

The Mangel



THEY'LL THINK IT WAS THE CAT!

HERE'S TO YOU ALL THIS HAPPY FESTIVE SEASON!



COME INTO the OFFICE, BOYS - AND GIRLS!

Your Editor is always pleased to hear from his readers. Write to him: Editor of the "Magnet," The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. A stamped, addressed envelope will ensure a reply.

WE are about to bid farewell to 1935, but before we do, let me once more wish every boy and girl the Happiest of Happy Christmases. I am proud to say there never was a man with such a loyal band of chums as your Editor, and I appreciate to the full the enthusiastic spirit shown by the great army of my pals. May our friendship never cease.

It's a pity that Christmas falls only once a year. But why worry, the good old MAGNET is published regularly every week, and there's no better or brighter paper for boys and girls on the market to-day. For twenty-eight years the MAGNET has stood the test and proved the best. New readers should make a New Year's resolution to stick to the MAGNET—the paper that never lets you down!

From Southsea comes a query which will interest all of you. A reader chum asks me: What is the use of

THE TWENTY-FOUR HOUR CLOCK?

Well, on the Continent, where different countries have different times, the twenty-four hour clock is a great advantage for the running of trains. Take, for instance, the Orient Express, which passes through six or seven different countries which use different times. But for the twenty-four hour system there would be great confusion in working out the time-tables when the train arrives at the frontiers. In fact, it would sometimes appear that the train arrives at its destination at a frontier station some considerable time before it starts from the previous station.

For the sake of convenience, European countries have now grouped themselves into three-time standards. One group use Greenwich time, another mid-European time, which is one hour fast, and the third group use east-European time, which is two hours fast. When a train passes through all three zones it makes matters less complicated if the time-table is reckoned by twenty-four hours. As Great Britain is completely in the Greenwich time zone, there is no necessity to use the twenty-four hour clock, which is probably why the railways have not adopted it.

It is interesting to know that before the coming of railways, places used Town time, based on the actual position of the town. That meant, of course, that every big town had a different time, which was hopeless for railway travelling. So railways were really responsible for the world using standard times.

TALKING of railways, streamlined trains are fairly common nowadays. Every country is experimenting with them and, as a result, railway records for speed are being broken so quickly that one can hardly keep pace with them. I am informed, however, that an attempt is now being made to evolve

A 300 M.P.H. TRAIN!

Needless to say, if this train is a success it will smash all existing records, and

inaugurate a new era in railway travel. The idea is that the train, instead of being propelled by ordinary methods, shall be pulled along the rails by giant magnetic arcs, placed at intervals along the lines. As the train passes through one of these arcs, it will shut off the power from that arc and then be dragged on by the magnetic attraction of the next arc, and so on.

The most revolutionary change which is planned, however, is that the train shall be ball-shaped, with a stationary chamber inside for the purpose of carrying passengers. Thus, instead of seeing ordinary trains flashing along the lines, we may see thousands of rolling balls, each containing passengers. The inventor claims that a speed of 300 miles per hour can be easily reached. A model has been operated successfully, and it is said that Switzerland might build a full-sized test train if the idea proves worthy of it.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that

STREAMLINED TRAINS ARE NOT NEW.

As long ago as 1865 an idea for a streamlined train was patented in the United States. The inventor's sketch shows a train which is remarkably like a modern streamlined train, although not quite so scientifically constructed. The idea was not taken up, for a very simple reason. Seventy years ago there was no such thing as light-weight stainless steel, of which modern streamlined trains are built. Nor was the Diesel engine available. The engine would have been extremely heavy, and would have had to be driven by coal and steam. It is doubtful, therefore, whether the additional speed gained would have compensated for the increased cost of building the trains.

Here comes a query from one of my air-minded readers, who wants to know something about

SKY-WRITING WITH SMOKE.

Doubtless you have all seen sky-writing carried out by aeroplanes. This reader wants to know how large the letters composing the sky-writing are. The answer may surprise him. Do you realise that the average letter in a sky-writing sign is between half a mile and a mile high? The amount of smoke used in this is enormous. It takes eight million cubic feet of smoke to write one letter! Approximately a quarter of a million cubic feet of smoke is generated in a second, and it takes about thirty-two seconds to write a letter. In other words, to write the name MAGNET in the air would take just under three and a quarter minutes, and forty-eight million cubic feet of smoke would have to be used.

Incidentally, sky-writing aeroplane pilots work out the various courses on which they must fly before they leave the ground. When they are in the air and ready to begin sky-writing, they have then only to follow the list of compass courses which they have mapped out—and the message is written!

QUITE a number of my readers are owners of home cinemas, so they will be interested to know that

CINEMAS ARE HELPING DENTISTS!

One enterprising dentist has evolved a scheme for making people forget their worries while they are in the dentist's chair. Just before he begins operations on his patient, the dentist switches on a home cinema, which projects a picture on to the ceiling. The patient, leaning back in the chair, sees the film and immediately gets interested in it. The result is that the patient's attention is diverted from any possible pain he might otherwise feel.

This dentist's home cinema is especially appreciated by youngsters, and by far the most popular films are cartoon comedies. Each film runs for about twenty minutes—by which time the dentist has completed his job. Some youngsters actually look forward to their next visit to the dentist!

Now for a few

THINGS YOU'D HARDLY BELIEVE!

An Active Volcano Produces Ice!—A Mexican volcano causes heavy hail-storms. The hail falls on the sides of the mountain, freezes hard, and is then cut up and sold as ice in neighbouring towns!

The Largest Atlas in the World!—A museum in Berlin, Germany, possesses an atlas that is 12 feet high and four feet wide.

A Fish that Ate a Bird!—An angler in America claims to have seen a large fish leap out of a river, catch a bird that was skimming the surface, and swallow it.

The Man who Climbed over 146 Steps a Minute!—A New Yorker climbed all the stairs to the top of the Woolworth building in nine minutes. The building has 55 stories and 1,520 steps.

A Toy Balloon Once Crossed the Atlantic!—It was released in New York and picked up at Edale, Derbyshire.

A Man Who Plays Billiards with his Nose!—A curious record is claimed by a billiards player who does not use a cue in the ordinary way. He bends over the table and strikes the ball with his nose—and can score 46 in one break!

Where Salt is Used as Money!—In certain parts of Africa salt is used as currency. In both Abyssinia and parts of the Sahara salt is reckoned to be "as good as gold."

I suppose you are all wondering what I have in store for you next week. Well, you'll certainly enjoy:

"GALLEON GOLD!"

By Frank Richards,

which winds up our grand Christmas series. Count Zero is still in pursuit of the treasure of the lost galleon, determined that nothing shall stand in his way—not even the lives of Harry Wharton & Co. As to his success or otherwise, I leave you to learn in due course. Frank Richards certainly possesses the ability to hold your interest from the very first to the very last lines of his yarns, and you'll find next week's story of the chums of Greyfriars a real top-notch.

"Supporting it"—as the cinema people say—will be another full-of-chuckles issue of the "Greyfriars Herald," a contribution by the Greyfriars Rhymester, and more thrilling chapters of our stirring sea story. Of course, I shall be "in the office," ready and willing to answer all your queries, or to pass on some more interesting and curious information.

Cheerio, then until next week.

YOUR EDITOR.

The HOUSE of MYSTERY!



By FRANK RICHARDS

It isn't like Vernon-Smith, the Bounder of Greyfriars, to show the white feather, and his decision to desert the haunted house of Polpelly surprises his friends. What's Smithy's game?

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Bunter Gets a Bullseye!

WAIT for me!" yelled Billy Bunter. And there was a chortle in the old hall of Polpelly House.

It was ten o'clock, on a bright, clear, frosty morning. The Greyfriars fellows, who were spending the Christmas holidays at the lonely house in the coomb, on the Atlantic coast of Devonshire, had been up at dawn—with the exception of Billy Bunter.

Harry Wharton & Co. were standing in a cheery group at the doorway, looking out through the old stone porch down the coomb to the sea. Tom Redwing had just come up from the boathouse, to announce that the tide was coming in and that the boat was ready. The Famous Five and Smithy were ready to start.

Billy Bunter wasn't!

Bunter had been down only ten minutes. In that time he had eaten only one breakfast. He had, in fact, hardly got going yet on his morning meal.

"Come on, if you're coming!" grunted Herbert Vernon-Smith.

"I've got to finish brekker——"

"We'll be back by then, old fat man!" said Bob Cherry. "We shall be only a few hours gone."

"Beast!" said Bunter. "Look here, you wait for me! I shan't keep you half an hour——"

"You won't!" agreed Johnny Bull. "You won't keep us half a minute."

"Come on!" said Smithy.

"Hold on, I tell you!" hooted Bunter. "If that's the way you treat a guest, Vernon-Smith, after asking him to this rotten place——"

"Bow-wow!" was Smithy's reply, and he walked out.

"I say, you fellows——" yelled Bunter, as the Famous Five followed the Bounder.

Harry Wharton paused a moment.

"Look here, you ass, if you want to come, come!" he said. "Mr. Redwing's got the boat ready—and we can only get into Black Rock Cave when the tide serves. Get a move on!"

"If you think I'm coming out hungry, you——"

"Oh, rats!"

"Don't you leave me in this beastly place alone!" roared Bunter, as the captain of the Greyfriars Remove followed his friends. "I'm not going to be left here on my own, you beast!"

"There's old Dan'l in the kitchen——"

"Blow old Dan'l!"

"Blow him as much as you like, if he'll let you!" agreed Wharton, and he walked out.

Billy Bunter blinked at the empty doorway with an indignant blink, through his big spectacles. They were going—actually going—and leaving him on his own in the haunted house of Polpelly! Unless he left his breakfast unfinished, which was impossible!

The fat junior rolled across to the window, which was open to admit the fresh air from the sea and the bright wintry sunshine. It was not snowing now, but the deep stone sill was thick with snow from a fall overnight. Billy Bunter blinked out of the window at the juniors crossing the courtyard to the old gateway on the steps down to the path through the coomb.

"I say, you fellows!" he howled.

"Ta-ta, Bunter!" called back Frank Nugent.

"Wait for me, you beasts!"

"The waitfulness is not an esteemed possibility, my worthy fat Bunter!" answered Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

"Smithy, you rotter!"

The Bounder did not even turn his head. It was true that Billy Bunter was a guest, of sorts, at Polpelly House. But Smithy did not seem to have a lot of politeness to waste on that particular guest.

"Smithy, you beast!" yelled Bunter. Smithy walked on.

"Smithy, you tick!"

The Bounder seemed deaf. The other fellows were grinning. Billy Bunter's eyes gleamed with wrath behind his big spectacles.

According to the proverb, contempt will pierce the shell of a tortoise. And even Billy Bunter, the fat Owl of Greyfriars, was not quite so thick-skinned as a tortoise!

He groped on the window-sill for snow. He kneaded a snowball, and took aim. Vernon-Smith had reached the gateway. From the gateway, great steps, cut in the steep side of the coomb, led down to the path. They were snowy and slippery, and needed to be negotiated with some care.

Whiz!

Plop!

Bunter was not often a good marksman, but this time luck favoured him—or ill-luck! He got a bullseye!

The snowball smashed on the back of the Bounder's head.

He stumbled forward, slipped on the top step, and went down. He gave a gasp as he went. He gave a howl as he rolled on the second step. He gave a spluttering yell as he hit the third.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Bob Cherry.

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"Smithy!" gasped Redwing.

From the top step, the chums of the Remove watched the Bounder's downward progress. They could not help him; he went too fast for that.

On those steep steps, slippery with snow, a fellow who started rolling had little chance of pulling up till he reached the bottom.

Smithy's arms and legs thrashed wildly as he went.

But he caught no hold, and, with a series of gasps, howls, and panting yells, he did all the steps one after another, till he rolled from the last, into the thick snow on the path.

There he sat up, spluttering.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Harry Wharton.

"He, he, he!" came from the window that framed Billy Bunter's fat face and glimmering spectacles. "Serve the beast right! He, he, he!"

"You silly ass!" roared Bob Cherry. "Smithy will come back and bust you!"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

He disappeared from the window.

It served Smithy right, of course. He had been contemptuously disregarding of a guest—a distinguished guest! He had asked for it—and got it! But Billy Bunter realised that it was likely to make him wrathful!

Smithy's temper was never very reliable at the best of times. In these circumstances, it was probable that it would fail him completely! Heedless even of his unfinished breakfast, Billy Bunter scooted across the hall and bolted out of the nearest doorway, into the interior of the ancient mansion.

Meanwhile, Harry Wharton & Co. picked their way down the steps, to join the Bounder in the coomb. He was still gasping breathlessly when they reached him. Tom had picked up his cap, which had fallen off in transit. Bob gave him a hand up.

"I'll smash him!" gasped Vernon-Smith. "I'll kick him from one end of Polpelly to the other! I'll—"

"Losing time, old chap!" murmured Bob Cherry, as the breathless and enraged Bounder started back towards the steps in the hillside.

"Never mind that fat ass!" urged Frank Nugent.

"The tide, you know——" murmured Wharton.

Herbert Vernon-Smith did not heed. He had collected innumerable bumps in his rapid descent of the steps. He was damaged, he was breathless, and he was infuriated. Taking no notice of remonstrances, he clambered savagely up to the gateway again and rushed back across the courtyard to the house. And the look on his face indicated that Billy Bunter had acted with unusual wisdom in getting out of reach before he came.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Smugglers' Cave

"BUNTER!"

Billy Bunter quaked.

"Bunter! Where are you, you fat scoundrel?"

Bunter heard! But, like Byron's gladiator, he heeded not!

"You fat rotter!" came the Bounder's enraged roar. "I'm going to smash you! Where are you skulking?"

"Oh lor'!" breathed Bunter.

He crouched silent.

He had scuttled out of the old hall of Polpelly into a stone passage. That passage led to the ruined wing of the ancient house.

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But it was closed at the end by a thick oak door, bolted and barred. Bunter had started to draw one of the bolts—but it was old, and stiff with rust—it hardly moved, and shrieked dismally as it stirred. Giving it up, Bunter crouched in darkness.

The old passage was windowless. It was very dark. It was very cold, too, for it was floored with immenso blocks of stone. But Bunter, for the moment, did not heed the cold. He only hoped that the gloom would hide him from the Bounder.

Crouching on one of the immense flagstones at the dark end of the passage, Bunter listened—and quaked. There were three big bolts on the oaken door—and even if he could draw them, the shrieking of the rusty metal would have warned the Bounder where he was. There was no escape for the fat Owl of Greyfriars, and he could only hope that he would remain unseen.

The Bounder's angry voice rang through the old house of Polpelly. It was clear that he was very anxious to get hold of Bunter—as anxious as Bunter was not to be got hold of!

He tramped up the stone stair to the state bed-room, the only upstairs room in the mansion that was habitable, and in which all the juniors had their beds. He rooted through the room, and stared under all the beds. Bunter was not there—and he came down again to the hall, breathing fury.

"Bunter!" he roared.

But answer there came none!

Down a stone passage the Bounder tramped to the ancient kitchen of Polpelly House. There he found Daniel Heard, the old ship's cook, who had been caretaker of Polpelly for years, and now led an unusually busy life as cook and general factotum for the Greyfriars party.

Old Dan'l was arranging the spit before a roaring fire, stumping on his wooden leg, when the Bounder strode in. He turned a mahogany face, covered to the eyes by beard and whiskers, on Vernon-Smith.

"Is Bunter here?" demanded Smithy.

"Hey?" Old Dan'l put his hand to his ear. He was very deaf.

"Have you seen Bunter?"

"Hey?"

"I'm looking for Bunter!" roared Smithy.

"Ay, ay, sir!" said old Dan'l. "I'll have mun ready agin you get back! The tradesmen's carts can't get through from Pilverton, with the snow on the road, but I got in the stuff!"

"Bunter!"

"Ay, ay!" Old Dan'l nodded, under the impression that the millionaire's son was anxious about the food supply. "I got mun! Young feller from Pilverton got through with the basket! There'll be a goose——"

"Oh gad! You deaf old ass!"

"Hey?"

"Can't you hear a word?" yelled the Bounder.

"Ay, ay, sir! It'll be ready agin you come in to dinner. You trust old Dan'l!"

"Have you seen Bunter?" raved Smithy.

"Hey? I'm getting a bit hard of hearing, sir!" said old Dan'l. "Not deaf, as you might say, but hard of hearing. If you mean about the tide, you ask John Redwing; he knows."

Vernon-Smith gave it up. It was clear that Bunter was not in the kitchen, anyhow. He tramped angrily away.

"Bunter, you fat villain!" he roared.

"Where are you? I'm going to smash you! I'll root all over the place for you till I find you! Where are you?"

Smithy did not really expect an answer, and he did not get one.

But having shouted, he stepped softly and quietly across the hall, and went out silently at the door. He wanted to give the fat Owl the kicking of his life; but he remembered that his friends were waiting, and that Mr. Redwing had the boat ready down the coomb, and that the tide would wait for no man.

As Bunter did not hear him go, probably he would remain under the impression that Smithy was still hunting for him, and would keep doggo in some dark, chilly corner of the rambling old place—and the Bounder hoped that it was very chilly indeed!

Leaving it at that, the Bounder tramped out, and joined the waiting juniors in the coomb—negotiating the steps at a less rapid rate this time.

"Did you find Bunter?" asked Bob, with a grin. The juniors guessed that the answer was in the negative, for if Bunter had been found, sounds of woe would have apprised them of the fact.

"No—but he thinks I'm still after him!" growled Smithy. "He's stuck himself in some corner—and he can stay there! I hope it's jolly cold!"

And Herbert Vernon-Smith tramped away down the coomb, and the other fellows followed. They chuckled as they went. Billy Bunter certainly deserved some punishment for having sent the Bounder tumbling headlong down the steps, and if he got cold in some hidden corner, while his breakfast got cold in the hall, it was no more than he deserved. It was a lighter punishment than he would have received had the Bounder found him.

Smithy was rubbing two or three aching places, and scowling, as he went. But the cheery sunshine, and the fresh wind from the sea, restored his good humour before the cove was reached.

It was a glorious morning, though bitterly cold. Through the great cliffs, like a gateway at the mouth of the cove, the vast Atlantic could be seen, rolling bright. Heavy waves were breaking on the rocks as the tide came in.

John Redwing, Tom's father, stood by the boat, which he had run out of the boathouse.

"All ready, young gentlemen!" said the sailorman.

"Safe and sound and seaworthy, what?" asked Bob Cherry, looking into the fifteen-foot dinghy that bobbed beside the rocky shore.

"Ay, ay, sir!" said John. "I've caulked every hole that that landshark bored in the timbers! You'll find her safe." A smile came over his bronzed face. "I won't say it's a safe trip up the cave on the tide, though. But she's a good boat."

"Safe enough for us," said Smithy carelessly. "Tumble in, you men!"

"All aboard, my hearties!" grinned Bob.

The juniors packed into the boat. It was roomy, and of solid build, and there was plenty of room. John Redwing sat at the tiller, and Tom took the sheets. The juniors lent a hand at hoisting sail, and the boat danced away on the ruffled waters of the cove.

John steered for a high wall of black rock that dropped perpendicular to the water. In the face of it opened a deep dark cavern. Even in the sheltered cove the water was rough close in to the cliff, and some of the crew took oars to fend off.

Under a soaring arch of solid rock the boat glided into the sea cave. There was always plenty of water in Black Rock Cave; but only when the tide was in was it possible to penetrate any great distance afloat. Now the tide was rolling in, and there was deep water under the keel. Under the arch of rock, John struck the sail, and the crew put out the oars.

The cavern was amply wide enough for pulling. Ahead of the boat was black darkness; behind, as they surged in, the great mouth of the cave grew smaller and smaller.

Daylight faded more and more, and the splash of the oars awoke strange echoes in the hollow of the rocks. In old days, when the squires of Polpelly had lived at the lonely mansion, the cave had been used by smugglers, and there was a legend that it was connected in some subterranean way with the house of Polpelly.

The squires of Polpelly had been a rough and lawless race, from the old Elizabethan sea-captain who had fought the Armada, down to the last of the family, fifty years ago. Unless local rumour belied them, they had had an extensive hand in the smuggling that, in the old days, had flourished at Polpelly.

"Jolly, what?" said Bob Cherry. "Ripping place for a smuggler bold!"

John lighted a hurricane lamp and slung it to the masthead. The light of day was now only a patch, far astern. The light glimmered eerily on dark, rolling, surging waters, as the boat pulled deeper and deeper into the depths of the smugglers' cave.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Bunter Drops In!

