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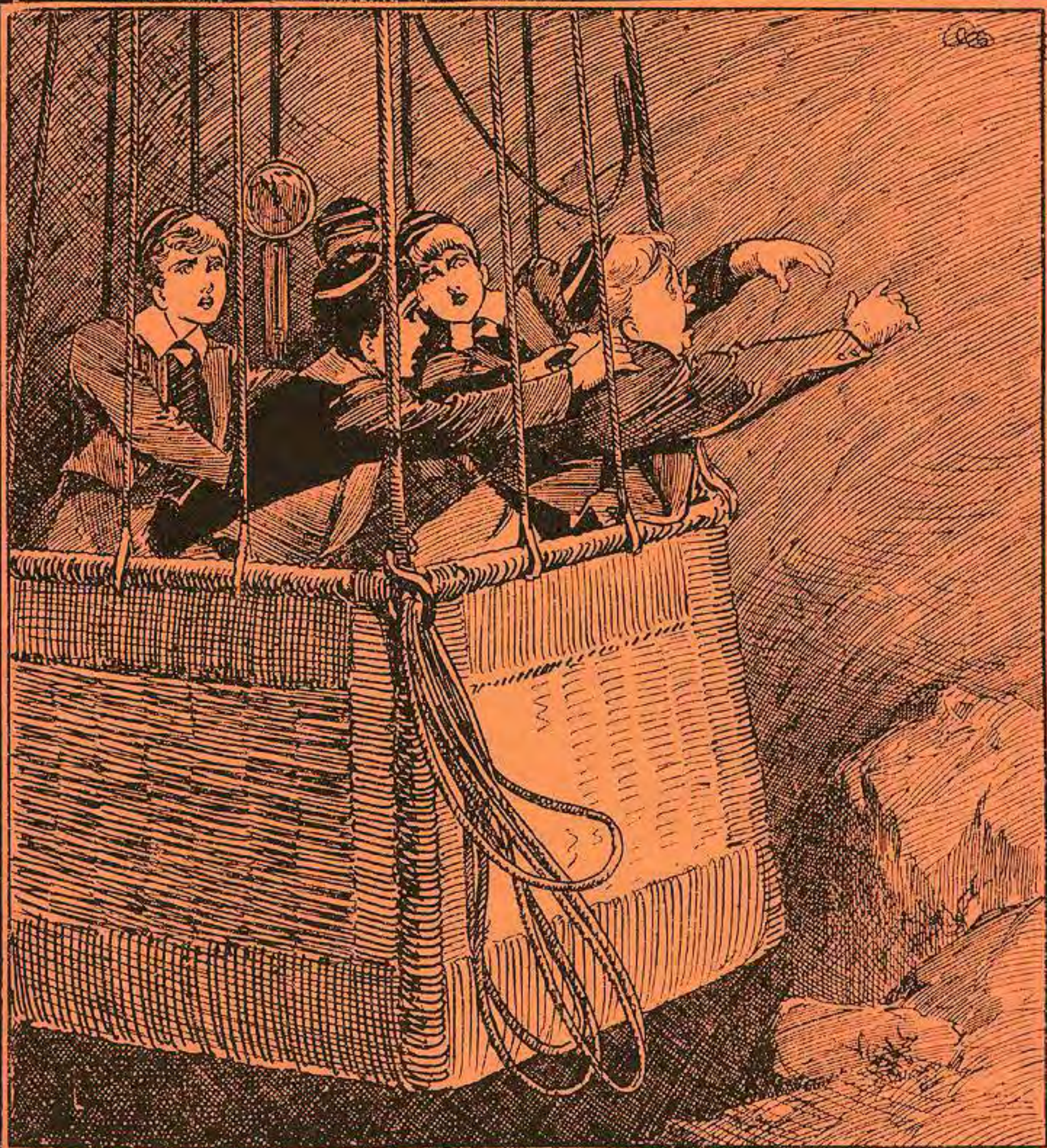
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NO. 111
VOL. 4.

A School Tale of
Harry Wharton & Co.

"THE GREYFRIARS FLIGHT."

By Frank
Richards



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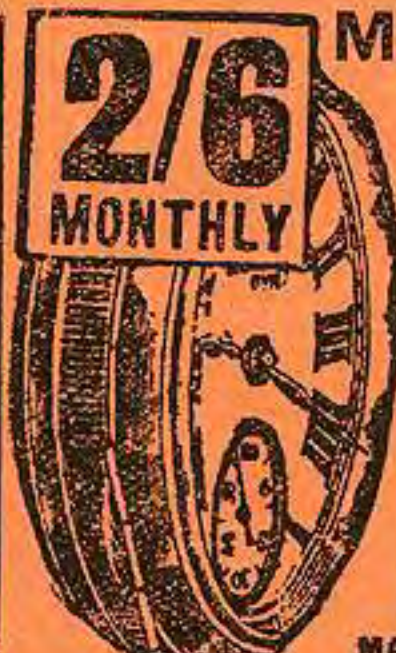
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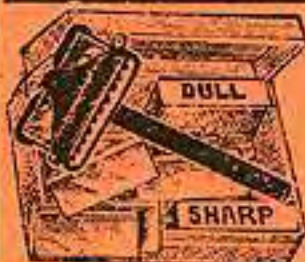
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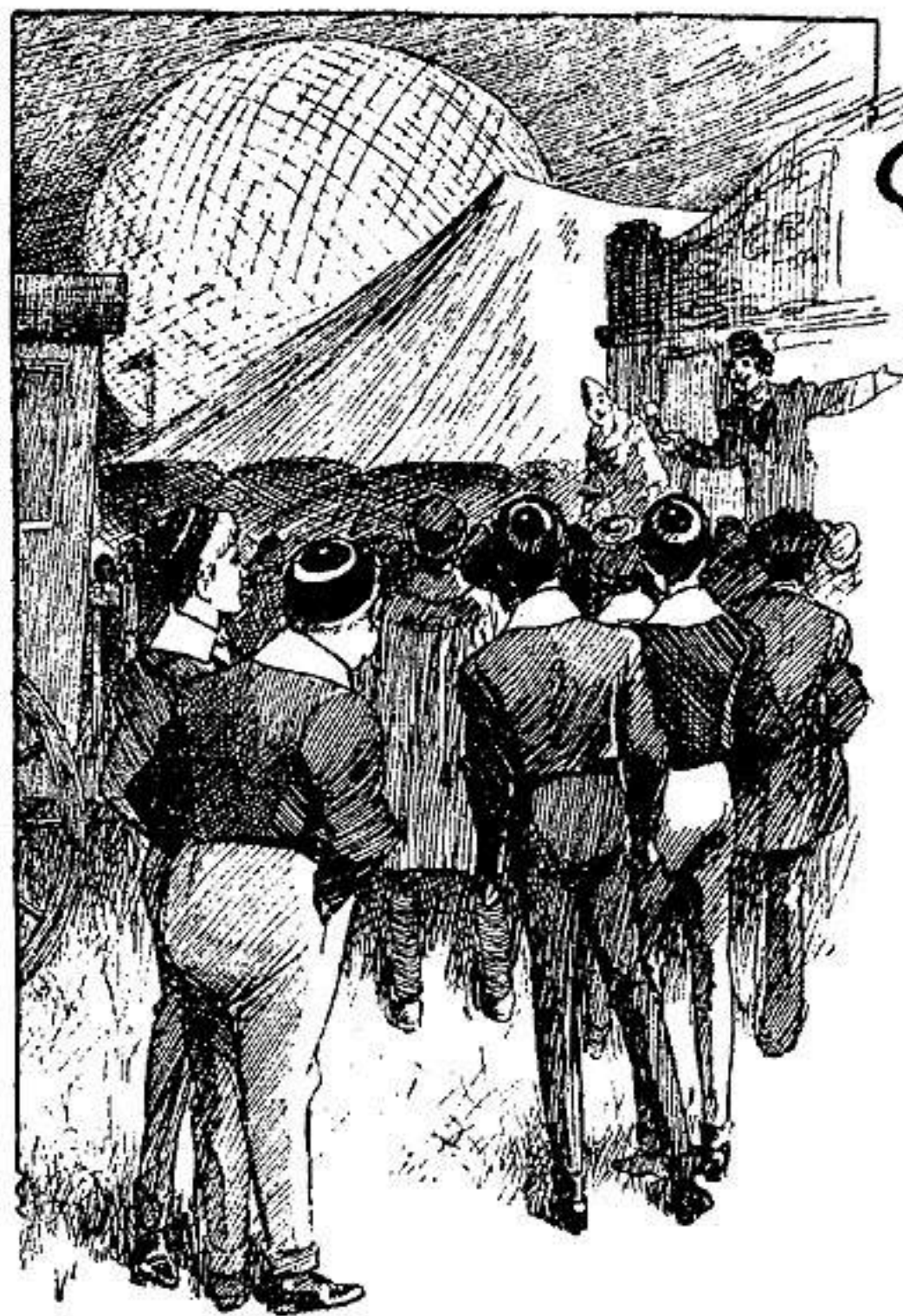
YEARS (Dept. 18), COVENTRY

TO-DAY

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



The Greyfriars Flight

A Grand, Long, Complete

School Tale of

Harry Wharton & Co.

BY

FRANK RICHARDS.



THE FIRST CHAPTER. Eight-and-Fourpence.

"I've got an idea!"
"Rats!"

Four voices made that reply to Billy Bunter's statement, with singular unanimity. And Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, the Nabob of Bhanipur, added, in his peculiar but emphatic English, that the ratfulness was terrific.

Billy Bunter blinked at the Famous Four through his big spectacles. Harry Wharton, Bob Cherry, Nugent, and Hurree Singh were sunning themselves on the steps, taking a well earned rest after some arduous football practice. The afternoon sun fell warmly into the Close, where the old elms

were growing greener every day, under the genial influence of spring.

Billy Bunter had just come out of the house, blinking round in search of Harry Wharton & Co., and he had nearly run into them on the steps. Bob Cherry's powerful grasp stopped him, and shoved him back breathless against the balustrade, and there Billy Bunter gasped out the piece of information that the juniors received so disrespectfully.

"I say, you fellows," went on Bunter, unheeding, "it's a really ripping idea—"

"Rats!"

"It's no good telling us you've got an idea, Bunty," said Harry Wharton, with a shake of the head, "we're willing to believe anything in reason, but—"

"But that's too thick," said Bob Cherry.

"Exactly!" said Nugent. "Having an idea implies having brains of some sort, which is as much as asking us to believe that you have brains, which—"

"Which is absurd," said Harry.

"The absurdity is terrific."

"Oh, really, you know—"

"Tell us something a little less steep," urged Nugent.

"We'll believe anything in reason. Tell us your postal order's come, for instance. But don't pile it on too thick."

"Look here—"

"Rats!"

Billy Bunter blinked indignantly. It was hard that the only really clever fellow at Greyfriars should have his ideas received in this rude way; and Bunter felt that it was so.

"I say, you fellows, I've really got an idea," he said pathetically. "I wish you'd stop rotting, and listen for a minute. You've heard about that circus chap in Friardale who is making balloon ascents—"

"We're going down to see him this evening," said Harry Wharton.

"Good! I'll come!"

"Ahem! Will you?"

"Certainly," said Bunter. "I'll come with you chaps with pleasure. I shall have to ask you to pay for my admission to the ground, because I've been disappointed about a postal order, and I'm rather short of money just at present. But my idea was really suggested to me by hearing about the balloon in Friardale. You know what a dab I am at anything scientific—"

"My hat!"

"I'm accustomed to petty jealousy here," said Bunter warmly, "but I really think, Wharton, that you oughtn't to try to belittle a fellow just because he's cleverer than you are. It's mean."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"My idea is, why shouldn't we make balloon ascents ourselves," said Bunter. "With my turn for mechanics and— and things, we ought to be able to make a balloon. I would give the directions, and you chaps could perform the manual labour part of the business, you know—and I think I should have to ask you to provide the capital, too, as I'm rather short of money."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at. You needn't be afraid of losing your money, as we could charge the fellows a bob a time for making ascents in the balloon, and get it back that way. In fact, we could make a handsome profit, and coin money."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, do stop cackling! I could make a splendid balloon for about a hundred pounds—"

"A hundred which?"

"Pounds! If Wharton were to write to his uncle, and ask him to find the money—"

"Yes, I think I can see myself doing it," said Wharton, laughing. "I should like to see Colonel Wharton's face when he received the letter, too! It would be worth something. Can't you make a hundred pence do, Bunter?"

Billy Bunter wrinkled his forehead thoughtfully.

"Lemme see—a hundred pence is four-and-eightpence—"

"Eight-and-fourpence, you ass!"

"H'm—so it is! I'm not very clever at arithmetic, you know. Great brains can't bring themselves down to these petty details of everyday life. My genius—"

"Your what?"

"My genius is too soaring for that sort of thing. However, perhaps I could make the eight-and-fourpence do."

And Billy Bunter held out his fat hand. Harry Wharton inspected it, as if it were some curious zoological specimen that was held out for his examination.

"Well?" said Bunter.

"Well?" said Wharton.

"I'm waiting."

Wharton scanned the extended hand again. Bob Cherry screwed a shilling into his eye, in imitation of an eyeglass, and examined it, too.

"Dirty!" said Harry.

"Nails neglected," said Bob.

"Nothing to brag of, or show about," went on Wharton. "Better wear a glove, and the thicker the better—or else wash it. Washing is a good thing."

"Oh, really—"

"Scrubbing is good," said Bob Cherry. "Scraping's better, in this case. That's my opinion."

"Oh, don't be funny!"

"I've delivered my opinion, and you can take it away," said Harry.

Bunter blinked at him.

"Look here, Wharton, I'm waiting for the eight-and-fourpence."

"For the what?"

"A hundred pence is eight-and-fourpence. I'll try and make it do. I suppose you're not going to break your word?"

"Break my word!" said Harry staring.

"Yes. You promised me—"

"Why, you young sweep, I did nothing of the sort. I was joking, and—"

"That's all very well," said Bunter. "You distinctly asked me if I could make eight-and-fourpence do. I'll make it do. I'd do more than that to oblige a fellow I know. I hope you're not going back on your word, Wharton. I know you had a good tip to-day from your aunt, and I don't think you ought to be mean."

"But—"

"If you're going to break your word, I think it's dishonourable—"

"My only hat!"

"But I think you're too honourable a chap for that," said Bunter. "I think you'll pay me what you owe me."

"Owe you!" gasped Harry.

"Yes; eight-and-fourpence."

Nugent and Bob Cherry grinned. Harry's face was a study. Whether Bunter was as stupid as he pretended to be was a question, but he certainly appeared to be very much in earnest. Wharton felt in his pockets.

"Well," he said at last, "you deserve it for your nerve."

"If you like to make it an even ten shillings, I'll let you have the balance back out of my postal order to-night—"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"I'm waiting, Wharton."

Harry drew out a handful of silver. He had had a tip of a couple of sovereigns that day, from Miss Wharton, his affectionate aunt, and Bunter knew it. Billy Bunter always seemed to know when a fellow had money. He had what Bob Cherry described as a nose for cash, and it was really mysterious how Bunter always found out when there was a chance, however slim, of getting money out of anybody.

"Eight-and-fourpence," said Harry. "Here, you can have it. I'm blessed if I know what I waste money on you for, too."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Still, if ever a chap deserved anything for his cheek, you're that chap," said Harry. "Here you are!"

Bunter's fat fingers closed on the silver.

"You wouldn't like to make it the even ten shillings—"

"Oh, rats!"

"Of course, this is only a loan. Will you have it back out of my postal order to-morrow, or shall I put it down to the old account?"

"Buzz off, you ass!"

"Oh, really—"

Harry Wharton lifted his foot wrathfully, and Billy Bunter beat a hurried retreat down the School House steps. Micky Desmond was just coming up the steps, and the short-sighted Owl of the Remove ran right into him. There was a bump as Bunter sat down on the steps, and a general clinking as the shillings scattered on all sides.

"Ow!" gasped Bunter.

"Faith, and whom have you been robbing intirely?" exclaimed Micky, in astonishment.

"Ow!"

Billy Bunter scrambled after the scattered coins. Snoop rushed up to help him, and promptly placed his foot upon three of the shillings, which had fallen together. Micky Desmond grinned and passed on.

"Ow!" gasped Bunter. "I've dropped my money. Desmond, you beast, you might help a chap pick up his money!"

But Desmond was gone.

"I'll help you, Bunter," said Snoop. "How much did you drop?"

"Six shillings and four pennies."

"I'll help you."

"Thanks, you're awfully decent, Snoop! I'm a little bit short-sighted, you know," said Billy Bunter.

Snoop grinned. Billy Bunter was extremely short-sighted, and his enormous glasses did not seem to help his vision much. The silver was glimmering almost under his nose, but he did not see it. Snoop, the cad of the Remove was "on the make," as he generally was. He pointed out coin after coin to Bunter, who picked them up, till he had three shillings and four pence in his fat hand again.

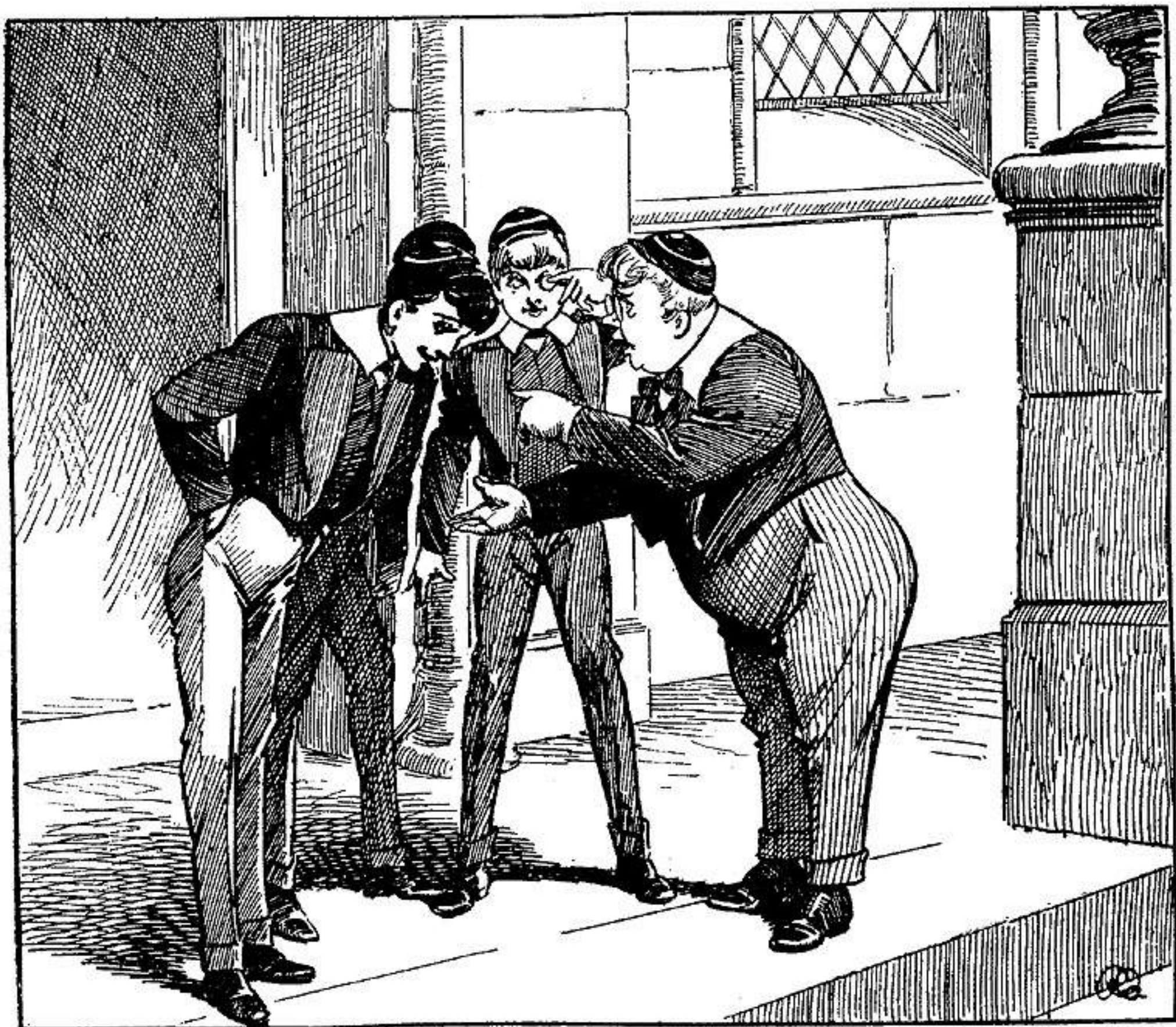
He blinked round for the others, which were safe under Snoop's boot.

"There ought to be three more bobs," he said anxiously.

"Can't you see them, Snoopey?"

"No," said Snoop; which was true enough, for they were invisible under his foot.

"Oh, I say, look for them, you know! I'm a trifle short-sighted."



"I'm waiting!" repeated Billy Bunter, holding out his hand. Bob Cherry screwed a shilling into his eye, in imitation of an eyeglass, and examined it carefully. "Nails neglected!" he said critically.

"Certainly. I suppose I can have one of them if I find the lot."

"Oh, really, Snoop—"

"Find them yourself, then."

"You might help a chap. I'll stand you a couple of tarts at the tuckshop, Snoop."

"Rats!"

"Look here—"

"Look for them yourself, you mean porpoise!"

"You can have one of them if you find them," said Bunter.

"Right you are!"

Snoop removed his foot, and uttered an exclamation.

"Here they are!"

"Good!" said Bunter, holding out his hand. "Lemme see. I said you could have sixpence, didn't I, Snoop?"

"You said I could have a bob."

"Oh, really, I don't think you ought to be mean, Snoopey."

"I like that, you mean worm! Why—"

"Well, you can have one, I suppose," said Bunter, with a sigh. "I'm pretty meanly treated by everybody. I—"

Snoop pocketed one of the shillings, and handed over the other two. Then he hurried away, but a strong grip on his collar swung him back. He gasped.

"Bunter, you ass, why—"

The cad of the Lower Fourth broke off. It was not Billy Bunter who had grasped him, but Harry Wharton, the captain of the Remove.

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 111.

NEXT WEEK: "THE FIRST AT GREYFRIARS."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

No Credit for Bunter.

HARRY WHARTON tightened his grasp upon the collar of the cad of the Remove. His brow was dark as he looked at Snoop, and Snoop instinctively shrank from him.

"Lemme go!" he muttered.

"Give Bunter his shilling!"

"But—but—"

"It's all right, Wharton," said Billy Bunter. "He's a mean beast, but I said he could have the shilling."

"I found them for Bunter," said Snoop.

"You didn't find them," said Harry; "you had your foot on them all the time! We all saw you!"

"Yes, rather!" said Nugent.

"The ratherfulness is terrific!"

"But—but—"

"Well, of all the mean beasts!" said Bunter indignantly. "Fancy a chap playing a mean trick like that. Really, you fellows—"

"You will not keep the shilling," said Harry. "You were deliberately hiding it from Bunter, and then you pretended to find it for him. It was no better than stealing."

"Look here—" began Snoop savagely.

"Give it back to Bunter."

"Yes, rather!" chimed in Bunter. "You're not entitled to it, Snoop; you're a swindler! If there's anything I can't

A Double-Length Tale of Harry Wharton & Co. By FRANK RICHARDS.

possibly stand in a fellow it's meanness! Give me back my shilling, you rotter!"

"I won't!" snarled Snoop.

"You'd better!" said Harry.

"I won't!"

"Take his ankles, Bob!" said Wharton, shifting his grasp to Snoop's shoulders.

The sneak of the Remove wriggled, but he was as an infant in the grasp of the champion athlete of the Lower School. He was swung off the ground, with Harry grasping his shoulders and Bob Cherry his legs.

"Wh-wh-what are you going to do?" he gasped.

"Duck you in the fountain!" said Harry sternly.

"Oh! I—I—"

"Bring him along!"

"What-ho!"

"Lemme go!" yelled Snoop. "I—I won't be ducked! I—I'll give Bunter his shilling! Ow! I—I'll hand it over at once!"

