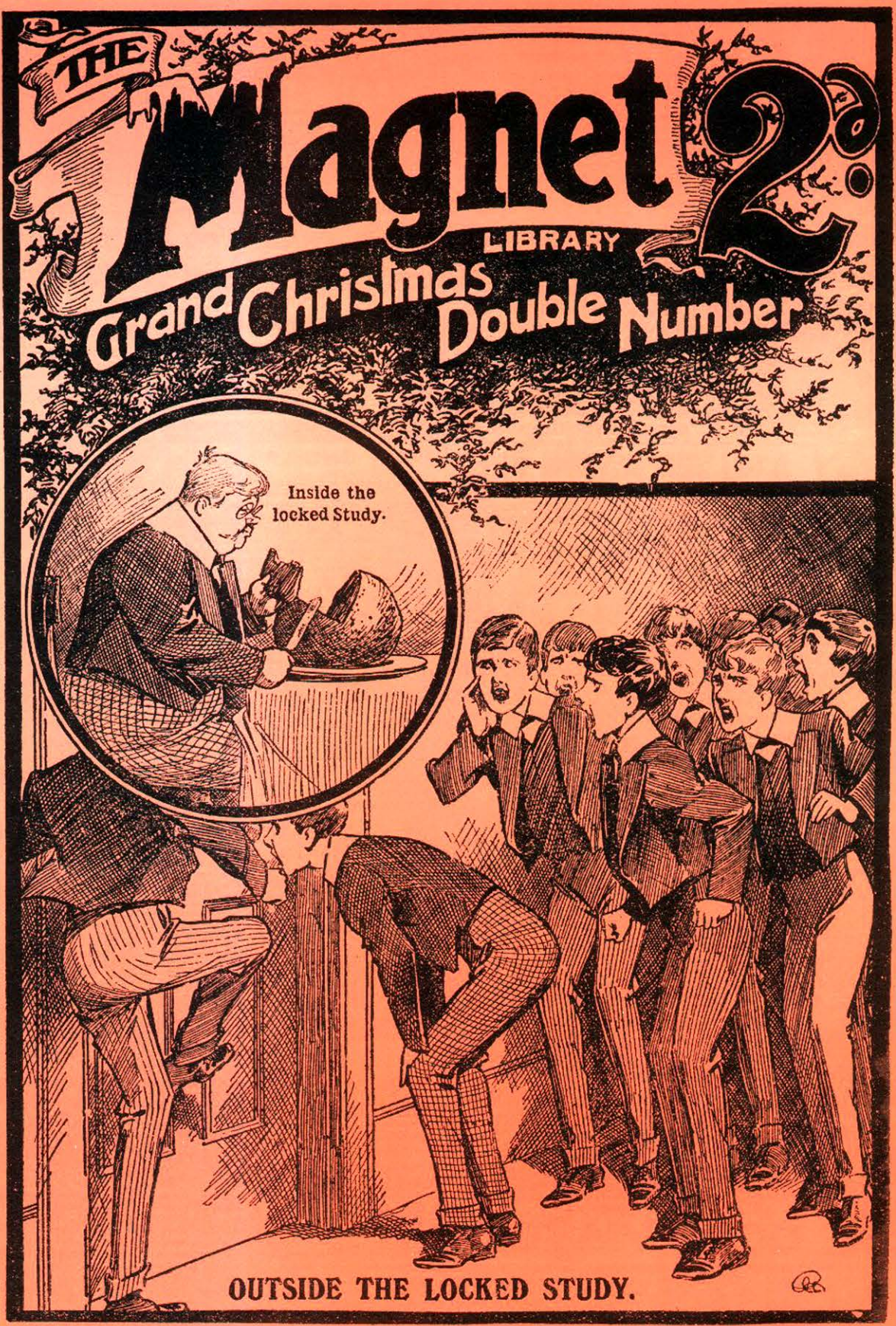
THE MERRY CHRISTMAS NUMBER.



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THE MAGNET LIBRARY

A Happy Xmas to all Readers!
—EDITOR

A Complete School-Story Book, attractive to All Readers.

The Editor will be obliged if you will hand this book, when finished with, to a friend.

Bunter's Bust-up

A Splendid Long, Complete School Tale of HARRY WHARTON & CO. at Greyfriars.

By FRANK RICHARDS.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Regardless of Expense.

"CHRISTMAS——"

"Eh?"

"Christmas is coming," said Billy Bunter.

He was standing in the doorway of No. 1 Study, in the Remove passage, and blinking in through his big spectacles. Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent occupied two easy-chairs, on either side of the hearth, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh was sitting on the table between them, with his feet on another chair. The chums of the Remove had simply turned their heads and looked at Bunter when he opened the door—merely that, and nothing more! They did not ask him in to sit down; they did not even remark that it was cold. They stared at him.

"Christmas——" Bunter recommenced.

"Is coming," agreed Frank Nugent. "Where did you hear the news?"

"Oh, really, Nugent——"

"You're sure you've got it quite correct—quite sure there won't be any oversight this year, and that Christmas won't get missed out of the calendar?"

"Look here——"

"Well, then, Christmas is coming," said Frank; "admitted unanimously. Would you mind shutting the door after you?"

"There's a draught," remarked Harry Wharton, and Hurree Singh added his opinion that the draughtfulness was terrific.

Bunter blinked wrathfully at the three juniors.

"Look here," he exclaimed, "I didn't come here to be funny. I wanted to mention to you fellows that as Christmas was coming——"

Frank Nugent poked the fire, and in the clatter of the poker and the coals, the rest of Bunter's speech was lost.

"Do you hear me?" roared Bunter angrily. "I should think that even you chaps might be thinking about peace and goodwill and things, just now."

"But Christmas isn't here yet," said Harry Wharton. "As a matter of fact, it's a jolly long time off, Bunty."

"But we break up before Christmas," said Bunter, "and if we're going to give that Christmas feed——"

"What Christmas feed?"

"I was thinking of a big Christmas feed, to—to celebrate Christmas, you know," said Billy Bunter. "It ought to be a time of plenty, and good cheer, and so on. I'm thinking of standing a big feed—a real bust-up, you know—entirely at my own expense. You fellows needn't be afraid of being asked to contribute, if that's what you're thinking of. The thing will be done entirely by me, regardless of expense."

"Good!" said Frank Nugent heartily. "Go and arrange it, Bunter, and—and shut the door after you, will you?"

Bunter snorted.

"I was going to ask you chaps your opinion about the idea."

"Jolly good," said Nugent.

"Ripping," said Wharton.

"The rippingfulness is terrific."

Yet Bunter did not seem satisfied. He was edging his way into the study. Billy Bunter was no longer a tenant of No. 1 Study, and since he had changed into No. 14, he had felt the lean years set in, so to speak. He had been accustomed to living on the fat of the land, and when he became his own provider, the difference was striking.

"I—I can't very well discuss it standing here," he remarked. "You might ask a fellow to sit down, at all events."

"Sit down at all events," said Nugent.

"Oh, really, you know!"

Bunter came in and closed the door. He came towards the fire, and coolly placed himself in front of Hurree Singh, shutting all the fire off from him. Then he blinked at Wharton and Nugent alternately.

"I never could be really comfy unless I had an armchair," he said.

"Go hon!" said Nugent, stretching out his legs lazily.

"Same here," said Wharton.

Bunter blinked at them again, and then, with a grunt, sat on the fender. There was an ominous creak from the fender under the weight of the Owl of the Remove.

"Well, speaking about that Christmas feed," he said. "You see, we shall have to give it before we break up, so we can't wait till Christmas. My idea is, the sooner the better. Why shouldn't a Christmas feed be had as early as a Christmas number? I think the chief question about it is, how to raise the funds."

"Yes, rather," said Wharton, laughing.

"Well, I'm attending to that," said Bunter grandly. "I'm standing this feed regardless of expense."

"To whom?"

"Eh?"

"Regardless of expense to whom?"

"Oh, really, Nugent! To myself, of course!"

"Rats!"

"If you are going to cast doubt upon my word, I think this whole discussion had better cease," said Billy Bunter, with a great deal of dignity.

"Much better. Shut up, then."

"Oh, really, you know! My idea is, to issue cards of invitation to all the fellows who ought to come to the feed," explained Bunter. "Nothing like doing the thing in style, especially as it is possible that some of my titled friends may look in. Now, I want you fellows to come."

"Thanks awfully."

"The thankfulness is terrific."

"Not at all. I used to be in this study," said Bunter. "I wasn't very well treated here; but bygones can be bygones at a time of the year like this. I'm not the chap to bear malice at Christmas time."

"Noble Bunter!" murmured Nugent.

"Well, yes, I am rather a noble chap," agreed Bunter fatuously. "I don't get justice done me as a rule."

"My hat! You'd have an awful time if you did get it!"

"Oh, really, Nugent!"

"The awfulness would be terrific."

"Look here," said Bunter. "To come back to bizney, I want you chaps to come to the Christmas feed. I want to show the whole school that bygones are bygones, and that I'm not the chap to remember any little unpleasantness at Christmas time. Will you come?"

"Oh, we'll come!"

"Then I'll put your names down in the list?"

"Put 'em down."

"I'll send you the cards of invitation a little later," said Bunter. "The whole thing is going to be handsomely done, regardless of expense. I'm expecting a postal-order—in fact, several postal-orders, and I shall be in funds, and shall not have to ask anybody for financial help."

The chums of the Remove looked at Bunter. He spoke so seriously that they almost believed him. Up to this moment they had deemed the Christmas feed merely an excuse for raising money for a feed for himself. His statement that he didn't want any money was generally a preliminary to borrowing. But of borrowing Bunter said not a word.

"Well, that's about all," said Bunter, taking out a notebook, and writing the names in it. "Wharton, Nugent, Inky. Good. I can depend on you?"

"Oh, yes!" said Nugent. "Look here, out with it, Billy."

"Eh?"

"How much do you want?"

"How much what?"

"Cash."

Bunter blinked at him indignantly.

"If you think I've come here to borrow money, Nugent——" he began.

"You don't mean to say that you haven't!" exclaimed Frank, in astonishment.

"Oh, really——"

"Well, wonders will never cease!"

"The wonderfulness is terrific."

"I say, you fellows, draw it mild!" said Bunter. "This isn't a nice way to treat fellows who are getting up Christmas feeds, more for your sake than anything else. I'm doing this thing entirely at my own expense."

"Well, my only Aunt Selina!"

"I want Bob Cherry to come, too," Bunter went on. "I can't forget that we all used to be in this study together, and we were very comfy, except that I never had quite enough to eat. I can't see Cherry just now, as he's being ragged in Bulstrode's study——"

Wharton jumped up.

"What's that? Bob Cherry's being ragged in Bulstrode's study?"

"I think they're singeing his hair with a red-hot poker," said Bunter. "I noticed a smell of burning. I don't suppose they'll really hurt him. I say, you fellows, where are you going?"

But the fellows did not reply. Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh were tearing at top speed out of the study to the rescue of their chum.

Billy Bunter blinked after them with a grin on his face. He crossed quickly to the door, and locked it, and then turned to the cupboard.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Bunter Captures the Pudding.

"BUCK up!" gasped Harry Wharton.

"Yes, rather."

"The ratherfulness is terrific."

With excited faces the Greyfriars chums dashed towards Bulstrode's study. Bulstrode was the bully of the Remove, and though he was terrible to small boys, he generally let Harry Wharton & Co. alone. But there was no doubt that he would always have liked to rag the chums of the Remove, if opportunity offered.

The juniors did not doubt for a moment that Bob Cherry had been inveigled into Bulstrode's study, and that the Remove bully and his friends were ragging the unfortunate Bob.

They did not stand upon ceremony.

If the raggers learned that rescue was coming, they would doubtless lock the door; and Harry Wharton did not mean to give them a chance to do that.

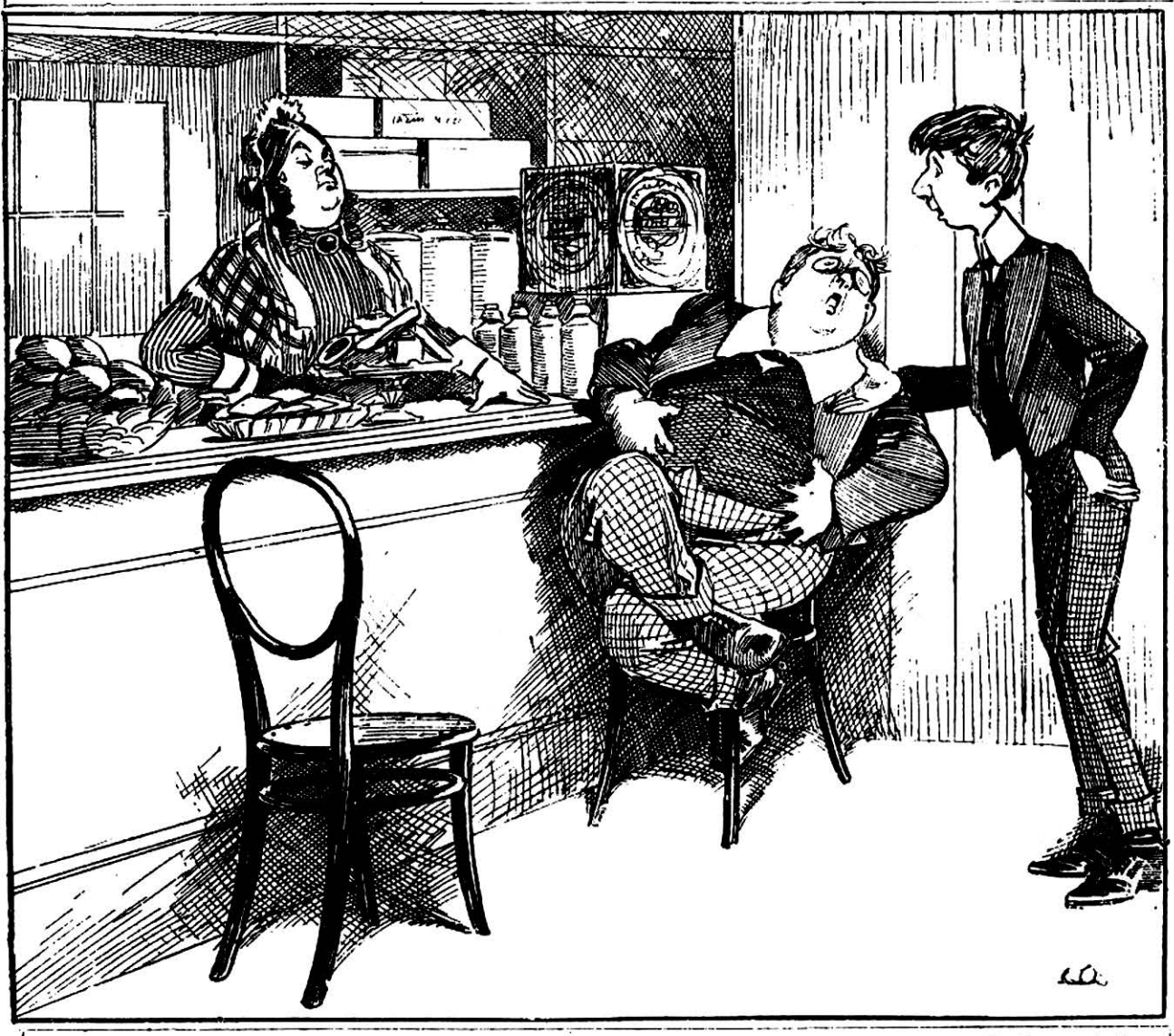
He dashed up to Bulstrode's door, threw it open without thinking of knocking, and rushed in with Nugent and Hurree Singh.

So quick and fierce was the rush, that the three juniors dashed right up to the study table, and dashed against it before they could stop themselves.

Bulstrode was seated at the table, writing. Hazeldene was standing beside him, handing him some blotting-paper. There was no sign of Bob Cherry, or of either raggers or ragging in the study.

The collision with the table sent it reeling.

The three chums clutched at it to save themselves, and threw their weight upon it, and the table shot along the



"Bunter has been overcome by weakness from hunger, Mrs. Mimble," explained Alonzo Todd, hurriedly. "Kindly hand over some substantial comestible, my dear madam!" "Master Bunter can have all that he can pay for," said Mrs. Mimble sourly. *(See page 16.)*

floor, crashing into Bulstrode and Hazeldene, and hurling them into the fender.

Then the table reeled over towards them, shooting down upon them books and papers and pens and ink.

Bulstrode roared.

"You mad idiots! W-w-what are you up to?"

"M-m-my hat!" gasped Hazeldene.

Wharton let go the table, and stood up gasping. Hurree Singh had rolled over, and was sitting rather dazedly on the carpet. Nugent had stumbled upon the waste-paper basket, and sat down upon it. The waste-paper basket was tall and narrow, and Nugent had sat in it with considerable force; with the result that he could not unseat himself. His feet shot up into the air, and he sat wedged in helplessly.

Bulstrode scrambled out of the fender.

His face was red with fury, and black with ink. There were about equal proportions of black and red.

"You dangerous asses!" he yelled. "Is this a silly rag?"

"My hat!" gasped Wharton. "Where's Bob?"

"Bob! What Bob, idiot?"

"Bob Cherry! I—I thought he was here."

"And if he was here, do you generally come in like a mob of Red Indians to look for a chap?" roared Bulstrode.

"N—— Ha, ha, ha! I'm sorry!"

"You—you——"

"Help!" groaned Nugent. "I can't get out! Lend me a hand, somebody!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, lend a hand!"

Wharton grasped Nugent's hands, and drew him to his feet. The waste-paper basket still remained stuck on to him, Nugent being bent in the middle at an obtuse angle. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh obligingly kicked the basket off, and a yell from Nugent showed that it was not only the basket that suffered from the kick.

"Yarooh! You ass!"

"The sorrowfulness is great if the esteemed kickfulness was too terrific," murmured the Nabob of Bhanipur.

"You chumps!" said Bulstrode. "You frabjous burblers! Look what you've done to my study!"

"B-b-but Bunter said you were ragging Bob Cherry here!" exclaimed Harry, in bewilderment. "We came in here to rescue him."

"He hasn't been in here, idiot."

"Then that young rascal was taking us in. It's a jape," said Harry ruefully. "Still, you've only got yourself to thank, Bulstrode. If you weren't such a beastly bully, you know, I shouldn't have been taken in."

"Get out of my study!" roared Bulstrode. Hazeldene was rubbing his limbs, and looking far from pleasant, but he did not speak.

"I'm sorry," said Harry. "Ha, ha—I mean, I'm very sorry. So long!"

And the chums of No. 1 Study cleared out. Bulstrode growled furiously as he mopped the ink off his face, and Hazeldene scowled as he picked up the fallen books. Neither of them was in a sweet temper.

"What did that young villain take us in like that for?" said Nugent, as they went into the passage. "I suppose it was his idea of humour."

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Harry Wharton frowned.

"Then we'll jolly well teach him not to tell lies for fun," he said, as he strode to the door of No. 1 Study. "Hallo, here's Bob Cherry!"

Bob Cherry and Mark Linley were just coming down the Remove passage. They looked in surprise at the excited and dishevelled juniors.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob. "What's the row?"

"You are!" grunted Nugent.

"Eh?"

"Have you been ragged by Bulstrode?"

"Bulstrode! Ragged! Certainly not."

"Then why haven't you?" demanded Nugent indignantly. "We went in to rescue you, and the least you could have done was to be rescued."

"What the dickens——"

Wharton explained, and Bob Cherry chuckled.

"Bunter wanted to clear you out of your study for something," he said. "Have you got anything in the cupboard?"

Harry Wharton looked alarmed.

"My hat! The Christmas pudding!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob. "That's what Bunter's after!"

"But—but he mustn't eat it; it'll make him ill!" gasped Wharton. "It's a doctored pudding—for a jape, you know. If he eats it—my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Bob again. "He's bound to eat it."

Wharton hastily turned the handle of the door, and tried to open it. It was locked on the inside.

He knocked at the upper panels with his knuckles.

"Bunter! Bunter! Billy Bunter!"

There was no reply from within. But the juniors, listening outside the door, could hear the click of a knife on a plate.

"He's gorging already," said Nugent.

"It must be the pudding," said Harry Wharton. "That's what he must have come for. It was sent in by Mrs. Mimble, who boiled it for us, a quarter of an hour ago. Bunter must have seen it sent in, and——"

"And laid this little scheme to scoff it," grinned Bob Cherry. "Well, he's scoffing more than he bargained for, this time. Ha, ha, ha!"

"What is there in the pudding?" asked Mark Linley.

"Liquorice powder," said Harry Wharton. "We mixed it in, you know, and put in lots of spices and things to disguise the flavour."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If Bunter bolts a lot of that pudding, he'll have some first-class pains under the waistcoat, that's all."

"He'll bolt the lot!" roared Bob Cherry. "Ha, ha, ha! He won't leave a morsel of it, old man!"

Harry Wharton looked alarmed.

"We must stop him somehow!" he exclaimed. "He'll be ill!"

He kicked at the door. There was no reply from within the study. Billy Bunter was too busy. The noise in the corridor drew many juniors out of their studies, and there were loud inquiries as to what was on.

"Faith, and phwat is the disturbance about?" demanded Micky Desmond. "Sure, it's interruptin' me prep. ye are!"

"Can't be helped. Bunter's locked up in my study——"

"Well, I said a long time ago that Bunter ought to be locked up," said Ogilvy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's got on the track of the Christmas pudding that Mrs. Mimble was boiling for us," said Nugent. "He's bolting it now."

"Ha, ha! You'll never see it again," grinned Morgan. "Bunter won't leave a trace of it to stain the dish, look you!"

"But the pudding's been doctored."

"What!"

"My hat!"

"It was for a jape on the Highcliffe fellows," said Wharton ruefully. "You see, those rotters got up a dodge the other day to doctor some stuff for us—I needn't go into particulars, but that was their game—they wanted to put us off colour just before the football match, so that they could lick us."

Hazeldene, who had just come out into the passage with Bulstrode, turned deadly pale, and drew back a little behind the bulky form of the Remove bully. Hazeldene had been the traitor who had been the instrument of the young rascals at Highcliffe on that occasion, and his secret was known to half a dozen fellows. They had promised to keep it a secret; but as Wharton spoke, a terror fell upon Hazeldene that he was about to be betrayed. But that was not Wharton's intention.

"The cads!" said Ogilvy. "I never heard this. How did you find out?"

"One of the Courtfield chaps found it out, and warned us. But this Christmas pudding was a Roland for an Oliver, you see. We were going to send it to the cads by post, without any name or address on it, and of course they would have scoffed it at once. It was a nice pudding—jolly nice—and the liquorice-powder we mixed in it was disguised by the spices. As they had tried to give us a dose of stuff, we thought they might as well have a tummy-ache themselves, to see how they liked it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And now that young villain's scoffing the pudding, and spoiling the jape!" said Nugent wrathfully.

"He'll rope in the tummy-ache!" roared Bob Cherry. "He'll eat six times as much as any of the Highcliffe fellows would."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The ha-ha-ha-fulness is terrific!"

Harry Wharton knocked at the door again.

"Bunter!" he shouted through the keyhole.

A voice, muffled as if it came from a mouth full of pudding, replied:

"Hallo! Go away!"

"Open the door!"

"Rats!"

"Are you eating the pudding?"

"Yes."

There was a roar of laughter from the Removites. Harry Wharton kicked at the door again. There was no sound from within the study save the click of a fork upon a plate, and a low, steady murmur of champing jaws. Billy Bunter was very busy.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Alonzo Makes a Suggestion.

THE crowd in the Remove passage was thickening. The banging on the door had attracted attention from all quarters. Shell fellows and Fifth-Formers were coming along as well as Removites, and there was a whisper that a prefect would be on the scene soon to see what the row was about.

So far as the jape on Highcliffe was concerned, Harry Wharton had given that up—Billy Bunter had wrecked the pudding by this time. His concern was now for the fat junior. The Highcliffe fellows would have eaten the pudding in normal helpings, and would have experienced a considerable ache inwardly, which would have been a just punishment for their attempt upon the Greyfriars footballers. But Bunter was never normal when it came to eating. He was certain to stuff in the pudding till he could hold no more. The result would be decidedly painful for Bunter.

Harry knocked at the door again.

"Bunter—I say, Bunter!"

"Hallo!" came from a mouth full of pudding again. "It's all right, you fellows; I'll leave you some. I can't eat all this!"

"My hat! I should think not!" gasped Nugent. "Why, there's enough for twelve fellows to grow fat on."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bunter, let that pudding alone!" shouted Wharton through the keyhole. "It will make you ill."

"Rats! It's a jolly nice pudding. I had my eye on you fellows all the time," said Bunter, in a pause of his eating. "I knew you were making a Christmas pudding. I knew you had taken it to Mrs. Mimble's to be boiled for you. You couldn't take me in. I had an eye on you all the time. Yah!"

"Look here——"

"Decent chaps would have asked an old study-mate to come in and have a snack," said Bunter; "especially a chap with a delicate appetite like mine, who wouldn't be likely to eat a lot. You know I've got a delicate constitution, and can only keep going by taking constant nourishment. I think you're selfish. Yah!"

"Bunter——"

"Oh, go and eat coke! I'm on this pudding. Blessed if I ever thought that you fellows could make a pudding like this! It's simply all right. I haven't eaten half of it yet. Go and eat coke! Yah!"

"Open the door, old man."

"Yah!"

That expressive monosyllable seemed to express Bunter's sentiments exactly. Wharton rattled the handle of the door, and shouted through the keyhole again.

"Look here, Bunter, I'm speaking for your own good. That pudding has been doctored."

"Rats!"

"We made it for a jape on the Highcliffe chaps, and were going to send it to them by the carrier, to pay them out for a rotten trick they played us."

"Yah!"

"There's a lot of liquorice-powder mixed in it."

"Bosh! I should taste it."

"We put in a lot of spices and things to hide the flavour. Look here, Bunter, if you eat much of that pudding you'll be ill!"

"Rats!"

"You'll get some awful pains."

"Yah!"

"Do you mean to say that you don't believe me?" roared Wharton furiously.

"Of course I don't!"

"What!"

"Oh, go and chop chips!" said Billy Bunter. "Yah!"

"Bunter! Look here, I give you my word——"

"Yah!"

"You can't doubt my word, Bunter!"

"Oh, really, Wharton! You've often doubted mine."

There was a chuckle in the passage. Harry Wharton might be anxious for Billy Bunter's health, but the other fellows were thoroughly enjoying the fun.

"That's a different matter, you young ass!" exclaimed Wharton. "Look here, Bunty, let that pudding alone or you'll be ill, I tell you!"

"Rats!"

"Bunter——"

"Yah!"

Harry Wharton ceased. The fork was still clicking on the dish in the study as Billy Bunter shovelled the pudding into his capacious mouth.

"My hat!" exclaimed Wharton. "What on earth's to be done? It isn't as if the young pig would be moderate! He'll make himself ill! I——"

"Ha, ha, ha! Let him alone."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Alonzo Todd, coming on the scene. "Dear me! What is the matter, you fellows? Perhaps I can be of use? My Uncle Benjamin always impressed upon me to be useful and obliging whenever I could."

"We want somebody to crawl through the keyhole, and unlock the door on the inside, Todd," said Ogilvy, with perfect gravity.

Todd blinked at Ogilvy, and then at the keyhole in the study door.

"My dear Ogilvy, it is impossible! Surely you must have sufficient observation to perceive that the dimensions of the orifice are far too restricted to allow of the passage of a human body?"

"Good old dictionary!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"The dictionaryfulness is terrific."

"My dear Cherry——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ah! Perhaps you are joking, Ogilvy," said Todd. "I have been told that upon some occasions I take observations in a more serious spirit than intended. But my Uncle Benjamin always told me to treat every individual seriously until I was satisfied that he was a foolish person."

"What?" roared Oglivy.

"Excuse me, Ogilvy, I am sure you do not mind my conversing with candour. However, that is not really the point. What is the cause of this extremely unruly disturbance, Wharton?"

"Bunter's scoffing a pudding in our study, and he won't open the door!" growled Wharton.

"Dear me!" said Todd. "That is practically an action amounting to dishonesty. I suppose the pudding belongs to you, and Bunter is eating it without leave? Dear me! My Uncle Benjamin would condemn such a proceeding in the strongest terms. Perhaps, however, by an appeal to Bunter's better feelings, I can prevail upon him to desist from the most reprehensible course he is now pursuing."

And Todd leant down and put his eye to the keyhole.

"My word!" murmured Nugent. "Where does he get those words from?"

"Uncle Ben!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Todd blinked in through the keyhole. He could catch a glimpse of Billy Bunter sitting at the study table, shovelling away pudding.

"Bunter! My dear Bunter!"

Bunter paused in the pudding-shovelling to make one remark. It was monosyllabic.

"Yah!"

"My dear Bunter——"

"Oh, ring off!"

"Bunter, you are acting in a dishonest way in devouring a pudding belonging to Wharton. You seem to have lost the distinction between meum and tuum, Bunter. My uncle Benjamin would be shocked—nay, disgusted!"

"Rats!"

"My dear Bunter, I beg of you to pause while there is yet time. I entreat you to do so, my dear Bunter. My Uncle Benjamin——"

"Yah!"

"Dear me," said Todd, rising to his feet. "He does not seem to be in the least amenable to reason. I can make only one suggestion, Wharton."

"And what is that?" asked Wharton, with a grin.

"That you make him a present of the pudding."

"Eh?"

"Tell him immediately that you give him the pudding," explained Alonzo. "That will make it his property, and it will no longer be dishonest of him to eat it. I regard that as an excellent way out of the difficulty. I am sure that my Uncle Benjamin would approve of it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My dear fellows——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Alonzo looked at the juniors in amazement. He could not see anything to laugh at in his suggestion. He was about to urge it further, when there was an alarm from the stairs.

"Cave!"

Loder the prefect, with a frown on his face and a cane in his hand, was coming up the stairs three at a time. The noise in the Remove passage had evidently reached the senior studies.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Hazeldene's Sister.

LODER looked surprised as he saw the extent of the crowd in the junior passage. He had expected to find a crowd of juniors there in the throes of a passage row, and had meant to lay about him impartially with the cane. But the crowd was too thick for that, and there were Shell fellows and some of the Fifth in it, and Loder did not care to take the risk of laying the cane about big fellows like Coker of the Fifth, or Hobson of the Shell. So he "slanged" instead of hitting out.

"What's all this row about?" he demanded. "I suppose you're at the bottom of it, as usual, Wharton?"

"I can't get my study door open, please, Loder," said Harry.

"Why not?"

"It's locked."

"Well, I don't see that there's any reason to cram half the school in the Remove passage, on that account," said Loder. "What do you mean—is somebody locked up in your study?"

"Well—yes."

"Who is it?"

"A Remove chap?"

"Name?"

There was no withholding the name from the prefect, of course.

"Bunter."

"He's locked you out of your study?"

"Yes."

"Very well, lick him when he opens the door," said Loder. "Don't make a row to alarm the whole school. Keep quiet here!"

"But he's bolting a Christmas-pudding——"

"More fool you for giving him the chance."

Harry Wharton coloured.

"I don't mean I mind the pudding going," he exclaimed. "But it was a doctored pudding, doctored for a jape, and it will make him ill if he eats much of it."

Loder's frowning face melted into a grin.

"Serve him right!"

"But——"

"That's enough, Wharton. If Bunter chooses to steal a pudding and make himself ill, that's his own look-out. Not another sound in this passage, mind, or I'll give you a hundred lines each all round."

And with that threat Loder departed, chuckling. The juniors looked at one another.

"Well, it's all up now," said Wharton. "Bunter will have to take his chance."

"The chancefulness is terrific."

"Well, it's his own look-out," said Bob Cherry. "He won't open the door, any way, and I'm not inclined to get a hundred lines trying to make him."

"Not much."

The juniors dispersed, most of them laughing. The reckoning was coming for Billy Bunter, and the Remove were anxious to see it when it came. Bunter was a deadly raider whenever he got scent of anything really tasty in another fellow's study, and it was only fair that Nemesis should get on his track sometimes.

Harry Wharton & Co. went downstairs. The early winter evening had set in, and the Close was very dark. But the gym. was lighted up, and the chums of the Remove crossed to it.

Wogg, the local postman, was puffing across the Close, steaming at every step. Wogg was wrapped up in so many coats that he had lost all semblance to a human figure in shape. He looked something like an Eskimo, and something

like a polar bear. He left a trail of steam behind him from his breath as he ploughed across the Close. The chums of No. 1 Study stopped him at once.

"Anything for us, Woggy?"

"Letter for Master Wharton?"

"Good! Hand it over!"

Wogg extracted the letter, and then steamed on to the house. Harry had glanced at it in the glimmer of the postman's lantern, and his face had set a little. He took the letter with him into the gym. without speaking.

Frank Nugent glanced at him inquiringly.

"What is it, Harry?"

"From Marjorie!" said Wharton briefly.

Marjorie Hazeldene, Miss Primrose's pupil, at Cliff House School, was their best chum. As a rule, a letter or a card from Marjorie was an event, and eagerly welcomed But the letter in the well-known handwriting did not bring pleased looks to the faces of the Remove chums now.

"It's rotten!" said Harry, in a low voice. "Of course, I haven't said a word to Marjorie about Hazeldene's rotten action. She doesn't know that he was in league with the Highcliffe chaps to get our eleven beaten."

"She mustn't know!" said Bob Cherry quickly.

"Never, of course. But—but she knows there's something up. Hazeldene has let out to her that he's not on good terms with us now. I don't well see how it could be hidden," Harry said thoughtfully. "We can't speak to him. He makes me sick. We've stood a lot from the fellow on Marjorie's account. But a chap who will join in a scheme with outsiders to play the traitor to his own school team—well, that's the limit. I don't think I can ever stand Hazeldene again."

"I don't, either," said Nugent "I think he got off pretty easily. If it hadn't been for Marjorie, he'd have had a warm time."

"I don't think he's been very happy, any way; but—but he can't expect us to overlook a thing like that," said Wharton. "But—but what about Marjorie. She knows there's something up, and she knows Hazel well enough to guess that he's been playing some rotten trick. She's fond of him. I suppose she'd naturally stick to her brother, however great a rotter he was. But—it's awkward for us."

"The awkwardness is terrific!"

"Well, see what Marjorie says."

Harry opened the letter. It was a very brief one.

"Dear Harry,—I want to see you, to speak about a matter that is important to me. Will you come over to Cliff House after lessons to-morrow if you can, or the next day?—Yours faithfully, MARJORIE HAZELDENE."

Bob Cherry wrinkled his brows. It seemed curious to Bob how naturally Marjorie wrote to Harry, and not to one of the others—say himself. He had known Marjorie quite as long as Harry had, and they were just as great friends. Yet if she wanted the help of a friend—a boy friend—in any matter, Marjorie wrote to Harry. Bob Cherry stifled a sigh. After all, he reflected that Harry was ever so much cleverer than he was, and always seemed to know the right thing to do, while Bob would blunder over the simplest thing where a girl was concerned.

"It's about Hazel, as she asks you alone," Nugent said.

"Yes, I'm sure of that."

"What will you tell her?"

Harry looked deeply troubled.

"I don't know. I can't tell her the truth; and I certainly can't tell her anything else. It's rotten!"

Harry Wharton thrust the letter into his pocket. Dearly as he liked to see Marjorie, he had avoided opportunities of meeting her during the past few days. One subject he was certain would come up—the subject of Hazel. Marjorie was concerned for her brother; none knew better than she his weak and wayward nature, and Wharton knew that it was only his sister's influence that had kept the boy from going to utter ruin long ago. But—but what answer was he to make to Marjorie?

"You'll go?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Yes, I shall go."

"And you'll say——"

"Blessed if I know."

And there the subject dropped. It would need a great deal of thinking out; though Harry felt that any amount of thinking out would not find a solution to the problem. Hazeldene had been so base that it was impossible for the chums of Greyfriars to remain on any terms with him; but if they lost Marjorie's friendship, it would be a blow to them, and to her. And how could they tell the girl that her brother was too base for them to speak to? It was impossible—yet to refuse to explain—what would she think of that? It seemed a hopeless position; and it was no wonder that a deep wrinkle appeared on Harry Wharton's usually smooth brow as he thought it over.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
Nemesis.

THE chums of the Remove did not return to their study until it was time to do their preparation, and by that time they had almost forgotten Billy Bunter and the Christmas pudding. When they reached the study, it was clear that Bunter had been gone a long time. The room was in darkness, and the fire was nearly out.

"Well, Bunter's not here," grinned Nugent, as he lighted the gas. "I wonder how he's negotiating that pudding?"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"I fancy he must be beginning to feel the effects of it by this time."

"He's getting his Christmas bust-up a little sooner than he intended, that's all."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The chums dismissed Bunter from their minds, and sat down to their preparation. They finished it, and then went down for a chat in the common-room before going to bed. They looked round for Bunter when they came into the junior room, but the Owl of the Remove was not to be seen.

"My hat, I hope he isn't really ill!" Harry Wharton exclaimed seriously. "I say, Bob, have you seen Bunter?"

"Not a sign of him," said Bob Cherry.

"Where can he be?"

"Might be in his study."

"Well, I'll go and look," said Harry.

Four or five juniors went with him to look for Bunter. It was not likely that Billy was in his study. When he was first put into No. 14 Study, Wun Lung the Chinee, and Alonzo Todd had shared it with him. Bunter had made himself so intolerable that the other two fellows had changed out of the study, and Bunter had it all to himself. Any of the fellows in the Remove would have liked a study all "on his own," as a rule; but it was no great benefit to Bunter.

Bunter was in a state of almost continuous impecuniosity, and what was the use of having a study if you couldn't have tea in it? And he had been accustomed to very cosy and comfortable teas in No. 1 Study with Wharton. Then, the juniors had to buy their own coal at Greyfriars, and as Bunter never had any money, he seldom had any coal, and a study in November or December without a fire in it was no great catch. And Bunter's raids on the other fellows' coal were severely punished when he was caught.

Upon the whole, Bunter did not regard being monarch of all he surveyed in No. 14 as being "all lavender." He would have preferred to change back into No. 1. But the fellows in No. 1 wouldn't hear of it.

They had had quite enough of Billy Bunter during his residence in the study, and they had told him in the plainest of plain English that they didn't want any more.

That Bunter was in his study without a fire was unlikely, but Wharton thought he would look there. And as he approached the study a deep groan from within warned him that Billy was indeed there.

"I can hear sweet music stealing," murmured Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Another groan.

The juniors entered the study. Wharton lighted the gas. Billy Bunter was sitting on the floor in a corner against the walls. His fat face was thick with perspiration, and he had both his large, fat hands pressed to his waistcoat.

He blinked up at the chums of the Remove over his spectacles. The glasses had slid down his fat little nose, but Bunter had not sufficient energy left to replace them.

The juniors crowded in the doorway staring at him.

"Ow!" groaned Bunter. "Ow!"

"What's the matter, Billy?"

"Ow!"

"Feeling bad?"

"Yow!"

"Is it the pudding?"

"Groo!"

"What sort of a pain is it?"

"Yowp!"

"Does it hurt?"

"O-o-o-o-o-oh!"

Bunter finished with a hair-raising groan. The juniors grinned. Bunter always made out his pains to be much greater than they were, and exactly how much pain he was suffering at the present moment they could not tell. But it was pretty clear that it was not all "spoof" this time.

"Well, I warned you about the pudding," said Harry Wharton. "I told you exactly how it would be, Bunter."

"Ow!"

"If you hadn't bolted so much, too——"

"Yarooh!"

"Does it hurt very much?"

"Groo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

"Letter for Master Wharton," said Wogg. "Good! Hand it over!" exclaimed Harry, glancing at the handwriting. The letter was from Marjorie Hazeldene. *(See page 6.)*

"Ow!"

There was evidently nothing to be done for Bunter. Harry Wharton & Co. departed, with his deep groans following them. Juniors came, and juniors went, looking in at Billy Bunter, still sitting in the corner of the study groaning in the throes of a stomach-ache which Hurree Singh justly described as terrific.

Half the school came to look at Bunter, but Bunter did not care. He was past caring.

When bedtime arrived at last, Billy Bunter did not come to the dormitory. Wingate, the captain of Greyfriars, had to put out the lights for the Remove that evening, and he looked round for the missing junior.

"Where's Bunter?" he asked.

"I don't think he's quite well, Wingate," said Wharton.

"Well, he will have to go to bed, anyway. I suppose he is malingering again. Where is he?"

"In his study, I think."

"Fetch him up."

"All right."

Harry Wharton went down to No. 14. Billy Bunter was not there. But there was a light in No. 1 Study, and Wharton looked into his own quarters, to find the fat junior in the armchair before a roaring fire.

Wharton stared at him

Bunter groaned.

"Ow! I'm so ill!"

"Well, you young spoofer!" exclaimed Wharton indignantly. "What do you mean by burning up my coal like that? I was going to make that scuttle last over to-morrow, and now you've scoffed nearly the lot!"

"Yow, I'm ill!"

"Well, you've got to come to bed now!"

"I'm too ill to move!"

"Come on!"

"Ow, these fearful pains——"

"I'll help you. Wingate's waiting to turn the light out, and you'd better not keep him waiting."

Bunter thought so, too. He staggered from the armchair, and, leaning heavily on Wharton's arm, left the study. Harry supported him manfully up to the Remove dormitory.

Wingate stared at them as they came in. The twisting and perspiring face of Billy Bunter showed that it was not wholly humbug this time.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Wingate.

"Groo! I'm ill—fearfully ill!"

"What is it?"

"An awful pain!"

"But what's the cause of it?" said Wingate. "I suppose it has a cause."

"Yo-es! It's through not—not having enough to eat, I think!"

There was a yell of laughter from the Remove. Even Wingate grinned.

"Out with the truth, you young spoofer!" he exclaimed "I suppose you've been gorging, as usual, and eaten something that doesn't agree with you."

Bunter groaned.

NEXT TUESDAY: "THE HAUNTED ISLAND."

Another School Tale of the Juniors of Greyfriars. By FRANK RICHARDS

"Do you chaps know?" asked Wingate, looking round. "He's a ghastly young pig, I know, but if he's really ill a doctor ought to be sent for."

"He's been scoffing a Christmas-pudding," said Wharton.

"Oh, I see!"

"Yow!" groaned Bunter.

"It was a doctored pudding," said Harry. "There was—was liquorice powder in it. You see, it was meant for a jape, and—and it would have given a bit of a twist to anybody who ate a normal amount. But Bunter bolted nearly the whole of the pudding, so——"

Wingate burst into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunter gave a deep groan.

"Get into bed, you young porker!" said Wingate. "You'll be all right in the morning. If you've got a pain, serve you right. Bundle in!"

Bunter bundled in, and Wingate turned the light out and retired. But it was not easy to settle down to sleep, for from Bunter's bed came deep groans, all the more deep and deadly because Bunter was determined that nobody else should sleep if he couldn't.

"Shut up that row, Bunter!" roared Bob Cherry, at last. "You're keeping me awake."

"Groo!"

"Dry up!"

"Ow!"

"Will you cheese it?" yelled Skinner.

"Ow! I'm in awful pain!" groaned Bunter. "I'm suffering fearfully."

"Well, suffer in silence, then, can't you?"

Apparently, Bunter couldn't—at all events, he didn't. Groan after groan came from the fat junior's bed, till the Remove were in a state of almost ferocious exasperation.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
Very Painful.

GROAN!

Groan!

"My only hat," said Bob Cherry, sitting up in bed, "I'm getting fed up with this! Bunter, will you stop that row?"

Groan!

"Stop it!" shrieked Bulstrode. "I'll get out to you soon."

Groan!

"Swamp his bed with water," suggested Vernon-Smith. "If the beast will groan, give him something to groan about."

"Hear, hear!" said Skinner.

Groan!

"Bunter! Shut up!"

Groan!

"Bunter, you ass, draw it mild!" said Harry Wharton impatiently. "I dare say you're in pain, but you know it's not necessary to keep up a row like that. Shut up. Make a little less row, and let us go to sleep."

But that was just what Billy Bunter did not intend to do. If he couldn't sleep, why should anybody else? That was the way Bunter looked at it. And in response to Harry's appeal, he delivered a more hair-raising groan than ever. If he had been a ghost in a melodrama, he could not have groaned more terribly.

Bulstrode gave a snort of rage.

"I'll jolly soon stop that!" he exclaimed.

He groped beside his bed for something to throw. His hand encountered a boot, and he picked it up.

He knew where Bunter's bed was. For the moment he forgot that most of the fellows were sitting up in bed now. He hurled the boot in the direction of Bunter's bed, and it whizzed through the darkness.

There was a fearful yell from Skinner. If Skinner had been lying down, the boot would have passed over him. But Skinner was sitting up. The boot crashed on his right ear, and Skinner saw stars.

"Yarooh!"

"My hat, there's another one beginning!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Have you been bolting a Christmas pudding, too, Skinny?"

"Ow!" roared Skinner. "Somebody's buzzed a boot on my head. Yow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My hat, I'm sorry!" exclaimed Bulstrode. "I meant it for Bunter."

"Ow! You silly ass! Ow!"

"Well, you shouldn't have been in the way, you know."

"You chump!"

"Oh, dry up! Gimme my boot back."

Skinner had already determined to do that. He grasped the boot in the darkness, and hurled it with deadly aim in the direction of Bulstrode's voice. But, as before, somebody sitting up was in the way of the boot. Bob Cherry gave a yell that rang through the dormitory.

"Gerrooh!"

"Oh, my hat! Cherry——"

"Who chucked that boot?" roared Bob Cherry. "Look here, Bulstrode——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Bulstrode. He guessed that Skinner had flung the boot back, and that Bob Cherry had had the benefit of it.

But the laugh was ill-timed. It made Bob think that Bulstrode had thrown the boot.

He scrambled out of bed, and rushed to Bulstrode's, and clawed the bedclothes off him.

"Hallo!" roared Bulstrode. "Stop that! Oh!"

Spank! spank!

"Yarooh!" roared Bulstrode, as Bob Cherry's large-sized hands came spanking on his bare limbs. "Oh! Ow! Chuck it! I didn't throw that boot, you ass!"

Bob Cherry paused.

"Oh, didn't you!" he exclaimed. "Who did, then?"

