

Grand New Circus Story by Sidney Drew Starts To-day.

THE Boys' Herald 2d

CHRISTMAS DOUBLE NUMBER



THE KING OF THE
CARAVANS.
A THRILLING CIRCUS STORY.

BY
SIDNEY
DREW.



Christmas at Cliveden

A Laughable, Seasonable, and Complete Tale of the Chums at Cliveden College.

Specially Written for Our Christmas Number by CHARLES HAMILTON.

The 1st Chapter. Left Behind.

THE Cliveden Combine were looking serious, not to say solemn.

The school was in a buzz of breaking up for the Christmas holidays. It was a fine frosty morning, cold but clear, and the sun gleamed on the frost-rime on walls and windows. In the old Close stood several brakes, upon which luggage was being piled, and in and on which eager youths were piling themselves.

All was bustle, and gaiety, and eager chatter. Much as the Cliveden fellows loved the old school they were glad to be off to their homes at the end of the term, to see familiar faces once more, and gather with family and friends round the Christmas fireside. But there were, as usual, some who were not going—some to whom the walls of Cliveden were to be the only home that Christmastide—and naturally they did not join in the cheery chatter and expectation.

There were three of them—and they were no others than our old friends the Combine—Neville, Flynn, and Poindexter, of No. 4 Study.

They stood in the doorway looking out at the preparations for the general exodus of the Cliveden inhabitants, and expressed their feelings to one another in a few well-chosen words.

"Rotten!" said Dick Neville with emphasis.

"Bastely!" said Micky Flynn.

"I guess so," Poindexter remarked. "It's simply pesky."

A whip cracked, and one laden brake rolled off towards the school gates. The youngsters waved their caps and shouted.

"Here, look sharp with that box, Bunter," exclaimed a well-known voice behind the Combine. "You don't want us to stop here for Christmas, do you?"

"That I don't, Master Pankhurst," growled Bunter, the worthy porter of Cliveden College.

"I certainly don't, Master Pankhurst."

"Then buck up with that box, Bunty. You're too slow. I was thinking of giving you a five-pound note for a Christmas-box, but on second thoughts I will make it tuppence, as you might be tempted to dissipate. Here, get out of the way, you kids."

The latter remark was addressed to the Combine. They stepped aside with such unusual meekness that Pankhurst stared at them in surprise. Pankhurst and Price, the two auburn-haired chums of the Fourth Form, were together. They were always together, and when they met the Combine there was usually a row.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Pankhurst. "What's come over you kids? It is the effect of Christmas—Peace on Earth and Goodwill to Everybody, I suppose. Well, I withdraw my remark. You can shove that box up, Bunter, and remind me about that tuppence next term."

Bunter grunted.

"But I say, what are you fellows looking glum about?" went on Pankhurst good-naturedly. "You aren't getting ready to go!"

"We're not going," growled Neville.

Pankhurst whistled.

"Why not?"

"You see, this is the thushness of it. My respected governor has been thoughtless enough to stay in India with his regiment, which settles the matter for me. Micky Flynn's people are careless enough to live in Ireland, and to be up to their necks in some row over something with somebody—"

"That's what I call lucid," commented Pankhurst.

"Quite so," said Price.

"So Micky is staying here over the vac. That wouldn't matter for either of us, because Poindexter's governor was coming to England, and he was going to take us all three under his star-spangled wing, so to speak, only—"

"I guess it's a rotten frost," said Poindexter.

"You see, some pesky villain has robbed my popper, and given him a lot of trouble, and he may be late in coming—may not be here till after Christmas, perhaps. So we're done in."

"Well, that is rotten luck," said Pankhurst. "I suppose you'll have to stay at the school in case he comes for you."

"I guess so."

"I'm sorry. There's nobody else staying except you three. You'll have nothing to do but think of the lickings we are going to give you next term," said Pankhurst.

Dick Neville laughed.

"Oh, we shall be all right. I expect we shall manage to dig up some fun somewhere. One of the masters is staying, you know, our form-master, little Lanyon. He's a jolly good little sort, and he'll do what he can for us. The Head's going, but, after all, we were never really very close and chummy with the Head."

Pankhurst grinned.

"Well, good-bye, old chap, and I hope Poindexter's popper will turn up in time. If he doesn't I've no doubt he'll send you a hamper of tinned beef from Chicago—"

"Oh, cheese it," said Poindexter, reddening.

"My dear chap, it would afford you a lot of sport. You could let it out of the tin, and chase it round the Close, and kill it—"

"Time we were going," said Price. "Good-bye, kids, and keep your peckers up."

"That's right," said Pankhurst. "Keep a stiff upper lip, kids. Good-bye, and a jolly Christmas."

And the ancient rivals shook hands heartily.

Pankhurst and Price took their places in the brake for the station, and waved their caps, and the Combine waved back, and cheered, and the boys of Cliveden rolled off at last, on pleasure bent, and silence settled on the old school.

Silence all the more heavy because of the late uproar.

The Combine went up to their study. The place seemed lonely. Strange echoes seemed to sound through the deserted buildings. And once more the chums of the Fourth expressed their feelings in laconic language.

"Pesky!" "Bastely!" "Rotten!"

The 2nd Chapter. A Midnight Visitor.

DICK NEVILLE shivered as he sat up in bed.

It was a cold, dark night. But a gleam of white came in at the windows of the Fourth Form dormitory, and he knew that it was snowing.

Some sound in the silence of the night had awakened Dick Neville. He sat up in bed, wondering what it was. Hark! There it was again!

Clang, clang, clang!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling!

Dick Neville started.

Who could be ringing the school-bell at that time of night? He did not know the time, but he knew that it must be past midnight. Yet someone was certainly at the gates of Cliveden, ringing away with all his might!

Clang-ting-tangle ting!

"My hat!" muttered Dick Neville. "Who can it be? What can it mean? It's Bunter's business to open the gate—oh, I forgot—Bunter's away! I wonder—"

"Are you awake, kids?" came the drawl of Poindexter from the gloom. "Can you hear that galoot, whoever he is, making that row at the gate?"

"I can," said Dick. "I just woke up."

"Sure and I'm awake also," said Flynn, sitting up. "My beauty sleep has been busted up by that fearful row. Who can it be?"

Dick felt for his jacket and extracted a box of matches. He struck one and lit the candle, and then looked at his watch. It indicated the hour of one, within a few minutes.

"Just on one o'clock," he exclaimed. "This is past a joke! Who can be ringing the bell at one o'clock in the morning?"

"It can't be a practical joker, out in the snow at this hour," shivered Poindexter. "I guess it means something wrong, Dick."



In a couple of minutes Poindexter returned with the black bag. It was opened, and the rolls of banknotes which had so surprised Mr. Lanyon were exposed to view. The form-master groaned at the sight of this proof of his cousin's villainy.

"Then we ought to go and wake Lanyon." "I wonder the row doesn't wake him. But he sleeps like a brick, I guess. Let's go down." The clanging of the bell continued. Through the still winter night it came clearly to the ears of the juniors. They rose and dressed rapidly. Such a summons at such an hour was so amazing that they could only conclude that something was wrong.

"Ugh!" shivered Dick Neville, as he opened the door of the dormitory. "It's beastly cold! Get your scarves on; we may have to go down to the gate. Come along."

Well muffled up against the cold, the three juniors left the dormitory, and descended the stairs to Mr. Lanyon's rooms, which were on the lower floor. Dick tapped at the bed-room door of the master of the Fourth Form. The stroke of one boomed out from the school clock. There was no reply. He knew that Mr. Lanyon was a sound sleeper, and he tapped again, and then thumped vigorously. A sleepy voice came at last from within.

"Who is there?"

"Us, sir—Neville, Flynn, and Poindexter. There's somebody ringing the bell at the gate, sir; he's been ringing a long time. We thought we'd better call you, sir," said Dick, through the door.

There was an exclamation of surprise within.

"Dear me! How excessively peculiar! I suppose I must see to this."

A light glimmered under the door of Mr. Lanyon's room. In a couple of minutes the Fourth Form master opened the door. He was clad in dressing-gown and slippers, and had a smoking-cap on his head and a muffler round his neck, so he presented an appearance very different from what his pupils were accustomed to. Mr. Lanyon was a little man, with short-sighted, kindly eyes, and an enormous pair of spectacles. The Fourth Form often made fun of him, but there were few who did not like him very much.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Lanyon. "How excessively peculiar!" That was his favourite expression. "I can now hear the sound distinctly. Indeed, I am surprised that it did not wake me. It was quite right for you to come down and tell me."

The bell was ringing more violently than ever. The master of the Fourth was evidently as puzzled to account for it as the juniors were.

