"'TWAS A LONG, LONG WAY TO TERRA FIRMA"

The Steeplejack Gets Some Fine Bird's-eye Views. He Has Little Competition in His Business. It's a Fine Job Until the Day He Falls—and He Falls Only Once.

NOT long ago I heard a physician tell about an experiment that was tried on a perfectly healthy inmate of a penitentiary. The man was blindfolded and strapped to an operating table. Then one of the doctors present faintly scratched one of the man's lower limbs with a needle. Warm water was slowly poured on the scratch and the blindfolded man was told that he was gradually bleeding to death. "And it is a fact," said the physician, "that the man kept growing weaker and weaker. Indeed, it was the opinion of those present that if the blindfold had not been removed from his eyes and the straps that bound him released, he would actually have passed away."

I remember of hearing of a horse tied near a railroad track that become so frightened at the sight of an approaching train that, with the final arrival of the engine to the accompaniment of a sharp whistle, the animal dropped over dead, suffering all the tortures physically of having been run over.

Somehow these two incidents came back to me with added meaning the other day. They seemed less absurd than when I had first heard of them, for the other day—mentally—I fell from a flag pole that was swaying in a gale of wind from the edge of a seventeen story skyscraper. Mentally, the rope to which I clung slipped through my fingers and my body, turning somersaults and constantly gaining momentum, struck the pavement with a sickening thud. The phrase "sickening thud" is old stuff, I know, but that's just how I struck—in my mind. If my body had actually taken the plunge along with my thoughts the suffering could not have been more intense. But Edmond Von Kaenel, professional steeplejack, who was higher up on the flag pole, became aware of the "psychic shock" I had experienced, and he instructed me how to get back to the gravel roof before I should follow my thoughts down into the sloppy street below.

I prefer that term "psychic shock" to certain other words that might be used in describing my morale as I dangled there on that swaying flag pole. The term has a nice, excusable ring to it.

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Has Played to Big Audiences.

I had heard of Von Kaenel. He has, at one time or another, balanced on the top of nearly every flag pole in Chicago's loop. He has been painting smoke stacks and tampering around church spires over the country for the last ten years. He has played to big audiences in cities from coast to coast—street audiences that know him only as a speck up near the clouds. His impressions of cities are all in bird's-eye. There are only a few like him; his is a game in which there is little competition. As Von Kaenel strolled into the office the other day I had not the slightest idea that he was one of those speck among the clouds fellows. He had a bunch of ropes over his arm and he had the appearance of a guy who had come to fix the telephone or do something that a lot of other fellows could do. But he came straight toward me and began to rattle off a spiel.

"Yes," I said finally, "I suppose it would make a good story for me to be a steeplejack for a day, but—" my speech stumbled a bit and I let my voice fall so that the others in the office could not hear, "but isn't there quite a bit of danger in this sort of work? I couldn't write any story, you know, if I'd take a fall off this pole you're going to paint."

"What's the use of being afraid," said Von Kaenel. "That's a motto of mine—what's the use of being afraid. I've been waiting for a job like this to come along so I could take you up with me. Why, I've even brought an extra suit along; it's out here in the hall. Come on, you've done pretty near every other stunt."

And I don't know, it seemed almost no time before Von Kaenel had gone as high as the elevator would go and we were on the gravel roof of a seventeen story skyscraper in the heart of the loop. The first thing I noticed was that they had built the flag pole so close to the edge of the building. I made a remark showing my disappointment over this feature and Von Kaenel, immediately busying himself at splicing ropes, reproached me.

"But you don't want to think of danger," he said impatiently. "Just test this rope. You see, it can't break. What's the use of being afraid—that's my motto."

Von Kaenel handled the ropes almost affectionately. He began to chatter about the various kinds of knots that could be tied in ropes and he looked lovingly toward the top of the pole. Then throwing one of the ropes around the staff, and jerking it ahead of him in some uncanny fashion, he started going up. I saw him get beyond the masonry that shut off view of all but the tops of one or two extra high buildings. I saw him pause for an instant, perfectly at ease, and look down directly below where a traffic policeman was having a busy time.

"But, I say, Von," I began, "are you sure there is no danger to this thing? Didn't you ever hear of any one ever getting killed climbing around this way?"