"OOOOGH!" gasped Billy Bunter.

He fancied that he must be dreaming.

Certainly he was not asleep! Bunter was a good hand at sleeping, and always prepared to fill up a few odd minutes with a nap; but even the fat Owl of the Remove was not likely to nod off in that dark, dismal, dank corner of the old house of Polpelly.

It was dark—it was cold—it was dismal! And as Bunter crouched there, uncomfortable thoughts of the phantom of Polpelly came into his fat mind.

Bunter was not afraid of ghosts in the day-time; but there was darkness round him now. At the end of the windowless passage, closed by the shut door, it was almost as dark as night.

But he did not dare venture out till he was sure Smithy was gone. In point of fact, Smithy had been gone half an hour; but the fat Owl was unaware of it, and every moment he expected to hear footsteps of the vengeful Bounder in search of him.

He was debating in his mind whether to take the risk of venturing forth, when suddenly the amazing thing happened that made him wonder whether he was dreaming.

The great flagstone on which he stood suddenly moved.

Huge flagstones floored that old stone passage; as solid, seemingly, as the ancient walls of Polpelly, which had withstood the gales and storms of long centuries.

Yet there came a sudden jerk of the flat stone under Bunter, and it sank beneath him.

He gave a startled, horrified gasp.

His fat brain swam with amazement. Before he could realise what was happening the stone had sunk a yard



As Vernon-Smith reached the steps, Billy Bunter let fly with the snowball. Whiz! Plop! The snowball smashed on the back of the Bounder's head, and he stumbled forward, slipped on the top step, and shot downwards, his arms and legs thrashing wildly as he went. "He, he, he!" came from the window that framed Billy Bunter's fat face. "Serve the beast right! He, he, he!"

or more, and he stood in an oblong orifice, with the other flagstones like a wall round him.

He goggled in petrified astonishment.

The rest of the flagged floor was intact—solid as ever. But that huge stone at the end of the passage was sinking under Bunter, apparently into the depths of the earth as if it had no support below.

Bunter made a frantic clutch at the surrounding floor to hold on and drag himself out.

But his fingers slipped on the edges as the stone under him sank rapidly deeper.

In a second or two the level of the passage floor was over his head. He squatted on the sinking stone, almost beamed with amazement and terror. Sinking rapidly, the solid mass of stone descended to the depth of six feet, and then, with a jerk, stopped.

Bunter, hunched on it, almost gab-

bling with terror, blinked round him through his big spectacles.

Solid earth, faced with stone, was round him, save in one spot, where there was an opening. A light flickered there in the dense darkness.

Too terrified to move or to make a sound, Bunter squatted and blinked. It dawned on his fat mind that the whole earth was not collapsing under him. There was human agency in the sinking of the stone from the passage floor.

A man could have reached up and pulled himself out of the pit. But Billy Bunter could not have reached the edge above if he had stood on tip-toe—even if he could then have pulled up his weight.

He squatted and blinked, his fat heart thumping with terror. Cut in the stone-faced earth on one side was a narrow low doorway.

Obviously it communicated with a
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subterranean passage, and the sinking stone was a secret way into the mansion above.

Bunter tried to suppress his breathing.

In the darkness beyond the little doorway flickered a light; but he could see no one, and he hoped that he could not be seen.

Someone was there, for a murmur of voices came to his ears; and the light, too, was a proof of it. The Owl of the Remove trembled in every fat limb.

Who were those hidden prowlers in the dark secret den under the ancient house of Polpelly? The Italians who had attempted to kidnap the Bounder—Count Zero and his man Beppo?

Who else could it be? No doubt that secret way had been used by the Polpelly smugglers in the old days; but smuggling days were over.

Whoever they were there was danger for Bunter, if they found that he had, by that extraordinary chance, discovered the secret. Likely enough they knew that the Greyfriars party had gone down the coomb to the boat, leaving only deaf old Dan'l in the house. Even if they knew that Bunter had been left behind, they certainly would not have expected him to be on the last flagstone in the dark old passage.

Somebody was going up into the house now that it was deserted. Bunter realised that. If he saw Bunter there—

He could not fail to see him if he came with a light. That was a certainty.

Bunter dragged himself to his feet.

He cast a longing blink upward. But the passago floor was hopelessly out of his reach. Unless he was to remain where he was the little doorway was the only exit. But that way lay the unknown enemy.

He blinked through it. The light came from a lantern, and Bunter made out the thick-set, bull-necked man who was holding it. He remembered that it was a thick-set, bull-necked man whom the Greyfriars fellows had spotted and nearly caught in the boat-house tampering with the boat. It was the same man, evidently—one of the hidden enemies who lurked about the old house of Polpelly.

He was speaking to another man farther on whom Bunter could not see. The murmur of his voice reached the fat junior, but Bunter could not distinguish any of the words, which were in some foreign tongue. His back was to Bunter as he spoke.

For the moment Bunter was unseen, unsuspected. Obviously it had not occurred to either of the men that the sinking stone, in descending, had brought down a passenger with it.

Almost paralysed with terror as he was, the fat Owl realised only too clearly that his only chance—a slim one, too—was to dodge away, if he could, before either of the men approached the sunken stone.

Trembling, as if with the ague, Bunter stepped through the narrow doorway—so low that even Bunter had to duck his head.

If the bull-necked man turned and flashed the light of the lantern on him he was done for. But the man did not turn.

He was not more than a dozen feet from Bunter. From the lower level of his head Bunter knew that there must be steps down. His fat brain was working at uncommon pressure.

Hardly breathing, stealthy as a cat

after cream, Bunter groped in the blackness, and felt the steps.

He gave the back of the man's head and the lantern an agonised blink. But the head did not turn; the man was still speaking in that foreign tongue of which Bunter did not understand a word.

Was there a corner into which he could squeeze? If there was he had a chance.

Later, he would get out somehow. There must be some sort of a way out. At the moment the urgent need was to avoid discovery. Life itself might be at stake in such desperate hands.

There were three steps down. They landed Bunter in the tunnel-like passage in which the man with the lantern stood. His fat hand, groping on the wall, felt an opening.

At the foot of the steps another passage branched off. Breathing thankfulness Billy Bunter stepped into it. It was easy enough to crouch there, out of sight, till those villains were gone.

Bunter took one step, then another, and then another, and then—A gasping gurgle of horror broke from him as he felt himself shooting downwards. As he went he heard a startled voice:

"Che cosa e'?"

"Niente!" came the bull-necked man's voice. "Nessuno!"

If Bunter had understood the Italian language, he would have known that the unscen man had exclaimed: "What's that?" And that the man with the lantern had answered: "Nothing; nobody."

But Bunter, though he heard, would not have heeded even had he been able to understand. He was falling—falling into deep darkness; and there was a sudden splash as he dropped into water.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Awful for Bunter!

"GURRRGGH!"

Bunter gurgled horribly. He shot downward through icy water. He touched bottom and shot up again. Instinctively—for his fat wits were utterly scattered, and he did not know what he was doing—he struck out, swimming.

Bunter could swim—after a fashion. Every Greyfriars fellow had to learn to swim. Bunter was a "funk." He would never have learned to swim had he been able to avoid it. Certainly he was the rottenest swimmer at Greyfriars. Still, he could keep himself afloat in calm water. And at the present moment he had reason to be thankful to the "beasts" who had made him learn, against his own lordly will and pleasure.

He swam.

He was in dense darkness. Blackness and icy water surrounded him; but he kept afloat, and his thrashing hands came in contact with rock. He grabbed and held.

He could see nothing. But the rock he hung to was above the level of the water. Summoning all his energy he clambered on it, dragging himself from the icy water, drenched and dripping, shivering and gurgling.

"Urrrrgh!" gurgled Bunter.

He squatted on the rock, gasping for breath. He was out of the water, at all events.

He blinked upward. There was only impenetrable darkness above. He blinked round him. Black darkness!

He groped in his pocket. Since the

night when the phantom of Polpelly had appeared to the Christmas party, Bunter had considered it judicious to provide himself with an electric torch so that he would never risk being left in the dark. So he had annexed one belonging to Frank Nugent. He groped for it, got it out, and flashed on the light.

He shuddered at what he saw.

How deep down he was he had not the faintest idea. But he knew that the water had saved him from a very unpleasant crash.

As it was he was not hurt; only drenched to the skin, and frightened out of his fat wits.

He stood on a rocky bank by the swirling dark water.

The water flowed through a natural tunnel in the rock—one of the unending caverns that honeycombed all Polpelly. Only a little above the water level was the shelf on which Bunter stood, backed by almost perpendicular rock that rose to a height far out of his range of vision.

But that rocky shelf seemed to extend all along the edge of the water, and Bunter could only hope that it led to somewhere out of this awful place.

Holding up the light, the fat Owl picked his way along the rocky path, shivering as he went.

Suddenly he became aware that the water was washing over his feet.

The path was not descending; it was rather rising a little. Yet the water now invaded the rocky bank.

Bunter blinked at it through his wet spectacles, in horror and amazement. But it dawned on his mind that that subterranean channel must be connected with the sea, and he had heard the juniors say, before they went out, that the tide was coming in.

It was the rising tide that was deepening the water in the black tunnel through the mass of rock below Polpelly House.

Bunter gave a squeak of terror as he realised it. If the rising tide cornered him in that den of darkness and death—

He hurried on with chattering teeth.

Was there no outlet? Was he going to be drowned like a rat in a trap? The water rose and rose; it washed round his fat ankles, and washed against the wall of rock on his left hand. It was soon washing round his podgy knees.

The electric torch almost fell from his shaking, fat hand. But he clutched it desperately and hurried on.

Suddenly—so suddenly that it made him jump—the wall of rock along which he groped disappeared. He was in open space.

He lifted the torch and cast the light round him.

He stood in an immense cave, the water washing round his legs.

The light glimmered eerily on the dark, threatening swirl.

He plunged on. Billy Bunter was not bright. But his fat intellect was exerting all its powers now—such as they were. The push of the flowing water came from the direction of the sea, and it was in the other direction that safety lay.

Innumerable fissures, tunnels, and clefts opened into the great cavern. Some of them were flooded; others, at a higher level, high and dry.

Bunter plugged and splashed on, and had the comfort at last of finding that the water dropped away from him—which meant that he was on rising ground, and getting out of reach of the tide.

At last—at long last—he reached a

stretch of sand, out of reach of the lapping water.

Exhausted by his efforts, he sank down on the sand, gasping for breath and perspiring in spite of the cold.

"Oh lor'!" gasped Bunter. "Oh crikey! Beasts! Oh lor'! How am I going to get out of this? Oh crumbs!"

Having rested, the fat Owl picked himself up at last. The tide was still coming in, and he had to go farther up the slope of sand.

He was safe from the tide, but where was he, and what was he going to do? He had long ago lost sight of the tunnel by which he had entered the cave. It was one of two or three dozen, all similar in the gloom.

But it was useless to go back, had it been possible; there was no escape by way of Polpolly House. Was there any other escape?

voice, rumbling through the vast hollow of the cavern. They had seen his light, and seen him shut it off.

What were they going to do if they got him? The whirl and swirl of the water in the darkness seemed to answer that question. He heard sounds—voices—the light flashed closer.

In desperation Bunter ran up the sandy floor of the cavern in the dark, careless of where he was going or what lay ahead of him, so long as he got away! In utter terror he heard the sound of footsteps in pursuit.

His foot caught in a crevice in the dark, and he stumbled and fell, with a gasping squeak. Too exhausted to make further effort, the hapless Owl lay, almost fainting with terror, as footsteps came nearer in the hollow, echoing cavern.

that dark stream, in boats laden with contraband goods, from some vessel that had slipped into the cove under cover of night. Now the splash of oars woke the echoes again, repeating cerily in the hollows of the rock.

John Redwing sat very silent at the tiller. His bronzed face was clouded. The thought of the phantom of Polpolly was in his mind—and the sailorman was not quite free of superstition.

The same thought was in the minds of the juniors. No one would have been surprised at any moment to see an eerie figure looming in the gloom, in the gleam of the lantern slung to the masthead.

Herbert Vernon-Smith, whose mind was as hard and practical as that of his father, the millionaire financier, scouted the idea of the superstition with scorn. The Famous Five and Tom agreed, so



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Billy Bunter groaned.

This was the result of those beasts going off and leaving him! Really, it was the result of his snowballing the Bounder and giving him a rough tumble down Polpolly steps. But it never occurred to Billy Bunter that any of the blame ought to come to his address.

"Beasts!" he groaned.

Suddenly he gave a jump! A light flickered and gleamed in the darkness of the great cave.

"Oh crikey!" gasped Bunter.

He stood and stared at the winking light in utter terror. It was approaching him.

In those dismal depths, far below Polpolly, he had supposed that he was safe, at least, from the men in the secret passage. Now it rushed into his mind that they were after him.

He trembled from head to foot! Remembering that his own light could be seen, he shut the torch off hastily. It seemed to him that he heard a calling

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Mystery of the Cave!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. peered round them, in the shadowy gloom, as the boat pulled up the flooded cave on the following tide.

Immense, infinite as it seemed in the gloom, the Black Rock Cave stretched in darkness. The spot of daylight at the mouth of the cavern had disappeared. The juniors seemed to be in a world of their own—of dark, rugged rock and dark, swirling water.

Vast rugged walls of rock shut them in, arching overhead out of sight; walls that were split with endless cracks and crevices and smaller caves, some flooded by the tide, others heaped with sand and seaweed left there by the waters.

Even Bob Cherry's cheery, ruddy face was a little grave in the silence and gloom of the great cavern. A hundred years, probably, had passed since the last of the old smugglers had pulled up

far as that went. Yet the Bounder's practical mind had been unable to find any explanation of the terrible vision that had appeared in the old house.

Unless it was the haunting spirit of the old sea-captain squire of Polpolly, the grim old skipper of Elizabeth's reign whose portrait hung in the hall, it was hard to explain how it had come and how it had gone.

Some days had passed since that terrible vision had appeared in the old house, and the Greyfriars fellows had watched for a reappearance in vain.

But, whether it was a phantom or a fake, they did not believe that they had seen the last of it.

Either it was the ghost of the old Elizabethan sea-captain, or it was some cunning trickster seeking to scare them away; and, in either case, they did not believe that the Christmas holidays would pass without another visitation.

They had hunted and hunted for secret passages in the old mansion, and

found none. And if it was Count Zero playing a ghostly part, how could the man from Italy know the secrets of the house, which a prolonged search failed to reveal to its occupants? So far as they knew, Count Zero had never entered the house, where his ancestor had been a prisoner in the reign of Queen Bess.

The boat bumped on shelving sand. They had reached the end of the water, and beyond, a sandy floor sloped upward, lapped by the creeping tide.

They pushed the boat to a mass of rock, where they could step ashore with dry feet, and moored it. Then they clambered over the rock, and tramped on the shelving sand.

Heaped in strange shapes by the tides, the sand lay thick, with masses of seaweed and mouldy old driftwood lying here and there. The light from the boat's mast glimmered some distance, and the Greyfriars juniors peered about them with curious eyes.

"Lots of time to explore the place before the tide turns!" said Vernon-Smith. "If there's any truth in the old tale of the smugglers, there's some way from this cavern up to Polpelly House."

"It will want some finding!" remarked Nugent.

"No sign of the jolly old galleon, or the giddy doubloons!" said Bob, with a faint grin.

"Fathead!" grunted Smithy. "The San Pietro must have broken up, and gone to driftwood, centuries ago. The chests of doubloons are gone for good, unless they were got ashore from the wreck."

"According to the giddy legend, the ghost of the old sea-captain is still mooching after them!" grinned Bob. "If the old squire got them ashore, his ghost would know where to lay phantom fingers on them—what?"

"Oh, rot!" growled Smithy. "Whether the doubloons are really in existence or not, it's absolutely certain that Count Zero believes that they are. His ancestor commanded the galleon, and was a prisoner, waiting for ransom, at Polpelly House, for years. He was ransomed at last, and got home—and, I tell you, he left some document as a tip to his family to get after those doubloons at a later date—"

"They've left it jolly late!" said Bob. "It's quite a long time since the Spanish Armada! Before my time!"

"Ass! The tip may have got lost—or the Zero tribe mayn't have felt inclined for the adventure—"

"Sounds a bit thin!" remarked Johnny Bull. "If I had a tip to thirty thousand golden doubloons, I should be after them pretty quick!"

"You're Yorkshire, not Italy!" grunted the Bounder. "I dare say generations of the Zero gang spent their time dancing and fiddling! Italians haven't got a lot of 'go' in them."

"Hear, hear!" said Bob.

"What do you think that blighter wanted Polpelly for?" demanded the Bounder. "Think he liked the idea of it as a residence—after Italy?"

"Oh, my hat! Not likely!"

"But he wanted it, to the extent of offering my father twice what he paid for it years ago. To the extent of kidnapping me, to force my father to sell, by threatening my life. Do you think he's come over from Italy to do all that for amusement?"

"Um! No!" said Bob. "But—well, I'd like to see the giddy doubloons! If they were got ashore from the wrecked galleon, this cave is as

likely a place as any! Lead on, old man—we'll all fill our pockets if we spot 'em! And if we wake up the ghost—"

"Oh! Look!" gasped Frank Nugent.

He grabbed Bob by the arm, interrupting him.

"What?"

"A light—up the cavern!"

"Oh!" gasped Bob.

All eyes fixed on the light that gleamed from black darkness far up the immense cavern. It seemed to wink like a glittering eye from the black distance. Even as they stared, it went out.

They heard John Redwing draw a deep, hard breath. There was a flicker of pallor in the sailorman's bronzed face.

Vernon-Smith's eyes gleamed.

"There's somebody in the cavern!" he said. "I tell you men, whoever is playing tricks at Polpelly knows the secrets of the place—whether he's that spaghetti blighter or not. Whoever he is, we're getting after him! Follow me!"

"Stop!" breathed John Redwing. "It's not of this earth, sir!"

That remark from any of the juniors would have drawn an outburst of mocking scorn from the Bounder. But he never failed to treat Tom's father with respect.

"I think it's a trick, Mr. Redwing," said Smithy. "But, trick or not, ghost or not, I'm going after it. You fellows can come or not if you like—I'm going!"

And, with his electric torch in his left hand, a thick oaken cudgel gripped in his right, the Bounder ran up the sloping sand.

Harry Wharton & Co. followed him at once. There was something eerie and unnerving in that flicker of light from the desolate darkness of the lonely cavern.

But they were not going to let the Bounder face it alone, whatever it was. Tom Redwing followed them, and John followed more slowly.

Blackness lay before them, pierced by the bright beam from the Bounder's torch. Suddenly Vernon-Smith flashed the light on the sandy floor and gave a cry of exultation.

"Look!"

"Footprints!" exclaimed Wharton.

"Does that look like a ghost?" grinned the Bounder. "Didn't I tell you it was all trickery! Do phantoms leave footprints?"

"Douse my deadlights!" gasped John, staring blankly at the deep and distinct track in the sand.

Obviously, they were the tracks of a human being. And Harry Wharton, bending to examine them, uttered an excited exclamation. His knowledge of scouting came in useful now.

"He's running!" exclaimed Wharton.

"How do you know that, sir?" asked John.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Scoutcraft, Mr. Redwing! Look—the toes are pressed in deeper than the heels—you can see it in all the tracks! A man doesn't walk on his toes, but he runs on them."

"Come on!" breathed the Bounder. "We'll get him!"

He ran on, flashing the light ahead. Fast at his heels came the rest of the juniors, with eager faces.

"Hark!" muttered Bob.

There was a sound of a heavy fall in advance. Evidently they were close behind the runner—and he had tripped in the dark and fallen.

"We've got him now!" said Smithy, between his teeth.

He tore on.

The light gleamed on a sprawling, gasping form. Up went the Bounder's cudgel, ready for a blow. There was a yell from Bob Cherry.

"Hold on, Smithy! It's Bunter!"

"B-b-b-Bunter!" stuttered the Bounder. His arm fell to his side. "Bunter!"

"The esteemed and absurd Bunter!"

"Great pip!"

"How the dooce—"

"What the thump—"

They had run down the mysterious prowler of Black Rock Cave. They gathered round him as he sprawled, staring at him in blank and utter amazement. They had got him—and he was Billy Bunter!

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Only Bunter!

BILLY BUNTER sat up.

The Bounder's torch gleamed on his big spectacles as he blinked round in dire terror.

