but I detect a certain anxiety in your manner," he said. "I observe a slight tendency to rush me into this thing."

"My hat! Can't you gas?" asked Willy tartly. "I thought you were the general manager of this show? What's the idea of frightening people away by putting your face in this hole?"

"I have placed myself in this cage in order to prevent unscrupulous persons—such as, I fear, yourself—from getting in on the nod," replied Browne. "You require three stalls, Brother William. Am I to understand that you will pay for these tickets?"

"Absolutely!" said Willy promptly.

"Now?"

"Cash down on the nail."

"Alas! I wish I had some guarantee——"

"Honour bright!" replied Willy calmly.

"That, of course, clinches the matter beyond all question," said Browne, beaming. "I trust you will accept my apologies, brother, for my suspicions. Here you have your three tickets. Four-and-sixpence."

Willy took the tickets, and pocketed them.

"Thanks!" he said. "You might lend me five bob, Browne."

"What is this base suggestion?" asked Browne, frowning.

"You've only got to give me sixpence, and it's a deal," said Willy. "I'll pay you the five bob back after tea. How's that?"

"I fear you have been trifling with your honour——"

"Not a bit!" interrupted Willy. "If you won't lend me the five bob, I'll give you the tickets back. But I thought it safer to get hold of them first. Buck up, old son! Let's have that tanner!"

Browne handed over sixpence, and sighed deeply.

"And a moment ago I apologised!" he said sadly. "One day, Brother William, you will rise to a great height. You will become the leader of a famous gang. Your name will be displayed, in large type, in the Sunday newspapers. What an ambitious outlook! Go! But let me congratulate you upon your smartness. In spite of myself, I admire you. Indeed, I could not have done better myself."

Willy & Co. passed in, and sat in three of the best stalls, while Browne added four-and-sixpence of his own money to the receipts.

By this time, the auditorium was well over half full, and Handforth & Co. were lucky to get in at all—for, as usual, they were late. Only the cheaper seats were available, and these were rapidly filling.

"By George!" ejaculated Edward Oswald, with a start. "Look there!"

Church jumped.

"What is it?" he gasped. "Fire?"

"You—you babbling ass!" snapped Church. "You gave me a start!"

"My minor!" said Handforth thickly. "Sitting down there in the stalls! And we're in the pit! Do you think I'm going to stand that? Come on! We'll turn those fags out, and take their seats!"

"Dash it all, that's not cricket!" protested McClure. "If they've paid for their seats, they've got a right to 'em—and everybody's paying to-day. We could have got stalls if we'd been here earlier."

But Handforth didn't wait. He strode down the gangway, his breast filled with indignation. It was not likely that Willy & Co. should sit in the stalls while he, Edward Oswald Handforth, had to put up with the pit!

"Hallo! It's Ted!" exclaimed Willy, as his major blundered up. "Good man! Just the chap I wanted! Lend me five bob—quick!"

"What the——"

"It's urgent!" said Willy sharply. "Come on, Ted—no messing about! Don't stand there gaping! Five bob!"

"Look here——"

"QUICK!" hissed Willy.

"I came here to pitch you out——"

"I tell you it's vital!" insisted Willy, clutching at his major. "Give me five bob, and I'll talk to you afterwards. He's coming! Look! Quick, Ted—out with it!"

Handforth was so flustered by his minor's urgency that he dived into his pocket and produced two half-crowns. William Napoleon Browne was coming down the gangway, and Willy checked him.

"Half a tick, Browne!" he said, picking the two half-crowns out of his major's hand. "Here's your five bob!"

"A pleasant surprise," said Browne affably.

"For these seats," explained Willy blandly. "Thanks, Ted."

Handforth gasped like a freshly-landed fish.

"For—for these seats?" he gurgled. "Do you mean to say you hadn't paid for 'em? And you had the nerve to——"

"Brother Handforth, give it up!" urged Browne. "When it comes to a question of nerve, Brother William is the holder of the world's highest diploma. I had always considered myself the proud possessor of that

honour, but I relinquish the title without a qualm."

"You can relinquish your title, Browne, old man, but I'm not going to relinquish this seat," said Willy, grinning. "Sorry, Ted! You'd better get back to the pit. Thanks for that five bob; it'll do me nicely until this evening. I'll come and see you again after tea."

Handforth reeled off, weak and dazed.

CHAPTER XV.

HORACE STEVENS' HOUR.

THE curtain rose amid a soft murmur of voices, intermingled with a few titters. Nine-tenths of the audience had come here in the expectation of seeing a ragged amateur effort. They had an idea that the whole show would be a first-class joke. They took it for granted that the play itself would be only half-baked.

Handforth, who was in the midst of a new play of his own, was scornful. He was congratulating himself upon the fact that he had accepted no part in this petty production. He regarded it as a foregone conclusion that the show would be a fizzle.

But the play had only been on the go for five minutes before a gradual change came over the audience.

There was something uncommon about this production. There was something novel about it, something which caused the youthful audience to sit up and take notice.

The entire cast was composed of boys and girls, and yet their efforts were polished and easy. There was none of the amateur awkwardness about them. Everybody on the stage was supremely confident and certain of their lines, and the whole show had a finish and a polish.

There were two factors to account for this—firstly, the brilliance of the dialogue, and, secondly, the patience of William Napoleon Browne and Mr. Noggs. Jointly, they had drilled their company into a thoroughly workmanlike state.

Long before the first act was over, the audience was enthralled. This play was no commonplace effort, but the work of a dazzling playwright. Every line sparkled and scintillated. The epigrams were not merely witty, but masterly. Right through, the dialogue was a sheer delight to listen to, and it was delivered ably. The very cleverness of the play helped the youthful actors and actresses to a far greater extent than the audience realised. It was almost impossible to fail with such wonderful material.

Horace Stevens, however, was the greatest surprise of all.

There had been rumours to the effect that he was a dark horse, but nobody quite believed these yarns.

Now they could do nothing else but sit in the theatre, spellbound. When Stevens was on the stage, he exercised a magnetic influence over the entire house. There was something in his personality that commanded silence. A gesture, a word, a mere movement from him was sufficient to still the audience. He held them in the hollow of his hand.

Browne was excellent in his own part. He gave a finished character study—extremely difficult, considering that he played the part of an elderly man. Nipper was equally good, and Reggie Pitt revealed many brilliant touches of comedy. The girls did their own work famously—particularly Doris Berkeley. Her vivacity was a sheer enchantment. Archie Glenthorne and Marjorie Temple provided still another touch of comedy.

But, when all was said and done, Horace Stevens was the only one that mattered. The hour was his. His genius as an actor stood out like a beacon. The others were good, but he was amazing.

At the end of the first act, the curtain fell, and the audience fairly let itself go. They had never imagined anything like this. They not only cheered the play, but the players. This was a first production—little more than a dress rehearsal—and the first act, at least, was bewilderingly entertaining.

At the back of the pit, in a secluded corner, Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs had been watching. Roger Barton was with him, and at first the latter had sneered openly, gibing at these young performers.

But now that the act was over, he was changed. There was a glitter in his eyes. And there was something strange in his manner.