"I—I think I had better see into this," he remarked. "How unfortunate that Bunter is away! I—I shall have to go down to the gate. How excessively unfortunate! Perhaps I had better put on a coat and boots."

Mr. Lanyon drew on a pair of boots in place of his slippers, and put on a greatcoat over his dressing-gown. Then he came out of his room, carrying a lamp.

"You lads had better go back to bed—"

"Hadh't we better come down to the gate with you, sir?" suggested Dick. "It may be a—burglar, sir, trying to get into the school."

"That is hardly likely," said the form-master, smiling. "Still, perhaps it would be as well for you to come—in case of any mischief. Follow me."

Mr. Lanyon led the way downstairs into the hall. He opened the great door, and the wind instantly blew his lamp out. Flakes of snow came in on the gust.

"Dear me," said Mr. Lanyon, "how excessively unfortunate!" He set the extinguished lamp down. "Never mind, we must proceed without a light."

He stepped out into the snow. It was three inches deep in the Close, and still falling in light, feathery flakes. The wind whirled the flakes hither and thither, and whistled round the ears of the form-master and the boys.

Mr. Lanyon led the way down to the gate. The gate was of iron bars, and between the bars, white now with snow, could be dimly seen a form muffled up against the weather.

"Dear me, there is someone there!" exclaimed Mr. Lanyon, as if that were really a most surprising circumstance. He halted in the snow on the inner side of the gate. "Who are you, my good fellow? What do you mean by ringing this bell at this time of night?"

A white face peered through the bars.

"I want to come in, you fool! Don't stand chattering there, but open the gate!"

Mr. Lanyon was a peaceable, inoffensive little man, but he bristled with wrath, naturally enough, at this address.

"Go away," he commanded—"go away at once, or—or I will telephone for the police!"

The three juniors could not resist a chuckle at this threat.

"I guess I can see the police turning out of Cliveden Station, on a night like this, to walk a mile here," murmured Poindexter.

"Yes, rather."

The applicant for admission seemed to see the comic side of the form-master's threat, for he burst into a savage kind of chuckle.

"You confounded fool," he exclaimed, "let me in! What the deuce do you mean by parleying with me? Let me in!"

"I am not likely to let an entire stranger within these walls without a word of explanation," said Mr. Lanyon.

"Fool! I am a relation of a master at this school, and I have come to stay with him."

"Nonsense. There is only one master staying here during the vacation, and that is myself. The other gave a start."

"Are you Owen Lanyon?" "Yes," said the form-master. "And I have no relations in England—and if I had, they would not visit me at this hour in the middle of a snow-storm. I—"

"But you have a relation in America—"

"What has that to do with it?"

"This much—that I am your cousin Ralph from Chicago, and that I want you to take me in."

Mr. Lanyon gave a jump.

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(Continued from the previous page.)

"My cousin Ralph! Impossible!"

"Not at all. Get a light, and look at me."

"I have a lantern here, sir," said Dick. "I can light it."

"Do so, my lad," said the form-master in an altered voice.

Dick sheltered himself from the wind round the corner of the porter's lodge, and succeeded in lighting the lantern. He brought it back to the gate and handed it to the form-master. To his surprise, he saw that Mr. Lanyon's face was deadly pale.

The master of the Fourth took the lantern with a trembling hand and held it up so that its rays fell upon the face outside the bars. The stranger did not shrink from the scrutiny.

The face that was disclosed was hard and white, with cold, keen eyes and mocking lips. There was a faint resemblance to the features of the form-master—enough to tell the watching juniors that the man's claim was well-founded.

"Do you believe me now?" exclaimed the stranger impatiently.

"Yes," said Mr. Lanyon, speaking with an effort. "How—how came you here? I thought you were in employment in Chicago."

"So I was; but I have left it, as you see. I thought you would be glad to see me, cousin mine," said the stranger, with an indescribable inflection of irony in his tone.

"But to come—to come at this hour—"

"That was not my fault. I arrived in Clivedale by the last train, and could not find a vehicle to bring me here. I walked—and here I am. Come, open the gate."

The form-master made no further demur.

The key grated in the lock, the bolt was withdrawn, and the iron gate swung open, with a creak. The stranger stepped in. He held out his hand to Mr. Lanyon; but the latter did not appear to notice it. He closed the gate and fastened it again carefully.

The newcomer gave a start as he saw the boys in the shadow.

"What are these brats doing here?"

Hot words leaped to the juniors' lips at the man's look and tone, but they restrained them.

Mr. Lanyon looked at them, and handed the lantern back to Dick.

"You may go back to bed, my lads," he said in that dull voice which told of a weight on his mind, in which he had spoken since his recognition of his cousin. "Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir!" said the three juniors respectfully.

They did not speak till they were in the Fourth Form dormitory again. They heard the heavy door close downstairs. The quarter chimed from the school clock.

"What do you think of that, kids?" said Poindexter at last.

"There's something wrong about that fellow," said Dick, with conviction. "It's very curious his getting here in the middle of the night; and did you notice that Lanyon wouldn't shake hands with him?"

"Sure and I did," said Flynn. "Lanyon doesn't want him here—that's certain. He's forced himself on him."

The door of the dormitory opened. Mr. Lanyon looked in with a lamp. His face was pale and worried.

"Not in bed yet, boys!"

"Just in, sir," said Dick.

They tumbled into bed. The form-master retired and closed the door; and the juniors were left to wonder at his curious looks till they fell asleep.

The 3rd Chapter.

The Unwelcome Guest.

"RALPH, what have you come here for?"

Mr. Lanyon entered his study after coming down from the dormitory. The stranger was there, sitting at the table, upon which he had laid a small black bag. He had shaken the snow from his coat upon the floor, and was brushing his hat.

He looked up, with a nod, as the master of the Fourth came in.

In the gaslight Ralph Lanyon's face showed up plainly—hard and cold and determined, with a steely glitter in the flinty eyes.

"Horrible weather," he said easily. "But you seem to have snug quarters here. I daresay we shall be quite comfy during the Christmas vacation."

The form-master closed the door, and stood looking at his cousin. He adjusted his big spectacles, and blinked before Ralph's hard, steady gaze. It was evident that little Mr. Lanyon was as helpless in dealing with his determined relative as a bird fascinated by a deadly snake.

"Ralph"—his voice was low and mumbling now—"what do you want here?"

"Shelter," said Ralph coolly. "That is not much to ask of one's only relation in the world, is it?"

"N-no. You know I should never grudge you that. But—but—"

"But what?" said Ralph impatiently. "What are your misgivings about?"

"You know," said Mr. Lanyon, speaking slowly and painfully, resting one unsteady hand upon the table—"you know under what circumstances you left England."

The other gave a short, hard laugh.

"Yes, I am not likely to forget; but that is years ago."

"I gave you all I could to help you to a fresh start," said Mr. Lanyon. "I sent you money whenever you wrote for it from your new home. Though you had disgraced your name and mine, I never deserted you. I helped you beyond my means, I faced difficulties you never thought or cared about in consequence. You returned me nothing; but I never asked it, content to know that you were doing well in a new land."

"And to have got rid of me," said Ralph mockingly, "and the danger of being disgraced by me among your respectable friends."

"I was glad of that, too, of course. I never grudged you help, Ralph. I thought you were doing well in America, and that you were settled there. Now you have come back to trouble me. Why?"

The man from Chicago gave a hard laugh.

"You think I have come back to sponge on you, and sew away your paltry earnings?" he exclaimed. "Well, you are mistaken."

Mr. Lanyon's face expressed a very strong incredulity.

"Bah, I will prove it to you! You helped me, you say—you sent me a great deal of your beggarly pittance. How much—fifty pounds—a hundred pounds?"

"Less than a hundred pounds in all," said the form-master quietly. "But all I had—more than I could spare."

"I can, and will, repay every shilling."

"You can—and will?"

"Judge for yourself." Ralph Lanyon picked the black bag from the table and opened it. There was a crisp rustle, and he drew out a roll of notes. He tossed a bundle of them on the table. "Take them!"

The form-master looked at the notes in wonder. There were ten of them for ten pounds each, and he could see that they were genuine.

"Take them," repeated Ralph Lanyon. "You see, I have not come back a beggar. Your wretched pittance is safe from me. I have done well in Chicago—better than I ever told you in my letters. I ask nothing at your hands but shelter for a week or two. Why don't you take your money?"

The form-master had made no move to touch the banknotes.

"Is that money yours, Ralph?"

"Mine? Of course it is."

"I mean, did you come by it honestly?"

Ralph Lanyon flushed with anger.

"You—you question that, then? Bah! money is money, wherever it comes from. But if you are so particular, the money was come by honestly. I made it by a speculation in Chicago, and every cent of it is mine."

Still the form-master did not touch the money.