"Ow! Keep off!" howled Bunter. "It wasn't me! I won't tell anybody! I never saw either of you, and I won't mention it! Help! Mercy! Rescue! Oh, help!"

"Bunter!" roared Bob.

"He's potty with funk!" said the Bounder. "But how in the name of all that's fatheaded did he get here?"

"Help! Ow! Help! Keep off!" yelled Bunter.

He was too utterly terrified to realise that the figures that surrounded him were those of the Greyfriars fellows.

He had fancied that it was foes pursuing him. Now he fancied that he was in enemy hands. He howled wildly for help and mercy.

"Bunter, old chap!" said Tom Redwing gently.

"You shivering funk—" shouted Smithy.

"Bunter, you fat duffer—" exclaimed Bob Cherry.

"It's us, Bunter!" said Harry.

"Our esteemed and ridiculous selves, my fat, funky Bunter!"

The familiar voices of the Remove fellows seemed to penetrate the mists of terror. Bunter blinked—and blinked again—and recognised familiar faces in the light.

He stared blankly, as surprised to see the Greyfriars fellows there as they were to see him!

"Oh! You!" he gasped. "I say, can you see them?"

"Who?" gasped Nugent.

"Those villains—they're after me! I saw their light, and ran for it, and they chased me—"

"You blithering owl!" hissed the Bounder. "It was us chasing you!"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. "I say, you fellows, ain't they here? I thought they were after me! Oh dear!"

Wharton and Bob gave the fat Owl helping hands, and he tottered to his feet. He blinked round into the surrounding shadows, with fearful eyes.

"Sure they ain't here?" he asked.

"Nobody here but us!" growled Johnny Bull.

"I say, you fellows, I'm jolly glad to see you!" groaned Bunter. "Did you fall down into this awful place, like I did?"

"Fall down!" repeated Wharton blankly. "We came in the boat! You knew we were going up Black Rock Cave in a boat, fathead!"



"Look!" said Vernon-Smith, between his teeth. "The trickster! He's tripped in the dark and fallen. We've got him now!" The light gleamed on a sprawling, gasping form. Up went the Bounder's cudgel, ready for a blow. "Hold on, Smithy!" yelled Bob Cherry, suddenly. "It's Bunter!" "B-b-b-Bunter!" stuttered Vernon-Smith. "Bunter!"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. "Is this Black Rock Cave, then?"

"Did you really think it was the Great Cave of Kentucky?" asked Bob. "Oh, really, Cherry! Oh dear! I—I understand now!" gasped Bunter.

"Fancy Bunter understanding anything!" remarked Johnny Bull. "Wonders will never cease!"

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter pulled himself together. He realised that his danger had not been so terrific as he had supposed. Nobody was after him; and at low tide it would have been possible to walk out of Black Rock Cave, and walk back to Polpelly, along the cove and up the coomb. Bunter, had he only known it, only had to wait for the tide to turn.

"I—I see now!" he gasped. "Oh lor'! I say, you fellows, I've been murdered—"

"Oh crikey!"

"I mean, nearly murdered! At least, I should have been if they'd got hold of me! All that beast Smithy's fault. I shouldn't have been there at all but for that beast Smithy—"

"That reminds me that I owe you a kicking!" grunted the Bounder.

"Beast!"

"But how did you get here?" roared Bob Cherry. "We took you for a giddy ghost, or else a spaghetti sportsman; and it turns out to be only you! You're the fellow to drop in when least expected, I know, but how the dickens did you drop in here?"

All the juniors were eager to hear. Bunter had been left in Polpelly House—hiding in some obscure corner from the wrath of the Bounder! Now he was here, in Black Rock Cave! It was a proof of the old legend, that

there was communication between the mansion and the smugglers' cove.

In gasping tones the fat junior told of what had happened to him. The juniors listened in amazement.

Bunter was too scared and unnerved to indulge in any of his usual fanciful trimmings to the tale. He told them exactly what had happened. Probably for the first time in his fat life, the Owl of the Remove told a plain, unvarnished tale!

The Bounder's eyes were glittering.

"What did I tell you?" he said, when Bunter was finished. "Mr. Redwing, wasn't it in that very passage that you saw the spectre disappear, the night before we got to Polpelly?"

"Ay, ay!" muttered John.

"And now Bunter's found a secret way out of it!" grinned the Bounder. "That spectre didn't vanish through the solid stone, Mr. Redwing! He went down on the sinking stone in the floor, just as Bunter did!"

John Redwing nodded slowly.

"And we saw it vanish, in the old oak wardrobe in the bed-room," said Vernon-Smith. "Some trick of a moving stone behind it, of course!"

"Shouldn't wonder!" assented Bob.

"I've kept that old wardrobe safely locked, ever since," added the Bounder, "so that way couldn't be used again! But they had the sinking stone in the passage—just as easy! I dare say there are other ways, too!"

The juniors nodded assent. It certainly looked as if the Bounder was right. The revelation of the sinking stone threw an entirely new light on the mystery of Polpelly. Was it, after all, a cunning trickster who had played ghost, and groaned behind the old wainscot? It began to look like it.

"And those sportsmen you saw underground, Bunter," went on the Bounder. "What were they like?"

"I only saw one of them," quavered Bunter. "I think he was the man you found at the boathouse the other day—a bull-necked beast, short and stocky—"

"You heard them speaking? What did they say?"

"How should I know?" grunted the fat Owl.

"You blithering idiot! I suppose you know what they said, if you heard them talking."

"Well, you see, they were talking in German."

"German?" exclaimed Smithy.

"Some foreign language, anyhow," said Bunter. "If it wasn't German it was something else."

"Go hon!" said Bob, with deep sarcasm. "Sure of that, Bunter?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Was it Italian?" asked the Bounder eagerly.

"How should I know?" grunted Bunter. "We don't learn Italian at Greyfriars, do we?"

"Didn't you catch a single word, you howling ass, that a fellow might spot the language by?" snapped the Bounder.

"Oh, yes; I heard one beast yapping out something as I fell. It was ness-ness-ness-something-or-other."

"Ness?" repeated the Bounder. "Does anybody here know enough Italian to know a word beginning with ness?"

The Greyfriars fellows were at a loss. They had a classical education at Greyfriars, and could have held some

sort of conversation with ancient Romans, in the extremely unlikely event of meeting any. But of the language of modern Italy they knew nothing, or next to nothing.

Smithy gave an impatient grunt. He was certain—absolutely convinced—that the prowlers of Polpelly were Count Zero and his helpers. Could they have been identified as Italians it would have been as good as proof.

It was John Redwing who came to the rescue. John had no classical education; indeed, he had little of any kind. But he had knocked about the wide world and picked up smatterings of many tongues, in various ports. The old sailorman kept silent, waiting for the Greyfriars fellows to speak—in the innocence of his simple heart taking it for granted that Public school fellows would know better than a rough old sailorman. But as nobody answered the Bounder, John weighed in, diffidently.

"I think I can tell you that, sir. It's quite a common word to hear among Italians. I've heard it a main lot of times—at Leghorn, and Naples, and Genoa—"

"Good old John!" chuckled the Bounder. "I told you, Reddy, that this party would be a frost if your father didn't come! Go it, Mr. Redwing!"

"There's an Italian word, 'nessuno,' sir," said John, smiling.

"That was it!" said Bunter. "I dare say it means something. I don't know what, and jolly well don't want to!"

"Well, we want to, if you don't!" snapped the Bounder. "What does it mean, Mr. Redwing?"

"It means 'nobody,' sir."

"Well, that's rot!" said Bunter. Bunter, evidently, was recovering. "Why should a man say nobody? I

heard one of the beasts call out something I didn't catch, and the other one said that word. But he can't have said nobody. Why should he?"

"You blithering bletherer!" said Smithy. "Suppose they heard you—might have heard you grunt, for instance. You're always grunting."

"Oh really, Smithy—"

"Or might have heard you tumbling over. And suppose one of them called out 'Who's that?' the other might very likely have said 'Nobody,' not knowing that a fat and fooling fathead was there—"

"Beast!"

"That's very likely," said Harry Wharton. "Anyhow, we've got on to this: They were speaking Italian, and that means that they were Italians; and that, again, means that we're up against Count Zero!"

"Which I jolly well knew all along!" said Vernon-Smith.

"Let's get back to the boat!" said Tom Redwing.

Vernon-Smith stared at him.

"We're here to explore the cave, fathead! Finding that fooling freak here doesn't make any difference—"

"It does, Smithy!" said Tom quietly.

"Those dagoes didn't open the secret stone for nothing. They must have done it to enter the house. Most likely they'd watched us leave, and they were up to something there during our absence. As they never saw Bunter they would have carried on, and goodness only knows what may be happening at Polpelly now—"

The Bounder started.

"By gum! I never thought—"

Reddy's right, you men! Let's get back! We can come here another time. Something may have happened to old Dan'l—"

"Oh lor!" gasped Bunter.

The juniors stared at Bunter. It was so unlike him to concern his fat mind about others that they could not help staring.

"I—I say, they wouldn't hurt that old ship's cook!" exclaimed Bunter. "I say, I hope they haven't done anything to old Dan'l!"

"We all hope so," said Harry. "But I'm blessed if I expected to see you worrying about it, Bunter!"

"Oh, really, Wharton! Old Dan'l was cooking the dinner—"

"What?" yelled the juniors.

"What I mean is, if anything's happened to him we shan't get any dinner."

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Wharton.

Bunter's sudden concern for the old ship's cook was explained now.

"You fat villain!" roared Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"I owe you a kicking, Bunter," said the Bounder. "I was going to let you off, but now you've asked again, here goes!"

"Yaroooh!" roared Bunter as Smithy's foot landed. "Owl! Beast! I'll jolly well— Yarooop!"

"Come on!" said Harry; and the juniors trooped back down the cave to the boat, Billy Bunter rolling after them, spluttering with wrath and indignation, and very anxious—not about old Dan'l, but about dinner.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

What Happened to Dan'l?

"PULL, you fellows!"

It was not easy work, pulling out of Black Rock Cave, against the running tide.

John Redwing pulled a strong oar, and Tom, Wharton, and Bob Cherry backed him up, the bounder steering. But the boat made slow way, and more than once was in danger of being dashed on the rugged, rocky walls of the cavern.

The juniors had planned to explore the cave, and go out again on the tide when it turned; but that meant at least two hours to wait, and they did not want to waste minutes. In every mind was the thought of what might have happened at Polpelly House in their absence.

That the Italians had opened the sinking stone, to enter the mansion by the secret way, was certain. How they knew the secrets of Polpelly was a deep mystery to the juniors, but it was certain now, from what Bunter had told, that they knew. As they had seen nothing of Bunter, owing to his tumble into the underground channel, there was no doubt that they had carried on. Likely enough, they knew that the party had gone to the cave, and expected them to be absent the whole morning—as they would have been, but for the surprising and unexpected encounter with the Owl of the Remove.

Something, there could be little doubt, was going on at Polpelly House. If harm was intended to old Dan'l, he was at their mercy.

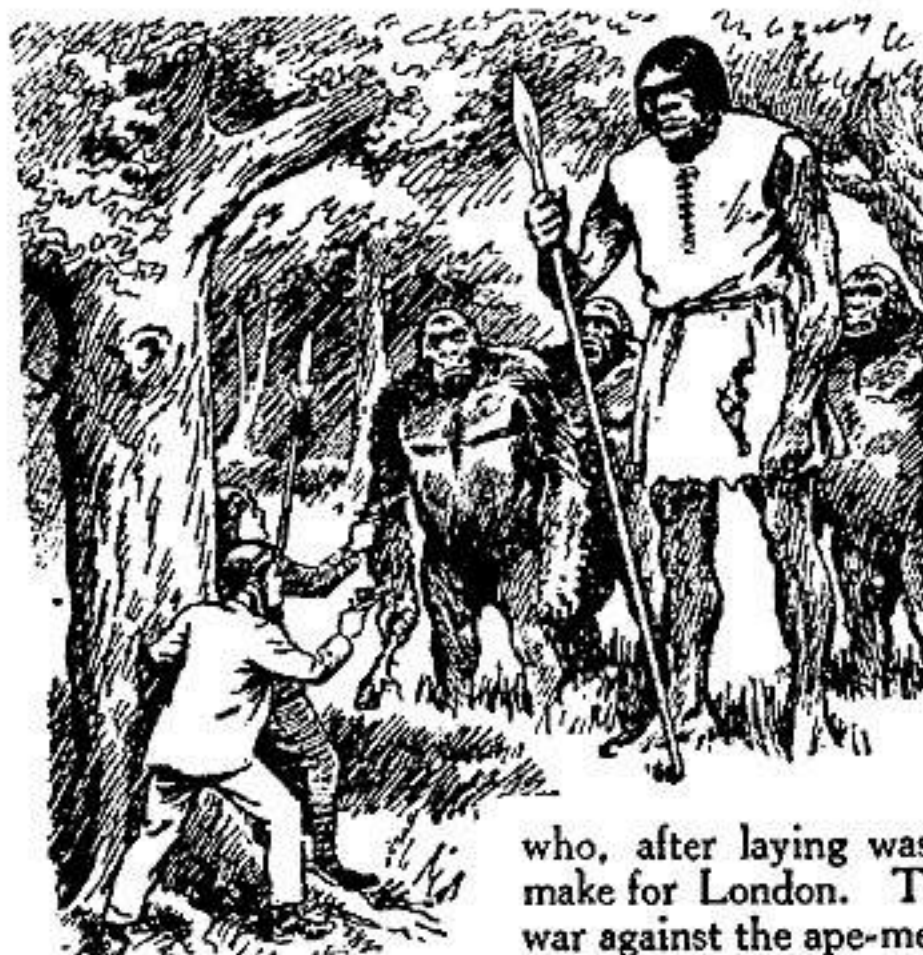
It seemed unlikely, yet what else they could intend, was harder to guess. At all events, something was "on," and all the party felt that the sooner they got back, the better.

Slowly, but surely, the boat made way against the tide, and the daylight was seen again at the mouth of the cavern.

"I say, you fellows, back up!" grunted Billy Bunter, "I'm cold! Kik-kik-kik-cold! Get a move on! Can't you row?"

Bunter sat huddled in the boat, wrapped in Bob Cherry's warm overcoat. He was wet and he was cold, and

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Bob had kindly handed over the coat—pulling at an oar kept Bob fairly warm.

"Like to take your turn rowing, Bunter?" asked Bob.

"Eh! No! I could row your head off—but I'm too k-k-cold! Hungry, too!" said Bunter dismally, "I never finished my brekker, owing to that beast Smithy! That's what he calls hospitality to a guest, I suppose."

"You're such a weird guest, old fat bean!" grinned Bob, "Guests don't bump their host on the back of the napper with a snowball in the best circles."

"I jolly well wish I'd cleared off, like I said I would!" grunted Bunter. "I stayed on to protect you fellows, and you go out and leave me to those villains—"

"Shut up, Bunter!" said the Bounder. "You talk too much, old fat man!"

"Yah! For goodness' sake put some beef into it, you fellows!" growled Bunter, "I'm hungry!"

The boat pulled on steadily to the mouth of the cave. Billy Bunter sat and shivered, and groused. He was cold—and he was hungry—especially hungry. And the other fellows, with the selfishness Bunter knew only too well, and expected of them, did not seem to think it mattered! They were actually concerned about a wooden-legged old ship's cook, and not about Billy Bunter at all.

Billy Bunter had started to leave Polpelly once; after seeing the terrifying phantom. He had lost his way and rolled home! As the ghost had not appeared again, Bunter had taken comfort, and decided to stay on. The alternative to Polpelly, was Bunter Court—and Bunter seemed to have no deep yearning for that magnificent abode. And it was not easy to get away from Polpelly, so long as the upper road was blocked with snow, and no vehicle could approach the place.

Outside the cavern at last, the boat glided into the open water of the cove, and John Redwing shook out the sail, and ran the boat along to the landing-place.

The Greyfriars fellows scrambled ashore, and leaving the boat tied up, started up the steep coomb towards Polpelly House.

Billy Bunter's little fat legs went like clockwork, keeping pace. For once, Bunter was willing to put on speed. He did not give a thought to old Dan'l, and what might have happened to him. But he gave many thoughts to the foodstuffs.

"I say, you fellows, don't leave me behind!" he hooted. "I say, if there was a decent chap here, he would give a fellow a hand."

"Oh, come on!" sighed Bob, and he grasped a fat arm, and helped the Owl of the Remove up the rugged way.

"Don't pinch my arm!" grunted Bunter.

"Like me to take hold of your neck?" "Beast!"

Bunter panted on. He was getting warm at all events. But he was as hungry as ever—in fact, hungrier.

Polpelly House came in sight at last. The juniors hurried up the steps from the coomb, and crossed the courtyard to the great doorway, which stood open, as the Bounder had left it.

The old oak hall presented its usual aspect, as they crowded in. There was no sign of anyone having been there. Sounds could be heard from along the passage that led to the ancient kitchen. It sounded as if old Dan'l was in his usual place, at his usual tasks.

They ran down the passage to the kitchen.

There stood the old ship's cook, at the table, busy with a goose for putting on the spit. He did not hear them coming, and did not turn his head. But it was plain that he was safe and sound.

"I say, you fellows," gasped Bunter, panting in after the rest, "I say, is it all right? I say—"

Vernon-Smith ran across to Daniel Heard, and tapped the deaf old man on the shoulder. That apprised Dan'l that they were there—but the result was surprising.

The old cook gave a sudden, alarmed howl, leaped away, clattering with his wooden leg on the stone floor, grasped a cleaver from the table, and whirled it aloft.

"Sheer off, you lubbers!" roared old Dan'l, "You landsharks, sheer off! Shiver my topsails, I'll—"

He broke off, as he saw the astounded schoolboys. With a sheepish grin, he lowered the cleaver, and threw it on the table.

"Skuse me, sir!" he said, "I reckoned it was them piratical swabs agin. They laid me aboard without me seeing them."

"Who's been here?" asked Smithy. It was clear from old Dan'l's words, that somebody had.

"Hey?"

"Have you seen anybody here?" roared the Bounder.

"Ay, ay, the goose is going on!" said Dan'l, "I wasn't looking for you back so airy, sir. The pie's done—"

"We ought to have brought a megaphone!" grinned Bob Cherry. "Anyhow, there seems to have been no harm done, even if somebody has been here."

"Somebody has—and they never came for nothing!" snapped the Bounder. He put his mouth close to the cook's head, and yelled:

"Tell us what has happened here."

"Oh, ay!" said old Dan'l, nodding to show that he heard, "Ay, ay, sir! I was plucking the goose, sir, that the young feller brought up through the snow from Pilverton—young feller of the name of Coffin—"

"Blow him, and his name! What has happened?" shrieked the Bounder.

"Ay, ay, sir, it's a good goose, and a plump one."

"Oh crikey!"

"But as I was saying, sir, I was plucking the goose, when they laid me aboard, from astern!" said the old sea-cook, "I never heered mun! Sudden they got me, and whips a sack over my figure-head—dousing the glim for me, sir. Down I goes, and one of them sits on me and keeps me down. I tell you, sir, I was on that floor ten minutes or more, and that swab sitting on my head in the sack!"

The juniors listened in utter wonder. What the sea-cook described looked like a "rag," which would not have been surprising in the Remove passage at Greyfriars. But it was amazing and unexpected in the haunted house of Polpelly.

Only Bunter was not listening.

Bunter's eyes, and spectacles, were fixed on the half-open door of the huge old oven. A pie within was revealed.

It was a large pie—a luscious pie—a lovely pie! It was nearly done—and it looked scrumptious. Bunter's mouth watered as he looked at that pie.

What had happened to old Dan'l did not interest Bunter. Nothing had happened to the big plum pie! But, if Bunter could contrive it, something was going to happen to it.

"You didn't see them, then?" asked the Bounder at last.

"Hey?"

Vernon-Smith howled the question into the ancient ear.

"No, sir, I never see mun, with the sack over my figure-head from astern." said old Dan'l. "Ten minutes, sir, I lay aground, with that sea-lawyer a-setting on my nut! I tell you, sir! Then they slips their cable! I gets the sack off, and takes an observation—they was gone! Slipped their cable and run out to sea, sir!"

"Well, my hat!" gasped Smithy.

"When you ran me alongside jest now, sir, I reckoned it was them swabs again!" explained old Dan'l. "Nasty joke to play on an honest man, sir. Some of them young fellers along to Pilverton, larking! I'll give 'em larks, if they run me aboard agin!"