As a theatrical man of long standing, as a man who had spent many years on the boards, he recognised the true art, the actual genius, of this play. And he recognised also the astounding ability of Horace Stevens. Literally his breath was taken away, but he strove hard to conceal this fact.

"Well, Roger, what think you?" asked Mr. Noggs, amid the confusion of the interval. "How now? I hear no disparaging comments as yet."

"The play isn't bad," admitted Barton. "Of course, these youths rather spoil it."

"A base and foul accusation!" boomed Mr. Noggs indignantly. "Have you no charity, Roger? You know in all truth that these boys have performed well. And the play! Shades of Shakespeare! The play! Such lines have not been written in our generation, Roger!"

Barton shrugged his shoulders.

"You're over enthusiastic, guv'nor," he growled. "Just because you helped in the production, you're losing your sense of proportion. I'll admit the play is good—distinctly good. But it's not a masterpiece. For Heaven's sake, Andy, keeps your wits about you. You're not yourself. You'd better dose yourself up with something, and recover your normal outlook."

"'Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it'—Shakespeare," retorted Mr. Noggs. "What ails you, friend? As a man of experience, you know that this play is clever. You know it is brilliant. Why, then, stilt your words? Why stint your praise?"

"Nonsense!" scoffed Barton. "I've produced more plays than I like to think of—but I'd need a lot of courage to put this show on in a big theatre, Andy."

Mr. Noggs made a growling sound in his throat.

"'Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once'—Shakespeare," he said grimly. "You are becoming faint-hearted, Roger. If I had the money this play would not lie in obscurity for another hour. 'Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air'—Gray. What would I not give for such an opportunity!"

"I will grant the first act is decent, but I'll warrant the whole thing'll peter out before it's over," growled Barton. "That boy's good, too. All the same, you'd be surprised if you heard the opinions of competent judges."

"Opinions!" said Mr. Noggs, with fine scorn. "'A plague of opinion—a man may wear it on both sides, like a leather jerkin'—Shakespeare. Nay, Roger, your words are strange. Are we not competent judges? But hush! The curtain rises."

Mr. Noggs was puzzled by the attitude of his manager. The old showman had particularly urged Barton to be present at this performance—he had sent a special message so that he should be here. For Mr. Noggs was anxious to prove to his colleague that this play was something exceptional.

The second act was even better than the first. Not only was the dialogue consistently good, but the construction of the play was masterly. Every trifle of action was dovetailed so perfectly that the movement was almost unconscious. The audience was carried on without knowing it.

And Mr. Barton, in spite of his uttered words, was lost in breathless admiration. This play was undoubtedly the work of a genius! The very thought was startling.

A masterpiece, wasted on this juvenile audience, and performed by juvenile artists!

And Stevens!

Horace Stevens had seized his opportunity with both hands. In the big scene he just let himself go He forgot the audience, he forgot the very fact that he was acting. Indeed, he proved to all and sundry that he was no mere mummer, but an actor to his very core. He was one of those rare exceptions—an artist who concealed his art. In a word, he acted so superbly that he didn't seem to be acting at all. He was so natural that the audience forgot that he was Stevens of the Fifth. He became the character he portrayed, and his own personality was overwhelmed.

It was a triumph from first to last.

And it was a staggering triumph, too. Browne had pictured this final scene from the very first. His keen sense of vision had enabled him to foresee the result.

But even Browne was thrilled to the marrow by the great scene of enthusiasm which signalised the fall of the curtain. The audience did not merely applaud—the audience went wild with excitement, and cheered madly.

"Stevens—Stevens!"

"Hurrah!"

"Come on, Stevens!"

"Speech—speech!"

"Encore!"

"Speech!"

Nobody left the theatre. The enthusiasm was at such a pitch that nothing but a speech would suffice. William Napoleon Browne appeared on the stage, and held up his hand. But for once Browne was unable to control the crowd.

"Get off!"

"We want Stevens!"

"Go and fetch him, Browne!"

"We don't want any of your gas!"

"Come on, Stevens!"

Horace Stevens, in the wings, could hardly believe the evidence of his ears. He had no real idea of his own ability. He wondered why the crowd was making such a fuss. But it came to him quite clearly that there was no escaping a speech.

CHAPTER XVI.

ROGER BARTON'S EVIL PLAN.

"HURRAH!"

"Well done, Stevens!"

"Bravo!"

Horace Stevens stood on the stage, and accepted the flood of enthusiastic cheering. But when he tentatively raised his hand there was an immediate silence. Poor Stevens was hopelessly self-conscious. He had always led such a quiet life. This sudden popularity overwhelmed him. A week since he had never dreamed that such a thing could be possible.

"Thanks awfully, but you're making too much of it," he said uncomfortably. "I am glad you like my pater's play. I've always thought it was good, and I've always had a longing to act this particular part——"

"You've done wonders, old man!"

"You're too good for this booth!" shouted somebody. "You ought to be in the West End! Aren't you going to let the public see you? You'll be the rage if you act in the ordinary show, Stevens!"

"Rather!"

"See Mr. Noggs about it!"

"It's only a preliminary performance," said Stevens. "I don't know what on earth I can say. I'm not so bad when I've got lines to speak, but—but—— Hang it all, I'm stuck! Supposing we let it go at that?"

He managed to escape from the stage, and at last the audience dispersed. But Stevens' performance, and the play itself, were the talk of St. Frank's for the rest of the day. And long afterwards, too. Outside the Imperial Theatre, Handforth & Co. decided to wait for the hero of the hour. As a matter of fact, Handforth was struck by Stevens' ability, and he was going to offer him a part in his new play.

"You hopeless ass!" said Church, exasperated. "You can't do a thing like that, Handy! Stevens wouldn't look at your tosh! He wouldn't demean himself by mouthing your piffle!"

"My tosh?" asked Handforth. "My piffle?"

"That's all it is!" retorted Church. "That first play of yours was bad enough—the one that Browne burnt—but the new one about Limehouse is too ghastly for words. And you're going to offer Stevens the principal part!"

"It's nothing more or less than an insult to an artist," said McClure, encouraged by his chum's attitude. "The best thing you can do, Handy, is to burn the second play, too. In two minutes you'll be saying that it's better than the one we've just seen."

Handforth stared at his chums dully.

"My hat!" he said, at last. "You—you faithless rotters! Do you mean to say that my play isn't as good as 'THE THIRD CHANCE'? You'd better apologise, or I'll——"

"Chuck it, Handy," said Church. "If you start any of your rot, we'll roll you over, and rub you in the mud! There's a limit to your rot! We're just about fed up with it!"

Once in a while, Church and McClure took a firm stand—and this was one of those celebrated moments. Handforth was nonplussed—but he refrained from drastic action. There was something about Church and McClure which he didn't quite like. They looked capable of carrying out that threat!

"This is all the support I get from my own pals!" he said bitterly. "All right, my sons! We'll see! I've got another idea now! I shan't tell you what it is—but I'll make you sorry for yourselves!"

He stalked off, and Church grinned.

