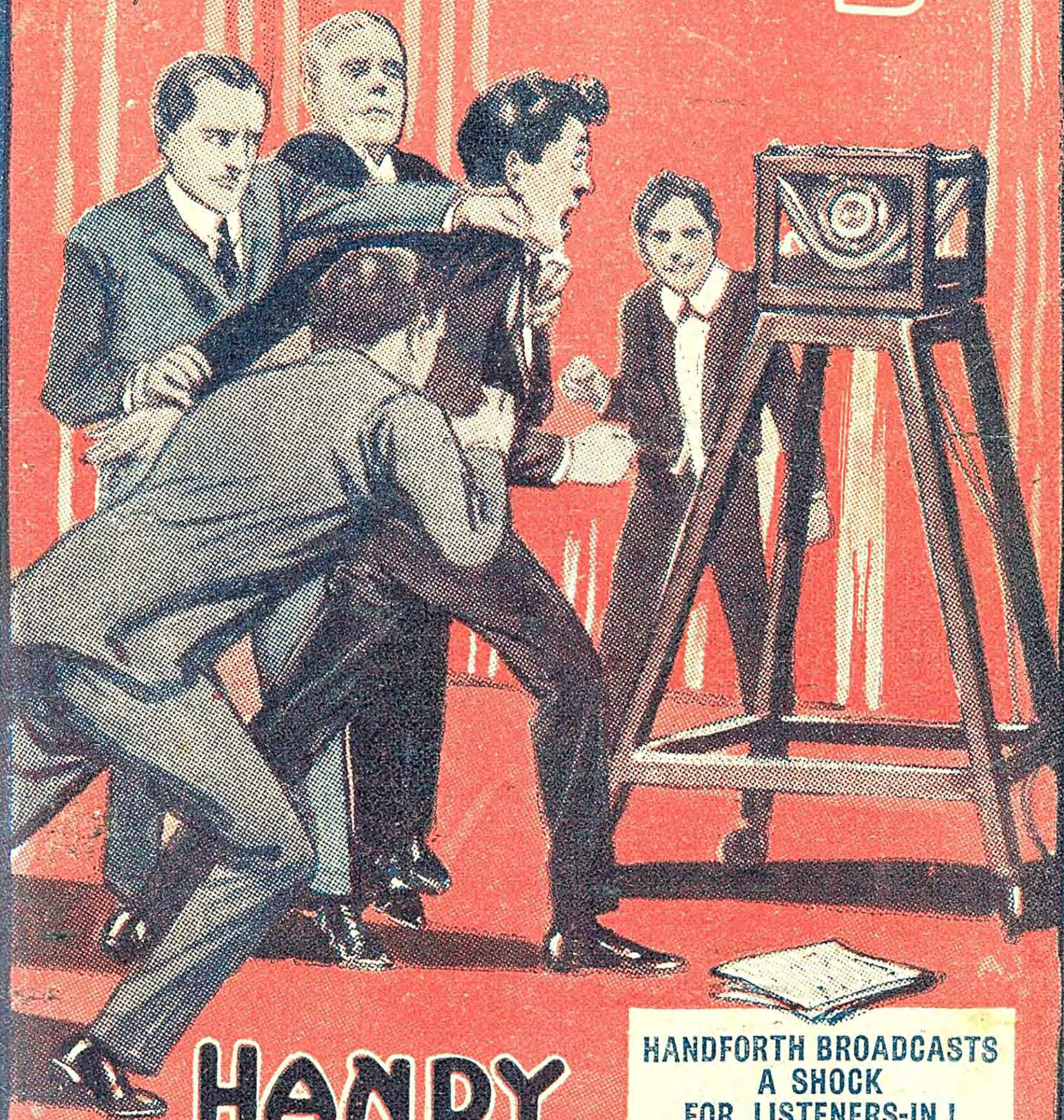


THE SCHOOLBOY ACTORS MAKE THINGS HUM!

THE NELSON LEE

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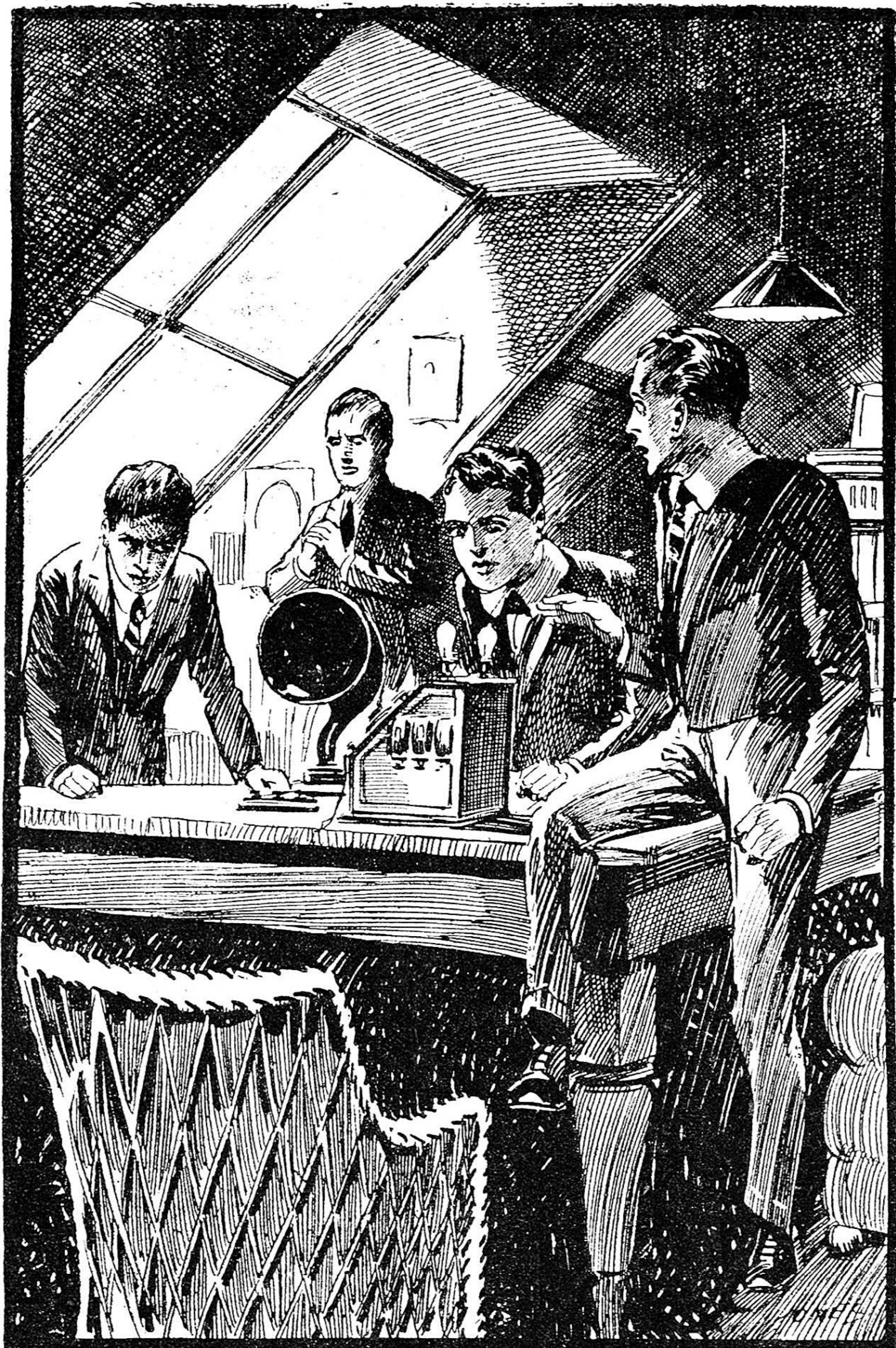
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HANDY BEHIND THE SCENES

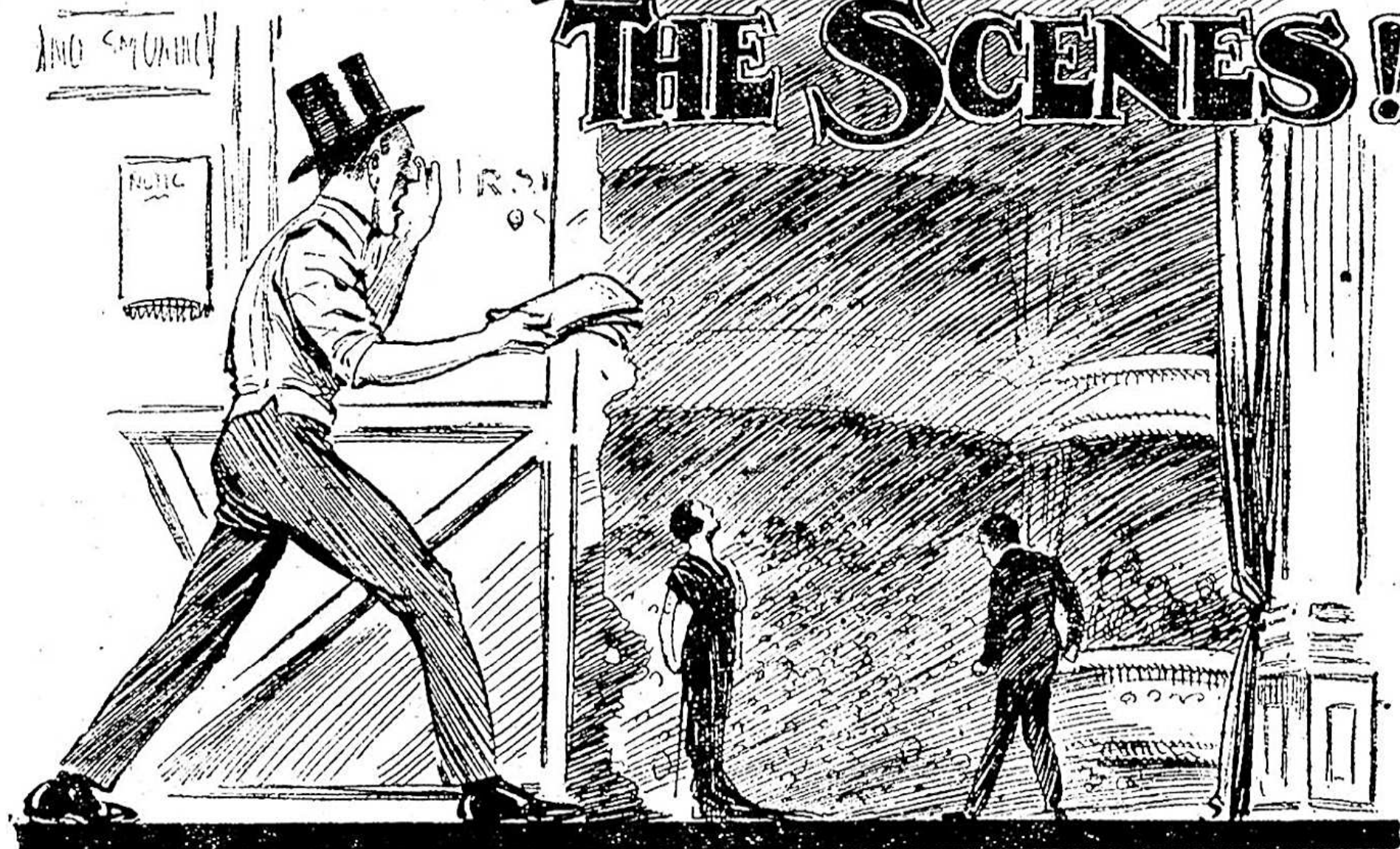
HANDFORTH BROADCASTS
A SHOCK
FOR LISTENERS-IN!

A STUNNING SCHOOL YARN OF THE BOYS OF ST FRANK'S



"It's a lie!" roared the new voice. "Roger Barton is a liar and a thief! He stole that play from the real author."
"Handy!" gurgled Nipper, aghast.

HANDY BEHIND THE SCENES!



*In this Rollicking Story of the Famous Boys of St. Frank's,
Handy gives Listeners-in a Shock.*

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER I.

THE HANDFORTHS AT HOME.

SIR EDWARD HANDFORTH, M.P., snorted.

"This is getting beyond endurance," he exclaimed testily. "We are starting breakfast again, and none of the children are down! Talking to them seems to be a mere waste of breath."

"It is holiday time, remember, dear—" began his wife.

"Rubbish!" interrupted Sir Edward gruffly. "That's no excuse whatever. Not the slightest excuse. Edith gets down to breakfast—and so does Arthur. Why can't the younger children do the same? When I was their age—"

"Hallo, everybody!"

It was a cheery greeting from the doorway, and Ena Handforth tripped in, looking bright and fresh in a new Spring frock. "Cheerio, dad! Don't frown so much—it shows all your wrinkles!"

"Upon my soul!" exploded Sir Edward. Ena came over and kissed him affectionately.

"It's no good attempting to conciliate me with this pretence of love!" blustered her father. "You're late, young lady! We started breakfast five minutes ago! Can't you be down in time—even on Sunday morning?"

"I heard the gong, dad, but I wasn't quite ready," explained Ena sweetly—using her usual formula. "Anyhow, I've beaten Ted, haven't I? And I don't suppose Willy will show up until we've finished. Ted wouldn't let him get into the bath, you know."

Ena bade good-morning to the other members of the family, and sat down at the table. They were in the sunny dining-room of Sir Edward Handforth's London house, and the family consisted of Ena's parents, her elder sister, Edith, and the latter's husband, Arthur Kirby.

Kirby was a schoolmaster, with an excellent appointment at one of the biggest public schools in the North. Like the other members of the family, he was home for the Easter holidays. He and Edith generally stayed at Sir Edward's during these periods—for Kirby was a resident Housemaster at his school.

"It's all very well to ignore me, Ena, but I won't have it!" said Sir Edward, laying down his newspaper. "This lateness must cease. I have spoken about this before, but it seems to be quite useless. If you are late to-morrow morning——"

"But it'll be Easter Monday, dad!" protested Ena, reaching for the toast.

"What difference does that make?"

"Oh, well, Bank Holiday, you know——"

"A perfectly preposterous excuse!" interrupted Sir Edward. "Good gracious! So you are already preparing your justification for to-morrow, eh? I am sure I don't know who you take after, Ena!"

Lady Handforth and Edith and Arthur smiled—quite privately. These little flutters were of daily occurrence when the children were home for the holidays. Sir Edward didn't actually mean to be harsh or unkind. At heart, he was one of the most generous men under the sun—and, treated diplomatically, one could get almost anything out of him.

"You see, dad, I wanted to look extra nice this morning," explained Ena coolly. "It's Sunday, and I know how particular you are about us looking tidy and neat. So, just to please you——"

"That's all very well," interrupted Sir Edward gruffly. "You can't expect to excuse yourself by such subterfuges——"

"Hallo, here's Ted!" put in Arthur Kirby. "Trouble, I'll bet!"

Edward Oswald Handforth, the famous leader of Study D at St. Frank's, came into the room with all his usual force. Apparently he opened the door by the simple expedient of barging into it. It flew open with a crash, and the Removite came in smiling, and sniffing the air.

"Hallo! Kidneys!" he said briskly.

He took utterly no notice of the family, but strode to the sideboard, and examined the contents of the various dishes. His rugged features were glowing with the effects of a recent wash, and he had forgotten to brush his hair.

"Who's pinched all the kidneys?" he asked indignantly. "Ena, you greedy little boulder, you haven't left me anything worth——"

"Edward!"

His father's voice boomed across the breakfast table.

"Eh? Oh, hallo, dad!" said Edward Oswald. "Morning! Morning everybody else! About these kidneys——"

"If you will ring, dear, the maid will bring some more," interrupted his mother gently.

"Good egg!" said Handforth.

"There!" stormed Sir Edward. "Instead of teaching these youngsters a lesson you deliberately pander to them. What is the good of my trying to teach them punctuality? You calmly keep their food hot for them! Bah!"

Sir Edward grabbed his paper, and discovered that half of it was missing—Ena having seized an opportunity to borrow some of it.

"Ena!" roared Sir Edward. "Give me that paper at once!"

"But you can't read all these pages, dad," protested Ena.

"I won't have my paper rumpled and separated!" stormed her father. "If there is one thing I utterly detest, it is to have my newspaper divided into a dozen sections."

"Oh, very well, dad," said Ena tartly. "But I'm blessed if I can see how you can manage it! Let's have the picture paper, Edie."

"When I've finished with it," said her sister severely.

"Selfish cat!" said Ena crossly.

"Darling!" protested her mother.

"Well, isn't she selfish?"

"Of course she is!" put in Edward Oswald. "Edie, don't be a beast! I want a piece of that paper—I want to see the review of last night's play. I'll bet the critics have gone dotty over it!"

Sir Edward looked grim.

"Understand, I won't have these slang words used at my table!" he said angrily. "And how dare you call your elder sister a beast, Edward?"

"Well, Ena called her a cat!" challenged Edward Oswald.

"That is no reason why you should——"

"Here we are!" said Willy Handforth, dodging in. "Any breakfast left? I'll bet Ted's wolfed the lot! Just my giddy luck!"

His father bestowed a cold glance upon him.

"Oh!" he said, with heavy sarcasm. "Splendid, William! You have condescended to come down to breakfast!"

"Yes, dad," said Willy, nodding.

"Very kind of you, my boy—very considerate!"

"Oh, well, I didn't want to keep breakfast hanging about too long, you know," explained Willy. "You generally get ratty if we're late. So I thought I'd be down on time for once."

"On time!" thundered his father. "You are late, you young rascal! We have nearly finished! What have you got to say?"

Willy sat down, and eyed the eatables.

"Well, I'm in at the death, anyhow," he replied. "What's the programme for to-day? Church this morning, I suppose? My hat!"

There was something about Willy's tone which sounded significant.

"Explain the meaning of that absurd expression!" ordered Sir Edward. "To-day is

Sunday, William! I won't have you racing round the garden, or shouting about the house. And if those noisy young friends of yours dare to come round, I shall order them away. They were here last night, and for a solid hour the atmosphere was hideous!"

Willy grinned.

"You mean Juicy Lemon and Chubby Heath?" he asked. "That was Juicy's fault, really—he brought a mouth-organ round. The young fathead couldn't play it for nuts. But I got all sorts of tunes——"

"So it was you who made that appalling racket?" put in his brother-in-law.

"You ass!" said Willy. "I played the thing beautifully. I say, Ted, isn't it fine to be able to say 'You ass' to a House-master! I wish you were at St. Frank's, Arthur!"

"Thank heaven I'm not!" said Arthur Kirby, with feeling. "It's a wonder to me that your Form-master is still alive! The poor man is probably a mass of nerves at the end of every term."

"Don't let's talk shop, Arthur," said his wife.

"I should think not!" agreed Willy. "This is Easter, and we don't want to think about school at all. By the way, who's got all the papers? Let's have a chunk of yours, dad!"

"I shall do nothing of the sort!" said his father coldly. "And don't use such ridiculous expressions. There is no such thing as a chunk of a newspaper."

"Well, a slice, then," said Willy.

"A slice is no better!" frowned Sir Edward. "We are not talking about bacon! In any case, a boy of your age has no reason to read newspapers. When I was a youngster I never dreamt of reading newspapers."

"Well, I'm not dreaming about reading one, dad," said Willy calmly. "I want to look at the dramatic page. Ted was telling me about last night's new play—'The Whirlpool,' at the Emperor Theatre——"

"I entirely disapprove of this interest in theatrical plays," said his father sternly. "I have already seen the report concerning 'The Whirlpool,' and I shall tell you nothing about it. So don't ask me. I won't have you exhibiting this precocious spirit."

"No, dad," said Willy. "How did the play go?"

"According to the critics, it seems to be the most notable success of the year," replied his father. "A wonderful play—a play that will become the rage—— Eh? Confound you, Willy, didn't I tell you not to bother me?"

"Does it say anything about Roger Barton?" asked Willy.

"You mean the author?"

"Yes, dad."

"There is a very peculiar report concerning Mr. Barton," said Sir Edward, turning the pages of his newspaper. "There is some

ridiculous rumour that he was horsewhipped by a schoolboy—— Upon my soul!" he added, with a start. "How many more times must I tell you that I won't answer your questions?"

"All right, dad—just as you like," said Willy. "I'll have a look at the paper when you've done with it. Or I'll grab Edie's."

"Try and get it!" said Edith, laughing. And breakfast continued in much the same way.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRUTH ABOUT ROGER BARTON.



"BY George!" said Handforth excitedly.

He had managed to secure one of the Sunday newspapers—there were several at the table—and he had just finished reading the criticism of the previous evening's new play at the Emperor Theatre.

"By George!" he repeated. "This—this makes me boil! They give Barton all the credit—they claim him as the greatest playwright of the decade! And the rotter didn't write a word of the play!"

"How on earth do you know?" asked his brother-in-law.

"How do I know?" Handforth stared, and then snorted. "My hat! Didn't old Browne produce this very play in Noggs' Theatre? It was called 'The Third Chance' then, and Barton was Noggs' manager. The blackguard's pinched it—and sold it as his own!"

"It's a swindle," said Willy indignantly. "All St. Frank's knows that Stevens' father wrote that play——"

"One moment—one moment!" interrupted Sir Edward from the head of the table. "What is this—this discussion? Edward, what nonsense were you saying about Mr. Roger Barton?"

"Weren't you listening, dad?"

"I was reading—but I heard a few of your words," said his father. "You mustn't make such scurrilous assertions. I can't allow it, Edward. You have called this man a blackguard——"

"He's worse than a blackguard!" snorted Edward Oswald. "He's stolen that play from Stevens, of the Fifth. Every word of it—every giddy scene! Isn't that right, Willy?"

"Of course it's right," said his minor. "Didn't we produce the play in Noggs' Theatre? But don't forget we promised to keep mum, Ted. Stevens doesn't want his mother to know anything about it yet—it'll be too much of a shock for her."

"We are keeping mum," said Handforth, frowning. "We can talk in our own home circle, I suppose? We can trust the pater and mater to keep their own counsel—and

Arthur won't spout, I know. I'm not so sure about Ena——"

"I shan't speak about the old play!" said Ena coldly.

Sir Edward laid his paper aside deliberately.

"I had intended ignoring this discussion, but I find it impossible to do so," he said firmly. "What is all this talk about swindling and thieving? And Noggs' Theatre? Noggs, by George! What a ridiculous name!"

