HANDFORTH PRODUCES HIS GREAT PLAY!

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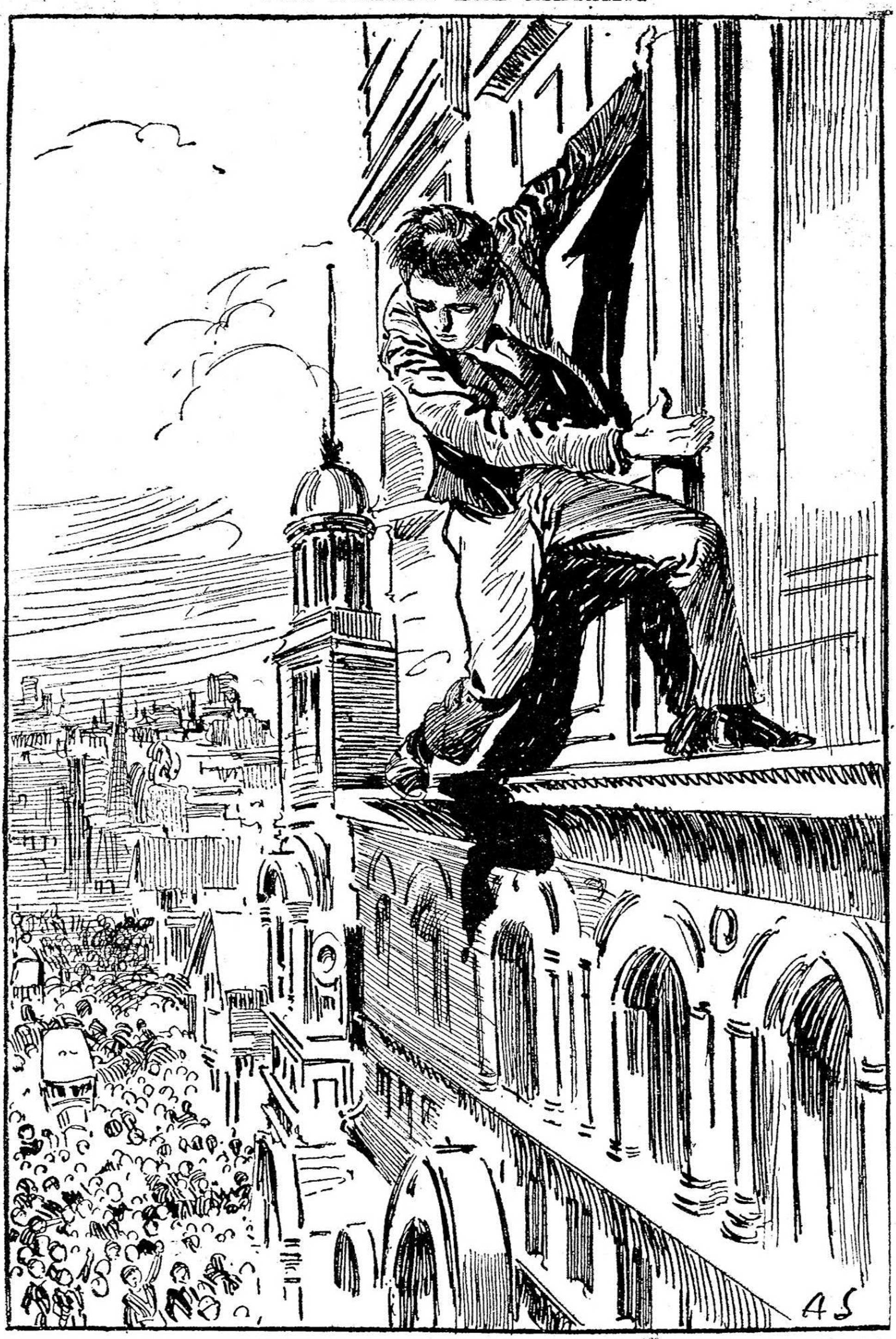
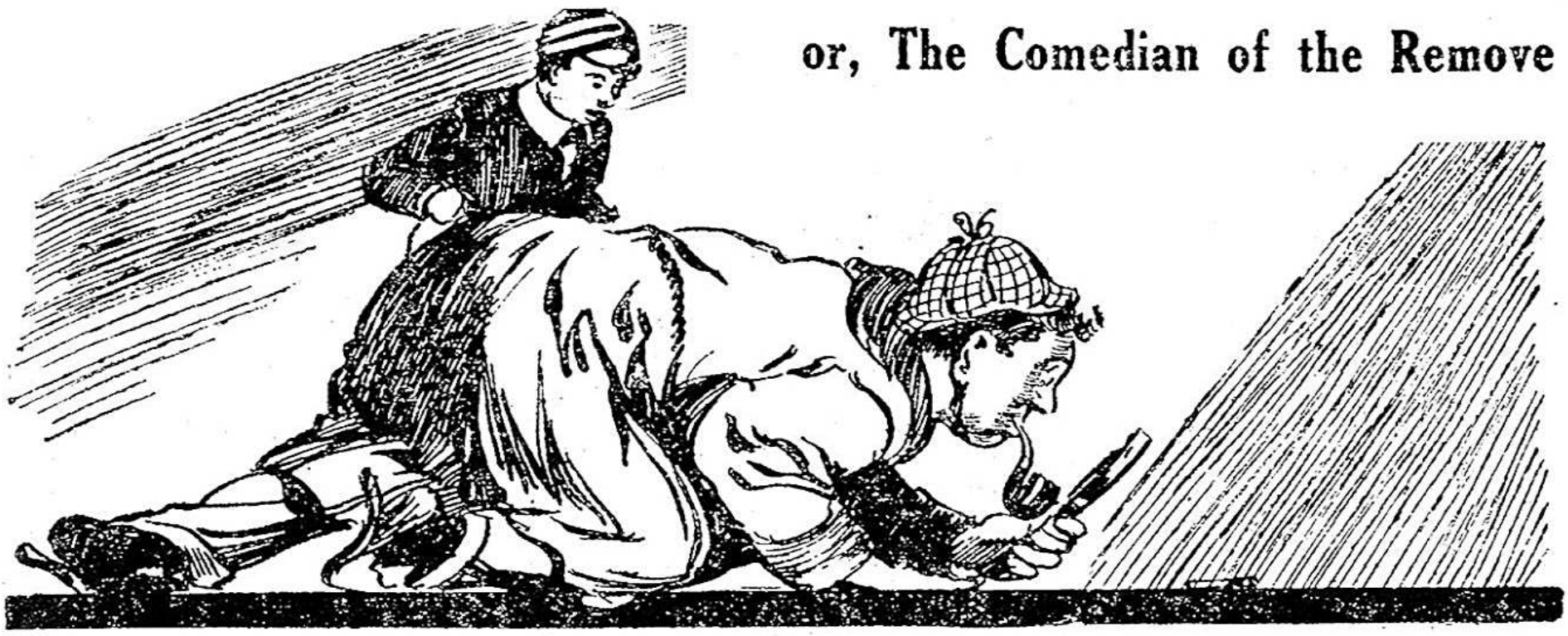


Suddenly, a long gasp sounded—rippling over the Square like the sound of a breaking wave. Johnny had suddenly slipped. He clutched desperately, and hung there.

HANDFORTH ON THE TRAIL;

or, The Comedian of the Remove!



A Side-splitting Yarn of Handy on the Stage.

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER 1.

THE SCHOOLBOY PLAYWRIGHT.

FATTY LITTLE put his head hungrily round the door of Study D.

"Great pancakes!" he ejaculated blankly.

The fat junior of the Remove was hot on the trail. He was on the warpath. To be absolutely exact, he was engaged in a hamper hunt—one of his favourite pastimes.

It generally happened that one fellow or another received a tuck hamper, and these food arrivals were of daily occurrence—either in the Remove, the Fourth, or the Third. Fatty Little had an unerring scent for these occasions.

It was nearly tea-time, and Fatty had heard, on good authority, that Church was the lucky recipient of a big hamper. Fatty was filled with a determination to hunt it to earth.

But Study D was empty, save for Edward Oswald Handforth. There was no sign of Walter Church, and there was certainly no hamper. Tea, apparently, was not even on the schedule. For Handforth was working at high pressure. He seemed to be fighting the clock. Seated at the table, he was writing furiously, and sheets of paper surrounded him.

They smothered the table, they overflowed on to the floor, and the fireplace was littered with screwed-up fragments which had obviously been discarded from time to time. There was rather a wild look in Handforth's eye, and his hair was ruffled. He had no idea of Fatty's presence.

"My only hat!" said Fatty, staring. "Poor old scout! Old Crowell must have given him about a thousand lines! I say, Handy!" he added, raising his voice.

Fatty Little was full of sympathy. Practically the whole of St. Frank's was taking advantage of the fine afternoon, for the March day was sunny, springlike and placid. Football was the general pastime, but thoughts of cricket were taking a more concrete form. Some of the fags had fished out ancient bats and unspherical balls, and were indulging in preliminary canters.

"I say, Handy!" repeated Fatty, raising his voice.

Edward Oswald Handforth looked up, and started.

"Go away!" he barked. "Who told you to come in? And what do you mean by smashing that lock?"

"You ass, I haven't smashed anything!"

"Don't argue!" roared Handforth. "I locked the door. Do you think I don't know? Don't interrupt me now—I'm busy!"

"I was wondering if you'd seen Church ——"

"Then you'd better go and wonder somewhere else!" interrupted Handforth. "I pitched him out about half an hour ago—McClure, too. The fatheads came in here with a rotten hamper, and wanted to unpack it."

Fatty stared.

"And—and you kicked them out?" he asked, amazedly.

"Yes, hamper and all!" retorted Handforth. "Like their nerve, bothering about

their beastly tuck while I'm busy on my new play."

Fatty's brain reeled.

"Great frying sausages!" he ejaculated. "You don't seem to realise that that tuck hamper is about ten times more important than your silly old play! I've heard about it, Handy—and all the chaps are saying that you've gone off your rocker."

Handforth slowly rose.

"Are you going out of this study quietly, or do you want to get kicked out?" he demanded darkly. "This play of mine is the greatest drama that's ever been written! It's the most wonderful thriller that's ever come from the pen of a playwright."

"There's nothing like modesty!" grinned Fatty. "By the way, I suppose you can't tell me where Church went to with that hamper?" he added anxiously.

"Of course I can't tell you!" growled Handforth. "How should I know? I've got something more important to think about. As a matter of fact, I've just finished this play," he added, with satisfaction. "You came in at the last minute. I only need to collect it together now, and then it can be put straight into production."

Fatty Little nodded.

"What's it about?" he asked, playing for time. "I heard you were bringing Chinese into it, and Yung Ching was pretty indignant. Unless you're careful, Handy, you'll be treading on somebody's corns."

Fatty was edging his way towards the cupboard. He hadn't given up the hamper hunt, but he was a firm believer in seizing every opportunity that offered. And if the cupboard of Study D contained some tuck, it would be quite an easy matter—with Handforth in his present abstracted mood—to annex a certain proportion of it.

"Chinese?" repeated Handforth contemptuously. "I've given that up long ago. This is a detective play! It's a thriller. It's full of hair-raising surprises. And the mystery is maintained until the very last minute! Just wait until you hear some of it."

"Hear some of it?" repeated Fatty, startled. "Oh, rather!"

The prospect was black, but it had certain advantages. If Handforth started on his play, he wouldn't know anything that went on around him, and Fatty would have the full range of the cupboard at his mercy. The idea of hearing Handforth's play wasn't so bad, after all.

"You needn't think I'm going to read any of it, though," said Handforth curtly. "Not likely! Get out of this study, you food burglar! You've only come here to see what you can scrounge."

Fatty was shocked at this bald statement of fact.

"I say, chuck it!" he protested. "You know jolly well I was looking for Church! But this play of yours sounds marvellous, Handy! Don't be a rotter! Let's hear some of it!"

Handforth looked at the fat junior suspiciously.

"I'm not sure that I'll lower myself," he said tartly. "A playwright mustn't make himself too cheap, you know. Still, I might let you hear the first scene. This play's all about Trackett Grim, the world-famous investigator. Of course, I shall play Trackett Grim."

"That play ought to be stunning!" said Fatty, with hearty approval, as he edged open the cupboard door. "What about Splinter, Trackett Grim's assistant? I suppose he comes in, too?"

"Rather!" agreed the leader of Study D. "Of course, I've used Splinter as a foil. He's an awful dud in the play—just to make Trackett Grim all the cleverer. Detective writers always do that, you know," he added carelessly. "Look at poor old Watson."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Why, he's made out to be a ghastly sort of duffer," said Handforth, with the air of one who knows. "He can't see his nose on his face! He can't see a clue when it's pushed in front of him."

"He's not so bad as all that," said Fatty. "I've always thought Watson was pretty deep. And he's coming on well at the footer."

"Footer?" gasped Handforth.

"He played for the House this week——"

"You blithering ass!" hooted Handforth. "I'm talking about Dr. Watson and Sherlock Holmes!"

"Great chestnuts! I thought you meant Tommy Watson," said Fatty. "Why the dickens couldn't you explain yourself? Well, go ahead with that play—I'm dying to hear it!"

One glance into the cupboard had assured him that his time was well spent. A big cake was in full sight, and there was a tin which promised a supply of biscuits. There were some odd buns, too, and several pots of jam. Fatty's enthusiasm for the play became fervent.

"Well, the first scene is laid in Trackett Grim's consulting-room, in Baker's Inn Road," said Handforth. "Trackett Grim and Splinter are discovered—that's the right term, you know, and all we playwrights use it—are discovered poring over a cryptic message which has just been pushed under the door——"

"The cryptic message is all right, but why not have them at breakfast?" asked Fatty. "Why not provide a big feed on the stage? Then the message can be pushed under the door after you've had a huge feed. Think how ripping it would be to sit there, having a good old tuck in while the audience——"

"You silly glutton!" interrupted Handforth. "I'm not so jolly keen on grub as all that! This play is one long punch, from

start to finish—there's no time for feeding! Before Trackett Grim can decipher the cryptic message, a client shoots in. But he doesn't come through the doorway!" he added triumphantly. "He drops down the chimney!"

"Fine!" said Fatty, carving the cake.

"He drops down the chimney!" repeated Handforth impressively. "There you get the first punch in the opening minute. The poor beggar is being hunted down by crooks, and he daren't come to the front door, in the usual way. So he thought it a ripping idea to drop down Trackett Grim's chimney."

"It's a bit risky," said Fatty. "He might have dropped down the wrong fireplace. And it's lucky for him there wasn't a fire on the go. Well, what happens next?"

"Trackett Grim gives one look at the client, and recognises him as a duke," continued Handforth. "Trackett Grim can see this by his aristocratic features. When the duke enters, his face is absolutely smothered in soot. He looks like a nigger——"

"Then how can Trackett Grim see his features?"

"H'm! That's a bit of a point," admitted Handforth thoughtfully. "Perhaps I'd better wipe out the soot. Don't quibble over details, you chump! Now, the funny thing is, this cipher message is a warning to Trackett Grim not to accept the duke's investigation. If he does accept it, it'll mean instant death. So, of course, Trackett Grim accepts."

"And dies?'

"Yes, rather—— No, you ass!" snorted Handforth. "How the dickens can he die in the first scene? Trackett Grim is so tremendously clever that he can defy death. He listens to the duke's story, and undertakes the case on the spot."

Handforth was so enthusiastic over his play that he hardly noticed anything else. He certainly had no idea that Fatty Little was performing a sheer record in cake demolition. Fatty was so impressed by the wonderful drama that he got a sudden idea.

"By the way, he said, ruthlessly interrupting. "I suppose you couldn't lend me three bob?"

"Three bob?" said Handforth absently. "Of course I can lend you three bob—don't bother!" He took out the money, and tossed it on the table. "Now, this case is an intricate problem. The Duke of Pottlebury has lost his only son and heir, and he's nearly dotty with worry."

"I suppose the kid was pinched out of the cradle?"

"Cradle? The duke's son is a man!"

"Ripping!" said Fatty heartily. "I suppose you couldn't make that ten bob?"

"Eh? What the—— Can't you listen to my play, instead of bothering about money?" demanded Handforth gruffly. "Ten bob? Oh, take it, and stop worrying! As soon as Trackett Grim hears about this son and heir——"

Handforth went on with great enthusiasm, after pulling out a ten-shilling note and giving it to Fatty. This moneylending business was purely mechanical—for Handforth's mind was on the play the whole of the time.

"And the scene ends with Trackett Grim looking out of the window, and seeing two masked men on the other side of the street," said Handforth impressively. "He shouts out a warning, there is a dull thud, a splinter of glass, and the duke drops like a stone. How's that?"

"By gravy, marvellous!" gasped Fatty, caught with his mouth full. "So that's the end of the play? Handy, old man, it's a triumph!"

CHAPTER II.

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH glared. "I knew you'd like the stuff, but what's this dotty idea?" he demanded. "You hopeless ass—that's only the end of the first scene!"

"Oh, sorry! I thought——"

"What's that stuff you've got in your hand?" went on Handforth, coming out of his abstraction. "By George, cake! Why, you greedy burglar, have you been rifling our cupboard?"

Fatty's mind worked like lightning.

"I like that!" he said indignantly. "Didn't you invite me to?"

"Oh, did I?" said Handforth. "All right—but don't drop the crumbs all over the table. Now listen to the second scene——"

But Fatty was not particularly keen on this. Curiously enough, with the finishing of the cake, and the discovery that the biscuit-tin was empty, he lost all his enthusiasm for Handforth's play. It was such a coincidence that a more alert fellow than Edward Oswald might have been suspicious.

Besides, Fatty had borrowed three shillings more than he had expected—in fact, thirteen shillings more than he had expected—so he thought it high time to make a bee-line for the school shop. Trackett Grim had no appeal whatever. Even Church's hamper wasn't so alluring as it had been.

"Sorry, old man," said Fatty hastily. "I've just remembered something. I've got to meet somebody immediately."

"But look here, you tubby idiot——"

"Can't stop!" said Fatty. "It's urgent."

He omitted to mention that the "appointment" was with Mrs. Hake, and he succeeded in escaping before Handforth could inflict any more of that thriller upon him.

The great playwright felt aggrieved. Where were Church and McClure? Why weren't they here to support him in his great triumph? It was just like the selfish bounders to go off on their own, and leave him in the lurch!

For the moment it had escaped Handforth's recollection that he had forcibly pitched his chums out of the study, and had informed them, in unmistakable terms, that any return before the hour of seven would be received by a mere repetition of the entire process.

Writing his play had been an all-absorbing labour to Edward Oswald; he had desired nothing but solitude. But he was by nature a fellow who wilted and drooped unless he was in the society of others. And now that the play was finished, he wanted to show it to everybody.

He emerged from Study D, in search of victims.

Just at the end of the passage, chatting, were Ralph Leslie Fullwood and Clive Russell. Ulysses Spencer Adams was passing, too.

"Just a minute, you chaps," said Handforth briskly. "Listen to this!"

"Something important?" asked Fullwood, as he observed the sheaf of papers.

"My new play."

"Geewinnikers!" ejaculated Adams. "Beat it, you fellows! This guy's dangerous! I guess that play of his is more deadly than dynamite! Say, Handy, we can sure stand a lot, but that dope of yours——"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth. "This is a new play entirely. It's all about Trackett Grim and Splinter. Stand there, and I'll read some of it out. The first scene is Trackett Grim's consulting-room, and the great detective and Splinter are poring over a cipher message when the curtain goes up."

"Fine!" grinned Russell. "But I think you'd better wait——"

"I'll read you the first act," continued Handforth crisply. "This is how it kicks off——"

"Say, we're busy!" interrupted Adams. "That play of yours is sure snappy, but I've got to quit. I've gotta go some pace to find De Valerie. That bird owes me a five-spot. An' I'm on my way to collect it."

"A five-spot?" repeated Handforth.

"Sure! Five bucks."

"Bucks?"

"Five bones!" explained Ulysses.

"Bones?"

