ANOTHER FINE YARN OF THE SCHOOLBOY ACTORS!

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See This Week's Grand Long Complete Story of the Boys of St. Frank's.

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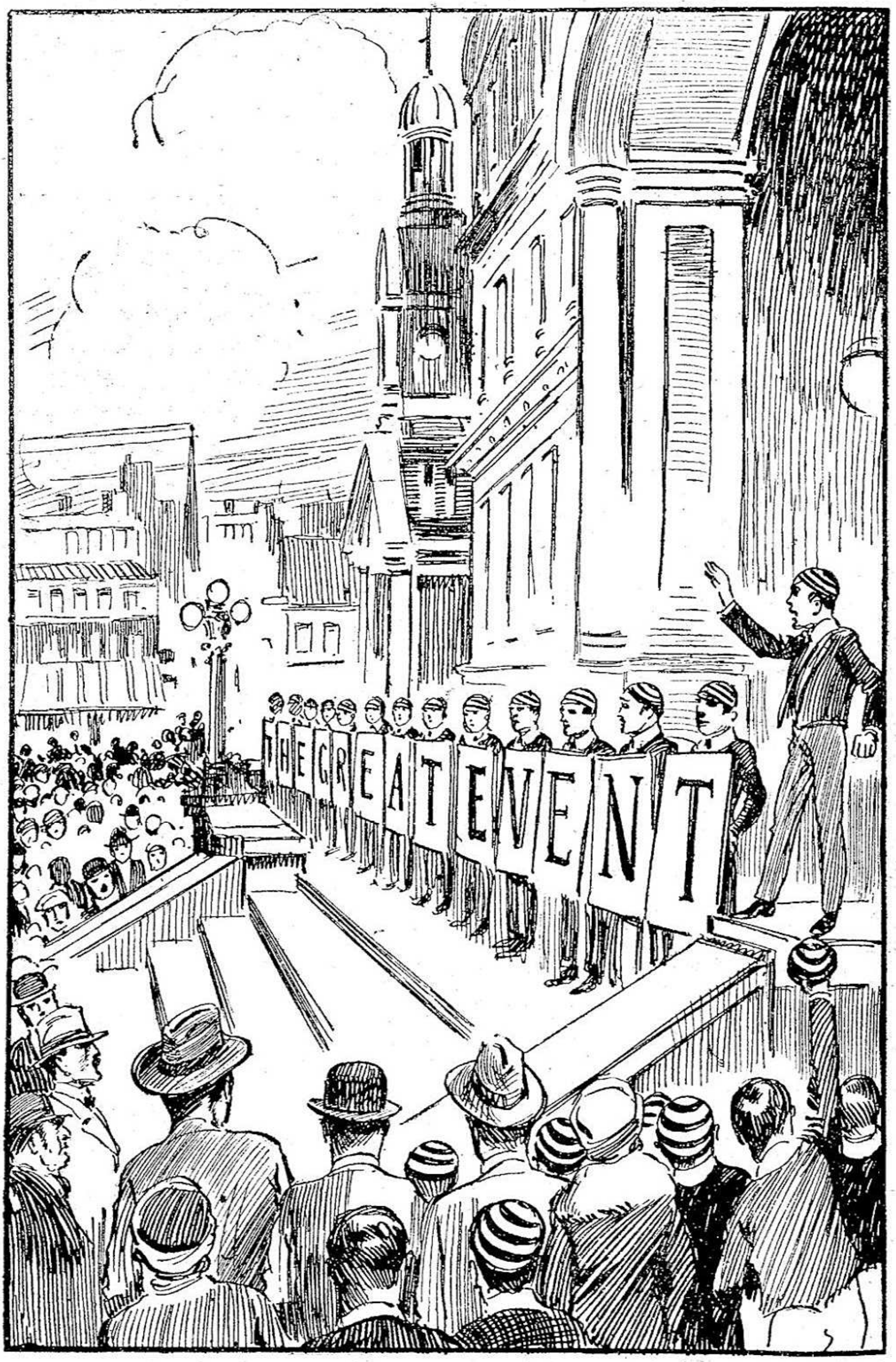


THE GREAT EVENT! What could it mean? The crowds watched eagerly, in anticipation of a fresh surprise.

THE TRIUMPH OF TRACKETT GRIM!

Another Rollicking Complete Story of the Schoolboy Actors of St. Frank's.

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER 1.

THE ST. FRANK'S ADVERTISING EXPERTS.

JOHN BUSTERFIELD BOOTS, the go-ahead skipper of the Fourth Form at St. Frank's looked round at his squad of assistants with a keen eye. Among them were a good many Removites, and even some Third Formers.

"Now, you fellows, we've got to put some ginger into it," said Buster Boots, in his crisp, businesslike way. "We've come here to startle Bannington, so Bannington's got to be startled."

"All right—no need for a lot of talk," put in Reggie Pitt. "For once, Buster, we're under your orders. Let's start something. It's nearly five, and we've only got about two hours."

"An hour too much!" replied Boots calmly. "This is one of those occasions when we've got to electrify the populace into action. Give them too much time, and they'll probably think twice. Once we start, it's got to be a fierce onslaught."

The juniors were standing in a group in the yard of the Grapes Hotel, in Bannington, having just stored their bicycles. The High Street was only a stone's throw away, and the town was indulging in its usual period of afternoon lassitude.

Being a Tuesday, there was no particular excitement in the air, and the March afternoon was surprisingly mild and sunny. The shops were all quiet, and even the cafes were more or less deserted.

Noggs' Imperial Theatre, pitched upon a piece of waste land near the centre of the High Street, was looking even more deserted than the shops. Scarcely a soul had been to the box-office during the day to book seats for the evening performance.

Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs, the proprietor, was a gloomy man. Quite recently he had allowed his hopes to soar high, but they were gradually subsiding. He had only opened in Bannington the previous evening, and business had been poor. And yet, in Caistowe, he had done marvellous business towards the end of his stay. But only because of the helpful advertising of the St. Frank's fellows. Bannington was slow to patronise this travelling theatre.

So Buster Boots and his merry men were ready for the onslaught. They meant to wake up Bannington, as they had awakened Caistowe. For the St. Frank's fellows were keenly interested in the fortunes of old Andy Noggs. They not only liked the old showman—they knew him to be a genuine sportsman—but they had personal reasons for wishing him success.

William Napoleon Browne—that genius of the Fifth—for example, was intent upon giving Horace Stevens every chance of showing his ability as an actor. Horace Stevens

was Browne's study-mate and bosom chum, and he had recently displayed rare talent on the boards.

A kind of mutual feeling has arisen between the school and Mr. Noggs. He was quite willing to let them use his theatre for their own purposes—and they, in return, were determined, if possible, to set the old fellow on his feet again.

They didn't know that Roger Barton, his business manager, had been cunningly and systematically working against his employer ever since the tour had commenced. Barton had gained a hold on Mr. Noggs by advancing him various sums of money, and his scheme was a deliberate plot to swindle the old actor out of his theatre.

The St. Frank's juniors were not friendly with Mr. Barton, and their present activities were by no means palatable to him. Not that they could make much difference now. Success—even if they brought it—would come too late.

"What's the first thing to be done?" inquired Clive Russell briskly. "We're all itching with eagerness to get busy, Buster."

Boots lost no time in issuing his instructions, and in less than five minutes the crowd was ready for the campaign. Everything went quite smoothly—owing, perhaps, to the absence of Handforth. The redoubtable leader of Study D had remained at St. Frank's, refusing to take the slightest part in the programme. Edward Oswald Handforth was in one of his moods.

His minor, however, was well on the scene. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon, the other two stars of the Third, were with him. Buster Boots didn't quite know what to do with them. He was rather glad that the Third Form was not more fully represented. For Buster had learned, from experience, that the fags were a ticklish crowd to handle.

"The fact is, Willy, old son, I don't quite know what you can do," he admitted, at length. "Dodd's getting busy with his pony, and the other fellows are preparing for their march down the High Street. But I don't see where you come in. I think you'd better just watch."

Willy Handforth sniffed.

"In that case, why not think again?" he asked tartly. "They call you the advertising expert of the Fourth, don't they?"

"Of St. Frank's, you young ass!" said Buster severely.

"Huh!" said Willy briefly.

It wasn't much, but it sounded significant.

"What's the idea of that snort?" demanded Buster.

"My dear old chap, you've been deluded," said Willy, shaking his head. "You don't even know the first principles of advertising. I don't like to speak like this, but it's a duty."

"You—you cheeky young ass——"

"A painful duty," went on Willy gravely. "I was hoping that I shouldn't find it necessary to speak. But what else can I do? You adopt the oldest stunts, and let the glorious opportunities slip by! I'm disappointed in you, Buster. I thought you were made of better stuff!"

There was something so patronising about Willy's tone that the great Buster wilted. The thing was incongruous. A mere fag, half Buster's size, talking to him as though he were a mere infant. Willy always produced this feeling when he adopted his sarcastic vein. Any other fag would have had his head biffed in about ten seconds, but Willy had so much nerve that he was immune.

"You'd better go easy, my lad!" said Buster grimly.

"Rot!" retorted Willy. "You don't seem to realise that you're appealing to the wrong people. I don't blame you, of course—there's a limit to your intelligence. But I'd just like to point out that this publicity stunt of yours is—— Well, it's commonplace."

"Commonplace!" roared Buster.

"What else do you call it?" asked Willy. "A few tricks by Jerry Dodd and his pony to collect a crowd. Then a procession of your pals with sandwich-boards, advertising Noggs' Theatre."

"It's a topping scheme," said Buster indignantly.

"Elementary!" retorted Willy, shaking his head. "It's as old as the hills, and it's all over fungus. A chap of your reputation ought to strike out boldly in a new direction. I'm only saying this for your own good——"

"By Jupiter! You'd better stop, you young fathead——"

"I'll stop when I've finished," interrupted Willy. "Naturally, you don't like to hear these things—but they'll do you good. Why appeal to the crowds? The gapers? The idlers who'll collect? They're not the people we want at all. My suggestion is to go for the big pots. Once they support the theatre, the rank and file'll fall over themselves to do the same."

"The big pots?" repeated Buster, glaring.

"Well, you know what I mean—the Mayor, and the Aldermen, and the Councillors," suggested Willy. "If they patronise the theatre, Bannington will trip over itself to book the best seats——"

"You hopeless young idiot!" yelled Buster. "How the dickens do you expect us to do an impossible thing like that? It's the public we've got to appeal to—the general public, my lad!"

"The Town Council is sitting to-night," said Willy thoughtfully. "They start in about half an hour, I believe. Why not pop along to the Town Hall and address the Mayor and the Council, and make them promise to give old Noggs an official welcome to the town? That's the way to get the general public into the thing. And look at the trouble you save!"

Boots had been getting angrier and angrier, and now he fairly boiled over. The grins of Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon clearly indicated that Willy Handforth was indulging in a little leg-pulling.

"All right!" roared Buster. "I'll give you that job, my son!"

"Good!"

"You can go along to the Town Hall and address the Mayor and Council!" said Buster, with heavy sarcasm. "If you're so jolly keen on it, you can take the job on! But don't bother me again."

He stalked off indignantly, and Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon gurgled.

"You did that toppingly, old man," grinned Chubby. "Buster hasn't had his leg pulled like that for weeks past!"

Willy stared.

"Leg pulled?" he repeated. "I wasn't pulling his leg, you ass!"

"Oh, I say! Chuck it!" said Juicy.

"I meant every word!" went on Willy. "Buster's given me permission, too, so it's all settled. As soon as the Council collects, we'll stroll along and interview the Mayor."

"You—you mean it?" gasped Chubby Heath, turning pale.

"Of course I mean it!"

"But—but we thought you were spoofing!" yelled Juicy Lemon.

"You shouldn't think," said Willy. "It doesn't agree with you chaps. It's putting too great a strain——"

"Wait a minute!" panted Chubby, grabbing at his leader's arm. "Look here, Willy! Are you seriously suggesting that we should go into the Council chamber and tell the Mayor and the Aldermen to visit Noggs' Theatre?"

"Don't forget the Councillors," said Willy.

"But do you mean it?" howled Chubby.

"Every word."

"You raving maniac! You dotty lunatic!" shouted Chubby. "You'll get arrested! They'll call in the police, and have you pinched!"

Willy looked at him pitifully.

"Why call in the police?" he asked. "Don't you know that the police are always in these Council chambers? I shall get them to go to Noggs' Theatre, too! For once in the life of the Bannington Town Council, it'll have something important to discuss! They'll welcome me as a ray of sunshine. Just you wait until I address the Mayor!"

The amazing thing about Willy Handforth was that he actually meant it. It wasn't merely a piece of humour on his part. He not only meant it, but he had supreme confidence in his own ability to carry the extraordinary idea into execution. When the leader of the Third started anything he seldom relinquished his grip until he had finished it. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon stared at him in dazed, bewildered horror.

"You—you don't expect us to come in, too?" asked Chubby breathlessly.

"You'll be far better outside," retorted Willy. "This is a one-man job, and you can wait for me in the reading-room. Perhaps we'd better go along to the Town Hall now, and have a preliminary look round."

"Oh, crumbs!" said his chums blankly.

They were still sceptical. It was never possible to take Willy seriously. Until he actually started on a thing, his chums were always in a state of uncertainty. But, somehow, they felt that he was really serious this time. And it left them limp.

In the meantime, a certain amount of excitement was manifesting itself in the broad part of the High Street. John Busterfield Boots and his advertising experts were well on the job.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUMAN POSTERS.

BANNINGTON was interested.

A great crowd of people filled the large space near the war memorial. Jerry Dodd, the Australian junior, was giving a free show. And anything in the nature of a free show appealed to Bannington immensely.

First and foremost were the children. There was never the slightest trouble about collecting these. Then there were the idlers—those interesting people who apparently had nothing whatever to do. Finding a performing pony in the High Street they condescended to lounge round.

The ordinary citizens, those people who had business to attend to—held back for a while, being naturally particular. But Bud was doing such wonderful things that even these sensitive beings condescended to gather round. So far, nobody had any suspicion of the true object of this demonstration.

Jerry Dodd was very proud of his pony. The Australian Removite exercised Bud quite a lot, but he generally took his rides on Bannington Moor, or round the lanes near the school. And he never failed to keep Bud well up in his tricks. In fact, Bud was Jerry Dodd's hobby.

Cricket was perhaps Jerry's only other great weakness. Cricket and Bud were his manias, and he was already beginning to think seriously of the glorious summer game.

At the moment he confined himself to putting Bud through his tricks, and the Bannington crowd was very appreciative. It grew bigger and bigger, and the police began to take an interest in the proceedings. They were almost on the point of requesting Jerry to desist, in fact.

But it was rather a delicate matter. Jerry was breaking no law, and indeed the police themselves were interested in Bud's activities. The little pony was uncannily

clever, and some of his tricks were fascinating in the extreme. They represented months of patient work, months of kindly persistence, on the part of the genial Jerry.

"We can't have this, young man," said a sergeant, pushing through the crowd. "It's all very well, you know, but you're obstructing the traffic," he added kindly. "I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to shift."

"Leave the boy alone!" shouted somebody.

"He's better than Tom Mix and Tony," declared somebody else, obviously a patron of the local cinema. "Talk about these Americans. These St. Frank's boys can do better. Blowed if they can't!"

"Hear, hear!"

The sergeant looked rather uncomfortable.

"All right, officer," smiled Jerry Dodd, with one eye up the street. "It's all over now. I'll trot off. My cobbers are just coming along."

"Your what?"

"My friends," explained Jerry. "By jingo, this is a real dinkum idea!"

There was no necessity for any further trick, for the real activity of the evening was commencing. From a neighbouring alley marched a long procession of St. Frank's fellows, headed by Buster Boots.

They were all wearing sandwich-boards, and they strode impressively up the imposing steps of the town hall. For a moment the crowd thought the procession was going inside but Boots swerved, and the juniors strung themselves out along the terrace.

Jerry Dodd and Bud had judiciously vanished. They had done their part of the work—they had collected the crowd. And now it was for the others to carry on.

Willy had been too hard perhaps. The scheme wasn't bad at all. Facing the throng, the amateur sandwich-men displayed an unintelligible collection of letters. For each board contained merely a huge letter of the alphabet.

The crowd wondered what on earth all this meant. There was no indication of the real object, and there, of course, lay the genius of Buster Boots' scheme. He had got the crowd guessing, and the advertisement, when it came, would arrive as a surprise.

"Mad!" declared one of the local idlers. "I've allus said these boys was loony. I s'pose they call this one o' them rags, hey? No sense nor reason in it."

"It do seem kind o' queer!" admitted his neighbour.

John Busterfield Boots raised his hand.

"Watch!" he shouted impressively.

It was obviously a guide to his own men, in addition to being a signal to the crowd. For an immediate shuffle took place. Some of the juniors altered their positions sideways, others turned round, revealing similar boards.

And the crowd beheld this legend—displayed at great length and with absolute clearness across the whole front of the town hall:

THE GREAT EVENT!

The townspeople began to get a glimmering of the truth. There was something pretty deep in this plan. The Great Event! What could it mean? The crowds watched eagerly, in anticipation of a fresh surprise. It soon came.

"Pay attention!" roared Buster, raising his hand again.

Another shuffle, another turning round of units, and these words formed themselves, and stood out boldly:

NOGGS' THEATRE.

"Well I'm blessed!" ejaculated one of the townspeople. "It's an advert. for that confounded booth! Just fancy these schoolboys interesting themselves in a place of that sort!"

"It's jolly cute, though," said somebody else.

Again the sandwich-boards were rearranged, and a third legend stood out for all to see. And this time it was not merely an announcement, but an injunction:

GO THIS EVENING!

A lot of people laughed. Others were so pleased that they set up a round of applause. And then the police came along and livened things up. They ordered the boys to get off the town hall steps, and sent them off peremptorily. But Buster Boots didn't mind.

He had managed to get his advertising stunt over before the interference came. And he had hardly expected such luck. The whole town was talking about the affair, and it was the chief topic of conversation. And that, of course, was just what Boots wanted.

Providing a sufficient number of people were interested, they would go to the theatre out of sheer curiosity. Indeed, any amount of citizens made up their minds then and there to patronise the fit-up theatre. If it was good enough for these public schoolboys to interest themselves in, it was obviously a better proposition than the town had thought. The rumours concerning it were probably false.

Mr. Roger Barton had taken good care that every town or village was thoroughly alienated in advance of the show. While he himself pretended to boost the coming theatre, a confederate went round to every public gathering place and confidentially informed his listeners that Noggs and his theatre were an absolute frost. And

Barton's accomplice had done this work very thoroughly.

It was the task of the St. Frank's juniors to undo it, and this advertising campaign of Boots' was going a long way along the right road. But Willy Handforth apparently thought otherwise.

"It's all right as far as it goes!" he admitted. "But how far does it go? It doesn't appeal to the right people. We want the tip-toppers. The mayor, the aldermen, the councillors. They're the chaps we want to rope in. It doesn't matter about the others—they'll follow like sheep."

Chubby Heath snorted.

"It's easy enough to talk!" he said, exasperated. "But I'd jolly well like to see you face the mayor!"

"Watch me!" retorted Willy promptly.

CHAPTER III.

PUTTING IT TO THE MAYOR.

THE Bannington Town Council was in session.

Alderman Tobias Crump, J.P., the mayor, was dealing with some important matters concerning the left-hand gutter at the end of the High Street. The town surveyor had proposed a new gutter, and several of the aldermen were dubious regarding the expense. This vital question had been debated on and off for several months.

In the meantime Bannington motorists had frequently become bogged in the treacherous gutter, which had subsided, and was a danger to all traffic. The mayor, much to the surprise of his colleagues, was urging that something should be done before the end of the coming summer. Unkind aldermen were inclined to believe that the mayor was concerned because his own motor-car had been held up at that particular spot during a storm the previous week.

The council chamber was quiet and orderly. One could hardly imagine it otherwise. Strangers who ventured into the public gallery crept about like mice, and were afraid to cough. Even the councillors spoke in awed voices. And no raised tones were ever allowed.

Now and again, during a debate, an alderman might forget himself and shout, but this was a very rare occurrence. It was very seldom that any sounds emanated from the chamber.

The ordinary townspeople had a simple explanation for this. They declared that the council used the place as a club. They went there to have a quiet nap. Nobody believed that any business was ever transacted. The proofs of this lay in the fact that a hundred and one crying reforms were still overdue. Not that the Bannington Town Council was different from any other town council.

Into this place of repose therefore entered Willy Handforth.

It must be admitted that his entrance was more or less secretive. There were certain guardians of the council's peace who had to be avoided. Instinctively Willy felt that these misguided people would bar his entrance. And to argue with them would be a mere waste of time.

Subterfuge was accordingly the only safe policy.

To an ingenious youth like Willy this was mere child's play. Half the police force of Bannington wouldn't have kept him out of that council chamber, once he had made up his mind to get inside. And there were only two sleepy-looking constables to negotiate, one at the outer door, and another in the inner lobby.

The first policeman was easy. Willy chose a moment when the officer had his back to him, and he crept up with the speed of a hare and the silence of a shadow. Then he tossed a stone down the passage, where it fell with a sharp clink.

The constable looked round with a start, and took several strides in the direction of the stone. He had no notion of Willy's presence, for Willy was behind him all the time. The next second the fag was through the swing doors, and the puzzled constable was left with a mystery to solve.