"I don't suppose the man can help it, dad," said Handforth. "Andrew Sylvanus Noggs—that's his name. He's the owner of a travelling theatre, and my play—my great 'Trackett Grim' burlesque——"

"Good gracious, yes!" interrupted his father. "You told me about it, didn't you? There's no need to go over it all again, Edward."

"No need at all," said Arthur Kirby promptly. "But this London show is a different thing. I suppose you know you've made a pretty libellous accusation, young man? You'd better be careful. If you said a word like that in public it might lead to a slander action——"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth. "Barton daren't bring any action for slander. The man's a crook—a swindling robber! Didn't he try to twist old Noggs out of his theatre?"

"Didn't he try to what?" asked Sir Edward.

"Twist old Noggs."

"Twist him?"

"Well, rook him, then?"

"I knew what you meant the first time!" said his father sternly. "But my efforts to correct your slang are evidently foredoomed to failure. The modern speech is becoming utterly appalling!"

"Oh, chuck it, dad!" protested Willy. "Don't start a giddy lecture about slang! We're talking about that rotter, Barton. Ted was going to tell you about the play last night—but you and the mater packed us off to bed."

"You came in very late, dear," said his mother.

"Nearly midnight!" growled Sir Edward. "When I was a boy I had to go to bed at nine o'clock! Holidays or no holidays! I'm altogether too easy-going with you—that's the trouble. Well, what about Barton's play? What is this cock-and-bull story you have got hold of?"

"You'd better do the talking, Ted," said Willy.

"I was going to do it, anyhow—so don't you interrupt, my lad," said Handforth. "Have you seen this report?"

"Not yet."

"The paper's gone dotty over that play," went on Handforth. "Says that it's the most amazing success that London has seen for twenty-five years! I believe it, too—the audience went simply mad last night. Clean

mad. I've never heard such cheering in a theatre."

"Are you sure you're not exaggerating, Ted?" asked his elder sister.

"Honest Injun, Edie, it was simply terrific," said Handforth earnestly. "And this newspaper says the same thing. They claim that 'The Whirlpool' will be the rage of London—and that it'll run for two or three years solid."

Sir Edward nodded.

"I must confess my own newspaper intimated the same thing," he said. "And this journal is quite a sane, staid periodical. It would not lend itself to any cheap-jack methods. There is not merely the usual criticism, but a separate column concerning the play. It undoubtedly created a sensation."

"I should think it did!" agreed Edward Oswald. "Weren't we in the theatre—Church and McClure and I? And Nipper and Pitt and Watson and Archie and a lot of others? Browne and Stevens were there, too——"

"You must remember, Edward, that these names mean nothing to us—or very little, at all events," interrupted his father. "Who are Browne and Stevens? I don't seem to remember having heard those names before?"

"Browne's the skipper of the Fifth, pater," explained Willy. "A chap after our own heart, too. He reminds me of you a bit."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, rather. He can do anything. He's the most capable fellow you could wish to meet—with a pure, colossal cheek. He's got a nerve like—— Well, there's no word to describe his nerve! The fellow's a born comedian, too. One of the best."

Sir Edward did not seem particularly flattered.

"So this boy, Browne, has a colossal cheek—and he is a born comedian!" he repeated coldly. "And he is like me?"

Edward Oswald snorted.

"Don't take any notice of Willy, dad," he said. "The young ass doesn't know what he's talking about. You couldn't hold a candle to Browne when it comes to getting things done—— I—I mean, not in the same way," he added hastily. "It was Browne who produced this play—and Willy and I acted in it. So we know what we're talking about. Why, Stevens produced the original manuscript. It was written by his own father——"

"But who is Stevens?" asked Edith.

"Horace Stevens, of the Fifth—Browne's particular pal," explained Handforth impatiently. "A pretty keen actor, too—he did marvels in old Noggs' Theatre—played 'Hamlet,' you know. Noggs was wild about it—wild with enthusiasm, I mean."

"But hang it, you must be wrong somewhere," said Arthur Kirby dubiously. "This play you're speaking about can't be

'The Whirlpool' under another name——"
"It is!" interrupted Edward Oswald.
"Or, rather, 'The Whirlpool' is Stevens' play with a new title. I tell you that Roger Barton is a crook. He pinched the thing—deliberately stole it."

"Then why doesn't the real author take proceedings?" asked Sir Edward. "Come, Edward, this is altogether too fantastic——"

"Stevens' pater is dead," said Handforth quietly. "His mother isn't particularly rich, and she's none too strong, either. They're not telling her about this production yet—it would be too much of a shock for her."

"Oh, I see," said his father. "Upon my soul! I wonder if there can be any foundation for your suspicions? It certainly sounds peculiar——"

"Suspensions be blowed!" roared Handforth. "Sorry, dad! But, dash it, you seem so jolly hard to convince! They aren't suspicions at all. We know it! Don't I keep telling you that we acted in the play? We saw the manuscript, and—and everything! And last night the whole play was put on at the Emperor Theatre word for word, and scene for scene. Nothing was altered except the title and the names and places. And then Barton—that rotten crook of a Barton—came on the stage and made a speech! Why, it—it was absolutely fearful!"

"The newspaper mentions that there was some disturbance, but it glosses over the actual details," said Sir Edward. "Good gracious! I trust you didn't take part in this uproar."

"I jolly well did!" retorted his son. "I got up, and called Barton a liar—in front of the whole giddy house! And so did Stevens. Why, we were simply boiling with rage. That blackguard must have broken into St. Frank's one night and——"

He broke off, and gasped. A startled, amazed expression sprang into his eyes.

CHAPTER III.

SIR EDWARD'S INVITATION.



EVERYBODY at the breakfast table was watching Handforth curiously.

"What is it, 'Edward?'" asked his mother.

"I—I've just thought of something!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "By George! Something that happened weeks ago—one night at St. Frank's, when I'd gone downstairs after lights-out——"

"Oh!" said his brother-in-law. "That's very interesting. Is that the kind of thing you do at your school?"

"Don't be a chump!" protested Handforth. "I wasn't off on the razzle——"

"You weren't what?" asked his father.

"I wasn't going out on the spree, dad," explained Handforth impatiently. "I just went downstairs to write some of my new play. It was one o'clock before I'd finished, and—— Yes, I remember now! I saw somebody in the upper corridor. I chased him—and nearly grabbed the beggar, too. Great Scott! It must have been Barton—pinching poor old Stevens' play. I'll bet a quid it was Barton!"

"This is the first I've heard about it," said Willy severely. "Ted, you ass, why the dickens didn't you tell me?"

"Why should I tell you?" asked Handforth tartly.

"Because we might have got on the track," said his minor. "I'll bet you forgot all about it the next day——"

"Forgot all about it!" echoed Sir Edward. "But—but that's absurd! Surely you reported this suspicious occurrence to your Housemaster, Edward?"

Arthur Kirby laughed.

"Surely he didn't!" he said drily. "I can hardly imagine a junior reporting to me that he had been out and about at one o'clock in the morning! I'll bet the young rascal maintained a discreet silence."

"Young rascal yourself!" said Handforth, glaring. "You're not my Housemaster, thank goodness, Arthur! I'll bet some of your chaps go through the mill, poor beggars!"

"You needn't insult Arthur!" said his father, sternly.

"I'm used to it!" grinned Kirby.

"I didn't think the affair was worth reporting, anyhow," said Handforth. "Nobody missed any valuables, and I didn't want to create any unnecessary comment. That reminds me, too!" he added, with a start. "By George, yes! I've got one of the chap's buttons!"

"That's a fat lot of good!" said Willy tartly.

"It's a clue!" retorted his major. "An overcoat button, my lad—not a common or garden thing, but a special pattern, with a distinctive scroll to it. If we could only see Barton in that overcoat——"

"Even supposing the man was Roger Barton, he is not likely to have kept that coat after that incident," interrupted Arthur Kirby. "Or, at least, he would have the sense to change all the buttons."

Sir Edward sat back, and looked thoughtful.

"A most peculiar affair," he commented. "Under the circumstances, I can hardly doubt the truth of your story, Edward. If you acted in this play, you should certainly know what you're talking about. Barton is evidently a worthless scamp who stole that poor lad's play for his own purposes."

"Marvellous!" breathed Willy.

"It remains to be seen what can be done," proceeded Sir Edward. "Cannot this boy, Stevens, persuade his mother to take legal action?"

"His mother doesn't know anything about it, dad."

"No, so you said. But she cannot be kept in ignorance for long. This play is worth a fortune—Barton must be coining money already—"

"That's just the point, pater," put in Willy. "Barton's not only coining money, but the owner of the Emperor Theatre is Samuel Arrowsmith—practically a millionaire."

"What of that?"

"Mr. Arrowsmith is bound to support Barton if there's any hint of legal proceedings," replied Willy. "It's Arrowsmith's production, isn't it? And with limitless money at their disposal, they'll squash anything that comes along. Poor Mrs. Stevens won't stand a chance."

Sir Edward frowned.

"I was not aware that you were invited to express any opinion, William!" he said severely. "A mere child! Upon my soul, these youngsters are under the belief that they know as much as their elders! Um! At the same time, you are probably right, my boy. You have, indeed, raised a very important point."

"Of course I have," agreed Willy.

"I fear that Mrs. Stevens will indeed engage upon a hopeless battle if she brings any action against the Emperor Theatre management," said Sir Edward.

"But—but this is awful!" shouted Handforth excitedly. "Do you mean to say that that swindling rotter is to reap all the profits of Stevens' play? Why, it's scandalous! I'll bet old Browne won't sit still under a thing like that!"

"Clever as this boy Browne may be, there are limits to his powers," said the master of the house. "No, I fear the matter looks very serious. There have been cases of such gross injustice before—and, unhappily, the wrong parties have triumphed. There is this rumour, too, about Barton being horsewhipped—"

"Rumour!" interrupted Handforth, with a snort.

"An absurd rumour, of course—"

"Why, dad, you're dotty!" gasped Edward Oswald.

"What!"

"I—I mean, it isn't a rumour!" panted Handforth. "We saw it! Church and McClure and I! Browne, too! We saw the whole thing!"

"You saw Barton horsewhipped?"

"Of course we did."

"By this boy Stevens?"

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Handforth, exasperated. "Stevens lashed him like the dickens—chased him half up the Haymarket! A terrific crowd collected, the police came, and Stevens actually asked to be arrested."

"Oh, the foolish, foolish boy!" exclaimed Lady Handforth, in horror.

"And did they arrest him?" inquired Edith.

"No," snorted her brother. "Barton was afraid to bring the charge. I expect he thought it would mean too much publicity. Of course, he didn't want to appear in the court, and have Stevens accuse him of stealing his play. Let's have a look at the paper, dad."

This time Sir Edward made no objections, and Handforth stared rather dazedly at the item concerning the so-called rumour.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he gasped. "Look at this! An absolute denial! It's called 'A Ridiculous Trumped-up Story.' They say there's not a word of truth in it—and that Roger Barton is treating the affair as a joke. This paper ought to be publicly burnt!"

"It's not the paper's fault, you chump!" said Willy. "They wouldn't have a reporter on the spot, and you can bet that the Emperor Theatre management sent them that denial. I expect it's published in good faith."

"But—but it's a lie!" panted Handforth. "Barton was horsewhipped! I saw it! And now the public's fooled—all the papers are saying that the horsewhipping was only a rumour. The public ought to know the truth."

Sir Edward shook his head.

"Does the public ever know the truth—about anything?" he asked sagely. "I'm afraid not. The most difficult thing in the world, Edward, is to get the truth known. Lies can be easily circulated—nothing, in fact, is more readily accomplished. But the truth—no!"

"Why not broadcast it, to-night, dad?" grinned Willy.

"Don't be absurd, my boy!" said his father.

"But think of the chance!" went on Willy. "You'll be in front of that microphone, and you can snap it out before the B.B.C. officials can stop you! I say, what a chance!"

"Willy, I dislike these facetious suggestions of yours!" said Sir Edward coldly. "Unless you are very careful, I shall refuse to let you come with me to the London Studio."

Handforth was staring.

"What's this about broadcasting?" he asked. "I didn't know you'd joined the B.B.C., dad. Are you going to sing, or what?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" frowned his father.

"The B.B.C. has asked me to give out the general news this evening—and, as a public man, I cannot very well refuse. A ridiculous affair, of course," he added carelessly. "A nuisance, in fact. But we have our duties, and we must perform them. If you had been at home last evening, Edward, you would have heard of this."

"Oh, well, it's nothing much, anyhow!" said Edward Oswald. "Giving out the general news, eh? I thought it was going to be something good! I'd like to see the Studio, though," he added thoughtfully. "Can I come with you, dad?"

"H'm! I'm not so sure," replied his father. "I have already promised Willy that he can come— Well, I suppose it will be all right," he added. "Yes, Edward, you can come if you wish."

Willy sighed.

"Now the fat's in the fire," he said resignedly. "Just like you, dad, to go and spoil everything! I'd purposely told Ted nothing about it. I knew he'd want to come. We shan't have a minute's peace with him there—and we shall probably be chucked out of the Studio on our necks!"

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised!" said Handforth tartly.

The elders assumed that he was merely sarcastic—but Willy caught a curiously grim note in his major's voice, and he gave him a sharp look.

"Oh!" murmured Willy to himself. "O-ho!"

CHAPTER IV.

HORACE STEVENS' MISERY.



HORACE STEVENS gave his mother's arm a gentle pressure.

"That's all right, mother," he said softly. "No need to worry about me like that. I shall be all right."

I've given up all hope of Oxford, and I



"But, Mr. Webb, haven't I told you how impossible it has been?" asked Mrs. Stevens, her voice more tremulous than before. "I beg of you to go. My son knows nothing of this affair, and he may be down to breakfast at any minute—"

"I can't help your son," interrupted the other gruffly.

don't suppose I shall be able to stay at St. Frank's for very long, either. I'm resigned. I'm going to put my heart and soul into acting."

For a moment or two Mrs. Stevens made no reply. She and her son were alone in the quiet drawing-room of their modest home at Regent's Park. It was afternoon now, and the drawing-room was singularly peaceful.

Mrs. Stevens was a widow, her husband having died many years earlier. And she and her son were practically alone, for there were no other children. Aunts and uncles and nephews and nieces, of course—but visitors of this type were few and far between. For the Stevenses were poor.

Much poorer than Horace ever realised—until now.

He had been at St. Frank's from a fag upwards, and had never given a thought to financial matters. He knew, of course, that his mother had to be careful with new suits, books, and other essentials of school life. His pocket-money, too, had always been more or less limited.

This was a point he had intended raising during these holidays. Now that he was over seventeen, and well into the Senior School, there were a hundred and one ways in which money could be used. In fact, at a great Public school like St. Frank's, money was essential.

However, he had learned—to his inward dismay—that financial affairs were by no means as stable as he had always imagined. His father had left Mrs. Stevens with a comfortable income, and before the war she had been able to maintain an excellent home. But her income remained stationary whilst the cost of living became nearly doubled. And then the income had grown less—owing to unexpected falls in the stock market.

Even Stevens had no real idea of the truth. His mother had simply told him that money was none too plentiful. He didn't guess how she had screwed and pinched—how she had denied herself endlessly. He had always come first with his mother.

And during these holidays she had broken the news to him that Oxford was impossible. She might be able to continue the heavy expenses of St. Frank's—but the University, no. His hopes in that direction were shattered. And he was resigned to the idea now.

Mrs. Stevens was rather a fragile-looking lady—pale-featured, delicate, and showing the faded traces of a previous beauty. Indeed, she was still beautiful, in a gentle, inexpensively charming way. There was something very lovable about Mrs. Stevens.

Horace himself sat for some little time in silence, too. There were thoughts in his mind which he dared not speak aloud—thoughts concerning his dead father's great play. Last night Stevens had seen that play achieve one of the greatest successes that London had ever known. And he had seen another man claim the work as his own!

But his mother knew nothing. The title of the play was changed, and, in any case, Stevens had taken good care to keep the newspapers away from his mother. If she read the criticisms she might recognise the plot—and suspect.

Later, of course, it wouldn't matter—for she would inevitably hear of the play's amazing success. She wouldn't associate it with her husband's work. Her health was frail, and Horace was terribly afraid that the shock of learning the truth would bowl her completely over.

"You're not saying anything, mother," he whispered at length.

"No, dear," replied Mrs. Stevens. "I was thinking. I am so concerned, Horace—so worried about you—"

"About me? What on earth for?"

"You keep on talking about acting, dear," said his mother gently. "Oh, I don't want to discourage you—I don't want you to think I don't appreciate your enthusiasm and your talent! But, Horry, do you think it wise? Do you think you will be able to make an honourable name for yourself?"

"Why not?"

"The stage is so precarious, my boy," she went on, shaking her head. "Even the best of actors have their trials. It is terribly difficult to make a good income unless you are at the very top. Business is different, Horace. It is more certain—more stable—"

"But I hate business, mother!"

Mrs. Stevens sighed.

"I know," she said. "But perhaps you won't always hate it, Horace. And if you only persevere—"

"Oh, hang it, mother, aren't you a bit old-fashioned?" asked Stevens rebelliously. "I've set my heart on the stage, and I mean to make it my career in life. It wouldn't matter if I had thousands—millions! I should still want to act—just for the love of it. The very idea of business stupefies me. I couldn't stick it, mother! I should be— Oh, I don't know! Anyhow, I couldn't stick it!"

Mrs. Stevens looked at him gravely.

"You're full of enthusiasm, Horace, and I don't wonder at it," she said. "I'm afraid your companions have been putting big ideas into your head. Wrong ideas. It sounds so rosy now—the future looks so promising. But you have made your success because you are a schoolboy. It is only a false impression, dear. It would be very different if you started out to make a living."

Horace breathed hard.

"I don't want to argue, mother—you wouldn't understand my feelings, anyhow," he said quietly. "But I couldn't stick in business. I should become absolutely stagnated—and get nowhere. But on the stage— By jingo, on the stage there's no knowing where I should get!"

"Dreams, Horace, dear—they are just castles in the air," said his mother sadly. "Oh, don't I know? Didn't your father have the same dreams? He wrote plays—wonderful plays—and never made any success at all. Give up these wild ideas, Horace."

"They're not wild, mother—"

"There's Mr. Tudor, our family lawyer," continued Mrs. Stevens. "He has promised me to find an opening for you when you leave school—which, I am afraid, will be sooner than we had first thought. I don't think you can remain at St. Frank's after this year, Horace. Mr. Tudor knows a big man in the City—a great firm of stock-brokers—who will give you a good start in their office."

Horace Stevens' face became clouded.

"A stockbroker's office!" he muttered.

"Oh, hang it, mother—"

"It won't be so alluring as the stage, dear,

but it will be more certain," said his mother gently. "For a year or two you will receive a merely nominal salary—but it will be sufficient for your own needs. Our saving on the St. Frank's expenses will help enormously, too."

"But are things really as—as tight as that?"

"Yes, darling."

"Why didn't you tell me before, mother?" he asked gruffly. "I'm hanged if I'll go back to St. Frank's at all! I've got an appointment with Mr. Crowson, the owner of the Pall Mall Theatre. He'll give me a job, I know. Before the end of the year I'll be earning good money on the West End stage."

"Horace, you mustn't think—you mustn't dream of it!" interrupted Mrs. Stevens, with concern. "It's—it's too precarious! Besides, I've promised Mr. Tudor—"

"Good old Tudor!" muttered Stevens. "He's a brick, I know, but he doesn't understand me, mums, dear. Neither do you. But if you're really set on this, I suppose I'd better chuck up my own ambitions."

He became silent—staring gloomily in front of him. And there was something, too, about his flushed face and his tense eyes that hinted at something suppressed. His mother regarded him very tenderly.

"You mustn't become depressed, Horace," she said. "And there's no need to talk about leaving St. Frank's immediately. Indeed, you mustn't. Your fees for next term are already paid—"

"Hush!" murmured Horace, as a tap sounded on the door.

CHAPTER V.

LETTING HIMSELF GO.



A MAIDSERVANT appeared.

"Mr. Browne, ma'am, and two other gentlemen," she announced.

Stevens sprang up.

"Good!" he said, with ill-concealed relief. "I was expecting old Browne!"

"And old Browne has not failed you, Brother Horace," observed William Napoleon Browne, as he lounged gracefully into the drawing room. "In fact, old Browne has turned up in all his regal glory—accompanied by Brother Hamilton and Brother Pitt. Greetings, dear Mrs. Stevens. Allow me to express the view that you are looking charming. Although the sky is cloudy at the moment, the sun inevitably shines when you are present."

Mrs. Stevens smiled.

"What a boy you are for talking nonsense, Billy!" she protested, as she gravely shook hands. "Splendid! Nipper and Reggie! I think I've got the names right,

haven't I? You've come to tea, haven't you?"

"That wasn't exactly the idea, Mrs. Stevens," smiled Nipper. "We just came round to see your son, you know. We don't like to palm ourselves on you like this—"

"Another word, my lad, and I'll kick you!" said Stevens grimly.

"Horace!" protested his mother.

"Well, the young fathead shouldn't talk like that," growled Stevens. "Palming themselves on us! What next?"

Browne, the elegant and lanky skipper of the Fifth, smiled.

"I am inclined to echo, 'What next?', Brother Horace," he remarked. "This abode, of course, is our second home. We have always regarded it as such. We walk in as we please, and we do as we like. That, I take it, is the general idea, dear lady?"

"Of course it is, Billy—and you know it!" smiled Mrs. Stevens. "I suppose you'll want to go up to Horry's den now, won't you? You'll come down when the gong sounds?"

"Two stairs at a time, fair lady," promised Browne.

They went off—the two seniors and the two juniors. Reggie Pitt and Dick Hamilton were not constant visitors, such as Browne was, but there was a particular reason for their Sunday afternoon call on this occasion. Browne, of course, had not exaggerated when he declared that he regarded the house as his second home. During every holiday he spent fully half his time at Mrs. Stevens' table—and Horace spent the corresponding half at Sir Rufus Browne's table.

The "den" was a small room at the top of the old-fashioned house—an attic, in fact, which Stevens had converted into a little study. There were one or two easy-chairs—a few bookcases, and the walls were plastered with photographs of famous cricketers and footballers, and such like. Altogether, a schoolboy's den, in every sense of the word.