"Gee, ain't you dumb?" said the American boy. "Five dollars—or a pound, in your queer old language."

"Why the dickens can't you speak English?" demanded Handforth. "We're not talking about money, either. Listen to this play. I've already told you that Trackett Grim and Splinter are examining a cipher. It goes on like this:

TRACKETT GRIM: By George, Splinter, we've got it! The sign of the Pointing Finger! This message is from our arch-enemy, Heeza Tyke. They're on our track!

SPLINTER: The whole gang, sir?

GRIM: Yes, my lad, the whole gang! But that makes it all the more interesting. This organisation is the greatest criminal confederation in the world. But, in spite of their power, they can't touch me! I defy them all!

SPLINTER: But this cipher message was only shoved under the door a minute ago, sir, and the agents of the gang may be lurking on the landing. We'd better have a look, sir.

GRIM: Never! I can see through doors, Splinter! My eyes are like X-rays. At this very moment there are two dastardly miscreants hovering on the mat——

(Enter THE DUKE OF POTTLEBURY. With dramatic surprise, he shoots down the chimney, and lands in the fireplace with a clatter of irons. The whole scene is smothered in soot, but it rapidly clears. The DUKE is discovered sitting in the fender, as black as the dickens).

SPLINTER: A client, sir!

GRIM: Clever boy! You are right, Splinter. The Duke of Pottlebury has chosen a strange method of entry, but he is welcome. Be quite sure, duke, that you are safe in my keeping.

THE DUKE: How did you know my name? Mr. Grim, I am in desperate need of your help——

"I think we're in desperate need of something, too," said Fullwood, clutching at Russell for support. "By gad! Water!"

"Let's—let's escape!" moaned Clive.

Adams was apparently too weak to utter anything, and the three of them reeled off down the passage, dazed and stunned. Handforth watched them in amazement. He frowned darkly as he heard three volleys of laughter from the distance. But his eyes gleamed at almost the same moment, for another junior came within sight. Handforth seized upon him as a hungry dog seizes a bone.

"Just a minute, Scott!" he rapped out. "Listen to my new play! I want your candid opinion—— By George, I shall get it, though, shan't I? You're the ass who can't speak anything but the truth."

"Unfortunately, yes," said Larry Scott, grinning. "It's considered to be the correct thing to be truthful, but I find it very embarrassing at times. Most chaps can make an excuse, or an evasion, but I'm hopeless. I've got to come out with the truth, or nothing."

Larry Scott was quite an ordinary fellow to look at, and he shared Study R, in the West House, with Doyle and Yung Ching. He was quite normal in every way except for his unhappy propensity for telling the bald truth. He often tried to evade a direct answer, but it never came off. Something within him impelled him to be absolutely candid.

"Well, it's all the better," said Handforth. "Some of these fellows pull my leg, you know. They think my play's ripping, but

they pretend to faint," he added, frowning down the passage. "That's all piffle. Mere jealousy, of course. They don't like to admit how they admire my gift. But you'll tell me the truth, my lad! You can't evade it!"

"But I don't want to hear your play," said Scott.

"What?"

"I haven't any desire to hear a word!" went on the truthful fiend. "So if you'll excuse me, Handforth, I'll get back to my own House."

"You won't go back until you've heard some of this!" said Handforth grimly. "This is the greatest 'kick' play that's ever been written. It's so full of kicks that any ordinary audience will be weak with excitement before the end of the first act. It's serious, too—a grim, powerful drama."

"Oh, well, perhaps you'd better let me hear some of it," said Larry Scott resignedly. "I don't want to hear it, but I shan't get any peace until you've had your way. You're a good chap, Handy, but you're so obstinate."

Handforth frowned, but he didn't waste any further time. He planted himself in front of Scott, and relentlessly read the first act aloud.

CHAPTER III.

HORACE STEVENS' AMBITION.

AT least, he read a portion of the first act. He didn't think it necessary to repeat the beginning—he seemed to take it for granted that Scott knew all about it, so he carried on from the spot where the Duke of Pottlebury sought Tracker Grim's assistance.

Larry Scott listened with careful attention, but it was noticeable that he winced once or twice. Cecil De Valerie came along with Alf Brent and Somerton. They paused, listening. They made rude comments, too. But Handforth was so engrossed in his own play that he was unaware of these comments. Tom Burton and Jerry Dodd joined the group.

At last Handforth reached the end of the first act.

"Wonderful!" gurgled Brent admiringly.

"What is it—an entry for a competition?" asked Somerton politely. "The one who sends in the worst drivel gets the first prize?"

"Sounds like it," grinned Jerry Dodd.

"You cackling fatheads! It's my own play!" roared Handforth.

"Oh, sorry!" said the Australian boy. "It's marvellous! It's a dinkum play, old man. It ought to create a sensation."

"It probably will," agreed De Valerie, nodding, with a wink at the others. "Imagine Handforth's name in electric letters, in Piccadilly Circus. All London flocking to see the latest detective thriller."

"It'll be the rage of the year," declared Brent.

"The play of the season," said Burton stoutly. "Great marlinspikes! You've sailed a good course this time, shipmate!"

Handforth visibly swelled.

"I knew you'd like it, of course," he said modestly. "You've got to realise that this play has required a lot of brain-power. It needs experience to be a playwright. By the way, Scott, I was reading it out for your benefit. What do you think of it?"

Larry Scott hesitated.

"It's rotten!" he replied mildly.

"Eh?"

"It's too awful for words!"

"You—you——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The expression on Handforth's face was comic, and the other juniors howled. Larry Scott looked quite pained, but it was the truth with him, and nothing but the truth. He felt impelled to enlarge.

"I've got to say it, Handy; but—but honestly, it's the most unadulterated drivel I've ever heard," he continued. "It isn't a play at all—it's tripe!"

"Tripe?" gasped Handforth. "But tripe's the inside of something!"

"I don't mean that sort of tripe," explained Scott. "When a piece of writing is particularly puerile, it's called tripe, you know. And this play of yours is about the worst rot I've heard for months."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you think it's no good, then?" asked Handforth blankly.

"It's too horrible for words," said Larry. "All that nonsense about the duke falling down the chimney. And the dialogue. My only hat! If you put that thing on the stage you'd get the bird in no time. Take my advice and burn it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth began to look so dangerous that the other juniors dragged Larry Scott away, and they all disappeared down the passage. Edward Oswald gave a mighty snort, and went off in search of Church and McClure. He had an idea that they would give a different opinion of the play.

"Poor old Handy!" moaned De Valerie, as he paused in the lobby. "He thinks it's good stuff. What a scream!"

William Napoleon Browne of the Fifth paused as he came downstairs. He regarded the juniors inquiringly.

"I judge there is some reason for this unseemly mirth, brothers?" he inquired. "I trust there is an idea behind this merriment? If so, kindly admit me into the joke. I am a gay fellow, and there is nothing tickles my fancy so much as a good joke."

"It's about old Handy!" panted Fullwood, holding his sides.

"Ah, our own comedian!" beamed Browne.

"Comedian's right!" chuckled Russell. "He's written a new play, and it's the biggest scream you ever heard."

"I trust I shall escape this particular infliction," said Browne firmly. "Only a few days ago I had occasion to burn one of Brother Handforth's efforts, and since that fateful hour I have been in fear and trembling lest he should burst upon us with another one. Alas, the blow has fallen!"

Browne went off, sadly shaking his head. Arriving in his own study, he found Horace Stevens sitting in the easy chair, staring straight in front of him. Stevens, in fact, was in a reverie, and he didn't even observe Browne's arrival.

"This is distressing!" said the Captain of the Fifth. "Indeed, I am not exaggerating when I declare that I am shocked. I come here, Brother Horace, expecting to find the merry kettle on the hob, and the tea steaming in the pot, and what do I find?"

He waved an expressive hand.

"I find a cheerless apartment with the fire nearly out," he went on. "I find my boon companion in a brown study. Splendid! You will observe the unconscious humour, Brother Horace. I am improving. You are in a brown study in a Browne study. Distinctly witty."

Stevens displayed a blank appreciation.

"I also discover that I am talking to myself," went on Browne sorrowfully. "Not that I could talk to anybody better. I am at least assured of an appreciative audience."

Stevens came to himself with a start.

"Oh, hallo!" he said, sitting up. "You here, Browne? Sorry! I was thinking, you know."

"Indeed?" said Browne politely. "For the moment I suspected that you had taken morphia, or some such deadening drug. Let us see what tea can do in the task of revivifying your mental apparatus."

"I was thinking about that play——"

"Speak not of plays!" interrupted Browne, pained. "We have just heard the sad news concerning Brother Handforth. It may be difficult to believe, but this misguided youth has produced yet another magnum opus."

"He has produced a what?"

Browne started.

"This is serious!" he said, with concern. "The world's most promising actor, and he is ignorant of such trivialities. A sparkling member of the Fifth Form, and he displays such lack of knowledge. A magnum opus, Brother Horace, is a great work—a masterpiece."

"I know that, you silly ass!" said Stevens, turning red. "I was merely wondering how on earth Handforth could produce one."

"Perhaps the term was somewhat exaggerated," admitted Browne, as he made preparations for tea. "But let us dwell upon more entertaining matters. Let us discuss hot muffins and cherry cake."

Stevens helped, but of late he had lost a great deal of interest in the home life of his study. At one time he had been merely an amiable fellow with ordinary habits. But now he was different. He had suddenly become Somebody of Importance. All the Houses of St. Frank's were still talking about Horace Stevens' amazing performance in the chief role of his father's play, THE THIRD CHANCE.

It was quite a romance in itself.

Nobody had even guessed that Stevens possessed any aptitude for the stage until the coming of Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs and his travelling theatre. Mr. Noggs was an actor of the old school, a true itinerant showman of a type which is rapidly dying out. His long hair, his heavy, clean-shaven face, his fur collar, in fact, everything about him, proclaimed the typical Bohemian.

And Mr. Noggs was in sore straits. His Imperial theatre was by no means a ramshackle affair. On the contrary, it was a costly erection, electrically lit, and provided with all the modern equipments of the theatre. And yet this tour of his had been a financial failure. No matter what town or village he pitched in, the public refused to support him. For months Mr. Noggs had been playing to empty houses, and his financial status had fallen lower and lower. And now the abyss of disaster yawned before him.

In a measure the St. Frank's fellows had discovered Mr. Noggs' plight. They had been sorry for him. They had done their best to boost business up. And in return Mr. Noggs had allowed them to use his theatre, when he was not using it himself, for their own ends.

William Napoleon Browne had been surprised by the enthusiasm of his usually stolid study mate. Stevens had been fired by Mr. Noggs' acting, and the old showman was certainly a first-class actor. And then Stevens had brought to light a ragged script, including the parts, which proved to be the last play his dead father had written.

This play had never been produced, and Stevens had only brought it to St. Frank's as a curiosity, and it had remained at the bottom of one of his trunks, only to be brought out in strict privacy. For Browne discovered that Stevens had always had a secret longing to go on the stage, and Stevens had been in the habit of shutting himself up in solitude, and going over the parts. Indeed, he knew every word of the play by heart.

Reading the play, Browne had formed the opinion that it was a masterpiece. And

with his usual smartness he had instantly decided to put the play into production. It had occupied many of the St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls for a week past, and they had all performed well in the private presentation in Noggs' Imperial Theatre. As for Stevens, he had revealed himself as a super actor, as a genius for the stage. His performance indeed had been startling in its unexpected brilliance.

had he taken sufficient money to cover expenses.

Once or twice the schoolboys had filled his theatre, and this very fact had aroused a lukewarm interest in the general public. So Mr. Noggs had remained at Caistowe for a longer period than he had originally intended, putting on a different show every night.

His plan was to shift to Bannington on

There was rather a wild look in Handforth's eye, and his hair was ruffled. He had no idea of Fatty's presence.

Mr. Noggs himself had had no words to say at the finish.

All St. Frank's had buzzed with excitement over the affair at the time, but a week had passed, and the excitement had completely died down. Stevens was being regarded as a normal Fifth-Former again. The usual routine of the school went on placidly. And Mr. Noggs' theatre was still pitched at Caistowe. For the first week in the tour business was looking up. But it was still considerably weak. Not once

the following Monday, but the general outlook was black. For he could see no way of taking sufficient money to extricate himself from his difficulties. His business manager, Roger Barton, had advanced him several big sums, and the date of repayment was drawing near. Failure to produce the necessary money would mean the loss of his entire property. And then, indeed, he would be a broken man.

There was something almost child-like in Mr. Noggs' lack of business knowledge. He

was an actor, first and last—and he left his business affairs in the hands of Barton. The latter was deliberately swindling him. For Barton had an accomplice who always went in advance of the show, giving it the worst possible name. Barton, while pretending to advertise Noggs' theatre, was really striving hard to ruin it by proxy. In this way he would ultimately gain full possession of it. It was a cunning plot, and it was showing every sign of coming to fruition.

CHAPTER IV.

BROWNE ADVISES CAUTION.

STEVENS was looking as thoughtful as ever when he sat down to tea. Browne said nothing for several minutes, but now his inquiring mind could rest no longer.

"Forgive me for intruding upon your innermost thoughts, Brother Horace, but what is this problem?" he asked gently. "What is this great weight which rests like a dumb-bell upon your mind?"

"Eh?" said Stevens, staring. "Oh, sorry! The fact is, I am a bit unsettled, old man. About that play of my pater's. Everything seems to have fizzled out, doesn't it?"

"I confess that I fail to grasp——"

"Well, you know what I mean," interrupted Stevens. "We held that one performance a few days ago, and everybody said the play was topping. There was a lot of awful rot about my acting, too——"

"Allow me to interrupt," put in Browne firmly. "And allow me to disagree. There was no awful rot in regard to your acting, Brother Horace. On the contrary, the measure of praise was singularly inadequate. Without hesitation I can describe your performance as unparalleled. An exhibition of genius. A display of dazzling brilliance——"

"What a chap you are for superlatives!" growled Stevens. "Chuck it, Browne. It seems a bit of a pity, that's all. We haven't had any proper criticism of the play. I mean, it was a private show, and the ordinary public hasn't seen it. Why shouldn't we give the play a real trial? You suggested it yourself at first."

"A public performance," said Browne thoughtfully. "Yes, the idea is by no means murky. At the same time, brother, I urge patience. At first I was eager to present the play publicly. But having seen it acted I hesitate. I am afraid. I am nervous. You may not believe it, but I tremble."

"You think it would be a ghastly failure?"

"What conclusions you jump to," said Browne severely. "Not a failure, Brother Horace, but an unprecedented success. That is what your play will be."

"Then why delay?"

"For several reasons," replied the astute Browne. "I do not expect you to see them. Your brain, Brother Horace, is attuned in a different key to mine. I possess the faculty of looking ahead. My watchword is caution. Never do I depart from that axiom. And so I tell you to wait. It would be a fatal mistake to rush into this production, much as we both desire to see it a concrete reality."

"I thought it'd be rather a good idea to present the play to the public on Monday evening, when Noggs opens at Bannington," said Stevens. "Why not? Noggs could get his own company to perform the thing——"

"No!" interrupted Browne. "I am sorry, but I must be firm. The play is too good—much too good!"

"I'm hanged if I can see——"

"In fact, it is so good that the whole effort would be wasted," continued Browne. "Noggs' Theatre has got a bad reputation, brother. For some reason—which we cannot fathom at the moment—it is shunned by the public. I have certain suspicions—certain lurking thoughts; but it would scarcely be fair to put them into words until I have investigated. But the fact remains that Noggs' Imperial Theatre is regarded, by the ordinary public, as the last word in wash-outs. And our dear friend, Mr. Andy Noggs, is consequently knee-deep in the broth. It must be our task to rescue him from this savoury, but undesirable, bath."

"What on earth can we do?"

"There are sundry valiants in the Remove who will rally nobly to the cause," said Browne. "But more of this later. It would be a shame, Brother Horace, to waste your father's masterly play on the hobbledehoys of Bannington. For you may be quite sure that Monday evening will see nothing but the riff-raff in the auditorium."

"Poor old Noggs!" said Stevens. "It's a shame, you know. It's a dirty shame! What's the matter with the public, anyhow?"

Browne sighed.

"The public, I fear, is very akin to a flock of sheep," he said. "Nothing succeeds like success, and nothing fails like failure. And Mr. Noggs' theatre is suffering from a bad spell. Your great play would receive no support from the class of citizens who now patronise the theatre. It is better to wait. All good things wear well, Brother Horace. Let your play rest in abeyance until the Remove has done its work. And then, when the right people are flocking into the theatre—then will be the time for your production."

"Jove, it's a good argument," admitted Stevens. "There's no sense in putting good stuff before the riff-raff, is there?"

"I would further point out I desire NO public performance of your father's play until the question of copyright is ready to be settled," continued Browne. "You must remember that it is a masterpiece. To your innocent mind, it will probably come as a shock that there are thieves in this world. There are theatrical thieves, in addition to the more commonplace type."

"Theatrical thieves?"

"Unless we are careful, the plot of your play may be stolen," continued Browne solemnly. "Strictly speaking, Brother Horace, our safest course would be to push on this public performance at the earliest possible moment. But I am reluctant to do that."

"If it's the safest course, what are you reluctant about?"

"Failure!" replied Browne impressively. "Mr. Noggs has a poor company. I am forced to say, in fact, a putrid company. A ghastly collection of has-beens. Imagine what they would do to your father's play, brother! Conjure up the horrifying thought! Your own acting might save it, but the risk is terrible. And if this first performance was a dismal figure, the play would be off the map for ever. Therefore we must wait."

"Well, we've decided that already——"

"Yes, and that is why I am urging complete secrecy," went on Browne. "Let us forget this play for a week or two. Let us concentrate upon improving the status of Mr. Noggs' theatre. Once that has been accomplished, the greater triumph will inevitably follow."

"It sounds good, but I'm hanged if I can see how we can do anything to improve the status of the place," said Stevens. "The theatre's all right—for a fit-up show, it's pretty marvellous. But Noggs doesn't get the right crowds. That's the trouble. The decent people won't go. Look at Caistowe. He only gets a few of the sixpenny seats occupied. And he's got to shove on piffling melodrama at that!"

"And he started on this tour with the laudable object of giving the public first-class plays!" sighed Browne. "Let us gather the lads together at once, Brother Horace. We will hold a conference immediately. And unless a workmanlike plan of action is evolved, I shall be a very surprised man."

CHAPTER V.

THE CONFERENCE.

BERNARD FORREST grinned.

"By gad, it looks like the real thing!" he said gleefully. "Nobody would dream it was only printed on a home set. Buck up, Gully! We shall want fifty of these, at least!"

Study A, in the Ancient House, was not looking exactly normal. It was tea-time here, too, but Forrest & Co. had given no thought to tea. Instead, they were converting the room into a temporary printing office.

On the table rested a "home printer"—quite a good set of its kind, and capable of producing bold work. At the moment, Bernard Forrest was holding up a slip of paper about a foot wide by five inches deep. And it bore these words, in large, distinct type:

TO-NIGHT! TO-NIGHT! TO-NIGHT!

Positive Personal Appearance of
SIR HARRY LAUDER.

THE SENSATION OF THE YEAR!

Gulliver and Bell grinned with delight as they saw that printed notice. Already the study was littered with them, and Gulliver was producing more as fast he could work the printing set.

"We shall just have time to get round Caistowe on our bikes before six," chuckled Forrest. "The show doesn't start till half-past seven, so the whole bally town will be talking about it, and Noggs will get a full house."

"He ought to be grateful to us for boosting up his business," said Bell. "Look at the trouble we're going to!"

The others yelled.

"Gad, it's the jape of the season!" said Forrest maliciously. "It'll be the talk of the whole giddy countryside. I always believe in doing a good turn, so——"

"We shall have to be pretty careful," interrupted Gulliver. "It wouldn't do for anybody to see us pastin' these slips over Noggs' playbills. How many more to do, Gully?"

"Only about another dozen," replied Gulliver, as he worked.

"Good!" went on Forrest. "Bell, you buzz out, and get the bikes ready. We'll follow along in three minutes. And don't let anybody suspect anything. We want this jape to be kept secret."