"That's the way to do it," he said calmly. "We mustn't let Handy ride the high horse too much. That play of his is worse than chloroform. One act of it is enough to put a chap into a week's sleep!"

And inside the theatre Mr. Noggs was talking with Barton.

"Laddie, I'm surprised," he was saying. "You've seen the whole play. You've seen the acting. Do you still think the show's no good?"

Browne mournfully tore the script into shreds and dropped them into the blazing fire. Then he gave a breath of thankfulness and beamed.

"'Twas best!" he murmured. "Do not trouble to thank me . . ."

Handforth uttered a curious sound at the back of his throat.

"You've been carried away by this schoolboy enthusiasm, Andy," said Barton contemptuously. "It's got into your head, man. There's nothing in it, I tell you. The show's fair—but nothing else."

"Am I so devoid of judgment?" asked Mr. Noggs. "If I only had a play like that, I could make a fortune!"

"Why not ask the boy for it?" sneered the other.

"I am in no position for that," replied the old showman sadly. "To take the play without money would be dishonest. It is worth hundreds—thousands—but I cannot find such a sum. No. Roger, I can't take advantage of the boy. This play ought to go to the West End."

"If I ever see it there, I'll forfeit a thousand pounds on the spot," said the advance manager. "Forget it, Andy. These boys have talked you over so much

that you've forgotten your own business. You're an idealist, Noggs—that's your trouble. It's a good play—it's a wonderful play——"

"Heaven be praised!" growled the old actor. "Then I am not alone in my opinion. You change like the weathercock, Roger! You veer this way and that way."

"No, I don't," denied Barton. "I was talking from a commercial point of view before. The play is so good that there's no money in it. Dear old Andy, you're hopeless for business. This play is a thing of glory—but it's worthless. We couldn't make a penny on it. The public won't stand that kind of stuff nowadays. The man who put that on in the West End would lose a fortune. Take my advice, and forget it."

He walked out, and Mr. Noggs looked sombre.

"I am old," he muttered. "Maybe I am behind the times. Maybe my wit is deserting me. 'When the age is in, the wit is out'—Shakespeare. Is this man right? Am I so lacking in judgment that I know not what the public wants? Great Cæsar! A sober thought, indeed."

But Mr. Noggs was not such a fool as Mr. Barton would have him believe. For at that very moment the advance manager was walking alone—deep in thought—oblivious of his immediate surroundings. His eyes were glittering, his whole being was aglow with intense inward excitement.

"The old man's right!" he muttered. "That play's the greatest thing of the age! There's a fortune in it—it's worth a mint of gold! Another 'Farmer's Wife'! By gad, what a chance!"

Barton narrowed his eyes as he walked.

"And this play—this brilliant masterpiece—has been lying in that schoolboy's trunk at school!" he went on tensely. "It isn't even copyright. This performance doesn't count. If I seize this opportunity——"

The very thought dazzled him.

"Who's to prove anything?" he asked himself fiercely. "There's only one copy of the play in existence—and if I get hold of it they won't be able to prove a thing! Afterwards it won't matter. I can snap my fingers at the boy and everybody else. Without any proof, they'll be done."

Roger Barton's idea was about as unscrupulous as it could be.

For, then and there he decided to act. He would get this play into his own hands! Somehow or other, he would seize the original script, including the parts. Once copied, he could destroy the originals, and there wouldn't be an atom of evidence left. The play had been lying idle for years, and Stevens had never taken the trouble to protect it.

Barton could claim it as his own work—and have it produced in London. His fortune would be made! It was an idea that took hold of him, and gripped him with its very hugeness.

And in the meantime, at St. Frank's, Horace Stevens was receiving congratulations from all sides—until, indeed, he hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels. Fortunately, Browne was by his side to steady him.

Little did they imagine what lay in store!

THE END.

In Next Week's Splendid Story,

"THE COMEDIAN OF THE REMOVE,"

Handy, in real seriousness, fully believes himself to be a second SHAKESPEARE, HENRY IRVING and SEXTON BLAKE rolled in one.

And when Handy is serious, he is at his funniest, as you will agree when you read this side-splitting story.

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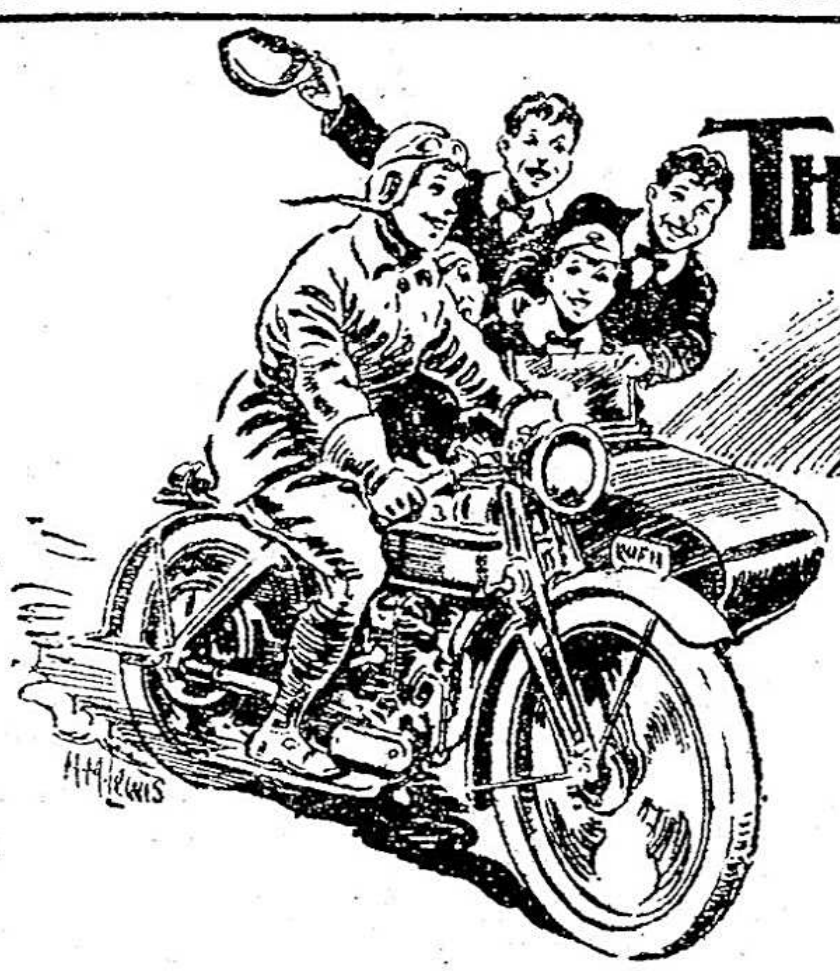

THE CALCROFT CASE.

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 the world-famous detective, Sexton Blake, pays a surprise visit to Calcroft, his old school. While motor-cycling with a former school chum, Tinker witnesses a motor-car tragedy, the driver being killed by revolver-shots fired from behind a hedge. The murderers had mysteriously vanished. The dead man is afterwards identified as a bookmaker named Aggsby, and it is believed that he was a victim of a race-gang feud. Tinker has a theory that Aggsby was killed in mistake for another man. The mystery of the affair deepens, and Tinker persuades Sexton Blake to investigate, which explains why the great detective accepts a temporary vacancy as sports master at Calcroft, and why Tinker takes the opportunity of polishing up his studies at the old school.