"Take it back, Ralph. I pray to heaven that you are speaking the truth," he said. "But I cannot touch your money. What I gave you I gave. If you require no more that is sufficient relief for me without repayment of old loans. Take that money back."

Ralph Lanyon shrugged his shoulders.

"As you like," he said, taking up the banknotes and replacing them in the bag. And as he did so the form-master observed that there were rolls of the notes there, though the man closed the bag quickly. "As you like. Money must be cheap with you, for you to refuse a hundred pounds for a fancy. But are you satisfied now that I have not come home a beggar?"

"Yes."

"And are you willing to shelter me for Christmas?"

"Yes."

"You do not speak from your heart, but that matters little. I shall not trouble you after the school re-opens for the new term. It suits me to pass a few weeks quietly in the country, and no one would think of looking for—I mean, I shall be far enough from the mad-ding crowd in this dead-and-alive hole. The question is, how shall I keep from being bored to death."

"I cannot entertain you," said Mr. Lanyon. "I am a quiet man, and I live among my books when I am not doing my duty as a form-master here."

"Yes, I remember your old habit of spending the vacations at the school, and that is why I came," smiled his cousin. "It was fortunate for me. Fortunate, I mean, because I want to spend a quiet time myself."

Mr. Lanyon came closer to the man from Chicago, and peered at him through his big spectacles.

"When you arrived so late in Clivedale, Ralph, why did you not put up at the inn instead of tramping a mile through a snowstorm?"

"Because I was so anxious to see you," said Ralph, mockingly.

"You had a reason—"

"Well, if I had, what then?"

"Confess the truth, man. Are you—are you hiding from someone—from—from—"

"What utter nonsense! Of course I am not!"

"That money—you have so much—and your sudden return to England without notice. And I know you passed under a false name in Chicago."

"My dear fellow, you are exciting yourself over nothing. I had a lucky speculation. I had an assumed name in Chicago, because I did not know what I might get into there, and I wanted to keep my own clean to return to England with. Hundreds of emigrants do the same. I have made this pile by speculation. Do be sensible."

"I suppose I must take your word," said the form-master, with a sigh. "Heaven grant that you have not come here to bring fresh disgrace upon me. But—but you were rash to come as you did—if there is anything to conceal. The boys—"

"I did not guess that there were boys staying here over the holidays. But, after all, they are only boys—they will see and think nothing. Who are they?"

"Three boys in the Fourth. They may not stay here long, as Poindexter—"

Ralph Lanyon sprang from his chair.

"What name did you say?"

"Poindexter," said Mr. Lanyon, looking at him in wonder. "One of the boys is named Poindexter, and it is possible that his father may send for him and for the other two."

"Not Poindexter of Chicago?"

"Yes, I believe Poindexter's father is a merchant in that city."

"Thousand devils!"

"What is the—"

"Bah! Where is my room? I am tired, and want to sleep."

Mr. Lanyon, without a word, but lost in amazement at his cousin's strange manner, took up a lamp and led the way from the room. He threw open the door of the bed-room belonging to the master of the Fifth Form, now away for the Christmas vacation.

"You will occupy this room," he said. "My friend East will not mind."

The man from Chicago granted.

Mr. Lanyon's brow was darkly wrinkled as he slowly took his way back to his own quarters. The coming of his cousin had cast a gloom upon him that was not easily to be dispelled.

The 4th Chapter.

Christmas Eve—A Rough-and-Tumble.

LINCOLN G. POINDEXTER jumped out of bed.

Morning sunlight was streaming in at the windows of the Fourth Form dormitory. The sills and the branches of the trees without were gleaming with snow.

"Snow!" exclaimed Poindexter gleefully. "It has been keeping it up all night. We'll have some snowballing in the Close to liven us up, kids."

"Sure, and we will!" exclaimed Micky Flynn, leaping from his bed. "Ugh, it's cold! Dicky, darling, up you get!"

He jerked the bedclothes off Dick Melville, and the hero of the Fourth Form rose with a shiver. All three faces were bright as they looked from the window into the Close. Ground, and walls, and outhouses gleamed with spotless white. The sun was bright, though cold, and a few feathery flakes were still falling.

"Jolly!" said Dick. "Snowballing will put some life into us. I wish Bunter were here—it would be better fun than snowballing each other."

"Or Pankhurst and Price," said Poindexter. "I guess a row in the Close would set us up. But buck up, kids. There's no rising bell this morning, and we're late. You know we are to breakfast with Mr. Lanyon."

The three juniors were soon dressed, and they descended together to the dining-hall. It looked very large and empty, but near one fireplace a table was laid for breakfast, and it looked a cosy corner. The table was laid for four, the housekeeper as yet being unaware of the presence of Mr. Lanyon's visitor.

The juniors went out into the Quadrangle for a run before breakfast. When they came in Mr. Lanyon and the man from Chicago were in the room. Breakfast was ready, but the things for the chums had been moved to the next table. They were not to have the honour of breakfasting with the form-master after all.

Mr. Lanyon was looking so pale and worried that the Combine could not help noticing it. There was something of uneasiness in Ralph Lanyon's look too. He glanced up quickly as the boys came in, and his gaze settled upon Lincoln G. Poindexter. He looked a question at Mr. Lanyon, who nodded.

The chums breakfasted with good appetite. So did Ralph Lanyon, but the form-master ate scarcely anything. Poindexter was drinking his second cup of tea when Ralph Lanyon rose and lighted a cigarette.

"I hear you are from Chicago, my boy," he remarked.

Poindexter glanced round.

"Yes, sir."

"A relation of Mr. Cyrus K. Poindexter, the Beef King?"

"His son, sir." Poindexter looked curiously at Ralph Lanyon. "Do you know my popper, sir?"

"Of course I have seen him, as I have been in Chicago," said Ralph. "He is a great figure there. You are expecting him, I think, here?"

"Oh, I don't know about that. I hope he'll send for us, at any rate. He might come down himself, but I expect he'll be too busy."

"He is in England, then?"

"I believe so, sir. He was to have been here before this, but something happened to detain him in Chicago after he intended to leave."

Ralph Lanyon nodded, and smoked his cigarette. The chums left the table and strolled out into the snowy Close. Dick Neville glanced at Poindexter curiously.

"I say, that chap was mighty curious about your governor, Poin?"

"I guess so. My popper's a big gun, you see, over there. I don't like this chap much. And it's pretty easy to see that Specs doesn't like him either. I wonder why he's come to Cliveden."

"He could have put up at the inn in Clivedale last night," remarked Flynn. "Sure it was peculiar for him to come here in the snowstorm, kids."

"Excessively peculiar, as our revered form-master says," grinned Dick. "No business of ours, though, I suppose. Come for a run round the Close."

"Righto. Remember the post will be in at ten," said Poindexter. "I guess that's my last chance of hearing from my popper before Christmas, as there's only one post here on Christmas Eve."

"That's so. I think we're booked for a Christmas at Cliveden."

The juniors sprinted round the Close through the snow, and a three-cornered duel was fought with snowballs. Then Poindexter looked at his watch, and discovered that it was a quarter past ten, and a rush was made for the house to look for letters.

The postman was coming away.

"Any for me?" demanded the three juniors with one voice.

"One for Master Poindexter," said the postman, "that's all. I've given it in."

"It's from popper!" exclaimed Poindexter, gleefully. "Perhaps he's going to send for us after all. Let's get it and see."

They darted into the hall. The letter should have been in the rack, and Poindexter went towards it quickly. The rack was empty, but near it was standing Ralph Lanyon, with an open letter in his hand. A quick suspicion shot into Poindexter's mind—quickly verified, for a glance showed him that the letter was in his father's writing. Ralph turned round quickly and thrust the letter behind him; but too late. Poindexter had seen it.

The boy was trembling with anger.

"Give me my letter!" he exclaimed sharply. Ralph looked at him savagely.

"Your letter! What do you mean?"

"That is my letter you have in your hand! Give it me at once!"

"It is not! It is—"

"I saw the writing, and the postman just told me there was a letter for me. Give it to me at once, you cad!" cried Poindexter.

Ralph's eyes glittered. He thrust the letter into his pocket.

"I shall not give it to you. It is not yours. Complain to Mr. Lanyon if you like, and—"

Poindexter clenched his fists hard.

"And you read my letter, while I'm gone!" he exclaimed. "You—you cad! Give me that letter, or I'll take it."

A sneer crossed Ralph Lanyon's lips.

"You cheeky young rascal! Get away, or I'll—"

"You give me that letter. It's mine. Chaps, you'll stand by me! He's reading my father's letter, and there may be private business in it."

"Rather!" said Dick Neville. "Let's fetch Mr. Lanyon—"

"He'll read it while we're gone."