"Trust me!" said Bell.

He opened the door, and one of the printed slips was caught by the draught and blown through the open window into the West Square. It was just one of those little accidents which none could foresee. Bernard Forrest made a grab at the elusive piece of paper, but he failed to detain it.

"Confound!" he snapped. "Shut that door, Bell, you idiot!"

Bell shut the door, rather startled.

"No need to bark!" he ejaculated. "You gave me a fright, you ass!"

Forrest made no reply. He slipped out of the window and looked round for the fugitive sheet. The wind had caught it, and it was just wafting over towards the West Arch.

Forrest was alarmed, for he instinctively felt that the majority of the juniors would not approve of this jape. Of course, it was

a corker—the finest joke of the term. But the other fellows were so infernally squeamish! He didn't want the whole thing ruined.

He had planned it out with cunning. At first, he had thought it a good idea to paste the slips over Mr. Noggs' playbills after lights out, thus giving them a full day's publicity. But mature consideration had told him that such a course would be wrong. For Mr. Noggs was bound to hear of the sensational "engagement," and would have the announcement obliterated. By pasting them up ninety minutes before the show, however, there was no risk of such failure. And the public would have plenty of time to rally round.

As it happened, fate was against the plotters.

Dick Hamilton & Co. were just coming through the West Arch when the paper slip blew in. As though by intent, the wind-blown paper wrapped itself round Sir Montie Tregellis-West's foot, and he halted.

"Hi! That's mine!" yelled Forrest, rushing up.

"Begad! There's no need to shout like that, you frightful ass!" protested Montie. "I don't want your beastly papers!"

He pulled it free, and Forrest made a grab at it. But during that momentous second Dick Hamilton had caught a glimpse of the words.

"Hallo! What's this?" he said sharply.

"Give that to me, Nipper, confound you!" panted Forrest.

"Wait a minute!" said Nipper. "'Positive personal appearance of Sir Harry Lauder!' What's the meaning of this? What's the idea, Forrest?"

"Mind your own business!" retorted Forrest.

"My hat! Those cads are going to paste these slips over old Noggs' playbills!" said Tommy Watson excitedly. "I heard Gulliver and Bell yelling with laughter in the school shop during interval! And they said that old Noggs would get a shock to-night."

"Don't be a fool!" roared Forrest. "It's only a jape."

"You admit, then, that you were going to——"

"I don't admit anything," interrupted Forrest. "It's about time you fellows learnt to look after your own affairs! Confound your rotten inquisitiveness!"

"We'll look into this," said Nipper grimly.

He took the slip, and marched back through the archway into the Triangle. His chums followed him and Bernard Forrest was completely ignored. A minute later, the investigators forced their way into Study A. One glance at the table was enough for Nipper.

"You miserable cads!" he said hotly.

"Look here——"

"It's a good thing that slip blew away!" went on Nipper. "We can put a stop to this contemptible trick now. By Jove, of all the ill-natured, mean tricks! Noggs has never done you any harm."

"Who said he had?" demanded Forrest angrily. "It's only a joke!"

"A joke!" snapped Nipper. "Do you call it a joke to get people into Noggs' theatre on false pretences?"

"Isn't the man going broke because he can't get the crowds in?" demanded Gulliver. "We thought we'd give him a helping hand."

"You mean, you thought you'd play a dirty, low-down trick!" shouted Nipper. "That announcement will probably get the people in, but what's going to happen when Sir Harry Lauder doesn't appear? Why, they'll call Noggs a swindler. They'll probably wreck his theatre! They'll get wild with rage, and pull the whole show down! You contemptible worms!"

"Any trouble in here?" asked Handforth, looking in the doorway.

Tommy Watson hurried off to fetch further reinforcements, and Handforth was acquainted with the details. His indignation was supreme, and lots of other juniors were equally enraged.

"Where's a match?" roared Handforth.

But Nipper was already throwing the printed slips into the fireplace, and a match was set to them. Forrest & Co. watched helplessly. They could do nothing against this indignant crowd. They were apprehensive, too. They somehow felt that the incident was unfinished.

It was.

The cads of Study A were set upon, dragged out into the corridor, and placards were affixed to their backs—stout paper placards smothered with glue. And then they were released. Each one of them bore this legend in the rear:

"I'M A CAD! KICK ME!"

"Certainly!" roared Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth obliged with vigour, and Bernard Forrest nearly left the ground from the force of that biff. Gulliver and Bell were assisted down the corridor, too. To be quite exact, Forrest & Co. were literally kicked out of the Ancient House."

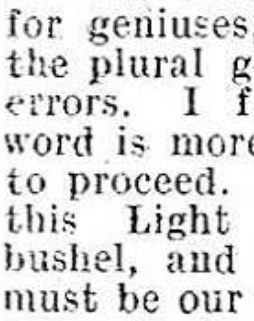
"That's better!" said Nipper, at length. "It's a jolly good thing we scotched that rotten business before it had got started. They would have done poor old Noggs an awful lot of harm."

"Talking about Brother Noggs, there is a subject which needs swift discussion," observed William Napoleon Browne, striding up. "I appear to have come on the scene at a lucky moment. Brother Hamilton, kindly attend in my study. Brother Pitt, be good enough to do likewise. Brother Boots, you would be a welcome addition. Brother Handforth—— But no! We desire peace at this conference. Brother Fullwood, I subpœna you also."

Thus, within five minutes, Browne's study was fairly well packed. Nowadays, Browne was such a power in the land that his calls to arms were generally answered without question.

CHAPTER VI.

A CHANCE FOR BUSTER BOOTS.



STRANGELY enough, Handforth didn't force his way into the meeting. He had hardly heard Browne's reference to himself, and he had gone off, after the Study A affair, still searching for Church and McClure.

He badly wanted to read his new play to them. But they badly wanted to avoid reading it. So they remained mysteriously absent. Or, at least, if not absent, they were well beyond Handforth's reach.

In the meantime, the conference was beginning.

"We have met, brothers, on a matter of considerable import," declared Browne, opening the proceedings. "The first item on the agenda—indeed, I might say, the only item on the agenda—concerns our learned brother on the left, and his career."

"Chuck it!" said Stevens gruffly.

"We must, of course, make allowances for geniuses," said Browne kindly. "Or is the plural genii? One is apt to make slight errors. I fancy, however, that the latter word is more or less Arabian Nightish. But to proceed. We have here a Light. So far this Light has been hidden beneath a bushel, and has only once peeped out. It must be our life's work to lift him out of his present obscurity, and——"

"Look here, Browne, if you're going to rot, I'll clear out!" growled Stevens, turning red. "He's in one of his dotty moods, you chaps," he apologised. "It's about that play of my pater's. We think it better not to go ahead with a public production until old Noggs is in better odour with the public."

"Exactly," agreed Browne. "Very concisely put."

"You'd have taken about half an hour to say it!" chuckled Reggie Pitt. "Well, it's a pretty good idea," he added, becoming thoughtful. "It's not much good producing the play with old Noggs' crowd as they are at present. He's about the only decent actor in the bunch. Besides, he doesn't get any representative audiences."

"That is the difficulty," said Browne. "Imagine the tragedy of presenting this play, for the first time, to a mere collection of gaping rustics! Imagine the serried rows of half-baked bumpkins! And try to picture the reception they would give 'The Third Chance!' The vision is not only horrifying, but nauseous!"

"It wouldn't be any good, Stevens, old man," said Nipper, nodding. "It would be a sin and a shame to have that show produced in a fit-up! It wouldn't be doing it justice."

"I make no objection to the fit-up, Brother Hamilton, but I do object to the present status of this fit-up," declared Browne. "Mr. Noggs started this tour with laudable intentions, but I can only conclude that his plans have sprung a leak. Instead of giving the public the higher drama, he is giving them the lower drivel. Consequently, nobody with a more massive intelligence than a tadpole patronises his Thespian backwater."

"Thanks!" said Nipper grimly.

"Eh?"

"We've all visited Mr. Noggs' theatre don't forget," said Dick. "But don't bother. We don't mind being called tadpoles, do we, Reggie?"

"We love it!" said Pitt promptly.

"Alas, one is apt to be misunderstood," sighed Browne. "Surely it was not necessary for me to mention the old formula—present company excepted? It must be our aim to raise the status of the Imperial Theatre. We must fill it with people nightly—we must improve the tone of the drama—we must make it a fit place for Brother Stevens to act in. Above all, we must provide Brother Stevens with a reputation. And we must never forget the honour of St. Frank's."

"It's all very well to talk like this, Browne, but what on earth can we do?" asked Fullwood. "It's not our theatre. We can't interfere with Andy Noggs' business."

"There is a difference between interfering and helping," said Browne. "Our plan must be to boom the theatre first, get the crowds in next, and then feature Brother Horace in a world-famous play. We must enable him to get a following, and to make a name for himself before the great play is sprung. That is the programme, and it now remains for us to put it into execution."

"My dear man, it's impossible," growled Stevens.

Browne frowned.

"Impossible?" he repeated. "Where have I heard that word before? A strange word, brothers—an objectionable word. Never have I included it in my own vocabulary. Glance in my dictionary and you will find it deleted, in company with another objectionable word—'Cannot.' Both are merely the terms of the inefficient. Away with them!"

"My hat!" grinned Fullwood.

"You appear surprised?" went on Browne. "But let me enlarge."

"Help!" murmured the other members of the conference.

"As I have already said, we must feature Brother Horace in a world-famous play. And what play could be more suitable than 'Hamlet'?"

"'Hamlet'?" repeated Nipper dubiously. "My dear chap, it's impo—— I mean, it's

too risky," he added, with a grin. "Imagine 'Hamlet' in Noggs' Imperial Theatre!"

Reggie Pitt shook his head.

"Just like imagining a poached egg in a coal shovel," he said.

"Alack, that Brother Hamlet should be compared to a poached egg!" said Browne, aghast. "But why do you hesitate? Why do you falter? Can you mention a more suitable part for Brother Horace? Hamlet! The part of parts! To be or not to be—— Ahem! I take it that we are all agreed upon this decision?"

"I have often thought you were mad. Browne, but now you've cast away the last lingering doubt," said Stevens. "Do you think I should have the nerve to play Hamlet?"

Browne waved his hand.

"That is not the point," he replied. "You may not have the nerve to play the illustrious Prince of Denmark, but I certainly possess the nerve to make you play it. For always remember, Brother Horace, that you are but the prodded. I am the prodder. I venture to suggest that without me behind you, with a bundle of fireworks, you would not progress a yard. Ah, these talented freaks! They need constant care and attention. Hothouse flowers are not in the same class!"

"You drivelling idiot!" roared Stevens indignantly.

"Peace, brother—peace!" said Browne, holding up an admonishing finger. "It has been decided that you shall play Hamlet. Mr. Noggs will learn this piece of news in due course—and will receive instructions from me to get his company into good order. He, no doubt, will play the Ghost."

"A pretty solid ghost," grinned Nipper.

"A mere detail," said Browne, waving it aside. "We must now prepare the leading up activity. Mr. Noggs' theatre must be relieved of the hoodoo which consistently brings it bad business. I apologise for the use of an American expression, but I fear the films have a bad influence over our daily speech!"

"But, look here, Browne, I don't see——"

"You are not required to see, Brother Reginald," interrupted Browne. "I am the one who sees, and it is merely for you to carry out my various instructions. An advertising campaign must be put in hand at once."

John Busterfield Boots looked alert.

"Advertising?" he said promptly. "That's me!"

Browne beamed.

"You'll observe how Brother Boots snaps at the bait like a hungry mackerel after a sardine!" he said calmly. "Knowing the special talent of Brother Boots, I naturally desired his presence here. I will leave this advertising propaganda entirely in his able grip. I venture to predict that Brother Noggs will do good business to-night."

"To-night!" echoed Boots. "You hopeless ass! There's no time to do any advertising this evening. Why, it's half-past five already. Noggs opens his doors in less than two hours."

Browne gave him a cold glance.

"I suspected that you were about to use that hated word 'Impossible,' Brother Boots," he said sternly. "Go! Collect your myrmidons, spread them over Caistowe, and urge the inhabitants to patronise Mr. Noggs. If urging is useless, drag them to the pay-box by their back hair. Do anything, in fact, to ensure good business. But, above all, do not come back and report failure."

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

"By Jove, Browne, I believe you're right," said Nipper eagerly. "Why give it up because there's not much time? There's lots of things we can do, you fellows! Has the Remove ever been dismayed?"

"Never!" said the other Removites.

"Splendid!" beamed Browne. "There is still hope for you, brothers. I am instilling you with my own indomitable spirit. A step forward! A distinct advance! Indeed, an achievement!"

"The show has got two more days in Caistowe, anyhow," went on Nipper. "Two more days after to-night's performance. Why not boom it up at full pressure, and give it a good name before it gets to Bannington?"

"Rather!" agreed Pitt. "We're all sorry for poor old Noggs. He's one of the best, and he's been having terrible luck. Let's all go into this thing with the determination to succeed!"

Browne fairly whooped.

"Better and better!" he exclaimed. "Never did I expect to live through this moment! To arms, brothers! Let us away—and let us ensure Brother Noggs a full house for to-night!"

CHAPTER VII.

WILLY'S CANDID OPINION.

"BY George!" said Edward Oswald Handforth.

He stood stock still, staring. He had just opened the door of Study S in the West House, but he had only expected to see the youthful Lord Pippinton sprawling on the lounge or on one of the easy chairs.

Handforth was fed-up. He had spent twenty solid minutes going from House to House, from Common-room to Common-room, from study to study, looking for Church and McClure.

He had only entered Study S in the hope of hearing from a chance visitor that his chums had been seen. And there they were! Calmly seated at old Pippy's table, indulging in about the most disgusting feed that Handforth had ever set eyes on.

"By George!" he said thickly.

"Handy!" gurgled Church.

"My hat!" breathed McClure.

"You—you traitors!" roared Handforth, leaping forward, and seizing a cherry cake. "Take that, Walter Church. I'll teach you to——"

"Whoa!" howled Church, rescuing the cake in the nick of time. "You dangerous lunatic! Do you want to ruin old Pippy's furniture?"

"Blow old Pippy's furniture!" snorted Handforth. "And blow old Pippy!"

"Oh, rather!" said Lord Pippington mildly. "What-ho! I mean, eh? Furniture, and so forth, and such like? Pretty ghastly sort of stuff, really. A chap's always knocking his elbows or his ankles, or his knuckles on the horrid stuff!"

Lord Pippinton seemed only half awake. There was a dazed, vacant expression in his eyes. As a matter of fact, he was particularly alert just now. Usually, he went about in a sort of trance. With Church and McClure in the room, he had been kept constantly awake.

But it was altogether too much bore to protest. They had just piled in, concluding that old Pippy's study was about the safest place they could get to. And here was Handforth, after all!

"You bounders, you deliberately sneaked off and gave me the slip!" said Handforth darkly. "But I've rooted you out! I don't write Trackett Grim plays for nothing! You can't escape me—or Trackett Grim!"

"We've had tea, anyhow," said Church resignedly.

"I'm going to read you my play!" threatened Handforth. "It's all finished, and you've got to listen—— Hallo! Why, what the—— Great pip!" he roared. "Somebody's pinched my play!"

He searched himself frantically, turning his pockets inside out with such haste that the rich carpet became littered with odds and ends and bits of fluff. Pippy stood looking on with a kind of dull horror.

"I say!" he protested. "What? All this untidy business! What about it? Have a heart, old chap. I mean, old chap, have a heart!"

"Bother your beastly heart!" howled Handforth. "Who's pinched my play? I had it on me two minutes ago——" He paused, and glared at McClure. "Did you grab it just now——"

"I wouldn't touch your play with a barge-pole!" interrupted McClure indignantly. "I expect you've left it somewhere. It's a wonder to me you don't hang yourself in the lobby sometimes, and expect your cap to walk out! I never knew such a careless——"

"I've got it!" yelled Handforth suddenly. "I left it in the study. I remember now. I went back there to look for you idiots, and left my play on the table. Come on—quick!"

He rushed out, much to the relief of Church and McClure. Lord Pippinton sank back into his chair, and promptly went off into a trance. The peacefulness after Handforth's departure was too much for him.

Racing across to the Ancient House, Handforth fairly hurled himself down the passage, and tore into Study D like a cyclone. He had a gnawing fear—a horrible suspicion—that somebody had pinched his play. He didn't forget how his last one had been calmly thrown into the fire by William Napoleon Browne.

"Great guns!" panted Handforth.

There, seated in the best chair, was his minor—and Willy was deeply engrossed in the depths of the famous play. He glanced up at his red-faced major, frowned, and waved his hand.

"Scoot!" he said curtly.

"What?" breathed Handforth huskily.

"How do you expect me to read this thing with you here?" asked Willy. "My hat, Ted, you're all in a fluster! Go away and cool yourself! I'm busy! This play needs full concentration. It's the thickest thing I've read for years!"

"Thickest!" said Handforth, striding into the study. "Look here, you young rotter ——"

"Didn't you hear me tell you to scoot?" interrupted Willy.

"By George! You—you——"

"Don't interrupt!"

"Look here——"

"Can't you let me finish?" asked Willy tensely. "Just when I've got to the most interesting point, you butt in, and start behaving like a loud speaker with a lot of atmospherics! For goodness' sake, go away!"

"If you think you can fool me——"

"I'm just at the place where Trackett Grim is fighting Heeza Tyke. They've chucked the swords down, and they're using broomsticks——"

"Broomsticks!"

"Well, rapiers, or something," said Willy impatiently. "Don't mess about, Ted! I've got to finish this play. I've got to! Of all the marvellous stuff, this is the most weird! Now, dry up!"

Willy continued reading the manuscript greedily. And his major stood there, momentarily cooled. It was one blessing to know that his play was still safe and sound. But to see the precious script in the hands of his minor was a different matter.

Handforth was not usually a suspicious fellow. One could generally palm off the most beautiful yarns on him, and he wouldn't suspect a thing. But where his minor was concerned, he was always wary. He had an instinctive feeling that Willy was ready to spring a bombshell of some kind.

Handforth stood there, watching closely. But there was no question of Willy's genuine interest. He was really reading the play, and he was really soaking it in. His eyes shone, his whole being quivered. He seemed like a fellow entranced.

But still Handforth wasn't satisfied.

"It's no good, you young sweep!" he growled, at last. You're only putting it on! I know my play's a winner, but I don't expect any appreciation from you! If you clear out of here I'll give you five bob!"

He uttered these last words with a triumphant note in them. But his eyes widened when he observed that Willy took no notice. He hadn't even heard!

"Five bob!" repeated Handforth impressively.

"I haven't got five bob!" snapped Willy. "I can't lend you any money—— Eh?" He started and looked up. "Haven't you gone yet?" he added angrily. "How many more times have I got to tell you? I'm getting sick of this! Any more of your rot, my lad, and you'll go out on your neck!"

"My only hat!" said Handforth, scratching his head.

He gave it up, and watched his minor with a growing hope that there might be something in this, after all. Was Willy really interested? He was not left in doubt for long. Willy reached the last page, scanned it to the bottom, and then heaved a sigh.

"Marvellous!" he breathed softly.

"Look here, Willy, are you spoofing me?" asked his major, his voice quivering. "Are you pulling my leg, you young beggar?"

Willy looked at him dazedly.

"It's a winner!" he exclaimed, his voice unsteady with emotion. "It's an absolute cert! It's got to be produced, Ted! Why, it'll be the greatest scream—I mean, the greatest success on record!"

Handforth thawed considerably.

"I say, is this honour bright?" he asked eagerly. "Do you really think my play's O.K.?"

"Absolutely!" said Willy, turning the pages over in a fascinated way. "O.K.? My dear chap, it's all the other letters in the alphabet as well! It's the ripest thing I've come across in twenty years!"

"You young ass, you haven't lived twenty years."

"I crowd so much into a year that I live four years in every one," explained Willy. "And this play—— This—this masterpiece! Ted, old man, I didn't think it was in you! Thank goodness you've got it out!"