"Skinner, you fool!" yelled Bulstrode. "By George, I'll——"

"Oh, I'm sorry, then," said Bob; "but it serves you right for starting chucking boots about in the dark!"

"You—you frabjous ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

Bulstrode rubbed his tingling limbs, and Bob Cherry and Skinner rubbed their heads. All three of them were hurt.

The laughter died away, and then Bunter thought it was time for him to appear on the scene again. There was a deep groan once more.

This time a yell of exasperation rose.

"Stop that row, Bunter."

Groan!

"Will you shut up?"

Groan!

"My dear Bunter," said Alonzo Todd, "it is really terrible to hear you groaning in this manner? Would it relieve you if I were to sit by your bedside and hold your hand?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Remove.

"My dear fellows——"

Groan!

"It is really terrible to hear Bunter. My Uncle Benjamin would feel it very much. I wish I could do something to relieve you, Bunter."

Groan!

"I'll do something to relieve him!" exclaimed Bulstrode, jumping out of bed.

He took his braces, and groped his way to Bunter's bed.

Swish!

Slash!

"Yarooh!" roared Bunter.

Swish! slash! swash!

"Ow! Yow! Help! Murder! Fire! Yarooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Does that relieve you?" demanded Bulstrode.

"Ow! No! Yow!"

Slash! swish! slash!

"Help! Yaroop! Yah!"

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yow! No! Yes! Whoop!"

"Good. Do you think you will groan any more?"

"Yes—no! No!"

"Good," said Bulstrode. "If you do, and I have to get out of bed again, I'll give you a real licking, and not joke with you like that."

"Ow!"

"Hallo! Are you beginning again?"

"Yow! No. I—I'm all right."

"Better keep all right, then."

And Bulstrode went back to bed.

Billy Bunter gasped and snorted. But he did not groan any more. The juniors chuckled over the cure Bulstrode had administered.

Alonzo Todd was astonished. He had never heard of pain being cured by an application of braces through the bedclothes. But that application seemed to have cured Bunter.

The Remove were able to get to sleep at last.

In the middle of the night, however, Harry Wharton awoke. There was a sound of a groan in the darkness. Starlight was glimmering in through the high windows of the dormitory, and he could see Billy Bunter sitting up in bed, rocking to and fro.

"Hallo, Bunter!" he said sleepily. "At it again?"

"Ow! I feel awfully bad!" groaned Billy Bunter.

"Where's the pain?"

"Inside."

"It's Nemesis, old man."

"Taint!" groaned Bunter. "It's the tummy ache."

Wharton chuckled.

"I mean it's Nemesis—justice—on your track," he said.

"Nemesis was the lady of ancient times who used to give people beans when they got offside. I knew Nemesis would be on your track when you scoffed the pudding, Bunty. Go to sleep."

"I—I c-c-can't!"

"Better not wake Bulstrode up."

Billy Bunter thought so, too, for he ceased groaning. But Nemesis gave him very little rest that night. In the morning, Bunter was looking very pale and ill. He astounded the Remove by having only a slight appetite for breakfast. And then even Bulstrode agreed that he must be suffering terribly.

But during the morning the effects of the Christmas pudding wore off, and Billy Bunter became himself again. At dinner-time he more than made up for any little deficiencies at the breakfast-table.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Wingate's Contribution.

"I SUPPOSE you fellows are going to help me a bit with that Christmas feed?"

Billy Bunter made that remark as the chums of the Remove came out of the Form-room after lessons.

Bob Cherry gave a chuckle.

"Bunter's himself again," he remarked. "Are you hungry for Christmas pudding, Bunty?"

The fat junior shuddered.

"Ow! I—I don't think I shall ever eat any Christmas pudding again," he murmured. "Look here, I'm thinking about that bust-up. You chaps agree that it's a good idea, and—and you are going to help."

"Certainly," said Nugent, "we'll help. We'll promise to eat our full share, if the feed's to our liking. I can't say more than that."

"Well, you see, I—I shall want some little help. A fellow doesn't give a bust-up every day," explained Bunter. "My idea is to save up all the postal-orders I get between now and Christmas, and have a really stunning feed."

"Good egg!"

"Only there's a slight difficulty arises," said Bunter. "You see, we break up before Christmas, and we want to give the bust-up some little time before the school breaks up, because—because we—we do, you know. So if the money isn't saved up till Christmas, and the feed is given, say, on Saturday this week, the money won't be on the spot to pay for it. Mrs. Mimble won't give me credit for the things till Christmas. That woman has no knowledge of business at all."

"Perhaps she has too much to trust you, Bunty."

"Oh, really, Nugent! Look here, you see that I'm in a bit of a difficulty about it, don't you?"

"Yes, rather."

"Well, what do you think about it?"

"I think there's nothing to be done," said Wharton gravely. "Better give up the idea of a bust-up, Billy."

Bunter snorted.

"If that's all you've got to say, Wharton, you may as well dry up!" he exclaimed. "I'm not going to be done out of a Christmas feed that's practically arranged already. There are really only a few details to be seen to, such as raising the money, and—and——"

"Ha, ha, ha! Well, come and tell us more about it when you've raised the money, Bunter."

"I was thinking that you fellows might care to advance me the money, and have it back out of the heap of postal orders I'm going to save up."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm going to devote the whole of the money——"

"What money?"

"The money I shall have by—by Christmas. I'm going to devote the whole of it to this bust-up—the thing is going to be carried through regardless of expense. The only trouble is a lack of ready money at the moment."

"The lackfulness is terrific."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Bunter. "If you fellows care to contribute say a pound each, I'll let you have back twenty-five shillings for each pound, in Christmas week. What do you say?"

"Well, I say rats as far as I'm concerned," said Bob Cherry. "What do you other chaps say?"

"Rats!" said the other chaps, with great unanimity.

"Oh, I say, you fellows——"

"Well, I must be off," said Harry, and he went out, taking down his cap as he went, and his chums accompanied him to the gates of the school. Billy Bunter toddled on behind, with his little fat legs going rapidly to keep pace.

"I say, Wharton, where are you going?"

"Out!" said Harry.

"If you're calling in at the tuckshop in Friardale——"

"I'm not."

"Look here, Wharton. I don't object to strolling along with you——"

"You may not, but I do," said Harry. "So long, you chaps!"

And he strode down the Friardale road. Bunter was rolling out after him, when Nugent caught him by one fat ear. Bunter squeaked shrilly.

"Ow, ow!"

"Come in, Billy!"

"I'm going to speak to Wharton. There's something rather important that I forgot to say to him."

"You're coming in."

"Oh, really, Nugent! Look here, I know jolly well that Wharton's going to Cliff House, and I know the girls would like me to go to tea. You know how disappointed Marjorie and Clara are whenever I don't go—— Ow, yow!"

Bob Cherry's heavy boot sent Bunter in at the gates. As the fat junior staggered, the boot came behind him again. He broke into a run for the School House, and Bob ran after him, dribbling the fat junior across the Close.

Bunter bolted into the House, and dashed into the passage. Bob Cherry halted panting in the hall. His chums overtook him there, grinning.

Billy Bunter fled into the Sixth-Form passage, where he did not expect to be pursued. Junior rows in the sacred precincts of the Sixth-Form quarters were strictly tabooed. The fat junior stopped, gasping outside Wingate's study.

Wingate's door was open, and Bunter, as he leaned panting against the wall, could see into the captain's study. Wingate was opening a letter, and Billy Bunter saw him take a postal-order from it. The captain of Greyfriars had evidently received a remittance.

Bunter rolled to the doorway and tapped, and Wingate looked up. He grinned at the sight of Bunter.

"Well, are you ill to-day?" he asked.

"No, thank you, Wingate; I'm quite well," said Bunter. "I'm a bit hungry, that's all. I—I was expecting a postal order to-day, you know, and there's been some delay in the post, or—or else the letter has been delivered to the wrong person. I—I suppose my letter hasn't been handed to you by mistake?"

"No, it hasn't."

"There would be a postal-order in it, you know."

Wingate laughed.

"Look!" he said.

He held out the envelope. His name was written upon it.

"I suppose that's all right," said Bunter doubtfully. "Of course, a chap might hastily write down the name Wingate instead of Bunter, and——"

"Oh, don't be an ass! Buzz off!"

"The fact is, Wingate, I—I want to speak to you, if you don't mind, on a rather important matter," said Bunter. "If you can spare me a minute——"

"Buck up!"

"I'm thinking of standing a big feed, a regular bust-up, regardless of expense," said Bunter. "It's to—to take place before we break up for Christmas. My idea is to have a really good feed, and—and invite all the prefects, and the captain of the school, of course. The object of the celebration is to show our—our respect and affection for the seniors. Would you care to contribute to the idea?"

Wingate looked at him.

"You see," went on Bunter, encouraged, "there is sometimes a little strain between Upper School and Lower School, and juniors get set against seniors, and seniors against juniors, and so on. Now, Christmas is a time of peace and good will, and things, and I thought that a really good bust-up would promote harmony and good feeling, and so on. You, of course, would be the guest of honour."

"You young rascal!"

"Oh, really, Wingate——"

"Get out!"

"But what are you going to contribute?"

Wingate chuckled.

"This!" he said.

He took the fat junior by the collar, twisted him round, and planted his boot behind him. Billy Bunter staggered along the passage, gasping, and Wingate slammed his door after him.

Bunter brought up against a wall, and snorted.

"Ow! Beast!"

Then he rolled away in a very dissatisfied frame of mind. He felt that he had really never had a better idea than that of a Christmas bust-up; but he was not receiving the encouragement he deserved. Wingate's contribution had helped him forward in one sense, but not in the way he wanted.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.
Wharton's Promise.

"HARRY! I'm so glad you've come."

Marjorie Hazeldene met Wharton in the lane outside the gates of Cliff House. Her sweet face was pink with the wind from the sea, and her eyes were bright. Very charming she looked in her little coat, with a scarf round her neck. She shook hands with Harry with so much pleasure that a foolish or conceited lad might have had his head a little turned by it, and jumped to wholly wrong conclusions. But Harry Wharton, whatever his faults might be—and he had a good many—was neither foolish nor conceited. He know that Marjorie was glad to see him because he was a valued friend, and more than usually glad now because she was anxious about her brother.

"And I'm jolly glad to see you, Marjorie," said Wharton.

"But you might have seen me before, and you haven't," said Marjorie. "You have been avoiding me."

Harry Wharton coloured.

"It was because of Hazel," said Marjorie, as they walked slowly down towards the sea in the dusk. "I know it, Harry. I—I must speak about it, and I must go in in five minutes, so I shall have to hurry. You are on bad terms with Hazel now."

Wharton was silent.

"Of course, I don't want to interfere in any way," Marjorie said hastily. "I shouldn't think of it. Only—only if it is any little matter—any nonsense—that has come between you and my brother, I should like to—to see you make an effort to get over it. I know that Hazel misses your friendship. I wouldn't speak like this to anyone but you, Harry. But I know you'll understand me."

"It isn't a light matter, Marjorie."

"Then you have quarrelled?"

"Not exactly quarrelled."

"But it is a serious matter?"

"Yes."

"And you cannot make it up with Hazel?"

He did not reply.

"Not even if Hazel made the first advance, Harry?"

Wharton stirred uneasily.

"I wouldn't make him do that, Marjorie. I don't want to see any fellow eat humble pie. If I could make it up with him, I'd make the first advance myself. But——"

"But he has done something you cannot forgive?"

"Well, you see——"

"And you won't tell me what it is?"

"You—you wouldn't understand."

"Hazel won't tell me anything, either," said Marjorie. "But—but it makes me very unhappy to see you on bad terms. You are my best friend, and he is my brother. Don't you think you could look over it, whatever it is?"

Harry was silent.

"I am sure the fault is on his side," Marjorie went on. "I know that has been the case so often before. I know what happened when you were in Switzerland, and you forgave him. Surely this cannot be so bad as that?"

"In a way, no—in another way, yes. But—but I hate to be talking about a chap," said Wharton. "I don't want to make your brother out to be a—a rotter. Only—only I don't see how we can speak again. I—I don't think Hazel wants it, either."

"I am sure he would," said Marjorie.

There was a short silence.

"Now, I don't know the circumstances," said the girl, at last, "but I know Hazel has often been very foolish and reckless, and you have been a good friend to him, Harry. If he has worn out your patience at last, I ought not to be surprised. I know I have sometimes lost patience with him myself when he has been very reckless. Only—only there's always this to be said for Hazel—he does not mean any harm, and he is always led into things by others. He is really nobody's enemy but his own."

"Yes, that's quite true, Marjorie."

"Then don't you think you could forgive him once more? I won't ask what he's done. But—but it is Christmastide now, Harry, the time for forgiveness and kind feelings," said Marjorie, with a little tremble in her voice. "And—and you could not do me a greater kindness."

Wharton was at a loss for words.

To refuse Marjorie seemed impossible; to tell her what Hazeldene had done seemed impossible too. But to extend the hand of friendship to the schoolboy traitor—to become friendly once more with the fellow who had sold a Greyfriars match to the enemy—surely that was impossible?

"I don't know what to say!" he exclaimed at last. "I wish you had never heard of the matter, Marjorie; but I suppose you had to. I don't want to appear an ungracious brute, but—but—but——"

"But you can't do as I wish?"

"Oh, yes, I can, and I will!" Wharton burst out suddenly. "After all, who am I to set up to judge anybody? I'll make the best of it."

"You will be doing right, Harry," said Marjorie, in a low voice.

"I—I suppose so," said Harry dubiously. "I don't bear malice, you know. It isn't that. Only—only—well, I've said I'll make the best of it."

"Thank you, Harry. It is the kindest thing you could have said to me," said Marjorie, with a shake in her voice. "You don't know how troubled I have been about Hazel."

"I think I do," said Harry.

There was a sudden shout from the dusk of the path.

"There he is!"

"College cad!"

"Collar him!"

Marjorie started, and Harry Wharton stopped, his hands clenching. He turned to the girl quickly.

"Cut back to Cliff House, Marjorie; there's going to be a row."

The girl did not stir.

Four or five forms loomed up in the winter dusk, and Harry Wharton recognised the fellows of Courtfield County Council School—Trumper, and Grahame, and Solly Lazarus, and Barney O'Neil.

"Faith, and we've caught him."

"Collar him!"

"Sure, we'll chalk up the spalpeen as we did Hazeldene the other day!"

"Come on! Collar him!"

"You thilly asses!" said another voice. "Thtop! Can't you see there's a lady, you thilly chumps?"

"Oh!"

The Courtfield fellows stopped their rush. They looked rather sheepish at the sight of Marjorie standing by Wharton's side.

"Oh!" said Trumper. "I—I didn't see you, Miss Hazeldene!" And he raised his cap instead of rushing on.

Marjorie smiled.

"All therene, Wharton," said Solly. "We wouldn't think of ragging you in the presenth of Mith Hazeldene. Tho-long, dear boy!"

And the Courtfield fellows vanished as quickly as they had appeared.

Marjorie laughed softly.

"That was a narrow escape for me," said Wharton, with a smile. "Thank you, Marjorie; I should have had a bumping if you had not been with me."

"It is time for me to get in," said the girl, and they walked back to the gates of Miss Primrose's school. "You will do your best for Hazel, Harry?"

"Yes, Marjorie."

"Thank you so much!"

They parted at the gate with a handshake. Wharton watched the graceful figure pass up the path, and behind the laurels, to the house. Then, with a deeply thoughtful brow, he walked away towards Greyfriars.

He had come to Cliff House not knowing what to say to Marjorie. That had been decided for him now. To refuse Marjorie was impossible; but what had he undertaken? His disgust at Hazeldene's treachery was undiminished. Had he done well in promising to make the best of Hazel? Well or ill, he was committed to it now, and there was only one thing for him to do—to keep his promise to Marjorie.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.
Coker's Fiver.

COKER of the Fifth was sitting in his study, in the easy-chair, with his feet on another chair, and a cushion behind his head.

Coker was taking it easy.

It was not long since Horace Coker had passed into the Fifth, but the Shell was a long way behind Coker. Coker's Aunt Judith was still in a state of great elation at her darling nephew getting his step in the school, and she showed her delight by keeping Coker well supplied with pocket-money. Coker had dawned on the Fifth in a blaze of glory, so to speak, and the Fifth had received him with open arms, banknotes and all. There had been trouble since then, owing to Coker's ambition to figure as a Fifth-Form footballer. But that had blown over at last.

As Blundell of the Fifth nobly said, how could they be stand-offish with a fine fellow like Coker? Bland said it was rotten to treat Coker in that way. Higgs was of opinion that too much had been said about that football matter. These observations were made shortly after Coker had been seen to take a banknote out of a registered letter addressed to him by his Aunt Judith. Of course, only a grovelling and suspicious mind would have seen any connection between the banknote and the remarks of the forgiving Fifth-Formers.

Coker was tired of being on bad terms. He had even

"You mad idiots! W-w-what are you up to?" roared Bulstrode as Harry Wharton & Co. crashed into the study, and sent the table and Bulstrode reeling into the fender. *(See page 3.)*

thought of chumming up with Shell fellows again, but that would have been too terrible a fall from his high estate. So when the Fifth fellows began to grin at him in a friendly fashion again, Coker contrived to forget that they had bumped him, and bumped him hard, upon a certain footer field, and friendship was once more established, and all, as the poet says, was calm and bright.

Hence the present comfortable attitude of Horace Coker. Blundell had given up to him the easy-chair, when he came into the study. Bland had placed the other chair for his feet. Higgs had put the cushion behind his head. Coker accepted all these kindly little attentions with placid calmness. Coker was generally supposed to be a duffer. Fellows who had known him for a long time, however, averred that Coker knew a thing or two, and that although it might suit him to be buttered up, he was very seldom really taken in.

The sweet strains of Orpheus, it is said, drew iron tears down Pluto's cheek. The sweet flattery of the Fifth-Form study might have the effect of drawing a banknote from Horace Coker's pocket.

"Jolly cold weather!" said Higgs. "Would you like a little more on the fire, Coker?"

"Thanks!" said Coker.

"Shove on some more coal, Bland."

There was a knock at the door.

"Oh, that's Potter!" said Higgs.

But it wasn't Potter. It was Billy Bunter, of the Remove. The Fifth-Formers stared at him as he came in.

"A blessed fag," said Blundell. "What is it, Bunter? A message?"

"Not exactly a message," said Bunter. "I say, you fellows, I'll come near the fire if you don't mind. It's cold in the passages."

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"Kick that fag out, Higgs!"

"Here, hold on—I say, it's important—I've got something to say to Coker! It's awfully important."

"Let him jaw!" said Coker.

Coker's word was law in the study. The hands that were raised to hurl the Owl of the Remove forth into the passage were dropped again.

"Certainly," said Bland. "Go ahead, Bunter!"

Billy Bunter squirmed closer to the fire, and warmed his fat hands at it. Bunter was very fond of making himself comfortable.

"I—I say, Coker," he remarked—"I say, you fellows, I've got a good idea. Christmas is coming, you know——"

"Go hon!"

"Well, you see, at Christmas time we ought to have lots of peace and goodwill and so on," said Bunter. "I've got an idea of standing a big feed—a regular bust-up. I want you Fifth chaps to come."

The Fifth chaps thawed considerably. If there was a Christmas feed on, they might contrive to sink their dignity for once, and condescend to visit the juniors.

"Well, get on," said Higgs quite amiably.

"My object," went on Bunter, "is to establish more—more friendly relations if possible between the juniors and the Fifth Form. There's been a lot of bad feeling in the past, and I think that now Christmas is coming round, it's time we turned over a new leaf. I'm going to save up all my money between now and Christmas, and stand a regular bust-up, regardless of expense."

"Good wheeze!" said Coker.

"Well, if Coker's satisfied, I am," said Higgs. "It's a good wheeze!"

Bunter blinked at Coker through his big spectacles.

NEXT TUESDAY: "THE HAUNTED ISLAND."

Another School Tale of the Juniors of Greyfriars. By FRANK RICHARDS.

Although he was careful to be very honeyed to the other fellows, it was clear that Coker was really the object of his affection.

"Well, I'm glad you like the wheeze," said Bunter. "I've written to an association for some tin, but it may not come, and I'm determined to carry the thing through regardless of expense. My idea is that the Fifth should figure as patrons of the feast, and the guest of honour, of course, will be Coker."

"Quite right!"

"Hear, hear!"

Coker grinned.

"It will cost something," he remarked.

"As I said, it will be got up regardless——"

"Got the tin?"

"Ahem! I think I mentioned that I was going to save up all my postal-orders from now to Christmas, to raise the money. The only difficulty is, that I want to give the feed now, and so I shall have to obtain an advance of ready-money somehow. Of course, that is a mere detail."

Coker chuckled.

"I was thinking," said Bunter, "that you might care to advance me five pounds or so, Coker, so that I could stand the feed at once. Of course, I should send you postal-orders for an equal amount, without fail, at Christmas."

"My word!" murmured Blundell, amazed.

He knew that Bunter must have heard of Coker's fiver. But the coolness of the fat junior in coming and asking for the whole of it was astounding. Fellows might have tried to borrow five or ten shillings. But to calmly ask Coker to hand over the whole of his banknote was a thing that could be done only by Billy Bunter.

Coker was a little surprised himself. He sat and stared at Bunter.

The fat junior rattled on.

"You see, it would really be only investing your money in a safe place, to be returned to you at Christmas, with interest if you like——"

"A very safe place!" grinned Higgs.

"Oh, really, Higgs——"

"Well, of all the cheek!" said Coker.

"Oh, really, Coker——"

"I don't think I ever heard anything to equal it," Coker remarked.

"But, you see, you'll have all my postal-orders at Christmas, so it will be just the same thing," Bunter urged. "Do be businesslike, Coker——"

"Ha, ha, ha! I think I shall be businesslike enough to keep my money in my own pocket," said Coker.

"But, I say, you know——"

"One of you fellows do me a favour?" asked Coker, looking round.

"Anything you like, old fellow," said Higgs affectionately.

"Kick that fat bounder out into the passage."

"Oh—oh, really—— Ow!"

There was a rush to oblige Coker.

Three feet crashed upon Billy Bunter's fat person at once, and he hopped wildly to the door. Three more kicks, same time and same place, landed Bunter in the passage. He alighted there with a mighty crash.

"Ow!" he roared. "Yow! Help! Ow!"

Bland slammed the study door, laughing. Bunter slowly picked himself up. He blinked at the closed study door, and did not venture to open it. He limped away down the passage, with a series of heartrending groans.

"The rotters!" he murmured. "The beasts! No good trying the Fifth—they're as caddish as the Sixth. But—but I must raise the money. A thing like a Christmas feed can't be put off indefinitely. My hat! I'll walk over to Cliff House and see Marjorie & Co. about it!"

And Bunter, full of that idea, left off groaning, and rushed away for his coat and cap.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.
Bunter Does Not Go.

HARRY WHARTON came striding through the dusky lane towards Greyfriars; and he almost strode into a fat and unwieldy figure that was rolling towards him. It was rather difficult to make out what the figure was at first, but Harry discerned that it was a fat youth wrapped in several coats, with two scarfs round his neck. The figure stopped as Harry caught it by the shoulder.

"Where are you off to, Bunter?"

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"Where are you going?"

"I don't see that that concerns you, Wharton," said Billy Bunter loftily. "Still, I may as well tell you that I have found a way of raising the funds for the bust-up, without asking you. I should scorn to take anything from you now."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"And where are you going to raise the funds?"

"Perhaps I've got friends," said Bunter. "Perhaps there are girls who will be glad to see me. It's not your business."

"Isn't it?" said Harry, grimly, his grasp tightening upon the fat junior's shoulder. "You are not going cadging to Cliff House, Bunter."

"Oh, really——"

"Come back!"

"I—I won't! I—I suppose I can do as I like?" howled Bunter.

"That's just where you make your mistake. You can't! Come in!"

Bunter had no choice about that. Harry Wharton's knuckles were digging into his neck, and the fat junior was marched into the gates again, and into the house. He went protesting.

"My hat! What's the row now?" exclaimed Frank Nugent, as Wharton propelled the Owl of the Remove into the house.

"Bunter's got a new dodge," said Harry, frowning. "He's going to Cliff House to cadge off the girls there."

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"The rotten worm!" said Nugent. "He ought to be ducked! Why, my hat! What are you doing in my overcoat, you young sweep?"

"I—I——"

"And my scarf!" shouted Bob Cherry.

"You see——"

Nugent and Bob Cherry seized the fat junior. Bob dragged at the scarf, and Bunter whirled round and round like a teetotum as it unwound. He gasped and panted, and a gathering crowd roared with laughter as he spun.

"Blessed if he isn't as good as a giddy, spinning dervish!" grinned Bulstrode. "Keep it up, Bunty!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunter ceased to rotate at last, and came to a halt, very giddy and gasping. Then there was a shout from Ogilvy as he recognised another scarf on Bunter's neck.

"My scarf!" shouted the Scottish junior.

"Oh, really, Ogilvy——"

Ogilvy seized the end of the scarf, and Bunter rotated again. The scarf came off, and Billy Bunter spun away to the wall, which he clutched, and clung to, gasping.

"Ow! Ow! Oh!"

"My hat! He's got my coat on, too!" shouted Tom Brown.

"Oh, really Brown——"

The New Zealand junior grasped Bunter, and hauled his coat off. There was still another coat beneath, and it was recognised by Hazeldene.

"My coat! You worm!"

"Oh, really, Hazeldene——"

Hazeldene dragged his coat off the fat junior. There were shouts of laughter as the Owl of the Remove was stripped of his borrowed plumes.

He blinked indignantly at the juniors.

"I suppose you didn't want me to catch cold?" he exclaimed.

"Blessed if I care!" said Hazeldene. "If I find you in my coat again, you'll catch something worse than a cold, you fat bounder! It's a wonder you haven't burst out the seams!"

Billy Bunter rolled away with a snort. A little later Harry Wharton & Co., going to their study for their preparation, found the fat junior curled up in their armchair. He blinked at them without moving.

"I say, you fellows, you don't mind my doing my prep. in here, I suppose?" he remarked. "It's too jolly cold in my study."

"Is that how you do your prep.?"

"Well, I'm just going to begin."

"Well, don't take all the fire; get on one side."

"Oh, really, you fellows, don't be selfish——"

Wharton seized the armchair by the back, and turned the fat junior out upon the hearthrug, and pushed the chair aside. Billy Bunter scrambled up, red with wrath, and sat down on the fender.

"I suppose I sha'n't be in the way here?" he snorted sarcastically.

"We'll jolly soon shift you, if you are!" said Nugent.

And the chums of the Remove did their prep. Billy Bunter made no motion towards doing his. He sat and blinked at them while they were at work, and made several attempts to open a conversation on the subject of the bust-up.

"Shut up while we're working!" said Wharton. "Can't you see we're busy? Dry up!"

"The dryupfulness is terrific."

"Oh, really, you fellows——"

Nugent picked up a ruler, and Bunter promptly shut up. He did not speak again until the prep., was over. Then he started once more.

"I say, you fellows——"

"Look here, Bunter, you're to give up that wheeze of cadging at Cliff House," said Harry Wharton, frowning. "Mind, if I ever hear of your asking for money here, I'll give you the licking of your life!"

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"Mind, I mean every word I say."

"I don't see that it's your business, Wharton. Besides, I'm not thinking of going over there now. I know you fellows are going to shell out for the bust-up."

"Rats!"

"The ratfulness is terrific."

"I say, you fellows, the thing's practically settled now," said Bunter persuasively. "I only need the money——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you see, I really haven't fully explained my object to you. My real object is to stand a feed to the Remove only, and you fellows, of course, would be the guests of honour. I want to show the whole school that I don't bear you any ill-will for the rotten way you treated me when I was in this study. Christmas is a time to let bygones be bygones, and I'm going to do this thing regardless of expense, to prove that I regard you as friends!"

"Rats!"

Bunter rose to his feet. There were volumes of indignation in the look he gave the chums of the Remove through his big spectacles.

"Well, under the circumstances, I shall have to think twice about asking you to the feed," he said. "Of course, Marjorie and Clara will be coming, and if you fellows get left out, it will be your own fault."

"Rats!"

"Look here——"

"More rats!"

Bunter went to the door and opened it, so as to be quite ready to escape, and then he proceeded to give the chums of No. 1 Study a piece of his mind.

"You rotters!" he said. "You beasts!"

Nugent picked up the inkpot. But Bunter was too short-sighted to notice his action.

"You rotten bounders!" he said. "I'm disgusted with you! I'm sick of you. In future, I'll trouble you not to speak to me. Your meanness is simply appalling. Blessed if I know how you—— Ow! O-o-o-o-och!"

Nugent had jerked his hand, and the ink flew from the pot in a stream, and impinged directly upon Bunter's fat face.

There was a splash, and the fat junior was transformed with startling suddenness into a very good imitation of a Christy minstrel.

Some of the ink was in his mouth, and he gasped and spat furiously.

"Ow! Groo! Yough!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beasts! Yah! Rotters! Yow! Yarooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hand me the other inkpot!" said Nugent.

But Billy Bunter did not wait for the other inkpot. He slammed the door and fled.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Not a Cheque!

"LETTER for Bunter!"

Billy Bunter was coming downstairs in the morning—last down of the Remove, as usual—when Ogilvy spoke. Bunter made a rush.

"Where is it? Hand it over!"

Ogilvy took the letter down and tossed it to Bunter. The fat junior caught it eagerly.

It was a large, square envelope of thick white paper, and on the flap at the back were three initials in gold, in old English type.

"C. D. A."

Bunter took the letter and turned it over in his fat hands. A good many fellows looked at it, too, wondering who could have written to Bunter in that imposing envelope.

"One of your titled friends, Billy, I suppose?" Bob Cherry remarked, with a grin.

Bunter blinked at him.

"I expect it's from Sir William," he said.

Bob Cherry staggered back, and caught at the wall as if to support him—apparently quite overcome.

"Sir William! My only maiden Aunt Matilda! Uncle of yours?"

"Old friend of the family," said Bunter indifferently.

"They're his initials on the back, of course," Ogilvy remarked sarcastically. "Which of them stands for William—C, D, or A?"

"Oh, really, Ogilvy——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo! What's the joke?" asked Temple of the Upper Fourth, coming along with Dabney and Fry. "Bunter got a postal-order at last?"

"No. Letter from a titled friend," said Bob Cherry. "Sir William Walker."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

"Or is it Sir William Spoof, or Lord Knowswho, or Duke Humphrey?" asked Skinner, with sarcasm crescendo.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, you fellows, it's from Sir William Thorne," said Bunter. "He's the head of the Christmas Dinners Association."

"Well, that sounds like a jolly good association," said Snoop. "Have you been writing him a begging letter for a Christmas dinner?"

Bunter disdained to reply to that question. He opened the envelope by the simple expedient of slitting it with his thumb, and took out the letter. He opened that with the expectation of finding something inside, but there was nothing. The look of disappointment on his fat face made the Removites roar again.

"Sir William hasn't dubbed up!" roared Bob Cherry. "I'm sure his name is William Walker, after all."

"Mean of him," said Ogilvy. "I should sack my titled friends, if I were you, Bunty, and get some common or garden untitled ones."

Bunter read the letter and snorted.

"Well, of all the rot!" he exclaimed.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, it's rotten!" said Bunter, in great disgust. "I wrote to this chap, and explained my wheeze of—of standing a big bust-up for the special benefit of fellows who couldn't afford to buy a Christmas dinner. That's my real object, of course, in standing this Christmas feed."

"First I've heard of that," grinned Bob Cherry. "I thought your object was to get a big feed yourself, regardless of expense to the chaps who found the tin."

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"Faith, and go on with the letther!" said Micky Desmond.

"You see, this rotten association looks after poor people at Christmas and provides them with dinner, and things," Bunter explained, "so, of course, when I wrote to the president of it and explained my great idea of—of feeding the poor at Christmas, I expected he would send a decent contribution."

"My hat! So you've started writing begging letters, have you?" exclaimed Nugent.

"Oh, really, Nugent, I wish you wouldn't put a bad construction on everything I do," said Bunter peevishly. "Blessed if it isn't enough to make a chap stop sacrificing himself for others. I never get any thanks for it, I know that. Well, instead of sending me a contribution, the beast—I mean Sir William——"

"An old friend of the family, you know," said Ogilvy.

"Well, my father knew him, I mean," said Bunter hastily. "That is——"

"Oh, I know all about it!" said Skinner. "Bunter senior supplies Sir William's household with butter and eggs, and cheats him in the quality of the eggs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"As I was saying," said Bunter hastily. "The beast——"

"Look here, Bunter, you're not to speak of your father that way. If he's anything like you, he may deserve it—but it's bad form."

"I was speaking of Sir William, you ass! Sir William has written me a rotten letter instead of sending me a contribution."

"Let's hear the letter," grinned Ogilvy.

Bunter, glowering with indignation, read out the letter.

"Sir,—In reply to your request claiming a contribution from the funds of the society for charitable objects in Friardale, I beg to inform you that our Mr. Sharpe will call upon you on Thursday morning to inquire into the circumstances. If the same be found satisfactory, your request will be placed before the Donations Committee at the next meeting.—Yours faithfully, H. JONES, Secretary."

"Not even a letter from Sir Bill!" exclaimed Skinner. "Why, anybody could have a letter from a common or garden secretary. Rats!"

"And no remittance!" said Bob Cherry sympathetically. "Curious how these people know when you're trying to spoof 'em."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I regard this letter as an insult!" said Bunter. "It's jolly near expressing a doubt of my personal honour."

The juniors gasped.

"His personal honour!" murmured Bob Cherry. "Where do you keep it, Bunter? You've never let us see anything of it!"

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"Well, if you succeed in spoofing 'our Mr. Sharpe,' you'll be clever!" grinned Skinner. "Why, the man will turn you inside out, you duffer!"

"I shall treat him very sharply, I can tell you!" said Bunter. "I'm not going to have my bona-fides doubted in this rotten way."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunter thrust the letter into his pocket and rolled away. He doubted very much now whether he would succeed in extracting anything from the Christmas Dinner Association. They were not likely to provide a Christmas dinner for him. He would have to look elsewhere for the funds for the great bust-up.

But where? That was a puzzle. Bunter thought it over while he was waiting for breakfast, but as far as he could see, there was no cash on the horizon. He stood in the hall outside the dining-room, with his hands in his pockets, and a most lugubrious expression upon his face, and Mr. Quelch noticed him when he came by.

Mr. Quelch was in an unusually good humour that morning. Perhaps it was the near approach of Christmas which was having a softening effect upon the master of the Remove. He gave Bunter a nod, and signed to him to approach.

"Bunter, you are looking downcast."

Bunter immediately looked a picture of misery. The slightest sympathy was always enough to make him exaggerate his sufferings, whatever they were.

"Yes, sir!" he mumbled.

"What is the matter, Bunter? Have you been overeating?"

"Oh, really, sir!"

"I hope you are not ill!"

"Oh, no, sir, I'm quite well!" said Bunter, with a heavy sigh. "I—I'm thinking of others, sir. That's what it is, sir!"

"Indeed!" said Mr. Quelch, in great surprise. "That is not a complaint you frequently suffer from, is it, Bunter?"

"No, sir—I mean, yes, sir!"

"Well, if you are thinking of others, I should be glad to encourage you to do so, Bunter!" said Mr. Quelch. "I think it is a most welcome change in your character."

"Ye-es, sir. You see, sir, Christmas is coming, and—and I like to see happy faces round me at Christmas time, sir. I like to—to entertain my friends, sir, and they expect it of me, as—as I'm a very popular fellow, sir."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir. I—I've made all the arrangements for a regular bust-up, sir, regardless of expense, for the sake of entertaining the fellows, and now at the last moment I've been disappointed about a remittance."

Mr. Quelch looked at him curiously.

"Indeed! That is very hard, Bunter."

"It is hard, sir. But—but I had an idea of making up the funds, if possible, by small contributions, so as not to disappoint the fellows, sir," said Billy Bunter eagerly. "Perhaps, sir, you would care to make a small contribution?"

"Quite so, Bunter."

"You're very kind, sir. It's such a pleasure to have a really kind and generous Form-master!" said Bunter, his fat face beaming. "You can give as much or as little as you like, sir. There's—there's no limit, sir!"

Mr. Quelch felt in his waistcoat pocket. Billy Bunter watched him eagerly, his round eyes gleaming through his spectacles.

Was Mr. Quelch going to contribute a sovereign or a half-sovereign? That was the question that Bunter was anxious about.

Mr. Quelch extracted a coin.

"There, Bunter," he said, extending his hand. "I am very glad to make my small contribution to so worthy an object!"

He pressed the coin into Bunter's hand, and passed on into the dining-room. The feel of the coin showed Bunter that it was not a sovereign—it was not large enough. Still, a half-sovereign——

Bunter blinked at the coin. It was not a half-sovereign.

It was a sixpence!

"M-m-m-my word!" murmured Bunter, aghast.

Sixpence!

Billy Bunter was still standing with the sixpence in his fat palm, staring at the silver coin, when the chums of the Remove came crowding in to breakfast. Bunter seemed to be at a loss for words to express his feelings.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

A Quarrel.

"HAZELDENE!"

Hazeldene paused. Morning lessons were over, and he was going down to the gates, with his cap on and a coat over his arm. Harry Wharton was coming towards him.

Hazeldene frowned as he stopped.

"Well?" he said shortly.

"I want to speak to you."

"I'm in rather a hurry."

"I'll walk with you a little of the way, then. You're going out?"

"Yes."

"Very well."

Wharton walked on with him. Hazeldene gave an uneasy look round, but made no remark, going on towards the school gates in silence.

"You're going over to Cliff House?" asked Harry.

"No."

"Which way, then?"

"Down the road—to Friardale."

They turned into Friardale Lane. Hazeldene opened his lips two or three times, without speaking. At last he broke out:

"Well, what is it, Wharton? I don't want you to come with me as far as Friardale."

Wharton coloured.

"And I don't want to come as far as that, anyway," he said. "I've got footer to attend to this afternoon. You seem to have dropped footer entirely, Hazel."

"I told you I should give it up, when you dropped me from the Form team," said Hazeldene sullenly.

"I suppose you considered I did you an injustice——"

"I know you did."

"The other fellows don't think so; but never mind that. Even if I was wrong in dropping you from the Form team, Hazel, that's no reason why you should give up footer. You'll get right off your form, and you'll miss the exercise, too."

"I've other things to fill up my time."

Harry Wharton frowned.

"I suppose that means the rotten games that Vernon-Smith goes in for, and that he's been trying to lead you into for a long time?"

"That's my bizney."

"Well, look here, Hazel," said Wharton, with an effort. "I'm going to try to look over what you did—in connection with the Highcliffe fellows, I mean. I want to let bygones be bygones, if you are willing."

Hazeldene gave a shrug.

"I don't care much either way."

"You don't care to be on good terms again?"

"Oh, we may as well speak when we meet, I suppose!" said Hazeldene. "I don't care much. No good having scenes, anyway. But if friendship with you means having interference in my private concerns, then I don't want it."

Wharton bit his lip. His promise to Marjorie was heavy on his mind; it was not easy to be on good terms with Hazeldene.

"If you keep on with the footer," went on Harry, "I'll do my best to find you a place in the Form eleven as soon as you are decently fit for it."

"I don't care to play."

"What?"

Hazeldene grinned a little.

"I don't know that I care to play," he said. "There's no great catch in fagging at footer. A fellow might easily find something more amusing than that."

"You've changed your mind a great deal in a week."

"Well, I didn't like being dropped from the eleven, and there was Marjorie, too—she was disappointed!" said Hazeldene. "Now, it's done, I don't care, and I'm not going to place myself in your hands again. You are a little too high and mighty to please me, Wharton, if you want plain English. I've other friends who are a little easier to pull with."

"Vernon-Smith, I suppose?"

"Others, too, perhaps!"

Hazeldene stopped. The two juniors had been walking quickly, and they had reached the cross-roads by this time. Hazeldene faced the captain of the Remove, with a far from agreeable expression upon his face.

"Don't you think you've come far enough?" he suggested.

"Perhaps. You are meeting someone in the village, I suppose?"

"That's my affair."

"Vernon-Smith, of course. I remember he left Greyfriars immediately after dinner. Look here, Hazel, don't you think that for your sister's sake you might give that rotter a wider berth?"

"I shall please myself about that."

"Marjorie——"

"Oh, don't talk about Marjorie!" said Hazeldene angrily. "You didn't think very much about her when you kicked me out of the footer eleven. Besides, what have you to do with her, anyway? Leave her name out of it."

Wharton stood silent. In thinking of "making it up" with Hazeldene he had thought only of the great effort he would have to make in speaking familiarly once more to the schoolboy traitor. It had not occurred to him that Hazeldene would be exacting—that he would pick and choose, and force Wharton into the position of a humble suitor.

To press his friendship upon a fellow he despised—to force his company upon one who made him sick with disgust; that was a hard task for Harry Wharton.

"Well," said Hazeldene, with a sneer, "you're forgetting your precious footer. Hadn't you better get back to Greyfriars?"

"I suppose I may as well," said Harry slowly. "I haven't done much good by talking to you, anyway."

"You're not likely to, either."

"Look here, Hazel——"

Wharton broke off as an overcoated form came swinging into sight from the direction of the village. It was Vernon-Smith. As Wharton had guessed, the Bounder of Greyfriars had been waiting for Hazeldene there. Doubtless, he had become impatient, and was coming back to meet Hazeldene en route.

He started a little as he saw Wharton with Hazeldene.

"Hallo, Hazel!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know you were bringing anybody."

"I'm not," said Hazeldene promptly. "Wharton has come with me without being asked. I've had the benefit of his company entirely without any wish on my part."

"Oh, I see!"

Wharton's face went crimson, and then pale. His hands clenched hard, and he was nearer to knocking Hazeldene down at that moment than he had been for some time. Hazel started a little and wished he had not said that. But Wharton had his temper well in hand.

He turned on his heel, and walked back towards Greyfriars, without a word to either Hazeldene or Vernon-Smith.

Hazeldene stared after him, and the Bounder broke into a chuckle.

"That was one on the mouth for our officious friend," he remarked. "I suppose he has been keeping you in order again, Hazel?"

"Trying to," said Hazel.

"Well, some chaps can't get out of the habit of interfering," said Vernon-Smith. "It's a way they have. Never mind Wharton. I say, Hazel, I've got an idea for this afternoon. I've had a big tip from the pater, and we can have a really good time."

Hazeldene's eyes gleamed. He had long ago fallen into the habit of letting the Bounder pay his expenses. He had a very moderate allowance of pocket-money, and the Bounder was rich, and he could hardly associate with Vernon-Smith, and indulge in the same amusements, without sponging.

"Right you are!" he exclaimed. "I'm on!"

"Look here," said the Bounder, looking away from Hazeldene as he spoke, "why shouldn't we call at Cliff House for your sister and Miss Clara?"

Hazeldene shifted uneasily.

"We could give them a ripping time, and score off those rotten prigs in No. 1 Study," urged Vernon-Smith.

"Marjorie wouldn't come."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's no good beating about the bush, Smithy; but—she doesn't like you," Hazeldene blurted out. "She's asked me more than once not to speak to you."

"Perhaps you'd better do as she wishes!" said the Bounder, with an angry gleam in his eyes.

"You needn't put it like that," said Hazeldene uneasily. "I'm sticking to you, ain't I? But you know what ideas girls get in their heads. Marjorie doesn't like you, and—and she wouldn't come out."

"You're her brother," said Vernon-Smith. "She wouldn't refuse if you really asked her seriously."

"I tell you it's no good," said Hazeldene irritably. "Besides, a girl in the party only spoils the fun. I suppose you wouldn't think of playing cards if Marjorie were with us? She'd get up and walk away if you began anything of that sort."

"Of course not, idiot. I suppose a chap can be decent sometimes!" growled the Bounder. "Look here, I want to be on friendly terms with your sister. I think you ought to make it easy for me. I've done enough for you."

"Yes, it's just like you to throw that in my teeth!" said Hazeldene bitterly. "And now we're talking plainly, I may as well tell you that even if Marjorie were willing, I wouldn't let her come out with you. You're not the sort of a chap for a girl to talk to or go about with. And that's plain English!"

The Bounder gritted his teeth.

"You talk like that to me," he said, "you sponging cad!

I'm not good enough to talk to the sister of a chap who sold his own side in a footer match!"

"You egged me on to do it, anyway," said Hazel, turning livid, "and I don't care what I've done, you're going to have nothing to do with Marjorie. Whatever I am, I'm not rotter enough for that."

"Then we'll part here!" said the Bounder savagely.

"I don't care."

"Very well."

Vernon-Smith strode away towards the village. Hazeldene remained standing alone, with a very blank expression on his face. He felt stranded. He had repulsed Harry Wharton's overtures, and now he had quarrelled with the Bounder. He had said that he did not care; but, as a matter of fact, he did care very much.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

A Sudden Recovery.

"RAISED the wind yet, Billy?" asked Bulstrode, with a grin, as he came upon the fat junior in the doorway of the schoolhouse.

Billy Bunter blinked at him despondently.

"Not yet, Bulstrode. I'm expecting some postal-orders this evening. But just at the present moment I'm short of money. Did you say you were going to advance me something towards the bust-up?"

"No, I didn't!"

"H'm! It would really be like putting your money in the bank, you know, to have it back with interest at Christmas," said Bunter persuasively. "As a business chap, you ought to see the advantage of that, Bulstrode."

Bulstrode grinned.

"Besides, the feed is really being stood in your honour," Bunter explained.

"Mine!" ejaculated Bulstrode.

"Yes. You see, my real object is to show the Remove that they ought to look up to you, and not make so much of Wharton, you know. You will, of course, be the guest of honour at the feed, and the whole thing will be intended to mark our respect for you."

"Not good enough, Bunty!" grinned Bulstrode.

And he walked away.

"Beast!" muttered Bunter. "Rotter! Mean bounder! I wonder whether I could——" He paused, as Hurree Jamset Ram Singh came in.

"I say, Inky, stop a moment."

The nabob was always polite. He paused, with a graceful inclination of his head to the fat junior.

"Certainfully, my worthy and esteemed fat chum. I am in a somewhat hurry."

"I won't keep you a minute. It's about that bust-up, you know."

"The knowfulness is great."