"Jolly good!" commented Reggie Pitt, as he sat on the corner of the table. "This is the first time I've been up here, Stevens. I've got a room at home, but it's not as good as this. I think I'll take it as a pattern."

"Yes, by Jove, it's natty," declared Nipper.

"One moment, brothers—one moment!" said Browne gently. "I may be wrong, but it seems to me that Brother Horace is surcharged with a certain amount of surplus emotion. Whatever it is, Brother Horace, let it surge forth. Let it—"

"Barton!" panted Stevens. "I'm thinking about that hound, Roger Barton! Thank goodness, you chaps have come! I've bottled myself up all day—I haven't breathed a word to the mater! But I can let it out now, thank goodness!"

"Go ahead, brother."

"Barton's a blackguard—a thieving dog!" exclaimed Stevens fiercely.

"Splendid!"

"He's nothing but scum!" went on Horace. "And I've got to face the mater, and say nothing! The cur! The crooked rotter!"

"Better and better!" beamed Browne.

"The filthy leper isn't fit to mix with human society!" went on Stevens passionately. "And to-day his name is on the lips of everybody in London! He's famous! The great new playwright! The most talked-of man in dramatic circles! And that play is my father's! Oh, the thieving, swindling beast! The unmitigated scoundrel!"

Stevens paused, breathless.

"One moment!" said Browne gently. "I have here, Brother Horace, an excellent pocket dictionary. A brief glance, I am sure, will acquaint you with quite a new selection of words. There are still plenty left——"

"Chuck it, Browne," said Nipper, frowning. "The poor old chap's nearly distracted. I expect you saw that paragraph in the paper this morning, too, Stevens? That denial of the rumour?"

"Rumour!" burst out Stevens. "Good Heavens! How the man possesses the nerve, I don't know! Hundreds of people saw me horsewhip him—I chased the hound up the Haymarket! And yet it is reported in the papers as a rumour—and denied! I feel like going to the Press agencies and telling them——"

"A waste of time, old man," interrupted Pitt. "They wouldn't take any notice of you. You can't expect them to. A school-boy's word against that of Roger Barton and Samuel Arrowsmith!"

"Arrowsmith is about the biggest man in the theatrical business," said Dick Hamilton. "You couldn't possibly fight him, Stevens. He's got millions behind him."

Horace Stevens seemed to crumple up.

"Yes, I know," he muttered hoarsely. "That's what nearly kills me. What chance have we got? What hope of justice? We're poor—poverty-stricken—and it costs money to bring actions. How can the mater and I do anything against Barton? How can we prove that he's stolen my father's play? Ye gods! I feel so helpless—so absolutely helpless!"

He paused, breathing heavily.

"The reports this morning, too!" he went on, before anybody else could speak. "Did you see them? They say that this play is going to make theatrical history! The critics have gone mad over it. They reckon it'll run for years. It's worth a fortune!"

"That's a certainty," agreed Nipper. "I've never seen an audience go mad like it did last night. The play deserved it, too—it's a winner from the rise of the curtain to the fall."

Stevens sprang up, his face pale and drawn.

"And the mater and I have got to stand by and see this thief take the money that belongs to us," he panted shakily. "We're broke! D'you hear? The mater's nearly off her head with worry! I shan't be able to stop at St. Frank's after next term, either! Our income has dwindled, and I believe there are a lot of debts—— And Barton—— Barton gloats over his money—our money!"

He stopped abruptly, and sat down.

The others were looking pained, and for a moment or two there was an awkward silence. It was Stevens himself who broke it.

"I'm sorry!" he muttered. "Forgive me, Browne, old man. Forgive me, you chaps. I didn't mean to let it out like that. Forget what I said about debts—and things——"

"We would like to forget, Brother Horace, but, alas, it is too late," said Browne. "It is not our desire to know your mother's financial affairs—but since you have released the cat from the bag in one bound, we cannot refrain from comment. And why be ashamed? Poverty is no crime. And, if it comes to that, your mother has no poverty. She is rich. You are both rich. This play is yours, and you will naturally reap the benefits."

"But Barton——"

"For the moment, Brother Barton holds the whip hand," continued Browne. "But he will not triumph for long, Brother Horace. It is upon this very subject that we have called. Your father's play will make a fortune—and that fortune belongs to your mother. Patience is the watchword. Above all, have patience. And in the end you will be triumphant."

"I wish I could share your optimism, Browne," said Nipper dubiously.

"So do I," added Reggie Pitt.

"It's no good, old man," said Stevens, shaking his head. "What can we do? It costs a mint of money to bring actions—and a bigger mint of money to win them. Barton has got Samuel Arrowsmith behind him, and they'll both fight to the utmost limit if we start any legal proceedings. I tell you, we haven't got a chance."

William Napoleon Browne patted his chum's knee.

"A purely fantastical theory, Brother Horace," he said gently. "You not only stand a chance, but you are certain of victory. Have I not given you the promise of my support?"

"It's jolly good of you, Browne, but——"

"And have I not brought you word that my pater has promised to see you, and to discuss things in general?"

"Your pater?" breathed Stevens, with a start.

"A man of sound stability, I assure you," nodded Browne. "Indeed, I venture to suggest that my pater is a somewhat sounder proposition than a dozen Samuel Arrowsmiths—and a thousand or so Roger Bartons."

"Your pater—Sir Rufus Browne," whispered Stevens, his eyes gleaming. "He's—he's pretty well up in legal matters, isn't he?"

Browne smiled.

"With all due modesty, let me remark that my pater is not merely well up, but at the topmost pinnacle," he replied. "A K.C. for many years—a great name at the Bar. And nowadays a celebrated judge. What greater man could you have at your side during this time of trial?"

Stevens clutched his friend's arm.

"And—and your pater has promised to help?" he asked breathlessly.

"Not exactly—but I have promised that my pater shall help," beamed William Napoleon Browne. "And what, Brother Horace, is the difference?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE B.B.C. STUDIO.



WILLY HANDFORTH sighed.

"What's the good of being ready on time?" he asked tartly. "No sign of Ted yet—and I expect the pater will be hours

late! He always is. And then Ted wonders who he takes after! We shall get to the studio just as they are closing down!"

Willy was standing in the hall of his father's house, overcoated in readiness for the evening's jaunt, and with his cap in his hand. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were standing near by, looking envious.

"Luck beggar!" said Chubby Heath. "It isn't everybody who can go to the B.B.C. studio! I say, can't you manage to get a few words in? We'll stay here, and listen in on your pater's 5-valve set! In fact, your sister has advised us to!"

"I thought she had more sense!" said Willy. "Edie, you mean? My hat! She'll have a fine old time, looking after you chaps—and looking after the sideboard!"

"The sideboard?" said Juicy Lemon, with a start. "I'd forgotten—. H'm! Those bananas look rather topping," he added, glancing into the open doorway of the dining-room. "And the oranges are pretty decent, too. I just feel like an orange," he added carelessly.

Willy grinned.

"That's a good riddle," he said. "When does a lemon feel like an orange? But none of those hints, my lad! If Edie is dotty enough to pander to you, that's her look out—Hallo, here's Ted at last! Where are my smoked goggles? This is too dazzling for the naked eyesight!"

"Young fathead!" said Handforth fiercely.

Willy gazed at his major, with one hand shading his eyes. Undoubtedly, Edward Oswald was dressed perfectly for the occasion. His evening suit was beyond reproach.

His white shirt was spotless, his dinner jacket innocent of any rucks, and his trousers were superbly creased. And his feet were encased in gleaming patent-leather shoes.

But Willy need not have made any pretence of being dazzled—for he was practically as smart as Edward Oswald. A spot or two of ink on his front, a splash of orange juice on one cuff, a slight crumple at the rear of his collar—these trifles were not worthy of notice.

"Where's the pater?" asked Handforth importantly.

"No sign of him yet," replied Willy. "The car's at the door, we're all ready, and the pater is still upstairs, dressing. Can you imagine anything more disgusting?"

"You young ass, the mater will hear if you're not careful!" hissed Handforth. "All the better, perhaps," he added, as a thought struck him. "You'll be forbidden to come. Goodness knows we don't want you!"

"Why not stay behind, Willy?" asked Chubby Heath. "It'll be great fun listening to your pater, you know. You've got a lovely loud-speaker here, and there's that sideboard, too—"

"We're taking the loud-speaker with us" interrupted Willy.

"What? To the studio?"

"Yes!"

"What the dickens for?"

"How do I know?" asked Willy. "He wants to come—that's all!"

"Eh? He wants. Oh, you mean your major!" grinned Chubby. "By Jingo, that's not a bad description!"

Fortunately, Handforth himself was struggling into his overcoat, and did not hear these insulting references to himself. He was looking in one of his grimmest moods—hardly the kind of humour one would expect when bent upon such an innocent mission. His mind seemed to be fixed firmly upon some desperate project, and he gave little or no attention to the fags.

"Why doesn't the pater come?" he asked impatiently, as he glanced at the hall clock. "Great Scott! Look at the time! Half-past eight! And we're supposed to be in the studio at a quarter to nine! Hi! Pater!" he bellowed, going to the foot of the stairs.

"It's no good doing that, you ass!" said Willy. "The pater never comes if you urge him. He's just like you—obstinate. The more you want him to do a thing, the less he'll do it. Better go upstairs and tell him he's got tons of time, and he'll dash out like mad."

But Handforth wisely refrained from adopting such a course. He fumed about in the hall, much to the amusement of his sister Edith and her husband, who had just come in from a Sunday evening walk. It wasn't until the clock showed twenty minutes to nine that Sir Edward came bustling downstairs.

"About time, too, pater!" said Handforth impatiently. "The car's been outside for

hours! We can't possibly get to Selfridge's in five minutes."

"Selfridge's!" retorted Sir Edward. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, isn't the London studio just near Selfridge's?" asked Handforth. "Every kid knows that—"

"What!" ejaculated his father, gazing at the clock. "Good gracious! I had no idea— Quick! Are you ready, boys? We shall be late! We can't possibly hold up the news bulletin! The official announcer will give out the news unless we are quick."

Sir Edward seemed exceedingly anxious. He wasn't like a man who regarded the affair as a nuisance. As a matter of fact, that was only a pose. In his heart, he was very proud of the fact that he had been asked to broadcast. And although he pretended to be doing his sons a favour, he badly wanted them to accompany him so that they could witness his great feat. Like his elder son, Sir Edward had a certain propensity for showing off.

And now he was in a great hurry. This haste, however, was quite unnecessary—as Willy revealed to his chums as he jabbed them in the ribs by way of saying good-bye.

"Tons of time!" he murmured. "I shoved the clock on ten minutes. We have to do these things with the pater, you know."

"You'll get licked if he finds out," said Chubby dubiously.

"How can he find out?" asked Willy. "You've got to put the clock back ten minutes as soon as we've gone. Ta-ta! See you to-morrow, I suppose? Don't forget—ten o'clock, under Nelson's monument."

They agreed, and Willy hurried off—just hopping into the car as his father was making inquiries about him. Naturally, they reached the London studio with plenty of time to spare, and the courteous B.B.C. officials escorted them into the particular studio from which Sir Edward would broadcast. His two sons displayed the correct amount of awed interest. They thought it just as well to put it on a bit, for they always found that it paid to spoof their father in this way. A sufficient amount of dazzled wonder at his doings invariably meant a handsome tip.

Sir Edward ran over the news, and obtained a thorough understanding of the procedure. He was determined to put in one or two comments of his own regarding the news items—and this, he found, was quite in order. It further pleased him to learn that his name would be clearly announced in advance.

"And remember, not a sound from you boys!" he said warningly, turning to his sons. "I am not altogether sure that you should be permitted to remain in the studio during this transmission."

"Then what was the good of coming, dad?" asked Willy.

The officials made it clear that the juniors were welcome to remain if they maintained

a discreet silence. The time was drawing near. Sir Edward eyed the microphone rather dubiously.

"Rummy looking thing," said Handforth, gazing at the box-like apparatus on its wheeled framework. "If I speak into that contrivance, do you mean to say I shall be heard all over London—all over England and Wales?"

"You won't be heard, Ted—because you won't be allowed to smash the diaphragm with your beautiful voice!"

Complete silence was enjoined a minute or two later, for the hour had arrived. Sir Edward gave out the news with expert efficiency, speaking clearly, concisely, and with a decided air of importance. One or two of the officials stood by, thoroughly satisfied.

Edward Oswald and Willy stood by, too—and there was something tense about Handforth's attitude. Twice he seemed on the point of taking some sort of action, but he checked himself, and silently gulped—as though he couldn't make up his mind.

Then his face clouded with indignation. For his father was just transmitting an item of news which acted as a spur. Even Sir Edward hesitated before giving this piece of news out. But it was on the type-written sheet, so he could not avoid it.

"Mr. Roger Barton, the brilliant author of last night's new play—'The Whirlpool'—has to-day received thousands of congratulatory telegrams," said Sir Edward, reading aloud. "It is many years since London has witnessed such an outstanding success as this remarkable play. Unfortunately, Mr. Barton caught a slight chill last night, and is to-day confined to his bed—"

"By George!" breathed Handforth, thickly. There was a wild look in his eyes—an expression of utter recklessness.

CHAPTER VII.

LISTENING-IN.



HORACE STEVENS looked rather apologetic.

"It's hardly worth turning on," he said. "It's not much of a set, you know—only one valve, and the loud speaker isn't particularly loud, either. Not bad, of course—because we're so close to the studio. But it's a job to pick up much else, and we—"

"Pointless objections, Brother Horace," said William Napoleon Browne. "Let us switch on, by all means."

"After your whacking great super eight-valve set at home, you'll think this is an awful dud," said Stevens dubiously.

"Rubbish!" replied Browne. "I dislike using these strong terms, Brother Horace—but rubbish! Brother Handforth's father is bent upon delighting an eagerly impatient

throng with the sound of his voice. Imagine the millions who are now waiting, with bated breath, to hear the great man give out the general news bulletin."

"By Jove, Handy's pater!" said Reggie Pitt. "Yes, I remember now—I saw something about it in this morning's paper. But I'd forgotten it. Switch on quickly, Stevens, or we might miss it."

They were in the drawing-room, Mrs. Stevens having insisted upon the three visitors staying for the evening. They had partaken of tea, and Mrs. Stevens was now personally superintending the preparation of supper—for she was old-fashioned enough to have mid-day dinner on Sundays, although late dinner was the usual order for weekdays.

Stevens was feeling much happier—much easier in mind. The knowledge that Sir Rufus Browne was interested in his case had bucked him up tremendously. Sir Rufus didn't know anything about it yet, but his son had given his word. And Stevens knew Browne well enough to trust him.

The wireless was switched on, and it wasn't half so bad as Stevens had intimated. The reception was clear and full, and some orchestral music was being broadcast. It was naturally of a sober nature, being Sunday evening.

"It's all right—we're before time," said Stevens, as he finished tuning in. "Not so bad, is it? Perhaps they're transmitting better than usual."

Browne nodded.

"They'll need to, Brother Horace," he agreed. "With Brother Handforth's pater at the microphone! But what is this? Splendid! Hold yourselves ready for the great orator!"

A minute later Sir Edward's voice filled that quiet Regent's Park drawing-room. It came booming out with such lifelike resonance that Reggie Pitt and Nipper grinned. They were well acquainted with Sir Edward's voice.

"He sounds pretty pleased with himself," chuckled Nipper.

"He's in his element," nodded Reggie. "There's nothing he likes better than this sort of thing. Sir Edward would give anything if the country had a general election every six months! Think of the opportunities for political speeches!"

"Dry up, you young asses!" said Stevens, frowning. "Why, hallo! What the—Barton, by Jove!"

They all became silent at the mention of Roger Barton's name. And the expression on Horace Stevens' face became tense as he heard that reference to Barton's "slight chill." All four listeners-in knew that Barton was confined to his bed because he was covered with weals.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Barton caught a slight chill last night, and is to-day confined to his bed," came Sir Edward Handforth's voice from the loud speaker. "We feel that all our listeners will wish him a speedy re-

covery. Such dramatists as Mr. Barton are scarce—"

At this point, Sir Edward's voice broke off suddenly. A swift confusion of sounds followed, and then came another voice—loud, excited and clear. The speaker was obviously so close to the microphone that the reception was imperfect. But every word could be heard and understood.

"It's a lie!" roared the new voice. "Don't take any notice of that last bit, everybody! Roger Barton is a liar and a thief! He denied that he was horsewhipped last night, but he was horsewhipped! The rotter was absolutely tanned until he's black and blue—because he stole that play from the real author!"

"Handy!" gurgled Nipper, aghast.

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Reggie Pitt.

Horace Stevens' eyes were gleaming.

"He's denied that rumour!" he panted.

"But—but—"

"Hush!" murmured Browne.

"He was horsewhipped gloriously!" came Handforth's voice again. "Leggo, blow you! I say, people, don't take any notice if the B.B.C. officials apologise for what I've been saying. It'll only be their spoof. I was on the spot, and I jolly well saw Barton dancing about as the whip—"

A kind of rattle interrupted the voice, and then it was abruptly shut off—probably as the unfortunate officials switched the microphone out. They hadn't been able to prevent Handforth's few words—for he had got them in at express speed. And with full effect, too—for at that very minute tens of thousands of listeners were wondering what on earth had happened.

The loud speaker remained silent.

"Let us give all honour to Brother Handforth for this night's noble work!" said William Napoleon Browne reverently. "A masterly effort, brothers! Indeed, seldom have I heard of such braininess. We must reconstruct our views regarding Brother Handforth's intelligence."

"By Jove! The pure nerve of it!" ejaculated Nipper.

"That," said Browne, "is the quality I most admire."

"We knew old Handy was reckless, but this takes the biscuit," grinned Reggie Pitt. "He's broadcast the truth, too—even to the length that Barton pinched the play!"

Browne sighed.

"Unfortunately, the effort will be futile," he said. "It is a sad, but great truth, that a lie will be believed in preference to fact. Brother Handforth's splendid stunt will be regarded as a mere joke, and even at this minute I fear he is feeling the length of his father's tongue."

"Hold on!" said Nipper. "There's something coming!"

A moment later the official announcer made a handsome apology concerning the recent "escapade" of an unnamed visitor to the Studio. It was to be hoped that his wild statement would not be taken as official, and

the remainder of the news bulletin would follow at once. Sir Edward Handforth was so upset by the interruption that he had begged to be excused.

"So that's that!" said Stevens. "By Jove, I'm glad the mater wasn't in the room, you fellows! She might have asked awkward questions, and I don't want her to hear anything about the play yet. Good old Handforth! It's fine to know that all you chaps are so keenly on our side."

"Rats!" said Pitt. "How can we be anything else? Didn't we act in that play ourselves? We know it's your dad's, and if Barton sticks to all the money from it there's no such thing as justice."

"Poor old Handy!" said Nipper. "We can't help admiring him for his pluck—but I'll bet the poor chap is having an awful time at this minute. His father'll slaughter him!"

As a matter of fact, Edward Oswald was, at that moment, being practically dragged from the Studio by his enraged parent. Sir Edward was simply fuming with a white-hot fury. But Handforth didn't care. A feeling of triumph was surging through him. He had broadcast the truth! If people didn't like to believe it, it was their own silly fault.

Willy very wisely maintained a discreet silence. He didn't think it necessary to make any comment whatever. And so the trio found themselves in the car again, homeward bound.

Sir Edward scarcely remembered apologising to the B.B.C. officials. He hardly knew how he had got off the premises. He was only aware of the fact that this worthless son of his had disgraced him for all time.

CHAPTER VIII.

LIKE SON, LIKE FATHER!



"DISGRACEFUL!" panted Sir Edward, for about the fiftieth time.

"Good heavens! The scandal of it! The appalling scandal! I am a laughing-stock—the butt of everybody's gibes and jeers! Wait until we get home, young man! Wait until we get home!"

Handforth said nothing. He knew, from past experience, that it was always better to let his father get over the first flush of rage. Afterwards, he was easier to "wangle."

This affair, however, was something of abnormal audacity. There was no telling how Sir Edward would act. Handforth had never

enraged his father to this extent before. Outwardly, he maintained an appearance of half-scared humility. But inwardly he was scared out of his wits.

Willy sat on the opposite seat, deeply concerned for his major. He had visions of a long, pliable s'rap—visions of Edward Oswald partaking of meals standing up—visions of the unfortunate imprisoned in his bed-room for days, or in one of the cellars. Perhaps his father would even have a special dungeon built!

"An affront! The most appalling affront I have ever suffered!" continued Handforth senior, his voice husky and thick. "And from my own son! I wonder that I remain sane! You young rascal! You infernal young reprobate! You shall suffer for this, Edward! I am disgraced for ever—utterly discredited and dishonoured!"

Edward Oswald was stung into a hot retort.

"You'd have been dishonoured if I hadn't butted in, dad!" he burst out. "You know about that play—you know that Barton stole it! How could you have broadcast that lying report?"

"Enough!" thundered his father. "Not satisfied with disgracing me—your own parent—you now slander the B.B.C.—"

"But I'm not, pater!" protested Handforth. "The B.B.C. just sent out the usual news bulletin. They can't guarantee the truth of every report, can they? There's nothing against them—not likely! I think the B.B.C.'s doing jolly well! I don't agree with all these people who run it down! They've done wonderful things—"

"Silence!" stormed Sir Edward. "Don't dare to utter another word, Edward! Do you hear me? Not another sound!"

"Ted's right, though, dad," said Willy.

"What?" barked Sir Edward. "Good heavens! Shall I find it necessary to thrash you, too?"

"Not at all, dad," said Willy promptly. "I wouldn't dream of putting you to all that trouble! I've got more consideration!"

Sir Edward seemed to half-choke.

"I am in no mood for your impertinence, young man!" he panted. "You will see whether I shall be put to any trouble by thrashing you! I have not the slightest doubt that you were fully aware of Edward's base intention, even before we entered the Studio."

"I wasn't," denied Willy hotly.

"So much the better for you!"

"I only suspected it," said Willy.

"You—you young rascal—"

"But I couldn't act on suspicions, could I?" went on Willy. "Besides, I agree with the whole thing."

"You agree with it?" roared Sir Edward.

"Of course I do!"

"Upon my soul, this—this is too much—"

"Ted's a hero!" said Willy proudly. "He's upheld all the noble traditions of the race! I never dreamed he had it in him!"