(Now read on.)

CHAPTER IX.

THE MISSING STONE.

FROM the study window, a couple of days later Master Jack Hasland, otherwise Sexton Blake's assistant, Tinker, and Master Lionel Fane watched the members of the Calcroft Cadet Corps doing physical jerks. Very smart they looked, in their white flannel slacks, singlets, and canvas shoes, and very smartly and in perfect time they imitated the evolutions of the new gymnastic instructor, Mr. Basil Strong.

"Well, there's one thing about it, old bean," said Fane, who, of course, was in the secret, "your guv'nor knows more about it than old Corby ever did, though Corby was a fairly good one. And doesn't he look the part, eh? You can see his muscles twinkle as he waggles those Indian clubs about. That's the stuff to give the bounders! Corby was too stiff in the joints to make 'em perspire, but you'll be able to wring water out of them by the time your boss is through with them."

There were many good points about Tinker's study-mates—Pye, Fane, Bindley, and Manners—and one of the best, from Tinker's point of view, was that they did not badger him with questions. And as, quite naturally, the four juniors were almost bursting with curiosity, their self-restraint was worthy of all praise.

Sexton Blake's clear voice rang across the quadrangle, giving the order to dismiss, and the perspiring cadets admitted to each other that they had had a dusting. Tinker, who was supposed to be taking special lessons from Mr. Pycroft, M.A., for some imaginary examination, turned away from the window as Master Wilberforce Stott came in. Fane took Wilberforce gently by the tip of his long nose, and peered at him.

"Not a spot," he said; "not a vestige of a green blob. They've all gone, Wilb, and I'm almost sorry. It's a pity they wore off, for, in my opinion, they were the best part of your face. Don't you miss 'em, too, Jack? Don't you remember his lovely green blotches?"

"I fancy you wired to me that some low thief had stolen 'em," said Tinker. "How's the game, Wilberforce?"

"I really came to pay Bindley back a shilling he generously advanced," said Wilberforce. "I have been amazingly lucky, for, quite unexpectedly, I received a postal order for five shillings from home."

"For the love of Mike, don't let Beilby know you've got five bob, or he'll want to live with you," said Fane.

"Really, when I have paid Bindley, four shillings is very little for the purpose, which

means there will be six of us," went on Wilberforce Stott; "but you fellows have been so good to me that I'd like you to come to the tuck-shop and regale yourselves to the extent of eightpence per head, which, of course, will be only a small repast, everything being so terribly dear."

"You're a jolly good sort, but there's nothing doing," said Fane. "We've given up eating tuck-shop stuff, haven't we, Jack? You stick to your four bob. It's very nice of you, and all that, but your invitation is off."

Wilberforce clumped away in his thick-soled boots, very much relieved in his mind, for pocket-money was scarce, and he wanted the four shillings to purchase seeds for the little garden he cultivated beside the river. The garden was not always a success, for the river had a habit of flooding unexpectedly, which, though it might have improved watercress, did very little good to the crops. What the river spared generally went to the wild rabbits, for there were swarms of them in the woods, and when Stott's garden was beginning to fill its owner's heart with pride, the rabbits usually made a midnight raid in full force and gnawed it flat.

"What's your gadget this afternoon, Jack?" asked Fane. "Out on your own, or what? It's a 'half,' if you didn't know it."

"Dunno quite," said Tinker. "I might meet you later. Is Calcroft Town in bounds to-day?"

"It is unless Pycroft has got a bee in his bonnet and cuts it out," answered Fane, opening the window. "I'll tell you in a second. Hi, Reffel!" he shouted to a passing junior. "Slip in, like a decent son of a gun, and see if there's anything on the notice-board about the town."

"Oh, take it in!" said Reffel, glancing up. "That window of yours reminds me of a butcher's shop after he's almost sold out. Only one sheep's head left. If you want to know what's on the notice-board, crawl down and see for yourself."

"You seem to have quite a lot of nice, polite kids about," said Tinker, as Reffel left.

"M'yes, we do find a few of 'em," grinned Fane. "I'll give him sheep's head next time I bump against him. Out of bounds or in bounds, we'll meet you in Calcroft, if that's what you mean, only you're not going to do all the paying. You're too fond of that."

"Make it about three, then," said Tinker. "I can't absolutely promise to turn up, so don't wait more than a quarter of an hour."

"Outside the picture-hall, then. Go up the turning next Bloomby's shop. If you don't know Bloomby's shop, sniff till you smell fish, and then follow your nose."

Tinker put on his cap with the Calcroft badge, and, instead of crossing the bridge, he took the road to Potter's farm. Calcroft's new gymnastic instructor was seated on a stile, smoking strong tobacco in an old and squeaky briar pipe.

"Tired after your jerks, guv'nor?" asked Tinker.

"Not a bit, young 'un," answered Sexton Blake. "I'm just enjoying my pipe and the view, and thinking a bit. A pretty place, Calcroft."

"And when you've finished enjoying the view?"

"I'm going down to the corner. We'd better let the boys clear out of the way first. I want to look at that corner."

It was quiet enough when they turned back. The gate of the private road was shut, and, leaning his arms on it, Sexton Blake looked lazily about him. On his left the road narrowed and curved round towards Calcroft Green. Almost opposite was the hilly Barren Tor road, and on his right the road to the town.

"That's the post the car hit, guv'nor," said Tinker; "the second one."

Blake nodded.

"They fired from the other side, there's no doubt about that," he said. "Nothing to be found, I suppose?"

They crossed over. The corner, with its rough grass and bushes, had already been searched by the police, and later by Detective Dedgard.

Sexton Blake poked about with the walking-stick he was carrying, and then stood still.

"Was the entrance gate shut, Tinker?"

"Yes; I pushed it open when I was waiting for Bindley," answered Tinker.

"It's a fine gate, young 'un," said Sexton Blake, "and they use good paint at Calcroft and don't spare it. It would show up in the dark."

"White generally does," said Tinker.

Swinging the walking-stick, Sexton Blake went further down the road till Calcroft Green, with its shining pond, came into view. One side of the pond came close up to the road. The pond was railed off and the railings were painted as dazzlingly white as the entrance gates, for they were school property, and all the school property was kept in excellent repair.

"Now we'll stroll back, young 'un," said Sexton Blake.

They were well on the way to Calcroft Town before the private detective spoke again.

"What did you think about it?" he asked, knocking his pipe against a tree to clear out the ashes.

To most people the question would have been so much Greek, but not to Tinker.

"Well, to somebody who didn't know the way, it would be an easy direction, guv'nor. If I'd wanted to meet you at that particular corner, provided you were coming towards Calcroft and not from it, nothing could be easier. You couldn't miss the common, and it must be jolly dark when you can't see a pond with a white railing round it."