"My real object in standing this feed," went on Bunter, "is to show the fellows that it's all rot to talk about you being a nigger, or anything of that sort. You, of course, will be the guest of honour, and the whole thing will be got up regardless of expense to mark our respect for you. I think that at Christmas time something ought to be done to promote peace and good feeling, and so on, and to show that we're all brothers—I mean, brethren—in spite of differences of colour. What do you think, Inky?"

"I think the honourable Bunter is an esteemed and terrific ass!"

"Oh, really, Inky——"

"I think also that his rottenfulness is great."

"Look here, Inky, I think you might be decently grateful when a chap gets up a celebration, regardless of expense, to do you honour!" exclaimed Bunter indignantly. "Some chaps would bar a nigger. I don't."

"The graciousness of the esteemed Bunter is terrific."

"Well, I mean to be gracious, on an occasion like this," Bunter explained. "I don't see why you're not as good as I am myself, for that matter, though you're darker. And you're not so very dark, either. If you could stand me a fiver——"

"I fear that I cannot stand the honourable Bunter at all."

"Look here, Inky, make it a pound."

"The ratfulness is terrific."

"You blessed nigger——"

"The esteemed Bunter has stated that my worthy self is not so very dark!" the nabob exclaimed, with a grin.

"You—you ace of spades!" grunted Bunter. "Look here, I think you might make a contribution like a decent chap. I——"

"The good-byefulness is great."

"Hold on a minute, Inky. Look here, I think you might make some slight contribution. I'd take half-a-sovereign."

"Not from me, my worthy chum."

"Well, say, half-a-crown."

"The esteemed Bunter may say it if he wishes."

Bunter snorted.

"Look here, you black beast, are you going to make a contribution or are you not?" he roared.

"The notfulness is terrific."

"You—you black bounder!"

"There is one thing I shall have great pleasurefulness in presenting to the esteemed and ludicrous Bunter."

"What's that?" asked Bunter eagerly.

"The kickfulness of my august foot."

"Ow! Leggo!"

Bunter was spun round, and the nabob's foot was planted behind him.

The fat junior went sprawling, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh walked on his way with a soft and placid smile.

"Ow!" groaned Bunter. "The black beast! Help! Yow!"

Alonzo Todd rushed up to help Bunter up from the Close. He had seen Bunter sprawl out of the doorway, but had not seen the cause of it. He seized the fat junior by the shoulders, and tried to drag him up.

"My dear Bunter!" he exclaimed, in great distress. "My dear fellow, what is the matter? What is the cause of this sudden collapse?"

"Oh!" groaned Bunter.

"Dear me! I hardly know what to do. I wish my Uncle Benjamin were here. What was it made you fall down, Bunter?"

"I'm hungry!" groaned Bunter. "I've collapsed from sheer weakness. If you could help me as far as the tuckshop, Toddy, I should be all right."

"Oh, certainly, my dear Bunter!"

Bunter allowed himself to be dragged up, and, leaning on Todd's arm, he made his way to the tuckshop across the Close.

"Do you feel better, my dear Bunter?" asked Todd, with great solicitude, as he piloted the Owl of the Remove into Mrs. Mimble's little shop.

"Ow! Yes." Bunter sank upon a stool. "Something to eat—quick, or I'm afraid it will come on again!"

"Dear me! Mrs. Mimble! Mrs. Mimble!"

Alonzo Todd rapped on the counter with his knuckles, and Mrs. Mimble came out of her little parlour. She did not seem particularly pleased at the sight of Bunter, or touched by the expression of martyred suffering on his fat face.

"Bunter has been overcome by weakness from hunger," said Todd hurriedly. "He requires some nourishment to prevent a return of the state of collapse. Kindly hand over some substantial comestible, my dear madam."

"Master Bunter may have all that he can pay for!" said Mrs. Mimble sourly. She knew Master Bunter of old.

"My dear Mrs. Mimble, surely you will not consider so sordid and mercenary a detail as payment at such a time as this?" expostulated Alonzo.

"My rule is no credit, Master Todd."

"You hear, Bunter? Are you strong enough to get your money out of your pocket?" asked Alonzo anxiously.

Bunter groaned deeply.

"N-n-no! You settle for it, Todd, and I'll pay you presently."

"I will get your money from your pocket for you, Bunter, if you will indicate which pocket contains your financial resources."

"I—I forget."

"I will go through each in turn, and——"

"I—as a matter of fact, I've left my money in the study, Todd."

"I will fetch it."

"Now, I come to think of it, I lent it to Wharton," said Bunter. "You settle up with Mrs. Mimble, Toddy, and I'll make it square when my postal-order comes. I'm expecting a postal-order this evening."

"I should be delighted to do so, Bunter——"

"Go ahead, then!"

"Only I have no money," explained Alonzo. "If, however, you could return me a portion of that ten shillings of mine which you used by mistake——"

Bunter sat upright and glared at Todd.

"You're stony, you ass?" he howled.

"I'm so sorry, Bunter, but I am certainly what you characterise as stony—in a state of complete financial denudation," said Alonzo. "Otherwise, I would pay for anything that was necessary to revive you, for my Uncle Benjamin always impressed upon me that——"

"You chump!"

"My dear Bunter——"

"You howling ass!" roared Bunter, rolling off the stool. "I've a jolly good mind to give you a thick ear, you fathead!"

And the fat junior snorted and rolled out of the tuckshop.

Alonzo Todd looked after him in blank amazement. It was astounding to the Duffer of Greyfriars to see Bunter recover so suddenly and without the assistance of any refreshment.

"Dear me!" said Todd. "This is most surprising. My dear Mrs. Mimble, isn't it odd?"

But Mrs. Mimble had gone back to her little parlour.

Alonzo Todd left the tuckshop still in a state of great astonishment.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.
Mr. Sharpe Calls.

TROTTER, the House page, put his head into the Remove Form-room the next morning during lessons. Mr. Quelch was guiding the Lower Fourth through the labyrinths of deponent verbs, and in the thrilling interest of that pursuit he did not notice Trotter. He was tackling Billy Bunter, and Bunter, whose scholarship was not what Hurree Singh would have called terrific, had just given him the extraordinary information that a deponent verb was normal in form and abnormal in meaning. Mr. Quelch had taken up his pointer, with the idea of pointing out to Bunter that his definition was not quite correct—through the medium of the palm of the hand—when Trotter's voice was heard:

"If you please, sir, Master Bunter's wanted, sir!"

Mr. Quelch looked round.

"Master Bunter's wanted, sir."

"Indeed? What is it?"

"A wisitor, sir."

Bunter blinked round.

"If you please, sir, I expect it's one of my titled friends, sir, come to give me a Christmas tip!" he exclaimed.

"Who is it, Trotter?"

"A Mr. Sharpe, sir."

"Oh!" ejaculated Bunter.

He had forgotten the promised visit of the representative of the Christmas Dinners Association.

"Which the 'Ead sent me for Master Bunter, sir," said Trotter.

"You may go, Bunter."

"Ye-es, sir."

Billy Bunter left the Form-room. He left the Remove grinning. They did not think that he would get very much change out of the representative of the Christmas Dinners Association.

Bunter followed Trotter down the wide, flagged passage.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"In 'ere, sir," said Trotter, opening the door of the library. "I took in 'is card to the 'Ead, Master Bunter, and he sent me to tell you there was a wisitor for you."

"The Head's not there?" exclaimed Bunter, startled.

"Oh, no, Master Bunter!"

Billy Bunter drew a breath of relief.

He went into the library, and a tall, thin gentleman rose from a chair. The gentleman was so thin and so tall that it seemed to Bunter as if he would never leave off rising up, to so great a height did he go. He was certainly over six feet, and his thin form was clad in a tightly-buttoned frock-coat, which made him look longer and thinner, and, in fact, almost telescopic.

Bunter blinked up at him, with almost a crick in the neck.

"Mr. S-s-sharpe?" he asked.

"Certainly!" said the towering gentleman, in a deep bass voice. "I expected to see Mr. Bunter—Mr. William Bunter."

"I'm Bunter, sir."

The stranger adjusted a pair of gold-rimmed glasses upon a prominent thin nose, and looked at Bunter in surprise.

"You are Bunter?" he repeated.

"Certainly."

"But—but the application which was received by our committee," said Mr. Sharpe. "It was—er—it was sent in for a contribution to a scheme for feeding the—er—in fact, the poor."

"Exactly, sir. I sent it in."

"But you are—er—in fact, a boy," said Mr. Sharpe.

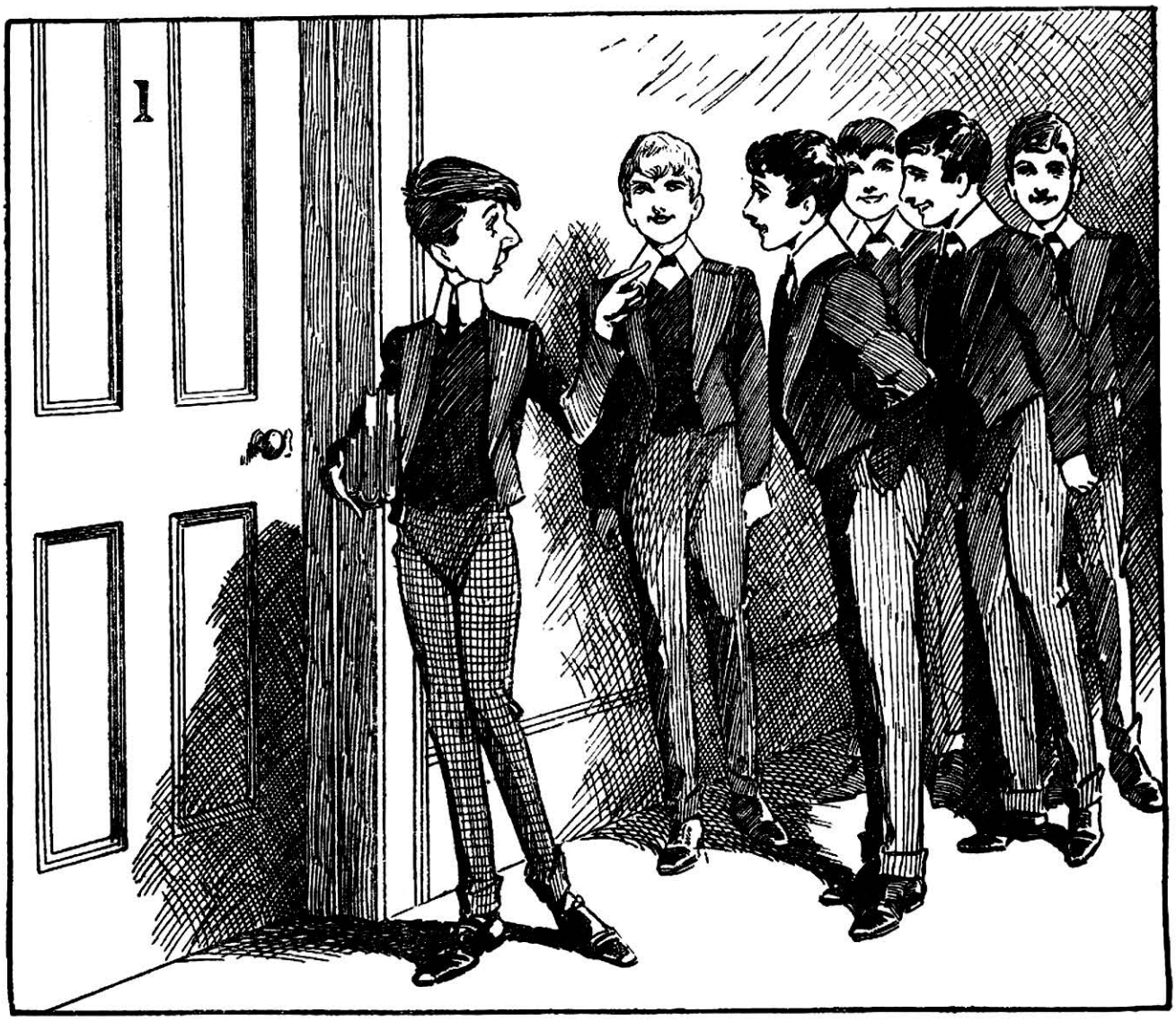
"Well, I'm a bit older in most things than the other fellows," said Bunter. "I'm rather a clever chap, you know, and very experienced. And, besides, I like helping the poor, sir. That's really what I live for."

"Indeed!"

"Certainly, sir. If this contribution is sent by the Christmas Dinners Association, sir, they can rest assured that it will be well spent—entirely on grub, sir."

"Ahem!"

"My object in standing the bust-up—I mean the feed, is to help the poor over Christmas, sir," said Bunter. "I have already written invitations to a number of poor Board-



"Dear me," exclaimed Alonzo Todd, "What is the matter, you fellows? Perhaps I can be of use? My Uncle Benjamin always impressed upon me to be useful and obliging whenever I could. I will call to Bunter through the keyhole." *(See page 5.)*

school boys in the neighbourhood, sir, and they're all coming."

"That is certainly a very worthy object," said Mr. Sharpe, scanning the fat junior very closely.

"Yes, sir. My real object is to promote peace and good-feeling between the fellows here and the County Council School chaps," Bunter explained.. "I'm getting up a feed, regardless of expense, for that reason solely."

"Very good! You are, however, very young to be entrusted with the spending of money," said Mr. Sharpe, "and I should have, of course, to be satisfied of your bona fides before I could recommend your claim to the committee."

"I should give you my word of honour, Mr. Sharpe," said Bunter grandly.

"Ahem! I think I should prefer a word or two with your head-master first," Mr. Sharpe observed.

"I—I hardly think it's necessary, sir. If you hand the money over to me the whole thing will be quite satisfactory."

"I am afraid I could not do so. Perhaps you will wait while I have a few words with your head-master?"

"Please don't trouble, sir. Dr. Locke is a very busy man, and—and he gets very bad-tempered when he's interrupted, especially in the mornings."

"Ahem——"

"He might even be violent, sir," said Bunter desperately.

"There—there was a chap he nearly brained once for interrupting him in the morning."

"Dear me!"

"I'm standing this Christmas bust-up entirely at my own expense, except for any little help I get from your committee, sir. I am being perfectly lavish—the whole thing is being got up regardless of expense."

"I think I had better see your head-master."

"Quite unnecessary, sir."

Mr. Sharpe appeared to have his own ideas about that. He touched the bell, and Trotter reappeared, and conducted him to the Head's study, leaving Billy Bunter waiting, in a far from enviable frame of mind, in the library.

Bunter waited with a dismal face.

That the head-master would allow him to receive any contribution from the Christmas Dinners Association, if they were willing to send one, was doubtful.

"It's rotten!" muttered Bunter. "I call it rotten! The suspiciousness of some people is simply fearful. It's just as if they couldn't trust their money into my hands."

Trotter came in, with a grin on his face, and Bunter blinked at him.

"Is that gentleman with the Head?" he asked.

"Yes, Master Bunter. The 'Ead wants you to go to his study."

"Oh! Are you sure?"

"Yes," grinned Trotter. "He sent me to fetch you, sir."

"I—I suppose I'd better go," murmured Bunter.

And he took his way to the Head's study.

He did not like the prospect of facing Mr. Sharpe and the Head together. He was greatly inclined to bolt instead of obeying the summons. But, after all, where could he bolt to? He was in for it now, and with slow and unwilling steps he made his way to Dr. Locke's room.

His hand trembled as he tapped at the door.

"Come in!" said the deep voice within.

The voice was familiar enough, but it made Bunter jump. He pushed the door open, and went into the study.

Mr. Sharpe was sitting by the window, the Head at his desk. Dr. Locke turned a severe glance upon the Owl of the Remove as he came in.

"Bunter!"

"Ye-e-es, sir?"

"I hear that you have written to this gentleman for money," said the Head sternly. "Will you kindly explain yourself, Bunter?"

"Ye-e-es, sir!"

"Well?" snapped the Head. "I am waiting for an explanation. I may mention that unless it is a perfectly satisfactory one I shall cane you severely, Bunter."

"Oh, really, sir——"

"I am waiting, Bunter!"

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.
The Way of the Transgressor!

BILLY BUNTER'S knees knocked together.

The dark frown upon the doctor's face terrified him, and put to flight whatever little wit he might have had.

"Well, Bunter?" said the Head, in a voice that seemed to the fat junior like the rumble of thunder, though it really was not very loud. "Well?"

"If you please, sir——"

"Go on, Bunter!"

"I—I—I——"

"You have written a begging letter, Bunter."

"Oh, no, sir! I—I hope you wouldn't think that I should do anything of that sort, sir! I despise a chap who wants money. You see, sir, the idea really was to stand a Christmas feed to the poor, and I was getting it up regardless of expense. I thought the Christmas Dinners Association would like to send in a bit of a contribution to so—so noble an object, sir."

"Ah! And who are the poor you are thinking of feeding at Christmas, Bunter?" asked the Head grimly.

"Oh, the poor, sir!" said Bunter vaguely. "There are lots of poor, sir."

"The poor of Friardale, perhaps?"

"Yes, exactly, sir."

"And how will you be able to feed them at Christmas, Bunter, when you will not be here? The school breaks up before Christmas, and you will be gone home."

"I—I meant the bust-up to take place before we broke up, sir. I—I've already invited some poor Board-school boys, sir—the Courtfield fellows."

"Have they accepted?"

"Not yet, sir. I'm expecting to hear from them to-day. I thought you might approve of my trying to—to put things on a better footing between the two schools, sir, by means of a Christmas bust-up, regardless of expense."

"You tell Mr. Sharpe that you are providing most of the funds yourself."

"Practically the whole, sir," said Bunter, recovering his confidence a little. "Two-thirds, at least, sir, regardless of——"

"Indeed! You have purchased the provisions?"

"N-n-not yet, sir."

"Then you still have the money in hand?"

"In a way, sir."

"Can you show it to me, Bunter?"

"I—I—I——"

"Please show me the money!" thundered the Head.

"I—I c-c-can't, sir!" stammered Bunter. "It hasn't come yet, sir. I—I'm expecting a large number of postal-orders, from some rich relations and from some titled friends of mine, and——"

"Don't talk nonsense, Bunter!"

"Oh, sir!"

"You have no money, and your talking of feeding the poor at Christmas is all empty nonsense," said the Head sternly. "You have attempted to obtain money from the very worthy society this gentleman represents, but I fear very much that it would not be devoted to the promised object if you succeeded in obtaining it."

"Oh, really, sir——"

"I apologise to this gentleman," said the Head, with an inclination towards Mr. Sharpe, "for the trouble he has been put to, and assure him that you will be punished for having given him this unnecessary journey."

"Not at all, sir!" said Mr. Sharpe politely.

And he took his silk hat and his leave.

Bunter remained all alone with the Head.

He blinked after the tall gentleman till he disappeared, taking with him as it were, Bunter's last hope of a free contribution of funds for the Christmas bust-up. But Billy Bunter had little time to think about that. The voice of the Head called his attention back.

"Bunter," said Dr. Locke sternly, "you have acted in a disgraceful manner."

"Oh, really, sir——"

"I fear very much that you hoped to obtain a contribution from this charitable society, for the purpose of keeping it for your own uses."

"Oh, really——"

"You have not, I suppose, considered how dishonest that would be," the Head continued. "But perhaps a caning may impress that consideration upon your mind, and induce you to reflect upon your conduct."

"If—if you please, sir, I—I'd rather reflect without being caned, sir," ventured the fat junior nervously.

"Probably you would, Bunter, but that would not meet my views. You will kindly hold out your hand," said the Head, rising from his seat.

He took up his cane. Bunter received two swipes on each hand, and they doubled Bunter up like a pocket-knife. The Head eyed him grimly.

"There, Bunter! I think that that will perhaps be a lesson to you. If it fails to prove so, I must see what a further application of the same kind of correction will effect. You must learn, Bunter, that the way of the transgressor is hard. You may go."

He tucked his hands under his arms in the passage, and went along groaning dismally.

The classes were being dismissed now for the morning recess, and Bunter ran into Temple, Dabney & Co., of the Upper Fourth, in the passage.

"Hallo!" said Temple. "Here's Bunter in trouble again! What was it for this time, Bunter?"

"Nothing," groaned Bunter. "All through my desire to do good to the poor at Christmas-time, that's all. Ow!"

"Good old Bunter!" chuckled Temple. "Always some spanking whopper, and each one bigger than the last."

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney.

Bunter blinked at them.

"I say, you fellows, speaking of Christmas feeds——"

"Who's speaking of Christmas feeds?" said Temple.

"I am," sand Bunter. "Speaking of Christmas feeds, look here, suppose you chaps were to make a contribution towards the bust-up."

"What bust-up?"

"I'm standing a big Christmas bust-up before the school breaks up," Bunter explained. "You, of course, would be the guests of honour. My real object is to—to promote good feeling between the Upper and the Lower Fourth, and—and make the two Forms get on better, by—by showing our respect for the Upper Fourth. Now, if you chaps cared to make a contribution——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at. I——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows—— Look here, don't walk away while I'm talking to you. I tell you—— Look here—— Beasts!"

Temple & Co. walked away laughing. Bunter tucked his hands under his arms once more, and recommenced groaning.

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.
Marjorie's Reply.

"SATURDAY'S the day after to-morrow," Billy Bunter remarked, cornering Harry Wharton & Co. in the tuckshop, where they were discussing gingerpop, and he blinked at the chums of the Remove significantly.

"Dear me!" said Nugent. "To-day's Thursday, so the day after to-morrow is really almost certain to be Saturday. Quite right, Bunter; but did you do that in your head?"

"Oh, really, Nugent——"

"Why don't you go in for higher mathematics, Bunty?" asked Bob Cherry. "A fellow who can work out things like that——"

"Look here, you fellows, I'm talking business. Saturday's the day after to-morrow, and that means that the bust-up has got to come off in two days' time, or not at all."

"Then I fancy it will be not at all," said Wharton, laughing.

"The not-at-allfulness will be terrific."

"Oh, very well; if you fellows want the guests to be disappointed, and Greyfriars to get a name for inhospitality, I don't see why I should care," said Bunter loftily.

"What! What guests?"

"Oh, the Cliff House girls."

"What!" shouted the juniors in chorus.

"Of course, I've invited them," said Bunter. "I shouldn't be likely to leave Marjorie & Co. out of a Christmas feed, I suppose."

"You checky young ass! But they won't come," said Harry. "They know you too jolly well for that."

Bunter snorted.

"Then there are the Courtfield fellows."

"The Courtfield fellows?" repeated Harry.

"Yes, I've asked them."

"You've asked Trumper & Co.?"

"Yes. You see, my object is to feed the poor at Christmas, and I don't suppose those Board-school chaps have any Christmas dinners," said Bunter. "They are coming to the feed, and I should think you fellows would stand by me, in case anything goes wrong and I don't get a remittance in time."

The chums of the Remove stared at Billy Bunter. They had had some samples of the fat junior's coolness before, but this really seemed to beat all previous records.

"My only hat!" said Bob Cherry at last.

"You've asked them to come, Bunter?"

"Of course. And I should think you fellows would——"

"Have they accepted the invitation?"

"I'm expecting their reply to-day. Under the circumstances, I should think you fellows would shell out. I suppose you don't want those Board-school chaps to go away saying that they were asked to a feed here, and when they came there wasn't anything for them."

"My word!"

"The wordfulness is terrific."

"You see, they're certain to come," Bunter explained. "I put it very tactfully to them in my letter. I pointed out that as they were probably too poor to have a decent feed at Christmas, this was really a good thing for them."

"You—you said that?"

"I wrote it."

"And that's what you call being tactful?"

"Well it was just as well to speak plainly, you know. I told them we should treat them well, and not take any notice of the fact that they were Board-school bounders, and not our class."

"My hat!"

"They'll be jolly glad to come, I should think," said Bunter. "I mentioned that they would be treated just as if they were on an equality with me, although I am a gentleman."

"Great Scott!"

"Probably Trumper will call in and tell me he's coming to the bust-up" said Bunter. "Anyway, I'm sure they'll come. They're not likely to miss a chance of a feed, especially with a chap so far above them socially. Marjorie is sure to come, too. Of course, she wouldn't miss——"

"Miss what?" asked Bob Cherry, with a dangerous gleam in his eye.

"Miss seeing us all," said Bunter hastily. "Hallo, there's the postman! I expect he's got Marjorie's reply to me."

And the fat junior dashed out of the tuckshop to intercept the postman. The chums of the Remove followed him. A crowd of juniors gathered round the postman; but he had only one letter to hand out, and it was addressed to Billy Bunter—or, to be more exact, to Master William Bunter, Greyfriars College.

Bunter grinned as he took it. A dozen fellows observed that it was addressed in a girl's hand, and some of them knew it to be Marjorie's.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "That's the letter, then. I'll bet you a dozen to one in thick ears that Marjorie has refused, Bunter."

"Oh, rats!" said Bunter.

"Well, let's see."

"Oh, I'm not going to open the letter here," said Bunter, with a look of exceeding slyness. "Never show a girl's letter in public, you know. A chap mustn't kiss and tell."

"You young cad!"

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

Harry Wharton grasped the fat junior by the collar as he was walking away with the letter, and swung him back.

"Hold on!" he said grimly.

"Oh, really, you know, I want to read my letter."

"You'll read it here. You heard what the young cad said, you fellows," said Harry, looking round at the juniors. "He's trying to make out that Marjorie has written something he wouldn't show to us—something chummy. Of course, it's his rotten lying; Marjorie can't bear the sight of the beast."

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"If Marjorie knew what a cad you were, Bunter, she wouldn't write you a line at all," said Wharton. "As it is, I'm not going to let you make capital out of it. You know very well that that letter is quite a formal one, in answer to your impudent invitation. After what you've implied, you'll open that letter here and read it out to all the fellows."

"Oh, really, I jolly well sha'n't. I'm not going to have all my tender little secrets made public, I can tell you. Ow, ow, ow!"

Wharton shook the fat junior till his arm ached.

"Yow!" roared Billy Bunter. "Yow! Chuck it! You'll make my glasses fall off, and if they get broken you'll have to pay for them."

"Open that letter! After what you've said, every chap here is going to know what's in it, so that you will be convicted of being a lying, bragging cad."

With Wharton's knuckles grinding into the back of his neck, Bunter was not in a position to refuse. He sulkily split the envelope with a fat thumb.

"I—I don't object to reading out the letter," he mumbled. "Of course, what I just said was a—a figure of speech."

"Read out the letter, you worm!"

Bunter read it out. With three or four fellows looking at it, too, he could not falsify it in the reading. It was short if not sweet.

"We are sorry we cannot accept your invitation."

"M. HAZELDENE."

That was all

A more direct snub had probably never been administered even to Billy Bunter who seemed to spend most of his time in asking for snubs and deserving them.

There was a shout of laughter as the contents of the letter were made known. After what Bunter had said and implied, the snub direct from the Cliff House girls was extremely comic.

"Well, if that's a sample of the tender little secrets, you're welcome to 'em!" grinned Bulstrode.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I should think that could get through the hide of a hippopotamus," Mark Linley remarked. "Even Bunter ought to feel a little smaller."

"I—I—of course, this is only in fun!" said Bunter.

Wharton released the fat junior, with a look of contempt. At that moment there was a shout from the direction of the gates.

"Courtfield cads!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob Cherry. "Here come Trumper & Co. with an answer to your invitation, Bunter!"

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.
An Invitation Not Accepted.

TRUMPER & CO. marched into the Close with grim faces. They certainly did not look as if they had come to accept an invitation in an amicable spirit.

"Here they are!" said Nugent. "Here are your guests, Bunty!"

Bunter grinned.

"I suppose you chaps will stand by me in getting up the feed now," he remarked.

"You'll need somebody to stand by you now, to judge by Trumper's expression," said Wharton, laughing.

"Eh?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Brown. "Trumper looks wrathy! You must have worded the invitation rather crudely, Bunter!"

"Oh, rot! I put it very delicately!"

"The delicateness was terrific."

Trumper & Co. had caught sight of Bunter, and were marching straight towards him. The fat junior was too short-sighted to make out the expressions upon their faces till they came very near.

Greyfriars fellows were gathering round, none too well pleased by this invasion of the Close by the Courtfield fellows. Trumper & Co. were in great danger of a general ragging. But the Removites waited for Harry Wharton to take the lead, and Wharton showed no sign of hostility towards the Council School fellows.

"Bunter! Bunter there?" roared Trumper, in his big, bass voice.

"Yes, here I am, Trumper!"

"You wrote me this letter?"

Trumper held out a letter, scrawled and blotted and smeared in Bunter's well-known style. Bunter blinked at it.

"Yes, that looks like my letter, Trumper."

"My hat, it does!" gasped Nugent.

"Look at it!" roared Trumper. "Listen while I read it out, and then tell me what you think of it, you fellows!"

"Go ahead!" said Nugent. "Coming from Bunter, it's bound to be written in a really decent and gentlemanly spirit."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Trumper read out the letter.

"'Dear Trumper,—I am standing a Christmas feed, a regular bust-up regardless of expense, and I want you and your friends to come. Although you are all Board-school chaps, and cannot as a rule expect to mix with fellows of my class, we shall treat you quite well, just as if there were no distinction between us socially. At Christmas time, I really think that even fellows like you ought to be treated with friendliness, and so I hope you will come to the bust-up. Of course, you will see that your friends wash their hands and put on clean collars, and that sort of thing, and don't wear down-at-heel boots, or anything of that sort, so as not to disgrace me. It will be a splendid feed, and as I don't suppose you fellows get any Christmas dinners to speak of, it will be a treat for you.—Yours, WILLIAM G. BUNTER.'"

The Greyfriars fellows grinned as the letter was read aloud. The Courtfielders were red with wrath.

"Well," roared Trumper, "is that the sort of letter they teach you to write here? You'd learn better manners at a Board-school, I can tell you!"

Wharton flushed.

"Look here, don't put it down to us!" he exclaimed. "It was that fat cad wrote the letter, and none of us knew anything about it. We shouldn't have allowed him to send it if we'd known."

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

Trumper tore the letter into pieces.

"Look here, I don't see anything wrong with that letter," said Bunter. "If a blessed Board-school bounder is coming here to teach me, why, I think——"

Bunter paused to dodge behind Wharton as Trumper made a grab at him.

"Ow! Keep off!"

"You fat cad!"

"Oh, really——"

"Get from in front of him, Wharton. I'm going to lick him!"

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Bulstrode aggressively. "You can't come here and swank on our ground, you know!"

Trumper turned on the Remove bully.

"The fat little rotter isn't worth licking!" he exclaimed. "But if you like to take the matter up for him, I'll lick you instead!"

"Yeth, rather!" said Solly Lazarus. "Lick the thilly ass, Trumpy!"

Bulstrode looked warlike at once. It was not so long ago since he had stood up to Trumper and had been soundly licked. But Bulstrode had heaps of dogged courage, and he was quite ready to fight again.

"Come on, then!" he exclaimed.

Wharton interposed.

"Hold on, Bulstrode——"

"Oh, keep out of it, Wharton! What will you always be shoving your oar in for?" the burly Removite exclaimed angrily.

"Do you want the Head to see you?" said Harry angrily. "Do you think you can fight here almost under his study windows?"

Bulstrode paused.

"Well, there's something in that!" he admitted.

"The somethingfulness is terrific," remarked the Nabob of Bhanipur. "I also think that the causefulness of the fight is terrifically small."

"I'm going to lick that fat bounder!" said Trumper doggedly. "If you think I'm too big for him, the smallest chap here will take him on. He's bigger than Solly—and Solly will take him in hand."

"Yeth, rather!" said Solly.

"Oh, Bunter can't fight!" said Harry. "He can't fight in glasses, and he can't see without them."

"Well, I'm jolly well going to lick somebody!" roared Trumper. "Do you think I'm jolly well going to be insulted for nothing?"

"Come into the gym.," said Bulstrode.

"I'm ready! I——"

"Stop it!" said Wharton. "If you don't shut up, Bulstrode, you'll fight me instead of Trumper. Bunter has acted in a disgraceful way, and I'm as ashamed of it as anybody could be——"

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"Anybody who stands up for Bunter now, and takes his part, is as bad as he is," said Harry. "I suppose nobody here will say that letter ought to have been written, or that any decent chap could have written it?"

"Rather not!"

"The notfulness is terrific."

"Well, I don't uphold that letter, of course," said Bulstrode. "But I'm not going to have fellows swanking about here."

"If there's any swanking to be done, Bulstrode is quite equal to it himself," Nugent remarked, and there was a laugh.

"We didn't come here to swank," said Trumper. "But if one of you fellows got a letter like that——"

"We're not Board-school chaps!" said a voice in the crowd, which sounded very like Snoop's.

Trumper turned round with blazing eyes.

"No," he said, "you're not! But if what they say is true, there are some chaps here who go down to the inns in Friardale of a night, and that's a thing we don't do in Courtfield. And if I wrote you a letter of invitation, and said you mustn't come drunk, or with packs of cards in your pockets, how would you like it?"

"Oh, draw it mild!"

"Cheese it, you bounder!"

"Chuck them out!"

"Stop that!" said Harry Wharton. "Look here, Bunter has insulted these chaps, and he's such a booby that he can't fight. He'll have to apologise, or take a licking!"

"We're not going to let anybody stalk in here and lick a Greyfriars chap, whatever he's done!" said Bulstrode.

"I'll lick him myself, as far as that goes!"

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"You hear that, Bunter? You'll apologise humbly to these fellows, or you'll take the licking of your life, so you can choose!" exclaimed Wharton.

"I—I—— Oh, really——"

"Take your choice—and quick about it."

Billy Bunter blinked round. But there was no sympathy in any of the faces he blinked at. No one was likely to uphold his action. And Harry Wharton was in a mood few of the fellows cared to cross. His teeth were set, and his brows darkly contracted, and when Wharton had that expression on his face, he was in a dangerous temper.

"I—I—— Of course, I haven't the least objection to apologising," said Bunter. "I—I didn't mean that letter as an insult. I intended it to be delicate and tactful."

Even the Courtfield fellows could not help grinning at Bunter's idea of delicacy and tact.

"I—I apologise!" went on Bunter. "I'm awfully sorry—sincerely sorry—and I take it all back. Is that all right?"

"Yes," said Trumper, with a snort, "that's all right, you worm! And now look out, you Greyfriars bounders; after this, whenever we meet you, anywhere, there'll be trouble."

"Yeth, rather!"

"Oh," said Bulstrode, "then it may as well begin now! Rush the bounders!"

There was a threatening movement on the part of the Remove. But Harry Wharton stepped in front of the Courtfielders.

"Stop that!" he said curtly. "These chaps will go without being touched. Bunter's to blame all through, and they're not going to be ragged while I can stop it!"

Trumper & Co. turned towards the gates. The juniors looked very unwilling to let them go, but Harry Wharton had his way. Wharton walked with them to the gates.

"Look here," he exclaimed. "I'm sorry this has happened—Bunter is a howling cad, and we're all ashamed of him—I should think you chaps could look over it."

Trumper's face melted a little.

"Well, if you don't stand by him——" he began.

"Of course, we don't," said Harry. "Bunter's a rank outsider—the limit, in fact. He hasn't the faintest idea of decency."

"Well, it's all right!" said Trumper.

"All therenc, dear boy!"

"Certainly!" said Grahame. "I suppose it was silly to get ratty about what a worm like that wrote, only——"

"Well, let's shake hands on it," said Harry cordially.

The Courtfield fellows could not resist that. Wharton's heartiness was infectious.

They shook hands with him in turn, and went down the road from Greyfriars in cheerful spirits.

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.
The Only Way.

"I SAY, you fellows——"

Harry Wharton & Co. were going into the tuckshop after lessons on Friday. It was the day before the day Bunter had fixed for his celebrated bust-up; but the fat junior was no "forrarder."

It began to look as if the bust-up would really never come off at all.

The chums of the Remove looked at Bunter, and walked into the shop. Billy Bunter followed them in at once.

The juniors stopped at the counter, and Mrs. Mimble looked at them all smiles. Mrs. Mimble had more smiles for Harry Wharton than for Bunter. Wharton was a paying customer. Billy Bunter never paid anybody for anything if he could help it. His maxim was apparently that of our old Shakespearian friend—"Base is the slave that pays."

"I say, you fellows——"

No one replied. The Famous Four seemed to have made up their minds to ignore Bunter.

Harry Wharton opened his pocket-book, and took out a rustling banknote. Billy Bunter's eyes almost started from his head at the sight of it. It was a generous Christmas tip sent to Harry by his uncle, Colonel Wharton, and Harry was intending to "blow" it in a feed to the whole Form as a way of celebrating the approaching break-up for the Christmas holidays. It was to be a bust-up, regardless of expense, as Bunter would have put it, but it was not to be a bust-up for Billy Bunter. The Owl of the Remove was barred.

"I want a really good feed for to-morrow afternoon, Mrs. Mimble," said Harry. "I'm going to order the things now."

"Yes, Master Wharton."

"I'm going to stand a bust-up, you know, regardless of expense," Harry explained, still addressing his remarks to Mrs. Mimble, and taking no notice of Bunter.

"Certainly."

"I say, you fellows——"

"Get out the list, Nugent."

Frank Nugent produced a pencilled list from his pocket.

It was a very long list, and a single blink at it made Bunter's mouth water. The articles mentioned in that list were certainly enough to feed the whole Remove, and a couple of other Removes as well.

Wharton laid the five-pound-note on the counter, and Hurree Singh laid a couple of sovereigns on it, and Bob Cherry and Nugent half-a-sovereign each. Each was contributing to the bust-up according to his means.

"M-m-my hat!" gasped Bunter. "Are you chaps really going to spend all that money on a feed?"

There was no reply. The Famous Four seemed to be quite unconscious of Billy Bunter's presence in the tuckshop.

Bunter watched Mrs. Mimble hungrily as she looked over the list. The good dame read out the items, and Bunter almost wept with emotion. There were cold fowls, and ham and tongue, cold beef and game-pies, rabbit-pies, and meat-pies—all sorts and conditions of pies, to say nothing of puddings. There were cakes and biscuits and fruits, fresh fruits and preserved fruits, and candied fruits, in great variety. There were eatables of all sorts, in fact, galore.

There was no doubt that the Greyfriars Christmas bust-up would be "regardless." Mrs. Mimble opened her eyes in surprise behind her spectacles as she went on with the list. Bunter watched her with his mouth open.

"Is that all, Master Wharton?" asked Mrs. Mimble.

"That's all, I think," said Harry. "We're getting a good many guests here, you know, as well as the Remove chaps—nearly all the Remove; but I think there will be enough to go round."

"Dear me! I should think so."

"We want the lot delivered in the Remove Form-room for teatime to-morrow," said Harry Wharton, "and they're not to be given to anybody who may come for them."

"I quite understand, Master Wharton."

"There'll be some change out of this cash," said Harry. "You can let me have it when you've made out the bill, Mrs. Mimble."

"Certainly."

"I say, you fellows——"

The Famous Four walked out of the shop. They had not spoken a word to the fat junior all the time. Bunter rushed after them excitedly.

"I say, you fellows——"

They walked on.

Bunter grasped Wharton desperately by the coat, and stopped him. Then the captain of the Remove appeared to see him for the first time.

"Hallo, is that you, Bunter?" he said.

"You jolly well know it is!" roared Bunter. "Look here——"

"Well, I'm looking——"

"The lookfulness is terrific."

"Well," said Bunter, in a mollified tone, "it's all right. I want to thank you fellows—to thank you most sincerely."

They stared at him.

"You want to thank us?" echoed Harry Wharton.

"Yes, rather. It's jolly decent of you."

"What is?" demanded Harry.

"Ordering those things for me, for my bust-up," said Bunter, blinking at him. "Of course, you were ordering them for me?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, you fellows——"

"There's a slight mistake somewhere," said Harry. "We weren't ordering them for you, Bunty; we were ordering them for ourselves."

"Oh, really——"

"Good-bye!"

"I say, you fellows, it was my idea, you know, to stand a bust-up for Christmas," said Billy Bunter, in an aggrieved tone. "I don't think you ought to take the matter out of my hands in this way. Still, I don't mind, so long as I come."

"But you're not coming!"

"What?"

"Porpoises are barred," said Bob Cherry sweetly. "Pigs not admitted! No entrance for porkers! Fat toads need not apply!"

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"My dear chap, you said that you wouldn't accept the hospitality of No. 1 Study any more," said Wharton. "Stick to it. It's lucky, too, because there isn't any hospitality for you to accept. The fact is we're having the Cliff House girls, and we can't inflict you upon them."

Bunter glared through his spectacles.

"Well, you blessed rotters——"

"Thank you!"

Bunter stood regarding them with silent wrath and indignation for a minute, and then rushed after them again, and caught them up in the doorway of the School House.

"I say, you fellows, I suppose you're joking?" he exclaimed.

"Not a bit of it!"

"You're going to ask me to the feed?"

"Rats!"

"Well, I shall jolly well come, anyway!"

"You'll be jolly well kicked out if you do!"

"I—I say, you fellows, I want to help you, you know," said Bunter feebly. "What I said the other day was only a—a figure of speech. Look here, I don't really want to

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Another School Tale of the Juniors of Greyfriars. By FRANK RICHARDS.

come to the feed for my own sake at all, you know. My real object is to help you, and—and wait on the others, and show my friendship for you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You see, the Courtfield fellows are coming, too," said Harry. "You've pointed out that there's a great difference between you and them, so you can't very well come to the same feed."

"I should be willing to waive that, you know."

"Yes; but they mightn't."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By Jove, I've got a wheeze!" said Bob Cherry. "Bunter says that what he wants to do is to come and look after the other fellows, and help, and so on——"

"Of course!" said Bunter eagerly. "That—that's just what I've been looking forward to, you know. I want that more than anything else."

"Good!" said Bob. "And I suppose it's admitted that we can't very well ask the Courtfield chaps to sit down to a feed with a chap like Bunter in the company——"

"Oh, no! They'd feel so insulted."

"Well, then, let Bunter come as a waiter."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I—I'll come as a waiter, or—or——"

"Or anything else, so long as you come!" grinned Nugent. "All serene, then! Bunter can be waiter, and perhaps we may let him finish up some of the grub afterwards—if there's any left over. Of course, we shall expect our waiter to be in evening-dress."

"Of course!"

"The evening-dressfulness should be terrific!"

"Oh, really, you know——"

"Well, that's settled!" said Harry Wharton, laughing. "If you like to come as a waiter in evening-dress, Bunter, you can come. If not, not. Is it a go?"

"Yes," grunted Bunter, "it's a go."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

— — —

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER.
Bunter the Waiter.

THERE was one yell of laughter in the Lower School when it became generally known that the Remove were standing a Christmas feed and that Billy Bunter was to officiate as a waiter in evening-dress.

Bunter had talked so much about the bust-up, that what was really to happen was screamingly funny. After so many extensive plans for bust-ups regardless of expense, to officiate as a waiter at somebody else's bust-up was a fall for the fat junior.

But Bunter did not seem to care, so long as he got to the feed somehow.

Wharton's invitations were promptly sent out, and were couched a little more tactfully than Bunter's.

The Cliff House girls promised to come, and so did Trumper & Co., of Courtfield Council School. All the Remove fellows who were asked agreed willingly enough, and those who weren't asked declared that they weren't going to stand on ceremony with old Wharton, and that they should come all the same.

Upper Fourth fellows heard of it, and condescendingly remarked that they would drop in, to which some of the Removites retorted that if they did they would very promptly be dropped out again. Hobson, of the Shell, told Wharton that he was coming, and Wharton promised to have his football-boots on ready, at which Hobson smiled in a sickly way and dropped the subject. Even Coker—the great Coker—of the Fifth, mentioned to Harry that he would be glad to come to the Remove Form-room on Saturday afternoon. And Wharton heartily replied that he had no doubt of it, and he had no doubt that Coker would be still more glad to get out of the Form-room again. And Coker gave up the idea of coming.

When, after school on Saturday, Mrs. Mimble's supplies were delivered in the Form-room the juniors' eyes opened at the extent of them.

"My only hat!" Bulstrode ejaculated. "It will be a bust-up, and no mistake! I'm glad I'm coming. After all, it's rotten to keep up bad-feeling at Christmas-time."

Hazeldene, to whom he made the remark, nodded.

"I was just thinking the same," he assented. "I don't believe in bearing malice and carrying ill-feeling into the New Year."

At which Bulstrode grinned.

As a matter of fact, Hazeldene was feeling very much stranded lately. He had known all along that Vernon-Smith was chumming up with him because he wanted a chance of cutting out the chums of the Remove with Marjorie. His refusal to help the Bounder in his object had resulted in a quarrel, and that quarrel was not made up. The Bounder believed that if he held out Hazeldene was bound to give in. Hazeldene owed him money, and had fallen into the habit of borrowing of him, and would miss that source of supply. Hazel, too, was on the worst of terms with his old friends, and had nobody to chum with now that he had quarrelled with both parties.

Consequently, Hazeldene was thinking very seriously of accepting the olive-branch Harry Wharton had held out. Wharton, too, was thinking about the matter.

Marjorie would hope, if not expect to see her brother at the feed; and Wharton felt that he ought to put his pride in his pocket, if necessary, in order to relieve the girl's mind of a worry. It went against the grain for him to risk a further insulting rebuff from a fellow he despised; but, for Marjorie's sake, he made up his mind to it.

He looked for Hazeldene on Saturday afternoon, shortly before the Cliff House girls were expected. He found him in the Close, hanging about alone. Vernon-Smith, keeping up his policy of leaving Hazeldene to come to his senses, as he termed it, had gone out with Snoop and Skinner, without speaking to Hazel at all. Hazeldene was walking under the leafless trees, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and a frown of discontent on his face, when Harry Wharton came up. There had been an early fall of snow, and the Greyfriars Close was powdered with white.

"Hazel, old man, will you come to the feed?" Harry asked, plunging directly into the subject. "Nearly all the Form will be there, and your sister has promised to come."

Hazeldene hesitated.

"I suppose you're asking me because you know Smith has gone out and left me in the lurch?" he said, biting his lip.

"I didn't know Smith had gone out; and I don't care a rap whether he's in or out. I ask you because I want you to come."

Hazeldene grinned faintly.

"Well, I'll be glad to come," he said.

"Good! Marjorie will be glad."

Hazeldene walked to the School House with Wharton, and several times he opened his mouth to speak, and said nothing.