The second stage was not quite so simple.

Policeman number two was looking straight at him as he came through the swing doors. Willy didn't hesitate a second. Any sort of nervousness at that moment would have been fatal.

"It's all right, sergeant," he said briskly.

"What's your business, young gent?" asked the policeman suspiciously.

Willy walked straight on, and nearly got into the council chamber, but the constable pulled him back.

"Licences!", said Willy confidentially.

And before the officer could make up his mind Willy had gone. It was too late to go in after him, and it so happened that a perfectly legitimate visitor happened to come along at that moment.

Willy Handforth found himself facing the councillors, the aldermen, and the mayor. It was not a full gathering by any means, but there were plenty for Willy's purpose.

He stood for a moment or so getting a grip of the scene. He wasn't impressed. He saw a sombre looking chamber, with panelled walls and a big skylight, and tall, narrow windows. Almost the entire floor space was occupied by comfortable seats, with small tables in front of each. They

were placed in oval formation, with a sort of raised platform at one end, where there were several other chairs and tables.

"H'm!" murmured Willy. "Worse than I expected!"

The aldermen and the councillors were an elderly looking lot, prosperous tradespeople, for the most part, with a generous assortment of bald heads. The mayor was sitting on his throne-like eminence, with the town clerk on one hand, and the town surveyor on the other. The mayor himself was a stout, florid man, with pince-nez. He was addressing the council in a dull, monotonous voice, and the council was slowly relapsing into a state of coma.

"This is going to be tough!" muttered the leader of the Third. "My hat! What a lot! It's a wonder they haven't got cobwebs all over 'em!"

Even Willy's stout heart quailed for a moment. These were the people he had decided to address—with the object of making them patronise Noggs' Imperial Theatre! The task seemed heavy.

At this moment, the mayor caught sight of the youthful figure just inside the doorway, and he paused in the midst of his address, and laid a sheaf of papers down. Then he adjusted his glasses, and gazed at Willy over the top of them.

"Who is this young man?" he asked curtly.

It seemed to Willy that there were constables everywhere, for yet another officer was close at hand. Willy didn't wait to try conclusions with him. He strode into the centre of the Council Chamber, and nodded cheerfully.

"Shan't keep you a minute," he said, with far more confidence than he felt. "You're the mayor, I suppose?"

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated the mayor.

The aldermen and the councillors sat up, staring. It was too much for them to understand all at once. They regarded Willy in dumb astonishment.

"I don't want to interrupt the conference for more than a tick," went on Willy. "The fact is, there's something jolly important that you've overlooked. What about old Noggs?"

"Good heavens!" said the mayor.

"One of the finest actors you could wish to see!" went on Willy enthusiastically. "He comes to your town, and you don't even give him a civic welcome! He brings his theatre here, plumps it right down in the High Street, and none of the big nobs go near him!"

He turned round, and took in the aldermen and councillors with one wave of an indignant hand.

"I'm not only talking to the mayor!" he went on severely. "I mean the lot of you! You're all in this—you're all tarred with the same brush! Why don't you show some appreciation of old Noggs' enterprise? Give me the tip and I'll book stalls for you for to-night's show!"

"This—this is preposterous!" ejaculated the mayor, dropping his glasses in his agitation. "Mr. Weeks, who—who let this boy in? Constable! Take him away at once!"

"Just a minute!" said Willy grimly. "There's no hurry. Remember, I'm doing this for your own good. I'm not getting any commission out of Noggs, or anything like that. I'm just giving you the straight tip."

"The straight tip!" gasped Mr. Crump feebly.

"Out of the horse's mouth!" said Willy, nodding.

"'Ere, out of it!" said the constable firmly. "If I'd 'ave known what you was up to, young 'un, you wouldn't 'ave got past me!"

"Of course I wouldn't," agreed Willy. "But I'm here now, and I want the mayor to give me his promise that he'll buzz round to old Noggs' theatre with all the big wigs. It's publicity that Noggs wants! Just think of the boost he'd get if the Bannington Town Council filled his stalls!"

The mayor, who had been bubbling for a moment or two, fairly exploded.

"Take this boy away!" he thundered. "Good heavens! I have never known such impertinence in all my life. Somebody will get into trouble for letting this—this young rascal into the council chamber!"

"Perfectly disgraceful!" said Mr. Weeks, the Town Clerk.

The constable, coming to himself, took a firm hold on Willy's shoulder. He was far more nervous than the fag. The mayor's eagle eye was upon him, and he could already visualise a painful interview with his inspector.

"Now, then—out of it!" he growled fiercely.

"Look here, Mr. Crump——" shouted Willy desperately.

"Take this boy away!" stormed the mayor.

"I say, chuck it!" protested Willy. "This isn't a rag, you know. I'm not trying to be cheeky, or anything like that. If you'll let me talk for two clear minutes I'll walk out as quietly as a lamb. Come on, Mr. Crump, be a sport!"

"Insolent young rebel!" said Mr. Weeks indignantly.

"These schoolboys are getting beyond all bounds!" commented one of the aldermen. "If I were you, Mr. Mayor, I would take the boy's name, and report him to his headmaster."

"Hear, hear!" murmured an assortment of councillors.

Mr. Tobias Crump waved his hand.

"We have no time to waste on such insignificant puppies!" he retorted coldly. "The business of the council has been interrupted long enough. Constable, take that boy away at once!"

"Yessir!" said the policeman.

Willy Handforth heaved a sigh. He went meekly, and his captor was greatly relieved. He had been anticipating trouble. Unfortunately, he failed to notice the grim gleam in Willy's eye.

CHAPTER IV.

WILLY DOES IT AGAIN.

MR. CRUMP seated himself again with an air of triumph. Willy Handforth was just against the door, and the constable was about to push him forcibly into the passage. But something went wrong. The constable gave the necessary push, but Willy seemed to vanish.

There was a kind of swirl, and the officer was aware of an abrupt twist. When he looked round his elusive prisoner was down the chamber, and actually upon the raised platform where the mayor and his satellites reposed.

"My heye!" gasped the constable.

The mayor rose to his feet with a burst of renewed anger. Just after he had congratulated himself, too! He fixed Willy with a grim, warlike eye. But Willy didn't flinch.

"How—how dare you?" thundered Mr. Crump breathlessly. "You—you impertinent young rascal!"

"I say, go easy!" protested Willy. "There's no impertinence intended, Mr. Crump. Honest Injun! I came here for the sake of old Noggs, and if you're a fairminded Britisher you'll hear me out!"

"I absolutely refuse——"

"Don't spoil your record, sir!" went on Willy earnestly. "Haven't we all heard how fairminded you are? You're famous at St. Frank's, you know—the whole school's been talking about you lots of times! What's going to happen if I go back and say that you kicked me out of the council chamber?"

"Really, I can't stand this interruption ——"

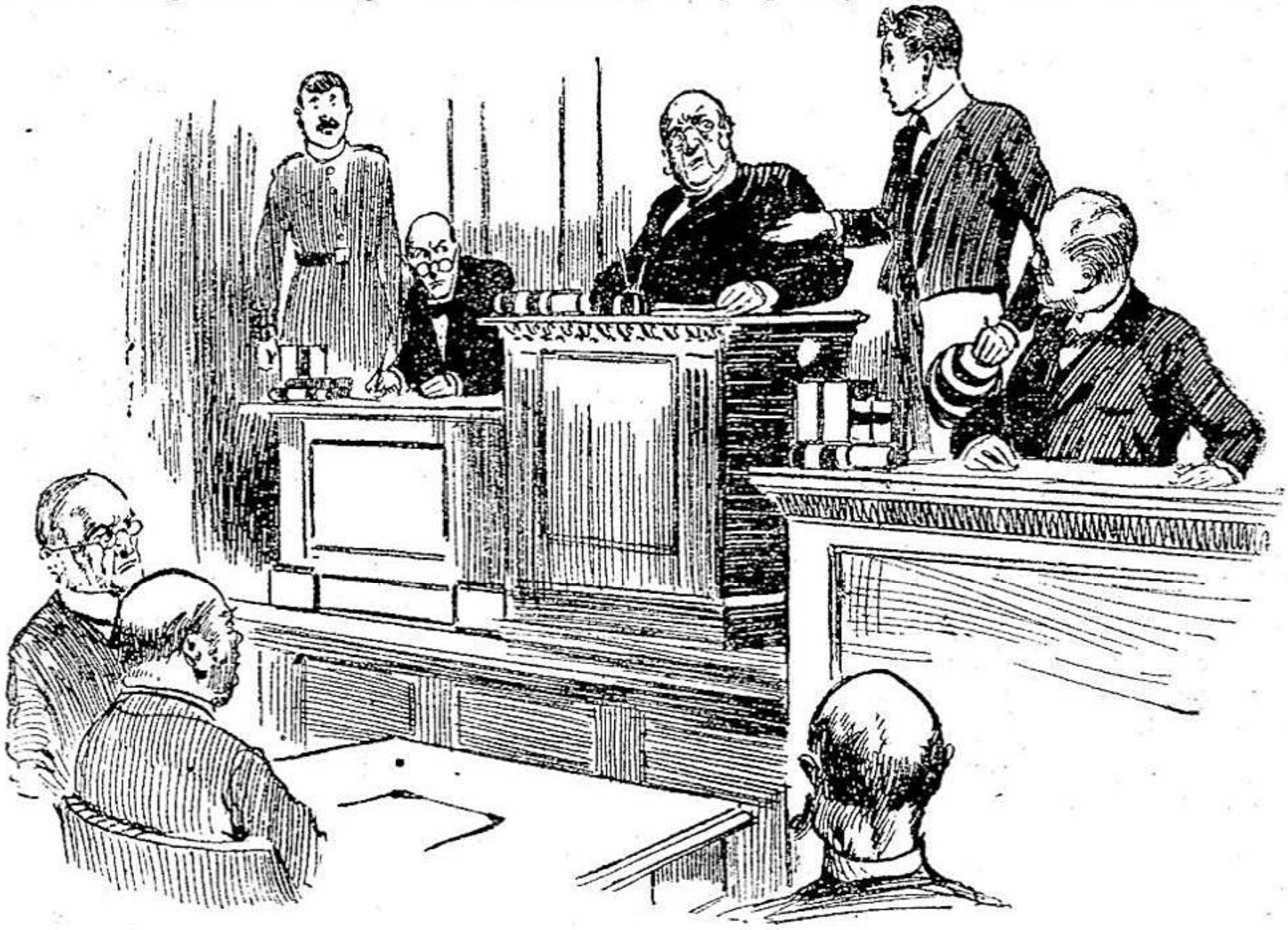
"You'll spoil everything, sir!" went on Willy quickly. "The whole school will be against you! They'll call you unfair and unjust. I'm not asking you to promise anything blindly. Just give me two minutes."

"Upon my soul!"

"Two minutes!" repeated Willy breathlessly.

He had failed to mention that the school had generally talked about Mr. Crump in a facetious manner. Information of that kind was totally unnecessary at a moment like this. The mayor was a man who had no objection to flattery, and Willy's earnestness was beginning to have effect.

"The whole thing is utterly irregular," blustered Mr. Crump. "My boy, you don't seem to realise that you're interrupting the



"Just a minute!" said Willy grimly. "I want the Mayor to give me his promise that he'll buzz round to old Noggs' Theatre with all the big wigs."

business of the council. Come to my private house, and I will see you——"

"That's not the same thing, sir," interrupted Willy. "This is an official visit, and I want an official answer. I say, be a sport, won't you? Just two minutes, you know! It'll save an awful lot of time. I'll give you my word it's not a practical joke, and I shan't make a lot of publicity about it. I'm only here to give you the facts."

The mayor was on the point of succumbing. There was something so impelling about Willy's tone that Mr. Crump's rising gore subsided. He even became interested. He dimly realised that this boy was a refreshing character. There was a peculiar attractiveness about him.

The councillors were frankly entertained. The aldermen, having got over their first stupefaction, were also beginning to take an interest. An incident of this kind hadn't happened in the council chamber since the place had been built.

These council meetings were always dull, formal, and ordinary. Everybody knew exactly what was going to happen, and practically every speech was known to the rest by heart before it was delivered. Willy Handforth's advent, therefore, was welcomed as a distinct livener.

But only after he had impressed his personality on these sleepy old fogies. At first they had been merely furious—angry with outraged dignity. But Willy's remarkable charm prevailed. It wasn't precocity—it wasn't an example of unadulterated cheek. It might have been in any other fag, but not in Willy's case. He just did these things in a perfectly natural manner, without the faintest idea that he was displaying an awful nerve. He was so accustomed to such activities that they were commonplace.

"Just two minutes!" he urged tensely.

Mr. Crump looked at him, and removed his glasses. Willy smiled engagingly—not a prepared smile, by any means, but just his usual cheery grin. The mayor came completely unstuck.

"Very well—very well!" he said gruffly.

"You'll let me have those two minutes?" asked Willy brightly.

"I'm sure I don't know why I'm surrendering in this ridiculous fashion, but you shall have your way," growled the mayor. "Mr. Weeks, kindly remember the various points we were discussing. We will resume after this young gentleman has had his way. Now, my boy!"

Mr. Weeks was chuckling gleefully. He was a stout, good-natured gentleman, and he had completely surrendered to Willy's personality. As for the aldermen and councillors, they had not felt so wideawake for many a day.

"It's about Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs," said Willy, addressing the whole council. "I suppose most of you think that his theatre is a mere booth, and that you'll look undignified if you visit it? If so, you're wrong. Mr. Noggs' theatre is a jolly good place."

Willy hadn't quite prepared his speech, but he would soon warm up. As a matter of fact, he had hardly realised that he would ever address the council in this way. But there he was—a mere fag of St. Frank's—addressing the Bannington Town Council with the permission of the mayor! There was something rather startling in this affair.

"My boy, this idea of yours is ridiculous," said the mayor gently. "Quite ridiculous. Naturally, we are aware of this—this so-called theatre in our midst. But to give it any official recognition is out of the question."

"Quite!" agreed some of the aldermen.

"Why?" demanded Willy. "Just because it's never been done before, eh? Look here, Mr. Mayor, is that sportsmanlike? You don't know anything about Mr. Noggs, you've never been inside his theatre, and yet you condemn it as a twopenny gaff!"

"Really!" protested the mayor, "I—I——"

"Everybody in Bannington has got the same view," went on Willy indignantly. "They condemn Mr. Noggs without any evidence! Why, dash it, it's not British! It would only be fair to sample the thing, wouldn't it? Then you'd be in a position to judge!"

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Crump. "I—I will admit that there is something in the argument, but, really, I cannot allow such criticism——"

"Don't misunderstand me, sir," interrupted Willy quietly. "I'm not criticising. Here's a poor old showman in Bannington, nearly on his uppers, and he's one of the finest dramatic actors on the boards! If only you gentlemen would make an official visit to his theatre the rest of the town would follow in flocks. And that would set Mr. Noggs on his feet—and enable him to engage a really good company, and give first-class shows. It's only support he wants—not charity."

Mr. Crump was very upset.

"But, my boy, what you ask is out of the question," he said, frowning. "You must remember that such a visit would be very undignified——"

"It might be undignified if you went alone, sir," interrupted Willy. "But if you announce in the 'Bannington Gazette' tomorrow morning that you are going to give Mr. Noggs an official welcome, the town will look upon it as a praiseworthy act. Mr Noggs has got two ripping private boxes and you and the aldermen could go along and enjoy the show. To-morrow night Mr Noggs and his company are playing Shakespeare—'As You Like It.' Where's the indignity of supporting Shakespeare?"

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated the mayor. "Shakespeare! I had no idea! I must confess that I am a great lover of Shakespeare. And if this man is really presenting such plays, perhaps he is worthy of our support."

"Decide on it, sir!" said Willy quickly. "All the big people of Bannington will follow your example, and Mr. Noggs will do his best to please you. We St. Frank's fellows have supported him for weeks past—so I know what I'm talking about. Not only the juniors, but the Fifth and Sixth, too. St. Frank's wouldn't support him if he was a common gaff-merchant, sir. Can I tell Mr. Noggs that you'll come along to-morrow night?"

"Well, I'm by no means sure——"

"If that announcement comes out in the morning paper, sir, all the best people in Bannington will rush for seats," continued Willy. "You won't be in bad company! And in these democratic days it's just the thing to do. Why, Bannington will praise you to the skies! You'll be so popular that you'll all be re-elected next year."

Mr. Crump started. As a matter of fact, he was painfully aware that the Town Council was not excessively popular at the moment. He and his colleagues had come in for much adverse criticism. A bold action, such as Willy suggested, would catch the public fancy. It would indeed be a democratic gesture, and one that would popularise him at once. Quite apart from this, the Mayor was immensely struck by Willy's serious plea.

"Mr. Weeks, what do you say?" he asked dubiously. "Upon my word, I am half inclined——"

"By all means," said Mr. Weeks. "I think the boy is quite right. As a matter of fact, I have heard, quite privately, that Mr. Noggs is an excellent actor, and a worthy member of the great profession. I should hesitate to visit his theatre alone, or with my own family. But an official visit is a totally different matter. There would be no loss of dignity, Mr. Mayor. I heartily suggest that the plan should be adopted."

"Hear, hear!" said many members of the Council.

"Then we will certainly do so," said Mr. Crump promptly. "I am sorry, young man, that I misunderstood your intentions when you first came in. Your arrival was—er—somewhat irregular, but we will overlook that point."

"And may I tell Mr. Noggs that the announcement will be in to-morrow's 'Gazette,' sir?" asked Willy eagerly. "You'll pay an official visit to-morrow evening?"

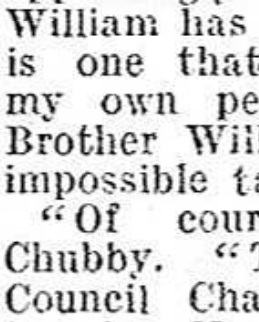
"Well, yes," said the Mayor. "Yes, certainly. I dislike being hastened into a decision. But, perhaps, in this case—— Yes, you can tell Mr. Noggs—— But one moment!" he added thoughtfully. "I will see Mr. Noggs personally this evening, and arrange the whole affair."

"Good enough!" said Willy crisply. "Thanks awfully, sir. Well, I won't hold up the business of the Council any longer," he added, glancing round. "Good-evening, gentlemen! See you at the show to-morrow!"

He smiled cheerfully, waved his hand, and strolled out.

CHAPTER V.

TWO HUNDRED AND SEVENTY POUNDS.



WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE, the genial skipper of the Fifth, regarded Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon with a solemn eye.

"I deplore this touch of levity, Brother Heath," he said severely. "When I ask you a question, I expect a truthful answer—a serious answer. Let us have none of this unseemly sarcasm."

"You long-winded ass, it's the truth!" said Chubby Heath indignantly. "If you want Willy, you'll find him in the Council Chamber, talking to the Mayor. He went in over twenty minutes ago. Juicy and I have been expecting him out for ages."

"It's jolly rummy," said Juicy anxiously. "He ought to have been chucked out long ago. Of course, he won't see the Mayor. The hopeless idiot said he was going to address the Council about old Noggs! Said he was going to get the Mayor to give old Noggs an official welcome."

Browne raised his eyebrows.

"A most laudable object," he said approvingly. "I must confess that Brother William has forestalled me. Such a scheme is one that might well have occurred to my own peculiar intelligence. But, alas, Brother William has, I fear, attempted an impossible task."

"Of course it's impossible," growled Chubby. "Think of it! Barging into the Council Chamber, and asking the Mayor to give Noggs an official welcome! The nerve of it!"

"As you intimate, it is indeed startling," said Browne. "It may be an excellent idea to institute a search for this intrepid youth. Possibly he has already been flung into a prison cell. Let us collect a few of the valiants, and—— But wait! What is this we see?"

They saw Willy Handforth tripping calmly down the Town Hall steps. He was looking blithe and happy, and he performed several exuberant evolutions on the way down. Under no circumstances was it possible to assume that he had met with failure.

"Hallo, Browne!" he said as he came up. "Still busy on the advertising stunts? I don't like to boast, but I've beaten the lot of you."

"Nothing," said Browne, "would surprise me where you are concerned, Brother William. I have long since come to regard you as one of Nature's phenomenons. I am even prepared to hear that you have conquered the Mayor."

"Yes, with knobs on!" grinned Chubby Heath.

"Tell us something we can believe," remarked Juicy Lemon.

Willy regarded them coldly.

"Didn't I go into that Council Chamber to get a promise from the Mayor?" he asked. "Did you ever know me to admit defeat? As a matter of fact, it's all fixed up," he added carelessly.

"Fixed up!" yelled his chums.

"The Mayor and the Aldermen have promised to give Noggs an official welcome at to-morrow evening's performance," replied Willy coolly. "How's that? Rather a boost for the Third, eh?"

His chums stared blankly, and Browne shook his head.

"I trust, Brother William, that this is authentic?" he asked. "I trust that you are refraining from any possible leg-pulling? It pains me to see such confidence in one so young."

But even Browne was convinced after Willy had given his word, honour bright, that he had done the trick. Chubby and Juicy were wild with excitement. They could scarcely credit it. They prophesied that the Mayor would back down.

"Not a chance of it," said Willy promptly. "He knows I've come out to spread the news, and he can't get out of it now. The rumour will be all over Bannington in half an hour, and we've got to set it going. Of course, nobody will believe it; and then there will be the official announcement. We're waking Bannington up, my sons!"