Ralph Lanyon turned to stride away. Poindexter, flaming with anger, sprang towards him and gripped his arm. Lanyon swung round his hand, and caught the boy a savage blow on the side of the head. Poindexter reeled, and fell heavily against the hallstand. But that was a little too much for Dick and Micky. Without stopping to think of the consequences or anything else, they sprang at the man from Chicago, and Ralph Lanyon found himself struggling with two athletic juniors, who clung to him like cats.

Either of them he could have knocked out in a few seconds, but the two together were a larger order. He struggled with them furiously, dragging them to and fro. Poindexter was springing to join in the fray the next minute, and his sinewy arms came round the rascal's neck from behind.

"G-r-e-e-r-r-r-r!"

Half-choked, and wholly overpowered, Ralph Lanyon was dragged backwards, and he went down to the floor with a crash. All three juniors fell upon him, Poindexter on his head, Dick Neville on his chest, and Flynn on his legs. The unfortunate man was nearly crushed, and he gasped painfully under the three weighty forms.

"Hold him!" panted Dick. "We've got the beast now! Get your letter, Pointpusher."

Ralph Lanyon struggled frantically. He seemed to attach a great value to Poindexter's letter, for he fought like a tiger to retain it. But the odds were too heavy against him. Dick and Micky pinned him down by sheer weight and strength, and Poindexter dragged the crumpled letter from his pocket.

"Got it!" exclaimed the American chum. "Look! 'My dear Lin,' that's how it begins. Isn't it my letter right enough?"

"Of course it is! Fancy the fellow being cad enough to read another chap's letter! My hat! He—he ought to be fed on tinned beef, or something fearful like that."

"Let him go now," grinned Poindexter, putting the letter in his pocket. "I've got it safe. Let the beast get on its hind legs."

The juniors released Ralph Lanyon. He staggered up, white with fury. The three chums drew close together, prepared for an attack; but the fellow seemed to realise the hopelessness of making one, and with a savage oath he turned away.

Mr. Lanyon came on the scene at that moment. The uproar of the brief struggle had reached his ears. He was looking worried and alarmed.

"What is the matter?" he asked nervously. "What has happened?"

"I'm sorry, sir," said Poindexter respectfully; "but that pesky chap was going to read my letter—he had torn it open, and wouldn't give it up to me. We had to take it."

The form-master gasped.

"Ralph! what does this mean?"

Ralph Lanyon did not reply or turn his head. He strode away, gritting his teeth. Mr. Lanyon looked extremely distressed.

"I—I am sorry this has happened," he stammered. "I—I cannot understand it. I apologise to you for my cousin, Poindexter."

And he turned quickly away. The chums understood his mortification, and they felt sincerely sorry for him. They went out into the Close together, and Poindexter took his letter from his pocket.

The 5th Chapter.
The Letter From Popper.

POINDEXTER opened the letter slowly, a wrinkle of thought upon his brow. "I don't quite get the hang of this, I guess," he remarked. "What should that chap want to read my letter for? He comes from Chicago, and it's plain he's a pesky rascal. Can he know anything about popper's business, I wonder? Can he be up to some game, and on the trial for information? I don't quite get the hang of it."

"Read the letter," suggested Micky Flynn. "Sure it may have something in it that'll explain." Poindexter read the letter out. He had no secrets from his chums of the Combine. The note was a brief one:

"My dear Lin,—I am sorry I have not been able to fetch you away for Christmas as was arranged. It may be possible yet, but I don't know. I am in London now, and I think we are on the track of that rascal Phipps. The total sum he absconded with from the Chicago counting-house turns out to be nearly fifty thousand dollars, which is too big a sum for me to lose without a tussle. The detectives have tracked him across the ocean, and it is known that he was in London as late as two days ago. He has been living here quietly under the name of Harris, and we should have had him if he had not somehow got a hint, and fled before we could seize him. He seems to have disappeared from London, but the detectives are still hopeful. As I am the only man in England who knows him by sight, I am wanted on the spot; but I shall try and run down Christmas Eve to see you, whether the rascal has been captured or not. If that can't be done, I shall see you Christmas Day. Tell your chums I am sorry the affair has gone so awry, but we'll make it up to them I guess. In haste, from your loving popper, CYRUS K. POINDEXTER."

"Well, I hope they'll catch him, that's all," said Dick Neville. "As for us, it doesn't matter. We seem to be getting some excitement this Christmas, anyhow."

"Sure and we are, Micky darling. As for that spalpeen Lanyon, he's a dirty scoundrel; and I shouldn't be surprised if he was a giddy criminal. Oh, crumbs!"

A heavy hand descended upon the Irish lad's shoulder. The three boys were standing by the angle of a building, and Ralph Lanyon had suddenly come round the corner. Whether he had heard the American reading out the letter or not they did not know. His hard face was inflamed with rage. He had certainly heard Micky's uncomplimentary reference to himself, and he was furious. He boxed the Irish lad's ears right and left.

"Take that, and that, and—oooooh!" Micky was struggling helplessly in an iron grip, but his chums were not long in coming to the rescue. Poindexter and Dick stooped together, and gathered snow. Two snowballs flew at the same instant, and both caught Ralph Lanyon full in the face. He staggered back with a gasping grunt, and released Micky.

"The—the baste!" gasped Micky, staggering away, and falling in the snow. "The bastely baste! Give him socks, ye kippers!" Dick and Poindexter were giving the ruffian "socks." They gathered snowballs like lightning, and pelted Ralph Lanyon right and left.

He sprang at Poindexter like a tiger, and grasped him; but a snowball in his left ear from Neville bowled him over, and as he staggered, Micky sent one in his right ear that set him upright again. He muttered savage oaths between his gritted teeth.

But he was getting the worst of the encounter, there could be no doubt about that, especially as the active juniors soon got to a distance, and pelted him with deadly aim, dodging all his frantic rushes and attempts to seize one or another of them. Muttering savagely to himself, he beat a retreat at last towards the house.

"Hurrah!" shouted Poindexter. "Give him a send-off."

The chums were not slow to do so. They rained snowballs upon the hapless rascal, and he broke into a run, and was glad to gain the shelter of the porch.

"What—what is all this about, Ralph?" Little Mr. Lanyon met him in the hall, peering at him through his big spectacles in worry and dismay. Ralph did not trouble to reply. He brushed rudely past his cousin, and went up to his room to scrape off the clinging snow. Mr. Lanyon sighed.

The chums in the Close were jubilant. They had routed the enemy, and though Micky at least had received some hard knocks, the victory was with them, and they were satisfied.

"The beastly ruffian!" said Poindexter. "I guess he was hiding there, and heard me read the letter, kids. What can his interest in the matter possibly be, I wonder?"

"Perhaps he's a friend of the chap who robbed your pater," suggested Dick Neville, struck by a brilliant idea.

Poindexter started. "My hat! There might be something in that, kids. Why should he be so anxious about knowing what was in popper's letter? His looks and actions show that he's afraid of something. Specs said that he's come from Chicago without warning. Specs didn't know why he had returned to England all of a sudden. By the ghost of George Washington, kids, he may know something about the robbery! He may be a confederate of Phipps."

It was a startling idea. Yet, as they thought it over, it seemed to the chums that there was probably something of truth in it. Otherwise Ralph Lanyon's conduct was hard to account for. "We'll keep an eye on him," said Dick Neville. "What a ripping joke if we got a clue to the thief here at Cliveden, while the detectives are hunting for him in London."

"Good! We've got nothing to do, and he started the warfare all on his own," said Poindexter; "I guess we'll play the giddy detective. You noticed that black bag he brought in with him last night, and how awfully careful he was with it. He seemed to prize it as if it were the apple of his eye. Under the circumstances, as he has proved himself to be a rascal, and may be a confederate of a thief, we should be justified in looking into that precious bag."

"Certainly." "Then let's get up a wheeze," said Poindexter, "and do it. We can work the oracle if we set our wits to work."

And the Combine put their heads together: and they seldom did that without devising a scheme to bring complete discomfiture to their enemies.

The 6th Chapter.
The Combine on the War-Path!

RALPH LANYON was seated alone in his room. He had lunched with his cousin downstairs, a short and silent meal. Now he was smoking in solitude, and ruminating savagely. The early twilight of Christmas Eve was settling upon Cliveden. A tap came at his door.

"Come in," he called out, angrily. The door opened, and Micky Flynn put his grinning face in. Ralph gave him a threatening look. Micky watched him warily.

"What do you want, you confounded brat?" growled Ralph, taking his pipe from his mouth.

"Nothing; only to ask you a question, sir." "Ask it."