Finally, he broke out, with a scarlet face:

"I'm sorry about—about that Highcliffe affair, Wharton," he said, dropping his eyes. "It was horribly caddish, I know. Those Highcliffe cads got me into it, and—and there was another chap egging me on all the time. Of course, I know I was the worst; but—but I was furious about your dropping me from the team, and those cads took advantage of it. I'm sorry."

Wharton's face lighted up.

"It's all right," he said. "I'm jolly glad to hear you say that, Hazel. I thought at the time that the proposal must have come from the Highcliffe fellows, and that you wouldn't have carried it through if Vernon-Smith hadn't egged you on. He was the cause of all the trouble between us. Well, never mind! Let bygones be bygones; and neither of us need mention the thing again."

"Thanks!" said Hazeldene, in a low voice.

And the subject dropped.

There was a powdery snow falling when the fellows from Courtfield arrived, tramping up the lane in their overcoats. They were given a hearty welcome. Even fellows who were inclined to indulge in a snobbish sniff or two felt that they could not do otherwise than be civil to Wharton's guests when they themselves were at the feed.

Trumper & Co. had nothing to complain of in the way of lack of courtesy. In fact, Solly remarked, with great satisfaction, that it was "all therene."

"Look here," said Trumper, tapping Wharton on the arm in the Form-room, "you said that Bunter wasn't coming; but—but if you're leaving him out on our account, don't do it. We don't mind him."

"It'th all therene!" assured Solly.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"It's jolly decent of you to say so," he said; "but it's too late now. He can't come to the feed."

"Why not?"

"He's engaged as waiter."

"As—as what?"

"Waiter!"

The Courtfield fellows roared.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here he is!" exclaimed Bob Cherry.

Billy Bunter rolled into the Form-room.

Ever since the compact had been made Billy Bunter had tried to squirm out of it, and to get an assurance that he would be tolerated at the feed in the capacity of guest. He had failed. It was made quite clear that he could come as a waiter, or not at all; and so he had kept to the agreement. He entered the Form-room now in evening-dress, looking, as a matter of fact, extremely like a real waiter.

He blinked at the juniors through his spectacles, and a roar of laughter greeted him.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here's Bunter!"

"Here's the waiter!"

"Waiter! Waiter!"

"Garcon! Garcon!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows——"

"Now then, none of your beastly familiarity, waiter!" exclaimed Nugent. "What the dooce do you mean by addressing us as 'fellows'? Kindly remember that there's a social distinction between you and Master Trumper."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, you know, I jolly well don't look like a real waiter!" roared the fat junior.

Bob Cherry looked at him critically.

"No, you don't," he agreed: "your figure's not good enough."

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"And your manners are too crude."

"Look here——"

"Silence, waiter! Get the things out for the feed, and lay the cloths," said Harry Wharton. "Some of you fellows keep an eye on that waiter. I had him without a character, and he may try to pinch some of the grub."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, I'll watch him!" said Ogilvy. "He won't pinch any grub while I've got my eye on him."

"Oh, really, Ogilvy——"

"Mister Ogilvy, please, you cheeky, low-class bounder!"

"Get on with your work, waiter. There's plenty to do."

Bunter, simmering with rage and indignation, was set to work. There was, indeed, plenty to do, and the Removites made him do it. And sharp eyes saw to it that he did not purloin any of the eatables he handled in the course of his duty. The early dusk was closing in over the Close, and the lights were going in the Form-room, and a huge fire blazed and roared away in the grate. Two or three juniors were on the look-out for the girls from Cliff House, and presently there was a shout:

"Here's Marjorie!"

And the chums of the Remove rushed to greet the guest of honour.

THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER.

The Bust-Up!

MARJORIE came in with her pretty face pink under her bonnet, and her eyes dancing.

Hazeldene had been with the chums when they greeted her at the School House door, and that showed the girl that matters were on a friendly footing once more. She gave Harry Wharton a grateful look as she shook hands with him, and Harry felt that, after all, he had done very little to oblige so sweet a girl as Marjorie. The juniors received the Cliff House girls with enthusiasm. Miss Clara and Wilhelmina and Grace were with Marjorie, and all of them looked cheerful and bright. They had smiles for everybody, Trumper & Co. getting as many as anybody else. Indeed, Miss Clara seemed to be so taken with Trumper's rugged, good-natured ways that she showed a disposition to allow him to become her cavalier for the afternoon—a position which half the fellows there would gladly have taken up.

Billy Bunter came forward to greet the Cliff House girls, and they looked at him in surprise. They knew Bunter of old, and that he was always showy and flashy whenever he could borrow another fellow's clothes or money. But they had not expected even Billy Bunter to turn up to a feed in the afternoon in evening clothes.

But they were soon apprised of the facts. As Bunter came forward, wriggling his unwieldly person in what he imagined was a graceful and insinuating way, Bob Cherry pushed him back.

"Get on with your work, waiter," he said.

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"Mister Cherry, you impudent dog!"

"Look here——"

"Wharton, I'm not satisfied with your waiter. I think he'd better be kicked out, and we'll wait on ourselves."

"I—I—it's all right!" stammered Bunter, as he scuttled away.

"What does this mean?" said Marjorie, with a smile.

"Oh, only a cheeky waiter," said Bob Cherry carelessly. "His name's Bunter, or something, I think. He has to be kept in his place, that's all."

The girls laughed. They understood, without its being explained, that the Owl of the Remove had been offending again, and that this was his punishment.

The girls were given seats near the fire, and the tables—made of boards laid across desks, and covered with cloths lent by Mrs. Mimble—were already groaning, as the novelists say, under the viands. Round the walls of the Form-room were coloured paper chains and bunches of holly, upon which the light sparkled and gleamed. Marjorie & Co. looked round in great admiration. The juniors had certainly done very well in the way of adornment, considering, as Miss Clara remarked, that they had done it without the assistance of girls.

As the seats were taken, there was an uproar from the improvised sideboard, where Bunter, the waiter, was in charge of the provisions not yet set out on the tables.

"The thafe of the world!" rang out the indignant voice of Micky Desmond—"the unholy thafe!"

"What's the matter there?"

"It's the waither."

"Oh, that fellow Bunter again! What has he been doing?"

"Faith, and I caught him eating a raisin!"

There was a roar of laughter.

"Kick him out!" called out Bulstrode.

"I—I say, you fellows, I won't eat any more!" gasped Billy Bunter. "I—I felt that I ought to have a snack, you know, to keep up my strength."

"Silence, waiter!"

"I—I'm of a delicate constitution, you know, and I can only keep going at all by taking constant nourishment," said Bunter feebly.

"Nonsense. Waiters don't have constitutions. What the dooce do you mean by accepting an engagement as waiter if you're not up to the work. Kick him out!"

"Oh, really——"

"Well, we'll give you another chance," said Harry Wharton severely. "But, mind nothing of that sort occurs again, waiter."

"Oh, really——"

"Silence!"

Billy Bunter was silenced, but the other fellows were making noise enough. There was a cheery steam of tea and

coffee, and at the same time corks were popping, and ginger-beer and lemonade flowed in abundance.

Outside, darkness was settling on the landscape, and the snow was drifting against the windows and blurring them.

But what mattered that, when within the fire gleamed upon holly berries and kind faces, and crackled and roared in concert with cheery voices and merry laughter?

The cloud that had long rested on Hazeldene's face was gone now, and Marjorie was glad to see her brother look so cheerful. Even Bulstrode forgot to swank, and was as kind and merry as the best of them. Mark Linley lost his usual gravity, and came out wonderfully as a merry dog, as Bob Cherry put it. As for the Courtfield fellows, they enjoyed themselves, and showed it. They chummed up with the Removites in the most amicable manner, and some of the lordly Remove were quite surprised to find that "those Board-school chaps" were very nice fellows, whose manners left nothing to be desired.

The only person who wasn't quite happy was William George Bunter.

Bunter was suffering the woes of Tantalus. He was in the midst of plenty, which he could not touch.

The chums of the Remove meant to let him have a feed when the rest were finished; but Bunter was not sure of it, and the doubt was quite sufficient to keep him on tenter-hooks all the time.

And he was kept busy, too.

Through all the laughter and talking, there was a continual cry:

"Waiter! waiter!"

"Garcon! Garcon!"

And if Bunter did not reply to the calling quickly enough, he was assailed with all sorts of personal remarks, and all his defects were discussed and commented upon with Lower-Fourth freedom.

"Waiter! waiter!"

"Where's that blessed waiter?"

"Wharton, I'm not satisfied with that man of yours."

"I conthider him a thilly ass."

"Look here, you waiter, run a bit faster. It'll bring your at down, and make your next job easier."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Bunter ran, and rushed to and fro till his fat face was streaming with perspiration, and his fat legs seemed to bend under him. Only Alonzo Todd took pity upon him. As Bunter carried up a big pie in a dish from the sideboard, Alonzo rose to help him. There was a shout.

"Sit down, Todd!"

"Let that waiter alone!"

"Todd, I'm surprised at you," said Nugent. "You know perfectly well what a social distinction there is between you and that man Bunter."

"My dear Nugent, my Uncle Benjamin——"

"Order!" yelled Micky Desmond. "Silence for Todd's Uncle Benjamin."

"My dear Desmond, my Uncle Benjamin always impressed upon me to be useful and obliging. Although I candidly acknowledge that the incessant reprehensible actions of Bunter have fully merited the punishment meted out to him, yet, on the other hand, it appears to me that it would only be considerate, and, according to the precepts of my Uncle Benjamin, to accord him a slight assistance in dealing with the heavier portion of his multifarious duties."

"How does he do it?" said Bob Cherry, in great admiration. "Why, he beats a gramophone hollow."

"Go it, Todd! Go on talking!"

But even Todd had done talking. He was assisting Bunter. He had hold of one end of the pie, and was assisting Bunter to place it on the table, reaching over the shoulders of Stott and Lacy. It was unfortunate that Alonzo's best-intended efforts ended in disaster. Somehow, his hand slipped on the dish—perhaps because it was hot.

"Dear me!" he gasped. "Look out!"

"The look-outfulness is terrific."

But the warning was too late!

The pie had crashed down, and the dish broke on the edge of the table, and the contents shot fairly over Lacy and Bulstrode. Several other fellows were splashed, but Lacy and Bulstrode were simply smothered.

"Yow!" roared Bulstrode, jumping up. "I'll—I'll kill that duffer!"

"The waiter's to blame," shouted Ogilvy. "Kick the waiter out. Wharton—Bulstrode's not satisfied with the man you've engaged to wait!"

"Oh, dear!" gasped Alonzo "I'm sorry—so sorry!"

Bulstrode seized hold of Bunter. The fat junior yelled, and two or three fellows dragged the furious Bulstrode off.

"Hang it all, not with the girls here!" said Morgan. "Behave yourself, Bulstrode!"

"Look at what he's done."

"Well, go and change."

Bulstrode coloured under the glance of Marjorie. He stamped from the room to change his clothes, snorting with wrath, and Lacy followed him.

"Be more careful, please, waiter," said Wharton. "Todd don't you help him again."

"I'm so sorry."

"Yes, I dare say you are, but that won't mend the pie Sit down!"

"But my Uncle Benjamin——"

"Dry up!"

"Always impressed upon me——"

"Cheese it!"

"Always to be obliging and—— Ooch!"

A jam-tart caught Alonzo in the mouth, and his remark ceased quite suddenly. Uncle Benjamin was not mentioned again.

A gleam had come into Bunter's eyes, as if a new thought had dawned upon him. Perhaps the accident with Bulstrode and his escape from punishment because the girls were present, had put it into his mind.

The cries for the waiter were still as incessant as ever Bunter was being kept very busy.

"Ginger-pop here, waiter!" shouted Russell. "Open it you chump!"

Pop!

Russell gave a roar as the cork smote him behind the ear and the ginger-beer bubbled out and poured down the back of his neck. He jumped up, kicking his chair over backwards, and it caught Bunter on the shins and sent him staggering.

The fat junior fell with a bump, and the infuriated Russell seized a water-jug and emptied it over him, and added jam tarts and fruit-pies with a reckless hand. Bunter, and Bunter's evening clothes, were reduced to a shocking state inside a minute.

"Order!" roared the juniors.

But Russell was too wrathy to listen. Bunter yelled and squirmed.

"Hold on!" he shrieked. "It was an accident. I won't do it again. Yow! It was an accident, and—— Yow! Gerrooh!"

"There!" panted Russell. "I'll guarantee you won't do it again now."

Bunter didn't. He sat on the floor, a gasping and sticky mass, and it was a long time before he moved.

By the time Billy Bunter had recovered the feast was over, the juniors waiting on themselves and upon the girls for the rest of the time. Then Wharton proposed an adjournment to the drawing-room, a proposal that caused some surprise, till it turned out that the drawing-room was the Fourth Form class-room, which the chums had obtained permission to use for a couple of hours in the evening.

The Cliff House girls and the Courtfield fellows and the whole Remove crowded into the next room, where Trotter had kept a bright fire blazing, and where the walls were decorated with holly and mistletoe in a really charming way. Mr. Quelch's piano had been lent for the occasion, and soon the cheerful strains of music were heard, mingled with voices in song. The girls sang, and the juniors sang, and there was part singing, and a comic dance by Micky Desmond, and a clog-dance by Mark Linley, and the fun waxed fast and furious. Solly Lazarus brought down the house with a song delivered in his peculiar accents, the juniors almost weeping with laughter when he sang that he would "lothe himself with Luthy at Lutherne." All too soon the time came for the Cliff House girls to depart.

Then there was a putting on of coats and scarves, and Harry Wharton & Co., and Trumper and his friends, walked home with Marjorie to Cliff House.

"It's been an awfully jolly time!" said Miss Clara, when they parted at the gate. "Hasn't it, Marjorie?"

"Very jolly!" said Marjorie. "Thank you so much!"

She was thanking Wharton for more than the entertainment, and he knew it. Trumper & Co. and the Greyfriars juniors walked back to Greyfriars in the best of spirits, and on the best possible terms. They parted at the gates of the school, Trumper & Co. going on to Courtfield.

Harry Wharton looked in at the Remove Form-room when he returned. A light was still burning there, and there was a sound of a knife and a fork upon a plate.

"My hat!" said Bob Cherry. "He's still at it!"

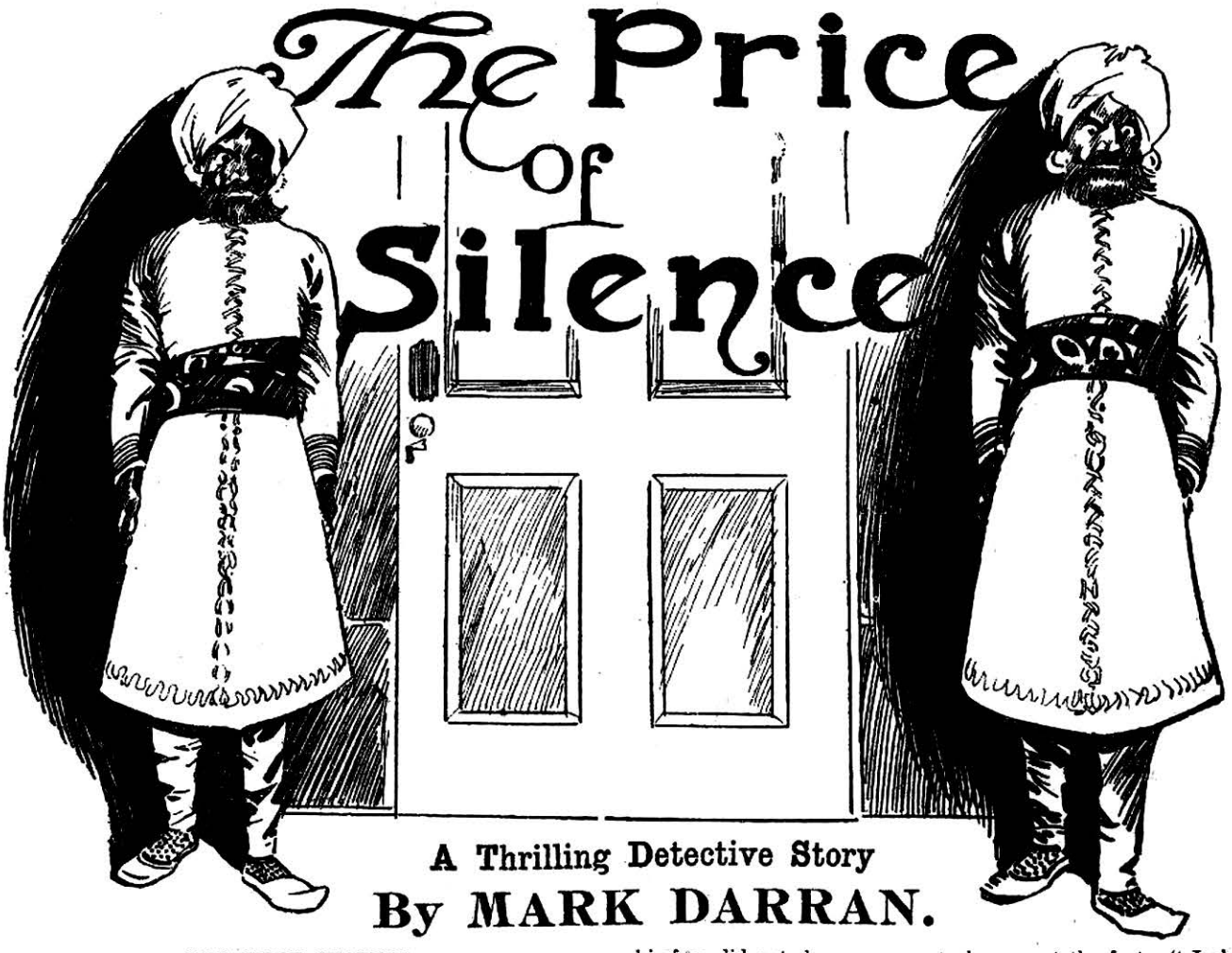
"Bunter! Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunter blinked up at them through his spectacles. The fat junior was busy. He had not troubled to change or clean down after his little affair with Russell. With sticky and draggled evening clothes, and his face smeared with jam, his hair matted with ginger-beer, the fat junior sat at the table, very busy. Puddings and pies, eatables of all sorts, were going the same way. Billy Bunter just glanced up at the juniors, and then dropped his eyes upon his plate again. He did not speak. He was too busy for words.

Billy Bunter was having his bust-up after all!

THE END.

The Second Long, Complete Story.



The Price of Silence

A Thrilling Detective Story

By MARK DARRAN.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Strange Cry—The Mystery of a Barred Room—Who Did It.

SIR JOHN HANSARD'S house in Berkeley Square was the one patch of light that really broke through the dense fog. True, from the windows of other houses lights shone, but they had not the brilliancy of those in Sir John Hansard's. As a matter of fact, the awning that stretched from the door to the kerb, and the line of carriages and motors that had been arriving for an hour back, showed that an entertainment was in progress there.

It was not a nice night for the ball that was being held in celebration of Jack Hansard's return to England after spending some years abroad. Always of a roving nature, the restraint of London had always been irksome to him, and it was only now that his father was getting on in years that he had consented to return and take his place in society.

With him had arrived a collection of curios large enough to stock a small museum.

In the ball-room that Sir John had built out at the back of the house, dancing was already in progress, though the majority of the guests were content to lounge about and talk when they could make themselves heard above the strains of the string band.

Sir John, a stately old man, was standing near the doorway, and from time to time he glanced towards the staircase, a little frown showing between his eyes.

"And where is the hero of the evening, Sir John?" an elderly lady inquired as she entered.

"Probably smoking in his own room, Lady Sellars," Sir John answered, with a gesture of despair. "I am afraid that this sort of thing does not amuse him, and he even threatened that he would go out, and——"

"Oh, I was not talking of Jack," Lady Sellars interrupted, "but of London's new lion—Prince Rani Singra, rajah of somewhere or other. He is staying here, isn't he?"

"Yes," Sir John admitted; and somehow the expression of his face did not show any great pleasure at the fact. "Jack met him abroad somewhere, and so asked him here."

A tall man, wearing a diplomat's order, paused for a moment as he was about to pass.

"Is the prince here?" he asked, with a carelessness that appeared to be a trifle overdone.

"Yes," Sir John answered. "I expect he will be down shortly, but he has been taking a meal in his own room—custom of the race, you know, not to eat with white men. Do you know him?"

The diplomat's hands went up in a curious little gesture.

"I have that pleasure," he answered slowly, and moved on.

"This is really getting quite exciting, Sir John," Lady Sellars said, with a laugh. "Do the prince's attendants do conjuring tricks or anything—you know what I mean? Mango trees growing out of a little heap of mud, and telling fortunes?"

Sir John frowned, his eyes still on the staircase.

"It has been quite the rage for the prince to tell fortunes," he answered; "but I absolutely refuse to have that sort of nonsense in my house. I consider it harmful."

The orchestra broke out into a dreamy valse, but above its strains rang out a cry that stopped the dancers as if they had suddenly been turned to stone. The faces of the women went white, and the men glanced round nervously.

A second time it rang out, a shriek of absolute terror, then broke off as if it had been choked back.

Mechanically the orchestra had stopped playing it.

"It came from upstairs," Lady Sellars said, in a shaking voice. "It sounded like—murder!"

Sir John, despite his years, squared his great shoulders and stepped out into the hall. As he did so a white-faced footman came hurrying down the broad staircase.

"The prince's room!" he gasped.

Followed by a dozen or more of the men guests, Sir John hurried upstairs, and along the corridor leading to the rooms occupied by Prince Rani Singra. Who the latter was the fashionable world of London would have found it hard to say.

NEXT TUESDAY: "THE HAUNTED ISLAND." Another School Tale of the Juniors of Greyfriars. By FRANK RICHARDS.

Somehow or other he had suddenly appeared in their midst, and probably no one had ever tried to fathom the mystery.

Everything was quiet now as Sir John made straight for the door that gave entrance to the prince's rooms. He gripped the handle, but only to find that the door was locked.

"Is anything wrong?" he cried hoarsely.

No answer, and the guests looked meaningly at each other. It was George Bigham, the diplomat, who broke the silence

"The cry may not have come from here," he said.

Sir John, looking dazed, passed a shaking hand across his face.

"I think I had better send for the police," he said huskily.

"Why not break the door in first?" a quiet voice suggested. "There may not be very much the matter."

The man who spoke was a tall young fellow of twenty-five, his face tanned by much exposure, his figure lithe but well-developed by exercise. This was Jack Hansard, Sir John's son.

"Jack is right," the diplomat agreed quickly. "The police are so fond of making a fuss about things."

As if at a signal, the guests drew back, and Jack Hansard flung himself bodily at the door. It was stout, however, and flung him back. His second attempt proved more successful, the door creaking ominously, and a kick at the lock finished the work.

Hesitating, yet anxious to see what lay inside, the men crowded forward, and more than one caught his breath in sharply as something met his gaze.

The room was brilliantly lighted, showing the costly furniture and the few Oriental nicknacks that Prince Rani Singra had added to the decorations.

Ay, and it showed more than that, for it revealed an overturned chair, and, by the window, a figure, clad in an Indian gown, that lay terribly still.

"Dead!" a man whispered in awestruck tones.

Jack Hansard pushed his way forward, a look of determination on his face.

"It may not be as bad as that," he said quietly, and knelt beside the figure.

It lay curiously close to the window, huddled right up against the wall, as if it had been trying to escape from something in the room.

After a moment's hesitation, Jack Hansard turned the prince over on to his back and felt for his heart.

"He is alive," he announced in tones of evident relief. "It must be a seizure of some kind. Isn't Dr. Mellor one of the guests here to-night?"

"Yes. I'll fetch him," the diplomat answered.

The group of white-faced guests stood looking down at the still form of the Indian prince. He was a handsome man, his face clean-shaven save for a slight moustache, but just now it was positively repellent to look upon. The jaw was slightly dropped, and the face, though rigid, held a terrible expression of fear. A man of forty or more, with lines here and there in his face that suggested trouble at some time or another.

A little man, possessed of a very big manner, came quickly into the room, and without comment knelt beside the rigid figure. In quick, professional manner he made his examination.

"Shock," he said, with decision.

"Are the consequences likely to be serious?" Sir John asked anxiously.

Dr. Mellor shook his head non-committally.

"It is impossible to say," he answered. "It would be well to put him to bed at once." He started to loosen the robe from the prince's throat, and as he did so a sharp cry broke from him. "Foul play!" he gasped, and pointed to the man's neck.

Round it was a thin, red line, such as might have been made by a rope

"Impossible!" Sir John put in sharply. "There was no one in the room, and the door was locked on the inside."

"There is the window," Dr. Mellor persisted, frowning at the idea that he could be wrong.

Sir John crossed to the window, drew the blind up, and revealed the fact that there were steel bars across it.

"I had that done after we were burgled last year," he announced. "No one could possibly enter or escape that way."

The guests looked at one another in astonishment, or else stared down at the red mark round the prince's throat.

"It may be old," Jack Hansard suggested.

"It is not," the doctor answered doggedly.

Jack Hansard shrugged his shoulders, and looked round the room.

"Then who did it," he inquired, "if the door was locked on the inside, and to enter or leave by the window is impossible?"

The prince's two Indian servants had entered the room, and they stood staring with frightened eyes at the body of their master.

"Put him to bed," Dr. Mellor ordered, and Prince Rani Singra was carried across the corridor into the bed-room opposite.

Sir John wiped the perspiration from his face and his hand was shaking badly.

"I shall be obliged if all of you will go downstairs," he said huskily, "and tell the others that there is really nothing serious the matter. Will you please stop, Bigham, and you, Jack?"

In a few seconds the three men were left alone, and of the three it was only Jack Hansard who did not appear to be nervous or shaken. But then, his life had been an adventurous one sometimes held in the hollow of his hand.

"I must send for the police," Sir John said slowly. "There can be no doubt that Mellor is right—there has been foul play. Yet I hate the idea of publicity—some of the mud always sticks to the wrong people."

Bigham caressed the upturned ends of his white moustache and looked thoughtful.

"Why not send for John Smith?" he suggested.

"John Smith?" Sir John echoed blankly.

"Of Daring & Co.," the diplomat explained. "The firm that has the reputation of never having failed in anything it has undertaken. As a matter of fact, it is one man only—John Smith himself.

An eager look came into Sir John Hansard's eyes.

"Is he the sort of man to trust," he asked quickly—"who can keep a secret?"

George Bigham shrugged his shoulders with the gesture of a man who objects to answering foolish questions.

"When I tell you that he has been employed by most of the Courts of Europe, including our own, is that enough?" he answered. "I know him personally, and will telephone to him, if you like. I am certain that he will come if he is at home."

"It will be a favour," Sir John agreed; and the diplomat hurried from the room.

Jack Hansard stroked his moustache, and smiled slightly.

"I fancy that even John Smith has found a mystery too deep for him at last," he remarked.

"I trust not, Jack," the old man answered. "It is terrible that such a thing should happen in my house—terrible! Why, violence to such a man might even cause trouble with India!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

John Smith Arrives—A Straight Question—The Blackmailer.

A LARGE motor whirred up to the door of the house in Berkeley Square, and a man of medium height, wrapped up in a fur coat, stepped out.

"Will you tell Sir John that I have arrived," he said, in a quiet voice to the frightened-looking footman at the door. "I am John Smith."

"Then will you please come upstairs at once, sir?" the man answered, hastily leading the way.

Up in the room where Prince Rani Singra had been discovered Sir John Hansard, Jack, and George Bigham were still waiting.

"Thank Heaven you haven't failed me, Mr. Smith!" the diplomat cried.

"Is it a custom of mine?" the representative of Daring & Co. answered coolly, as he took off his heavy coat. He was in evening-dress, without an order of any kind, and yet there was something striking about him. True he was only medium build, though well put together, but it was the face that attracted and held the attention. It was clean-shaven, and would almost have been wooden in expression had it not been for the grey eyes. They were hard, and cold, and grey—a fitting match to the rather thin-lipped mouth.

It was seldom that a man had seen John Smith smile.

"It is very good of you to come, Mr. Smith," Sir John put in quickly, "though I fear that the mystery will remain one."

John Smith shrugged his shoulders.

"Hardly a compliment to Daring & Co.," he suggested.

"I did not mean that," Sir John said hurriedly.

John Smith bowed, looked to Sir John for permission, and lit a cigar.

"A reputation for success is not easily made," he said, "but easy to lose. May I have the details of this affair?"

Very concisely, forgetting nothing of importance, Sir John related all that had happened, and as he spoke the eyes of John Smith were moving continually about the room, so that it almost seemed as if he were not paying attention.

"And you found him here?" he asked, crossing to the window. "The chair has not been moved, I presume?"

"Nothing has been touched," Sir John assured him.

John Smith looked from the window, across the chair that

lay on the floor, to the table at which the prince must have been sitting.

"And the door was locked on the inside and the window is barred," he mused.

"It is quite a mystery," Jack Hansard remarked.

John Smith turned towards the window, glanced at the sills, and dropped the blind again.

"I should like to see this prince," he said.

"There is only the red mark round the throat," Jack said.

John Smith flicked the ash from his cigar, and his face was particularly expressionless.

"I will see it," he said.

In the bed-room the men found Dr. Mellor, who had as yet failed to bring the prince round, while the latter's two attendants hovered round helplessly.

John Smith bent over the bed, turned the clothes back, and glanced for a moment at the red mark. Whatever it told him his face did not express his thoughts.

"Thank you!" he said simply.

"And what will you do now?" Sir John asked eagerly.

"If Mr. Hansard can spare time I should like to discuss the affair with him," John Smith answered quietly. "He has been much abroad, I believe, and his experience may help me."

"I doubt it," the young man said impatiently, looking sharply at John Smith. "But I am at your service. My room is just along here."

As a matter of fact, the room proved to be next to that in which Prince Rani Singra had been found unconscious. Its walls were covered with weapons and other curios; in fact, there was practically only one small space on the wall not covered. That there had been something there was plain, for the nail still showed, and the paper was darker where the sun had not been able to reach and fade it.

"You have certainly travelled a great deal," John Smith remarked quietly. "You have been Texas way, I see." He nodded at a great pair of silver spurs that hung close to the empty patch on the wall."

"Yes," Jack Hansard admitted, dropping rather impatiently into a chair.

"Don't you think we had better discuss the affair in hand?" he added.

John Smith looked at the young man in mild surprise, and lit a fresh cigar.

"We are discussing it," he answered between puffs. Then he took the cigar from between his teeth, and his jaw set hard.

"Why did you do it?" he asked slowly.

Jack Hansard started in his chair, and his face was a little pale under its tan.

"Do what?" he asked.

"Lasso this Indian through the window," John Smith replied, and there was no doubt in his voice.

For a moment Jack Hansard sat still, his eyes on the other's face, then he crossed to a cupboard, took a lasso from it, and threw it at John Smith's feet. The latter picked it up and glanced at it.

"Cotton," he muttered. "I knew it could have been no other sort of rope when I saw a few shreds of it on the window-sill, where it had rubbed. Such things are not common in England. Besides, how else but by the window could this prince have been reached?"

Jack Hansard eyed the representative of Daring & Co. with eyes that were very wide, but there was no fright in them.

"How did you guess that I did it?" he demanded.

"I did not guess," John Smith answered, with a touch of impatience; "I knew. Few men in England can use a rope. You have been a cowboy; apart from which, you have skinned your wrist a trifle by turning the rope round it."

Jack Hansard glanced down at his wrist, and saw the red mark right enough.

"What are you going to do?" he asked doggedly.

"Learn why you did it," John Smith answered coolly, taking a chair.

Jack Hansard rose and paced up and down the room, a doubtful expression in his eyes, but when he did stop that doubt had left his face and it was very determined.

"Listen to me, Mr. Smith," he said, in a hard voice, "and I will tell you why I did this thing to-night; why, with that brown beast at the end of my rope, I tried to frighten him into leaving this country."

"Go on," John Smith said, without emotion.

"It is some years back that I met this prince—he bore a humbler title then," Jack Hansard began—"out in India. At first he was a poor man, but by degrees he grew rich and bought a large bungalow at—well, the place does not matter. I had many friends there, and one of them, an Army man, at the same time grew proportionately poor. First his horses went, then it became whispered that he was in debt. Lastly, he shot himself."

Jack Hansard looked quickly across at John Smith, but the latter's face showed no emotion.

"He left a letter, and Willoughby's fate was no longer a mystery. Years back, under great temptation, he had done a certain dishonourable thing, but had since tried his best to live it down. This Indian had learnt of it, and had blackmailed him mercilessly, threatening exposure, until he could bear it no longer."

The young man squared his shoulders, and his eyes were very hard.

"It would have been bad for the cur if Willoughby's friends had got hold of him," he continued, "but he left the day that Willoughby shot himself. Since then I have travelled in many countries, but imagine my amazement when I ran across this man, calling himself Prince Rani Singra, in one of London's most fashionable houses. He did not recognise me, and that gave me my chance. I know the man, and that he is here for no good, and so I asked him to this house, with the result——" He nodded in the direction where the man lay.

John Smith's eyes were curiously bright, and for once a slight smile curled his lips.

"This explains much," he said.

"In what way?" Jack Hansard asked, in surprise.

John Smith threw away the end of his cigar, crossed the room, and hung the lasso up in its old place.

"This is strictly in confidence," he said.

"You can trust me."

"Only three weeks ago," John Smith explained, "a certain young man of good family was arrested for pawning jewels that were not his property, although it was impossible to prove that he needed money. Prince Rani Singra was staying in the house at the time."

Jack Hansard caught his breath sharply, for he understood.

"There is a skeleton in many a cupboard," John Smith continued.

"Ay, and this cur of an Indian is the man to open the doors and let them out," he said between his teeth. "It was always believed that it was by hypnotism that he obtained poor Willoughby's secret, for he had more than once shown his skill in that way."

John Smith thought of the women who went so eagerly to the prince to have their fortunes told, of the darkened rooms in which these affairs always took place, and he wondered how many secrets were in the man's mind, stored ready for profit. More than once John Smith had heard of this new London lion, for it was his business to learn and—remember.

He rose to his feet now, and slipped into his coat.

"What are you going to do?" Jack Hansard asked huskily.

"Finish your work—force this man out of England," John Smith answered.

"No one will dare to give him away," Jack Hansard said doubtingly.

"Daring & Co. have accomplished harder things," John Smith replied, with a shrug of his shoulders.

The two men passed into the corridor, and down into the hall. To their amazement they saw the prince, helped by his two native servants, going towards the doorway.

"But, my dear prince," Sir John was protesting, "you really are not in a fit state to be moved."

Under the brilliant lights of the hall the Indian's face showed a dirty, muddy brown, but there was an evil grin on his lips as he turned towards a lady of forty or so who stood ready dressed to leave.

"Lady Minter has been so kind as to say that I may stay at her house," Prince Rani Singra answered, in excellent English, and with very little trace of an accent. "She is proving herself a friend."

The eyes of everyone present were on the prince, or they would have seen something very like a shudder run through Lady Minter Her face was curiously pale, too. Considering that she had only met the prince a week ago at a friend's house—she had gone to the little room set aside for him, as others had done, though she had always laughed at fortune-telling, yet she had come out with a white face and a look of fright in her eyes.

And now Prince Rani Singra was to stay at her house.

John Smith moved quietly forward, and solicitously helped the Indian forward.

"You must allow me to call on you," he said quietly, "as I shall not rest until this matter is cleared up."

A startled look came into the prince's eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"I am John Smith, of Daring & Co.," John Smith answered, in a low voice. "Some people call me a detective, possibly because I have never failed—by the aid of Providence—to clear up any mystery that I have attempted to solve."

"What has that to do with me?" the prince demanded, and there was something of a snarl in his voice.

"You have been roughly handled to-night," John Smith explained. "Sir John Hansard has asked me to bring the culprit to justice."

The hands of Prince Rani Singra hovered round his bruised throat.

"It is foolish," he said hastily. "I was in the room alone, the door locked, and—fainted."

John Smith nodded in assent, and appeared to be quite satisfied.

"Perhaps the climate does not agree with you," he suggested.

The Indian looked round quickly, and the eyes of the two men met.

"I should try India," John Smith added. "Good-night!"

"Yes, the change of air might benefit you!" Lady Minter put in eagerly.

A cruel little smile came back to the lips of Prince Rani Singra, and he took the lady's hand and raised it to his lips. She flinched as if a snake had bitten her.

"Why, no," he said, "it is the atmosphere of friendship that will make me recover quickly. I shall remain in England."

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Prince's Terms Refused—The Blackmailer at Work.

JOHN SMITH, having just finished breakfast, was marking with blue pencil the paper that lay before him, but he looked up as a knock came at the door. His housekeeper entered, with a doubtful expression on her face.

"Prince Rani Singra, sir," she announced.

John Smith ticked off another item in the paper, and nodded.

"I will see him," he said.

A few seconds later the Indian stepped into the room. He was dressed in European clothes, save for his turban, and his face was still a muddy colour. Behind him followed his two attendants.

"I am glad you have come so early," John Smith said coolly; "I feared that I might have to wait in for you."

A startled expression came into the Indian's eyes.

"You expected me?"

"After our conversation last night—yes," John Smith assured him.

The two attendants would have followed their master into the room; but John Smith motioned them back, and closed the door upon them.

Prince Rani Singra evidently wished to appear at his ease, but his efforts were not crowned with any great success.

"It is about that affair last night," he said quickly. "I do not wish the matter to be carried farther, for the sake of Sir John Hansard. I admit that there was foul play, but I forgive the man who did it."

"I wonder if he forgives you for causing Willoughby to shoot himself?" John Smith said musingly.

The Indian gave vent to a choking cry, and his eyes were ugly with fright.

"I don't know a Willoughby," he managed to stammer.

But John Smith shook his head reproachfully, much as one does at a child.

"Why lie about it?" he asked, and a sudden gleam of anger came into his eyes.

He thrust the newspaper towards the Indian, and pointed at a certain part that he had marked

"Read it!" he ordered. "It is your work again."

This was the paragraph:

"It is rumoured that a certain young man well-known in society is shortly to go abroad to start ranching, owing to recent heavy financial losses. It is not revealing too much to say that only a few weeks ago he entertained a distinguished Indian prince who is now on a visit to this country."

Mechanically Prince Rani Singra passed his eyes over the type, and slowly his expression changed. An evil grin curled his lips, and a defiant look was in his eyes.

"And if it is?" he sneered. "Suppose he is going abroad because of something I know?"

John Smith answered nothing, but on his face was the expression that was always there when his mind was fully made up. Possibly the Indian saw this, for his manner changed.

"I admit it—everything," he said coolly. "I tell you that because of my powers I am winning a great fortune from these fools who are frightened I will tell their secrets. But"—he bent forward towards John Smith—"there is money enough for two in it—for two!"

John Smith did not move, though he could guess what the other meant.

"Very soon," the Indian went on eagerly, "I shall bring off three great coups. Nothing can stop them, but your interference may make my work more difficult.

"I will pay well for you to leave me alone, though I need pay nothing. For who of them all dare act against me?"

John Smith rose slowly from his chair, and his eyes were like points of steel.

"Out of here—before I kick you!" he thundered.

So threatening was his attitude that the prince started back and snatched a revolver from the bosom of his coat.

He might as well have saved himself the trouble, for John Smith was too quick for him. His right fist swung upwards, caught the Indian's wrist clean on the bone, and the weapon fell to the floor.

John Smith flung the door open, then his arms went round the Indian, and he fairly flung him out into the passage.

The man scrambled to his feet and made a bolt for the door, where his attendants were waiting. With his hand on the handle he paused and looked back, and his dark face was terribly evil in expression.

"You will be sorry for that!" he snarled.

"I am sorry now," John Smith answered coldly—"for soiling my hands with you."

Lady Minter's pretty drawing-room was more crowded than usual, and for the excellent reason that it was known that Prince Rani Singra had honoured her by consenting to stay at her house. The Berkeley Square incident had already travelled widely, and it is more than a little probable that more than one man or woman, good-hearted enough in the ordinary way, wished that there had been no rescue. Naturally, the story had taken many forms, the versions ranging from an attack by one of his own attendants, who had suddenly gone mad, to an attempted theft of his valuable jewels by an armed swell cracksman who had contrived to get in to the ball.

One curious thing might have been noticed at Lady Minter's, and that was that there was not one woman present who had ever had her fortune told by the Indian prince. As a matter of fact, it almost seemed that once was enough for most men or women, for they never went to him again unless actually picked out by him. Then, with something of the air of doves going into the cage of a snake, they obeyed without demur.

Lady Minter's face was white, despite the bright way in which she gossiped with the women who were present, and her eyes never left the corner where, seated on a pile of cushions, was Prince Rani Singra.

His dark face still looked a trifle pale—if that is possible—and there was a certain restlessness in his eyes which was not usually to be noticed there.

Lady Minter crossed the room, and it was curious to notice that her manner was almost humble as she addressed the man she was befriending.

"I have told my friends that you are not nearly well enough to tell their fortunes to-day," she said rather quickly, with a forced laugh. "What would Dr. Mellor say for allowing me to let you work your brain so soon?"

The smile that curled the prince's lips was not pleasant to look upon, and his eyes held Lady Minter's with a curious intentness.

"They shall not be disappointed," he answered quickly. "Already my servants have arranged the little room across the passage."

"But the fatigue?" Lady Minter protested, though feebly.

Prince Rani Singra rose from his pile of cushions, and, with his hand lightly on her arm led Lady Minter from the room. There was a smile on his face; but as the door closed behind them it vanished, and his mouth snarled like that of a wild beast.

"You fool!" he whispered. "What would you do?"

"Oh, this cannot go on!" the woman answered shakily. "I cannot see you in this house forcing my friends' secrets from them."

"They should have no secrets," the Indian sneered.

"Surely you have had enough money?" Lady Minter ventured. "This blackmail——"

The man thrust a hand brutally over her mouth, and his eyes blazed.

"Say that again, and, by Krishna, your husband knows that the jewels you wear are false, and that the real ones have been pawned to pay your debts at bridge." The man laughed mirthlessly, almost noiselessly. "It would please him, wouldn't it, to think that the historical gems——"

A servant came along the passage, and Prince Rani Singra drew hastily back and moved towards a room opposite.

"May I suggest that you send Mrs. Beemish in first?"

"Yes," Lady Minter answered, but her lips formed the word rather than gave utterance to it.

Prince Rani Singra pushed open the door of the room and entered. The blinds had been drawn over the windows, the heavy curtains had been pulled close, so that there was little light. On a small Oriental table in the centre of the room burned a little fire in a brass bowl, a curiously pungent

Detective-Inspector Blakeland thrust his hand through the hole in the floor, and the next moment brought to light the missing jewel cases. *(See page 35.)*

smell arising from it. Beside this stood a saucer containing some dark liquid, and pens, ink, and paper.

"Vashti!" the prince said in Hindustani.

The taller of the two native servants, a man with wild eyes and a thin, cadaverous face, bowed low.

"My lord?" he asked humbly.

"To-day there must be no failure!" the Indian went on sharply. "Many rupees have I paid you, so that when you return to India you will be a great man among your people. Yet the other day you failed to learn that which I desired."

"The brain is not a horse, my lord," Vashti answered, with a touch of spirit; "flogging will not make it work the faster."

There was a footstep outside the door, and Prince Rani Singra dropped hastily upon a pile of cushions, just before the door opened to admit a tall, handsome woman of about fifty years of age. She stood hesitating on the threshold, evidently more than half inclined to retreat.

"Oh, don't be silly!" a girl's voice said. "I'm told it's just lovely! Do go in!"

"It is well that you have come early, Mrs. Beemish," the Indian said in a soft voice. "Yesterday I was much shaken, so that to-day my power is not great. What would you have?"

"Then perhaps I had better not trouble you?" Mrs. Beemish said hastily.

Ayasha, the shorter of the two attendants, stepped noiselessly forward, picked up the saucer of dark liquid from the table, and held it out to the woman.

She took it mechanically, looking into it wonderingly, something of the fascination of the unknown taking possession of her.

In the gloom Prince Rani Singra watched her with eager eyes, while Vashti's eyes fairly glowed as they never left her face.

"What would you have?" the prince asked again, and softly drew towards him one of the sheets of paper that lay on the table.

"Tell me if there is happiness in the future?" the woman asked, with a touch of eagerness.

"Then look into the bowl."

The woman's eyes were fixed intently on the dark liquid, but she saw nothing there.

Vashti moved slightly, but his eyes never left her face, which began to change curiously in expression. All the life seemed to go out of it, and it became fixed and rigid.

"What is it that is troubling you?" It was the prince who asked the question.

"There is nothing——" Mrs. Beemish began, but stopped abruptly.

For a few seconds she was silent; and when she continued she spoke slowly and haltingly, so that the Indian had no difficulty in taking her words down on paper.

"Why has Dick done it?" she said. "He knows that I would have got the money for him somehow. But to have put his father's name to that bill. I know he meant no harm, thinking that he would be able to meet it. His father will never forgive him—never!"

"How much is it?" Prince Rani Singra asked, and his voice was shaking with excitement.

"Two thousand pounds."

Softly as a cat Prince Rani Singra stepped forward and laid the paper on the table. Then he took the saucer of fluid from the woman, and placed a pen in her hand.

"Sign it!" he ordered.

Just for a moment Mrs. Beemish seemed to hesitate, then the pen moved across the paper.

With a laugh of triumph the Indian turned and waved his hand to Vashti.

Instantly the light died out of the man's eyes, and at the same moment the woman looked up and passed a hand nervously across her eyes.

"Why, I—I saw nothing," she said, with a hysterical laugh.

"Yet you have written it down," Prince Rani Singra answered her softly, and at the same time drew the blinds from the window, so that the light came into the room. "Read what you have written."

Mrs. Beemish picked up the sheet of paper, on which her signature was still wet; then a cry of fear broke from her.

"No, no!" she cried. "It's a lie—about Dick!"

The prince snatched the paper away from the woman, as if fearing that she might destroy it.

"In that case, it doesn't matter if I show it to the others," he said carelessly. "I don't suppose they would tell your husband—though news has a way of travelling."

Mrs. Beemish swayed as though she would have fallen, but steadied herself by gripping the edge of the table.

"Give me that paper," she said harshly.

The Indian read the contents of it with great care, then looked up and met the woman's eyes.

"What a wicked world!" he sneered.

Mrs. Beemish stepped forward, as if in her desperation she would strike the man.