Old Dan'l resumed dealing with the goose. The juniors stared at one another, quite blankly.

They had hurried back, fearing that something might have happened to the old sea-cook—expecting they knew not what, but sure that there had been some happening at the old house. And all that had happened, apparently, was a rough practical joke on deaf old Dan'l. It seemed more comic than tragic—but it was as mysterious and perplexing as anything that had happened at the old house of Polpelly.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

All the Pie for Bunter!

"I SAY, you fellows—"

"Oh, dry up, Bunter!"

"But look here—"

"Shut up!" howled the Bounder. Puzzled and perplexed and irritated, Smithy was in no mood for Bunter's improving conversation.

"Beast!" hooted Bunter. "Do listen to a chap! It's important!"

"Well, what is it, then?" snapped Vernon-Smith. It occurred to him that the fat Owl might have some forgotten detail to tell of his adventure that morning.

"That pie—" Bunter pointed to the oven.

"What?" shrieked Vernon-Smith.

"It's done!" said Bunter.

"D-d-d-done!" gasped the Bounder.

"Yes! Look here, as the pie's done, I'm going to have some! I told you I was hungry, though I dare say you've forgotten it!" said Bunter, with biting sarcasm. "Well, I know Dan'l's made that pie for dinner, after the goose, but there's some Christmas pudding left, and lots of mince pies, so I think—"

"Kill him, somebody!" said Bob Cherry.

"I'm going to have that pie!" hooted Bunter. "It's done to a turn! It won't spoil my dinner, if that's what you're thinking of—"

"Oh crikey!"

"I shall manage the goose all right when it comes along! Look here, Smithy, if you're going to be mean about a pie—"

Vernon-Smith made a step towards Bunter. The fat junior promptly dodged behind Bob Cherry.

The other fellows were laughing; but Smithy looked savagely angry. Billy Bunter, safe behind the sturdy Bob, blinked at him warily.

"I say, you keep off, you beast! Nice sort of chap you are to ask fellows to a party, and grudge them a plum pie! If you had come to Bunter Court, I'd have fed you on the fat of the land. Talk about a stingy beast—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Co.

Vernon-Smith's angry face broke into a grin.

"You fat, frowsy, loozling frump!" he said. "You can have the pie, you blithering, blethering, bloated bandersnatch! Stuff it till you burst, if you like! And shut up!"

Bunter blinked at him.

"Well, if you don't mind my having the pie, I don't see what you're making a fuss about!" he said. "But if you mean it, all right."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! I say, you fellows, you have some of the pie, too," said Bunter generously. "It's done—I suppose Dan'l was going to keep it warm for dinner and use the oven for the spuds—you needn't be afraid that it's not done! You have some, Smithy! After all, it's your pie."

"Shut up!" shrieked the Bounder.

Only Bunter was thinking of pie! The other fellows were thinking of the latest and strangest mystery of Polpelly. They looked about the extensive ancient kitchen in search of some clue to what the unseen intruders had wanted there. But there was no clue.

Old Dan'l believed that some practical jokers from Pilverton had played that strange prank on him. The Greyfriars fellows did not think so for a moment. From what had happened, it was clear enough to them that Count Zero and his confederate had entered the house by the sinking stone; and, taking the sea-cook by surprise, had carried out that strange attack.

Why, was a mystery! Putting a sack over his head and holding him down for ten minutes, looked as if they had some scheme to carry out which they did not want anyone to see. They had, in fact, blindfolded him long enough to do unseen, what they had come to do! But what was it? Something must have been done—they had not taken the trouble for nothing! But what? It made the juniors feel as if their heads were turning round as they tried to puzzle out that perplexing riddle.

"Avast there!" roared old Dan'l suddenly.

The sea-cook had spotted Billy Bunter, armed with a thick cloth, lifting the pie from the oven.

Bunter gave a squeak.

"I say, Smithy, tell that old ass I'm to have this pie? 'Tain't his pie, anyhow—the cheeky old ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Old Dan'l was stumping towards Bunter on his wooden leg, with the evident intention of rescuing that luscious plum pie! Vernon-Smith yelled to him, and the sea-cook grunted, and turned back to the goose.

"That there pie was for dinner," he grumbled. "I ain't baking no more pies, seeing I want the oven for vegetables! I made mun for dinner."

"I'd advise you to sack that cheeky old image, Smithy, if he wasn't such a good cook!" said Bunter. "I say, you fellows, carry this into the hall for me, will you? Take a plate and a spoon and a knife, and—Beasts!"

Regardless of Bunter and the plum pie, important as both of them were, the juniors left the kitchen. There was no trace of the handiwork of the strange visitors there, and they went farther afield to search.

Old Dan'l grunted discontentedly, with a baleful eye on Bunter, as he went on with his duties. Heedless of the old cook's discontent, Bunter lodged the pie on the table, and sorted out implements. As nobody seemed keen on carrying off his plunder for him, the fat Owl decided to deal with it on the spot.

He pulled a stool to the table, sat down, and carved the luscious pie-crust.

Within was a sea of rich juice and lovely plums, and an aromatic odour rose therefrom when the crust was cut.

Bunter's fat face beamed.

He forgot his awful adventure of the morning. He forgot that his clothes were wet; anyhow, they were drying fast in the heat of the huge kitchen fire. He forgot time and space, and everything else—everything but that scrumptious pie!

He took a large helping—very large! It vanished as if by magic! He took another—and it vanished as quickly! A third followed it on the downward path.

Then Bunter seemed tired of taking helpings! He fancied that he was equal to dealing with the whole pie! He was going to try, anyhow! Taking a large spoon, he tackled the pie in the dish, shipping his cargo in bulk, as it were.

Old Dan'l's discontented frown changed to a look of wonder. His look of wonder deepened to a look of awe. Dan'l had seen hungry seamen eat. But he had never seen anything like this! Billy Bunter's performance with that pie was really awe-inspiring.

Bunter did not finish the pie. Even Bunter had a limit, though a very wide one. But the amount of it that he parked left the dish with a rather vacant look.

He sat with a fat arm leaning on the table, blinking at Dan'l through his big spectacles. He seemed tired.

"Jolly good pie!" said Bunter.

He blinked—and blinked—and blinked! No doubt he needed rest after his exertions. But old Dan'l was surprised, and not at all pleased, to see him drop a fat head on a fat arm.

"Avast, there! Don't you go to sleep in my kitchen!" growled the sea-cook.

Snore!

With a snort, old Dan'l came round to him, grasped him by the shoulder, and gave him a shake.

"You ain't going to sleep in my kitchen!" he hooted.

Snore!

Bunter's head rolled over into the pie-dish! It rested there!

"Shiver my top-sails!" grunted the sea-cook, staring at Bunter. The fat Owl was fast asleep, and Dan'l snorted, and left him to it.

Meanwhile, the Greyfriars fellows were making a search of the house. Every room was visited; every passage was traversed. Not a sign was found of the intruders, or of what they had been doing there during the absence of the Christmas party.

More and more perplexed, they gave it up at last—some of them almost inclined to believe, after all, that it was some local practical joker who had "bagged" old Dan'l.

"That's utter rot!" snarled the irritated Bounder. "We know they came—that was how Bunter dropped through the floor. They came—and they didn't come for nothing! But—it beats me!"

"The beatfulness is terrific!" said Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

"Let's examine that stone," said Harry. "It may be possible to move it from above, now that we know it's there."

And the party gathered in the dim, dark passage, where Bunter had had so startling an experience a few hours ago; and two or three electric torches were turned on the grimy old flagstones.

That the last of the series of great, flat stones was movable, they knew now; but it was wedged in with the rest, and looked, and felt, as solid as the others. Bob Cherry stamped on it, but there was not the faintest motion under his feet.

The Bounder gave an angry grunt.

"If we hadn't found that fat foozler in the cave I should think he had dreamed the whole thing," he said; "but we know he didn't. That stone goes down when they release something underneath, but we can't shift it from above."

"Looks like a fixture, and no mistake," said Harry Wharton.

"We'll get at the rotters, if we have to drag up every flagstone in the floor!" said Vernon-Smith savagely. "But—"

He broke off. To shift the huge flags was a labour far beyond the powers of the schoolboys. It meant getting workmen to the spot with strong crowbars—and even then the task would be long and difficult.

"No use!" went on Smithy. "We could get police here, and workmen to shift the flags; but the birds would be flown, of course. They'd have plenty of time to get clear; they're certain to keep watch on anyone coming to the house. They've got a way in down there that we know nothing of, and they could get out the same way—either by the cave or another way—perhaps half a dozen ways."

"Not much doubt about that," agreed Bob.

"We'll get them yet!" snarled the Bounder. "We know who they are now, at any rate; and there can't be any further doubt what they're after: If we could only spot what it was they came up for while we were out—"

"That's a jolly old puzzle."

The juniors left the stone passage. Old Dan'l's voice could be heard calling that dinner was ready. They went to the ancient kitchen to lend a hand in carrying the dinner into the hall.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" ejaculated Bob Cherry at the sight of Bunter. "My only hat! Look!"

The juniors looked and burst into a laugh. Even the angry face of the Bounder melted into a grin at the sight of Billy Bunter fast asleep with his head resting in the piedish.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Drugged!

"A, ha, ha!"

"Bunter!"

"You fat chump!"

"Wake up, Bunter! Dinner!"

Bunter did not stir, he snored.

Old Dan'l snorted. He was clearly not pleased by Billy Bunter using his kitchen as a dormitory. But the fat Owl of the Remove snored on regardless.

Bob Cherry bent over the sleeping beauty and roared into a fat ear:

"DINNER!"

That word ought to have awakened Bunter. To his fat ears it was the sweetest word in the language; and even if the magic word-dinner had no effect on him, Bob's roar certainly ought to have startled him out of slumber. It might have awakened Rip van Winkle, or the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.

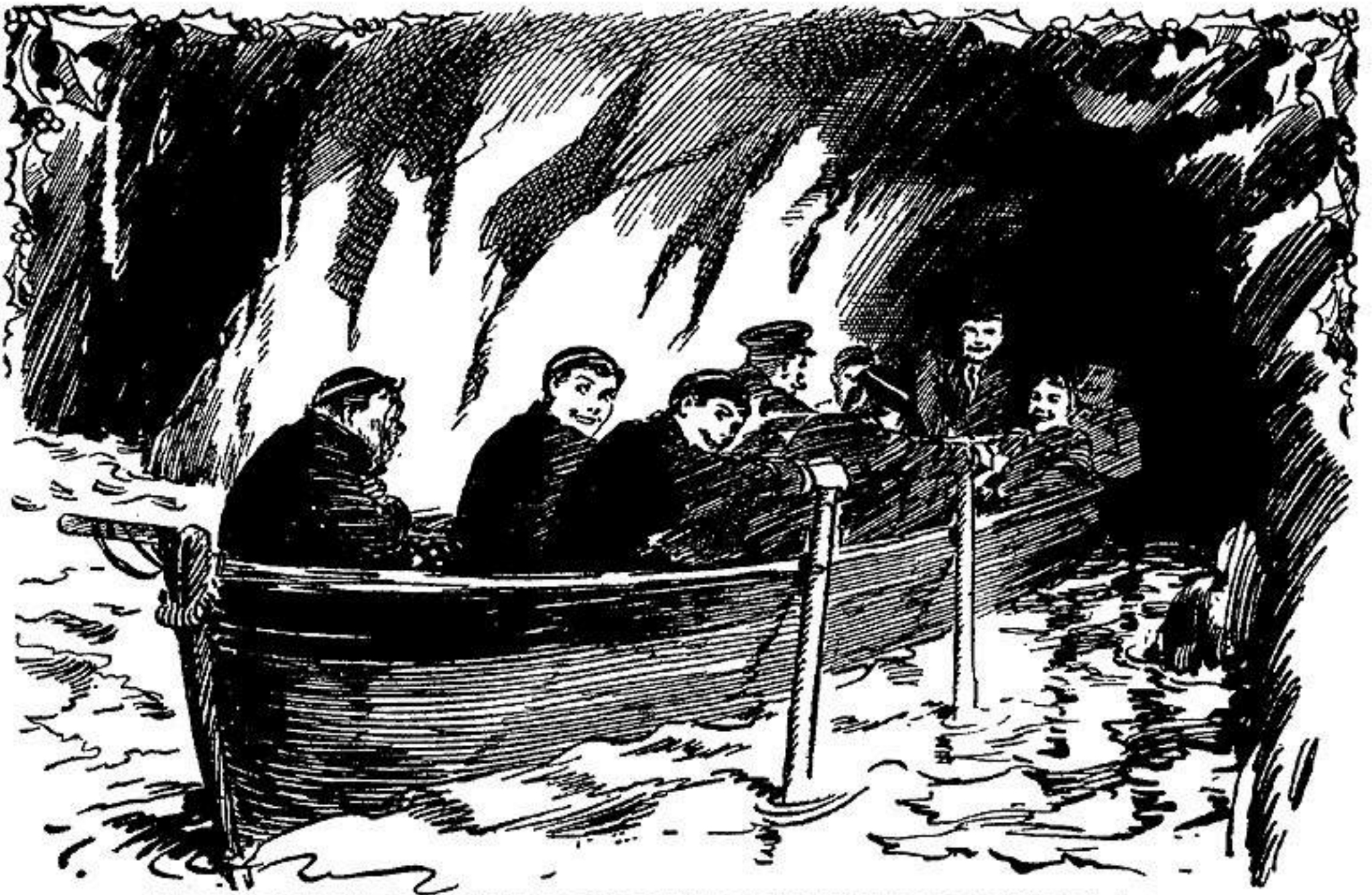
But it had no effect; Bunter snored on.

Bob grasped him by the shoulder and shook him. To the amazement of the juniors, Bunter still did not awaken.

His fat head and fat face came out of the piedish, both adorned with fragments of crust and dripping juice; rich juice dripped from his spectacles, but his eyes did not open.

"Wake up, you fat ass!" roared Bob, shaking him.

"He must be trying to pull our leg," said Harry Wharton in wonder. "He can't really be still asleep!"



"Buck up, you fellows!" grunted Bunter. "I'm cold! Kik-kik-kik-cold! Get a move on! Can't you row?" The fat junior sat huddled in the boat, wrapped in Bob Cherry's warm overcoat. "Like to take a turn, Bunter?" asked Bob. "Eh? No! I could row your head off—but I'm too k-k-cold!" said Bunter dismally.

Snore!
"Stick a pin in him!" suggested Vernon-Smith.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Johnny Bull produced a pin and touched Billy Bunter's fat shoulder. He had no intention of sticking it in, but if Bunter had been pretending to be asleep, from some extraordinary idea of a joke, the merest touch of the pin-point would have caused him to open his eyes wide; instead of which, however, Bunter went on snoring.

He sagged heavily, and would have fallen off the stool had not Bob held him. In utter wonder the juniors realised that he was fast asleep and could not be awakened.

"What the dooce is the matter with the fat fool?" exclaimed the Bounder. "He seems to have stuffed nearly a whole pie, but that couldn't make him sleep like that."

"The sleepfulness is terrific," remarked Hurren Janset Ram Singh.

"He must be ill," said Harry. "But he was all right when we left him here. Give him another shake, Bob."

Shake, shake, shake!

Snore!

"Well, this beats it!" said Frank Nugent. "I suppose there wasn't anything in that pie to send him to sleep. Dan'l hasn't been flavouring it with rum, I suppose."

"Oh, my hat! Blessed if it doesn't look like it!" ejaculated Bob. "Here, Dan'l, what did you put in that pie?"

"Done to a turn, sir!" said old Dan'l. "I tell 'ee, sir, it's as good a goose as ever I see. But there won't be no pie, seeing as that swab has wolfed it!"

"What did you put in the pie?" yelled the Bounder.

"Eh? The pie? Plums, sir, and sugar. There wasn't nothing the matter with that pie. Look how inun wolfed it!"

"Must have tasted nice, to judge by the amount Bunter parked!" grinned Bob. "What can be the matter with him?"

"Better shove him somewhere to sleep it off," said Harry.

They lifted Bunter from the stool. He hung a dead weight on their hands—and it was a tremendous weight—but with two fellows grasping each fat arm he was got out of the kitchen and along the passage to the hall.

There he was laid on a settee near the fire, and Bob placed a cushion under his head.

His eyes had not opened; he lay where he was placed without a movement, snoring stertorously. He lay there while the Greyfriars fellows sat down to dinner. John Redwing gave him perplexed looks.

"That ain't a natural sleep, gentlemen," said John at last. "The young lubber has taken something."

"Only pie," said Bob.

John shook his head.

"More to it than that, sir," he said slowly. "I've seen drugged seamen, shanghai'd at foreign ports. I don't know how it came about, sir, but that lad has been drugged."

"Drugged!" gasped the Bounder.

"Ay, ay, sir!" answered John with conviction.

"But old Dan'l—" exclaimed Bob. "My dear sir, old Dan'l made that pie for all of us. It only happened that that greedy bounder scoffed the lot. Old Dan'l wouldn't play such an idiotic trick on us."

"Not on your life, sir!" said John. "But—"

The Bounder gave a yell. He saw it now.

"That's why!" he roared.

"Why what—?"

"We wondered why they came up and bagged old Dan'l—blindfolded him in the kitchen! That was why!" Vernon-Smith pointed to the sleeping fat Owl. "If we'd followed up the goose with that pie we should all be in the same state now and at their mercy."

"Oh, great pip!"

The juniors jumped up from the table. They had finished the goose, and they were glad from the bottom of their hearts that there was no pie to follow. It was clear instantly what had happened; only the suggestion was needed to make it clear to every mind.

They looked at one another with startled faces.

"They mean to drug the lot of us!" said Harry Wharton in a low voice. "Easy enough to put a drug in a plum pie, mixing it with the juice. But for Bunter scoffing it—"

"We've found out now what they came for!" said the Bounder grimly.

"This is getting a bit thick!" muttered Johnny Bull. "Bunter looks as if he's booked for hours to come, and we—"

"We should have been booked, too," said Nugent. "Thank goodness Bunter scoffed the pie!"

"Yes, rather!"

The juniors gathered round Bunter, still snoring on the settee. He was deep in a sleep from which, it was evident, it would be a long time before he awakened. His extensive meal on that scrumptious pie had doubtless given him an extra dose of the drug.

"I—I suppose it's a harmless drug,"

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(Continued from page 13.)

faltered Nugent. "He looks all right, except that he can't wake up."

"He's all right," said Vernon-Smith. "Zero's game was to get us at his mercy—though goodness knows what would have happened next. The man's no murderer; I don't believe he's even a crook, though he's acting like one. He may fancy he has some claim on the doubloons, through old Marco Zero who commanded the galleon they went down in. He won't stick at much. But there's nothing the matter with Bunter, except that he's put to sleep."

"My esteemed ohums," murmured the Nabob of Bhanipur, "a wheezy idea occurs to my absurd and debilitated brain."

"Go it, Inky!" said Bob. "What have you got in your old black noddle now?"

"The execrable Zero intended all of us to take his noxious and ridiculous drug!" said Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh. "And he does not know that the esteemed fat Bunter scoffed the pie. Probably he will expect us all to be as senseless as the absurd Bunter this afternoon."

"Pretty certain," said Harry. "But what—"

"He will come up to carry out whatever his execrable intention may be," said Hurree Singh. "But we are very far from senseless, owing to the happy accident of Bunter scoffing the pie. Let us watch for him, and bag him when he comes up by the sinking stone."

Smithy's eyes glittered. "Good old Inky!" he said. "That's the game! The rotter will think we're all in the same state as Bunter! Why shouldn't he? Instead of that, we'll be rather wider awake—and on the watch!"

"Good egg!" The whole party jumped at the idea. It was a chance of getting to close quarters with the enemy.

There was no reason, so far as they could see, why Count Zero should not believe that his treacherous scheme had been a success. It was by the merest chance that it had miscarried. He would come!

The juniors lost no time in getting ready for the expected visit.

Each of them armed himself with a stout oaken cudgel. They posted themselves round the doorway which opened on the stone passage, at the farther end of which was the sinking stone.

Except for the outer door at the end, that passage had no other door. If the Italian came, he could only leave it by coming out into the hall. That, indeed, would be his object, as he would expect to find the drugged juniors insensible there.

The winter afternoon was misty and dusky; the old oak hall was already in shadow, save for the firelight. The fire was allowed to burn low, and the dusk in the long, lofty room deepened.

The juniors waited—impatiently, but

in silence. Once the Italian stepped out of the stone passage into the hall, he was in their hands. Seven sturdy juniors and the muscular sailorman were more than enough to deal with him; or with three or four, if it came to that. And they were more than ready to use their oaken cudgels if needed.