"A task," commented Browne, "that I should have thought impossible. However, one never knows until one tries. You have done well by the school, Brother Willy. My congratulations are herewith showered upon you. I presume that you intend to acquaint Brother Noggs of the glad news at once?"

"Rather!" replied Willy.

Mr. Andy Noggs was hardly in a fit condition to hear such glad tidings. He was filled with inward excitement already, for queues were already forming, and most of his bookable seats were sold. The efforts of the juniors had borne rapid fruit, and business was booming.

This, in itself, was exhilarating. But to learn that the Mayor and Council would honour his theatre on the next evening was a stunning shock. It was a thing that Mr. Noggs had never dreamed of in his wildest moments. At first he thought it was a mere joke, but Willy soon convinced him.

"A wondrous event indeed!" declared Mr. Noggs heavily. "My joy is almost more than I can bear. Alas, I am afraid it is tempered with sombre thoughts. Can it last long? 'Headlong joy is ever on the wing'—Milton."

"But this is a cert., Mr. Noggs," said Willy.

"I believe you, laddie—I believe you," agreed the old showman, his eyes grave and troubled. "'Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer'—Shakespeare. But your service to me is, I fear, of little avail. Success comes tardily. Success comes for others to reap."

Mr. Noggs went off to his comfortable caravan with bowed shoulders, and Willy and Browne exchanged glances. They had expected a different reception. Mr. Noggs was grateful, but he seemed utterly bowed down by the news. It had not given him the great encouragement the Third Form skipper had expected.

"There's something rummy about this," said Willy shrewdly. "What's the matter with the old boy? The best piece of news he's ever had—and yet he's melancholy!"

"We must probe this mystery to the bottom," declared Browne firmly. "I have certain suspicions, but we must obtain proof. There is work for us, brothers."

Nipper and Reggie Pitt and Buster Boots came along, accompanied by many of the other St. Frank's fellows. They had completed their work, and were satisfied that their efforts had not been wasted. And Willy's great news proved to be the best of all.

Boots was frankly amazed, for he had contemptuously turned down Willy's suggestion. He had never imagined that the volatile fag would carry out that seemingly impossible programme.

"Why, old Noggs is made now!" declared Buster enthusiastically. "What with our efforts and a visit by the Town Council, including the Mayor, the people will flock to the theatre in droves. Old Noggs will be able to stay here for a month, and fill his theatre every night."

"It's a cert.," agreed Nipper. "Well, good luck to him!"

Ashwood, the "juvenile lead" of Mr. Noggs' company, came hurrying towards the group of St. Frank's fellows. He was looking excited. Stephen Ashwood was quite a good sort—a man who had stuck to Mr. Noggs through thick and thin, and who had a genuine regard for the old showman.

"I say, is it true about the Mayor?" he asked breathlessly.

"Copyright by Reuter," replied Browne. "Indeed, it has the official seal of Brother William. And what could be more binding?"

"Ye gods!" ejaculated Ashwood. "The Mayor and the Council! An official visit! This is something the guv'nor has longed for all his life! He's never been able to get the right people into his theatre—and yet he's always appealed to the intelligent. And now the honour is being bestowed on his theatre to-morrow evening! By Jupiter, what atrocious luck!"

"Surely an ill choice of adjectives?" suggested Browne.

"No, by thunder, it isn't!" snorted Ashwood. "It's the most atrocious piece of

luck I ever heard of. This theatre belongs to old Noggs to-night, but to-morrow it won't!"

"It won't?" shouted the crowd.

"The very first day it passes out of the guv'nor's hands, the Mayor and the Corporation turn up!" said Ashwood bitterly. "Why, it's—it's—— Confound it, I'm speechless. But I wouldn't be if you boys weren't here!" he added significantly.

They regarded him with deep concern.

"What do you mean, Mr. Ashwood?" asked Nipper. "Won't Mr. Noggs be in control to-morrow? You're right about the atrocious luck if he won't! Barton, eh? You mean Barton?"

"Who else?" snapped Ashwood. "To-morrow is the last day! The guv'nor owes him money—pots of it! Owing to that bit of success in Caistowe, and what with to-night's takings, he'll be able to meet the bulk of the money. That's a slight consolation, I suppose—thanks to you boys. But he'll still be a lot short, poor old boy?"

"What do you call a lot?" asked Reggie Pitt.

"Oh, a terrific amount—hundreds of pounds," said Ashwood fiercely.

"Hundreds?" repeated Browne. "Let us go into this question! Two hundred? Four hundred? Six hundred——"

"No, no, no! About two hundred and seventy, roughly," interrupted the actor impatiently. "The total sum was well over a thousand, but the guv'nor has been screwing hard. We've all gone short in the hope that we could help him. But time has beaten us. To-morrow's the day, and the poor old chap won't be able to rake the cash together."

And Stephen Ashwood, in the stress of his exasperation, swore softly under his breath.

CHAPTER VI.

BARTON MEANS BUSINESS.

DICK HAMILTON was looking serious.

"If it's only a question of two-seventy pounds——" he began.

"Only?" interrupted Ashwood. "Confound it, Nipper, what's the idea? The guv'nor hasn't got the means of raising two-seventy pence! He's not an established merchant; he can't raise a loan from the bank. He can't mortgage his theatre—he's done that already, with Barton. That's what the money's wanted for."

"But won't Barton be satisfied with the bulk of the money?" asked Buster Boots. "I've always heard that these things can be arranged. Won't Barton give him an extension? If there's only two-seventy pounds left owing, he can wait for that for a week or two, I suppose?"

"You don't understand," said Ashwood harshly. "This isn't an ordinary business deal. Barton's taken good care to keep within the law—and the guv'nor can't touch him—but he's only a common swindler. Mr. Noggs is no business man, and that infernal hound has prepared all sorts of tricky agreements, and the guv'nor has signed them. Haven't I seen them," he added hotly. "But what can we do? Nothing!"

"Why not?" asked Pitt.

"Because Barton's got the law behind him," retorted Ashwood. "That's why not! He's fixed things so that all the money shall be due to-morrow. If it's a penny short, Barton can seize the entire outfit, and it becomes his sole property. It's like a swindling hire-purchase agreement. Barton has done it deliberately. He made those agreements, and then hired somebody to crab the show in advance, in every town!"

"Even as we suspected!" said Browne grimly. "But does Mr. Noggs know of this dirty work?"

"He found it out to-day," replied Ashwood. "But he's got no proof—he can't bring any action against Barton. And Barton means to collar this outfit to-morrow. That's what he's been working up to for all these weeks! And he'll do it unless every cent of that money is on the table, in cash!"

"There's no chance of an extension of time?"

"Not a chance in a million!" replied Ashwood. "We've all been talking about it to-day. We're ready to sell everything we've got—even to our shirts! But what's the use? We couldn't raise a hundred—we couldn't raise fifty quid! Three hundred is as impossible as a million."

"You said two-seventy——"

"Well, what's the difference?" growled Ashwood, breathing hard. "We'll say three hundred as a round sum. With to-night's takings, it'll be less than that—but not much. Poor old boy! No wonder he's looking so broken! Just when success is coming, his whole worldly possessions are being torn away from him. That's the tragedy of it!"

William Napoleon Browne coughed.

"Brothers, this is eminently one of those occasions when heads should be placed together," he suggested smoothly. "A little judicious wangling, and I venture to predict that Brother Noggs will be dragged out of the soup-tureen in time. So far, he is merely ankle-deep."

"You mean——" Nipper paused, and looked keen. "By Jove, it's not an impossible sum, is it? There's Archie Glenthorne, and Somerton, and old Pippy, and Singleton——"

"A limited company," said Browne thoughtfully. "I myself am not so devoid of cash as one might imagine. Distinctly, brothers, this is our opportunity. Let us acquire an interest in Noggs & Co., Limited. Let us invest in a worthy concern. We are

interested in theatrical production already. Why not consolidate our position? Why not sink a little solid cash into this praiseworthy undertaking?"

"Why not?" chorused the others eagerly.

"And, at the same time, and by the same token, why not forcibly place the half-nelson upon Brother Barton?" continued Browne. "There is nothing I should like to see more than Brother Barton beaten by a short head. Let him remain in ignorance of this coming thunderbolt. Let him arrive with itching palms for the spoils, and let him depart with an aching rear after we have administered the valedictory kick."

"It doesn't matter what kind of kick it is, so long as he gets it!" said Willy practically. "But as for this cash business, I'm dished. I shall have to leave it to you fellows."

"Let no such worry concern you, Brother Willy," said Browne. "You have done your own part nobly—superbly. You have, indeed, performed a miracle of strategy. It is no exaggeration to acclaim you as a genius. Even I could have done no better."

"Well, let's go and see Mr. Noggs," said Nipper briskly. "It's no good leaving him in the dark. We've got to prepare him—and it'll give him some good heart, too. When he knows that we're ready to find that money, he'll be so bucked up that it'll act as a stimulus, and he'll give one of his best performances."

Stephen Ashwood had been listening, and was staring.

"Wait a minute," he said breathlessly. "What's all this? Are you youngsters suggesting that you should find that money? It's ridiculous! You don't seem to realise the amount! Nearly three hundred pounds——"

"A mere trifle, Brother Ashwood," interrupted Browne. "You must remember that we are many. Also, a certain number of the bloated rich are included in our ranks. It is at times such as these that the bloated rich come in useful. Alas, I fear they are a much maligned class! They have their uses, in spite of popular rumour."

Ashwood went almost pale with sudden excitement.

"You're going to find that money?" he gasped. "Great Scott! I can't—I can't—— You boys are the limit!" he went on tensely. "You've done a lot for the guv'nor already, but this beats everything! I say, you are a set of young bricks, you know!"

"I have no doubt that Brother Barton will agree with you—when we hurl ourselves at him to-morrow," replied Browne smoothly. "But enough! Can you not observe the deep, crimson blushes which suffuse our faces? Modesty is our strongest asset, Brother Ashwood."

They went off to Mr. Noggs' caravan, and Ashwood tore round like a madman to tell the other members of the company of this latest development. There was no fear of them allowing a word to leak out for Barton's ears. Every member of the company was staunch to Mr. Noggs. If Barton noticed any subdued excitement, he would put it down to the general uncertainty of things.

So many surprises were coming at once. The full house for this evening; the knowledge that the Mayor was to give the theatre an official welcome on the morrow; and now, the glorious news that Barton was to be defeated at the post. No wonder the company was quivering with inward excitement. It seemed that the threshold of prosperity was at their feet.

Browne and Nipper had both thought of the thing simultaneously. It seemed so obvious. Three hundred pounds was not such a big sum to find—especially when there were so many well-filled wallets to draw upon. Archie Glenthorne was always rolling in cash—and so were Lord Pippinton and the Hon. Douglas Singleton, and several others. Browne himself felt confident that he could find fifty pounds by the morrow. There was plenty of time to dispatch a judiciously-worded wire to his pater. And Nipper, of course, was certain that his guardian, Mr. Nelson Lee, would rally round.

Indeed, the sum seemed ridiculously small to the fellows as they talked it over before invading Mr. Noggs' caravan. And it was ridiculously small. This travelling theatre, with its electrical installation, its well-equipped stage, its numerous motor-lorries—this modern outfit was worth many thousands.

But the tour had been a failure all along; money had failed to come in, and Mr. Noggs had sunk deeper and deeper into Roger Barton's debt. And now, for the sake of a paltry hundred or two, the old showman was in danger of losing everything. And he had invested his life's savings in this concern.

Legally, Roger Barton was within his rights. He had fooled his employer at the start, and was ready to rob him openly. But it was only a moral robbery, for the law would uphold this unmitigated scoundrel. He had arranged everything so that he was safe. Only the finding of that money would completely upset Mr. Barton's apple-cart. It was for this reason that he had been so worried over the juniors' recent activities. But he knew that he would grab the prize—he knew that Mr. Noggs was short of the required sum.

Under the circumstances, the old showman's state of mind was acute. How could he appreciate the coming official recognition when his theatre would have passed into other hands?

Browne and the others entered the caravan and found Mr. Noggs sitting in a deep armchair, smoking his favourite old pipe. There were no lights on, and only the dusk came through the neat little windows.

"Brother Noggs, we don't want to beat about the bush," said Browne firmly. "We have heard on the highest authority that your pocket-book is light to the extent of three

hundred pounds. It is our earnest wish to see Brother Barton squirm. Let us, therefore, invest this three hundred pounds with you. Do not deny us the pleasure of seeing Brother Barton performing his celebrated squirming act."

Mr. Noggs dropped his pipe.

"By the shade of Sheridan!" he ejaculated hoarsely. "What now? Are my ears deceiving me, or is this deliverance?"

CHAPTER VII.

NOGGS, BROWNE & CO., LTD.

THE old showman rose to his feet and looked at the little group of fellows in a dazed kind of way. Then he shook his head.

"No!" he boomed. "No! You have done too much already, laddies! I cannot expect more. I cannot accept more. There is such a thing as imposition. And I must not let my troubles fall upon your young shoulders."

He waved his hand, and went on before anybody could speak.

"Besides, where can you find this money?" he asked. "Three hundred is the smallest amount I shall require. It may be less—it may be slightly more. This reptile will seize my property if I am even one farthing short."

"That's simple, Mr. Noggs," said Nipper. "We'll be on the safe side, and invest five hundred. Then you'll have some working capital to employ better actors, and improve your future productions."

"Five hundred!" said Mr. Noggs breathlessly. "What wonder is this? No, no! I must not think in this fashion. 'O, that way madness lies—let me shun that'—Shakespeare! I cannot believe these words. I am dreaming. Let me awaken from this trance."

"We'd all like to see Barton dished, sir," put in Buster Boots. "When is he coming? What time to-morrow?"

"I don't know," replied Mr. Noggs, rather bewildered. "He said he would see me this evening—and arrange the hour for the morrow. He may be here at any minute. I am waiting," he added, his voice becoming curiously harsh. "I have certain things to tell Mr. Barton."

"You found out about his treachery, then?" asked Nipper.

"Ay, I found out," replied Mr. Noggs slowly. "Fool that I am! Thrice fool not to have seen through this rascal before. And now 'tis too late. I know of his guilt—I have heard enough to satisfy my meagre intelligence—but of proof I have none——"

The door broke open, and Roger Barton himself stood there. His way was barred by the crowd of juniors—for the caravan was almost full. For a moment they stared at one another aggressively.

"Confound your impertinence!" roared Barton. "Get out of this caravan! Get off the ground! You young hounds have been interfering long enough, and I'm sick of you!"

Mr. Barton was making no attempt to restrain himself. Hitherto he had been more or less polite when Mr. Noggs was near by. But now he had dropped all pretence.

"We'll get out of here when Mr. Noggs asks us to go," said Nipper curtly. "We're not taking any orders from you, Mr. Barton."

"Impertinent young cub!" shouted Barton. "You'll get off these premises within a minute, or I'll——"

"Laddies, stay where you are!" interrupted Mr. Noggs quietly. "You are my guests, and this is my hearth——"

"Better not keep up that farce, Noggs," interrupted Barton, forcing his way past the juniors. "This property is mine—or will be to-morrow!"

Andy Noggs regarded Barton grimly.

"Unseemly haste!" he boomed. "Be not so sure, Barton! 'To-morrow's sun to thee may never rise'—Congreve."

"To blazes with your infernal quotations!" snarled Barton. "We can't waste time on pleasantries now, Noggs. And it's no good hoping for miracles to happen. You'll pay me every penny to-morrow, or I'll foreclose on the spot. I've warned you of this already—but you force me to be blunt."

Mr. Noggs swept his hand round, and pointed at Barton—but he addressed the St. Frank's fellows.

"See!" he exclaimed. "'A man he seems of cheerful yesterdays—and confident to-morrows!'—Wordsworth. Maybe you are right, Barton. Certainly I haven't the money. Even with to-night's good business, I shan't have the money. And Heaven knows I've mortgaged every article of value I ever possessed. Crow on, Barton! It suits your mean spirit. At one time I thought you were a friend. But I now see you in your true form. If I had known your character to begin with, I should not have fallen into your accursed traps. 'An open foe may prove a curse, but a pretended friend is worse'—Gay."

Barton laughed contemptuously.

"You won't be gay much longer," he said with feeble humour. "I meant to have a long talk with you, Noggs, but I can see you are not in the mood. I shall be here to-morrow, accompanied by my lawyer, at two-thirty. Be good enough to have everything in readiness at that hour. I shall take possession from that moment onwards."

"Brothers, the tones of this misshapen toad grate upon my delicate nerves," said Browne gently. "Shall we assist him to leave these premises? I leave it to you."

"By Jingo, there's only one answer!" shouted Pitt.

And the next moment Roger Barton was not merely hustled out of the caravan, but pitched out. He staggered away, and turned just as he was about to negotiate the rear of the theatre.

"You can do this sort of thing now—but it will be a different story to-morrow," he snarled. "You'll set foot on this ground at your peril!"

He strode off, boiling with fury. And Mr. Noggs, at the door of the caravan, watched with serious gaze.

"I intended saying more to the rogue, but of what avail?" he asked. "I can prove nothing, so I should merely waste my words. And words are precious. He holds the upper hand."

"He won't if you'll let us help you, Mr. Noggs," said Nipper. "We'll be here at two-thirty with that money, and then you'll be able to snap your fingers at the brute."

For a moment the old showman flushed.

"No, I can't allow it," he muttered. "There is a limit, ladkins! Already my pride has suffered—I cannot let it sink into the very dust. Leave me to my fate. I beg of you to go."

Browne took his arm.

"It appears that we are at cross-purposes, Brother Noggs," he said benevolently. "This is no question of pride. Neither is it a question of a loan. It is our suggestion to invest the money in your enterprise. Surely that is a purely business proposition?"

"Invest the money?" said Mr. Noggs.

"Let us say, form ourselves into a limited liability company," suggested Browne. "I rather fancy it will sound good—Noggs, Browne & Co., Ltd. You will all notice my modesty in placing my own name second on the list."

The Removites and Fourth Formers grinned.

"Don't take any notice of Browne, Mr. Noggs," chuckled Nipper. "There'll be no question of a limited company, but we'll invest the money privately. We can trust you, I should hope. Later on we can withdraw our investments—if we want to—with the accumulated interest. Browne's quite right when he calls it a business deal. We'll guarantee five hundred—but it might be more."

Mr. Noggs took a deep breath.

"Such generosity as this leaves we with few words," he replied quietly. "You may, of course, cloak your words in what phrases you will—but I am not so dull that I do not see the true inwardness of your motives."

"Wait!" said Browne. "It is not purely generosity on our part, Brother Noggs. I, as the principal producer, am anxious to acquire an interest in this theatre. My proposal is to produce 'Hamlet' in the near future. Indeed, rehearsals must commence at once. Furthermore, Brother Stevens—that rising young actor—shall play the title role. We shall need an excellent company—and excellent scenery. Let us, therefore, invest our money, and thus have the right to our way."

"'Hamlet'!" said Mr. Noggs dubiously. "It will mean failure, laddie! I am playing Shakespeare to-morrow—but I only announced the show as a jest. Business was so poor that we could do no worse. So why not produce the best? Even our own satisfaction is something."

"As it happens, you couldn't have done better, Mr. Noggs," said Nipper. "Thanks to young Willy, the Mayor will be present—and half the giddy Council! And 'Hamlet,' with Stevens in the title role, will be even more successful."

"It shall be as you say," said Mr. Noggs quietly. "Forgive me, laddies. My mind is unsettled. So much has happened that I scarcely know where I am. And time presses. I must be ready for the curtain."

It was quite true. Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs was like a man in a dream. His protests regarding the money had been feeble. He was ready enough to grasp at this last straw—and the juniors had put it so tactfully that there was no dishonour in accepting their help.

It seemed that his fortunes were turning all at once—in one great earthquake. An hour or so earlier he had regarded himself as a broken man—a dismal, arrant failure.

And now, thanks to these extraordinary schoolbooks, the clouds were beginning to break up and disperse. But even so, Mr. Noggs took nothing for granted. There was a lingering doubt. He could not credit that these boys could produce the required sum by the morrow.

But Browne, Nipper, Pitt & Co. had no misgivings.

CHAPTER VIII.

HANDFORTH, THE COMEDIAN.

CHURCH, of the Remove, walked miserably into the lobby of the Ancient House. McClure was there, leaning disconsolately against the wall. He looked up as Church appeared.

"Well?" he asked. "How is he?"

"Worse than ever!"