"Where did you get that face?" Micky Flynn asked this question politely enough, with the air of one who really wanted to know. Ralph Lanyon sprang to his feet with an exclamation of rage. He rushed to the door and Micky fled. Down the passage he went scuttling like a rabbit, and Lanyon paused at the door, realising the hopelessness of pursuit. He returned to his chair with a muttered curse. He put his feet on the fender, and staring into the fire, resumed his gloomy reverie. The door opened again. He swung round in speechless rage to see the smiling face of Dick Neville looking at him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Lanyon," said Dick, civilly. "May I ask you a question?" "Yes," snarled Ralph. "Where did you get that face?"

Crash! A heavy inkstand smashed on the door as Dick slammed it. Ralph Lanyon fumed with rage. This baiting by the juniors, in his already savage frame of mind, drove him almost to a frenzy.

But barely had he settled down again, when a pebble rattled on his window. He started and looked towards it. Another rattle. He went savagely to the window. In the dimness of the early twilight a form was visible outside. It was Micky Flynn's.

The Irish lad waved his hand as Ralph jerked the window open. "Where did you get that face?" he inquired, pleasantly.

He dodged away in time to escape a missile. Ralph turned from the window cursing, and the door of his room was thrown open.

"Where did you get that face?" shrieked Dick Neville from the passage. It was the last straw!

Snapping his teeth, Ralph Lanyon made a rush into the corridor. Dick Neville fled at top speed, the angry man tearing furiously on his track. Away down the dim unlighted corridor they went, and at a certain point Dick Neville jumped over a taut string stretched across the passage; but Lanyon did not know it was there, and he caught his foot in it and went down with a severe crash.

As he sprawled on the floor, Dick nipped back past him, and a heavy door in the passage crashed to, and a key turned in a lock. Ralph sprang to his feet, and rushed back. But the door across the corridor was locked, and his return was stopped. He kicked savagely on the door, thinking only that he was the victim of a boyish joke.

But that was not all! The moment Ralph Lanyon had disappeared down the dusky corridor in pursuit of Neville, Poindexter slipped from a dark recess, and ran into Lanyon's room. The ruse had succeeded!

It was not only for a "wheeze" on the rascal that the juniors had tricked him into leaving his room. Poindexter looked round quickly: he knew he might not have many minutes. He heard the slam of the heavy door in the corridor,

but there was another way round, when the tricked rascal found it.

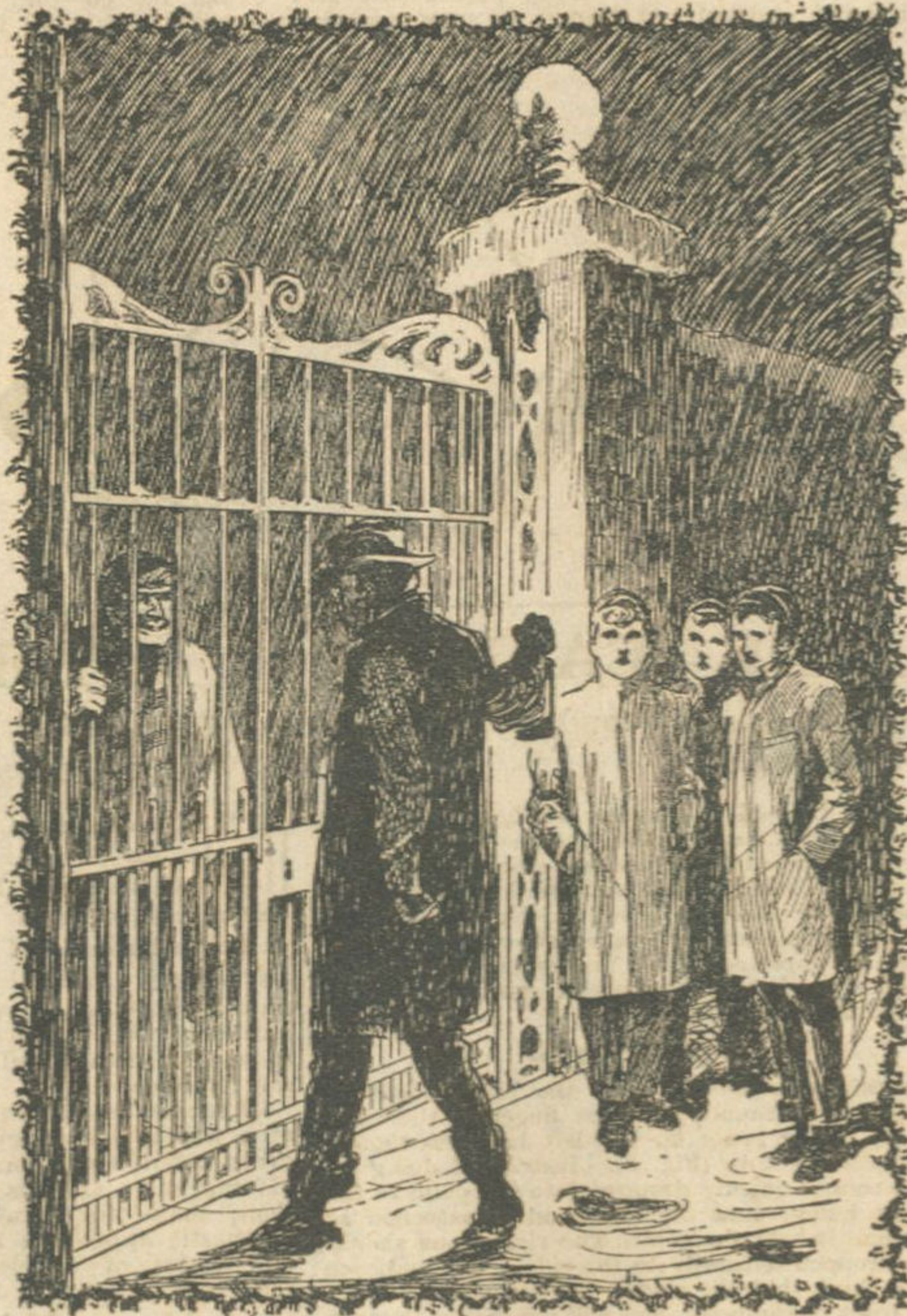
The black bag was not to be seen. But Poindexter quickly discovered it, under the pillow on the bed. It was locked, and the key was gone. There was no chance of making the investigation which might have proved whether Lanyon was what Poindexter suspected, a confederate of the Chicago thief.

Poindexter could have taken away the bag, which was a small one. But it was Ralph Lanyon's property, and he felt that he could not. But a sudden thought struck him. Near the bed stood the wardrobe belonging to the absent master of the Fifth. The top had a high ornamental front, and there was a space behind, on top of the wardrobe. In a moment, as soon as the idea flashed into his mind, Poindexter tossed the bag on top of the wardrobe, where it was quite hidden from sight.

He quickly smoothed the bed again, and then ran to the door. Footsteps were coming along the corridor; Ralph Lanyon had found a way back, in spite of the locked door. Poindexter darted down the passage, and a moment later the man, catching a glimpse of his fleeting form, came running up to the door.

"Who was that?" cried Ralph Lanyon, hoarsely. "What have you been doing in my room?"

Poindexter did not reply. He scuttled away, bursting with chuckles, to join Dick and Micky. Ralph Lanyon went quickly into his room. A



"I am your cousin Ralph, from Chicago, and I want you to take me in," said the stranger. The master of the Fourth Form took the lantern with a shaking hand, and held it so that the rays fell upon the face outside the bars. The face disclosed was hard and white, with cold, keen eyes and mocking lips.

sudden ghastly paleness had come over his face. He glanced round the room, and then, prompted by uneasiness, went straight to the bed and jerked aside the pillow. Then a fearful yell left his lips. The black bag was gone! For a few moments Lanyon gazed at the vacant space hollow-eyed, ghastly!

"Gone!" he muttered. "They've taken it. Madman that I was to leave it for an instant unprotected!"

Then a flash of the truth came into his mind. "That was why they tricked me from the room—they knew—they knew what the bag contained—the brat Poindexter knows all!"

He clenched his hands. His eyes were blazing with rage. He dashed from the room, and down the passage to Mr. Lanyon's study. The little form-master started up in alarm as his cousin burst furiously into the room.

"Dear me!" he gasped. "What is the matter! How excessively disturbed you look, Ralph."

"Have you taken my bag?" "Your—your bag! Do you mean the black bag you had last night! Certainly not."

Ralph gave him a searching glance, but in spite of his rage he could not doubt little Mr. Lanyon. The little form-master was innocence itself.

"Then it was the boys! Those confounded brats—they have robbed me." "Nonsense!" said Mr. Lanyon, with unusual spirit. "Utter nonsense! They are incapable of robbing you or anyone else!"

"Fool! I tell you they tricked me into leaving my room, and while I was gone they abstracted my bag from the place in which I had hidden it," shouted Ralph. "I tell you it is impossible."