He didn't give his major any chance for further conversation, but suddenly made a dash for the door. The fact that Handforth was in the way made no difference to Willy. Edward Oswald was merely aware of a swish near him, a rustle of paper, and then the door banged. Willy had gone.

"Hi!" yelled Handforth, in alarm.

He tore the door open, dashed out, and collided with Mr. Crowell so violently that the unfortunate Form-master sat down with a horrible thud in the passage.

"Sorry, sir!" gasped Handforth. "Seen my minor?"

He glanced up and down the passage, failed to see Willy, and tore off towards the lobby—forgetting all about Mr. Crowel As Handforth was to discover later on, Mr Crowell hadn't forgotten all about him!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE JAPE OF THE TERM.

WILLY reached William Napoleon Browne's study just at the moment when the big conference was on the point of breaking up—for most of these events had been taking place simultaneously.

"Just a minute, Browne," he said, as he entered. "Hallo! Nipper and Pitt and all the rest of you, eh? Good! The very chaps I wanted! If you listen to this, you'll simply lie down on the carpet and die!"

Browne frowned.

"In that case, Brother William, be good enough to take it away!" he said severely. "Why do you come here to blight our young lives in this sensational fashion? Hence!"

"Chuck it, Browne," said Willy.

The Captain of the Fifth winced.

"I am prepared to accept such expressions from men of my own age—but not from the mouths of babes and sucklings," he said firmly. "Brother William, let me assure you that I shall not 'chuck it,' but I shall chuck you. I shall chuck you into the passage."

Willy was in no way impressed.

"Cheese it!" he said tartly. "Is that better? I've got my major's play here, and I'm going to read it out——"

"Do not desert me, brothers!" pleaded Browne, as the Removites made one dash for the door. "Would you leave me to the mercy of this unscrupulous miscreant?"

Willy looked round at the juniors and frowned.

"You needn't faint yet!" he said. "You'd better reserve all your fainting until afterwards. But you'll be too weak to do anything. This play's going to make your sides ache for days. It's the funniest thing that ever happened."

"We are quite prepared to accept your word, Brother William," said Browne. "Who are we to doubt you? Let us, therefore, dismiss this unsavoury subject——"

"Who's running this show, anyhow?" asked Willy, looking round. "I've got a play here—a corking, hilarious wonder! And

you don't want to hear it! You don't know what you're missing!"

"We'll chance a minute of it," suggested Nipper.

"I'm game!" said Boots resignedly.

"In that case, my own small voice must be stilled," murmured Browne regretfully. "Proceed, Brother William, but I beseech you to make it snappy. I wonder if there is another fag in the whole range of public schools who can command attention such as you? Verily, I stand amazed."

"Then sit down, and try to look intelligent," said Willy. "This play is all about Trackett Grim and Splinter, and—— Well, listen to it! It won't take me long to get through the first act.

And Willy proceeded with the dirty work. His listeners arranged themselves in attitudes of supreme boredom at first, inwardly wondering why they put up with this sort of thing. There was something uncanny about the way Willy Handforth got his own way in everything.

But after a few minutes the boredom vanished, and a few grins appeared. They were followed by chuckles. And long before Willy had reached the end of the act, the listeners were desperately holding themselves, and suppressing their hilarity.

Willy gave them no opportunity to laugh outright. He rattled on at high speed—but put such intonation into his reading that Handforth's dialogue became utterly ludicrous. All the exaggerated points were trebly exaggerated by Willy's rendering.

"Stop!" yelled Fullwood, at last. "I can't stick any more of it! Oh, my hat! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The others fairly roared. Even Browne condescended to unbend. He lay back in his chair, and shook with laughter as heartily as the juniors.

SPLINTER: A client, sir.
GRIM: Clever boy! You are right, Splinter. The Duke of Pottlebury has chosen a strange method of entry, but he is welcome. Be quite sure, Duke, that you are safe in my keeping.
(Scene from Handforth's great play.)

"Well?" asked Willy. "The best is to come——"

"You young ass, the thing's impossible!" gasped Reggie Pitt. "It's the most awful junk I've ever heard! It's nothing more nor less than idiotic piffle."

"Worse than that," grinned Fullwood.

Willy regarded them coldly.

"I don't think much of your judgment!" he said. "This play is a masterpiece."

"It's a certain success."

"You hopeless young ass!"

"Produced as a burlesque, it would be funny enough to kill," went on Willy. "Not merely funny, but a scream."

William Napoleon Browne held out his hand.

"Let me examine this ninth wonder of the world," he said.

He took it, and turned the pages over. Boots and Fullwood and Pitt were impatient to be off, but Nipper detained them.

"There's something weird about Willy," he said, shaking his head. "The kid's right. That play of Handy's IS a scream."

"What?" gasped Fullwood. "You think it would be a hit?"

"Not merely a hit, but a knock-out!"

"Brother Hamilton is undoubtedly right," put in Browne, looking up. "With Brother Handforth in the part of Trackett Grim, acting with grave sincerity, this play would send an audience into convulsions. It would be necessary to have straight-jackets by the hundred, in order to restore order. Without exaggeration, this is the richest piece of unconscious humour I have yet encountered. Our brother, Handforth, is a dark horse."

Most of the juniors looked astonished.

"The joke of it is, he's written it as a serious play—as a thriller!" grinned Nipper. "He thinks it's perfectly serious! By Jove! I've got an idea!"

His eyes gleamed, and Browne shook his head.

"Do not keep us in suspense, Brother Hamilton," he said. "What is this cyclonic disturbance of the brain?"

"Why not give old Handy a lesson?" suggested Nipper. "He's always writing this sort of stuff, and kidding himself that it's serious. Why not convince him, once and for all, that he's only a comedian?"

"I fear it would break the poor fellow's heart!"

"Rats!" chuckled Nipper. "It would knock some of the rot out of him, and he might improve afterwards. There aren't many characters, are there?"

"Only about five or six," said Willy. "They're mostly simple ones, too. Two of the girls might be brought in."

"An excellent suggestion," agreed Browne.

"We could rehearse the thing in a day or two," went on Nipper. "Handforth probably thinks it's a full-length play, but it wouldn't run for more than half an hour, pushed through at burlesque speed—especially after we'd made one or two cuts. My suggestion is to produce it privately at Noggs' theatre on Monday afternoon, say."

"But how will that teach Handy a lesson?" asked Fullwood. "Producing that stuff would only encourage him to write more of it!"

"Wait until I've finished," went on Nipper. "My dear chap, this is the richest jape I've ever thought of! There'll be an audience, of course, composed entirely of Remove fellows——"

"And Fourth-Formers," put in Buster Boots grimly.

"All right. You Fourth-Formers will be welcome, of course," said Nipper. "The girls, too. But here's the point. Everybody will be secretly instructed to keep serious. That's the most important thing of all. The idea will be to spoof Handforth to the limit. We'll make him think that his play is a serious contribution to the Drama."

"It will be a difficult task to remain serious," said Browne. "It will strain the control of the audience to the utmost."

"By a manly effort, I think we could do it," said Nipper.

"But where does the lesson come in?" demanded Fullwood.

"Why, we'll persuade old Noggs to put the play into his ordinary programme during the evening," chuckled Nipper. "He can use it as a front piece—before the show proper."

"My hat!"

"The ordinary public will be in the theatre then, don't forget," continued Nipper. "And the ordinary public won't be instructed not to laugh. And, of course, they'll howl. They'll go into hysterics. Imagine the eye-opener for Handy."

Reggie Pitt gave a low gurgle.

"Nipper, my son, this is pure genius!" he said breathlessly. "Spoofing old Handy is overdue, too. He hasn't been properly japed for terms! I didn't know you had this brain power!"

"We are all ready to admit that it is supreme," agreed Browne. "Let us, therefore, decide to carry this thing through to a successful issue. I can imagine no more congenial pastime than pulling Brother Handforth's leg. Furthermore, we shall be advancing our original plan of bringing business to Brother Noggs' portable Drury Lane."

"Good!" said Willy. "Then that's settled. Considering this was my original stunt, though, I think I ought to play Splinter. You can trust me to spoof old Ted up to the neck."

"I can imagine no more brilliant Splinter than yourself, Brother William," said Browne, nodding. "Indeed, I predict that you will be a veritable thorn in the side of your major. But wait! What is this? Wait! Surely our luck is in this evening?"

Browne was looking out of the window, and without another word he dashed out of the study.

CHAPTER IX.

GETTING THINGS ON THE MOVE.

NIPPER glanced out of the window.

"What on earth's the matter with the man now?" he asked. "Hallo, by Jove! Irene and some of the other girls." He grinned. "Browne doesn't mean to waste any time in securing his cast!"

"That's about it," said Boots. "You'll

want two of the girls for that burlesque, won't you? Well, I can't bother with that. I've got to collect the chaps together, and get a move on. And if Noggs' theatre isn't better patronised to-night, I'll eat my hat!"

Buster went off, filled with enthusiasm and determination. He was an energetic fellow under any circumstances, but Browne had instilled him with even greater vim. He had made up his mind to do big things.

Nipper, Pitt, and Fullwood hurried out into the West Square, and joined Browne. He was talking earnestly with Irene Manners, Doris Berkeley, and Mary Summers, of the Moor View School. Curiously enough, the three girls were looking far from earnest, however. Their pretty faces were alight with smiles.

"And so, sisters, two of you will be required," Browne was saying. "I should suggest Sister Irene and Sister Mary—and I can only silently pray that Sister Doris will not change colour with jealousy——"

"There's not much fear of that, old son," interrupted Doris. "If the parts suit Renie and Mary better, I'm satisfied. Irene's certainly the very girl for the heroine. Ted'll act a lot better if she's in the cast!"

Irene chuckled.

"I'm not so sure about that," she said. "I might put Ted off his stroke. He's awfully self-conscious, you know. Still, that'll make it all the funnier, won't it?"

"Hush!" warned Browne. "Remember, sisters, that this play's serious. Let there be no more of this hilarity. One word in Brother Ted's ear, and the fat will indeed be in the fire. Caution is the watchword."

Irene and Mary were keen upon helping in the great jape. Mary had recently been staying at St. Frank's, for she was the niece of Mr. Beverley Stokes, of the West House. But she had now definitely joined the ranks of the Moor View contingent.

Browne's warning was timely, for a moment later Handforth himself hove into view. He had, as a matter of fact, spotted his minor, and he was hot on the track of his precious play. He came up, breathless.

"You young burglar!" he panted. "Where's that play of mine? I'll jolly well tan you——" He paused and looked at the girls. "Oh, sorry!" he added. "Didn't see you for the minute!"

Doris gave a hollow groan.

"And we came out in our spring finery!" she said sadly. "What's the use?"

Handforth had been so obsessed by the play that he hadn't even seen the girls until he was actually on the spot. And now he glanced at Irene very cautiously, and became diffident. Nobody had forgotten how he had kissed her, a week or two earlier—and Handforth himself remembered it more vividly than anybody else.

"It's all right, Ted," said Willy. "Browne's got your play. I took it to him, you know."

Handforth started violently.

"Browne's got it!" he yelled. "But Browne burns my plays!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Be at peace, Brother Handforth," said Browne gently. "Your latest effort is in no danger. Indeed, we have decided to put it straight into rehearsal, and to present it on Monday evening. Sister Irene and Sister Mary have kindly consented to take the two feminine rôles. Brother Willy will make an excellent Splinter. I, alas! can find no better part than the Duke of Pottlebury. I have a mind to transfer it to other hands."

Handforth failed to take in the sense of this for a moment or two. But when he did, he stared in a kind of bewildered unbelief.

"You're—you're going to produce my play?" he asked breathlessly.

"Certainly; it is all arranged."

"You're going to produce my play!" repeated Handforth mechanically. "You—you spoofing rotter! You're just trying to pull my leg! It's a dirty trick to fool me——"

"Evidently, then, you take it for granted that your play is unworthy of production?" asked Browne. "I am grieved to hear that, Brother Handforth. Such modesty is alarming. We, on the other hand, are convinced that your play will create a furore."

"My play will create few roars?"

"Quite possibly; but that was scarcely the idea," said Browne. "You, of course, will act the part of Trackett Grim. We could search the entire world, and find nobody more suitable. You ARE Trackett Grim."

"But do you mean this—honest injun?" asked Handforth, taking a deep breath.

"It is the positive truth, official, and copyright strictly reserved," replied Browne, nodding. "Rehearsals must begin this very evening. So it behoves us to make definite plans, and to get the company together at the earliest moment."

Edward Oswald was nearly stunned. He simply couldn't believe it. Although he had written the play with the object of having it produced, he had never really thought that it would see the light. In his heart, he had known that he was fooling himself.

And now, like a bombshell, came the information that the play was a certainty. He suddenly came to himself. With one of his characteristic rapid changes of mind, he took a grip on himself, and saw the whole thing as clear as daylight. What an ass he had been! Why should he have felt any surprise at all? Naturally, the play was going to be produced. Why should he have ever thought otherwise?

"Well, I'm glad you've shown some sense at last," he said calmly. "I'll even forgive you for burning that other play of mine, Browne. Yes, I'll be Trackett Grim, naturally. I shall produce this play with all

the surprise effects. It'll be one long thrill from start to finish! It'll be a gripper!"

"Oh, Ted! How wonderful!" said Irene, clasping her hands.

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"It's nothing, really," he said modestly. "These detective things seem pretty marvellous to the uninitiated, but it all comes from experience. Look how many Trackett Grim stories I've written! It's second nature to me to produce these deep mysteries."

The others kept their faces straight with supreme difficulty.

"But think of it!" said Irene, her eyes sparkling. "Your own play, Ted! And I'm to have a part in it! Could anything be more glorious?"

"You've got a big part, too," said Handforth, nodding. "You'll be on the stage nearly all the evening, Irene. The show will run at least three hours, and perhaps I'd better make a few cuts—although it's a pity to waste good stuff."

"Three hours!" echoed Mary. "But I thought——"

"Forgive me, Brother Handforth, but there are two slight corrections I should like to make," put in Browne. "In the first place, I shall produce the play. That is a point upon which I insist. You, as the leading actor, will take your instructions from me. In the second place, you are labouring under a misapprehension regarding the length of your masterpiece. It will, I am pleased to say, run for no longer than thirty minutes. But let us adjourn indoors to discuss the full details."

Handforth was so filled with inward excitement that he took little notice of Browne's words. And he saw none of the smiles which were exchanged. Indeed, this jape could not have been played on any other fellow. Handforth was notoriously blind to everything that went on around him. And when he was obsessed by anything, his blindness became phenomenal. The japers were counting upon this characteristic to the full.

Before going indoors, Browne cast an approving glance into the Triangle. A large number of juniors were just wheeling out of the gateway on their bicycles. John Busterfield Boots was in command—and John Busterfield Boots was filled with a firm determination to do big things.

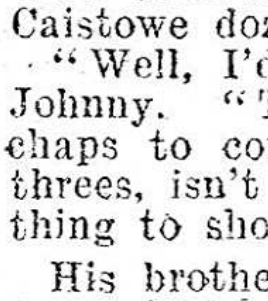
He had rallied a number of Removites and Fourth-Formers together, and they were all as keen as mustard to go forth upon this mission in aid of Mr. Andy Noggs. Advertising operations were to commence at once.

Not ordinary advertising operations, of course. The time was short, and it would be necessary to give Caistowe something sensational in order to attract the necessary attention.

But Buster Boots was undoubtedly the fellow for the task. He was prolific in ideas, and in this particular line he was in his element. He had thought out several schemes, and the good people of Caistowe were booked for some unusual excitement.

CHAPTER X.

THE HUMAN FLY.



CAISTOWE was more than usually sleepy and quiet on this particular March evening. The sun was still shining, and the air was quite mild, when two St. Frank's juniors strolled leisurely into the little Market Square of the town. It was a little distance from the sea-front, but the real centre of Caistowe. The Town Hall was situated here, and the two juniors paused and looked up at it.

"Easy!" said one of them.

"You must be careful, Johnny," warned the other gloomily.

"You ass, there's no danger," said Johnny Onions. "This stunt is a ripping idea of Buster's. I've got to give him the credit. It ought to work wonders, too."

They stood there, still looking at the face of the building. There was scarcely anybody else in the Square. Even the shops were deserted. It was just the hour when Caistowe dozed.

"Well, I'd better start, I suppose," said Johnny. "The scheme is for those other chaps to come running along in twos and threes, isn't it? Well, I'll give them something to shout about."

His brother nodded, and gazed up at the Town Hall closely.

"Don't take any risks, Johnny," he warned. "You'd better find the west section of the ball before you start."

"For goodness' sake don't mix yourself up here, Bertie!" grinned Johnny. "I suppose you mean the best section of the wall?"

"Oh, sorry!" said Bertie. "That's what I meant, of course. Why not have a look at the rear? Let's roll round the string."

"Let's do what?"

"Stroll round the ring," said Bertie. "The fact is, I'm nervous. I don't like you doing this stunt——"

"Rats!" interrupted Johnny. "Here goes!"

Quite calmly he walked to the face of the building, and commenced climbing. There was something almost monkey-like in his movements as he rose higher and higher. For years Johnny Onions had performed in his father's circus—as a boy acrobat and tight-rope walker. The task he was now attempting was child's play to him.

He was wearing crepe-soled shoes, and he knew perfectly well that he was in no danger. Other fellows would have risked their lives had they attempted this climb. But Johnny was just as safe on the face of

that building as any other fellow on the solid ground.

The climb was deceptive.

It looked perilous, but wasn't. The Town Hall was an unusually high building for such a small locality. It was high, too, particularly in the centre, where it arose to a square, imposing tower. The architect had provided a liberal amount of niches and crevices. And Johnny was able to obtain hand-grip and foothold without a trace of danger.

From below it looked sheer madness.

Those crevices seemed hardly big enough to provide grip for a monkey. Actually, they were deep and solid. Johnny mounted higher and higher, enjoying himself as he progressed.

When he was about a third of the way up, Bertie let out a shout, and this was instantly taken up and echoed by Bray and Denny and several of the Fourth-Formers. They came running into the Square from one of the side-streets. And they paused in a group, apparently wild with excitement, and pointing upwards.

"Look!" yelled Bray. "Oh, the idiot!"

"Look at the fathead!"

"He'll fall!"

A chorus of yells went up, and one or two of the local shopkeepers, scandalised by this disturbance, came out to see what it was all about. The few people in the Square were already staring upwards, frightened and apprehensive.

"Bless my soul!" gasped one of the inhabitants. "Them schoolboys again! Young varmints! There's never any telling what they'll be up to next!"

"That lad will kill himself!" shouted another.

Several women screamed, and, as though by magic, the Square began to fill.

Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey and De Valerie and a number of other Removites came tearing into the Square from the other direction. They, too, set up a tremendous din, and appeared to be frantic with alarm.

"Hi!" roared Pitt. "Come down, you ass!"

"Johnny, don't be such a reckless chump!"

Johnny Onions was now about half-way up, and he merely paused and waved his hand. Buster Boots, watching from near the Town Hall, grinned with appreciation.

"By Jove, it's working like a charm," he chuckled.

"I never knew there were so many people in Caistowe!" said Singleton. "Look at 'em! They're pouring in like a flood!"

The Market Square was, indeed, filling from every side. The air was filled with shouts, and there was every element of a first-class sensation.

Traffic—what little there was of it—was completely brought to a standstill. And when the police arrived, wondering what all the noise was about, the tension reached fever pitch.

Johnny Onions was merely performing the "human fly" act, so common in the United States. But over there men have willingly taken appalling risks for the sake of a large reward, or the love of sensation. Immense skyscrapers have been climbed, and more than one of these "human flies" have paid the penalty for their foolhardiness by crashing to destruction.

Johnny Onions' stunt was a mere joke by comparison—but it was sensational enough for sleepy Caistowe. The very fact that he was climbing the face of the building was enough. The watchers did not appreciate the fact that this boy had been trained as an acrobat, and that the building was so curiously constructed that it provided certain safety.