"Then do so—sharp!"

Snoop was set down, and he extracted the shilling from his pocket, and sullenly handed it to Billy Bunter. The fat junior seized it at once.

"That's all right!" he said. "You're a mean beast, Snoop!"

"You can go!" said Wharton scornfully.

Snoop gave him a glance of bitter hatred.

"You—you bully!" he muttered. "You'll go too far one of these days; my turn will come! And—and if it does, I'll make you squirm!"

Wharton laughed contemptuously. The cad of the Remove slunk away, his face still dark with rage. Bunter rattled the silver in his pocket, and started off through the elms towards the school shop.

Bob Cherry clapped him on the shoulder.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Are you going to make the balloon?"

"The—the what?" stammered Bunter.

"The balloon!" grinned Bob. "Are you going to buy the materials in the tuckshop?"

Bunter coloured.

"Well, you—you see," he said hesitatingly, "I—I shall have to have a snack first, to keep up my strength. I've got a delicate constitution, you know, and I have to keep it up by constant nourishment, or I should have a breakdown."

"Well, a breakdown would do you good; any exercise in the form of dancing is good for fat people!" said Bob Cherry innocently.

"Oh, really, Cherry, you know I didn't mean that!" said Bunter. "I mean a physical breakdown, you know."

"Oh! Not a sort of cellar-flap?"

"Certainly not!"

And Billy Bunter hurried off, leaving Bob Cherry chuckling. The fat junior lost no time in getting to the tuckshop. Mrs. Mimble, the good dame who kept that establishment, frowned darkly as he came in. Bunter was not a welcome customer.

But as the fat junior slammed eight shillings and fourpence down on the little counter, Mrs. Mimble's face brightened up.

"Good-afternoon, Master Bunter!" she said, quite affably.

"Good-afternoon, Mrs. Mimble! You refused me credit this morning for a couple of twopenny tarts!" said Billy Bunter severely.

"Well, you see, Master Bunter—"

"I don't mind not having the tarts," said Bunter, not very truthfully; "but what I dislike is the slur on my honour!"

"You see—"

"I had a great mind to take my money down to Uncle Clegg's in the village, now that I'm in funds, Mrs. Mimble!"

"Oh, you wouldn't do that, Master Bunter!" said Mrs. Mimble, eyeing the eight shillings. "I have some nice fresh jam tarts, and I know how fond you are of them. I am sorry now that I didn't let you have the tarts this morning."

"Well, if you're sorry, that's all right!" said Bunter magnanimously. "What I didn't like was the implied doubt of my honour."

"Of course, I wouldn't doubt you for a moment, Master Bunter!"

"You'd let me have tick this afternoon if I needed it?"

"Oh, certainly!" said Mrs. Mimble, feeling that she was safe in saying that, with the heap of silver under her eyes.

Bunter swept the money back into his pocket.

"Oh, all right, then, Mrs. Mimble! Wharton really lent me this money to get some materials for a scientific experiment, but I felt I must have a snack. If you like to let me run up, say, five shillings, I'll settle out of my postal-order to-morrow!"

Mrs. Mimble's face seemed to freeze suddenly.

"Nonsense, Master Bunter!" she said, with asperity.

"Oh, really—"

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GORDON GAY. A Schoolboy Actor you will enjoy reading about in

"You can pay, and you must pay, or you will have nothing here!"

"But you said—"

"Never mind! I have no time to talk nonsense!" said Mrs. Mimble. "Do you want anything here, Master Bunter, or do you not? You are wasting my time!"

Bunter blinked at her with great indignation.

"I think you're a most unbusinesslike woman, Mrs. Mimble!" he exclaimed. "However, it's too great a fag to go down to the village. I'll have some tarts. I suppose I should be justified in spending half this money on a snack."

And Bunter started.

When Bunter began to eat, his appetite was regulated by the amount of money he had in his pockets at the time, and by no other consideration.

He kept on without a pause, and pork pies and apple turnovers and jellies and cream puffs and jam tarts all went down with great rapidity.

Mrs. Mimble stopped him when the bill reached exactly the sum of eight shillings and fourpence.

"Now, Master Bunter—"

"I'll have some more jam tarts, Mrs. Mimble—"

"But—"

"And some cream puffs—"

"But—"

"And some dough nuts—"

"Eight-and-fourpence, please, Master Bunter!"

"Eh?"

"Eight-and-fourpence!"

"You don't mean to say—"

"Yes, I do, Master Bunter!"

"Better let it run up to ten bob," said Bunter reflectively. "I'll settle the balance out of my postal-order to-morrow!"

"Nonsense, Master Bunter!"

"Oh, really, Mrs. Mimble—"

"Eight-and-fourpence, please!"

And Billy Bunter, who knew of old how useless it was to argue with Mrs. Mimble, or to get her to take his businesslike view of matters, paid up, and left the tuckshop rather disconsolately. He was feeling very well fed, but his funds were as low as ever now, and the scientific experiment in ballooning was evidently "off."

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Fun of the Fair.

"TIME to be off, kids!"

Six o'clock was striking from the clock-tower of Greyfriars. Harry Wharton & Co. rose from the tea-table in No. 1 Study.

The balloon ascents in the village were to begin at half-past six. There was easy time for the walk down to Friardale. During the visit of the travelling circus to the village many of the juniors had obtained leave to go down to Friardale, and among them were Harry Wharton & Co., who were going down together on this particular evening. A crowd of other fellows of various Forms were going, too.

The balloon ascents were made by torchlight—at all events, that was what the advertisements stated. As a matter of fact, the torchlight was provided by naphtha lamps.

It was very exciting to the village lads, and to the boys from Greyfriars, to see the balloon go up, and some extremely adventurous spirits had ascended in the car. As the charge for doing so was five shillings a head, however, the number of those who could afford to make the venture was necessarily small.

Harry Wharton & Co. had discussed the idea of going up in the balloon, and as Harry was in unusual funds just then, they had decided to do so. As the chums quitted the study Billy Bunter came along the passage.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Late for tea!" said Bob Cherry, who had been a guest in No. 1 Study for tea. "What's the matter—ill?"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Or have you been making that balloon?"

"You see, I wasn't able to do that," said Bunter. "I had to have a snack, and the money went, somehow! Besides, eight-and-fourpence wouldn't have gone very far, you know, in getting expensive materials. Upon the whole, I felt justified in spending it in keeping up my strength. After all, it's a chap's first duty to keep himself fit!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!"

"You won't keep yourself fit by gorging jam tarts, that's all!"

"I suppose a chap ought to know best what's good for him. That's really why I'm late for tea; but I'm ready for tea, if you chaps like to wait!"

"Rats!"

"Well, if you're starting now, I'll come."

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"Don't bother to come!" said Bob Cherry kindly. "Go in and have your tea!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Come on!" said Harry.

The chums of the Remove went downstairs, and Bunter went with them. The fat junior evidently did not intend to be left out of the expedition.

"I'm awfully interested in aeronautics," Billy Bunter explained, as they crossed the Close towards the gates. "I'm rather a dab at that sort of thing myself, you know, and I feel sure that if I had a chance I could easily beat Zeppelin and Bleriot and the Wright chaps. With a brain like mine—"

"There isn't another like yours in the wide world," said Bob Cherry. "If you want to find anything like your brain you'll have to go to a turnip-field for it."

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

A crowd of Removites were turning out at the gates. Snoop was there, with Bulstrode and Skinner, and he gave Harry Wharton a dark look. He had not forgotten the incident of the lost shilling. Harry did not even glance at him.

A flare of wavering light in a field outside the village caught the eyes of the juniors as they came nearer to Friar-dale.

It showed where the fair was. The "fun of the fair" was in full blast. In a big marquee a circus performance was going on, and the strains of a wheezy band proceeded from the tent. They mingled with the music ground out of a merry-go-round. There were cocoanut shies and swing-boats, and innumerable other attractions, but the great one was the balloon.

The juniors saw it at once as they entered the field.

It was returning from an ascent. An ascent only meant going up about a hundred yards, the length of the thick rope that was attached to the car, and the other end of which was fastened to a fence rail.

The balloon was captive all the time, and it was drawn to the earth again by the simple expedient of a half-dozen men hanging upon the rope and dragging it down.

The juniors stopped and looked on as the balloon was hauled in. The great gas-envelope was struggling and swaying, for there was a keen wind blowing towards the sea.

There were five or six persons in the car, and some of them were looking a little green and sea-sick as they stepped out when the balloon was made fast again.

"Now, gents!" sang out a hoarse voice. "Balloon ready to ascend! Take your seats, ladies and gentlemen!"

"Are we going, kids?"

"Oh, rather!" said Harry Wharton. "Four of us—that's a pound—"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"You don't want to come, Billy. It will make you sick, you know, after the way you've been gorging."

"Look here—"

"Besides, you've got no nerve—you'll be scared," said Harry, taking out a sovereign. "Four of us are going, please."

"Very good, sir! Step in, sir!"

The famous four stepped in.

Billy Bunter caught hold of the rim of the car and blinked indignantly at the chums of the Remove.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Oh, bosh! You'd better not come, Billy."

"Look here—"

"Sheer off!"

"I say—"

"Buzz off!"

"Here, I'm going up in this blessed balloon!" exclaimed Bulstrode of the Remove, striding up with Snoop and Skinner.

"You chaps coming?"

"Too jolly dear," said Skinner.

"Oh, I'll stand treat," said Bulstrode, with his most princely air.

"Good!"

"I—I don't think I'll come, thanks!" said Snoop nervously.

"I—I think I'd rather watch."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob Cherry. "He's afraid he would fall out."

Snoop gave him a bitter look.

"I'm not afraid," he said; "but—but—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows, don't be awfully mean!" urged Billy Bunter. "As I am studying aeronautics now, this is really the chance of a lifetime. I'll let you have the five bob back out of my postal-order to-morrow, Wharton."

"If you want to come you can," said Harry; "but I warn you that you won't like it. You have no nerve."

"Oh, really—"

"Well, shut up, and jump in!"

Billy Bunter clambered over the wicker rim. The wind caught the balloon and it swayed, and the car jerked violently, and Billy Bunter entered it head first. He rolled among the feet of the juniors.

"Oh!" he roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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NEXT WEEK: "THE FIRST AT GREYFRIARS."

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ONE
PENNY.

"Ow! I'm hurt!"

"Well, that's not the way to enter a balloon," said Nugent. "You ought to put the other end in first."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow! Oh!"

"Here, let's get in!" said Bulstrode. "Come on, Skinner!"

"Excuse me, gentlemen, only six can go up at a time," said the showman.

"Oh, rats! One of you chaps get out, then."

"Rats!" said Bob Cherry cheerfully.

"Wait till next time," said Snoop. "You don't want to go up with that crew, do you?"

"Eh? What's that?" said Bob Cherry, and he reached out and took hold of Snoop's ear. The sneak of the Remove dodged back quickly, but not quite quickly enough.

He gave a wail of anguish as Bob's sinewy finger and thumb closed upon his ear.

"Now, then," said Bob Cherry, "sing it over again to me!"

"Ow!"

"What did you call us?"

"Ow!"

"Take it back, my son, or you'll come up with us—by the ear!" said Bob.

"Yow! I—I was only joking!" wailed Snoop.

"Then the sooner you drop the humorous line of business the better for you," said Bob Cherry.

Snoop stepped back out of reach, rubbing his ear, which was crimson. Bulstrode and Skinner grinned, and Snoop had no sympathy. Bob Cherry shook his finger at him.

"Don't be funny any more," he advised. "Your kind of humour isn't likely to be fully appreciated, you know."

"I say, you fellows—"

"Shut up, Bunter!"

"But I say, wouldn't it be a good idea to take some grub up with us, and have a feed up there?" said Bunter. "It would be a novel experience."

"Rats!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"'Nother gentleman wanted," said the showman. "'Nother gentleman—only five bob. Now, then, sir!"

He addressed Bulstrode. The burly Removite shook his head.

"I'm waiting for next time."

"You, sir?"

"I'm not going," said Snoop.

"Let go!" said the showman. "Hold fast, gentlemen!"

"Right you are!"

The rope was released, and the balloon rose into the air.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Adrift.

BILLY BUNTER gave a convulsive gasp, and clutched the wicker rim of the car, as the balloon rose. The other juniors held on without alarm as the car swayed and swung, but Billy Bunter was terribly scared. He clung to the rim of the car with one hand and to a rope with the other, his spectacles sliding down his nose and his eyes blinking wide open over them.

"Oh!" he gasped. "The—the thing's going over!"

"It's all right, Billy!"

"I—I think I'm falling out!"

"Bosh!"

"P-p-put my glasses straight, will you?" mumbled Billy Bunter. "I shall fall out and get killed if I let go! I suppose you don't want to see me killed?"

"Certainly not!" said Bob Cherry. "I've no objection, of course, to its being done, but I don't want to see it particularly. I never could stand the sight of a pig being killed."

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"There you are!"

Bob Cherry put the spectacles straight on the junior's little fat nose. Billy Bunter blinked round him, and made the discovery that the car was not really half-over, as he had imagined it to be.

He let go with one hand and sat down, still holding to the rope.

The balloon was rocking in the wind. The wind was rising, and blowing hard away towards the North Sea. Beyond the cliffs of the great Shoulder the juniors could hear the wash of an angry sea.

The car swung almost level, and there was no danger of anyone falling out. Even Billy Bunter was reassured.

"This is all right!" he remarked.

"Go hon!"

"Oh, really, you know—"

"The fair ground looks ripping from here," said Harry Wharton, glancing over the side of the car towards the ground.

The juniors looked down. The fair ground was lighted up on all sides, and they could see everything—the swing-boats in motion, the merry-go-round rattling away, the booths where articles were exposed for sale—the whole scene lighted up by the flare of innumerable naphtha lamps.

Below, the rope that held the balloon captive was sagging and swaying as the car swung. The end of it was tied to a strong fence rail, somewhat out of the circle of the flare of naphtha lights.

Wharton made out the form of Snoop leaning against the rail as he glanced down. Snoop was chatting with Bulstrode. The Remove bully strolled away, leaving Snoop alone, and then the cad of the Remove gave a quick glance round him.

A momentary glimmer of light fell upon his face, and Harry saw that it was deadly pale, the eyes burning from a face like chalk, and that the lips were set in a spiteful, sneering grin.

There was a shout from another part of the field as a swing-boat was worked up to its fullest extent, and Harry recognised Ogilvy and Mark Linley and Tom Brown in the boat.

They were pulling against the next boat, which was full of Upper Fourth fellows, and beating them.

"Bravo, Remove!" shouted Bob Cherry.

"Go it, Linley!"

"Buck up, Remove!"

The balloon gave a sudden powerful wrench as the wind caught it.

"Hold on!" gasped Nugent.

The juniors clung to the ropes. The balloon was swaying—sagging—there was a wild shout from below.

"The rope!"

"Catch the rope!"

"My hat!" gasped Harry Wharton. "We're rising!"

"Impossible!"

"But we are!"

Dismay fell upon the juniors.

There was no doubt about it.

The balloon was rising—rising on the wind. Harry looked over the rim of the car. The lights of the fair ground danced below his eyes, fading rapidly into distance.

He caught a glimpse of the showman wildly waving his hands—of dismayed faces—of the trailing rope with the loose end a score of yards above the reach of any hand.

The balloon was loose!

Then the fair ground, with its blaze of light, faded away into a blur, and the shouts died into silence.

"We're adrift!"

"My only hat!" muttered Bob Cherry. "Adrift!"

"Good heavens!"

The rope swayed under the balloon, and the juniors heard it crackling through the foliage of trees below. For a moment or two they hoped that it might catch. But it did not. The rope trailed on, as the wind drove them onwards.

Billy Bunter sat for some moments petrified. The chums of the Remove were silent in grim dismay—but cool. They were not likely to lose their heads, though they already realised their danger.

There was a sudden howl from Billy Bunter.

"Did—did you say—say adrift!" he gasped.

"Yes," said Harry quietly.

"Oh!"

"Keep cool——"

"I—I—I'm going to jump out!" gasped Bunter, scrambling to his feet. "I——"

Harry grasped him with a grip of iron, and thrust him into his seat again.

"Keep where you are."

"I—I say——"

"Are you mad, Billy? You can't jump out! We're a hundred—two hundred yards from the ground. You would be killed!"

"Ow!"

Bunter sat trembling in every limb. The fat junior was not brave. The first alarm of danger was enough to throw him into the extreme of terror.

"Hold on!" muttered Bob.

The car was rocking roughly now. The wind was strong, and the great gas-envelope reeled and swayed as it was buffeted.

Billy Bunter held on with both hands, and sat palpitating. The others held on with set, pale faces.

There was no way of stopping the balloon. What was to happen? What was to become of them? They hardly dared think.

For now, sounding clearer and clearer as they were hurled nearer the shore, came the deep murmur of the sea. The balloon was being driven directly over the cliffs, and ere long the wild waves would be rolling under them.

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NEXT WEEK: "THE FIRST AT GREYFRIARS."

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Above the Sea.

HARRY WHARTON looked down from the car. Blackness lay below. The lights of the fair had vanished in the distance.

Black night met his gaze.

Faintly in the darkness he made out the dim forms of trees, of a church tower. The balloon was much higher now, and it cleared the tower with twenty yards or more to spare. Dim, twinkling lights appeared on the right, and Harry knew that they were passing the village of Pegg, the fishing hamlet on the shores of the bay. He glanced below the car, and caught a glimpse of the lighted windows of Cliff House—the school where Marjorie and her friends were, probably quietly having their tea, and little dreaming of the peril of their boy chums.

Ahead there was a dim glimmer in the darkness, with a huge black shadow on the left. The black shadow was the great cliff called the Shoulder, and the glimmer came from the waves of the North Sea.

The sea!

Ere long the balloon would be over the water; the wind was driving it swiftly along. Cliff House disappeared in the shadow of the Cliff. The juniors gazed back for a last glimpse of the lighted windows. Was that to be the last time they were to look upon the place?

It was only too likely.

"We must stop the blessed thing somehow!" exclaimed Nugent desperately. "Hang it all! What's to be done?"

"Ow! We shall be killed!"

"Oh, dry up, Bunter!"

"Ow! We shall be drowned!"

"Dry up, you young ass!"

"Ow! Ow!"

It is probable that the cowardice of Bunter had the effect of bracing the courage of the others. They looked at the shivering Owl of the Remove, and pity and contempt were mingled in their looks.

"Don't be scared, Bunter!" said Harry. "We may get out of this all right yet. No need to cry before you're hurt, you know?"

"Oh! Ow! Why don't you stop the balloon?"

"We can't!"

"You ought to, somehow!" howled Billy. "You ought to stop it! You've got me into this, and you ought to get me out!"

"Well, I like that!" said Bob Cherry. "You cheeky young ass——"

"Ow! Oh!"

"It's no good talking to him, Bob," said Harry quietly. "The question is, what's to be done? There's no way of stopping the blessed thing."

"There ought to be a valve or something to let the beastly gas out," said Nugent, looking up at the black mass swelling over their heads. "Anybody know how to work these things?"

"There's a cord here," said Bob Cherry.

He grasped it, and looked doubtfully at his chums. It was doubtless the cord which controlled the valve by which the gas was allowed to escape. But it would be a dangerous business manipulating it.

The balloon was reeling in the wind. To descend was probably to be dashed violently into the cliffs, or to be smashed up among the trees. And how much gas to allow to escape the juniors did not know.

"Well, what's to be done?" said Nugent. "We shall be over the sea soon, and then it will be too late."

"Hold on!"

"But——"

Harry Wharton shook his head. Only a few minutes had elapsed since the balloon was set adrift, and already they were close to the shore.

"We should be smashed up!" he said quickly. "Don't pull, Bob!"

"But to go out to sea——"

"There's a chance, but there's no chance if we descend. We should be smashed."

Bob nodded quietly. He saw that Harry was right. The descending balloon, in the wind and darkness, would crash against the first obstacle, and the juniors would be hurled to their death.

Billy Bunter half started up.

"Wharton! Let's go down!"

"It's not safe, Billy!"

"Let's go down! I don't care! We ought to get down!"

"But——"

"Too late!" said Bob Cherry.

He pointed below.

A glimmer of starlight came through a rift in the dark clouds, and it fell upon a turbid, rolling sea.

A Double-Length Tale of Harry Wharton & Co. By FRANK RICHARDS.

The balloon was past the cliffs now, and the strip of beach had flashed away below, and now the juniors were over the bay. The waves, angry in the lashing wind, were running high below.

"The sea!"

Billy Bunter gave a groan.

"It's your fault, Wharton! We shall be drowned! It's all your fault!"

Harry Wharton made no reply. There was nothing to be said. Below sounded the roar of a heavy surf.

And still the wind drove the balloon onward.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

In Direst Peril.

THE wind was driving the clouds before it, and through rifts in the dark masses overhead the juniors caught glimpses of the starlight. It glimmered upon a turbid sea, rolling with a sullen murmur upon the coast. The lights of the fishing village vanished as the juniors swept seaward.

There was silence in the car, save for the whistle of the wind in the cordage. The Greyfriars juniors were looking pale enough now.

It was too late now to take the chances of a descent.

Harry felt that he had been right. But the prospect before them was terrible. Without food or water in the car, they were being swept out over the open sea.

"The wind may change," said Harry, after a long silence.

And the others nodded.

That was their chief hope. The wind was very uncertain, and several times it had shown a tendency to veer to the southward. If it changed, they might be blown back over the land before morning, and descend safely in the daylight.

The thought of that cheered them a little.

But Billy Bunter was past comfort.

The fat junior crouched in the basket, overcome with terror, and there was a look in his eyes that Harry did not like when he caught it. He wondered whether Billy Bunter was quite himself.

Rolling and swaying, and with the car swinging wildly to and fro underneath, the balloon rolled seaward.

Billy Bunter staggered to his feet, and clutching the rim of the basket, looked over it, downwards.

He caught the glimmer of the sea in the starlight, and shuddered.

"Is that the sea, Wharton?"

"Yes."

"We shall be drowned."

"The balloon is not sinking."

"Suppose the wind tears the gasbag?" said Bunter.

"Suppose—"

"What's the use of supposing?" said Nugent impatiently.

"We're all right so far. You'd better lie down and go to sleep."

"The betterfulness is terrific."

"Yes, and fall out of the car," said Bunter. "I believe you'd like me to fall out and be drowned."

"Don't be an ass!"

"I'm not going to sleep."

"Stay awake, then."

"Look here—"

"Oh, shut up!"

Bunter sat down again. Harry Wharton drew nearer to him. There was something in Bunter's expression he did not like. It occurred to him that terror might have unhinged the fat junior's mind a little. He tapped him on the shoulder.

"Buck up, Billy," he said, as cheerily as he could.

"We're not hurt yet, you know. We shall get back all right."

Bunter made no reply.

The balloon swept onwards. The wind was indeed changing, and choppy gusts came from the north that made the gas envelope reel drunkenly, and set the car rocking at dangerous angles.

"Hold on, Billy!"

Bunter staggered up.

"I say, you fellows, I'm not going any further!" he exclaimed. "I've had enough of this! I'm going to get out."

"Keep where you are!"

"Shan't!"

"Are you dotty?" exclaimed Nugent, in amazement.

"Can't you see we're over the water? What's the matter with you, Bunter?"

"I'm going to get out!"

"Hold him!"

Harry Wharton's grasp was already upon the Owl of the Remove. Billy Bunter was trying to climb over the wicker rim when Harry's grip dragged him back.

The fat junior struggled.

"Let me go! Let me go!"

"Billy—"

"Let go!"

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ONE
PENNY.

The fat junior's eyes were glittering, and his face strangely flushed. He struggled furiously in Wharton's grasp, and the captain of the Remove had some difficulty in holding him.

"Lend a hand, you chaps."

"What on earth's the matter with him?" exclaimed Bob Cherry, in amazement, as he grasped Billy Bunter. "Bunter, don't be a fool!"

"Let me go!" panted Bunter.

"Keep still!"

"I won't stay here to be drowned!" cried Billy Bunter shrilly. "You want to murder me! Let me go!"