"I have heard strange things of you," she said huskily; "and I have noticed that where you have been unhappiness has followed. Now I know why, you blackmailer. You live by prying into people's secrets, by taking into the light——"

"No," Prince Rani Singra interrupted, with a laugh. "I can always keep secrets—at a price."

Mrs. Beemish raised her head proudly, though there was a despairing expression in her eyes.

"The price?" she asked.

"Two thousand pounds," the Indian answered readily. "You see, my consultations are not expensive—no more, in fact, than the little—er—indiscretion of your son."

"I haven't so much," Mrs. Beemish sobbed.

"I can wait," the Indian assured her blandly. "I think you had better return to the others."

Like a woman in a dream Mrs. Beemish moved towards the door, opened it, and stepped out into the passage. As she did so a man brushed past her and entered the room, closing the door behind him.

Prince Rani Singra swung round from the window, where he had been standing reading the paper again, and tried to thrust it under his robe. At sight of his visitor he gave vent to a cry of fear, for it was John Smith, dressed in conventional morning-coat, a silk hat in one hand and a malacca cane in the other.

"You do not often have men visitors," John Smith said coolly. "It must be quite a change to you."

The Indian stood with the paper crushed in his hand, making a great effort to pull himself together.

"Nor do I want them," he answered harshly.

He made a motion as if to pull the heavy curtain across the window, but John Smith gripped it and tore it down, so that the room was flooded with light. Then he stood with his back to the wall, so that neither of the Indian attendants, who looked ugly, could come at him from behind.

"I will not trouble you to tell my fortune," he said coolly. "All I want is to see that paper."

"It is private," the Indian snarled.

John Smith shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no wish to read it, only to give it back to Mrs. Beemish," he said coolly.

The Indian's eyes searched the man's face, but he could read nothing there.

"How much do you know?" he demanded.

"That, despite my warning, you are still at the same game," John Smith answered, without hesitation. "Give me that paper."

"No!" the Indian snapped.

With a sudden movement he bounded forward and thrust the paper into the embers of the fire that burned in the brass bowl, but the next second John Smith had dashed the whole thing over with his stick, and snatched the paper up while the embers burned away on the parquet floor.

Mad with rage, his eyes shining like a tiger's, Prince Rani Singra gave an order to his men. Knives flashed from their robes, and they started forward.

As they came a thin blade of steel flashed out from the malacca cane, and John Smith, his knees bent like a fencer's, stood waiting. The men drew back.

"It would be foolish," John Smith said quietly. "I should almost certainly have to injure both of these men, and if you join in, I kill you!"

There was a note of deadly earnest in the voice of the representative of Daring & Co., and though Prince Rani Singra laughed, there was no mirth in the sound.

"It would be murder," he said.

"Is killing a snake murder?" John Smith answered him. "Besides, unfortunately for you, I stand rather well with the police, and I fancy that they would believe my tale when they saw those men's knives. I should really order them to put them away, in case anyone enters."

Even in his rage the Indian knew that this quiet-faced man was speaking the truth, and he motioned his men to put up their knives.

"What will you do with the paper?" he snarled.

"Return it—unread," John Smith answered, and backed towards the door. As he opened it he sheathed the thin blade of steel in his cane again, for all danger of attack was passed.

"By the by," he said, "I will tell Lady Minter that you are far too unwell to do more to-day."

John Smith closed the door, and, as coolly as if nothing had happened, entered the room opposite. Lady Minter greeted him with surprise.

"I must really apologise for my call," he said quietly; "but I thought it only right to inquire after the prince. I have just seen him, and he asked me to say that he does not feel strong enough to do more to-day."

Exclamations of regret broke from many present, especially from the younger women.

"I am afraid I must ask you another favour, Lady Minter," John Smith continued. "May I be allowed an introduction to Mrs. Beemish?"

Lady Minter murmured the formal words, and John Smith crossed over to where the lady sat by the fire, her face very white.

"The prince asked me to give you this," he said, holding out the scorched paper. "I have no idea what it is, but I imagine it is your fortune."

With an exclamation of relief Mrs. Beemish almost snatched the paper from John Smith's hand.

"Oh, do let me see?" a dozen voices cried. But the words had scarcely left their lips before the paper was in the fire.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Prince Rani Singra Takes Action — John Smith has an Escape.

IN his own room at Lady Minter's sat Prince Rani Singra, and the expression of his dark face suggested that he was none too pleased with himself. Despite his caste, he was drinking brandy-and-soda, and a distinctly expensive cigar was between his teeth. The man Vashti squatted close to the fire that burned in the grate, but Ayasha was absent.

As a matter of fact, Prince Rani Singra had every reason from his point of view, to be discontented with the way in which matters were shaping. Since his failure of yesterday he had had a second disappointment. He had been fully expecting to have a certain foolish young man call on him, and he had failed to do so. The explanation had not been far to seek, for without difficulty he learned that John Smith had taken him out early in the day, and that only a few hours later, provided with a kit, supplied also by the representative of Daring & Co., the young man had left for abroad.

"Vashti!" Prince Rani Singra spoke sharply in Hindustani, and the man by the fire rose and salaamed low.

"My lord?" he queried.

"If a pig rooted up your garden what would you do?" the prince asked, in a low voice.

"Kill it, lord!" Vashti answered promptly.

"And if a snake was in your path?"

"Crush its head with my heel!"

"And if a man were your enemy"—the prince's voice was very low now—"so that you were not able to pay your faithful servants the rupees you had promised them, what then?"

Vashti's hand went into his robe, and when he withdrew it there was a knife between his fingers.

"Kill!" he hissed. "Is it the smooth-faced dog who never smiles who stands in my lord's path?"

Prince Rani Singra nodded, and his eyes were murderous as they looked at the knife. He knew that at a word from him the man would not hesitate, and that John Smith would trouble him no longer. But that would mean murder—the man shuddered—and already——

"No, there must be some other way," he said slowly. "True, he must die, but it must not seem to be by your hand or mine."

Vashti crouched over the fire again, his eyes staring into it.

"In India I have seen a man die by his own hand," the prince said meaningly; "and yet he was murdered by a man who sat alone—perhaps miles away—and willed that he should do it. Have you that power, Vashti?"

The native servant turned, and his eyes glowed as if they had taken a fresh fire from the coals.

"I have much power, my lord," he answered.

Prince Rani Singra drew money from his pocket, gold that made the servant's eyes glint with greed, and flung it towards him.

"There is the river," the prince muttered; "but some fool might save him. There is always——" His hand touched a revolver that lay in his own pocket. "That is the way."

He took the weapon from his pocket, clicked the cartridges from it, and tossed it to Vashti. The man caught it, and there was a meaning look in his eyes as he raised it, pressed it against his temple, and pulled the trigger.

"He is most probably at home now," the prince went on. "It would be better for him to do it in some park, however. There is not so much chance of interruption."

"And to such a place one might follow, my lord," Vashti answered; "and then there would be no mistake."

"Oh, Vashti, you have the wisdom of the serpent!" Prince Rani Singra said, with an evil laugh.

From a brass bowl that stood in the corner of the room Vashti took a handful of powder and cast it on to the flames of the fire, the room at once being filled with a pungent scent. Then he drew his knees up, and, with his chin resting on them, stared into the flames.

An hour passed, and during that time the man never moved. The prince watched him eagerly, smoking furiously all the time—watched him as a fanatic might wait to see a tiger spring at his victim and drag him down to death.

Suddenly Vashti rose, took from a cupboard a coat and hat of European make, and slipped them on. All the time his eyes were vacant, and when his master spoke to him he left the room without answering.

. . . . . .

John Smith had just finished dinner, and, with his usual cigar burning steadily, sat down to think of all that had happened since he had been called in by Sir John Hansard. So far he had succeeded in twice thwarting Prince Rani Singra, but much had yet to be done.

It was only too true that the blackmailer's victims dared not take action, and it seemed likely that this man would go on making a fortune out of weak people who, inadvertently or not, had done something of which they were now ashamed.

With a gesture of unrest, uncommon in him, John Smith rose and started to pace up and down the room. Then he flung himself into a chair and tried to read, but the restless fit was on him, and he started to once more pace up and down.

"I'd better go out and think in the fresh air," he muttered. "Ah, I forgot! Jack Hansard is coming here to-day for news, and he ought to be here soon."

Knowing this, however, John Smith still could not settle down, and at last he wrote a note to Hansard, telling him that he had gone into the neighbouring park, and that he would find him under the group of old trees, where there are seats, near the smaller lake. That done, he pulled on his hat and coat and moved towards the door.

With his fingers on the handle he hesitated, returned into the room, and took from a drawer in his desk a heavy revolver. He clicked the cylinder open to make sure that it was loaded, and dropped the weapon into his pocket.

Out of the house he went, through the quiet streets that led out into Westminster, and so along towards the park. It was a dark night, with a nasty bite of rain in the air, but John Smith did not trouble about it, though it seemed an absurd thing for him to be going out to think in the rain when he could do so much more comfortably at home.

A policeman standing by the entrance to the park looked curiously at the man walking through the rain, but touched his helmet as he recognised John Smith.

"Dirty night, sir," he said.

"Is it? Oh, yes!" John Smith answered absently.

Inside the park the rain was dripping down disconsolately from the leafless boughs of the trees, making the night more wretched than ever, but John Smith took no heed of it.

Neither did a tall, thin man, who, waiting until the policeman's back was turned, followed into the park. He moved with a curiously stealthy motion that was not English.

At a rapid pace, John Smith made along one of the paths, stepped over the wire fence, and walked across the sodden grass to where a seat stood under a clump of trees. Behind lay the water of the lake. This particular spot was dark, for it was some distance from the path, and anyone passing along the latter would never have seen the solitary figure that seated itself on the damp wood.

Neither would they have seen the other man as he stood hidden behind a tree only a few feet away—the same man who had slipped so stealthily into the park.

In a dim sort of way it occurred to John Smith that he could not be particularly well. His head felt heavy, and he seemed to be unable to think. He tried to turn his thoughts to Prince Rani Singra, but all that he could conjure up was the evil face of Vashti, as he had last seen him with a knife in his hand.

Would they beat him? Would Daring & Co. fail?

Never before had John Smith allowed such an idea to enter his brain, but now it forced its way somewhere from a back cell until it became almost a certainty, try though he would to shake it off.

What was there to prevent him succeeding, as he had done in far harder cases? But the only answer that would come into his brain was the face of Vashti.

Then the disgrace of a failure came in full force to John Smith, and he felt desperate. No, whatever happened, he would not live to see Daring & Co. fail. Sooner than that——

John Smith's hand was in his pocket, his fingers on the butt of the heavy revolver. There was an easy way out of it all. Surely he had had successes enough, and he might as well die while his name was still honoured.

Slowly he drew the weapon out, and once more examined it to make sure that it was loaded. He raised the barrel, and the cold rim touched his temple.

Possibly it was the cold touch of the steel, but John Smith dropped the weapon from its dangerous position.

Again the impulse to end all his doubts, all his risks of failure, possessed him, and the barrel touched his forehead. Ay, the grinning face of Vashti might be in his brain now, but very soon——

John Smith's finger squeezed on the trigger, then a hand snatched the weapon away from him. As it fell something in his brain seemed to snap, and he stared in amazement at the man before him.

"What the dickens are you playing at, man?" the angry voice of Jack Hansard demanded. "You gave me the most awful fright."

John Smith's brain was clear enough, and he stared at the revolver that lay in the mud at his feet.

"I can't understand it," he answered slowly. "I've never wanted to do a thing like that, but to-night I felt that I had got to, that some will stronger than my own was urging me on, so that——"

There was the squelch of a foot in mud, and Jack Hansard swung round just in time to make out a thin figure starting from among the trees. Acting on the spur of the moment, not in the least knowing why he did it, he leapt in pursuit, flinging his arms round the figure before it had gone a score of yards.

The man struggled hard to loose himself, but Jack Hansard was strong, and he managed to turn him round so that he could see into his face. Then a cry of horror broke from him, and he called out to John Smith, who came hurrying up.

For once in his life the latter's coolness deserted him.

"Vashti!" he gasped.

"Ay, the will that was stronger than yours!" Jack Hansard answered meaningly.

"You can't mean," John Smith began, "that he could hypnotise me into doing away——"

"I do," Jack Hansard said with a shudder, still keeping his grip on the native. "Something of the kind was suggested when poor Willoughby shot himself, for men who have lived long in India expect to see strange things happen. I laughed at the idea then, but now I know that it was right. What can we do with this cur?"

"We can do nothing," John Smith answered with conviction. "Our hands are tied."

"Not much," Jack Hansard admitted, "but something to cool this beast's blood down."

Lifting the man bodily in his arms, Jack carried him towards the lake. Then, with a mighty heave, he flung him into the water, yelling as he went under. There was only a depth of about three feet, however, so that the man soon came wading towards the bank. Dripping from head to foot he started to run away, but of a sudden he swung round.

With a regular trip John Smith sent Jack Hansard flying into the mud.

"What the dickens did you do that for?" he demanded sharply, as he scrambled to his feet.

John Smith nodded at the trunk of the nearest tree. A thin-bladed knife was quivering in it.

"I am not the only one who has had an escape to-night," he said.

The figure of Vashti had already disappeared in the darkness, and John Smith and Hansard turned towards the gate. Both were silent, realising the escapes they had had. Halfway there they met the policeman, who was advancing at a run.

"Thought I heard a cry!" he panted.

"Then you have better hearing than we have," John Smith answered quietly, and passed on.

Ten minutes later the two men entered John Smith's house, and Jack Hansard at once took off his coat and hat.

"I tell you one thing, old man," he said, "I am going to stop with you until that black beast is either in prison or on his way back to India."

John Smith smiled, and lit a cigar with a hand that was as steady as a rock despite all that he had been through that night.

"I have always boasted that I work alone," he answered, "but this time Daring & Co. is going to take a partner."

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

A New Development—A Supposed Theft.

JACK HANSARD dropped the newspaper that he had been glancing through at breakfast, and whistled shrilly. True to his word, he had stopped that night at John Smith's, and the representative of Daring & Co. sat opposite to him now.

"What is the trouble?" John Smith asked casually, his mind on the curious case that he had in hand.

"Listen," Hansard answered. "'The police were informed this morning, by telephone, that the house of Sir Charles Minter was broken into last night by burglars, and that the famous Minter diamonds, worth many thousands of pounds, are missing. When the police arrived on the scene they were informed that it had been discovered that Prince Rani Singra, the distinguished Indian guest staying in the house, had also lost valuable jewels.

"'The precise value of his loss is not yet known, and as he is a very rich man, it is only the historical value of the gems, which are reported to be very ancient, that will come as a blow to him. There is at present, it is stated, no clue to the identity of the thief or thieves, though Scotland Yard is hard at work on the case.'"

John Smith rose from his chair, methodically lit a cigar, and smiled.

"It seems to me that this is our chance," he said quietly.

"How?" Jack Hansard asked in amazement.

John Smith shook his head, and the smile had left his lips.

"My dear Hansard," he answered, "when I accepted you as a partner it was a sleeping one—for the present, at least."

"But surely you can tell me what you suspect?" Jack Hansard persisted. "If it is that Singra has committed the robbery, you are wrong. He hasn't the pluck to do it."

"Yet the fact remains that I shall certainly call there this morning," John Smith assured him.

"To see Sir Charles?"

"No; Lady Minter."

Jack Hansard looked hard at John Smith; but he, like many another, failed to learn anything from the quiet face.

"You don't mean to suggest——" he began.

"I suggest nothing, my friend," John Smith interrupted. "And I will only tell you one thing—I fancy we have our chance to lay the prince by the heels, anyway for a time."

Five minutes later John Smith, seated in his car, was being whirled away to the West End, and it was not long before he knocked at the door of Sir Charles Minter's house. A white-faced footman opened the door to him.

"Are you another of the detectives, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"No," John Smith answered.

"Then you can't come in," the footman said shortly, making as if to shut the door.

"Give that card to Sir Charles," John Smith ordered.

The footman hesitated, but there was something in the manner of this quiet-faced caller that commanded obedience, and he took it in. The next minute he returned and requested John Smith to follow him to the library.

Sir Charles Minter, a little, old man, with a head far out of proportion to his body, eagerly greeted his visitor.

"It is more than good of you to come, Mr. Smith," he said shakily. "I have not forgotten what you did for the Government when I was in the Cabinet." He threw his hands up distractedly. "I would not lose those stones for twice their actual value, for they have been in my family hundreds of years.

"The police are upstairs now, but I fancy this case is beyond them. They admit that there is absolutely no clue, and their only hope is to get them back when the thieves try and sell them."

John Smith nodded soothingly.

"May I see Lady Minter?" he asked.

"I fear not," Sir Charles answered. "She is naturally very upset, and already the police have nearly worried the life out of her. Besides, I can give you all the information you desire."

"A woman's memory is better for such things," John Smith persisted. "I shall really be very much obliged if I may see your wife."

"Well, I will try," Sir Charles conceded, and bustled from the room, adding over his shoulder: "Of course, you know that the prince has lost some property, too?"

Ten minutes later Lady Minter entered with her husband. There were dark marks under her eyes, and the hand she held out to John Smith trembled badly.

"Thank you for coming," she said, in a voice that was little above a whisper.

John Smith pulled a chair forward for her, then turned to her husband.

"I would rather be alone, Sir Charles," he said firmly. "The memory acts better when there is nothing to distract the mind."

Sir Charles hesitated, glancing at his wife, but she sat listlessly, and made no sign.

"Very well," he agreed, and went out.

John Smith stood by the window, so that he could see every changing expression of Lady Minter's face.

"Lady Minter," he said quietly, "I want you not to be offended at anything I am going to say."

A slight flush crossed the woman's face as she looked up, but only to drop her head again the next moment.

"Why should I be?" she said nervously.

"Were the jewels really stolen?" John Smith asked.

Something between a gasp and a cry of fear broke from Lady Minter, and there was terror in her eyes as she looked at John Smith.

"Yes," she whispered.

John Smith shrugged his shoulders, and there was a stern look in his eyes.

"And yet I heard a rumour, not so very long ago," he said, "that the last time you were seen to be wearing the diamonds that they seemed to have lost their lustre. I suggested that you were wearing an imitation set for safety, and, as a matter of fact, I casually asked your husband if that precaution had been taken."

"You asked my husband?" the woman almost sobbed.

"Naturally, he laughed at the idea," John Smith continued calmly. "There was another rumour," he added.

"And that?" Lady Minter's lips merely formed the words.

"That you had lost at bridge more than you could afford to pay." John Smith held up his hand as the woman was about to speak. "I asked you not to be offended."

But the look on Lady Minter's face was one of fear rather than anger.

"The prince has been robbed, too," she said, with her eyes averted.

"The prince?" For once John Smith allowed himself a laugh. "Suppose I have heard rumours about him, too?"

"Well?" There was a touch of defiance in the woman's voice now.

"Suppose I have heard rumours that I have confirmed, and that I know him to be nothing better than a blackmailer? Is it not natural, then, that I should wonder why he is in this house?"

By a mighty effort Lady Minter was keeping herself in hand. She wanted to scream out—do anything to relieve her feelings.

"You mean that you don't believe that there has really been a robbery?" she asked, in a dead voice.

John Smith nodded in silence.

With a sudden sob Lady Minter dropped her face into her

hands. But soon she looked up again. Somehow the fear seemed to have gone out of her eyes.

"There has been none," she said slowly. "The real jewels were pawned by me months ago, after I had had an imitation set made, to pay my debts."

John Smith's face betrayed no triumph. He drew nearer to the woman, and laid a hand upon her shoulder.

"And this Prince Rani Singra learnt of this, and has blackmailed you since," he said. "Well, you are only one of many."

"I know," Lady Minter groaned; "but what could I do?"

John Smith was silent, for he was thinking rapidly, and the woman never took her eyes from his face.

"I wish to stand your friend, Lady Minter," he said at last, "and I can do it—possibly save you from all the consequences of your rash act—if you will help me."

"Help you?" The woman laughed hysterically. "You don't know what it has meant to me! More than once I have been on the point of confessing everything to my husband!"

"Very good. Where are the imitation stones?" John Smith asked.

"The prince has them."

John Smith was silent again, and when he spoke his plans were completed.

"As soon as the jewellers who have the real stones see the announcement in the papers they will naturally communicate with the police," he said. "How much will get them out?"

"Something over two thousand pounds," Lady Minter answered quickly.

"Good!" John Smith said. "My car is waiting, and I will fetch them at once. While I am away, get Prince Singra out of the house if possible."

A look of hope had come into Lady Minter's eyes, but it quickly died out again.

"Why should you do it?"

"Because it will give Daring & Co. a chance to do that which they have undertaken," John Smith answered simply. "If you take my advice, however, you will tell everything to your husband."

"Oh, no!" the woman gasped.

"Think," John Smith answered, as he left the room.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Missing Jewels—The Arrest and the Trial.

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR BLAKELAND looked with some annoyance at the card that one of his subordinates brought in to him.

"John Smith," he read ,and his expression changed. "Show him in."

John Smith entered the office, his usual calm expression on his face.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Smith?" the inspector asked politely; for more than once in the past the representative of Daring & Co. had been of considerable service to him.

"It was something that I thought of doing for you," John Smith answered coolly, "provided that you consent to act in the way I tell you."

Inspector Blakeland looked indignant, and pulled at his short beard.

"I can't promise that," he said, "but I will do my best."

John Smith rose from the chair in which he had seated himself, and took up his hat.

"Then we will waste no more time," he remarked. "It would have saved you a lot of time over that Minter jewel case."

The expression of the inspector's face changed.

"I think, perhaps, I might promise," he said hastily. "I am sure that you have too much sense, Mr. Smith, to make absurd suggestions."

John Smith bowed, and there was a little smile on his lips.

"You have heard of a certain Prince Rani Singra?" he inquired. "He is reported to also have lost jewels."

"Yes," Inspector Blakeland answered eagerly. "I have sometimes thought there was something fishy about the man—and yet he has been entertained by good people."

"He took the jewels," John Smith said quietly.

Inspector Blakeland was on his feet in a second, and buttoning up his coat.

"You are sure of this?" he cried. "It would not do to make a mistake. How can you prove it?"

"That is one of the things I do not wish to explain," John Smith replied. "It is natural that you might wish to search the rooms again—it is equally natural that you would notice a loose board. And I can assure you that beneath it you will find the missing jewels—the imitation ones."

"Imitation ones!" the detective gasped in amazement.

"Precisely," John Smith explained. "In the excitement of the discovery, it was not noticed which set had been taken. Fortunately it was the wrong one."

Inspector Blakeland whistled, then looked questioningly into John Smith's face.

"How did you come to take the case up?" he inquired.

"I have not taken it up, my friend," John Smith answered. "I was after the prince on a different charge—blackmail

—and I shall be only too pleased to see him out of the way for a time."

Actually, John Smith was afraid that Prince Rani Singra would give away the part that Lady Minter had played, but yet he might fear to do it, knowing that it would make his sentence heavier.

"Well, the jewels are the things for me to see to," Inspector Blakeland said. "Shall I take any men with me?"

"It might be wise," John Smith assured him, "as he always has two native attendants with him."

A few minutes later John Smith's powerful car was whizzing westwards, with Detective Blakeland and his two assistants aboard, and upon arriving at Sir Charles Minter's house they were at once admitted, Sir Charles himself meeting them in the hall. He took John Smith aside for a moment.

"My wife has told me all," he said huskily. "Do you think we can hush it up?"

"I am going to," John Smith answered; but even he did not guess in what a strange way the prince's lips were to be closed.

"Is the prince upstairs, Sir Charles?" Inspector Blakeland put in bluntly. "I wish to search his room again."

"Yes," Sir Charles answered, and led the way upstairs.

On the way they passed Lady Minter, and John Smith noticed that, although she was very pale, there was no longer any fear in her eyes.

"Everything is arranged?" John Smith whispered.

"Yes," she answered, in the same tone.

The door of Prince Rani Singra's room proved to be locked, but at a request from Sir Charles it was opened by Ayasha. The prince sat by the window, a nervous expression in his dark eyes, while Vashti crouched in his usual attitude over the blazing fire.

"Inspector Blakeland is sorry to disturb you, prince," Sir Charles said quietly, "but he wishes to examine the room."

The prince scarcely seemed to hear the words. His eyes were upon John Smith, and the look of fear in them had increased. By an effort, he roused himself.

"What is there to learn here?" he asked harshly.

"No knowing, sir," the detective answered bluntly.

Remembering his promise to John Smith, Inspector Blakeland went poking round the room until he had examined every spot save that covered by the cushions on which Prince Rani Singra sat.

"May I trouble you, sir?" he said quietly.

A sudden pallor turned the Indian's face to a particularly ugly colour, and he shifted uneasily.

"It is absurd," he said, in a low voice.

"Duty!" Inspector Blakeland snapped. "Got to be done!"

Slowly Prince Rani Singra rose from the cushions, and his eyes were turned towards the doorway. If he had any intention of trying a dash for liberty, however, he must have seen the hopelessness of his chance, for one of the detectives stood there with a carelessness that was distinctly assumed.

With quick hands Inspector Blakeland jerked the cushions away, and an ejaculation broke from him as he saw that several of the parquet blocks were loose.

Vashti, squatting by the fire, buried his right hand in his robe.

Taking a knife from his pocket, the detective quickly wrenched the blocks up, and thrust his hand through the hole formed. The next moment he had brought into the light several jewel-cases. He snapped one open, showing a great necklace of diamonds within, but the light that came from them was not particularly dazzling.

With a wild cry, Prince Rani Singra leapt for the door, but the detective standing there met the charge and hurled him back.

Then Vashti jumping from his crouching attitude, was at the officer, who fell back with a knife wound in his shoulder.

All this happened so quickly that there was no time to prevent it, not stop the prince's leap over the body of the prostrate man. But close behind him followed John Smith, and at the top of the broad flight of stairs he collared him. In his desperation the Indian was not giving in easily, and with a trip he brought John Smith down. For a moment they struggled at the head of the stairs, then they went rolling and bumping to the bottom, John Smith with his head buried well into the other's body for safety.

Down the stairs Inspector Blakeland came hurrying, and he gave a sigh of relief as John Smith struggled clear and seated himself on the prince's back.

"You'd better get the bracelets on him, inspector," John Smith said coolly, "as I fancy he's suffered no more damage than having the wind knocked out of him."

As a matter of fact he proved to be stunned, apart from having a nasty cut across the head, and it was some minutes before he was able to stagger to his feet. When he did do so he stood gazing down foolishly at the steel manacles on his wrists, as if not understanding what they were doing there.

Ayasha, looking perfectly stolid, had already been brought down into the hall.

"You will charge them at Bow Street, I suppose?" John Smith asked casually.

Before the inspector could answer there was a disturbance outside, then the door was opened, and Vashti was fairly dragged in by two policemen, one of whom held the man's bloodstained knife in his hand.

Perhaps it was the entry of the man that roused Prince Rani Singra; but, anyway, the dazed look vanished from his eyes and an expression of utter hate took its place. With a frantic effort he made as if to try and snap the manacles.

"I should advise you to come quietly," Inspector Blakeland said pompously. "I must also warn you that anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you."

Prince Rani Singra uttered a hoarse laugh.

"Warn me?" he cried. "Bah! You had better warn others about what I will say!"

The detective laid a hand forcibly on the man's arm and pulled him towards the doorway. Outside, a cab was already waiting.

"Be in court, John Smith, of Daring & Co.!" the prince cried wildly. "Be there when I'm tried—it will interest you!"

The door closed behind the detectives and their prisoners, and Sir Charles Minter laid a shaking hand on John Smith's arm.

"I fear that he will carry out his threat!" he said, in a voice that trembled. "What has he to lose?"

There was a hard line between John Smith's eyes, and his jaw had become curiously prominent.

"You have my promise, Sir Charles," he said quietly, "and you have no reason to think that I shall not keep it."

But as he lay back in his car, after ordering his man to drive him home, John Smith could not help wondering how he was to keep it. Sir Charles had spoken truly when he said that the arrested man had nothing to lose, and it was more than likely that he would risk a longer sentence by deliberately stating in court all he knew about the imitation jewels.

John Smith raised his head sharply. Daring & Co. had never failed before, he told himself, and it was too late for them to begin now.

Back in the house Jack Hansard was waiting impatiently, and he received the news of the arrest with glee.

"By Jove! But there'll be a mighty lot of people glad to learn the news!" he cried.

John Smith shrugged his shoulders as he paused in the act of lighting a cigar, and for once his face expressed doubt.

"It depends what the man says when he is on trial," he answered.

Jack Hansard whistled softly, his expression changing.

"Never thought of that," he admitted. "Can't he be stopped?"

"How?" John Smith answered simply.

"There must be some way," Jack persisted.

For the second time John Smith shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't you think I have tried to find it?" he asked, a trifle bitterly. "Don't you realise what it means to me? I swore to stop this man's infamous work——"

"You have done it," Jack Hansard put in.

"Yes, but without keeping his tongue quiet," John Smith added.

The bell of the telephone rang sharply, and he picked the receiver up from his desk.

"Hallo! Yes, I'm John Smith. Oh, it's you, Blakeland!" John Smith's face set, as if he feared bad news. "Will I come round at once? Yes, with you in five minutes."

John Smith dropped the receiver back into its place and turned to Jack Hansard.

"It means that the prince has spoken," he said bitterly, "and that Daring & Co. has failed at last."

He touched the bell on his desk that summoned his car round, and within a minute or so a hooter announced its arrival.

"Coming, Hansard?" he inquired.

"Yes."

The two men descended to the car, and John Smith gave his man the order to proceed to Bow Street, for it was from there that Blakeland had telephoned. Five minutes sufficed to take them there, and they were promptly shown through to the office where Inspector Blakeland was talking eagerly to the officer in charge.

"Most remarkable thing!" the detective cried. "We've laid our hands on a man we have wanted for five years."

John Smith shrugged his shoulders, and his face showed no interest.

"Surely you could have telephoned that news to me?" he asked, with a touch of impatience.

"But it's the prince," the detective explained. "When he was brought here, we naturally had to search him, and then we found that he is not an Indian at all, but a white man."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Hansard ejaculated.

"More likely he will be," Inspector Blakeland continued grimly. "There are certain curious tattoo marks on this man's body that seemed familiar to me, and a glance at our list of men wanted soon told me who the man really is."

"Who is he?" John Smith demanded, just a trace of excitement on his face.

"John Lorimer," Inspector Blakeland answered triumphantly, "the man wanted for the Littlehampton murder of nineteen-five. We had proof enough against him to convict him a dozen times over, but he just dodged us at the last moment."

There was a little smile on John Smith's lips, and the look of anxiety had left his face.

"There is no doubt?" he asked.

"We are not in the habit of making that sort of mistake," Inspector Blakeland answered stiffly.

"Of course there will be no objection to my seeing the prisoner for a minute alone?" John Smith asked.

"Against the regulations," the officer in charge answered shortly.

John Smith shrugged his shoulders, and turned to Inspector Blakeland.

"Don't you think that an exception might be made in my case," he said, "considering that I gave the infor——"

Inspector Blakeland coughed so loudly that the rest of John Smith's words were quite inaudible.

"I think we might, Saunderson," he said gruffly. "Mr. Smith gave me some information over this case that I admit helped me a little."

Inspector Saunderson looked doubtful, but eventually consented, and John Smith was shown through to the cell in which Prince Rani Singra—to use his old title—sat.

But what a different man! Most of his finery had been stripped from him, and where his vest still remained open could be seen the place where the dark skin ended and the white skin commenced. The handcuffs were still on his wrists.

He looked up with a cry of fear as John Smith entered and the door was closed behind him. Beads of sweat were on his face, and altogether he was a pitiable object to look upon.

"I—didn't do it!" he stammered.

John Smith looked down at the man contemptuously, yet found it in his heart to pity him for the state of terror he was in.

"That remains to be proved," he answered, "though the police tell me there is no doubt about it."

The man shuddered, so that his teeth chattered, and he looked a guilty man if anyone ever did.

"And if they do prove it," John Smith continued, "they will hang you!"

"No!" the man shrieked.

"Unless"—John Smith paused to give emphasis to his words—"unless powerful influence is brought to bear to get the sentence commuted to one of penal servitude for life."

A ray of hope came into the man's eyes, and he held his manacled hands out imploringly.

"Will it be brought?" he cried chokingly.

"On one condition," John Smith answered him, "I will bring to bear the influence that I possess in high quarters."

"What is it? I'll do it!" the man cried.

"You will stand your trial," John Smith explained. "Well, you have threatened to tell of certain things you know. Should you keep that threat the law will take its course, but if you keep silent I think I may promise you that, anyway, your life will be spared."

"I promise!" the man gasped.

. . . . . .

The sensational trial of John Lorimer, alias Prince Rani Singra, had been over a week, and the man had been sentenced to be hanged. That a commutation of sentence was probable few people believed, and yet on the seventh day it was announced in the papers.

John Smith saw it as he glanced at the news while having his breakfast, and the ghost of a smile curled his lips.

"Well, even a murderer cannot say that Daring & Co. has failed," he muttered.

There were others, in high places, who read the news, and wondered, men and women who had trembled right through the trial, little knowing how it was that this blackmailer kept so silent. They did not know that it was John Smith, of Daring & Co., who had saved them; and as for John Smith—why, it was enough for him that he had kept his word.

THE END.

The Third Long Complete Story.

THE EMIGRANTS

A Splendid Tale of the Adventures of a Boy and Girl in London and Canada.

— By —

LEWIS HOCKLEY.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Jerry Gains and Loses.

THERE is plenty of heroism in the world apart from the achievements of the battlefield, the warship, or those encounters with the deadly forces of nature, such as the coal-miner, the sailor, or the fireman—to select but a few instances—engage in. There is heroism in the living of a quiet life, in the constant battling against surrounding circumstances, the doing one's best amid conditions that tempt to the reverse. Such heroism as this was that of Peggy and Jerry Oswald when, deserted by their father, they set bravely to work to maintain themselves respectably and honestly, and not only themselves, but the smaller children also.

Jerry remained in the berth he had obtained through the kindness of his old wrestling tutor. He provided the money for keeping the home together, and his sister spent it, with a wisdom and carefulness such as a woman twice her years might have equalled, but could not have surpassed.

From time to time they heard from their father. Sometimes he remitted them money, and this Peggy, like a prudent housewife, would lay aside against the coming of a possible rainy day.

Within six months of the memorable conversation with the Canadian agent of the firm where he was employed, Jerry's wages were raised three shillings a week. This was an event, a matter of considerable importance, and Peggy was in high glee when her brother came home with the news.

"You are getting on, Jerry, and no mistake," she said proudly. "You're a brother to be proud of."

"Nonsense, sis," the boy said; but his cheeks flushed with pleasure for all that. "And I tell you——"

"Well?" his sister said, for he stopped suddenly.

"Why," he blurted out hurriedly, "if it hadn't have been for you and the children, I shouldn't have done it."

"But why not?" And Peggy Oswald's pretty eyes opened widely. "Don't tell such stories, Jerry; you'd have done all just the same as you have, even if our father hadn't —had been here," she corrected.

"No, I wouldn't," Jerry said, and it wasn't the flush of pleasure on his face this time. "It was just because I saw you so brave and hard-working that I felt I ought to do something, even if the something was what I didn't like doing. I felt ashamed to see you working to try to pay for the rent and our food, and all that, while I was doing nothing."

"But that wasn't your fault, old fellow," interrupted Peggy quickly. "You tried, too, just as hard as I did, and harder, I dare say. You couldn't help it."

"But I ought to have helped feeling that I didn't want to do it," the boy said doggedly. "I didn't, but I couldn't help it. I hated wandering about trying to get odd jobs, holding horses, running errands, and things like that. I hated having to give up entering for that wrestling competition, for I was quite sure I'd have won it, and I did want the medal so much. And I hated going on the music-hall stage that time, and so losing my status as an amateur by competing against a professional, although I did get the ten pounds for doing it. I hated it all, and was sick of it."

"And yet you did it," Peggy said softly. "Jerry, old fellow, if only you could see it, you're a greater hero——"

"Bosh!" was the rude interruption. "Don't tell such fibs, Peggy. I was a beast. I know I was."

"To do something that you didn't want to do? I shouldn't call anyone who did that a beast, Jerry? And I'm quite sure if father knew what you'd done he'd say the same as I do."

"Ah!"

Jerry's thoughts were always on his father and the land he had gone to. He wanted to be there, too, to get away from England to the glorious land of his imagination, where work would be different, somehow—where he wouldn't have to do the work he was doing and didn't like, but something more to his taste. He hated England, he hated London, the dirty, mean street in which he had to live, the stuffiness, the confinement, the rushing and striving; he wanted to be out of doors all day, to be a cowboy, a hunter—even a farmer's life would be better than his.

Poor Jerry. He was learning the lesson that everyone has to learn some time or other; he was going through that period of revolt against the circumstances circumscribing him which at some time or other comes to every one of us. The things that others do are always better than we do ourselves. Others always seem more fortunate than ourselves. Where we are and what we do are invariably different from where we want to be, and feel ourselves best qualified to do.

But as his sister said, he was doing the distasteful things, none the less; he was learning the value of controlling and disciplining himself, and the lesson would bear good fruit in after years, unpleasant to go through at the time though it might be.

Jerry had a pleasant day with his sister, and the two younger children on the Sunday following the receipt of the news of his advance in wages, and on the Monday he went back to work in a better and more contented frame of mind.

This was somewhat influenced by a letter received from his father while they were at breakfast that morning. One passage in the script sang itself over and over again in Jerry's ears; he could not forget it, and, strange though it

NEXT TUESDAY: "THE HAUNTED ISLAND."

Another School Tale of the Juniors of Greyfriars. By FRANK RICHARDS.

may seem, it relieved instead of inflaming the longing in his heart.

"I am getting good wages now," wrote James Oswald, "for I have got a job with the Canadian Pacific Railway, the biggest thing of its kind out here, and I hope to get still better before long. I am sending you twenty dollars, which I hope you'll spend wisely. But at present I can't see my way to having you all out here with me, for I'm moving about all the time, going from place to place, and not above three days in the same spot. And that wouldn't do for you and Jerry"—James Oswald's letters were always written to his daughter, though now and then there'd be a note for Jerry himself enclosed—"and the other youngsters, for I couldn't take you along with me. But I think there's a chance in six months' time, or round and about that, of my getting a berth that will let me settle down in one place, and then I'll be glad. Ah, my dear daughter, I can't tell you how glad I shall be to have all of you with me again. I oughtn't to have left you; but that's all done now, and it can't be undone. Before the year's out, I'm hoping I'll be able to send over and tell you to join me."

This was the passage that remained in Jerry's mind; he thought of it as he walked down to the timber-yard to begin his day's work; he thought of it during the morning; and he went over it again word by word during the dinner-hour. At last, it seemed, there was hope of his dream being soon realised. Before the year was out! Perhaps he and the others would be spending Christmas with their father in his Canadian home. The thought was consolation to Jerry.

The thought came to him later, but with a different significance.

He had scarcely resumed work after the hooting of the steam-horn, which signified the termination of the dinner-hour, when a dapper young clerk entered the yard.

"Young Oswald here!" he sung out, as he reached the cleared space where Jerry and two or three of the other workers were engaged.

"Yes," he called out shortly in answer.

He didn't like that clerk, Charley Marchant, by name. There was a superciliousness in his method of addressing the workmen which grated on Jerry's nerves, and irritated his somewhat easily aroused temper. A slim, always spruce-dressed young fellow of two or three-and-twenty years of age, who parted his hair in the middle, was never without a flower in his coat, sported a light cane, wore brilliantly-coloured neckties and socks, and put a cigarette between his lips at every conceivable opportunity, he was most objectionable to Jerry's mind, and nothing would have given the lad greater pleasure than to have told Mr. Marchant his opinion of him first, and knocked him down afterwards. Many a time Jerry had figured up what sort of show the dapper, smart-looking clerk would cut on the wrestling mat, and whether he would be able to stop a cross-buttock throw if he, Jerry, got the proper hold on him.

Jerry doubted it, but would have been highly delighted could he have contrived to bring about a practical and convincing establishment of his belief.

"You there, Oswald?" inquired Marchant, again, affecting not to have heard Jerry's reply.

"Yes."

"Where?" And Marchant looked ostentatiously everywhere.

"Here."

"Oh, there you are! You didn't say 'sir,' so I didn't see you. You ought always to say 'sir' when you answer a superior, Oswald. Just remember it another time."

"Yes!" Oswald answered very deliberately and significantly, looking the clerk straight in the face.

"Impudent young beggar!" muttered Marchant under his breath, and he coloured slightly.

"The governor wants you!" he went on peremptorily. "Wants you at once, so hurry up and come. You know he doesn't like to be kept waiting when he sends for any of the workmen. He's in his private room. It's Mister George."

"Thank you." Then, for the temptation was too great to be withstood: "Doesn't he mind being kept waiting when it's one of the gentlemanly clerks he sends for?"

There was a snigger, quite audible to Mr. Marchant, from the other workmen at hand, and the clerk flushed redly.

"I don't want any impudence from you," he said rudely. "Just remember who it is you're talking to or you'll get into trouble," and with that he went off quickly.

"Don't like you, Jerry," observed one of the hands as Jerry put on his jacket.

"No, and I don't like him, vulgar little tyke!" And the lad made haste to the junior partner's room.

Having knocked, and bidden to come in, Jerry waited until his master and erstwhile wrestling instructor, who had pleasantly greeted him, and told him to sit down, had finished the addressing of a letter. He wondered vaguely why he had been sent for; the last time he had been into the room, it was to hear what the Canadian agent of the firm had to say concerning his father.

"Well, Jerry"—and Mr. Warren swung round—"I've got something to say to you that maybe you'll be pleased to hear."

"Yes, sir."

"You're getting on all right here, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir; thank you."

"I hear the foreman recommended you for a rise."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you like the work?"

Jerry hesitated. To say that he didn't would be to show ingratitude to one who had proved a real friend and benefactor to him, but at the same time he hated to say that which was not true.

George Warren smiled.

"Not so much but that you'd be willing to change it for something you liked better—eh?"

The flush that came to Jerry's cheeks was sufficient answer to the correctness of the surmise, but Mr. Warren did not seem displeased.

"Of course you would," he went on; "so would everybody else, and I don't blame them. Well, I think there's a chance of the opportunity coming to you, Jerry; and if you accept the change, I think you'll like it. Mr. McDonald, our Canadian representative, is over here for a short spell; he goes back in three days' time, and he wants to take back with him"—Mr. Warren didn't say the suggestion had emanated from himself, and his kindly desire to benefit Jerry—"someone from our works who knows something of the trade, and would be able to assist him in the clerical work. It's a working clerk or assistant that he wants, and I thought I'd offer the berth to you. You're a trifle young, but you're strong, and we know you're to be thoroughly trusted, and I dare say you'd like the work.

"It won't be all pen-work you'll have to do. Mr. McDonald has to get about a deal—in fact, he's always, more or less, on the move; consequently, a large part of your time would be spent out of doors. You'd get about; you'd see over a large part of Canada; meet decent people. I think you'd find the work very interesting. As for the salary, they pay in dollars out in the Dominion, and living may be a bit higher, so we'd say that—— Let me see, what are you getting now, Jerry?"

"Twenty-one shillings a week, sir, now that I've got the rise," Jerry answered, in a strained sort of voice that caused his master to look at him a trifle curiously.

"Very well, if you'll go to Canada, we'll say thirty shillings—no, thirty-two, eight dollars, that's a trifle more than two-and-thirty shillings. How would that suit?"

But Jerry could not answer; his tongue seemed tied to the inside of his teeth, and there was something in his throat that prevented him from the power of articulation.

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THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Tantalising Offer.

IT seemed to be quite a long while after his last words that Jerry Oswald again heard his employer's voice, though in reality not ten seconds had elapsed. But they were ten seconds of bitter conflict in the lad's heart.

"Well, Jerry," Mr. Warren was saying, and there was a distinctly disappointed note in his voice, "doesn't the idea seem an agreeable one to you? Wouldn't you like to go to Canada? I thought you told me your father is there. You may not actually be able to go where he is, but you'll be a lot nearer to him than if in England."

"Want to go, sir!" The words fairly leaped from Jerry's lips; he half raised himself in his chair, and his eyes literally flashed fire. "Want to go! Oh, why, I'd——"

Warren eyed him steadily, then he broke into a smile.

"I thought you'd like it, Jerry," he said. "And moreover, I believe you'll get on very well; that the work will suit you, and you the work. I may say it's a most advantageous offer for you."

"Yes, sir," Jerry rejoined, his voice toneless, and his tongue licking his dry lips.

"And that being so, you'll accept—eh?"

Try as he would Jerry could not force his lips to frame the refusal; he nodded his head negatively. Never in his life had he felt quite so wretched.

Mr. Warren stared incredulously.

"You won't go, Jerry?" he asked. "Do I understand that is what you mean?"

"Yes, sir." The words were spoken so low they scarcely reached his employer's ears.

"Isn't it good enough for you?"

Again the miserable shaking of the lad's head.

"I don't understand you, Jerry," Mr. Warren said, after a short pause. He looked puzzled and a little hurt. "The offer is a good one; it is one that seems thoroughly well suited to your likings and capabilities, and yet you say you don't want to go?"

This time Jerry left his chair completely; he sprang forward excitedly, and the hand he laid on the junior partner's desk was trembling.

"No, sir!" he cried tremulously. "I didn't say that I don't want to go. I didn't mean that, indeed I didn't. I'd love to go. It's what I want; to get away from England, to go to some other country, and where my father is. And I'd love the work, sir. I'd like nothing better. And I'd do it well, sir; I'm sure I would. And the wages are grand; better than ever I could expect. It's good of you, sir—oh, ever so good—and I can't ever thank you enough! It'd be *splendid*! But——"

The lad's high voice sank, his flushed cheeks suddenly paled, and a very suspicious looking moisture clouded his sparkling eyes. In the "But——" was a volume of misery and disappointment beyond written expression.

"Well," observed Mr. Warren kindly, "but what, Jerry? What is it that prevents you from doing this which you would so much like to do? What keeps you here? Is there any tie?"

"My sisters."

Jerry had found his chair, and sat down again, his chin sunk upon his breast, his whole attitude one of the most complete dejection. Mr. Warren surveyed him for a minute or two in silence. Then he rose from his chair and came to the lad, placing one hand on his shoulder.

