

'TWIXT EARTH AND SKY.

PAGES FROM A STEEPLEJACK'S DIARY.

It is Mr. W. E. Harrison, the veteran steeplejack, of Regent Terrace, Sheffield, who narrates this exciting story of experiences on the dizzy heights of spires and chimney stacks. Mr. Harrison, is extremely well-known in Sheffield and district, where, on the occasion of the visit of H.R.H. Prince Albert Victor some years ago, he immortalized himself by ascending to the top of the Parish Church spire, from which dizzy altitude he waved a flag bearing a motto of welcome.

"I became a steeplejack," says Mr. Harrison, "because that was my father's trade, and I frequently used to go aloft with him when a youngster. I have been working for 25 years, and during that period have had several narrow escapes and adventures. Nearly all of these, however, have been in connection with chimney stacks. Few accidents happen on spires or towers, because they are much easier to deal with than stacks. There are no heavy sailing courses — as the parapets on the top of chimneys are called — to be removed, no smoke, heat, or poisonous fumes, or anything of the kind. In fact, experienced steeplejacks look on spire-repairing as a kind of holiday. On chimneys, I always expect accidents, simply for one fact alone, and that is that some people will persistently neglect their stacks.

"Once I got into a tight fix through an engineer's forgetfulness. I was repairing the top of a stack a hundred and fifty feet high, and my work was nearing completion. I had arranged with the engineer not to fire the boilers until I gave a pre-arranged signal to indicate that I had finished. Somehow or other he forgot all about me, and the stokers set the great furnace below going. I was on the opposite side of the stack to that on which the ladders were, and to my utter dismay I found that I was cut off from reaching them by volumes of dense black smoke, the intense heat of which drove me back. My first thought was how to avoid falling, for the heat and smoke made me

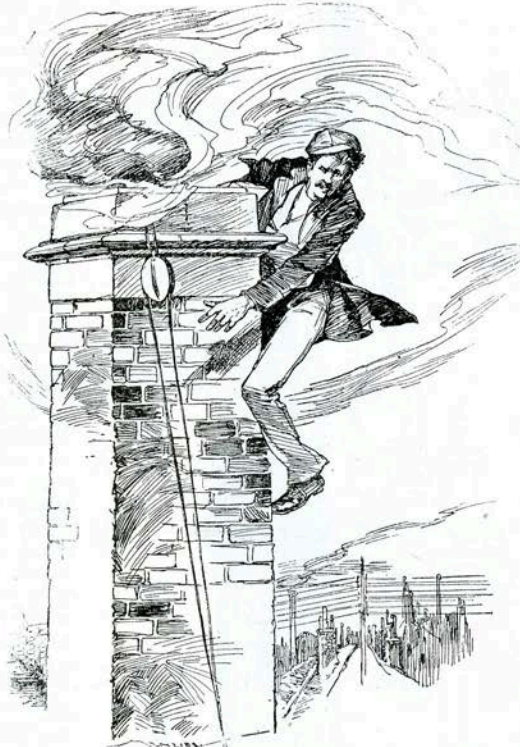
reel. I clutched the small blocking—the extreme top of the chimney—but the stone was so hot that I burnt my hands badly. To avoid crashing down to the bottom, I had to incline my body somewhat over the mouth of the shaft, and in a few seconds all my hair was singed. Suddenly there flashed through my mind a single thought: 'The guy-line underneath.' This was a light line used for hauling up small articles, such as tool-baskets, etc. If it would bear my weight I was saved. It was the work of a moment to slide over the projecting parapet, feeling for

the rope as I went. Having found it, I wrapped my leg round it, sailor fashion, and gently let go of the coping. My weight was a fearful strain on the frail line, but it bore me safely to the ground, burnt and smoke-begrimed, with a feeling of animosity towards engineers in general, and the forgetful one in particular.

"But my most thrilling experience was the following, seeing that death actually stared me in the face. About seven years ago, four men and myself were engaged to take down a massive stack, two hundred and ten feet high. It was a very large chimney, fifty feet in circumference at the top, and eighty-one at base, and its weight was computed at six thousand tons. Having taken off the heavy stonework

forming the top of the chimney, which weighed 105 tons, we had begun on the brickwork, when suddenly I noticed some small white cracks showing in the joints of the inner tube.

"Immediately I grasped what was happening. The inner brickwork, robbed of its supports, was giving way! Knowing the value of keeping one's nerve at such a moment, I calmly drew my men's attention to the cracks. They were naturally alarmed, for the white seams were spreading slowly but surely downwards, broadening as they went. I tried to impress on the men the necessity of meeting the situation as bravely as they could, and made as light of the danger as possible, but in my heart of hearts I was certain that in a few



FEELING FOR THE ROPE AS I WENT.

seconds or moments at most, we should be hurled to death. Just imagine the position for yourself. The lining of the chimney, insecure from age, was giving way, and would presently crash downwards. The fearful strain of the tons of falling brickwork would inevitably cause the outer shell, on the edge of which we were, to be involved in its ruin. Knowing all this, and our technical knowledge enabling us to realise it yet more clearly,

the whole of that ponderous mass of brickwork collapsed, bounding tumultuously from side to side of the outer shell, causing it to rock, at first gently, and then, as the falling débris gathered volume and force, more and more, until it seemed to us at the top, clinging desperately to it and one another, that it must overbalance and fling us to the earth. The intense horror of that sickening swaying motion will go with me to my grave. But gradually, by almost imperceptible degrees, the pendulum motion slackened, and finally ceased altogether. When the shaken stack was once more stationary, we shook one another by the hand thankfully, descended our strained but still secure ladders, and worked no more that day.

"I have said that few accidents happen on spires; but it was on a spire that the only fatal accident among my men occurred. Some repairs being necessary to the vane on the top of a spire, my foreman, whom I had trained from a lad to the business, was doing the work, sitting a-straddle on the vane, when suddenly it snapped in the middle, causing the poor fellow to fall to the earth, where he was killed instantly. This was a severe blow to me, for he was my right-hand man, conscientious and attentive to business.

"Our work on the Nelson Monument in Trafalgar Square was rather difficult, because we were not allowed to drive our ladder fastenings into the interstices of the stonework. Instead, we had to rope them, which of course took longer. The old Admiral is a big chap when you get on a level with him, and one of my men sat on his cocked hat with ease. Strangely enough we found the skeleton of a fowl up there, together with large masses of caked soot. I have been told that the bleached skeleton of the long-defunct rooster must have been a relic from the dinner which the masons and others engaged on the column gave on the completion of the work.

There was an old legend to the effect that some silver vessels had been enclosed in the hollow of the hero's hat, but we disproved that, for as a matter of fact there *is* no hollow, the stone being rounded off so that the rainwater will not lodge in it."

Mr. Harrison has had several awards for lightning rods and other apparatus at various exhibitions, and is at present engaged in supervising the labours of his staff on chimneys and spires in some half a dozen different localities.



THE VANE SUDDENLY SNAPPED IN THE MIDDLE.

we had to stand there absolutely helpless, watching the cruel fissures slowly enlarging. It was no use attempting to escape by the ladders, for the fall would take place long before we could reach the bottom.

"I vividly recollect asking the men to offer up a prayer, and put their trust in God. Each of us prepared himself for the final catastrophe in his own way. Meanwhile the cracks gaped rapidly, and then with a sudden thunderous roar,