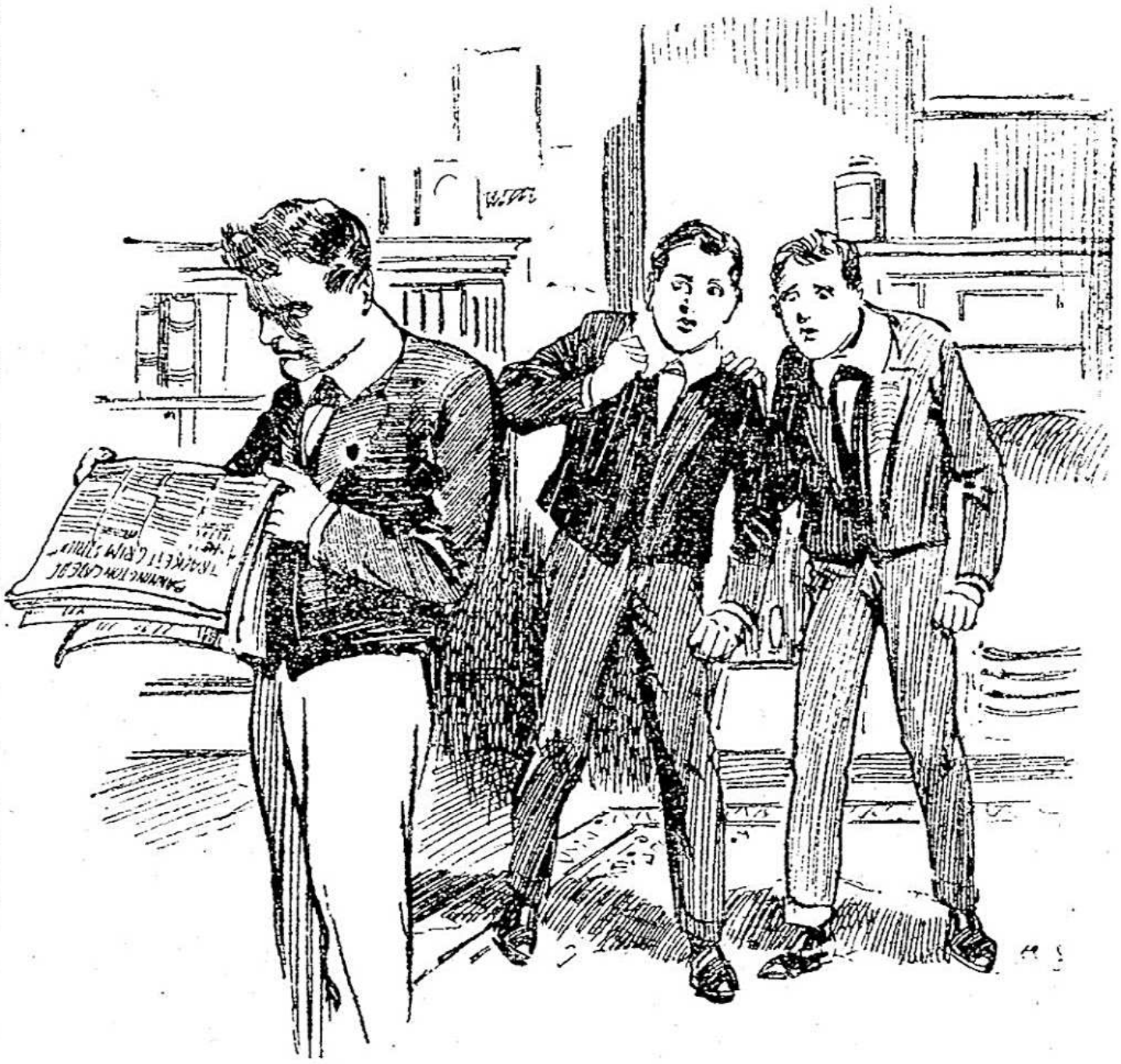
"I knew it!" said McClure, with a grunt. "There's no living with Handy when he's got a fit of the blues! One of the best chaps breathing, but he properly gives you the pip when he's upset."

"We haven't had any peace since yesterday!" muttered Church, joining his chum against the wall. "I just put my head in the study door and he barked at me. Fairly barked. I didn't open my mouth, either."

"And we had to have tea in Hall!" said McClure gloomily. "What's the good? I feel like taking the fathead by the scruff of his neck, and scragging him! We could do it, too—both of us together."

For a moment, Church looked eager, but then he shook his head.

"It wouldn't be playing the game," he said. "The poor old scout's as miserable as sin. I've never known him to be so worried—or so upset. The worst of it is, he makes us miserable, too. He's not one of those chaps who can keep his troubles to himself. When he's worried, he fairly exudes it!"



"H'm! There's something rummy about this," commented Handforth, at length. "It's not a bad report, on the whole. Of course, the man's mad—clean off his rocker! That play of mine is a serious drama—not a comedy."

The famous trio of Study D was in an unhappy condition. Edward Oswald Handforth, the celebrated leader, was, according to his own statement, broken for life. Existence had no further interest for him. He merely wanted to mouch about silently, or drag himself into a corner and die.

Nobody else could understand his point of view

The entire Junior School had howled at him the previous night—had hailed him as the greatest comedian that the Remove had ever produced. He had been acclaimed on all sides as a discovery.

His short play, "The Triumph of Trackett Grim," featuring Handforth himself as the great detective, had been an instantaneous success. It had even been presented to the ordinary Bannington public, and it had been highly appreciated Unfortunately, Handforth regarded it as a serious contribution to the Drama—whilst the public accepted it as a burlesque.

It was, of course, the latter. William Napoleon Browne had produced the play as such—he had rehearsed his company with the deliberate obj ct of presenting the play as a farcical absurdity. And without doubt it had been a triumph.

But Handforth hadn't known the dreadful truth until the fall of the curtain. And then, amid the applause and the congratulations, he had learned that his leg had been pulled from first to last. His play was not a masterpiece of dramatic art, but a burlesque. He was not regarded as a dramatic actor, but as a comedian! This blow had been so severe that he had brooded upon it ever since—even refusing to help in the advertising stunt that afternoon.

And now he was still shut up in Study D, and his faithful chums were as miserable as he was. Handforth & Co. were inseparable, and the worries of one were the worries of the three.

"I'm blessed if I know what we can do," said McClure helplessly. "The fathead won't listen to reason—he won't believe a word we say! Even when we tell him how wonderful he was as 'Trackett Grim,' he still thinks we're pulling his leg! The poor old chap is wilting away."

Church grunted.

"I've felt sorry for him up to now—but I'm getting a bit fed up," he said glumly. "There's a limit, you know! Why can't he be content? He's made a name as a

comedian, and it's no good for him! His Highness wants to be a second Irving!"

Ulysses Spencer Adams, the American boy, strolled in.

"Say, lamp this snappy article in 'The Gazette'!" he grinned, pausing.

He held out the current issue of the local daily—which did not always find its way into the school.

"Do what?" asked Church.

"Get this dope!" said Ulysses, indicating a certain column.

"Lamp it?" repeated McClure. "Get some dope? Why the dickens can't you talk English? That giddy American slang of yours is like a foreign language! You can talk properly if you like, Adams!"

"Gee, you guys make me tired!" sighed Adams. "I hand out a nifty line of talk, and you can't get it! Say, what do you know about that? I guess my English is the real honest-to-goodness language. When I spill a sentence or two I sure say a mouthful. And you boneheads can't understand. How come?"

"Cheese it!" growled Church. "You're shoving that New York slang on all the thicker, you chump! What's that article, anyhow? Something important?"

"I'll tell the world it's important," replied Ulysses. "You said something! Handforth is handed the boost of the year right here, in cold print."

"My hat! Let's have a look!" ejaculated McClure.

He grabbed the paper feverishly.

"You're welcome!" grinned Adams. "Don't trouble to ask!"

Church and McClure gazed fascinatedly at the little article in the newspaper. The American boy stood by, watching.

"They've sure gotta line on that poor fish!" he went on. "It's a crackerjack boost, kiddoes! The guy that handled that write-up sure knew what he was after. When I saw Handforth last night I nearly passed. Oh, boy! Some comedian! I guess he'd make a hit on Broadway—and get by!"

"Why, this is topping!" said Church excitedly. "There's a full criticism of Handy's play! I didn't know the critics were in the theatre last night! And this article's full of praise, too! Praise for the play, the production, and the acting!"

"You said it!" agreed Adams. "The guy that wrote this is some little booster! He hasn't given anybody a knock."

"Let's go and show it to Handy!" suggested McClure breathlessly.

"Hot dog!" said Adams.

"Eh?"

"Nix, kid!" grinned Adams. "It's no good explaining these things to dumb-bells! Even if I made a wise crack in the only real language, I guess you wouldn't get it. Are we going to Handforth? All right! Shoot!"

McClure glared.

"Thanks for the paper, Adams, but if it's all the same to you, we'd rather go alone," he said pointedly. "Handy isn't particularly fond of your marvellous 'line of bull,' and you'd only get his rag out. So the best thing you can do is to 'beat it'!"

Church and McClure hurried off, and the American boy stared.

"For the love of Mike!" he ejaculated. "Can you beat that?"

Church and McClure burst into Study D, and found Handforth standing in front of the mirror, glaring ferociously at his own reflection. He turned round, and went red in the face. Apparently, he did not like to be caught at such an occupation.

"Who told you to come in?" he demanded. "Buzz off!"

"Look here, Handy—cool down!" said Church grimly. "Here's to-day's 'Gazette,' and there's a full criticism of your play in it!"

"I don't want to see it!" retorted Handforth.

"It's all about the production, too——"

"Take it away!"

"But it's favourable——"

"I don't care if it's favourable or not!" roared Handforth. "I don't want to see it. I won't see it. I refuse to see it."

"All right, I'll read it out," said Church.

"If you do, I'll slaughter you!"

Church breathed hard.

"You—you obstinate rotter!" he panted. "Don't you realise that this review is all in your favour?"

"I don't care!"

"You're hailed as a wonderful new comedian——"

"WHAT!" hooted Handforth dangerously.

"Steady, old son!" urged McClure, grasping his arm. "No need to take it so badly. It's a wonderful notice, really. This critic says that you're one of the cleverest young writers of the day."

"Oh, does he?"

"He says that you're better than a comedian—you're a genius——"

"Eh?"

"A genius," repeated McClure, seizing his advantage. "That play of yours is described as a brilliant effort, and your performance is praised as a gem of comedy. My dear chap, it's a sheer eulogy."

"Oh!" said Handforth gruffly.

He turned aside, glared at his reflection in the mirror, and for a few moments he said nothing. His chums discreetly remained silent. From past experience they knew that a thaw had set in. Edward Oswald's frozen demeanour was in the process of changing.

"Let's have a look at that paper," he said at length.

Church and McClure nearly fell over themselves in their haste to place the newspaper in his hands. They exchanged rapid, thankful glances.

CHAPTER IX.

THE NEWSPAPER REPORT.

HANDFORTH looked at the newspaper report, and stood there with pursed lips. But the misery had gone out of his eyes, and they were now revealing a strong hint of inward excitement.

"H'm! There's something rummy about this," he commented at length. "It's not a bad report, on the whole. Of course, the man's mad—clean off his rocker. That play of mine is a serious drama—not a comedy."

"Still, the paper praises you pretty well, doesn't it?" asked Church. "You don't often see such a wonderful notice as that. It's just one long line of admiration, Handy. You ought to be jolly pleased. And it only proves what we've all been saying. You're a genius at comedy."

Handforth made no comment for a moment.

He was aware that Church had come very near the mark, for this Press notice was indeed ample proof that his play was appreciated. But after the shock of discovering how his leg had been pulled Edward Oswald had suspected everybody and everything. He had indeed refused to believe the high words of praise which had been showered upon him by all and sundry. His state of mind had been such that he shut his ears to everything.

But this criticism couldn't be ignored.

The "Bannington Gazette" was a reputable journal. Not a particularly important one, but it had the name of being solid and staid and thoroughly reliable. The Editor would never have allowed that notice to appear unless it met with his approval. And anything in the nature of "leg pulling" would have horrified the entire editorial staff. No, this article was a thoroughly genuine expression of opinion.

"Mad, of course," repeated Handforth slowly. "But that's nothing new. Everybody's mad. You chaps are mad. The whole school's mad!"

"In fact, everybody's mad except you?" asked Church.

"By George, yes!" said Handforth with a start. "I hadn't thought of it like that before. That's the explanation. I'm the only sane fellow left. Well, it's something to be recognised as a genius. I suppose I shall have to overlook these potty references to humour."

"Couldn't do better," declared McClure.

"And after all, why not?" mused Handforth. "When you come to think of it, humorous writing is more difficult than any other kind This chap knows what he's talking about. He's told the plain truth about my play. I didn't think they'd have sense enough to publish it."

"For a madman, it's not bad," agreed Church.

"Eh? Oh, well, perhaps he's not really mad!" admitted Handforth. "It's simply a matter of focus. It all depends upon the point of view, you know. By George! 'Brilliant acting!' 'A gem of comedy!' 'The work of a genius!' I dare say the man's right. Perhaps I was a bit too serious over it."

"Not a bit," said McClure. "Churchy and I could appreciate the wonderful seriousness of your play, but everyone else misunderstands it. As you say, they're mad. Even this critic is off his chump."

Handforth frowned.

"Rats!" he retorted. "The man's right. Now I come to look at the thing squarely, I suppose that play of mine is a bit funny. It's a gem of comedy, don't forget."

"What!" said McClure feebly.

"These crook dramas are played out," said Handforth. "They're a back number. It's ten times more difficult to write a burlesque. What on earth are you chaps looking so startled about?" he added, staring.

"Nun-nothing!" breathed Church.

"We—we're not startled," panted McClure.

Handforth was indulging in one of those lightning changes of his, and his chums were taken off their guard. They were generally prepared for such vagaries, but Handforth had been so stunned recently that they had never believed it possible that he could turn so completely.

"I'll tell you what!" went on Edward Oswald. "That play of mine's going to be presented again. And the next time there won't be any spoof about it. I shall know it's a burlesque, and I'll act the part accordingly."

"But you don't need to alter it," urged Church. "You were topping, old man. You'll spoil the whole part if you alter it."

"Rot!" said Handforth. "I'm going to make a lot of improvements, and then we'll put the thing on properly. I'll go and see Browne about it."

"Browne isn't here—he's still in Bannington with Nipper and Pitt and Boots and the rest of the chaps."

"What the dickens have they been doing there?"

"Why, boosting up old Noggs' show, of course."

Handforth started.

"Why wasn't I in it?" he demanded hotly. "By George! Those rotters have gone off without me. How the dickens can they expect to do any good without me in charge of affairs?"

"Goodness knows," said Church sarcastically. "They looked awfully miserable when

they left, but I dare say they've muddled through somehow."

"Besides," added McClure, "we asked you to come along, Handy, but you refused. So it's no good blaming anybody if the advertising stunts have failed. But I expect your minor has deputised all right. He was there, and Willy's a keen young beggar."

Handforth breathed hard.

"My minor!" he gasped. "Do you mean to say my minor went along as my deputy? Where is he? Where's Browne? I'll show the fatheads that they can't mess me about!"

He rushed out of the study, intent upon action. Throughout the day he had been living in a kind of dream, and he hardly remembered what had actually taken place. But now that he was thoroughly awake his one determination was to make up for lost time.

As it happened, he ran right into William Napoleon Browne as the latter strolled into the Ancient House with Horace Stevens. Horace Stevens was the real acting genius of St. Frank's. His recent performance in his father's play, "The Third Chance," was still talked about reverently. Stevens had labelled himself a magician of the footlights by that character study.

"Ah, Brother Handforth——"

"Have you just got back from Bannington?" demanded Handforth breathlessly. "Have you been advertising Noggs' show?"

"We have all contributed towards that laudable end," replied Browne. "Your minor, the esteemed Brother William, has performed a miracle. In his own inimitable way he has prevailed upon the Mayor of Bannington to honour Brother Noggs' Theatre to-morrow evening. An achievement indeed."

"Why wasn't I there?" roared Handforth. "That's just the sort of game I should have been up to. It was a dirty trick for you chaps to rush off like that without telling me anything about it."

Browne regarded him thoughtfully.

"I take it, Brother Handforth, that you have partially recovered from your recent indisposition?" he inquired. "Splendid! You are resigned to the fact that your talent lies in the direction of humour."

"I'm a genius of comedy," said Handforth, nodding.

"I am the first to admit that modesty is a virtue," murmured Browne.

"You ass, that's what the paper says!" roared Handforth. "And I want that play produced again, so that I shall be able to do full justice to the part. In fact, I'm going to write another one—a real burlesque this time. You wait until I get down to work."

"Alas, I fear that you will spoil everything!" sighed Browne. "Your humour, Brother Handforth, was of the unconscious variety. You set yourself to write drama, and you produced tripe. Set yourself to produce tripe, and you will probably produce a concoction too horrible to contemplate. Let me urge you to leave this matter well alone. Be content with your present laurels."

But Browne's good advice was wasted upon the leader of Study D. He had completely recovered his spirits. More than recovered them, in fact. He could not understand why he had been so upset previously. The world regarded him as a comedian, so he would show them what he could do when he really set himself out to be funny.

But there was one point which Handforth failed to realise. He had been funny because of the unconscious nature of his humour. Browne was probably right in assuming that a deliberate attempt at humour would be a ghastly failure.

But Handforth was not to be discouraged by such statements of opinion. He was acclaimed in the Press as a humorous playwright and a great comedian—so he would show everybody what he could do.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIGURE IN THE NIGHT.

"AND there it stood, a dim, sinister figure in the gloom of the haunted chamber."

"Eh?"

"Slowly it advanced towards me. I was rooted to the spot with terror, Mr. Grim. I stood there, frozen to the marrows. I was so startled that I fled."

"You—you dotty ass!" growled Church. "Can't you stop that mumbling? Why can't you go to sleep? And how the dickens could the man flee if he was rooted to the spot? And how could he be rooted if he was frozen?"

Handforth & Co. were in their dormitory, and it was after lights-out. Church and McClure, being normal, sensible fellows thought it rather a good idea to get to sleep. But Handforth insisted upon sitting up in bed in the darkness, thinking out new lines for the improvement of his celebrated play.

"You might as well chuck it up for to-night, Handy," growled McClure. "It's no good thinking of these lines now, you'll only forget them by the morning. Besides, that play of yours doesn't want altering. It's good enough as it is!"

"It's a masterpiece," said Church. "It's all piffle to bring in this haunted chamber stuff. And why talk about it in the dark, anyhow?"

Handforth took absolutely no notice.

"Mr. Grim, I fled!" he said impressively. "And that awful apparition came flying down the corridor after me. And then suddenly, suddenly, suddenly—— H'm! There ought to be something particularly startling here. This chap is telling Trackett Grim his yarn, you know."

Handforth got out of bed, and paced up and down the little dormitory. In the dark he blundered into McClure's bed, tripped, and pushed one of his fists into McClure's face. But he didn't seem to know anything about it, although McClure loudly proclaimed his presence.

"That's the idea!" said Handforth tensely. "The more melodramatic I can make it the better. That's where the burlesque comes in. And this ghostly stuff is just the right touch. We can have somebody come on the stage all dressed up like a fearsome apparition. It can speak in a hollow voice, and——"

"I say, can't you chuck it?" complained Church bitterly. "My hat! We've been miserable all day because you wouldn't speak—and now you're apparently going to jaw all night! About ghosts, too! My hat! What was that?"

"Only the wind, fathead!" growled Handforth, as the casement rattled. "I'm fed up with these interruptions—I don't get any help from you chaps! I'm going downstairs!"

"You ass, somebody might spot you."

"I can't help that—I've got to get this thing off my mind," said Handforth obstinately. "I've got some marvellous lines in my head—and no paper. I'm going down to the study to make some notes."

"Thank goodness!" murmured McClure.

"Eh?"

"I mean, don't desert us!" said McClure hastily. "Besides, you've got to get your sleep, Handy. Don't forget footer practice in the morning. Nipper's pretty keen, and he'll drag us out early——"

"Yes, that's it!" interrupted Handforth. "Trackett Grim goes down to Weird Moat Grange, and finds——"

"A gang of coiners?" asked McClure sleepily.

"No, you chump!"

"Oh, well, perhaps you'd better go and make your notes, old man," put in Church. "We're bound to bother you if you stop here—and you can't do much in the darkness."

"I can't do much with you fatheads interrupting," said Handforth tartly.

He was still fully dressed, and he softly opened the door and crept out into the corridor. He inwardly knew that it was a foolish thing to go downstairs on such an errand as this, for he was liable to run into a master at any minute. But his natural obstinacy impelled him.

Besides, he was unable to sleep. That play of his was on his mind, and he wanted to improve it. In all probability he would only succeed in spoiling his earlier work—and Browne, when he saw the new stuff, would undoubtedly drop it into the waste-paper basket.

Handforth didn't think of these possibilities, however. His mind was set upon writing, and he risked the possible consequences of breaking bounds. He didn't seem to realise the danger, for he walked downstairs as though he owned the entire school, making no attempts to be stealthy.

As a natural consequence, he reached Study D in safety. If he had crept along with supreme caution, he would have run into the arms of a master. Handforth's luck was proverbial.

He even switched on the electric light, and forgot to pull the blinds down for at least ten minutes. And still he was safe. He only lowered the blind as an afterthought, and then settled himself to work.

He became engrossed, and took no notice of the passing minutes. He wrote pages of stuff, and threw most of it away. He was sleepy, but he wouldn't admit it. But at last the chilliness of the room awoke him to a sense of realities. The fire was out, and the radiators became cold.

"Dotty idea—turning off the giddy heat!" muttered Handforth irritably. "Oh, well, I suppose I'd better chuck it up." He yawned. "Must be nearly eleven o'clock. I shan't get my giddy beauty sleep!"

He glanced at his watch, started, and then gulped.

"Great pip!" he gasped. "One o'clock! Rot! This watch must be going wrong! I haven't been here all this time. I'll jolly well smash Mac for messing about with my ticker! I told him not to use that pin!"

But a moment later the school clock solemnly chimed out the hour. One stroke followed, and Handforth waited for ten more. But they didn't come. And he couldn't believe that the school clock had suddenly become two hours fast. He was forced to the startling conclusion that his watch was right.