ANSWERS

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In fact, I always thought he was a hopeless chump."

Handforth, who had commenced to regard Willy with brotherly warmth, suddenly glared.

"Look here, my lad—" he began.

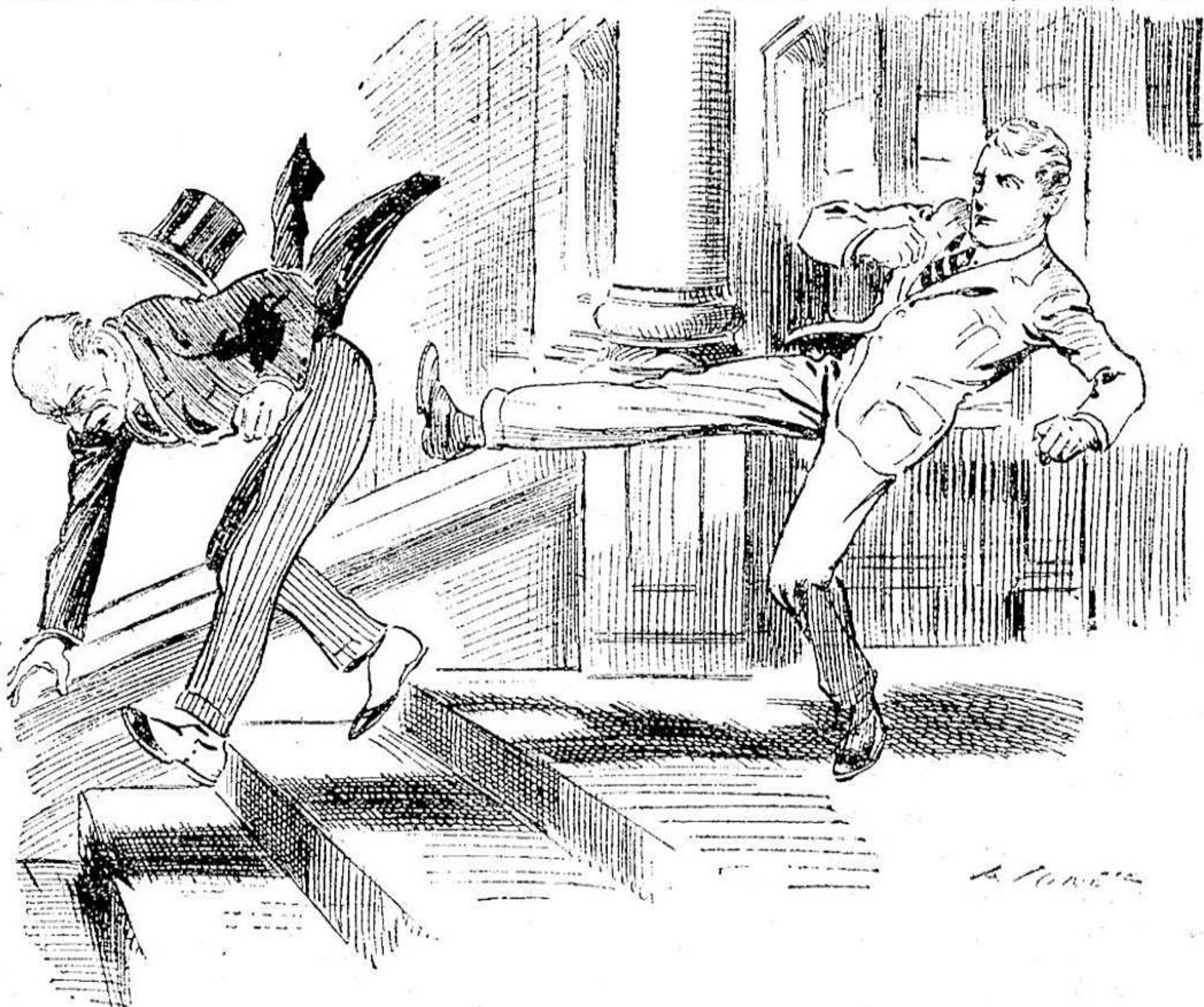
"I always regarded him as a hopeless chump," repeated Willy. "But I find I'm wrong. He isn't hopeless! In fact, after to-night, it's pretty clear that he still stands a chance."

"A chance?" breathed his major. "A chance of what?"

Edith and Ena had heard it, too—to say nothing of Arthur Kirby and Juicy Lemon and Chubby Heath. Fortunately, the latter pair had been hustled off home immediately after the disaster.

So the family would be quite to itself. Knowing Sir Edward's violence, Lady Handforth was immensely relieved. It would have been terrible if a number of grown-up visitors had been present. For they could not have been hustled off in the same way as Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon.

"I'm afraid—I'm dreadfully afraid!" Lady



Then he placed his boot well in the rear, and heaved.

"Outside!" he said breathlessly.

Mr. Webb certainly went outside. He took the steps in one flying leap.

"Cease this senseless argument at once!" commanded their father. "Your voices irritate—they annoy me! Do not dare to utter another sound! When we get home—"

He paused ominously, but it so happened that they reached home at that very moment—so the period of suspense was not likely to be long. The car glided to a standstill outside Sir Edward's residence.

Within, the whole household was fluttering.

Lady Handforth, of course, had heard her son's dramatic outburst over the wireless.

Handforth was saying. "Oh, how could Edward do it! His father will be furious!"

"I don't wonder at it," said Arthur Kirby. "Of all the born young idiots, he's the biggest! It was such a senseless thing to do—"

"But Ted only told the truth," put in Ena.

"I know that—but who'll believe it?" asked Arthur. "It's no good doing ram-headed things of that sort. It wasn't fair to the B.B.C., either. They were naturally

forced to apologise, and it placed them in a pretty rotten position. Ted deserves a thundering good hiding."

"I'm afraid he'll get it, too," said Edith, with concern.

"Here's the car!" cried Ena, from the window.

A minute later Sir Edward marched straight into the drawing-room, forcing his sons in front of him like prisoners being led to their doom. One glance round was sufficient to tell him that the family was alone.

"You heard?" he asked hoarsely.

"Don't be too hard on him, Edward!" said Lady Handforth. "I don't think he realised what he was doing——"

"I did!" broke in Handforth tensely. "I planned it this morning—at breakfast-time! I'm not afraid, either!"

"You see?" exclaimed his father, white with anger. "The young rascal gloats over it! He planned it in advance—he did the thing deliberately. How did it sound? Tell me!"

"Of course, we heard every word, father," said Edith.

"Imagine it!" said Sir Edward, still retaining his grip on his sons. "I was rudely pushed aside—thrust away from the microphone! And then—then this scamp shouted——"

"I couldn't stand it, mater!" broke in Handforth tensely. "I simply couldn't stick it—and if you want to give me a hiding, you can, dad! I don't mind! I'll take my gruel!"

"To-morrow is Bank Holiday!" said his father fiercely. "You will remain in your room all day, young man! Throughout these holidays you will stay in the house. And to-night I shall thrash you!"

"Steady on, pater!" interrupted Willy. "If you'll only cool down, you'll realise that Ted did the right thing."

"Take my advice, young 'un, and keep quiet!" murmured his brother-in-law.

"Rats!" said Willy coolly. "If pater wasn't so jolly hasty, he'd be proud of Ted."

"Silence!" stormed Sir Edward.

"I'm going to have my say—even if you thrash me, too!" retorted Willy rebelliously. "In fact, if you do give Ted a hiding, I want one, too! I'm with him in this affair, heart and soul!"

"By George!" breathed Handforth, staring.

"He's upheld the finest traditions of the Handforths!" went on Willy. "He's shown the true grit of the family. I'm surprised at you, dad!" he added reproachfully. "In fact, I'm shocked!"

His father regarded him speechlessly.

"Think of it!" went on Willy. "There's poor old Stevens, nearly off his rocker with worry because that blackguard of a Barton has stolen his dead father's manuscript—and because he's produced the play under another name. Poor old Stevens must be having an awful time."

"You had better be silent——"

"I'll speak first, dad!" retorted Willy. "Stevens horsewhipped Barton last night—in public, too! He horsewhipped him in a blind rage, because the ruffian had committed a deliberate robbery. And then Barton denies it! Calls it a rumour! And then what happens?" added Willy, turning to the family, hot and breathless. "Why, the pater calmly stands in front of the microphone, and broadcasts a lot more lies."

"What!" thundered Sir Edward.

"I don't mean that you were telling lies—or that the B.B.C. was telling lies," said Willy. "But weren't you broadcasting all that tommy-rot about Barton catching a chill? Naturally, Ted couldn't stand it—and he came out with the truth!"

"Willy's right!" said Edward Oswald. "I only told the truth."

"Upon my soul!" muttered Sir Edward.

"Think of it!" continued Willy indignantly. "We're both going to be thrashed—we're both going to have our holidays messed up—because Ted told the truth! Because he came out boldly with facts!"

Sir Edward was cooler now, and his expression changed.

"You can't do it, dad!" said Willy, seizing his advantage. "You can't give Ted a tanning for telling the truth! You ought to be proud of him—you ought to give him an extra tip for being plucky. Why, he's a brick! And if people call you names for what happened to-night, they're not worth worrying about. Everybody who matters will honour your name!"

Sir Edward took a deep breath.

"Upon my word, I believe the boy's right!" he said enthusiastically. "Willy, young man, now that you put it in that light, I can appreciate Edward's motives. Of course, I realised this all the time!" he added gruffly. "No son of mine could perform any mean or unworthy act! Edward, perhaps we had better say no more about this affair."

"Yes, pater!" said Handforth breathlessly.

Five minutes later the entire family felt immensely relieved. Out in the hall, Edward Oswald and Willy privately shook hands.

"Willy, old son, you're a wonder!" murmured Handforth.

"Of course, I am!" grinned Willy. "Didn't you know that before?"

CHAPTER IX.

A SHOCK FOR HORACE STEVENS.



EASTER MONDAY morning was simply glorious.

The sky was blue, the sun shone brilliantly, and there was a warm, tranquil breeze. It was one of those

Bank Holiday mornings which people generally pray for, but which don't often materialise.

Horace Stevens, emerging from the bath-room, was singing softly to himself. He felt happy. Things were generally bad, and he had no real right to feel like singing. But the influence of William Napoleon Browne was strong—much stronger than Stevens supposed—and everything seemed very bright and gay on this sunny Bank Holiday morning.

Money was tight; there was a prospect that Stevens would have to leave St. Frank's after another term—a further prospect that he would never be able to fulfil his ambition to go to Oxford. And Roger Barton was reaping the royalties from the great play which Stevens' father had written.

Surely a sufficient number of reasons for Stevens to be gloomy and depressed.

But he was singing. Somehow he had a feeling—amounting to a conviction—which told him that the cloud had a silver lining. There was an almost uncanny "way" about William Napoleon Browne. And on the previous evening Browne had been so calmly confident that he had inspired his chum with hope. Stevens felt, deep within him, that the position was not half so bad as it looked. And although everything was as bad as it could be, a wave of optimism had taken possession of him.

He was particularly pleased that his mother knew nothing of this recent production at the Emperor Theatre. Such knowledge would have worried her immensely. For years she had longed to see that play presented to the public. But to find out that it had been produced under a false name, and that a usurper was taking all the credit, would have prostrated her.

Perhaps she could be kept in this state of happy ignorance for a good many days yet—until Browne's scheme had been put into operation. Stevens didn't know what this scheme was. He wasn't sure that Browne even had a scheme. But he knew that Browne would soon get things on the move.

Going downstairs, Stevens thought of something else—and this gave him a thrill of pleasure, too. It was Monday morning—he had overlooked, for the moment, that it was Bank Holiday—and Browne would be round very shortly. They had arranged to pay another visit to Mr. Augustus Crowson, the owner and manager of the Pall Mall Theatre. This was the theatrical gentleman who had seen Stevens' wonderful performance of "Hamlet" in Noggs' Travelling Theatre, near St. Frank's.

And the stage magnate had been so impressed that he had promised to present Stevens to the London public at a special matinee. The schoolboy-actor had already kept one appointment, but Mr. Crowson had pleaded a rush of business, and nothing had been settled. Stevens had better hopes for this morning.

He had almost reached the bottom of the stairs when he paused, frowning.

Voices were proceeding from the breakfast-room—the comfortable little apartment where he and his mother generally partook of breakfast and luncheon. It was a chummy sort of room, by no means pretentious, but thoroughly home-like. And voices were proceeding from it—his mother's voice and a man's voice. And there was something indescribably unpleasant in the latter.

Stevens glanced at his wrist-watch.

"Rummy time for anybody to call," he murmured. "We haven't had breakfast yet! Yes, by Jove, and it's Bank Holiday, too!"

He went down another two stairs, and was practically opposite the breakfast-room door, just across the hall. The door wasn't quite closed. The catch of the lock, in fact, was imperfect—as Stevens had good cause to know, for his mother had frequently scolded him for not closing the door properly.

"... very sorry, Mrs. Stevens, but I cannot possibly accept any more excuses. My patience is exhausted."

Stevens started. The indescribably unpleasant voice had been raised, and he couldn't help hearing the words. His brows contracted. What on earth—Excuses? Exhausted patience? Here was a puzzle!

"I see no reason why you should come here this morning, Mr. Webb," came Mrs. Stevens' voice, a trifle raised, too. "Surely, you can leave me in peace on a public holiday?"

"Public holidays make no difference to my business—as you ought to know, Mrs. Stevens," replied the man harshly. "I came to you last week, and you promised me faithfully—"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Webb, but I did not promise—"

"That's merely an excuse—"

"I told you that I would do my best," interrupted Mrs. Stevens, her voice quivering. "In any case, I never dreamed for a moment that you would come to-day. I must ask you to leave it until Wednesday."

Mr. Webb laughed shortly.

"Wednesday?" he repeated. "I'm afraid not."

Somehow, Horace Stevens gained an impression that Mr. Webb was about the most unpleasant gentleman in the world. There was something so nasty about his voice that Stevens went hot all over. His face became flushed. This—this confounded brute was talking to his mother!

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Stevens," continued Mr. Webb. "You may imagine that I like waiting, but I don't. I waited until last week—and I've waited until to-day. I am very sorry, but I don't propose to wait any longer. You know as well as I do that the whole thing is overdue—"

"But Mr. Webb, haven't I told you how impossible it has been?" asked Mrs. Stevens, her voice more tremulous than before. "I beg of you to go. My son knows nothing of

this affair, and he may be down to breakfast at any minute——”

“I can’t help your son,” interrupted the other roughly.

“But I tell you——”

“If the boy finds out, he finds out—that’s all,” said Mr. Webb. “Now then, I want something definite—something tangible——”

But Stevens hardly heard any more.

A kind of dull fury was taking possession of him. This man was no gentleman—he was speaking as one would speak to an inferior. And Horace Stevens could think of nobody on earth who was superior to his mother. A wild desire to kick the fellow out of the house took possession of him.

Only for a second did he hesitate. His mother didn’t want him to know—that much was clear. But he had heard all this quite accidentally, and it was more than human flesh and blood could stand to calmly retreat, and pretend that he knew nothing.

This flashed through his mind so quickly that Mr. Webb was still speaking—still on the same sentence, in fact—when Stevens pushed the door open, and strode into the breakfast-room.

“Oh!” exclaimed his mother, catching her breath.

It was really a wonder that Stevens didn’t hurl himself at the visitor forthwith. For there was a world of consternation and pain in his mother’s short exclamation. She was sitting near the window, and the centre of the hearthrug was occupied by about the most contemptible specimen of humanity that Horace had ever set eyes on. At least, this is how the man impressed him at the moment. Perhaps Stevens was prejudiced.

Mr. Webb was an undersized man—a hawk-featured fellow, with spectacles and a pale complexion. His shoulders were stooping, and he was slightly knock-kneed. He was, however, scrupulously attired in the most expensive clothing—and at least looked a gentleman.

“Can—can I do anything, mother?” asked Stevens thickly.

“No, dear, please!” said Mrs. Stevens. “This—this gentleman has merely called on a little matter of business. I’m sure you won’t mind leaving us until——”

“I heard this—gentleman talking to you, mother!” interrupted Stevens, keeping himself calm with difficulty. “He wasn’t speaking as he should do.” He swung round on Mr. Webb. “I don’t know who you are, but let me warn you to be careful!” he added, in a sudden outburst. “If you dare to insult my mother, I’ll take you by the scruff of your neck and kick you out of the house!”

Mr. Webb backed away from the blazing eyes.

“Really!” he protested. “Am I to suffer this indignity, too? Who is this boy, Mrs. Stevens? Your son, eh? I thought so! You had better advise him to be careful.”

“Horace, dear——” began Mrs. Stevens.

“Because if he’s not careful, I may be inclined to take drastic action,” said Mr. Webb, his voice more unpleasant than ever. “In fact, unless I get that money by to-morrow, I’ll kick the pair of you out!”

Stevens stared at the man, and felt a wave of consternation flow over him. In a flash he understood. A money-lender!

CHAPTER X.

EXIT MR. WEBB.



MR. WEBB smiled maliciously. “Upon my word!” he exclaimed, in an indignant voice. “Things have come to a pretty pass when I am threatened with violence! Take my advice, boy, and get out of this room. I want no interference from striplings.”

Stevens ignored the man.

“Mother, what does Mr. Webb want?” he asked quietly. “He’s a money-lender, I suppose? And you owe him something?”

“Please, dear, I didn’t want you to know anything about this,” said Mrs. Stevens, deeply pained. “But I suppose it cannot be avoided now. Mr. Webb is the manager of a financial bureau. I was compelled to—to borrow a few hundred pounds—I mortgaged a certain amount of this property——”

“Bill of sale,” interrupted Mr. Webb briefly.

“What’s that?” asked Stevens. “What’s a bill of sale?”

“You don’t understand these things, dear, so perhaps I had better deal with Mr. Webb myself. He has a perfect right to ask for his money. It is overdue——”

“I don’t care what right he has!” said Stevens hotly. “He’s got no right to insult you, mother! And if he dares to speak to you in that way again, I’ll knock him down!”

“A fine show of bravado, eh?” sneered Mr. Webb. “But it won’t do, young man. Your mother made certain promises to me, and she has broken them——”

“You’d better be careful!” muttered Stevens angrily. “I don’t understand much about business, but I’m not a fool! And I can see that you have been taking advantage of mother’s helplessness here. You thought she was defenceless, didn’t you? But you’ll have to reckon with me!”

“Splendid!” said Mr. Webb. “Heroics from the only son! They sound very nice, my boy, but they’ll do you no good—and they’ll do your mother no good. An instalment of one hundred pounds was promised to me last week, and I intend to have it to-morrow. Either that, or——”

“Or what?”

“Your mother knows what,” said Mr. Webb curtly.

"How much did you borrow, mother?" asked Stevens hoarsely. "Please tell me! I believe this man is exceeding his rights."

"I borrowed three hundred pounds, Horace," said Mrs. Stevens, pale with agitation. "Mr. Webb is quite justified in his demand. I did promise to pay another hundred, but only on condition that certain shares were negotiated——"

"You borrowed three hundred?" asked Stevens. "But how much have you paid back?"

"Confound your impudence——" began Mr. Webb.

"My son has a perfect right to ask, Mr. Webb," said Mrs. Stevens coldly. "At different times, I have already paid you five hundred pounds. Your interest has been heavy——"

"You saw the Bill of Sale before you signed it, didn't you?"

"I am not questioning your legal rights——"

"Five hundred pounds!" ejaculated Horace.

"Two hundred more than you borrowed! And now he's threatening to take action if you don't pay another hundred! Why, it's robbery. Look here, Mr. Webb, I don't know much about this affair, and I don't care a toss whether you're legally within your rights or not—but I do know that you're worrying my mother. I'll give you two minutes to get out of this house!"

Mr. Webb backed away again.

"This—this is intolerable!" he burst out. "Mrs. Stevens, you had better get rid of this son of yours at once! I have no dealings with half-baked minors! And I am tired of your excuses—tired of your worthless promises. I should have had more sense than to transact any business with a woman who denies her obligations——"

"Woman!" roared Stevens. "You dare to call my mother a woman? And you say that she makes worthless promises? You—you insulting hound!"

Crash!

Before Mr. Webb could dodge, he received a devastating blow on the jaw, and reeled completely over the breakfast-table. Fortunately, that corner of the table contained very little crockery, and not much damage was done. Mr. Webb slithered to the floor in a disorderly heap.

"Horace!" panted Mrs. Stevens, horrified.

"Now then—outside!" panted Horace.

He hardly heard his mother's exclamation. He seized the money-lender by the scruff of his neck, and dragged him to the door. Mr. Webb kicked feebly. He had gone pale, and his eyes were filled with sudden fear.

"Stop!" he bleated. "I—I will give you time—another week! Release me at once, confound you——"

Stevens took utterly no notice. He dragged Mr. Webb out into the hall, flung open the front door, and jerked the wretch into an upright position. Then he placed his boot well in the rear, and heaved.

"Outside!" he said breathlessly.

Mr. Webb certainly went outside. He took the steps in one flying leap, and landed in a confused heap at the bottom. Stevens whirled round, saw a hat, stick, and bag on the hall-stand, and hurled them out on top of the wreckage.

Slam!

Horace closed the front door with a crash, and didn't care what happened to Mr. Webb. He raced back into the breakfast-room, and found his mother sobbing piteously.

"Mum, dear!" breathed Stevens, kneeling beside her.

"I didn't want you to know, Horry!" she whispered.

"It's all right—I've kicked him out," he exclaimed. "The insulting rogue! He can't start those tricks with me, mother! The rotter's got no right to come here on Bank Holiday, and to threaten you—especially after having received all that money!"

"But the Bill of Sale, dear!"

"Why—mother?" he asked. "Was—was it absolutely necessary? I mean—for me?"

"Not merely for you, Horace," she sobbed. "Oh, it was—it was everything. Somehow, the income has been getting less. Dear old Mr. Tudor has offered to help——"

"Why didn't you borrow money from him?" asked Stevens, amazed. "Why did you go to this shark?"

"I—I was ashamed!" muttered his mother. "I couldn't tell Mr. Tudor how serious things were. I didn't like to—— Please, Horace. I do wish you would try to forget—— Oh! There goes the bell!" she added, with sudden alarm. "He's back!"