"Bah! why am I wasting words on you?" snarled his cousin. "I will have it back, if I have to cut them to pieces."

"Ralph! I forbid you to use any violence—!" His cousin laughed savagely, and dashed from the room. The loss of the black bag had rendered him absolutely frantic. He knew which room was occupied by the chums, and he ran straight to No. 4 Study. But No. 4 was dark and empty.

He shouted to the boys. Like a madman he ran along the corridors, searching for them. But Cliveden was an ancient building, full of nooks and crannies, and Ralph knew nothing of the place. The three chums heard him raging in search of them, while they lay low in an alcove not a dozen feet from Mr. Lanyon's study.

"I guess that fellow's pretty wild," chuckled Poindexter. "There must be something awfully valuable in that bag, kids, or he wouldn't be so excited about it. I daresay he'd give one of his ears to know that it was safe in his own room all the time."

"Ha, ha! I say Pointpusher, it would be dangerous to meet that chap now. I believe he's a fearful ruffian, and—quiet! Lie low!"

Pattering footsteps came down the passage. The frantic searcher for the three chums was passing the alcove again. It lay back in the dark passage, and he did not observe it, but the chums, keeping still and silent as mice, watched him pass, and they caught a glimpse of his face as a ray of starlight fell upon it from a window.

And the sight of it made them shudder. For it was white, and set, and the eyes were gleaming with a deadly light, and the lips, drawn tight over the teeth, showed the latter set and hard and savage. And something was gripped in the man's right hand—something short and heavy and dangerous-looking. Poindexter tapped Dick's arm when the ruffian had gone.

"Did you see what he was holding? It was a life-preserver!"

"Holy St. Patrick!" murmured Micky Flynn. "Phwat a Christmas! Bhoys, it's not safe to stay here! Mr. Lanyon's no good to protect us, and that horrible ruffian—"

"I believe he'd do murder to recover that bag," said Poindexter, in a low voice. "There's more in this than we thought, kids. That man ought to be in prison, and I can't help thinking that—look here! I know what I'm going to do. I'm going down to the village to send a wire to my popper in London, asking him to come here, and telling him what I suspect."

"Good," said Dick Neville. "We'll all go. My hat! That chap's face makes my blood run cold. Let's get away before he comes this way again. I know where Lanyon hangs the key of the gate, in the hall. We can easily get it."

"Come on, then." The chums stole into the hall. Dick easily found the key. Then Poindexter opened the great door. Blackness reigned without, broken by a few faint gleams of stars, and the glimmering whiteness of the snow that covered the Close like a carpet. Snow was still falling, and a savage gust drove the flakes into the hall as the door opened.

Little did the juniors care for the snow. They stepped out, and the door slammed behind them, slipping from Poindexter's hand.

"I guess he'll hear that," muttered the American chum. "Come on."

They ran through the snow towards the school gates. A few seconds later the door opened again, and Ralph Lanyon glared out into the whirling snow. He had heard the slam—and guessed. The wind and snow blinded him for a moment; but he gazed again. The deep tracks of three pairs of boots in the snow caught his eye. He muttered an imprecation, and was about to rush from the house when a hand fell upon his arm.

"Ralph! What is it—where are you going?" He flung off little Mr. Lanyon's detaining grip, and rushed into the snowy night. The master of the Fourth stood in amazement and dismay, wringing his hands, the snow blowing into his face as he stood there looking out. Ralph Lanyon darted across the Close on the track of the Combine.

The 7th Chapter.

A Startling Meeting!—And a Merry Christmas.

DICK NEVILLE turned the key in the great lock, and the gates swung open. Poindexter was looking anxiously back.

"He's coming." The light from the open doorway was streaming out into the Close. In the light could be seen the figure of little Mr. Lanyon, wringing his hands. "Back up, ye gossoons!" muttered Micky Flynn.

The chums ran out of the gate. The wind whistled about their ears as they set their faces towards Cliveden and ran.

Thud! thud! thud! in the snow behind them came the footsteps of the pursuer. Ralph Lanyon was running hard, with desperate determination.

A wild Christmas Eve, and a wild way of passing it. The juniors' hearts were in their mouths as they ran through the whirling snow. Deep was the snow under foot, and they sank to the ankle at every step; deep and thick were the whirling flakes. Save for the falling snow, all around them was dark as the pit.

"Keep it up!" gasped Dick Neville. They ran still harder, but the dull pounding behind them was louder and nearer. Good runners were the chums of the Fourth Form; but a desperate man, straining every nerve, was behind them. Poindexter's foot slipped in the snow, and he went down on his hands and knees. Dick and Micky came to a halt instantly. They knew only too well, how great their danger was, but they were not the fellows to desert their chum.

Dick caught Poindexter by the arm and dragged

Christmas at Cliveden.

(Continued from the previous page.)

him to his feet. The running figure behind loomed up out of the gloom, and two desperate eyes gleamed as a right hand rose and fell. Dick gave a gasp of horror. The life-preserver was sweeping down upon Poindexter's head, when Dick flung himself recklessly at the scoundrel, to save his chum.

The shock diverted the blow; the weapon swept down, but met with no resistance, while Dick clung tenaciously to the ruffian's arm to prevent him from again using the weapon. Micky Flynn, his teeth hard set, fastened like a cat upon the scoundrel, and gripped his left arm. Poindexter scrambled up and gripped him round the body.

They struggled furiously. The juniors felt that they were fighting, if not for their lives, for something very like it. The ruffian fought like a tiger, striving to tear his hand free to use the life-preserver. With a tremendous effort he succeeded, and the weapon rose, but a blow from the swift American knocked it from the savage hand. It dropped into the snow, but the ruffian's fist clenched and was driven with fearful force into Poindexter's face, and he fell half-stunned.

With a snarl the ruffian tore himself from Dick, and Dick fell into the snow. Micky was still clinging to Ralph Lanyon like a cat, but a savage grip was on his throat now. It seemed as if the ruffian was to win; he required but a few moments to free himself and once the life-preserver was in his ruthless hand again—

A tall, fur-coated figure loomed into sight. A traveller, coming from the direction of the village to the school—a powerful form, stick in hand.

"Waal, what's all this anyhow?"
A sharp voice with a nasal twang.
Poindexter gave a yell of delight.
"Popper!"
"Help!" gasped Micky, "help, he's—"
Dick Neville was springing to his aid again. But he was not needed. The tall stranger took in the situation in a second. His heavy walking-stick circled in the air, and came down with a terrific crack on Ralph Lanyon's head. The ruffian dropped into the snow as if he had been shot.
"I guess he won't get up in a hurry," said the

tall gentleman, complacently. "I don't quite get the hang of this. Is that you, Lincoln G.?"
"Yes, popper," shouted the delighted Poindexter, "lads, this my father. Dad, these are the chums I told you about—Neville, Flynn. So you've come down after all, and just in time to save us—to save our lives, I believe, pop."

"This is mighty queer. I arrove at the village," said Mr. Poindexter, "and couldn't find a vehicle to make this trip in the snow for love or money, so I set out to walk, I calculate. But I never expected to meet you on the road, Lincoln G. What's the blessed game, anyhow?"

Poindexter hurriedly explained. While he was talking, Dick and Micky secured the hands of the stunned ruffian. He was showing signs of returning consciousness. In a few minutes he was himself again, but his wrists were fastened together by a couple of stout neckties, knotted and knotted again, and he wrenched at the fastening in vain.

"Got him!" said Dick, triumphantly. "You rotter, it's our turn now."

"I guess I'd like to see that varmint's face," remarked Mr. Poindexter. "I've kinder got a suspicion into my noddle, young gents. Bring him along to the school, anyhow. I'm going to put up there to-night, and we can see his face in the light there."

The ruffian, with his hands tied and his brain swimming, hardly attempted resistance. He was hurried along by the juniors, Mr. Poindexter bringing up the rear with his stick ready for use. But it was not needed. They passed through the gates, and tramped through the snow towards the door of the school-house, which was still open. In the light that was streaming out the disconsolate figure of Mr. Lanyon was still visible.

Ralph Lanyon was bundled into the lighted hall. Mr. Poindexter fixed, his keen grey eyes on the sullen, savage face. Then he uttered an exclamation.

"I thought so. So this is where we meet again, George Phipps!"

Poindexter uttered a cry of amazement.

"Phipps?"
"Yes, my boy; that's

Phipps, who was in my employ in Chicago, and bolted with fifty thousand dollars," said the Chicago magnate. "He's got it still, unless I'm mistaken."

The form-master smote his forehead.

"Heavens!" he groaned, "I feared it—I suspected it! Oh! what shall I do? I am ruined."

Mr. Poindexter looked at the little man curiously.

"How does it worry you?" he asked, "and who are you, anyway?"