"One o'clock!" he breathed. "My goodness! I never knew that play-writing was so jolly engrossing! I shall be like a rag in the morning!"

He scrambled his papers together, threw them into a drawer, and switched the light off. Then he hurried upstairs. But this time he was aware of the danger, and moved with caution. To be caught out of his dormitory in the small hours of the morning would result in nothing less than a public flogging. Inwardly, he was scared.

He succeeded in reaching the upper corridor in perfect safety. The Ancient House was quiet and still. In fact, the entire school was asleep, and not a single light was showing from any window. By this hour, even the most sleepless masters had turned their lights off and settled down for the night.

There was a bit of a wind, and it whistled round the angles of the old building. A window rattled here and there. There was a chill in the air, proof that March was still present.

Handforth had just turned into the Remove corridor when he came to an abrupt halt. At the further end was a cross passage, with a window set in the wall. There was no moonlight, owing to the drifting clouds, but the moon was somewhere in the sky. The window, therefore, stood out boldly. And a figure had just moved across the face of it.

Edward Oswald caught his breath in.

He had heard no sound, and the sight of that stealthy form was the first indication he had had of another's presence. In spite of his sleepiness, his brain was acute. When it came to a question of action, Handforth was no dullard.

And there was one fact which struck him forcibly.

This figure was no master! For a fleeting second he had feared that he was about to be caught, but the next instant he dismissed the thought. No master would employ such stealth. The figure had been that of a man, but his actions had been curiously furtive.

"My only hat!" breathed Handforth. "A burglar!"

He always thought of dramatic possibilities—even when the circumstances did not justify him. But in this instance he seemed to be right. And without hesitating a moment, he pressed forward, his heart beating rapidly.

He swung round the end of the corridor, and was just in time to glimpse the figure turning round the corner. He shot off in full pursuit.

The stranger—if, indeed, he was a stranger—then received his first intimation that somebody was awake. Handforth fairly charged into him in the pitchy blackness of the corridor, near the head of the rear stairs. The man gave a gasp of startled consternation.

"Got you!" gasped Handforth triumphantly.

That gasp had been enough to tell him that the other was an intruder. He grappled fiercely, but failed to obtain a firm grip. The man, without uttering a word, lashed out with one of his feet, and caught Handforth on the shin. It was a vicious, cowardly blow, and the junior was in such momentary agony that he involuntarily released his grip.

"Oh!" gasped Handforth. "You—you filthy rotter!"

Wrenching himself completely free, the intruder shot off, and hurled himself down the stairs recklessly, his one idea being, apparently, to get clear away before any alarm could be raised. Handforth gave chase again, but the pain in his leg was so acute that he stumbled badly.

He made the great mistake of remaining silent—deluding himself into the belief that he could catch this burglar single-handed. One of Edward Oswald's faults was overconfidence. He wanted to receive the honour of trapping this man unaided.

But when he reached the bottom of the stairs there was no sign of the stranger. There was no sound. Three or four passages led off into different sections of the building, and there was no telling which one the marauder had taken.

Handforth gritted his teeth helplessly.

CHAPTER XI.

ROGER BARTON'S VILLAINY.

"RATS! Blow! Confound! Dash!"

Handforth relieved a portion of his disgust in the expression of a few murmured exclamations. He was thoroughly fed up. He had spent ten minutes exploring the lower floors, but he had only just come across the evidence of the night visitor's retreat.

He was standing in front of a small window—at the end of a little cul-de-sac, in the midst of the domestic quarters. It was the only window which Handforth had found unfastened, and it directly overlooked a patch of kitchen garden, with clumps of evergreen close at hand.

This was obviously where the man had made his escape. And even the optimistic Handforth realised the utter futility of attempting any chase. By this time the fellow would be a mile away.

"Oh, well, the rotter didn't have time to pinch anything, anyway," decided Handforth. "I must have come across him before he could get busy. Not that there's much to burgle in this house!"

In fact, he couldn't quite understand why anybody should have broken into the Ancient House. There were no valuables—negotiable valuables, that is, of a type which a burglar would make for. Handforth came to the conclusion that the fellow had probably been a tramp, just scouting round for any trifle that he could lay his hands upon.

All the same, he thought it just as well to take another look round, so he decided to explore. If he found anything suspicious he would awaken one of the masters, and report.

Just as he had come to this resolution the moon peeped out from behind some heavy clouds, and an acute beam slanted down through the little window and formed a patch on the floor. Something glinted.

"Hallo!" said Handforth.

He bent down, and grunted with disappointment when he found that the glinting object was nothing more startling than an overcoat button. A number of shreds still filled the holes. The intruder, in his haste

to escape, had evidently caught the button upon the lower windowsill as he wriggled out. It had wrenched itself free, and had fallen to the floor.

Handforth examined it in the moonlight. His eyes took on a more eager expression. The button wasn't of the ordinary black variety. It was curiously chased, and made of some mottled brown composition, with streaks of amber. A distinctive button. A button that would be difficult to match.

"By George, a clue!" muttered Handforth grimly. "I've only got to find a man with an overcoat with a missing button, and I've got him! It'll be as easy as pie to identify the beggar by the other buttons."

He did not bother as to how he should first find the man. He stowed the button away, and decided to get on the track on the morrow. In the meantime, he made his way upstairs, and had a general look round—prowling about from corridor to corridor.

But there seemed to be no reason for alarm. There wasn't the slightest indication of a burglary. And Handforth decided to say nothing. If some valuables were missing on the morrow—and the loser would soon notify the fact—he could explain then. There was nothing to be gained by causing an alarm in the small hours. Besides, Handforth hugged the hope that he might be able to track down the burglar single-handed.

His old interest in detective work had revived. Recently he had forsaken it in favour of authorship and acting. There was no reason why he shouldn't combine all three. So he went to bed with firm resolutions for the morrow.

The intruder, however, had not escaped empty-handed, after all. In point of fact, Handforth had come upon him after he had obtained the thing he sought.

In one of the quiet lanes near the Bannington Road, Mr. Roger Barton halted in the dense shadow of a spinney, and wiped his heated brow.

"Phew!" he breathed. "The young hound! I'm nearly winded, and for all I know he's roused the school! Well, I'm safe now. They'll never track me, I'll swear! And I've got it! I've got it!"

There was a gloating, triumphant note in his voice. In his hands he held a package—a rather untidy, bulky brown paper parcel. It was tied with tape, and Mr. Barton regarded it lovingly. He had already examined the contents of that parcel, and his jubilation was justified.

So this was the man who had committed the felony of unlawfully breaking into St. Frank's, and escaping with stolen property! The business manager of Noggs' Imperial Theatre! The man who was threatening to descend upon Mr. Noggs on the morrow, and to seize the old showman's property!

Mr. Barton's criminal activities were evidently extensive in their scope. And although he was within the law so far as Mr. Noggs was concerned, he had certainly laid himself open to police-court proceedings to-night. He had committed a plain, straightforward burglary—and was therefore a common crook.

Edward Handforth caught his breath in. He had heard no sound, and the sight of that stealthy form was the first indication he had had of another's presence.

Not that his prize was of the usual crackman's type.

That parcel contained nothing more valuable than some sheets of paper—bound manuscripts. To be exact, it was the original script of Mr. Vincent Stevens' play, "The Third Chance"—including the various parts, and every other scrap of material connected with the production.

Horace Stevens had placed everything in that parcel, and had stowed the precious bundle in his trunk. At least, it was precious to him, and precious to Mr. Barton. To the average person it would have been mere wastepaper. Intrinsically, it was of no value whatever.

Yet, to Stevens, it represented almost everything in the world that was worth living for. Quite apart from sentimental reasons, he placed a fabulous value upon that script. It was the last play that his dead father had written—and it was the only copy in existence.

Mr. Roger Barton knew this latter fact—or he would never have ventured upon this risky mission to-night. He had heard all about it from Andy Noggs—at the time when the play had been produced, a week or so earlier. Barton knew, indeed, that once that package was in his possession,

there would be no shred of evidence regarding the play. His desire was to make it vanish—completely, utterly, and absolutely.

Stevens had taken the leading role at that memorable private production, when all the parts had been taken by St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls. The play had been so wonderful, and Stevens' acting so inspired, that William Napoleon Browne had decided to produce the play on a grand scale later.

Browne was cautious. He wanted Stevens to attain a measure of fame before appearing before the public in that great play. It was for this reason that "Hamlet" was being produced. Browne was convinced that Stevens would cause a sensation in Shakespeare. He would make a name for himself—Bannington would flock to see him. And then, at the right moment, out would come the great play, written by Stevens' pater. It would cause a fresh sensation, and Browne would be sure that several London managers were in front at this public premiere. He had it all schemed out. And he assumed that Stevens was taking good care of the precious script.

But Roger Barton had witnessed that private show, too.

Whilst openly sneering at the play, and calling it a hopeless failure, he had secretly told himself that it was a masterpiece. His excitement, at the time, had known no bounds. For Barton had had twenty years' experience in theatrical matters, and he had instantly recognised the value of that play. It was worth a fortune! Produced in London, at the right theatre, it would be the rage of the year.

And this script was the only copy in existence!

It was this fact which had set Barton's crooked mind to work. Once in his possession, he could copy it, and destroy the original. With this evidence gone, he could claim the play as his own—and defy Stevens with a snap of his fingers. For Stevens would have no proof—no shred of evidence.

Barton had succumbed! The play was here—in his hands!

It was unfortunate that one of the boys should have run across him just as he was about to make his exit. It was the last thing that Mr. Barton had anticipated at such an hour of the night.

There was one consolation, at least. He had not recognised the boy, and he was certain that the boy had not recognised him. Even if there was a hue and cry, there was nothing to show who the intruder had been, or what he had been after. When all the valuables were found to be safe, it would be concluded that the housebreaker had been surprised before commencing his operations.

It would be a pity if Stevens discovered his loss at once—for Mr. Barton had been hoping that he would have several days' start before the faintest suspicion was aroused. Not that it really mattered. The important point—the one vital factor in the case—was settled. He had examined the parcel, and he knew that everything was there. Within twenty-four hours it would be copied—and the original destroyed.

Mr. Roger Barton drew a deep breath, and continued his journey through the night. After years of struggling vicissitudes, he could see a fortune looming immediately ahead.

He had made a bold bid—and victory was now assured.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CONFUSION OF MR. BARTON.

RAIN—incessant, driving rain—was a feature of the following morning.

It was a Wednesday, and therefore a half-holiday. Most of the St. Frank's fellows accepted the rain with gloomy resignation. Didn't it always rain on a half-holiday?

It seemed to be an indication of the day's events.

For this was the day of Roger Barton's triumph—the day of Andy Noggs' downfall. Mr. Barton was by no means displeased at the lowering skies and the dripping clouds. They seemed to be in keeping with his mood. Noggs' Imperial Theatre was a wet, depressing place—a fitting place for such a scene as that about to be enacted.

To-day, Barton was filled with inward jubilation. No amount of rain could still the gloating tremors of his heart. Victory! The realisation of all his carefully schemed plotting!

He had never felt happier—never more genial.

Everything had gone splendidly, in spite of the impudent interference of the St. Frank's juniors. Old Noggs had met with a little recent success, but it was insufficient to tide him over the snag. He was several hundred pounds short of his liability. Barton knew this. In his own peculiar way, he found out these things.

Andy Noggs was short of the required sum, and the valuable property would thus pass out of his hands. The mere possibility of the boys raising the required cash never entered Mr. Barton's head. Quite wrongly, he had assumed that these schoolboys possessed no more than a few shillings of pocket-money.

Furthermore, Barton had gained possession of that play—another cause for gloating. The field now lay open before him. He could sell Noggs' property immediately—indeed, he had a prospective buyer in tow. With that large amount of ready cash, he would go to London, live in great style, and sell Stevens' play as his own. He had never

known his fortunes to be in such a rosy condition.

Originally, he had intended running the theatre on his own—running it properly, and making handsome profits. But the unexpected acquisition of Stevens' play made all the difference. The theatre would only be a drag on him. Far better to sell it quickly, gain the cash, and transfer his activities to London. Barton knew many theatrical people—some of them big magnates in the theatrical world—and he was confident of getting the play quickly produced. As his own work, he would launch it before the public.

Two-thirty was the hour fixed for the seizure. Mr. Barton felt no misgivings—and certainly no compunction. He was not the kind of man to possess the faintest tinge of remorse. He had been working up to this climax from the very beginning of the tour. He had used Mr. Noggs as a glazier uses putty—working him through his fingers with supreme ease. For the old showman had trusted him, and was consequently in a trap.

It is possible that Mr. Barton might not have been cheered by the conversation of several St. Frank's fellows as they motored serenely and comfortably through the rain towards Bannington—just after the hour of two.

William Napoleon Browne, of the Fifth, was at the wheel of the cosy Morris-Oxford saloon. It was his own car. The rest of it was crammed with Horace Stevens, Dick Hamilton, Reggie Pitt, Handforth, Buster Boots, and one or two others. Exactly how they all got in was a mystery. Browne was filled with vague misgivings concerning the springs, the upholstery, and the windows. But he hadn't had the heart to condemn the juniors to their bicycles on such a soaking day.

"We shall get there a quarter of an hour before time," remarked Nipper, as he glanced at his watch. "Couldn't be better. I suppose you'll do all the talking, Browne?"

"Who better?" asked Browne.

"You'll have to look sharp, that's all—Barton might be a bit early," said Dick. "We want to give the beggar a complete surprise, so we mustn't be seen there. We'll give the money to old Noggs, and then get into the theatre. We'll be close at hand in case of a sudden call."

"What's the good of that?" demanded Handforth. "My idea is to grab Barton as soon as he arrives, and kick him out."

"An excellent suggestion, Brother Handforth, but scarcely feasible," declared Browne. "And why should we deprive Brother Noggs of five exquisite minutes? Surely both parties can be satisfied?"

"Five exquisite minutes?" repeated Handforth, staring.

"There may be better terms to express that period, but life is short," replied Browne. "Imagine the sensations of Brother Noggs as he faces this human shark. Brother Barton will presumably arrive with his myrmidons, and will curtly order Brother Noggs off the premises. Is it necessary to speak further? Our imaginations can surely visualise the delightful scene which would inevitably follow."

"Yes, by Jove, poor old Noggs will get his own back to-day!" declared Pitt. "Wouldn't it be a good idea to arrange a signal, so that Noggs can call us on the scene to chuck Barton out?"

"A plan which I have already decided to adopt," said Browne. "Thanks to Brother Glenthorne, Brother Singleton, Brother Hamilton, and one or two other kindly souls, our wallet now bulges with the delectable stuff known as cash. We have five hundred of the best upon us, and I have no hesitation in predicting that Brother Barton will regard this money with loathing and horror."

All the "wealthy" St. Frank's fellows had rallied round, and it had been a simple task to raise the necessary sum. Browne himself had contributed fifty pounds, and Nipper had easily persuaded Nelson Lee to contribute twenty-five. And with millionaires in the school—and the sons of millionaires—like the Hon. Douglas Singleton, Lord Pippinton, Archie Glenthorne, and the youthful Duke of Somerton, the rest of the task had been child's play.

Browne, indeed, was seriously thinking about investing even more money—so that the St. Frank's fellows would have a still greater interest in the theatre. But that would do later. The five hundred was ample for the day's needs.

Browne turned his saloon on to the piece of waste land in the Bannington High Street, and pulled it up discreetly in the rear of some storage tents—quite out of sight. Then he and the others squeezed out, and descended upon Mr. Noggs' caravan, with the intention of invading it. It still wanted a minute or two to two-fifteen.

Within the caravan, Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs and Stephen Ashwood were engaged in grave conversation. Both were anxious—Ashwood even more anxious than his employer. The "juvenile lead" was still sceptical. He could not believe that deliverance was at hand.

All the members of Mr. Noggs' company knew that to-day would mean either disaster or victory. Mr. Noggs had tried to keep his troubles from the others, but they had inevitably discovered the truth. He owed them money—large sums which represented back salary. They had been content to wait, confident that the show would make good in the long run.

But with Roger Barton threatening to seize the theatre, they stood to lose everything. For it was generally recognised that Barton would dismiss them all at an hour's notice, and close the theatre down. So not only the fate of Mr. Noggs, but the

fate of his whole company, depended upon the St. Frank's fellows.

"It seems impossible, laddie," admitted Mr. Noggs sombrely. "I will grant that it seems impossible. These boys have been splendid. They have boomed my theatre until business is good. But can they do more? They are optimistic, and have promised——"

"But what's the exact sum, guv'nor?" asked Ashwood. "Two hundred and eighty odd, isn't it? Roughly, three hundred? Hang it all, these schoolboys can't rake up a sum like that! They've been fooling themselves——"

The door opened, and Browne strode in.

"Greetings, brother," he said benevolently. "Ah, a cheery apartment, indeed! Your expression, Brother Noggs, fails to match the general atmosphere. And as for you, Brother Ashford, I deplore this look of hopeless misery. Be of good cheer, for we have arrived with the goods."

Mr. Noggs started to his feet.

"You have brought the money?" he asked huskily.

"That," replied Browne, "is the general idea."

"Three hundred?" breathed Ashwood.

"What's the good of three hundred?" said Handforth, pushing in. "We've got five hundred—and we could rake up a lot more if you wanted it. Out with the cash, Browne!"

"An excellent suggestion, Brother Handforth," agreed Browne. "Watch closely, Brother Noggs! Attention, Brother Ashwood! Feast your eyes upon this wonderful sight. Could any picture be more entrancing?"

He pulled out a thick, bulky wad of notes—fivers and ordinary currency notes for the most part. Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs, flushing, picked the bundle up, and fingered it dazedly. The notes crackled between his fingers.

"'As sweet and musical as bright Apollo's lute'—Shakespeare," he murmured, his eyes gleaming with untold relief. "'Music, forsooth! So sweet, so soft, so faint, it seemed an angel's whispered call to an expiring saint'—Scott. Money! Music! Are not both the same at such a moment as this? 'The only universal tongue'—Rogers."

"You—you mean we've got the money, guv'nor?" asked Ashwood breathlessly. "We can kick Barton out, and defy him? Ye gods! This is what I dreamed of, but I never hoped——"

"Alas, that you should place such little faith in our pledge," sighed Browne. "Did we not assure you of this event last night? All is well, Brother Ashwood. But let us hasten. The ogre may materialise at any moment, and I fear the caravan is already overcrowded."

Mr. Noggs attempted to express his gratitude, but he was so overcome that he could say little. The fellows were all glad. They didn't want to hear any expression of thanks. This affair meant little sacrifice for them, and they were convinced that their money was being well invested.

Somehow, they found themselves out in the rain again, and they took refuge in the empty theatre. In the meantime Mr. Noggs and Ashwood were gazing at one another speechlessly. Words seemed ridiculous at such a moment.

The old showman had gathered every penny he possessed together—quite a respectable sum. He had been nearly three hundred pounds short, but he had made up his mind to ask no favours of Roger Barton. But now, instead of being the underdog, he was the master! He had more than sufficient money to repay every one of Barton's loans. He could pay the scamp out, and send him about his business.

As it happened, Browne and the others only reached the privacy of the theatre in time. For Roger Barton's car rolled up, and discharged Barton himself and a shifty-eyed individual, who turned out to be a shady lawyer—a man with a legitimate practice, but with questionable methods. They both entered the caravan with ostentatious arrogance.

"Right on time, Noggs," said Barton truculently. "It's just two-thirty. We don't want any unnecessary talk, do we?"

Mr. Noggs bowed.

"Strange that our desires should coincide so precisely!" he boomed. "Tell me your will, and we will get to business. And let us be speedy. 'Dispatch is the soul of business'—Chesterfield."

"Perhaps I had better do the talking, Mr. Barton," suggested the lawyer. "Mr. Noggs, I understand that you have had various loans from Mr. Barton at different times?"

"That is so, laddie," agreed Mr. Noggs.

"I further understand that all these loans fall due for repayment to-day," continued the lawyer. "We desire no unpleasantness, and it is our hope that this matter can be settled with amiability on both sides. Be good enough, sir, to verify this statement."

"Mr. Foote has had full charge of my affairs for years," said Barton airily. "You may rely upon his figures as being accurate."

The old showman gazed at the papers which the lawyer handed him, and uttered a contemptuous snort.

"Of what use are these things to me?" he asked scornfully. "Acting is my forte. Business is foreign to me, or I would not be in this present position. H'm! A maze of figures—a confusion of tangled words! But I have no doubt as to their character. 'Here are a few of the unpleasantest words that ever blotted paper'—Shakespeare. Away with them! What is the exact sum that you require of me? Let us deal with simple figures."

Roger Barton smiled grimly.

"We'll soon get down to facts, then," he said. "You want the figures, Noggs—we'll give them to you."

He named the exact sum, his voice vibrating with gloating victory. He did not realise that Mr. Noggs was quivering from head to foot with joy. For he had more than sufficient money to meet every claim.

"So!" he boomed. "We need waste no words, gentlemen. I will trouble you for a full and complete receipt. Here is your money—and you may go! The sooner the better!"

CHAPTER XIII.

EXIT MR. BARTON.

ROGER BARTON started.

"Don't talk nonsense, Noggs!" he snapped. "I want the full money—not a portion of it! Either you pay the whole debt, or this property becomes mine. The sooner you understand that I'm in possession, the better! You don't want me to fetch the sheriff, do you?"