"Oh, is he?" breathed Horace Stevens.

He strode out, and reached the door long before the maidservant could come up from the old-fashioned basement. He flung the door open, his eyes blazing, and his hands ready.

"You confounded——"

"Greetings, Brother Horace!" beamed the figure on the doorstep. "I must confess that your own salute is not particularly promising. There is a certain lack of warmth in your tone—and yet, in another sense, an unnecessary amount of it."

"Browne!" gasped Stevens. "I—I say! I'm awfully sorry, old man! I thought——" He paused. "I didn't wait to look——"

"All is well, Brother Horace," said William Napoleon Browne benevolently. "Pray, trouble to make no excuses. And I should like to congratulate you upon the extreme neatness of your recent enterprise. A horsewhipping last night—a hefty boot this morning. You are improving, brother. Your old lack of fire is no longer——"

"You—you saw it?" asked Stevens. "You saw me kick that beast down the steps?"

"I saw you kick something," agreed Browne. "I wasn't quite sure as to its nature—but I gathered that it was unpleasant. The unhappy creature passed me a few moments ago. Correct me if I am wrong, but did I merely witness the finale?"

It struck me that the gentleman was slightly cricked in the neck."

"Come inside, old man," said Stevens quietly. "Perhaps I was a bit too hasty. I don't seem to remember what happened. No, this way—come into the dining-room."

They entered, and Stevens shut the door.

"That—that hound was a money-lender!" he panted. "He was threatening my mother that he'd kick us out if he didn't get a hundred pounds within twenty-four hours! Ye gods! A hundred pounds! And by the end of this week Barton will have made thousands out of my pater's play!"

Stevens gulped at the very thought.

"A fortune!" he breathed. "Ours—mother's! And—and these spiders come out of their webs to prey on her. That's not bad!" he added, pulling himself up. "The man's name is Webb, now I come to think of it."

"A singularly appropriate one, too," agreed Browne. "It pains me to hear these family details, Brother Horace—and yet I am honoured to receive your confidences. I urge you to remain cool. Above all, keep your head. Let us defer this discussion until we are out together," he added diplomatically. "I would not like your mother to know that you have told me. We must spare her all the pain we can."

And five minutes later they were partaking of breakfast together—Stevens having previously forgotten that Browne had promised to come to breakfast. And during that meal there was not the slightest hint of the dramatic episode which had so recently taken place.

CHAPTER XI.

BROWNE'S STARTLING OFFER.



LATER, Browne and Stevens sallied out into the warm sunshine.

The Fifth Form captain's smart Morris-Oxford saloon was waiting, and the pair were soon gliding smoothly off. Browne drove very slowly, for there was no particular hurry, and he took a turn round the park.

"Yes, Brother Horace, one of the speediest pieces of work it has been my pleasure to witness," he observed approvingly. "Seldom, indeed, have I known a man to leave any house so rapidly. I trust your foot is in no way injured?"

Stevens was silent.

"Not," continued Browne, "that I give you full credit for this. Always remember that it was I who awakened you to a sense of manliness and strength. What were you some months ago, Brother Horace? A mere weakling! An easy-going weed by the wayside. It pleases me to note that my efforts have not been entirely fruitless. The weediness is vanishing, and you are blossoming

forth as a healthy specimen of humanity. I am proud of you, Brother Horace. You do me credit."

Stevens started.

"Eh!" he said. "Sorry, old man. Were you speaking?"

"Alas! How many times do I speak, and how many times are my words wasted?" sighed Browne. "The tragedy of it! It would not matter if my words were empty or valueless. But is it not sombre to think of such sweetness being lost upon the desert air?"

"Chuck it, old son," said Stevens, practically. "I'm worrying about mother, you know. She was pretty wonderful at breakfast—not a sign of that worry. But I'll bet she's crying now. I—I feel like going back——"

"Much as she loves her clever son, I venture to suggest that she would prefer his absence at the moment," said Browne. "And do not be concerned, Brother Horace. This Webb man shall be attended to. He will not bother your mother again."

Stevens stared.

"I don't understand!" he exclaimed.

"It is not necessary for you to understand," replied Browne smoothly. "Neither is it necessary for you to put the clutching hand upon my driving arm—unless, of course, you are really anxious for us to sweep gracefully into one of these street islands. You have queer likes, Brother Horace. Perhaps it would suit your mood if we performed a gentle crash?"

"Oh, sorry," said Stevens, releasing his hand. "But about Webb? Do—do you mean that— Look here, Browne, you mustn't pay that man anything! Why, if mother knew, she'd die of shame——"

"It is not my intention to pay Brother Webb a penny—or to cause him to be paid a penny," said Browne. "But there are other methods. You must remember that my pater is a gentleman of legal knowledge. You must also remember that he shares some of my own astuteness. In a certain measure, he is almost as capable as I am. Praise, indeed!"

"Thanks, old man," said Stevens gratefully. "I'm pretty sure that Webb is exceeding all his legal rights. It's awful to think of Barton stealing all our money, and this other rotter dunning mother——"

"If it is awful to think of these things, why think of them?" asked Browne. "Switch your mind to other matters. We are now about to descend upon Brother Crowson in all our glory. Ten o'clock was the hour of the appointment. Do not fail to be honoured by that fact, Brother Horace!"

"Which fact?"

"Brother Crowson's appointment at the hour of ten," replied Browne. "You surely must know that for a theatrical man, ten o'clock is an hour of unearthly earliness? In the world of the theatre, innocent one, practically no business is even thought of

until after luncheon—and even then it is only thought of!”

“It’s jolly decent of Mr. Crowson to take all this trouble.”

“Trouble?” repeated Browne. “Alack! When can I make you realise your own worth? Disabuse yourself of these philanthropic ideas concerning Brother Crowson. He is a theatrical man—and therefore a man who thinks solely of himself. He is not contemplating this interview for your benefit, Brother Horace, but for his own. Mr. Crowson is no kind fairy.”

teach you the ways of the world. But at the moment, Brother Horace, you are a mere child, innocent and guileless. You have no conception of your own abilities. You imagine that people are kindly and generous. When you act upon the stage you are loudly applauded, and you take this applause as a sign of geniality. It never crosses your gentle mind that such applause is spontaneous—a humble tribute to genius. Perhaps this modesty is all to the good.”

“By Jove,” said Stevens, looking at his watch, “it’s one minute to ten!”



“My dear sir,” said Browne pleasantly, “allow me to introduce your new leading man.”

And he gave Horace Stevens a slight push forward.

“Oh, I say——”

“He knew, strangely enough, that in you he had seen a rising young actor,” continued Browne. “He saw your performance—he was dazzled. He offered to present you to London. But for your sake? Nay, Brother Horace! For his own! I will grant that Brother Crowson is a gentleman of integrity, a gentleman of honour, but he is certainly not a pie-can.”

“You mean he’s doing it for his own sake—really?” asked Stevens, staring. “Not—merely as a favour?”

“One day,” said Browne, “perhaps I may

“And we are outside the Pall Mall Theatre,” said Browne, applying the brake. “I trust—although I have no hope—that Brother Crowson is equally punctilious. It would not surprise me in the least to learn that Brother Crowson is, at this moment, either snoring in his bed, or reading the morning paper in his bath.”

But for once William Napoleon Browne was wrong.

As soon as he and Stevens entered the theatre they were assured that Mr. Augustus Crowson was in his private office. The acting manager shook his head rather

dubiously as he regarded the two schoolboys. Not that Browne looked like a schoolboy. Stevens was attired in baggy flannels, a sports coat, and his St. Frank's cap—but Browne was resplendent in a morning-coat, striped trousers, and topper.

"I'm afraid you can't see Mr. Crowson now," said the acting manager. "It's Bank Holiday, you know—"

"Permit me to make a slight interruption," said Browne gently. "Brother Crowson made a definite appointment for this hour. I take it that Brother Crowson is a gentleman who regards an appointment with solemn reverence? Or is he like any other theatrical gentleman?"

The acting manager stared.

"An appointment, eh?" he said dubiously. "Oh, well, perhaps you'd better come up!"

A minute later they were ushered into the great man's presence, and he looked at them rather vaguely, his expression one of acute worry. Mr. Crowson was a tall man, slightly grey, and with a face which told of great intelligence. Considering the hour was only ten o'clock, his appearance was surprisingly untidy. To William Napoleon Browne's utter horror, it was clear that Mr. Crowson had not even shaved. Browne distinctly winced as he noticed this fact.

"I trust there is no grave trouble?" he asked, seeking for an explanation. "A family bereavement? A sudden—"

"Who are these boys?" asked Mr. Crowson irritably. "Upon my word, Mr. Turner, you ought to have more consideration—"

"They said they had an appointment!" broke in the acting manager.

"Don't you remember, sir?" asked Stevens eagerly. "You told us to come this morning. You're going to fix the date for that special matinee. 'Hamlet,' you know. You saw me acting the part in Bannington—"

"Oh, yes!" said Mr. Crowson, nodding. "Of course—of course. A wonderful performance, too! This is the young fellow I told you about, Mr. Turner. A genius, if ever I saw one. The boy's simply remarkable."

"Paltry words, but they will suffice," said Browne. "You were saying, Brother Crowson, that—"

"Boys, I'm genuinely sorry," interrupted the great man. "But the fact is, I can't attend to you now. I am so worried that I hardly know what I am doing. It is Bank Holiday—we are booked up solid—"

"But let me remind you, brother, that this is the second appointment," said Browne gently. "On the first occasion you side-tracked us. We accepted gracefully. Are we to be thrust further down the siding?"

"I tell you I'm booked up solid for to-day—and I heard, only an hour ago, that my leading man has met with a grave motor-ing accident," said Mr. Crowson agitatedly. "Boys, I can't attend to you: I'm in a dreadful hole. This man is unconscious—in hospital!"

"But surely, at such a theatre—an under-study—"

"That's the curse of it!" broke out Mr. Crowson, with sudden violence. "The infernal young fool had no more sense than to go motoring in the same car! He's in the same hospital—with a broken leg! Was ever a man so absolutely helpless? Bank Holiday! Not a seat left! And both the leading man and his understudy crocked up! I simply can't give the show—that's all."

Browne smilingly shook his head.

"Such a waste of really excellent agitation!" he said regretfully. "My dear sir, allow me to introduce your new leading man!"

And he gave Horace Stevens a slight push forward.

CHAPTER XII.

HORACE STEVENS' CHANCE.



STEVENS pulled himself back.

"Don't be such a hopeless ass!" he gasped, turning red.

"Nay, I am quite in earnest," murmured Browne. "Remember, brother, this is your opportunity! Seize it! Insert your teeth firmly into it, and hold it! Do not release your molars for one second!"

Mr. Augustus Crowson was looking annoyed.

"This is no time for joking, my boy," he said impatiently. "I have quite enough worry without listening to these absurd suggestions."

Browne winced.

"Under the circumstances, Brother Crowson, I will forgive you," he said kindly. "Imagine my feelings. I make a suggestion of pure brilliance—of sheer gold—and it is characterised as being absurd. As I have said, I will forgive you—"

"In Bannington, I was amused at your quaint sayings, young man; but at the moment they irritate me," interrupted Mr. Crowson harshly. "I shall have to ask you to leave—both of you. Come and see me another day—telephone me to-morrow, and I will fix an appointment. I don't mean to be rude to you, but I simply can't spare another moment."

"This way, please," said Mr. Turner firmly.

"I suppose we'd better go!" muttered Stevens, turning.

But Browne shook his head.

"It is remarkable how these good people will mistake us for sheep, Brother Horace," he said smoothly. "But are we to be herded off in this undignified fashion? I ask you, as man to man, do I look like a sheep?" He turned. "Brother Crowson, you are agitated. You are worried. You are pale about the gills. Indeed, I have seldom seen a man look so utterly murky in the whole

of my career. But all these things are unnecessary. I am sorry for your leading man, and I grieve over his understudy. But here, in your very presence, is the solution to your problem."

"Confound you, boy——"

Mr. Crowson checked himself and stared. Quite suddenly, a curiously intent light entered his eyes. He looked at Stevens with a new interest, eyeing him searchingly—so searchingly, in fact, that Stevens became embarrassed.

"By Jupiter!" muttered Mr. Crowson.

Browne smiled with cool understanding.

"Nay, Brother Horace, do not flinch," he said gently. "Stand quite still under this scrutiny. Indeed, it may be as well if you will turn round, walk up and down once or twice, and display your good points to advantage. You are in the process of being sized up."

"Look here, Browne, you ass——" began Stevens.

"By Jupiter!" said Mr. Crowson again, giving Mr. Turner a sharp glance. "Just about the right size, isn't he? The very spit of young Dexter! A trifle young, perhaps, but—but——"

"He couldn't do it, guv'nor," said Mr. Turner dubiously. "It's one of the hardest parts in London. Besides, look at the time! How on earth can he get into a part——"

"Yes, the time!" said Mr. Crowson, frowning. "Of course, that's impossible. And yet, if only—— But no. It's no good getting such ridiculous ideas. We shall have to put a notice outside, Mr. Turner. You've had the instructions given out, haven't you? We're closing——"

"One moment," said Browne. "Surely there is no need for this panic? I wonder why you theatrical people are so prone to panic and agitation? Brother Horace is ready to learn this part in time for to-night's performance——"

"What?" gasped Stevens.

"In time for to-night performance——"

"You—you hopeless idiot!"

"In time for to-night's performance," said Browne, for the third time.

"You're mad!" shouted Stevens. "You're dotty!"

"You will, of course, take no notice of these uncouth sounds," said Browne gently. "Much as I regret to say it, Brother Horace is much given to these animal outbursts. Ah, I have had a great deal of trouble with him. He is generally quite well behaved, but occasionally he lapses."

Stevens nearly burst a blood-vessel.

"What do you think I am—a performing bear?" he burst out indignantly.

"It's impossible!" said Mr. Crowson absently. "No, young man, there isn't time—it couldn't be done—— But it's Bank Holiday, though. It'll be a sheer disaster if we can't—— Not that a Bank Holiday crowd is very critical," he added suddenly. "Mr. Turner—fetch the part! Quick! Let's have a look at that part!"

"And," said Browne, "it is high time!"

Stevens was too flabbergasted to say anything. He knew nothing whatever about the play—and didn't quite realise what all this talk was leading up to. He had a vague, half-formed suspicion; but he dared not allow that train of thought to get a grip.

But William Napoleon Browne was as cool as ice. He knew exactly what he was doing, and it so happened that he had seen this very play a night or two earlier in company with his famous pater. It was an excellent show—a serious play, and quite pure and wholesome. There was nothing whatever nasty about it—nothing to offend the gentlest ear, or the most susceptible conscience. Surprisingly enough, it was a success.

And the leading part, as Browne was well aware, was taken by a young fellow who was supposed to be an undergraduate. In the play, this young man was involved in some serious family trouble—family misunderstandings. It was the strong part of the show—with two particularly powerful scenes.

Mr. Crowson paced up and down his office, eyeing Stevens nearly all the time, and apparently turning the problem over and over in his mind.

"Yes, you've got the right touch, my boy," he muttered. "But there isn't time! You can act, too—I've seen you act, and I know. But who else is there? The part's a difficult one——"

"You may search every actors' haunt in London, Brother Crowson, and you will find nobody suited to this particular type," said Browne gently. "I have seen the play—I know what is required. There aren't three available men in the whole of London. And how can they be found? Brother Horace is here—champing at the bit with impatience."

Stevens fully understood at last.

"Are you suggesting that I should learn this part, and be ready for to-night's show?" he panted. "How on earth can I do an impossible thing like that?"

"Have no fear, Brother Crowson—he will be ready when the curtain rises," said Browne smoothly. "I might almost promise that he will be ready for the matinée—but I fear that Brother Horace does not possess my own optimism."

"Hang the matinée!" said Mr. Crowson. "In any case, it's a different play. We're giving another show at the matinées—with a different company. It's to-night I'm thinking about——"

"You may, of course, think about it—but I urge you not to worry," said Browne. "Ah, here is Brother Turner with the part. May we be allowed to scan this interesting document?"

Mr. Crowson and Browne looked it over together. Stevens, apparently, was of no importance—so far as Browne was concerned. One might have supposed that he—Browne—was going to read it up.

"Hopeless!" said Mr. Crowson dully.

"Simple!" beamed William Napoleon Browne.

"I tell you it's hopeless," repeated the manager, as he turned the pages over. "He'll never be able to learn this by to-night. What about a rehearsal, too? We shall have to have a rehearsal before the actual show—perhaps two. This is a long part—"

"May—may I see it, sir?" asked Stevens breathlessly.

It was handed to him, and he turned the pages over with shaky hands. His heart sank as he saw the length of the part. But he was quivering from head to foot with the very thought of the thing.

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Horace Stevens' brain reeled at the very idea of it.

"I can't manage it, of course," he muttered. "I'd love to—"

"Telephone Number 00991 Mayfair," said Browne smoothly. "Kindly ring up, Brother Crowson, when you have settled the time for the rehearsal. You will find me within arm's reach of the 'phone, and I will leap for it at the first ring."

"Look here—" began Stevens.

"Humour him, I beg of you," smiled Browne. "Humour him by taking no notice. I, William Napoleon Browne, will guarantee that he will be ready."

"By Jupiter, you mean it?" breathed Mr. Crowson, staring. "Why not? At least, you can have a shot at it! It won't do any harm. And there's nobody else—Yes, see what you can do. We'll give the show, even if I have to make a public apology afterwards."

Browne gripped Stevens firmly by the arm.

"You will make no apology, Brother Crowson," he declared. "On the contrary, you will find it necessary to hand Brother Horace a large and handsome cheque in return for his life-saving services."

Horace Stevens gulped. A cheque! Good old Browne!

CHAPTER XIII.



"**H**EARD the latest, Archie?"

"Absolutely," said Archie Glen-thorne, of the St. Frank's Remove. "And a frightfully bally sort of bother it is,

too! I mean to say, it's a bit dashed thick when a lad is required to scrap all his bally neckties—"

"Neckties?" asked Reggie Pitt, staring.

"Well, didn't you ask me about the latest?" said Archie. "It appears that there's a new fashion in colour schemes surging forth. Absolutely the last word in gents' neckwear, as it were. I can tell you candidly, dear old article, Phipps is knocked all of a heap."

"I'm not talking about neckties, you dummy," grinned Reggie Pitt. "I mean the latest about Stevens, of the Fifth. If old Browne is to be believed, he's going to act in that show at the Pall Mall Theatre to-night."

"Who? Browne?"

"No, Stevens."

"Going to act at the Pall Mall?"

"Yes."

"When? To-night?"

"Yes, you fathead!"

"Good gad!" said Archie mildly.

They were standing in Archie Glen-thorne's flat—or, to be exact, in Archie Glen-thorne's brother's flat. Or, to be even more exact, on the verandah overlooking the street. It was afternoon now, and the sun was still shining merrily.

"You don't seem to understand what I'm talking about," said Pitt gruffly. "There's a show at the Pall Mall Theatre called 'His Father's Son,' and the leading man has met with an accident—"

"How frightfully poisonous," said Archie.

"And his understudy's met with an accident, too—"

"How poisonously frightful!"

"And old Stevens—you know, our own Horace—is mugging away at the part like steam now, and Browne says he'll be ready in time for the show," went on Pitt. "It's a terrifically tall order, of course, and I doubt if it'll come off. And yet Browne's an uncanny beggar—he's always right."

"Absolutely," said Archie. "But, I mean to say—Browne—what? I understood you to say, old chump, that Stevens was the laddie?"

"Stevens is only the chap who is acting the part," grinned Pitt. "It's Browne who's making him do it. Stevens is a marvellous actor—but he can't do a giddy thing without Browne behind him. I thought I'd pop in and tell you as I was passing."

"A dashed good idea," said Archie enthusiastically. "Thanks frightfully, old thing. I mean, there's absolutely nothing I like better than to have chappies popping in as they pass by. I'm expecting a few other lads of the village to pop in, too, Handforth, McClure, and sundry other merchants of the same ilk. Nothing like being merry and bright, what?"

"Have you got anything on to-night?" asked Pitt.

"I thought it rather a bright scheme to take the dear old boys and girls to one of the theatres," replied Archie, beaming.

"How about it, laddie? You and Winnie, what?"

"Which theatre, old man?"

"As a matter of absolute fact, we haven't yet decided—"

"You fathead!" grinned Reggie. "Bank Holiday—and you haven't decided! A fat chance you'll stand of getting any seats to-night, my lad. Unless, of course, you decide upon the Pall Mall."

"The absolute place," said Archie brightly. "Odds brain-waves and flashes! Why didn't we think of it before? The very old spot where Stevens is going to perform, what?"

mean to say, four dashed boxes! How, I mean, does he do it?"

"Well, it was a stroke of luck, really," explained Pitt. "It seems that the leading man—the poor chap who met with an accident—had booked those boxes himself, for a holiday party for his people. The manager heard that none of them were coming, in view of the accident—and Browne grabbed the boxes like a shot. It's an ill wind that blows nobody—You know the rest."

"Absolutely," said Archie, nodding. "It's an ill wind—Whoa! I say, dash

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"Yes, I think we ought to see him in that part."

"Where's Phipps?" said Archie crisply. "Phipps, old lad! Dash round to the Pall Mall and book a frightful amount of stalls! A couple of rows, or something—"

"Cheese it, Archie," grinned Reggie Pitt. "As a matter of fact, this is Browne's invitation—I was only trying to see if you had made any plans of your own. Browne has secured four boxes, and he proposes to pack about ten of us into each—including Irene and Marjorie and Doris and a few of the other Moor View girls."

Archie looked greatly interested.

"But, dash it, isn't this Browne chappie a bit of a dashed magician?" he asked. "I

it! I mean, that was a frightfully ill wind, what?"

A sudden draught had come through the open door in the rear, and Archie's panama sailed gracefully down to the street. Handforth & Co. had arrived, to say nothing of Willy and Alf Brent, and Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson.

It seemed that Pitt had named Archie's flat as a meeting place.

Irene Manners and her chums turned up, too, and everybody was delighted at the prospect of spending the evening at the Pall Mall Theatre. With Stevens acting in the play, the show would have a personal interest.

Handforth came in for a good deal of

chipping regarding his escapade of the previous evening—but he received any amount of compliments, too. And while the juniors and the girls were innocently enjoying themselves, Horace Stevens was working as he had seldom worked before.