"Look out!" cried Nugent.

A gust of wind caught the car, and it rolled and reeled. The juniors went sprawling in a heap in the bottom of the basket, with gasping exclamations. Bunter rolled over with the rest, and rolled out of Harry's grasp.

In a moment the fat junior was on his feet again, and springing for the side of the car. In his delirium he fully intended to spring out—to death in the sea below.

Wharton clutched after him in wild haste, and caught one of his ankles, and held on to it. Bunter was pulled short in his leap, and rolled back again.

He struggled fiercely to free himself.

"Help!" gasped Harry.

Nugent and Hurree Singh seized the fat junior. Bunter was endowed with unusual strength at that moment. He fought like a wild cat for his liberty. In the wildly-tossing car the struggle was fraught with terrible danger to all the juniors.

But they held him fast.

He was pinned down in the bottom of the car, and Nugent sprawled across him and kept him there by sheer weight, while Wharton grasped his wrists.

"Bunter, old man! Keep quiet!"

"Let me go!" shrieked Bunter.

"He's mad!"

"Mad as a hatter," gasped Bob Cherry. "Keep hold of him, for goodness' sake. There's a rope here somewhere we can tie him with."

"Let me go! Let me go!"

"Not much!"

Bob Cherry groped for the loose rope, and found it. The others held Bunter while Bob Cherry tied his ankles together, and then his wrists.

Bunter was struggling violently all the time, and the task was not easy. But Bob accomplished it at last.

Then the end of the rope was secured to the car, for Bunter, in his present helpless state, would otherwise have been tossed out when it rolled.

Then the juniors rose, gasping, to their feet.

Bunter wriggled for some minutes, trying to get free, and then seemed to collapse suddenly. He lay quite still, breathing jerkily, his flushed face growing white and deathly.

"My only hat!" gasped Bob Cherry.

"The only hatfulness is terrific," murmured Hurree Singh, rubbing his nose, upon which Billy Bunter had planted his fist with considerable force.

"Lucky we saved him," said Harry, breathing hard.

"But look, the wind has changed!"

"Good luck!"

For lights were flashing through the windy darkness now, and the juniors knew that they must be the lights of some coast town and village. The balloon was driving southward, instead of eastward, now, and if the wind changed a little further, they would be carried back over the land, though at many miles from the spot where they had left it. Holding on to the ropes, swept blindly through the darkness, the juniors waited and watched.

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THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Billy Bunter is not Happy.

"DAYLIGHT!"

Harry Wharton uttered the word. The juniors were sinking with weariness. It seemed to them an age since they had gone adrift in the balloon at Friardale Fair. The long hours of the night had worn away with terrible slowness, while the wind changed and changed, and the balloon was driven and tossed to and fro, in what direction they hardly knew. But sometimes lights gleaming in the darkness had told them they were not far from land.

Holding on mechanically, the juniors had sunk into an uneasy sort of half slumber. On the floor of the tossing basket Bunter was sleeping soundly. The others slept and woke by starts.

But all were broad awake when Wharton called out the welcome news of daylight.

Bob Cherry rubbed his eyes and blinked into the darkness. "Where?" he exclaimed.

There was certainly little of the day to be seen so far. The darkness closed in the balloon like a black cloak.

Harry Wharton pointed to the east.

Faintly, in the blackness, a glimmer of grey was rising—enough to indicate to anxious eyes that the day was returning at last.

"There it is, Bob."

Bob Cherry grunted.

"Little enough of it," he said. "But I suppose it will soon be morning. I wonder where on earth we are?"

"Nowhere on earth," said Nugent, with a faint grin.

"Oh, don't be funny now!" said Bob Cherry pathetically.

"I say, are you hungry?"

"What-ho!"

"Famished!"

"The famishfulness is terrific."

"So am I," said Bob. "Don't wake Bunter up, or he'll be suggesting casting lots for one of us to be eaten. If we're famished, what must he be?"

"I say, you fellows—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! He's awake!"

"I say, you fellows, lend me a hand, will you? I've got entangled in a rope, or something," said Billy Bunter plaintively, blinking at them.

Bob grinned. It was evident that the fat junior had no recollection of the outbreak of the preceding night. The juniors exchanged glances. Bunter seemed fully in his right senses now, and Harry thought that it would be safe to untie him.

"Right you are, Billy," he said cheerfully.

The wind had dropped considerably, and the car was floating almost level. From the east came a broader glimmer of grey, and the edges of the clouds were tipped with silver.

Bunter tried to sit up, and fell back again. He blinked down at his fastened limbs, and glared indignantly at Wharton.

"I say, you fellows, this is a rotten trick to play on a chap when he's asleep. Somebody's tied my feet and hands."

"You see—"

"It's mean."

"You young ass," said Bob Cherry. "You were off your rocker last night, and wanted to jump out of the balloon."

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Honest Injun, ass."

"Oh, really—"

"There you are," said Harry, jerking the rope off. "Get up! Mind, no more of your tricks, you know. There's nothing to be afraid of now."

"We're still in that blessed balloon," said Billy Bunter, blinking up at the swelling gas-envelope overhead.

"Did you expect to change it for a first-class railway-carriage while you were snoring?" asked Nugent sarcastically.

"Oh, really, Nugent—"

"Blessed if I know whether we're over land or sea," said Wharton, looking downwards. "It's still too dark. The sun will be up soon, though."

"I say, you fellows—"

"Well, what's the matter now?"

"My bones feel awfully stiff," said Bunter. "It's through being tied up, I suppose. If one of you fellows would like to rub them—"

"What offers?" grinned Bob Cherry.

There were none. Billy Bunter started chafing his cramped limbs himself, with a discontented grunt.

"I'm jolly hungry," he remarked.

"So are we all."

"I don't suppose you're as hungry as I am. Isn't there anything to eat here at all?"

"Nothing."

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GORDON GAY. A Schoolboy Actor you will enjoy reading about in

"Haven't you got any chocolate in your pocket, Cherry?"

"No."

"Got any toffee, Nugent?"

"None."

"Haven't you got anything to eat, Inky?"

"Nothing, my worthy fat chum."

"I say, Wharton—"

"I haven't anything, either, Billy," said Harry. "But I think we shall be able to go down soon. We're over land!"

"Hurrah!" shouted Bob.

The juniors gazed downward. As the sun rose, they could dimly make out the scene below. Behind the balloon lay the wide sea rolling; before it, and underneath, wide fields, and a line of hills in the distance.

"Land!" said Nugent, with a deep breath of relief.

"Yes, rather."

"I wonder where it is?" said Bob. "We've been pitched to and fro so much that I haven't the faintest idea where we are."

Harry shook his head.

"I should imagine it was Kent," he said. "But I can't tell. However, it's English land—that's a comfort. We might have been blown across the North Sea to Belgium or Germany, or over the Channel to France."

"Or we might have dropped into the sea," said Nugent. "After all, we've a lot to be thankful for. There's never anything happens that mightn't be worse."

"I'm jolly hungry."

"Never mind, Bunter—we may get some grub to eat in a dozen hours or so," said Nugent consolingly. "Anyway, there will be grass as soon as we get down, and you can have a Nebuchadnezzar dinner, you know."

Billy Bunter grunted. He did not see any humour in jokes on such a serious subject as a fellow's meals.

Bunter was feeling very hungry. He had had no supper the previous night, and the sea air and the keen wind naturally sharpened one's appetite. Billy Bunter was fast getting into a ravenous state. He had already started chewing a fragment of leather to appease the growing pangs.

The sun was rising higher now, and daylight showed up the country below the swaying car. The juniors looked out eagerly for landmarks, which might indicate where they were. The smoke of a town rose on the horizon to the south. The wind seemed to have settled down to the south-west now, and was blowing steadily, but not hard. Its force had so much lessened that Wharton felt it would be safe to descend if a favourable spot could be found.

"No hurry," he said, in reply to a question from Bob. "It's no good jumping down in a moor or a common miles from a town. We want to get some grub, and to get back to Greyfriars somehow."

"Yes, that's so."

"And when we get back to Greyfriars," said Nugent, "we want to inquire into how the balloon got adrift."

Wharton glanced at him quickly.

"Then you suspect, too—"

"I don't see how the rope could have got loose by itself," said Nugent. "The balloon had ascended a good many times before, and it hadn't got loose. Snoop was standing by the rope. It looks to me—"

"I suspected it."

Bob Cherry gave a whistle.

"But—but would Snoop be such a beast?" he exclaimed. "He must have known that he would be risking our lives."

Wharton shook his head.

"I don't suppose he thought it out at all. He meant to send us loose, to give us a scare; and very likely he never thought till afterwards of the danger."

"The worm! If he did it—"

"We'll jolly well make him sit up for it when we get back," said Nugent; "but we're not back yet."

"It seems to me that we're nearer the ground than we were," said Bob Cherry, looking puzzled. "You haven't pulled the valve cord, have you?"

"No."

"Well, I'm certain we're lower down."

Wharton looked down anxiously. The car certainly did seem nearer the ground. He could make out the objects below with greater distinctness now.

"The gas is escaping, I suppose?" he said.

"Phew! Lucky it didn't happen while we were over the water," said Bob Cherry, with a deep breath.

"I suppose it began there. This balloon is only a showman's balloon, and not intended for voyages in the air," said Harry. "I don't suppose it's in very good condition, or made very well in the first place. I suppose the wind has torn some crack in it, and the gas is oozing out."

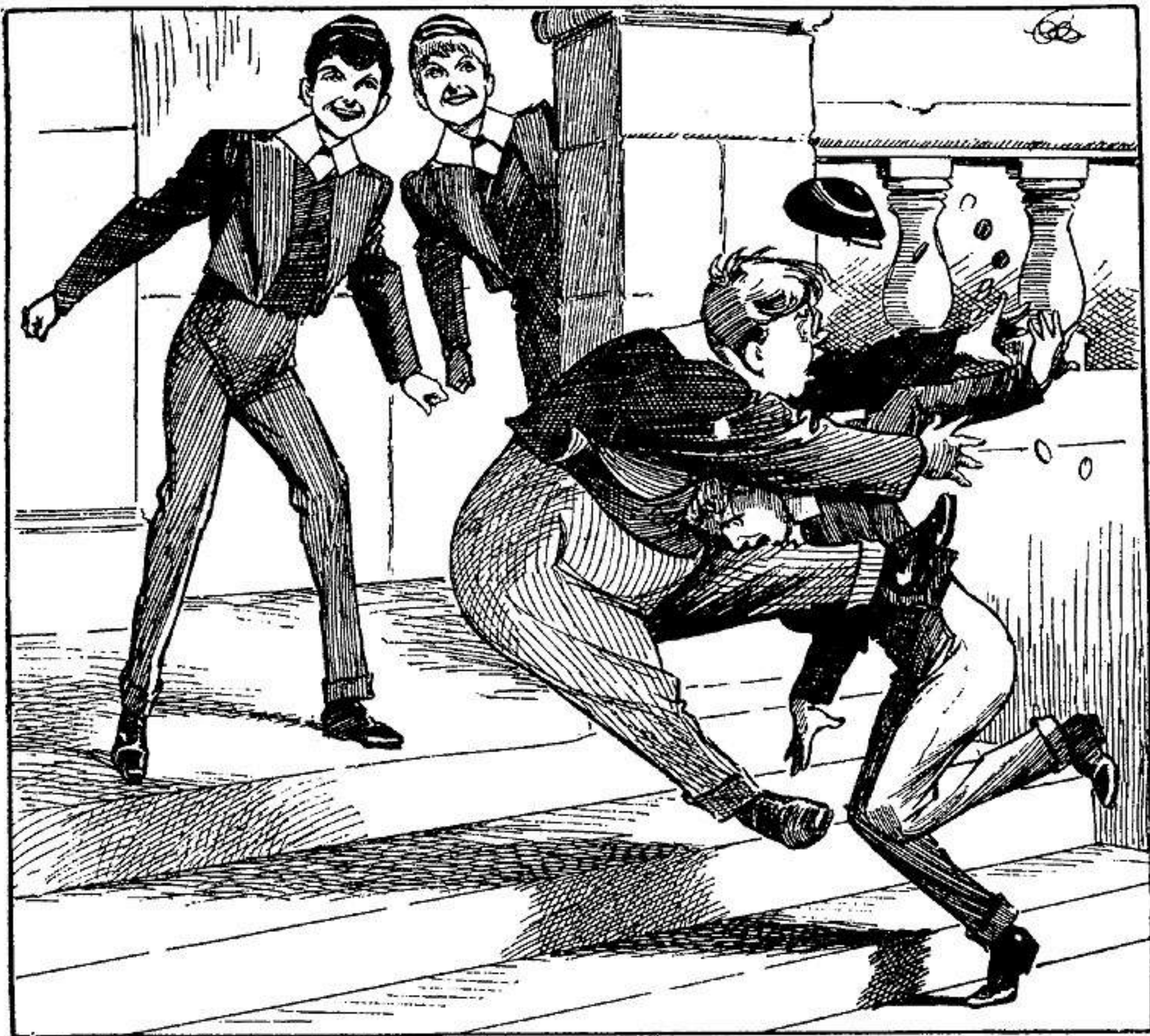
Billy Bunter uttered an exclamation of alarm.

"Good heavens! We're falling!"

"We're not falling!" said Wharton. "We're going down almost too slowly to notice it. Don't be frightened."

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"Ow!" roared Billy Bunter, and there was a bump as the fat junior sat down on the steps, and a general clinking as the shillings scattered on all sides.

"I'm not frightened," said Bunter, reassured by Harry's reply. "I believe I'm the only chap here who's shown any nerve all the time!"

"My hat!"

"Well, I was sleeping peacefully enough, while you chaps were staying awake," said Bunter. "Looks to me as if you fellows have spent the whole night in a state of blue funk."

The juniors did not reply. They only looked at him. Billy Bunter blinked at them with considerable self-satisfaction.

"A chap needs nerve in an emergency like this," he remarked. "You chaps should watch me, and take example by my coolness. Now, I——"

"Falling!" exclaimed Bob Cherry suddenly.

Bunter broke off with a gasp of terror.

"Falling! Oh! Ow! We shall be smashed to pieces! Ow! Help! Murder! Oh! Help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Help! Oh, help! Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors simply roared. Billy Bunter blinked at them uncertainly, and it dawned upon him that Bob Cherry had only been joking.

"Cherry, you beast——"

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NEXT WEEK: "THE FIRST AT GREYFRIARS."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We're not falling!"

"I never said we were," grinned Bob. "I simply said 'falling,' to see what you would do. Of course, I knew you wouldn't be alarmed, as you are so brave!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really——"

"Lemme see, we're to watch you, and do what you do, in a time of danger," said Bob, with an air of reflection. "I know now what you would do—jump like a cat with its tail trodden on, and yell 'Help!' and 'Oh!' and 'Ow!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunter snorted. But even Bunter had nothing to say, and he only looked sulky while the juniors laughed. Nothing more was heard on the subject of his bravery.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

A Change of Places.

WHARTON was watching the land below. That the balloon was over Kent, he was almost certain, but he saw no scene to recognise. Green fields and farm-houses came into sight and vanished as the balloon floated on to the south-east. If they kept on long enough,

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there was no doubt they would reach the Channel, but there was many a long mile between them and the south coast yet.

The balloon was sinking slowly but surely.

The rent in the gas envelope was probably a small one. The gas was escaping, but only by slow degrees.

In time the balloon would settle down of its own accord. Whether to quicken the process by pulling the valve cord was a doubtful question. The juniors knew nothing of the management of balloons, and it was quite easy for them to let out perhaps too much gas, and come down with a bump that might end in injuries.

There was a rustle below as the trailing-rope, hanging below the car, brushed against the top branches of trees.

"There ought to be a grappling-iron on that rope," said Bob Cherry. "Perhaps there's one in the car."

He looked about him. The car, which was never intended for aerial voyaging, was bare of everything; but Nugent pointed out a large iron hook and a coil of rope hanging on the wicker wall. Bob Cherry uncoiled the rope.

"We could anchor now," he remarked.

Wharton shook his head and glanced below. The balloon was floating over a thick wood, and there was no possibility of a safe descent among the trees.

The car was much lower now, and several times it brushed against the topmost branches, and once a high bough came over the car, and Harry touched the foliage with his hand. The boys looked anxious. If the balloon sank upon the tops of the trees, and was caught there, their situation would be an unenviable one.

But the trees were cleared at last.

Beyond them lay a wide expanse of green, dotted with furze and small trees—evidently a great stretch of common-land. A white road ran like a ribbon across it, and the balloon was following almost precisely the line of the road.

"That road leads somewhere," said Bob Cherry, looking down. "If we could get down here, we'd never find a better place."

Wharton nodded assent.

"It looks safe enough," he said.

"There's somebody on the road," said Nugent.

A figure appeared on the road—a man tramping along in the direction the balloon was following. He was ahead of the balloon, but the juniors were rapidly overtaking him. The dangling rope was now touching the ground, and leaving a trail of dust on the white road as it passed.

That in a quarter of an hour or so the balloon would be bumping on the ground was certain, and it might then bump into a pond, or a thicket, or a wood. Harry Wharton decided that now was the time. The man below could hardly fail to lend them a hand if called upon, and the rope was within his reach.

He had not seen the balloon yet. It was directly behind him. He was tramping on with a dogged pace, like a man fatigued, but determined to keep on.

Suddenly he turned his head and looked back.

The juniors thought he had become aware of the proximity of the balloon, but it was not that. His gaze did not turn upward. He was looking back along the road with a strange, tense gaze.

The juniors could not help remarking that look. The man's face was white and hard, and his eyes seemed to be burning. He looked back along the road with an almost wild gaze, and his look was that of a man in dread of pursuit.

"Something up, there," said Bob Cherry, in a low voice.

He looks like a chap who's been robbing a hen-roost, and has got the farmer after him."

"He doesn't look like a tramp."

"No. But—"

"This is a lonely place," said Nugent. "Miles from anywhere, as far as I can see. It may be a case of footpads, you know, and this chap is buzzing off away from them."

Wharton glanced back along the road. From a lane some distance back two figures had emerged—the figures of mounted men. They were too far off for Harry to make them out clearly, and half hidden by the trees along the road.

Were they in pursuit of the man below the car?

A sudden exclamation from below drew Harry's attention to the man again. He had seen the balloon. The swelling mass almost over his head could hardly fail to catch his eye. He was standing in the road now, looking up, with blank astonishment in his face.

Harry waved his hand to him.

"Catch that rope!"

The man only stared blankly. He did not seem to understand.

"Catch that rope!" shouted Harry, pointing to the loose end dangling to the ground below the car. "We want to come down. Catch the rope, will you?"

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The man seemed to understand at last. He grasped the rope.

"Good! Throw your weight on it, and it will bring us down."

The man nodded. There was a curious gleam in his eyes. He grasped the rope with both hands, and threw his whole weight on it.

That weight was sufficient to bring the already sinking balloon to the earth.

It swept on slowly, sinking and sinking, and the man, hanging upon the rope, was dragged along with it.

He clung to the rope, clear of the ground, so as to throw his whole weight on the balloon; and as the car descended, he climbed the rope, so as to keep all the time clear of the ground.

"Jolly cute chap," said Bob Cherry. "We shall be down in a minute now."

"Good!"

"The goodfulness is terrific!"

"I say, you fellows—"

"The rope will have to be fastened to something," said Harry, looking round anxiously. "I say, there!" he shouted.

The man did not look up. But as he was swinging on the rope, it was hard for him to see Wharton at all, leaning over the car. Harry shouted again.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Pass the rope round a tree and pull, will you? That will bring us down steadily."

The man did not reply.

The car was so near the ground now that he could touch it, and he was clinging to the rope within reach of the wickerwork basket. He did not appear to understand Wharton's directions, or did not choose to do so.

"Don't you understand?" shouted Harry. "Get the rope round a tree."

Still no reply.

But the man made a sudden grasp upward, and his hand—strong and sinewy—came over the rim of the car, and clung there.

The balloon swooped further down, and the man clung on the rim of the car, with his feet dragging in the dust of the road.

There was a loud shout from the distance, but the words were indistinguishable. The two horsemen behind were spurring on the track of the balloon, but the juniors were too much occupied just then to even glance at them.

Bump!

The bottom of the car touched the road, and the concussion sent the balloon shooting up again, and it rose twenty yards in a second.

The man hanging upon the rim of the basket clung tight, only that firm grasp saving him from death—for a fall now meant instant destruction on the hard road.

Harry Wharton saw his intention, and lent him a helping hand to enter the car. The man clambered over the edge and rolled in, and gasped as he gathered himself up.

The balloon was swiftly settling down again. It would evidently settle in a series of hard bumps on the road, each bump sending it shooting up again, but each rise would, of course, be slighter than the last.

If the stranger had passed the rope round a tree, instead of entering the car himself, the descent would have been easy and safe. Now it was neither; but Harry did not say a word on the subject.

The man was a short, thick-set fellow, with very powerful limbs. His face was strangely white; in spite of his exertions, his eyes gleaming and keen. He gasped almost painfully for breath as he stood up in the swaying car.

"We want to descend," said Harry. "Thank you for your help."

"You had better jump out."

"It is not safe yet."

"But when the car touches the ground—"

Harry shook his head.

"We must all land together," he said. "If one gets out the balloon will rise again as soon as the weight is gone."

"Yes, but—"

"We're all going together."

"Look out for the bump!" said Bob Cherry.

"What-ho, she bumps!" murmured Nugent.

The car touched the ground, and as it touched the man seized Nugent, and with a single swing of the arm lifted him over the side of the car, and stood him upon his feet on the ground. The action was so sudden, and the strength exerted so great, that Nugent did not make the slightest resistance. His feet touched the ground just as the car bumped upon it, and the next moment the balloon shot up, leaving him standing there dazed.

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THE NINTH CHAPTER.

The Fugitive.

Up, up, up went the balloon!

It was not only the bump on the ground, but the sudden relief from Nugent's weight that sent the balloon shooting upward.

Up it went, two hundred yards from the earth, with a sudden rush that took away the breath of the juniors. There was a shout below. The two horsemen had spurred up, too late to seize the balloon, and they were close to Nugent now. Frank Nugent was standing dazed, gazing after the balloon from which he had made so sudden an exit.

Harry Wharton's brows contracted.

He did not as yet suspect that the stranger intended anything but to help them; but the man was certainly taking too much upon himself, and acting in a way directly contrary to Wharton's wishes.

"Look here," said Harry, "this won't do!"

The man looked at him.

"It's kind of you to help us," said Harry, "but you must leave us to manage our own affairs ourselves."

"The boy is safe."

"I know that; but we may get down miles away from him. We want to land all together. Now his weight is gone, too, the balloon will be longer settling down."

The man smiled slightly.

Wharton looked over the side. The balloon was moving along slowly, and slowly sinking again. Frank Nugent was running along the road after it, but he was already but a mere speck in the distance. The two horsemen were riding at full speed, spurring on their animals, and they were keeping pace with the drifting balloon.

Wharton started as he looked at them.

For he could see now that they were in uniform—police uniform—in a word, that they were mounted constables.

They caught sight of him looking down, and waved and shouted to him, but their words were lost in the wind.

The Greyfriars junior looked with sudden suspicion at the stranger in the car. There was no doubt now that he was a fugitive, pursued by the police. A dogged look came upon his face as he caught Wharton's glance.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed Harry.

The man gave a short, bitter laugh.

"It means that I need this balloon," he said. "It means that it's my last chance—that it's a godsend. They would have had me by now."

"Then you—you are——"

The man nodded coolly.

"I am escaping the police. You can see that for yourself."

"Then you cannot expect us to help you," said Harry.

"You had no right to enter this car. We cannot aid you."

The man laughed scoffingly.

"I don't expect it."

"But——"

"I am going to help myself. Mind, I am a desperate man!" He showed his teeth for a moment between tightly-drawn lips. "This balloon has come—at the last moment—when all was up—as if by miracle. Do you think I am going to lose such a chance, and go to seven years' penal servitude?"

"What have you done?"

"Never mind that. What I am going to do is more important. I am going to escape. Mind, if you make a move to hinder me, I will throw you from the car. Liberty is dear enough to risk one's neck for."