Mr. Noggs swept open a drawer, and slammed a fat bundle of notes upon the table.

"You may fetch the sheriff, and anybody else you please!" he thundered. "Indeed, it might be better to have them present—for I am in sore fear that I shall yet be swindled! 'The curtains of yesterday drop down, the curtains of to-morrow roll up'—Carlyle. This is my triumph, Barton—not yours!"

Barton went as pale as a sheet, and his eyes took on a frightened, startled expression. He started forward, gibbering. The words failed to come to his aid. Mr. Foote, the lawyer, was confused.

"But—but I understood—— I thought—— You informed me, Mr. Barton, that your partner was not in a position to pay!" he stammered. "This—this is totally unexpected!"

"I'll warrant it is!" remarked Ashwood gloatingly.

"There's—there's a mistake!" gasped Barton. "The man's lying, Foote! He hasn't got the money—I know he hasn't got it! It's all a bluff! We're not going to be deluded by this foolery!"

"You have mentioned the sum—and here is the money!" boomed Mr. Noggs grimly. "Our partnership ends, Barton! You are within my walls, and you will curb your insolent tongue. Take this money and go!"

"But we'll have a receipt first, please!" put in Ashwood. "Don't forget that I'm a witness, Barton! There's going to be no hanky-panky business this time!"

Barton refused to be convinced.

"It's a lie!" he shouted. "We'd better go, Foote! We'll arrange another interview——"

"Not on your life!" interrupted Ashwood savagely. "You've come here to settle this thing—and it's going to be settled! You'll take this money, and give Mr. Noggs a full receipt. He'll discharge his liability here—and now! He's had enough truck with scum!"

"Really!" protested Mr. Foote indignantly.

But, as a lawyer, he knew that the position was lost. If the money was forthcoming, the only possible course was to give a receipt, and go.

Barton was still confused and dumbfounded. This cash was a mere trifle compared to the sum he had expected to reap from the sale of the property—less than a tenth, indeed. But he could not refuse to take it, since the settlement was of his own seeking.

"Where the thunder did you get the money from?" he snarled furiously.

"You'd like to know, wouldn't you?" asked Mr. Noggs. "But we deal with facts, Barton—and I give you no information. Take this money and remove your unsavoury presence. Pah! The very atmosphere stinks! Your presence is like a noxious poison to me!"

Barton breathed hard.

"You'd better count that money carefully, Foote!" he panted. "I believe there's some trickery——"

"No, the sum is correct," said the lawyer, as he counted it. "We can do nothing but give a full receipt, Mr. Barton, and thus end the transaction. There is no other course open to us."

The details were soon settled. Barton had his money, and there was a witness to prove that it had been paid—and there was a witness to see that the receipt was in order. Roger Barton, in spite of all his plotting, left that caravan a beaten man.

It was Ashwood who sent forth a shrill whistle as the rascals left. A rush from the theatre followed, and a swarm of figures confronted Roger Barton as he was about to descend the steps.

"There he is!" roared Handforth. "The swindling rotter! Let's pitch him out for good!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with crooks!"

Barton started back, alarmed. But Stephen Ashwood gave him a shove, and pitched him down fairly into the arms of the waiting juniors. They fell upon him like a pack of wolves

"Police!" screamed Barton. "Foote, fetch the police——"

His voice trailed away as he fell into a muddy patch. The juniors were rather thankful for the rain, for it had converted this piece of waste land into a morass. Roger Barton was flung over, and rolled into the mud until he no longer resembled a human being.

Finally, he was pitched out into the High Street, and thrown into the gutter. And Mr. Foote thought it very unwise to inform

the police. He had no particular desire to give any publicity to this affair. He was well aware of the shady character of it.

"Well, that's that!" observed Browne genially. "I predict, Brother Horace, that we shall see no more of Brother Barton. A fitting conclusion to a most interesting episode."

"The beast hasn't got a quarter of what he deserves," growled Stevens, frowning.

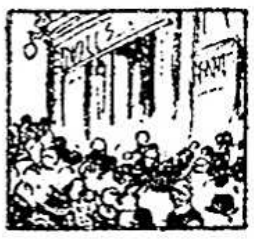
They were both standing near the rear of the theatre—having taken no actual part in the rag. Stevens little realised the true significance of his words. For Barton deserved a great deal more than he had received.

He had Stevens' play in his possession—and the loss was so far undetected. As a matter of fact, Handforth had neglected to make any report concerning the figure he had seen. Nobody had complained of any loss, so he had held his tongue. His mind was too full of his play, and he had completely forgotten the incident.

And so, although Barton had finished with Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs for good, he was destined to have many further dealings with the St. Frank's fellows.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FEVERISH WEEK.



MR. NOGGS was a changed man.

An hour had passed, and at last the old showman had calmed down. He knew that the nightmare was over, and that he stood in no further danger of being robbed. His associations with Roger Barton now seemed remote.

And the difference in Mr. Noggs was startling.

Success had come to his theatre—too late, he had believed—but it now burst upon him, in a flood, that he would be the sole one to benefit. Barton would not reap the reward. But Mr. Noggs did not forget that everything had been made possible by the timely co-operation of the Remove.

"At last!" he exclaimed, as he faced the fellows in the privacy of the theatre. "This is mine—mine! I am my own master once again! And the show will pay for itself, or I am a mistaken man. From now onwards this tour will be a success."

"You'll have to stop in Bannington at least a month, Mr. Noggs," declared Nipper. "You're getting so famous now that you'll be able to fill the theatre every night. And why go at the end of a month?"

"Why, indeed?" asked Mr. Noggs. "I remain in Bannington until the public tires of me. I wish to be near you, laddies. I wish to see you often—daily, if possible. For I do not forget your services. Indeed, it is vividly impressed upon me that you share my property."

"A totally wrong assertion, Brother Noggs," said Browne gently. "It pleases us to refer to ourselves as Noggs, Browne, & Co., Ltd., but that is merely a figure of speech. We have invested our money in your concern, but it remains your sole property. We desire no return of that cash until you are in a position to repay it without inconvenience."

"That's the idea, sir," said Pitt.

"Nothing stands in the way of success," said Mr. Noggs. "We have removed the obstacle, and a clear path lies ahead. 'Tis not in mortals to command success, but we'll do more—we'll deserve it'—Addison."

He looked round the dim theatre with a loving gaze, and his old bearing of bowed-down despondency had gone. He was upright and firm. His gaze was steady.

"Mine!" he murmured. "'I am monarch of all I survey; my right there is none to dispute'—Cowper. And what return can I make for this great independence? How can I settle my debt?"

"We don't want that money for weeks—months—not until you can pay it without feeling it," said Singleton. "Don't worry about it at all, Mr. Noggs."

"Kindly words—words that burn and impress me," said the old showman. "But you mistook my meaning, laddie. There is a greater debt. A debt that has no connection with this money, this filthy lucre. You have saved me from ruin. It is your aid that has made a new man of me. That, indeed, is a debt that I can never discharge. But perchance there is something within my power?"

"We only want to use your theatre for our own productions, Mr. Noggs," said Browne calmly. "And for that we are willing to pay at the usual rates. We did not come to your aid for the purpose of gain. Alas, that you should so misunderstand us!"

"Nay, there is no misunderstanding on my part," said Mr. Noggs, his eyes shining with warm affection. "I know you too well, my boys! You have proved your worth to me. As for my theatre, it is yours also. Do as you will with it. Regard it as your own property I know you so well that I can trust to your discretion. The more I see of you, the better. It gives me cheer to have you near me."

"Then," said Browne, "everything is as we desire it. On this day week, Brother Noggs, we shall have pleasure in presenting that well-known play, 'Hamlet,' written, I believe, by a gentleman of Stratford-on-Avon. And we should deem it a favour if this special performance is given under your patronage, and included in the evening bill."

"It shall be done," declared Mr. Noggs.

"Furthermore, I desire to aid in the production," went on Browne calmly. "You, I take it, Brother Noggs, will give yourself

the part of the ghost. Brother Stevens shall be 'Hamlet,' and it behoves us to obtain some fresh talent for the rest of the company. Money is now a matter of no object. Let us have the best!"

"What about me?" demanded Handforth.

"I said, let us have the best," Browne reminded him.

The other juniors chuckled, and Handforth stared.

"Haven't I been acclaimed as a fine comedian?" he demanded. "Didn't the local paper praise me up?"

"Without the slightest exaggeration, Brother Handforth, you're a comedian of rare and fruity vintage," interrupted Browne. "At the same time, I fail to see the precise notch into which you will fit. 'Hamlet' is scarcely a comedy, and I have certainly never seen it described as a burlesque. So your own talents must await another opportunity."

"Can't I play Falstaff, then?" asked Handforth aggressively.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A juicy suggestion, Brother Handforth, but scarcely apt," said Browne. "Far be it from me to air my superior knowledge, but I have always believed that Sir John Falstaff appeared in the 'Merry Wives of Windsor.'"

"There's no need to quibble over a mere character!" snapped Handforth. "I'll play Grumio, then."

"You silly ass, Grumio is one of the servants in 'The Taming of the Shrew,'" grinned Nipper. "You'd better chuck it up, old man! This production is only an opportunity for Stevens to show his genius."

"Chuck it!" said Stevens uncomfortably.

"Ever modest—as befits a great actor," murmured Browne. "But make no mistake, Brother Horace, this day week you shall play Hamlet, and you will have a cast in support that will make history. With Brother Noggs at the helm, and with myself at the compass, we shall steer towards certain victory."

"It—it seems too good to be true," muttered Stevens.

"By the ghost of Garrick, I believe the boy'll play the part like one possessed!" declared Mr. Noggs. "A severe strain—a task indeed! But, judging by what I have seen, he will rise to it."

"And later—perhaps before you leave the town—we shall present Brother Horace in his father's play, 'The Third Chance,'" said

Mr. Noggs swept open a drawer and slammed a fat bundle of notes upon the table.

"You may fetch the sheriff, and anybody else you please!" he thundered. "This is my triumph, Barton, not yours!"

Browne. "Unhappily, the Easter holidays intervene, and I fear that we shall be absent. But you will still be on the spot when we return. And then will come the great triumph. Brother Horace, there are big things to look forward to."

Stevens took a deep breath.

"I'm afraid they're a bit too big," he said. "I can't quite believe it, you know. This present production will be wonderful, but if I can only appear in my pater's play —— By jingo, what a thought!"

He broke off and stood there, thinking. He was attempting to visualise the happy days in store. He had always longed for the stage, and recently he had tasted its joys, only to feel the urge to do better and bigger things.

One would suppose that his ambition could rise no higher than Hamlet. But, much as he loved Shakespeare, he felt that his real opportunity would not come until he appeared in his father's play. That was the millennium for him. And it was a programme which Browne was determined to carry out.

They did not know that Roger Barton had got that play in his own possession! For the time being, at least, they were spared this shock. And the rehearsals in connection with "Hamlet" were so feverish that days passed, and still the loss remained undiscovered.

Stevens had no occasion to go to his trunk. It was in his box-room, locked securely. The play was stored away until it should be required. Why worry over it? He never went near the trunk once. And Barton, in the meantime, was putting in some swift work, too.

For William Napoleon Browne and Horace Stevens the week was absolutely packed.

Stevens spent every spare moment in learning his part, in rehearsing. Browne assisted Mr. Noggs in the production, and the old showman soon discovered that the Fifth Form captain was brimful of new ideas, of daring suggestions, of striking innovations. Most of Mr. Noggs' old-fashioned notions were knocked out of him.

And this production of "Hamlet" promised at least to be a novelty

Nipper & Co. put in a lot of time at football, and the other juniors found plenty to occupy them, too. They were all intensely interested in the production, although they were taking no actual part in it. And the entire school was ready to back up the actor of the Fifth.

It was a case of first come, first served, so far as the seats in Noggs' theatre were concerned. For not only did the St. Frank's fellows want seats, but the townspeople of Bannington were eager for them, too. Long before the great night every seat was sold, every inch of space was booked.

Browne insisted that the show should be repeated on the Thursday evening and again on the Friday evening, so that all should have an opportunity of witnessing it. And, as he pointed out, it would be excellent practice for Stevens.

At last the night arrived.

The crowds poured in, and Mr. Noggs was feeling happier than he had ever felt in his life. He had reason to feel so. He had done better business this week than he could ever remember. Full at every performance, his theatre packed with enthusiastic audiences. At last he had come into his own.

And although he retained Stephen Ashwood and one or two other members of his original company, most of them were dismissed. At least, they were dismissed from the theatrical side of the concern. But they had all been so loyal to Mr. Noggs that he retained them for other work—advertising, and so forth. The whole concern was flourishing amazingly.

Ever since the St. Frank's fellows had given their attention to it, Noggs' Imperial Theatre had grown in popularity. There is an old saying that nothing succeeds like success, and the truth of it was being amply proved now!

CHAPTER XV.

"THE WHIRLPOOL."

MR. SAMUEL ARROWSMITH removed a fat cigar from between his teeth, and looked across the table at Roger Barton.

"Yes," he said steadily, "it's good."

Barton felt a tinge of disappointment. He had expected something rather more expressive than "good." He knew Mr. Arrowsmith fairly well, but not well enough to realise that "good" was an admission of deep enthusiasm. Mr. Samuel Arrowsmith was a man who spoke little. But when he did speak, he meant what he said.

The office was a luxurious one, a glittering mass of polished mahogany, soft pile carpet, and other superb furnishings. And it was tucked away in a corner of the Emperor Theatre, in the Haymarket, London.

Barton could scarcely contain his anxiety and impatience. By dint of spending much money, obtaining introductions, and so forth, he had at last succeeded in placing his play before the great Mr. Arrowsmith himself. The famous man had had it for three days, and the present interview had been made by appointment.

There were few men higher in the theatrical profession than Mr. Samuel Arrowsmith, the world-famous West End manager, the supreme controller of several big London theatres. He had not produced a failure for years. Somehow he possessed a magic faculty for choosing winners, and his success was a byword in the world of the theatre.

Roger Barton had been lucky indeed in getting his play into the hands of such a man. He had only been able to do it because of his inner knowledge of the stage. No outsider could possibly have gained access to Mr. Arrowsmith.

"Good?" he repeated, in response to the great manager's comment. "Thank you, Mr. Arrowsmith. If there is any prospect——"

"The play is good," repeated Mr. Samuel Arrowsmith, resuming his cigar, and getting to his feet. "I shall produce it, Mr. Barton."

"By Jove, that's splendid!" said Barton eagerly. "When? When, Mr. Arrowsmith? Can you give me any inkling of the date?"

Mr. Arrowsmith did not reply for a moment or two. He was a short man, inclined to stoutness. His face was clean-shaven and rather heavy. But his eyes were keen and extraordinarily intelligent. There was something about him which was suggestive of untold vitality. The very presence of the man was inspiring.

"I shall produce it at once," he replied.

"You—you mean——"

"The present moment is the most favourable opportunity of any," continued Mr. Arrowsmith smoothly. "I must thank you, Mr. Barton, for giving me the privilege of producing this play. I do not think you need fear any failure. If I am a judge, this play will be a success."

Roger Barton hardly knew what to say. He was just beginning to appreciate that Mr. Arrowsmith did not indulge in superlatives. He said little, but what he did say meant a tremendous lot.

"'The Whirlpool,'" continued the great man. "A good title, too. There is no need to make any change there. It is short and impelling. London will soon be talking of this title."

"I thought you would rather like it," said Barton modestly.

He could at least claim to have written that much of the play! It was his own title, even if the play was "The Third Chance," by Vincent Stevens. The play had undergone but little change during these past eventful days.

That original precious script—the one thing in the world that Horace Stevens valued—was now nothing but smoke and ashes. The play had reappeared in a new form.

It was a neat-looking script now—entitled "The Whirlpool," by Roger Barton—beautifully typewritten and bound. Barton scarcely knew how he had got through so much work in a single week. Indeed, the play in its new form had been born only two days after he had made his ignominious exit from Noggs' Imperial Theatre.

Every name in the play had been changed—every scene was altered. And in one or two minor places, the action had been revised. But the dialogue remained exactly as Stevens' father had written it. To all intents and purposes the play was precisely the same.

Barton had no fear of coming trouble.

It was possible, of course, that at some future date Stevens would recognise the show. But what could the boy do? He had no proof that his father had written it, since the original manuscript was destroyed. And, in any case, how could he fight? Barton had taken some pains to ascertain that Stevens had nobody but his mother—and she was the reverse of rich. It would require money to fight, and Barton would have plenty of it. He would be able to snap his fingers at any feeble attempt to prove the real authorship of "The Whirlpool." He had taken it to Mr. Arrowsmith as his own work, and the latter, of course, had no suspicion of the truth. Barton would maintain his authorship whatever happened—grimly, tenaciously, in spite of anything that might arise. And he knew that he could win.

At the best, he had hoped that one of London's minor managers would produce the show. But, unexpectedly, an opportunity had arisen for him to place the play in the hands of Mr. Arrowsmith—the greatest man of all. It is a sad thing that luck will favour the unscrupulous—and from the very outset Mr. Arrowsmith had been interested.

Now he had given his decision!

"May—may I ask in which theatre the play will be presented?" asked Barton, his whole interior throbbing with emotional excitement. "Frankly, Mr. Arrowsmith, I am rather startled."

"Indeed? Why?"

"Well, I hardly hoped that you would be ready——"

"I am always ready to produce a play that meets with my approval," interrupted Mr. Arrowsmith. "It will go into rehearsal almost at once, and will be presented here, in the Emperor Theatre."

Barton was freshly excited.

"But—but you already have a play in rehearsal for this theatre!"

"It shall be shelved," said Mr. Arrowsmith smoothly.

"But—but why?"

"Because your play is the better of the two," replied the other. "A very simple explanation, Mr. Barton. I am not usually demonstrative, but in this particular instance I feel like being so. Mr. Barton, this play of yours is wonderful! It is a masterpiece! I congratulate you with all my heart and soul for having produced such a superb work! I feel compelled to speak in this way."

"It is very kind of you," said Barton, hardly knowing which words to choose. "I always thought the play was a winner, but your words encourage me enormously, Mr. Arrowsmith. I may take it, then, that you definitely accept the play for immediate production?"

"Certainly," replied the other. "I shall, indeed, attempt to fix the first night before Easter."

"But is that possible?" asked Barton in astonishment. "There are not so many days——"

"The production of the play is largely a matter of choosing the cast, and the subsequent rehearsals," interrupted Mr. Arrowsmith. "There are no special sets to be prepared—no elaborate scenery to be made. I see no reason why we should wait until after Easter. The present play comes off next week, and I dislike having my theatres idle."

Mr. Arrowsmith proceeded to name one or two celebrated actors and actresses, and Roger Barton's breath was nearly taken away. His stolen play was not merely to be produced at the best of all theatres, but it was to have the best of all casts!

His recent disappointment over Noggs' Theatre—his bitter hatred against the St. Frank's fellows—all faded to mist. A fortune was within his grasp. That cast alone would make the play! That cast would make almost any play—and this play was certain of success, anyhow.

Barton's star of fortune was soaring.

CHAPTER XVI.

HORACE STEVENS SCORES AGAIN.

ALMOST at that very moment—when the details of the new production were being discussed by Mr. Arrowsmith—Horace Stevens was achieving a notable triumph in Noggs' Imperial Theatre.

The second act of "Hamlet" had just come to an end, and the packed house had accorded Stevens a tumultuous ovation. Never had the theatre been so filled with distinguished people.

Ever since the visit of the Mayor and the Council—for, true to his word, Mr. Crump had paid an official visit with his entourage on the previous Wednesday evening. Ever since then, the character of Mr. Noggs' audiences had changed.

His theatre had suddenly become the vogue.

Exactly as Willy Handforth had predicted, the best people of the town literally fought for the stalls. Instead of being regarded as a booth, the travelling theatre was now on the verge of becoming "highbrow." And William Napoleon Browne had suggested many alterations for the improvement of the general tone.

Exquisitely-dressed attendants had taken the place of slovenly boys, the programme was printed on thick art paper instead of

being a mere rag. Such deft touches as these had raised the tone of the place.

And now, with "Hamlet" in the programme, and with the St. Frank's senior in the leading part, the theatre was definitely established as a thoroughly respectable place of amusement. It had ceased to appeai to the rowdies, and even the pit was nightly filled with genuine lovers of the drama.

All this had an immense effect. Mr. Noggs was determined to produce only the best plays, and his new company was worthy of such. With the help of that unexpected capital from the boys, he had been provided with a fund to draw upon. And the consistent excellence of the business enabled Mr. Noggs to spend lavishly. Again, this was Browne's advice. It would all come back—with a lot more. Every member of the old company had received his or her back pay, and the theatre now possessed an air of life and prosperity.

Horace Stevens' performance as Hamlet was a real achievement.

It was no mere flash in the pan—a freak display. In every movement, in every gesture, in every tonal quality, he revealed the true actor. And his "Hamlet" was totally different from any other. In some respects he eclipsed all the famous actors who had appeared in the part of all parts. For Stevens invested it with a new atmosphere—a rendering entirely his own. He borrowed nothing—he copied nobody.

There were, of course, adverse criticisms concerning his novel treatment of the part, but the most conventional critic was obliged to admit that Stevens was a young genius. His performance was a revelation of masterly elocution and unparalleled talent.