He and Browne were locked away in William Napoleon's own den at the latter's Mayfair home. Browne had given orders that nothing was to disturb him. And Stevens was swotting—swotting madly.

At first he had been inclined to learn the part feverishly—but Browne had soon put a stop to this sort of thing.

"There is an old adage, Brother Horace, which points out that a great deal of haste results in a serious loss of speed," he observed. "Take things quietly, refrain from panic, and all will be well. I have given my promise to Brother Crowson, and we must not let him down."

"You were too rash, old man," groaned Stevens.

"Were you an ordinary human being, I should certainly have been rash. But, happily, I am aware of your quickness of eye—your retentive memory—your facility for learning," replied Browne. "Also, I am aware of my own powers as a trainer. Brother Horace, regard yourself as caged, and I will guarantee that you will perform your tricks for the delight of to-night's audience."

"It's all very well, old man, but I'm not a monkey!" growled Stevens.

"Were you a monkey, I would not expect you to learn the part," said Browne smoothly. "And we are wasting time. Proceed!"

William Napoleon worked as hard as Stevens himself—if anything, perhaps harder. He went over the part with his chum again and again—slowly, deliberately, persistently. Then he eased off while Stevens soaked in the lines, and while Stevens obtained a grasp of the whole part. For Browne had brought the entire play—and, helped by his own memory, he had given Stevens a concise resume of the theme.

Hour after hour passed—and the progress was amazing.

Browne was aware of a great relief. He had taken a chance—a big chance. In spite of his airy assumption of confidence, he had actually been uncertain. But Browne was a fellow who believed in showing a bold front under all circumstances. His optimism was being justified, for Stevens made splendid progress.

At first, Horace had quailed at the task. He had thought it an impossible one—he had shied at it like a frightened colt. But then, after going through it once, he had realised the wonderful possibilities. And a fierce, burning determination had taken possession of him.

He would learn it! He would make good his chum's promise! His woes were for-

gotten—Roger Barton's villainy became a vague memory—and he hurled himself heart and soul into this unexpected task.

There was the thought of money, too. Not that Stevens wanted it for himself. Under ordinary circumstances he wouldn't have accepted a penny. But his mother—and that money-lender! His ambitions for the stage! His whole-hearted love of acting! With such spurs as these, how could he hesitate and falter?

"We shall win, Brother Horace," declared Browne joyfully, during a pause. "Have I not always told you that the word 'impossible' is a word to be avoided? Anything can be accomplished if one is determined. Mountains become hillocks—quagmires become smooth footpaths. It is all a matter of will power. Those who are faint-hearted fail at the outset. But those who go forward with strength finish with strength. Determination, Brother Horace, is the most desirable human quality of all."

CHAPTER XIV.

BEHIND THE SCENES.



AND then came a sort of reaction.

By tea-time, after five hours of acute concentration, Horace Stevens had become word-perfect in his part. It seemed too good

to be true—and it was too good to be true.

No matter what cue Browne gave him, Stevens was ready. He not only knew his words, but he delivered them naturally and with powerful grace. Browne was delighted—but inwardly alarmed, too. This was a flash in the pan.

Mr. Crowson, who had received reports hourly from Browne, was on tenterhooks. He had called the company together, and insisted upon them being in readiness for a rehearsal immediately Stevens arrived.

The company was not only startled, but indignant.

Most of them were actors and actresses of West End reputation—with well-known names in the theatrical profession. They were startled at the thought of a stranger—an unknown public schoolboy—taking up the leading part at a few hours' notice. It struck them as being fantastic—indeed, preposterous. They were full of forebodings.

But Mr. Augustus Crowson was a man of iron determination, too. He gave the company to understand that this was no time for grumbling. It was either Horace Stevens, or no show at all. And with every seat in the house booked and paid for, something desperate had to be done. If Stevens failed them, the theatre would be closed. But just as long as there was a faint shred of hope, Mr. Crowson was carrying on. He, himself, was the very first to admit that the whole thing was fantastic. But he

doggedly maintained the hope that Stevens would not be a ghastly failure.

Browne's reports were encouraging—and the company was kept at the theatre, ready for that rehearsal the instant Stevens arrived. It wasn't until nearly six o'clock that he turned up with Browne. Before starting, he had been word-perfect. But when he arrived he discovered, with a shock, that his memory was failing him. Lines that had come to him freely and naturally an hour earlier, were now eluding him.

"Courage, brother—courage!" whispered Browne.

Stevens looked awkward and self-conscious as he was introduced to the company. And the company did nothing to make him feel easy. He detected a latent spirit of hostility from the very first.

And the rehearsal itself was an agony to Mr. Crowson.

In one or two places, Stevens was brilliant. He revealed his true talent—his dawning genius. But mostly he was nervous and faltering, forgetting his lines and confusing his words.

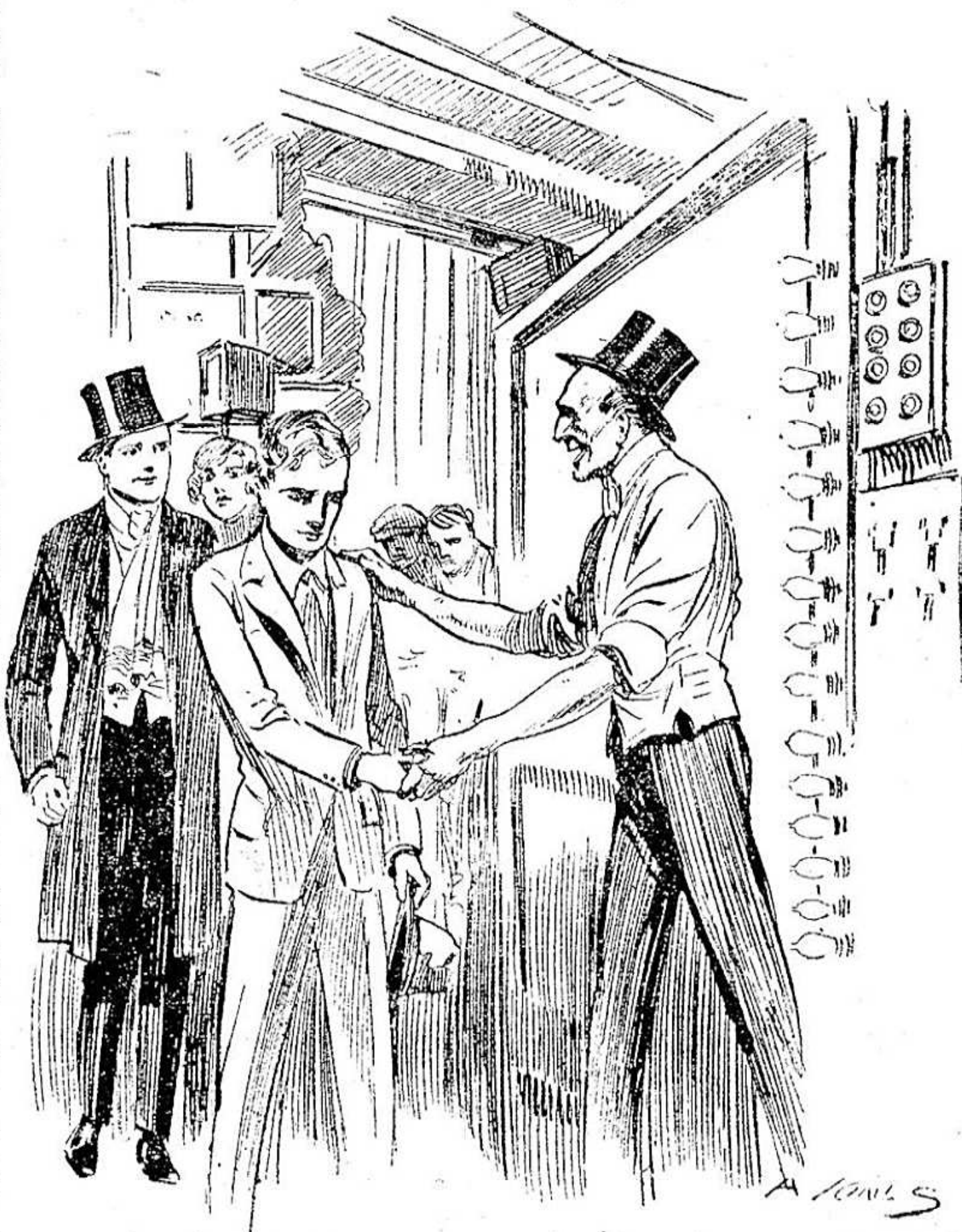
"It's no good," said Mr. Crowson again and again. "We can't go on, boy! You don't know your part!"

"I know!" groaned Stevens. "And yet I was all right an hour ago. I—I'm awfully sorry—I can't understand—"

"Hush!" interrupted Browne. "Brother Crowson, I urge you to have no fear. Patience is the watchword. Wait! Above all, I beseech you to wait. When the curtain rings up for the actual performance, Brother Horace will be toeing the line, ready for the great sprint."

"These boys are bluffing you, Mr. Crowson," said one of the other actors. "The thing was impossible from the start—"

"Well, we'd better go on," growled the manager, who always became obstinate if



"Wonderful, my boy, wonderful!"
Mr. Crowson, nearly mad with joy, wrung Horace Stevens' hand

opposed. "Stevens, my boy, is it any good? You're hopeless at present. The audience would never tolerate you."

"If Brother Horace fails at the post, I will personally step upon the stage and explain the position," said Browne smoothly. "What more can I say? Be assured that the audience will get its money's-worth, in either case."

And so, amid doubts and misgivings, the rehearsal went on. In places, it was repeated—until, indeed, there was scarcely any time left. At last Stevens went off to his dressing-room to prepare for the actual performance—and Browne stuck to him like a leech. He was Stevens' shadow.

Alone, Horace nearly gave in. He was

haggard and wild-eyed. Panic had come to him, and his determination was drifting.

"It's no good, old man—it's no good!" he panted. "I'm a washout. Oh, what a hopeless hash I made of it! That rehearsal! Did you ever see anything so ghastly in your life?"

Browne nodded.

"I am ready to confess that it was several degrees below zero," he admitted. "At times, in fact, it was so frosty that I distinctly observed icicles commencing to form. But do not be discouraged by such a trifle——"

"Trifle!"

"An airy nothing!" said Browne. "We shall triumph in the end!"

"But you just said I was a frost."

"A thaw has already set in," said Browne soothingly. "There are no more icicles, brother, and I can distinctly perceive the light of dawning hope in your faun-like eyes. They may be bleary—they may be bloodshot—but have no fear. The audience will never observe that. Now let us take the second act again. That is the point where you are somewhat inclined to jib at the hurdles."

Browne gave the cue, and Stevens spoke his words effortlessly—with a fine, perfectly-attuned modulation. He had no difficulty in speaking his lines with the utmost fluency.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he said, pausing. "I'm all right now! And yet I couldn't think of a thing—— What the dickens——"

Browne was executing a hornpipe.

"All is well, brother," he beamed. "There is not merely a thaw, but a heat-wave has set in. There is nothing to fear. You will go upon the stage, and you will triumph."

"But—but——"

"We cannot, of course, expect you to understand," went on Browne kindly. "But it is merely a question of psychology. In other words, you are troubled with self-consciousness. Alone, with nobody but Brother Napoleon to listen, you are word-perfect. In the presence of the company you remind me of a gramophone needle that persistently runs in the same groove."

"Then I shall be a perfectly ghastly failure," said Stevens, in alarm. "If I'm as bad as that in front of the company, how shall I be with a full house watching me?"

"You will be ignorant of the full house."

"But I shall see all the faces——"

"Possibly you will see them, but you will not notice them," said Browne calmly. "For the first few moments, perhaps, but then will come a blank. You will carry on with your part indifferent to audience and players alike. I know!"

Browne was so confident that some of Stevens' faltering spirit revived. His chum's indomitable assurance was infectious. But it was an anxious time, nevertheless. And

Stevens filled every minute of it by swotting away at his lines.

Mr. Crowson came bustling in, anxious and hot.

"Well, we've burned our boats now, young 'uns," he said. "The house is filling up—we're letting the audience in! How do you feel, Stevens, boy? Better?"

"Heaps better," replied Browne promptly.

"I don't know——" began Stevens.

"In fact, I can safely say that we are ready for the fray," continued Browne. "Go back to your office, Brother Crowson, smile at all and sundry, and draft out a fat cheque. But stay! If you draft it out now you may omit an all-important nought. Wait until Brother Stevens has triumphed—and then we shall need ropes to hold you from burgling the nearest bank—so great will your anxiety be to load us with riches."

"Upon my word, I've never known a fellow with such assurance as you've got!" said Mr. Crowson frankly. "I don't like to call it unutterable cheek—but it's something closely approaching it."

Browne smiled calmly.

"We will forgive you," he said tolerantly. "We cannot expect you to understand after so short an acquaintance. But now we must insist upon solitude. Kindly close the door after you, Brother Crowson."

Mr. Crowson didn't quite know why he did it, but he took the hint, and departed. Ordered out by a mere schoolboy! And yet, Browne had been fully justified, for he was in charge of Stevens, and he had no desire for any distractions.

Stevens was fairly shaking.

"Only a few minutes now!" he muttered. "Browne, old man, I daren't! I tell you, I daren't! When it comes to the point I shall absolutely dry up! I shan't remember a word! I shall stand there on the stage looking like a fool!"

"We must do our best to combat these misfortunes of nature," said Browne smoothly. "I will grant that it is difficult for you to look intelligent, but I have great hopes. To-night, Brother Horace, will be our greatest achievement. We are full of confidence, and we are cool and collected. And we know our lines without the slightest fault."

"By Jingo!" breathed Stevens. "I'll try, old man—I'll do my best!"

"More than that we cannot expect from any man," agreed Browne gently.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ORDEAL.



ARCHIE GLENTHORNE beamed with good nature.

"Not so dashed bad, what?" he asked.

"Somewhat squashed, and all that sort of thing, but

who cares? I mean, Bank Holiday, and all

that sort of thing! Chappies expect to get squashed on Bank Holidays. It's absolutely the good old fashion."

Private Box A was certainly packed—and if it came to that, so were Private Boxes B, C, and D. In addition to Archie, there were four or five other St. Frank's juniors, to say nothing of Marjorie Temple, and two other girls—Winnie Pitt and Mary Summers.

"I'm afraid you can't see the stage very well," said Marjorie, who was in the front. "Have you got a good view, Archie?"

"Absolutely," replied Archie. "A perfectly priceless view, old girl."

Practically the whole of his vision was filled by Marjorie's head and shoulders, and he could see very little of the stage. But he spoke with such conviction that he was apparently satisfied.

"Perfectly priceless," he repeated approvingly. "Odds visions and fairies! How absolutely stunning you look to-night, Marjorie, old dear! That dashed silky gown, what? Absolutely the goods!"

Marjorie turned, flushing.

"I don't believe you can see the stage at all!" she protested.

"I mean, why see the good old stage?" asked Archie mildly. "The curtain isn't up yet, anyhow. Besides, from this angle—I mean, that priceless little curl on your—"

Marjorie brushed the priceless little curl aside, and pretended to be indifferent. In the other boxes the situation was very much the same—a considerable jamming of youthful theatregoers. All of them were keenly anxious to see how Horace Stevens would act the part. Nothing much could be expected, for his notice had been so appallingly short.

There were six boxes in the theatre—the four upper ones, occupied by the St. Frank's party, and two below. In one of these latter sat a tall, kindly-looking gentleman, accompanied by a lady of obvious culture. They were, in fact, Sir Rufus and Lady Browne—William Napoleon's parents. Exactly how he had secured this box for them nobody knew—but Browne had made up his mind that his father should see Stevens on the stage, and consequently his father was here. Browne had an extraordinary way of getting things done.

"Thank goodness we're in a private box!" said Church rebelliously, as Handforth nearly pushed him over the edge. "Why the dickens can't you keep still? If we were in the stalls you'd have been chucked out before now!"

"He can't help it, poor chap," whispered McClure. "He's trying to get nearer Irene, that's all."

Handforth had, of course, made certain that he was in the same box as Irene Manners, but some idiot had placed himself between them. Quite thoughtlessly, of course—the idiot being Willy Handforth.

Church and McClure were suspicious about that thoughtlessness.

But for Irene's presence, Willy would have been ruthlessly pitched to the back of the box like an empty sack. But Irene was talking with him, and if Handforth had interfered, she would have noticed something at once. No girl could possibly have missed seeing her companion flung headlong to the rear under her very eyes.

But at last she turned her head, to speak to one of the others.

"Willy, you young rotter!" hissed Handforth. "Change seats!"

"What for?" asked Willy.

"Change seats, blow you!"

"Sorry, old man, but I couldn't allow it," said Willy judiciously. "I've decided that Irene shall see a bit of this play—and how much chance would she stand if you were sitting next to her? I've got to protect her! If she's left to your mercy, she'll only hear your voice, and—"

"You—you— You might let me have the programme, Willy!" blurted out Handforth, changing his tone suddenly as Irene looked round.

"Why? It's just the same as yours," said Willy brutally.

Handforth was clutching one in his hand, and he gazed at it with such confusion that he didn't notice it was upside down. Fortunately, the lowering of the lights came to his aid. And a moment later the play started.

"Come on—let's give him a clap!" urged Handforth, ready to do anything to relieve his feelings. "Good old Stevens!"

"You blithering chump!" hissed Willy. "He isn't on yet!"

"Eh? I thought—"

"And don't give him a clap, either—even when he does come on," said Willy. "The poor chap'll be nervous enough as it is—without us distracting his attention. Let him have a fair chance, for goodness' sake."

The play opened well—the scene being the bright interior of a country house, where a family gathering was shown. The dialogue was brilliant and witty, and it was one of those shows which are so natural that the audience appears to be looking into a real home.

Stevens was playing the part of the son of the house—in fact, the one part in the whole show that really mattered, for later on the strong scene was entirely his.

The audience was aware that the real star was absent—for notices to this effect had been slipped into every programme. But it was not known that the substitute was a mere schoolboy, utterly raw to the West End stage.

Stevens made his entrance after about ten minutes—running in through the open French windows, breathless, and with tousled hair. He was in white flannels, and carried a tennis racquet—and looked the part with amazing fidelity.

But then a feeling of awkward uneasiness stole over the audience. Stevens spoke his first lines without faltering—but in a strained, stilted, unnatural manner. His second lines he completely forgot, and dried up.

"Oh, my hat!" said Nipper sympathetically.

"Poor old chap," breathed Reggie Pitt.

Exactly as Horace Stevens had foretold, he stood there—"like a fool." The voice of the prompter came clearly—and it was the voice of William Napoleon Browne. But only those in the near boxes heard it.

Stevens struggled on, and the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls listened in a kind of agony. It seemed like drawing blood from a stone to get those faltering lines out of Horace Stevens.

Indeed, the whole action of the play was jeopardised. The other players were thrown off their stroke, and for one terrible minute it seemed that the action would collapse.

The audience became restless. Murmurings came from the pit and gallery. And during those tense opening minutes the unfortunate amateur came perilously near to "getting the bird."

And Mr. Augustus Crowson, in the wings, had three heart attacks in rapid succession. Once it nearly stopped beating. He inwardly groaned. What a fool he had been to trust that babbling young idiot of a Browne! The curtain never ought to have been rung up!

It seemed to Mr. Crowson that an hour had elapsed. He wanted to give orders for the curtain to be lowered—he wanted to bring this farce to an end. The other actors and actresses were similarly affected.

The only individual on the stage who remained supremely cool was William Napoleon Browne. Stevens' opening failure had no effect upon him whatever. Browne took it quite as a matter of course.

In the wings, with the script in his hands, Browne performed his prompting with as little concern as though he were in one of the St. Frank's lecture halls, superintending a trivial sketch.

"Courage, Brother Horace—courage!" he whispered, while one of the other actors was speaking. "What is this I see? Weakness? Rubbish! Remember that we are out for fame and fortune! So to it, brother!"

But Stevens did not really need this urging. He was vaguely aware of a change in himself. His appalling nervousness was going. His lines were coming to him more clearly. And then, suddenly, like the casting off of a cloak, he felt his self-conscious fit vanish.

In the space of ten seconds, he changed utterly and completely. He gave a low, musical laugh—a laugh which wasn't really in the play at all. And from that very second he forgot the audience—he forgot Browne—he forgot everything except the

fact, that he was revelling in this joyous experience.

The action of the play ran on smoothly—the uneasiness of the audience vanished—and the whole house became electrified by the obvious ability of this unknown youngster.

Browne smiled serenely as Mr. Crowson joined him.

"Well, Brother Crowson, who was right?" he murmured.

"By Jupiter!" breathed Mr. Crowson. "You're a marvel!"

"It has taken you a long time to find it out, but we will forgive you," smiled William Napoleon. "Who are we to criticise your lamentable shortsightedness? It is something in this dreary old world to receive recognition—even if it be tardy!"

CHAPTER XVI.

HORACE STEVENS' TRIUMPH.



"WONDERFUL, my boy—wonderful!"

Mr. Crowson, nearly mad with joy, wrung Horace Stevens' hand with such vigour that he was nearly breathless. The second act had just ended—and Stevens had come through the big scene with flying colours. He had only just finished taking his fourth curtain call, and the audience had applauded and cheered him to the echo.

Deservedly, too. Not once after that opening minute had he faltered or hesitated. On occasion, Browne had prompted him—but so judiciously that none knew except the pair involved. Moreover, Stevens had gripped his audience—for even in this great West End theatre he had exercised his gift of magnetism. He didn't know why it was—nobody knew—but he possessed that rare quality of holding his audience in the hollow of his hand. Even now, with such small experience to his credit, he was able to command the whole theatre.

The other members of the company had completely lost their hostility. Everybody connected with the theatre was overjoyed with this boy—eager and anxious to shower their congratulations upon him. They had been hostile because they thought that he was a duffer—a hopeless amateur. But now that they knew the truth they were generous in the extreme.

"Wonderful!" declared Mr. Crowson. "Upon my word, in spite of your ignorance of the part, you are better, in some ways, than Dexter himself! A notable achievement!"