The scheme was a triumphant success from the point of view of the advertising expert—Buster Boots. He stood there, gleeful and delighted at the size of the crowd. Before very long the entire Square was filled—and people were still coming from every quarter. There was something rather amusing about it.

The policemen shouted to Johnny in vain. He took not the slightest notice of them. On the contrary, he thought it about time to oblige the crowd with a few thrills.

He was now on the tower itself—high above the pavement, and clinging there like some monster insect. As he grew higher the shouts were hushed, and the people watched in breathless suspense.

Suddenly, a long gasp sounded—rippling over the Square like the sound of a breaking wave. Johnny had suddenly slipped. He clutched desperately, and hung there. Even his own chums nearly had heart failure. But Johnny himself, with his face to the wall, was chuckling contentedly. He had taken no chance—but he had hoodwinked everybody.

"The hopeless ass!" groaned Bob Christine. "Why the dickens can't he act sensibly?"

"There's nothing to be afraid of," remarked Bertie, who hadn't turned a hair. "He's quite safe."

"My hat, you've got more nerve than I have!" muttered Bob. "I shall be jolly glad when the prize duffer has got to the top. There's such a thing as being too clever—— Oh! Oh, the—the——"

Christine paused, gulping. Once again Johnny had feigned a slip, and once again the crowd had felt its heart missing a beat. But the schoolboy climber was still safe. He still went upwards.

The police could do nothing. They were helpless. There was no way of getting this young lunatic down. The only possibility was to let him finish his climb, and then take drastic action. But many wondered if there would be any necessity for action. The boy was doomed.

The police kept the pavement clear immediately beneath the climber. They evidently expected him to come hurtling down-

wards. But he didn't. He climbed on, and three parts of Caistowe stood watching, breathless and apprehensive.

The perpetrators of this crowd-collecting stunt had never hoped for such astounding success. Buster's only fear was that the people would disperse before he could properly complete his scheme. Everything would depend upon the attitude of the people after they had learned the truth.

As for Johnny, he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

He made no particular haste, for he wanted to give the people plenty of time to congregate. It would be a mistake, however, to over-prolong the sensation. And the moment had just arrived when the actual object of this stunt should be disclosed.

Johnny was near to the summit—and Buster Boots had already made his way into the Town Hall, and was racing up towards the tower. Johnny, glancing down, took full note of the police. He grinned. There would probably be a fuss later on, but it was all in the game. And even if he was reprimanded by the Head, there was nothing much to worry about.

But something else caused Johnny to hasten. The Fire Brigade was getting into action, and the big escape was being rushed up. The idea, apparently, was to rear it against the Town Hall, and rescue this crazy schoolboy. Hundreds of people thought that the unfortunate youngster had taken leave of his senses.

"Buck up, Johnny!" came a breathless voice. "Unless we're quick, we shall overreach ourselves. Now's the minute!"

Johnny glanced up. Leaning over the parapet was Buster Boots, hot, flushed, and perspiring. He had raced up the tower steps three at a time, and had found a way through a trap-door on to the leads. Johnny nodded.

"Right you are!" he said briskly. "Go ahead!"

"I'll go ahead when you're up here," replied Boots. For goodness' sake be quick! It gives me an awful turn to see you clinging there like that! I didn't realise it was so horribly dangerous!"

"You ass, I'm as safe as you are!" retorted Onions major. "There's no risk in this. I'm as fresh as paint!"

He reached the parapet, and, to Buster's relief, pulled himself into certain safety. A long roar went up from the assembled crowds below. Cheers sounded, and there was a perfect babble of excitement.

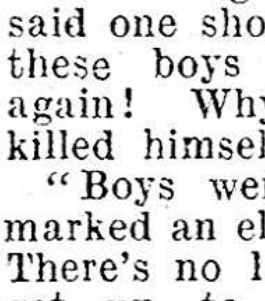
And then John Busterfield Boots acted.

Producing a huge megaphone, he placed it to his lips, and directed it downwards. Johnny Onions stood by, watching with amusement. He couldn't quite understand why there had been so much excitement. He had performed feats in the circus ring which had entailed real risks—and people had thought nothing of them.

"Silence!" roared Buster. "People, lend me your ears!"

CHAPTER XI.

GIVING MR. NOGGS A BOOST.



REGINALD PITT looked round rather anxiously.

"I hope this thing's going to fizz!" he said. "The people are drifting already. They think everything's over. It's up to Boots to claim the crowd's attention before the opportunity's gone. Even then it's a question of treatment. Unless he says the right thing, the whole business will do more harm than good."

"We can trust old Buster," said Nipper confidently.

On every hand the Caistowe people were animatedly discussing the affair. The general feeling seemed to be one of indignation. The townfolk regarded it as a piece of nerve that this schoolboy should have upset the even tenor of Caistowe's evening hour. It was felt that escapades of this sort should be put down with a strong hand.

"It's a good thing the police are here!" said one shopkeeper warmly. "They'll warn these boys not to be such young idiots again! Why, that young fool might have killed himself! Never knew such tricks!"

"Boys weren't like it in my time!" remarked an elderly inhabitant gruffly. "Huh! There's no limit to what the young folks'll get up to nowadays! Seems as though they can do just as they like!"

At this point, Buster Boots took charge of the situation. His voice came down into the Market Square with extraordinary effect. That megaphone was an efficient one, and the acoustic properties of the surrounding buildings were helpful, too. There wasn't a person in the square who could not understand every word that came floating downwards.

"Awfully sorry to have given you a turn, but there wasn't any need to worry," sang out Buster. "Allow me to introduce Johnny Onions—the World's Premier Schoolboy Acrobat and Tightrope Walker. Johnny, bow to Caistowe!"

"You ass!" grinned Johnny.

But he bowed, and the crowds ceased their comments, and listened for more. This was certainly a surprise. There was something novel in being addressed from the top of the Town Hall, through a megaphone. Everybody felt that there was something behind all this—something which was yet to be disclosed.

Indeed, the knowledge that the climber was Johnny Onions made all the difference. Johnny was well known in Caistowe, for it

was here that his father's circus had been pitched at the time of his public triumphs. The Caistowe folk realised at once that the boy had been in no real peril.

Many of the younger people cheered, and Johnny bowed again.

"Now we're going to ask you to forgive us," went on Buster Boots candidly. "And when I say 'We,' I mean the St. Frank's Remove and Fourth. We've all had a hand in this game, and we did it on purpose to get a thousand or so of you together, in one place. Thanks for rallying round so loyally."

"Darn my skin!" observed an old fisherman gruffly.

"Another o' them boys' tricks!" said somebody else. "I thought there was something rummy about this affair! What'll they do next?"

"I want you to do us a favour," continued Boots. "Johnny has obliged by giving a free show, and St. Frank's would like you to open your eyes to something which you're evidently blind about. I'm here to give you the tip! You've got something good in your midst, and you don't even know it!"

"That's the right note!" murmured Nipper, nodding.

"But before I go into any details, I want to add that we're disinterested," proceeded Boots. "We're doing this merely as a favour to Caistowe. You're missing a great opportunity, and we want to put you on the right track. It may seem like an advertising dodge to you—and it is. But we're not getting paid for it, and we don't want to get paid for it. It's a stunt of our own for the benefit of everybody concerned. Take my tip, and go to Noggs' Imperial Theatre."

Buster paused after that, in order to allow his words to sink in. They sank in within a second. Everybody in the square gave one ejaculation—and at the top of the tower it sounded suspiciously like an indignant snort. Echoes of it came upwards in waves.

"Wait!" roared Buster, his voice booming through the square like thunder, owing to the amplification of the megaphone. "Mr. Noggs doesn't know anything about this. He hasn't asked us to give his show a boost. It's our own idea entirely—so don't get any wrong ideas."

The crowd still listened, and now thoroughly appreciated the fact that they had been expressly brought into the square to hear this surprising advertisement. Not many people were angry. The majority accepted the situation at its true worth, and felt amused.

"Boys will be boys!" said one onlooker, shaking his head. "Reg'lar young monkeys, they are—no good saying they ain't!"

"By all the sharks, Jiggs, ye're right!" growled a bluff, stocky man near by. "I've had some o' these boys! Roarin' cyclones! I'd rather be afloat on a raft—without rations or water—a thousand miles from land—than have any more dealin's with schoolboys!"

Handforth obliged with vigour, and Bernard Forrest nearly left the ground from the force of that lift.

His voice carried across to Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey, who were near by.

"Hallo," grinned Reggie, stalking up. "Good-evening, Cap'n Boom! Got over the shock of St. Frank's yet?"

It was Mr. Jiggs who answered—Mr. Jiggs being the captain's boon companion.

"He ain't bin himself these last five or six weeks, young gent," he said gloomily. "A rare dance you led us that time, an' no mistake!"

"I'll bet you won't forget the West House revolt for as many years!" chuckled Jack Grey. "But there's no ill-feeling, is there? Always glad to see you, captain. And you too, Mr. Jiggs!"

Captain Boom and Mr. Jiggs were the butler and manservant of a certain Commander Rudd, wlio lived a few miles along the coast. They had no opportunity of making any further comment, for Buster Boots was talking again.

"Why ignore Mr. Noggs' theatre?" he asked earnestly. "This is a disinterested recommendation. Is it fair to an enterprising showman to shun him like this? He's a marvellous actor! One of the most wonderful character actors of to-day! Why not give him a chance?"

"Hear, hear!" roared all the St. Frank's fellows.

"You've only got until Saturday!" thundered Buster. "Now then, Caistowe! Show what you can do! Buck up and swarm round Noggs' Imperial Theatre, and give the old chap some heart! You've only got

to-night, to-morrow night, and Saturday. Let Mr. Noggs leave Caistowe with the determination to come again! His show's worth twice the admission money—the seats are good, and the theatre's thoroughly up to date. It's a dirty trick to ban him! We St. Frank's fellows have decided to do all we can to help. But unless you people rally round, we've worked for nothing."

Boots said a great deal more in this strain, working himself up into a fine pitch of enthusiasm. He waxed eloquent over Mr. Noggs' capabilities—and could do so with true heartiness, since Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs was indeed a clever actor.

Boots became hoarse, but he continued—and there was no doubt that he had made a big impression. A number of the more intelligent people argued the thing out. If these boys were willing to get up an affair like this solely in Mr. Noggs' interests—well, there must be something in the man. He couldn't be such a dud as reports had indicated."

"That's all I'm going to say!" concluded Buster Boots. "I'll leave it to you now. Forget the cinema for once—give old Noggs a chance! If you don't like the show, then you're not capable of liking anything. Mr. Noggs has had the enterprise to tour this theatre, and the poor old boy's in despair because you ignore him. Live and let live!"

Buster put his megaphone down, and vanished behind the parapet. All the juniors gave him a roaring cheer—and quite a number of the ordinary populace echoed it. They had been warmed up by the appeal. And they fully accepted Buster's statement that he and his companions were disinterested.

"Sink my anchor, Jiggs, we'll go to this show!" declared Captain Boom, with a nod. "Before we set sail for home, we'll steer for the theatre and find a couple of berths."

Mr. Jiggs nodded.

"Might just as well," he agreed. "I ain't seen a good theatre show for months. An' I've allus had a liking for a good drama. No good sayin' I ain't!"

"But let's hope these boys won't be there," said the skipper darkly. "May I never cross the Line again if I want these young demons floating in my waters. I don't like 'em, Jiggs. Neither do you!"

"Young cuttlefish—that's what they are!" agreed Mr. Jiggs, nodding. "Can't get on with boys—no good sayin' I can! Steer a wide course, cap'n—that's my advice. Boys are worse than derelicts. Always likely to get in your course, an' sink you! I don't like 'em, an' it's no good sayin' I do!"

In the meantime, Buster Boots and Johnny Onions had arrived in the wide foyer of the Town Hall—only to find themselves confronted by a solid phalanx of police. The two juniors were grinning widely.

"Sorry, sergeant," said Boots. "It was only a rag——"

"Sergeant!" snorted the Caistowe inspector. "The pair of you deserve to be taken to the station! I never saw such a trick in the whole of my days! You'll hear more of this, young men!"

"Oh, chuck it, inspector," said Johnny. "You're not going to report us to the Head, are you?"

"That's just what I am going to do," said the inspector curtly.

"But it was only a stunt to get the crowd up," urged Johnny. "I wasn't in any danger, and we haven't done any harm. Be a sport, inspector! I'm sure you don't want to get us into trouble with the beaks!"

The inspector grunted.

"Well, you'd better not get up to any more of these silly tricks," he said, frowning. "I've got to keep law and order. I'll think about it. If you boys behave yourselves I might make no complaint. But I don't want any more of these sensations."

Johnny and Buster congratulated themselves as they emerged into the open air. They had a pretty shrewd idea that the inspector would let the matter drop. They were immediately surrounded by a crowd of Removites and Fourth-Formers on the Town Hall steps.

"Good for you, Johnny," said Nipper with approval. "I believe the thing's going to work. We've heard lots of people saying they'll go."

"Where do I come in?" asked Boots indignantly.

"Oh, you share the honours, of course," replied Nipper. "We don't want any professional jealousy——"

"I say, there's some trouble over on the other side of the square," interrupted Tommy Watson, running up. "There's a man kicking up a terrific fuss. He's demanding all sorts of things. He wants you, Boots!"

"Who the dickens is he?" asked Buster.

"The manager of the cinema, I believe," grinned Watson. "He didn't seem to like that speech of yours—— Hallo! He's coming over."

Tommy Watson was right. The man was indeed the manager of the local picture theatre. He proved to be a beery, uncouth individual, with about as much talent for management as a plough-horse. Curiously enough, many rural cinemas are controlled by people of this type—and the owners of such places wonder why the populace goes to the big towns.

"I'll have the law on you!" roared this unpleasant gentleman. "This'll mean a prosecution, you young busybodies!"

"What on earth have I done?" asked Boots, glaring.

"Didn't you tell the people to go to this infernal fit-up?" demanded the cinema manager. "Didn't you tell them to give my place a miss?"

Boots decided that the man had a little grievance.

"Awfully sorry," he said, calming down. "That was just a slip, and I apologise. But it didn't make any difference. And you needn't worry about Mr. Noggs—he's only here for another three days——"

"If I had my way he wouldn't be here for another three minutes!" shouted the man. "As for your apologies, you can take them somewhere else! I'll have you prosecuted for this business! Interfering young hounds! That's all you are! Why the thunder can't you mind your own business?"

CHAPTER XII.

AT THE THEATRE.

MR. PONSONBY proved to be the rather aristocratic name of the cinema manager. But he belied any hint of breeding by his brusque manner. And the attitude of the St. Frank's fellows changed.

Buster Boots had done everything that the occasion demanded, but the man preferred to make himself unpleasant. In fact, he was exceedingly nasty. The very thought of losing some of his patrons infuriated him. It was another case of professional jealousy.

An immediate conference was the result.

And less than an hour later, when the town had calmed right down, and the Market Square was placid again, a certain movement commenced in the neighbourhood of the Caistowe Cinema.

This was a comparatively small place. In the summer time, of course, there were various forms of high-class amusement, but during the off-season Caistowe had to be content with this one-horse picture theatre.

It was Thursday evening, and therefore a new programme was being shown. It was one of the best evenings for the cinema, and the doors were just being opened. The place was situated in a narrow side-street. About a hundred yards from the building a crowd of St. Frank's juniors formed themselves into a solid barrier. And a similar crowd took up their posts at about the same distance on the other side.

Mr. Ponsonby knew nothing of this at the moment, for he was one of those managers who stayed at home and left the direct control to his underlings. He generally turned up some time after the show had commenced—just to take charge of the money, and have a general look round.

Another of Buster Boots' ideas was being put into operation.

Under ordinary circumstances he wouldn't have adopted such tactics, but Mr. Ponsonby had made himself so unwarrantably nasty that the juniors were ready enough to steal his patrons. There was no suggestion of force, however. The matter was left entirely to the would-be picture-goers.

Boots was in control on one side, and Nipper on the other. And everybody bound for the cinema was compelled to encounter either one group or the other. And none were allowed through until they had been interviewed.

"Just a minute, ladies!" said Boots briskly, as three girls came along. "Going to the Cinema?"

This was the general system adopted. Sometimes the people were merely passing through the street, and they were then allowed to proceed without further delay. but when they announced their intention of entering the Cinema, they were held up.

"Why not give Mr. Noggs a chance?" asked the juniors. "You haven't been to his theatre, eh? Good! Then give him a trial! He's only here until Saturday, and you'll always regret it unless you go. Take a chance this evening, and run along to Noggs' Imperial Theatre."

Fully fifty per cent of the people thus addressed good-naturedly changed their plans. There was something very persistent about these schoolboys. There was no suggestion of force, but many of the people were half afraid to refuse.

As a direct result of this, the usual cinema patrons only dribbled in, and the road leading to the travelling theatre became thronged with playgoers. Curiosity played a large part in the proceedings. Quite a large number of people had made up their minds to visit Noggs' Theatre in any case. The evening's events had aroused their interest—and this, of course, was exactly what Buster Boots had been playing for all the time.

It was the persistency of the "drive" that brought the results. And while these events were in progress, Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs knew nothing whatever about them. Nobody had given him the tip that a special effort was being made this evening—proof positive, indeed, that the St. Frank's juniors were entirely disinterested.

Mr. Noggs, in all truth, was in a very downcast frame of mind. It was nearly opening time, and his business manager, Roger Barton, was not in a cheery mood, either. They were both in the old showman's caravan, and everything outside was quiet and dead.

"It's no good talking, Noggs, business has gone to pot," Barton was saying. "What's the good of fighting against Fate? You'll only be in a worse mess by Wednesday. Far better come to an agreeable arrangement now."

Mr. Noggs shook his head.

"No, laddie—no," he replied. "I'm going on. The outlook is black, but I'll remain my own boss until the last minute."

"Have you thought of Saturday?" asked Barton. "What about paying the company's wages?"

"The ghost hasn't walked for many a Saturday;" replied Mr. Noggs gloomily. "True, I have managed to pay them some-

thing—enough to keep the wolf from the door. And this Saturday will be no exception."

"But you're broke, man!"

"'Tis infamous, I grant it, to be poor'—Smollett," quoted Mr. Noggs, shaking his head. "But after all we are still alive. 'Man wants but little, nor that little long'—Young. 'Poverty is no disgrace to a man, but it is confoundedly inconvenient'—Sydney Smith. 'There is no virtue like necessity'—Shakespeare."

Roger Barton grunted.

"Confound your quotations, Noggs," he said irritably. "Haven't you got any words of your own? Half your conversation is stolen from the dead!"

"The illustrious are never dead—Noggs!" replied the old showman promptly. "Far better to use wisdom from bygone lips than triteness from my own—Noggs. I am not so poor in the invention of phrases, laddie. But why should I use water when wine is available?"

"You're a hopeless idealist, Noggs; that's your trouble," retorted Barton. "Think of the rotten business we've been doing—week after week, month after month! What's it leading to? Ruin! Do you think you'll get thirty shillings in the house to-night? More likely a few miserable pence!"

Mr. Noggs nodded.

"I fear you are right, ladkins," he agreed. "And why is this tragedy? I will admit several members of my company are poor—they are, indeed, utterly lacking in the slightest trace of ability. But am I so unattractive myself? Are my own powers gone? At one time I could command audiences——"

"That's the past," interrupted Barton. "We've got to look at the present, Noggs—we've got to stare facts in the face. And the unpleasant fact at the moment is that your theatre is practically banned. None of the decent people will patronise you, and only a few of the riff-raff. Why not end it all now? I'm willing to settle at once."

Mr. Noggs gave a hollow laugh.

"Your humour is of a tragic kind, Roger," he replied grimly. "You have money, and thus you look at this thing from a different viewpoint. You are trifling with me—jesting with my poverty. But is it not always so? 'The jests of the rich are ever successful'—Goldsmith. We have already reached one agreement, and your money is due next Wednesday. Why hasten the doom of a penniless showman by coming to another arrangement?"

"Nonsense!" snapped Barton. "I am making this suggestion entirely in your own interests. For Heaven's sake, man, why carry on when there's not the faintest hope? On Wednesday next, unless you can pay up, I obtain legal control of your theatre—of the entire property. That's understood, isn't it?"