It was weary work waiting; but they waited, as the winter dusk deepened into dark. The old mansion was silent save for a sound or two from old Dan'l in the kitchen and a snore from Billy Bunter.

The minutes seemed endless—but they passed! An hour—two hours—glided by. Was the man coming?

There was no sound from the stone passage. If Zero was coming he could hardly delay much longer. He must have planned to come while his victims were insensible under the influence of the drug. Obviously, he could not have intended to give them time to recover from it.

But the darkness deepened, and he did not come.

A sound was heard at last, and it made the juniors start! But it came from the settee where Billy Bunter was stretched. It was a grunt!

Bunter was coming to his senses!

There was another grunt, and a movement as the fat Owl stirred. Then his voice was heard:

"I say, you fellows!"

Vernon-Smith gritted his teeth. He threw down his stick, struck a match, and lighted a candle.

"Chuck it!" he growled. "He's not coming! We've had our watch for nothing! He's spotted somehow that we've not taken the drug."

"I say, you fellows, wharrer you in the dark for?" squeaked Bunter. "I say, have I been asleep? I say, I'm hungry."

Bunter sat up and blinked round him as the juniors lighted more candles. Their feelings were deep. As Bunter had now recovered from the drug, it was clear that all would have recovered from it, had they taken it, and the enemy could not be coming now. He knew, somehow, that they had not taken it. That was the only explanation.

"That means," said Harry Wharton quietly, "that there's a spy-hole in these old oak walls somewhere, and the rotters are able to keep an eye on us. Zero knows we were waiting for him."

"The knowfulness is terrific," said Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh ruefully, "and the wheezy idea was a detestable frost."

"I say, you fellows—"

"Oh, shut up, Bunter!" yelled the Bounder.

"Beast! I'm hungry!"

Bunter rolled off the settee. He seemed none the worse for his long sleep. He had awakened hungry—fearfully hungry. He gave the juniors an indignant blink, and rolled away in search of foodstuffs.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

The Phantom Again!

KNOCK!

There was a general start in the old hall of Polpelly.

The hour was late.

Harry Wharton & Co. were thinking of bed. The Bounder, in a black and angry mood, was pacing restlessly up and down, his hands driven deep in his pockets, a deep line in his brow.

He was deeply exasperated by his sense of helplessness in dealing with invisible enemies. All the fellows had

a feeling of uneasiness, from the knowledge that a watching eye, from an unseen quarter, might be upon them at all moments. Only Billy Bunter was at ease. After a large supper, Bunter was stretched on the settee, nibbling at chocolates. In Bunter's fat mind there was room for only one idea at a time, and at the moment he was concentrated on chocolates!

The sudden knock at the door startled all the Christmas party. Even Bunter gave a jump, and forgot chocolates.

Vernon-Smith stopped in his pacing and swung round towards the door, staring.

"Who the dickens—" he grunted.

Knock!

It was a sharp and heavy knock!

Harry Wharton was standing before the portrait on the wall of the old Elizabethan sea captain, the Squire of Polpelly who had captured the Spanish galleon. It was in the likeness of that old seafaring squire that the phantom of Polpelly had appeared to the juniors. Wharton turned quickly from the picture.

Knock!

It came a third time.

"Better open the door!" said Harry.

"Somebody lost his way in the snow, I suppose," said Bob Cherry. "Look out for the wind when we get the door open. It's blowing great guns!"

Who was knocking at that late hour, unless it was some wayfarer, was hard to guess. The Bounder went across to the great door, and Wharton and Bob went with him.

There had once been an outer door to the stone porch outside, but it had long fallen into ruins. The wind beat on the oak door of the hall, piling up snowflakes. The wind from the Atlantic was roaring up the coomb, and snow was falling again, white flakes whirling in clouds.

The Bounder drew back the heavy iron bolt, and the door flew open under a gust of fierce wind. Outside, all was dense blackness, save for the glimmer of the snow.

The wind came in at the open doorway with a howl, and almost in a twinkling, the score or so of candles that burned in old-fashioned sconces were blown out. The log fire crackled in the wind, and shot up flame; but there was no other light in the great hall.

"Who—" exclaimed Harry Wharton, staring out into the darkness.

No one was there.

The juniors had naturally expected to see whoever it was that had knocked as soon as the door was open.

But the old stone porch was empty, save for the snowflakes whirling in on the wild wind.

They stared out into the bitter winter night.

"Nobody here!" said Bob.

Smithy set his teeth.

"Some more of the ghost trickery!" he muttered. "Oh!" He broke off with a gasp. "Look!"

Suddenly, from the darkness, a figure appeared. Only the uncertain, leaping firelight from within revealed it—a shadowy figure that seemed to merge into shadows.

In sea-boots, trunk hose, ruff, and cloak, and sword, it was the figure of the old sea-captain squire—the Phantom of Polpelly! Even to the features and the trim moustache and pointed beard, it was the old Elizabethan of the portrait over again.

The juniors, catching their breath, gazed at it spellbound.

The Bounder was the first to recover. With set teeth, he made a spring out

into the porch, grasping at the phantom figure.

But even as he grasped at it, it vanished into the blackness of the night. The Bounder, plunging after it, slipped in the snow and fell on his knees.

Tom Redwing caught him by the arm and dragged him up.

"Hold on, Smithy——"
"Come on!" hissed the Bounder. "Follow me!"

But his chum held him back. "You may be running into a trap, fathead!" exclaimed Tom. "Do you think you'll find him in this blackness unless he wants you to?"

The Bounder jerked his arm loose, but he did not follow the vanished figure into the wild night. It was almost too dark to see one's hand before one's face, and it was evidently useless to pursue the phantom.

He stepped back into the hall. The wind was blowing in in heavy gusts, scattering snow over the oaken planks of the floor.

"I say, you fellows, get that door shut!" squeaked Bunter.

Three or four of the juniors had to exert their strength on the great door to shut it against the fierce wind. But they got it shut at last, and shot the bolt.

They returned to the fireside, with set faces. The candles were lighted again.

Billy Bunter blinked at the juniors through his big spectacles.

"I say, you fellows, who was it?" he asked.

Vernon-Smith pointed to the ancient portrait on the wall. Billy Bunter blinked at it, and his fat hand, which was half-way to his mouth full of chocolates, stopped in transit.

"Oh lor!" he gasped. "The—the—the gig-gig-ghost!"

"Yes, the gig-gig-ghost!" mimicked Vernon-Smith.

"Oh crikey!"
"If a fellow could only get to close quarters with that sneaking trickster!" said the Bounder, between his teeth.

"Hark!" squeaked Bunter.

There was the sound of a groan. It echoed eerily through the old hall. John Redwing gave a start, and set his lips under his beard. Bunter gave a squeal of alarm.

The Bounder stared round savagely.

"Where did that come from?" he hissed.

"Behind the wainscot somewhere!" said Harry Wharton in a low voice.

"Hark! There it is again!"
Groan!

"I—I—I say, you fellows, I'm going to get out of this!" mumbled Bunter, through his chattering teeth. "I say, it makes a fellow's flesh creep! I—I say, suppose it comes again to-night, as it did before!"

"It won't!" snarled the Bounder. "It can't get into the room we sleep in now the old wardrobe's locked up. There's a secret way in behind that old wardrobe, as I'm jolly sure, though we can't find it. We shan't see it in that room again."

"I think you're right, Smithy," said Bob slowly. "But——"

Knock!

It was a knock at the door again, so sudden that it made the juniors start. But they did not think of opening the door this time.

"Let's get off to bed!" said Harry.

"I say, you fellows, I shan't sleep a wink!" groaned Bunter. "I jolly well wish I was miles from here!"

"So do I!" snapped the Bounder.

"Beast!"

The juniors took candles, and went

up the old stone staircase to the bedroom. Billy Bunter assured the other fellows that he wouldn't sleep a wink when he turned in. But in about five minutes, his snore was mingling with the howl of the winter wind.

Sleep was slower in coming to the others. But it came at last, and there was no alarm in the night; and it seemed that the Bounder was right. Now that the oaken doors of the ancient wardrobe were secured, the phantom of Polpelly could not appear in the sleeping-room—which was as good as a proof that the phantom was not a supernatural apparition, though its exact resemblance to the old sea-faring squire of Polpelly was a perplexing mystery.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Funk!

"I SAY, you fellows——"
"Push in another brekker, and shut up!" suggested Bob Cherry. "Beast!"
It was morning, bright and frosty.

Bunter, having eaten several breakfasts, one after another, was finished, and he did not adopt Bob's suggestion. He had no room to push in another breakfast, and he was not inclined to shut up.

"I say," went on the fat Owl, "I'm fed-up with this! We've got to get out of this rotten place! I can't find the way to Pilverton alone through this filthy snow! Who's coming with me?"

"Echo answers who!" remarked Johnny Bull.

"Look here," hooted Bunter, "I'm going—see?"

"So am I!" said Vernon-Smith unexpectedly. "And you fellows had better pack up and come, too!"

Harry Wharton & Co. stared blankly at Herbert Vernon-Smith. It was so utterly unlike the Bounder to accept defeat or to show the white feather that they could hardly believe their ears.

Tom Redwing was the most astonished of all, knowing Smithy's obstinate nature even better than the other fellows did.

(Continued on next page.)

GREYFRIARS INTERVIEWS

Our clever Greyfriars Rhymester, who knows what it is to burn the midnight oil, takes a real delight in interviewing a swot like MARK LINLEY, the Lancashire scholarship lad of the Remove.



(1)
Breaking up for Yule-time, going home to-day!
Holidays from school-time! No more work! Hooray!
Christmas in the offing, sparkles in our eyes,
Soon we shall be scoffing turkeys, cakes and pies!
Everybody's doing packing up, but me;
I go interviewing! What a jolly spree!
Every merry japer having lots of fun!
I have pen and paper—well, it must be done!

(2)
Where's that bounder Linley? "Seen Mark Linley, Todd?"
Peter answers thinly, "Yes, he's in the Quad!"
Off I go to jaw him, find he isn't there;
Skinner says he saw him on the box-room stair!
Asking everybody, back I go again;
Come across old Toddy, leave him with a pain!
Bump right into Bunter, leave him looking pale!
I'm a mighty hunter when I'm on the trail!

(4)
"Put that tripe away, ass!" I shout in alarm.
"Run away and play, ass!" Linley's very calm.
"Why don't you leave that in your desk?" I ask, and he
Replies: "I'm fond of Latin! I like it, don't you see?"
It is not a question of swotting for a prize,
There is no suggestion of trying for a rise!
I read this for pleasure; often do, you know!
When I've any leisure, I read Horace—so!

(3)
Up and down the stairway goes a merry throng.
If I get in their way, well, I'm not there long!
In the crowded box-room Mauly works apace!
Tries to find his socks room, in his packing case!
Linley isn't present; no, he's been and gone!
This is most unpleasant, but I struggle on.
Find him—I'm not rotting—find him in the Rag,
Swotting, really swotting, as he packs his bag!

(5)
Well, opinions differ; just as well they should!
I would read it if a fellow really could.
Fellows really liking Latin make me blink,
It's a very striking oddity, I think.
Still, that's Mark all over, he's a brilliant type!
Marky is in clover with the awful tripe,
Yet he's very sporting, good at work and play,
Sturdily supporting Greyfriars in the fray.



(6)
Yes, he's straight and decent, I may say "true blue!"
First in all the recent classic papers, too!
Now old Marky's going home to Lancashire,
Joyfully, well knowing he could go no higher.
Many things he told me, some which made me grin,
But the Ed. would scold me if I put them in.
Space is not extensive, I must call a halt:
Marky may be pensive, but he's worth his salt!

But John Redwing gave a nod of approval.

"I think you're wise, sir!" he said. "No good ever came of meddling in things not of this earth!"

The Bounder gave him a rather curious look. John was as brave as a lion, and would never dream of leaving Polpelly so long as the schoolboys remained there. But he had his share of a sailor's superstition, and the mysterious, unearthly phantom affected him much more than it did the Greyfriars fellows.

Billy Bunter grinned with satisfaction.

If all the fellows were going, Bunter would be able to go. Moreover, they would have to spend the remainder of the Christmas holidays somewhere, and Bunter would be able to stick on, and avoid the dire necessity of heading for Bunter Court when he left Polpelly.

"I say, Smithy, that's jolly sensible!" he exclaimed. "Of course, I'm not afraid of ghosts—"

"Not in the day-time!" remarked Bob.

"Oh, really, Cherry, but there's a limit!" said Bunter. "This is a rotten hole! I'd never have come if I'd known what it was like! The grub's good; I admit that—"

"Does anything else matter?" asked Johnny Bull sarcastically.

"Beast! I'm jolly well going!" said Bunter. "I'd ask the lot of you to Bunter Court, only the decorators—"

"Give us a rest, Bunter!" said Harry Wharton. "Look here, Smithy, are you serious?"

"Quite!"

"You're really getting out of Polpelly?"

"Yes!"

Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, if you're going, we haven't much choice about the matter," he said.

"I suppose we'd better pack."

"Look here," growled Johnny Bull, "I never expected Smithy to show the white feather, but I don't feel inclined to follow his example. I'm not afraid of dashed Italians playing ghost! I'm sticking it out!"

"The stickfulness is the proper caper!" agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Greyfriars never has cold feet!"

"You fellows can do as you jolly well like!" snorted Bunter. "But I'm going, and Smithy's going—ain't you, Smithy?"

"I am!" said the Bounder quietly.

"And I'm sorry to disappoint you, Bull, if you want to stick it out. But I couldn't be responsible for leaving any fellow here."

Johnny Bull's rugged face reddened as he fixed his eyes on the Bounder.

"Does that mean that you're turning a fellow out after asking him here?" he bawled. "Well, if you put it like that, you won't have to say so twice! It's your father's place, and you can do as you like, I suppose! I'll get out as fast as I can!"

Johnny Bull marched across the hall to the door on the staircase. His face was crimson with resentment.

"Nothing to get shirty about, Bull!" said Vernon-Smith. "In the circumstances, I think we'd better get out of the place—"

"You've got frightened, and you're running away!" roared Johnny Bull, with angry scorn. "And you don't like a fellow showing more nerve than you've got yourself! Well, I'm going!"

Johnny tramped out angrily. He tramped up the stone stairs, and started packing his suitcase at once.

His friends, after an exchange of

glances, followed him, Tom remaining with the Bounder. Tom's face was troubled.

"I can't understand you, Smithy," he said in a low voice. "You can't be scared—it's not in you to be scared! What game are you playing?"

"Let's go and pack," answered the Bounder.

"Well, if you mean it—"

"I do mean it, ass!"

"You're treating those fellows rather rottenly, Smithy! They came here for the Christmas holidays—"

"You shut up, Redwing!" said Billy Bunter. "I say, Smithy, we can get a train for Barnstaple at Pilverton. We can get to your father's place in London this afternoon—what?"

The Bounder did not answer that. He went down the passage to the kitchen to speak to Daniel Heard. His voice was audible to all the fellows as he shouted to deaf old Dan'l that the party were leaving.

After which Smithy came up to pack.

Packing was done in silence. Johnny Bull was still angry, and the Co. were disappointed, a little resentful, and a little scornful. Tom was worried and dubious. Smithy was quiet, cool, and calm. He could not fail to know what the other fellows thought of him; but he did not seem to care.

Bunter had little packing to do; he was, as usual, travelling light. But his fat face was very bright as he did that little.

Other fellows might like lonely coombs, smugglers' caves, phantoms, and kidnapping Italian adventurers; Bunter didn't. Bunter liked warm and solid comfort and security. Bunter was looking forward with eager yearning to Mr. Samuel Vernon-Smith's palatial mansion in Courtman Square, London. That, he had no doubt, was the party's destination—and he was very keen to arrive at that destination.

Packing finished, the juniors went down to the hall. John Redwing was waiting for them there, his bag packed. There was a light fall of snow, and a glimmering of wintry sunshine. Five miles to Pilverton, across the snowy moorland, was a hefty walk, but the juniors were ready for it. And even Billy Bunter thought less of the exertion than of getting away from Polpelly.

"Old Dan'l staying on, Smithy?" asked Wharton.

"Naturally," answered the Bounder. "He's caretaker, and has been here for years. He will stay here."

"You think he's safe here?" he asked.

"As safe as he was before we came, I suppose."

"Well, it's your business."

The Bounder smiled sarcastically.

"Old Dan'l hasn't been damaged yet," he said. "I don't see any reason why the dagoes should want to damage him, either. And I'm certain he wouldn't thank me for sacking him. He's sticking on, at any rate."

"While we run away," grunted Johnny Bull.

"Exactly!" assented the Bounder.

"We'd better not tell the fellows about this next term at Greyfriars," said Johnny. "We shall be laughed to death for a lot of rotten funks."

"It's for Smithy to settle," said Harry quietly.

The juniors went to see old Dan'l and bid him farewell, and hand over Christmas-boxes. He came to the door to see them off, and stood ducking his head and touching his greasy forelock as they started. And in a silent

crowd the Bounder's Christmas party turned their backs on the haunted house of Polpelly.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER

Rather Mysterious!

SNOW lay thick on the road at the top of the coomb. No vehicle could approach anywhere near Polpelly until the thaw, of which there were no signs as yet.

Even Billy Bunter realised that it was impossible to get a car or even a cart, and made up his mind to walk across the lonely desolate moorland. Bunter's suitcase was not large, and it had not much in it, but he changed it from one hand to the other, and from the other to the one about six times in the first quarter of a mile. Then John Redwing took it from him and carried it for him, much to Bunter's satisfaction.

The party marched on, leaving a deep track in the snow across the waste, slowly obliterated behind them by the falling flakes.

Several times the Bounder glanced back as if to ascertain whether they were followed, or watched. But there was no sign of any human being on the wide waste of the moorland.

"Why not run for it?" asked Johnny Bull, with deep and bitter sarcasm.

"Shut up, old man!" murmured Bob.

"No good ragging."

But the Bounder's angry temper did not break out. He glanced at Johnny and smiled.

"Better sprint," urged Johnny, still sarcastic. "The dagoes might get after us, you know. There seem to be two of them, and there are only nine of us, including Bunter. This is just the place for a hold-up if they want to stage one. Let's run our hardest."

"Cheese it, old bean!" said Harry. "After all, they did try to kidnap Smithy, and they tried to hold us up the day we left Greyfriars. It's not at all impossible, old chap."

"They won't try it on here," said the Bounder coolly. "They couldn't carry me off on their backs across this moor if they got me; and we've got Mr. Redwing with us, too. Besides, I fancy that Count Zero will be quite satisfied at getting shut of us. Now we're gone he's got Polpelly to himself."

"Fancy letting a dashed foreigner see that we're afraid of him," said Johnny Bull.

The Bounder made no answer to that. He tramped on a little ahead of the party. It was hard going on the rugged moor ridged with snow. John Redwing and Tom were tireless, and the Famous Five kept up well; but Billy Bunter was soon panting and gasping.

A mile from Polpelly the fat junior came to a breathless halt.

"I say, you fellows, hold on!" he gasped. "I've got to have a rest."

"Oh, keep on!" growled Johnny Bull.

"Beast! I'm tired!" hooted Bunter. "I say, Smithy! Smithy, old chap, you're boss here! You tell those beasts to stop!"

Vernon-Smith stopped and glanced back at the panting fat Owl.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Owl! Yes! Rather!" gasped Bunter.

"Take a rest, then. Sit on your bag," said Smithy. "We'll wait!"

Bunter blinked at the Bounder through his big spectacles. Smithy



Bob Cherry grasped Bunter by the shoulder, and shook him. But still the fat junior did not awaken. His fat head and fat face came out of the pie-dish, both adorned with fragments of crust and dripping juice. But his eyes did not open. "What's the matter with the fat fool?" exclaimed Vernon-Smith. "He seems to have eaten most of the pie—but that wouldn't make him sleep like that!"

was the very last member of the party whom he would really have expected to hang about willingly while he took a rest.

But Smithy was rather a puzzle that morning.

He had astonished the whole party by his sudden and unexpected decision to desert Polpelly. Now he astonished them again.

Thankfully Billy Bunter sat down on his bag to rest his weary fat limbs. Tom and John Redwing halted, cheerfully enough, to wait.

Harry Wharton & Co. stopped, also; but they exchanged glances. Smithy watched them with a sarcastic grin as they spoke to one another in low voices. Then Harry came towards him.