"I—I thought I was pretty awful——"

"We are proud of ourselves," interrupted Browne smoothly. "It is not our habit to boast, Brother Crowson, but I think we deserve not only a clap on the back, but

several medals of honour. Brother Horace has come up to the scratch in the celebrated Browne style. He has done us credit."

"He's right, Mr. Crowson," said Stevens. "I shouldn't have done a thing without old Browne, you know. You've got to thank him—not me."

"I have already made that clear," observed Browne gently.

But this, of course, was only his fun. For Browne himself was the very first to congratulate Stevens upon his success—and later, in a serious moment, to give his chum all the credit for the noteworthy performance. It was only in his flippant moods that Browne claimed the credit for himself.

Right to the end, Stevens maintained his grip on the part. In the last act, indeed, he was the best of all, and his fellow players were breathless with wonder. They simply couldn't understand it.

There was, in all truth, something uncannily strange about it all. That morning Stevens hadn't even seen the part. His feat was by no means a record, but for one so young it closely approached one. And it is doubtful if any previous "last minute" actor had given such a notable rendering of a hastily learned part.

The audience somehow knew the truth towards the finish. They knew that this young fellow was a schoolboy of St. Frank's. Perhaps it was Handforth who had let the cat out of the bag. For Handforth had certainly taken no trouble to lower his voice during the intervals. And word had passed round from mouth to mouth.

And when the final curtain came, the play received the greatest ovation of its run. The applause for Stevens was tumultuous, and nobody was satisfied until Mr. Crowson came upon the stage, and made a brief speech.

"I feel that it is my duty to inform you, ladies and gentlemen, that young Mr. Stevens knew nothing of his part until this morning," he said, amid a hush. "He's only a schoolboy—just over seventeen years of age, and I venture to remark that St. Frank's College is lucky, indeed, to have such a genius within its walls—"

Loud clapping interrupted him for a moment.

"If possible, Mr. Stevens will take the part again to-morrow evening, and perhaps for the rest of the week," continued Mr. Crowson—to Horace Stevens' stupefied joy and amazement. "I feel that I am making no false prediction when I declare that he will one day become one of our greatest stars. In the near future I hope to have the opportunity of presenting him, in this theatre, in three special matinees of 'Hamlet'—"

Again he was interrupted by the clapping and cheering, but at last he managed to finish, and the curtain was lowered. Horace Stevens ran up to him, excited and breathless.

"Thank you, Mr. Crowson!" he panted.

"Did—did you mean that about my playing the part again?"

"Of course I did," said Mr. Crowson. "I have heard from the hospital this evening, and Mr. Dexter has recovered consciousness, and the injury is not so serious as they at first reported. He may be able to resume his part by Thursday—but certainly not before. Would you like to carry on until then?"

"He would!" said Browne calmly.

"And—and those matinees?" asked Stevens incredulously.

"Yes, those matinees, too," nodded Mr. Crowson. "And now, my boy, we'll defer all this discussion until to-morrow. I want you to join me at supper."

"Thank you, sir!"

"Unfortunately, Brother Crowson, such a programme is impossible," put in Browne gently. "Brother Horace has already accepted an invitation to a quiet supper at home with his mother. She, I am convinced, is even now awaiting him with considerable eagerness."

"By Jove!" breathed Stevens, starting. "I—I'd forgotten— Oh, what a cad! I didn't even tell her—"

"Don't let that worry you, brother—your mother knows all," interrupted Browne. "She has been informed since this morning—and, unknown to you, she has witnessed this show. A little detail I omitted to mention earlier. She has already been escorted home by various knights, including Brother Nipper and Brother Pitt. So hasten!"

"Thanks awfully, Browne, old man," said Stevens gratefully. "What on earth should I do without you?"

"Let us not dwell upon such a murky prospect," said Browne.

Mr. Crowson, of course, was only too willing to see Stevens rush off—for he could realise that his mother came before anybody else.

Browne had wanted to get Stevens into a quiet chat with his father—but, under the circumstances, he postponed this. Sir Rufus Browne was tremendously impressed. He was indignant, too. He assured his son that he would give Stevens every help in the latter's injunction against Roger Barton and the manager of the Emperor Theatre.

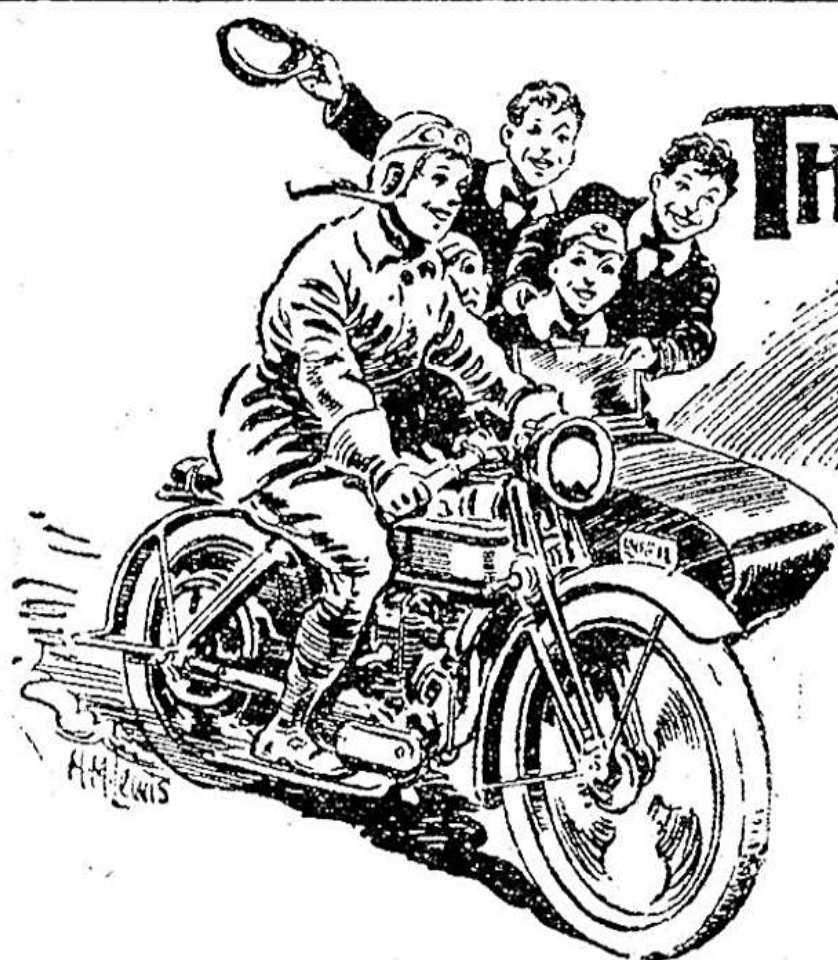
Sir Rufus was very much like his son—there was something about him which indicated that he was a man who meant to get things done. It seemed that the tide of fortune had turned for Horace Stevens.

Indeed, there was a dawn of hope for the schoolboy actor and his mother, and the events of the immediate future promised to be not only gripping, but exciting in the extreme.

THE END.

Another Grand Long Story of this Topping Series will appear Next Week, entitled "ST. FRANK'S IN COURT!" It is a story you must not miss on any account. For further particulars of Next Week's Attractions, see page 39.

Thrilling long instalment of new Detective Serial!



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 the famous detective, Sexton Blake, witnesses a motor-car tragedy, in which a bookmaker, named Aggsby, is mysteriously shot. Sexton Blake and Tinker go to Calcroft to investigate the crime. Tinker has a theory that the murdered man was shot in mistake for a man who is missing from Wisthorpe Hospital. Subsequent events indicate that attempts are being made to foil the detective and his assistant in their quest of the murderer by a wealthy cattle dealer named Roath, whose nephew is a senior at Calcroft. As to what connection the two Roaths have with the crime, more disclosures will be revealed in the exciting instalment below.

(Now read on.)

THE SLEEPWALKER.

HAS he pinched anything?" asked Fane. "That kid has taking ways, you know. Has he pinched our grand piano?"

"That kid" referred to Beilby, who had taken advantage of some study furniture being temporarily deposited in the passage to pile it up against the study door, so that it fell with a clatter when the door had been opened by its owner.

"I hope he's pinched some of the springs out of that rotten easy-chair," said Tinker. "A lovely study I got dumped into, didn't I? I reckon he offered you about three-halfpence too much for this clutter. Aren't you ashamed of the rubbish?"

"Don't grouse at me, my lad!" said Fane. "Once upon a time we had quite nice furniture, but those three wild Indians are always fighting and ragging, and the poor old sticks have gone through it. If you

knew the fines we've paid for study damage, you'd know why we are poor. Anyhow, when the Head comes round at the end of the term he's sure to condemn and scrap the lot, and put in a fresh lot. I wish he wouldn't, for they can't charge study damage on this wreckage; that's why we like it. Furthermore— Oh, drat! Here's more beastly fag for us!"

A bell was clanging. The door of the Rag opened, and the juniors streamed out into the corridor, and formed up. It was the fire bell, and possibly a false alarm. Seniors hurried past, and dashed down the stairs. Fane yelled a few orders, and the juniors marched along the corridor and down the staircase, grumbling furiously.

Tinker opened the window and looked out. The bell was clanging, and the other houses were emptying, but he could see no sign of any fire. Seniors, wearing leather jackets and shining brass helmets, were racing towards the building in which the fire-engine was lodged.

"Well, here's my chance," thought Tinker.

He crossed the corridor to Martin Roath's study, knowing that there was not another soul in the house, for even the servants were compelled to answer the summons of the fire-bell. At Calcroft juniors were forbidden to lock their study doors, but this rule did not seem to apply to seniors, for though Roath might have left in a great hurry, he had not forgotten to lock his.

Tinker had to go up to the dormitory to obtain a bunch of keys. A glance out of the dormitory window showed him the motor fire-engine in the middle of the quadrangle, and the fire-escape being run towards Windover's house, while the amateur fire brigade, captained by Holgate, unrolled hose-pipes and linked them up at tremendous speed.

It was quite like the real thing without the fire, and Tinker hoped that Holgate

would keep them busy, for he had some trouble with the lock. At last it yielded, and he switched on the electric light. The study itself was not very luxurious. The lid of the roll-top desk had been pulled down, automatically fastening all the drawers. This was a more difficult affair than the lock, and Tinker decided to leave the desk till the boys had gone to bed.

He passed into the bed-room. Most of the senior boys, who had plenty of money, added new carpets and expensive bits of furniture to their studies and bed-rooms, but there was no sign of it here, for Roath had probably been told that he would soon be transferred to another house. There was a bureau by the bedside, and, like the desk, it was locked.

"Cautious beggar," muttered Tinker. "I'll get inside that thing, anyhow."

He knelt down and got to work, but when he had opened the bureau he found nothing in it except a flagon of Australian burgundy, a box of cigarettes, a pair of gloves, and a handful of loose silver and coppers. The fire-grate contained the ashes of various letters and papers, and if these had been burnt hastily, they had been burnt thoroughly, for there were not two scraps of paper left which he could piece together.

If there was anything to be found at all, it would be found in the desk. Again the bell clanged, warning him the the fire-drill was over. Fane, Pye, Bindley, and Manners were quite indignant about it.

They could not blame Holgate, for although he directed the fire-brigade, he never knew when a practice alarm would be given.

"I call it a dirty trick, Jack," grumbled Fane. "I don't mind being fetched out of bed, and we jolly well love being fetched out of class by the old fire-bell, but it's a mean stunt to do it on us in our own time. We ought to send a deputation to the Head and protest. It's coming to something if poor beggars like ourselves can't shake a loose leg in peace after being bullied and sweated and jumped on all day."

"Galley slaves!" added Pye. "Of course, the giddy thing is useful in its way, and we don't grouse about that, but why should they bag our time for it?" Pye got on a chair and smote his chest. "Brothers and comrades, listen a few. Are we slaves, are we worms, are we giddy black beetles, to be stamped on in this fashion by the big boots of tyranny? Are we? If which, why so? Must we line up in our own time, and waddle out to stand in the cold night air watching a lot of brass-hatted lunatics climb ladders and squirt water about? Must we? I pause for a reply!"

"There it is, old bean," said Manners, hurling the waste-paper basket at the orator.

As the basket was aimed from behind and hit the speaker in the nape of the neck, Pye got down rather hastily, and got hold of Manners. They settled the argument

under the table, in spite of the protests of Wilberforce Stott.

"Really," sighed Wilberforce, "I think you ought to stop them. It is dreadful. I know you will tell me it is quite friendly, but often I have seen black eyes and gore as the result. How can this dreadful savagery be friendly. It is horrible. Just listen."

Fane, Tinker, and Bindley grinned. Certainly it did not sound particularly friendly, for above the sound of thumps and bangs and scuffling they heard Manners remark to Pye that if he could only get his teeth in Pye's left ear he would chew it off. To this cannibal threat Pye replied in an equally breathless voice that if he could find a little more room he would walk all over the hideous thing Manners dared to call a face, and jump on it regularly every time Manners came out of hospital after having it repaired.

However, though both showed signs of wear and tear, they were quite friendly afterwards. Then the dormitory-bell rang.

"Absolutely cheated out of half an hour," said Fane. "Let's have a rag upstairs, and get our own back."

"Better not," said Bindley. "Cut it out for another night, for surly Clackman is the prefect on duty. Not that Clackman would go moaning to Pycroft if we kicked up a dust, Jack," he added to Tinker, "but he's got the cunningest flick with the corner of a wet towel you ever felt. It stings through your pyjamas just like a wasp sticking its spike into you; so I'm doing no ragging. I'd give Clackman a couple of bob to teach me that flick, and try it on Beilby. Gee! Wouldn't the little rat squeal!"

Tinker was glad that there was to be no rag. Quiet came at last as he waited in the study. He went down to see whether Mr. Pycroft had gone out or retired early to bed, as he sometimes did, and heard a murmur of voices in the Housemaster's private room.

"A bit awkward," he muttered. "If the guv'nor rings up early, Pycroft may come chasing me, and I don't want him to catch me tinkering with Roath's desk. I wonder if he knows what has happened to Roath. Funny nobody mentioned it, and as a rule the kids get all the news quickly."

Trusting to his quickness of ear to hear the approach of Mr. Pycroft in time to get out of Roath's study if he failed to hear the telephone-bell, Tinker set about a very difficult task—the opening of a roll-top desk without damaging it or using force. A chisel would have done the trick in a few seconds, but that was a brutal way, and must have left marks, and Tinker prided himself on being an artist.

When he had tried all his keys three times over, and failed, he took out his knife. The button-hook in the knife did what nothing else would do. Tinker pushed up the top of the desk, switched off the light that shone through the ground-glass pane above the

door, and switched on Martin Roath's green-shaded reading-lamp, placing his cap on the top of the cardboard shade.

Then, with one ear cocked towards the door, he sat down to ransack the desk.

There was nothing there to help to solve the mystery. There were a few letters, but Tinker quickly discovered that they did not concern the Fifth-Former, Martin Roath, but had been left behind by the previous tenant of the study. The large drawer at the bottom contained clothing and a couple of tennis racquets.

"As blank as a whitewash wall," thought Tinker, greatly disappointed. "I expect if there are any papers or letters he hasn't burnt, they're in his locker in the Fifth Form class-room. All that for nothing at all—gee-whizz!"

Tinker's hand went to the switch of the shaded lamp and cut off the light. He fancied he had heard something scrape gently against the door which he had left ajar to listen for Mr. Pycroft or the telephone-bell. Tinker did not know how long he had been in Roath's study, but the whole house was so still that the click of the electric switch seemed to make a tremendous noise.

The scraping came again, but not so distinctly. Tinker peered out and saw a figure in pyjamas and slippers moving slowly along the corridor, dragging his fingers along the wall as he went. The figure stopped, and turned, and Tinker recognised Beilby. Then came a tread on the stairs, Beilby went into the Rag, and Mr. Pycroft appeared with a book under his arm.

Tinker did not stir as the housemaster passed and went up to his bed-room. Up there Mr. Pycroft had a control-switch, and presently the lights in the corridor and hall went out.

"I wonder if that little bounder is walking in his sleep," thought Tinker. "If he's awake it's funny he should have kept touching the wall like that. Perhaps he's lost a halfpenny and it's preyed on his mind so much that he has to walk in his sleep to try and find it."

Though he was not particularly fond of Beilby, Tinker did not want to hurt him, and he knew it was an unwise thing to wake a sleep-walker too suddenly. Of course, in spite of his curious way of touching the wall, Beilby might be wide-awake, and when he was awake there was no drowsiness about that young gentleman.

In the gloom, Tinker tip-toed towards the Rag. Up loomed the ghostly form of Beilby, making for the staircase and leaning over the banisters. Tinker watched the dim figure descend the stairs. The fine old hall was panelled in oak as was the corridor leading down to the class-room. Beilby's slippers made scarcely any sound, but Tinker could hear the faint scrape of his fingernails against the woodwork.

"Gone along the class-room passage," he thought. "The young rat's asleep right

enough or he wouldn't have toddled down those stairs so steadily in the dark. Something must be twisting his wicked little conscience."

Tinker was not at Calcroft School to shadow Beilby, though Beilby did owe him half-a-sovereign, but these strange tactics had aroused his curiosity. He followed as quickly as he could. There were stars in the sky now and the tall windows of the class-room let in a fair amount of light.

At first Tinker failed to see the wanderer and fancied he must have gone further on, till a breath of cold air drew his attention to the fact that one of the windows had been opened. Tinker crossed the class-room and saw the figure in pyjamas making for the gate. Something fell to the ground with a tinkle, and the next moment Beilby was stooping down feeling about for what he had dropped. It sounded like a coin, and evidently Beilby found it, for he went on and proceeded to climb over the gate.

"If I go after him that rotten 'phone is sure to ring," thought Tinker. "Perhaps it's ringing now. I'm sure he's asleep. He's got some money and he couldn't stay in his bed till he'd hidden it. I'll wager he's got a regular hoard hidden somewhere, and I can't go after him to find it. Asleep or awake, that little worm seems to have me beaten every time. All the same, I hope he won't break his neck."

By closing and fastening the window, Tinker might have made it awkward for the artful junior, but as he might be called away himself before Beilby returned that would not be playing the game. Tinker went back to Mr. Pycroft's room, which commanded a view of the gate, and kept watch while he waited for Sexton Blake's promised telephone-call.

At last he saw a gleam of grey through the ironwork. Beilby made the climb and descent quite safely, but in the middle of the asphalt path, about fifty yards from the steps of Mr. Pycroft's house, he suddenly stopped and put his hands to his eyes.

"Gosh! He was asleep!" muttered Tinker. "Now for his squeal. If he's wakened up he'll be more scared than a mouse in a trap."

Even through the thick glass of the window, Tinker heard Beilby's terrified shriek.

"Ee-ee-ee-ee-ee! Ow! Where am I? E-e-e-e-ee-ee-ee!" screamed the horror-stricken junior.

If that weird scream awakened anyone in the school, it was put down to Cornelius the cat. Beilby soon stopped, for it came into his mind that some of his dormitory mates had played him this shabby trick. Perhaps he had been snoring and the beasts had carried him downstairs and put him in the quadrangle without wakening him. His horror was that they might have locked him out.

"If they have, the dirty cads, I'll hammer and ring till I get Pycroft out of bed," he muttered. "I don't care what happens,

for I'm not going to stop out here to freeze. I expect that brute Hasland put 'em up to it all on account of his measly half-quid. The brutes, the pigs! I'll show 'em!"

Then Constable Blagg, rather earlier than usual, opened the side gate. Beilby saw him, and if he had gone forward and explained to the constable what he thought had happened, all might have been well. Instead, panic seized Beilby and he bolted for the shelter of the cloisters, and quite naturally Constable Blagg bolted after him.

As Tinker stood grinning at the window he was betting on Beilby, for having to run away so often Beilby had acquired quite a dazzling pace as a sprinter for fifty yards

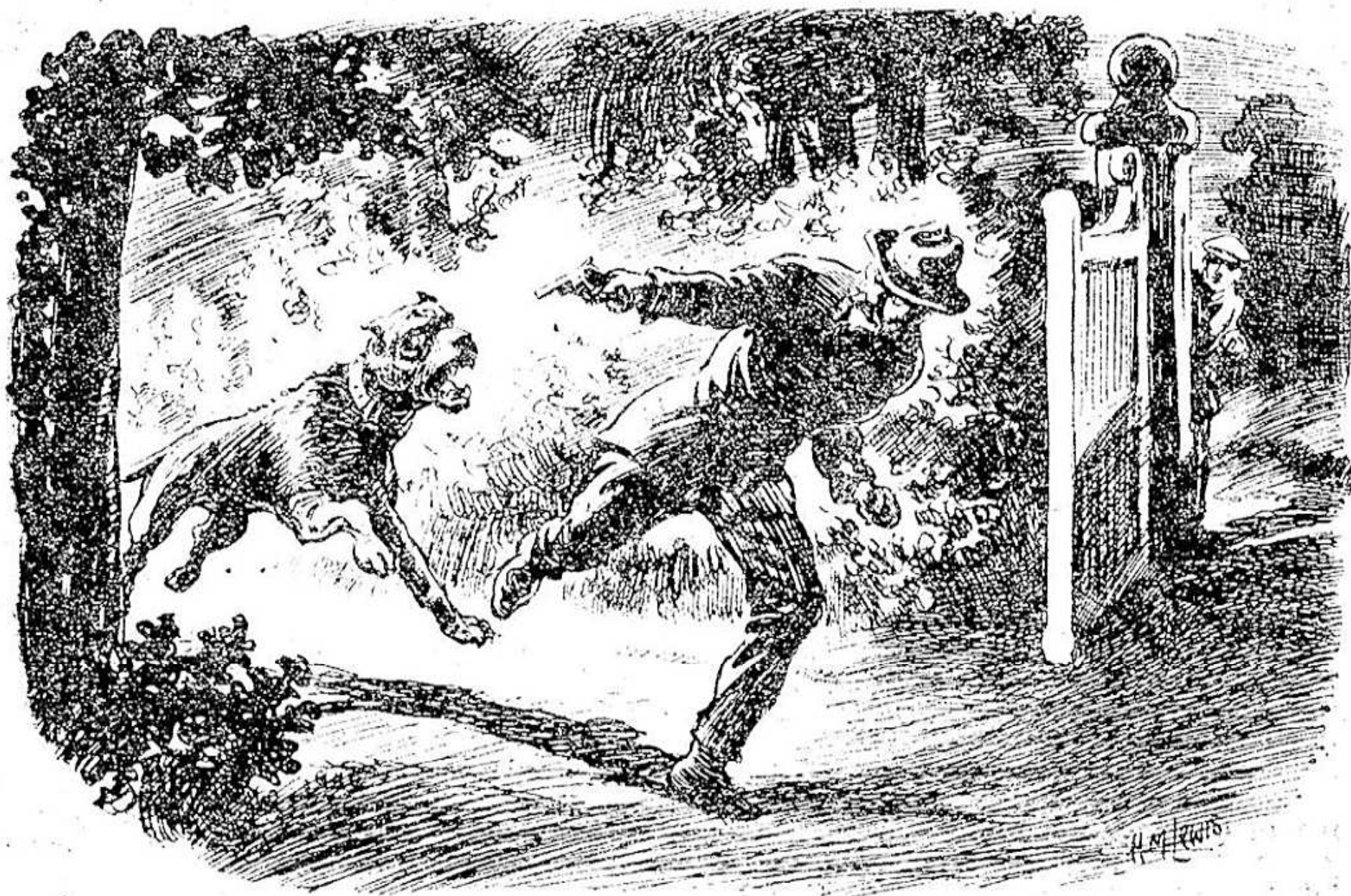
"Ah—er—Beilby, to be sure," said the grim voice of Mr. Pycroft. "Good gracious! Go in there, my boy, and let us—er—have a little talk together."