"Of course. If you'd written or 'phoned to me to keep round by the pond after I'd crossed the common, and pull up at the first white gate I saw, I don't think I'd have missed you, young 'un," said the private detective. "You can see the avenue gate whether open or shut, but better when it's shut. Was it open when you rode into the town?"

"Yes, for I'd remember if I'd had to get down and open it. I must ask Bindley, for he biked down after me. It's generally open, though it isn't to-day, but it was certainly shut when the shooting happened. I wonder if that brute, or brutes, shut it purposely?"

"A queer appointment to make if it was an appointment," said Sexton Blake. "A diabolical trick. It was the right place to get their victim. When he saw the gate he'd pull up right alongside the ambush."

"And there you have it, guv'nor," cried Tinker. "Aggsby wasn't pulling up. He couldn't help seeing the gate, but he was passing it, so it's jolly plain to me he was the wrong man. He'd slowed, but he didn't intend to stop until he saw a signpost or somebody coming along he could ask. If those shots hadn't been fired, he'd have asked me where he was, for the poor chap had lost his way. The villains weren't waiting for Aggsby at all, but for the man who didn't come, the man who was taken to Wisthorpe Hospital."

"We might make a worse shot than that, young 'un," said Sexton Blake. "I'll turn off here and go along the towing-path. We'd better keep apart at first. By the way, you might bring the car up and put it in the garage on the Barren Tor road, where it will be close and handy."

"All serene," said Tinker.

Things did not look very hopeful to Tinker from a professional point of view. He was quite convinced in his own mind that the man who had escaped from Wisthorpe Hospital and disappeared so mysteriouly was the man for whom the murderers were lying in wait, not the unhappy bookmaker—James Burton Aggsby—who had been the victim of tragic misfortune.

"And if the other chap has made a hole in the water, and they can't trace the car, that will about put paid to it," Tinker thought. "Anyhow, a week or so at Calcroft will be as good as a holiday."

The first person he saw in the town with whom he was acquainted was Beilby, and Beilby greeted him with a friendly smile.

To Beilby Tinker was a new kid, and new kids, whether big or small, are generally green and often have cash.

"Oh, I say, Hasland, I've done such a silly thing, you know, and it's put me in a bit of a hole," gushed the wily one. "Put on the wrong waistcoat like a silly ass, and left a pound note in the other one. Went into Jarry's and bought toffee and stuff, and then found I hadn't got a rap on me. If it had been a strange shop I should have felt an awful ass, but, of course, they know me at Jarry's. You might let me have five bob till I get back. Beastly inconvenient to be without cash, you know."

"I haven't got five bob," said Tinker. "I've got two half-sovereign notes, and if you'd like one till to-night, you can have it."

Beilby nearly fainted, and fell off the pavement into the gutter. It seemed like a dream, far too good and wonderful to be true.

"You'll pay me back to-night, cert," said Tinker.

"Absolutely, the very first thing," said Beilby, clutching the note with greedy fingers. "You're a jolly good chap, Hasland, and I wish you hadn't got in with that crowd of rotters, for they'll twist you. You can treat 'em and treat 'em till you're broke, but they'll never treat you back. I know 'em. If you ever want a pal, you come to me. I'll back you up through thick and thin. So long, old man."

Hugging himself with delight, Beilby jumped on a passing omnibus, and jumped off again before the conductor could collect his fare. Tinker grinned. His half-sovereign had gone, and he never expected to see it back in cash, but he meant to have full value for it.

It was too early to keep his appointment with the juniors, but he stopped at the fish-shop. The proprietor of the shop was Bloomby, the mayor of Calcroft, but having amassed much wealth and attained to high civic dignity, the mayor kept away from the shop.

Beilby was coming back, so Tinker glided round the corner. Calcroft was famous for shrimps and Beilby was fond of them. He spent threepence of Tinker's money on half-a-pint of these dainties in Mr. Bloomby's shop. When he emerged eating shrimps, shells included, out of a paper bag, he was not too pleased to find the new boy waiting for him.

"I'm awfully sorry, Beilby, but I find I'm running myself a bit short," said Tinker. "They forgot to pack me any pyjamas, and I had to borrow a suit from Bindley last night. I want to buy one lot till I get mine from home, so let me have five bob back."

This was a bit sudden, but it did not upset Beilby.

"Oh, rot," he said. "If you've worn the things once, they'll have to be washed, and they won't cost any more for washing if you wear 'em a month. And for the love of Mike don't buy anything of that sort in Calcroft, for they're a pack of thieves."

"But I must have them," said Tinker, "so give me back five shillings and the rest to-night."

"Oh, don't be an ass. They'll ask you about a guinea for a decent lot, and you're not the sort of chap who'd wear cheap

trash. I say, old top, I've got a clinking outfit, pink and red and blue stripes and real doggy. They're too big for me, but they'll fit you a treat. Cheap as dirt they are at fifteen or sixteen shillings, but as you're a pal you can have 'em for a dollar. No, I'll give 'em to you—for four bob. Regular dandies, old bean, and you'll fancy yourself when you've got 'em on. Four bob to you, fifteen to anybody else."

"I don't want any second-hand pyjamas. I want five shillings," said Tinker.

"Gee! Here's my 'bus," said Beilby, and sprinted after the vehicle.

"One to Beilby," muttered Tinker, still grinning. "Cunning little rat. He'll wish he'd never seen that half-sov. before I'm through with him."

There was no Tinker when Fane, Bindley, Pye and Manners arrived outside the picture hall, but he did not keep them waiting. He drove up in the car and was greeted with cheers.

"Never mind the pictures, you rebels," he said. "We'll have a buzz round and have some fresh air."

There was quite a fight for the seat beside Tinker, and Bindley won.

"Where to?" asked Tinker.

"Make it Wisthorpe, old son," said Fane. "There's a rattling good little tuck shop just over the bridge, and a good road all the way. Cheap, too, and good stuff. It's a fine ride to Hipdale woods, but they rush you twice as much there for tea as they do at the other place."

"Awful thieves," agreed Manners. "Fivepence they charged me for a ham sandwich, and nothing in it except mustard. Give that show a miss. If you go to Hipdale take your own grub with you and sit on the refreshment-room doorstep and eat it. That makes 'em wild."

"And if Tinker starts bouncing and wanting to pay, we'll soak his head in his own petrol and put a light to it," said Manners.

This kind suggestion on the part of Manners was greeted with loud applause as Tinker drove up the hill. And when Tinker told Bindley he had lent Beilby half-a-sovereign, and Bindley passed the news back to the others, there were roars of laughter.

"You'll never see the colour of that cash if you live umpteen thousand years unless you take it away from him by force," said Fane.

"And he'll watch it that when you do try force you won't find fourpence-halfpenny on him," said Bindley.

"Don't fret. I'll have a good run for my cash," said Tinker. "Now I'm going to let her out, so I hope there aren't any police-traps. Hold on to your caps. This old 'bus can hop it a bit when you tread on the gas."

Tinker hooted a warning, swung into the Barren Tor road, and set the big car at the steep hill. She swept up and over it like a bird, and dropped humming into the valley and up over Little Tor on a long round. When they pulled up at Wisthorpe Bridge after a glorious ride, Bindley nodded approvingly.