"Alas, only too plainly."

"Well, you've no chance of pulling round between that time and this—so why not effect the transfer to-day?" demanded Barton. "It will be all to your advantage, Noggs. You're tired, man. You're worn out. Get rid of these responsibilities, and you'll be a changed being. I'll get you a good company, and I'll pay you a good wage. We'll open in Bannington with a boom."

"And I as merely a paid servant?" asked Mr. Noggs. "Away with this talk! Do you think I could act in this theatre under such conditions? No, Roger! When my interests are wiped out, I am wiped out, too. What matters if I starve? 'There are worse pangs than those of want'—Lytton."

"You're obstinate, Noggs," snapped Barton. "Your pride is too great. Many a famous man has sold his own interests, has admitted defeat, and has appeared as a paid artist."

"They, then, have more courage than I," replied Mr. Noggs gravely. "No, Roger. Away with your inducements. I am my own master until Wednesday. I expect no miracles, and my theatre is virtually yours. But let me be the master of it until the last minute."

Barton knew that further words were useless. Andy Noggs was not only an obstinate man, but he was a firm one. He wasn't to be drawn into any precipitate agreement. He had no business ability, but he was a man of caution.

And he was beginning to suspect his manager. Barton had advanced him many sums of money, but their full total amounted to less than one third of the value of the property. Legally, Barton was entitled to seize the theatre and effects unless the repayment was made. But morally, such a seizure would be more or less of a deliberate theft. It came as a shock to Mr. Noggs to realise that this man—whom he had trusted—could contemplate such a move.

He had no idea that Barton had been conspiring with a man named Lister ever since the tour had commenced. He never dreamed that the bad business had been the result of a deliberate system.

And Mr. Noggs was determined to hold out until the end.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STAGGERER FOR MR. NOGGS.

ROGER BARTON rose to his feet, frowning.

"Oh, well, it's no good, I suppose," he grunted. "You're a good actor, Noggs, but you're an obstinate sort of dog! You'll let your

company starve rather than give in. Well, you'll have to give in on Wednesday, or you'll have the sheriff at your doors——"

"So it has come to threats, eh?" interrupted Mr. Noggs grimly. "I'm beginning to suspect that you are a false friend, Barton. It is as well that I should know the character of those who surround me. At present I am still the master of my own. On Wednesday, perhaps, it will be different. Then I shall go forth, and none will bemoan me. 'The wretched have no friends'—Dryden."

The door opened, and Ashwood looked in. He was the actor who generally played the juvenile leads, and he was looking excited. He was in the midst of his making-up, for his face was only half "finished." Furthermore, he wore no collar or tie.

"Haven't you seen, guv'nor?" he asked breathlessly.

"Seen what, laddie? Seen what?" asked Mr. Noggs.

"Why, they're pouring in!" exclaimed Ashwood. "Crowds! Not country bumpkins, either—but the real townspeople! The stalls are selling like hot cakes!"

"Rubbish!" snapped Barton, with sudden alarm.

"It doesn't seem to please you, Mr. Barton," said Ashwood sharply.

"Why, I—I—— Confound you, what do you mean?" demanded Barton. "If the people are coming in, there's nothing I like better. But you're talking nonsense!"

"All right—come and see for yourself!" retorted Ashwood, with an unpleasant glance at the manager "Guv'nor, it'll do your old eyes good to come and see!" he went on enthusiastically. "You're wanted, too! The box-office is over-worked!"

Mr. Noggs loked rather dazed.

"This is surely an impossible thing?" he muttered. "A mere flash in the pan! Come, let us see this marvel."

Clearly, Mr. Noggs was unconvinced. It occurred to him that Ashwood had been deceived by a few people coming up in quick succession. Often enough had Mr. Noggs himself been raised to high hopes by such a temporary flood. He had no thought of the truth, for optimism had died in him long since.

But once out of the caravan, his eyes took on an amazed sparkle. He only walked a few yards, and then came to a halt—standing there in the gloom, almost hidden, but able to see the front of the theatre, with its glaring electric arcs. Roger Barton stood beside him, equally dumbfounded.

"Great Cæsar!" said Mr. Noggs, taking a deep breath.

There were only a few people at the side

entrance—which gave admittance to the sixpenny pit. These, as a rule, formed the only throng, the front of the house being deserted.

But this evening the front of the house was crowded. People were lining up in long queues—and more were flooding through the gateway of the meadow in a continuous stream. It was a sight which thrilled the old showman to his very core.

"'O, wonderful, wonderful, and most wonderful wonderful, and yet again wonderful'—Shakespeare," murmured Mr. Noggs, his breath short and sharp. "What is this that I see? 'Life is a series of surprises'—Emerson. Roger, look at this! Feast your eyes upon it, laddie!"

Roger Barton was looking, but it was scarcely a feast. From his point of view, this spectacle was decidedly unpleasing. Success of any kind for Noggs' Imperial Theatre by no means suited his book.

"There's something infernally queer about this!" he muttered harshly.

"Queer, you say?" retorted Mr. Noggs. "Man alive, have you no other word? Have you nothing more adequate? Last evening we were playing to empty benches—and now we are likely to be packed! 'O. day and night, but this is a wondrous change'—Shakespeare."

"It's absolutely uncanny!" ejaculated Barton. "Why should these people come flooding in like this? What's the reason? Things don't happen without a cause."

"It is not for us to inquire into causes," said Mr. Noggs. "The people are coming—and for once I shall step upon the stage with a good heart. To-night, old spifkins, I shall act! And perchance the future is not so black as it has hitherto seemed."

Barton was thoroughly alarmed.

"You can't count on this sort of thing continuing," he said savagely. "It's only a temporary——"

"Who knows?" interrupted Mr. Noggs, his whole attitude alight with renewed hope. Success! At last, Roger—at last! 'We must fight our way onward—we must be brave—there are obstacles to be met, and we must meet and crush them.'—Dickens. Inspiring words, laddie!"

Mr. Noggs was so altered that Barton looked at him with real alarm. But he was more concerned about the crowds. There was no deception about this sudden influx of playgoers. They came continuously.

Indeed, every record for the tour was broken—for after the house had entirely filled there were more people at the pay-box. Money was turned away—but not before a great many people had booked their seats for the following evening. The latecomers were impressed by the full house, and, after the fashion of crowds, they were precipitate in their desire to share this newly-found amusement.

The old showman was a totally different being.

When his house had been filled by the St. Frank's fellows, he had received a temporary spur—but he had known, all the while, that these boys were no criterion to judge by. It was the general public he wanted. It was the general public upon whom he had to rely.

And this evening the general public had rolled up—had filled his theatre to the brim. And the marvel of it had a great effect upon Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs. He became so enthusiastic that he imbued the other members of his company with his own spirit. The show that evening was destined to be a sparkling one.

Roger Barton was inwardly furious, and alarmed at this unexpected turn of events. And he was at a total loss to understand the reason. But neither he nor Mr. Noggs were left guessing for long.

A few minutes before the curtain rose, while Mr. Noggs was busy at his make-up in the caravan, a brisk knock sounded on the door. The old showman turned, and opened it. He beheld a throng of St. Frank's juniors outside—and Barton stood in the background, attracted by this sudden invasion.

"Hallo, Mr. Noggs!" sang out Nipper cheerily. "How's business?"

"Booming, laddie—booming!" replied Mr. Noggs, in a great voice. "We are full! Not a seat left! And half the stalls booked for to-morrow!"

"Hurrah!" yelled the juniors.

"Good egg!" shouted Buster Boots. "You can always trust me to boost things up, Mr. Noggs! I'm the advertising expert!"

"Rats!" yelled the crowd. "We were all in this!"

"By the ghost of Garrick!" ejaculated Mr. Noggs. "You—you mean——"

"We've just been doing a little high-pressure work," explained Buster calmly. "But this is only the beginning. Just wait until you open up in Bannington! The best thing you can do is to order a new theatre—about three times this size!"

"Good luck to Noggs' Imperial Theatre!" chanted the crowd.

And Mr. Noggs thoroughly understood. The mystery was explained—both to him and to Mr. Roger Barton. Their sensations were diametrically opposed to one another. For Mr. Noggs was transported into a fever of joy, and his manager was grim with concentrated rage.

CHAPTER XIV.

"THE TRIUMPH OF TRACKETT GRIM."

MONDAY arrived after a hectic week-end. For Handforth. the past two or three days had been strenuous in the extreme. And all the other members of the "Triumph of Trackett Grim" cast were equally exhausted.

William Napoleon Browne, who had done at least seventy-five per cent of the work, was as fresh as ever, as energetic as ever, and his untiring vim was inexhaustible. In fact, the volatile skipper of the Fifth positively thrived on hard work.

He had kept everybody hot on the go.

The girls had not been spared. Irene Manners and Mary Summers had been compelled to attend several rehearsals. That very morning, in fact, a final rehearsal had taken place in the gymnasium—before breakfast! And Irene and Mary had been forced to attend.

And now, with afternoon lessons over, a flood of juniors were setting off for Bannington. It would be cut very fine, for there would only be just sufficient time to get the performance through before Mr. Noggs would require the theatre for his own purposes.

Chiefly owing to Browne's constant energy, the spirit of solemnity had been maintained. Not once had Handforth been allowed to suspect the real spirit behind this production. He continued to imagine that his play was a deadly serious thriller. The rehearsals had been carried out with a gravity which had more than once strained the endurance of the youthful actors and actresses to the very limit. They hardly knew how they had carried on without bursting into laughter.

The audience, too, had been carefully trained. Browne never did anything unless he did it thoroughly. And he had selected every member of the audience to the full capacity of the theatre—and had spoken to them collectively, warning them to maintain the joke throughout. Under no circumstances was Handforth to have an inkling of the truth.

Mr. Noggs was only too pleased to loan his theatre for the necessary period. He was now pitched in an excellent position in Bannington. He had secured an ideal site on a piece of waste ground in the very centre of the High Street, and not a stone's throw from the main centre of the town.

The old showman was bubbling with high spirits and good humour. When Browne and Nipper encountered him that afternoon they found a very changed man.

"Hail! Welcome, friends!" boomed Mr. Noggs, as the pair appeared at his caravan. "Welcome to this humble soil!"

"Let's hope you do good business here, Mr. Noggs," said Nipper. "You didn't finish up so badly at Caistowe, did you?"

"Three packed houses, ladkins!" replied Mr. Noggs enthusiastically. "The best business of the tour! I was sorry to leave—but it's better that I should be here. Bannington is my big hope. And we arrive with a growing reputation. Our newly-achieved fame has raced us."

Mr. Noggs was more grateful to the boys than he could express—for he fully realised that he had to thank the juniors for his recent boost. And he was willing to do anything in his power for the boys by way of return.

"Hi" yelled Handforth in alarm. He tore the door open, dashed out, and collided with Mr. Crowell so violently that the unfortunate Form-master sat down with a horrible thud in the passage.

He not only agreed to place his theatre at their disposal for Handforth's play, but he was delighted at the idea of including it in his evening programme—as a front piece. It would probably create a lot of talk in the town, and any kind of talk meant an advertisement.

"Who am I to deny you anything when in reason?" asked Mr. Noggs genially. "Go ahead with your plans—use my theatre as you will. I, myself, will announce this play of yours at the evening's performance."

"Enough!" said Browne. "We have the all-clear signal, and that is all we need. Our debt, Brother Noggs, is mutual. We are helping you, and you are helping us! Splendid!"

The audience was piling into the little theatre. It consisted exclusively of Removites, Fourth-Formers, a few members of the Fifth, and quite a number of Irene's friends from the Moor View School.

And owing to Browne's careful tuition, an air of gravity pervaded the occasion. There was just the ordinary low murmur of talk. No secret chuckles—no exchange of grins. Handforth's play was being taken in deadly earnest.

But the ordeal was only just commencing. Behind the scenes, Handforth was proving a sore trial to the other members of the company. For he took the play more seriously than anybody else—and his earnest attitude, his whole-hearted gravity, only served to make the situation funnier than ever.

"It's too bad, Dick—it is, honestly!" murmured Mary Summers, as she stood with Nipper in the wings. "We're nearly ready to start, and Ted's simply eating the whole affair. He thinks it's going to be a triumph of dramatic art! It'll be an awful shock to him this evening."

"When the general public howls, you mean?" grinned Nipper. "I'm not so sure that this afternoon's audience won't howl, too! When this burlesque fairly starts, they'll never be able to contain themselves."

Mary shook her head.

"But isn't it rather cruel?" she asked dubiously.

"They say it's kind to be cruel sometimes. And you needn't worry about Handy. He's as tough as leather. This sort of thing'll do him a world of good. It'll knock some of the rot out of him. He thinks he's a wonderful playwright and a great actor. But he's only a comedian."

"But an unconscious comedian."

"That doesn't make any difference," said Nipper. "He'll have nothing to growl about, Mary. He'll be a huge success, if you want to know my opinion. He ought to be proud of the fact that he can write burlesque, and act it. It's a great achievement for a schoolboy."

Mary lost her doubts. After all, Handforth would have nothing to growl about if the show was really funny. Indeed, he would have something to congratulate himself upon—for it is always more difficult to produce humorous stuff than to produce drama.

The play itself started amid a ripple of suppressed amusement. But it was only the faintest ripple, and Handforth didn't notice it. He was so enthralled in his own part that he scarcely took any notice of the audience.

As "Trackett Grim," he was a solid mass of concentrated alertness.

It was only by a miracle that the whole house didn't go into one yell at his first appearance. His make-up consisted of a kind of exaggerated Sherlock Holmes effect, complete with dressing-gown and pipe—the latter being unlighted.

In his own opinion, Handforth spoke his lines impressively and without any trace of staginess. But, as a matter of fact, he unconsciously burlesqued the part to such an extent that the other members of the cast seemed almost ordinary—although they were burlesqueing for all they were worth.

The audience, having got over the first five minutes, bravely managed to hold themselves in. Although on the point of exploding, they sat in their places, grave and apparently intent. They seemed to be thrilled to the core.

Browne, of course, had made one or two drastic alterations. There were no sudden entrances down the chimney, and the entire production had been brought within the range of Mr. Noggs' "props." Nevertheless, the thrills and the surprises came piling one on top of the other. And Handforth seemed to believe that they were genuine shocks for the audience.

The whole thing was rattled through at breakneck speed, and there were one or two occasions when the audience nearly collapsed. But there was no question whatever of its success.

As a drama it was ghastly—but as a burlesque it was supreme.

CHAPTER XV.

THE COMEDIAN OF THE REMOVE.

"OH, my goodness!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shssssh!"

One or two members of the audience found it impossible to contain their laughter. Half-way through the first act they managed to scramble out, and give vent to their mirth in the open. They were positively afraid to return.

As a playwright, Handforth had a trick of naming his characters according to their dispositions. Thus, "Heeza Tyke" was the villain. And when his lady accomplice was announced as "Miss Ima Lyre," the audience practically died on the spot. Mary Summers, who took this impersonation, only just managed to carry it through with the necessary gravity.

And as the play proceeded, the wilder grew the burlesque. The appearance of the heroine, with a similar made-up name, only taxed the audience the more. And the dialogue was every bit as excruciating.

Without question, William Napoleon Browne's peculiar genius was visible throughout the entire piece. It was he who had converted the play from a hopeless jumble of nonsense into a real winner. Handforth's dialogue remained practically intact, but the situations had been so welded that everything went with a swing.

At the end of the first act the curtain came down amid a roar of applause. The fellows had to let themselves go somehow. And if they couldn't laugh, they could at least yell. And they yelled to some purpose. The play was arranged in two short acts, but a tremendous amount of action happened in each of them.

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Handy!"

On the stage, the applause came through the curtain like something solid. Handforth stood there, dazed. He was taken by surprise, for he was so wrapped up in the play that he had forgotten all about the end of the act.

"Marvellous, old man!" said Church, rushing on and grabbing his hand.

"Eh?" gasped Handforth. "My hat! It's not the end, is it?"

"Only the end of the first act, you chump," said McClure enthusiastically. "You've made a record, old man! You've —— Oh, corks!"

Church and McClure fled, in complete disorder. The curtain had been raised, so that Handforth could make a bow. And the unexpected appearance of Church and McClure gave the audience a fine opportunity to let out a yell of laughter. It was an immense relief.

And they entered into the spirit of the affair thoroughly. The applause was thundered out like the roaring of guns. Not merely handclaps, but cheer upon cheer.

There was scarcely a breathing space during the interval, however.

Browne's idea was to rush the play through at breakneck speed from start to finish, and the interval lasted no longer than a minute. And then the curtain rose on the second act—with Trackett Grim and Splinter investigating at the scene of the crime.

It was in this scene that Trackett Grim encountered the villain, and there was a tremendous fight. The whole thing went off with complete success. And Handforth was thoroughly convinced that his play was a dramatic masterpiece, and his acting a perfect cameo of art.

Even when the play came to an end, and the audience let itself go, he still had no suspicion. He heard nothing of the laughter. He was only aware that he had achieved a triumph. He was cheered and clapped, and called again and again.

"Speech! Speech!"

"Hurrah!"

"Come on, Handy!"

"Speech!"

The demand for a speech was universal. Even Mr. Noggs, standing at the back, joined in. For the old showman was delighted. At first he had been rather dubious about including this piece in his own programme. But the humour of it was so palpable that he was only too pleased to have the opportunity. Naturally, Mr. Noggs had been thoroughly primed in advance by Browne.

"Speech! Speech!"

The curtain went up for the tenth time, and Handforth stood there, flushed, excited, and bewildered. But as the audience magically became silent, his calmness returned. This was the moment of his life he had always dreamed of. The idol of the public! Edward Oswald was a fellow who blossomed like a flower in the glare of the limelight. Obscurity stifled him.

He advanced towards the edge of the stage.

"I'm jolly glad you like it, anyhow," he said conversationally. "It only proves that I was right all along. Lots of you fellows laughed at me when I wrote this play, but you know differently now!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old Trackett Grim!"

"Of course, this is only a try-out!" went on Handforth. "But when it's put on in London we shall have all the big dramatic critics there. I don't want to boast, but this play's going to make history. It's only a short one, but it's packed with staggering surprises from beginning to end."

"You'll break all records, old man!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Wait until to-night, Handy!"

"Yes, we shall be able to judge how the public likes it," agreed Handforth, nodding. "It's jolly decent of you fellows to give me such a reception. I've always thought I was cut out to be an actor, and now I've proved it. Of course, I shan't always stick to detective drama. My idea is to act in something big—something like Shakespeare. My plan is to write a play of that sort."

"Good old Handy! You'll whack Shakespeare yet!"

"Good gad!" murmured Archie Glenthorne. "This is absolutely foul! I mean to say, the poor old lad is being spoofed to the top of his dashed collar! He believes every dashed word!"

"It's not merely a case of leg-pulling," grinned Brent. "He's having both of 'em yanked at once!"

William Napoleon Browne was saying very much the same thing in the wings. Irene and Mary were looking worried. They could hear everything that was being said by Handforth, and his complete misunderstanding of the situation rather upset them.

"Hadn't we better tell him?" asked Irene. "I mean, won't it be too much of a shock for him to find out the truth at the public performance?"

"Nothing," replied Browne, "will be too much of a shock for Brother Handforth. Let me urge you to calm your fears. I have made a life study of this human joke, and I have come to the conclusion that he is impervious to dynamite. The only weak spot in his armour is his susceptibility to ridicule. This evening he will learn the dread truth."

Irene's pretty eyes were troubled.

"It'll break his heart," she declared.

"Quite possibly," agreed Browne calmly. "But let me point out that Brother Handforth's heart is one that can be easily mended. I am well aware of the cruelty of this treatment, but we must harden ourselves. Only in this way will Brother Ted appreciate that he is a great comedian. Only in this way will he realise that his hopes of the higher drama are doomed.

Were we to delay action, he would nurse this delusion for good."

The girls understood that Browne was right. The only way of showing him the truth was to let the general public laugh at him.