The juniors drew together. Frank Nugent was gone. But there were three of them, strong and able to fight if needed, without counting Billy Bunter.

The man made a hasty movement back.

"Don't be afraid," he said harshly; "I shall not hurt you if you do not force me to it. Only let me alone, that's all I need."

"But we must descend."

"You cannot descend!"

"But I tell you——"

But the man was not listening. He was looking over the rim of the car. The balloon was sinking down to the road. The man turned a haggard look upon Wharton.

"Will you boys jump out in turn?"

"No," said Harry.

"It will be quite safe."

"Possibly, and possibly not. And when only one is left, if it suited you to throw him out, what then?"

"I promise you——"

"Do you expect us to trust to a man who confesses that he is a criminal, and flying from the police?" exclaimed Harry.

"You must go!"

"We will not go!"

"Rather not!" said Bob Cherry, with emphasis.

"The rather-not-fulness is terrific," murmured the Nabob of Bhanipur, picking up the iron hook from the bottom of the car. It was a useful weapon in a fight, and it looked for a moment as if there would be a struggle.

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ONE
PENNY.

But the man looked at the three sturdy juniors, who did not quail from his glance, and he turned from them with a muttered oath.

The car was sweeping along now only a dozen feet from the ground.

The two mounted policemen were riding directly under it, and they were ready to grasp at the basket as soon as it should come within reach. One of them had caught the trailing rope, and was pulling upon it.

The fugitive in the car looked down, and snarled. His hand groped in his breast, and he drew out a large knife, and opened it.

The juniors exchanged a quick glance. But the weapon was not intended for them. The man drew the keen blade quickly across the rope where it was fastened to the car, and the severed rope fell upon the constable who was holding it. The horseman uttered a cry.

The other rider waved his hand as he caught Wharton's glance.

"Stop that balloon!" he shouted. "Descend at once! That man is Abel Lagden, the forger, and I have the warrant for his arrest."

The name struck a chord of memory in Harry's mind. He dimly remembered hearing some echo of a great forgery case, and of the escape of the criminal after the issue of the warrant for his arrest. So this was the man—the man whose portrait was in most of the newspapers, though Wharton had not happened to see it.

The fugitive gritted his teeth.

"We must descend!" said Harry.

"You cannot!"

"I tell you——"

"Keep your hand off that cord!" said the man, as Harry stretched out his fingers to the valve-cord.

Wharton met his eyes steadily.

"You cannot expect us to assist your escape from justice," he said. "We are going down."

"You are not going down!"

Harry grasped the cord without replying. He drew back his hand again as the cord, slashed through by the forger's knife, fell severed.

It was cut above his reach. The loose end remained in his hand. Lagden looked at him with a sneering smile.

"You are fortunate that it was not your wrist instead of the cord," he said, between his teeth. "I have told you that I am a desperate man. You had better not trifle with me."

Wharton was silent. After all, the balloon was descending of its own accord. Lagden looked round feverishly for something to throw out to lighten the car.

The balloon was intended to take up six passengers, and as only five had ascended, the showman had placed a bag of sand in the car. It was lying there, the only one the car contained, for the car was of course not furnished for a voyage. The fugitive picked up the bag, and threw it bodily over the side.

The car swept up again, out of reach of the two horsemen, who had just been able to touch the wickerwork with their finger-tips.

"Descend!" shouted an angry voice below.

The fugitive burst into a sneering laugh.

The lessening of the weight made the balloon shoot up a hundred yards or more, though it was certain to settle down again. But it had now left the road, which was winding.

Below was a hilly expanse of moor, and the horsemen, leaving the road in pursuit, spurred on up to their stirrups in fern and bracken. The horses were panting, and the riders' faces were flushed with hot exertion. But they stuck gamely to the chase. They, as well as the juniors, knew that the gas was escaping by degrees, and that the fall of the balloon was only a matter of time.

The fugitive looked down from the car. Already the impetus of the upward rush was spent, and the balloon was floating level, a hundred yards above the ground.

In a few minutes it would be settling down again.

The forger turned to the boys with a desperate look.

"The car must be lightened!" he said.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Hurree Singh is Left Behind.

THE Greyfriars juniors drew closer together. They meant to fight to the last gasp if the ruffian attacked them, and an attack seemed certain now. Billy

Bunter was whimpering with terror as he crouched behind the others. But Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry and Hurree Janset Ram Singh were cool and steady enough. And the three of them looked too dangerous to tackle.

Lagden gritted his teeth savagely.

"The car must be lightened!" he repeated.

"Jump out, then!" said Bob Cherry coolly. "You're not wanted here."

"Fool!"

The fugitive looked savagely round the car. There was a seat inside, running round the car, and the man wrenched it loose and tossed it over. The balloon rose again, and swept onward in a new direction as it entered upon a fresh current of wind.

The two spurring horsemen below decreased in size, like figures seen by looking through the wrong end of a telescope. But they still kept on the track. The fugitive uttered a sudden exclamation of triumph.

Wharton followed his glance, and saw a wide river ahead, rolling through the green fields, and gleaming in the morning sun.

The balloon was heading directly for the river, and if it passed over it, the two pursuers would be left hopelessly behind. The river was too deep and broad for them to dream of swimming their horses across, and there was no bridge in sight.

The balloon swept onward. It was certainly settling a little, but now that the weight in it had been sensibly decreased, the descent was almost imperceptible.

The juniors exchanged glances.

If the balloon passed over the river the pursuit would be cut off, and the man would escape. That certainly was not their concern; but what would happen afterwards?

Beyond the river lay stretches of level country, stretching south and west. The wind would carry them as far as the Channel if they did not descend. They would be over the sea again.

Harry's brows contracted at the thought.

That terrible peril had been escaped once—were they to risk it again to please a man who was escaping from justice?

Wharton made up his mind.

"We shall descend," he said abruptly.

Lagden gave him a savage look.

"We shall not descend," he said. "I gave you a chance of leaving the balloon, and you did not take it."

Wharton glanced at the shortened valve-cord. He could have reached it by stretching his fingers to their fullest extent. The man was watching him with a savage glance. The bare blade of the knife glittered in the sun.

"Take care!" he said.

Wharton hesitated. He glanced down again. The two constables, looking strangely small in the distance, were spurring over the field. They were shouting, and the wind brought the sound of their voices to the juniors. What they were saying the boys could not catch, but they could guess that the pursuers were calling upon them to lower the balloon before the river was passed.

"Listen," said Lagden, in a low, tense voice. "I will not be captured—I would die rather. But let me pass the river in safety, and I will descend on the other side, and allow you to land."

"And the balloon?"

"I shall keep it."

"But—"

"I cannot afford to part with it. Now, don't reach towards that cord—I swear that I will strike you down if you do." And the knife glittered as he moved it.

Wharton thought it out. After all, it was no business of his to help in hounding down the man, whatever he had done.

"Very well," he said, at length. "We descend on the other side of the river."

"And I retain the balloon."

"We should have to abandon it, in any case, Harry," Bob Cherry remarked.

Harry nodded.

"Very well—we will leave it."

"Good!" said Lagden.

The balloon swept on. Wharton stood in troubled thought. He did not know whether he had done rightly in making any terms at all with a man who was a self-confessed criminal, but it would have been no light matter to enter upon a struggle with a desperate man armed with a deadly weapon.

The river was gleaming close ahead now. The juniors watched and waited. Billy Bunter was crouching in the bottom of the basket, and he took care to keep the others between him and the fugitive.

Lagden watched the horsemen.

They were keeping pace with the balloon, though the ground they were riding over now was rough and broken and they had to put their horses to several difficult leaps.

They shouted at intervals to the boys, but the boys could do nothing, but wait. The balloon swept out over the river.

But now they could see what they had been too far off to see before—that there were boats on the river, and people standing in them, staring up at the balloon with wide-eyed

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interest. Three boats Wharton discerned as he glanced down, up or down the river, and one of them was a rowing-skiff containing four men in rowing-shirts, evidently out for a morning's pull. The rowers had rested on their oars now, and were looking up at the rolling balloon.

The decrease of weight in the balloon had ceased to tell. The car was sinking towards the river.

The mounted constables were shouting, and the men in the boat understood. They pulled to the shore, and three of them jumped among the bulrushes and clambered up, ready to intercept the balloonists if they landed. The other sculled the boat back across the river with the evident intention of ferrying the police over.

Lagden ground his teeth savagely. He had not foreseen this, though it might easily have been foreseen.

Wharton watched him narrowly. He did not mean the agreement to be departed from. He had no mind to be embarked upon a possible drifting over the Channel to please a fugitive from justice.

"We cannot descend!" exclaimed Lagden abruptly.

"We must descend!"

"It is impossible!"

"But we must!"

Lagden snarled.

"I tell you that we shall not, and that finishes it!"

"It does not finish it," said Wharton quietly. "We shall descend, and you must take your chance. What right have you to expect us to become parties to your escaping the police?"

Lagden made a gesture with the hand that held the knife. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh made a sudden catch with the iron hook, and caught his wrist. Lagden gave a cry of pain, and the knife dropped into the bottom of the basket.

"At him!" gasped Bob Cherry.

It was the psychological moment, and the juniors seized it.

They sprang upon the man like hounds upon a stag, and in a second he was rolling in the bottom of the car on top of the knife.

He struggled furiously in their grasp, and the three of them had plenty to do to hold him.

"Bunter!" shouted Bob Cherry. "Help, you rat! Help here!"

Bunter gasped and shook.

"I—I—I—"

"Lend a hand, you coward!" bellowed Bob Cherry.

But Bunter did not lend a hand—he only crouched as far back as possible from the struggling combatants, and clung to the ropes. He was in danger of being tossed out of the car, which was oscillating violently.

The struggling four rolled over and over, gasping and panting, while the car rocked and swung.

Lower sank the balloon, and there was a scraping below as it dragged through a bush. Then it jerked and swayed as somebody below clutched at it, and caught upon the wicker-work.

"Help!" shouted Wharton. "Climb in!"

"We're coming."

A pair of hands appeared over the rim—one of the oarsmen, with a powerful spring, had caught the side of the car. His face came up over the side, and his weight dragged the car down with a heavy bump.

The bump was so violent that the combatants were wrenched apart, and they lay gasping. The man outside the car clambered on the wicker-work—his comrades were not far behind. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh jumped up, and gave him a helping hand to clamber in.

But Lagden was on his feet now.

He grasped Hurree Singh round the body, and rolled him over the side, and the Nabob of Bhanipur fell upon the man he was trying to help in, and the two rolled on the ground together.

The loss of the nabob's weight made the balloon shoot up like a rocket.

Up it went—and up—and up, till it seemed that it would pierce the clouds. The ground, the river, the boat and the oarsmen and the police vanished below.

Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry scrambled up. Lagden turned upon them with his eyes gleaming with triumph. He looked round for the knife, but Bob Cherry had picked it up and tossed it over the side before the ruffian could make a movement to recover it.

"Beaten again!" said Lagden. "They have not caught me yet!"

The balloon rushed on in the wings of the wind. At a higher altitude the wind was stronger, and it bore the balloon along at an increased speed.

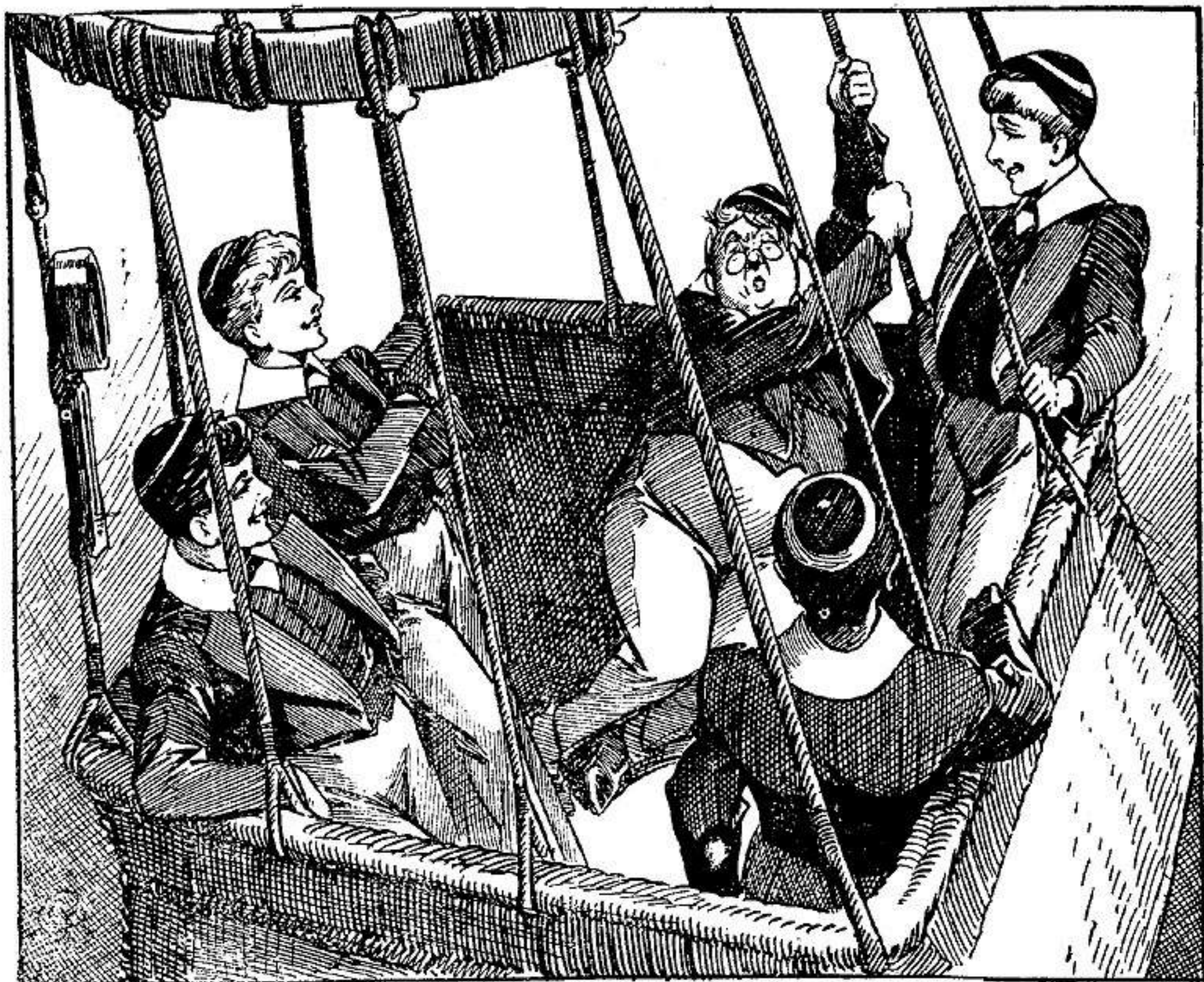
A wide, gleaming surface caught the eyes of the panting juniors.

"The sea!" muttered Bob Cherry.

It was the sea again—the Channel this time! The balloon was rushing on directly towards the sea.

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"Oh-h;" gasped Billy Bunter. "P p-put my glasses straight, will you? I shall fall out and get killed if I let go, a-and I suppose you don't want to see me k-killed?"

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

One or All.

ABEL LAGDEN'S white face lighted up at the sight of the sea. The wide green field ran on the very edge of the cliffs, and beyond the cliffs was a shelving beach of sand, and then came the blue waters, rolling on the shore. To the juniors the sea meant danger, and perhaps death—to Lagden it was safety from pursuit, perhaps freedom.

"What do you intend to do?" said Wharton, in a low voice.

Lagden laughed.

"We are going on."

"Over the sea?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"France is on the other side," said Lagden coolly. "France—and freedom."

"But there may be fifty miles of water before us—or sixty or seventy," said Wharton. "We must be a great distance west of the Straits of Dover. The balloon is not in a state to cross."

Lagden shrugged his shoulders.

"We must take our chance."

"You, yes; but us—"

"I gave you a chance to get out—you refused it," said

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NEXT
WEEK:

"THE FIRST AT GREYFRIARS."

Lagden. "I shall not sacrifice my liberty for you. I am desperate. I would rather be drowned than go to what awaits me if I am captured. You must take the risk."

Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry exchanged glances. They did not know what to do. Lagden was strong and determined, and they had not been able to overcome him, even with the help of Hurree Singh. And Hurree Singh was gone now. The Nabob of Bhanipur, quite unintentionally, was gone from the car. He was not hurt—Harry had seen him rise and call out after rolling on the ground—but his help was no longer to be had. Wharton and Cherry had only themselves to depend upon, for Billy Bunter was useless in a fight. And the chances of a combat with the desperate man in the car were more than doubtful, unarmed as he was now.

The balloon was approaching the sea at a rapid rate. A stretch of rising ground shut off the view of the country behind. The mounted constables were miles away now, and had probably given up the pursuit. Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh had been left behind as Nugent had been, though at a distance of many miles from him. Would the chums ever see either of them again? They would return to Greyfriars, but would Harry Wharton or Bob Cherry ever return?

It seemed very doubtful.

The balloon swept over the cliffs. Below, not more than a dozen yards away, were the cliff-tops, covered with herbage to the very edges.

The verge of the cliff-line was passed, and then the balloon

A Double-Length Tale of Harry Wharton
& Co. BY FRANK RICHARDS.

was floating in wide space again, with the sea rolling at least five hundred yards below the car.

Out over the sunny waters they swept.

Behind them the cliffs rose in a grim grey line, with sea-gulls whirling at the summits; below, the water rolled, glimmering in the sun.

Ahead, as far as the eye could reach, was nothing but the wide waters, rolling and gleaming; and the cliffs faded fast behind.

Lagden drew in a deep breath as the sea-wind made the balloon rock and reel. That wind brought freedom and hope to him.

But it was different with the Greyfriars juniors.

To them the parting from the Kentish cliffs meant danger, and perhaps death; but they could not help themselves. They knew that the balloon would soon be sinking towards the water again, as the gas oozed away from the rent in the envelope—and what was to happen then? A plunge in the sea, and death for all, or a struggle for life? The two juniors instinctively drew together.

"Look out!" murmured Bob Cherry. "We must watch him!"

Harry nodded.

"It will be a fight, Bob."

"Yes, rather!"

Harry glanced at Bunter. Their lives might soon depend upon their personal strength, and Bunter's help would have been valuable—if he rendered any. But the fat junior was evidently in no state to put up a fight. He was sitting in the bottom of the basket, with his back against the wicker, apparently only half conscious.

Wharton shook him by the shoulder, and Bunter blinked at him dazedly.

"Billy!"

"I—I say, Wharton, I—I'm hungry."

"We're all hungry," said Harry. "But it's not a question of that now. Wake up, Billy; rouse yourself!"

"I'm hungry."

"Get up!"

Bunter whimpered.

"Ow! I wish I was back at Greyfriars! What did you bring me here for? You oughtn't to have taken me in the balloon. Ow!"

Wharton gave it up in despair. Billy Bunter was helpless, and was not to be counted upon in a fight. Harry and Bob had only themselves to depend upon.

They watched Lagden narrowly.

The man gave them no attention at first. He was looking back at the fading range of cliffs. The smoke of a steamer appeared on the sea below, and seamen were visible looking up at the balloon; but the vessel soon disappeared.

The sun rose higher; the morning was fine and clear. The sea rolled in limpid green.

The balloon was perceptibly sinking now.

The relief from the weight of two of the voyagers had given it, as it were, a fresh lease of life, and that was all. The gas was still slowly escaping, and the fall of the balloon was only a matter of time.

There were great indentations visible in the gas envelope now, as the sides sagged in. Lower and lower the car sank towards the sea.

Lagden glanced down at the sea, which seemed rising to meet them, and looked at the juniors. The Kentish cliffs were only a pale, grey line now.

Round the balloon were sea and sky, and a few circling sea-gulls.

The sea was terribly near now.

Lagden's look became desperate. It was clear to all—excepting Billy Bunter, who was insensible to everything except hunger—that ere long the car would plunge into the water. It was not built for floating. The sea would rush in, and then all would be over in a few seconds.

And there was no way of preventing it.

With one or two passengers, the balloon might have risen again high enough to reach the coast of France before collapsing. But with the four of them, there was not the faintest chance of that.

Unless the car could be relieved of a good part of the weight in it, the voyagers were doomed.

Lagden made a motion towards the boys. They instinctively closed up together and clenched their fists.

The fugitive burst into a savage laugh.

"I was not going to touch you," he exclaimed.

"Keep your distance!" said Harry sternly.

"Listen to me. You can see that the balloon is sinking. In a quarter of an hour, at the most, we shall be in the water," said Lagden hoarsely.

"It is your fault, for making such a mad venture."

Lagden shrugged his shoulders.

"That is not the point now. We are here now, and death is in sight, unless the balloon can be relieved of some of its weight."

"I know it."

"One must go—or all!" said Lagden.

"All, then!" said Harry. "You cowardly hound! If you dare to lay a finger on any of us, you go out of the car, I warn you!"

Lagden pointed to the crouching form of Billy Bunter.

"Let him go!"

"What!"

"That will be sufficient to save us."

Wharton's eyes gleamed.

"You villain!"

"Fool!" exclaimed Lagden fiercely. "He will be drowned with the rest of us. Let him go first, and save us."

There was a yell from Billy Bunter. He had his wits about him sufficiently to know that his fate was being debated.

"Wharton! Cherry! Ow!"

"Don't be afraid, Billy!"

"I—I won't be murdered! I—I—"

"Shut up!" growled Bob Cherry. "The villain sha'n't touch you—so long as we can help it, anyhow."

Billy Bunter whimpered helplessly.

The two sturdy juniors stood between him and the reckless criminal, and Lagden saw very plainly that he would not be able to touch the fat junior without settling with Harry and Bob first.

He drew a deep breath.

"You understand?" he exclaimed. "It is death to all—or one."

"I don't care!"

"Have sense!" said Lagden savagely. "I tell you that the balloon shall not sink into the sea. He goes, or you go!"

"You rotten hound!" said Bob Cherry. "You'd better try, that's all."

Lagden did not reply. He made a sudden spring, and the two juniors fastened upon him together, and the three rolled in the bottom of the car, struggling furiously.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

For Life or Death.

THE Greyfriars chums were fighting for their lives, and they knew it. Lagden was powerful and desperate; but the juniors were desperate, too.

The fight was a savage one, but the forger did not get the better of it. He succeeded in getting Wharton down, and grasped his throat with choking hands; but Bob Cherry dragged him off, and then it was his turn to be undermost.

He crashed down on his back, and Bob planted a knee on his chest, and he struggled furiously, the car rocking with his wild efforts.

"Help, Harry!" gasped Bob.

Harry was already scrambling to his aid. He threw himself upon the ruffian, and pinned him down with a fierce grasp upon his throat.

Lagden spluttered and choked.