"Jerry," he said, and there was a great gravity in his voice—"Jerry, I'm sorry—I'm sorry that I tempted you with an offer that you are unable to accept. I had forgotten. I was thinking that when your father—that you were left alone here. I should have remembered, and then I wouldn't have mocked you with the suggestion. I recollect your family now, and that it would be impossible for them to go with you, and still more impossible for you to have left them behind. My boy, you're an upright and honourable young man. You're a hero quite as much as the man who risks his life by trying to save another from drowning. And I may tell you that I respect you the more for being able to withstand the temptation. Everyone could not. And I can understand that the temptation is a great one. It would have been a wicked thing for you to have left your sisters behind"—Jerry winced at the allusion, entirely unintentional, to his absent father—"but none the less you are to be commended, though I'm sorry that Mr. McDonald won't be able to take you back with him."

Mr. Warren said no more, and Jerry went back to his work in the timber-yard. But he worked spiritlessly; he was entirely miserable, and the hope that his father's letter of the morning had awakened in him was dulled and shadowed by the regret he felt for the lost, or rather, declined, opportunity to do that which he wanted to do. He could think of nothing else. He pictured the life he would have had—the going about, the change of scene, the importance and responsible character of his position, the fine wages he would have been receiving, and in spirit he groaned. He felt sick and sorry; more than ever discontented; angry with the sense of the injustice under which he was suffering. The men spoke to him, but he would not, could not, answer. He hugged his misery, eating it over and over again, and blindly wishing for some physical outburst to relieve his feelings.

When the time came for leaving off work, he hurried away without the customary good-night to his mates. He wanted to be alone, and shunned and evaded the half-dozen with whom he customarily, for a part of the way, went home. He felt hurt, and angry with everything and everybody. Even the last and commendatory words of his employer brought no healing balm to his wounded spirit.

"Injustice! Injustice!" rang in his heart, and once or twice he caught himself uttering the word aloud.

So it is with persons older and wiser than Jerry Oswald when they find themselves prevented from getting or taking something they want very badly.

Walking hurriedly, almost blindly along the pavement, he suddenly collided with an individual moving in the same direction as himself. The shock was of some violence, and the person involved was all but thrown off his balance.

"Steady on there! You clumsy fool!" he shouted angrily, recovering himself. "Can't you see where you are going. Blind young fool!"

The repetition of the epithet caused Jerry to halt; he turned to meet the angry countenance of Mr. Charles Marchant. But though the latter recognised him, Jerry did not for the moment know him.

"What d'you mean walking along—— Oh, it's you, is it," cried the clerk. "Clumsy fool!" he said again.

"What's that?"

"Clumsy fool I called you, and so you are, banging into anyone like that. I'll say it again!"

"Better not!"

"Oh, why not, Oswald? Who're you, pray? Clumsy fool!"

"I told you not to say that again," Jerry said thickly.

"Well, I shall. You deserve to be kicked, walking along the road like that," and Marchant, whom the accident had filled with a wrath equal to Jerry's own dull anger, raised his light cane and struck Jerry sharply across the leg.

The next moment the cane was wrenched from his grasp, twisted, and broken, and flung into the roadway. Marchant in his anger struck savagely at Jerry, and, seized by the shoulder, he was the next instant, flung forcibly against a lamp-post.

Heedless of what the hurt one might next do Jerry strode on. The incident—in the wrong though he was—had done him good; it had stirred the dull and muddy depths of his thoughts on the injustice he had suffered. Suddenly he stopped and went back again. He had done wrong, and he meant to find the dapper clerk and apologise for his own rudeness and violence. But Marchant had retired, and a feeling of shame seized Jerry.

Walking slowly homeward he began to realise the selfishness of his anger and regret. He had been thinking too much for himself, and of himself. What of Peggy and the little ones? Had not his mates shown him a good example of self sacrifice and unselfishness? And how little he had profited by it. It was in a chastened mood he reached home; and so quiet was he that Peggy noticed the fact and inquired of him if anything were the matter. But he assured her that he was quite well, nor did he say anything of the offer that had been made to him that afternoon by Mr. Warren. Not until long afterwards was it that Peggy learned of it, and then not through her brother. But more than once in after years—for the girl never said anything to him to let him know that she was aware of the temptation that he had been through—Jerry was puzzled by some remark or demonstration of his sister, something that seemed to show that the opinion she held of him was a curiously high one, and he wondered exceedingly.

But Jerry's slight altercation with Charles Marchant did not end with the apology which he tendered to that insulted young gentleman the next morning, and was received in a fashion that made the lad feel half sorry that he had made the overture, and required a stern restraint to be laid on his temper and his tongue.

"H'm! Glad to see that the common herd do sometimes realise when they have acted badly," was Mr. Marchant's comment. "I accept your apology, Oswald, but I shall not forget the outrageousness of your conduct." A reply that sent Jerry Oswald away filled with a burning desire to pull Mr. Marchant's nose, or otherwise let him see in what contempt his inferior (?) held him.

It was about a fortnight afterwards that Jerry again saw Marchant, and, somewhat to his surprise, in the street in which the Oswalds lived. The clerk affected not to hear Jerry's "Good-night" as he passed, in fact, he most ostentatiously ignored him, and Jerry passed on with burning cheeks and hot thoughts. His old feeling towards the ill-mannered young man was considerably strengthened.

So much did he take it to heart—though really Marchant was not worth it—that when his sister, who had been on some housewifely errand, returned, he felt compelled to unburden his mind. He did not notice, so full was he of the matter, that Peggy herself seemed a trifle upset and annoyed. If he noticed the unusual flush on her cheeks at all, he ascribed it to hurrying on her part.

Several times after this he came upon Marchant, always most spruccly dressed, and always in the same place; but when they passed one another Jerry gave the clerk no opportunity for indulging in his petty snubs. But he did wonder what had suddenly brought Marchant into his neighbourhood, and in his youthful self-consciousness presumed that the latter "had his knife in him" and was seeking for some opportunity of damaging Jerry in the eyes of their employer.

One evening, however, his eyes were opened. Quite by chance he had learned during the day that Marchant was domiciled in a rather superior street to his own in the same neighbourhood; he saw the clerk as a matter of fact as he went home, and Marchant, whose office hours terminated an hour before Jerry left the works, was idling along the street puffing a cigarette.

Peggy went out later in the evening to purchase some household necessities, and when she returned Jerry, who was laying the table-cloth for supper, noticed her face was very red indeed; her usually peaceful grey eyes were bright and angry, and the simple, tasteful lace scarf she wore round her throat was very much disarranged.

She seemed extraordinarily agitated; there were tears in her eyes, altogether so different was she from her usual self that Jerry, with brotherly concern, asked her what had happened.

"I've been insulted!" the girl cried passionately.

"Insulted! How? Who by?" demanded Jerry quickly, though with a good deal of surprise. He spoke angrily too; for, as his sister's protector, such a matter affected him greatly.

"That man!" Peggy replied. "Man! Boy rather!"

"Who is it?"

"How should I know his name? But this isn't the first or the second or the third time, and I will not endure it any longer!"

"When and where, sis, was it?" the lad asked eagerly. This was a matter for him to take up. No one was going to offer insult to his sister if he could prevent it; and he could.

"In the street here. No, no," she cried, as Jerry made for the door. "It's no use you going down. He isn't there now. Perhaps he won't attempt it again. Stay here Jerry."

And Jerry stayed, and contrived to extract from her how, during the past week or two, she had been greatly annoyed by the undesirable attention of a young fellow who, no matter what time in the evening she went out, was always waiting somewhere in or near their street. He had addressed himself to her; offered to carry her parcels, to accompany her, and had begged of her to go for a walk with him. He had been proof against snubbings—her obvious distaste of him—refused to discontinue his unwelcome courtesies, and laughed at her attempts to intimidate him.

His blood almost boiling, Jerry listened, outwardly calm, and when he asked for a description of the cad, he received such information as caused a suspicion that was almost a certainty to form in his mind. He said little, however, beyond endeavouring to comfort and reassure Peggy, but he registered with himself a vow that the insulter—who had gone so far as to attempt to snatch a kiss that evening—should speedily be brought to book.

The next evening, persuading Peggy to wait until the two younger children were asleep, he saw her leave the house; and, after waiting a minute or two, went after her. It was a quiet street, not very well lighted, and very little travelled. From behind he saw a masculine figure come from under a lamp-post as Peggy neared it, advance towards the girl, stop her, and then, as some pedestrians came towards them from the other end, draw back again.

Peggy continued on her way, and he who had accosted her returned to the lamp-post. Two or three persons were coming into the street, and the blackguard did not desire to attract their notice.

When his sister had disappeared, Jerry strolled towards the lamp-post. He was feeling hot inside and cold out, and his hands within his trousers pockets were twitching. Slowly he neared the waiting figure on the kerbstone, came parallel with it, stopped, laid one hand on his shoulder, and as the man turned round came face to face with Mr. Charles Marchant.

"I thought so!" the lad exclaimed between gritted teeth.

"Oswald!" cried Marchant in astonishment.

"Yes, Oswald. Now, you blackguard, you cowardly cad, I want to talk to you."

"But I don't want to talk to you," Marchant retorted.

"Then you'll have to put up with me." And Jerry laughed harshly. "You're not going away until I've—er—talked to you. You spoke to a young lady who passed just now."

"Go to Jericho! Who the dickens do you think you're talking to, I'd like to know, Oswald? Humph! Fine thing this! Be off and mind your own business."

Marchant spoke in an aggressive voice; he was trying to take the high hand. But it didn't work with Jerry.

"You've been carrying this on a long time," the lad pursued. "Last night you——"

"What the dickens are you getting at?" interrupted Marchant furiously. "Just you leave my affairs alone, and mind your own business."

"It is my business. Anyway, I'm going to prevent it."

"You! Well, this beats—— Here, get out of it! Be off!"

"It's my business, inasmuch as that young lady is my sister, and I'm not going to have——"

Jerry, in a sudden uprising of uncontrollable anger, broke off; he could restrain himself no longer. Grabbing Marchant by the arm, he got a good hold of his neck with the other hand, ruining an exceedingly high collar, and disarranging a most gorgeous necktie, and proved that his abstention of late from the wrestling-mat hadn't impaired his ability to make a most satisfactory cross-buttock.

Marchant came heavily to the ground, and he yelled lustily, for he found the pavement hard to fall upon. He yelled still louder a second after, for wrenching from his fingers the cane he held, Jerry laid it on his back and shoulders with the force and industry of an energetic and robust woman beating carpets.

Jerry kept on until the yells died away to a series of whimpering moans. While the thrashing was in progress Peggy passed. She saw the commotion, went into the roadway to avoid it, and hurried by; but she had a plain view of her brother's face, and was at no trouble to guess who it was lay on the ground.

Five minutes afterwards, Jerry Oswald was back in the kitchen of his home, where Peggy was preparing supper. Brother and sister looked at each other, but said nothing, nor did they ever refer afterwards to the incident of that night. But no more was Peggy ever troubled by the insulting impertinences of her caddish admirer; and when Jerry returned from work on future evenings, he saw no more of Mr. Charles Marchant. Moreover, during the rest of Jerry's stay at the timber-yard, the well-trounced young clerk never spoke another word to him; he avoided him, and if Jerry or any other workman were summoned, it was some other clerk who carried the message.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Leaving Home.

AT last the day came which brought the letter from James Oswald, telling his children that they were to join him in his home in the new world. The letter was brief, and contained a money-order for sixty pounds, this for the payment of the family's passage over to British Columbia. Their father would try to meet them at Winnipeg; further east he could not go, for he could not spare the time, but he trusted that Peggy and Jerry between them would manage all right. He named the steamer by which they were to travel, gave them the date of its sailing, and the name and whereabouts of the emigrant official at Halifax, Nova Scotia, to whom to apply for directions for their further procedure.

With the letter was a note enclosed for Jerry, and it was with great pride the lad read what his father had written.

"Dear Jerry (ran the note),—From what your sister has told me in her letters, I gather you have already proved yourself so much of a man that I have no hesitation in leaving your sisters in your care during the journey out here to meet me. I am sorry I cannot come over myself to fetch you. I am sorry for a good many things, but I guess I'll be better able to talk to you and Peggy when I see you than I can in a letter, so we'd better let it wait until then.

"As for the trip, I've told you all I can. The rest I feel confident I can leave to your own good sense and intelligence. Don't hesitate about accepting the advice of Mr. Gilbert, the emigration agent, to the letter. Do just as he tells you. Don't make too many or close acquaintances on the journey, for there are plenty of sharks hereabouts who'd be only too willing to relieve you of your money.

"I don't know what you've learnt while I'm away—if you've got any trade in your hands, but I guess a lad like you will be able to strike some good paid job before you're over here long. It's a grand country for anyone who can and will work, and you may be sure I'll do my best, if only to make up for these last months, and the harm I've done you and the others.

"Good-bye for a while. YOUR FATHER."

Of course, the letter was discussed over breakfast. The two youngsters very quickly became almost frantic at the news of going to a strange country, of sailing on a big steamer, at the prospect of a seven or eight days' railway journey, and, above all, with the meeting with their father at the end of it.

Peggy didn't show such extravagant joy; she was not particularly demonstrative, and the idea of leaving her own country saddened her somewhat. Womanlike, she had the natural shrinking from, the natural apprehension of, something so tremendous as this transportation to another country, the beginning of an entirely new life, the losing of all her present associations, and making acquaintance with fresh ones.

As for Jerry, he could have jumped and yelled for joy, have stood on his head, or done something otherwise extravagant in his delight; but a newly-born sense of importance held him quiet, and bade him keep up his dignity as the man in charge.

"You'll tell Mr. Warren, of course, Jerry?" asked Peggy, as her brother hurriedly despatched the remainder of his breakfast and prepared to leave.

"Of course I will, old girl; I'll show him the letter this morning."

"He'll let you go, though I dare say he'll be sorry."

"I'll bet he will," Jerry said decidedly. "He didn't think, though, when, five months ago, he offered me that——" Jerry caught his sister's eyes fixed questioningly

upon him, and he suddenly pulled up, and hurriedly got on to another tack—"that I'd be leaving him so soon."

"I expect he will be sorry," Peggy said thoughtfully. "He seems to think very well of you, Jerry, and he has been good to us."

"He has!" was the emphatic agreement. "He's a jolly good sort is George Warren. And all because I was so quick to learn when he came down to the gymnasium to teach the fellows wrestling."

"And you'll be sorry, too, won't you, old boy?"

"I will. But I'll be jolly glad also."

Peggy sighed softly, stared rather vacantly at the narrow though clean and bright curtained little window for a few seconds, then jumped hurriedly to her feet, and told her brother he'd have to be off. He mustn't be late that morning, even though he was in a position to give his master notice of his intention to leave his employ.

During the afternoon Jerry applied at the offices to see the junior partner, and a little before four o'clock he was sent word that Mr. George was disengaged, and would be glad to see him

"Well, Jerry, what is it? Sit down and tell me," was the kindly greeting he had; and Jerry sat down.

Now that the time had come, Jerry was decidedly conscious of some little diffidence, hesitation, even regret that he was going to leave his employer, who had proved himself a true friend in need.

"I—I—I want, sir—I was going to tell you——" Somehow or other the words wouldn't come.

Mr. Warren came to his assistance with a joke.

"What? That your sister is going to be married, and that if I've another berth in Canada to offer you you'll be glad to take it?"

"No, sir." Mention of the word Canada seemed to give the lad a lead. "Not that; but that my father's written to tell us to go out there to him, and we're to start in a fortnight's time."

"Oh!"

There was silence for a few seconds. Mr. Warren sat looking at the papers on his desk, and Jerry was beginning to feel somehow that he was hurt, when the junior partner suddenly looked up.

"Here's the letter, sir." And Jerry held out his hand.

"Thank you. Well, Jerry, let me tell you that I'm glad to hear of such good news for you, for of course it is good news. It would be a funny thing, a most unnatural thing, too, if you weren't glad at the prospect of seeing your father again; and after such a long time. I'm pleased to hear that he is doing so well. It'll be all right your leaving here. I can't detain you; I wouldn't if I could, for it is to your own benefit. But I won't stop now. I'll come round and give you a call, perhaps to-night, and then we can talk it over. Let me congratulate you, my boy."

George Warren did call that evening, and so early that when Jerry got home he found the junior partner already there, sitting in the kitchen in conversation with Peggy. That his sister seemed a trifle flushed and excited Jerry did not observe.

"I have been hearing of your good news, Jerry, from your sister," Warren said, as he rose. "She's been telling me of the arrangements your father has made for you. Feel a bit important, don't you, having to take care of her, not to speak of the youngsters, for, here, a journey of nearly six thousand miles? Feel equal to it?"

"Yes, sir; I reckon I'll pull through all right." And the boy looked at his sister.

So did Mr. Warren, and Peggy smiled; and George Warren smiled too. Except in a purely physical sense, he probably thought Miss Margaret Oswald to be a young lady who could take care of herself pretty well. She had proved herself equal to it since the defection of their father—and more besides. Still, he sighed somewhat even as he smiled.

Mr. Warren stayed to have some supper, and when he left it was with the understanding that the Oswalds, all four of them, should come up to his father's house to tea on the Sunday following.

"You'd better knock off work on the Saturday before, Jerry," he said. "Oh, don't worry about the notice! It's a biggish thing you're undertaking. There's a lot to do, and you'll want some time to do it in before starting."

The visit proved a decidedly successful event. Peggy and her brother were well received by Mr. Warren and his father, and the lady who acted as housekeeper made things very pleasant indeed for the two little girls.

"I have to thank you very much, Mr. Warren," Jerry said soberly when the party left; and he added naively: "I'm glad I wanted to learn wrestling."

"And so am I," his earlier tutor answered, with sincere emphasis. "You may find it useful to you."

"I have, sir," replied Jerry, thinking of Mr. Charles Marchant.

"Yes, yes, of course!" laughed Mr. Warren. "So have I. I was forgetting it was when you challenged that professional the night at the music-hall that I came upon you, after having lost sight of you for so long. Yes, it was decidedly useful and lucky that you had a taste for the game."

Peggy was very quiet on the homeward journey, but Jerry was so full of talk himself, the decidedly slight share his elder sister took in the conversation didn't worry him at all.

The next week was a busy one; the youngsters' impatience grew into a perfect fever, and Peggy and her brother had their hands full in making arrangements for their leaving.

The less they had to take with them the better; furniture and such cannot be transported six thousand miles, and though their father had said nothing about it, they decided to sell all the belongings they had except their clothes, and a few small articles they desired to keep as mementoes. Fortunately, this presented no difficulty, the landlady being quite willing to purchase everything as it stood, as she had the idea of letting their vacated rooms furnished.

The tickets were purchased, and on the Friday morning Jerry convoyed his charges to Euston Station. He had charge of the money left of the sixty pounds their father had sent over, while in Peggy's possession was that which she had contrived to save—rather more than the total of the sums James Oswald had from time to time remitted.

On the platform they were surprised to find Mr. George Warren. He had come, he said, to see the last of them, and impressing on Jerry his desire for a letter now and again to hear how all would be getting on, he made the lad a small present, a souvenir of their acquaintance, in the form of a silver English lever hunter watch. The lad took it with expressions of gratitude, heartfelt, though few.

He was feeling all at once that Providence was being very good to him. There were also a couple of small presents for the little girls, but though there was nothing in evidence for Peggy, that young lady did not look as if she were feeling very hurt by the omission. Not that she showed such excited delight as the little ones, or the important, self-conscious joy of her brother; indeed, she seemed for a while a trifle unhappy. When the train steamed out of the station on its way she was actually in tears.

"Sorry, Peggy?" asked her brother.

"Yes, I am!"

"I'm not; though it does hurt a bit parting from a chap you know and like as much as Mr. Warren. I say, Peggy, he's a ripping good sort, he is; a really fine fellow. I like him. Though not because of the watch," he added hastily, as if fearful of being misunderstood. "It's a beauty, though. But we may see him again. What d'you think he told me, Peggy, just before we came away?"

Miss Oswald shook her head.

"Can't guess, Jerry."

"Why, that he might see us next spring. He has to go over to Canada on business occasionally, so he said—though he hasn't been this year, I know; and, perhaps, if he has time, he'll come and give us a look up. I'm to let him know where our home is to be."

"Yes," Peggy said faintly, not appearing greatly interested in the news, a fact which her brother noticed.

"Well, wouldn't you want to see him?" he demanded, somewhat indignantly. "I'm jolly well sure I will. I tell you he's a really splendid chap!"

"Think so?"

"Yes, I do," was the emphatic answer.

"Well, as he's said he'll come, I expect he will," Peggy replied; and there was a queer glance in her moist, pretty eyes. "I should think he's a man who sticks to his word; and, of course, I'll be glad to see him."

Jerry, engaged in looking at something beyond the window that had caught his attention, heard the words, but he understood no special significance in them, nor did he see Peggy's face. It wouldn't have mattered if he had.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Off to Canada.

JERRY realised that there's work to do in convoying three members of the feminine sex, and more than once before all were safely settled in the steerage of the steamer, his forehead grew moist with perspiration, and his mind worried. There were plenty of other passengers in the steerage; all were as forceful and insistent as himself, and some a good deal bigger; all wanted attending to first; and all worked on "the devil-take-the-hindmost" principle. Two incipient fights were only just nipped in the bud by Peggy's intervention, and Jerry ultimately got on board, and found quarters for his charges, very much out of temper, and feeling that of all the places in the world he'd least like to be, the steerage of an American liner was the very one.

Of course, if he'd been by himself, he'd have been all right,

so he told himself—to take care of a big girl and two little ones was a very different sort of proposition. But his fit of ill-temper vanished once things had shaken down pretty well; he found his companions were not nearly so bad as he had thought, and he was surprised later by the finding out of what a number of things his sister had contrived to do.

While he was worrying about the safe stowage of such luggage as they had, and making himself more than a bit of a nuisance to various officials, Peggy found out where they were to be berthed, made friends with one of the stewardesses, and put the little sisters comfortably away in a corner where they'd be no trouble to themselves or anybody else, and got for them something to eat and a drink of milk.

When Jerry did find her, his mouth full of complaints, she commended him for what he had done, soothed him, told him that he had managed things splendidly, that everything was very nice and comfortable, and asked him to get her a cup of tea.

When supper-time came Jerry shook himself, found that, after all, things had gone very well, felt quite satisfied with what he had done, and ate an exceedingly good meal.

That trip across the Atlantic was, to Jerry, after the first twelve hours, the beginning of the entry into a new life—of the life of which he had dreamed. Of the first twelve hours the less said the better, for Jerry was violently sick. He did not care to say anything himself about it, either at the time or afterwards. He found, during those twelve horrible hours, that life could be more wretched than ever he had suspected. Even in the wretched days when he could get no work to do he had never believed life was less worth living than during that period of sea-sickness. It was the first time that ever he had been at sea, and his stomach paid the price of the new experience.

But by dinner-time the next day, for the steamer left port about seven in the evening, Jerry was quite a different being; the seasickness had left him, and with it his miserable outlook on existence. His stomach, having recovered, clamoured for something wherewith to satisfy its emptiness, and his inquiries as to when the next meal would be served were so frequent that the steward at last lost his temper.

Jerry went to find the others. He admitted it, and to his shame and remorse, that he had forgotten about everything but himself and sufferings during his period of illness. He had lain in his berth, groaning and heaving, and sisters and father had been as nothing compared with the violent sense of nausea that filled him.

Two turns along the deck sufficed for the finding of his sisters. He had not seen them since the previous evening when supper had been partaken of, and in the steamer the womenfolk were berthed apart from the men.

Playing on the deck, he found the two little ones, with Peggy near at hand, sitting in a chair, and taking care of one of two small babies a fellow-emigrant was burdened with.

"What ever's the matter, Jerry?" the girl asked as he came into view.

It was no wonder she asked, for the lad was of a villainously-livid colour, and his eyes were bloodshot. Though he was feeling perfectly sound again, the traces of his sickness had not yet vanished.

"Nothing."

"But you—— Oh, what?"

"Been sick," Jerry answered shortly, "haven't you?"

"No; we've been getting on famously," Peggy answered brightly. "None of us have been ill."

"Well, I was bad for a bit; right as a trivet now, and feeling I could eat a horse. It didn't last long, thank goodness, but it was bad while it did last."

Jerry sat himself down on the deck and commenced to join in the play of the little ones, but suddenly he turned on Peggy with the remark:

"I say, sis!"

"Well, Jerry?"

"Why did you say you expect George Warren will come over to Canada next spring?"

Peggy flushed, and bent down over the infant she was nursing.

"Why, you said he told you so yourself," she replied.

"So he did; but I've been thinking, why should he come? He's never been to Canada before?"

"On business, I suppose."

"Yes, but he's never done it before."

"Well, it's not out of the way if he should, is it? Why shouldn't he go if he wants to, or has to?"

"No reason at all; but if he's in Ontario and we're in British Columbia or Vancouver Island, it'll be a good long stretch for him to come just to see us. Oh-h-h!"

Jerry suddenly broke into a long-drawn-out exclamation which became a whistle; he was looking steadily at his sister, and Peggy was blushing.

"Oh!" the lad said again, and the wonder in his eyes gave place to a twinkle of amusement. "That's it, is it?" he muttered, and he looked seawards.

"Well, I'm blessed!" was his next remark.

Suddenly getting up, he walked alongside Peggy's chair.

"So that's it, Peggy, is it?" he exclaimed.

"That is what, Jerry?"

"That's why you said you were sorry you were going to leave England. That's why you cried when we were in the train. That's why he was at our house the night I came home to tell you I'd told him of my leaving!" He spoke in quite a low voice, smilingly, but Peggy's pretty face was blushing crimson. "That's why you're sure he will come to see us next year."

But Peggy said nothing. Then his eyes fell upon her left hand, resting upon the infant's shoulder.

"But where's the ring, Peggy?"

"There isn't a ring, Jerry," the girl said very soberly. "I told him I couldn't have it until I was sure—in six months' time, perhaps—until after he'd seen my father; I couldn't let him give it until I had spoken to our father. Do you see?"

"Well," Jerry replied, "this is an eye-opener; and I never guessed it. Well, I'm blessed! But I say, I am glad, and he's a jolly lucky fellow. No wonder he told me I'd got to take jolly good care of you, and see that nothing happened. Now I know. Well, I wish you luck, old girl, for he's a real good sort. Did you——"

"What?"

"Tell him about that chap Marchant, I was going to say?"

"Yes, and he thought you'd done splendidly; done so well he thought there was no need for him to take any notice."

"Well, well, well!" But Jerry's astonishment at so startling a discovery as that he had made didn't prevent him from eating a good dinner when the time came.

Uneventful journeys are best, and the trip across from Liverpool to Halifax was made without any incident of note arising. At Halifax Jerry found the emigration agent whom his father had mentioned, and he advised the waiting of the Oswalds until the day after landing before taking the train for Montreal.

This meant the delay of a day as an emigrant train was due to go out four hours after the arrival of the steamer, and delay Jerry did not wish.

"We'd better go on to-day, sis," he said, as he entered the long waiting-room wherein the majority of the women and children were seated.

"But father said we were to do as Mr. Gilbert directed," objected Peggy.

"Yes, but I'll bet he didn't know that he'd tell us to wait. What's the advantage?"

"Well, you heard what Mr. Gilbert said, Jerry, that some of the emigrants are rather a rough lot, and I think on account of the little ones here we'd better wait if we're to get greater comfort of travelling. Still, if you——"

"Oh, I think we'd better go on; I'm here with you all, and I don't see how any harm'll come to us."

"All right, then."

Jerry went out of the house, and outside the door was joined by a thin-faced, light-haired, grey-eyed young man, who had evidently been waiting for him.

"Well," he said, "yer coming?"

"Well, my sister doesn't want to," began Jerry; "but——"

"Oh, rats on that!" was the rude interruption. "What in thunder does a man want to be talked to by a bit of a woman? If you've got any horse sense——"

"Here, pull up!" Jerry exclaimed. "I'm not going to have my sister spoken of like that, Merriman!"

"Well, well!" the man called Merriman altered his note. "I didn't mean to say anything against her, sure; but women do git fancies, and a man oughtn't to give way to 'em. What's the matter with this train, anyway?"

"Well, Mr. Gilbert says——"

"Oh, shucks on him!" Merriman said impatiently. "Why do yer listen to his chin music? Don't yer see his little game? Oh, he's spry, he is! Wants all of you to stay over-night, so's he can board and lodge yer. Got a place here, and take yer in at a dollar apiece. That's twenty in his pocket. Oh, yes, siree, Tony Gilbert's no fool; and that's what he's on to! Wonder a cute young chap like you don't see through his little game."

Jerry stood irresolute. He and this fellow Merriman had chummed up while on the steamer, Merriman making himself extremely agreeable to the young Englishman, who, so he ascertained, had something like thirty pounds in ready money in his possession.

Now, Merriman was a chevalier d'industrie—which is a classical name for one who lives by his wits—was, not to put too fine a point on it, a thief, and he contrived to make a fairly lucrative living out of persons travelling across the Herring Pond. Where he did not directly steal he swindled, and more than one emigrant had found himself landed on

Jerry seized Marchant by the shoulder, and flung him forcibly against the lamp-post. (*See page 37.*)

Canadian soil with empty pockets, thanks to Mr. Hiram G. Merriman, American citizen.

Gifted with a pleasing manner, and able to make himself extremely agreeable, Mr. Merriman counted as victims some scores yearly, and it is small wonder that Jerry was imposed upon.

The lad's anxiety to travel by the emigrant train was due to Mr. Merriman's prompting. The crook, having failed to "persuade" Jerry out of his money during the voyage, had decided to possess himself of it during the long railway journey between Halifax and Quebec or Montreal. Hence his annoyance when Jerry seemed to be in favour of abiding by his sister's advice.

"Wal, my buck, are yer going to let his Nibs relieve you of yer dollars just because you can't make up yer mind to say 'no' to a female?" asked Merriman's drawling, sneering voice.

"Yes, I am," Jerry said, with sudden decision.

Why, in that brief moment, he so decided he could not say.

"Wal, more fool you!" snarled Mr. Merriman. "Say, kid, how d'yer know yer've got yer money, anyway?"

"Of course I have!" Jerry answered, considerably surprised by the question. "It's here!"

He placed his right hand on his jacket-pocket, and the next second he felt himself tripped and felled to the earth.

Merriman, finding his villainous project likely to fail, meant—the space in front of the building was empty—to resort to force.

Even as the lad fell Merriman was upon him; his hand went into Jerry's pocket, the wallet in which was the lad's money was abstracted, and, as fast as he could lay foot to ground, he ran off in the direction of the railway station.

But for once fortune was against the American swindler. Jerry was very quickly upon his feet; he could run like a greyhound, and Merriman's thirty yards' lead was reduced to ten ere a further hundred and twenty were covered. The lad was at his heels when the buildings of the station were in sight, and Merriman, conscious that the game was up, had to resort to a most desperate means. He spurted, gained a few yards, took out the stolen wallet, and hurled it backwards across his shoulder in his pursuer's face.

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Involuntarily, Jerry pulled up; the wallet was of more concern to him than catching Merriman. He stopped, regained his property, and before he was ready to continue his pursuit the Yankee had gained the fenced way alongside the goods' yard. Vaulting it, the rascal disappeared between the waggons drawn up on the sidings.

Very thoughtfully Jerry made his way back to the building where were his sisters.

Peggy was standing at the door, and as her brother approached she called out:

"We're ready, Jerry."

But Jerry shook his head.

"We'll wait until to-morrow, sis, after all," he said.

They left by the morrow's train, and on the platform they heard the railway officials discussing news of an accident on the line, that had just come in by telegraph. Their train started, but, eight hours out, they were hung up and sidetracked. There had been an accident—a severe one—to the emigrant train that had gone off the previous day.

At their stopping-place seven or eight hours were spent—the line was still blocked, and they could not go on.

While waiting, Jerry got some news from one of the railway men. Twelve unhappy passengers had been killed outright, and it was feared nearly a hundred were injured. Of the names of the former some were known, and in the list Jerry read that of Hiram G. Merriman.

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THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
A Set-Back.

FIVE or six hours' railway travelling is sufficient to more than satisfy most persons, and when that time comes to be multiplied by ten a train becomes somewhat of a wearisome place to be in. At first the novelty was decidedly attractive, and the long, compartmentless cars—like mammoth tramcars, except that the seats were crossways, with an aisle down the centre—did permit of more extensive freedom of movement than the English railway-carriages, which was greatly to the taste of the little children, but after half a day the monotony of continuous travelling began to pall.

Consequently, it was with a feeling of great relief the Oswalds found themselves running into the station at Montreal. Here they would have to wait two or three hours before boarding the train which was to take them on the still longer journey right across the Dominion. But they did not leave the station, much as Jerry desired to see all there was to be seen.

By midday they were again on board and speeding westward through country that, as many of the folks near to them declared, was "quite like England."

Fourteen hundred miles they had to run before reaching Winnipeg, and they had plenty of time wherein to say all that they found need to say. The youngsters got tired and fretful, but their elder sister kept them in hand. Apparently proof against the weariness and monotony of travel, she kept the little ones amused with tales and games, the while Jerry stared out of the window with untiring eyes or chatted with fellow-travellers.

"Quite a lot of people," he observed to a man, against whom he had sat down.

He was a man of middle-age, quiet-eyed and grey-bearded, with a tanned and weatherbeaten face, quiet of demeanour and silent, and he looked at his companion gravely.

"Fair," he answered. "But we're too late for a big load."

"Too late?"

"Yes; ye oughter see 'em just before harvest-time out west; trains can't run fast enough, or take enough at a time."

"You know the line, sir?"

"Oughter; have been over it before. Just out from the Old Country?"

"Yes—London. Father is going to meet us at Winnipeg if he can find the time. He's in British Columbia."

"Ah, fine country! Farmin'?"

"No; with the railway—the Canadian Pacific."

"Ah! Oughter see the line about July or August; everybody's goin' west to help in harvestin'. From all along the line we picks 'em up—all classes an' all ages an' sizes. Hard work, harvestin'; but the pay's good. You goin' on th' railway?"

"Don't know yet."

And then the elderly man fell to talking, and Jerry heard such tales as made his eyes to flash and sparkle—tales of solitary rides over the lonely prairie, of rounds up at the big cattle ranches of Alberta, of months of hard work in clearing and breaking new land in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, of fights with the winter cold and snow, with wolves, with bad men and desperate characters in the lonely parts of the country, and tussles with the rough hands engaged in clearing the ground and laying the metals for new branches of the great railway system. So interesting was the old settler's conversation Jerry forgot all about the passing of time.

Even journeys of a thousand miles and more come to an end; and at last the train ran into the station at Winnipeg.

Almost before it came to a standstill Jerry had dropped off the platform at the end of the car and ran his eyes up and down in search of his father. But he failed to see him, and in a moment was back at the train again, to catch the youngsters in his arms and assist Peggy to alight.

Putting them all in a place where they would not be knocked down, Jerry busied himself about getting the luggage he owned sorted out from the pile which the brakemen tumbled out of the goods' cars. Having recovered it he went off to Peggy.

"Seen him?" he shouted.

But Peggy shook her head.

"I haven't seen father!" shrilled Helen excitedly, running up to her brother. "Where's daddy? Where's daddy?"

"We'll have a look for him in a bit," the lad said cheerfully. "I expect he can't find us because we've all altered so. It's a long time since he saw us. I'll have a look. Stop with Peggy."

In haste Jerry went up and down the long platform; but there was no sign of him, and slowly, keen disappointment in his heart, he went back to the waiting, expectant group.

"Don't see him, sis."

The faces of the two little girls fell; they looked as if they were about to cry.

"Go and make sure, Jerry," Peggy said, and she turned to her sisters.

Jerry did go. He inquired of everybody likely to give him information, he went outside the station, he asked if there were an east-bound train overdue, and was told that the last had passed five hours before, quite up to time, and the next would come in late that night.

"Is it likely my father's addressed any letter or wire or message to me here?" asked Jerry desperately. "My name's Oswald."

But the clerk to whom he was turned over informed him that no such message was waiting; and Jerry had to carry the disappointing news to his sisters.

"We'll have to wait until this time to-morrow before we can go on," he announced; "so I'll see about finding some place where we can spend the night."

"But where's daddy?" cried Helen pitifully.

The children had been building on this meeting for days past; now that it had failed them they seemed desolate. Both were in tears.

"What can we do, Jerry?"

"Must stay here, sis. There's an east-bound train coming in to-night; I'll come down and meet it; father may have been delayed. If he don't we'll go on to-morrow; but perhaps we'll get a message before that."

"But can't you send him a wire?"

"By Jove, I'd forgotten that! So we will!"

Jerry put his hand into his pocket, as he turned off, stopped suddenly, and uttered an exclamation of dismay.

His wallet was gone!

A hurried search was made in his pockets; but the leather case failed to materialise. Either it had dropped from his pocket or someone had stolen it. All the money he had was a little loose change—a dollar or so, three or four quarters, and a few cents in copper money.

"It is lucky we did agree to divide the money," Peggy said, when the loss was realised.

"But however——" began Jerry blankly. "You must think me a fool, sis, to go and—— Hallo! Why, my coat's cut!"

And examination proved that this was so. The outside flap of the pocket had been ingeniously slit, making removal of the contents an easy matter, but when and by whom no one could say.

"Hev t' look mighty sharp hereabouts," observed a railway man who had witnessed the scene, and thus offered condolence. "There's some mighty slick crooks an' sharps comes over on these trains. One of 'em's had yer all right," which was poor consolation for the victims.

Then Jerry did the right thing; he went to one of the Government officials, and from him learned of a good boarding-house not far from the station where his sisters could stay over night, and forthwith carried them off there.

Having seen them safely located, he went back to the station, got the luggage disposed of for the time being, sent off his telegram—though by no means sure that it would reach its destination—and went back to the boarding-house for a meal.

Things might be worse. Their father hadn't positively

stated he would meet them, so there was as yet no need to feel any anxiety upon that account; while the money—some eight or nine pounds—Peggy had would see them through all right.

Anyway, as much had been done for the present as might be done, and, with as much cheerfulness as if things had not fallen out otherwise than had been expected, Jerry went back to the boarding-house.

A good meal revived the spirits of the children, and, as nothing could be done until the expected wire arrived or their father himself came, Jerry took his charges for a look round the city. This passed away the afternoon; tea was taken at a creamery, and, after a further look round, all returned to the boarding-house.

The children in bed, and supper eaten, Jerry left the house to go down to the station to see if the incoming east-bound train carried his father. No reply had been received to the wire despatched; but Jerry did not look upon this as a bad sign.

At the station, however, he was disappointed. Of the thirty or forty persons who alighted James Oswald was not one, and it was with slow steps the lad turned away from the station.

Deep in thought, he went along the sidewalk, his head bent down, so that he gave no heed to a commotion that filled the street, late as was the hour. He heard men running and shouting, but without attention, and not until he turned into the road wherein was the boarding-house did he arouse himself.

The road was half full of people, and suddenly he saw a long, flame-coloured tongue shoot upward to the starlit sky. Another and another followed. A house was on fire, and for a moment the lad's heart seemed to stand still. The fire was a hundred yards ahead, in about the spot where was the lodging-house. Great heavens! It might be the very one!

And so it proved. When, with fierce efforts, the lad succeeded in penetrating the crowd gathered about the burning structure, he saw that it was in truth the house in which were his sisters. He had been gone no more than half an hour; but then, half an hour is quite sufficient when a house is built mainly of wood.

It was the upper part of the building that was aflame. Police and fire-brigade were already there, and the most strenuous exertions were being made to rescue the occupants and such of the furniture as might be. Bursting through those who gathered outside, Jerry dashed into the house. A woman was coming down the staircase holding a little girl—in her night-gear, and screaming with terror—in her arms.

The woman was Peggy, the little girl Helen; and as her eyes fell upon the lad's figure, Peggy uttered a cry of joy. Not five minutes had the blaze been in progress, and she, in the drawing-room below, had been alarmed, rushed upstairs, and brought down the child.

"Save——" she gasped, as brother and sister drew near.

But though the roaring of the flames drowned her voice, Jerry guessed instinctively what they were. His other sister was still in the bed-room.

The boarding-house held a score or more inmates, all grown-up persons, and these, some in night attire, were pressing down the staircase, carrying such articles of property as they had been able to snatch up. All were desperate, the majority being women, and they gave no heed to the lad as he strove to force himself past them.

"Get away—get away!" some shouted.

A dozen were blocked on the staircase, one woman struggling with a huge trunk, which impeded her, and so kept others behind. But, heedless of the danger she was occasioning those behind, and their frantic cries to her to go forward, she refused to abandon the cumbrous piece of luggage.

"Out of the way!" the lad shouted. But the woman—she was a middle-aged, light-headed Teuton—was not affected a jot.

And then the lad made a sudden leap at the banister-rails of the stairs above him, where the staircase turned round to the right up to the first landing. Quickly he drew himself up, got one foot on the banister, and then stepped to the narrow outside edge of the stairs above.

The stairs themselves were packed, but Jerry drew himself up on the outside until the underneath part of the flight above struck his head and he could go no further. And then he threw his left leg over the banister, found room to force himself after, and rushed into the first of the wide-open doors giving on to the landing.

He had no idea in which room was his little sister—there had been no time to ask of Peggy—and chamber after chamber he rushed into and out again, meeting no sign of the little girl. The roaring of the flames almost deafened him; the smoke was suffocating and blinding; and though he had been cold when he left the station, the heat within the house was so great that the sweat was streaming down his forehead.

He began to mount the second flight of stairs to the floor where the fire was burning most fiercely. Up the stairs he bounded, four at a time. A woman met him midway.

"Go back—go back!" she shrieked. "You will be burnt to death! There's no one here!"

The light dress she was wearing was smouldering where the flames had caught it and been beaten out. There was sense in what she said, but at such a juncture as this commonsense stands for naught. It is overridden and swept aside by the human feeling of love, which is so strong that it becomes a part of divinity. His sister was above—she must be; so much was certain—and it was Jerry's duty to save her. Was not she in his charge until their father came?

Stuffing his handkerchief in his mouth, Jerry pushed past the descending woman. The flames swept over the landing as he gained it, but he rushed through them. They scorched and licked him, but in his delirium of daring he felt no pain. Into one room he forced his way, scarce able to see anything by reason of the thick smoke. Out again, for the room was empty.

A closed door was facing him, the flames just licking its surface. Without staying to try the handle, he drove at it with his foot, and so fierce was the blow that the door flew open. The heat was as that of a furnace, though until the opening of the door there was but little smoke in the room.

Half leaning out of the opened window stood the figure of a little girl, and Jerry knew her to be his sister. He shouted, but she did not hear. Terrified by the fire, awakened by Peggy's entry to remove the other girl, Mary had fled from her own room to this one, and shut the door.

A bed stood against the wall, and as Jerry rushed by it he grabbed at the topmost covering. From behind Mary he flung the counterpane over her, pulling her backward, enveloping her entirely, and suffocating her sudden shriek of terror. Rolling her into a bundle, he picked her up in his arms and made for the door.

How the boy fought his way down that flight of stairs he never knew. His hair was singed, and his clothes and flesh burned. He went blindly, Providence saving him from a stumble or misstep. The stairs creaked and shook beneath him, but he gained the landing and the lower flight of stairs. And then the landing above fell in, the burning debris covering the bottommost stairs by the entrance-hall, and blocking his progress.

He saw, but he did not stop. Holding his burden to his breast with one hand, he gripped the banister with the other and steadied himself as he stepped over to find a foothold on the outer edge of the stair. The hot wood burned his palm, but he found the foothold he sought. He was dizzy and blind; his senses were reeling; he knew he must drop, but feared, not knowing on to what he might fall.

And then he heard, though it seemed to him as if he must be miles away, so faint was the voice, his sister Peggy speaking, though what she said he could not determine. For hours he seemed to hang in this insecure position, and then the stairway collapsed, and he dropped with it.

That was all he knew, for his senses left him entirely. When they came back, he was sitting with a blanket round him on a man's knee in the road, and another was pouring something like liquid fire between his scorched lips. So fierce was the pain that he leaped upright.

"Mary, Mary!" he shouted. And would have broken away, but strong arms seized him and restrained him.

"She's all right, sonny!" cried a rough voice. "A gal—God bless her, for she's a gritty one!—ran an' took her away from yer just as yer was hauled out. Guess she ain't any worse for it. Steady, up there! Yer ain't goin' to fall to pieces now, mate, surely."

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Together at Last.

JERRY didn't fall to pieces, though if all those who wanted to had been allowed to grip his burned hands he would have stood a fair chance of having his arm shaken to bits. He was a peach, a bit of the old stuff, real grit, and many other things beside, for everyone in the crowd knew how he had entered the burning house, and brought down his sister from the blazing top floor.

And what was to Jerry of more importance than the fact that, though he was pretty extensively burned, and three-parts of his hair had gone, none of his hurts were serious, was the news that Peggy came to give him. He had not risked his life for nothing.

When little Mary was unwrapped from the quilt her brother had covered her with, she was found to be insensible indeed, but untouched by the fire. Save for the shock, she was unhurt. Peggy, too, had escaped with little worse than

superficial burns; and Helen was without injury at all, thanks to her sister.

The house had been burned to the ground, though efforts to prevent the fire spreading had proved successful, but no lives had been sacrificed.

It was in a neighbouring hotel that Jerry found himself, and it was there Peggy came to him. He was lying in bed, and little of him that she could see but was enveloped in oil-and-flour bandages. In a few words she told him of the providential escape of all, and then fell on her knees beside him.

"Jerry, my poor old chap," she said, "you're a hero. I told you so once before, and you wouldn't believe me; perhaps you will now. I can't kiss you—I mustn't, the doctor won't let me—but when I can I will. I'm proud of you, old fellow; and so is everyone; and——"

"Where's father? Has he come? Have you heard anything?"

The lad's voice, though weak, was anxious, and Peggy turned away her head.

"Not yet," she said. "We haven't had time to see about anything. Do you know, it's only twelve hours ago since the fire took place? And you're not to move or get excited—the doctor says so."

"But where are we, sis?"

And she told him.

"How long'll we have to stay here? When can I get up—to-day?" he asked feebly.

"I don't know; perhaps not," she replied evasively. "But you're not to worry yourself. I expect you'll get up before very long."