"Look here, Smithy!" he said. "There's no need for us to wait here. Bunter's your guest, not ours, and you can wait for him as long as you like. But we'd rather get on to the railway station."

"I say, you fellows, you wait!" squeaked Bunter. "You'd have to wait at Pilverton, anyhow. You can't go before Smithy does."

"Why not?" grunted Johnny Bull.

"I suppose you can't get to London first, and barge into Mr. Vernon-Smith's house without Smithy?" snapped Bunter.

"Fathead!"

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"You want to catch an earlier train, Wharton?" asked Vernon-Smith, with a mocking glimmer in his eyes.

"We want to take the first train available," said Harry. "We're not going on with you to London. We came to Polpelly with you for the hols,

and, as you've chucked Polpelly, we're clucking the whole thing."

"You're fed-up with me—what?" sneered the Bounder.

Wharton paused a moment.

"Well, yes, if you want it plain," he said. "It's not our way to funk, and we feel pretty sore at leaving that man Zero to believe that he's frightened us away. The fact is, Smithy, you've let us down, and the sooner we part company the better."

"Much the better," growled Johnny Bull. "Let's get on, you men!"

"I think we'd better clear, Smithy," said Bob. "After all, you don't want us. But let's part friends."

"But suppose I do want you?" suggested the Bounder.

"Well, I'm not coming with you to London, for one," said Johnny Bull. "You might get frightened there, you know, and start running again. Showing the white feather once is enough for me."

The Bounder's eyes gleamed. But his temper, generally ready to leap out at a word, was kept well in check.

"Stick to me till we hit Pilverton, and then you can do as you jolly well like, Wharton!" he said. "Let it go at that."

Wharton glanced at his friends. Johnny Bull grunted, but the other fellows nodded.

"Right, then!" said Harry.

"You're sticking to me till I get to Pilverton?" asked the Bounder, with a grin that puzzled the Famous Five.

"Yes."

"That does it, then! Let's wait for dear old Bunter. Mustn't tire out Bunter. Isn't he the most important member of the crowd?"

"That's right, Smithy!" gasped Bunter. "Never mind those silly asses! You stick to your old pal."

The Famous Five waited. They could not understand the Bounder in the least that morning. They knew that he did not care two straws whether Bunter was tired, or only slacking as usual, and that if he had wanted to get on his way he would have gone on, utterly regardless of the fat Owl. If he stopped at that spot it was because he chose to stop. Only the fat and fatuous Owl supposed that it was on his account.

Smithy ascended a little hillock by the snow-hidden path, and stood looking back towards distant Polpelly.

He came down after about ten minutes.

"No sign of the rotters following or watching us," he said. "I fancy they're satisfied that we've cleared off for good."

"I suppose they know we have!" grunted Johnny Bull. "They had an eye on us, and they must have heard you yelling to old Dan'l."

"Quite! Let's get on."

The Bounder restarted. Bunter heaved his weight up, to follow. John Redwing picked up Bunter's bag, to carry it again. But Vernon-Smith was no longer heading in the direction of Pilverton, which lay inland.

He struck off across the moor, following a line parallel with the line of the Atlantic cliffs, a mile to the west.

Wharton called to him.

"You're missing the way, Smithy."

"What rot!"

"Look here, this isn't the way to Pilverton!" snapped Johnny Bull.

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"The town's straight ahead, inland across the moor."

"I know that!"

"We shan't get to the railway this way, Smithy," said Nugent.

"I know that, too."

"Well, what the thump do you mean, then?" asked Bob. "If you're going wandering, we'd better part here."

The Bounder laughed.

"You've agreed to stick to me till I reach Pilverton," he answered.

"That's right! But you're not heading for Pilverton!"

"Quite; and I'm not going to."

"You silly ass!" exclaimed Johnny Bull. "Have you been pulling our leg?"

"You've got it!" assented the Bounder.

"Well, then, look here, you cheeky ass—"

"I say, Smithy—" squeaked Bunter.

Herbert Vernon-Smith tramped on, following the new route he had selected, apparently at random. The rest of the party followed, puzzled and irritated, Bunter in a state of great dismay and uneasiness.

Smithy, it seemed, was not heading for the railway, after all, and the millionaire's mansion, in Courtman Square, was farther off than ever. Billy Bunter panted, at the tail of the Greyfriars party.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

At the Sign of the Ship!

NINE HOST of the Ship Inn, at Crewey, standing in the inn porch, and looking out over a rugged street, and a pebbly beach, and a waste of Atlantic waters, smiled. It was a smile of satisfaction that illumined his rubicund face almost from ear to ear.

It was caused by the sight of a numerous party marching on the inn; no fewer than nine of them, at a time of the year when visitors to the little

Devonshire fishing village were few and far between. In the summer plenty of people came to Crewey; in the winter nobody came, or hardly anybody. And here were nine in a bunch!

And Mr. Yeo, landlord of the Ship, hurriedly called into the inn, to order preparations to be made for that unexpected contingent of guests. They would want lunch, at least—and lunch for nine was an unusually big order in the last days of the old year. While, if they were going to stay, every available room in the ancient inn would be required.

"I say, you fellows, is that an inn?" ejaculated Billy Bunter, as he spotted the sign of the Ship. "I say, what about grub?"

The Famous Five came to a halt in the rugged, straggling street that ran down to the beach in a series of gigantic steps.

"Look here, Smithy, what's this game?" demanded Harry Wharton. "We started for Pilverton, and you've worked around across the moor, and arrived at the village—only a mile from Polpelly, if we'd come round the cliffs, instead of striking inland. We've had a morning's walk for nothing!"

"Not for nothing!" argued the Bounder. "I believe you can get a jolly good lunch at the Ship—and I believe Bunter's ready for lunch."

"Yes, rather!" gasped Bunter.

"Are we lunching here, and then going on to Pilverton?" asked Bob, puzzled and impatient.

"We're lunching here, anyhow," said Smithy. "Ripping place—awfully picturesque! Artists come here in the summer to paint it—"

"Oh, don't talk rot!" snapped Johnny Bull. "If you've been making fools of us, Smithy—"

"I haven't made a fool of you, old bean!" answered the Bounder. "Must have been Nature that did that! Not my handiwork!"

"You cheeky ass!" bawled Johnny Bull. "I don't want to punch you at Christmas-time, Vernon-Smith, but if I

have any more of your dashed cheek—"

"I say, you fellows—"

"Shut up, Bunter!"

"Shan't! I say, it's a jolly good idea to have lunch here, and we may get a lift to the station afterwards—maybe a cart or something here! I say—"

"Look here, Smithy—"

"Do shut up, Bull! I say, about lunch—"

"Like to order the lunch, Bunter?" asked Vernon-Smith. "You're a pretty good man at that!"

"What-ho!" grinned Bunter.

"Cut on, then!"

Bunter did not need telling twice!

He rolled on to the Ship, his fat mind concentrated on the important business of lunch. The others remained with the Bounder.

"Now," said Vernon-Smith quietly, "I'd better put you fellows wise. No need to tell that gabbling fat ass! I couldn't tell you at Polpelly—because walls have ears! We know those dago rotters watch us—and they may be able to overhear us there, for all I know. But—I think you might have guessed."

"What was there to guess?" asked Bob. "You seem to me to be talking in riddles."

"I don't see—" growled Johnny Bull.

"You needn't mention that; nobody expects you to see anything."

"Look here—"

"Oh, don't rag!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "For goodness' sake, Smithy, if you've got anything to tell us, get it off your chest!"

"I've got to tell you what you'd have guessed, if you'd been as quick on the uptake as a bunny rabbit!" snapped the Bounder. "I'm not leaving Polpelly."

"You've left it!" grunted Johnny Bull. "What the dickens do you mean?"

"Zero and his gang think I've left it—I meant them to think so. Now they're shut of us, they will come out of their den and carry on."

"I suppose they will," said Bob; "but we shall be far enough away by that time."

"We shall be about a mile away—here, at Crewey," said the Bounder coolly. "And after they're absolutely certain that we're gone, we shall go back. At least," he added, with a curl of the lip, "I shall go back. You fellows can please yourselves."

"Oh!" ejaculated Wharton.

"We're putting up here for the night," went on Vernon-Smith. "An hour before dawn we shall turn out, back to Polpelly. Whatever those rotters are up to, we shall catch them at it."

"Oh!" said Harry again.

"You never gave us a hint—"

"Because I didn't want to give the Italians one!" grunted Vernon-Smith. "You might have guessed, though! Only silly idiots would have fancied that I'd let those dagoes frighten me away."

"Thanks!" said Harry, dryly.

"I knew you were up to something," said Tom Redwing. "But I never guessed that one, Smithy! It's a good idea!"

"We can leave Bunter here," went on the Bounder. "But you, Mr. Redwing, may prefer to come back with us, though I know you don't like spooks—"

"I surely shouldn't let you boys go back alone, sir," said the sailorman

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quietly. "I'd rather see you steer clear of the place; but if you're going back, you go back under my convoy." "So that's the game?" asked Harry Wharton, with a deep breath. "Well, if Zero was on the watch this morning, Smithy, you've taken him in all right—for you certainly took us all in!"

"The take-in was terrific!" grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"So you're not scuttling, after all?" said Johnny Bull slowly. "I—I see! You were only pretending to clear off, to pull that dago's leg."

"Have you really got it, at last?" asked Vernon-Smith. "Good! I was afraid that a surgical operation might be needed to get it into your head."

"Look here, you cheeky ass—"

"You can't blame us for having our leg pulled, Smithy," said Bob. "But I'm jolly glad it was only a leg-pull! I won't tell you what I was thinking about you for getting scared."

"Don't!" said the Bounder. "I might punch your cheeky head if you did!"

"Order!" interrupted Frank Nugent. "Let's get on to the inn! I'm ready for lunch, after that giddy tramp, as well as Bunter."

And the party walked on to the Ship Inn. There they found Billy Bunter warming his fat toes before a roaring fire, and watching, with eyes that glistened through his big spectacles, the preparation of an extensive and substantial lunch.

He gave the juniors a cheery blink as they came in. Mr. Yeo welcomed his Christmas guests with hospitable smiles and bows, and assured them that lunch was almost ready.

"I say, you fellows," said Bunter eagerly, "I say, I believe the grub's good here! Looks like it to me!"

"I breathe again!" said Bob Cherry solemnly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! I believe the grub's all right, and if the grub's all right, everything's all right! I say, Smithy, if it turns out that the grub's good, what about stopping the night here and starting to-morrow?"

"Isn't Bunter full of good ideas to-day?" said the Bounder. "If you think so, Bunter, we'll certainly do it!"

"Well, let's have lunch first!" said Bunter cautiously. "I believe the grub's all right; but the proof of the pudding is in the eating, you know. Decide after lunch, shall we?"

The juniors chuckled. The matter was already decided; though Billy Bunter was unaware of that circumstance.

Lunch, however, was not merely good; it was top-hole. Half-way through the meal, Billy Bunter made up his mind.

"We'll stay, Smithy!" he said.

"Sure you'd like to?" asked Smithy gravely.

"Yes, old chap! This grub is simply spiffing!" Bunter beamed over the festive board. "Besides, if you give them till to-morrow, they may be able to fix up a lift for us to the station somehow. Book rooms for us for to-night, Smithy! I'll pay for them, if you like."

"I'll leave that to you, then, Bunter."

"What I mean is, you'd have to lend me the money, old chap, as I haven't had some postal-orders I was expecting, owing to being stuck in that out-of-the-way hole at Polpelly. Lend me a fiver—"

"Why not a tenner?" asked Smithy.

"Well, if you don't mind, Smithy, perhaps I'd better make it a tenner!" agreed Bunter. "You don't mind if I ask you to lend me a tenner instead of a fiver?"

"Why should I, when I'm not going to lend you either?" asked the Bounder.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beast!"

Bunter devoted himself to lunch, and wasted no more of his valuable time on Smithy.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

Bunter in the Dark!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. turned in early that night. They were to be called an hour before dawn; and they wanted a night's rest first. So they supped early and were in bed before nine.

The rooms at the Ship were small and old-fashioned, with tiny windows, and up and down all sorts of creaking old stairs; but the beds were comfortable and well aired; and the juniors slept soundly to the sound of the Atlantic boom that came up the rugged street of Crewey.

Mr. Yeo was considerably surprised by the desire of his guests to be called at such an early hour in the morning. He was still more surprised by their desire to hire a boat to run out to sea before the sun was up. But he undertook to have breakfast ready at an unearthly hour; and he easily found a good boat for his guests. The Bounder had decided to run back to Polpelly by sea—to save a long and weary tramp round the cliffs in snow and darkness; but for another reason also.

He had no doubt that the enemy, having the mansion to themselves, would come out of their hiding-place and carry on with what it was they intended—a search, perhaps, for the hidden doubloons. If they kept a look-out, it would most likely be in the direction of the road—they would never expect visitors from the sea in wild winter weather. Coming up the coomb from the sea, instead of down from the inland road, there was all the more chance of taking them by surprise.

Certainly, it was a rather risky proceeding, for the Atlantic was wild and rough, tossed by fierce winter winds. But John Redwing was a capable sailor-man, able to handle a boat, and he knew the coast almost as well as the local fishermen. They would run into Polpelly Cove and land there long before it was light. If Zero was at Polpelly, they felt that they could count on catching him napping.

In spite of the whistling wind, the boom of the sea, and the creaking timber of the old inn, the Greyfriars fellows slept soundly. But there was one exception—and that was Billy Bunter.

Bunter was dreaming—of Christmas pudding!

At supper there had been a Christmas pudding—upon which Bunter had kept an appreciative eye. It had been Bunter's intention to deal with that pudding, after parking a considerable quantity of other things.

But, alas! The cold turkey had been so delicious that Bunter had packed to capacity; and unwillingly, but inevitably, he had had to leave the pudding untouched.

It haunted him in his dreams!

It popped in and out of his slumbers tantalisingly. No doubt eleven helpings of turkey, seven of ham, and some other things, topped by a pound or two of rich Devonshire cream, disturbed Bunter a little, and added to the visions of the night! That Christmas pudding appeared to him sometimes as a pudding—sometimes with the dark, chubby, handsome features of Count Zero—sometimes with the ghastly countenance of

the phantom of Polpelly! Bunter gargled and groaned in his slumbers; and at last he awoke.

"Ooogh!" gasped Bunter, as he sat up in bed in a perspiration of nervousness.

It was black as pitch.

He blinked round in the darkness, groped for his spectacles and jammed them on his fat little nose and blinked again. Almost he expected to see a phantom Christmas pudding grinning at him in the darkness.

He reached for a matchbox, and struck a match to see the time. Then he made the interesting discovery that, having forgotten to wind his watch, it had run down. It had stopped at midnight; and Bunter fancied it was later than that! As a matter of fact, it was much later.

He laid his head on the pillow again.

But he did not sleep.

His thoughts, instead of his dreams, ran on the Christmas pudding. It was in the inn larder. Bunter knew where that larder was—he had had his eye on it several times. And Bunter was hungry!

The more he thought of the pudding, the more hungry he felt. Twice, thrice, he made a move, to roll out of bed. But it was very cold outside the warm blankets—and the thought of dark passages and stairs was discouraging. Suppose those beasts at Polpelly had tracked them to the inn at Crewey—and suppose Bunter ran into them in the dark.

It really was not probable. Bunter realised that—more and more clearly as he felt hungrier and hungrier.

He got out of bed at last.

He put on a pair of slippers and a jacket-over his pyjamas. Then he struck a match and blinked round for his candlestick.

But he had left the candle burning when he went to sleep, not liking the dark; and it had burned out.

Bunter gave a snort. There was no help for it—he had to light his way with matches if he was going to annex that pudding at all. And that was a settled thing now. Life, without that pudding, was not worth living!

His door creaked as he opened it. Holding up a match he stepped out, and groped his way down the winding stairs.

Match after match was struck—and he blinked uneasily to and fro, as he crept on his way. But he reached the larder at last—and to his great satisfaction, found that, although it was locked, the key was in the lock.

He opened the door, and rolled in:

It was cold and draughty—but Bunter forgot cold and draught, as he held up a match and surveyed the generous contents of the inn larder.

Something rubbed against Bunter's leg, and he gave a sudden start. But it was only a cat.

Bunter's eyes danced behind his spectacles.

This was worth getting out of bed for, even on a dark and cold winter's night! All sorts of good things on all sides met his eyes. Facing him was the Christmas pudding, crowned with a sprig of holly.

"Oh, good!" gasped Bunter.

There were rosy-cheeked apples in a barrel; there were cakes and pies and all sorts of good things. Bunter took a large bite at an apple to go on with; and while he munched it, he stacked apples in his pockets. Then he grabbed the pudding.

"I dare say they'll think it was the cat!" murmured Bunter. "Anyhow, I'm jolly well having that pudding."

With the pudding under a fat arm, the Owl of the Remove crept out of the roomy old larder.

He gave a sudden start. There was a creak from somewhere in the darkness. It made Bunter's fat heart jump.

Was it a footstep?

"Oooooogh!" breathed Bunter.

He stood and listened for a moment or two. Then, with thumping heart, he crept on his way to the stairs.

Visions of swarthy Italians, and of grisly spectres, haunted him as he crept, and he dared not strike a match. He groped on in the darkness. Up the creaking old stairs he went, feeling his way. An apple dropped from a rather overcrowded pocket, and went down the stairs, bumping from one step to another.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

He plunged on in the dark, up the narrow, old winding staircase. Suddenly a yell of horror left his lips.

In the darkness he bumped into a human form!

"Yaroooh!" yelled Bunter.

"Who—what—?" came a startled howl.

"Yoop!"

Bunter staggered and clutched at the unseen figure to save himself.

There was a yell, a crash, a bump, and Bunter and the unseen one went rolling together down the stairs, accompanied by a rolling Christmas pudding!

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Light in Black Rock Cave!

BOB CHERRY roared.

"Ow! Wow! Help!"

Billy Bunter yelled.

"Yaroooh! I say, you fellows, help! Ghosts! Burglars! Kidnappers! Yaroooh!"

"What the thump—?" came Harry Wharton's voice above stairs.

"Yoo-hoop!"

"Oh crikey!"

There was a glimmer of light. Harry Wharton, half-dressed, ran down, with a candlestick and a flickering candle. After him came the other fellows, also half-dressed.

An extraordinary scene met their eyes at the foot of the stairs.

Bob Cherry was stretched there, on his back, with Billy Bunter sprawling across his chest. The back of Bob's head rested on a squashed Christmas pudding!

Bob was struggling frantically to heave off Bunter's weight. Bunter was yelling with sheer terror.

"Bob!" exclaimed Wharton.

"Bunter!" yelled Johnny Bull.

"What the dickens—?" hooted the Bounder.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Yeo came up a passage from somewhere, carrying a candle. He stopped, to stare at the amazing scene. He was on his way to call the Greyfriars fellows. Evidently they did not need calling!

"What—?" stuttered the innkeeper.

"Yaroooh! Help! I say, you fellows—"

"Draggimoff!" gasped Bob Cherry. "My head's stuck in something! Drag that mad porpoise off!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors gathered round, grasped Billy Bunter, and rolled him off. Bob staggered to his feet. He groped over the back of his head, and his hands came away sticky with pudding.

"Ow! I say, you fellows!" gasped Bunter. "Keep him off! Kidnappers! I say, he got me in the dark, on the stairs—"

"You howling ass!" yelled Vernon-Smith. "It's Cherry!"

"Eh?" Bunter blinked in amazement. "Oh! I—I thought it was those dagoes. Oh crikey! What was the silly idiot coming down in the dark for?"

"What were you coming up in the dark for, you blithering owl?" yelled Bob.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. "I—I never went down for the pudding—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you fat idiot!" gulped Bob. "I've stuck my head in your beastly pudding—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've spoiled that pudding, you silly ass! What the thump are you up as late as this for?" demanded Bunter.

"Late, you fathead! It's early. It won't be light for another hour yet," said Harry. "Bob was down first, that's all. We're going out—"

"Well, you silly chumps!" said Bunter, in disgust. "If you think I'm coming out before daylight you're jolly well mistaken! I'm going back to bed—but I want something to eat first!"

"You can have this pudding!" hissed Bob Cherry.

"Not after it's been busted on the floor, and you've stuck your silly head in it," said Bunter. "I don't want it now."

"You're going to have it, all the same."

And Bob, grabbing up with both hands what was left of the dismantled Christmas pudding, jumped at Bunter, and slammed it on his bullet head!