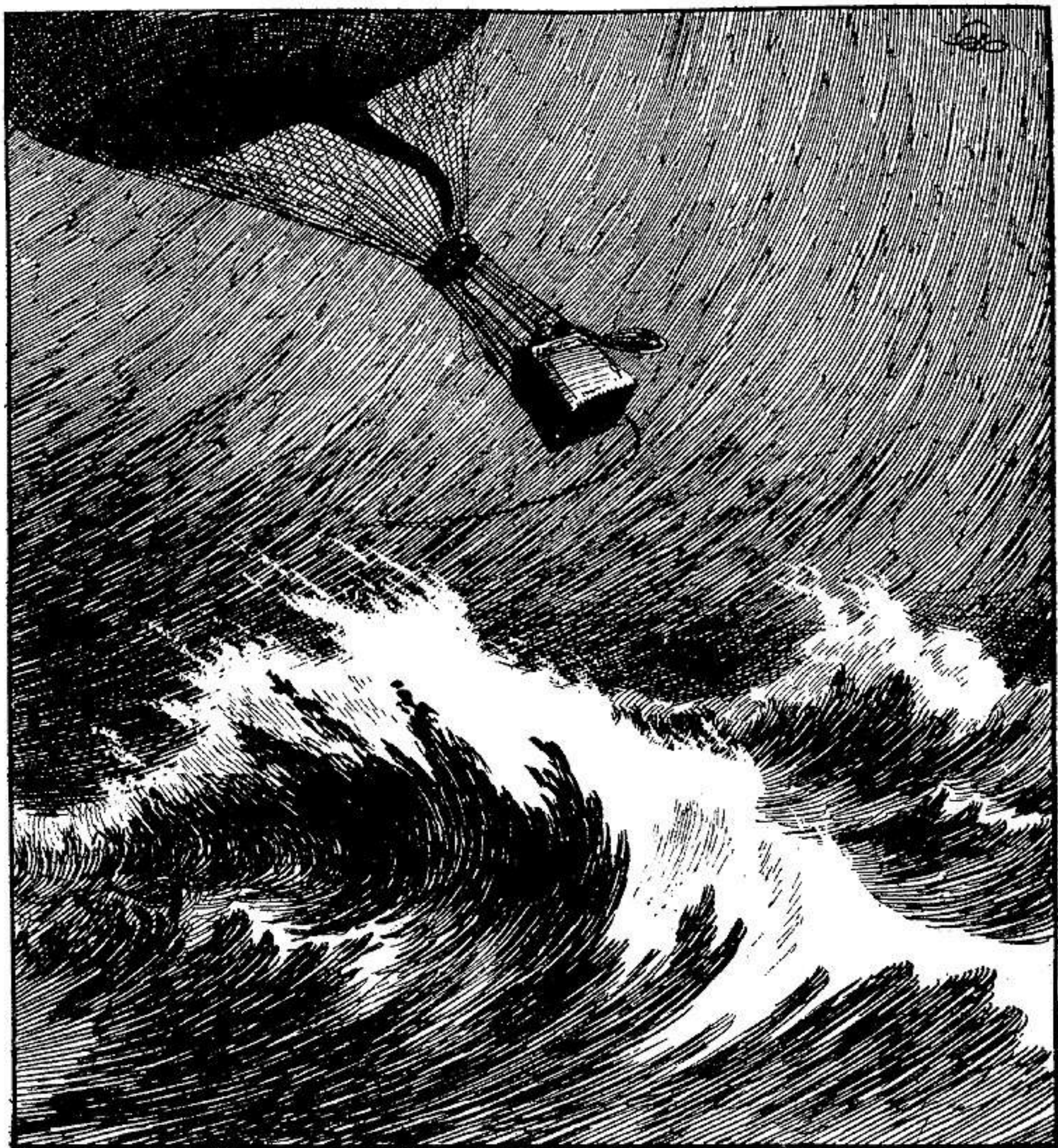
"Got him!" muttered Bob.

"Bunter!" rapped out Harry.

"Ow!"

"Bunter! Lend a hand here!"

In The **"EMPIRE"—"CORDON GAY"**
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The balloon was past the cliffs, and now the juniors were over the bay. The waves, angry in the lashing wind, were running high below.

The fat junior blinked at him dazedly.

"Lend a hand, you ass! Give me that rope!"

Bunter mechanically obeyed. Wharton drew the rope tightly round Lagden's wrists, and knotted them together.

Then the juniors staggered to their feet.

The car was swinging dangerously to and fro, from the violence of the struggle. Lagden rolled over helplessly as it rocked.

He scrambled into a sitting posture, and his face was deadly white now.

His look showed that he fully expected to be tossed into the sea, and he was helpless, at the mercy of the Greyfriars chums now.

The car was getting lower and lower towards the water, THE MAGNET LIBRARY.--No. 111.

and the inevitable plunge was not far off. Harry and Bob looked at one another as they gasped for breath. They would have been fully justified in tossing the villain over the side, as he had intended to do with them. But they could not do it.

"We're going down," said Bob, in a low voice. "It would save us, Harry!"

"I know. But—"

"But it can't be done."

"No."

And Bob nodded assent.

"Look out! We're in for it!"

There was a splash. The bottom of the car had skimmed upon the summit of a high surge, and there came a trickle

of water through the wicker work. Billy Bunter gave a gasp of utter fear.

"Oh! We shall be drowned!"

The balloon swept up again on the wind, and again a dozen yards or so separated the car from the water. Then it swooped downward again. It was simply a prolongation of the inevitable end.

Lagden was deadly white. He struggled with the rope on his wrists, but Wharton had knotted it securely.

"Let me go," he muttered. "Will you let me drown like this?"

"I cannot trust you."

"Listen—"

"Oh, hold your tongue!" said Wharton roughly.

Lagden's eyes glittered.

"Listen," he said again. "There is a chance yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you a knife?"

"A pocket-knife—yes."

"We can fasten ourselves to the network on the gas bag, and cut the car adrift," said Lagden. "It is a chance."

Harry Wharton started.

He had not thought of that. It was a chance, as Lagden said—a desperate chance indeed, but the only one. At least it postponed the end; and while there was life, there was hope!

"Good!" he said curtly.

"Let me loose, then."

Wharton did not reply. He did not intend to let the forger loose; he was too dangerous a neighbour for that.

The junior opened his pocket-knife, and Bob Cherry did the same. Then he shook Billy Bunter by the shoulder.

"Get up, Billy!"

"Ow! We shall be drowned!"

"You will be drowned if you don't help yourself, old chap," said Wharton very patiently. "The car will soon be under water. Get up into the ropes here."

"Ow! I shall fall!"

"I'll hold you."

"I—I can't do it," whimpered Billy Bunter. "It—it makes me giddy to look at it."

"Come on; I'll help you."

"Oh! I—I—"

Wharton forced him to rise. The fat junior staggered like a drunken man. His nerve, what he had had of it, was completely gone. He was white as a sheet, and trembling in every limb. It was plain enough that he was incapable of making a movement to save himself.

"Lend a hand with him, Bob, old man."

"Right-ho!"

Billy Bunter, shivering and whimpering, was forced up on the rim of the car, so that he could be bound to the network under the gas envelope. He closed his eyes with a long shudder, and abandoned himself to the hands of the juniors. Lagden sat helpless in the car, watching them with burning eyes.

The car swooped upon the sea again, and there was a lapping of water in it. Then again it rose half a dozen yards.

The juniors had enough rope to secure Bunter. They fastened him as comfortably as they could, the fat junior's eyes closed all the time. He was now in a semi-conscious state, from sheer terror.

It was better so, for he made no resistance, and gave his helpers less trouble. Only an occasional whimper came from his pale lips.

The juniors glanced down at Lagden. Harry began to cut through the ropes that held the car, with his knife.

"You are not going to leave me here?" cried Lagden hoarsely.

Wharton hesitated.

"We cannot trust you," he said.

"Give me a chance for my life."

Wharton jumped down into the car. He untied one of Lagden's hands, and left the other fastened and knotted behind him.

"That is not enough—"

"It will have to be enough," said Wharton curtly. "I do not intend to have another tussle with you, you murderous hound!"

"But—"

"Oh, ring off!"

Wharton clambered up again, and the pocket-knives made quick work of the ropes. Lagden staggered to his feet. With one hand free he could climb into the network, and he did so, and held on there, with one hand and his legs. He was safe as long as the gas envelope floated, but he could not make any further attack upon the Greyfriars juniors.

There was a snapping as some of the ropes parted, and the car hung on one side. It was dipping in the sea now, and the water washed round it. The end was not more than a

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GORDON GAY. A Schoolboy Actor you will enjoy reading about in

few minutes distant, unless the juniors could get rid of the weight of the car.

They slashed savagely at the holding ropes.

One after another they parted. The car was quite in the water now, and the rolling surge washed over the juniors' feet as they clung to the cordage, and slashed and slashed with the knives. Above them the great gas envelope towered and bellied, and seemed as if it would collapse upon them at any moment.

Wharton gasped as the last rope parted.

The car suddenly plunged under, the balloon, relieved of its weight, shooting up with a suddenness that made the juniors' heads swim.

"Hold on!" panted Harry.

They held on for their lives. Up shot the balloon like a rocket, and the juniors, clinging to the ropes, floated high above the sea.

The ascent slackened and stopped, and the balloon floated on, with four figures clinging to the hacked ropes, and the sea rolling and gleaming below. No longer ballasted by the weight of the car, the gas envelope was rolling and tumbling wildly, and the clinging figures were flung violently to and fro.

Breathless and gasping, they held on for their lives.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

Picked Up at Sea.

HARRY WHARTON felt his brain whirl as he looked downwards. For the moment there came upon him an almost irresistible impulse to let go with his hands, though he knew that it was death to do it. But he resisted it, and his senses cleared. He looked at Bob Cherry; he had his eyes tightly closed.

They swung on the ropes, while the balloon bellied and sagged above them. It was reeling wildly in the wind, and again settling down.

Onward it swept, the juniors swinging to and fro.

Harry Wharton looked down again, as his head became steadier. A black blur of smoke on the sea told of the passing of a steamer.

It was a chance of rescue.

"Bob—Bob!"

Bob Cherry looked at him with haggard eyes.

"Harry!"

"There's a steamer yonder! Yell!" said Harry desperately.

"Good egg!"

"Help!" shouted the juniors together, with the full force of their lungs. "Ship ahoy! Help—help!"

But the wind carried their voices away into the air—the steamer was too far off. They had a faint hope that the crew might observe the balloon and lay by for them.

But the hope proved illusory.

The blur of smoke faded down on the sea—the steamer became a speck in the distance, steaming on towards Brighton.

Bob Cherry groaned.

"It's all up, Harry!"

"Don't give in, Bob, old man! We're not done yet!"

Harry Wharton spoke with an assumption of hope he little felt. What chance was there for them, floating upon the wrecked balloon over the boundless waters?

The eyes of the juniors swept the sea in search of a sail or of smoke. Surely there would be some vessel soon in sight in the well-frequented waters of the Channel—some ocean-going craft steaming east or west, or some passenger-boat going north or south, or, at least, a fishing-craft?

But no sail appeared.

They stared ahead—towards the south, where the wind was bearing them. How far off was the French coast?

They could not guess.

They only knew that there was no sign of it on the sea—and the balloon was following a slanting line on the wind, sinking nearer and nearer to the water. Harry Wharton thought he could almost calculate the exact point at which it would plunge into the sea.

A chill ran through him.

Was this to be the end? Thoughts of Greyfriars thronged wildly into his mind. He thought of the grey old walls, the ivied tower, the football field, the green, sunny Close, the kind old face of the Doctor! Was he never to see them again?

Bob Cherry gave a shout.

"A ship! Look!"

Harry looked, with wild eyes. Yes, there it was—a sail glancing upon the sea—a brown sail, that glimmered in the sun.

Hope beat again in the junior's heart.

"A sail! Thank Heaven!"

The sail was directly in the line of the balloon's course. It was tacking against the wind, and moving at a moderate rate. The tacks were not very long, and not likely to take it out of sight of the balloon at any time.

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Harry's eyes glistened.

It was a chance at least. The craft, as it came nearer and he saw it more clearly, proved to be a small one—a little schooner with two masts, and Harry made out four figures on her deck, and guessed them to be probably all her crew.

A burly man in sea-boots, with a pointed black beard, was turning a glass skyward, and evidently examining the balloon. Harry gave a gasp of relief.

"They've seen us!" he exclaimed.

"They've seen the balloon, at any rate!" said Bob. "Whether they've seen us—"

"Shout!"

"What-ho!"

And the juniors shouted together.

"Help!"

"Help!"

They saw a sail taken in on the little schooner, and exchanged glances of satisfaction. The schooner's skipper had seen them, and was intending to lay by and pick them up.

Lagden called out hoarsely to the juniors.

"Release me now."

"No hurry!" said Harry coldly. "Wait!"

"We shall be picked up now," said Lagden, his eyes glittering. "That boat will pick us up."

"I hope so."

"What do you intend to do? Will you tell them who I am?"

Harry looked at him coldly.

"Certainly I shall!" he replied. "As soon as we set foot on deck I shall tell them that you are an escaped criminal, and call upon them to seize you."

"You will not keep silence?"

"After your murderous attack upon us? It is not likely!"

"Listen to me—"

"I want to have nothing to say to you. You are a scoundrel and an attempted murderer, and I will do everything in my power to give you up to justice."

Lagden ground his teeth.

"I am not a prisoner yet!" he muttered.

"You soon will be."

Wharton looked towards the schooner again. The man in the big sea-boots waved his hand and shouted, but the words could not be made out.

Harry loosened one hand from the ropes and waved it in return.

The balloon was slanting down towards the sea, and the schooner was lying directly in her path, and the seamen were standing ready to lend a helping hand.

If the gas envelope passed closed to the vessel a boat would soon pick up the juniors if they could keep themselves afloat till they were reached, and already a boat was being lowered.

The two oarsmen in it were ready to pull in whatever direction was needed, waiting for a signal from the deck.

Lower sank the balloon.

The man in the sea-boots shouted again, but the juniors did not catch the words. But Harry guessed his meaning from the thought that was rising in his own mind.

If they sank into the water with the gas envelope collapsing over them they would be drowned helplessly under it like rats in a trap.

"We must drop into the sea, Bob," Harry exclaimed.

"I was just thinking so, kid."

"I'll cut Bunter loose."

"Free my hand, then!" exclaimed Lagden hoarsely.

"You can wait."

"Do you want me to drown helplessly?"

"You have only yourself to thank if you do."

The man ground his teeth savagely. Harry cut the rope that held Bunter to the netting, and the two juniors supported him between them. Lagden was struggling with his bonds. His right hand was so tied that he could not reach the knots with his other hand to unfasten them. His face was deadly white. He had said that he would die rather than be captured, but at the sight of death below every instinct of life woke in him, and he was desperate.

The balloon was so low down that the juniors' feet were dragging in the sea. It was clear that the end was close at hand.

Wharton slung himself towards Lagden and slashed through the rope that bound his right hand to his back.

"You are free!" he said.

Lagden replied with a curse.

"Let go, Bob!"

"I'm going!"

"Oh!" whispered Bunter.

The two juniors slid into the sea, with Bunter between them, in their grasp. Bunter gave a last wild whimper as he felt the chill of the water round him, and fainted. Harry and Bob supported him in the sea, forgetting all about Lagden. The forger was swimming strongly, but he gave no hand to the boys with their burden.

There was a shout on the sea. Harry saw the boat pulling towards him, and gave a shout in response.

The sea was calm, fortunately. The juniors rose and fell on the surge. Harry and Bob were both excellent swimmers, THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 111.

NEXT WEEK: "THE FIRST AT GREYFRIARS."

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and they kept afloat with ease, supporting Bunter between them. The boat loomed up close at hand.

A voice called to the juniors, and a strong, rough hand grasped Bunter and dragged him into the boat. The two juniors, panting and breathless, were helped in after him, and they sank down in the bottom of the boat beside him. There was a cry from Lagden as he swam towards the boat, and the boatmen turned towards him. He was pulled in a moment or two later, and the seamen pulled back towards the schooner.

Harry Wharton, gasping and exhausted, raised himself upon one elbow and looked over the gunwale for the balloon. Relieved of the weight of its passengers, and deprived of their ballast, the gas envelope had shot upward to the sky, and was rolling over and over in the strong wind.

Wharton sank back into the boat.

In a few seconds they had reached the schooner, and they were helped up the side. The bearded man in the sea-boots received them with a rough but friendly grasp, and the juniors sank exhausted on the deck. Lagden leaned against the mast, panting. Billy Bunter was still unconscious.

Harry Wharton staggered to his feet.

He pointed to Lagden.

"That man is a criminal, escaping from the police!" he exclaimed. "Seize him!"

The man in the sea-boots, evidently the skipper of the little craft, looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"Do you understand?" exclaimed Wharton. "That man is a criminal! The police are hunting for him!"

The skipper shook his head.

"Je ne comprends pas," he said.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

On a French Craft.

L AGDEN looked at the junior with a sneering smile. Harry's heart sank. The keen-eyed forger had seen at a glance what now dawned upon Harry and Bob—that they had been picked up by a French craft.

The big man in the sea-boots did not understand a word that Harry uttered, and the faces of his men showed that they were equally ignorant.

They looked interested and curious, and apparently understood that Wharton was making some accusation against his fellow-voyager, but that was all.

"You are French?" exclaimed Harry. "Vous etes Francais?"

The skipper nodded.

"You do not speak English?"

A shake of the head.

"Well, of all the rotten luck!" said Bob Cherry, slowly picking himself up, and shaking the water out of his clothes.

Lagden laughed scoffingly.

"You are not lucky," he said; "you cannot make him understand, and I shall give him what version of the affair I please."

Harry gave him a glance of contempt.

"It will be easy enough when we reach land," he said.

"The vessel is going towards the English coast, luckily, and we shall find enough to understand us there."

Lagden sneered.

"Expliquez vous," said the skipper.

Wharton called up his best French, and was beginning, when Lagden broke in. The forger poured out a volley of French with the greatest fluency. It was clear that he had the language at his finger-tips, and he spoke it so fast that the juniors could not even follow his words.

They exchanged looks of dismay.

What chance had they against this?

Wharton's faltering school-French would have been only half comprehended by the skipper of the Belle Marie, while Lagden was able to talk to him with the ease and fluency of one of his own countrymen.

The skipper nodded.

He was evidently impressed by what Lagden was saying to him.

The forger broke off at last, and turned to the juniors with a smile on his face. He seemed to be in a curiously good-humour.

"What have you said to him, you villain?" exclaimed Harry.

"Only that I am your uncle!" said Lagden coolly.

"What!"

ANSWERS

A Double-Length Tale of Harry Wharton & Co. By FRANK RICHARDS.

"And that we were making a voyage for pleasure in Kent when we were blown out to sea," went on the rascal, with a genial smile. "He swallows every word I have also hinted that you are lightheaded from terror and exposure, and that he need not attach much importance to anything you say!"

Harry stood, aghast.

The ready and plausible invention of the rascal astounded him. And he knew that it would be very difficult to erase from the French skipper's mind the impression Lagden had made by his cunning explanation.

The skipper tapped Harry on the shoulder, and spoke in rapid French, and the junior guessed, by catching the words "la bas" and "mangez," what he meant. They were to go below to eat.

Wharton gave up the attempt to explain at present. He was in no condition for a wordy dispute with Lagden, and with the villain standing there, ready to contradict anything he said, in far more fluent French, a dispute would only have gone against him.

"Well, let's get something to eat," said Bob Cherry, "and some dry clothes, too! We can settle with that waster afterwards."

Lagden smiled, and followed one of the seamen below.

The juniors went down to the cabin, and a fat, good-natured-looking Frenchman followed them down. His apron and his fat face indicated that he was the cook of the schooner, though he evidently took part in the hauling and pulling when his services were required on deck.

The juniors were given towels to dry themselves, and a change of clothing—the latter belonging to the seamen, and of a size that left them plenty of room in it. Lagden also changed his clothes in the little cuddy, without speaking a word to the boys.

Dried and clothed, the juniors saw their own clothes placed to dry before the galley fire, and then they sat down to a meal.

The fat cook helped them plentifully. Wharton asked him if he spoke English, and he grinned and nodded, but his English proved to be very limited.

"Speak Englese," he said. "Speak little—un peu—comprende—oui!"

"Oh, you understand—eh?"

"Oui, m'sieur!"

"What is your name?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Henri."

"Good! And the captain—his name?"

"Capitaine Danglars."

"Where are you going—ou allez vous?"

"Angleterre."

"Good!" said Harry. "If the schooner is going to England, that settles the case for our friend the forger! As soon as we land—"

Lagden, who was eating at the other side of the table, broke into a sneering laugh.

"We may not land in England as soon as you think!" he remarked.

"You cannot prevent it!"

Lagden shrugged his shoulders, and went on with his meal. Billy Bunter, who had been rubbed dry, and placed in a bunk in the cuddy, blinked over the edge of it at the juniors. Perhaps the smell of the savoury stew the boys were partaking of had aroused him.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Are you awake, Bunter?"

"Yes, I am, Cherry! Where are we?"

"On a ship."

"Oh, I'm hungry!"

"Go hon!"

"I don't remember getting on the ship," said Bunter, wiping his spectacles and readjusting them on his fat little nose.

Bob Cherry laughed.

"You were fainting at the time, you see—a clear case of the bluest of blue funk!" he said. "You would have gone straight to the bottom of the Channel if we hadn't held on to you! Blessed if I know what we did it for now."

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"There's plenty of grub," said Wharton, getting up to give the fat junior a helping hand out of the bunk. "Wiro in, Billy!"

The Falstaff of Greyfriars sniffed appreciatively.

"Yes, rather!" he said. "I've got a tremendous appetite; I don't think I've ever felt quite so hungry in my life before."

"My hat! You'll make a clearance, then!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Go ahead!"

"I mean to," said Bunter, with emphasis. "That smells like a good stew. I wonder what it's made of?"

"It's made by a Frenchman, so you'd better not ask!"

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grinned Bob Cherry. "But it's jolly nice, so you can wire in without asking questions."

"It smells ripping!"

"It tastes ripping! Go ahead!"

The cook placed a large plate and a spoon and knife and fork before Bunter. Then he helped the fat junior with a big wooden ladle from the bowl of stew. It certainly was a savoury stew, with rich broth and with pieces of things floating in it—meat and vegetables.

Bunter comforted himself with the reflection that frogs must be unobtainable at sea, and fell to with a keen appetite.

Henri watched him with a hospitable smile.

The fat junior travelled through the huge supply at express speed, and then looked at Henri. Henri ladled out a further plateful.

It disappeared in about two minutes, and Bunter smacked his lips.

"I think this is going to be all right!" he remarked.

"Going to be!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"Yes. Give me some more to taste, you French chap."

Henri ladled out a third helping. Bunter consumed it with a thoughtful expression upon his fat face, and nodded his head over the last spoonful as if satisfied.

"Yes; it's all right!" he announced. "I'm going to have some!"

Bob Cherry roared.

"Going to have some!" he gasped. "Haven't you had any yet?"

"I've just been tasting it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at!"

"Ha, ha! If that's only a taste, I wonder what the feed will be like!" gurgled Bob Cherry. "You are going to astonish Henri!"

"More, please!" said Bunter. "Encore de potage!"

Henri looked surprised, but he filled the fat junior's plate again. Bunter travelled through the fourth helping as quickly as before. Then he made signs for more.

"Encore?" asked the astonished cook.

"Oui, oui, oui!"

"Mon Dieu!"

Henri helped him again, and watched him eat, as one watches the animals at the Zoo. Bunter cleared the plate again.

By this time a great shininess was glimmering all over his fat face, his breath was coming stertorously, and his mouth did not quite shut.

But he was not finished yet.

"Encore?" gasped Henri.

"Yes, rather—I mean, oui, oui, oui!"

"Ciel!"

"Go easy, Billy!" said Bob Cherry, looking a little alarmed. "'Nuff's as good as a feast, you know! This isn't your last meal; you're not going to be hanged to-morrow morning, or anything like that! Take it easy!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Better have a rest!" urged Wharton. "You can sleep a bit, you know, and then have another feed when you wake up."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

Bunter started again, and cleared his plate. He was showing signs now of his exertions, but he was not beaten yet. Henri silently passed the ladle over to him, with a sign that he was to help himself.

"You're wearing him out!" said Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really—"

"No good waiting here for him to finish," said Harry, rising. "He won't leave off eating so long as there's anything left to eat on the vessel!"

Bunter did not speak; he was too busy. The bowl of stew was nearly empty now. Bunter scraped the ladle round for a last helping, and demolished it. Then he gave a deep sigh of contentment.

"I feel better now!" he remarked.

"I think I should feel a jolly lot worse if I put away a feed like that!" said Bob Cherry. "Where do you stow it?"

"I feel hardly peckish at all now."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't think I could eat any more stew," said Bunter thoughtfully. "Of course, I could eat some tarts or cake. I wonder if this chap has any pudding?"

"Oh, don't be a pig!"