At last the auditorium was cleared and the theatre closed. And then the fellows and girls dispersed. Many of them returned to their schools, but quite a number remained behind, invading the Japanese café for tea.

Handforth, having changed, received further congratulations from Church and McClure and others. The other members of the cast kept their make-up on, for the evening performance would begin in less than an hour. But Handforth was keen upon strolling out, and watching the people as they crowded into the theatre. He wanted to have a look at his new audience.

Unfortunately, it didn't promise to be a very big one.

It was the opening night in Bannington, and Mr. Noggs was hoping that the news of his late success in Caistowe would have reached the town. And he generally did good business on the first night, anyhow. At least, he had always done so until the beginning of this present tour.

Buster Boots had delayed action. There had been no advertising stunts worked on Bannington yet. Browne and the other fellows, in fact, thought it only fair to give Mr. Noggs a fair chance to start with, and to let the Bannington people roll up of their own accord. It would be time to adopt some high pressure advertising if they failed.

And they did fail.

When it was almost time for the curtain to go up, the theatre was less than half full. Indeed, there were scarcely any of the stalls taken, and Mr. Noggs' high spirits were dampened. He had had such hopes of Bannington, too!

Roger Barton was grimly pleased. Lister had done his work well! And Bannington, flooded with rumours to the effect that Noggs' Imperial Theatre was a wash-out, decided to take no chances.

Boots was looking determined.

"Well, of course, this settles it," he said to a number of other juniors. "Bannington needs waking up as much as Caistowe! Are we going to wake it up, my sons?"

"We are!" said the others promptly.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DREADFUL TRUTH.

THE curtain rose to a well-filled house.

But it was a false index. The majority of the vacant seats had been taken, at the last minute, by the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls. They had loyally waited until starting-time before crowding in. For Browne advised them to give the general public the first option of the seats. Naturally, ordinary prices were paid.

From Mr. Noggs' point of view, the takings were satisfactory. But it would be impossible for the boys and girls to keep up this patronage. For it was really a false indication of the theatre's business.

Handforth was more confident than ever. That first performance had removed the last trace of uncertainty. He knew that he was a success. He knew that his play was a triumph.

So he walked upon the stage now with supreme confidence. But before he could open his mouth to utter his first words, a yell of laughter fairly smote him like an explosion.

The general public started it, but the St. Frank's crowd, now relieved of the necessity to remain grave, joined in with gusto.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Great Scott!" muttered Handforth, startled and alarmed. "What's all that? Some fathead must have upset the audience!"

Splinter—in other words, Willy—gave a gasp.

"Chuck it, you ass!" he hissed. "Get on with the play!"

"Eh?" Handforth stared. "But I tell you—— Hi! Silence! How the dickens can we get on with the play if you yell like this?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Willy was desperate. The audience was simply howling, and the burlesque hadn't even started. Willy, by the way, had played his own part with his usual consummate skill, investing Splinter with an exquisite amount of subtle humour. While apparently the soul of gravity, Splinter had spoken his words with such meaning that they became doubly funny.

"For goodness' sake get on with the play!" panted Willy. "Don't take any notice, Ted. You mustn't speak to the audience like that!"

At last Handforth realised that something had to be done. So he treated the hilarity with lofty disdain, and carried on with the play. He entered into it with the same whole-hearted enthusiasm as before.

To the juniors, the whole thing seemed funnier than ever.

Handforth's unconscious burlesque gave them the laugh of their lives. He attempted to overcome the laughter by shouting at the top of his voice, and emphasising his words. And this, of course, only added to the piquancy of the play.

At the interval he was hoarse with shouting, and his eyes were blazing with indignation.

"They're mad!" he gasped. "What the dickens have they been laughing about? Browne, what's happened out there?"

"This is no time, Brother Handforth, for such questions," replied Browne briskly. "Let us carry on with the performance. Prepare yourself for your next entrance. The curtain goes up at once."

"Yes, but look here——"

"These matters can be discussed after the play is over," continued Browne, with rare diplomacy. "Take my advice, brother, and loftily ignore this hilarity. Remember, it is the first public presentation. We must allow nothing to mar our individual efforts."

There was no time for Handforth to protest. The curtain went up on the second act, and the play was soon into the break-neck fling of its final phase. And the audience had the surprise of its life. They had come here expecting to see a dud show, and they were being provided with a tear-provoking laughter-maker.

And at last the curtain fell, amid a yell of merriment. The public cheered vigorously, and when Handforth took his bow he was clapped with enthusiasm. But there was no mistake about the continuous peals of laughter.

He went back to his dressing-room, for the theatre was well equipped in this respect, in a dazed condition. He found Church and McClure grinning widely. He found Willy sobbing with recently escaped merriment. He found William Napoleon Browne smiling with indulgent pleasure.

"Splendid, Brother Handforth! Splendid!" beamed the Fifth-Former. "Let me be the first to congratulate you upon this wondrous success. The public has hailed you with delight. You have arrived. The world welcomes its new comedian."

"Comedian!" gasped Handforth blankly.

"Oh, Handy, you were marvellous!" sobbed Church. "I thought you were pretty good this afternoon, but you beat your own record at this performance. Your Trackett Grim is the funniest thing I've seen for years!"

"Help!" moaned McClure. "I'm sore all over!"

Handforth stood there, dulled and flabbergasted.

"Funniest thing for years!" he muttered. "Did—did you laugh, too? Did you all laugh?"

"Alas, Brother, there was nothing else for it," said Browne gently. "This afternoon we were heroes. We contained our mirth. But it is humanly impossible to keep that sort of thing up for long."

"But—but my play is a serious one!" said Handforth, gulping. "It's a thrilling drama."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, Handy, chuck it!" gurgled Church. "Do you mean to say you don't know the truth? This thing isn't a play at all—it's a giddy burlesque. Everybody's been overacting on purpose. Everybody except you, anyhow!"

"And—and Irene——"

"She's been in the secret, of course," said Willy. "Take it gently, Ted. We've been spoofing you, old man. Your play isn't what you thought it was, but you can cheer up. You've made a tremendous hit. You're the greatest comedian the Remove Dramatic Society has ever discovered."

Handforth sat down abruptly, his eyes glassy.

"A comedian!" he muttered, in a broken voice. "Then—then you've been pulling my leg all the time?"

"All the time, Brother Ted," nodded Browne softly.

"And—and I'm not recognised as a great actor at all?"

"A great actor is, after all, no greater than a great comedian," replied Browne. "Alas, brother, I fear you are not cut out to be a second Irving. Your own peculiar genius lies in the direction of humour. As a comedian, you show great promise."

Handforth took a deep breath.

"But I don't want to be a comedian!" he blurted out. "I won't be a comedian. I can't believe it, you know. I—I thought—— By George! Spoofed! Spoofed all along the line! Oh, my goodness!"

He was positively stunned. But he was no longer under any misapprehension. Like a flood of sunlight, the truth burst upon him. His play hadn't been produced seriously at all, but as a mere jape. His great hopes were dashed to the ground. Instead of being famous as a wonderful new actor, he was regarded by all and sundry as a mere comic.

It was a far greater blow for him than any of the fellows realised. Indeed, he received the truth like a bombshell, and his chums failed to console him. For the rest of that evening he was broken-hearted, a wreck of his former self.

And nothing that the fellows could do would change him. His depression was complete and absolute. His success as a comedian meant nothing. Indeed, it was a blow in itself.

Poor old Handy had learned the truth, and he was in the depths.

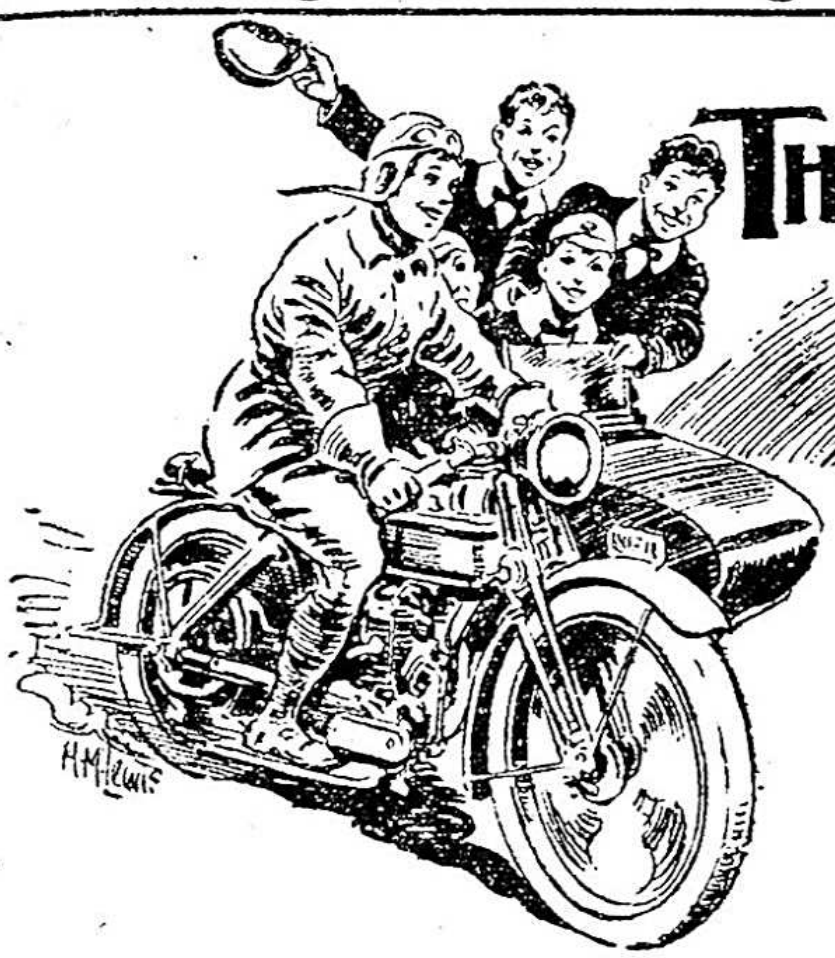
But, as William Napoleon Browne pointed out, it was all for the best. Sooner or later this new comedian would get over the shock, and would then rise to greater heights. And those who knew Handforth best were inclined to agree.

He wasn't the kind of fellow to remain in one mood for long.

THE END.

More about the Schoolboy Actors and Handforth's great play will be described next week in: "THE TRIUMPH OF TRACKETT GRIM!"

You can begin this thrilling new serial to-day!



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, Tinker witnesses a motor-car tragedy, in which the driver is killed by revolver-shots. The murderers disappear, and their victim, identified as a bookmaker, named Aggsby, is believed by Tinker to have been shot in mistake for another man. Sexton Blake comes to Calcroft as a sports master for the purpose of investigating this mysterious crime, and with the beginning of this instalment he and Tinker have just set out to trace the whereabouts of a man who has disappeared from the Wisthorpe Cottage Hospital, and who bears a marked resemblance to the murdered man.

(*Now read on.*)

TINKER had his fishing apparatus ready, twelve inches of lead gaspipe, to which he had tied a dozen fish-hooks. He had passed the line through the pipe in such a way that the pipe would sink horizontally in the water. It was an effective little grappler that could miss nothing it was drawn over that was not too hard for the hooks to penetrate.

"Right, young 'un," said Sexton Blake.

"The pursuit of the elusive pyjamas," grinned Tinker, as he dropped his grappler overboard. "If we find 'em I hope nothing will be wearing 'em except that rock, guv'nor, for I don't want any horrors. A bit far out, aren't we?"

"You couldn't tell me the size of the flint, so I don't know," said Sexton Blake. "We'll work in closer after every haul."

Tinker was not successful.

"I'm only stirring up the mud, guv'nor," he said. "Let's wait for that to settle, and then try the lamp. There's one thing about the old Calder, the water is jolly clear even when there's a muddy bottom. Hold easy while I get the lamp and the telescope gadget."

A few minutes later Tinker was leaning over the side of the boat, peering down through a brass tube, while a little electric lamp hanging from a wire a couple of feet from the bottom cast a circle of light there, and astonished the roach and bream. Suddenly, as the boat came closer to the bank, he saw a greyish patch against the darker mud, and reached for the grappler.

"Back her a foot or two, guv'nor," he said. "There's something down here that looks like rag. A bit more, and still a bit more. That ought to do the trick." He tightened the line of the grappler, and chuckled. "I've got a bite, anyhow, so we'll haul in the illuminations."

Tinker switched off the light of the lamp, but in pulling it up it must have switched on again by accident, for its ray, much brighter in the air than in the water, shot out through the darkness just as he took the wet lamp in his hand. It showed them a man standing on the bank, and then went out. It was only an instantaneous snapshot, and not too vivid. The man had flung his arm across his face as if dazzled by the light. Above the gentle lapping of the water they could hear him running across, and when Tinker managed to switch on again he was too far off for the rays to reach him.

"Who the thump was that—the gardener?" asked Tinker.

"I don't know, but he was evidently watching us. I could only see that he was a fairly tall man. What have you got?"

"Something heavy, guv'nor," answered Tinker. "I wonder if that guy has gone

for the police. She's coming now, slowly but surely. What is it? 'Ware the hooks, guv'nor. Let me lift it in by the line, for it's strong enough to hold a whale. Got it!"

As Tinker lifted his dripping catch into the boat, Sexton Blake rowed swiftly for the shelter of the bridge.

"Any luck, young 'un?"

Tinker gave a chuckle.

"Wait till I get 'em off and rinse 'em," he answered, and there was a splashing sound. "Yes, here's the jacket complete, with linen buttons, also the trousers. The missing rock had got 'em on, guv'nor, by which I mean that the pyjamas were tied round the big flint. That little grappler of ours beat the drag the police used to a frazzle. He's the boy to hook 'em."

The wet, mudstained rags were not pleasant things to handle. After Sexton Blake had inspected them by the light of the flash-lamp, Tinker took off his coat, turned back his sleeves, and gave them a further rinse, and then wrung the water out of them.

"So that's that," he said. "But what shall we do with the rock, guv'nor? It's a heavyish lump to cart about."

Some heavy vehicle went rumbling over the bridge, and as it passed on its way all was silent again.

"We'd better keep it," said the private detective, "or if you like we'll drop it overboard near the bank, where we can fish it up again if it's wanted."

"I'll heave it ashore," said Tinker, "and that will save fishing. Nobody will touch it in a month of Sundays."

Tinker stood up as the boat drifted clear of the bridge on the lazy current. As he reached forward to pick up the heavy flint something came hurtling from above. There was a sudden crash of splintering wood. Sexton Blake, who was leaning forward holding the sculls, dropped them and made a clutch at Tinker, but was too late. Tinker and the stone went overboard with a sudden splash, and after clutching at something as the boat tilted and filled, Sexton Blake went overboard, too.

The moment Tinker rose to the surface he swam swiftly back into the shadow of the bridge. He headed for the shelter of the arch instinctively. The boat had foundered, and the sculls had floated away. There was another swimmer beside him.

"If I hadn't been standing up I should have got that packet, guv'nor," said Tinker. "Did a coping-stone fall off?"

"Not unless it was pushed off," said Blake quickly. "Something heavy was dropped on us, and not by accident, either. Head right across now, young 'un, and we'll go ashore on the other bank."

Five minutes later Blake and Tinker, dripping wet, were standing at the southern end of the deserted bridge. They hurried along.

The coping-stones were as solid as rock, and none was missing. On the northern side, just opposite the tea-shop, the pavement was being repaired, and several flagstones had been left leaning against the wall of the hospital grounds by the workmen.

"It was one of those he lugged out and dropped on us, guv'nor," said Tinker. "The guy we saw watching us, of course."

"I should imagine so, and as he's had time to get away, there's nothing to be gained by waiting here," said Sexton Blake. "You're a wretched oarsman to spill us like this, Tinker. Or are we both novices in a boat, and were idiots enough to stand up together to change seats?"

Tinker was very wet and uncomfortable, but he laughed.

"Spin what yarn you like, guv'nor," he said. "You'll have to pay for the boat, anyhow. If they fish her up they'll know you've taken liberties with the truth, for that paving-stone must have made a nasty mess of her stern. Gee! We've lost the pyjamas!"

"I've got the jacket, young 'un," said Blake. "I clutched that just as we turned turtle, and as its marked 'Wisthorpe Cottage Hospital,' and has a number, the jacket is quite enough. Get a move on, for I'm beginning to feel chilly."

The little town was not very well lighted, and there were few people about, but those who noticed the two hurrying, bedraggled figures stared after them curiously. In the vestibule of the hotel sat Mr. Roath, smoking another of his expensive cigars and talking to the proprietor. Blake explained that they had had a spill, and when he discovered that Blake was quite prepared to pay for the boat, the proprietor of the hotel was quite sympathetic.

"I'll order a couple of hot baths," he said, "and you'd better drink something hot, too. I dare say I can manage to rig you out, unless you prefer to go to bed while we dry your clothes. Risky thing boating in the dark, sir. Not in my line a bit."

"We'll have the hot baths and hot drinks," said Sexton Blake; "but we don't want to borrow any clothes, thank you, for we have them with us. They're in the portmanteau in my car, if you'll be good enough to ask the waiter to fetch it."

Tinker was down first after his bath and change. Mr. Roath had gone, and so had the Rolls-Royce when Tinker went to bring out their car. Sexton Blake settled up with the proprietor.

"The mean skunk!" said Tinker, as they drove towards Calcroft. "You paid three or four pounds more than that rotten skiff was worth."

"I had to, young 'un. He was willing to take the boat back if I'd pay for salving it, and give him something towards the damage; but I don't want it fished up just yet, so I bought it out and out."

"Anyhow, he bled you for it," said Tinker. "How about our wet togs? You can't dry them up in your rooms, guv'nor."

"You can take them to the cleaner's at Calcroft in the morning," said Blake. "Ease up as you run round the pond, young 'un, and notice what the avenue gate looks like. Though it isn't wet, it must be nearly as dark as it was on the night of the murder."

As they came round the curve, Tinker hooted and slackened speed before he turned into the Barren Tor Road, and the Avenue gates flashed out vividly white in the glare of the head-lamps.

Sexton Blake leapt from the slowly-moving car and sprang into the shrubbery, a flash-lamp in his left hand and an automatic pistol in the other. In surprise, Tinker stopped the car.

"All serene, young 'un," said the private detective's voice. "I'll wait for you while you put the 'bus away. Bring the parcel."

In Blake's rooms, the private detective and his assistant had a long talk, and then Tinker crossed the quadrangle and unlocked the door of Mr. Pycroft's House. He took off his boots and tiptoed up to the dormitory. All was still there as he proceeded to undress in the darkness, and all was still and silent outside until the silence was broken by the squeaky voice of Beilby.

"It is real silver," said Beilby, who, in his dreams, was trying to palm off a metal watch-chain on Pye. "Can't see the hall-mark on it? Why, you fathead, you must be blind! Only eighteen-pence. Give me a bob, and I'll let you owe me the tanner till Saturday—— Hasland? Wow! The kid's barmy! Lent me half a quid. Barmy as an owl, Hasland is!"

"Oh, is he, my lad?" thought Tinker, as Beilby's voice trailed off into a snore. "Perhaps, and perhaps not. We shall see."

"That will do," said Blake. "This is a sparring match, not a prize fight."
"Just an-another s-second, sir, and I'll knock him out," panted Bindley.
"Just half a second more and I'll put him in hos-hospital, sir," gasped Fane.

CHAPTER XI.

BEILBY SCORES AGAIN.

SEXTON BLAKE sat on the vaulting-horse in Calcroft's fine gymnasium, and watched Fane and Bindley sparring with the gloves. It was no gentle affair, for both youngsters were hard hitters. They were the staunchest and most loyal of chums, but when they had the gloves on they did not spare each other. It was getting rather too exciting and strenuous, when the private detective interfered.

"That will do," he said. "This is a

sparring match, not a prize-fight, so drop it, or one of you will get a black eye."

"Just an-another s-second, sir, and I'll knock him out," panted Bindley.

"Just half a second more and I'll put—put him in hos-hospital," gasped Fane.

"Stop it!"