"I am a master here," said Mr. Lanyon, miserably, "and I have the misfortune to be that villain's cousin, and his disgrace is mine. Once before he brought me to shame, but after this I can never hold up my head again. I shall have to leave Cliveden—I am ruined! But I cannot ask you to spare him, after—besides, what am I to you?"

"Not so fast," drawled Mr. Poindexter. "I don't know you, but—what sort of a galoot is this gentleman, Lincoln G.? I trust your judgment? Is he likely to have been in cahoots with Phipps—"

"Sir!" exclaimed Mr. Lanyon, "Sir, I—"
"Oh, no, dad," cried Poindexter hastily, "He's Mr. Lanyon, our form-master. He's one of the best; we all like and respect him. Popper he can't help that scoundrel being his cousin. It's rotten if he has to suffer for it."

Mr. Poindexter hesitated. Ralph Lanyon thought he saw a chance, and he spoke swiftly.

"Let me go—only give me a chance—the money is nearly all intact, only changed into English notes—your son can tell you where it is—"

"Do you mean it's in the black bag?" asked Poindexter.

"Yes," Ralph gritted his teeth, "A thousand cur—"

"Hush!" said Mr. Poindexter. "I don't know whether I ought to give way—but—if what you say about the money is correct—"

"I swear it is. Your son knows where the black bag is—"

"It's on the wardrobe in your room, my fine

fellow," grinned Poindexter. "I hid it for a lark. Ha, ha! I'll get it, popper."

Ralph Lanyon ground his teeth as Poindexter ran off laughing. In a couple of minutes he returned with the black bag. It was opened, and the rolls of banknotes which had so surprised Mr. Lanyon were exposed to view. The form-master groaned at the sight of this proof of his cousin's villainy.

"Now let me go—"

"I believe," said Mr. Poindexter, slowly, "that this is something awfully like compounding a felony, but I'm not a pesky policeman, anyhow, and I don't let you off, mind, I only don't seize you, but leave it to the detectives to do their own work. For this gentleman's sake, and as it's Christmas time, I give you a chance. On Boxing Day the hunt starts fresh; if you're in England then, look out, that's all."

The rascal was released. In two minutes more he was gone from Cliveden, for ever. The boys never saw him again, and neither did the form-master, whom he had so basely wronged, and so nearly ruined.

And so the Cliveden Christmas was a merry one after all. Mr. Poindexter had regained nearly all the stolen money, so he was satisfied. Mr. Lanyon had got rid of his rascally cousin without an open disgrace, so he was satisfied, and the Combine had been mainly instrumental in bringing that desired result about, so they were satisfied. The only dissatisfied person, probably, was Ralph Lanyon, fleeing through the winter weather for his liberty, but as he had received much less than his deserts, he did not count.

Mr. Poindexter carried off the boys on Christmas morning, to his quarters in town, and the rest of that Christmastide was very jolly for the Combine, and they had adventures to relate when the new term started, sufficient to make Pankhurst and Price turn green with envy, and make the Old Firm wish that, like the Combine, they had stayed for Christmas at Cliveden.

THE END.

(Another story of the Cliveden Chums next Wednesday. My readers should now turn to the front page and start reading the specially-long instalment of THE KING OF THE CARAVANS, our grand new Circus Serial, by Sidney Drew, author of many other popular stories.)

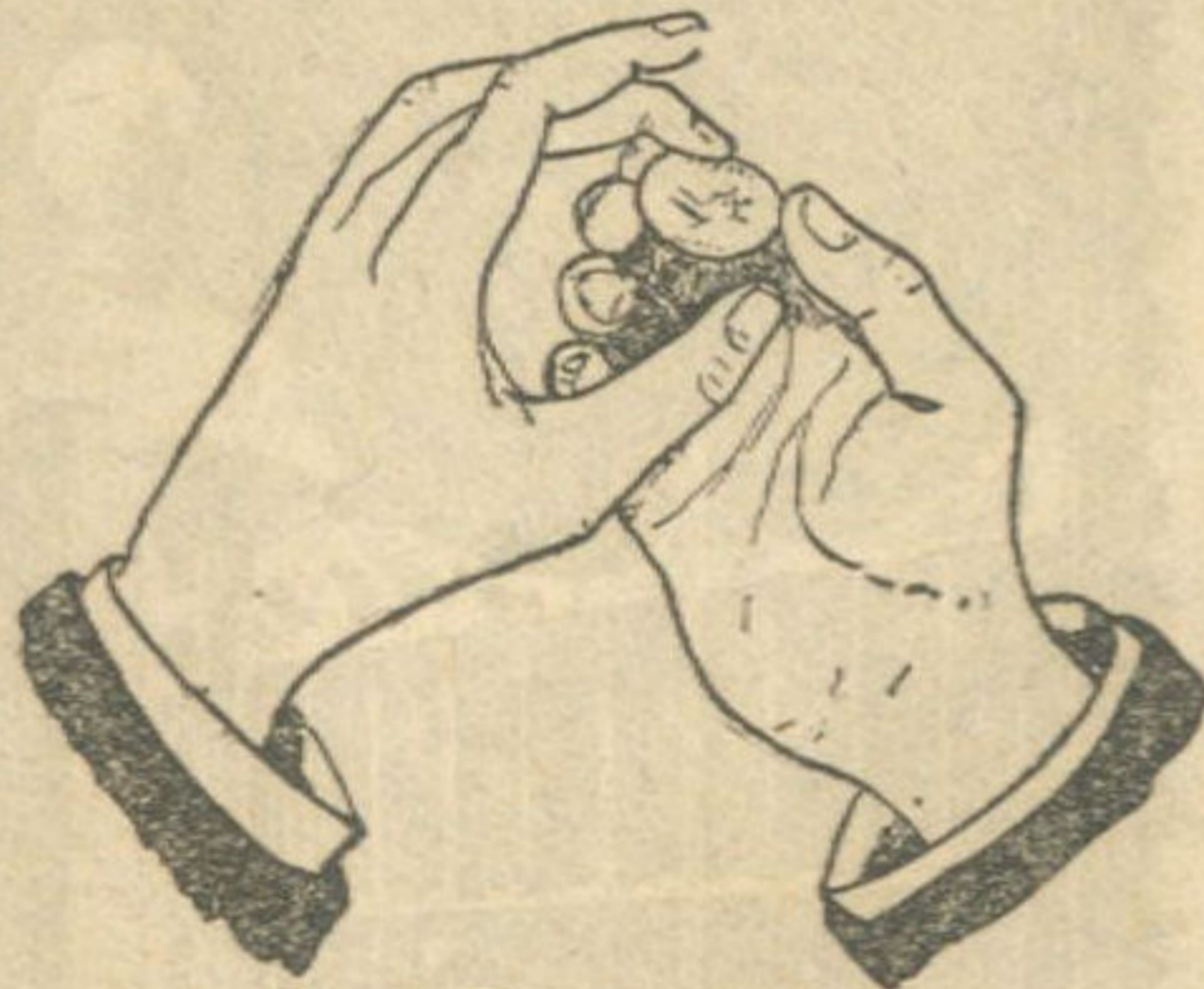


Fig. 3.—The French Drop.

CONJURING MADE EASY.

A Well-known Drawing-room Entertainer Shows How to Make and Use Conjuring Apparatus.

"HIGH presto! Here is your missing watch, sir—tied round the neck of the rabbit. That will conclude the few experiments I have shown you to-night; but before you depart, allow me to thank you for the kind attention with which you have honoured me throughout my entertainment."

The curtain is lowered; and the audience wend their way homeward delighted, but mystified. Had they but known the working of those tricks, they would have been surprised that they were mystified. The reason of their not "seeing



Fig. 2.—Palming an Egg.

through" the tricks performed is because the performer has practised them for years, until he himself almost believes that he is helped in their performance by some being from another world.

"But," my readers will say, "I cannot spend years and years of my time in the pursuance of a hobby."

Certainly not. I am, therefore, going to show them how to make and use apparatus by which they can dispense with practically every sleight-of-hand movement which take so long to acquire. They will only want to master two, i.e., Palming and the French Drop, but these can be mastered with a week's steady practice. I will, therefore, describe them without further delay.

Palming

is the method of concealing an object in the hand in a natural manner. It is advisable for the beginner to start with a half-crown, as this is large and, at the same time, has a milled edge, making it easier to hold. The coin should be held by the slight contraction of the fleshy part of the hand just below the ball (Fig. 1).

This should be practised until the fingers and thumb can be easily and naturally moved. Then the reader should try palming two coins, and so on. Then palm three coins, and pick up a glass, holding it with outspread fingers by the brim. When this can be done without dropping any of the coins, the reader will know that he has, in some measure, mastered the art of palming coins.