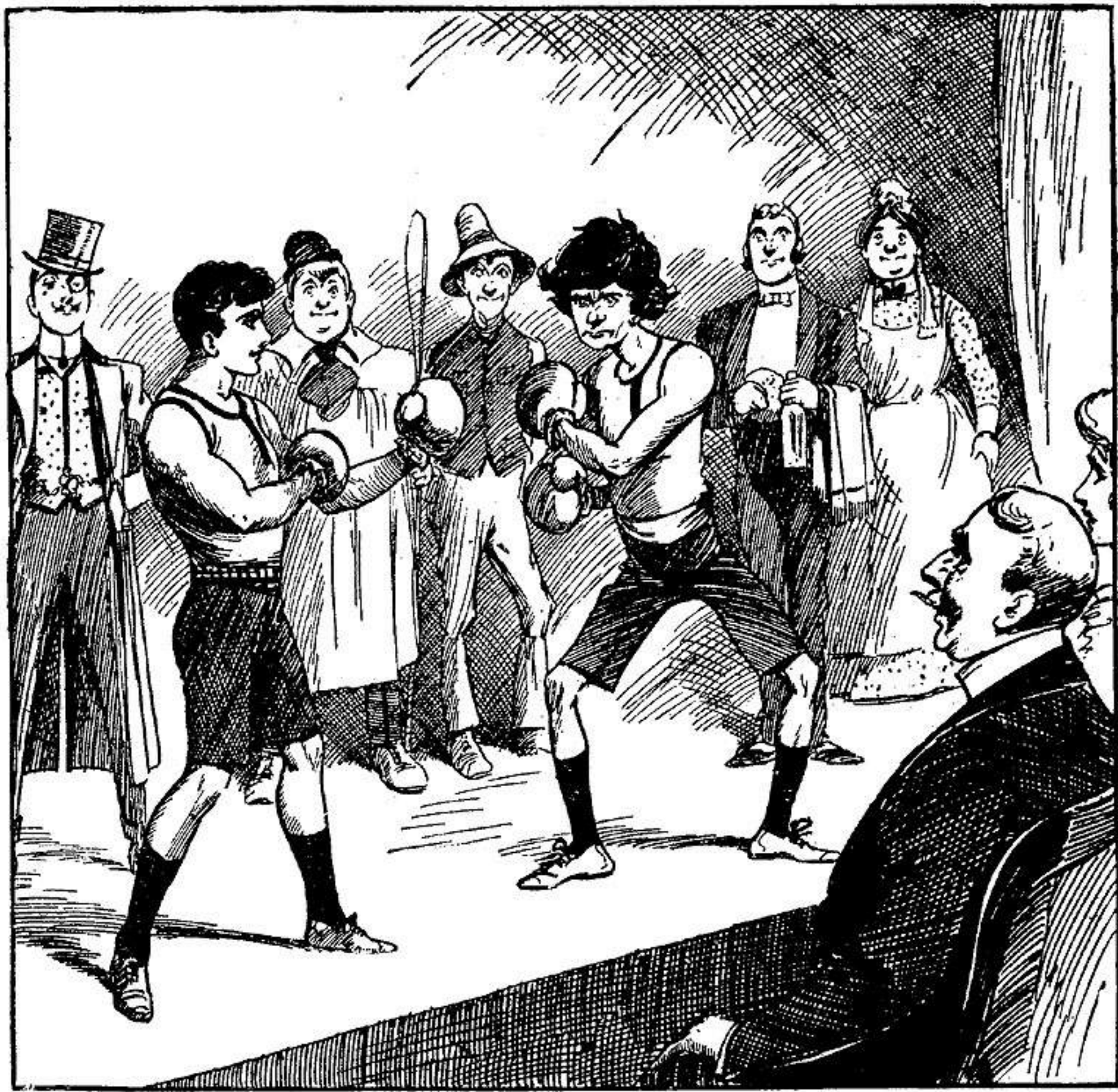
"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Get to bed, and snore," said Bob Cherry. "I should think you need a rest after a gorge like that, like a blessed boa constrictor."

"Well, perhaps a nap would be a good idea," said Bunter; "I didn't get much sleep last night. I'm a delicate chap, and I shall have to take care that my constitution doesn't suffer from what I've been through."

And he climbed into the bunk again. In a couple of

A Double-Length Tale of Harry Wharton & Co. By FRANK RICHARDS



"Are you ready?" shouted Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Yes!" "Then time!" And the "great fight scene" between Gordon Gay and Tadpole began in earnest.
(A laughable incident from the tale of "Gordon Gay, the Schoolboy Actor," in "The Empire Library." Out to-day. Price One Halfpenny.)

minutes he was fast asleep, and his unmusical snore was echoing through the cuddy.

Henri looked at the empty bowl, and then at the sleeping Bunter, and then at the juniors, and made an expressive gesture.

"Mon Dieu!" he ejaculated once more.

Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry laughed, and went on deck.

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER. Lagden in Luck.

THE noonday sun was blazing on the sea as the juniors came up the ladder. It was a sunny spring day, and the sea was smiling in the sunlight. The juniors drew in invigorating draughts of the keen air. Both of them were tired, and greatly inclined for sleep, but Wharton wished to speak to Captain Danglars before he slept. He felt that he ought to do his best to warn the schooner's skipper of the character of the man he had rescued from the sinking balloon.

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GORDON GAY. A Schoolboy Actor you will enjoy reading about in

The juniors looked round for the balloon—but it had disappeared. The probability was, that it had long ago plunged into the sea and sunk.

The schooner was tacking to and fro, making slow progress against the wind, towards the distant shore of England. Captain Danglars was on deck, and the Greyfriars boys touched their caps to him.

The skipper smiled cordially enough, and began to speak in French.

"He wants to know comment we are alleying," said Bob Cherry, with a grin.

Wharton smiled, and explained to the skipper in his best French. Lagden was still below, and so could not interrupt him. Harry did his best to make the skipper understand the state of the case. Captain Danglars listened with great attention; but it was evident that Lagden had gained a great advantage by telling his story first.

Finally the captain waved his hand towards the direction of the English coast, and spoke in rapid French.

"What does he mean?" asked Bob.

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"I understand him," said Harry. "He means that we are going to England, and when we get there, it will be all right. He doesn't know whether to believe me, or to credit Lagden's statement."

"I see."

"He means that when we get to England the point will be settled."

Bob Cherry looked away to the north.

"But when shall we get there?" he asked.

"I'll ask him."

Wharton put the question in French.

"Six ou sept heures le soir," said the captain.

"Eh? What does he mean by his seezoosettur?" said Bob.

Harry laughed.

"Six or seven o'clock this evening," he said.

"Phew! That's a long time for a short run like that!"

"The wind's against the schooner, you see. She is tacking twice the distance that she makes ahead," said Harry.

"I see. Well, I suppose the scoundrel can't do any mischief between now and this evening," Bob Cherry said thoughtfully. "He can't escape from the schooner without jumping overboard."

"That's so."

"And he can't do any harm—even if it would serve his purpose. I don't see that it matters if he runs loose till we get to England."

Wharton nodded.

"You're right, Bob. He can't do any harm—and as soon as we arrive at an English port he can be arrested. We shall be watching him, and we'll take jolly good care that he doesn't slip ashore before he can be taken."

"Right-ho! Now let's go and get some sleep. I'm as tired as a dog."

And the juniors went below. Wharton glanced at Billy Bunter before he turned in. The fat junior was fast asleep, but his lips were moving. Bunter was talking in his sleep, a little habit he had sometimes, and the juniors grinned as they caught his words:

"A shilling's worth of jam tarts, Mrs. Mimble. Of course, you'll let me have thirteen for a shilling?"

"The ruling passion," murmured Bob Cherry.

Bunter was silent for a moment, and then he went mumbling on.

"Oh, really, Mrs. Mimble, I'm surprised at you! Surely you know that the whole system of modern finance is built up on lines of credit. Still, as a matter of fact, I'm expecting a postal-order this evening, and I'll settle up out of that. Now, do be businesslike."

"Good old Bunter!" said Bob Cherry. "I wonder whether there's a single moment, day or night, when he isn't thinking or dreaming about grub."

"Probably not."

"By the way, where's Lagden?" said Bob, looking round.

"I haven't seen him since he was grubbing here with us."

"Oh, taking a rest, I suppose?"

The juniors turned into the bunks Henri pointed out to them. They were fast asleep in about two minutes.

Billy Bunter's snoring died away. The fat junior was in too deep a slumber even to snore.

Henri, the cook, looked benevolently at the sleeping juniors, and left the cuddy. The boys were left alone.

About a quarter of an hour later, Lagden looked into the cuddy.

There were signs of weariness in the man's face—he was fatigued, perhaps more so than the juniors; for he had been hunted and harried before the adventure in the balloon. But he had not slept; and he showed no intention of doing so.

He glanced at the sleeping boys, and a slight smile crossed his face. From the cuddy a narrow alley-way ran to the little cabin belonging to the skipper of the Belle Marie.

Lagden stepped quietly along it.

The little cabin was untenanted. Lagden entered it quietly. The only furniture consisted of a bunk and a locked chest, with a chair and a shelf.

Lagden paused at the chest, listened for a moment, and then drew a chisel from his pocket, which he had doubtless purloined in the vessel. In a couple of seconds the chest lay open before him.

The adventurer smiled grimly. He was searching the skipper's cabin in the hope of finding a weapon there, and he had found one. There was a revolver locked up in the chest. Lagden grasped it, and examined it. His mere grasp upon the weapon showed that he had handled a revolver before.

He drew a deep breath. There was a box of cartridges in the recess with the revolver, and the adventurer slipped them into his pocket.

Then he closed the chest, and withdrew from the cabin as quietly as he had entered it.

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GORDON GAY. A Schoolboy Actor you will enjoy reading about in

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.

No Chance!

HARRY WHARTON awoke.

He sat up in the bunk, and bumped his head, and uttered an exclamation. He had quite forgotten where he was.

"Oh!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

"You awake, Bob?"

"Sounds like it, doesn't it?" said Bob Cherry, sitting up. "Ow!"

"What's the matter?"

"Ow! I've bumped my head."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob Cherry snorted.

"Well, you cackling ass, I don't see anything to cackle at! There's nothing funny in bumping one's head. Ow! It hurts! You ass! Ow!"

"Ha, ha! I've just bumped mine!"

"Serves you right!" said Bob Cherry. "Ow! Let's wake up Bunter, and make him bump his. It would be only fair."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bunter! I say, Bunter!"

Bunter snored; he did not wake. A cannon fired close to his ear would hardly have awakened the fat junior out of that deep slumber.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"You won't wake him up, Bob!" he exclaimed. "Let him sleep. I don't suppose he'll wake until we're at anchor, if then."

"What a blessed row he's making!" said Bob Cherry.

"What did you wake me up for? I'm going to sleep again. What's the time?"

"Four o'clock," said Harry, looking at his watch.

"No need to move for two or three hours yet, then," said Bob Cherry, settling himself down in the bunk.

"No, but—"

"Besides, I've got a sort of queer feeling, as if I were on the sea, and I shall be ill if I get up, I think."

"Yes, but—"

"Oh, go to sleep!" said Bob Cherry, closing his eyes.

"I say, Bob—"

"Good-night!"

"I'm rather anxious about that chap Lagden," said Harry, stepping out of the bunk and stretching himself. "I can't help wondering what he's up to."

"Oh, blow him!" said Bob sleepily.

"He may mean mischief."

"Oh, rats! He can't turn the ship round, can he? And as soon as we get to England he's going to be arrested."

"Yes, but—"

Snore!

"I say, Bob—"

Snore!

Harry gave it up. He rinsed his face in a bucket of cold water, and felt much refreshed thereby, and then he looked out of the cuddy. He glanced up the short wooden ladder to the deck, and saw a patch of blue sky over the open hatch. He stepped up, and glanced up and down the deck. Lagden was not in sight there.

Where was he?

Harry could not help wondering. The food and rest had greatly refreshed the Greyfriars junior, and Harry Wharton was quite himself again. As he thought over the matter, he was fully convinced that Lagden would not quietly return to the country he had fled from, to be unresistingly arrested on landing, and marched off in the hands of the police. The fugitive would make some effort for freedom. But what, and how?

Wharton stepped down into the little cuddy again. A sound in the narrow alley-way drew his attention, and he looked into it.

Lagden was there.

He was standing with his back to the junior, and did not observe him. Harry wondered what he was doing. The man was evidently busy with something in his hands, and a faint click told Wharton that it was mechanism of some kind.

Lagden moved slightly, and a gleam of light fell upon metal—upon the barrel of a revolver.

Wharton started violently.

He understood then. The blood rushed to his heart. He knew then that his surmise was correct, that Lagden meant to make a fight for freedom, and that he had secured a deadly weapon, which he would certainly not hesitate to use if needed.

With his heart beating like a hammer, Harry Wharton stepped away quietly, and returned to Bob Cherry's bunk. He shook his chum by the shoulder.

"Bob!" he whispered.

The junior grunted.

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"Bob!"
"Groo! Lemme alone!"
"Wake up, old man!"

Bob Cherry's eyes opened. They fell upon Wharton's pale, serious face, and Bob understood at once that there was cause for alarm.

"What's the row, Harry?" he whispered.

"Lagden."

"Where is he?"

"In the alley there."

Bob sat up, taking care not to bump his head this time.

"What is he doing, Harry?"

"Loading a revolver."

"Phew!"

"I don't know where he's got it from," said Harry.

"From the skipper's cabin, I expect. He's standing there loading it now."

"My hat!"

"Better get up, Bob."

"Yes, rather!"

Bob Cherry slipped out of bed. He was blankly dismayed. Lagden, one man against half a dozen, was one matter; Lagden with a six-shooter in his hand was another.

Bob fully realised how grave the situation was.

"What on earth's to be done, Harry?" he muttered.

"Do you think the villain would shoot?"

"I am sure of it."

"My hat!"

"We—we must warn the captain first——"

"No, you will not!"

It was Lagden's voice, with a curious metallic ring in it.

The two juniors started and looked round.

Lagden was standing before them, and the revolver was levelled in his hand. The glimmering barrel swayed a little from side to side, alternately covering the two juniors. Harry felt a thrill run through his veins. It needed only a slight pressure of Lagden's finger to send a bullet crashing through him, and it was a terrible and thrilling thought.

The forger looked at them with a sneering smile.

"The cards are all in my hands, you see!" he exclaimed.

"This revolver is loaded, and I am a dead shot."

Harry faced him fearlessly.

"You will be hanged if you use it," he said.

Lagden shrugged his shoulders.

"I know my risk as well as you do," he said. "I have no desire to place my neck in a noose, if I can avoid it. But I am determined not to return to England."

"You cannot help it."

"You will see. Listen! I shall not use this weapon if I can help it, as I have said; I do not want to endanger my neck. But if I am forced to it, I shall shoot without mercy." He gritted his teeth, and his eyes gleamed. "A dozen lives shall not stand between me and my freedom."

Harry and Bob were silent. They could read the relentless determination in the forger's eyes, and they knew that he meant every word that he said. Their lives hung upon a thread.

"If I am compelled to use this revolver, I shall not use it only once," went on Lagden. "You understand? If there is bloodshed, there will not be a little. You had better take care not to provoke me or interfere with me in any way. I have no wish to hurt you; but my own safety comes first. You were saying that you would warn the captain. You will do nothing of the sort. Stay here!"

"I——"

"You will remain here!" said the forger imperiously. "If you attempt to reach the deck, I shall fire."

He made a threatening gesture with the revolver, and turned towards the companion ladder. He ascended it to the deck.

Harry and Bob exchanged glances. Bob made a hopeless gesture.

"What on earth's to be done now, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. He was nonplussed.

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Upper Hand!

L AGDEN stepped out on deck, with the revolver held down at his side, concealed in the loose folds of the sailor clothes he was now wearing. There were three men on deck—Captain Danglars, in his big sea-boots, a seaman at the wheel, and the mate, who was chatting with the captain. Both of them were looking to the north, where a dim grey line appeared on the horizon—the white cliffs of England.

Land was in sight.

Captain Danglars glanced round at Lagden, and nodded. Lagden had been very agreeable to the French skipper, and had made a good impression upon him. Harry Wharton's explanation of the facts had been necessarily very imperfect, and the skipper was greatly inclined to believe it all a strange fancy caused by exposure and privation—the freak of a disordered brain. But he was soon to discover the truth, in a very unpleasant way for himself.

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NEXT WEEK: "THE FIRST AT GREYFRIARS."

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The crew of the schooner was very small, consisting only of four men, including the captain, and the constant tacking was hard work. It had occurred to Captain Danglars that the man he had picked up might be able to lend a hand with the pulling and hauling, and make himself useful.

He was about to speak on the subject when Lagden came up, but the forger gave him no time.

"Captain Danglars!"

"Oui, m'sieur."

"You are getting near to the English coast," said Lagden, speaking in French, very quickly. "I want you to turn and run before the wind."

The French skipper stared at him in hopeless amazement.

"Monsieur!"

"You heard what I said."

"Yes, but I do not understand," said the captain, in his own language. "I am bound for England."

"I do not wish to return there."

"Why not?"

"That is my business."

The skipper's eyes suddenly gleamed.

"Ah! Is it true, then, what the boy said?"

"Whether it is true or not, I do not choose to return to England," said Lagden, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I want you to bout ship."

The skipper laughed, as if amused by the coolness of the request.

"I refuse!" he said.

"I insist!"

"Ah! Monsieur is mad!" said the skipper, with a shrug.

"I repeat that I insist, and I shall be obeyed," said Lagden.

"Bah!"

Lagden whipped up the revolver to a level. The astonished captain started back a pace.

"Monsieur!"

"Stand back!" Lagden's voice rang out menacingly as the French skipper made a movement as if to spring upon him. "Keep your distance."

"Scoundrel," said Captain Danglars, clenching his hands.

"Villain! That weapon is mine—you have taken it from my chest."

Lagden laughed.

"And I was lucky to find it," he said. "Now, are you going to do the sensible thing? Turn before the wind, and take me to the French coast—with a wind like this behind the schooner, you will make the run in a few hours. It will simply be a loss of time to you. To refuse will be loss of life."

"Villain!"

"Come—come, this is no time for bandying words!" exclaimed Lagden impatiently. "Will you do as I wish?"

"Non—non!"

"Consider——"

"Non!" exclaimed the Frenchman angrily. "I will not be ordered on my own deck by a criminal. Go below!"

"Fool! I am armed, and you are not. Will you force me to fire?" exclaimed Lagden hoarsely.

His finger shook on the trigger—the hammer half-rose. But the man was evidently very unwilling to shoot. Perhaps the inevitable penalty in case of capture was looming before his mind.

"Go below!" repeated Captain Danglars.

"Oh, you are mad!" said Lagden. "I tell you that I am the master of this vessel, and I will be obeyed."

Captain Danglars clenched his hands hard. He looked round him, and grasped an iron belaying pin. Another moment, and he would have hurled himself upon Lagden.

The forger had not a second to lose.

It was neck or nothing then—and he pulled the trigger. But as he did so, he shifted his aim, and the bullet seared its way into the shoulder of the French skipper, instead of into his chest.

Captain Danglars gave a terrible cry, and staggered backwards. The belaying pin fell with a resounding crash upon the deck.

The mate sprang forward and caught the captain as he fell.

Lagden was white as death; but the smoking revolver was steady in his hand.

"He would have it!" he muttered.

The mate lowered the captain to the planks. Danglars was already unconscious. Harry Wharton ran on deck at the sound of the revolver-shot, followed by Bob Cherry and Henri, the cook.

Lagden faced them all, the pistol in his hand.

The odds were against him; but he was master of the situation still.

"Keep your distance!" he said threateningly.

A Double-Length Tale of Harry Wharton & Co. By FRANK RICHARDS.

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.

A Criminal in Command.

THE revolver in Lagden's hand enforced obedience. The desperate man would have fired again—and again—if needed. Harry Wharton gave him one glance, calculating the chances, and he saw that they were all on the side of Lagden.

Then he knelt by the side of the captain.

He helped the mate to strip off the coat and shirt, and expose the wound. The bullet had passed clean through the skipper's shoulder, without remaining in the wound. There was a profusion of blood, but the wound was not likely to prove fatal, if proper care were taken. Harry guessed that Lagden had purposely aimed the bullet to disable with as little risk as possible to life.

"Better get him below, sir," said Wharton to the mate. He pointed, "la bas!"

"Oui—oui!"

The mate and Henri, the cook, raised the insensible skipper in their arms, and carried him down to his cabin. There he was stretched upon his bunk. Harry Wharton explained in weak French and with many gestures that he was able to deal with the wound, and the French mate, who seemed quite helpless in the matter, left it in his hands.

Harry Wharton had trained a great deal as a Boy Scout, and he had learned to give first aid in case of injuries. He had never had a bullet-wound to deal with before, but he was not greatly at a loss. It was fortunate that the bullet, fired at such close range, had passed clean through. Harry succeeded in stanching the bleeding, and bandaging the wound. The skipper remained unconscious all the time.

Bob Cherry helped all he could, looking on with a white and anxious face. The junior of Greyfriars felt himself strangely thrilled in the presence of dark tragedy—a phase of life so new and different to him.

"Harry! Will he die?"

Bob hardly breathed the words. Harry shook his head.

"I think not," he said. "Not if he gets proper care soon, anyway."

"But how is he to get it? That scoundrel is going to make them return to the French coast."

Wharton's brow darkened.

"Perhaps we can stop him."

"But if not—"

"Well, with this wind, we shall be on the French coast in a few hours, and then the poor fellow can be taken ashore."

Bob shook his head.

"But do you think Lagden will consent to land at a French port? The mate and the seamen would only have to call out a word to have him seized."

Wharton nodded thoughtfully.

"He won't," he agreed. "He will want to make for some lonely spot, further up the coast, and run the schooner ashore."

"That's so! And then what chance will Captain Danglars have?"

"Very little, I'm afraid."

"We must stop him somehow, Harry," said Bob, in a low, tense whisper.

"I say, you fellows—" Billy Bunter peered into the cabin. "What's going on? What's everybody so excited about? I've been woke up by people trampling about, and the ship is shaking like anything."

"They're turning to the south again," said Bob.

"Then Lagden is having his way."

"Looks like it."

"I say, you fellows—" Bunter blinked at the deathly face of the skipper. "Good heavens! What has happened?"

"You'd better go back to your bunk, Bunter, and stay there," said Harry Wharton quietly.

"But—but what has happened?"

"Lagden has a revolver, and—"

"Oh!"

"Stick in your bunk, and—"

"I—I—I really think I'd better," mumbled Billy Bunter, and he scuttled back to his bunk and dived into it, and drew the blankets over him.

"We can't do anything more for the skipper at present," said Harry quietly. "Let's get on deck."

"Good!"

The juniors ascended the companion. Lagden was on deck, with the revolver still in his hand. His face was white and set. It was clear that the situation was no more pleasant to him than to the others, but he was determined to carry it through.

He had had his orders obeyed. After the fall of the captain, the mate and the two French seamen had not ventured to oppose him.

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NEXT WEEK: "THE FIRST AT GREYFRIARS."

The schooner had been turned about, and was now running free.

Her speed, with the wind behind her instead of against her, was wonderfully increased, and the long, weary course of tacking was over.

The Belle Marie was dashing through the water, and the cliffs of the English coast were already fading away on the sea-line.

Lagden glanced at the juniors as they came up, and came towards them. The two lads assumed a defensive attitude at once. Lagden laughed harshly.

"Don't be afraid!" he exclaimed.

"We are not afraid," said Harry quietly.

"How is the captain?"

"He is unconscious."

"I did not intend to more than disable him," said Lagden. "I hope nothing worse will come of it. But I shall gain my liberty, if every soul on board the vessel perishes. You had better not trifle with me."

Harry regarded him steadily.

"Are you making for a French port now?" he asked.

"For the French coast."

"But where will you land?"

"I have not decided yet."

"Not at a port?"

"Certainly not."

"If Captain Danglars does not have proper surgical care he will certainly not recover," said Harry abruptly. "Do you want his death on your hands?"

Lagden gritted his teeth.

"The fool brought it upon himself. If he dies I am sorry—but not for his sake, for my own! But I cannot make for the land now. I must go further up the Channel, and land at a distance from a port."

"That will mean running the schooner ashore?"

"Perhaps."

"It will be death to the man below."

"I hope not—but I cannot help it."