"Well, it's a good job you've got that money, sis," he observed, after a short pause; "for if father don't come, and we've got to stay here, it'll require money, and——"

But Peggy turned away. She hadn't the heart to tell her brother yet that the money on which they had depended was gone; that, for safety's sake, she had placed her purse in one of two small handbags taken up to the boarding-house, and these had been lost in the fire. She and the others had been taken straight into the hotel, and there they must stay until Jerry was able to move, but how they were to make payment for the cost of their food and lodging she did not know.

No news came to the Oswalds of their father during the next three days, though of would-be visitors to the lad there were plenty. But Peggy wouldn't have her brother disturbed, and the newspaper men and others had to make what they could out of her. And this was not a little, seeing that they learned form other sources of the part she had played at the fire. The girl would have been extremely surprised could she have read all that was written about her. But she had quite enough to do without that in seeing after her brother, and taking care of Helen and Mary.

On the second day she was greatly surprised to be told by the waiter that a gentleman was waiting to see her in one of the downstairs rooms. With thoughts of her father, she ran down; but what actually took place at that interview was something for which she had not bargained.

A quarter of an hour later she was beside Jerry, her eyes sparkling and mouth twitching with amusement. And what she had to say to Jerry proved a better tonic than anything the doctor gave him, for it brought from him laugh upon laugh.

"He actually wanted to marry me, Jerry," the girl cried between sobs of mirth. "Said he'd read of me in the papers, and had come in from twenty miles out to ask me to be his wife. Was sure, after what he'd read, that there couldn't be a better wife in the world for him, though whether by that he meant to say that he was always having fires at his farm I don't quite know. Think of it, Jerry! I can see I shall have to keep a strict watch over you when you're well enough to get about, for it's possible the Canadian damsels are as impetuous as the men, and I may find two or three coming here wanting to take you and marry you straightaway—because you're so useful when fires are going!" she added mischievously.

On the third day the better part of the bandages were removed, and the doctor told Jerry that he might go out of doors the day after, though he was to take precautions against the cold setting up inflammation. Able to speak properly now that his jaws were released, Jerry had with his sister the talk, the coming of which she had so long dreaded.

"I reckon we'd best be getting on, " the lad said. "Father's evidently not coming, as he said; can't get away, I suppose; but it does seem a bit queer that he shouldn't have written."

"Expect he's away from home, and that's why he didn't get the wire you sent," Peggy said nervously.

"Reckon that is so; but I don't see that we need wait any longer. I can go out now; so we'd better settle up here, and get the next day's midday train west."

Peggy said nothing; and, after waiting a while, Jerry looked at her curiously.

"Don't you want to get on, Peggy?" he asked.

"I wish we could."

"Well, why not?"

"We've got to pay the people here first, Jerry."

"Well, there's the money you have."

And then she told her brother the news of its loss.

Jerry listened, and soon the horror in his face gave way to resignation.

"Seems as if we're not to meet father," he said dejectedly.

"Don't say that, Jerry dear," the girl said quickly.

"But the people here won't let us go. Have you explained things to them?"

"No; but I will, and I'll tell them the money——"

"Will be paid? From where? Get it from father? We can't get any otherwise."

"Yes, we will," Peggy said quietly. "I've written to tell father all; but if he's far away—and you know he has said he's sometimes away for months at a time——"

"That was before he settled down."

"Well, dear, the point is—we've got to pay; and, now you're pretty right, I'm going to get the money to pay our debt. I've arranged how."

She explained. And, though Jerry declared it shouldn't be so—that his sister was not going to take a servant's place in the city if he knew it, that he wouldn't have it—Peggy carried her point. She wouldn't be in debt, she wasn't going to trade upon the kindness of people, and while she had health and strength she wouldn't be the recipient of charity.

This was a reference to something else, of which Jerry knew nothing—the opening of a subscription list in the city—Canadians are generous to a fault in such circumstances—for those who had suffered by the fire.

Peggy had declined. It was not as if they were destitute, she argued, since somewhere in the country was their father, who was able and would be eager to provide for them; let the subscription be for the benefit of the man and his wife whose house had been burned and their all lost.

And Peggy, who was a very masterful young lady, if quietly so, when she chose, had her own way, though, as she told her brother, it was only because he was unable to work that she was taking the responsibility upon herself.

And she did, finding work without a great deal of trouble as parlourmaid in the house of a prominent storekeeper of the city, who did not disguise the fact that Peggy's reputation as the heroine of the fire was no small part of her suitability for his service. He was a Yankee, as are many of the shopkeepers in Winnipeg, and he knew it couldn't hurt him to have her in his employ. He would have preferred her—and given her higher wages—as cashier in his store, but she refused. Such popularity she hardly enjoyed; though, had she cared for it, she could have had it, as the Yankee's offer was but one of a score.

But her period of service—and Jerry's term of self-reproach—was short. Before the week was out a strapping, bronzed, bearded man walked up to the hotel where Jerry and the younger children were living, and it didn't take long for the three of them to recognise him as their father. Peggy's surmise had been correct—his work had taken him away from his home, and, strong as were the desires to disregard it, this might not be. The work completed, however, he had gone home, and there Peggy's letter awaited him; and, it scarcely needs telling, that James Oswald lost little time in travelling to Winnipeg to find the family from whom for so long he had cut himself adrift.

The day but one after his arrival the whole of the family sat in the train en route for British Columbia, and it is safe to say Canada did not hold five persons more happy.

What came after may be told in a few words. Jerry, thanks to his father and his own knowledge gained in Mr. Warren's timber-yard, found a berth with the C.P.R., which, if it took him away for weeks at a time from the parent from whom he had been so long separated, put good money into his pocket.

As for Peggy, she proved herself as good a housekeeper in British Columbia as in London, though not for long. For, keeping his promise, George Warren arrived in the town where was the Oswalds' home during the next spring; and, though he was condemned to wait a twelvemonth before he might claim her, he went away with the knowledge that the year following Peggy Oswald was to return to England with him as his wife.

THE END.

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The Fourth Long Complete Story.

Two Chums.

A Capital Tale of the Ring. By a New Author.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Boss of the Circus.

"I DON'T care wot anybody says, I'm boss o' the earth, so far as circus shows is concerned!"

"I'm very glad to hear it," said the fair young girl, tapping with her riding-whip the high heel of her boot. "All the same, I've never had the pleasure of hearing your name."

Amusement at the other's pomposity danced in her clear, blue eyes.

"Wot! Never heard o' me?"

The squat figure, in the shabby frock-coat, and, contrasting curiously with silk hat of irreproachable gloss, puffed out his capacious chest, ran a fat, greasy hand over a festoon of gold that formed a chain, and regarded the girl almost contemptuously.

"Wot! Never heard o' me—Captain Barnum—cap. for short, missie—the inventor, controller, superviser, organiser, and solo proprietor of the one and only top-dog circus in the world—Barnum's Colossal Conglomeration of Miraculous Marvels. There, missie, wot d'yer think o' that?"

"It sounds rather airy, Captain Barnum, and I'm sure I'm proud to have met you. But you'll excuse me."

"Not at all, miss—not at all. You're not keeping me, although, as you know, I'm a very busy man. You see, I had laid myself out purposely to accord you some of my valuable time, and—er—well, the fact is——"

"Captain Barnum, being a circus-rider, I'm very interested in all you've told me about your show, but my time is not my own. Signor Barnetto——"

"Barnetto—oh, 'e don't count! I'm not talkin' guff, miss. I'm speaking big money to you."

"Big money. What do you mean?"

The slim figure in the neat riding-habit, stiffened, and comprehension flashed across her sweet young face. She gathered her skirts in her free hand, and her fingers tightened over thong and haft of the riding-whip.

"To cut matters short——"

"You're doing anything but that, Captain Barnum!" retorted Claire Forster. "Pray finish what you have to say, and let me wish you good-morning!"

The circus proprietor stared. This—this from a girl of fifteen or sixteen.

"My dear young lady, you don't know your business. You don't know the game; you don't know a good thing when you see it; you don't know when the chance of your life's come your way."

"And I'm not likely to while you beat about the bush so. Is that all?"

"All! I haven't begun yet. Think of it. Fifteen pounds a week and star position on the posters; name in type nine inches deep. Two-colour printing, red and blue on a yellow background—'Mam'selle Claire, the most Daring, Dashing, and Dauntless Horsewoman of the Century, late of Barnetto's Travelling Circus, now appearing exclusively, at a Fabulous Figure, in Barnum's Marvellous Melange and Medley of Mysteries.' Fifteen quid—pounds, miss, a week, and——"

"Do I understand you are doing me the honour of offering me a position in your circus?" There was a warning note in the girl's voice that a less conceited man than the showman would have recognised.

"That's it, Miss Forster—that's your name, isn't it? I'm givin' you a chance that'll never come your way again."

"Thank you very much, but——"

"No, don't thank me!"—airily. "I want you—I want all the stars from the best circuses."

"But I thought you regarded the Signor Barnetto's show as rather second rate?" said the girl cuttingly.

"Well, miss, it ain't wot it might be—now, is it? An' fifteen pounds a week——"

"Fifteen pounds a week, or fifty pounds a week wouldn't take me from it!" retorted the young horsewoman, a flush of sudden anger crimsoning her cheeks. "I have the satisfaction of working with a man—a gentleman, I should say—who respects himself more than to attempt to bribe a rival showman's hands!"

"Barnetto—your boss—a gentleman? Ha, ha! I like that! Why, I rec'lect when Barnetto's father kept a ham-and-beef shop in the Old Kent Road."

"Yes, that may be true or not, but a ham shop owner can also be a gentleman, which is more than you are, or ever will be, Captain Barnum!"

"So you refuse my offer?"

"I have never entertained it."

"Not so fast, missie—not so fast; we 'aven't done yet," laying a heavy paw on the girl's arm.

Claire drew back, her lips tightening.

"How dare you touch me? I'm only a girl, Captain Barnum, but lay your finger again on me and you'll regret it!"

She seemed to grow before his very eyes. In a moment the timid girl vanished, and in her place stood one who looked more than capable of holding her own.

Yet the man had one more card to play.

"Perhaps when you knows as much as I do about yerself, you'll listen to me!" he said, an evil grin expanding his flabby cheeks.

Claire started. Her cheeks paled visibly.

"What do you mean?"

The usually sweet voice trembled, and her eyes narrowed with fear.

"I mean—I know more about you, and the mystery of your birth than you and Barnetto put together."

The words sounded like a threat to the girl. For an instant the light went out of the sky; all was dark. She stretched out her hands, groping blindly towards the man, who stood regarding her triumphantly.

"Oh, tell me! What is it you know? For pity's sake, tell me!"

Her riding-crop fell at Barnum's feet. He picked it up, and fingered the thong thoughtfully.

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 148.

NEXT TUESDAY: "THE HAUNTED ISLAND."

Another School Tale of the Juniors of Greyfriars. By FRANK RICHARDS.

"Ah, I thought that'd move you! Now, p'r'aps, you're willing to give me an 'earing?"

Claire stared at him mistily. Who was the man, and what was the power he held?

"Now, what do you say?" went on the rival circus-proprietor. "Fifteen—pounds—a—week—and—star—position—in—my—show. There!"

"Never! Signor Barnetto is my friend—my best friend." Claire paused, as recollection of someone else—of Dick Rivers, her circus-chum—surged over her. "Barnetto is my friend, and nothing you can say or do would make me leave him. Now, go—please, go!"

"Is that your decision?"

"My last word. Go, I say!" She stamped her dainty foot in uncontrollable anger.

"Yes, I'll go, young madam," he said evilly; "but remember, breathe a word of what I've told you, and the secret I hold shall be published everywhere!"

"The world can know what it likes!" cried Claire wildly. "Tell it—tell everybody your precious secret, but get out of my sight!"

She stooped and picked up the whip which Barnum had dropped. He looked at it uneasily, and then at the straight young form in front of him. Without another word, he stuck his hands into his pockets, and walked jauntily away.

As his bulky figure disappeared among the trees Claire burst into tears. The man frightened her; he was so coarse and brutal. And he wanted her to leave her present employer—to desert Barnetto's circus, and to join his own. And the bait—money—money. How she loathed the very sight of the man!

"Oh, I'm a baby to cry over nothing!" she murmured, drying her eyes. "What would Dick say of his chum, if he saw her now?"

She smiled through her tears, and made her way back to the circus.

"Watto, watto, watto! e, i, o, u! The most daring and dangerous horsewoman in all the Antipodeans. Mam'selle Claire, queen o' the ring, who 'as performed before all the unshaved 'eads o' Europe, Arup, Irup, Jacob, and Syrup, makes 'er first appearance in the grounds at eleven o'clock in the mornin'. Watto, watto, watto! This must be looked into, as the boy said when 'is mother sent 'im a 'amper o' tuck from 'ome." And William Bransby Piddicombe dropped the pail he was carrying, and turned a double somersault, landing right-end-up at the girl's feet.

"You seem very happy this morning, Mr. Piddicombe," said Claire, smiling bravely at the clown.

"'Appy! Why shouldn't I be? The ole woman's gone an' left me. Better than an ole age pension, says I. Eh! what! Oh, it's you, sossidge, is it?"

"I don't tink why you's callums me zossidge!" grunted Herr Schmidt, emerging from the nearest tent. "An', too, I'll rader be eine zossidge, dan ein pie-can!" grunted the German. "Goot mornin', Mees Claire. A nize mornin', ain'd it? Your friendt Tick, 'e looks mit you."

"Dick wants me? Now?"

"Nein, not now it ain'd," said the German kindly. "'Ere, pie-can, hop id, you zilly feller. Der ain'd no room vor sdale veez merchands here. Yez, mees, der goot poy, Tick, he'm look vor you, and goes mit himselfs into the voods."

"What, after me?"

The German nodded.

Dick had gone into the woods to seek her. Claire thought of Dick's direct way of dealing with things—especially such things as Barnum.

"The captain might not have been so happy if Dick had turned up," she reflected.

"Thank you, Herr," she went on slowly. "Do you know if Patsey has got Nigger ready?"

"Patsey was gleanin' der pig plag 'orse just now, I tinks," replied Herr Schmidt. "At least, zomepody's vas prushin' im down."

The young horsewoman thanked the genial lion-tamer, and walked towards the temporary stable.

The sound of a rich young voice singing softly caught her ears. It was Dick, not Patsey, the new stable hand, who had left his own work to superintend the cleaning of her beloved horse. Yet her heart sank. When Dick sang like that he was usually very serious, and now, as he looked up at her entry, she saw by the grave light in his eyes that something was amiss. At his first words the colour faded from her cheek.

"Claire, I want to speak to you," he said, with a troubled look on his serious, boyish face.

"Yes, Dick. What is it? Nothing amiss, I hope? You haven't been in trouble with Mr. Burton again?"

Burton was the acrobat, and one of Barnetto's best hands.

"No. It's nothing to do with me," replied Dick lugubriously. "It's you I'm worrying about."

"Worrying about me? Whatever for?"

For a second she had forgotten her encounter with Barnum, the rival circus-proprietor.

But the boy saw too much to be deceived.

"Yes, Claire—you. Something is troubling you. You are worrying. I know it. I saw you with my own eyes. In the woods, as you were coming back to the circus, I saw you through the trees, and you were crying."

He gave Nigger a final brush down, and faced the girl squarely.

"Of course, I didn't want to intrude; but I can't bear to think of anything or anyone making you cry. Claire, isn't there anything I can do to help you?"

"Really, Dick, nothing I assure you. You are a good chum, thinking of me, and looking after Nigger, too. Well, now, that is nice of you. But where is Patsey? He should have done this."

"Out for Mr. Burton, I think—at least, Piddy says he saw Burton speaking to the youngster some while back, so I suppose he's sent him on an errand."

"And as you didn't want me to be disappointed in my morning ride, you left your own work to see to Nigger?"

As she spoke she caressed the beautiful horse affectionately, running her dainty hand down his glossy coat, and, as her glowing eyes plainly showed, appreciating Dick's kindness and the thoroughness of his work.

"Hallo!" she said suddenly, deftly turning the conversation. "There goes Herr Schmidt, and Mr. Piddicombe, and Hercules, and Mr. Burton, and all the other turns! This isn't treasury day, is it?"

"I'm afraid not," laughed Dick, "or you would find me with them. Now that I've left the stable and show on the bills as the Young Tiger-Tamer, the signor has put me on the pay-roll," said the boy simply. "It's very nice to think you're earning something, isn't it?"

"It is when you can put your money to some good use," returned the girl gravely. "But I'm afraid a good many of them here waste most of what they get. I do wish some of them would try to save, if ever so little. Why, I heard the dear old Herr telling Hercules he hadn't 'a mark in der vorld,' but he was quite cheerful, as Mr. Burton had promised to lend him some."

"Burton!" echoed Dick, his eyes narrowing. The acrobat was Dick's special aversion. "I hope neither he nor anyone else will lend the Herr a shilling. Poor old fellow! As soon as he gets it, he spends it at the bar."

"It does seem a shame; and he's so good and kind. I wish something could be done to save him from himself."

"And from others, too," added Dick, thinking of Burton. "I wonder what's up?"—as the last of the little procession disappeared into the circus proprietor's tent.

At that moment the odd figure of William Bransby Piddicombe waddled into view, and as he drew near he laid one fat finger knowingly alongside his nose, and gave expression to a most prodigious wink.

By his manner, usually so placid and undisturbed, but now indicative of excitement, ill-suppressed, it was clear something unusual was in the air. Claire and Dick stared at each other in surprise, wondering what it could mean.

The Two Chums were not left long in doubt.

"Miss Claire, and Dick, William Bransby Piddicombe, Hesquire, begs to announce that 'the old man' is off 'is rocker!" said the clown, regarding the two solemnly.

"Who—the signor?" they asked, in chorus.

"The selfsame 'seen-your-funny-face,' alias Barnetto, and a dozen other aliases known only to Scotland Yard in pertikler and the police-force generally. 'E's got a bolt loose, sure. Listen to the latest. 'E thinks we're all sich a brainy lot, an' 'is own pate is so addled that all us stars——"

"I'm not a star," interposed Dick.

"If you ain't a star, you needn't try to comet with me," retorted William solemnly, dodging to avoid the brush which Dick heaved at him. "But to resoom. The old 'un is calling a weekly meetin', once a fortnight—bring yer own drinks and baccy, which doesn't apply to you, miss—in 'is tent and everybody like us 'as got to attend on pain of 'avin' their screws rizzed."

"What's the idea, Mr. Piddicombe?" asked the girl.

"The idea! That's just it—the idea! Don't you see? That's it. It's the idea—to get an idea from each of us, in fac' it's all ideas. The signor ain't got any, so 'e's relying on us brainy 'uns to give 'em to 'im. You'd better come along slick, or any ideas you've got'll be stale before you get there."

Somewhere in the back of his mind Billy was conscious of having made some sort of a joke, though exactly what it was he didn't quite know. Anyhow, he had succeeded in his mission, for Dick and Claire followed him into the tent where the rest of the circus performers were lounging about a wooden platform on which, in a capacious armchair, reclined John Barnett—otherwise Signor Barnetto, sole proprietor of Barnetto's Royal Circus.

Who started the scheme no one knew; but evidently the signor was much struck with it.

"You see, the wheeze is this," he was saying as the circus comrades entered. "I feel it's perhaps hardly fair for me to keep the show runnin' as I have done, entirely on the products of my own brain."

A loud "I don't think," from the irrepressible Billy broke the oratorical flow.

"I'm bringing in a speakin' tortoise, Billy, five 'undred years old, to tell you some new jokes," Barnetto said, ere he resumed. Mr. Piddicombe murmured something about "the onkinderest cut of all," when the speechmaker resumed.

"I feel you would all take a greater interest in the show if only some of yer own ideas and suggestions was taken up."

"What about the Modern Military 'Ercules stunt for the strong man?" cried Dawson, the crack shot. "Worn't that my wheeze?"

"Yes; pinched after a bob's worth at the Tivoli, London, where Conchas was showin' it," piped Mr. Piddicombe.

"You shut up, Billy," cried Barnetto, "or I'll show the company the old pre'istoric records you learn your jokes from. No; what I want is this—every man and every lady here——"

"Shentleman," muttered the lion-tamer, in a loud aside. "In der Faderland we always put der fraus firdst—aind't it?"

"I'll put you first outside if I hear any more from you," said Barnetto warmly. "This meetin' ain't meetin'——"

"The meetin' ain't meetin' wiv any success, because it ain't a meetin'," chirped Billy, at which Hercules, at a nod from Barnetto, seized the clown by the hind parts of his nether garments and collar and took him outside the tent at a run.

"Billy's gone to look for a new wheeze," the circus proprietor continued. "Until he digs it up, we can go on in peace. I hope I've made my meanin' clear to all."

"What you want us to do, signor, is to suggest new ideas for the show?" interposed Claire.

"That's it, my dear. Times are not so good as they might be. Seriously, I know you all work very hard, but the public is askin' for something fresh—at least, old stunts dressed up in a new form, and when you think of 'em, I want you just to tell 'em to me. We'll have a little gathering every fortnight in my tent, and discuss ideas. Other shows are goin' ahead, so must we."

"Now, there's Captain Barnum's; he's doin' well, or he wants to. I've heard he's made up his mind to be the boss showman of this country; but unfortunately for him, I've got nearly all the stars."

"'Ear, 'ear!" came from the tent-flap, and the wrinkled visage of the clown showed in the opening. "If I were to go over to Barnum's, this concern would bust in a week—eh, what?"

Why he did so he could not tell, but at that moment Dick looked across to where Jim Burton, the acrobat, the man who had been his sworn enemy ever since he entered the circus as a stable-lad, the man who had plotted his downfall, the man who resented his comradeship with Claire, sat idly swinging his legs from the edge of the platform.

Burton was watching Mr. Piddicombe, and at the clown's words a queer light flashed across his face. He made a mental note of something—a fact which was not altogether lost on the astute Dick.

Barnetto broke the silence.

"Now, is there anyone got anything to say?"

"There ain't no one goin' to say nothink, because there's nobody wot ain't got nothink to say to no one," chirped the clown.

A movement from Hercules again dispersed him, and Dick spoke up.

"You said, sir, that even old ideas dressed in a new form might be acceptable."

"I did, my boy—in fact, they're the best, because the public pats itself on the back when it half knows what to expect."

"Well, sir, might I suggest reviving the 'Turpin's Ride to York' idea? I've heard my father say that was a great circus favourite when he was a lad."

"Your father! Who wants to know anything about your father?"

The remark came, not from Barnetto, but from Jim Burton, the acrobat, who regarded the boy spitefully. "If he ever entered a circus, it was with paper money or by creeping in under the tent."

Dick's face flamed, but Barnetto quelled the threatening storm.

"The boy's idea's a good one. Bless me if I don't do it!" he cried, rubbing his hands.

"The thing could be mounted in a modern form, sir," continued Dick. "Instead of the old mail coach, you could have a motor; instead of the old-time footpad, a modern highwayman on a motor-bicycle. The motor-car has a break-down; it is loaded with specie being taken from one bank to another—or, better still, make it a Royal Mail van loaded with bullion—the modern Dick Turpin comes flashing up on his motor-bike, holds up the driver of the car at the point of his pistol, and is about to ride away with a box of the specie, when the queen of the ring arrives on the scene on Nigger; an exciting race follows, in which the horse wins, the motor-cyclist falls from his machine, is pounced upon and captured by the horsewoman, and kept a prisoner under the muzzle of his own pistol until the arrival of Hercules, the strong man, when he is carried off amid the cheers of the crowd."

"Bravo, Dick!" cried the signor. "That's the sort of wheeze I want! And it shall be done! Any more coming along?"

Several other schemes followed, but undoubtedly that of the new hand, who already had risen to be assistant tiger-tamer, was the pick of the bunch. He was young, and brought freshness into the company, which was just what Barnetto waned.

"Rather a smack in the eye for you, funny phiz," remarked Mr. Piddicombe to the acrobat, when the meeting broke up. "You'll have to think of puttin' a little novelty into your turn, or the signor'll be advertising for a new tumbler. They don't reckernise the old ones in the bar since the Budget," with which remark Billy walked away whistling, leaving Burton fuming with hatred against the boy who seemed to foil him at every turn.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Silent Watchers.

DICK RIVERS hadn't been with the signor long. Very few months had elapsed since ill-fortune had come upon him by the death of his father, and he was face to face with the problem of finding work.

Then, one morning, as the boy left home on the now ever-pressing quest for a job, the lovely sight of a fair young maid riding a coal-black horse had burst upon him; he had raised his cap in courtesy as he moved aside, never dreaming that he would ever get to know so fair a vision of youthful grace and loveliness. But Fate was kind to Dick that morning. He was able to render service to Miss Claire Forster, the accomplished girl rider, and as a consequence he began an acquaintance with the signor, which ended in his becoming stable-lad in Barnetto's Royal Circus. Thenceforward his rise was rapid. Herr Schmidt's growing addiction to alcohol induced Barnetto to place the tigers under the boy's care. One day, if all went well, he might be sole animal-trainer to the circus.

The boy's disagreements with Jim Burton, the acrobat, followed naturally after his promotion, seeing that Dick represented the very opposite qualities possessed by the overbearing, crafty, and vengeful gymnast.

However, even the hatred of Burton had not prevented the new stable hand rising to the position of assistant to Herr Schmidt, the tiger-tamer.

The result was inevitable. One success breeds another, and Dick recognised this from the very start of his career in the circus. The warm reception which the signor accorded his suggestion gave him a tangible stake in the show, and he resolved to do his very best for the company of which he was now a recognised member.

He was busy all the rest of that day, but at nightfall, when the last naptha flare was extinguished and hauled down, and all the props made hard and fast for the night, he sought Billy the clown, whom he found engaged in earnest conversation in the tiny caravan of Hercules, the strong man.

Hercules looked anything but a model of physical beauty now. His great, good-natured face was streaked with dirt and grease-paint, and as he sat in his shirtsleeves contentedly pulling at an ancient clay, he offered a strong contrast to the tight-bespangled figure who had snapped chains and performed other superhuman feats in the arena an hour or so before.

"Come in, lad—come in!" called Billy, as Dick approached. "You're as welcome as if the place's my own. Only don't rub your feet too hard on the doormat, as it forms Mr. Dobson's waistcoat during the day."

The boy took the proferred seat, and, as he anticipated, the talk soon veered round to Captain Barnum—the rival showman.

"They do say 'e's makin' desprit efforts to git 'draws'!" grunted the strong man.

"So the signor says; but without the original one and only Piddicombe 'e won't git much of a look in—eh, Dick?" This from the clown, who, in private life had no small opinion of his abilities and worth.

"I hope not," replied the boy. "But who is this Barnum?"

Hercules swerved round and faced Dick steadily.

"Cap. Barnum, as he calls hisself, is a bit o' the frayed edge of humanity," he said slowly. "A dago sort of chap who would rob a pal of 'is ticker while he slept. But, like many another, he's got on, lad—and now the world won't 'old him."

"Thoroughly unscroopilous, so I've heared," interjected the clown, "an' it ain't a good sign fer the old man that 'e's knockin' about these parts."

"'E's comin' it pretty close," agreed Hercules. "'E'll be showing at Warminster next week with us not six miles away. It ain't playing the game, you know. Say, Dick, if you should ever run across him, don't let him come any of his ole buck with you—see, lad?"

Dick didn't quite see, but he thought he understood what Hercules meant.

"Rivets, boss wants you, sharp!" Dick turned. Framed in the doorway was the dark, evil face of Burton.

Dick said nothing, but went straight to the signor's caravan.

"I was very much struck with that idea of yours," said Barnetto, as the boy stood cap in hand before him. "Now, lad, sit down, and let's hear more about it. There's nothin' like working out these things quick, or someone else gits hold of 'em."

For quite an hour they remained together—the proprietor and his youngest hand—discussing the great spectacular effect which the signor "opined would fetch 'em in their thousands."

At last the boy rose to go. A slight shadow falling athwart a tiny strip of glass in the farther end of the caravan momentarily attracted his attention. Over and beyond the signor's shoulder he stared—stared at the image of a dark, handsome face with black flashing eyes. He looked again, but this time caught the glass at an angle, and the reflected image was distorted out of all recognition.

With a muttered "Good-night!" he turned to the door, and went down the steps two at a time. All was silent as the grave. No sign of life or of human form met his gaze. He stood for a moment listening. Yes! Faintly on the still night air, his quick ear detected the rustling of leaves and the snapping of dried twigs at the edge of the clearing.

"Somebody was watching—and listening," he thought. "Who?"

Cautiously he went forward, plunging noiselessly through the undergrowth.

The night was dark, with promise of a late moon. Again he halted and lay flat with his ear to the earth. This time the sound was quite distinct—the soft pad of footsteps over the leaf-strewn turf.

"Whoever it is, he's coming this way," the boy conjectured.

A moment or so later his prediction was verified. A tall form passed him in the gloom, so close that he could have touched it with his hand, yet so intense was the blackness that recognition, even at that distance, was out of the question.

Dick's pulses beat madly. Every nerve in his body tingled. The suspense was almost unnerving, yet he kept his presence of mind, hung close to the earth, and only when the mysterious night visitant was lost to sight did he rise and track him by the soft noise of his footsteps.

Deeper and deeper into the wood plunged man and boy, both halting simultaneously as a low whistle trembled through the trees.

The man in front of him answered it, and a second form stole from the shadows.

"Hist! Is that you?"

"It's me right enough!" answered a deep voice.

Nearer and nearer crept the boy until he came to shelter a yard or so from where the two men stood.

The low rumble of voices reached him in a confused murmur. Quick though his ears, he could make out nothing. Was his courage to go unrewarded? It looked like it. Yet, just when he was despairing most the reward came.

"Right you are, Barnum. Thursday night in your caravan at ten!"

"Ten o'clock it is, then, in my caravan on Thursday night, and don't fail."

The voice of the plotter was low, but quite distinct to the listening Dick.

"Depend on me; I sha'n't fail you. I'll be there. I daren't stay later."

The listening boy turned the words over in his mind. Oh that the speaker had said just a little more! As it was, he could only guess at the identity of the man he had followed.

Just then the plotters parted, and Dick's fate hung in the balance, for again his man almost kicked over him as he passed. Then the darkness and the forest swallowed him up, his footsteps died suddenly away, and the boy was left alone with his thoughts. Too dazed to move, the quarry had slipped from him; he had missed the chance of his life!

For a time he hung about darting from tree-trunk to tree-trunk in the hope of sighting one or other, but the quest was vain. He gave it up at length, and returned to the camp, now wrapped in sleep.

The next morning the boy tiger-tamer rose with the sun. His first care was for the animals. Long before any of the hands were astir he had cleaned out their cage, watered and fed them, and then, his work done till midday, he snatched a hasty breakfast of a cup of cocoa and bread-and-butter and left the camp.

Out on the high-road, a quarter of a mile away, he swung, setting his face towards Warminster. The clock in the church near by struck seven as he turned on to the heath, and, taking in full, deep breaths of the fresh morning air, settled down to enjoyment of his walk.

He had gone perhaps a couple of miles when the regular thud of hoof-beats caused him to turn. Towards him, at a brisk canter, came horse and rider, at sight of whom a glad light leapt to his eyes.

"Good-morning, Miss Claire!" he called, doffing his cap as the young horsewoman reined up, and looked smilingly down on him to exchange greetings.

Her fair, rounded face was pink with the flush of perfect health and the vigour of her ride.

"You're afoot very early!" she laughed gaily. "Isn't it glorious out here—tasting the day at its birth? Why, they don't know half the enjoyment of life who don't get up till the last minute!"

"I quite agree with you!" laughed Dick. "But, you see, most of them down there"—indicating the now-awakening camp in the distance—"are pretty tired and done up when the day's work is finished. And they have to turn out early, too. I don't suppose they feel very inclined to take exercise before breakfast—except what they get from their work."

"I'm afraid I'm very thoughtless, Dick!" Claire said gravely. "They don't all have such an easy time as I. Why, sometimes I feel I could run away. I'm such a shocking example—the signor spoils me!"

"Who wouldn't?" thought Dick, glancing admiringly at the delicately-formed face, with its most bewitching smile and dancing eyes. Aloud he added:

"You're the signor's ward, Miss Claire, and—well, he could hardly treat you as one of the hands. You know, you're such a busy little woman, that once you got to work there'd be nothing left for the rest of us to do—and then we'd all have to look for new jobs."

"Oh, Dick, Dick, thy name is flatterer! But where are you off to so early?"

"Just for a walk. I wanted to think, so came out here. I'm not going to keep you from your ride any longer. Good-bye!" He took off his cap once more, and started off briskly across the heath.

"That's rather sudden. I wonder where he's going?" reflected the girl, as, flicking Nigger with her gloved hand, she urged him forward at a brisk canter. She did not know that Warminster was the young tiger-tamer's destination, that he had some set purpose in thus being so early afoot.

So she rode away on into the morning, thinking deeply of the recent changes that had come into her young life—of that thing she prized so much, the newly-formed friendship with the boy—of that unhappy incident a few days back with Barnum, which now was fast fading into the regions of unreality, and of what the future held for her.

Meanwhile Dick held on his course. It was market day in the little town, and by the time he arrived the narrow roads were thronged with people. Through the busy streets he went at a swinging pace, noting the gorgeously-coloured placards that everywhere announced the presence of Barnum's Circus.

No need to inquire its whereabouts, for even at that time idle crowds were flocking to the fenced-in field at the back of the town, now filled with a mixed collection of small tents, booths, and richly-painted caravans.

In the centre of the field a score of sleepy hands were at work on the task of erecting the great tent. Jack wanted to know more of Barnum's show, what it was like, and who was the man that owned it.

"I don't much like the look of friend Barnum being so close to our show after what Hercules said, and my adventure of last night in the wood," he reflected, as, passing among the groups of idle sightseers and loafers, he passed from one part of the grounds to another, gazing at the putting up of the booths, the erection of side-shows, and the gradual completion of the big tent with as much fascination and interest as Barnetto's Royal Circus had for him on the memorable day of its coming to the little town of his birth.

They were a coarse, foul-mouthed, dirty crew, these men employed by Barnum; so different from the crowd amongst which he now passed his life.

Dick could not help making one or two mental comparisons between the two circuses, and what he saw made him very thankful that he was with a man like Mr. Barnetto rather than with Captain Barnum.

Yet what was it that made life so pleasant to him just then? He was working hard, perhaps too hard, doing as much as any two men, and not getting much for it either. Every day had a sweetness of its own.

Then in a flash he realised what lay behind it all—what was the sustaining and ennobling influence in his life. It was his friendship with Claire, the queen of the circus, who, although she was but a girl, was enshrined in his heart as the model of womanly goodness and perfection.

Dick was not a mooney, love-sick youth, but a lad blessed

with the capacity for getting all that was good out of his friendship with Claire, and in return he was willing to give her all that was best in him.

Suddenly his thoughts of Claire were turned aside by the sound of a hoarse voice almost at his elbow.

"Now, then, you lazy whelp, where's that trap?"

Dick swung round to see a well-attired man of ample proportions, with a coarse, flabby face, in which were set a pair of beady blue eyes, scowling heavily at a sullen-looking negro lad, who edged nervously away from his inquisitor, in evident fear of the long curling whip carried by the man.

"Ready, sar, ready! By-em-by—soon!" he whined.

"By-and-by! Why the blazes ain't it ready now? Hop it, quick, you black brute!"—making a dexterous cut at the lad with the whip.

The sharp thong whistled through the air, and curled round the negro's shoulders venomously.

"If that pony ain't in the shafts within three minutes I'll have the skin off your back!" shouted the man, making another, but this time ineffectual, slash at the boy.

"Right, Cap'n Barnum; dat haws he be thar, sah, for suah!" replied the nigger, rolling his dark eyes fearfully.

Barnum swung round, and saw Dick watching him scornfully.

"What do you want?" he leered vindictively. "Same as I give 'im?"

"It wouldn't pay you," retorted Dick coolly, fixing the man with a steady eye in which there was no trace of fear.

Barnum regarded the lad thoughtfully. One glance at the upright, well-knit figure proclaimed the lad as able to render a good account of himself.

"Well, you'd better be gitting out o' this," he replied. "'Tain't no good hanging round 'ere. Show don't start afore eight to-night. Come then, but bring yer money with yer. No sneakin' in."

Dick turned away without a word, his mission accomplished. He had seen the man he sought, and the little incident he had just witnessed gave him a far deeper insight into the real character of Captain Barnum than ever he could have gained from the reports of others. The man was a bad 'un, a rank outsider.

"The signor'll have to keep his eye on that gentleman," he reflected as, pushing his way through the jostling throng, he passed rapidly through the fields, down the Warminster High Street, and made for the open country beyond.

Soon he heard behind him the rattle of wheels, and, glancing round, recognised the captain overhauling him fast in his trap. Dick stepped aside as the vehicle flashed past, but not fast enough, for with a brutal laugh the captain leant sideways, and aimed a dastardly blow at the boy with his whip.

So unexpected was the action that Dick could not even raise his hands to shield his face. The thong leapt across his cheek, raising an angry blood-red weal.

"You cur!" shouted Dick, smarting under the pain and injustice of the blow. "You shall pay for that!" But Barnum, whipping up his horse, simply retorted with a brutal laugh, and was soon out of earshot.

"What a revengeful brute!" the boy muttered. "Simply because he didn't like being seen knocking that black kid about. Before he's gone much further he'll run across the signor."

Indeed it looked like it, for a few miles on Barnetto's Royal Circus was encamped.

Soon Dick left the high-road, and cut across the fields into the woods, a way that lessened his journey considerably.

Already he could hear faint voices—the rough cries of the tent-men, hoarse commands to the animals being led to water at the spring near by. Another quarter of a mile, and he would be giving the tigers their midday meal.

Suddenly a low cry brought him up with a start. He looked about him. Trees on every side; not a vestige of a human being. He listened intently.

Someone was crying. It was a girl or a woman, and she was sobbing as if her heart would break.

Now, if there was one thing more than another that upset and unnerved Dick, it was the sight of a woman's tears. Gladly would he have passed on, but someone was in evident distress.

He pushed through the undergrowth noiselessly, his footfalls making no sound on the carpet of dead leaves. A little cry of astonishment burst from him at sight of a slim form leaning against a tree-trunk, her fair head pillowed on her arm, and her frail form shaking from convulsive sobbing.

"Good heavens, it's Claire!" he muttered, hurrying towards her.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
For Love of the Fatherland.

"CLAIRE, Claire! What is it? What's the matter? Has someone been upsetting you? You mustn't cry like that!"

"Oh, I'm a baby, I know!" she cried, looking at him through her streaming eyes. "I made an effort to keep back the tears, but they would come. Aren't I a silly girl, Dick? There, I knew you would be ashamed of me!"—noting the frown that gathered on the boy's face.

"Ashamed of you, little comrade? I'd never be that; but I'd like to get my hands on the one who made you cry. Who was it?"

"It was nothing, Dick, really nothing; only he was such a perfect beast."

The words were out almost before she knew it. Dick flashed with anger.

"He? Who's he? Someone has been unkind to you. Who is it?" he asked quietly.

There was a determined ring in the clear young voice that brooked no compromise. Dick would find out, if it took him a week. Ever since he had come to the circus it seemed natural he should constitute himself the protector and champion of this beautiful and lovable girl.

"You didn't see him, then?" Claire asked. There was relief in her eyes as Dick shook his head.

"No, I didn't; I only wish I had come a minute sooner." He laid his hand gently on the girl's arm, and their eyes met. "Claire," he said slowly, "I wouldn't ask you to tell me if I didn't think I could help you. But only the other day someone met you here in the wood and caused you pain. Oh, I'm only a boy, I know, but you're my chum, and chums should share each other's secrets. Won't you tell me what and who is troubling you?"

She looked straight into the depths of his earnest, trustful eyes, and there read trust and sympathy.

"You can't help me in any way, thank you, chum," she said, smiling at him in sisterly affection. "All the same, you sha'n't worry for my sake. The trouble is of my own making. I have it in my power to end it in a moment, but I won't.'

"Of course, you don't understand," went on Claire. "It's simply that Captain Barnum, of Barnum's Circus, wants me to leave the signor and join his show. Now you know all."

The two chums walked on in silence for a while, both much occupied with their thoughts. Curiously enough, the same idea was in the mind of each.

It was Claire who put it into words.

"How I wish I had a mother!" she said, with a far-away, dreamy look in her eyes. "You know, a mother means so much to a girl."

"Yes, and to a boy, too," answered Dick. "I, like you, Claire, have lost mine. She died only a few years ago, and after—well, home was never the same. Dad, dear old dad, tried hard to fill her place, but no home's ever the same when the mother's gone. There's a sweetness and a gentleness goes out; she has an influence no one else can supply. When she was alive and I was quite a little chap father often used to say, 'A boy's best friend is his mother.' I didn't realise it then, but I do now."

"What was she like? Tell me about her?" asked the girl.

There was a wistful yearning in her tones, and her eyes grew very dim as her chum spoke so reverently of her who was at peace beyond the grave. It was not sloppy sentiment that inspired the boy to talk then as he did to Claire; it was deep and living affection for one whose pure, gentle influence was still the strongest factor in his fresh, young life.

"I can't tell you about my mother," said Claire softly; "I don't even remember what she was like. I have just a faint recollection of her, and I always feel that if she still lived and I were to meet her face to face, I should know her again. I was two when she died, and ever since I've been with the signor and Mrs. Barnett; and really they're just as good as father and mother to me."

There was silence for a moment or so.

Dick broke it with an exclamation of anger. He couldn't get Barnum out of his mind.

"That Barnum fellow's a scoundrel!" he said, kicking the turf viciously. "Hercules and Billy told me as much last night; the signor hinted at the same thing, but to-day you've given me absolute proof."

Then he told her of the scene he had witnessed in Warminster, and of Barnum's savage and unwarrantable attack on him from the secure position of his trap.

"He did that—made that weal?" cried Claire, catching sight for the first time of the livid mark on the boy's cheek. "The cur! I thought his treatment of me was bad enough, but to strike you with a whip when you had no means of defending yourself—— Oh, I hate him—I hate him!"

She clenched her little fist, and her eyes blazed with scorn and passion.

"It's nothing," laughed Dick. "The man's a pig, and not worth worrying about; and yet—and yet——" He paused for a moment, as if doubting the wisdom of speaking now. No, he would keep silence, for the present, at any rate.

"I little dreamt when he passed me on the road he was on his way to see you," he went on.

"He meant to have another try to get me to join his circus," she replied. "You know, before, when you saw me crying, he had been worrying the life out of me then to sign on with him."

"The signor says he's straining every nerve to get all the stars. But wait—wait till we get some of our new attractions on the boards."

"Your idea, the Modern Highwayman, is a good one. The signor's taking it up, isn't he?" Claire's tones were eager.

"We were hard at work on it all day yesterday," Dick replied. "We ought to have it ready within a fortnight. And then Dawson's coming out with a new act. He's invented a small biplane, and he's going to do two turns—first the Crack Shot Act, and afterwards, disguising himself with a beard, he will appear as the Flying Man."

"How lovely!" The girl clapped her hands with sheer delight. Whatever her own troubles, the circus—in fact, anything in which Barnett had an interest—was very near and dear to her. "Hallo, here's the Herr!"

They were close upon the encampment now, and the German lion-tamer approached with a smile of welcome on his kindly, expansive face.

"Goot-morning, mine chiltren!" he said, removing his battered straw hat. "I tinks der goot poy Tick vos calt vor py der signor choost now ain'd it?"

"The signor wants me? Right-ho!" cried Dick briskly. "Excuse me, Miss Claire!"

He bowed an acknowledgment of her assent, and hurried away. The girl and the German remained chatting together.

Claire had waited long for a chance to speak with the Herr. His first words gave her the opening he desired.

"It vos very dull mit nodings der do, Mees Glaire," he said, taking a pensive puff at his long meerschaum.

"Well, now, that is nice, to have nothing to do for a few minutes. You can just sit down and talk to me." She led the way to a fallen tree-trunk, over part of which the old fellow spread for her a huge multi-coloured bandana handkerchief.

The girl thanked him for his thoughtfulness, and sat down. It was nice of him to think of her riding-habit.

"Now just sit by me and tell me how you are getting on," she began. "Here, let mö light your pipe for you!"—seeing it had gone out. She drew a box of matches from the Herr's capacious pocket, struck one, and held it for him.

The action pleased him immensely. Except from Dick and Claire, he received few kindnesses from the rest of the circus folk, now that his weakness for intoxicants had made his position in the show a most precarious one.

He puffed contentedly at the meerschaum, and detailed his grievances in a much milder tone.

"I vos miss der digers very mooch," he said, with a shake of his great head. "Der poy Tick is goot to them, but somedimes I tinks dey vands der old Herr bag again."

"No doubt they miss you, but perhaps one day the signor will buy more lions, and then you would have those to train and look after."

"You'm tink so?" The Herr's eyes rolled in anticipation. Five minutes before he was aching to screw up courage to go to Burton and ask for money to buy a drink. Now for the moment the craving was forgotten beside this thought.

"You never know what the signor might do," continued the girl. "You see, Herr, it wants a very strong man to look after both lions and tigers, and at the present time there's only one strong man in the circus."

"Who's dat?" He stared at her through his glasses.

"Hercules, and he doesn't like tigers and lions. So you see, Herr, if you walked a lot, took plenty of exercise, and got young and strong again, more lions might be added to the circus, and then the signor would ask you to look after them, and you'd be just as well off as you were before."

"How putiful!" exclaimed the German, puffing out his cheeks and extending his chest. He felt no bitterness towards Dick for having supplanted him in part of his work, for he realised that Barnett had done right in refusing to allow a man who was constantly under the influence of drink to have control of anything more dangerous than a few aged and decrepit lions; tigers were quite out of the question. He knew, too, that his own intemperate habits had caused his downfall and the subsequent installation of Dick Rivers in his place. But, all the same, he felt his punishment very keenly.

Surely they might give him more to do than look after a couple of mangy old lions, leaving him to pass many hours of the day as best he could, with the inevitable consequence that most of them were spent in the bar.

Claire knew this quite well, and that was why she welcomed the opportunity of a talk with him.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Herr," she said, patting his great hand. "Every morning, before I take my ride on Nigger, I'll ask you to walk with me. Walking is fine exercise, and then when we get away from the circus you shall tell me lots about your beloved Germany." She realised, if only he could win back his physical powers, the desire for drink would swiftly pass away. This was just an instance of her regard for the welfare of others.