"And not locked up yet," he said. "Old Tinker has absolutely busted the law, chaps. Thirty-seven miles in forty-one minutes isn't exactly crawling. Are you all here, or have we spilled a few of you?"

There was a putting-green in the garden of the snug little riverside tea-house, and after tea Fane, Bindley, Pye, and Manners indulged in a round. After watching them for a time, Tinker happened to glance up, and recognised the roofs and chimneys of the hospital Sexton Blake had pointed out to him. The Calder, a swift and shallow stream for most of its course, ran deep and quickly in that particular reach, and if it had been thoroughly dragged, and a body was there, it was strange that the body had not been found.

"I could go over that lot in a day myself with a drag," thought Tinker; "and if there was anything it it, I bet I'd get it out."

A hundred yards above him and less than two hundred yards below him he could see reeds and rushes where the deep water ended and the shallows began. Tinker went to the end of the garden, and passed under the arch of the bridge. It was a stone bridge, but had been widened by building an iron structure on the hospital side of it.

There was a boat tethered to the bank, with oars in it. Tinker stepped into the boat and pulled up the reach, and found himself in front of the hospital grounds. There was no fence, except a line of iron hurdles. He noticed the circular flower-beds edged with stones that had been cemented together. In the centre one a stone was missing, leaving a gap. The stones were big, rough flints dug out of the chalk-pits on the downs, and much in demand for making rockeries.

"Now where the thump did that chunk of stone go to?" Sexton Blake's observant assistant asked himself. "If the gardener had knocked it out when he was rolling the grass, he'd have put it back. Like a missing tooth, it quite spoils the effect."

Tinker was so impressed that he went ashore. He had only time to discover that it was quite easy to pull the flints away from the cement, when he heard a shrill female voice shouting that there was a lad stealing flowers. Though quite guiltless, Tinker thought it would be a lot easier to leave than to explain, so he sprinted back to the boat and left.

The juniors had finished the game, Bindley and Fane, as partners, having made hacks of Pye and Manners.

Take it easy on the run back, especially when we get near Calcroft," said Bindley. "Our special slop, Blagg, will be on duty. He's dead nuts on speed merchants. Gee!

Wouldn't he cheer up if he could collect the whole bunch of us, and haul us up before fat Bloomby, the mayor. Not such a bad ruffian, Blagg, but he believes in doing his duty."

"Blagg or no Blagg, she going to hustle," said Tinker; "and if I'm caught, it won't be your funeral."

Luckily, they did not encounter Blagg. After garaging the car, Tinker went to Blake's rooms, lately tenanted by Mr. Corby. They were in Windover's house, and right on the top of it.

"Then you are back, guv'nor," said Tinker, when Sexton Blake opened the door. "Pretty comfy?"

"Not so bad, young 'un. My predecessor was a tidy sort of chap, and left things neat and clean. Both the Head and Mr. Pycroft are upset because I have to do my own cooking. They'd like me to breakfast, dine and lunch with them, but that would settle it. Where have you been?"

"A run round in the car, and been at Wisthorpe with the noble four," said Tinker. "Done anything?"

"Not much," answered Sexton Blake. "I saw the inspector and the local detective, and I think they'd give their lives to know what we're after. I wish they'd find that hospital man, dead or alive. Of course, the police are positive that he's dead."

"You mentioned it, then, guv'nor?"

"Only quite casually. They say he'll turn up when the next flood comes along."

Tinker whistled thoughtfully.

"You didn't go through the hospital grounds?" he asked.

"Only along the terrace at the top where he had climbed out," answered Sexton Blake. "I had a look at them from the bridge."

"Then you couldn't have seen what I saw," said Tinker. "There's a flint wall about two feet high built round the flowerbeds, and from one of them a big chunk of flint is missing. Of course, it may have been missing for a long time, but if it hasn't and nobody has noticed it, they must be blind."

"Do you mean you think the man tied it round his neck to make sure of sinking?"

"He might have tied it with the cord of his pyjamas," said Tinker.

"Or he may only have sunk the pyjamas."

"You've got me, guv'nor," said Tinker. "Of course, if he's down there, the police ought to have got him. Also, if he's not down there, they ought to have got the pyjamas. I wish I'd gone and asked them when they missed that chunk of rock; but somebody yelled that I was stealing the flowers, so I cleared."

"Try a bluff," said Blake, "for I fancy you've made an important discovery. Ring up the matron and ask her about it. Not from here, as it's such an odd thing to inquire about, they may ask at the exchange where the call came from."

"I'll scoot down to the slot 'phone in the railway station, and do it from there," said Tinker. "I've put the 'bus where you told me."

Within half an hour Tinker was back again, grinning wildly

"I got the matron all right, guv'nor," he explained, "and when I mentioned the missing chunk she told me it was Wisthorpe Hospital, and as it seemed to be the asylum I wanted, I'd got the wrong number. Then I bluffed that the police wanted to know, which is true enough, for if they had our clue they'd want to know jolly badly. She told me it was the first she'd heard about the missing stone. They've got a new gardener, it seems, though I couldn't catch how long he'd been there, so I rang off."

"A new gardener wouldn't report a thing like that, young 'un," said the private detective. "He'd notice it was untidy, and look about for another stone to fill up the gap. We had better go and have a look."

"And if we're lucky, what do you expect to find down there?"

"The same as you—pyjamas."

Tinker nodded.

"Great minds think alike, guv'nor," he said. "If we find those pyjamas there'll be something to think about. We've got a lamp that will do the trick; and I'll rattle back into the town and get some fishhooks. We could borrow the Head's motor-launch, but it's a rotten drag up to Wisthorpe by river, and two or three locks to go through. It must be in the dark, for that bridge is a bit too public in daylight. We should have too many people watching our fishing."

"We'll go to Aperling," said Blake. "They have boats at the hotel where we lunched, and it's an easy pull down to Wisthorpe and back. There's nothing surprising in taking a fancy to row in the dusk. We shall be late, so you'd better ask Mr. Pycroft to lend you a key, and remind him not to lock you out. Make it about eight, and meet me at the garage."

CHAPTER X

WRECKED!

AS this was not a joy-ride as the previous one had been, Tinker took the shortest route. As it was an easy run back to the school, Sexton Blake did not book bed-rooms at the hotel, but ordered dinner. The hotel did not seem to be doing a very flourishing trade, for they appeared to be the only visitors.

"Well, it's a nice evening for a row, guv'nor," said Tinker. "Trade seems rotten, doesn't it? There's a fine Rolls-Royce in the garage, and if that belongs to the boss of this place, this must be a jolly quiet

(*Continued on page* 40.)

CAREERS FOR BOYS

— By A. C. HORTH —

THE CARPENTER.

CARPENTRY AND JOINERY COMPARED.

Of all the trades connected with building, that of the carpenter is probably the oldest, and although it is usual to couple together the trade of the carpenter with that of the joiner, there is a considerable difference between them. Carpentry includes all structural work, and is usually of a heavy nature, the material being prepared and fixed on the building. Joinery includes the internal fittings of a useful as well as an ornamental nature, the material being prepared in a workshop and brought to the building to which it is to be fixed.