Lagden turned away before Harry could say more. He was in a desperate mood, all the more so since he had been forced to fire, and risk incurring the guilt of murder. If Captain Danglars died, the forger had something more terrible than prison to fear. But he did not falter in his purpose.

"The hound!" muttered Bob Cherry. "We've got to get the better of him somehow, Harry. If we could only talk it over with those French chaps—"

Harry shook his head.

"We cannot make them comprehend us easily enough," he said. "It's no good trying to concert a plan with them. Besides, they seem quite under Lagden's thumb."

"Yes, rather."

"Whatever we do, we shall have to do ourselves; but I'm blessed if I know what we can possibly do," said Harry restlessly. "We must think it out."

Lagden was certainly master of the schooner now. The three Frenchmen obeyed his orders without a word or a sign of disobedience. They knew that he was ready to shoot, and that was enough. Lagden, who evidently had sailed a vessel before, rapped out orders in French, taking the place of the captain.

In spite of his antipathy towards the hardened criminal, Harry felt a certain flicker of admiration for him. Lagden's own situation was a terrible one, fraught with peril, but he never lost his coolness for a moment. He had stepped into the skipper's place, and seemed quite as capable as Captain Danglars of sailing the Belle Marie. He gave his orders to the seamen in their own language, and was obeyed implicitly. And it seemed that he must have had a constitution of iron. He had gone through as much as the juniors, and more—and he had not slept—and yet he was cool, alert, keen as ever.

The schooner fled rapidly through the water as the sun sank lower towards the distant Atlantic.

The juniors descended into the cuddy again and ate a meal in grim silence. Billy Bunter peered at them over the edge of his bunk.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Hallo!"

"Is that chap still there?"

"Of course he is."

"You fellows ought to do something," said Bunter. "Why don't you rush on him and seize him, or knock him down, or something?"

"Ass! He's got a revolver!"

"Well, it only needs a little pluck, you know, I—I'd do it myself, only—I'm feeling rather queer. Don't you think the ship is rolling a lot?"

"Oh, rats!"

"I'm blessed if I know what to do," said Bunter, blinking at them. "I'm in a jolly awkward situation. You see—"

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"Don't do anything," said Bob Cherry. "You can't do anything. Stay where you are."

"Yes, but—"

"And shut up!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Oh, ring off!" said Bob irritably.

"But I don't know what to do," said Bunter indignantly.

"You ass! You can't interfere!"

"Eh? Interfere with what—whom?"

"Lagden."

"Who's talking about interfering with Lagden?" said Billy Bunter peevishly. "I said I was in an awkward situation, and didn't know what to do. I'm awfully hungry, and at the same time I'm feeling rather sea-sick. What would you advise me to do?"

Bob Cherry burst involuntarily into a laugh.

"You young ass!"

"Oh, really, you know! It's a serious matter. You see, I've got a delicate constitution, and I have to keep myself up by taking nourishment. On the other hand—"

"Oh, do go to sleep!"

"On the other hand, I feel rather qualmy, and eating may—"

"Shut up!"

"Well, what would you advise a chap to do?"

"I'd advise you to shut up and go to sleep."

Bunter blinked at him thoughtfully.

"Well, perhaps there's something in that," he agreed.

"You're not a very intelligent chap as a rule, Cherry; but I really think you're right this time."

And Billy Bunter closed his eyes and began to snore.

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER.

A Fight to a Finish.

THE sun was gone, and darkness settled upon the sea. It was a fine, clear evening. One by one the stars came out in the clear sky.

Harry Wharton looked in at the captain's cabin. Captain Danglars was conscious now. The mate had been down to see him, and had cautioned him to remain still in his bunk, and told him what was happening on deck. The skipper was very white, but very quiet. He thanked Harry in a faint voice for what he had done.

Harry's brow was contracted as he went on deck. The skipper was in a perilous state, and needed immediate care. The prolongation of the voyage, and landing in a spot far from a town, might easily mean death to the wounded man. That was Lagden's intention, and Harry felt that any means would be justifiable in preventing him from carrying it out. Apart from the fact that he was a dangerous criminal, escaping to prey upon humanity once more, there was the fact that a wounded man's life was at stake. But how was the villain to be baffled—how was he to be overcome?

The starlight fell in a glimmering light upon sea and schooner. Harry saw Lagden standing beside the man at the wheel, looking over the starlit sea. Afar in the dimness appeared the lights of a vessel, and Harry heard the throbbing of an engine in the silence. A steamer was passing them in the night.

Lagden's face was pale and worn, and the signs of weariness about him were plain enough, but he was still steady, cool, and determined. Would he never sleep?

If he had but sunk into slumber, if only for a few minutes, his enemies would have had a chance. Once his revolver was wrenched away there would be an end to his supremacy—any one of the French seamen was a match for him. But it seemed that he would never sleep. If he closed his eyes he was in terrible peril at once, and the course of the schooner might be altered, too. He might awake to find himself in the heart of a busy French port. He dared not let his eyelids close.

Yet the strain upon his nerves must have been terrible.

He glanced at the boys, but did not speak. Harry Wharton looked out over the sea. The steamer had passed on and disappeared.

The junior could not tell where the ship was, and whether a coast was near. He drew near to the wheel and glanced at the compass. The *Belle Marie* was bearing to the west now. Lagden had determined to land in France far to the west of the usual ports where English passengers to the Continent landed, in the hope of eluding pursuit. But this meant time, and it might be that the night and the next day would be passed before the *Belle Marie* reached land. And meantime, what of the wounded man below in the cabin?

Wharton set his teeth as he thought of it.

Somehow the desperado must be overcome and disarmed, but how? The junior racked his brain to think of a plan. A general attack upon him was not to be thought of. The French seamen had been reduced to complete obedience by the fear of the deadly revolver.

"We can't tackle him openly," said Bob Cherry. "That blessed revolver settles that. It's no good getting potted like a pair of blessed partridges."

"Not much."

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ONE
PENNY.

"We've got to trick him somehow, but how?"

"That's what we've got to think out."

"There's a better chance in the dark, anyway."

Wharton nodded. He was thinking deeply. What could be done? Lagden suddenly left his post beside the helmsman and walked over to them.

There was a faint glimmer in the moonlight at his side. The revolver was in his hand—it seldom left it.

"Go below!" he said abruptly.

The juniors stared at him. Lagden pointed to the companion-way.

"Go below!" he said. "You can turn in; I do not want you on deck. Do you think I cannot see that you are plotting against me?"

"But—"

"Go below at once!"

The revolver rose menacingly. The juniors, with anger in their hearts, moved slowly towards the companion. There was nothing for it but to obey.

Lagden watched them with glittering eyes, following them to the hatchway.

"You will remain below," he said. "Don't let me see you on deck again. You can look after Captain Danglars—he may need your care."

Wharton set his teeth. To be prisoners below—to give up the last chance of turning the tables—to submit to their fate like sheep. In that moment the Greyfriars junior made a desperate resolve.

He walked slowly towards the companion. He gave Bob a glance, and Bob, understanding, drew a quick, throbbing breath, his heart beating hard.

Wharton stepped into the hatchway, and Lagden, completely deceived by his apparent submission, was already turning away to go back to the helm.

Wharton expected it, and it was his chance.

In an instant he had whirled round and flung himself desperately upon the ruffian.

"Quick, Bob!" he panted.

He was grasping Lagden's right arm before the rascal fairly knew that he was attacking him, and dragging the wrist down, so that the revolver could not be raised.

Lagden uttered an oath.

"You mad young fool!"

He dragged up his right arm, pulling the trigger as he did so. But Wharton was dragging the arm down.

Crack!

Wharton felt the buzz of the bullet as it passed him, whizzing downward, and burying itself in the planks of the deck.

Crack!

The revolver was rising now, and Wharton dragged at the pistol-arm, and the bullet flew he knew not where. Lagden's left fist was beating at his face and dazing him, but Bob Cherry was springing to the attack.

Bob charged at Lagden as he might have charged on the football field, and his whole weight was hurled upon the forger.

Lagden staggered backwards, and crashed upon the deck.

Crack!

A third time the revolver cracked, but the bullet flew at random. Then, as he bumped with stunning force on the deck, Harry grasped the weapon and wrenched it from his hand.

He sprang up.

His arm swept through the air, and there was a glimmer in the starlight as the revolver went flying over the side, to disappear with a splash into the sea.

Lagden was struggling up. He had hurled Bob Cherry aside, and almost regained his feet. But now there was a yell from the French seamen, who had been watching the scene spellbound till now.

They realised that the revolver was gone—that Lagden had only his hands—the same weapons that they had—to defend himself with. The mate and the helmsman rushed to the aid of the juniors, and piled themselves upon Abel Lagden.

The man struggled desperately. His strength was great, and in his fury he seemed to have doubled it.

Four foes were clinging to him struggling for the mastery, and yet they could not overcome him, and he almost broke loose.

"Henri!" shouted the mate. "A moi!"

Henri, the cook, came tumbling up in hot haste to lend his aid. He had a heavy saucepan in his hand.

"Help!" gasped Harry.

Lagden was almost loose.

Henri sprang forward, and the iron saucepan swept through the air. It caught Lagden upon the side of the head, and he gave a groan and fell to the deck.

In a moment more the seamen and the juniors were piling on him, and he was secured.

THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER.

The Return.

HARRY WHARTON and Bob Cherry rose gasping and breathless from the struggle. Lagden lay half stunned, and the seamen were winding ropes round him and knotting them upon his limbs. The criminal was a prisoner at last. He was not likely to get loose from the lengths of rope that were knotted upon him again and again. He lay powerless, his eyes burning.

"Got him!" gasped Bob Cherry.

Lagden muttered a curse.

"You are lucky that you have not committed a murder, you scoundrel!" said Harry Wharton sternly. "It is not your fault that one of us was not killed."

Lagden snarled.

"I wish I had not spared you!" he panted.

"Well, you will not be loose again in a hurry," said Bob Cherry. "I think these French chaps can be trusted to take care of you."

There was very little doubt upon that point.

The crew of the *Belle Marie* did not mean to run any more risks with their dangerous passenger.

Lagden was tied and tied again, till he could hardly stir a limb, and then he was bound to the mainmast with a strong rope. There was not much chance of his getting loose again.

The juniors helped the crew to trim the sails, for the mate was changing the course of the schooner now that the vessel was in his hands again. The schooner was beating up for the English coast, and the mate told Wharton in French that they would arrive there in a few hours. Although the wind was not favourable, the schooner made good way. The mate carried the news of the recapture of the schooner down to Captain Danglars, and the French skipper was somewhat consoled by the thought that if there was a reward offered for the capture of the escaped forger he would have a good slice of it, which would be some compensation for his injury.

Billy Bunter was sitting quaking in his bunk all the time. The shots on deck had awakened him, and the fat junior sat trembling, in terror every moment of seeing Lagden rush into view, revolver in hand.

The chums of Greyfriars had forgotten all about the junior till they came below, and Billy Bunter's voice quavered out from the bunk.

"I—I say, you fellows——"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" said Bob Cherry cheerfully. "You don't mean to say that you've woke up, Billy?"

"I—I heard shooting——"

"It's all over."

"Anybody hurt?"

"No—only Lagden. He has a bruise as big as an egg on his head, and he's saying things on deck. But he's tied up, so it doesn't matter."

Bunter gave a gasp of relief.

"Is he a prisoner?"

"What—ho!"

"Good! I'm sincerely sorry I couldn't lend a hand, you fellows, but I—I was asleep, and I didn't hear what was going on——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!"

"Ha, ha! You just said that you heard shooting on deck, that's all!" grinned Bob Cherry. "Fellows like you should have good memories, Billy."

"I—I meant, I—I sort of heard it in my sleep," stammered Bunter. "You see——"

"Yes, I see a fat, cowardly porpoise!" said Bob Cherry. "Shut up, and don't bother! I'm going to turn in."

"But I say, is it all right now?"

"Right as rain!"

"Thank goodness! I say, the schooner's rolling a lot. I'm feeling a little bit rocky. I wonder if it would do me good to have something to eat, Cherry?"

Bob Cherry snored.

"I say, Wharton, will you ask the cook to bring me something to eat?" said Bunter.

Harry's head sank upon his pillow, and he did not reply. Billy Bunter grunted, and went to sleep.

When Wharton awoke again, it was with a noise of voices and rattling ropes in his ears. He started up, and just avoided knocking his head.

He listened intently.

There was a trampling and a calling of voices on deck, and the Greyfriars junior knew that the schooner was in a harbour.

He tumbled out of the bunk and looked at his watch in the light of the cuddy lamp. It was only nine o'clock.

"Bob, wake up!"

Bob Cherry grunted, and turned in bed. Harry shook him violently by the shoulder.

"Lemme alone! Groo!"

"Wake up, duffer! We're in port!"

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Bob Cherry rubbed his eyes.

"In port?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Jolly good! Yank Bunter out! Good! Hurray!"

"Yah! 'Tain't rising-bell," mumbled Billy Bunter, as Wharton shook him. "Lemme alone! I can have another few minutes, anyway. I'm not going to do much washing this morning, as I've a bit of a cold. Yah! Leggo!"

"Wake up, you young duffer!"

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"We're going ashore."

"Oh, I—I forgot where I was!" mumbled Billy. "Oh, I shall be jolly glad to get back to Greyfriars! And the next time you want me to go up in a balloon with you, Wharton, you can beg of me till you're black in the face; but I jolly well sha'n't go!"

Wharton laughed.

The three Greyfriars juniors were on deck in a few minutes. Lagden, half asleep from sheer weariness, in spite of his position, was still sitting on deck, bound to the mast. Henri, the cook, grinned at the juniors.

"What place is this?" asked Wharton.

"Ze Newhaven, m'sieur."

"Newhaven! Good!"

"Ze gendarmes zey come," said Henri, pointing with a wooden-ladle to a boat that was approaching the anchored schooner, in which the helmets of policemen were visible. "Ve have signal to zem for ze help, n'est-ce-pas? Zey take him."

"Jolly good!"

The police reached the schooner, and an inspector jumped lightly on deck. The mate poured out a stream of voluble French, at which the unhappy man looked quite helpless. Harry Wharton came forward.

"I had better explain, sir," he said.

"Go ahead," said the inspector tersely.

Wharton explained.

The inspector's eyes almost started from his head when he heard that Abel Lagden, the forger, was a prisoner on board the schooner.

"The story's in all the papers already," he exclaimed. "He was supposed to have escaped to France in a balloon. He pitched out some of a party of schoolboys who were in the car, and the others were carried off with him."

"Exactly."

"Where are they now?"

"Here! We are the chaps you mean!"

"Oh! And where is the balloon?"

"Somewhere in the Channel."

"And Lagden?"

Wharton pointed to the bound man at the foot of the mast. The police inspector turned the light of a lantern upon the haggard face, and gave a chuckle of triumph.

"By George, it's Lagden! It's the man, right enough!"

"He is your prisoner, sir."

"I suppose you know there's a reward of two hundred pounds for his capture?" said the inspector.

"I did not know it. But it should go to the captain of this vessel, who has been shot by the villain," said Wharton. "He lies below, dangerously wounded."

"Oh! He may have something besides forgery to answer for, then," said the inspector. "Untie him, men, and clap the darbies on. Mind that he doesn't get loose."

But there was little chance of Lagden getting loose. Even his iron frame had yielded at last to exhaustion, and he was fairly spent.

He was untied and dragged to his feet, and the handcuffs clinked on his wrists. He turned his white face towards Wharton with a look of undying hatred.

"Well, Lagden, we've got you!" said the inspector.

"I know whom I owe it to," said the prisoner, between his teeth, his eyes burning as they were fixed upon the Removite of Greyfriars. "I shall not forget!"

He was taken over the side into the boat, and the juniors saw him no more. A few minutes later they went ashore themselves, and glad enough were they to set foot once more upon English soil.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER.

Home Again!

DARKNESS lay upon the ancient pile of Greyfriars; but a glimmer of light was appearing in the east. It was five o'clock in the morning. But early as the hour was, a light gleamed from the hall windows of the old school, and the hall door was open. Dr. Locke stood looking out into the Close. Mr. Quelch, the master of the Remove, was with him. There was glad relief in both the masters' faces.

They had had reason to leave their beds at that untimely hour. For the House had been knocked up by a messenger from the nearest telegraph-office that was open all night, and

the dusty messenger had handed Dr. Locke a telegram that brought a gasp of relief to his lips.

It was from Harry Wharton, and dated from the port of Newhaven.

It ran:

"All safe. Returning at once.—WHARTON."

And that telegram removed a weight from the doctor's mind.

For since the balloon had disappeared at sea with the three Greyfriars juniors, he had almost given up hope of seeing them again.

Frank Nugent and Hurree Singh had returned to Greyfriars; but three were still missing, and the last seen of the balloon was when it was vanishing seaward over the chalk cliffs.

The telegram, telling of the safety of the missing juniors, fully compensated the Head for being knocked up in the middle of the night.

The juniors were evidently leaving Newhaven by the night express; but when, and by what conjunction of trains, they would reach Greyfriars, the Head did not know.

But he had decided to wait up with Mr. Quelch.

The light in the east was growing stronger, and the Head was thinking of extinguishing the electric light in the hall, when there was a sound of wheels in the Close. Gosling had been ordered to keep the gates open in readiness.

A trap drove up to the house, and three juniors jumped out and ran up the steps.

Dr. Locke uttered an exclamation.

"Wharton!"

"Here we are, sir!"

"Thank Heaven!"

"Sorry to disturb you with that wire, sir," said Harry.

"But I thought I'd better let you know that we were safe as soon as possible."

The Head pressed his hand.

"It was quite right, Wharton. I have never had my sleep broken for so good a cause. And you are all quite safe?"

"Quite safe, sir."

"I'm awfully hungry, though," said Billy Bunter.

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"You had a jolly good feed at the town before we got into the trap," he said. "We've had to come all the way from Northmoor in a trap, sir."

"I'm hungry again now—"

"You shall have some supper, and then bed," said the doctor. "I will pay your driver. You need not get up again till you choose."

Bunter's face brightened up. Next to eating, sleeping was his delight.

"Thanks very much, sir," he exclaimed. "I feel as if I could eat a jolly good meal, and then have a long sleep."

"Are Nugent and Inky—I mean Hurree Singh, safe home, sir?" asked Wharton.

"Quite safe," said the Head. "They came back after being left behind by the balloon. They are in bed now, and they have been very anxious about you, as I need not say. And the man who was with you in the balloon—"

"He is arrested now, sir."

"Very good. You shall tell me the whole story to-morrow. Now, supper and bed."

And the juniors, after a solid, cold supper; or, rather, early breakfast, went up to the Remove dormitory.

The dawn was stealing in at the windows, but it was not nearly time for the rising-bell yet, and the Remove still slept. The beds were in readiness, and the juniors undressed rapidly. Billy Bunter turned in, and Harry Wharton was stepping towards his bed, when there was a sudden gasp of horror.

"Oh, mercy! His ghost! Oh!"

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ONE
PENNY.

Snoop was sitting up in bed, staring at Harry with wide-open eyes of fear.

Wharton hesitated. If his suspicion that it was Snoop who had loosened the balloon rope needed confirmation, it was confirmed now.

"Snoop—"

"Keep off!" shrieked Snoop wildly. "You're not alive! I know you're drowned! Keep off! Don't touch me! Mercy! Help!"

"You young hound!" cried Bob Cherry fiercely. "Then you did cut the rope?"

Snoop started and shuddered.

"You! You, too!"

"You cowardly ass!" said Wharton contemptuously. "Can't you see that we're alive? We are not ghosts! Stop that row!"

Snoop ceased his wild whimpering, staring at the chums blankly. Slowly he realised that they were indeed flesh and blood, and not the spectres his guilty brain had imagined.

"So you cut the rope, did you?"

"It—it was only a joke!" faltered Snoop. "I thought you would have a fright, and the balloon would come down in the next field. I—I never foresaw what would happen. If—if you knew what I've been through since, you'd—you'd be sorry for me."

Wharton could quite believe it, as he looked at the haggard face and the trembling limbs. Snoop had plainly enough been through agonies of mind, caused by the mingled influence of remorse and the terror of discovery and punishment.

"Oh, go to sleep!" said Harry scornfully. "I sha'n't say anything about the matter. The showman will have to be compensated for his loss; if that can be arranged, nothing more need be said."

"My only hat!" exclaimed Frank Nugent, jumping up. "Is that you, Harry?"

"Here I am."

"And the others?"

"Safe and sound—here as well."

"Good!"

"The goodfulness is terrific!" ejaculated the Nabob of Bhanipur. "It is gladdening to my esteemed heart to see my worthy chums return safe and soundfully once more."

"And we're jolly sleepy," said Bob Cherry, putting his head down on the pillow. "Tell you all about it to-morrow."

And he fell asleep at once. There was a chorus of questioning voices.

"Where have you been?"

"What's happened to you?"

"Tell us about it."

Half the Remove were awake now. But from Billy Bunter and Bob Cherry came only deep snores.

"Wharton! I say, Wharton—"

"The sayfulness is terrific—"

Snore!

"Just tell us, old chap—"

Snore!

The Remove gave it up. The three returned wanderers slept soundly, and did not even wake when the rising-bell went. They did not come down until morning classes were over that day; and then, for the first time, the Removites had their curiosity satisfied as to the true history of the Greyfriars Flight.

THE END

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STANLEY DARE

The Boy Detective

INTRODUCTION.

Stanley Dare, the Boy Detective, having rescued a lad named Tom Winfield from the Thames, into which he had been flung by would-be assassins, becomes interested in the case. He journeys from London to Launceston, Tasmania, where Tom Winfield lives, and there meets his old friend, Professor MacAndrew, who offers to assist him to trace young Winfield's unknown assailants. One night in the hotel at Launceston, a man known as Jim the Tracker enters Stanley Dare's bedroom, but is secured and handed over to the police. Meanwhile, Tom Winfield is kidnapped, and Stanley Dare, disguised as a "sundowner," sets out to trace him.

Stanley Dare Discovers Tom Winfield.

Dare's reading of the footprints in Tom Winfield's bedroom was a very marvel of accuracy, which few even of the cleverest detectives could have equalled. He knew now with absolute certainty that the man who had thrice attempted Winfield's life—the young Colonial's mysterious enemy, was now before him.

"Are you dumb?" growled the man, as Dare did not answer him at once. "What do you want here?"

"I ain't dumb," replied Stanley Dare, playing up to his character. "I was a bit surprised, that's all, at the way you snarled at me. I'm making my way to Lefroy, where I reckon to get a job. All I want is a bit of something to eat, and a shakedown for the night."

"I know," sneered the man. "That's all you sundowners* ever want; and you're always tramping after work, which you take care never to find. I know your blessed breed, and I won't have any of you here. Clear out!"

"Hold 'ard, Bastaple! Don't turn the chap away without giving him a feed. It ain't lucky."

A second man came from the interior of the hut, and as he had a frying-pan in his hand, he was evidently about to prepare the evening meal. He was short in stature, but with immensely broad shoulders and long arms that gave proof of tremendous muscular strength.

"Curse you, and your silly ideas of luck!" snarled the man addressed as Bastaple. "Give him food, then, if you've a mind to be so generous. But I won't have him in the hut—mind that!"

There must have been a very strong reason for keeping Dare, whom they imagined to be no more than he appeared to be—a man on the tramp from one township to another—outside the log shanty, for the hospitality due to wayfarers in the bush is regarded in so sacred a light by nearly every settler that it is not refused to anyone who is not actually a suspicious character. Dare concluded that the reason was that Tom Winfield was a prisoner in the hut.

He made up his mind that, no matter what the risk, he must find his way inside.

The short man, whose name was Flinders, brought him out some fried bacon, a piece of bread, and a pannikin of tea.

"Get through with that," he said; "and then make tracks as quick as you like. You've slept in the bush afore, I reckon, without a roof over you?"

"Yes."

"Then you can sleep in the bush again."

With that he re-entered the hut and closed the door after him.

Stanley Dare finished his meal, and, feeling certain that he was being watched all the time, shouldered his swag, and calling out, "So-long," to his invisible hosts, strode into the bush and was soon lost to sight amid the wattle-gum trees.