Utterly dazzled and with his knees wobbling, Beilby was pushed into Mr. Pycroft's room. Tinker—for it was Tinker, not the housemaster—gently locked the door.

"Well," he said, still imitating Mr. Pycroft's voice, "will you kindly—ha! explain yourself? What were you doing out there at this hour?"

"Pip-pip-please, sir—"

"You will—er—kindly stop pipping and explain," said Tinker. "Do you hear what I



Half turning as he ran, the man took aim at the beast's very jaws with a heavy revolver.

or so. Pursuer and pursued vanished into the cloisters. Constable Blagg was wily, too. He did not go in very far, but emerged again and made for the other entrance, guessing that the runaway would double through the dark, quaint old passages and emerge at that end.

But Beilby, though terribly scared, was quite as wily as Constable Blagg. He stopped shivering and, almost on the verge of tears, listened. Then he crept back and put a scared face round the arched entrance and was back across the quadrangle and at Mr. Pycroft's door before Blagg even dreamed that he had gone.

The door opened, a strong hand dragged him in and a dazzling light shone in his face.

say, sir? How dare you be out of the dormitory, sir?"

"Pip-pip-pip-please, sir, I—I don't know, sir," whimpered Beilby. "I—I was taken out in my s-s-s-sleep, sir. I—I c-c-can't r-remember, sir. I w-woke up and f-found myself in the quad, sir. Ow! Pip-pip-pip-please, sir, I—I don't know how I got there, sir."

"A likely story," said Tinker. "Good gracious! Miserable boy, do you think I am—er—so absolutely bereft of reason as to accept such—ha—such a preposterous story. In the morning I will go further into the matter. For the moment you will write five thousand lines—"

"Ow!" wailed Beilby.

"On every—er—half-holiday until you have completed them."

"Wow-oo!" said Beilby.

"And be—ha!—gated for the rest of the term."

"Ee-ee-ee-ee!" squealed the victim, as these hideous penalties fell on his horrified ears. "Oh! Pip-pip-pip please don't, sir."

"And be shot at dawn," added Tinker in his natural voice.

As he spoke, Tinker switched on the light, and at the same moment Constable Blagg, who had found the open window and made his way round through the class-room passage, put in his helmeted head.

If looks were daggers, Beilby would have stabbed Tinker dead, for the look on his dirty, tear-stained face was almost diabolical.

"You pig," he said, "you utter hog! I knew it was you all the time, but I'll jolly well murder you, you see if I don't."

Then Beilby dodged past the constable and fled upstairs, and Tinker smiled at the man of law.

"I was just coming to shut that window," he said. "Sorry to give you so much trouble. That young ass Beilby broke loose. There's nothing wrong. Like a drink?"

"It's against the rules, and I don't suppose I ought, but it's very kind of you," said the constable, thawing.

"And it's not my whisky, but we'll present Mr. Pycroft with another bottle if he wants one," said Tinker. "Very kind of him to leave it out. Help yourself and sit down for a minute, Mr. Blagg. It's quite O.K. Take a large dose and—excuse me for one second."

The telephone-bell was ringing at last, and Tinker put the receiver to his ear and listened, quite conscious of the fact that in Mr. Pycroft's room Constable Blagg was also listening with distended ears.

"Oh, very well," said Tinker. "I wish you told us that before. Have to send to the makers for a new radiator, eh? That's a nuisance. We wanted the car to-morrow afternoon, but if you can't do it, you can't, I suppose. Yes, it's a French radiator. The name of it, did you say?"

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked Sexton Blake's voice.

"Somebody listening, that's all," answered Tinker in French. "Yes, that's the name of it. What do you want to tell me? Oh, yes. I'll see to that. Leave it alone till I come along. I didn't quite catch what you said. That's right."

Tinker hung up the receiver and went back to Constable Blagg.

"All your fault," he said. "If you'd pulled up young Roath he wouldn't have banged into our car and given us all this trouble. You knew it was young Roath, didn't you?"

"Well, to tell the exact truth, I didn't, sir," said Blagg. "but, of course, I did know it was one of the senior gents. You see, it

isn't quite so easy on a beat like this. I try to do the right thing, but somehow, though some of the junior gents nearly drive me raving mad, Calcroft School is Calcroft School. Just like you'd say Parliament is Parliament."

"I can quite understand that you don't want to make any trouble," said Tinker.

"That being so, sir," said Constable Blagg, draining his glass, "I'll go out by the window and see you shuts and fastens it after me."

"By all means," said Tinker.

Giving the constable ample time to get out of the way, Tinker put on his hat and overcoat and set out for Calcroft. He laughed softly as the thought of Beilby came into his mind.

"If I didn't get my half-sovereign out of the little worm when I was posing at Pycroft in the dark, I got most of it," he chuckled. "A good nine shilling's worth easy. Well, dear old Calcroft School is a joy-ride. If it wasn't for this rotten murder I could laugh all day."

CHAPTER. XV.

NARROWING DOWN.

TINKER found it a dark and lonely road. Calcroft had automatic gas-lamps which put themselves out and turned themselves on by some clockwork arrangement at different hours according to the time of year. This saved the wages of lamplighters, though somebody had to go once-a-week and wind up the gadgets. Unfortunately, the clockwork was not always a complete success; and it was not very unusual for a lamp to burn all day and put itself out at night when it was really wanted.

Unfortunately, when Tinker went along all the lamps outside the town were in good working order, and had snuffed themselves out, except those in the town. He kept well in the centre of the dark, tree-grown road, for the affair at the Sloop Inn had taught him to be wary. Though his ears and eyes were active, he had still time to think. There was very little to think about, for in his own mind, Tinker had already solved the mystery of the crime at Calcroft. To Tinker it was the plainest and simplest thing in the world, and he knew it was just as plain and simple to Sexton Blake, though the famous detective had said so little.

As he had thought almost from the first, James Burton Aggsby had been shot by mistake. It was the man who had disappeared from Wisthorpe Hospital the ambush had been arranged for. This man must have held some terrifying secret, or some cause for bitter-revenge, or else this murderous ambush would never have been laid. To Tinker, now, everything pointed to the

Roaths as the murderers, but after all there was nothing definite.

If the little man with the fair beard was, as Tinker suspected, the man who had escaped from the hospital at Wisthorpe, he held the whole secret. It was a secret of which the local police had never dreamed, but if the elder Roath was the man who had watched them fishing in the river at night opposite the hospital grounds, he must have guessed that they were following up a fatal clue.

"No wonder old Roath was keen on hoping that the man's body was at the bottom of the river and that they wouldn't be able to trace the car," mused Tinker. "Of course, he didn't say that when I heard him talking to the policeman at Aperling, but I jolly well know he was thinking it. He's getting it rubbed into him hard and rough now, for he knows the guv'nor and I are on his trail, and that the man he tried to kill didn't jump into the Calder and drown himself, but is very much alive and kicking."

Tinker's musings carried him past the turning he ought to have taken and he had to go back. Tinker had brought his automatic pistol this time. His hand closed on it as he heard a tapping sound, for the road was much darker than the main road. Then came a soft whistle, and Tinker answered it as he quickened his pace.

"I took you for a wood-pecker when I heard you knocking your old pipe out," he said, "though I believe woodpeckers aren't such idiots as we are, and go to bed at night. Young Roath's study was a wash-out. I fagged all the way through it and opened his desk and bureau, but there wasn't a thing there worth looking at twice. Have you done any good?"

"Precious little, young 'un," answered Sexton Blake, "neither have the police. I saw Dedgard again, and the old chap is choking with rage, and he has a terribly sore head. He can't make it out at all. The police boarded the yacht and searched it, but they found no wounded bruisers there. Somebody on the yacht knows all about it, of course. In my humble opinion the gang came over just for the job from Shorehaven, which is a tough little hole. What they intended to do with us I can't say, but I presume they'd made preparations for a failure, and when they failed they rowed across the harbour and got away in a car, or a couple of cars, that were waiting there."

"Most likely," said Tinker. "Poor old Dedgard! He's fond of billiards, but you have to be jolly fond of a game to see the fun of having a billiard ball slammed at you. Oh, that was Constable Blagg listening when I spoke some of my rotten French to you on the 'phone, guv'nor. I should say he's quite a good sort, but as he knows his bosses don't like our being here, he

doesn't like it either. And having said so much, will you tell us what we're doing on this dark, beastly road at this time of night."

"Speak quietly, young 'un," said Sexton Blake. "I'm rather expecting your friend with the fair beard to come along."

"Did you trace him then?"

"Somebody like him. Dedgard had a brief to search the lodging-houses. As his head was too sore to do any work of the kind I went myself."

"And you traced your man? Good egg!" said Tinker.

"I didn't trace him properly, unfortunately. I found that a man who answered the description had been staying in a sailors' lodging-house in Marsh Street for nearly five days. He gave his name as Nathan Smith, and cleared out yesterday."

"It's millions of quids to nothing his name isn't Nathan Smith," said Tinker. "I know this is the way up to Roath's place, but what makes you think he'll come to-night, guv'nor? I know I've got into a bad habit of asking questions lately, but you've been so quiet yourself over this affair, I have to."

"Well, to save trouble, I'll answer a few for you, though I'm not going to guarantee the accuracy of my replies, young 'un," said Blake. "The yacht won't sail for a day or two, for her owner has ordered five hundred tons of steam coal, and in a place like this you can't get five hundred tons of the best steam coal in a few minutes, nor can you stow the stuff aboard very quickly. That's one of them. Nathan Smith will come along if he has business with Roath, and I fancy he'd prefer dark to daylight for transacting his business."

"He'll be a blatant ass if he comes at all," said Tinker.

"Admitted, but don't put me out of my stride. The younger Roath is with his uncle."

"You mean, if his uncle's at home, guv'nor," corrected Tinker. "I'll take it that you've answered all the questions I want to ask, for I don't want to overwork you. It's all very nice, but I'm fed-up with standing on wet grass under this beastly tree. S-sh! Something alive at last, guv'nor! That's a car on the top road. If it pulls up, we'd better sprint, for if it stops it will be at Roath's gates."

The car did stop, but only for a moment or two. Keeping on the grass that edged the roadside, Sexton Blake and Tinker ran forward swiftly. The car had gone up the carriage-drive of the big house Roath had purchased. They were so close behind it that the gate had not had time to close. It clanged behind them as they squeezed through. Keeping along the drive, they saw a bright light shine from the doorway, revealing a Rolls-Royce car and two men walking up the steps.

"That's Roath on the left, guv'nor," whispered Tinker, "but I don't recognise

"The guy in the tall hat with the bag. A doctor, I guess."

"I shouldn't wonder, young 'un. The nephew may be worse. If it wasn't so late I'd go and ask."

"Some nerve," said Tinker, "especially when he's got you taped. They seem to be keeping the car to take the doctor back."

The chauffeur had got down, and was talking to the footman who had opened the door. Tinker ducked down behind the shrubbery and crept closer.

"Pretty bad," he heard the footman say. "I don't think they ought to have fetched him away from the hospital. Who's the sawbones?"

"Sir Guy Rossover. We fetched him from Slaynes, and I've got the beastly job of taking him back again," answered the chauffeur.

A hand touched Tinker's arm.

"Keep low and look to the left," whispered Sexton Blake. "Who's that behind the tree?"

Someone else was watching the millionaire's house as well as the private detective and his assistant. As if scenting danger, the man slipped away into the shadows, and the private detective glided in the direction the watcher seemed to have taken swiftly and silently. The chauffeur went into the house, and the door was shut, guessing, no doubt, that it would be some time before his services would be again required. The name he had mentioned—Sir Guy Rossover—was well known to Tinker, for Sir Guy was a celebrated London surgeon, who, no doubt, was attending to some other patient in the neighbourhood, and, having heard of it, the elder Roath had motored over to obtain his services for his nephew.

In a few windows of the big house lights showed dimly from behind the drawn curtains and lowered blinds. Tinker had little doubt as to the identity of the other watcher, whom Blake had attempted to follow. He would not have been in the position of the elder Roath then for ten times his wealth. It was not an enviable position to know that the cleverest detective in the world was living in disguise so close to him waiting to discover his secret; and over and above that for a man who had a dark and dangerous secret to hide, another foe had arisen like a spectre from the grave to avenge some wrong of the past, for that is how Tinker looked at it.

"He'd have bolted before this if young Martin hadn't smashed into the guv'nor," thought Tinker. "I wonder if he thought the little chap was dead till he jumped out at him from the shop. If he did think him dead, and then recognised him, he must have had a terrific shock. And where's the third man? There must have been a third to provide the little guy with clothes and cash when he got away from the hospital. And where's the guv'nor?"

All was still except for the rustle of the

night wind in the trees, as Tinker peered about and listened; and then from the open door a light streamed out. Against the light Tinker saw the elder Roath holding a mastiff by the collar. Tinker had not bargained for mastiffs. The dog was a huge, powerful brute, and was probably a trained man-catcher. So Tinker backed away, and took to his heels.

There is only one way to deal with a dog trained to hunt, throw, and pin a man down, and that is to shoot it or get mauled, and Tinker was far too fond of dogs to want to shoot one. As he ran for the gate a deep-throated baying sounded from the gloom, telling that the dog had picked up the scent.

Tinker reached the gate, and opened it, ready to close it promptly if the dog appeared. He heard another sullen bark, and then the sound of running feet, and the next minute Sexton Blake had joined him.

"So you left, too, guv'nor," said Tinker. "A jolly sensible idea. I'd sooner tackle a man than a dog any time."

"S-sh! The dog's puzzled," said the private detective. "There are too many scents for him. Perhaps he'll miss us and do what I failed to do—round up the other chap."

"Roath loosed him, guv'nor," said Tinker, "so I wonder what Roath will do if the dog collars the man."

Crisp and clear sounded the ringing echo of a revolver-shot, followed by the noise of crackling branches and a scurry of hurried footfalls, and the dazzling glare of the headlamps of a motor-car streamed down the carriage-drive. Along the drive, running like a coursed hare, came a man, the great mastiff bounding, open-mouthed, behind him. Screened by the pillar of the gate, with Tinker behind him, Sexton Blake stood ready, his automatic pistol in his hand. It was a matter of inches, for the dog was gaining at every bound. Half-turning as he ran, the man took aim at the beast's very jaws with a heavy revolver. There was no report, only a sharp metallic snap, and the great paws were almost on the man's shoulders, when Sexton Blake crashed the gate to, and the leaping mastiff crashed against the bars, baffled and snarling. The glaring lights went out, and a whistle recalled the dog. Tinker was so dazzled that the air seemed full of moons, but heard Sexton Blake's quiet voice.

"A close shave, that, friend," said the private detective. "Who are you?"

"Oh, nobody in particular," said the man. "Who are you?"

As he spoke, Sexton Blake pressed the button of his flash-lamp and turned its rays on the man, who was panting heavily after his run. Behind a levelled revolver he saw a man with a fair beard, who wore a cheap cloth cap and had a blue handkerchief knotted round his throat. Though the man could not possibly have seen the private

detective's face with any clearness, he could not fail to see the automatic pistol resting on the wrist of the hands that held the flash-lamp and pointing straight at his head.

"I think I asked you first," said Sexton Blake.

"That's my business. What's the good of blinking at each other over a couple of guns like a pair of silly owls? If you're not the police, shift out of the way and let me go. If you are the police, I reckon one of us looks like getting shot."

"Drop that gun and look pleasant!" said Tinker's voice from behind. "Don't argue about it, for I've got you covered."

"And I've got you both covered!" said another voice from the gloom. "Walk right away, Nat. Mind your own cursed business, you two. I can see you both plainly, and if you are asking for a funeral, you can have it."

Then out of the darkness, thrown with deadly aim, came a sod of grass torn from the wet ditch. At the sound of the unexpected voice Sexton Blake had involuntarily turned his head, and the missile struck him full in the face. He staggered, half-blinded by the loose soil, and Tinker made a clutch at the flashlamp as it went spinning from his hand. Then something whiplike wrapped itself round Tinker's legs, and a sudden powerful jerk dragged his feet from under him and brought him down heavily on his back. The same mysterious force dragged him feet foremost down the road for several yards, and then came the noise of an approaching car and the glare of advancing head-lamps. Making a frantic effort—for his ankles seemed firmly roped together—Tinker raised himself on his hands and rolled himself over and over, just in time to clear the car as it flashed past him.

(To be continued.)

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ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 34. April 10, 1926

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SECTION

B

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C

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CAREERS FOR BOYS

— By A. C. HORTH —

THE PLUMBER.

MUCH of the actual work that a plumber has to do was indicated in the previous article on the trades associated with plumbing, and in this article the methods of training and registration will be dealt with. In common with many other skilled trades, but not to such an extent as in many of them, apprenticeship has been allowed to fall into decay. The result is, that there are a large number of operative plumbers who have not had a thorough training, and who are incapable of carrying out work requiring a high degree of skill. A smattering of the work has been picked up by the handyman, so often employed by the small builder to do the many little odds and ends in general repairing.

THE NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP COUNCIL.

A scheme of apprenticeship was drawn up in the year 1920 by the National Apprenticeship Council, composed of master-plumbers, operative plumbers, and representatives of associated interests, such as the Ministry of Labour, the Board of Education, the Association of Technical Institutions, the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Royal Sanitary Institute, the Worshipful Company of Plumbers, and the Water-works Engineers. This scheme is known as the National Scheme for Apprenticeship in the Plumbing Trade, and was drawn up in the hope that, through it, the general standard of craftsmanship in the plumbing trade might be raised, and as a step forward towards the time when every plumber should be a true craftsman and bad work eliminated. The scheme aims at the thorough training of every boy entering the trade, ensuring both that the employers shall see that he has a grounding in the technical processes of the craft, and that by attendance at a technical school he shall acquire an understanding of the processes themselves, and include in the range of his knowledge other branches of the craft which the employers may not have facilities for teaching.

THE FACILITIES FOR TECHNICAL TRAINING.

Technical classes for plumbers, providing theoretical lectures and practical work, are held in most of the large towns, and in London, apart from the classes organised in connection with the many polytechnics, elementary and advanced classes in both practical and theoretical plumbing are held at the Trades' Training Schools, under the

auspices of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, in conjunction with the Worshipful Company of Carpenters, and at the L.C.C. School of Building, at Brixton, plumbing forms an important department of the scheme of instruction. In order to be able to take full advantage of the special courses of instruction, apprentices to the plumbing trade should have a good general education, and should have a knowledge of workshop arithmetic and geometrical drawing.

WHAT THE APPRENTICE SHOULD KNOW.

The National Apprenticeship Council give a list of thirteen processes that an apprentice should know before he can be considered as thoroughly trained; the first six are considered obligatory, and should form the basis of the training provided by the employer, the remainder of the processes may not be within the scope of the work done by the employer, and should be learnt as a part of the instruction given at the technical class. The processes are: (1) Fixing of waste, soil, vent, hot and cold supply, and overflow pipes in iron, lead, and other metals, and all appurtenances therewith. (2) Sheet lead working. (3) Lead pipe bending. (4) Soldering and jointing with solder. (5) Fixing of gutters and down pipes, in iron and other metals. (6) Lead burning. (7) Brazing and preparing joints for same. (8) Lead casting. (9) Oxy-acetylene (or other process) welding. (10) Gas-fitting in lead, iron, or other metals. (11) Iron pipe bending, cutting, screwing, and fixing. (12) Copper pipe bending, cutting, screwing and fixing. (13) Glazing.

THE NATIONAL REGISTRATION OF PLUMBERS.

The National Registration Movement was initiated in 1883 by the Worshipful Company of Plumbers for the following objects: To enable the public to distinguish plumbers who have given evidence of their competency, and undertaken the responsibility required by the conditions of their registration. To raise the efficiency and status of plumbers as a body, in a manner consistent with the important position they occupy in relation to the public health, and in connection with the distribution and uses of water in dwelling-houses and other buildings; to obtain public recognition of properly qualified men. Plumbers holding a certificate of registration are entitled to wear the badge granted by the Royal College of Arms and to use the letters R.P.

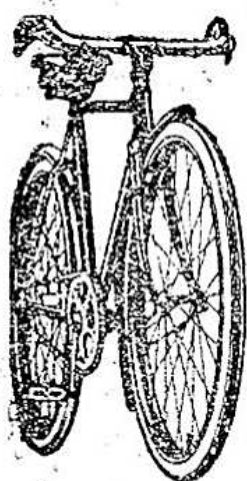
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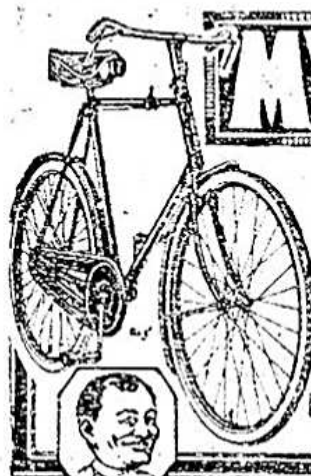
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