His very appearance on the stage was the signal for tense, compelling silence. And this was a sure indication of his magnetic control of an audience. Few actors possess this remarkable power. His words were listened to with enchantment, his long speeches were gripping and tense.

This one night, alone, was sufficient to make Noggs' Theatre famous.

William Napoleon Browne's confidence in his chum's ability was definitely substantiated. From the very first, Browne had foreseen this triumph, and so he was quite calm and cool now.

And at the final curtain the enthusiasm was so stupendous that a considerable portion of Bannington collected in the High Street, excited and interested by the loud cheering. It was Horace Stevens' great hour—an indication of what might follow when he appeared in his father's own play.

There was something else, too.

In one of the little boxes sat Mr. Augustus Crowson, the sole proprietor of three of London's most important theatres. He was, indeed, one of Mr. Samuel Arrowsmith's greatest rivals.

Browne, of course, was the instigator of this fresh move. Three times he had written to Mr. Crowson; six times he had wired to him; ten times he had telephoned to him. And finally, on the previous day, he had run up to London to see him. Browne was nothing if not persistent. And now Mr. Augustus Crowson was thankful that he had responded to the urgings of this remarkable schoolboy.

His enthusiasm was unbounded. Stevens, of course, had known nothing of Mr. Crowson's presence in the theatre—and he knew nothing until the excitement was all over, and until Browne took him to Mr. Noggs' caravan, with a great escort of Removites and Fourth-Formers. All had received special permission from their Housemasters to be out later on this memorable evening.

"I say, chuck it up, and let's get home!" Stevens was saying. "I don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels! You chaps are making too much fuss——"

"Brothers, take no notice," said Browne smoothly. "True genius is ever modest. Have we not struggled with Brother Horace for weeks? Have we not applied the spur so continuously that he is now a mass of dents? It is his one peculiarity—he will never move until he is prodded."

"You ass!" said Stevens gruffly.

"It always bowls a chap over when he's cheered by the multitude," said Handforth. "I've had some of it—I know it. What about my play, Browne? You've been so jolly busy with 'Hamlet' that you've forgotten all about me!"

"All in good time, Brother Handforth," said Browne. "I am afraid we must defer your own production until after the holidays. But that will be an event to look forward to. For the moment, I am bent upon introducing Brother Horace to a gentleman from London."

And "Brother Horace" was duly introduced. Mr. Augustus Crowson was the antithesis of Mr. Samuel Arrowsmith—an exceedingly tall, thin gentleman, with iron-grey hair and a voluble manner. Where Mr. Arrowsmith used two words, Mr. Crowson used twenty.

"My boy, let me congratulate you heartily," he said, pumping Stevens' arm. "A wonderful performance! A memorable achievement! I have seen many 'Hamlets,' but seldom have I seen such an outstanding performance as yours. My admiration is intense. You have a great future before you. I am hoping that you will allow me to present you to the London audiences."

Poor Stevens was nearly bowled over.

"London audiences!" he stammered. "But—but I didn't expect——"

"I forgot to mention, Brother Crowson, that our pet genius is inclined to be somewhat diffident," put in Browne gently. "Pray take no notice of his glassy-eyed

condition. Address all your remarks to me. Where business is concerned, I am Horace Stevens. It is sad, but true, that Brother Horace is a mere cipher."

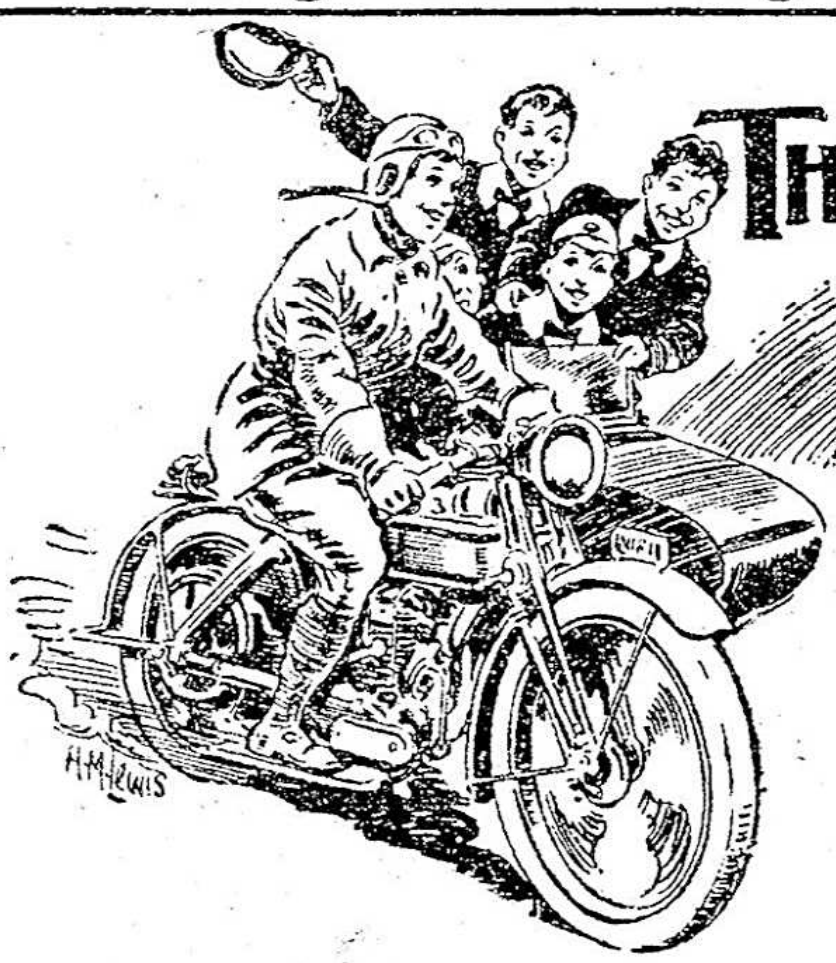
"Well, there's one thing certain," smiled Mr. Crowson. "I want this production of 'Hamlet' to be given in London. I will arrange a special matinée at one of my own theatres. That, of course, will be a mere preliminary. You must come and see me in London."

"Precisely what I was about to suggest," said Browne. "The Easter holidays are looming near, and we shall then descend upon London in a swarm. Be good enough to tell London to be prepared. Make all appointments with me, Brother Crowson. I will see that Brother Horace is there at the precise moment."

But neither William Napoleon Browne, nor any of the other St. Frank's fellows imagined what a shock they would receive soon after the holidays had commenced! Matters were rapidly working up to an unexpected development—a development which would hit the Schoolboy Actor with the force of a sledgehammer!

THE END.

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.

While on a visit to Calcroft, his old school, TINKER, the clever young assistant of SEXTON BLAKE, the celebrated detective, witnesses a motor-car tragedy, in which a man named Aggsby is mysteriously shot. Tinker believes that Aggsby was murdered in mistake for a man who is missing from Wisthorpe Hospital, which is in the neighbourhood. Eventually Sexton Blake comes to Calcroft to investigate this mysterious crime, and as he does not wish to arouse suspicion, he assumes the rôle of drill instructor at the school. With the beginning of this week's instalment, Blake and Tinker have just discovered an important clue—a pair of pyjamas belonging to the missing man, which had been thrown into the river, weighed down by a stone.

(*Now read on.*)

"SOMEBODY wearing riding-boots," thought quick-eared Tinker. "Young Martin Roath, I expect."

He tiptoed to the door, opened it half an inch, and peeped out. It was not Martin Roath, the Fifth-Former, but the elder Roath, who turned the handle of the study door and put in his head.

"Are you there, Martin?" Tinker heard him ask.

Tinker put on Bindley's tall hat which happened to be hanging up behind the door, for on Sundays and speech-days the Calcroftians wore such things. As Bindley had a fairly large head, it was not a bad fit, though it was an abominable hat. In that hat and the gloom of the corridor Tinker did not think Roath would recognise him, so he went out whistling.

"Do you know where I can find Roath?" asked the visitor, who was booted and spurred.

"Sixth-Form class-room, I suppose," answered Tinker. "Fourth House down on the left from here. It's class time now."

"I wonder if it's possible to find anyone who'd take a note to him from me."

"I'll take it," said Tinker.

Roath thanked him. There were note-paper and envelopes in the Fifth-Former's desk. Roath wrote rapidly, and standing in the doorway, Tinker, out of sheer habit, watched every movement of the swift pen, and read the message just as easily as if he had been looking over the man's shoulder.

"Am in your study. Must see you urgently, so come at once.—G."

"I daren't offend you by daring to offer you anything for your services," said Roath, handing the envelope to Tinker, "but I'm very much obliged."

In the hall, Tinker got rid of Bindley's hat. He knocked at the door of the Fifth class-room and went in.

"A note for Roath, sir," he said to Mr. Graveways, the master in charge.

"A note for you, Roath."

The dark-haired, handsome senior stood up. Tinker saw him start and flush as he read the message.

"From my uncle, sir," he said. "He's waiting for me in my study. May I go?"

"Your relative has chosen a rather unreasonable time to pay a visit," said Mr. Graveways tartly. "Yes, you may go."

Roath did not trouble to thank Tinker, but set off at a run the moment he was out of the class-room.

"In too much of a hurry to remember his manners," thought Tinker, as he strolled

towards the gate. "And I wish I could borrow you for the rest of the afternoon for a gallop round Barren Tor, old man," he added, patting the fine grey horse that was tied there. "It's certain that Roath didn't know me again, which isn't surprising, for I don't think I'd know myself in that hat."

Tinker sauntered down the avenue and up the hill to the garage. Blake had taken the car, so Tinker turned back again. At the avenue gate he discovered stalwart Constable Blagg and the plump and smiling Police-sergeant Siler talking together. As they both knew who he was, he gave these two guardians of the law a cheerful nod.

"Anything doing yet, sir?" asked Sergeant Siler.

"Nothing to write home about," answered Tinker. "Are you keeping your end up?"

"Well, not a lot to write home about, either," replied the sergeant. "The man from Scotland Yard turned up again this morning."

"So Detective Dedgard's back, is he?" said Tinker. "The big chap with the red face, you mean, eh?"

Sergeant Siler nodded, and as a clatter of hoofs sounded, Constable Blagg made haste to open the gate for the rider. Roath acknowledged their respectful salutes with a flourish of his hunting-crop.

"Is he one of the local magistrates?" Tinker inquired.

"He will be next year, I expect," said the sergeant. "We want an extra one, for Admiral Screwhamer has got his knife into old Bloomby, the mayor, and won't sit on the Bench with him. I don't blame him for that, for though he's rich, he's a vulgar old hunk. Being Mayor of Calcroft, he's chief magistrate, so if the admiral doesn't like it, he has to lump it. Well, good-day to you, sir, and so-long, Blagg. And I say, Blagg, if you should notice this young gentleman rattling his car along a bit fast, look the other way, see?"

Constable Blagg grinned a slow grin.

"Absolutely!" he said. "If the young gentleman is alone he can bust all the speed-limits for me, but don't let me catch him overdoin' it when he's got any of the young gents from the school aboard with him, 'specially such as Master Fane. I'm their natural protector, so to speak, though I'm paid for it, and I wouldn't have a single 'air of their precious 'eads 'urt. If I catch him puttin' their valuable lives in danger I'll blister him with a summons as sure as a gun."

Tinker laughed.

"It's jolly fine to think you're so fond of them, and they'll be awfully pleased when I tell them," he said.

"I don't think so, sir," said Blagg, and turned on his heel; "not Master Fane!"

"Gee!" cried Tinker. "Here's something to blister, if you like."

A motor-bicycle came tearing down the avenue, the exhaust clattering and banging like a Lewis-gun in action. The rider, who was crouching over the handlebars, was heavily goggled, but Tinker recognised the Fifth-Former, Martin Roath. He jumped out of the way, as did the constable, and Roath whizzed round the gatepost and shot across the road and up the hill.

"That guy's in a hurry," said Tinker. "If you managed to get his number, give him three or four blisters."

Constable Blagg made no reply, but took out his notebook and moistened the point of his pencil with his tongue. After a moment's thought he muttered something about private property, closed the book, and went home to his tea.

Just before the dismissing-bell was due to ring, Tinker took up a position in the hall, screening himself as much as possible behind one of Mr. Pycroft's overcoats which was hanging there, and waited for Beilby. Shouting and laughing, the juniors scampered out of the class-room, but there was no sign of Beilby. Last of all came Mr. Pycroft, and fancying that Beilby must have been kept in for being late, Tinker went to see.

At the very instant Tinker opened the door Beilby was getting out of the window, and he did not fail to see Tinker.

"Yah! Mouldy face!" said Beilby, putting out his tongue. "Waiting for me, weren't you? You can wait and wait, but you'll grow long whiskers before you catch me. If you've any sense, you'd take that cigarette-case, for it's all you'll get!"

"Let's look at it, then."

"See any green?" said Beilby, ready for flight. "I've seen things lost that way before. You'd bag it and still swear I owed you ten bob. I'll show it you at tea, if you like, for old Holgate will be there, and he won't let you rob me or bullyrag me. So long, pudding-head."

Then Beilby shut the window with a bang and faded away in the direction of the cloisters.

Tinker got out of the window also, but not to pursue Beilby, for he espied Manners, Pye, Fane and Bindley rolling across the quadrangle arm-in-arm, wearing their school caps very much on the backs of their heads. Overtaking Wilberforce Stott, who was clumping along towards his garden with a spade on his shoulder, they begged him to be merciful to the worms, and then looked round as Tinker shouted.

"Here's Jack chi-iking," said Pye. "I think we ought to duck him in the river for being such a careless ass."

"Give him a chance to explain first," said Bindley. "Perhaps he did it on purpose, for you never know what games these sleuth-hound chaps are up to."

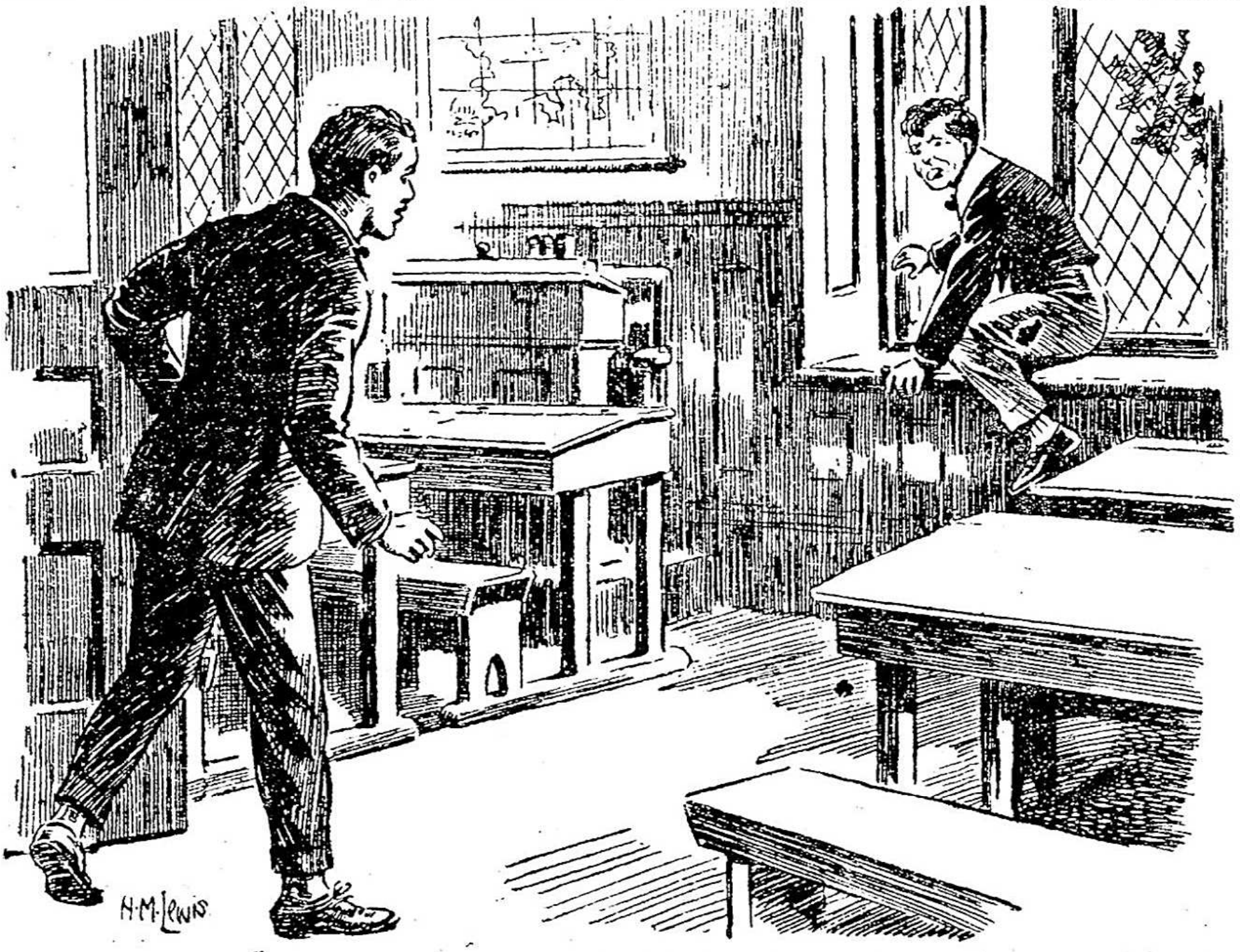
Tinker joined them.

"Whither away?" he asked.

"Just along the towing-path, where it's quiet to hold an inquest on you, old bean," said Fane. "Look here, Tinker, is it just bluff or are you really trying to be Jack Hasland, not Tinker, and your guv'nor Strong, the gymnastic instructor, not Sexton Blake?"

"Of course we are," said Tinker. "I say, we've not been rumbled, have we?"

"If you've not been rumbled, you ought to be and jolly soon will be," said Fane. "You're a careless sort of juggins to chuck



"Yah! Mouldy face!" said Beilby, putting out his tongue. "Waiting for me, weren't you? You can wait and wait, but you'll grow long whiskers before you catch me."

things like this about if you don't want every kid in Calcroft to know who you are. Here's something you must have dropped. Luckily, when we came out of class, Pye was the first upstairs and saw this thing."

It was a sheet torn from a magazine published in New York, and on one side of it was printed a full page portrait of Sexton Blake, and excellently reproduced, too.

"Whe-e-ew!" whistled Tinker, as he read what was printed below.

"Photographs of Mr. Sexton Blake, the famous private detective, are extremely rare. The one we present to our readers was enlarged from a snapshot taken aboard the White Star liner, Majestic. Sexton Blake's amazing knowledge of criminals and their ways and his almost uncanny skill in solving the darkest and most baffling mysteries of crime have made his name a household word in both hemispheres."

Tinker was astonished, but he did not lose his presence of mind. It was unwise to let even his loyal chums know too much. He had never seen the photograph in his life before and did not even know that it existed, so how it came to be blowing about on the lower staircase of Pycroft's house was a complete mystery. It was probable that Sexton Blake himself had no knowledge of the portrait, for he was very wary of snap-shooters.

"If I dropped that I ought to be shot," said Tinker. "Jolly good thing you found it before anybody else got hold of it, Pye. It's fine of the guv'nor's face, but the hair is faked. I expect he had his hat on, and the engraver has cut the hat out and faked in the hair."

"It doesn't matter about his hair, old top," said Bindley. "Wilberforce Stott is as blind as an owl, but if he'd picked that up, even Stott would have noticed the likeness between the photo and our new gym.

instructor. With that beastly murder only a little while ago, it might not have set Wilb. guessing, but it would have started any other kid guessing right away, and guessing hard."

"And if I hadn't known all about it, my dear children," said Fane, "and suddenly discovered that Sexton Blake, king of detectives, and his bladder-headed assistant, Tinker, were in the school under assumed names chasing a murderer, I'd have bet money they were after Pycroft."

"What's he done to you now, then?" asked Manners, with a chuckle. "I didn't think he'd been jumping on you lately."

"Walloped two hundred lines on poor little Bindley and me just because we forgot to wear our shirts, the giddy tyrant," said Fane.

"And had our braces tied round our waists," added Bindley. "He said we were vulgar navvies, and though it was quite true about Fane, it was a libel on me. He'll ask for those rotten old lines in the morning, and I've looked at the stock and we're a good hundred short. Can't you be a real pal and arrest him for something, Tinker? It needn't be for murder, for I don't want the old boy hanged, but something he'd only do about seven years for, like forgery or burglary, or pinching cheese out of a mouse-trap."

"It's awfully rotten not to be able to do a little thing like that to please you, but I can't work it," said Tinker. "Sorry to disappoint and all that. Here, what's that? Is it Wilberforce screaming because some savage worm has bitten him or has somebody run over a dog?"

"Shrimp-o! Fine fresh Calcroft shrimp-o! Fresh watercresses and Calcroft shrimp-o!" chanted a voice.

It was an old acquaintance, Mr. Jerry Dibs, with his barrow. Jerry was not allowed to enter the quadrangle with his barrow, but he was allowed to sell his wares outside the gates, and he often did a roaring trade.

"Here y'are, Master Fane," he said. "Shrimps as big as lobsters, worth ninepence a pint and only a tanner to you. And there's watercresses crisp and tender for a penny a bunch. Here's the stuff to make you enjoy your tea. Ever see shrimps the size of that afore? Like lobsters, they are!"