But he did not go far. Making a wide semi-circle, he

returned to the edge of the clearing at a spot exactly opposite to the point at which he had struck into the bush half an hour previously.

Flinders and Bastaple were now seated outside the hut smoking. Dare was at the back of the shanty. There was a small, unglazed window about a foot square in the side. Depositing his swag on the ground, and drawing his revolver, he crept noiselessly up to the hut, and, standing on tiptoe, looked through the opening.

The hut was divided into two parts, and the window through which he was looking served to give light during the day, and ventilation at all times, to the smaller of the two rooms.

The interior was now lighted by a tallow candle stuck in an empty bottle, and by its feeble glimmer he saw a figure lying on a ragged wallaby-skin rug in a corner of the room.

It was Tom Winfield! The light fell on his face, pale and haggard-looking. He was bound hand and foot, so that he could only move by rolling to one side or the other.

"Tom," whispered Stanley Dare.

The young Colonial opened his eyes and stared at the small window.

"Dare!" he gasped. "Can it be you? How did you find out where they had brought me? For Heaven's sake be careful! If they discover you they will kill you."

"I must get you out of their clutches. Hush! What's that?"

Coo-e-e!

It was the regular bush-call, which can be heard at a great distance. It was repeated in a peculiar manner, and answered by Flinders. The young detective turned and slipped back towards the timber. A man sprang out of the shadows, and gripped him by the shoulder.

"Bastaple! Flinders! Come here, quick!" yelled a harsh, croaking voice in his ear. "I've caught a fellow spying round. Ah-h! Curse you! Ouch-h!"

The peculiar exclamation which Stanley Dare's assailant gave vent to as a sort of wind-up to his outcries for assistance, was in a measure quite involuntary. Primarily, it was due to the fact that the young detective had turned upon him, and flung him with terrific force against the trunk of a blue gum. He slid to the ground in a heap, groaning and cursing.

Dare had just time to notice that the fellow was a lean, wizened-faced scoundrel, with scanty side-whiskers, and dressed in a suit of rusty broadcloth—an unusual rig-out for the bush—when the others were upon him. He fired once, and Bastaple dropped.

Flinders hung back a second on seeing how his partner had fared, and Dare saw the chance of making a dash into the bush and getting clear away.

But at that moment a whiplike crack sounded to his right, and he felt a sharp pain in his thigh. He was wounded. Flinders, seeing this, took the precaution of sheltering himself behind a tree-trunk, out of the line of Dare's bullets, and waited calmly for further developments. He knew that with a bullet in his thigh the young detective must soon drop.

Like a tiger at bay Stanley Dare stood for a few minutes, revolver in hand. With the exception of Luke Bastaple, who lay motionless on the ground a short distance away from

*A "sundowner" is the name given in the Colonies to a man who tramps through the bush from station to station during the day, arriving just about sunset, when all work is finished, to claim the usual bush hospitality of a night's lodging and a meal.

him, his assailants had vanished. One at least—the one who had wounded him—had not so far put in an appearance.

The pain of the wound and loss of blood soon produced the effect which the hidden men were waiting for. Dare reeled forward, and all objects around him became blurred and indistinct. Then he fell. The sound of galloping hoofs broke upon his ears, and a rider pulled up close to him.

Gazing upwards, Stanley Dare saw a man bending from his saddle and staring down at him. It was Jim the Tracker!

Silas Warner, Attorney-at-Law—A Terrible Threat—The Black Fellow.

Stanley Dare lost consciousness at the moment that his eyes fell on the man whom he thought was safely in the gaol at Launceston, and when he recovered his senses a few minutes later he found himself lying outside the log-hut bound hand and foot.

Jim the Tracker was unsaddling his horse, at the conclusion of which operation he lit his pipe and walked to Dare's side. Flinders was attending to his wounded comrade.

"You didn't expect to see me again so soon, Mr. Boy Detective," he said, puffing out a cloud of smoke. "I gave the reg'lars the slip easy, for, seeing that I had the darbies on, they reckoned they had me safe. That's where they made their mistake. I've got a pal in Launceston what saw me through that bit o' business all serene."

Dare, meaning to stick to his character of a sundowner, disclaimed all knowledge of Jim the Tracker, or the "business" to which he referred, but Jim only laughed.

"You can stow all that," he said. "You peeled your face against the trunk of a wattle when I dropped you, and that pretty make-up all came off one side. You play your hand well, but you've run up against old stagers at the game, and they're bound to win."

"Bound to win; yes, you may stake all you've got on that," croaked Dare's first assailant, who came slowly out of the hut at this moment. "And this young stager has played his last hand, if I've got anything to say in the matter."

"You haven't got quite so much to say here as you would have in your office," remarked Jim the Tracker.

"But you've a deal too much to say anywhere," snarled the other.

Dare had given an attentive ear to the interchange of "civilities" between these two oddly contrasted men.

His wound pained him intensely, although the bullet had fortunately dropped out while his captors were binding him. A rough pad thrust over it, as he afterwards discovered, by Jim the Tracker, had partially stopped the bleeding. He determined, however, to make the best of the situation, and, assuming an air of careless indifference, he directed his eyes at the individual in broadcloth, and said:

"Who and what are you when you are at home?"

"I'll interduce yer," put in Jim the Tracker, who seemed to be a light-hearted kind of scoundrel. "This gent in the Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes is Mr. Silas Warner, attorney-at-law, of Melbourne, with an office at Launceston as well. He knows who you are—so now you know each other, I hope you'll improve your acquaintance."

"Don't be so handy with my name," snapped Warner.

"I won't," replied Jim the Tracker, "if you'll be a little handier in shelling out your money. Ten quid you owe me now for keeping my mouth shut, and don't you forget it. If it ain't paid within a week I'll be a bit more handy with your name and your business than you'll care about."

The lawyer turned livid with rage and fear, but made no reply to Jim's veiled threat. Instead, he turned to wreak some of his spite upon Stanley Dare.

"I've got an account to settle with you," he said, "that is bound to be paid anyhow. First, for the way you handled me just now"—he put his hand to his side, where no doubt there was a fairly large-sized bruise—"and secondly, because you are interfering in matters that don't concern you. You're a detective, and, although only a young one, you are dangerous. 'Self-preservation is the first law of nature,' you know, and as I think more of my little finger than I do of the whole of your body, you are likely to suffer. Understand?"

Flinging a look of such diabolical meaning at Stanley Dare that even the steel-nerved young detective shivered involuntarily under it, he turned and shuffled into the hut.

The careless words spoken by Jim the Tracker, who appeared to be indifferent whether he offended his associate or not, gave Dare much food for thought. Who was this Silas Warner, who—if Jim the Tracker's statement was correct—belonged to an honourable profession, and yet was the associate of criminals?

If he was a lawyer, he was one of a villainous type which is happily fast dying out. That he had some interest in getting Tom Winfield put out of the way seemed tolerably clear, and the conclusion that Dare arrived at was that he had arranged with Luke Bastable to do the work for him.

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 111.

NEXT WEEK: "THE FIRST AT GREYFRIARS."

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ONE
PENNY.

But Jim the Tracker certainly had some hold over him, as was evidenced by his reference to the ten pounds owing to him—payment for "keeping his mouth shut." What was the secret that he had gained a knowledge of, and which Silas Warner found it advisable to bribe him not to divulge? Stanley Dare meant to find out, for he had not failed to notice that the mere hint from Jim the Tracker that he would make it known had turned the lawyer's face grey with fear.

In the meantime, however, there was his own position to be considered. His situation was desperate and he feared that there was little hope of assistance from MacAndrew, for the simple reason that he did not know where he was. And there was no trail to follow, as he had come the greater part of the way to Whirlpool Reach in a boat.

The long hours of the night dragged slowly by, and Dare had fitful snatches of uneasy sleep. He had tried to wrench his hands free, but the rope which bound his wrists was so securely fastened that it did not give the fraction of an inch. It was useless to waste his strength in any further efforts to free himself by that means.

Day dawned brightly, but there was no sign that the villainous quartette intended to make a move. Luke Bastable did not come out of the hut during the day, for Dare's bullet had gone clean through his shoulder, and the wound was a nasty one. The lawyer, Flinders, and Jim the Tracker, passed the time in smoking, drinking, and eating. Some food and water were given to Dare about midday, though Silas Warner observed that it was waste of both.

Dare took no heed of his remark; indeed, he did not speak half a dozen words during the whole day, but his eyes and ears were always on the alert, and no word or movement of his captors escaped him.

It was just about sunset when Luke Bastable came out of the hut, assisted by Flinders. His face was pale, and as his eyes rested upon Dare an awful look came into them. There was murder in the look.

"Pile some more wood on the fire," he said; "I want to have a good look at this fellow."

"You have seen me before," exclaimed the young detective. "Perhaps you remember the first time, when you stared through the window of the Dolphin Inn, in London. You were behind a mask then."

Bastable started slightly, and for a few moments stood regarding the young detective in silence. When he did speak it was in a quiet, suppressed voice, far more terrible than any wild outburst would have been.

"I like to gaze upon the face of a person who is about to die," he said. "It does me good."

"I shall gaze upon yours," retorted Stanley Dare, "when you are dead!"

Flinders had thrown some more wood upon the fire, and the red flames blazed upwards. Darkness was closing in rapidly; among the trees it was already as black as night. A wisp of a new moon was settling down towards the western horizon.

Bastable drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his bloodless lips. The scent of wood-violets became at once noticeable. What a terrible mockery it seemed that such a crime-steeped miscreant should use a delicate perfume on his handkerchief, like some dainty society woman or a man of fashion addicted to the use of scents.

"Bring out our other prisoner," said Bastable.

Tom Winfield was dragged out of the hut more dead than alive, and when he saw Dare lying on the ground with his wrists and ankles secured, he gave a sharp cry of despair.

"I have brought you to this," he cried. "It is through me that your life is now imperilled. These ruffians won't spare either of us now that they have us in their power!"

"You never spoke truer words in your life," croaked Silas Warner.

But Dare called out some cheering words to his companion in misfortune. The tone in which they were uttered rather than the words themselves, put a ray of renewed hope into Winfield's heart.

"Don't give way, Tom, we're not dead yet."

"No, not yet," said Luke Bastable; "but you can number the hours of life left to you on the fingers of one hand. Your client"—he uttered the word with a malignant sneer—"can count the minutes that he has to live. Lift him up, Flinders, and you, Warner, help him, and secure him to that tree-stump yonder. Lend me your rifle, Jim."

"What for?"

"Because I can shoot straighter with a rifle than a revolver, and I want to finish the job at the first shot."

Jim the Tracker leaned on his rifle and looked Bastable squarely in the face.

"You won't get my rifle for that job," he said.

"What do you mean?"

Bastaple's evil face was working convulsively with passion. He was not accustomed to be defied.

"What I say," replied Jim the Tracker slowly. "Hi! You, Silas Warner, it's you that wants that young feller put out of the way. Now, listen to me. I'm a pretty bad lot myself, but I can't hold a candle to you for villainy. I hold a secret of yours, that you're paying me to keep to myself. I'll do it so long as young Winfield is alive. If he is killed, I'll take care that what I know about you is published in every town in Tasmania within a week. Now, make your choice."

"Curse you!" snarled the lawyer. "You talk like that because you think it's to your interest to keep him alive."

"I know it is," returned the other.

Silas Warner snatched a revolver from his pocket, but before he could use it, if that was his intention, Jim the Tracker had his rifle levelled.

"Don't try that game," he said. "Drop that gun, or I'll plug yer!"

The lawyer was cowed. He returned the weapon to his pocket, while the others looked on with mingled feelings—surprise on the part of Flinders; rage on the part of Bastaple.

"You'd give your ears to settle me," pursued Jim the Tracker, "but I'm one too many for you."

"Give me your revolver, Warner!" shouted Bastaple. "I'll precious soon settle this business!"

"No," said the lawyer; "I—I'd prefer not to go any further with it—to-night. Give him another day's grace, and I'll have a talk with Jim."

There was fear in his eyes as he darted a look at Jim the Tracker—fear and hatred, too. Bastaple was mad with rage.

"I've got something to say in this!" he cried, "and it'll be bad for the man that interferes. Tie that young fool up with his face to the tree, and strip his shirt off!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Have him flogged!" roared Bastaple.

"No, no!" cried Winfield. "You won't dare to do it, you coward!"

"Won't dare!"

Bastaple re-entered the hut, and presently appeared again with a length of thin rope, which he cut into four pieces, making it into a sort of "cat." He flung it over to Flinders.

"Give him fifty lashes!" he cried; "and after you've finished with him, we'll give this smart young detective fifty. That'll be in part payment for the wound he gave me. Tomorrow morning he shall dance in the air at the end of a rope! This is my affair only; d'ye understand that, all of you?"

"I've had my say," replied Jim the Tracker. "'Tain't my business to interfere any further than I have done."

For the past two or three minutes Stanley Dare's eyes had been fixed on a spot in the scrub just beyond the circle of the clearing, with a persistency that might have attracted attention had the others not been so fully occupied with the altercation among themselves.

Presently, while they were stripping Tom Winfield to the waist, and lashing him with his face against the tree-trunks, Dare rolled himself clear of the circle of firelight into the darkness. There he lay perfectly still.

"Are you all ready?" called out Bastaple.

"Yes," replied Flinders, who was standing with the improvised "cat" in his hand.

He evidently stood in awe of Luke Bastaple, and was ready to carry out his orders, although, for the matter of that, it is possible that he was quite indifferent to the fate of either of the captives.

"Very well, then. Lay it on as hard as you know how."

There was a short pause. A dead silence fell upon the group as Flinders stepped back a pace in order to get a full swing of the arm. A grim, horrible silence it was. Then Flinders swung the rope round—it made a swishing sound as it cut through the air—

But the blow never fell.

As Flinders raised his arm, Stanley Dare leaped to his feet, the bonds flying from his wrists and ankles in several pieces. In two bounds he had cleared the space that lay between him and Flinders, and, taking the fellow utterly by surprise, had snatched the cat from his hand.

The next instant he had flung himself upon the lawyer and deprived him of the revolver which he had so recently failed to use. Silas Warner, thinking his last hour had come, flung himself grovelling on to the ground.

But Stanley Dare had no special thought for him.

Flinders carried a weapon, Jim the Tracker was armed, and Bastaple had brought out a shot-gun from the hut, and in an instant every weapon was levelled. But as the reports rang out, Dare dropped flat upon the ground; then, rising unhurt, he bounded into the scrub and disappeared.

"Follow him!" yelled Bastaple. "I'll give twenty quid to the man who brings him back alive!"

But no one stirred, for the young detective's voice rang out clear from the darkness:

"The first man that moves a step to follow me will have a bullet in his body!"

He had been obliged to leave Tom Winfield in their hands, as he would have certainly been shot down had he attempted to cut him free, and the young Colonial would then have been in a worse plight than ever. At the same time, he intended to make an effort to rescue him as soon as possible, as he did not go very far away from the camp.

The fire had been scattered by Flinders as a measure of precaution, but Stanley Dare, peering between the tree-trunks, could just discern the figures of the men moving about the camp. Tom Winfield was still lashed to the wattle-stump.

The young detective could not lay claim to being well versed in woodcraft, but the sound of a breaking twig on the ground close behind him warned him that he was not alone in the bush. He swung round, and found himself facing an Australian native. (Aborigines of Tasmania have long since become extinct.)

"Black fellow did that well—eh?" exclaimed the native.

"You did, indeed!" exclaimed Dare. "And you shall be well repaid for your service. Who put you on my track?"

The black fellow handed Dare a crumpled piece of paper, and then, crouching behind a bush, struck a match to enable him to read what was written.

"By the merest chance," ran the words in MacAndrew's handwriting, "I got hold of the black fellow who brings this note, and engaged him to follow on your track, and find out what had become of you. He has been employed by the police as a bush-tracker. He will direct you, or lead you, to the place where I am waiting for you."

"SETH MACANDREW."

"P.S.—Guidsakes; to think of an Edinburgh professor, with half the alphabet after his name, wandering about the bush with a scantily-clad black man who answers to the heathenish name of Watoonga! But the black is more at home in the bush than I am."

Stanley Dare could not help laughing at the professor's postscript. It was a clever idea of his, though, to engage the black, who had already proved himself to be resourceful and courageous. For it was the black fellow that Dare had noticed signalling to him from behind a tree-trunk, and who had afterwards cut his bonds.

"Do you think you could cut my friend's wrists and ankles free, the same as you did mine, Watoonga?" Dare asked him.

The black shook his head.

"Look, white fellow!" he said, pointing to the camp. "Your mate being taken away."

Dare leaped to his feet. Dimly he could make out two men crossing the clearing, and carrying a third between them. It was Tom Winfield that they were carrying. A minute later they had all entered the hut.

(Another long instalment of this thrilling detective story next Tuesday. Please order your "Magnet" in advance. Price One Penny.)



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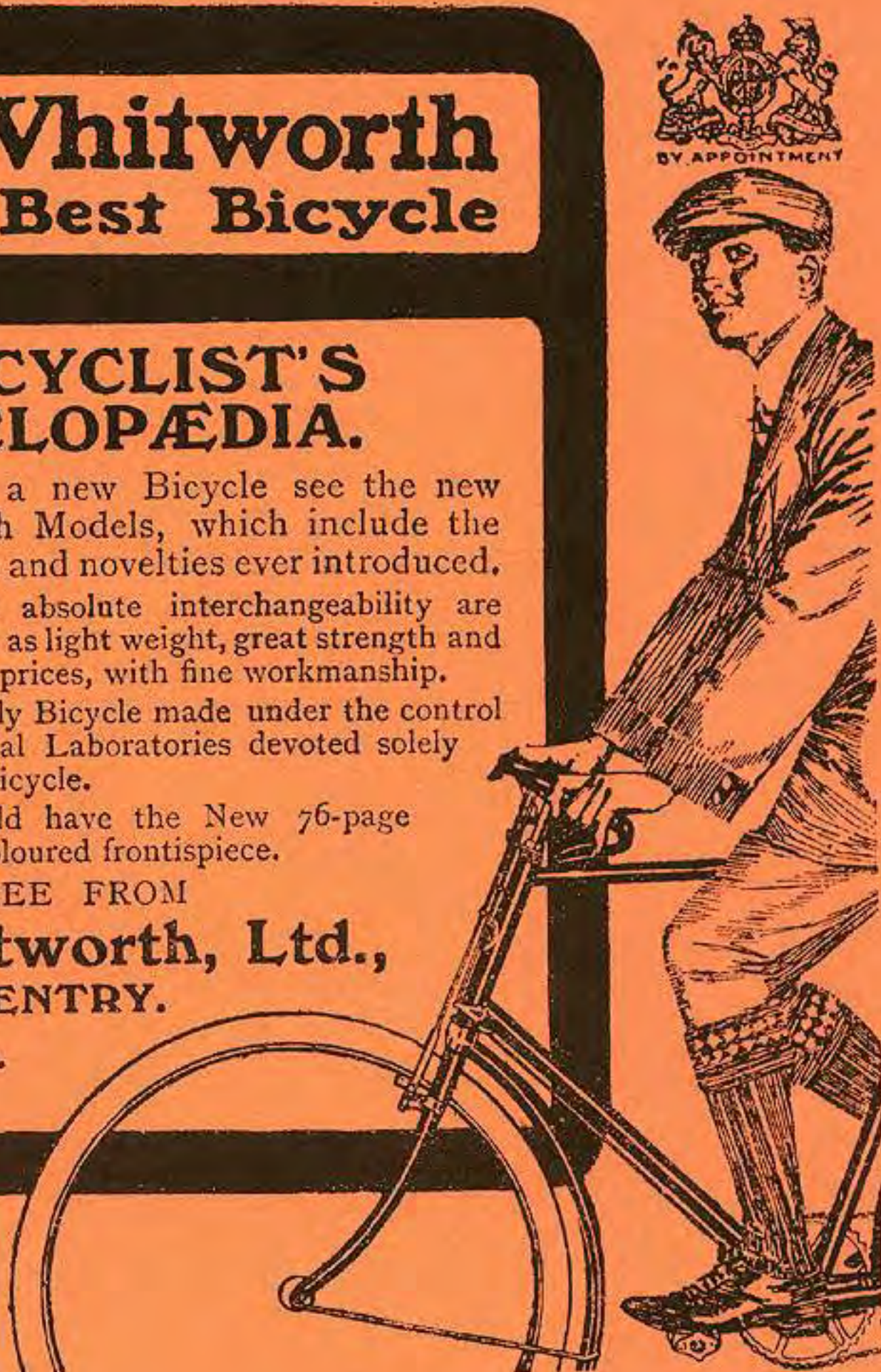
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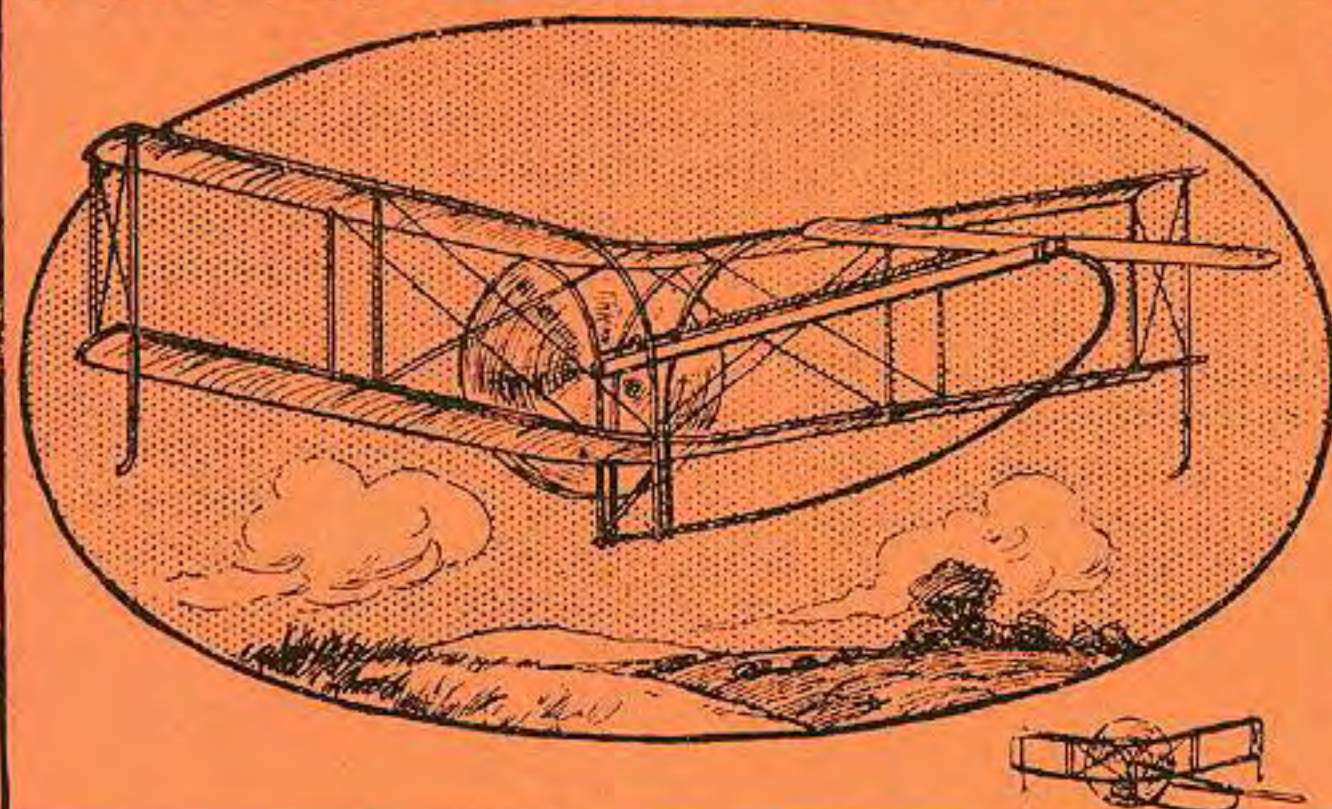
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