The boxers dropped their hands obediently and went over to the new gymnastic instructor for him to unfasten their gloves, both very flushed and short of breath. The private detective fanned them with a towel.

"Get Tinker to give you a few lessons," he said. "He'll teach you some tricks that may be very useful."

At that instant Tinker came in, only to swing round and bolt out again. He had seen Beilby go into the tuck-shop, and he wanted Beilby. Seeing that there was something in the wind, Fane and Bindley left their coats, waistcoats, collars and ties behind them, and sprinted after Master Jack Hasland, otherwise Tinker.

Tinker guessed that Beilby had not gone into the tuck-shop to buy anything for himself, for that thrifty youth rarely bought anything that he could not sell again at a handsome profit. As a matter of fact, Bargrave, the prefect, had sent him for a syphon of lemonade, and Beilby had demanded and received threepence for his services. A startled look came into his cunning little face as Tinker entered, but it faded out at once and was replaced by a beaming smile.

"Hallo, Hasland, old chap!" he said. "I'll see you in a minute. I've got to hike this lemonade over to Bargrave, for the beast is in an awful hurry for it. I'll be back in half a mo'. Sorry to leave you, and all that, but Bargrave is a nasty-tempered pig, and he wouldn't think twice about giving me a clip under the ear if I kept him waiting."

"You'll jolly well have to keep him waiting till you've paid me my half-sovereign," said Tinker. "Fork it over and don't talk so much."

"I—I—I really can't, Hasland," said Beilby. "I—I had to spend it, you know, and I haven't got it till to-morrow."

"Why, you miserable fibber, you told me you had a pound note at home, before I lent you the cash," said Tinker.

"I—I thought I had, but I couldn't find it," said Beilby. "I say, don't make a fuss about a silly little thing like that. You'll get paid right enough. Look here, I've got a ripping silver cigarette-case. If you don't smoke, it would be a ripping present to give to your pater or a rich uncle, you know. You'd be certain to get a big tip. Dirt-cheap at thirty bob. Give me three bob, and you can have the case, old man, and we'll call it square. I shall lose seventeen shillings, but I don't mind losing a bit on you as you did me a good turn."

"Hand over that ten shillings or you're going through it!" said Tinker. "Pay up or take a hiding!"

Tinker had no intention of thrashing an insignificant little rat like Beilby, but he made a show of taking off his coat, and the one thing that terrified Beilby more than anything in the world except losing money was the thought of getting hurt.

"You touch me if you dare, you pig!" he squealed. "Keep away, or I'll shy this at you."

As Tinker made a dive at him, Beilby sought refuge behind one of the marble-topped tables. Then, with a happy thought, he remembered that the lemonade was Bargrave's, so he pressed down the top of the syphon.

For Beilby it was a magnificent shot, and for once the tuck-shop lemonade had plenty of gas in it. The sticky, frothing stream took Tinker neatly on the bridge of the nose, which, deflecting the torrent, filled his eyes, foamed round his ears, and ran down the back of his ears into his collar. Beilby, so often chased and so seldom captured, doubled like a hunted hare, and made for the open door.

To his horror, Bindley and Fane stood there, but he was less afraid of them than he was of Tinker, to whom he owed money, so he fired more lemonade and charged down on them.

Fane and Bindley got out of the way, and Beilby, with two-thirds of the lemonade missing, scurried away as if for his very life.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Oh, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" laughed Tinker's faithless chums. "Oh, dear us! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Mrs. Kinter, who was looking after the tuck-shop, was quite used to little affairs of this kind, and she came to Tinker's aid with a towel. She wiped the lemonade out of Tinker's eyes and ears, and rubbed it out of his hair.

"Well, you grinning hyenas, you laughing jackasses, you are a couple of pretty pals to have!" said Tinker, when he could see. "Why didn't you nail the little beast, and hold him for me?"

"Not on this earth, old bean," grinned Fane. "Beilby's your funeral. You lent him the cash, so you get it back on your own if you can. It's your funeral. You're a smart 'un, Jack, but you'll have to be smarter than that. That was one to him, wasn't it?"

"Two," said Tinker. "He told me the lemonade was for Bargrave, so I hope Bargrave will jolly well make him pay for what's missing. And I don't think much of you. If you'll come back to the gym, and put the gloves on, I'll set about you both, one up and one down."

"I'm game, old top," said Bindley cheerfully. "That will also be your funeral, for you'll be on crutches for a month."

"And when you look in the glass you won't know whether your face is a face or a——" began Fane.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the voice of Mr. Pycroft. "What, in the name of——

What does this mean? In the quadrangle, with your suspenders tied round your waists like vulgar navvies, and—— How dare you, Fane and Bindley! Not even your shorts—only your undervests. Go and dress at once, and—er—if such a thing is remotely possible—make yourselves tolerably respectable. And take two hundred lines each."

"There you are, chaps," said Tinker, when Mr. Pycroft had gone. "If you'd only collared Beilby and barged in here with him, Pycroft wouldn't have seen you, and you'd have dodged that packet. Serves you right, too! Walking about this select and fashionable quad. like a couple of bargees. I'd have given you umpteen thousand lines for it. How about a bit of nourishing grub to get your peckers up to face the horrid task?"

"Well, if the veal and ham pie is any good, I don't mind letting you pay for a slab of it," said Fane. "Coffee for me. Order it while I toddle along and fetch our wardrobe. I think we've got enough 'lines' in stock, but if we haven't old Wilberforce Stott will rattle 'em off for us. As long as Pycroft sees our writing on the front sheet, and we tell him he's got the full lot, he doesn't trouble to look at the rest."

"It would be a bit awkward if he did happen to look, wouldn't it?" asked Tinker.

"Yes, I expect the balloon would go up and the merry old band would play, but we have to take a few risks," said Bindley. "He's sure to find out the wangle one day, and then some unhappy guy will go through it, and I jolly well hope it won't be one of our crowd."

Fane came back with Bindley's garments and his own, and a message to Tinker from Sexton Blake.

"You'd better scoot, for your guv'nor wants you," he said; "and don't skite off without paying, for we're nearly bust again."

Tinker made for the gymnasium, and Sexton Blake handed his assistant a newspaper and pointed to a paragraph.

"'Curious Sequel to the Calcroft Mystery!'" Tinker read. "'Our representative has received some curious and exclusive information with reference to the above unsolved crime. Yesterday Mrs. Aggsby, the widow of the bookmaker, James Burton Aggsby, who was shot dead when driving a motor-car near Calcroft town, received a bulky registered packet addressed to her at her London home. When opened, the packet was found to contain five hundred pounds in one-pound Treasury notes. Mrs. Aggsby's name and address were written boldly on the brown paper cover of the parcel in block letters, and the packet bore the West Central London postmark. There was no communication of any kind enclosed. Mrs. Aggsby is of opinion that the money is a gift from some kind-hearted person who sympathises with her in her tragic loss and great distress. On the advice of our representative, she is communicating with the police.'"

Sexton Blake, whose duties were over for the day, was changing his canvas shoes for walking boots.

"That'll make Dedgard and the inspector look funny if they still have a notion Aggsby was shot over some quarrel he had with a racing gang," said Tinker. "Jolly likely, isn't it? Fancy any of those toughs getting tender-hearted and sending five hundred pounds to the widow of the man they murdered in cold blood. Of course it's not impossible that some wealthy, good-hearted person did send the cash along, but it's jolly unlikely."

"Don't you think the murderer might have sent it? We've wiped the theory of the race gang off the slate long ago, young 'un."

Tinker nodded.

"It fits in with what I've been sticking to, that they killed the wrong man," he said. "Five hundred pounds is a biggish sum. The chap must have money whoever he is, and he's trying to ease his conscience."

"I haven't got it yet," said Sexton Blake. "I'm going over to Aperling again. If we could lay hands on the fellow who was watching us from the hospital grounds, and who sank our boat, we might clear up things, for I'm convinced it was the same person."

"Somebody in the know," said Tinker. "It's as plain as a pikestaff that the guy who had lost, or pretended to lose, his memory, and cleared out of the hospital, had a confederate waiting who supplied him with clothes and cash. And we're supposing they were waiting to shoot opposite the Avenue gates when they killed Aggsby. I wonder if the gardener helped him."

"You forget, young 'un," said the private detective, as he put on his coat. "If the gardener had helped him, he might have been rather startled when he discovered two people fishing at night close to where the hospital pyjamas had been dumped. But it wasn't the same gardener. You seem to forget that the matron told you the gardener had been discharged. And even so, it's not such a terrible crime to help a patient to escape from a hospital, not crime enough for any sane man to attempt a double murder to try and hide it."

"Fact," admitted Tinker briefly; "but it's also a fact that our bit of fishing gave the brute a nasty jar."

"Well, we'll stick to it now, young 'un," said Sexton Blake. "If I have to teach gymnastics for the rest of the term, we'll see it through."

"And no fat cheque at the end of it, not a bean," said Tinker. "Anyhow, it's such a puzzler, it's worth worrying through for nothing. Perhaps the lost-memory chap has shot it for keeps. If I knew what poor

(*Continued on page* 39.)

CAREERS FOR BOYS

— By A. C. HORTH —

THE JOINER.

A CRAFTSMAN AND A MACHINIST.

As a rule, a joiner spends most of his time in a workshop, which is generally equipped with various machines as well as benches, and his work consists in preparing the wood and cutting and fitting all kinds of joints for use in making doors, windows, staircases, etc., and in doing such curved work as hand-nailing, and finishing, such as jamb linings, counters, desks, and cupboards. A considerable amount of labour is saved by the use of machinery. Among the machines in common use are circular, frame and band saws, planing and thicknessing machines, jointers, moulders, and spindle moulders, borers, routers, mortising and tenoning machines, dovetailing and sandpapering machines.

DANGER OF BECOMING A MACHINIST ONLY.

The tendency of late years has been to separate the joinery from the builder's workshop, and run it as a separate industry. In many ways this is an advantage, as the joiner employed in a joinery business has a fixed place of work and regular employment; but, owing to the increased number of machines that are in use at the present day, the joinery apprentice or learner must guard against becoming a machinist instead of a craftsman. The fully qualified joiner should understand thoroughly the method of setting out and setting up the work, and the construction and mechanical principles of power-driven machines; but he must also be expert in the use of his hand tools.

WHAT A JOINER MUST KNOW.

The joiner must know the characteristics of a large number of different kinds of wood; he must be able to set out and cut all the ordinary joints as well as the many special varieties of these joints which are used in joinery work; he should be able to match and joint up long lengths of board, using tongue and groove, dowels or glue alone. The higher branches include the planning of stairs and the construction of handrails, and all kinds of circular work, such as strings for geometrical stairs and mouldings, and at times be able to do simple wood-carving. The making of shop-fronts, airtight showcases, is also a branch of joiners' work, but of late years the work of shop-fitting has developed into a separate trade.

HOW TO ENTER THE JOINERY TRADE.

Apprenticeship as a method of entry into the joinery trade is being revived, and the general conditions under which a boy can learn his craft have undergone considerable improvement in recent years. In shops where apprenticeship does not obtain, it is usual to take on learners, who have to pick up the work in the best way they can, and it often happens that they do not get much further than machine operators by the time they reach manhood. It is of the greatest importance that a proper form of indenture should be signed by the parent and the employer in order to ensure that a boy has every chance to learn the trade in a thorough manner.

APPRENTICES' ADMITTANCE TO THE TRADES UNION.

A scheme for apprentices in the building industry has been prepared by the Education Committee of the Industrial Council for the Building Industry, but it is not compulsory, although it is supported by the trades unions and many employers. Apprentices are admitted to the trade union as soon as they enter the trade, and they pay a small contribution, which entitles them to receive sickness benefit and compensation for loss of tools. Boys may enter the trade at 14, but the usual age of entry is 16, and not later than 17. They will have to provide themselves with a kit of tools, and as many more hand tools are required by the joiner than the carpenter, the cost of training is somewhat higher.

A DEMAND FOR COMPETENT JOINERS.

Owing to the large amount of manufactured joinery, especially doors and other fittings for houses, which is imported from abroad, a certain amount of work is lost to the joinery trade in this country, but foreign competition is not so serious as in many other industries. There is at the present time a considerable demand for competent joiners, and this demand is likely to continue in common with all other branches of the building industry.

THEORETICAL TRAINING.

To obtain proficiency as a joiner, and be able to undertake work requiring great skill, the apprentice must attend a trade class, and

should aim at obtaining a certificate from either the Carpenters' Company or the City Guilds of London Institute. A knowledge of geometry as well as the principles of construction and design is essential. A knowledge of mensuration and mechanics is useful, and also a general knowledge of the properties of materials used in building construction. Where it is possible for the apprentice to obtain practical instruction at the trade classes, he should take full advantage of the facilities provided, but in many small towns it is possible only to take a course of study in the theoretical side of his work. In this case, in order to obtain a complete mastery over his tools, the learner should fit up a bench at home and get all the practice he can.

"THE CALCROFT CASE"

(*Continued from page* 37.)

Aggsby got was intended for me, I'd shoot it. And I say, guv'nor, if I'm not in request, I have a little private detective work of my own to do. I have to track down a desperate young criminal named Beilby, and recover some loot. As a matter of jolly old fact, my reputation is at stake. While Fane and my other special chums quite believe I could track murderers, forgers, and jewel-robbers, they're sure that kid will beat me all the time."

The class-bell was ringing, but, as Tinker was supposed to be taking private lessons from Mr. Pycroft, and not the regular course of studies, he was spared the anguish of sitting in the class-room most of the day under Mr. Pycroft's spectacled but eagle eyes. He looked in at the window as he passed it, and Beilby, who happened to be looking out, protruded his tongue and put his thumb to his little apology for a nose. Tinker made a quick signal to Manners, who was also looking out, and Manners sprang at Beilby and gripped that youth's arms.

"Open the window, Pye," shouted Manners, "and help me to heave this little rat out."

"Beast! Cad! Leggo, lemme go-o-o!" shrieked Beilby, struggling and back-heeling.

Pye opened the window, and then helped Manners to bundle Beilby over the low sill, amid ringing cheers from the other juniors, and Tinker claimed him.

"Got you, my little lemonade-squirter!" said Tinker gleefully. "Now, what about my ten-shilling note? Trot it out sharp, my lad."

"E-e-e-e-e-e!" shrieked Beilby.

Tinker had never heard such a squeal. It pierced his ear-drums like a knife, and the pigeons that strutted and cooed in the quadrangle flew off in terror. That squeal almost outdid the famous top-note of Cornelius the cat. Three of the five tall lattice windows that lighted the class-room fronted the class-room. The other two opened, and infuriated juniors hurled things, a waste-paper basket, books, an ancient apple or two, pen-holders, balls of paper, chunks of rubber and ink-erasers, tennis-balls, and other articles that hurt where they hit without doing any serious damage.

"E-e-e-e-e-eee!" squealed Beilby, even more shrilly. "Hog, beast, thief! Lemme 'lone! Lemme go-o-o-o! E-e-e-e-e-eee!"

Bindley dashed into the noisy class-room.

"Cave, you idiot! Cave!" he cried. "Pycroft!"

"Pycroft, Jack!" yelled Pye.

In spite of Beilby's squeal, and the fact that a tennis ball had just bounced off his ear, Tinker heard and left. The windows were hastily closed, and the juniors scuttled back to their desks. All was quiet when Mr. Pycroft entered his class-room, for Beilby had stopped squealing and was collecting the loot. There was nothing of great value, but Beilby did not despise penn'orths.

"Silence!" cried Mr. Pycroft, as he always did, although the class-room was as quiet as a graveyard. "Ahem!"

With the loot tied up in a handkerchief, Beilby got out of range of the window, quite aware of the fact that Tinker was hiding in the porch waiting for him. And Beilby's lucky star was shining, for across the quadrangle came fat Mr. Chules, the drawing-master, to speak to his friend, Mr. Pycroft, M.A.

"Please, sir," said Beilby, "can you tell me the time, sir? My watch has stopped."

Forgetful of the fact that Beilby had only to look up to see the big clock, Mr. Chules pulled out his gold watch.

"It is exactly twenty-two minutes to three," he said.

Keeping as close to Mr. Chules as he possibly could, Beilby went up the steps and passed safely through the hall. As he passed Tinker he closed one eye and put out his tongue. Screened by the ample figure of the drawing-master, he entered the class-room, and got safely to his desk before Mr. Pycroft had discovered his absence.

"Cunning little beast!" thought Tinker, with a grin; "and lucky, too! I never expected that ten shillings back, and I don't expect to, but I'll get good value for it."

He went up to the study, which looked very untidy and dilapidated, and would have looked more so except for Wilberforce Stott, who came in occasionally and good-naturedly straightened things up. With the boys at their studies, Pycroft's House, the noisiest House at Calcroft, seemed strangely quiet.

Tinker put an atlas on the seat of the one so-called easy-chair before he sat down, for all the springs were broken, and began to think over the Calcroft murder and the mystery that lay behind it. Then someone came down the tiled corridor at a quick pace. The footfalls fell crisply, accompanied by a rustling.

(*To be continued.*)

AS SIMPLE AS A B C.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C by running the pen diagonally across both Sections. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. The second form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. **Member Applying for Bronze Medal:** It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms are needed, and these must be taken from copies of the latest issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the forms are sent in. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided the forms are taken from the latest issue of the THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the forms are sent in.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medals can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B, which has been revised for this purpose. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members, they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

These Application Forms can be posted for ½d., providing the envelope is not sealed and no letter is enclosed.

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 33. Mar. 20, 1926

SECTION A

READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.

Being a regular reader of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare myself to be a staunch supporter of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and that I have introduced Our Paper to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with Membership Number assigned to me.

SECTION B

MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.

I, Member No..... (give Membership No.) hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me..... (state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.

SECTION C

NEW READER'S DECLARATION.

I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) ..... to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," which I will read with a view to becoming a regular reader of this paper.

(FULL NAME) .....

(ADDRESS) .....

.....

IMPORTANT.—Complete and post off this form before the next issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY is on sale. Otherwise the form becomes out of date and useless.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

My dear Chums,

It seems quite a long time since I had a little pow-wow with you about the League, and there are really quite a number of things I want to talk to you about.

You will remember that I asked you at the beginning of the year to look carefully through the lists of Organising Officers I was publishing until you spotted one living nearest to you, and to make a note of his address. At the same time, I asked you not to worry the poor chap until the lists were complete. With the exception of newly created O.O.'s, the final list appeared the week before last. This means that you can register your name and address with your O.O. as soon as you like—the sooner the better. Just send him a postcard, giving your name, address, and membership number. In the meantime, I will be communicating with each O.O., giving him instructions how to set about forming a club, with a suggested list of rules, and hints on how meetings should be conducted.

After you have registered your name and address with your nearest O.O., you will hear from him in due course, when he will notify the time and place for the first meeting. Should you not receive an answer within a day or two, don't get impatient. Give him at least a fortnight, and then if you do not hear from him, write to me, and I will make inquiries, or put you on to another O.O.

With the coming formation of S.F.L. clubs in all parts of the British Isles and the Colonies, and the corresponding increase of members, it has occurred to me that a little pocket S.F.L. notebook, containing a Who's Who of members, a list of O.O.'s and clubs, and general rules, might be supplied to O.O.'s for distribution among members at a nominal charge of a penny each. I cannot definitely promise to issue such a pocket-book, but it is worth consideration. We must first see what progress is made in forming the S.F.L. clubs.

If you have any suggestions to make or any questions to ask about the League or the N.L.L., I shall be delighted to hear from you, and to answer your letters personally.

With very best wishes,

Your sincere friend,

THE CHIEF OFFICER.

NEXT WEEK!

"THE TRIUMPH OF TRACKETT GRIM!"

Another Long and Amusing Yarn of the Schoolboy Actors of St. Frank's, with E. O. HANDFORTH again very much to the fore.

"THE CALCROFT CASE!"

An Exciting Instalment of this clever School and Detective Mystery, in which interesting developments are foreshadowed.

FORMING A CLUB.

Specially written by the Chief Officer of the St. Frank's League.

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