WHERE CARPENTERS CAN LEARN THEIR TRADE.

The trade of the carpenter is not entirely confined to building operations, it is required in several other industries, but as it is usual for carpenters employed in industries other than building to learn their trade under similar conditions to carpenters engaged in building operations, it is not necessary to give separate details. In large towns and with big building concerns, it is usual for a carpenter to spend the whole of his time in structural work on buildings, but in small towns and country districts, all the carpentry and joinery is carried out generally by men who have had a good training in both these branches of woodworking.

VARIED NATURE OF HIS WORK.

The work of the carpenter is of a very varied nature, and includes the construction of roofs, some of which are of elaborate construction; the construction of floors with the necessary beams, joists, etc.; the making of partitions and the framework for bungalows and temporary buildings; and the making of fences and gates, including the elaborate forms of the lych-gate. The carpenter should be familiar with the methods of constructing masons' and bricklayers' scaffolding, gantries to carry travellers and staging for building piers, etc. He should understand centering for bridges and cradling and temporary casing for ferro-concrete; the methods of shoring and underpinning for new foundations, the construction of domes and cupolas, and he may be called upon to provide struts in the construction of shafts and mines and lattice, bow spring and arched rib trusses for bridges and viaducts.

REQUIRES KNOWLEDGE OF TIMBER.

The carpenter must have a thorough knowledge of the various kinds of timber and their uses, the methods of seasoning, the defects of timber, and its durability in wet and dry positions, trade marks, and the marketable sizes, and must be acquainted with the mechanical principles involved, especially with regard to resistance to compression, tension, and cross-strain. He must have a sufficient knowledge of geometry to apply it to all forms of construction, as in the finding of bevels in hipped roofs, angle brackets, groined ceilings, etc.; and he should be able to make working drawings and set out work to full size from scale drawings. He must also have an intimate knowledge of all the joints used in carpentry, and be able to apply them properly.

TENDENCY FOR SPECIALISATION.

It will be seen that a considerable amount of experience is necessary to carry out all the work that a carpenter is expected to do, but the common tendency in nearly all trades to specialise in one or more branches of the work, has prevented a large number of carpenters acquiring an all-round experience. Many apprentices and learners have no opportunity of getting into practical touch with more than the simplest kinds of roof and floor constructions, and unless they are able to attend trade classes, where they can get practical as well as theoretical training, they find that their opportunities are limited. It is rarely that an apprentice can gain an all-round experience during his period of training, and it is usual to spend a few years as an improver, working at different branches of the trade, in order to become thoroughly qualified.

A HEALTHY AND WELL-PAID CALLING.

The trade of the carpenter, especially when combined with that of the joiner, is a healthy one, and it is generally well paid. It is a highly-skilled craft, and for many years to come is not likely to be overcrowded. The period of apprenticeship, where it obtains, is usually five years, with or without premium; but during this period, it is necessary for the learner to collect a good outfit of tools. For a beginner

(*Continued on page* 40.)

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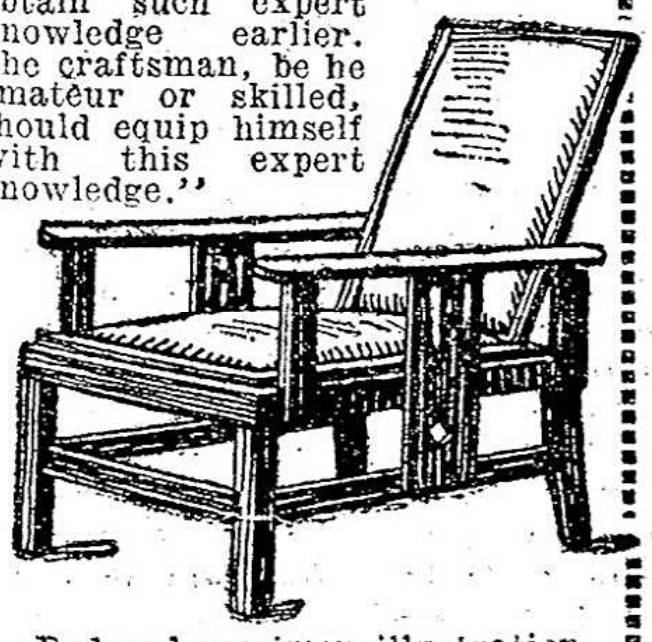

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(*Continued from page* 38.)

the essential tools will cost between four and five pounds. Many firms will supply their apprentices with sufficient tools for a start, deducting a small amount from wages until they are paid for, but for a few years, it will be necessary to add to the outfit.

TRADE CLASSES IN ALL THE BIG TOWNS.

Trade classes for carpenters and joiners are general in all the large cities, and in London there are exceptional facilities, as in the trades training schools of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters at Great Titchfield Street, W., and the L.C.C. School of Building at Brixton. The principal trade union is the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers. The Worshipful Company of Carpenters are prepared to favourably consider helping necessitous cases with the payment of an apprenticeship premium for boys anxious to become carpenters or joiners.

"THE CALCROFT CASE"

(*Continued from page* 37.)

evening for business, or else he has a private income. Gosh! I believe he's actually got another customer."

The waiter was laying another table. He put a vase of flowers on it and a bottle of champagne.

"Roath!" muttered Tinker, as the diner came in and sat down.

The private detective gave a quick nod. Roath did not look their way, but opened the newspaper the waiter brought him and read it until his soup was brought. After the second course he told the waiter he wanted no more. The champagne was opened, and he lighted a cigar, and its exquisite aroma drifted across the dining-room to Sexton Blake and Tinker.

"We'll have coffee outside," said Blake to the waiter.

"Seems almost a pity to leave the smell of that cigar, guv'nor," said Tinker. "I'm no smoker, but I'll bet they cost a good deal more than fourpence."

"A Clarinada," said Blake. "You'd be nearer the mark if you said thirty shillings. He has a very pretty idea of a good cigar. Ask the waiter about a boat. It will come more naturally from you, as grown-up men generally prefer to take a rest after dinner."

There was no difficulty about a boat, and they had the choice of three.

"If you don't know the river, I shouldn't advise you to go below the railway bridge, which is the second bridge," said the waiter. "It starts to run fast there, and it ain't easy to get back. A funny sort of river is the Calder. Where's she slow she's dead slow, and where she's fast she's a regular millrace. Very often visitors take a boat out and get below the railway-bridge. Generally, they leave the boat and walk back, and we have to send for it."

"Then if I'm going with you, Jack," said Sexton Blake to Tinker, "be very careful not to take me below the railway bridge, for I don't intend to do any rowing, and I strongly object to having to walk back. While I admire your energy I prefer to digest my dinner quietly. I don't mind a lazy game of billiards after dinner, but rowing is too much like hard work."

The sun had set, and there was still a fading tinge of red in the water when Tinker pushed off. Roath had come out of the dining-room, and was standing on the terrace. He watched them pull away.

"Take it easy, young 'un," said Blake, "for it won't be dark for some time yet."