This method of palming applies to all round objects with flat surfaces, such as a watch. An egg is palmed in a similar manner, the only difference being that it must lie longways across the hand. Another good method of palming an egg or a similarly shaped object, is to grip it with the first and little fingers (Fig. 2). Never look at the hand containing the palmed object.

We now come to the

French Drop.

In this very useful trick, the coin should be held in the thumb and first finger of the right hand. Now bring up the left hand as though to take the coin (Fig. 3). Instead of doing so, the coin is quickly dropped into the palm of the right hand; and the left hand is extended as though it held the coin. The right hand should be dropped naturally to the side. The audience will think that the coin is in the hand extended in front of the body, and will not give a thought to the hand really containing the coin.

Many puzzling little tricks can be executed by means of this useful pass. I will describe one of these. After having made the drop, bring the left hand down smartly upon the crown of the head, then show it empty to the audience, who will be led to believe that, by some miraculous manner, it has passed into your head.

Now dive down to the heel of your boot and pull out the coin with the right hand. By the same means the coin can seemingly be passed through the knees or open legs.

The reader can invent a number of mystifying tricks with two eggs. By means of the French drop and palming he can make them pass in at his head, out of his mouth; in at his mouth, out of his heels, and so on, making the audience gasp with wonder. On no account must he let them know he is using two eggs.

Having now explained to the reader two sleight-of-hand passes, which it is essential he should be able to perform perfectly, he must still continue to practise them until he becomes fully proficient.

(Another article will appear next Wednesday.)

GYMNASTICS AT HOME.

Our Expert Will Tell You How to Make and Use All Kinds of Apparatus.

If a lad can afford it there is nothing better for his physical well-being than to join a gymnasium. Here he will obtain expert instruction in the use of the various gymnastic appliances, and his physique will benefit accordingly. But this is not sufficient. A night, or two nights, a week spent at a gymnasium are all very well, but every boy ought to have at home similar appliances for everyday practice.

Of course, no lad can hope to be the possessor of a well-appointed gymnasium, up-to-date in every possible way, but he can, if he will use his ingenuity and his skill with carpenter's tools, make for himself quite a number of gymnastic appliances for home use. In this new series of articles I hope to show my readers how this may be done.

How to Make Dumb-bells.

Let us start with dumb-bells. Every boy ought to possess a pair of these, and they can be easily made at home. All that is required is four old croquet-balls. These can be obtained very readily, for they are constantly exposed for sale on secondhand stalls. It is quite possible, too, that many of my young friends have some knocking about in the lumber-room.

Having obtained your croquet-balls, clamp one in a carpenter's vice, then bore a hole in it 1 in. in diameter, as shown in Fig. 1. Do the same with three more balls. Next, get your mother to give you an old broom-handle, or a small curtain-pole, about one inch in diameter. Cut this into lengths of about a foot.

Then get your saw and make a notch in each end, as shown in Fig. 1. Having done so, smear glue over the outer ends and fix a croquet-ball on each. Now drive a wedge into the ends of the stick, first smearing the wedge with glue. Thus you will obtain at practically no expense a dumb-bell as shown in Fig. 2. To make a brother to it will give you no trouble.

Bar-bells can be manufactured

in exactly the same way, only, of course, you will want a longer bar of wood than that used for a dumb-bell. We are getting on splendidly. Already we can see a fine home gymnasium looming in the distance.

Now, about an exerciser. You may think that make this is beyond you, but I think you will agree with me when you have read the simple directions I am about to give you that nothing could be easier.

First of all, you will want a piece of fine planking about 12 in. wide, 60 in. long, and 1 1/2 in. thick, and another piece to project from the



Fig. 1.—Palming a Coin.

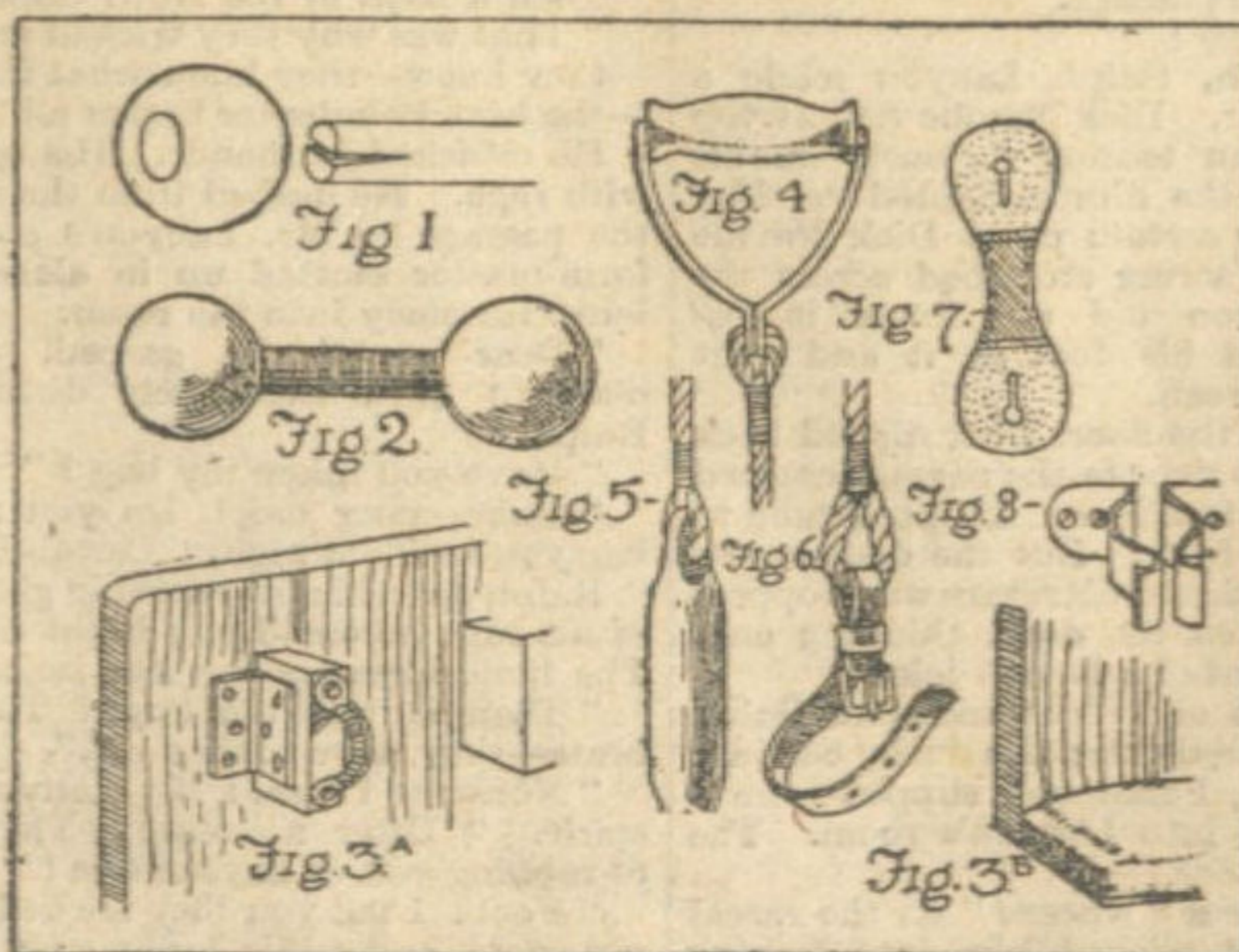
bottom of the plank, as shown in Fig. 3b. Two blocks of wood, 4 in. long, 2 in. wide, and 1 in. thick, will also be necessary. Attach the latter to the upper end of the plank by means of hinges. (See Fig. 3.) To the face of the two blocks pulleys must be screwed, and through these sash-cords are passed. A couple of 4 lb. weights are attached to the ends of the sash-cords. These can be obtained from any ironmonger.

Obtain the handles from a couple of tin pails, and make them perform a similar service for your exerciser. Bend the wires round so that a rope can be lashed into the eyes at the ends, as in Fig. 4.

The foot of the exerciser now needs attention. You must cover that piece of projecting wood with a pad, which need only consist—for lack of anything better—of a few old rags, with a neat covering of cloth. When the sash-ropes have been pressed through the pulleys, you can make a knot in them, to prevent them going through too far. Thus you can ensure the weights just resting on the foot of the exerciser in an upright position. If the knots were omitted, the weights would tumble off on to the floor each time you released the cords.

The ropes should be about five feet long in all, from the eye of the weights to the tin handles. To have them longer is only to take away from the usefulness of the apparatus. So set to work, boys, and make this exerciser in your spare time.

(Another article will appear next Wednesday.)



See the Article on this page Showing You How to Make Dumb-bells, Trapeze Rings, Bar-bells, etc.