"Miserable little rotters," said Fane. "They're like lobsters looked at through the wrong end of a telescope, only smaller. Better have three half-pints, I suppose; and four bunches of that beastly yellow stuff you call fresh watercress. About umpteen thousand years ago it might have been fresh, but it's bald-headed and gone at the knees now. What? One and a penny for that? Here, Bindley, come and write him a cheque for it."

"Not me, my child!" said Bindley. "I wouldn't give him one and a penny for the whole doings with the barrow chucked in. Here's a tanner towards it, anyhow, and then for the jolly old workhouse. It's quite a nice workhouse at Calcroft, isn't it, Jerry?"

"Never tried it yet, sir," said Jerry, "but I believe they give 'em breakfast in bed, take 'em for motor-rides and to the pictures and supply champagne at dinner. And talking about motors, I just 'eard about a smash out Aperling way, motor-cyclist barged into a car on Wisthorpe Bridge. Killed hisself, I think, the cyclist did. Anyway, they was both took to the hospital—— Sold again to a gentleman! Shrimp-o! Fine, fresh Calcroft shrimp-o! Fresh watercresses and Calcroft shrimp-o! Here's your quality, gentlemen. Shrimp-o!"

Jerry quickly disposed of his stock, and Tinker and his four chums went back to the study for tea. Calcroft was famous for its shrimps and the limpid Calder for its watercress, and as Tinker had provided home-made butter from Mrs. Potter's farm and a home-baked loaf from the quaint old-fashioned shop on Calcroft Green, tea was quite a feast.

In the midst of it, Wilberforce Stott knocked and put in his spectacled-face.

"Really, I am very sorry to interrupt you," said Wilberforce. "Really——"

"Oh, squat down," said Bindley. "You're a bit late for the shrimps, Wilb., except the heads and tails, but there's bread-and-butter and water-cress and cake—not much cake."

"Really, it's awfully good of you, Bindley," said Wilberforce. "In fact, I often stay away because you are too kind. I came to say that the telephone-bell was ringing in the hall, and as no one was there I answered it. Unfortunately I am rather clumsy with a telephone, and hear with extreme difficulty; but with amazing distinctness I heard a voice asking for Hasland. I sincerely trust I did the right thing. I said, 'Will you please wait and I will endeavour to find Hasland,' and then placed the trumpet thing you put to your ear on the top of the instrument."

"Abso-bally-lutely the goods," said Fane. "It's a jampot for you again, Wilb., for all our beautiful old Worcester tea-cups are in use."

Tinker had hurried down to the telephone.

"Hallo, hallo!" he said. "Do you want Calcroft School and Hasland. Yes, I'm Hasland. Hasland, of Pycroft's House—yes. You've got us."

"It's the house-surgeon of Wisthorpe Cottage Hospital speaking," said the voice. "We have a Mr. Basil Strong here who has been injured in a motor-car accident, but luckily, not very seriously. He is asking for you, so will you come at once? Right, I'll tell him, thank you."

"Great pip! Wisthorpe Hospital," thought Tinker. "That must have been the smash that shrimp-merchant was talking about. Not hurt seriously, that's jolly good news. There must have been some pretty driving on the other chap's part, for the

guv'nor could steer a car round a bent corkscrew."

Tinker rushed upstairs for his cap and gloves.

"I've got to beetle off, chaps," he said. "The message was from my guv'nor. Sorry and all that, as you'll observe by the tears that are streaming down my pallid cheeks. Kick Beilby for me if I'm not home in time to do it. Kick him hard."

"Right," said Pye. "I've got a pair of new footer foots I haven't tried yet, so I'll try 'em on Beilby. Don't be late."

Holgate, Calcroft's captain, was in his study, and Tinker borrowed his motor-cycle. He reached the hospital in quick time, and then had to kick his heels impatiently for a quarter of an hour before the house-surgeon came to him.

CHAPTER XII.

"THE CRIME AT CALCROFT."

IT was anything but a busy hospital, and after a few words of conversation Tinker followed the house-surgeon into a small ward containing only six beds. The only occupied bed was the one in which Sexton Blake was lying. Almost before Tinker was well inside, the porter came hurrying down the passage.

"Mr. Roath, sir."

Probably Mr. Roath contributed to the funds of the hospital, and was of too much importance to be kept waiting, for the house-surgeon hastened after the porter, and Sexton Blake, whose head was bandaged, sat up in bed and reached for his cigarette-case and match-box that lay on the table beside him.

"Well, guv'nor, you seem to be doing things," said Tinker. "If you can enjoy a smoke, you aren't likely to die just yet. I heard on the 'phone that you hadn't smashed yourself seriously, but don't tell me you've put the old 'bus in hospital as well as yourself."

"The wind-screen is smashed, and the bonnet's a bit twisted," said Blake. "I think there's an ashtray on the mantelpiece, young 'un, if you'll be kind enough to hand it over. No, I'm not badly crocked, though I had to roll out in a hurry. Is the kid conscious yet?"

"What kid? Was it a kid?"

"Young Martin Roath?"

"Great gingerbread!" exclaimed Tinker. "So that's what has fetched Roath along, is it? Did you barge into Roath then—young Roath?"

"I didn't, for the young lunatic barged into me," said Sexton Blake. "I was just crossing the bridge, making towards Calcroft, when he came round the back of a brewer's dray, all out. I wasn't going at any pace, and there was room to pass, for I pulled in as close as I could without scraping the near-side mudguards against the parapet. I don't think he side-slipped, but the young fool either lost his head or control of the machine, or both, for he swerved and drove right into me. He hit the step, and thinking the cycle was going to jump right in on top of me, I clapped on the brakes and rolled out."

"And he didn't kill himself?"

"Not to my knowledge, Tinker," said the private detective, "though I was too groggy myself to take much notice. I got a cut on the head, but nothing that won't heal up in a day or two, and a nasty shaking. The house-surgeon has advised me to rest for a few hours before I go out, and as his advice happened to suit me, here I am. It was Roath senior, then?"

"That's what the porter said, guv'nor. And do you know, I'm not surprised that silly guy barged into something. I was talking to Blagg, the policeman, when he came down the school avenue at a furious lick. I told Blagg to take his number and summon him for furious driving, but he wasn't having any. Just before that old Roath was in Martin's study. As a matter of fact, I took a note for him to——"

A sound of voices in the corridor checked Tinker, and the house-surgeon entered the ward accompanied by the elder Roath.

"Mr. Strong, I fancy," said Roath, bowing stiffly to Blake. "I am extremely sorry, Mr. Strong. My nephew, Martin, who is now conscious, wishes to express his sincere regrets. He admits that he was riding a little too fast, and that he lost control. He thinks something must have gone wrong with the steering. I beg to add my regrets to his, and you may look to me for payment for all damage done to your car and for your personal injuries. It is gratifying to learn from our friend, Dr. Skene, that the latter are only trifling."

"Thanks," said Blake. "Boys will be boys, I suppose, but I think you're nephew ought to learn a little about the rules of the road before you let him loose again. For my part, for I bear no malice, I hope he is not seriously injured."

"He isn't," put in the doctor. "The average boy is an extraordinary creature in that respect, and will often come out of a smash practically unhurt that would kill a grown-up man stone dead. The youngster is bruised and shaken, but like a cat and most of the Calcroft boys, he has nine lives."

Roath scribbled something on the back of one of his visiting cards.

"I am leaving the name and address of my solicitor, Mr. Strong," he said. "If you will get your car repaired and send the account and other expenses to him, you will receive a cheque without delay. Please believe that I am very sorry, and, above that, I am quite prepared to meet your just claim. Good-afternoon to you!"

"Good-afternoon to you, Mr. Roath!"

The door of the ward closed behind the

house-surgeon and his visitor, and Sexton Blake took a lazy pull at his cigarette.

"Quite fair and above-board, and anxious to pay," he said, smiling. "The porter will tell you where they've put the car, young 'un, so go and have a look at her. If she's drivable, you can drive me back, or I'll drive myself, if you've brought a jigger."

Blake was not only dressed when Tinker returned, but was taking a stroll in the grounds. Tinker reported that the damage to the car could not be repaired at Wisthorpe under twenty-four hours.

"Then we'll arrange to have her towed back to Calcroft, young 'un," said Blake. "There's quite a good repair shop there, and we don't want anybody who only half knows his job tinkering with her. Did you come on your own outfit?"

"It was too far to fetch it, so I borrowed one," said Tinker. "There's a seat behind I can perch on, and you can punt us home."

When Sexton Blake reached his rooms he found a visitor waiting for him in the person of Detective Dedgard of Scotland Yard. Dedgard sat in an easy chair with a cigar in his mouth, looking extremely rosy and comfortable.

"Were you the winner or the loser, old man?" he asked, noticing Sexton Blake's bandaged head.

"I think the ground won, or a brick wall, I forget which, but it wasn't much of a victory, Dedgard," said Blake. "Just a little motor-car accident. I hope you've been circumspect and careful about this call of yours. I don't want to be given away."

"As Tinker says, 'I'll watch it,'" said Dedgard. "I'm a very old friend, so they showed me up and told me to wait. What an amazing and puzzling chap you are when you get started. I can't believe you're here teaching boys gymnastics and physical jerks for the fun of it, or to get your muscle up, or for a rest cure. What's the stunt? Why this thusness, anyway?"

"Oh, Tinker got rather interested in this shooting business, and pulled me into it," said Blake. "I'm rather glad he did, for it's worth a bit of trouble. I can't say we've made a great deal of progress, but we're not down-hearted yet on that account."

Dedgard slowly shook his head.

"Curious chaps, you and young Tinker," he said. "You'll always be riddles to me, Blake. If it isn't a mare's nest, and you clear it up, what will it be worth to you? It can't add anything to your reputation, for it's a pretty big one now, and there's nobody to pay you a brass farthing for all your time, trouble, and expense. Well, that's your funeral, of course, but I can't understand two smart people working for nothing."

"Then we needn't discuss our point of view," said Blake. "How about those notes that were sent to the widow? Are you trying to trace them?"

"Yes, but they're such a mixed-up bunch that we haven't got very far. On the face of it, the present looked like a sort of conscience-soother, but then it may be nothing of the kind, for the world's full of crazy people. Some idiot who had nothing more to do with it than that fender may have read the case, and felt sorry for the woman. In the newspaper this morning some juggins has returned several hundred pounds to the Government—income-tax he diddled it out of umpteen years ago. If a lunatic will do anything like that, you can expect anything."

"I suppose so," said Blake, with a nod. "Were you trying to locate any of the notes down this way?"

Dedgard shrugged his shoulders, and then uttered a deep laugh.

"To tell you the honest truth, old man," he answered, "you're a sort of cat among the pigeons. They want to know what you're doing down here, not only the local police, but the big pots at our end. Of course, the inspector reported that you had taken on a fresh and queer job, and that your brilliant assistant was going in for a further course of education at this very swagger and expensive school. I couldn't very well tell them to mind their own business, though I thought it."

"If I thought you'd come to spy on me, I'd put you out through the window, big as you are," said Blake, with a laugh.

"You might try, old chap, but I prefer to leave by the staircase, as I'm a bit of a heavy-weight to fall about four floors," said Dedgard. "Of course, there's no rubbish like that. They know very well that you're not nosing round Calcroft for fun; so they've ordered us to put on another hustle. You're not the sort to go hunting in a place where there's no game. Have you scented any?"

"It's a very stale scent, Dedgard. The police were over the ground first, and that spoiled it for us more or less. It's rather flattering of you, and I wish you luck with your hustle. Tinker and I have our ideas, but they're a long time in developing. Just now it's only marking time."

"And running up expenses," said Dedgard, "for I don't expect you're drawing a salary for your job. If you're not ashamed to be seen walking about with your head in splints, come and see me at the hotel. I'm not fond of new faces, and these local police bore me stiff."

Dedgard made the stairs crack as he descended. Tinker, Pye, Manners, and Bindley were sitting on the parapet of the bridge, but although Dedgard recognised Tinker, he passed on without a sign.

"A big sort of guy, that," remarked Manners. "I wonder what he's doing here?"

"Travelling in wirting-paper or red ink, or perhaps he's been trying to sell old Pycroft a bottle of hair-dye," said Bindley. "Do you know, you chaps, I've got a sort of sinking feeling, and nothing will do it good except a chunk of hardbake. If there was anybody I could trust I'd weigh out the money and send him for half a pound. If

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

CAREERS for BOYS

By A. C. HORTH

Masonry

THE work of the mason consists of cutting and dressing all kinds of stone used in building. It is a highly-skilled craft of great antiquity, and from time immemorial, masons have held a high place among craftsmen. The work of the mason is more lasting than that of almost any other craftsman, as witnessed in the wonderful pyramids of Egypt, where the huge stone blocks are so accurately dressed that it is impossible to push a thin knife-blade between them. The skill of the masons who built the magnificent temples of the ancient Greeks is unsurpassed even in the present day. The cathedrals of our own country form monuments of the skill of medieval craftsmen and point out the great traditions behind the skilled masons of to-day.

WHAT MASONRY IS.

Masonry is a trade requiring physical strength, but it combines great hand skill with considerable knowledge. Owing to the introduction of stone-cutting and stone-dressing machinery, much of the severe hand labour has been eliminated. Building stone that at one time had to be sawn from the rough quarried block, is now cut and dressed by special machines, but apart from certain kinds of stonework that can be shaped on a lathe, most of the curved and carved work has to be done by hand. Apart from the saw which is used to divide up large blocks of stone and provide an approximately smooth surface, the main tools of the mason are a chisel and mallet. With these two tools, although of the former he may use several shapes, the mason is able to form his material into all manner of shapes, and when sufficiently skilled, can leave the surface quite smooth to the touch.

WHAT THE MASON HAS TO DO.

The main work of the mason at the present day consists in squaring, jointing, and properly bonding stone into wall, in dowelling, the use of straps and bolts, and in fitting and securing stonework to modern steel construction. He must be able to use the key-joint, both open and concealed, and carry out stone staircasing in all its forms. The advanced work of the mason consists in working mouldings, oriel windows, tracery windows, door-heads, and in connection with church work must be able to carry out Gothic and other classic work, twisted work, domes, spires, vaulting, groining, etc. He must have a good knowledge of the properties of all kinds of stone, marble, alabaster, etc., and should have a working knowledge of the methods of quarrying the material he uses. He must understand the difference between the various kinds of sandstone, limestone, granite, marble, and other stones, and be able to cut and place them with a due regard to their weathering qualities and surfaces. He must know the different methods of cutting soft and coarse stone, such as sandstones and the hard and fine stones, such as granite and marble, and he must be able to dress the surfaces to a fine surface.

THE DEMAND FOR MASONS.

Although a considerable amount of artificial stone, moulded to the exact shape required, is used in buildings for sills, steps, and other purposes, and that much labour has been saved by the introduction of machinery and the increased number of reinforced concrete constructions, the highly-skilled mason is still in demand, and is likely to be in demand while building is in progress. The present tendency in large public buildings, churches and huge blocks of offices and business premises, is to have stone facings, even if the construction is not wholly of stone. Carved mouldings, carved pediments, and other decorative features are common, and they all call for the skill of the mason. Apart from the need for the mason in the construction of buildings, he is in demand for monumental work, and in the work of the monumental mason a considerable amount of skill is required. The demand for highly-skilled masons is not likely to fall for many years.

THE METHOD OF TRAINING.

Apprenticeship still obtains with many master masons, and with the growing tendency for contract work in connection with building work, the stone-masons' yard is likely to continue under private management. The usual term of apprenticeship is five years, the wages are not large at first, but a well-qualified mason can earn a good wage. Classes for the further education of masons are generally to be found in all large towns, and masonry is usually an important branch of building trade classes. There is a Friendly Society of Operative Stone Masons, which forms the trade union, but masons form an important section of the Federation of Building Trades Unions. The boy who desires to become a mason must be strong, possess hand skill, and not mind hard work; he will in time be able to earn an income better than many other skilled tradesmen. If attendance at suitable classes is continued during the period of learning, he will be able to aim at the position of foreman or become a master mason working on his own account.

FORMING A CLUB

By THE CHIEF OFFICER.

Specially Written for Organising Officers of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE.

NOW that the St. Frank's League has got itself well going, the Organising Officers all over the country have been receiving applications from members who want to form clubs. There is no doubt of the tremendous value of clubs. They bring fellows together, and serve the cause of friendship, whether the club is for the purposes of sport, or hobbies, or friendly discussion.

CALLING A MEETING.

In order to help League members who intend to form a club, I am giving here a few hints of the best method to adopt. We will take the case of an O. O. who has received requests from a dozen or twenty members of the League, asking him to form a club. The names of all Organising Officers to date have been published, and now is the time for starting work.

THE PLACE OF MEETING.

The first meeting can be called either at the home of one of the members, or even in the open air at any suitable spot. The O. O. will have received promises of attendance from, say, twenty fellows. They will not all turn up; they never do, but there will be enough to get things going. The O. O. will act as spokesman, and he will suggest the name of a likely member to act as secretary pro tem. The secretary must have a notebook to take a minute of the proceedings. Next the O. O. will put it to the meeting that the acting secretary shall be elected to this post. He will ask a member to second this; the proposal is then put to the whole meeting. Those in favour hold up their hands. This resolution is pretty well sure to be carried unanimously. Then comes the election of a treasurer and a deputy-chairman, who will act at future meetings when the O. O. may not be present.

PUTTING THINGS TO THE VOTE.

Questions as to ways and means will then come before the meeting, and it is very important that the secretary should make a full note of what is decided upon. His minutes will be read at the second meeting. The suggestions made will all be put to the vote. If a show of hands indicates that members approve, the proposals are carried, and become part of the policy of the club. It will be for the O. O. to take the initiative and put forward ideas about the rate of subscription, the rules to regulate the club, but all such suggestions must have the assent of the members present to become official.

FUTURE MEETINGS.

It is important that the date and time and place of the second meeting be fixed. At a first meeting it will only be possible to lay the foundation, as it were. Some members may desire the new club to confine itself wholly to sport; others will wish for a social club with indoor games and little weekly palavers. All these matters will be voted on.

SUBSCRIPTIONS.

As a rule, it is safe to say that the lower these are fixed the better. The chairman will put various suggestions to members and so arrive at the sense of the meeting. It is important for every fellow present to express his opinion.

USES OF CLUBS.

It is not necessary for me to deal at length with this matter. But I am getting many letters about the formation of clubs, and wish to help my chums to the utmost. In a general way I recommend the smallest subscription possible, and a very brief code of rules. There is no need to draft such a regulation as this: "Members must not make a noise. Those breaking this rule will be kicked out."

I notice that such a regulation was tabled at a meeting! It is far too drastic. There may be occasions when a slight "dust up" is called for. Wealthier clubs may run to a subscription large enough to pay a shilling or so for the hire of a room one night per week, but this is not really essential. The club is made by the fellows who belong to it, and it can meet anywhere. Then, as the majority of members will be living within easy distance of each other, it will not be necessary to spend much on correspondence and postage. By the way, it will be the duty of the secretary after the first meeting to draft out a small programme—something like this: "This club, to be styled the 'Blankhampton S. F. L. Sports (or Social) Club,' has been formed to foster a spirit of comradeship and to help members in every possible way."

WRITE TO ME!

I shall be delighted to answer personally all inquiries sent to me regarding any other points in the formation of clubs. There may be certain matters concerning which Organising Officers are in doubt. I can assure all chums that I am always willing to assist.

"THE CALCROFT CASE"

(*Continued from page* 38.)

I sent one of you, you'd come back licking out the bag ith the hardbake inside you. Not a soul I can trust in the whole show except old Wilberforce Stott, and of course Wilb is chasing caterpillars or slogging slugs when he's wanted badly It's awful to have to live in a place where people are so dishonest."

"Insulting hog!" said Pye. "You're nearest, Tinker, so biff him a hard one."

"Too tired," yawned Tinker; "and, besides, he doesn't include me, and he's known you longer than I have. I'm not at all keen on hardbake, but I want a tin of boot-polish. Shall we wander along, or is the shop out of bounds?"

As nobody seemed to care whether the little shop at the corner of Calcroft Green was out of bounds or not, the boys walked down the private road. The sight of Mr. Pycroft in conversation with Mr. Chules brought them to an abrupt stop.

"Always in the way," grumbled Pye. "That does it. He's sure to want to know where we're going if we try to pass the gates."

"And I believe he must have a share in our rotten tuck-shop," added Manners, "for if we tell him the truth, he'll want to know why we want to spend our money outside. Our hardbake is just like chewing rotten coke, and dearer."

"All serene," said Tinker; "you wait, and I'll cut along, for he can't stop me. Hardbake and boot-polish wanted. Any more orders?"

"You'd better sprint, or you may get a wet shirt," said Bindley, glancing up at the darkening sky. "I just felt a splash of rain on my hand."

Mr. Pycroft and Mr. Chules also looked up at the sky. Heavy rainclouds were passing swiftly over Barren Tor.

"Good gracious, Chules," said the Housemaster, "we are in for a drenching shower. I anticipated it, for I have—er—been experiencing a twinge of rheumatism in my left knee. We had better hurry, my dear fellow, for here it comes!"

Mr. Pycroft trotted away jerkily, but briskly, Mr. Chules trotting at his heels; and as the raindrops came pelting down, Pye, Bindley, and Manners decided to make for shelter, so they turned up their coat-collars, and sprinted after the two masters.

The rain had also taken Tinker unawares, but as it was as near to the shop as back to the school, he made a run for it."

(*To be continued.*)

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