"And if we're a long time they won't be anxious about us," said Tinker. "They'll only think we've got too far down and are having to tie up to the bank and walk home. I want to get down while there's a bit of light to make sure of the place. That was Roath's car in the garage," he added. "I asked the waiter."

"What was the matter with it?"

"Nothing that I know of," answered Tinker. "It wasn't such a bad dinner as dinners go, but if I were a millionaire and so close to home with a Rolls-Royce to take me there, I don't think I'd dine at a country hotel. Perhaps his French chef has sacked himself, or Roath has had a row with his wife."

"You may be correct about the cook, but I fancy Roath is a bachelor," said Sexton Blake. "You can go faster now, for it's clouding over."

Tinker rowed past the tea-shop and under the first bridge, and then let the boat drift. Lights gleamed in the windows of the hospital, and then became partially obscured as the blinds were drawn.

"We're dead opposite the flower-bed with the missing stone now, guv'nor," said Tinker. "We can't start fishing yet, for they can see us from the bridge, and it will be a bit of a puzzle to get on the mark again when it's darker."

"I can manage that," said Blake. "How large was the missing flint, Tinker?"

"Now you've got me, but by the size of the gap it was a hefty bit of rock, too big to pitch very far."

Tinker pulled back and tied the boat to one of the piles of the bridge. They waited there for quite half an hour, and the traffic on the bridge became less frequent and the gloom deepened.

"We'll make a move now, young un," said Blake. "I'll do the navigating and you do the fishing."

(*To be continued.*)

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Special Sketch by Mr. Briscoe, for "The Nelson Lee Library," of

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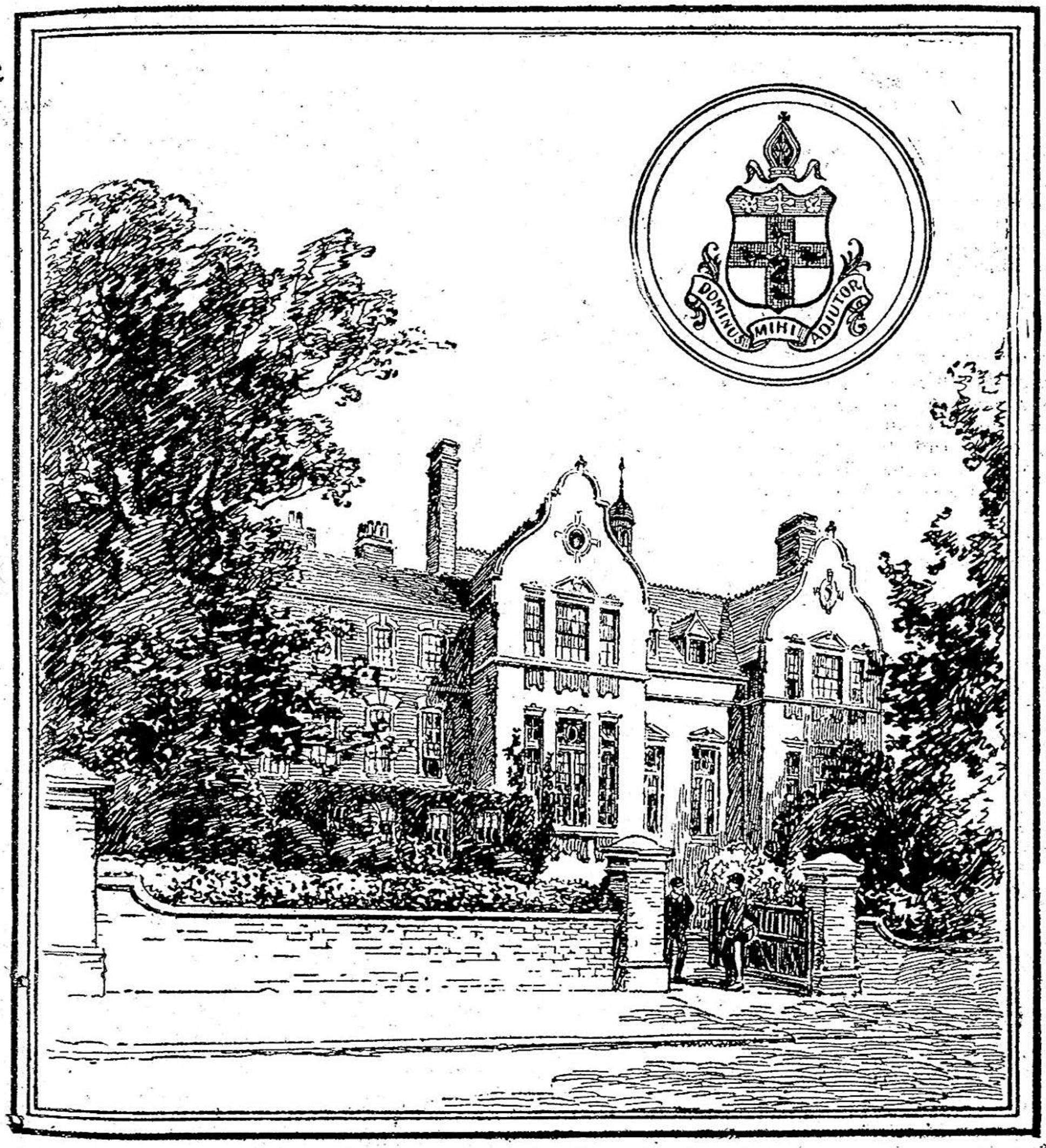

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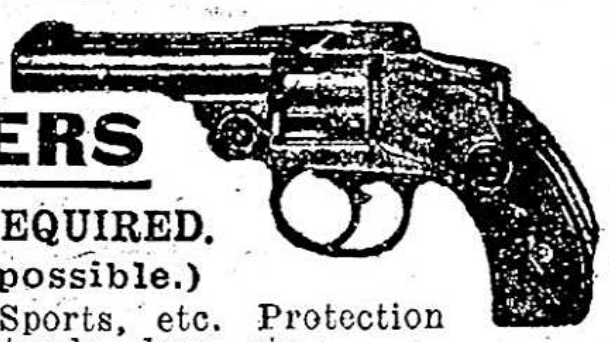

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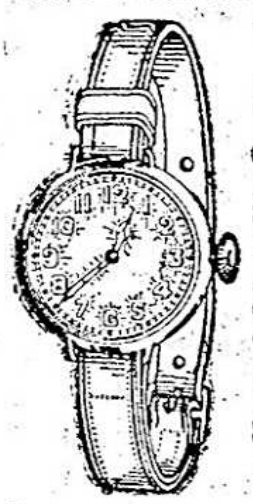

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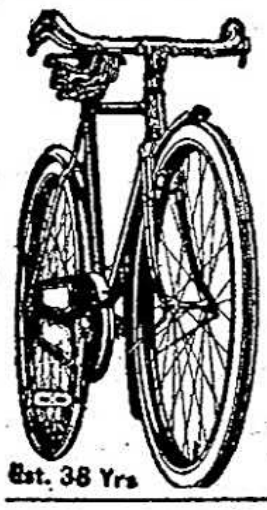

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