"Urrrrgh! Beast! Oooooogh!" spluttered Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow! I'm all sticky! I'm all clammy! Ow! Urrgh!"

"Wait a minute, while I scrape up the rest!" gasped Bob. "I'm going to shove it down your silly neck!"

Bunter did not wait a minute. He did not wait a split second. He turned, and bolted up the stairs!

A door was heard to slam above, a key to turn in a lock. Bunter, evidently, did not want the remnants of that pudding down his neck!

The juniors, chuckling, returned to their rooms to finish dressing.

Bob Cherry had a considerable amount of cleaning to do, and there were still traces of Christmas pudding in his hair when he came down at last. He had been first down of the party, but, owing to the fat Owl and the pudding, he was the last to join up for brekker.

Harry Wharton & Co. had their breakfast by glimmering candlelight.

Then Mr. Yeo let them out of the inn and bolted and chained the door after them.

It was pitchy dark in the steep street of Crewey, and they had to pick their way down to the beach.

At the old stone jetty a glimmering lantern told where an ancient mariner was standing ready with the boat.

John Redwing jumped in, and stepped the mast. The sea was rolling heavily, and the wind was strong from the north. The wild, dark sea looked far from inviting.

But the chums of Greyfriars were good sailors, and they were not afraid of the sea. The Bounder leaped lightly into the boat after John, and Tom followed, to help his father with the sail. The Famous Five packed themselves in, knotting their scarves, and turning up their coat-collars against the searching wind.

"All roight?" asked the ancient mariner on the quay.

"Ay, ay!" answered John Redwing.

And the Crewey man shoved the boat off. Tom sat at the tiller, and his father handled the sheets. The wind caught the sail and spun the boat across Crewey Bay to the open sea.

A bright lantern gleamed from the bows of the boat. But it was the only light. There was hardly a gleam of a star in the black sky.

The boat danced and rocked on wild waves, running before the wind. Spray dashed over the juniors in clouds.

Harry Wharton & Co. sat silent. There was danger in running down the rocky coast in wintry weather, and they were well aware of it.

Tom's hand was firm on the tiller. His father was silent, only now and then rapping out an order, which Tom obeyed instantly.

Through the darkness and the lashing spray the boat rushed on, the boom of breakers on the rocks sounding unpleasantly close, on the port side.

They had to run out more than a mile to steer clear of the rocks. Then John tacked, and stood in for Polpelly Cove.

It was well for the schoolboys that they had a hardy and experienced sailorman on board. On their own, they certainly would never have got the boat safe into the cove. As it was, their hearts leaped a good deal as they spun past looming rocks, on which the heavy waves broke in masses of spray and foam.

"This is where the jolly old Spanish galleon went down, that the squire of Polpelly captured from the Armada," murmured Bob Cherry. "No wonder, if the old bean tried to make this cove in a storm! If we bump on one of these rocks, my beloved 'earers, we shall take a short cut to the giddy old galleon."

"We're in!" said Harry.

The boat glided on the smoother waters of the cove. The Bounder scrambled forward, and put out the lantern in the bows. A light on the cove might have been seen from a window of Polpelly House.

In blackness the boat surged on. "Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob suddenly. "Look! A light!"

From the blackness of the shore a light glimmered and twinkled. The juniors fixed their eyes on it.

The Bounder gritted his teeth. "By gum, if they're on the watch!" he breathed.

"That light's in the cave, sir!" said John Redwing.

The sailorman seemed able to see, like a cat, in the dark.

"Oh!" exclaimed Vernon-Smith.

The vast cliff at the back of the cove was a mass of blackness against a dark sky. The opening of Black Rock Cave could not be seen. But as they floated past it the juniors could make out that the light came from the spot where they knew the cave to be.

Deep in the recesses of the old smugglers' cave it gleamed and twinkled and moved. Someone, evidently, was afoot in the dark old cavern—seeking what? Was it in Black Rock Cave that the man from Italy suspected the lost doubloons to be hidden?

Even as they watched from the gliding boat, the light faded farther up the deep cave, and vanished. Impenetrable blackness blotted out the cave.

"He's gone!" muttered Bob.

The boat surged on, to the landing-place. John Redwing made it fast, and the juniors scrambled ashore.

It was densely dark in the coomb. There was, as yet, no glimmer of dawn in the sky. In the deep dark the Greyfriars fellows tramped up the rugged path along the coomb, heading for Polpelly House.



"I don't think you'll get away, you rascal!" said Vernon-Smith. "We shall keep your paws tied till we hand you over to the police." "But I can use my fingers," said Count Zero. "And now—Addio!" There was a sudden click and the oak panel behind the count opened. Instantly Count Zero flung himself backwards through the opening and vanished!

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.

Caught Napping!

FURFANTE! Ah, ladro, furfante!"

The voice, in low, hissing tones, sounded clearly in the firelit hall of Polpelly House. The strange words fell on the ears of the Greyfriars fellows. What the words meant they did not know; but they knew that the language was Italian, and they had no doubt about the identity of the speaker.

Harry Wharton & Co. were within the walls of Polpelly once more.

By a little door, half-hidden among frosty ivy and banked snow, the Bounder had let them in. He had locked that door before leaving, and taken the key with him, after carefully oiling both lock and key.

They had tramped up the coomb and clambered in at the old gateway, to find the mansion shut—but with a flickering gleam of firelight on the windows that showed that it was occupied.

Old Dan'l, at that hour, would be fast asleep in his room, adjoining the kitchen—if nothing had happened to him since the juniors left. It was not likely that he would have kept the fire going all night in the hall.

But it was evident that it was burning, and that someone was there, for the juniors caught a glimpse of the shadow of a pacing figure on a window.

They passed round the building, led by Smithy, and entered by the door to which he had the key.

Within was a stone passage, black as the inside of a hat—one of the innumerable winding passages of the old house.

The Bounder whispered a word of caution, as he stepped in. He groped up the passageway with the rest of the

party silent at his heels, John Redwing bringing up the rear, after silently closing the little door.

The passage led into a vaulted room which had been an armoury in the old days, and still contained specimens of ancient weapons—arquebuses, crossbows, halberds. The armoury adjoined the great hall, by an arched doorway from which the doors were gone.

Through the arch came the gleam of firelight and candle-light from the hall, and the sound of a voice—the voice, as the juniors realised with a thrill, of Count Zero!

The Italian was there!

Vernon-Smith's eyes glittered, and his grip closed harder on his oaken cudgel. His stratagem had evidently been a success. It was clear that the Italian plotter believed that the Christmas party were gone for good—the Bounder had successfully pulled the wool over his eyes.

The juniors suppressed their breathing. They peered cautiously through the old arched doorway into the lighted hall.

The fire, at a distance from them, roared and leaped on the ancient hearth. A dozen candles were burning. On the table lay the remains of a meal.

A swarthy man, with chubby features, stood full in their view. His profile was turned towards them, as he stood gazing up at the portrait on the wall of the old seafaring squire of Polpelly.

Harry Wharton & Co. recognised the man at once. There was no mistaking him.

"Count Zero!" whispered Harry.

The Italian was alone. There were traces of mud on his clothes and his boots, and his dark face looked tired

and weary. They could guess that he had not slept that night.

No doubt he had been busily occupied, ever since the departure of the Christmas party had left the old mansion at his disposal.

But if he had been seeking for the treasure of the galleon, they did not need telling that he had had no good fortune.

His face was dark with anger and disappointment as he stood staring up at the picture of the old squire, and they saw him shake his fist at the painted face looking down at him over the old Elizabethan ruff, under the plumed hat.

"Ladro—furfante!" came in a snarl from the Italian, with a savage roll of the "r's" in the words, "furfante—furfante!"

From the count's tone, the juniors wondered whether he was swearing in his own language. It sounded rather like it. As a matter of fact, however, the word "furfante" implied only rogue or rascal.

It was evident that the count was deeply incensed against the old sea-captain of Elizabeth's time who had captured the galleon commanded by his ancestor, Marco Zero, in the Armada.

"Furfante!" hissed the count again.

"Dov'è il tesoro? Dov'è? Dov'è?" Little as they knew of Italian, the schoolboys could easily guess that "tesoro" meant treasure. "Where is the treasure?" was the question Zero was snarling at the grim old sea-captain in the picture.

Turning abruptly from the portrait, the count groped in a pocket and drew out a slip of ancient yellow parchment.

He stepped to one of the candles, held it to the light and scanned it with

glittering black eyes, like points of jet. The juniors stood silent, watching. They were waiting for a signal from the Bounder before making a move. Vernon-Smith made no sign as yet. He stood with his gleaming eyes fixed on the Italian.

He knew now that his surmise had been correct. Marco Zero, captain of the San Pietro, in the Armada, had languished for years, as prisoner, at Polpelly, waiting for his ransom to be paid. He had gone back at last to his own country, and the Bounder was assured that he had taken with him some knowledge of the doubloons lost in the galleon, and had left what he knew written down. Only on that theory could Count Zero's knowledge be accounted for.

The sight of that strip of yellow parchment in Zero's hand made Vernon-Smith sure of it. That, he divined at once, was the count's clue to the treasure—a doubtful clue, certainly, since it had not led him to the discovery of the doubloons.

The Italian stood motionless, scanning the parchment by the candle-light. Plainly he had not the remotest suspicion of danger at hand. Keen and wary and cunning as he was, the Bounder's stratagem had deceived him completely. He was utterly off his guard.

Old Dan'l, no doubt, had been secured. Zero was in possession of Polpelly House—never dreaming of being disturbed there. A startling surprise was coming to him.

Smithy looked round at his comrades. "We've got him!" he breathed. "We're not giving him a chance to handle a gun! He's desperate enough, I fancy! Follow on!"

"Ready!" muttered Wharton. With his oaken stick gripped in his hand, the Bounder stepped through the arch into the old oak hall. He made a sudden rush.

Instantly the rest of the party were speeding after him, racing across the oaken floor towards the Italian.

Count Zero gave a sudden, amazed start. He turned from the candle, and the parchment dropped from his hand.

For a spellbound instant he stared at the juniors rushing upon him; then his hand flew to his hip.

But he had no time to draw the automatic there.

The Bounder was on him like a tiger, lashing out with his stick, and the blow caught Zero on the shoulder, and sent him staggering.

Wharton lashed out a split second later, getting the Italian's right arm. A moment more, and Count Zero was on the floor, yelling with rage, dazed by the rain of blows from half a dozen cudgels.

"Got him!" panted Bob. He dropped a heavy knee on the Italian's chest, pinning him down.

Zero was making a wild effort to get at his weapon; but Harry Wharton seized his right wrist, and held it fast. Johnny Bull grabbed his left arm.

Vernon-Smith brandished his cudgel over the swarthy, enraged face that stared up in the candle-light.

"Tie the brute up!" he panted. "I'll crack his nut for him if he stirs a finger!"

"Cospetto!" gasped the Italian. "You can pack that up, old bean!" grinned Bob breathlessly. "We've jolly well got you, you kidnapping rotter!"

"I've got a whipcord here," said Johnny Bull. "Look out, you men,

while I tie his paws—there may be others about."

Count Zero's hands were dragged together behind him, and Johnny knotted the strong whipcord round his slim, dusky wrists.

Then he was allowed to get on his feet.

He stood tottering, and panting for breath. A sudden yell broke from his lips:

"Beppo! Presto! Beppo!" "Look out for Mister Beppo!" grinned the Bounder.

There were six or seven doors in the old hall, and the juniors had an eye on all of them. But there was no sound or sign of Beppo arriving. They knew that the count had a companion at Polpelly—the bull-necked man who had helped him in the attempt to kidnap Smithy at Greyfriars. But it was clear that Beppo was not at hand. Probably it was Beppo who had been carrying the light they had seen in Black Rock Cave.

Zero, no doubt, realised that his man was not within hearing, for he did not call again. He stood panting, his black eyes scintillating at the schoolboys who had captured him. He gave one savage wrench at the bonds on his dusky wrists. But Johnny Bull had tied the knots securely, and he had no chance of getting loose.

The rage in his swarthy face was terrible. But it passed quickly, and his brow cleared. He burst into a laugh and shrugged his shoulders.

"Signorino Vernon-Smeat, you have beaten me!" he said. "I believed that you were gone—frightened away! It is what you call in your barbarous language, pulling the leg—non e vero? Now you have me, as that old furfanto had my ancestor Marco, a prisoner in Polpelly! Addio il tersoro!"

"That means good-bye to the treasure, I suppose!" said the Bounder, with a grin. "I knew what you were after, my pippin! You're going to find that Italian brigand games don't pay in this country! And, as you've been making so free with my father's property, I'll follow your example—to the victor the jolly old spoils!"

And the Bounder picked up the parchment the Italian had dropped, and scanned it eagerly in the candle-light.

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.

Vanished!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. gathered round the Bounder as he held the parchment to the candle-light.

A pale glimmer of wintry dawn was coming in at the top of the high windows now; but it was still dark.

Count Zero opened his lips, as if to speak—but he closed them again, and was silent. As the Bounder had said, it was the spoils to the victor—and the clue to the treasure, left by Marco Zero three hundred and fifty years ago, was Smithy's now. The count moved away a little, and stood leaning on the old black oak of the wall, breathing hard after the struggle. Keenly interested as they were in the parchment, the juniors did not fail to keep an eye on their prisoner; and had he moved towards a doorway, he would have been collared fast enough. But he stood far from a doorway, leaning on the old oak wall beside the portrait of the old seafaring squire, his bound hands behind him.

"Now for the giddy secret!" said Bob Cherry.

All eyes fixed on the parchment.

There were strange tracings on it, in ink faded from age. Some of them had faded out and were indecipherable. Three written words were easy to read, however.

"IL TESORO QUI."

"Tesoro must be treasure," remarked Harry Wharton, "and 'il,' of course, means 'the.' But what is 'qui'?"

"I dare say Mr. Redwing knows," said the Bounder.

John Redwing smiled. "I'm no hand at spelling," he said. "I wouldn't say I'd write the word down—but if it's pronounced 'kwee,' it means 'here.'"

"The treasure here! That's what it means, then!" said Smithy. "Didn't I tell you that old blighter Marco had left a clue for his family to follow up? And this is it! But—making it out is another matter. It seems to have puzzled his descendant a little."

"Vero!" said the count coolly. "True!"

"The treasure here!" said Bob. "But where?"

"The wherefulness is preposterous!" grinned Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

They scanned the strange tracings. It seemed to be the plan of an extensive building, and it suddenly dawned on them, that it was a plan of Polpelly House.

"Polpelly!" exclaimed Wharton. "Look—here's the hall, where we're standing now—there's the armoury—there's the courtyard—the gate—"

"That's it," said Nugent.

"But the words are written outside the plan," said the Bounder puzzled. "Does that mean that it's in the coomb somewhere, or in the cave?" He knitted his brows. "There's been something traced here, but it's faded out. If we could make out what that old johnny put down three centuries and a half ago, we could lay our fingers on the doubloons."

"Looks like it!" agreed Harry. "Blessed if I see how the old squire's prisoner knew, when the squire himself didn't know—but it certainly looks like it."

"I dare say our dusky friend could explain that," said Smithy, with a glance at the silent man leaning on the oak panels.

Count Zero smiled, with a flash of white teeth.

"Why not?" he said carelessly. "When I saw you at your school, little signor, I knew not that you had any knowledge of the treasure—but I have heard much of your talk here since. Walls have ears, in Polpelly. For two long years my ancestor, Marco, was a prisoner in this old house, after the galleon went down in the cove. He was permitted to move about as he pleased—he was rather a guest than a prisoner, as he waited for his ransom to arrive, as was the custom in those old days. He knew more of the doubloons than his captor imagined."

"They did not go down in the galleon, then?" asked Harry.

"They were taken off in the boat, when the sea-captain escaped from the wreck, with my ancestor his prisoner," answered the count. "The squire landed the treasure of the galleon and buried the chests of doubloons for safety in the sands of the sea-cave. There are records, in the Palazzo Zero at Milan, left by old Marco, telling of his imprisonment in this barbarous country. I have read them all. Only one was of practical use—the one you now hold in your hand, Signorino Vernon-Smeat!"

(Continued on page 28.)

DAN of the DOGGER BANK!

By DAVID GOODWIN.

Spies of the Black Fleet!

KENNETH GRAHAM, son of a millionaire shipowner, is rescued off the Dogger Bank by the crew of the fishing trawler, Grey Seal.

His past life a complete blank, he is given the name of "Dogger Dan," and signed on as fifth hand under Skipper Atheling, Finn Macoul, Wat Griffiths and Buck Atheling.

Aware of his nephew's fate, and knowing that he will be heir to the shipowner's money when his brother dies, Dudley Graham engages Jake Rebow, commander of the Black Squadron, a fleet manned by cut-throats, to get Kenneth out of the way for ever.

Arriving at Amsterdam, Dan and Buck Atheling go ashore, where Rebow's confederates made a fruitless attempt on their lives.

Late that night, the two chums catch the crew of the Adder, the Blacks' flagship, smuggling. Boarding the trawler, they imprison the two men left in charge, and make for port.

Caught in a hurricane, they are wrecked on a lonely sandbank, where they discover an old Dutchman, named Jan Osterling, gloating over a huge pile of gold coins.

After informing the two chums that he has made his wealth out of birds' eggs, the miserly old man asks them to walk round the island for an hour while he makes up his accounts.

"Sink me if I ever saw the like of that!" said Buck, as they walked away over the sandhills. "The old chap's a miser right enough!"

"He's more than a miser. He's a sort of gold-drunkard!" said Dan. "One thing's plain to me—he's more than half dotty!"

"His yarn about making all that pile out of birds' eggs is bunkum!" said Buck.

"Of course it's bunkum! There's no gold money about these days. He had to say something, so he pitched us that tale. Mind you," added Dan, "I'd say he makes quite a bit by that game, too. We took about five hundred eggs to-day; plovers' eggs fetch a lot in the markets. Three pounds' worth to-day alone. Say fifteen pounds a week. I'll bet Jan and his young nephew, too, are pretty well off. And living costs Jan nothing. Been hoarding up for years, I reckon!"

"Still, he wouldn't get paid in gold," objected Buck.

"And those were old coins," said Dan. "Smugglers don't pay in gold, either. Where would they get it? It beats me where the gold came from!"

Buck stopped short.

"I've got it!" he said, and gripped Dan by the arm. "Somethin' I just remembered. Dad's often talked about it. There was a ship wrecked on one o' these islands—ever so long ago it was—with cases of gold coin in her hold. She was broke up and swallowed by the sand."

"Treasure ship, do you mean?"

"Yes. There were lots of attempts to salve her an' find the gold. A company



Peering through the window, the two seamen saw old Jan Osterling seated at a table loaded with gold coins!

tried their luck not so long ago, but had to give it up. Couldn't locate the stuff. Might be anywhere; an' it's anybody's money. I'll bet old Jan—"

Dan smacked his knee, and chuckled.

"You've hit it, Buck! Must be so! Jan's nosed out that gold—found it! He's the sort that would, too! Scooped the lot—after it's been buried maybe a hundred years. Bit of luck, eh? The sly old bird has buried it in his hut, and he's sitting on it like an old hen!"

"Well, it's his, I suppose," said Buck.

"Oh, I should say so! Findings—keepings! He owns the island, too, doesn't he? I reckon it's stumbling across a fortune like this that's sent him dotty. But he's not a bad old bird in his way!"

"No," said Buck. "But he'd be an ugly customer if anybody interfered with him when he was handling that stuff of his, eh? It's as well he doesn't know we tumbled to it last night. I'll bet he's fondling his gold now!"

"Shouldn't wonder. I don't reckon

he likes us being around, and will be glad to see the last of us!"

"I guess so," agreed Buck. "By the way, have you got that revolver we took from the chap on the Adder?"

"No," answered Dan. "It's gone. It was slung on my belt when we went to the house. Must have lost it somewhere."

"Jan's taken it!" said Buck. "When we were asleep, I reckon. Wanted to have the pull over you, in case of trouble. Well, we don't want his money, an' we don't want any scrappin'; got plenty on our hands as it is. I vote we keep on the right side of the old man, and get off the island as soon as we can. It's giving me the creeps. Why, that gold we saw last night—"

Dan caught him suddenly by the sleeve and stared towards the house.

"Look!" he said, under his breath. "Look yonder!"

Out of the scrubby undergrowth, by the west side of the dunes, came two long, dark figures in seamen's clothes.

They walked slowly and stiffly, with a rolling stride. There was a sneaking, furtive look about them.