"Der Faderland, der Faderland!" exclaimed the Herr, his eyes kindling. "Ach! Der Faderland is der vinest gundry in der vorld. One days, ven I haf der monies, I go pack to vere my leedle Gretchen lies peried unter der hill, in der diny jurchyard—ain'd it?"

"It will be very nice for you to go back to the old country where you left all your dear ones."

"Ach, my tear, Shermany is der vinest gundry in der vorld! I haf not peen since der time of der vor. Ach, der vor, Claire; it vos a great pig vippin' ve did gif der Vrench!"

"You fought through the Franco-Prussian War, then, Herr?" asked the girl innocently, knowing full well she had heard his tales of that terrible campaign again and again since he first came to the circus.

"I vos in den baddles, my child!"

"Ten battles!" she echoed in amazement, yet so oft had she heard them she could have rattled them off with lightning speed—Le Bourget, Langres, Le Mans, Abbevilliers, Alencon, Buchy, Fauvillo, Gravelotte, Issy, and Sedan.

"Ach, den baddles! Look!" With hands that trembled from excitement he unbuttoned his ragged coat, and showed, stitched over his breast, some strips of faded coloured ribbon.

"Ah, you must be very proud of them, Herr Schmidt!" the girl said. "The knowledge that you won those fighting for your country must be a very sweet memory. Often when you have trials and battles to fight you must remember what you have done in the old days, and what you can do again."

He looked at her curiously—at this fair-haired Saxon maid with a face of childish innocence and a heart as good and pure as gold. Somehow she reminded him of his Gretchen, and at the thought tears welled into his eyes.

"I tinks I go mit myselluffs now," he said, turning away. "Goot-morning, Miss Claire. You haf peen very kind to an old man."

He waddled off, blinking suspiciously. Once out of sight of the girl, he took the big bandana from his pocket and blew his nose with unusual vigour. Claire had stopped him at life's cross-roads, and had pointed out the way. From that day—from that hour—Herr Schimdt never looked back.

"What's the matter, old steam-engine? Got a cold?"

It was Burton, the acrobat, who stood a few feet off leering at the German cunningly.

"Nein! I ain'd got no gold!" growled Herr Schmidt.

"I know you ain't got no gold!" laughed Burton mockingly. "Don't you wish you had? What price this—eh?"

He held out a dirty palm in which reposed a heap of sovereigns.

"Donner and blitzen! Vere you vos get dose—eh?"

"Ah! Where?" laughed Burton. "You would like one—eh?"

Like one! The Herr ran his hands through his pockets. He hadn't so much as a shilling. Not even a penny.

"I just tink I vould. You lend me vun?"

"Lend you one! Yes. I'll lend you one with pleasure, my boy. Here, come and have a drink."

The acrobat moved away in the direction of the circus bar. Cautiously the Herr looked around. Claire was nowhere in sight. She had gone to her caravan.

Should he go? What would the girl say? How could he get well and strong again unless he kept off the drink? Yet, the sovereign! Burton wouldn't lend him that if he didn't go.

"Come along, old 'un! If you want that quid, come and have a drink to cement the bargain!" he called out.

Still the Herr wavered. Of late he had borrowed a lot of money from Burton. Goodness only knew when he would pay it back. Since he had lost his job with the tigers, the signor had reduced his wages by half.

"Are you coming, or not? If you don't want the quid, say so." Burton was growing angry. "Now, Herr, be a man and toddle up!"

Be a man! Burton thought him a coward, then—afraid of just one drink. Not he!

"I comes mit you, my poy. Just vun, only vun—ain'd it?"

"Only one, but I'll take good care he has a few more besides!" muttered the acrobat. "No, my friend, you don't escape Jim Burton so easily! I've got work for you—work, my boy, work that'll help to make me a rich man."

Then, aloud: "Spoken like a gentleman, Herr! Come along!"

He linked his arm in the Herr's, and together they strolled into the saloon. The place was empty.

They sat down on upturned tubs, and Burton called for two pegs of whisky. They drank them down, the Herr chattering volubly once the fiery stuff was inside him.

It was not a difficult matter to induce him to have another, and a third.

By this time the Herr was getting excited, but still was far too sober to be of service to Burton.

"Just one more, and then we'll go," said the acrobat affably.

The old lion-tamer's hand shook in the act of draining his third glass—shook so violently that the dregs splashed down his waistcoat.

With a muttered exclamation he tried to brush the drops off. The frayed strips of coloured ribbon on his breast caught his eye. He recollected—in a flash it all came over him—his talk with Claire, the promises and resolutions he had made.

Already the glass of whisky-and water was at his elbow. Burton's evil face leered triumphantly at him. In that second the German seemed to see behind the smiling mask a soul black and treacherous plotting his further downfall and destruction. He snatched up the tumbler, drew swiftly back, and dashed its contents full in the acrobat's face.

Then, without a word, he drew himself up, wheeled round unsteadily, and strode from the bar. The awakening had come. Herr Schmidt never tasted a drop of spirit again. Claire, the pride of the ring, had proved to be his guardian angel.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Prisoner.

THE signor reckoned that Dunstone had enough spending money in its pockets to last three weeks. It wasn't often he stayed so long in the same place, but a circus hadn't been there for many years, and with a cluster of fair-sized villages and townships around he calculated that a good show, with new "draws" and plenty of star turns, ought to last out the twenty-one days.

To-day there was no afternoon performance. The great arena looked bare and gaunt, its serried tiers of seats devoid of human forms, save those of the signor and his wife, who occupied a couple in the five-shilling row to watch the full-dress rehearsal now in full swing.

"Try that double somersault again!" sang out Barnetto, as Burton, swinging from a flying trapeze, suddenly let go, turned over twice in mid-air, and then landed feet foremost in the tan. "Seems to want a trifle more spring in it."

The face of the acrobat flushed, and he carried out the order with no good grace, performing the evolution again and again until he had got it to the boss's liking.

Then Dick came on, and put his tigers through their paces.

"The lad gets on well," whispered the signor to his better half, as the tigers, at the sharp commands of the boy, jumped and gambolled, no touch of the rawhide thong ever being necessary to precipitate their movements. "I shall boom 'im as a 'star' soon, see if I don't."

All the while he kept his keen eyes fixed on the tiger's cage, about which the boy walked with a calmness that compelled his admiration as much as it awakened the burning jealousy in the breast of Jim Burton.

"The young cub! He doesn't half give himself airs!" growled the acrobat, wiping his perspiring brow and puffing vigorously.

He thought he spoke to Dawson, but, instead, found Claire, who had just led Nigger into the ring, standing at his elbow.

"That's just where you make a mistake, Mr. Burton," she said quietly. "If all of us were as modest as Dick it would be a good thing."

"Of course, you'd champion the boy!" he grumbled bitterly, fixing her with his handsome eyes, burning with unconcealed admiration. "It hasn't taken him long to get into your good books."

"Longer than it takes some people to get out of them," she said. "Dick has proved himself a real friend to me, and, naturally, that counts for a lot. Mr. Burton, tell me, why don't you try to get on with him better?"

"Why should I trouble to? Dick Rivers and I weren't made to hang round one another's necks! And, what is more, the less I see of him the better I like it!"

"But why—tell me why?" pleaded the girl.

Burton heard nothing of the signor's words of advice or instruction to the young tiger-tamer still busy rehearsing his turn; he was oblivious of the quips and cranks of Billy Piddicombe, who stood bowing and smirking before an imaginary audience; he did not even hear the sound of Dawson's rifle-shots as coloured balls and globes were

shattered to atoms in the air. He only knew that at his side stood the one creature in the world who represented everything that was desirable in life and worthy of possession.

Yet it was a selfish affection, this, of Burton for the queen of the ring. He knew that Dick Talbot occupied a far higher place in her esteem than he could ever hope to gain, and the knowledge was gall to his soul.

"I hate the brat!" he cried contemptuously, his face flaming with anger. "I hate him! And you know it!"

"Mr. Burton, I'll not talk to you while you speak of my friend like that!" she flashed back. Claire seemed suddenly to have merged into womanhood.

The next instant she was on the Nigger's back, and careering round the great arena with the speed of the wind.

Dick's turn was finished, and now he stood, all hot and glowing, watching his girl chum. She sat the horse like a beautifully sculptured statue, her fair hair flying with the swiftness of her going, her exquisite face pink from excitement and exercise.

How proud of her he felt at that moment, but proudest still when, after she had performed a number of daring evolutions proclaiming the most expert horsewomanship, she brought the horse to a standstill at his side, and instead of leaping from the saddle herself, held out her daintily-gloved hand for him to assist her to the ground.

"Thank you!" she said, smiling sweetly. Then she caught sight of his face.

"Why, how pale and tired you look, Dick! I'm afraid you're over-anxious about your turn. That won't do, you know. Now what do you say to coming along and having a cup of tea with me?"

"I should like to—but the signor?"

"You needn't worry about him," she laughed gaily. "Wednesday, as you should know, is my At-home day, and I generally ask whom I like to my caravan. Why, last week Betty and Mrs. Piddicombe came; but to-day I'm all alone, so you shall come and help me pour out the tea."

She kept up a running conversation as he led her beautiful horse out of the tent to the stable. Then, promising to accept her invitation, he hurried away, had a wash and brush up, put on a clean collar, and duly presented himself at the door of Claire's caravan.

Next to the signor's, it was far and away the most handsome in the whole circus; inside, it possessed a comfort and charm Dick had never dreamed of.

"Sit down and make yourself quite at home," said the girl, busying herself with a spirit-stove and kettle. "You sha'n't have to wait long."

Dick could not help but make comparisons. He looked at his own shabby clothes—the best he had, for as yet he had been unable to save enough for an outfit—and then at the prettily gowned figure of the slim, fair creature whose guest he was.

There was grace and refinement in her every movement and as she handed him a dainty china cup of tea and some fancy cakes his heart beat with pride and happiness.

"I'm sure I don't know why you should have honoured me like this," he said modestly between sips of the delicious beverage. "I'm afraid the rest'll be frightfully jealous."

"Not at all. Why should they be? I have them all in turn—except—— Well, most of them come, and I'm always glad to see them. It makes a little break, you know."

She sat down on the other side of the tiny table, and chatted with engaging frankness. Dick's conscience smote him. Hadn't he, only the previous day, told Claire that chums ought to have no secrets from each other? And here was he keeping a big one from her—a secret which, the more he thought over it, seemed to weigh more heavily on his mind.

"Miss Claire," he said at last, his mind made up, "I want to tell you something."

"Fire away, chum!"

"Chum." That one word settled the matter. Shame on him that he should ever have hesitated to trust his secret with her—just because she was a girl, and girls are not supposed to be able to keep things to themselves.

"Well, I'm going to surprise you," he began hesitatingly. "I believe there's mischief afoot—though quite what, I cannot tell."

"Mischief!" Her blue eyes grew round with wonder.

"Yes, mischief, and I don't feel I know the signor well enough to say anything about it. You see, he has worries enough, and should my fears prove groundless, he'd bless me for making him anxious about nothing at all."

"What's wrong, then?" she asked.

"Listen, and tell me if you think I'm right. Three nights ago the signor sent for me to talk over the new Modern Highwayman scheme. I was with him almost an hour discussing the working out of the idea; and he decided to lay

out a lot of money in purchasing a car and motor-bicycle and all the other accessories to make the thing the most attractive spectacular and dramatic effect ever shown in a circus."

Claire nodded.

"Last night the motor-bike came down, and I tried it. Got along fairly well after a spill or two, but I think before the week is out I shall have my part all right. The boss's getting Burton to drive the car, and altogether the affair promises to be an exciting and gigantic success, but——"

"But what?"

She leant across the table and watched him closely, her eyes narrowing. She felt something unpleasant was coming.

"Don't be surprised when I tell you," Dick went on. "When I turned to leave the signor that night, I discovered someone had been eavesdropping, and must have overheard all we said."

"Eavesdropping?" Her voice was lowered to a whisper.

"Yes. We were watched and overheard, but by whom I haven't the faintest idea. But worse is to come. When I got outside the caravan no one was about, but I heard a sound at the edge of the clearing. I followed into the wood, and there I myself played the part of watcher."

"Whom did you see?"

"Barnum, and one other."

"Captain Barnum?" she echoed, amazed. "Does the signor know?"

"I've told no one but you. I couldn't get near enough either to recognise the voice or see the face of the other man; but whoever he was he is to be at Captain Barnum's caravan at ten o'clock to-morrow night. What do you think of that?"

"I can think only one thing," she replied steadily. "Someone is selling our plans; there's a traitor in the circus."

"I'm afraid you're right," said Dick gravely. "I've made up my mind to the same thing—especially after what you told me yesterday about Barnum trying to get you to leave the signor and join his show. You remember what the boss said at the meeting the other night."

"About Barnum making desperate efforts to become king of the road?"

The boy nodded assent.

"It looks like a deep-laid plot to scotch the signor's plans. Anyway, we shall both know by this time Friday morning."

"How?"

"I'm going to be at that meeting in Barnum's caravan."

"Oh, Dick, you mustn't!"

"Mustn't I, though? We'll see. I'm going to hear every word of what's said, or know the reason why."

"But supposing he should find you—that brute who struck you yesterday. You mustn't go, Dick. Promise me Tell the signor, and put him on his guard."

"What can he do? This new idea we're working is a good one; he's spent lots of money and time on it already. Why should he have to give it up, just because a man like Barnum comes sneaking round and tries to queer his pitch?"

"But what can you do to prevent him?"

"Nothing, until I know for certain that that is his game. Then, when his guilt is clear enough, we can step in and down him."

There was a look of fear on Claire's face. She didn't at all relish the notion of her chum running himself into danger like this, for Barnum she looked upon as a veritable ogre.

"*Oh, don't go, Dick!*" she pleaded.

For an instant the boy's resolution wavered; then he thought of the other side of the picture—how completely the tables might be turned on Barnum could he indubitably establish the man's guilt.

"I'm afraid I must go," he said decisively. "But there's no risk, I assure you. Trust me for that. I've got a plan which cannot fail; at least, I shall test it to-night, and if it doesn't hold out every hope of success I promise you I won't try it. There, that's a fair bargain, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," she admitted unwillingly. "But promise you won't run risks."

"I promise, solemnly. Don't worry, Claire. It'll all come right. And then you'll be glad, won't you? But not a word of this to anyone."

"You can trust me?"

"With my life. Now I must be going."

He thanked her for the tea, and, promising to see her the next morning, hastened off to give the tigers their last meal before the evening performance.

Whatever the plan the young tiger-tamer had in his mind he did test it that night, and as it appeared to him to promise every hope of success, he determined to carry into execution the project of being an unseen witness to the interview between Barnum and the mysterious man whom he had shadowed into the wood.

During the following morning he again mentioned the matter to the queen of the ring, and although she felt none too sure of the wisdom of the move, she knew it was hopeless trying to dissuade Dick from carrying it out.

"But I don't see how you're going to get to Warminster at that time of night without your absence being noticed and commented upon," she said, when he unfolded his plans to her. "How far do you reckon it is?"

"Six miles—and I've worked it out to the minute. My turn is over at eight or eight-fifteen; I shall have the tigers comfortably settled for the night by a quarter to nine, then by the time our own show is through, I shall have heard all that passes between Barnum and his friend, and be back here in time for bed. Now, what's wrong with that?"

"Oh, nothing, I suppose; but the whole affair worries me. I wish you weren't going alone."

"Well, I can't take anyone with me, can I? Now, good-bye, Claire!" At her request he had dropped the "Miss" of late. "To-morrow we shall know every move in Barnum's little game."

The thunderous applause that awaited the boy at the end of his turn that night had hardly died away, when he was outside the great tent divesting himself of the gorgeous red uniform which he always wore in the ring, and making the animals safe and snug for the night.

"Not even Burton'll spot my absence," he told himself, giving a final glance at the programme. "I see he doesn't appear till nine-fifteen—which means he won't have finished before half-past. As usual, he'll go straight to the bar, and by the time he's through with his drinks I shall be back in my own van."

This thought was comforting, and having snatched a morsel of bread and cheese, Dick quietly quitted the circus and struck off at a sharp pace in the direction of Warminster.

For the first mile his way lay through the woods, but after that the heath and high road lay before him right into the town. Once on level ground he broke into a quick run, which he kept up until within sight of Warminster.

Then he moderated his pace, and by the time he stood within the circus-ground had fairly recovered his wind.

On every side of him was a great silence, save in the direction of the densely packed tents, from which every now and then came a sudden burst of clapping, telling that the show was still in full swing.

The night was dark, but not dense enough to prevent the boy finding the caravan he wanted. Only the previous evening he had paid a surreptitious visit to Barnum's Circus to assure himself which was the boss's van, and the best place to keep his vigil.

"No standing on wheels or steps is good enough for me. I'm going to hear all that's said or nothing," he determined, when at last he found the captain's caravan.

On either side—but some distance away—were other vans, and in most of these lights burned, but no sound of voices came from within.

"Guess they're all at the show," mused the intrepid Dick. "Now to put my head into the lion's mouth."

Cautiously he crept from the shadows and mounted the short side ladder. The next instant he stood within the caravan—in the tiny living-room, at one end of which was the stove and cooking apparatus, at the other a door leading into the captain's sleeping apartment.

In the centre of the living-room was a small table with chairs around it, and, taking care not to disturb these, Dick made his way into the sleeping-apartment, the door of which he left slightly ajar, and then sat himself on the covered seat beneath the bunk to await events.

"They'll be here soon," he conjectured, as salvo after salvo of cheers sounded from the tent. "Hurrah! They're shutting down early to-night. Now for the fun."

On all fours he crept beneath the seat, his face turned towards the partly-opened door, through which he hoped to see and hear all that transpired between Barnum and his associate.

Nor was his courage to meet with disappointment, for ere very few minutes were passed a heavy step mounted the ladder, someone struck a match, lit an evil-smelling oil-lamp, and by its yellow rays Dick caught fleeting glimpses of Barnum himself.

Shutting the outer door, the captain took bottle and glasses from the side rack, poured himself out a drink, and growlingly awaited the arrival of his visitor.

Hours seemed to pass, and already the boy was beginning to experience all the pains of cramp, when a gentle tapping on the window-pane fell on his listening ears.

Barnum lumbered to the door and threw it wide. The new-comer entered, the bolt was shot—and the boy tiger-tamer knew that he was a prisoner in the caravan with two desperate men!

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
The Traitor.

IT was a trying position for any boy to be in—to feel that even were he successful in running the gauntlet of these two ill-natured rascals, there still remained between him and freedom the bolted door.

For the first time it dawned on Dick that perhaps he had been over-sanguine in imagining he could carry out such a desperate enterprise without very great risk of discovery. Little use, however, to think of that now.

Barnum's first words enchained his attention.

"What the blazes does that mean?" the circus proprietor growled.

"Does what mean?" came back the reply.

"Why, that black stuff across your face."

Dick peered from his hiding-place—and drew back in surprise.

The second man was masked. His eyes flashed brightly through two slits in a deep band of black velvet.

"I know a thing or two, Barnum. This isn't the first time I've been about when recognition would have meant ruin. I'll keep it on, if you please."

Dick stared. The simple disguise prevented any possibility of recognition.

"Well, to business!" rapped out the captain, pouring his visitor a stiff peg of whisky.

"Here you are, then, cap. A full plan of everything. If you can't come in on the rise now, then I'm not worth the money you're paying me."

Barnum took the sheet the other handed to him, and studied it attentively.

"Splendid, my boy—splendid!" he guffawed. "Dick Turpin up to date. So that's the wheeze, is it?"

"The identical—replete with all modern effects—motor-car, motor-bike, Black Bess, daring and dashing horse-woman to the rescue. Something that'll take the fancy of the great B.P., and put shekels into the pockets of the proprietor of Barnum's Marvellous Medley of Miraculous Masterpieces."

"Not so loud—nor so fast, my friend. When's Barnetto going to run this out?"

"Next Wednesday—at the night show."

"That means I've got to have everything ready to start it by the beginning of next week. Can't be done, old man!"

"Why not?"

"Well, to-day's Thursday. I've got my own car; but I ain't got a motor-bike, and there ain't no one in the show as can ride one—at least, not sufficiently well for a stunt like this."

"But you must do it—you must! Think what it means to you—hundreds of quids! By the end of the week, if he can get the bills out, Barnetto'll be advertising this 'Novel and Unprecedented Spectacle—the Greatest Attraction of the Age.' Everybody'll see it for miles around. Then on Monday—two days before he's ready—you'll come out with the same idea. At the most it'll be but a curious coincidence; and if he kicks up a shine you can accuse him of copying your idea."

"'Ow d'yer make that out?"

"The boy—the boy who was up here the other morning—the boy you told me you struck across the face with your whip—he was here. What for? Why, to sell secrets, of course! You can get a dozen to swear to seeing him. Ain't that good enough?"

"If you don't lick creation! With a brain like yours, you ought to make a fortune."

"Not with tight 'uns like you about, Barnum."

"Ain't I treatin' you liberal?"

The circus proprietor was getting angry.

"I suppose you are," admitted the other tamely. "But that ain't the point. What do you think of the scheme?"

"The best I've ever struck," replied Barnum, brightening as he fingered the paper. "All the directions—the patter is 'ere, too?"

"Everything—just as Barnetto's going to produce it on Wednesday next."

"Don't reckon he'll want to give the British public a stale turn—eh, what? Fancy coming out with a wheeze that Barnum's Circus 'as been showin' for two nights before 'im! There won't be much in it for 'im—eh?"

"Not much, I reckon. Now, I'll get on the move. Everything's clear, ain't it?"

"Quite!" replied the masked man, rising to go. "Simply follow that paper. Don't be afraid of spending a bit of money in coming out with the bills prompt on Monday. By the end of the week, after you've put hundreds of quids in your pocket, you can reckon you are the top-dog showman—in this country, at any rate. Now for my bit."

The chink of money followed, and, after another drink and an interchange of congratulations, the masked man got up.

Barnum accompanied him to the door.

"Find your way all right?" he called out, as the other lumbered down the steps.

"Ain't so sure!" came back the muffled reply.

"'Arf a mo', I'll give yer a 'and as far as the end of the field."

The blood leapt in Dick's veins.

Was Dame Fortune to be kind to him, after all?

"You'd better, I think!" came back the reply. "Don't want no one stumbling across me with this pretty covering on my face, or they'll take me for the Modern Highwayman."

Barnum laughed, and descended the steps.

Stealthily Dick crept from his hiding-place. He reached the door, waited till the voices of the two men had died away on the edge of the encampment, then he slipped out into the fresh night air.

"Burton's the traitor," he said to himself. "I could almost swear to it—though I didn't see his face. Wait, my fine friend—wait; my day of reckoning will come!"

Swiftly he dodged from caravan to caravan, made a wide detour to avoid any possibility of meeting with the two men, then, gaining the high-road, doggedly tackled the six miles that lay between him and Barnetto's Circus.

Barely had he gone a hundred yards than an idea came to him.

"By cutting across the heath I'll get back long before Burton, if it was he," he conjectured.

And, although the way was a desolate and lonely one, the object at stake spurred him on, and, taking a bee-line across country, he made his way at a rapid rate back to the camp.

The place was almost in darkness when he arrived, utterly worn out with his experience and the walking of the past few hours. Here and there the light from an open caravan cleft the blackness and served to guide him through the encampment.

Before one of these he started, and drew back into the deep shadows. The door was wide open, for the night was warm, and, peering within, Dick saw something that gave him the biggest surprise of his life.

Peacefully reposing in his bunk along one side of the vehicle, punctuating the silence with loud snores, was Burton, the acrobat, soundly wrapped in sleep!

Burton there—and he thought that the man who had plotted with Barnum—the man he had left miles behind on the Warminster Road was he. Instead, Burton was fast asleep in his own van—sleeping the sleep of the just.

Filled with amazement, Dick turned away.

Would the mystery never be solved? Was the traitor to Barnetto's cause to go unpunished?

It looked very much like it. And, as the boy sought his own pallet, he had to confess that the other side held all the winning cards.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
Claire's Triumph.

NEVER before had man, woman, or child in Barnetto's Royal Circus seen the signor in such a raging, tearing temper.

He was more than mad—a wild, roaring, human tornado, he swept from one part of the camp to another, giving vent to paroxysms of violent vituperation and frenzied abuse.

"Let me find him! Only let me get my hands on him, whoever he is, I'll wring every breath from his body! I'll—I'll——"

Further speech failing, he dragged himself wearily into Claire's caravan, which happened to be the nearest to hand, and, muttering some sort of an apology, threw himself into a chair.

It was Sunday—Sunday midday—and the signor had only just returned from Warminster.

Natural curiosity prompted him to drive over early to see what turns Barnum was billing. To his unutterable amazement, every hoarding and space which would take a poster was placarded with the following amazing announcement:

GREATEST ATTRACTION OF THE CENTURY.

On Wednesday Next,
at 3 o'clock, and again at 8 o'clock,
will be presented, in addition to

BARNUM'S
COLOSSAL CONGLOMERATION OF MIRACULOUS MARVELS,

The Greatest Spectacular Diversion of the Age,
Devised, invented, written, and here presented
For the First Time by THE GREAT CAPTAIN BARNUM himself,
entitled:

"THE MODERN HIGHWAYMAN."

In which will appear
Joe Davis, the Famous Driver of his Majesty's Motor-Mail;
Danvers, Champion Motor-Cyclist of the Universe,
in the part of
The Up-to-date DICK TURPIN,
and
CERISE, Queen of the Ring, who, on her
Fiery, Untamed Arab Steed, Mohmand, will rescue
The Motor-Mail, its Driver, and Thousands of Pounds' worth of Specie from the daring clutches of the
MOTOR HIGHWAYMAN.

Nothing Like it Ever Presented to the Public Before, Etc., etc., etc.

The signor mopped his perspiring forehead wearily.

"Pinch? It's the most colossal pinch one showman's ever practised on another! Look, me gal—look at it!"

Claire took the handbill and read it through. Already she knew it off by heart. Dick had shown her one some time before.

Again the signor burst into an angry torrent of threats, abuse, and invective. It wasn't like him to get into a violent temper—before a woman, too. He ceased at last and sat down again, trembling with rage and mortification.

"Forgive me, girl," he said thickly. "I've never had such a knock-down blow as this in my life. To think that the scheme which me and young Dick Rivers worked out, and on which already I've busted hundreds, should not only leak out, but be copied—no; forestalled—by a rival showman—well, I'll shut down the blessed circus, blowed if I won't! Yes; that's what I'll do. I'll pay 'em all off, every man jack, and send 'em packing. Go and ask the missus for my cheque-book. I'll do it now, afore I cool."

"That's just why you shouldn't do it, signor," said Claire, passing her warm, soft arm about his neck. "Now, just listen to me, and I'll tell you something that'll make you want to give every hand in the circus a present of a five-pound note instead of the sack."

Barnetto turned his head slowly, and his eyes widened in wonderment.

"What's that?"

"I mean what I say; and you know, signor, I think too much of you to let you down. If you could only see it in the right light, you can get the biggest free advertisement out of this that you'll ever get in your life. But you can't see it—you won't see it until the whole thing's done; and, instead of making pounds, as you would have done by first producing 'The Modern Highwayman' turn, you'll make hundreds."

"Claire, whatever's wrong with you? You ain't right, girl!"

"Right! I'm the sanest of us two, signor!" she laughed merrily. "Now, just you listen carefully, and what I ask you you've got to promise."

"Eh?"

"Got to promise; and you'll do it, too. I could have told you about this long ago had I chosen."

"You? Then why——"

"Because Dick and I worked out a wonderful scheme—not only for taking a rise out of Captain Barnum, but for robbing him for ever of all hope of smashing up Barnetto's Royal Circus."

"You can't mean——"

"I'm not going to tell you what I mean. All you've got to do is to trust me. If you do that, all will be well; if you don't—well, Barnum will make a heap of money, and you will be nowhere."

The signor positively gasped.

"You want me to sit still and do nothing?" he spluttered.

"Not at all. I want you just to go on with your scheme as if nothing had happened; to have it ready, as you planned, on Wednesday evening. Is that clear?"

"Ye-yes."

"Very well, then, promise."

"I can't."

"You must, or you're ruined. Now promise!"

"Eh? Very well, then. You women always want your own way."

"You needn't if you don't want to," said the girl, with feigned hauteur. And she rose, as if to leave the caravan.

"All right. I promise."

"One thing more. Don't get any more bills out on Monday, but start posting everywhere on Tuesday. Promise that."

"I do."

"Now, you won't question either me or Dick, will you?"

"Dick Rivers! What's he got to do with it?"

"Everything. It's his idea, but I'm putting it before you."

"You minx!"

"Don't call me names, uncle dear," she said, patting his cheek.

She often called him uncle when she wanted particularly to get her own way.

"I don't know what you're driving at, you two, but I suppose I'd better say 'Yes' to everything."

"Now you're talking sensibly. Still one thing more. I'd almost forgotten Dick and I won't appear in the ring on Tuesday night."

"Great Scott! Here, I say, Claire—— No; I can't agree to that."

"But you promised."

"No, I didn't."

The signor began to bluster. The girl waited patiently.

"When you've agreed to that I'll go on. Dick and I won't appear on Tuesday night."

There was a finality in her tone that was convincing.

"But what can I do? The show'll go to pieces!" said Barnetto weakly.

"It won't make a bit of difference to you," said Claire. "Herr Schmidt will have to do Dick's show with the tigers, and you can put on an 'extra' for me. You won't lose a shilling by it. But the next night—ah, the next night!—you'll simply be turning money from the doors, and for many a night after that."

The circus proprietor didn't quite know whether he was awake or dreaming.

"Go on!" he said curiously.

"I think that's all," murmured the Queen of the Ring. "Mind you stick to your word, or I sha'n't answer for the consequences. Do what you've promised, and, as I've told you, after Wednesday you'll simply be coining money. Now, aren't I getting mercenary? But you know, dear, it's all for you."

Again she put her arm caressingly around his neck, and kissed him affectionately. He had been a father to her ever since she was a tiny mite; now she saw a way of repaying him—at least, she and Dick had worked it out together.

"You beat me to bits, Claire!" the old showman said at last. "How it's all going to end I don't know."

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

"The King of the Road."

TUESDAY night in Barnum's Circus! The announcement of the marvellous new attraction had made a tremendous appeal for miles around, and the big tent was packed to overflowing.

It was not the blare of the band, or the flare of the naptha lamps, or the gags and funniosities of the comic man outside the paybox that drew together that immense concourse of people.

Seats in every part of the tent—cheap and expensive—were alike crowded. Barnum's Circus was about to commence a show the like of which had never been presented—not even before the crowned heads of all the monarchs of Europe.

"It's magnificent—magnificent!"

The words came from Captain Barnum himself. Arrayed in a perfectly-fitting new evening-dress suit which he had had purposely made for the occasion, gorgeously bedecked and bejewelled with a massive gold chain and gem-studded rings, he looked the epitome of success and self-satisfaction as he surveyed the vast throng that packed the giant enclosure from floor to roof. It was, in truth, magnificent!

At last the band played the opening air, the beat of horse-hoofs thundered in the tan, and the next minute the first turn was in full swing.

Performer after performer followed in quick succession—clown and acrobat, bareback-rider and juggler, elephant-tamer and conjurer, contortionist and tumbler—but every eye was watching, and every heart beating in tumultuous anticipation for the event of the evening.

The great moment drew nigh.

Well might the oily captain rub his hands with glee. Never before had such a crowd assembled in any circus enclosure. There were hundreds of pounds already in the pay-box, and still the gangways and every inch of standing room was being taken up. He had found—or, rather, thieved—a gold-mine.

A round of hand-clapping, growing in volume every second, rolled through the huge tent; to the stamping of feet were added wild calls for the appearance of "The Modern Highwayman."

The turn came at last. One by one the lamps and flares were extinguished, and, save for the gleaming electric bulbs that lit up the music for the band, and the soft radiance

from the limelight apparatus in the roof, the place was in darkness.

"Here it comes—here it comes!"

The whisper passed from mouth to mouth, increasing in sound until the combined buzz of expectancy broke into one prolonged cheer.

Barnum himself strode into the limelight, and raised his jewelled hand to enforce silence.

From a half-sheet of notepaper he announced the turn—in far-fetched, glowing language he described it—the greatest spectacular and novelty effect ever shown in any circus.

Another round of cheering, then silence once more.

A deathlike stillness seemed to have settled on that breathless multitude—a stillness broken suddenly by the tense, sharp throbbing of an engine. Out from the darkness loomed a pair of startlingly-white headlights, and a giant motor-van leapt into life—to start on a mad career round the arena.

Faster and faster it went, the limelight following it, and proclaiming it as his Majesty's mail.

The audience gazed spellbound. Hark! What is that? Above the deep thunder of the motor-van could be heard the one long continuous burst of short, sharp explosions. Then into the ring, some hundreds of feet behind the larger vehicle, shot a motor bicycle, ridden by a masked man.

See! They are racing—faster and faster, the smaller gaining every moment on the larger.

One instant more, and the motor-bicycle is alongside the Royal mail. Swift as lightning the masked highwayman whips a pistol from his coat. There is a quick report, a flash of flame, the mail-driver topples from his seat, and the van is at the mercy of the robber.

At once he has the doors unlocked; the chests of golden coin and notes lay to his hand. He fills a box on the back of his machine, is about to make off, when a coal-black steed flashes into the ring.

The robber mounts, and is off—off, to the crackle of his engine and the cheers of the spectators. But stay! That horse and rider. Surely they are riding quicker, making even greater speed than the engine-driven machine. Now the fearless horsewoman draws alongside—see, she is edging him in, nearer, over nearer, to the barricade.

Stop he must, or certain death awaits him. He dare not foul that speeding steed, or its flashing hoofs would beat the life from his body in a second.

No; he is cornered. He must stop or be killed. Slower and slower his engine beats, the machine stops, and he jumps off, to find himself looking down the muzzle of a pistol, held in the unflinching hand of the Queen of the Ring.

Captain Barnum heaves a sigh of intense satisfaction.

It is over. No; not quite. There is something more to come. Out of the darkness, from somewhere at the back of the tent, steals a pencil of ghostly light, hovering this way and that, until it comes to rest on the great black side of the motionless mail-van.

It is a message. One by one, words are unfolding themselves on the improvised blackboard. Every eye is upon them. Five thousand people read them. And this is what they read:

THE TURN JUST GIVEN

IS BUT A POOR IMITATION OF THE ONE AND

ONLY ORIGINAL PRODUCTION OF THE GREAT SCENIC SPECTACLE

"THE MODERN HIGHWAYMAN,"

to be shown

TO-MORROW NIGHT, AT EIGHT O'CLOCK,

in

BARNETTO'S ROYAL CIRCUS AT DUNSTONE.

That was all, but it was sufficient. A mighty roar went up from that vast assemblage. They felt—and knew—that this announcement implied battle between the two greatest rival showmen of Britain. To-night they had come in their thousands; to-morrow night they would go in their tens of thousands to Barnetto's Circus, to witness the next round of the battle.

They would talk about it. It would get—and did get—into the papers.

It was a triumph for the two young brains that had planned it—Dick Rivers, the young Tiger Tamer, and Claire Forster, Queen of the Ring.

While yet the big tent shook with mingled cheers and wild cries, they slipped down from their vantage-point, some few feet from the ground, outside Barnum's tent, hurriedly

packed away the acetylene lantern by means of which they had thrown the slide bearing the great announcement across the circus arena on to the side of the mail van, and, ere a living soul could bar their progress, they had gained a trap waiting them on the high-road, and were being driven as fast as the signor's pony could carry them back to Barnetto's Circus.

"It'll do it—it'll do it! I'm sure of it!" panted Jack, hugging himself with delight. "I know by the yells and shouts of surprise that the audience appreciate the situation. Wait, Claire—only wait till to-morrow night, and watch them come! This'll prove the biggest draw that any circus has ever had!"

And Dick was right. The scheme turned out the most colossal and money-making success ever patronised by the British public. They felt there was something more behind the affair than met the eye. And when the newspapers began to take it up, and some inquired why Captain Barnum did not take legal proceedings against his rival, and no answer was forthcoming, the excitement increased to inconceivable dimensions.

As Claire had predicted, the signor literally coined money. The boom lasted not for a week, but for months. Wherever they went the news of the occurrence preceded them—how one circus had come out with a great attraction which the other had incontestable proof was but a vulgar imitation of its own.

And so our story draws to its end. The contest between the rival showmen—the rascally attempt on the part of Captain Barnum to wrest from the signor the kingship of the road—ended in complete and overwhelming victory for the latter. And behind it all were the cool brains and tremendous daring of Claire and Dick—the chums of the ring.

But Barnett wasn't the man to let the matter rest there. His own company was never safe whilst there remained a traitor in the camp, and to that end, when, a few days after the startling denouement, he and the rascally Barnum came face to face, he forced the latter—under pain of threatened legal proceedings—to reveal the name of the one who had been at the bottom of all the trouble.

Jim Burton didn't stay long in the circus after that. As a matter of fact, the next day—and for a good many days after that—he was looking for a new billet. Anyway, Barnetto's Circus knew him no more. For, more persons than one his forced retirement from the concern was a good thing—particularly for Herr Schmidt.

It was only when the acrobat had turned his back upon the encampment for the last time that his purpose in lending poor Herr Schmidt money and encouraging the German's weakness for alcoholic liquors became patent to all who shared the knowledge of his rascality. He wanted not only to inflame the ex-tiger-tamer's animosity towards the lad who had in part supplanted him—a task in which he failed hopelessly, for the simple reason that Herr Schmidt hadn't a spark of ungenerousness in his nature—but also, by lending him money which there was no chance of ever getting back, to gain such a hold over the Herr as to compel him to swear that Dick Rivers must have sold the secrets to Captain Barnum, as the lad had tried to get him to help in the villainous scheme.

However, as we know, Herr Schmidt's honour was never put to the test, and if it had been we may be sure the old man would have passed through the ordeal like the soldier and gentleman he was at heart—for awakening had come to him on that very day when Claire reminded him of his duty towards himself and his beloved Fatherland.

And with the resolution strong upon him to atone for the past, Herr Schmidt started in to repair his shattered fortunes, and it was not long before he had sufficiently re-established himself in the estimation of the circus-proprietor to induce the latter to reinstate him to his former coveted position.

But what of Dick? The fact of his severing his connection with the animals that one time had been under the German's care was but the first step in a circus career that landed him, in a very few years, at the top of the tree.

To-day Dick Rivers is no longer a boy—he is a prosperous, energetic young man, whose success has done something more than make him a junior partner in Barnetto's Circus; it has provided him with the privilege of asking the girl who, in those far-off struggling times, had been his constant companion and friend, to share whatever may come to him in the future. And we may be sure that, come sunshine or storm, Dick Rivers and the Queen of the Ring will remain, till the curtain of life rings down, what, since the first day of their meeting they started out to be—true circus chums!

THE END.

Stanley Dare

The BOY DETECTIVE.

INTRODUCTION.

Stanley Dare, the Boy Detective, is engaged by a big firm of South African merchants to recover the sum of £200,000, which has been stolen from them. Dare finds that the money has been stolen from the original thief by a secret criminal society, one of whose members, an Englishman named Mark Sefton, has absconded with the whole of it. The young detective traces Sefton to a town called La Union, and he is there informed that Sefton is dead. Scala, Valdez, and Quintana—three members of the criminal society—are anxious to obtain the stolen money. Before they can do this, however, it is necessary that they procure a part of a link of a chain which is in Sefton's possession. Finding the missing piece has been buried with Sefton, the three men unearth the coffin. Just as they have discovered that there are only lumps of lead inside, Stanley Dare approaches them. "I give you two hours in which to get out of La Union," says the young detective. "Go!"

(Now go on with the Story.)

On the Mountain Range—The Detective's Peril.

The two villains slunk off without another word, and as soon as they were out of sight Dare set to work to examine the lead with which the coffin had been weighted.

Each piece was neatly sewn up in canvas, and the pieces were of the size and shape used for ballast in small yachts.

The port of La Union did not seem to be at all a likely place in which to find a yacht; but he determined to make inquiries of the Customs officials the first thing in the morning, for he wanted to find out where the pig-lead had come from.

In pursuance of this intention he went down to the quay after he had had breakfast, and finding an official who was ready to give all the information at his disposal for a couple of dollars, he learnt that a small vessel of about a hundred tons, named the President, which had once been a yacht, but was now a trading vessel, had sailed two days previously for Esparsa. He remembered that she had some ballast on board such as the Senor Inglese had described.

He also remembered—on the receipt of two more dollars—that the President carried one passenger—a Spanish gentleman, he believed—who was suffering from bad health, and went at once to his cabin as soon as he got on board.

It was tolerably certain that the "Spanish" passenger on board the President was really Mark Sefton. He had played a splendid game of bluff in circulating a report—or getting one circulated by others—of his death, and then going through all the business of a mock funeral.

The presence of the lead ballast in the coffin seemed to point to the fact that the captain of the President had taken part in the deception.

With the rapidity which characterised all his actions when he picked up the trail, Stanley Dare had engaged a fifty-ton cutter, with her skipper and crew of four men, before noon of that day to convey him to Esparsa.

At two o'clock in the afternoon the cutter weighed anchor, and by sunset the coast line of Salvador was out of sight astern.

From La Union to Esparsa was a distance by sea of three hundred and fifty miles, and as the winds were mostly light, it took the cutter exactly three days to cover the distance.

Esparsa is only a small port in the Gulf of Nocoya, with hot, narrow streets, and no hotel accommodation whatever.

The President was at anchor in the roadstead when the young detective arrived there. She had arrived only two days previously, and Stanley Dare had no difficulty in finding out what had become of her solitary passenger.

In so small a town, quite out of the busy world, the advent of a stranger is noticed, and is a matter of comment.

From inquiries which he made, Stanley Dare learnt that Mark Sefton had gone to San Jose, a town situated amid the mountains. From San Jose there is a short line of railway to Port Limon, on the Atlantic side, and to Port Limon the fugitive was now bound, thus doubling on his tracks, and going back almost to his starting-point. From Port Limon he had, no doubt, meant to make his way to England, there to obtain possession of the money. It was the last lap in the race, so to speak, and the young detective realised that if he was to win, he would have to put all his energy into his final spurt.

A guide was not to be procured, but Dare cared little about that. The chances were that he would be better without one. The road was plain enough to follow, although for the greater part of the way it was nothing better than a rough mule-track.

The young detective bought a good, sturdy animal, strapped a valise with his belongings to the saddle, and set off on his lonely journey.

All went well on the first part of the way. He had reached the foot-hills of the mountain range, and put up for the night in a hut which had once been used by a charcoal-burner.

On the second day it was hard climbing all the time in the direction of the San Jose Pass, which was five thousand feet above the sea-level. At noon he camped under the shade of a clump of petioles. A mountain stream trickled lazily past, and Stanley Dare, listening dreamily to its murmur in the noonday heat, fell into a doze from which he presently had a rude awakening.

It was a deep, reverberating crash of thunder which aroused him, and he sprang to his feet as some heavy raindrops splashed upon his face.

A blinding flash of lightning seemed to fill the atmosphere with quivering fire. A frightful peal of thunder followed, which so terrified the mule that he broke his head-rope and began to plunge wildly hither and thither.

Dare attempted to secure it, but was flung by the affrighted animal head over heels over some rocks. The mule dashed off, and that was the last he ever saw of it. But that was not the worst mishap, for when Dare rose to his feet he saw coming round the bend of the mountain-path none other than Leon Scala. Pedro Valdez followed him. There was no one else, but they were enough. It was evident that these two villains had succeeded in picking up the trail again.

Leon Scala uttered a shout of malignant triumph.

"By all the fiends!" he cried. "Our luck has not deserted us! It is the young English detective! We can settle our score now! Hands up, you hound! I'm the man with the revolver ready this time!"

Stanley Dare did not move.

"Hands up, I say!" yelled Scala. "Hold them above your head!"

The young detective did not answer. A desperate plan of escape had flashed into his mind. Within half a dozen paces of where he stood a mountain torrent roared down a deep and rocky channel. He might be able to keep afloat if he leaped into it, and in a few moments the foaming waters would carry him out of the range of his enemy's revolver.

Scala began to count slowly.

"One—two—three—four—five——"

With one tremendous leap Dare reached a ledge of rock overhanging the torrent. There was a shout of rage from his foes. A revolver shot rang out, and the bullet whizzed past Dare's head.

Then the young detective made a second leap clear into the foaming waters, and disappeared beneath the surface.

Leon Scala shrieked out a furious oath in the madness of his passion, and rushed to a rocky ledge a short distance lower down stream, in order to try and get another shot at the young detective. The ledge was slippery and moss-grown. He lost his balance, and his feet shot from under him; then, with a wild shriek of despair, he plunged headlong into the torrent and vanished instantly from sight.

Pedro Valdez was too startled at the suddenness with which it had happened to do anything more for a few minutes than to stare stupidly into the water where his companion had disappeared; not that it was likely he could have helped him, but he made no effort to do so.

"Caramba! He is gone!" he muttered. "He can't swim a stroke, so there is not the smallest hope for him. Well, the band can break up now. Sefton a traitor, Leon Scala dead! We have not a man left fit to take the leadership. I must let Quintana know what has happened."

This was Leon Scala's requiem.

His lieutenant turned back and again mounted his mule, and leading the one on which Scala had been mounted, he descended the mountain road towards the sea coast.

In the meantime, Stanley Dare, splendid swimmer though he was, was having a desperate battle for life in the roaring torrent. He was hampered by his valise, which was still strapped across his back, but he was unable to unfasten it. It was lucky for him that he could not, for the valise was eventually the means of saving his life.

The torrent was deep, but as the young detective was carried down, he was considerably bruised by the rocks and floating tree-trunks, against which he was continuously being dashed. He began to fear that he would be drowned, after all, when suddenly the straps of his valise caught in a projecting snag of rock, and there he hung, so breathless and exhausted, that for some minutes he was quite unable to do anything to help himself. While he hung there the body of Leon Scala was swept past him, tossed hither and thither like a cork on the foaming waters.

(To be continued).

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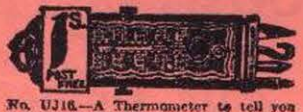

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