"O, about twelve fellows I have worked with have 'got theirs,'" he answered flippantly, as he began making ready for me. "You know you only have to fall once. There was Bill Wilson got his dump while he was shifting the rigging on top of a stack of the Miller & Hart Packing company. He was ninety feet up. Willie Thatcher dropped while he was hanging rigging on a cornice. He had tied up to an old chimney and the cement had rotted out and the chimney came down. A pin in the truck broke for Tommy Greeley while he was on a flag pole a good deal like this one, and a stack caved in on Lew Everson while he was working on a steel mill stack on the south side; he had fastened his turn buckles too tight. Maybe you read about my brother-in-law, Clyde Walters, who was killed out at Oak Forest. I was with him on the job and I was just above him when he dropped. I heard him holler that he had a cramp in his hand and I called to him to 'tie up.' He swung over to reach the rigging but missed it by an inch. Then he made a second attempt. 'I can't hold out any longer—here I go,' he yelled, and the rigging started to unravel. He started to go down in the sitting position and after about fifteen feet down he grabbed for the lightning rod, but his fingers hit the stone wall first and the flesh was torn off them. He held to the stone just for a second and then he went on down, doing a loop the loop, and struck his head on a stone cornice about twenty feet before he hit the ground. I jumped out of my rigging and slid down as fast as I could. An eye bolt, two and a half inches thick, had buried itself in the base of his skull. Here, catch that rope with the knot in it! That's the one you're to hang on by. Everything's about ready now. What's the use of being afraid—that's my motto."

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Makes Fifteen Dollars a Day.

Although the brick wall protected me, I could tell that there was a severe wind blowing from the northwest by the way the pole swayed. I found myself stalling a little as I tried to follow Von Kaenel's instructions as to how I should fasten myself up in the ropes.

"How much do you fellows make a day?" I called up.

"Well, I average about $3 to $5 an hour," answered the 28 year old steeplejack. "Some jobs pay me from $300 to $500. The year around I average about $15 a day. You see I can do brick laying, cement work, and slating, as well as paint."

"On an average, about how many fellows are able to do this work?" I asked, giving another test to the tiny rope.

"About one out of fifty who come to me with a hunch that they would make good in the business," answered the man 'higher up.' "A lot of them are confident up until the minute they go to work. They are loud talkers and will bet a week's salary in advance that they can get up on a pole and do so and so, but when they actually get on the job they change their minds and the first chance they get they sneak away. You see, I've been climbing up high ever since I was shanghaied on a fishing smack as a kid in New York City. The top gantling broke on the smack and the skipper sent me up to rig it. Before that trip was over I was used to swaying on dories on rough seas. The fascination for that sort of work kept growing on me. Say, there must be four hundred people stopping in the street to look at me now. You can hear the autos and the wagons, but you can't hear the people. I don't know how the top of this pole is yet, but I guess it hasn't got a crack in it."

"Are you prepared to die any time?" I inquired, and I had to shout my question, because he had started to climb higher.

"Well, I always say my prayers every night," he called back. "My wife is always warning me against accident. She said to me this morning as I left for work: 'Now, Ed, you look out for those street cars and automobiles.'"

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On Seventeen Stories of Air.

Von Kaenel had reached the very top of the pole and he stood poised sixty feet straight above me. He waved both of his hands free from the pole. He lifted the ball at the top of the pole free from the staff and then placed it back in its socket. He started to sing "It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary." Then he called to me to hang tight to the rope with the knot in it and he gave the other ropes in which I was entangled a steady pull.

My feet swung away from the gravel roof. My body gradually rose toward the sky until I felt the breath of the northwest gale full against my face. It was a cold wind and it sang as it penetrated my borrowed garments and chilled the perspiration against my skin.

I had cleared the brick wall that surrounded the roof of the building.

The ropes to which I was attached were pulling me up—up! The breeze caught my body and swung me out away from the pole. Turning my gaze from Von Kaenel, who was working at the ropes attached to the tiny pulley high above me, I glanced down.

That one glance meant my finish as a steeplejack!

Instead of the roof beneath me now there was nothing but seventeen stories of air. And far beneath me—far down below—there were the specks of people and the toy street cars and the hard pavement.

The blood rushed to my head.

I gasped for breath.

"Don't look down," yelled Von Kaenel, and his voice had in it a screeching sound. "All you've got to do is to watch out for that rope you've got hold of. Get ready now; I'm going to give you another pull."

But after that one glance I could look nowhere else but down. As my body swung back to the iron flag pole I tried to dig the toes of my shoes into it for protection. I forgot everything, save that I had started to fall, that my body was turning somersaults in the air—that soon there would come the sickening thud that would actually be a relief. Nothing was more certain in my mind than that if Von Kaenel pulled me up a foot farther I would loosen myself from the ropes and start on that journey downward. What breath I had left I used in calling up to Von Kaenel, though my eyes never left a certain spot on the pavement down, down, down below me.

"Let me go back," I yelled. "Which rope do I pull?"

I fumbled at the ropes until a twitch at one of them let me back to the old gravel roof again. Von Kaenel quickly followed me down the pole and with a puzzled look on his face came over where I stood trying to make my knees understand that it wasn't necessary to tremble any more.

"But you got to imagining what was going to happen if you should fall," complained Von Kaenel. "That's just what I told you not to do. I never let myself think there is any possibility of danger. My motto is——"

"I don't care what your motto is," I interrupted. "I've got a little old motto of my own—'Safety first.'"