They crossed the sandy pastures to the farmhouse. Before the door they paused for a moment, and looked round, as though uncertain whether to knock.

The two seamen cast their eyes over the house and outbuildings, and then one of them, stepping aside, looked in through the window. For a second he stood as though dumbstruck. Then, bobbing down quickly below the level of the glass, he beckoned to his companion.

The other man crept up beside him, and then both of them peered through the leaded panes.

The men seemed to whisper to each other, and the hand of each man stole to his belt.

"Gosh!" muttered Buck. "It's the Adder's men! They were saved, then—and they've found Jan Osterling and his money."

"Quick!" cried Dan. "We've got to warn Jan!"

The two chums sprang up, and raced down from the dunes and across the plain. They had little doubt what would happen if the Adder's men should surprise the old man counting his hoard.

But the enemy did not wait. The two men from the Adder caught sight of the boys the moment they were clear of the dunes.

They hesitated for a moment, and then, to the surprise of Buck and Dan, took to their heels and disappeared among the sandhills beyond the little tangled thickets of thorn.

"Hooked it!" said Buck. "Wouldn't stand against three of us. Or, maybe, they've got some pals over yonder."

"Ease up!" returned Dan, as they arrived within fifty yards of the house. "We mustn't burst in on old Jan or he'll scalp us!"

The two boys halted, and Buck gave a shout.

After a moment's pause the door of the farmhouse was flung open, and Jan Osterling appeared, his face red with passion, a gun in his hand.

"Schellums! Rascals!" he cried. "You vos promise not to come back for an hour!"

"You're being watched!" said Dan. "And you'd better listen. The Adder's men are on the island. We saw them sneak up and look in at the window."

Jan's face changed from red to white. "Wait!" he said. "Wait von minute!"

He went hurriedly back into the house, and disappeared for some time. Then he came to the door and called the boys in. The big room was in order, and nothing unusual was to be seen.

Jan's eyes had a dangerous glint in them. He looked over the boys cautiously.

"A secret dot I haf kept all my life is found, and by der last people in der world dat I would haf to know it!"

"You mean the Blacks, captain?" said Dan. "Ay, we know what they are!"

"Ha!" returned Jan. "Yes, dey vos enemies of yours, too! And do you know mine secret as well?"

"I believe we do," said Dan, after a pause. "We thought we'd dreamed it at first; it seemed so queer. But last night, if it wasn't a dream, we saw you

handling a pile of gold two feet high on that table there!"

The old man sank into a chair. "I got to trust you. See—if dose men get von liddle chance, dey get dot gold. I fear not dem, but der Black f'leet will know."

"Did they see it all?" asked Buck.

"No; der money under der floor I had not out. It vos here"—he opened the lower part of an old grandfather clock—"dat I bring out der money dey see. It vos not mooch—about two hundred pounds. I had von half on der table. Der oder half vos plain to see in der clock. Der door vos open. Dey know all dot, of course."

"Then you'd better shift the money somewhere else, pretty quick," said Dan.

"No, I leave it dere. If by chance dey get in dey think it vos all. But onder der floor—I trust you boys"—he lowered his voice to a whisper—"is more than five dousand pounds! You vunder dot I keep it here? I tell you—I must have somedings to play mit!" His eyes gleamed again. "It vos lonely here on der island, and I lofe mine money. It is not all. Dere is ten dousand pounds more in der bank at Utrecht!"

"Now, I tell you vot you do for me. I get dis money away to-morrow. But if anydings should happen to me beforehand, you defend der money, and gif it to mine nephew, who came to-day. He lif at Urterhuisen. You promise?"

"We promise," said Buck.

"Goot! Now, because you know my secret, und help me, you shall haf your share. See here!" Jan drew a piece of paper from a slide in the clock-case. "You see dose bearings? Dey give der marks for five dousand pounds more, buried in one iron box in der dunes, near where you come ashore. Last night, ven you shipwrecked, you crawl over five dousand pounds in gold! Ha, ha, ha!"

Jan was excited. His voice rang through the room, and he waved the paper before the boys' eyes.

"Steady!" whispered Dan, thrusting the paper aside. "Someone's outside listening."

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A savage, unkempt head, the eyes alight with cunning, showed for a moment at the window.

Dan and Buck sprang out through the door, but found nobody. The man had slipped away.

"Come back!" commanded Jan, as the boys were about to go in search. "Come back, I say! No one must leave der house yet!"

The boys returned reluctantly.

"Ve must not separate till ve haf decided," said Jan. "It vos easy to hide on der island. It will be hard to find dem. But if you had to go mit der gold, you would take dot sailing-boat mit leeboards dot you see dis morning by der landing-stage vere my nephew come."

"She'll be useful, anyway. But haven't you any better weapons than these old crocks, captain?" said Buck, indicating the ancient guns on the wall.

Jan chuckled. He pressed a spring in the wall, and an oak panel flew open. Inside were half a dozen good Mauser rifles, as many six-shooters and two open cases of greased cartridges. All of them old war stores—many years old, but sound.

"Mit dose," he said, "in dis old farmhouse, you could keep off a regiment, if dey had no big guns. Der shutters inside are bullet-proof mit loopholes."

He showed them how easily the house could be defended, and Dan, who had a natural turn for strategy, took it all in.

"But all this is only in case of need," concluded the old man. "Dere vos nodings to fear from dose two rascals. Vot I fear is dat dey find means to let der oders know. Den ve have thirty men against us, and—"

"The boat!" exclaimed Dan. "They will take her, and warn the Blacks."

"I am a fool!" cried Jan, starting up and tearing his hair. "Boy, you have hit it. Der boat is der danger. If ve had dose rascals on der island alone ve can hunt dem down like wild pig. See! You both go at once, and stave her in! I haf tools here and wood. You can mend her enough to sail to der mainland after. Quick—go!"

Dan and Buck raced off, making their way with all speed towards the inner side of the island. The twilight was rapidly falling. They had not realised that, worn out by the hardships of the night before, it was past noon before they were out of bed, and much had been done since then. When they reached the beach it was dark.

"Hope they haven't scooted already," said Buck. "It's the first thing they'd do, now they know that we're on to the game."

"It strikes me it will be the best thing for old Jan if they have," said Dan, as he sprinted along the beach. "We could take the gold safely to the mainland at once, and bring reinforcements off to trap the Blacks when they come."

"That's all very well. But how could we get off without a boat? That nephew only comes twice a week with his craft. You know how the squadron's organised. They'd be down on us in two days. Steady! Here's the boat!"

The craft was safe. She was a beamy, fore-decked sailing-boat with a short, stout mast.

"Good!" said Dan. "Get a big stone and stave her."

But stones were scarce on the sandy shore, and in the darkness it was some time before they found one—about a hundred yards from the boat.

"Bear a hand here," said Buck. "It's too big for one to lift."

The two chums were about to heave up the stone, when a sound that chilled the very blood in their veins broke the silence of the night. It rang fearfully through the stillness, distant, but clear—a shriek of mortal agony. Then all was quiet.

Dan snatched up a boat-hook.

"Quick!" cried Buck. "Back to the house! Never mind the boat! That was old Jan screaming!"

The two chums rushed back to the house.

"Steady! Go quietly!" said Dan, as they reached the outer fence. "Might be a trap!"

Swiftly but silently they stole to the door. Hoarse voices sounded within, and the chink of coin.

With a heavy kick Buck sent the door flying open, and the boys rushed in. Their worst fears were realised. Lying unconscious on the floor was old Jan Osterling. The two Blacks were looting the room, and squabbling over the gold on the table. They sprang up as the boys entered.

In a moment a knife gleamed in the hand of the taller man; a savage oath broke from his lips, and he rushed at Dan.

Buck made a wild swipe at him with the heavy boat stretcher that he held gripped in his fist. It struck the attackers' wrist, and the knife went flying across the room.

That blow, swift as it was, saved Dan's life. The man staggered back against the table with a yelp of pain, upsetting it, and sending the gold pieces rolling across the floor.

Dan, blind with rage, drove his boat-hook at the other man, who dodged it and bolted out of the room, squealing with fear. Panic seized both men. Greed had driven them to attack a defenceless man, but neither of them had any stomach for a fight unless the odds were in their favour.

The man with the injured wrist, finding himself deserted, made one bound for the door, and dashed away into the night.

Buck and Dan, taking no count of the risk, rushed blindly after them.

But in the windy darkness outside, black as the pit, they lost sight of the fugitives, who had scattered and run in different directions.

After a vain chase towards the shore Buck pulled up, panting.

"No good! They'll hide up till daylight. We might stumble on to 'em and get knifed before we know it. Got to get back an' see if we can save old Jan."

"Beasts!" sobbed Dan, fighting for breath.

"Never thought they'd turn tail like that. Jake Rebow wouldn't have done so," said Buck grimly. "Lucky for us they did, though. They couldn't have had any guns on them—those two. I hope they haven't done for the old boy. Expect he put up a fight."

The two chums hurried back to the house. Old Jan, lying prone on the stone floor, stirred and muttered as they came in.

They knelt by his side, and the old man opened his eyes feebly.

"I'm going, lads!" he said, in a weak voice. "Dey got me dis time."

"Is there nothing we can do?" groaned Dan. "Get some brandy, Buck, and tear four strips from a sheet. Where are you hurt, captain?"

"No goot—no goot!" said the old Dutchman, with a faint smile. "I vas called for der last voyage. I fetch mine moorings in another place to-night. Stay by me till I go."

The boys tore up a sheet, and tried to bind the old man's wounds. But it was plain from the first that human aid was useless. The tough life in the fine old fellow's sturdy frame made a brave struggle to hold its own, but inch by inch it ebbed.

"You not forget your promise?" said Jan feebly. "You not forget?"

"Never fear, captain. We'll see it through," said Dan, trying to keep down the lump in his throat.

They brought pillows, and made the old man as comfortable as might be on the floor. Any attempt to raise him to the bed gave him such pain that they had to desist.

"Never mind," said Jan, with a groan.

The old man's hands began to stray restlessly over the floor beside him, and as they clutched at the gold pieces that lay strewn about, his eyes brightened through the film of death that was creeping over them.

"Goot!" he murmured. "So I should wish to die, mit der feel of der red gold in my hands—so! I lie in it! It is all around! See, boys, it is the colour of blood itself, und it eases der pain of death!"

"It is not for mineself I lofe der gold. It is for mine nephew—der son of mine only sister—und his fair young wife, und der liddle nipper dot shall call me oncle. Poor old Uncle Jan!"

"It is all for dem. You will see dey get it, boys, in spite of all der scoundrels of der Black Fleet—all except der five dousand pounds. Dat you keep. You haf der paper? Goot! Und now I go!"

Taking a handful of gold in each fist, the grim old Dutchman clenched his bony fingers upon it, and then passed peacefully away.

As the boys lifted the lifeless body of Jan Osterling on to the bed, a shower of gold coins fell from each limp hand and jingled on the floor, as though in mockery of human desires.

"Stay by him, Dan, and guard the house," said Buck, in a low voice. "I must go to the landing-stage and see after the boat."

"I'll come, too," said Dan. "I'm not letting you go alone. There is nothing to be done here now poor Jan's gone. And if they find you they'll be two to one."

"Come on, then!" said Buck. "It's our last chance. If they capture the boat, we're done!"

Away they scudded, tired and worn-out, sick with the horror they had seen.

Panting and weary, they arrived at the little wharf that looked out upon the waste of waters.

The boat was gone!

All Alone!

THE last thread that bound the boys to the living world was broken. The spies of the Black Fleet had vanished.

Round the little wharf were the tracks of heavy sea-boats. A long furrow in the sand showed where the keel of the boat had ploughed through it when the murderers of Jan Osterling had launched her. There was no sound amid the darkness save the distant whistle of curlews and the weary crying of the sea.

"Alone!" said Dan, staring into the darkness.

"Ay, alone," returned Buck grimly, "unless you count the sea-birds. Alone, with ten thousand pounds and a dead man, on a spit of sand! Well, there's work before us. If we can't get off before they bring the Blacks down on us, we look like going the same way as Jan Osterling."

"Let's light a bonfire, and see if we can't show 'em on the mainland that something's wrong," suggested Dan. "They'll send a boat off to us."

"We'll try. Though I'm afraid the mainland doesn't worry its head much about Baltrum Island. You go back to the house an' get some straw from the barn, while I collect some o' this driftwood."

Dan went off on his errand, and by the time he got back to the wharf, Buck had piled a good heap of dry wood on the top of a tall sandhill. Both boys heaped the straw round it and made a large stack of wreck-timber, with which the inner beach of the island—unlike the sea-front—was strewn. A match was then put to the straw, and in ten minutes a bonfire that shed a red glare all along the beaches was crackling and roaring on the dunes.

"That'll fetch 'em, if anything can!" said Buck. "But we mustn't depend on it. We must take a turn round the island, an' see if there's any vessel's light in sight, or any signs o' the spies' boat. Then we'll go back to the house an' clear up."

Dan shuddered a little. His nerves were of iron, but the thought of their late host lying there was awesome.

The boys were glad, tired as they were, to walk briskly round the island, keeping a look-out for any signs of help or notice. They found none.

At last they returned to the house, and, by the flickering light of the wood fire on the hearth, that cast strange shadows over the great room, they put things shipshape. The scattered gold was gathered up and stowed in the clock-case, and the furniture put back in its place.

"We'd better have a look at this job of ours," said Buck, when they had finished, "so as to be able to get the money out when it's needed."

They swept the sand from the centre of the floor. There was nothing to show that any space lay below. But one of the flagstones tilted up an inch when stepped on at one corner. The tipped-up edge showed marks and scratches.

"That's the dodge, no doubt," said Dan. "I saw a crossbar in the clock-case."

Inserting the thin end under the stone they managed to raise it. A dry, dark coffin-shaped recess lay beneath, filled with small canvas pouches.

Buck pulled one out, and cut the cord at its neck. A stream of Dutch and German gold pieces poured out.

"So far, so good," said Dan, replacing the pieces. "Now we know how the land lies. Jan was right. Shove the bag back and replace the stone. Scatter the sand over it again, and nobody will be any the wiser. What next?"

"Sleep," said Buck. "We're played out. And goodness knows what lies ahead of us! You take the farther bunk. I don't want to trouble poor old Jan. I'll camp on the hearth with a blanket."

It was not long before the boys sank into a deep slumber.

(Will the morning bring hope for the stranded chums, or will Rebow and his cutthroat crew turn up again? See next week's thrill-packed chapters, chums.)

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY!

(Continued from page 24.)

He laughed.

"The old squire buried the doubloons safe, and spread a story that they had sunk with the galleon," he said. "He feared that the good Queen Bess, and her good minister, the Lord Burleigh, would want—what you call—a whack?"

"Deep old card!" grinned Bob.

"And my good ancestor Marco found the spot, and removed the doubloons to a safer spot, known only to himself, while the squire was away in London at one time!" drawled Count Zero. "Of this the squire knew nothing, or probably he would have passed his sword through my ancestor. Afterwards, he sought for his treasure in vain—and the story goes that his phantom is still seeking it!"

"So that's how it was!" said Vernon-Smith.

"That, little signor, is how it was," smiled the count. "And for centuries old Marco's papers have lain unheeded in the palazzo at Milan. Few read them, and those few did not heed so strange and wild a story, but—" He laughed again. "In these days of the New Italy we are more enterprising. Fascismo has waked us up. Gold is needed by my country. That is why I am here. There is a war in Africa; there are what you call the Sanctions of the League of Nations; trade is almost dead, and only with gold can Italy buy what she needs—and at such a time 30,000 golden doubloons would be very useful. A drop in the bucket—but every drop counts. And these doubloons, little signor, I will yet place at the service of my Duca—if it costs me my life, and many other lives."

The juniors looked at him curiously. That the man was no common crook they had been aware, though he had acted with ruthless unscrupulousness.

Evidently, in his own eyes, he was a patriot—serving his country.

He was a Fascist—a follower of Mussolini.

He made little distinction between right and wrong in serving the cause he had at heart.

"Well," said the Bounder, "whether the jolly old doubloons are ever found or not, I fancy you'll never get your paws on them, Mr. Zero. They'll never be spent on bombs to drop on the Abyssinians."

"Forse che si, forse che no!" said Count Zero, with another shrug of his shoulders. "Perhaps yes—perhaps no!"

Vernon-Smith slipped the parchment into his pocket.

"We may be able to make something of that later," he said, "though that sportsman hasn't made much of it so far. We've got lots of time ahead—and Count Zero won't barge in again. As soon as it's light we're going to walk

him across the moor to Pilverton and give him in charge of the police."

"Vero?" smiled the count.

"You've asked for it—and you'll get it!" said the Bounder. "You're wanted by the police on a charge of kidnapping, and they'll take care of you long enough to give us a free hand here. If you've damaged old Dan! you'll have to answer for that, too."

"You will find the old cook locked in his room," smiled the count. "He has not been harmed. Why should I harm him? I imagine that he is in a bad temper, judging by what he has said at intervals through the keyhole. But you will find him safe."

Dawn was brightening the windows now. There was still no sign of the man Beppo; the man probably was still in the cave, and certainly he had no suspicion that his master had fallen into the hands of the Greyfriars party.

Bob Cherry threw open the great door; the sunrise glimmered into the dusky old hall.

"Better get that man safe to the police, sir," said John Redwing. "It's light enough to get across the moor."

The Bounder nodded.

His face was very bright now. He had won the game against the man from Italy. A tramp across the moor to Pilverton, and the police would take charge of Count Zero—to stand his trial for the kidnapping at Greyfriars. The Christmas party at Polpelly would carry on, unmolested further; and the rest of the holidays could be spent in a search for the lost doubloons. Whether the treasure was found or not, the Bounder had beaten his rival—and that was a keen satisfaction to Smithy.

"Take care that he doesn't bolt, you fellows," said Vernon-Smith; "though I don't think he'd get far with his hands tied."

He stepped towards the count, who was still leaning carelessly on the oak-panelled wall by the side of the old portrait.

"You are so sure of me?" asked Count Zero, with a glimmer of mockery in his eyes. "But I am not yet at Pilverton, little signor; your dull-headed police have not yet found for me a cell!"

"I don't think you'll get away, you rascal!" said Vernon-Smith. "We shall keep your paws tied till we hand you over."

"Eyen with tied hands, perhaps I am not powerless," said the count, smiling. "My wrists are very tightly tied, but I can use my fingers—and I have been using them, amico, while you have been what you call wagging the chin. I thank you for permitting me to lean on the wall in this particular spot, which is well known to me, and now—Addio!"

There was a sudden click.

The oak panel behind the count

opened like a door, disappearing behind him, and leaving a tall cavity.

Instantly Count Zero flung himself backwards through the opening and vanished.

For a split second the juniors stood transfixed.

Then the Bounder, with a roar of rage, leaped forward in pursuit. He knew now that the count, as he leaned on the wall with his bound hands behind him, had been feeling for a secret spring with his slim, nimble fingers—and all unconsciously the juniors had given him time to find it.

"After him!" roared the Bounder.

He bounded at the cavity in the old oak wall.

The next moment he staggered back, as the heavy oak panel slammed in his face. It clicked shut, and the Bounder gave a yell as the hard oak tapped on his nose.

In a few seconds the juniors were hammering furiously at the panel.

But it remained immovable. The Bounder beat on it with his clenched fists in savage rage. But it did not open. From behind the wall there came the sound of a mocking laugh.

It was the last they heard of Count Zero.

"Get an axe!" shouted the Bounder furiously.

The old oak, thick and strong as it was, shattered under the blows of an axe wielded in the strong hands of John Redwing. The ancient panel flew in fragments. The Bounder scrambled through the opening. But he knew that he would be too late.

Beyond the shattered panel was a stone passage, but it was blocked at the end by solid stone. The count had escaped, and the massive stone that closed the passage like a door was fastened on the farther side. Already, it could not be doubted, Count Zero was hurrying away by some unknown tunnel to rejoin his confederate in Black Rock Cave.

The Bounder came back into the hall gritting his teeth.

"We're not done with that villain yet!" he growled. "But we're sticking it out and seeing it through!"

"We are—we is!" agreed Bob Cherry.

All the Christmas party at Polpelly were agreed on that—though they little guessed at the moment the wild and strange adventures that lay before them in the ancient mansion that echoed to the boom of the Atlantic.

THE END.

(The final story in this splendid Christmas series is better than ever, chums. It's entitled: "GALLEON GOLD!" Watch out for it in next Saturday's MAGNET!)

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